

NEW HOUSING PROPOSED IN NORTH EAST TOWN



Around 25 new affordable are to be built in Stonehaven as part of a larger development from **Churchill Homes (Aberdeen) Ltd.**

After over two years of planning, Churchill has made an outline planning application for the construction of 109 new homes at Carron Den in Stonehaven. Having appointed architects, **Cadell²**, the scheme, currently before the planning department, has addressed all the issues tackled by the **Aberdeenshire Design Forum**, and includes living spaces and streetscapes a kin to the original Stonehaven old town, all be it, with a more contemporary twist.

The scheme is based on the idea of 'home zones' linked together by way of careful design, removing the focus on the car and instead, integrating the community safely and subtly. Having been part of the Forum, Churchill Homes' involvement was to provide input from their experience of providing high quality, low density family homes in the area. During the process however, it became immediately apparent that there is a real desire to raise the quality of design and living spaces throughout the housing market in general.

As part of the development, at least 25% of the houses will be identified as affordable homes, being no different in specification or character from the remaining homes. It is important to Churchill Homes and the scheme, that integration is at the forefront and not isolation, as happens invariably. The scheme will consist of 2, 3 and 4 bedroom homes all with private garden spaces. Private parking will be provided to all properties in the form of integral garages and small courtyards, which will informally link the various street grids together.

Plans for the new Stonehaven homes

BOGUS-SELF EMPLOYMENT COSTING CONSTRUCTION BILLIONS

Giving evidence to the **Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform** select committee, **Alan Ritchie, general secretary of UCATT**, has revealed the huge amount of money being lost to the Exchequer through bogus-self employment.

He also warned that if mistakes already made at the Olympics were not corrected, then it could create "an industrial relations disaster" in the future. The select committee is midway through a major investigation into the construction industry.

Mr Ritchie revealed that UCATT now estimates that almost 50% of the construction industry, around one million workers, were working bogus self-employed. He said that he believed that bogus self-employment was now costing the Exchequer £5bn every year, the equivalent of 20 brand new hospitals. Bogus self-employment occurs when a worker who has all the characteristics of an employee is classified as self-employed for tax purposes. The vast majority of bogus self-employed workers operate under the **Construction Industry Tax Scheme**. Workers are taxed at source (20%) like a normal employee, pay lower national insurance contributions and are entitled to make an annual tax return.

As the workers are classed as self-employed, employers do not pay any national insurance contributions and the worker pays a lower rate, than a PAYE employer. It is estimated that bogus self-employment costs the Treasury £2.3bn in lost NI contributions alone. The remainder of the £5bn is lost through the ability of CIS members being able to make an annual tax return. The cost of travel, tools tax and other expenses are all offset against tax. Many CIS members can also claim a weekly rate for their spouses or partners, for assistance with taking calls and bookkeeping. When questioned about the Olympics Mr Ritchie emphasised UCATT's commitment for the project and gave the Olympic Delivery Authority 6 out of 10 for the negotiations he had been involved in at this stage.

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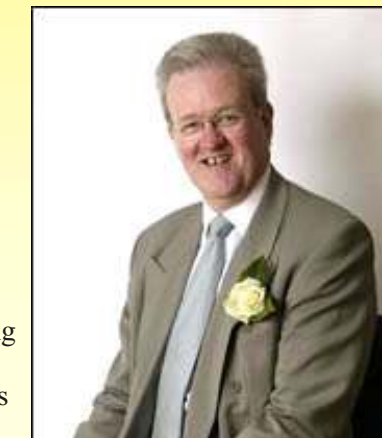


February 2008

GOVERNMENT URGES COUNCILS TO RELEASE MORE LAND FOR HOUSING

Councils are being encouraged to identify and release more land for housing under a new planning policy released by the **Scottish Government** for consultation. The draft **Scottish Planning Policy 3: Planning for Housing (SPP3)** will facilitate new land supply for housing development and ensure best use is made of existing housing land allocations. The draft policy encourages councils to work together to better assess and identify housing requirements across market areas. Using a variety of information sources, including need and demand, identified housing requirements will be embedded in long term development plans.

Planning Minister, Stewart Stevenson said: "We must improve the supply of homes to buy, to rent and for low cost home ownership, especially in areas facing housing pressures." While demand for new housing has risen, there has been no corresponding increase in building. If Scotland is to benefit from more sustainable economic growth, we must build more homes to higher standards. "Development plans must be central to ensuring the right kinds of houses are in the right places. The new policy requires councils to take a strategic look at need and supply. Where there are particular pressures on supply, the policy allows quicker release of appropriate land and more effective use of existing land allocated to housing - this will be central to providing more houses to meet affordable housing need and market demand."



