

Introduction

This statement forms part of the application for Planning Permission to build an Eco House and Retreat Centre on land at South Lodge, Grangemuir, Pittenweem.

Site Context

The site is currently part of South Lodge's garden land and is separated from the main site of South Lodge by an unnamed road which provides access to the Balcaskie Estate from Charles Street. The site is bounded to the East, South and West by agricultural land and to the North by the unnamed road and the remainder of the property of South Lodge.

The garden land has been part of the property for more than 20 years. Due to the separation of the site from the remainder of South Lodge's property the owner has not developed the land as part of their formal garden area and have, in the past experienced problems with fly-tipping on the site.

There are a number of trees on the site all of which are to be retained. There is a burn running along the Eastern boundary of the site which is a tributary of the Dreeel Burn.

Principle of Development

The Site is within a zone of Countryside as defined in the adopted FIFEplan 2017.

Policy 1, Part A 1 criteria b) of the adopted FIFEplan stipulates that development will be supported if it is in a location where the proposed use is supported by the Local Development Plan. As this site is in a countryside location the proposed development is required to comply with the criteria detailed in Policy 7 - Development in the Countryside and Policy 8 - Housing in the Countryside.

Policy 7's intended out come is to support "a rural environment and economy which has prosperous and sustainable communities and businesses whilst protecting and enhancing environmental quality".

This application could be supported by Criteria 7.4, 7.6 and 7.7.

Criteria 7.4 allows for development which "is for small-scale employment land adjacent to settlement boundaries, excluding green belt areas, and no alternative site is available within a settlement boundary which contributes to the Council's employment land supply requirements".

This proposal is for small scale employment and will also act as an opportunity hub

for local home-based businesses. There is no suitable land within the Pittenweem settlement boundary identified for the development of employment in the Local Development Plan.

Criteria 7.6 allows for development which "is for facilities for outdoor recreation, tourism, or other development which demonstrates a proven need for a countryside location"

The market for retreats in the countryside has grown extensively over the last decade as has the interest and participation in mental health focussed wellness activities such as Yoga. A mix of indoor and outdoor facilities are shown in the plans including a sensory garden and meditation area overlooking the neighbouring fields. A countryside location, ideally within easy access of local amenities is essential for the financial viability of this type of business as the key attraction of the activity is to 'get away', relax and learn. The site is a short distance from Charles Street but is separated from the road by trees. The building itself will isolate the retreat centre from the unnamed access road to the Balcaskie Estate which is not a main thoroughfare. As well as providing on site Yoga and Wellness sessions we propose to run guided walks through the countryside and along the coastal path including wild swimming at the nearby Pittenweem Outdoor Pool.

In all cases, the policy states that the development must:

1. be of a scale and nature compatible with surrounding uses;
2. be well-located in respect of available infrastructure and contribute to the need for any improved infrastructure; and
3. be located and designed to protect the overall landscape and environmental quality of the area

1. The proposed dwelling and retreat centre is of a scale in keeping with other buildings in the area and as an addition to the existing facilities for tourism in the area its nature is also compatible with surrounding uses. It seeks to promote the appreciation and celebration of the countryside as well as providing an opportunity for nearby tourist accommodation facilities to extend the range of opportunities available for guests.

2. The site is within a 20 minute walk from Pittenweem High Street allowing access to all of the village infrastructure and it contributes to the business and tourism infrastructure of the East Neuk.

The proposal includes facilities for guest accommodation up to a maximum of 12 participants but includes a hall which could facilitate around 25 delegates for Yoga and other retreat activities. We anticipate working in partnership with the neighbouring Madeira in Fife who have just completed work on 3 tree houses to the north of the site where guests to the retreat centre could stay while retaining the feel of being 'on-site', which is an essential element of such activities.

3. The proposal is located on a currently vacant site which has historically experienced problems with fly-tipping. The design will be sympathetic to the local

environment incorporating green roofs to the rear of the property and will be in line with the architectural style of local buildings. The use of straw as the primary construction material in combination with lime plaster finish will not only be in keeping aesthetically but also environmentally with the local area.

The site has historically always been part of the South Lodge property and is not on prime agricultural land. The site has not been zoned as agricultural land within the last 20 years.

