LARGE DIGITAL SCREENS
IN PUBLIC SPACES

Joint guidance from English Heritage and CABE
INTRODUCTION

This guidance has been prepared jointly by English Heritage and CABE to help local authorities in their consideration of planning applications for large digital screens in public places. Some of these will be part of the Live Sites programme for the London 2012 Olympic Games and the Paralympic Games, installed by the organising committee, LOCOG. However, increasingly there are proposals from other organisations, broadcasters and commercial companies to install large digital screens in towns and cities for a variety of purposes.

The guidance has been developed in conjunction with a wide range of parties, including LOCOG, and it has been the subject of extensive public consultation. It sets out a clear set of principles which should be considered when proposals are advanced for individual sites and locations, and provides illustrated examples of good and bad practice.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When considering applications for planning permission for large digital screens, local authorities should:

• develop a plan-led approach based on a thorough area-based urban design analysis to ensure that screens are permitted only in locations identified as being appropriate as part of an overall strategy for placemaking or area regeneration and where existing uses are not displaced or compromised.

• assess the potential impact of proposals on the historic environment of a place through the application of English Heritage’s Conservation Principles.

• avoid buildings and areas of architectural or historic interest including scheduled monuments, listed buildings, conservation areas, registered parks or gardens and their settings.

• wherever possible, direct proposals to new public realm which has been purpose-designed with the capacity and flexibility to accommodate new patterns of movement and activity around the screen. Where this is not possible, ensure that there is adequate funding in place to integrate it into the redesign of an existing space.

• consider the purpose and remit of the proposed screen: whether civic in nature and based on public service, or commercially-driven as an electronic advertising platform.

• discourage proposals for digital commercial advertising in significant public places.

• assess carefully the content proposed, its curatorial management and its potential influence on audience size, movement and public access and safety.

• ensure that they retain the ability to review the impact of the screen periodically through limited period permissions or other relevant measures.

• consider carefully how to resolve precedent, in particular; competing applications from other broadcasters or commercial operators.
GUIDANCE ON LARGE DIGITAL SCREENS IN PUBLIC PLACES

THE ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Local authorities are responsible for deciding whether or not digital screens should be permitted, and, if so, where. In every case they will need to weigh carefully the potentially conflicting benefits and disbenefits arising from a specific proposal. Where they are sited appropriately and curated and managed, large digital screens have the potential to contribute positively to town and city centre spaces and to support local policy objectives such as regeneration, economic development and community engagement. However, equally, in inappropriate locations they can cause significant harm to the character, appearance and amenity of such spaces and impede other objectives. Wherever they are proposed, before a decision is made to permit a screen, the local authority will need to establish that there are substantial benefits to the function, amenity and quality of the space, as part of an integrated approach to placemaking and sustainable regeneration, and that any harm to other attributes is minimised.

In every case applicants should carry out pre-application consultations with the local authority.

WHAT ARE LIVE SITES?

Live Sites – the erection of a permanent network of large-scale digital screens in town and city centres across the UK forms one of the legacy benefits of the Cultural Olympiad 2008-2012. The project is being delivered by the London Organising Committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) in conjunction with the BBC and participating local authorities which may, in turn, have other local non-commercial partners. The intention is to enable people to participate locally in the celebration of the Games, to provide an opportunity for local audiences to interact with audiences of other public screens, and to provide performance spaces for local cultural, sporting, education and community groups.

Live Sites screens are permanent, large-scale, digital screens of varying size but typically up to 7.3m wide and 4.1m high which are proposed for 30 or more public spaces across the UK. LOCOG provides the screens while local authorities are responsible for their maintenance and providing event support for the public space. The authority becomes the owner of the screen after the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The BBC provides content management of material supplied by LOCOG, the local authority, a range of national and local non-broadcast, non-Olympic and non-commercial suppliers and its own specially-created material for the Big Screens. The BBC provides staffing at the local level to deliver the partnership with the local authority. This provides opportunities to local cultural, sporting and community groups to display locally-curated material. Since 2003 the BBC and LOCOG have installed 21 Big Screens in cities across the UK. Experience of these is referred to in the examples illustrated in this guidance. LOCOG will also work with various partners to deliver a series of temporary Live Sites at Games time in 2012 which will be temporary structures purely provided to support and enhance the Olympic experience without any legacy.

