

HIE's latest vision for Cairn Gorm – how to chuck £27m down the pan

Description

HIE yesterday announced a new £27m vision for Cairn Gorm ([see here](#)), along with a video and Executive Summary ([here](#)). The figures dwarf the £4m they had previously identified as necessary to secure the future of CairnGorm Mountain Ltd and Natural Retreats.

There are three good things about the announcement. First, that a public agency is prepared to advocate the investment of large sums of money – that is what we need across the country. Second, that after decades of neglect HIE has at last recognised that there is a need for proper investment in NEW ski infrastructure at Cairngorm. Third, and related to this, HIE has again confirmed something it first admitted last year, that the funicular is of very limited use for skiers:

With improved uplift in place, Cairngorm should explore restricting the funicular to a few types of visitors (i.e., ski school, nonskiers).

Apart from that, however, its new vision confirms what parkswatch has consistently argued, that HIE has learned nothing from its long tenure of the Cairngorm Estate. This post takes a critical look at HIE's new vision and the accompanying report.

HIE's vision and the report it commissioned into ski uplift infrastructure

The Report HIE published yesterday purports to be an Executive Summary of the review into ski infrastructure which HIE commissioned from SE Group at the end of last year ([see here](#)). This was a consequence of the stushi that resulted from HIE and Natural Retreats removal of the chairlifts in Coire na Ciste without consultation ([see here](#)). I say "purports" because the Executive Summary is in HIE's name, not that of the SE Group. SE Group submitted a draft of their Report in June but HIE has still not made this public (FOI requests have now been submitted asking for this report and all the draft versions to be made public).

Moreover, the proposals set out in the Executive Summary cover far far more ground than is covered by the original scope for the Review as set out in tender documents ([see here](#)). That focussed on a review of ski infrastructure, including the potential to install tows in Coire na Ciste, but didn't mention anything about developing a new vision. There was no need for that as HIE and Natural Retreats had already published what they insisted was a £4m masterplan for CairnGorm Mountain. The Report and Video therefore, while containing proposals to improve ski infrastructure which probably are derived from the work undertaken by the SE Group, contain much wider proposals. These appear to have come from HIE. Why?

The proposals for new ski infrastructure at Cairn Gorm



There are no diagrams in the Review so this is taken from promotional video. Right red line is new lift Coire Cas. Left red line second phase chairlift while purple lines appear to represent the existing lifts to be retained

HIE's latest vision discounts any possibility of new ski infrastructure in Coire na Ciste and proposes replacing all the current lifts in Coire Cas by two new modern 6 seater chairlifts. The first of these would run from the Day Lodge to just beneath the headwall of Coire Cas and the second from the shieling to above the Ptarmigan. Unfortunately, no detailed justification of the proposals, which involve the removal of the Car Park T-bar, Coire Cas T-bar and Fiacail Ridge T-bars, are provided. Perhaps these are in the main unpublished report? Among the questions HIE need to answer are:

- is a future envisaged for the recently installed Shieling rope lift designed for beginners?
- if so, how will beginners access this (its not clear that there is any chairlift mid-station)?
- how is it proposed to address the avalanche risk at the new Coire Cas top station (the top of the current t-bar was sited where it is to avoid avalanches but even so has been affected)?
- will this chairlift be able to operate in all weathers (based on wind records in upper Coire Cas) and if not what happens then? (Getting rid of lower tows looks a high risk strategy)?
- what is the extent of work required to create new pistes connecting the proposed Cas top station

with say the top of the Fiacaille Ridge poma?

