

## **PLANNING DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE PUBLIC HEARING**

ABERDEEN, 18 May 2016. Minute of Meeting of the PLANNING DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE. Present:- Councillor Milne, Convener; Councillor Finlayson, Vice Convener; and Councillors Boulton, Cooney, Corall, Cormie, Donnelly, Greig, Hutchison, Jaffrey, Lawrence, Jean Morrison MBE, Nicoll and Sandy Stuart.

Also present:- Councillors Allan, Dickson and Noble (for part of the hearing).

The agenda and reports associated with this minute can be found at:-  
<http://committees.aberdeencity.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=348&MId=4231&Ver=4>

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### **SITE VISIT - VICTORIA ROAD PRIMARY SCHOOL TORRY - 151260**

1. The Committee conducted a site visit prior to the Hearing. The Committee was addressed by Mr Andrew Miller, Senior Planner and summarised the proposal for the overall site.

The Convener explained that the Committee would return to the Town House to commence the Hearing.

### **HEARING**

#### **VICTORIA ROAD PRIMARY SCHOOL TORRY – DEMOLITION OF THE EXISTING VICTORIA ROAD PRIMARY SCHOOL AND ERECTION OF 56 RESIDENTIAL UNITS WITH OPEN SPACE, PARKING AND ASSOCIATED INFRASTRUCTURE - 151260**

2. The Hearing was opened by the Convener who extended a warm welcome to all present and explained that at the Planning Development Management Committee meeting of 17 March 2016, consideration was given to a report which recommended that a public hearing be arranged, and that this had been agreed.

The Convener made it clear that the purpose of the Hearing was not to determine the application but to allow the Committee to consider (1) officers' objective views of the development; (2) details of the development presented by the developer and their agents; and (3) the views of those who submitted written representations and responded positively to the invitation to speak at the Hearing. The Convener advised that a decision would not be taken until the Planning Development Management Committee meeting on 16 June 2016 at the earliest.

The Convener invited **Mr Andrew Miller, Senior Planner, Aberdeen City Council**, as the first speaker to address the Committee. Mr Miller described the application proposal, advised on the policy background and the main issues arising, and identified the nature of the concerns expressed by consultees and objectors. His presentation to the Committee was in the following terms:-

The application before members was for detailed planning permission for the demolition of Victoria Road Primary School and the erection of 56 residential units that would be split into the following:-

- 23 terraced 3 bedroom houses in the northern half of the site accessed from Abbey Road; and
- 33 flats in two 3-storey blocks on the southern half of the site accessed from Victoria Road.

Parking would be provided on site with two car club spaces on Victoria Road. Six trees would be lost but nine would be retained, that were subject to a Tree Preservation Order. In regard to consultation Mr Miller explained that as this was classed as a major development, the proposed development was the subject of pre-application consultation in Torry Youth and Leisure Centre on 25 February 2015 between the applicant and the local community. The consultation was publicised in the press as well as public notices being displayed in the surrounding area and notifications sent direct to 103 neighbours. The event entailed a drop in exhibition open to the public with specific invites for a preview before the event sent to Torry Community Council and Torry/Ferryhill Elected Members. It was estimated that 85 members of the public attended. Two presentations were also given at the Council's Pre Application Forum. In regards to consultees, SEPA had objected to the application and Mr Miller described various issues raised from the Roads Department.

**Members then asked questions of Mr Miller, and the following information was noted:-**

- The property could be demolished at anytime without planning consent;
- The re-use of the granite could be stipulated as a condition of the application
- The Council owned the two derelict buildings that are on the site.

The Convener then invited **Mr Gregor Whyte, Engineering Officer, Aberdeen City Council**, to address the Committee.

Mr Whyte explained that the Roads department was comfortable with the outline proposal that had been submitted, as well as the car club provision. He indicated that there was no concern in regard to the overflow of cars onto Victoria Road due to adequate parking being provided. Finally Mr Whyte advised that a transport assessment study was still to be carried out and submitted to the Council by the applicant.

**Members then asked questions of Mr Whyte, and the following information was noted:-**

- The arrangement for service vehicles was included in the submission;
- The zebra crossing on Victoria Road would remain; and
- A transport assessment study was still to be submitted from the applicant.

The Convener then invited the applicant to address the Committee. **Mr Mick Wernham from Halliday Fraser and Munro and Mr Scott Pettit from Barratt North Scotland** outlined the application to members.

