

# Review of SG Bus2: Office development

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this paper is to examine the content of SG Bus2: Office development whilst considering any relevant changes in the national policies and local context that may alter the rationale of this policy. This paper will consider whether SG Bus2: Office development continues to meet the requirements of Scottish Planning Policy and any other relevant national planning documents, and whether it forms a sound basis for making planning decisions regarding new office developments in Aberdeenshire.

## 2. Policy Approach

- 2.1 The current policy supports new office development and identifies that office use is appropriate on land allocated in the plan for employment use; or where it will make use of other existing derelict, despoiled, unused or underused land or buildings. The trip generation of such uses is identified to require accessible locations and special controls are applied to “retail offices” commonly found in town centres (estate agents etc) to ensure they continue to contribute to town centre vitality.
- 2.2 This policy aims to ensure that new office developments are located on the right sites appropriate to their scale and function. New office developments should take into account traffic impacts and neighbouring uses to ensure a healthy mixed-use environment which should contribute to the vitality and viability of each settlement and its town centre.
- 2.3 Criterion 1 details that the types of land new office development would be acceptable on would have to be designated in the Local Development Plan as employment land or existing brownfield land. The Brownfield Capacity analysis of sites in Banff, Macduff, Fraserburgh and Peterhead identified the potential to increase, the amount of brownfield land within these town centres that can be redeveloped for office or commercial use. This is discussed further in section 4 below.
- 2.4 Corresponding with other sustainable requirements, criterion 2 identifies the need for new office developments to be accessible by a range of sustainable modes of travel. This policy identifies how adequate accessibility can be measured to assess the amount of proximate households who can access the site by foot or public transport, against the predicted amount of employees.
- 2.5 Criterion 3 asserts that developments under the Class 2 category must also demonstrate that a sequential approach to site selection has been followed. This is due to the fact that Class 2 service should ideally be located within the town centres’ main retail hub. Thus, this part of SG Bus2 is closely related to the town centres and retailing policy.

## 3. Background

### National context

- 3.1 Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) urges local authorities to respond to the diverse needs and locational requirements of different businesses by exercising a flexible approach and removing any unnecessary planning barriers to business development.

- 3.2 SPP recognises that business development should be occurring in sustainable locations, where the development can be easily accessible via sustainable modes of travel. This has to be particularly true for office developments as they can result in large 'hotspots' of employment and high peak travel demands. The use of derelict or underused land, buildings and infrastructure should be promoted to ensure they are being utilised to their full potential. SPP is also highly in favour of development that provides employment opportunities to enhance local economic development and competitiveness.
- 3.3 In terms of brownfield land, SPP directs planning authorities to utilise this underused resource as potential sites for new development, allowing the land to be back in productive use and creating more attractive environments. To enable redevelopment opportunities, SPP encourages local authorities to exercise their compulsory purchase powers to ensure the reuse of derelict or underused buildings and previously developed land.

#### Strategic/regional context

- 3.4 One of the prime objectives of the Aberdeen City and Shire Structure Plan 2009 is to provide opportunities which encourage economic development and create new employment in a range of areas that are both appropriate for and attractive to the needs of different industries. Office development specifically, is not deemed to be a strategic issue.

### **4. Drivers of change**

- 4.1 The nature of modern business results in a greater proportion of 'employment development' essentially resulting in the construction of offices. The 'sub – sea cluster' at Westhill is a good example of modern knowledge based businesses, and which has had a significantly greater impact on peak traffic flows than could have been expected from traditional employers.
- 4.2 Pressure on the viability of existing town centres remains a significant issue, which may be addressed by a policy which encourages these locations for office uses. There is a need to clarify criterion 3 and link the content with the town centres and retailing policy. There may also be the opportunity to introduce Class 4 business office use as well as Class 2 office services.
- 4.3 In accordance with the Scottish Government, there is a need for greater sustainability in the location of office developments.
- 4.4 Availability of accessible and viable brownfield land within centres is limited for housing and employment uses, but there is potential for offices and retailers that have a locational need. The brownfield capacity study for Banff, Macduff, Fraserburgh and Peterhead appraised sites over 0.3ha in size to assess whether it will be possible to identify additional brownfield land within these four settlements that could be incorporated into the plan. The study concluded that few sites could be included in the plan as land values in the four settlements have fallen to the extent that the cost of developing these sites outstrips the value of the land itself. As such, the majority of sites are financially unviable. However, there is still potential for uses that require a specific location and adopting the sequential approach to site selection would ensure brownfield sites of all sizes are considered.

## **5. Recommendations**

- 5.1 Modify criterion 1 and of Supplementary Guidance Bus 2 Office development as follows:

### SG Bus 2 Office development

- 1) They are on a site within a town centre defined on the proposals map that would not adversely impact on availability of prime retail floorspace, OR
- 2) Where it can be demonstrate that there are no sites within the town centre that can accommodate broadly the same scale and format of development proposed by the developer, it is located on land allocated for employment use; or uses existing despoiled derelict, unused or underused land or buildings ; AND
- 3) The applicant demonstrates that the development would be adequately accessible by public transport where available, by walking or other non-motorised means of travel , or would deliver improvements to public transport services in scale with the development

## **6. Summary of main points**

- 6.1 This supplementary guidance conveys a clear policy approach to new office developments within Aberdeenshire. It should equip development management to arrive at clear decisions for new office planning applications. It is in accordance with national policy in that it supports new office developments that will utilise derelict or underused land and buildings, creating a more pleasant environment. The policy also places emphasis on new office developments being accessible by sustainable means, in line with SPP requirements.

Introduction of a sequential approach for Class 2 offices and a simplified sequential test for class 4 offices represents a main issue that requires wider consideration and re-wording of the policy

## **References**

Aberdeenshire Council (2012) *Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan 2012*

Aberdeenshire Council (2013) *Brownfield Capacity study of Banff, Macduff, Fraserburgh and Peterhead*, Ryden LLP

Scottish Government (2010) *Scottish Planning Policy*