

The Cairn Gorm funicular: a national embarrassment and a gross waste of public funds.

## Description



People working at height on Saturday to repair the funicular in Force 12 South Westerlies with gusts of over 100mph recorded at the weather station on the top of Cairn Gorm. It would appear HIE are determined to get the funicular re-opened whatever the health and safety risks.

The funicular railway on Cairn Gorm was returned to service in late January 2023 after having been closed for repairs since October 2018. Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) committed >£26m to the work that it had deemed a better option for the future of the CairnGorm Mountain business than removing it. The eye watering final (?) bill was well in excess of the original budget and additional finance had to be approved and provided by the Scottish Government. Whether HIE will have to repay that with the settlement of the funicular courts cases [\(see here\)](#) is still not clear.



Limited capacity, speed restrictions and a midstation with two halts, one for the carriage going up and one for the carriage going down, mean the funicular is a poor form of uplift for skiers and non-skiers alike.

The decision to repair funicular in the first place was highly questionable simply because it has never and will never carry anywhere near sufficient passenger numbers to make it financially self-sustaining.

In the first 5 years of its operation the funicular carried an annual average of 174,935 passengers and in the 5 years to 2015 it carried an annual average of 124,272 passengers. That's close to a 30% reduction in passenger numbers and ought to have been a major factor in the repair or removal decision.

Additionally, it was very obvious that the funicular was continually dragging the business down to the extent that there wasn't any money for the thorough maintenance and upkeep of other infrastructure. An example is the £1.1m that HIE provided for improvements to buildings and uplift when they made the major strategic blunder of hiving the business off to a private operator, Natural Retreats, in 2014. Another, the more recent repair work to the upper Cas car park, which had been allowed to deteriorate into a deplorable state, came in at close to £1m.



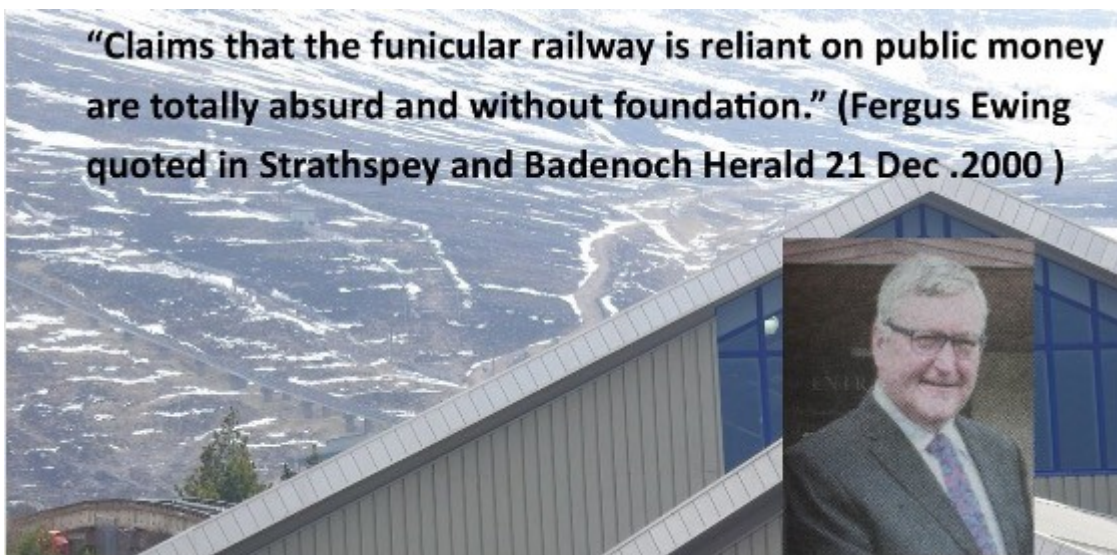
The dilapidations are far from fixed. A simple walk around the Day Lodge and a look at the building and environs will show anyone just how poorly maintained it has all become. HIE/CMSL have said they intend to replace it, eventually, but where will the capital be found to do this?

