

HIE's mountain coaster at Cairn Gorm (1) - playing with the public

Description



The red lines show the location of the proposed mountain coaster. Image credit Ryden from Design Statement.

Highland and Islands Enterprise (HIE)'s plans to build a mountain coaster, first proposed in 2018 and now described as a toboggan run, are now in the news ([see here](#) for example). A planning application was submitted to Highland Council on 2nd April and called-in by the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) on 27th April ([see here](#) for planning papers). This post argues that HIE and its subsidiary which runs Cairn Gorm, Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Ltd, are once again treating the public as mugs.

Election purdah - what purdah?

Effectively these applications were an announcement by HIE, which will be funding the mountain coaster, of another investment at Cairn Gorm slap bang in the middle of an election period. Scottish Government guidance on the elections ([see here](#)) is that its agencies were supposed -to avoid any significant new initiatives- from the 26th March when the Scottish Parliament went into recess until after the elections. Having experienced officials at one public body postpone a meeting which I and others were due to attend because of election purdah, it appears there is one rule for HIE and another for everyone else.

In 2024 Midlothian Council completed the construction of a mountain coaster at -Destination Hillend-, formerly known for its dry ski slope, as part of a three phase project. The total costs were reported by the New Civil Engineer in December 2024 to have soared -since it was first okayed by

the council four years ago from £13.8M to £37M. I have not been able to find from Midlothian's accounts how much they actually spent on the coaster but it seems likely that HIE's investment will come into the 'significant' category. In that case it is likely to have been approved by Scottish Ministers and raises questions about who authorised the planning applications to be submitted in the election period.

Concealing the costs of the coaster

63. We also note that the Scottish Government is working on improving the transparency of infrastructure projects. The Committee seeks improved transparency on major capital projects taken forward by Scottish Government funded public bodies, such as Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) in relation to the Cairngorm Funicular Railway. The Committee therefore asks that such projects are included in future Major Capital Updates provided by the Scottish Government and in its future IDPs.

IDP = Infrastructure Delivery Pipeline. One of the recommendations from the Scottish Parliament's Audit Committee into the Cairngorm Funicular railway published on 24th February 2026

Stuart Black, Chief Executive of HIE, responded to the Public Audit Committee (PAC) about its report on the funicular railway on 20th March ([see here](#)), i.e too late for the Committee to consider what he said. He informed them that the reason the funicular was not included in the Scottish Government's Infrastructure Delivery Pipeline is 'no further significant capital spend beyond routine inspection, monitoring and maintenance is planned for the funicular over the next four years or beyond'. He went on to say that 'There may, however, be other significant capital spend at Cairngorm e.g. relating to delivery of the masterplan' and we will liaise with Scottish Government in relation to this.

There is no sign of those other significant capital projects in the Scottish Government's list of IDPs ([see here](#)).

Unfortunately the PAC's inquiry and report was limited to HIE's management of the funicular and not their management of Cairngorm as a whole. That has allowed HIE to swerve the implications of its recommendations about the need for greater transparency and carry on with other projects as secretively as ever:

3 UPDATES CUNNTASAN AS ÙR

3.1 Cairngorm

Elaine Hanton and Peter Dennis joined the meeting.

The Cairngorm Project Lead and the Project Manager provided an update on matters relating to Cairngorm.

[Paragraph removed in the interests of the effective conduct of public affairs, and due to commercial sensitivity].

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Rachel Hunter left the meeting temporarily for another appointment.

[Paragraph removed in the interests of the effective conduct of public affairs, and due to commercial sensitivity].

Peter Dennis left the meeting.

Extract from most recently published minute of an HIE Board meeting held on 16th December 2025

This minute was published before the PAC made its recommendations but illustrates the secret way HIE operates. The effective conduct of public affairs would be much better served if the public knew what HIE was doing at Cairngorm and how they were planning to spend public money rather than them falsely claiming this information is commercially sensitive.

The public minute continues:

3.1.1 Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Ltd

Mike Gifford, Peter Mearns and Mark Tate joined the meeting.

The Board welcomed the Chief Executive and the outgoing and incoming Chairs of Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Ltd to the meeting.

The CMSL Chief Executive delivered a presentation on current operations, environmental initiatives and forward planning for Cairngorm Mountain. Since the funicular returned to service at the end of February 2025, it had been used by around 106,000 visitors, generating income of £2.7m and reducing operating losses to a level below forecast. With snow on the mountain already, the resort had opened for snowsports in November. The funicular continued to be fully operational and had passed a positive health and safety audit.

Interestingly, neither the outgoing or incoming chairs of CMSL or their Chief Executive attended the first part of the HIE Board discussion about Cairngorm. That raises questions about how much they have been told about what is really going on with the funicular?

After recording the "good news", most of the important information about HIE and CMSL's plans for the mountain is once again redacted:

A new business plan was nearing completion and would feature several key projects including a proposed mountain toboggan. *[part of sentence removed in the interests of the effective conduct of public affairs, and due to commercial sensitivity]. [Sentences removed in the interests of the effective conduct of public affairs, and due to commercial sensitivity].*

The Board welcomed the presentation, noting the improved financial performance that had been achieved since the funicular's return and commenting positively on the range of environmental initiatives and future plans. *[Sentences removed in the interests of the effective conduct of public affairs, and due to commercial sensitivity].*

Further discussion focused on the need to progress towards business sustainability. The CMSL Chief Executive agreed this was a key goal and noted that the toboggan plan was intended to complement the existing range of year-round activities and other new ideas to continue to reduce the resort's historic dependence on suitable winter snow conditions. *[Sentence removed in the interests of the effective conduct of public affairs, and due to commercial sensitivity].*

Nowhere that I can find has HIE published the costs of the new coaster which would allow the public and politicians to judge whether the Scottish Government should have included it in its Infrastructure Delivery Pipeline. It also seems quite extraordinary that the HIE Board "commented positively" on the the plans for a mountain coaster before having sight of the business plan given the £25.4m costs HIE told the PAC it cost to repair the funicular.

