



Design and Access Statement and Business Case for Trail Development

Application for Planning Approval

Additional Mountain Bike Trails,
BikePark Wales
Gethin Woodland Centre, Abercanaid
Merthyr Tydfil, CF48 1YZ

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04th May 2023

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1. Introduction

This design and access statement and business case is to accompany an application for planning approval for an expansion of the mountain bike trail network at BikePark Wales which is located at Gethin Woodland on the outskirts of Abercanaid.

The trail expansion application supports the buildings and infrastructure planning application P/19/0073 and the revision P/22/01292 which focussed on improving the provision of facilities for guests including an increase in parking areas (an additional 150 spaces plus 46 overflow spaces) and providing accommodation on site with camping pods and a toilet/shower block.

The trail planning application works hand in hand with the expansion masterplan to allow a staged development of the trail network attracting new visitors and crucially as competition grows in the bike park market, maintaining BikePark Wales as the number one facility in the UK and ensure that the company and all the local businesses that it supports, can continue to thrive into the future.

The trail expansion will provide a further 33,407 metres of descending mountain bike trails and provide a suite of graded difficulty trails, to better meet the needs of the increasingly diverse customer base that visit the park, which now includes many more novices, beginner riders and families as well as the more experienced and expert riders that have always frequented the park.

Included in the application are trails that will provide crucial links between existing routes and improve the layout and user friendliness of the site, as well as new trail options that allow for a more progressive range of difficulty trails which also serves to improve safety on site by giving visitors plenty of choice within their ability range.

Also included in the application are 2,986 metres maintenance and emergency access tracks required to service the trail network expansion and 737 metres of uplift track extension to offer a better service to our customers with a drop off location at the start of a set of trails cutting out a pedal across the hill, and a shortcut to the uplift track route 500 metres shortening the overall distance and meaning less time for customers sat on an uplift bus and more time riding their bikes.

The proposed trail expansion is sympathetic to the site and the existing development and will trigger a more sustainable and environmentally friendly form of forest management by our landlords.



1.1 Supporting Documentation

This Design and Access Statement should be read in connection with the following supporting documentation:

Plans (drawing titles)

- Application Boundary
- Proposed Trails
- Existing Trails
- Proposed Trails (with existing)
- Proposed Access and Emergency
- Individual Trail Plans by title - Trail 1-27, Climb 1-9, Skills Area A+B, Link Trail 1-7
- Trail Feature Drawings TF01-TF21

Trail Design and Detail including Uplift Track Amendments

- BikePark Wales Trail Development Plan
- Bike Park Wales New Vehicle Access Track 2023 AMA
- Road Section B Specification

Ecology

- Provision of New Bike Trails at Bike Park Wales Site, Gethin forest. Report
- Provision of New Bike Trails at Bike Park Wales Site, Gethin forest. Appendix 1 Photographs

1.2 Design Team

The planning application and supporting information has been provided by the following team:

Applicant..... Bike Park Wales
Trail Designer..... Bike Park Wales
Ecologist..... Hawkeswood Ecology

2. Site Assessment

The applicant site is within the lease area of the BikePark Wales development located in the Natural Resources Wales woodland known as Gethin Woods, situated off the A470 on the edge of Abercanaid.

Site access is via an existing roundabout off the A470 which links to a part tarmacadam and part stoned, single width forest track that provides access to the visitor centre buildings and car parks.

As the bike park has grown in popularity and more people come to ride and stay in the area, BikePark Wales have increased the parking areas to accommodate the increase in visitors to the site.

The masterplan planning application submitted in 2021 focuses on the infrastructure around the visitor buildings with additional car parking and toilets and showers to support the planned business growth. This trail planning application aligns with the masterplan to allow a staged development of the trail network as the site infrastructure masterplan is developed.

The area in which the trail development that makes up this application sits, is a countryside location of mixed woodland that includes conifer productive stock both mature and establishing, clear felled areas and broadleaf cover. The woodland is managed by Natural Resources Wales with BikePark Wales as the major stakeholder and consultee for the area in which it operates the bike park.

3. Character of the Proposed Trail Facilities

3.1 Layout

As BikePark Wales prepares to enter its 10th year of operation a lot has been learnt about how riders and visitors use the trails and navigate the trail network.

