

HIE's abuse of the planning system at Cairn Gorm - magic carpets and the snow factory

## Description



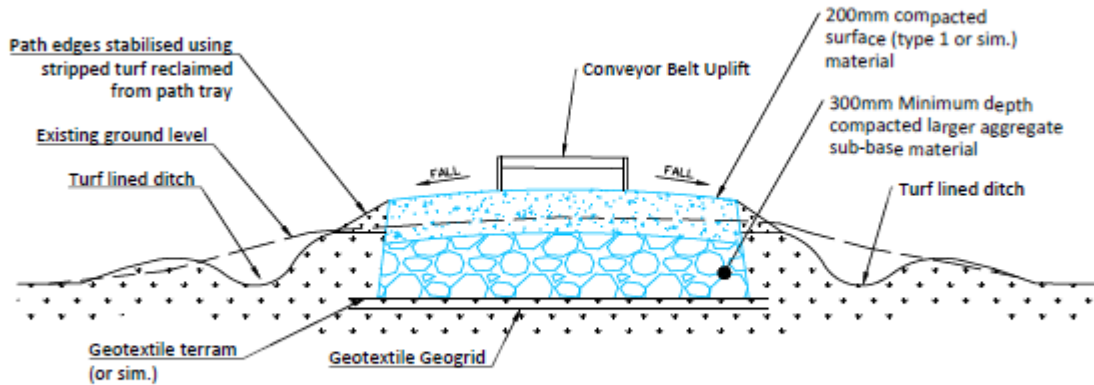
The bottom section of the magic carpet or is it? Photo credit Ayrshire Lad

[NB a postscript has been added to the post to take account of response from CNPA planners]

In the last couple of weeks parkswatch has been sent several photos of works at Cairngorms by readers. Initially I thought this photo showed construction work on the magic carpet which Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) announced had started ten days ago ([see here](#)). The magic carpet formed part of the planning application to construct family mountain bike trails in the lower part of Coire Cas which the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) approved in May ([see here](#)).

However, the digger appears far larger - it must be over ten foot broad - and the track far wider than what could conceivably be required to construct and support a magic carpet. While these can

come in several widths, the maximum would normally be about three foot. If HIE had wanted to minimise the impact on the natural environment at Cairn Gorm and the cost they could have used much smaller diggers. I therefore checked the planning application ([see here](#)).



**Conveyor Belt Track Construction Detail**

Extract from planning document showing cross sections and that a 300mm sub base will be covered by a 200mm surface

While the diagrams do not show the scale – very poor practice – they do show the depth of material below the carpet: to be 500mm. If the diagram is remotely to scale, the width of the base would appear to be about three times that, or 1.5m, and the magic carpet itself about 50mm wide. So why is HIE creating a track three times the width of what would be required to support the magic carpet?

What is more 500mm of aggregate would never support a digger of the size and weight shown in the photo over boggy ground (note the amount of peat by the digger in the first photo). This suggests that HIE must be installing far more aggregate than was specified in the planning application and that is supported by the large piles of aggregate lying by the bottom of the construction track.



Photo credit Ayrshire Lad

To understand what might be going on you need to look at the planning application ([see here](#)) which is being currently considered by the CNPA to move the snow factory up the hill from its current location in the Coire Cas car park.

