

CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

FOR DECISION

Title: RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION ON VISITOR
MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS AT CAIRNGORM
MOUNTAIN

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Purpose

To agree the response to the consultation by Scottish Natural Heritage and The Highland Council on proposed changes to the visitor management arrangements at Cairngorm Mountain.

Recommendations

- a) That the Board approves the consultation response set out in **Annex 1**.

Executive Summary

The funicular and its associated facilities opened in December 2001. Since then it has provided an attractive and popular new visitor attraction (one of the top 10 paid visitor attractions in Scotland); provided a high quality winter sports facility; brought significant benefits to the local economy; provided a significant number of permanent jobs (around 100 FTEs); and provided a quality visitor experience throughout the year. Visitor management arrangements were introduced to allow the operation of the funicular railway while at the same time ensuring continued protection of the adjacent protected European sites (Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas). Protecting of such sites is a duty on the UK Government that stems from European Directives, and is a condition attached to European Development Fund grant.

Changes have been proposed to the visitor management arrangements by Cairngorm Mountain Ltd. Scottish Natural Heritage and The Highland Council are seeking input from interested parties before coming to a decision. The paper presents for approval a response to the consultation which suggests that both the proposed changes to the arrangements are welcome.

Response to SNH Consultation on Visitor Management Arrangements at Cairngorm Mountain – For Decision

Background

1. The funicular and its associated facilities opened in December 2001. Since then it has provided an attractive and popular new visitor attraction (one of the top 10 paid visitor attractions in Scotland); provided a high quality winter sports facility; brought significant benefits to the local economy; provided a significant number of permanent jobs (around 100 FTEs); and provided a quality experience throughout the year.
2. Visitor management arrangements were introduced to allow the operation of the funicular railway while at the same time ensuring continued protection of the adjacent protected European sites (Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas). Protecting of such sites is a duty on the UK Government that stems from European Directives, and is a condition attached to European Development Fund grant. The visitor management arrangements were underpinned by a formal Section 50 agreement which, amongst other things, restricts direct access to the plateau from the top station of the funicular.
3. A comprehensive information paper about the visitor management arrangements, including a summary history of the development, was presented to the Board in July 2005. In discussion a number of points were made by Board members. The Convenor summed up as follows:
 - a) *Responsibility for the section 50 agreement and associated Visitor Management Plan (VMP) lay clearly with Highland Council and SNH. The CNPA had an advisory role.*
 - b) *The possibility of a review of the VMP appeared to be implicit in its wording. There was no indication of timing written into the VMP, but the review at around the five year point might be sensible.*
 - c) *It was important to reflect on what was meant by a 'review' – the intent must be to improve the Visitor Management Plan (in line with the wording of VMP as set out at paragraph 11). This must include improving the protection of the designated site, and the key aim would also be improving the visitor experience.*
 - d) *There seems to be a general feeling that now was the time to consider a timetable and the parameters for a review. Any review would need to be based on good evidence and the National Park Authority may have a role in making sure that the necessary information was generated.*
 - e) *Implicit in what had been discussed was that any review needed to take account of all four aims of the National Park (noting that the National Park had not existed when the VMP had been put in place).*
4. Since then, things have moved on in two respects. There have been further discussions at officer level with a range of parties, including SNH and The Highland Council, to look at further work which could inform any future review and how

more use could be made of existing monitoring data. In addition, proposals have come forward to transfer the Cairngorm Estate from HIE ownership. The Board considered this matter in November 2005 as part of a review of future management and ownership options on the estate. The most likely scenario at the present time appears to be that the land will be transferred to the Forestry Commission Scotland. We understand that a further consultation will be launched shortly on this issue. The transfer of ownership, if it goes ahead, will provide an opportunity to consider the provision of integrated visitor management arrangements across the wider area of Glenmore and the Cairngorm Estate, all in the context of the National Park.

