

The funicular re-opens amidst a toxic culture dispute at Cairn Gorm

Description



Cairngorm Mountain Resort
50m · 🌐



End of day Thursday 27th February.

Thanks to all who visited us today, enjoying lovely calm, sunny weather. Good to see Farr primary getting their first taste of skiing. Another good day in prospect tomorrow with more sunshine.

Funicular Railway, Ptarmigan tow, Polar Express and lower Conveyor opening at 9am. Nice, soft, granular snow on the upper runs.

The team have been busy pushing snow, with a good, wide run down the Ptarmigan fence line to the Top Station and a direct... [See more](#)

Yesterday with almost no notice the funicular at last re-opened. Highlands and Islands Enterprise, in a news release issued on Wednesday ([see here](#)) claimed that “all safety-critical matters have now been concluded” – not exactly the same thing as stating all the safety concerns that caused them to close the funicular in August 2023 have been addressed. Indeed, HIE went on to state:

“Balfour Beatty will return to Cairngorm during a less busy period in late spring or early summer to carry out some final remediation works that are not essential for safe operations.”

Whether any independent safety inspections of the works have taken place or whether the Department for Transport, which signed off the funicular as safe in January 2023 after the original repairs, have done so again or simply taken HIE’s word for it was not stated. Nor did HIE state how long it expects the latest repairs to last, whether they are guaranteed or the final cost to the public purse.



Skiing at Ptarmigan bowl yesterday

HIE's late announcement perhaps explains why there were so few people enjoying what snow there was in the Ptarmigan bowl on a nice day. That snow, however, illustrates what has been lost by the funicular being effectively closed for six out of the last seven snowsports seasons – if, that is, HIE manages to keep it open for the next couple of months.

That after perhaps the poorest snow season on record, the top of Cairn Gorm still has snow, without any artificial snow making tells you something. Due to its altitude it is clearly the last place in Scotland where downhill snowsports will be sustainable in the face of global warming. Within that context, wasting six seasons all because HIE and the then Minister responsible, Fergus Ewing, decided it was better to repair the funicular – at a cost of over £25m – rather than install new uplift which could have been operating several years ago is a massive scandal.

The toxic culture wars

Perhaps it was just a coincidence but before learning that the funicular was re-opening this week, the Badenoch and Strathspey Advertiser had been fed a story that the majority of staff at CMSL strongly supported management, which it ran on its front page. In a written statement staff claimed that those who had made allegations about bullying and harassment ([see here](#)) were pushing “their own agendas without facts or evidence” and that it was they, not management, who had created a toxic culture at Cairn Gorm:

Cairngorm Mountain staff defend past and present bosses

By Gavin Musgrove
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A MAJORITY of staff have rallied to defend senior management past and present at Cairngorm Mountain amid claims of bullying and a toxic environment at the resort.

The statement was issued to the Strathly this past week and has been signed by 34 staff from across the company excluding management team members.

Employees said they were acting in response to recent allegations about a toxic and bullying culture at Cairngorm Mountain with former CEO Susan Smith and senior management being singled out.

A significant number of full-time and part-time Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Ltd staff said they felt the need to respond to the claims also made in The Times.

The statement reads: "During Susan Smith's five-year term, we in no way found her management style and leadership toxic. To the contrary, she engaged well with staff and always offered an open-door policy should staff have needed to communicate with her.

"She was instrumental in encouraging local people to work on the mountain. She encouraged training and modern

New twist in management bullying row

apprenticeship programmes to help secure the company's future.

"Susan drove forward the vision of Cairngorm becoming an all-year-round attraction with the karting, mountain biking, tubing, adventure play park, ball run, mountain garden and summer campervan park.

"Susan set the highest standards of customer service for our customers who use the site.

"This is while the company was going through some of the most challenging periods including the

closure of the funicular and the Covid pandemic.

"In the lean winters since the closure of the funicular, she continually encouraged the team to utilise the SnowFactor which enabled the business to employ seasonal workers and support local ski schools and businesses throughout the valley.

"What is more upsetting to the staff is the anti-CMSL (people) who have used these media statements to push forward their own agendas without facts or evidence.

"This is what is damaging and toxic to the company and its staff.

"CMSL and Susan have been the target of unfair criticism, speculation, and misinformation. This, in fact, is the toxicity that surrounds the Cairngorm Mountain ski area.

"The staff at Cairngorm Mountain work hard to deliver snowsports whenever possible, and this has always been the case."

There are currently around 50 workers this winter excluding top management.

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ALLEGATIONS over the running of the business - which relies heavily on public funding - have come to the surface in recent weeks from the operators of a former ski school business and some ex-staff.

Three of those who spoke to the Strathy recently are ex-resort human resources manager John Swinden, and Tim Davey and Debbie Williams, who ran Ski Norwest.

Asked for a response to the staff statement, they said: "We have always been clear we are passionate about Cairngorm Mountain and voiced repeatedly that there are wonderful staff working there.

"The main drive behind speaking out was a hope for positive change going forward.