Given the rapid pace of development of outdoor digital display equipment and the broadcast and digital media, Live Sites may be only one amongst many future initiatives involving large digital screens in public places. Future proposals might come from broadcast, online media providers other than the BBC, and the advertising sectors. This guidance anticipates not only the impact of Live Sites, but also the potential demand for large format outdoor screens of different types and sizes from other broadcasters, companies and digital media organisations.
Local authorities should adopt a plan-led approach to large digital screens. However, given the short timescale of the Live Sites programme for example, few local authorities will have specific policies in place for screens. Local authorities will need to consider the role and purpose of the screens against a range of local policy areas. There may be potential benefits or conflicts between policies on regeneration, planning and conservation, advertising, the control of crowds at events, town centre management, evening and night time economic strategies, the consumption of alcohol in public spaces, community safety and crime prevention, community and arts development, sustainability, noise pollution, street cleansing and maintenance and residential amenity.

For these reasons local authorities may wish to prepare interim policy documents which draw together all existing relevant policies and set out their approach to their interpretation and use.

Any assessment to permit a screen will need to establish the overall benefit to the local area having weighed up the potential advantages and disadvantages and resolved any obvious conflicts and challenges. In terms of the impact on the overall townscape, policies relating to the installation of large-scale advertising may be particularly relevant.

At locations affecting the setting of listed buildings and conservation areas, applications will need to be assessed against national guidance set out in PPG15: Planning in the Historic Environment as well as local planning policies. In conservation areas, all new development should preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the area, i.e. reinforce the qualities which warranted the original designation. In each case, it will be important to set out clearly how that local character will be preserved or enhanced by a large digital screen. English Heritage’s Conservation Principles (see www.helm.org.uk) should help local authorities to assess the impact of a proposal on the heritage values of a place.

Local authorities should develop a strategy for large digital screens that ensures a consistent approach to assessing their merits and contextual considerations. The digital media market is highly competitive and its regulation is dynamic. This may well stimulate demand from media organisations for more public screens. The primary consideration for policies relating to outdoor screens should be their impact on the amenity of the place for which they are proposed rather than mediating a digital public media market, or stimulating or exploiting its commercial potential.
In Bristol, Leeds and Swindon, screens have been integrated successfully into new buildings alongside new public spaces which have been designed specifically to accommodate large numbers of people.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

In the right locations screens can deliver a range of benefits and local policy objectives such as part of an overall vision for urban regeneration, placemaking and local community and arts development, particularly in areas of new development or new public space. A screen could attract new audiences to town centres and help to sustain activity in spaces by extending the visitor offer beyond normal shopping hours and to a wider range of people.

Screens can also help with community development benefit by providing local programming that could highlight local arts, cultural and educational activities. Some BBC big screens have been more successful than others in developing and promoting such content reflecting the local mix of interested organisations and suppliers. Local authorities will need to establish in detail how such local content is procured and curated and how they can encourage such activity. Another general community benefit is that material is presented on a free-to-view basis that might be available elsewhere only on a charged basis – allowing potentially new audiences of different socio-economic backgrounds to experience events such as an opera or a sports fixture.

POTENTIAL DISBENEFITS

Because their content is made up of moving images, digital displays can have a disproportionate impact on a public space. Moving images draw the eye to an outdoor screen in the same way as to a television in an indoor space. This can be detrimental to the character, amenity and existing uses of public spaces if they are not thoughtfully located and controlled. They may be distracting in a location generally designed or used for passive enjoyment, or where other landmark features are already in place. Similar considerations regarding the sound of digital broadcasts should be taken into account. The extent and intensity of visual and aural intrusion may be different. Whilst the impact of any intrusive activity may be acceptable for short-term temporary events, permanent provision could have significant long-term implications for local amenity. Similarly, a temporary screen for a one-off event might be acceptable, but repeated use at frequent intervals could set an undesirable precedent.
CONSIDERATIONS

Experience of existing large screens has demonstrated that major sporting events, particularly large championship matches in football, have generated both the biggest crowds and the biggest risks. An incident of violent disorder in Manchester where the temporary screening of football was being used to manage up to 100,000 unticketed visiting fans has highlighted how explosive crowds can be if a screen fails and where visitors have been drinking. Other events elsewhere have been less problematic, but all will require careful policing and public order management from a variety of local agencies.

