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Brechfa
Carmarthenshire
SA32 7QL

Brechfa Forest Connection (EN020016)

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I am chairman of Brechfa Forest and Llanllwni Mountain Tourism Cluster Association (BALM) and have been the coordinator of responses on behalf of BALM members at earlier stages of the planning process. Obviously our members are united in opposition to this proposed development, we particularly wish to highlight the lack of assessment of the impact of this development on the tourism industry and community led projects to support sustainable development linked to the cultural heritage of the area and the lack of mitigation for these issues. This is one of the policy areas which Carmarthenshire County Council have identified as not being complied with by this planning application.

BALM started as a group of tourism businesses who worked together to promote Brechfa Forest and Llanllwni Mountain to attract additional tourists to the area. In 2009 we started to work on projects supported under the Cambrian Mountain Initiative, a high profile project to showcase (and test) the benefits of Welsh Government policies for sustainable, community led, development. Membership of BALM is free and is open to all who are interested in working to promote both Brechfa Forest and Llanllwni Mountain as tourist attractions and who actively support sustainable tourism activities. Brechfa Forest and Llanllwni Mountain form the ancient forest of Glyn Cothi. Every story of Robin Hood has parallels with the history of this forest being the base of Welsh Princes during the 200 years of conflict with the Normans. The forest has the same importance to the heritage of Wales as the New Forest has to English history, having been an ancient hunting forest, which provided employment for the community while they managed the forest up to the creation of the Forestry Commission and its recent move to mechanised management of the forest. Since the 1980's it has been Carmarthenshire County Council and Welsh policy to support the development of a tourism industry based on Welsh government policy of promoting its open access status.

I can confirm that BALM was not approached by WPD when they were gathering information on the value of tourism in the area or the communities plans for Brechfa Forest. According to the planning application they have considered locally promoted trails in the application, but I can confirm that has not occurred, they have not asked for information on or referred to information on the trails promoted by BALM.

Value of tourism in the area.

Carmarthenshire County Council records show that there are 640 bed spaces close enough to Brechfa Forest for visitors to use sustainable methods of transport (walking, cycling or riding) when travelling to the forest. The principle of the sustainable tourism policy for the area is to encourage tourists and residents to walk, cycle or ride from their accommodation or start point, not use their cars. (Which would be an impractical option for most local riders anyway as research shows only 10% have transport for their horses.) So any visual impact from rights of way or the road will impact on the guests experience, but the impact on the local economy of a reduction in the attractiveness of Rights of Way and the forest has not been included in the assessments of the impact of the power line or the value of mitigation in the planning application.

The value of the tourism industry is not calculated by the just the amount spent on accommodation, but on the total spend of the tourists. Guests staying in local accommodation and day trippers visiting Brechfa Forest spend money in local businesses including pubs, village shops, cafes, restaurants, takeaways, petrol stations. Keeping the area attractive to tourists assists in keeping all these valuable resources in our community profitable and therefore creating jobs and safeguarding resources used by the local community.

There has been independent research published on the reduction in the amount that tourists are willing to spend when the view from their holiday accommodation includes a power line, but this is not referenced in WPD's application.

The standard economic multiplier quoted by Visit Wales is that each £1 spent by a tourist is worth £1.75 to the local economy. The academic definition of a tourist, and the formal analysis of the tourism industry covers both those staying overnight in an area, and day trippers/people using the area for recreation. Carmarthenshire County Council estimate that the open access land is worth £18 million a year to the area as a tourist attraction at present.

There has been limited research undertaken on the spending patterns of local walkers, or cyclists but with the assistance of Carmarthenshire Riders and the BHS it has been possible to calculate that Brechfa Forest supports an equestrian industry worth £29.5 million annually. Carmarthenshire has an abnormally low percentage of its rights of way network at bridleway or byway status. It has therefore been Carmarthenshire County Councils policy to maximise the benefits of open access land available to riders, specifically Brechfa Forest. There has been a number of research projects into the average spent per horse per year by horse owners, so by combining the average of those research programs, with the number of horses with passports in the areas close enough to hack to Brechfa Forest we can have a clear picture of the value of the equestrian industry dependant on the open access land.