"It is extremely sad to read that by voicing genuine concerns we are now being described as the 'toxicity' that surrounds Cairngorm Mountain and that we are using the media for a personal agenda.

"Our grievances were based on facts not misinformation. Investigations into some of our concerns found that there were 'company-wide cultural and leadership legacy issues that need to be addressed. We are not alone in our experiences - many who share similar views have been afraid to speak out for fear of this sort of backlash.

"This is a vibrant area, full of energetic, talented people who have a genuine passion for Cairngorm Mountain.

"Of course there may sometimes be differing perspectives, but we would hope different voices could always be listened to with respect."

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While only staff, not management, signed the statement it is not clear

whether the Strathy was told who actually drafted it. One could speculate about the wording, which

contains a fair amount of management speak and sounds almost too good to be true.

The more interesting question is why only 34 staff signed the statement when the last accounts for CMSL, for the year till 31st March 2024, record there were an average of 88 staff employed during the year (up from 72 the year before)? Even if eight of those are managers and twelve were “new starts” this season, that would mean only half the staff at CMSL signed the statement to the Strathy. Were only 34 asked or did some refuse?

The three whistleblowers (see left) responded to the accusations in the statement with dignity and reminded readers that (while evidence had not been found to prove their complaints) the investigation had revealed issues which needed to be addressed ([see here](#)). Therefore what they had said was based on facts and evidence and was NOT toxic misinformation as claimed.

Besides the limited number of staff signing the statement, the number of staff who have left CMSL and the reasons for this is also relevant. John Swinden claimed ([see here](#)) that he had “listed between 12 and 15 staff” who had “left the business in a 12-month period because they could not tolerate working there because of the treatment they received.” The numbers, at least, should be easy enough to verify.

True to form the local MSP, Fergus Ewing, decided to wade into the fray and the way he did so confirmed Parkswatch’s recent conclusion that he is deluding himself about the management at Cairn Gorm ([see here](#)):

Resort staff defend top chiefs

CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

Supporters said 12 of these are new starts this season so were not in a position to give an opinion and a signature.

Strathspey MSP Fergus Ewing praised Ms Smith for leading from the front: “She worked hard for us and cared deeply for her team.”

“I know because I worked alongside her and visited the team at a time when they were somewhat beleaguered. This support is evident from the warm terms of the open letter from the team.”

He said the resort had constantly faced obstacles not of their own making including the judicial

review of the funicular.

“Ever since then operations at the hill have been hindered by endless tinkering and delay by various quangos including much by the Cairngorms National Park Authority,” said the MSP.

“Whilst the staff and management cannot speak out about this - I can.

“Nor have HIE been given credit for successful pursuit of remedies in cost recovery and far less for sticking by the staff at times of pressure.

“The demands for inquiries and the like won’t achieve anything but would cost huge amounts of money.

“No wonder many who

have worked at the hill for years have become fed up with a constant stream of criticism.

“Susan was a strong leader wholly committed to the team and taking them through tough times. Let her efforts be recognised.”

Ms Smith retired as CMSL CEO in September last year, having been initially seconded to the post by HIE in 2019 and then appointed full-time to the role in 2021.

An HIE spokesperson said: “It would not be appropriate for HIE to comment on a staffing matter, all the more so when it concerns a subsidiary company.”

The “for us” is interesting, it confirms Mr Ewing is personally involved in Cairn Gorm in a way that few other constituency MSPs are with local businesses or

services, whether public or private.

Mr Ewing's claim that "operations on the hill" have been hindered by the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) is completely unsupported by the facts. The CNPA has approved one poorly thought out and inappropriate planning application after another, including the repairs to the funicular which have cost the public £25m. The only exception was the artificial ski slope HIE wanted to build above the car park in a very prominent position facing the prevailing south westerly winds. A large proportion of what the CNPA has approved, however, has then been botched by CMSL: from the Sunkid rope tow and beginners area which has since been effectively abandoned to the plan to move the snow factory up the hill.

Mr Ewing claims HIE should be given credit for the amount of money they recovered (from Natural Retreats going bust and from the original construction of the funicular). The total recovered was £11.1m out of over £50m wasted on the funicular to date ([see here](#)), not to mention all the other money lavished on Cairn Gorm. In addition, when approving the Full Business Case to repair the funicular, Mr Ewing, as the minister then responsible, committed £73.09m in public subsidy to keep the funicular running for the next 30 years ([see here](#)).

While I agree with Mr Ewing that public inquiries are generally a waste of time and money, they can compel key witnesses like Mr Ewing to give evidence under oath. Perhaps, if he thinks public inquiries are such a bad thing he could publicly commit to co-operating fully with an inquiry by the Scottish Parliament? That would be a major step forward. Besides the funicular, such an inquiry could look at why HIE and "the team" haven't been able to make Cairn Gorm work despite having everything on a plate compared to the other ski centres in Scotland: the best transport links, the longest natural season and many more times in public funding than the other four centres combined.

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