

The funicular, the Public Audit Committee & Cairn Gorm Mountain's propaganda offensive

Description



The predictable happened yesterday, the strong south east winds blowing across Cairn Gorm deposited large quantities of snow in the lee of the entrance to the tunnel at the top of the funicular

blocking it. It took considerable efforts on the part of at least four Cairn Gorm Mountain staff working with shovels ([see here](#)) to unblock the entrance, potentially opening the upper slopes at Cairn Gorm to snowsports enthusiasts today. This morning the tunnel appears to be blocked again with staff reported to be working on the upper parts of the hill to get the funicular operating.

No wonder many people living in Strathspey regard the staff working at Cairn Gorm as heroes. But how many funicular railways at ski resorts on the continent need to be dug out like this when it snows?

The blocking of the funicular tunnel by snow was an issue we raised at the Public Audit Committee (PAC) on 14th January ([see here](#) for draft official report or [here](#) to view on Scottish Parliament TV we are on at 11am). We used it to illustrate why the funicular is fundamentally flawed as a means of uplift in both winter and summer and how this limits the income Cairn Gorm mountain is able to generate. We also pointed out that the funicular railways high up in the Alps they are usually underground (eg Val d'Isère & Tignes). Accompanying evidence submitted to the PAC from Graham Nugent showed funiculars are more commonly used lower down to transport people up to mountain resorts.

Other fundamental design flaws with the funicular include:

- its limited capacity to carry people up the mountain made worse because it has NEVER run at its full design speed and those speeds now appear to have been restricted further due to ongoing concerns about the safety of the structure;
- the two mid-stations, one for those going up and one for those going down, which slows the funicular down further;
- the segmentation of the carriages into separate compartments that prevent people moving through the train which would facilitate loading and unloading (a point made by Graham Nugent in his evidence) and makes it difficult to carry mountain bikes up to the mid-station in summer

You would never have known any of this from listening to BBC Radio's Scotland Outdoors programme on 17th January which was broadcast from Cairn Gorm ([see here](#)). When asked by Mark Stephen if all Cairn Gorm Mountain's troubles were behind them, new CEO Mike Gifford replied (just after 58 mins) that the mountain had had "a couple of rough years". Really? The funicular was closed for safety reasons in August 2018 and has been open for less than two of the succeeding six and a half years. During that time it has received at least £10,913,567 of public money to keep afloat (on top of all the money that has been spent by HIE on capital items including the repair of the funicular)..

Mr Gifford went on to assert state the funicular has been operating for almost a year now and "there have been no issues at all". HIE must have been delighted. However, what he said is not true, as the following exchange, which took place between the Convener of the PAC and Stuart Black, CEO of HIE, illustrates:

The Convener: I read somewhere that it [the funicular] was closed in May 2025.

Stuart Black: Yes I am sorry. There was a three-week period of closure in May 2025 for some additional works.

The Convener: I understand that there are also more scheduled closures in September and November this year.

Stuart Black: There will be a short scheduled closure for three days next week. There is also a routine maintenance period in November, which is usually a bit longer, but this year it will be just one week.

The Convener: Those are routine maintenance shutdowns. They are not to address substantive structural engineering issues.

Stuart Black: Next week's closure is to deal with some final remediation issues. The closure in November might also deal with some of those, but they are not substantive. They are relatively minor, and there is nothing to concern the committee with regard to the structure. The closures are really about minor remediation works.

(Official record PAC meeting 17th September)

There is reason to doubt Mr Black's claims about the safety of the structure, as I will show in a further post, but the more fundamental issue is illustrated by the snow blocking the funicular tunnel. Whatever the evidence, HIE and the senior management at CMSL appear incapable of acknowledging publicly the many serious problems with the funicular and that, as a result, they need to start planning an alternative form of uplift now.

The inability of HIE to acknowledge this or any other of its mistakes at Cairn Gorm is the reason why we told the PAC that Cairn Gorm needs to be transferred from their ownership, leaving them the liability of the funicular. Only when that happens will people like Mike Gifford, who was two of our delegation to the PAC had met and thought well-intentioned, be free to speak the truth.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

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