

# Dublin Mountains Project Public Information Meeting Report

## Introduction

With almost one third of people accessing the Dublin Mountains through the Hell Fire Club and Massy's Wood, and visitor numbers growing, South Dublin County Council (SDCC), Coillte and the Dublin Mountains Partnership have proposed to develop a Dublin Mountains visitor centre (or 'gateway') at Coillte's Hellfire Club property. This would take the form of improved road access, increased parking capacity, improvements to the network of trails, conservation works and sensitive interpretation of the protected structures and other cultural heritage features, a visitor centre building including a café and audio-visual/exhibition room, and the conversion of some 26 ha of productive coniferous forest into mixed deciduous forest park.

On **Thursday, 6<sup>th</sup> April** and **Friday, 7<sup>th</sup> April** SDCC and its partner Coillte held two days of Public Information Meetings about the Dublin Mountains Project. The meetings were held at Tallaght Stadium between 8am and 8pm and were open to all. The meetings were part of the non-statutory consultation programme for the project (this is running in parallel with the project design and environmental assessment process). The purpose of the meetings was to provide information to the public about the emerging project proposals, and to receive feedback from the project about the proposals.

## Format and Attendance

- The key elements of the emerging development proposals were displayed on boards, including proposals for improvement of the R115 Killakee Road, proposals for a visitor centre building, and proposals for access and interpretation facilities around the Hellfire Club building. The Feasibility Study report prepared in 2015, which led to the selection of the proposed project site at Coillte's Hellfire and Massy's Wood properties, was also displayed.
- A number of staff from SDCC and Coillte, and members of the consultant design team were on hand to discuss the proposals with the public.
- Members of the public who attended were asked to register (not all attendees registered), and encouraged to browse the available information and discuss the project with the project team.
- No formal records were made of individual engagements. The format was deliberately informal and conversational to encourage the sharing of information. Members of the public were invited to make written submissions through the SDCC project website if they wished (this facility has been publicised), and/or to make observations (or objections) through the statutory consultation process once the planning process is formally initiated. **This record is not therefore a formal minute of the meetings; it is intended as a general record of the proceedings and a collection of notes taken informally by the SDCC, Coillte and design team staff, to inform the design process of the public's general attitude to the development as well as their aspirations and concerns.**
- Around **177 people** attended the two-day event, 81 on Thursday and 96 on Friday.

## Main Findings

- The majority of people who attended the meeting revealed that they were there to receive more information on the development before they made up their mind about it.

- Of those that expressed an opinion the majority are in favour of a project of the nature proposed. Many suggested that it is 'long overdue', that it will encourage healthy activity and appreciation of the natural and cultural heritage of the Dublin Mountains landscape, and provide a resource for locals (especially children and families) and visitors.
- A minority of people have strong reservations about the project. Some suggested that the site selection process was inadequate or flawed. Some suggested that the site and receiving environment are too sensitive to accommodate the development.
- Some local residents expressed concern over encouraging additional traffic into the area and the possibility of the project leading to further development in the area.
- It was discovered during the meetings that several myths surrounding the project had come into public focus. (Some members of the public who are neutral or in favour of the project expressed frustration that people opposing the project are spreading wrong information and forming public opinion, and suggested SDCC should do more to counter these views.) The three primary pieces of misinformation which were mentioned repeatedly were:
  1. The Hell Fire Club will be knocked down or turned into a restaurant;
  2. The project will introduce charges for the public to access Hellfire and Massy's.
  3. A cable car will be built on the side of the mountain to bring people up to the area.

While the project team alleviated people's concerns about these two myths, it is something that could be addressed on a larger scale in the future when communicating about the development.

- During the meetings, several concerns were raised by the public surrounding the overall impact the development would have and how it would solve several ongoing problems in the area. The biggest concerns that people expressed were to do with:
  1. The high number of people who don't use the car park and instead park on the road illegally.
  2. The pinch point sections of the roads will create congestion and a backlog of traffic.
  3. The poor maintenance and vandalism of the area.
  4. Security of the carpark.
  5. Public transport to and from the area.
- Several members of the public and those within the tourism sector who attended the meetings openly expressed their support for the projected, citing that it was a good idea and one that needed to be done to improve the area, praised the idea, and said they were fully behind the project as it would mean more opportunities for the locality.

### **Project Concept**

- Questions were raised over where the project idea came from who / what body came up with the idea in the first place?
- What studies were undertaken and what surveys conducted to reach the conclusion that the concept was actually needed?
- Is there an overall plan for the Dublin-Wicklow mountains?
- Will the project be sharing information with Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council?

## **Project Rationale**

- Most attendees agreed that doing nothing was not an option given trends in relation to visitation/use generally of the Dublin Mountains.
- It was alleged that the focus on tourism would be a commercial motivation that will change the character of the area, inhibit it operating as a gateway, cause congestion and ruin local and wider amenity.
- It was commented that SDCC and Coillte were not effectively communicating community (and especially family) benefit of the Project as it was a positive surprise to many that 26ha would be removed from commercial forestry, the trail upgrades, heritage interpretation, benches, footpaths, facilities, etc. and that these positive initiatives should be given more profile than the building element.

