HIE needs to explain where the Cairn Gorm car park charging money has gone

Description



Upper Coire Cas car park October 2018 â?? Photo Credit Alan Brattey

Despite all that is going on with the funicular and HIEâ??s new vision for Cairn Gorm (see here), I make no apology for looking again at the new car park charges at Cairn Gorm (see here) and (here). While they might appear a relatively minor issue, they illustrate the disastrous way in which Cairngorm Mountain Ltd has been managed since Highlands and Islands Enterprise sold the company to â??Natural Retreatsâ?•.

The compulsory parking charge trial period (see here) has now come and gone at Cairngorm. It appears to have been conducted during the months of June, July, August but to have ceased at some point in September, when Natural Retreatsâ?? staff ceased to make any attempt to collect charges. True to form, the mountain business operator made no announcement about that or about their future plans for compulsory parking charges

About 164,000 vehicle visits to the Coire Cas car parks each year [+/- 10,000], according to the data notes within the â??Introduction of compulsory charges at CairnGorm Mountainâ?? document which was published by the operator in April 2018. That document suggests that around 50,000 vehicles would have visited between the beginning of June and early September. Some vehicle owners would have refused to pay, others would be staff, suppliers, service buses and those arriving after 3pm when charging ceased for the day. However, even if only 60% of vehicles did pay an average Â£2 to park, then that still should have provided â??Natural Retreat with around Â£60k in revenue. A net sum of Â£50k, when labour costs have been deducted, would be a conservative estimate.

While a long list of fairy story projects have been put forward as benefiting from the additional income raised via compulsory parking charges (see below), it is self-evident that the car park surfaces and drainage should be very much the No1 priority. What evidence then is there of any of the sums raised this summer being committed to car park improvements?

Upper Coire Cas



October 2018 â?? Photo Credit Alan Brattey

There was a small amount of re-screeding work done with surplus materials that were brought in by HIE for maintenance work to the Northern Corries footpath network. The picture above shows that the rain

has already washed this away and you can see an exposed plastic drainpipe

Further down the upper Coire Cas carpark (top photo) the surface is as poor as it has ever been and erosion by rainwater continues with each downpour. It simply isnâ??t fit to be driven over.

Lower Coire Cas



Lower cas cark park. At the bottom of the wooden fence around the drainage channel you can just s spoil that had blocked the sump and caused the flooding and erosion in the foreground. Photo Cred Brattey November 2018..

The drainage channel that comes down from the main Cas carpark was choked. That meant that the rain water had nowhere to go other than down the lower Cas carpark which has suffered severe surface damage.



Half the lower car park has been eroded by the flooding from the blocked drainage ditch. Photo Cre
Brattey November 2018.

That picture speaks for itself. Preventing this sort of damage did not require car park charges, it simply required Natural Retreats to take a little care. Having caused the damage, none of the revenue raised from parking charges seems to have found its way to bringing about any improvements to the carpark surface there.

Coire na Ciste



Photo Credit Alan Brattey October 2018

HIE also own the Coire na Ciste carpark which is leased to the operator. Itâ??s in much the same state as the Cas carparks with no evidence of any remedial maintenance having been done.



Photo taken late Oct 2018 Credit Alan Brattey

Other problems are accumulating



Drainage channel above link road Nov 2018 Photo Credit Alan Brattey

Something that generally escapes attention are the drainage channels, similar to the one below the upper and lower cas car parks, which were constructed along the link road between the Ciste and Cas carparks. An excellent job was done back then and the link road has benefitted from good drainage since. That might not be the case for much longer though because they are very neglected now and in

a state of collapse with trees taking root.



Photo Credit Alan Brattey

It might have been expected that remedial attention would have been included in the â??fairy storyâ?? projects wish list or that this had been brought to the attention of Highland Council, as the roads

authority. Alas, nothing appears to be being done and the dilapidation will only get worse with time. Itâ??s just another example of the degradation that afflicts the area today.

The operator published a long list of â??Potential Investment Opportunitiesâ?? to which the car park revenues could be committed:

1. Maintenance Costs â?? of the carpark
2. Environmental Management
3. Ranger Support
4. Ranger Support â?? Footpath infrastructure
5. Queuing management
6. Automated ticketing
7. 24 hour toilet facilities
8. Campervan facilities/electric hook-ups
9. Ski Racks
10. Winter Shuttle Service between the Ciste and Cas carpaks
11. Bus stop facilities
12. Family Initiatives
13. Snow Fencing
14. Litter

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Clearly then the carpark revenue is going to have to be stretched very widely but unfortunately there isnâ??t any evidence of any of that having happened, up to now. The carpark surfaces and drainage should be the No1 priority but it seems that nothing has been done to remedy the dreadful state that they are in.

The operator should take due note of what can happen when customers are dissatisfied with what is being done with the money that they put in. When the donations scheme was introduced the donations were at a reasonable level being

2013 â?? Â£10,426

2014 â?? Â£11,174

2015 â?? Â£12,427

But then dropped significantly

2016 -Â£5,274

2017 â?? Â£4,079

Can there be any doubt that customers ceased to make voluntary donations because they saw that the money they put in wasnâ??t being committed to the carpark surfaces?

Through FOI, an attempt was made to find out how the sums of Â£10,426 and Â£11,174 donated in 2013 and 2014 were used. HIE were in full control of the business then. Regrettably HIE claimed that they did not have that information but gave assurances that the funds were committed to car park maintenance and other projects. Quite how they knew that when they didnâ??t keep a record of the

necessary information remains a mystery!

Introducing a compulsory car parking charge may lead to even less people visiting the mountain if it becomes apparent that the money being levied is not then committed where it is needed most.

The trial and the future

The operator had this to say at the very beginning of the compulsory parking charges document:

â??â??*CairnGorm Mountain is planning to introduce a compulsory* ***year-round*** *[my highlighting] parking charge at the Coire Cas carparks it currently operates at CairnGorm Mountain to support the ongoing maintenance and future improvement of the carparksâ??â??*

Thatâ??s a bit cheekyâ?¦calling it a trial but planning to introduce compulsory year round charges all alongâ?¦â?¦.but what *â??ongoing maintenanceâ??* has taken place over the summer?

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Then they claimed:

â??â??Collection machines would be implemented prior to winter 2018/19â??â??

â??â??Ticket machines will be installed at locations around the car parks [subject to the necessary consents] which will operate for manual payments. These will be supported by mobile pay services such as Ringo â?? a service which allows for card payments over the phoneâ??â??

There is no sign of any of the above being installed in the Cas carparks and a check with Highland Council planning revealed that â??the necessary consentsâ?? have not been sought .i.e. no planning application has been submitted

It does seem that the plans to enforce year-round parking charges may have fallen flat. What has happened to the cash collected this summer that might reasonably have been expected to be committed to the installation of ticketing machines since it apparently hasnâ??t been apportioned to carpark surface improvements.

HIE, as landlord, ought to be asking these questions because they own the car parks and they are permitting their tenant, â??Natural Retreatsâ?• to fail to maintain them, as required under their lease, far less to make improvements.

The condition of the car parks is just another factor that is contributing to the drift away from Cairn Gorm, as evidenced by the snow-sports market share collapse over the last few years. Action is required by HIEâ?¦.quickly.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. HIE

2. natural retreats
3. planning

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