

P-04-605 Save Cwmcarn Forest Drive – Correspondence from the
Petitioner to the Committee, 11.02.15

Friends of Cwmcarn Forest Drive

Petitions Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

Dear Sir/Madam,

Many thanks for your communication of 5th February 2015. Firstly I would like to briefly update you on the current progress being made by NRW at Cwmcarn. The felling of the diseased trees in the Cwmcarn Forest has still not started and local people have been very saddened and upset about the way in which the facilities on the drive were decommissioned, likening this to mindless vandalism. Our new organisation, the Friends of Cwmcarn Forest Drive, has been keenly pursuing the stakeholder meetings on the future of the drive proposed by NRW, however there has been no indication to date that these will commence in the near future.

While I understand the Petitions Committee would now like to close my petition I feel that, given its high number of signatories, it should be kept open, and possibly returned to from time to time, in order to ensure that NRW are fulfilling their promise to complete the felling quickly in order to re-open the Drive to cars. There is another possible course of action that the Petitions committee could take if passes a request to the relevant Assembly Committee(s) to regularly monitor the work to ensure the speedy completion of the felling. It could also work with stakeholders to explore all possibilities for the re-opening of the Drive to private cars.

We feel that any other alternative would be grossly unfair and discriminatory to the many people, including elderly and disabled people, who are only able to access the Drive with its fantastic scenery via motor transport. The minibus service on the Drive for the mountain bikers continues but there seems no likelihood that this, or similar transport, will be made available to the wider public. As a rambler I can walk the Drive and the many hills and valleys locally, however there are many people who cannot and I feel it that it is in the best interests of these that the drive re-opens as soon as possible. NRW may need encouragement to do this and, as our representatives, the National Assembly is obviously best placed to do this and to regularly monitor progress towards this goal.

I have also attached our submission to the Committee, dated 10 December 2014, on the matter of the closure along with this letter. I hope that the Petitions Committee will be able to take both of these documents into consideration when discussing the future of our sadly missed Forest Drive.

Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rob Southall', written in a cursive style.

Rob Southall
Chair, Friends of Cwmcarn Forest Drive

P-04-605 Save Cwmcarn Forest Drive – Correspondence from the Petitioner to the Committee, 10.12.14

Submission to the National Assembly for Wales Petitions committee

Regarding the petition titled: Save the Cwmcarn Forest Drive from Indefinite or Permanent Closure

Petition Text: We call upon the National Assembly for Wales to urge the Welsh Government to reverse the decision of Natural Resources Wales to close the Cwmcarn Forest Drive indefinitely on 2nd November 2014

Statement: I first heard of Natural Resources Wales proposal to close the Cwmcarn Forest Drive around March–April of this year and initially thought nothing of it assuming it to be temporary and a matter of felling the trees quickly and transporting them out of the valley. I did, however make a mental note at this time to contact NRW's Heritage and Conservation Officer Rosalind Watkins (formerly Codd) to seek reassurance that the felling would not threaten sensitive environmental and archaeological areas. I thought this as I am currently researching the history of the lost farms of Mynydd Maen it seemed a sensible precaution to take. This is especially the case since the careless destruction by forest contractors a few years earlier of the ruins of Ty'n y Waun farm, near Cwmfelinfach in the lower Sirhowy valley.

In mid to late August I happened to chat to Robert Cole who as the contract warden was employed on a contract basis by NRW to man the pay lodge at the entrance of the Forest Drive. It was he who first informed me of the full extent of the closure. Mr Cole informed me that the drive was to close indefinitely with a caveat that it would take at least six years to complete the felling and that due to lack of funds the drive might never re-open to cars. This was corroborated later by Mrs Barbara White who lives a Ty'n y Ffynnon farm which is actually situated just off the drive in the heart of the Nant Carn valley. Mrs White also told me that she had been told by local NRW employees that

the sculptures were to be removed and transported to other locations, the children's playground was to be dismantled and given away and the barbeques were to be demolished. Mrs White also told me that she had not been informed of any of NRW's plans officially in spite of being directly affected by them. Needless to say I was appalled and decided to set up the Facebook group to fight NRW's decision. This group picked up nearly 500 members in its first hour which gave me some indication of people's opposition to NRW's proposal.

Following this I wrote an e-mail to Peter Cloke, a senior manager within NRW's south Eastern region, to get an official response on the closure from him. That same evening I also wrote to First Minister Carwyn Jones AM in opposition to the NRW's closure plans, copying in a number of local AMs, including Lynne Neagle AM, Jocelyn Davies AM and William Graham AM and Gwyn Price AM. The first three responded over the next few days. That same evening I set up the Facebook group 'Campaign to Save the Cwmcarn Forest Drive' and was quite amazed to find that after just over an hour over five hundred people had joined. 4936 people are currently members of this group.

