

More planning shenanigans at Cairn Gorm – the car park barrier and tube side applications

Description

Following the planning application to repair the funicular ([see here](#)), Highlands and Island Enterprise have submitted another two Planning Applications at Cairn Gorm. These indicate that HIE intend to submit no less than six further applications in the short-term. This post explains what is going on and takes a critical look at the new applications for a car park barrier and more tube slides.

What the applications reveal about HIE's plans for Cairn Gorm

There is still no sign of a masterplan for Cairn Gorm, despite almost every stakeholder with an interest in the place saying this is needed, and despite the Cairngorms National Park Authority last year agreeing that a masterplan should be submitted before any further planning applications were considered.

HIE has completely ignored the National Park Authority since then: four applications approved so far (Ptarmigan, Tube Slides, Snow making machines and groundworks to beginner's area); three applications in planning the pipeline (funicular repair and the new ones) and six more to come "in the short-term". This is not joined up government.

Both new applications are accompanied by a planning statement:

Purpose of Statement

Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Limited (CMSL) is currently engaged in an extensive upgrade and modernise the facilities at Cairngorm Mountain. This programme faces the face of many challenges.

The current lack of the funicular railway is an obvious difficulty for the operation. However, CMSL is also addressing a number of other challenges regarding the visitor attractions. CMSL is also addressing a range of maintenance and renewal projects that were not progressed by the previous management company.

As a result a number of development proposals are to be brought forward. Some are of more consequence. In addition, the works for the repair of the funicular railway is the subject of a significant planning application, submitted by Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

The purpose of this statement is to demonstrate that there is a coordinated approach to the development proposals, even although each will be brought forward as a free-standing application.

So what is this extensive programme? Neither the public nor the CNPA are being told.

The statement that is a range of *“maintenance and renewal projects which were not progressed by the previous management company”* (i.e Natural Retreats) is very interesting . HIE effectively assumed responsibility for the liabilities associated with these maintenance and renewal projects when they took Cairngorm Mountain into public ownership. So what is the estimated cost? And how come then that HIE bought back Cairngorm Mountain Ltd for TWICE the price they sold it for ([see here](#))?

Parkswatch gave extensive coverage to Natural Retreats' failure to invest in infrastructure at Cairngorm as required under the contract with CML ([see here for example](#)) and a number of people tried to raise this unsuccessfully with HIE. Here, for example, is the response I received from Charlotte Wright, the Chief Executive of HIE, on 12th June 2018, i.e. just five months before Cairngorm Mountain Limited put itself into administration:

HIE remains satisfied that our monitoring arrangements of the contract between HIE and CML are rigorous and compliant.

If HIE's monitoring was so rigorous, how come they they have inherited so many *“maintenance and renewal projects“*?

There is no reference in the Supporting Statement to any masterplan, instead it talks of a *“co-ordinated approach”*

to the planning applications:

The shorter-term development proposals (and related planning applications) wh forward now, in early 2020, do not undermine this more strategic and medium-term approach. The oversight provided by HIE and CMSL ensures that this is the ca

What that co-ordinated approach might be, we are not told. There is nothing in the Supporting Statement to explain the purpose of the planning applications or how they fit together. Instead the applications are split into:

- projects of significance;
- a list of two further projects whose importance is not clear, and
- a list of “more limited projects”:

Two projects of significance are to be the subject of planning application

- The proposed repairs to the funicular viaduct, and related infrastru (application now submitted and registered 12 March); and
- The relocation of the snow factory from its existing location in the position some 350m up the hill in a south-easterly direction.

Both of these applications have their own supporting planning statements (documents) and are not covered by this supporting statement.

The Supporting Statement doesn't even include a map showing the location of all the “projects”. As a from the public which side of the funicular the snow factory might be located. “Some 350m up hill in mean anywhere.

HIE's consultants don't attempt to justify putting forward these “projects of significance”, before any masterplan is approved. Moreover, having failed to include the track upgrades and temporary new tracks required to repair the funicular in that application ([see here again](#)), HIE are now revealing they wish to install two new tracks:

Two further projects, will also shortly be the subject of planning applications:

- A new vehicular track to the east and south of the Shieling mid-station;
- A new vehicular track to run to the eastern side of the funicular base st

Both of these applications will have their own supporting planning statements (documents) and are not covered by this supporting statement.