Mr Pettit advised that the site had been vacant since 2008 and had been on the market for a considerable amount of time, prior to Barratt submitting a bid for the site. The bid had been before Full Council and they had been nominated as the preferred bidder. Mr Pettit noted the sentiment of the school to the local community and provided details on the public consultation that was held in February 2015. Mr Pettit explained that following discussions, the application was reduced by 10% and would now be for 56 units instead of the 62 which was originally anticipated. As a result of the change, there had been a delay in producing the necessary transport survey. He also advised that it had been Barratt's intention from the beginning that the site would be demolished and not refurbished, as this would not be viable. Throughout discussions, Barratt had always given commitment to keep certain elements of the building, to keep part of the heritage of the building. A bat survey was to be carried out in the coming weeks as well as preliminary investigations for contamination. In summary, Mr Pettit outlined that the application was for 56 units in order to regenerate a derelict site, which would be for family housing, affordable housing and an investment in Torry, with a commitment to keeping key features of the site.

Mr Mick Wernham, Halliday, Fraser and Munro, highlighted planning policies that were relevant to the application and brought members' attention to the following policies, namely Policies D4, H2, D1, D2, NE5 and T2.

**Members then asked questions of Mr Pettit and Mr Wernham, and the following information was noted:-**

- From the application submitted to Aberdeen City Council in 2014, Barratt had always intended to demolish the site and had never stated that it would be retained.
- It was noted that a lot of granite would be available from the building and they explained that it could be used for various aspects within the new development, as was the case at another site at Royal Cornhill Hospital.
- The applicant was comfortable to work in conjunction with various parties to retain the granite from the site.
- A permanent factoring would be in use and residents would contribute to the cost
- Additional trees would be planted that would add to the street scene
- A planning condition would be in place in regards to bin collections.
- An earlier objection from SEPA was being examined and trying to be resolved by the applicant
- The affordable housing element allocation would be agreed at a later date, following discussions with officers at Aberdeen City Council; however it was noted that it would likely be 25% affordable housing but the requirements were determined by officers within the Council.

The Convener then welcomed **Mr David Fryer, Secretary of Torry Community Council**, to address the Committee and he did so in the following terms:-

Mr Fryer began by thanking the Committee for the opportunity to address members in regard to the former Victoria Road School. He explained that there were a huge level of objections in regard to the application and intimated that the Torry community cared greatly about local history and respected its place in history. He explained that there

must be an alternative to demolishing the school however he did commend Barratt for continuing sticking to their original brief of requiring a clear site for development and not one that would be refurbished. Mr Fryer outlined how granite buildings were now irreplaceable and how other granite buildings in the city had been refurbished and retained and asked if this could be done at the Victoria Road school building. Mr Fryer advised that there had been a catalogue of lost buildings and he would not like to see this happen in Torry. Causewayend School was an example of how a granite building was refurbished and redeveloped to student accommodation.

Mr Fryer explained that a lack of security had led to a fire in the building but noted that the structure was sound. He felt that the mature trees should also be saved. He summarised by advising that common sense should prevail. The Torry community needed a new school and he saw potential in the building being restored.

Mr Fryer asked that the application for demolition of Victoria Road School be refused.

**Members then asked questions of Mr Fryer, and the following information was noted:-**

- Torry Development Trust looked at a feasibility study of the site. Lottery funding was received to employ an independent consultant to look at the site;
- When asked about desirable use, Mr Fryer advised that a new school would be desirable;
- The current school site was not big enough to deliver a new school which would meet the criteria for the Curriculum for Excellence, which was a Scottish Government initiative;
- It was suggested that the Sports Centre which was next door could be used to help with the need for open space in primary schools. Mr Fryer asked that all ideas be examined and not just the application.
- It was suggested that a footprint of the adjoining properties be circulated to members, which would include the business units, to give members an overall hectare size of the site.

The Committee then heard from **Mr George Wood** who explained to Members that he was against the development and addressed the Committee in the following terms:-

Mr Wood explained that he was not Torry born but was culturally bound to Torry through ancestry, shipbuilding and years spent around Aberdeen Harbour.

