

Hill road upgrades and the planning system – Strone three years on

Description



View over to the Allt na Beinne from near the wildcat trail behind Newtonmore. The track from Strone visible beyond (mid-picture). Note the deer fence, part of an extensive network of new fences on the Pitmain and Glen Banchor estates, and the crow trap beyond.

On Saturday I walked up the Strone road as part of a round of the Monadhliath. It is almost three years since I first blogged about the “improvements” that were being carried out on this road and considered the implications for the planning system ([see here](#)). The Cairngorms National Park Authority, to their credit, then decided that because of the extensive nature of the work, it should require full planning permission. Eighteen months later they completed negotiations and granted planning consent subject to a number of conditions. These were finally agreed in December 2019 ([see here for planning papers](#)).

2019/0121/DET CONDITIONS 1 AND 4



Plan of track showing culverts and borrow pits

Despite the time taken to agree them, the planning documents are quite brief. The key proposals for how the track might be brought up to the standards one should expect in a National Park are covered in a couple of pages:

PROPOSED RESURFACING OF EXISTING HILL TRACK:

The existing hill tracks are for land management and sporting purposes only for management of sheep and deer in areas.

Track resurfacing to be of locally won materials with banks and ditches to be turfed in one sitting. i.e. turfs will only be moved once in order to protect heather, surface vegetation and underlying peat. Turf will be skimmed off and used to cover or fill ditches promoting re-growth as well as drainage to keep surface water to a minimum. Visual impact will be minimised by following the existing tracks and contours of the land. This will also mitigate poaching and rutting during winter management operations by avoiding steep inclines where practicable.

All tracks deviating from the existing track route will be turfed over, thus migrating any informal tracks into one hill track minimising disturbance to peat surfaces and heather cover.

The track maintenance programme will be an integral part of the efforts to restore and improve the biodiverse habitat which requires much greater flock management and targeted deer control.

SPECIFICATION:

Materials to be used in the resurfacing of the track base to be of good quality granular material with less than 15% silt content. Material to be placed and compacted in layers not exceeding 200mm thick. Note the degree of compaction depends on the moisture content of the material being placed. Road surface finished with 100 to 150mm crushed rock. Approximate proposed track width to be 2.5metres wide.

Track will be no more than 2.5m in width. Central vegetation along the whole of the track will be no less than 0.75m in width

This succinct proposal provides quite a contrast to the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority where planning applications are accompanied by reams of paper which often make it very difficult to ascertain what exactly has been agreed.



The lowest section of track is quite level and the upgrade work first became obvious where it steepens up by a beautiful wooded area.

It is, however, what happens on the ground that counts. At first sight I was not impressed, with the first steep section of track appearing at risk of serious erosion.



Boundary between finished and unfinished road surface marked by end of central vegetated strip

It was only higher up that it became clear that this was work still in progress. Unfortunately, although the Scottish Planning Portal allows the start and end dates of work on developments granted planning permission to be recorded, neither of our National Parks use this facility. With planning permission lasting three years, this makes it very difficult for any member of the public concerned about a development in a remote area to monitor what is going on. My visit at this stage in the development was pure chance. A lost opportunity for our National Park Authorities, who talk a good game about making more use of volunteers, to empower outdoor recreationists to help monitor developments in our hills.



Note how the centre of the road has been raised so that water is shed either side. This prevents the road turning into a watercourse

From where it steepened, a new surface had been added to the road – as per the planning application – and a new drainage ditch excavated, but neither had been finished.



The plastic culverts were not just marked on the plan, they had been concealed and finished, something that happens all too rarely on hill roads.

The basic quality of the work appeared good, .



Note not just the vegetated strip but how the banks of the drainage ditch have also been surfaced with vegetation. The vegetation to do this has been “robbed” from either side.

Further up it became clear that the contractors were working from the top down to complete the surface of the track. The specification, which was for a 2.5m road with a 75mm vegetated strip down the middle, has been strictly observed. While arguably the work might have been better done in the Spring, allowing time for the translocated plants to put down roots, if it survives the winter the landscape impact by this time next year should be very little.



Sphagnum moss, which thrives in bogs, used to cover a short section of the central strip. The erosion on the left of the road appears to have been caused by sheep (see below).

While it is amazing what skilled operators of diggers can do, they do still make mistakes. That is why all work on hill tracks needs to be actively monitored and the workforce advised to change their practice where necessary.



Sheep prints were visible along much of the vegetated edges of the road

A much bigger issue is that grazing animals, primarily sheep, have trampled over much of the vegetated sides of the road helping to break it up and destroy the vegetation before it has taken root. This damage, which is in no-one's interests, could be prevented if planning consents for hill roads included a standard condition requiring farm animals to be removed until vegetation has recovered.

In terms of landscape impact, the line of original road was well chosen and is generally hidden from a afar. I identified two concerns about the design. The first is that a couple of sections exceed 14°, the recommended maximum angle for hill roads. While the addition of vegetation to the raised central strip will help reduce the risk of erosion, it is unlikely to prevent it completely. Future maintenance is therefore likely to be an ongoing issue but any alternative route would have had a much greater landscape impact.



The second is the turning circle at the top of the road. There is no need for it. It significantly increases the landscape impact of the road but has also required the destruction of peat to create the new drainage ditch. This should never have been agreed, particularly when the owner of Glen Banchor is being paid public money to restore damaged peatbog elsewhere on the estate ([see here](#)).

The implications for the planning system in the National Park

Having taken action to remove the unlawful Glen Clova hill road ([see here](#)) and require retrospective planning applications for a number of hill roads on Speyside, land owners and land managers should now be getting the message from the Cairngorms National Park Authority that multi-purpose hill roads need to be approved through the planning system. That is very welcome, even if there is still some way to go.

While I have made a number of criticisms/suggestions in this post, generally the work done on the

Strone hill road appears to raise the bar in terms of the standards to be expected in our National Parks and that is also very welcome. In particular, the CNPA appears to be listening to organisations concerned about the landscape. The requirements for a central vegetated strip appear to have been agreed after strong representations on this point from the North East Mountain Trust.

Besides the detailed design issues, it is very important that the road stops where it does and is not extended further into the wild coire lying between A'Chailleach and Carn Sgulain:



Carn Sgulain centre, A'Chailleach left. The large faint patch in the centre of the photo results from heather dying off, possibly due to old age.

Unlike other parts of the Glen Banchor estate, above the end of the road there is little sign of grouse

moor or deer management until you approach the summit of Cairn Sgulain:



In my post first on the Strone road I suggested that while all new hill roads should require full planning permission, upgrades could potentially be decided under the Prior Notification system as long as the estate had agreed a specification for such work with the Planning Authority. In such cases they could simply submit the specification and a map showing the extent of the proposed works. Effectively, this is what has happened (eventually) with the Strone hill road. This could potentially incentivise all landowners to develop agreed specifications for road upgrades, based on none being more than 2.5m wide and all have vegetated central strips. On the downside, however, it would also reduce the income Planning Authorities receive, reducing their ability to monitor such work effectively given current financial constraints..

The Strone case does show, however, that good quality hill road upgrades do not necessarily require reams of paper. My suspicion is that it is the commitment of planning staff, the support they get from their managers, their relationship with landowners and contractors, and having the time to monitor development work is what really counts. We need to value professionalism more than bureaucracy.

Category

- 1. Cairngorms

Tags

- 1. CNPA
- 2. hill tracks
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