CHOICE OF LOCATION

In identifying appropriate locations, local planning authorities should ensure that a screen is considered only after a comprehensive assessment of its impact on the public realm, urban design and existing and future uses of a place. In addition to considering the wider objectives of sustainable urban design that apply to all new development, set out in the CABE publication By design, this should:

- take into account the historic context of the wider area through characterisation analysis
- assess the potential impact of the siting of screens on local movement patterns
- include a character appraisal of the immediate context, identifying those elements that create local character and other important features and constraints. These might include:
  - natural topography
  - urban grain
  - scale and height
  - streetscape and open spaces
  - scheduled monuments, listed buildings, conservation areas, registered landscapes and relevant local designations
  - landmark buildings and areas and their settings, including backdrops, and important local views, vistas, prospects and panoramas
  - large trees whose growth may in future obstruct a screen, requiring pruning or felling that might reduce its amenity value
  - identifying sites where the removal of existing installations, such as poster boards, might reinforce local character
SIZE OF TOWNS AND CITIES

In smaller towns local authorities will need to be particularly careful when evaluating the merits of a screen if there are only a few public spaces. Such places are likely to be multifunctional providing for a range of temporary activities such as markets and fairs, civic, arts and cultural events alongside more everyday use for informal social interaction, quiet enjoyment, sitting and pedestrian movement. As a result the installation of a permanent screen will need to be assessed very carefully to ensure that multifunctional use is not reduced, and that existing uses and users are not displaced, especially where there may be no alternative public space available.

SIZE OF THE SPACE

Large digital screens are most likely to make a positive contribution to urban areas where they are situated in a space large enough for significant gatherings of people. Some screens and events can generate very large audiences particularly for sporting fixtures. The adequacy of the space will be dependent on the type of programming envisaged. At Cardiff and Liverpool, for instance, big screens which face relatively compact public spaces have been successful in showing events catering for smaller audiences. However, a small space does limit the potential to accommodate a larger gathering for an important event. Smaller public spaces should also be avoided where screens would dominate the character of the space. There are also potential crowd control and health and safety issues in a small, more confined space, particularly if there are steps or constrained pedestrian access routes.

EXISTING SPACES, USES AND USERS

Many sites proposed for large digital screens will be in existing public spaces within towns and cities. These will already have a range of uses and users, and a screen may have a significant impact upon them. Moving images will draw the eye to the screen and sound will travel for some distance. This could have both positive and negative consequences. While a screen might attract some people, others may feel it distracts them or spoils their quiet enjoyment of a space, or its features.

Inevitably, local authorities will need to balance the needs and views of different sectors of the community. The extent and intensity of visual and aural intrusion will be different to different people, and will vary at different times of the day and with the particular attributes of the location. Each location will have other competing lighting, sound and physical activities going on within it such as local traffic, water features, street lights and nearby uses. It is essential to evaluate how a screen will interact with these, how these might change during the day and at night, and between weekdays and weekends, and to avoid visual saturation. Also the attraction of the screen will vary depending on the nature of the programming. Some content may bring large groups together at specific times, such as a sports event or a major news announcement, yet other programming may interest only a small section of the population. As a result the impact on other users will vary. It will be important not to allow the screen and its content to dominate a space for long periods to the exclusion of other activity.
CONCEPTUAL IMPACT

Large screens are likely to be inappropriate in architecturally or historically important places, particularly if they harm the character, appearance or setting of scheduled monuments, listed buildings, registered parks or gardens, or conservation areas. It will be important to consider such elements even if a screen is some distance away because of its moving content and high visual impact. When assessing impacts and potential harm to the historic environment, the following factors should be considered:

