

What next for Cairngorm?

Description

Cairngorm artificial ski slope plans skid to a halt

● **Planners vote against 'bright green' plastic installation**

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT
REPORTER

Proposals for an artificial ski slope at Cairngorm were resoundingly thrown out by the Cairngorm National Park Authority planning committee yesterday, against planners' recommendations.

The decision was the latest blow to those involved in the resort as they make plans to compensate for the funicular railway being out of action this season for safety reasons.

Operators Cairngorm

Mountain Ltd, on behalf of leisure company Natural Retreats, had applied to install a plastic slope to accommodate beginners and intermediate skiers.

Adam Gough, head of property at Natural Retreats, told the meeting the slope was an important part of the company's investment in the centre.

He said: "We would like nothing more than to be able to invest in the infrastructure and improve the snow sports experience for everyone, but there has to be a long term process built on solid foundations."

He also referred to the ongoing row over the closure of the funicular railway and its implications for the Strathspey community.

He said: "We are fully aware of the impact the mountain has on the businesses and communities in Aviemore and Badenoch & Strathspey."

Highland councillor and board member Carolyn Caddick, a keen skier and instructor, said it was the wrong development in the wrong location.

"I was very sympathetic to the application by Natu-

ral Retreats - I fully understand the potential increase in visitors makes good business sense and offers more employment opportunities

"It's the wrong slope in the wrong place"

locally. However, given the experience of other ski areas who have, in the past, installed and then removed dry slopes, this did

not appear to be a sound economic investment, particularly when weighed against the impact the construction would have had on the environment."

Bessa Jones of Badenoch & Strathspey Conservation Group said it was a 'text book example of unsustainable development in the wrong place' requiring stripping huge amounts of peat from a valuable natural habitat.

Aviemore Business Association secretary Alan Bratley said his members were overwhelmingly against the artificial slope,

as 'it's the wrong slope in the wrong place for the wrong reasons'.

He said: "The matter is to be a bright green in found in the landscape."

Susan Smith, HIE's head of business development said a forthcoming report into the uplift infrastructure "will present a range of exciting options to guide future investment at the leading visitor attraction and snowsports centre."

Mr Gough said: "We are naturally disappointed with this decision and will now take the time to evaluate all our options."

Press and Journal article Saturday

On Friday Cairngorms National Park Authority Board Members voted against the recommendations of their officers and rejected Natural Retreats' Planning Application for a dry ski slope at Cairngorm. I must admit that, having just a week earlier praised the CNPA Board for being far more open and prepared to take other Public Authorities than the LLTNPA Board ([see here](#)), I had been dismayed to see the Committee Report on the dry ski slope and wondered if I was about to get egg on my face. In the event, feedback from people who attended the meeting was that there was a well-informed critical debate and in the end only one Board Member was prepared to second the officers' recommendation (they could find no seconder). While Board Members raised a number of different concerns ultimately they agreed to reject the dry ski slope, the right decision, on landscape grounds, probably the strongest reason in planning terms for doing so. They are to be commended for this.

The central problem with our current planning system is its totally stacked in favour of developers. Whatever the past record of developers such as at Natural Retreats, Planning Authorities are not allowed to take this into account and are told only to consider the application before them. Then, when the Developer makes claims which bear no resemblance to reality, they are apparently not allowed to take that into account either. Adam Gough, head of property at "Natural Retreats" – not the same as either Cairngorm Mountain Ltd or Natural Assets Investment Ltd the parent company – is quoted by the P and J as arguing to the Committee that the "slope was an important part in the Company's investment in the centre".

Which company? From their accounts neither CML nor NAIL would appear to have any money to invest ([see here](#)). Anyone listening to Adam Gough would have thought that it was whatever company he was referring to rather than HIE, with their £1.5m loan, who were financing the proposed dry ski slope. Gough is then quoted as saying *“we would like nothing more than to be able to invest in the infrastructure to improve snowsports for everyone (so why then go along with the removal of the lift infrastructure in Coire na Ciste?) but there has to be a long-term process built on solid foundations”*. How can CML under NAIL ever build solid foundations when the consolidated net liabilities of NAIL at the end of last year stood at over £34m?

After this apparent guff from Gough, Susan Smith from HIE is quoted as saying that the forthcoming uplift review *“will present a range of exciting options to guide future investment”*. HIE still need to explain why they had decided to push ahead with a dry ski slope – which included uplift – BEFORE reviewing what uplift infrastructure was needed and consulting on the wider picture. A recent FOI has shown that HIE have had a copy of this uplift report from the end of June, so why wasn't it made public and provided to the CNPA as part of the planning process? It will be very interesting to see what if anything the report says about dry ski slopes as an option.

The problem facing both the CNPA and the public, is that both HIE and Natural Retreats appear incapable of working in partnership and have their own agendas which appear incompatible with the objectives of the National Park. The latest example of their failure to deliver is the so called long-term strategy Natural Retreats submitted with the planning application. This is nothing more than a list of headings for a strategy and has no content ([see here](#)). Its now two years since they committed to deliver a proper plan for Cairngorm under the Glenmore and Cairngorm Strategy and effectively nothing has happened.

I believe therefore its time the CNPA showed some leadership and, instead of waiting for piecemeal and inappropriate planning applications, it started to make public demands on HIE and Natural Retreats on what they need to do at Cairngorm.

At the centre of what needs tackling is the funicular which back in 2009, when Audit Scotland last investigated, had consumed over £25m in public funds. While the funicular needs to be fixed for this winter, its time for HIE to commission an expert report on the likely maintenance costs over the next 20 years. The Planning Application to expand the Ptarmigan and the review of uplift infrastructure should then be considered in the light of that. The fundamental question here is whether it continues to make any financial sense to pour money into trying to keep the funicular going if there are better and/or cheaper alternatives. In other words the funicular should be included in a cost benefit (and environmental impacts) analysis of all uplift options. Until that issue is tackled, I don't think anything else that really needs doing at Cairngorm will happen so long as HIE is in charge.

Category

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