No attempt is made to explain the purpose of either track. From the description of their location, neither seems associated with any other development. So what are they for? The potential impact of

two new tracks on the landscape and environment at Cairn Gorm is likely to be significant. That's yet another reason why a masterplan is required.

A brace of more limited projects are also to be the subject of planning applications, which are covered by this overview supporting statement, include:

- The installation of car park barriers;
- Surface improvements to the upper car park;
- The installation of additional tubing slides (play equipment) within the car park;
- The provision of conveyor belts for snow sports beginners, with small Mountain Bike Trails; and
- An extension to the Kassbhorer Garage.

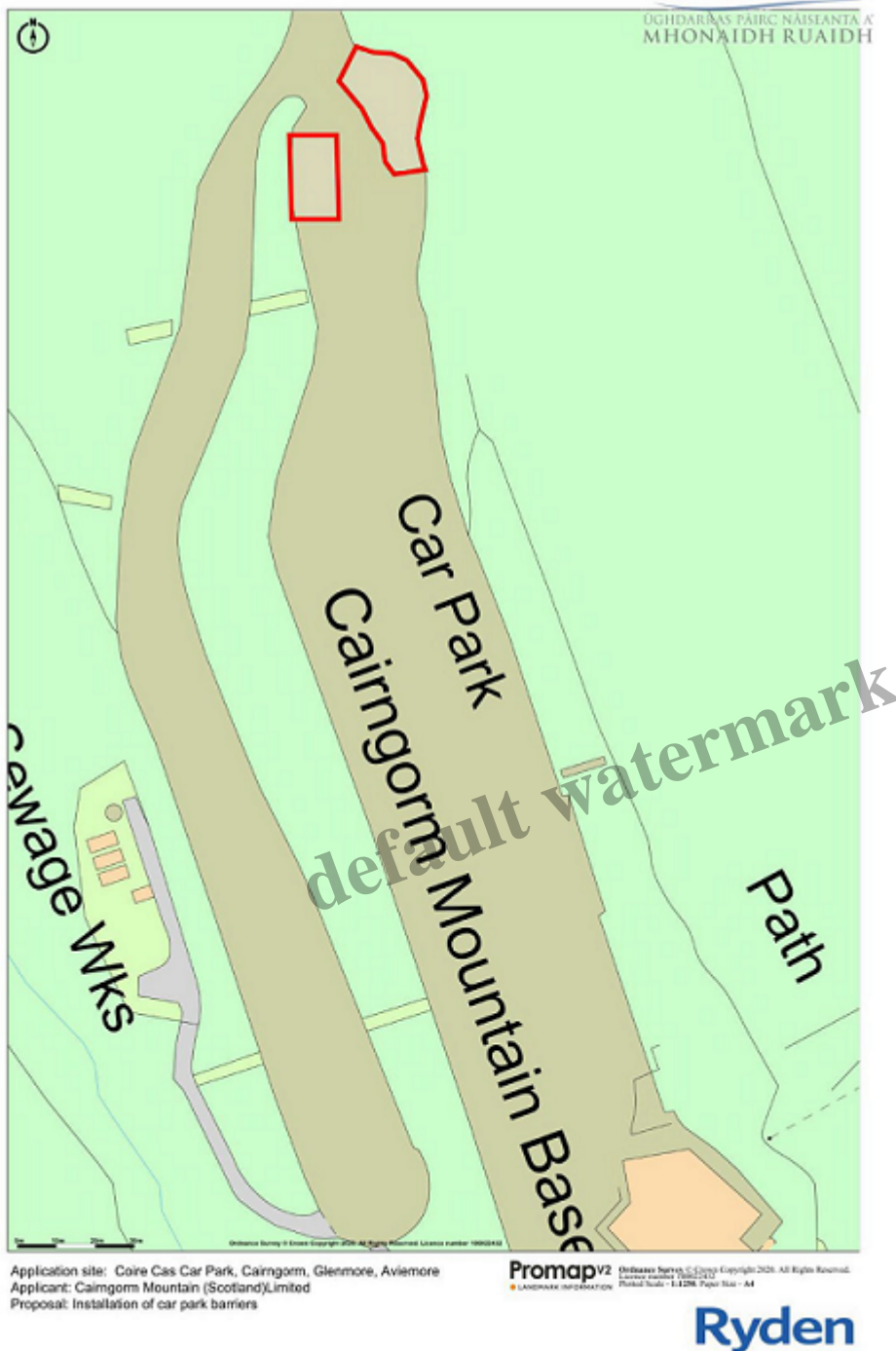
The covering letters for each of these applications will contain additional information for each individual application.

