



The Conversion of Steadings and other Non-residential Vernacular Buildings in the Countryside

Supplementary Guidance

November 2008

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'The architecture and buildings of our towns, cities and rural settlements are a repository of our common culture and heritage, they provide continuity and a unique sense of history and tradition... The challenge for our architecture today is to fuse what is still vital in local tradition with the best in our increasingly global civilisation, to marry them in new ways that meet our modern needs and aspirations.'

**Scottish Government:
The Development of a Policy on
Architecture for Scotland**

FOREWORD

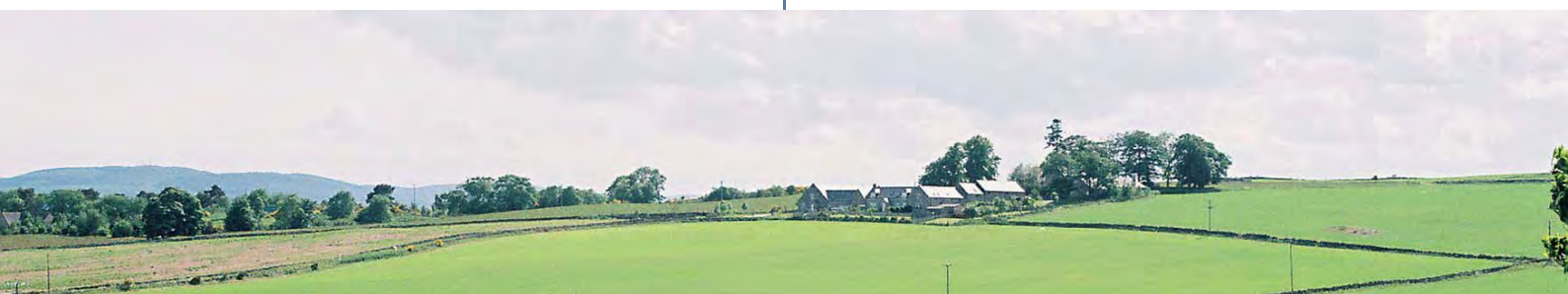
If you are considering converting a traditional agricultural steading or other non-residential vernacular building in the Aberdeen countryside to an alternative use, then this design guidance will assist you in gaining planning permission for your proposal. It outlines some basic principles that can ensure the sensitive conservation and creative conversion of redundant vernacular agricultural buildings to other uses.

In recognition of the potential harmful effect residential conversion can have on the character and appearance of these agricultural buildings or 'steadings', the practical design advice concentrates on this type of conversion.

The advice also highlights the Council's statutory requirements to protect certain species and their roosts or nests when considering proposals to change the use of traditional agricultural buildings.

Some wider aims of the guidance are to:

- maintain a sense of place and conserve and enhance the landscape setting of Aberdeen
- promote the use of traditional materials and building techniques
- stimulate debate about design
- foster greater consistency in planning decision making
- streamline the development process for all involved by ensuring developers are aware of their obligations at the earliest possible stage



INTRODUCTION

Traditional agricultural steadings, mainly dating from the 19th Century, are a major feature of the Scottish landscape, and an important part of Scotland's architectural and cultural heritage. During the 20th Century, changes in agricultural practice such as increased mechanisation, resulted in many such buildings falling redundant. Their conversion to residential and other uses offers a finite number of exceptional opportunities, not only to increase the level and variety of the housing stock of the City, but to create for each owner, a dwelling of highly individualistic character within an attractive rural setting.

This guidance is designed to give advice on how to preserve and enhance the visual amenity of the green belt, and of the countryside around the City in general, by encouraging the appropriate re-use of farm steadings. It also seeks to ensure that this is carried out in a sensitive and innovative manner that both conserves and exploits the essential character of each building.

