

Golf & Leisure Resort

Menie Estate, Balmedie, Aberdeenshire



Written Statement - Access Strategy

WRITTEN SUBMISSION – EFFECTS ON PUBLIC ACCESS AND RECREATION, AMENITY AND LOCAL COMMUNITY FACILITIES

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose and Structure of the Written Submission

The purpose of this written submission is to summarise the following sources of information:

- Environmental Statement Chapter 13 – ‘Recreation, Access and Community Effects’;
- Response to Aberdeenshire Council and Statutory Consultees (July 2007) Chapter 10 – ‘Recreation, Access and Community Effects’; and
- Response to Aberdeenshire Council and Statutory Consultees (July 2007) Appendix 1 – Public Access Plan.

The submission addresses the impact of the proposed golf and leisure resort development on local residents and recreational visitors to the Balmedie Country Park and the adjacent coastline and addresses the wider affects of the proposal on local amenity and on local community facilities. Potential recreational, access and community impacts include:

- Introduction of a major golf and resort development into a coastal area used extensively for informal recreation;
- Effects on visitor numbers to the Forvie National Nature Reserve;
- Effects on the adjacent Balmedie Country Park;
- Effects on the extensive network of informal paths along the coast and through the sand dunes.

2.0 BASELINE CONDITIONS

2.1 Forvie National Nature Reserve

There are 50 National Nature Reserves (NNR) in Scotland, each of which helps to protect a range of wildlife and landscapes. These include many rare species and habitats of international importance.

Forvie is located approximately 13 miles north of Aberdeen on the coast between Newburgh and Collieston and was established as a National Nature Reserve in 1959 by agreement with the previous owner Slains Estate. The Reserve covers an area of approximately 966ha and consists of mobile dunes along the coast between Newburgh Bar on the mouth of the Ythan Estuary and Rockend, and the southern tip of the Forvie peninsula. The northern half of the Reserve has extensive fixed dunes and dune heath. The tidal zone of the River Ythan, which extends northwards from the mouth of the estuary 7km inland to Mains and Waterton, is also in the Reserve.

The Reserve is home to a variety of wildlife and is particularly renowned for its birds, including the largest breeding colony of eiders in Britain, four species of breeding terns and a wealth of wildlife and waders on the estuary. Forvie is recognised as internationally important and is now considered one of the sites in the Natura 2000 network of protected areas in Europe, both for its bird life (Special Protection Area) and its habitats (Special Area for Conservation). The site is also listed under the Ramsar Convention as a Wetland of International Importance.

2.1.1 Visitors

Forvie National Nature Reserve presently receives approximately 15-20,000 visits per year and visitors generally include bird watchers, local people out for a day trip or a walk along the beach and tourists. The Reserve is also well used by educational groups, natural history groups, walking and hiking groups, and scout, beaver and guide groups.

2.1.2 General Facilities

The Reserve contains a range of facilities for visitors. This includes a Visitor Centre which was initially developed in the 1980s and substantially upgraded in 1998, and is presently owned by SNH.

2.1.3 Recreation

Recreation opportunities at the Forvie NNR presently include:

- Education
- Bird watching
- Fishing
- Walking

2.2 Balmedie Country Park and Area Proposed for Future Golf

Balmedie Country Park is located 8 miles north of Aberdeen and immediately south of the proposed Menie Estate Golf Course, at Ordnance Survey (OS) National Grid Reference (NGR) NJ976182. The Park covers an area approximately 1 mile along the coast and half a mile inland. This is part of a larger dune system that stretches 14 miles from Aberdeen to north of the mouth of the River Ythan at the Forvie National Nature Reserve, Newburgh. Balmedie Country Park has a range of features which include a long sandy beach, a wide system of dunes, wetland vegetation and an area of stable grassland.

The area proposed for future golf is located immediately adjacent to the northern boundary of Balmedie Country Park, which is not demarcated on the ground. As a result visitors to Balmedie Country Park may walk north, not realising that they are outside the Country Park. There is therefore a degree of overlap between the recreation and leisure activities which take place at the Park and those which take place in the area proposed for future golf.

2.2.1 Visitors

In the year mid-February 2005 to mid-February 2006 approximately 69,044 vehicles utilised the car parking facilities at Balmedie Country Park. Assuming an average occupancy of 3.2 people per vehicle (based on survey carried out the 1980's) this gives an annual visitor number of some 220,940 people. This figure does not take account of local residents who may walk to the Park, and therefore may be notably higher. It is estimated that during any given year, two thirds of visitors to the Park tend to be in the summer with one third visiting in the winter. On a busy summer weekend it is estimated that the Park may have in the region of 2,000 visitors.

2.2.2 General Facilities

The Park contains North and South car parking areas, which are situated on the landward side of the sand dunes in an area of stable grassland. Car parking is open all year round during daylight hours with estimated capacity for approximately 100 vehicles. Two public

toilet blocks are also located within the Park with the block located at the North car park open all year round and containing facilities for disabled.

