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Planning & Environment

David M Poch, Director
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Dear Sirs,

An Ambition For Forest Cycling and Mountain Biking: Towards A National Strategy: A report by Tourism Resources Company (TRC)

I refer to the above report recently posted on the Forestry Commission website.

I am please to offer the following comments regarding the report, on behalf of North Lanarkshire Council, and to provide suggestions for the Strategy and Action Plans.

The demand for dedicated mountain bike facilities appears to be growing rapidly amongst residents within North Lanarkshire and surrounding areas of Scotland's "Central Belt". This can be evidence by a number of informal and unauthorised "tracks" which have been created in woodlands and parks within our area and by formal requests by organisations such as the Carron Valley Development Group and the Scottish Wildlife Trust for Council support in developing dedicated mountain bike trails and mountain bike adventure parks.

"Forest cycling" provision also has a significant role to play in addressing a demand within our area for families, youth groups and the elderly, who have reservations using many public roads due to traffic levels.

North Lanarkshire Council has increasingly recognised the demand, and indeed the need, for dedicated cycling facilities which address issues of quality of life and health improvement, community development and economic benefits associated with these facilities.

The Council also recognises the need to be sustainable in developing and maintaining these dedicated biking facilities through planned long-term investment both by the Forestry Commission and by partner public agencies. We therefore partially agree with the "Affordability" aim contained within the report's Strategic Framework that existing sites should be completed prior to new sites being developed. It is our view however that from an environmental sustainability perspective, areas such as the Highlands and Scottish Borders have a high provision of sites, whilst the Central Belt, which contains the vast majority of Scotland's population suffers from underprovision of both centres and more specifically lengths of mountain-bike (and forest cycling) trails. Whilst recognising the role which the existing "rural" mountain bike and forest cycling facilities provide in supporting rural economies, if the National Strategy is to be considered serious in delivering opportunities for health, recreation and access for all, then centres within the Central Belt are essential.

Within a North Lanarkshire context, the Council has already been working in partnership with the Scottish Forest Lowlands District, the Carron Valley Development Group, and other partners, in developing a nucleus of trails at the Carron Valley Forest located between Kilsyth, Falkirk and Stirling.

The site is one of the most centrally located for centres of population within Central Scotland and with the development of more trails and support facilities, could function both as a local community facility for local residents, and as a wider evening and day centre for serious mountain bikers and for beginners. It also has potential to provide access to cycling and particularly mountain biking for those living in socially disadvantaged communities, who currently may not have the means to reach more rural biking centres. There is potential to transport local school children and youth groups to the site for "taster" sessions. Both "bike counter" statistics and anecdotal evidence suggest that the facilities already developed, whilst only formally opened since April 2006, are already being heavily utilised.

The Carron Valley Forest is sufficiently large to operate both as a working forest for timber production and as a significant mountain bike centre which could sustain a much larger dedicated trail network than has currently been developed. North Lanarkshire Council has been working in partnership with the Forestry Commission, Stirling Council, the Clanranald Trust and other partners to assess other recreational facilities within the area that can be developed to support and provide synergy for the mountain biking attractions.

Both at a national level and specifically at Carron Valley Forest, the Strategy needs to address and advise regarding private sector involvement in providing support facilities.

Facilities which could be provided by private sector involvement include: equipment supply and repair, catering, toilet and washing facilities. Particularly where development is constrained by lack of public sector funding, the Forestry Commission should actively look at engaging private sector interests in providing and managing such facilities. Such agreements would clearly however require to be subject to a high standard of service provision by the commercial sector but equally realistically long leases or franchises from the Forestry Commission or its partners. The role of the private sector therefore does not seem to have been sufficiently addressed within the report.

The development of mountain bike facilities both within and immediately adjacent to the Council area is considered as integral in supporting tourism infrastructure, short-stay and day visitors. It is our intention to highlight the links between the existing facilities at Carron Valley and other visitor attractions within the Kelvin Valley, eg. the Forth and Clyde Canal "Millennium Link", the Antonine Wall, and the Kilsyth Hills.

Summary

In conclusion, the Council notes positively the Vision and key principles contained within the Strategic Framework. However, there is a need to develop centres for forest cycling and mountain biking within the Central Belt area where such provision can help deliver on a number of key Scottish Executive policy objectives, such as health improvement, community participation and social inclusion.

Additionally, development of such centrally located centres providing access to a wider section of the population can only increase Scotland's reputation as one world class destination for mountain biking and recreational cycling.

The Carron Valley Forest provides an ideal location to develop a range of such facilities and it is strongly hoped that the finalised National Forest Cycling and Mountain Biking Strategy will recognise the potential of this location, and its situation within easy travelling distance of large numbers of the Scottish population.

I trust your will find the above comments of assistance.

Yours sincerely

pp. Mark Forrest.

David M Porch
DIRECTOR OF PLANNING & ENVIRONMENT

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