
Donegal County Council



County Donegal Development Plan 2012-2018



Appendix B Building a House in Rural Donegal. A Location Siting Design Guide

June 2012



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Donegal landscape is a finite resource and one which warrants careful and considered management. To maintain the beauty of the county, we are charged with managing the impact new development has on the landscape.

The information in this guide provides assistance to those involved in the planning and development process of designing a house in the countryside, the;

- Applicants/Agents:
To help them develop proposals specific to the character of Donegal.
- Planning Authority:
To consider the likely visual impact of the scheme on the landscape and the quality of design when dealing with applications.

The guide advocates an integrated approach to the design of a dwelling in the countryside considering the three key elements of **Location, Siting and Design**.

In summary a house in the countryside should;

- Integrate satisfactorily within the landscape.
- Reflect its location and contribute satisfactorily to the character of the area, expressing local influences and materials appropriate to the rural area.
- Be well designed informed primarily by site specifics.

People have lived off the land in Donegal for generations, where buildings respect and respond to the land which they inhabit. This relationship can be further sustained through informed and sensitive siting and design.

While this information will help applicants with the design aspects of the process of obtaining planning permission, the main documents of the plan contain the policies which address the principle of building a house in various parts of the countryside.

Notwithstanding these principles, proposals which fail to demonstrate an understanding of the site specifics and subsequently fail to integrate new buildings with the surrounding countryside will not be permitted.

- The Design Brief.
- Pre-planning Consultation.
- Other:
 - Building Energy Rating.
 - Effluent Disposal.
 - Roads and Access.
 - Adaptability.
 - Renewable Resources.

This guide derives from the County Donegal Development Plan Core Document RH-P-1 Part 1 where it states:

'Proposals for individual dwellings shall be subject to the application of Best Practice in relation to the siting, location and design of rural housing as set out in Appendix B and shall comply with Policy RH-P-2.'

General Guidance for Applicants

When designing a new building in any environment a series of steps are to be considered. The key principles of site selection, house design, architectural detailing and material specification are considered so as to achieve an informed, site-specific design solution. In doing so a number of factors require careful consideration:

- The Design Brief
- Pre-planning Consultation
- Other:
 - Building Energy Rating
 - Effluent Disposal
 - Roads and Access
 - Adaptability
 - Renewable Resources

The Design Brief

When thinking about building a new house in the rural area, in the first instance, look at your site, make a list of what you want from a house in the countryside, meet with and discuss your needs with your designer. Your designer should begin by analysing these requirements, considering your site first and foremost, the relevant policy context, your spatial requirements and your budget to ensure your needs are properly realised, efficiently and economically. These factors are then translated into a design tailored to your site, your spatial requirements, in line with current legislation and the policy framework.

Information and particulars in relation to making an application to the local planning office are available in your local Public Service Centre, in County House Lifford or online at www.donegalcoco.ie.

All applicants are encouraged to engage suitably qualified professional designers. The implementation of good design principles need not incur additional cost, instead informing the energy performance and life time functioning of the building. This in turn may influence



the capital value of the building, while increasing the quality of life enjoyed from the building by its recipients.

Pre-planning Consultation

Organise a pre-planning meeting with the Planning office to discuss the proposals. Donegal County Council encourage communication with the Planning office at the outset and will provide pre-planning advice in relation to an application, addressing any concerns arising and discussing possible alternatives as necessary.

Provide site maps, site photographs and preliminary sketch designs, preferably in advance, to aid discussion with the Planning office so as to ensure informed feedback is available to progress an application further.

Building Regulation and the Energy Performance of Buildings

You should also be aware of the National Building Regulations, which cover various aspects of construction. This legislation is independent of the planning code and you are legally obliged to comply with these building regulations to ensure your building is constructed to a quality standard. In this regard one of the most important aspects of the National Building Regulations legislation to be considered is the potential to be explored in terms of energy efficiency and sustainability. This will inform the siting and design of your building, providing for a warm comfortable home, potentially reduce your fuel bills, and adding value to your investment.

