

SUBMISSION BY IRISH PLANNING INSTITUTE TO DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT, HERITAGE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

CONSULTATION DRAFT GUIDELINES FOR PLANNING AUTHORITIES ON:- SUSTAINABLE URBAN HOUSING: DESIGN STANDARDS FOR APARTMENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Institute welcomes the preparation of these draft Design Standards for Apartments, as part of a larger suite of national policy and planning guidance on sustainable urban housing. The Institute established a committee drawn from its membership, with extensive experience of planning practice in putting forward and in assessing residential developments. This committee has carefully considered the Consultation Draft, and has made a number of suggestions by way of amendment.

The Institute asks the Department to consider the points made in this submission, which are put forward with the intention of improving the document, of raising queries or comments on certain aspects, and of ensuring that the final Guidelines, when issued, will not only be appropriate, but will also be operable in practice.

GENERAL COMMENTS

The starting point for the Institute is the statement set out in the recently-published Statement on Housing Policy “Delivering Homes – Sustaining Communities”, recently issued by the Department. In this policy, the present Guidelines are stated to be part of new comprehensive planning guidance on interrelated housing and planning issues including:-

“revised minimum floor area standards/facilities for apartments, particularly from the point of view of ensuring higher proportions of family and child friendly development.”

In the Institute’s view, if apartments are to be generally accepted as other than starter homes or homes for single persons, and are to be seen as suitable for family dwelling use in particular, then significant changes will have to be made in the way in which apartments are designed, with particular emphasis on increasing floor areas, increased open space and other facilities, and a better “livability” in terms of access to sunlight, daylight and privacy. The current over-provision of smaller units, units with limited or no private open space, and of single aspect apartments, will have to be altered.

The Institute therefore fully supports the overall thrust of the draft Guidelines, in that they seek to provide for a level of certainty in terms of setting minimum standards for apartments, and to enable Planning Authorities to adjudicate on proposals for new apartment development based on considerations of quality and sustainability. The Institute is satisfied that these considerations can best be assured through the regulatory mechanism provided in the planning application process, and Development Management generally, and not through the Building Regulations or through voluntary codes of practice. However, it should be stressed that mere adherence to quantitative standards is not sufficient in order to provide high quality sustainable communities, and that greater emphasis on design quality has to be seen as an integral part of the overall suite of guidance. Issues such as high quality architecture, materials and landscaping can make for a much more attractive place to live - something which cannot be measured numerically.

The following comments are made, based on the sections of the draft Guidelines.

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

DEFINITION

It is submitted that, if these Guidelines are to be operated effectively, it will be absolutely necessary to define the scope within which they are to be applied. Therefore a definition of “apartment” is required. Many Development Plans have such definitions, and make a distinction between conventional housing and apartments. The proposed companion document, to be issued by the Department, on the issue of taking in charge standards and management companies, makes this distinction, and the Minister is on record as instructing Planning Authorities not to condition the provision of management companies for residential developments of houses only, as opposed to apartments. Hence the distinction is well recognised, and it is therefore reasonable to provide a definition of apartment so as to define the developments to which these standards will apply. This would also have the advantage of ensuring that there would be no question of any applicant seeking to argue that the standards in the Guidelines would not apply to their development.

A suggested definition for an apartment is:-

“a residential unit in a multi-unit building with grouped or common access”.

SCOPE OF GUIDELINES

The Guidelines are orientated towards internal standards but the issues of communal facilities, private open space and communal open space are also dealt with. In this context it is considered that the issue of car parking provision should be dealt with, not least because it is a necessary ancillary facility and because it often competes for space with communal open space. This could be done in these Guidelines, or in the revision to the Density Guidelines, but note the comment below under paragraph 3.8.

CHAPTER 2 - RECOMMENDED INTERNAL DESIGN STANDARDS

Paragraph 2.2.

In acknowledging that all apartments should not just meet the standards, but seek to achieve higher standards, it is recommended that the phrase “*some – if not all – apartments*” should be replaced by “*a significant proportion of apartments, with the proportion to be determined by the Planning Authority in its Development Plan / Local Area Plans*”.

