

LOCAL REVIEW STATEMENT

Reference No: 21/00018/PP

Applicant: Mr Brendan Walsh

Proposal: Erection of a steel building for the storage of airfield maintenance equipment and aircraft and formation of hardstanding area

**Site Address: Glenforsa Airfield,
Glenforsa, Isle of Mull**

Preliminaries

This Local Review Statement has been prepared in response to the refusal of Planning Permission under delegated powers of Application ref:21/00018/PP 'Erection of a steel building for the storage of airfield maintenance equipment and aircraft and formation of hardstanding area' (hereafter the Application) at Glenforsa Airfield, Glenforsa, Isle of Mull (hereafter the Application Site).

The Applicant is Mr Brendan Walsh (hereafter the Applicant) of Glenforsa Hotel who operates Glenforsa Airfield under a lease from the Estates Department of Argyll & Bute Council.

The Applicant bought Glenforsa Hotel in 2003, and has leased the Airfield since 2015. His current lease runs to 2040. The lease includes maintenance responsibilities that the Applicant must perform to keep the Airfield open, which requires him to have machinery, for which he currently has no storage space (see further below). He is also required to hold third party insurance for the Airfield at a significant cost to himself.

The Airfield is run as a separate business to the hotel under the name Glenforsa Airfield Ltd. This company runs at a loss, but the Applicant is accepting of that because he is an experienced and very enthusiastic flyer himself, and sees running the Airfield as a vocation.

He also has his own plane, which is a vintage Boeing Stearman, an 80-year-old biplane. He is unable to hangar this at the Airfield, and so keeps it at Oban Airfield during the winter, and then brings it to Glenforsa Airfield in the summer. The proposed hangar building will allow the Applicant to keep his plane at the Airfield all year long.

The Application was refused on 30th of March 2022 for a single reason, as follows:

"In terms of the adopted 'Argyll and Bute Local Development Plan' 2015 the application site is located within the 'Countryside Zone' (CZ) where Policy LDP DM 1 normally only gives encouragement to small scale developments on an appropriate infill, rounding off, redevelopment and change of use of building basis.

Within the Countryside Zone all development proposals which are not small scale infill, rounding off, or redevelopment might be supported if it is deemed that an appropriate 'exceptional case' has been made and where the proposed development can be shown to have no materially harmful landscape impact in accordance with an Area Capacity Evaluation (ACE). The 'exceptional case' required to justify carrying out of an ACE is in all circumstances, either; the demonstration of a locational and/or operational need tied to a precise location which is agreed with and acceptable to the planning authority, or; demonstration of an overriding economic or community benefit which outweighs other policies of the Local Development Plan and is agreed with and acceptable to the planning authority.

In the case of the current application, the site for the development does not represent infill, rounding-off or redevelopment.

In this case, no sufficient claim of an exceptional case has been presented by the applicant. Upon request for additional supporting information the applicant has provided justification on landscape terms only. The details submitted are not considered sufficiently substantive so as to underpin the special circumstances of the proposal without which the development would be considered contrary to the provisions of the LDP.

As the current application is not accompanied by the requisite supportive evidence to underpin the claim of an exceptional case, the proposal is considered to be contrary to the provisions of SG LDP DM 1 of the adopted 'Argyll and Bute Local Development Plan' 2015."

It will be obvious straightaway that much of this Statement is addressing the 'exceptional case' that the Applicant considers exists, and justifies Planning Permission being granted. The Applicant accepts that he should have submitted this at the time the Application was being considered. However, due to the case officer changing three times over the course of the year that the Application took to process, and crosswires in what was required, he did not provide the justification that he knew to exist based upon the community and economic importance of the Airfield, and why the hangar building is required to support its ongoing functioning and success. This is expanded upon below.

A site visit and hearing have also been requested, as each will allow councillors to understand why the building is required, and will allow them to question the Applicant on what it is for, and why it is required for the ongoing and future success of the Airfield.

This Statement will start with describing the proposal; then moves on to an introduction to Glenforsa Airfield; it will then explain the need for the proposed building, and why this represents the 'exceptional case' required by policy; and will then continue in the same order as the Report of Handling to address the other matters raised therein.

Proposal

The proposed building is a conventional hangar type building that will be eighteen metres long by twelve metres wide. It will be four metres to the eaves and 5.6 metres to the ridge.

The front of the building will have sliding doors that, like hangars across the world, can be pulled back beyond the main footprint of the building, so that the widest possible opening is available to allow a plane in and out.

The building will be finished in profile sheeting, the colour of which can be green, or whatever colour councillors would prefer to see.

Appearance-wise, with the doors closed, the building will appear like any number of agricultural sheds that can be found elsewhere on the island.

In use terms, the Applicant has applied for a Class 6 storage and distribution building. However, there is no intention of it being used otherwise than in combination with the Airfield. Therefore, if councillors wish, they can specify that by planning condition.

