

Time for a re-think at Cairngorm

Description

Looking back on my long involvement in conflicts on Cairn Gorm what always strikes me is that the main cause has not be tensions between landuses but simple incompetence – particularly by HIBD/HIE. Now Highlands and Islands Enterprise is having to take over a bankrupt company running the facility for the second time and there is a proposal for a further “investment” of £27 million, ignoring the £1 million recently spent on a snowmaking machine. Does this not bring things to the point where a long step back is needed to consider the situation more widely than HIE’s scrabbling around within its repeated crisis?.



The bridge over the Allt Mhor near the bottom of the ski road 24th November 2018, half-blocked by t

boulders and one flood away from another disaster? (The blockage has been reported to Highland Cllr Bill Lobban)

The first area of conflict was erosion and flash flooding, which last increased greatly on Cairn Gorm, twice taking out the road bridge over the Cas. On the first time the flash flood came within seconds of causing multiple fatalities. This was all caused by handling a sensitive mountain environment as if it was a builders' yard and much pressure was brought to bear by NGOs and others to contain this problem! The current cost of ground repairs etc? Unknown.



Coire na Ciste is still like a builders' yard despite the clear up last year paid for by HIE

The proposal for western expansion into the Northern Corries and Lurchers Gully was against the advice of the then manager of the chairlift company Bob Clyde who wanted to expand east, but Highlands and Islands Development Board reps insisted. This major conflict produced a six week public inquiry at great cost. The proposed development was turned down by the reporter on grounds of impacts on landscape and other recreations. But substantial evidence on the lousy snowholding of the

corries, misdesign of the access road, misunderstanding of the traffic capacities etc etc, showed it had been a totally impractical proposal from the start. Its refusal very likely saved the chairlift company from bankruptcy.

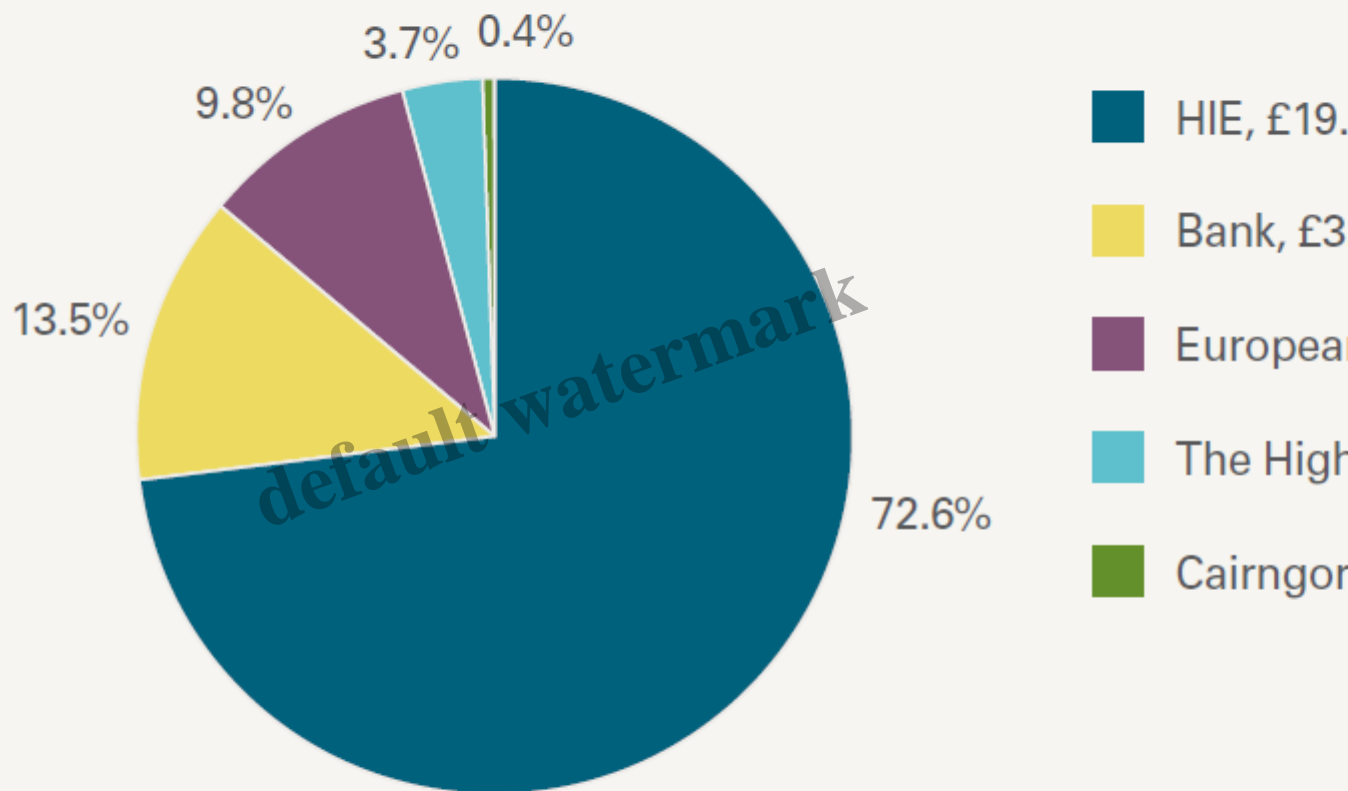
The user figures forecast for the funicular were very doubtful from the start, but informed criticism was ignored while much silly hype on a “World Class Experience” on Cairn Gorm was pursued by HIE. Again, it caused a major conflict.

