
CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

Title: REPORT ON CALLED-IN PLANNING APPLICATION

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DEVELOPMENT PROPOSED: THE FORMATION OF 4,000 METRES OF FOREST TRAILS SUITABLE FOR ACCESS BY HORSE, THE INSTALLATION OF TEN INFORMATION BOARDS AND THE CREATION OF TWO PICNIC AREAS AT STRATHMASHIE FOREST, LAGGAN. (FULL PERMISSION)

REFERENCE: 05/409/CP

APPLICANT: LAGGAN FOREST TRUST FORESTRY COMPANY, FOREST OFFICE, STRATHMASHIE, LAGGAN.

DATE CALLED-IN: 23rd SEPTEMBER 2005.

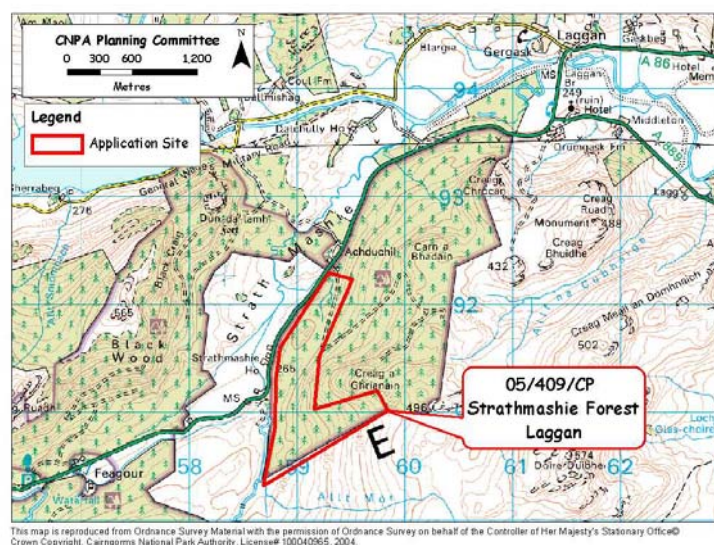


Fig. 1 - Location Plan

SITE DESCRIPTION AND PROPOSAL

1. Full planning permission is sought in this application for the development of approximately 4,000 metres of forest trails suitable for access by horse, in Strathmashie Forest near Laggan. Strathmashie Forest is located adjacent to the A86 trunk road, in the south western area of the Cairngorms National Park. The overall forest landform rises up from the public road in an easterly direction and extends to approximately 520 hectares, although the application site does not cover the entire area. Access to the section of the forest that is the subject of this application is achieved at two locations off the A86 with the main one being located at Auchduchil where there is a car parking area, which is part of the recently established Wolfrax Mountain Biking Centre, as well as the Haflinger Pony Trekking business.



Fig.2: Existing forest and Wolfrax entrance



Fig.3 : Wolfrax 'Basecamp' facilities.

2. The area already accommodates a series of mountain biking trails used as part of the Wolfrax Centre development, which was opened in 2004. Car parking facilities as well as a café and changing areas exist as part of the facility. The carpark and other facilities are located at the northern end of the proposed site, and are also utilised by the Haflinger Pony Trekking Business. The pony trekking business currently uses existing forest roads, of which there are approximately 1,600 metres.



Fig.4 : Example of existing informal routes used through forest

3. The proposed new trails are intended to complement the network of forest roads. The installation of ten information boards is also proposed in addition to the trails. The information panels are to be positioned at the start and end of the trails, and at a number of key areas along the routes. Two picnic areas are also proposed which would be equipped with simple seating arrangements, possibly using logs. The picnic sites which are proposed to extend to approximately 36 sq.m., are to be located in existing clearings and in addition to seating each picnic area would have an interpretation board and also a rail for securing horses.



