Midlothian Snowsports Centre / Hillend Country Park: Draft Stage One Planning Brief

Pentland Hills Regional Park Joint Committee
22nd July 2011

Purpose of report

1 To update the Joint Committee about Midlothian Council’s proposals for the development of Midlothian Snowsports Centre and other land within Hillend Country Park.

Main report

2 At a special meeting held on 27th August 2010 and following an extended period of uncertainty, Midlothian Council decided to keep Midlothian Snowsports Centre open subject to the implementation of efficiency and restructuring proposals and continued negotiation about future funding with Sportscotland.

3 Following these negotiations, £553,000 of capital funding has been secured from Sportscotland to improve infrastructure and facilities. A further £400,000 of revenue funding has been made available from the Scottish Government’s Active Schools programme to support use by schools throughout Edinburgh and the Lothians.

4 In order to support the longer term financial sustainability of the Snowsports Centre, Midlothian Council is proposing to enable complimentary commercial development on land within Hillend Country Park.

5 A draft Stage One Planning Brief has been prepared and was approved in principle by Midlothian Council’s Planning Committee on 11th January 2011 and tabled at a meeting of the full Council held on 22nd March 2011. Midlothian Council would now like to consult with key stakeholders on the draft Stage One Planning Brief.

6 The draft Stage One Planning Brief (Appendix 1) described the planning policy context and extent of potential development opportunities.

7 The Snowsports Centre and Hillend Country Park are located with an Area of Great Landscape Value (AGLV), Green Belt and the Pentland Hills Regional
Park. The importance of these designations and the wider landscape, habitat and amenity value of the area are reflected in local planning policy. The draft Brief aims to indicate the potential for appropriate development within the limits of existing planning constraints.

**Financial Implications**

8 Midlothian Council intends that development of complementary facilities would generate additional revenue and increase the customer base of the Snowsports Centre. It is intended that this would contribute to the longer term financial sustainability of the Snowsports Centre.

9 Development of new facilities at Hillend may support local economic development by acting as a ‘hub’, not only for snowsports, but as a gateway for wider public enjoyment of the Pentland Hills for outdoor recreation.

**Environmental Impact**

10 Hillend is an important upland landscape and an important place for recreational access to the Pentland Hills. This sensitivity is reflected in the existing designations and Planning Policies that apply.

11 New development would have the potential for adverse impact on landscape quality and the overall character of the Country Park. The draft Stage 1 Planning Brief aims to minimise this impact by identifying land which is screened by existing topography and indicating the type of built development that might be sympathetic to the site.

**Recommendations**

12 It is recommended that the Joint Committee:

   a) notes the contents of the draft Stage One Planning Brief for Snowsports Centre and Hillend Country Park;

   b) requests that Officers from Midlothian Council make a presentation on the proposals to the Pentland Hills Regional Park Consultative Forum; and

   c) receives regular update reports on the proposals.

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**Appendices**

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|                               | Keith Logie (Parks Development Manager, 0131 529 7916)       
|                               | Alan McGregor (Regional Park Manager, 0131 445 3383)         |
| Wards affected                | All                                                           |
| Single Outcome Agreement      | Relevant to the following National Outcomes:                 |
|                               | 1  We live in a Scotland that is the most attractive place for doing business in Europe. |
|                               | 2  We realise our full economic potential with more and better employment opportunities for our people. |
|                               | 6  We live longer, healthier lives.                          |
|                               | 10 We live in well-designed, sustainable places where we are able to access the amenities and services we need. |
|                               | 11 We have strong, resilient and supportive communities where people take responsibility for their own actions and how they affect others. |
|                               | 12 We value and enjoy our built and natural environment and protect it and enhance it for future generations |
|                               | 13 We take pride in a strong, fair and inclusive national identity. |
|                               | 14 We reduce the local and global environmental impact of our consumption and Production. |
|                               | 15 Our public services are high quality, continually improving, efficient and responsive to local people’s needs. |
| Background Papers            | None                                                          |
Midlothian Snowsports Centre and Hillend Country Park, Midlothian

Stage One Planning Brief for Development Opportunities

[PHOTOGRAPH OF SNOWSPORTS CENTRE]

Midlothian Council
[Date]
Introduction

1.1 Midlothian Council wishes to explore development opportunities at both the Midlothian Snowsports Centre and within Hillend Country Park. The Snowsports Centre and the Country Park, within which the Centre is located, are identified on Figure 1.