Proposed changes to visitor management arrangements

5. There are two ways in which changes to the current Visitor Management Plan (which is an essential element of the Section 50 agreement) can be altered:
 - a) SNH and Highland Council can trigger a review in light of information received;
 - b) Cairngorm Mountain Ltd can request changes at any time, in which case Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and The Highland Council (THC) must then consider the issues involved (including whether proposals will have a damaging impact on the European designated sites that lie adjacent to the ski area) and come to a decision.
6. SNH/THC have now received a request from Cairngorm Mountain Ltd to amend the Visitor Management Plan. The request is attached at **Annex 2**. A general map of the ski area and European sites (or Natura 2000 sites) is at **Annex 3**.
7. Prior to making any decisions SNH and THC are seeking views on the two specific changes being proposed:
 - a) To add the Windy Ridge footpath (An t –Aonach leading to Sron an Aonach) to the list of preferred paths in the Visitor Management Plan. The preferred paths are those that act as promoted primary walking routes within the operational ski area.
 - b) To allow walkers who enter the Ptarmigan building the option to purchase a one way ticket back down to the base station. Currently, walkers can enter the Ptarmigan building but must leave the building to walk down to the car park. Only return tickets can be purchased at the bottom station providing the visitor follows the visitor management arrangements by not exiting the Ptarmigan station and return to the bottom station via the funicular railway.

Policy Context

8. The draft National Park Plan contains a number of Strategic Objectives that are relevant to this issue, especially in the sections on Conserving, Enhancing and Managing the Park and on Understanding and Enjoying the Park. The section on the Montane Area says that application of these Objectives in the montane area should:

- a) Improve the long term sustainability and restore the full range of montane habitats through managing pressures from grazing, other land management and development;
 - b) Demonstrate the highest standards in managing the impacts of recreation on montane habitats, soils and natural processes through sensitive path repairs, targeted advice and encouragement of the long walk in; and
 - c) Retain the sense of wildness in the montane area through restoration of high altitude vehicle tracks, removal of redundant infrastructure and managing the impacts of motorised access, organised events, aircraft noise and commercial infrastructure.
9. The following Guiding Principles in the draft Park Plan are also particularly relevant: Sustainable Development, Social Justice, People participating the Park and Managing Change.
10. There are also relevant Strategic Objectives in the Sustainable Tourism Strategy, particularly relating to:
- a) Environmental management and conservation;
 - b) Quality of visitor experience; and
 - c) Visitor Management.
11. The draft Outdoor Access Strategy (which is currently out to consultation) has a number of Park-wide policies that are relevant:
- a) OAS Policy 2: Provision for people of all abilities and multi use paths
 - b) OAS Policy 6: Managing recreational impacts at popular countryside sites
12. The priorities identified for the Central Cairngorms area in the draft Strategy are:
- a) Promotion of responsible behaviour to minimise impacts to the sensitive natural and cultural heritage of the Area;
 - b) Development of a comprehensive understanding of path condition (building on the comprehensive work done on land owned by National Trust for Scotland and Highlands and Islands Enterprise) in order to set priorities for repair and maintenance;
 - c) Putting effective maintenance regimes for paths in place, especially relating to previous capital repair works;
 - d) Specifying and agreeing with partners standards for path repairs that are appropriate to the sensitive landscape character of the area;
 - e) Further development of path repair techniques in the most difficult upland situations (for example, on broad, exposed ridges); and
 - f) Managing organised events so as to minimise adverse effects on the special qualities of the area and people's enjoyment of them.

Response to the consultation

13. The final decision on the proposed changes lies with SNH and Highland Council. A proposed response is attached at **Annex 1** which:
- a) reflects the CNPA's role in ensuring that a coordinated approach is taken to the collective achievement of the four National Park aims. On that basis, and taking into account the information available, the view is expressed that these are appropriate changes to the visitor management arrangements which should be welcomed;
 - b) suggests that the questions asked in the consultation paper give the impression that the only factor for consideration is the effect of the proposed changes on the European protected sites. While these sites are undoubtedly of primary importance in the determination of whether, and how, the proposed changes should be implemented, there are also other factors worthy of consideration in coming to a decision – not least the features of the natural heritage which are outwith the European sites, visitors' experiences of the area, etc;
 - c) suggests that in view of the data that have been collected through the existing monitoring arrangements, it would have been helpful to all parties if SNH/THC could have provided some preliminary analysis as a basis for the consultation.

Consultation

14. This paper is the result of internal discussions amongst staff in the Visitor Services and Recreation Group and Natural Heritage and Land Management Group of the National Park Authority.