Fig. 5 : Proposed picnic area 1



Fig. 6 : Proposed picnic area 2

4. The new trails are proposed to have an average width of between 2 and 3 metres, although at their narrowest points would be 0.5 metres. Although the trails would be available for use by walkers, etc¹., they are primarily intended to accommodate horses and their riders, and consequently the construction is proposed to be carried out in accordance with standards set out by the British Horse Society. The trails are to be constructed using the 'Hymac' method with "as dug" or locally quarried materials. Supplementary information provided with the application provides details of the background to the need for the proposed trails. In the course of the forest area being used for pony trekking activity in recent years – using a combination of existing temporary trails and forest trails – the activity has been blighted by poor weather conditions, ground deterioration, forest harvesting activities and storm damage. It is also understood that more recently the potential to use informal trails in some areas of the forest has been lessened due to the development of mountain biking routes and the potential conflict arising from the two uses in such close proximity. It is intended that the proposed formation of permanent trails designed specifically, but not exclusively, for the use by horse and rider would address most of the issues.

¹ Supporting information submitted refers to an acceptance that there "may be occasional use by cyclists, however cyclists will be encouraged to use the purpose built facility which is already on-site."

5. The 4,000 metres of horse trails, together with the existing tracks, are intended to facilitate riders over three varying lengths of treks through the forest – ½ hour trek over a 1,373 metre route, a one hour trek on a 3,313 metre route, and a two hour trek over a trail of 6,213 metres. The proposed trails are intended to provide a variety of “safe routes, surfaces and experiences, and to take into account basic needs, aspirations and constraints of all users.”
6. A total of 25 way markers are proposed at various stages along the trails, providing directional guidance. The ten information boards proposed extend to approximately 1.5 metres in height, with the actual information panel having dimension of 800mm x 1200mm. The information boards would provide details on the immediate local habitat, and are intended to combine a pictorial and written format.

DEVELOPMENT PLAN CONTEXT

7. **NPPG 11 – Sport, Physical Recreation and Open Space** sets the national policy context within which to assess developments of the nature proposed. A section entitled ‘The Countryside : Sport and Recreation in Rural Areas’ (paras.60 – 67) is of particular relevance, and it is acknowledged that in addition to widespread participation in ‘informal recreation’ such as hill walking and rambling, a smaller but growing number of people are taking part in more ‘organised sports’. Cycling and horse trails are specifically mentioned. In addition to recognising that natural resources for specific activities attract visitors to the countryside, NPPG 11 also alludes to the fact that people residing in rural areas have the same need for sport and recreation facilities, and given the often scattered population of rural areas, it is often the case that a combination of support and use of facilities by residents, tourists and visitors are the only means by which such facilities are viable. In addition, NPPG 11 highlights the fact that the provision of recreation facilities in rural areas has a significant purpose “in contributing to the retention of population and in promoting tourism, hence having an impact on the rural economy.”
8. **NPPG 11** is realistic in noting that there are concerns about rural recreation, for example where there may be conflict between active sports such as mountain biking and more passive sports, such as walking or fishing. Other concerns highlighted include the environmental impact of recreational pursuits and their related developments, their relationship to rural land management, and “how they can be harnessed to bring benefits to the rural economy without posing a risk for landscape, nature conservation and rural management objectives.”

9. Paras. 64 and 65 of NPPG 11 provide guidance on the provision of recreational facilities within sites designated for nature conservation purposes or areas designated for their national landscape or cultural heritage importance. It is recognised that some recreational developments may be inappropriate but “there is no general prohibition against development in these areas.” In general however, the approach of the strategic provision of managed facilities or the selection of alternative locations is advocated as a means of possibly reducing visitor pressure on the more sensitive environments.
10. The **Highland Structure Plan 2001** includes several policies that are broadly applicable to the type of development proposed, including policies on sport and recreation as well as tourism, and the environment. The benefits of sport and recreation facilities are highlighted in section 2.5.1 of the Plan, where they are attributed to making an important contribution to sustainable development and enhancing the health and quality of life of the residents of the Highlands. The Plan’s strategic themes include encouraging the “adoption of a proactive approach to the wise use of the natural environment”.
11. Section 2.5.10 of the Plan concentrates on the subject of informal recreation and access, noting that it is of very high importance, underpinning a range of recreational pastimes and their associated quality of life benefits, as well as being a key component of the tourism industry. The Plan however recognises that increasing demands for access necessitates the achievement of a balance between accommodating the needs of countryside users and protecting the fragility of the Highland countryside. Section 2.5.13 of the Plan notes that the “protection of rights of way and provision of an integrated system of well maintained and signposted paths catering for walking, cycling and equestrian use are a valuable resource for local communities and visitors, both in terms of providing access and heightening appreciation of the wider environment.
12. The **Highland Structure Plan** also includes a number of detailed policies on Tourism which are considered pertinent to the development proposal. Section 2.7.1 of the Plan describes tourism as a vital element of the Highland economy, and notes that opportunities to participate in outdoor pursuits are amongst key visitor attractions. The Structure Plan strategy aims to build on the Highland identity and take a proactive approach to the wise use of the natural environment as a primary resource for tourism. Section 2.7.1 also highlights the fact that community needs should also be considered in order to ensure that facilities and opportunities are provided which serve the needs of both visitors and local residents.

