

Cairngorm Advisory Group

NOTE OF MEETING

Glenmore Lodge, Aviemore
and online

Wednesday 4 December 2024
10.30 – 12.30



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Note of meeting

Present

Bill Lobban	Convenor, Highland Council (Chair of meeting)
Alistair Dodds	Chair, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (Advisory Group Co-chair)
Alastair Dargie	Aviemore & Vicinity Community Council
Craig Mills	Cairngorm Business Partnership
Tim Hurst	Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Ltd – Interim CEO
Colin Matthew	Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Ltd
Jim Cornfoot	Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Ltd
Gavin Miles	Cairngorms National Park Authority
Laura Nicoll	Forestry and Land Scotland
Lewis Hannah	The Highland Council
Audrey MacIver	Highlands and Islands Enterprise – Area Manager
James Palmer	Highlands and Islands Enterprise – Project Manager, Construction
Chris Roberts	Highlands and Islands Enterprise – Head of Communications
Ghillelan Macleod	Highlands and Islands Enterprise – Senior Project Manager
Paul Dziedzicki	Highlands and Islands Enterprise – Property Portfolio Manager
Jack Faren	Highlands and Islands Enterprise – Graduate Project Officer
Pete Crane	Mountaineering Scotland
Johnnie Grant	Rothiemurchus Estate
Ben Oliver Jones	RSPB (Abernethy Forest Estate)
Euan Baxter	Snowsport Scotland
Iain Ramsay-Clapham	Snowsport Scotland
Shaun Roberts	sportscotland
Joanathan Coulson	Turnberry Consulting
Chris Taylor	VisitScotland

1	Welcome and apologies
	Bill Lobban welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced Tim Hurst, who was attending the advisory group for the first time. Apologies were noted from Alice Fogg, Carol Mackintosh, Chris Donald, David Frew, Davie Black and Grant Moir.

2	Note of previous meeting
	The meeting note was approved.

3	Matters arising from the meeting note
	Ghilleen Macleod confirmed that Chris Taylor's VisitScotland presentation had been emailed to CAG members, as requested. There were no other matters arising.

4	Cairngorm funicular update
	James Palmer updated the group on the present situation regarding funicular remediation works being led by Balfour Beatty and further steps that would be required to enable the funicular to return to service. Balfour Beatty were reporting that they now expected to complete remediation by mid-December. Following this, mechanical safety checks, trial runs and staff training would be carried out, along with required documentation. This meant that plans to relaunch the service at the start of the 2024/25 Cairngorm winter season on 21 December could not be fulfilled. Based on current information from the contractors, HIE now anticipated a return by the end of December or early in 2025.

5	Cairngorm Masterplan key strategies
5a	Scottish Centre for the Mountain Environment (day lodge)
	Jonathan Coulson of Turnberry Consulting delivered a presentation on the proposed Scottish Centre for the Mountain Environment (SCME), which was a key strategy in the Cairngorm Masterplan. The centre was intended to be underpinned by three pillars – research, education and sports – and consultation had taken place with over 20 stakeholder organisations involved in these areas. Benchmarking with mountain centres across Europe had been carried out. There was a consensus among consultees that the present day lodge required replacement and recognition that SCME could provide an enhanced sense of arrival with transformational potential. Stakeholders expressed some reservations regarding whether the project had sufficient potential to be monetised, however, and agreed that capital and revenue costs would be critical. Public transport and green travel opportunities were important, as was continuing environmental protection of the plateau, and the centre should not duplicate other regional facilities. It was recommended that SCME should be a catalyst for day lodge replacement, supporting year-round activity and providing an opportunity to improve efficiency for the operating company. It would include exhibition space and research facilities, including accommodation. Sustainability would be a key consideration.

