

Cairn Gorm – the Coire na Ciste motor home park planning application

Description



View out over Coire na Ciste car park to Glen More May 2018

The idea of developing facilities for campervans at the Coire na Ciste car park is, in principle, quite sensible. Even though the Glenmore campsite has opened up this year, there are a lack of facilities in Glen More and a shortage of informal places to stop off overnight. Meantime, the Coire na Ciste car park, dating from the heyday of downhill skiing at Cairn Gorm, offers a large expanse of tarmac and gravel which is generally underused and in need of a large dose of tender loving care. It provides an opportunity, therefore, for Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd (CMSL) to do something positive for Cairn Gorm, after the disastrous mismanagement of the last

twenty years.

Unfortunately, the Planning Application which is due to be considered by the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) on Friday ([see here](#)) is not just a missed opportunity, it promises another low quality eyesore.

Campervan facilities and the long-promised masterplan

Developing facilities for campervans was one of the “activities” that HIE promised to consider further in its consultation document, “Cairn Gorm: Towards a Vision and a Masterplan”, published in July last year ([see here](#)). According to that document:

“All future activities and proposals for the mountain will be assessed against:

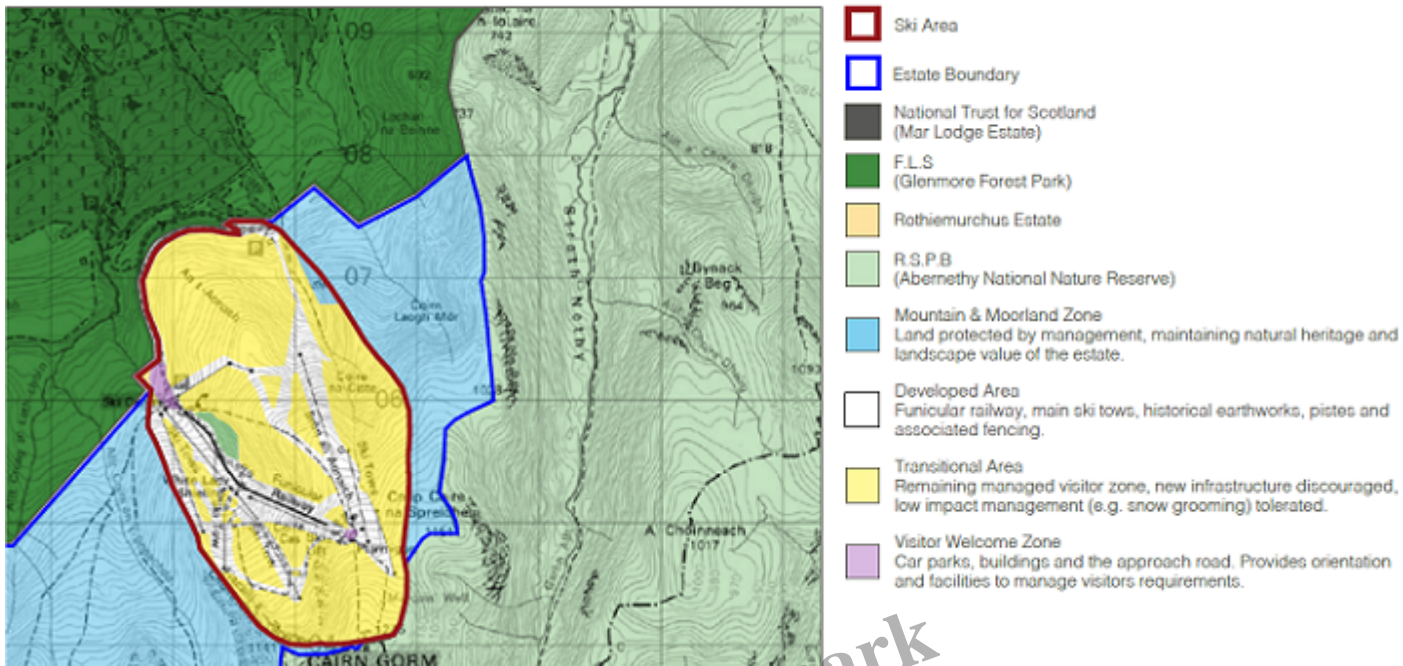
- *The visions guiding principles and HIE’s core objectives*
- *Key Strategies*
- *The Masterplan”.*

HIE has been promising a masterplan for Cairn Gorm since October 2016, when it committed to do so as part of the Cairngorm and Glenmore Strategy. At the end of last year it indicated the masterplan would be completed early this year. There is still no sign of the document and therefore there has been no assessment of how this planning application fits with HIE’s plans for Cairn Gorm as a whole.