2.2.3 Grassland, Dune and Shore Based Recreation

Grassland, dune and shore based recreation within of the Park includes:

- Picnic areas
- Barbecue sites
- Children's play
- Education
- Bird watching
- Equestrian activity
- Walking
- Running
- Orienteering
- Ultimate frisbee
- Kite recreation
- Quad biking and mini-motorcycles

The ES has examined the extent of recreational activities which currently take place on the Estate. Now that the shooting has ceased on site, these primarily involve limited informal recreation on the very southern extremity of the Estate, as a result of spill over from Balmedie Country Park, and the existence of a path used by horse riders which runs through the dunes. Both of these issues have been considered during the design process. The path through the dunes will remain.

2.2.4 Water Based Recreation

Water based recreation within the Park includes:

- Swimming
- Surfing
- Wind surfing
- Kite surfing (kite boarding)

2.3 Rights of Way

The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 allows the public access to land for recreation and this includes the dunes and beach immediately north of Balmedie Country Park. Section 6 of the Act details land over which rights of the public are not exercisable and this includes '*land which has been set out for a particular recreational purpose*'. This will include access to golf greens within the land proposed for future golf immediately north of Balmedie, whether they are in use or not.

2.4 Public Access

2.4.1 Existing Public Access Routes

Two primary public access routes on the site have been identified. The first is an equestrian route which runs through the dunes along the length of the estate, linking Balmedie Country Park with Newburgh. The second is a much shorter route, which is around 1.3km in length, starting at the car park within Balmedie Country Park, and running to the north, through the

area identified for future golf. As part of the TIGLS project, it is proposed that the existing equestrian route which runs through the dune area will be retained.

3.0 POTENTIAL ISSUES

3.1 Construction Phase

Potential issues arising from the construction phase of the proposed development, which could affect recreation, access and the community, are:

- noise and vibration and dust nuisance from works and works traffic;
- visual impacts;
- safety issues – heavy plant, construction traffic; and
- pedestrian access – road works and path diversions/ disruptions.

3.2 Operational Phase

Potential issues arising from the operational phase of the proposed development, which could affect recreation, access and the community, are:

- traffic noise;
- visual impacts;
- safety issues, increased traffic; and
- pedestrian access/ severance and amenity.

4.0 MITIGATION

Mitigation measures designed to reduce adverse impacts on the existing recreation, access and communities are noted below.

4.1 Construction Phase Mitigation

There are standard conditions, restriction and responsibilities generally imposed on the site development contractors to mitigate potential construction impacts. The contractor will be required to notify local residents and other occupants of local properties of all short-term potentially significant impacts, including alternative access arrangements. The contractor will also be required to ensure that any other agreed mitigation requirements are not adversely affected or compromised.

4.2 Operational Phase Mitigation

A range of measures will be implemented to mitigate the visual impact of the new development, including a requirement for high quality building design and landscaping.

4.3 Mitigation Action for Recreational Users

The need for screening/ mitigation of the TIGLS site will be further examined at the detailed design phase once the likely potential impacts are determined. At this stage, the built development forms part of a conceptual Masterplan and will be assessed once finalised designs are in place.

4.4 Mitigation Action for Country Park Users

The area classed as Future Golf which borders the boundary with Balmedie Country Park has not been subject to detailed design at the outline application stage. As a result no provision has been made for the requirement for a buffer zone between the Country Park and the TIGLS site.

It is considered unlikely that such a buffer zone will be necessary or provided given the maintenance of existing public access between the two areas along routes to the beach to the north. The area of Future Golf is not part of the formal Country Park boundary and therefore the alterations proposed have no impact on the existing recreational facility. The boundary between the TIGLS site and the Country Park will be further examined at the detailed design phase in discussion with Aberdeenshire Council.

4.5 Residents Recreational Needs

As the development comprises a golf and leisure resort, there will clearly be a high level of formal recreational provision on-site, in the form of the two golf courses, short game area and driving range, the spa facilities. There will also be extensive opportunities for informal recreation including walking, cycling and use of the extensive beach. There will also be a requirement imposed by Aberdeenshire Council for the provision of public open space within the residential areas on a pro rata basis.

4.6 Proposed Public Access Routes

Three proposed public routes have been identified in an effort to promote access to the site. They have been devised to take account of the existing access routes on site, the features of interest in the surrounding area, and the relevant environmental designations.

4.6.1 Route A

Route A runs along the northern boundary of the site, and follows an existing route, which is understood to have the status of an historical right of way. The route originates on the A90, at the property known as Delfrigs. From there, the public road travels in an easterly direction for approximately 1.2km, until it reaches the property known as Hatterseat. Beyond Hatterseat, the remainder of the route is a hardcore track, which measures approximately 2km, and is suitable for vehicles. The route is suitable for walking, running and cycling (mountain bike), and provides a link from the A90, to the northern beach area, within approximately 3km of the Ythan Estuary.

4.6.2 Route B

Route B will provide the primary access through the resort for walkers, runners and cyclists. Access will be taken from the A90 along the existing farm route opposite Hill of Menie. The existing track is hardcored for a distance of approximately 2km, until it reaches the junction with the private access at Mill of Menie. Beyond this point, the route crosses the dunes and the proposed golf course, and it will therefore be necessary to form a surface which is sensitive to this environment. It is proposed that this be achieved using boardwalks.