In recent year the customer base has been broadened by adding a green beginner friendly trail and in the coming years this would be reinforced by adding trails that help assist beginners' enjoyment of the bike park and to allow them to progress to enjoy the rest of the trails with added Green and Blue Trails.

Alongside development of these more accessible trails the proposed trail expansion focuses on the core customers; experienced and enthusiastic mountain bike riders with trail difficulty grades developed from Advanced right through to Expert and Pro Lines.

It is the terrain and variety of trail styles and difficulties that sets BikePark Wales apart from its competition and keeps visitors engaged with the park and wanting to come back year after year, crucial to the sustainability of the business and the positive impacts it brings to the local area.

The proposed trail expansion builds upon this trail variety and maximises the forest terrain through its careful and specific design catering for all abilities with a logical arrangement that is easy for customers to follow intuitively which ensures that there is an efficient movement of riders throughout the site and that they can access trails of the right difficulty across all areas of the site.

A broader trail network is more resilient to external factors that can adversely affect the site such as adverse weather or forestry operations and enhances the visitor experience through a wider range of trail choices and styles.

The trail development will provide the following facilities which are graded according to their level of difficulty much like in skiing:

Green Graded trails – suitable for novices, families and newcomers

Blue Graded trails – suitable for intermediate riders with some previous off-road experience.

Red Graded trails – suitable for advanced riders.

Black Graded trails – suitable for expert riders.

Pro-Line trails – only Suitable for those with an elite level of skill.

Two compact 'Skills Area' – where riders can practice and develop their skills.

It is important that there is a balance of development across the various trail grades to meet the diverse needs of the market and to ensure that from a safety point of view, there is adequate provision for the different levels of ability of our customers. This has been carefully planned out with adequate provision of each style and grade of trail to allow the park to develop and improve its offering.

3.2 Size of Provision (Amount of Trails)

The expansion and development of the trail network is important to Bikepark Wales for two main reasons, firstly to maintain the bikepark at the forefront of UK mountain bike centres and to maintain the interests of our existing customers keeping them coming to visit and stay in Merthyr Tydfil. And secondly to grow our business, with the aim of being recognised as one of the world's best bike parks which in turn means accommodating more visitors from a wider range of backgrounds and providing the variety of trails that supports and drives this.

The trail sections in this application are individually identified no matter how short they may be in length for ease of identification, management, and delivery. The trails range from short linking pieces of trail 50 metres long through to full length trails of several thousand metres in length. Most trail sections are between 400-800 metres long.

The application includes:

27 no. Descending Trail Sections

These are the key downhill gravity fed trails that make up the main expansion of the bike park trail offer.

9 no. Climbing Trail sections

These are a mix of short sections and one long climbing trail that allow riders to pedal to the top of the hill on dedicated bike trails whilst avoiding the forest roads. The increased popularity of electric pedal assist bikes means there is a greater need for these trails as more riders opt to pedal to the top of the hill versus the uplift.

7 no. Link Trail Sections

These are short sections that simply link together existing trails improving connectivity and helping support easy movement of riders around the site.

2 no. Skills Areas

These are two compact and defined areas where a number of graded trail features will be developed to allow riders to work on specific skills in a confined area where it is easy to replicate again and again to polish and develop bike handling skills.

2 no. Amendments to the uplift access road.

These are short stone forest road sections, road A is a shortcut on the existing uplift track route cutting out a dog leg with a separate uphill and downhill route and shortening the overall distance and therefore time to reach the top of the hill.

Road B is an extension to the current top of the track, creating a new drop off area and giving customers the choice of two start locations.

29 no. Access and Emergency Tracks

These are tracks that allow our trail maintenance team to access the trail for repairs or our first responder / emergency services to access the trail in the case of a rider accident/injury. These are typically positioned in areas that facilitate ease of access due to forestry operations such as clearings/rides between plantations or 'thinning racks' where rows of trees have been removed as part of previous or ongoing forest management.

3.3 Scale and Appearance

The proposed trail layout design was chosen after a year of exploratory work walking the hillside to survey the terrain, understand any topographical constraints and to test the feasibility of various options.