Local and national policy acknowledges that redundant agricultural buildings have the potential to make highly attractive country residences within easy commuting distance of the City. In converting these properties for residential use, the temptation often arises to incorporate standardised domestic features, which result in very modest vernacular buildings becoming suburban in appearance. In doing so, their original character and setting can be compromised. The best conversions reinforce the original architectural qualities of a building. Sometimes, innovative and contemporary interventions can successfully contrast with, yet highlight a building's traditional qualities.



A proposal for converting a steading at Nether Contlaw Farm to residential use, which recognises the original architectural qualities of the building, with a few carefully designed but larger contemporary interventions.

GAINING PLANNING PERMISSION FOR YOUR PROJECT

If you intend to convert an agricultural building into a dwelling or other use, you will have to apply for planning permission from Aberdeen City Council (ACC) - the local planning authority in Aberdeen. As a public body and as the planning authority for Aberdeen, ACC is obliged to support biodiversity and avoid any adverse impacts on natural heritage. ACC would be failing in its statutory duties if it approved a development proposal that did not assess or address its impact on protected species.

Protection of Habitats and Species

Farm buildings, and any associated drystone dykes and surrounding trees may be home to protected species. The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc) Regulations 1994 (as amended), and the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 protect some species and their roosts and nests, even when the species themselves are not present.

For example, bats are a protected species and tend to return to the same roosts every year. Even when they are not present, their roosts are protected.

Where it is suspected that a development proposal is likely to impact upon protected species, you should contact an Environmental Planner at the Council, who will be able to advise you. Protected species surveys should be undertaken at certain times of year by a licensed surveyor, before a planning application is submitted.

The next step is to work up a more detailed design proposal, incorporating any mitigation suggested by a protected species survey. Your planning application will be assessed by ACC primarily on the basis of how it accords with policies in the statutory **Development Plan for Aberdeen**, and other material considerations – such as relevant supplementary guidance.



ACC publishes Supplementary Guidance (SG) to explain and support policies in the development plan.

Public consultation has been an essential component in the preparation of this SPG and strengthens its weight as a material consideration in the planning process.

The next two sections summarise the development plan, legislative and national planning policy context of this SPG. The final section contains the design guidance.

Before submitting your planning application, we encourage you to discuss your proposal with us. We can advise you of your project's compliance with planning policies and on detailed design matters. Please call (01224) 523470 to talk to or arrange an appointment with a planning officer.

Development Plan Context

The Development Plan for Aberdeen comprises the Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire Structure Plan and the Aberdeen Local Plan



The **Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire Structure Plan 2001-2016**, says in its Policy 28, “Development in the Green Belt”, that no development will be permitted in the Green Belt for purposes other than those essential for agriculture, forestry, recreation, mineral extraction or restoration or landscape

renewal.”



The **Aberdeen Local Plan** Policy 28 allows for the change of use of buildings in the Green Belt of an architectural interest or traditional character which contribute to the landscape setting of the city. If it has been demonstrated that the building is no longer suitable for the purpose for which it was originally designed, the

policy would support a change of use to private residential or to a use which makes a worthwhile contribution to the amenity of the Green Belt. Policy 28 also says that where extensions are proposed in conjunction with a conversion or rehabilitation scheme, these will be permitted provided that (a) the original building remains visually dominant, (b) that the extension is designed to be sympathetic to the original building in terms of massing, detailing and materials, and (c) the siting of the extension relates well to the original building.

There will be other policies in the development plan which are of relevance to individual conversion proposals and which they should comply with.

This supplementary guidance complements and should be read alongside the development plan – not in isolation.

National planning policy and legislative context

In order to prepare SG, planning authorities must have regard to guidance produced by the Scottish Government in the form of Scottish Planning Policies (SPP's) and Planning Advice Notes (PAN's). The following are most relevant to the preparation of this SG:



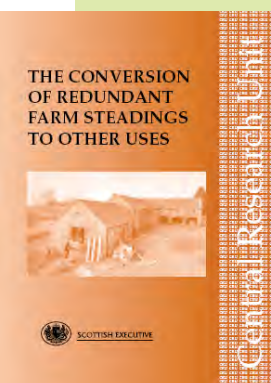
SPP3, "Planning for Homes", states that "Non-residential buildings in the countryside which are no longer required for their original purpose can offer opportunities for conversion to dwellings. Residential and business conversions are a way of retaining buildings which contribute to local character, and can result in distinctive assets

to the local environment. Proposals for the sensitive re-use, conversion or rehabilitation of buildings which can be accessed safely and serviced readily should be viewed sympathetically."