Paragraph 2.3. Development Plan Standards

The Institute welcomes the concept of a target average floor area, since it allows for variations in standards to take account of local conditions, while still ensuring that the minimum standards set out in the Guidelines are adhered to. However, the Guidelines should state (perhaps in a footnote to this paragraph) that, where a target average floor area is specified, a maximum floor area for the largest units should also be specified, for calculation of this average. This is necessary in order to avoid a situation where the target average floor area figure would be skewed by the provision of, for example, one very large penthouse apartment on top of a block of other smaller apartments of the minimum floor area. Such a situation would not be conducive to ensuring sustainable residential communities, which is an aim of the Guidelines. This point was noted in the background Research Study Report, but has not been carried through into the draft Guidelines themselves.

Paragraphs 2.7 and 2.8.

The provision of the information set out in these paragraphs in planning applications is necessary in order for Planning Authorities to assess apartment developments in the light of the recommended standards. However, the draft Guidelines are vague as to whether or not this information should be a matter for validation of applications. It is implied that the information in paragraph 2.7 would be a “requirement” (and therefore a validation issue), whereas that in paragraph 2.8 would not. However the background Research Study Report, at chapter 6, specifically recommends that all of this information should not be an issue for validation of applications.

The Institute considers that the appropriate means of ensuring that necessary information is provided to enable assessment of a development, on the one hand, and that the delays in the system, which are currently caused by excessive invalidation, are not further exacerbated, on the other, is that the information set out in paragraph 2.7, including the table, should be included in the proposed standard application form, as recommended by the Department in the Development Management Guidelines. The information set out in paragraph 2.8 should not be required as a validation issue, but applicants could be advised that, if it is not provided, there is a likelihood of a request for additional information.

CHAPTER 3 – STORAGE AREAS AND COMMUNAL FACILITIES

The Institute considers that the demand for increased storage space in apartments is an issue that requires greater attention, if apartments are to be suitable for family use. Apartments must be able to accommodate growing families along with their possessions. The Guidelines should provide better guidance, detailing adequate levels of storage. It is felt that the text of the Guidelines on this issue requires augmentation, possibly including more of the points made in the Research Study Report.

It is considered essential that all apartments (rather than ‘some’, as appears to be suggested in the draft Guidelines) should have storage for items such as buggies, cases and vacuum cleaners. In addition, it is submitted that this chapter should be modified by including some ‘good practice’ guidance on dedicated storage for other bulky items in the basement / ground floor areas of apartment complexes (such as for bicycles). In each case, these storage areas should be in addition to, and not instead of, the overall floor areas for apartments, as set out in the Guidelines.

Paragraph 3.2. General Storage

The qualification of “*minimum*” referring to kitchen presses and bedroom furniture should be omitted, on grounds of clarity, and also to ensure that the suggested storage area would not be eroded.

The requirement that storage be separate to the area for water storage (hot presses) and boilers is contained in Recommendation no. 34 of the Research Study Report, and is often found in local authority development plans. Its omission from the draft Guidelines should be addressed given the extent of co-location of these facilities in many layouts. In a quantitative sense, this leads to ‘double counting’ and ultimately an under-provision of storage. In a qualitative sense, it leads to layouts whereby often the boiler is located at the back of the storage area, and, for fire safety or access reasons, the storage area should be kept clear.

Paragraph 3.3. Refuse Storage

Waste management presents particular difficulties for apartments. It is suggested that the Guidelines should address this issue in greater depth either in the main body of the document or in an Appendix. Failure to deal with issues relating to waste can impact on the quality of life of apartment dwellers and on the ultimate sustainability of apartment developments developing as real communities.

The statements in the draft Guidelines regarding waste management services require expansion to reflect current and future policy, including the Department’s own environment policy. Integrated waste management requires separate collection of source-separated waste in terms of (a) recyclables, (b) biodegradable waste and (c) residual waste. The provision of bring bank facilities should also be factored in at design stage.

It is suggested that the rather vague content of the Guidelines in this paragraph should be replaced by the more detailed Recommendation no. 56 in the background Research Study Report, and that these be then supported by ‘best practice’ guidance, based on experience in Europe. Without such detailed provision in the Guidelines, apartment development which is lacking in this area will undermine the delivery of the Government’s own waste management initiatives.

Paragraph 3.4. Shared Circulation Areas

The draft Guidelines recognise the problems associated with these, but are not sufficiently specific as to what constitutes good practice. It is still a fact that too many apartment schemes have common corridors that are excessively long. This practice should be clearly stated to be unacceptable, and it is suggested that a maximum length of internal corridor should be specified in the Guidelines. Restricting the length of

corridors, and the number of accesses to units from such internal corridors, would minimise issues such as the lack of a sense of ownership over common areas.