1.2 The Council is committed to maintaining the presence of the Snowsports Centre in Midlothian and seeks to maintain and enhance the success of the Centre and the Country Park as leisure and visitor attractions. It recognises the need to upgrade and enhance the Snowsports Centre to secure its future as a centre of excellence. It acknowledges the Centre’s importance as a recreational and educational resource and supports, in principle, development that is complementary and ancillary to the Snowsports Centre’s function, and necessary for its continued viable operation. Accordingly, the Council will consider favourably proposals for holiday/ short stay accommodation, related retail and restaurant facilities which it considers complementary and ancillary development to the Snowsports Centre, as set out in the Midlothian Local Plan (MLP)(2008).

1.3 In that context, this planning brief has been prepared to provide a framework to consider sensitive development and/ or redevelopment in the Country Park that will seek to secure the long-term viability of the Snowsports Centre. The Council will expect development in the Country Park to contribute, including financially where it considers appropriate, to the upgrading of the Snowsports Centre and the facility as a whole.

1.4 This planning brief identifies locations for development and types of development that will, in principle, be supported by the Council subject to proposals satisfying the requirements of the brief, and those of the MLP. The brief and the MLP policy framework recognise the significant sensitivities associated with development in this location. Landscape impact has been a very important consideration in the identification of locations for potential development.

1.5 This Stage One Brief provides the planning policy context and an indication of likely development opportunities. A Stage Two Brief would be expected to be jointly prepared by the Council and a prospective development partner on the basis of further assessment, most notably in terms of more detailed work on infrastructure and ground conditions surveys, as well as features of historical and natural heritage.
The Location

2.1 Hillend Country Park is located at the northern end of the Pentland Hills and comprises, in the main, steeply sloping land, much of which is elevated and open to long distance views. The Snowsports Centre includes artificial ski slopes, a chairlift and ski lifts. In addition there are a number of buildings on the site, mainly grouped at the lower end of the ski slopes. The buildings have developed in a fairly ad hoc manner over the years. Most of the existing buildings and the lower parts of the ski slopes are screened from open views by the landform around the site and by existing planted areas. This very effective screening allows further development areas to be identified.
Planning Context

3.1 Hillend is a very sensitive area for development due to its location and visibility. The land subject to this brief is within designated countryside, Green Belt, an Area of Great Landscape Value, the Pentland Hills Regional Park and the Hillend Country Park. The MLP sets out the policies applicable to these designations, and what issues development proposals in this location should address for them to accord with the Local Plan’s policy framework.

3.2 The key relevant MLP policies and provisions are listed and summarised in the Appendix of this brief. One of the main concerns regarding new development or redevelopment at Hillend will be how the development will fit into the landscape, given the visibility of the location. The visual impact of the proposals will be of critical importance to a successful development.

3.3 While the Council acknowledges that the Country Park is a location that accommodates more intensive countryside recreation particularly at its northern end, proposals will require to accord with the aims of the Pentland Hills Regional Park as a whole which are set out in policy DP4 of the MLP (see Appendix). These aims include retaining the essential character of the hills as a place for peaceful enjoyment of the countryside.

3.4 Therefore, while the Council’s support in principle for certain forms of development at the Snowsports Centre is set out in MLP policy COMF7 Midlothian Ski and Snowboard Centre, all proposals will require have regard to all other relevant Local Plan policies.
Development Opportunities

4.1 This section of the brief sets out the locations and types of development that the Council will support in principle at the Snowsports Centre and within Hillend Country Park. The brief has sought to identify areas within the Country Park which may be best able to accommodate development from a landscape impact perspective. However, there may be scope for development of a design quality to create a landmark feature at this important gateway to Midlothian.

4.2 Essentially this planning brief supports redevelopment at the Snowsports Centre itself, and also identifies other indicative locations where development in the Country Park complementary to the Snowsports Centre, helping to maintain its presence at Hillend, will be supported.

4.3 The MLP, specifically policy COMF7, sets out the support the Council will give to the upgrading and enhancement of the Snowsports Centre, and also to appropriate proposals it considers as complementary and ancillary to the Snowsports Centre. Complementary and ancillary development may include holiday/short stay accommodation, retail related to the activities that occur in the Country Park, and restaurant facilities. Accommodation might include hotel and/or holiday cottage/villa/chalet development with associated leisure/sports and conference/training/event facilities.

