

Bid for National Contemporary Art Gallery for Wales Anchor Site

National Trust Cymru - Conway Centre, Plas Newydd, Ynys Môn

The Conway Centre is a former naval school located within the heart of the 18th century Plas Newydd estate in one of the most spectacular locations in Wales. Situated on the shore of the Menai Strait it has its foundations firmly within Ynys Môn but looks across to the mountains of Eryri and the communities of Bangor and Caernarfon. The Conway Centre offers a unique range of buildings and facilities including the very large Menai Centre with its hall, chapel, and bedroom accommodation for over 400 people; a Grade II listed Gothic stable block and an atmospheric dockside and harbour.

Plas Newydd is at the heart of Ynys Môn's thriving tourism offer, attracting 160,000 visitors a year. It is part of a wider ecosystem of visitor and cultural attractions within the area including Beaumaris Castle, Anglesey Sea Zoo, Oriel Môn, Plas Cadnant Hidden Gardens, Ribride and Storiell among many more. It attracts visitors by road thanks to its proximity to the A55; by rail with its local station Llanfairpwll on the main lines from Holyhead to Cardiff and London; and by sea, hosting groups from the many cruise ships that dock at Holyhead.

For many years, the Conway Centre has operated as an arts and outdoor education centre under lease to Cheshire West and Cheshire and its predecessor authorities. It has very large spaces that could be used for galleries, extensive storage facilities, kitchens, multiple bathrooms and access to gardens and parkland that could accommodate a wide range of outdoor programming and installations.

In the table below we have demonstrated how very closely the Conway Centre meets the specification for the Contemporary Art Gallery for Wales Anchor Site. We believe the site offers a unique and exciting opportunity to position the Anchor Site within the heart of North-West Wales, enabling it to act as a counterpoint to the large cultural institutions within the South-East of the Country. This Môn a Menai site would link into an existing cultural and tourism offer while simultaneously helping to support the wider regeneration activities within the local area and North Wales as a whole. Importantly, investment in a major gallery at this location would add significant value to wider regeneration investments in the region through the North Wales Growth Deal, the Holyhead Freeport, the National Museum at Llanberis and others.

Key Criteria
Museum and exhibition criteria: 7,500-15,000m ² , with at least 2/3 rd gallery space and with at least one single gallery 1000m ² plus potential to extend further in the future.
The buildings and facilities at the Conway Centre are extensive. They include two primary sites: 1) The main Menai Centre (a former naval school and now outdoor arts and education centre), which comprises a number of buildings dating from the 1960s onwards. These include the very large spaces within the hall and chapel as well as multiple classrooms, bedrooms, bathrooms, and other adaptable spaces. Total floor space is 10,348m² (see appendix 1 for full breakdown of the spaces) 2) The Grade II listed Stables building on the Grand Drive to the estate with its indoor climbing wall and storage spaces. Total floorspace here is 1,543m² In addition, there are: a boathouse, a sun-house (redundant), an outdoor tidal swimming pool which could make an engaging setting for art installations, and the adjoining dockside, jetty and harbour which allow boat access to the site. All of these additional facilities offer the opportunity to extend and expand the offer at the site. It is worth noting that while Plas Newydd itself is currently run as a separate operation, if the National Contemporary Art Gallery for Wales came to the site, National Trust Cymru would be keen to take a holistic approach to the estate ensuring that the visitor offer was complementary and integrated across the whole.
For main gallery areas height of 6m would be required and some gallery areas it would be 10m e.g. for sculpture/ major installations. (Some gallery space could be less than this, but a significant proportion will need to be this height or have the potential to become this height)
Within the current building configuration there are two rooms with the height required: the main hall and the Chapel, both within the Menai building. These two rooms connect so visitors could flow from one to the other. The Main Hall has a stage, and there is lighting in the Chapel so there is already provision for performance art.

