

No smoke without fire – the masterplan at Cairngorm

Description



Photo taken Sunday 19th March and posted by Donald Morris on the Save Cairngorm Mountain facebook page – great source of information for what is going on at Cairngorm. Natural Retreats were burning off the old snow fencing which they had previously committed to remove from the mountain.

After Highland and Island's Enterprise announcement that they had agreed a new masterplan for Cairngorm, along with a £4m loan to Natural Retreats ([see here](#)), I asked HIE for a copy of the masterplan and any associated plans for the proposal- such as a business plan providing evidence for the proposals:

HIE Response

“At the HIE Board meeting on 11 April 2017, the Board approved CML’s [Cairngorm Mountain Ltd’s] new Master Plan. However, the CML Master Plan is commercially sensitive and cannot be published at this time.”

Comment

The business plan – although HIE has avoided answering whether such a plan exists – could be commercially sensitive and thus exempt from FOI law, but a masterplan is a planning document and should be available to the public.

I also asked for a list of all organisations HIE has consulted on this proposed and any information relating to that consultation:

HIE Response

“CML will be the applicant in terms of any forthcoming planning application. Both HIE and CML have been involved in prior consultation with CNPA, THC [Highland Council] and SNH.”

Comment

HIE have failed to answer whether they hold any information relating to this “consultation” with other public bodies.

My final request was asking HIE to clarify whether whether Schedule 4 to the current lease, which was about the requirement to deliver a new day lodge as part of the lease, has been revoked:

HIE Response

At the HIE Board meeting on 11 April 2017, the Board agreed that the legal documents will be amended to accommodate the new projects.

Comment

This is the only informative part of HIE’s response. What it means is that the HIE Board have agreed to drop the legally binding requirement in the original lease with Natural Retreats to develop a new Day Lodge. Its significance is that this was an opportunity for HIE to terminate their lease with Natural Retreats. They have chosen not to do so.

The failures and lack of accountability of HIE

It is not unreasonable to ask how a public authority, funded by public monies, believes it is acceptable to put out a press release stating a masterplan has been agreed at Cairngorm but then keep that masterplan secret?

The proposal for a masterplan at Cairngorm formed part of the Glenmore Strategy agreed by the Cairngorms National Park Authority last year.

Delivery will be co-ordinated through the following project structure:

Cairngorm & Glenmore Partnership Program		
Partnership Board & Project Team CNPA, FES, HIE, SNH, Highland Council		
Cairngorm & Glenmore Transport Working Group: Highland Council, HITRANS, Natural Retreats, FES, CNPA	Cairngorm & Glenmore Visitor Services Working Group: HIE, FES, CNPA, SNH, Natural Retreats	
Site specific delivery:		
Cairngorm Mountain masterplan Natural Retreats	Cairngorm Estate Management Plan (HIE)	

Natural Retreats and Forest Enterprise Scotland will lead on delivering spatial plans that set out facilities at Cairngorm Mountain and Glenmore respectively. These plans are expected to be completed by 2025.

While I cannot find any reference to a masterplan in the CNPA Local Development Plan agreed in 2015, the footnote to the table above indicates that the masterplan is a spatial plan and therefore, it is fair to assume, a masterplan in the formal planning sense. Even if not, in terms of good practice, one might have hoped HIE would have taken some heed on the Scottish Government Planning Advice Note on developing masterplans ([see here](#)).

That guidance I believe is very relevant for Cairngorm. It requires site appraisal – for Cairngorm that would mean a look at the ski area as a whole – and consultation with local communities:

“When creating successful places, people must be at the heart of the process. The local community’s understanding of the needs of an area are invaluable in establishing priorities and arriving at a vision for a place. Once the local community and key stakeholders (the community in its widest sense) have been identified, early discussions can provide a wealth of information about the area’s history and how it functions. An engagement plan could be devised to identify mechanisms for involving the community. These will establish opinions and confirm local people’s aspirations for the place. Various types of interests may have to be engaged in different ways.”

While because of the special nature of Cairngorm, I would argue that consultation should be far wider, and involve for example recreational (e.g skiers and mountaineers) and conservation interests, the important point is there has NO consultation at all. HIE has apparently agreed what it wants to happen at Cairngorm with Natural Retreats and how to fund this through public money without any

consideration of other views. A top down solution that again is likely to end in tears.

Natural Retreats is not fit to manage any development at Cairngorm

While HIE and Natural Retreats have kept all information about the proposed dry ski slope secret at present (e.g its location) one detail emerged on the Cairngorm Mountain facebook page on 13th April where they said it would be constructed out of snowflex . This raises some intriguing questions because the nature of the product <http://www.snowflex.com/> which is “solid” rather than other types of artificial slope:

- with no spaces for vegetation to grow through, it is likely to have a greater impact than other potential products on the vegetation and soils at Cairngorm;
- without holes in the matting, there is higher friction and this means snowflex requires a water misting system which cannot operate in low temperatures because it freezes up;
- because of the high friction, snow flex also needs to be installed on steeper slopes (unlikely to be of use at the Shieling rope tow which was installed for beginners). While the manufacturer states it can be used when frosted, in such condition it can only be used by better skiers and boarders. Not much use then for beginners in winter then;
- if my understanding is correct and you cannot use piste bashers on snow flex, then if partly snow covered, snow flex could not be used at all (it would be like skiing over grass patches but worse).

There is nothing wrong with snowflex as a product, the trouble is its not designed for use in a mountain environment year round. Its advantage over other products comes in artificial snowparks (artificial half pipes etc). One wonders therefore if a summer snowpark is the secret plan for Cairngorm?.

If there is any case for an artificial ski slope at Cairngorm, it would be to provide a beginners area when there is insufficient snow and to link to the piste system. This has been done in other parts of the world using different materials.

The revelation about the proposed use of snowflex just provides further evidence of Natural Retreats' lack of competence to manage the Cairngorm ski area.

Cairngorm Estate Management Plan

Meantime, there is no sign of HIE's proposed estate management plan which might one have hoped excluded practices such as taking skips up the mountain to burn off fencing (first photo) and which needs to be considered along with any masterplan.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. HIE
3. natural retreats
4. planning
5. Scottish Government

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