- will removal of existing tows/t-bars to free up more ground for skiing create new pistes without the need for yet more extensive engineering works? (t-bar uplifts tend to be very narrow)
- the upper chairlift takes an absurdly exposed line, both in terms of wind (196mph wind speeds have been recorded at the funicular tunnel mouth and higher up they will be even greater) and visual prominence. Indeed one of the arguments for the funicular was it could run here when it was too windy for a chair lift to operate. So, just how many days each season could this chairlift operate compared to the M1 Poma which it is proposed will be removed?
- the upper chairlift top station is way above the Ptarmigan, so even more exposed, and would open up access to the plateau to both skiers (and mountain bikers if they were ever allowed to use the lift). This would re-open all the legal issues about the protection of the Cairngorms plateau which forced the funicular to operate as a closed system in summer
- the upper chairlift is also only proposed for phase 2, which would start in five years time, so how will the Ciste and Cas be connected meantime? More specifically, how will the current crisis created in part by the funicular breakdown but also due to its unsuitability for transporting skiers be resolved?
- what has happened to the proposal mooted by the Scottish Ski Club to fund and build another lift by the white lady?

While it appears that HIE are proposing to retain the Day Lodge poma and the Coire na Ciste/Ptarmigan lifts and t-bars, they have discounted any new ski infrastructure in Coire na Ciste. If chairlifts are the answer in Coire Cas, freeing up ground for skiing and reducing costs as HIE claims, why then is there no proposal to replace the West Wall poma with a chairlift?

HIE's Executive summary explicitly discounts new chairlifts in the Ciste, as proposed by the Save the Ciste group, in a few short paragraphs:

Coire na Ciste

This assessment was specifically tasked with investigating the possibility of re-establishing the second base area at Coire na Ciste. The two main reasons cited for this are 1) to enable ski access when the Coire Cas road is closed, and 2) to alleviate crowding and queues at Coire Cas.

To open the ski area during a road closure, the Coire na Ciste base area would require a duplicate of nearly everything found at Coire Cas - ticketing, rentals, snowsports school, food, administration, medical services, at least one snowcat/pisting machine and maintenance facility.

Two possibilities for the reopening the Ciste were identified and analysed; one involving a surface lift system and a second using a chairlift.

A surface lift would cost around £600k and require snow to operate. Relying on natural snowfall or traditionally produced man-made snow (i.e., utilising snow cannons) is inadvisable below 620 metres. The Ciste sits at 540 metres. A SnowFactory machine could work at lower levels, and would typically cost around 400k euros to buy and £35k a year to run. This option has very high capital and operating costs without fully improving the guest experience.

An aerial chairlift would not require a skiable track back to the Ciste base. A new installation would cost between £2.5m, for a fixed-grip, and £5m for a detachable/gondola system (none of the past lift infrastructure could be utilised in a new system).

With 8,000 visits a day as the standard guideline in mountain planning to justify a second base area, it was concluded that the mountain simply doesn't have a high enough skier capacity to merit reopening Coire na Ciste. Cairngorm should instead maximise the operational efficiency by upgrading facilities at Coire Cas.

The main justification for new lifts in the Ciste has nothing to do with the upper part of ski road being closed – something that appears to have only become a massive problem since Natural Retreats took over management of the mountain – or to alleviate crowding but because it is far more SHELTERED. It therefore has the potential to hold the snow far better and to be used when other parts of the mountain are out of action due to high winds.

It will be interesting to see what the SE Group actually said in their report which has been kept secret. What HIE's "Executive Summary" does show is that for £2.5m (a small proportion of the £27m HIE is promising) that a new chairlift could be installed in the Ciste. The issues they claim are associated with providing a base area could be addressed with a little imagination and will. Moreover, HIE is still proposing to spend a chunk of the £27m – £2.5m was the figure touted in the current planning application – on redeveloping the Ptarmigan. So, why not use that money instead at the bottom of the Ciste and get rid of the current eyesore?



The Coire na Ciste bottom station has still not been “cleared up”. The area behind the former base station leading up onto the Ptarmigan is far more sheltered than Coire Cas (Photo taken May 2018)

What’s more, a sensitive development at the bottom of Coire na Ciste would help to bring infrastructure DOWN the mountain, a fundamental principle which should be applied to all proposals at Cairn Gorm.

