Information Bulletin
Building and Safety Standards Branch
PO Box 9844 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria BC V8W 9T2
Email: building.safety@gov.bc.ca
Website: www.gov.bc.ca/buildingcodes

No. B24-09
April 19, 2024

Adaptable Dwelling Units
Frequently Asked Questions

This bulletin provides responses to frequently asked questions about changes in the British Columbia Building Code (Building Code) 2024 regarding adaptable dwelling units. This bulletin may be updated from time to time.

Bulletin B24-01 provides information on the effective date for these new requirements. Information on the technical changes to the accessibility and adaptable dwelling unit requirements will be further discussed in separate bulletins, soon to be released. Code users are encouraged to sign up for BC Codes updates and check often for new technical bulletins.

More information on accessibility, adaptability, including reports on public engagements can be found on the Building Codes & Standards' website.

What is an adaptable dwelling unit?

The Building Code 2024 defines an adaptable dwelling unit as "a dwelling unit designed and constructed with some accessible features and which accommodates the future modification to provide more accessible features." This means the elements and features of a building that are impractical or impossible to renovate are built to be resilient to multiple future renovations at the initial time of construction.

Building walls and systems, such as plumbing and electrical, that are not easily renovated in an apartment building (could be loadbearing, could be fire separations) are located and designed to suit a variety of occupants' needs and preferences over the life cycle of the building, minimizing expensive or impossible renovations.

Furnishings and finishings, such as kitchen and bathroom cabinetry, fixtures, and appliances, are easier to change over the life cycle of the building. The Building Code provides designers' choice for such furnishings and finishings within dwelling units as occupants have various unique preferences and needs and that these preferences and needs can evolve over time.

The contents of this Bulletin are not intended to be provided as legal advice and should not be relied upon as legal advice. The Building and Safety Standards Branch does not enforce compliance with the British Columbia Building Code. Local authorities are authorized to enforce the British Columbia Building Code through the Local Government Act and the Community Charter.

Building and Safety Standards Branch
PO Box 9844 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria BC V8W 9T2
Email: building.safety@gov.bc.ca
Website: www.gov.bc.ca/buildingcodes

Why does the Province require units to be adaptable?

The Province is committed to delivering better buildings and more homes that are sustainable and accessible for people. Investing in safer and more accessible housing will deliver long-term benefits to all people living in British Columbia.

Adaptable dwellings help people through every stage of life. Adaptable dwellings provide accessible housing options for:

- people living with disabilities,
- young parents with infants and toddlers,
- people who experience life changing illnesses or temporary or permanent injuries,
- multigenerational families, and
- seniors who may wish to age in place.

Adaptable housing minimizes expensive future retrofitting and relocation costs, helps tenants secure appropriate housing, and eliminates cost premiums for accessible units.

Adaptable dwellings also provide inclusive spaces for all people to visit and participate in social gatherings and events, which they may otherwise be excluded from.

What units of what buildings must be adaptable?

The adaptable dwelling unit provisions in the Building Code 2024 apply to single-storey units that are served by a common accessible interior corridor. Typically, this means single-storey units in apartment-style buildings will need to be designed and constructed as adaptable.

There are several circumstances where the adaptable dwelling unit provisions do not apply to a dwelling unit, such as:

- The dwelling unit is more than two stories,
- The dwelling unit has its own separate entry/exit to the exterior, or
- The dwelling is not served by an interior corridor that is required to be accessible.

For apartment-style buildings, the Building Code 2024 requires the common building entrances to be accessible as well as the common paths of travel on the entry level.

For buildings following Part 3 of Division B, this can mean first storey dwelling units must be adaptable, but second storey units may not be unless an elevator provides access to that second storey. An elevator is required in three storey buildings following Part 3 which essentially means access is required for all common corridors and spaces throughout the building and that all units served from the accessible interior corridors must be adaptable.

