

CAIRNGORMS

NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

2018/0177/DET

TRÌDÈAN NA BÈINN

MHONÀIDH RUÀIDH

Ptarmigan Extension

Cairngorm Mountain

Supporting Statement

Revision	Issued to	Issued by	Date of issue	Reason for issue
*	Planning	AG	12.03.2018	Submission

Summary

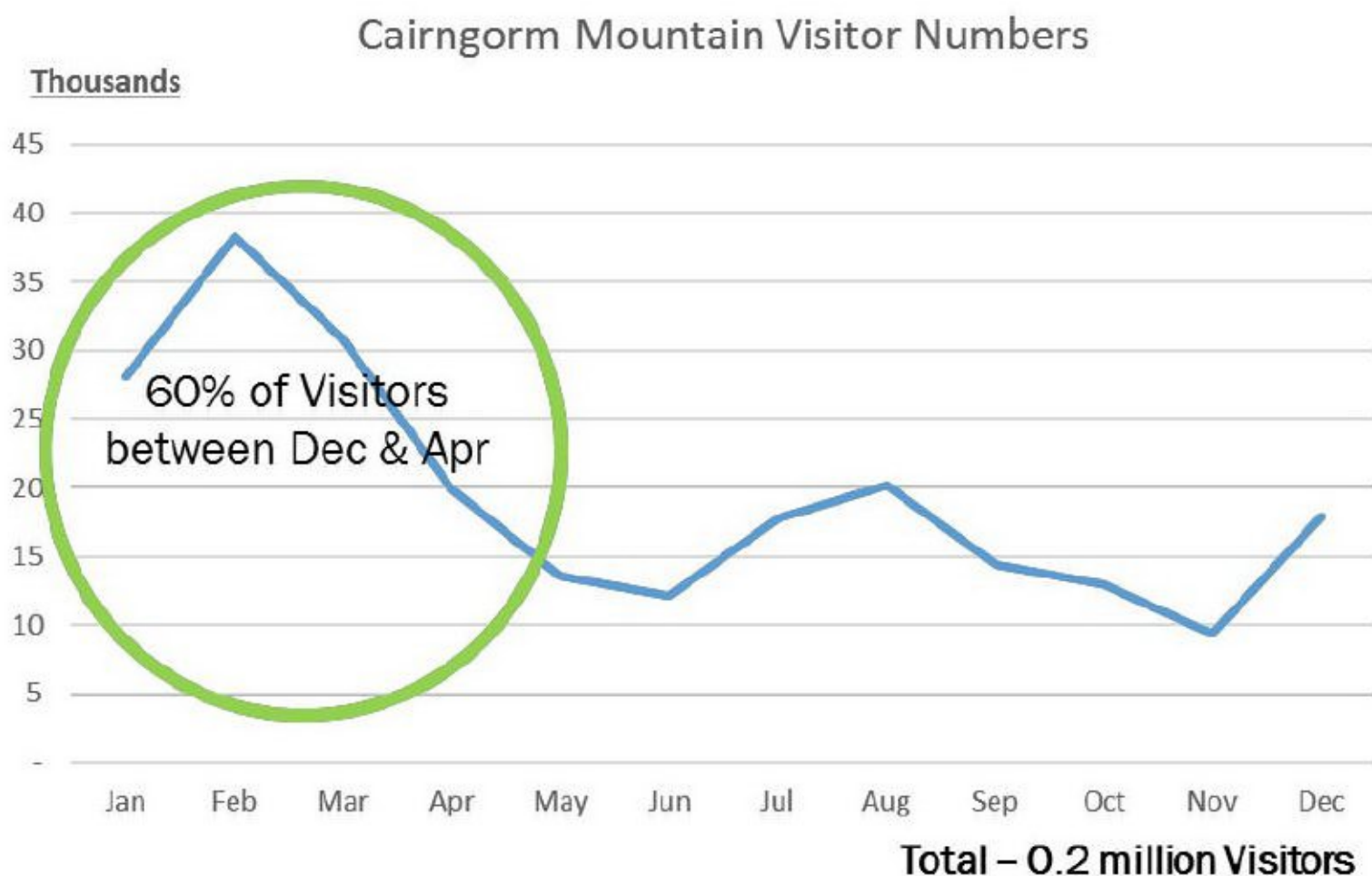
- Cairngorm Mountain Limited has been operating the Cairngorm Mountain Ski Area under new management since 2014 and during this period has gained a clear understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by the heavily seasonal operation.
- The challenges faced by the business through lack of snow has heightened the need to alleviate the strong seasonal nature of the business.
- This planning application will help address the current seasonal challenges faced by the business to deliver a world class, year round destination in the heart of the Cairngorm National Park.
- Following the completion of the Pre Application process in conjunction with the Highland Council and the Cairngorm National Park Planning Authority, Cairngorm Mountain Limited would like to submit this detailed planning application for an extension to the Ptarmigan building.
- This extension will create:
 - Improved access to existing toilets and shop.
 - Storm lobby providing easier access on to the mountain and preventing winds into the building.
 - Café and bar to be significantly increased with improved accessibility and circulation.
 - Extra seating in lobby and foyer with 'Grab and Go' dining amenity.
 - Enhanced exhibition space to provide new audio visual experience.
 - Wraparound terrace which provides access to further external space and views in the summer.
 - Enhanced lobby space with clear circulation and better accessibility.

