

Havant Thicket Reservoir - Phase 9 Planning Application - APP/26/00574

Reserved Matters - NW layout, Visitor Centre, Bird Hide, Hub Building

I **object** to application APP/26/00574 for the following reasons;

- The siting of the visitor centre as an island within the wetland conservation area where it will cause increased disturbance of wildlife is not appropriate.
- External terraces with public access on the wetland side of the visitor centre where they will increase disturbance to the wetland and result in litter blow from the outside tables are not appropriate.
- The lack of a managed hedge and/or fences (incorporating mesh) to stop public and dog access along the NW shore of the wetland. The area of shore adjacent to the play and picnic area will attract high numbers of children and dogs, if there is no barrier this will inevitably increase disturbance to the wetland wildlife, with repeated access also causing erosion of the wetland edge vegetation. Designated, managed access points such as dog dips should be incorporated into the bankside.
- The lack of a barrier to prevent access to the retaining structure islands during drawdown is also a significant concern which will increase the risk of disturbance and should also be a health and safety concern.
- The small size and square shape of the bird hide is disappointing. It does not optimise its value to the community, and the lack of internal circulation space will make access by mobility vehicles more difficult and less safe.
- The failure to design the hide such that it is suitable for dual use (public use & education groups). This is a wasted opportunity for the community and informal education/ environmental engagement.
- The hide plan shows the boardwalk from the visitor centre arriving obliquely at the hide. It should be re-routed to join the main gravel path to the hide at an earlier point so that it arrives directly behind the hide door. This will help reduce disturbance. School groups in particular can be very noisy when approaching hides.
- The inadequate size of the ground's maintenance store, with no direct vehicle access, and the entrance in a busy public area between the kiosk and toilets. If this important facility is to be provided within the Hub Building it should be located on the car park side of the building to provide vehicle access, improve access for staff and volunteers and reduce manual handling distances. A layout that requires tools and machinery to be carried through a busy public area is not safe.
- The proposal for the visitor centre to be used at night for dining and events. Night-time use was not part of the original proposal and any after dark use of the access roads, car park and visitor centre will inevitably cause disturbance to night-time ecology which includes protected bat species and schedule 1 nightjar, which I myself have observed in this NW area.

I have set out below particular concerns with respect to the siting and layout of the visitor centre

[Redacted text] the outline design for the Havant Thicket Reservoir wetland conservation area. I [redacted text] were initially impressed with the level of engagement by Portsmouth Water and commended their commitment to provide a minimum retained wetland area of 10 hectares. A retained wetland of this size should be a huge asset to the local community as well as to regional biodiversity, particularly given its proximity to the coastal SPAs of

Langstone and Chichester Harbours. Whilst the true potential of the wetland may not be realised for several years it is important to ensure that public access is very carefully manipulated and sensitively controlled through careful design from the start to ensure that disturbance to wildlife is minimised. The wetland experts in the technical sub-group recommended to Portsmouth Water that the visitor centre should be constructed on the shoreline where it could be carefully designed to minimise disturbance to the wetland conservation area, not as an island within the wetland.

Unfortunately, the Phase 9 planning application, maps and illustrations for the NW corner of the reservoir site show the visitor centre (VC) as a floating pontoon island within the retained wetland, the primary conservation area of the site. Access is via a boardwalk over the water with a drawbridge, which will only add to the area of the wetland that is disturbed. [Redacted text] have repeatedly commented on the **inappropriateness of the island location within the wetland, because it extends the zone of disturbance for wildlife out into the wetland.**

For ease of reference, I have attached as Appendix A what I would anticipate would be the likely zones of disturbance for a VC located on the shore compared to that of the proposed island location [redacted text]. You will see that if the VC is sited as an island within the wetland the zones of disturbance extend much further out into the wetland and across the island of the wetland retaining structure. This also has the potential to include disturbance to the area of water in front of the bird hide reducing the educational opportunities for those using the hide. The zones are based on a lifetime's experience of watching and monitoring birds at wetlands. Where birds have access to open water and islands, as they will at the reservoir wetland, they behave very differently to birds in an open mudflat environment such as the Severn Estuary, which I believe the consultants used when assessing disturbance. Guidance based on disturbance monitoring of tidal mudflats should not be used as the basis for the assessment of the likely disturbance at the reservoir site.

The undulating topography of the north-west wetland compartment means that it would have a good variety of water depths, including deeper water making it a highly valuable area for wildlife, especially a wide variety of waterbirds. It therefore seems particularly detrimental to physically locate the VC within this sector. **I do not support this at all. To provide a wetland habitat and then put the honey-pot location directly within it is bizarre!** The visitor centre is one of the areas where the greatest intensity of disturbance will occur, with large numbers of families with children and dogs. Why put that inside the conservation zone? Of course, I fully accept that the visitor centre needs to provide a view over the water, but this can be achieved by setting the centre back on the NW shore. The primary purpose of the retained wetland should always be conservation and the enhancement of biodiversity to help mitigate the loss of original habitats at the site. The box which set out the zone for location of the VC at the outline approval stage provided space for the building to be located on shore and I would recommend that is where it is located.