"Brace", as expressed here, would normally mean a pair, but perhaps the consultants, Ryden, intended to mean "a physical support"?

These applications are not limited, rather they are related. The location of the snowfactory is relevant to any consideration of new conveyor belts for snow sports beginners and where "these" (note plural) might be located (again we are not told). Future plans for downhill skiing do have a bearing about whether extending the existing Kassbhorer garage makes sense. Reducing the capacity of the lower car park through installing more tube slides, has implications for downhill skiing while the proposal to install barriers and re-surface the car park are also clearly related. The CNPA should not be considering any of these applications on a stand-alone basis but requiring they are considered as part of a masterplan.

To sum up, while HIE's supporting statement to these applications tells us very little, the lack of content demonstrates exactly why a masterplan is required. To claim that "HIE and CMSL will provide the oversight to prevent *"the more strategic and medium term planning approach"* from being undermined is wrong. Only the CNPA can do that.

The application for car park barriers at Coire Cas



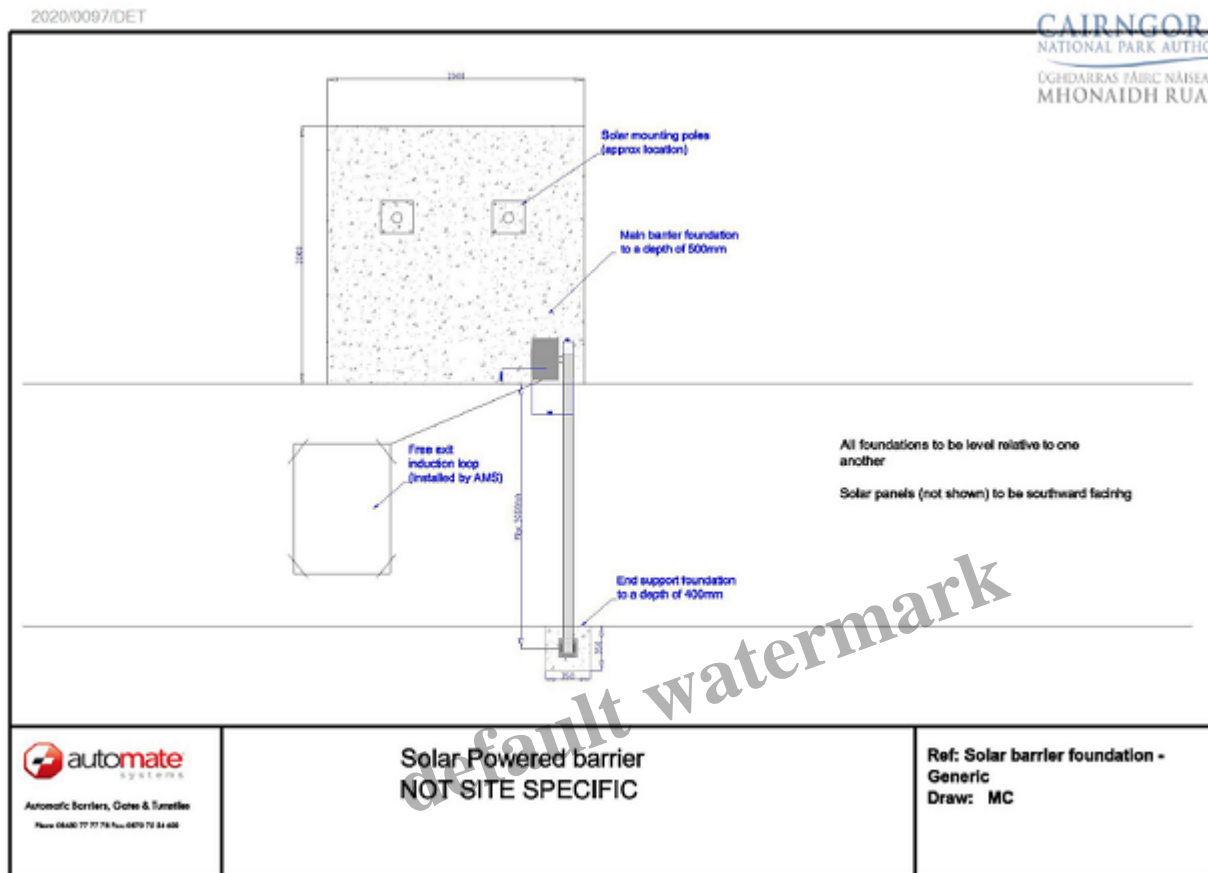
The location of the proposed application

