



Alex Ferguson,
Planning Dept,
Aberdeen City Council

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Denmore,
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Aberdeen
AB23 8LH

22nd September 2016

Dear Mr. Ferguson,

14, The Chanonry, Old Aberdeen
(Planning application ref. 161152)

Proposed Change of Use of Dwelling house to incorporate Business Use
with 4 offices, and Meeting Room

The Society wishes to register a strong objection to this application.

Our objection is based on the following grounds, (which we shall expand on later), in that this proposal would:-

- (1) Be **detrimental to the character** of the **Old Aberdeen Conservation Area**, and so would fail to meet the statutory requirement to preserve or enhance that character.
- (2) Create **an undesirable precedent**, whereby further, similar, applications for properties in The Chanonry could not be refused, **leading to a fundamental change in the character of this unique corner of the Conservation Area, and also in the character and setting of this superb enclave of listed buildings**, which as a whole, have been assigned Category 'A' Group Listing. This change of character, in both cases, would be severely detrimental to both the character and appearance of this, Aberdeen's no.1 Outstanding Conservation Area.
- (3) Be **contrary to Policy H1** of the Local Development Plan.
- (4) **Exacerbate the existing traffic and parking problems in the area.**
- (5) **Pose a threat to the preservation of the key characteristics of The Chanonry** as outlined and commended in the City Council's new guidance issued specifically for Old Aberdeen - the **Old Aberdeen Conservation Area Character Appraisal** (Dec. 2015)
- (6) Most importantly, it would be **contrary to what has been the City Council's settled view** on proposals such as this for office use within the Chanonry, **as evidenced in the firm refusal of the last such application, for part business use at no.7 The Chanonry.**

To expand on these points:-

(1) **Would be detrimental to the character of the Old Aberdeen Conservation Area**

(a) We have two concerns about the effect that this application would have on the **physical character** and appearance of the Conservation Area:-

- (i) First, while there is as yet no proposal to make structural alterations to the house, a change of use to business would certainly require the erection of a signboard, detailing the name of the building, the organisation which was housed there, their contact details, emblem etc., as is customary outside business establishments. Permission for such a sign would be difficult to refuse if change of use were permitted, and it is our view that such a sign would conflict with the domestic character and appearance of what has always been a family home.
- (ii) Although no parking in front of the house has been specifically applied for at this stage, it is clear that there would be times when staff would need to rely on parking in the front garden in order to find a parking space. Parking of 2 or 3 cars there could significantly affect the setting of this house, obscuring important features, which would have a detrimental effect on the setting of this listed building, and, indeed, on the setting and character of this part of the Conservation Area.

(b) **The character of a conservation area, however, is not just about physical appearance.** Just as important is the atmosphere, or 'feel' of a place, which is intimately tied up with the use to which it is put.

In the case of no.14, The Chanonry, we hold, its character as a private family home, with only the few comings and goings associated with that, would be lost if much of it were converted to business use, as a workplace, with employees coming and going, along with various visitors, meetings and larger gatherings.

There also has to be concern about possible expansion of business activities, as although such expansion is not currently envisaged by the applicants / prospective purchasers, it has not been expressly ruled out. More to the point, if this house were to change hands in future years, the permission for business use would remain, while the new owners might very well make a much more intensive, and more commercial, use of the building than that envisaged by the current applicants, thus having an even greater impact on the character of this house, and so, also, on this part of the Conservation Area.

Any change in the character of this family home is bound to have an impact on the 'feel' of the surrounding Conservation Area. Once a business use is introduced, and a home becomes to a large extent an office/workplace, the wholly domestic atmosphere of The Chanonry is gone, and its unique character is lost. Granting permission for this change of use would therefore, we hold, conflict with the Council's statutory duty to preserve or enhance that character.

- (2) **Would create an undesirable and dangerous precedent**, whereby further, similar, applications for other houses in The Chanonry could not be refused, and homes could start to be converted to offices or combined homes/offices, with all the accompanying traffic and corporate signage, and the wholly residential and tranquil character of this unique gem of a street would be lost.

