

COIS ABHANN – LIFFEY VALE BIODIVERSITY EDUCATION CENTRE – CHAPELIZOD ROAD

Liffey Vale House is located on the northern banks of the River Liffey at Longmeadows along the Chapelizod Road. The house (a Protected Structure) and gardens, which are derelict, are owned by Dublin City Council. The Parks, Landscape & Biodiversity Department of Dublin City Council have developed proposals for Part 8 approval for the regeneration of this important site as a biodiversity education centre. It is our intention to lodge Part 8 proposals in the coming weeks and we therefore notify the Area Committee of this.



Site Location

Concept

Dublin City Council appointed a conservation architect led integrated design team, (led by Blackwood Associates) to develop proposals for the sustainable development of this site which has been derelict for over 20 years. Following the completion of extensive surveys and inspections, the completion of detailed consultation and the examination of best practice exemplar projects, we are now proposing that Liffey Vale is developed as a site for biodiversity and education, Cois Abhann. The site will offer the opportunity for all to spend time in nature, and learn about the animals, plants, and ecological systems that thrive in close proximity to the city and along the river's edge. The house and gardens will intertwine to form one unique experience of nature with learning opportunities throughout.



Existing Site Condition

Liffey Vale house (which is derelict) will be restored and a classroom, small café and public toilets will be constructed. The grounds of Liffey Vale will become publicly accessible for all where the general public will be able to enjoy for the first time the wildness of the site through the careful insertion of pathways and outdoor interpretive materials. The site will be linked to the linear Liffey Valley Park and Chapelizod, through the transfer of lands from the Department of Defence to the west. This area will include disabled parking and a bus pull in area for schools and other tours. Access to the site will encourage sustainable transport through, walking, cycling and public transport. Some additional accessible parking bays are also provided within the site.

Should planning permission be approved in the coming months following the Part 8 process, CRES would propose issuing construction tender documents in Autumn 2022 with construction work to begin in Q1 2023 and to take approx. 12 months to complete. The centre would be operational in early 2024. The total project cost for the Cois Abhann, including design, construction, VAT etc is €3.8m and will be funded from the Parks Capital Programme with some additional grants.



Artist Impression

Cois Abhann will include interpretation on biodiversity and the history of the Liffey, a learning space (large enough for school groups) a small café and associated public toilets. The building will tell stories as well as provide the setting for stories to be told. It will celebrate the richness of the natural history of the site and encourage curiosity in visitors of all ages and abilities.

Biodiversity affords us our own circle of life by providing clean air to breath, water to drink, food to eat - a sensitive, interdependent ecosystem that we must understand and protect. Cois Abhann will demonstrate how human hands can considerately manage the once manicured area of Liffey Vale, guiding nature to follow its natural course to establish and welcome diverse habitats and species.

Cois Abhann will embed itself within the locality, becoming an eye-opening and culturally relevant stop on a daily walk or weekend cycles. It will seek to reawaken us all to the interconnectedness of the Liffey corridor and natural surroundings, renewing lost understanding of and connectedness to the world around us while re-enforcing wellbeing and calm. Greater awareness can impact on home life, bringing green issues to the dinner table, influencing decisions and changing behaviours into the future.

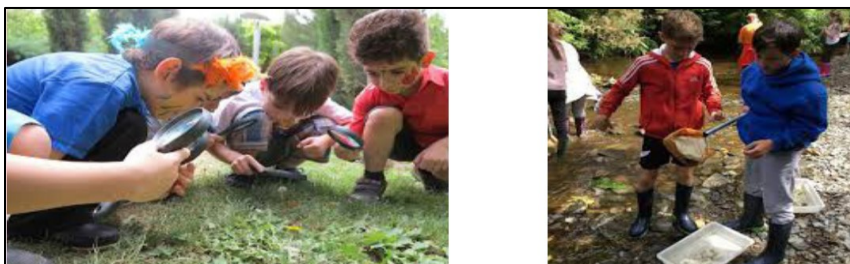


Artist Impression looking east with new classroom, toilets and café on the left

With biodiversity being lost at a dramatic rate, there is a need to educate and empower people to take action for the protection of nature. Environmental education, experiential and hands on learning are powerful tools for building awareness of the natural environment and for developing a connection and care towards nature and biodiversity. The outdoor learning space is a living classroom providing an opportunity to learn first-hand about our flora and fauna, promoting a sense of well-being both physical and mental.

