

# Aberdeen Planning Guidance 2023: Student Accommodation

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Status of Aberdeen Planning Guidance

Aberdeen Planning Guidance (APG) provides guidance on purpose built student accommodation, be this new build or proposals for change of use. It has been prepared by Aberdeen City Council and outlines issues that need to be considered in the decision making process when it comes to student accommodation. This APG also provides clarity to developers, agents, universities and other stakeholders on how Aberdeen City Council will manage the development of student accommodation.

This APG supports the Development Plan and is a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

This APG expands upon the following Aberdeen Local Development Plan policies:

- Policy H7 – Student Accommodation Developments

The Council aims to take a positive and proactive approach to new student accommodation to ensure that they are in the most suitable location in terms of accessibility and amenity impacts on the surrounding area; that they are well managed and are appropriate in size and scale; meet the needs of the further education institutes; and that they offer appropriate accommodation.

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. References to the former Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) and Strategic Development Plan (SDP) have been largely removed from this APG to minimise confusion, and wherever possible updated references to NPF4 have been included. Occasional references to SPP and the SDP have been retained where necessary to explain the source of data and/or essential context for the APG, but it should be noted that the LDP together with NPF4 now forms the basis of the statutory development plan.

## 1.2 Background

According to the National Records of Scotland 2021 (NRS), Aberdeen's proportion of 16-24 year olds is 10.9%, a reduction of from the Census (2011) which documented the age group to occupy 16.1% of the City's population. The NRS documents a general decrease in the population of Aberdeen by 0.7% and an increase in the population of Aberdeenshire by 0.7% in the same period. This is consistent with the broader pattern seen across Scotland during the Covid-19 pandemic which saw populations in cities falling while some rural areas saw their populations rise. The percentage of population change saw the largest decrease within the 16-24 year old portion of the population which fell by 21.5% compared to 11.6% across Scotland. The NRS surmises that the pandemic has been a factor in student populations decreasing in cities across Scotland as they temporarily return home to their parent's address. Students are a vital component of the City and whilst their population has seen a decline in recent years, it is unclear at present if this trend will be sustained.

Aberdeen is home to two major universities: the University of Aberdeen and Robert Gordon University (RGU), as well as the North East Scotland College. The continued success of these higher education institutions are a key driver of Aberdeen's economy.

Over the past 5 years, the number of students in further and higher education has been steadily increasing. Latest figures from Aberdeen City Council's Housing Need and Demand Assessment (2023) highlights that in 2021/2022, the University of Aberdeen had 21,404 students (14,071 full time), RGU 17,493 (12,223 full time) and North East Scotland College 25,607 students (6370 full time). The number of students attending the three further education institutions has seen an increase of 15.8% in the last five years (Housing Need and Demand Assessment 2023). The increase in student numbers however, has not just occurred among 16-24 year olds; this is due to the fact that there has also been a growing number of mature students attending university and college in recent years.

Occupancy rates of student accommodation from all three institutions could not be made available as it is commercially sensitive data however, based on figures provided from the institutions, data from the past five years suggests a maintained

level of vacant bed spaces.

Most students in the city either live in purpose built student accommodation, shared housing or in their parental home. For the University of Aberdeen, student accommodation is generally located in or around Old Aberdeen and its immediate neighbourhood, Hillhead Student Village and within the city centre. RGU accommodation is generally focused in and around Woolmanhill and students commute to its Garthdee Campus. North East Scotland College does not have its own accommodation for students. Instead, it expects students to find their own accommodation either from student accommodation providers or from the private rented market.

Traditionally, university accommodation is guaranteed only to first year students. Thereafter, students are required to look for accommodation elsewhere. Most students rent from private landlords, others rent from social landlords and others live in properties purchased by their (or friends) parents.

In 2015, there was a lack of lettings at the lower end of the private rental market in Aberdeen which presented a major problem for students as most of them are unable to afford the high rents. Evidence from the [Citylets Rental Report](#) (2015) indicated rents in and around Aberdeen remained higher than elsewhere in Scotland, including Edinburgh and Glasgow however, the picture is quite different in 2022. Evidence from Scottish Government statistics documents average rents from 2010 to 2021 in Aberdeen and Shire to have fallen: down 19.5% for 1-bedroom properties, 14% for 2-bedroom properties and 7% for 3-bedroom properties. This compares to the Scottish average which saw increases of 23.5% and 25.1% to one and two bedroom properties respectively, over the same period. In the academic year 2022/2023, student accommodation bed spaces in Aberdeen range from £82 to £163 per week, typically including bills. Citylets Rental Report 2022 indicates average private rental values as follows: £448 for a one bed property; £642 for a two bed; and, £914 for a three bed. Consequently, average rental value for private rented housing is competitive and in many cases more affordable than purpose built student bed spaces.