The other ski infrastructure proposals are:

The Beginner Experience

Infrastructure improvements such as a base area carpet conveyer lift would provide a ‘best-in-class’ beginner experience, regardless of weather, to attract and maintain the family market.

Snowmaking

A snowmaking system would enable Cairngorm to ensure snow coverage on a significant portion of the runs, up to 30 hectares of terrain making Cairngorm a more enticing to destination skiers.

The proposed location for a “base area” carpet lift appears to be behind the day lodge – presumably an attempt to address the landscape issues of dry ski slope proposal recently rejected by the Cairngorms National Park Authority ([see here](#)). Nothing is said about the size or cost – still £1.5m?

Nothing is said either about the number, cost and location of the proposed snow making machines. HIE have still not published the results of the snow making machine trial last winter which might help answer the real questions here about where snow making machines might work best and how this ties in with proposals to reduce lift numbers. Perhaps the trial results are in the secret report from the SE Group? There is no mention of hydro power, as proposed by Save the Ciste, for the snow machines – which are otherwise neither sustainable nor likely to be affordable (£35k a year power costs).

HIE’s proposals for new additional non-skiing infrastructure – Flamingo Land on high?

Unfortunately, the Executive Summary shows that HIE’s main preoccupation is how to develop the upper reaches of Cairn Gorm in an attempt, apparently, to make the funicular financially viable. This is jumping the gun when HIE have not even explained yet what is wrong with the funicular and whether it is worth repairing in the long-term.

There are three main new projects. In phase one a zip wire, which would zip zag from one side of Coire Cas to the other from the top of the funicular, and a mountain roller coaster on the slope above the car park to the west of the Day Lodge poma. Then in phase 2 (years 5-10) a mountain bike track again departing from the funicular, with tracks all over the mountain.

What is staggering is that just six months ago, Natural Retreats, in the supporting statement ([see here](#)) to the planning applications for the dry ski slope and enlarged Ptarmigan, explicitly rejected two of these proposals as not viable!

c) Zip Wire

The leading Zip Wire operators in the UK were brought to Cairngorm Mountain to assess the potential for Zip Wire within the ski area. Having carried out a survey of the possible locations Cairngorm Mountain were advised that the gradient of the mountain and current locations of existing infrastructure meant that the installation of a zip wire facility was unfeasible at this time. No engagement with planning authorities took place following this initial site investigation. As technology advances over the coming years this may well be an opportunity Cairngorm Mountain revisit but at this time it is not something the management plan to take forward.

So why, after the UK's leading operators dismissed a zip wire here as unviable, are we now supposed to believe that its the answer to getting bums on funicular seats? And make no mistake, the proposal is ONLY about saving the funicular. HIE know it would face huge difficulties trying to remove the funicular closed system so its answer is a zip wire which would allow visitors to exit the Ptarmigan without their feet ever touching the ground.

The proposal is daft, so daft I am pretty certain the SE Group will never have proposed it. It would involve cables more than 1-2 km long in free span. Given lift lines can ice up to more than 18" in diameter, its unclear how any cable could take the load without being totally out of scale and with support towers to match those on the Beauly Denny. From a skiing viewpoint, falling ice would present a serious danger. From a summer tourism standpoint, the top of the mountain is in clag and affected by wind and rain much of the time. The risk of hypothermia to those brave or stupid enough to use it in such conditions would appear high – but maybe all users will be encased in down bags and gortex? Yes, zip wires can provide an enjoyable passive recreational experience for some, but the top of a mountain is not the place and the top of this mountain plain stupid.

b) Mountain Biking

The existing uplift infrastructure and topography presents an opportunity to introduce Mountain Biking to the ski area. Investigations and feasibility studies were carried out to assess the potential. These demonstrated that there is potential to create a unique and high quality mountain bike operation with multiple grades of difficulty to cater for a wide market, utilising the existing infrastructure and operating within the ski area. However, upon further investigation and consultation with neighbouring stakeholders there would be a significant amount of legal work required considering the potential impact on the Visitor Management Plan alongside impact on protected species outside the boundary of the ski area. The management team at Cairngorm still wish to investigate the possibility of creating a mountain biking operation but this will not be considered in the current plans and likely to be discussed with neighbours and stakeholders in the future.

