

An aerial photograph of a residential area, likely Mountsandel, featuring a large lake on the right, a dense forest in the center, and a road at the bottom. The image is overlaid with a teal color filter. The text 'A Blueprint for Mountsandel' is centered in the lower half of the image.

A Blueprint for
Mountsandel

Contents

1. Introduction

- A Blueprint for Mountsandel 03
- Project Context 06
- Study Area 06

2. Understanding Mountsandel

- Site Location and description 08
- History of Mountsandel 10
- Legal and Policy Context 12
- Physical Analysis 17
- Conclusions of Analysis 19

3. Vision for Mountsandel

- Mountsandel – Vision Statement 20
- Blueprint Concept 21
- Blueprint Overview 21

4. Proposed Blueprint Projects – possible sites for development

- Somerset Riverside Park Car Park 22
- Somerset Forest 23
- Somerset Riverside Park (including Christie Park to the north) 23
- ABC Laboratories Site 24
- Locks and quayside 24
- The Cutts Crossing 25
- Mountsandel Wood – Landing/orientation station 26
- Anglo-Norman Fort 26
- The Mesolithic Encounter 27
- Mountsandel Wood Jetty 28
- Existing car parks 28
- Former ABC Laboratories Site 28
- Visitor orientation hub/facility for Mountsandel Experience 29
- Span Board Site 29
- Visitors to the Mountsandel Experience 30
- Funding Options 30

5. The Way Forward

- Blueprint Summary 31
- Blueprint Delivery 31





1. Introduction

A Blueprint for Mountsandel

Mountsandel is a site of outstanding regional and national importance to the common heritage of humanity in Ireland. The site is a repository of man's interaction with the landscape and its location on the River Bann can chart much of the island's history as far back as the Mesolithic period.

This document sets out a possible strategic vision and potential options for development of the wider Mountsandel site, including the adjacent lands on the western bank of the Lower River Bann (referred to in this document as the Study Area).

It has been developed by Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council officers through a process of consultation with statutory bodies (Forest Service, Waterways Ireland, NIEA), the local interested community, Coleraine Rotary Club and Professor Peter Woodman of University College, Cork.

Project Context

There has been much discussion and deliberation as to what is the best management and presentation of the Mountsandel site. The impressive Anglo-Norman fort and the forest walks have been a local attraction and recreational amenity for the people of Coleraine for many years. The archaeological excavations carried out between 1973 and 1977 uncovered evidence of habitation some 9,000 years ago and with this the significance of the site gives Coleraine the claim of having Ireland's earliest settlement, referred to by Professor Woodman as 'the cradle of civilisation in Ireland.'

Coleraine Borough Council commissioned a development and promotional options report in 2003 and key recommendations included a tourism and educational discovery centre, interpretation, a woodland walk and a feature discovery point circa to the Mesolithic dig site.

Causeway Coast & Glens Museum Service have been proactive over the years in raising awareness and promoting the historical significance of the site in the local and wider community. A key output has been the creation of a dedicated interactive website (www.mountsandel.com) telling the 'Mountsandel Story', primarily aimed at school children as part of the schools' curriculum.

The process of developing the Coleraine Market Yard museum facility, which subsequently didn't materialise, also captured and consulted on the historical heritage and importance of the site.

In 2003 Waterways Ireland, following consultation and the recognition of the River Bann and Mountsandel as important recreational and heritage sites, installed two jetties on both sides of the river at Mountsandel Wood and Somerset Riverside Park.

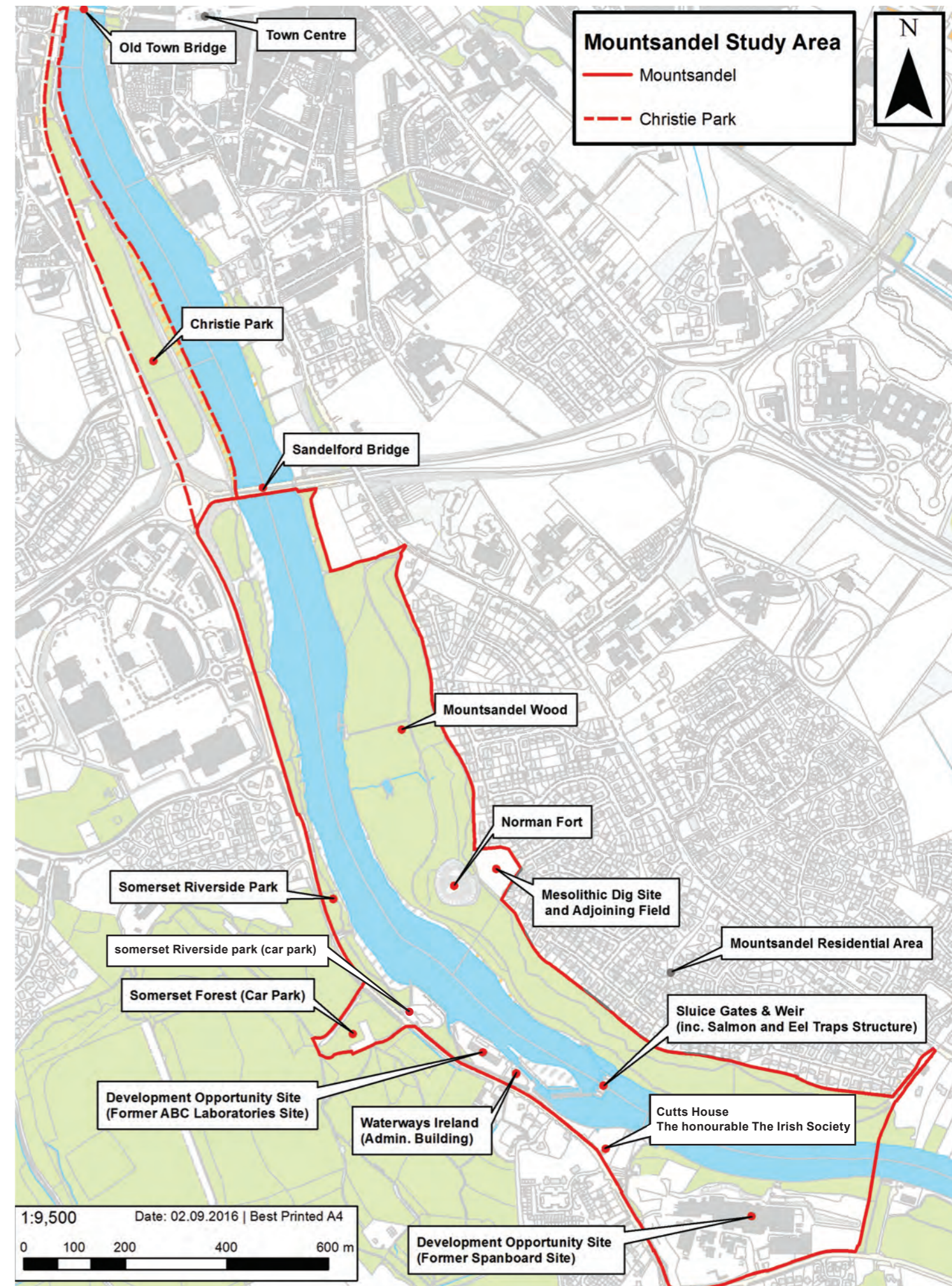
More recently Council Officers, with the support and interest of the Rotary Club of Coleraine, have informally been looking at ways to promote the importance of the site.