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Exhibit 2

Total cost broken down by source

The public sector has spent £23 million on the funicular to date, most of which was provided by HIE.



Note: We have not included within our estimates the cost of any of the staff in monitoring and supporting the project, although this is likely to be significant. HIE includes £629,000 owed by CML for unpaid rent and dividends, various other purposes, and £85,989 which was repaid by the Scottish Government. The total for HIE excludes the amount paid to the bank to purchase the shares.
Source: Audit Scotland

Funicular costs from Audit Scotland Report 2009

Cost of construction soared from just over £14 million to £19.1 million but this was only part of a wider

redevelopment. Included in the total must be a further £1 million for the interpretive centre (a loan from Highland Regional Council that had to be largely written off) and £3.6 million for HIDB to buy the Daylodge from the chairlift company to give it some working capital. It is difficult to accurately measure the **overall** losses of the eight years of the new chairlift company for these included costs other than those it had incurred but it was about £16-20 million. The admission by the then HIDB that the operation could not provide an economic rent and the reduction in rent from £500,000 to £100,000 meant most future maintenance costs would have to be picked up by HIDB/HIE – i.e. the public purse!

It is no surprise that Cairngorm Mountain Ltd under Natural Retreats also operated at a loss. HIE had spent £1.5 million of staff time on the operation during the eight years of the previous Chairlift Company, £75,000 of that on economic consultants looking for ways to run the operation more cheaply. The answer seems to have been there wasn't any way to make much savings. How then can any future company operate at other than a loss without sustained financial support/subsidy from HIE?

Surely it is time to come to a major final decision about the whole operation on Cairn Gorm within a broad context:-

1. The welfare of the local economy (the social and other benefits to downhill skiers never quite gets a mention). How can the operation be made sustainable for the local community and for the enjoyment of skiers?
2. The whole Glenmore area including its diverse recreational and biodiversity assets.
3. Other ski developers who have to compete with this massively subsidised competitor.
4. The Cairngorms National Park. Effective conservation of protected mountain massifs like the Cairngorms depends largely on the management of development pressures around them. A margin of surrounding foothills to adsorb some pressures is key and the Cairngorms have that except at Glenmore where direct access to the core is provided. The pressures created by the continuing development of Aviemore/An Camus Mor at this critical point is increasingly creating a classic problem in National Park management.
5. The wider Highlands and Islands Community which HIE is meant to serve. If large amounts of money are disappearing down a bottomless pit on Cairn Gorm, it cannot be spent on other communities – so who or where is losing out as a result?
6. The national community. At a time of austerity, when we increasingly can hardly properly finance children's' education or hospitals etc, should we be pouring £27 million etc down the financial hole on Cairn Gorm?

Time for a decision? The costs of removal of the funicular may be horrendous, but the costs of maintaining it and indeed any operating company seem substantial and endless.

Once the report on the repairs of the funicular is published, this would be the right time for local community interests and the wider environmental and recreational interests to put their heads together.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation

- 3. HIE
- 4. natural retreats

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