

The failure of the National Park planning system at Cairn Gorm – the magic carpet construction

Description

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Construction of magic carpet 4th December – Photo Credit Alan Bratney

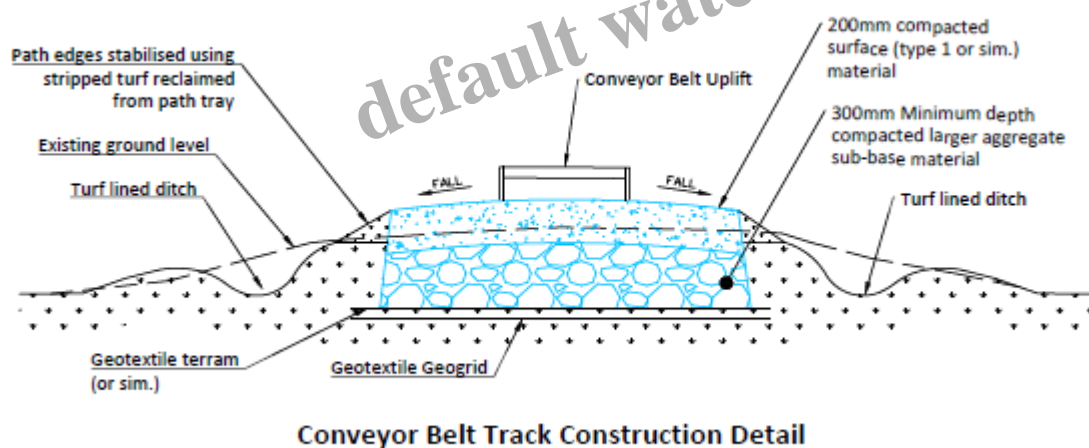
The work being undertaken to construct the lower of the two magic carpets bears no resemblance to that which was approved by the Cairngorm National Park Authority (CNPA) in May.

First, there is the width of the construction corridor. While the width of the magic carpet was referred in the planning application – 60cm with 30cm on either side – the construction corridor was not specified. However, the Construction Method Statement from McGowan, the contractors, which the CNPA approved on 10th November, stated:

“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.”

While it is difficult to estimate the exact width of the construction corridor from the photo, the vehicle tracks on the right suggest the corridor on the right of the conveyor is nearer four metres and more in places. It appears therefore the work McGowan is doing is not only contrary to their own Construction Method Statement, it is in breach of planning conditions.

Second, is the way the magic carpet is being constructed. This bears no resemblance to the plans approved by the Planning Committee:



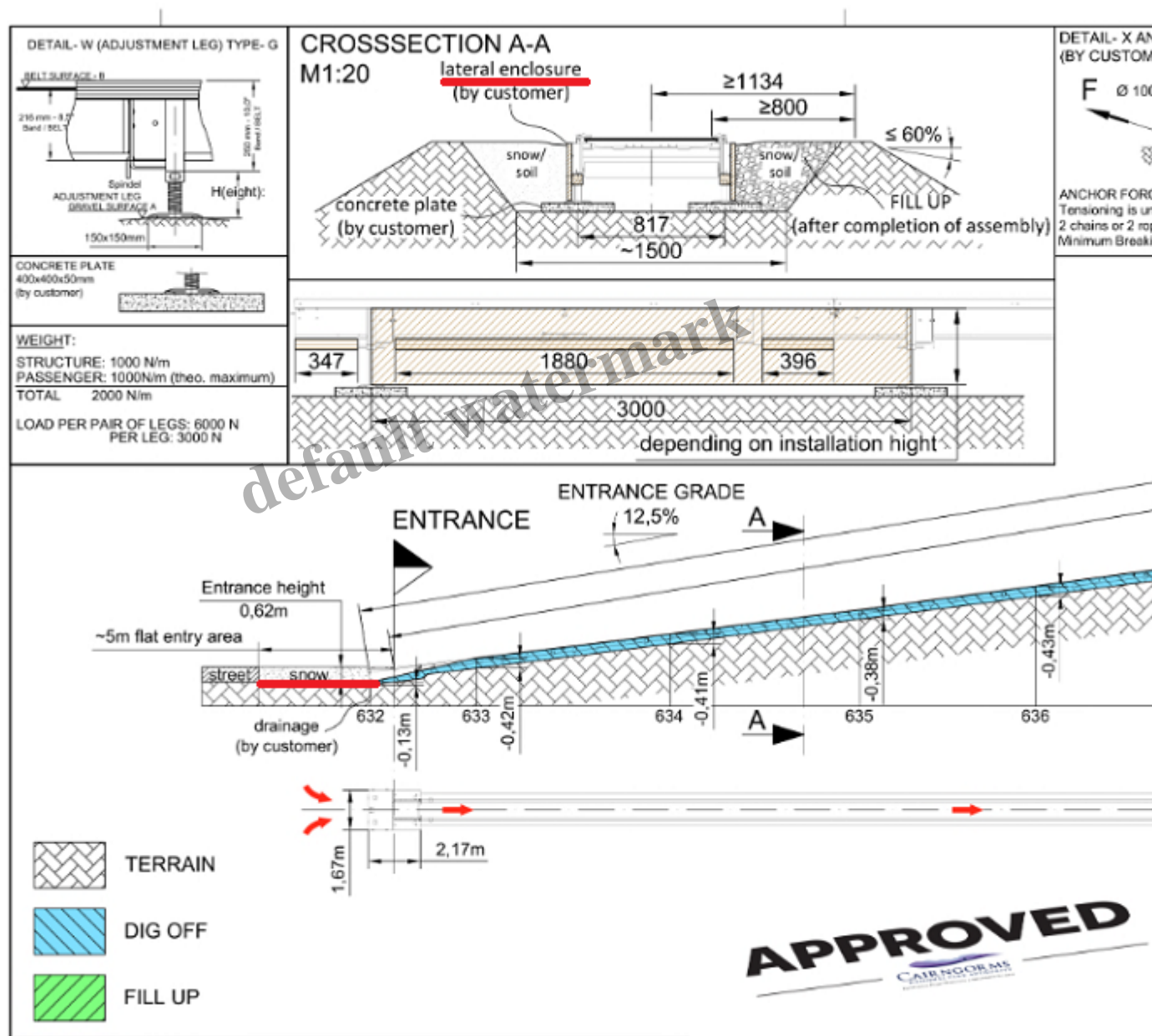
In the original plans approved by the CNPA planning the magic carpet would have sat above the ground with a turf lined ditch on either side. These plans were not sensible. They would have risked users falling off the edge, except when there was lots of snow, and stored up further trouble in winter, with snow likely to get in under the conveyor.