13. It is the policy of Highland Council as expressed in **Policy T2** of the Structure Plan to support high quality tourism development proposals, particularly those which extend the season, spread economic benefit more widely and provide opportunities for the sustainable enjoyment and interpretation of the area's heritage.
14. The **Structure Plan** includes a detailed section on forestry, noting that it is a significant land use within the Highlands, and highlighting the fact that forests increasingly serve a variety of purposes besides commercial timber production (section 2.10.3). The opportunity to provide an important network of recreational facilities, capable of accommodating a much higher number of visitors than more open areas is emphasised. Reference is made to the growing trend for community woodland initiatives, which is seen as a reflection of a growing trend of "community aspirations to secure a stake in the future development of their area." **Policy F4** accordingly states that the Council "welcomes and wishes to encourage the continued involvement of communities in the management and fuller understanding of their local woodland resources."
15. The proposed site is located within a designated Area of Great Landscape Value (AGLV). **Policy L4** on Landscape Character applies, where it is stated that "The Council will have regard to the desirability of maintaining and enhancing present landscape character in the consideration of development proposals."
16. The **Badenoch and Strathspey Local Plan 1997** details a number of pertinent conservation objectives and states that the priority is to promote sustainable development of the areas's resources and ensure an acceptable balance between economic growth and safeguards for the outstanding heritage. The conservation strategy advocated for the countryside includes provision being made for the restoration and expansion of the core Caledonian Forest, and the upgrading of facilities for recreation, tourism, interpretation and education / research in more robust locations. In particular, multiple use of forest areas is encouraged.
17. The subject site is located on land allocated for Forestry purposes in the Landward Strategy of the **Badenoch and Strathspey Local Plan**. The general principles in considering planning proposals in the landward area as detailed in the Local Plan include the protection of the area's exceptional scenic, nature conservation, wildlife and landscape resources and heritage; the promotion of a hierarchy of visitor facilities for information in relation to the natural environment; and the promotion of tourism and countryside recreational pursuits, including use of the area's outstanding resources for outdoor activities.

18. Tourism and Recreation is addressed in Policy 2.2.9 of the Local Plan where it is acknowledged that tourist activities will continue to make a vital contribution to the economy. The priority is to ensure that broadening the range and quality of facilities is balanced with protecting the area's exceptional scenic and heritage resources. The Local Plan also states that the more accessible intermediate lowland areas have potential for a broad range of activities and that provision should be made for upgrading recreation, tourism, interpretation and education / research facilities in the more robust locations better able to absorb visitor pressure. Multiple use of forest areas in particular is encouraged.

