
CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

Title: REPORT ON CALLED-IN PLANNING APPLICATION

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(DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT)

DEVELOPMENT PROPOSED: FULL PLANNING PERMISSION FOR THE UPGRADING OF AN EXISTING ACCESS TRACK AT THE SKI CENTRE, CAIRNWELL, BRAEMAR.

REFERENCE: 08/140/CP

APPLICANT: GLENSHEE LTD., SKI CENTRE, CAIRNWELL, BRAEMAR.

DATE CALLED-IN: 18 APRIL 2008

RECOMMENDATION : APPROVE WITH CONDITIONS

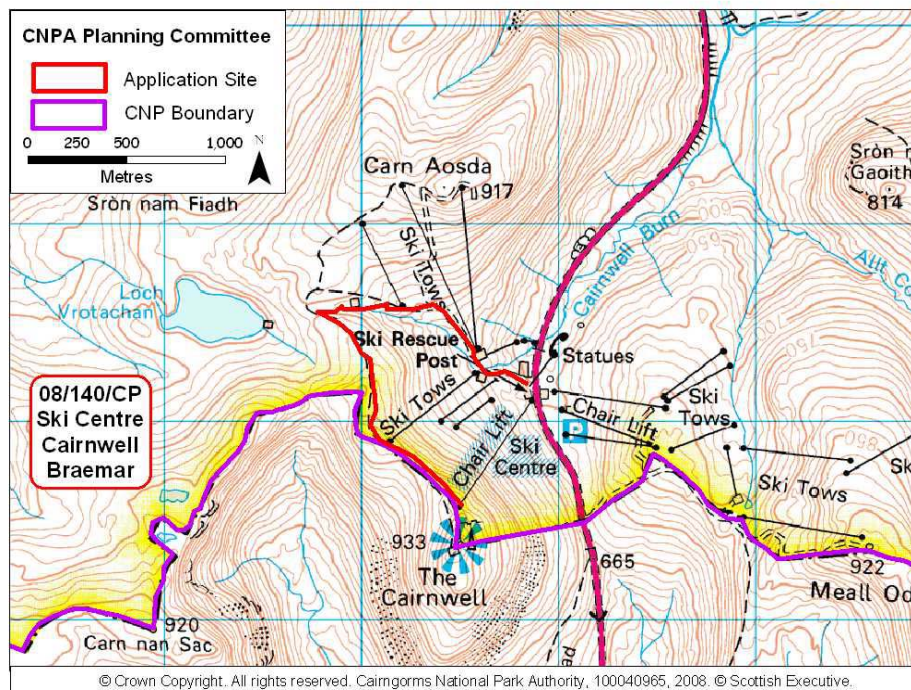


Fig. 1 - Location Plan

SITE DESCRIPTION AND PROPOSAL

1. Full planning permission is being sought in this planning application for the upgrading of existing 'land rover' tracks at the Glenshee Ski Centre at Cairnwell, Braemar adjacent to the southern boundary of the National Park. For clarity, please note that the original development description as notified to the Cairngorms National Park Authority by Aberdeenshire Council referred to the 'upgrading of existing track and the formation of new tracks.' It has since been clarified that the proposal does not involve the formation of any new tracks. The track upgrading is proposed in order to facilitate their use for mountain biking activity. Reference is made in supporting information from the applicants, Glenshee Ltd., to mountain biking being a fast growing sport and the Company consider that utilising the facilities at Glenshee in the summer months for this activity would assist in diversifying activities at the Centre.



Fig. 2 : start of the cycle route at the top of the Cairnwell chairlift

2. The track which it is proposed to upgrade extends approximately 2.6 kilometres, from the top of the Cairnwell chairlift to its final descent at the rear of the main ski centre building. The track is part of a long established network of landrover tracks which have been utilised for many years by various estate and hill workers in vehicles. For the first 1.4 kilometres of the track, there are views towards Loch Vrotachan which lies to the north west / west, with the track being approximately 200 metres from the loch at its closest point. At this point the existing track forks, with one track leading uphill towards the summit of Carn Aosda while the track which would be utilised as part of the mountain biking route leads downhill in an easterly direction towards the Carn Aosda Hut before winding its way past several existing ski lifts and

tows.¹ At the point where the track crosses the Butcharts poma, it runs in a south easterly direction, past the octagonal shaped hill café building from where it descends steeply along the final part of the track towards the rear of the main group of ski centre buildings.