Negative publicity,

The dramatic increase in social media, smart phones, online reviews and internet searches has had a major impact on marketing within the tourism industry. Guests don't look in

brochures or rely on travel guides to select their holidays very often now, they search online for information on the area. Every place along the route of the power line where residents feel that insufficient mitigation has occurred and they write to the local press or publish photos using social media to air their grievance will be flagged as being linked to Brechfa because the wind farm and grid connection been named after the forest. Our members are in no doubt that given the strength of objection by the residents to having a wind farm with overhead power lines imposed on them that very high levels of negative publicity will happen from the moment the first bulldozer rolls into the forest, until the turbines and power line are removed.

Safety.

We are concerned by the lack of research into the impact on the safety of walkers, cyclists and riders travelling to the area using the country lanes at the same time as the construction traffic and local traffic using the lanes as rat runs to avoid the congestion caused by construction vehicles.

Cultural Heritage.

This planning application omits information on how BALM members are currently working on four grant projects, and have worked in partnership with Carmarthenshire Tourist Association on another grant funded project to raise awareness of the historical environment and the impact on these projects of the power line.

WPD were informed that BALM had obtained a heritage grant to fund the production of A2 size framed display boards for village schools, community centres, pubs, restaurants and tourism businesses, leaflets on the local heritage and a website containing not only the local stories, but also a map showing all the heritage sites within the open access land and beyond the surrounding villages that have an entry in the Historic Environment records to assist visitors to the area in understanding the cultural heritage of the site. The HER is the national database of Welsh Heritage sites managed on behalf of Welsh Government by 4 agencies including Dyfed Archaeology. The users of the new website can select to view sites from specific historical periods, or all heritage sites, and can click on each site to view all the information on that site in the HER database.

We have also ensured that WPD were aware during the consultation meetings that we had successfully applied for grant funding for Dyfed Archaeology to carry out additional research into the historical features in the open access land and surrounding 10km. This additional information including up to date photographs has been added to the National Database of Welsh Heritage by Dyfed Archaeology. The website developed by BALM with the previous grant links into this database, so as more information is added to the database by heritage experts, visitors, community groups and individuals on heritage sites in the area, our website will be automatically be enhanced. WPD have failed to incorporate information on the location of all heritage sites recorded in the HER database along the route of the proposed grid connection, or to mention mitigation of the impact on the views of those sites of the overhead power line.

BALM's targets for all the projects are not only to increase the number of people using the forest and mountain for recreation and the promotion of Brechfa Forest and Llanllwni Mountain as tourist attractions, but to also raise awareness of the cultural significance of this forest.

Why are owners of tourism businesses working together on projects to promote the area which encourage people to spend money in other businesses?

Dr Goodwin a recognised expert on sustainable tourism starts his talks by pointing out that :- Tourism Businesses do not sell bed spaces, you can guarantee that nearly all of their clients will have a comfortable home with a bed they selected. They generally don't book into holiday accommodation because just of the accommodation. What tourism businesses are actually selling is what there is to do on the doorstep of that business and then why tourists should stay at that accommodation.

The whole experience of their guests, during their stay determines not only the likelihood of guests making repeat bookings, but also how guests will describe their holidays to friends, and in online reviews. Making it easy for our guests to set out for a walk from our properties, enjoying the attractive landscape, appreciating the cultural heritage while calling in at a village shop or pub for lunch along the way, where possible purchasing local produce, enriches our clients stay and supports all the other businesses providing essential services to the community.

This community has been selected as a leading example of best practice of sustainable development, and the historical environment project is the first of its kind in Wales. It will be used as a demonstration of the benefits of Welsh Governments Historical Environment Act currently progressing into legislation. It is unfortunate that at the time the legislation comes into force, the demonstration project could be in difficulty because the impacts on it have not been taken into account during a planning application.

Yours truly.