The average passenger numbers are falling because a ride on the funicular is generally not on the list for tourists who have done it in previous years. Clearly, there are not sufficient numbers of first time tourists in the area each year to keep the funicular passenger numbers high. It might be expected that numbers will continue to gradually decline, making this gross loss-maker even more of a financial burden.

HIE has pushed the line that the CairnGorm Mountain Business is a key driver of the local economy. That is certainly arguable in respect to snowsports but what isn't arguable is the fact that the funicular itself is most certainly not a key economic driver. It's has been largely out of service for the last 5 years, during which time Badenoch and Strathspey has continued to be busy and relatively prosperous. Shortages of staff continue to be the major inhibitor on business, not the closure of the funicular.

Politicians bear a major responsibility here. Those closely associated with the funicular should have been well enough informed to know that the funicular was a major loss maker and, if repaired, it would require a considerable public subsidy, into the future.

Even back in December 2000 it was clear that HIE would be continuing to pay for all hardware replacements/renewals into the future including: 1. Haul Rope; 2. Counter Rope; 3. Rail; 4. Motor Invertors Control; 5. Electric Motors [2 @ 500Kw]; 6. Standby Generators top; 7. Hydrostatic Drive; 8. Gearbox; 9. Bogie including 3 Track Brakes; 10. Carriage Replacement; 11. Train Control Computer. That list makes it very evident that a public subsidy **would** be required into the future quite apart from the annual operational losses



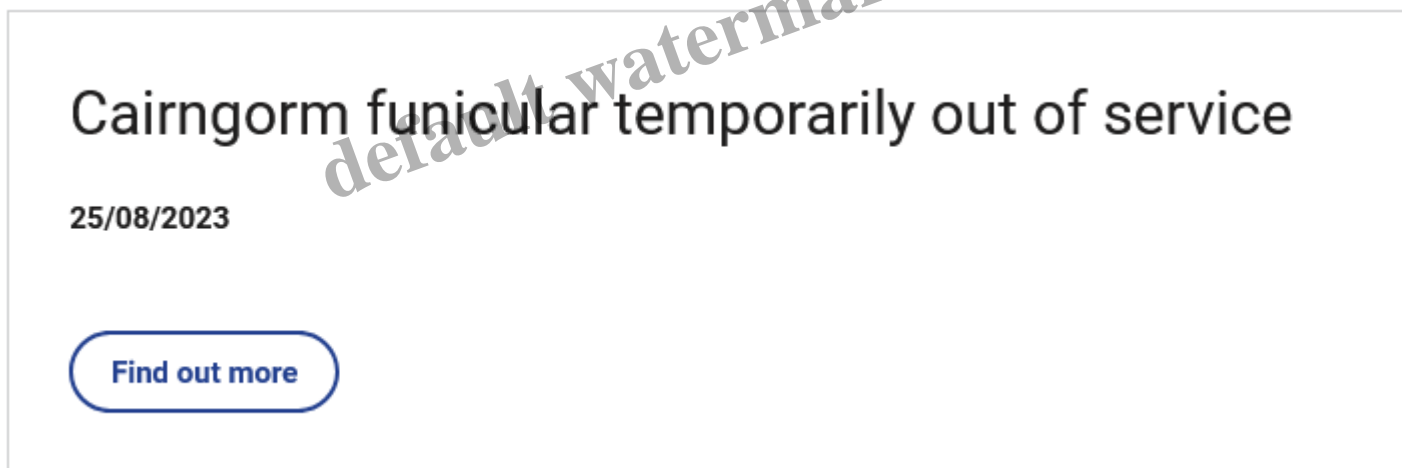
We might have expected that a Cabinet Minister, having been so poorly informed at the time that the funicular first went into service, would have ensured that he'd all the facts in the future. Regrettably, that statement, which should have haunted Fergus Ewing, failed to teach him anything and he bears

primary responsibility for inexplicably agreeing the business case ([see here](#)) which allowed the funicular repairs to proceed.

