

Review of SG Bus4: Tourist facilities and accommodation

1. Introduction

- 1.1 SG Bus4: “Tourist facilities and accommodation” seeks to promote tourism related planning applications within Aberdeenshire, whilst ensuring that there is no detrimental effect on the resource it is utilising as an attraction. The purpose of this paper is to examine the content of SG Bus4: “Tourist facilities and accommodation”, whilst considering any changes in national and regional policies that may result in an amendment to this policy. This review should ensure that this policy remains a sound tool in assessing tourism related planning applications, in accordance with national and regional policy requirements.

2. Policy Approach

- 2.1 The overall aim of SG Bus4 is to promote tourism development in locations where it would not damage the primary tourism assets of the area on which it is based – for example the natural environment, landscape, built environment or cultural assets. The policy therefore ensures development proposals would not be supported if it prejudices any of these assets.
- 2.2 The policy identifies the great economic power of tourism within Aberdeenshire and the sustainable nature of the industry as long as it is not overdeveloped to an extent where it impacts on the special qualities that make the area attractive to tourists. Location, siting and design of new tourism developments must remain a priority in order for the development to be compatible with the surrounding environment.
- 2.3 Part A of SG Bus4 deals with the sustainable requirements of new tourism developments in that it requires proposals to be in close proximity to existing settlements to avoid dispersed development, or a locational requirement has been demonstrated. Due to tourist activity potentially generating large amounts of traffic, this part of the policy sets out criteria that attempts to locate tourism developments in areas which are easily accessible by public transport and other sustainable means. Otherwise the need for a development to be in a less sustainable location must be justified.
- 2.4 Part B of SG Bus4 details the policy approach towards proposals that convert existing tourist accommodation to other uses. This part of the policy has been put in place primarily to protect hotels and/or holiday lets in Aberdeenshire being converted to residential use. This policy has set out strict criteria for proposals that convert tourist accommodation to residential use not to be acceptable.
- 2.5 SG Bus4 also conveys that where retail is proposed in parallel with tourism developments, the proposal must also conform to Policy 2 Town centres and retailing.

3. Background

National context

- 3.1 Scottish Planning Policy identifies the tourism industry as being one of Scotland’s largest business sectors which is continuing to grow. SPP

encourages planning authorities to acknowledge this and support high quality tourism related development, including the provision of appropriate facilities in key locations across urban and rural Scotland.

- 3.2 Linking in with rural development, SPP urges tourism related development to be supported in small towns and rural areas in a strive towards promoting economic activity and diversification. This should only be done whilst ensuring that the distinctiveness of rural areas, the service function of small towns and the natural and cultural heritage are protected and enhanced.
- 3.3 SPP states that the historic environment is a vital part of Scotland's cultural heritage and of great importance to the growth of tourism. SPP maintains that development plans must focus on safeguarding these valuable historic assets to continue enhancing national, regional and local distinctiveness.
- 3.4 The National Planning Framework for Scotland 2 seeks to establish Scotland as the best place to do business in Europe and promotes the country as a perfect location for investment and tourism. The Scottish Government identifies tourism as one of the key industries their efforts will be focussed on.

Strategic/regional context

- 3.5 Aberdeen City and Shire Structure Plan 2009 identifies tourism as one of the key service sectors that can enable and boost economic growth. All forms of tourism, including business tourism, are promoted within this prime objective of boosting the regional economy.
- 3.6 Aberdeenshire's built, natural and cultural assets form the core of our tourism industry. Aberdeen City and Shire Structure Plan 2009 has a key objective of ensuring that new development maintains and improves these principal resources, and should not lead to the loss or damage of them.
- 3.7 The Proposed Aberdeen City and Shire Strategic Development Plan emphasises that the region must acknowledge the potential positive economic impact of the Menie Estate golf resort.

4. Drivers of Change

- 4.1 NPF2 continues to promote Scotland as an ideal location for tourism and has identified the industry as one of its priorities.
- 4.2 National and regional policy place emphasis on supporting tourism as an industry that can significantly boost the regional economy. Therefore local development plans and associated supplementary guidance should ensure that tourism developments are strongly supported, as long as they do not adversely impact on the built, natural or cultural heritage of the surrounding area. The current SG Bus4 could be deemed to be too restrictive because it requires all tourism developments to be located within a sustainable location.
- 4.3 The growth of golf courses within Aberdeenshire, particularly Trump International, may create a greater demand for high end tourist accommodation.
- 4.4 Aberdeen Airport is set to expand with a draft Master Plan having recently been published, and this should subsequently increase the tourism industry within the region.

5. Recommendations

- 5.1 Part A of the policy details how tourist facilities or accommodation will be approved, subject to their location and how sustainable that setting and the connections are. This part of the policy may be too restrictive in supporting tourism proposals in rural areas. The policy refers to a 'locational requirement to specific tourist attractions' being demonstrated. However, the coast itself or the rural landscapes do not constitute a "tourist attraction", so it is difficult to approve rural tourism proposals under this policy.
- 5.2 Protection of the tourist asset aside, the opportunity for tourism proposals to support rural development is restricted by the need for a sustainable location which is not required of other business development proposals. This is a clear anomaly and disadvantages this industry in comparison to others. Revision of the policy through removal of the section A1 locational requirement and alignment through cross reference to SG RD1 would be an appropriate response. This would result in restrictions to tourism development in the Aberdeen Housing Market area, but through application of clause A2 opportunity retained to develop specific tourist attractions
- 5.3 The 'tourist attraction' definition in the Reasoned Justification section should be modified or removed, in accordance with changes to part A.2) of this policy. The difference between a tourist attraction and tourist accommodation should also be clarified.
- 5.4 Consideration should be given to the content of criteria A.b). The cumulative impact of tourist *accommodation* could be considered as beneficial as it would provide supply, which could in turn generate demand. However the cumulative impact of tourist *facilities* could be detrimental for businesses. The policy urges that the cumulative impact should only be 'taken into account' and this is deemed a reasonable requirement. The cumulative impact of similar proposals may not necessarily undermine a tourism planning application.

6. Summary of main points

- 6.1 SG Bus4: Tourist facilities and accommodation generally forms a sound basis for assessing tourism related planning applications. This report has shown that national and regional policies seek to ensure that planning authorities are supporting urban and rural tourism as a driver for economic growth. However, SG Bus4 may be too restrictive when assessing tourism proposals in rural locations if they do not relate well to existing settlements. The current policy does not promote dispersed development and rather supports sustainable development by only supporting proposals that are within close proximity to existing settlements, or those that demonstrate a need for a peripheral location. Minor changes are suggested within the recommendations section.

References

Aberdeenshire Council (2012) Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan 2012.

Scottish Government (2009) National Planning Framework for Scotland 2.

Scottish Government (2010) Scottish Planning Policy.