

Beyond the Funicular (1)

Description

This is the first of four posts for Parkswatch Scotland (summarised on the Winter Highland forum) about alternative short term options to fixing the Cairn Gorm funicular. The first post will deal with some of the issues raised in my planning objection to its repair ([see here for background](#)). It will be followed by three posts outlining potential projects at the Lecht, Cairn Gorm and Glen Coe, that should total a similar capital outlay but bring much greater and wider benefits.

Post 1 – Why not the funicular?

On Friday 24th July, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) published a document 'Towards a vision and masterplan' ([see here](#)) – this follows on from public consultations taken during the 2020 snowsports season.

Arguably the most significant phrase in the entire document is the first of the key assumptions: *"The funicular railway will be operational"*. That assumption wholly prejudices the entire master planning process, by definition it locks in a Coire Cas centric and funicular based future. Whereas the master planning process should be a much wider appraisal of all options that assesses not just the best route forward for Cairn Gorm but seeks a sustainable and integrated approach for both the mountain and Glenmore corridor.

On 22nd May the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) approved HIE's planning application for repair of the Cairn Gorm funicular ([see here](#)). However, given the required level of funding is outwith HIE's normal budget capabilities, the ultimate decision on whether to repair the funicular now rests with the Scottish Ministers.

From information given in public statements and made at public events regarding the funicular, the project looks to have costs in the region of £14-£20m:

Estimated costs are attributed as:

- £10-£15m provisional estimate for repair of Funicular Viaduct.
- £2.5-£3m redevelopment of Ptarmigan Station.
- £2m estimate for upgrading / replacement of running gear, rolling stock & safety / control systems of the Funicular.



Snow burial of the track and subsequent digging out may have contributed to the funicular's structural issues. The proposed repairs though modest in comparison to the scale of the viaduct will nonetheless exacerbate problematic snow accumulation at the funicular viaduct.

Substantial though these costs are, they fail to address any of the funicular's shortcomings and operational issues. The funicular was predicated on being a reliable form of uplift on a mountain notorious for adverse weather conditions, but wind tolerance is only one factor.

Burial of the tunnel entrance and funicular track is a recurring problem, causing frequent delayed openings and many days with no funicular service at all in winter. Most damaging is that the biggest problems occur when there is extensive and deep snow cover on the mountain, meaning it is when potential demand for snowsports and winter sightseeing is at a peak that the funicular is most frequently out of service.

Indeed far from proving more reliable, the stats for February (which is the most commercially critical month of the season with half term) from the 10 years prior to the funicular ceasing operations in autumn 2018 show that the funicular was out of service an average of 8.5 days in February, compared with 4.5 days for the Nevis Range Gondola and 5 days for Glencoe's Access Chairlift respectively. Being able to reopen promptly when a storm abates and snow conditions are good is of much greater commercial importance than being able to uplift skiers in a 70mph wind.

In their report to HIE in 2018, SE Group noted that the funicular cannot in practice operate at its nominal 1200 persons per hour capacity. That requires a departure every 6 minutes, while the shortest permissible journey time is 4 minutes, giving only 2 minutes for unloading and loading of the cars. Operational reality is load times alone are around 6 minutes and to keep turnarounds from considerably exceeding that only 100 passengers are usually loaded. Thus even at full speed, only 6 departures an hour are achieved, giving a practical max capacity of just 600 passengers per hour.

The mid-station not being at the mid point of the track requires a double stop when in use and this effectively limits the funicular to one uplift every 15 minutes. Applying the same criteria of loading only 100 person per car means in practice only 400 an hour get uplifted to the Ptarmigan and only 200 an hour from each station if split equitably. The latter figure that is only ONE THIRD of the 600 passengers per hour that both the White Lady and Carpark Chairlifts were individually capable of carrying up the mountain.

The funicular railway is dysfunctional in winter, it is low capacity, high cost and sucks up a disproportionate amount of staff time / resources dealing with track burials and burial of the tunnel entrance. This has knock on effects delaying opening of other uplift and terrain which only serves to further degrade the snowsports customer's experience.

Background to the Funicular Planning Application

Removal of the Funicular viaduct would very substantially reduce the visual intrusion of the snowsports area from the wider strath and thus would significantly improve the landscape qualities of Cairn Gorm Mountain, while also improving snow holding of the signature White Lady Run and allowing more appropriate uplift to be installed.