CONSULTATIONS

19. **Scottish Natural Heritage** have assessed the proposals and have stated that there is no objection to the application and therefore supports the proposal to create such facilities at Strathmashie. It is noted in the response that the proposed trail on the western side of the development lies within 50 metres of the River Mashie, which is part of the River Spey Special Area of Conservation. The SAC has been designated for its population of Atlantic salmon, otter, sea lamprey and freshwater pearl mussels. SNH do not however consider that the proposal would have any significant effect on any qualifying interests either directly or indirectly. The consultation response concludes with a positive endorsement of the development proposal, stating that it will "promote specialist recreation at a managed site and could be of benefit to the local community and visitors to the area."
20. A consultation response originally received from **SEPA** expressed concern regarding the potential culverting of existing watercourses and highlighting the adverse impacts of this practice on water habitats, the potential to lead to flooding and erosion and the possibility of preventing fish passage if incorrectly designed. The concerns were conveyed to the applicants, together with a request that consideration be given to the use of bridges rather than culverting as the preferred method of construction. In a response received from the Laggan Forest Trust Forestry Commission Ltd. three watercourses have been identified for culverting. The method of laying culverts is detailed, where 25% of the culvert is buried "below the water line to allow natural sediment to form in the base." However, the submission also indicates that in the event of a recommendation to "adopt a bottomless arch culvert to comply with SEPA's guidelines", that method shall be adopted.
21. As the proposed development involves access off a trunk road (A86), the **Trunk Roads Network Management Division** of the **Scottish Executive** were consulted. The response received recommends granting planning permission, subject to two conditions. The first condition requires the provision and maintenance of visibility splays at the junction of the vehicular access with the public road. (As the

access in question is the entry / exit to the Wolftrax development, works to achieve the required visibility have already been undertaken in fulfilment of conditions stipulated by the Trunk Roads Network Management Division in relation to a previous application for the Wolftrax development). The second condition recommended by the Trunk Roads Network Management Division is a prohibition on the placing of advertising signage on the trunk road verge, in the interests of ensuring that there is no distraction caused to drivers on the trunk road.

22. The **Natural Heritage** section of the CNPA have also examined the proposal and generally concur with the comments of **Scottish Natural Heritage** as detailed earlier in this report. The response notes that Strathmashie Forest is of plantation origin, and is between 40 and 60 years old. The proposed trails are on a site that supports native woodland ground flora where the canopy is sufficiently open to allow it to develop. The consultation response acknowledges that the proposal would result in the loss of semi-natural habitat, but notes that “the scale of the loss is not sufficient to be significant when considered across the site as a whole.” Specific reference is also made to the fact that the wood is not known to have any capercallie population.
23. In summary, the response from the **Natural Heritage** group takes a positive view of the proposal. Reference is made to the fact that the site is already a popular recreational forest, and that the proposal would appear to consolidate access provision in a forest which has the capacity to absorb such use without detriment to the natural heritage. It is also stated that the proposed development could reduce pressure on other forests within the National Park where the construction and use of new trails would be more contentious.
24. The **Visitor Services and Recreation Group** of the CNPA has examined the proposals from an access perspective. Reference is made in the response to the fact that the provision of trails designed and constructed for horse access within the National Park is low. Therefore, the proposed facility is considered to provide an important recreation opportunity, that would be of further economic benefit to the Laggan area in particular, to assist in sustaining it as an all year round destination for recreation. In particular the comments make reference to the fact that forests offer an attractive backdrop for informal recreation and have the added benefit of being able to absorb large numbers of users without them having an undue impact on other recreational users enjoyment.

25. The consultation response also refers to details in the application stating that cyclists would be able to use the proposed trails, but would be encouraged to use the other purpose built trails. VSRG state that the Cairngorms National Park Authority, as the access authority, “would be tolerant of the route not being actively promoted for cycling” but note that there would be “cause to have concern if cyclists were being actively discouraged from using the routes.”
26. An assessment of the proposal by the **Economic and Social Development Group** of the CNPA resulted in a positive response, noting that the development of further infrastructure for visitors and residents is to be welcomed as it helps build to a critical mass of activities available, which allows for longer visitor stays, thereby encouraging increased bednights and higher visitor spends in this relatively remote rural area. The consultation response makes reference to the recently established Wolfrax development and refers to anecdotal evidence suggesting that business in the area has increased. **ESRG** expect that business would increase further with the proposed development. In terms of community involvement, it is noted that the Sustainable Tourism Strategy highlights community involvement in the planning and development of tourism, and ESGR “welcome the fact that Laggan Forest Trust are behind the project.”

