

Landscape and Ecological Management Plan – BikePark Wales Trail and Access Track Construction

Project Details and Purpose of LEMP

Project Description

BikePark Wales have created this Landscape and Ecological Management Plan (LEMP). This LEMP relates solely to the works proposed as part of the expansion of the mountain bike trail network and uplift tracks of BikePark Wales under the planning application for 'Construction of Mountain Bike Trails, Access Trails, and Uplift Track Extension and Amendments'. It integrates with a wider area of management, of which is discussed but not a material matter to that aforementioned planning application. The application site (the Proposed Development) is located on the hillside to the west of the BikePark Wales buildings and facilities on land leased from Natural Resources Wales.

BikePark Wales is located to the west of Abercanaid and the A470. The site is accessible from the A470 via a private road.

The Proposed Development comprises of a set of mountain bike trails and uplift access tracks that will complement and expand upon the existing mountain bike trail network at BikePark Wales.

Purpose of the LEMP

A LEMP is required to be prepared and submitted as part of this planning application to comply with requirements of legislation and policy, to ensure no significant impacts would be created by ensuring that any proposed mitigation, compensation, and enhancement measures are successful.

The LEMP sets out the biodiversity aims and responsibilities of the developer (BikePark Wales) and also highlights the aims of the landlord (NRW) which are captured in the collaborated document the Future Forest Vision. The presence of bike trails and the ongoing management of those trails can create ecological enhancement to the local environment and help diversify habitats on a local and macro level.

Development Description & Wider Site Setting

The Proposed Development site consists of narrow trail and track corridors which are sited across a large area of mixed woodland (both coniferous and broadleaf) with small open spaces, tracks and rides throughout. Parts of the site are designated as Ancient Semi Natural Woodland and others as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCS). The site slopes west to east and comprises a mix of open and wooded areas with existing forestry management infrastructure and bike trails. The site is bounded to the west and North by the wider productive forest managed by NRW and to the south by neighbouring grazed farmland. The wider area around the site includes a mix of woodland types on the valley sides above the River Taff, which lays at the bottom of the valley and is the main watershed for the Merthyr Valley. The A470 road runs north-west to south-east of the site to the east, and the settlements of Abercanaid and Pentrebach are found to the east, with industrial, retail, public and residential spaces present.

The site is being used as a Mountain Bike Park that is classed as Sui Generis under the Use Classes Order 1987 (as amended). With the wider forest outside the trail corridors managed by Natural Resources Wales with a lease agreement in place (subject to the planning consent approval associated with this

trail application) safeguarding the 'core area' of the woodland from commercial timber production and switching focus to supporting the mountain bike park operation and managing and improving biodiversity of the woodland.

Agreement for Lease – Subject to Planning Consent

BikePark Wales and NRW have a signed agreement for lease, the full lease terms will be triggered upon grant of the planning consent this LEMP relates to for 'Construction of Mountain Bike Trails, Access Trails, and Uplift Track Extension and Amendments'. The new lease will commit NRW to a change in woodland management to the forest area around the bike park which has been labelled the 'core area'. The change is to move away from the current productive forestry model of coniferous woodland harvesting and clear fell sites and to a model that actively seeks to retain tree cover and therefore has both landscape, environmental and ecological benefits as the landscape will not be subjected to the upheaval of large scale forestry with large machines clearing areas of forest, then prepping them for replanting which can affect water runoff and sediment transport. In its place the development of low impact bike trails will ensure that the tree cover is retained and the focus of the management of the core area switches to a focus of retention, stability and ecological enhancement with small scale forestry works to achieve these aims. This management plan is captured and set out over 20 years in the Future Forest Vision for Gethin Woodland.

While this is important for the overarching context of this LEMP, this approach of wider land management extends both over the site but also a wider area, of which is not considered material to the planning application this plan accompanies.

