

The car parks at Cairn Gorm – ongoing mismanagement and planning failures

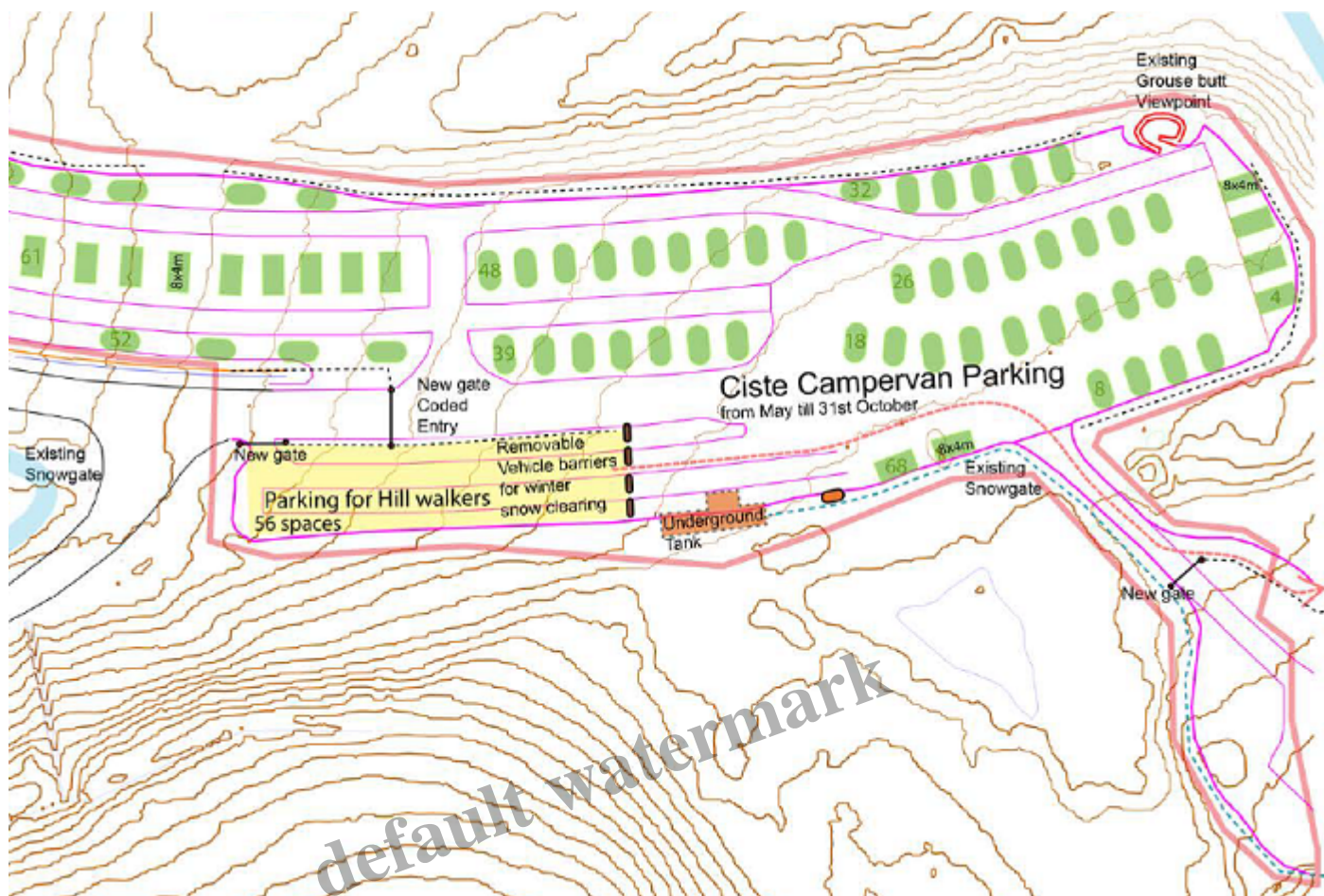
Description



Looking back across the fence from the “hillwalkers car park” to the entrance of the Coire na Ciste campervan park with the funicular repair compound, marked by the helicopter wind sock, behind.

