

Wrenbridge at the wheel as Lotus accelerates Hethel plans

Regional Growth Fund enables car manufacturer's 117,000 sq ft expansion plans at Hethel plant. Sarah Stewart reports

Lotus has selected Wrenbridge as its preferred development partner for a 56,000 sq ft visitor centre at its 80,000 sq ft Hethel factory in Norfolk.

Property Week understands the sports car manufacturer also intends the building to be a "centre of excellence" for automotive manufacturing.

Wrenbridge will act as development manager and be responsible for working on the planning application for the 50 acre site, which is expected to be lodged in the third quarter of 2012.

In September, *Property Week* revealed that Wrenbridge has launched Wrenbridge Sport, a division to develop sport and stadium opportunities that is headed by Richard Arnold, former project manager at the Olympic Delivery Authority, who was responsible for the many of the Olympic venues.

The development will be opposite Lotus's ongoing development of a second, 75,000 sq ft factory, which includes assembly halls and a paint shop. Construction started the day after it received £10.4m from the Regional Growth Fund on 1 November.

Lotus blooms: production line expansion includes second factory, visitors centre, engineering building and press area



Lotus Cars, a subsidiary of Group Lotus, applied for £27.5m in the first round of bids from the fund, but its application was turned down in April. The company's Malaysian owner, Proton, then chose to bid again for a smaller sum.

The money will contribute to an investment pot of £200m towards the expansion of the UK business over the next five years and will support the industrial research element of a new range of

low-emission sports cars, which requires upgraded production facilities on the 85 acre site.

Lotus is close to gaining planning consent for two further elements on the park. It has one live application for a 47,500 sq ft motorsport and chassis engineering building, which has been recommended for approval by South Norfolk Council. The other is for an 11,000 sq ft extension of its factory, which will become an educational facility for staff and a press area.

Section 106 agreements are still being negotiated with the local council, but are expected to be resolved before the end of the year. These elements are scheduled to

be operational by spring 2013.

Group chief executive Danny Beher told *Property Week*: "Lotus is a British car manufacturer. I am happy that, as a result of governmental support, the production of Lotus cars will stay in the UK."

Gary Hancox, senior planning officer at South Norfolk Council, says: "As soon as the section 106 agreement is reached, the extension to the existing building and the creation of new space will take off." ■

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