3. Proposed upgrading works include the removal of large loose sharp stones from various sections of the track and also improvements to sections of the track which have become badly defined, primarily due to vehicles avoiding difficult sections. The area of track particularly affected by this is across a peaty section close to the Carn Aosda Hut, approximately half way along the route. It is intended to improve this section of track to such an extent that it is clearly distinguishable and its use can be contained by all forms of transport. It is proposed to open up a borrow pit close to the track in order to extract base material in order to line the trench of the track, covering existing large sharp stones. If required a geotextile would be used as a barrier over any remaining soft areas.



Fig. 3 : a section of track as it extends downhill from the chairlift station



¹ Butcharts tow, Carn Aosda tow and the Butcharts Poma.

Fig. 4 : Existing section of track east of
the the Carn Aosda Hut.

Fig.5 : Existing track as it approaches
Butcharts Tow.

Background to the proposal

4. The main purpose in upgrading the existing track is to facilitate its use by mountain bikes during the summer months. By developing mountain biking activities the applicants consider that it would present a good opportunity to diversify. The buildings and services already at Glenshee are described by the applicants as offering excellent support facilities for potential users of the mountain bike trail, with facilities including shops, toilets and café.

Employment benefits

5. As already detailed the mountain bike trail would start at the top of the Cairnwell chairlift. The chairlift already operates during the summer season, with its operation being determined on a daily basis subject to demand and appropriate weather conditions. Each of the single chairs would be fitted with a removable hook in order to enable bikes to be attached and transported uphill with their owners. The applicants envisage that hours of operation² during the summer months would be from 09.30 to 16.30, with the possibility of a further hour of operation until 17.30 if there is adequate demand. It is hoped that the opportunity for mountain biking would result in a sufficient increase in summer activity at Glenshee to make it viable to extend the operating periods of the café and chairlift and generate full time employment rather than seasonal positions. Increased use of the chairlift is projected to secure three jobs on the chair, while a further three jobs could be created in the café. There is also a possibility that the shop would be opened to provide bike accessories and possibly bike rental. The applicants have highlighted the benefits of increased employment opportunities that could be derived from increased summer activity. Reference is made to the increasing difficulties in recruiting at the present time for employment limited to the winter season.³ Year round employment would improve recruitment opportunities and improve employee retention.

Initial development of mountain biking activity

6. The applicants have indicated in supporting information that the approach is being taken of upgrading and utilising existing tracks

² The hours of operation would be subject to weather conditions.

³ Approximately 70 people are employed at present in the peak winter season.

as an initial step in facilitating mountain biking activity at Glenshee, in essence as a means of testing this market. The point has been made by the applicants that Glenshee Ltd. is required to be self financing.⁴ While the long term goal may be to develop purpose built, professionally designed tracks, the ability to do this will depend financially on the success of the initial development. It is a strategy which the applicants themselves concede is a “less than ideal solution” but is nonetheless necessary as the construction of a brand new, professionally designed track is outside the financial remit of the company at present. However, if funds were to become available, having had the opportunity to test the market, Glenshee Ltd. would look to developing new purpose built routes in the future.

Management of mountain biking activity

7. The applicants are aware of the proximity of the existing track⁵ to a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest and have submitted information describing the management regimes that would be put in place to direct mountain bike users to the specific track. The mountain bike track would be clearly identified by wooden posts with distinctive neon banding being positioned along its left hand side at intervals of approximately 100 yards. The mountain bikers tickets which it is proposed to use have been designed to include ‘conditions of carriage’ advising of the requirement of adhering to the identified track and ensuring that that cyclists are aware of and do not stray from the track into the SSSI. It is also proposed to erect signage displaying information of a similar nature at the base and top stations of the chairlift.



Fig. 6 : example of proposed waymarker

⁴ Reference is made to other ski centres which fall within the boundaries of the Highland and Islands Enterprise area and therefore have more financial benefits.

⁵ At its closest point the track is approximately 75 metres to the east of the Cairnwell SSSI.

