

Outdoors groups call for transparency on Cairngorm plans to ensure best use of public funds

A coalition of outdoors organisations is calling for plans drawn up by Highlands & Islands Enterprise (HIE) to be made publicly available prior to a decision by the Scottish Government as to whether to fund the proposals. The four organisations are concerned that public money may be wasted on costly and unsustainable proposals for the mountain's ski area, including the fate of the funicular railway which has been closed since 2018.

The group is very concerned about the lack of transparency and public accountability regarding decisions about the future of Cairngorm Mountain ski centre. They believe it is crucial that any future plans should evaluate two scenarios, one with and one without the funicular railway to ensure full value for public funds which are being invested in the area.

Dave Windle of North East Mountain Trust representing the group said:

"Skiers have been deserting the mountain since well before the closure of the funicular. It's now clear that the funicular is not even needed to attract summer visitors given the number of tourists flocking to the area this summer when it wasn't working. HIE's plans must get things right this time or more public money will be wasted, and downhill skiers will continue to go elsewhere."

The group is calling for a sustainable skiing operation to be created along with summer activities which are compatible with an environmentally sensitive high mountain environment.

From the moment the funicular ceased operation, the group believes that HIE decided that the funicular should be repaired and discarded other options. Of equal concern is the likelihood that a decision to repair will be made by the Government without any opportunity for parliamentary or public scrutiny of the financial details.

Dave Windle continued

"It will be totally unacceptable if the Government takes a decision before allowing MSPs and the public to consider the rational for, and the costs of, the case presented by HIE. Of particular concern is the fact that future costs will not be limited to the £10-£15m estimate for the repair of the funicular but will need to include new ski uplift as well, probably a high speed chair lift, whether or not the funicular is repaired. In addition, there is a large backlog of maintenance of the infrastructure, including the Day Lodge and the Ptarmigan buildings.

"On top of that, all previous operators have lost money. Things need to be different this time, which is why HIE and the Government need to be open and transparent. Local skiing enthusiasts have better ideas on how to get skiers back to Cairngorm.

"The business case for supporting the repair of funicular must be made public now before a decision is taken. Only in this way can people and businesses on Speyside, skiers and those who are concerned about the mountain be assured that repair of the funicular is the best option and that public money wouldn't be better spent on a different model or on supporting struggling businesses elsewhere on Speyside."

Notes for Editors:

The ski area is owned by HIE which has contracted day to day operations to private companies or, as at present, to a subsidiary owned by itself.

Recently, the management of the ski area has had to be taken back into public ownership twice at significant cost. The funicular has been unusable due to serious structural problems for the last two years.

Over the period 2004 - 2013, average annual skier days were 78,000 equating to a 41% share of the total Scottish market. Over the period 2014 -2018, this was down to 60,000 (32% market share), a reduction of 30%.

In response to recent written Parliamentary questions, Fergus Ewing (Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy) has stated that:

- A decision on the repair of the funicular is expected shortly.
- The business case will be published shortly.

This suggests that there will be no period between publication of the business case and a decision by the Scottish Government.

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The outdoor organisations supporting this statement are:

Cairngorms Campaign

North East Mountain Trust

Ramblers Scotland

Scottish Wild Land Group