

Carron Valley Development Group

Briefing Session, Scottish Parliament, 21st November 2007

Background

Mountain biking is one of the fastest growing sports in the UK and allows people of all ages and backgrounds the opportunity to participate in a healthy activity, whilst exploring and appreciating our fantastic natural environment.

Scotland has been awarded the status of “Global Superstar” by the International Mountain Bike Association, thanks to progressive access legislation and “bike friendly forestry department”. Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) has spearheaded development of sizeable purpose built mountain bike trail centres on the forest estate - notably: The Borders and Dumfries & Galloway (7 Stanes), Fort William, Laggan, The Black Isle and more recently Golspie (private forest – majority of funding through FCS Woodland Grants scheme). In addition FCS has supported community driven schemes in Moray, Lochgilphead, Bonar Bridge, Arran and Kyleakin. This list is not exhaustive but the sole driver for all these development has been tourism and without exception, these centres are in rural locations.

FCS should be commended for developing these centres but there is a very large gap in the provision of such a facility near to where the bulk of the population lives. This does not assist the sport at grass roots level because those visitors capable of traveling to such centres are by definition, finite. In other words, this policy does not practicably allow participation by disadvantaged sections of society – the very people who could benefit most are least likely to be able to get there. This sentiment is largely echoed in two consultant’s reports^[1 & 2] and throughout the mountain bike community in Scotland.

Mountain bike trail development at Carron Valley (CV) has been ongoing for over four years however, the public have ridden bikes around the forest roads at Carron Valley for many years. Carron Valley Development Group (CVDG) was borne out of and reflected public demand for MTB development in the public forest at Carron Valley. It is widely recognised that the small amount of MTB development at Carron Valley has been exceptionally well attended and that it has become the driver and focus for a much wider recreational agenda. There is wide support for significant MTB development at Carron Valley - across the spectrum and across political divides.

Whilst many community driven projects can take years to germinate and blossom the Carron Valley project is unusual in terms of the strength and breadth of backing it now has from other public agencies notably Stirling and North Lanarkshire Councils and Scottish Water who were founding members of the Carron Valley Partnership (CVP), alongside CVDG, FCS and the Clanranald Trust for Scotland. The partnership was formed in 2006 to build on the success of the initial mountain bike trails and deliver a fully formed recreational facility at CV.

Timeline

2003

April

Mountain bike enthusiasts form loose group and meet FCS ranger at Carron Valley to discuss creation of a trail centre for central Scotland.

June

CVDG formalised, insured and constituted.

2004

June

CVDG committee members meet with Michael Wall - Forest District Manager, FCS Scottish Lowlands - a review is being undertaken to inform the impending National Strategy for Mountain Biking. The strategy is due to be published in December 2004 and is cited as reason to delay meaningful development at Carron.

July

Limited permission for trail development granted by FCS to CVDG.

FCS host drop in meeting at Carron Valley to inform recreational strategy.

November

Stirling and North Lanarkshire Councils formally back CVDG ambition for MTB development at Carron Valley as part of wider recreational ambition for venue.

December

CVDG becomes Charity No SC 036047 recognised by Inland Revenue Charities.

The chief executives of both Stirling and North Lanarkshire Councils formally back plans.

2005

January

Joint council workshop held to discuss recreational development at Carron Valley - funded and hosted by North Lanarkshire Council.

June

CVDG fund and build the first sections of purpose built singletrack in central Scotland – even before they were finished and publicised, the trails were attracting visitors.

October

Tourism Resources Company submit “West and Central Scotland Forest Cycling” report^[1] to FCS (£30,000 funded by North Lanarkshire and Fife Councils) - development of significant MTB facility recommended for Carron Valley. CVDG singled out for praise as a model for community group development.

2006

February

CVDG meet with FCS to discuss branding for Carron Valley. Not yet delivered.

March

Cathie Craigie MSP opens Carron Valley MTB trails at an event attended by hundreds of guests and MTB riders.