4.6.3 Route C

Route C is the shortest, but likely to be the most popular. This is due to the fact that it builds upon the existing facilities and features of interest at Balmedie Country Park. It is proposed that route C be retained along the existing walking route which crosses the area identified as

Future Golf. As the condition of this path is currently stable, causing little environmental damage, it is proposed to retain it as existing.

5.0 IMPACT ASSESSMENT

5.1 Forvie National Nature Reserve

5.1.1 Assessment of increased recreational pressure on the Ythan Estuary, Sands of Forvie and Meikle Loch

Analysis of the existing levels of activity indicates that the Forvie NNR is currently visited by a combination of bird watchers, tourists, and local people, who use the area for walking and day trips. Clearly the proposed resort will introduce significant numbers of tourists and new residents to the area however for the following reasons their impact on Forvie NNR is likely to be limited. The Public Access Strategy which has been produced provides clear access routes from the resort to the beach and dune areas at Menie. The quality of this environment is comparable to that found at Forvie, and its proximity to the resort would suggest that tourists and residents of the proposed private housing would be much more likely to walk the short distance to the nearby beach and dune environment, rather than driving the 7 miles to Forvie. For this reason, the predicted impact on Forvie NNR and related sites, from tourists and residents of the TIGLS development is considered to be minimal.

It is recognised that the Forvie NNR has significance to ornithologists, and it is therefore recognised that those with a particular interest in this subject, who are resident at the Menie Resort are more likely to visit the Stevenson Centre and its associated facilities.

It is important that the management of future recreational pressure takes into account the conservation objectives in relation to the Ythan Estuary, Sands of Forvie and Meikle Loch SPA to ensure that the viability of the site is not compromised. The Information to Inform an Appropriate Assessment (T16) undertaken in May 2008 concluded that:

- The residual impact on qualifying species, for both the SPA and Ramsar sites, is reasonably argued as slight.
- The Menie development is not a threat to the Conservation Objectives of the SPA as all populations will be sustained, albeit with a local reduction in numbers at Menie, with no likely change to population in the north east of Scotland or at European sites.
- The integrity of the SPA and Ramsar site would be maintained and the conservation objectives sustained.

5.2 Balmedie Country Park and Area Proposed for Future Golf

5.2.1 Grassland, Dune and Shore Based Recreation

The following activities which take place within the Park will not be directly affected by the proposed development:

- Picnic areas
- Barbecue sites
- Children's play equipment and beach and dunes environment
- Education including Visitor Interpretation Centre and activities within Park
- Bird watching
- Equestrian activities including horse riding and parking of horse boxes at Park
- Walking, including dog walking

- Running
- Orienteering
- Ultimate Frisbee
- Kite recreation
- Quad biking for beach cleaning and maintenance

The proposed area for future golf is likely to have an impact on the overspill informal recreational activity; however the very limited nature of this was not considered sufficient justification to leave this area untouched, particularly in the context of the ample recreational resource which is available in the Country Park. The proposed changes which will take place as part of the proposed resort will dramatically increase the range of recreational opportunities which are on offer in the area. These new opportunities will significantly outweigh any minor effect on existing recreational patterns.

Informal activities which take place within the area proposed for future golf, which may be directly affected as a result of the proposed development include:

- Children's play within dunes environment
- Education, including areas of dunes utilised for environmental education
- Bird watching
- Equestrian activities, including informal horse riding and organised events
- Walking, including use of established circular route
- Running
- Orienteering

Suitable alternative informal sites for several of the informal recreation activities outlined above can be located within the adjacent Country Park.

5.2.2 Water Based Recreation

The following activities which take place at Balmedie Beach will not be directly affected by the proposed development:

- Swimming
- Surfing
- Wind surfing

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Access Strategy

The proposed access plan is to increase accessibility to the site, through the implementation of 3 public access routes. These do not seek to replace the existing access rights which exist as part of the Land Reform Act 2003, which will remain largely as they do as present. The proposed routes build upon existing popular usage in the area, and allow improved accessibility within the area of the proposed resort.

TIGLS will accept the imposition of a planning condition requiring the preparation of an Access Strategy for approval by Aberdeenshire Council, in consultation with relevant special interest groups including the Ramblers Association and the Belhelvie Community Council.

6.2 Summary of Residual Impacts on Informal Recreation, Access and Community Effects

| Impact | Impact Magnitude | Receptor Sensitivity | Impact Significance |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Loss of area for children's play within the area proposed for future golf. | Moderate | Minor | Minor/ Moderate |
| Loss of area for environmental education within the area proposed for future golf. | Moderate | Moderate | Moderate |
| Disruption to bird watching within the area proposed for future golf. | Moderate | Moderate | Moderate |
| Disruption to horse riding activity and events within the area proposed for future golf. | Major | Moderate | Moderate/ Major |
| Severance of circular walking route within the area proposed for future golf. | Major | Moderate | Moderate/ Major |
| Loss of area for running within the area proposed for future golf. | Moderate | Minor | Minor/ Moderate |
| Loss of area for orienteering within the area proposed for future golf. | Moderate | Minor | Minor/ Moderate |