

HIE's response to the crisis at Cairn Gorm – fake news and flannel

Description



Report from Press and Journal 31st October 2018

Apologies to readers who received notification of a post yesterday by Alan Bratley on HIE's failure to maintain ski infrastructure at Cairn Gorm and then found the link broken. I removed the post a few minutes after it had been published because HIE, on receipt of the report featured in it, had asked Alan for a meeting and for those involved to hold back on issuing more publicity until that had taken place. We will see if anything comes from this but if HIE was to use the information in the report to initiate enforcement action against Natural Retreats' with a view to terminating their lease at Cairn Gorm that would be worth it. Alan and other local campaigners are quite clear that all such information will be made public in due course and there will be NO behind closed doors deals. The truth needs to come out.

Fake news

The HIE press release ([see here](#)) of 31st October, issued the day after their Board had met to discuss the funicular crisis, exposes the fundamental problem with their operations on Cairn Gorm – no politician or member of the public can trust what this public body says.

In this press release HIE explain that they are providing £1million to install a snow making machine in Coire Cas this winter and go on to state:

“This investment means that, even if the worst case scenario comes to pass and the funicular is out of action for the season, we can still look forward to a season of winter sports at Cairngorm, just as in any other year.”

If this statement was true we can assume that we do not need the funicular in ANY winter season – apparently its replacement with a snow making machine this year will ensure that the winter season can proceed *“just as in any other year”*. Why then have Natural Retreats effectively made 48 ski instructors redundant?

It is also fake news because without the Funicular there will be no way up to the Ptarmigan for beginner, children and early intermediates.....so to claim all will as usual is complete nonsense

This statement is a deliberate attempt to fool members of the public into believing that they can plan skiing holidays on Cairn Gorm in the expectation that, despite the non operation of the funicular, winter activities can continue *“just as in any other year.”* It is also a deliberate attempt to fool those who have already bought season tickets for the coming season to think that everything will be OK, *“just as in any other year”*. On the contrary these season ticket holders should be entitled to a full refund of their tickets – HIE has been totally silent on this – combined with an offer of discounted day tickets for those days when some uplift is working in the coming season.

HIE’s about turn on the potential of snow making machines

Mountain chiefs splash cash to guarantee snow

Exclusive: £1m to be spent on machines at crisis-hit mountain

BY STAN ARNAUD

Enterprise chiefs are buying £1 million worth of snow-making equipment to boost the fortunes of crisis-hit Cairn Gorm, while the snow sports centre's funicular is out of action.

Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) hopes to have the kit in place by December as the ski season gets under way, the agency's chief executive Charlotte Wright told The Press and Journal last night.

The artificial snow will be used on the lower slopes of Cairn Gorm,

near Aviemore, which is Scotland's second largest skiing and snowboarding area.

The resort was plunged into crisis earlier this month when the 17-year-old mountain railway that gives access to higher, longer runs, was taken out of operation on safety grounds after problems were discovered with the structures that support its tracks.

There has been widespread concern in the area over the impact the closure will have on the local economy, with many

businesses dependant on income from winter sports enthusiasts.

Owned by Scottish Government-funded HIE, the ski centre is run on a 25-year lease by Cairn Gorm Mountain (CML), which is part of holiday accommodation group Natural Retreats.

The decision to buy the snow-making equipment was made by HIE's board yesterday as it met for the first time since the funicular problems emerged.

Ms Wright said: "The board were very keen to

get an update on the whole situation and are very concerned about it.

"We approved funding of £1m to acquire snow-making facilities, which is really good news as it will enable skiing to happen on the lower slopes."

The HIE chief executive said the agency would fund a new marketing campaign for Cairngorms Business Partnership, aimed at reminding visitors there is "more to the Aviemore area than just skiing".

It will also continue to support the work of a response team set up in

partnership with HIE Council and Business Gateway to help businesses hit by the funicular closure.

Ms Wright said a board member expressed concern over CML's decision not to run a ski school at the centre this season, which had been taken without consulting HIE.

She continued: "There has been a keen that we continue to have regular discussions with the current operators."

"There was a concern over the ski season decision."

P and J article 31st October

No-one should be surprised that the HIE Board decided to splash the cash in response to the uproar around their mismanagement of the mountain. They had already allocated £1.5m to lend Natural Retreats to build a dry ski slope and since that application was refused the money is "spare" and available. In fact some of the critics of the dry ski slope – which would have supported a handful of jobs at most – had long been arguing that Cairn Gorm Mountain Ltd should be using snow machines and the Save the Ciste Group has produced a detailed plan for how these could be powered by a run of river hydro scheme in Coire na Ciste. HIE has long dismissed those suggestions so its apparent about turn is welcome but should be treated with a healthy dose of scepticism.