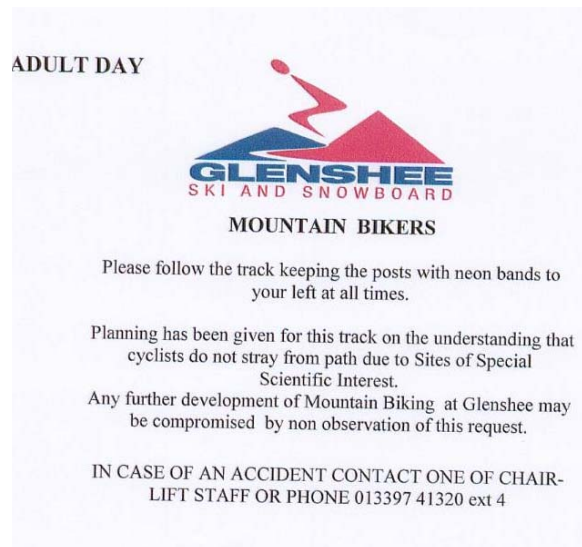


Fig. 7 : example of ticket and signage information

DEVELOPMENT PLAN CONTEXT

National Policy

8. Although this is an application for the upgrading of an existing hill track, as detailed earlier the main purpose of the upgrading works is essentially to facilitate mountain biking activity. In this respect **NPPG 11 – Sport, Physical Recreation and Open Space** is of relevance. A section entitled 'The Countryside : Sport and Recreation in Rural Areas' (paras.60 – 67) is of particular relevance, where it is acknowledged in addition to widespread participation in 'informal recreation' such as hill walking and rambling, that 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."
9. **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.”

10. Paragraphs 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.
11. **NPPG 12 – Skiing Developments** sets out general policies in relation to skiing developments. It emphasises the importance that existing ski centres can have for the rural economy while advising that this needs to be weighed up against the need for the conservation of natural heritage, including international and national designations. While mountain biking uses are not specifically mentioned, Paragraph 36 states that some of the facilities provided to support downhill skiing, such as chair lifts, can also be used to provide access to higher areas outwith the ski season. The benefits of this kind of alternative use, for the viability of the enterprise, through increased tourism, is acknowledged. However, it is also stated that the presence of a ski development should not carry with it an automatic presumption in favour of non-skiing uplift facilities and uses, unless such a use can be accommodated and managed without significant environmental damage.
12. **NPPG 14 - Natural Heritage** notes that attractive and ecologically rich environments where natural heritage is valued and cherished are essential to social and economic well-being. Para. 9 advises that conservation and development can often be fully compatible, and with careful planning the potential for conflict can be minimised. **NPPG 14** details the various national and international statutory designations and the objectives of designation. Para. 46 also makes reference to the fact that natural heritage is not confined to the statutorily designated areas, but is found throughout the countryside.

Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire Structure Plan 2001 – 2016 (North East Scotland Together, NEST)

13. The **Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire Structure Plan 2001-2016 (North East Scotland Together, NEST)** includes a section on Sport and Recreation which notes that the plan seeks to increase accessibility to sports facilities for all. Paragraph 3.34 describes how Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Council are committed to promoting better access to open space and the countryside through a network of footpaths, bridleways and cycling routes. **Policy 17** focuses on Countryside and Open Space Access advising that local plans should encourage and protect responsible access to open space and countryside. However it also advises that care must be taken to minimise detrimental impact on the environment.

Aberdeenshire Local Plan (2006)

14. The proposed site lies within an Area of Landscape Significance (Marr area). Areas of Landscape Significance have been identified as being important not only for their physical landforms, but also for the flora and fauna which they support and the environmental assets which they represent. **Policy Env\5B** states that development within or adjacent to an Area of Landscape Significance will not be permitted where its scale, location or design will detract from the quality or character of the landscape, either in part or in whole. In instances where development is acceptable, the highest standards of design will be expected, in terms of location, scale, siting, aesthetics and landscaping. **Policy Env\5B** specifically mentions that within the Cairngorms National Park greater weight will be given to the conservation and enhancement of the natural and cultural heritage of the area of the Park's aims are in conflict. The aim of the policy is to provide the best landscapes of Aberdeenshire and provide adequate protection against damaging development.
15. **Policy Env\21** discusses Vehicle Hill Tracks and states that "development involving vehicle hill tracks, insofar as it is not Permitted Development will be refused unless it can be integrated satisfactorily into the landscape and minimise detrimental impact, such as soil erosion, on the environment including habitats and watercourses." The aim of the policy is essentially to ensure that any new development is designed to fit with existing contours and existing landforms and landscape features. The design of tracks is required to minimise the need for engineering and road related earthworks.

