

The disnaefication of Cairn Gorm and the gormless planning system in the National Park

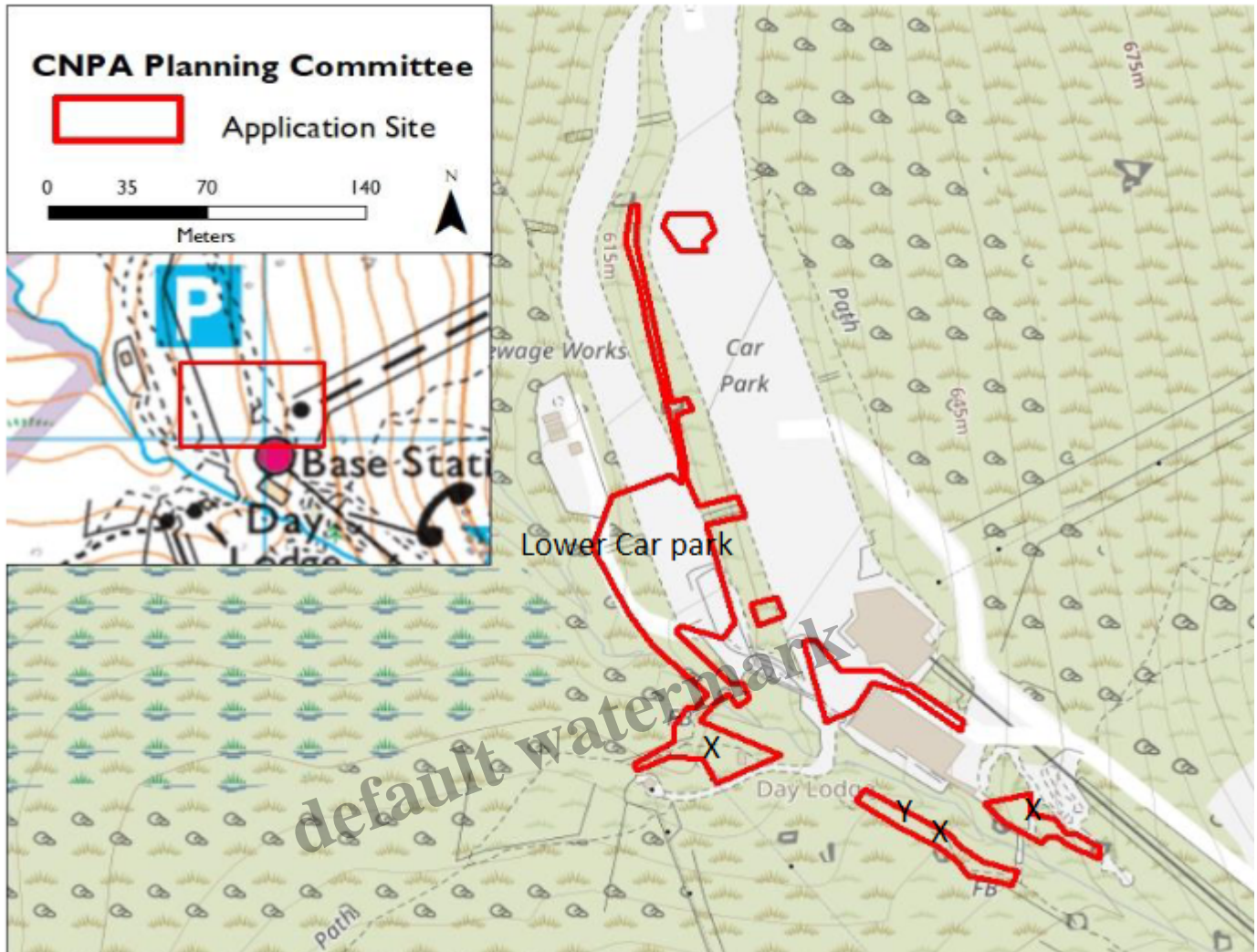
Description



The 12m x 5m play bird (a pigeon or ptarmigan) proposed for the Lower Cas car park, viewed through the love heart and with the 3m high “climbing” letters spelling CAIRN GORM behind. Graphic credit CNPA planning portal.

At the end of June an article in the Strathy ([see here](#)) alerted the public to Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd (CMSL)’s latest planning application for Cairn Gorm, “playtime”. While Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) planning staff called in the application for raising “issues of significance to the collective aims of the National Park it has taken them only a few weeks to recommend to their Board that the application be accepted. That may account for some of the mistakes and flawed arguments in the report. It provides another example of CNPA planning staff to hold Highlands and Island Enterprise, CMSL’s parent body, to account or to use their planning powers to protect Cairn Gorm which should be the jewel in the crown of the National Park.

