

LANDSCAPE

Application Reference No:	2018/0112/DET
Application Name/Description :	Installation of beginner and intermediate artificial ski slopes with associated services Cairngorm Mountain, Glenmore, Aviemore
Advisor:	Matthew Hawkins
Date of Advice	17 th April 2018

The Development
Installation of beginner and intermediate artificial ski slopes with associated services

Landscape Designations & Inventories Cairngorms National Park NSA
The site lies within the Cairngorms National Scenic area

Landscape Character (physical attributes)
Features and Sensitivity
<p>The Relevant landscape character assessments can be found here:</p> <p>i. Landscape Areas - Cairngorms National Park Authority</p> <p>The landscape assessment follows standard practice and on the whole the descriptions of LCA are correct and the standard assessment methodology is followed. However there are issues that I feel the assessment understates or has missed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The hillside, on which the site lies, is part of landscape setting of the ski centre. Generally the major infrastructure, buildings funicular base and car parks, are set in lower parts of the corrie and the surrounding ridges forming the sides of the corrie, they often screen these larger features from views around the area. These ridges and outer slopes also have the uplift, pistes and snow fencing some places, though not all. This tends to be smaller and is visually less intrusive, though the extent is larger. Some parts of the hill are without any infrastructure and form the outer extent of the ski centre and the limit of its physical influence on the surrounding landscape. They all contribute to the character for the ski centre. The hillsides and ridges have a strong texture which is complex and relatively small grained. This is derived from the natural vegetation and the matrix of upland heath, wet flushes, some grassy area and a few

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small trees together with natural rock exposures, some solid and some is glacial deposit or scree. It emphasises the natural setting of the ski centre and of course the harsh nature of the climate at such altitudes.

- The dominant colours of the landscape are browns and warm greys. Green is a feature that is only prominent during the summer months though it persists in small patches in the wet flushes throughout the year.
- Snow white is of course an important part of the colour palette for the site and this can appear from September through to June in various ways and persistence. The pattern of snow lies is complicated and changes throughout the season. It is affected by texture of the ground, undulations, snow fencing, exposure to wind and temperature. Exposed slopes are often left with a thin patchy covering whilst gullies have deep deposits. New snow covers evenly on flat surfaces but with a more mottled effect on rougher textures such as heathland. It is important to consider how the proposal interacts with this pattern at this can effect visibility and landscape character considerably.
- The proposed carpet area is contrary to the existing landscape character in almost all respects. It is a regular shape and flat colour. The application only states dark green, though the visualisations show a mid-green. The precise shade is not indicated. The colour green is not well suited to match existing shades of the natural landscape. The flat even texture will hold snow in different ways to the surrounding area. The location of the ski slope moves the infrastructure into the natural zone of the hillsides. The topography will be broadly similar to existing however the bottom of the slope will be built up.
- A number of mitigation measures are proposed. However they are unlikely to be effective because –
 - A large regular shape will still remain in single block of colour; the planting around the edge will have limited effect in softening the lines. The colour green is not appropriate to this landscape.
 - Peat reuse could be useful but there are technical difficulties about how to transport the material and these are not explained in the CMS. Overall however small pockets of repaired eroded habitats around the ski centre will not compensate for the change in landscape character of the proposal area. It will improve the condition of these areas but will not in themselves mitigate landscape change on the site from the immediate vicinity. In addition it will have no discernible benefit from further views.
- The report does not consider the long term visual effect and the changes in the matting over time. The evidence from Keswick suggests that it will deteriorate (see attached annex). This could have several effects; fading of the colour and replacement patching. In places in Keswick white strips have been added to the carpet. None of these make the carpet area look better or necessarily allow it to fit into the landscape more easily.
- Similarly the report does not consider the life span of the development or the restoration of the site after its useful life.

Special Landscape Qualities

The relevant published SLQ report is: [the Special Landscape Qualities of the Cairngorms National Park](#)

The applicant's SLQs assessment is within the main report. I have some concerns over the adopted methodology. It attempts to apply a similar approach to that of LVIA, using assigned sensitivity with magnitude of effects. Consequently it has resulted in a reductive argument that averages out the assessment results and misses

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some effects that will be very apparent to visitors to the area. SLQ assessment requires a more narrative approach. It should focus on the SLQ that are present and describe the effects upon that from the development. It should then go on to discuss possible mitigation for adverse effects. There is little attempt to weigh the positive and adverse effects. Sensitivity has been applied to the site and the wider area, however the justification for this is not always apparent or indeed how it is used to assess the effect or what the significance of effect is. It is argued that the site has few SLQs but this misses the point that it is not a quantitative assessment. It is also argued that the site is not distinctive and yet it is typical of upland moorland. The tables examine the extent of land cover within the surrounding 5km that share the same feature. It is not clear how this 5km buffer has been determined.

One significant SLQ in the area is that of wildness. The site itself does not exhibit high levels but the parts of the surrounding areas that do and this has not been considered in sufficient detail. In particular users of the corrie path will see the ski slope as a focal point for approximately 2km when descending from the plateau. It will also be the first feature of the ski centre to be seen when approach the end of the path. The path is an important part of the transition from non-wild to wild, though there are many for who even the car park will seem relatively wild. The level of wildness rises steeply when leaving the ski centre. Conversely when walking towards the centre wildness only reduces close to the corrie and car park. However extending the influence of the ski centre along this track, by making it more visible further away, will diminish the quality of experience. This will be a localised adverse effect of diminished wildness along this track sooner than is currently felt

Wildland Land Area 15 (Cairngorms)

The proposal will be visible from cairngorms WLA. However the WLA is large and extends over the core of the mountain and plateau. It will not be visible from most of this area. Where visible effects will be exacerbated during light snow when surrounding will be white but carpet will appear a dark square. Indeed there will be time when the opposite may be true when a light fall of snow settles evenly on the mat but not on the rougher surrounding vegetation. The wild land assessment does not recognise that such visibility is likely to make the carpet a focal point in the views from the WLA. The location of the proposed slope makes it more likely to reduce the experience of wildland. In moorland areas, even around the ski centre, features like that proposed are not common and therefore unexpected. If the same feature was, hypothetically, in Glenmore it would be likely to have a smaller effect on the wildland experience because it would be less unexpected.

