

Sea Containers (Shipping Containers)

What you need to know before placing a container on your property

THE SHORT VERSION

A shipping container is not automatically a 'shed' just because you intend to use it for storage. Planning approval and Building Permit requirements depend on the proposed use, location, duration and how the container is installed or modified. Before buying or placing one, check with the Shire.

YOUR PROJECT IN 5 SIMPLE STEPS

1	2	3	4	5
Check planning	Check permit	Design it	Get approval	Install & maintain
Confirm zoning, use, siting and planning approval.	Confirm whether a Building Permit or temporary exemption applies.	Address setbacks, wind, tie-downs, footings, soil and modifications.	Obtain required Building and Planning approvals first.	Install as approved and keep it safe and compliant.

What is a sea container?

A sea (shipping) container is a large steel container originally designed to transport goods. Once placed on land for storage or another ongoing use, it can be regulated as a building or incidental structure. Its transport certification does not by itself demonstrate compliance with Australian building requirements.

Do I need planning approval?

Planning approval may be required depending on the zoning of the land, proposed use, location and visibility, and whether the placement is temporary or permanent. Sea containers are generally not supported in residential zones except for temporary use and should be incidental to an approved use of the land.

BEFORE YOU BUY ONE

Do not purchase a container first and ask about approval afterwards. A container can be difficult or impossible to approve in the proposed location or for the proposed use. Confirm the planning position with Development Services first.

Do I need a Building Permit?

- A Building Permit is typically required where the container is used as a Class 1 or 10a structure, is fixed in position, is structurally modified, or is used in a way that may affect structural integrity or safety.
- A temporary container may be exempt from a Building Permit in some circumstances, but planning approval may still be required.
- Do not assume that being delivered by truck, or not being permanently anchored, automatically makes it exempt.
- If unsure, obtain confirmation from the Shire before placement.

PLANNING APPROVAL AND BUILDING APPROVAL ARE DIFFERENT

Planning approval does not replace a Building Permit, and a Building Permit does not replace Planning approval. Where both are required, the appropriate planning approval must be dealt with before the Building Permit can be issued.

Design & Building Permit requirements

What we need to know about the container and its site

For a Building Permit application

1 Site plan Boundaries, setbacks, buildings and services.	2 Elevations Dimensions, doors, openings and appearance.	3 Structure Footings, supports and restraint.	4 Wind & soil Site-specific wind and ground conditions.	5 Modifications Every opening, cut, roof, lining or attachment.
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Application checklist

- ☐ Completed BA1 certified or BA2 uncertified Building Permit application, as applicable.
- ☐ BA3 Certificate of Design Compliance where a certified BA1 application is used.
- ☐ Site plan showing the container, all boundary setbacks, existing buildings and relevant structures.
- ☐ Elevations showing container dimensions, height, doors, openings and external appearance.
- ☐ Details of footings, supports and/or slab.
- ☐ Tie-down or anchoring details suitable for the site.
- ☐ Site-specific wind region classification and design assumptions.
- ☐ Soil classification and footing design appropriate to the site.
- ☐ Engineering certification where required, particularly where the container is modified or the installation is non-standard.
- ☐ Details of electrical, plumbing, mechanical, roof or other additions.

Structural matters people often overlook

THE CONTAINER ITSELF - A container is designed primarily for transport and stacking loads, not automatically as a permanent building. - Removing wall sections for windows, doors or openings can reduce structural capacity. - Cutting the roof or attaching heavy structures can change load paths. - Corrosion or damage to an older container may affect its suitability.	THE SITE INSTALLATION - The container must remain stable under site-specific wind conditions. - Footings/supports must suit the soil and loads imposed by the container. - Anchoring/tie-downs must suit the actual installation. - A level, compacted surface is not automatically an adequate footing system.
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ENGINEERING IS ABOUT MORE THAN THE CONTAINER

Where the container is modified or the installation is outside a straightforward system, structural engineering certification will be required for the container, supports, tie-downs and effects of modifications. Provide the complete design rather than relying on a generic container specification.

Wind and bushfire

A shipping container still has to be suitable for the conditions at its site. Wind region, terrain, exposure and tie-down requirements must be considered. In a bushfire-prone area, the container's location and proposed use may also bring additional planning and/or building requirements.

Use, siting & common mistakes

The things that can turn a simple storage container into a difficult approval

What can you use it for?

STRAIGHTFORWARD STORAGE

- Storage of goods or equipment is the most common proposed use.
- The container should remain ancillary to an approved use of the land.
- The proposed use and location still need to satisfy Planning requirements.

CHANGING THE USE

- Offices, workshops, accommodation or other uses may require a different Building and Planning assessment.
- A habitable room is not created simply by adding insulation, windows and air-conditioning.
- Changing the use can trigger substantial NCC requirements beyond the original container.

Can I live in a sea container?

NOT AS A SHORTCUT TO A HOUSE

Sea containers are typically Class 10a non-habitable structures and must not be used for habitation unless fully approved and constructed in accordance with the NCC as a Class 1a habitable building.

Converting a container into a dwelling or habitable room is a substantially different project from using it for storage.

Siting checklist

- ☐ Confirm required setbacks before delivery - do not assume a container can sit directly on a boundary.
- ☐ Do not place the container over septic tanks, leach drains, easements or underground services.
- ☐ Consider access for delivery and removal, including the truck, crane or other equipment required.
- ☐ Consider visual impact, screening and the effect on neighbours and the streetscape.
- ☐ Keep the container in good condition and address corrosion, sharp edges, damaged doors and other hazards.
- ☐ If the container is temporary, know when it must be removed and do not allow a temporary arrangement to become an unauthorised permanent installation.

Common mistakes

- Buying the container before checking whether it can be approved.
- Assuming 'it's only storage' means no approvals are required.
- Assuming a container is structurally compliant because it was certified for shipping.
- Cutting large openings before obtaining structural advice.
- Placing the container first and applying for approval retrospectively.
- Putting it over a septic system, leach drain, easement or service.
- Assuming temporary placement means Planning approval is not required.

Useful links

- [WA Building and Energy - Building Approvals & Forms](#)
- [WA Building Act 2011 — Current Legislation](#)
- [WA Planning — Development Approvals](#)

GUIDE ONLY

This information sheet is a plain-English guide based on the Shire of Denmark's Sea Containers information sheet and current WA building approval requirements. Planning controls are site-specific and may change. Always confirm the requirements with the Shire before purchasing, delivering or modifying a sea container. Additional information may be requested during assessment.