Mountain bike trails vary in style from those which are largely natural and a 'light touch' addition to the landscape, aiming to blend in and minimise impact, to wider and more constructed trails with trail features such as jumps and berms. Fundamentally it is the topography of the hill that dictates the difficulty grade and style of trails which can be developed in certain areas, for example, easier green grade trails are longer and require to contour the hill with gentle gradients, whereas black graded trails are shorter and tend to descend the hill more directly with steep gradients. The location and presence of existing trails also impacts on where new trails can be located, as does accessibility.

The on-foot survey work to assess the potential locations of the routes identified the best fit for the new trails taking the topography constraints into consideration, along with the need for the trails to complement the existing development and help to link it together in a manner that is clear and easy to follow for the trail and bike park users.

The trails will be largely made from the natural sub-soils found on site, although some trails will require some surfacing works with crushed stone aggregate. Further information relating

to the trail network expansion and individual trails specifications are listed in the supporting report 'BikePark Wales Trail Specifications and Development Plan'.

4. Landscaping

Crucially, the presence of the bike park at Gethin Woods has ensured that tree cover is maintained in the immediate area surrounding the trails with a recent arrangement agreed in principal with NRW our landlords, to manage the woodland for recreation and ecological benefits alongside the bike park trails rather than commercial timber production. What this means in reality is that in the 700 acre area around the bikepark large areas of trees will not be felled and cleared to take to the timber industry and the negative landscape and environment impacts associated with this, instead the tree cover will be retained unless being managed for safety of ecological enhancement.

A big part of the mountain bike trail experience is riding through woodland and weaving in and out of the trees; it is the trees that create a big part of the 'feel' of a good mountain bike trail. Woodland lends itself perfectly to the creation of trails and trails situated within a mixed woodland habitat can help develop biodiversity.

The proposed trails sit well within the landscape, mountain bike trails are built with natural sub soils and soon after creation of the trail routes, the immediate area around the trail will return to its natural flora. The creation of trails creates edges and transitions that allows light into areas that otherwise would not benefit from it and can encourage a more diverse mix of flora and fauna.

The proposals will require the removal of some of the low value conifer trees within the productive crop where the crop remains unthinned (densely packed monoculture trees where little light can penetrate) and the tree spacings are very tight which will allow for other species to establish. There will be no mature tree removal outside of the conifer woods where the trees pass through open ground and areas of broadleaf cover.

5. Accessibility

The trails that form the application are specialist mountain bike trails designed to provide the best possible experience to mountain bike riders. BikePark Wales have worked to ensure some trail sections both in our existing trail network and within the proposed would be accessible and suitable for less able-bodied riders whether that be on two wheels or in some cases on specialised three- or four-wheel bikes often utilised by riders who have suffered spinal injuries or have been born with spinal defects. Specifically, green and blue graded flow trails tend to be suitable for wider accessibility. We have ongoing dialogue with individuals and groups to provide this access where it is reasonably practicable.

6. Movement / Site Access

The proposed trail development would not alter the movement and access to site as detailed via planning permission P/19/0073. Appropriate and safe vehicle access would be provided into the site from the A470 and through the site on the established routes to the parking areas. The proposed trail development would not generate greater levels of vehicles entering

the site from the numbers previously agreed via permission P/19/0073 but it would support the site reaching those numbers by improving the attraction. Whilst the majority of people access the site via vehicle, access is available from public transport (bus and rail stops) in the local settlement of Abercanaid and Pentrebach. The Park is connected to public transport infrastructure via a series of rights of way and public routes.

6.1 Car Parking

The car parks for the visitor centre and facilities have been expanded in a number of phases over the 10 years of trading to date to increase the capacity in line with the visitor numbers.

The future needs for increased provision of Car Parking space on site have been addressed under the recent planning application P/19/0073 which provides sufficient parking for peak times and events with the increase in visitors expected through the ongoing development of the site adding accommodation and additional trails.

7. Environmental Sustainability

The activity of mountain biking is a healthy, outdoor pastime and encourages its participants into the outdoor space where they relate to the environment and the countryside. The mountain bike trails are natural in their makeup, they are formed from the earth and subsoils and therefore have a relatively light touch approach with stone added where required.

