

Aberdeen Planning Guidance

Denburn Valley City Centre

May 2012

The guidance was first produced prior to the adoption of the Local Development Plan. However, the document remains valid and the guidance derived from this still informs the City Council's decisions on such development in Aberdeen. Therefore any queries concerning the text of the guidance should be directed to the Planning Authority for possible clarification.



Denburn Car Park



Woolmanhill Hospital



"Our aim is for Aberdeen in 2030 to be a sustainable city at the heart of a vibrant and inclusive North East of Scotland"

Aberdeen Local Development Plan 2010

Development Guidance and Planning Brief

Updated September 2011

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1.0 The Brief

- 1.1 These sites offer a unique opportunity to create a new and distinctive high quality urban environment, introduce new uses that complement the existing built heritage and cultural identity of Aberdeen City Centre and integrate an underachieving part of the urban fabric back into the City Centre.
- 1.2 This Brief has evolved through the early work of the Urban Realm Strategy and previous investigative work undertaken by Aberdeen City Council. First published in 2004 it has been updated to draw on more recent guidance at national and local levels. The Scottish Government “Designing Places” – A Policy Statement for Scotland sets the national policy context for creating places. The Policy states that successful places are safe, pleasant, easy to move around and welcoming to visitors. Successful places are sustainable and adaptable to changing circumstances in social, economic and environmental conditions.
- 1.3 The Aberdeen City and Shire Structure Plan (2009) sets an ambitious vision for a successful and sustainable future for the north east. It specifically recognises the importance of the completion of a City Centre Masterplan. The proposed Aberdeen Local Development Plan, prepared in conformity with the Structure Plan, recognises that access to an attractive and vibrant City Centre is vital to achieving a sustainable economic future for the City and Region. It highlights the need for a City Centre Development Framework to set out the development principles to guide and co-ordinate development and infrastructure investment in the City Centre, identifying key projects and opportunities needed to achieve the vision and setting a programme to monitor the delivery of agreed priorities in the City Centre.
- 1.4 This Brief requires to be read in the context of the City Centre Development Framework which promotes a strategy to complement and enhance the features of the City Centre that make Aberdeen unique. By identifying clearly defined character areas, reinforcing their identity and ensuring their accessibility and connectivity, the Framework seeks to ensure that the right projects will be developed in the right places and in appropriate ways to ensure that the social, economic and environmental futures of the City Centre will thrive.
- 1.5 It identifies 9 character areas and urban quarters focussed on Union Street as the spine of the City Centre and main thoroughfare that connects the urban neighbourhood. The Denburn Woolmanhill area forms part of the “Cultural Quarter” where the main focus is the Denburn Valley and Union Terrace Gardens. Improved connectivity with Union Street and the wider area is a key issue for regeneration of the gardens and the linkage of Denburn, Woolmanhill through the cultural quarter will be one of the main challenges in redeveloping the Denburn Car Park and Woolmanhill sites.

2.0 The Sites

- 2.1 These sites offer two distinct challenges. The 'A' listed Woolmanhill Hospital complex (0.98Ha) has tight boundaries with the requirement to retain and convert the buildings. Meanwhile, the Denburn car park and health centre site (1.28Ha) incorporates a decked 1970's reinforced concrete split-level car park with a health centre on the upper level and a 21 storey residential tower block immediately adjacent. Complicated site levels at Rosemount Viaduct will require imaginative solutions and all development will need to be of the highest standard of design and materials to complement the surrounding urban form, listed buildings and conservation area.



Figure 1 – Site Boundary and Existing Buildings

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- 2.2 Although within the City Centre, the sites appear remote from it for a number of reasons, including:
- significant level differences between Rosemount Viaduct and the sites;
 - convoluted access arrangements through narrow stairs or steep slopes;
 - dual carriageways and busy junctions with limited crossing points;
 - visual and physical screening behind trees; and,
 - lack of physical attractions or amenities to draw people to the sites, other than to use the healthcare facilities and the car park. The Denburn public car park is one of a number spread around the edge of the City Centre.

- 2.3 The sites are, however, ideally positioned to make a positive impact on the City Centre and benefit from their close proximity to the main shopping, leisure, employment, education and transportation facilities nearby. Prominently located and within easy walking distance of the central core of the City, a more sustainable location would be difficult to find.



Figure 2 – Location Plan in relation to Aberdeen City Centre

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- 2.4 Any proposed development must be of the highest design quality, take a contemporary approach that also respects the obvious local built heritage and create an urban community that can be considered a legacy for Aberdeen from the 21st century.

