

1.1 CONTEXT

1.1.1 RESPONDING TO CONTEXT AND PLACE

Show that proposals are informed by a detailed understanding of the wider context.

Make sure design contributes positively to the unique character and appearance of the context, both at an immediate and wider city scale.

Where the surrounding area has heightened heritage significance, make sure that design reinforces this significance.

Where the surrounding area lacks a sense of coherence or distinctiveness, make sure development contributes to improving the character of the area.

City Plan 2030 Policies

Env 1 -	Design Quality and Context
Env 3 -	Development Design – Incorporating and Enhancing Existing and Potential Features
Env 4 -	Development Design – Impact on Setting
Env 9 -	World Heritage Sites
Env 11 -	Listed Building – Setting
Env 14 -	Conservation Area – Development
Env 19 -	Special Landscape Areas

NPF4 Policies

Policy 7 -	Historic assets & places
Policy 14 -	Design, quality & place

The character and appearance of an area is important to its sense of place. For a proposal to respond positively to its context, it is essential that it is designed with a good understanding of its site and the surrounding area and the wider city. Proposals that do not respond positively to the context will not be supported.

Responding to an area's character

All developments need to clearly demonstrate how the character of the site and surrounding area where the development is proposed has been assessed, and how the development has been designed to reflect and creatively interpret this. There are many aspects that contribute to the character of an area that need to be considered when assessing site context. This includes:

- Topography and geology.
- Open space, vegetation, trees, ecology, and water environment.
- Views.

- History and heritage.
- Landmarks and historic and cultural assets.
- Neighbourhood layout (including positioning of buildings, density, plot sizes, settlement patterns and urban grain).
- Streets, routes, and transport infrastructure (including movement hierarchies).
- Built form (including heights, roofscape, scale and proportions, massing, materials and architectural style and detailing).
- Microclimate (including sunlight, air quality, wind, humidity, sounds and smells).
- Land uses and functions.
- Social, education and community infrastructure.

This distinctive pattern of features can be described as the landscape or townscape character of a rural or urban area. These aspects all combine to create an area's 'sense of place'.



Responding to historic context - The new buildings in the Quatermile development are designed to respond to the layout, massing and heights of the historic former Royal Infirmary buildings. © Getty Images

High quality design responds to and builds on this 'sense of place'. This is not as straightforward as just duplicating the building styles around the site. It requires an understanding of how these aspects of an area's character interact with each other to create a unique place. Consistency and continuity are important, and new buildings should not draw attention to themselves disproportionately.

A baseline character assessment can help to define objectives on how to respond to the landscape or townscape and to evaluate how it may be altered by a development.

Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) is a tool to evaluate how a development alters the landscape or townscape and how this would impact views. See "[1.1.3 Visual Impact, Skyline & Protected Views](#)" on page 9

Historic Environments

Responding to context is of particular importance in historic environments. The Council wants new development in historic settings to be contemporary and stand the test of time.

Edinburgh's historic environment includes historic buildings, townscapes, parks, gardens and designed landscapes, landscape, the layout of fields and roads, the remains of a wide range of past human activities, ancient monuments, archaeological sites and landscapes and many other features. It comprises both statutory and non-statutory designations and a range of non-designated historic assets and areas of historic interest.

- **World Heritage Sites:** There are two World Heritage Sites in the city: The Old and New Towns of Edinburgh and the Forth Bridge. There are management systems in place for both World Heritage Sites to protect their 'Outstanding Universal Value' (OUV). Any development in or near to these sites will require consideration of how the proposal responds to this historically significant context and the relevant cultural and natural heritage attributes. Development

that presents a threat to a World Heritage Site's OUV will not be supported.

