

Unacceptable telecommunications masts (18) – Ryvoan and the ridiculous Shared Rural Network Programme

Description



The view back to Ryvoan bothy and Glenmore from just south of the mast site July 2024. Photo Credit Dave Morris

Mobile phone operator Three's Planning Application for a 22.5m telecommunication mast 400m from Ryvoan bothy, ostensibly intended to provide mobile coverage for the big four operators in the 'Total Not Spot' between there and Glenmore, is generating just the sort of criticism needed to scupper the whole disastrous Shared Rural Network (SRN) programme. Besides over 45 individual objections ([see here](#) for planning papers), an extremely high number for this sort of application, there has been significant public criticism. Particularly helpful was the comment from the editor of the Badenoch and Strathspey Herald last week because it avoids any planning speak and puts the argument in terms anyone can understand:



By Gavin Musgrove

Not surprisingly plans to plonk a telecoms mast on the doorstep of one of the Cairngorms' best loved bothies have provoked a backlash.

You do sometimes wonder what some of these companies are thinking.

It is a vast and rugged countryside out there.

First of all is such a mast really needed? Is our need to be connected to the modern world so overwhelming?

And if you are out there is that not one of the reasons why you have gone off-grid?

To leave some of the digital world behind and enjoy more of what Mother Nature has to offer?

Secondly, yes, I realise I've already asked a lot of questions, if there really must be a towering telecoms in this part of the world then why on earth put it next door to this lovely little bothy?

We agree with outdoor access campaigner Dave Morris' sentiments on this one.

Why do we need coverage of 90 per cent of the nation by 4G mobile connection?

As Mr Morris points out surely 90 per cent of communities (and roads) is a much more common-sense target and will save more of our precious dwindling wilderness from such intrusions.

It is ludicrous that there are still long sections of the A9 road which do not have any coverage for most networks - we are thinking Dalwhinnie to Drumochter - and yet we have plans for a telecoms mast popping up at Ryvoan Bothy and also by the Sugar Bowl car park beyond Glenmore.

Madness! Fortunately there is still time to object and share your feelings with the Cairngorms National Park Authority's planners.

We would not want to second guess the outcome of the application but what's the point of having a national park if this type of proposal gets the green light?

Extract from Badenoch and Strathspey Herald which also carried an article on the mast featuring comments from Dave Morris.

Quite! The Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) should take note and start acting like a National Park!

The CNPA's unpark-like approach to telecommunications masts

My last post ([see here](#)) full of planning speak I am afraid! argued that the CNPA need to develop a policy response to the SRN programme and take a far more proactive approach to individual mast applications, instead of leaving most of these to local authorities to decide. Unfortunately, a quote from the SRN website ([see here](#)) shows that that CNPA staff provided uncritical backing to the whole mast programme at the start:

"There are now high expectations from residents, businesses and visitors about mobile connectivity – even in a mountainous National Park! Whilst mobile connectivity has improved in recent years, there are significant "not spots" where mobile coverage does not exist or signal "drops out" occur. The Shared Rural Network programme will certainly help us meet these expectations and address the not spots. There are of course sensitivities about the potential need for new masts in sensitive landscapes and will work carefully with SRN to address these challenges and get the best outcome for the Park."

Murray Ferguson, Director of Planning & Place, Cairngorms National Park

While it is possible the CNPA were lured into providing this statement and have subsequently changed their views, the reference to "sensitivities about the potential need for new masts" is quite revealing. It suggests the starting point of staff was that while some areas of the National Park might be sensitive in respect for these masts, nowhere – even in the remote mountainous parts of the National Park – would be treated as "no go areas". The historical consequences of our National Parks failing to adopt core zones dedicated to nature, as originally envisaged and operated in other parts of the world, has been disastrous and has opened the door to development creep.

More specifically, the statement fails to distinguish between the needs of people, in this case residents of the National Park and visitors, from the alleged "need" to provide blanket geographical 4G coverage – the core aim of the SRN programme. David and Robert Craig have shown in previous posts on parkswatch that such "area" coverage is neither necessary nor desirable from a land-management or recreational perspective and is also a misuse of public money which could be far better spent on local communities. Unfortunately, the CNPA appear to have failed to conduct any analysis of whether the SRN programme was compatible with their statutory duty to promote sustainable development and make wise use of resources before endorsing it.

Not only that, the letter withdrawing the planning application to erect a mast at Luibeg ([see here](#)) on the Mar Lodge Estate, suggests that the relationship between the CNPA planners and the SRN developers has been cosy rather than critical:

Deirdre Straw

From: Sarah McCorry <s.mccorry@whptelecoms.com>
Sent: 03 October 2023 20:52
To: Edward Swales; Planning; Niamh Mullan
Subject: RE: CNPA Call-In Notification - 2023/0364/DET (APP/2023/1574)

Importance: High

Categories: Withdrawn

Hi Edward,

Firstly, thank you for your engagement to date in relation to the above application and for keeping us informed on the upcoming committee meeting where the scheme was to be discussed.

In light of recent consultation responses received, we would like to request to withdraw 2023/0364/DET (APP/2023/1574) in its current form.