Criteria 7.7 allows for development which "is for housing in line with Policy 8"

FIFEplan Policy 8 - Houses in the Countryside

This proposal could be supported by criteria 2: it is for a site within an established and clearly defined cluster of five houses or more.

The site is bounded to the South, East and West by agricultural land. South Lodge lies 50m to the North of the Site with The Gardner's Cottage lying 150m to the north of the site, 5 Cottages at Madeira in Fife and the House at Madeira both lying between 180m and 200m from the site. In addition to this there are three further residential tree houses at Madeira in Fife, the car park for which is directly to the north of the Western boundary of the proposed site.

The site is an end site on the cluster but is bordered by agricultural land on all other sides and so would not encourage a ribbon development.

The proposal may also be considered under criteria 6 in that it is for a small scale affordable house adjacent to a settlement boundary and is required to address a shortfall in local provision. As noted in the minutes of the North East Planning Committee 08/02/2023 there is a shortfall in the provision of affordable housing in Pittenweem. As well as the nature of the business requiring the facility for the owners to reside at the property, the effect of this shortfall in combination with the reduction in the supply of long-term rental properties in the the East Neuk in general is that it would not be feasible to live locally but within an acceptable distance from the business.

The site is within 20 minutes walking distance of the Pittenweem High Street and is within a 10 minute walk of the settlement boundary of Pittenweem. This proposal would be in line with the development of 20 minute neighbourhoods as proposed in the National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4).

NPF 4 Aims to encourage rural economic activity, innovation and diversification whilst ensuring that the distinctive character of the rural area and the service function of small towns, natural assets and cultural heritage are safeguarded and enhanced. And has stated outcomes that rural places are vibrant and sustainable and rural communities and businesses are supported servicing a balanced and sustainable rural population.

Policy 29 a) states that development proposals that contribute to the viability, sustainability and diversity of rural communities and local rural economies will be

supported, including: ix) small scale developments that support new ways of working such as remote working, home-working and community hubs.

This development will facilitate home working for us and will also provide a community hub for arts, tourism and lifestyle businesses in the East Neuk with whom we have existing relationships. We propose to work in partnership with these businesses and individuals to develop a diverse, year round programme of retreats. The retreat centre will support local crafts people, artists, writers and will help to extend the range of activities which attract tourists to spend time in the East Neuk contributing to the diversity, sustainability and resilience of the local economy and community.

The proposal is for a sustainable business which contributes to the local economy and is in line with Fife Council's recognised priorities for economic development through the support and expansion of Tourism in the East Neuk.

The retreat centre will provide opportunities to extend the tourist season and will work in partnership with other established local businesses.

Architectural Style & Construction

The proposal is for a 1.5 story building constructed out of 0.5m thick straw bales and finished to the exterior and interior with white lime plaster. The main part of the building will have a 45 degree pitched roof, in common with many local houses, which will be finished with natural slate effect tiling. The use of synthetic slate rather than real slate results in a reduced weight of the roof which means that less wood needs to be used in its construction. Many of the artificial slate products available are made from recycled material and are designed to look very similar to natural slate and so would be in keeping with other houses in the area.

The building comprises: an area for owners' accommodation with one bedroom, a dressing room, bathroom, 'snug' living room and attic storage space; the residential retreat space which includes the kitchen and dining room space, 7 bedrooms, 3 bathrooms and storage space; a 62 square meter Main Studio space. These areas are linked by an entrance hall and conservatory which provides an additional studio / dining space.

The "Snug" and the "Main Studio" areas will have green roofs pitched at a 1.3 degree angle and planted with native grasses which will contribute to the thermal mass of these two areas promoting regulation of the internal temperature of the building, enhancing the visual amenity, minimising rainwater run-off, absorbing CO2 and providing a habitat for insects.

Straw is a co-product of the food industry and is often considered as a waste product. It is grown in abundance locally and so the reduced transportation miles contributes to the low environmental impact of the building.

The combination of straw bales with lime plaster render allows the building to have a high level of airtightness while also allowing it to breathe. This contributes to maintaining good air quality within the building.

