

A Plan for the Future of snowsports on Cairngorm

Description



Photo Credit G. Garfoot. 2016.

In 2018 and again in 2019 the **SE Group** were commissioned by **Highlands and Islands Enterprises (HIE)** to report on a sustainable, economically viable business plan ([see here](#)) for the redevelopment of the Cairngorm ski resort with its knock on economic benefits to the local communities.

Since then a new report into reducing snow cover caused by climate change has been issued with claims that the snow line will be higher up the mountain ([see here](#)). This means that at some point in the future the pistes below the Shieling will be devoid of natural snow cover for a lot of the winter season, effectively putting the Carpark and Fiacail ridge tows out of action!

The SE Group report proposed a two phase development of up to 10 years without any indication of where funding, approximately £16.5m for stage 1 and £10.5m for stage 2, will come from. HIE initially said that it hoped some “philanthropic entrepreneur” would appear to fund the project. Well that hasn’t happened yet, so now I am going to propose what I hope will be seen as an alternative way forward

and maybe HIE will listen.

I have broken this down into five phases.

PHASE 1. 2020. A 6 person chairlift from the Daylodge to a rebuilt Shieling



Photo Credit Doppelmayr

The terminal would be designed for integration into Phase 2.

The installation of a chairlift would allow reliable access to the Ptarmigan/ upper Ciste area using the M1 poma for the more experienced skier/ boarder and also to the upper slopes of Corrie Cas. A rebuilt Shieling could then be used as the ski school meeting place and restaurant. A chair/gondola hybrid would be preferable allowing more comfortable uplift, for beginners in winter and tourists in summer, to the re-commissioned Shieling improving the overall “guest experience, but this is considered to be too expensive initially as an early return to improve the economic viability of Cairngorm Mountain is more important.

Moving the Snowfactory up to the Shieling would also allow the Shieling platter area to be used as a beginner's area, as it used to be, and where an under-used tow is already in place. Heather cutting could be utilised to improve and enlarge this area, reducing the damage to the environment, although it will need re-cutting every 3 – 4 years. It also reduces the cost of new piste creation proposed by the SE Group ([see here](#)), which has been estimated to be in the region of **£850k**.

The Fiacail ridge tow could be kept to allow access to more experienced skiers/ boarders and even allow new terrain along the ridge from the top of Coire Cas as and when snow conditions allow.

A price has been obtained from Doppelmayr for this phase of approximately **6m euros**, valid for 2020. The investment could be paid back in as little as 4 seasons. N.B. The price of **£7.513m** for Lift "B" as proposed by the SE Group was from **May 2018**.

PHASE 2. A chairlift/ gondola hybrid from the Shieling terminal to the Ptarmigan



8 person gondola with 6 person chair combination. Photo Credit Doppelmayr

A 6/6/8 (chair, chair, cabin combination) is recommended by Doppelmayr and at the same time PHASE (1) could be increased to a 6/6/8 combination too, improving the "out of base" capacity as numbers increase allowing better access to the Ptarmigan and the upper Ciste tows for all grades of skiers and boarders. The chair/gondola hybrid is the preferred but also the most expensive option allowing the non-skiing visitor trade to the Ptarmigan which could still be revamped.

Once built, the M1 poma could then either be removed or moth-balled and brought into use during busy periods.

PHASE 3. A 6 person chairlift from the Ciste carpark to link up with the West Wall Poma

As snowsport numbers start to return to a more realistic level, this lift could take some of the strain off the Cas side and help to extend the snowsport season as it is well known that the Ciste tends to get snow earlier and hold it longer than the Cas.

This phase could also include re-building the Ciste restaurant, improving the catering provision for year round use, and the provision of spaces for campervans in the Ciste carpark.

PHASE 4. A 6 person chairlift to replace the West Wall poma

This would allow access to the Ptarmigan for beginners all the way from the Ciste carpark and, for intermediate and above skiers/ boarders, from the Daylodge via the Daylodge poma into Coire na Ciste in the right weather and snow conditions.

PHASE 5. A 4 person chairlift from the Shieling area to the top of Coire Cas



Tow at head of Coire Cas. Photo Credit G. Garfoot.

Most of the lifts on Cairngorm are now quite old, and t-bars/pomas take up space that could be used for snowsports terrain. Removal of the Cas tow would open up terrain currently used as uptrack and using the heather cutting technique new trails could be opened up as required and in different locations every year.

General Comments

ALL DRIVE STATIONS WILL BE BELOW GROUND LEVEL AND COVERED IN LIVING WALL TO LESSEN THE ENVIRONMENTAL AND VISUAL IMPACT.

The creation of mid-mountain lift stations would enable the creation of mountain bike trails, increasing the financial viability of the lifts, while protecting the fragile Cairn Gorm plateau.

Conclusions

The difference between the proposals outlined here and those in the SE Group Report is that these prioritise re-establishing uplift for snowsports to the Ptarmigan bowl and in Coire na Ciste before the replacement of the tow in Coire Cas

The plan allows a gap in the construction between each of the phases of two to four years. It would allow an improvement in revenues to Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Ltd and therefore an earlier return on HIE's investment, the capital spend spread over five phases rather than two and customers confidence to return knowing exactly what uplift will be available at the end of each of the construction phases. This plan also allows for a longer time scale which could be as much as 12 to 15 years for full implementation.

I know this is not perfect, but we need to be realistic. With the uncertainty of the weather in the future, small improvements are probably the best way forward.

What needs to happen

HIE have contracted two companies, 360 Architecture and Jura Consultants (email :- luke@jura-consultants.com) to form a masterplan for the future of skiing on Cairngorm with an open day due to be held in Aviemore. But snowsports on Cairn Gorm isn't just about those who live locally. It should be of concern to every snowsports club, skier/ boarder in the U.K. We need to get everyone who has skied/boarded and would like to do so there again involved in pushing for new uplift and a better future for the mountain business. Please comment and share this post to every skier/ boarder you know and send your comments to the masterplanning consultants at the contact email shown before it is too late and HIE proceed to repair the Funicular railway.

We need this now, before Cairn Gorm and the fantastic skiing/boarding that there once was, becomes a part of history. Let's return Cairngorm Mountain to being a "World Class" resort.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. climate change
3. HIE
4. skiing

Date Created

January 23, 2020

Author

graham-garfoot