

Laois - Kilkenny Reinforcement Project Environmental Reports

Route Corridor Assessment Report – Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment

Submission to: ESB International

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1. Introduction

This section analyses the existing landscape character and significance within the study area of the proposed 110kv transmission line and associated substations. It also provides an evaluation of the potential for landscape and visual impacts associated with the proposed development in the study area.

The assessment is made having regard to the vulnerability of the landscape to change and to the location of the visual receptors relative to the proposed development.

2. Methodology

The main landscape features and landscape character areas were identified through a combination of site visit and documentation surveys.

Landscape impacts were analysed based on:

- 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 the proposed electrical structures.

Visual impacts are evaluated taking account of:

- The potential level of visual intrusion; and
- The potential for visual impact dependent on the proximity and elevation of structures to a sensitive viewpoint/visual receptor.

3 Receiving Environment

3.1 Landscape Context

The area under analysis is the transition between the Central Plain and the outliers of the Castlecomer Plateau. 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 parallels much of the southern part of the routes, 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.

3.2 Landscape Character

The study zone 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 0.5km 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 interspersed 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 landscape – even when used for agriculture.

3.3 Landscape Significance

The southern route corridors of the proposed development traverse the Landscape Character Area Castlecomer Plateau as identified in the Kilkenny Landscape Character Assessment. It is adjacent to the Castlecomer transition area B2.

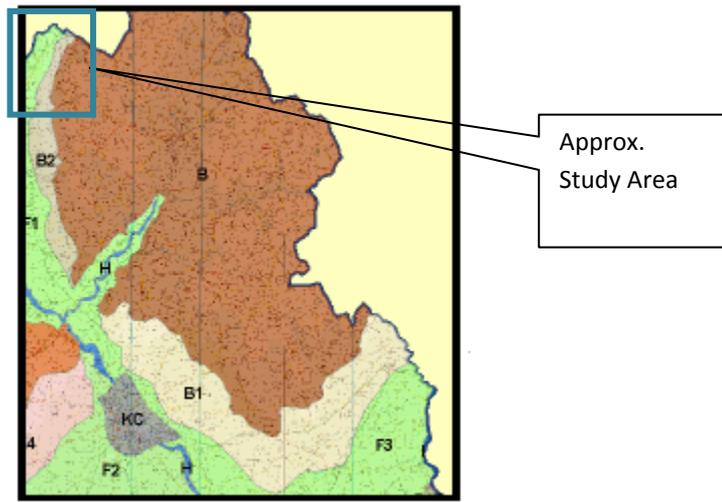


Figure 1.1: Landscape Character Area Castlecomer Plateau
[Showing approximate location of route corridor – in red]

Source: Kilkenny Landscape Character Assessment

The Castlecomer Transition (B2) is illustrated in Figure above. 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’*.

4.0 Assessment of Route Corridors

Route identification		Description	Evaluation
1	Central 110 kV Route Corridor (Node 1,2,3,4,6,7,8,9,10)	<p>The southern part of this route passes through level, open agricultural lowlands for most of its length. The northern part passes through transitional lands and rises to the lower uplands passing to the east side of Cullenagh Mountain.</p> <p>This route contains some conifer plantation/broad-leaved woodland.</p>	<p>The southern portion generally parallels the river Nore, the N77 and passes within 5km of the eastern outskirts of Abbeyleix.</p> <p>Between Nodes 2 and 3 the route traverses a High Amenity Area with associated Scenic Views. This section will give rise to at least two pole sets that will be located on visually prominent ridgelines that will be conspicuous over a wide area.</p> <p>It also appears likely that there may be visually conspicuous polesets [and an angle mast] in the vicinity of node 4 – though it will be significantly less prominent than those described above.</p> <p>The northern section passes through well enclosed landscapes with a high visual absorption capacity.</p>
2	Variant 1 Central 110 kV Route Corridor (Node 1,2,4,6,7,9,10)	<p>This route varies from that described at 1 above with two significant variations that will reduce visual impacts. The western variation between 2 and 4 will avoid the incursion into the High Amenity Area and will be significantly less obtrusive as viewed from the elevated Scenic Views.</p> <p>The western variant between 7 and 9 follows higher ground. This route may provide less visual impact because the line will be more difficult to discern against the background of the nearby woodland edge.</p>	<p>This route will have relatively low effect on the landscape because it generally occupies lower ground and minimises elevated ridge crossings.</p> <p>For much of its length it parallels the general direction of the prevailing topography. It occupies some of the least populated lowland parts of the study area and is generally at a distance from or visually screened from major roads.</p>
3	Variant 2 Central 110 kV Route Corridor (Node 1,2,3,7,8,10)	<p>This route involves a significant variant that traverses elevated ground to the north of Castlecomer.</p>	<p>This route contains all of the disadvantages between nodes 2 and 3 outlined at 1 above. This route has a number of additional elevated ridgeline crossings. It also appears to pass through areas of conspicuous upland forestry where the clearances required for the line are likely to create visual effects that are likely to be conspicuous over a wide area.</p> <p>This route has a significant advantage of being largely inconspicuous from the Nore, the N77 – except for the possible ridgeline effect referred to above.</p>
4	Eastern 110 kV Route Corridor (Node 1 – 10)	<p>This route is considerably longer than all other routes and takes a much more</p>	<p>This route has the greatest length – and therefore affects a greater area</p>

		southerly and easterly direction travelling south of Castlecomer in Co. Kilkenny. crossing much of the higher ground within the study area. The route also crosses part of the Coan Bogs The study zone also crosses some conifer plantation/broad-leaved woodland.	of landscape than all other routes. It also passes through upland areas with consistently lower visual absorption capacity than other routes. It is within 2 km of a series of national secondary roads for much of its length and passes through areas of population density.
5	Western 110 kV Route Corridor (Node 1, 5,10)	This route passes primarily along the lowlands along the Nore and further north and the route also passes close to the main channel of the River Nore	It closely parallels a 5km section of the 400kV Dunstown – Moneypoint 400kV line that lies about 4 km north east of Abbeyleix. The route is near and parallel to a number of locally significant amenities and roads as well as being closer to more settled areas than any other route.

5.0 Route Selection

It is recommended that the optimum general routing to minimise landscape and visual impacts is Variant 1 of the Central 110 kV Route Corridor (Node 1,2,4,6,7,9,10) described at 2 above.

This route will still give rise to residual landscape and visual impacts – particular attention will need to be given to the location of supports – especially angle masts on ridgeline locations – in particular those just south west and north of Node 4 that are likely to appear on the skyline when seen from Abbeyleix and its eastern environs.

While the western variant between 7 and 9 follows higher ground this route may provide less visual impact because the line will be more difficult to discern against the background of the nearby woodland edge.

Appendix I