Condition 5 of the planning consent granted by the CNPA to CMSL in May required them:

“to provide details of all materials and finishes, including elevation, and section plans, for the conveyor belts shall be submitted to and agreed in writing by the Cairngorms National Park Authority acting as Planning Authority and shall be constructed and retained, thereafter, in accordance with the approved details”.

The revised plans

CMSL submitted plans showing the design of each magic carpet on 10th November, at least a week after construction had started. These were followed by five further documents showing the finishes on 22nd November. Unless the CNPA published these documents late, CMSL and McGowan appear to have commenced work on the magic carpet before the plans were approved.



Extract from plan for the 93m or lower belt, i.e. the one in the photo above.

The revised plans ([see here](#)) show a very different installation to the one originally approved, a magic carpet almost flush with the ground and bearing a reasonable resemblance to the work in progress:

There are, however, some differences.

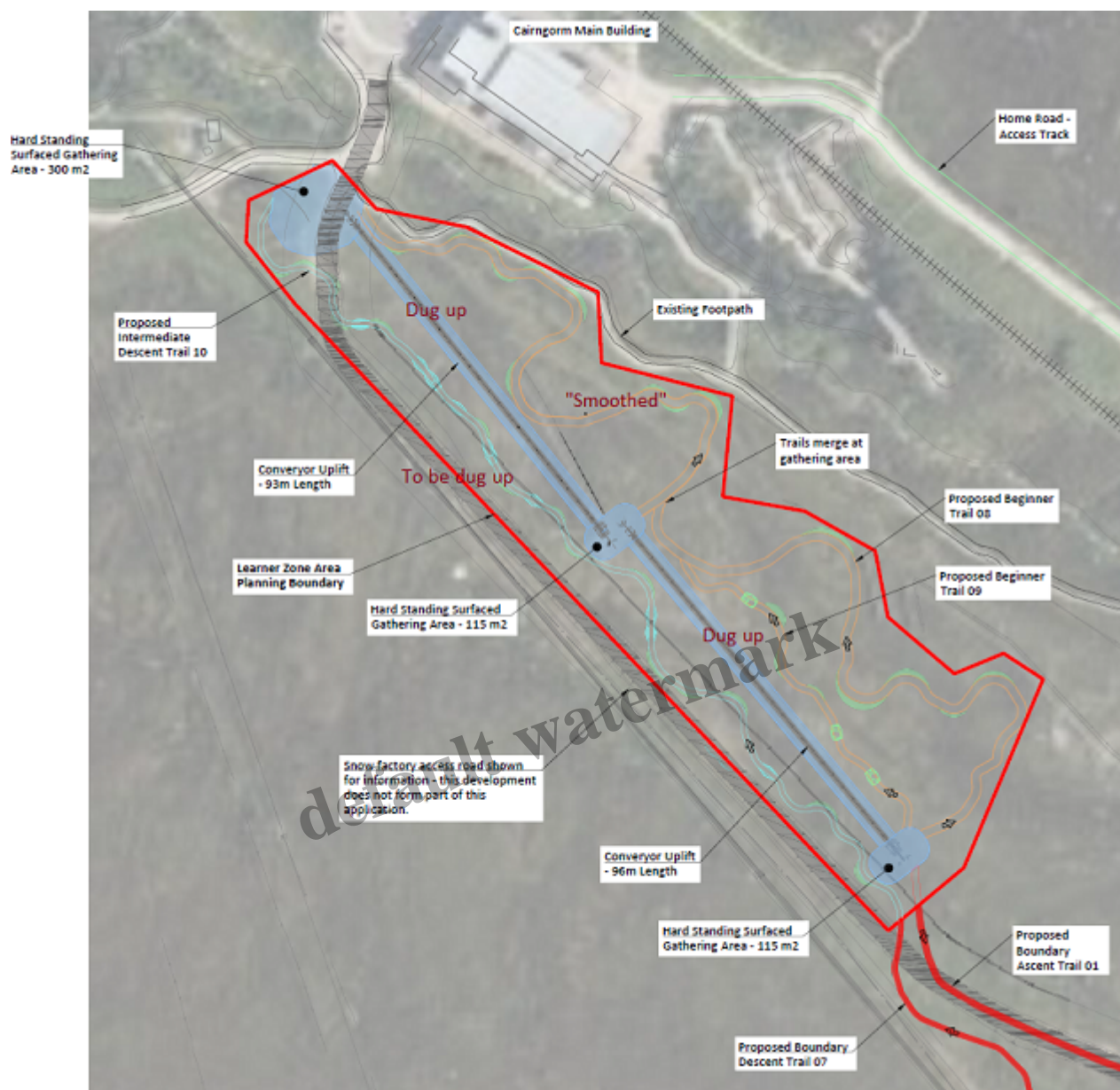
- The new plan shows the magic carpet sunk into the surrounding terrain (the hatched area). Had this been followed, only a narrow construction corridor and much smaller machinery would have been needed to install the carpet.
- In the plans the lateral enclosures of the space under the magic carpet (underlined in red) are vertical, whereas in the photo they are sloping at c45 degrees and half the space that the plans show would have been filled with soil/snow has been removed. That may not matter technically but is not in accordance with what the CNPA has now consented and means a bank will have to be constructed up the left hand side of the carpet, causing more ground disturbance.

A minor issue raised by the new plans is if terrain is to be brought up to the level of the magic carpet by packing down snow (also underlined in red), that will leave a step for children with mountain bikes to negotiate in summer on what is also supposed to be a family friendly uplift facility.

The most important point, however, is that none of the latest planning documents explain why such a broad construction corridor is required or have sought planning consent for this.

The impact of recent and proposed developments on the lower part of Coire Cas