The EU Directive on the Energy Performance of Buildings is aimed at improving the energy performance of residential and non-residential buildings, and also outlines the requirement to provide at the point of sale or rental of a building or on completion of a new building, an energy rating of your building in the form of a Building Energy Rating (BER) certificate. This Directive was adopted into Irish law as regulation in 2006. This rating is informed by the energy used in the construction phase of the building as well as through the life time of the building. Elements of the rating are influenced principally by topography and orientation through solar gain, shelter from prevailing winds, wind energy etc; and encourage the siting of dwellings to gain the maximum benefit from the environment in which they are situated.

Effluent Disposal

Applicants should demonstrate that the method of disposing of wastewater from the proposed dwelling is fully sustainable, checking the availability of connections to water and sewage facilities, in compliance with the requirements of Donegal County Council and in

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accordance with the Environmental Protection Agency guidelines. You should also be aware since the introduction of the 2006 Planning and Development Regulations, all planning applications, where it is proposed to dispose of effluent, not to a public mains system, must be accompanied by a site suitability assessment. This assessment must be carried out by an approved assessor details of which are as outlined on the Donegal County Council website www.donegalcoco.ie

Roads and Access

The location of the access from your site onto a public road should primarily consider road safety and be sited so as to maximise road visibility. Technical standards are as set out in Chapter 10 of the Core Document, the elements of which are to be considered and implemented accordingly.

Lifetime Adaptability/Extensions

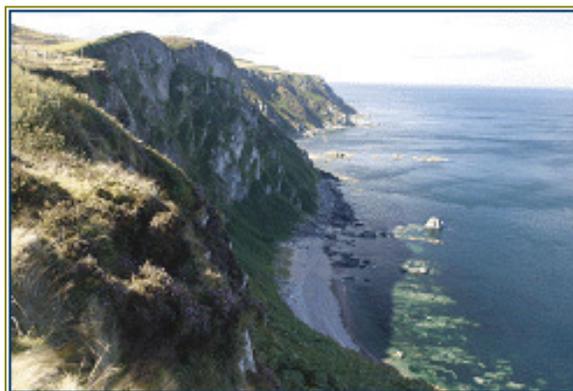
Buildings should be designed with flexibility and adaptability in mind, providing access to the older, the very young and people with disabilities. It is useful to consider the possible changing needs of the recipient in planning for a toilet and bedroom downstairs if needed in the future.

Renewable Resources

The use of renewable energy sources such as solar panels, domestic wind turbines, geothermal heating systems, rainwater recycling systems etc are encouraged in principle on existing or new dwellings.

Embodied Co2

The choice of building materials is important in terms of sustainable development. Currently, in Ireland the amount of CO2 emissions attributable to the manufacture of building materials are approximately 3-4 million tonnes per annum. This CO2 is termed 'embodied CO2' as it is the CO2 embodied in the construction materials. The use of green construction materials such as low carbon cements, insulation with lower embodied CO2, timber from sustainable sources or easily recycled material should be considered as part of any construction project. Taking steps to reduce embodied CO2 will contribute to the overall reduction of CO2, reducing dependency on fossil fuels, while encouraging and supporting the growth of the green economy.



2.0 LOCATION

The characteristics of the local area within which your dwelling sits, primarily land fall and vegetation cover, will inform the siting of your building within the rural environment and requires careful and considered analysis.

Throughout Donegal the characteristics of the landform vary and can do so quite dramatically over a short distance. The landscape of the county, its topography, terrain, vegetation cover, exposure, field and settlement pattern, determines and/or informs how successful any new building sits within the landscape.

The capacity of the rural landscape to absorb buildings varies depending on the outcome of much of the above, but generally contoured landscapes provide more opportunity for the integration of a new building in the countryside. That is not to say a new dwelling may not be successfully integrated into a low-lying terrain. The underlying factor in the success or otherwise of a new dwelling fitting into the countryside is a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the site specifics and its capacity to integrate satisfactorily a new dwelling within its environs.

In the first instance a knowledge and understanding of the different landscape types and building reference in Donegal informs the opportunities available at a given site.

Distinctive Landscape Types:

Coastal; to include cliffs, offshore islands and dunes.

