

ANGUS COUNCIL

PLANNING AND TRANSPORT POLICY COMMITTEE

25 April 1996

SUBJECT: DRAFT NATIONAL PLANNING POLICY GUIDELINE - SKI-ING DEVELOPMENTS

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF PLANNING, TRANSPORT & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Abstract: This Report outlines advice on ski-ing developments published recently in a draft National Planning Policy Guideline (NPPG) by the Scottish Office. The draft Guidelines seek to ensure that the future expansion and further development of ski-ing can be achieved in a sustainable manner, thereby extending the recreational benefit of the sport and providing invaluable support to the rural economy. Ski-ing development within Angus is minimal restricted to the high plateau area of Glass Maol at Glenshee and the Cross Country Ski Centre at Glenmarkie. Nonetheless the draft Guidelines provide a framework for inclusion as appropriate in both Structure and Local Plans as well as assessment of existing and new projects.

1 RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Committee:-

- i note the advice contained in the NPPG on ski-ing developments;
- ii generally accepts the advice as set out in the draft NPPG and notify the Scottish Office accordingly;
- iii agree that the advice when finalised in the NPPG will be taken into account in the preparation of appropriate policy statements- Angus & Dundee Structure Plan and Angus Local Plan;
- iv request clarification from the Scottish Office to the reference in paragraph 72 to the Dundee and Angus Structure Plan area.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The Scottish Office has recently issued for consultation purposes a draft National Planning Policy Guideline (NPPG) on ski-ing developments. A copy of the draft NPPG is available for reference at the Members Lounge, The Cross, Forfar.
- 2.2 This report summarises and comments on some of the main points raised and provides a basis for any formal response from the Council.
- 2.3 The draft NPPG when finalised will replace the present NPPG, published in 1984, and provide a framework within which decisions on ski-ing developments can take place.

3 KEY POINTS FROM THE NPPG

Ski-ing Background in Scotland

- 3.1 In comparison with other European Countries, downhill ski-ing in Scotland developed comparatively recently with major centres at Glencoe, Glenshee (1950's), Cairngorms (1960), Lecht (1977) and more recently Aonach Mor (1989). Ski-ing has therefore become a major sporting and recreational activity in Scotland. Demand is high but activity is very much dependent on the vagaries of the weather. Demand is principally for short stay visitors; day or weekend visitors. As a consequence the peak of activity is at weekend and key holiday periods.
- 3.2 Longer stay and weekday visitors have been increasing but are still small percentage by way of overall comparison.
- 3.3 Ski Centres by their nature are generally located in remote rural areas and therefore they can play an important role in bringing employment and economic benefit to such areas, particularly supporting tourism and contributing to an extension of the tourist season. In the main Ski Centres are often located in important environmental areas and therefore there is a need to reconcile the competing policy objectives in such a way that allows the development of ski-ing in a sustainable manner.

Guidelines for Ski-ing Development - General Policy

- 3.4 The previous NPPG (1984) indicated a distinction between primary and secondary areas. The current draft NPPG no longer maintains this distinction and indicates as a main priority the consolidation of development and improvement to the range and quality of facilities at existing Ski Centres. Completely new areas are not ruled out, however, there is a general recognition of the need to ensure that any new area meets the environmental tests established by the Guide-lines.
- 3.5 The priority of the general policy is:-
- to provide for the likely further growth in the demand for ski-ing at existing Centres through consolidating existing development and improving the range and quality of ski-ing and through expansion and further development at the Centres, subject to any qualifying comments in the area guidelines; and
 - to steer the expansion of commercial ski develop to areas which, with the application of appropriate policies, planning conditions and Management Agreements, minimises conflict and makes development more acceptable."
- 3.6 Paragraph 18 of the draft NPPG discusses broadly the various factors relating to growth and expansion of existing Ski Centres.
- 3.7 As indicated the draft NPPG favours a policy of consolidation however this does not preclude the development of new sites. Proposals for new development should however be assessed against the policy and general criteria set out in the draft NPPG and also subject to Environmental Assessment.

- 3.8 The draft Guidelines also recognise (paras 22-25) that spin-off can occur to other parts of the area as a result of the establishment and growth of Ski Centres. Authorities are encouraged to recognise the community benefit that can take place and planning policies should therefore:-
- "provide for associated off-slope tourist and recreational developments in nearby settlements and communities".