In 2016 Aberdeen experienced a spike in purpose built student accommodation applications, since then there has been a gradual decrease in the number of planning applications for purpose built student accommodation that have both been

received and approved by the City Council. Since 2019 detailed planning applications for student accommodation have related solely to change of use applications. Numbers of applications received and approved for student bed spaces have also been on a downward trend since 2016: 1732 (2016); 1156 (2017); 463 (2018); 29 (2019); 44 (2020); 0 (2021); with a small rise in 2022 of 107 bed spaces. These figures indicate a decreasing demand for purpose built bedsits. Factors that may be contributing to this trend could include the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic as population within Aberdeen decreased and, the availability of private rented accommodation which may offer a more cost effective solution due to decreased market rental values.

### **1.3 Climate Change**

Student accommodation, can make a considerable contribution to the built environment's transition towards net zero through the provision of mixed use communities with different housing provisions for different needs. The contents of this APG relate to [UN Sustainable Development Goal 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities](#) by ensuring Aberdeen is inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

### **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 building relationships, social contact and support networks that make up the social environment of local communities.

Ensuring that developments have access to sufficient sustainable transportation infrastructure to promote active travel has been shown to positively impact upon physical health.

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 some impact on population health and wellbeing. This means that it is possible a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) screening report will be requested to support any planning application, however 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.

## **1.5 Non-Planning Issues**

There are a number of other issues concerning the impact of student housing (both shared housing and purpose built accommodation) which cannot be directly addressed by planning policy or guidance e.g. policing matters and environmental nuisance. The City Council will continue to work with the three further education institutions, purpose built student accommodation providers, shared housing landlords, local residents, the Police and others to manage potential conflicts between students and other sectors of the community.

For non-planning enquiries please contact Aberdeen City Council's Environmental Health team:

Tel: 03000 200 292

Email: [commercial@aberdeencity.gov.uk](mailto:commercial@aberdeencity.gov.uk)

Or the Anti-Social Behaviour Investigation Team (ASBIT):

Tel: 0800 0510434

Email: [ASBIT@aberdeencity.gov.uk](mailto:ASBIT@aberdeencity.gov.uk).

## 2. Aberdeen Planning Guidance

### 2.1 Policy Context

Purpose built student accommodation is essential in contributing to the creation of sustainable communities in Aberdeen as they offer choice to students in the City. They help to relieve pressure on the local housing stock and pressures on Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), which account for a proportion of the available rental accommodation in the City and support the student population. For further guidance on HMOs, please see the Aberdeen Planning Guidance for Houses in Multiple Occupation and Overprovision.

National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) encourages sustainable economic growth and the reuse and redevelopment of brownfield land before any development takes place on greenfield sites. It promotes development that is designed to a high quality, emphasising six qualities of a successful place: distinctive; safe and pleasant; welcoming; adaptable; resource efficient; and easy to move around and beyond.

The [Aberdeen Local Development Plan 2023](#) has introduced a new policy to address the provision of purpose built student accommodation in the city, Policy H7 Student Accommodation Developments. Other policies within the Aberdeen Local Development Plan that are relevant to consider in preparing and determining applications for student accommodation include, but are not limited to:

- Policy D1 Quality Placemaking
- Policy D2 Amenity
- Policy D3 Big Buildings
- Policy H1 Residential Areas
- Policy H2 Mixed Use Areas
- Policy H3 Density
- Policy H7 Student Accommodation Developments
- Policy H8 Houses in Multiple Occupation and Overprovision
- Policy NE4 Our Water Environment

- Policy R6 Low and Zero Carbon Buildings and Water Efficiency
- Policy V1 Vibrant City
- Policy WB1 Healthy Developments

It is essential that all planning applications for purpose built student accommodation give due consideration to all relevant policies contained within the adopted Local Development Plan. The following Aberdeen Planning Guidance documents, along with any others relevant to the proposal, must also be duly considered:

- APG: Transport and Accessibility;
- APG: Open Space and Green Infrastructure;
- SG: Planning Obligations;
- APG: Houses in Multiple Occupation and Overprovision;
- APG: Resources for New Developments and;
- APG: Harmony of Uses.

## **2.2 Criteria for Purpose Built Student Accommodation**

The following will be considered when assessing applications for purpose built student accommodation (new and change of use):

### **A: The development meets an identified need for the type of accommodation proposed**

All proposals for purpose built student accommodation should give adequate consideration to addressing an identified need for the type of development proposed. Developers should consider:

- What specific need the proposal is aimed at and why this need is currently unmet;
- If the proposal is to meet a recorded increase in student numbers.

**B: The development should be in a location that is easily accessible to the higher education campuses by sustainable transport modes**

This allows ease of access to campus for students and will promote sustainable means of travel, thus minimising car use. We would encourage new student accommodation to have direct, attractive, safe and secure pedestrian links to higher education campuses. They should be ideally located next to high frequency public transport routes (10/15 minutes peak/off- peak) and cycle routes.

**C: The development should be designed in a way that does not conflict with adjacent properties or the general amenity of the surrounding area**

Successful built developments must also be in locations which will be attractive to students. They must be located and designed to minimise adverse impacts on their surroundings. Such impacts include overlooking, overshadowing or over domination of buildings.