Overall I would agree with the assessment that there is no significant affect upon the whole wildland area 15. However there will be specific and localised effects for those areas with a view to the new slope from the south.

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Visual Effects

Sensitivity and receptors

Visual

- Is the ZTV accurate? Meall a' Bhuachaille is visible from site. Though the angle means the proposal would be viewed obliquely and so less visually intrusive. The ZTV suggest that it is not visible. This underestimation of the visibility may also extend to other areas.
- The report acknowledges significant visual impacts from nearby areas
- Table A5 only considers major and major/moderate effect as being 'notable'. In usual EIA terms (though it is accepted that this isn't one) moderate effects are also considered significant or 'notable'. However there is no justification for this distinction. In view of the high status of the national park it is considered that even moderate effect should be regarded as significant or 'notable'.
- Report underestimates the value of wildness and the sensitivity of hill walkers in this area – it is arguable that a very high sensitivity should be applied to this group due to the specific expectations of being in a wildland area.
- Seasonal effects have not been adequately assessed but might increase the visibility of the carpet due to the contrast effects described above.
- There is no sequential assessment of the corrie track down from plateaux – it will be visible for the 2km from summit. The carpet will be the first feature of the ski centre visible, which would extend its visual envelope further into the wild area.
- Visual assessment tend to assume magnitude of minor for many views points however the assessment methodology defines moderate as “Moderate change in the view would occur where the proposals would be clearly noticeable and an important new element in the view.” The effect of the large simple geometry in a flat colour has been generally underestimated in the way it would attract the attention, especially as of the corrie track it is the focal point of the view and the destination of the track. The assessment from some VPs would be significantly different:

VP	Assessed magnitude	Assessed significance	Significance if magnitude is medium
4	slight	moderate	Major moderate
6	negligible	minor	Major moderate
7	slight	moderate	Major moderate

Information supplied

There are several pieces of information that have either not been supplied or are inadequate. These are required prior to approval to determine the effectiveness of mitigation and determine the full effect of the application:

- Landscape plan for the reinstatement of excavated areas showing full details and maintenance until fully established
- Working life of the artificial slope and potentially details of site restoration back to acceptable vegetation after it is ceased to be required. Financial arrangements for this may be appropriate.
- Carpet colour. So far only 'green' and 'dark green' has been mentioned but no specific shade, RAL reference or sample provided.

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- Full construction details including excavation, management of material, including peat.
- Cross and long sections showing existing slope and final construction

Summary

Impact and Significance of development

- The proposal does not conserve and enhance the landscape character of the site through the introduction of large regular shape on to a natural hill slope and extending infrastructure onto the surrounding hillside away from core of ski centre,
- The seasonal effects have not been considered and could significantly increase the visibility of the carpet.
- The report acknowledges significant adverse effects on the site and immediate area but underestimates visual effects from the immediate hillsides around the ski centre.
- The scheme is not likely to affect the integrity of the NSA or CNP but will reduce the quality and strength of the SLQ in the vicinity of the slopes and from the surrounding hillsides. There are likely to be adverse effects on the quality of wildness.
- The proposed mitigation strategy generally rests upon four key elements. None of these would be effective or likely to result in a scheme that enhances the landscape character:
 - The colour green is in itself inappropriate for this landscape and no suitable alternatives have been considered. It is still proposed to be a single block of monotone.
 - The restoration of heathland vegetation would soften the form of the carpet – however it will not be allowed to encroach over the carpet and so the edge will remain as a straight line and the regular shape of the carpet will remain highly visible.
 - The retention of the landform, in general terms, is largely a requirement for the ski slope. It is not in itself mitigation because it does not change. However there is significant cut and fill and loss of peat from the slope, the lack of cross or long sections makes it difficult to be clear on the extent of the effect. It is at best neutral.
 - The size of the carpet does not seem to have been influenced by the desire to make it fit the landscape character.
- Construction method statement – it is not apparent for the document submitted how the excavated material, especially, peat will be dug, transported and sorted. In addition the construction of the drainage and suds scheme is not fully explained. It does not have enough information.

Overall conclusion

It is clear that the proposed development would create a new feature that strongly contrasts with the current landscape features of the site. The development will have significant adverse landscape and visual effects and will not compliment or enhance the landscape character or special landscape qualities of the site and its surroundings.

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Conditions required if approval is recommended

- Condition to restore the landform back to acceptable vegetation after it is ceased to be required.
- For no lighting to the area, to reduce the effects on wildland to the south.
- Additional mitigation, including tree planting around the carpet area and possibly car parks to offset adverse effects.
- Carpet should be in different colours
- Full construction details including excavation, management of material, including peat, cross sections.
- Full landscape plans showing details of restoration plans

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Annex

Adam Gough of Natural Retreats highlighted that the proposed material and colour was used at the Keswick dry ski slope. This was visited by Matthew Hawkins and Frances Thin in May 2017 as part of another trip. The photos below illustrate the appearance of the carpet material in use at this site:



Looking up the slope from the entrance, worn areas have been patched over time looking across the slope, note 'moguls' towards the back of the carpet.

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Detail of the previous photos



looking down the slope from above