The reference to entrances being “clearly identified and welcoming” should be expanded by stating that properties should be readily accessible from “visually prominent entrance locations within the public domain”. Reference should also be made to the provision of intercom systems, in the interests of safety and security for residents.

Paragraph 3.5. Lifts

This matter is dealt with in greater detail, and more satisfactorily, in Recommendation No. 60 in the Research Study Report. It is recommended that this paragraph be substituted by Recommendation No. 60. In addition, it is suggested that stairwells and lift shafts should be designed to enable passive surveillance (for example by incorporating glazing in lift walls).

Paragraph 3.6 Service Ducts

In addition to the comment made in this paragraph, the Guidelines should state that the design of apartments should incorporate appropriate wiring and facilities for modern technologies. (Currently this is provided by some developers, but not by others). This would avoid the need for personal adaptation of apartment facades (for example by the addition of satellite dishes, CCTV etc.)

Paragraph 3.7 – Mailboxes (new).

The provision for mailboxes, as set out in Recommendation No. 61 of the Research Study Report, should be included. In addition it should be stated that such grouped mailboxes should be of substantial construction, and be of adequate size to take larger items of mail, in order to avoid theft.

Paragraph 3.8 - Car Parking (new)

While it is accepted that the bulk of car parking in the larger apartment developments should be located underground (not least for visual amenity reasons and to ensure that communal open space is maximised), it is suggested that the Guidelines should recommend the provision of surface car parking where possible to facilitate drop-off for shopping, elderly persons and young children, located adjoining entrance lobbies/areas. This will also facilitate “visitability” to the apartments for mobility-impaired visitors (in line with established Departmental policy on housing generally).

CHAPTER 4 – PRIVATE OPEN SPACES AND BALCONIES

Paragraph 4.1. Introduction

There should be a clearer emphasis on the quality and amenity value of communal open space. This paragraph, and paragraph 4.4, briefly discuss landscaping of communal areas. The guidance in this area should be expanded, and should highlight such issues as:

- Hard and soft landscaping, location and appropriateness;
- Multi-purpose spaces (i.e. play areas and areas of passive recreation);
- Orientation and overshadowing of open spaces;
- Levels of maintenance to ensure an enduring standard of performance and amenity;
- Screening, particularly for balconies facing public streets and for roof gardens, and other spaces that might need shelter;
- Greater emphasis on the character and design of private amenity space and semi-private open space in apartment schemes.

Paragraph 4.2

It is submitted that this paragraph needs to be strengthened. Access to sunlight and appropriate screening should be a requirement for all balconies or terraces, not only those at ground floor level. Access to sunlight and privacy is a necessary pre-requisite for all private open space.

Paragraph 4.3. Balconies

The use of the term “width” is confusing, and may be mis-interpreted. Does this mean the side to side measurement or it is the ‘depth’, i.e. the front to back measurement, of the balcony? It is suggested that what was meant was the latter, and hence the word ‘width’ should be replaced by ‘depth’. This is confirmed by the minimum floor areas set out for balconies in the Appendix. The minimum depths suggested in the draft Guidelines are supported by the Institute, and should not be reduced. Any performance criteria for balconies would indicate that, to be usable, the balconies must be sufficiently wide to accommodate sitting out by all of the residents of the apartment.

A logical corollary of the proposed standards is that balconies that have no depth, such as “Juliette” balconies, should not be permitted. It would be helpful if the Guidelines should explicitly state this point.

It is suggested that the phrase ‘*generally extending for the full length of the external living room wall*’, should be omitted. It is considered that this provision is a constraint on good design, having regard to the minimum balcony areas specified in the Appendix.

Care should be taken in allowing ‘winter gardens’ to substitute for balconies. In practice, there have been cases where extra large windows to living-rooms are proposed and the area of the living-room closest to the window is claimed as a winter garden. This approach ‘double counts’ the open space and a section of the living space, as well as essentially meaning that while the living-room is quite pleasant, there is essentially no open space. The Guidelines should specify that winter gardens should be functionally separate from living spaces, and should be designed such that the glazing can be removed or retracted in times of good weather (as is the practice in Europe). An appropriate system of glazing/access between the winter garden and the livingroom should be constructed.