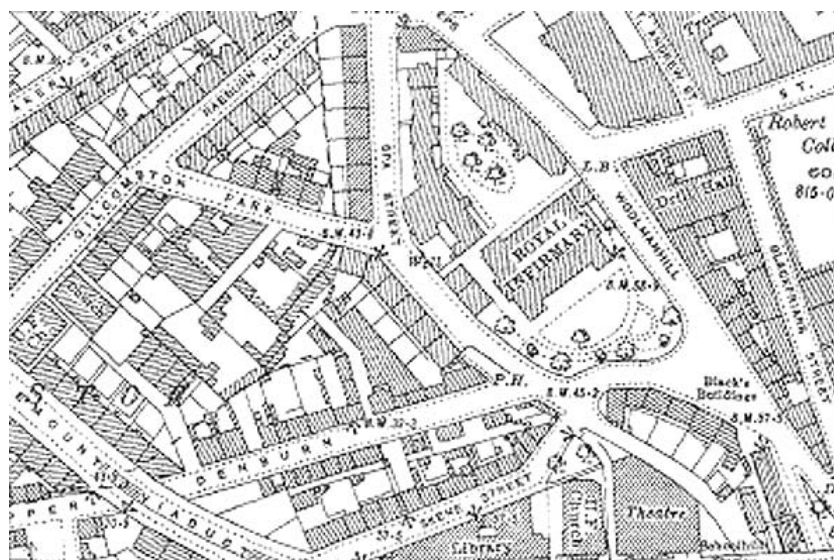


Figure – Historical Map (1926) showing the original building line to Skene Street (at the south of the map) and layout of streets, some of which are still recognisable today. The area of open space and trees on Skene Street, behind the Central Library, that now screen the car park was originally developed as tenements.

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3.0 Future Development, Best Possible Uses

- 3.1 Mixed use development on these sites could act as a catalyst for the regeneration of the wider area. An appropriate mix of uses could include healthcare, residential, commercial and an element of retail use with continued public car parking. This variety of uses is not only the most economically viable but also provides the greatest benefit to, and minimal conflict with, the surrounding area. The commercial uses could include ground floor retail and cafes or restaurants, office and business space and a City Centre hotel supporting the surrounding retail, leisure and cultural facilities. Residential uses are likely to be mostly flats due to the physical characteristics of both sites but could include a mixture of flat sizes from 1 bed to bespoke penthouse apartments, duplex apartments and townhouses with gardens. Uses that would likely be considered unacceptable are public houses, night clubs, fast food outlets and major retail.
- 3.2 Public consultation indicates that there is a wish amongst both the Denburn Health Centre practitioners and their patients for a healthcare use similar to the existing, to be retained on the site or in the immediate area. It is generally accepted however, that there would be considerable practical and financial difficulties in decanting to temporary accommodation while new accommodation was being created. Should however, a mechanism be found to achieve this economically, a health use on the site would be welcomed in both planning and social terms.
- 3.3 Car parking on the site will serve several functions. Long stay public parking is required to replace existing parking that presently serves the cultural, retail and business facilities in the area. Secure and segregated parking is required for the tenants of Denburn Court, and parking is required for any businesses or organisations that are located on the site. The parking requirements for the Woolmanhill site could also be satisfied on the Denburn site. Convenient temporary parking will require to be provided for the Denburn Court tenants during the construction period.
- 3.4 The Housing Strategy for Aberdeen City Centre (for Aberdeen City Centre Partnership, Feb 2000) included a survey of house buyers' preferences in the City Centre. It found that many people were looking for more expensive and better quality flats and that Woolmanhill was one of the most popular areas of search. Woolmanhill Hospital offers the opportunity for conversion to large apartments or business/commercial space set in landscaped grounds.
- 3.5 By mixing the uses within the site, it will be possible to spread the activity over daytime and evening hours. This not only helps create a convivial atmosphere across the whole day but also has an added advantage of increasing informal surveillance and the feeling of personal safety for those living in and visiting the area. To sustain people's enjoyment of any development, the public realm must be designed as integral to its function and layout.

3.6 A number of key factors will determine the future development of these sites:

- The continued provision of a public car park on the Denburn site;
- The retention of the A listed buildings on the Woolmanhill site;
- Good design and the quality of the end development;
- Linkages through the cultural quarter and with the wider City Centre; and,
- The creation of a sense of place

These will all have an impact on the best urban design solution and are addressed in the following pages of this brief.

