



Slieve Gullion Footpath Repair Project – response to Public Consultation February 2012

1. Introduction

Slieve Gullion is the centrepiece of a truly unique landscape. The mountain has an exceptionally rich heritage, and being an isolated peak at an altitude of 573m metres, it offers commanding views over a wide area.

The road along the western side of the mountain, and the high car-park (c.380m), have focused walkers along a line from the car-park to the south summit of Slieve Gullion. This route has exceeded its natural carrying capacity and is exhibiting the effects of trampling and human-induced erosion.

Slieve Gullion is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty to protect its environmental qualities. The area in question for this project is also designated as an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) and a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) under the EU Habitats Directive for its European Dry Heath habitat.

2. General observations about the project

2.1 Intervene only when necessary to protect the environment

Any intervention in the natural environment of the uplands should be carefully considered, and those proposing such work should be clear on their objectives. It is Mountaineering Ireland's (MI's) assertion that path repair or construction in the uplands should only be carried out when this is necessary to protect the environment from further degradation. Such work should not be undertaken from a perspective of making it easier to walk in upland landscapes. The ethos within the sport of mountaineering (which embraces walking in upland areas) requires that participants choose appropriate objectives and take personal responsibility for managing the risks presented by the natural environment. Rather than adapting the mountain, participants should seek to improve their own skills.

2.2 Quality work is essential

Path repair and construction techniques that are commonly used on lowland paths, and in a forest environment, can be excessive and obtrusive in an open mountain setting. Any path work carried out in the mountains should strive for minimum impact on the essentially wild character of the uplands. Through the use of locally sourced natural materials and good design, an upland path should blend into the landscape. Upland paths should be designed and constructed to withstand the harsh climatic conditions associated with high and exposed terrain.

The use of machines on the path should be kept to the minimum necessary. By helicoptering in a mini-digger and assembling on site (as was done on Slieve Binnian) unnecessary travel on the mountain, and consequent damage, will be avoided. Care should be taken to avoid scarring of rocks and the use of machines with metal tracks should be avoided.

It should be clear from the above comments that the style of construction, materials used and the quality of the finish, are absolutely vital in ensuring that the Slieve Gullion path repair project is successful in terms of protecting this special mountain landscape. Many people are drawn to the mountains by the wild character of the landscape. By working with the terrain, rather than imposing a path on it, the sense of adventure and challenge for walkers can be retained.

MI wishes to draw the attention of the project team to the Upland Path Trust's guiding principles for the management of erosion on upland paths (Appendix 1) and Mountain Meitheal Handbook of Trail Design and Construction (second edition, published 2011). This is the only manual currently available which looks specifically at the skills and techniques required to develop and maintain sustainable trails in Ireland. Two copies of the book have been posted to the AONB officer.

2.3 Experience is key

We note that the call for contractors sought Civil Engineering Contractors with experience in the repair and reinstatement of upland pathways. To date very little work of this nature has been done on the island of Ireland, and consequently there are very few contractors based here with relevant experience and good skills. It may be necessary to engage a contractor with experience of upland path work in Wales, England or Scotland.

MI is concerned that the engineers supervising this work lack the necessary experience and in that context, the contractors' experience and skills becomes even more important.

Mountain Meitheal, the voluntary footpath repair group, which has carried out upland path repair projects in the Dublin and Wicklow mountains over the last 10 years, has offered to spend a day showing the Slieve Gullion project team examples of their upland path work. If you wish to avail of this opportunity, please contact MI so that we can arrange a suitable date.

2.4 The importance of maintenance

Regardless of how well an upland path is constructed, some degree of maintenance will be required. MI urges Newry & Mourne District Council (NMDC) to make provision now for ongoing maintenance of the path on Slieve Gullion. If this is not done, there is a risk that the significant investment being made in this path could be wasted.

Furthermore, MI recommends that the contract for this project should include return visits over a period of a year for 'snagging' work, as in most projects of this nature there is a need for such follow-up work.

3. Comments in response to the engineers' drawings

3.1 A continuous path isn't necessary

As mentioned on the Ring of Gullion website there are sections of the Slieve Gullion path that have become badly eroded, or where there is trampling over a wide area. It is MI's view that only those bad sections should be repaired and that it is not necessary to put in a new path all the way from the car park. The path as currently proposed would result in an unnecessary and significant change to the character and landscape of Slieve Gullion.

On the first section from the road, people are contained within a narrow route by the presence of mature heather. Above the fence, the path is grassy and has withstood the same degree of traffic as sections higher up without eroding. In times of financial constraint, careful consideration should be given to how resources are allocated. The creation of an engineered path in a mountain environment brings with it an ongoing maintenance responsibility. Perhaps a portion of the resources available for this project should be directed to managing erosion at other points within the AONB, or retained as a maintenance fund, rather than creating a path where one is not needed?

As the road takes people high on Slieve Gullion, a further consideration is that providing a new, attractive, and physically easy path from the road will encourage people without appropriate footwear or clothing to climb the mountain. Those who have not planned ahead may not be prepared for the colder, wetter and windier weather they will encounter. It is consistent with the experience of being in the mountains to have rugged underfoot conditions. Leaving the bottom section of the path in its current condition provides a natural filter against the ill-prepared; to put in a new path would provide a false sense of security.

A related consideration is that a continuous engineered path is more likely to attract mountain bikers, which would add considerably to the wear and tear on the path.

