

Review of SG Landscape 1: Landscape character

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This paper is intended to review *SG Landscape 1: Landscape character* (SGLC1) to assess how it accords with national policy in view of any changes, and if it continues to provide a suitable basis for delivering development that is appropriate and consistent with its surrounding landscape character area.

2. Policy Approach

- 2.1 The current policy permits development where it is of an appropriate scale, location and design in accordance with the landscape character of the surrounding area. Appendix 1 of SGLC1 illustrates the different character areas throughout Aberdeenshire and Planning advice 12/2012 *Landscape character advice for small scale development* provides an overview of the key features and characteristics of each area and examples of good and bad practice.
- 2.2 Part 2 of SGLC1 stipulates that developments should not adversely impact the natural or historic features or overall composition of the landscape. This is particularly pertinent where the landscape unit is largely unspoilt by prominent development and greater care and protection of its features is required.
- 2.3 Part 2iii of SGLC1 states that the impact of a proposal on a landscape's natural/historic/overall composition must also be considered in relation to the potential adverse cumulative impact of other nearby proposals or developments.
- 2.4 Landscapes are vulnerable to the impacts of change and therefore the aim of the policy is to protect the special characteristics of high quality and sensitive landscapes. Therefore, development should generally be avoided in areas which are unspoilt. In addition, SGLC1 highlights the importance of considering the potentially negative impacts of even small developments.
- 2.5 The role of the Historic Land use Assessment is highlighted in the reasoned justification and areas which contain historic landscape features should be preserved and retained or the development should incorporate its features into the design.
- 2.6 Appendix 1 provides a list and series of maps identifying the landscape character areas within Aberdeenshire. The boundaries of the 37 character areas are based on Scottish Natural Heritage's Landscape Character Assessments, adjusted to accommodate errors associated with the scale of that mapping.

3. Background

National context

- 3.1 In 2006, the UK government ratified the European Landscape convention 2000, committing to support its principles. These principles should now be adhered to within the context of the UK, and therefore Scotland's, national and local policy. The aims of the convention "*are to promote protection, management and planning of all landscapes, including natural, managed, urban and peri-urban areas, and special, everyday and also degraded landscape*" (Scottish Government, 2009). The Scottish Government is satisfied that existing legislation, policy and land use planning systems are compliant with the convention and it is referred to in the policy.

- 3.2 Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) is the main national policy which governs Landscape and Natural Heritage. It states that '*Landscape in both the countryside and urban areas is constantly changing and the aim is to facilitate positive change whilst maintaining and enhancing distinctive character*'.
- 3.3 SPP highlights that the sensitivities of different landscapes should influence the level of development they are able to accommodate and states that the siting and design of a proposal should be informed by local landscape character. It adds that '*Areas of wild land character in some of Scotland's remoter upland, mountain and coastal areas are very sensitive to any form of development or intrusive human activity*'.
- 3.4 SPP also advises that planning authorities should ensure that all landscape impacts are considered in plan and decision making, particularly where incremental changes could lead to a more significant adverse impact.
- 3.5 Whilst SPP provides guidance relating to National Scenic Areas, there are currently none within Aberdeenshire to which this policy relates (i.e. outwith the Cairngorms National Park).

Strategic/regional context

- 3.6 The current draft of the Aberdeen City and Shire Strategic Development Plan identifies the need to deliver a range of housing options that meet the identified need of their locality. It states that priority should be given to developments which respect the character and landscape of the area.
- 3.7 It also stipulates that councils should take particular account of landscape - as well as other natural heritage features - in the development plan and when assessing proposals. Landscapes and their features are vulnerable to the impacts of development and there should be a focus on maintaining and improving them where development is proposed.

4. Drivers of Change

- 4.1 The current Landscape policy has encountered a change of approach from the last Local Plan (2006). This change was debated in the 2009 Main Issues Report. The Local Plan's policy identified a number of 'Areas of Landscape Significance' (ALS) which were deemed important for their physical landforms and environmental assets. These areas were afforded greater protection and were subject to a more stringent policy. This approach however did not always take into account each landscape as a whole and valuable landscape features that lay outwith the ALS areas. However, it has been highlighted that this approach was clearer, particularly for the assessment of development proposals.
- 4.2 SGLC1's approach is more overarching and takes into account all landscapes and their characteristics throughout Aberdeenshire. It places more emphasis on identifying what is and is not appropriate within each landscape character area to promote development that is compatible in scale and design with its surroundings. The planning advice 12/2012 is central to this policy. It provides an overview of the characteristics, sensitivities and features of each landscape that should be considered when assessing a proposal.
- 4.3 The current approach - which takes into consideration all landscapes - identifies particular 'sensitivities' which require greater consideration and protection. SGLC1 is consistent with the aims of national policy to protect and enhance

valuable landscape and to strive for developments that are compatible and appropriate with the landscapes in which they are being proposed. This approach provides a sound basis on which to assess and determine landscape impacts and it is not suggested that any changes are required.

5. Recommendations

- 5.1 It is not considered that are any major issues identified with the application or interpretation of the policy and it is therefore recommended that SGLC1 is retained as it currently stands.

6. Summary of Main Points

- 6.1 SGLC1 is currently a robust policy that is consistent with national and regional policy guidelines. It promotes the enhancement and protection of sensitive landscapes where development should be avoided and ensures that development is compatible and appropriate to its landscape character area. In addition, it stipulates that developments should not have an adverse impact on natural or historic features of the landscape or affects its overall composition and quality. The policy is compliant with the, albeit limited, regional guidance and it is recommended that SGLC1 is retained as it currently stands.

References

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

Aberdeenshire Council (2006) *The Aberdeenshire Local Plan*

Aberdeen City and Shire Strategic Development Plan Authority (2009) *Aberdeen City and Shire Structure Plan*

European Landscape Convention (2000)

Scottish Government (2010) *Scottish Planning Policy*