What is proposed in the planning application and the unlawful development to date



The planning application boundary from the CNPA Committee report. The three X's mark the ball runs that lie outwith the boundary of the play area, as shown on the Cairn Gorm masterplan, and the Y the ball run shown in the screen shot below.

The core elements of the planning application ([see here](#) for planning papers and Committee report) include the “bird” play structure between the existing tube slides, 6 “ball runs”, 2 water features one of which is a rail whose function appears to be similar to the ball runs, the 5m high climbing structures designed to look like letters and a bouncing pillow 14x10m. Alongside these are five shelters for sitting, new connecting paths, a mobile “food cart”, various wood carvings – including the love heart – and associated landscaping.

The CNPA Committee Report wrongly describes ALL elements of the application as “proposals” when at least some of the ball runs have already been constructed and put in place:



Ball run as viewed from Cairn Gorm mountain webcam – location marked on map above

Part of this planning application is therefore retrospective and should have been described as such by CNPA planning officers to their board.

A second mistake in the committee report is the statement that:

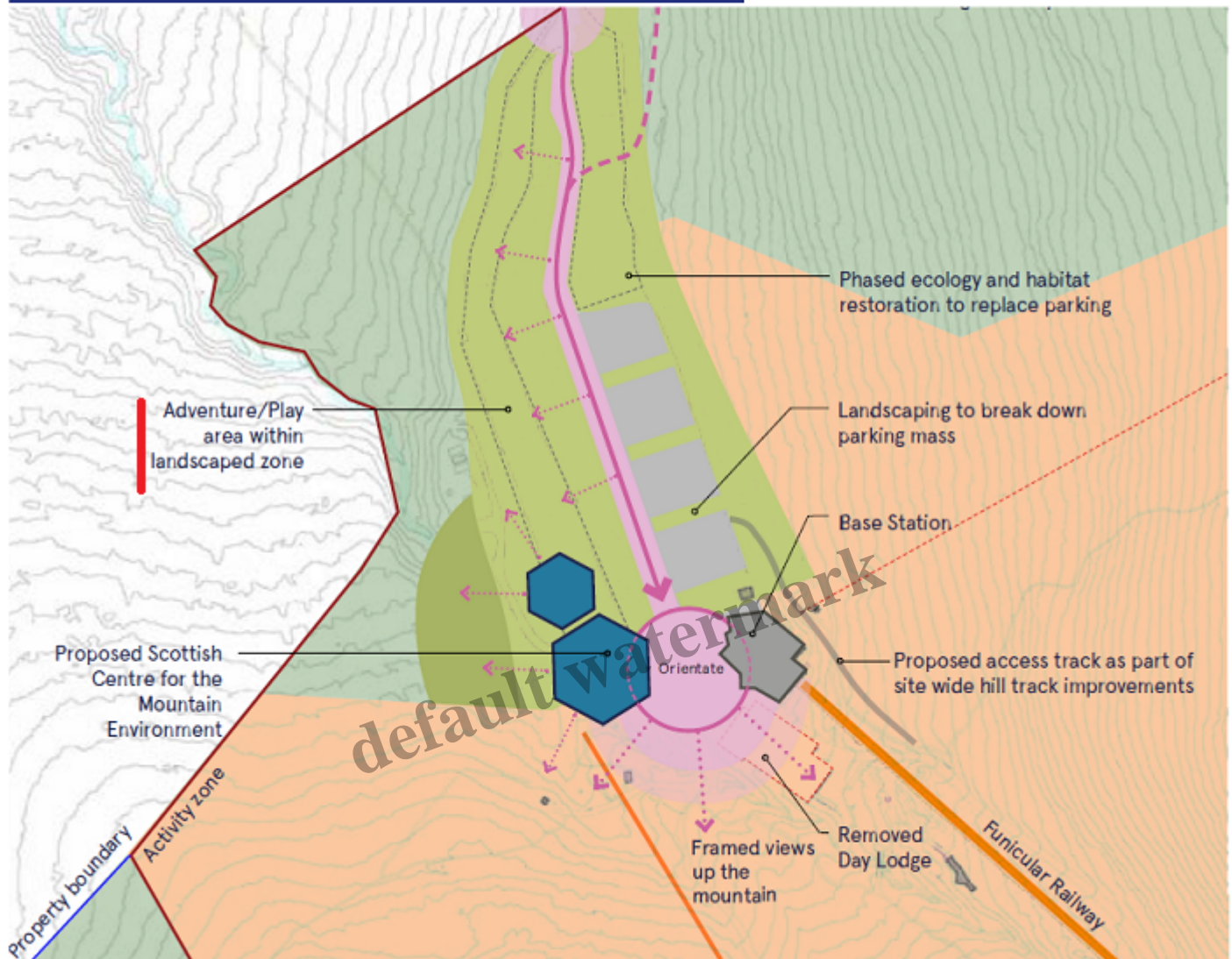
“A proposed food cart will be a timber clad 4m x 3m x 2.5m moveable structure. Two areas have been identified for this at either end of the main car park. At any given time one or the other will be in use.”

