
CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

Title: REPORT ON CALLED-IN PLANNING APPLICATION

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DEVELOPMENT PROPOSED: PATHWORKS, DYKING, LANDSCAPING AND ART WORKS AT CAIRNGORM MOUNTAIN CAR PARK (FULL PP)

REFERENCE: 06/258/CP

APPLICANT: CAIRNGORM MOUNTAIN LTD

DATE CALLED-IN: 14 JULY 2006

RECOMMENDATION APPROVAL

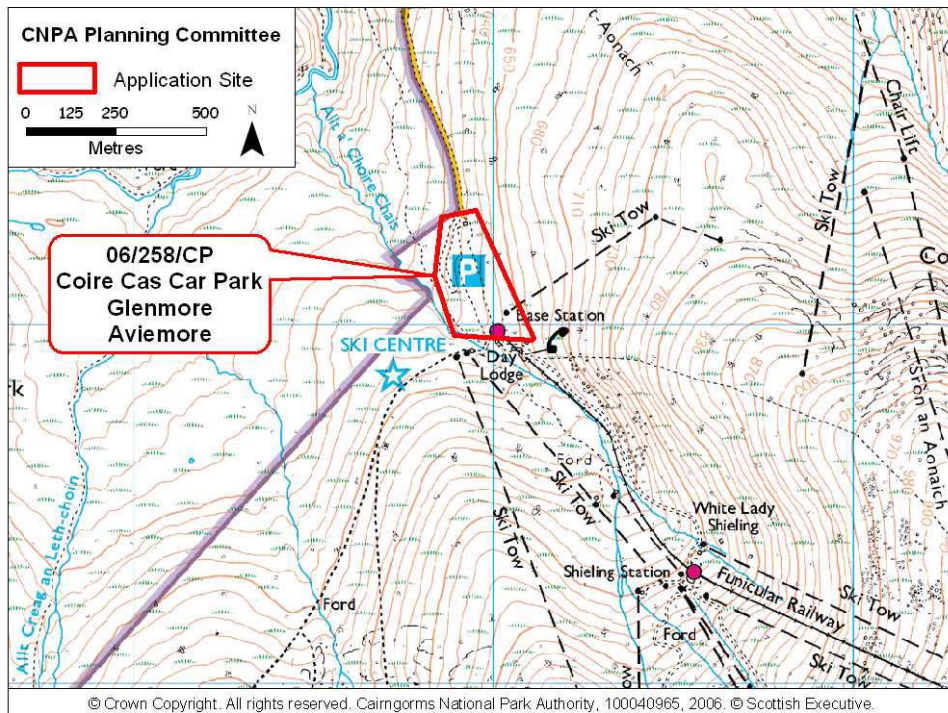


Fig. 1 - Location Plan

SITE DESCRIPTION AND PROPOSAL

1. The site to which this application relates is the Cairngorm Mountain Ski area and essentially consists of the embankment above the upper car park and associated all abilities footpath. The site lies within the National Scenic Area.



Fig 2 All abilities access to path and area for viewpoint feature

2. The Planning Committee will recall granting permission for a more extensive proposal in 2004 for the landscaping of the whole of the car park area and embankments between. This re-design of the proposal has come forward essentially as a scaled down proposal to replace the earlier project.



Fig 3 All abilities path looking north.

3. This, as with the previous application is essentially an arts based project. The artist leading the project is Arthur Watson who has already been involved with a number of installations in the funicular terminal building. Concerns had been expressed to the applicants regarding the formal geometry of some of the proposals and particular concern was raised regarding the design of a large flight of steps that gave access to

the path above from the car park. A number of amendments have subsequently been made to the proposal and the large flight of steps has been reduced to something more akin to the existing steps in this area.

