
CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

Title: REPORT ON CALLED-IN PLANNING APPLICATION

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DEVELOPMENT PROPOSED: RENOVATION AND CONVERSION OF SCHOOLHOUSE TO DWELLING HOUSE, WITH TIMBER EXTENSION AT OLD BALLOCH SCHOOLHOUSE, GLENBUCHAT STRATHDON

REFERENCE: 09/203/CP

APPLICANT: MR NORMAN DUNCAN

DATE CALLED-IN: 10 JULY 2009

RECOMMENDATION: REFUSE



Fig. I - Location Plan.

SITE DESCRIPTION AND PROPOSAL

1. Full planning permission is sought for the conversion of a former schoolhouse building to form a dwellinghouse at Balloch School in Strathdon. The old schoolhouse is located just off the A944 road which runs from Bellabeg to Glenbuchat Lodge. The schoolhouse is located in the valley near to the head of the Burn of Balloch, within the fringes of a coniferous plantation. The schoolhouse is currently in a very poor state of repair, and does not have a roof.
2. The schoolhouse is rectangular and single storey. It would have likely had a slate-roof, however, this is no longer in place. There is a porch on the southern elevation of the building and a coal store on the other side. The attached coal store is constructed of corrugated iron, while the slightly offset porch is a little narrower than the main building but finished in materials to match the schoolhouse. The exterior of the building has been rendered except for the north elevation which has exposed stone.



Figure 2 Schoolhouse from the road. Figure 3 Schoolhouse and porch.



Figure 4 Internal walls and chimney.

3. The proposal is to convert the former Balloch schoolhouse into a dwellinghouse including a timber rear extension which would be located behind the existing school house with a glazed link joining the schoolhouse and the proposed extension. The proposed rear extension would require a new opening into the wall of the schoolhouse. This part of the wall has been shown on the structural survey as being required to be rebuilt as it is currently in a poor state and partly fallen down. The existing coal store is proposed to be removed and replaced with a new side extension “snug”, which also requires a new opening into the wall of the school house. The proposed finish on the roof of the schoolhouse and extension would be natural slate. The roof on the link would be finished with lead. It is proposed that the existing walls on the school house be exposed and pointed with the walls on the proposed extension being constructed with timber linings. The windows are proposed to be timber sash and case style.



Figure 5 Elevations of the proposed conversion and extension.

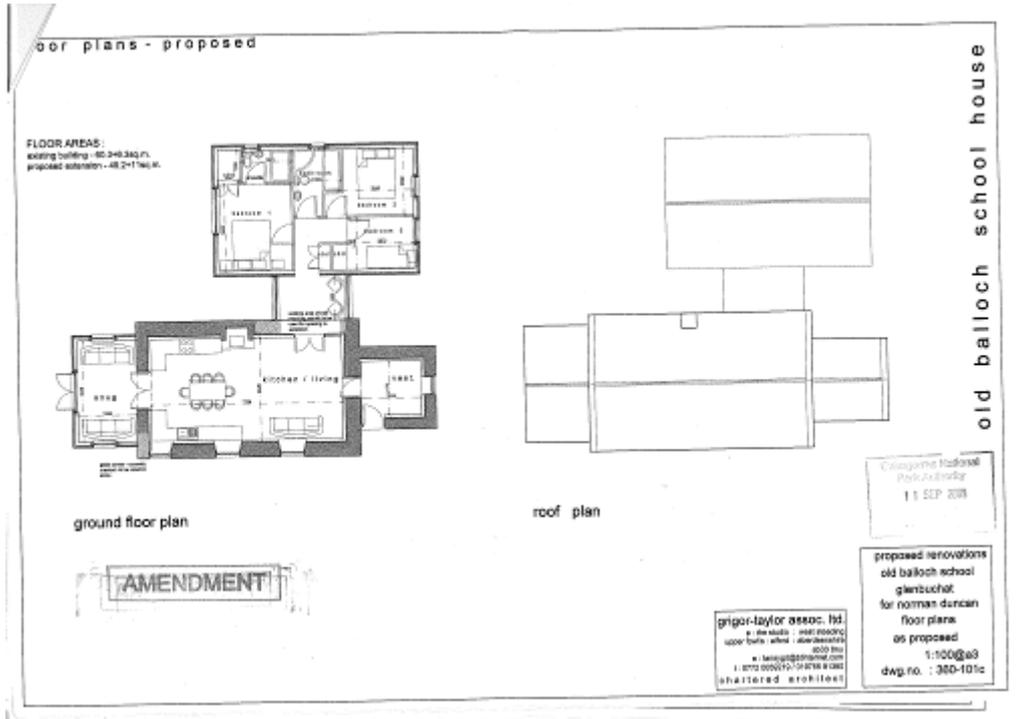


Figure 6 Proposed floor plans for the conversion and extension.

