

CUNNANE STRATTON REYNOLDS

CSR Ref: 16508/RB/170217

An Bord Pleanála
64 Marlborough Street
Dublin 1
D01V902

17 February 2017

Dear Sir/Madam,

REQUEST BY SOUTH DUBLIN COUNTY COUNCIL TO AN BORD PLEANÁLA, UNDER ARTICLE 120(3)(b) OF THE PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT REGULATIONS 2001 (AS AMENDED), FOR DETERMINATION AS TO WHETHER ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT IS REQUIRED FOR THE PROPOSED DUBLIN MOUNTAINS VISITOR CENTRE DEVELOPMENT

Cunnane Stratton Reynolds (CSR) has been appointed by South Dublin County Council (SDCC) as planner and environmental impact assessment coordinator on the design team for a proposed Dublin Mountains visitor centre. **We write to request a determination by an Bord Pleanála, under Article 120(3)(b) of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 as amended (hereafter referred to as the Regulations), on the requirement for an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in respect of the proposed development.**

The site of the proposed development is Coillte's Hellfire and Massy's Wood forest properties. The properties have a combined area of 152ha. The two properties are located on opposite sides of the R115 Killakee Road, on the eastern flank of Montpelier Hill, in the rural environment to the south of the Woodlawn and Rockbrook/Mountvenus areas in South Dublin.

The Dublin Mountains Project is a proposal by SDCC (in partnership with Coillte and the Dublin Mountains Partnership) to develop the site as a forest and cultural heritage park with visitor facilities, to function as an improved local amenity, a tourism attraction and a 'gateway' for all to the heritage and recreation amenities of the wider Dublin Mountains.

It is proposed to develop enhanced visitor facilities on the site in a manner that is sensitive to the environment, the local community and existing users. The concept (under review and subject to change) includes development of improved road access to the site and an expanded parking area; an improved network of trails including a footbridge over the R115 linking the Hellfire and Massy's Wood forests; a visitor facilities building including an audio-visual and exhibition space, a café and kiosk, a small shop, and toilets/changing rooms. The proposed development also includes conservation works to the Hellfire Club (a protected structure) and the walled garden and other architectural heritage features in Massy's Wood; interpretation features at points along the trails network; and landscape improvements throughout the site.

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We enclose the following documents to inform the Board's opinion:

- Site location map, drawing no. 16508/1/101, scale 1:25000 @ A3.
- South Dublin County Development Plan 2016 zoning map, drawing no. 16508/1/102, 1:25000 @ A3.
- (Provisional) Masterplan, drawing no. 1639/SD/901/B, scale 1:8000 @ A3.
- (Provisional) Plans, drawing no. 1639/SD001/F, scale 1:400 @ A3.

The plans of the proposed building, and the masterplan, are subject to change. The design process is ongoing in parallel with environmental impact assessment and a public consultation programme.

- Feasibility Study and Masterplan for a Flagship Tourism Facility for the Dublin Mountains.

This report was produced for SDCC in 2015. It provides information on the site selection process which led to the identification of the Hellfire/Massy's Wood site as the preferred option, and includes a provisional masterplan for development of the site. The masterplan has since evolved as a result of a review of the feasibility study, and continues to be refined informed by ongoing EIA and public consultation.

In Section 1.0 below we provide a summary description of the site. In Section 2.0 we provide brief description of the receiving environment. In Section 3.0 we describe the (provisionally) proposed development.

In Section 4.0 we set out SDCC's reasons for forming the view that the development would be likely to have significant environmental effects, as required by Article 120(3)(c) of the Regulations.

In Section 5 we request the Board's determination, in accordance with Article 120(3)(b) of the Regulations.

1.0 THE SITE

A site selection and feasibility study was carried out by SDCC in 2015. Six possible sites in the Dublin Mountains were identified and comparatively assessed for their potential for development of a Dublin Mountains Visitor Centre to optimise the use and value of the mountains as a tourism resource. The site was selected for the proposed development due to its position at the threshold between the city and the mountains, its unique combination of landscape, natural and cultural heritage and its established and growing use as a recreation facility.

