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Mr Mike Seddon
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Sent by email to: michael.seddon@forestryengland.uk

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Dear Mr Seddon

New Forest Parking Charges – Equality Impact Assessment and DEFRA Engagement

Thank you for Forestry England's response dated 12 June 2026 to Beaulieu Parish Council's latest Environmental Information Regulations request, and for providing the updated Equality Impact Assessment and the accompanying note on Blue Badge concessions and vehicle tax exemptions.

We note that Forestry England has declined to disclose the requested internal correspondence, briefings and related material, relying on Regulation 12(4)(e). While we reserve our position on this, our principal concern remains the substance of the Equality Impact Assessment and the wider approach to introducing parking charges across the New Forest.

Since receiving your response, we have also received a reply from Mary Creagh CBE MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Nature. The Minister has confirmed that DEFRA officials will engage directly with Forestry England to discuss the concerns we have raised (which includes the concerns of many New Forest Town & Parish Councils) particularly regarding the Equality Impact Assessment. We have therefore copied this letter to the DEFRA Ministerial Contact Unit and summarise below the key issues we suggest they review in detail, which we trust will be helpful. We welcome this development and believe it offers an opportunity to ensure that the issues identified by local communities, parish councils and other stakeholders are thoroughly, independently and objectively examined, together with the changes to Forestry England's car park charging policy as required.

The updated Equality Impact Assessment you have now provided is more comprehensive than previous versions and acknowledges a wider range of potential impacts on older people, disabled people, low-income households and other vulnerable groups. We welcome this recognition. However, we remain concerned that several fundamental issues remain unresolved.

Firstly, the assessment remains too narrowly focused on disability. Forestry England's accompanying paper concentrates heavily on Blue Badge parking and vehicle tax exemptions. Whilst these issues are relevant, they do not address the wider question of accessibility.

The issue is not simply whether Blue Badge holders should receive free parking. It is whether disabled people, including those with hidden disabilities, mobility, sensory and learning disabilities, and other protected characteristics, can access and enjoy the New Forest on an equal basis.

We remain concerned that Forestry England has not published a clear accessibility and inclusion plan that explains how barriers will be identified, assessed, and mitigated across the 129 New Forest car parks affected by the scheme.

Secondly, the updated assessment continues to rely heavily on generic national evidence, whilst acknowledging significant gaps in local demographic information. The New Forest is not simply another Forestry England-managed site. It is Crown land within a National Park, subject to unique statutory protections, governance arrangements and public expectations. We remain unconvinced that the assessment adequately reflects those local circumstances.

Thirdly, we are concerned about the statement on page 7 of the Equality Impact Assessment that "no formal consultation is required".

Beaulieu Parish Council accepts that Forestry England may have no specific statutory obligation to conduct a formal consultation before introducing car park charges. However, the Minister's Mandate for the New Forest explicitly emphasises community engagement, greater public participation in decision-making, and "extensive local consultations" through established New Forest governance structures.

The question is therefore not whether Forestry England possessed the legal authority to introduce parking charges, but whether the engagement undertaken was consistent with the expectations set by Ministers for the management of the New Forest Crown lands. In our view, for the reasons set out in our previous correspondence (which, for brevity, are not repeated in this letter), it was not. Effective consultation — involving genuine dialogue and the opportunity to influence proposals before decisions were taken — did not, in our opinion, adequately occur for Town and Parish Councils. What took place was predominantly the provision of

information about a programme that had already been developed. This distinction is important and remains a significant unresolved issue at the heart of our concerns.

Fourthly, whilst the Equality Impact Assessment identifies a number of potential adverse impacts, the proposed mitigations remain largely procedural rather than substantive. Posters, websites, telephone payment support and grace periods may assist some visitors, but they do not address the fundamental question of whether the charging arrangements themselves create avoidable barriers for disabled people, older people, and those on low incomes.

Fifthly, Forestry England's rationale for proposing no substantive changes to its newly introduced car park charging policy in the New Forest relies on administrative complexity and cost as reasons for rejecting concessions or alternative arrangements. This is precisely why we advised that the rollout should have been paused to allow the necessary work to be undertaken to ensure compliance with the requirements and spirit of the Equality Act 2010. In our opinion, that work has not been satisfactorily completed, nor have the requirements been met.

We do not consider that complexity and cost provide an adequate basis for declining to explore proportionate measures to assist those most adversely affected. Forestry England manages nationally important public land on behalf of the public and receives significant public funding. The starting point should therefore be how barriers can be reduced and reasonable adjustments achieved, rather than whether doing so may present administrative or financial challenges.

In light of the Minister's response, we consider that DEFRA's review, which we welcome, should, as a minimum, cover:

1. Whether the Equality Impact Assessment is sufficiently specific to the New Forest and its unique governance and access arrangements;
2. Whether Forestry England's engagement programme was consistent with the Minister's Mandate requirement for maintaining "extensive local consultations";
3. Whether the assessment properly considers disability access in the round, rather than focusing primarily on Blue Badge status and vehicle tax exemptions;
4. Whether Forestry England should publish a clear accessibility and inclusion plan for the New Forest car park network, identifying barriers, mitigations, existing facilities and planned improvements;
5. Whether concessions, exemptions, discounted memberships or other arrangements should be considered for disabled visitors, carers, older people,

low-income local users and other groups disproportionately affected;

6. Whether monitoring arrangements should be strengthened by publishing complaints and their resolution, equality impacts, enforcement outcomes, displacement parking effects and other relevant information; and
7. And crucially, whether the conclusion of “No major change” in the Equality Impact Assessment remains appropriate, given the range of impacts outlined in this letter and now acknowledged in the revised EqlA document itself.

Beaulieu Parish Council remains willing to engage constructively with DEFRA and Forestry England. However, we continue to believe that significant concerns regarding equality, access, and engagement remain unresolved and warrant further consideration within the DEFRA review process.

We therefore look forward to receiving confirmation of the outcome of the review by DEFRA officials, together with details of any amendments to the car park charging programme, the Equality Impact Assessment, and/or any associated mitigation measures arising from that review.

We trust that this process will result in a scheme that more fully reflects both the requirements and the spirit of the Equality Act 2010, whilst also meeting the expectations for consultation as set out in the Minister's Mandate for the New Forest.

Yours sincerely,

Nick Hubbard

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Clerk

Contact details above

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The Ministerial Contact Unit, DEFRA
Rt Hon Sir Julian Lewis MP
Rt Hon Sir Desmond Swayne TD MP
Cllr. Dan Poole, Hampshire County Council & New Forest District Council
Victoria Mander, NFNPA Chair
Brian Tarnoff, New Forest Consultative Panel Chair
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