The Ptarmigan and Dry Ski slope planning applications also dismissed mountain biking from the Ptarmigan as an option because of the legal issues connected with protecting the Cairngorms plateau. A new chairlift to mid-mountain (for example to the bottom of the West Wall) instead of the Ptarmigan, could offer opportunities for mountain biking that avoided those issues and the most sensitive ground at Cairn Gorm. However, that is NOT what HIE is proposing. It's all about the funicular.

Mountain bikers, of course, are affected by all the same weather issues as other outdoor recreationists. Any mountain bike trails utilising lifts are likely to be far more attractive if lower down the mountain where they could take advantage of the shelter offered by the forest in wet and windy conditions.

HIE's final proposal, for a mountain roller coaster is new. It's not linked to the funicular, being located on the slope above the car park. It raises all the same landscape issues, only to a far greater degree, as those that led the CNPA Board Planning Committee rightly to reject Natural Retreats/HIE's proposed dry ski slope. If HIE is deaf even to what the CNPA is saying, what hope is there?

The graphics in the video present the plans for the roller coaster separate from the Day Lodge poma and it's not clear how the two will fit. The proposal is pure Disney Land and totally inappropriate for the mountain but appears yet another attempt to try and attract summer paying visitors to Cairn Gorm in order to subsidise the funicular or the operator, Natural Retreats.

Just why so many new summer attractions are required when 18 months ago HIE launched its new "masterplan" for Cairn Gorm which involved just a dry ski slope and renovated Ptarmigan costing £4m is unclear. Perhaps it's an attempt to win back the support of local people on Speyside who have been affected by HIE's disastrous mismanagement of the funicular? If so, the money could be far better spent and local people should be demanding this.

Overview of HIE's proposals, summer and winter

Parkswatch has consistently argued that we need a new plan for Cairn Gorm and at long last HIE has launched a "vision" which at least touches on some elements that would play an essential part in such a plan.

What role Natural Retreats has played in this or whether HIE envisages a role for them in future is unclear. HIE's announcement though came just the day after HIE staff flew down to Manchester to meet Natural Retreats. If Natural Retreats have not been dismissed for breaching their lease they must be salivating at the thought of a £27m of investment paid, presumably, by others because, with net liabilities in excess of £34m reported at the end of 2017, they appear to be in no position to invest anything.

This raises some serious issues. Yesterday HIE also announced ([see here](#)) that:

Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) has awarded the operator, the Lecht Ski Company (LSC), more than £200,000 towards the £520,000 costs of acquiring a Snow Factory machine from Italian firm, TechnoAlpin.

So how much will the Natural Retreats group invest in the new snow making facilities? If they are not contributing at least as much as the Lecht Ski Company, why are HIE continuing to allow them to remain at Cairn Gorm and why are HIE favouring Natural Retreats so?

The new vision provides plenty of evidence for how HIE's investment in Cairn Gorm has been totally ad hoc to date and ill thought out. For example, this year, HIE spent money renewing the electric cabling for the Fiacaille Poma – destroying the uplift slope at the same time – when now they are proposing to get rid of this lift and the others in Coire Cas they have just renovated.

Some of the promotional material in the video is worse than naff: the video clip promoting walking at Cairn Gorm, is clearly west Coast, probably from Glen Coe; the mountain bike trail comes from the Alps. Talk about promoting Speyside or even knowing what Cairn Gorm looks like! The people at HIE responsible for Cairn Gorm appear totally divorced from current active recreational users, whether skiers, walkers, climbers, bikers.....or what is going on on the ground.

