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Dear Minister

Forestry England:

New Forest parking charges, the Equality Act 2010 and the Minister's Mandate

I write following your predecessor Mary Creagh's letter to me dated 16 June about the Equality Act 2010 implications of Forestry England's New Forest parking charges. She confirmed that DEFRA officials would engage with Forestry England about Beaulieu Parish Council's concerns, particularly relating to its Equality Impact Assessments. We would welcome the outcome of that engagement.

Our principal request is for DEFRA to assess whether Forestry England has met its obligations under the Equality Act 2010, including its continuing Public Sector Equality Duty. We also ask DEFRA to consider what concessions or other measures Forestry England should introduce, especially given its responsibilities as a public body and the Government's commitment to equality. We also ask DEFRA to examine the scheme against the New Forest Minister's Mandate and consider reviewing its consultation provisions. In our view, those provisions have not secured effective engagement with affected communities in this instance.

1. Equality and concessions

Neither Forestry England's original nor its revised Equality Impact Assessment, in our view, adequately addresses parking access to the New Forest, the potential disproportionate impact on people with relevant protected characteristics, or practical

mitigation. In its latest assessment, Forestry England places particular emphasis on Blue Badge holders when discussing mobility; its accompanying note explains why it has chosen not to offer them a parking concession.

The Parish Council's point is wider: possession of a Blue Badge is neither a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010 nor a complete measure of the disabled people who may be disadvantaged by the charges. Cycling and other ways of reaching the Forest are not equally accessible to everyone, and some people with disabilities or limited mobility depend on a car to access it.

The updated statutory Code of Practice on services and public functions came into force on 5 August 2026. It gives clearer guidance on the range of disabilities to consider, the anticipatory and continuing duty to make reasonable adjustments, and the scope for treating disabled people more favourably. Given the importance of ensuring fair access to parking, we ask Forestry England to urgently review its assessment of the charging scheme against that revised guidance, including the position of disabled visitors who do not hold a Blue Badge, and to explain what further measures it has considered. We would welcome DEFRA's assurance that Forestry England has undertaken this review and addressed its conclusions.

More recently, New Forest District Council has also debated the impact of the Forestry England New Forest car park charging scheme and noted that low-income and retired residents cannot afford the yearly membership, whilst also raising the issue of a lack of concessions for disabled residents.

In the context of this continuing level of significant concern, we ask DEFRA to consider whether Forestry England has assessed that wider impact and explored proportionate measures to reduce it. The Public Sector Equality Duty continues after implementation; a revised assessment alone does not determine the scheme's actual effects.

2. The Mandate and access to the Forest

The Minister's Mandate for the New Forest, signed on 5 July 1999, gives the Forestry Commission (and now Forestry England) responsibilities for conserving the Forest's natural and cultural heritage, supporting commoning, and providing for quiet enjoyment and recreation consistent with conservation objectives.

The Council requested Forestry England's business case for car park charging, but Forestry England declined to disclose it. We recognise its need to raise income to care for the Forest, although revenue generation must be considered alongside the above purposes. Nevertheless, a decision affecting access to all 129 car parks should be open to scrutiny by the communities it serves. We ask DEFRA to establish whether the business case assessed the potential adverse effects on public access and neighbouring communities and businesses, and whether the scheme is delivering the forecast income and other benefits. Forestry England should publish enough information to explain the commercial basis for its decision, with any genuinely sensitive details protected.

That question has become more pressing considering changes in car park use. Local resident Derek Biggs, working with Sir Julian Lewis MP, is reported in the local media to have surveyed vehicles in February, May and June this year and reports around 50% fewer vehicles at the locations he counted. These observations are indicative, not a formal Forest-wide assessment, but are consistent with our own observations, and raise a question about whether actual usage—and therefore revenue—matches the assumptions in Forestry England’s business case.

We ask DEFRA to assess whether the Forestry England scheme remains commercially sound, alongside its adverse effects on access, displaced parking and nearby communities and businesses.

3. Consultation with local communities

The Mandate calls for “close working relationships” with bodies concerned with the Forest and for consultation strategies that engage a “wide variety of relevant interested bodies and individuals” in forming and implementing policies, plans and programmes.

Continuing concerns raised by Sir Julian Lewis MP, New Forest District Council, and the New Forest Town and Parish councils suggest that Forestry England’s engagement over a change affecting all 129 car parks did not achieve the breadth or effectiveness envisaged by the Mandate. We therefore ask DEFRA to examine how representations from these elected individuals and bodies influenced the scheme, and whether the process met the Mandate’s expectations. The scale and persistence of significant local concern clearly suggests that they did not adequately influence the scheme and therefore justify that independent examination.

4. Monitoring and review of the Mandate

The Mandate states that it would be reviewed and renewed in 2008. We have found the version signed in 1999 but no later replacement. Please confirm its current status. We respectfully suggest that the unaddressed difficulties exposed by the rollout of car park charging provide a timely reason to review its consultation and engagement provisions, with MP, District, Town and Parish councils, the Verderers and community representatives fully involved.

We would appreciate a substantive response on these matters, including any concessions or other mitigations under consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Nick Hubbard

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Chair

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Victoria Mander, NFNPA Chair
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