PAN72, "Housing in the Countryside", states that the conversion or rehabilitation of rural buildings to provide comfortable, modern homes, not only brings a building back to life, but it may provide opportunities to sensitively conserve our built heritage, including buildings of merit which are not listed. It states

that the sympathetic restoration of buildings that are structurally sound, largely intact, safely accessible and linked to water and other services, maintains the character and distinctiveness of places.



The Scottish Government publication, "**The Conversion of Farm Steadings to Other Uses**", provides useful and detailed complementary guidance on this subject.

Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) prohibits the intentional killing, injuring or taking, of any protected species or damage, destruction or obstruction of places used by such species for shelter or protection.

Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 extends the prohibition to cover unintentional but 'reckless' acts and places a duty on public bodies to further the conservation of biodiversity.

NPPG14, "Natural Heritage" states that "The presence of a protected species or habitat is a material consideration in the assessment of development proposals."



DESIGN GUIDANCE

Condition Reports and Survey Information

Planning permission will not be granted for the conversion of any steading that is dilapidated to the extent that it would have to be substantially demolished and rebuilt, or where rebuilding on a different footprint or in a different form is proposed.



Where there is any doubt about the structural integrity and capacity of an existing building, a structural engineer's report will be required to demonstrate that any proposal to adapt an existing building is feasible. The report will indicate those parts of the building that are structurally sound and complete, and those that will require substantial demolition and rebuilding.

Every application for planning permission must be supported by survey drawings showing the building as it exists. These will include sections showing external ground levels and existing foundation levels.

Retention of Original Building Identity

Original characteristics of a steading that is to be converted for residential or other use, should be retained, and consideration given to the reinstatement of significant or attractive features that have previously been removed. Alterations should be the minimum necessary to allow the building to function adequately in its new use, and should not disguise its original purpose. A founding principle in adapting buildings of historic character, is that within practical limits, the user should adapt the use of the building to suit its form, rather than adapt the building to suit the use, which can lead to major and harmful transformation.

Features that should not be altered are:

- Ridge heights and roof pitches
- Wallhead heights and gable profiles

Features that should be respected are:

- Scale, massing and materials
- Door, window, ventilator and other openings
- Relationship of solid to void in masonry

Developing Within Original Envelope of Building

Accommodation should largely be created within the existing envelope of the building. Alterations to the external envelope should be kept to a minimum. Except in the very rare circumstances where the steading is listed and there are internal fittings of particular historical interest, applicants will generally have unrestricted freedom for internal alterations that do not alter the structure or envelope of the building. If the internal height of the steading allows the formation of an attic floor, this will be permitted provided it does not entail any increase in height of a wallhead or ridge, or any change in the roof pitch. A steading may have been extended several times over the years, and courtyards formed within "L" or "U" shaped steadings have frequently been infilled with timber, steel-framed or concrete block-work structures as the requirement for accommodation for livestock or equipment grew. Proposals to retain such structures as part of any newly created dwelling will not normally be accepted. These additions are seldom attractive and the restoration of the original courtyard can provide an appealing and useful space within a residential environment. The removal of such later buildings is to be strongly encouraged, unless they complement the original building.

Door and Window Openings

Two of the defining characteristics of steadings are that they have few openings in external walls, and sometimes on the plane of the roof. In planning a new internal layout of a steading, particular care should be taken to maximise the re-use of existing openings, even those that have been formed at a later date in the life of the steading, in order that the formation of new openings can be kept to a minimum. This not

only helps to retain the character of the steading, but also helps to contain costs, as these can be difficult and expensive alterations to carry out. All existing openings, and proposed downtakings and slappings must, therefore, be clearly shown on drawings.

