New Experiences at Hamsterley Forest

Forestry England

Forest Holidays

New proposals

Hamsterley Forest is County Durham's largest forest and is managed by Forestry England. The forest attracts visitors from across the region to explore, be active and enjoy the woodland, wildlife and scenery. Visitor numbers have increased significantly over recent years, with around 200,000 visits to the forest last year, reflecting an overall increase in tourism and recreation across the region. The existing facilities are now in need of upgrading and redeveloping to make sure they meet visitor needs.



Hamsterley Forest extends to over 2000ha and will remain a space for the quiet enjoyment of day visitors, a place for wildlife and timber production.

The proposals include a replacement Visitor Centre and repurposed meadow area. The cabins will be located within a leased boundary of 35ha in an area already used for recreation which will be enhanced to increase and broaden habitat, delivering substantial Biodiversity Net Gain.



Camping area

New improved public car park including an increase of Blue Badge spaces together with the introduction of electric vehicle charging points and a refurbished toilet block.

Natural play area





Nature sensitive cabins by Forest Holidays including a Forest Retreat with reception, shop and café.

New picnic area to replace previous informal parking area.



New Visitor Centre, café and classrooms



Cycle Hub



Go Ape

Key

- Main access roads to and within site
- Parking
- Café
- Toilets
- Visitor centre
- Play area
- Cycle Hub
- Camping
- Go Ape
- Forest Holidays



Kevin May, Forestry England Director (North)

"Forestry England manages woodlands to support climate change responses, respond to biodiversity decline and to improve our health and wellbeing. Hamsterley Forest is managed sustainably with costs being supported by our trading activity in selling timber, charging for car-parking and rental incomes. We want to invest in the forest now to make sure it remains resilient, relevant and 'fit for purpose' to what people want both locally, regionally and nationally."

Improving the Visitor Experience

Something for everyone

Growing the breadth of opportunities for people to enjoy in the forest includes finding new ways to access activities and experiences.

Forestry England, together with long established partners, Forest Holidays, Adventure Forest (Go Ape) and Forestry England Camping, propose to significantly improve and enhance the visitor offering at Hamsterley Forest to deliver greater benefits for people, nature and the local economy.

"Regionally there is an aspiration to support tourism and jobs which Forest Holidays, a new camping offer and new outdoor adventure offers such as 'Go Ape' will provide. A re-developed visitor centre will provide a modern, net zero, social hub for visitors with new office and café accommodation. Additionally, a new cycle hire area and family cycle trails will compliment our existing mountain bike trail network. Hamsterley Forest is over 2000 hectares with the proposed recreational developments covering a small percentage of the forest. The majority of the forest remains for quiet enjoyment and nature conservation."

Kevin May, Forestry England Director (North)

Overnight stays in the forest

The new proposals will support the region's tourism strategy, contribute to the county's visitor economy and offer a new way to holiday surrounded by nature.



NEW Nature sensitive cabins

70 nature-sensitive cabins by Forest Holidays are included in the proposals.

The plans are based on decades of experience with Forest Holidays successfully operating 12 sensitively placed cabin locations in other forests across Great Britain.



NEW Forest camping

An area of the forest called 'The Nest' lies 3km to the west of the Visitor Centre and is often used for events and camping. The proposals include a 48 bed bunkhouse and a new dedicated camping offering on the meadow operated under 'Forestry England Camping' for tents, shepherd's huts and small vans only.





NEW Visitor Centre

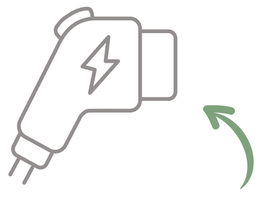
A purpose-built Visitor Centre with café and classroom space for schools and groups, accessible toilets and office accommodation for staff, will be built on the existing footprint replacing the current outdated facilities. A new information desk and welcome area will be created for visitors to improve public engagement and forest interpretation.

In addition, a new cycle hub and hire facility is proposed to the west of the Visitor Centre, providing exciting opportunities for visiting cyclists. The brand-new facility includes a new cycle workshop and a cycle wash.

A new 'Blue Grade' beginners and improvers cycle route will also be developed within the forest, enabling users to progress through skills grades safely and confidently, helping more people to get active outdoors for longer.

NEW Improved visitor facilities

A new separate multi-use quiet space and first aid room at the Visitor Centre will be created along with 11 additional toilets, including additional accessible toilets, a drinking water fountain and Changing Places and baby change facilities.



Car parking at Hamsterley Forest has evolved over time – the car park will be improved as part of the proposals, creating around 74 additional spaces, 16 accessible spaces and electric vehicle charging points.