The supporting information states that the VC is "imbedded in the landscape," yet it is completely at odds with the landscape. Constructing a floating VC on water held in place by stilts out in the water may be architecturally and visually striking, but it makes the building unnecessarily complicated and impractical to manage.

- On-going maintenance is more complicated by the location, issues with utilities become harder to resolve, and the play areas are automatically made more remote from the VC.

- There is no direct vehicle access for deliveries. So, deliveries such as those of daily fresh produce for catering purposes, require more drawn out moving and handling and greater organisational liaison between delivery companies and site staff.
- Moreover, the building is considerably less future-proofed and less flexible should operational needs require changes to the infrastructure or building footprint. A common problem with visitor centres / cafés is how often the initial extent of the kitchen space in the catering facilities is under-estimated, and as site popularity grows, how those facilities require upgrading and enlarging to cope with demand. Siting a VC in the water makes it much less able to adapt to changing demands in the future. Indeed, if there was a need to expand, based on the current location, this would require extending further into the wetland.

The plans currently show outdoor public terraces around the external edges of the visitor centre. If the centre is located over water these will likely lead to a higher risk of litter being blown or dropped into the water. It would be preferable to remove these and make the most of large picture windows, though precautions against bird-strike will need to be put in place. If the visitor centre were located onshore external terraces, especially away from the picture windows, would not be an issue.

The education bird hide should incorporate a combination of fixed, near full-length windows glazed with one-way glass and smaller slotted, opening windows. This provides the best combination for educational / family use, and use by birdwatchers / photographers, who prefer not to look through glass.

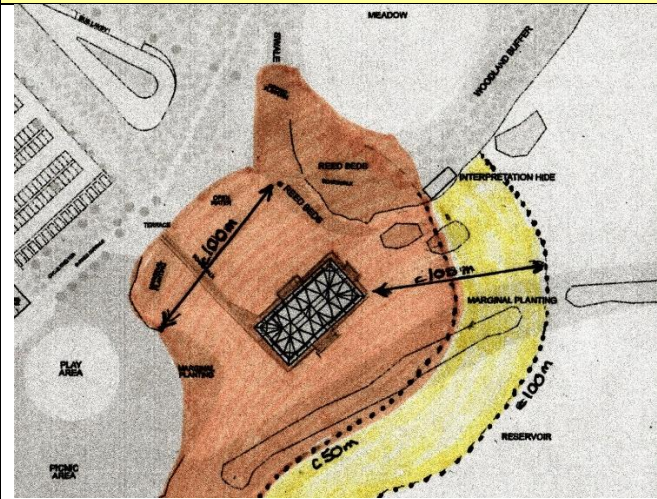
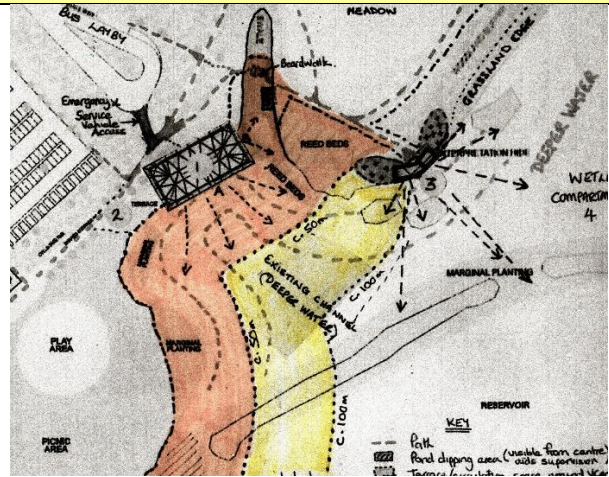
As part of on-site tree-planting it would be beneficial to incorporate the provision of disease-resistant hybrid elm trees into any planting schemes. This would be a positive step to support the spread of elm-feeding invertebrates such as white-letter hairstreak butterflies.