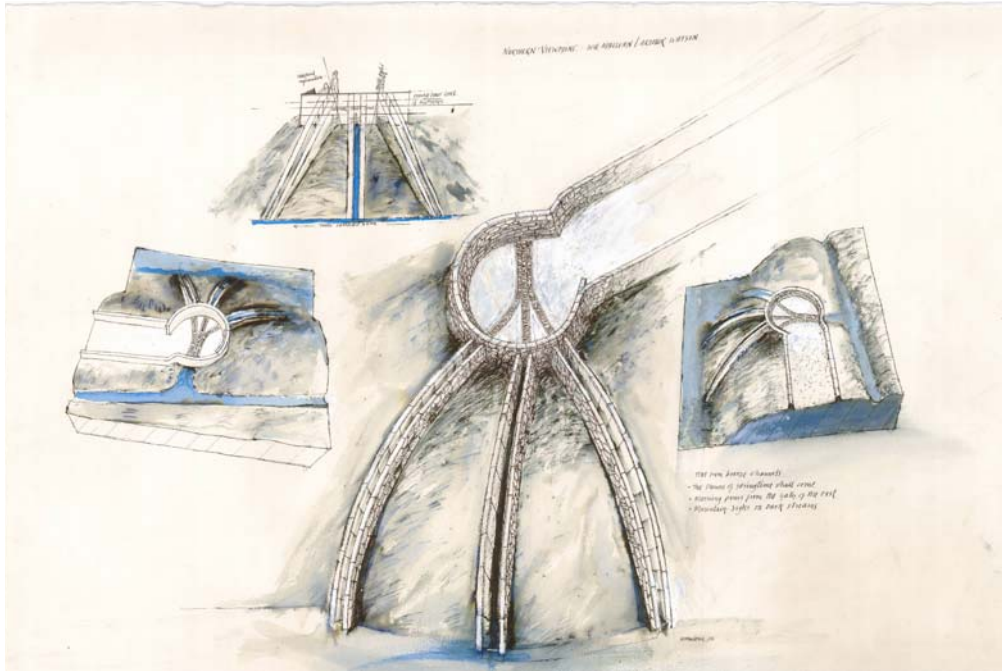


Figure 4 Artists sketch of viewpoint feature Will MacLean/Arthur Watson

4. An extract of the response to the brief from Arthur Watson the artist behind the project has been attached at the back of the report. The intention is to make a series of interventions in the structure of the existing car park and path above. This will be achieved by introducing elements of shelter and a focal point above the entrance to the car park. The brief includes the artistic and cultural reasoning behind the interventions proposed.
5. There are 3 key elements with this proposal, the first is set on the promontory that forms the northern end of the all abilities footpath (see fig 2) at the end of the car park and is already used as a viewpoint. A drainage ditch that runs along the rear of the promontory will be diverted directly underneath the floor of the viewpoint and will be covered by a bronze grid. The drainage channel then splits into 3 separate rills flowing down the outside of the embankment that will be hand built using irregular granite boulders (see fig 4). All 3 features are intended to carry discrete artworks and Scots words in bronze will be inserted into the base of the drainage channel where it flows below the viewpoint. The work will involve the removal of fencing and re-vegetation of the embankment in accordance with Scottish Natural Heritage advice.

6. The all abilities access ramp to this viewpoint will be improved in accordance with the requirements of Highland Council's Landscape Officer. The second key elements relate to a pair of sheltered seating areas carved out on both sides of the path, again in these areas will incorporate small artefacts in bronze or carved in the stone to represent the cultural heritage of the area. The areas would be constructed in granite with slate benches. The micro siting of these features has been altered as a result of consultation with Highland Council Landscape Officer to ensure that they have adequate clearance from the main path route.
7. The third key feature involves a story telling area on the all abilities path above where an existing informal set of steps ascend from the car park to the path. A small sheltered seating area will be created at car park level in the embankment for walkers to sit down while putting their boots on. The story telling area is a small immediately above the steps and projects slightly out from the embankment and back into the slope with bench type seating in granite and slate. Here a low key audio system will be used to play stories that the artist has recorded by interviewing local people in the strath and other parts of the Park.
8. Concerns had been raised by Highland Council landscape officer about altered gradients on the pathway. Because of this, the existing level of the path is to be retained. The grass banking along the car park will be subject to re-vegetation along its length to ensure that it is more typical of the surrounding vegetation. Dry-stone dyking will be used along sections of the path adjacent to the 3 key features. Lower sections of dyking will act as a guide rail between the features. The picnic benches and timber ranch style fencing will all be removed.

