CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

Title: REPORT ON CALLED-IN PLANNING

APPLICATION

Prepared by: MARY GRIER, PLANNING OFFICER

(DEVELOPMENT CONTROL)

NEW ACCESS ROAD PROPOSED TO SERVE DRUM STEADING AT ELLON, NETHY BRIDGE (FULL PLANNING

PERMISSION)

REFERENCE: 05/116/CP

DEVELOPMENT PROPOSED:

APPLICANT: DORBACK ESTATE

C/O C.K.D. GALBRAITH, REAY HOUSE,

17 OLD EDINBURGH ROAD,

INVERNESS.

DATE CALLED-IN: 24TH MARCH 2005

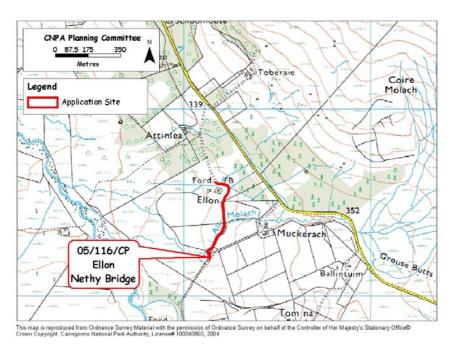


Fig. 1 - Location Plan

SITE DESCRIPTION AND PROPOSAL

- 1. Full planning is sought in this application for the construction of a new access road to serve Drum Steading on Dorback Estate. The access road is proposed to extend for approximately 495 metres across open, rough grazing ground and includes a crossing over the Allt Molach burn, which is a tributary of the Dorback burn and part of the River Spey SAC. The access road proposed is intended to form a link between existing roads / tracks serving Drum Steading to the south and a track running past the properties known as Attinlea and Ellon to the north. The main purpose of the new track is to facilitate access to Drum Steading, where work has recently been undertaken to convert the structure into a dwelling house, as well as refurbishing the existing dwelling house at that location.
- 2. Vehicular access to Drum Steading is currently taken from an existing track that leads from the public road north east of the subject site, through a working farm at Muckerach, with the track continuing on to Drum Steading. Full planning permission was granted by Highland Council under Planning Ref. No. 03/406/FULBS for the renovation of the existing house and steading to form one new dwelling house at Drum Steading, with the access to serve that development being identified as the existing track through Muckerach farm. Further details were submitted in the course of that application regarding improvements to the existing access track, and condition no. 1 of the planning permission required the track between the farmyard and the application site to be upgraded over its full length to a width of not less than 3 metres, and also required the provision of three passing places along the route.



Fig.2: Existing access track, with roofs of Muckerach farm in the background.

The background to the need for the currently proposed new access 3. road was investigated in the course of this current application, and a case has been advanced on behalf of the applicants stating that it is necessary to avoid the working farm steading at Muckerach as "it presents a potential health and safety hazard" and that "the Estate and its Tenant at Muckerach are anxious to minimise risk." pronounced risk is during winter when cattle are housed at Muckerach and when there are increased numbers of tractors and other vehicles operating around the farm steading. The case presented in favour of the proposed new access road refers to the fact that during that time of year the activities at the farmstead increase the likelihood of collisions or accidents that could be avoided by the creation of a new access. Reference is also made to the fact that the busy winter period and associated farming practices at Muckerach coincide with intended periods of peak occupancy at the converted property at Drum, "when the owners and their guests will regularly be in residence."



Fig. 3: Drum Steading

- 4. Although the drawings submitted do not show the provision of passing places on the proposed new access track, reference is made to the provision of passing places in a written submission. It is indicated that two passing places would be created on the proposed new section of access road, in conjunction with the three required passing places on the existing access road. The only detail provided in relation to surface dressing is a reference to "a similar dressed finish as per the remainder of the road." Having regard to drainage requirements, the written submission includes proposals to construct the road with a "slight camber, falling into a shallow roadside ditch linking into the existing small burns and field drainage system."
- 5. It is proposed that the road would be enclosed with a traditional style stock fence on both sides and with cattle grids where it crosses existing fence lines. In the course of assessment of the proposal, the concerns of the CNPA's Visitor Services and Recreation Group were conveyed to the representatives of the applicants, and in particular the impact of

cattle grids on the management of land in a manner that respects the needs of those exercising access rights. In response to this it has been proposed that bypass gates for livestock / pedestrians would be installed as appropriate in order to enable use of the track by those exercising access rights.

