

The folly at Cairn Gorm – work starts on the repair of the funicular

Description



View of the repair works from above the mid-station, with compound on left and pillars 51,52 and 53 visible

On 3rd November Highlands and Islands Enterprise announced that work to repair the funicular had started ([see here](#)). A large number of planning documents were published on the Cairngorms National Park Authority Planning portal the week before ([see here](#)). Among these is a timetable for the works:

Our programme is based on the following Key Dates:

- Signed Delivery Agreement, issue of IFC drawings & Planning Consent – 10th August 2020
- Issue IFC information including Design Check Certificate – 10th August 2020
- Programmed commencement on site – 7th September 2020
- Earliest Bearing Delivery – 25th November 2020
- BB completion of strengthening works & handover documentation – 18th December 2021
- DoT full sign-off – 23rd December 2021
- Reinstatement and demobilisation complete – 13th December 2021
- Contract Completion Date 3rd February 2022

Extract from Balfour Beatty's Construction Method Statement

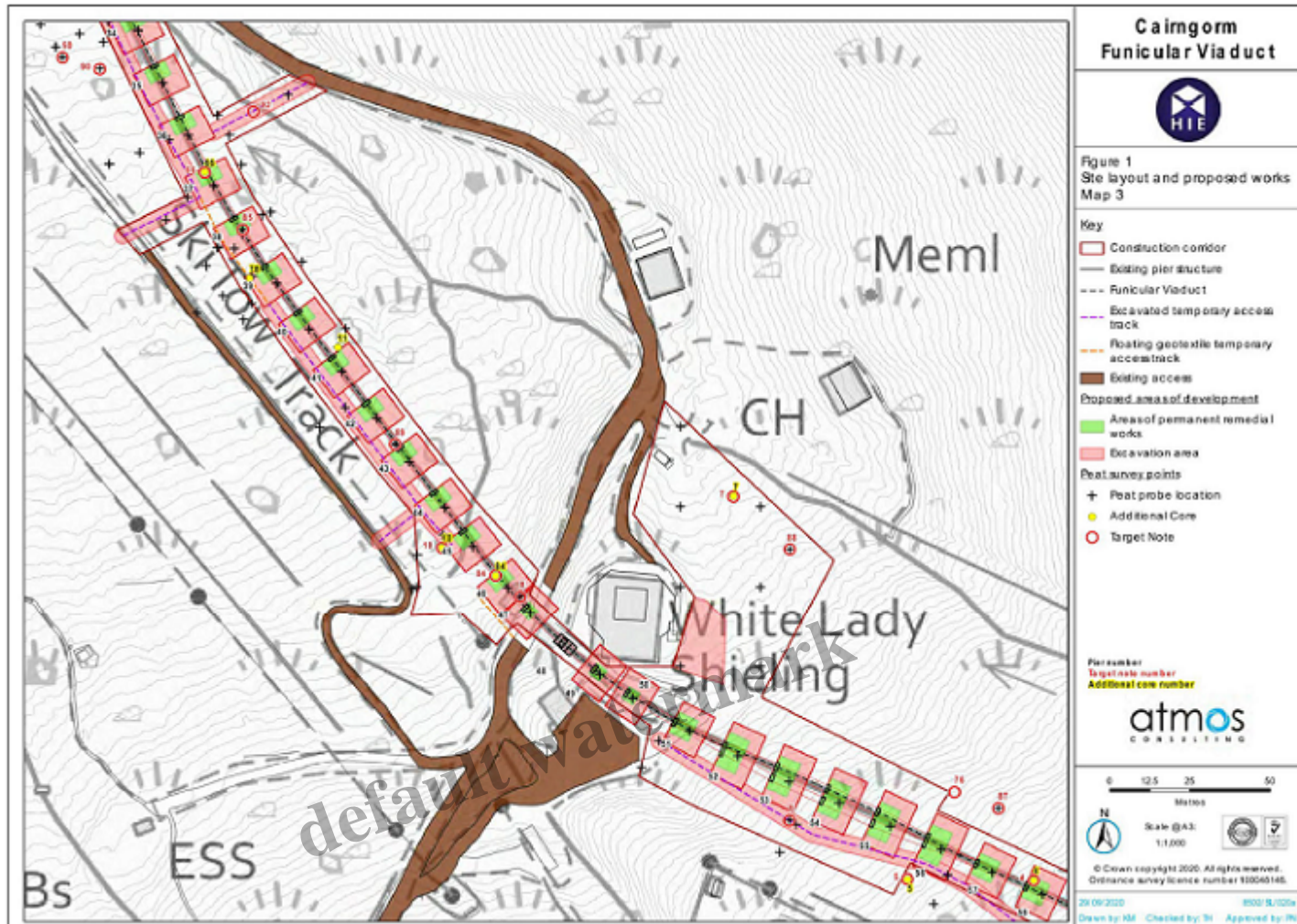
It would appear work has commenced two months late. There was no explicit mention of this in HIE's news release which says the intention is to *"bring the Cairngorm funicular railway back into service in winter 2021/22"*. But it explains the statement in the news release from Douglas Cowan, Director of Communities and Place at HIE that:

"The plan is to keep working for as long as possible during what remains of 2020, then resume as early as we can in the new year. That way, we can continue to keep the project on track to resume the service as planned in winter 2021/22."

