Dunbar Halls
PLANNING BRIEF

March 2003
1.0 Introduction

1.1 Dunbar Halls sits in a back land area at the very northern tip of Old Aberdeen immediately adjacent to Seaton Park. It has been used for a number of years for University of Aberdeen student halls but the buildings have now passed their best and have been empty for almost two years. Conservation area consent was granted in 2001 to demolish the buildings and this brief sets out the parameters for new development. It is likely that the University will wish to build modern student accommodation to replace the soon to be demolished structure.

1.2 This Planning Brief was prepared by Jenkins & Marr, planning and development consultants, on behalf of the University of Aberdeen and in partnership with Aberdeen City Council. A consultation exercise was carried out with the local community and a number of statutory consultees during the preparation of this brief.

1.3 Planning Briefs are produced as supplementary guidance to the Local Plan. They do not have the statutory status of the Local Plan. Any proposals that adhere to the principles of the Planning Brief will normally be received favourably by the Planning Authority.

2.0 Site Description

2.1 Dunbar Halls of Residence lie approximately 2.5 km north of Aberdeen City Centre. The 2Ha site occupies a back land position at the northern tip of Old Aberdeen immediately adjacent to St. Machar Cathedral, the Chanonry and Seaton Park. Despite the prestigious location, the site is generally well hidden behind the houses on Don Street and the substantial boundary walls of The Chanonry. The existing site is densely developed but the buildings, with the exception of the smaller two-storey block on Don Street, are only noticeable once you enter the site. See figure 1 above and figure 2.

2.2 The site itself is generally triangular in shape with a small section of open
space almost cut off from the remainder at the north east corner. The narrow arms of the existing halls stretch eastwards and westwards from a central dining hall with car parking made available in the southern part of the site. The building is constructed of modern materials and ranges from 4 storeys to the east, 3 storeys to the west and 2 tall storeys in the central communal dining hall with some smaller 1-storey additions. These building heights take advantage of the natural fall of the land from west to east.

2.3 There are a number of young trees within the site with the majority of mature trees outwith the site in Seaton Park to the north. The southern and eastern boundaries are generally back gardens of houses on The Chanonry and Don Street. The north west boundary is characterised by the high walls that bound St. Machar Cathedral cemetery and the northern boundary is delineated by Seaton Park boundary wall.

3.0 Site History

3.1 This site has been used for educational purposes since the 1960s.

3.2 The historical and archaeological importance of the site were examined during January 2002 by Aberdeen City Council Archaeological service. The site of Dunbar Halls is the known location of the palace of the medieval bishops of Aberdeen. First erected in the early 14th Century it was destroyed in 1336 and rebuilt around 1459. By the mid 17th Century the palace had been demolished and some of the stones used in the construction of King’s College and the fort on Castle Hill in Aberdeen. An archaeological survey consisting of 16 trenches identified some interesting finds and recommended further archaeological work as outlined later in this brief.

4.0 Planning Policies

4.1 National planning policies, approved Structure Plan policies and emerging Local Plan policies promote the re-use of previously used sites for new uses. National Planning Policy Guideline 3: Land for Housing (NPPG3) requires that full and effective use should be made of previously developed sites within existing built-up areas, including redevelopment and conversions, to meet as much demand for new housing as possible. Priority should be given to previously used sites in preference to greenfield sites, provided a satisfactory residential environment can be created.

4.2 The approved Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire Structure Plan 2001-
2016 (also known as North East Scotland Together or NEST), Policy 11: General Housing Considerations, specifically requires that new housing throughout Aberdeen is of a high quality with appropriate densities, a choice of residential environments and housing types, and directs housing to brownfield locations. There is no limit to the contribution that brownfield development can make to the housing land supply. Brownfield sites are defined nationally and locally as:

Sites normally “within settlements which have been developed or used for some purpose which has ceased. They may encompass the re-use of existing buildings by conversion; demolition and new build; infill and various other forms of intensification.”