If trails are unused for two years they are fully recovered by nature and you would be unaware of their presence, they require use and vegetation management to remain open and operational.

The presence of the trails helps to establish long term tree cover as the area is recognised as a valuable recreation and leisure site with forestry management focused on sustainability and environmental enhancement rather than timber production in the areas around the bike park trails.

No materials are removed from the site in the construction of these trails; any conifer trees felled to create a trail corridor are stacked adjacent to the trail in habitat piles which can enhance biodiversity. In many instances the completed trails look no more than a narrow footpath or 'sheep trail', with the larger trails well shielded by the surrounding trees and vegetation.

The proposed trail development would be undertaken in working partnership with our landlords Natural Resources Wales and the long-term aim is to improve the ecological value of the woodland through careful management and intervention where appropriate. The creation of trails helps to create transitions of flora and edges that can encourage a more diverse woodland.

As set out in the process below, the trail plan submitted has been circulated within NRW's operational team to allow the various departments to pass comment prior to submission to the local authority.

Processes to Building New Trails at Bikepark Wales.

- Site exploratory work undertaken to identify suitable routes for new proposed routes
- Initial trail plan is provided to NRW for internal consultation and comment
- Trail amendments are made in response to the consultation
- Trail Routes are walked by BPW representative and NRW to assess and agree.
- Landlords approval granted to submit for planning.
- Trail plan submitted to MTCBC for planning approval.
- Construction begins (subject to approval)

8. Water Control

The trails are constructed in a manner where they do not interfere or alter existing drainage patterns and water courses on the hillside. Small culverts are used to maintain the drainage profile of the land allowing a trail to cross and the drainage profile to continue unimpeded.

Due to them being built from the natural sub soils and aggregates they offer good permeability. Several techniques and methods are used to shed any water from the trail surface when rainfall is above the level where it can be absorbed by the ground permeability alone. These techniques to ensure that the flow and velocity of water is controlled, and these are used throughout trail construction and maintenance. They are listed below:

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.

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 or wear.

Grips – similar to grade reversals, these are small depressions across the width of the trail surface perpendicular to the direction of travel 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 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.

The above techniques are selected and deployed throughout trails in their construction and then in their ongoing maintenance. BikePark Wales have a dedicated trail crew currently with 10 staff whose tasks are to inspect and maintain the trail network. Regular maintenance of the above listed measures ensures that water is controlled and as far as is reasonably practicable possible follows its natural path that it would before the mountain bike trail existed. Any water that does follow a trail is quickly shed by the above features and allowed to disperse over vegetated ground which both slows the water and collects and deposits any sediments.

9. Business Case

This section is intended to give some context to the growth of the business since opening and the demands of our customers, and to outline any future growth and business ambitions.

Bikepark Wales has had a successful first 10 years of operation and the package offered to our visitors which is made up of the range of graded trails which are expanded and improved each year and the supporting facilities of uplift, café, bike shop, bike hire and car parks have proven to be very popular with mountain bikers from across the UK and overseas with many staying in Merthyr Tydfil for one or more night.

Our aims for the immediate future are to build a modest accommodation offering onsite (as per planning application P/22/01292) with supporting shower, toilet block and car parks, and to further develop our trail network to better serve the diverse range of abilities and riders that come to visit BikePark Wales.

Further to this we aim to make improvements to our uplift operation by making an adjustments to our uplift road (shortening the route) with the aim of reducing the time it takes for buses and our customers to reach the top of the hill, and to create a second drop-off location to the south of the existing drop off which will save riders from having to pedal uphill to reach the trails situated on the southern end of the site and therefore improve the customer experience.

BikePark Wales is a significant employer in the local area with over 80 direct jobs and a number of indirect jobs such as the many bed and breakfast providers and glamping sites that have opened to meet the demand for bed spaces. BikePark Wales further benefits the local area through its use of local suppliers across the range of facilities, from waste collection to food and drink suppliers through to garages for vehicle fleet servicing. The employment numbers will increase when the onsite accommodation is operational.