Unfortunately, while the CNPA appears to have done a good job in requiring HIE and Balfour Beatty to produce detailed plans for how they will protect the natural environment, it had set no conditions specifying when the work might be done. Working through the winter is very high risk from an environmental perspective. For example, the surface of the new temporary access road (foreground of photo) will be exposed to both freeze thaw action and potentially large volumes of snow melt and could turn into a burn. It would appear at high risk of washing away, with the potential to create further serious damage below. Moreover, while the CNPA has required the turves to be carefully stored and re-used (they are visible in the photo by the side of the new road), the chance of this happening if they are left in situ for the next year appears very low.

It is of serious concern that in the first few days already parts of the plans appear to have been ignored.

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The dotted purple line shows the temporary access road. This starts by Pillar 51 (pictured in photo above) just to the right of the brown laydown area. Document credit CNPA planning portal

In the planning consent the CNPA required HIE/Balfour Beatty to provide information about the micro-siting of the temporary access road. The map from the site layout and works overview document, published on 30th October, shows the temporary access road, which will extend between pillars 51 and 63, running close to the funicular. The photo suggests the road is now being constructed on a different line. How map or photo fit with the claim in the Construction Method Statement that Balfour Beatty intended to uncover the original temporary construction road is unclear.

The photo also shows a yellow digger on what appears to be another road being excavated towards the area between pillars 51 and 52. That does not appear on any plans. The issue is that the further the temporary access road is located away from the funicular, the greater the number of spurs will be needed to access the funicular and the more ground that will be disturbed. On current evidence much of slope could be dug up. It seems clear that the CNPA needs to start monitoring the works at Cairn Gorm on an almost daily basis if the repairs to the funicular are not to create far more damage than its original construction (which was undertaken with the greatest care).

The CNPA should also be mindful of Drumochter, where Balfour Beatty was the contractor for the Beaully Denny powerline where so much damage has been done to what was supposed to be one of Scotland's most protected areas ([see here](#)). The restoration efforts there were pitiful and the same

most not be allowed to happen at Cairn Gorm. Just how HIE could have selected Balfour Beatty as contractor for the works at Cairn Gorm, without any competition or any consideration of their record working in sensitive areas, is another question the Scottish Parliament's Audit and Post Legislative Scrutiny Committee ([see here](#)) should be asking.

The masterplan and the snow factory

Meantime, following the consultation earlier this year and the vision HIE launched in the summer ([see here](#)), there is still no sign of a masterplan for Cairn Gorm. After a spate of planning applications earlier this year, there was a lull over the summer before Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd submitted another application on 28th August ([see here for papers](#)) requesting an extension of the temporary planning for the snow factory in the Coire Cas car park for another year:

Description of Proposal

Please describe the proposal including any change of use: * (Max 500 characters)

Section 42 application to not comply with the provisions of Condition 1 of Planning Permission 19/04135/S42 . This application seeks the replacement of the current cessation date of 'November 19th 2020' with a revised date of 'November 19th 2021'.

Is this a temporary permission? *

Yes No

Description of Proposal Cont.

Please state how long permission is required for and why: * (Max 500 characters)

An additional one year. The intention is to relocate the snow factory to a more appropriate location. This relocation has been the subject of pre-application discussions with the planning authorities. A planning application will be submitted as soon as possible. The finalisation, submission, and subsequent consideration and determination of that application could run well into 2021. This S42 application therefore seeks the extension of the current temporary permission to cover this.

Two and a half months later there is still no sign of an application proposing a permanent application for the snow factory. Edward Mountain, MSP, in an article for the Strathy which called for structural changes in the way Cairn Gorm is managed ([see here](#)), last week put the issues succinctly when he stated:

“And we also need to sort out getting the snow to the top of the mountain – and not pushing snow uphill from a snow station that’s been built at one of the lowest points.”

The snow factory is in the worst possible place and the Cairngorms National Park Authority was right to call-in the planning application from Highland Council. What they can do is another question. It seems likely that having so far failed to come up with a coherent plan for downhill skiing, HIE now cannot move the snow factory without this interfering with the repair work on the funicular. If that is so, it has hard to see the snow factory being much use for next year either.



Photo taken end of October

Meantime work on smoothing the slopes near the Day Lodge to create the new beginner's ski area ([see here](#)) appears to have finished. While it is not all peat soup, apart from the environmental destruction (one wonders what impact a flash flood would have on this), it is difficult to think of a worse surface for artificial snow.



Unless the whole slope is frozen by a very hard frost, it looks as though much of the artificially created snow from the machines will melt into the mire. CMSL has announced these are due to start operating next week, planning permission or not. The evidence suggests that HIE's claims that flattening this slope would improve snow retention is very much in the balance and that, whatever the weather, there is little for downhill skiers to look forward to at Cairn Gorm this winter.

Parkswatch intends to take a further look at the new funicular repair planning documents in due course and try and monitor closely what is happening on the ground. If you are passing by, do take photos (the good, the bad, the ugly, it's the evidence that matters) and send them to me, Nickkempe@parkswatchscotland.co.uk.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. CNPA
3. conservation
4. hill tracks

- 5. planning
- 6. restoration

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