The site is comprised of two Coillte owned forest properties, the Hellfire Forest property and the Massy's Wood property. Refer to the site Location Map enclosed.

1.1 The Hellfire Forest Property

The Hellfire Forest property is 105 ha in extent and is an actively managed commercial coniferous forest. It is located on Montpelier hill, one of the outlying northern hills of the Dublin and Wicklow Mountains. The forest property has a single access point, from the R115 Killakee Road which runs along its east boundary.

The property is also used as a recreation facility. A parking area with a capacity of c. 80 cars is provided on the lower eastern slope of the hill near the entrance. The network of forest roads and additional trails are used for walking and horse riding. It is estimated by Coillte that some 80,000 visitors use the site annually. On busy weekend days and holidays the parking area regularly overflows and there is

uncontrolled parking outside of the property on the R115 (surveys during the Feasibility Study found the parking area full and up to 40 cars parked on the road on occasions). This causes traffic congestion and safety issues on the R115.

The existing attractions for visitors include the forested upland landscape (accessible due to the public ownership and the forest roads), spectacular panoramic views, and most particularly the cultural heritage features of the property. Most prominent among these is the Hellfire Club building. This is located at the top of Montpelier Hill overlooking Dublin and the Bay, in a clearing in the forest. The building, a protected structure (South Dublin Record of Protected Structures ref. 388) constructed in 1725, has iconic status in the cultural history of Dublin. In addition to its prominent location and panoramic views over the city, the building has a unique architectural form and a history and stories that lend the place some notoriety. These characteristics combine to make the Hellfire Club attractive to visitors including locals, Dubliners, domestic and foreign tourists, school groups, and groups of youths that visit at night to experience its particular character and atmosphere. The path directly up the east face of Montpelier Hill to the building is very heavily used. This has caused erosion, and scarring of the landscape. A standing stone half way up the path has been overturned at some point in the past and its setting is compromised. Fires are often lit inside the Hellfire building and the walls are graffitied.

Alongside the Hellfire Club building on the top of the hill are the remains of two ancient tombs. A licensed dig in 2016 (as part of the Hellfire Club Archaeological Project) revealed that one of these is a Neolithic passage tomb featuring megalithic art and still containing – despite historic disturbance – other archaeological features. It is thought that stone from the cairn of the tomb was used in the construction of the Hellfire Club building. This is the subject of ongoing investigation. It is also thought that some stone may have been taken from the cairn for the construction of the Military Road which runs through Massy's Wood.

The archaeologist carrying out the 2016 dig (Neil Jackman, Abarta) believes that Montpelier Hill is rich in archaeology. Using an aerial photograph from before the hill's afforestation he has identified numerous topographic features that may be indicative of archaeological remains. Any or most such remains would have been heavily disturbed by subsequent forestry activity but this does not diminish Montpelier Hill's suspected significance as a cultural/archaeological landscape.

Survey of the property has shown that despite its ongoing operation as a commercial forest the property does provide habitat for numerous species including the endangered red squirrel.

Recent and ongoing forestry operations have caused some conflict with recreational users of the property. An area on the east face of the hill, between the parking area and the Hellfire Club, was clear felled in 2016 causing some anger among user groups and locals.

1.2 The Massy's Wood Forest Property

The Massy's Wood property is 47 ha in extent and located to the east of Montpelier Hill and the R115 Killakee Road. Commercial forestry operations have been scaled back on the Massy's Wood property and it is now managed as a mixed woodland predominantly for recreation amenity. A small river (Crugh Brook, a tributary of the Owendoher River) runs through the forest south to north. The property is extensively used for walking and to a lesser extent cycling.

The property features extensive beech woods and numerous majestic specimen trees dating from the property's development as the demesne landscape and arboretum of Killakee House (now demolished).

Animal species known to occur in the Massy's Wood include Sika deer, badger, grouse, red squirrel, fox and numerous birds.