At the Leisure and Development meeting in November 2015, Council Officers presented an information item that outlined the work that had taken place on assessing the potential of the Mountsandel location, along with the surrounding amenity; and noted that officers wished to produce a document assessing the potential for development for the wider 'Mountsandel Experience' with a view to presenting this, with recommendations, to Council.

Norman fort, the Mesolithic dig site and adjoining field, Somerset Riverside Park and The Cutts sluice gates and associated buildings. Christie Park, immediately north of Sandelford Bridge, is also included given its strategic riverside location connecting Mountsandel with the town centre.

Study Area

The Study Area for this Mountsandel blueprint is delineated on the plan below. It extends from the south eastern corner of Mountsandel Wood in the south, to Sandelford Bridge in the north. It is bounded on the west by the Castleroe Road, and on the east by the dense Mountsandel residential development. It includes Mountsandel Wood, the Anglo-



2. Understanding Mountsandel

Site Location and Description

Mountsandel is situated on the southern periphery of Coleraine town, occupying higher ground on the east bank of the Lower River Bann, at a distinctive bend in the river just north of 'The Cutts' (a natural rapid and weir on the Bann, taking its name from a man-made cut made through the rock in the early 1600s to facilitate the passage of timber being floated downstream to Coleraine during the Plantation of Ulster).

The historic site, comprising the Mesolithic dig site and the Anglo-Norman Fort, is broadly located within Mountsandel Wood, bounded on the west by the Lower River Bann and on the east by the extensive Mountsandel residential development.

Mountsandel Wood, comprising 21.3 hectares of linear woodland, flanks the eastern bank of the river. Mountsandel Rd (C91), running parallel to the river in a broadly north-south orientation, bisects the residential layout, acting as an arterial route serving the town centre.

The western bank of the river in the vicinity of the site is characterised by publically accessible riparian parkland, providing traffic-free riverside access between The Cutts and the town centre. Somerset Forest largely screens the expansive Somerset residential development further west. The dominant man-made feature at the southern extremity of the Study Area is the weir and sluice gates, spanning the river at The Cutts, whereas Sandelford Bridge dominates the skyline at the northern end of the area.

Castleroe Road (A54) serves the western bank, with excellent connectivity, via Strand Rd roundabout, to the ring road, along which the Causeway Coastal Route is signed. The distance from the roundabout to The Cutts is approximately 1.3km.

Cutts House, the administrative home of The Honourable The Irish Society, provides a touch of riverside Georgian architectural elegance adjacent to The Cutts.



History of Mountsandel

It is well documented that the Lower Bann valley has been occupied by human habitation for approximately 10,000 years. Many artefacts dating from the Mesolithic (c 8,000 – 4,000 BC) and Neolithic (c 4,000 – 2,500 BC) periods have been dredged from the Bann during drainage and navigational improvement works.

