



Existing Visitor Centre Analysis, summarising analysis of existing layout (do not scale)

Approaches to either refurbish/extend or demolish/rebuild the Visitor Centre have both been explored, and this is presented in detail in the design development section of this report. Both offer opportunities and constraints. In particular:

Opportunities

- To exploit the relationship between the centre and adjacent Fish Pond, in terms of views, interpretation and leisure. The close relationship of the Visitor Centre to the pond should be a key design driver in any amendments to the building (noting that this can be improved but to a limited extent in any refurbishment).
- To make more efficient use of the footprint, through a rational plan layout that creates additional publicly accessible space.
- To increase the seating capacity of the café along with a variety of external spaces, catering to a broader range of users and generally improving the experience of the building to make it a destination and build upon its successful commercial value.
- To provide integrated and relevant interpretation within the design so that visitors gain an appreciation of the history and ecology of the park.
- To provide a Changing Places WC to increase the accessibility of the park and ensure it is welcoming to all.
- To provide WCs that are accessible internally and externally to maximise functionality.
- To provide views out of the centre at multiple levels to enhance the indoor/outdoor connection including focusing the visitor on a series of key vistas including Ivy Tower, Pond Cottage and Fishpond and long distance views across Neath. (Again, this is somewhat restricted in any option to retain).

CONSTRAINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- To improve the sustainable profile of the building through a strategy to reduce energy losses, integrate renewable energy sources and sustainable drainage, and reduce carbon emissions in construction.
- To integrate biodiversity measures including roosts, boxes and living walls and roofs.

Constraints

In addition to this, constraints include:

- Designation of the wider parkland as Grade II* Listed (Ref. Number: PGW(Gm)50(NEP)).
- Site adjacent to Fish Pond offering broad ecological value.
- Any demolition or removal of existing roofs require ecological surveys to investigate the presence of bats and/or nesting birds.
- Construction in close proximity to mature vegetation including access routes require consideration of impact on tree roots, and ecology generally.
- Existing adjacent play park and footpaths are to be retained.

Conclusions

Although there are some sustainability arguments for retaining the existing building, particularly as it remains structurally sound. The extent to which demolition and alteration is required to realise the exceptional opportunities available to a refreshed visitor centre unequivocally undermine the logic of retaining the existing. A replacement, purpose designed building offers an opportunity to improve on the impact of a building in this context through improved design, environmental performance and functionality.

DEVELOPMENT CONTROL

This document is supported by Planning Statement/Detailed Covering Letter by Asbri Planning and should be read in conjunction with the enclosed information.

Policy Context

Please refer to the supporting information produced by Asbri Planning which has been submitted as part of this application.

Local Development Plan

For details regarding the local development plan please refer to the Project Context Document produced by Hiraeth Architecture and the planning statement by Asbri Planning.

Relevant Designations

Historic Parks and Gardens are part of Wales' national identity. Registration identifies parks and gardens which are of special interest to Wales, and that reflect aspects of Welsh life, including places to live, work and play. The resource is worthy of protection as they provide a connection to the lives and ambitions of past generations. They are valuable and distinct places that should therefore be recognised and safeguarded for the enjoyment of current and future generations.

Inclusion on the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens is not a preservation order. However, such areas are identified in order to help protect their special interest, and, if necessary, manage their change so that they remain viable and sustainable in a changing social context.

The following statutory designation applies to the Gnoll Estate Country Park in which the visitor centre is located:

Gnoll Estate and Country Park -

Registered Historic Park and Garden (Grade II*)

'It is registered for the survival of its largely eighteenth-century landscape park, which is of great historic interest, in its original rural setting above Neath. It lies on the flank of the Vale of Neath, long famed for its picturesque beauty. The landscape of The Gnoll is exceptional for its combination of industrial and ornamental functions and for its strong visual relationship with the surrounding countryside.'