- impact on the heritage values of a place by the application of English Heritage’s Conservation Principles
- relationship to the wider historic and townscape context including below ground archaeology
- relationship to landscapes, open space and other street furniture
- natural topography
- strategic and local views, prospects and panoramas
- sound and light pollution and impact on skylines
- conflict with temporary or permanent current uses and activities within an existing space

As a rule, if having carried out a characterisation analysis and an urban design study, a local authority considers that a large digital screen could form an appropriate part of a public realm strategy, then proposals should favour:

- places that have a high footfall and are natural gathering points for a community where crowds of different sizes can be managed and supervised safely
- places where existing surfaces are robust enough to cope with the additional footfall; grass and planted areas are likely to suffer from increased wear and compaction
- spaces which can accommodate the needs of disabled people
- spaces which encourage ‘dwell time’ through natural ambience, and the provision of appropriate street furniture including seating
- enhanced management regimes to ensure that additional activity does not generate hygiene, litter or other public safety or amenity problems
They should avoid:

- listed buildings, conservation areas, areas of special control of advertisements and other places of architectural or historical significance
- places that are particularly visually or environmentally sensitive, such as smaller public spaces and those considered to be areas of quiet repose
- sitting screens in the centre of streets, or where their backs are exposed
- locations where traffic or people crossing the street may be distracted
- locations where residential or commercial occupiers may be disturbed by the sound of broadcasts
- locations where they would add to street clutter, or be sited close to existing street furniture, public art, trees or other townscape features
- locations where the screen would obstruct/interfere with the existing design concept of the space

NEW SPACES AND NEW BUILDINGS

New purpose-designed spaces and adjacent new buildings can offer the greatest potential for a screen as part of a wider exercise in placemaking. It will be important for the screen to be integrated into the overall concept from the earliest design stage. Using a new building as a mounting can avoid many of the problems encountered with siting screens across streets or public spaces eliminating the exposure of unsightly blank rear elevations and minimising visual intrusion. Careful consideration will be needed to ensure that the building façade is suitable, and that the appearance of the building is not adversely affected when the screen is switched off. The adjacent space will need to be an appropriate size and form a place of public gathering which will be attractive and pleasant to use even if the screen is switched off or removed at some stage in the future.
PRACTICAL ISSUES

THE RELATIONSHIP TO TRANSPORT INFRASTRUCTURE
Transport is important in relation to digital screens because of the potential for large numbers of people to gather for specific events and disperse safely from them. The capacity of public transport, the quality of links between transport points and the site, and the feasibility of making improvements, or temporary arrangements, where appropriate, are all important considerations. Screens should not be sited in locations which create a hazard or distraction for drivers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCESS
A full access audit should be carried out including access for those with disabilities and the emergency services.

SECURITY
Local authorities should consider public safety management and other requirements at the site, including anti-terrorist measures, in consultation with the police. This should cover issues relating to large-scale events as well as times when there are no events. It will be particularly important to evaluate the nighttime impact, both positive and negative, on city centres, as the screens will need to be integrated into wider area strategies for preventing crime and anti-social behaviour. Depending on the programming available, a wider range of people may visit and view events in the evenings and weekends in city centres and reduce the concentration of the evening economy on young people in licensed premises.

MANAGEMENT
Although they will not be directly responsible for its generation, local authorities will need to have in place an agreed strategy with relevant partners for the development of content, its curation and the operation of the screen on a day-to-day basis to control issues such as hours of operation, noise, malfunctions and the handling of complaints.

MAINTENANCE
A fully funded maintenance and servicing regime should be established to ensure that mechanical faults and potential vandalism are repaired swiftly and that screens are cleaned regularly. The experience of Manchester where a temporary screen provided for a very large crowd broke down before a major event demonstrates that reliability and continuity of service are vital for public safety. Contingency plans to deal with faults and the resultant public order and safety issues will need to be part of the management and maintenance programme for any screen.