16. **Policy Emp\10** of the Local Plan focuses on the subject of Sport, Leisure and Recreation. The policy indicates that new or improved facilities will be approved in principle if amongst other things they respect the character and amenity of the surrounding area, are located close to where people live and reduce the need to travel. In justifying the policy the importance of sport and recreational facilities to the quality of life, health and well being of both local communities and visitors is highlighted, as well as their being a recognition of the contribution of such facilities to the local economy of the area.
17. **Policy Env\2** details the policy in relation to National Nature Conservation Sites, stating that development which would have an adverse effect on a Site of Special Scientific Interest or a National Nature Reserve will be refused unless the developer proves :
 - (a) any significant adverse effects on the quality for which the area has been designated are clearly outweighed by social and economic benefits of national importance;
 - (b) the objectives of the designation and overall integrity of the area will not be compromised; and
 - (c) there is no alternative site for the development.
18. Access issues are touched upon in **Policy Env/22** of the **Aberdeenshire Local Plan**. The policy is intended to ensure that existing public access is protected and that future development does not restrict future opportunities for the extension of the public access network. The policy also states that encouragement will be given to new access routes which promote 'green transport' while not adversely affecting the land concerned.
- Cairngorms National Park Plan (2007)**
19. The **Cairngorms National Park Plan** sets out the strategic objectives that provide a long term framework for managing the National Park and working towards a 25 year vision. Under the broad heading of Conserving and Enhancing the Park, some of the strategic objectives include maintaining and enhancing the distinctive landscapes of the Park and also ensuring that development compliments the landscape character of the Park. Under the theme of Living and Working in the Park, the National Park is recognised as being a national asset and a place of recreation and enjoyment. One of the strategic objectives for economy and employment is to 'promote opportunities for economic diversification across all areas of the Park.' In discussing this, there is recognition that the Park has a relatively

narrow economic base, depending on a few sectors for employment and that many of the jobs associated with these sectors are seasonal and / or part time. The plan alludes to the fact that supporting appropriate opportunities for economic diversification has the potential to create higher paid, more permanent employment and also increases the resilience of the local economy to downturns within individual sectors.

20. Under the final theme of enjoying and understanding the park there is recognition that the Cairngorms National Park is known for its outstanding environment and outdoor recreation opportunities. The vision for the Park involves developing a world class destination and this requires a sustainable approach to developing tourism, and an excellent quality provision of outdoor access and recreation opportunities. The promotion and management of outdoor access, recreation and visitor services is considered to be an integral part of developing a sustainable approach to tourism and is also integral to land and water management and the conservation and enhancement of natural and cultural heritage. Some of the strategic objectives to achieve this third theme include maintaining a high quality environment by encouraging sound environmental management by those involved in tourism in the Park, strengthening and maintaining the viability of the tourism industry in the Park and also developing a wide range of opportunities for visitors to experience and enjoy the special qualities and distinctiveness of the Park.

Scottish Natural Heritage – Constructed Tracks in the Scottish Uplands

21. **Constructed Tracks in the Scottish Uplands** is a good practise guide published by Scottish Natural Heritage in 2005. Whilst it focuses to a large extent on the design, construction and maintenance of new tracks, it also includes advice on track enhancement and restoration. It is acknowledged in the document that there are a growing number of examples of poorly constructed tracks, many of which were developed several decades ago, and some of which created scars on hillsides. Track enhancement is considered to represent an opportunity to bring about environmental and also recreational benefits, as well as offering advantages for land management, for example by allowing easier access across an estate at different times of the year.

