

CITY DESK

Dublin City Council Propose a New Action Plan for North Bull Island

by Donal Corrigan

May 20, 2020



Photo by Donal Corrigan

It's a dull, grey day, but that doesn't stop groups of people flocking to North Bull Island, on the northern edge of Dublin Bay, on the first day of the **government's easing** of the Covid-19 restrictions.

"Bump, bump, bump," says a child to the rhythm of his dad's bike rolling over the wooden boards on the Bull Island bridge.

The father cycles onto the island with his toddler balanced precariously on the handlebars.

Silver and slate clouds stretch over the pair of them and continue out over the Irish Sea to the horizon this Monday evening.

“It’s not just a beach,” says Green Party Councillor Donna Cooney. “It’s an area that needs to be protected.”

This week, Dublin City Council has proposed the “North Bull Island Nature Reserve Action Plan, 2020–2025” as a blueprint for how to do that.

An Action Plan to Preserve the Island

For some time now, Dublin City Council has been debating how best to preserve the fragile landscape of North Bull Island.

The council’s new plan for that was presented to local councillors at a meeting of their North Central Area Committee on Monday, along with updates on conservation efforts for the island.

This new action plan is a continuation of a **2009 report** that set out major issues with regards to maintaining the conservation status of the island.

“This is basically distilling it down into specific actions that make that happen,” says Social Democrats Councillor Catherine Stocker.

The plan highlights the council’s plans to preserve the island in a variety of ways, such as preserving vegetation, plans for a new interpretive centre to support nature conservation, combating alien vegetation, and **tighter restrictions** for dogs being walked without a leash.

Out of the 20 aims on the plan, seven focus on curtailing the potential impact on North Bull Island from visitors, dog walkers and golfers.

Reducing access to certain parts of North Bull Island is one way the plan recommends doing this.

“For conservation reasons, it is proposed to restrict access to the northern end [of North Bull Island],” a spokesperson for Dublin City Council said.

It’s hoped that this will protect seals and ground-nesting birds, the spokesperson said. Restricted access would curtail humans and dogs disturbing the animals.

The plan also recommends restricting access to the salt marshes on the island to protect wild fowl and wading birds, said the spokesperson.

Golf Clubs

St Anne's Golf Club and Royal Dublin Golf Club have been cited in the report as potentially having an impact on the water table below North Bull Island. According to the report, both golf clubs "extract fresh groundwater for irrigation purposes".

Hydrology, or the distribution of water, plays a significant role in the ecology of the island, and a high water table is of importance, as it allows rare plant species to grow, says the report.

Tests are due to be carried out to see if the water table is increasing or decreasing at the moment.

"Changes to flora would indicate a possible lowering, but further studies are required," said the spokesperson for the council.

Another concern raised in the plan was St Anne's Golf Club wastewater treatment near the marshes on Bull Island.

"There is a constructed wetland adjacent to the alder marsh. Concern relates to potential impact in the event of a malfunction," said a spokesperson for the council.

St Anne's Golf Club declined to comment when contacted about the council's proposals.

"It just takes some accident and you can end up with an ecological disaster," Councillor Cooney says.

Dublin Fire Brigade were called to North Bull Island on Monday night to extinguish a **brush fire there**. Dublin City Council **later reported** that the firefighters had managed to keep the "minor fire" from spreading and "damaging protected habitats and species".

New Restrictions on Walking Dogs

Dogs should be kept on a leash in the dunes and in the northern section of the island all year round, the plan recommended.

Leashes can be kept off dogs on the southern end of the beach outside of bathing season – which runs from 1 June to 15 September – the plan states.

“We’ve received multiple emails from people concerned about this,” says Stocker, the Social Democrats councillor.

This might be down to a miscommunication, she says.

“A lot of emails that I have gotten in suggest that people’s dogs must be on leashes at all times, that’s not the case,” she says.

Some councillors wonder if the new dog walking measure is too harsh.

“I think that it is a little bit too much. I think we should look at a happy medium,” says Fianna Fáil Councillor Deirdre Heney.

This would be to let their dogs off the leash until a certain time, she says.

“Up to say 11 o’clock. The same way that we do it in our city parks. In St Anne’s Park the dog can be off the lead until 11 am,” she says.

Both Stocker and Cooney said they would support a system like this.

Building a New Centre

Progressing the plans for a new interpretive center on the island is also part of the action plan.

The current centre, built in 1986, is in the middle of sensitive dunes – any upgrades to it would cause unavoidable ecological disturbance, Stocker says.

This centre, which accommodates up to 20,000 visitors a year, acts as an educational and awareness raising centre, as well as a depot for maintenance purposes.

The planning process for the interpretive centre could happen as early as autumn 2020, the spokesperson said.

But some councillors are not keen on the proposed centre.

“The Discovery Centre [interpretative centre] in my view should be located off the island in the ‘buffer zone’ of the biosphere,” says independent Councillor Damian O’Farrell.

“The causeway is so peaceful to walk down. I don’t see why we have to ruin that,” he says.

“I’m not convinced that we need an [new] interpretive centre,” says Councillor Heney.

It seems like a bit of a contradiction trying to protect a biosphere while building an interpretive centre on it, says Heney.

Next Steps

The local area committee voted to further discuss the action plan in their June meeting when they can hopefully meet in person, Heney says.

A committee, or oversight forum, will be set to oversee the aims of the action plan being completed over the next five years.

“The oversight forum will include local politicians, I would certainly like to be on it. The Clontarf Residents Association have asked to be included on it and that has been agreed with them,” says Heney.

