

OLD ABERDEEN HERITAGE SOCIETY



Local Development Plan Team  
Aberdeen City Council  
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Marischal College

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Old Aberdeen  
AB24 3HP

31st May 2015

Dear Sirs,

Proposed Aberdeen Local Development Plan 2015

We enclose the Society's representations with regard to the above proposed Plan and Supplementary Guidance.

We have commented on:-

- Policy D3 and Supplementary Guidance - "Big Buildings"
- Supplementary Guidance - "Temporary Buildings"
- "Transport and Accessibility"
- "Shops and Signs"
- "Landscape"

We would ask that our observations and representations be given serious consideration.

Yours faithfully,



Ronald Leith

Chairman



## **Policy D3 and Supplementary Guidance - Big Buildings**

We have concerns about the presentation of this guidance. Nowhere is there any reference to the colossal impact which such buildings would have particularly on the character of Conservation Areas.

In their response to the Draft Character Appraisal for Old Aberdeen Conservation Area, Historic Scotland advised that it should include a policy relating to the threat posed by extremely large buildings-

***“notably University redevelopment proposals directly impacting the Conservation Area and affecting its setting”***

They also drew attention to the particular threat of the visual impact of new development/tall buildings on the setting of the core of Old Aberdeen, notably from University growth. They advocated a Tall Buildings strategy to address this issue.

Throughout the submission from Historic Scotland, there is an emphasis on the vernacular, small-scale character of the Old Aberdeen Conservation Area, which they describe as-

***“one of Scotland’s most outstanding historic townscapes”***

The Planning Officer’s response to Historic Scotland’s comments was to draw attention to the new city-wide SG on “Big Buildings”, which would apply to any proposed large/tall buildings in the University areas of Old Aberdeen.

This, it turns out, has not been sufficient. There is no recognition in this policy of the particular sensitivities of siting big buildings beside Conservation Areas, far less the incredibly detrimental impact that such buildings could have on the setting of the small-scale vernacular character of Old Aberdeen, which is of national importance, and has been singled out as outstanding by Historic Scotland as such.

This guidance concentrates on big buildings in the city centre and the immediate surrounding area, but adds that if a big building is proposed beyond these locations (such as Old Aberdeen, of course), it will be “assessed against the criteria within this document”.

It is absolutely shocking that nowhere in these criteria is there reference to the character, appearance or setting of Conservation Areas.

Old Aberdeen, being of outstanding historical and architectural value, should, indeed, be given especial consideration, and the strictest possible safeguards put in place to protect its setting. This is all the more urgent given the intense pressure being put on the area by the University, a pressure which is not only well-known and well-documented, but is also growing at a relentless pace.

This Big Buildings policy and guidance is completely inadequate. It is simply not fit for purpose if it does not place, at the heart of its concerns, the imperative to protect the setting of buildings, streetscapes and views in the City’s conservation areas. This protection should be at its most uncompromising when it comes to our No.1 Conservation Area, Old Aberdeen.

This guidance needs to be re-written to take account of all the above, and incorporate effective policy to protect our conservation areas from the detrimental impact of Big Buildings on their setting, such protection being the Council’s statutory duty.

## Supplementary Guidance - "Temporary Buildings"

We wish to make the following observations:-

### Section 2.5.1 - "Introduction to the Topic"

The SG states that-

*"The placement and length of time a temporary building is in place can have a significant impact on the appearance of the building next to which it is located and to the streetscene"*

It is our view that this is an inadequate assessment of the impact of these buildings.

It assumes that the temporary building is in a street. This is often not the case. Very often it is placed in the grounds of a public building or institution and it can often, unfortunately, be placed in a landscaped area; or, indeed, in a conservation area, or even a landscaped area within a conservation area.

This needs to be reflected in the SG.

Perhaps it could read-

*"can have a significant impact on the appearance of neighbouring buildings, and of the streetscene, or grounds within which it is located.  
This impact is particularly detrimental if it is sited within a landscaped area and/or a conservation area, where it will cause harm to their character and amenity".*

### Section 2.5.2 - General Guidance

- ① The first sentence should be more prescriptive, as it was in the 2012 SG, and so read:-

*"are designed to cater for short term needs only, and not for longer term accommodation purposes"*

This would strengthen the Council's position.

- ② The heading "Commercial Buildings" (as opposed to Residential Buildings), should read "Commercial and Institutional Buildings", as institutional buildings are otherwise not adequately covered by this Guidance. These do, of course, represent a significant proportion of temporary buildings, especially in the grounds of educational institutions or similar.

