



From mountain to sea

Empty Homes/ Conversion of empty buildings to create housing



Summary

This leaflet outlines the most common matters for consideration when planning the conversion of a non-residential property to create housing. This could, for example, include void space over a shop, an industrial building or a barn conversion. It may be that the use for which the property was built is no longer viable but it may have the potential for a change of use to housing. It may also apply to major alterations of an empty residential property.

Properties suitable for conversion

In principle, many structures could be converted into other uses including residential. However, there are specific matters, including financial viability that should be considered before committing to a project.

Property Condition

A structural or condition survey will help you make an informed decision as to the suitability of the building for conversion. From a full building conversion or a space over a shop, understanding the property condition and the constraints will save you time and money, and may prevent you taking on a project that is simply beyond your resources to deliver. Chartered Surveyors or Architects are suitably qualified professionals who could assist with this work. To find a surveyor go to the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors website [RICS Find a Surveyor \(ricsfirms.com\)](https://www.rics.org/uk/for-the-public/find-a-surveyor/). To find an architect go to the Royal Institute of British Architects [Royal Institute of British Architects \(architecture.com\)](https://www.architecture.com/) or Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland - [Find an Architect \(rias.org.uk\)](https://www.rias.org.uk/).

A full Structural Survey will consider many issues including:

- The site of the building – its boundaries, extent and any environmental concerns.
- Access – access to the premises, car parking, disabled access, shared access etc.
- The description and condition of the building including its state and inherent defects. Examples are the state of repair of its roof, walls, windows, foundations, floors; whether or not it has woodworm, dry rot, or wet rot.
- Services – the utilities including connection to electricity, water and drainage and gas.

The survey may act as a guide to the appropriateness of the building for the purpose you plan for it. Converting a building to housing is a complex area requiring a detailed knowledge of national building regulations as they apply to specific uses. It will include aspects of Health & Safety law, security, floor loadings, energy supplies and fire prevention.

Planning considerations

Aberdeenshire Council have Planning policies contained within both the [Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan 2023 - Aberdeenshire Council](#) and [National Planning Framework 4 \(NPF 4\)](#) that apply to building use. There are a number of factors which will affect how a proposal is considered such as location, land use allocation, flood risk, Listed Buildings status, Conservation areas, National Park status, other natural heritage designations etc. and more localised site-specific matters e.g. amenity/ privacy considerations and provision of garden space and parking.

Properties all have a “Use Class” category and conversion from one use to another may not always be acceptable in planning terms. Amongst others, some of the more common reasons for this are:

- Protected retail uses in a town centre
- Land safeguarded for Industrial/storage use
- Flood risk
- Design changes
- Lack of private amenity space, access or parking provision

You should always check with the Council’s Planning Service for advice on the relevant planning policies for the site or development. Aberdeenshire Council have an online pre-application enquiry form, and you are advised to use pre-application services in the first instance to seek views that the principle of residential development is acceptable for the building or site you are interested in and to determine what requirements there are for making a planning application [Planning pre-application advice - Aberdeenshire Council](#)

Building Standards

There are numerous considerations when applying for Building Warrants from the Building Standards Service and your agent should be able to prepare appropriate plans for the project. The most common matters are:

- Soundproofing/acoustics
- Fire separation
- Insulation

There will be specific issues for your building which your agent should advise you on, such as drainage layouts, utility connections etc. These matters can be costly to address, so it is important to have full details on these areas. Further information on Building Standards is available at [Building standards - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

Of course, you should always achieve the highest quality of build possible, and to create housing that people will want to occupy. The Building Standards Service will advise you of technical standards required in the build. These can include room sizes, construction details and insulation measures etc. Guidance on Domestic Building Standards is available online at [Building regulations - Building standards \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

If you are converting the building for affordable housing the Housing Service can advise on any further requirements. They can be contacted at:
affordablehousingmail@aberdeenshire.gov.uk

Environmental Health

Connection to a water supply is another consideration for owners and you are advised to contact your local Environmental Health team at the earliest possible time to discuss this.

If the property is on a private water supply, as part of the planning process, you will be required to test the water supply for water and quantity to ensure that it is wholesome and suitable for human consumption. Chemical and bacteriological samples will be taken, as well as a risk assessment undertaken on the source of the supply to identify risks of contamination. The results of the water analysis will determine if any filtration systems are required to ensure that the water meets the standards for drinking water. The 'quantity' test must be undertaken by an independent contractor to determine if there is sufficient supply capacity to support the dwelling. Further information can be obtained by emailing wateradmin@aberdeenshire.gov.uk

If your property utilises a private drainage system – i.e. septic tank, you should ensure that it is located at least 50m from a private water supply. In addition, the septic tank or sewage treatment plant should be registered with SEPA - [Small sewage discharges | Scottish Environment Protection Agency \(SEPA\)](#) It remains the owners responsibility to ensure that the system is maintained and does not cause a statutory nuisance to neighbouring residents.

If the property has been subjected to a 'Closing' or 'Demolition order the Environmental Health Service will require information to determine that the renovated property meets the tolerable standard and therefore is suitable for habitation. Please email environmental@aberdeenshire.gov.uk if an existing Closing or Demolition Order is on the property and you wish to have the order revoked. Please note, the Environmental Health Service do not issue orders for council tax exemption purposes.