He advised that he was old enough to remember the past, when Aberdeen's elected administrators approved developments, which with the clarity of hindsight, were planning disasters. He mentioned the demolition of the Royal Northern Club and the Palace Hotel and the building of shops on Union Bridge, all of which he felt combined to destroy the architectural integrity of Union Street forever and the Castlehill developments which he felt blighted that historic streetscape. Perhaps most apposite to this case was the clearance of Old Torry Village in the 1970's. Mr Wood stated that these were all replaced in concrete as developers, driven solely and soullessly by commercial gain, destroyed Aberdeen's granite heritage. At the same time, he added that Aberdeen could look to Glasgow, where successive administrations showed that it was possible to retain Victorian sandstone streetscape, whilst economically adapting the area to modern commercial use.

Mr Wood quoted the National Institute of Building Sciences, USA:- “Preserving historic buildings is vital to understanding our nation’s heritage. In addition, it is an environmentally responsible practice. An immediate advantage of older buildings is that a building already exists; therefore energy is not necessary to demolish a building or create new building materials and infrastructure. This not only makes good economic sense, but preserves our legacy and is an inherently sustainable practice”

Mr Wood intimated that in these days of “repair by replacement”, has felt it was an easier option to destroy and build anew with inferior materials, than it was to preserve and adapt that which our ancestors valued.

He advised that the building in question was not one of great architectural value, nor one occupying a strategic position, nor even one that was particularly beautiful. What was being considered was a significant building which was part of the vernacular heritage of the area and one which was closely associated by so many current and former residents, with that separate community and locality which was Torry.

He explained that the building, which was 138 years old, was initially supported by funding from the fishing community, when fishing dominated and defined the development of modern Torry. This was a building where the men and women who worked and thrived on the trades associated with the trawling and fish processing were educated, and stated it was little wonder this treasure house of memories was so deeply ingrained in the community’s soul. Mr Wood added that this was a building crafted from granite, that unforgiving stone which so clearly demonstrated the psyche of past Torry folk, but also the tenacious spirit of the modern, close knit and multi-cultural community which remained distinct as Torry.

Mr Wood indicated that the Committee was faced with a stark choice, demolish heritage for a short term financial gain, or listen to those diverse groups and individuals who wished to see the building retained to fulfil its fundamental purpose as an icon and focus for the spirit which this community demonstrated so amply and ably. Aberdeen had a building which retained its structural integrity and could be economically adapted to modern use for a wide range of purposes. Mr Wood added that if the will was there, Members could fulfil the elector’s desires.

Mr Wood advised that in accordance with the wishes of Torry’s residents, as well as respondents in Aberdeen and worldwide, he appealed to the Committee to uphold Aberdeen City Council’s own policy, as stated in D4 of the Local Development Plan “The City Council will encourage the retention of granite buildings throughout the city, even if not listed or in a conservation area”.

Mr Wood mentioned John Steinbeck who wrote in Grapes of Wrath; “How will we know it’s us without our past?”

Finally Mr Wood asked the Committee to refuse the demolition of Victoria Road School.

No questions were asked of Mr Wood.

The Committee then heard from **Dr Lorna McHattie** who delivered a PowerPoint presentation and requested that the Committee did not demolish Victoria Road School in its present form in favour of the development.

Dr McHattie made reference to four reasons for not demolishing the school, namely:-

- Aberdeen Local Development Plan 2012;
- National Planning Framework for Scotland (NPF2);
- Aberdeen City and Shire Structure Plan; and
- Torry residents: sense of place.

She referred to Policy D1 - Architecture and Placemaking, namely:-

- (a) to ensure high standards of design, new development must be designed with due consideration for its context and make a positive contribution to its setting.
- (b) factors such as siting, scale, massing, colour, materials, orientation, details, the proportions of building elements, together with the spaces around buildings, including streets, squares, open space, landscaping and boundary treatments, will be considered in assessing that contribution.
- (c) keep the old granite buildings and refurbish them.

Dr McHattie made reference to the successful development of three granite schools out with Torry, namely Mile End School which was now flats; Causewayend Primary School which was soon to be student accommodation; and Dough School, School of Navigation which was also flatted properties.

Dr McHattie advised that there were three options for the Committee to determine, which were as follows:-

1. reject Barratt's planning application for whole site;
2. reject planning approval for part of the site, keeping the main school building; and
3. keep the granite buildings and refurbish/extend, similar to examples in presentation.

Councillor Cormie asked Dr McHattie what she would like to see happen to the granite if the development went ahead as proposed by the developer, in response DR McHattie advised that there should be a condition to stockpile the granite and that it be kept locally for future use. She stressed that it should not be chipped.

