

The Mourne Mountains Gateway Project



Introduction

Aims

The **Mourne Mountains Gateway Project** aims “to *deliver a world-class tourist attraction that will support the sustainable regional growth of tourism in Northern Ireland and help to position Newry, Mourne and Down as one of the premier tourism destinations on the Island of Ireland. The project will provide major enhancements to the visitor experience in and around the Mournes, whilst protecting and enhancing the natural heritage and habitat of the region.*”

Site location



Purpose

The Mourne Mountains Gateway Project aims to create a sustainable, accessible attraction that enhances the visitor experience while protecting the environment. Our goals include promoting inclusivity, enhancing tourism, and supporting the local economy.

A funding package of up to £200 million is coming to the district through Belfast Region City Deal funding for projects based on tourism, regeneration, infrastructure and innovation. As part of this package, the Mourne Mountains Gateway Project has secured a £30 million Belfast Region City Deal Contract for Funding from the Department for the Economy. Other projects benefiting include Newry City Centre Regeneration and the Newry Southern Relief Road.

The Mourne Mountains Gateway Project will be transformative for Newcastle and Newry, Mourne and Down.

Engagement

As part of this engagement phase, an inclusive series of events and conversations are being held to gather the views of residents, businesses, community groups and other stakeholders.

November 2024

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4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	

Primary Schools Event (Nov 1)

Business Webinar (Nov 7)

Public Event (Nov 13)

High School Event (Nov 14)

Survey Window (Nov 15-17)

Background

The concept of the Mourne Mountains Gateway Project has evolved for almost 20 years.

A Strategic Outline Case and Outline Business Case for the project, developed from 2017 involved consultation with key stakeholders and identified the Thomas Quarry site as the preferred option for the Visitor Centre location.

Outline Business Case approval was secured following consideration by Tourism NI, Department for Economy and Department of Finance in 2022.

A highly experienced delivery team has now been appointed to further strengthen the project's development. An integrated consultancy team led by Arup, along with TODD Architects, Gleeds, and Tandem Design, will be responsible for delivering the Mourne Mountains Gateway Project.

Responses

Submissions or observations on the first stage of public consultation material may be made via the following methods:



Engage in the exercises



Completing a submission form



Visit our online survey via the QR Code



app.onlinesurveys.jisc.ac.uk/s/ovearup/mourne-mountains-gateway-project



Comhairle Ceantair
an Iúir, Mhúrn agus an Dúin
Newry, Mourne and Down
District Council

BELFAST REGION
CITY DEAL



Northern Ireland
Executive



UK Government

ARUP



Programme

Where are we now?

We're progressing through RIBA Stage 2, focusing on early concepts for the Visitor Centre, Gondola and Park & Ride facility. This involves outline proposals for structural design, building services systems, and outline specifications. We are also carrying out detailed surveys and environmental assessments to ensure that the designs respect the natural heritage of the Mourne Mountains.

As the engagement of stakeholder groups, community groups and the public is critical to inform the Mourne Mountains Gateway Project, we are also carrying out the first of three phases of engagement. We are currently working with community groups, local businesses, and schools to gather input, and hosting this event today to discuss further with you.

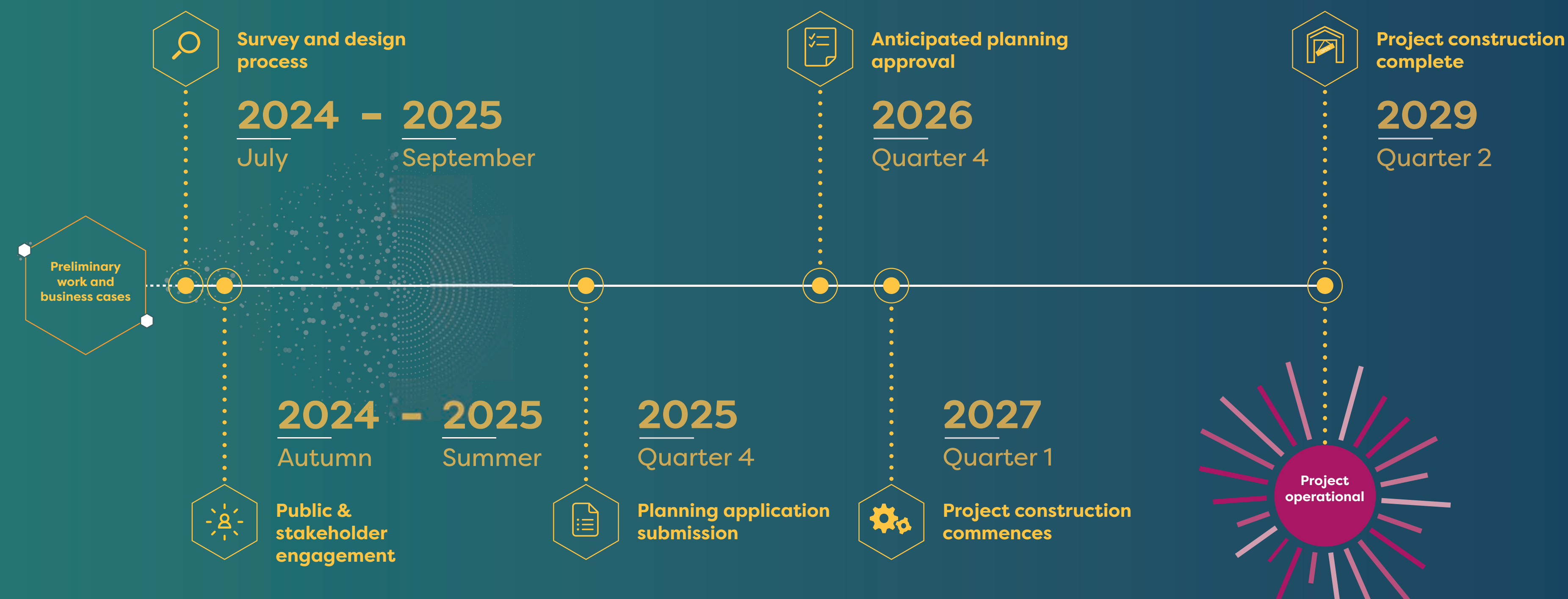
Where are we going?