The contents of this Bulletin are not intended to be provided as legal advice and should not be relied upon as legal advice. The Building and Safety Standards Branch does not enforce compliance with the British Columbia Building Code. Local authorities are authorized to enforce the British Columbia Building Code through the Local Government Act and the Community Charter.

Building and Safety Standards Branch
PO Box 9844 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria BC V8W 9T2
Email: building.safety@gov.bc.ca
Website: www.gov.bc.ca/buildingcodes

For buildings following Part 9 of Division B, this can mean first storey dwelling units must be adaptable, however second and third storey units are not required to be adaptable unless an elevator provides access to those second and third stories. An elevator is not required in buildings following Part 9 of Division B, if the second and third stories contain only dwellings.

For buildings following Part 3 or Part 9, an elevator is required to connect accessible common areas such as common recreation areas, common garbage and recycling rooms, and common rooftop occupancies. Amenities for the shared use and enjoyment of all occupants are to be accessible and connected by an accessible path of travel.

Can the clear spaces in adaptable units overlap with other required clear spaces?

Yes. Clear spaces can serve multiple functions and features. Utilizing clear spaces for multiple functions is encouraged as this helps reduce unnecessary movement between tasks.

Does all clear floor space have to be kept clear all the time?

Clear floor spaces that function as emergency routes must not be obstructed.

Recognizing that renovations may occur over the life cycle of the unit, many of the clear floor space requirements are only required to be shown on architectural drawings for the purposes of demonstrating the potential. The furnishings and finishings as part of the initial construction or initial decoration do not need to be the same as those illustrated on architectural drawings for the purposes of demonstrating the potential. Features such as an additional kitchen island or bathroom linen cabinet that are not depicted on the set of architectural drawings for the purposes of demonstrating the potential may still be included in initial construction. If the proposed unit design differs from the potential unit design, both proposed design and potential design should be clearly noted in the architectural drawings.

How many bedrooms and bathrooms in a unit must be adaptable?

One bedroom and one bathroom in an adaptable dwelling unit need to be adaptable.

Dwelling units with more than one bedroom or bathroom are only required to designate one of each to be adaptable. It is recommended, but not required, that if a bedroom with an ensuite is selected to be the designated adaptable bedroom that the ensuite be the designated adaptable bathroom.

The designated adaptable bedroom and adaptable bathroom must be connected with a path of travel that meets minimum clear width requirements, but this path of travel is not required to connect to other bedrooms or bathrooms. The path of travel serving the adaptable bedroom and adaptable bathroom is required to be connected to the unit entry/exit door, a living space, and an adaptable kitchen.

The contents of this Bulletin are not intended to be provided as legal advice and should not be relied upon as legal advice. The Building and Safety Standards Branch does not enforce compliance with the British Columbia Building Code. Local authorities are authorized to enforce the British Columbia Building Code through the Local Government Act and the Community Charter.

Building and Safety Standards Branch
PO Box 9844 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria BC V8W 9T2
Email: building.safety@gov.bc.ca
Website: www.gov.bc.ca/buildingcodes

Does the adaptable bedroom have to accommodate two people?

No. Although occupant load is typically based on two persons per bedroom, this is used primarily to assign appropriate fire safety requirements and not as a requirement that two people must occupy a bedroom. It may be prudent to designate the adaptable bedroom as one that can easily accommodate two people and provide access to multiple sides of a bed, but there may be other reasons not to. The Building Code does not regulate furniture such as beds, other than to demonstrate that a bed can be located such that an adequate turning/transfer space can be adjacent on one side. The Building Code does not limit the choice of bed nor require a path of travel to more than one side. A bed that is shown on architectural drawings to demonstrate an adequate transfer/turning space does not have to be the actual bed the occupant selects or in the exact location from the drawings as these are at the occupant's discretion. Furniture placement cannot obstruct emergency routes including egress windows.

What is an adaptable kitchen?

