

Cairgorm funicular railway: Written submission from Dave Morris, 7 November 2025

Scottish Parliament Public Audit Committee

Cairn Gorm funicular investigation

Evidence from Dave Morris, November 2025

I welcome the PAC visit to Cairn Gorm while noting that the last examination of operations on the mountain by a parliamentary committee took place 40 years ago. The House of Commons Select Committee on Scottish Affairs visited Cairn Gorm in 1985 during their investigation into the Highlands and Islands Development Board, predecessors of Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

It is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the value of the funicular without understanding the wider context. I will try and outline the main issues.

Environmental quality

The Cairngorms are the wildest, most remote mountains in the UK, of outstanding importance for outdoor recreation and nature conservation. The northern corries of the Cairngorms contain arctic alpine landscapes above ancient Caledonian pinewoods, with unrivalled opportunities for public enjoyment of nature. These values are recognised in a variety of environmental designations of national and international importance which, as a consequence, require all development projects to be of the highest standard.

International obligations

In 1996 the World Conservation Congress, meeting in Montreal, Canada, considered a motion on the proposed funicular railway in the Cairngorms and called on the UK Government “to evaluate the full range of development options, to agree a solution which satisfies all the main environmental considerations, which in terms of public funding, represents good value for money and is financially viable, and which is capable of gaining widespread public support”.

HIE never carried out the required evaluations, refused to meet with the main environmental interests to consider various options and failed to deliver a financially viable development which would command public support. The only occasion when Iain Robertson, then CEO of HIE, was prepared to discuss the funicular with its opponents was at a meeting called by Prince Charles at Balmoral in Deeside. Subsequently Robertson failed to fulfil the commitments he made at that meeting.

The split mountain

The original road and chairlift developments on Cairn Gorm were carried out in the 1960s when the Forestry Commission owned all the land from the forest in Glenmore to the summit of Cairn Gorm. In 1971 this ownership was split, with the HIDB taking ownership of

the upper slopes. This was a disastrous political decision which has led to today's problems. The financial problems on Cairn Gorm cannot be solved without a return to single ownership of the whole mountain or a single body which coordinates all development projects, from top to bottom. If this is not done the need for substantial public funds to keep facilities operational on the upper slopes will continue into the foreseeable future.

The financial challenge

When the funicular project was proposed a financial investigation was carried out by David Hayes, Director of Landmark Adventure Park and various visitor enterprises in Scotland, with support from David Pattison, former Chief Executive of the Scottish Tourist Board and previously Head of Tourism at HIE. Later Alan Blackshaw, a former civil servant but then a member of Moray, Badenoch and Strathspey Enterprise (a part of the HIE network) carried out his own investigation of the financial basis for the funicular project, despite hindrance from HIE at headquarters level. All these experts demonstrated that the funicular was financially unviable. This complemented wider experience of ski developments elsewhere in Scotland and further afield. These confirmed that a concentration of facilities on the upper slopes of the mountain was insufficient to provide financial viability. There has to be a flow of funding from profits developed at facilities on the lower slopes, or elsewhere, to maintain the upper slope facilities. Or endless public funding support is required. The expert advice provided by Hayes, Pattison and Blackshaw was ignored by HIE who chose instead to make public remarks to remind Hayes of the HIE funding he had received for the Landmark operations (ie he should keep his mouth shut) and criticised the integrity and competence of Blackshaw. He had been private secretary to various UK ministers and finished his civil service career as Director General of the UK's Offshore Supplies Office, based in Glasgow. An experienced skier and mountaineer he had also been a board member of Scottish Natural Heritage and the Scottish Sports Council and held senior elected positions in a range of UK and international bodies concerned with mountaineering, skiing, outdoor recreation in general and mountain development. HIE ignored the advice that Blackshaw was giving, treating him with contempt and derision. Blackshaw resigned from MBSE in 2000 after exposing the cosy relationship between HIE and Morrison Construction, exemplified by the departure of the HIE Chief Executive, Iain Robertson, to a senior staff post in this construction company just after HIE had awarded the contract to build the funicular to Morrisons. Robinson had been CEO of HIE since its formation in 1990. This was covered in the Sunday Herald on 20 August 2000 under a heading "Probe into contracts for cronies in the Highlands", the full text of which is available at annex 1.