Our next steps include working with the Gondola consultant, further surveys and investigations to inform the detailed design process and the environmental assessments, while continuing community and stakeholder engagement. We will prepare for a planning application submission in the later part of 2025. Your feedback will remain crucial as we refine the designs and move through the planning process.

Key engagement milestones



Anticipated key programme dates





What we've heard

We've been listening to your feedback!

Your feedback

We understand that many of you have already provided feedback on the proposed project. Data has been collected from past engagement events and subsequently received by the Council. We have reviewed various letters, submissions and conversations. To build a picture, we have thematically arranged the feedback and developed a list of the most common observations.

We are already using this feedback to influence the project where we can.

Please take a moment to review what we have heard so far, and what we are doing in response.



Engagement to date

"Why has there been a lack of public consultation?"

We acknowledge the concerns regarding public consultation. Over the past year we have been going through the process of appointing a suitable integrated consultancy team, which will address many of the issues raised, and during which time we paused engagement activities. Along with designers and engineers, this team includes environmental, planning and engagement specialists, who will ensure the project is sustainably and collaboratively developed. Moving forward, we are committed to ensuring that the community has ample opportunities to provide input and feedback throughout the project's development.



Accessibility

"Will the project offer access for all?"

The Mourne Mountains Gateway Project is committed to becoming a destination accessible to all visitors, regardless of physical ability. This includes the development of inclusive infrastructure, such as accessible pathways, gondola cabins designed to accommodate wheelchairs, and facilities that meet the highest standards of universal design.



Traffic and parking

"There will be too much traffic and not enough parking"

The project includes the development of a park-and-ride facility designed to improve overall traffic flow in Newcastle, not just for gondola users but for the town as a whole.



Environmental concerns

"It will be damaging to the environment"

Environmental protection and enhancement is a top priority. We are conducting a thorough Environmental Impact Assessment and Habitats Regulations Assessment to mitigate any potential threats to sensitive habitats, including Special Areas of Conservation and Areas of Special Scientific Interest.



Current visitor levels

"The Mournes is already too busy, we need better visitor management"

The project will incorporate a comprehensive Visitor Management Plan to enhance the overall experience for all visitors to the Mournes while safeguarding the natural environment. This plan will explore the potential for improved infrastructure, such as upgraded trails and facilities, or increased ranger services to guide and assist visitors.



Alternatives

"Have alternatives to the gondola been considered?"

Various alternatives have been considered over the years. Through the Strategic Outline Case and Outline Business Case processes the gondola was selected for its potential to provide a unique, exciting, and sustainable tourism experience. The Belfast Region City Deal funding has been allocated specifically to the Mourne Mountains Gateway Project and cannot be used by Newry, Mourne and Down District Council for any other purpose.



Visual impact

"There will be a visual impact on the Mournes"

We understand the importance of preserving the beauty of the Mourne Mountains. We are working closely with design experts to minimise the visual impact of the gondola and associated structures. Our goal is to preserve the natural beauty of the Mournes while enhancing visitor experience. As well as revising the early concept designs of the visitor centre, we will be carrying out a full Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment to evaluate and address any potential visual impacts.



Climate concerns

"Bad weather will stop it from working"

While occasional high winds or severe weather may temporarily affect operations, the gondola system will be engineered to operate safely under a wide range of conditions. Gondola systems worldwide, including those in regions with much harsher weather than ours, are designed to withstand high winds, heavy snowfall, and extreme cold.



Financial implications

"It's a financial risk"

We understand the concerns about financial risk. To get to where we are now, detailed financial, economic and strategic analysis has been carried out, indicating a strong confidence that the proposed project will be viable. We would not have been successful in obtaining the Belfast Region City Deal funding otherwise.