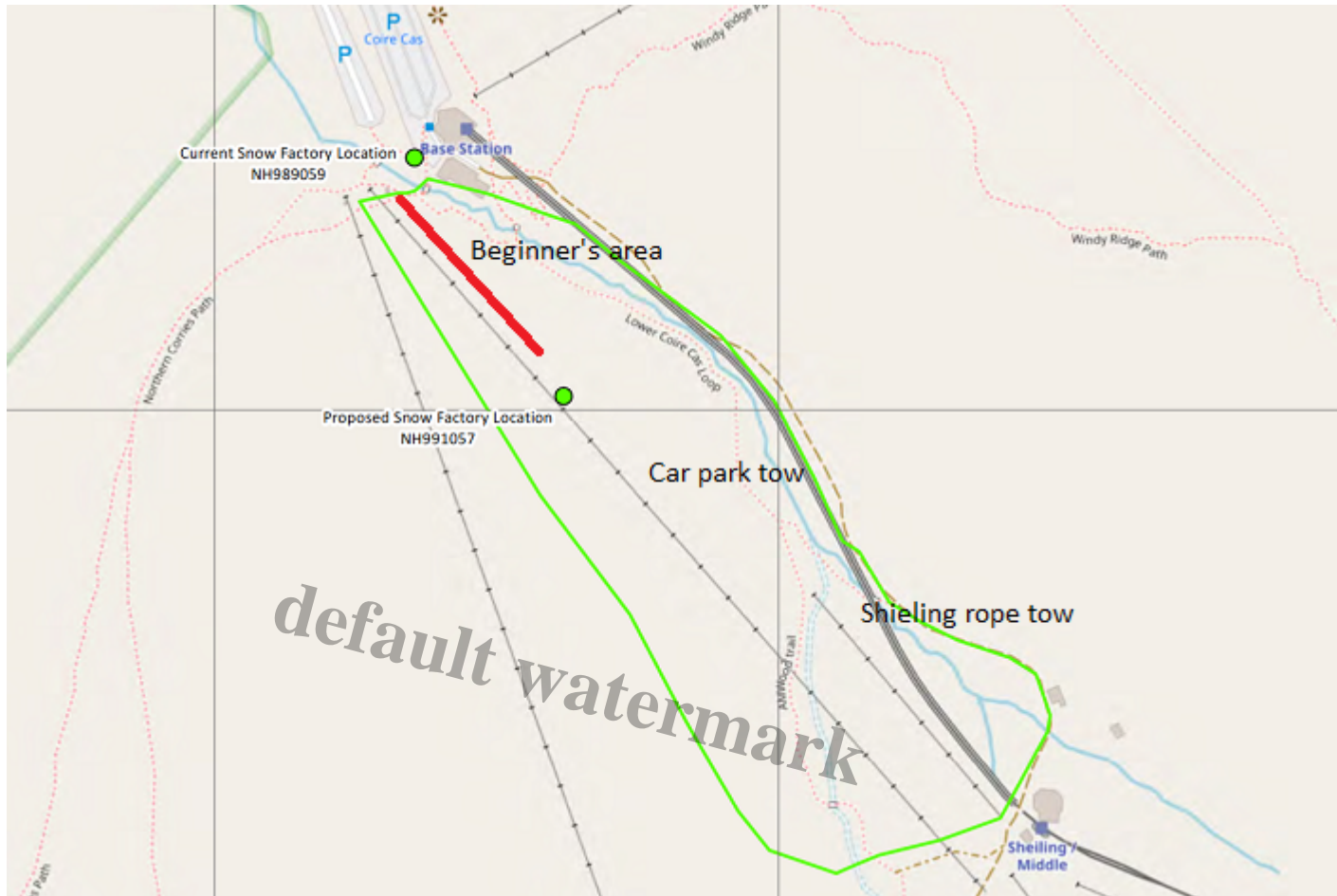
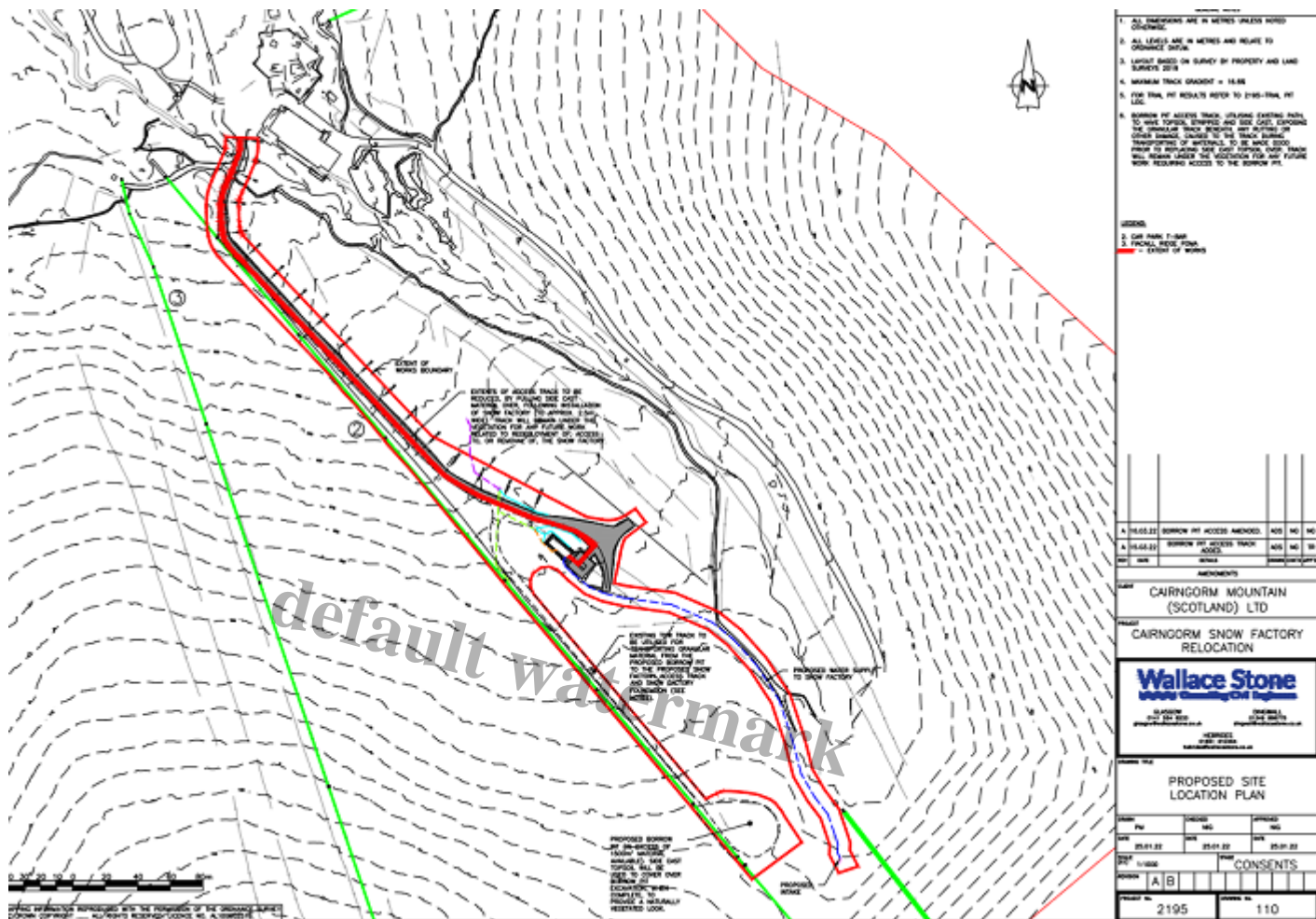


