



THE LODGE - WATERFALL TRAIL

Accessibility Case Studies

The Waterfall Trail at The Lodge, Queen Elizabeth Forest Park, has re-shaped the gateway to a network of trails in the forest. Completed in 2012, it offers all visitors the chance to access and enjoy this beautiful part of the Trossachs.

The project was one of a number undertaken in recent years to increase and improve the accessibility of Scotland's National Forest Estate for all potential visitors.

This Case Study describes the project and looks at some of the challenges we encountered along the way. It suggests a number of key learning points: we hope our experience will help others to be equally or even more successful.



A bridge on the trail had to be designed to allow plenty of space for the burn in spate, but without too steep a gradient.

BACKGROUND

Between 2011 and 2013, Forestry Commission Scotland worked with the Fieldfare Trust and other specialist accessibility advisors to review recreation provision on the National Forest Estate, focussing on opportunities for disabled visitors. This assessment was driven by a number of health and recreation policies, including the newly-implemented Equality Act 2010.

The review included access surveys at key visitor sites throughout Scotland. Over 200 kms of trails were surveyed and 18 phototrails (www.phototrails.org) were produced. The network of forest trails that were already “badged” as accessible to all were an important focus: we wanted to identify which of them met current specifications for accessible paths (see the end of this case study), and which might have fallen below the standard through the passage of time, erosion or other factors. We could then make decisions about improving existing routes, “de-badging” trails that were no longer fully accessible, renewed promotion of accessible trails, and the potential for developing new trails.



Disabled parking bays close to the visitor centre are an essential part of the access improvements.

We also focussed on key forests with special landscape experiences that were already popular, but that did not offer fully inclusive access. That meant they could potentially exclude a large number of potential visitors: about 830,000 disabled adults live in Scotland, representing 1 in 7 of the population. And because most people follow “the line of least resistance” when out in the countryside, making sure trails are as accessible as possible benefits everyone.

The results of the survey mean that Forest Enterprise Scotland, which manages the National Forest Estate as an agency of Forestry Commission Scotland, is now in a better position to make strategic decisions about improvements and investments in accessible trails. We want to increase the number of Scots who are physically active, and make sure that the experiences offered at our sites can be shared and enjoyed by all, whatever their age or ability.

IMPROVEMENTS FOR EVERYONE

The Lodge is one of the most popular destinations in Queen Elizabeth Forest Park, part of Cowal and Trossachs Forest District. The park receives over 400,000 visitors annually.

When planning for the trail began in 2011, no trails at The Lodge were badged as “all ability” or even “easy access”. One of the site’s standout attractions is a waterfall, but reaching this beautiful feature meant negotiating gradients in excess of 15%. Significantly improving access to the waterfall would mean creating a largely new route on difficult terrain, and integrating the new trail with the wider forest network.

It also meant getting visitors to accept a route that would introduce a new start to the trail network, and would be longer than existing options. At a popular site like The Lodge, and with a well-known feature such as the waterfall, visitors’ habits and expectations can be hard to change or influence.

The existing trail network was complicated, with a number of disparate links to individual features of interest. Some routes had relatively accessible sections, but none were fully accessible and most of the forest’s key features could not be naturally connected on a single coherent walk. Appraisals of the existing visitor experience showed that a large proportion of the site’s visitors – not just disabled visitors – were unable to access some special areas of the forest, or did not feel comfortable using parts of the trail network.

Although creating a new route at a well-established site would be a significant challenge, our goal for the Waterfall Trail went beyond just providing a physically accessible trail. We wanted to offer full accessibility to the site’s most attractive individual feature, while connecting a number of its other highlights.



In addition to the new trail, developments at The Lodge include fully accessible ramp access to the visitor centre.



The new trail had to be marked out across ground where no path had existed before.

PLANNING THE TRAIL

In October 2011, district recreation managers discussed a potential new trail to the waterfall and examined the route on the ground with a specialist accessibility advisor. This allowed us to start looking at the difficult questions about viability, specification and value.