April

FCS publish the TRC report “An Ambition for Forest Cycling and Mountain Biking Towards a National Strategy”^[2] and invite comments on their website, this is not widely publicised and interested parties are not informed.

June

FCS, CVDG, Stirling and North Lanarkshire Councils, Scottish Water and Clanranald Trust for Scotland sign concordat and form the Carron Valley Partnership (CVP)

July

Consultation on TRC report closes - FC promised to publish further information "in due course". Not yet delivered.

September

CVDG permission to maintain trails expires and is not renewed despite numerous requests and similar permission being granted to community groups elsewhere in the forest district.

October

CVDG submit project plan to CVP which gains CVP approval.

CVDG awarded Special Achievement Award by the Provost of Stirling.

November

CVDG submit project plan to Michael Wall - FCS Forest District Manager and Alan Stevenson - FCS Head of Communities, Recreation and Tourism. Both agree to back plan as project sponsor and champion respectively and submit to FCS Board for approval.

Michael Wall confirms backing subject to removal of 60% of red trail without justification.

CVDG complete further 2km of purpose built singletrack at Carron Valley - total investment now £125,000

December

FCS inform CVP that it needs to convert project plan to a Project Initiation Document (PID) before submitting the project to FCS board for their approval– this step is not mentioned during concordat negotiations.

FCS undertake to submit PID to FCS board in January

2007

January

FCS appoints Special Projects manager for delivery of CVP plan for recreational development at CV.

FCS undertake to submit PID to FCS board in February.

February

FCS undertake to submit PID to FCS board in March.

March

FCS undertake to submit PID to FCS board in April.

April

CSFT submit £500,000 funding bid to the Environmental Justice Fund based on agreed project plan.

FCS issues post-dated letter indicating that no further funding bids can be submitted.

FCS undertake to submit PID to FCS board in May.

May

CVP celebrate the completion of the enlarged trail network at the Carron Valley BikeFest – attended by over 500 visitors.

FCS press office alters quote by CVDG member without consultation.

FCS minutes of April's CVP meeting disputed by other partners.

FCS submit PID to board - due to "pressure of business" it is not discussed until board meeting of 11th June.

FCS refuse to share PID with CVP – project sponsor states that this will not be provided as it is an internal FCS document.

CVDG request and receive copy of PID under FOI legislation – it is immediately apparent that CVP project plan has been fundamentally altered by FCS without consultation with CVP.

Project sponsor and champion asked to attend monthly CVP meeting by a number of partners to explain FCS position. They refused.

June

PID goes to board.

July

CVDG obtain two further versions of PID. Only version three, which is radically different from earlier versions, is provided to the FCS board.

August

FCS releases minutes of board meeting on its website. Requests for clarification of the board's decision are rebuffed by FCS.

CVDG requests information from FCS relating to the PID submission to inform CVP position. FCS threaten to issue a formal refusal notice.

Stirling Council nominate CVDG for Scottish Awards for Quality in Planning 2007 in the Community Involvement category.

September

FCS issues refusal notice to the CVDG chairman denying access to all information requested.

CVP are forced to rescind offer of £15,000 of European funding from Leader+.

Sunday Herald publishes article heavily criticising FCS for its treatment of CVDG/CVP.

CVP meet with FCS chief executive to discuss issues surrounding the project and the way forward.

October

New Forest District Manager appointed to Scottish Lowlands

November

CVP meet for the first time since August – North Lanarkshire Council highlighted that further £18,000 of funding was in immediate jeopardy due to ongoing delays.

HLF award of £50,000 under threat as FCS continually refuse to extend the same maintenance guarantee that other projects enjoy.

CSFT inform CVP that they will not be involved in project managing the next phase as a result of FCS board decision that they should lead the project.

Sources

[1] West and Central Scotland Forest Cycling, Tourism Resources Company for Forestry Commission Scotland, 2005

[2] An Ambition for Forest Cycling and Mountain Biking towards a National Strategy, Tourism Resources Company for Forestry Commission Scotland, 2006