

Cairn Gorm – HIE’s Masterplan – the delays, the secrecy and what needs to happen

Description

This post takes a look behind Highland and Island Enterprise’s disastrous management of the Cairngorm mountain business, which includes:

- the failed strategy of removing other uplift capacity in an attempt to make the funicular pay;
- the gross errors in awarding the last operating contract to Natural Retreats ([see here](#)) and ([here](#));
- the failure to manage Cairngorms Mountain Ltd while a subsidiary of Natural Assets Investment Ltd and managed by Natural Retreats which appears to have resulted in cash being siphoned out of business ([see here](#));
- the failure to ensure that the facilities were maintained, resulting in a state of dereliction in many areas and HSE improvement notice being served ([see here](#)).

These and many other failures have been well covered on ParkswatchScotland and at least some of them are currently being investigated by Audit Scotland.

This post focusses on the last 18 months, within the context of the need for a masterplan, based on:

1. What HIE has done (or not done) to pick up the pieces left by the closure of the funicular back in late summer 2018 and the subsequent liquidation of CML
2. What HIE has done (or not done) develop a way forward for the Cairn Gorm estate and in particular the business previously managed by CML.
3. What HIE should have done given that major changes were required to enable the future business on Cairn Gorm to rise out of the ashes of the disastrous failures of the last 5 to 10 years.

The need for a Masterplan

The major changes required at Cairn Gorm will require a series of planning applications which individually or collectively come under the planning definition of a Major Development. A standard requirement for any Major Development is the preparation of a masterplan.

The Scottish Government promotes the use of Master Planning to improve the quality of developments. It states “*Masterplanning is an invaluable planning and design tool for responding to local development needs and making the most out of the landscape*”.

The key Scottish Government guidance document on masterplanning is Planning Advice Note (PAN) 83.

Intended audience

Masterplanning is a process that involves many disciplines, all of which must work closely together to achieve the best results. This PAN is therefore intended for anyone who has a role in the planning, design and approval of development. This essentially includes built environment professionals, key stakeholders (including financiers) and the community.

When is a masterplan required?

A masterplan can be prepared for almost any site, but there are certain types of sites or circumstances where a masterplan is most likely to be appropriate. In general, masterplanning is required for areas of large-scale change such as town extensions; regeneration projects; town and city centres; housing developments; and places where significant environmental assets require protection. Masterplanning, however, is also relevant to raising standards in relatively small developments.

Masterplans are usually commissioned by local authorities, developers, housebuilders, landowners and regeneration agencies or by any of these in partnership. One, or all, should assess the site and decide what contribution a masterplan could make.

Excerpts from the introduction to the Scottish Government's Planning Advice Note 83 on Master Planning

The Cairngorms National Park Authority earlier this year dispelled any doubt that a masterplan is required on the future of Cairn Gorm:

3. The CNPA Board agreed at its meeting on 29 March 2019 a set of principles for the work of the CNPA on Cairngorm Mountain. These principles provide a framework for developing work with partners over the long term.
- a) Any proposals should fit with the National Park Partnership Plan, the Local Development Plan and the Cairngorm & Glenmore Strategy.
 - b) Any proposals should be part of a masterplan for the ski area as set out in the proposed new Local Development Plan.
 - c) Any proposals should be cognisant of climate change scenarios to ensure long-term sustainability.
 - d) Cairngorm Mountain should provide a good Scottish ski experience with facilities and uplift commensurate with scale.
 - e) Cairngorm Mountain should provide opportunities for all to learn and enjoy the outdoors.
 - f) Summer visitors should be provided with an opportunity to enjoy the environment and be close to nature and wildness.
 - g) The operational model for Cairngorm Mountain needs to be fit for purpose and affordable in the long-term.
 - h) Any infrastructure investment should be in keeping with the mountain environment.
 - i) The wider Cairngorm Estate should be managed for nature and recreation and any future development within the ski area should be done with minimal environmental impact.

A key excerpt from Cairngorm Mountain – CNPA Working Principles

The Working Principles describe relatively clear requirements for the need of a masterplan and the overall principles with which the contents of the masterplan should comply. The problem with this document is that the CNPA Planning Committee has chosen not to apply these Working Principles to the Cairn Gorm planning applications submitted since March 2019, most recently last Friday when they approved the application for groundworks by the Day Lodge ([see here](#)).

Additionally, on 27 June 2019, in an address to the Funicular Response Group, Cabinet Secretary Fergus Ewing who is also a local MSP underlined the need for a masterplan.