Communities Minister, Stewart Maxwell, said: "It's clear that the current arrangements are simply not delivering enough new homes. This draft planning policy further demonstrates our determination to put in place concrete measures to address the real problems."

Homes for Scotland Planning Manager, Blair Melville, a member of the steering group set up by the Scottish Government to develop the Policy, said: "Despite rising demand for new homes there has been no corresponding increase in building. This has largely been due to the lack of land being made available for housing and inefficiencies in the planning system." "We therefore welcome the thinking behind the new policy that seeks to align itself with the objectives of the new Planning Act by providing clear advice to local authorities to ensure significantly greater allocation of land for housing."

SCOTLAND PRICES DEFY NATIONAL DROP

Scottish houses prices have continued to rise, despite a UK wide fall, according to the **Communities and Local Government's House Price Index - November 2007**

The mix-adjusted average house price in the UK in November 2007 stood at £218,330, down from £220,195 in October 2007. However, Scotland saw an increase in house price inflation in November 2007 from 13.9% in October to 14% in November. The mix-adjusted average house price in November for Scotland was £164,719. The average price paid by first time buyers across the whole of the UK was £165,230 in November, while the average price paid by former owner occupiers was £244,380. The UK house price inflation rate fell from 11.3% in October 2007 to 9.5% in November 2007. Between October and November there was a fall of 0.8% in the prices index of properties bought compared with a rise of 0.8% over the same period last year resulting in a decrease in the inflation rate.

This fall in prices can be attributed to decreases in average prices for detached houses (2.4%), bungalows (0.9%), flats (0.6%) and semi-detached houses (0.3%). It is partly offset by a small rise in the price of terraced houses (less than 0.1%).

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England, Wales and Northern Ireland, though, saw decreases. In England, inflation fell from 10.7% to 9.1%; in Wales from 9.7% to 5.9% and in Northern Ireland from 32.5% to 17.6%. House price inflation fell in six of the English regions and rose in three regions. The highest inflation rate was in London (14.1%) followed by the South East (10.7%), and the East (9.4%). Inflation rates were lower in the North East (7.6%), South West (7.2%) and the East Midlands (6.6%). The lowest inflation rates were in the North West (5.8%), Yorkshire and the Humber (5.7%) and the West Midlands (4.3%). The UK house price inflation rate for first time buyers fell from 10.9% in October to 9.4% in November. There was a fall of 0.9% in the prices index between October and November in the properties bought by first time buyers compared with a rise of 0.5% over the same period last year.

WHY ARCHITECTS SHOULD HAVE DESIGNS ON TIMBER FRAME

Mike Cruickshank, Sales Director at Scotframe Timber Engineering discusses timber frames



Timber frame housing in Dundee

Every so often, it becomes clear that a technology's time has come. The doubts are overcome, the arguments are won and the benefits become obvious and undeniable. At this point, the technology becomes an industry standard.

This is very much the stage timber frame construction is at. Despite rearward actions by proponents of traditional brick and block construction methods, timber frame now ticks the boxes in so many areas - from sustainability and carbon footprint to labour costs - that the real surprise is that anyone still builds by other means.

Why should developers and the industry persist in building on sites which are wholly at the mercy of the weather and indifferently-skilled labour, when the opportunity exists to fabricate off-site in the controlled environment of a modern, high-tech factory?

But as timber-frame becomes increasingly dominant, is a different mindset now required from architects? After all, timber frame construction not only maximizes flexibility and ease of construction but takes full advantage of potential standardization to reduce costs. Architects have not exactly been encouraged by developers to introduce bold innovations in commercial house construction of late, but the combination of a new political will to increase house building and the limitless possibilities of timber frame should put them back into the driving seat when it comes to influencing the built environment.

Computer-based design in an architect's office can integrate seamlessly with the engineering and manufacturing systems and highly automated plant in a modern timber frame factory. The architect can engage in online discussions with the manufacturer as the project progresses and design out potential problems before the job reaches the site. Getting the manufacturer involved in the design process at an early stage makes sense at many levels, not least on costs. But the architect can contribute substantially to cost savings and efficiency by accepting minor adjustments which need not compromise architectural integrity.

The most fundamental area in which cost-effective considerations should be taken into account is the floor plan. Ideally, to reduce labour and wastage from cutting standard size plasterboard and flooring sheets - and to suit standard stud and truss centres - buildings should be designed using either a 90mm or a 140mm stud depth on a 600mm "grid", measured from the inside face of timber frame to inside face of timber frame on the external walls. Ceiling heights should be designed to standard plasterboard dimensions. Although non-standard panel heights can be priced to the nearest standard height up, there will still be wastage and on-site labour costs for cutting.