DEVELOPMENT PLAN CONTEXT

9. **Policy L4 (Landscape Character) of the Highland Structure Plan** considers that the Council will have regard to the desirability of maintaining and enhancing present landscape character in the determination of development proposals, including off shore developments.
10. The **Badenoch and Strathspey Local Plan** regards Cairngorm as a sensitive area where there should be a presumption against non-essential development for winter sports. The Local Plan supports consolidation and upgrading within the existing lease area.

CONSULTATIONS

11. **Scottish Natural Heritage** (SNH) does not object to principle of the development as proposed; however recognise that there are a number of details which are not clear within the application.
12. SNH welcome the proposal for the sunken path, noting that the proposal has the potential to offer landscape gain through the removal of the current handrails and existing picnic benches. The footpath may offer some shelter to users, but given that the primary intended use is as an all abilities route, it would be important to ensure that shelter is balanced with the needs for wheel-chair bound visitors and young children to have a view to the west. Solutions to this should be considered.
13. The proposed work presents an opportunity to restore the damaged ground between the all abilities trail and car park. The appropriateness of the reinstatement and replanting proposals would be particularly important to SNH who would be happy to advise on this.
14. For all aspects of the proposal, the quality and detailing are key to the success and suitability of the project at such a sensitive location. The highest standards of workmanship should be undertaken to an agreed specification.
15. **SEPA** has no objection to the works subject to construction methods statement condition.
16. **CNPA Landscape Officer** has considered the application and some concerns are raised regarding the large geometric nature of the steps up to the all abilities footpath which seems at odds with the flowing nature of the surrounding landscape. The staircase is very grand and sweeping on plan and the precision of its geometry seems out of place with its surroundings. Similar concerns are raised regarding the viewpoint feature. Again the rills down which water will flow appear rather mechanical in design.
17. The drawings imply a construction that is very sharp and crisply detailed. The nature of local building material is the opposite consisting more usually of rounded stone washed and worn in glacial and fluvial deposits. Something more organic and flowing would suit local material better and be more in harmony with its surroundings. The detailing of the walls should allow for the natural irregularities of materials. If the scheme were to address these points then the dialogue between the artwork and its surroundings would be much more successful, the impact upon the landscape being wholly positive and it would make a good contribution to the area.

18. After a meeting with the artist and project manager CNPA Landscape Officer is supportive of the scheme and it is pointed out that the success of the project depends upon the level of workmanship. The latest sketch plans show that a much more irregular approach will be taken to the construction than at first appears the case from the engineering drawings. A maintenance and management agreement is suggested by planning condition to ensure that the landscaping is maintained in the future.
19. **CNPA Visitor Services and Recreation Group (VSRG)** had several concerns about the formal nature of the submitted scheme. However, after meeting with the project manager and artist VSRG welcome the removal of the grand central staircase and the amendments to the works on the path end structure. These are substantial changes to the original design and we feel that these soften the structure. We welcome the use of irregular boulder material for the construction of the water courses on the end feature and consider that these will reflect more the character of the mountain burns found in the area and less the more formal influences of the original design.
20. **Highland Council Landscaper Officer** has been consulted upon the revised plans and applicant responses to her earlier comments. The landscape officer notes that the changes result in a significant change to the proposals and may take them away from the original artistic concept. This is because the pathway is no longer to be set down but would be retained at its existing level. Given that the walling no longer encloses the length of the path will the fencing be retained or removed outwith the walled sections as some sort of restraint barrier would be required adjacent to the steep slope leading down into the car park.
21. The response points out that gradients remain too steep in most areas to meet the originally stated aim of providing an all abilities route. While there is now no proposals to change the levels, consideration must be given to the degree to which the function of the path may have changed, now giving access to a purpose built design feature and the degree to which this will require better access.
22. The changes to the steps are welcome the alterations to the side walls have led to the form of the hand rails being unsuitable. The hand rail shown on the application does not meet the required standards of building regulations. No information is given regarding the levels or the proposed extent of surfacing at the base of the access stairs.
23. Overall, whilst appreciating the artist led nature of the proposals concern remains about the stated aims of improving access not being met by the proposal and that the changes potentially compromise some of the aesthetic objectives that were initially laid out.