Gateway projects & visitor centres around the world

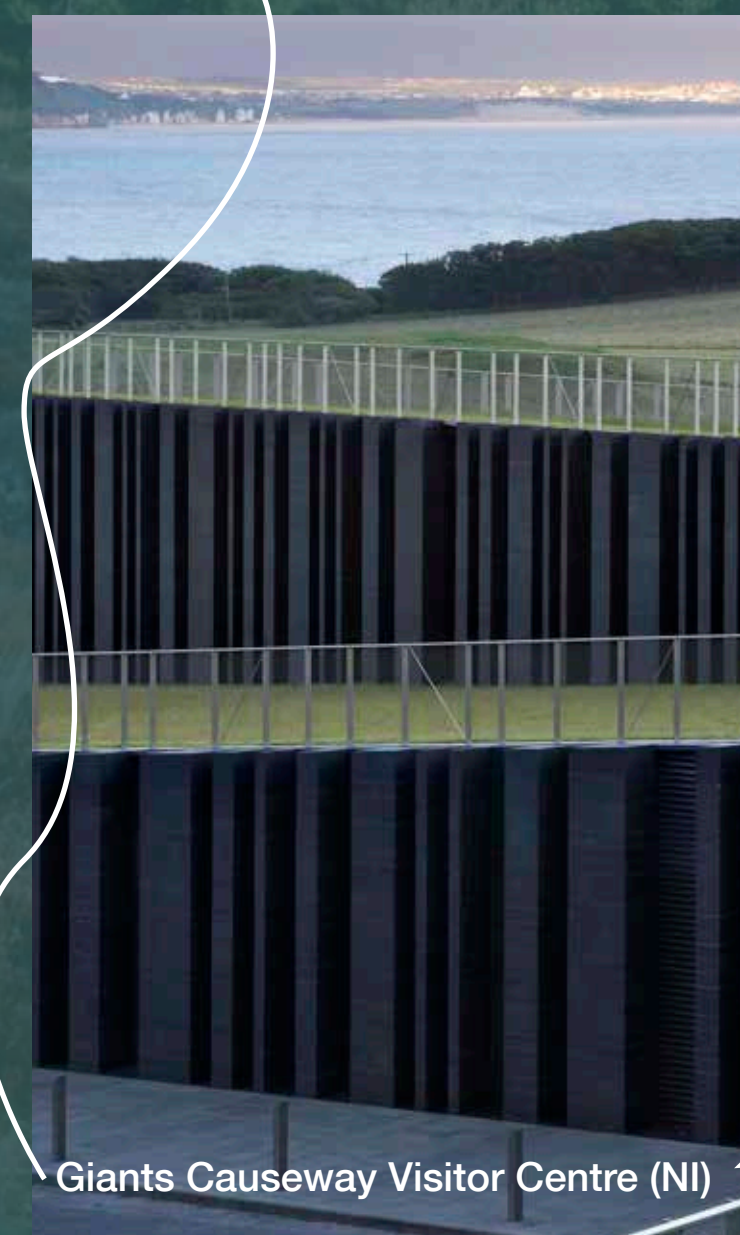
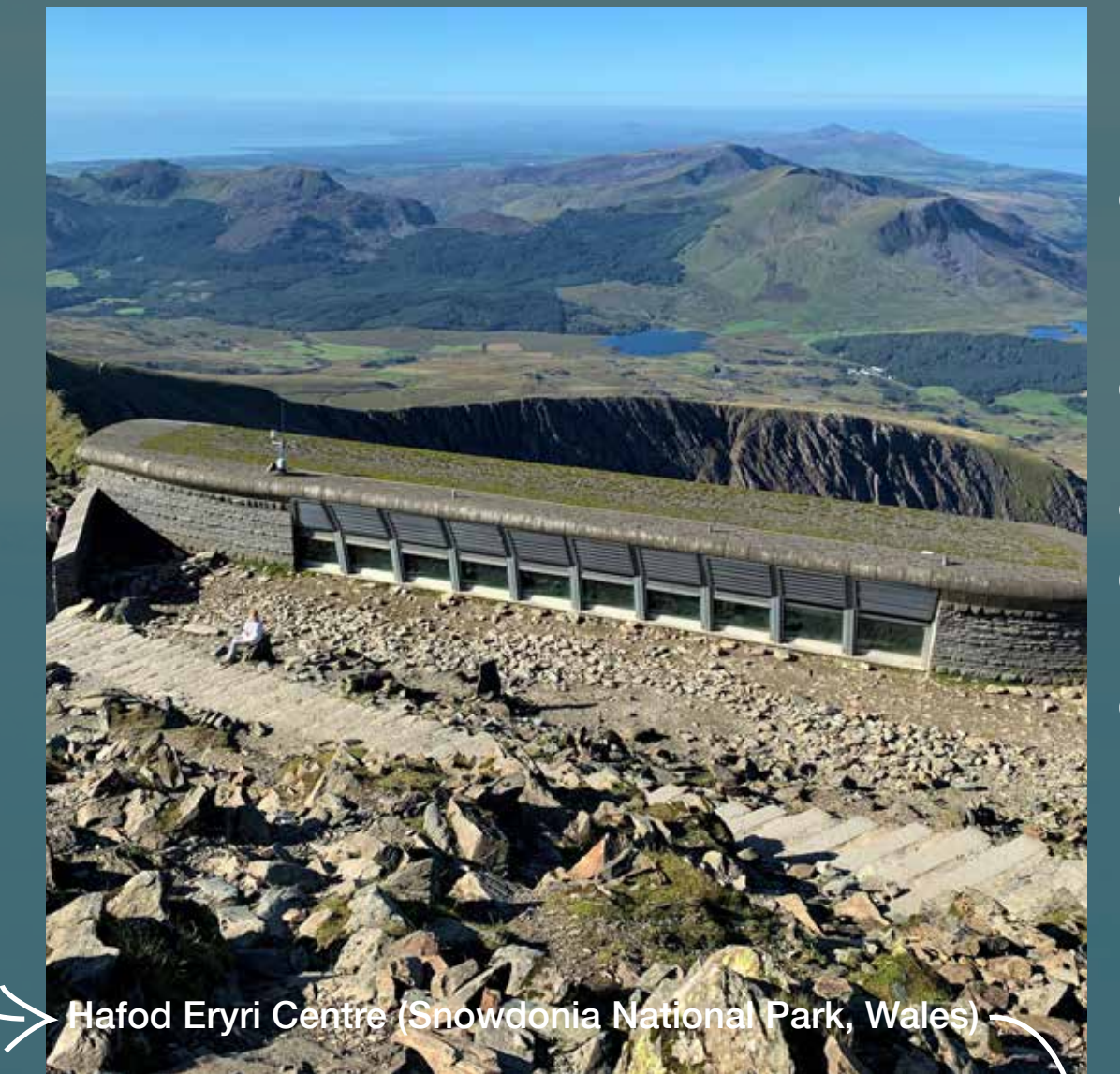
Learning from elsewhere