4. A new access would be constructed from the A944 Glenbuchat to Bellabeg road, providing access for the site and parking for three vehicles, as well as turning within the site. The proposed site layout and access details are shown in Figure 7.

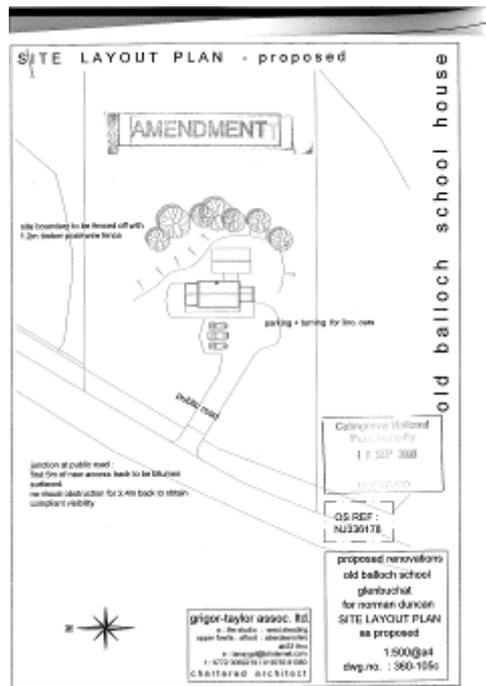


Figure 7 Proposed site layout.

DEVELOPMENT PLAN CONTEXT

National Planning Guidance

5. **Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) 3 Planning for Housing** recognises that housing in rural areas should generally be directed towards towns and villages. However, the guidance also points out non-residential buildings in the countryside which are no longer required for their original purpose can offer opportunities for conversion to dwellings. Residential and business conversions are a way of retaining buildings which contribute to local character, and can result in distinctive assets to the local environment. Proposals for the sensitive re-use, conversion or rehabilitation of buildings which can be accessed safely and serviced readily should be viewed sympathetically.
6. **Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) 15 Planning for Rural Development** generally encourages the re-use of existing non-residential buildings for housing. The policy goes on to note that in many rural areas there are small sites (eg sawmills and brickworks) which cease to be required for their original purpose where conversion to residential use would bring about a net environmental benefit subject to a range of detailed criteria such as proximity to services, design, drainage, highways etc.
7. **Planning Advice Note 72: Housing in the Countryside** sets out its purpose to create more opportunities for good quality rural housing which respects Scottish landscapes and building traditions. **PAN 72** identifies the conversion or rehabilitation of rural buildings as an example of one of the main opportunities to accommodate housing in the countryside. It details the benefits of this type of activity including bringing a building back to life whilst also providing an opportunity to sensitively conserve the built heritage. **PAN 72** provides advice on factors such as scale, materials and design.

Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire Structure Plan 2001-2016 (NEST)

8. **Policy 12: New Housing in the Countryside beyond the Green Belt** states that there shall be a presumption against house building in the countryside beyond the green belt except (d) the conversion of an existing non-residential vernacular building to a single house or up to three residential units with associated business space, which is conveniently accessible to local services by public transport, foot or bicycle. Any such conversions must be within the building's original structure and must retain the building's original character.
9. **Policy 13: Developer Contributions** require developers to address the impact of development by meeting needs specified in Local Plans. Contributions will be related to the scale and type of the new development proposed.
10. **Policy 21: Design** seeks a constant improvement in the standards of design.