It is easy to imagine the attraction of The Chanonry to various wholly commercial businesses as a most desirable and prestigious location for their main office, or a combined company headquarters and home. No doubt the large back gardens would also appeal as a perfect venue for “corporate entertainment”, such as large garden parties (and associated traffic).

If just one house in the Chanonry were given permission to incorporate significant business use, this, we feel, would be enough for other prospective purchasers to feel that they could justify demanding a similar change of use for another Chanonry house on sale. How could the council refuse? Why should the first be a special case? No doubt other organisations could put forward reasons why their proposed office use, or combined home/office use, was a special case. What reasons could be advanced by the planning authority for refusing a similar application, other than a preference for one sort of business over another? If the use was still the same - part home, and part suite of offices, - surely the Council would not be able to refuse a similar application?

There is, we believe, a very real risk of setting an undesirable precedent here, leading to further similar developments, and a resulting cumulative impact which could destroy utterly the character for which The Chanonry is renowned. Streets of fine mansions in the west end of the city have already been converted to streets of offices and commerce, with gardens (or more often driveways) sporting corporate signage of every shape, size and design.

This is the fate which, we believe, could sooner or later befall The Chanonry if once a change of use to office is allowed, for the Council can surely not rule that no future Planning Committee view this as a precedent.

If a precedent were set, then, we could see the gradual, but steady, destruction of the very essence of The Chanonry; its air of gracious domesticity and tranquillity lost, irretrievably, to the serious detriment of our heritage, not only in Old Aberdeen, and the whole city, but also in Scotland as a whole.

The unique character of The Chanonry is precious beyond words. Visitors to Old Aberdeen are immediately enchanted by its atmosphere when they encounter this peaceful oasis, far removed from the busy High Street and noisy St. Machar Drive. Here is an exceptionally beautiful and historic area, which seems untouched by the modern world of commerce, with a truly timeless quality. This is The Chanonry that generations of Aberdonians have come to know and love, but also one which is extremely vulnerable to change, and the granting of the current application could mark the beginning of the end of The Chanonry as we know it.

(3) **Would be contrary to Policy H1 of the Local Development Plan**

In short, we do not regard the proposed use as fulfilling the requirement of Policy H1 to be complementary to residential use, but rather as a business use incidentally juxtaposed with a residential use, which is a different matter.

We also have concerns that the proposed business use would cause conflict with the enjoyment of existing residential amenity in terms of pressure on parking in the area, and impact on vehicle movement in a congested area, when larger gatherings took place.

(4) **Would exacerbate the existing traffic and parking problems in the area**

(a) **Traffic**

It could be said that any development which would create extra traffic (at times considerable in volume) in an already confined area, is bordering on the unsafe.

No. 14 is situated in the most congested part of The Chanonry, a narrow mediaeval road which turns two corners in its short length. Approaching from St. Machar Drive, there is no through road straight ahead, as it leads only to the foot of Tillydrone Road, a picturesque mediaeval road, (more like a rural lane), open only to pedestrians and cyclists. The section of The Chanonry to the right, which includes no.14, is short and busy, and the last stretch, round the corner once again, is even more constricted. It is important to note here, that although cars can turn right on to Don Street here, coaches can not leave The Chanonry by this route (as some who try, find out to their cost!) as it is not possible for a coach to negotiate the corner with narrow Don Street. Accordingly, coaches have to leave The Chanonry by the way they came, back up to St. Machar Drive. To do this, coaches (often the large touring versions) have a fair bit of manoeuvring to do, and this is only possible in the area in front of the Gatehouses to the Cathedral, and the adjoining spaces, one of which is the area in front of no.14. When a coach, (or coaches), is only part of a much wider massing of vehicles attending an event such as a wedding, there can be quite some difficulty traffic-wise. Individual coaches bringing tourists to the Cathedral, though very frequent, are usually less of a problem, but when two arrive at once, there is congestion once again.

