

ABDN Property Income Trust's track upgrade proposals at Far Ralia in the Cairngorms

Description



The gate in its new location, the Wade bridge is the other side of the rise. Photo credit parkswatch reader

This post takes a further look at what is going on at Far Ralia which was bought in September 2021 by the Standard Life Property and Investment Trust (SLIPIT), renamed the ABDN Property Income Trust last summer.

The Wade bridge

First, a little good news. The gate that featured in my post on the Far Ralia road ([see here](#)) has been

moved from the Wade Bridge about 100m to the south, out of sight of the historic monument. The Prior Notification SAC Consulting submitted to Highland Council claiming it wished to upgrade the road for forestry purposes made no mention of this gate and there is still nothing about it in the papers on the Highland Council planning portal ([see here](#)). It seems likely, however, that it has been moved as a result of discussions between Highland Council and the developer as a result of Laggan Heritage's excellent comments on the Prior Notification (see link above).

Now the less good news. Laggan Heritage had also raised concerns about the proposal to build a new bridge alongside the old one, the Drochaid Balbh Bhordain, which it described as "one of the finest remaining examples of a single span packhorse bridge on the Wade Road". That has not stopped little green marker flags, which appear to show the proposed crossing, being placed next to it "in an open landscape, over a sinuous burn in a setting that has changed little in two hundred and fifty years":

