

Mystery about Ciste charity cash donation still remains

QUESTIONS are still to be answered after the Save the Ciste Campaign's Freedom of Information request to the Highlands and Islands Enterprise over charity monies still be paid from the sale of equipment from the coire two years ago.

After last week's story "The wall is over", one was raised by Aviemore-based David Ritchie & Sons Ltd.

Director Brian Ritchie wrote: "Your article makes mention of a local scrap metal merchant being in the process of gathering the relative paperwork, which in turn will enable the payment being made to the relevant charity organisations.

"I feel we must make it clear that our company are in no way connected to this matter and that no scrap metal whatsoever from the Coire na Ciste project came to our company.

"We would be very grateful if mention of this could be made in the very next issue of the Strathly and it is made clear that our company is not involved in this matter at all."

HIE had told the campaigners: "The contractor (McGowan Ltd, Aviemore) is presently pulling together the paperwork received from the local scrap merchant to establish the final value of the scrap metal debris. Details can be provided in due course."

We asked HIE to name the scrap merchant this week but a spokesman was unable to: "With various people on leave this week it would be difficult to get to that level of detail. It might be easier if you contact the contractor as they would have been the link with the scrap merchant."

The question was referred to the contractors on Wednesday morning. We hope to have more on the issue for next week.

Funicular repair? Yeah but, no but...

By Tom Ramage
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THE Cairngorms funicular railway will definitely be repaired - maybe.

That was one of the major outcomes of Thursday's public meeting in Aviemore, which produced far more questions than answers.

But then the organisers, the Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust, were after all hoping for a healthy question and answers session in the Cairngorm Hotel, in their drive to bring as many people together.

As project manager Alex Ash told a very encouraging turnout: "A community-owned company with access to multiple funding sources, run for the benefit of local communities and visitors, is the most realistic way to achieve a sustainable, long-term future."

"We need to maintain engagement with the community."

All the same, the main speaker was very clearly the HIE owner, James Gibbs, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, who held every body's attention with his own update: "The intention is to repair the funicular - subject to final approval from the Scottish Government, and since all the costs are known," he said.

He was not able to go into those costs at this stage and needed everyone to appreciate



TOP TABLE: Getting the community show on the road last week with Mr Gibbs (second right) were AGCT drivers Alex Ash, Duncan Swartzick, Mike Deynham and Mike Gale.

that it was not in anyone's interests to jump the gun, as it were, with clearly a lot of work to be done yet.

The repairs needed to the structure are very extensive and the project involves the detailed peer-reviewed design for extensive repairs for the supporting structure and bearings.

"There are also challenges of co-ordinating the repairs with replacement of the computer control system and other essentials such as bogies, gearbox upgrades, tensioning systems, which were due for replacement

two years' time at the 20-year point, but which have been brought forward in order to avoid a second break in the funicular's operation."

Mr Gibbs insisted that HIE were working on the procurement of the consultants required to submit a planning application in the Cairngorms National Park and Highland Council, which would involve ecological reports and construction and restoration methodology.

He added: "We have an indicative cost of repairs, which

is less than the cost of removing the funicular.

"Releasing this figure at this stage, however, could prejudice our ability to obtain best value from the procurement."

"We will have an accurate cost of repair once we have concluded the procurement process and obtained all statutory comments."

HIE, he promised, would publish the costs when known, "at an appropriate point".

But one answer did come on the night: "The funicular will not

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Following Alan

Bratney's post [The Cairn Gorm Funicular: Repair or Remove?](#), on Thursday Highlands and Islands Enterprise revealed at a meeting organised by the Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust (see above) that they intend to repair the funicular as:

"We have an indicative cost of repairs, which is less than the costs of removing the funicular".

This post takes a critical look at HIE's claim.

The basis for HIE's claim is completely secret. They have produced no costs for the removal of the funicular and have not up till now said they were looking at this as an option. If HIE have done work on this, why not tell the public who has done the work and the basis of the estimated cost? This is important because there is no one basis for estimating the costs of removal which could vary significantly depending on whether, for example, all infrastructure (tunnel, pillar bases etc) was removed or whether HIE followed the approach they took in Coire na Ciste in 2017 when they removed

the lifts there. There, the bases for the lift pillars, for example, were removed to just 200mm below ground level – instead of being removed completely – and the total cost of the removal was just £267k ([see here](#)).