The additional 33,407 metres of trail and improvements to the uplift route and service will provide adequate choice and quantity of trails to both meet and drive the demand identified in the recent planning application P/19/0073 and the revision P/22/01292. The two applications support each other, the increased facilities around the visitor centre buildings with more capacity for parking, onsite accommodation and a toilet and shower block require trail development to be realised and any increase in trail development requires additional facilities to support the visitors.

The trail development further supports our goal of retaining customers overnight in the area. With a larger trail offering it will not be possible for a visitor to ride them all in one or even two days, they will feel that they need to spend 2, 3 or more days in the area to enjoy the park (or return more frequently), further benefitting our business and those that support it in the surrounding area. Without expanding the trail network, the ability to grow other areas of the business including the uplift will be compromised.

10. Planning Statement

The proposed development relates to the following planning policies contained within the Merthyr Tydfil Replacement Local Development Plan 2016-2031:

SW4: Settlement boundaries / local constraints

The proposed site is located outside of defined settlement boundaries and is therefore regarded as “countryside development”. Policy SW4 permits this form of development if it is for “tourism, recreation or leisure facilities where the need for a countryside location is fully justified, or where the development supports the expansion of an existing business in the countryside. This Application supports the expansion of an existing business in the countryside.

EnW1: Nature Conservation and Ecosystem Resilience

The proposed site is an extensive area of woodland located on a hillside which offers a high degree of amenity value when made accessible. Policy EnW1 only permits proposals where they “minimise the contribution to climate change whilst maximising resilience to it” and aims “to maintain and enhance biodiversity and ecosystem connectivity”.

The expansion of the trail network has been planned so that there is no removal of valuable mature broadleaf trees, the trails thread their way through the environment and work around the trees. The only exception to this is when the trails pass through the coniferous productive crop, where selected submissive conifer trees will be felled to allow the route to pass through. These conifer trees which form part of the commercial crop are of little environmental or conservation concern and the site will be developed in partnership with the landlords to increase biodiversity. Crucially, the presence of the bike park trails within the woodland means that the woodland is managed for recreation and environmental benefit rather than timber value enhancing the resilience to climate change by locking carbon into the retained conifer woodland whilst improving biodiversity where trails create light and space to introduce new species.

SW11: Sustainable Design and Placemaking

SW11 supports good quality sustainable design.

Mountain bike trails due to their simple and natural make up allows them to be sustainable with ongoing management and also able to be returned to nature simply and lost back into the landscape if decommissioned in future years. Please refer to other sections in the Design and Access Statement regarding character, amount, layout, scale appearance, landscaping and environmental sustainability which describes how the proposals meet SW11.

ECW 7: Tourism, Leisure and Recreation Development

The policy supports tourism, leisure and recreation development outside settlement boundaries provided the need for a countryside location is fully justified and the



environmental and amenity impacts are minimised. The proposed development is required to be part of the operational BikePark facility to strengthen its offer; this is considered sufficient justification for a countryside location. The environmental and amenity impacts of the development have been explored with the development increasing the amenity value of the forest and acting to retain tree cover by designating the woodland as an area of recreation. The proposed development is therefore considered to meet the policy.

11. Conclusion

BikePark Wales has proven to be a fantastic facility offering an outdoors and healthy pastime and attracting visitors from all over the UK and further afield to Merthyr Tydfil. Many of which stay for one or more nights in the town or surrounding area.

BikePark Wales continually strives to maintain its position as the UK's number one mountain biking centre by developing and improving the trails and facilities for its visitors with increasing national competition from other mountain bike venues.

The woodland is the ideal environment to develop and support mountain bike trails with the presence of the trails on the hill side supporting the retention of the mature forest and encouraging biodiversity through a long term agreement with our landlords to retain tree cover rather than felling timber in the bikepark areas. Improvements to the uplift route will improve the customer experience significantly.

Access to the site from the A470 remains unchanged with future visitor numbers established in the previous planning application. Public transport links are found close to the site in Abercanaid which is within walking or cycling distance from the site and linked by a well-maintained bridleway.

The proposed trail network extension and uplift improvements in this application would work hand in hand with the recently approved parking, accommodation and toilet and shower block consent and through better provision of facilities will ensure the business is sustainable into the future years and continues to support the local economy and businesses that have established and/or grown since the Bike Park opened.