4.0 Design

4.1 Good urban design and quality architecture make good economic sense. High quality areas attract investment and commercial space becomes more desirable. Good connections to transport routes, local amenities and a desirable location all add to the overall success of new developments. Creating a development within its context that is sympathetic to surrounding businesses or residential communities can help minimise problems such as crime and vandalism. People tend to have a sense of pride and ownership in developments that cater for their needs and lifestyle, especially if they have been consulted during the planning process. This leads to better social integration and increased desirability of surrounding areas as the effects ripple outwards.

4.2 Scottish national policies on design echo these sentiments. A Policy on Architecture for Scotland and Designing Places (Scottish Executive, 2001) both recognise the social, economic and cultural importance of good architecture and good urban design.

“Good design has always been valued by those who appreciate architecture. Today its value is recognised also as a practical means of achieving a wide range of social, economic and environmental goals, making places that will be successful and sustainable.”

Designing Places (Scottish Executive, 2001)

4.3 Proposals for these sites must not only adhere to these policies, but go beyond them and create a development of distinction and excellence in both design and functionality. Security principles should be considered at the outset of any design, to ensure that the development can receive a “Secured by Design” accreditation.

5.0 Scale Of Development

5.1 Woolmanhill



- 5.1.1 On the Woolmanhill site the scale of development is straightforward. The buildings are A listed and must be retained and converted for a new use. There is very little scope for new buildings but some of the more modern additions (accretions) that detract from the original listed buildings could be removed. Parking will be the main constraint on the Woolmanhill site, as the central courtyard should preferably be reinstated as a pleasant pedestrian space. Innovative solutions such as underground parking or even utilising some spaces in the proposed new public car park on the Denburn site should be considered in order to support the conversion of these buildings. Historic Scotland will require to be consulted on any proposed changes.
- 5.1.2 The removal of the car parking to the south of the principle elevation of this building should be considered. Doing so would not only reinstate the original landscape setting of the building, but would also remove an unsatisfactory vehicular access off Woolmanhill.
- 5.1.3 There is a war memorial within Woolmanhill Hospital. Provision must be made for carefully removing it and re-siting it in a new location to be designated by the Healthcare Trust.

5.2 Denburn

- 5.2.1 This site offers, subject to the demolition of the existing car park and health centre, a clear but complex site for redevelopment. A public car park must be retained on site with the provision of long stay public spaces, long stay private spaces for the residents of Denburn Court and the requisite parking for any associated development.
- 5.2.2 The site is ideally located to minimise dependence on car travel being accessible by walking, cycling and public transport. Reference should be made to Council car parking standards and exact car parking numbers should be discussed with Aberdeen City Council. The car park must be integrated into the design and layout of any proposed scheme.

Car parks need not be bland boxes. The Glasshouse public car park (right), situated in the centre of Glasgow on the corner of Argyll Street/Glassford Street, has been developed on an infill site on a traditional street. It includes contemporary retail units on the ground floor with 527 car parking spaces above. Opaque glass blocks and imaginative lighting give this contemporary urban car park a positive presence during the day and evening.



- 5.2.3 The overall design and layout must also consider the setting of the 21-storey Denburn Court, integrating it into the final scheme and enhancing the amenity of those who live there. Whilst the general scale of development should, in some locations, reflect the scale of existing buildings that are adjacent to the site, this should not result in a significant loss of the already limited outlook from the site, of the residents of Denburn Court. The space between the new development and Denburn Court should be designed and landscaped to achieve this enhancement of the residents' amenity. Towards Gilcomston Park, the scale should reduce to reflect the changing context and residential nature of this street. (See figure 4 below).