Diagram from the Ecological Survey report (dated July 2020) showing the current and proposed location of the snow factory annotated to show the beginner's area and the approximate line of the magic carpets in red

The infrastructure that would be required to move and support the snow factory in its new location includes a concrete base for it to sit on, a "temporary" access track and a new pipeline to feed water into the machinery. The location plan in the planning application is dated January 2022 but does NOT show the relationship between the snow factory infrastructure and the magic carpet and associated mountain bike trails:



The green lines are the tows, the dark red shows the line of the access track, the blue the pipeline and the grey shaded area the turning area around the proposed site

Not only are the maps out of date, there is no explanation I can find in the planning documents to show the relationship between the snow factory installation and the mountain bike park/magic carpets.

It is possible therefore that HIE is intending to construct two new large tracks up by the car park tow, the first to construct and form the base of the magic carpet, as shown in the photos, the second to create a temporary access track to enable the huge vehicles required to transport the snow factory to move it to its new location.

It seems more likely, however, that HIE has decided to ask McGowan, who has been appointed to install the magic carpet, to construct a road large enough to install the snow factory. This would make sense IF the planning application is consented, as it would reduce the area of ground at Cairn Gorm that is being dug up, but it pre-empted the planning application and would therefore be unlawful. If this is the case it will not be the first time that HIE has paid for tracks to be constructed without planning permission at Cairn Gorm ([see here](#)). If not, and the planning application is approved, we can expect yet more destruction at Cairn Gorm with two enormous roadways, not one.



The proposed route of the track required to carry The Snow Factory up the hill, showing the mix of dry heath / acid grassland mosaic and winter sports infrastructure present. Taken from NH 989 059.

The caption on this photo is slightly misleading as it appears to have been taken from above the start of the proposed route as you can see if you compare it to the photos above.

There is no excuse for this situation. The date of the Ecology Report, July 2020, shows that HIE has been planning to move the snow factory to the proposed location for over two and a half years. They could have produced an overall plan for the lower part of Coire Cas, showing the relationship of the various developments and to consider their impact on the landscape and ecology as a whole, but have not bothered to do so.