Neither the “smoothed” beginners area nor the location of the magic carpet and associated mountain bike trails are shown in the current plans to move the snow factory up the hill ([see here](#)). What I had not realised when writing my first post on the construction of the magic carpet was that the proposed snow factory access track IS SHOWN on the plans considered back in May:



Proposed access track for snow factory is shown by shaded grey line running along the boundary of the application for the magic carpet and mountain bike trails. I have added annotations in dark red, “dug up”, “smoothed” etc.

As a result, I mistakenly thought the construction track for the magic carpet might have been also used transport the snow factory up the hill ([see here](#)). It looks fairly clear from the photo that the access track and damaged ground to the right of the magic carpet could never bear the weight of the vehicles needed to transport the snow factory up the hill. My apologies for the mistake.

However, the location map from the magic carpet planning application also show just how much ground parallel to the ski tow is being or will be dug up. Add to that the large area besides the magic carpets that has recently been smoothed ([see here](#)) and you can see that basically the whole of the area between the the ski tow and the footpath will have been dug over by heavy machinery if the snow factory is allowed to go ahead.

Had Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) submitted a proper master plan, the extent of the destruction in lower Coire Cas might have been clear. Instead, by submitting three separate planning applications they have concealed what is going on, the relationship between the three developments and their cumulative impact on landscape, land stability and hydrology.

The need for the CNPA to take a critical look at how HIE/CMSL are gaming the planning system at Cairn Gorm and take enforcement action where planning conditions are breached is as strong as ever. It is time the CNPA stood up to HIE/CMSL instead of bailing them out as they have done by helping fund the car park improvements ([see here](#)).

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CMSL
2. CNPA
3. HIE
4. landscape
5. planning

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Author

nickkempe

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