Aberdeenshire Local Plan (Adopted June 2006)

11. **Policy Gen\I Sustainability Principles** considers that development will be assessed against sustainability indicators that relate to the local environment, community and economy, demonstrated by whether the proposal accords with a range of criteria including d) protecting or enhancing any valuable natural resources including landscapes and wildlife habitats or species; e) does not damage built or cultural heritage resources; and f) does not impact negatively on the character, including landscape character, environment or amenity of the surrounding area. The policy concludes that where the assessment concludes that there is significant uncertainty as to whether the proposed development would cause substantial harm, the precautionary principle will be applied.
12. **Policy Hou/4 part 1: New Housing in the Countryside** states that the erection of new housing in the countryside will be approved, in principle if: a) it is for a full time worker in an enterprise which is itself appropriate to the Countryside; b) the presence of that worker on-site is essential to the efficient operation of the enterprise; c) there is no suitable alternative residential accommodation available; d) the proposed house is within the immediate vicinity of the worker's place of employment; e) it conforms with Appendix 1
13. **Policy Hou/4 part 2: New Housing in the Countryside** states that in the Countryside, the conversion of an existing non-residential vernacular building for housing will be approved, in principle, if the original building contributes to the traditional character and landscapes of the area and: a) the conversion is to a single house; or b) the conversion is to a single house combined with space for a business; or c) the conversion is to two or three houses, accessible to local services by public transport, foot or bicycle. In all cases, the developer will be required to demonstrate that a) the existing building contributes to the traditional character of the area and is largely intact; b) the existing building is no longer required or suitable for its original purpose; c) existing and proposed neighbouring uses are compatible with housing and any business use proposed; d) the converted building would largely preserve its existing form, retain its vernacular appearance, and maintain its contribution to the traditional character and landscape of the area; and e) regard has been had to the guidance contained in Appendix 2.
14. **Appendix 2: Conversion of Non-Residential Buildings in the Countryside** states that the conversion of traditional non-residential vernacular buildings to residential use is only appropriate where the original structure contributes towards the traditional character and landscape of the area. Buildings which are not of value in these terms will not be appropriate for conversion to residential use. The building should be largely intact, at least in respect of its external walls and roof. Issues regarding its structural strength and stability will require to be addressed, but any strengthening or renewal which is required should not detract from its traditional appearance or vernacular character.

15. A conversion should be considered only where the building has a traditional character worth retaining (with well-established and recognised proportions and features) and is large enough for the proposed use. When it is decided a conversion is possible and worthwhile, the primary objective should be to retain the original character of the building and the secondary objective should be to provide the new use. Alterations to the building should be kept to a minimum and retain as much of the original character and form of the building as possible, e.g sympathetic doors and windows, very limited use of non-traditional materials, style and extent of wall openings, etc. Extensions to the original footprint or structure should only be proposed where these are both important to the new residential use and do not detract from the building's appearance and contribution to the character of the rural area.
16. **Policy Inf/1: Roads and Accesses** states that new roads or other accesses will be approved if they are designed to be safe, convenient for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport, resource efficient and cause minimal impact on the character of the site and surrounding area.
17. **Policy Inf/4a: Drainage and Water Standards** states that development will be approved in principle if, when required, private infrastructure including a septic tank can be provided without negative impacts on public health, the environment or the quality of ground water and where requested, a drainage impact assessment has been provided by the developer.
18. **Policy Inf/5: Water Supply** states that development will be approved, in principle, if it can be satisfactorily served by a mains water supply, or if the developer is able to demonstrate an alternative adequate supply, including where necessary, potable water supply.

Cairngorms National Park Plan 2007

19. The Park Plan highlights the special qualities of the Cairngorms, stating that the "Cairngorms is widely recognised and valued as an outstanding environment which people enjoy in many different ways." It recognises that there is a wide diversity of landscape, land-uses, management and community priorities across different parts of the Park. In a section entitled 'Living and Working in the Park' the subject of 'housing' is explored. The Strategic Objectives in relation to housing refer to the need to ensure greater access to affordable and good quality housing in order to help create and maintain sustainable communities.
20. In terms of 'Conserving and Enhancing the Natural and Cultural Heritage' the National Park Plan includes a number of objectives in relation to Landscape, Built and Historic Environments. Strategic Objectives include maintaining and enhancing the distinctive landscapes across the Park and ensuring that development complements and enhances the landscape character of the Park. Of particular relevance to the current proposal are the strategic objectives relating to landscape and the built environment which seek to ensure that development complements and enhances the landscape character of the Park; understands and conserves the archaeological record, historic landscapes and historic built environment.