While Parkswatch has argued the standards applied to Coire na Ciste were unacceptably low and inappropriate for Cairn Gorm, were HIE to adopt a similar minimalist approach for Coire Cas the funicular could probably be removed for £1-2m. Leaving aside the question of standards, the repair costs for the funicular are likely to be far far more than that with HIE now admitting that the repairs needed are “very extensive”.

Incidentally its worth noting that the cost to the public purse of removing the lift infrastructure might have been even less if HIE had recovered the cost of the scrap metal. However, as the Save the Ciste Group has uncovered through FOI requests (see Strathy article above) HIE decided the value of the scrap metal should be donated to local charities. HIE’s incompetence at managing contracts is such that two years later this money has still not been handed over to the charities. Perhaps the police should be investigating whether anyone has profited from this failure?

On the other side of the equation, as the costs of repair are still being worked on and will be determined by a tender process, its hard to understand how can HIE KNOW these will be less than whatever the cost might be for removing the funicular. The key question here is how will HIE guarantee that the costs of repair won’t spiral out of control as they have done with the last two major procurement exercises they have conducted at Cairn Gorm?

HIE’s procurement record at Cairn Gorm

While the total cost of the Natural Retreats procurement debacle is still unknown ([see here](#)) – parkswatch is still on the case but the full truth is only likely to emerge if there is an investigation by the Scottish Parliament – we do know from the investigation by the Public Accounts Committee in 2010 that the original estimated costs for constructing the funicular, £14.8m, had almost doubled to £26.749m by the time it had been completed. Moreover, HIE’s contribution did double from an estimated £9.39m to £19.417.

As a consequences, the Public Accounts Committee in 2010 slammed HIE for failing to produce a proper business case finding that *“the project was pushed forward without proper regard to the risk to the public purse”*. The same appears to be happening all over again, with HIE having apparently decided to repair the funicular without any public business case or consideration of other options.

The short term costs of repairing the funicular, even if HIE claim these will include the cost of replacing parts which were due for renewal in two years time, are not the same at all as the long-term investment needed to maintain it. For example, how can the public be assured that further extensive repairs won’t be needed in 10 years time? (To assess that, HIE needs to make public what has caused the problems in the first place). That too needs to be included in the cost equation.

The Scottish Parliament’s Public Audit and Post Legislative Scrutiny Committee, which has replaced the Public Accounts Committee, needs to look at HIE’s mismanagement at Cairn Gorm and their proposals to repair the funicular BEFORE any more public money is wasted, not afterwards.

The case against repairing the funicular

Various posts on parkswatch have explained how the Cairn Gorm funicular has a number of built in inefficiencies that will not be removed by repairing it. These include the tunnel that gets blocked by snow in winter and needs to be cleared by hand, a mid-station that is not at mid point and therefore requires the funicular to stop twice and the inability of the funicular to operate at full speed due to design flaws. As a consequence it provides a very poor way of getting skiers up the mountain and there is no room to carry mountain bikers, which might have allowed creation of downhill mountain bike tracks from the midstation.

The snow sport statistics support this analysis. As other lifts have been closed and snowsports enthusiasts have been more and more reliant on the funicular to get up the mountain, they have been leaving Cairn Gorm in droves:

Scottish Ski Centre Skier Numbers and Market Shares 20									
Winter	CairnGorm		Glenshee		Lecht		Nevis Range		SK
	Skiers	% Market	Skiers	% Market	Skiers	% Market	Skiers	% Market	
2004	58,500	35.6%	27,471	16.7%	50,636	30.8%	20,855	12.7%	7
2005	55,586	37.8%	36,000	24.5%	25,252	17.2%	18,338	12.5%	12
2006	55,000	35.5%	42,460	27.4%	22,303	14.4%	18,430	11.9%	16
2007	38,553	48.8%	8,521	10.8%	13,200	16.7%	11,149	14.1%	7
2008	62,000	37.6%	39,007	23.6%	18,061	10.9%	23,021	13.9%	23
2009	65,000	40.7%	43,000	26.9%	19,110	12.0%	15,876	9.9%	16
2010	145,000	38.7%	116,614	31.1%	52,147	13.9%	34,686	9.3%	26
2011	121,000	41.8%	95,571	33.0%	40,678	14.0%	18,289	6.3%	14
2012	66,463	50.5%	33,947	25.8%	10,856	8.3%	9,788	7.4%	10
2013	113,000	38.8%	92,899	31.9%	44,429	15.3%	16,668	5.7%	24
2004 - 2013 Average	78,010	40.6%	53,549	25.2%	29,667	15.3%	18,710	10.4%	15
Winter	Skiers	% Market	Skiers	% Market	Skiers	% Market	Skiers	% Market	SK
2014	77,430	32.9%	84,397	35.9%	16,075	6.8%	25,711	10.9%	31
2015	76,588	33.2%	58,407	25.6%	31,218	13.4%	29,375	12.6%	35
2016	67,000	32.3%	59,126	28.5%	25,156	12.1%	26,760	12.9%	29
2017	21,267	39.6%	12,111	22.6%	4,002	7.5%	10,348	19.3%	5
2018	59,003	23.6%	76,367	30.6%	40,047	16.0%	33,000	13.2%	41
2014 - 2018 Average	60,258	32.3%	58,082	28.6%	23,300	11.2%	25,039	13.8%	28
Average Change	-17,753	-8.2%	4,533	3.5%	-6,368	-4.2%	6,329	3.4%	12