It is understood that further supplementary information is required to address the concerns raised and further outline the need for this development, which is a government requirement under the Shared Rural Network rollout. We intend to conduct additional engagement with the planning authority and other key stakeholders over the coming weeks, with the view to ultimately re-submit the scheme.

This site location and the surrounding area in the Cairngorms National Park, adjacent to the Lairig Ghru, currently has no mobile service from any mobile provider and is classed as a 'Total Not Spot'. Whilst it is understood that no residents or businesses are based there, it is a popular destination for walkers and mountaineers and we would argue it is therefore of critical importance for mobile service to be available, especially ESN. We fully appreciate the scenic beauty and wild character of the locale, however this is where the 'Total Not Spot' is present, as such any scheme to address the market failure in this area will unavoidably fall within this context and likely meet the same scrutiny.

Please can you confirm acceptance of our request to withdraw the application?

Many thanks,

Sarah McCorry MRTPI
Senior Town Planner
WHP Telecoms Ltd, Building 8, Unit 6 Carryduff Business Park, Comber Road, Carryduff, BT8 8AN

 Switchboard: 01925 424100

The implication is that the developer thought that as long as they provided further information, the application would have a good chance whatever the scenic beauty and wild character of the locale. Perhaps they got the wrong impression but this would be consistent with the view expressed by the CNPA on the SRN website.

More evidence showing the ridiculousness of the Ryvoan application

When explaining how the planning application for a repeater mast in Glenmore was designed to link with the proposed mast at Ryvoan ([see here](#)), David Craig did not realise that there was already an O2 mast at Lanchoil, east of Nethy Bridge. While not mentioned in either application this mast is in line of sight of Three's proposed mast at Ryvoan. A repeater mast in Glenmore is therefore clearly not needed. I tried to add a comment to that effect to the planning application for the repeater mast but the CNPA prevents any further comments from the public after the statutory minimum 28 consultation period. I have therefore written to the CNPA Chief Executive point this out and am waiting for the application to be withdrawn.

This provides a good illustration of how the big four mobile operators incapable of appear working together and the shocking waste of public money that results (the cost of each mast in a Total Not Spot is c£1m paid for the public). The most likely explanation of this shambles is that under SRN responsibility for erecting masts to eliminate Total Not Spots was shared out between the four mobile providers without taking any account of existing coverage. Three was then handed responsibility for filling in the Not Spot Ryvoan and, because it had no other mast nearby, then proposed a repeater mast without checking the coverage from other providers. That is what happens when government hands out large sums of money to private businesses and leaves it to them to decide how the money should be spent.

Three's failure, however, is even worse than that. Dave Morris reported that when out taking the photo of Ryvoan Bothy last week he found he had excellent 4G signal at the proposed mast site and his provider is Vodafone! Not only that but to continued to have good signal for part of the way back to Glenmore in the area supposed to be a Total Not Spot. While Three's Planning Application shows the 4G coverage that would be provided by a mast at Ryvoan, there are NO maps to show existing coverage from other providers in the area. The whole application is completely unfit for purpose and public should be asking why the CNPA ever accepted it without some basic checks?

How long will it take politicians to realise the failures of the SRN programme?

The CNPA's former Director of Planning was not the only person who lost their critical faculties in the rush to be quoted on the SRN website:

"The Scottish Government's £28.75 million 4G Infill programme (S4GI) and the Shared Rural Network are helping further Scotland's first class digital infrastructure. "Digital connectivity is key to Scotland and the UK's economic and social recovery from the pandemic; our S4GI programme is a blueprint for other government interventions. We are working closely with the Shared Rural Network and mobile operators to share knowledge and best practice so more people across Scotland can enjoy better access to mobile services. Continued investment in mobile infrastructure, whether by the Scottish Government or through commercial build, will help keep people safe and protect livelihoods. It offers local communities and businesses a fundamental opportunity to rebuild and prosper."

Kate Forbes MSP and Former Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Finance & the Economy

As a local MSP and now Deputy First Minister, one would hope that Kate Forbes could be persuaded to change her mind about the SRN as a result of the farce at Ryvoan and other examples in her constituency. It would be very helpful if the Scottish Government now called upon the UK Government to stop wasting money on eliminating Total Not Spots in the Highlands and instead forced the mobile providers to share all existing masts, the simplest and cheapest way to improve mobile coverage to local communities.

Failing that, the new labour MPs in Scotland are presumably looking at things to get their teeth into and reforming the Tory UK driven SRN programme provides them with a perfect opportunity. They could call on Peter Kyle, the new Minister responsible, to review the whole SRN programme as a matter of urgency. This could involve creating a new legal requirement on the four mobile providers to share masts in rural areas to eliminate partial not spots and re-deploying the £500m allocated to eliminating Total Not Spots to improving other rural infrastructure in Scotland instead of trashing some of our finest landscapes.

My thanks to David Craig for help with this post and for a reader for providing contact details for:

Rt Hon. Peter Kyle
Secretary of State
Department for Science Innovation and Technology
100 Parliament Street
London SW1A 2BQ
E mail: Secretary.State@dsit.gov.uk

If you have time do ask your MSP or MP to contact Mr Kyle on your behalf or alternatively you could try writing to him directly.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. landscape

3. masts
4. planning
5. Scottish Government
6. UK Government

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