Massy's Wood is also rich in cultural heritage features. Most notable is the large, multi-roomed walled garden, the walls of which are predominantly intact. The plinths and foundations of a Turner¹-designed glasshouse remain at the northern end of the garden. The garden is now overgrown with scrub. Other architectural features of the property include an ice house, the ruins of a cottage on the river bank, and a stone bridge over the river. These are collectively a protected structure (South Dublin Record of Protected Structures ref. 384). A 750m section of the Military Road (RPS ref. 385) traverses the property inside the western boundary. The Military Road was built in 1802 in the wake of the 1798 Rebellion to open up the Dublin and Wicklow Mountains to the British army. This 750m stretch of the road, with adjacent retaining walls, is the only section of the road that has not been tarmacked and retains its original cobblestones.

There is no parking provided specifically for the Massy's Wood property despite its extensive recreational usage. Visitors use the Hellfire forest parking area and cross the R115 on foot.

2.0 THE RECEIVING ENVIRONMENT

The proposed development site is located in the Dublin Mountains High Amenity zoned area of South Dublin. The two properties making up the site are divided by the R115 Killakee Road.

The forest properties are integral to the forested upland landscape of South Dublin and have a significant concentration of landscape and visual amenity resources, cultural and natural heritage, and recreational use between them which is representative of the Dublin Mountains High Amenity area.

There is a concentration of rural houses and enterprises in the vicinity of the site, mostly to the north of the site, along the R115. The businesses include Timbertrove, a timber products manufacturing and resale enterprise which has an attached homeware shop and café, and the Killakee Livery Yard. Immediately adjacent the site to the north is the Steward's House and attached stables, tower and gate (protected structures, RPS ref. 380). The house operated as a bar/restaurant for 30 years in the late 20th century, and is currently in use as a residence. The property has been the subject of several planning applications for small scale (three units) tourism accommodation development in the last number of years. Permission was granted in 2010 but not implemented and has now expired. In addition to these properties there are several houses fronting the R115 to the north and south of the site, forming a distinct concentration of rural development. These properties and their occupants would be sensitive receptors to environmental effects of development at the site.

In the wider environment, there is a concentration of rural (though partly urban-generated) housing in the Jamestown area to the east of Massy's Wood, and along the Cruagh Road, in the valley of the Owendoher River between Montpelier Hill and Cruagh Mountain. These houses are within 1-1.5km to the east of the Hellfire forest property. The occupants would be sensitive especially to landscape and visual effects of development at the site.

A short distance further to the north east there are the more urbanised areas of Rockbrook and Mountvenus, which lie outside of the M50 (passing some 2km to the north east of the site), somewhat removed from the city to the north. The relationship of these areas to the Dublin Mountains landscape is less direct (than the communities in the immediate vicinity of the site and in Jamestown and Cruagh

¹ Richard Turner was the designer of the glasshouses of the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, the Palm House at Kew Gardens and the glasshouse in the Winter Garden at Regent's Park.

Road), but residents would be among the existing users of the site for recreation, and enjoy views of the site in places (e.g. at Mountvenus cemetery). Further to the north on the edge of the city are the recently developed suburban areas of Ballycullen, Woodstown and Killininy. There are existing users and numerous potential users of recreation facilities on the site in these areas.

Piperstown Road and Mountain Road pass to the west of the Hellfire forest property and Montpelier Hill, on the side of the Glenasmole River Valley, somewhat removed from where the proposed development is concentrated near the R115. These roads have a relatively dense concentration of housing dispersed along them, but are separated from the Hellfire Club and Massy's by the bulk of Montpelier Hill and the extensive coniferous forest on its west flank.

These concentrations of settlement in the site environs are effectively the southern outlying areas of urban generated development beyond the edge of Dublin city.

Spread in an arc to the south of Montpelier Hill and the site lie the taller and more remote Dublin and Wicklow Mountains including Fairy Castle, Cruagh and Glendoo, Kippure, Seefingan and Seefin, and Corrig. The transport and settlement patterns in this area are sparse. Forestry generally stops beneath the 500m contour so the mountains are covered predominantly in moorland and bog. There are large areas designated as Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Area (SPA) at these upper elevations. The Glenasmole Valley to the west of Montpelier Hill is also a designated SAC and proposed Natural Heritage Area (pNHA).

