

Aberdeen Planning Guidance 2023: Big Buildings

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1. Introduction

1.1 Status of Aberdeen Planning Guidance

This Aberdeen Planning Guidance (APG) supports the Development Plan and is a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

This APG relates to, and expands on the following policies in the Aberdeen Local Development Plan:

- Policy D3 Big Buildings

It should be noted that buildings on employment land, industrial areas and established health or educational campuses will not be assessed against this Planning Guidance.

Given the timing of the Local Development Plan, a pragmatic approach has been taken to changes in the planning system. National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) was adopted following the examination and subsequent modification of the Local Development, and the publication of a draft version of this APG for consultation. As a result, some terminology referred to in this APG may vary from the new NPF4 policy framework but it should be noted that the LDP together with NPF4 now forms the basis of the statutory development plan.

1.2 Introduction to Topic / Background

Guidance is given to ensure big building proposals, when appropriate, will have a positive impact on the streetscene and surrounding area, and Aberdeen's skyline.

Big buildings can be tall buildings and/or bulky buildings. Generally, a big building is regarded as one that exceeds the general height of the surrounding built context and/or whose footprint is in excess of the established development pattern of the surrounding area.

1.3 Climate Change

This document strives to develop places which will encourage economic and social vitality and thus create jobs within the city, close to where people live. It also states that big buildings must be accessible to public transport options to reduce private car usage. This document therefore aligns with the [UN Sustainable Development Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities](#). It also outlines the standards required for the provision of open space which may include trees to reduce the urban heat island effect and/or places for pollinators. This document therefore aligns with [Aberdeen Adapts](#) Goal 4 – Secure Utilities and Communications, Goal 5 – Space for Nature, and Goal 7 – Healthy Trees and Woodlands.

Developments will adhere to low and zero carbon measures and will move towards low carbon communities. Policy R6: Low and Zero Carbon Buildings, and Water Efficiency, and the associated Aberdeen Planning Guidance, provide more information. Specific technical solutions such as green roofs and green walls, rainwater management are encouraged. These can make a significant contribution to enhancing air quality, reducing carbon footprint, and street/townscape. This document therefore also aligns with [Aberdeen Adapts](#) Goal 1: Protecting Buildings and Historic Assets.

1.4 Health and Wellbeing

Where we live, where we work, and where we spend our time has an important influence on our health and wellbeing. How places are designed within their urban or natural environment are vital to the health of the people and communities within them. Noise production, a consideration of big building development, is known to potentially affect mental health. Maintaining a good mix of different building types and tenures helps promote a sense of belonging and a sense of control.

This guidance can help to achieve the following Public Health Priorities for Scotland:

- Priority 1: A Scotland where we live in vibrant, healthy and safe places and communities; and
- Priority 3: A Scotland where we have good mental wellbeing.

This guidance is deemed to have minimal impact on population health and wellbeing. This means that, whilst it is unlikely a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) screening report will be requested to support any planning application, this will depend on the detail and scope of the application. There may be elements of the proposals that relate to the health and wellbeing of the population that warrant consideration. If that is the case, then a screening HIA will be required, and further advice on this will be provided.

2. Aberdeen Planning Guidance

Big buildings can define places by offering greater social intensity through greater densities and concentrations of use. They can bring greater accessibility to a range of amenities and create the opportunity for different economies and uses at different times of the day and night. Big buildings can also be a focus of interest through their design and their adjacent open spaces.



Figure 1

2.1 Site Analysis and Context

The most suitable location for big buildings is in the city centre and the immediate surrounding area/City Centre Masterplan Areas. Big buildings must be situated in close proximity to good public transport links to allow for access and an increase in pedestrian movement. Clustering big buildings is encouraged as this can provide a strong sense of place and signify the use/importance of an area. Appropriate access for site servicing must also be considered. Sites that will affect listed buildings and/or the setting of Conservation Areas must be sensitively considered.

