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Thank you for your letter of 1 May following up on our meeting on 16 April regarding Carron Valley Forest and mountain biking in the area.

As you may know the development of mountain bike facilities, supported by Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) and other public agencies, on the national forest estate, has taken place on an incremental basis. This has largely been due to two drivers:

1. The desire to invest in rural localities where tourism can provide a boost to the economy
2. The need to upgrade or replace self built trails, established by local mountain bikers, which need to be brought up to an appropriate standard and managed properly.

I am aware that there is wide recognition nationally and internationally of the very good work, which FCS has undertaken, not only to derive benefits, but also to stimulate interest, in mountain biking as a leisure activity and as a sport. I also recognise that this interest has developed to such an extent that there are other landowners and businesses that wish to play their part. Judging from feedback from recent consultations, the mountain bike community also wishes to take more responsibility and play a greater role.

All of this suggests to me that the FCS should take on a different role in the future. This new role will build on current success and focus on contributing through existing facilities, whilst encouraging local businesses to secure benefits. In addition FCS also has the opportunity to share the expertise it has accumulated.

I have therefore asked FCS to move forward on this basis and to set out how they might respond to requests for further specialist and technical trail development. To this end FCS will develop a set of business rules detailing how they will engage with third parties regarding future opportunities for the development of recreation on the national forest estate, including specialist and technical mountain biking trails. These will form a part of the forthcoming national strategic framework on mountain biking and together with my ministerial colleagues, who have an interest in tourism and sport, I look forward to seeing the production of this document.

With regard to Carron Valley I have made the following clear to FCS officials:

Relationships

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- There is a need for all parties to move forward and put the past behind them.
- FCS staff should work positively with the partners, within the available staff capacity. However, as mentioned at the meeting, I will also look for CVDG to significantly reduce the burden they place on FCS staff with regard to day to day contact and detailed requests, in order that FCS time can be focussed on delivery.

Development plan

- As agreed at the meeting the development plan should be drafted by FCS and made available to the wider Carron Valley Partnership by 31 May and, subject to the views and feedback from all partners, completed at a local level by 30 June. This should allow for sign off by FCS shortly thereafter.
- The development plan should serve as an aspiration for Carron Valley as a local recreational resource and needs to set out the expectations regarding the likely input from the partner bodies.
- Each project in the development plan should be taken forward separately and with a proper business case which deals with funding, governance and future maintenance issues.

Existing resources and commitments

- The existing commitments made by FCS to complete the toilet block, carpark improvements, multi-user trail, etc should be closed out as soon as possible.
- FCS will continue to contribute funding and staff time towards the maintenance of existing recreation facilities and services provided at Carron Valley Forest, as set out in the partnership agreement.

Future resources and commitments

- There should be no further financial investment by FCS in specialist and technical mountain bike trails, either in terms of new works or in additional management time or maintenance costs.
- Any additional future specialist and technical mountain bike facilities development proposed by other parties will require to be undertaken by them, through a formal agreement with FCS, most likely involving a lease of a specific site and an operating plan.
- FCS funding support for wider recreational developments at Carron Valley may be considered on a case by case basis, however there is no current provision beyond that which is currently allocated.

Management of health and safety

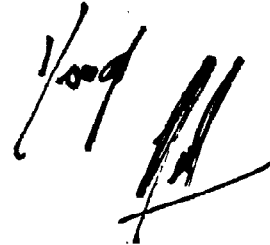
- With regard to liability, FCS will continue to adopt a professional approach to the continuing management and maintenance of existing facilities on the National Forest Estate in order to fulfil its duty of care.
- However, with regard to any new development, undertaken by a third party, FCS will look for those leading the development to meet the same professional standards, to provide evidence that the health and safety undertakings will be managed and that adequate insurance is in place to cover liabilities.

Volunteers

- FCS has recently prepared a statement on their policy and good practice on how they will work with volunteers and this will be shared with the partnership.

I have noted your views on the various Freedom of Information requests. I am content that the process currently in hand with the Information Commissioner's Office should be allowed to progress to a conclusion.

Finally, I appreciated the opportunity to share thoughts with you, local authority officials and the CVDG members and I hope this provides some clarity on the way ahead. As mentioned at the meeting I am happy to visit Carron Valley in due course.



MICHAEL RUSSELL