HIE's planning application heavily leaned on the already substantial visual impact of the funicular viaduct and rested on the claimed economic importance of the funicular – as per paragraph 6.1 of the supporting statement:

6.1 The CairnGorm Mountain Funicular has contributed significantly, during the past two decades, to a sustainable economy in Aviemore and the Spey Valley, and to the Highlands in general. It has helped extend visitor numbers and economic activity beyond the core tourist season and assist in the aspirations for a more viable year round economy.

HIE failed to provide any supporting evidence for the various bold economic claims contained within the planning application's supporting statement.

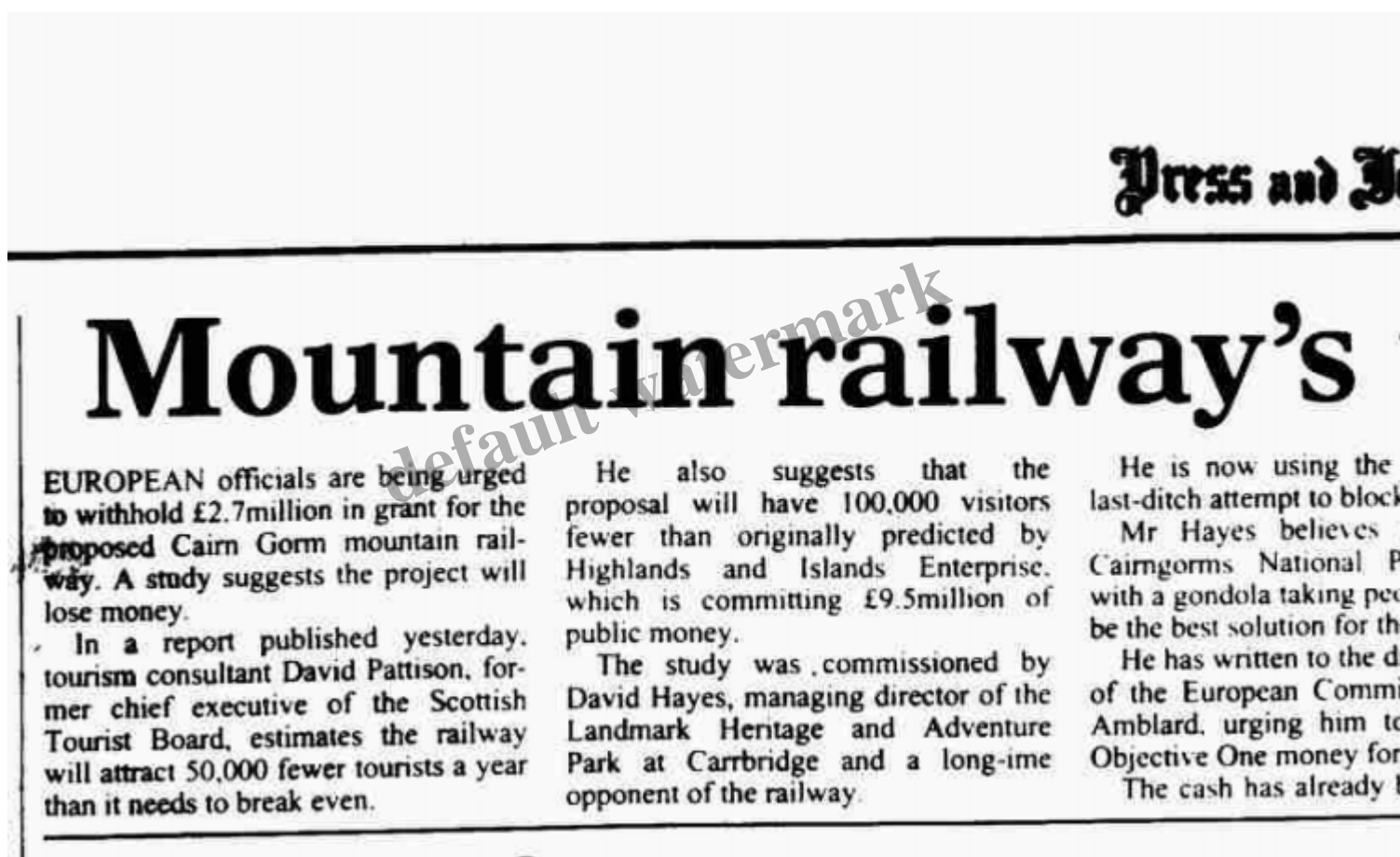
In the Guardian on Wednesday 28th April 1999, David Hayes from Landmark Forest Adventure Park was quoted:

"The project is without any doubt, commercially unviable."