NEW Go Ape

An exhilarating Go Ape course will complement the other activities within the forest and provide an additional eco-educational experience for guests staying in or visiting Hamsterley Forest. Go Ape already operates in 15 Forestry England forests across England.

The evolution of a masterplan for recreation at Hamsterley Forest

Forestry England

Forest Holidays

GO APE

Taking time to make the right enhancements

Forestry England manages the nation's forests to be sustainable and resilient, providing benefits for people, wildlife and the economy both nationally and locally. To ensure as many people as possible can enjoy the nation's forests, Forestry England continually review forests and their facilities to see how they could be improved and look for new ways for people to access and experience them.

Over the last few years, Forestry England has explored ideas to enhance the visitor experience by extending the facilities available and providing options for overnight stays in the forest.

Forestry England's board agreed for the ideas to be progressed and the government's Forestry Minister granted an 'option to lease' for Forest Holidays in 2021. This was a formal step indicating approval for full proposals to be explored and developed. The site selection process and assessment criteria of any potential new Forest Holidays location is conducted in accordance with established Forestry England process. Sites undergo a rigorous internal assessment process which is included in a submission to the Secretary of State to request consent to grant an option to lease. This assessment includes reference to: planning and environment; conservation, wildlife and landscape amongst others.



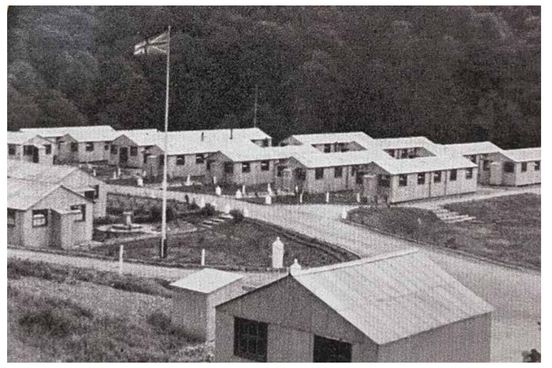
Next steps in planning

Following the public exhibitions, Forestry England and partners will consider the comments which have been made, and where necessary look to refine the proposals, and then aim to submit a planning application to Durham County Council.

Proposed timeline for the project

- Undertake any pre-commencement surveys
- Discharge of planning conditions
- Establish construction site, with community liaison
- Construction of masterplan elements
  (This will be a phased approach to keep disruption to a minimum)
- Creation of ecological enhancement areas
- Once cabins are operational, links with local businesses are established
- Ongoing ecological monitoring and woodland management

Scan the QR code to find out more about Forestry England.



Originally a post WW1 labour camp in the 1920s, the camp remained until the 1970s and the timber built legacy buildings are now used by Forestry England for offices, workshops and stores as well as the visitor café.

A methodical approach, examining multiple factors

A full suite of studies, including assessments for protected species, have been carried out over recent years and will be included within a full planning application.

These include:

Ecology

- Full Suite of Ecological Assessments covering ground flora, terrestrial mammals, bats, reptiles, amphibians, and birds.
- Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Assessment

Visual

- Landscape Assessment
- Detailed Landscape Plan

Trees

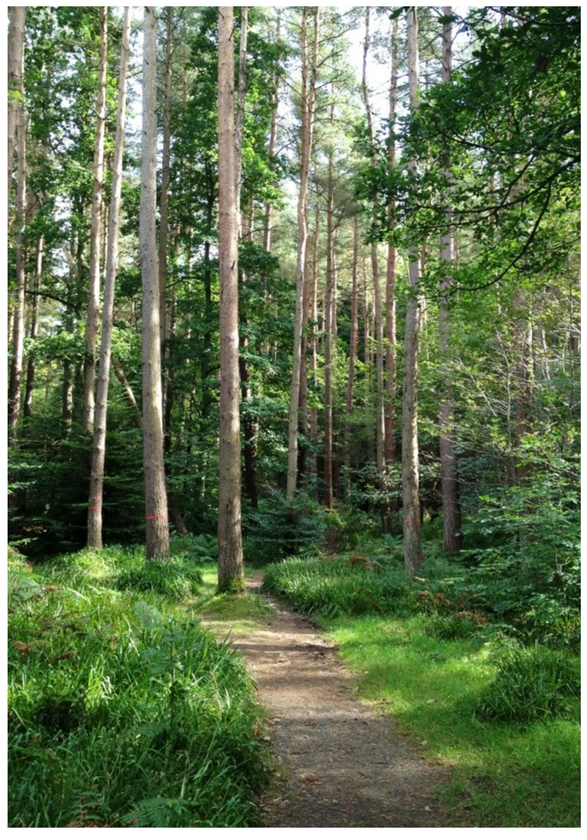
- Tree survey
- Arboricultural Impact Assessment
- Woodland Management Plan

Transport

- Full assessment of highways conditions and Transport Statement produced

Economy

- Economic Impact Assessment



Archaeology and Heritage

- Archaeological Desk Based Assessment
- Historical Buildings Report

Drainage

- Flood Risk Assessment
- Aquatic Ecological Assessment
- Water Framework Directive

Wildlife and landscape

Hamsterley Forest

Hamsterley Forest is mostly conifer plantation, planted during the operation of the labour camp and comprises of a mixture of spruce, pine and larch with pockets of broadleaf. Species reflect the soils present and exposure of the site, with spruce generally being sited on the less fertile and more exposed areas at higher elevations, and other conifers and broadleaves on the less exposed lower elevations.