3.2 Keep the path natural

Aesthetics are critical with any path in an open mountain environment. The path should be as natural as possible, this requires considerable judgment while work is taking place and it is vital that all members of the project team have a clear understanding of the characteristics of a good upland path. As an example, the bottom section of steps on the Slieve Binnian

path appears very harsh and angular in a mountain setting; this should be avoided on Slieve Gullion.

Wherever possible, rocks and boulders on site should be incorporated into the path, preferably without having to move the rocks. This will add to the walkers' experience and reduce the formality of the pitched sections. Seemingly random placement of rocks to the side of the path will help keep walkers on the path, but large amounts of obviously imported (i.e. angular) rock should not be left on site. The overall path works should be contained within as narrow a line as possible to avoid damage to the heath and visual impact.

We are not aware of the depth of peat on the site, but if it is less than 1000mm, a reversal path might provide a more cost effective solution as the path would be constructed using mineral soil from the site. The initial visual impact of a reversal trail can be ameliorated by the planting of a suitable nursery until the local vegetation takes over.

3.3 Width of the path

MI is concerned that the width of the path at an average of 1.5m for many sections is excessive for an upland path. We understand that the width will be reduced to 600mm for much of the path, this in our view is much more appropriate. This will lessen the visual impact of the path and also reduce the materials required.

3.4 Tread on steps

It is very important that walkers can maintain a natural gait while using the path; otherwise they may find it easier to walk off the path. The drawings indicate that the tread on steps should be a minimum of 250-300mm. This may be too narrow, requiring people to place their feet with care. MI draws attention to the Mountain Meitheal handbook (p56) which recommends a tread of at least 500mm.

3.5 Drainage

Even at this early stage, the Slieve Binnian path is showing damage from run-off following periods of heavy rain. As Ireland is likely to experience more intense rainfall events in future, it is important to factor this in to path repair projects, particularly in steep upland areas.

A rise of 50-75mm on waterbars seems very little; it would be useful to visit the site during a period of very heavy rain to observe the volume and flow of water on the mountain.

In general MI would like to see greater consideration given to the management of water, as this is key to reducing maintenance costs and keeping walkers on the path. Again reference should be made to the Mountain Meitheal handbook.

4. Communicating the project

4.1 Providing clear information for walkers

MI urges NMDC to provide clear information to walkers, through the Ring of Gullion website, Slieve Gullion Courtyard, signage in the Courtyard car-park and the high car-park, about the conditions they should be prepared for when climbing Slieve Gullion. The path up Slieve Gullion is high and exposed to the prevailing south westerly winds, which could leave poorly prepared walkers vulnerable in bad weather conditions.

MI has published a leaflet with basic safety advice for walkers (see enclosed PDF); hard copies of this are available on request and we are happy for this PDF to be made available on your website.

4.2 Project publicity

All publicity and communications about this project should emphasise that the purpose of the work is to protect the natural environment of Slieve Gullion; it should not be implied that an easy or safe path is being created. Communications about the path repair should emphasise the skills and equipment required for safe enjoyment of the Irish mountains.

4.3 Consultation process

MI welcomes the fact that NMDC included a public consultation as part of this process. MI recommends that in any future public consultations of this nature, that a description of the proposed works, including a map and some photographs, is made available with the project drawings. This would enable a greater number of people to engage in the consultation process.

As the representative body for hillwalkers and climbers, MI asks to be consulted by NMDC if any further upland path work is planned, at Slieve Gullion or other locations.

5. Conclusions

Given the upland location of the Slieve Gullion path, it is important that the path should have a natural feel, and should not appear heavily engineered. The quality of the finish is vital.

It is MI's view that the project should be about protecting the mountain environment by repairing the damaged sections of the path, and that it is not necessary to have a continuous path from the car park to the summit.

Further consideration should be given to drainage and path construction techniques and arrangements for ongoing maintenance should also be in place before work commences.

This is an exciting project, and an important opportunity to demonstrate best practice in upland path work, MI wishes NMDC well in the delivery of this project.

6. Further information

MI would be happy to elaborate on, or discuss, any of the ideas contained in this submission.

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Appendix 1

Upland Path Erosion – Guiding Principles

The repair and maintenance of paths in open country are subject to the following considerations that:

- Repairs are necessary to prevent or ameliorate visual intrusion and environmental damage.
- Works should be of a high standard of design and implementation using indigenous materials, sympathetic in colour and texture to the immediate surrounding area. Uniformity of construction should be avoided e.g. steps
- Techniques used should protect existing vegetation and, normally, only locally occurring plant species should be used in restoration. Non-local species will be accepted only where necessary as a nurse crop and where natural succession will rapidly result in their disappearance.
- The more remote the path, the more stringently the criteria for path repairs should be applied. This will be a matter of judgement but in general, the more remote or wild the location the less acceptable an obviously engineered path will be.
- Repaired paths should be suitable to the routes use and constructed on a scale appropriate for the intended use as a footpath, bridleway or byway.
- Before any repair work is agreed the question should be asked 'is there a better solution?'
- The use of waymarks, cairns or other intrusive features, other than those traditionally established on summits and path junctions, will be discouraged.
- A sustained commitment of resources to path management will be sought, so that small scale continuous maintenance can replace infrequent major repairs as the normal method of path management.

Upland Path Trust 2005, adopted from the Lake District National Park 1995.