PROVISION OF PUBLIC AMENITIES
Consideration should be given to the availability of facilities – food and drink outlets, toilets, meeting points and safe areas – recommended for large gatherings of people. The capacity of existing facilities to service large events should be understood, together with the ability to accommodate additional temporary facilities including their installation and removal, and the cleaning and reinstatement of a space after a major event.
In Norwich the recently-installed screen has been mounted carefully on to the entrance to a new shopping centre facing Chapelfield Plain.

In Hull, the screen, installed in an earlier phase, has been placed obtrusively on tall posts across King Edward Street dominating the entire area. The unsightly blank rear elevation is exposed to long views from behind. The siting of the screen is detrimental to the design of the wider public realm and townscape. The Liverpool screen, of the same vintage, raises similar issues.

**DESIGN ISSUES**

Generally, screens should be considered only where they form an integral part of a wider vision for an area and as part of an overall design for a space.

**THE SUSTAINABLE DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE PROPOSAL**

For all forms of development, good design means sustainable design. Large screens should set exemplary standards of design and operation because of their high profile and local impact. Proposals should therefore exceed the latest regulations and policies for minimising energy use and reducing carbon emissions over the lifetime of the development. Conditional consent may be appropriate to restrict hours of operation. The long-term resource and energy efficiency of large screens will be enhanced if their format can be adapted over time, and if they are switched off when not in use.

**THE CREDIBILITY OF THE DESIGN**

Big screens have the potential to provide a significant focus for a town or city centre. A high standard of design should be maintained throughout the project, and not compromised to keep costs down. The impact of all of the necessary supporting infrastructure and plant should be anticipated and minimised.

**THE CONTRIBUTION TO PUBLIC SPACE AND FACILITIES**

The proposal should contribute positively to its surroundings at street level. It should contribute to safety, diversity, vitality, social engagement and 'sense of place'. Where sites are identified as appropriate, local authorities should have in place sufficient funding to secure the complementary enhancement of the surrounding public space as part of a co-ordinated public realm strategy.
APPLICATIONS should demonstrate that the following issues have been addressed as part of the overall design and development process.

**THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT**

Applications should contribute to the quality of life of those who visit, live or work in the area where the screen is sited including function, fitness for purpose and amenity aspects of any new facilities.

To be acceptable, any new large digital screen should be in an appropriate location, should be of excellent design quality in its own right, and should enhance the qualities of its immediate location and wider setting. Failure on any of these grounds will make a proposal unacceptable to CABE and English Heritage.

**THE EFFECT ON THE LOCAL ENVIROMENT**

Including microclimate, overshadowing, night time appearance, noise and light pollution, vehicle movements and the environment and amenity of those living or working near the screen including residential, commercial or civic property.

**THE CONTRIBUTION MADE TO THE PERMEABILITY OF A SITE AND THE WIDER AREA**

Opportunities to offer improved access, and, where appropriate, the opening up, or effective closure, of views to improve the legibility of the city and the wider townscape.

**THE PROVISION OF A WELL-DESIGNED ENVIRONMENT**

Proposals should contribute to the quality of life of those who visit, live or work in the area where the screen is sited including function, fitness for purpose and amenity aspects of any new facilities.

Even on new buildings in new spaces nearby residents and users may be affected. In Swindon residents have complained about noise and light pollution. In Birmingham adjacent businesses secured an injunction against the City Council over noise pollution from the screen in Victoria Square (pictured above). The screen remains switched off and the situation is unresolved. This underlines how essential full public consultation is before decisions are taken.
PLANNING FOR SUCCESSFUL CONTENT

Content for Live Sites is managed by the BBC on behalf of the partnership with LOCOG and the local authority. The Live Sites programming has been developed to the point where the vast majority is unique to the Live Sites Big Screens network.

The development, management and curation of the content will have a significant impact on how a screen is used, the nature of the audience, public reaction, and the range of benefits that can be delivered. Closely connected is the length of time each day that the proposed screen is expected to be functioning. Inevitably there will be periods in a week, often of extended duration (particularly in the colder months), when outdoor audiences will be limited. Local authorities should require applicants to submit detailed proposals of the expected hours of operation and the nature of the content that will be provided at these times which demonstrate unique service and public benefit. It will also be necessary to understand how content will be curated, created and managed on a permanent basis. Whilst recognising that some content opportunities and resources only appear over time through the stimulus of the Live Site’s operation, authorities will need to be satisfied that there are sufficient safeguards and funding in place to ensure that the anticipated content is delivered and that such programming suits the screen in the specific location.

