

MEPA CIRCULAR 5/15

DEVELOPMENT CONTROL DESIGN POLICY, GUIDANCE AND STANDARDS 2015

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INTRODUCTION

MEPA has published a new Development Control Design Policy, Guidance and Standards 2015 commonly referred to as DC15. The 210 page document marks an extensive collaborative consultation exercise with the general public, periti in private practice, practitioners and various stakeholders. It also involved in-house training sessions with MEPA officials.

The purpose of this Circular is to outline the key principles in a convenient form in order to provide an overview of the main thrust of this document.

1 MAIN PRINCIPLES

It is acknowledged that the Policy and Design Guidance is a major planning tool used by periti, practitioners, planners and decision makers alike, and therefore development management should benefit from a more harmonized and regulatory framework.

The latest version (DC15) of the development control manual takes into account the different character of different areas in Malta and Gozo, whilst promoting the vitality of urban cores. Although visual appearance and architecture of individual buildings are very important factors, securing high quality and inclusive design goes beyond mere aesthetic considerations. Therefore the policy and design guidance is drafted in a way to avoid unnecessary prescription but concentrates on guiding development to consider scale, density and massing, etc. The document does not seek to impose any particular architectural style or taste but to encourage innovation, originality, and creativity, by promoting and reinforcing the concept of local distinctness.

Through this document, MEPA remains committed to sustain and enhance the significance of Malta's heritage assets and putting them to viable use consistent with their conservation. In addition, DC15 positively supports energy efficiency improvements to existing buildings, urging people/periti to take into account layout, orientation, and massing to minimize energy consumption.

2 CONTENTS

2.1 DC15 consolidates and replaces four separate policy documents:

1. Development Control within Urban Conservation Areas (1995);
2. Shopfronts (1994);
3. Traffic Generation, Access and Parking, MEPA Circular PA 3/93;
4. Policy and Design Guidance (2007).

DC15 signals a major policy overhaul over DC 2007. It moves away from planning/architectural policy making, to an approach focusing more on urban design. Essentially, the document is an urban design compendium based on the basic tenet that in order to address the ubiquitous, often soulless streets, one has to focus on contextual considerations, aesthetics and environmental issues. For the first time a new suite of policies have been introduced concentrating on having better streetscapes which should lead to better urban environments.

2.2 The document signals a new approach by having:

- General Policies (P) which are intended to give clear direction;
- Guidelines (G) to encourage creativity and innovation whilst suggesting alternative solutions;
- Standards (S) which are a number of mandatory internationally accepted standards.

Out of all the document's provisions, it is the policy which has most weight in the assessment of development applications. Policies have been specifically designed to focus on objective criteria. On the other hand, good practice guidelines are less stringent and allow more leeway in achieving the established principle. Technical standards complete the picture of establishing quantitative targets for universally agreed numerical considerations.

2.3 The document is broadly divided into five parts. Whilst Part 1 sets the scene, Part 2 introduces the broader contextual and street based approach to planning. Part 3 (Urban Form) can be arguably considered as the heart of the document, as it focuses on the spatial scale of the street. Architectural quality is then considered in Part 4. This section makes a case for integrally-designed, energy-conscious, quality architecture. The concluding chapter, Part 5, covers issues related to architectural elements.

In a bid to achieve development that respects qualitative considerations and avoid formulaic streets devoid of any architectural merit, the new document moves away from just considering quantitative measures and standards by introducing performance criteria.

2.4 The document DC15 attaches great importance to design of the built environment. Good design is the starting point to embark on sustainable development by contributing positively to better living spaces. Indeed, in order to achieve high quality and inclusive design (encompassing individual buildings and public and private spaces) one needs to establish a strong sense of place using streetscapes and buildings to create attractive places to live and work in.

In order to facilitate this 'local distinctiveness', four area typologies have been established. These include:

- A1 – Urban Conservation Areas
- A2 – Local Centres
- A3 – Residential – terraced (a); villas/bungalows (b); sensitive locations (c)
- A4 – Mixed Use Areas – Residential (a) and Commercial Areas (b)

3 IMPLEMENTATION

Although DC15 has been approved prior to the conclusion of the Local Plan revision exercise, MEPA has ensured that the appropriate transition arrangements are in place to avoid uncertainty and link with the whole planning regime hierarchy of SPED, Local Plans and DC15.

In the interim period pending the approval of the Local Plan, policies P4 (Applying height to width ratio in Urban Conservation Areas); P27 (Depth of built footprint) and P32 (Minimum dwelling areas) prevail over the Local Plans unless there is a site specific policy. Clearly, all other development applications will be assessed in line with existing Local Plan provisions.

More importantly, the Authority is now obliged, in its planning decisions, to take cognizance of other material considerations. Such material considerations may result in solutions that are different to those arising from the strict interpretation of policy.

4 COMING INTO FORCE

DC15 will come into force on Monday 16th November 2015.

All applications validated from this date onwards will be processed in line with the new policy. All applications validated prior to this date will be processed according to Development Control - Policy and Design Guidance, 2007 (DC 2007), unless specifically instructed otherwise by the Perit.

Periti who have submitted applications which have already been screened and have not yet complied with the requirements of the Screening Letter and wish to have their application assessed against DC 2007 are requested to upload any pending documentation and effect any payment by not later than Thursday 12th November 2015.

CONCLUSION

At the heart of good urban design lies the intent to help achieve sustainable development. To date, previous development control documents have tended to largely focus on quantitative standards with an emphasis on what is not allowable. On the contrary, DC15 is a positive document with a presumption in favour of sustainable development as the basis of every policy. This document should help to change the mentality replacing prescriptive policy documents with policies written simply and clearly which shape a better urban environment. With this in mind, one strives to replace poor design with better design.