The Committee then heard from **Mrs Millicent Birse**, who was against the demolition of the former school on Victoria Road.

Mrs Birse advised that she was born and brought up on Victoria Road and that she and her husband had attended Victoria Road School. She asked the Committee, especially those who had connections with Torry to think long and hard about what was being suggested for the school.

Mrs Birse indicated that she had heard that the Council wished to build another primary school in the Torry area, and thought that it would be a good idea to use the beautiful structure of Victoria Road School which was very sound structurally, and would not cost as much money to bring it back to what it once was.

She intimated that the 'powers that be' thought it would cost £20m to build a new school, and added that if it was anything like the schools in Edinburgh, it would not last long, referring to the saying "buy cheap, buy dear". She indicated that common sense should prevail on this very important issue, and she explained that she wanted to ensure that Torry kept some of its heritage.

The Committee then heard from **Ms Dorothy Bothwell**, who spoke in the following terms:-

Ms Bothwell advised that Victoria Road School was built by funds from fisherman of Old Torry in 1878 and was originally called Torry School. The original school faced Abbey Road but was extended in the 1890's and extended to Victoria Road. It was closed in 2008 after providing 130 years of education for the children of Torry, and also after surviving bombing during in June of 1940 when incendiary bombs were dropped on it.

Ms Bothwell indicated that schools were at the heart of the community, and the huge change was how, in this day and age, they were the catalyst for bringing the community together. Social integration was very important in Torry and the myriad of uses for the community.

Ms Bothwell intimated that given the deteriorating state of the planet, that it would be incumbent on all to find ways to live more sustainably. She asked that the city took on that environmental challenge. It could be a catalyst for whole community use or, she added, was Aberdeen going to keep treating its built fabric with such contempt. Did Aberdeen really wish to abandon dignity, memory, pride, quality and sense of place?

Ms Bothwell made reference to the performance in the Marischal College Quad of 'Granite' by the National Theatre Scotland (NTS) and indicated that there was so much of that script that applied to what they were trying to achieve, and quoted Elly Rothnie from the NTS as follows:-

"It's the thing that draws ye back,  
It shapes the landscape,  
it spikks o place,  
it's the stane that winna brakk,  
It pit the grit in the north-east race"

"The blocks that biggit our past, our hame,  
That shapes oor future's the granite stane"

She concluded by asking the Committee to join her in creating a legacy that Aberdeen could be proud of.

The Committee then heard from **Mr Bob Taylor** who delivered a power point presentation and explained to Members that he was against the development and addressed the Committee in the following terms:-

Mr Taylor, made reference to the recently built modern schools in Edinburgh and the comparison between the granite schools built to last. He explained that this development was about the land, its value which was driving the proposed development. He asked what was better value:- either a building that was cheap to erect but lasted 35 years, or a building that cost more to erect but lasted for ever with maintenance?

He indicated that he had searched the internet which revealed that many old school buildings could be restored and reused to 21st century standards. Experience had shown that it was generally less expensive to alter and rehabilitate an existing school

rather than build a new one. He noted that of course, many older schools were in poor condition and did not meet current educational needs.

Mr Taylor advised that the challenge was to determine whether such schools could be rehabilitated efficiently and cost effectively to meet 21st century educational standards. Many historic school buildings were constructed with materials and workmanship that could not be duplicated today.

Mr Taylor advised that there were three key principles as follows:-

- Principle: Redevelop first. Criteria: The school was located in a core community
- Principle: Use existing infrastructure—roads, water and sewer lines.
- Principle: Concentrate development. Foster the creation of well-designed development and walkable, bikeable neighbourhoods that offered healthy life style opportunities.

Mr Taylor indicated that Neighbourhood Schools could help keep older communities vibrant; walking to school helped young people develop healthy habits that would serve them for a lifetime; reusing existing buildings made optimum use of community resources; it saved energy and protected the environment; it improved neighbourhoods by reclaiming neglected structures as community centrepieces; and it was usually less expensive than new construction and took less time to complete.

Finally, the Committee heard an audio message from residents of Balnagask Care Home, namely Doreen Lyon, Joyce Duncan, William Robertson, Ali Spence and Pamela Swanson who were all concerned about the demolition of Victoria Road School and were all passionate about the granite heritage of Torry.

The Convener and Vice Convener thanked all participants for their presentations and noted that the application would go before members of the Planning Development Management Committee on Thursday 16 June for determination.

- **RAMSAY MILNE, Convener**