Environmental Issues

- 3.9 Conservation of the natural heritage is also given a high priority and the draft NPPG recognises the need to ensure sustainable development and the protection of the environment. Accordingly therefore Development Plans and Development Control should take into account the demand and nature of ski-ing and also consider the ability of the land to sustain activity in the longer term. It is however stressed that the development of downhill ski-ing need not be incompatible with the protection of natural heritage interest.
- 3.10 The draft NPPG recognises a number of environmental designations and in particular the international designations such as E.C. Directives and in particular, Special Protection Areas (SPA's) and Special Areas of Conservation (SAC's). A number of these designated and prospective SPA's are in and around the Ski-ing Centres such as at Cairngorms, Drumochter Hills, Caenlochan and Ben Wyvies.
- 3.11 The draft NPPG therefore indicates that proposals within or within close proximity to designated areas should be considered in the context of the following:-
- "Ski developments should not be allowed in or in close vicinity to proposed or designated special protection areas (SPA's) or special areas of conservation (SAC's) unless it can be demonstrated that the proposals will not have a significant adverse effect on the species or habitat safeguarded in the particular designated area or there are imperative reasons for over-riding public interest why the development should proceed, and there are no alternative solutions".
- 3.12 The draft NPPG also recognises the importance of national designations such as National Scenic Areas (NSA's), National Nature Reserves (NNR's), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's) and prospective Natural Heritage Areas (NHA's). Accordingly therefore the draft policy with regard to ski-ing development is as follows:-
- "ski developments should only be permitted where;
- it can be demonstrated that the proposal will not be incompatible with the purpose of a designated area;
 - with careful planning and control of ski developments, the overall integrity of the designated area in terms of both its purpose and scale is largely unaffected, and can continue to meet its overall conservation objective; or

- exceptionally, any significant adverse effects on the environmental qualities for which the site has been designated are outweighed significantly by the scale of the social, recreational and economic benefits that could arise."

Visual Impact

- 3.13 The visual impact of ski developments is also noted. It is highlighted that in the Scottish climate all downhill ski-ing developments are likely to be located above the tree line. This then makes them more conspicuous in the landscape. Although it is recognised that their impact will in part diminish with distance. The various structures required in support of downhill ski-ing such as tows, snow fences, access roads etc, will require to be carefully considered and the NPPG indicates:-
- "the construction of uplift facilities and snow fences in visually prominent locations, such as long ridgelines, should be avoided wherever possible".

Other Users

- 3.14 The document also highlights the relationship of ski-ing with other high mountain area users such as climbing, hill walking, bird watching and sight seeing. The document generally indicates that such activities can be compatible and that possible plans for ski-ing development should try and accommodate these.
- 3.15 Safety on ski slopes is also a high priority and in dealing with planning applications for extension to overall ski area particular attention should be focused on the requirement to ensure that the capacity of car park in terms of visitor numbers does not exceed that of the slopes themselves.
- 3.16 Downhill ski-ing clearly is a winter activity, however the facilities provided to support this use can also be used in summer activities. However it is recognised that in terms of environmental impact summer use may provide a greater disturbance to wildlife and erosion of fragile habitats. It is suggested that when planning applications for downhill ski-ing facilities are put forward then such applications should also consider the extent of any summer operations envisaged. The draft NPPG indicates that there can be no presumption that summer use of uplift facilities will be acceptable and the following policy is put forward:-
- "The presence of an existing ski development should not carry with it an automatic presumption in favour of summer use of uplift facilities, unless it can be demonstrated conclusively that such use can be accommodated and managed without serious environmental damage."
- 3.17 The draft NPPG recommends that dependent on the scale of downhill ski-ing developments, the use of Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Regulations 1988 should be considered as a valuable tool in appraising the acceptability of particular development proposals. The use of Environmental Statement is however at the discretion of the Planning Authority and it is for each Authority to consider the appropriateness of this particular environmental tool.

Monitoring and Management

- 3.18 Monitoring and management are also recommended as a way of ensuring a high standard of land stewardship. Key companies are now more aware of the need for both forward planning and management objectives and therefore the draft NPPG puts forward the following policy:-
- "the regular monitoring of environmental impacts should be regarded as a key element of the ski companies activities and comprehensive management regimes established to ensure that any damage is kept to a minimum. Planning conditions or where appropriate Section 50 Agreements should make provision for monitoring and ensure that a satisfactory regime is in place in relation to new centres or the expansion of existing centres."
- 3.19 The draft NPPG certainly places great stress on the adoption by developers of ski area development and management plans in order to guide their future operations and to enable the monitoring of the various activities to be undertaken.

4 AREA GUIDELINES

- 4.1 The draft NPPG deals in detail with the following ski centres - Cairngorms, Glenshee, Aonach Mor (Nevis Range), Lecht and Glencoe.

Glenshee

- 4.2 As far as Angus is concerned Glenshee Ski Centre fringes into the high plateau of the Angus area at Glass Maol and the Caenlochan area. The latter is a site of Special Scientific Interest and may become a Special Area of Conservation (SAC).
- 4.3 The draft NPPG recognises that the extension of ski-ing into the Glass Maol area has improved significantly the range and quality of ski-ing available at Glenshee, thus enhancing its attractiveness for longer stay visitors and therefore the economic benefits to nearby communities. Any additional ski-ing at the Glass Maol area will however require sensitive handling and need to reconcile the various environmental interests.
- 4.4 The following draft guidelines are therefore proposed:-
- "The primary aim at Glenshee should be to maintain the overall range and quality of ski-ing through the renewal, relocation of existing lifts and tows and where appropriate through the addition of new tows, both within and adjacent to the existing ski area. New and relocated ski tows, together with the associated ski runs should be sensitive to the importance of the nature conservation interest in the area and the most fragile areas should be safeguarded by routing skiers away from them.
 - Intensification of ski-ing at Glass Maol will be in accord with these guidelines provided it can be demonstrated conclusively that there are no damaging affect on the nearby ornithological interests.