	Next steps would see HIE and CMSL: • continue stakeholder discussions; • review the relationship between the day lodge and Ptarmigan building to avoid duplication; • seek specialist tourism advice to identify further opportunities on the mountain, and • progress to design stage for the new building. In discussion, CAG members recognised the financial challenge, but argued in favour of the project creating a genuine centre of excellence and not merely a replacement for the day lodge. Several expressed a strong desire to collaborate with HIE, CMSL and Turnberry to develop the vision and it was proposed that HIE should set up a short-life working group involving relevant organisations for this purpose. There was also a need to define the range of customers who would be attracted to use the facility, including tourists, researchers, academics, mountaineers and snowsports participants of different ages and levels of experience. • Action: It was agreed that HIE and Turnberry would follow up on the suggestion for a short-life working group and consider how best to continue the conversation with partner organisations whose experience and ideas would be invaluable in shaping the design of SCME as a centre of excellence.
5b	Cohesive ecology and habitat restoration
	Jim Cornfoot delivered a presentation on the range of environmental activity carried out by Cairngorm Mountain, including the ranger service. This included examples of areas around the funicular where reseeding and planting had been carried out, with the team using their in-house expertise on how to re-establish vegetation at high altitudes. Natural seed sources were also becoming established in the White Lady area. The mountain biking trails that opened in 2023 had been built to a very high standard, with great care taken to protect the environment, and natural growth was returning to areas that had been disturbed. Staff were continuing an extensive programme of tree planting and working with other organisations to do more, including Forestry and Land Scotland, CNPA and the Royal Botanical Gardens in Edinburgh. CMSL was also working with FLS on peat restoration. A new, sheltered terrace had been created around the Ptarmigan building and was expected to be well used once the funicular was back in service. As part of the work, an all-ability pathway had been established. The loading area around the Ptarmigan had also been improved. Mountain karting, introduced in 2024, had proven very popular, as had new adventure ball runs, all of which appealed to the family market and attracted a broader range of visitors beyond the traditional snowsports sector. The Co-chairs thanked Jim for a comprehensive report.

5c	Glenmore corridor
	Gavin Miles updated the group on CNPA’s approach to enhancing the Glenmore corridor. Actions included a study of the road network, including challenges with parking and congestion, and improvements were under way. Signage had been upgraded and further changes were proposed to make the main road better suited to active travel. More dedicated car parking could solve problems caused currently by irresponsible roadside parking. Another idea under consideration was for a cycle way to Cairn Gorm. This presented challenges, but these were not considered insurmountable. The group discussed an idea to introduce a single parking ticket that could be used in all car parks in the corridor. They also commented on the negative visual impact of plastic bollards on the roadside by Loch Morlich, which had been installed some years ago as a temporary measure. Lewis Hannah offered to take both of these points back to colleagues in the Highland Council visitor management group for consideration. • Action: Highland Council to explore possibility of a single parking ticket being used in all Glenmore corridor car parks. • Action: Highland Council to review use of plastic bollards and look into alternative means of preventing roadside parking by Loch Morlich.
5d	Year-round offering: mountain operations
	Colin Matthew provided an update on year-round operations at Cairngorm Mountain. While HIE’s contractor Balfour Beatty was progressing remediation works on the funicular viaduct, engineers from Swiss funicular specialist Garaventa had visited to carry out scheduled maintenance involving replacing the undercarriage assemblies (bogies) on the trains. Garaventa were due to return once remediation had concluded, this time to perform routine annual maintenance that would see the trains travelling on the track again prior to relaunch. CMSL’s winter season was scheduled to start on 20 December and the snow factory was in operation. Snow would again be donated to the Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust for their winter event. Reporting on water usage for the snow factory and snow guns was being implemented, with data gathered from monitoring stations in streams. These showed that usage was minimal and reports would be submitted to the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA). The popularity of mountain karting had exceeded expectations, generating very positive feedback from customers. It was expected to expand this offering next year, when the access track would no longer be required for the remediation works. Mountain biking had also been successful, attracting around 3,500 customers despite poor weather in the summer. Tubing slides continued to perform well and the most recent addition of adventure ball runs, introduced late in the summer season, had attracted 2,500 participants.

	Overall, the changes introduced in recent years had expanded the range of visitors to include more families with young and teenage children.
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6	Any other business
	The Co-chairs thanked everyone for attending this meeting and Glenmore Lodge for hosting.

Chris Roberts
4 December 2024