24. A subsequent meeting between the applicants and Landscape Officer has ironed out these concerns and further amendments to the plans have been incorporated showing improvements to ramp access, correct handrail heights, separation of cars from pedestrians at the bottom of the small stairway by means of a curved guard wall. With these changes Highland Council Landscape Officer has confirmed that they are happy to recommend the application for approval.

REPRESENTATIONS

25. **Aviemore Community Council** has been consulted and while raising no objection wondered if local granite would be more appropriate than Caithness stone in the artwork.
26. Letters from the applicant are attached at the back of the report. These are intended to address the concerns of the consultees as stated above.

APPRAISAL

27. A much more extensive scheme has been approved at this site that would have had very positive effects upon the landscape of the whole car park. The current scheme is of a much more modest scale but must be considered upon its own merits and acceptability rather than being compared with the previous project.
28. In terms of planning policy there is little of direct relevance to this proposal. The Badenoch and Strathspey Local Plan considers that there should be a presumption against non-essential development for winter sports but consolidation within the existing area may be appropriate. Policy L4 of the Highland Structure Plan considers that development should enhance landscape character.
29. The car park as it stands appears as a significant landscape detractor in terms of its formal geometry and engineered approach to providing car parking at the site. While the scale of the proposal would not have any significant positive impact upon the whole car park it would provide considerable benefit to the main back wall/embankment of the car park as it would include the re-seeding of this area and the enhancement of the northern viewpoint in particular would make a considerable positive difference to the main entrance to the site by car.

30. This scheme is essentially an arts based proposal and as such is perhaps a little more difficult to interpret and explain in the way that a normal planning application would. Despite this, the applicant has gone to great lengths to produce a range of material to help with the interpretation of the project and a model will be displayed at the committee meeting. There are three key features including a viewpoint area, shelter/seating areas and a storytelling area.
31. The most prominent feature is the viewpoint. The submitted engineering drawings portray a formal geometric structure which in line with the CNPA Landscape Officer initial comments would appear out of place with the surrounding landforms. Some design sketches have been prepared (see fig 4) which give a good appreciation of what is intended as opposed to the bare engineering bones of the structure. In principle, this element is providing a viewpoint feature at a point on the all abilities path that already effectively hosts a formal viewpoint, albeit less definitive than what is proposed here. The ability of the structure to transmit the sound of water underneath and running down the rills will be a significant addition for people who are visually impaired. The walls and the rills will be constructed in an irregular manner using local granite with areas in between being vegetated in accordance with the advice of SNH.
32. Moving southwards along the path, there are again two seating areas. The first using a semi-circular design projects out on one of the existing platforms occupied by a picnic bench. Second, further along the path a similar shallow feature is proposed as an intermediate viewpoint. This provides some shelter and precludes the view of the car park so that the line of sight is concentrated on the hills to the west and the strath below. Both of these features have been slightly amended to ensure that they do not conflict with the primary aim of all abilities access along the path. The final feature along the route is a story telling area this is linked by steps to the car park along the route of existing steps. Originally, this feature was a rather grand, theatrical set of steps sweeping down to the car park itself. This feature has been considerably reduced and is more along the lines of the existing steps. A small seating area at the bottom of the steps will be carved out of the embankment and will be protected from cars by a stone guard wall. A small audio system will be included in the story-telling area so that music and interviews with local people recorded by the artist can be played. Such features would again add interest to the area for less able people in particular. In addition, they would lead to positive landscape impacts with timber fencing being replaced by dry-stone dyking and general landscaping to the embankment above the car park.