What are HIE and CMSL's plans for snowsports at Cairn Gorm?

HIE and CMSL have now rebranded the SE's Group's 2018 mountain coaster proposal as a toboggan run, giving the impression that it is somehow connected with snow. In fact the coaster would run on a metal rail, summer and winter, and has nothing to do with snowsports.

The proposed investment, however, has significant implications for the future of snowsports at Cairn Gorm which, in the absence of other uplift, have been made totally dependent on the funicular. The funicular has limited capacity for skiers and boarders, is very slow and its operation is affected when the tunnel below the Ptarmigan gets blocked with snow. At best therefore what the coaster proposal means, if the CNPA were to grant planning permission, is that future investment in improving uplift for snowsports is likely to be delayed. At worst it could mean that new uplift that could serve not just skiers and boarders but mountain bikers NEVER happens.

Unfortunately, despite the recommendations of the PAC that HIE should do more to involve the public, it appears that HIE have no intention of allowing anyone to comment on its new business plan and what the priorities for public investment at Cairn Gorm should be. One wonders whether the new directors of CMSL appointed on 1st January ([see here](#)), all of whom (Mark Tait, Lesley McKenna and Alistair Todd) are skiers, have been given any in this or were presented with a fait accompli?

From a snowsports perspective, the proposal to operate the mountain coaster in winter can only be to the detriment of skiers and boarders. HIE and CMSL's decision to reduce the size of the car park at Coire Cas meant that this season it was often full by 8am and seriously constrained the number of people able to enjoy the good snow at Cairn Gorm. In the absence of any proposals from HIE and CMSL to create a first class shuttle bus service from Glenmore, adding another winter attraction to the mix can only add to the parking chaos. Strangely, there is no transport assessment accompanying the application and all the Design Statement says is that the mountain coaster could be accessed by bus number 30!

Covering up the truth

The planning application form submitted by Ryden LLP acting on behalf of CMSL and HIE states:

<h3>Pre-Application Discussion</h3> <p>Have you discussed your proposal with the planning authority? *</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No</p>

This is contradicted by the Landscape Visual Appraisal conducted by Brindley Associates:

1.7 Stakeholder Consultation

During December 2025, Brindley undertook consultation jointly with the Highland Council Planning Department and the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA), in order to identify the scope and extents of this LVA by way of a Scoping letter. A Scoping response was received on 7th January 2026 which was broadly in agreement with Brindley's approach to the appraisal. The CNPA landscape advisor requested that the scope of the appraisal be adjusted as follows:

This paragraph continues by setting out the detailed advice offered by the CNPA's landscape adviser.

Despite HIE/CMSL and their agents having been in detailed discussions about this planning application since December, the CNPA's letter to Highland Council calling in the planning application claims they were notified about it on 21st April:

Highland Council
The Court House
36 High Street
Kingussie
PH21 1HR

27 April 2026

Dear Sir or Madam

Application Number: 2026/0135/DET
Your Ref: 26/01428/FUL
Development Proposed: Proposed mountain toboggan track and associated structures, buildings, platforms, landscaping and infrastructure works
Location: Land 284M East Of Cairngorm Mountain, Glenmore, Aviemore

The Cairngorms National Park Authority were notified of the above planning application by Highland Council on 21 April 2026. The application was considered by the Cairngorms National Park Authority under their Call-in powers 27 April 2026.

Although the CNPA may have been FORMALLY notified about the planning application on 21st April they have clearly known about it for months. Words are important. It raises questions about what other discussions have been taking place between HIE, CMSL and their agents and the CNPA? The length of time the CNPA has been involved in discussions behind the scenes contrasts with the three weeks they allow the public to comment on planning applications.

Also highly misleading is the Planning and Design statement by Ryden. The section on Planning starts:

There is an extensive site planning history for various facilities associated with Cairngorm Mountain and the associated ski and leisure/tourism infrastructure and the funicular railway stretching back over 30 years. These have been for a variety of complementary individual proposals that are co-ordinated and suited in terms of colour, materials, design and landscaping consistent with the overall Cairngorm Masterplan and provides for general upgrading and improvement of facilities and the visitor experience and has significantly improved the arrival experience and environmental quality and visual amenity associated with the range of facilities currently on site. The more recent and relevant of which are summarised below:

The Cairngorm Masterplan was published by HIE on 2nd June 2021 ([see here](#)). It therefore postdates most of the planning applications Ryden lists as being 'consistent' with it. Ryden's list of 'relevant applications' starts in 2019. This is the year after HIE and CMSL had submitted a planning application to build a dry ski slope above the Coire Cas car park. That is the very same slope

where they now wish to construct the toboggan run. The then CNPA board refused that application because of its impact!

History matters but Ryden has failed to mention the planning application that has most relevance for the current application. One wonders why no-one from CMSL or HIE picked that up and insisted the Design Statement consider the implications? The answer is they believe the public are mugs.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. CNPA
3. funicular
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