The CNPA Board adopted a set of principles in March 2019 which called for a masterplan before any further planning applications were submitted at Cairn Gorm ([see here](#)). HIE has repeatedly ignored that request, submitting Planning Applications for the Ptarmigan, tube slides, snow making machines, electronic gates at the Coire Cas car park and the repair of the funicular since then. While previous reports to the CNPA Planning Committee have referred to the need for a masterplan, the current Committee Report is silent on the matter. This is despite the Local Development Plan for the Cairngorms, which was formally adopted in March, requiring that planning applications at the three ski centres in the National Park:

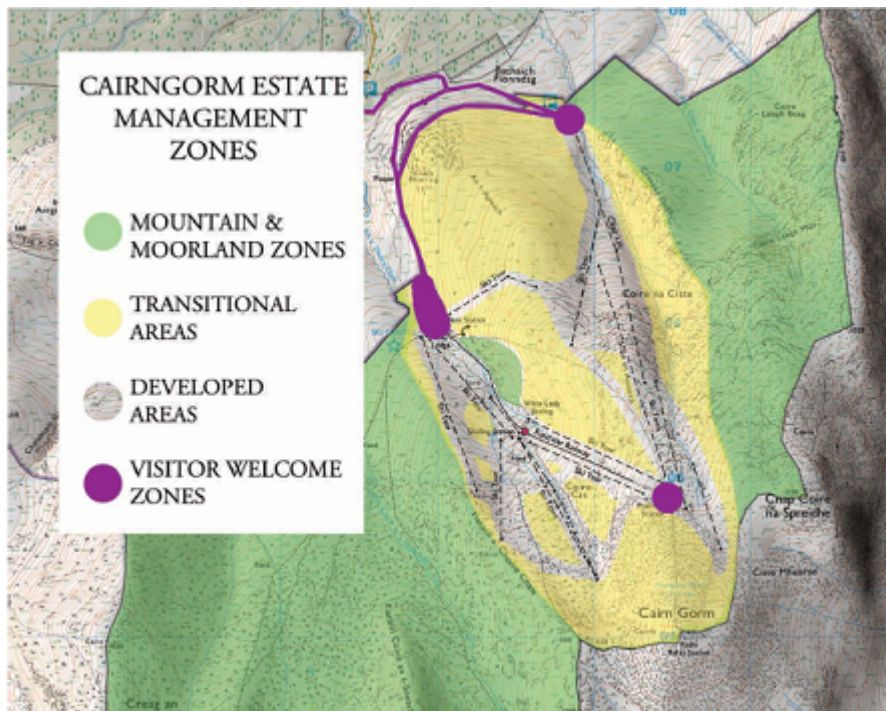
“should be supported by a masterplan or similar document which outlines the longer term development strategy for the centre and explains how the proposal fits within this.” (Para 4.39 [here](#)).

While CNPA officers appear to be ignoring their own Local Development Plan, HIE has been quietly amending its vision for Cairn Gorm:



Extract from Cairn Gorm: Towards a Vision and a Masterplan

Last year HIE proposed what it described as two “Visitor Welcome Areas”, one in Coire Cas and a second at the Ptarmigan (presumably for the handful of people who walk over to Cairn Gorm from Deeside!). Parkswatch commented at the time that the Coire na Ciste car park should also have been treated as an entry point.....