- ③ Under "Demountable Buildings", there is an important issue which needs to be addressed, but is lacking in the proposed SG.

There have, regrettably, been occasions in the past when permission has been given for demountable buildings on landscaped amenity areas with established tree and shrub planting.

This has been allowed, despite being contrary to Council guidance, by virtue of exceptional circumstances, and on the strict condition that the building be removed after five years only, and the landscaping fully restored.

In one well-known case, in Old Aberdeen, the owners were not only allowed an extension of five years, but at the end of that time, unbelievably, a further ten years – a total of twenty years on a site, where Council policy dictated there should have been no permission in the first place.

2

This, of course, is only one example; there may be many more.

Our point is that the SG must include some provision which ensures that this never happens again, and that the existing offending buildings are removed.

We suggest an addition to the section on demountable buildings, where it reads:-

*“Thereafter, units may be considered for additional shorter periods if:-“*

We suggest that a third bullet point is added here, reading:-

*“the building is not sited on what was formerly a landscaped amenity area, especially one with established tree and shrub planting. If it is, then no extension to the permission will be given, and the landscaping must be fully restored”*

**This addition is absolutely essential to prevent the abuse of the planning system by applicants wishing to find cheap and easy solutions to accommodation problems with no regard to the environment or amenity of the area.**

**Supplementary Guidance - "Transport and Accessibility"**

**Section 7.1.9 - "Parking in Conservation Areas"**

**pp 192, 193 - "Parking in Front Gardens"**

The Society has serious concerns about the efficacy of this section. This Guidance necessarily should take full account of the Council's guidance on Conservation Areas, but it does not do so. In particular there is no mention of the need to assess the possible impact of allowing cars to be parked directly in front of a property in a Conservation Area.

In July 2013, the City Council approved its "**Conservation Area Strategic Overview and Management Plan**"

This Management Plan, at Section 2.3, sets out "**Generic guidance for all conservation areas**"

On page 17 of this guidance under a section entitled "**Parking in front gardens**", there is a clear statement of the Council's guidance on this matter. We would draw your attention to the final piece of advice:-

**"Parking in all but the largest front gardens, which already have been designed with driveway access in mind, will have a detrimental effect on the setting of buildings in the Conservation Area, potentially obscuring important features"**

It is vital that this statement be added to the SG on "Transport and Accessibility", Section 7.1.9, so that this considered assessment by the Council's Senior Planner for Conservation Areas is read alongside the rest of the guidance. Without this addition, there is no consideration in the SG of the effect a parked car in front of a building can have on the setting of that building, especially in a relatively confined space. Anyone wishing to understand the Council's position on parking in front gardens in Conservation Areas could then be misled into thinking that the possible obscuring of important features, or indeed most of the house, was not a matter of concern for the Council.

\* \* \*

We should like also to draw attention to national policy and guidance which is helpful when looking at this question (underlining is ours):

The "**Scottish Planning Policy**" document, (section 139) states that:-

**"Local development plans and supplementary guidance should provide a framework for protecting, and where appropriate, enhancing, all elements of the historic environment"**

And at section 143:-

**"Proposals for development within conservation areas and proposals outwith which will impact on its appearance, character or setting, should preserve or enhance the character and appearance of the Conservation Area"**

It is our view that the proposed SG on "Transport and Accessibility" in the section we have referred to, does not accord with SPP Section 139, because it does not provide a framework for protecting all elements of the historic environment, in that it fails to take into account the clear guidance in the Council's Conservation Area Management Plan, and thus the SG is an incomplete statement of the Council's position. It is therefore not only inadequate, but indeed misleading, not only to potential applicants, but also to planning officers and the general public.

The Government's "Scottish Historic Environment Policy", 2011, (SHEP) is also relevant here. One of its "Key Principles", Section 1.15, (g), is to:-

*"have regard to retaining, or where appropriate enhancing, the setting of the building or landscape"*

This emphasis is also to be found in "Our Place in Time, the Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland" which states (p9) that:-

*"We will be guided by the following overarching principles:-" - one of which reads:-*

*"We should conserve the wider setting and context of our historic assets"*

To sum up, the possible visual impact on a building of a parked car in front of it in a Conservation Area, especially in a confined space, is not fully considered in the proposed SG. This is contrary to advice given in Historic Scotland's "Managing Change in the Historic Environment" document on "Setting" which says that:-

*"one of the factors to be considered in assessing the impact on the setting of a historic asset" is:-*

*"the visual impact of the proposed change relative to the scale of the historic asset or place and its setting"*

It is this factor which is not addressed in the proposed SG, and it is our view that it is therefore inadequate guidance. In particular, there is a clear need to incorporate the relevant section in the Conservation Area Management Plan, (p.17 – final part of paragraph J) in to the SG, and to make it quite clear that this kind of development would have a detrimental effect on the setting of buildings in the Conservation Area, and so, in line with planning legislation, would not be granted permission.