The application ([see here for papers](#)) appears to be for one entry barrier and one exit barrier at the edge of the car park. There is no explanation provided for why HIE wishes to install these barriers or how the barriers relate to the application to improve the surface of the car park which has still to be submitted. If it's part of a wider project, for example improve the car park and then introduce compulsory charging why not say so?

Knowing the purpose of the barriers is important because they will significantly constrain traffic flow into the car park. Imagine hundreds of skiers all trying to get into the car park via one barrier when the lifts open in the winter. That clearly won't work. So are HIE only planning to operate the barriers over

the summer months or is this yet another ill-thought out plan?

No detailed designs have been submitted for the barriers. If the location plan above is to be believed, people will simply be able to drive between the two barriers making them redundant! I suspect its incomplete.



Instead of a site plan, a generic diagram for solar powered barriers has been submitted. Does this mean that HIE has decided NOT to upgrade the electricity mains up to Cairn Gorm which would be needed if new lift infrastructure was to be included in the new masterplan? How will the barriers work when the sun stops shining for a few days? And what is landscape impact when, judging by the 5m length of the barrier, the solar panel area appears to be c25m square?

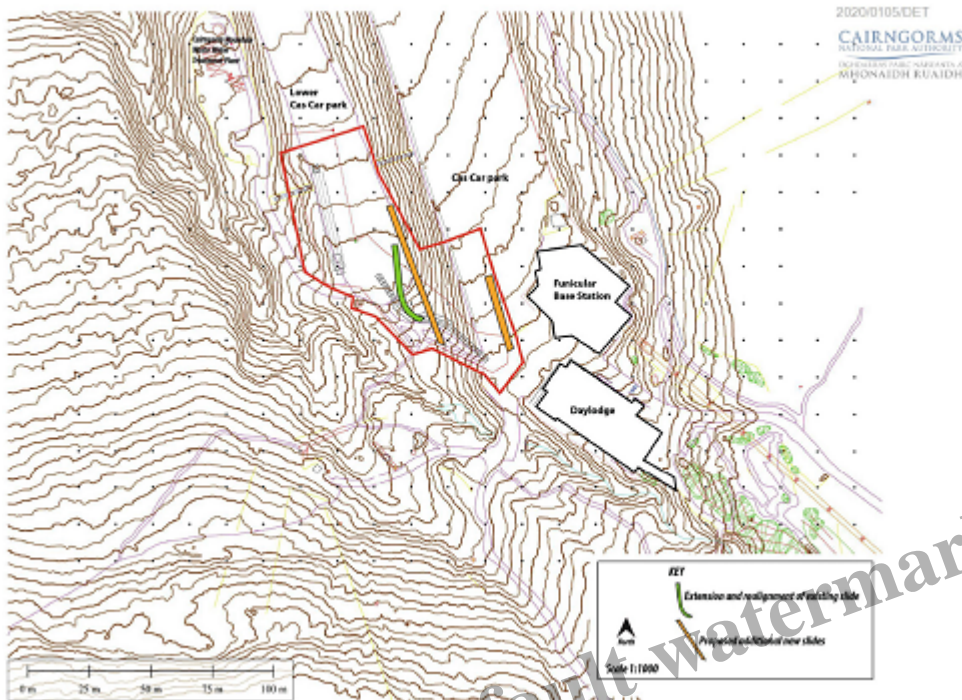
There are also serious issues relating to the public road up the car park. The plans don't show where the public road ends and whether the barriers are located beyond this. Whatever the case, the car parks are used as a turning area and are the only safe place to do this once you have driven past the Coire na Ciste carpark on the one way system. The Application begs the question of how will drivers be able to turn round if they don't want to proceed beyond the barriers at the entrance to the main Coire Cas carpark?

