



HOMEOWNER EDITION · 2026

The Council Process Guide.

Everything you need to know about getting a deck, pergola or carport approved in NSW — written for homeowners, by the builders who do it every day.

PREPARED BY
BC Complete

FOR
NSW Homeowners

EDITION
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REGION
Sydney + Illawarra

Welcome

This guide walks you through every step from idea to final inspection — in plain English. We've built hundreds of decks, pergolas and carports across NSW, so we know exactly where homeowners get stuck. Use this as your roadmap, and reach out anytime — we're happy to help even if you don't end up building with us.

“The council process isn't hard — it's just unfamiliar. Once you know the path, the whole thing feels manageable.”

— The BC Complete team

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01

The big picture

In NSW, three approval pathways cover almost every home building project. Picking the right one early saves weeks — sometimes months.

Most decks, pergolas and carports fall under one of three routes: **Exempt Development** (no approval), a **Complying Development Certificate (CDC)** (fast-track approval by a private certifier), or a full **Development Application (DA)** lodged with your local council. Which one you need depends on size, setbacks, materials, and where your property sits (heritage, bushfire, flood, etc.).

Pathway	Who approves	Typical timeframe	Best for
Exempt	No approval required	Immediate	Small low-impact structures
CDC	Private certifier	10–20 business days	Most decks & pergolas
DA	Local council	8–16 weeks	Heritage / bushfire / oversize

Quick test

If your structure is under 25m², freestanding, set back from boundaries, and you're not in a heritage or bushfire zone — you're likely in Exempt territory. We can confirm in a 5-minute phone call.

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Exempt development

The fastest path. No paperwork, no fees — but the rules are strict.

Exempt Development is set out in the State Environmental Planning Policy (Exempt and Complying Development Codes) 2008. If your project ticks every box, you can start building tomorrow. Miss one rule and it becomes unauthorised work — expensive to fix later.

COMMON EXEMPT LIMITS

Structure	Max area	Max height	Setback
Deck (1m above ground)	25 m ²	1.0 m floor	900 mm to boundary
Pergola (open roof)	25 m ²	3.0 m	900 mm to boundary
Carport (open)	25 m ²	3.0 m	900 mm to boundary
Privacy screen / pool fence	—	1.8 m	On boundary OK

Watch out

Heritage items, bushfire-prone land (BAL-29+), flood zones, and acid sulfate soils all remove the exempt pathway — even for tiny structures. Always check your property's planning certificate (Section 10.7) first.

03

Complying Development Certificate

The sweet spot for most projects — faster and more predictable than a DA.

A CDC is a combined planning and construction approval issued by a private certifier (or council, if you prefer). If your project meets the state code, the certifier **must** approve it — typically within 20 business days. No neighbour objections can stop it.

WHAT YOU'LL TYPICALLY NEED

Document	Who prepares it	Typical cost
Site & floor plans	Designer / draftsman	\$600 – \$1,800
Engineering certificate	Structural engineer	\$700 – \$1,500
BASIX certificate (if applies)	Online (NSW Planning)	\$60 – \$80
Bushfire report (if BAL-12.5+)	BPAD consultant	\$800 – \$2,200
CDC application fee	Certifier	\$1,400 – \$2,800

Tip from us

Choose your certifier before finalising plans. A good certifier will flag issues during design — a bad one will reject your application after you've paid in full.

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Development Application

Slower, but sometimes the only option. Don't let it scare you.

A DA is lodged with your local council and assessed against the Local Environmental Plan (LEP) and Development Control Plan (DCP). It can take 8–16 weeks, sometimes longer. You'll need a DA if your project exceeds the complying code (e.g. taller than 3m, closer than 900mm to a boundary, or on heritage / bushfire / flood-affected land).

DA STAGES — WHAT TO EXPECT

Stage	What happens	How long
1. Pre-DA meeting	Optional council chat to flag issues	1–2 weeks
2. Lodgement	Submit plans + reports via NSW Planning Portal	1 day
3. Notification	Neighbours get 14 days to object	2 weeks
4. Assessment	Council planner reviews, may request changes	4–10 weeks
5. Determination	Approval, refusal, or deferred	1–2 weeks
6. Construction Cert.	Separate certificate before you build	2–4 weeks

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Documents your certifier will ask for

A clean document pack is the #1 thing that speeds up approval.

Whether you're going CDC or DA, certifiers want the same core information. Get these right the first time and your approval moves quickly.

Document	What it shows
Survey plan	Boundaries, levels, easements, existing structures
Site plan (1:200)	Where the new structure sits on the block
Floor plan (1:100)	Dimensions and layout of the build
Elevations (1:100)	Heights, materials, finishes from each side
Sections / details	How it's put together — footings, framing, fixings
Engineering	Footings, beam sizes, bracing — signed by an engineer
Specifications	Brand and grade of every material
BASIX (if dwelling work)	Water + energy compliance

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Timelines & realistic costs

What it actually takes — from first sketch to first beer on the deck.