The point here is that although The Chanonry can indeed be peaceful for much of the time, at other times there are very considerable difficulties with traffic issues, and much of the congestion, due to the mediaeval road configuration, happens to be in the area just beside no.14. An increase in traffic, resulting from a change of use at no.14, would be bound to cause a corresponding increase in problems, which in turn raises issues of road safety.

It should be noted that there are actually quite a number of occasions during the year when a very large volume of vehicles are drawn to The Chanonry, in connection with large scale events or special services at the Cathedral. Clearly, there are a lot of weddings, some of which involve coaches as well as guests' cars, but there are also other events which generate huge volumes of traffic, such as major concerts, like those given by the Bach Choir, when there can be over 500 people (including choir, orchestra and audience members) travelling to this part of The Chanonry all at roughly the same time.

In spite of a certain amount of car-sharing, which does help, this can have a huge impact on this confined spot. Even just on rehearsal afternoons or evenings, there can be over 130 choir and orchestra members arriving at The Cathedral. If this sort of event were to coincide with one of the gatherings at the proposed Diocesan Centre at no.14, an already difficult traffic situation could be much worsened.

(b) **Parking Problems**

There is also the fundamental issue of whether an application for change of use demonstrates a capacity to accommodate adequate parking for that use. The current application, however, shows no parking provision, which has to be a concern. Not only would there be the parking requirements of regular non-resident staff to take into consideration, but the requirements of other visitors from across the Diocese, and those attending meetings or lectures, are important considerations.

Another concern is that there seems to be no indication from the applicants / prospective purchasers as to how the parking requirements of the 50 to 100 guests at events such as the New Year Gathering or Summer Garden Party would be accommodated.

In connection with this is the question of what would happen if a Garden Party at no.14 happened to coincide with, say, a wedding, a funeral or memorial service at St. Machar's Cathedral, not an unlikely situation. To have two major events drawing considerable volumes of traffic, most of which would require parking, on the same afternoon, for instance, could cause serious disruption, both in terms of traffic congestion and in terms of pressure on parking in the vicinity.

To sum up, we believe that in a confined area such as The Chanonry, with such a huge pressure on parking at times, and associated traffic issues, it would seem wholly inappropriate, and indeed detrimental to local amenity, to introduce a new use to the area which would exacerbate that pressure.

- (5) **The Old Aberdeen Conservation Area Character Appraisal**, approved by the City Council in December 2015, outlines the key characteristics of The Chanonry, and the proposal for change of use at no.14 is, we hold, not in keeping with those characteristics. This guidance document states (p.27) that:

“The Chanonry ... is now characterised by large, mainly detached Georgian, and some 19th century, residential properties set in large gardens and bounded by impressive walls.”

Further on in this document, (p.38), the residential nature of the Chanonry is identified as one of the key features which characterise the “Old Aberdeen Heart” section of the Conservation Area, its historic heart.

The current proposal for change of use to business use clearly would not preserve the established character of The Chanonry, and so would, according to the Character Appraisal, conflict with the Council's aim to preserve and enhance the character of Conservation Areas.

(6) **Planning History**

Given that the question of precedent is highly relevant to this application, and given that the character of The Chanonry as a whole is therefore a major consideration, we submit that the Planning History not only of this property, but also of other homes in The Chanonry, is of great importance.

The last time an application was made for change of use to office or business use in The Chanonry was as far back as 1987, when there was an application similar to the one currently under consideration. That application was for **no.7, The Chanonry**.

The proposal was for change of use to allow only two ground floor rooms in this dwelling house to be used as offices for a period of 5 years only. The applicant would make the property his home, and gave an assurance that it would revert to a dwelling house only, after 5 years had elapsed.

The Director of Planning Control stressed that even though the proposal might have a limited impact on the area, **“its approval would create a precedent for applicants of a similar nature”**, and recommended that the application be refused.