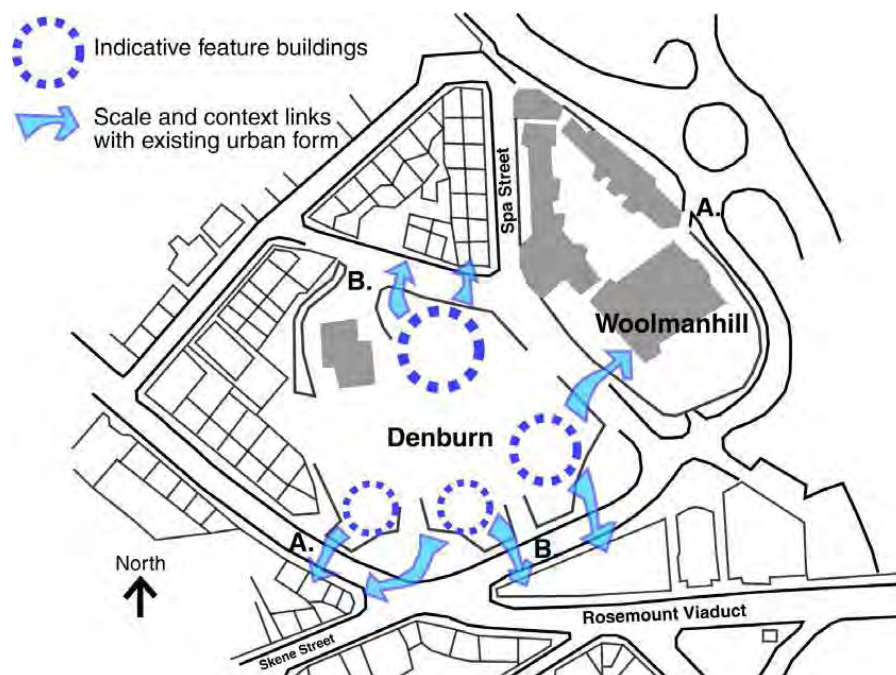


Figure 4 – Links with Existing Scale and Context – each part of any proposed development could take its reference from the scale of the surrounding buildings whilst offering a range of building heights across the site to provide interest. Principal outlooks from the lower floors of Denburn Court should largely be respected.

Note: Heights of buildings mentioned in text and diagrams are for general guidance only. Acceptable heights can only be properly ascertained once exact locations, footprints and massing of new buildings are known. Heights might therefore be higher or lower than suggested, but will be assessed within the context of the existing urban grain, whilst having regard to the amenity of neighbouring properties and financial realities.

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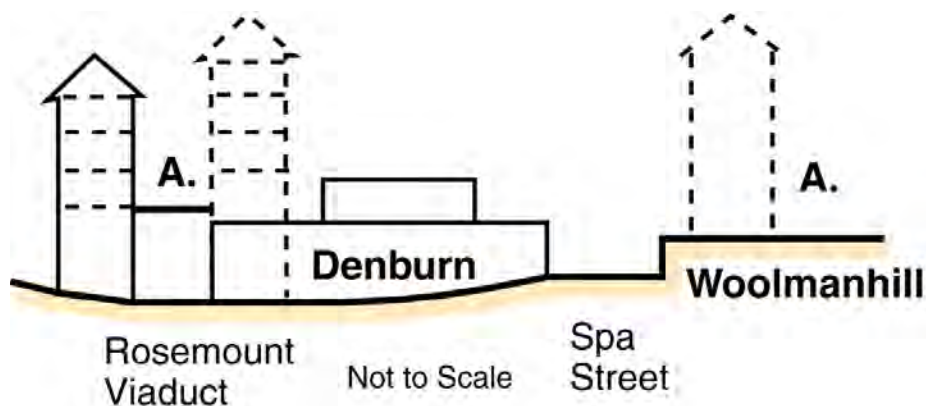


Figure 4a – Indicative A-A cross-section from figure 4 (existing) –

showing existing buildings at 4 or 5 storeys onto Rosemount viaduct but much higher to the rear. The site is virtually level from the remaining section of the Upper Denburn road on the west, to Spa Street on the east.