Listed building

If the building you are considering converting is a Listed Building, there are additional considerations for you. Proposals that affect the internal and external fabric of the building will need to be considered. There is information about categories of listing, applying for Listed Building Consent as well as information about funding and Grants on the Historic Environment Scotland website at [Advice and Support | Historic Environment Scotland | History](#) and Aberdeenshire Council [Listed buildings - Aberdeenshire Council](#)

Conservation area

If the building is situated in a Conservation Area, then there may be restrictions over the design of any proposal including the type of materials you can use at the property. The Council's Planning Service will be able to advise you if the property lies in a Conservation Area, or if there are any other restrictions in place.

[Conservation areas - Aberdeenshire Council](#)

To find a conservation specialist to help with your project -
[Quick links advice | The Institute of Historic Building Conservation \(ihbc.org.uk\)](#)
[Conservation Register \(architecture.com\)](#)

Linking to wider council or development plans

The building you are considering converting could be situated closely or within a wider Masterplan site. Contact the Council's Economic Development Department [Contact Economic Development - Aberdeenshire Council](#) and Planning Service [Planning applications - Aberdeenshire Council](#) to see if there are other, wider reaching plans for the area. It could impact significantly on your ideas for the building, and there may be other funding streams available to you that you were not aware of.

Cost of conversion

The cost of conversion will vary greatly from site to site. It will depend on whether you are managing the project yourself, or appointing a project manager to organise the works. You will have the following costs regardless of who manages the work

- Structural survey
- Scaled plans for Building Standards and Planning applications
- Discharge of conditions attached to planning consent
- Planning and Building Warrant application fees
- Professional reports, which may include contamination, flood risk, Design and Access statement
- Disposal of contaminated/unsuitable materials such as asbestos

If appointing a Project Manager the fee may typically be around 10 – 20% of the cost of the project, but they could identify savings on materials, labour costs etc. which may demonstrate greater value for money.

The financial viability of converting a property could be measured not only by the projected value of the building upon completion of the project, but also the potential rental income from the development.

Protecting natural heritage and wildlife

Development is required to ensure that there will be no unacceptable effects on natural heritage nor on any sites that are designated for its biodiversity, species, habitat, or geodiversity importance. Any natural heritage matters would be picked up in pre application advice from the Planning service [Planning pre-application advice - Aberdeenshire Council](#)

One of the main issues with empty homes can involve bats. It is a criminal offence to kill, injure, capture or disturb bats, including obstructing access to roosts. Obtain professional information from Aberdeenshire Council's Planning Service regarding dealing with wildlife. More information is available online at: [Standing advice for planning consultations - Bats | NatureScot](#)

Legal matters

You are advised to check the Title Deeds of a property. In some cases, particularly in rural areas where land has previously been sold off from a main land holding, there may be restrictions on additional residential development. These would normally appear as a Burden (sometimes called a covenant) on the property Deeds.

A Burden, imposes an obligation or restriction on one parcel of land for the benefit of the owners of another parcel of land. They are usually put there by previous owners, or the vendors and they are binding on any owners of that land and/or any future owners.

Details of any burdens will be contained within the information held by the Registers of Scotland. The website for RoS is [Registers of Scotland \(ros.gov.uk\)](http://Registers of Scotland (ros.gov.uk))

Some burdens may be very old and the purposes for which they were originally imposed may have long since ceased to be apparent or even reasonable. Alternatively, some may be fresh and imposed by the immediate vendors of the plot.

In all cases, no matter how old they are, burdens or covenants cannot be removed or disregarded unless they are extinguished by agreement, which usually involves some form of payment or an application to the Lands Tribunal. **You should consult with your solicitor to see if your plans for development or conversion are permissible in terms of the title deeds of the property.**

Materials

In order to keep refurbishment costs lower, or to source original materials in keeping with the building you could consider purchasing through Reclamation companies. Below are some of the companies operating in Scotland, although an internet search may find more, and these are not an endorsement from Aberdeenshire Council:

[CMD Stone | Drumoak | Aberdeenshire](#)

[Salvage | Strichen Antiques | Aberdeenshire & UK](#)

[Glasgow Architectural Salvage](#)

[Glasgow Salvage | Architectural Salvage & Reclamation](#)

[3BC Reclamation - Building Materials Supplier | Falkirk \(ueniweb.com\)](#)

[Hargreaves Reclaimed Flooring | Solid Wood Floors | UK Shipping |](#)

[About Us | Brick and Stone \(Scotland\) Ltd. \(brickandstonescotland.com\)](#)

Other sources of information

There is a vast amount of information available online and in publications about converting properties:

Information about Insulation and Energy Efficiency Options are available via the Energy Saving Trust Scotland.

[Energy Saving Trust](#)

If the property is in a rural area, contact the Rural Housing Service for advice and guidance.

[Rural Housing Scotland – National Voice | Local Homes](#)

Advice on development on contaminated land:

[Contaminated land | Scottish Environment Protection Agency \(SEPA\)](#)

Health and Safety Executive Info on disposal of Asbestos:

[Asbestos Essentials em9.pdf \(hse.gov.uk\)](#)

Information about VAT discounts and exemptions on conversions is available on the HMRC website:

[VAT for builders: Houses and flats - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

Information on how to repair and adapt traditionally constructed buildings including retrofit. [Publications | Leading Public Body for Scotland's Historic Environment](#)

A number of Builders Merchants have also offered discounts to people who engage with the Empty Homes officer within the council. Contact Aberdeenshire Council's Empty Homes Service who can arrange for you to access these.

✉ **Contact Aberdeenshire Council if you have an empty home and would like further advice:** emptyhomes@aberdeenshire.gov.uk

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