Whether Natural Retreats and HIE are capable of making effective use of snow machines is an important question. Last season HIE provided part funding so that a Snowfactory could be leased and trialed at Cairn Gorm Mountain and at the Lecht. Each centre had the use of the TechnoAlpin Snowfactory for 2 months. Natural Retreats placed the snow factory by the car park, the wrong place as it meant any snow created had to be moved uphill. It would have been much better located the above the new Shieling Ski tow which had allegedly been created for beginners and which was accessible from the funicular mid-station.

In addition, at Cairn Gorm power was provided by a diesel generator and Natural Retreats, who had dismissed all suggestions of a hydro scheme as being the best way to operate such machines sustainably in the long-term, balked at the costs involved. These problems were made worse as it appears Caingorm Mountain did not have an appropriate water supply. Water was extracted from the Allt Mor but, even with sump points built into the burn to 'still' the water and with a gauze filter over the end of the extraction pipe, there were issues with filters becoming choked. My understanding is that when the SnowFactory was moved from CairnGorm to the Lecht around the beginning of February 2018, it was inoperable and the Lecht had to call in TechnoAlpin engineers from Italy to return it to service. It has worked fine since.

After the "trial" at Cairngorm HIE then played fast and loose with the grant funding that had been promised to Lecht and Glencoe. HIE tried to delay it by calling in yet more consultants to examine the costs vs benefits associated with having TechnoAlpin Snowfactories in a Scottish Ski area. This appears to have been an attempt by HIE to stymie the ambitions of Lecht and Glencoe, who had long advocated snow machines. As an illustration of HIE and Natural Retreats' ability to make good use of the technology, ski activists posted information about the usage of the Robin magic carpet at Lecht and the Coire Pollach Tow at Glencoe last winter. They were both open for over 100 days and these are the lifts that will be made snowsure by the snowfactories. Meanwhile on CairnGorm the Sunkid Rope Tow at the Sheiling Track was only open for around 25 Days.

HIE, while demanding reports from each snow making trials they helped fund, have – you guessed it – have failed to make these public. Yet they are now splashing out £1m on snow factories at Cairn Gorm. Apart from panic, HIE now need to explain clearly why their Board agreed to splash this cash and how in fact they know the £1m will be well spent. How much, for example, will go on hire of the machines and how much to Natural Retreats and for what?

Snowfactories could be part of a wider solution at Cairn Gorm which involved new ski infrastructure and could help in the short-term but the public and skiers need to know that any money spent will be used properly.

Cracks open up between HIE and Natural Retreats – more HIE hypocrisy

Charlotte Wright, Chief Executive of HIE, has been widely quoted as being concerned by Natural Retreats' decision not to run the ski school this winter and failure to consult HIE on this. This is total hypocrisy. First because HIE has remained silent when Natural Retreats has failed to consult other stakeholders on what they are doing at Cairn Gorm. Second because Parkswatch has been warning of the impending financial disaster at CairnGorm Mountain for well over 18 months ([see here](#)) and a month ago explained yet again the gaping financial hole opening up under the company ([see here](#)). Why then would HIE expect Cairngorm Mountain Ltd, whose accounts shows its net liabilities had increased to £2,099,875 by December 2017 and whose parent company now has net liabilities of over £34m, do anything but lay off staff in such circumstances?

The real issues here are not whether Natural Retreats consulted on the ski school closure or not – that is simply a symptom of a much wider failure. Rather they concern how HIE ever decided to sell

CairnGorm Mountain Ltd at a discount to such company in the first place and their subsequent failure to act despite the growing list of problems. HIE has assured people who were concerned about the sale of Cairngorm Mountain to the Natural Retreats Group that all due diligence was undertaken. What should now be abundantly clear is whatever action HIE undertook was grossly insufficient, even if technically it met the standards at the time, and that there have been serious failings in the procurement process.

An important question about the sale of CairnGorm Mountain Ltd is how a bid from Cairngorm Snowsports, a local company who at the time employed over 85 ski instructors and admin staff over the winter and knew how the mountain operated, was excluded by HIE from the tender process back in 2013? Ostensibly, this was because the company failed to turnover £500,000 a year – so what one might ask when the alternative chosen by HIE was a group who have, ostensibly at least, made a net LOSS of c£5-6m each year? One might also rue the fact that having destroyed those local companies, there is now no-one readily available to step in and take over management of Cairn Gorm from Natural Retreats.

So, plenty of questions HIE need to answer. Its time for a Scottish Parliamentary Committee investigation into what has gone wrong at Cairn Gorm.

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