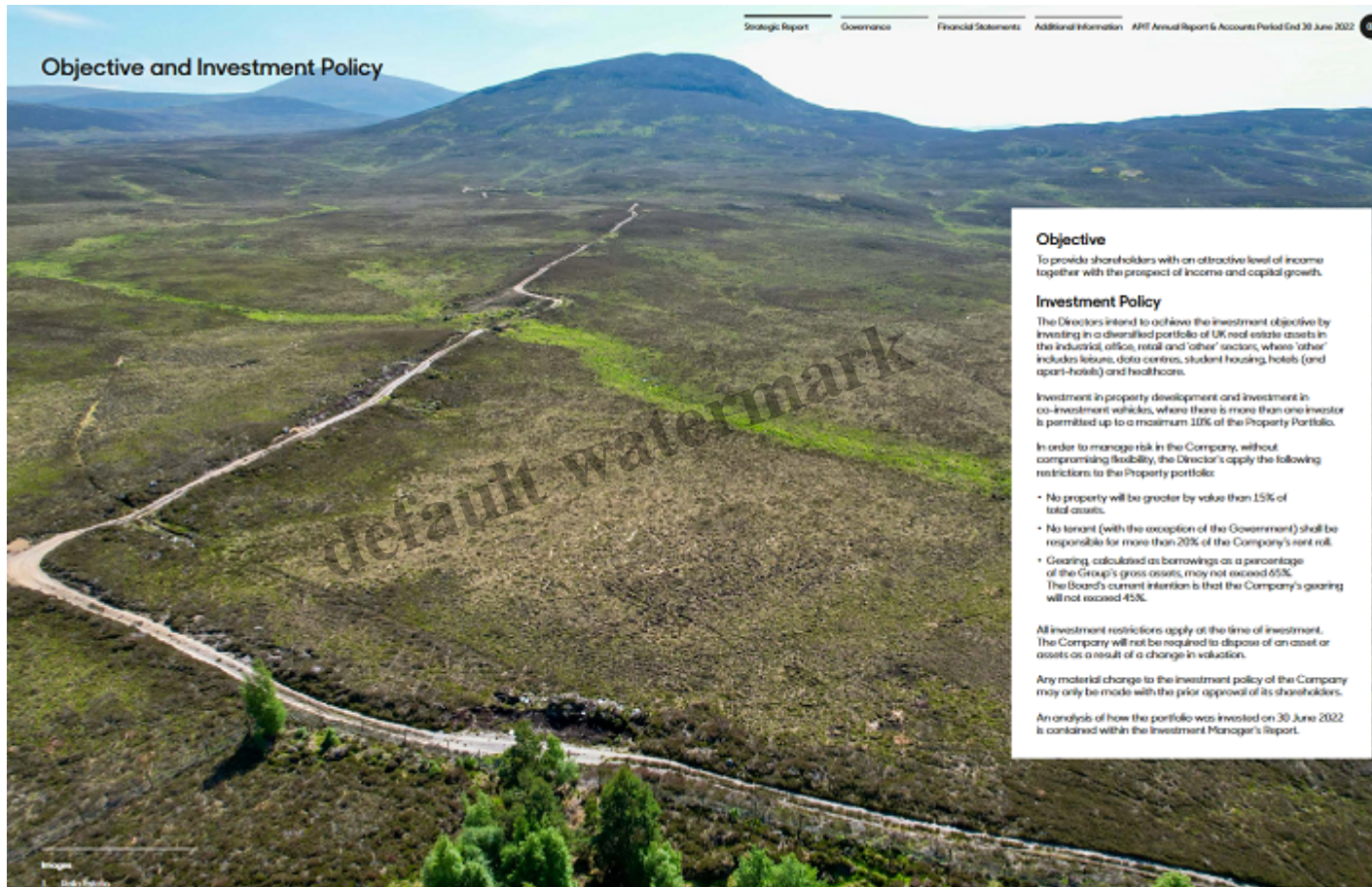


View of the markers from the Wade Bridge. Photo credit Parkswatch reader

If this is the proposed location, ABDN and its agents should think again. The new concrete bridge would not only be right next door to the Wade Bridge, ruining its setting, it would flatten the only sizeable tree in the area.

A forestry road for what?

ABDN's interim report and accounts for the half year until 30th June 2022, the most recent information on their website, are quite revealing. They contain this photo showing how the upper section of the road, which ABDN apparently wishes to repair so it can plant more trees above (on further areas of bog as I showed in my last post), cuts through a large area of blanket bog:



Looking towards Gharbh-meall Mor

The road as a whole effectively acts like a giant drainage ditch through the peat bog. You can also see from the photo the unrestored areas of bank which featured in my last post and serve to drain water from the bog even more quickly.

ABDN's interim report also contains this brief statement about the land they now own and their intentions:

“Land at Far Ralia: In September 2021 the Company acquired just over 1,440 hectares on unproductive open moorland in Scotland to undertake peatland restoration and reforestation of natural woodlands, with the aim of having a fixed cost carbon offset. Over the last 12 months we have been undertaking the required consultation and refining the planting plan, with an aim that we can start the planting of the circa 1.5m trees in spring 2023. We are working with Akre Trees, a specialist nursery that has been verified as a carbon negative tree nursery. Akre have been on site collecting seeds from which to grow saplings in their state of the art glasshouse”.

This confirms that ABDN are intending to undertake peatbog restoration at Far Ralia in order to obtain more carbon credits and reinforces the suspicion that the real reason for repairing the road may not be to transport in trees, which could be done with light vehicles, but to bring in diggers to fill in the drainage ditches in the area of bog that lies between Glas-mheall Mor and Glas-mheal Beag (photos in previous post). That might be justified but such a road upgrade would not come under the Prior Notification system and should require full planning permission.

Meantime, for any owner caring about conservation or from the perspective of the Scottish Government which has put so much emphasis on the importance of peat bogs for locking up carbon, why pay to block up drains and leave roads like this in place? Sadly, there are no plans for removing the road in the Prior Notification which was submitted to Highland Council .

Further doubts about the sense of ABDN's plans are also raised by the reference to Akre Trees and their having been “on site collecting seeds from which to grow saplings”. Akre runs a tree nursery which appears to have grown out of a consultancy, Kilrie Trees, and claims to have advised Standard Life/ABDN about the purchase of Far Ralia ([see here](#)). It has now submitted a Felling License to Scottish Forestry ([see here](#)) to chop down 3.67ha of native woodland to expand its tree nursery and “compensatory plant the felling area in a different location”. This is all perfectly lawful under our current forestry system but suggests that Akre have little interest in conserving soils, which are far more important than trees for storing carbon, whether this is at their nursery or Far Ralia.

Instead of employing Akre to collect seed from Far Ralia, transporting it to Fife to a nursery and then bringing the saplings back and planting them on what are predominantly peaty soils, why does ABDN not just let the seed regenerate naturally as is happening in Glen Tromie, owned and managed by Wild Land Ltd, just over the hill?

What needs to happen?

Planning Authorities are supposed to decide whether Prior Notifications for forestry tracks require Prior Approval within 28 days. The paperwork claiming the proposals to upgrade the road to and through Far Ralia were submitted on 19th January, over ten weeks ago now, and there is still no sign of a decision by Highland Council although the fact that the gate has been moved, strongly suggests that negotiations have been taking place with the developer behind the scenes.

In the absence of any approved forestry plan – the proposed tree planting is now thankfully well behind schedule – and given ABDN's stated intention to undertake peatbog restoration on site, there are strong reasons to believe the main purpose of the track upgrade is not for forestry purposes and therefore that it should require full planning permission. Were Highland Council to take that decision, I would expect the Cairngorms National Park Authority, which has a presumption against new roads on

moorland, to call the application in and force ABDN into a re-think.

Meantime, ABDN should be basing their plans for Far Ralia on re-wilding principles, not advice from consultants who are using the public grants system to offset the financial costs of carbon offsetting for private landowners. This serves to undermine claims from NatureScot and our National Park Authorities that green finance from the city has an important role to play in restoring nature.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. forestry
3. hill tracks
4. landscape
5. peatland restoration
6. planning

Date Created

April 10, 2023

Author

nickkempe

default watermark