Whilst the formation of new openings may be required, these should be kept to an absolute minimum, particularly on the same length of wall or on outward facing elevations. An accumulation of domestic scale windows can detrimentally affect the appearance and character of a steading, and it may sometimes be the case that a few, carefully designed but larger contemporary interventions, will have a lesser impact. Steadings generally had few windows, unless to provide daylight to a bothy within the steading, and there are often no particularly appropriate traditional styles of domestic windows in such situations. It will generally be preferable therefore, to employ a simple style of window in steading conversions, rather than any intricate, urban style of window.



A residential steading conversion to several units using high quality materials and appropriate boundary treatment, but with an accumulation of new window openings of a domestic scale and style. These new openings conceal the original simple character of the building.

Roof Alterations

Steadings seldom have structures built onto the roof, except where a door was formed in the roof to a hayloft, or where metal skylights were installed. Dormer windows, especially those of an urban style, look out of place on a steading roof and should be avoided. Several companies produce metal rooflights to contemporary insulation standards, and these can provide a higher level of illumination with less visual intrusion and at less cost than an equivalent dormer window. New rooflights should lie flush with the roof, and there should be no semblance of regularity in their layout. Where a dormer is unavoidable, it is best built off the wallhead in the style of a hayloft door, rather than the more common type of dormer set further up the roof. Pastiche versions of traditional dormers should be avoided.



Urban style dormer windows (and bay) on a residential steading conversion. Apart from the gable end the adaptation leaves very little to express the building's original function.

Extensions

Modest extensions will be permitted to allow small steadings to satisfy present day expectations of standards of accommodation. Small extensions may also be permitted to allow more efficient use of existing space in a steading. Large extensions will not be permitted to enable a steading that could comfortably accommodate one or more dwellings, to accommodate a higher number of units. Conditions may be imposed on any permissions granted to ensure that the traditional character of the building is not prejudiced by the exercising of permitted development rights.

Extensions should be subservient in scale and massing to the original steading, and should not be so large as to give rise to confusion as to which parts of the building are original and which are recent. For most situations where the enlargement of a steading is considered acceptable, the following criteria should be observed:

- The aggregated footprint area of extensions should be less than the original building footprint
- The width and length of any extension should be no greater than those of the original building
- The ridge of any extension should be lower, and certainly no higher, than the ridge of the original part of the building, and the roof pitch should not be significantly shallower

Where it is necessary to choose between extending into a loft space or building an extension, the option of the extension may be preferable where this helps to avoid the construction of dormers, insertion of an excessive number of rooflights, or formation of additional openings in original masonry walls. Care should be taken to not harmfully affect the solid-to-void relationship of the original steading walls.

Contemporary Architectural Styles

Alterations and extensions using scrupulously accurate traditional detailing and materials are normally acceptable. However, designs which attempt to replicate the local vernacular, but employ modern building techniques and materials, should be avoided. Often, well executed crisply detailed contemporary interventions formed in good quality materials, which respect the character and scale of the original building, complement the original building to a greater degree than pastiche construction. A minimal number of significant but carefully considered interventions may have a less detrimental effect on the character of the original steading, than a series of smaller but ill-considered alterations or additions.

Materials on Extensions

Roof finishes on extensions should generally match existing finishes. Where the extension's walls are masonry it is usually acceptable for them to be harled, but granite matching coursing and masonry finish of the original building is also acceptable. Base courses, stringcourses and decorative opening surrounds do not normally feature in steadings and should normally be avoided in extensions. Over-elaborate details such as stone quoins on corners, in conjunction with a roughcast finish, should also be avoided. The use of timber linings on a timber frame is a traditional form of construction that when carefully designed can sit comfortably against granite rubble masonry found on many common forms of steading.

Ancillary Buildings

Ancillary buildings in good condition and which are of substantial construction should be repaired and re-used whenever possible, as the retention of the original setting of a building can lend a sense of legitimacy to its presence in the countryside. New ancillary buildings must respect the setting of the original building in location, scale and choice of materials.