(Also refer to the Policy NH- P-6 of the CDP 2012-2018)

The Donegal coastline is typically a rugged indented coastline, with small bays and inlets, exposed rocky outcrops and long beaches sheltered by sandy dunes. Steep indented sea-cliffs complement coastal lowlands which are fringed by sandy bays and offshore islands, and make for some of the most dramatic coastline in the country. Many of the Offshore Islands are rugged, isolated and treeless, exposed to all the elements, including high winds and salt seas.

New development along the coastline and on the islands, should complement the visual amenity of the coastline and demonstrate a positive addition to the area. The scale mass



and form of any new building requires particular and sensitive consideration in such locations.

Mountains

(Also refer to the Policy NH- P-10 and NH-P-12 of the CDP 2012-2018)

Much of Donegal is characterised by rugged uplands. These generally unpopulated upland areas are in places protected by EU and Irish conservation designations. They are home to a wide diversity of wildlife and are popular visitor attractions.

The very nature of the mountainous landscape, the exposed terrain of the mountain range and frequent lack of vegetation, provides for a high level of visibility and consequently presents difficulties for the introduction of a new building in the landscape with limited opportunity for integration.

The success of any proposal will depend on a thorough understanding of the site, providing for a sensitive integration of a new building within the landscape. Building on the crest or shoulder of a slope is to be avoided. Alternatively naturally occurring tucks and hollows should be considered to provide shelter and privacy and assist in setting a building satisfactorily into the landscape. Significant excavation to create a level platform is not acceptable in this landscape.

Drumlin

Throughout a swath of Donegal, about 10-12 thousand years ago, the ice drifted and formed a mass of undulating, localised small hills, gravel soils, dry slopes with wet and damp areas collecting between hills and to the bottom of slopes called drumlins. Tree growth is often found at the base of these drumlins which are characterised by small enclosed field boundaries. The stone walls which outline these field boundaries are frequently prevalent due to the abundance of fieldstone. Given the abundance of stone walling, the use of stone sourced from the local area can be of particular importance in these areas in assisting a new buildings' integration within the landscape while complimenting the existing character of the area. Naturally occurring landforms, hills, trees and stone walls should be utilised to provide shelter and integration for a new building in the countryside.

Bogland

The bogs of Donegal provide a backdrop of colour and texture, with magnificent long views, interspersed with copses of vegetation. Many blanket bogs in Donegal are now protected as Natural Heritage Areas and SACs, active blanket bog is a Priority Habitat under the EU Habitats Directive. Due to the wet and porous condition of the ground, open bog-land is not



usually nor readily conducive to construction, it can also be hugely problematic in terms of achieving satisfactory disposal of effluent. As such this landscape provides limited opportunity for new development, where an opportunity does exist, the scale and form of the building and the specification of finishes are particularly important.

Providing a solution which complements the surrounding colour palette, ensuring any new development integrates in harmony with the immediate environment requires informed and sensitive consideration.

Arable

These areas of green fields are characterised by long stretching views and rich low-lying land. These large scale flat or gently sloping fertile plains are furnished with clusters of mature deciduous trees, a profusion of hedgerow and general lush vegetation cover and are typically sub-divided into large intensively worked farms. Larger houses on large plots traditionally serviced this fertile land and while careful consideration is to be given to the impact any development has on the long views of the area, there may be the provision, with careful and appropriate siting, and utilising existing tree clusters, to integrate a larger building footprint within this landscape. Notwithstanding the above particular care should be taken in these areas to minimise potential negative impact on the visual amenity of the area in providing individual houses which are incongruous to their setting and as a result unnecessarily dominant in their environment. The natural clustering of trees is to be maximised as a natural backdrop for a new house in the countryside, providing shelter and privacy. Moreover an existing grouping of farm buildings can be a natural starting point when analysing the location of a new dwelling, providing for a continued evolution of an already existing building cluster.

Building Reference:

Donegal's Rural Houses

The architectural heritage of Donegal has evolved, in the main, from the earlier linear form and detailing of the cottage to the later much larger grand proportions of the estate house, both of which were often serviced by a range of out-buildings of varying quality and quantity. Variations of this vernacular, from the inland east to the coastal west, both refer to classical proportion and reflect in their detailing the influences of a given time, from the famine to





the Plantation to the present day.