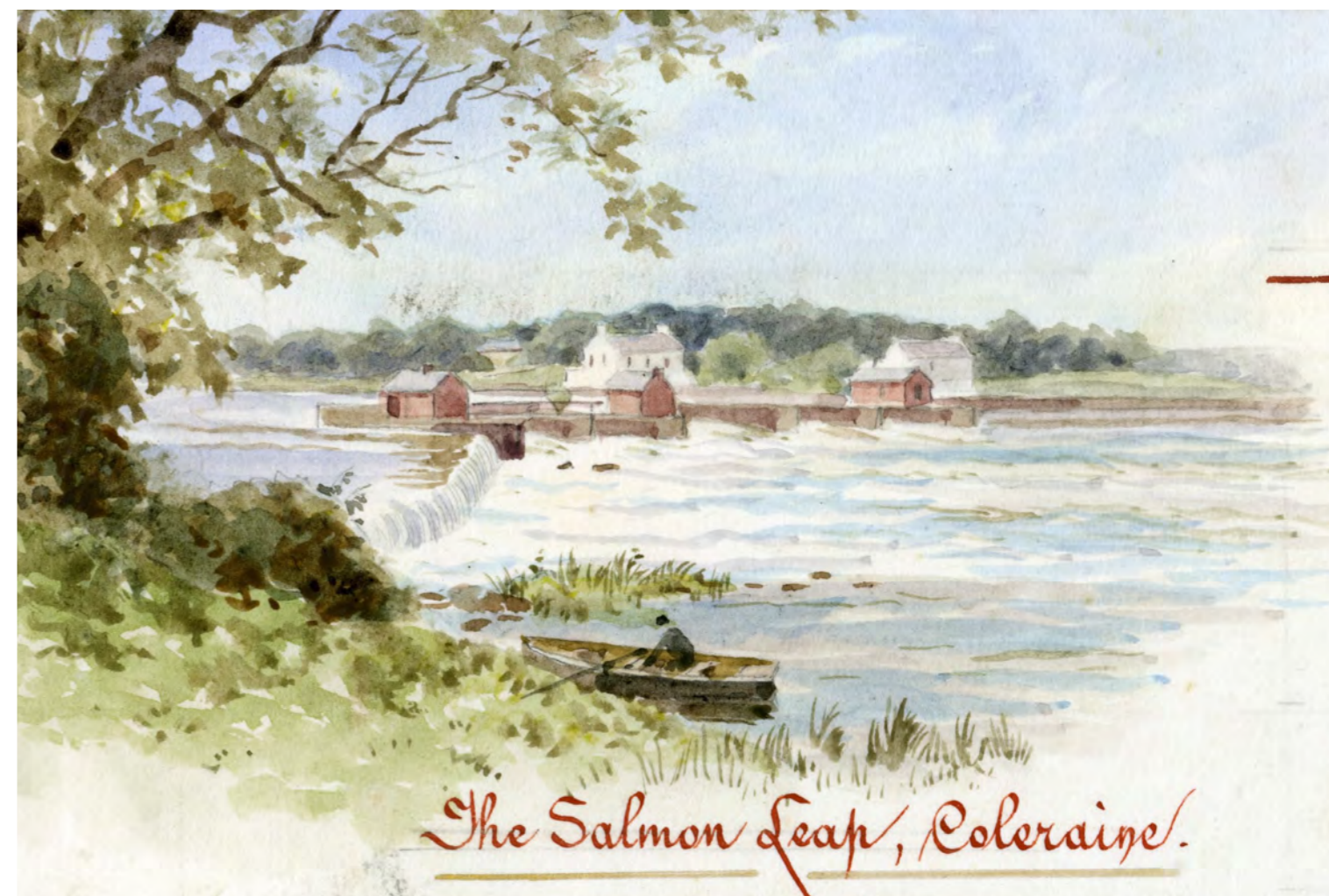
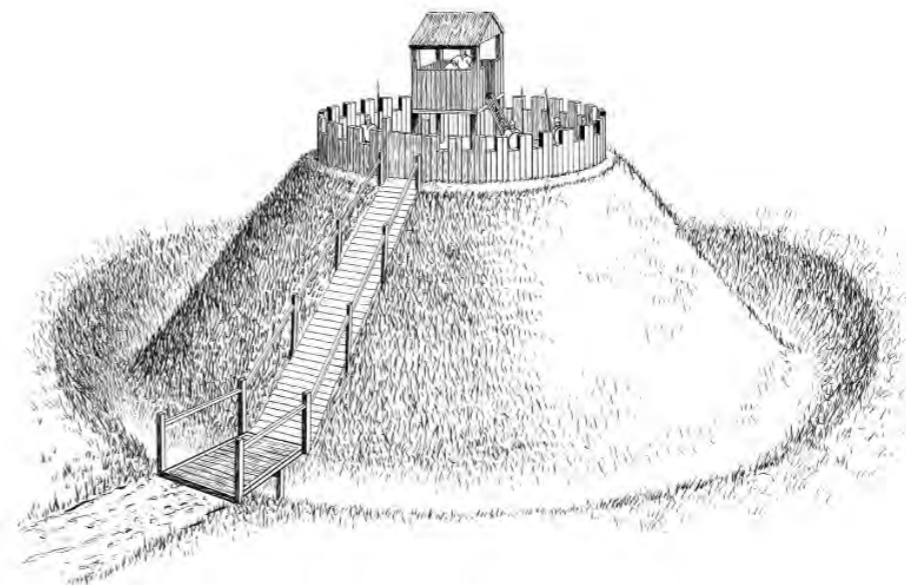
Undoubtedly, the most renowned Mesolithic site on the Bann is Mountsandel, the earliest known settlement in Ireland.

This site, immediately north east of the visually more dominant Anglo Norman earthen fort structure at this same location (known as Mountsandel Fort), comprises a flat, open green space of approx. 1.5 acres, bounded on three sides by residential development and Mountsandel Wood on the fourth. The site was excavated by Professor Peter Woodman of the Ulster Museum during the 1970s, revealing traces of up to seven circular hut structures dated from 7,600 – 7,900 BC.

Habitation of the area continued during the Bronze Age (c 2,500 – 500 BC) and Iron Age (c 500 BC – 450 AD) periods, although it wasn't until the late stages of the early Medieval period (c 450 AD – late 12th Century) that Coleraine started to develop as the settlement we know today. The Anglo Norman fort at Mountsandel, referred to above, is perhaps one of the most recognisable features from that era remaining to this day.

During the Plantation of Ulster, commencing in the early 1600s, The Honourable The Irish Society oversaw the development of Coleraine as a market town enclosed by earthen ramparts, with much of the street pattern layout from that initial planning era remaining in the town centre today.

Development continued throughout the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, and by the 1970s the suburban growth of the town had extended in a southern direction to subsume the then rural setting of Mountsandel, with the planning policy of the day allowing residential development to within several feet of the Mesolithic dig site.



Legal and Policy Context

Statutory Designations

The Mountsandel site and river corridor are not subject to any local or international statutory policy designations e.g. Special Area of Conservation, Area of Special Scientific Interest, National Nature Reserve.

The Mesolithic dig site is a Scheduled Archaeological Site and Monument (within private ownership), while the adjoining Norman Fort site is a State Care Archaeological Site and Monument (within public ownership).

Local Government Reform and The Planning Act

Since April 2015, as a result of Local Government Reform, Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council has come into existence, subsuming the former legacy district councils of Ballymoney, Coleraine, Limavady and Moyle.