At present vehicles could turn right, across any outcoming traffic from the main car park, into the lower car park. That won't be possible if the lower car park is used as the site compound for the funicular repairs (if they go ahead). And that site compound cannot be moved further along the lower car park because HIE wants to use that for the new tube slides. It therefore looks as though drivers up the public road will be required to do a three point turn if, when they arrive at the barriers, they decide not to proceed into the car park. It's not hard to imagine the chaos that this will cause. Strangely, Highland Council Roads department ([see here](#)) has responded to the application saying they have no comment to make "at this time". The CNPA needs to go back to them and ask them to comment on these issues. Meantime, what this illustrates is that the CNPA cannot consider plans for the car parks

without considering the plan for Cairn Gorm as a whole.

The deadline for responses to the Road Barrier Application is 12/05/2020 and you can do so online [here](#).

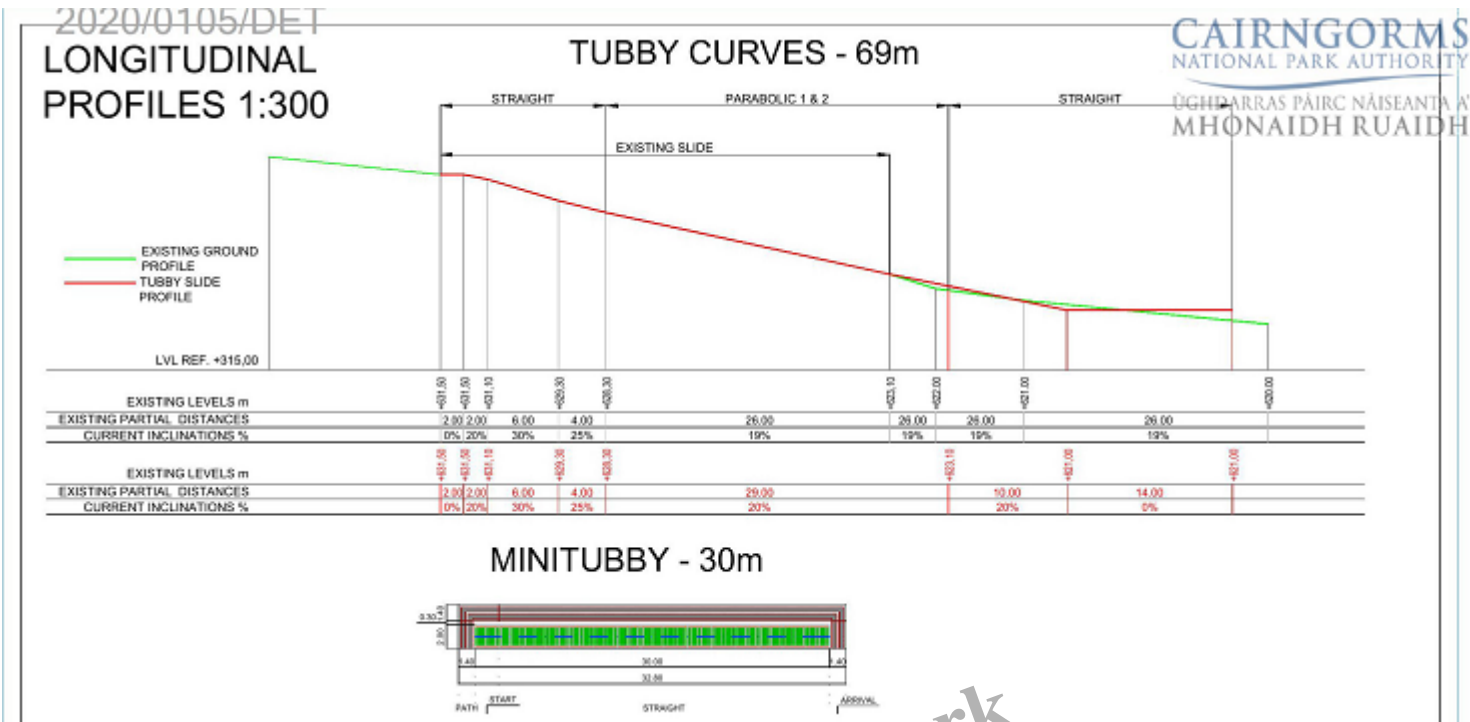
The application for tube slides in lower Coire Cas car park



In June last year Highland Council approved the temporary installation of a tube slide at Cairn Gorm ([see here](#)) and later in the year approved a variation to the application which required the slide to be removed over the winter months. The new application ([see here for papers](#)) is to extend the existing slide and to add two new ones.