## Supplementary Guidance - Shops and Signs

We are seriously concerned that this Guidance maintains that it is to be used “for listed buildings and those within conservation areas”, yet makes very little reference to the distinctive character of these areas and buildings as requiring especial consideration.

### Shopfronts

In particular, there is little acknowledgement of the kind of “shopfront” found on some historic listed buildings, where the shop is really only a former house, perhaps 18th or 19th century vernacular, converted into or incorporating a shop, but still retaining its domestic character. In such circumstances it is simply not the case that “proportions, materials and scale are the three most important elements of a shopfront”. It is simply important that the shopfront should be true to the character of the building, and appropriate to its historical context, particularly in the case of a listed building. This guidance does not address this kind of shop.

We wish to make the following point about the guidance on shopfronts:-

#### “page 21 - “Materials”

This guidance is ambivalent. First it says that timber is traditional for Aberdeen, and therefore is to be “expected”. Then it says that other traditional materials are also acceptable. This does not address the need for shopfronts in Conservation Areas to follow the traditional pattern.

It should be noted that in the 1993 “Conservation Area Report” for Old Aberdeen, there is clear guidance, viz .

*“New or replacement shopfronts should be to a design contemporary with the building to which they are attached”*

This is the kind of guidance that is needed.

### Signage

The guidance on fascia signage is even more worrying. Again there is talk of “the expected” method, but no definitive statement. This carries little weight, and can hardly be described as guidance. Certainly the appropriate and correct method on a listed building or within a conservation area is “painted lettering on a timber fascia”, but this needs to be affirmed as what is required, not just expected.

We are not clear what is meant by “painted lettering within the shopfront window”, but would think painted letters on the window inappropriate, and not historically correct for listed buildings. Where has this idea come from? There is, to our knowledge, no historical precedent for this.

Of even more concern is the suggestion that “individual cut out metal or coated metal letters may be appropriate if fixed to a rail”. This as general guidance for listed buildings?. Individual letters attached to the building are quite out of character with the historic 18th and early 19th century buildings of the High Street in Old Aberdeen for instance, which would never have sported such modern attachments.

Again it is worth noting that the last Conservation Guidance for Old Aberdeen (1993) simply stipulates that “shop signs should be painted timber”. And so, in sensitive areas like the High Street, they certainly should.

## Hanging or Projecting Signs

We are absolutely astounded by the guidance given in this section relating to projecting signs on listed buildings and in Conservation Areas.

First, it is stated that (non-illuminated) box projection signs with brackets will be permitted if “the design is of very high quality” and they project no more than 650mm.

This is completely unacceptable as general guidance. There are many listed buildings where box projection signs would be entirely out of character, being historically incorrect. The High Street in Old Aberdeen is one such example, and it is easy to see the damage done by such signs, both there and elsewhere,

To compound this folly, this supplementary guidance goes on to state that “illuminated, bracket suspended box signs may be permitted on listed buildings” if they are “of exceptional design quality” and “project no more than 600mm from the face of the building”.

This suggestion is quite simply appalling. To allow illuminated box signs of any design or thickness to be attached to a listed building in conservation areas such as Old Aberdeen is unthinkable. Whatever is our Planning Department thinking of?

Illuminated signs are not appropriate for historically important buildings, where no such signs would ever have existed. Again there is no regard here for the character either of Conservation Areas or for the integrity of listed buildings.

There is also the hugely important question of precedent. If even one such sign is given permission in a sensitive part of a conservation area or on an historic building, then it will be difficult for the City Council to refuse similar applications in these areas, and their historic character and integrity will be irreparably damaged.

It has to be asked whether the author of this guidance has any understanding of our historic environment. It has long been acknowledged, both at local and national level, that illuminated signs are inappropriate in historic conservation areas and on listed buildings.

