

“Cairngorm” – a key driver of the economy in Strathspey and Badenoch and the National Park?

Description



Car park tow left, Sunkid tow right. Photo Credit: CMSL Webcam on 6.1.23

The lower pistes at Cairn Gorm, together with the Sunkid rope tow and the Carpark T-Bar uptrack have all been rendered unusable after just a couple of days of moderate thawing.

The “Cairngorm Mountain Full Business Case” ([see here](#)), as prepared by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), has the following under Strategic Context:

*“Cairn Gorm is a unique asset for Scotland. It is a place of outstanding natural beauty. As a mountain resort it is also a **key driver** [my emphasis] of the economy of Strathspey and Badenoch at the heart of the National Park”*

In their efforts to redevelop the Cairngorm Mountain business HIE have now committed circa £30m to repairing the funicular and other Coire Cas projects. Other capital expenditures have also been made in recent times such as the £3.5m committed to the hill business by HIE when Natural Retreats held the lease. That included £1.7m for upgrades to buildings and ski tows as well as almost £1m for a snowfactory and eight TR8 Fan Guns. There was also more than £20,000 committed to the planning application for a Snowflex Artificial Ski Slope. The end result of that also points to strategic incompetence.



TR8 Fan Gun: There are 8 on the hill which were provided by HIE. Photo Credit: Alan Bratney

This raises the question whether the hill business is a driver of the economy of Strathspey and Badenoch to the extent that would justify the spending such large amounts of public capital?

In the Strategic review of Scottish Snowsports in 2011, HIE determined that each snowsports ticket sold on Cairn Gorm had a consequential spend in the local area. The report concluded that 55% of Day Ticket purchasers were single day trippers and that each of these customers contributed what would now be worth £60 into the local economy. The other 45% were multi day visitors requiring accommodation, food etc and their spend locally would be £178 each at current prices. Note that figures have been uprated for inflation using the Bank of England inflation calculator.

Over the two week period up to Monday 2 January, snowsports were offered on Cairn Gorm on a 200m piste served by two new magic Carpets, each being 100m in length. No other uplift was available during that time period apart from the M1 Poma which started operating during the afternoon of 2 January.

The hill business would have been able to sell a maximum of 150 day tickets at a full price of £38 on each of the 12 days it was open for snowsports between 17 December 2022 and 2 January 2023.

Assuming full capacity on each day then 2550 tickets would have been sold and the associated revenue would have been £96,900 if all tickets were at full price.

Using HIE calculation methodology the consequential spend on Strathspey and Badenoch would have been:

- Day Trippers: 55% of 2550 = 1403 @ £60 = £84,180
- Multi Day Visitors: 45% of 2550 = 1147 @ £178 = 204.166

The maximum that the Cairngorm snowsports business could therefore have been responsible for bringing into Strathspey and Badenoch during the busy Christmas and New Year holiday period was £288,346.

What could have been done

There has been significant publicity, over the last few weeks, and coverage on parkswatch ([see here](#)), ([here](#)), ([here](#)) and ([here](#)) about the failure to open up more of the hill which would have allowed many more tickets to have been sold each day. If we accept that uptracks on the M1 Poma, Ridge Poma and Cas T-Bar couldn't be pisted and therefore used due to a lack of depth and the "wrong type of snow", then CMSL couldn't have sold a further 750 Day Tickets each day, 1000 in total. However, that simply strengthens the argument in favour of the chairlifts that Cairn Gorm lacks.

Glencoe managed to purchase and install the Rannoch Chair, which opened on Hogmanay, in a shorter timeframe than the four years during which the funicular has remained closed. The inability to use surface lift also highlights the utter folly involved in the removal of the Ciste and West Wall Chairlifts in 2017 rather than refurbishing them.

The lower pistes are a different story though. The hill business has 13 Fan Guns at its disposal but CMSL made an operational decision to use them sparingly. That meant that the volumes of snow necessary to fill the pistes were not produced and no effort was made to make use of the Carpark T-Bar or Sunkid Rope Tows. The webcam image (above) shows the consequences of the operational decision not to use the majority of the Fan Guns.

The fan guns do need access to the water supply from the burn which restricts the distance away from it that they can be positioned. While this makes it difficult to reach the T-Bar uptrack, no effort was made to do so and certainly no snow made for the Sunkid Rope Tow which is close to the burn (this and all the damage done by its constructed was justified as providing a new beginners area).

Now, after two days of moderate thawing, the Rope Tow can't be used to help customers get up to the M1 Poma and Cas T-Bar which both require a longish walk to reach them.



The Cas T-bar is still open but a long walk

Readers can decide for themselves the validity of the recent statement from CMSL's CEO:

"our team are doing everything possible to get more of the mountain open as soon as the weather and snow conditions allow".

In CMSL's book, "everything possible" did not include making artificial snow using all 13 Fan Guns.

If snowmaking had been done effectively then the Carpark T-Bar and Sunkid Rope Tow could have been in use throughout the 12 days when snowsports were available up to 2 January. Arguably CMSL could then have sold 450 tickets each day. That would have led to a spend of £865,038 which would have been more in line with HIE's claim that the Mountain Business is a Key Driver of the local Badenoch and Strathspey economy.

This isn't the whole story though. The Ciste Gully has been skied and Boarded by many dozens of people over the last 2/3 weeks despite the absence of any uplift. Imagine the numbers if there were Chairlifts there!



The Ciste Gully on 3 January 2023. Plenty of snow and judging by the tracks it wasn't the wrong type of snow either! Photo Credit: Save the Ciste Campaign

Chairlift access to the upper part of Cairn Gorm from the Ciste car park as well as the pistes in Coire Cas could arguably have enabled 1000 day tickets to be sold each day over the recent holiday period. The would have had a consequential spend of £1,357,200 in Strathspey and Badenoch. We'd then be getting close to a level where the hill business could claim to be an important driver of the local economy. Whereas at present there are Guest House businesses in Aviemore that plan for a 9 month season, making a mockery of HIE's spurious claims.

The evidence points to the fact that the Cairn Gorm Mountain business currently provides little support for the wider Strathspey and Badenoch winter tourism economy, far less than being the main driver behind it. The major change of strategic and operational strategy that is a fundamental requirement for future success will only happen when HIE, together with the present CMSL Board of Directors and the incumbent CEO, are no longer involved in managing the hill business and it is transferred into the hands of the local Community Trust.

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