The Cois Abhann Biodiversity Centre will provide dynamic multi-purpose interactive spaces, both internal and external, to build awareness and interest in our natural environment, develop the capacity and capabilities of people to protect nature. It will offer a range of educational activities, children, youth and community programmes and events, workshops, training, and exhibitions focused on building awareness of nature and biodiversity and ways we can protect it in our everyday lives. It will provide a range of experiential learning opportunities; this will be achieved through the outdoor spaces. The Centre occupies an accessible location in the capital which will reach out to a wide variety of target groups while offering a superb facility to highlight the importance of biodiversity and get a first-hand opportunity to learn about nature through being in nature.

Cois Abhann can host a range of programmes to visitors focused on biodiversity e.g. Biodiversity workshops, Training courses, the Young Environmentalist Awards (with a particular focus on biodiversity) which promotes action projects in young people. It will run a range of initiatives aimed at encouraging young people to come together to meet like-minded young people and develop their interest and enthusiasm for nature.



For schools, the centre will include a range of learning opportunities including tours, trails, workshops, and courses linked to the curriculum for example around ecology field studies within biology and geography. For the community it will provide a new space to experience and learn of the history of the Liffey Valley and to relax and enjoy the natural surroundings, a place to meet with family and friends.

Cois Abhann will be equipped to provide a programme of accredited courses, non-formal and informal education as well as the use of new methodologies in learning including transformational learning. The Centres offerings would align with the DCC Biodiversity Plan.

Cois Abhann aims

- to provide an inspiring and appealing space that makes all ages feel welcome and builds interest and awareness of the Liffey Vale area.
- to provide a cohesive programme of events, training, workshops, education, information, and exhibitions.
- to increase awareness, knowledge and understanding in a wide range of target groups of the environment, biodiversity, ecology, and our role in nurturing and caring for nature.
- to promote citizen science and run a range of citizen science programmes.
- to support government policy and strategy e.g., the biodiversity action plan, the DCC Biodiversity plan, the Climate Action plan, the National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development.
- to provide an exemplar for the conservation, reuse and extension of a derelict historic building, using sustainable construction and minimising energy in use.
- to provide an exemplar of sustainable management of the garden and orchard areas, providing an informative example for both private and community gardeners.
- to embed the site of Liffey Vale House and gardens into the network of accessible pedestrian and cycle routes in this part of the city, encouraging car free leisure pursuits.
- to link the site to the extended and enhanced natural environment of Liffey Valley Park.
- to embed the site in the lives and environment of the local community and of the wider city of Dublin.

Main Actions

The site is divided, on the basis of historic and natural divisions into areas of orchard, garden and wilderness. Liffey Vale House will include interpretation on biodiversity, a multi-purpose learning space, large enough for school groups, a small café and associated public toilets. Our approach to the design has been to respect the existing scale of the house and its relationship to the site, with new additions being complementary in scale and form. In the interior of the house, we will retain traces of the historic features; floors and fireplaces that have been lost over the years. The building will tell stories as well as provide the setting for stories to be told.

Once out in the open a series of paths will be provided to allow access for all, through a range of natural features, including woodland, wetland, the river edge etc. A range of interpretative methods will be used to inform and guide while a significant area of the site will be left inaccessible and wild.

It is intended to provide best practice in relation to drainage, the reuse of materials, solar energy and waste management. A bus pull in area will be provided on Chapelizod Road in association with accessible parking bays and bicycle parking infrastructure. The emphasis is on sustainable transport

with adjacent public transport available. Cois Abhann and Liffey Valley Park will be linked through a new entrance to the west of the site, which is being facilitated through the Department of Defence.

Should Part 8 permission be forthcoming it is the intention to begin site works at Liffey Vale in late 2022 and open to the public in late 2023.

