

8th March 2012

David Green
Chairman
CNPA

Jane Hope
Chief Executive
CNPA

Dear David and Jane,

Re: Balmenach Distillery, Cromdale: called in application.

I am writing in my capacity as the constituency MSP for Inverness and Nairn with regard to the application submitted by Inver House Distillers relating to Balmenach Distillery.

At the invitation of the regional manager Derek Sinclair and local manager I recently spent two hours inspecting the distillery and discussed the application which was originally submitted to the Highland Council and which was I believe called in on 5th August 2011 by the CNPA.

I have also spoken to a number of the residents at Balmenach both on the occasion of my most recent inspection and previously.

I am writing in support of the application and in order to submit a number of arguments in support of the application in the hope that it will be approved when it is considered shortly by the CNPA. It strikes me that the nature of the economic benefits of the proposal as well as the operational advantages are given little or no recognition or weight in the report to the committee. As a result it lacks the necessary balance which is fundamental to properly considered planning decisions. Let me expand on this.

First, the whisky industry is enjoying considerable success in Scotland at present and I understand that production at Balmenach Distillery has been increased in order to meet additional demand. The distillery is now open 24 hours in order to meet this demand. Recently additional employees were taken on at the distillery increasing the number of employees to 12 from 10 in order to deal with this additional capacity and also in order to distil the new product Caorunn Gin – a luxury branded gin which is distilled at Balmenach.

I note that in paragraph 13 of the planning officers recommendation reference is made to the Scottish Government's central purpose of increasing sustainable economic growth.

I would advise members that the whisky industry is identified by the Scottish Government as one of the key sectors where economic growth potential is considerable and which deserves special support.

The application has been submitted in order to allow the business of the distillery to be operated more efficiently, more safely and more effectively. I hope that more weight can be

attached to these factors and that members will recognise that by the removal of redundant buildings and carrying out of the proposed works, the business will be able to operate more effectively and thereby contribute to economic growth as well as sustaining additional employment in the area.

Second, I was advised of the extreme difficulties that there are for vehicular access for lorries that make delivery to the premises. There are two lorries from a local firm of hauliers that are dedicated to deliveries to and from Balmenach. At present the vehicular access involves large lorries having to reverse long distances along a fairly narrow carriageway. Given the distillery sits within a residential context, this is surely not ideal. There are, I know, a number of children who live in the area. The proposals for a new turning circle will massively improve the situation and increase the safety of the vehicular movements.

Traditional Scottish distilleries were not constructed with the needs of modern heavy goods vehicles in mind. The major improvements proposed by Inver House will allow lorries to access and egress the premises more safely and eliminate a potential source of risk - especially during the winter months when the road surface is icy. The immediate access to the distillery at the drop off point is on a fairly steep slope and the new access will enable lorries to tackle this more safely.

Third, by provision of new staff canteen premises the work force will have a significant improvement in the conditions which they currently enjoy. During winter months they must leave the distillery to access the existing canteen which is a small self-contained non-descript building. The new premises will therefore massively increase the work experience of the distillery workers and this should I suggest be welcomed.

Fourth, by removal of the malt bins and other buildings there will, as the applicants have pointed out, be a removal of one of the most major eye sores within the Cairngorm Park. I hope that members will support this – and anyone who has seen the malt bins must surely agree that this building is by any standards unattractive and obtrusive.

The applicants advise me that the roof of the maltings and malt barns fell in because of the weight of snow in winter over a year ago. Having inspected these buildings myself - all of them in the course of my inspection – it is clear that these buildings serve no purpose whatsoever, and they appear to have no merit or interest whatsoever.

There continued presence can only be a potential hazard especially for anyone seeking to enter the buildings without permission. In particular, I would respectfully suggest that they could pose a hazard to children. It is difficult to see why there would be any reason whatsoever to save any of these buildings and their demolition and removal as proposed by the applicants will significantly enhance the visual attraction of the distillery and restore much of its original character and charm.

Finally, I understand that a major issue for those advising the CNPA has been the proposed demolition of the four flats. I have carefully inspected this building externally and internally. I understand it is not listed. The building is located immediately beside and possibly in the path of the turning circle referred to above.

Moreover Inver House have carried out an exhaustive feasibility study of potential restoration and concluded in 2004 in a study which I am sure they will make available to the CNPA that it would have costed at 2004 prices around £700, 000. The applicants are in the business of distillers not holiday home landlords or affordable housing providers. There are no workers who live at Balmenach who work at the distillery. I would respectfully suggest that the applicants are not required and should not be required by the planning system to enter in to these areas of business activity. However, even if that were not the case it seems impractical to restore the flats which in any event of little architectural value or interest.

I would suggest that the applicants have considered these matters extremely carefully and come to the right conclusion and that there is no reason that this building should not be demolished.

I very much hope that all of these arguments will be taken into account by the Cairngorm Park board members.

Yours sincerely,

Fergus Ewing MSP
Inverness and Nairn