Energy Use & Sustainability

The building will be built from straw bales sealed and finished with lime plaster. A research project carried out by the University of Bath found straw-bale construction provides twice as much insulation as that required by UK building regulations. They concluded that "This technology combines the lowest carbon footprint and the best operational CO² performance of any system of construction currently available. In fact, as an agricultural co-product, straw buildings can be carbon negative as straw absorbs CO² when it grows."

The building is split into 3 separate envelopes with an adjoining access corridor. Each envelope will be constructed in order to maximise air tightness and fitted with highly thermally efficient windows and doors. Each envelope will achieve an airtightness of 5m³/h/m². The separation into separate envelopes will allow for maximum efficiency in heating and cooling the three separate areas.

Passive Solar

The building has been designed to take advantage of passive solar heating by having large south facing windows and small windows on the north facing side. The building has been designed to have a high thermal mass with the combination of straw bale construction on an insulated concrete pad. This contributes to regulation of the internal temperature of the building and maximises the benefits of passive solar design.

There is a large conservatory area on the south facing portion of the building which is outside the envelope of the three areas of the building. The insulated concrete pad extends into the conservatory allowing the transfer of passive solar heat from the conservatory to the rest of the building.

Underfloor heating piping will be installed in each of the three enveloped areas.

Passive Cooling

The building has been designed with high level remotely controlled opening windows in each of the envelopes. This will facilitate passive cooling using the stack effect.

Solar Power

The proposal includes the installation of 19 solar panels which will feed into a battery bank.

This will minimise dependence on the use of mains electricity.

Recycling

The site will include a compost area for recycling food waste and an area is marked on the plans for recycling bins.

Flooding and Drainage

There are no recorded incidents of flooding on the site and according to the SEPA Flood Maps there are no areas of the site when a risk of flooding is indicated.

Regular site visits between October and February 2024 during periods of unusually high and sustained rainfall confirmed that the site is well drained and is unlikely to flood.

While the site is serviced by mains water and electricity there is no connection to the mains sewerage. The proposal includes the installation of a domestic sewage processing plant (Tricel Novo UK 12 or similar) which will discharge into the burn. The processing plant is sited more than 20m away from the burn to minimise the risk of contamination should any flooding occur in the future.

Accessibility

The building has been designed to be accessible for wheelchair users with all internal and external doors on the ground floor having a minimum clear opening of 850mm and all access corridors having a minimum width of 1200mm. Access to the main entrance from the car parking area is by a path on level ground and it is flush to the ground floor level. All ground floor bathrooms have been designed to be accessible for wheel chair users.

All facilities required for participation at the retreat centre are available on ground level.

Two accessible car parking spaces have been allowed for.

Accessibility will be considered when landscaping the garden area, sensory garden and meditation area.

Access & Parking

Access to the site is via an unnamed road which joins the public highway at Charles Street, Pittenweem as shown on the Location Plan.

The proposal includes parking for 5 cars including 2 disabled spaces. We propose to encourage the use of public transport by providing a shuttle service to and from the bus stops in Pittenweem and the train stations in Leven and Leuchars.

Noise and Privacy

It is not anticipated that there will be noise pollution produced from the facility as this would be contrary to the concept of retreats. Privacy for South Lodge has been taken into consideration with all of the retreat facilities being on the South side of the building.

Windows and openings to the north facing side of the building have been kept to a minimum and are small in size. The windows on the north facing portion of the building have been set at a height so that they allow light in but do not facilitate a direct view of the road or South Lodge.

Landscaping and Outdoor Spaces

There will be an area of lawn to the rear of the house which will be used as an outdoor yoga space. A sensory garden area is also planned which will include native species of herbs and wildflowers. The area to the south of the lawn area will be left as is with the possible addition of raised beds for growing vegetables for use by the retreat centre.

The car parking area will be excavated and then reconstructed to the existing level with a layer of hard core aggregate and topped with compacted stone chips to assist drainage.

The boundary to the north will be planted with native beech hedges.

Visual Impact

There are no proposals to remove any of the trees on the site. The proposed boundary treatments are beech hedges to the north side of the property as shown on the plan. This is in line with the hedgerows locally.

The site is minimally visible from Charles Street as shown on the artists impression below.

Existing view of site from Charles Street.



View showing proposed development