Measures the Tenant/Developer will Undertake

Post construction of the mountain bike trails, an ongoing maintenance regime will be undertaken on the linear strips of land that BikePark Wales have responsibility for (the verges either side of the trail line). In these areas BikePark Wales will:

- Manage the vegetation for 2 metres either side of the developed trails by consistent brushcutting, stopping its succession to scrub and creating better conditions for a flora rich transition to the thicket, bracken or forested areas beyond.
- Clear any windblown trees from developed tracks or trails and stack them in habitat piles between 2 and 10 metres from the trail edge for ecological enhancement.
- Maintain the linear bike trails which in turn are utilised as wildlife corridors outside of operational hours; alongside benefits, as well as to assist the management, of their adjacent habitats.
- Selectively remove spruce, larch and other conifers from the corridor to favour native and broadleaf trees to develop without being outcompeted and suppressed by the faster growing conifer trees.

Key Considerations and Mitigations when undertaking the above management of the habitats and environment:

- The trackside vegetation should be cut after seed is set, in approximately June, if this is safe to do so. This will allow vernal species time to set seed and propagate.
- Cutting of track verges should try maintaining a minimum vegetation height of around 10cm. This will allow smaller plants to grow without damage (i.e. common dog violets) and maintain a different habitat for invertebrates.

- Continued working to educate riders to respect the habitats they are riding through, to reduce single use plastics usage and take all rubbish away with them, working closely with advocacy and action charity 'Trash Free Trails'. Running trail clean-ups when required to maintain a pristine environment.
- No works affecting scrub or trees will be undertaken during the accepted breeding season of end February to end August unless surveyed by suitably qualified ecologist and consent provided immediately prior to works.
- Removal of the Site from productive commercial forestry will support the use of more environmentally beneficial methods of woodland working including the creation of gaps and small open spaces when dangerous trees are removed rather than wholesale clearance.

Future Forest Vision

The future forest vision is a collaboratively developed and legally binding document that sets out the aims and objectives for management of the core area of the forest – a 600 acre block of woodland that surrounds the mountain bike park and its trails. This applies to areas that contain bike trails, including the site of proposed new trail development.

With planning permission granted and the new lease triggered the Future Forest Vision becomes a live document with a set of 5 year and 20 year objectives and actions that set out how NRW intend to manage the forest which can be reviewed in detail in the supplied supporting Future Forest Vision Document.

The below table sets out the key objectives:

No.	Prioritised Objectives	Indicator of objective being met
1	Deliver the recreation within the forest (delivery of the BPW Lease and supporting plans)	1. Improve customer experience 2. Deliver Approved masterplans 3. Increase visitor numbers 4. Maintain profitability
2	Enhance the Biodiversity of the habitats in the Core Area	1. Enhancement and expansion of the ASNW 2. Removal of conifer trees in broadleaf woodlands identified as Minimum Intervention Areas 3. Monitor Wildlife within the Core area to identify potential impact
3	Implement water management techniques and designs to minimise the impact of the bike park and forest management activities.	1. Identification and implementation of Water Management Plan 2. Trialing techniques of water management for NRW / BPW Staff
4	Implement silvicultural management techniques that allow management of the forest around a bike park	1. Enhance crop stability in the young crops (NOTE SBCPT) 2. Minimised approach to management of crops to deliver LTR/MI?
5	Explore alternative management techniques and timber products	1. Recovery of timber for use by BPW 2. Use of products within community 3. Horse extraction

No.	Prioritised Objectives	Indicator of objective being met
6	Management and enhancement of the forest to increase carbon capture, climate change mitigation and generation of renewable resources.	• Explore opportunities to increase value of woodland through carbon capture. • Increase use of renewable resources. • Identify alternative sources for biproducts produced in the forest. • Reduce Fire Risk within the Forest, producing fire management plan. • Incorporate resistance to storms in design plans

Again, these are overarching objectives that inform this LEMP but are not a material consideration of the proposed development, except where they inform this strategy.

Specific management in relation to the landscape is focused on the wider FFV delivery which aims to retain the woodland and enhance it by selectively favouring broadleaf trees in areas of competition, and on BikePark Wales direct management of the trailside vegetation. The development proposals will offer long term benefits to the ecological resilience of the Bike Park core area (approximately 350ha). Currently, the four blocks of ASNW affected by the proposals are separated by blocks of commercial forestry. Should the proposals go ahead, lease conditions with NRW will become active, and will change the designation of the area from a productive commercial forest to recreation as a primary use, allowing further ecological enhancement across areas wider than the site.