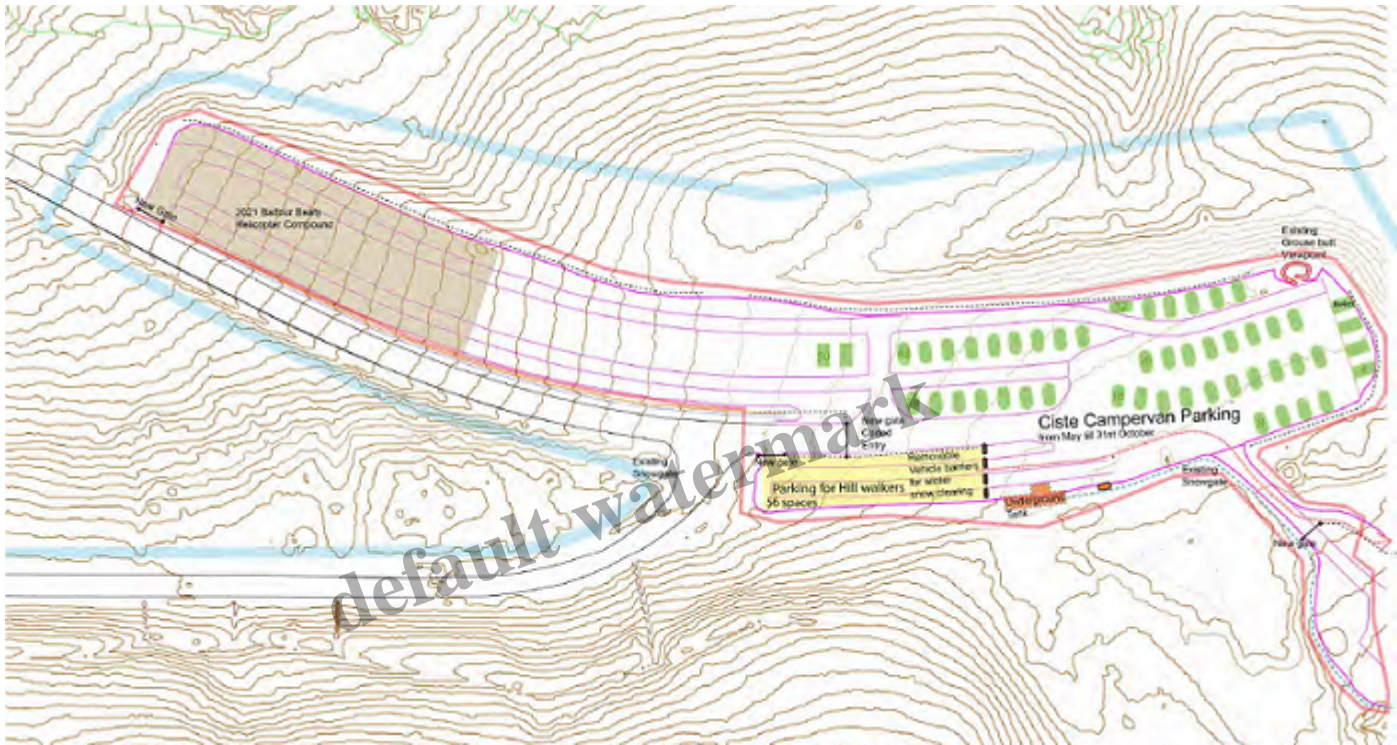


The Coire na Ciste car park is marked by the topmost purple disc shape in the “Visitor Management Plan” accompanying

the application.

.....and now it is! HIE have clearly been updating their masterplan document, so why hasn't this been provided to the CNPA? And why have CNPA officers not demanded it be made public?

The proposal



Blue line = boundary between land owned by HIE and Forest and Land Scotland. Red Line = Planning Application boundary. The faint dotted line – a new fence round the perimeter of the car park. The yellow area = parking for hillwalkers. The brown area, currently used as a compound for the funicular repair will eventually revert to a public car park.

The Planning Application is to create a fenced off parking area for 50 motorhomes, reduced from 68 in the original application, a tap, a facility to dispose of chemical waste and a litter collection point. There is no mention of any electric hook-ups so it appears these are not included in the proposal.



The former Ciste building which housed toilets, a cafe and ticket office, too spruced up with a coat of paint.

The building above the Ciste car park, which had been subject to two previous planning applications and has been condemned as unsafe ([see here](#)), sits outwith the planning application boundary. Conveniently, it has also been omitted from the maps submitted with the application. The future of the building, and the potential for the toilets there to be brought back into public use, are therefore not on the planning agenda.

CNPA Board Members could still ask whether its sensible for a Public Authority to aim to attract dozens more people to the vicinity of a building that has been condemned as unsafe? Or even what HIE's future intentions for the building are within the context of a masterplan?