Big buildings must set exemplary standards in design because of their high profile and local impact. It is crucial that sites are identified as a result of a thorough analysis to understand their context. The design process will respond to the site's opportunities and limitations. Design decisions must be linked to this analysis.

The below lists some questions that designers should consider when preparing proposals:

Urban Physical Patterns

What is the nature of the urban grain surrounding the site and how can the footprint and siting of a big building respond to this context? How can permeability and connectivity be encouraged? How can quality open space be incorporated? How can suitable microclimates be formed? Is there a commonplace mass and scale to the adjacent buildings and how will a design proposal respond to this and fit into the wider cityscape?

Local Detailing

What are the surrounding architectural styles? Is there a fenestration pattern on the street? Are there prevalent local materials and/or colours? Is there any significant texturing or detailing? Are there cultural references associated with the site? How will a design proposal reference these features on the building or within open space?

Environment

What are the opportunities to contribute to an active streetscape and how can a less welcoming servicing access be sensitively managed? How will a building respond to the changing seasons? How can the orientation of the building and arrangement of its features contribute to passive heating and cooling? Are there amenity considerations such as noise or overshadowing?

2.2 Visual Analysis

A Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) of the proposal must be submitted with any application for planning permission for a big building. This Assessment should cover views from different approaches to the proposal. It should take in near, middle and distant views and consider assessment along vistas towards the site (this may be a straight length of road leading to the site), or panoramas (from a public vantage point towards the site).

Views from longer distances are helpful in outlining how a proposal will sit within the city skyline amongst existing structures and how prominent it will feel even at a distance. Proportion, mass, silhouette, skyline composition, juxtaposition and lighting are important factors.

Views from middle distances are helpful in displaying how a proposal will act as a place maker, defining a junction or node. Views from near distances are helpful in demonstrating how lower floors function with the street and the quality of architectural detail and how these elements combine to create a sense of place and animation to the street scene. Materials, textures, colours, uses, interiors, entrances become fundamental to our appreciation of the building as the importance of height, scale, mass, and juxtaposition with other buildings generally diminishes.

It is important to begin a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment from a sufficient distance. The example of the Silver Fin building on Justice Mill Lane (**Figures 2 and 3**) demonstrates the surprising prominence of a big building from a significant distance along Rose Street and Albyn Place.



550m



475m



300m



From the approach along Albyn Place the Silver Fin is visible but not dominant due mainly to the roadside trees. By a distance of approximately 250m it starts to become more visually dominant and marks the junction to Union Street west as a node of activity. By 100m it becomes mostly obscured behind buildings that front Union Street.



100m



150m



250m



650m



500m



350m



From the approach from Rose Street, the Silver Fin has a presence from 650m away. The building has significant visual gravity by 350m and towers over the streetscape as Rose Street slopes down towards the city centre.



