

Everything that is wrong with Cairngorm Mountain.

Description

This post reveals two further examples of how Cairngorm Mountain is being mismanaged. These confirm that there is something rotten at both Highlands & Islands Enterprises (HIE) and Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd (CMSL). Both these organisations are in desperate need of a clean-out if what was once Scotland's premier ski resort is to return to its former glory.

HIE/CMSL's response to business interest in the lower Coire na Ciste area.

It was a fairly open secret that an approach had been made to HIE by a business to re-open the lower part of Coire na Ciste. The question of the possibility of the Ciste being sub-leased to another business was then raised in a post on the Aviemore & Glenmore Community Trust (A&GCT) Facebook page on 29/10/2019. The A&GCT said it had heard the rumours circulating locally about this but on asking HIE about the subject, HIE had denied that they were in discussion with anyone. It had previously been established through Freedom Of Information (FOI) requests that CMSL ARE allowed to sub-lease, BUT, only with the expressed written consent of HIE.

I decided to double check the position and therefore submitted an FOI request to HIE on 31st October. I received a response on 28th November which revealed there had been email exchanges with not just one business but TWO! [E-mail from enquirer 1 with redactions](#) and [E-mail from enquirer 2 with redactions](#). They raise a number of serious issues.

First, in response to a question from Enquirer 1 about the possibility of leasing the Ciste dated 3rd November last year, Dave Macleod, HIE's Head of Infrastructure, made a brief reply on 12/11/2018:

"HIE has a lease of the ski area with CML, including Coire na Ciste, which expires in 2039."

This was at the very time that the HIE Board was planning how to take back CML into public ownership! The HIE board meeting of 30/10/2018, which considered this, lists those present as including Dave Macleod (and Paul Dzialowski who was also involved in the responses)!

Paragraph removed in the interests of the effective conduct of public affairs.

Administration was a highly likely outcome for CML, and the Board discussed the potential for HIE to regain direct control of operational responsibilities from the company. This could potentially be achieved following the company's administration, through a pre-packaged deal agreed with the administrator, or by acquiring assets through share purchase. The key goal would be to ensure a smooth transition that would minimise disruption to the business, its customers, and the local community.

In these circumstances, the following conclusions were agreed:

- HIE would begin negotiations to achieve a managed exit from Cairngorm for CML.
- *Paragraph removed in the interests of the effective conduct of public affairs.*
- HIE would proceed with purchase of snow making equipment, with the aim of maintaining access to snowsports at Cairngorm through the 2018-19 winter season and in future years.
- The Chief Executive and the Head of Business Improvement would meet the directors of CML at the earliest opportunity to inform them of these decisions.
- Given the seriousness and urgency of the present situation, it was also agreed to form a sub-group of the Board to review and make recommendations for appropriate solutions that would be considered by the full Board at the earliest opportunity.

Susan Smith, Dave MacLeod, Paul Dzialdowski and Allan McIlwaine left the meeting.

The minutes effectively say that negotiations were already underway to cancel the HIE/ NAIL lease agreement so why did HIE staff suggest otherwise?

Second, the first email enquiry was made just four days before HIE released their new vision for Cairn Gorm as set out in the SE Group Report ([see here](#)). Following this, Susan Smith, who is now the interim CEO of CMSL and at the time was HIE's Head of Business Development was quoted in the press ([see here](#)) as claiming that it would be nice if a "philanthropic investor" would be prepared to invest in the mountain business! What the emails show is that there were two potential investors and HIE/ CMSL have said no to both of them without asking any further!

On Thu, 3 Jan 2019 at 16:55, Paul Dzialdowski <paul.dzialdowski@hient.co.uk>

Hi [REDACTED]

Sorry, HIE have no plans to either sell or lease the building.

Kind regards

Paul

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: 03 January 2019 17:47
To: Paul Dzialdowski <paul.dzialdowski@hient.co.uk>
Cc: Dave MacLeod <dave.macleod@hient.co.uk>; [REDACTED]
Subject: Re: Coire na Ciste proposal

Paul,

thanks for your clarification.

[REDACTED] I have to say that I find it somewhat disappointing that as a public body encouraging enterprise, that having been approached with the prospect of [REDACTED] area you have made no attempt to even enter into a dialog.

regards [REDACTED]

WHY? Was it because these businesses were interested in the Ciste, which HIE has been trying to shut down for years, or was it because they were afraid that another business might be so successful that it would show them up?