From this there are a number of existing rural building types which contribute to Donegal's rich landscape and heritage;

- Estate Houses and service buildings.
- Classical Farmhouses and their outbuildings.
- Cottages and their outbuildings.
- Well designed contemporary dwellings.

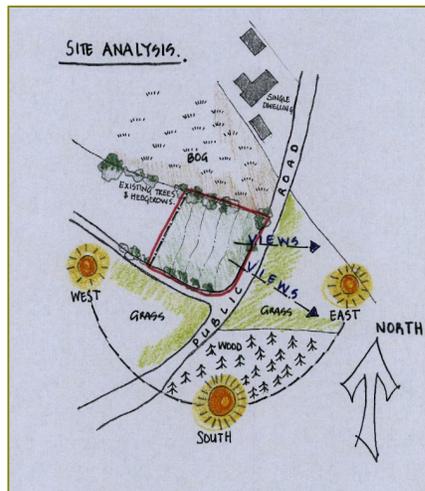
Many of these buildings manifest the same principles in their built form;

- Of classical reference.
- A simplicity of form.
- Are site specific
- From a local palette of materials.

It is from this reference, which we begin, expressing our local identity within a rural context.

Key Principles:

- Consider the specific natural characteristics of the local area identifying eg the location and type of tree cover, land type etc. This information will in part inform the siting and plan form of the new building.
- Consider the detailing and plan form of the surrounding built environment, noting the difference in traditional detailing through out the county. This variation within the county should be considered in the building design.
- Identify and utilise a location's specific natural features to inform the integration of a new building sensitively and harmoniously within its host setting.
- New buildings should harmonise with rather than dominate the visual character of an area.
- Protect and conserve views adjoining public roads, coastlines and river valleys throughout the county where these views are of high amenity value.
- Consider relevant landscape and building designations which may impact upon potential development.



3.0 SITING

The capacity of the countryside to accept new development varies according to the local character of the area, therefore to design with the landscape goes some way to ensure the positioning of buildings are unobtrusive and visually appealing in their setting.

When considering the potential of a site for a dwelling in the countryside, become familiar with the site, read the landscape, and think about the siting of the new dwelling. In doing so the specifics of the site are analysed which consider a number of issues, this site analysis in turn informs the plan form/layout of the dwelling on the site and includes:

- Topography.
- Orientation.
- Boundary Treatments/Entrance and Access.
- Gardens
- Cultural Influence.

It is recognised that building a house, for many, is the single largest investment they are likely to make and therefore maximising a sites potential is essential in creating an energy efficient home, a quality living environment and a positive addition to the landscape. Notwithstanding the above the siting of a building in the countryside is considered one of the most important aspects of the planning process.

Site Analysis

A site analysis identifies significant features or qualities of a site and involves, visiting the site, walking the site, referencing photographs, archives, sketches, mapping etc. This investigation brings a greater sensitivity to and understanding of the opportunities of the site which in turn informs the design process and planning evaluation.

As a starting point, it may be useful to photograph the local area within which the site sits. Photographs taken from key vantage points may inform the visual impact of proposed development on the site, considering in particular the long views towards the site. This information may be included within a planning application and referred to as supporting documentation informing the decision making process.



Each of the key considerations of topography, orientation, boundary treatment/entrance and access, gardens and other cultural influences are now discussed in more detail, the findings of which inform the siting and layout of any proposed building on the site.

A holistic approach is to be adopted in the design process displaying sensitivity towards the rural environment and natural energy conservation, acknowledging and respecting the rural nature of the surrounding landscape and specifics of the site.

Topography

Donegal is a rich and diverse scenic landscape, and includes rolling fertile plains and valleys, magnificent upland and mountain, spectacular rugged coastline and a profusion of inland waterways and loughs, all of which inform the topography of the county. Consider:

- Where possible position buildings to run along the contours of the site. In exceptional circumstances, where it is necessary to run across the contours introduce stepped gables and rooflines, as necessary provide a detailed contour survey which will inform the design process.
- Avoid the unnecessary excavation of the site to create a building platform incongruous within its natural setting.
- Site your buildings to blend sympathetically with the landscape, integrating rather than dominating the host environment.
- Construction of houses on elevated or exposed sites which will be obtrusive and which will detract from the visual character of the rural area will not be permitted.
- The building should be sited so as not to break the skyline or waterline.

