

28<sup>th</sup> June 2004

Michael Wall  
Forest District Manager  
Forestry Commission Scotland  
Scottish Lowlands Forest District  
Bankhead Steadings  
Braxfield Road  
Lanark  
ML11 9BU

Dear Michael

### **Mountain Bike trails at Carron Forest**

Many thanks for your letter dated 7<sup>th</sup> June, following our meeting 2<sup>nd</sup> June.

Obviously we were unprepared for what you had to say during our meeting and have therefore spent the intervening time digesting and deliberating the contents of your letter. This has now been fully discussed at the groups AGM, which took place 22<sup>nd</sup> June and I am instructed to respond as follows.

Firstly, we are most appreciative of the time taken to meet with us, the time you have quite obviously spent in confirming the points you outlined during our meeting and, in stating The Forestry Commissions position as regards mountain biking development at a national, regional and local level. Furthermore, we acknowledge that you are not personally responsible for The FC current stance in respect of mtb trails at Carron Forest. We trust therefore, that you will take the following comments in a similar spirit.

As regards the specific points, I would like to respond to these in the order contained within your letter

### **Existing Centres**

We note your comments however, The Group has studied The FC own 'exit poll' statistics from Glentress and so we know the demography of the visiting population. Also, there is substantial empirical evidence to suggest that Carron Forest *is* geographically best placed to serve the needs of a large *local* population - one that

simply will not visit the 7 Stanes anyway. Fort William is distant, even by Central Belt standards, and as it is now a regular venue on the World Cup circuit, its status and popularity seem assured. We fully understand that The FC has partners to consider and that there are politics involved in any scenario such as this however, we feel that this should stop short of actively discriminating against at least a modest development at Carron Forest. MTB developments are taking place all over the country and central Scotland, where most people live and work, appears to be the one gaping hole.

One example of a non FC project is the development of trails around Jedburgh. This project has just secured in excess of £100,000 of funding for developing nearly 30 miles of trails, including 2 family routes. These are mostly on private land however, they also include sections through FC plantations. I gather The FC funding is *in kind* and that they have also taken the opportunity to include this venue in The FC 7 Stanes marketing.

This is very much in the mould of the *ground up* theme you outlined: Councils working with Community Groups, The FC, private landowners ( they have agreements with 12 ) and other leisure interests such as horse riders and walkers. The overall focus is much as we envisaged for Carron - sections of multi user trails with the emphasis on mtb. As a comparison, Jedburgh ( which has a comparatively tiny community ) is 40 miles from Glentworth. Glasgow city centre is nearly 60.

As we have indicated, we are not looking to The FC to hand us funding for this on a plate however, we believe there remains a very strong case for allowing Carron to be developed on an equal footing with examples such as the above. To that end, we feel it would be tragic if Carron ultimately fell short of anything below *regional* status.

### **National Strategy**

The Group is naturally interested in making representations to The FC on the suitability of Carron Forest as a "primary mountain bike investment location" and we would be pleased to hear from you as to what form that might take.

### **Campsie / Touch Hills study**

As you know, the concept of a Campsie Trails / Regional Park was one that was floated some years ago and foundered for a variety of reasons. Recent changes to the water authorities position at Carron, our presence ( and that of others ) has brought this back in to focus. We know that Stirling Council in particular favour such a park and we back this. Once again, we would like to contribute to the "stakeholder consultation" to which you refer. Robert Hunter has also confirmed that Stirling Council is to fund a workshop in the Autumn and that 2 of our group will be invited to represent mtb interests.

Whilst this is a welcome development, we feel that there are any number of venues in Central Scotland where traditional sports enthusiasts can *get a fix* and that some fresh thinking is required to cater for many of the pursuits that people ( and *kids* in particular ) are taking part in today.

### **Current Mountain Bike course**

Thank you for confirming your offer of practical assistance as regards completion of the first course. We have now spoken with both Stirling and North Lanarkshire Councils regarding your references to matching a proportion of the materials requirements.

Obviously you have an on going dialogue with both parties however, Cathy Johnston was disadvantaged to the extent that she hadn't spoken with us before and thus wasn't up to speed on what we had achieved on the ground. She also hadn't noted the inference in your letter that North Lanarkshire could provide practical assistance and wasn't therefore envisaging anything other than 'strategic support.' Once I'd pointed this out, I went on to outline what essentially would be required to complete the course and how the 3 parties might work together. Cathy subsequently came back to me with some useful suggestions on several promising resources ( more on this later )

Robert Hunter has been in contact with us since the beginning and so is more familiar with the practicalities on the ground. He noted that the first course was outside Stirling Councils boundary and we can appreciate how this would cause him problems in obtaining resources and or funding from his Council.

