

# Review of Supplementary Guidance Special Types of Rural Land 1: Development in the coastal zone

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 This paper is intended to review *SG Special types of rural land (STRL) 1: Development in the coastal zone* to assess how it accords with national policy in view of any changes, and if it continues to provide a suitable basis for guiding development within Aberdeenshire's coastal areas.

## 2. Background

### National context

- 2.1 There are a number of national policies and legislation that relate to the coastal areas and marine environment. The National Planning Framework 2 along with Scottish Planning Policy (2010) are key overarching national policies which advise how and where development should be located within coastal areas. They emphasise the local and national importance of coastal areas in terms of landscape and ecological importance, meaning they are desirable locations for economic activity such as recreation and tourism.
- 2.2 The National Planning Framework (NPF) 2 (2009) broadly outlines that *'the planning system should help to ensure that marine resources are developed sustainably, with development taking account of effects on environmental resources, the capacity of marine and coastal areas, with adverse effects minimised and mitigated'*.
- 2.3 SPP advocates that *'new land-based development in coastal areas should not normally be permitted where it will require significant new defences against coastal erosion or coastal flooding'*. It further stipulates that new development should be avoided in areas *'at risk from coastal erosion, areas where conservation or enhancement of the natural and historic environment requires development to be limited'*. In addition, isolated areas of coast *'should be protected, and there is a presumption against development in these areas'*.
- 2.4 Coastal areas which are deemed by SPP to be more suitable for development include *'existing settlements and substantial free standing industrial and energy developments, particularly where development is linked to regeneration or the re-use of brownfield land'*.
- 2.5 SPP also highlights that *'The risks associated with rising sea levels and coastal flooding should be taken into account when identifying areas that are suitable for development'* (2010). This is a particularly pertinent point which is also raised in the early draft of the National Marine Plan which states that *'Rising sea levels imply more flooding and more coastal erosion by waves for any given storm scenario. Coastal erosion and flooding can pose a threat to people and their property'* (2011).
- 2.6 A new marine planning system is being introduced in accordance with the Marine (Scotland) Act, which will apply to the marine environment and its setting. This will see the creation of a National Marine Plan of which a draft is expected to be released for consultation in June 2013. A pre-consultation draft was produced in 2011, which outlined the following key objectives:
- Protect coastal land and habitats against erosion and flooding.
  - Minimise and mitigate any landform changes that an activity or development will have on coastal processes.

- To ensure coastal activities and developments will themselves be resilient to risks of coastal change and flooding.
  - To prevent and discourage development which may affect areas at high risk and probability of coastal change unless the impacts upon it can be managed.
  - Minimise environmental impacts of coastal defence.
- 2.7 It is proposed that the new National Marine Plan will sit along side and work with existing land use plans as well as ensuring accordance with National Planning Framework 2. Whilst NPF3 is currently being produced along with a revised National Marine Plan, it is assumed that this will still be the case.

### Strategic/regional context

- 2.8 The Aberdeen City and Shire Structure Plan (2009) identifies that within Aberdeenshire a number of coastal areas lie within 'Regeneration Priority Areas'. It is therefore proposed that tourism can be further developed in some of these areas as a means of encouraging regeneration and economic prosperity. However, there is a potential policy conflict in this.
- 2.9 The structure plan also stipulates that development should not be permitted in areas where there is an unacceptable risk of coastal (or river) flooding as per the 'Indicative River and Coastal Flood Map for Scotland' or determined by a flood risk assessment.

## **3. Policy Approach**

- 3.1 The current policy permits development within the identified coastal areas subject to other policies where it is within an identified settlement boundary, requires a coastal location or is the redevelopment of an existing building or within the curtilage of an existing building for which there is no alternative.
- 3.2 Controls are in place to ensure developments in coastal locations are not at risk from coastal erosion, will not impact on water quality, or natural coastal processes or habitats. In addition, the policy concludes that development should not create or increase coastal erosion or flooding elsewhere.
- 3.3 STRL1 maps out the boundaries and extent of the coastal zone. This was informed by a previous study by outside consultants, and mainly follows road and rail routes along the coast. As part of the policy review, the appropriateness of these boundaries is examined.

## **4. Drivers of change**

- 4.1 Bad weather events have recently caused significant damage and flooding to a number of coastal areas within Aberdeenshire. More frequent and extreme weather events may mean that development proposals in coastal areas will require more rigorous assessment. However, simultaneously, their contribution to the local economy as an attractive place to live and visit must continue to be supported. In terms of policy, the flooding policy in conjunction with SG STRL1 will help ensure that developments are not being approved in vulnerable locations. SG STRL 1's reasoned justification states that '*The full range of management options should be considered over the lifetime of the development and against appropriate climate change projections*'. Whilst at this stage, the full extent of current and future climate change impacts in Aberdeenshire are not known, resilience to climate change is becoming an increasingly pertinent issue which planning policy must take into account.

- 4.2 Another issue that has emerged is the identified boundary of the coastal zone. A number of applications have been received which apply to both the rural development policy RD1 as well as STRL1, resulting in competing aims/objectives. This is in part accountable to the extent of the coastal zone boundaries. In many cases the boundary extends a significant distance beyond the sensitive coastline for which the policy was designed. For example, at Whinnyfold south of Cruden Bay, the coastal zone extends 2.5 kms inland.
- 4.3 In a number of cases, RD1 has taken precedence where proposals are not within immediate proximity of the coastline but within the coastal zone. Therefore, a revision of the coastal boundaries to allow an adequate but not excessive buffer of the sensitive coastal areas is suggested. This will give greater weight to the coastal zone policy as there will be less overlap with RD1. The extent of coastal habitats has to a large extent been determined through survey associated with the new scheme of Local Natural Heritage sites and this may represent a more accurate delimitation of "the coast" that the historic coastal zone boundary.

## **5. Recommendations**

- 5.1 On the basis of this information, it is recommended that;
- The coastal zone boundaries are reviewed and reduced to provide a boundary that is more reflective of the coast and its sensitivities and habitats. It is proposed that the new boundaries are guided by the Local Natural Heritage sites designations (which are currently under review) of which there are a significant number along the coast.
  - Following the review of the boundaries, for the RD1 policy to apply outwith coastal zone areas to stop any overlap of the policies.

## **6. Summary of main points**

- 6.1 STRL1 addresses the main principles outlined by national policy, indicating that the issues and pressures have not changed significantly. The policy continues to promote sensitive and appropriate developments in coastal areas which do not compromise the setting, character and quality of the natural environment. Whilst Aberdeenshire's coastal areas are becoming more vulnerable to the effects of climate change through severe weather events, erosion and flooding, the policy does stipulate that in all cases it must be demonstrated that developments are not exposed or will contribute to these impacts.
- 6.2 A key issue and subsequent recommendation for STRL1 is for the review and potential amendment to the coastal zone boundaries. They currently extend in many areas significantly inland (up to and over 2.5 km) meaning there is policy overlap with, most notably, RD1. By re-considering the boundaries, it would be possible to have a more robust and consistent policy that better addresses the needs of the sensitive and ecologically fragile coastal areas. In addition, to further this approach, it could be added that RD1 should not apply in the coastal zone to avoid overlap and competition between the policies.

## **References**

Aberdeenshire Council (2012) *Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan 2012*

Aberdeen City and Shire Strategic Development Plan Authority (2009) *Aberdeen City and Shire Structure Plan*

*Marine (Scotland) Act 2010*

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

Scottish Government (2010) *Scottish Planning Policy*