

## Petition: P-05-759 Re-open the Cwmcarn Forest Drive at Easter 2018

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 13 Mehefin 2017  
Petitions Committee | 13 June 2017

### Research Briefing:

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Petition number: P-05-759

Petition title: **Re-open the Cwmcarn Forest Drive at Easter 2018**

Petition text:

**We call upon the National Assembly for Wales to urge the Welsh Government to provide the necessary means to allow Natural Resources Wales to fully re-open the Cwmcarn Forest Drive to private cars at Easter 2018.**

In the summer of 2014 Natural Resources Wales stated that the Cwmcarn Forest Drive, also known as the Scenic Drive, would be closed for a minimum of two years from November 2014 and that this was necessary because of the infection of the Japanese larch in the Cwmcarn valley and surrounding hillsides. The removal of the larch is now almost complete and NRW are beginning to reinstate the cycle tracks and footpaths, however there does not appear to be a plan to reinstate the scenic drive, even though the vast majority of the route is undamaged. To single out private car users of the drive is unfair and unnecessary when other users will face only temporary disruption. Many of those who access the Drive via private car do so because they have limited mobility, some are families with small children, many are elderly, disabled or from our ethnic minority and immigrant communities. Failing to provide a facility for these people is discriminatory especially when there are plans, and funds available, to provide further facilities for other users. The lack of a fully accessible scenic drive deprives those people who are our most culturally and materially deprived of their main facility for health and well-being. Our organisation, the Friends of Cwmcarn Forest Drive wants equality of access for all users of the scenic drive and calls for the Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales to provide the means to make this possible.

## Background

The Forest Drive is one of a number of facilities provided by Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and Caerphilly County Borough Council in the Cwmcarn valley. These facilities also include a visitor centre with a café and a gift shop, walking and mountain biking trails, and fishing and camping facilities.

The Forest Drive closed in November 2014 to allow NRW to undertake a large-scale felling operation of larch trees infected with *Phytophthora ramorum* (larch disease). 78% of the trees along the drive were larch trees infected by the disease. This approach is part of NRW's Wales-wide strategy to reduce the risk of larch disease spreading further.

In April 2015, NRW gave the following [reasons for closing the Forest Drive \(PDF 189KB\)](#):

- The safety of the public is the number one priority;
- The Forest Drive road is a single track, one-way road system for most of its length;
- The road will be used to site harvesting equipment during operations;
- Timber will be stored directly on or adjacent to the road and loaded onto lorries;
- Large haulage lorries will be travelling along the road at regular intervals; and
- Given that the road is not built to highway standards, it is highly likely to be damaged by the 40 tonne timber trucks and harvesting machinery. It would therefore be unsafe for public motorists to use the road during operations.

In January 2016, NRW told the Research Service:

Closing the drive for felling has inevitably led us to ask some hard questions about whether or not we open the drive again. Like other public bodies, we are having to think about how best to use our limited resources. We haven't yet reached any conclusions, but we need to be realistic about the challenges we face at Cwmcarn. In particular:-

- There will be some significant up-front costs associated with re-instating the roads and recreational facilities.
- We also know that any investment or re-opening would require a rationalisation and re-fresh of the facilities we offer, and that this would also be an additional cost.
- The way in which we have been managing the drive is not sustainable, and we need to find a more efficient model for managing the facility. It's currently running at a net loss.

We need to consider all of these factors, as well as looking at potential sources of funding over the next few months. Whilst we can't make any commitment that the drive will definitely open, we do recognise the value of the drive to the health and wellbeing of local communities, and will be doing everything we can to make sure an opportunity is not lost here.