CONSULTATIONS

22. The **Transportation and Infrastructure (Roads)** section of Aberdeenshire Council has assessed the proposal and noted that the tracks are not directly connected to the public road. The existing parking facilities in the area are described as being long established and would easily accommodate all vehicles that this development would be likely to generate.⁶
23. Aberdeenshire Council's **Flood Prevention and Coast Protection Unit** has also considered the proposal and has stated that it does not anticipate that there are any flooding issues and consequently the unit has no further comment to make.
24. **Scottish Natural Heritage** was consulted on the proposal and note in the response that the proposal lies adjacent to the boundary of the Cairnwell Site of Special Scientific Interest. Some concern is expressed that there is a possibility that mountain bikers would be tempted to use the evolved hillwalkers path that crosses the Cairnwell SSSI, in which case the rare plant communities associated with limestone outcrops at this site could be threatened by erosion or subsequent path repair works. However, despite this concern **SNH's** view is that the plant communities are not directly threatened by the proposal and the risk of an indirect impact is negligible but could potentially increase over time. The official position of **Scottish Natural Heritage** is one of no objection to the proposal. It is however recommended that conditions are attached in the event of the granting of planning permission. The recommended conditions include (a) that there is no encroachment of development activities beyond the development boundary and (b) that no construction vehicles, storage or dumping of construction material / debris should be permitted on land designated as SSSI. **SNH** also recommend that the Planning Authority consider the potential for mountain bike access to result in damage to sensitive habitats and plant species within the SSSI and suggest that this is an issue which may need to be kept under review and which may require management, for example through the provision of advice to cyclists.
25. The proposal has been considered by Braemar Community Council and a consultation response has been received conveying "enthusiastic support" for the proposal. The Community Council consider that the proposal would start to provide "some of the much needed diversification for Glenshee

⁶ Supporting information provided by the applicants suggests that an average of 20 – 30 cars per day might be expected at the facility. The existing car parking area at the ski centre can accommodate approximately 1,200 cars.

Ltd. which is essential if the Ski Centre is to survive." It is noted that it would provide additional employment in the area and would create a valuable and much needed additional visitor attraction. The response from the Community Council also requests that consideration of the proposal is undertaken as quickly as possible.

26. A response has been received from the CNPA's **Sustainable Tourism Officer** responding on behalf of the Economic and Social Development Group. Reference is made to the sustainable tourism strategy for the Cairngorms National Park which recognises the increasingly unreliable snow cover and the consequent threat to the local economy and the associated suggestion that snowsports are positioned as one of many activities rather than a stand alone product. The consultation response acknowledges that diversification of existing ski centres to provide year round activities has the potential to increase the financial viability of the business and secure year round local employment.
27. The response also recognises that mountain biking in Scotland is a fast growing market and comments that the development of carefully designed and built trails would be a logical diversification. However, some concern is expressed in this regard in relation to the specifics of this proposal, where it is noted that the proposal is simply to upgrade existing multi use tracks and it is questioned whether or not this would be attractive enough to mountain bikers as the target audience. Concern is also raised about the possibility of mountain bikers using the uplift provided to cycle outwith the ski area, particularly if not directed to specific mountain bike trails and associated features. Nonetheless there is a recognition that serious investment in infrastructure may not be possible due to financial constraints. The Sustainable Tourism Office accepts that there may be an argument for a trial period of mountain bike promotion on existing tracks whilst carrying out market research on the product. Overall, the conclusion from the **Economic and Social Development Group** is one of general support for the upgrading of the track in order to facilitate mountain biking provision within the ski centre and it is considered a welcome diversification.
28. The opening comments in the response from the CNPA's **Visitor Service and Recreation Group** refer to Outdoor Access Strategy for the Cairngorms National Park which is supportive of the development of cycling opportunities in the Park. It is however stated that the support is based on the principles of professionally engineered routes (policy 13) which use high standard

specification and design (policy 1) and adopt best practice standards (policy 6).

29. In terms of the physical aspects of the track the response from the **Visitor Services and Recreation Group** refers to the steep gradients along some of the track, for example in the upland area near the Tiger chairlift and also on the last descent from the hill café to the main building. The steep gradient could result in the route being quite challenging in terms of technical difficulty, particularly when coupled with the nature of the surface terrain, which is covered with varying sizes of loose sharp stones. It is also suggested that cyclists when faced with rough or wet sections of track are likely to try and avoid them by going around and there is therefore potential for 'braiding' to occur, which would be to the detriment of the landscape and the natural heritage.
30. In discussing the quality of the proposed track upgrade and its suitability as a mountain bike route, **VSRG** comment that visitors to Glenshee who are seeking a downhill mountain biking experience will inevitably compare it with purpose built facilities such as Wolftrax at Laggan or the Witches Trails at the Nevis Range and such comparisons are likely to be unfavourable given that the Glenshee track would not be specifically surfaced or designed with mountain biking in mind. Concern is expressed that its use as a mountain biking route the project may "fall between two stools" as the route would not be 'extreme' compared to other bespoke facilities, offering too little in the way of designed technical interest for more experienced bikers while at the opposite end of the spectrum it would probably be too challenging for the family market, with some difficult and steep sections.
31. **VSRG** speculate that there is a risk in having a poor quality experience that people would not want to return or alternatively they would seek other routes off the hill, which could potentially result in further degradation to the natural heritage of the area. In order to reduce such a risk the **Visitor Services and Recreation Group** suggest that the developer should identify a system for managing visitors to the site in order to encourage them to use the identified track and thereby avoid the formation of informal tracks and erosion of other trails and the open hillside.
32. Following the receipt of additional information from the applicants detailing their proposed mechanisms for managing mountain biking visitors **VSRG** have commented that the issue is addressed by the "conditions of carriage" on the sale of the uplift ticker. However, it is commented in the consultation