At this early conceptual design stage, the design team is actively conducting detailed surveys and thorough site analysis to guide the decision-making as the project evolves. Previous design concepts are being critically assessed to identify key strengths and areas for improvement, providing valuable lessons and influencing the ongoing design. At the same time, the team is interrogating international precedents to learn how gondola infrastructure and visitor centres have been successfully integrated into sensitive landscapes elsewhere. These insights will guide the project to help achieve a balance between functionality and minimising environmental impact on both Newcastle and the Mourne Mountains.

Community engagement is central to the success of the project. Therefore, the team is working closely with local stakeholders to ensure that the project not only meets practical requirements but also reflects the aspirations of the local community. This collaborative approach is essential for aligning the project with local and regional goals for sustainable tourism and environmental responsibility.

With a clear project brief established, the design team will develop an ambitious, contextually sensitive architectural response. The design will prioritise a memorable visitor experience, with careful attention being paid to the building's form and materiality to ensure the proposal acts as a positive intervention in the immediate and wider context. By selecting environmentally sustainable materials and utilising modern construction techniques, the design aims to be visually striking, respectful of the sensitive landscape, and sustainable throughout its lifetime.

Examples from around the world



The visitor centre

Imagining the visitor centre - Your input matters!

Exploring experiential opportunities

The Mourne Mountains Gateway Project Visitor Centre will deliver a uniquely accessible, surprising and insightful experience for all, regardless of age and ability.

Interpretation within the Visitor Centre will:

