

Hamsterley Forest Centre Development

FC Centre and FC Offices

The preferred option identified in the TRC report in September 2009 was for the Forest Centre to be situated on the existing site. This avoids flood plain constraints and offers opportunities to use the elevated position and the sloping ground in front of it to utilise the open area leading down to the river presently car parking, but planned to be the gathering area.

A pre condition of this site is the removal of the forest road from the front of the buildings to the rear of the buildings. This will mean a new road to be built approximately 250m long, on a slightly elevated position built into the bank side.

The new Forest Centre could then utilise the existing road partly as building and partly as a sitting out area overlooking the re-profiled bank, sloping gradually to the gathering area towards the river.

A pre condition of any development would also be the removal of the forest garage and forest store and the urea store and the deer larder from the site. These would need to be repositioned, using a combination of Low Redford, The Nest and/or possibly a site near Forest Lodge.

It is likely that the forest office will remain at the forest centre as this would allow additional supervision and would be more convenient for the FC business.

Our thinking has moved on a little since the July 2009 development plan. The main changes are that we now envisage a single story building, that the bike hire shop will be in a separate building on the site of the existing bike hire, and that the separate toilet will be retained, possibly replaced to include changing rooms.

The original proposal in the TRC report was to include a new bike hire facility in the Forest Centre.

There are advantages in this in that it will free up the existing bike hire land for car parking. The disadvantages are the additional cost and the security element. Bike hire buildings tend to be attractive to vandals. If the bike hire is to be re-located then it should be in a separate secure building on the site of the current bike hire. It also means that we wouldn't have bikes milling around the VC. This is our preference.

The TRC report proposed a two storey building. The ground floor was 550 sq.m and the first floor 90 sq.m.

If the bike hire facility were in a separate building, it would occupy approximately 190 sq.m. This removes the need for the first floor on the forest centre. Any space at that level should be for storage only on perhaps a mezzanine level. A single storey building would be simpler and would fit into the site more discretely.

The building would accommodate the following uses:-

Woodland Café – this could also form part of a display area, 90 sq.m (this is the same size as the existing visitor centre display area).

Kitchen and storage – 60 sq.m

Classroom and additional dining area for busy periods/conferences etc – 50 sq.m

Storage – 20 sq.m

Staff toilets and changing – 20 sq.m

Visitor toilets for café customers – 45 sq.m

Disabled unisex toilets – 10 sq.m

FC admin offices – 25 sq.m 3 staff

FC ranger office – 25 sq.m 3 staff

Storage area for Ranger's educational materials 10 sq.m

Storage area for Forester's files 10 sq.m

Staff canteen – 15 sq.m

Lobby and reception – 10 sq.m

Boiler room (pellet boiler, fuel store and accumulator tanks) – 35 sq.m

Circulation space – 80 sq.m

TOTAL area 505 sq.m including circulation space.

Outside veranda area – 140 sq.m

The main aspect of the building will be towards the south overlooking the valley. The south elevation would be largely glazed and have a partially covered veranda area for gathering, eating and sitting.

The toilets, storerooms, boiler rooms and offices will be located toward the rear of the building.

FC visitor centres typically cost around £2200 a sq.m to include all professional costs and wood heating.

Bike hire building – this would be a separate building of mainly concrete block in structure on the site of the current bike hire– total 190 sq.m to include bike shop – 35 sq.m, bike maintenance 30 sq.m, bike storage 100 sq.m, canteen and toilets etc. 20 sq.m. We recently built a steel frame, block built, timber clad bike hire building at Kielder which cost £280k. That figure should be accurate enough for the purposes of project costing at Hamsterley.

The existing toilet block would be retained or replaced with one including changing rooms. This makes sense with the separate bike hire building, means that toilets are available when the VC is closed, and enables the VC toilets to be reserved for VC customers. We are not envisaging showers because of maintenance costs, but provision of a “leg wash” is a good idea.

Within the forest centre area there would need to be parking for disabled cars, minimum 10 (based on 6% guideline in BS8300 and DfT Advisory Leaflet 5/95). Plus some staff parking say 10.

Access Road

The realignment of the forest drive to pass behind the new forest centre would allow the centre to have pedestrian access to the valley floor internal trails network.

Visitors arriving by car or bus would be directed into the car parks at the east of the forest centre. Through traffic would turn behind the forest centre before heading westwards along the Bedburn valley. Service vehicles would need to stop adjacent to the rear of the forest centre.

The main forest parking areas are to the east of the forest centre and in the area presently occupied by the woodcraft centre.

Infrastructure

The road re-alignment is one of the main aspects to be tackled here. See plan for approximate layout.

A kiosk for collecting entrance fee should be provided

A covered area in the gathering area for casual eating.

The main overhead electricity cable in front of the visitor centre running through the central gathering space must be placed underground in order to give full enjoyment of the gathering space and to improve the amenity. The supply to the centre is believed to be 60kva which should be sufficient for the new centre particularly if we move on to a biomass heating system and away from night store heaters.

The water supply system is adequate although untreated and will need a water treatment plant for an enhanced visitor centre. Ideally, toilet flushing should continue to be with untreated water.

The sewage system will need renewing, replacing the existing septic tank with a sewage treatment plant. This should not be located close to the forest centre, but could be located where the existing septic tank is located utilising the existing soakaway system.

A trailhead and 400m of multi-user trail alongside the forest drive would need to be established from which the bike trails and the walking trails commence, as identified on TRC plan. The plan also shows two additional footbridges to be provided across the Bedburn Beck to lead to a new adventure play area and a footpath circuit (1800m of footpath in the vicinity of the Visitor Centre). These footpaths would also would lead to the "Go Ape" centre if this were to be developed.

The provision of the car parking is shown on the TRC plan:

Lower car park below the toilet block around 150 cars.

Upper car park and mini coach parking around 90 cars and 5 mini coaches.

(This will be reduced by the decision to retain a bike hire facility in this area)

Reinforced grass parking would accommodate approximately 160 cars.

These are maximum numbers and the parking is likely to be less formal. Our landscape architect is currently reviewing car park design.

Graham Gill

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