response that the **Visitor Services and Recreation Group** would like to work closely with the operators at Glenshee in order to ensure that the conditions stated on the day ticket “follow on from a responsible behaviour etiquette rooted in the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and reflect people’s need to respect the environment.” In order to achieve this it is recommended that the wording on signage and day tickets be amended and agreed with the CNPA prior to the upgraded track being promoted as a mountain biking route.



Fig. 8 : final downhill descent towards ski centre buildings

33. It is the view of the **Visitor Services and Recreation Group** that if the proposal was purely to upgrade existing vehicle tracks to make them more sustainable there would appear to be little concern, although **VSRG** comment that a judgement as to whether or not the proposed upgrading works would result in a standard of track sustainable by vehicle use, particularly over existing softer areas of the track, is one which falls outwith the remit or expertise of the group.
34. The proposal has also been assessed by the CNPA's **Heritage and Land Management Group** and comments noted that there are two landscape issues to take into account. The first landscape impact identified is in relation to the upgrading works across the more open peat section in the middle of the track, while the second impact is likely to arise from the possibility of cyclists venturing away from the ski area into the open hillside. As detailed earlier the applicants provided details of the efforts which would be made in relation to the management of mountain bike users on the track.

35. The response from the landscape officer also suggested that this application could possibly be used to address some of the factors which give rise to landscape concerns in relation to the ski centre. For example it was suggested that redundant and broken features such as snow fencing and signage could be removed. The landscape officer also suggests that consideration could be given to the possibility of removing some of the existing snow fencing in the summer months in order to improve the visual quality of the area and allow unfettered views of the mountains.
36. This is a point which was subsequently explored with the applicants, who advised although it is not intended to remove snow fencing in conjunction with the development proposal fencing is repaired or replaced as part of an on going maintenance programme. Existing fencing in the vicinity of the subject route would however be inspected and any hazards would be rectified.

REPRESENTATIONS

37. No representations have been received in respect of the proposed development.

APPRAISAL

38. The main issues to consider in this application relate to the principle of the development, the nature of the proposal including its construction and the associated implications, particularly on the natural heritage designations adjacent to the proposed development area, and also consideration of its contributions towards the provision of access in the area.

Established Use

39. As detailed earlier in this report, the proposal is purely for the upgrading of an existing track although the work is proposed to be undertaken primarily to facilitate and encourage the use of the upgraded track, in conjunction with existing uplift facilities, for downhill mountain biking activity. The track has been in existence for several years and is clearly identified on Ordnance Survey maps of the area. It continues to be used when the need arises by vehicles accessing estate lands, as well as vehicles associated with the operation of the ski centre, for example by contractors and other workers repairing and maintaining ski infrastructure in the area. Under the Scottish Outdoor Access

Code it is also available for use for general access, including use by cyclists. In the course of a site visit I encountered several hillwalkers ascending the track. Although the track which is the subject of this application could be used to access a wider network of tracks extending into the hills, the extent of upgrading works (and any subsequent promotion of the route for mountain biking) is contained within the boundaries of the ski centre area.