I was up in Speyside mid-week and took the opportunity to take a look at the car parks on Cairn Gorm. The weather was terrible, 98 mph gusts apparently on the summit of Cairn Gorm and lashing rain. It was one of those days when car doors can be ripped off their hinges so my photos were taken from inside our vehicle and from constrained viewpoints.

When we reached the former entrance to the Coire na Ciste car park the gates to the seasonal campervan park were locked and the access to the hill walkers car park tucked behind was far from obvious.



Extract from campervan park planning application

Even on a good day I suspect most tourists will now drive past the Ciste car park without stopping. This is a shame because they will miss out on the brilliant views out across Glen More. The “grouse butt viewpoint” was constructed and publicly funded for that purpose, but there is nothing in the hillwalkers car park to indicate it is there. That probably suits Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd (CMSL) whose unstated strategy is not to allow anyone to stop off on the Cairn Gorm Estate without paying.

The planning approval granted for the campervan park by the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) last year ([see here](#)) was on the basis it would “only be operational from May to 31st October which would have no impact on any skiing season”. The implication was that the campervan area would still be used during the winter season, when the Ciste car park still serves as an overflow for snow sports, and would be re-opened to the public at other times of year.

But this is HIE and, as the CNPA should have learned by now, if it doesn’t make every aspect of decisions explicit, they get ignored.



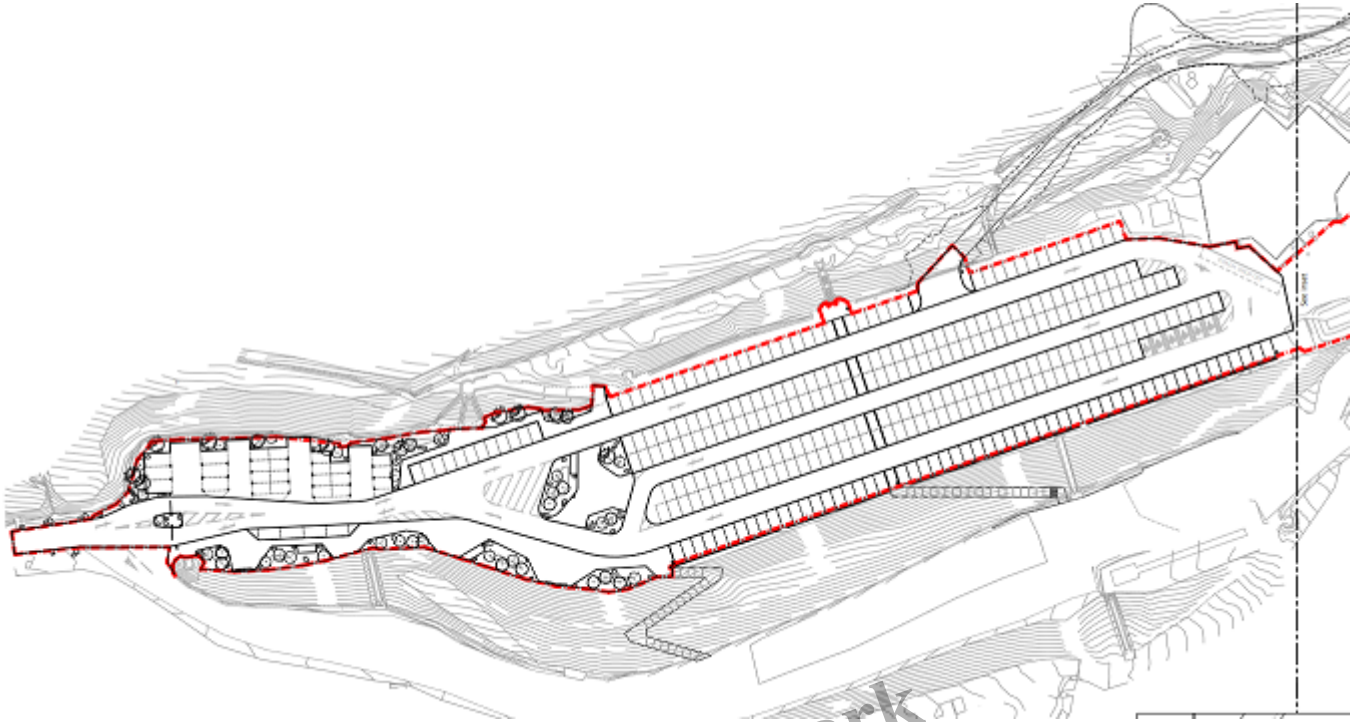
View towards the Day Lodge and snow factory – terrible conditions to be working in!