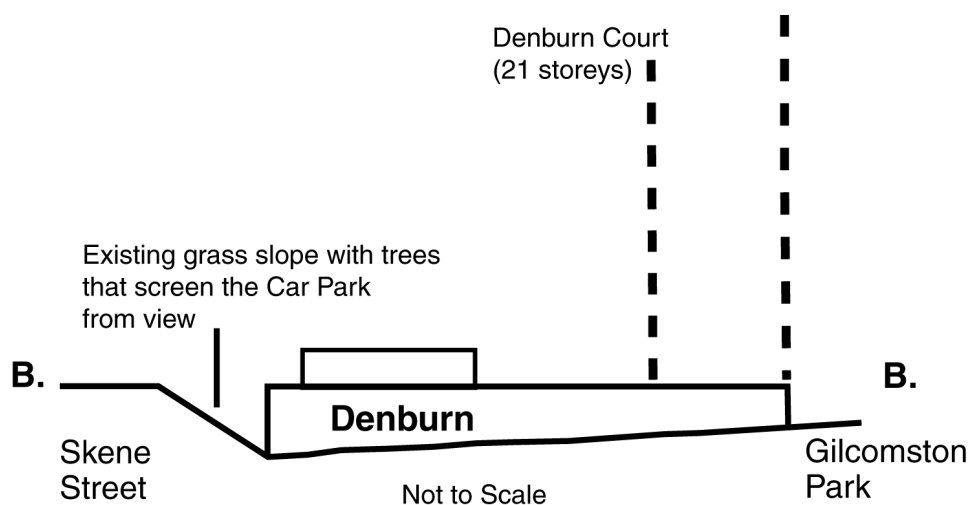


Figure 4b – Indicative B-B cross section from figure 4 (existing) –

showing the steep grassy bank at Skene Street and the dominance of the 21- storey Denburn Court. Trees on the steep embankment make a positive contribution to the existing streetscape and general ambience of the area. Whilst these trees undoubtedly are an important feature of the existing amenity of the area, their removal, in part or in total, might be considered acceptable if it can be demonstrated that this would result in a much better urban solution than could otherwise be achieved, and a more viable development overall. It would be a condition of their removal that they be replaced with semi-mature specimens of indigenous species located in well designed spaces throughout the development, where they could grow to their full maturity. Re-establishing the prior built form up to the pavement of Skene Street would then be an option that could improve both the access to, and amenity of the Denburn site and the surrounding streets.



- 5.3 **Integrating development into the City Centre (Indicative Sketch 1 above)** - looking north past the Central Library to Rosemount. By introducing well- designed buildings of an appropriate scale with a public space onto Rosemount Viaduct/Skene Street, the site becomes clearly integrated into the City Centre, offering a new and usable public space as well as much improved street level pedestrian access into the site and to the City Centre. The scale of the buildings should take account of the factors outlined in item 5.2.3.



- 5.4 **Creating development at the appropriate urban scale (Indicative Sketch 2 above)** - looking west up Skene Street from the rear of His Majesty's Theatre. Proposed buildings at the corner of Spa Street/Skene Street should reflect the scale opposite. Their design should be contemporary whilst respecting the surrounding listed buildings and provide interest and definition to the corner. Denburn Court will remain dominant on the skyline but well designed feature buildings on this corner should reduce its impact and complement the listed buildings nearby.

- 5.5 The following figures 5, 6 and 7 indicate the general layout of future development, scale and wider integration of the sites into the urban pattern:

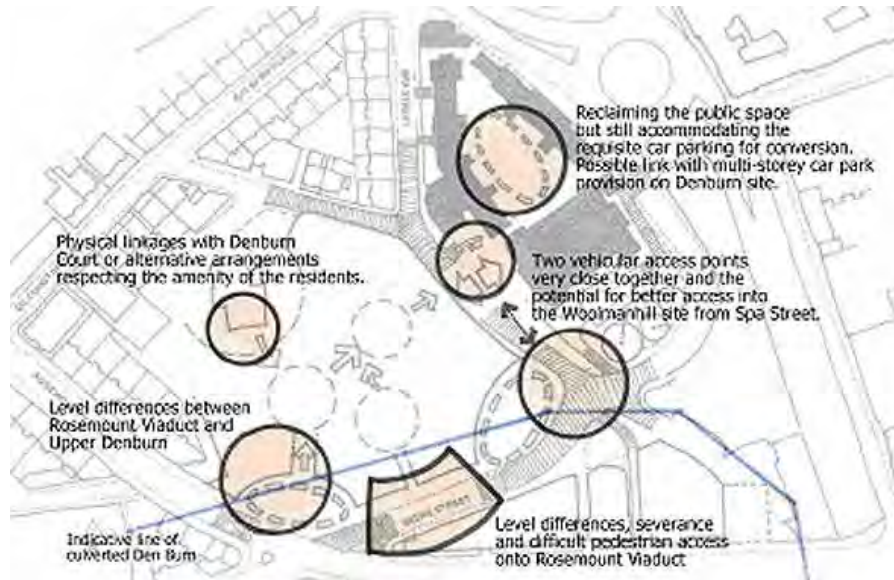


Figure 5 – Main physical challenges – showing the key challenges to be tackled when redeveloping these sites. The integrity of the culverted Den Burn must be respected in any redevelopment scheme.
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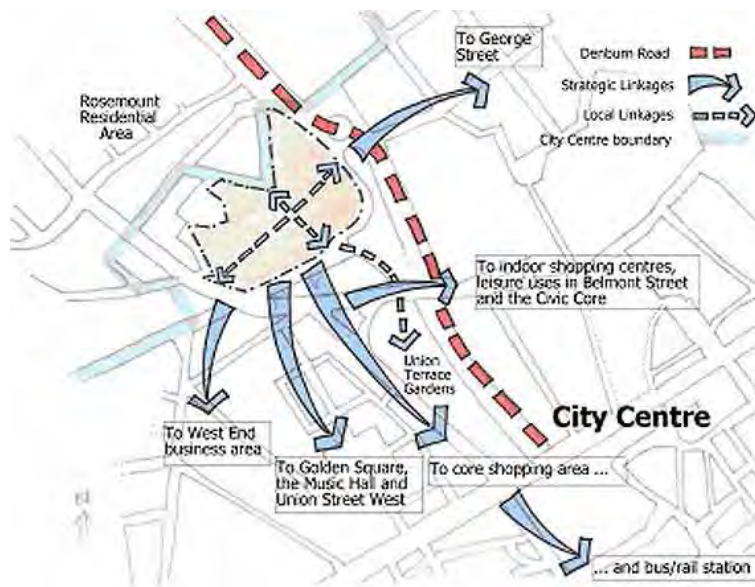