CONSULTATIONS

21. **Aberdeenshire Council Transportation and Infrastructure (Roads) Section** have no objections to the application subject to conditions being applied to any grant of planning consent.
22. **Aberdeenshire Council Contaminated Land Section** have advised that there is no indication of any past use or activities on site that may have caused contamination and there is not known to be any asbestos in the building.
23. **Aberdeenshire Council Planning Gain** section has examined the proposal and the consultation response indicates that a financial contribution is required towards affordable housing and secondary education.
24. **Aberdeenshire Council Environmental Services** note that a private water supply is proposed. The applicant should supply information relating to the quality and quantity of the private water supply including information to ensure that the water supplies of no other nearby properties would be detrimentally affected.
25. **Aberdeenshire Council Environment Team** has said the proposals are acceptable subject to a photographic survey being undertaken by the developer and approved by the planning authority. The photographs should be deposited in the Local Sites and Monuments Record.
26. **Donside Community Council** – No response at time of writing report.

REPRESENTATIONS

27. The proposal was advertised on 10th July 2009 in the Piper and Herald as contrary to the Development Plan. No representations have been received to the proposal.

APPRAISAL

28. Full planning permission is sought to renovate and convert the former Balloch schoolhouse to form a single dwellinghouse. The proposal includes the formation of a new access and erection of rear timber extension and glazed link for the proposed dwellinghouse. The applicants also propose to remove the existing coal store and replace it with a side extension “snug”. The overall floor area of the original building is 66sq.m with the proposed extension including glazed link and snug, being 60sq.m. The initial submission was larger in size and the proposed extension was one and half storeys in height. After discussions with the planning officials the proposals were reduced in size and scale.

The Principle of the application

29. As the existing building has no roof, the principle of conversion to residential use is contrary to Appendix Two of the local plan. The applicants have said that in order for the conversion to be worthwhile there is a need for an extension to be situated to the rear of the schoolhouse with a glazed link between the schoolhouse and the proposed extension. This would help to retain the character of the existing school house but also make the conversion to a dwellinghouse practical.
30. The proposed extension would be finished in timber linings and would contain three bedrooms one of which is ensuite and a separate bathroom. Whilst recognising the schoolhouse has a strong cultural value and that the proposed design of the extension ensures the character of the school house is maintained the proposal is considered to be contrary to Policy 12 in the Structure Plan as “any such conversions must be within the building’s original structure”. The proposal is also considered to be contrary to Policy Hou/4 (Part 2) of the local plan which states “the converted building would largely preserve its existing form, retain its vernacular appearance, and maintain its contribution to the traditional character and landscape of the area”.
31. The applicant was asked to supply a structural survey for the property to attest to the stability of the building and its practicality for conversion. This is attached in Appendix One. The structural survey recommended that *“an experienced stone mason should comment on the practicalities of making good the walls in their current condition, as on opening up of the walls and starting to re point/mortar the walls it may be large areas if not all of the walls may require to be taken down and rebuilt to safely and permanently make good the structural integrity of the walls. If it is considered impractical for areas of the walls to be repaired any new walls should be built on suitable new foundations and suitably tied/jointed, to the engineer’s details.”*
32. A stonemason was also asked by the applicant to comment on the proposals and in discussion with the engineer they both advised that they were *“satisfied the School can be structurally made good and it appears that once the stone mason starts and gets into the walls, where he finds local areas of the walls where the mortar has degenerated, these areas can be taken down and cleaned back to sound mortar then brought back up as required.”*
33. Based on the structural survey and the comments from the engineer and stonemason, which were submitted by the applicants agent, it does not appear that the walls in their present condition are structurally sound and there is a strong likelihood that all of the walls may require to be taken down. It is the view of the CNPA that given the information contained in the structural survey the building is not capable of conversion in its current form and if all the walls had to be taken down and rebuilt, then this would remove the cultural heritage value of the building which is the key aim of the project and would result in a new house in the countryside without a justification. The proposal would therefore be contrary to the requirements of the Development Plan.

