Cairngorm Mountain â?? the wheels come off in the New Year

Description

Wheels are in motion for mountain biking plans

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Dave Macleod is in charge of Cairngorm project for HIE.

Application to be submitted early in 2022

A PLANNING application for mountain biking at Cairngorm Mountain will come forward early in the new year, while trials to allow people out onto the plateau could start later in 2022.

A family-friendly biking facility between the Day Lodge and mid-station will form the first plank of the masterplan agreed last summer to revive the resort's fortunes.

Unlocking Cairngorm Mountain's true potential will be a 'marathon rather than a sprint', it was warned at the end of May as the long awaited blueprint for the next 25 years of the resort was finally unveiled.

Now owner Highlands and Islands Enterprise is about to embark on the first steps.

David Macleod, HIE's head of property and infrastructure, said:

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"The focus of the work we have been doing this past year has been on the mountain biking and the evolution of the Section 50 agreement for the Ptarmigan in terms of accessing the plateau.

"The mountain biking is a product we believe we can deliver fairly quickly and is one which we think has a lot of support in the community.

"We have been carrying out a lot of stakeholder engagement this year to work through some of the obvious challenges due to the sensitive environment and how we monitor people using the facility."

HIE has been working closely with Developing Mountain Biking in Scotland.

Mr Macleod said: "We think it is an exciting project for the resort and the wider community.

"The focus has been with DMBS' advice and support to focus on a family-friendly facility which will be complementary to the other mountain biking activity in the local area."

Mr Macleod is hopeful plans can be submitted early in the new year.

The mountain biking will use existing facilities and the ski slopes by the Day Lodge within the primary activity zone agreed in the masterplan.

Mr Macleod said: "There is potential for some new uplift for younger age groups with older more experienced riders able to make their own way up the hill."

This will comprise magic carpets which can also be used for

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I have not so far blogged on the long-awaited (see here) masterplan for Cairn Gorm which Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) published last June (see here). Subtitled â??Unlocking the potential of the Cairngorm Mountain Estateâ?•, the masterplan is a vague and poorly drafted document: the operator, Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd (CMSL) is to explore â??options for new chairliftâ?• (sic) in Coire Cas; HIE is lead on engaging with others â??to assess potential for collaborative approachâ?• (sic) to a new Centre for the Mountain Environment to replace the Day Lodge; the Cairngorms National Park Authority is delegated to lead on the delivery of a feasibility study into sustainable transport between Cairn Gorm and Aviemore.

The lack of concrete plans should not surprise anyone. Having committed to spend close on Â£15m to fix the funicular (see here) â?? an amount that will have since risen due to the repairs taking a year longer than originally planned (see here) â?? HIE has little money to invest in anything else at Cairn Gorm. Their announcement on mountain biking (above) needs to be understood within that context.

According to the masterplan HIE was, in years 1-2, going to create a â??mountain biking development planâ?• and then only in years 3-5 seeking planning consent to develop mountain biking activities at Cairn Gorm:

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KEY STRATEGY	LEAD STAKEHOLDER	YEARS 1-2	YEARS 3-5
A - ALL-YEAR SUSTAINABLE OPERATING MODEL	HIE	Stabilise the current operating company, with a continued focus on snowsports and other outdoor pursuits. Review options for future ownership and operating models.	Develop strategies that support the business to diversify and generate revenue from popular activities in all seasons of the year.
B - COHESIVE ECOLOGY AND HABITAT RESTORATION	CMSL	Identify clear zones of ecology regeneration and prepare deliverable action plan.	Review species and supporting landscape protection and monitoring as defined in the SSSIs, SAC and SPA. Implement action plan.
C – PROMOTE ACTIVE TRAVEL AND SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT	CNPA	CNPA to lead delivery of a feasibility study on public, active and sustainable transport options for the Aviemore, Glenmore and Cairngorm area.	CMSL to provide facilities to support active travel and sustainable transport.
D – A MOUNTAIN FOR ALL	CMSL	Act on SE Group report, exploring options for new chairlift in Coire Cas for snowsports and other activities. • Create a defined brief for facilities development in Coire Cas. • Create a defined brief for facilities development at Ciste gateway. • Carry out public engagement to inform all proposals.	Develop business case(s) and pursue funding for priorities, including third-party investment that will drive the wider economy.
E – SCOTTISH CENTRE FOR THE MOUNTAIN ENVIRONMENT	HIE	HIE to lead on engaging with education, research and business sectors to assess potential for collaborative approach to a new facility at Cairngorm.	Develop business case for new building to replace current day lodge and offer new education and research opportunities. Identify and pursue opportunities to attract third-party investment.
F – ENHANCED USER EXPERIENCE	CMSL	Identify and prioritise specific opportunities to enhance the visitor experience, aligned with development of other strategies.	Landscaping improvements to Cas and Ciste gateways to transform sense of arrival.
G – MOUNTAIN BIKING	HIE / CMSL	HIE/CMSL to lead on engagement with CNPA, NS FLS and DMBS regarding monitoring of bikes on Cairngorm and neighbouring land. HIE/CMSL to create mountain bike development plan and guidance for Cairngorm and develop costed plans for initial phases of activity.	CMSL to seek planning consent to develop mountain biking activities at Cairngorm.

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If the planning application is submitted early this year, as claimed, that will be two years earlier than scheduled but without any mountain bike development plan having been made public or consulted on.