The following powers and functions, likely to have an impact on the successful delivery and realisation of this blueprint, transferred

from central to local government during the reform process: local planning, including development control and plan functions; community planning; regeneration; off-street parking and aspects of local tourism.

It is Council's aspiration that this blueprint will help inform any future policy compilation relevant to the Mountsandel and wider Bann corridor area of Coleraine.

Northern Area Plan 2016

The Northern Area Plan (NAP) 2016 becomes the local development plan for the Council area until the Council adopts its own Local Development Plan.

Within the NAP, the following Local Landscape Policy Areas (LLPAs) apply to the Mountsandel site and the wider Mountsandel river corridor area in Coleraine:

- Mountsandel Woods LLPA
- River Bann and Banks LLPA
- The Cutts LLPA
- Somerset Woods LLPA

It is worth noting the Mesolithic dig site, and adjoining open green space, falls outside the Coleraine Settlement Development Limit, as does Mountsandel Wood, Somerset Forest and Somerset Riverside Park. The Waterways Ireland facilities at The Cutts fall within the Castleroe Settlement Development Limit.

Any proposed development resulting from the Blueprint must take cognisance of the relevant plans and accompanying policy statements.



Coleraine Town Centre Masterplan 2012

The Coleraine Town Centre Masterplan, adopted by Coleraine Borough Council in 2012, pays due cognisance to the presence and importance of the Mountsandel site and the River Bann in relation to Coleraine Town Centre.

This importance is reflected in part of the vision statement, outlined below, which forms the basis upon which the Masterplan initiatives were due to be evaluated.

“Coleraine Town Centre will sustainably develop into a leading historic and cultural destination by drawing on its plantation origins and deep rooted Mesolithic connections associated with the archaeological site of Mountsandel.

Well designed pedestrian routes, streets and spaces, that embrace the River Bann creating a distinctive waterfront, will ensure good connections throughout the town centre and adjoining residential neighbourhoods.”

Several of the aims and objectives made reference to strengthening Coleraine’s historic relationship with the River Bann and strengthening existing connections with the historic Mountsandel site.

With specific reference to improving accessibility for walkers and cyclists within the town, the masterplan also proposed that additional pedestrian and cycle routes would extend the existing network along both sides of the River Bann, taking cognisance of the National Cycle Network routes 93 and 96.

It stated that scope also exists to provide a pedestrian and cycle crossing point further south along the Bann linking Mountsandel to the Cutts.

It is hoped that this blueprint for Mountsandel will be read in conjunction with the Town Centre Masterplan and help to inform and guide future developments in this area of the town.



Recreational, Tourism and Commercial Product Identification Study for the Lower Bann Corridor

This evaluation was commissioned by a partnership involving Waterways Ireland, the 4 local authorities within whose areas the river runs, Tourism NI, Sport NI and The Honourable The Irish Society. The purpose of the report was to identify what action to take to enhance recreational, tourism and commercial opportunities on the Lower Bann, establishing a vision and statement of ambition to guide future development.

The document makes reference to the development of ‘Tourism and Recreation Hubs on the Lower Bann’, the concept of the ‘hub’ being about the provision of leisure facilities and amenities in key locations. Mountsandel is identified as one such ‘hub’.

Amongst other recommendations, Mountsandel is also identified as a potential ‘honeypot’ site for a proposed Lower Bann Heritage Trail.

At the time of writing, the final report had not been completed and adopted by the respective agencies.



The Norman Fort when viewed from the west bank

Physical Analysis

For the purposes of this report's physical analysis of the Study Area, it has been sub-divided as follows:

1. The Mesolithic dig site and adjoining field, together with the neighbouring Norman Fort in Mountsandel Wood.
2. The immediate wider River Bann corridor extending from the Old Town Bridge to the Cutts, including Mountsandel Wood

Mesolithic dig site, adjoining field and Norman Fort

The earthen mound on higher ground on the east bank at the distinctive bend in the river, constituting the Norman Fort, is synonymous with 'historic Mountsandel' for the average onlooker when viewed from the readily accessible west bank of the River Bann within Coleraine.

Owing to topography, vegetation cover, and neighbouring residential development, it is virtually impossible to view the Mesolithic dig site and adjoining field from anywhere other than within the boundary of the site itself.

Equally, views from the Mesolithic site are extremely limited, whereas the summit of the Fort affords magnificent panoramic views overlooking the Bann and The Cutts, and further afield towards the higher ground in a westerly direction.

The residential development backing on to the Mesolithic site on 3 sides is typical of 1970s suburban sprawl and, owing to planning policy during that period, houses were constructed to within several metres of the actual dig site. The site is accessed from the housing development via one formal and one informal pedestrian access routes, together with an informal pedestrian access point on the site boundary with Mountsandel Wood.

Vehicular access to the site is problematic, the only route being via narrow service roads winding through the dense housing estate adjoining the site. One such road, Mountfield Drive, culminates in a cul-de-sac bounding the site, capable of accommodating no more than 2 or 3 parked cars.

No formal car parking exists in close proximity to serve the historic site. The closest car park, at a distance of approx.

1150m, is a small parking area at the south eastern extremity of the Wood, with capacity for around 10 well-parked cars, accessed from Mountsandel Road. A dust path located on the higher land ridge within the Wood links the car park with the site.

The Norman Fort is virtually totally surrounded by mature trees yet, owing to its height, remains the dominant landscape feature in this suburban riverine landscape.

Being located within a popular suburban woodland setting, and owing to the wood's particular footpath network, the Norman Fort experiences year-round usage. Compared to the neighbouring Mesolithic dig site, the Fort affords the visitor a more rewarding 'user experience', both in terms of the physical integrity and scale of the earthen structure, and the views afforded from same.

Unfortunately the physical characteristics and visual appearance of the Mesolithic dig site belie the historical significance of this particular location.