- **Listed Buildings:** Listed buildings are buildings that have been given a statutory designation that recognise them as having special heritage significance. Additional permissions are needed to make alterations to a listed building.
- **Conservation Areas:** Conservation areas are areas that have special architectural or historical interest. Not all buildings in a conservation area will be making a positive contribution to the area. [Conservation area character appraisals](#) help manage change in the area. They provide an agreed basis of understanding of what makes an area special. This understanding informs and provides the context in which decisions can be made on proposals which may affect that character.
- **Gardens and designed landscapes:** [Historic Environment Scotland maintains an Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes in Scotland](#) that are of national importance. Proposals on or affecting a site listed in the inventory must consider the impact development will have on the site and its setting. As will proposals that have potential to affect non-designated historic landscapes or feature.

Developments that will impact historic environments will need to clearly set out how the significance of relevant historic assets is being considered when developing a design. This is assessed using a *Heritage Impact Assessment*. Developments should be appropriate, and the benefits presented by a proposal should outweigh any risks to the surrounding heritage. This sensitive contextual approach should be considered in all stages of the design process, from responding to the urban grain, developing the architectural approach and choosing materials. This does not just relate to the buildings, but also the spaces between them. Development should retain significant gaps or open spaces which contribute to the street scene or provide the setting for buildings of architectural or historic importance.

Archaeology

Where a site is of known or suspected archaeological significance a programme of archaeological works will need to be agreed with the Council. As the archaeology may influence the extent of development, this should be done at the site appraisal stage. On some sites, excavations may be required.

Areas of poor urban quality

Not all areas in Edinburgh have a positive character. Some neighbourhoods have been developed in a piecemeal approach and lack coherence and consistency. Some do not create healthy environments and lack green space or playspace. Some have been designed for motor travel at the expense of providing a safe and pleasant environment for people. In these areas, development should improve the character of the area and address these shortcomings. This should be done by identifying the positive aspects of character that do exist in the area. This should then be supplemented by looking at areas of positive character nearby or in the wider city. These should be combined to create a stronger sense of place through built forms and new blue green infrastructure that also create a liveable, sustainable and productive neighbourhood.

Further Reading

- [Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas Guidance](#)
- [HES: Managing Change in the Historic Environment guidance series](#)
- [The Garden History Society Planning Conservation Advice Note 11 Development in the Setting of Historic Designed Landscape.](#)
- [Landscape Institute - Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment](#)

1.1.2 INCORPORATING AND ENHANCING EXISTING FEATURES

Reinforce positive, locally distinctive patterns of development, townscape, landscape, scale, materials and quality, where these exist.

Retain and incorporate features worthy of retention such as:

- views and vistas to landmarks or features of interest.
- trees, hedgerows, other habitat and landscape features.
- existing buildings, boundary elements and materials.
- archaeological features.

City Plan 2030 Policies

Env 3 - Development Design – Incorporating and Enhancing Existing and Potential Features

NPF4 Policies

Policy 7 - Historic assets & places

Policy 14 - Design, quality & place

Development should respond well to and reinforce positive characteristics and features of the site and its surroundings including topography, physical features, built form, urban grain, views and vistas. This is particularly important in historic settings, conservation areas and natural assets where, in addition to the historic settlement pattern and the general character of the wider context, features such as landscape elements, plot boundaries, enclosures and pedestrian routes should inform the design.

Views

Integrating and celebrating local and citywide views in a new site layout can anchor a development in the city and its local neighbourhood context, provide a sense of place, support wayfinding and enhance the amenity of new streets, squares, and open spaces.

The height and massing of buildings can affect the availability of views. [See “2.2.3 Height and Form” on page 78.](#) Consider how views to be retained might be affected by any adjacent redevelopment. The demolition of buildings, where justified, may also open up previously hidden vantage points.

Incorporating views in developments should be considered in addition to the specific views and vistas which protect designated assets, sites or their settings.



Retaining views: The massing of the new buildings in Caltongate frame the view across to Nelson's monument

Natural features

Trees and planting make a significant contribution to the streetscape character, backdrop and setting of many parts of the city. Layouts should retain existing trees, woodland, hedgerows and other biodiverse habitat, including naturalised land. Natural features should be integrated with the layout of new streets, buildings and open spaces. In addition to enhancing or restoring ecological value, this contributes to the city's blue green network, providing connectivity for people and wildlife and building resilience to climate change. See Chapters [“1.3.2 Green Blue Infrastructure” on page 25,](#) [“1.4.1 Biodiversity” on page 30](#) and [“1.4.2 Trees & Woodland” on page 34.](#)



Retaining trees: The mature street trees on Comely Bank Road contribute positively to the streetscape and were retained as part of the design and layout of the Edinburgh Academical stadium.