The Council's principal policies on designing high quality and healthy places include Policy D1 – Quality Placemaking, Policy D2 –Amenity, and Policy WB1 – Healthy Developments. All proposals for new student accommodation will be required to comply with these Policies.

Taller, higher density student accommodation should be sited in locations where this is compatible with the existing built area. The most suitable location for such developments is in the city centre and the immediate surrounding area. They must be situated in close proximity to good public transport links to allow for access and an increase in pedestrian movement. Pedestrian permeability in large, high density developments is essential to their integration with surrounding areas.

Where new developments are proposed in residential areas outwith the city centre, these must have regard to the local residential environment by respecting the existing character, massing and height of the area. These developments must also respect and consider form, landscape and topography, existing street pattern and permeability, noise, scale, materials, connectivity and urban grain.

**D: The layout, standards and facilities provided within the development are of high standards**

*Open Space Provision*

Access to good, quality open spaces is important for both students and other members of the local community. Proposals for new student accommodation should make provision for high quality and accessible open spaces. This could include natural green spaces and green corridors, allotments or outdoor sports areas. Open space should always be provided on-site unless there is a strong justification otherwise, in which case an off-site contribution will be sought. Further information is provided with the Aberdeen Planning Guidance: Open Space and Green Infrastructure.

*Inclusive Design and Accessibility*

New student accommodation should incorporate high quality design that is inclusive and accessible. This includes within the accommodation and the external areas, along key access routes to and from the site (in line with Policy H7). For further information on inclusive design and accessibility please refer to Aberdeen Planning Guidance: Transport and Accessibility; and, PAN 78: Inclusive Design. Minimum requirements for student accommodation (new and change of use) can be found in the Building Standards Regulations: Technical Handbook – Non Domestic.

*Parking*

Existing car parking guidelines for new student accommodation must be considered as part of the development. That is; 1 parking space per resident staff member plus 1 per 10 students in the city centre, the inner city and the outer city areas (see Aberdeen Planning Guidance Transport and Accessibility). Disabled parking, electric vehicle charging points and enhanced cycle parking facilities should also be provided as set out in the APG. The level of parking proposed in new development must be agreed with the Planning Authority.

### *Travel Plans and Car Clubs*

Developments are encouraged to prepare Travel Plans in support of their applications. However for developments which exceed the thresholds mentioned in the Aberdeen Planning Guidance Transport and Accessibility, Travel Plans are mandatory. Travel Plans aid in promoting more sustainable travel choices for students, while decreasing reliance on the private car.

Proposals which enter into agreement with Car Clubs will be encouraged as a means to help to eliminate the need for onsite parking and minimise overall traffic.

### *Waste Disposal Facilities*

Consideration should be given at an early stage in the design process to the provision and management of waste disposal facilities such as residual waste bins, organic waste bins and mixed dry recycling bins. This provision should be convenient and accessible both for students and for waste collection staff, ideally at ground level. Waste storage areas must be within 10 metres of an access point for collection vehicles. Vehicular access in terms of vehicle weight, width etc. need to be taken into account in the design process. Proposals must ensure that waste is disposed of in accordance with the waste hierarchy set out in Policy R5 – Waste Management Requirements for New Development.

### *Energy Efficiency*

Purpose built student accommodation (new and change of use) should be designed to meet Building Regulations energy requirements. They must install low and zero-carbon generating technology to reduce predicted carbon dioxide emissions as set out in Policy R6 –Low and Zero Carbon Buildings, and Water Efficiency.

### *Complementary Uses in Student Accommodation Schemes*

Where other uses are proposed as part of a purpose built accommodation scheme, for example gyms, cafés or restaurants, these will be encouraged so long as they are proportionate to the scale of development proposed.

Proposals for such uses will be considered against all other relevant national and local planning policies and guidance. For further information on mixed-use matters please refer to the [Aberdeen Planning Guidance: Harmony of Uses](#).

### *Flexibility*

Purpose built student accommodation is not required to contribute to affordable housing, and it is for this reason that all student accommodation will be conditioned to limit occupancy to students. Approval to remove this condition at a later date will need to be demonstrated at that time that all of the policy requirements for general needs housing, including amenity standards and education provision, can be met.

Developers should aim to ensure the design of new accommodation is as flexible as possible, for example by considering how the proposals could be reconfigured to meet general housing needs in the future.

### **E: The development scheme has an appropriate Management Plan in place**

#### *Management Plan*

Well managed student schemes can significantly minimise negative impacts on surrounding areas. The Council will expect all student accommodation schemes to have a Management Plan to ensure a satisfactory residential environment for existing residential neighbourhoods. Applicants are encouraged to prepare a Management Plan that addresses general management operations, site and landscape maintenance and servicing.

### **3. Further Reading**

1. Aberdeen Local Development Plan 2023
2. PAN 78: Inclusive Design
3. BREEAM Communities: Technical Manual
4. Technical Handbook – Non Domestic
5. Behind the Granite, 2015
6. Census, 2011