Thus, the site is situated on the threshold between the city and the rural environs. Development at the site has the potential to affect both of these environments and environmental receptors.

3.0 THE PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

The proposed development is currently in a process of review and design, building on (but scaled back from) the concept and masterplan which resulted from the Feasibility Study. The proposals are not yet fixed; they will be determined to an extent by parallel processes of EIA and consultation. However, the guiding vision and concept can be summarised as follows: A multi-faceted development including complimentary measures for heritage conservation, landscape restoration, access improvement and provision of visitor facilities:

More specifically the development proposals are likely to include the following significant physical interventions:

3.1 Access and Parking

- Interventions along the R115 to the north of the site may be proposed, for example the development of passing bays in places to facilitate traffic movement.
- A pedestrian path alongside the R115 between the site and Stocking Avenue to the north may be proposed, to facilitate pedestrian access from the city direction.
- The entrance to the Hellfire forest property may be modified, for example by the development of a turning circle on the R115 at the site entrance, to facilitate improved traffic flow.
- It is proposed to expand the existing car parking capacity on the Hellfire property from c. 80 spaces to c. 250-300 spaces, and to provide some coach parking spaces, to cater for existing demand and increased visitor numbers.
- This may require the felling of some or all of a stand of mature conifer trees above the existing car park, as well as extensive earthworks (as the site is steeply sloped). The existing conifer

trees are approaching end of life and due for felling, and would be replaced by new planting/landscaping to integrate the expanded parking area.

3.2 Trails Improvements and Heritage Interpretation

- The project is intended to provide an improved walking experience for visitors to the Hellfire and Massy's site, and the wider Dublin Mountains. Proposals are likely to include upgrading and/or realignment of some of the existing trails and forest roads, where required, to provide a safe, accessible network through the forest park, giving access to the heritage features, the landscape and views, the new visitor facilities, and linking to the Dublin Mountains Way.
- Equestrian routes are also envisaged to maintain this established use.
- Proposals will likely include a range of interpretation materials (signage, panels, etc.) at points along the trails network, to discretely explain the natural and cultural heritage of the site, or a view, etc.

3.3 Tree Canopy Walk/Bridge

- In part to link the two parts of the site safely across the R115, and also to provide a unique experience for visitors, it is proposed to develop a feature tree canopy walk/bridge linking the lower flank of Montpelier Hill across the R115 to Massy's Wood.

3.4 Proposed Visitor Centre

- A purpose built building (total of c. 900 sqm currently envisaged) housing visitor facilities is proposed on the lower eastern flank of Montpelier Hill, near the parking area, possibly to include the following facilities/uses:
 - Café: A glass fronted café (c. 75 seats) offering panoramic views, with associated kitchen, servery, store, etc.
 - Audio-visual and exhibition space: Presenting high quality cinematic experiences and interpretation of the cultural and natural heritage of the Hellfire Club and Massy's and the wider Dublin/Wicklow Mountains. This space could also be used for exhibitions and small events.
 - Retail space/shop: Providing provisions for walkers and possibly some souvenirs.
 - Kiosk: Providing take-away refreshments/picnics for walkers.
 - 'Ramblers' Lounge': Internal space for visitors/walkers to rest and find information about the site and the Dublin/Wicklow Mountains.
 - Toilets and baby changing facilities.
 - Outdoor terraces: Providing outdoor seating and viewing points in front of the building.

3.5 Hellfire Club Building, Montpelier Hill Tombs and Their Setting

- The Hellfire Club building is a protected structure. Measures for the conservation of the building, and possibly interpretation of its history and stories, may be proposed. These may need to include measures to restrict access at times to prevent further damage to the building for example by fire or graffiti.
- Protection measures may be proposed for the Neolithic tombs and their setting, and to direct visitor access in a way that protects the monuments from further damage.
- Interpretation facilities in the vicinity of the cultural heritage features may be proposed.