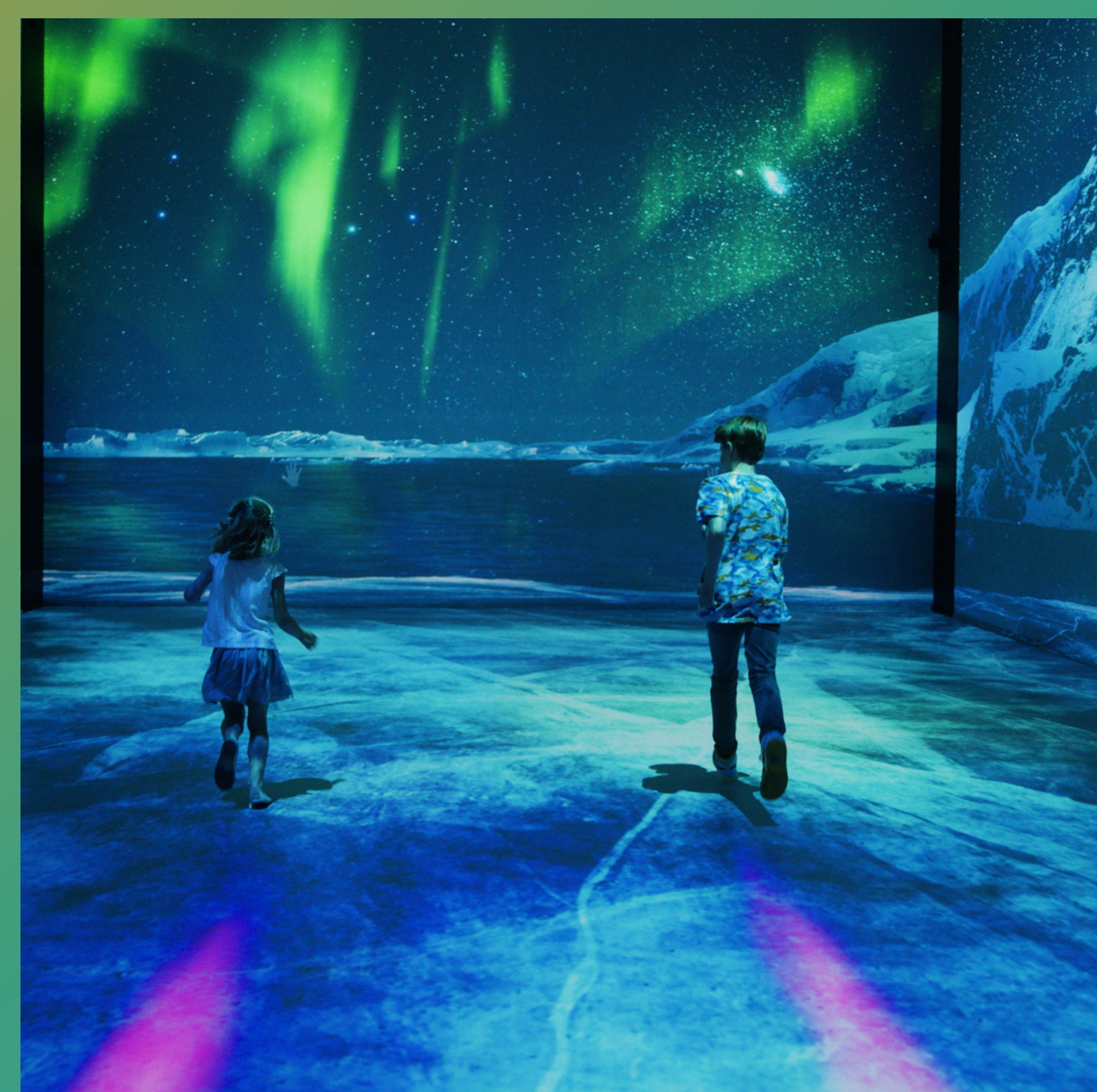
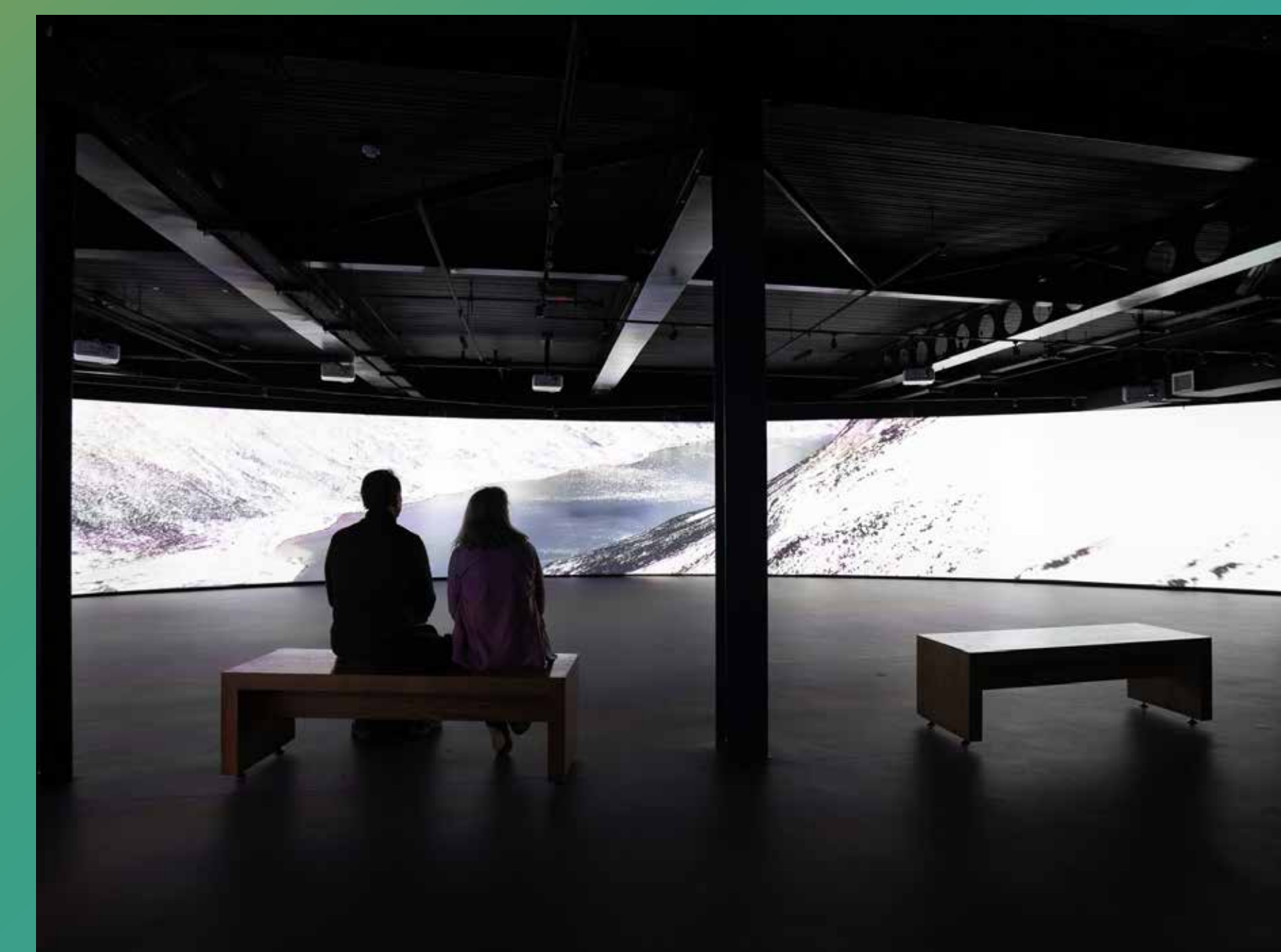
- Promote appreciation of this wild and sensitive landscape
- Prepare all visitors to explore in an enlightened way
- Reveal the heritage and spectacles of this special place
- Aim to reach and inspire a broad spectrum of society
- Use techniques that deliver best practice physical and intellectual accessibility

Visitors will enjoy an enriching, insightful and dramatic experience that fosters empathy for the delicate biodiversity of the Mournes as well as its rich culture.