The review of the Section 50 Agreement, which prevents summer users of the funicular exiting from the Ptarmigan restaurant onto the Cairngorm plateau, has also been brought forward:

H – DE-CARBONISE THE MOUNTAIN	CMSL	CMSL to progress recommendations from Renewable Energy Options Appraisal for site-scale opportunities. CMSL to continue planning for permanent location of Snow Factory and electrification of snow cannons.	HIE/CMSL to con SSE on provision electrical power c Work with SSE to capacity, aligned
I – VISITOR MANAGEMENT PLAN: ACCESS FROM PTARMIGAN	HIE / CMSL	Creation of a stepped plan and methodology to identify when and where monitoring is most required.	Evolution of the V Plan to review op flexible without c objectives.
J – MONITORING IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW ACTIVITIES	CMSL	Consult with key stakeholders to create and agree a structure for m activities. This will complement the S50 Detailed Monitoring Schem Management Plan and include 5-year reviews of this masterplan.	

Both are now being described as the â??first plankâ?• of the masterplan showing that HIEâ??s plans really arenâ??t worth the paper they are written on.

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What is being proposed?

Plans set to take a step forward

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wintersports. The funicular could also provide uplift once in operation.

Several trails around one kilometre in length are in the pipeline, but Mr Macleod did not want to go into detail prior to the application.

The stakeholders involved in the ongoing biking discussions are also the signatories of the resort's visitor management plan (VMP) – Highland Council, NatureScot and Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Ltd, as well as the Cairngorms National Park Authority.

Mr Macleod stressed the mountain biking and 'evolution' of the closed system were both separate.

He said: "We do not see the removal of the closed system as something which is an option and neither is it something we want as we understand the environment up there is very special.

"What we are working towards is some trials to see whether we can evolve the Section 50 so people can get out of the Ptarmigan station without being guided so they can go out on their own."

He said they were looking at technology to allow this with the intention that 'we can start having some trials during 2022.'

Campaigners Save the Ciste have given a guarded welcome to the progress.

Spokesman Alan Brattey said: "The continued commercial failure of the Cairngorm Mountain business makes it clear that diversification is essential.

"Mountain biking could form one part of a diversification strategy. However, the operator would need to be absolutely clear that the costs of maintaining mountain biking trails did not outweigh the income."

Among the other key proposals to create an all-year sustainable operation are a new Scottish Centre for the Mountain Environment in place of the Day Lodge and a new chairlift in Coire Cas.

There is also a pledge to review options for future resort ownership.

The article in the Strathy suggests there will be a number of family friendly 1 km long mountain bike trails between the Day Lodge and the mid-station. While some people might bike up the access road to the trails, the hope is that people will pay to have their bikes carried up on the funicular or the magic carpet.

Using a magic carpet for mountain bike uplift was a new concept for me and I havenâ??t been able to find any references to them being used in this way elsewhere. Magic carpets are generally quite short, slow moving and used on gently inclined slopes, like the lower Cas. It seems to me any child who is a competent enough cyclist to head down a trail on such a slope is also likely to be able to bike up it â?? and much more quickly! It would be interesting to know what Developing Mountain Biking in Scotland, whom HIE claim to have consulted closely, think. But in my view it is difficult to see this proposal drawing many families to Cairn Gorm and even if there was demand for such a facility, itâ??s in the wrong place due to the weather on the mountain.

The use of the funicular for mountain bike uplift raises a different set of issues. Presumably, HIE will remove some of the seating, which is installed in the summer to allow visitors to enjoy the views in comfort, but reduces capacity. Carrying bikes, however, appears likely to reduce capacity even further. Perhaps demand is so low that that wonâ??t matter? But you can see issues where two coach loads of tourists and several families with bikes turn up at the same time. Still, there are funiculars in Europe that carry mountain bikes, so these problems may not be insuperable. But there is still the issue of the mid-station which is egressed by a flight of steps â?? hardly suitable for children and bikes.

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Dave MacLeod was coy about what trails are proposed, stating these will be revealed at the time of the planning application, so it is not clear how many are proposed, what the cost will be and the potential environmental impact.

More intriguing at this stage is HIEâ??s plan to allow people leave the Ptarmigan restaurant without amending the Section 50 and removing the closed system that was designed to prevent summer funicular users wandering out over the plateau. One wonders if the technology HIE is considering is a form electronic tagging that will allow visitors to walk up the stone steps to the summit of Cairn Gorm and back? Perhaps they are looking at the No Fence system that gives livestock an electric shock when they step over a line? People are so used to being tracked on their phones they will probably accept anything.

Why these proposals?

The most likely reason these two parts of the masterplan have been brought forward is that they potentially offer ways of getting more people to use the funicular. For the last 25 years the funicular and how to attract visitors to use it in summer has driven everything HIE does at Cairn Gorm. Moroever HIE needs to be seen to do something to reduce the anticipated Â£9.76mthe funicular will lose over the next five years (see here).

Far from being a sign that HIE is about to â??unlock Cairngorm Mountainâ??s true potentialâ?• itâ??s more of the same. That appears to have been confirmed by HIEâ??s announcement that Susan Smith had been appointed as permanent Chief Executive at the beginning of December (see here), a job she had filled temporarily since 2019. It was Ms Smith who oversaw the disastrous outsourcing of the

business to Natural Retreats (see here) and was responsible for the Ciste Campervan debacle last summer (see here). Perhaps she will change now she has the permanent job?

If so, the first thing she should be directing her attention towards is new chairlifts at Cairn Gorm, which would be better than the funicular for both skiers and mountain bikers. The big idea in HIEâ??s masterplan appears to have been to rebrand Cairn Gorm as a family friendly visitor attraction hence the tube slides, magic carpets, and postage stamp beginners ski area. The whole concept is a terrible idea, not just because we shouldnâ??t be turning one of Scotlandâ??s finest hills into a theme park, but because of the weather â?? there are too many bad days. Because of that HIEâ??s latest big idea wonâ??t work any better than the original which was that summer visitors would throng to travel by funicular up to the top of Cairn Gorm in the clag.

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