Landscape elements, including hills and natural landforms, the coastline, watercourses and urban edge should be retained and enhanced to provide structure within the townscape and a transition between the built-up area and its surrounding landscape and countryside.

Intact layouts, essential characteristics or remnant features of gardens and designed landscapes of regional



Integrating trees, Malta Terrace: Existing trees have been carefully integrated into this housing development

and local interest should be understood through historic landscape appraisal and retained and interpreted as appropriate.

Buildings and built elements

Existing buildings and boundary elements (such as walls or railings) can contribute positively to a development's character, even where these are not listed or in a Conservation Area. Where this the case, their retention is encouraged.

Where this is not possible, historic fabric and materials can be re-used on site, adding to the character and interest when integrated with new high-quality architecture and landscape design, minimising waste. This could include the salvage and re-use of bricks, carved stone, cast iron/steel/concrete elements and setted paving.



Retention of existing buildings - As part of the redevelopment of the former engine yards at Shrubhill, the conversion of the redundant tram sheds has safeguarded an important landmark that makes a special contribution to the surrounding area, while retaining the embodied carbon of the buildings.

An unlisted building can make a positive contribution if, for example, the property:

- has significant historic associations with local people, past events, or the development of the conservation area;
- has landmark quality;
- reflects the traditional functional character of the area;
- has characteristics that match a substantial number of other buildings in the conservation area;
- is related to or contributes to the setting of adjacent historic buildings.

In exceptional circumstances it may be appropriate for a proposal to rebuild or build to a pre-existing or reconstructed design where, for example, there is a gap in an existing formal scheme.

Archaeological features

Non-designated archaeology should be assessed and recorded to understand its importance and inform decisions about land use change. This can inform site design and layout as well as providing the opportunity for learning and to explain the site's history alongside its contemporary use.



Archaeological Interpretation Flodden Wall: The archaeological remains of the Flodden Wall are below these markings in the hard landscape of the Grassmarket. Their retention helps the understanding of the history of the city.

1.1.3 VISUAL IMPACT, SKYLINE & PROTECTED VIEWS

Consider the visual impact of a development on its surroundings.

Protect views and the setting to landmark buildings and topographical features and conserve the city's unique skyline.

City Plan 2030 Policies

- Env 3 - Development Design – Incorporating and Enhancing Existing and Potential Features
- Env 4 - Development Design – Impact on Setting
- Env 9 - World Heritage Sites
- Env 11 - Listed Building – Setting

NPF4 Policies

- Policy 14 - Design, quality & place



Protecting views - The experience of walking along Bruntsfield Links reveals views of the Castle and across to Salisbury Crags and Arthur's Seat. These views are protected as view S1b and S1c - see Appendix 2 for further information, including links to the View Information Sheets.

Visual Impact

The visual impact of a proposal must be considered from a range of distances and orientations to test how it will appear from different vantage points. These include hill tops, paths and green spaces, visual corridors along streets and roads, bridges and residential neighbourhoods. This impact should be considered in the short, medium and long term. Views to important landmark features in the landscape and built area should be retained. This includes, but is not limited to, the city's Protected Views.

Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA), as part of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), examines likely significance of a proposal to the landscape resource and people's views and visual amenity.

For projects not requiring an EIA, Landscape and Visual Appraisal (LVA) helps to understand a proposal's layout, height, scale, and materials in relation to its surroundings.

Alongside plans, sections and elevations, accurate visual representation (AVR) can help to communicate a proposal to local communities, stakeholders, planning officials, and elected members.