Visit our online survey via the QR Code



THEVISITORCENTRE





The visitor centre

Imagining the visitor centre - Your input matters!





The visitor centre

Imagining the visitor centre - Your input matters!

Themes and topics

The diagram opposite shows the themes and topics that we are currently considering and it shows how they relate to one another.

Key themes include:

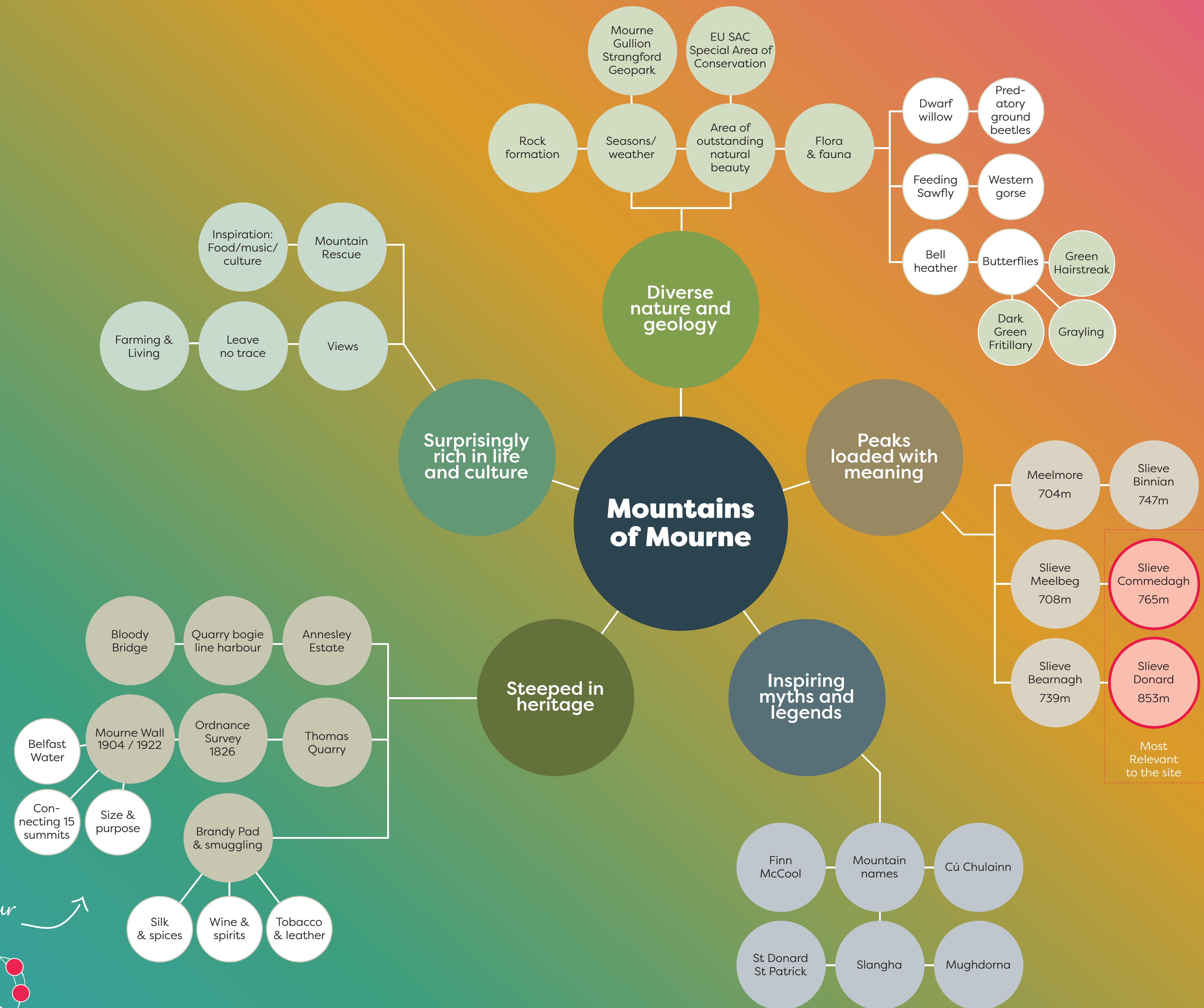
- Formed across millennia, excavated by ice
- Steeped in history and legend
- Where smugglers sought refuge and made their escape
- The Kingdom of Mourne
- Where pilgrims contemplated the divine
- Amongst the finest granite in Ireland
- Granite, destined for the greatest cities
- Echoing with the sound of the chisel
- Shattered rocky screes
- The Magic of the Mournes
- Escape the world below
- Rejuvenate the body and rest the mind
- Rich in biodiversity
- Formed of molten magma

Question

Which are the most important to you?
What else would you like to see being covered?
Stick a post- it here or fill out a comment card at our feedback station.

Place Your Dot

Prioritise what is important to you!



Accessibility & inclusivity

A gateway for everyone

Making the Mournes accessible for all

An accessible gondola will allow individuals and groups to experience a special place that they otherwise would not be able to reach.

This may be the only way in which many could share in the sights, sounds and beauty of the Mourne Mountains.

Crucially, it will promote a strong sense of shared responsibility for this unique environment, especially to those otherwise unfamiliar with the delicate ecological balance found in the Mournes.

Question

What amenities would make the experience most accessible for you or your group?

Make the most of your voice & post-it here...