1. Opening remarks – Cabinet Secretary Fergus Ewing

Mr Ewing noted that Cairngorm is very important to the Scottish economy and vital to the local community. The Scottish Government is committed to supporting a long-term, sustainable future for Cairngorm Mountain. **The Cabinet Secretary has tasked HIE with the responsibility to prepare a Masterplan which needs to evidence a suite of sustainable developments on the estate which should utilise the natural resources available, be fully inclusive, collaborative and commercial. Capturing the knowledge of CMSL staff and the views of local communities in the masterplan will be essential.**

Excerpt from the Funicular Response Group Meeting minutes (obtained via an FOI)

So with these clear requirements what has HIE been doing to create a masterplan since the closure of the funicular in October 2018?

What has HIE been doing (or not doing)?

This is a difficult question to answer given the thick veil of secrecy over HIE activities.

Before the funicular closed it would appear that HIE had some inkling that all was not well with the Cairngorm Mountain business. Frankly, Cairngorm Mountain's falling share of the winter sports market was clear for all to see. In January 2018 SE Group was commissioned by HIE to conduct a comprehensive review of uplift facilities at Cairngorm Mountain. In November, as CML was going bust, HIE launched a new vision for Cairn Gorm ([see here](#)) which it claimed was based on the SE Group's report. This, although effectively completed in the summer, was dated November 2018 and only released under FOI in December ([see here](#)). After the seriousness of the structural problems underlying the closure of the funicular became known, an addendum was published, dated June 2019. This proposed new developments such as zip wires and mountain coasters ([see here](#)).

The SE Group reports were presented by HIE at a few public meetings. Back in the first half of 2019 many people thought that HIE intended that the SE Group report would form the basis of any future masterplan, but then everything seemed to go quiet. All the focus and press announcements switched to repairing the funicular and the so-called emergency measures aimed at stabilising the Cairngorm Mountain business.

Clearly, with the new HIE-owned operating company Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd (CMSL) picking up the mess left by Natural Retreats and the bleeding of major financial losses month on month, effort was needed to try to 'stabilise' the business. I will avoid in this blog commenting on how HIE went about this, apart from stating that a competent organisation in similar circumstances would not just focus on the day to day issues, they would concurrently press on with the development of a new future – a masterplan.

So from October 2018 what has HIE been doing to develop a new strategy and masterplan for Cairn Gorm? I'm sure HIE would say that they had to wait for the SE Group report and assess the structural problems with the funicular then get these engineers reports peer reviewed and costed etc. etc. We are now, however, in the second winter with little or no uplift on Cairn Gorm and with no real idea as to

when Cairngorm Mountain will be able to return to a viable business position.

As shown below, prior to the funicular closure HIE did not seem to take masterplanning seriously but instead presented projects on a piecemeal, apparently disjointed basis. This habit has continued post funicular closure when the need for a masterplan for the future of Cairn Gorm is even greater. The recent projects which have been submitted for planning approval are:

- Extension to the Ptarmigan Restaurant building ([see here](#))– granted by CNPA, May 2018
- Artificial ski slope ([see here](#))– rejected by CNPA, October 2018
- Tube slide, zip line and play area ([see here](#))– temporary permission granted by Highland Council, June 2019
- Engineering works to smooth and regrade land near the Day Lodge – granted by CNPA, December 2019 – despite powerful arguments against ([see here](#))

The problem is that other planning applications are known to be in the pipeline, all so far not supported by any masterplan. Will CNPA have the courage to apply its “*Cairngorm Mountain – CNPA Working Principles*”, or is this document yet another piece of CNPA window dressing?

There is still little sign of any masterplanning, though consultants have recently been appointed to progress this. Evidence obtained through FOIs and many of the reports appearing in the press have shown considerable work going on to build a case for repairing the funicular but very little else, apart from the work on disjointed individual planning applications. From reading their press releases it seems that HIE is building a so-called “business case” for repairing the funicular based on the premise that it is estimated to be cheaper to repair it than to remove it. To develop a business case or make any decision to repair the funicular without a professionally developed and publicly tested masterplan which clearly demonstrates that the funicular has a cost-effective role in the future business on Cairn Gorm is crazy, particularly when public money is at risk. Yet that is what seems to be happening – all behind closed doors.

It appears that HIE only commenced the tendering process for masterplan consultants in June 2019 after the Cabinet Secretary’s remarks to the Funicular Response Group. As part of the newly formed group Campaign for a Better Cairngorm, I had a meeting with HIE in September, trying to get across to HIE some of the basic ideas for the future of Cairn Gorm that resulted in the paper, Cairn Gorm: a Vision of the Future ([see here](#)). A colleague and I were specifically told at that meeting that an announcement of the award of the masterplan contract should be later that week. It took until November 2019 before the award of the masterplan contract was announced.