DEVELOPMENT PLAN CONTEXT

National Policy

- 6. **NPPG 17 : Transport and Planning** primarily covers general transport issues, whilst **PAN 57 : Transport and Planning** offers more specific advice that could be applied in assessing proposals for new access tracks in the countryside. Section 42 of the document notes that new roads should, where possible, follow existing gradients and work with existing landforms and landscape features, and advises in the event of planning permission being granted for a new road / access track, provision should be made for the preservation of existing landscape character and for its enhancement by new planting using native species where appropriate.
- 7. Annex 1 of PAN 57: Transport and Planning addresses Landscape Considerations and the Natural and Built Heritage. In particular, section 6 of Annex 1 states that "consideration should also be given in remote and rural areas to setting limits to access by motorised transport e.g. all terrain vehicles, and to the associated construction of hill tracks." In relation to the impact of road / track building on the natural environment, section 7 advises that any loss should be compensated for by habitat creation and management. It is requires that any maintenance, construction or restoration is carried out to the highest environmental standards.

The Highland Structure Plan 2001

8. The Highland Structure Plan 2001 in detailing policies on infrastructure does not include any specific policies relating to the development of rural access roads / tracks. The Structure Plan includes a policy on Landscape Character, Policy L4, which is of relevance in the assessment of development proposals, where it is stated that "The Council will have regard to the desirability of maintaining and enhancing present landscape character in the consideration of development proposals." In addition, Policy G2 on Design for Sustainability considers that the impacts of development should be assessed against landscape and scenery issues as well as a range of other factors.

- 9. Section 2.5.21 of the Structure Plan makes reference to Wild land¹ and advocates the Scottish and Highland countryside matching the attractiveness of walking, climbing and outdoor pursuit areas elsewhere and accordingly emphasises the "responsibility for the stewardship of the natural heritage" and in particular for those relatively limited areas where "remoteness and a sense of sanctuary are sought." The Plan details the key qualities of wild land as generally providing a sense of solitude, absence of built artefacts and structures, apparent freedom from current human activities, and to a lesser degree a seemingly high quality of naturalness.
- 10. The Cairngorms National Park Authority Draft Interim Planning Policy No.3: Vehicle Hill-Tracks was developed to deal primarily with hill-tracks. However, much of the policy can also be considered pertinent to the assessment of proposals for access tracks on lower ground, particularly in the absence of specific policies in the statutory Development Plan. It is therefore considered that the interim planning policy and the Park's Aims should be considered as "other material considerations" in the context of the assessment of the current development proposal. The draft interim policy is as follows:

Policy VHT1: Vehicle Hill-Tracks

There will be a presumption against new vehicle hill-tracks, or upgrading/extensions to existing tracks within the Park unless all of the following conditions are met, and section 7.3 is conformed with where:

- a) The proposal can be demonstrated as necessary for the efficient working of the estate/farm, and there are no existing tracks which can be utilised.
- b) There are no significant adverse environmental impacts on flora, fauna, habitats, drainage and landscapes/landforms which cannot be satisfactorily mitigated against.
- c) The track does not cross a designated site (SSSI's, Reserves, Natura sites, SACs/SPA's etc.)
- d) The track is constructed in line with section 7.3 (and Appendix b); a method statement is required for the works, landscaping and maintenance.
- e) It would not adversely affect the amenity of existing public access; new tracks should give consideration to public access in their design (e.g. via stiles, signage).
- f) As part of development proposals for new tracks, the CNPA expects to see that steps are taken to ensure that tracks which are no longer required are reinstated to an approved natural condition/reduced to footpath width.
- g) Cultural Heritage issues, e.g. relative to historic drove-roads or military roads, should be carefully considered and protected.

¹ Wild land is defined in NPPG 14 Natural Heritage as "uninhabited and often relatively inaccessible countryside where the influence of human activity on the character and quality of the environment has been minimal."