Orientation

The orientation of a house should recognise prevailing winds, prospects and the path of the sun. Orientation was a critical factor in the traditional siting of houses and it should remain so, to conserve energy and potentially reduce home heating bills. Rural dwellings typically demonstrate a strong ratio of solid to void whereby walling is the dominant element, this is a particularly important consideration on the north elevation where windows may be typically smaller to minimise heat loss with typically larger expanses of glass on the south side, usually with a vertical emphasis to maximise light and solar gain.



- Site your building to capitalize on passive solar gain and shelter from the prevailing wind.
- Design your building to provide for maximum sunlight, creating spaces for entertaining and safe play.
- Entrances and doorways should be located and designed to provide shelter from the prevailing wind. Where possible utilise existing trees to provide a shelter belt from the wind and rain.
- Consider presenting the gable to the exposed windward situation, well sheltered areas enable planting to succeed and contribute further to the visual integration of buildings in the countryside.
- Consider the location of internal rooms to maximise the path of the sun; morning sun into your kitchen, setting sun furnishing the living room, and thus informing the building foot print.
- Orientation of the house shall be determined by factors such as sun, wind and land form, not the alignment of the nearest road.
- A narrow plan footprint allows for dual aspect and can benefit from 100% solar gain and day-lighting.

Boundary Treatment/Entrance and Access

The field pattern, road network, neighbouring buildings, boundary walls gates and gardens, hedgerows and trees, inform the landscape and can provide a backdrop within which a new building may sit in the countryside considering;

Boundary Treatment:

- Boundary condition, to include details of gates, pillars and boundary wall finishes, hedges and vegetation are to be detailed so as to enhance the existing field boundary and complement rather than dominate the house within.
- Boundary walls are to respect traditional road boundaries, while providing privacy and security for their recipients. Where possible re-use any existing stone on the site supplemented with local stone, and re-build walls typical of the area, in coursing, jointing, height and detail.
- Existing dry stone walls are to be retained where possible where they provide a positive contribution to the surrounding area. Where removal of a dry stone wall is necessary so as to conform with visibility standards, or for the purposes of road widening, a new dry stone wall shall be provided to the satisfaction of the council.



- Specifics of boundary condition to include gates, pillars and walls are to complement the immediate area and not appear overly dominant to neighbouring buildings or along the road side.

Access and Entrance:

- The details and requirements of the access servicing a new dwelling are to be considered in line with Technical Standards Chapter 10.
- Access to the site should consider the quality, crown spread and the location of any existing indigenous trees, mature specimen trees and established hedgerows on site. Where possible these elements are to be retained.
- Access should be taken from existing lanes where possible.
- Entrances and driveways should be located to, where possible, follow existing contour lines, crossing them harmoniously thus integrating the dwelling with its entrance and site.
- All applications for planning permission for a house in the countryside should include detailed drawings and specifications for entrance and boundary wall treatments.

Gardens:

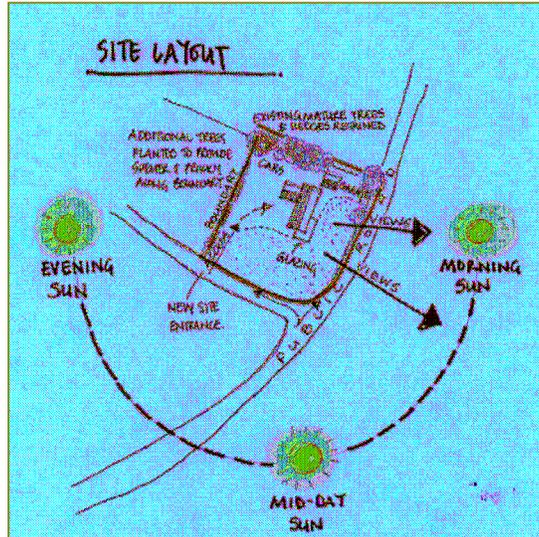
Gardens, trees and hedgerows provide an easy backdrop to the built environment. They greatly enhance the visual amenity and the wild life value of the countryside, and create an easy transition from the natural to a more cultivated, designed landscape.