With hindsight it is difficult not to concur with David Hayes statement because:

- Cairngorm Mountain Limited (CML) accumulated £2.753 million of losses during the period the funicular and the current Ptarmigan Restaurant were both in full operation.
- Cairngorm Mountain's operator was twice taken into public ownership by HIE, firstly in 2008 (to stave off a formal insolvency) and again in 2018 (after entering administration).

David Pattison (former head of the Scottish Tourist Board) projected the non ski season visitor numbers for the Funicular would be between 77,000 to 104,000 and that annual funicular usage would be some 50,000 plus below the breakeven point of viability for the Funicular.



In the final 3 full summer trading periods for the funicular the number of funicular visitors outwith the snowsports season were:

2015: 83,017

2016: 96,099

2017: 91,304

Thus contrary to the oft stated mantra of providing skiing as a service off the back of the funicular as the core business, the reality was snowsports was subsidising the funicular. This was to the substantial detriment of the business and customer experience as both the extent and capacity of uplift

were significantly reduced over the years.

In 2015 CML's financial year changed from the fiscal year to the calendar year, posting a shortened accounting period covering April to Dec 2015. This provides a unique insight into the financial reality of CML in summer with the funicular in operation. Over the 'summer' trading period in 2015 CML posted a loss of £1.248 million.

The Cairngorms National Park Authority's Local Development Plan 2020 evidence paper notes that there has been a 13.4% increase in visitors to the national park between 2009 and 2016. However over the same period non-snowsports funicular usage actually declined by 3%.

The evidence on the ground post the funicular closure suggests Aviemore's summer trade has continued to be strong, which suggests that the Funicular is far from being a driver of the area's summer tourism industry.

Indeed the real benefit of CairnGorm Mountain to Strathspey is that through snowsports it has a unique capacity to bolster a year round visitor market. The very fact that visitor numbers to Cairn Gorm peak in the winter and are out of sync with the wider summer peak in Strathspey is not a weakness, it is a strength. That is why making a success of snowsports is critical to realising the mountain's potential economic benefits to the local community.

A survey of the Loch Morlich Winterhighland webcam at 1pm during the months of May to September in 2013, 2014 and 2015 indicate that even during the core summer trading months the Ptarmigan Restaurant at the top of the funicular Railway is in cloud 1 day in 3 on average. This contrasts to the Base Station being in cloud an average of just 1 day in 35. The difference suggests that the Ptarmigan is too high up the mountain to optimise the potential of CairnGorm for paid sightseeing.

It is clear that the funicular railway is not the economic success and importance that HIE proclaims, rather the funicular has been a financial millstone around the neck of CML that has directly contributed to the run down and derelict nature of the built environment on CairnGorm and related loss of uplift and catering capacity.

Prejudging the Master Plan

As I explained in my full objection to the planning application to repair the funicular ([see here](#)), the case for repairing the Cairn Gorm funicular is very weak. HIE is seeking to spend a substantial sum of public funds to restore a failed status quo that has proven itself to be economically unviable.

Planning officers asserted to the planning committee meeting on Friday 22nd May 2020 that repairing the funicular would not prejudice a future master plan for CairnGorm because it would not prevent other projects being taken forward.

That position is just not tenable, repairing the funicular wholly prejudices the master planning process because it:

- Excludes evaluating the future of the funicular against the bigger picture.

- Prevents a 'blank canvas' approach to the mountain, to re-imagine the snowsports area to make it more attractive, efficient and sustainable.
- Locks in the current failed funicular centric strategy.
- Locks in a Coire Cas base & road accessed future.
- Uses up limited public funded capital which is no longer available for projects in the master plan.

Repairing the funicular and locking in Coire Cas as the sole base effectively excludes development of modest accommodation offerings similar to Glencoe's in the vicinity of the Coire na Ciste car park. A small scale development which could considerably contribute to a sustainable business on the mountain, without significant revenue extraction from the wider strath.