- 11. For information purposes only: The Cairngorms National Park Draft Local Plan includes a section on transport and reference is made within this to Upland Vehicle Hill Tracks. The draft policy could also be considered applicable to the provision of new access tracks on lower lying land. Policy 24 refers to a general presumption against the development of new hill tracks, or upgrading / extensions to existing tracks within the National Park. It states that new tracks will only be considered in exceptional circumstances where a number of criteria are met. Criterion include a demonstration that a proposal is vital for the efficient working of an estate / farm and that no existing tracks can be utilised and that there are no significant adverse environmental impacts which cannot be satisfactorily mitigated against.
- 12. Para. 3.11 to 3.19 of the draft Local Plan discuss the Landscape of the National Park and highlight the fact that "the diverse and spectacular landscapes of the National Park are one of the area's key assets and that the distinctive character of the Park is one of the reasons for the creation of the Park itself." Para. 3.17 notes that "it is the character of the landscape and the important natural and cultural heritage features that it contains that makes the area special and the Local Plan will seek to conserve and enhance the character of all the landscapes of the Park, whether or not the land is within a National Scenic area." Para. 3.18 refers to Wild Land in a similar vein to that detailed in the structure plan, setting forth the view that the Local Plan can assist in protecting wild land character by "preventing developments which would introduce permanent and overtly man-made development to areas with little or no current development."
- 13. **Policy 4** of the **Cairngorm National Park's draft Local Plan** details the landscape policy as follows "development that is likely to have an adverse impact on the special landscape qualities of the National Park including: landscape character; scenic qualities; natural beauty; amenity; historic landscape elements; cultural components; or wild land character of parts of the National Park, will not be permitted."

CONSULTATIONS

14. **Scottish Natural Heritage** were consulted in respect of the proposed development and have stated that they do not object to the installation of the proposed new link road. The duplication of access to the property known as Drum Steading is highlighted, as is the loss of arable grazing on the land over which it is proposed. Despite this the consultation response states that SNH do not consider that the proposal would "significantly impact on the natural heritage nor have any particular landscape impacts."

- 15. Although Scottish Natural Heritage do not object to the proposed development, a number of observations and recommendations are nonetheless made in the report. It is noted that Allt Molach, over which the link road would cross, is a tributary of the Dorback Burn, which is part of the River Spey SAC. The associated natural heritage features of the SAC include salmon, freshwater pearl mussel, sea lamprey and otter. SNH note however that neither sea lamprey or freshwater pearl mussels are known in this area. In relation to otters, it is considered likely that the Allt Molach is used as a thoroughfare, although there are no known holts or resting places in the vicinity of the proposed development. According to SNH advice it is unlikely that otters would be affected by the proposed development as long as adequate precautions are taken by contractors in the course of construction to ensure that loose items, rope, nets or plastic are not placed where they may pose a risk of entanglement to any passing otters. The consultation response from SNH also highlights the fact that in addition to otters being one of the features of interest of the River Spey SAC, it is a 'European Protected Species' and it is therefore an offence to deliberately capture, kill or disturb an otter, or damage or destroy the breeding site or resting place of an otter.
- 16. **Scottish Natural Heritage** have also advised of the necessity for strict adherence to **SEPA** guidelines in undertaking work associated with the construction of the bridge crossing of the Allt Molach.
- 17. In an initial consultation response received from **SEPA** reference was made to the lack of information on surface water drainage, and further detailed information was required in this respect, with SEPA particularly advocating the incorporation of Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS) in the design of the proposals. Further to receipt of this information, **SEPA** noted that the proposed access track would be the subject of light residential usage, and that measures to minimise pollution are proposed to be implemented, and refer for example to fencing, to prevent livestock access. In addition, the response from **SEPA** also makes reference to proposals to lay turf along the side of the road to act as a filter strip. In conclusion "**SEPA** accepts that the proposals do not present a greater risk to water quality and consider the proposals acceptable."
- 18. In order to prevent against potential water pollution, **SEPA** request that a condition be attached in the event of the granting of planning permission, requiring that a detailed site specific construction method statement be agreed with the Planning Authority, in consultation with **SEPA**, prior to the commencement of any work at the site, with the method statement addressing issues including surface water run-off, timing of works and details of landscaping works.