Since then I have obtained the brief for the consultants from HIE without having to resort to a formal FOI request – a first!. This reveals that:

“A final report and presentation to HIE, hard copy and electronic – the draft should be provided within 7 months of the start of the contract and the final report within 9 months of the start of the contract”.

That suggests a report will be forthcoming next August/September, far too late for the next ski season. A report on a masterplan, however, may NOT be the same thing as an actual masterplan supported by the public and agreed by HIE, the Cairngorms National Park Authority and, ultimately, by the Scottish Government. As evidence of that look what's happened to the SE Group Report.

What should HIE have done?

Ask any competent project manager how to manage a project with time constraints and their answer will be that whenever possible you run tasks in parallel, not sequentially: HIE actions indicate they have been and are doing the latter. HIE knew that it needed a new masterplan of the future for Cairn Gorm. The SE Group reports were not a masterplan, just a set of ideas from a marketing consultancy.

HIE should and could have:

1. started the masterplan process back in November or December 2018, by tendering the masterplan contract then
2. had preferred consultants in place in the Spring of 2019
3. completed consultations with stakeholders, visitors, community bodies, environmental groups, hillwalking and mountaineering groups and other interested members of the public by end of the Summer 2019
4. ensured that the masterplan consultants took fully on board the Global Climate Emergency and the recent predictions on reduced snow cover ([see here](#))
5. reconciled that first draft masterplan with developments, funicular repair costs, climate change etc. and converted into a comprehensive masterplan ready for full public consultation by now
6. have had a fully consulted masterplan in place by late Spring 2020

Conclusions

Instead of prioritising a masterplan for Cairn Gorm HIE has been plodding on for the last 20 months intent on understanding the funicular repair vs removal costs and dreaming of legal actions against the funicular designers or contractors. Has there been any input from the newly appointed masterplan consultants? I doubt it, and even if they have been involved, it has been behind closed doors with no input from stakeholders, visitors or the community.

What we have witnessed from HIE has been dithering, delay, more expense and little or no communication – even the Aviemore & Glenmore Community Trust who have (in my view) mistakenly tried to work with HIE by not contradicting them or making them feel uncomfortable now belatedly admit their tactics of working with HIE have failed.

HIE has presided over failure after failure on Cairn Gorm with the loss of at least £30M of public money. During that time it has refused to listen to others with experience and knowledge, and has not even adequately consulted its customers. Based on the past track record, ideas for the future emanating from HIE and CMSL are doomed to fail.

It's about time the Scottish Government realises that the HIE position is becoming increasingly isolated

and subject to criticism from local businesses, local community, snowsports enthusiasts, hillwalkers and mountaineers, environmentalists and many interested people throughout Scotland and the UK. Under the management of HIE and CMSL we are witnessing the demise of Cairn Gorm as Scotland's premier snowsports resort.

What needs to happen now

A radical change of direction and speed of action is required.

HIE needs to:

1. Publish in full the business case being put to the Scottish Government over the funicular repair to enable informed public comment to be aired.
2. Start listening to those with the knowledge and experience and together develop a solution that has a chance of success, rather than end up with yet another HIE failure. Maybe even an emergency conference of all interested parties is the vehicle to get this change of direction?
3. Openly admit that they have made major errors and that they don't have the knowledge or ability to take this business forward, belatedly learn the lessons of past mistakes and understand how the other Scottish snowsport resorts are managing to keep solvent with much less input from public funds
4. Announce a detailed plan for the masterplan process to enable all interested persons and groups to input their ideas.
5. Ensure that any masterplan covers not just future plans for Coire Cas, but objectively looks at Coire na Ciste and indeed (maybe as part 2) cover what should happen in the rest of the Cairn Gorm estate (e.g. rewilding)
6. Commission a visitor survey to establish why winter sports visitors are not returning to Cairn Gorm, and what our summer visitors are really looking for in our mountains: the results should be fed into the masterplan
7. The masterplan consultation must not be the all-too-often seen process of just getting the 'tick in the box' for completing the process, but should be interactive, listening to the people with the knowledge and experience of not just the winter sports industry in Scotland or the summer tourism industry in Strathspey, but of the environmental impact of any proposals and the impact climate change will have on future plans.

If HIE is not willing or capable of making these actions happen, the Scottish Government needs as soon as practicable to remove them from ownership of the Cairn Gorm estate.

Category

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