

Highlands and Islands Enterprise enters the Pantomime Season but safety checks loom

Description

Well it's that time of year again.

Now you see it:



The Cairngorm funicular has only run for eight months since September 2018 because of safety concerns over the 1.8km viaduct.

Photo credit Badenoch and Strathspey Advertiser

Now you don't:

WhiteLady 2024-12-05 13:10:36



Screenshot Courtesy of CM(S)L webcam

Last year's pantomime dame, Susan Smith, has now retired and been replaced by another, although this time it follows tradition in being a man. The script, however, has not changed.

After the funicular closed "*in the interests of public safety*" in August 2023, Susan Smith and her team announced new reopening dates at regular, almost fortnightly, intervals ([see here](#)). This was to encourage the crowd, in the form of season pass holders, to buy their passes for the new snowsports season, starting on 22/12/2023, with the promise that the funicular would open sometime in the 23/24 ski season.

All together now.....

"Oh no it didn't."

It was bad enough that Susan Smith had no qualifications for her role but the new interim CEO, Tim Hearst, doesn't appear to have any either ([see here](#)). He is another HIE insider who has been seconded from HIE's subsidiary Wave Energy Scotland after representing HIE on the Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd board which directs the whole pantomime. HIE had ample opportunity after Susan Smith declared her intention to retire to hold interviews for a full time QUALIFIED CEO but instead held auditions for a new pantomime master on a part time, two days a week, basis.

Mr Hearst has carried on the script of announcing new opening dates at regular intervals ([see here](#)) and just a week ago got himself onto the front page of the Strathy:

Back on track?

Good news as date given for reopening of mountain railway



THE COUNTDOWN IS ON: CMSL interim chief executive Tim Hurst in the Base Station with the funicular yesterday.

By Gavin Masgrove
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THE Cairngorm funicular will be back on track in time for the start of the resort's snowsports season, its owners have confirmed.

One of the leaders of the Cairngorm Ski Club has said that it is the best present their youngsters could get if it is delivered for December 20.

Resort owners Highlands and Islands Enterprise have confirmed the date - the first time an actual return has been given since the mountain railway was closed in August, last year, on renewed safety concerns.

Previous updates had just stated at some point in the coming snowsports season.

This generally runs to Easter at Cairngorm Mountain and concerns had persisted that it could mean March or April and another winter without the resort's main uplift.

Tim Hurst, interim chief executive of CMSL, told the Strath yesterday the programme of remediation works led by Balfour Beatty is on-going.

He said: "As long as all goes to plan that will enable the funicular to be available at the start of the snowsports season."

"The Ptarmigan Building will also re-open in conjunction with the mountain railway and we also have the Cairngorm Café and refurbished bars bar open throughout the winter season in the Day Lodge Building."

"Season passes are available for purchase and are selling well... As always, parking will be free

throughout the snowsports season in our refurbished main car park."

Mr Hurst added: "We are delighted to be moving towards a reopening of the mountain railway which is great news for all our customers and our dedicated team at Cairngorm Mountain."

Strathspey MSP Fergus Ewing (SNP) is a long-time supporter of the funicular.

He said: "This is great news and I thank the staff on the hill and the Balfour Beatty workers and those of the contractors."

"It is so easy to forget that this is the most challenging building site in the UK. I hope that there is a good season for skiers and snowboarders to enjoy."

Badenoch MSP Kate Forbes (SNP) described the closure of the funicular as 'an exceptionally challenging time for Cairngorm Mountain'.

"I am delighted to hear it will be operational again soon," she said. "This is great news."

"Everyone I have spoken to - whether that's locals, businesses or visitors - agrees that there is huge untapped potential in the future of the mountain."

"I hope the reopening of the funicular will help the resort move forward from the disappointment and frustration of the past few years."

Cristian Pizarro, vice chairman of the Cairngorm Ski Club said: "We have just opened bookings for our winter coaching programme for eight to 18-year-olds and having the funicular back would be the best Christmas present for our community."

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The headline indicates a degree of scepticism on the party of the Strathly

There was an aim to have it back in service for the start of the snow sports season this month.

