Laois - Kilkenny Reinforcement Project Environmental Reports

Study Area Constraints Report – Landscape

Submission to: ESB International

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October 2010

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1. Introduction

This section identifies the constraints associated with the Landscape that exist in the study area as defined for the proposed Laois-Kilkenny reinforcement project. The project study area extends from its southern boundary about 6km below Ballyragget, Co. Kilkenny to its northern boundary at Stradbally, Co. Laois, and from its eastern boundary about 2km from Athy, Kildare to its western boundary 4km from Durrow, Co. Laois. This report has been prepared by Conor Skehan, Landscape Architect and Impact Assessor [MILI, MRIAI, MIEMA].

The purpose of this report is to provide an assessment for the lead consultant ESBI, of the constraints found within the overall project study area.

2. Methodology and Information Sources

The following list of information sources were reviewed as part of the desk study:

- Laois County Development Plan 2006 - 2012;
- Kilkenny County Development Plan 2008 – 2014;
- Ordnance Survey Mapping and Photography;
- Fáilte Ireland and Local Tourism websites.

The main landscape constraints were identified through a combination of a site visit and documentation surveys. The potential to impact visually on landscape constraints had regard to the following considerations:

- The capacity of the existing landscape to absorb the proposed development;
- Effects on landscape character and features (e.g. removal or alteration);
- Proximity of sensitive viewpoints (e.g. scenic routes) and visual receptors; and
- The location and height of any proposed electrical structures.

3. Landscape Character Areas and Types

3.1 General

The area under analysis is the transition between the Central Plain and the outliers of the Castlecomer Plateaux. The core of the area contains complex small-scale landscapes formed by the incisions of the River Nore and its tributaries. It is a relatively lightly populated area with relatively few features of regional or county landscape significance – though the town of Abbeyleix to the west is an important local amenity and the N77, which is a well trafficked

inter-county road. The general landscape types – which consist of agricultural lowlands and transitional/upland landscapes are of a type that is regional and nationally abundant.

3.1 Landscape Character Areas, Types and Significance

The study area contains four principle types of landscapes

Central Plain Lowlands

These are an abundant type of landscape through the centre of Ireland that comprises fairly level ground – usually used for pasture and tillage on lighter soils – interspersed with areas of wetland and occasional bogs. These landscapes generally have lower visual absorption capacity in areas with higher agricultural capability where fields are larger and hedges are lower. In areas of impeded drainage or poor soils these areas can have medium to high capacity to absorb visual effects – though areas of open water, wetlands and bogs are very visually vulnerable. Such landscape west of Ballyragget and Abbeyleix are of the more open type.

River Valleys

These are common, but very localised landscapes – rarely extending for more than 0.5 km on either side of the river. They are visually complex – often having very high degrees of visual robustness on account of topography and dense vegetation – though open views along the length of the River can be very expansive and proportionately vulnerable. These conditions are usually interlinked leading to a general character of visual sensitivity in such landscapes. The Nore is a river landscape that is noted as a visual and amenity resource.

Transitional Areas.

The zone where lowlands blend into uplands are usually characterised by smaller fields, less fertile soil and complex patterns of vegetation, topography and settlement – all of which combine to give relatively high capacity to absorb visual effects.

Uplands.

Elevation, topographic exposure, little or no tall vegetation, and few other man-made structures mean that upland areas are usually characterised as being more visually vulnerable than other landscapes – even when used for agriculture.

3.2 Landscape Significance

The southern section of the study area is located in the Landscape Character Area 'Castlecomer Plateau' as identified in the Kilkenny Landscape Character Assessment (Kilkenny County Development Plan). It is adjacent to the Castlecomer transition area B2.

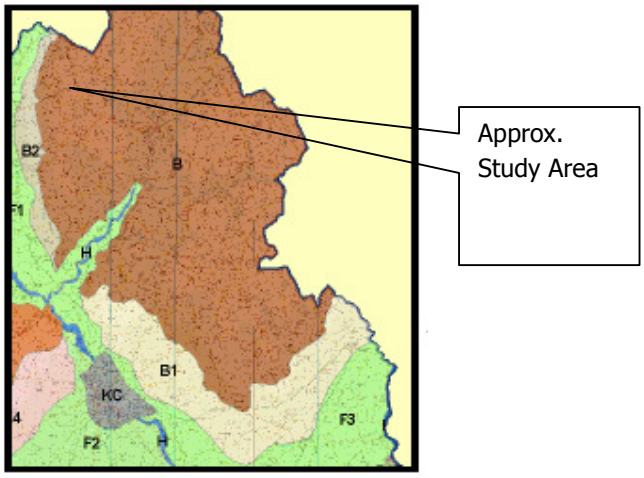

Figure 1: Landscape Character Area Castlecomer Plateau
[Showing approximate location of Study Area]
Source: Kilkenny Landscape Character Assessment

The Castlecomer Plateau (B) is illustrated in ***Figure 1*** and is noted in the Landscape Assessment as being an extensive upland area with an almost circular shape that lies between the valleys of the Rivers Nore and Barrow, covering most of the north-east of the County. The terrain steeply slopes from the river valleys to the surface of the Plateau, which gently undulates and gives rise to several small ridgelines at an elevation of between 200 and 340m above the sea level. The elevated nature of this physical unit provides a defined skyline and significant and scenic views over the Kilkenny basin and the Nore and Barrow river valleys.

The Castlecomer Transition (B2) is illustrated in ***Figure 1.*** The western area is a long linear strip of land, running in a north-south direction, which is parallel to the River Nore Valley and close to the Dinin River. The area encompasses the environs of Ballyragget and Castlemarket areas. The Assessment notes that *'These transitional areas are not perceived as having special landscape or scenic amenity values and are considered suitable for development'.*

4. Potential for Landscape Impacts

In these types of landscapes there are a number of potential landscape impacts that frequently arise as a result of:

- Siting of polesets or angle masts on top of hills;
- Alignments running along the centre of river valleys; and
- Alignments crossing rivers.

The above typically generally give rise to the potential visual impacts as follows:

- Angle masts give rise to greater visual impact than polesets;
- The visual impact is greatest when the route is seen silhouetted against the sky and is least when seen against a dark, visually complex background such as mature forestry.

5. Potential Mitigation Measures

In general terms, the best and only mitigation measure is a route selection process that minimises visual intrusion on skylines, shorelines or waterbodies and that avoids or minimises excessive proximity or dominance on sensitive visual receptors such as scenic routes, residences, tourism and leisure amenities and facilities.

6. Constraints of the Study Area

The principle constraints of the Study area are as follows;-

- Avoid predominantly east-west corridors because the principle topographic orientation of the study area is north-south.
- Avoid excessive proximity to the River Corridors within the Study area
- Avoid excessive prominence on the skyline when seen from river corridors, National Routes and scenic views or drives.
- Minimise crossing or visual intrusion on river corridors and demense landscapes.

7. Conclusions

Seek upper mid-slope routes that generally parallel river valleys and ridges in the centre of the study area – to the east of the Nore.

Landscape impacts will arise in the immediate vicinity of the overhead line route regardless of where it is located.