Yours sincerely

[Redacted text]

Appendix A

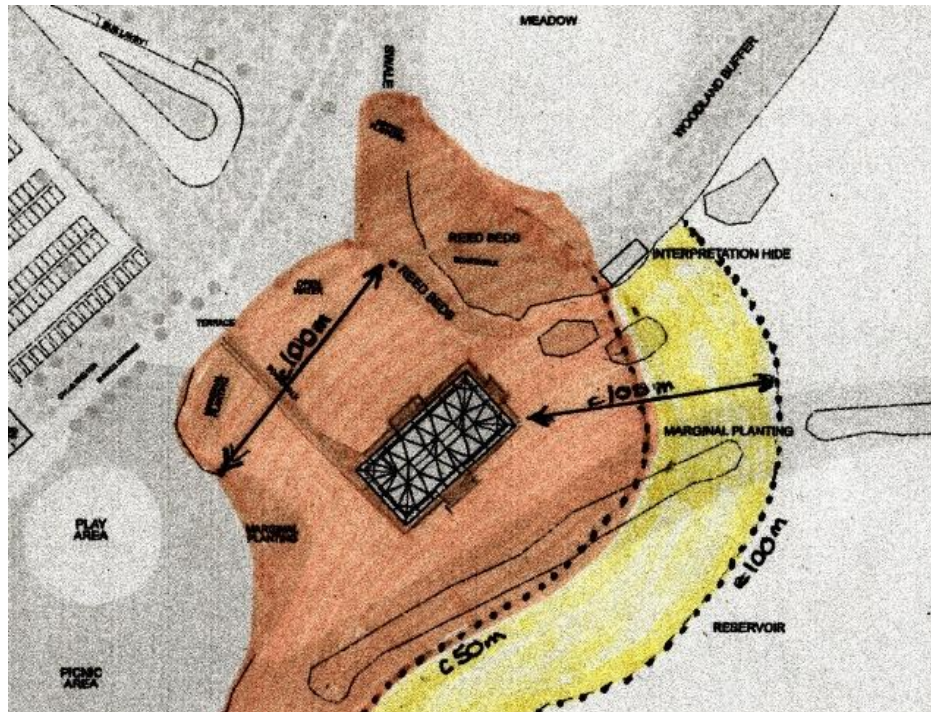
Summary of the impact of alternative siting of the Visitor Centre as an island or in a shoreline location, including an assessment of the anticipated Disturbance Zones

Island Visitor Centre (with external terraces)	Shoreline Visitor Centre (no front terrace)
Orange – High risk disturbance zone; area disturbed the majority of the time due to proximity to the play area, picnic area & Visitor Centre / terraces. Likely to see species that tolerate disturbance and can become habituated including; coot, mallard, mute swan, Canada goose, black headed gull & herring gull.	
Yellow – Moderate risk disturbance zone; disturbance more intermittent if very loud or sudden noise, or uncommon activity occurs. The good range of water depths and mix of riparian/ island habitats and open water should enable a greater range of species to feed and roost most of the time including; grey heron, little egret, great crested grebe, little grebe, <i>teal</i> , gadwall, <i>shoveler</i> , <i>wigeon</i> , tufted duck, <i>terns</i> , <i>redshank</i> , <i>black-tailed godwit</i> , <i>ringed plover</i> & kingfisher, as well as snipe and Mediterranean gull which previously used the reservoir site. (Species in <i>italic text</i> are qualifying species for nearby Langstone & Chichester Harbour SPA)	
	
Island location means high disturbance zone (orange) extends much FURTHER OUT into the wetland & reservoir.	Zone of high disturbance (orange) does NOT extend out as far into the wetland/ reservoir.
Reduced species diversity close to shore and VC (see orange box above), giving less for visitors to see. They would need a telescope to view more interesting species.	Greater species diversity likely to be present closer to shore and VC, increasing viewing experience/ opportunities for visitor engagement and education.
VC takes up valuable wetland habitat space which is completely unnecessary.	VC does not take up valuable wetland habitat, optimising the area of wetland habitat available.
Zone of maximum disturbance extends up to the education hide. The yellow zone of moderate disturbance extends in front of and beyond the Education Hide which will impact what can be seen. This can be avoided with careful siting of the VC to optimise the viewing opportunities from the education Hide.	Zone of maximum disturbance does NOT reach the Education Hide. The yellow zone of moderate disturbance only marginally impacts a small part of the view looking west from the Education Hide, ensuring great viewing opportunities & a broader range of species are more likely to be seen.

