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Mike Hedges AM
Chair – Petitions Committee
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Dear Mike

Thank you very much for instructing committee clerks to forward Lesley Griffith AM, the Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs, letter of 8th May. I am a little concerned that the Minister's letter does not seem to be a response to our current petition (which is asking the National Assembly 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) rather it seems to be responding to our previous petition which asked the National Assembly urge the Welsh Government to reverse the decision of Natural Resources Wales to close the Cwmcarn Forest Drive indefinitely on 2nd November 2014. Perhaps the Minister could clarify this?

What we would like to see in this instance is for the Welsh Government to assist NRW in seeking and securing funding to re-open the drive. While I understand that the Welsh Government delegates responsibility for the management of state woodland in Wales to NRW the influence of the Welsh government has been strong throughout this sorry affair - in initially signing off the closure in the Spring of 2014, in failing to provide a fund to re-establish the Drive and also, and most significantly, in reducing the annual grant to NRW which means that they currently lack the resources to re-open the Drive. Senior managers of NRW have themselves admitted that they would like to re-open the Drive but lack the resources to do so.

Our society is particularly concerned that while no Welsh Government resources have been provided to re-open the drive that yet another mountain bike track is being planned in the Cwmcarn valley and our group have assumed that funding must have been provided for the planning and construction of this. We have to ask ourselves whether the needs of the majority, i.e. those who wish to access the drive in their cars perhaps because of limited mobility, are being overlooked in favour of

the needs of a relatively small number of mountain bikers who are usually young, fit and affluent males, often from outside of Wales.

As a politics lecturer who has recently contributed a chapter on pressure groups in Wales to a new University of Edinburgh publication on the Government & Politics of Wales (Deacon, Denton & Southall) which is due for publication later this year I have become deeply concerned about the extent of corporatism within the Welsh Governmental system. Cycling charities and mountain biking organisations are being prioritised here and one particular charity whose aim is to promote walking and cycling, but who concentrate almost entirely on catering for the needs of cyclists, seems to have had an undue influence. The Welsh Government must consider the needs and wishes of the silent majority rather than simply pandering to the demands of organised interests which, through their insider status, not only influence Welsh Government policy but to some extent direct it.

We do not feel that this is an unfair accusation as far the NRW facilities in the Cwmcarn valley are concerned as there appears to be ample evidence for this - with NRW having a designated cycling warden (but no one with a responsibility to promote walking), with the cycling routes being prioritised over footpaths, not just in these being cleared and opened sooner but also in the rather dangerous practice of diverting downhill mountain bikes onto public footpaths (so much for the safety of the public!) , and lastly in the continued use of the Drive roadway by the mountain bikers uplift service, i.e. minibus and trailer, while the general public is being told that the drive is no longer in a fit state for private car use. Over the past few months I have walked the entire seven mile route of the drive on several occasions and I am pleased to report that apart from some areas where the road surface needs replacing, that the actual road is in better condition than many back roads in the county borough of Caerphilly. We are constantly being told by NRW and CCBC that the Forest Drive was losing money, that the cyclists bring in much needed cash and yet people actually paid to use the Drive whereas the cyclists are not charged for the use of the cycle tracks or the general upkeep of the forest area. They are only charged for parking (£3.00 per day) and for the use of the privately owned uplift service so how can it be that be the whole truth of the financial situation? There is an obvious conflict here between NRW's provision for the needs of the many and the demands of the few and I am sure that the Welsh Government do not need reminding that they, and other public bodies they fund, should focus their limited resources on the former rather than the latter.

In response to other points raised in the Minister's letter. Our group is concerned that the longer the Drive remains closed the greater the likelihood that it will never be reopened thus permanently excluding a large number of former users. We have been extremely patient and built up a close and cordial relationship with NRW, while at the same time being largely ignored by the local authority (CCBC). We were assured by Carl Sergeant, the previous Minister for Natural Resources, in correspondence with Lynne Neagle AM (see attached 24.09.14) and in a letter received from Amanda Thomas, the Welsh Government's Access and Outdoor Recreation Officer (see attached 16.9.14) that there is no intention to close the Drive permanently and that after a two year closure that planning for the re-opening would commence.

However the Drive has now been closed for over two and a half years and we have seen no hard evidence that the re-opening is being planned for, other than rather vague allusions to yet another feasibility study looking at the management and commercial value of the drive in the long term rather than planning for its re-opening

to the public in the near future. The Cwmcarn Forest Drive is a publically owned facility held in trust by the Welsh Government which should cater for the needs of the general public and not simply those of commercial investors or unaccountable government bureaucrats. We have to ask the NAFW whether spending several thousand pounds on this feasibility study is good use of the public purse. Wouldn't the money be put to better use if used to repair the damage to the Drive's road surface?

We understand that NRW requires the forest roads to complete the felling and to restock the affected areas but we feel that we have a real grievance in the fact that the promise to plan for the re-opening just isn't happening. In addition the Welsh Governments spending of over nine million pounds on a privately owned facility in the Heads of the Valleys which may or may not happen (of which several hundred thousand pounds were used to purchase a company that later went into liquidation) is galling to our members and supporters. Wouldn't have been put to better use if used to provide facilities that everyone young and old, able bodied or disabled, rich or poor can access? The fifteen hundred people who have signed our latest petition certainly think that this is the case and we sincerely hope that both the NAFW and the Welsh Government can take their wishes in consideration and provide a positive response to our request that they help to resolve the matter of the continued closure of the Drive.

Yours faithfully

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

Robert Southall
Chair, Friends of Cwmcarn Forest Drive