In the following days I received a confirmation from Peter Cloke that the information I had received initially about the closure was correct and I queried the need for an indefinite and/or permanent closure of the Drive. I felt that NRW were being intentionally vague and evasive. I was also finding that the information NRW were putting out was inconsistent. I contacted the South Wales Argus about this and it elicited several articles over the following weeks. I also contacted Iolo ap Dafydd, Environment correspondent for BBC Wales about this. Initially he was not minded that the press releases were inconsistent, but after further consideration he came back to me in full agreement with the points I had made. Several NRW managers and employees had put out statements and press releases that didn't seem to correspond to one another -some said the Drive was closing for a period of time and others confirmed the closure of the Drive would be permanent.

The main thrust of my argument was that the closure of the Drive to private cars was, and remains, discriminatory. In the course of the

campaign I have found that many people; a number of carers use the Drive almost daily to take clients, and elderly family members, out to enjoy the fresh air and fantastic views the drive affords. One of our society's leading activists, Mrs Sharon Peck, is a professional self employed child minder who uses the Drive and lake area daily.

The main reason I believe the closure is discriminatory is that the drive is only being closed to private cars. The cyclists can continue to use the Drive and the various cycle trails (and public footpaths!) within the valley, in addition the minibus and trailer service (Cwm-down) that ferries cyclists and their bikes up to the top of the downhill trail (at the very top of the Drive) is being allowed to continue, with only minor and temporary limitations. As a walker I can also continue to walk the Drive –and would fully intend to do so if walkers were barred.

A group of concerned people came together around the Facebook page and, at the beginning of September; we formed a loose society called 'the Friends of Cwmcarn Forest Drive' to take the campaign forward. The Friends will become a constituted society at the beginning of 2015. Our society is here to stay as we fully intend to continue to press to get the Drive re-opened to cars.

Around mid September I arranged a meeting at Crosskeys RFC club house with Andy Schofield who is regional land manager for NRW. The meeting was held in good spirits by all concerned and Andy provided several specialist maps featuring sensitive environmental and archaeological areas and hydrological features. He also informed us at this point that the larch around the Drive would now be felled over the first two years of a six year local felling plan and following the two years NRW would look at options for re-opening the Drive to private cars. I received a letter from Lynne Neagle AM dated 8th October which included a response from Carl Sargeant AM which outlined the reasons for the closure, talked about the revised felling plan and re-iterated that the Cwmcarn Forest Drive would now only be closed for two years –I have an electronic copy of this and would be happy to forward it to the Petitions Committee

We held a public meeting at the Cwmcarn Institute on Wednesday 16 October. This was attended by Andy Schofield and Jo-Anne Anstey on behalf of NRW and they presented on their organisation's plans. Both NRW managers re-iterated that the Drive would now only be closed for two years while the felling was in progress and after this NRW would endeavour to re-open the facilities to cars. Interestingly when I asked Jo-Anne Anstey if the sculptures from around the Drive were to remain at Cwmcarn she responded by saying that most would be moved to the sculpture trail at Fforest Fawr near Castell Coch. I asked again if any were to remain at Cwmcarn and received what I considered to be an intentionally vague and evasive answer. Later I contacted Mike Owen, the manager of the Cwmcarn Forest Drive Visitor centre, to ask if any had been offered to the local authority which runs this facility. He responded to me the following day, copied in to Jo-Anne Anstey, to say that none had been offered but they would be delighted to receive some if asked by NRW. This email was followed by an email from Jo-Anne Anstey telling him that they were available if the local authority could arrange transport. I understand the Caerphilly County Borough Council now plans to install some of these sculptures in the lake area which is managed by them and therefore remaining open.

Around 50 people attended and many of these asked questions of NRW. Gwyn Price AM (Lab-Islywn) and Jocelyn Davies AM (Plaid-SE Wales) also attended along with a BBC Wales Radio journalist and a South Wales Argus Reporter. On the afternoon of the closure (Sunday 2nd November) our society held a rally on the Drive which was attended by at least 20 other cars -it would have been ore but we had to bring it forward from 3.00 to 2.00pm to keep NRW happy. However this was not an issue because the rally was merely symbolic and I hope it re-iterated to NRW that our society is here to stay and we fully expect the Drive to re-open to cars in two years once the felling is complete.

In responding to Carl Sargeant AM's recent letter I have to say I am a little surprised that he seems to be backtracking on a statement he made in his letter dated 28 September to Lynne Neagle AM which runs as follows "Officials are in contact with Natural Resources Wales on this matter and have been assured that there is no intention to

permanently close the route. I understand that the route will be closed for approximately two years to allow for the safe and efficient felling and extraction of the infected trees". The Friends of Cwmcarn Forest Drive intend to hold NRW and the Welsh government to their promise and would certainly welcome involvement in plans for the future of the Drive -this has so far only been mentioned informally. We look forward to meetings with NRW to discuss this involvement in the New Year.

Robert J Southall
Chair, Friends of Cwmcarn Forest Drive