Paragraph 4.4.

It is queried whether overlooking of a busy street is a particularly negative characteristic in all circumstances. Urban areas are inherently active, and good urban design encourages passive surveillance

of streets. It is felt that the first sentence of this paragraph should be omitted. Recessed balconies might be appropriate in historic areas, and this alternative should be mentioned as well as the other options.

The Guidelines should explicitly state (as noted in the background Research Study Report) that private open spaces such as balconies and terraces should be accessible from the main living accommodation of apartments if they are to be of any real benefit (rather than accessed from bedrooms).

Paragraph 4.5

The advice given in this paragraph should be expanded. In the interest of promoting life long living in apartment schemes, greater consideration should be given to the design, size, location, usefulness and materials of balconies and terraces. Safety for children, in terms of the materials and heights of balustrades, should be explicitly referred to. Balconies should be part of the design of the apartment scheme, and not have the appearance of a stuck on afterthought. Floors of balconies should be solid and self-draining, and partitions should be provided such that views from the public realm are obscured by low walls or obscure glazing.

CHAPTER 5 – OVERALL DESIGN ISSUES

Paragraph 5.2. Facilities for Children

It is considered that the final two sentences in this paragraph, referring to circumstances in which reduced levels of childcare facilities may be provided, should be omitted. If apartments are to be accepted as a viable option for families, then adequate provision for childcare, at a location and of a quality that will attract families to such apartments, has to be seen as a pre-requisite. Permitting a reduced level in new developments, based on the existing profile of an area, is inappropriate in what has proven to be a dynamic residential environment.

Paragraph 5.3.

The threshold of 150 apartments for the provision of larger play areas for older children/teenagers should be reduced to 75, similar to the threshold for the provision of crèches. Alternatively, where such play areas would not be suitable to the layout or scale of a development, provision could be made for the payment of financial contributions in lieu of such larger play areas, to enable the Planning Authority to provide suitable spaces for older children/teenagers, in accordance with the Authority's play policies.

The last section of this paragraph refers to the concept of central communal open space within a perimeter block as being an ideal form of design to contain childrens' play areas. However, these areas should not lead to the apartment scheme becoming a gated community, as such gated communities are inimical to the principles of social sustainability, promote social segregation, and also pose problems for good urban design by preventing permeability and connectivity.

It is submitted that where such spaces, surrounded by perimeter blocks, are permitted, the open space areas should be fully usable and have adequate levels of sunlighting. It is recommended that a standard be adopted whereby the heights and layouts of the perimeter blocks be such as to permit such spaces to have direct access to sunlight over at least half of their areas during the months of March to September inclusive. Design typologies of perimeter blocks which are based on examples at lower altitudes, where the sun is located directly overhead for much of the day, are not suitable to locations at higher latitudes such as Ireland where sunlight is at a lower alignment.

Paragraph 5.4.

Part of this paragraph refers to the need to provide adequate childrens' study space. It is suggested that the Guidelines should require that a general study space should be provided, both for childrens' use, and for adult use (as for example home offices etc). Alternatively, more emphasis might be placed on the need for bedrooms to be adaptable and to be of sufficient size to accommodate study space/desks. This could be achieved, for example, by increasing the minimum floor area of the single bedroom from 7.1 sq metres to 9 sq metres.

Paragraph 5.5.

A more positive statement is required in relation to dual aspect apartments. These should be the norm for all developments. Single aspect apartments should only be accepted in exceptional circumstances, where justification could be demonstrated in terms of increased internal amenity. (This could be, for example, where single aspect is necessitated by the site circumstances in infill situations or restricted sites in dense urban areas, especially city centres, which are in need of regeneration.) The mix of single to dual aspect apartments should be determined by Planning Authorities in their own standards, subject to these principles. In particular, if single-aspect apartments are accepted in some situations subject to facing south or west (as suggested in the draft Guidelines), then they should not be permitted where they face north or east, and the Guidelines should be specific in this regard.

In terms of the orientation of apartment buildings within a site, regard should be had to the effects of wind funnelling, particularly where apartment blocks are located in close proximity to one another, since microclimatic effects can have impacts not only on the amenity value of open spaces, but also on the safety of residents using them, or even walking to their homes. Planning authorities should be advised to seek wind impact studies as part of applications for apartment developments where this could be an issue.