Background

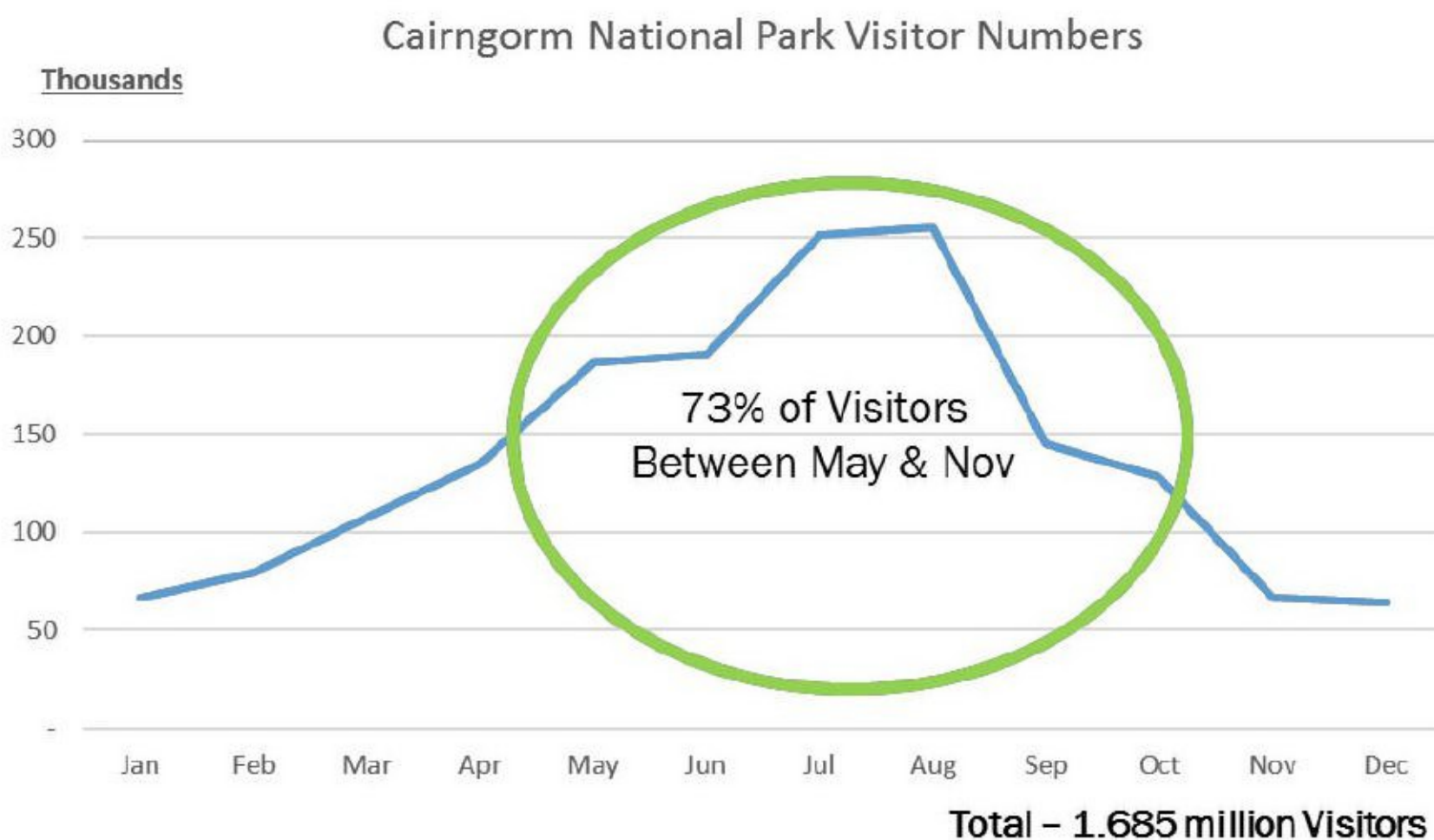
- Cairngorm Mountain is predominantly known for its winter sports with 30 km of ski runs and approximately 33% market share of winter visitor numbers making it the UK's largest mountain ski resort.
- The Mountain is home to the only Funicular railway in Scotland and has the UK's highest restaurant (The Ptarmigan). The facilities within the Day Lodge building at the base of the Mountain include additional food and beverage, snow school, ski and bike hire and retail facilities.