Third, in the case of the second enquirer HIE appears to have realised they were wrong to shut down the dialogue because a few days later they suggested the second enquirer could contact CMSL:

On Mon, 7 Jan 2019 at 13:17, Paul Dzialdowski <paul.dzialdowski@hient.co.uk> wrote:

Hi [REDACTED]

I should've clarified that the Coire Na Ciste building is currently leased by HIE (as part of the ski area) to the operator Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Limited. Their interim Chief Executive [REDACTED] is copied in above and should you wish to email [REDACTED] directly to discuss potential investment. [REDACTED] can also be contacted on [REDACTED]

Kind regards

Paul

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: 07 January 2019 13:52
To: Paul Dzialdowski <paul.dzialdowski@hient.co.uk>
Cc: Dave MacLeod <dave.macleod@hient.co.uk>; [REDACTED]
Subject: Re: Coire na Ciste proposal

Paul

Many thanks. I will contact [REDACTED]

regards - [REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: 03 May 2019 11:11
To: Paul Dzialdowski <paul.dzialdowski@hient.co.uk>
Subject: Re: Ciste proposal

Paul,

do you have enough information from previous correspondence to be able to provide an estimated figure for rent of the Ciste property as per the map I sent to [REDACTED] Would it be helpful for us to have a chat about this?

regards — [REDACTED]

You will notice lines across the emails, this is a result of them being cut and pasted in chronological order.

This suggests that when HIE was initially contacted by the second enquirer they should have immediately referred the interested parties to CMSL with their business ideas and not taken it upon themselves to shut down the discussion. What they did was prejudice the business case before it was even presented to CMSL! The correct course of events would have been for the interested parties to present their case to CMSL management, who should then have presented it to their board for approval or refusal. In the case of approval, the business case should then have been presented to HIE for consent.

Fourth, as the extract above shows, there are obviously emails missing regarding the second enquiry between the 07/01/2019 and 13/05/2019. These were presumably between CMSL and the business proposer – another FOI beckons!

HIE's response to suggestion that heather cutting might help beginner's ski area

While I have been very critical of the beginner's ski area proposal ([see here](#)) I am a strong supporter of downhill skiing at Cairn Gorm. Some of you may remember from a previous post that I had investigated the option of "heather-cutting" instead of the bulldozing for the new beginner's ski area which is now due to be considered by the Cairngorms National Park Authority Planning Committee on Friday.

I presented the idea to Carroll Buxton, interim CEO of HIE, and Susan Smith, interim CEO of CMSL over a month ago with the genuine belief that it would help in preparing a better beginner's area for this year than if nothing was done. Here are my suggestions and their responses highlighted in yellow:

In the planning application by CMSL it was reported that in the 2018/19 winter season 508cu.m of "factory" snow was used to create a beginner area of 668sq.m. It was obvious, even before I first emailed you, that the application was unlikely to be heard at a planning meeting in time for action being taken for this coming ski season, which is why the heather cutting was the only available economic option.

Heather brashing is only useful to implement the reinstatement, it will not change the problem of the existing open ditch throughout the area, nor will it alter the landforms which were created in the 1960's. As an organisation we are aware of the use of heather brashing and have worked on projects with the CNPA and part funded by SNH to use it here at Cairngorm. We already have the capacity to do it, as we have a brush cutter and do use it.

The lower area within the planning application was already heather brashed in 2015. Existing people within this company are best placed and have the knowledge of what is required to make the ski area better, whilst maximising the opportunities for ecological diversity. We have undertaken heather brashing (involving school children) where we reinstated bare peat at the site of Jeans Hut which had been bare since the 50's and before the days of the Cairngorm Chairlift Company.

All CMSL had to do was make a few phone calls or send emails just to confirm the information I gave you, but looking at photos of the lower slopes where their piles of snow are, it appears nothing has been done!

The following is some basic maths I have done for you. 508cu.m. of snow was used to fill in "voids" and yet the amount of infilling required for depressions, according to the planning application, is only 114cu.m. That leads to the assumption that the remaining 394cu.m. was used to cover the vegetation over their 668sq.m. beginners area. If my proposal had been actioned by CMSL, that volume of snow at a depth of 0.15m would cover an area of almost 2,600sq.m., which is slightly less than the area proposed in the planning documents, although at a more sensible depth of 0.3m the coverage would be about 1,300sq.m.. This is still twice the area covered last season, allowing a larger beginners area but at only the same cost.

As stated above Heather brashing will not improve the area in the planning application for usable snow.