Refer to [Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment](#), [Landscape Institute and the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment](#) and related [Landscape Institute Technical Guidance Notes](#)



Limiting the height of buildings to maintain a view - The height of this student accommodation on the corner of Abbey Mount and Abbeyhill was limited to maintain views across to Whinny Hill from Regent Road Park. This helps to reinforce the city's landscape setting and visual containment, which contributes to the sense that Edinburgh is a compact city.

Significant Landmarks and Visual features

The topography of Edinburgh has shaped the way the city has evolved. The setting of the city, between the open hills and the Firth of Forth, and the impact of volcanic hills and ridges which define the built form, create a very strong sense of place. This establishes views to and from many key features around the city and allows the city to be defined by its topography rather than the height of its buildings.

To protect this aspect of Edinburgh's character, the city's most striking visual features and views to them from several public vantage points have been identified. The landmark features which are to be protected include:

- The Castle, Castle Rock and Tolbooth St John's Spire.
- Calton Hill.
- The Old Town spine.
- Arthur's Seat and the Crags.
- The New Town.
- Coastal backdrop and Firth of Forth.
- Open Hills.
- The Forth Bridges.
- St Mary's Cathedral Spires.
- Fettes College.
- Craigmillar Castle.

Detailed guidance on protecting views of these landmark features and the list of recognised protected views is in ["Appendix 2 - Protected Views" on page 121](#)



Protecting Edinburgh's Skyline - The view of Calton Hill from west escarpment of Long Row, Whinny Hill is protected (view no. E05)

Sky Space

One mechanism for protecting the views has evolved from a study of views and skylines undertaken for the Council. Essential to implementing the guidance is an understanding of the concept of 'sky space'. Sky space is the space around the city's landmark features that will protect their integrity. Once the sky space is 'pierced' by a development, it has started to impact on a protected view. Although there is a general presumption against breaking the sky space, if a development can demonstrate that it adds to the city's skyline in a positive way and enhances the character of the city, it will be supported subject to it meeting other relevant policy considerations. It should also be noted that a development can have an adverse effect on the skyline, not by breaking the sky space, but through being too large in its built form or by failing to recognise the importance of rooftop detailing and modulation.

Tall buildings

Proposals for higher buildings will need to consider the scale of surrounding buildings as well as their potential impact on protected views. More guidance on height and form is provided in [Chapter "2.2.3 Height and Form" on page 78](#). Applications must be accompanied by:

- A townscape and visual impact assessment.
- An analysis of context including a strategic justification for the proposed location.
- Visualisations (including photomontage) at different scales that demonstrate impact on distant views, townscape, the street level experience and, where relevant, the cumulative impact of tall building clusters. Images may also be required to show impacts at night and in different seasons.
- Environmental modelling that addresses safety and amenity issues related to wind force and safety, thermal comfort (wind chill and overheating), noise levels, air quality and overshadowing. Modelling should also address mitigation measures.
- Details of existing above ordnance datum (AOD) levels across the site, and the AOD heights of proposed built form.

1.1.4 COORDINATE DEVELOPMENT

Demonstrate a comprehensive approach to development and regeneration.

Reinforce and/or futureproof connections to surrounding streets, spaces, green-blue networks and facilities.

Show how layout will enable effective development of neighbouring land.

Replicate existing positive characteristics of streets and spaces.

Comply with development frameworks or masterplans that have been approved or adopted by the Council.

On larger sites, engage a multi-disciplinary team to prepare a masterplan that integrates well with the surrounding context.

City Plan 2030 policies

Env 2 - Co-ordinated Development

Env 6 – Green Blue Infrastructure

Env 25 - Layout Design

Where appropriate the Council will develop Place Briefs in consultation with local communities which will set out key principles to inform the preparation of a masterplan.

Coordinating with surroundings

Coordinated development requires connections to the surrounding area to be safeguarded, reinforced and/or future-proofed. To do so, site layouts are required to:

- Provide and/or future-proof safe, convenient movement routes [see “1.5.3 Layout Design to Support Sustainable Transport” on page 55](#)
- Take cues from positive characteristics of surrounding block structure and frontage patterns.
- Provide clear articulation between public, private and semi-private space.
- Respond well to topography.
- Reinforce and extend the green-blue network.

