

The National Park and HIE's plans for Cairn Gorm - car park charges and tubes

Description



Entrance to Coire Cas car park, the location of the proposed car park charging barriers. . While the path up to Coire Cas has now been re-opened the car parks remain closed. Photo taken 8th June.

Today, Friday 12th June, the Cairngorms National Park Authority will consider HIE's latest ill-conceived plans for Cairn Gorm. You can view the deliberations live at 14.30 [here](#) [now on YouTube [\(see here\)](#)]. Two reports to the Planning Committee ([see here for Committee papers](#)), just two weeks after their last meeting, predictably recommend approval of HIE's proposals to install barriers at the entrance to the main car park and extend the tube slides in the lower car park ([see here for issues](#)).

The applications have implications for almost everyone visiting Cairn Gorm and for wider visitor management in the Glenmore corridor.

Car park charges

HIE's Planning Application for the barriers made no attempt to explain their purpose, how they fitted in with its plans for Cairn Gorm or the implications for visitor management in the Glenmore corridor, the busiest area in the Cairngorms National Park. The Committee Report clarifies that the barriers' purpose: to apply *the existing car park charging regime that has been applied between April and October without the need for staff to manage it*. This is misleading, leaves much unexplained and may be the first step in an attempt to increase parking charges significantly:

- Currently, people are asked to consider a £2 voluntary donation (see photo) that is hardly a regime.
- If the current £2 charges continue, as suggested, how long will it take HIE to recoup the capital costs of installing the barriers? (The costs have not yet been made public).
- Once the capital costs are re-paid, how will the money be used? Will it be used to keep the toilets open 24 hours and repair the car parks, and if so what is the plan for this or will it be spirited away? This happened under 'Natural Retreats' (see here). HIE has never explained what happened to all the car park donations the public made to that outfit. Its still happening. HIE has not explained what it did with the £22,479.92 parking donations it collected in 2019 (as revealed by FOI requests). None of this money appears to have been spent on the car park which continues to deteriorate.
- Will the new entry and exit barriers enable differential charges to be levied depending on length of stay? If so, might HIE's intention be to levy extortionate charges, like Argyll and Bute Council have done at the Cobbler (see here)?
- No justification is given for charging people in summer, but not in winter. If you are local person who drives up to Cairn Gorm regularly, you face being charged for a walk in summer but not for a cross-country ski in winter. Perhaps the explanation is that solar powered barriers don't function well in winter and would result in long queues?

The CNPA's recommendation to approve the application includes no conditions setting out when the barriers might operate or about charges. This gives HIE carte blanche to do what they want in future.

The implications for traffic and visitor management

Unfortunately Highland Council's Transport Planning section expressed no concerns about the proposal. HIE's application fails to explain or include plans for how vehicles being driven up the public ski road will be able to turn safely if they decide they don't want to enter the car park and pay the charges. A recipe for traffic chaos.

It is also predictable that some people will, rather than pay the charges, try to park along the verges below the car park. The safety implications of that are not discussed. Others will return down Glen More or head for the Coire na Ciste car park and walk back up the hill along the road. More road safety issues and potentially, both positive and negative, environmental impacts. The implications for

the environment and visitor management, as set out in the Cairngorm and Glenmore Strategy ([see here](#)) which both CNPA and HIE signed up to in 2016 are, however, not considered. That appears to be yet another dead duck policy document.

The tube slide

The Committee Report recommends temporary planning consent for additional tube slides in the lower car park until November 2021. The landscape assessment states this will have a significant impact in the National Scenic Area but since the impact is local it's acceptable. Somehow our National Park Authorities have lost all sense of what developments might be appropriate in our finest landscape. The public have a much better understanding that National Parks were never intended as theme parks, hence the outcry about the Flamingo Land proposals at Balloch and zip wires in Thirlmere.

With Covid-19 still circulating, a few people whooping droplets onto the hard inside surfaces of the tubes looks about as sustainable as cramming tourists into a repaired funicular. This proposal looks even less likely to pay for itself financially than the car park barriers and it almost certainly can't do so before the temporary planning consent expires in 17 months time.

In May 2019, just before the first tube application last year, Susan Smith interim CEO of Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd told the audience at an Aviemore business breakfast that she was trying to secure Â£200k from HIE to finance a tube slide and exhibition. She did not say how much of the Â£200k was allocated to each. However, we do know that the tube slide brought in Â£12,877.66 from August to December 2019. At that rate, without factoring in staff costs, it appears likely to take years to pay for itself. In other words this is not a sustainable temporary development and may not be sustainable at all. Either it will never get built or, as for existing tube slide, HIE will come back with an application to extend the permission. And then another, and another until the tube slides get permanent consent.

The farce will continue until the planning system in our National Parks re-discovers a sense of moral, environmental and recreational purpose.

The wider picture

Having thought they had persuaded the Directors of the Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust to concentrate their efforts on an ice rink rather than the future of skiing ([see here](#)), [NB see below AGCT advise that they have changed their position] Highlands and Islands Enterprise must have thought they had cleared the way for their mis-management of Cairn Gorm to continue indefinitely. It was extraordinary that a Trust set up *to seek community ownership of the Cairngorm Ski Area and Infrastructure, in order to ensure that it is more effectively managed for mountain visitors, employees, and the local and wider community* had not a single comment to make about either of these two planning applications.

Covid-19, however, has almost certainly changed everything. Before the crisis, it appeared that HIE's intention was to repair the funicular and place it at the centre of a new 'masterplan' for Cairn Gorm focussed on summer tourist visitors rather than outdoor recreation. With the collapse of the coach tour market as a result of Covid-19, any business case for repairing the funicular is now in tatters. Whatever the findings of the Audit Scotland Report, the outcome of HIE's consultation on the masterplan is now probably redundant. All this should create new opportunities for a coalition of those concerned about Cairn Gorm to come up with an alternative plan for the mountain.

Postscript

The Planning Committee approved both applications

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