The decision to provide further £millions when the repairs considerably overran the budget wasn't Fergus Ewing's to make as he'd been removed from the Scottish Cabinet by then. The minister in charge was Ivan McKee MSP and to his credit he did question whether the funds should be withheld and the business closed down. However, it probably wasn't politically expedient to take the hard decision and the go ahead to proceed was given. It would seem likely that it was concluded that stopping the work after many millions had been committed would be seen as a scandal and not something that the Scottish Government was prepared to do. The scandal is much bigger today and how they must wish they could turn the clock back

After re-opening, the funicular was subsequently closed on Tuesdays and Wednesdays during the months of May and June 2023 to enable what were termed as 'Tidying Up' works. Alarms bells should have been sounding at St Andrew's House at that point in time.

On the 26 August 2023 the funicular was suddenly pulled from service right on the cusp of the busiest weekend of the summer season. HIE/CMSL put the closure down to 'Snagging Works' and it was to last for a week.



Screenshots from news section HIE website

## Cairngorm funicular expected to return to service during

06/09/2023

The funicular railway at Cairngorm Mountain, near Aviemore, could be back in service before the end of this

[Find out more](#)

## Cairngorm funicular works to continue into October

26/09/2023

[Find out more](#)

## Cairngorm funicular works set to continue into November

13/10/2023

[Find out more](#)

The reopening date was pushed back on no less than 7 occasions until finally HIE/CMSL wakened up to the reality of the fact that they didn't actually have a clue about when it might re-open. In a press release on the HIE website on 28 November they decided to stop making fools of themselves and ceased referring to the works as 'Snagging Works' Everyone who has been taking even a passing interest in this debacle has been sure for some time that serious engineering difficulties had been encountered and there was to be no 'Quick Fix'

It is clear that HIE/CMSL have not yet given up on the funicular for the forthcoming snowsports season and workmen can be seen on the tracks every decent and now not so decent day.



Workmen on the tracks during the w/end of 2/3 December. The metal brackets in the photo are to prevent the scarf joints breaking up.

HIE/CMSL are now saying that it will not be back in service for their announced opening date for the snowsport season, 22nd December. With the festive holidays beginning around that time then a significant loss of potential revenue is assured. Unless HIE manage to shortcut safety checks and persuade the Dept for Transport that no inspection of the repairs to the repairs are required, it seems unlikely that the funicular will be back up and running until some time in January at the earliest

Graham Garfoot has previously written extensively about the nature of the problems with the concrete viaduct ([see here](#)). The concrete beams, on which the rails are secured, are probably not fit for purpose over the medium to longer term.

On past form it might be anticipated that HIE will double down on their funicular obsession and go cap in hand to the Scottish Government for more £ millions to finance the replacement of the concrete beams with steel. It should be unthinkable for any further public funds to be committed to this National Embarrassment, all the more at a time when the public purse is bare.

Cairn Gorm should be primarily seen and managed as snowsports area, as it was originally. Diversification is good but not if it comes at the expense of the one thing that can bring in the real

money. Unless CairnGorm Mountain is quickly returned to majoring on this primary activity then it doesn't have a future. There's no reason why CairnGorm Mountain should not be financially self-sustaining but the right strategies need to be in place for that to happen as well as appointing suitably qualified management that have the knowledge and ability to make it a reality.

## What needs to happen

The Scottish Government needs to get tough and take the following decisions:

1. Remove HIE from all operational involvement on Cairn Gorm.
2. Sack the CMSL Board of Directors whose main function is to do HIE's bidding.
3. Ask Kate Forbes MSP and the Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust to lead on the formation of group from the local community to take over the reigns at Cairn Gorm and quickly develop uplift proposals that do not include the funicular.
4. Provide financial guarantees to the new operator over the short to medium term using the £11m recovered by HIE from the court cases.

### Category

1. Cairngorms

### Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. funicular
3. HIE
4. Scottish Government

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