- Any proposed landscaping schedule should consider the provision of shelter, privacy and existing field boundaries.
- Landscaping proposals must be submitted with all planning applications for development to include for native species seen locally in the area, appropriate to site conditions paying particular attention to the boundary treatment.
- Where possible retain mature and native deciduous trees, established hedgerows and old stone walls. Native deciduous trees add to the amenity value of the immediate area, while providing a natural setting and backdrop for a new dwelling in the countryside.
- Native trees and shrubs include; alder, ash, birch, blackthorn, gorse, hawthorn, hazel, oak, rowan, willow.



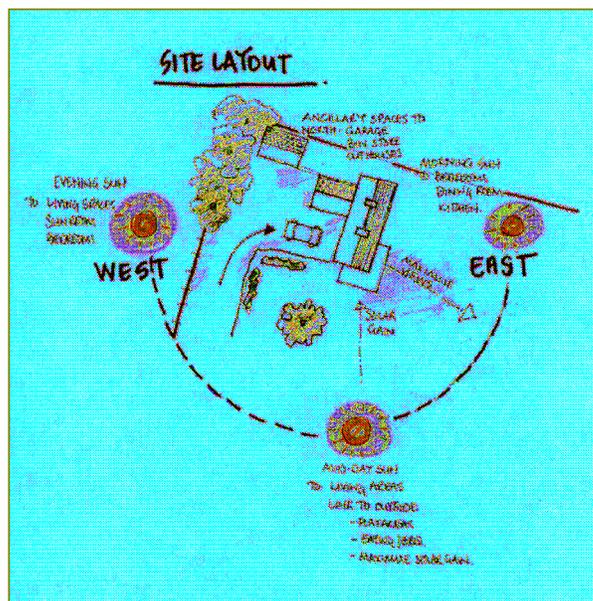
Cultural Influence:

The character of an area, as well as its natural environment, is defined by its built environment. The grouping of buildings and the nature of the spaces between them include settlement patterns, existing wall steads, vernacular and associated outbuildings, buildings of particular importance such as those recorded as protected structures, designated as monuments or areas of archaeological importance. Refer to Chapter 6 Section 6.3 with regard to potential issues arising in terms of any new development impacting upon the buildings or areas as previously referred to.

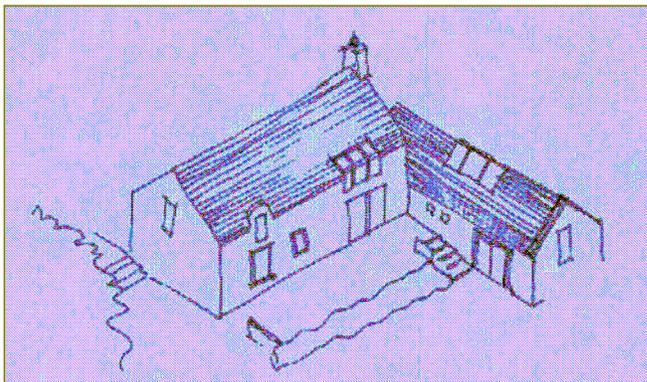


Key Principles:

- Select your site and locate the house to integrate sensitively within the landscape minimising any potential negative impact of the building within the countryside.
- Maximise existing site conditions; where possible the removal of mature trees, specimen trees, established hedgerows or dry stone walls should be avoided.
- Aspects of solar gain, light and wind shelter should be maximised, using any existing natural backdrop of trees to provide shelter and privacy, additional planting may be necessary to complement the existing vegetation and field boundary on the site.
- Provide a design solution which considers site specifics drawing from any existing features worthy of consideration on the site.
- A new house in the countryside should be a positive addition to the rural environment.



Site analysis is the key to a well-designed project. The careful and complete analysis of a site and its surrounding context can lead to better development proposals, smoother design implementation, and, ultimately, higher quality built environments.



4.0 DESIGN

This guide seeks to encourage innovative design which is well informed, site specific, contemporary in nature and of its time.

