

HIE's management of staff at Cairn Gorm under the public spotlight

Description



The Times. Monday, 27 January 2025.

The treatment of staff at Cairngorm Mountain

For a number of years now I and other campaigners have heard about the toxic culture at Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland Ltd (CMSL) but until now staff and former staff have been very reluctant to speak out about it. Besides the bullying and intimidation referred to in the Times article ([see here](#)) this has also included homophobia, misogyny and worse. Trying to get staff and former staff to come forward and comment publicly, however, has been very difficult until now.

Recently there appears to be a change in people's willingness to speak out or leak information about the deep-seated problems at Cairn Gorm, perhaps following the example of the civil engineer John Carson and the funicular ([see here](#)). This takes considerable courage but is now being supported by the press:

former staff on the mountain.

A former employee's testimony leaked to The Times reads: "During my time at the mountain, I witnessed and was victim to, bullying and intimidation. I was constantly undermined and made to feel like a lesser person."

When John Swinden, an HR manager at the company, left his role in 2023, he raised a grievance about the way employees were treated.

One seasonal worker said: "The culture up there was just a toxic culture."

Another staff member who shared their reasons for quitting said: "I wasn't sleeping. I was dreading going to work ... I have never been so unhappy going to work."

After warmer weather the only slopes useable for skiing and snowboarding were in the beginners' area, where the snow is made by a machine. Hurst is clear this is a short-term solution: "If the situation of low snow and limited capacity arises again, we will use the same system to cover the busy holiday periods, but as we cannot predict the weather we can provide no assurance beyond that."

Edward Mountain says there is a "rift" between the Cairngorm Mountain team and people trying to protect businesses that rely on winter tourism. Some express frustration with those whose salaries appear to be guaranteed by the public purse.



Information leaked to the Times

meeting with Peter Mearns, chairman of the board that oversees Cairngorm Mountain, after concerns raised over the past two years. "The nature of it is really sensitive," she said. "These are things raised in confidence at surgeries."

She added: "I think there's confusion and uncertainty around where the buck stops. Having some kind of outcome to any complaints that people still feel have not been addressed, that is what I want to get to."

The Times has seen the outcome of an investigation into Swinden's grievance in which he claims staff were "publicly humiliated". His concerns were not upheld.

The letter, dated April 2023, states that sufficient evidence to substantiate the claims had not been found and that some evidence was contradictory, but it also says: "It is possible some of your allegations may be true."

It acknowledges "there are matters that need to be addressed" and promises recommendations "to the board which focus on culture change and leadership development."

What is also significant is that an SNP

MSP, Emma Roddick, is now publicly expressing concern about what is happening at Cairn Gorm and whether HIE has responded appropriately.

The fact that the former head of Human Resources, John Swinden, the manager primarily responsible

for staff wellbeing, also submitted a complaint is extraordinary. It suggests there were people trying to prevent him doing his job. While HIE did not uphold his complaint because of a lack of evidence – bullies rarely leave any evidence – they did admit *“it is possible some of your allegations may be true”* and *“there are matters that need to be addressed”*.

The problem is a toxic culture usually starts at the top of a business, in the management structure. This raises serious concerns about whether the previous CEO, Susan Smith, her board and her senior managers have addressed issues for which they were ultimately and perhaps directly responsible.

In that respect, HIE’s decision to award two existing managers further responsibilities (and power) to cover the departure of Susan Smith and the appointment of an interim part-time Chief Executive ([see here](#)) raises further questions about whether HIE may have promoted staff who were the subject of these allegations. Messrs Cornfoot and Matthews, the managers who were given additional responsibilities, either deserve to have their names cleared or should never have been promoted. Whatever the case, HIE needs to explain publicly what it has been doing to eradicate the toxic culture at Cairngorm Mountain.

Why does Cairngorm Mountain find it so difficult to recruit staff?

Cairngorm Mountain resort ‘couldn’t have survived’ without Ukrainian refugee staff

New documents lift the lid on a staffing crisis at the national tourist resort fuelled by a local housing and workers shortage.

by **Justin Bowie**

January 27 2025, 6:00 am

Cairngorm Mountain resort managers admitted a staffing crisis was so bad it relied on Ukrainian refugee workers to keep operating, The Press and Journal can reveal.

Bosses revealed their concerns in records of talks about the pressures facing the major Speyside attraction by Aviemore.

In one note, seen by the P&J, Cairngorm Mountain chief executive Susan Smith said the resort “couldn’t have survived” without support from Ukrainian workers.

The records show a local housing shortage was a “major problem” for the resort with staff regularly having to commute from Inverness.

