

The funicular – time for some honesty from HIE and time for some serious thinking

Description



Looking over Coire na Ciste to the Ptarmigan tows 22/1/19. With the funicular out of action the Ptarmigan runs are inaccessible but could not operate anyway due to lack of snow. Is the funicular really the answer to poor snow winters?

Highland and Islands Enterprise's announcement last week ([see here](#)) that the funicular would remain out of action for the summer and possibly longer, failed to explain what has caused the problems or the likely cost of the repairs that might be needed to make it safe to use again. Meantime it has announced that the company it has set up to run Cairngorm, Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Ltd will develop alternative plans for the summer but without mentioning any engagement with the local

community or stakeholders. Lack of transparency and a failure to consult are two hallmarks of HIE's mismanagement of Cairngorm. This post takes a look at the issues and the public debate which needs to happen.

What is causing the problems with the funicular and the implications?

After it suspended the operation of the funicular, almost five months ago now, HIE announced that it had commissioned a detailed engineering report for early December. That was then delayed to just before Xmas, allegedly because of the weather. HIE then took a further month until they made their announcement on 29th January. Instead of making the engineer's report public, however, HIE has now commissioned *"an independent peer review of COWI's report, in line with industry best practice for complex investigations of this nature."* The effect of this is that stakeholders and the public will be kept in the dark about what has gone wrong that bit longer.

HIE clearly knows more than it is letting on but, rather than explain what has gone wrong and why, it has preferred to provide a list of the major works required to fix the funicular:

Work is required to strengthen the piers, beams and foundations, and install new bearings with higher load and movement capacity.

I don't believe any of this is accidental.



Unaligned bearing



Aligned bearing

The concrete beams on which the funicular track is laid are supported by (replaceable) metal plates sandwiched between them and the pillars. These bearings are designed to allow a certain amount of movement from weight transfer as the train moves over them, expansion/contraction from changes in temperature, seismic movements etc. On one side of the funicular these bearings sit in grooves, allowing only up and down movement, but on the other side are free, allowing sideways expansion and contraction.



The groove with the line inside marked by the arrow showing the extent of movement along it – in this case, the movement appears to have been within normal tolerances

The basic problem, as shown in the top right photo above, is that many of the bearings are now no longer aligned properly (the plates should re-align in average temperatures when the train is not in use). This suggests that the pillars must have moved and explains the exploratory investigations that have taken place around the pillar bases.

I have been informed, by people far more knowledgeable than me, that between 20 and 30 of the pillars appear to have permanently misaligned bearings. I had hoped the detailed structural engineers report might provide confirmation of this but, since HIE appear to want to keep this secret, believe its in the public interest that people are made aware of the likely extent of the problems. While the numbers may not be exactly right, HIE's admission that any works may take more than the summer to fix, suggest both that the fundamental problem is that pillars have moved and that the number involved is extensive.

The interesting question is why this should have happened? Does it stem from an original fault in the design or has the problem been created more recently? One possible explanation, which I have mentioned before on parkswatch, is that funicular railways normally operate underground in tunnels

where there is limited temperature variation between winter and summer. Could the extremely hot weather in May, with temperatures of over 25C recorded on Speyside, and the sun beating down on one side of the funicular have exceeded the design specification? Could expansion of the track have shifted the pillars? This explanation however does not appear to explain which pillars have been affected. Alongside the new Shieling Rope tow there is a continuous row of 12-13 pillars where the bearings appear misaligned but above the mid-station the affected pillars appear more random. Does the explanation lie in ground movement and could it be therefore that the works that took place to install the Shieling Rope have somehow contributed to the problem? For example, could the alterations in drainage caused by the Sheiling works, accentuated by the hot weather, have caused the neighbouring funicular pillars here to move?

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Works in 2016 took place outwith the area granted planning permission for the shieling rope tow and close to the funicular

If so, HIE's failure to ensure the Shieling planning conditions were adhered to and that work was confined to the designated area ([see here](#)) would have really come home to roost.

Both these suggestions are simply hypotheses but do I hope show why its so important that HIE releases the report into the public realm and it explains what has caused the problems. Without a satisfactory explanation of the causes of the problems, no lessons can be learned (or legal action taken if appropriate), there will be no guarantee that the problems won't recur and it will be impossible to provide realistic estimates of the cost of repairs..

HIE's assumptions about the future of the funicular

Without providing any indication of the likely costs and without any consultation with the local community and stakeholders, HIE's announcement last week basically said that the funicular will be repaired. That is wrong.

