



An
Bord
Pleanála

Inspector's Report ABP-309459-21

Development	Erect a 21m high monopole telecommunications support structure together with antennas, dishes and associated telecommunications equipment.
Location	Eir Exchange, Shean Lower, Blarney, Co. Cork
Planning Authority	Cork City Council
Planning Authority Reg. Ref.	20/39672
Applicant(s)	Eircom Ltd
Type of Application	Permission
Planning Authority Decision	Refusal
Type of Appeal	First Party -v- Decision
Appellant(s)	Eircom Ltd
Observer(s)	None
Date of Site Inspection	26 th May 2021
Inspector	Hugh D. Morrison

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1.0 Site Location and Description

- 1.1. The site is located 0.5 km to the east of The Square in Blarney town centre. This site lies in the south-eastern corner of the grounds of the town's telephone exchange and in a predominantly residential area with a school, Scoil Muire gan Smal, to the north. It is accessed off a cul-de-sac, which is in turn accessed off Castle Close Lawn (L2794).
- 1.2. The site itself is virtually square in shape and it extends over an area of 0.012 hectares. This site occupies a position adjacent to the southern eastern corner of the telephone exchange. Its southern and eastern boundaries coincide with the south eastern corner of the grounds to this telephone exchange. They are denoted by means of concrete post and chain link fences: The fence along the southern boundary is a new one, while that along the eastern boundary is an older one with cranked heads to the posts and accompanying barbed wire. Trees that formerly lay on the inside of these fences have been felled.
- 1.3. The southern boundary is with a house plot that has recently been redeveloped to provide a new dwelling house, which is sited towards the rear of the plot. The eastern boundary is with a house plot on which a bungalow is sited towards the front of the plot. This bungalow has been extended to the rear. Its plot is accompanied on its northern side by another house plot, which is presently being redeveloped to provide a new dwelling house.

2.0 Proposed Development

- 2.1. As originally submitted, the proposal would entail the erection of a 21m high monopole telecommunications support structure on a concrete plinth, together with antennas, dishes and associated telecommunications equipment, i.e. 2 pairs of operators ground equipment cabinets, each on a concrete plinth. The southern and eastern boundaries would be the subject of landscape screening.
- 2.2. At the appeal stage, the height of the proposed monopole telecommunications support structure was reduced by 3m, from 21m to 18m.

3.0 Planning Authority Decision

3.1. Decision

Permission was refused for the following reason:

The proposed development, by reason of its height, design and location in very close proximity to existing residential properties, would be visually intrusive and overbearing, and would seriously injure the amenities and character, and depreciate the value of residential property in the vicinity. The proposal would conflict with Policy Objective ED 7-1 in the County Development Plan 2014 and would therefore be contrary to the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

3.2. Planning Authority Reports

3.2.1. Planning Reports

See decision.

3.2.2. Other Technical Reports

- Cork Airport: No comment, requests that IAA be consulted.
- IAA: Advises that there is no requirement for obstacle lighting.
- Cork City Council:
 - Waste Management & Control: No objection, subject to conditions.
 - Contributions: Nil.
 - Area Engineer: Further information requested with respect to on-site parking provision and drainage of any additional hard surfaces.

4.0 Planning History

None

5.0 Policy and Context

5.1. Development Plan

Under the Cork County Development Plan 2014 – 2020 (CDP) and the Blarney – Macroom Municipal District Local Area Plan 2017 (LAP), the site is shown as lying within the development boundary around Blarney and in an existing built up area. Blarney ACA lies to the west and south of the site where it coincides with the town centre and the Blarney Castle Estate.

Section 9.7 of the CDP addresses Telecommunications Infrastructure. The following two objectives are set out under this Section:

ED 7-1: Telecommunications Infrastructure

Support the provision of telecommunications infrastructure that improves Cork County's international connectivity. Facilitate the provision of telecommunications services at appropriate locations within the County having regard to the DoEHLG

"Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures, Guidelines for Planning Authorities". Have regard to environmental and visual considerations when assessing largescale telecommunications infrastructure.