- 19. **Spey Fishery Board** were also consulted on the proposal and initially expressed some concerns, including the fact that the proposed access road crosses Allt Molach, which is noted for its importance as a spawning stream for salmon and trout in the River Spey. **Spey Fishery Board** required further information on the design of the actual crossing in order to assess whether or not it would create an impassable barrier to fish migration. The **Board** subsequently indicated their willingness to withdraw their 'holding objection' subject to confirmation that the bridge construction proposed is clear span and that the stream bed would remain unchanged. The agents clarified that the bridge proposed is in fact a "clear span construction, sitting on concrete abutments placed on top of either bank" and that the steam bed would not therefore be disturbed during or after construction.
- 20. The response received from the **Archaeology unit** of Highland Council noted that the proposed development affects no known archaeology, but advised that sites associated with an historic settlement are known to lie within the immediate vicinity. The route of the proposed new access road would pass close to the remains of a former lime kiln, which is a recorded historical site. The consultation response advised that the applicants attention should be drawn to this in order to ensure that the surviving remains of former structures are not impacted by any proposed development. The report also highlighted the potential possibility of discovering sub-surface archaeological remains within the proposal area and the Archaeology Unit accordingly require immediate notification in the event of the discovery of anything of possible historic or archaeological interest, of any type or period, during construction on site. Furthermore, the report also advised that Scottish Treasure Trove Law may apply to any finds made, "which must thereafter be retained and reported."
- 21. The development proposal has also been examined by the **Area Roads and Community Works** section of Highland Council, and it is recommended that permission be granted for the proposal, subject to a number of conditions. The conditions include the carrying out of a number of works remote from the proposed access road, prior to the commencement of work associated with the actual access road. The works required include the upgrading of the existing vehicular access track north of Muckerach (i.e. the track serving the properties known as Attinlea and Ellon) at its junction with the public road, with measures to be put in place to protect and maintain the public road carriageway fronting the access. Adequate visibility splays are to be achieved and maintained on each side of the site access. Requirements are also set put for the surfacing of all new or improved lengths of the proposed access track, including the provision of passing places.

- 22. The development proposal has also been examined by the **Natural Heritage** unit of the Cairngorms National Park Authority. The
 consultation response states that the proposal is not considered to
 pose a threat to biodiversity, and it is recommended that the advice of **Scottish Natural Heritage** is adhered to in respect of otters, and
 furthermore that the advice of the Spey Fisheries Board is sought in
 relation to salmon and other migratory fish.
- 23. As referred to in an earlier section of this report, the **Visitor Services** and **Recreation Group** of the CNPA in their examination of the proposal expressed concern at the potential impact of cattle grid provision on those exercising access rights in the area, in particular horses and their riders and also less able bodied people. VSRG accordingly requested that alternative access points are provided in conjunction with cattle grids, and they suggest a system of unlocked, self closing gates.

REPRESENTATIONS

24. Three letters of representation have been received, all of which are opposed to the proposed development. Cllr. David Gordon of Hinton St. George, Somerset, writes in his capacity as a part owner of the residential property known as Ellon, located adjacent to the proposed new access track. Mr. Gordon objects on four grounds. Firstly he refers to a "presumption against new tracks in the Cairngorms National Park" and states that the proposal is in contravention of this. Secondly he expresses a concern about the impact of the proposed access track on the adjacent property at Ellon, which he states his family have authentically restored as a croft house. The author considers that the presence of the access road and the traffic likely to be using it would result in a serious loss of amenity and detract from the special feature of the property at Ellon, which he considers to be a combination of its isolated position at the end of a rough track and its "lack of modern intrusions into its surroundings." A further issue raised by the author is the permission granted for Drum steading, which was "based on using the existing track." It is guestioned why this is now considered insufficient and raises concerns about the possibility of the applicants trying to secure further planning permissions through an incremental approach. The final point of the letter concerns the actual surfacing of the proposed road. It is noted that the initial submission documents do not provide any specification details, and it is stated that "any track would be an intrusion, but a tarmac-surfaced one would be an even worse imposition on this special landscape."

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Fig. 4: Existing Ellon / Attinlea track approaching 'Ellon'