The problem is that for twenty-five years HIE has been obsessed with the idea of the funicular, to the degree that it cannot envisage any alternatives and is deaf to all criticism. The latest issue of the Cairngorms Campaigner, the excellent newsletter of the Cairngorm Campaign (I am a member), contains a facsimile of a letter sent to the Secretary of State for Scotland in June 1996 objecting to the funicular. The lead signatory was David Attenborough and it was signed by a number of other famous people such as Colin Baxter, Chris Bonnington, David Bellamy and Chris Packham alongside a host of experts. The last three reasons it gave for questioning the funicular are as relevant as ever:

- *the commercial viability of the project has been widely and authoritatively questioned*
- *the financial support sought by this project represents poor value for money to the taxpayer; and*
- *alternative, environmentally sustainable and more economically viable development options are available and should be considered.*

Deja vu! Yet, despite having now had to rescue Cairngorm Mountain from bankruptcy twice in the intervening years, on both occasions in large part due to the financial dead weight of the funicular, HIE ploughs on as if nothing has changed.

HIE is only able to do this because it has never been held to account. Even Audit Scotland's report into the funicular fiasco simply washed over it.

I was in Aviemore a couple of weeks ago and, despite the lack of snow and the lack of the funicular, the place was heaving. Its like that much of the year now with tourist numbers steadily increasing. The fact is that the funicular is not very important to the local economy. What is important for attracting visitors is the natural environment, the qualities that led to the Cairngorms being designated a National Park.

Yet HIE is still stuck on a model of providing a permanent year built visitor "attraction" at Cairngorm. Hence why, as I discovered recently, almost the first thing it did on setting up Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd was to inform the Cairngorms National Park Authority that it wished to go ahead still with the Ptarmigan Planning Application. That was BEFORE it had any idea of what the costs of repairing

the funicular might be. That is not rational behaviour.

This is not to suggest that downhill skiing does not still make an important contribution to the Speyside economy in the winter months. It does and it provides a unique outdoor recreational experience in Scotland. With global warming, however, and less snowy winters, any future plan for Cairngorm needs to look ahead and consider what happens if, as appears likely, there is even less snow than now. I am confident, based on the numbers of people now visiting in winter, that the local economy will adapt. Meantime, downhill skiing on the model that has been developed by Scotland's other ski resorts could be sustainable, but it needs to be planned for on the basis that there is unlikely to be extensive skiing every winter, that the ski lifts should be used for other purposes (e.g mountain biking) and should be designed and located in a way that is compatible with the area being a National Park.



View over the middle section of Coire na Ciste. A new lift to mid-height could also be used for mountain biking without posing any threat to the sensitive Cairngorm plateau

What is now needed, is a cost/benefit analysis of putting in new ski lifts which takes account of the importance of downhill skiing for active outdoor recreation and the opportunities for mountain bike trails along with a discussion of how the conservation value of the ski area can be enhanced.

That needs to be considered alongside a cost/benefit analysis of repairing the funicular, including whether the cost of repairs and proposed improvements to the associated infrastructure are ever likely to pay for themselves. This should not be difficult to do. HIE has all the figures for visitor numbers and with two structural engineering reports should be able to provide accurate costs for repairing the funicular. All this information needs to be put on the table for the local community and other stakeholders as a basis for some open and honest discussion.

Unfortunately, that appears unlikely to happen without political intervention. What HIE appears set on doing is thrusting its own solution on the public, on a take it or leave it basis, without any real consultation. This is what it did with its ill-thought out new vision for Cairngorm announced last October ([see here](#)). That vision is now in tatters, with the chances of the public purse being able to fund both the repair of the funicular and fantasy projects like the zipwire being minimal.

What needs to happen

Now that HIE has rescued Cairngorm Mountain from the clutches of Natural Retreats, there is no need for it to remain in charge of what happens at Cairngorm. Indeed, all the evidence shows it would best be kept out of the decision making process. Its role should be limited to financing any new development that is agreed and to financing the restoration of all the damage that has taken place under its aegis, including the cost of removing the funicular if that proves to be no longer financially viable.

The local community, in consultation with recreational and conservation organisations, should now play the key role in determining what happens at Cairngorm. To do so they need support and that needs to come from other public authorities. While it makes sense to transfer the Cairngorm Estate to Forest Enterprise in the first instance, so all the land from Loch Morlich to the summit of Cairn Gorm is owned by one body, the Cairngorms National Park Authority has an important role to play in ensuring that any future developments are worthy of a National Park. Forest Enterprise is responsible to the same Scottish Cabinet Secretary as HIE, Fergus Ewing, and so very unlikely to speak out. Perhaps therefore it's time for the CNPA, which appears to be constantly pressurised by Mr Ewing but is not directly accountable to him, to start taking a lead?

Category

1. Cairngorms

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1. CNPA
2. HIE
3. landscape
4. Local communities

- 5. natural retreats
- 6. Scottish Government

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