Contributors to parkswatch have been calling for improvements to be made to the Coire Cas car park for years ([see here](#)) so HIE's announcement ([see here](#)) in August that it was going to do up the car park was most welcome, even if the work should have been completed before the imposition of compulsory car park charges. Of the £710,000 this is to cost, HIE is contributing £616,000 with the remaining £96k coming from the CNPA who were quoted as saying:

"We are happy to support the project, which is a key part of the delivery of the Cairngorm Mountain Masterplan and which will significantly improve the landscape and sense of arrival at this very important site for visitors."

Why the CNPA would want to assist an agency that has continually tried to ignore it is unclear. In my view it would have been far better to invest the money in the footpath repair work that is so badly needed across the National Park. However, the decision to fund the car park has also created a conflict of interest as the CNPA is also the planning authority and no planning application has been submitted for the works.

The CNPA's likely defence of this will be that the current work is legally simply improvement and/or maintenance to an existing development and therefore does not require planning permission. That may be true legally but why then in August did CMSL have to submit a planning application ([see here](#)) to Highland Council "to install 14 non-illuminated direction and information signs at Coire Cas car park.....for a period of 10 years" when the planning report concluded the "signage is upgrading of existing signage"?



Extract from signage application to Highland Council

The planning application for the new signage, which was not called in by the CNPA and consented by Highland Council in October, even included a plan showing the layout of what appears to be the new car park! Major works slip through the net but the much more minor works associated with them require planning consent. It makes one wonder!

The contradictions and issues raised however run deeper than technicalities and also concern the role of the planning system in protecting the natural environment. When considering the Ciste campervan park planning application, the CNPA was rightly concerned about the impact the development might have on drainage. As a consequence its Board Members imposed this condition:

9. For the avoidance of doubt, the vehicle parking areas within the site shall be constructed in a permeable material unless design and provision of a Surface Water Management System (SuDS) sufficient to manage runoff from all impermeable areas and ensure that surface water runoff leaves the site, has been submitted to and approved by the Cairngorms National Park Authority acting as Planning Authority and shall be implemented in accordance with those details.

Reason: To ensure that any surface water drainage requirement complies with the principles of SUDS; in order to protect the water environment and in accordance with Policy 10: Resources of the Cairngorms National Park Local Development Plan 2021.

If that was right for the Ciste, why not for the Car park where it looks like a larger area of impermeable surface is being created ?



Looking towards the exit to the car park, with new hardstanding on right.

Perhaps the CNPA took a look at the proposed extent of tarmac and other impermeable hard-standing,

compared to what has existed up till now, as part of a “SUDS” [sustainable urban drainage systems] assessment before deciding to help fund this work? If so, should that not be public and why not expose it to the scrutiny of the planning system?



Unfinished work with the drain line protruding above the surrounding ground. Note how water is already eroding the surface on the left.

The drainage issues on the Coire Cas car park site have not fundamentally changed, with the challenge being how to design parking that fits in with the natural environment (landscape and ecology) but whose surface can withstand frost heave, snow ploughs and the action of water running across it.

Another option might have been to cover all the surfaces required for parking with blacktop but reduce the number of spaces and create a much wider verge above the lower car park to absorb the run-off. Added to that could perhaps been a couple of green islands within the car park, again to absorb water – a pond maybe? – and reduce the landscape impact. That, however, might have required CMSL to use the Coire na Ciste car park in good snow conditions and run a shuttle bus up to the Coire Cas, something which at present appears beyond their management competence.

One hopes that the CNPA has considered these issues before committing £96k to this project. While the Coire Cas car park is looking much better at present, the question is for how long and whether the £710k is well spent?

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. CMSL
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