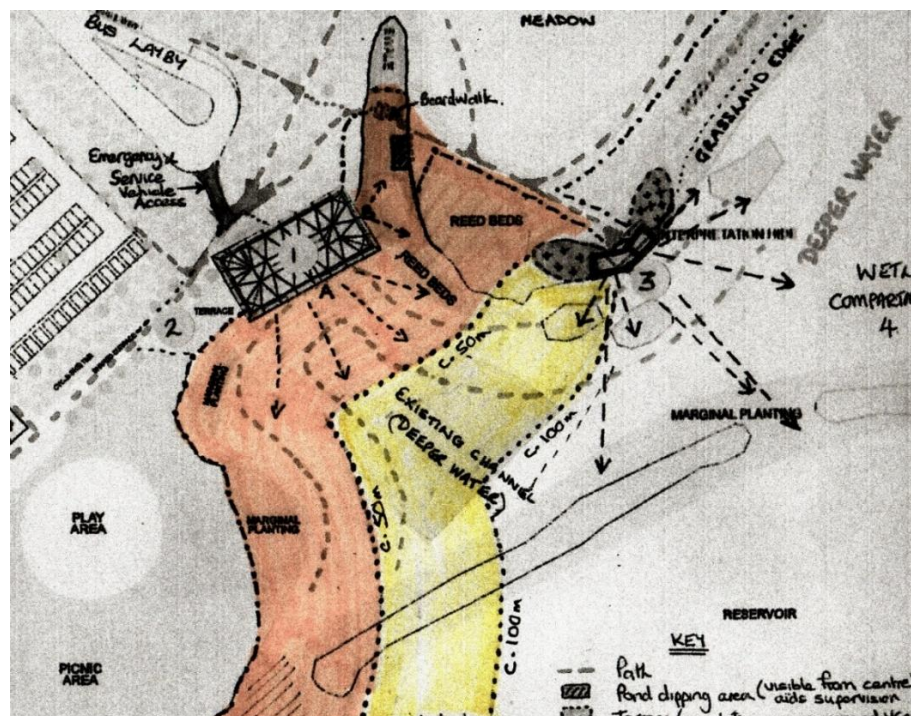
VC has excellent views out over the wetland and reservoir giving the 'wow' factor, the long access boardwalk, terrace on each frontage ensures the wetland habitat is disturbed so species available to view would be extremely limited (wasted opportunity)	VC on shore has excellent views south across wetland/ reservoir and to the east over swale channel and reedbed, still giving a great 'wow' visitor experience. Space at rear taken up by toilet, kitchen & offices so does NOT need great views.
Long boardwalk (c.25m) over water for access to the visitor centre maximises disturbance to the wetland as noise of people & silhouettes breaking the skyline is guaranteed to scare off wildlife. Noise of trolley wheels carrying supplies & wheelchairs over boards (hit & miss noise) will add to the disturbance.	Excellent screened access from carpark minimises disturbance from visitors arriving, providing simple ALL ability short access to VC. Great connectivity between VC & terrace. Trolleys carrying supplies enter from rear causing no disturbance to wetland.
VC sits on top of existing valley which would have flooded to provide deeper water habitat.	Existing valley feature (see contours on map above) when flooded will provide a variety of submerged vegetation and deeper water which diving species such as tufted duck and great crested grebe could use & still be visible from the shore & VC.
The majority of the retaining structure island south of the visitor centre will be within the disturbance zones, with 80% expected to be within the high risk disturbance zone (orange), reducing the biodiversity value of the island habitat, especially for birds.	Less than 50% of the retaining structure island south of the visitor centre will be within the disturbance zones, with just 15% within the high risk disturbance zone, protecting the habitats on the island from significant and regular disturbance.
New reedbed enhancement north of VC shown on an area which was formerly dry neutral to acid grassland which is <u>not</u> likely to form a wet reedbed habitat and will <u>not</u> stop visitor/dog access to the shore. Limited wildlife value does not compensate for the loss of c.1269m ² (27m x 45m) of high quality wetland habitat taken up by the island location of the VC.	Swale and new reedbed enhancement will add interest to the view from the east end of VC, but access routes from VC to Interpretation Hide mean it will be within the high disturbance zone anyway, so any disturbance from the VC will make no difference.
Limited opportunity for intelligent design of the building to reduce disturbance as visitors, including children and dogs will be present causing disturbance outside the structure.	Intelligent design in location and layout can minimise impact on wetland. For example, sealed windows on south & east facades, vents can be directed away from wetland, building can help screen noise from the terrace, fencing & low hedging along shore can facilitate great views but stop dogs/ children disturbing the wetland shore.
Very exposed location of VC/ café and SW prevailing wind will make it impossible to stop litter blowing into the wetland (paper cups, napkins, drinks cans, wrappings & stirrers)	VC location sheltered by trees/ landscaping reducing the wind and risk of litter being blown into the wetland. Litter blown off tables can be captured on fence/low hedge around terrace on shore.

Note 1: Maps consider disturbance to the wetland/ reservoir area based on experience of visiting hundreds of similar sites. Zone s peer reviewed and agreed by Richard Levett (retired wetland specialist with more than 30 years' experience of managing/ monitoring wetlands).

Map 1 - Island Location - Visitor Centre as an island



Map 2 - Shoreline Location - alternative siting would reduce disturbance of wildlife and impact on the wetland (located within permitted VC area box in outline hybrid permission)



Note 2: In both location scenarios it is assumed the Education/ Interpretation Hide is screened on both sides to minimise disturbance in front of the hide.