An area of hardstanding will be provided around the hangar building, with vehicular access via the existing grass trackway that connects this part of the Airfield with the gated vehicular access to the Airfield itself, and its parking area, which are situated to the immediate north west of the hotel. The parking area is accessed from the A849 by a part public and part private road that also serves the hotel, a farmyard, and about fourteen private houses, one of which is the Applicant's own home.

Glenforsa Airfield

The airfield was built in 1965 by the army (Royal Engineers) to support the cottage hospital in Salen. It is still used by the air ambulance helicopter to this day, and is thus an important, potentially lifesaving, facility for the island. There were twenty-four medical related flights from the 1st of October 2021 to date this year that used the Airfield, and the Applicant ensures that the helicopter landing pad is always available throughout the year.

It has also, in the past, been used for commercial flights to the island, but these ceased in 1980 when the Loganair flight that served the island, and connected it to Oban and Glasgow, ended.

Today, most of the use of the landing strip is by small aircraft using it to land on Mull between the 1st of May and 1st of October when it is available to general flyers. This includes day trippers and people visiting the island for a longer stay, and some islanders who own planes. It is mainly used by planes, but also sometimes by microlights and helicopters.

It also receives charter flights from Glasgow and further afield for groups coming to the island to play golf, or to stay elsewhere on the island and explore its attractions. The most regular charter flights are by Hebridean Air who fly in with charter flights a few times a year, with up to eight passengers.

Argyll Aeroclub members can also make use of the Airfield, with members flying over from Oban and elsewhere.

It also exists as an attraction for flyers from far and wide who wish to fly to and visit the island, or simply land on one of the few unspoilt grass strips still available in Scotland, and cross this one off their (flying-related) bucket lists.

When the Applicant first bought Glenforsa Hotel in 2003, the Airfield had 192 movements per year (a movement is one flight in and the same plane leaving). In 2021, there were 881

movements, and more are expected this year (2022) as Covid restrictions have now been lifted.

As can be seen, therefore, the Airfield is an important facility for the island offering a lifeline medical facility, and a way for people to visit Mull other than by ferry, whilst it also exists as a tourist attraction in its own right.



It is difficult to say exactly in monetary terms what economic benefit the Airfield brings to the island. The landing fees that are charged are small, but it is clear from reviews online, what the Applicant hears about, and other anecdotal evidence, that people flying into the Airfield are spending money in the wider island economy, as well as the Applicant's hotel. This reaches its maximum around the annual Mull Air Rally in May, which has attracted over 150 aircraft, and famous faces, to the island in past years. The event this year is set to take place on the 28th and 29th of May. There are also other events in August and September.



The photograph above is from the 2021 Mull Air Rally event.



The Applicant runs the Airfield very much as a labour of love. Although landing fees are charged, as mentioned already, these do not cover the cost of maintaining the Airfield, which is, instead, left to the Applicant to do himself. Although the strip is grass, and the wider area is grazed by livestock, or left for silage, there is still a lot of work required to mow the strip and keep it in decent shape and available. This is a never-ending process and requires the Applicant to have machinery both large (a tractor) and small to do the tasks necessary. The Airfield currently has nowhere to store this equipment, which was the reason for this Application in the first place, with the building being used to house existing and new equipment and keep it out of the worst of the weather. The need for the building was so obvious to the Applicant, and he thought to the case officer, that he did not think he would need to explicitly explain this. However, in hindsight he wishes he had, as that may have allowed the Application to have been approved. He now hopes councillors will grant him Planning Permission instead.

Apart from the Applicant's own plane, the building will offer storage for at least the following: a tractor and grass mower, a telehandler, two other smaller mowers, a roller, a harrow, and a mini digger. If someone else's plane gets stuck at the Airfield, which can happen in severe weather, it will also offer temporary storage space for that as well.

As for the location chosen for the building, then the Applicant has carefully chosen it to be away from the operational part of the Airfield, in an area that seems less useful for farming, but in a location that is still accessible by vehicles. It has also been sited away from the Glenforsa Hotel, and the houses that border the Airfield, to avoid noise intrusion, and in a location that is visually discreet against a backdrop of mature conifer trees (see images below).

All the above represents the Applicant's 'exceptional case.'



Consultations

These are noted. In particular, the Applicant accepts what the Council's Estates Department have said, and he is happy to work with them to facilitate the agreement of the agricultural tenant, which is anyway a civil and not planning matter. The Applicant is of the view that there is a good prospect of the tenant agreeing to the building, particularly given its location, and so councillors can be comforted that, if they grant Planning Permission, it can (and will) be implemented.

Representations

The responses of the case officer to the various points raised by objectors are noted and agreed.

Policy and Guidance

The list of policies and guidance in the report of handling is agreed with.

Assessment

The case officer's assessment of the proposal starts and ends with the fact that the Applicant did not submit an 'exceptional case.' That has been accepted above, and the reasons for that explained.