Paragraph 5.7 Designing in safety and security (new)

The draft Guidelines do not specifically discuss the issue of general security for residents. A dedicated section or paragraph should be provided on how issues of safety and security can be designed in to a scheme from the start. This would provide a useful guide to designers. Such a section/paragraph might address issues of:-

- Lighting (both external and internal to common areas);
- Safety by design principles;
- Access to underground parking and storage areas;
- The need for concierge/security units in large apartment developments.

Security issues for ground floor apartments are regularly an issue of concern. It would be appropriate to provide some level of guidance on this issue in the Guidelines. It is recommended that the Guidelines should refer to the value of a concierge service for apartment schemes, or possibly the provision of a one-bed unit on the ground floor, adjacent to the entrance foyer, with both external and foyer access, to allow for such a person to be accommodated. (The employment of such a person would, in most cases, be an issue for the management company).

APPENDIX

Minimum Floor Areas

The Institute fully supports the provision of these tables, as a ready-reckoner and checklist for designers and planners in setting out the main quantitative standards to be applied.

However, it is considered that some of the standards suggested are rather minimalist, and could be adjusted upwards. It is noted in the background Research Study Report that the market is already providing units generally in excess of some of the minimum apartment floor areas that are now being recommended. Accordingly, it is suggested that the minima might be adjusted upwards, particularly for the one and two bedroom units.

Minimum overall apartment floor areas

It is recommended that these be increased, in the case of all apartments, by 2 sq. metres. The main purpose of this is to facilitate families, including those with children, and to take into account the variety of household arrangements and typologies, which are significantly different now to those that would have applied at the time of the Parker Morris standards (from which the consultant appears to have derived many of his principles).

Specifically, it is suggested that the minimum floor area of a one bedroomed apartment should be 47 sq metres, that of a two bedroomed apartment should be 75 sq metres, and that of a three-bedroomed apartment should be 88 sq metres. (These figures reflect the increased floor areas for bedrooms – see below). As noted by the consultant, such floor areas, or higher, are now a regular occurrence in the marketplace, and it is considered that there should not be any material impacts on costs from such requirements at this stage.

It is considered that the rather artificial distinction made between a 3 person and a 4 person two-bedroomed apartment (derived from the former social housing guidelines) has no reality in the private housing marketplace, which would simply designate such an apartment as a 2-bedroomed unit.

Minimum bedroom floor areas/width

It is suggested, in the interest of clarity, and as an anti-avoidance measure, that the footnote to this table should state:-

“Note: minimum floor areas exclude built-in storage presses, and ensuite bathrooms/wc’s”

Minimum aggregate bedroom floor areas

The basis for the suggested increase in the minimum overall apartment floor areas, above, relates to the minimum bedroom floor areas. The Institute feels that it is necessary, in order to provide greater flexibility to allow for wider variation in the composition of families, or other groups of occupants, that the indicated double bedrooms (11.4 sq m) should be changed to twin bedrooms (13 sq m) in the case of one and two bedroomed apartments. It is submitted that it is not appropriate to assume that a double bedroom would be adequate for all families, and it is preferable that twin bedrooms, which could allow either for a double bed or twin single beds, with appropriate furniture, be provided. The larger floor area would also facilitate the provision of cots in the parents’ room, in the early months, and would allow for adequate space for study desks in rooms used by older children/teenagers.

As noted above, it is also suggested that the minimum floor area of the single bedroom should be increased from 7.1 to 9 sq m, to accommodate room for study desks.

The table should therefore read as follows:-

Minimum aggregate bedroom floor areas

<i>One bedroom</i>	<i>13 sq m</i>
<i>Two bedroom</i>	<i>13 + 13 sq m = 26 sq m</i>
<i>Three bedroom</i>	<i>13 + 13 + 9 sq m = 35 sq m</i>

Minimum floor areas for main apartment balconies

This heading should be altered to ‘minimum areas for balconies serving living areas of apartments’, in order to avoid ambiguity. As noted earlier, it appears to be the intention of the Guidelines (as set out in the background Research Study Report) that balconies should be accessed from the main living areas of apartments. The heading, however, might imply that only the “main apartments” in a scheme would have to have balconies with this floor area (which is clearly inappropriate and could lead to problems of interpretation and enforcement of the standards).