During 1999 contact was made between Ramblers Scotland and Peter Burt, Chief Executive of the Bank of Scotland, to discuss the proposed funicular. The BoS was the only private sector interest that was supporting operations on Cairn Gorm, including the funicular proposals. Those discussions concluded with Burt agreeing that alternative uplift arrangements should be made on Cairn Gorm, not involving a funicular railway, and a joint

meeting was booked with Alasdair Morrison MSP, then Deputy Minister for the Highlands and Islands in the newly formed Scottish Executive. The purpose of the meeting was primarily for Burt could explain the new approach and the additional finance that the BoS was prepared to put into the revised plans. Also involved in the planned meeting were Ramblers Scotland and David Hayes. The meeting was cancelled at the last minute, with the explanation that the newly established Labour/Lib Dem administration had already agreed that the funicular should go ahead as part of the “done deal” between the political parties that formed the first administration after the reconvening of the Scottish Parliament.

The funicular repairs

Nobody is confident that the funicular will remain operational for the next 20 years. It seems like further repairs will be required within a few years as a consequence of the original decision to build the main framework of the funicular supports in concrete instead of steel. It is therefore essential that development now takes place on Cairn Gorm which ensures that public enjoyment of the mountain is no longer dependent on the funicular. Whether the funicular continues to operate, or is mothballed, or is removed from the mountain should be seen as the responsibility of HIE and nobody else. The funicular should play no part in the future proofing of the mountain against existing and projected climate change problems.

Alternative facilities

New chairlift facilities are needed to transport snowsport participants over the lower slopes which are now snow free for much of the winter, with these chairlifts providing links to existing ski tows to transport participants to better snow cover in the Ptarmigan bowl on the upper slopes. These chairlifts will also be very useful for sightseeing tourists, walkers and mountain bikers and need to replace some existing tows, namely the Day Lodge Poma and the Car Park T Bar. Associated with this should be some new trail development, especially from the top of a Day Lodge Chairlift to provide walking and mountain biking routes down into both Coire Cas and Coire na Ciste and the ground in between. These new chairlifts would also increase the attractiveness of Cairn Gorm for ski mountaineers and tourers, using alpine or Nordic skis.

The existing master plan for Cairn Gorm needs revision. It was produced by consultants based in North America and fails to take proper account of Scottish snow conditions and weather. The proposed new chairlifts in that plan are in the wrong locations and would be excessively expensive. Most of the facilities which have been produced as a result of that plan, or are in preparation, would be better located lower down the mountain, in the forest zone. Low cloud, rain and high winds affect much of the upper slopes of Cairn Gorm for much of the year. There is no need to build such facilities on the upper slopes, they will get far more use elsewhere.

Land ownership and management

An attempt to restore the north slope of Cairn Gorm to single ownership was made in 2005/6 by Forestry Commission Scotland who tried to replace HIE on the upper slopes. That effort had widespread public support but failed, due it is believed because HIE were trying to offload responsibility for the funicular to FCS. The FCS initiative was made under the Labour/Lib Dem Scottish Executive. The subsequent SNP Scottish Government, elected in 2007, have done nothing to further this initiative. Ministers should re-visit this proposal, as a consequence of the current PAC investigation, and see if all the land on the upper slopes can be transferred to FCS while financial responsibility for the funicular remains with HIE.

Other ownership or operational arrangements should also be considered. These could include the involvement of the Cairngorms National Park Authority, NatureScot or an independent Trust. The overriding priority should be to remove HIE from the mountain. They are a toxic presence which inhibits proper dialogue, effective strategic planning and any private sector participation in future Cairn Gorm development.

Conflict of interest

HIE is not only responsible for land ownership and development decisions on Cairn Gorm but it also has an important role in grant aiding economic development throughout Badenoch and Strathspey and elsewhere in the Highlands. This represents a serious conflict of interest and a further reason why HIE should be removed from the mountain. Very few people are prepared to publicly criticise HIE activities on the mountain in case this results in a diminution of grant support for their own businesses or other activities. That is a problem that affects not only local businesses but also the other ski resorts in Scotland, all of whom provide a far better outdoor recreational experience at far less cost to the public purse than HIE's performance on Cairn Gorm. The other ski resorts have much to contribute to help resolve the problems on Cairn Gorm but, as always, HIE will not tolerate any form of criticism from these other experts. Keep your mouths shut and your eyes on your future grant applications is the principle.