Fig. 5 : Proposed route of new section of track to the side / rear of Ellon

- 25. The second letter of representation comes from Mr. Adam Gordon of Miltonburn, Aviemore (and part owner of Ellon croft). His submission makes reference to the planning permission granted for the renovation of Drum Steading, which included proposals for use of the existing access track. The author states that he "can see no good reason for the estate to put in another road when there is an existing one serving The second point raised refers to a the farm and steading." presumption against new roads and tracks in the open countryside in the Cairngorms National Park and states that the development proposal would go against that policy. Concern is also expressed that the proposed track would be clearly visible from any high ground to the south or north and would consequently "have a detrimental impact on any views from the surrounding area." Finally, in relation to Ellon croft, Mr. Gordon raises similar concerns to the previous author, referring to the main characteristic of the croft being its peace and guiet and stating that the frequent use of the a new road passing close by the croft would "have a considerable impact on the amenity and solitude" of the croft.
- 26. The third and final letter of representation comes from Mr. Thomas Gibson, with addresses at 'Attinlea', Dorback, and also in London. Mr. Gibson objects to the proposal on a number of grounds. He states that the proposed road would "take away the amenity" of his property, and he is concerned that there would be considerable traffic up and down the lane, referring to the fact that the applicants have informed him that the shooting facilities are intended to be used by themselves and also rented out. Similar to the previously detailed letters of objection, the author questions why permission is being sought for a new road when "there is a perfectly good existing access road which leads from Muckerach to Lower Drum" and he ponders whether or not the applicants require two entrances "one for themselves and one for those to whom they are renting the shooting."



Fig. 6: 'Attinlea'



Fig. 7 : Access track leading to Ellon / Attinlea at junction with public road.

APPRAISAL

- 27. There are a number of key factors to take into account in assessing this application, including whether or not the proposed development conforms to planning policy, the likely impacts of the development on the landscape of the area and the associated suitability or not of this type of development in the National Park, and also whether or not there is a justifiable need for a new access track at the proposed location.
- 28. As I have detailed in paragraphs 6 to 8 of this report, there is little direct policy or planning guidance at national, regional or local level related to specific infrastructural works of the nature proposed. However, the general thrust of existing planning policy and guidance is that such development should be limited and curtailed to areas where it would have minimal impact, through working with existing landforms and landscape features. The new access road is proposed in an area of open and exposed countryside, which could be considered relatively remote and akin to 'Wildland' as defined in NPPG 14 on Natural Heritage. I do not consider that the proposal would contribute towards maintaining or enhancing the landscape character of the area. The proposed access road would traverse approximately 495 metres across

open land, and the actual track, together with the associated fencing would have a significant visual impact, and would undoubtedly appear alien to its landscape setting. An indication of the visual effects of a development of the nature proposed can be seen in examining the existing track, which follows the route of a long established track, but has recently been upgraded to facilitate access to Drum Steading (see Figs. 2 and 3). The proposed new section of track would further exacerbate the existing visual scars on the landscape.



Fig. 8 : Existing access track leading from Muckerach farm steading to Drum Steading.



Fig. 9 : Proposed route of access track as viewed from existing track (property at Ellon located to right)

29. In considering the suitability of this type of development in the National Park, it is necessary to consider two important factors (1) the actual landscape setting - which as detailed above is a remote rural area of open and exposed countryside; and (2) the necessity for the proposed track. Paragraph 3 of this report details the case advanced in terms of need. In essence, the 'need' appears to be derived primarily from a desire rather than a necessity on the part of the owners of Drum

Steading to provide separate access to their newly refurbished property, along a route that traverses past residential properties only, rather than past a working farm. I am sensitive to the practicalities of travelling through a farmyard and the obvious concern for health and safety issues. However, one cannot overlook the fact that the access issue was explored in some detail at the time of the proposal for the renovation of Drum Steading and that the conditions of the permission (Highland Council Planning Ref. No. 03/00406/FULBS) related mainly to requirements from the Area Roads and Community Works section including upgrading of the existing access track and the achievement of the required visibility splays at the junction of the existing access lane and the public road. The history file does not indicate any reluctance on the part of the applicants, or indeed does not include any alternative access proposals, other than use of the existing track.