The Ecology Report is very revealing in this respect. It starts by commenting on the level of damage in the lower part of Coire Cas:

“Due to the degraded nature of the habitats from the existing level of human activity, and ongoing management of the ski area throughout the year, the proposed works are considered unlikely to cause significant levels of further degradation to the upland heath BAP [Biodiversity Action Plan] habitats on site.”

That may be true, but if the CNPA keep allowing HIE to dig up the site it will never recover and each time they are allowed to do so it will also impact on the hydrology and with that the risks of flooding and landslides. The Ecology Report proves that has happened with the creation of the beginner’s ski area above the Day Lodge:



Run off from higher altitudes has formed several drainage watercourses on the lower slopes, and small pools have formed in flatter areas of the lower slopes. Run off has changed with the reprofiling of the pistes and ski tows, and the culvert / drainage system needs updating.

This report was written only one year after the beginner's snow sport area was constructed! That provides support for parkwatch's argument at the time that proposal was fundamentally flawed, ([see here](#)) and ([here](#)) for example, not least in respect in respect to hydrology and drainage. It was never a good idea to locate a beginner's snow sport area on boggy ground.

## The snow factory planning application

As Graham Garfoot argued again recently ([see here](#)), the focus of snowsports infrastructure at Cairn Gorm needs to be higher up the hill because of global warming. The proposed location of the snow factory is too low down, but, having forced through a beginner's ski area and ill-conceived plans for mountain bike trails, HIE is never going to admit they have got it wrong. Moreover, they appear to believe that they can safely ignore the Cairngorms National Park Authority.



Photo from planning application

The snow factory, which is now an outdated piece of technology – most of Europe has moved on from using this kit – is also a visual monstrosity. Placing it in the middle of the lower part of Coire Cas will have a significant landscape impact. The Supporting Statement ([see here](#)) reveals that the CNPA appreciated this and requested visualisations from a number of viewpoints as part of pre-application discussions.

In response, the Supporting Statement explains it is accompanied by four photos, A - H showing the visual impact of the development. The first four of these are of the snow factory viewed from north, south, east and west in its current location (see above), not much help for assessing the visual impact except to note that HIE want to plonk the equivalent of a two and half storey building in the middle of the lower coire. The application implies there will be screening by trees but that would take 100 years to happen on lower ground and, unless the warming climate changes the weather to the extent that wind stop blowing at Cairn Gorm, is never going to happen in Coire Cas.

Unfortunately, photo G, purporting to show tree growth 5-7 years after planting doesn't show very much:

<p><b>Snowfactory Relocation</b>          Cairngorm Ski Area, PH22 1TB          Proposed location 331 metres South South East of current location at Coire Cas car park.</p>	<p>CMSL Document Title: Viewpoint 01C Snow Factory visualisation with 5 to 7 year tree planting and access track.</p>		
<p>default watermark</p>			
	<p><b>Notes:</b>          View point location chosen by CNPA Planning.          Top of Coire Cas car park, next to the Day Lodge building looking across the bridge in a South East direction towards proposed Snowfactory location.          Tree planting as agreed with CNPA planning under planning application for ground snowing works and Snowfactory relocation.          Tree growth shown at 5 to 7 years.          Snowfactory haul road is shown after reduction post completion of Snowfactory move.</p>	<p><b>Viewpoint O.S. reference:</b> N160070555  <b>Viewpoint elevation:</b> 632.5 Metres  <b>Direction of View:</b> 142° South East  <b>Distance to Snowfactory:</b> 321 Metres  <b>Enlargement factor:</b> 0  <b>Horizontal field of view:</b> 31°  <b>Vertical Field of view:</b> 19.5°  <b>Paper Size:</b> A2  <b>Correct print size:</b> Height 750mm Width 415mm.          View flat at a comfortable arm's length.</p>	<p><b>Camera:</b> Canon EOS 7D  <b>Lens:</b> Canon 28mm f11  <b>Camera height:</b> 1.5 metre AGL  <b>Date:</b> 16/09/2009  <b>Time:</b> 16:35  <b>Weather:</b> Sunny, dry, clear sky, warm with no wind.  <b>Image:</b> R.M.  <b>Drawn by:</b> J.C.          12/1/02.</p> 

But it is better than photo f, which at present is a completely blank sheet, and photo h which is completely missing from the planning portal! That leaves photo e, taken from close to the Day Lodge:

**Snowfactory Relocation**  
Cairngorm Ski Area, PH22 3PB  
Proposed location 227 metres South-South East of current location at Cairn Cas Car park.

