

Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the Ptarmigan Planning Application and the National Park

Description

Almost the first thing Highland and Islands Enterprise did after it bought back Cairn Gorm Mountain was to inform the Cairngorms National Park Authority that it wished to proceed with the Planning Application to redevelop the Ptarmigan building near the summit of Cairn Gorm ([see here for background](#)). About a month ago stories appeared in the local press that the Planning Application would go to Committee in April. Now, in its latest [Cairn Gorm update](#) HIE is indicating that the Application will be considered in April or May and:

“If the plan is approved, CMSL will then review whether this option remains attractive and feasible, as part of a new strategy for the business.”

This post takes a look at the implications of HIE pushing ahead with the Planning Application before a new strategy has been developed.

The business rationale for the Planning Application

The original justification for the Ptarmigan Planning Application was that if a new visitor attraction was built near the top of Cairn Gorm, more people would be attracted to use the funicular. The proposal was another attempt to try and get the funicular to pay for itself. Like previous attempts, it was likely to fail because the top of Cairn Gorm is simply not an appropriate place for a visitor attraction. Now, however, the funicular is broken, the costs of repairing it unknown and the whole business is in crisis.

HIE had been going to lend Natural Retreats £2.5m to redevelop the Ptarmigan – how they were going to secure that loan has never been explained – but that money is now needed elsewhere. One option is to use it to help repair the funicular, if that could be done for a reasonable price. While HIE’s newsletter claims they *“expect to receive information on potential option in the next few weeks”*, the length of time taken the investigations have taken so far suggests the costs may be £ millions. A competing priority is the need for new lift infrastructure at Cairn Gorm. HIE asked SE Consulting to review the recommendations of their Uplift Review in the light of the funicular breakdown. Again the newsletter says *“Key findings will be made public”* in the next few weeks. Why then press ahead with Ptarmigan Planning Application until the financial implications of BOTH these reports are public?

Why indeed press ahead with the Ptarmigan Application before any work appears to have been done on all the other investment needed at Cairn Gorm? When is HIE going to announce the total repair bill for Natural Retreat’s failure to maintain the infrastructure as they were required to do under their lease (lift infrastructure, car parks, the Day Lodge etc)? What about the costs of finishing the clear-up and removing further redundant infrastructure (which could include the funicular)? How about the

costs of upgrading the electric supply so that the snow factory, currently broken, does not have to be powered by polluting diesel generators? Then add to all of this, the costs of repairing the damage that has been done to the natural environment at Cairn Gorm and an ecological restoration plan.

The more you consider all the investment that is needed at Cairn Gorm, the less the Ptarmigan proposals make financial sense. One possible explanation of why HIE is pushing ahead on this is that they are simply incapable of changing direction. The appointment of Susan Smith, as interim Chief Executive, appears evidence for this â?? though I would be delighted to be proved wrong. She was the senior HIE member of staff responsible for managing the Natural Retreats debacle. An alternative explanation is HIE want to use any planning approval for the new Ptarmigan as a bargaining chip to show that only they are capable of managing Cairn Gorm (and keep the local community at bay).

A masterplan for Cairn Gorm

Parkswatch has long argued that instead of piecemeal development proposals, what is needed is a new comprehensive strategy for Cairn Gorm. HIE has twice in the last two years claimed to produce such a strategy. The first when it announced its plans for a dry ski slope and the Ptarmigan development, which it described as a masterplan ([see here](#)). The second was when it packaged the Uplift Review it had commissioned as a new vision for Cairn Gorm ([see here](#)). In neither case had there been any public consultation on the proposals, which were far from comprehensive. Some like the zip wire and Coire Cas dry ski slope were unworkable.

The Cairngorms National Park Authority had tried to get Natural Retreats and HIE to agree to a proper strategy for the mountain as part of its Cairngorm and Glenmore Strategy. Unfortunately it agreed that Natural Retreats should take the lead on this and nothing happened ([see here](#)) until a sheet of paper listing elements of such a strategy was submitted with the dry ski slope application. Now HIE is back in charge they have still made NO announcement about what they intend to do to develop that strategy. Its very good to see therefore that the CNPA has now included the following in its Local Development Plan which is out for public consultation ([see here](#)):

â??There are three ski centres in the National Park and these play an important role in the local economy. They face challenges and pressures in continuing to provide the modern infrastructure and facilities that visitors expect, as well as responding to climate change and considering ways of increasing summer visits and revenues. The Plan will support appropriate development and enhancement of these facilities. Planning applications in these locations should be supported by a masterplan or similar document which outlines the longer term development strategy for the centre and explains how the proposal fits within this.â?•

While a masterplan is a planning document, it is strategic in nature, setting out the overall plan for an area. By stating that any planning applications by the ski centres in future needs to be accompanied by a masterplan, the CNPA is in effect saying that the current approach by HIE, which has involved numerous one-off applications (dry ski slope, Shieling Rope tow, Ptarmigan, Snow factory etc) will not be acceptable in future. Perhaps that is another reason why HIE is trying to push ahead with the Ptarmigan Application now before the Local Development Plan is agreed?

So where has the Ptarmigan Planning Application got to and what needs to happen in planning terms?

On 8th February a document called 'Revised Processing Agreement' appeared on the CNPA Planning Portal under the Ptarmigan Application ([see here](#)). This set out a timetable for the Application to be considered by the April Planning Committee but indicated that for this to happen all the target timescales for all the intermediate steps would need to be kept. The first, for 28th February, was for Scottish Natural Heritage to respond. Their response is STILL not on the planning portal so unless this has been received and is being kept secret from the public, the process is now over five weeks behind schedule.

Following the decision by the CNPA to reject the dry ski slope proposal, I would like to see the CNPA taking more of a lead at Cairn Gorm BEFORE agreeing the new Local Development Plan. There is a lot in that Plan which could help steer the Cairngorm Mountain business in a new direction. It allows for new development BUT crucially insists that any development must be fitting for the National Park:

Whether within settlements or in the countryside, proposals must be of the highest quality, with no significant adverse impact on residential amenity or on the Park's special qualities.

Formal recreation provision provides significant economic, recreational and health benefits to residents and visitors. It is recognised that many of these facilities are constrained by their sensitive location and the policy supports their development where this is undertaken in harmony with the location; where the proposal extends the tourist season and the availability of facilities to communities; and is designed to the highest standards.

Comment: this policy appears specifically designed to cover the ski areas. Given the experience at Cairn Gorm it could be strengthened further by adding a requirement that any development should not only be designed to the highest standards, it should be constructed with the minimum possible impact on the natural environment.

Proposals must also include information on the future management and maintenance arrangements that are in place to retain the highest quality provision.

Comment: this is welcome - think of the maintenance failures at Cairn Gorm - but could be strengthened if the CNPA required developers to provide bonds to guarantee redundant infrastructure was removed.

The CNPA should not wait until its new Local Development Plan is agreed before taking a more proactive role at Cairn Gorm but should be articulating the requirements in the plan now. Maybe they are? Maybe behind the scenes the CNPA are trying to persuade HIE to hold back on the Ptarmigan Planning Application until a new plan has been developed for Cairngorm Mountain in consultation with the local community and recreational interests?

Someone needs to take on HIE at Cairn Gorm and in an ideal world there should be no-one better placed to do this than the National Park Authority.

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Date Created

April 3, 2019

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