34. The schoolhouse building is considered to contribute to the cultural heritage of the Glenbuchat area and is also recorded on the inventory of the National Monument Record. A statement in support of the application from the applicant's agent is shown in Appendix Two. This supporting statement makes the case for the retention of the old school and states that *"if something is not done with this building within the next year it may be beyond repair, and then will be lost to the community forever"*. The supporting statement goes on to say *"when great effort is going into the fragile cultural heritage in so many ways – story-telling, music etc, surely the physical preservation of the local school, especially one in such a special setting, has to be important to the Cairngorms National Park's aims and achievements?"*
35. However, despite there being a case made on retaining the cultural heritage value of the building it is felt that the principle of conversion on this site is, as previously stated, contrary to Policy 12 from the Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire Structure 2001-2016 (House Building in the Countryside Beyond the Green Belt) and also contrary to Policy Hou/4 and Appendix Two of the Aberdeenshire Local Plan (New Housing in the Countryside). Even if the CNPA considered that there was cultural and historical interest aspect to the old schoolhouse, in principle to justify a departure from these policies the findings of the structural survey on the suitability of the existing building for conversion mean that the CNPA cannot consider the schoolhouse to be capable of conversion and therefore the principle of the conversion cannot be supported.

Technical Issues

36. Foul drainage will be to a septic tank and there would appear to be ample land within the applicants control to allow for this.
37. Access to the site is to be taken via a new access from the A944 Glenbuchat to Bellabeg road. It is proposed to have parking and turning for three cars. Aberdeenshire Roads have looked at the application and recommend a number of conditions which are achievable at the site.
38. The proposed water supply is to be from a private source. Aberdeenshire Environmental Health have advised that investigations will need to be carried out with regard to the quality and quantity of the proposed supply which will include an aspect that needs to ensure that any existing users of the supply are unaffected.

Conclusion

39. It is accepted that the schoolhouse building has a strong cultural and historical value to the local area. However, from the information contained within the structural survey it is considered that the schoolhouse is not capable of conversion therefore the proposal would result in a new house in the countryside without a justification. This would therefore be contrary to the Development Plan policies. Furthermore, due to the proposed conversion not being within the buildings original structure and not having a roof this is also contrary to the Development Plan policies. Therefore, in light of the building

being incapable of conversion the proposed conversion is recommended for refusal.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE AIMS OF THE PARK

Conserve and Enhance the Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Area

40. The site is not located in a sensitive area in terms of nature conservation. Although the site is fairly prominent in the immediate landscape, the building already exists and the scale and design of the extension would not provide any significant landscape or visual impacts which would impinge on the character of the countryside. In relation to cultural heritage, the proposals would result in the removal and rebuilding of some, if not all of the walls of the existing building, and this would arguably remove the cultural heritage value of the building to the area.

Promote Sustainable Use of Natural Resources

41. There are no discernible effects, positive or negative, in terms of this aim.

Promote Understanding and Enjoyment

42. There are no implications for this aim

Promote Sustainable Economic and Social Development

43. The location of an additional house in the countryside on this site has the potential to add to servicing costs for the local community in terms of services such as school transport, refuse collection, fire and health etc and would tend to promote reliance upon the private car.

RECOMMENDATION

That Members of the Committee agree to a recommendation to:

Refuse Full Planning Permission for the renovation and conversion of schoolhouse to a dwelling house, with timber extension at Old Balloch Schoolhouse, Glenbuchat, Strathdon for the following reasons;

1. That the proposed steading conversion is not contained within the building's original structure and currently does not have a roof. The proposal is therefore contrary to Policy 12: House Building in the Countryside Beyond the Green Belt as contained in the Statutory Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire Structure Plan 2001-2016 and Policy Hou/4 (Part 2): New Housing in the Countryside of the Aberdeenshire Local Plan 2006. These policies aims to secure the contribution that redundant traditional vernacular buildings make to the traditional character and landscape of the area but specifies that the buildings must be largely intact, large enough for the proposed use, be within the buildings original structure and retain the buildings's original character.
2. The proposed steading conversion is not considered to be capable of conversion therefore this would result in the erection of a new house in the countryside which is without a suitable justification. Therefore the proposal is contrary to Policy Hou/4 (Part 1): New Housing in the Countryside of the Aberdeenshire Local Plan 2006 and would set a precedent for further unjustified development of this nature in the countryside.

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14th November 2009

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