Visit our online survey via the QR Code



ACCESSIBILITY & INCLUSIVITY





Environmentally sensitive design

Protecting & enhancing our natural habitat

The project is located within Donard Forest and Thomas Quarry surrounded by areas of environmental, cultural, and historical significance.

These include several environmental designated sites including:

- Eastern Mourne Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI)
- Murlough SAC and ASSI
- Mourne Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Nature Reserves
- Cultural and Industrial heritage assets
- Glen River.

A landscape shaped by nature & people

The surrounding landscape reflects a long history of human settlement and industry, including forestry, tourism, quarrying and agricultural. These activities, along with natural challenges such as wildfires & recreational pressure, have shaped the area.

As part of our project, we are committed to ensuring that the area's unique cultural and natural heritage is preserved, like these projects which the project team have previously worked on...

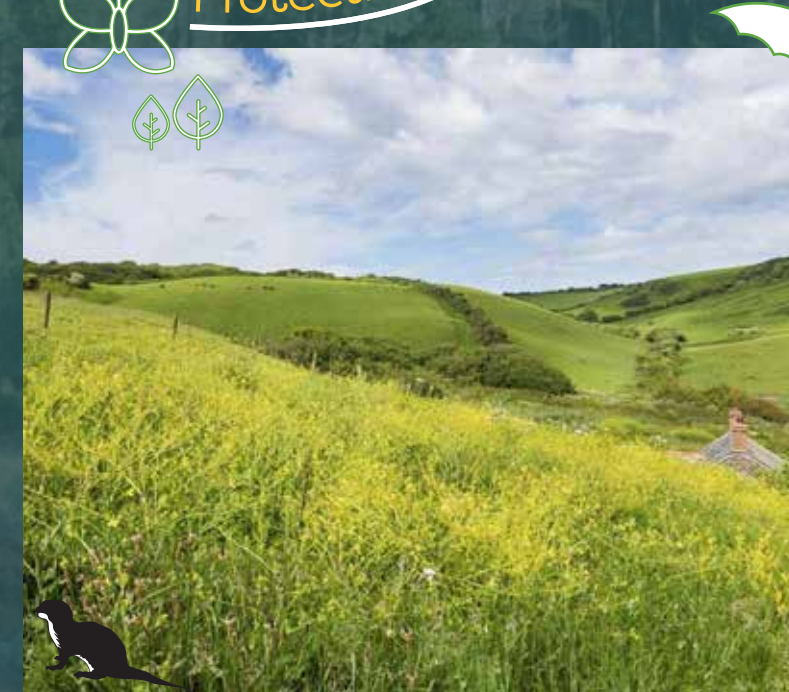
Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) & Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA)

An EIA and HRA will be undertaken to assess impacts and be developed responsibly.

The EIA process is a critical step in progressing the design, allowing us to better understand the local environment of the development and embed environmental design into the project.



Protecting key species



A40 Keyn Glas

A Green Infrastructure project that successfully combines mitigating negative environmental impacts of roadbuilding to create enhanced biodiverse and connected habitats in the Cornish Landscape.

Interventions included orchard planting, providing habitats for pollinating insects, new woodland and hedgerow habitats providing wildlife habitats.

A mosaic of habitats



Castlefield Viaduct

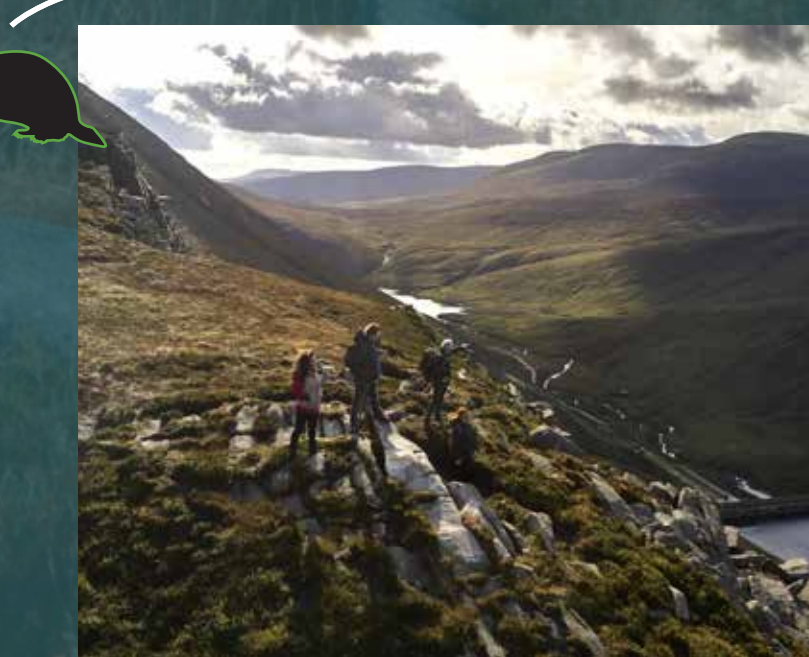
Together with the National Trust's initiatives to create new wildlife habitats and being peat-free, Arup integrated several environmentally sensitive measures into the pilot, including rainwater collection for irrigation and LED lighting.

Connswater Community Greenway

This Arup project revitalised the urban environment with cleaner rivers, new bridges, 16 km of paths, a C.S. Lewis themed square, accessible open spaces, semi-natural habitats, invasive species control, improved water ecology, and native tree planting, enhancing both ecological and recreational aspects.