At their meeting of 1st October 1987, the Planning Committee resolved to refuse that application on the grounds that the proposal, if implemented, would:

- (1) *“be detrimental to the amenity and character of the area by reason of the introduction of a commercial use into a wholly residential area.”*
- (2) *“be contrary to the Council’s Conservation Area Policy.”*
- (3) *“be prejudicial to public safety by reason of the likely increase in traffic generation in The Chanonry, which is a residential street incapable of coping with additional traffic flows.”*
- (4) *“have a deleterious effect both on the listed building in particular and on the Conservation Area in general.”*

It is clear that **it was the Council’s settled view** that such a use was **in conflict with the character of The Chanonry**. One of the many objectors to the proposal observed that:

“Previous attempts to introduce business and commercial premises into the conservation area of Old Aberdeen have been successfully resisted, because this residential area is of unique interest both to Aberdonians and to tourists.”

We submit that **the reason we still have this wonderful street of unique character** is largely due to the strength of purpose shown by the Council in 1987, when they resolved to refuse that application for change of use to office, and to preserve the character of The Chanonry as one of family homes; purely residential. This is why we still have this treasure today; why, in the words of another objector in 1987:-

“these large old houses have been spared the office development which has blighted other imposing streets in Aberdeen.”

Her letter goes on to say that:-

“a change of use to allow for office development and accommodation is not acceptable, whoever or whatever that organisation may be. To allow this ... would be to create an unjustifiable precedent.”

Finally, from yet another objector at that time, came the following:-

“The Chanonry is a residential area of exceptional character ... knit with our City’s history, a place of dignity and beauty ... Granting of permission could be the first step to destroying the unique character of a cherished part of our City’s life. Don’t allow it, I beg you all.”

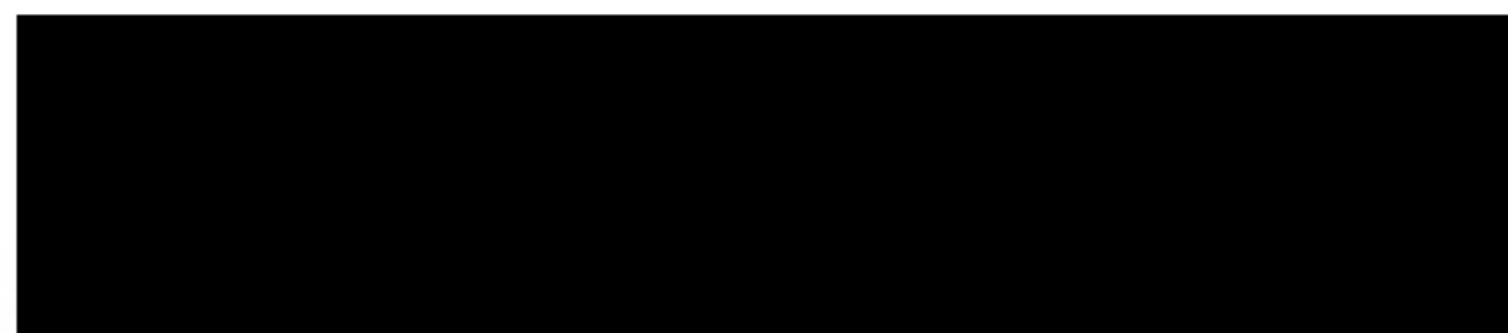
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The recognition of the risk of creating a precedent, and the consequences of such a move was clearly at the forefront of concerns not only of local residents, but also many such as the last correspondent quoted, who lived at the far end of Aberdeen, but whose love for this unique corner of Old Aberdeen was such that he was moved to make this plea.

Old Aberdeen Heritage Society holds that the situation is no different today. The Chanonry is still a cherished part of our City’s life, and the introduction of any form or extent of business use, however limited, could set a precedent which could, indeed, be the first step to destroying the character of this unique historic gem of a street.

We therefore entreat the Council once again to confirm its settled view on the importance of preserving the character of The Chanonry, and refuse the application for change of use at no.14.

Yours sincerely,



(Mrs) B. McPetrie
Planning Secretary