



# WLI information sheet

## No. 2: Masterplanning for wetland centres

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### Introduction

Masterplanning is a tool to help you create a centre that works well at both operational and structural levels. It can be defined as: *a document that defines the direction of a project and acts as a point of reference for the subsequent stages of the construction and management of a visitor centre*. Ultimately, it will help to give your visitors the best experience possible whilst helping you to meet practical requirements such as financial sustainability, forecasting of visitor numbers, budgets and operational and maintenance requirements. Whilst it will not guarantee success, it will help to identify issues and opportunities early in the process, and create a useful fund-raising and planning tool.

### Masterplanning process

Often people decide that they want a visitor centre, and go straight to the stage of commissioning an architect to create a visitor centre building. Design and management of the wetland happens separately, and the educational materials and equipment are considered last. This can lead to a building that does not accommodate the equipment very well, does not make the most of the surrounding wetland, and results in visitors not being satisfied with the experience of their visit. It can also be more costly in the long-run as buildings or interpretation often need to be changed once visitor issues start to emerge when the centre is complete.

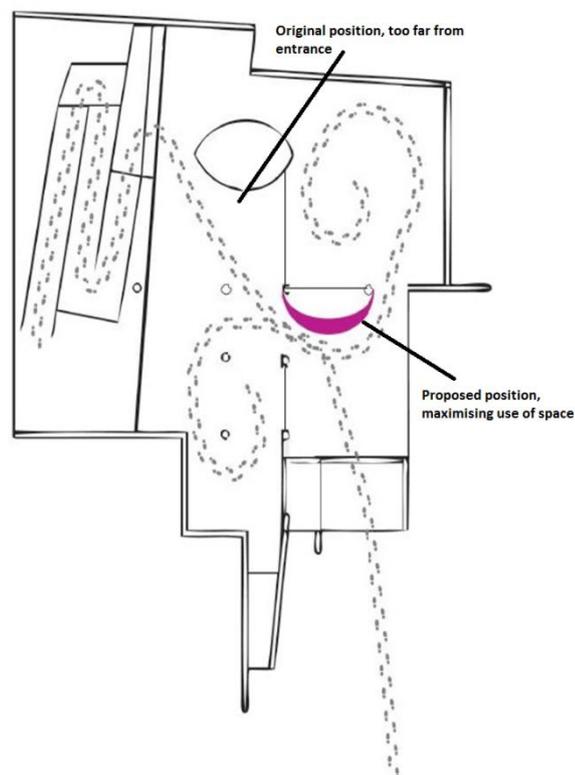
Masterplanning starts before the decision to build the centre – indeed, a conventional building might not be the best solution for the site. First steps should include consultation with the prospective audience / visitors, site managers, commissioning organisation and statutory organisations. Questions to ask include:

- **Who is your wetland centre for?** Schools, community groups or farmers; research students; for committed conservationists; or maybe an international audience at a high profile wetland? Will there be hundreds, thousands or tens of thousands of people coming?
- **How big is your budget** not just to construct the centre, but also to run the centre? If there is a big initial capital spend, you must still find funding for ongoing revenue costs.
- **How will people get to the site?** Is there public transport? Is there room for car parking?
- **What themes and issues** does the centre want to communicate and how? What exhibition space is needed, what sort of interpretation? Are there requirements of the building design e.g. animal husbandry space, wall space, dark space for audiovisual presentations, etc.
- **Will it have a shop, cafe or toilets?** Can you access these separately to the centre?
- **Will people have to pay to get in**, or is it free? Will there be subsidies for local groups? **Does the centre need to be financially sustainable** or is there a guaranteed stream of revenue support, e.g. Government funding to support the educational initiatives?

## Some examples

At WWT Slimbridge, a new building was created in the year 2000. Part of the design included a large foyer, with high ceilings and lots of space, aiming to create an impressive entrance. However, the space is now difficult to fill, expensive to heat and leaves visitors to walk a long way through 'dead space' between the entrance doors and the reception desk. Moving the reception desk nearer the entrance doors would greatly improve the visitor experience by providing a clear route to the point of entry and start of their journey and creating usable space to display changing freestanding exhibits.

WWT Consulting produced a masterplan for the development of Ras Al Khor Wetland Park in Dubai, UAE. It is a Ramsar site and adjacent to a planned residential development so the masterplan was key to providing visitor access whilst minimising disturbance to the waterbirds. In essence, the wetland park would form a buffer zone between the sensitive natural habitat and the built environment. Early stakeholder engagement provided a clear vision for the facilities and services required in the park and the nature of the visitor experience, which includes physical access to the wetlands via boat safaris in addition to engagement via the visitor centre interpretation. Business and operation plans formed part of the masterplan to provide a clear reference point for the centre's development and sustainable operation and, in conjunction with an architect, visuals were produced for the centre to steer the detailed design stage.



## Top tips

- Carry out your masterplanning well in advance of making decisions on design, location or size of your building. The structure should reflect the purpose of the project.
- Build in some flexible space. Your organisation might expand, change exhibitions or require seasonal variations in visitor numbers.
- Involve local people in the initial discussions – that way you will find out not only what would be attractive to them, but also interesting historical and local information.
- The key is being able to consider the future to foresee the details of how the centre will function and how all the spaces will be used. This is the best masterplanning tool to ensure that what is eventually designed and built will be fit for purpose.

### Further resources

WWT Consulting

<http://www.wwtconsulting.co.uk/our-services/visitor-centre-planning-and-design/>

WLI at [www.wli.org.uk](http://www.wli.org.uk)

### Glossary

Operational costs – the costs of running a centre including staff costs, general running costs and repairs, updating exhibitions etc.

Capital costs – costs of construction of buildings.

Animal husbandry – techniques of looking after captive animals.



WLI is recognised as a key implementer of the Ramsar CEPA programme