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Sussex Planning for Nature Group – an open letter to Center Parcs

Dear Martin Dalby,

You will be aware that the Sussex Planning for Nature Group, which consists of the Woodland Trust, RSPB, Sussex Wildlife Trust, CPRE Sussex, and Sussex Ornithological Society, has jointly expressed its concern regarding Center Parcs' proposals to develop a new Center Parcs village facility at Oldhouse Warren in Mid Sussex.

We would like to clarify that our organisations do not oppose the principle of a new Center Parcs' village development in this part of the country. Our concerns are entirely with the location that Center Parcs has selected for this new facility.

Oldhouse Warren and the surrounding landscape make up the remnants of Worth Forest, a once medieval hunting forest and an integral part of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). This ancient woodland site is a habitat rich with nationally rare archaeological and ecological features, including veteran trees, and also neighbours an area of SSSI ancient ghyll woodland. It is for this reason that we are asking Center Parcs to reconsider developing here. Should Center Parcs wish to develop a resort in the South East then it should seek a sustainable location where it can support national efforts to help nature recover, increase wildlife populations, and reduce the impacts of climate change in line with its own stated environmental policies.

We note Center Parcs' response to our concerns to date: *"We take our responsibility to the environment and forests extremely seriously. We have more than 30 years' experience of sensitively managing the woodlands in which our villages are located, carefully nurturing and maintaining the forests to protect and enhance biodiversity."*

Although there do not appear to be any public detailed proposals, it is our joint considered view that there is no prospect of Center Parcs being able to build a new resort at Oldhouse Warren that could avoid grave and irreparable harm to the ecosystems and biodiversity, both above and below ground, for which Oldhouse Warren is protected. As well as the introduction of infrastructure, the proposals would bring a massive increase in private recreational use of the area resulting in a deterioration of the character and features that make this site so special.

The proposals for such a large facility would have a significant and irreversible adverse impact on the landscape character of this part of the High Weald AONB. Any such proposal on this site would clearly be in breach of national planning policy that protects nationally important landscapes and ancient woodland from loss or harm.

Ancient woodland is irreplaceable; it takes centuries, more often millennia, for ancient woodland soils to accumulate and the rich connections between soils, plants, animals, and other organisms to develop and evolve. Where new development is introduced to ancient woodland such as lodges,

leisure facilities and associated infrastructure, the important biological relationships and variety of ecological niches within the ecosystem are irreversibly harmed and destroyed.

We believe it is impossible for any new construction of this nature and scale to be undertaken without inevitable and extensive loss and deterioration of ancient woodland. We have yet to see any evidence from Center Parcs that they have demonstrated this in practice. Center Parcs may claim that a proposal would not result in loss and deterioration; however, given the irreplaceability of this habitat and its soils, this is simply not achievable where any development is to be sited within ancient woodland.

We believe the responsible approach for both climate and biodiversity is to find an alternative site which currently has low ecological value and plan for extensive planting and natural regeneration of new and existing native woodland. This could serve to improve the new site's conservation value and be an act of positive ecological responsibility for which future development can be designed around. Center Parcs has an opportunity to increase biodiversity, not destroy it; helping Center Parcs support national climate change policy to plant an additional 30,000ha of new woodland every year in the UK, and avoid destroying the irreplaceable ancient woodland of Oldhouse Warren set within the nationally important High Weald AONB.

The Sussex Planning for Nature group would welcome an explanation from Center Parcs to the points raised. If you consider that there is value in doing so, we would be happy to arrange a meeting to further discuss the concerns raised by our group.

Yours sincerely,

Sussex Planning for Nature Group