An adaptable kitchen is one that can be shown on architectural drawings as a functional kitchen layout that provides the required clear floor space. The architectural drawings must show the potential for a cooktop and sink to be adjacent, or the potential for a continuous counter to connect the two. It is anticipated that kitchen renovations may occur over the lifecycle of the unit, so it is not required that the kitchen initially constructed be the same as the kitchen layout demonstrated on architectural drawings for the purposes of demonstrating the potential. It is however required that the plumbing system serving the kitchen be located at a height where it penetrates the wall such that a sink could be installed at multiple different heights without requiring substantial reconfiguration to the plumbing system. It may be helpful to consider the adaptable kitchen design referred to in the Building Code as the surrounding kitchen walls and area provided for the kitchen and not the finished cabinetry or appliances themselves as cabinetry and appliances can change over the building's life cycle.

What is an adaptable bathroom?

An adaptable bathroom is one that can be shown on architectural drawings as a functional bathroom layout that provides the required clear floor spaces. The architectural drawings must show the potential for a lavatory (sink), and shower or bathtub, that meets some accessibility provisions, but it is not required that the fixtures initially installed be the same as the bathroom layout demonstrated on architectural drawings for the purposes of demonstrating the potential. It is however required that the plumbing system serving the lavatory, and shower or bathtub, be located such that the wall penetration enables different fixtures to be traded out without requiring opening the walls and substantial reconfiguration to the plumbing system. A clear lateral transfer space is required adjacent the water closet.

The contents of this Bulletin are not intended to be provided as legal advice and should not be relied upon as legal advice. The Building and Safety Standards Branch does not enforce compliance with the British Columbia Building Code. Local authorities are authorized to enforce the British Columbia Building Code through the Local Government Act and the Community Charter.

PO Box 9844 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria BC V8W 9T2
Email: building.safety@gov.bc.ca
Website: www.gov.bc.ca/buildingcodes

Utilizing clear spaces for multiple functions is encouraged. It is possible to utilize the floor area of a zero-threshold shower to also serve as the functional clear floor space required for the use of other fixtures, such as the water closet (toilet).

Grab bars are not required, however; the walls adjacent to the water closet, and to the shower or bathtub, must be reinforced so that the future installation of grab bars is not limited by insufficient or unsuitable anchorage points.

Do adaptable dwelling units look different from other dwelling units?

Adaptable dwelling units can look and feel the same as other dwelling units. The designer has the same choices for furnishings, finishes, and aesthetics broadly as for other dwelling units. The difference between adaptable dwelling units and other dwelling units is that adaptable dwelling units are shown on architectural drawings to have the potential to be renovated to suit a variety of occupants needs without costly and intrusive reconstruction of building systems (such as, but not limited to, structural, fire protection, and plumbing).

What is the impact to construction costs?

Some feedback indicates concern that requiring adaptable dwellings will impact the size of units and therefore impact housing construction costs. The adaptable dwelling unit provisions share some similarities with SAFERhome Standards which, when incorporated in the design stage, can be achieved with a nominal construction cost increase of approximately $1 100. Construction costs to renovate an existing home to the provide the same features can exceed $100 000.

Providing adaptable housing provides safer housing for all, as slightly larger spaces may help reduce trips and slips, thereby reducing personal distress and impacts to the medical system.

The Building Code 2024 includes many updates to the accessibility requirements including the reduction and elimination of historical variations to the model National Building Code of Canada (NBC). Recent anthropometric data has been reviewed to inform better and more economical design. A notable example is that B.C.'s historical default for the width of an accessible path of travel was 1 500 mm; the NBC 2020, based on recent anthropometric data, requires 1 000 mm as a minimum. The Building Code 2024 adopted the 1 000 mm minimum in large part to ensure the space the Building Code requires provides the greatest chance of being needed and used, without requiring the expense of constructing space that may not be used. Scrutinizing these historical requirements is one way the Province worked to economize floor space in buildings.

The contents of this Bulletin are not intended to be provided as legal advice and should not be relied upon as legal advice. The Building and Safety Standards Branch does not enforce compliance with the British Columbia Building Code. Local authorities are authorized to enforce the British Columbia Building Code through the Local Government Act and the Community Charter.