Figure 6 – Enhancing future links with City Centre uses.

Enhanced links through and from the sites will allow convenient access to cultural, retail, leisure, employment, education and civic services for those who live and work there as well as the users of the replacement car park.
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- 5.6 The Urban Realm Strategy, promoted by Aberdeen City Centre Partnership and the more recent City Centre Development Framework recognise that these sites act as an important gateway to the City Centre and provide exciting development opportunities linked to the Union Terrace Gardens and, with a bit of imagination and foresight, to Union Street and the rear of Belmont Street. Providing a new public car park will not only support the existing uses but will provide a firm base upon which to encourage and support new commercial, cultural and community uses.
- 5.7 As evidenced by the City Centre Development Framework, Aberdeen City Council remain committed to the City Centre, the pedestrianisation of Union Street and the improvement of Union Terrace Gardens. The extension to His Majesty's Theatre has helped to add a renewed sense of vibrancy to the area whilst the adoption of the key regeneration projects set out in the Development Framework and encompassed within the proposed Aberdeen Local Development Plan, support the redevelopment of these sites with the potential for much improved linkages to the rest of the City Centre.

6.0 Public Realm

- 6.1 Good design is not just about the buildings. It is also about the spaces that surround the buildings and the details within those spaces. New development on these sites should incorporate public spaces that function as both pedestrian routes and pleasant places that people will want to visit. They should be designed to be flexible, incorporate green space and street trees, and include integrated artistic or design elements that give the development a unique character. A safe children's play space should be provided that is accessible and easily supervised.
- 6.2 A landscape design framework should be prepared encompassing both hard and soft landscaping, replacement trees and public art.



Details can make a place –

Pillar tops in a new public square just off the Royal Mile, Edinburgh, new quality paving materials in Belmont Street and integration of a public space for outdoor cafes and public art in Langstane Place/Bon Accord Street, both Aberdeen. Aberdeen photos courtesy of Aberdeen City Centre Partnership.

7.0 Basic Planning Policy Guidelines

- 7.1 The sites have a complex planning background. They are covered by local policies relating to listed buildings, conservation areas, existing healthcare uses, residential uses, open space policies etc. A fuller explanation of the exact policies is contained in section 13. In general, development that does not unduly conflict with surrounding uses should be acceptable.

