

BACKGROUND

The purpose of this Planning Advice Note is to inform interested parties of the material planning considerations which the Planning Authority will apply to applications which are submitted for prior notification or planning permission in respect of telecommunications developments.

With the increasing importance of digital connectivity and the changing nature of technology which is vital to Scotland's economy, the Scottish Government has amended the planning regulations to help facilitate the rollout of electronic communication infrastructure by extending the potential permitted development rights. Guidance is available from the Scottish Government regarding the changes in planning regulations.

The Planning Authority must determine all applications which are submitted for prior notification or planning permission in respect of telecommunications developments, in accordance with the adopted development plan unless material planning considerations indicate otherwise. This Planning Advice Note constitutes a form of non-statutory guidance which has been designed to be consistent with national and local guidance which ensures that it constitutes a material planning consideration.

During the determination process of applications which are submitted for prior notification or planning permission in respect of telecommunications developments, the most common issues which may be raised are their potential to create a health risk and/or their potential visual impact.

Therefore, and when taking all of the above into consideration, it is for the Planning Authority to secure a reasonable balance between the aspirations of the Scottish Government, the demands of the telecommunications industry, and its duty to protect and whenever possible enhance the local environment.

HEALTH RISK

The Scottish Government states clearly within national guidance that the planning system should not be used to secure objectives that are more properly achieved under other legislation. Emissions of radiofrequency radiation are controlled and regulated under other legislation which ensures that it is not necessary for Planning Authorities to treat emissions of radiofrequency radiation as a material planning consideration.

As stated above, the Planning Authority must determine all applications which are submitted for prior notification or planning permission in respect of telecommunications developments, in accordance with the adopted development plan unless material planning considerations indicate otherwise. Therefore, as emissions of radiofrequency radiation do not constitute a material planning

consideration, the Planning Authority will be unable to take into account any objections from a representee based solely on the suspicion of a health risk.

However, national regulations require that in certain circumstances the submission of written notices, prior notifications and planning applications must be accompanied by a signed declaration that the equipment is designed to be in full compliance with ICNIRP (International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection) guidelines for public exposure to emissions of radiofrequency radiation. These guidelines establish the limitation of exposure of the general public to electromagnetic fields. In compliance with the national regulations and where required, the Planning Authority will request the submission of a signed ICNIRP declaration.

When required, the Planning Authority will negotiate with telecommunications operators in order to discourage the siting of telecommunications developments which are within close proximity to the most sensitive land uses (e.g. schools) or where a large number of objections have been received from representees. In such instances, telecommunications operators will be encouraged to consider alternative, less sensitive locations.

VISUAL IMPACT AND DESIGN

All components of equipment should be considered together and designed and positioned as sensitively as possible, though technical requirements and constraints may limit the possibilities. The cumulative visual effects of equipment should be taken into account by the Planning Authority.

Visual Impact – Built-Up Areas

The most preferred location for telecommunications developments is within existing industrial areas and brownfield sites etc, which are not situated within close proximity to any boundary with existing residential properties. Employment land and town centre locations (especially if mounted on existing buildings) are also likely to be generally acceptable subject to their visual impact being minimised particularly in conservation areas. Any telecommunications developments which are attached to listed buildings will demand particularly careful consideration regarding siting and design.

Existing residential areas are best avoided as telecommunications structures are likely to be intrusive and unsightly and will likely disturb the enjoyment by householders of their residential amenity. In circumstances where it is impossible to avoid predominantly existing residential areas due to operational reasons, careful siting and design will be important in order to ensure that a telecommunications development could be considered acceptable by the Planning Authority.

It is anticipated that there would be a high level of objection from representees regarding the siting of telecommunications developments which are located within close proximity to a school, nursery, hospital or other sensitive land use. It is also considered that the siting of telecommunications developments within a public open space/parkland is likely to be obtrusive and over-dominant. In such instances,

telecommunications operators will be encouraged to seek alternative, less sensitive locations.

Visual Impact – Open Countryside

In the past, site selection in the open countryside has largely been driven by technical demands but telecommunications operators will now be expected to give greater consideration to visual impact. It is possible to find acceptable sites located within the open countryside by carefully exploiting topographical features such as utilising the land form to hide or partly screen a mast. Skyline locations will only be considered acceptable by the Planning Authority in circumstances where telecommunications operators can successfully justify that there are no alternative practical locations.

Locating a mast within a group of existing trees or against a backdrop of existing trees will assist in making a site more acceptable to the Planning Authority. A proposal to plant trees within an otherwise unacceptable location is unlikely to assist in making a site more acceptable to the Planning Authority due to the time it would take for sufficient growth to occur.

It may be possible to utilise existing masts or pylons, farm buildings (e.g. silos) or other structures and buildings located within the open countryside in an attempt to accommodate new telecommunications developments in a less visually obvious manner. Attaching telecommunications developments to these existing structures will usually be preferable as opposed to a further new free-standing mast etc. In the past, telecommunications operators have been reluctant to install equipment on electricity pylons and trees but this is possible and can provide an acceptable solution. Mast sharing is also highly recommended although this is not always a panacea as it can mean an unacceptable increase in the height of a mast. In all cases, every effort should be made by telecommunications operators to avoid known or fine views and designated areas within the open countryside.

Design

Appropriate, innovative and sensitive design goes hand in hand with careful site selection. There are examples of telecommunications developments being disguised as street furniture; being located in buildings behind glass reinforced plastic screens; as public art; or simply by being painted in a colour akin to the background which can then help 'camouflage' the equipment.

In the open countryside masts can be disguised as trees but this design needs to be used carefully and only really works in the vicinity of or amongst existing trees.

Telecommunications developments should be kept simple, such as the use of slimline monopoles etc, as complex structures usually attract attention. Lamppost designs may provide a very acceptable solution in some urban areas but, dependant on their height, may be over-dominant within a village streetscape.

Before opting for ground mounted installations, consideration should be given to attaching the equipment to existing buildings or structures (including chimneys, water towers, pylons, silos and churches etc) as invariably the latter will provide a

better visual solution. Smaller telecommunications developments on existing buildings, with careful siting in relation to architectural features and detailing, can be made to almost disappear, especially if finished in a matching colour.

Amongst trees, a dark matt green or brown coloured finish is preferable whilst within the open countryside a pale grey colour is preferable. With regards to the attachment of telecommunications developments on existing buildings, a finishing colour that matches the colour of the existing building will be the most preferable.

PLANNING REQUIREMENTS

The first requirement of the Planning Authority will be evidence that these guidelines have been followed i.e. that the preferred or suggested locations and designs etc have been fully considered before reverting to less desirable or less supported solutions.

Depending on how close the proposal achieves the preferred solutions, the Planning Authority is likely to request:-

- an operational justification for the chosen location;
- evidence of consideration given to other sites;
- a statement justifying the proposed design;
- evidence of consideration given to the potential for mast sharing; and
- what opportunities exist for attaching the equipment to existing buildings or structures.

On rarer occasions telecommunications operators may be asked to submit evidence of consultation which has been carried out with the local community; a photomontage; an analysis of the potential environmental impact (e.g. if located in a designated area); and a coverage map(s).

CONCLUSION

National and local guidance highlights the importance of digital infrastructure across towns and cities, and in particular the more remote rural areas. Planning Authorities should support development which helps deliver the Scottish Government's commitment to world-class digital connectivity; allow networks to evolve and respond to technology improvements and new services; encourage the provision of digital infrastructure in new homes and business premises; and provide opportunities for new digital infrastructure which is sited and designed in order to ensure environmental impacts are kept to a minimum.