REPRESENTATIONS

27. No representations have been received in respect of the proposed development. However, as part of the submission documents accompanying this application, copies of two letters of support have been included. The first letter was submitted by Mr. Alan Girdwood, Head Teacher at a West Lothian primary school, where pupils have experienced visits to the Haflinger pony centre and associated rides through existing informal routes at Strathmashie Forest over the past twenty years. “Wholehearted support” is expressed for the proposal, and it is stated that permanent access trails at Strathmashie would be of tremendous benefit, particularly in “today’s society where health and safety issues are uppermost in our minds.”
28. The second letter of support was submitted from Ms. Kate McMahon of Church Terrace, Newtonmore, and she describes the project as ‘excellent’ and ‘well researched.’ The letter alludes to some difficulties experienced in relation to riding activity in the forest since the establishment of the Wolfrax centre, in particular “the loss of a variety of wide safe tracks which are ideal for the safety of beginners, schools and disabled.” The author of the letter recounts from a personal perspective the benefits of trekking in the forest, as experienced by her daughter, and concludes with positive sentiments, stating that the purpose built paths will allow the continuation of trekking in the area, complimenting the success of Wolfrax and that the “whole centre will

be a real asset to the area being appreciated by local people and visitors alike.”

APPRAISAL

29. On the basis of national, regional and local level planning policy, as outlined in earlier sections of this report, the principle of this type of recreation development is acceptable, and indeed supported by policy. A further positive point to note is the fact that there are no constraints on the site and the forest is not the subject of any natural heritage designations. Accordingly, the proposed site at Strathmashie is not considered to be sensitive in relation to nature conservation issues. As detailed in para. 22 of this report, the forest is not known to have any capercaillie population. This is in fact an issue that was explored in significant detail in the course of the CNPA commenting on the Forestry Commission's Notice of Proposed Development of the Wolftrax Mountain Biking Centre. At that time it was noted that the forest is isolated with respect to other capercaillie populations and is therefore unlikely to receive dispersing capercaillie. Furthermore, the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology capercaillie distribution map does not show any records for the species, with the record dating back to the early 1980s.
30. A significant amount of the proposed new horse trails either skirt the periphery of the existing canopy generally following fire breaks, are proposed in areas where harvesting operations have recently been undertaken, or follow existing clear routes through the forest which are already used on an informal basis. In addition, as detailed earlier, the two proposed picnic areas are to be located in existing clearings. The proposed development would not therefore result in the felling of trees, nor would it erode the woodland character of the area.
31. The portion of Strathmashie Forest included within the site area of this application already facilities a mix of recreational uses, including some pony trekking, walking and mountain biking, with the latter use of the area having increased significantly due to the opening of the Wolftrax centre in 2004. The supporting information accompanying this application stresses the fact that the proposed new horse trails will be designed to accommodate not only riders but also walkers and picnickers. Despite the diverse recreational uses likely to be carried on in the forest, it is unlikely that there would be any significant level of conflict between the uses. The location of the proposed horse trails is primarily along the western fringes of the forest, whilst the majority of the mountain bike trails have been created in areas to the north and east of this. The most adventurous and fast moving biking generally occurs on the specially created bike trails, away from the horse trails and therefore the possibility of sudden and fast movements frightening horses is minimised. Biking activity at a more leisurely pace is likely to take place over some of the existing forest tracks that are also intended

to form part of the horse trail circuit. A strategic approach is being taken to the development of recreational facilities at Strathmashie Forest, in order to manage potential conflicts by allowing differing needs to be met in the differing areas of the woodlands. Appropriate “in forest” signage is already being used as a management tool to minimise such problems, and will be further employed in conjunction with the horse trails.