4.4 Figure 2 in this brief identifies parcels of land (parcel nos. 1-6) at the Snowsports Centre, and also within Hillend Country Park, that the Council considers to have potential for appropriate development that accords with the opportunities identified in policy COMF7. Identifying parcels of land for new and/or redevelopment allows the various parts of the site to be considered individually and detailed constraints to development identified as a guide for potential developers.

4.5 Throughout the Country Park, tree and vegetation loss should be kept to a minimum and be agreed in advance with the Council. Wherever possible, existing vegetation in the Country Park should be retained and enhanced. This applies equally in the land parcels identified by the Council as having development potential.

Redevelopment at the Midlothian Snowsports Centre – Land Parcels 1 and 2

4.6 The Council will in principle support redevelopment of the facilities at the Snowsports Centre, whether this is to the ski slopes and/or the buildings at the Centre.

4.7 Previous improvements to the Snowsports Centre have included improved visitor viewing and dining facilities, re-matting the slope, improved ski jumps, new nursery slope/fun slope with jumps, rails bowls and splines. The Council will support in principle the further development and enhancement of such facilities.
Development Potential in Parcel 1

4.8 New and/or redeveloped buildings and structures on parcel 1 that do not exceed 12 metres above the 135 metre contour line (marked in red on Figure 2) will generally be supported. Similarly, proposals which may come forward for the replacement and/or redevelopment of existing buildings at the Snowsports Centre, will also generally be supported. The area at the foot of the ski slope, where the existing buildings and car park are located, is the part of the Country Park that has the most capacity in landscape terms to successfully accommodate development.

Development Potential in Parcel 2

4.9 This parcel would be appropriate for an extension of the existing car park, if considered necessary. There is some landscape potential for a small extension northward, and also for extensions southward for parking uses. However, there may be significant financial issues with such extensions to provide land for parking due to the slope and ground conditions. Any such extensions would require a good landscape framework as part of the development.

Development Potential in the wider Country Park – Land Parcels 3 to 6

4.10 Locations for other development complementary and ancillary to the Snowsports Centre, including accommodation that the Council will support in principle, are identified in parcels 3-6 on Figure 2.

Development Potential in Parcels 3 and 4

4.11 These parcels are considered suitable for dispersed smaller buildings of a maximum of 1.5 storeys. Small chalet/cottage-style development providing self-catering accommodation would perhaps be appropriate in these locations.

Development Potential in Parcel 5

4.12 This parcel is considered to have potential for a building up to 3 storeys in height, possibly a small to medium-sized hotel with associated car parking.

Development Potential in Parcel 6

4.13 This parcel contains a building suitable for sensitive conversion, extension and possible reuse.

Summary – Land Parcels 1 to 6

4.14 The scale of development identified in this section is indicative. Given the sensitive location of this area, all proposals, irrespective of which parcel they are located within, will require to undergo a rigorous assessment of any visual impacts that they may have. Accordingly, proposals will normally need to be accompanied by theoretical visibility mapping to assist with the assessment of proposals.

4.15 The external appearance of the buildings should be afforded significant consideration in view of the planning policy context. External materials should be of dark, muted
colours and the use of timber would be appropriate. A modern, unstained timber finish would be acceptable. Wall finishes could be smooth or wetdash render. All roofs should be dark in colour and slate should be used on pitched roofs.

4.16 Buildings of either high quality traditional or contemporary design, and contemporary materials, would be appropriate. Given the sloping nature of the land, split level buildings are considered to be the appropriate approach to developing the site.

4.17 All external lighting should be carefully considered to avoid light spillage outside the Country Park.
Infrastructure Considerations

5.1 There are a number of infrastructure considerations that developers should address and take account of in their proposals. These include:

Access

5.2 Appropriate access must be provided to the site for pedestrians, bicycles and vehicles (including service vehicles, coaches, buses, private cars). Access proposals from the A702 Trunk Road to the Snowsports Centre and Country Park will require to be designed to the satisfaction of Transport Scotland and the Council. Parking should be provided to an appropriate standard.