- Improved access and uplift facilities from the A93 to O Dhur will in principle accord with this guidelines."

4.5 The draft NPPG also suggests that further easterly expansion of the ski area towards Gardh Choire is not likely to be feasible without investment in the new road and car parks accessed from the A93. It also indicates that such a development could raise major issues of environmental intrusion. In the short term sites to the west of the A93 road should be considered.

4.6 Development as indicated above could increase capacity to about 8-9,000 skiers.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 The draft NPPG recognises the contribution that ski-ing developments can bring in both employment and other economic benefits to rural areas. Sustainable developments and protection of the environment are also lay features of the draft NPPG. In particular the importance of national and international conservation designations such as SPA and SAC are highlighted as factors which Authorities should take into account in assessing applications for developments and existing and new ski centres. The role of Environmental Assessment as a tool to assist the overall assessment is also promoted.

5.2 While the principle established by the draft NPPG merit general support it should be stressed that considerable investment has been made at existing ski centres and wherever possible weighting should be given to maximising on the investment and the economic benefits that can accrue to that area as a result of additional investment on development. It is however recognised that in dealing with future development proposals the relationship between economic and environmental issues will require careful consideration.

5.3 Within Angus policy guidance on winter sports is provided by the Finalised Tayside Structure Plan 1993 which indicates the following principles:-

"Policy 5 - To support Glenshee as a national ski centre

Policy 6 - To encourage winter sports and related development which:-

- 1 secure economic and social benefits for Tayside communities;
- 2 enable diversification into more weather resistant and environmentally sensitive forms of year round activity;
- 3 respect the natural environment and do not prejudice the environmental policies of the Plan.

5.4 In consideration of the Finalised Tayside Structure Plan the Secretary of State endorsed these policies. However with regard to the supporting text associated with the Glenshee policy the Secretary of State proposed as a modification the additional caveat "that development outwith the ski areas must take account of conservation interests, particularly the designation of Special Protection Areas and Special Areas of Conservation".

- 5.5 While the Draft Modification raised no major concern clarification has been sought as to whether this applies to existing and new ski areas or to winter sports generally. The terms of this modification have yet to be confirmed by the Secretary of State as part of his final approval of the Structure Plan which is awaited.
- 5.6 The draft NPPG also puts forward action required by Local Authorities and in particular the Structure Plans for Highland, Aberdeenshire and Dundee and Angus should provide the planning context for additional ski-ing developments consistent with the published guidelines. The Structure Plans should therefore:-
- "include policies which provide for the further development of existing ski centres, in accord with the area guidelines;
 - set out the criteria against which new ski developments will be considered; and
 - provide for associated off-slope development in nearby settlements.
- 5.7 The omission in the draft NPPG of any reference to the future Structure Plan for Perth and Kinross is clearly an error. Clarification is also required of the reference to the Dundee and Angus Structure Plan particularly as the main Glenshee area is located within Perthshire. It could be that reference to Dundee and Angus is in the context of the development in the Glass Maol/Cairn Lochin area however it is suggested that this reference be clarified prior to finalisation of the document.
- 5.8 The draft NPPG also makes reference to action on behalf of Local Planning and suggests, where appropriate, Local Plans should:-
- "reflect the policies of the Guidelines and Structure Plan in order to provide a framework for development control;
 - indicate the sites to be developed or improved, having regard to visual and other likely environmental impact;
 - provide for the monitoring and management.
- 5.9 In broad terms the Finalised Tayside Structure Plan 1993 (including draft modifications) is consistent with the guidance contained in this draft NPPG. Opportunity will also be taken to take on board the guidelines when finalised for ski-ing development during the preparation of the Angus Local Plan and subsequent review of the Structure Plan for Dundee and Angus.

6 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no financial implications arising from this Report.

7 CONSULTATION

- 7.1 The Director of Law and Administration, Director of Finance and Director of Recreation Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

8 CONCLUSION

- 8.1 The recently published draft NPPG on ski development provides up to date national advice on the future expansion and further development of ski-ing to ensure that this can be achieved in a sustainable manner. The draft NPPG also recognises that additional ski-ing development will extend the recreational benefits and at the same time providing invaluable support to the rural economy.
- 8.2 The draft NPPG reflects the need to balance environmental with economic considerations and the various guidance will be of use in both Structure and Local Plan preparation and assessing future development proposals.

NOTE

No background papers as defined by Section_50(d) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, (other than any containing confidential exempt information) were relied on to any material extent in preparing the above report.

GDP/KW

Alex Anderson
Director of Planning, Transport & Economic Development

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