

David J Rowlands  
Chair  
Petitions Committee  
National Assembly for Wales  
Cardiff Bay  
Cardiff  
CF99 1NA

15 November 2017

Dear Mr Rowlands,

Thank you for your letter of 18 October 2017. You will be aware that Dr Emyr Roberts has retired from NRW and so I am responding as interim Chief Executive until our new Chief Executive, Clare Pillman takes up her position in February 2018.

Can I begin by saying that we do understand the frustrations felt by the community and it is acknowledged that progress has been slower than we would have wished. We do take seriously the comments of Mr Southall, on behalf of the Friends of Cwmcarn Forest Drive, which you enclosed with your letter. Mr John Hogg our Head of Operations South Central, who has attended the public meetings at Cwmcarn, spoke with Mr Southall on 10 November 2017 in order to explain the current position and respond to the issues that were raised by him. He has also offered to speak with him in one month to update him further.

Before responding to the specific points in Mr Southall's letter I should like to explain the position of NRW. Without a significant capital sum we will not be able to undertake the necessary work to re-open Forest Drive to a standard that permits public vehicle usage. Initial surveys that we have carried out indicate that stability in some areas would require further investigation and it would not, in our opinion, be as straight forward as suggested by Mr Southall. We need to better understand those likely costs so that we can make a funding bid to the Welsh Government (WG). Discussions with WG have started on exploring funding options e.g. re-prioritisation of WG capital funding, WG's Targeted Regeneration Fund and Heritage Lottery funding.

Mr Southall is correct that we have not gone out to tender on the feasibility study but we have continued to discuss how best we and Caerphilly County Borough Council (CCBC) could work together. The feasibility study will look at how working with the local authority and/or others we can ensure a sustainable future for Forest Drive and the other amenities. It is regrettable that we have not been able to progress this as quickly as we would have

wished and this has been due in part to staff absence, however, we are making every endeavour and as mentioned above Mr Hogg will be updating Mr Southall on progress.

We are sorry that Mr Southall feels he has not been kept informed of progress and specifically that a member of our staff has not responded to his emails. It is not acceptable to not respond to emails and Mr Hogg has apologised to Mr Southall. We believe that through Mr Hogg, and in due course other staff, we can update Mr Southall on a more regular basis. We have also agreed to attend a public meeting in the spring of next year.

The new mountain bike routes being proposed at Cwmcarn are a council initiative. The council approached us with the idea to find out if we would allow them on our land and this in turn led to an approval in principle to allow them to proceed to a planning application. However, they would take full responsibility for the trails, including design, construction and ongoing maintenance. I would add that we did suggest to the council that if they were developing new mountain bike routes they should as part of the project include other recreational improvements such as improved walking trails etc. No official agreements have been developed with the council, so perhaps this could be a matter for the community to raise directly with them? The way these routes will be managed in practice will be determined at a later stage but we would of course work with the council on things like route maps, marketing information, and on physical management, as long as NRW was not losing out financially.

Thank you for telling us that Ken Skates AM has advised through a response to a question from Rhiannon Passmore AM that the WG hoped to reopen the Forest Drive to cars in 2019. As mentioned above we are in discussion with WG on sources of funding and can include that information in our discussions.

In summary, I hope the above reassures your Committee that we continue to progress our work at Cwmcarn, albeit progress to date has been slower than we would wish. Keeping the community informed of our work is important to us and I hope that you will see that we have taken steps to remedy that break down in communications.

Kind regards

Kevin Ingram  
Interim Chief Executive