

Housing and planning in National Parks â?? the Beachen Court development at Grantown

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Homes aimed first time buy

By GAVIN MUSGROVE

THE developer behind plans for 16 homes in Grantown has expressed his surprise that the town's watchdog opposed the scheme aimed at first time buyers.

Robbie McLeod was commenting after Cairngorms National Park Authority's planning committee members approved the housing application by RS McLeod which will form part of the Dulicht Court development.

Grantown Community Council had spoken out against the design of the houses claiming that the "architecture was not of a high enough standard for the town".

The latest phase of 16 properties - a mixture of two and three bedroom properties - by Seafeld Avenue and Beachen Court will qualify for the Scottish Government's 'Help to Buy' scheme.

Committee member Zander McDade had proposed a motion to refuse the

application when it was heard at Boat of Garten Community Hall on Friday. This was based on concerns about the design but it was defeated by 13 votes to three.

After the decision, Mr McLeod said: "I am delighted there was overwhelming support from all of the CNPA's officials and the planning committee much to the disgust of some others.

"The most important thing of all is that we want to bring forward affordable housing at this site - 45 per cent of the properties will fall into this category which is well above the 25 per cent requirement.

"I was disappointed Grantown Community Council objected and I feel that Bill Sadler, who represented them at the meeting, was speaking out of his own self-interests.

"After all, how a community council can object to affordable housing is beyond my comprehension especially in our community where it is so badly needed."

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Beachen Court - the Developer's perspective

I have been aware of the Beachen Court housing development at Grantown for some time. I believe it illustrates many of the fundamental issues facing the Cairngorms National Park Authority in respect to

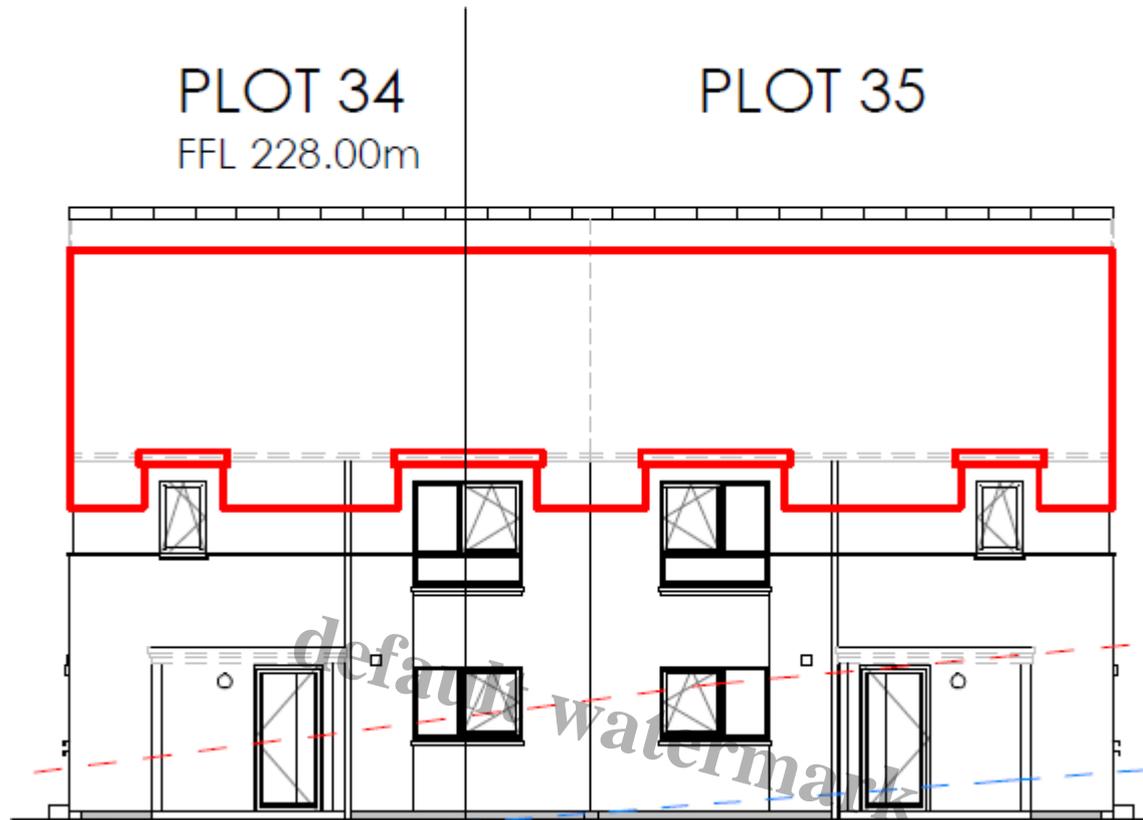
housing and planning, some of which it is currently consulting on in its Main Issues Report ([see here](#)). The area, previously flower rich grassland used for informal recreation by local people, had been earmarked for housing in the CNPA Development Plan and subsequent site standards developed through consultation.

