NYMNPA Planning Department
The Old Vicarage
Bondgate
Helmsley
York
YO62 5BP

Your ref:

Our ref: 6023/1

Date: 5 February 2018

To the appropriate Officers

Covering Letter; Sutton Bank Development – Further Information and Rationale of the Development

Cass Associates, on behalf of the NYMNPA are submitting the enclosed planning application for a development at Sutton Bank National Park Visitor Centre. The application comprises three elements; development of the buildings, an increase in car parking capacity and a small building in Cliff Wood that will function as a dark sky observatory / bird hide. Part of the car parking capacity was the subject of the recently approved application ref; NYM/2017/0291/R3

The enclosed application will be followed by a second application (that is still in development) for a variety of outdoor activities including cycle tracks and improvements to rights of way in the Sutton Bank area. It is hoped to submit this in time for either the April or May 2018 Committee. It is envisaged that the items in both planning applications will only go ahead in the immediate future if a funding bid (which is being worked on by Officers) for all elements is successful.

The rationale for the development is that investing in the rights of way network and outdoor activities such as cycling, dark sky viewing (which is becoming increasingly popular and supported by the National Park’s two week long Dark Sky Festival) and creating bird watching opportunities will attract more visitors into the vicinity using the visitor centre as a base. As a result of these activities which will be supported by an improved Visitor Centre, Café, bike shop and toilets, visitor numbers are projected to increase up to 40% by year 3 after completion. The additional car parking will be needed to accommodate the demand especially in peak periods of school and bank holidays. However, it is not currently proposed to construct the west car park extension until such a time as the demand is great enough to warrant this.

Decisions by Officers based on ecological information
The planning application is accompanied by a baseline ecological assessment of the NPA owned land, and incorporates a bird survey and report of the site with a large buffer zone included. The recommendations in the report have been given serious consideration by Directors and Officers with corporate decisions taken as follows;
1. An additional 56 car parking spaces in Cliff Wood have been designed in such a way that the impact on heathland vegetation is limited and some of the existing tree cover will be retained so as to avoid a significant adverse landscape impact.

2. 44 additional spaces are proposed in the west car park on the condition that a maximum of 4m width be added at the western edge which would utilise the least valuable part of the species rich grassland area. Extending the width on the east side by 5m would be possible but the semi mature sycamore, which is the largest tree on the site, and three other trees next to it will be left intact. It was acknowledged that this could potentially reduce the number of spaces available. It is not intended to extend this car park until the demand for it is confirmed which will be when all other car parking is full on a frequent basis.

3. The policy for Cliff Wood is for it to be used for quiet recreation within the heathland (to include the current walking and cycle routes) and that, other than the encroachment on the southern edge for car parking, there should be work carried out to maintain and enhance the heathland and its flora and fauna.

4. Improvements in favour of Turtle dove (a red listed species seasonally present in the area) would be considered when planning seeding of bare areas and other potential habitat benefits. In particular, at least one area rich in perennial flowers such as birds-foot trefoil would be created where extra car parking is added. The new car parking area in Cliff Wood would not be tarmac but grid and gravel seeded with a Turtle Dove friendly seed mix where it can grow as far as care allow in the least heavily used areas.

5. It was agreed that a dark sky viewing facility / observatory would be a suitable addition to Cliff Wood. The preferred location (suggested by Richard Darn, Astronomer & media consultant) being just behind the overflow car park coach and stone bay area on the edge of the Wood. The structure (in principle), to comprise a viewing area and a simple building where talks could be held and equipment stored. The building would be designed in such a way as to be dual purpose and used as a bird hide with an outlook to the north and west. This would need some existing dense birch and conifer scrub to be cleared and would incorporate an area sowed with Turtle Dove friendly seed mix in the viewing zone. The creation of small wet areas will add to the attractiveness of the site in what is otherwise generally a dry area. A project of this nature would be consistent with the theme of ‘quiet recreation’ and acceptable in this particular location given existing vegetation.

Ecological works will be overseen by Officers.

Please get in touch if you need any further information.

Yours sincerely

Michael Graham
Assistant Director of Park Services