5.3 The existing access road is owned by the Council but it is not adopted.Depending on the scale of development proposed, there may be a need to enhance the existing access and junction. However, the existing vegetation north of the access road should be retained and consideration given to its enhancement.

5.4 In landscape terms, there may be potential for providing additional access roads in the Country Park, however, these should be kept as close as possible to the northern boundary of the Country Park. Such improvements are likely to have significant financial implications.

Infrastructure

5.5 Consideration will require to be given to existing Scottish Water infrastructure in the Country Park and Hillend area. Scottish Water has reservoirs, a trunk main, and distributor pipes within the Country Park. Details of this infrastructure, and its implications for development in the area, should be obtained from Scottish Water.

5.6 Developers should satisfy themselves that access, ground conditions, together with existing and any proposed utilities infrastructure will not preclude the type of development they are proposing.
Next Stages / Contacts

6.1 The area which is the subject of this planning brief is considered to be a single entity, with the parcels regarded as an inter-related potential development location and not a piecemeal arrangement of individual sites. Accordingly, prospective development partners are expected to come forward with a comprehensive and coherent set of proposals. Such prospective developers are encouraged to contact the Council’s Planning and Development Service at an appropriate stage.

[Contact details]

Note: The content of this planning brief shall be a material consideration, but shall not be binding, in the assessment and determination of any planning application that may be submitted to the Council.
Appendix: Midlothian Local Plan (2008)

Summary of the key Midlothian Local Plan (2008) policies relevant to development at the Midlothian Snowsports Centre and in Hillend Country Park.

Development in the Countryside

Policy RP1 Protection of the Countryside

This policy sets out the circumstances in which development in the countryside will be permitted. These circumstances include: where the countryside location is required for the furtherance of countryside recreation and tourism; it is within a designated non-conforming use in the Green Belt; or it accords with policy DP1 Development in the Countryside. However, the latter two circumstances do not apply at this location or to the development opportunities arising from this planning brief.

The policy requires all development to:
- demonstrate a requirement for a countryside location;
- be of a scale and character appropriate to the rural area;
- be well integrated into the rural landscape; and
- take account of accessibility to public transport and services (where appropriate).

Development in the Green Belt

Policy RP2 Protection of the Green Belt

Policy RP2 identifies the exceptional circumstances in which development will be permitted in the Green Belt. These exceptional circumstances include proposals that provide for opportunities for access to the open countryside, outdoor sport or outdoor recreation which reduce the need to travel further afield or, in exceptional circumstances, community facilities (where no suitable alternative location exists).

The policy requires that any development proposal shows that it does not conflict with the overall objectives of the Green Belt to:
- maintain the identity of the city and Midlothian towns by clearly establishing their physical boundaries and preventing coalescence;
- provide countryside for recreation and institutional purposes of various kinds; and
- maintain the landscape setting of the city and Midlothian towns.

Landscape and Visual Impact

Policy RP6 Areas of Great Landscape Value

Policy RP6 does not permit development where it may adversely affect the special scenic qualities and integrity of the Areas of Great Landscape Value (AGLVs). The policy sets out that the scale, siting, design, form, materials and impact on important landscape features are all aspects of a proposal that could have an adverse effect on the AGLV. These considerations will be applied to proposals in this sensitive location, and will be a very important part of the assessment of proposals.
Policy RP7 Landscape Character

Policy RP7 does not permit development where it may adversely affect the quality of the local landscape. The policy states that, where development is acceptable, it will respect the local landscape character and contribute towards its maintenance and enhancement. The policy requires that new developments will incorporate proposals to:

A. maintain the local diversity and distinctiveness of landscape character including natural and built heritage features of landscape value such as woodland, hedges, ponds, stone walls and historical sites; and

B. enhance landscape characteristics where they have been weakened and need improvement and create new landscapes where there are few existing features.

Nature Conservation and Biodiversity

The Local Plan contains a suite of policies that set out the protection afforded to nature conservation and biodiversity, and the need for proposals to establish the impact of the development on nature conservation and biodiversity. These policies address matters relating to the mitigation of the impact of proposals.

The relevance of the following policies should be considered and taken into account in the development of proposals:

RP10 Internationally Important Nature Conservation Sites;
RP11 Nationally Important Nature Conservation Sites;
RP12 Regionally and Locally Important Nature Conservation Sites;
RP13 Species Protection;
RP14 Habitat Protection outwith Formally Designated Areas; and
RP15 Biodiversity Action Plan.