Yet again, we would draw attention to the guidance in the Conservation Area Report for Old Aberdeen, which was in force until very recently, which simply and authoritatively states that for the core heart of Old Aberdeen:-

**“no illuminated signs will be permitted”.**

How has our Planning Department managed to slip from these historically informed standards of guidance to what seems to be such a lax policy that is hardly worth having?

Conservation areas are there to be preserved, protected and enhanced. Illuminated box signs do not contribute to this aim in any way, but, rather, cause significant harm to the historic environment, being completely out of character. Listed buildings should warrant even more sensitive treatment.

**This guidance not only fails in these respects, but actually poses a real threat** to those buildings and areas which the Council has a duty to protect.

It is our firm view that it is essential that no illuminated signs be permitted within conservation areas or on listed buildings, in conservation areas which are predominately residential or “village-like” in character.

While a case could be made for allowing box projecting signs on non-listed buildings in some conservation areas, these would be wholly inappropriate in others. Again, a case might be made for



allowing illuminated signs in, for instance, the commercial heart of the City, where restaurants, bars and nightclubs proliferate, but in quieter, non-urban conservation areas, these are completely out of place and would be severely detrimental to the special interest and character of these areas which the Council endeavours to preserve.

Part of the problem with this Guidance is that it treats conservation areas and listed buildings with a “one size fits all” approach. Aberdeen’s conservation areas, however, differ widely from each other in terms of size, geographical setting, historical background and distinctive character. Some, such as Union Street, are primarily commercial, filled with shops, bars and restaurants; some are quiet residential areas of dignified Victorian villas; others, now in the suburbs, represent former distinct villages; and one or two, such as Footdee and Old Aberdeen, represent distinct village communities adjacent to the original town, but with their completely separate identity. In the case of Old Aberdeen, it was, of course, also a separate burgh for 400 years.

This diversity should not only be apparent to all planners, but should also be a prime consideration in forming policies or guidance which might have an impact on the integrity of any or all of these areas. What might be acceptable in an urban context would, for example, be utterly inappropriate in a conservation area which still has the feel of a separate village, with simple, small-scale vernacular architecture predominating, such as Footdee or Old Aberdeen.

This Guidance fails to take account of this diversity, and therefore poses a threat to these areas.

Unfortunately, the situation is compounded by the fact that the Council’s new Conservation Management Plan (2013) contains no guidance whatsoever on shopfronts or signage: a very serious omission.

Furthermore, the draft Conservation Area Character Appraisal for Old Aberdeen also fails to provide guidance on this sensitive topic. When our Society questioned this, in the consultation process, the response was that there would be Supplementary Guidance on Shopfronts and Signage which would address the relevant issues.

To sum up, then Old Aberdeen has no guidance on this matter either from the draft Character Appraisal or from the Conservation Area Management Plan, and we are told to look to Supplementary Guidance for the protective policy which Old Aberdeen urgently needs.

We have looked to the promised Guidance, and have found it to be inadequate, ambivalent and muddled; worst of all, though, it has the potential to allow developments which would cause significant damage to the distinctive character and amenity of historic jewels such as Old Aberdeen.

We request, therefore, that this Guidance be re-written, so that it presents a robust and protective policy on shopfronts and signage in the historic environment, but also acknowledges and accommodates the diversity amongst conservation areas in this respect.

We still hold, incidentally, that a separate policy on shopfronts and signs, (and all other signage) for the heart of Old Aberdeen is very much needed. The High Street, especially, has long been acknowledged as worthy of exceptional attention, and this is demonstrated by the fact that it was designated as the City’s only Area of Special Control for advertisements well before the creation of any of the City’s Conservation Areas.

Neither that designation, nor recent city-wide guidelines have been enough, however, to prevent some inappropriate and ugly signs appearing over the last few years, and we do need a specific policy in place in the Character Appraisal to protect the High Street and its environs.

What we do not need is city-wide guidance on signage which relaxes the standards for historic conservation areas and listed buildings, such as this, to the point where it threatens to make meaningless their designation as historically or architecturally important.

## **Supplementary Guidance - Landscape**

We should like an addition made to this SG which would give protection to areas of landscaping around buildings in years to come, to protect them from proposals for further building in these areas.

There have been too many examples of permission being given for a large building with conditions that certain landscaping be provided, only to be followed some years later by an application to build on that landscaped area. It is our view that if the landscaped area was judged important enough to be required for permission for the original building, then it must be protected against further development in the future, which would then detract from the setting of that building.

We therefore wish to see a provision added to this SG to put that protection in place.