

Luibeg Bridge communications mast – a threat to the integrity of the central Cairngorms

Description



Looking south: the mast would be just above and to the right of the trees (Photo credit Sandy McIntosh)

An application ([link here](#)) to erect a 20m digital communications mast adjacent to the Luibeg footbridge and the paths to the Lairg Ghru and to Coire Sputan Dearg has been called in by Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) for a decision.

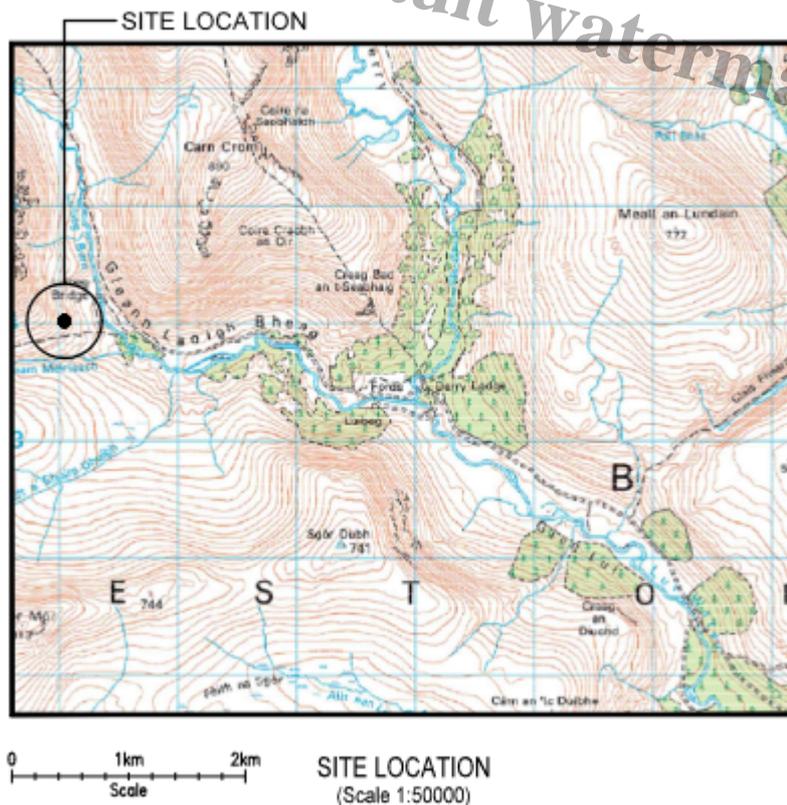
Background to the Luibeg application

As readers of Patchwatch will know, this area is an “inner gateway” to the very centre of the Cairngorms and to some of its finest corries. In landscape terms, it is of national importance, so why is a visually intrusive mast being proposed here?

The Shared Rural Network, developed by four UK network operators, is a UK wide scheme mandated, and part funded, by the government. It aims to deliver 4G coverage to 95% of the country, thus *enabling rural businesses and communities to thrive*. Implementation has been given over to commercial companies to deliver, without, it would seem, any guidance from the government on the implications for sensitive landscapes. The companies map *not spots* where coverage is limited or occasionally non-existent and submit applications to the relevant planning authorities, which are left with the unenviable task of sorting out the conflicts between improving communications and defending landscapes.

Landowners who do not want masts on their land have no legal rights to *refuse* their erection.

This year has seen a rash of applications across Scotland, many of them in sensitive areas where they will, if approved, be blots on unspoiled landscapes. The North East Mountain Trust has commented on, or objected to, a number of proposed masts in the Grampian area. The applications themselves have almost all been of very poor quality- *cut and paste jobs* lacking site specific and other essential information. Many, if approved, will have limited value as the areas they cover have no, or almost no, permanent habitation.



