

## **CARRON VALLEY MEETING – 21 September 2007 draft**

### **PRESENT**

Hugh Insley (FCS)	Cathie Craigie MSP
Alan Stevenson (FCS)	David Russell (CVDG)
Brent Meakin (FCS)	Robert Hunter (Stirling Council)
Nicky Whitaker (FCS)	Nail Thomson (CVDG)
Jeff Brown (Bell Ingram - Scottish Water)	Alan Fail (Scottish Water)
John Brinkins (North Lanarkshire Council)	

The aim of the meeting was to agree a way forward for Carron Valley Partners in their collaboration regarding the development of the national forest estate managed by Forestry Commission Scotland and the reservoir and associated facilities managed by Scottish Water at Carron Valley.

The following were agreed as the next steps:

1. The existing concordat and partnership would be wound up 3 months from the date of the meeting.

We have to disagree. Hugh suggested winding the partnership up (at the meeting) however, this was rejected by the other Partners. It is essential all Partners act within the framework we are signatory to. The terms of the concordat are clear: Clanranald has resigned and the partnership is therefore dissolved 3 months after CR resignation however, CR resignation only triggers the dissolution of the Partnership if the remaining Partners cannot agree to support its continuance. CVDG, NLC, SC and SW all agree to continue the partnership until it is replaced. What is the point in winding the partnership up until we have something to replace it with? We are continuing to work in partnership after all. If FCS and CSFT wish to terminate the Partnership they can exercise their prerogative on 9<sup>th</sup> November. FCS/CSFT needs to clear the air here and state their intention.

2. The aim would be to achieve a consensus on a new partnership agreement with the same vision and objectives and for this to be in place concurrently with the conclusion of the old concordat and partnership. FCS to produce the first draft of the partnership agreement.

We agree. Hugh made a point of reinforcing his view the existing partnership was “unfair and one sided” however, isn’t the agreement itself really a non issue? The main question for the other partner members is: Will FCS now work within the spirit of any partnership in relation to this location?

3. The membership of the partnership should be widened to include adjacent local authorities East Dumbarton and Falkirk and other user group representation like walkers, horse riders, water sports participants.

We agree however, this can only be after we have a fair, non partisan agreement which other potential partners would feel happy becoming a signatory to.

4. The partnership document would aim not to be as one sided in favour of FCS. It would identify a clearer framework within which the partners could operate, including FCS and Scottish water policy and principles for their investment in the site. It would identify operating procedures for the partners.

We agree however, any partnership must surely meet the needs and aspirations of all partners? CVDG do not consider the original document to be inherently flawed – we already have “operating procedures.” There is in no record of any partner complaining about the unfairness of the partnership agreement itself, the main issue is a failure to comply with the operating procedure of the existing partnership.

5. FCS and Scottish Water would retain a final say in ensuring developments met their public, corporate and business requirements. This is best done in partnership if the public purse is involved.

We agree however, it is important these “requirements” are clearly defined from the outset.

6. Any developments had to have a sustainable legacy, in most cases this means sufficient revenue funding to maintain them.

This was a stated position not a point of general agreement. Nicky raised the issues of “over ambitious project costs” and (potentially) “high revenue costs” for maintenance. Nicky’s benchmark was Glentress and the assumption being there would be a similar “legacy implication” at Carron Valley. Essentially, Nicky applied the same % of capital cost at Carron as FCS had done for Glentress. This formula would be used to determine the future maintenance implications for Carron.

Question: Do the facts bear these assertions out?

Niall countered that it was the engineering specification and maintenance implications of the “built trail length” that determine future maintenance costs - not the cost to build. The Carron Valley and Glentress trails do not employ similar engineering solutions. For example, the CV trail has been over engineered using 100% quarried material in huge depths to mitigate the effects of the prevailing ground conditions and to minimise future maintenance requirements. Much of the original Glentress trails used as-dug. The electronic trails counters indicate the CV trail is one of the most heavily used MTB trails in Scotland however, it has not required any cash spent on it as a result of “wear and tear” since completion (2 years.) FCS has possession of the design and contract documentation developed for the Carron Valley project therefore it would also be helpful if the Partnership could study the design detail, trail counter data, capital and maintenance costs from other FC centres in order consider the legacy implications at Carron Valley with objectivity.

7. There is the potential for private or NGO lead developments on the site.

Agreed, this was generally outlined as a possibility.