ED 7-2: Information and Communication Technology

Facilitate the delivery of a high capacity ICT infrastructure and high speed broadband network and digital broadcasting throughout the County. Support a programme of improved high speed broadband connectivity throughout the County and implement the National Broadband Strategy in conjunction with the Department of Communications, Marine & Natural Resources

5.2. National Planning Policy & National Planning Guidelines

- National Planning Framework
- National Development Plan
- Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy for the Southern Region 2020
- Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures Guidelines + Circular Letter PL07/12

5.3. Natural Heritage Designations

- Cork Harbour SPA (004030)
- Great island Channel SAC (001058)

6.0 The Appeal

6.1. Grounds of Appeal

The applicant begins by describing the site, which is in the south-eastern corner of land that accommodates an existing telephone exchange with telecommunications equipment on its roof top, and the proposal, which would entail the erection of a monopole with antennae, dishes, and associated equipment. As originally proposed, this monopole would have been 21m high. However, at the appeal stage, its height has been reduced to 18m, by way of response to the Planning Authority's concerns.

The applicant outlines the need for the proposal, insofar as improved coverage and capacity is needed for mobile telecommunications and broadband services in Blarney. The existing telephone exchange is too low to provide a platform for the needed equipment and alternative freestanding support structures are not substantial enough.

The applicant cites the following grounds of appeal:

(a) Visual impact of the proposal

- As indicated above, the proposal would be reduced in height and it would also be accompanied by screen planting. The visual impact of this revised proposal is the subject of a Visual Impact Assessment, which utilises 4 viewing points within the vicinity of the site. This Assessment indicates that it would not be visually obtrusive in the wider area of the site nor would it be overbearing and obtrusive from points nearer by.
- The existing telephone exchange with telecommunications equipment on its roof top are of many years standing and so they form part of the area's established skyline. The proposal would represent the further development of the host site and it would be partially screened by the building that is already upon it.

- The local streetscape comprises not only the existing telephone exchange with telecommunications equipment on its roof top, but other vertical structures such as lampstands and telegraph poles. The proposal would be seen within this context.
- The Blarney ACA is some considerable distance away from the site.
- The height of the proposal would ensure that the identified technical objectives can be achieved for multiple operators within the area where increased coverage/capacity is needed. The resulting benefits to the locality should be weighed against the proposal's visual impact.

(b) Impact on property value

- The applicant disputes that the proposal would have a negative impact on property values. In this respect, it discusses several Board reports/decisions:
 - PL26.247800: The proximity of masts to housing was acknowledged, particularly in urban areas, along with the absence of any required minimum separation distance.
 - PL02.243341: The potential impact on property values was discussed only to be dismissed. Similarly, PL02.236307 & PL02.216361 set aside the issue of impact upon property values.
 - In addition, PL02.236307 stated that the availability of improved broadband may off set any reduction in property values. This latter possibility has only strengthened in recent times.

(c) Need for telecommunications structure

- Blarney does not have any freestanding masts, e.g. a Garda mast. The chimney stack at Blarney Woollen Mills is in use to support equipment. However, for structural reasons, it does not afford the opportunity for further equipment to be supported upon it. Hence the need for a freestanding mast arises.
- Sections 3.2.5 & 3.2.22 of the LAP set out the role of Blarney as an integrated employment centre, with significant employment land being developed at

Stoneview, and the need to protect the town's attractiveness to tourism and the employment that it affords. The proposal would promote these initiatives.

- As outlined under (a) above, the visual impact of the proposal needs to be weighed against its considerable benefits to the town. In this respect, its design and height would be typical of monopoles that have already been erected elsewhere in existing built up areas/residential areas.

(d) Site suitability

- The relevant Guidelines do not require that a minimum separation distance between masts and housing be achieved, as such a distance could inadvertently adversely affect the technical objectives of such masts. The only requirements in this respect relate to non-ionising radiation and these are addressed separately from the planning system.
- The selected site is one that would, within the confines of the host telephone exchange site, ensure that the proposal would be furthest away from the main concentration of housing to the west.

(e) National and County Policy and Guidelines

- Report of the Mobile and Broadband Taskforce and Action Plan for Rural Development: The proposal would promote the imperatives identified in this Report.
- Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures Guidelines + Circular Letter PL07/12: The proposal would accord with the advice of these Guidelines, which promote mast sharing and the continued use of existing utilities sites.
- CDP: Section 9.7.1 acknowledges the role of telecommunications in promoting economic development and improving the quality of life for the public.

(f) Planning precedent

- Attention is drawn to two cases: 20/6183 for a 15m high monopole mast in the grounds of the telephone exchange at Crosshaven, which the Planning Authority permitted, and ABP-307377-20 for the extension of a lattice tower to

a height of 21.5m in the grounds of the telephone exchange at Ballyboden, which was permitted by the Board.

