

Dublin Bay Discovery Centre

Dublin Bay Discovery Centre - Creating a place of discovery where people are inspired and connect with nature.

UNESCO has recognised the importance of Bull Island and Dublin Bay as a special place worthy of conservation where knowledge sharing, research and education should be at the forefront of informing sustainable development. Dublin Bay has been a place where people and nature have co-existed for centuries and the challenge is to ensure that this balance is managed into the future using creative and innovative ways for people to live in a society of equal opportunity and for nature to flourish. It is about seeking the balance between human activity and ecological preservation. It also requires us to find ways of informing and educating about this symbiotic relationship so that they feel inspired to positively contribute towards it

Since 2015, Dublin Bay with North Bull Island Nature Reserve at its heart is now part of a World Network of Biosphere Reserves designated by UNESCO as exemplars of sustainable development. Dublin Bay UNESCO Biosphere stretches from Baldoyle Bay, Ireland's Eye and Howth Head around the bay to Dalkey Island and Killiney Hill. It includes the city, port and coastal suburbs.

In 2015, Dublin City Council (DCC) commissioned a feasibility study to explore the potential benefits of a new Discovery Centre to replace the existing 'Interpretive and Education centre'. The existing building, opened in 1986 by the former Dublin Corporation. Unfortunately the building is no longer fit for purpose as it does not have universal access to its public areas and toilets, its fossil fuel energy system and septic tanks have an adverse impact on the environment and the capacity of this one room venue to cater for schools and research or educational programming is very limited. Located within the protected sand dune system on Bull Island it is not possible to extend or upgrade the building.

The location proposed for the new Centre was along Causeway Road on an area created in the 1960s and early 70s by land reclamation and dumping and will have no impact on sensitive habitats.

In 2019, a design team led by Howley Hayes Grade 1 Conservation Architects was appointed by DCC to prepare plans for a new Interpretive and Education Centre to be called the Discovery Centre, the remit of which is to be a forum for the resolution of nature conservation issues locally in the Nature Reserve and Dublin Bay, to promote the values of UNESCO and to inspire a sense of global citizenship to address global climate issues.

The purpose of the Centre is to share knowledge, to impart understanding and to inspire change.

The design team have been working to incorporate the feedback received from a stage 1 building design public consultation in 2019/20., with the building now reduced to a single story, timber frame structure, the building size reduced by 30% and the lookout tower reduced in area and height. A greater emphasis has been placed on the education/exhibition/research areas and also the provision of enough space to allow the centre to act as the HQ for management of the nature reserve going forward.

The entire focus of the Discovery Centre is on education, interpretation and learning with a view to enhanced conservation. It is not a centre for tourism with modest visitor numbers being envisaged (45,000 in year 1 of operation) and the majority of these being those already visiting the Island. Admission fees will be in line with those at OPW state run facilities, with special concessions for the local community. There are well in excess of 1million **visits** to the island annually according to a survey

in 2019. With the pandemic and restrictions on people's ability to travel the numbers are probably twice that in 2021.

The potential benefits, are both timely and far reaching given the national and international biodiversity and climate crisis. As we learn about environmental challenges on an almost daily basis, the new Discovery Centre will present a tangible opportunity for us act on the recent covid appreciation of the importance of our environment and being close to nature to inspire change locally and globally.

Rationale and Purpose of a Discovery Centre

- **Universal Access:** To facilitate access for everyone regardless of their abilities through the implementation of universal design principles. Heretofore, people with disabilities, older people and people with reduced mobility have not been able to access, appreciate or engage with the Nature Reserve and the Dublin Bay UNESCO Biosphere. The new centre however, will crucially for the first time facilitate access by all people regardless of their abilities (according to the 2016 census, 13.5% of the population are classified as people with disabilities).
- **Interpretation:** To provide a year round and non-weather dependent experience of the wildlife spectacle (the migrant waders and Brent Geese are only present for winter months).
 - To facilitate a virtual experience and understanding of the marine ecosystem of the bay.
 - Technologically enhanced interpretation that focuses on natural heritage, human influence and the importance of the Biosphere. Visitors will have an opportunity to discover the changing natural habitats within the Biosphere and reflect on the history of human intervention.
 - To facilitate an in-depth understanding of the flora and fauna of the nature reserve and other terrestrial areas of the biosphere reserve.
 - To act as a receiving centre for cameras located around the biosphere relaying images of various habitats and species which are otherwise inaccessible.
 - To act as a receiving centre for cameras located within the nature reserve relaying images of various species along the saltmarsh and the norther tip of the nature reserve where the public are being asked not to enter.