Visitor Numbers

- Cairngorm Mountain receives on average 210,000 annual visitors, with approximately 60% of visitors arriving in the winter months between December and April.



- This is set against the visitors to the Cairngorm National Park which receives over 1.68 million visitors per annum with around 73% arriving between May and November.



- Popular destinations within the immediate vicinity of Cairngorm Mountain are Aviemore which receives 1.0million annual visitors and Glenmore which has 600,000 people visiting annually.

Visitors

- As noted from the tables above Cairngorm Mountain experiences peak visitation in a trend that is diametrically opposite to the surrounding area and the wider Cairngorm National Park. Cairngorm Mountain is looking to attract summer visitors that are already visiting attractions in the immediate vicinity.
- During the winter, Cairngorm Mountain has a core market of leisure visitors (mainly Snowsports) that are made up of families, beginner and intermediate winter sports enthusiasts accompanied by friends and families as spectators. Approximately 25% of winter visitors are advanced or expert skiers.
- There is currently a limited summer visitor experience on offer at the mountain with the predominant offering being provided by the Funicular railway, exhibition space and the viewing platform from the Ptarmigan building at the top of the Funicular railway. Visitors are not allowed to exit the Ptarmigan building which is a condition of the Visitor Management Plan put in place following the installation of the Funicular railway.
- There is controlled access from the Ptarmigan building through guided walking trips which have proved popular. The 'Summit walk' enables them to reach the top of Cairngorm having travelled up the mountain using the Funicular Railway. In 2016 between May and November there were over 1,650 people who took advantage of the guided 'Summit Walk'.
- The majority of summer visitors are inactive day visitors – those that come as part of a bigger coach party or with friends and family to utilise the funicular as a way to access the mountain. They will enjoy food in the Ptarmigan or Storehouse and buy gifts and souvenirs in the Outfitters. The wider demographics range from families with young children, to older people, some with disabilities.
- The more active summer visitors such as walkers, nature enthusiasts, hikers and mountain bikers do not typically use the funicular and tend to walk from the base station to the top of the mountain and beyond to explore the wider Cairngorms.

Business Model

- This current operation creates an unsustainable model of seasonal revenue generation. This is exacerbated by a lower spend per head combined with lower visitor numbers in summer compared to winter.
- The uneven distribution of revenue becomes even more unsustainable when the snowfall upon which the winter revenue is dependent fails to materialise. This was the case recently as the winter of 2016/7 was the worst winter for snow cover since 2002/3 and had an immense effect on the operation of the business and wider community.
- The over dependency on unreliable winter revenue does not allow the business to forward plan for the investment in and improvement of facilities on the mountain - namely ski infrastructure. The negative impact on revenue caused by unreliable winters also has a direct impact on the summer land management initiatives and maintenance regimes required on the mountain.
- A solution needs to be sought to stabilise the unsustainable, seasonal revenue generation and allow for long term planning for the growth of the operation.