Delivering Sustainability

15. The existing visitor management arrangements were based on principles of sustainability, providing economic, environmental and social benefits. The proposed changes to the arrangements are in accord with these principles. The effects of the proposed changes will be monitored and appropriate changes to management arrangements can be made in the light of the findings.

Delivering a Park for All

16. The proposed changes to the arrangements provide opportunities for higher quality experiences by a broader range of people, without damaging the special features of the site.

Delivering Economy, Effectiveness and Efficiency

17. The proposed changes are capable of delivery in line with these parameters.

Implications

Financial Implications

18. There are no financial implications for CNPA arising from this paper.

Presentational Implications

19. Those who have been calling for a review of the visitor management arrangements associated with the funicular are likely to welcome the proposed changes as a sensible and measured step, albeit not going far enough in some eyes. Others may express concerns at this being the "thin end of the wedge" in terms of relaxing the measures in place to protect the natural environment.

Implications for Stakeholders

20. The proposed changes will provide opportunities for higher quality experiences by a broader range of people without damaging the special features of the area.

Next Steps

21. The next step is to submit the consultation response to SNH (before 17 August) who will then decide, along with The Highland Council, whether to accept the proposed changes and incorporate them in the Visitor Management Plan.
22. In addition, a consultation be issued in the near future on detailed proposals for the transfer of ownership of the Cairngorm Estate from Highlands and Islands Enterprise to Forestry Commission Scotland. This will provide an opportunity to consider arrangements for integrated visitor management arrangements over the wider area of Glenmore and Cairn Gorm.

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July 2006

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Annex 1: Draft response to Scottish Natural Heritage and The Highland Council on visitor management arrangements at Cairngorm Mountain

General points

- Response to the detailed questions posed in the consultation paper was based on judgements using our general knowledge of the site and on the information contained in the Annual Report of Environmental Monitoring 2005. We have framed our response within the area covered by this report (which is bounded by the west side of Lairig Ghru, Ben Macdui summit, east side of Loch Avon and Corrie Cas car park). We note that the environmental monitoring information is collected primarily to assess the impact of the current visitor arrangements and the monitoring scheme was not designed to assess the likely success or failure of any proposed changes to these arrangements.
- We feel that a preliminary analysis of the proposals should have been provided by SNH/THC with reference to the existing monitoring data and other information and with input from specialist staff. This would have allowed consultees to frame responses which were better informed.
- The questions asked in the consultation paper give the impression that the only factor for consideration in assessing the proposed changes to the Visitor Management Plan is their potential effect on the European protected sites. While these sites are undoubtedly of primary importance in the determination of whether, and how, the proposed changes should be implemented, there are also other factors worthy of consideration in coming to a decision. For example, features of the natural heritage outwith the European sites should also be considered along with the desirability of ensuring that all visitors to the area have a high quality experience. We urge SNH and The Highland Council to take such matters into account in coming to a decision about whether to accept the proposed changes and how they should be implemented.
- Both proposed changes to the arrangements provide opportunities to improve visitor experiences for wider range of people while continuing to protect the natural environment. This is in line with the views expressed by the Board in July 2005 and is very welcome.

Responses to questions posed in the consultation paper

- 1. Do you think that either of the proposed changes to the Visitor Management Plan would be likely to result in significant changes to patterns of recreational activity? If so, what changes do you think are likely?**

Addition of Windy Ridge path as one of promoted primary walking routes

No. The proposed change will very likely lead to some increased use of the path but this is not likely to be significant in the context of the overall pattern of recreational activity in the area covered by the Environmental Monitoring Report.

We should be clear at the outset that people's access rights under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 apply to the path and that, provided they behave responsibly (as set out in the Scottish Outdoor Access Code) people have a right to go there.

The nature of any change to pattern of recreation (numbers, demographics, distribution throughout the year, etc) is difficult to assess in the light of the information available. Any change will probably depend most significantly on the level of promotional activity that is undertaken. The nature of any change is more likely to be a slight redistribution of visitors (i.e. from one route that they may have followed to another) rather than an overall increase in visitor numbers to the area. It is clear that the Windy Ridge path is already used by a substantial number of people and is promoted by a range of existing commercial publications as a route to the summit of Cairn Gorm. The lower part of the path is steep and the physical effort involved in climbing it will discourage some people from starting out or continuing far. A range of easier alternatives for a walk are available in the area including a new path specifically designed for all people of all abilities. The Windy Ridge path offers a more attractive route to those users interested in ascending Cairn Gorm than the available alternative through Corrie Cas ski area. The proposal to signpost the path to Windy Ridge to be consistent with the information provided in the ranger base is sensible.