Stakeholder Engagement and Monitoring

Ongoing consultation will be held through the landlord/tenant relationship held between BikePark Wales and Natural Resources Wales which has a duration of 33 years as per the lease. This will include monitoring and review meetings of the FFV delivery and of BikePark Wales's direct areas of responsibility within the trail corridors against the objectives of the FFV.

In addition, BikePark Wales's operational practices will ensure that vegetation and management of the trailside verges is ongoing and part of routine inspections and works.

Fire Risk Management

One of the greatest risks present to the woodland environment and its habitats is a large-scale wildfire. The risk of these fires has been steadily increasing with the effects of climate change.

NRW in consultation with BPW and the South Wales Fire Service have been proactive in establishing physical measures in the wider area around the site to help reduce this risk. These include:

- Creation of Fire breaks – removing the fuel source to prevent continued spread of a fire across a woodland block.
- Reduction of fuel source onsite – removing stacked timber and removing or mulching brash where practicable from forestry sites in the wider productive forest outside the core area.

Water Management

Water on the site is managed by both the landlord and the tenant with respect to their respective areas of responsibility. NRW manage the wider woodland and drainage or water courses that occur throughout. BikePark Wales manage the water flow as it enters the trail corridor and have measures to ensure that water and sediment transport is effectively managed to reduce any potential erosion of the trail and to minimise the risk of sediment reaching a watercourse.

Trails are designed to have a number of features that manage the flow of water and seek to retain the natural sheet flow of surface run off or modify this to reduce the risks. The main techniques employed in water management within the bike trails are as follows:

Outsloping of the Trail – trails are benched into the slope and are cut with a shallow out slope (3-5%) so that rain and water can sheet over the land and directly over the trail maintaining its existing path of travel. A trail maintenance team perform a task known as ‘deberming’ which reinstates the out slope if it starts to be lost due to a build-up of leaves on the outside edge or wear.

Grade Reversals – these are reversals in the grade of a trail. Bike trails are generally ‘benched’ or cut into a side slope and descend the hill. If a trail continuously descended, then it would be possible for water to follow the trail and build volume and speed, instead trails especially those of lower difficulty grades have regular reversals in grade. Whilst they overall descend the hillside, they will have a short break where they go back uphill before going downhill again. This is repeated at regular intervals, every 10-30 metres or so and regularly sheds and prevents any build-up of water.

Grips – similar to grade reversals, these are small depressions across the width of the trail surface to shed any surface water, but these are added whilst the trail continues to descend. These are used little and often to shed water at regular intervals and prevent build up.

Culverts – where a trail crosses an existing flow of water, a twin walled poly pipe with header walls of minimum 300mm diameter is used to allow the water to pass under the trail surface unimpeded.

Catchment and Settlement Pits – where culverts are used to allow an existing flow of water to pass under the trails, a settlement pit is used where appropriate on the top side of the culvert pipe to collect and allow any sediment to settle. Low side of the pipe it will be assessed if the water already sheds to vegetated ground and therefore disperses naturally, or whether any additional measures are required to slow the flow of water, such as settlement pits, stone dams and swales.

All trails are to be formally inspected monthly with any water management or drainage items identified and programmed into the works for the month. In addition to this, trails are inspected following any extreme weather events that trigger an amber weather warning and are regularly ridden by both customers and staff throughout the month providing live reporting of any issues allowing for a proactive management approach.

Timetable for Works

All trails are to be inspected monthly via a walked inspection, a safety focussed task and will identify any hazardous trees or vegetation growth that is obscuring the visibility of the trail. Following inspections, a work plan of vegetation management and preventative maintenance is developed for each month along the trail side verges.

The wider woodland is then managed by NRW under the future forest vision with a 5 year task based plan developed and a 20 year set of objectives set. It is important to highlight and understand the plans for the woodland management, and how the development of trails at BikePark Wales supports and triggers the change in management for the better in terms of landscape and ecological impacts. It is also

important that BikePark Wales cannot be held responsible for any actions on land that they have no legal responsibility or rights upon. The combined effects of NRW delivering on the future forest vision, with BikePark Wales ability to manage the trail corridors and the overall cessation of large-scale disruptive clear-fell forestry practices within the core area all serve to ensure that the environment, landscape, and habitats are both preserved and enhanced over the term of the 33-year lease.