Figures courtesy of Save the Ciste

The winter market share of the ski business at Cairn Gorm had collapsed prior to the funicular being

taken out of service. Repairing it won't bring these customers back.

In summer, tourist numbers using the funicular have always been much lower than the original forecasts, which has meant it has failed to pay for itself. Repairing it will not change those numbers either. That means HIE will, besides the cost of repair, also need to push ahead with the inappropriate Planning Application ([see here](#)) to extend the Ptarmigan at the cost of another £2.5m. Those costs should be added to those of repairing the funicular and included in any business case.

Alongside this, if a Mountain Coaster were to be built on the Fiacaille Ridge, as proposed in the SE Group ([see here](#)), that is likely to have a negative impact on funicular passenger numbers with some tourists deciding that the thrill of a trip in open air is a better option than a trip up into the clag in the enclosed funicular system. It's also likely that the newly opened tube slide, which incidentally cannot be used in wet weather and has already suffered two closures since it opened, will also negatively affect tourist numbers using the funicular.

The wider problem is that all these facilities are inappropriately located and on the many days of poor weather experienced at Cairn Gorm hold no attractions for the general tourist. Most of the money HIE is proposing to spend on Cairn Gorm on summer visitors could be much better spent elsewhere.

The fundamental choice facing Cairn Gorm

The money required to fix the funicular and extend the Ptarmigan is likely to be substantial and the experience of the last twenty years provides plenty of evidence that it will never be recouped. Spend money on that and it's unlikely there will be any money to invest in new lift infrastructure. To put it bluntly, if the funicular is repaired, it appears likely that downhill skiing at Cairn Gorm will be finished. The challenge facing HIE and other Public Authorities is that under the Section 50 legal agreement, if the funicular ceases to be used, it must be removed. Now in principle I believe this is right, we shouldn't be leaving redundant infrastructure in place in our mountains, and certainly not in National Parks and places like Cairn Gorm. However, HIE left the Ciste lift towers in place for years – along with the option to re-open the lifts there in future – and there seems to me no reason why they could not do the same with the funicular and mothball it for the next few years. That would allow money to be invested in other things.

More specifically, mothballing the funicular would enable priority to be given to the mountain environment and to putting outdoor recreation at the heart of what happens at Cairn Gorm (snowsports, mountain biking lower down the mountain, wildlife watching etc). There is no point in HIE spending a fortune on snowmaking equipment without improved lift infrastructure. That is necessary to save downhill skiing on the mountain and reverse the decline in market share which has done so much harm to the local tourist economy over the winter months.

Beyond this, repairing all the damage that has been done to the mountain environment at Cairn Gorm is likely to make a far greater and more sustainable contribution to the local economy than tourist "attractions" which would be better located lower down the mountain or elsewhere. Cairn Gorm, because of its accessibility, has real potential to allow a different type of tourism experience based on its natural beauty and enabling people to experience a series of ecological zones from Caledonian forest, up through a montane scrub zone to the high tops. For that to work, however, there needs to be some investment in environmental improvements – e.g addressing the car park eyesores, dilapidated buildings and poor visitor facilities (toilets, cafes etc) – and in ecological restoration. That I believe, rather than repair of the funicular, would be in accord with the principles for future development at Cairn Gorm adopted by the Cairngorms National Park Authority earlier this year ([see here](#)).

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