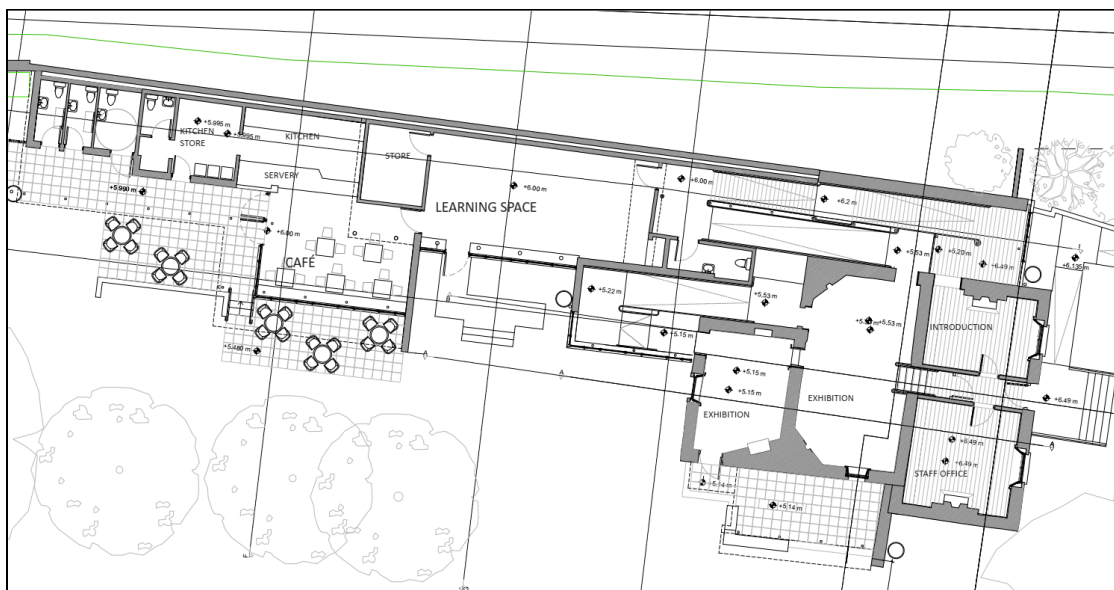


Section showing historic building, new classroom, café and public toilets

Conservation Approach

Liffey Vale House is a protected Structure and has suffered significant damage over the years, including an extensive fire. The significance of the derelict house lies as much in its location, scale and its relationship to its site and setting, as in the fabric and design of the building itself. As such, in approaching the use, conservation, and presentation of the Protected Structure the Design Team have prioritised the need to ensure the scale, and the domestic external character and form of the building is retained in relationship to the site, while ensuring the building has a sustainable new use.

The building will be restored as a biodiversity education centre and an additional sensitive extension added to include a classroom, small café and public toilets. The challenge was to provide the useful space required for the public function of the building, while not swamping the scale of the historic building, or cutting it off from its relationship with the garden, orchard, and approach drive. Part of our brief was to provide universal access for visitors. The ramps are a response to this. These new spaces offer the opportunity for exhibition as well as movement through the spaces in an inclusive manner for all, and enable the envelope of the historic building to remain free of obtrusive platform lifts.



Plan showing historic building, new classroom, café and public toilets



General site layout showing from east to west, new vehicular entrance to Chapelizod Road, new landscape arrangement with paths, rewilding, clearing of ditches, restored house and new classroom etc., new entrance from west to the orchard site, new bus pull in and disabled parking space and new link to Liffey Valley Park and Chapelizod.

Current Condition of the Site

Alder, ash and elder saplings have self-seeded and bramble thickets are spreading in the orchard and gardens. In the former water meadows, larger alders have established themselves along the ditches, and the mature willows have split, fallen and regrown. Trees are also colonising the raised area at the east end of the site. A number of species of bats have been recorded at the site, common bird species nest and frogs, are also resident. It is not however, only native “wild” species who are claiming space for themselves. The laurel, buddleia and snowberry have spread from their original planned locations within the garden, and two stands of Japanese knotweed have established themselves in the reclaimed part of the site. Himalayan Balsam, an invasive annual, is brought into the site by natural processes.

In order to maximise the potential within the site, for the development of increased biodiversity, and for learning opportunities for both the public, and the Dublin City Council, it is proposed to not simply stand back and let nature take its course throughout the site. By a series of carefully considered interventions, and responses, to the contrasting existing conditions at the site we hope to facilitate the evolution of a variety of different habitats through the “self-willed” processes of nature.

In proposing management regimes for the site, and in order to inform the landscape design of the site we have identified three distinct zones:

1. The gardens and orchard, lying on the gently rising ground between the boundary ditch and the Chapelizod Road.
2. The level area, bounded and divided by historic ditches, that was formerly the flood plain of the River Liffey.
3. The raised area, at the eastern side of the site that is formed of spoil, dumped there when the GAA Sports Grounds were created.



1 Gardens and Orchard

Within the bounds of the historic garden and orchard it is proposed to take a composite approach, illustrating how wild species can flourish in a garden / cultivated area in combination with wildlife friendly ornamental planting. The management regime will be low maintenance and organic, and the

buildings and paved areas and drainage designed to minimise negative environmental impacts. Existing garden plants of limited value for biodiversity i.e. cherry laurel, buddleia, snowberry and privet will be removed and re-placed with more wildlife friendly species.

2 The Wilderness

From the perspective of its current and potential ecological importance this is the most significant zone of the site. It is also the area where fewest interventions will be made prior to, and during, the rewilding process. The wilderness area is bounded by ditches and the river. From a visitor management perspective this is important in that the visitor must cross a bridge in order to enter this area, highlighting its autonomy and specialness.