Among the documents, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) chief Stuart Black noted staff had been housed at Aviemore’s Macdonald resort.

But this had to be shelved when redevelopment works were being carried out.

On-site winter accommodation for 20 staff was also no longer available, the notes show.

HIE told the P&J eight of the mountain resort’s 79 staff in August 2023 were Ukrainian refugees, more than 10%.

Towns across the Highlands such as Aviemore are affected by a much wider housing problem.

Last year it was reported the region needs to build 24,000 homes in the next 10 years to meet current and future accommodation demands.

In 2023, Highland Council approved plans to control the number of short-term lets allowed in Aviemore and surrounding towns and villages.

Press and Journal 27th January

If Cairngorm Mountain is so crucial to the local economy, as HIE claim ([see here](#)), why has the operating company, Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Ltd (CM(S)L) depended on Ukrainian refugees to work there and been unable to recruit from the local workforce? Is this because local people know about the toxic culture and the lack of practical support for staff and consequently are reluctant to work on the mountain?

I worked at Cairn Gorm one winter season. There was no staffing crisis and the workforce was not only made up of locals but also by people from all over the UK and foreign workers from Australia, Canada and Sweden who wanted to ski. We were all classed as seasonal workers! What has changed is that back then we had a guaranteed 40hr week AND the Cairngorm Chairlift Company, as was, had its own worker's hostel and provided transport to get the workforce up the hill ([see here](#)). HIE and the new CEO when appointed should take note! The company looked after us. Loyalty works both ways.

While the P and J reports HIE as saying “*Staff had been housed at Aviemore’s Macdonald resort*” it is not clear who paid for this accommodation: the staff, HIE, CM(S)L or was it the Scottish Government through the refugee programme?

What sort of person is needed to sort out the mess at Cairngorm Mountain?

On 22/01/2025 HIE issued a news release ([see here](#)) announcing it was advertising for a new CEO at Cairngorm Mountain:

“Join the team

- **Position:** Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd. Chief Executive
- **Location:** Cairngorm Mountain, Aviemore.
- **Salary:** £85,000 per annum.
- **Benefits:** Defined contribution pension scheme, company benefits, relocation package.

We are seeking an inspirational and experienced Chief Executive for Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Ltd, one of Scotland’s best known, year-round visitor attractions

The person

Possessing exceptional leadership, people management and communications skills, the CEO will lead a highly motivated and skilled team to promote Cairngorm Mountain as a leading Scottish attraction, plan sustainable growth and direct day-to-day operations.

Commitment to building positive relationships with a broad range of customers, partner organisations and stakeholders at local, regional and national levels will be critical.

It is important that the Chief Executive has a clear and strong commercial focus, awareness of environmental issues and a proven ability to make high quality investment decisions to grow and sustain the business.

Candidates will be able to demonstrate senior leadership and management experience, with the highest standards of professional excellence and customer care. We are also looking for experience of working with a board and leading, motivating and managing a delivery-focused team. Experience of innovation in the tourism and leisure sectors would be an advantage."

(Extract from the ad, red is my highlight – further details [here](#)).

My initial reaction was that to offer a salary of £85,000 for the CEO of a company that is completely reliant on taxpayer funding to keep the business afloat is ridiculous and a more sensible option would have been a much lower salary with a performance related bonus scheme. This could then be considered for all staff not just the CEO. The harder you work the better you will be rewarded.

The new CEO, however, will now be faced with not only trying to improve the business offer but sorting out these recent accusations and the toxic culture. There's an old saying "*There's no smoke without fire*"! The new CEO therefore needs to have both the knowledge and skills of how to turn around a Scottish ski resort which has been mismanaged ever since HIE took it over, with global warming making the task even more difficult, how to sort out the staffing and management crisis and, most important of all how to persuade HIE to support solutions to these problems (hint, the funicular is NOT part of the solution and nor is the current management on the hill).

Where next?

While someone who could do all those things might deserve an £85k salary, the suspicion of campaigners is that the salary is designed to ensure that the person appointed will not dare to challenge anything HIE does or says. To make such a post work, the Scottish Government needs to transfer the land and assets at Cairn Gorm to another body while leaving HIE with the massive liability of the funicular.

For some time Edward Mountain MSP has been pushing for a public inquiry into the funicular, something I have supported on parkswatch. However after watching the Post Office inquiry I now think that would be a complete waste of public money and would lead nowhere. Usually nobody is found to be at fault by such inquiries or is really held to account and the main people benefitting from the process are the lawyers. There is however another option that could be quicker and just as effective and that would be a parliamentary inquiry. Maybe that is now what Edward Mountain should be pushing for?

Category

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Date Created

January 30, 2025

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