30. A submission from the agents relating to the need for the proposed new section of access track refers to a desire on the part of the Estate owners and the tenants at Muckerach to minimise health and safety risks that they perceive may be associated with use of the existing route through the working farm. The submission states that the "risk is at its most pronounced during winter" which "also coincides with peak occupancy at Drum, when the owners and their guests will regularly be in residence." It is my understanding that the occupation of the refurbished property at Drum Steading will not be permanently occupied, and although I do not have figures for the expected levels of traffic likely to be generated to and from the development, I feel that the proposal to create an extensive new section of track is an unwarranted solution to the perceived inconveniences of accessing Drum Steading at limited times of the year. The apparent 'need' for the new route is based on a perceived potential "likelihood of collisions or accidents that otherwise could be avoided." On the basis of the supporting information advanced I do not consider it has been demonstrated that the new section of access track is necessary for the efficient working of the estate / farm, nor has a satisfactory case been advanced to suggest that there are no existing tracks which can be utilised. Neither would the provision of an extensive section of new track negate the need for or use of the existing track between Muckerach farm and Drum Steading, and therefore I do not feel that the proposal offers any positive benefit in terms of offering potential for reinstatement of that land to its natural condition or a reduced width. Having regard to the conditions set out in **Draft Interim Planning Policy No. 3: Vehicle** Hill-Tracks (which as detailed in para. 10 includes several development principles applicable to the development of vehicle tracks across lower ground), the proposal fails to conform with the conditions, thus indicating that a presumption should be maintained against such a development.

31. The majority of the farm buildings at Muckerach are located to the south and east of the existing farmhouse and it is my contention there are far simpler solutions available to any perceived problem in traffic movements through Muckerach farm. For example, a smaller scale localised new section of access track, extending for approximately 80 metres from the existing track to the east of the farmhouse could be created to provide exclusive and direct access to the farm buildings and yard area. I am however mindful of the fact that this would still necessitate a new crossing of the Allt Molach and would also involve gradient issues, as the land rises southwards from the burn towards the farm buildings. A second possible alternative would be a new section of track (approximately 60 metres long), developed on lower ground to the west of the existing access track near Muckerach Farmhouse, taking traffic for Drum Steading away from the immediate environs of the farm complex. Either of the potential alternatives would minimise the impact of excessive and unnecessary new tracks through the open countryside whilst allowing the continued utilisation of the majority of the existing access track. This would further have the benefit of avoiding unnecessary increases in vehicular traffic past the existing properties known as Attinlea and Ellon, and would avoid the need for an uncharacteristic upgrading of the rough track leading into this area, allowing it to taper off naturally to a 'wildland' state.



Fig. 10: View of the existing track from its junction with the public road, looking towards Muckerack Farmhouse and farm buildings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE AIMS OF THE NATIONAL PARK

Conserve and Enhance the Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Area

32. The proposed development does not make any positive contribution towards the aim of the National Park to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area.

Promote Sustainable Use of Natural Resources

33. The proposed development does not promote the sustainable use of natural resources.

Promote Understanding and Enjoyment of the Area

34. The proposed new access road is not of benefit to the general public in promoting their understanding and enjoyment of the area, and could be considered to detract from the enjoyment of the area due to the significant visual impact likely to result from the imposition of this man made feature in an area of open countryside.

Promote Sustainable Economic and Social Development of the Area

35. No case has been advanced on behalf of the applicants to suggest that the provision of a new section of access track would be of benefit in promoting the sustainable economic and social development of the area.

RECOMMENDATION

That Members of the Committee support a recommendation to:

Refuse planning permission for the proposed new access road to serve Drum Steading at Ellon, Dorback, for the reason listed hereunder –

1. That the proposed development represents a man made intrusion into an area of relatively remote open countryside, where a justifiable need for the 495 metre section of access track has not been shown. The development would be detrimental to the visual amenity, quality and overall character of the local landscape, would erode the remote 'wildland' character of the area and would fail to conserve or enhance the natural or cultural heritage of the area. The development proposal would be injurious to the landscape character of the area and would detract from the enjoyment of the rural qualities of this area by the general public and is therefore contrary to the first and third aims of the National Park. The route of the proposed access track would also have the potential to be injurious to the residential amenity of properties in close proximity, and in addition would create an extremely prominent

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precedent for unsympathetic new development of this nature in the National Park.

Determination Background

The application was called in by the Planning Committee of the Cairngorms National Park Authority on 24th March 2005, following which the consultation process commenced with a variety of internal CNPA groups as well as external sources. Upon receipt of the consultation responses, a detailed letter was issued to the representatives of the applicants in May 2005, requiring further information on a number of aspects of the proposal. A written response was received from the agents on 5th September 2005 addressing some of the required points of information, and the deficiencies in the response were conveyed to a representative of the applicants in a telephone conversation in late September 2005. The final details required to complete the assessment of the proposal were submitted to the CNPA in December 2005.

Mary Grier Planning Officer, Development Control

18th January 2006

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