6.2. Planning Authority Response

None

6.3. Observations

None

6.4. Further Responses

None

7.0 Assessment

7.1. I have reviewed the proposal in the light of the National Development Plan 2018 – 2027 (NDP), National Planning Framework (NPF), Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures Guidelines and Circular Letter PL07/12, Cork City Development Plan 2015 – 2021 (CDP), Blarney – Macroom Municipal District Local Area Plan 2017 (LAP), the submissions of the parties, and my own site visit. Accordingly, I consider that this application/ appeal should be assessed under the following headings:

- (i) National policy, local need, and alternatives,
- (ii) Visual amenity and property value, and
- (iii) Appropriate Assessment.

(i) National policy, local need, and alternatives

7.2. The NDP has as a fundamental underlying objective the need to prioritise the provision of high-speed broadband. Likewise, Objective 48 of the NPF undertakes to “develop a stable, innovative and secure digital communications and services infrastructure on an all-island basis.”

7.3. These national objectives are reflected in Objectives ED 7-1 & 7-2 of the CDP, which support the provision of telecommunications infrastructure, having regard to

environmental and visual considerations, and the delivery of high speed broadband connectivity.

- 7.4. The applicant outlines the need for the proposal, insofar as improved coverage and capacity is needed for 4G mobile telecommunications and broadband services in Blarney, particularly with the development of employment land in Stoneview. Under Comreg's service coverage map, 4G coverage to the outskirts of Blarney, including Stoneview adjacent to the junction between the N20 and the R617, is either good/fair/fringe, and this is the pattern not only for the applicant, Eir, but for other operators, too.
- 7.5. Unusually, Blarney does not have existing masts, e.g. a Garda mast, upon which new antennae and dishes can be attached. The applicant proposes the development of the selected site in the light of the following alternatives which it considered:
- The existing telephone exchange roof provides a platform for antennae and dishes. However, its height of 8m is too low for the equipment that now needs to be installed.
 - The chimney to the Blarney Woollen Mills does support existing antennae and dishes. However, structural considerations preclude the addition of further equipment to it.
 - There is a 24m high lattice tower at the Old Blarney Railway Station, to the north-east of the town. Vodafone transmits from this tower. Even if Eir could remodel it for its own use, it would not achieve Eir's objectives of erecting "its own fit for purpose monopole, adjacent to its existing infrastructure", i.e. the telephone exchange.
 - Eir transmits from Derryroe Townland, 2 km to the east of Blarney. This site is too remote from the target coverage area around Blarney.
- 7.6. Section 4.5 of the Telecommunication Antennae Support Structures Guidelines acknowledges that mast sharing will normally reduce the visual impact of installations and that the opportunity to secure such sharing is greatest "in the case of new structures when foreseeable technical requirements can be included at the design stage."

- 7.7. I consider that the third alternative discussed above could potentially meet the applicant's requirements. However, as the mast in question is *in-situ* and the applicant does not appear to be in a position to alter it to meet its requirements, this mast appears, in practice, not to be available. The relevance of the above cited advice from Section 4.5 of the Guidelines is thus borne out.
- 7.8. The applicant would thus appear to be justified in principle in its selection of the application site, the development of which would meet its technical objectives.

I conclude that the proposal would accord with national and local objectives for telecommunications infrastructure, it would meet a local need to boost coverage, and the site has been selected following a consideration of alternatives.

(ii) Visual amenity and property value

- 7.9. As revised the proposed monopole telecommunications support structure would be 18m high. This support structure would be sited beside the south-eastern corner of the telephone exchange, which is a modern building with a square footprint and a height of 8m. It would be 32m to the west of the rear elevation of the nearest bungalow to the east or c. 28m to the rear extension to this bungalow, and 20m to the north of the nearest corner of the dwelling house to the south. The nearest dwelling houses to the west, on Castle Close Avenue, Nos. 15 & 17, would be 55m away.
- 7.10. During my site visit, I observed that the trees along the southern and eastern boundaries of the telephone exchange site have been felled, although some have been retained along the northern portion of the western boundary. The telephone exchange building, which was formerly largely screened by these mature deciduous and conifer trees (cf. Google street view July 2019), is now clearly visible from public vantage points and surrounding residential properties and along with it the application site. Existing equipment mounted on the roof of the telephone exchange is also clearly visible.
- 7.11. The Planning Authority refused the proposal on the grounds that it would be visually intrusive and overbearing with respect to nearby residential properties, with adverse implications for the character, amenity, and value of these properties.
- 7.12. The applicant has responded to these grounds by addressing the visual and property value impacts of its proposal.