## Welsh Government action

Lesley Griffiths AM, the Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs, wrote to the Committee on 8 May 2017. Her letter states the following:

- The Forest Drive was closed to ensure the large-scale harvesting operations remain on schedule and any risks to public safety are managed properly. This remains a high priority for NRW.
- Engineering surveys of the Forest Drive have indicated that substantial investment is required to keep it open.
- NRW has maintained regular contact with the Friends of Cwmcarn Forest Drive over the past 18 months, including providing updates at public meetings.
- The future of the Forest Drive “has not been concluded and nothing has been decided.” NRW has “always been clear that they cannot commit to re-opening the Drive until the funding to support the work associated with it can be identified”.
- A study into the commercial feasibility and management options at Cwmcarn will commence this year. Options for the future of the Forest Drive will be included in this study. NRW hopes to review the findings from the study in early 2018.
- The petitioners should be encouraged to continue to work with NRW to develop a plan to secure the long term future of the Forest Drive.

## National Assembly for Wales action

The closure of Cwmcarn Forest Drive has been the subject of a number of oral and written questions in the Assembly over the past two years, including the following.

On [3 February 2016](#) William Powell AM asked:

... the Cwmcarn Forest Drive has now been closed to cars since November 2014 to allow the felling of over 150,000 infected larch. There's been considerable uncertainty amongst the public, both in terms of the long-term future of that particular attraction and also with regard to the rights of way that are still open to walkers and to mountain bikers. The Cwmcarn Forest visitor centre is set, I understand, to record at least a 10 per cent drop in visitors. This is believed, in part, to be down to a misunderstanding as to the current status of the footpath network. I know that my colleague, Jocelyn Davies, has recently written on this topic in the local media. In this regard, also, Rob Southall, chairman of the friends of Cwmcarn Forest Drive, has brought a petition to the Petitions Committee. Given the importance of the forest drive, what more can the Welsh Government do to support NRW in addressing the concerns of the local community and to ensure that it does open again and as soon as possible?

Carl Sargeant AM, the then Minister for Natural Resources, responded:

I know that NRW are working extremely hard in the area to try and resolve these issues, but biological security for that area and for the rest of Wales is extremely important. I believe that they're

handling the situation very well. Of course, we'd like to see the Cwmcarn Forest Drive open, but it's a matter of making sure that we can deal with the phytophthora ramorum infection that is under way in that particular region.

On [22 June 2016](#) Rhianon Passmore AM asked:

... Natural Resources Wales has stated, regarding the tree felling on the seven-mile Cwmcarn forest scenic drive, which temporarily closed in November 2014, that this is a long-term operation that could take between three and four years to complete. Will the Cabinet Secretary reiterate the Welsh Government's absolute, unequivocal determination that one of the natural wonders of the Welsh environment will be a priority for the Welsh Government, with priority put on ensuring that the drive will once again become available to the public?

Lesley Griffiths AM, the Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs, responded:

The Welsh Government is very aware of the value of the Cwmcarn forest drive to the local communities and to visitors. Both Natural Resources Wales and Caerphilly County Borough Council have set up a working group to look at the long-term opportunities there, including how walking and cycling routes, and campsites, can be sustainably funded in future.

On [5 July 2016](#) Rhianon Passmore AM asked:

... tourism hubs within the city region's connectivity agenda are absolutely essential in terms of releasing the potential of our beautiful landscapes within the Valleys communities and, so, would the Minister agree with me in terms of how important it is, for instance, that the Cwmcarn scenic drive in my constituency is actually regenerated and rejuvenated as a true vision of what we can do with Valleys communities, and what we can do in terms of regeneration of our Valleys communities?

Alun Davies AM, Minister for Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language, responded:

I absolutely agree. I think the Cwmcarn forest drive is a fantastic resource for all of us, and not just for those of us who live in the Valleys. I know the Cabinet Secretary is in her place and has heard the points that you've made. And, certainly, the work that I believe that NRW has been involved with will ensure that Cwmcarn scenic drive is available for people in the future. It's a very good example of how the environment and the geography and the landscape of the Valleys are something that can provide, not simply enjoyment and pleasure for those of us who live there, but also can ensure that we have an economic impact, and one that we need to harness and use for the future.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.