

Cairn Gorm – HIE’s strategic folly

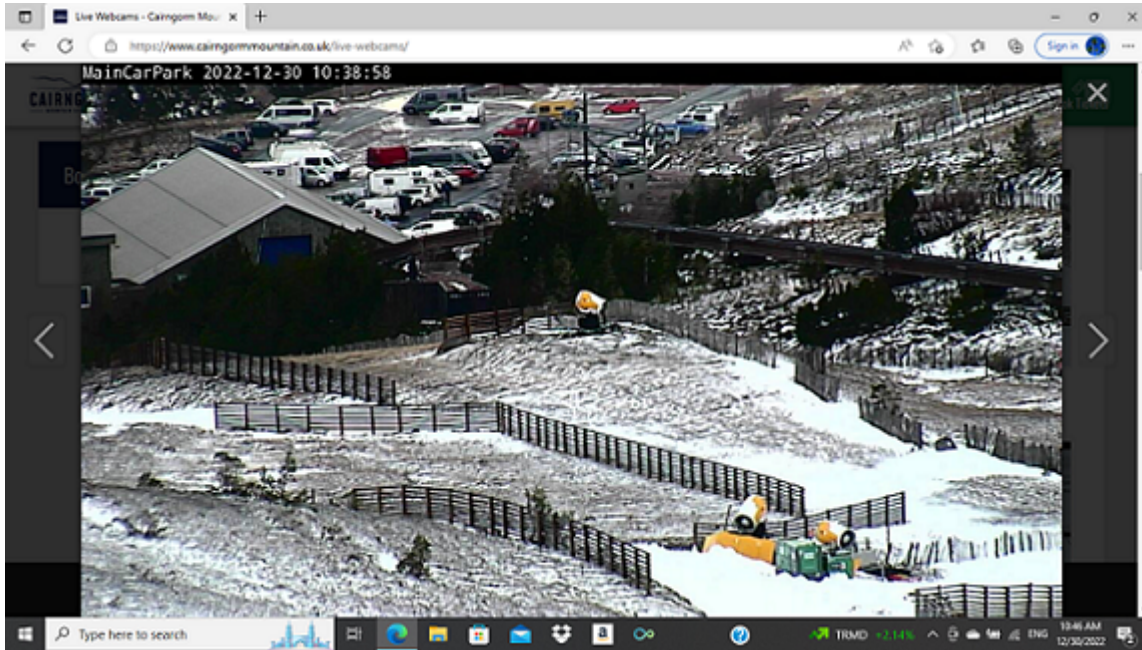
Description



Skiers and a Boarder in the Ciste Gully, Cairn Gorm, on 30 December 2022

Cairn Gorm, alone amongst the five main outdoor snowsports areas in Scotland doesn't have any chairlifts. Following on from Graham Garfoot's post on Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and the mismanagement of snow sports at Cairn Gorm ([see here](#)), the SE Group report, commissioned at a cost of circa £120k, identified the fact that chairlifts are essential to future success. Their report also identified snowmaking as a vital component of the snowsports infrastructure. It's an indisputable fact that CairnGorm doesn't have any chairlifts and parkswatch recently publicised ([see here](#)) the appalling minimal use of the snowmaking fan guns during the recent 2 week-long cold spell.

We are pleased to see that CMSL has responded to that criticism and brought in generators:



Generators (green) visible by the snow guns above the Day Lodge. Had HIE upgraded the electricity network at Cairn Gorm, following the purchase of the fan guns, the use of polluting generators would not be necessary

The more fundamental problems remain. The relative collapse in the Cairngorm Mountain business' share of the Scottish snowsports market has been well publicised. Its pre-eminent position within Scottish snowsports led to an average market share of 40.6% in the decade to 2013. During the following 4 years to 2017 that share fell to 34.6%. That reduction was dramatic enough but in 2018 a very significant collapse to just 23.6% occurred. A drift away from Cairn Gorm had been occurring since 2013 but the collapse in 2018 can be directly attributed to the demolition of the Coire Na Ciste and West Wall chairlifts.



West Wall Chairlift Towers: cut down at the base in August 2017. Photocredit Save the Ciste campaign.

That proved to be the last straw for thousands of snowsports enthusiasts who had harbored hopes that the two chairlifts would be refurbished and brought back into use.

HIE's obsession with the funicular culminated with the decision to repair it at a jaw dropping projected cost of £16.6m. Strategic Folly! The final cost is now expected to be around £25m with a further £5m being committed to other projects in Coire Cas. When all of this work is completed, the snowsports area will still have no chairlift access to the top pistes and Coire Na Ciste will still be without any uplift from the Ciste car park.

This Strategic Folly was brought directly into the full glare of publicity when the ill fated funicular failed and was taken out of service in the Autumn of 2017. The hill business is now into its fifth season without any non-surface uplift. The Ciste and West Wall chairlifts would have enabled the business to continue trading as these two chairlifts would have made it possible to get snowsports customers up to the snow.

This season the Ciste Gully as well as the Ptarmigan and Ciste T-Bar pistes have been in usable condition for some time now as evidenced by reports and pictures posted on social media. Regrettably, there is no non surface access up the hill and CMSL has had to trade on the Daylodge beginners area with a capacity of just 150 rather than the several hundred that could have parked in the Ciste car park and been uplifted from there.

The beginners area and snow factory came at a cost of circa £1.5m which would have been more than sufficient to refurbish both chairlifts. A report from Swiss company Rowema, in 2010, provided a quotation of circa £285k ([see here](#)) at the exchange rate prevailing at that time for the refurbishment of the Ciste chairlift. It would have therefore been possible to bring it back into use then at a cost of much less than £0.5m. It was emphasised then that the West Wall chairlift could have been brought back into use for approximately the same sum.

The numbers that could then have enjoyed snowsports on Cairn Gorm over the last three weeks and through the New Year holiday would have been considerably more than the small beginners area is able to accommodate and made the business more viable financially.



Decent conditions in the Ciste Gully which was easily skiable to the old Boardwalk on 30 December 2022

It does not take much imagination to 'see' that many more people would have paid the £38 day ticket price to be able to enjoy lift served sport from the top of the Ptarmigan tow down to the boardwalk as well as in the Ptarmigan and Ciste T-Bar pistes. That would represent far better value than what is presently the case for a 200m piste served by two Magic Carpets.

By comparison, on 31st December, Glencoe are asking for £30 for the 650m Plateau Poma as well as the 400m Coire Pollach Poma.

Chairlifts can be replaced and in this case that is what's required. It's what snowsports enthusiasts want to happen on Cairn Gorm before they will return in the numbers that would go a long way to restoring financial viability to the business. Community ownership can bring that about and it would be widely supported.

What should happen now:

The Strategic Folly at Cairn Gorm will continue as long as HIE is in charge. They have no real interest in supporting real snow sports, only “visitor attractions” whatever the sense and whatever the expense. The magic carpets are just one example.

Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust should apply to bring the area into Community Ownership so that the strategic direction of the business can be altered to what customer desire rather than what HIE, as owners of the business, wants to provide.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. CMSL
3. HIE
4. snowsports

Date Created

December 31, 2022

Author

alan-bratney

default watermark