



Orchard Cafe, Worcester Woods Country Park - Ethical Catering

Location: Worcester Woods Country Park, Wildwood Drive, Worcester, WR5 2LG

Tel: 01905 766 492

Email: cafe@theorchardcafe.co.uk

Website: www.theorchardcafe.co.uk

An environmentally sustainable visitor centre selling ethical food?

At the Green Flag award-winning Worcester Woods Country Park, with its 51 hectares of woodland and meadows, Worcestershire County Council has been working hard to promote ethical messages in a variety of different ways. The existing Countryside Centre was built in the late 1980's and had always been very popular with visitors. However, our needs had outgrown the building; our visitors wanted more seating in the café and outside by the play area, increased shade in the summer and more community meeting space. Countryside Service staff had been housed in portakabins for several years, which were unlikely to be re-awarded planning consent and we were short of secure storage space for our work vehicles, timber and tools.

We were lucky enough to secure several grants from the Liveability Fund, Heritage Lottery Fund, Environment Agency and our own County Council capital programme to develop an extension to the existing visitor centre. With the help of our own Property Services team, who are becoming nationally renowned for their development of sustainable buildings, including schools, an environmental education centre and new library and history centre, we came up with a design to suit our needs. Our visitors had been involved in this exercise through Focus Groups, comments cards, visitor surveys and open days, so their ideas were all put into the melting pot as well. What we came up with was a new eco-building alongside the existing refurbished visitor centre. This houses Countryside Service staff, the reception and enquiries office and two new community meeting rooms. The design includes a sedum (green) roof, sustainable timber, a woodfuel boiler, and recycled newspaper insulation.

The two buildings are connected by a shady pergola over a large sun terrace. Part of the development also included the creation of the 'Worcestershire Garden', a quiet, enclosed area for community and event use which has been landscaped with features and species distinctive of the county, such as fruit trees, an old fashioned apple press, a pond and wildflower area.

The existing visitor centre was given a revamp with improved lighting, a larger indoor seating area and state of the art touch-screen interpretation and information. An innovative approach was used for the new furniture, which was not actually new at all! Through the 'Green Chair' project, we asked people to donate their old wooden chairs which were restored where necessary by our own staff and all painted in the same shade of green. This was the answer to our lack of funds for purchasing new furniture, but it also had an important recycling and anti-landfill message. A new leaflet rack and two breakfast bars were made in-house from oak milled ourselves from the woodland on site; again, another message about sustainable sourcing of what you need, for little money.



All we needed now was ethical food. The visitor centre cafés at both our Country Parks are run on a franchise basis, each with a tenancy of five years. We had recently been successful in securing a new café tenant at our other Country Park, Waseley Hills, near Birmingham, and from that we had been able to gain some useful experience of trialling a more specific visitor and sustainability focused lease. Our café tenant at Worcester Woods had been with us for many years, but felt it was time to move on to pastures new. This gave us an opportunity to push our sustainable food agenda even further than before. Of course, a normal business lease is usually quite standard and stems from a profit making point of view. With our visitor centre leases, whilst the income we

receive for them is vital to our work, they exist to enable a high quality service to be given to our visitors. It is in the interests of both us as a County Council and our tenant to work together in partnership to deliver this. A good relationship and understanding the same values are key.

With this in mind, we aimed to attract a certain type of business from the start. We have learnt many lessons on how to secure a tenant from the past. Standard newspaper or catering magazine ads are very expensive and generate little interest, so we opted for displaying a large banner at the roadside, combined with press coverage and placing an eye-catching half-page colour advert in the local paper.

We aimed high, suggesting that we wanted our new Orchard Café to become the place in Worcestershire to come for ethical food. By ethical, we mean offering Fair Trade, free range (meat and eggs), local and organic where possible. We also included strict conditions about packaging and waste and that any gifts and other merchandise sold in the visitor centre were to be sustainably sourced, such as crafts that are Fair Trade or made by local people. The response was very positive and we shortlisted twelve potential tenants. We then took them through a rigorous selection process, more akin to a job interview than a commercial transaction. But it proved its worth, our new tenants, Guy and Nett Ward, have a wealth of experience in the catering industry, from cooking, to restaurant management and staff training for companies such as Frankie and Bennies and Prêt a Manger. They also have a love of the countryside and the part it has to play in producing good quality wholesome food.

What is so valuable about Country Parks is the combination of things they offer. People have come to expect certain facilities to be available on their visit; a visitor centre with a café, toilets, information and interpretation, children's play area and way marked trails - all set in a pleasant 'natural' environment. What this offers us as practitioners is the ability to get across important messages and showcase examples of good practice in sustainability.

The Countryside Service is able to accommodate visits from other organisations who want to find out more about initiatives like those above, and other subjects such as working with volunteers, health and safety management, business development, community engagement and income generation. If you would like to discuss a package tailored to your needs, then please contact Rachel Datlen, Countryside Greenspace Manager on 01905 766493 or rdatlen@worcestershire.gov.uk