Planning policy compliance

40. Given that the proposed track upgrade is primarily intended to facilitate its use for mountain biking activity, national planning policy as expressed in **NPPG 11 – Sport, Physical Recreation and Open Space** and also **NPPG 12 – Skiing Development** is relevant. The policies which have been detailed in paragraphs 8 to 11 of this report all generally encourage increased recreational opportunities in the rural area, where they can be reconciled with the need to conserve the natural heritage of an area. The upgrading of a track within the ski centre area to facilitate mountain biking activity is consistent with **NPPG 12** which encourages the use of skiing facilities to provide access and recreation opportunities outside the ski season. The potential economic benefit of increased recreational activity in rural areas is also alluded to in both of the aforementioned planning guidance documents. The need for diversified activity at Glenshee ski centre outside the core winter ski months, is a necessity which has been referred to by the applicants in their supporting documentation and it is a case which has been recognised in consultation responses from **Braemar Community Council** as well as the CNPA's **Visitor Services and Recreation Group** and also the **Economic and Social Development Group**. The approach that is being taken at Glenshee is consistent with planning guidance. Diversification at Glenshee is being considered on a small scale basis, as finances permit, with the proposed track upgrade representing the start of diversification activities which would build on established facilities at the ski centre. The proposal to upgrade and improve the existing track is also consistent with the general approach advocated in the **SNH** document "Constructed Tracks in the Scottish Upland" with track enhancement being viewed as an opportunity to bring about environmental improvements as well as creating recreational opportunities.
41. In terms of planning policy as expressed in the Structure Plan and Local Plan there are few policies directly applicable to the nature of this proposal. Given the established nature of the track and the fact that the extent of works proposed is confined to upgrading activity it is not appropriate to treat the proposal as a

new vehicle hill track (as referred to in **Policy Env\21** of the Aberdeenshire Local Plan). However, the overall aim of that policy is generally applicable as it seeks to ensure that hill track development is designed to fit with existing contours, existing landforms and landscape features. In choosing to upgrade an existing track as opposed to developing a new track specifically for mountain biking activity the impact of the development would be minimised and contained to the existing man made feature. In doing so it represents a conscious effort to fit the development to the landforms and features of the area. Given that the primary purpose of the proposal to upgrade the existing track is to encourage and promote its use as a mountain biking track it is worth noting that there are no specific planning policies which cover mountain bike trail proposals.

Benefits to multiple users

42. The existence of a variety of infrastructure at the Glenshee Ski Centre, including the chairlift, buildings accommodating a cafe, shop, and toilet facilities as well as the availability of ample existing car parking, provides an ideal base for the diversification of activities to provide recreational opportunities. Mountain biking opportunities are an example of diversification possibilities and this activity is the main motivation behind the proposed upgrading works. However, the benefits of an upgraded track to all users should not be ignored. An improved track which links to the Cairnwell chairlift could also encourage increased use of the track by walkers, particularly those wishing to experience the uplift system and then descend on foot to the base buildings via an improved track, with associated new signage / route markings. In addition, given that the track is already utilised by vehicles, the improvements would also be of benefit, particularly in more clearly defining the route of the track across an area of peatland in the middle section. The proposed improvement works, including the use of a geotextile membrane where necessary, should eradicate the practice of vehicles meandering off the track in order to avoid the more 'difficult' areas, thereby confining the impacts of vehicular use to the defined track.

Impacts on the wider area

43. As evidenced from the consultation section of this report, some concern has been expressed from both the CNPA's **Visitor Services and Recreation Group** and also the **Economic and Social Development Group** regarding the fact that the upgrading of existing tracks in the area may not adequately meet the requirements or expectations of the growing mountain biking market, particularly given that other locations offer

purpose built, specifically designed mountain bike trails, catering for varying levels of ability. Whilst it is the case that the upgrading works are on existing tracks that would continue to have a multi use function which at the same time would be marketed by Glenshee Ski Centre for admission based mountain biking activity, the issue of the viability or appeal to its target market of a mountain biking operation at this location is largely beyond the parameters of this planning application. I accept the case that has been advanced by the applicants to justify the approach that is being taken at present of undertaking the limited extent of the works proposed. This is in order to facilitate a level of mountain biking activity which would provide some indication of the potential level of demand or interest, prior to embarking on any further plans for specialist mountain biking trails which would inevitably require significant financial outlay and could potentially have an increased impact on the natural heritage and landscape features of the area.