All of the buildings that comprise the Menai Centre are adaptable. There is the potential to combine smaller rooms to create larger gallery spaces as required.
Tenure (Long Leasehold or Freehold)
The buildings would be available on a long leasehold arrangement.
Capable of accommodating significant annual footfall. (750k – 1m)
The Conway Centre currently hosts 25,000 children on residential trips per annum. Given the additional infrastructure that is required for overnight visits, if these figures are converted into a day-visiting equivalent it's clear that the site can meet the footfall requirement. Plas Newydd itself already welcomes 160,000 visitors per year. Across the estate as a whole there is the capacity to grow visitor numbers significantly.
Potential to coordinate/facilitate touring exhibitions.
Both the Conway Centre and Plas Newydd have a long history of hosting exhibitions. Growing this art-led programming is a fundamental aspect of National Trust Cymru's vision for the estate. There is the space, the expertise, the facilities, and the desire to coordinate and facilitate these exhibitions going forwards.
External display area for specific installations.
There are a wide variety of external areas that could be used for specific installations. These include gardens, parkland, woodland, coastline, redundant buildings within the estate, and the dockside area. Access to these areas is easy by foot, but there is also golf buggy provision to enable those who are less mobile to access them.
Access, infrastructure and location:
Transport infrastructure (road and rail) –enables sufficient access for large numbers of people.
The Conway Centre is located just 6 minutes' drive from the A55 Expressway on a road which visitors and locals alike use to access one of the most popular sites in North Wales: Newborough Warren and Ynys Llanddwyn. Its nearest railway station, Llanfairpwll, is a request stop on both the Holyhead to London, and Holyhead to Cardiff direct lines. Holyhead port is only 30mins drive away. As a popular stop on many cruise line itineraries, this provides opportunities to attract a high-spending overseas audience. Finally, the Conway Centre offers the unusual option of being accessible directly by boat as it has its own dockside and jetty. In the past various boat tours have operated from the site. If the National Contemporary Art Gallery was located here, there would be the option to work with local providers to incorporate the site into boat tours along the Menai Strait, linking with Bangor, Menai Bridge and other locations.
Tourism Infrastructure (i.e. sufficient hotels, places to stay overnight, restaurant offer).
Visitors coming to a gallery within the Plas Newydd estate will be spoilt for choice in terms of places to eat and stay. As part of a vibrant tourism economy, the visitor infrastructure is well established within nearby Bangor, Menai Bridge and Beaumaris. There is accommodation available at all price points, and a very vibrant food offer with options ranging from the highly popular Dylan's Bistro to the premium culinary experience at Sospan. The Conway Centre also offers both eating and accommodation options on site. There is already a café and a restaurant available at Plas Newydd while the kitchen facilities within the Conwy Centre could be easily used to provide a food & beverage offer within the gallery. Meanwhile, with its bedroom accommodation for 380 students and 55 staff, the building offers the unique and exciting opportunity to offer accommodation within the actual gallery. This would mean that Wales's national gallery could offer a permanent, immersive, residential experience that couldn't be found anywhere else in the world.
Ample Parking for Visitor Numbers. (c500 spaces)
We have calculated that approx. 385 new parking bays could be created in the vicinity of the Menai buildings (see Appendix 2). This would be in addition to the existing 250+ car parking on site and would be subject to planning permission.
Availability of digital connections.
There is full fibre broadband to the site.
Location should include regeneration potential.
The Plas Newydd estate is located within the Môn a Menai regeneration area, and within close proximity to two of North Wales's greatest regeneration priorities: Bangor and Holyhead. Much of the regeneration investment within the region, whether through Targeted Regeneration Investment (TRI), Town Centre funding or others, is

targeted at these two centres. Placing a National Contemporary Art Gallery for Wales between the two would bring significant benefit to both, adding value to the investments already made.

Locating the anchor site here would also consolidate and strengthen Ynys Môn's primary economic driver: tourism. The island has the highest reliance on tourism of anywhere in Wales. In 2021 it had 1.48m visitors creating £342.87m in economic impact and supporting 3,698 full time jobs. However, the tourism offer on the island is particularly seasonal with 15% of all visitors coming in August. It is also very reliant on overnight visits with 90% of the economic visitors coming from the 53% of visitors who stay overnight. One of the most impactful interventions that could be made to increase the value and resilience of the tourism economy on Ynys Môn would be to create an offer that would give people a reason to visit all year round and to make an overnight stay. Placing the National Contemporary Art Gallery for Wales on the island would do exactly that, safeguarding and creating jobs in one of Wales's most precarious local economies.

Proximity to major urban centres/ other visitor attractions Could consider rural location if suitable transport links. Ideally rail and road

The Conway Centre is located only 6 miles from Bangor and less than 30 minutes' drive from Holyhead. This gives it access to the two major areas of population within North-West Wales. Through its train station at Llanfairpwll and its location near the A55 it is also easily accessible from other major urban centres such as Llandudno, Colwyn Bay, Rhyl, Chester, and the cities beyond. It is close to a wide range of other visitor attractions including the Sea Zoo, Rib Ride, Halen Môn, and all of the many cultural attractions such as Beaumaris Castle listed in the culture section below. It is also in close proximity to facilities such as the high-end Plas Coch Holiday Park as well as a range of other holiday accommodation providers at all price points.

Building features:

Landmark building, perhaps existing heritage, significant piece of architecture in its own right, balancing it as a 'magnet' and potential cost envelope - could be new or repurposed building.

The landmark building within the Conway Centre is the castellated and turreted Grade II listed 18th century stable block. This Gothic-style building was developed in 1797 by James Potter and James Wyatt to accommodate 2 coaches and 14 horses and was part of the major remodelling of Plas Newydd during that period. Despite its heritage significance the building is both flexible and robust as its historic interior was removed to accommodate varying educational purposes over the past 50 years.