3 Reclaimed Land

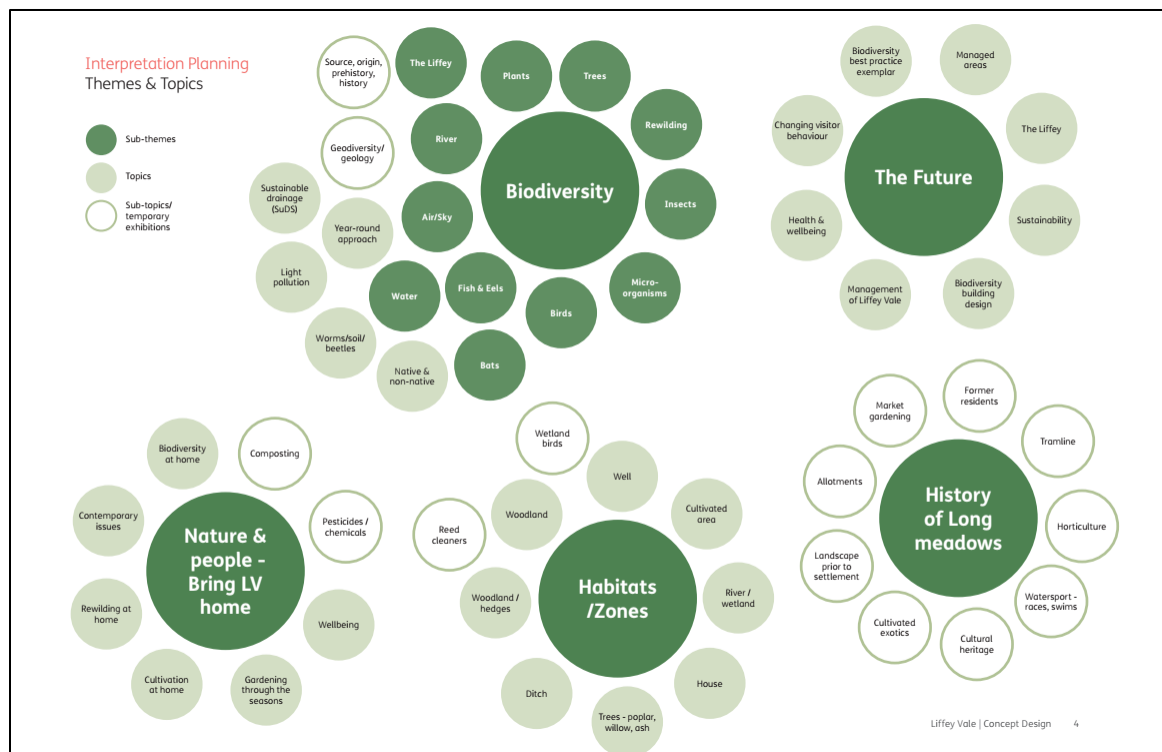
Although both environmentally, and historically the least significant area of the site, this zone is also important as an example of how nature colonises disturbed land (of which inevitably there is much in any city). It is also valuable, in that its raised elevation provides the opportunity to look out into the canopies of the trees and to look down onto the River.

Opportunities for monitoring and community engagement

The project at Cois Abhann offers the opportunity to illustrate the potential and processes of managed rewilding, in the specific context of Dublin and the River Liffey. The project is a further chapter in the story of the site: the symbiosis between humans and non-human life forms over thousands of years. The new paths and infrastructure will enable the public to explore and enjoy the environment and learn about the natural world. Highlights will be the river and the abandoned fields, now a “wilderness”.

This project will bring in better plants and ensure appropriate management. The public is being invited in to see what happens when only limited maintenance is applied, and a site is taken over by a management body which ensures biodiversity enhancement is the objective. It will demonstrate good management for biodiversity to the people who visit the site who can learn about mowing regimes for grasslands which will enhance grassland biodiversity, the establishment of native hedgerows, habitats which will encourage bird nesting and the selection of pollinator friendly shrubs and herbs.

As the new, modified and existing woodlands and grasslands establish themselves, other species and life forms will follow: insects and birds, fungi, mosses, algae, microscopic life forms. Exactly what and when cannot be foretold, but this project offers the opportunity to observe, monitor and learn from this process. Bird diversity and numbers of nesting birds is an excellent indicator. Other forms of monitoring may also be undertaken; there is a wealth of opportunity for community engagement and dissemination of understanding through educational initiatives.



Interpretive themes to be developed as part of the education programme as Cois Abhann