These proposals have evolved through collaboration between the partners to ensure that they continue to satisfy the economic, social and environmental objectives. The proposals will deliver a 'Biodiversity Net Gain' considerably above that required and after construction of the masterplan elements, the woodland and habitat will be managed in accordance with Habitat Enhancement and Woodland Enhancement Management Plans.

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is a legal planning requirement that aims to leave the natural environment in a measurably better state than it was beforehand.

A comprehensive landscape scheme alongside detailed habitat, landscape and woodland management plans will introduce a variety of native tree and shrub planting. This will enhance the aesthetics and visitor enjoyment of the area whilst providing a more diverse, species rich environment supporting a wider variety of flora and fauna.

As landlord, Forestry England ensures all tenants and partners respect and enhance the forest.

Forestry England has established a set of guiding principles and core requirements which all tenants and partners are legally obliged to adhere to. These include principles that require development to be designed, built and managed in a sustainable manner with minimal environmental impact and help to manage the site and surrounding woodland to Forestry England standards. The land is part of the nation's forests and continues to be managed by Forestry England.

The robust and long-term partnership is managed through a high-level legal agreement. Each Forest Holidays location in England also has a site-specific lease which specifies how each site is managed, as well as detailed conditions included on each planning consent. Through all of these different agreements, how the cabin locations are managed and what happens to them in the future is very tightly controlled.

Forest Holidays are stewards of 244.5 hectares of UK forests and their business is designed to respect nature and benefit ecosystems. Forest Holidays locations positively impact and conserve the environment whilst creating space in nature for people to stay overnight in a well-managed, ecologically diverse, and quiet forest setting.

The creation of a new woodland pond creating additional wetland habitat.





Specific bat mitigation is proposed through the retention of existing features, the construction of a bespoke bat house and through incorporating bat roosting opportunities within the new Visitor Centre buildings.

The introduction of new glades and rides with scalloping alongside verge edges providing further habitat enrichment for birds, reptiles, invertebrates, and bat species.





Hedgerow restoration in the SSSI meadows will provide further habitat and create corridors for wildlife.

"Extensive wildlife surveys are conducted before development of buildings, cabins and other activities to identify existing wildlife and to highlight opportunities for potential improvements to the forest. The proposal for Hamsterley Forest includes significant improvements to deliver 'biodiversity net gain' – increasing the overall biodiversity value of the forest."

Forestry England

Holidays in nature

Providing opportunities to stay in the forest



Forestry England Camping

Forestry England has long provided opportunities for camping within the nations forests and woodlands. Proposals for a new camping offering include grass camping, camping pods, small vans and pre-erected safari tents on three meadows linked by an access road and separated by stands of mature trees.

In addition, a former farmhouse and outbuildings (now partially collapsed and unused) will be renovated as a bunkhouse with 48 beds. An old barn will be replaced with toilets, a cycle lock-up and kitchen block to further enhance the overnight accommodation offer proposed for Hamsterley Forest.



"Forest Holidays' cabins are a vital component of this scheme, bringing income and significant investment into the local community and the forest to facilitate the wider improvements to the forest."

Forestry England

Scan the QR code to watch a documentary about Forest Holidays
Find out more about the company's journey.

Forest Holidays



Forest Holidays locations which are tucked away in forests, mainly within National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty throughout Great Britain, give people the opportunity to discover, explore and reconnect with our natural world. Importantly, they also contribute a sustainable income to help support forests for years to come.

Each cabin location sensitively places the cabins amongst existing woodland, providing space in nature for people to stay overnight in a well-managed, ecologically diverse, and quiet forest environment. Holidaying in a forest offers a more immersive experience, providing greater physical, mental, and emotional benefits compared to a short visit. It provides an escape from fast-paced daily life and an opportunity to connect with nature on a deeper level.

Holidays surrounded by nature
The Forest Holidays experience is all about a connection to nature. Investing in landscapes and biodiversity enhancements is at the forefront of everything they do. Nature conservation is a critical component of the business with over 80% of the land occupied across the UK ringfenced for conservation; with various local schemes focused on protecting and enhancing specific habitats to support native species and increase biodiversity.

