

HIE speak hits new low at Cairngorm

Description

While working on Tuesday's post, I was delighted to get a letter ([see here](#)) from the acting Chief Executive of Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Charlotte Wright, who has confirmed my claims ([see here](#)) that there is NO masterplan at Cairngorm:

By way of initial explanation, I consider that the word "masterplan" is an inaccurate description of the document and neither the Business Plan to be a "masterplan" or "associated plans" for the development of the Cairngorm Mountain Resort rebrand. No application has yet been submitted and the outcomes are uncertain of outcome. Much of the Business Plan contains information to the current and planned operation of the business.

So, the acting Chief Executive of HIE now considers the word masterplan inaccurate when it was the [hie news release](#) of 12th April, in which she was quoted, which introduced the term masterplan through its headline "Masterplan Agreed for CairnGorm Mountain"! While I do appreciate Charlotte Wright might not have seen the HIE News Release which quoted, either it was a deliberate attempt to mislead the public, a lie in normal parlance, or HIE staff would appear to have no understanding of the difference between a "Business Plan" and a "Master Plan". Neither explanation inspires much confidence.

While the letter is in response to my FOI request, it contains another extraordinary claim:

I can confirm that HIE has not conducted a consultation Business Plan, however, we understand that Cairngorms have conducted a consultation with the Cairngorms National Council and Scottish Natural Heritage. I anticipate that in respect of Natural Retreats' consultation, rather than a

The statement "*we understand that CML have conducted a consultation with.....Scottish Natural Heritage*", which to most people would imply that these meetings took place without HIE being involved, is totally disingenuous. HIE staff appear to have been fully involved. How do we know? Through SNH's FOI response to George Paton and myself which provided emails about the "consultation" meetings which included HIE staff members Keith Bryers and Susan Smith. Here is an example:

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From: [REDACTED]@naturalretreats.com]

Sent: 31 August 2016 18:52

To: stuart.black@highland.gov.uk; Victoria.Masson@highland.gov.uk; Grant Moir; Murray Ferguson; Gavin Keith.Bryers@hient.co.uk; susan.smith@hient.co.uk; Peter Crane; Hamish Trench; Malcolm Macleod - TS (malcolm.macleod@cne-siar.gov.uk)

Cc: [REDACTED]

Subject: RE: Cairngorm Mountain

Good Afternoon All,

Further to the note below the meeting will take place this Friday the 2nd at 9:00am in the Aonach Road the Base Station

I have attached a short overview on the current development plans for Mountain for discussion during the first part of meeting with the objective to understand broad feedback on the components, identifying areas that may need more attention or even further opportunities. This part will also help confirm the next steps in the process with regards to the formal planning matters, consultation with key parties, PR and communication. I will be running through this document during the meeting to prompt input and discussion from all sides.

The latter part of the meeting will focus on the current state of the mountain and the impact this is having on all parties in particular the ongoing criticism and commentary. We would like to discuss collectively how we can work to proactively address this and in particular what can be done to deal with the current appearance of the mountain with regards to unused and leftover items and paraphernalia. As part of this item we have prepared a budget cost for proposed clear up works that I hope to circulate tomorrow.

We have allocated approximately 2 hours for this and parties not present should dial in to the conference numbers to be provided.

If you have any questions in advance please let me know,

[REDACTED] | SVP - Resorts & Lodges - Europe

Its worth reading the second main paragraph of the email to note the response to the criticism of the Cairngorm last summer which was extensively covered on parkswatch – it may have been discussed and then done about it!

The problems with lack of transparency and misrepresentation at HIE go very deep. I had also asked HIE for the minute of the April HIE Board Meeting which approved the £4million loan to Natural

Retreats but this is still not on their website. How the £4m ([see here](#)) could be agreed by the Board when Charlotte Craig, the Acting Chief Executive, claims in her letter above that *“the outcomes postulated in the Business Plan are not finalised or certain of certain”* is difficult to understand and I believe should be a matter of great public concern. The failure of governance is even worse because the Board know Cairngorm Mountain must be trading at a large loss (see quote below) and should also be aware that Natural Assets Investment Ltd which owns them are effectively bankrupt, so then to approve a loan without an agreed business plan seems quite extraordinary.

The minutes of the February HIE meeting have now been published (unlike other public authorities there appear to be no Board Papers in the public realm) and contain this reference to Cairngorm:

At Cairngorm, HIE staff were continuing to work very closely with operating company Natural Retreats, which was suffering from a complete lack of any significant snowfall to date during the 2016/17 winter season. Building local engagement through stakeholder relations remained a key area of focus. A revised masterplan for Cairngorm Mountain Ltd was expected to be presented to the HIE Board in June.

Ignore the misrepresentations to the Board – what local engagement to build stakeholder relations has taken place? – companies don't have masterplans, only business plans. A masterplan would be for Cairngorm, not Cairngorm Mountain Ltd. Perhaps this is an error in the minute but unless there is after all a masterplan, it looks like the business plan was due to be completed in June but for some reason was approved by HIE, incomplete, in April. If this is the case HIE need to explain why.

Keen readers, who read all of Charlotte Craig's letter, will have noted that HIE are, in response to my FOI, refusing to divulge the business plan for Cairngorm on the basis that it contains *“commercial information that is not publicly available and the disclosure of which would harm the legitimate economic interests of Natural Retreats”* and that there is *“no public interest in Natural Retreats' competitors being given access to confidential business information”*. I think this is totally wrong and will appeal. The public interest is surely in knowing why the business plan is so good that HIE are prepared to commit a further £4m of public money to Natural Retreats when Cairngorm Mountain Ltd, in the 9 months till December 2015 ([see here for full analysis](#)), made an operating loss of £1,219,606 and ended up with net liabilities of £1,316,645. To make matters even more risky at the end of the same period its parent company, Natural Assets Investment Ltd, had net liabilities of £22,831,678. Just what is the public justification for lending public money to a company that only continues to function due to guarantees from its ultimate owner, the hedge fund manager, David Michael Gorton?

What needs to happen

- The HIE Board need to get a handle on what staff are presenting to them about Natural Retreats and the plans at Cairngorm
- Charlotte Craig, the Acting Chief Executive, needs to get a handle on what staff are doing and writing in her name.
- HIE needs to explain why its lending £4m to a company that appears effectively bankrupt and whose business plan has not been finalised.
- Audit Scotland should start asking some of these questions

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Freedom of Information
2. HIE
3. natural retreats
4. planning
5. secrecy

Date Created

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Author

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