But now owner, the Scottish Government Highland and Islands Enterprise agency, has confirmed that it will not be back in service for the official launch of Cairngorm Mountain's 2024/25 winter season on December 20 as had been hoped.

The funicular railway now looks set to be back in action towards the end of December or early in the new year.

It the

same pantomime as last year except the dates now seem to be changing every week!

"Oh yes it will! (aside) Maybe!

Oh no it won't".

To continue on a more serious, less festive, note.....

Selling season passes, including approx. 200 to the Cairngorm Ski Club, on these flaky assertions generates a distrust in any communications from either HIE or CM(S)L. That is not good business sense. Under the FAQs section of the CM(S)L website about the purchase of early bird season passes ([see here](#)) it was still stating this morning:

When will the mountain railway return to service? ^

Here is the latest update from our parent company, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) – we’re currently aiming for the funicular to be back in service at the start of the upcoming winter season at Cairngorm Mountain, which begins on Friday 20 December 2024.

Screenshot 10.20 6th December

How long will it take HIE to get the repairs signed off by DfT?

Before the funicular can re-open it needs to be signed off as safe by the UK Department for Transport. FOI requests from Gordon Bulloch and Nick Kempe earlier this year obtained copies of communications and documentation relating to how the original repairs to the funicular structure had been signed off as safe in January 2023 ([see here](#)).

In summary the process involved:

- the production of an independent safety report, which HIE commissioned from Sequus consulting – a tiny local firm which employed one person at the time;
- the checking of the safety report and final commissioning trials by LECS UK, lift and elevator specialists, who act on behalf of the DfT;
- final authorisation being issued by civil servants at DfT.

While most of Sequus’ safety report appears to have been written before the repairs in 2022 repairs were finished, it was only finalised and signed off once they were completed on 16th December. LECS UK then attended “final commissioning tests to confirm compliance” on 20th December and it then took another month for DfT to grant the authorisation on 24th January.

If the same timescales were required now and given the Xmas/New Year holidays, it would take about

five and a half weeks from the scaffolding being finally removed from the structure until the funicular could re-open. That should make people extremely sceptical about HIE's claims this week that the most recent delays will only be a matter of a few days.

There are, however, a number of reasons why the safety process should take longer to sign off this time, not least that the organisations involved got it so wrong last time: how could a "cableway" declared safe in January 2023 be closed for safety reasons in August? HIE has so far failed to answer that question.

Moreover, the last report from Sequis was based on a number of premisses:

"The case for safety within this report is built on the following elements:

? Competence and quality of all organisations, individuals and processes involved in the design of the construction work.

? Good practice Engineering Safety Management processes have been completed.

? The risk associated with the installation is understood. The risk is tolerable and reduced to As Low As Is Reasonably Practicable (ALARP).

? The proposed strengthening works are compliant with relevant standards and legal requirements"

The problem for HIE, Sequis, LEKS UK and the DfT is that since the last repairs failed most of this can no longer be assumed but will need to be justified by evidence. For example it appears "the risk associated with the installation" clearly weren't "understood" last time as the funicular was allowed to re-open and run for eight months before being closed again on safety grounds.

Mountain rail's concrete will 'keep deteriorating'

By Neil Macphail
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AN expert engineer has voiced serious concerns about remedial work currently being carried out in an effort to get the Cairngorm Mountain Railway running again and he has doubts over the eventual safety of the structure even after the latest repairs.

John Carson (76), who was in charge of the company that built the Skye Bridge, believes it was a blunder to initially build the funicular railway's viaduct in concrete rather than steel.

He said this is because concrete does not perform well in the extreme cold that is experienced on the slopes of the Cairngorm Mountain resort.

Mr Carson said that the remedial work now being employed by fixing stainless steel brackets onto the existing concrete beams 'is like putting lipstick on a pig', as he fears that the brackets will expand and contract as it gets hotter and colder leading to further problems.

And he said: "I would be the first person in the witness box if there was a disaster inquiry to say 'I told you so.'



"Like it or not I am an expert with 50 years experience and know what I am talking about, and I wouldn't put people on that railway."

He considered the funicular should either be 'mothballed as a monument to incompetence' or demolished.