There remains a perception that *mountain biking* is an extreme sport practised by a limited number of people. We know and speak to many of the people involved in The 7 Stanes as some of our members are also Trail builders at Glentress. It is true that there has to be a finite number of enthusiasts who are mobile and have sufficient disposable income to travel around the country riding the FC trails and spending money in the local communities. We believe both The Councils ( and yourselves at a local level ) would be pleasantly surprised at what could be achieved at Carron without threatening what's happening elsewhere.

You coined the phrase: 'ground up development 'and given your very clear statements as regards current policy and the forthcoming strategy, and our own regarding Jedburgh, for instance, this is something we are keen to explore and to work within.

As we see it there are 5 key issues:

1. It is taken as read, that no course development can be seen to detract from the success and development of The 7 Stanes and Fort William venues.
2. It is understood that The FC will not make an unconsidered leap of faith (although we acknowledge that your current offer constitutes a tacit backing of sorts.)
3. Mountain Bikers / Family cyclists (we don't make the distinction - to us Carron Valley should be about cycling on a mountain bike) need *pleasurable* trails to cycle on, or they won't come. Kids in particular have a huge choice of sports opportunities available to them nowadays and generally speaking a short pootle on a flat cycle track will not cut it with them. ( not intended in any way as criticism of your trail suggestions )

It is possible to develop safe trails, which can be enjoyed by families, challenge enthusiasts and most importantly - enthuse the kids.

4. Other groups must be considered.
5. To develop the trails, The Group need to demonstrate to potential volunteers that there is a clearly defined objective in the form of trails which can ultimately provide a days cycling enjoyment.

Unfortunately, the development of one 3mile loop ( of which less than half is actual trail ) will only provide 20minutes riding time to someone of average fitness ( a non cyclist for instance - a fit rider would get round this trail in less than 15 ) and therefore it is stretching the imagination slightly to envisage how this alone can provide the "means to show there is a demand for mountain biking at Carron Forest" Again, the Jedburgh project is probably a good example of how even a modest development compares.

Whilst still falling a long way short of what we had initially envisaged, we would like to suggest a compromise where the dead end fire roads to which you referred can be linked up in the initial scheme with a *reasonable* proportion of trail to provide a maximum loop of 2+ hours. Variants of this could then give a days workout and conversely shorter versions ( by simply not cycling as far West on the way out and by cutting back on another fire road earlier ) for those just out for a spin.

The longer version could head directly West on existing trails,( round the back of Meikle Bin for instance, ) then eventually back to the top part of our first section of trail. This is currently a climb and so it could be reversed to make a descent. The final part would be a climb to the trail head where you saw the work done by Stirling Councils people and then along and down to the dam head, The principle being that you climb on Fire road and descend, or contour, on trail.

One added benefit to all this being that the *trail* network would then be within Stirling Councils boundary from the outset.

### **Completion of the course**

There has been a big drive on site, since we met with you. The trail has been widened, headroom increased and we have removed all stumps and obstacles - at least all but which the very youngest of riders will have no difficulty in overcoming. There will be 2 saws working tonight to clear the last of the dead and windblown trees in spooky wood. Everything from the highest point down, is now ready for surfacing where required.

We understand that Andy Gallacher has already done some research on sources of stone and a means of getting this to the trailhead, and whilst it is clear from your letter that The FC are willing to make some resources available we are unclear as to who is to drive the project forward ( yourselves or us, ) when you would envisage practical completion of the trail, and what material shortfalls you would expect to be made up by the Councils and or others.

We feel we have an important role to play in all this however, we also feel that we need to be allowed room to source funding. To this we would like to suggest a tri party approach which has more clarity of purpose. The CERS scheme ( of which I'm sure you are familiar ) is one example of how The Councils could be backing the project without The FC having to take a committing lead role?

I'm flying a kite here Michael however, CVDG is of the view that the project only moves when we push and we are confident that there is considerable latent support in the local communities (not purely mtb obviously) and further afield for the Carron cause, so to speak. We aren't just talking about the forest, there seems to be little *public* dialogue with the councils as regards access trails among other things and we think this is something which should be developed and harnessed to provide a project of value to the local communities and beyond.

We look forward to hearing your views on our suggestions. If you would rather discuss these face to face we would be delighted to meet with you at Lanark.

Yours sincerely

**Niall R Thomson**  
**Chairman**  
**CVDG**