To their credit the CNPA this time have not left this to Highland Council to decide the application and have called it in on the grounds that it raises “*issues of significance to the collective aims of the National Park*”. Normally this would happen within a few days. The fact that the application was lodged on 5th March and not called in until 27th April suggests that HIE has lobbied hard behind the scenes to prevent the application being called in. If that is so, congratulations to the CNPA for standing their ground.

Again, the detailed plans are very sketchy:



There is no attempt to look assess the landscape and environmental impacts of the slides or explain how they fit with HIE’s wider plans for Cairn Gorm. The application looks like a further attempt to turn Cairn Gorm into some sort of theme park by planning creep. That is exactly why a masterplan is needed.

HIE does, however, make an attempt in the Supporting Statement to justify the application:

The snow factory and the related snow cannon have delivered skiing oppo which provide an alternative to those who are unable to reach the higher slop to the funicular being out of operation. The play equipment has been very suc during the summer season in providing additional attractions for visitors.

The play equipment is a reference to the tube slides

A couple of months ago Alan Bratley submitted a Freedom of Information request to Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd asking them how much income their operation earned in 2019 broken down by various categories. The response included the income from the tube slides:

Income	Jan-19	Feb-19	Mar-19	Apr-19	May-19	Jun-19	Jul-19	Aug-19	Sep-19	Oct-19	Nov-19	Dec-19
Tickets	96466	109928	5500	25.97	0.00	0.00	0.00	19.07	56.60	8.76	4382	7055
Catering	6329	8852	5732	6703	7613	2425	7.61	2.04	2639	1516	8805	2798
Retail	627.32	5627	1493	3098	0980	3029	1.37	1892	6286	4986	8123	1120
Equipment	6621	7467	3869	3390	0.17	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Car Park						2715	4203	6553	8092	3464	2205	1445
Exhibition							1426	5388	3526	6773	61	0.00
Play equipment								4008	3408	5371	7565	2024
	5290	2196	5263	4407	2735	2856	2858	2763	6647	4892	2671	1069
												1622
												586.06

The tube slides brought in just under £13k last summer. That is what HIE describes as “very successful”. That sum may not have even covered the wages of the staff needed to supervise the operation, let alone the costs of installation. In the new Application HIE have made no attempt to assess the income that the new slides might bring in against the costs of operating them.

The Landmark Centre at Carrbridge is a successful local tourist business which operates three water slides and a number of chutes. HIE’s proposals will impact on their business and it now appears that HIE is preparing to go into competition with them. That is not only wrong, and arguably unlawful under the EU rules on state aid, it’s stupid. The place for such “attractions”, even if justified, is not high up the mountain but somewhere sheltered and hidden in the trees, like Landmark,

The deadline for objections to the application is Monday 25th May ([see here to submit comments online](#))

What’s really going on?

How to explain this rash of planning applications and the absence of any masterplan for Cairn Gorm? Unintentional incompetence or deliberate?

While there is plenty of incompetence on show at Cairn Gorm, HIE’s failure to produce a master plan has gone on so long that it can no longer be explained by incompetence. We need to remember that HIE announced the bones of a new masterplan, with proposals for new lift infrastructure, 18 months ago ([see here](#)). HIE had had sight of the S.E Group’s proposals at least six months before that and it would have been quite easy to consult on these. Instead of consulting on the ideas set out in the SE Group Report, early this year HIE employed consultants to undertake a new consultation starting from

scratch ([see here](#)). That has still not reported. What happened in-between the SE Group report and the current consultation is that it became clear the funicular was not only broken, it would take at least £10m to repair.

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Thursday, April 30, 2020

Gondola is the best option for Cairngorm

I WOULD like to make a few points regarding the proposal to repair the funicular on Cairngorm for which a planning application has been submitted and called in by the Cairngorms National Park Authority for determination by them.

It occurred to me that the funicular is not a mode of transport that anyone would willingly wish to use going forward.