50m



125m



250m

2.3 What do we look for with Big Building Design?

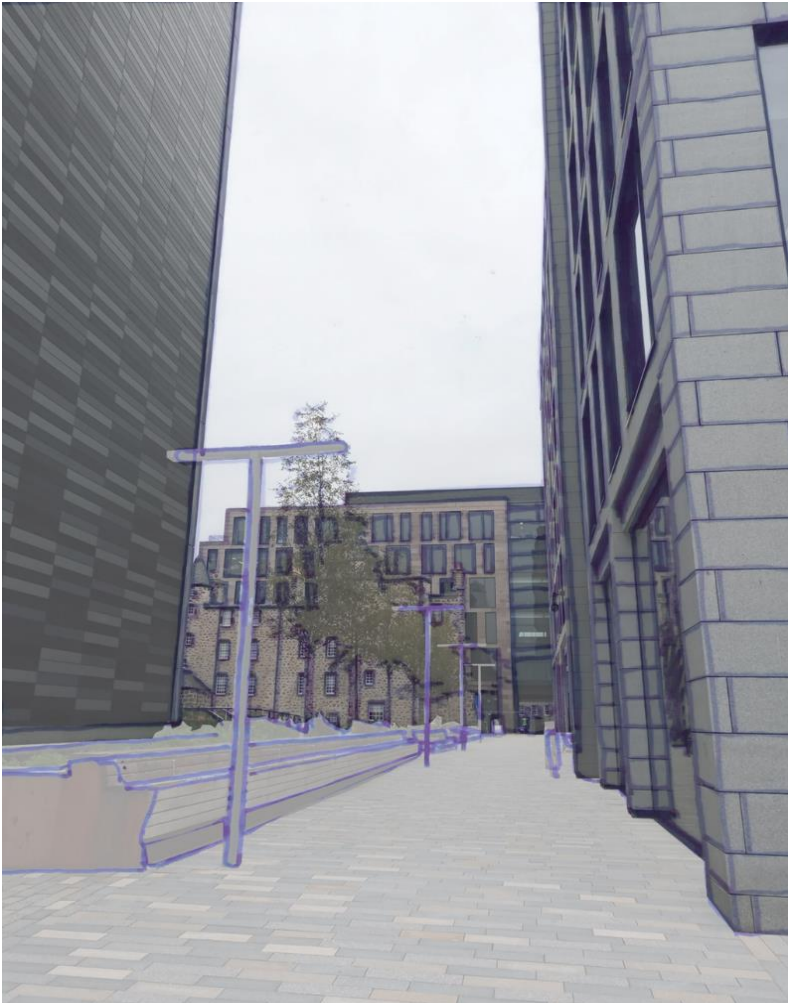


Figure 4

Vertical Emphasis

Big buildings will have well designed proportions and an interesting silhouette to complement the existing streetscapes and the skyline. Large scale buildings will have a vertical appearance to the elevations to minimise their bulk.

Lighting

A Lighting Management Plan may be required. Energy efficient technologies and building management systems will be required.

Design and Access

Building proposals shall include a Design and Access Statement that sets out architectural and townscape ambitions and demonstrates the achievement of excellent design in sufficient detail to allow a suitability assessment to be made. Pedestrian permeability in large, high density, developments is essential to the integration of big buildings with surrounding areas. Prominent access routes should be included, along with associated high quality public realm improvements. Proposals should provide access for all, including where possible, options for ramps, lifts, gentle rising steps with landings etc.

A Mix of Uses

Big buildings can be stand-alone or part of a larger complex of buildings, with smaller buildings wrapped around the base. A mix of uses is encouraged to ensure ground and lower floors will have active frontages encouraging activities. Top floors and accessible roof terraces are likely to provide good views across the city and useable outdoor amenity space. The roof can introduce distinct elements to the building making it more interesting to look at from street level. Consideration of all elevations and their impact on the street scene is fundamental.

Public Realm

Where open space is proposed, it is expected to be designed to be welcoming and inclusive. Consideration should be given to overlooking of the space, integration with through routes and comfortable places to stop and rest, taking account of microclimate.



Figure 5

Figure 6



Materials, Colour, Craftmanship, Detailed Design, Maintenance and Future Proofing

The maintenance of a big building is critical to the image it projects within the public realm. High-quality materials and design with low maintenance implications is essential. Good quality detailing is expected as this adds visual and tactile interest to a building, reinforcing distinctiveness, attractiveness and quality of a place. Detail between different materials, particularly those brought together at the junctions is fundamental. This includes materials of the building and the public space around it.

Designing for long term sustainability, flexibility and changing functions is fundamental. The long-term resource and energy efficiency of big buildings will be enhanced if their design can be adapted over time - this includes flexible internal re-arrangement.

Applicants need to consider a variety of internal and external materials and finishes that have long lives, require low maintenance and which also meet the best practice requirements of sustainability standards. Applicants will need to:

- Describe the palette of materials, and its association to the local character.
- Describe the appropriateness of the materials used, in terms of their sustainability.
- Provide supporting information (if applicable) on the method used to measure the materials' performance in sustainability terms, both initially and throughout the building's life cycle.