Overall Business Objectives

- Create world class year round visitor experience by developing more reasons to visit out of the winter season.
- Capture a greater share of the current summer visitors already in the National Park, Aviemore and Glenmore corridor by attracting them to the mountain with new and improved facilities.
- Build on the reputation for activities and adventure that already exists at Cairngorm Mountain and in Aviemore and attract existing winter visitors to the mountain in the summer.
- Increase the uptake and use of existing facilities and infrastructure already in place on the mountain. Improve the overall quality of the visitor experience to increase dwell time on the mountain and in the local area.
- Create additional year round, full time employment and avoid the annual loss of experienced and quality staff.
- Appeal to the largest segment of market to maximise likelihood of success
- Stabilise annual revenues and remove reliance on winter income to create a more resilient, year round business

Options

The following options have been considered in order for the business achieve these objectives:-

a) New Day Lodge

Owing to the inefficient nature and deteriorating condition of the existing buildings, initial consideration was given replacing these to improve visitor experience and enhance the offering on the mountain. Following initial pre application submission and public liaison and upon further review of the operations in light of the critical nature of the seasonal revenue generations these proposals have been postponed until further notice.

b) Mountain Biking

The existing uplift infrastructure and topography presents an opportunity to introduce Mountain Biking to the ski area. Investigations and feasibility studies were carried out to assess the potential. These demonstrated that there is potential to create a unique and high quality mountain bike operation with multiple grades of difficulty to cater for a wide market, utilising the existing infrastructure and operating within the ski area. However, upon further investigation and consultation with neighbouring stakeholders there would be a significant amount of legal work required considering the potential impact on the Visitor Management Plan alongside impact on protected species outside the boundary of the ski area. The management team at Cairngorm still wish to investigate the possibility of creating a mountain biking operation but this will not be considered in the current plans and likely to be discussed with neighbours and stakeholders in the future.

c) Zip Wire

The leading Zip Wire operators in the UK were brought to Cairngorm Mountain to assess the potential for Zip Wire within the ski area. Having carried out a survey of the possible locations Cairngorm Mountain were advised that the gradient of the mountain and current locations of existing infrastructure meant that the installation of a zip wire facility was unfeasible at this time. No engagement with planning authorities took place following this initial site investigation. As technology advances over the coming years this may well be an opportunity Cairngorm Mountain revisit but at this time it is not something the management plan to take forward.

- Beyond the investigation into the above options an alternative perspective was considered that would meet with the targeted business objectives whilst improving the winter visitor experience and supporting winter operations.
- This perspective focussed upon 1) improving the current winter sports beginner experience by creating a dedicated beginners' area around an artificial ski slope and 2) improving the visitor experience in the Ptarmigan building for both summer and winter visitors.
- Having carried out a pre-application submission on both of these items and received feedback from the statutory consultees it was agreed that the best approach would be to take each of these components forward in separate detailed planning applications.
- This application is focussed upon creating an improved and more accessible Ptarmigan building which will significantly enhance the visitor experience all year round.

Ptarmigan Extension – Objectives & Opportunities

When considering enhancements to the Ptarmigan building at Cairngorm Mountain the challenges observed since taking over the operation of the mountain have been considered along with the long-term objectives.

Cairngorm Mountain has the potential to become a world class, year-round visitor destination located in the most prominent position within the Cairngorm National Park. It requires facilities to be able to create amazing experiences all year round - dealing with the peak time winter seasons and offering summer visitors the chance to sample the truly exceptional setting.

The proposals will address the following challenges experienced with the current building with a view to adequately resolving them and improve the attraction all year round.

Sense of arrival

- The current experience within the building at the top of one of Scotland highest mountains does not live up to expectations. This starts with the underwhelming sense of arrival once visitors depart the train which then sets the tone for what should be a truly special visitor experience all year round.

Design

- The current building was engineered primarily as a summit train station with guest amenities and facilities incorporated around this. Being positioned as the highest building in the UK in a hostile setting means there is limited scope to create an ideal aesthetic. The opportunity is to improve the appearance of the building to create something more in keeping with the unique setting.

Congestion

- The current building layout creates several traffic pinch points at key locations in the building, most notably when exiting the train, when returning into the building during winter and accessing the Ptarmigan restaurant. Major lines of traffic cross over at critical points. The lack of space creates heavy congestion during peak periods but also in quieter periods there is a lack of breathing space within the building. These factors combine to reduce dwell time within the building.

Winter Opening

- Owing to the design of the building the fire exits on the lower levels are regularly snowed in during winter months making them unusable. Until the fire exits are cleared the building cannot accept visitors. The fire exits must be cleared by hand as they cannot be accessed by the grooming machines. This is an arduous and time-consuming process which takes up valuable resource and delays the opening of the funicular service which is the main uplift service on the mountain.

Flow & Wayfinding

- Once visitors are in the building, the complicated layout which is split across multiple levels, is further complicated by poor wayfinding, lack of obvious flow and inconsistent circulation around the building.