Ecological problems

The Cairngorms are subject to intense rain storms which can lead to debris slides and flooding. These problems will increase as a result of climate change. The access road to Cairn Gorm has already been cut through by river flooding on three occasions, the last being in 1981. Partly as a consequence of this flooding the NCC in the 1970s provided grant support to the then Cairngorm Chairlift Company to plant trees around the buildings in the Cas and the Ciste to demonstrate that trees would grow at such altitudes and above. This complemented ongoing actions by the company to revegetate large areas of bare and eroding ground in the Cas which had been caused by previous construction activity. This ecological restoration is essential to reduce downstream flooding from Coire Cas which could affect both the public road below and the Glenmore camp site. It is unfortunate that

little successful tree planting has been carried out in the following 40 plus years despite the ongoing flood risks as well as the lost opportunities to enhance the landscape and wildlife of Coire Cas and to improve snow holding capacity through tree planting. In 2025 however 33,000 trees and shrubs were planted at a high level in Coire na Ciste, with funds provided by the CNPA. No public consultation was carried out about this project, despite its significance for landscape, wildlife and recreational activities on the mountain. This planting has been done in the wrong corrie. It should have been carried out in Coire Cas, not Coire na Ciste. The Ciste is not the source of downstream flooding damage from Cairn Gorm, the soils and vegetation are intact and woodland is already returning to the Ciste slopes through natural regeneration, at no cost to the public purse. Meanwhile the Cas continues to be in a fragile condition, with far too much bare ground vulnerable to downstream erosion. These problems were explained by ecological experts, including Adam Watson, a renowned Cairngorms scientist, to the politicians who attended the site visit in 1985 by the House of Commons Select Committee. Why has there been such ineffective political inaction ever since?

Future Dialogue

The most successful land reform action by the Scottish Parliament was in 2003 when, with strong cross-party support, Scotland's right to roam legislation was established. This world class legislation was derived from years of discussion within the National Access Forum which was established by Magnus Magnusson, as chair of Scottish Natural Heritage, in the early 1990s. The NAF brought together outdoor recreation interests, land managers and public bodies, meeting several times a year. It continues to this day. An equivalent type of body is now needed, as a matter of urgency, to provide ongoing dialogue and advise on land management and development projects in the northern corries of the Cairngorms, from summit to strath.

Another option would be to establish some form of Citizens Assembly for the Cairngorms, an innovative mechanism for public and political dialogue which is gaining increasing traction in many countries. Such a body could provide a focus for improving environmental and economic progress in the northern corries, but also over a wider area. In the 1980s there was political support for the establishment of a World Heritage Site in the Cairngorms. Subsequent politicians have made no further progress towards this objective. The forthcoming elections to the Scottish Parliament will provide an opportunity to remedy this situation in the Cairngorms, as well as resolving the on-going problems on Cairn Gorm itself.

Personal knowledge

My own experience of the Cairngorms extends back to 1964 when I made my first visit to Coire Cas for a downhill skiing holiday. From 1973 – 85 I worked for the Nature Conservancy Council, as an area scientific and policy officer based in Aviemore, and dealt with many issues in the Cairngorms, including the Lurchers Gully Public Inquiry in 1981. From 1989 to

2014 I worked for a Non-Governmental Organisation, the Ramblers, as head of their Scottish operations. That included dealing with the funicular railway project, during its proposal, construction and early operational phases.

I am familiar with ski development operations in many mountain areas, from North America, the European Alps and Scandinavia to Russia (Caucasus mountains) through personal recreational activities and professionally through work with various international organisations concerned with environmental protection and public enjoyment.

Annex 1

Probe into contracts for cronies in the Highlands

from Sunday Herald, 20 August, 2000 by Rob Edwards

ONE of Scotland's leading economic development agencies is being investigated over allegations of cronyism and financial mismanagement after a director of a local enterprise company resigned in protest.

The chief executive of Highlands and Island Enterprise (HIE), Iain Robertson, announced last month that he would be leaving in October to become director for corporate development for Morrison plc, an Edinburgh-based construction company. In the last five years HIE has awarded Morrison contracts worth £12.7 million, including £9.6m for building the controversial railway up Cairngorm.