Recreation

Policy RP16 Regional and Country Parks

Policy RP16 does not permit development where it is would be contrary to the policy aims of management plans or strategies for the Pentland Hills Regional Park and/or Hillend Country Park and policy DP4 Pentland Hills Regional Park.

Copies of the Hillend Country Park Management Plan and other relevant plans can be obtained from either Midlothian Council or the Pentland Hills Regional Park Authority.

Policy DP4 Pentland Hills Regional Park

Policy DP4 sets out the aims of the Pentland Hills Regional Park and contains nine detailed policies (policies PHP1 – PHP9) that relate only to proposals within the Pentland Hills Regional Park boundary (within which Hillend Country Park is located). These are as
follows:

Aims:

- To retain the essential character of the hills as a place for the peaceful enjoyment of the countryside.
- Caring for the hills, so that the landscape and the habitat are protected and enhanced.
- Within this caring framework, to encourage responsible public enjoyment of the hills.
- Co-ordination of these aims so that they can co-exist with farming and other land uses within the Park.

Specific policies:

PHP1
The AGLV designation for the Pentland Hills Regional Park will be the overriding factor when considering proposals which may be acceptable under other Local Plan policies.

PHP2
Development, redevelopment and the conversion of existing buildings within the Regional Park will not be permitted unless essential for the purposes of agriculture (including farm-related diversification), forestry, outdoor recreation, tourism or other rural activities compatible with the aims of the Regional Park.
Any such development proposal will be considered against the following criteria:
  a) it should make a positive contribution to the amenity of the Park in terms of design and landscaping;
  b) it should not be visually obtrusive or necessitate visually obtrusive constructions;
  c) it should be compatible with existing adjoining and neighbouring developments and uses;
  d) it should be capable of being served by an adequate and appropriate access;
  e) it can be serviced at reasonable cost and there would be no unacceptable discharge to watercourses;
  f) where conversion is proposed, this should be possible without substantial rebuilding and with the retention of original character and attractiveness.

PHP3
With the co-operation of owners and occupiers, SNH and other interested bodies, the economic, landscape and nature conservation of the grouse moor will be protected and safeguarded.

PHP4
Midlothian Council will seek to ensure that, through design, species composition and sympathetic integration, new forestry schemes will complement the hill environment.

PHP5
There will be a general presumption against waste disposal operations within the Midlothian section of the Regional Park.

PHP6
The conservation of the hill landscape and wildlife interests will be sought in all proposals involving the installation of the public service utilities.
Intrusive tourist developments, including static and transit caravan and camping sites, will not be permitted within the Regional Park.

Public car parks will be provided only on the periphery of the Regional Park. They must be related to specific recreational opportunities and will be designed to integrate with the landscape and character of each particular location.

There will be a general presumption against formal picnic sites in remote hill areas. Managed picnic sites will be provided only in association with existing facilities and car parking.

Policy COMF7 Midlothian Ski and Snowboard Centre

Policy COMF7 permits proposals for the upgrading and enhancement of the Midlothian Ski Centre and ancillary facilities in order to secure its future as a centre of excellence for artificial skiing and snowboarding.

The supporting text for policy COMF7 on page 111 of the Local Plan explains that Midlothian Council recognises the need to upgrade and enhance the Snowsports Centre to secure its future as a centre of excellence. The Local Plan acknowledges the Centre’s importance as a recreational and educational resource, and establishes that the Council supports, in principle, development that is complementary and ancillary to the Snowsports Centre’s function and necessary for its continued viable operation. The Council considers that accommodation, related retail and restaurant facilities might be considered as complementary and ancillary development to the Snowsports Centre.

Note
The above list is not exhaustive and there will be other Local Plan policies, such as policy RP8 Water Environment, that will need to be considered. This Appendix presents a summary of the key Local Plan policies relevant to the development opportunities identified in this planning brief.
Figure 1: Hillend Snowsports Centre and Hillend Country Park, Midlothian
Figure 2: Hillend Snowsports Centre and Hillend Country Park, Midlothian
Development Potential - Land Parcels

Land with landscape capacity for appropriate development - indicative locations

Hillend Country Park

135 metre contour line - see Planning Brief

1: 3,000 at A2

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