The development is taking place in phases, each subject to separate planning applications, subsequent to basic infrastructure being put in place. There have been issues with the developer adhering to the planning conditions for this infrastructure which were referred to at the December CNPA planning committee in their report on enforcement:

a) Beachan Court, Grantown-on Spey

This is a housing development with permission for roads and plot layout for 53 houses (and full permission for 10 affordable units granted in October 2016) and included a range of conditions dealing with SUDS provision, levels, tree protection and measures for species protection. The opening up of the site, significant infrastructure works and interaction between different conditions has required monitoring to ensure conditions are complied with and development commences in a satisfactory way. The CNPA has investigated a number of enforcement enquiries raised by the public on the site.

Unfortunately the report did not explain what action the CNPA had taken as a result of those concerns. That same meeting, however, also considered a planning application for the second phase of the development (the first phase being the construction of 10 social housing units by Highland Council), the subject of the Strathy article above. The main point of contention in the application (which was objected to by the Community Council) was the proposed design of the housing which breached the design policy the CNPA had adopted for the site: this has originally been that houses should be 1.5 storeys in height (with the upper floor set in the roof) but had been relaxed to a maximum of 1.75 storeys in height. :



The appearance and size of a one and three quarter storey house is outlined in red, the new proposal for a full height two storey house in grey. CNPA planning papers.

The Developer argued that full height two storey houses were needed to make the houses affordable:

The Design Statement explains that the type of housing complies with the Scottish Government's 'help to buy' scheme which helps buyers who would not otherwise be able to do so to buy a new home. The applicants assert that this has meant that 1 ¾ storey houses would be difficult to provide given the ratio of construction costs to valuation costs and this has led to the current proposal for two storey houses. The statement seeks to address the relationship to the original design brief as approved for the wider plot layout which set out design principles for future development and included a statement that all new housing would be a maximum of 1 ¾ storeys high which was reflected in the planning conditions attached to the original plot layout consent here.



Entrance Elevation

Scale - 1 : 100

The proposed appearance of the 2 storey dwellings CNPA planning papers

CNPA staff had this to say about the proposed design:

In terms of the design the houses types are considered to be functional and satisfactory, of simple design incorporating an acceptable range of materials were not exactly enthusiastic about the standard of the design

Hardly an enthusiastic endorsement, but they nevertheless recommended the designs be approved:

61. It is appreciated that the guidance contained in the non-statutory development brief for this site set out that development should be up to 1 ½ storeys. This was amended in the subsequent application for the wider site where 1 ¾ storey development was put forward in the accompanying design and access statement. The applicant is now putting forward the case for 2 storey housing

on the application site. The financial reasons behind this are not considered to be an overriding planning consideration, but simply an explanation from the developer as to why they have gone down this route. The land use planning consideration here is simply whether or not on these particular sites two storey properties as proposed are acceptable.

62. Given that the house designs are satisfactory, there are no adverse impacts on amenity of neighbours and sections demonstrate that the houses will sit acceptably on the sites there is no planning policy reason to refuse the application simply because it does not comply fully with the guidance contained in the design brief and development brief.

What message does it give to developers if development briefs can be ignored? If planning in the our National Parks is to become really effective, our National Park Authorities need to hold developers to agreed design briefs and to adherence to planning conditions. I suspect the CNPA is storing up problems for itself for later phases of the development of this site (and its worth saying here there were many excellent elements in the original design brief including such things as dedicated cycle storage facilities – the proportion of National Park residents who cycle is very high) and the developer will come back with further proposals to relax the original design brief in later stages of the development. We will see!

While the Planning Committee approved the proposal, to their credit three members of the Board supported an amendment that the CNPA should stick to their policy. Further the mover of the amendment, the new Board Member nominated by Perth and Kinross Council, Xander McDade (referred to in the article above), hit the issue on the head when he stated it should be possible to provide high quality affordable housing, a challenge to the Developer’s claims that the changes were necessary to make the housing affordable.

Readers' letters

Authority is ignoring its own guides

YOUR correspondent from Boat of Garten indicates interest in a report in the Strathy about a controversial planning application at a prominent Grantown site ("Homes aimed at first time buyers", December 21 and, Letters, "Affordability matters", January 4).

Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group, the local community council and others expressed varied concerns about 16 private houses at the Dulicht Court development. Despite these, the Cairngorms National Park board approved this application by a majority vote last month.

For the record, BSCG welcomed the 10 nearby and separate council houses that are part of the wider development at the Beachen Court-Seafield Avenue site.

BSCG understands that all these 10 are constructed on land owned by the council and will provide social rented housing with the council being the Registered Social Landlord.

Concerns are, however, ongoing about the affordability of the 16 private houses. As the developer has emphasised, these private houses will qualify for the Scottish Government's controversial Help to Buy scheme.

However, with these houses advertised at £178k and £179k for two bedrooms and £198k for three (there is a Scottish Government cap of £200k on Help To Buy houses), it is questionable how affordable

these are in practice to many people parking in the local economy, even with the scheme's government

subsidy and five per cent deposit. The 16 private houses are above the Highland average price for 2017 which ranged from £170,359 to £177,924 according to figures from Highland Solicitors Property Centre. A three-bed semi for sale in Grantown for £125k, also perhaps indicates that the new houses may not be affordable by Grantown standards.

The Help To Buy scheme has recently been criticised because "Across the UK it has been responsible for increasing house prices" and is "dysfunctional".

Housing experts, including Shelter Scotland and Andy Wightman MSP (who chairs the cross party group on housing at the Scottish Parliament) have called on the Scottish Government to scrap this programme.

The Director of Shelter Scotland Graeme Brown has reasonably maintained that the money would be better spent on supporting affordable housing for social rent, commenting that "Help to Buy is not the right way of addressing the housing crisis. It adds public money into the market rather than lowering prices for everyone".

In Scotland the development firm Persimmon, whose chief executive has recently gained notoriety for his £110 million bonus, has benefited most from the Help To Buy scheme.

Vince Cable recently commented that it was an outrage that Persimmon's chief could profit so much from a "government subsidy" in the help-to-buy scheme; and MP Rachel Maskell commented "It is disgraceful that while Britain faces a housing crisis, housebuilding executives can be paid extortionate bonuses after making huge profits off the back of a government subsidy".

Another concern raised by BSCG and other objectors to the 16 houses is that the development does not



TAKING SHAPE: Dulicht C

comply with the CNPA's D (recommending houses u and a half storeys), for wh was a public consultation has been in place for som

The developer gave his not complying with the d as financial, stating: "stor a-half or three-quarter dw would be problematic du unfavourable ratio of con cost to valuation cost".

The lack of concern app shown by the CNPA plan most board members in o their design brief for the p houses prompts question consistency and discoura healthy early public enga the planning process, in l Scottish Government poli

It can be viewed as yet example of how reliance engagement in planning little relevance to final ou

Gus Jones, Convener of the Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group had an interesting letter in the Strathy last week about the decision which focusses on the alleged merits of the Help to Buy Scheme as a means of providing affordable housing.

The underlying issue here is the price of land. This was subject to a very interesting report from the Scottish Land Commission [Land Lines. The housing land market in Scotland](#). The report is well worth reading in its entirety for anyone who wants to understand the housing market and its findings are very relevant to the CNPA's consultation on its Main Issues Report.

Main findings

House prices have risen dramatically in Scotland in recent decades, far outpacing growth in incomes. The driving force behind rising house prices has been increasing land prices.

The way the land market operates depends largely on the laws, institutions and political history of particular nations, and so varies widely. In Scotland, the key characteristics are a reliance on the private sector operating on a speculative model to deliver new house building; a legal framework that allocates the uplift in the value of land resulting from planning permission to landowners rather than public authorities; a liberalised mortgage credit market; a taxation system that is highly favourable to land and property; and a paucity of publicly available information on land values and ownership.

This system has resulted in an under-supply of housing and escalating housing costs, which in turn has undermined living standards, exacerbated economic inequality, and stifled productivity growth and output.

Policy options to improve the supply of land for housing include public land value capture, compulsory sale orders, a new housing land development agency, tax reform, and greater market transparency.

Intervening in the land market would have a number of long-term economic benefits including a more productive and dynamic economy; a fairer and more inclusive society; improved living standards; and healthier public finances.

While I will come back to this in a more detailed consideration of the CNPA Main Issues Report, the relevance to Beachen Court is that good quality housing which met the original design requirements could have been provided for considerably less than Â£178k for two bedrooms if it had not been for the price of the land. Hence, the message to the CNPA for their Main Issues Report is that if they truly want to deliver affordable housing in the National Park given the enormous gap between current prices and the average income of residents they need to start tackling the land question.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. Development Plan
3. housing
4. planning

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