CMFL Document Title: Viewpoint 01A Cairngorm Snowfactory Relocation Current View.



	<b>Notes:</b> View point location chosen by CNPA Planning. Top of Cairn Cas car park, next to the Devonshire building across the bridge on a South East direction towards proposed new Snowfactory location.	<b>Viewpoint Details:</b> Viewpoint: 01A Direction of View: 142° South East Distance to top of Cairngorm: 242 Metres Enlargement factor: 0 Horizontal field of view: 30° Vertical field of view: 70° Paper Size: A2 Correct print size: Height 150mm Width 415mm. View flat at a comfortable arm's length.	<b>Camera:</b> Canon EOS7D Lens: Canon 24mm f/11 Camera height: 1.5 metres AGL Date: 05/09/2019 Time: 10:20 Weather: Breezy, clear, 14°C, mainly with no wind. Wind: 4-11 Down light: 15/021	
--	--	---	---	--

Nice photo but you would not know from this where the snow factory is to be located let alone what it would look like!. You can use your imagination, however, and transpose the photos of the snow factory into the landscape pictured here.

On the basis of this photographic evidence, Ryden, the consultants whom HIE has paid to make the planning application on its behalf, concludes:

â??It is submitted that, in relation to these visual assessments, the proposed snow factory would not undermine the policy aims and provisions of Policy 5 [which is about preserving the landscape character of the Cairngorms].â?•

Ryden are not stupid and are not going to waste any time trying to justify the unjustifiable. Their main hope appears to be that the CNPA will roll over.

## What needs to happen?

I will today ask the CNPA to investigate the construction work currently being carried out by the Car Park tow as an unlawful development. So far, the planning application to move the snow factory which was submitted on 30th September has not received a single comment from the public. Please consider adding a comment, which you can do [here](#).

It seems to me there are three broad reasons for objecting:

1. The impact on the ground, vegetation and hydrology if the CNPA keep allowing HIE to dig up Cairn Gorm the land will never recover and the risk of a major ecological disaster increases.
2. The landscape impact. Cairn Gorm may be developed but again the challenge for the National Park is to improve all the development that currently impacts on the landscape, not make it worse.
3. The fact that the snow factory is in the wrong place and will therefore be an ineffective means of supporting outdoor recreation (snow sports) and a wasted investment in respect of economic development.

The CNPA officers and board need to take a stand on this one and give HIE the clear message that enough is enough. They would also be doing the Scottish Government a favour. After Fergus Ewing guaranteed the Scottish Government would meet all the costs of the funicular repairs, his successor Ivor McKee asked HIE to contribute any spare money they had ([see here](#)). It would appear now that HIE are now splashing out money willy nilly at Cairn Gorm to make sure they don't have to contribute a penny to the cost of the funicular repairs!

## Postscript

After publishing this post on 11th November I sent a copy and questions to the head of planning at the CNPA and he responded that afternoon very much appreciated! and also added a number of further documents to the planning portal including the construction method statement. Unfortunately, I have had not had the internet access to update the post until today (15th).

The CNPA have confirmed the works shown in the photo are for the magic carpet and the line of the proposed new road to transport the snow factory up the hill will lie between this track and the tow and be 4.5m broad. They have also pointed out that there was information in the planning report (apologies that I missed) about the width of the magic carpet, 60cms, and that there would be a 30cm space on either side, ie total width of 120cm. The Construction Method Statement refers to excavators

The construction corridor for the magic carpet is clearly far greater than 120cm. The Construction Method Statement from McGowan which is now on the planning portal states:

It is envisaged that a working width of 2.75m maximum would be required for the initial vegetation removal along the proposed conveyor belt footprint.

I have written again to the CNPA seeking clarification about this but the key point at issue is if the track in the photo is 2.75m wide and the CNPA then approve a 4.5m track to carry the snow factory up the hill a huge area of ground in lower Coire Cas will have been dug up and that is contrary to their policies that ground works should minimise disturbance to soil and vegetation. I will write a further post once the issues are clarified.

## Category

1. Cairngorms

## Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. CNPA
3. funicular
4. HIE
5. planning
6. Scottish Government

## Date Created

November 11, 2022

## Author

nickkempe

*default watermark*