The remainder of this record takes the form of notes under topics listed alphabetically.

## **Accessibility**

- Requests were made to ensure that access to Massy's and Hellfire Club be made as far as possible for those with mobility issues.

## **Animals**

- Questions raised about whether horses will have their own dedicated trail or will they have to share trails?
- Are cattle crossings being factored in to the plans (along Killakee road)?

## **Café**

- One person had concerns that the visitor centre would be taken over by a large commercial operator; felt it should support local community enterprises.
- Another person had concerns it would be badly run and the council would be unable to get rid of a sitting tenant that was not able to meet high standards.

## **Car Park**

- Several asked if the car park will be built any higher up the hillside.
- There were worries that there will be high parking fees that will go towards paying for the project.
- Several people wanted to know why hasn't any notice been put up in the car park about the project.
- An issue was raised asking if any measures will be taken to stop OAPs availing of free parking and then getting the bus into town (relating to off-site car-park).
- People wanted to know how the carpark can be expanded without borrowing into the landscape – could a two-story carpark be built with one of the stories underground.
- Is there scope to put a carpark into Massy's as there is free space that can be used?
- Why was a carpark in Massy's not chosen?

- Concern that extra parking capacity on Hellfire will not dissuade people who are accessing Massy's from parking on Killakee Road as they already do.
- People want to know a breakdown of how many parking spaces will be available for coaches and cars.
- Several people wanted to know if a traffic count conducted of the entire area was conducted or just the carpark?
- Was the team confident that a bigger carpark will stop people parking illegally on the roads?
- Just how many parking spaces exactly will the carpark have?
- The proposed routing in the car park was criticised as not being "intuitive".

### **Community Involvement**

- Would like to see community enterprises being developed; in relation to woodcraft, involvement in forest management, other community initiatives.

### **Consultation**

- Criticism of the manner of Coillte consultation with landowners was voiced by some residents.
- Misunderstandings existed as to what stage the project is at in terms of the consultation process and how the planning stage consultation will work.

### **Cyclists**

- Several people stated that they would like a stronger focus to be put on the cyclists on the roads.
- Several people wanted to know if there will be separate bicycle trails in the woods. (Answer is no – currently off-road cycling is provided in Ticknock forest).
- Several cycle club members attended and were suggesting family friendly mountain bike trails in the woods as well as longer more challenging adult trails. (Answer is no – currently off-road cycling is provided in Ticknock forest).

### **Environmental / Sewage / Drainage**

- Several people wanted to know if the area has gone through an Environmental Impact Assessment and if the document is available to the public.
- Concern expressed that both the Hellfire (parts at least) and Massy's are sensitive and valuable habitats, which cannot accommodate increased public access so it shouldn't be facilitated.
- Several people believed that safety and maintaining the area should be among the top priorities.
- A question was raised asking how much / the value of the timber crop value in the area is?
- Several people raised concerns about the litter and general anti-social behaviour in the area and how it will be tackled.
- Is there access to the bio diversity report on the area?
- Will the development affect the local pond life in the area?

- Suggestions for eco-friendly restrooms and the possibility of treating sewage on site if it were possible.
- Has it been ascertained that wastewater treatment cannot happen on site, i.e. that mains sewerage connection is absolutely necessary?
- Will the development will have any effect on the tree growth?
- Several people wanted to know if there will be new road drainage.
- Several people wanted to know where the sewage will runoff to?
- Visual impact was raised – light pollution management needed.
- Visual impact – opportunity to underground unsightly infrastructure (ESB, etc) should be taken as part of the Project.

### **Facilities**

- The provision of basic facilities and interpretation was broadly welcomed but some people questioned the need for the café given the local offering.

### **Hell Fire Club / Hell Fire Circle**

- Reservations about the Hell Fire Circle (a new proposed trail around the top of Montpelier Hill just below the Hell Fire Club building opening new panoramas as it encircles the hill – panoramic display boards at ground/low level to show key reference points in the distance) as it was outlined and suggestions that boulders might be a better option than seats on the top of the Hell Fire as the seats might be vandalised.
- The Hell Fire Circle also received high praise from several members of the public who stated their belief that it was one of the key features that they fully supported.
- Suggestions of adding telescopes to the Hell Fire circle.
- Suggestion of having low level lighting at the Hell Fire Club building to try and prevent people using the building as an illegal restroom.
- Suggestion of lighting the building on special occasions as a feature lit landscape attraction visible from the City
- Wants to know if there will be picnic areas and planting of shrubs.
- Is there is a proposal for a greenway at Hell Fire?
- Questions were raised if the tunnels to the Hell Fire Club will be preserved.
- Suggestions for building the Visitor Centre out of stone/granite to match the Hell Fire Club rather than the wooden façade as in the artist's impression.
- Suggestions to consider a design solution that incorporates Hell Fire Club as part of the café with views of the city.
- Questions as to how the archaeology on site will be presented and made accessible at Hellfire.

