

The Scottish Government and the funicular at Cairn Gorm

Description

Most of my working life has been as a mechanic in various fields from commercial to private vehicles, so I have a practical and varied knowledge of mechanical engineering. In writing posts for parkswatch, I would hope it is obvious that I haven't done all the work myself. I have been advised and assisted by a number of individuals who are qualified in their areas of expertise and whose help has then been translated into the kind of language that the ordinary person can understand. Many have extensive knowledge of Cairn Gorm and some were even involved in the Lurchers' Gully Public Inquiry back in 1982! My thanks to all of those people.

When it was announced in the Herald that the Scottish Government had considered withdrawing funding for the funicular repairs and closing down the business Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd ([see here](#)), some of us realised that we could be facing the end of snow sports on the hill within a few years. I consequently emailed Mr Ivan McKee, the business minister responsible, whose concerns were revealed by the Herald. I was delighted to secure a face to face meeting with him on Tuesday 05/07/2022 at the government buildings in Glasgow for myself and an invited team of five others, each with different areas of expertise and hopefully representing the feelings of many snow sports enthusiasts throughout the U.K.

We presented Mr McKee a draft report on the funicular, which will be published soon in further parkswatch posts, and made a number of requests which are set out below. The meeting was very positive and an offer was also made to arrange a meeting with local business leaders and another with the operators of a ski resort in Italy. The meeting with business leaders was arranged by a member of the team and took place in Aviemore on Tuesday 30/08/2022. More about that in a further post.

Our requests to Ivan McKee at the meeting on 5th July 2022

These requests arose from our analysis of the problems facing Cairngorm Mountain and the potential solutions we set out in our draft report written in response to the financial crisis facing Cairn Gorm. The reasoning behind each request lies in the corresponding section of the draft report.

Request 1 That the Minister seeks independent advice from qualified experts who are completely independent of HIE about the likely final cost of the repairs and for how long they are likely to work. While we appreciated this may be difficult to do, we asked the Minister to consider halting the repairs until then or at least suspend further expenditure on the replacement / modernisation of the control / drive systems, running gear and rolling stock until independent reports on the life span of the viaduct repairs have been received and understood.

Request 2 That while some of the design flaws in the funicular should have been fixed by Highlands and Island Enterprise (HIE) long ago, we didn't believe the Minister should ask HIE to fix them now as that would be more good money after bad. Instead, we asked the Minister to consider whether the

funicular is really central to the future of Cairn Gorm as HIE would have the public believe.

Request 3 That the Minister endorse the need for an alternative business case because, whether the repairs are completed or not, the funicular is never going to be a viable financial proposition and will drain money out of HIE that would be better spent elsewhere.

Request 4 Given the great pressure on public finances at this time with the Scottish Government facing many competing priorities we suggested it would be much better use of public money and better for the local economy if the Minister asked HIE to spend what money it has on infrastructure that will support “intermediate” outdoor recreation user in the form of snowsports and mountain biking than on trying to keep the funicular going. Such infrastructure would also have the potential to provide a much better general visitor experience in the northern Cairngorms than is presently available.

Request 5 That the Minister recognise the need to transfer the ownership and management of the Cairngorm Estate away from HIE, apart from the liabilities associated with the funicular, and explore how HIE could retain responsibility for that while freed from other ownership and management responsibilities.

Request 6 That the Minister initiates discussions with Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS) with a view to transferring the land Cairn Gorm to them and considers how this could be done. As an immediate step, however, we recommended the setting up of an Advisory Forum, along the lines proposed by Forestry Commission Scotland in 2006, to provide strategic guidance on the way forward for the whole mountain, from Glenmore to the summit of Cairn Gorm. While either FLS or the Cairngorms National Park Authority could chair such a Forum, we asked the Minister to consider chairing the first meeting of such a Forum to establish quite clearly amongst all participants the Scottish Government’s desire for cooperation and coordination between all stakeholders to resolve ongoing problems.

Request 7 That the Minister support our proposal that the Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust (AGCT) is asked to develop an alternative Outline Business Case in consultation with the Advisory Forum, as outlined above, and the local community.

The discussion at the meeting

We had what we regarded as a very positive discussion with Mr McKee. He listened, asked good questions and was very open about his concerns. Rather than trust us on that though, I am pleased to publish here – with their permission – the notes taken by the civil servants at the meeting. I and other members of the delegation might of course have put this very slightly differently (it’s never easy to record wide ranging and open discussion) but the point is that for the first time since the funicular was mooted, the Scottish Government appears to be taking what critics are saying seriously.

Key Points

“The delegation made the following points during the discussion:

- Concerns were raised about the viability of the funicular. Assessment of documents released

under FoI did not clearly state a specific cause of failure. It was felt that the geology of the area (including presence of water springs) and lack of maintenance meant that the structure was destined to repeatedly fail.

- The issue of snow burial was raised, with the tunnel mouth seemingly regularly filling with snow meaning the funicular cannot be used.
- Questions were raised over the economic benefits of the funicular with empirical data referenced showing that the funicular has no effect on local business.
- The delegation stated that the uplift capacity of the funicular was less than the design capacity, meaning fewer can get to the top of the mountain which in turn impacts on the snowsports potential.
- They were clear that chairlifts and gondolas were a cheaper, more effective and more suitable alternative but felt this had been dismissed out of hand by HIE
- There was discussion about why customers may be choosing to ski elsewhere with the delegation feeling that the lack of chairlifts made Cairngorm an unattractive option, other areas with newer chairlifts were attracting more visitors. Design faults in the location of the Ptarmigan restaurant were highlighted and the group was critical of HIE's approach to diversification, stating that children's attractions and 'magic carpets' for mountain bikers were unsuitable.
- The removal of the funicular was discussed, including the ways in which the land could be restored. The delegation felt that grinding down the concrete posts to around 300mm beneath ground level would enable the land and vegetation to grow over them, therefore restoring the land in a less expensive and easier way than full removal. They felt this had not been explored by HIE.
- The delegation was critical of HIE's overall approach to the funicular, feeling it was focussed on reinstatement and therefore had not seriously examined other options. It was also felt that HIE was dismissive of ideas and offers of support from local business and community groups.
- In terms of solutions, the group felt that removing the whole estate from HIE ownership would be an important step, with HIE retaining liabilities for the funicular. They felt that FLS would be a better owner and would engage the community more effectively, harnessing their interest, passion and private sector contacts in order to make the mountain an economic success. “

At the end of the meeting Mr McKee committed to undertake certain actions which were again recorded by the civil servants:

- **“Mr McKee to ask HIE for sight of a ‘long list’ of options that were considered before the short list noted in the Business Case were settled upon.**
- **Mr McKee agreed to share the delegation’s report with HIE and ask for a response to the points raised**
- **Mr McKee also agreed to meet with tourism representatives when he visits Aviemore later in the year. The delegation agreed to identify suitable contacts and work with SG on logistics. “**

While we are still to hear HIE's response to the first two points, the action that was within Mr McKee's control, the meeting in Aviemore, did take place as I noted above.

More to follow!

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. funicular
3. HIE
4. outdoor recreation
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