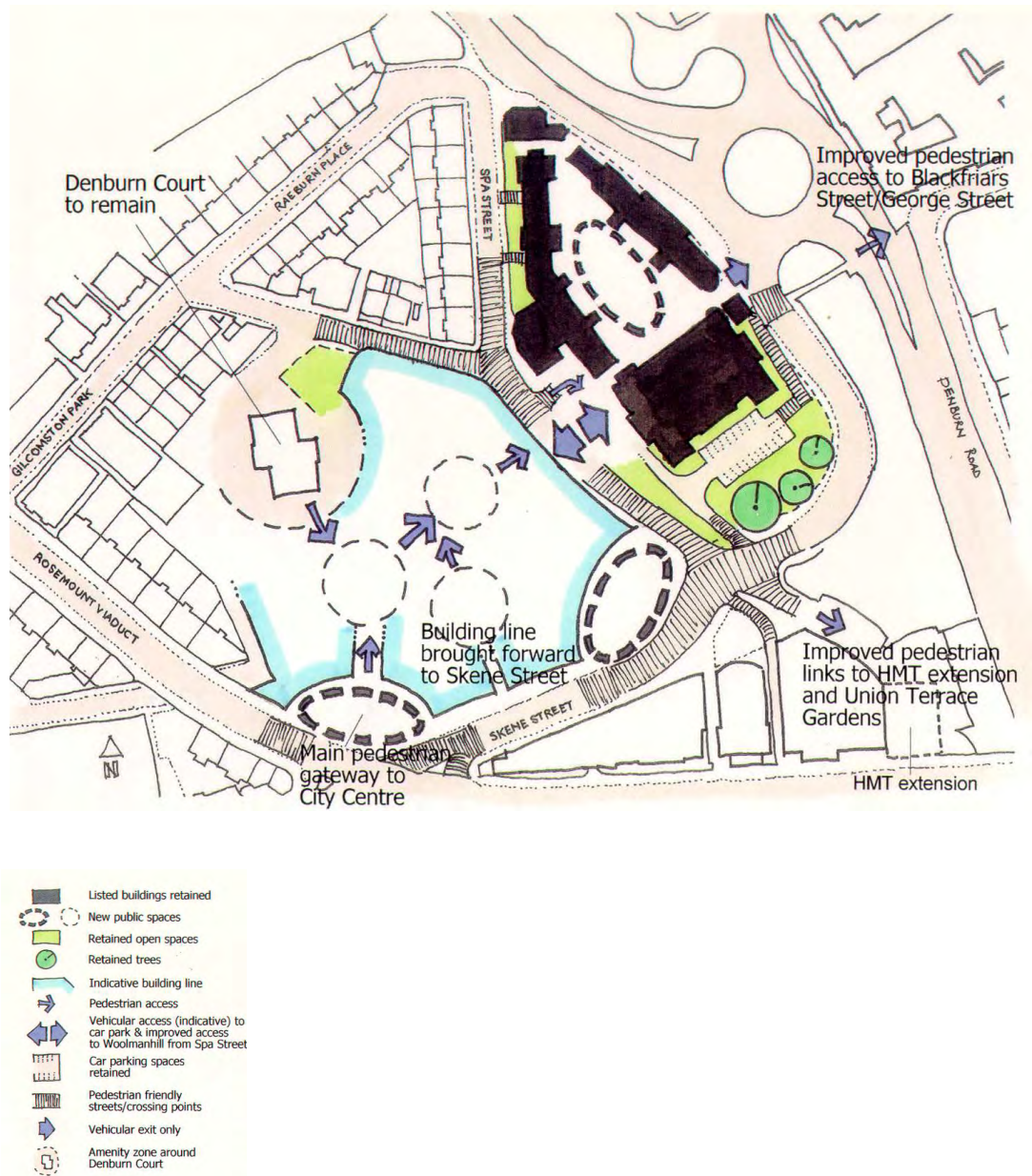


Figure 7 – General Principles for Future Development

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8.0 Key Principles for Future Development

- 1) Relating the uses of the sites to the existing cultural and leisure activities, Union Terrace Gardens and the central shopping zone immediately to the south
- 2) Encouraging a mix of uses by providing appropriate and adaptable commercial and residential space
- 3) Retaining Spa Street as the main access to the public car park and introducing pedestrian friendly zones making it easier and safer to reach destinations
- 4) Retaining and converting the listed buildings at Woolmanhill with a pedestrian friendly public courtyard linking eastwards toward George Street.
- 5) Highest quality design, layout and integration with the existing City Centre facilities and function.
- 6) Giving these sites a presence within the City Centre by turning the Denburn site to face the City Centre, rather than hidden from it, and drawing both sites back into the City Centre.
- 7) Reflecting the existing building lines down Rosemount Viaduct and along Skene Street west of Rosemount Viaduct.
- 8) Possibly bringing the building line forward to Skene Street, as it was historically, and introducing trees and open space in appropriate and usable locations throughout the Denburn site.
- 9) Respecting the amenity of Denburn Court by retaining appropriate window- to-window distances and views from individual flats.
- 10) Improving both the quality and effectiveness of pedestrian routes through both sites, connecting with the City Centre and the wider area. These sites should be accessible by all and integrate with a sustainable transport system.
- 11) Introducing pleasant and well designed public spaces that relate to the proposed uses, with buildings facing onto public streets or these public spaces

9.0 Access, Transport And Infrastructure

- 9.1 In terms of access and connectivity, reference should be made to the Local Transport Strategy 2008 -2012 and the Regional Transport Strategy 2021. The sites, being centrally located, provide opportunities for new innovative forms of sustainable and active travel. A transport Assessment should be prepared addressing access by walking, cycling, public transport and private car. There will be a requirement for a scoping study to be provided and agreed with the Council at an early stage in any proposals. Roads within the development must meet Council standards and be subject to road construction consent. The layout, car parking provision etc. must meet Council standards. The main vehicular access to both developments is likely to be taken from Spa Street, as the Gilcomston Park junction with Rosemount Viaduct is not suitable. Alternative arrangements for vehicular access will be considered. The provision of safe pedestrian access points across Skene Street should be addressed, taking into account difficulties arising from the nature of the topography of the site.
- 9.2 Surface water run-off should be dealt with using Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS) incorporated within the design of any proposals, and must be approved by the local planning authority, in consultation with SEPA and Scottish Water prior to the commencement

of development. A Flood Risk and Drainage Impact Assessment will be required and developers should demonstrate that their proposals for foul and surface drainage are the best available in terms of Sustainable Urban Drainage. This will be especially important, as the Den Burn is culverted under the south west section of the sites.