44. The main context in which the use of the track for promoted mountain biking activities becomes of concern would be in the event of mountain bikers deviating beyond the identified track, resulting in potential encroachment into the nearby Site of Special Scientific Interest. In response to concerns raised in a number of consultation responses on this point, including in particular concerns expressed by **Scottish Natural Heritage** the applicants provided an indication of the management measures that would be put in place to safeguard against such a situation. Having regard in particular to the concerns expressed about the potential encroachment into the designated areas, and the fact that the applicants have acknowledged that the upgrading of the track and its associated promotion for mountain biking is on a type of test basis, I consider that it would be prudent in the event of consideration being given to the granting of planning permission to restrict use of the track for admission based mountain biking activity to a temporary period, in order to allow an opportunity to review the impact of mountain biking use on the upgraded track and the wider area in the future. This issue has been discussed with the applicants and they are amenable to such a condition.
45. Finally, in discussing the landscape impacts of the proposed track upgrade, it is necessary to acknowledge that the existing track is in an elevated upland location, and is visible at present from areas to the north and east in particular, including from the A93 trunk road. However, the extent of upgrading works are limited, consisting mostly of repair works including elements of surfacing. The work does not involve increases in track width or

the formation of any new areas of track. Whilst resurfaced areas may temporarily become more noticeable when viewed from the surrounding areas, the overall visual and landscape impact would be negligible when considered in the overall context of its location within the ski centre boundaries, amidst the existing accumulation of ski apparatus.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE AIMS OF THE NATIONAL PARK

Conserve and Enhance the Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Area

46. The proposal to upgrade an existing track would not in itself conserve or enhance the natural heritage of the area. However, the improvement works would provide a clearly defined route which should deter users, particularly those borne by vehicle, from deviating off route, thereby lessening the impact on adjacent land.

Promote Sustainable Use of Natural Resources

47. The majority of the required material for the upgrading of the track would be sourced from an adjacent borrow pit which it is proposed to temporarily open. In addition, the work is to be carried out by employees at Glenshee Ski Centre.

Promote Understanding and Enjoyment of the Area

48. The proposed upgrading of existing tracks would assist in providing a new recreational activity at Glenshee and could therefore have the potential to provide increased opportunities for the general enjoyment of the area.

Promote Sustainable Economic and Social Development of the Area

49. The upgrading of existing tracks in the area and their associated use for mountain biking activity would contribute positively towards the local economy and could result in the creation of additional job opportunities or increased job security year round at this ski centre location.

RECOMMENDATION

That Members of the Committee support a recommendation to:

Grant full planning permission for the upgrading of an existing track at Glenshee Ski Centre, Cairnwell, Braemar, subject to the following conditions:

1. The development to which this permission relates must be begun within 5 years from the date of this permission.
2. Any promotion of admission based mountain biking use of the upgraded track shall be for a temporary period only which shall expire at the end of five years from the date on which the development commenced.
3. Prior to the commencement of development, a management plan (for the regulation of the use of the track for admission based mountain biking activity) shall be submitted for the agreement of the Cairngorms National Park Authority acting as Planning Authority. For the avoidance of doubt, this scheme, shall include details relating to access to the top of the track; restrictions on access outwith the site and usage of the trails; signage and waymarking; staffing of the operation; and any upgrades of existing boundary fencing. Thereafter, the agreed scheme shall be implemented on an on-going basis
4. Prior to the commencement of development, a construction method statement for the upgrading of the track shall be submitted for the agreement of the Cairngorms National Park Authority acting as Planning Authority. Thereafter, the agreed construction method statement shall be implemented to the satisfaction of the CNPA acting as Planning Authority.
5. Prior to the commencement of development, details of a programme of works for the on-going maintenance of the upgraded track and associated signage which is to be erected shall be submitted for the written agreement of the Cairngorms National Park Authority, acting as Planning Authority. Thereafter, the agreed scheme/schedule shall be implemented on an on-going basis, all to the satisfaction of the CNPA acting as Planning Authority.

6. Prior to the commencement of development a site location plan shall be submitted for the written agreement of the Cairngorms National Park Authority acting as Planning Authority to identify the precise location of the proposed temporary borrow pit. Details shall also be submitted for the written agreement of the CNPA of the size and extent of the borrow pit, as well as full restoration proposals, including an indication of the timescale for restoration.
7. There shall be no encroachment of development activities beyond the identified development boundary of the track.
8. No construction vehicles and / or storage and / or dumping of construction material / debris shall be permitted on land adjacent land which is designated as the Cairnwell Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Advice note:

The applicants are advised to liaise with the CNPA's Visitor Services and Recreation Group regarding the information content of signage on the trails.

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