

Planning approved for Forth Bridge walkway

Planning permission has been approved for a major new tourist attraction on the Forth Bridge with breathtaking views over the Forth.

A new bridge walkway leading to a 367 feet high viewing platform on the historic structure will be built alongside a reception and visitors centre at South Queensferry.

Led by Network Rail, the ambitious project has suffered push backs as a result of rising costs, initially estimated at £35 million. But following revisions to proposals, which were re-submitted to the council in January, the price tag is now at around £24 million and full planning permission was granted by councillors on Wednesday.



However, support was not unanimous amongst Edinburgh City Council's Development Management Sub-Committee, as SNP and

Green members voted to continue the application amid concerns about a lack of disabled parking spaces and the 'unacceptable' width of a path leading to the site from a local train station.

The long-awaited Forth Bridge Experience, first put forward by the rail firm back in 2017, is expected to welcome 85,000 visitors a year and create 40 jobs, giving a boost to the economy.

Accompanied by a guide, up to four groups an hour, each made up of between 12 and 15 people, will embark on the 367-foot-high ascent to the top of the A-listed structure, which is recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It's expected a tour will last around two-and-a-half hours.

The development will consist of three parts: a reception hub, nearby staff offices and the walkway itself which will give access to an observation deck being built on the bridge's south cantilever.

The single-storey reception hub, located at Hawes Brae, South Queensferry, was initially planned to be on the west side of the bridge but revised blueprints show it will now be constructed to the east of the line to mitigate disturbance to nearby residents.

There, visitors will be briefed before changing into safety clothing and harnesses, which will be attached to a continuous running safety line starting at the foot of the access ramp.

The planning statement says: "Existing access infrastructure on the bridge is to be utilised, and new sections added where required, in order to create a continuous safe access route to the top of the south cantilever.

"The new walkways required along the top member will be visually unobtrusive and will be largely contained within the line of the existing steelwork."

In addition, a nearby house owned by Network Rail known as 'The Forts' will be converted into office space for staff working at the Forth Bridge Experience, with two outbuildings associated with the property set to be demolished.

Going before councillors for approval, David Key, SNP, criticised the plans for having a "towering lack of ambition" with regards to accessibility and parking for visitors.

The reception building will be accompanied by 56 parking spaces, four disabled parking bays and room to store 19 bikes.

Cllr Key said cycle storage needs to be "beefed up an extraordinary amount" and added the number of disabled parking spaces proposed is "not sufficient."

Concerns were also raised about the 1.5 metre-wide path leading to the site from Dalmeny railway station, which Green councillor Chas Booth said was "not acceptable" and would "create conflict between disabled users and pedestrians and cyclists."

A furious Cllr Booth added: "This is a woeful application, absolutely woeful in terms of disabled access; Network Rail claim in their sustainability statement that 'it's crucial we can do everything we can as a business to play our part in tackling the global climate crisis' – this application shows that those are just empty words, it's absolutely shocking.

"Unfortunately, with the policies that we have we cannot refuse this, I would dearly like to refuse this application. They don't deserve their planning permission."

But others were more sympathetic to the designs submitted to the council. Tory councillor Tim Jones said he would be "one of the first visitors" once the experience opens.

He added: "I absolutely love the concept for this is iconic bridge. Having said that, I fully support that we should have

more disabled parking and more cycle parking, but in principle I love the concept.”



Cllr Hal Osler Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com
Committee convener Cllr Hal Osler said: “I do strongly support the idea that we need to improve the disabled blue badge parking in it.”

Going to a vote, planning permission was narrowly granted by six votes to five as SNP and Greens moved to continue the application to allow further scrutiny. However, members voting in favour of the proposals agreed to urge Network Rail to increase the number of disabled parking bays and storage space for bikes.

Alan Ross, Network Rail Scotland’s director of engineering and asset management, said: “The bridge walk experience will offer the public a unique chance to explore this world-famous structure and bring a real economic boost to the local economy.”

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter

The Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) is a public service news agency: funded by the BBC, provided by the local news sector, and used by qualifying partners. Local Democracy Reporters cover top-tier local authorities and other public service organisations.