Wider River Bann Corridor

Undoubtedly the River Bann is the outstanding landscape feature within the wider river corridor in this part of Coleraine. The western flank is characterised by publicly-accessible riparian ‘parkland’, with the formal manicured Christie Park to the north in stark contrast to the more natural riparian habitat within Somerset Riverside Park to the south.

The northern extremity of Christie Park culminates at the Old Town Bridge in the town centre, the park acting as a physical link between it and the out-of-town Mountsandel setting at The Cutts.

Mountsandel Wood, comprising 21.3 hectares of linear riverside woodland and extending in length to approx. 1,800m riverside frontage, screens the adjoining residential development and provides a constantly changing backdrop due to the variety of indigenous broadleaved trees planted within it.

The Cutts, in its own right, is an extremely significant example of industrial archaeology. In order to perform the modern day function of controlling the flow of the River Bann from Lough Neagh, the presence of dominant sluice gates are necessary and sit cheek-by-jowl with the aesthetically more pleasing historic salmon and eel traps.

A shared use pathway, for walkers and cyclists, runs throughout the length of Christie Park and Somerset Riverside Park, providing an excellent continuous riverside traffic-free route between The Cutts and the town centre at the Old Town Bridge.

Views of the Wood are possible throughout the length of the parkland, with the earthen Norman Fort only becoming visible further south depending on the degree of leaf cover of the surrounding trees.



Conclusion of Analysis

The work carried out by Council officers and stakeholder partners to date has allowed an analysis of key findings and conclusions:

- There already exists, on both sides of the river, quality accessible public amenity in the form of riverside parkland and deciduous woodland with integral suburban public access.
- The River Bann, a dominant feature within the Study Area, has in the past offered, and continues to offer, important historical, recreational and leisure interest.
- The majority of the natural and built features within the Study Area is within public ownership.
- The Study Area has several key historical features, including the Mesolithic dig site, Anglo Norman Fort and The Cutts spanning the River Bann.
- The Mesolithic dig site and adjoining field is in private ownership.
- A ‘physical disconnect’ exists in the form of the river, separating the significant historic sites on the east bank from the existing visitor infrastructure on the west bank.
- The landscape quality of the Study Area is recognised within the NAP through various Local Landscape Policy Area (LLPAs) designations.
- There already exists strategic documented support for appropriate development and promotion of the ‘Mountsandel Experience’.



3. Vision for Mountsandel

Mountsandel - Vision Statement

Mountsandel is a site of outstanding regional and national importance to the common heritage of humanity in Ireland. The site is a repository of history and its location on the River Bann can chart much of the island's history as far back as the Mesolithic period. Acknowledging the site's significance, this document proposes the following overarching vision for the site:

Through appropriate development and conservation, the custodians of the site will bring our shared history to light and make it accessible to the wider community and visitors. Through using creative and inspirational, yet authentic, stories, it is proposed to bring the story of Mountsandel to life by using vivid and unforgettable imagery to entertain, inform and energise its visitors.



Blueprint Concept

As alluded to earlier, a very strong sense of disconnection exists due to the spatial location and physical environment in which Mountsandel is located.

The River Bann is an obvious physical barrier separating the west and east banks. The Mesolithic site, Norman Fort and Mountsandel Wood are clustered on the elevated east bank, while Somerset Riverside Park, The Cutts and a possible site location for any potential visitor orientation hub/facilities are located directly opposite on the lower-lying west bank.

Owing to the physical restrictions and environmental sensitivities governing any proposed development on the east bank, it is suggested that any significant development options should occur on the west bank in the vicinity of Somerset Riverside Park Car Park and the general area surrounding The Cutts.

The key blueprint concept is to create a 'Mountsandel Experience' by connecting the various sites of significance on both sides of the

river, both by physical interventions, including trails and 'bridge structures', and intellectual and interpretative solutions.

The key blueprint concept is to "overcome the disconnect", both in a physical and psychological sense, that currently exists regarding the 'Mountsandel Experience'.

Ideally, and in line with one of the main proposals emanating from this blueprint study, development proposals on the west bank should be physically linked with the historic assets on the east bank by means of a new river crossing structure incorporating the existing sluice gates and salmon traps structure spanning the river at The Cutts.

Blueprint Overview

Realisation of the proposed Vision Statement for Mountsandel will largely be achieved through the delivery of the following integrated environmental, recreation and regeneration projects.

Collectively they sensitively raise the profile of this unique location, both regionally and nationally, and provide a critical massing of attractions and assets in close proximity suitable for local community benefit, an educational resource and a regional visitor attraction.

These projects, detailed in the following section of the report, range in scale, complexity and cost of delivery.

4. Proposed Blueprint Projects – possible sites for development



Somerset Riverside Park Car Park

Due to the topography and residential development pattern immediately surrounding the Norman Fort and Mesolithic site at Mountsandel on the east bank of the Bann, opportunities for additional car parking and associated visitor orientation developments are severely restricted and deemed unsuitable for further investigation, and consequently any visitor orientation hub/facilities are likely to be sited on the west bank.

Bearing reference to the Causeway Coastal Route (the Causeway Coastal Route (CCR) passes through Coleraine approx. 1.3km north of this site, with the Strand Road roundabout offering a suitable junction with Castleore Road for readily accessing the site), Somerset Riverside Park car park and amenity area offers the ideal location for development as a visitor orientation point for the wider Mountsandel Experience. This site, on the western bank, almost directly opposite the Norman Fort, boasts an extensive riverside frontage in public ownership, with fantastic accessibility by car, foot, bicycle and even by boat, owing to the jetties installed on this section of the river by Waterways Ireland.