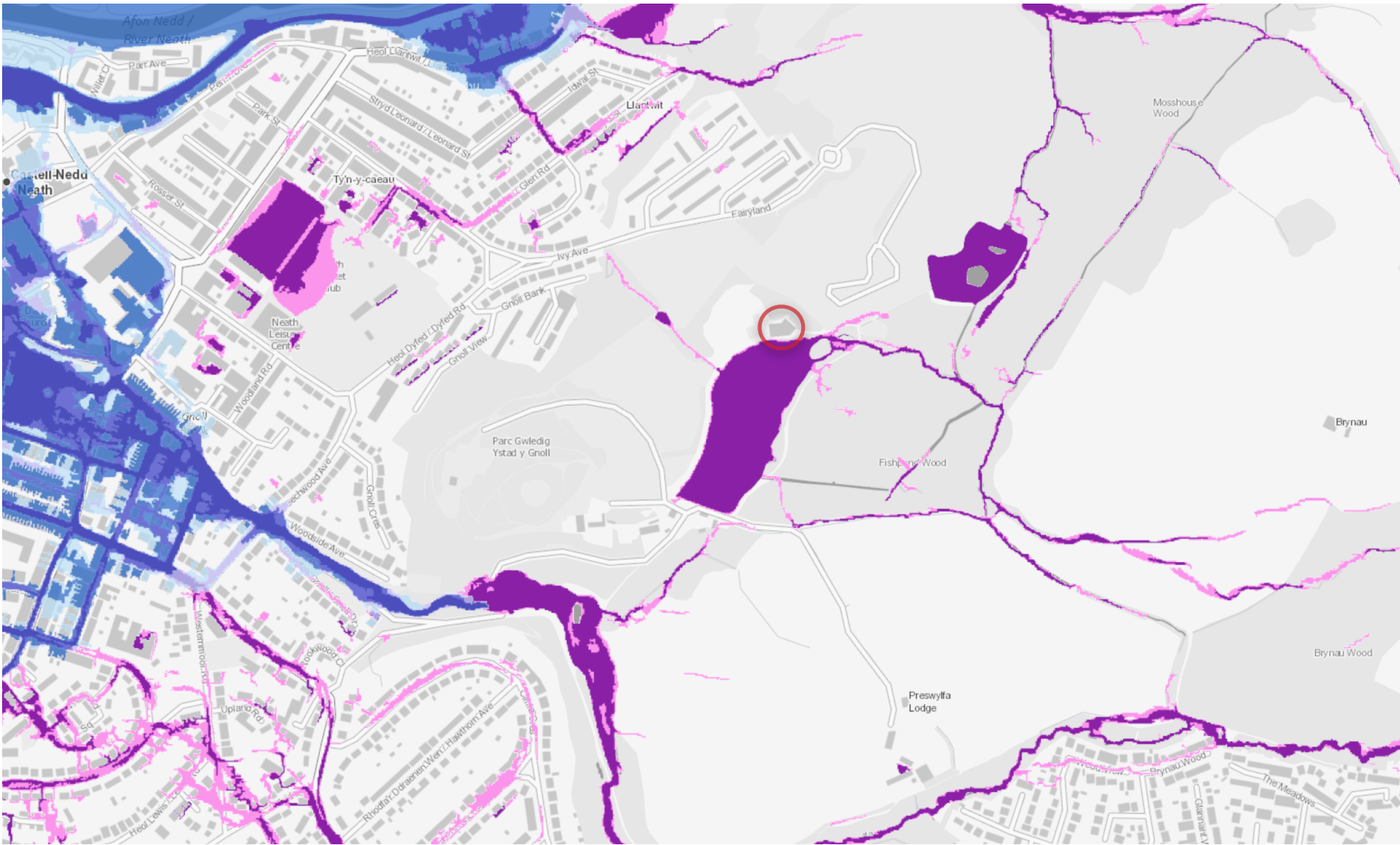
Ivy Tower (Grade II)

Listed for its architectural interest as a prominent example of an eye-catcher folly associated with the Gnoll Estate.

For further listings relating to Gnoll Estate Country Park please refer to the Project Context Document.

Flood Risk

Flood risk assessments are used to show how the flood risk to a site, or elsewhere as a result of proposed changes to the site, can be managed as part of a development proposal. The red circle locates the existing Visitor Centre. The map demonstrates that the site sits outside any Flood Risk Zone. Therefore a flood risk assessment will not be required going forwards.



Extract from the Flood Map for Planning, showing site and flood zones

Ecology

Gnoll Estate Country Park is a designated Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) (NPTSINC036) by the Local Planning Authority through the Local Development Plan (2011- 2026).

Bats and their roosts are fully protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended), and the Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations 1994 (as amended). Under Regulation 3 (4) of the Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations 1994, local planning authorities, in exercise of their functions, are to have regard to the provisions of the 1992 *Habitats* Directive (92/43/EEC) in so far that they might be affected by those functions

Bat surveys have been carried out by Neath Port Talbot Ecologist (Consultancy + Planning).. In terms of wider biodiversity, the ecologists have also had input into the development proposals. These are detailed in the Visitor Centre Bat Survey and Preliminary Ecological Appraisal prepared by the Ecologist (Planning +Consultancy) Countryside and Wildlife Team Neath Port Talbot CBC.

The reports look to cover ecological mitigation measures in relation to the particular habitats, any protected species and the proposed works. Details of ecological mitigation measures to be implemented prior to and during construction to protect and mitigate effects on important ecological features within the site are covered within the Ecology report and should be referred to in full as part of this application.

Arboricultural Impact and Tree Protection Orders

An Arboricultural Impact Assessment has also been carried out as part of the development proposals by Neath Port Talbot Arboriculturalist (Consultancy + Planning). This is also attached to the application. Whilst a number of Category C trees need to be removed, the report highlights that no Category A trees are to be removed and only 1 Category B tree will be removed. It is also noted that there are several low quality trees in the vicinity that would benefit from removal as part of the scheme. It has been deemed that this is an acceptable loss in the context of the extensive new tree planting that is to be undertaken across the wider landscape.

Previous Planning Applications

Please refer to the Project Context Document for details of previous planning applications pertaining to the site.

Building Control

The Building Regulations set standards for how buildings must be constructed to achieve a minimum level of acceptable performance. The proposals for the new visitor centre look to meet this and indeed exceed these levels generally. This is addressed in part via the sustainability statement that is included in this document. Other elements to highlight are:

- Drainage : Proposals include the replacement of an existing foul drainage system with a foul treatment plant sized appropriately to meet the demands of evidenced visitor numbers. Please see associated documentation. A new sustainable drainage system will also deal with surface water drainage, with accompanying drawings setting this out.
- Access : Approved Document Part M sets out guidance to ensure that people are able to access and use buildings and their facilities. The building acts to engage positively with the topography of the site creating routes at both first and ground floor suitable for equitable access. This approach is supplemented by the incorporation of a lift within the new building.
- Fire : Fire safety guidance is set out in Approved Document Part B Volume 2 - Buildings other than dwelling houses. The nature of these requirements have been identified and integrated into the proposals. Due to the remote nature of the building it has been deemed necessary to incorporate a fire suppression system within the scheme proposal with associated plant.



Existing bench in the park, showing the atmosphere of the area close to Gnoll House