### **Massy's**

- Many people suggested that Massy's would be a good location for both a natural and historic heritage trail (specimen trees, arboretum, old estate heritage etc).
- Suggested that Massy's would be a good location for benches and natural play facilities for families and a fairy trail (many attendees referenced Slieve Gullion).
- Some expressed the view that Massy's is a very sensitive and valuable habitat (supporting red squirrel and numerous birds in particular), which cannot accommodate the likely increase in human access.
- Concern expressed over the stability of the river banks, existing (suggested erosion is visible in places), and in the event of increased visitor traffic.

#### **Site Selection Matrix (Feasibility Report) / Orlagh House**

- Several people asked if Orlagh House was included in the selection process in addition to Hell Fire and Massy's?
- How is tourism broken down in the Matrix?
- Was sewage included in the Matrix?
- How did we come to figure if you added the combined options as it doesn't calculate them?
- Why did SDCC not CPO the land?
- Several people asked for an explanation as to how exactly the Matrix System works and if the calculations are correct.

#### **Residential Entrances**

- Several residents wanted to know if the entrance to their driveway will be affected and if it'll be more difficult to park their car.
- Several of the residents suggested bringing them in for a separate group discussion once it was known the effects the development will have on their entrances.

#### **Roads / Pathways**

- Suggestions for a one-way system of traffic for buses / coaches.
- Several people stated that they believe that it should be made clear that the road development won't go ahead if the Visitor Centre doesn't go ahead.
- Several people wanted to make sure that the cemetery isn't disturbed during the development on the roads.
- Will any measures be taken to make sure the roads and paths are safe when it snows?
- Several people wanted to know why the original plan to have a roundabout at the Hell Fire has been removed?
- Several people believed the back entrance to Massy's could be used as an alternative pathway / entrance.
- Why can't the surrounding land be CPO'd to make sure that the road is wide enough for two coaches to pass at the pinch point sections?

- Plans for greenway development should be expedited to facilitate local and cycle access. Rights of way for this should be explored and secured.

### **Security**

- Several people were concerned about supervision of the car park. Would like to see CCTV and car park attendant.
- Several people asked if it was possible for Gardai to police the site.
- Will there be a security patrol or ranger station nearby?

### **Signage**

- Requests for the signage to be changed to the correct spelling of Massy's.
- Several people requested having bilingual signs in the area and to make sure that all translation be vetted by fluent speakers and not through a computer translation program.

### **South Dublin County Council**

- What is SDCC going to do to preserve the Military Road within Massy's?
- Does SDCC have an overall vision for the Dublin Mountains Project?
- Several people requested uploading the Feasibility Study onto the website.
- Several people wanted to know how South Dublin County Council can get planning permission when others can't.
- Several people requested for the project appendices to be uploaded onto the website.
- Concerns that servicing the development will be "the thin edge of the wedge" and facilitate planning permission for further proliferation of housing/development in the mountains.

### **Financing the Project**

- Several people wanted to know who is paying for the project and how much will it cost.
- How much South Dublin County Council paid Coillte?
- How will SDCC realise its investment?
- What happens if the Failte grant fails?
- Some people expressed a belief that Project motivation was commercial by Coillte, if not also SDCC.
- Some people suggested SDCC should focus on social issues and leave the area undeveloped.

### **Stewarts House**

- Several people wanted to know if anything is happening with Stewarts House? Would like something done with it if possible as it's an awful eyesore.

### **Tourism**

- Have any tourist groups looked at the plans and given their input?

- Concerns expressed that by Coillte and SDCC licensing future services etc. that access will be restricted and charges will come in and the Gateway concept will be lost.
- Several people (some representing groups) expressed concern that without achieving extensions and loops out of Hellfire and out to NPWS/Featherbed lands for walkers that the Hellfire will fail as a gateway and become a congested site.
- Several staff from the Maldron Hotel praised the idea for the development and said they were fully behind the project.

### **Transport**

- Questions were raised about what public or otherwise transport options are in place to transport people to and from the site.
- A number of people believed that public transport to Hell Fire would be an important factor.
- A number of people believe that the lack of infrastructure to get to Hell Fire should be a centre point of the project.
- Several people asked if a shuttle bus service will be available and how it would be funded.
- Several people expressed concern that traffic management plans should be developed for the wider residential areas of approach roads to the mountains which are already congested and will be impacted by the development. The Ballycullen LAP was referenced multiple times.

### **Tree-Top Bridge**

- What are the health and safety features of the tree-Top bridge and what materials will it be made from?
- Concerns that the Tree Top bridge is a “costly over-engineered” solution to road safety issues that could be addressed by traffic calming and a pedestrian crossing.
- Concerns expressed that the Tree Top Bridge will be underwhelming if it doesn’t offer views of the City.
- The Tree Top Bridge will facilitate a substantial increase (ten to twelve-fold estimated by a member of the public) in footfall in Massy’s Wood. Can the ecology of the Massy’s site accommodate this?