Meanwhile the main building of the Menai Centre is itself an imposing example of 1960s architecture, especially given its location on the shore of the Menai Strait.

Both buildings would be relatively straight forward to re-purpose given that they are still in 24-hour use and have all services connected to them. The main costs would be in repair and refurbishment, and in the potential to add to recent environmental improvements by introducing a renewable heating system.

Extensive storage space for collections, including suitable security and environmental conditions.

As previously stated, there are many rooms within the suite of Menai Centre buildings, and others available elsewhere on site within the Stable block and beyond. These could be reconfigured to meet specific storage and security requirements. The rooms do not currently meet the necessary museum/gallery environmental standard but could be upgraded.

Lift access within the building infrastructure (or space to incorporate it) for goods and visitors.

There is a ramp into the main building of the Menai Centre. Once inside there is a lift (carrying a maximum of 13 people) at each side of the building. There are also stairlifts in place to give access to communal areas where there are stairs. The two largest spaces of the main hall and the chapel can be accessed on the level.

Adequate and separate areas for exhibition build and change over.

As above, the very large square meterage of the building provides lots of options for exhibition build and change over. It might be preferable to reconfigure some of the spaces to make them more suited for these specific uses.

Policy Considerations:

Supports and promotes wider national and local culture offer in Wales and does not detract from existing culture offer.

Because the Conway Centre is located within the Plas Newydd estate it would benefit from the existing footfall to the site of 160,000 visitors per year. A contemporary art gallery would be very complimentary to the existing, established offer at Plas Newydd which has a long association with the Arts, and which has hosted a variety of art exhibitions in recent years.

Meanwhile the site is in close proximity to Oriel Môn (9 miles) and Storiol (6 miles), both smaller-sized galleries that would benefit enormously from connections to a major national cultural institution. There are a wide range of other cultural assets of all sizes in the area including Beaumaris Castle, Llynnon Mill, Penrhyn Castle, Beaumaris Gaol and Court and the very special ancient burial chamber of Bryn Celli Ddu which is almost directly opposite Plas Newydd. A National Contemporary Art Gallery located within the heart of a cultural network of this kind offers the opportunity both to capitalise on, and grow, an existing cultural audience, while adding significant value and impact. It would increase the interest and appeal of the whole region. Cultural programmes and tours could be designed which incorporated a range of attractions within the network, significantly increasing visitor numbers for all involved.

Potential to explore art in the outdoors such as sculpture especially if a venue came with land and had the potential to use sculpture part as a different way to bring art and nature together.

One of the most special and exciting opportunities of the Conway Centre is the potential within the outdoors. The Centre itself has 60 acres of grounds within its demise and is set within the 40 acres of gardens and 129 acres of woods and parklands of the Plas Newydd estate, meaning there are almost limitless possibilities for outdoor programming. This outdoor offer is set against the spectacular backdrop of the Menai Strait, the Telford Suspension bridge and the mountains of Eryri. The site has direct access to the waters of the Menai Strait with 1.5 miles of the coastline running through the estate. There are a wide variety of other natural settings within the grounds including an Australasian arboretum and a 5-acre rhododendron garden all of which would provide inspiring opportunities to bring art and nature together.

Making the most of the gardens to develop a sculpture park would be completely in tune with National Trust Cymru's own vision for the site. The National Trust centrally is planning to make one of its two biggest investments UK-wide into Plas Newydd to support the local team's vision of increasing access to new audiences. If the Trust's own investment were to be complemented by the development of a contemporary gallery on site, the estate could be presented in a much more holistic way.

Need to ensure digital access options as keyway to democratise and promote access to the national collection.

With good digital connectivity to the site, there would be no barriers to digital access. National Trust Cymru would be keen to work in partnership to improve digital access to the whole of the estate as part of its wider vision of engaging new audiences.

We hope the above demonstrates how well the Conway Centre matches the requirements for an anchor site. From an affordability perspective it could offer excellent value for money. There is an existing operational structure here to work with, negating the need for a costly new build. There are also options to create an environmentally friendly offer at this site, with the potential to use either the extensive grounds and/or the Menai Straits for renewable heating options.

Redacted under S43 of the Freedom of Information Act

There is sector specific expertise within the National Trust Cymru team around the development of contemporary art galleries of national significance which could be invaluable in supporting the development of this project.

We believe this site has something truly special to offer which could turn the idea of a National Contemporary Art Gallery for Wales from a concept into a reality. It provides the opportunity to bring a major cultural institution to the North of Wales which would be accessible to both rural and urban communities. This site would be complementary to existing investments within the area and would make an enormous contribution to regeneration by reducing the seasonality of the tourism offer within a region that is reliant on its visitor economy. We hope you will be excited by the opportunity the Conway Centre offers and will give us the option to progress to the shortlist so we can develop the proposal in more detail.