As Freeman Tilden, the 'father' of Heritage interpretation was quoted:

"Through interpretation comes understanding; through understanding comes appreciation, through appreciation comes protection."

- **Research:** To act as a portal for universities to collaborate on scientific research and monitoring in Dublin Bay Biosphere and the dissemination of learning into educational programming.
- **Community Development:** To act as a forum for local community engagement. The Oversight Forum of the North Bull Island Nature Reserve Action Plan 2020-2025 which represents the views of local community, NGO and volunteer groups will play a crucial role in achieving the conservation objectives of the nature reserve.
- **Reducing Disturbance of Sensitive Habitats and Species:** While nothing can substitute experiencing the natural world first hand, the marine and much of the headlands and islands are not accessible to the population and it is desirable from a conservation perspective that they should remain this way. The inclusion of immersive experiences within the Centre is therefore important for reaching audiences to promote understanding and conservation particularly for those who visit in inclement weather, or who visit out of season (for migrating birds etc.).

- **Education:** To deliver education programming for primary and secondary schools.
- **Inspiring Change:** People visit the island for many reasons other than nature conservation. One of the aims of the Discovery Centre therefore is to promote responsible behaviour and stewardship within the local community. The Discovery Centre will be the hub for this one-on-one engagement with locals and visitors alike.
 - To inspire visitors to support the values of UNESCO in promoting global citizenship.
- **Gateway:** To act as a gateway/marker for the Nature Reserve. While many people at present think of the island as a wild unmanaged space, no one in the future visiting the island could be other than aware of the important national and international standing of the place.
- **Conservation through Culture:** To facilitate art and cultural activities as a means of engaging people in conservation.
- **To achieve the Dublin Bay UNESCO Biosphere vision**

“to celebrate and promote a wider appreciation of the natural and cultural heritage of Dublin Bay, to capture the inherent passion of the community for the Biosphere concept and for Dublin Bay Biosphere to be an exemplar for a new wave of biospheres in the world network”.

As part of the proposal the Causeway Road will undergo upgrading to include - Provision of up to 280 parking spaces (using a permeable surfaced finish) incorporating disabled and elderly parking bays at strategic locations, the formalisation of the shared greenway to a minimum width of 5m along the entire length of the Causeway, with benches and information placed at regular intervals (allowing people to rest and admire views), the provision of additional cycle racks and improved links with public transport to allow a greater range of sustainable access.

The up to date plans are being presented to a wide range of stakeholders in the coming months ahead of a formal submission to an Bord Pleanála in the Summer. The plans will include detailed analysis of any potential impacts both during construction and operation of the facility and outlining any mitigation measures to reduce or avoid any impacts, as well as details of the site selection process completed.



Artists Impression of the Discovery Centre viewed from the Causeway Road



Artists Impression of the Discovery Centre viewed from the Causeway Road looking east



Artists Impression of the Discovery Centre viewed from the Causeway Road looking west

- 80% public facing spaces to maximise public benefit of the centre
- 75% of this is dedicated for education, exhibition and research to support core functions of the centre
- Principal features include:
 - Exhibition area containing an immersive, interactive exhibition on Bull Island and the Dublin Bay Biosphere
 - Education space which can extend into the multi-use hall space
 - Research room
 - Education wet room and external education space
 - Café
 - Reception, information
 - Nature Reserve HQ



Ground Floor Plan



Reception Area