Forest Holidays is a Which? Recommended Provider.





Example of Forest Holidays reception, café and small shop.

Guest facilities

Forest Holidays breaks are Feefo rated 4.8 and loved by guests. At Hamsterley Forest, a small reception, café with shop serving local produce and 70 nature sensitive cabins are proposed to the north of the existing Visitor Centre.

Forest Rangers
Sharing an understanding of the environment and championing the forest locally, Forest Holidays Forest Ranger roles cover a broad spectrum. From engaging guests with forest-based activities and Citizen Science projects, including ecology monitoring, supporting local schools with forest school activities and partnering with community and wildlife groups.



Working in the forest with Forestry England's local team for the benefit of nature and visitors.

A unique concept in forest tourism

Supporting the visitor economy

Hamsterley Forest is County Durham's largest forest, welcoming around 200,000 visitors every year. The forest is already a great destination for cycling, wildlife watching, and adventure play for all the family. An investment of £32.6 million will further enhance and expand the breadth of the tourism experience, providing new outdoor recreational activities and the opportunity to stay overnight in the forest.

The introduction of overnight stays in the forest will bring considerable benefits to both the forest and the wider regional economy. The plans are designed to meet the needs of the local area for inward investment, sustainable tourism, jobs and year-round income. This major investment supports the region's tourism strategy to boost national and regional visitors and spending, through being an attractive overnight and day visitor destination.





Partners help Forestry England to broaden experiences and extend the public benefits the nation's forests deliver, whilst contributing a sustainable income to help preserve them for years to come.

Forestry England is working together with long established partners Forest Holidays, Adventure Forest (Go Ape) and Forestry England Camping, to deliver greater social and economic benefits, whilst securing greater diversity of habitat.

Tourism is an important economic, social and cultural asset and the sector is a major contributor to jobs and growth in the UK.

Hamsterley Forest proposals include :

£32.6m
investment in Hamsterley Forest to enhance the visitor experience.

408
Full Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs created in the local area as part of the construction.

135
Full Time Equivalent (FTE) permanent jobs created.

£6m
annual boost to the local economy from visitor spend.

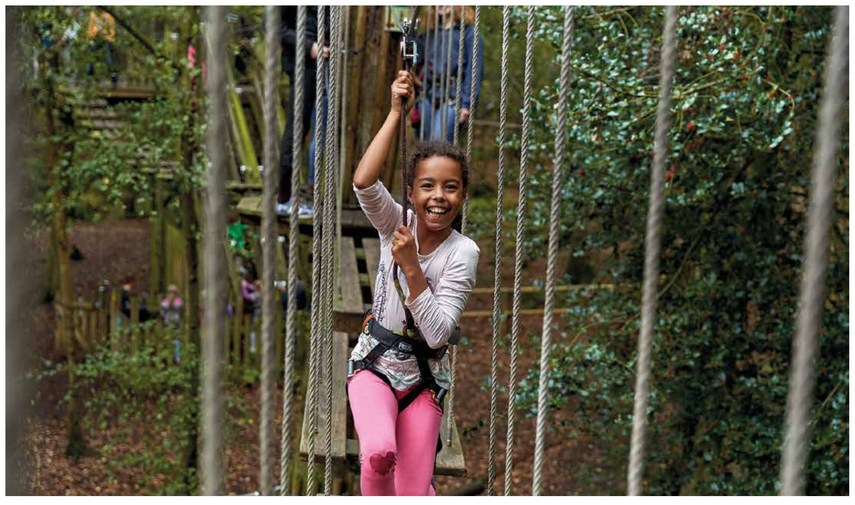




Overnight visitors bring spending power to surrounding businesses

The sensitively placed cabins and camping offering at Hamsterley Forest would give visitors a chance to stay overnight and explore the forest in a new way which would generate additional year-round jobs and income for the local economy. Forest Holidays and Forestry England Camping champion sustainable tourism, offering an unpackaged experience which encourages guests to visit local attractions, explore the surrounding areas and eat, drink and shop locally during their stay. Both organisations also buy and contract locally to keep as much spend in the local area.

Offering young people (and adults), a naturally thrilling outdoor experience, tempting them away from devices.



Supporting the management of the forest

Forestry England receive less than a fifth of their income from government and generate most of their revenue themselves by sustainably harvesting and selling timber, visitors and membership support and by working with commercial partners to offer new ways to experience and enjoy woodlands and develop business activities. All of their income goes back into creating thriving forests for people to enjoy and habitats for wildlife.

Forestry England plays a key role in supporting businesses and local economies around the country. Across the nation's forests they support over 640 private businesses through their cafés, shops, recreational, woodland and estate management.