Local authorities will need to challenge the purpose of a screen if the majority of the content is expected to comprise long periods of rolling transmission of existing television channels, leaving the screen simply to be a large television set ‘left on’ in a public space. If this were to occur the screen is likely to be a distraction or irritant for other users, and to conflict with existing uses within the space. As such content is freely available elsewhere, there will be little public benefit from the screen. Authorities will need to ensure that contractually they retain the power to review and amend the operation of the screen and its content so that it does not conflict with other users or uses within the space, or the overall amenity of the area, and to curb potential commercial advertising.

Where the screen is intended to show locally developed content based on local arts, cultural, sports and educational activities, local authorities should seek to support those bodies delivering content. They may wish to offer funding for the provision and curation of such content.

TECHNICAL CRITERIA

There are a number of technical criteria such as viewing angles, power supplies and maintenance access that need to be considered in the siting of big screens.

When selecting screen technology, the following factors should be considered:

- image quality and the relation to content such as size, shape and resolution
- brightness of the display and integration with wider lighting systems
- sustainability and energy efficiency – screens should not be left on standby and should use electricity from a sustainable source
- use of different types of light sources such as LED, LCD and fluorescent. LEDs offer the greenest solution
- the impact of high definition systems on the relationship of the viewer to the screen
- screen technology should be easy to use and to maintain and should sit unobtrusively in the townscape when not active

CONTRACTUAL ISSUES

In most cases there will need to be a contract between the local authority and the applicant for screens in public spaces. Robust conditions should be attached to prevent all forms of advertising for the life of the screen, and for the removal of the screen and all ancillary equipment and the reinstatement of the site at the end of the contract.

PLANNING PERMISSION

Local authorities should ensure that there is full public consultation for all proposals for digital screens. Should proposals be advanced at any stage for any form of advertising on the screens, either of a commercial or public nature, separate control of advertisements’ consent may be required. Generally, planning permission should be for a limited period of 3 to 5 years to allow for a regular review of the screen and its impact on the local environment. If a screen fails, is not maintained properly, or becomes the focus of anti-social behaviour; it should be removed at the end of the limited period and the site reinstated to operate without the screen. Appropriate provision will need to be made for the costs of removal and the reinstatement of the affected space and surfaces.
When reviewing projects, CABE can provide expert advice on whether a proposal for a large, digital screen is appropriate to the wider built environment.

Some locations for large screens could have an effect on the wider historic environment as well as on the local context. In such circumstances, early pre-application consultation with English Heritage staff, preferably alongside local authority representatives, will help to ensure that all the implications are fully understood and addressed in the access and design statement.

Details of regional English Heritage contacts are available at www.english-heritage.org.uk and in the publication Planning and Development in the Historic Environment: A Charter of English Heritage Advisory Services (see www.helm.org.uk). The forthcoming Temporary Structures in Historic Places will offer useful additional advice from English Heritage on the installation of temporary structures for events.

The English Heritage/CABE Building in Context Toolkit Programme (www.building-in-context.org) aims to stimulate a high standard of design when development takes place in historically sensitive contexts.

PPG19 Outdoor Advertisement Control and Circular 03/2007 offer guidance on issues of visual and aural amenity and public safety.
This document offers advice and guidance on good practice in relation to the siting of large digital screens in public places. English Heritage and CABE recommend that local planning authorities use it to inform policy making and the evaluation of planning applications for large screens. It should also be used as a guide to best practice by those considering putting forward such applications and proposals.

Both organisations recognise the growing desire for the provision of such facilities, both temporary and permanent, particularly in the lead up to the Olympic Games and the Paralympic Games, and this guidance is designed to assist all parties involved in the decision making process when considering the potential effects on the wider historic environment as well as on the local context.