Effective development of neighbouring land

A comprehensive approach to development is also important where there is a possibility that neighbouring sites will be developed in the future, as is often the case with smaller brownfield sites. This will help ensure that the future development of neighbouring sites is not compromised.

Applicants may be asked to submit information, including indicative layouts, showing how their proposals are designed to enable development on neighbouring sites, including how future connections could contribute to a cohesive network of streets and spaces.

Preparing a masterplan

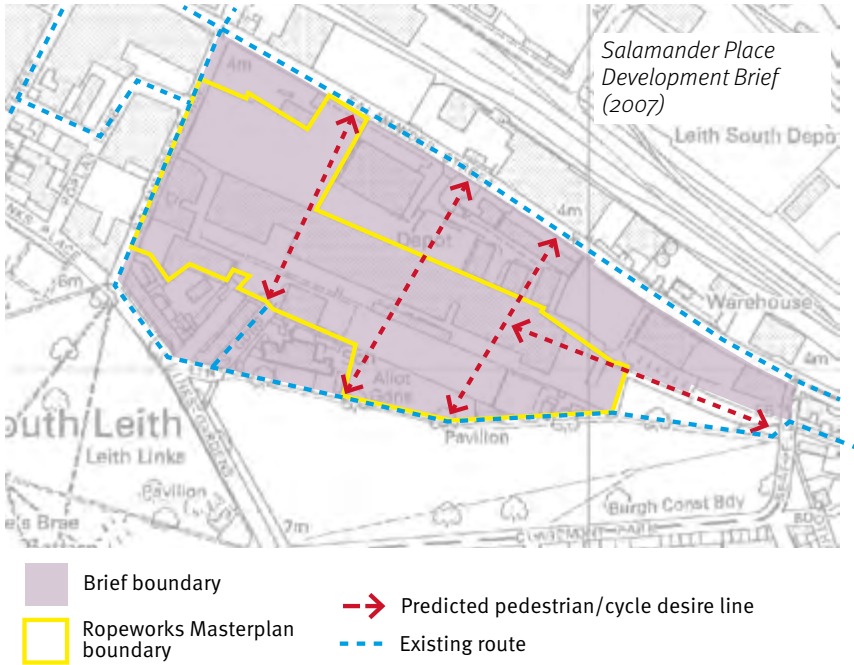
It is expected that masterplans will be prepared by a multidisciplinary team including architects, urban designers, landscape architects, flood engineers, ecologists and historic environment professionals.

Where a masterplan is prepared it must demonstrate a sound understanding of key issues and opportunities based on an analysis of the wider site context, its setting and its history. In sensitive settings, including urban edge development, this analysis must include a heritage and/or landscape appraisal that examines potential capacity for development on the site and identifies measures to avoid negative impact. ([See “1.1.1 Responding to Context and Place” on page 5](#))

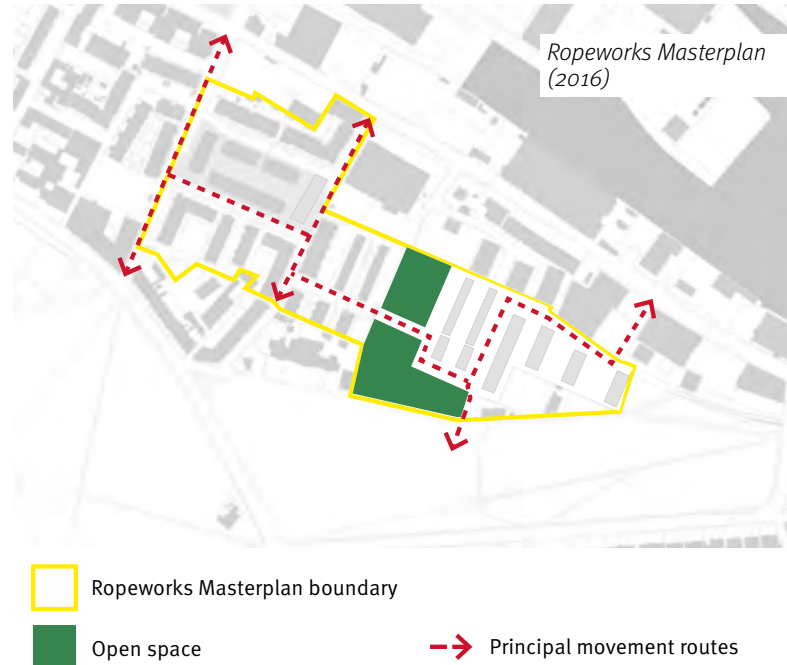
The masterplan should support the creation or expansion of integrated, mixed-use neighbourhoods that combine residential, employment, commercial and community uses with easy access to facilities, services and good public transport connections. It must provide a robust development framework for efficient land use, connectivity, urban design, landscape/open space design, built form, infrastructure and service provision, resilient to the changing climate.

