

HIE's approach to Cairn Gorm – riding roughshod over all – has to stop

Description

INVESTMENT
INVESTMENT in the resort is in two phases. The cost for phase one would be around £16.5 million for a chairlift, mountain coaster, zipline tour, snowmaking to cover 30 hectares and environmental works.
Phase two is a further £10.5 million, including an additional chairlift, snowmaking and mountain biking.
The plans include:
■ A 3200 people per hour (pph) aerial chairlift in Coire Cas and an additional 3000 pph aerial high speed chairlift linking other areas of this area. They would be able to operate in winds of up to 100kph
■ A base area carpet conveyor lift would provide a 'best-in-class' beginner experience
■ Expanding and remodelling the Ptarmigan, reopening the Shelling, and improving the base facilities would improve operations, capacity, experience, and revenues across the resort
■ A lift-served mountain biking system and mountain bike tracks using existing routes and trails

Helping mountain to reach its peak

Ambitious £27m plan to attract 150,000 visitors every winter

By Gavin Musgrove
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A £27 million vision to revive CairnGorm Mountain has been laid out to release the resort's 'immense unlocked potential' over the next five to 10 years.

US-based consultancy SE Group believes the resort can attract in the region of 150,000 winter visitors per year – more in seasons when there are peak snow conditions – with the right targeted investments.

But controversially they appear to have written off any future for Coire na Ciste which accounts for one-third of the ski area and boasts the best terrain for skiers and boarders at intermediate level and beyond.

Instead the report proposes that all the focus for snow-sports is on Coire Cas and two state-of-the-art six person chairlifts should be installed.

There is also a role for the funicular which is currently not running at the resort because of safety fears.

However, it is seen as having a subsidiary role as snow-sports uplift and to be used and maintained more for



Major investment could help attract many more visitors to CairnGorm Mountain.

non-skiers and ski school customers.

Vermont based SE Group carried out its independent review of uplift infrastructure at the resort between February and September, earlier this year.

No funding has been allocated. Highlands and Islands Enterprise who commissioned the report have described the findings as a starting point.

But it appears that there would have to be very

persuasive arguments to now veer from this set course.

HIE's head of business development Susan Smith told the Strathy: "This is the start of a long journey but at the centre of this needs to be the buy-in from stakeholders and the local community..."

"Naturally an element of funding has to come from the public purse.

"There are large infrastructure funds for which this project may be eligible."

Intriguingly she continued:

"Without setting hares racing it is prudent that we look at what alternative funding mechanisms might be available.

"I would put the option forward there may be a number of philanthropic investors out there who are passionate about Cairngorm who may with a sensible model and plan consider some form of philanthropic investment."

Ms Smith would only add when pressed: "We have a very loose expectation of

interest which suggest to us there may be the opportunity to do a bit more work to tease out whether this is an alternative strategy but there is absolutely no guarantee."

On Coire na Ciste, she said the consultants found there was no business case to develop the area as campaigners and many ski visitors would like to see.

The HIE boss said: "They have come back quite unequivocally saying that it would not stack

"They have looked at the two sites and said it is unsustainable as a second site until there is a capacity of 8000 people (per day) or more using CairnGorm Mountain because facilities would have to be doubled up.

"This is the view of the experts and they have consulted widely and I have to take confidence in that... to deviate from these findings there would have to be a significant rationale to do so."

Ms Smith said the two new chairlifts would replace some of the surface lifts but was unable to say which ones.

She said that their partners Highland Council

Strathy 8/11/18

Last week I wrote to Charlotte Wright, Chief Executive of Highlands and Islands Enterprise, welcoming HIE's recognition of the need for investment in new ski infrastructure at Cairn Gorm but suggesting it was now time for them to step aside and let others develop a new plan. Unfortunately HIE's pronouncements about their new vision for Cairn Gorm ([see here](#)), as quoted in the press last week, suggest this is unlikely to happen and that they are digging an even bigger hole for themselves. This post looks at the issues.

The first is that HIE cannot be trusted. This is well demonstrated once again at the end of the extract from the Strathy above where Susan Smith says some of the current lifts in Coire Cas will be replaced but "was unable to say which ones". Here is HIE's spokesperson totalling contradicting the plans as shown in HIE's Video and Executive summary (link above). This clearly show all the current uplift in

Coire Cas, with the exception of the Shieling tow, being removed. HIE would appear to have no regard for the truth.