Extract from planning application showing proposed location of the mast

Key issues related to the Luibeg mast

- In landscape terms it would have a highly detrimental visual impact on a Wild Land Area which is also covered by numerous statutory designations aimed at protecting it. The application acknowledges that the visual impact cannot be mitigated for.
- The mast would have very little public benefit. The application states that the mast would benefit economic activity including farming and tourism and adds that *“local businesses in the area could reap the benefits of improved connectivity for sustainable growth, higher economic profits, and essentially a higher quality of life”*. This is misleading. There is no farming in the area and no businesses (Mar Lodge cannot be characterised as such). Indeed, it can be argued that *“the quality of life”* of those who visit the area would be diminished by the visual intrusion of the mast in such a wild landscape. It is stated that the population is very small when, in fact, there are no permanently inhabited buildings at all in the area. An example of the cut and paste approach which characterises these applications.
- The application states that connectivity *“can improve upon people’s experience when exploring the Park. There are several online OS maps and mobile applications that are highly valuable resources to assist walkers in navigating trails. None of the mobile operators currently serve this area, which includes no emergency service presence, and therefore improved coverage would only improve upon hiker’s overall experience and safety”*. Firstly Ofcom mapping shows that much of the area is already covered by cross-network emergency call coverage. Secondly this statement contradicts the advice given by mountain rescue teams which is that mobile phones should be kept on flight mode when in the hills to conserve the battery and to prevent the partial updating of relevant apps if a person moves in and out of connectivity. In addition, NEMT understands that many apps are downloadable and do not require coverage for use. Mountain safety experts continue to insist that those going into the hills should consider a mobile phone as back-up only to the main navigation tools of map and compass.

The siting of a mast at Luibeg conflicts with the CNPA’s Statutory Aims and its Local Development Plan and with Scotland’s National Planning Framework 4 [which was approved by the Scottish Parliament] in a number of ways.

Incompatibility with the National Park’s Statutory Aims

While the CNPA has a duty *“to promote sustainable economic and social development”*, this is overridden if it conflicts with its aim *“to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area”*. This raises the issue of public benefit versus the environment, in this case landscape. The area in question is amongst the finest in the Cairngorms and the public benefit would be negligible, therefore the Park’s over-riding aim must take precedence.

Incompatibility with National Park’s Local Development Plan

Policy (6b) on digital communications equipment states that equipment will only be permitted *“in sensitive areas (where) detailed evidence demonstrates that the proposals would not lead to unacceptable effects on areas of particular ecological interest or landscape importance”*.

Incompatibility with National Planning Framework 4

Policy 4 (Natural Places). The relevant sections are

1. a) *Development proposals which by virtue of type, location or scale will have an unacceptable impact on the natural environment, will not be supported.*
2. c) *Development proposals that will affect a National Park, National Scenic Area, Site of Special Scientific Interest or a National Nature Reserve will only be supported where: i. The objectives of designation and the overall integrity of the areas will not be compromised; or ii. Any significant adverse effects on the qualities for which the area has been designated are clearly outweighed by social, environmental or economic benefits of national importance.*
3. e) *The precautionary principle will be applied in accordance with relevant legislation and Scottish Government guidance.*
4. g) *Development proposals in areas identified as wild land in the Nature Scot Wild Land Areas map will only be supported where the proposal: ii) is for small scale development directly linked to a rural business or croft, or is required to support a fragile community in a rural area.*

Policy 24 (Digital Infrastructure) While supporting national roll-outs, Policy 24 adds the following caveats d) *Development proposals that deliver new connectivity will be supported where there are benefits of this connectivity for communities and the local economy*. As demonstrated above, there no significant benefits in this case. e) *Development proposals for digital infrastructure will only be supported where: i. the visual and amenity impacts of the proposed development have been minimised through careful siting*. As acknowledged by the applicant, it is not possible to minimise the visual impact in such a sensitive area.



Looking north: the mast would be just above the trees on the left (Photo credit Sandy McIntosh)

This is test case. The integrity of the central core of the Cairngorms, unarguably one of Scotland's finest landscapes, must be protected.

For people wanting to object to find application either click [here](#) or go to- <https://cairngorms.co.uk/planning-development/> click on "View planning applications" and enter Application number- 2023/0364/DET; then to object click on "Comments" on the bar.

The closing date for objections- 16th October

(George Allan on behalf of North East Mountain Trust SC008783)

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