Analysing the siting of a new building considering topography and orientation, has already to some extent informed the location of rooms within a new dwelling in the countryside. New buildings should respect the rural context within which they sit, and demonstrate an informed use of traditional reference in reaching a site specific and well informed design resolution. Reference is now made to the plan form and component parts of the building.

Plan Form

The linear plan form is of particular and historic rural reference, considering a narrow plan, modest in scale with a vertical emphasis to the gables. Notwithstanding the above, a deep plan footprint may equally be considered appropriate depending on the opportunities afforded by the site. Details of the site analysis will in part determine the plan form of a dwelling in the countryside.

Consider:

- Where necessary overall massing maybe fragmented into smaller units while reducing the apparent scale of the development .
- The location of service areas; garages, stores or outbuildings should be considered to provide for an integrated grouping of built form.
- A linear form often responds well to ground levels, contours and orientation.
- The building mass should relate proportionally to the site and landscape setting, and therefore relative to its surroundings. Large buildings generally are unlikely to be compatible with a small enclosed site.
- Consider the scale and proportion of traditional buildings in the countryside to inform a contemporary design resolution.
- Form, scale, proportion and massing are intrinsically linked and should all be considered carefully, to provide for a sensitive building intervention which sits harmoniously within its environs.

Component Parts:

The expression of the building layout, in plan and elevation, is informed by the component parts; the roof, windows and doors, materials and details. Simplicity of elevation is a familiar characteristic of rural dwellings and should be carefully considered when dressing the building,



considering particularly the specifics of local reference that vary from area to area within the county.

Openings:

Windows and Doors/Porches.

- The traditional ratio of solid to void should inform the treatment of the elevation.
- Where porches are proposed they should be closely integrated with the proportion and scale of the building and their materials should relate to the main house.
- Windows should be given a vertical emphasis and complement the window to wall ratio accordingly.
- If dormers or roof-lights are used they should always suit the elevation they sit within in terms of scale, detailing and material specification. Wall plate dormers are of particular rural reference.
- Bay windows should be simple in form, matching the proportion and detailing of the other windows in the house. Large ill-proportioned panes should be avoided.

Roof Detail:

Chimney, Verge, Ridge, Rainwater Disposal.

- Chimneys are traditionally visually robust, with a strong vertical contrast to the horizontal plan form and usually located along the ridge.
- Eaves and verges are usually plain and simple, the flush verge of particular rural reference.
- The treatment of the roof edges should be carefully considered and relate directly to the rural detailing of the area.
- The location and frequency of rainwater downpipes are to be carefully considered, a proliferation of rainwater downpipes on the front of houses should be avoided.
- Depending on the site context a full two storey building may be preferable to a concentration of dormers and rooflights on a storey and a half.
- Historically a 35-45degree roof pitch provides maximum wind and rain resistance and is of particular rural reference.





Material Specification/Finishes

- If using stone, locally sourced materials should be used. The use of local materials adds to local distinctiveness, responding to the setting within which the building sits and reinforcing a sense of place.
- Use a restrained palette of material reinforcing the simplicity of elevation.
- Adopt a holistic approach to the design of the building considering materials and colours at the outset to complement the building design.
- Colour and texture is a strong feature in the Donegal landscape, this should be reflected in the finishes and material specification of any new building in the countryside.

Key Principles

- The scale and form of a new building will be considered in relation to the surface character of the location; terrain, vegetation cover, topography etc., as well as the size and specifics of the site and its surroundings to determine how easily a new building is likely to integrate within its setting.
- The overall proportion of solid to void must be carefully considered in the treatment of the elevations.
- Annex buildings and garages should be subordinate and sited to complement the main dwelling.
- New buildings in the countryside should respect the rural context, and contemporary design solutions should demonstrate an informed use of traditional reference.
- A new house in the countryside should be a positive addition to the rural environment.

The information in this document encourages a site led approach to designing a house in the countryside and in doing so reinforces a local tradition where the architecture of Donegal is based not on style or typology, but is generated in response to the land and the elements. It is possible to respect and reflect the proportions of our traditional built heritage within the modern context and in doing so create a contemporary architectural legacy for future generations.