33. The engineering drawings offer an inevitable geometric approach but these are required to clearly show the extent of the works that are required. As noted by the response from SNH the detailed quality and workmanship involved will be the key to what materialises on the ground at the end of the day, interpreting the proposal by means of engineering drawings does not in my view portray the quality of what is proposed. Our own landscape officer is more relaxed about the amended proposals and again considers that workmanship of high quality will result in a significant improvement to this part of the site. It is understood that the artist considers this to be a hands on project and he will be around to supervise the work at regular intervals.
34. Some initial criticisms of the scheme were made by Highland Council's landscape officer, many of these concerns relate to access to the site for the less able and how this will be afforded. Amendments have been made to the drawings as a result of these concerns and the Landscape Officer is now happy for consent to be granted. The path levels are maintained as existing but the ramp up to the viewpoint will be improved from material sourced in the landscaping of other areas.
35. The scheme has undergone a range of changes throughout the planning process and I am of the view that this is a high quality positive scheme that brings together the natural and cultural heritage aspects of landscape. The scheme requires relatively limited earth works, is considered appropriate to the site and has been amended in detailed negotiations to meet the requirements of a range of consultees as well as the collective aims of the National Park. The application is accordingly recommended for approval subject to conditions at the end of the report.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE AIMS OF THE NATIONAL PARK

Conserve and Enhance the Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Area

36. The works proposed are within the existing developed area of the centre and will not impact negatively on natural heritage. Indeed, the changes proposed would positively enhance the immediate landscape of the car park and re-vegetation of the car park embankment will take place with the advice of Scottish Natural Heritage. In terms of cultural heritage the proposal will help to interpret both the natural and cultural heritage of the area and its people based upon research that the artist has undertaken.

Promote Sustainable Use of Natural Resources

37. Granite will be sourced locally. It is also understood that the dry stone elements of the proposal will be undertaken by the same person that has previously carried out walling work at the site. An example of this work can be seen in the Mountain Garden at the site.

Promote Understanding and Enjoyment of the Area

38. The proposal clearly contributes to this aim. The project brings together the landscapes of the area with cultural heritage. The design features such as the viewpoint and story telling area emphasise sound as a way of helping people to appreciate the qualities of the area. The proposal will also lead to improvements to the all abilities route.

Promote Sustainable Economic and Social Development of the Area

39. As pointed out above the proposal will be constructed using local labour and local granite and will enhance the existing facilities at Cairngorm. The landscaping works will improve the facility for local people and schools as well as visitors. All of this can be considered to enhance the economic and social development of the area.

RECOMMENDATION

40. That Members of the Committee support a recommendation to: **GRANT** Full Planning Permission for pathworks, dyking, landscaping and artworks at Cairngorm Mountain Car Park, 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. A full report detailing the methods of construction and timing of construction and methods/location and storage of materials for all landscaped areas shown on the approved site plan shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Cairngorms National Park Authority, acting as Local Planning Authority in consultation with SEPA prior to the commencement of the development hereby approved. This report shall also identify all waste streams associated with the work and practices should be identified to minimise the use of raw materials and maximise the use of secondary aggregates and recyclable/renewable materials. This statement shall also include methods to prevent erosion, sedimentation and discolouration of controlled waters, along with contingency proposals. Measures should be incorporated to ensure that any fuels/chemicals from machinery do not result in pollution. The report shall also provide information regarding sources of seed and plants to be used (sources should be local to the site). The report should also set out a monitoring and maintenance programme for the development.
 3. Prior to the commencement of the development on site a detailed plan showing alterations to the gradient/surface of the ramp at the start of the all abilities path shall be submitted to and agreed in writing by the CNPA acting as planning authority.

4. Detailed scale drawings of the viewpoint/storytelling/seating areas showing bench heights and wall heights shall be submitted to and approved by the CNPA acting as Local Planning Authority prior to the commencement of the development hereby approved. The development shall be implemented in accordance with the approved details.
5. Prior to the commencement of the development hereby approved a sample section of dry stone dyking shall be erected on site for the approval of the Cairngorms National Park Authority acting as Local Planning Authority. Dry stone dyking at the site shall then be carried out in accordance with the approved sample.

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31 January 2006

The map on the first page of this report has been produced to aid in the statutory process of dealing with planning applications. The map is to help identify the site and its surroundings and to aid Planning Officers, Committee Members and the Public in the determination of the proposal. Maps shown in the Planning Committee Report can only be used for the purposes of the Planning Committee. Any other use risks infringing Crown Copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings. Maps produced within this Planning Committee Report can only be reproduced with the express permission of the Cairngorms National Park Authority and other Copyright holders. This permission must be granted in advance.