However, it is hoped that, having now read the case presented above, councillors will agree that there is a rationale for why the Airfield needs a hangar building, and why it should be located as indicated. There is thus an 'exceptional case.'

That just leaves the question of the Area Capacity Evaluation (ACE) to be considered, which is explained in detail in Supplementary Guidance. An ACE is described as a *"tool to assess planning applications in the relevant development control zones, in order to establish the capacity of the wider countryside containing the application site to successfully absorb that particular development."* In effect, it is a version of a landscape appraisal where you understand the landscape into which the development is to be located, its ability to absorb development, and consider any visual impacts that the development may have.

To start with, it should be noted that there are no national, regional, or local landscape designations that would be impacted upon by this proposal. The Sound of Mull is a Special

Area of Conservation, but the Application Site is over 160 metres from the sea, and as far away from it as you can get.

The SNH 'Landscape assessment of Argyll and the Firth of Clyde' (1996), which is mentioned in the guidance as a starting point for an ACE, places the Airfield in the 'Coastal Plan' landscape character area. The key characteristics of this area are noted as follows:

Key Characteristics



- **Completely flat, linear coastal plain, backed by a coastal road.**
- **Straight, angular field patterns and lanes.**
- **Gradual transition from agricultural fields to marsh, mud flats and beach.**
- **Open, exposed character.**
- **Post and wire fencing encloses fields.**
- **Predominantly pasture, but some arable fields.**
- **Remnant clumpy gorse hedgerows and stunted, wind-blown trees.**
- **Isolated farmsteads and some development along coastal road.**

Courtesy of SNH 'Landscape assessment of Argyll and the Firth of Clyde' (1996)

In terms of the Specific Landscape Guidelines for the area, then the following list applies, and none of these will be compromised in any way by this development taking place.

Specific Landscape Guidelines

- Beaches, marshes and mudflats should be conserved to retain the ecological balance of these important coastal habitats which support a diverse range of flora and fauna.
- Identify and conserve the traditional setting of isolated farmsteads with characteristic stands of trees and high stone walls.
- Stone walls should be conserved as distinctive landscape features and broken walls restored using local materials and techniques.
- Sprawling linear development along the coastal road should be avoided.
- Built development and caravan parks should be carefully sited, taking account of long views from the coastal road as well as views from adjacent elevated land. Development should always be associated with low, scrubby planting, stands of native trees and stone walls to integrate it with the surrounding landscape. The aim should be partial screening by layers of vegetation, with a relatively wild, natural character; full screening would be difficult and inappropriate. Attention should be given to the massing and silhouette of any new buildings.
- Development of caravan parks should be restricted in particularly open, visually sensitive parts of the *coastal plain*; areas overlooked from adjacent elevated land, such as the raised beach cliffs on the west coast of Kintyre, are also particularly sensitive and development here could not be screened.
- Any large swathes of planting should have ragged, rather open edges and a wild, natural character.
- Conifer plantations should be limited to relatively small blocks which reflect the shelter belts characteristic of the open, windswept landscape.

Courtesy of SNH 'Landscape assessment of Argyll and the Firth of Clyde' (1996)

In landscape terms, the major feature of this area is the Airfield, with the area being flat and grassed to allow planes to land. It is thus a part designed landscape rather than being a wholly natural one. On one side, the Sound of Mull borders the Airfield, and on the other it is bounded by mature woodland. It is, therefore, a landscape that can cope with some built form being added, particularly a building like this that you would expect to anyway see on an Airfield, or, indeed, on a farm. The case officer seems to agree with that view in that, in replying to one of the representations, she comments that "*such a proposal would not be an uncommon addition to this location.*" Hopefully, councillors will concur, and obviously the opportunity is anywhere there for them to visit the Application Site to confirm the acceptability of the siting for themselves.

Furthermore, if there is any lingering concern that the landscape cannot absorb this one building, then the Applicant would be happy to accept a planning condition requiring him to put in some landscaping. The more that things like this are required, however, the more negotiation there will need to be with the tenant, but the Applicant would rather have a consent albeit with a landscaping condition attached than no consent at all.

The other issue that is considered in an ACE is visual impact. In that regard as well, the case officer has helpfully concluded that there will be no visual impact on Salen due to the distance (1500 metres) and that there are no core paths in the immediate vicinity that will be impacted upon. The only views of the building will be localised and from within the Airfield itself. It will be visible from there to locals, but will be the type of building that one would expect to find in such a location. In most cases, it would be there for agricultural purposes, although, in this case, it is there for a specific purpose related to the Airfield.

Conclusion

For the above reasons, it is considered that a robust case has been made that an 'exceptional case' exists. There is a locational and operational need for the building, which is tied to a precise location, i.e. the Airfield. There is also an overriding community (medical-related) and economic benefit. Furthermore, the building itself would anyway pass the ACE test, and will have limited landscape and visual impact. Planning Permission should, therefore, be granted as the Application accords with all development plan policies and related guidance.