4.3 The Adopted Local Plan (1991) and the Modified Finalised Local Plan (2002) both include the site with a residential area (R1 – Residential and H1 – Residential respectively). These areas are predominantly residential in character with a presumption in favour of new residential development. Other complementary uses are acceptable as long as they do not cause conflict with the existing residential amenity. The site is identified as an opportunity site in the Modified Finalised Local Plan 2002.

4.4 Both adopted and unadopted Local Plans contain polices protecting open space in urban areas and providing guidance on the amount of open space required for new developments. The unadopted Modified Finalised Local Plan 2002 introduced new policies relating to the design and layout of brownfield sites – H5 Protection of Urban Open Space; H6 Design and Context; and H7 Design and Amenity. Developers should pay due regard to these policies, or their substitutes, as they progress through the Local Plan adoption process, when considering the layout of any future development on this site.

5.0 Other Designations

5.1 A number of other designations affect this site.

5.2 The site falls within Conservation area 1 (Old Aberdeen). Proposed development would be required to preserve and enhance the character of that conservation area through good design, high quality conversion of existing buildings where required, high quality hard and soft landscaping and the protection of trees (all trees are automatically protected within a conservation area). There are no buildings of historical merit on this site. The Old Aberdeen Conservation Report 1993 (Aberdeen City Council) sets out design guidance for new development. It indicates that new development would be appropriate where the location and form of the new building helps to reinforce the historic layout of the settlement and positively enhance the character of the conservation area.

5.3 There are a number of listed buildings close to this site as shown on Figure 4. Development within the site must respect their setting.

6.0 Future Uses and Potential

6.1 This site has a number of uses that could be acceptable. The existing use for higher education and student accommodation could continue but the site could also accommodate private sector housing. Other uses that are normally found within residential areas and do not cause any undue conflict with the surrounding uses may also be acceptable e.g. local shop or community uses.
6.2 If the site were to be developed for private sector residential use then a mixture of house types would be preferred. Developers of the site should be aware that the City Council has approved the Modified Finalised Local Plan for Aberdeen which, though not yet adopted, and subject to objection that has yet to be resolved through a Local Plan Inquiry, contains a policy to secure an element of affordable housing within all major residential developments. This is in line with guidance from the Scottish Executive (SPP3 Feb 2003) and the approved Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire Structure Plan. Housing layouts must ensure that any affordable housing provision is appropriately integrated with the development as a whole and be in accordance with the Development Guidance in Section 9.

6.3 In determining what constitutes affordable housing, the role of the University in providing student accommodation is recognised. This provision reduces the level of demand on mainstream rented accommodation. The effective contribution that new student accommodation can make towards the required element of affordable housing is currently being assessed.

7.0 Site Coverage

7.1 The existing buildings will be demolished. Current open space policies and maximum car parking standards should be adhered to.

7.2.1 Where modern student accommodation is to replace the existing accommodation, then a building of similar mass would be acceptable. Its design, however, should fit better within the site, provide a clear pedestrian access to and from Don Street and the Chanonry, provide usable public open space and respect the historic setting. Maximum building heights are likely to be similar to the existing building.

7.3 The archaeology of the site, alluded to in section 3 of this brief, will need further investigation. A number of areas of further research were identified in the survey undertaken in January 2002 and the Aberdeen City Council Archaeology unit should be consulted prior to any development taking place.

8.0 Access, Traffic & Car Parking

8.1 The Dunbar Halls site is situated close to King Street, a key public transport corridor, key distributor and trunk road with easy access to the City Centre and within easy walking distance of many services and facilities, especially recreational.

8.2 The main vehicular access relating to new development must be taken from the section of Don Street preferably using the established access point to the north of Cheyne Road shown on Figure 4.

8.3 It is likely that the new use as modern student accommodation will accommodate a similar number of students and generate similar impact on the surrounding road infrastructure. Where this is not likely to be the case, a transport assessment should be prepared addressing access by private car, cycling, walking, public transport etc. Roads within the development should be constructed to the Council’s standards and be subject to Construction Consent. The layout, car parking provision, etc, should meet the Council’s Standards.

