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David Rowlands AM
Chair – Petitions Committee
National Assembly for Wales,
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Dear David

Thank you very much for forwarding Emyr Robert's letter. I have to say that I am absolutely flabbergasted with Mr Roberts' response as our society has been told by NRW that the feasibility study is 'happening' for the last eighteen months. We actually thought that this feasibility study had started but they wanted to keep it under wraps. Please ask Mr Roberts how could NRW say 'we continue to work with Caerphilly County Borough Council (CCBC) on the feasibility study' if it has not yet been commissioned? It strikes me that Mr Roberts and his organisation think themselves completely unaccountable to your committee, and to the National Assembly for Wales, and because of this they see it is acceptable to sell half-truths and outright fabrications to you as well as to our society.

Secondly I have to take Mr Roberts to task when he says 'we are in contact with Mr Southall on a regular basis'. It has been over six months now since I received any update on NRW's work in the Nant Carn valley which I could forward to the committee members of the Friends of Cwmcarn Forest Drive –this was actually before our last public meeting which you attended –I checked and it was 20

February 2017. I have been in touch with NRW officials since then but the only communications I have had with them have been over the extension to the cycle tracks in the Cwmcarn valley and my request for a path clearance for a walk I led for the Twmbarlwm Society in June. We have been told that Sally Tansey, their regional land manager, would update us but we have had no information from her since the last public meeting and she has not responded to any of my emails since March.

Mr Roberts also seems to be down playing the whole purpose of the feasibility study when he writes "I should like to add that the feasibility scheme will only suggest medium to long term options, and the question of reinstatement of the drive is obviously one of the concerns of the community" –so what is the point of commissioning yet another expensive study – NRW and CCBC have at least two other studies from the last decade. It makes us think that the whole purpose of this study was simply a stalling tactic and this is again apparent when he writes "We are currently looking at the condition of the drive " We have to ask how long does it take? If it takes them this long to look at the condition of the drive, then it will take a decade for NRW to assess the costs of such reinstatement. I can walk around the entire length of the forest drive in about 2 hours and it seems to me that, although there are some sections which will need complete replacement, over eighty percent is as good as it was before the Drive was closed three years ago.

We also expressed concerns about the opening up of new mountain bike trails and Mr Roberts refers to this in his letter stating that these "new trails, although on the Welsh Government estate, are a proposal being developed by CCBC at no cost to NRW." I am afraid my committee feels that this response is disingenuous. CCBC could not have made a planning application if it did not have the agreement of NRW as it is on their land. It seems to us that CCBC and NRW can get together to look at the condition of the land over which the track is to run and to make decisions about its suitability and for NRW to give permission to CCBC to press ahead with the project and yet NRW just does not have time to consider re-instating the Forest Drive which would bring a great deal of pleasure to those in our community who lack the mobility to make use of these 'elite' cycle tracks. We would like to re-iterate here that these cycle tracks are for 'the few' whereas the Forest Drive was for 'the many' i.e. those who wish to access the drive in their cars perhaps because of limited mobility or those with young children, are being overlooked in favour of the needs of a relatively small number of mountain bikers who are usually young, fit and affluent males, often from outside of Wales. It should also be stated that the public paid a fee to drive around the Forest Drive whereas cyclists pay nothing to ride on these cycle tracks. Further to this, in respect to the issue of the new cycle track, we must ask Mr Roberts if Robert Campbell, Mountain Bike Manager for NRW, will be involved with the new cycle trail if it goes ahead. If he will then that means

that NRW are financially involved. In addition, we must also ask who is responsible for the upkeep of this new cycle track. If it is CCBC then our society will be asking questions about where that money is coming from. CCBC cannot seem to be able to clear footpaths, and definitely not bridleways, so it should not really have the resources to keep a cycle track up in tip top condition. The grant would only pay for the instalment of the trail and it would not provide for the upkeep.

Since our last correspondence we have been made aware that Ken Skates AM, the Welsh Government's Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure, stated in a response to a question raised by Rhianon Passmore AM (Lab-Isllwyn) in late June or early July that the Welsh government hopes to re-open the Forest Drive to cars in 2019 as a part of a government programme of works for that year -If my memory is correct I was told that the year 2019 will be the 'year of exploration' or some such thing. I have not been able to get more details on this but I think that it would be worth your committee writing to Ken Skates to see whether he is willing to make a statement on this. Obviously this is especially relevant to the question raised by our petition as it asks for the Welsh Government to help source the finances required to re-open the Forest Drive and if there is a requirement to draw on European Union (WEFO) funding then time is now of the essence and it should be done as soon as possible.

Once again I would like to stress that our society understands that these issues take time to resolve but we strongly believe that when the Welsh government has a will they will usually find a way. The fifteen hundred people who have signed our latest petition certainly think that this is the case and for this reason we would like to request that the Petitions Committee keep our petition active. We believe that this is essential if we are get a positive outcome for 'the many' and not just for 'the few' and we continue to hope that the Welsh Government will provide the resources to ensure that the drive is once again open to private cars.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'R Southall', written in a cursive style.

Robert Southall
Chair, Friends of Cwmcarn Forest Drive