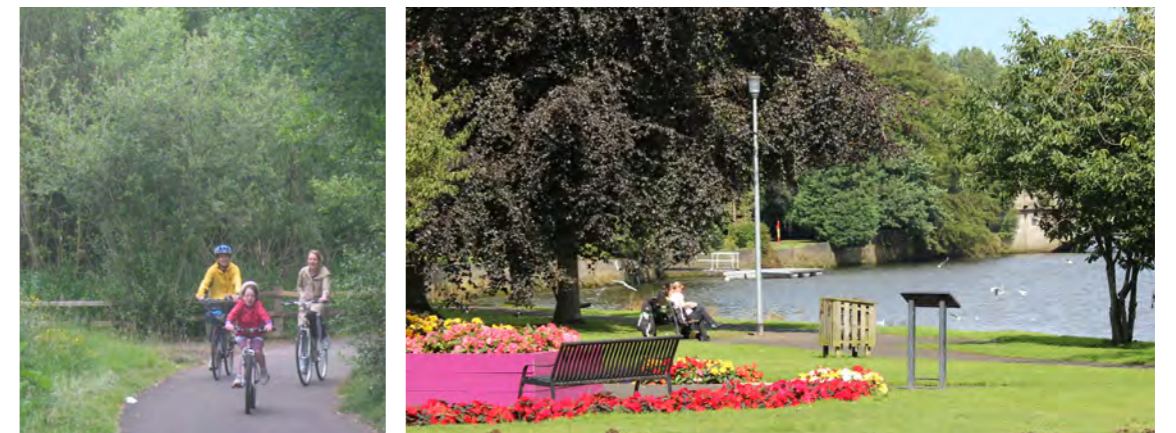
Public sculpture, in the form of 'Source', provides an eye-catching focal point on the river's edge, depicting the history of man's development on this island through the ages.

Proposals include redesign of the car park to increase capacity, provision of an upgraded picnic area and the installation of a viewing platform/contemplation deck projecting over the riverbank providing panoramic views of the river both upstream and downstream.



Somerset Forest

The above site is also adjacent, albeit separated by Castleroe Road, to Somerset Forest, with an extensive trail network and parking. Potential exists to develop additional car parking and coach parking facilities, subject to agreement with Forest Service.



Somerset Riverside Park (including Christie Park to the north)

Owing to the juxtaposition of Somerset Riverside Park and Christie Park on the west bank, continuous linear traffic-free linkages exist between this proposed 'visitor orientation point' and the town centre. A shared-use path adjoins the river, providing opportunities for viewing the site when approached from both directions. Through strategic and sensitive vegetation clearance, opportunities exist to develop and strengthen these views through the construction of one or two viewing points/contemplation decks.

Opportunities also exist at the northern end of Christie Park, essentially linked to the pedestrianised town centre, to encourage or 'direct' tourists, perhaps on foot or bicycle, to visit the 'Mountsandel Experience', possibly through the creative use of life-size sculptures depicting human and animal life during Mesolithic times. (line drawing)



ABC Laboratories Site

This derelict site comprising approx. 1.6 acres, in the ownership of The Honourable The Irish Society, represents a significant development opportunity site. The site occupies a prime riparian location, with continuous river frontage affording excellent panoramic views of the river and towards the historic Mountsandel site. There is no public access along the river front within the site. The site falls within the development limit for Castleroe village as delineated in the Northern Area Plan (NAP) 2016.



Locks and quayside

The locks and quayside adjacent to the Waterways Ireland administrative building are fully accessible to the public by foot and afford magnificent opportunities to experience the river at The Cutts. Access by boat is facilitated by a modern jetty. Opportunities exist to further develop this public space, including interpreting the story of the salmon, the history of The Cutts and the Plantation of Ulster. Given the proximity of fast-flowing deep water at this location, any proposed developments must incorporate appropriate and sympathetic public safety measures.



The Cutts Crossing

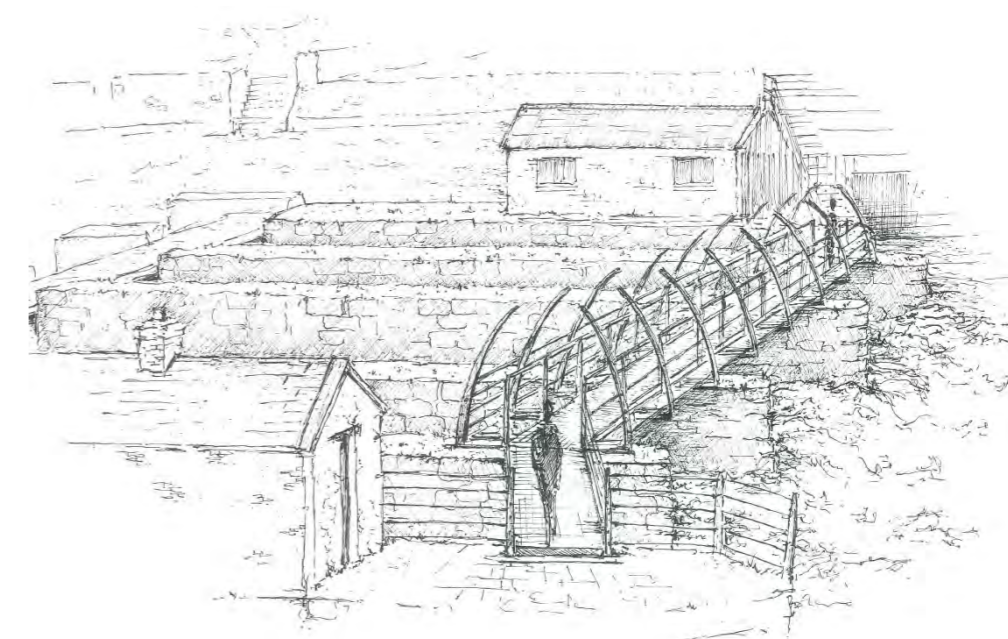
Extensive engineered structures, constructed in phases over a 200 year period, already span the entire width of the river at this location known as The Cutts.