3.6 Massy's Estate Architectural Heritage

- Measures for the conservation of the walled garden, the glasshouse (remains), the ice house, bridge and ruined cottage may be proposed, along with associated landscape improvements to enhance their setting.

3.7 Landscape Development

- SDCC and Coillte have signed a Memorandum of Understanding which would grant to SDCC - in the event of the development going ahead - the right to manage the east face of Montpelier Hill for amenity purposes. This would involve the replacement, over time, of a large area of coniferous plantation with permanent, non-commercial mixed forest. This would complement the managed forest on the Massy's Wood property, forming an extensive forest park managed for recreation, biodiversity and cultural heritage access/conservation objectives.
- The development of the forest would be complemented by interventions to restore areas on the site disturbed by previous commercial forest operations and un-managed visitor access, and to integrate new built elements into the landscape.

In combination these provisionally proposed interventions constitute an extensive development of visitor access improvements, visitor facilities, cultural heritage conservation and interpretation measures, and landscape enhancements - with significant potential environmental effects.

4.0 SDCC EIA SCREENING OPINION

The requirement for an EIA arises in the first instance from Article 2.1 of the EIA Directive (85/337/EEC) which states.

"2.1. Member States shall adopt all measures necessary to ensure that, before consent is given, projects likely to have significant effects on the environment by virtue, inter alia, of their nature, size or location are made subject to a requirement for development consent and an assessment with regard to their effects. Those projects are defined in Article 4."

In the context of the proposed development the obligation to conduct EIA under Irish law arises under s. 172(1) of the Act of 2000, as amended, which must be interpreted and applied in accordance with the EIA Directive. Section 172(1) of the Act provides for mandatory EIA where the particular threshold for the relevant class of development is exceeded. Section 172(1) also requires that EIA be carried out in respect of sub-threshold development where the planning authority or the Board, as the case may be, determines that the development would be likely to have 'significant effects on the environment'. For ease of reference, s. 172(1) provides as follows:

"(1) An environmental impact assessment shall be carried out by the planning authority or the Board, as the case may be, in respect of an application for consent for proposed development where either—

(a) the proposed development would be of a class specified in—

(i) Part 1 of Schedule 5 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, and either—

(I) such development would exceed any relevant quantity, area or other limit specified in that Part, or

(II) no quantity, area or other limit is specified in that Part in respect of the development concerned, or

(ii) Part 2 of Schedule 5 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 and either—

- (I) such development would exceed any relevant quantity, area or other limit specified in that Part, or
- (II) no quantity, area or other limit is specified in that Part in respect of the development concerned, or
- (b)(i) the proposed development would be of a class specified in Part 2 of Schedule 5 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 but does not exceed the relevant quantity, area or other limit specified in that Part, and
- (ii) the planning authority or the Board, as the case may be, determines that the proposed development would be likely to have significant effects on the environment." (own emphasis)

The Planning and Development Regulations 2001 as amended identify:

- the development classes which should be subject to mandatory EIA (Part 1 of Schedule 5);
- the classes of development which should be subject to EIA where they exceed a certain threshold of scale (Part 2 of Schedule 5);
- the classes of development which should be subject to EIA (Part 2 of Schedule 5) where the planning authority or the Board determines that they would be likely to have significant effects on the environment due to the characteristics of the proposed development, the location of the site, or the characteristics of the potential impacts (Part 2, Schedule 7).

With regard to the Regulations, the proposed development can be classed as 'Tourism and Leisure' development, the class of development identified in Article 12, Part 2, Schedule 5. The proposed development does not comply explicitly with any of the particular development descriptions (a) to (e)² of Article 12. Therefore it does not exceed any threshold defined in Article 12 and s.172(1)(a) of the Act does not apply.

However, it is our opinion, and the opinion of SDCC, that s.172(1)(b)(ii) of the Act does apply in the case of the proposed development. The proposed development is a 'Tourism and Leisure' development and therefore should be screened for EIA in accordance with Schedule 7 of the Regulations. Schedule 7 sets out the criteria for determining whether a development would or would not be likely to have significant effects on the environment. These criteria include:

"The environmental sensitivity of geographical areas likely to be affected by the proposed development, having regard in particular to:...