The condemned building is on the far side of the car park, perfectly situated for children to play!

In the absence of functioning toilets, HIE is proposing to restrict use of the site to motorhomes “with cassettes”, i.e have their own facilities. The evidence, as captured in the photo above, is that approximately half of the vehicles that stay overnight currently are campervans [NB this has been updated as result of comment below – more campervans have toilets than I realised] not all of which have their own internal toilets. The Planning Application therefore has the potential to displace some campervans back down into Glenmore, adding to the problems there. It is possible, that HIE is proposing to divert campervans without toilets to stay overnight in Coire Cas, where it states it has plans to open a 24 hour public toilet. Unfortunately, without a masterplan, neither the general public nor the CNPA can have any idea of what HIE’s true intentions are or any means to holding them to account.

What HIE/CMSL intends to charge is unclear. How much motorhomes, which tend to use more electrical appliances than campervans, will be prepared to pay for staying on a site without electricity is unclear.

CMSL’s supporting paper on Visitor Management refers to the application as *“a Phase 1 proposal that can be improved on as more revenue is generated in future years and the Cairngorm Masterplan is realised*

“. While this reinforces the need for the masterplan to be made public, providing toilets, wash facilities – a shower might be appreciated – and electricity would cost a fraction of the £16m HIE is spending on the repair of the funicular and the annual subsidy that it has committed to CMSL over the next 30 years ([see here](#)). So why can't HIE use some of that huge slush fund to invest in facilities that might actually help people and reduce pressures on Glen More?

It shouldn't take a genius to work out that good facilities are far more likely to attract people than a few lines on tarmac on gravel.

Impact of the development on the landscape

The reduction in the number of motorhome from 68 to 50 appears to have been a result of concerns from the CNPA's landscape adviser. Although motorhomes tend to be far more conspicuous than campervans, no other measures are proposed to reduce their visual impact or improve the landscaping of the car park.



HIE owns the banks which were formed by the creation of the car park and could be planting trees there

In the longer term natural regeneration around the site could conceal the car park entirely. That could be helped by a bit of judicious planting on the soils that were disturbed by its construction. But there is also plenty of scope to break up and soften the large expanse of tarmac and gravel through tree planting. Such landscaping would make Coire na Ciste a much more attractive place to stay.

The Planning Application, however, pays no attention to the “visitor experience”. Parkswatch recently ([see here](#)) brought attention to the quality of the area and ability of the public to enjoy it. It was great to see a sign post the sign that had lain by the



sugar bowl for over a year (left) was removed, presumably

by Forestry and Land Scotland. Well done them! By contrast, Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd, appear to make a point of not addressing problems brought to their attention.

An excellent example of this are the exposed powerlines by the path into Coire na Ciste which have now been covered by sandbags. Here is what CMSL have to say about that issue in the planning documents:

9.4 Old Ciste Chairlift access path.

An old path line that once followed the chairlift route to the middle station of the old Coire na Ciste chairs. This is, in part, the line of the SSEN HV ring main cable for the ski area. This path line has had no formal improvements other than work carried out by SSEN. It is not a promoted or built path and its use will continue to be discouraged. SSEN have a programme of work to replace the Ring main cable.

The inconvenient fact, ignored here, is that the natural topography above the car park invites the visitor to walk up into Coire na Ciste. How CMSL intend to discourage people from doing so is unclear but they are unlikely to be successful without fences (see below).

CMSL also failed to mention that as well as the cables, there is significant damage from erosion that has been in need of repair for years:



The creation of a new visitor “welcome point” at Coire na Ciste should have prompted a review of what needed to be done in the surrounding area to restore past environmental damage and help those staying overnight to enjoy it.



Path erosion across this slope has contributed to the destruction of vegetation below.

HIE/CMSL's failure to address these issues should surprise no-one, it all goes back to the disastrous decision to transfer the Cairngorm Mountain Estate from the Forestry Commission to the then Highlands and Islands Development Board. Since then, care of the natural environment at Cairn Gorm has always come a poor third.