Now Alan Blackshaw, a former senior civil servant and a leading expert on mountain recreation, has quit as a director of Moray Badenoch and Strathspey Enterprise, the company in the HIE network which covers the Cairngorms. In his four-page resignation letter, seen by the Sunday Herald, he said his decision had been prompted by the "considerable difficulties" raised by Robertson's departure. "Mr Blackshaw has made some very serious allegations which need to be investigated," said Scottish minister for enterprise Henry McLeish. "These are matters for the enterprise body to consider. My officials have already written to Dr James Hunter, the chairman of HIE, seeking his urgent comments on these allegations."

In his letter, Blackshaw pointed out that the original decision to build a funicular up Cairngorm was made during the six years when Sir Fraser Morrison, chairman and chief executive of Morrison plc, was also chairman of HIE. In 1999, the year after Sir Fraser left HIE, it awarded the £9.6m funicular contract to Morrison.

"It was important in this context that HIE were – and were seen to be – independent in all respects from Morrison...This independence was in part ensured by the fact that Iain Robertson, as HIE chief executive and accounting officer, seemed to have a high degree of personal involvement in the funicular project," Blackshaw wrote.

"It is not clear when the possibility of Iain Robertson working instead for Morrison first arose, and what arrangements were then put in place to continue to ensure the necessary HIE independence regarding the Morrison contract, ongoing for another 15 months from now."

Blackshaw, who used to chair the British Ski Federation, also criticised HIE for blocking any consideration of alternatives to the funicular. He is strongly committed to redeveloping the Cairngorm ski resort on a sustainable and economic basis, but regards the funicular as a mistake.

In addition, Blackshaw raised questions about the way in which £7.6m worth of payments for the funicular were handled in the Moray Badenoch and Strathspey Enterprise (MBSE) accounts. As a non-executive director of the company he was repeatedly denied information he requested, he said. "In these circumstances I do not feel able to continue as a MBSE board member."

The responses he has drawn from HIE and MBSE are fierce. "On the day Iain Robertson announced his resignation and move to Morrison he withdrew from any involvement in property matters, a situation confirmed in writing to HIE's head of property," stated an HIE spokesman.

"Mr Blackshaw's questioning of the accounting for the funicular project betrays his lack of understanding of the relationship between HIE and the Local Enterprise Company. Property expenditure is made by HIE on behalf of the LECs and is accounted for on that basis."

HIE has previously pointed out that the funicular contract was awarded to Morrison in line with a recommendation from external consultants following a competitive tendering exercise. Since the contract was finalised six months before Morrison approached Robertson "no question of conflict of interest arises", HIE insisted.

The MBSE chairman, Jim Lochhead, claimed that the points raised by Blackshaw had been thoroughly scrutinised by the competent authorities. "His remarks on the role of individuals do him no credit whatsoever. The procedures for the implementation of the project are beyond reproach in terms of public sector accountability and propriety," he said.

"The board of MBSE were not disappointed to receive Mr Blackshaw's resignation. Since joining the board in 1998 his contributions and attendance were modest."

Yet last Monday Lochhead wrote to Blackshaw saying that "your immediate resignation from the board is noted with disappointment". Blackshaw pointed out that in his 21 months as a director of MBSE, he attended 15 meetings and wrote 65 letters or submissions.

Blackshaw's criticisms of HIE are widely echoed by recreational groups and MSPs. "Our experience of the funicular saga suggests that, under Iain Robertson's leadership, HIE has developed secrecy, bullying and intimidation to an art form," alleged Dave Morris, director of the Ramblers Association Scotland.

"HIE has always refused to sit around the table with environmental and recreation groups such as the Ramblers and discuss different options for development on Cairngorm. We have never seen such arrogance and contempt for other interests in any other government organisation."

Mike Rumbles, the Liberal Democrat rural affairs spokesman and MSP for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, did not think that there had been sufficient public scrutiny of the funicular. "I am very uneasy at the perception of a conflict of interest between HIE and Morrison," he said.

"I am not happy with the way in which the funicular has been handled by HIE and the Scottish Executive. If the Scottish parliament had been in place before the funicular was built, I think we would have seen a different result."

The Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, set by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has advised some senior civil servants not to take up jobs with companies they have dealt with until two years after they have left the civil service. Blair imposed a two-year ban on David Davies, former chief scientific adviser to the Ministry of Defence, to prevent him giving commercial advice to British Aerospace.

But a spokesman for the Scottish Executive confirmed last week that the advisory committee's advice did not extend to non- departmental public bodies like HIE.