- *The absorption capacity of the natural environment, paying particular attention to the following areas:*
 - (c) *mountain and forest areas,...*
 - (h) *landscapes of historical, cultural or archaeological significance."*

The site of the proposed development is in a mountain and forest area. It is also a landscape of historical, cultural and archaeological significance. Therefore s.172(1)(b)(ii) applies.

² Article 12, Part 2, Schedule 5 of the Regulations:

"12. Tourism and leisure

- (a) *Ski-runs, ski-lifts and cable-cars where the length would exceed 500 metres and associated developments.*
- (b) *Sea water marinas where the number of berths would exceed 300 and fresh water marinas where the number of berths would exceed 100.*
- (c) *Holiday villages which would consist of more than 100 holiday homes outside built-up areas; hotel complexes outside built-up areas which would have an area of 20 hectares or more or an accommodation capacity exceeding 300 bedrooms.*
- (d) *Permanent camp sites and caravan sites where the number of pitches would be greater than 100.*
- (e) *Theme parks occupying an area greater than 5 hectares."*

As to whether s.172(1)(b)(ii) applies where a proposed development does not explicitly comply with one of the development descriptions (a) to (e) of Article 12, Part 2, Schedule 5 of the Regulations (refer to footnote on page 8 of this letter), we submit that a purposive approach must be adopted to interpretation of the EIA Directive. The broad development type 'Tourism and Leisure' should not be interpreted as only development that complies with the five development descriptions (a) to (e). Other types of tourism and leisure development could have significant effects on the environment, where they occur in sensitive environments, and in the spirit of the EIA Directive these developments should be subject to EIA.

It is SDCC's objective – while seeking to carry out the proposed development - to avoid any significant negative effects on the site and receiving environment. However, it is considered prudent, and in the public interest, that the EIA Directive (and s.175 of the Act) be applied in this case to ensure that the proposed development takes account, properly and transparently, of the environmental sensitivities.

We refer the Board to the judgement in the case of *Berkeley v. Secretary of State for the Environment* [2000] 3 AER 897 where Lord Hoffman at para. 8 of his judgment stated:

"Perhaps the best statement of this aspect of an EIA is to be found in the U.K. government publication 'Environmental Assessment: A Guide to the Procedures' (HMSO 1989) at p.4:-

'The general public's interest in a major project is often expressed as concern about the possibility of unknown or unforeseen effects. By providing a full analysis of the project's effects, an environmental statement can help to allay fears created by lack of information. At the same time it can help to inform the public on the substantive issues which the local planning authority will have to consider in reaching a decision. It is a requirement of the Regulations that the environmental statement must include a description of the project and its likely effects together with a summary in non-technical language. One of the aims of a good environmental statement should be to enable readers to understand for themselves how its conclusions have been reached, and to form their own judgments on the significance of the environmental issues raised by the project.'

In summary, it is SDCC's opinion that (a) the EIA Directive would be given its intended effect by an EIA being carried out in respect of the proposed development, and (b) that the public would best be served by use of s. 175 of the Act, i.e. by SDCC making an application to the Board for approval of the development, in accordance with Part 10 of the Regulations.

5.0 REQUEST FOR AN BORD PLEANÁLA TO MAKE A DETERMINATION AS TO THE REQUIREMENT FOR EIA

We request, under Article 120(3)(b) of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 as amended, that the Board make a determination as to whether an EIA should be carried out in respect of the proposed development, and therefore whether the relevant authority for determining a planning application is an Bord Pleanála in accordance with Part 10 of the Regulations.

We respectfully request that the Board make its determination as soon as possible.

As a result of concern being expressed by some members of the public and public representatives over potential significant environmental effects of the proposed development, SDCC is anxious to give assurance to these parties that (a) EIA will be carried out, and (b) that an Bord Pleanála and not SDCC itself will be the determining authority on any application for development.

We trust that the case for the use of s. 175 of the Act and Part 10 of the Regulations is clearly set out above and that the Board can make its determination with the information provided.

If the Board requires any further information or if you have any other queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

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