



KIRROUGHTREE - WILD WATCH TRAIL

Accessibility Case Studies

The Wild Watch Trail at Kirroughtree, in Galloway Forest Park, was created as part of a major re-development that included a new visitor centre. This involved significant changes to the design of visitor flow and visitor experience, and gave an opportunity to make the trail closest to the centre fully accessible. Now everyone can begin their forest adventure together.

The Visitor Centre project was one of a number undertaken in recent years to improve the visitor offer as well as the accessibility

of Scotland's National Forest Estate for all potential visitors.

This Case Study describes the Wild Watch Trail, developed as part of 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.



Accessible trails are good for everyone, not just people with mobility difficulties.



The new visitor centre at Kirroughtree is part of a major investment in the site.

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.

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.

KIRROUGHTREE CHALLENGES

When Kirroughtree was first considered by the accessibility review, there were few obvious options for developing a trail that would be both attractive and fully inclusive. Adding just a small degree of full accessibility, without integrating it into the overall visitor management plan, would have seemed like a token gesture rather than a real benefit to visitors. Worse still, small add-on developments can be a waste of valuable resources, particularly if they get little use while still demanding a substantial maintenance commitment.

However, we hoped there would be a more significant development of the whole visitor offer at Kirroughtree in the near future. Rather than develop a small stand-alone project, we did some initial scoping work to look at how full accessibility might be included in a new, fully integrated visitor hub.

In 2013, the Galloway Forest Park received around £5m of investment in visitor facilities, including a significant development at Kirroughtree. The site now has a new visitor centre offering information, a café, cycle hire and an adventure play area.

The site was already popular with regular visitors and a legion of mountain bikers. The new development meant it was in a much better position to create an accessible trail at its hub, fully integrated with the wider trail network. Of course, there's no point developing an accessible trail unless visitors can get to it. The new visitor centre includes accessible parking bays, and fully accessible toilets.



Part of the route ran over wet ground, under trees that shed a lot of leaves in winter.



Sealed concrete makes a more durable path surface along this stretch.

DO IT YOURSELF

With the new visitor facilities in place, the project manager planned a new accessible trail starting from the visitor centre, connected to all the newly installed features and adding something new for all visitors to the forest. Building on the earlier review and scoping work, it was now possible to connect with the new facilities and still incorporate some of the former trail network.

We drew up contract documents for competitive tender and invited submissions from contractors in the open market. But when the returns were received, it was clear that the market price for the trail as designed was far higher than the allocated budget.

Part of the problem was the site's location. The contracts specified that the paths should be surfaced with Toptrec (now marketed as Ultratrec), a recycled material that gives a similar smooth surface finish to whin dust but is more resilient. Ultratrec is supplied only by the Lafarge Tarmac Group, and the costs of transport from their depot in central Scotland to Galloway made the costs higher. In addition, local contractors were not experienced in building paths with this material.

It looked as if the development of an integrated, accessible trail might have to be put on hold. This would have failed to meet the aims of the overall re-development project, and abandoning the accessible trail would have been difficult to justify given the project's size.

We already had some in-house experience of trail construction in Galloway Forest District. After reviewing the scale and



The level of the finished path surface had to be carefully marked out with wooden boards.

specification of the necessary trail works, and the capabilities of the forestry team, we decided to set aside the competitive tender process and deliver the project in-house. This meant we could deliver the trail within the budget, and build our team's knowledge and experience.



Once the path surface was laid, earth was banked up to stabilise the edges and soften them visually.

THE WILD WATCH TRAIL

We have now delivered a fully accessible trail that enhances the site for all visitors and is well-integrated with the wider development project. It includes a new, accessible Wild Watch Hide that offers established visitors to the forest something new and attractive to enjoy.

The new trail includes a variety of surface finishes, all meeting full accessibility standards. Some sections are in sealed concrete, chosen where there is significant leaf fall and a lot of water drips from the canopy. Concrete provides a more secure surface for these conditions: it should maintain its integrity better and need less maintenance. Its initial "urban" visual appearance will soften over time. It was also a better solution in this location than Ultratec, our usual choice for surfaced paths, especially given the high transport costs to the site.

Once the trail construction was complete, we commissioned a new external survey to assess the route's accessibility and seek guidance on enhancing the basic provision. The survey made a number of small suggestions that add to the base specification of the Countryside for All Standard and these have now been implemented.



Local granite makes a cover for a culvert along the route that blends with the landscape.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Forest Enterprise Scotland has always taken great pride in what we provide to our visitors. This project was no different and initially it was daunting for the in-house team to consider such a project. It took longer than hoped, but the experience and knowledge gained from carrying out the work now means the local team can consider other projects.

Some of the key things to consider if you have not done such a project before are:

- **Does the team have the capacity to try new things and learn from them?**
- **Have you fully researched what materials you can use to deliver the project?**
- **Have you taken advice about the trail's final appearance and how it all blends in with the wider offer?**

Looking back, these are the aspects that we were least prepared for, and yet where we achieved the most. The project has not only given us the confidence to tackle more ambitious schemes but has also developed our team experience.



The finished path is popular with all visitors, not just those with reduced mobility.



“The most common factors leading to less than full accessibility were linear gradient, in most cases because of the route selected, and a lack of seats and resting areas.”

From the trail audit

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- Don't be afraid to delay the implementation of an accessible trail if you cannot deliver it in a way that will bring real benefits.
- 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 being an addition to it.
- Consult with current and potential visitors about your plans.
- 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.
- Take advantage of in-house knowledge and skills. Look at how you can capitalise on the project to develop a team's understanding and experience.
- If you are concerned about a key accessibility parameter such as trail surfacing, specify a higher standard so that you build certainty and security into your project.
- Transport costs for specialised materials can have a major effect on a project's budget, especially for more remote sites. Be prepared to be flexible in your choice of materials.
- Allow a budget for specialist support on relevant parts of the process, especially if the project is to be delivered in-house.

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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