

An enterprise agency without enterprise – HIE’s defence of their campervan park at Cairn Gorm

Description



Bad luck or incompetence? One of the campervan places at Coire na Ciste. Photo credit Alan Bratney.

This post takes a look at a recent attempt by Highland and Islands Enterprise (HIE)/Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd (CMSL) to defend their new but low standard and barely used campervan facility in Coire na Ciste at Cairn Gorm. [Update: for how HIE/CMSL responded to some of the issues raised in this post ([see here](#))].

Background

Following Alan Bratney’s post on the Coire na Ciste campervan park ([see here](#)), a reader who commented followed that up with an email to CMSL and HIE about their experience of trying to use the

facility and the impact of the funicular repair work. Parkswatch was copied in to the email and the responses from an HIE official and from Susan Smith, Interim Chief Executive of CMSL, who is soon to return to HIE. It is Susan Smith's email ([see here](#)), sent from an HIE account – further confirmation that CMSL and HIE are one and the same ([see here](#)) – and the points she made relating to the Coire na Ciste campervan park that are considered here.

The issues raised and CMSL/HIE's response

Campervanners can only gain access to the Ciste campervan park at specified times each day. The email to CMSL/HIE described how someone who had paid for entry was forced to wait an hour and a half to get in, how a small queue then formed with the fourth vehicle stuck projecting onto the main road and how three campervans then gave up and left. The writer witnessed a single campervan in the park compared to 19 up at Coire Cas. They pointed out that:

- with only three time slots and 45 places potentially available, 15 vehicles could be forced to queue at popular times, creating a hazard on the public road (why didn't the Cairngorms National Park Authority planners consider this before granting the development consent?);
- part of the appeal of campervanning is that you can decide where to stay at the last minute (this is particularly relevant to Cairn Gorm when its often blowing a hoolie);
- the number of campervans at the Ciste shows that the system is nonsensical.

The writer went on to raise a number of other issues covered in Alan Bratney's post, the £15 a night charge and the waste disposal facility.

HIE/CMSL's response – "Reasons behind three book-in time slots".

"Our facility opened on 7 Sep 2021 and we wanted to set time slots to avoid campervans turning up and causing any noise or disruption to people already using the facility. We want to avoid customers turning up 'on-spec' and have a managed facility. We started with two booking slots, with one aimed at allowing some availability to facilitate campervans that have arrived in the area later. This was aimed at the users you have described as 'making last minute decisions to go to a place'. During the first two weeks of operation we spoke to users and with their feedback increased time slots on the booking system."

Comment



The Ciste campervan park early morning 27th September – not a single campervan staying overnight. Photo credit Alan Bratney

It is good to see that HIE/CMSL have listened to the handful of customers they have had and increased the number of time slots – from two a day to three a day. It's not made any difference.

Their whole argument for restricting access is management-speak divorced from reality. A “managed facility” but without staff or facilities! Fixed time slots for entry justified by an alleged need not to disturb campervanners already on the site – when the reality is there is nobody to disturb because its almost impossible to get access! There is no acknowledgement that campervanners are being displaced elsewhere or why this is happening.



Campervans in Coire Cas, where you can stop off for a £3 donation, morning of 27th September. Photo credit Alan Bratney

Operating a campervan facility is not like running a restaurant during Covid and any time slot system will drive visitors away. Part of the market CMSL/HIE should have been aiming for is the people who drive up in their vans in the evening to get an early start on the hill next day. Under CMSL/HIE's logic this risks creating disturbance to others. The reality is the main potential source of disturbance is not campervans coming or going but rather the behaviour of their occupants on site, e.g. whether people play music loudly. Thankfully this is not a common occurrence.

HIE/CMSL's response – "Online booking system"

"I note your frustration regarding the online booking system as it is currently. We are in the process of changing the platform and system we use and this will provide us with greater flexibility on booking slots and timings, which we believe will alleviate the issue that you have highlighted."

Comment

While HIE/CMSL propose to alleviate the issues by changing the booking system and, it appears, by introducing more booking slots, this won't solve the fundamental problems described above. What,

however, is the cost of replacing the online booking platform after just a month of operation? And what does this say about the competence of CMSL/HIE to operate such a facility?

HIE/CMSL's response - "Price at £15.00 Per Night"

"We realise that price is a factor for some customers. The cost of establishing this facility was c. £60k and as such we have had to establish what we believe to be a reasonable price for the safe and proper removal of all forms of waste, including chemical toilets which also comes with an operational cost in removing waste from the closed system tank that has been installed. The price we set is comparable to facilities at Findhorn. We have regularly asked for customer feedback and on the same day as you used the site we received highly positive feedback on the facility in comparison with other sites across the Highlands."

"We are currently considering trialling an 'off-peak' week night price of £10.00 per night to test price sensitivity."