- The building itself is served by a central lift to provide wheelchair access to all levels but a number of key attractions points are not wholly wheelchair friendly, notably the viewing terrace which has a poor surface and the main dining area which itself is on split levels.
- During the non-winter seasons the funicular train currently makes a lower level stop at the Ptarmigan building which creates a delay to visitors disembarking at the base station. With the improvement to the flow and wayfinding it is likely that this two stop operation would cease.

Visitor Facilities – Food & Beverage, Retail, WCs

- The single food and beverage outlet adds to the congestion at peak periods owing to the single service point. This also limits the ability to offer adequate choice for visitors. Winter users want to be able to consume grab and go options from easily accessible locations and avoid having to join the main food outlet. Summer users are more able to take time to select options providing they are available.
- The current location of the retail outlet is within the inner confines of the building and suffers from poor visitation due to inadequate wayfinding and a compromised location. Being able to disperse the retail offering amongst different parts of the building in satellite or pop locations would allow other elements such as interpretation or exhibitions to be included in the current retail space.

Viewpoints

- The building does not take full advantage of the unrivalled views offered by the amazing setting. There is a limited viewing platform and a small number of dining seats with immediate views. These are a key part of the summer offering having to work within the closed system and visitor management plan.

Exhibition

- The current exhibition space has been neglected for many years and as a result is outdated and uninspiring both in message and format. This contrasts with the many unique features that Cairngorm and its surroundings offer. The exhibition space provides a significant opportunity to better inform visitors, improve their overall experience and subsequently increase the time they spend in the building all year round.
- The exhibition space is also an opportunity to better promote the work of the stakeholders involved with the Cairngorms especially the Cairngorms National Park.

Storage

- The building does not currently provide adequate storage for winter operational equipment such as poles, markers and netting. These are currently stored externally alongside the building adjacent to the main exit onto the mountain. This looks unsightly and not befitting of the location.

Functions, Meeting and Events

- The building currently hosts a number of events throughout the year including weddings, ceilidhs, parties and celebrations. The opportunity to improve the offering to broaden the appeal to host meeting and events all year round will allow a broad range of visitors to enjoy the mountain and take advantage of its setting.

Weather Ingress

- The building currently suffers from the weather ingress at the main winter exit/entry points. This current arrangement does not have a means of abating or controlling the wind and snow during periods of inclement weather. This has a direct effect on the experience of visitors but also operations and temperature within the building.

Visitor Management Plan

- The visitor management plan was originally introduced as part of the project to develop the funicular mountain railway and is to protect the integrity of the adjacent areas which have been designated under the European Habitats and Birds Directives, from the potential impacts of non-skiing visitors as a direct consequence of the funicular development.
- All future proposed development projects on the mountain should consider the potential impact they may have on the visitor management plan.
- Currently the building is a focal point for the visitor management plan. Much of the feedback concerning the visitor management plan focusses on the keenness to feel like visitors are outside, away from the building and being able to experience what it is like to be on the top of the mountain. The current building does not adequately provide for these aspirations.
- Under the visitor management plan in the non-winter period walkers who have reached the Ptarmigan building are allowed access in order to use the facilities and if required purchase a single ticket to travel down the mountain. The management and monitoring of this access is currently carried out manually. There is sufficient technology and mechanical solutions available to automate this process and improve the management.
- The visitor toilets are currently located within the building on the level below the main concourse. During peak times in winter, skiers wishing to just use the toilet must come through the main reception node of the building, across main lines of traffic to access the facilities. More immediately accessible facilities would improve the visitor experience and reduce congestion.
- The potential impact on the visitor management plan of the Ptarmigan extension has been considered and Cairngorm Mountain cannot foresee any issues that will arise from the introduction of the visitor management plan that would compromise the visitor management plan. The concept seeks to wrap around the existing form reducing spread on the mountain by keeping within the area disturbed by the original construction as far as possible. The extended viewing platform is designed to enhance the experience of being at the top of the mountain, reducing the desire to leave the Ptarmigan building maintaining the closed system policy.
- Potential indirect impacts have also been considered as to whether the proposed Ptarmigan extension could put further pressure on the designated areas out with the existing building. This has been considered and determined that the extension will place no further pressure on the designated areas out with the development boundary. Significantly enhanced views from the existing building and proposed wrap around walkway will enhance the opportunity to enjoy the views and environment, taking the pressure off the desire to exit the building in the summertime and strengthening the “Closed System” management policy in place.