Pathway	Design + docs	Approval	Build	Total realistic
Exempt	1–2 weeks	—	2–6 weeks	3–8 weeks
CDC	3–5 weeks	2–4 weeks	4–10 weeks	9–19 weeks
DA	4–8 weeks	8–16 weeks	4–12 weeks	16–36 weeks

Approval & consultant costs

Item	Low	Typical	High
Design / drafting	\$600	\$1,500	\$3,500
Engineering	\$700	\$1,200	\$2,500
BASIX certificate	\$60	\$70	\$80
Bushfire / flood report	\$800	\$1,400	\$3,000
Certifier (CDC)	\$1,400	\$2,000	\$2,800
Council fees (DA)	\$500	\$1,400	\$4,000

Figures based on Sydney metro projects, 2025–2026. Your project may differ — we'll quote real numbers, not estimates.

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BASIX, BAL & engineering

Three acronyms every NSW homeowner ends up learning. Here's the plain English version.

BASIX

The Building Sustainability Index. Required for new dwellings and major alterations — not usually for a standalone deck or pergola, but always for an attached room or roofed extension. Filed online via the NSW Planning Portal. Takes about 30 minutes once your plans are final.

BAL — BUSHFIRE ATTACK LEVEL

If your block is in a bushfire-prone area, an accredited consultant assigns a BAL rating (BAL-Low, 12.5, 19, 29, 40, or FZ). The higher the rating, the more your materials and detailing must resist bushfire — non-combustible cladding, ember screens, treated timbers. A BAL report is a fixed cost up front but unlocks the entire project.

ENGINEERING

A structural engineer signs off on footings, posts, beams and bracing. For most decks and pergolas this is a one-page certificate plus a footing detail. Always engage them before lodging — retrofitting engineering after approval is the #2 cause of build delays we see.

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Neighbours & notifications

How council handles objections — and how to keep neighbours on side.

Under a CDC, neighbours can't formally object — but they'll be notified two days before work starts. Under a DA, neighbours get 14 days to make a written submission. Council weighs objections against the planning rules; an objection alone isn't enough to refuse a compliant project, but it can slow things down.

Our advice

Talk to your neighbours **before** you lodge. A 10-minute chat, a copy of the plans, and a heads-up about noise windows almost always prevents formal objections. Most disputes are about surprise, not the build itself.

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Construction Certificate & inspections

After approval comes the build phase — and a small handful of critical inspections.

A CDC bundles approval + construction certificate together. A DA needs a separate Construction Certificate (CC) before any work starts. From there, a Principal Certifying Authority (PCA) — usually the same certifier — does mandatory inspections at key stages.

Inspection	When	What's checked
Footings	Before concrete pour	Depth, reinforcement, soil bearing
Frame	Before lining / cladding	Members, fixings, bracing
Waterproofing	Before tiling (if wet area)	Membrane coverage and lap
Final / OC	On completion	Compliance with approved plans

Occupation Certificate

The Occupation Certificate (OC) is the final tick. Without it, insurers may not cover the new structure, and a future sale can be held up. Always make sure your builder hands you the OC, not just an invoice.

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The five most common mistakes

Everything we wish homeowners knew before they call us in a panic.

#	Mistake	Fix
1	Building first, asking later	Always check your pathway before tools come out
2	Using a generic certifier	Pick one who specialises in your build type
3	Skipping engineering	It's \$1k well spent; retrofits cost 10x
4	Ignoring BASIX / BAL early	Get these in the first 2 weeks, not the last
5	No written contract	HIA / MBA contracts protect both sides

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Your homeowner checklist

Tick these off in order. If you can answer yes to all 12, you're ready to lodge.

I know which approval pathway applies (Exempt / CDC / DA)

I have a current Section 10.7 planning certificate

My block is checked for heritage, bushfire, flood and acid-sulfate constraints

I have a survey plan with levels and easements

Site plan, floor plan and elevations are drawn at correct scale

Engineering certificate is in hand (or scheduled)

BASIX is completed if my work touches a dwelling

BAL report is ordered if I'm in a bushfire zone

Certifier is engaged and has seen draft plans

Neighbours have been told face-to-face

Builder is licensed, insured and has provided a written quote

I understand my inspection schedule and final OC requirement

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How BC Complete can help

We build decks, pergolas, carports and outdoor rooms across Sydney and the Illawarra. We've walked hundreds of homeowners through the council process and we'd be happy to do the same for you.

Free pathway review

Send us your address and rough idea — we'll tell you exactly which approval path applies, in writing.

Full design + approval

We'll handle drafting, engineering, BASIX, BAL and certifier liaison so you can stay focused on the fun bits.

Build + handover

Fixed-price contracts, licensed trades, weekly progress photos, and we hand you the Occupation Certificate at the end.

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SERVING

Sydney + Illawarra

This guide is general information, not legal or planning advice. Always confirm with your certifier or council before starting work. © BC Complete 2026.