There are actually three areas proposed for the food cart, the third outside the car park area. That is significant because it is outside the area designated in the masterplan for this type of facility (see below) and as such represents “creeping development”.

How does the proposed development fit the Cairn Gorm masterplan?

In 2021, after a lot of pressure from the then CNPA Board to put an end to the stream of individual planning applications being proposed without any explanation of the thinking behind them, HIE produced a “masterplan” for Cairn Gorm. While most of the commitments in the masterplan were vague, allowing HIE plenty of scope to chop and change its proposals for Cairn Gorm in future, it did set out the spatial parameters/zones for development at Cairn Gorm. This included a play area in the lower Cas Car Park:

5.6 CAIRNGORM GATEWAY 25-YEAR VISION



Unbelievably there is NO mention of the masterplan in the Committee Report and with most board members having changed since 2021 it is likely that very few will be aware of it. Perhaps the planning officer, who appears to be new, didn't know either? The key planning point is that whatever the merits or otherwise of an application described by staff as being for the "Erection and installation of adventure play equipment", one would expect such a development to take place within the area earmarked for this in the masterplan. Instead, five out of the six ball tracks are located outside the designated play area

Item 3 – Ball Track Activities

Location; 6 separate ball runs to be installed in mountain garden, Lower Cas Car Park, area beside day lodge building and area at base of mountain bike tracks.

Size; various lengths with a maximum of 1.5m high

Material; locally sourced timber with galvanised steel legs and integrated steel play features

Example Photos;



Annotated plan showing position of the six ball tracks and the third location for the proposed food cart. Only no 6 is within the lower Cas Car Park designated in the masterplan for play purposes.

While the Supporting Statement from Ryden LLP does mention the masterplan, it fails to mention the

designated play zone and offers no justification for erecting play equipment outside this area. While placing a ball run outside the Day Lodge (5 on map) may be unimportant in planning terms, that is not the case for runs 1 -4. It extends the size of the development envelope contrary to the masterplan and contrary to what is claimed in the Committee Report “Critically, the proposed development does not extend the visual envelope of the ski centre.”

The landscape impact of the proposed development

While most of the proposed development is within the designated play zone in the masterplan, that still leave the question of whether the play equipment proposed is appropriate. The response of the CNPA’s Landscape Adviser, after explaining the development lies in the Cairngorms National Scenic Area and Glenmore Landscape Character Area, couldn’t be clearer:

“Potential landscape and visual issues

This proposal is inappropriately sited. It would significantly exacerbate the existing cluttered appearance of infrastructure associated with the Lower Cas car park and the ski centre. The proposed animal and letter climbing play structures will be large (up to 5m high) and particularly intrusive and would significantly detract from the natural setting and grandeur of the Cairngorms massif. They would compound the negative perceptions associated with infrastructure in the vicinity of the ski centre and car park especially for who walk into the mountains to seek tranquillity within highly natural surroundings. They would mar views to the northern corries from the start/finish of walks into the core of the massif.

The majority of these play and visitor facilities would be better sited within the less elevated woodland setting of Glenmore Forest to provide screening and shelter and not close to one of the most iconic and dramatic parts of the Cairngorms National Park. Apart from landscape and visual intrusion, the exposure of the site would be likely to result in substantial weathering of timber framed structures in particular such that they would require high levels of maintenance to avoid appearing eroded and tatty.

I consider that this proposal would be contrary to Policy 5 Landscape of the CNPA Development Plan 2021 in that it would not conserve or enhance landscape character and the special qualities of the National Park”.

Note how the landscape adviser does not reject any play facility, rather they say “the majority of these play and visitor facilities would be better sited within the less elevated setting of Glenmore Forest”.

In response, CNPA planning officers claim the Landscape Adviser has got it totally wrong:

21. Cairngorms National Park Authority Landscape Consultant reinterprets the established description of the landscape character within the Landscape Character Assessment (that considers the established ski infrastructure to be a part of the established landscape character) to be one where the character of the landscape is marred by the presence of the infrastructure and car park. In their opinion, the letter and animal features would significantly detract from the natural setting and grandeur of the Cairngorms, exacerbate the cluttered appearance of existing infrastructure in the vicinity and compound the negative perceptions associated with infrastructure in the vicinity of the ski centre and car park especially for those who walk into the mountains to seek tranquillity within highly natural surroundings.