Fig. 7 : example of existing signage in the forest

32. It is likely that the introduction of the proposed new facility will result in an increase in the number of users of the area, although no information has been submitted to quantify this – submission details refer to the fact that over a thousand riders have trekked through the forest in the past year. In terms of the vehicular movements in the area, users of the horse trails will have the benefit of using the existing, recently developed ‘Basecamp’ facilities associated with the Wolftrax centre, including the use of the established entrance from the A86 which has been developed to the standards required by the Trunk Roads division of the Scottish Executive, as well as use of other facilities such as the car parking area and toilet and refreshment facilities. In addition, due to the existence of the Haflinger Pony Trekking Centre to the north of the car parking area (which will cater for some of those wishing to ride through the forest), the existing layout already includes a turning space for horse boxes to facilitate riders travelling to the site with their animals. A short path, created specifically for use by riders and their horses leads from the turning area and adjacent corral, and provides an effective segregation of the horses / ponies from the car parking area. A further area for the parking of horse boxes has been identified on the site layout plan to the south of the existing car parking facility. On the basis of the existing level of infrastructure and facilities in the ‘Basecamp’ area and their shared availability for all users, it is not considered that the increased number of users associated with the proposed horse trails would give rise to any adverse impacts in terms of general safety in the area.

33. In conclusion, the proposal meets the terms of planning policy as found in NPPG11, The Highland Structure Plan and the Badenoch and Strathspey Local Plan. The application documentation illustrates that the proposed horse trails are intended to complement the existing cycle trails and that points of contact will be minimised through appropriate design and management. The creation of permanent trails will result in the opportunity to improve safety for all users of the forest, and in general consolidate access provision in a forest area which offers the potential to absorb such uses without detriment to the natural heritage of the area. In addition the development also has the potential to bring economic and educational benefits to the area.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE AIMS OF THE NATIONAL PARK

Conserve and Enhance the Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Area

34. The proposal has no negative impacts on species, habitats or the landscape. It also does not affect any features of cultural or historic interest. Although, there is no direct on-site conservation benefit, the proposal does provide the opportunity to direct this type of development away from more environmentally sensitive areas of the National Park.

Promote Sustainable Use of Natural Resources

35. There are no significant negative impacts associated with the proposed development, although there may potentially be an increase in travel by car to and from the site. However, the creation of a facility using an existing woodland, which promotes a healthy outdoor pursuit must be seen as a positive sustainable use of the National Park's natural resources.

Promote Understanding and Enjoyment of the Area

36. The proposed development promotes additional recreational use of the area and provides opportunities for enjoyment of this part of the National Park. The proposal also involves the provision of information boards which are considered to potentially be of benefit in promoting the understanding of the area by the general public.

Promote Sustainable Economic and Social Development of the Area

37. The proposal by its nature and location provides the opportunity to attract additional visitors to the Laggan area and would therefore be of significant benefit to the socio-economic development of the community and the wider area.

RECOMMENDATION

That Members of the Committee support a recommendation to :

Grant Planning Permission for the formation of 4,000 metres of forest trails suitable for access by horse, the installation of ten information boards and the creation of two picnic areas at Strathmashie Forest, Laggan, subject to the following conditions -

1. The development to which this permission relates must be begun within five years from the date of this permission.
2. The visibility splays shall be provided and maintained on each side of the access to the satisfaction of the local Planning Authority. The splays are the triangles of ground bounded on 2 sides by the first 4.5 metres of the centreline of the access driveway (the set back dimensions) and the nearside trunk road carriageway measured 215 metres (the y dimension) in both directions from the intersection of the access with the trunk road. In a vertical plane, nothing shall obscure visibility measured from a driver's eye height of between 1.05 metres and 2.00 metres positioned at the set back dimension to an object height of between 0.26 metres and 1.05 metres anywhere along the y dimension.
3. No advertising signs shall be placed on the trunk road verge.
4. Prior to the commencement of development, detailed proposal shall be submitted for the agreement of SEPA and the Cairngorms National Park Authority acting as Planning Authority to show any existing watercourses affected by the proposed trails bridged rather than culverted where possible. Where culverting is justified and deemed acceptable, it shall be sized to accommodate spate flows, kept to the minimum length required and designed to allow fish passage in accordance with the SEERAD 'Stream Crossing and Fish' leaflet.
5. Prior to the commencement of development, a method statement and programme for the construction of the horse trails shall be submitted for the agreement of the Cairngorms National Park Authority and Scottish Natural Heritage. All works shall subsequently be carried out in accordance with the method and programme agreed.

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24th November 2005