8. Any developments would need to be phased and that the first phases would focus on a more inclusive and family friendly multi-use paths, the toilet, on site works to improve the quality of visitor experience, and interpretation.

All present agreed any development required to be phased (but there was never any suggestion to the contrary in the existing plan anyway) however, there was no agreement on what any first phase would comprise. Everyone agreed the quality of the visitor experience and interpretation needed to be improved, Hugh made the point the entire entrance area, and in particular the (remains of) Rangers office looked down at heel.

Multi use paths are in fact small forest roads - we need to define what is meant by this term.

Alan asserted (3 times in fact) the current trail was “extreme.” however, the current trail is actually graded Red with the exception of 1km which is ungraded – as determined by FCS Cycling Development Officer. FCS website defines a Red trail as FCS also defines two grades above this: Black and Orange. It is actually Orange which is graded extreme. CVDG has not proposed any Black or Orange trails therefore there are no extreme trails or even expert trails in the proposed plans - the situation does not arise. It is not therefore helpful for FCS to use emotive language and preface all debate on the mix of trail types and grades with the inference the existing trails, or those proposed, are in “extreme,” “non inclusive” or “non family friendly.” We cannot possibly be inclusive if we do not offer a range of trail types – this is particularly valid given the trail usage at present and Carron Valleys close proximity to large local populations.

Offering “beginner only” trails is no more appropriate than offering intermediate / expert only trails. The CVDG plan is based on two Feasibility Study recommendations – one of which was largely funded by the Partnership. This does beg the question: Was there a complete misunderstanding (by FES Board) over the range of trails the original plan was offering?

The fact is the original plans were inclusive and they were family friendly. The project plan comprises many miles of walking trails and the overall balance of trail types largely favours: multi user, beginner and intermediate trails - it had balance. It is also important to point out that many of the walking trails were actually removed from the plan by FCS staff in their final PID.

All the evidence points to a centre which is already well attended by families and one which is attended by a very broad cross section of the general public so are we to suggest otherwise and discuss a hypothetical situation which does not exist? How can we say this? Numerous schools and groups use the facility, we have trail feedback forms (circa 500) which tell us precisely who people are, where they come from, what they think and what they'd like to see. There are 4 electronic trail counters which tell us the facility is well attended at all times and we have an active website where news and views are regularly aired. The venue has now hosted a Triathlon, an MTB demo day and there has been a joint partner Bikefest. All of these were well attended and the feedback has been excellent.

Significant amounts of time and money have been also spent on: a Recreation Consultation, a Workshop, two Feasibility Studies, a Forest Visitor Survey, two Ground Surveys. Carron was even selected as one of a small number of forest locations to have a vehicle counter installed (although FCS has not provided the partnership with any data from it) In fact, Carron Valley has surely been subjected to the most intensive monitoring and evaluation process in the entire forest estate. We are not dealing with an unknown quantity therefore CVDG cannot see any justification for repeatedly wasting more time and money going over the same ground. It would be helpful if Alan could pass Brent a copy of the previously agreed plans. These will confirm the intention to provide a “family friendly,” “inclusive” development and they clearly state where.

Site improvements and interpretation, or at least design, were largely agreed over one year ago. Nothing new is being offered here?

9. Further development would be to meet the needs of visitor numbers.

This was a stated position, not agreed. Points 8 and 9 imply FCS has pre determined the first phase will be multi use paths and that subsequent phases will be dictated by visitor numbers (this is impossible to rationalise as FCS do not define the term “meet the needs”)

CVDG do not understand the site specific rationale being applied here. FCS has invested substantial sums of money in other trail projects where no facility pre existed so visitor numbers could not have been known. Carron Valley is an established venue and we already have precise visitor information, we already have the results of numerous feasibility studies and we already have a partnership which would be the envy of any similar project – one that has already committed considerable time and money to 18 months of talks. The project has broad political and community support and it fits within all the partners stated aims and objectives – including those guided by the Scottish Forestry Strategy. It is very difficult to understand on what basis any party could state we do not already have a justifiable case for further development?

10. There is an offer of £35k WREN funding to CVDG to be used by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2008. This is for cycle trails. CVDG to send a copy through to FCS Brent Meakin. FCS to consider the development and what legacy responsibilities would require public funding in the future. Any decision made would have to be quickly communicated back to the group.