Threats and bullying

Susan Smith, head of HIE business development is also quoted as saying *“at the centre of this needs to be buy-in from stakeholders and the local community”*. So everyone has to buy-in to HIE’s top down plan for Cairngorm, whatever that is – it appears to change from day to day – without any proper debate or consultation? Why? This is a sure way to waste another £27m at Cairn Gorm.

As an illustration of just how divorced HIE is from local opinion, at the Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust’s AGM and open meeting on 8th November a member of the audience questioned HIE ruling out redevelopment of Coire na Ciste. This was then put to a show of hands and those in favour of re-developing Coire na Ciste first, before any new developments in Coire Cas, vastly outnumbered those supporting HIE’s proposals.

The Strathy article has done the public an enormous service by making clear that HIE has decided on one “set course” and are hell bent on following it: *“But it appears that there would have to be very persuasive arguments to now veer from this set course”*. So, what persuasive arguments have HIE made for their ill-thought out and inappropriate proposals for zip-wires and mountain roller coasters?

What needs to happen at Cairn Gorm is a bottom up plan, starting with the local community and stakeholders. People should not accept HIE’s bullying approach.

HIE and the SE Group Report

report may be edited

Highlands and Islands Enterprise may edit “commercially sensitive information” from the uplift report before finally publishing it.

The Press and Journal requested a copy of the report yesterday but were told it wasn’t possible to release it yet.

A spokesman said: “The full report is still in draft form. The findings are not going to change however, so rather than delay, we finalised the executive summary and published it in order to share the findings, along with an animation video.

“We do hope to be able to publish the full report when it is finalised.

“There is information in it that is likely to be commercially sensitive, so that will need to be reviewed.”

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HIE’s claim to the Press and Journal (left) that the SE Group

Review into ski infrastructure at Cairngorm is still in draft form and therefore cannot be released beggars belief. The SE Group submitted a draft copy of their report back in June as required by the tender. That same tender required the successful bidder to *“Finalise report with preferred prioritised option(s) and recommendations and submit to HIE by THE END OF SEPTEMBER 2018 (HIE’s emphasis)”*. If SE Group missed that deadline – it appears unlikely, they are a professional organisation – why not say so? The evidence suggests HIE may be trying to hide what SE Group really said

Isn’t it amazing that HIE can publish an ill-thought out vision for Cairn Gorm, any change from which they claim would need persuasive arguments, when they have NOT published the report on which their own vision is allegedly based?

Note too how HIE *“do HOPE to publish the full report in due course”*. If there had been a valid reason for not publishing the report, the honest thing to do would be to explain why and then commit to publishing the report.

Instead, HIE claims that some information may need to be withheld on grounds of commercial confidentiality. This is another smokescreen. They have had since June to identify what, if any, information might be commercially sensitive but amazingly have still not identified what this is.

The so-called “commercial” information most likely to be in the report is the current cost to Natural Retreats of operating and maintaining the infrastructure at Cairn Gorm. There is a very strong argument that this is not sensitive because it relates to infrastructure that the PUBLIC still own – Natural Retreats role is to operate it – and with a twenty-five year lease Cairngorm Mountain Ltd has no competitors. Its also needed to inform any future investment decisions from the public purse. Its in the public interest therefore to make it available yet HIE appears to want to do otherwise. Why?

HIE’s attempts to manipulate organisations and processes

Helping mountain reach its peak

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Cairngorms National Park Authority, Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Enterprise Scotland were 'enthused and excited' by the vision.

She said: "They believe that for the first time in many years this is a sensible approach for the way forward."

She also said HIE wants to be much more inclusive working with the 'right community representatives'.

Ms Smith explained: "It can not be a free for all. It has to be through proper and proportionate channels that we bring this forward."

She said Natural Retreats is the operator and part of the journey and 'had bought into it'. There have been no discussions with them on the route map.

Quizzed on their funding role she said there had been no talks with them yet.

There have been calls for the operator to be removed by owners HIE because of a loss of faith in them and a lack of investment with £6.2m pledged in 2014 not materialising.

Charlotte Wright, HIE chief executive, said: "Clearly £27m, even over 10 years, is a

large investment for a single resort, and funding is often the most challenging of all obstacles."

Highland Council convener Bill Lobban said the uplift review provides "a fantastic, positive view of the potential future for Cairngorm".

The report also says there should be improved transport links between Cairngorm and the broader Aviemore area to ease pressure on car parking.