Purchase of one way ticket from top station

No. The proposed change is likely to be attractive to some people and the proposed change will modify their recreational activity but the change is not likely to be significant in terms of the overall pattern of activity in the area in the area covered by the Environmental Monitoring Report.

As above, the nature of any change is more likely to be a slight redistribution of visitors (i.e. from one route that they may have followed to another) rather than an overall increase in visitor numbers to the area. We are aware that around 5000 people per year currently enter the top station but have to leave again and walk down. A proportion of these people are likely to buy the proposed one way ticket. It is more difficult to assess how many people will be prepared to modify their visit (from the one they would have undertaken if the one way ticket was not available). It is likely that the option to purchase the one way ticket would be most attractive:

- to people who have not been on the funicular railway before – the one way trip would be a new part of their overall recreational experience;
- to people who are in the general vicinity of the top station in any case and so do not have to travel far to avail themselves of the one way ticket; and
- when the weather is bad.

Given the physical effort involved to reach top station and the range of other opportunities to those on such high ground we estimate that the overall effect on patterns of recreational activity in the area will be insignificant.

2. If you answered Yes to the first question, do you think that these changes would be likely to impact on the qualifying features within the European sites? If so, what type and scale of impacts do you predict?

It will be for SNH and THC to assess whether the proposals are likely to have a significant effect upon the qualifying features of the European sites. If so, then we understand that an appropriate assessment under Natura Regulations will have to be carried out as part of the decision making process.

From the information available to CNPA and our knowledge of the site it seems unlikely that there will be a significant change to the pattern of recreational activity in the area. Therefore the impact, if any, of the proposed changes on the qualifying features of the European sites would be negligible. This opinion would need to be evaluated in the light of more detailed information that will be available to SNH.

3. Are there any measures that could be put in place to minimise or prevent impacts on the European sites, whilst allowing the change(s) to the Visitor Management Plan? If so, what measures do you suggest, and how effective do you think they would be?

It would be prudent to make sure that Windy Ridge path was in good physical condition and had routine maintenance regime in place before increasing promotion of it.

The level of promotion of the path should generally:

- be commensurate with the results from monitoring of environmental impacts and an adaptive approach to management (ie modifying management actions based on the information collected) should be adopted; and
- be presented in the context of a range of recreational experiences that are available at the site and make clear that various alternative walking routes are available from the car park so that people can make appropriate route choices.

Measures should be taken as part of the overall management of the estate to promote the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and the concept of responsible behaviour.

Steps should be taken to continue the development of approaches to effective path management on the high ground, (especially from Cairn Gorm and along the rim of the Northern Corries) in order to provide a good walking surface and so reduce trampling damage and disturbance to sensitive species.

4. Apart from causing changes in recreational activity, is there any other way that these proposed changes could affect European sites? If so, in what way and how?

By improving opportunities for visitors to enjoy the general area there will be new opportunities to build support for the visitor management arrangements and for the protection provided by the European sites generally. We met with SNH/THC and others (in

November 2005) to encourage further public investment to this effect, for example through improved interpretation promoting further contact between visitors and rangers.

5. If your answers are supported by evidence of which Scottish Natural Heritage and The Highland Council may be unaware, are you able to provide that evidence?

The National Park Authority holds no specific data concerning this issue that are not already available to SNH and THC.

6. If the proposed changes are approved, how should any possible effects be monitored?

Monitoring arrangements should be reviewed so that impacts of the proposed changes can be assessed on an annual basis as part of the overall visitor management arrangements. It should be possible to do this by adapting the existing methodology for monitoring at very modest additional cost.

7. Do you have any other comments about the proposed changes to the Visitor Management Plan?

Further information about the total package of visitor management arrangements and their success in protecting the natural environment should be provided to visitors. As mentioned above, we have already discussed with SNH, THC and Cairngorm Mountain Limited the willingness of the National Park Authority to assist with such work.

Cairngorms National Park Authority
July 2006