10.0 Planning Requirements/Conditions

- 10.1 Having regard to the complex nature of the topography, it is likely that a scale model will be required of any firm proposals for redevelopment.
- 10.2 Planning conditions attached to any planning approval will stipulate times when no construction work will take place. It is also suggested that the contractor nominates a member of their staff to act as a liaison officer to the Denburn Court Tenants Association.

11.0 Sustainability

- 11.1 New development could contain ICT infrastructure to accommodate changing work patterns. A recycling facility could be included within any new development provided it was protected from vandalism
- 11.2 Given the central location of the sites and their accessibility by walking, cycling and public transport, opportunities should be taken to maximise sustainable travel and in particular consider innovative measures to achieve this. Air quality is an important consideration and developers should ensure that opportunities are taken to improve air quality within the City Centre..
- 11.3 In accordance with Scottish Planning and Local Development Plan Policy, consideration must be given to the introduction of low and zero-carbon generating technologies in all new development. This should seek to reduce the potential carbon dioxide emissions by at least 15% below 2007 building standards.
- 11.4 Consideration might be given to the provision of a combined heating/power system and heat recovery system that might be shared with Denburn Court and possibly the Central Library and His Majesty's Theatre. The existing boiler house at Woolmanhill could possibly be utilised for this purpose.

12.0 Maintenance

- 12.1 The guidance set out in this brief points toward a mixed-use scheme that includes both private and public open space, natural and hard landscaping and buildings that face onto public streets or spaces. The future management and maintenance of the City's public realm should be a key consideration in the redevelopment and regeneration of the sites. Developers should ensure that a maintenance regime is put in place to the satisfaction of the City Council.

13.0 National, Regional and Local Planning and Transportation Policies

- 13.1 Scottish Planning Policy encourages regeneration and the full and appropriate use of land, the re-use of brownfield land, conservation of important historic and cultural assets, good design and better access by foot, cycle and public transport. These goals are reflected in the Aberdeen City and Shire Structure Plan approved by the Scottish Ministers in August 2009.
- 13.2 The proposed Aberdeen Local Development Plan, prepared in conformity with the approved Structure Plan (2009), is the “settled view” of the Council and is presently the subject of examination by Scottish Ministers. It identifies the land allocated to meet the City’s development needs over the next 10-20 years and sets out the planning policies to be applied on promoting the sustainable growth of the City over this period.
- 13.3 Located within a Conservation Area, the sites also fall within the defined City Centre boundary where they are designated for mixed uses. Development within these areas must take account of the existing uses and character of the surrounding area and avoid undue conflict with adjacent land uses and amenity. Where new housing is proposed, a satisfactory residential environment should be created which should not impinge upon the viability or operation of existing businesses in the location.
- 13.4 More specifically, the combined sites are identified in the Plan as opportunities for mixed use development. Potential uses listed include healthcare, hotel, residential, small scale retail, food and drink, further education, offices/businesses (Class 4) and car parking. Due to the presence of the Den Burn it also highlights the requirement for a Flood Risk Assessment to accompany any planning application.
- 13.5 The Council’s open space standards as set out in Supplementary Guidance will apply. The steeply sloping area of open space and trees onto Skene Street is designated as “Urban Green Space”. Redevelopment of this area will only be permitted if an equivalent and equally convenient and accessible area for public access is laid out and made available in the locality for urban green space purposes.
- 13.6 There are a number of listed buildings within and around the sites as indicated in figures 1 and 8 of this brief.
- 13.7 The basic national, regional and local planning issues that will help determine the proposals for this site are:
- These are brownfield sites. National and local planning policies encourage the redevelopment of such sites.
 - Woolmanhill Hospital is both A listed and within a conservation area. The hospital buildings must be retained but any proposal that helps to free up public space within the central courtyard and reinstate the setting of the main frontage of the building will be welcomed. Development should respect the many other listed buildings close to the site.
 - New uses that conform to this brief and don’t conflict with surrounding uses should be looked upon favourably.

- Trees and open space are protected but may be replaced where developers can demonstrate that their proposals create useful spaces that are integral to an overall design solution.
- The council's current open space and car parking standards will apply.

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