The closed system should remain place at the top of the funicular.

continuation of Strathy article8/11/18

The public should be sceptical that Highland Council, the CNPA, SNH and Forest Enterprise Scotland have all signed up to the vision "as a sensible approach for the way forward" as Susan Smith has claimed. Have Board Members and Councillors considered the proposals in secret? I doubt it. This looks like another attempt by HIE to try and bounce agencies into agreeing anything on the promise of money and as an attempt to address the current crisis at Cairn Gorm caused by its failure to maintain the funicular properly.

HIE is quite blatant in its disregard for local communities. Who are "the right community representatives"? Once again HIE decides who it will speak to and who will be excluded from processes. I find this chilling, an example of what could best be described as corporate fascism.

Funding HIE's vision – the role of "Natural Retreats"

"Quizzed on their (Natural Retreats) funding role she (Susan Smith) said there had been no talks with them yet".

This revelation from the Strathy is quite extraordinary. Four years ago when HIE appointed "Natural Retreats" to run CairnGorm Mountain Ltd it was claimed they would bring £6.2m in new investments in the first five years ([see here](#)). Now, HIE, launches a new £27m vision, in which it promises significant

public investment, and it has not even asked Natural Retreats, what they will contribute. While this is a tacit admission that neither CML, nor their owners the Natural Assets Investment Ltd, are in a position to contribute anything it is fundamentally wrong. Natural Retreats were appointed in preference to local organisations on the basis they would bring investment to Cairn Gorm. Its been abundantly clear for two years that they can't do this and HIE should not be allowing them to remain on the mountain to profit from future public investments

What's going wrong is demonstrated by the temporary Planning Application that a Ms Sinead Mulvenney lodged with Highland Council at the beginning of November ([see here](#)).



The use of snow making machines, is a good idea, though the issue of a sustainable power source needs to be addressed sooner rather than later. With the funicular not working this winter and in the absence of chairlifts, the only sensible thing it to place the machines in lower Coire Cas and hope that any snow created there will connect with natural snow above allowing skiers to use all the tows and pomas in Coire Cas. As long as the snow really can be blown 300m up the hill the car park is also probably the best place to locate these machines temporarily.

There is a fundamental question about fair treatment of operators at different ski resorts which HIE needs to address. They appear to be funding the entire cost of two machines at Cairn Gorm, without even asking Natural Retreats for a contribution, when they have awarded just £200k to the Lecht ski

company towards the cost of one machine ([see here](#)). The HIE press release ([see here](#)) does not make it clear who will own the new machines. Perhaps, HIE will retain ownership but if so why haven't they offered this option to the other ski resorts and on what basis are they allowing Natural Retreats to use the machines (eg will the rent Natural Retreats pay increase?).

There are other issues. Its extraordinary that the Planning Application is in the name of an individual, albeit one giving the same address as Natural Retreats in Wilmslow, Cheshire. There is no indication of what organisation, if any, is making the application. At best this shows incompetence and at worst invalidates the application. While the section on the landowner's consent appears to have been completed, its been redacted. Why? HIE who are a public body own the site so why cannot their information be made public.

Description of Proposal

Please describe the proposal including any change of use: * (Max 500 characters)

Installation of a double unit snowfactory to provide a more substantial benefit to the winter operations and top to bottom skiing earlier in the season. This follows the successful trial of a single unit snowfactory during the previous winter season.

Is this a temporary permission? *

Yes No

Description of Proposal Cont.

Please state how long permission is required for and why: * (Max 500 characters)

12 months in a temporary location to service the upcoming winter operations until a more permanent location can be determined.

Contrary to the claim in the Application NO evidence has been provided that the trial last winter was a success. HIE has withheld the results of that trial. The evidence from Cairn Gorm, however, suggests that, unlike the other ski areas, the trial there was far from successful and the machinery was out of operation for much of the time. HIE however simply allows the spin to continue without any proper investigation of Natural Retreat's competence to run the resort or adherence to the terms of the lease.

All of this begs the question as to why any philanthropic investor would want to come to the aid of Cairn Gorm, as suggested by Susan Smith, when its run by HIE and "Natural Retreats".

What needs to happen

The standard of HIE's stewardship of Cairn Gorm and their ability to engage properly with stakeholders is completely unacceptable. If HIE are not prepared to leave the mountain voluntarily, retaining financial liability for all the mistakes they have made and the costs of rectifying them, the Minister responsible, Fergus Ewing, needs to instruct them to do so. Sooner rather than later.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. Governance
3. HIE
4. natural retreats
5. planning
6. renewables
7. scottish natural heritage

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