

Summary Precognition by Cllr Debra Storr

as part of the case by Cllrs Ford, Johnston, Ross, and Storr

in support of Aberdeenshire Council's decision to refuse the application by Trump International Golf Links Scotland for housing, hotel, holiday apartments, golf courses etc. at Menie, near Balmedie, Aberdeenshire

1 Introduction

- 1.1 I am Councillor Debra Storr, the only local councillor to have been in place throughout the history of the application.
- 1.2 I will discuss the application and in planning terms, drawing on the Statement by the Aberdeenshire's Head of Planning Policy & Environment (ISC17). My precognition usually takes at face value the applicant's environmental assessments but will also refer to the critique of these by Aberdeenshire planners in Production ISC17 and by other consultees.

2 History of the Application

- 2.1 In December 2005, the applicant outlined the proposal to me as a golf course and associated infrastructure, a hotel, some holiday homes, and possibly some open market houses. The development would be environmentally sensitive, probably low-lying, modern architecture, using local materials of stone and wood set carefully into the landscape with the choice of location as a focus for golf tourism building on other local high quality courses. I recognised the potential of such development but also advised that the site very sensitive in landscape and environmental terms, and that residential housing would be very difficult to support.
- 2.2 In November 2006 the application was finally submitted.
- 2.3 I will discuss each element of the application in turn:

3 The Golf Resort

- 3.1 This is a large diverse site consisting of agricultural land, a Listed Building set in a designed landscape, and part of an extensive dune system running south for many miles and running north to the Forvie National Nature Reserve. The dunes are part Site of Special Scientific Interest, (SSSI) a national designation and part Site of Interest to Natural Science, (SINS), a local designation. This is an important asset to

Aberdeenshire and the City.

- 3.2 Dealing with this application has been difficult. But in line with planning policies and in order to ensure full public involvement in the decision making process, such major departures from significant local, regional and national planning policy and the scale of the proposed development should be dealt with via the Development Plan System. A new Structure Plan is being drawn up and a new Local Plan will follow shortly. PAN43 *Golf Courses and Associated Developments* Para 75 and 30 support this plan led approach.
- 3.3 The impacts of the development are summarised in Production ISC17 as:
- ◆ Landscape – **largely adverse in an area of medium to high sensitivity on the Undeveloped coast and high sensitivity on the Area of Landscape Significance. All in all, the significance of landscape are both assessed as moderately adverse.**
 - ◆ Menie House – **medium to high sensitivity with a moderate adverse impact**
 - ◆ Menie House designated landscape – **medium to high sensitivity with a moderate adverse impact due to the boulevard**
 - ◆ Residential development – **medium sensitivity and moderate adverse impacts on this open undulating farmland.**
- 3.4 Drawings provided by the applicant show that the holiday accommodation proposed bears no relationship with the landscape and is not complementary to the local vernacular.
- 3.5 The scale of this proposal is too important to be left to detailed applications over such a large site. A more appropriate route would be the development of a proper Masterplan and Design Code to cover the whole site.
- 3.6 The first 18 hole golf course is on a highly sensitive area and has major adverse impact - including the “total loss” of the reason for the SSSI designation. It is simply not possible to stabilise a mobile dune system listed for its geomorphological interest and retain the interest.
- 3.7 The presumptions against development on SSSI in NPPG 14 *Natural Heritage* Para 24 and Para 25 are more forceful in ALP Env/2 which states that such development will be refused unless the developer proves:

- a) that any significant adverse effects the quality for which the site has been designated are clearly outweighed by social and economic benefits of national importance
- b) the objectives of the designation and overall integrity of the area will not be compromised; **AND**
- c) there is no alternative site for the development”

- 3.8 Nine golf holes can never be of national importance and therefore as the impact results in the loss of the SSSI designation, this portion of the development must be refused.
- 3.9 In addition the necessary infrastructure will provide moderate to substantial adverse impacts across the whole of the golf course area including on the SINS.
- 3.10 Twenty-seven holes are on the SINS. While the test for refusal on for SINS in ALP Env/3 is lower, this area is widely recognised as being of similar quality to the SSSI and it forms part of the long dune system running from Bridge of Don to the Ythan in an Area of Landscape Significance. The impacts are "strongly adverse" and therefore this development should also be refused or radically modified to reduce the impact.
- 3.11 Turning to consider the hotel and holiday accommodation, The National Planning Framework encourages tourist development but Para 93 and 94 say this must be coupled with the protection of our environmental assets. Other policies also emphasise that economic development complement and protect our environmental assets.
- 3.12 Together the policies detailed in my full precognition say that economic development and particularly tourist development must be sensitive to the environment and specifically to protect and enhance any environmental assets being exploited. Here it is clear that the asset being exploited is the dune system and the location of the accommodation and the rest of the development is justified in terms of the links location.
- 3.13 Here we have a very sensitive site, lying between Balmedie Country Park and the SSSI to the north, continuing to the Forvie National Nature Reserve. The dune system is one of the largest areas of wild land close to Aberdeen and wild land is rare.
- 3.14 This proposal is unprecedented in scale in the North East and as it is of some distance to the nearest settlement and on a very open coastal location. The hotel would be one of the largest in Scotland and, accompanied by a thousand holiday apartments and houses, is of such a scale that the proper route for consideration would be via the development plan system.