8.4 The main University academic buildings are located in Old Aberdeen, a short walk from the site. If retained for student accommodation, it is likely that the majority of students would walk or cycle to classes.
9.0 Development Guidance

9.1 The redevelopment of this site is seen as an opportunity to make a positive urban design contribution to this important conservation area. Figure 4, Site Development Principles, indicates the guiding principles for development. These are based on current planning policies/designations and the opportunities for making best use of the site.

9.2 The following principles will apply:

- The key feature of any development should be the creation of a new pedestrian street running from the Chanonry to the new pedestrian access off of Don Street. Any new development should be planned around this spine with the majority of new building to the north.

- The redevelopment of this site can help meet national and local policy requirements and augment the City’s housing land supply. In this instance, the supply of modern student accommodation can meet a recognised need.

- Any mainstream housing on this site is to be of a good quality design and contribute to the choice of housing types throughout the City.

- There is potential for higher density development. The layout and design, however, should be appropriate for its sensitive location in Old Aberdeen.

- Proposals will be required to protect the mature trees surrounding the site.

- Current open space policies will apply.

9.3 Figure 5 shows the site split into 5 areas:

- Area 1 is a smaller triangle of land almost cut off from the remainder of the site by private garden ground. This area does not have any obvious associations with the main site and could be developed separately, potentially for individual houses reflecting the quality and design of the existing buildings to the south west. Satisfactory parking may be difficult due to the change in level between Don Street and the site.

- Area 2 is a higher part of the site but could accommodate buildings of around 3 or 4 storeys as per the existing buildings. A line of trees should be retained along the northern boundary.

Aberdeen University wishes to retain student accommodation but, failing this, the site can also accommodate a number of other uses (see 6.0).

Vehicular access should be taken from the existing access point to reduce the potential impact on residential amenity.

Existing traditional boundary wall should be retained.
■ Area 3 could accommodate a single house of similar scale to those nearby or could be maintained as open space contributing to the overall supply across the site. A new pedestrian access to the whole site should be introduced in this area.

■ Area 4 is bounded by high walls to the west and rear gardens to the south east representing one of the most sensitive areas of the site in terms of impact on neighbouring properties. New building in this area should take account of the relevant window-to-window distances and potential overshadowing in order to maintain residential amenity. The height of new building should be restricted to 2 or 3 storeys.

■ Area 5 is the most visible from the churchyard of St Machar Cathedral and the Chanonry. Even so, its impact is limited to the first 10 metres or so of the churchyard and the existing 3 storey building, set below the level of the adjacent churchyard, does not have a major detrimental impact on the setting of St. Machar Cathedral. Accordingly, any new development could be of a similar height and be designed with regard to its setting providing visual interest when glimpsed from both The Chanonry and the St. Machar churchyard. A green fringe should be maintained along the western boundary. The grand gateway from The Chanonry into the site should be re-opened for pedestrian access.

9.4 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 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.

10.0 Construction Arrangements

10.1 Any construction works should be carried out in such a way that no existing tree that is being retained within or immediately adjacent to this site is harmed. Trees should be protected in accordance with British Standard 5837 (1991).

For further information, please contact:

Aberdeen City Council
City Development Services
St Nicholas House
Broad Street
Aberdeen
AB10 1BW

Telephone: 01224 523470
Fax: 01224 636181

E-Mail: admin@planning.aberdeen.net.uk
Web-site: www.aberdeencity.gov.uk

Reproduced from Ordnance Survey mapping with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty’s Stationery Office. © Crown Copyright. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown Copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings. Aberdeen City Council - Licence No. LA 09025L. The Ordnance Survey mapping within this publication is provided by Aberdeen City Council under licence from Ordnance Survey in order to fulfil its public function as a planning authority. Persons viewing this mapping should contact Ordnance Survey Copyright for advice where they wish to licence Ordnance Survey mapping for their own use.
Figure 4
Development Guidance