

How the wheels came off the bus – the sorry story of public transport to Cairn Gorm

Description



My last post ([see here](#)), on the facilities available for snowsports enthusiasts parking in Coire na Ciste, failed to highlight the deterioration in bus services to Cairn Gorm, as a couple of readers pointed out afterwards. I hope this post will help make up for that.

The current situation

In June 2021 Highlands and Islands Enterprise published their masterplan for the Cairngorm Estate which included this commitment in respect of improving public transport:

Public transport

- Visitor circulation should be achieved by: carbon-neutral provision; connecting between visitor attractions, accommodation and local communities; displacing private car use, and enabling better coordination of parking provision.
- Promote the enhancement of local bus services linking with Cairngorm Mountain.

They have a long way to go. In half-term week, besides the minibus service from Coire na Ciste, there were just five buses a day (the No 37) connecting Aviemore with Coire Cas and, as at the end of last year, I heard it sometimes terminated at Glenmore. That is certainly what happened on Friday when Ron Greer reported:

“No37 bus to Cairngorm Mt only going as far as Glenmore yesterday afternoon. Quite a few disappointed visitors in Aviemore. What was that about reducing car journeys?”

When the wheels were on the buses

What anyone under a certain age may not know is that in the 1970s and 1980s coaches were the main means of transport to Cairn Gorm and that the Cairngorm Chairlift Company not only ran a fleet of shuttle buses but they ran the entire Strathspey local bus service into the 1990s. At peak the Chairlift Company operated over 10 buses, with 6 multi door Scania buses that were used for transporting skiers from Aviemore and shuttling them for free between Coire na Ciste and Coire Cas. As you can see from this photo ([see here](#)) they were way superior to the minibuses now on offer (top photo), enabling speedy boarding and rapid turnaround.

High floored buses with chains on the wheels were also able to shuttle people into Coire Cas when the road was otherwise impassable. Similar conditions nowadays force the whole snowsports business to shut down.

Besides these advantages, which would now tick lots of boxes on climate, making the countryside more accessible etc), season pass holders were able to travel free on the Aviemore to Cairn Gorm bus year round, while staff were able to travel free on the whole network. This made it much easier to recruit people to work on the hill and was a significant perk while it lasted (Cairngorm Mountain

Scotland Ltd has recently had difficulty recruiting staff because of the costs of travel).

In the 1990s, under its then Chief Executive Anne Angus, the Chairlift Company started to wind down its transport operation, selling off its assets. Eventually the transport department was shutdown and all its staff dismissed at the end of the 1998 or 1999 season after consultants had advised the Chief Executive that the business should focus on its core offering and not be operating transport! What the people taking the decisions didn't understand was that given the split bases in Coire na Ciste and Coire na Cas and the topography of Cairn Gorm was that the transport capacity of the company was integral to the success of the core business.

Twenty years with little change

Having shot themselves in the foot Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), which had replaced the Highlands and Islands Development Board in 1991, then came up with the bright idea of a funicular railway, while rejecting an alternative proposal for a gondola from Glenmore which would have enabled access to Coire Cas when the road was closed by snow.

There was then little attempt to improve public transport to Cairn Gorm until 2015/16 when the Cairngorms National Park Authority developed the Cairngorm and Glenmore strategy which committed to "enhance transport infrastructure" and included as one of its management principles:

"Improvements to transport and access infrastructure will increase public transport and non-motorised access to the area from Aviemore and beyond; and walking and cycling within the area."

Out of this was created a Cairngorm & Glenmore Transport Working Group comprising of Highland Council, HITRANS (the regional transport partnership for the Highlands), Natural Retreats, Forest Enterprise Scotland and the Cairngorms National Park Authority. HIE's decision to put Natural Retreats on the group was at best an abdication of responsibility and at worst a deliberate act of sabotage. Whatever the case nothing changed and seven years later public transport along the Glenmore corridor, the most visited place in the whole National Park, is as bad as ever.

What needs to happen?

Why not just learn from what was done forty years ago? HIE could buy a small fleet of electric buses to transport people up and down Glenmore – as happens on far less popular dead end roads on the continent – but add bike racks and ski boxes on the back. This would be cheap and good value compared to the repair of the funicular. They could then hand over responsibility for managing the transport to a can-do organisation like the Aviemore and Glenmore Community trust

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