A comprehensive approach to development is necessary to achieve a well-designed, cohesive networks of streets, open space and green-blue infrastructure. This is particularly important for masterplans and on sites large enough to become neighbourhoods in their own right.

The Council wants development to provide streets and spaces that are safe and attractive for people of all ages and abilities. Streets and spaces should also reflect and reinforce the city’s unique character and distinctiveness.



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Case study- Ropeworks

The Ropeworks Masterplan (2016) established a framework for residential-led mixed use on a 6-5ha brownfield site north of Leith Links. Preparation of the masterplan involved close collaboration between the Council and the development team, informed by the Salamander Development Brief (2006).

This coordinated development approach enabled phased delivery of a mix of 640 residential units (apartments, townhouses, colony flats), commercial units, a small park and allotments, parking for cars and cycles, and a network of streets and active travel routes with strong links to surrounding streets and spaces. The masterplan also set parameters for building heights, roofscapes, views and vistas in response to the built, landscape and archaeological heritage of the adjacent conservation area.

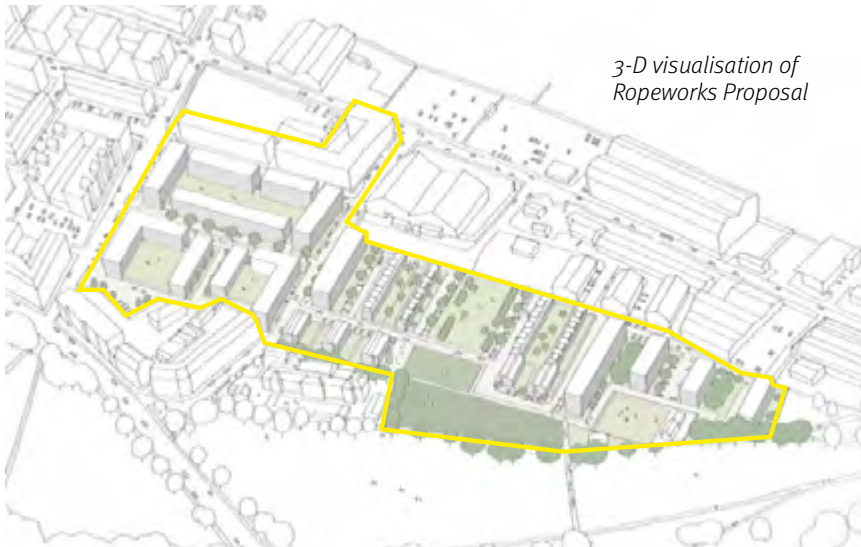


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Development took place in several phases between 2017 and 2023. Infrastructure, including streets, paths and the park, was put in place early. Ropeworks has delivered a high quality, high density, mixed-use extension to the eastern edge of Leith, using a diverse mix of housing typology and size. Its network of streets and active travel routes, lined with active frontages, has significantly improved the connectivity and permeability of the surrounding area, creating safer, more convenient access to local facilities, the Links and public transport stops.