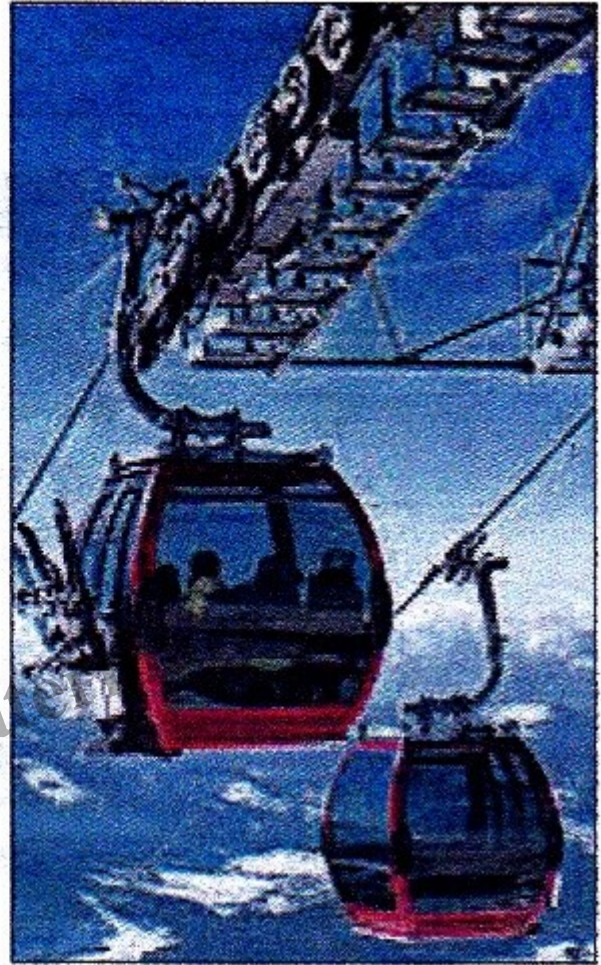
Who would want to be crammed into a carriage with around 100 other snowsports enthusiasts given the reality of life into the future.

At peak periods, with no low-level snow, there can be queues down the stairs and out of the ticket office as people wait to use this thoroughly inefficient method of uplift.

Can there be even the slightest doubt that user groups and individuals will simply head off to the other areas where cramming large numbers of people into a very confined space does not happen.

The funicular is to all intents and purposes now obsolete and it falls to Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) to do the right thing and withdraw the discredited planning application.

On the February 21, 2020 there was a media report in which the outgoing chairman of the HIE board of management, Lorne Crerar, said that HIE "would move heaven and earth" to get the funicular running again but only if a consultation exercise finds there is support for that among businesses and people in the area.



Should funicular be replaced by a gondola system at Cairngorm?

It seems that they too have had cause to rethink what they previously had to say about the funicular.

On 13 June 2019, the trust told the local community council that "The Funicular has been successful but being out of action has made it difficult".

On 31 July 2019, on their Facebook page they had this to say: "...like it or not it does bring in reasonable summer revenue".

I can only assume that they have done some research since making these statements and they now know that in the nine-month financial year from April to December 2015, the hill business posted a loss of £1.248 million.

A trading period that was

The absence of a masterplan means HIE can avoid consulting on future alternatives like a gondola. Letter Credit the Strathspey and Badenoch Herald.

One way to understand the planning application to repair the funicular and the host of “smaller” planning applications in the pipeline is that these comprise HIE’s TOTAL plans for Cairn Gorm. The new plan could be summed up as fix the funicular, re-vamp the Ptarmigan, add a few play slides and use the car park as an additional source of revenue. Meantime, to keep up the pretence of being interested in downhill skiers, keep up the snow factory for the time being, add a couple of conveyor belts but do NOTHING to create the new uplift that is needed.

Then, once all the current Planning Applications are through, announce that the Scottish Government has agreed to pay for the repair of the funicular but, sadly, no more money is available. That then removes the need for HIE to consult on any alternative plan for Cairn Gorm. Effectively this consigns downhill skiing on the mountain to history as Alistair Bell warned might happen four months ago ([see here](#)). A year or two later HIE can then announce that, again sadly, the snow factory and beginner’s ski belt are no longer financially viable and flog them off.

What might prevent this is that there are increasing signs that some of the interests that supported HIE in the past are no longer doing so (see George Paton’s excellent letter above). It’s surely time that all those with an interests at Cairn Gorm got together and agreed a way forward that does not involve HIE.

Category

1. Uncategorized

Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. CNPA
3. hill tracks
4. landscape
5. planning

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