Good value, even basic on mountain accommodation has the potential to turn a portion of present day trippers into short stay visitors who would not consider staying in Aviemore or outlying villages, as they would still have to get in their car to drive to the mountain. This would turn single day visits into two or more day visits.

Realistically such accommodation would need to be in Coire na Ciste where the base area is at a lower elevation, less exposed and not reliant on the most difficult to keep open sections of the ski road into and out of Coire Cas.

The Master Plan draft document published on 24th July alludes to the need to replace the Daylodge building in Coire Cas, to provide modern base facilities and to develop the long talked about 'National Centre for the Mountain Environment'. Putting these facilities in Coire na Ciste or Glenmore would likely give more facilities for a given budget, have less visual impact and benefit economically from more reliable and weather resilient access.

Beyond the funicular – short term alternative investments

In considering short term alternatives to repair of the funicular, any project should not prejudge the potential for rebalancing the snowsports area between Coire Cas and Coire na Ciste, nor force a commitment to either coire as the base nor effectively exclude the potential for removal of the public ski road at a future date.

The historical development of Cairn Gorm into a two base ski area happened for a reason, the lie of the land, the shape of the mountain and the hugely exposed Windy Ridge dividing the two developed corries. This means Cairn Gorm is ill suited to a single base above the treeline.

Given the current circumstances surrounding the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic it is critical that public expenditure is well thought through. Publicly funded capital investment into the snowsports sector should be spread more widely than just Cairn Gorm and into projects delivering real improvements that increase capacity and drive strong returns on investments for local areas in the Highlands.

It is inevitable that as long as the corona crisis lasts, the funicular will remain a deeply unattractive form of uplift compared to open chairlifts or small cabins that can be occupied privately by groups / families.

Given the role HIE plays on Cairn Gorm, I have considered options across the four snowsports areas

within the HIE funding area, these being the Lecht, Glencoe and Nevis Range in addition to Cairn Gorm (Glen Shee is outwith the HIE area). My objective was to identify clearly beneficial stand alone projects that would total a roughly similar amount of capital investment to the proposed funicular repairs that could be brought forward to construction relatively swiftly.

Nevis Range has a relatively modern lift network, in terms of capacity it reasonably matches terrain and it experiences significant queues less frequently. In contrast the single seater Cliffhanger Chair at Glencoe sticks out as somewhat archaic in uplift capacity terms and is substantially below terrain capacity.

Thus considering the above the following projects are proposed as short term infrastructure investments as an alternative to fixing the Cairn Gorm funicular. These projects should be brought forward both asap and as close to concurrently as possible:

- CAIRNGORM: White Lady Express high speed detachable chairlift.
- LECHT: Quad Chairlift to replace the Harrier and Falcon Pomas.
- GLENCOE: Triple Chair to replace Cliffhanger Chair.

The Cairn Gorm proposal will allow all ability levels of skiers to reach the Ptarmigan Bowl once again in the short term, while not prejudicing the future redevelopment options for the mountain. These three projects will be expanded upon in subsequent posts here on Parkswatch.

Fixing the funicular is almost certain to sound the death knell for CairnGorm Mountain after a short term dead cat bounce. The commercial unviability of the funicular, as evidenced by two business failures and the poor condition of the facility, means restoring the status quo offers little hope of the operator being able to raise £20-£30m of capital investment required for the SE Group vision on commercial terms.

Without the means to raise capital to invest further, a retreat to the Ciste & Ptarmigan, plus Coire Cas T-bars, as the Pomas become uneconomically life expired, seems to be both inevitable and the closest Cairn Gorm could get to the SE Group vision.

The problem then would be a snowsports area far below the capacity required to sustain the cost of operating the dysfunctional funicular railway. Either ongoing public subsidy or taxpayers footing the final removal of the ski area would be the remaining options.

Repair of the funicular is beyond HIE's normal budget capabilities and therefore the final decision now rests with the Scottish Ministers. HIE are due to submit a full business plan and options appraisal this summer. It is vital the Scottish Ministers consider all the evidence and not merely base their decision on the seemingly impenetrable sophistry emanating from HIE.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

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Date Created

July 28, 2020

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