Having carefully read the Landscape Character Assessment for Glenmore ([see here](#)) NOWHERE does it state that the established ski infrastructure is part of the established landscape character. In fact it hardly says anything about the ski infrastructure but DOES refer to the views from the car park:

“A large car park is sited at the foot of the funicular railway and the ski slopes which are marked by snow fences, metal gantries and ski lifts. It offers expansive views across the basin of Glenmore Forest and Strathspey.”

This confirms the Landscape Adviser was absolutely right to be concerned about the 5m high letters spelling CAIRN GORM. In Autumn 2018 the CNPA Board rejected the recommendation of their planning staff and refused HIE’s application to build an artificial ski slope above the car park on landscape grounds. The current Committee Report lists all the planning applications considered at Cairn Gorm over the last five years, every one of which has been accepted, but not the one five and a half years ago which wasn’t. It appears that planning staff don’t want Board Members to be reminded of the time they took the right decision and rejected a development by the car park because of its impact on the landscape.

Sustainable or appropriate development?

There is no business case accompanying the planning application and the Committee Report does not clarify whether CMSL intends to charge for using the play facilities, as it does for the tube slides. That is despite the masterplan stating:

A sustainable operating model will match long-term expenditure by the operator with long-term income. This allows for both ‘earned’ and ‘unearned’ income, such as public funding support. Like any business, the operating company will aim to attract investment that achieves positive, commercial rates of return.

The CNPA called in this application because it had implications for the aims of the National Park, which include sustainable development and wise use of resources. Despite those aims and despite the commit to sustainability in the masterplan, the Committee Report completely avoids the question of whether this development is sustainable or not, from either an environmental or a financial perspective.

Given the disaster of the funicular, it would be in the public interest to know whether these play facilities were yet another gift to CMSL, paid for by HIE out of public money at the expense of other projects in the Highlands, or whether they are expected to pay for themselves.



Further work to repair the funicular Sunday 14th July

(While HIE has clarified the Balfour Beatty is paying for “remedial works” to the failed repairs ([see here](#)), it is picking up other costs including project management and lost income to CMSL).

The implications of the development for access

In response to questions from the CNPA Outdoor Access team about access to and charges for the play facilities, the Committee Report states CMSL had provided “additional information relating to the maintenance of public access across the site” and “the Officer noted that the proposed play equipment will not interfere with access across the site”. The meaning of this and its implications for access rights is far from clear. Unfortunately, whatever additional information was provided to the CNPA has

not been published on the planning portal so is not a matter of public record (I will submit a Freedom of Information request).

The CNPA planners should have learned from what has happened with the mountain bike tracks where, subsequent to the planning application, CMSL has tried to prevent anyone who has failed to purchase an uplift ticket from using them, contrary to access rights and contrary to the practice of other mountain bike trails in Scotland. Does CMSL intend to charge people for hiring balls to use on the ball run and, if so, do they intend to prevent children bringing their own balls?

The Committee Report also fails to mention or make recommendations about other points raised by the Outdoor Access Team: the need for an access plan (the position of existing and proposed paths is unclear); the impact of the ball runs on other recreational users; whether the play equipment will be accessible to children with disabilities etc.

Why the proposed development should be refused

This post has described a number of fundamental flaws in the Committee Report being discussed later today and a number of material reasons why the CNPA Board should reject their officers recommendation: a significant part of the proposed play areas lies outwith the designated play zone; the landscape impact of the development will be significant; and there are serious questions about its sustainability and impact on access which remain to be answered.

Set aside the planning speak and the requirements of Scotland's increasingly bureaucratic and tick box planning system, however, and the fundamental issues with HIE's proposed play facilities is that they are naff and are in completely the wrong place. When the weather is kind Cairn Gorm is a great place for children to experience the mountain environment through play: a paddle or pooh sticks in the burn, a bounce in the bog, a scramble over rocks, a search for creepy crawlies in the heather. Cairn Gorm offers in fact one great, easily accessible, natural playground.

There is therefore absolutely no need to create an artificial play area in the lower Cas Car park and around the buildings. Its completely redundant and can only serve to detract from the natural qualities of the mountain, including opportunities for play. If the CNPA was acting like a real National Park it would have told HIE to cut the play zone out of the masterplan and instead urged HIE to employ more rangers to encourage less confident adults and children learn how to play in the great outdoors.

And as for those adults and children who for whatever reason want to experience an artificial play park, half way up Cairn Gorm is totally the wrong place due to the weather. Such play facilities should be lower down, in the shelter of the trees, like the very successful Landmark Centre at Carrbridge. They could tell both HIE and CNPA planning officers something about the crass stupidity of this planning application, if only they were prepared to listen.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

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

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