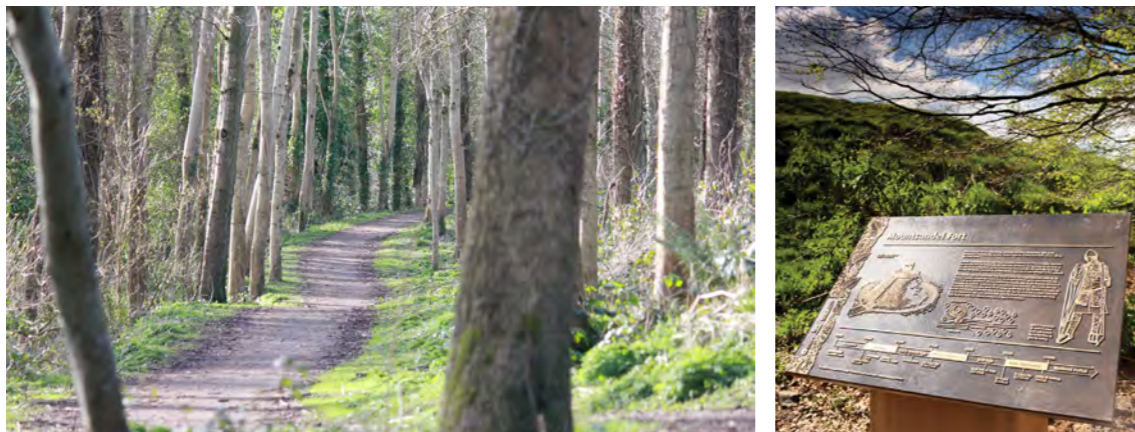
The feasibility should be explored of utilising these existing structures to carry a new pedestrian crossing/bridge structure, to enable people to walk from one bank to the other, effectively overcoming the 'physical disconnect' that exists between the east and west banks. (line drawings) Opportunities exist for interpreting the story of salmon and eel fishing, while the two small fishermen's 'cottages' on the piers could also be incorporated into any interpretative solution.

Any potential bridge structure design should be sympathetic to, and potentially influenced by, the Mountsandel story, while public art or sculpture could be incorporated depicting Mesolithic lifestyles e.g. bronze life-size sculpture of Mesolithic man gaffing salmon. (line drawing)

It is recognised that the sluice gates are an integral element in the overall drainage management system for Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann, and any proposals for a pedestrian river crossing at this location would require extensive consultation with, and agreement from a range of stakeholders, principally Rivers Agency (DAERA).

In addition to the symbolism of broadly following in the footsteps of Mesolithic man by crossing the river at this location, a new crossing facility at this point would create a range of possible walking routes and link the village of Castleroe with development on the east bank.





Mountsandel Wood – Landing/orientation station

In the event of a bridge structure being constructed, it would be necessary and advantageous to create a ‘welcome and orientation point’ at the intersection of the bridge and the Wood. The Wood, occupying approx. 21 Ha of riverside land, has much to offer in terms of an existing trail network and rich biodiversity. Visitors could be introduced to the woodland setting, with interpretation and signage highlighting points of interest e.g. Anglo-Norman Fort and Mesolithic site. Opportunities also exist to integrate life-size sculptures within the woodland setting, depicting, amongst others, Mesolithic hunters and animals.



Anglo-Norman Fort

The Fort is perhaps the most iconic and readily identifiable feature within the Mountsandel Experience, arguably due to its elevated and dominant position overlooking the Bann when viewed from the accessible west bank. Within a wider Mountsandel Experience, opportunities exist to develop and promote family fun activities and interpretation at this feature. From the summit of the Fort, magnificent panoramic views are afforded over the River Bann, with The Cutts to the south, and the town of Coleraine to the north, and westwards over Somerset Forest and beyond. The site is a scheduled monument within the ownership of Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA).

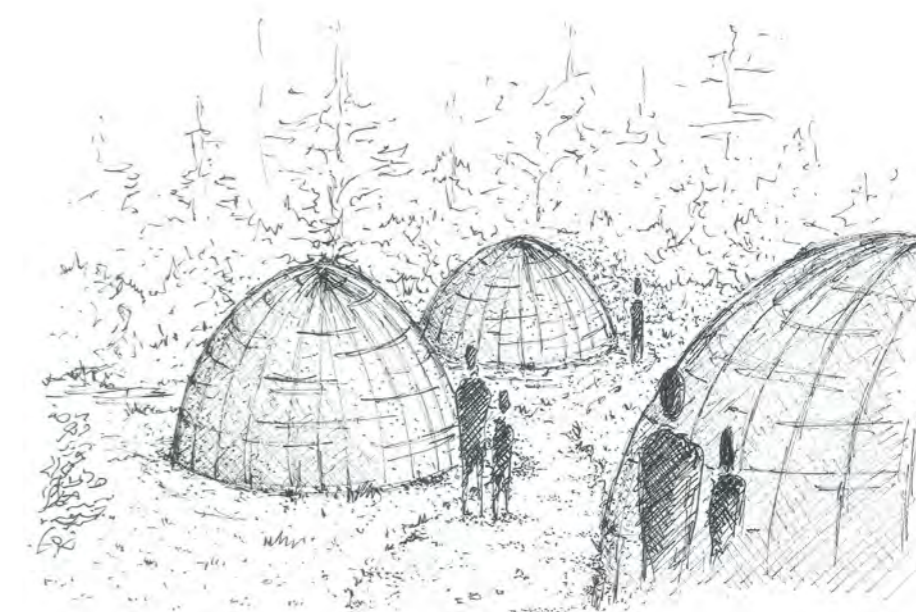


The Mesolithic Encounter

While not readily visible or visually impressive in its current form, the Mesolithic site at Mountsandel is certainly worthy of sensitive development and promotion as the most significant prehistoric site in Ireland, owing to the fact that it is the location of the first known settlement in Ireland, dating from approx. 9,000 years ago.

