

Cairngorm Advisory Group

NOTE OF MEETING

10.00 – 12.00

Wednesday 9 August 2023

Macdonald Aviemore Resort and online



Highlands and Islands Enterprise
Iomairt na Gàidhealtachd 's nan Eilean

Cairngorm Advisory Group
9 August 2023

Note of meeting

Present - Aviemore

Bill Lobban	Convenor, Highland Council (Chair of meeting)
Alistair Dodds	Chair, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (Group Co-chair)
Uwe Stoneman	Abernethy Forest Estate (RSPB)
Mark Tate	Cairngorms Business Partnership
Susan Smith	Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Ltd
Colin Matthew	Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Ltd
Lesley McKenna	Cairngorm Mountain Trust
Paul Dzialdowski	Highlands and Islands Enterprise
Ghillelan Macleod	Highlands and Islands Enterprise
Chris Roberts	Highlands and Islands Enterprise
Debbie Greene	NatureScot
Johnnie Grant	Rothiemurchus Estate
Scott Simon	Snowsport Scotland
Euan Baxter	Snowsport Scotland
Chris York	Walking the Talk (presenting item 4)

Present – online

Grant Moir	Cairngorms National Park Authority
Rachel Davies	Disability Snowsports UK
Ewan Wiseman	Forestry and Land Scotland
Shaun Roberts	Glenmore Lodge
Douglas Cowan	Highlands and Islands Enterprise
Davie Black	Mountaineering Scotland
Mark Blyth	Scottish Ski Club

Apologies had been received from: Kirsty Bruce, Chris Donald, James Gibbs, Lewis Hannah, Peter Long, Dave MacLeod, Malcolm Macleod, Jason Martin, Duncan Swarbrick, Chris Taylor and Ruari Watt.

1	Welcome and introductions
	Bill Lobban welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were noted.
2	Note of previous meeting
	<p>The note of the meeting held on 14 December 2022 was approved.</p> <p>Previous actions: The following actions since the last meeting were noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ghillelan Macleod had contacted Lesley McKenna and Shaun Roberts to follow up on suggestions on improving collaborative working and enhancing stakeholder engagement.• CAG members had submitted short descriptions of their organisations and these would be circulated to the full membership.

3	Matters arising
a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terms of reference Updated terms of reference for the Cairngorm Advisory Group, incorporating feedback from CAG members, were noted and approved.
4	Access to Cairngorm Mountain
a	<p>History behind the Section 50 requirements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paul Dziedzicki introduced this item, noting that unsupervised access to the Cairn Gorm plateau from the funicular top station was prohibited under a legally binding Town and Country Planning Act Section 50 agreement that aimed to protect designated sites close to the snowsports area. • Section 50 partners the Highland Council, HIE, NatureScot and CMSL meet regularly and the visitor management plan (VMP) has been reviewed and adapted over the years, notably to introduce ranger-guided walks. • Continuing to evolve the VMP is one of 10 key strategies in the Cairngorm Masterplan, published by HIE in 2021. It aims to introduce greater flexibility in the plan without compromising its key objectives. • HIE had commissioned Walking the Talk (who are also the report officer for the VMP monitoring requirements under the s50 Agreement) to conduct a wide-ranging review of the effectiveness of the present arrangements and consider options for further evolution.
b	<p>Evidence from the monitoring work to date</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chris York of Walking the Talk described the background to the review and summarised its findings, which had previously been shared and discussed with the Section 50 partners. • Key points included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Over several years before the VMP was introduced, environmental damage had resulted from thousands of people ascending Cairn Gorm by chairlift and going on to walk to the summit. – The VMP had been created to address concerns that greater visitor numbers attracted by the funicular railway, which opened in December 2001, had the potential to increase footfall in designated areas including Natura 200 sites that HIE, as landowner, had a legal duty to protect. – Annual monitoring reports demonstrated that the closed system, preventing access outwith snowsports season, had been successful in preventing further damage and enabling habitat and species recovery, albeit at a slow pace due to altitude.
c	<p>Outcomes of the more recent review of access</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key points included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Conservation operates on the precautionary principle – damage occurs quickly while recovery is slow. – Habitats and species are under pressure from climate change, especially at high altitude. – Managed access (ranger-guided walks) had enabled around 1,800 people to access paths, with no measurable impact.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Heat mapping technology shows there is already pressure outwith the designated ski area from walkers, skiers and mountain bikers. – While maintaining the closed system is a zero risk option for visitor management, permitting monitored activity could offer a low-risk alternative. – Breeding seasons are a vital factor that needs to be carefully considered.
d	<p>Recommended actions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key points included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Any evolution of the present VMP would need to be subject to clear and enforceable conditions that ensure environmental protection is maintained. Precautionary principles, monitoring pressure, reporting back to the s50 Group and making decisions. – Knowing where people are going; Providing necessary Information and Monitoring and Intervening. – Any plans to allow greater access would seek to restrict walkers to the designated hard paths, providing this can be achieved while also maintaining compliance with the Land Reform Act. – No animals would be permitted, with the exception of assistance dogs. – GPS could provide a means of monitoring access, providing individuals give consent (required under GDPR). – Consideration should be given to a pilot scheme using GPS and a bespoke app that could be installed on smartphones used by visitors. • In discussion, CAG members raised the following points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The closed system has been shown to be effective in achieving its aim to protect the environment and any change being considered must continue to do this. – Increasing access presents an opportunity to improve understanding of the mountain environment among a greater range of people, which can be life-changing. – Engagement with funicular passengers would be important to improve understanding of VMP and reasons behind it. – Any change to the VMP should be mindful that some visitors will have limited or no previous knowledge and experience of the mountain environment, including how quickly weather conditions can change. Potential risks to personal safety, as well as habitat and species, would need to be managed. – Cairngorms National Park Authority is currently developing a national park app that may present opportunities to link with Cairngorm VMP evolution. Potential for partnership with other app providers (Strava or similar). – Revenue implications of varying the closed system were currently unknown and would need to be explored, including assessing the balance between the costs of monitoring greater access against any potential increase in visitor income for CMSL. – Any changes that may be introduced should be piloted, monitored and designed to be phased over a number of years. – HIE and Walking the Talk planned to publish the review document and engage in further discussion with the Section 50 partners and stakeholder groups.

	The CAG members thanked Mr York for an informative report and discussion.
5	Any other business
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Legal issues Douglas Cowan informed the group that a settlement had been agreed in respect of legal cases that HIE had been pursuing against the original designer and contractor of the funicular, the resort's former operator and its main shareholder. A public announcement would be made shortly. Car parking CAG members commented favourably on the quality of improvements made to the main car park. The Chair indicated that the Highland Council was aware that some drivers were seeking to avoid paying by parking on the road, which created a safety risk, and was considering what options were available to address this problem. Date of next meeting HIE will look to arrange the next CAG meeting following the end of the 2023/24 winter snowsports season.

Chris Roberts
9 August 2023