Native species



Valuing wildlife-rich habitats & sites

Resilient landscapes

Mourne, Gullion, Strangford UNESCO Global Geopark

The UNESCO Global Geopark comprises three distinct regions, each with unique characteristics significant for sustainable tourism, education and scientific research.



Environmentally sensitive design

Protection and conservation

Protection and conservation of the natural environment that surrounds the project is of critical importance. We are seeking your views on how best environmental design and sustainability can be delivered through the project.

These interventions could include:

- Eco-friendly transport
- Interpretive guided tours
- Wildlife education
- Better signage
- Sustainable facilities

We value your continued input

Please take a moment to provide your thoughts on what interventions could ensure an environmentally sensitive design.

Question

How can we enhance your experience of the Mournes while ensuring we preserve the area's natural and cultural heritage?
Make the most of your voice & post-it here...



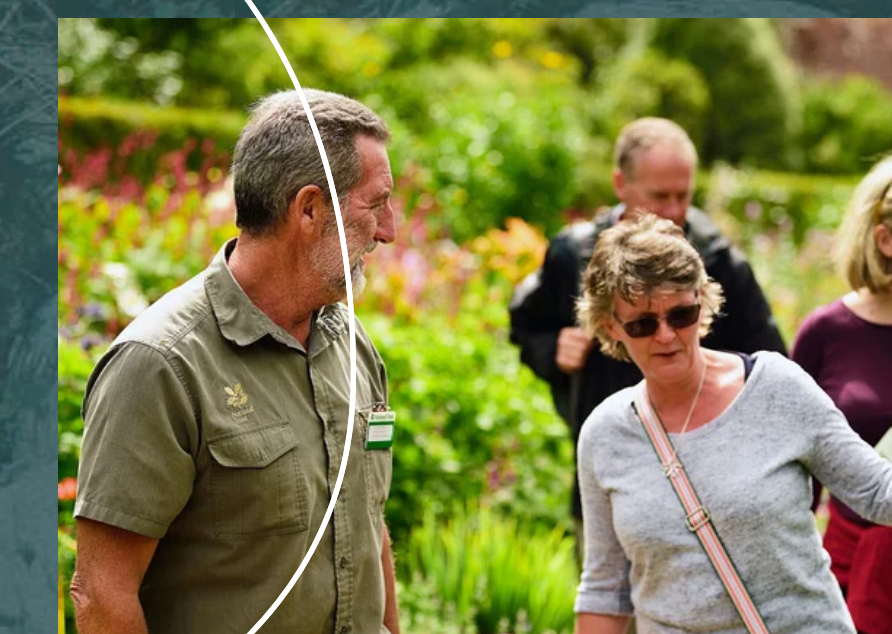
Locally sourced materials



Guided tours



Eco-friendly transport



Wayfinding signage & clear no-go areas



Wildlife education



Controlled access

Visitor Experience Entrance



Park-and-ride & traffic management

Improving access & reducing traffic

To address town centre congestion at peak times, a park & ride service is proposed. The location, routing and operation of this service is currently in early stages of discussion.

Some key requirements for it that have been identified so far are:

- Appropriate location to reduce pressure on town centre
- Stops to serve town centre as well as the base station
- Inclusive and accessible service

Data on existing parking demand and traffic flows has been collected during the summer and this information will help inform the future park & ride service.

Travel to the site by walking and cycling will also be encouraged, and we are working with Newry, Mourne and Down District Council and the Department for Infrastructure to align with their active travel strategy and any future improvements.

Question

What would encourage you to use a park and ride shuttle service for Newcastle?

Make the most of your voice & post it here...



Visitor management plan

What is a visitor management plan?

Visitor management plan

The Visitor Management Plan is a comprehensive strategy designed to balance the enjoyment of the Mourne Mountains with the need to manage visitor flow, safety, and infrastructure. It outlines how we will accommodate increasing numbers of visitors while maintaining high standards for safety, access, and sustainability.

The plan focuses on several key areas, including:

- Improving access & infrastructure to support further visitors
- Ensuring the safety & wellbeing of all visitors through clearly marked routes and facilities.
- Preserving the unique cultural & natural heritage of the Mournes while supporting tourism and recreation.
- Coordinating visitor activities to prevent overcrowding & improve overall visitor satisfaction.

Key challenges

- **Visitor access:** How can we manage visitors who arrive at the base station but don't use the gondola? What solutions can we implement to guide them safely along designated paths and prevent congestion?
- **Access beyond the visitor centre:** Should visitors have access to the mountains from the visitor centre? What measures would ensure their safety and protect the site's most important features?



Question

We value your input on how to manage visitor access in and around the Mourne Mountains Gateway Project. Please drop your suggestions here on how we can address some of these challenges

Make the most of your voice & post-it here...



Visit our online survey via the QR Code





Feedback station

What
FACILITIES
would you like
to see?

What
EXCITES
you about
the
Project?

How
can the
project be used
to **ENHANCE**
the
environment?

How can
the project
be more
INCLUSIVE?

What
CONCERNS
do you
have?

What
BENEFITS
would the
Project
deliver?



What do you think?
Please share your
thoughts or further
suggestions on
a comment card
and post it in the
feedback box

Don't forget to also
take part in our
online survey. Scan
the QR code above
or let us know if you
need a hard copy