Nowhere in the Executive Summary is it explained how much of the £27m HIE is proposing to spend on new ski infrastructure compared to new summer “attractions”. However, it appears the balance is wrong with not enough money proposed for ski infrastructure and far too much devoted to needless summer attractions.

In terms of the Speyside economy, visitors to Glenmore have been growing year by year despite falling funicular numbers. There is thus absolutely NO need to try and attract more summer visitors to Cairn Gorm. The issue is about how to reverse the disastrous drop in numbers of skiers coming to Cairn Gorm. This, while partly a result of climate change, has as much to do with HIE's failure to upgrade ski facilities and Natural Retreats' disastrous mismanagement of the mountain, which has resulted in skiers departing Cairn Gorm in droves. That has been brought to the head by the breakdown of the funicular. HIE's new vision fails fundamentally to address this issue. There are not enough new ski lifts. The proposal that any new lift to the Ptarmigan should be in Phase 2 and is lower priority than the daft zip wire proposal says it all.

The proposals for a new Disneyland type resort in summer demonstrate that HIE is still obsessed with trying to get the funicular to pay its way. The fundamental question here is why bother? Is it worth chucking yet more good public money after all that has been wasted to date. That needs to be answered once HIE receives the report on the extent of the current structural problems. The focus in terms of investment, however, first and foremost needs to be on getting the winter infrastructure right, with some consideration of how chairlifts might also be used in summer by walkers and mountain bikers. This needs to happen before bringing forward any more summer proposals or proceeding with the current Planning Application to redevelop the Ptarmigan. Then, if there is any money left over, consideration can be given to whether investment in summer infrastructure is needed.

In my view investment at Cairngorm winter or summer, should focus on active recreation, whether skiing or mountain biking, not on passive recreation such as trips in the funicular. Any new plan needs to put active recreation first. There are plenty of other – and better – places for a passive recreational

experience.

What needs to happen

More than £80k has been spent on a consultancy report that HIE have kept secret and then amended to produce a summary set of proposals that if published by Save the Ciste or the Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust would have been absolutely shredded by the powers that be. HIE's "Executive Summary" report appears to have been produced partly in response to the current crisis at Cairn Gorm caused by the breakdown of the funicular. However, it does almost nothing to address those issues apart from putting a very hefty and welcome public investment on the table.

Coupled with HIE's absolute failure to consult properly in the past, now is the time for another body to take forward a proper plan for the mountain and Glenmore as a whole, with HIE's role limited to the provision of public finance (up to the £27m they have now committed to).

The body best placed to do this in the short-term is Forestry Commission Scotland because:

- it owns the land below the Cairn Gorm estate and is therefore in a position to integrate and join up existing infrastructure making better use of resources. It would provide opportunities to move some developments DOWN the hill (e.g mountain biking) while promoting woodland regeneration UP the hill. This would be good for both skiing and other recreational users and conservation.
- it has a far better record than HIE on community consultation and empowerment which it could use to work effectively with other stakeholders including the Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust (with the potential for a land transfer in future)..
- it has helped create a world class visitor attraction at Aonach Mor, so has very relevant experience which could be brought to Cairn Gorm

What is now needed is an independent stakeholder group which can help take HIE's latest vision and plan apart and re-assemble it into a coherent plan for Cairn Gorm and Glenmore. Such a group could be based on the Response Group, chaired by Cllr Bill Lobban, which has been created as a result of the funicular breakdown and involves public agencies. It should however expanded to include those with expert knowledge of skiing at Cairn Gorm (like the Save the Ciste Group) and recreational and conservation organisations. HIE should step back from this until a new draft plan or consultation has been agreed when they would be brought in to comment on how they would help finance the proposals.

Such a group, working with Forestry Commission Scotland, could come up with a new vision and plan for Cairn Gorm which might finally be both appropriate for the mountain, support active outdoor recreation and more specifically skiing in winter, which is so important both for skiers and the local economy.

Category

1. Cairngorms

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