



CALENDAR PARK WOODLANDS - YEW TRAIL



FCS Accessibility Case Studies

Callendar Park Woodlands form the backdrop to Callendar Park, on the outskirts of Falkirk. The park includes a popular boating lake, a play park and a golf course, all centred around the magnificent mansion of Callendar House. The woodlands are one of the top four forest destinations in Scottish Lowlands Forest District, with around 160,000 visitors per year. In 2013 the Yew Trail, a 2 mile (3.4 km) route through the woodland, was upgraded to meet easy access standards.

The 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 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.



BACKGROUND

Between 2011 and 2013, Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) 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.



The trail passes through impressive beech woodland.

“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 FCS trail audit



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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 FCS 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.

BUILDING ON THE PAST

The Callendar Park woodlands are part of the designed landscape created by the wealthy Forbes family around Callendar House, with viewpoints and carriage drives that form the basis of today's routes through the parkland. When Forestry Commission Scotland took ownership of the woodlands in 1999, they were badly overgrown with rhododendron and the paths were in a poor state.

Historic carriageways and new paths were opened up, and the trails surfaced so they would stay in good condition. The new routes were a big improvement, but the forest offered little for people who needed easier access: the trails were often narrow, and several had steep gradients or cross falls. Callender House is a popular destination, with accessible parking bays in front of the house and an accessible toilet on the ground floor: access improvements that would allow more visitors to enjoy the woodland were a priority.

We developed a plan to upgrade the woodland trail closest to Callendar House, including a link path not on FCS land that joins the trail with Callendar Park. The park is run by Falkirk Community Trust (FCT), a charitable company responsible for many recreation, arts and heritage facilities in the Falkirk Council area. Working with the trust to include the link path meant the upgraded trail would be fully integrated into the site as a whole.



The impressive Forbes family mausoleum is one of a number of features from the park's wealthy past.



All ability access means that families and friends can enjoy the trail together.

PATH USERS KNOW BEST

We were keen to involve potential users in planning the trail, so we invited the Falkirk Area Disability Access Panel to discuss the path on the ground when the initial grading was done, as well as close to the end of the works. They asked for longer bays next to the benches along the trail than were suggested in the Countryside for All standards, to allow easier access for wheelchairs and mobility scooters. We were able to accommodate this by extending the bays and placing the benches at the end of each one.

Comments from users have also been helpful since the path was built. We had always planned to install benches along the route at intervals of about 100 metres, but budget constraints, delays in making the benches and contract programming meant they didn't get installed until 2015. In the meantime, we were often asked if and when benches were going to be installed, so we know they really do meet peoples' need to sit and rest!



Covering the edges of the trail with topsoil will help them blend into their surroundings.



Transition zones between the new path and existing tracks through the wood needed particular attention to maintain the right gradient.

UPS AND DOWNS

In some ways, this was a relatively easy project. The existing path had a good line, with reasonably gentle rises and bends. But getting the path built wasn't always straightforward. The transitions at both ends of the trail, from the woodland path to the parkland, were particularly challenging. We had to re-align the existing path, and develop the new route through careful survey work and planning. Surveying the route, and measuring gradient and cross fall, helped to identify the best line. The line could then be pegged out to make sure the contractor meets the easy access standard.

Getting the contractors to meet the standards we wanted was a challenge: the work specification had to be very clear, and they needed a lot of supervision to make sure they met it.

In hindsight, some sections could have been better if we had involved a Landscape Architect in the design. Details like the exact placement of benches would have been improved by giving more thought to the user experience, and to factors such as which side of the path they should go and which direction they should face. This would have meant we could have used the resting places to highlight features such as specimen trees.

Another challenge was the need to install culverts with head walls to take rain water underneath the path at resting places, which increased the budget quite a bit. Features like this are essential if the path is to work and can save money on annual maintenance, but they're easily forgotten.

The finished trail is quite long for an easy access route. Some stretches push the limit of the Countryside for All standards for rural settings, but it has created a beautiful route through the woodland for users who were excluded before, allowing people of all ages and abilities to enjoy the forest. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and we now want to look at promoting the path more widely, and linking it to paths that connect the woods with local communities.

A significant part of the trail is within Callendar Park, and therefore managed by Falkirk Community Trust. With FCT agreement, we included a section of their path in the project, but there are short sections where accessibility could have been improved. For example, there are speed ramps running across the tarmac surface that can act as an obstacle to some less able users. There was a limit to what work we could do away from FC land, but it would have been good to have worked more closely with FCT to address these other points. At the time, FCT had only just taken over management of the site from Falkirk Council, so the timing was not ideal from their perspective.



“I’ve met a lot of older, physically less able people using the trail – they really appreciate it.”

John Ogilvie
Beat Forester

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.
- Look for opportunities to work with partners, who may be responsible for neighbouring land, to make sure the entire route of the trail meets accessibility standards.
- Involve local groups that represent path users in planning the trail, and be prepared to respond to their concerns.
- Meeting the Countryside for All standard improves access for everyone, not only disabled visitors.
- Draw up tight contract specifications and supervise contractors carefully, especially if they have little experience of building easy access trails.
- Get a Landscape Architect to help develop the trail design: they will make sure it offers a really good experience rather than simply providing easy access.
- Allow flexibility in the budget for essential but unglamorous features like drains.
- Where possible, ensure all aspects of the work are included in the project plan and budget. In this case, there was a long delay in installing benches that could have been avoided.
- Where ownership or responsibility for a facility is shared, work closely with neighbours and partners to develop a cohesive plan. Plan far enough ahead to allow for funding applications where necessary, as well as potential local planning approvals.
- Build in an on-going maintenance budget to ensure the trail continues to meet accessibility standards and does not fall below them due to erosion or other factors.

Countryside for All

Standards for paths that will make the countryside accessible for all, published by the Fieldfare Trust, were 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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