Mr Carson said whatever is being done to get the mountain railway and its viaduct open again 'will not delay the deterioration of the concrete'.

He was a fellow of the Institution of Civil Engineers before he retired, the highest ranking membership.



■ MAJOR CONCERNS: Expert engineer John Carson.

■ LEFT: The Cairngorm funicular in operation before the mountain railway became dogged by problems and controversy.

Mr Carson previously worked as the chief estimator for Balfour Beatty, the company trying to sort out the funicular this time round.

The mountain railway was first shut in September 2018 and only re-opened in January 2023 after over-budget repairs which cost £25 mil-

lion. It was out of commission again just seven months later for further 'snagging works' and is yet to reopen.

Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) which operates the mountain, still aims to have the railway functioning for snow sports this coming winter.

HIE won £11 million last year after suing the now owner of the company who designed and built the funicular, which first opened in December 2001.

Balfour Beatty carried out the first round of repairs and is incurring the cost of the ongoing works.

A spokesperson for the development agency said of the claims: "The remediation works at Cairngorm are progressing well and we're looking forward to seeing the funicular back in action for the snow season."

"Safety has always been our top priority, as demonstrated by the immediate decision to withdraw the funicular from service in August 2023."

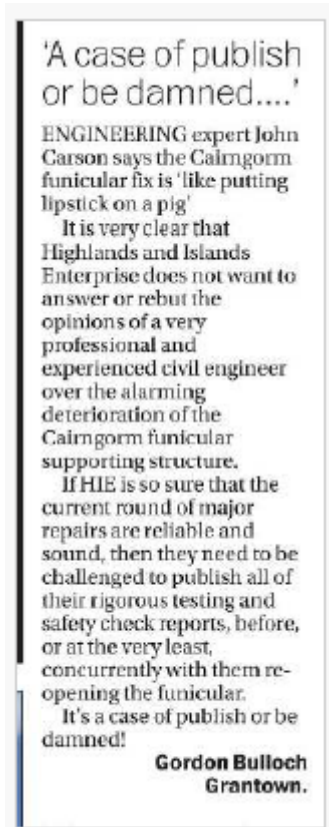
"Rigorous testing and safety checks will be carried out before passengers are welcomed on board."

The

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challenge has become all the greater since engineering expert John Carson has spoken out. The risk for both Sequs and LECS is that if the funicular were to fail catastrophically, they could be in the dock. It is not unreasonable to state therefore that both organisations, if still contracted to do the safety checks, will want to be exceptionally thorough and that will take time.

What needs to happen



Strathy 21/11/24

HIE needs to clearly and unequivocally state that it puts the safety of funicular users first. That means being transparent about why the first set of repairs didn't work and why, with the second set of repairs, Balfour Beatty has had to retension all the metal brackets ([see here](#)). It also means explaining HOW the safety of the funicular will be monitored assuming it passes all the safety checks.

At the same time it needs to be open and honest about how long it will take for the funicular to be declared safe once the repair work is finally complete and stop trying to sell season tickets with claims that the funicular will re-open soon.

It would be a far better for the reputation of the business to admit the uncertainty of the funicular reopening and then offer a free season ticket to anyone who manages to use day passes of an equivalent value to the early bird pass (£358 compared to £571 for a full adult pass).

For those who have already bought season passes, as a gesture of good faith, CM(S)L could offer a refund if enough skiing days were not available.

It would also help if CMSL stated how many of the thirteen publicly funded snow cannon are going to be operational this winter to allow access to the upper mountain if the funicular doesn't operate? And will the cabin, again publicly funded and currently fitted to a Unimog, be used for its intended purpose to convey snowsports enthusiasts up to the snow covered slopes?

At the end of the day CM(S)L and HIE are accountable to the Scottish Government who therefore need to intervene to sort out the whole pantomime. Cairn Gorm used to be the U.K's premier ski resort, the go to destination for thousands of recreational skiers and a major training area for our National and

Olympic hopefuls. Despite the endless public funds it has completely collapsed under HIE's management. We cannot afford to lose this facility. When is the Scottish Government going to step up, get HIE off the hill and put CMSL under honest and competent management.

Category

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Tags

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