In the design phase of the ground floor, it is vital to consider the spans of the upper floor joists. If joist spans are designed near to their limit, it increases deflection whilst avoiding excessive spans solves a number of traditional problems, including ensuring that load-bearing partitions are positioned correctly. Designers, in a dialogue with manufacturers, can also benefit by standardizing external door lintel heights and window dimensions. For instance, a lintel height of 2.1m from finished floor level will accommodate most external door sets and increase choice. Non-standard internal doors should be avoided. Bespoke windows are attractive from a design point of view, but are expensive and can lead to delivery delay. It may be possible to achieve an architecturally similar effect by combining the widths of standard modules.

Using the "grid" plan referred to above will also reduce the number of trusses needed for "room in the roof" designs using dormer windows, Velux windows and stairs. Stairs themselves can be finalized at the design stage to make them fully compliant with new building control requirements.

The variety of standard skirtings and facings and the materials from which they are made - is now so extensive that there is no real need for specifying non-standard items. Once again, all they will do is increase costs and delivery times.

The technological advantages of timber frame construction are an opportunity for architects to make an impact on the urban environment as never before. If designers work in tandem with reputable manufacturers, the benefits can be reaped not only in cost and time, but in the quality of people's lives.

HSE SAFETY ALERT ON QUICK HITCHES

HSE is issuing a safety alert to users of excavators fitted with quick hitch devices.

There have been a number of serious incidents in the construction industry, including four fatalities since December 2006. This alert outlines the precautions which should be taken when relying on these devices.

HSE inspectors will be encouraged to take robust and appropriate enforcement action where quick hitches are found to be in use without adequate precautions.

The four fatal incidents in the last 12 months involved semi-automatic quick hitches, but there have been other incidents involving both manual and automatic types in the past. There are many different types of quick hitch but the common theme through all of these fatal incidents was a missing retaining pin or bar.

The pin holds the attachment in place against the quick hitch and insures against accidental release. A quick hitch may still operate for some time without the retaining pin in place and then suddenly, without warning will swing open or fall completely off. If this happens when lifting over / close to a person then the result is likely to be fatal.

The precautions to be taken should be identified by a comprehensive risk assessment and should include excavator operators should be adequately trained on the use of quick hitches in general; excavator operators should be competent to use the specific hitch on the machine they use; and the manufacturer-specified retaining pin must be available on the machine.

Also, operators should only use pins which have been designed for this specific use; there should be a system for checking that the pin is in place on the hitch before starting the work and every time a different attachment is fitted; and operators should be instructed not to use the machine unless they are satisfied that the quick hitch is secured in place. If the operator cannot see from the cab of the vehicle due to poor weather then s/he must visually check from the ground. Those in control of sites should undertake random checks to ensure the precautions are being implemented.

Site Waste Management

Site Waste Management Plans (SWMPs) are a hot topic at the moment with legislation enforcing their use expected from spring 2008. SWMPs are a planning tool designed to reduce not only the amount of waste produced on construction sites but also reduce the volume of this material currently sent to landfill. But why are they being introduced, do they have any value or are they just another bureaucratic burden to deal with?

"Every year the construction industry creates 72 million tonnes of waste; this is harmful to the environment and costs the industry money. The introduction of SWMPs is likely to change the way waste is handled in the future and should be viewed as a very positive step.

"SWMPs need not be a complex document. They identify who will be responsible for resource management, what types and quantities of waste are likely to be produced by a project, how these waste materials will be managed in terms of re-use, recycling or recovery, which contractors will be appointed to handle the wastemanagement process and how the waste will be recorded and measured.

"These details will help ensure legal obligations are met and hopefully incidents of waste crime will decrease, waste arisings will be reduced, more materials will be recycled, reused or used as energy sources, and less waste will be landfilled if the plans are put into place. In addition, and perhaps more importantly for the survival of smaller companies, when resources are measured they can be managed more efficiently saving projects time and money.

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"SWMPs are likely to be compulsory for all construction projects costing over £250,000, with more detail required for projects costing over £500,000. Any company that fails to keep, produce or attempts to forge a SWMP may face strong penalties and even a criminal conviction. Planning now will therefore help you to be ahead of the game.

"A waste management strategy will not only ensure that you meet the new legal requirements before the legislation is introduced, but it also demonstrates best practice, putting you on the front foot with your clients. There is a strong corporate and financial business case for early compliance to the legislation that will ultimately cut costs from the bottom line and provide a forward thinking, competitive edge."

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