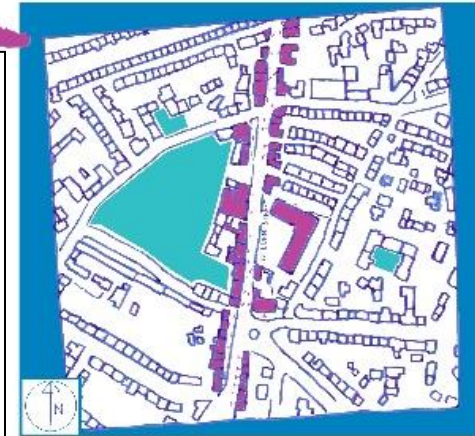
All big buildings should have a robust Management Plan to address maintenance issues.

2.4 Respecting Urban Context



The context of the urban grain of Holburn Street has been eroded to some degree by the big building at 163. Siting a car park between the building and the street fractures the rhythm of active frontages and removes street level human interaction.

Figure 7 & 8.



For the most part Justice Mill Lane has become an access for servicing vehicles. Active frontages at ground level should be utilized to bring about interest at street level.

Figure 9.

Proposals should respect urban rhythms, local architectural language, urban grain and historic setting. These intricacies define how the city is understood. New big buildings should make reference to their surroundings by means of footprint, orientation and alignment. Lower floors are particularly important and they should have a prominence through use and detailing.



2.5 Environmental Issues

The design of big buildings needs to consider the following environmental issues:

- Overshadowing;
- The effect of winds;
- Glare reduction;
- Night time appearance;
- The environment and amenity of those in the vicinity of the building;
- Potential impact on radio, communications and television equipment;
- Contribution to urban heat island effect;
- Impact of illumination;
- Potential impact on bird and animal movements due to height; and,
- Rainwater runoff.

Big buildings can adversely affect environmental quality of surrounding areas through the diversion of high speed winds to ground level and through the overshadowing of adjacent buildings and spaces. The impact of both these elements can be mitigated through good design and sensitive siting. The impact of shadows at different times of the day and throughout the year will need to be assessed. The use of architectural devices such as screens, terraces, and awnings and also façade setbacks can be adopted to minimize the effects of high-speed winds and the bases of big buildings. Proposals should seek to create well orientated spaces that foster a pleasant microclimate at the buildings base.

2.6 When to Carry Out a Formal Wind Assessment

Buildings proposed on exposed sites with large frontages to prevailing wind direction (southwesterly) tend to be most sensitive to wind issues. Big buildings adjacent to areas frequently used by pedestrians, and particularly vulnerable pedestrians (schools and hospitals), also require careful attention. When these factors are combined, planning officers may request further detailed assessment.

3. Summary of Guidance

Big buildings should;

- complement or improve the existing site context, consider the natural topography, scale and height of structures, urban grain, streetscape and built form, open spaces, effect on the skyline, and respect, reinforce and, where applicable create opportunities for enhanced views and vistas and make a positive contribution to the skyline when viewed from all angles from near, middle and distant views, both during the day and at night;
- consider the environment and amenity of those in the vicinity of the building, including micro climate, overshadowing, glare reduction, night time appearance, internal and external lighting;
- at street level, present an active frontage and be comfortable for people and, where feasible, include publicly accessible areas within the building;
- be situated in areas where existing topography, urban scale and transport make them sustainable;
- have a well-designed vertical emphasis;
- be constructed of high quality materials, craftsmanship and have detailing with low maintenance implications;
- provide fully integrated servicing arrangements which are, wherever possible, off street;
- comply with Civil Aviation requirements and those of other telecommunication, television and radio transmission networks;
- be adaptable over time and utilise best sustainable practices; and,
- contain a mix of uses rather than rely on a single use to achieve a viable development. It may be appropriate for big buildings to form part of a wider development mix with smaller scale buildings that reduce any dominating impact