It is proposed to sensitively create an opportunity to ‘meet the earliest Irish settlers’. Proposed interventions include the following:

- Procure the site into public ownership
- Replicate a Mesolithic family encampment, including huts, planting and landscaping
- Excavate original post holes and install a glass platform over them to enable visitors to view the scale and extent of the original huts
- Develop and install interactive interpretation depicting the site’s history, maximising the potential of modern technology – could include smart phone information point / hologram display or similar
- Sensitive access provision through the site to link into the neighbouring Wood and existing housing estate path network
- Subtle landscaping and planting around the dig site, to provide a contextual setting for the above measures, including screening the dominant residential development overlooking the site





Mountsandel Wood Jetty

Waterways Ireland has installed a jetty facility at Mountsandel Wood on the eastern bank, approx. 0.5km north of the jetty at Somerset Riverside Park car park. Such a facility creates opportunities for guided boat trips on the river and tours of Mountsandel, including openings for private sector operators. Low-key picnic facilities and interpretation are proposed at this site.

Existing car parks

There are currently 2 small car parks on the eastern bank serving Mountsandel Wood, both accessed from Mountsandel Road. The northern one has informal capacity for only about 3 cars, while the southern one can accommodate approximately 10 well-parked vehicles. Visitors using these car parks can walk on foot along forest paths to access the Norman Fort and Mesolithic site. The current proposal for these car parks involves a very 'light-touch' including welcome and orientation signage, interpretation and light surface dressing. Extending parking capacity could involve private land acquisition, a potentially costly solution, and therefore is not a proposal within this blueprint.

Former ABC Laboratories Site

This site is adjacent to the Waterways Ireland site and is approximately 1.6 acres in extent, the majority of which is suitable for development. It is the blueprint authors' understanding that, at the time of writing, the site is in the ownership of The Honourable The Irish Society.



Visitor orientation hub/facility for Mountsandel Experience

A potential opportunity exists for the development of a visitor orientation hub/facility incorporating commercial, educational and interpretative facilities, to essentially act as the administrative hub for the Mountsandel Experience. Given the prominent riverside location on the west bank, the opportunity exists to design an iconic structure with subtle design influences referenced from the key components of an early Mesolithic hut structure. In addition to a café/restaurant, retail and toilets provision, the building could include a mezzanine floor hosting a 'walk around' interactive interpretive facility, telling the story of the "History of Ireland Starts Here", the River Bann, geological timelines and natural history, highlighting how man has interacted with, and changed, the landscape through his industry and habitation. (The location highlighted within this blueprint is situated at The Waterways Ireland Administrative Office, and is for illustrative purposes only, and other sites should also be considered).

Span Board Site

An opportunity exists to work with the current owners of the former Spanboard site, now derelict, believed to be The Honourable The Irish Society, regarding the feasibility of locating a visitor orientation hub/facility on the north western corner of this site overlooking The Cutts. This expansive site enjoys extensive river frontage and associated views and is well served by the main road network.

The site falls within the Settlement Development Limit for Castleroe Village as delineated in the NAP 2016, with the majority of the site zoned as an 'Existing Area of Economic Development' within the Plan.

5. The Way Forward

Visitors to the Mountsandel Experience

Initial analysis suggests that there are 3 key potential markets that would benefit from the Mountsandel Experience:

- The citizens of Coleraine and wider Council area who wish to avail of a high quality riverside public amenity and associated activities
- The schools and further education market who could benefit from a potential interpretative experience that captures the history of Ireland story and the area's natural heritage
- Visitors to the area, both domestic and international, who are seeking a quality heritage experience that complements other regional attractions in our area, and adds critical mass to similar heritage sites such as Carrick-a-rede, the Giants Causeway and Dunluce Castle. The Causeway Coast & Glens area has a strong appeal for discerning tourists seeking a strong cultural experience. Tourism Ireland has identified a key segment for overseas growth as being 'the Culturally Curious' sector.

Funding Options

Depending on the development of a full cost-benefit analysis of the options and other possible options identified after greater stakeholder engagement, the Mountsandel Experience project may be eligible for external funding.

Initial investigations by the authors of this blueprint suggest sources of funding are limited but with a sound assessment

and business case, major funding could be sourced from funding bodies with an interest in bringing benefit to communities through shared heritage and the development of new opportunities that exploit our heritage and make a beneficial contribution to our community. The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) may be a possible source of funding.

The future for 'The Mountsandel Experience'?

A range of possible outcomes exists concerning Council's role regarding the future of Mountsandel:

1. Do nothing i.e. maintain the status quo. Individual organisations, including Council, will continue to maintain their assets as per the current regime, and the public will continue to use them as individual sites in isolation of each other. Knowledge of the historic significance of Mountsandel will remain at its current level, and future opportunities for significant promotion and marketing as a viable heritage tourism product will not materialise. Development opportunity sites may be developed in a fragmented manner with no overall coordinated vision steering such development.
2. Undertake a cost-benefit analysis for selected individual projects identified within the Blueprint and potential additional elements identified after full stakeholder and public consultation. Upon completion of this appraisal, prioritise individual projects and secure agreement on interventions. These may be limited, therefore only certain elements identified within the Blueprint will be realised.
3. Undertake an economic appraisal and design for all the individual projects outlined within the Blueprint and further refined after full stakeholder and public consultation. Upon completion of this appraisal, Council will consider whether it wishes to implement the 'Mountsandel Experience', subject to detailed design, public consultation, securing funding and obtaining necessary statutory approvals.

Blueprint Summary

This blueprint document has proposed a vision and highlighted possible interventions which, if developed, could create a 'Mountsandel Experience' to help both understand and celebrate the regional and national significance of this special landscape called Mountsandel.

Improved riverside access, building on the current provision, will help to focus attention on the river and provide a degree of connectivity currently missing.

Sensitively designed and located signage, interpretation and public sculpture will help to both animate the narrative and guide and direct potential visitors.

An aesthetically pleasing visitor orientation hub in the vicinity of The Cutts would create a focus for the whole 'Mountsandel Experience' and could potentially revitalise this outlying fringe area through attracting additional footfall and creating opportunities for revenue generation.

A new pedestrian crossing over The Cutts, a critical element of the proposed 'Mountsandel Experience', will help to overcome the physical disconnect by connecting both river banks.





A Blueprint for
Mountsandel

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