At meetings of the Funicular Response Group, Susan Smith has commented about the "huge challenge in stemming losses" and "high overheads with little income" etc., and yet when offered an opportunity to improve the situation has apparently done NOTHING. Maybe if she had it would have been noticed that at last HIE/ CMSL were starting to engage with their customers and stakeholders which has often been your stated intention. A positive instead of the usual negativity.

I do not accept the above comment. Heather brashing is used within Cairngorm Ski Area and will continue to be used.

The reality of the situation is that the people on the ground to whom this application is important to, are fully supportive and have documented their support to this application – The Aviemore and Vicinity Community Council, The Cairngorm Mountain Recreational Trust, The Scottish Ski Club, The Cairngorm Ski Club, The Cairngorm Snowboard Club, The three local ski schools who are based at Cairngorm, The AGCT, The Badenoch and Strathspey Schools Snowsport Association. and local outdoor education providers. It should also be recognised that there is 100% support from all CMSL staff who's jobs depend on moving this company forward.

SNH have no objections and recognise these groundworks do not effect the designations beyond the Ski Area.

The head of the CNPA planning department has recommended this application for approval.

CMSL wanted to carry out these works in August so we are not at "odds with the –"Working With The Environment At Cairngorm" which we submitted as part of this application. The real issue here is that we have tried hard to get this work done for the benefit of snow sports visitors to the area this winter- (also to help mitigate the current loss of the Funicular Railway). We have already stated that this is not going to be possible until next summer as it is now too late for us to carry out these works – which is a real disappointment.

As always we are managing a recreational ski area, which is set up to protect the designations beyond the ski area boundary, which we balance with our aims to maximise the Cairngorm Ski Area's full potential.

You will notice in the reply that the term “heather cutting” has been changed to “heather brashing” and is used repeatedly throughout the reply, a clear attempt to divert attention from the fact that CMSL has done absolutely nothing to help themselves. Let me explain.

Heather brashing is generally considered to be only the removal of the flower/ seed part of the plants, the brashings so obtained being spread on other areas to help with repair and rejuvenation after works which have damaged the natural environment.

Heather cutting, on the other hand and was what I proposed, can mean anything from taking 1cm. off the top to removing it completely to ground level, and despite CMSL’s insistence would have improved the beginners area.

default watermark



Picture from CMSL. 30/11/2019



Picture from CMSL 28/11/19 showing extent of heather

“It will not change the problem of the existing open ditch”. That is correct, but, with a bit of lateral thinking, cut heather could have been used to temporarily fill in or cover the ditch in the more important places for the duration of the ski season thereby improving the skiability of the lower slopes.

“Heather brashing is used within Cairngorm Ski Area and will continue to be used”, but, if you go back a couple of sentences *“The lower area within the planning application was already heather brashed in 2015.”* Four years previously! And then *“Existing people within this company are best placed and have the knowledge of what is required to make the ski area better”*.

My emailed reply to this was:-

“Miss Smith,

I am appalled and astonished at the level of arrogance displayed in your reply to my suggestion for heather cutting, considering the dire financial position of Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd.”

“CMSL wanted to carry out these works in August so we are not at odds with “Working with the environment at Cairngorm” which we submitted as part of this (planning) application.”

If CMSL wanted to carry out the works in **August 2019** then the planning application should have been entered long before the Date of Validation by the Planning Authority which was **30/07/2019**, only days before you intended starting work, and which is still being added to! The document referred to here was written by Mr K. Bryers on **14/02/2018** and in part 4.4 specifically says *“Works involving excavations should ideally be done in the late **spring**; completion of earthworks should be aimed for **mid-June** for the highest sites with re-instatement 2 – 3 weeks later..... and to allow the maximum growing season for the plants”*. **August is neither late spring nor mid-June.”**

Conclusions

Everyone affected by the ongoing crisis at Cairngorm should be taking notice of the economy with the truth displayed and be careful in their dealings with management at HIE and CMSL.

“The head of the CNPA planning department has recommended this application for approval.” If CMSL can't even be bothered to help themselves and improve the beginner area with something as simple as heather cutting, let's hope that the CNPA board stick to their guns when considering the Planning Application for the beginner's area on Friday and insist HIE/ CMSL present their “Masterplan” before any further planning approvals are granted.

Senior management at both HIE and CMSL were employed when the company CML was first taken over by HIE in 2008, to prevent bankruptcy. They were still in place when it nearly went bust in 2017, and eventually did go bust in 2018, and are still there now apparently quite happy wasting public money. It is my belief that the situation will never improve unless there is a radical change in attitude by them.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. CNPA
3. Freedom of Information
4. Governance
5. planning

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