Setting, Boundary Enclosures and Extent of Curtilage

The space around the outside of buildings can make a major contribution towards the setting and character of most agricultural buildings. Typically, surrounding spaces are free flowing, often contained by drystone walls or other traditional boundary treatments. Careful consideration should be given to arranging spaces to give the building a setting appropriate to its rural setting.

If a building to be redeveloped has its site boundaries historically defined by dry stone walls or similar features, these should be carefully respected. Should the site not have any natural boundaries, then the curtilage that is designated must be appropriate for the type and scale of the building. The curtilage should not be unusually large nor, conversely, should it be unnaturally constrained. Boundary enclosures such as “ranch fencing” are not acceptable. Due allowance must be made for the retention of existing trees, and for landscaping and other amenity space. Landscape planting should consist of local, indigenous, robust species that would typically be found around farms giving shelter. Courtyards often found within farm units should be designated as communal space, and not artificially sub-divided into the separate curtilages of each residential unit. Advice on landscape matters can be found in ACC’s landscape guidance on its website:

http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/acci/web/site/Planning/SL/pla_LandscapePlan.asp

Drainage

Planning permission will not be granted for the conversion of buildings in the countryside until it has been demonstrated that foul and surface water can be adequately disposed of on land within the applicant’s control, and in accordance with any regulations pertinent at the time. Details showing the main routes and items of external drainage should be submitted at the time of lodging the application.

Provision of Services

Potentially successful developments of redundant agricultural buildings can be spoiled by the cumulative impact of boiler flues, meter boxes and ventilation outlets. The position of all external penetrations of the building envelope should be carefully considered so as to minimise their visual impact. Meter boxes should be installed internally or ground mounted. Extracts and flues taken through the roof via discreetly designed outlets are often preferable to rows of wall mounted outlets that disfigure masonry. The potential for the development proposal to incorporate low and zero-carbon energy solutions (such as ground source heat and biomass) should be explored at an early stage.

Access and Lighting

Rural areas need design solutions and road standards which are appropriate to their character and setting. The application of urban standards and materials have resulted in development in the countryside looking too formal and over engineered.

Accesses to traditional farm buildings usually follow field boundaries, often along the lines of drystone walls. As a result, they are usually discreet, blending in naturally with the landscape. Proposals for the conversion of farm buildings should retain existing accesses.

The adoption of suburban street lighting is not only inappropriate and increases light pollution, but often the lamp design can look out of place in the rural context. Every effort must be made to adopt an approach which complies with safety standards and yet responds sensitively to the rural scene and local circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Granite steadings are a valuable resource, whilst the materials and energy used in constructing them represent a significant reserve of embodied energy and of minerals. They add visual interest to the rural landscape and their careful conversion can provide a useful and diverse addition to the City's housing stock. The Council therefore welcomes, therefore, their adaptation for residential use, provided the original character and visual interest of the steadings so converted, are retained in a manner consistent with this guidance.

CONTACT US

Please get in contact if you wish to discuss your proposal with us:

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USEFUL WEBSITES

The Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire Structure Plan
www.nest-uk.net

The Aberdeen Local Plan
www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/aberdeenlocalplan

Scottish Government
SPP3: Planning for Homes www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/07/25092557/0

PAN 72: Housing in the
Countryside [www.scotland.gov.uk/
Publications/2005/02/20637/51636](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/02/20637/51636)

The Conversion of Redundant Farm Steadings
to other uses [www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/
Doc/156688/0042110.pdf](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/156688/0042110.pdf)

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH)
www.snh.org.uk

Bats in buildings - [www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/species/
BatsBuildings.pdf](http://www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/species/BatsBuildings.pdf)

The Bat Conservation Trust
www.bats.org.uk

The Barn Owl Trust
www.barnowltrust.org.uk

The Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland
(RIAS) Directory of Architects Practices
www.rias.org.uk/directory



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