Broadly agreed however, there is in fact £35k from WREN, £15k from Leader+, £20k from North Lanarkshire (John Brinkins to confirm but time limited to Mar 08) and potentially £50k from Heritage Lottery. HLF has been held up by FCS for over 4 months. These matters are now pressing but almost another month has gone by and nothing appears to be moving here?

FCS would ensure the completion of the toilet block in discussion with Clanranald by the end of March 2008. – potential now to use LEADER+ funding as well.

This was a position stated by Hugh but not one that was agreed. The key partners have endured 4 years of prevarication on this issue, a further 6 months is now completely unacceptable. This building can be completed within a matter of weeks – it is a trifling construction project which FCS can resource and resolve immediately and at little further cost. If this cannot be done at little cost there are other solutions which should be employed.

CVDG has since offered to broker a quick solution however, we remain very uneasy over the entire issue and it is clear from Hughs remarks (“the FC/Clanranald arrangement is very strange”) this sentiment is shared, at least in part, by FCS. The partnership is now trying to resolve an issue which it should not be addressing in the first place. It is also trying to do so blind: Why are we not debating the detail of this issue openly? Clanranald are currently outside the partnership yet we are proposing partnership money earmarked for one project is now switched to resolve a pre existing agreement between Landlord and Tenant - one which was intended to deliver a public asset at no cost to the public. Also, what of Clanranald in general?

In essence the partnership requires transparency here - this has to be done at minimal further cost to the taxpayer as the building:

1. Simply replaces what was there before Clanranald were on the scene ( only it's now within their lease area)
2. Is not of high quality
3. Is in the wrong place (namely within the CR campus and not in the general amenity area )
4. Is barely large enough to cater fro todays requirements and certainly too small to cover future requirements

In CVDG view unless the building can be completed within a matter of weeks and at minimal cost to the public there are better strategic solutions to hand and Clanranald should still deliver that toilet using their resources.

FCS to investigate road improvements with tarmac to bell mouth at entrance.

Agreed however, this has been discussed for over 3 years. Essentially this is a Duty of Care issue which can / should be completed without further Partner discussion. This issue does not bring anything new to the debate.

11. It was agreed that any position statement on the meeting should say that there had been a discussion about development at Carron Valley and that it had been agreed that the partnership would be reformed with a wider and more open structure.

There was no agreement or consensus on this and the partnership should jointly decide any "position statement." A wider and more open structure means nothing in itself - there is a negative inference there was something inherently wrong with the original partnership agreement and this is not really the case. The Partnership needs to translate 18 months of talking into tangible output: We need agreed aims and objectives within clearly defined timescales.

12. FCS has a fire damaged building on site and that they would investigate its repair/replacement.

Agreed however, Alan and Michael were discussing and agreeing "high quality timber buildings" for Carron Valley with Richard Barton and Niall Thomson nearly one year ago i.e before FCS building was partially destroyed. Hugh agreed to consider all options. Any "repair" would be a regression to the make do and mend mentality of the past. Surely this issue should be central to the entire debate? There are community aspirations and potential planning gain implications from wind turbine developments - we need to inject some fresh thinking and we hope Brent can bring some to the table. Again, target timescales are essential.

13. FCS to set a date and place for the next partnership meeting to discuss the draft partnership agreement when we have a draft.

Not our recollection - we are in danger of regressing into talks about talks. We agreed to defer the September CVP meeting to allow Brent to assume FDM position and get to grips with the detail however, that was nearly 4 weeks ago and we do not need a new agreement to hold a meeting. There are other issues (Funding, toilets, Leader+) we need to discuss now. Hugh implied "standard agreements" could readily be provided - if an agreement is to be fair should the other partners not be allowed a relatively blank canvas in which to sketch in their concept of what constitutes a fair and open agreement? Could examples of these not be forwarded to CVP members without further delay for comment?

Also CVDG made the point it has devoted months of volunteer leave from work to attend various meetings - there was general agreement the CVP should recognise this and adopt a more flexible approach to meeting times and venues.

Points not covered by Brent:

14. We agreed the first objective at the first partnership meeting was to "sit down and discuss the Project Plan and the PID" (Cathie)

15. Geoff pointed out, the water opportunities have been completely sidelined by this debate and it was agreed the opportunities offered by the reservoir need to be brought back to the fore.

Brent Meakin  
Forest District Manager  
Scottish Lowlands Forest District  
Forestry Commission Scotland