The plan for the new route was to incorporate aspects of the visitor experience such as the waterfall and a "Lumber Jill" statue, and to integrate them with sections of the existing network. This would enable the obvious trail head to be kept close to the visitor centre and would mean a mix of completely new path construction and upgrading work on some established path sections.

A new potential route was walked, assessed and marked out. It wasn't too difficult to see the potential for creating an accessible linear gradient along the new route but its successful delivery would come through clear specifications in contract documents and good contract management.

We also invited members of the local Access Panel to visit the site for a "walk and talk" meeting to provide comments and feedback. This led to further improvements to the path gradient, and re-surfacing on sections with loose stones to get a firm, smooth finish on the path surface.

The budget for the new Waterfall Trail was £60,000 - £70,000.



Artworks like these mirror figures add interest along the route.



THE WATERFALL TRAIL

If we could change one thing in the process with the benefit of hindsight, it would be to draw up the trail specification with a stricter standard for the maximum linear gradient. This would have eased the pressure on both project managers and the contractor in getting the work done to the standard required.

The trail has delivered many benefits for visitors to The Lodge, including:

- A clear primary trail, which has encouraged further development and the addition of environmental play, art and interpretation.
- A trail head integrated with a superb new visitor centre.
- A very significant increase in accessibility for a huge diversity of visitors.
- Making the very best features of the forest accessible to many more people.
- A trail with real longevity that requires relatively minimal on-going maintenance.
- A challenge to the district to deliver comparable experiences at other sites.

Keys to its successful delivery were:

- Early appraisal of the potential and the viability of such a significant alteration to the access network.
- The engagement of experienced specialists, both internal and external to the organisation.
- Good project systems to control cost, quality and programme.
- Consultation with local user groups to get comments on the trail.

Significant challenges included:

- Achieving the specified maximum linear gradient. Some remedial work on the initial stage of the trail was needed after completion.
- Specifying an all-weather, fully accessible boardwalk surface.
- Managing the quality and consistency of stockpiled construction materials.



The new trail gives access to special areas of the forest for everyone.



“A friendly welcome allows visitors to find out what’s on offer at the Lodge.”

Will Huckerby
Recreation Manager
Queen Elizabeth Forest Park

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- Appraise the accessible trail within the context of the local access network. Ensure that it is or will be integrated with the local network rather than an addition to it.
- Don't just see the path specification as the target. Look for ways in which improving accessibility can enhance the experience for all visitors, not just those who may have particular access needs.
- Undertake a comprehensive access survey before tendering a contract.
- Consult with local disability groups about the best ways of addressing access design issues.
- Work towards the least restrictive options based on consultation and evidence.
- Clear, accurate information is important in helping people decide whether to visit a site and how well they would be able to use it once there. Provide information in accessible formats, off-site and on-site, that allows people to decide for themselves.
- When choosing contractors, make a high-quality track record a key criterion.
- Don't rely on the contractor understanding what you want from the contract documentation alone. Let them know about the reasoning behind the trail development, emphasise the importance of adhering to the Countryside for All standard, and "walk and talk" the trail with them before any groundworks commence.
- Establish agreed quality control standards as soon as possible. Make building a test section of trail a first stage in the construction programme.
- If you are concerned about a key accessibility parameter, specify a higher standard than you actually need, so you build certainty and security into your project.
- Develop your skills in contract management (including the Clerk of Works role) and/or ensure you have back-up and support for this task.
- Don't be afraid to cost in specialist support for any relevant part of the process.
- Keep paper and photographic records throughout: they make valuable learning resources.

Countryside for All

Standards for paths that will make the countryside accessible for all are published by the Fieldfare Trust. Developed through the BT Countryside for All project, the standards cover specifications for features such as surface, width, gradient and cross slope.

Because people expect different types of path in different countryside settings, the standards are designed to help you develop accessible paths that are appropriate and sympathetic to the location. Near towns and around intensively managed sites, for example, people expect better paths than they would in open country or wild land.

You'll find details of the standards on the Fieldfare Trust's website at www.fieldfare.org.uk. The first step is to assess the right setting for your site through a few simple questions that will help you place it in the "Urban and formal", "Urban fringe and managed" or "Rural and working landscape" category. You can then download detailed path specifications for the relevant category.

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