- 3.15 The raft of duties to protect and enhance our environment must be taken seriously. This is not a balancing act between competing interests - sustainability requires social, economic and environmental interests to be considered together, not set against each other.
- 3.16 Published indicative plans show this as an enormous development, with each of the individual condominium blocks being larger than any existing building in Aberdeenshire and the hotel the highest building by a significant margin between the chimney of Peterhead Power Station and the Seaton high rise flats in Aberdeen. The scale of development proposed is much larger than comparable developments and in this site is simply too large.
- 3.17 The development is close to the Sands of Forvie Special Area of Conservation and The Ythan Estuary, Sands of Forvie and Meikle Loch Special Protection Area that also forms part of a Ramsar site under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. It is very much for the applicants to demonstrate that the development will not adversely impact these areas and as that impact can not be mitigated the development should be refused. On the Precautionary Principle, any doubt should be lead to a refusal.
- 3.18 Furthermore, the access proposals would reduce the current level of access to the site.
- 3.19 The overall scale of the proposal raises serious issues as to whether this landscape can accommodate this scale of development within this sensitive location without adversely impacting on the very quality that attracted the applicant to the site.

4 500 Residential Houses of Open Market Housing

- 4.1 The applicant proposes, in addition to all the above, to develop 500 units of open market housing. These houses are planned as being at the upper end of the market and no affordable element is included within the site.
- 4.2 There is simply no local, regional or national policy that supports the development of land purely to fund other commercial development.
- 4.3 Permitting this would create a very unfavourable precedent, whereby housing development is permitted in exchange for the promise of jobs.
- 4.4 This proposal is not connected to any existing settlement and is therefore a new settlement. Despite the promise of a convenience store on site, the vast majority of services for the open market housing (and the staff accommodation) must be elsewhere. Without the holiday accommodation, even the proposed shop will not be

sustainable: other facilities - education, library, medical, etc will not be delivered on site. Nor is the proposed new settlement within the accepted 5 minutes “walkable neighbourhood” of such services. All this accommodation, will inevitably be heavily car dependent.

- 4.5 All the housing proposed at Menie is to be of a broadly similar type, towards the top end of the North East market, with the affordable housing off site rather than creating and supporting diverse mixed and sustainable communities. Availability of a variety of affordable homes is a major issue in the North East
- 4.6 It is inconceivable that the housing element alone would be granted on this site and indeed an application for a single house within the curtilage of an existing house was refused just before this application came to FAC for decision.
- 4.7 The nature of this development means that it is unlikely that the residents will be employed on-site - and indeed all affordable housing proposed is off-site.
- 4.8 All together, there is no policy support for housing at this location and especially not for housing justified in terms of cross funding.

5 Accommodation for 400 staff to be sited within the residential elements

- 5.1 The proposal is for an accommodation block for 400 staff out of a full complement of 1180 FTE. This is a very high proportion of staff especially as the development is within reach of Aberdeen City, Ellon and Peterhead.
- 5.2 Given the proximity to Aberdeen, Ellon and Peterhead, it is difficult to make the case that staff need to live on site and therefore the exception in ALP Hou/4 does not apply and therefore this element should be refused.

6 Summary

- 6.1 The SSSI should be protected in its entirety and the impact on the SINS should be minimised. This can be done. No responsible public authority, charged with protecting and enhancing our natural environment and particularly those areas with national designations, can grant permission for these courses.
- 6.2 The proposed hotel and holiday homes are massive, out of scale with anything in this sensitive coastal location. The scale of these needs to be reduced substantially and these need to be designed so they complement and enhance rather than dominate this open rolling landscape. Given severe doubts as to whether this scale of the development proposed can be fitted into the landscape, these elements must be restricted or refused.

- 6.3 The open market housing and staff accommodation should be refused as such development has no policy support in this location. Moreover the concept of enabling development for the open market housing can not apply and would set a very undesirable precedent. It certainly does not justify the departures from planning policy.
- 6.4 There is a development that is possible at Menie. A smaller development would protect our scarce and internationally-valued natural resources for the benefits of future visitors to Menie, to Balmedie and to Aberdeenshire. It could yield the world profile that the applicant trumpets and it could deliver much of the on-going economic benefit to the north east of Scotland.
- 6.5 There is a solution that is a win-win. All it needs, all it has ever needed, is some willingness from the applicant to modify the proposals to address the serious concerns raised.