Comment

It is very helpful to know that the cost of the campervan park has been £60k – so far – though the operational costs, including removal of the waste are not stated.



Some of the quality work that has gone into erecting a fence around the campervan park to keep people from disturbing capercaillie in the forest below

Whether that £60k provided value for money is another matter.





Most of the numbered slabs of concrete marking places

are already broken. Whether campervans are responsible for this is another matter – there have been so few its hard to see how they could have done so much damage. Rather, it looks as if a heavy truck has been allowed access and been joy ridden around the site!



There is still no sign of quality control at Cairn Gorm. Does no-one check on whether staff are bothering to clear up? Photo credit Alan Bratney.

The business case for the repair of the funicular was based on a net loss of £73.09m over the next 30 years ([see here](#)), in the context of which £60k and the quality of what it has bought is merely lose change. But if CMSL/HIE wanted to recover those costs, that should have been quite easy, given the

number of campervans visiting the Highlands.

Price, however, is far more than just a “factor for some customers” as HIE puts it. People don’t like being ripped off. Being charged £15 a night for water and a waste disposal point without electricity on what feels like a derelict site is not good value in any sense.



The bridge over the Allt na Ciste, which gives access to the best walk from the Ciste car park has still not been repaired – signs saying it was too dangerous to use were erected in March

[This section has been updated as it originally referred to just the commercial and the not community site at Findhorn. It was the latter which HIE referred to in her email. Thanks to Cameron McNeish and others for correcting me to this].

The Community campervan park by the beach at Findhorn ([see here](#)), cited by HIE/CMSL, charges £15 a night for fresh water and disposal of black and grey waste, but there are also toilets available, so campervanners without toilets are welcome, unlike at the Ciste, while campervanners who are passing by and want to dispose of their waste can do so for £5. There is another site at Findhorn [which I originally referred to] which charges £23.50 for a place on hardstanding and £21.50 on grass. This provides electric hookups and a range of facilities including toilets, showers, laundry and an adventure playground ([see here](#)).

The Glencoe ski centre, which now provides camping pods and places for campervans is a site in a comparable location. For £20, as well as water and a black water waste disposal point, it provides campervans unlimited electricity and access to toilets, showers and even a drying room ([see here](#)).

Any campervan passing by that wants to dispose of its waste can do so for £5. There is also a cafe open for breakfasts and which stays open until 8pm in the evenings with last orders for food at 7.30pm. £20 for all that or £15 for a derelict car park?

Or there is the site at the Tomintoul Bowling Club ([see here](#)) which charges £8 without an electric hook-up, £12 with and provides access to water and a toilet and operates year round (unlike the Ciste which will close 31st October).

HIE/CMSL cannot get away from the fact that what they offer is extremely bad value and don't appear to understand that if you overcharge for poor facilities there will be consequences. The maths is quite simple. 20 campervans paying £5 a night – a reasonable price for a tap and a waste disposal point – will raise more revenue than 5 campervans paying £15 a night. Over the last month – the site is being closely monitored – the numbers have been far less than that.

HIE/CMSL's response – "Waste Disposal"

"Disposal of waste on the site can be made using the grey water discharge, or if you have a fixed system you can drive across the chemical toilet discharge point and dispose of the grey waste in the same drain – as your email has suggested."

"We are working on improving the signage to make this more obvious to customers and will emphasise this within the booking information."



It is good to see the signage has now been improved (right) but how easy will it be for campervans to remove the cover has been put over the chemical disposal point before using it?



Nothing however has yet been done to separate the drinking water (left) from the grey water disposal point, although its good to see the drinking water now appears to have been tested and the sign (visible on the left hand tap) removed:



Now the site has drinking water it is marginally better value. Photo credit Alan Bratney.

What needs to happen

The email from HIE/CMSL demonstrates once again why they are totally unfit to run Cairn Gorm. If they cannot run a campervan park, what does this say about their ability to manage the repair of the funicular? Since taking ownership of the Cairn Gorm estate they have destroyed the ski business, a far more important recreational resource, and the natural environment to boot. It is time that the Scottish Parliament's Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee took another look at what is going on. Richard Leonard, former leader of the Scottish Labour Party is now Convener of that

Committee and just over a week ago put a very powerful case for public funds being spent openly and transparently ([see here](#)). There would be no better place for the new Committee to start than HIE's use public funds at Cairn Gorm.

The funicular is now so great a liability that no-one apart from a government agency guaranteed unlimited funds for the foreseeable future from the Scottish Government could take it on. But Coire na Ciste, now stripped of ski facilities is another matter. The Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust, who are about to open an ice rink at Aviemore (about which more anon) and demonstrated far more competence than HIE has ever shown, should make a bid to take over the "facilities" in Core na Ciste sooner rather than later.

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