Curtailing public rights

Highland Council Roads Department in their response to the application, failed to comment on how the fences and gates that HIE proposes to install will affect the public road. This is despite the fact that the road, which is their legal responsibility, appears to run through the car park:

The Highland Council – List of U Class Adopted Roads

Road Number	U2284	U0258D	Date of Adoption	12.03.1970
Description	COIRE NA CISTE ROAD, CAIRNGORM			
Length of Adopted Road	Miles	0.49	KM	
OS Coordinates	Start	9906 0751	End	9980 0743
Adopted Road Description	Commencing at its junction with the Cairngorm Road (C1126) extending in an easterly direction through but not including the car park area a distance of 861 linear yards or thereby. The adopted road will extend to boundary fences or walls, or in open ground to a distance of 3 metres from the edge of the surface carriageway or passing place, or to the top of the slope in cutting or the bottom of slope in embankment, whichever distance is greater.			

Note “through but not including the car park” which suggests the tarmac is public road while the gravel bits are not

If my interpretation of this information is right (others have submitted FOI requests to determine the exact course of the road), approval of the planning application would effectively allow HIE to annex a section of public road for its own purposes without following due process. This follows HIE’s unlawful closure of the public road up to Cairn Gorm during lockdown. It amazing how our public authorities ignore the law when it suits them.

The reason a boundary fence has been included in the plans for the car park is because of the Habitats Regulations Appraisal conducted by the Cairngorms National Park Authority ([see here](#)):

*“To reduce the risk of increased use of the BLANK [redacted] route as much as possible, to avoid increased activity in sensitive capercaillie woods over and above existing levels of activity. The mitigation required for HRA purposes, as conditions of any permission granted, is:
– Perimeter post and rail fence as marked on the site layout plan to be in place prior to the car park being used for booked overnight motorhome stays, and maintained in perpetuity while the motorhome overnight parking is in operation. The specification and location of the fencing to be agreed with CNPA prior to installation. [Reason: To discourage people from undertaking off path activities or increasing use of routes connected to sensitive habitat, therefore minimising the potential for likely significant effects on capercaillie habitat in the Cairngorms SPA.]”*

What is the logic of installing fences to “protect” capercaillie, one might ask, when fences are known to be of the main causes of premature death in capercaillie ([see here](#))? This stupid proposal also has serious implications for access rights and goes a step further than the signs that Cairngorms Capercaillie Project has erected at Carrbridge ([see here](#)). Those signs tell people to keep their dog on a lead and warn that anyone disturbing capercaillie may be committing a criminal offence, but at least they only apply for a few months of the year. Now the CNPA is promoting the erection of physical barriers along the western and northern boundaries of the car park that are designed to stop people and could kill capercaillie year round. All this, just to prevent people accessing one route, a route that Forestry and Land Scotland says is rarely used anyway, where there is no evidence have been disturbed and where the maximum increase in usage is predicted to be less than 10%!

The main attraction of the Coire na Ciste car park at present are the uninterrupted views out over Glen More. No consideration has been given to the impact that fences will have on this – the design has not yet been agreed – but between them CNPA and HIE have turned what could have potentially be a wonderful facility into something that is likely to feel more akin to a prison camp. Instead of wasting

money on fencing, the CNPA could have required HIE to invest in improving the paths from the car park, including that up in Coire na Ciste, which naturally lead people away from the area where capercaillie are found. Alternatively, a short new path to a “hide” could have provided a way for those who wanted a chance to see the capercaillie without disturbing them. Why weren’t these options considered and consulted on with organisations representing recreational interests?

What needs to happen?

Cairn Gorm, despite HIE’s legacy of mis-management, is a fine mountain and the most visited in the National Park. It deserves only the best. Instead, on Friday, the CNPA Planning Committee (the meeting starts at 10am and can be followed [here](#)) is being asked to approve a third rate planning application, made worse by the ill-thought out proposal to erect fences and barriers around the site and across the public road.

The CNPA Planning Committee should:

- Refuse to approve the Planning Application until HIE has agreed with them a masterplan for the whole of Cairn Gorm, including longer terms proposals for the Ciste car park and the surrounding area;
- Advise HIE that any revised application for a formal overnight stay area for campervans must have suitable facilities, including toilets and electric hook-ups, and should include proposals to improve the landscaping of the car park;
- Advise HIE and officers to develop a visitor management plan that facilitates enjoyment of the wider area by those staying at Coire na Ciste and protects wildlife without the use of fencing.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. access rights
2. Cairn Gorm
3. camping
4. CNPA
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