- 7.13. With respect to visual impact, the applicant has submitted 4 existing views of the site from viewpoints within the surrounding area and 4 corresponding photomontages of the proposal superimposed on these views. It contends that the proposal would not be visually obtrusive within views that include existing vertical utilities, such as lampstands and telegraph poles, and the juxtaposition of existing dwelling houses and the telephone exchange would partially screen this proposal, thereby lessening its visual impact.
- 7.14. The applicant also contends that the well-established telephone exchange and the equipment mounted upon its roof form part of the existing skyline and hence character of the area. The proposal would represent the further development of this utilities site.
- 7.15. During my site visit, I was able to view the site from the viewpoints shown in the applicant's presentation. I observed the proximity of this site to the nearest dwelling houses to the east and to the south. I also observed the utilitarian design of the telephone exchange building and the existing equipment mounted upon its roof.
- 7.16. I note that the former trees along the southern and eastern boundaries of the site would largely have screened the telephone exchange, but they would have led to a degree of overshadowing of the residential property to the east. I note, too, that the scope for screening the proposal would appear to be limited to that of the ground mounted equipment in the compound beneath the support structure.
- 7.17. The Telecommunications Antennae Support Structures Guidelines advise that monopoles should be specified for sites close to residential properties and Circular Letter PL07/12 advises that minimum separation distances between such poles and residential properties are not to be prescribed on visual amenity grounds. In the current case, I consider that the amenity of the nearest dwelling houses to the east and south has been altered by the removal of trees: Consequently, screening of the telephone exchange site has been lost and improved lighting has been gained. Under the proposal, the utilitarian character of the site would be reinforced with the erection of a tall, if slender, structure that would be visible from within these adjacent residential properties. Horizontal views from within these properties would be of the pole while more vertical views would be of the antennae and dishes that it would support. Visual amenity would be affected but within the changed context discussed

above, whereby the utilitarian nature of the site has become more apparent and improved lighting levels are being experienced.

- 7.18. With respect to property value, the applicant cites several Board cases in which the potential impact of telecommunication proposals upon property values were discussed only to be set aside. It also cites a case in which any adverse impact was considered to be offset by improved broadband reception and it expresses the view that such effect is only likely to have been increased in recent times.
- 7.19. I consider that the presence of the telephone exchange and the likelihood of its development as a utilitarian site may have a bearing on adjoining residential properties but that this would pre-date the current proposal. I also consider that there is likely to be substance to the applicant's contention that improved broadband reception has a bearing on property values.
- 7.20. I conclude that the proposal would be compatible with the visual amenities of the wider area of the site. I also conclude that this proposal would affect the visual amenity of the residential properties closest to this site, but that such impact would reflect a continuation in the changes experienced to the residential amenities of these properties as a result of the recent felling of trees. Within this context and in the light of relevant national planning advice, I do not consider that, on balance, the impact upon visual amenity warrants objection. I further conclude that the proposal would be unlikely to affect the value of these residential properties.

(iv) Appropriate Assessment

- 7.21. The site is in an urban area and the proposal and it would be sited in an existing utilities compound. This site is neither in nor near to any Natura 2000 sites and there are no connections between it and such sites in Cork Harbour.
- 7.22. Having regard to nature, scale, and location of the proposal, it is concluded that no Appropriate Assessment issues arise as the proposal would not be likely to have a significant effect individually or in combination with other plans or projects on a European site.

8.0 Recommendation

- 8.1. That permission be granted.

9.0 Reasons and Considerations

Having regard to the National Development Plan 2018 – 2027, the National Planning Framework, the Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures Guidelines, the Cork County Development Plan 2014 – 2020, the Blarney - Mallow Municipal District Local Area Plan 2017, and the location of the site in the grounds of Blarney telephone exchange, it is considered that, subject to conditions, the proposal would improve the coverage and capacity of mobile telecommunication and broadband services in line with national and local planning objectives. The site selected is appropriate, in principle, for this proposal, and the siting of it reflects the advice of the Guidelines with respect to the siting of telecommunication support structures. The amenities of the area would not be unduly affected, and no Appropriate Assessment issues would arise. The proposal would thus accord with the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

10.0 Conditions

1.	<p>The development shall be carried out and completed in accordance with the plans and particulars lodged with the application, as amended by the further plans and particulars received by An Bord Pleanála on the 17th day of February, 2021, except as may otherwise be required in order to comply with the following conditions. Where such conditions require details to be agreed with the planning authority, the developer shall agree such details in writing with the planning authority prior to commencement of development and the development shall be carried out and completed in accordance with the agreed particulars.</p> <p>Reason: In the interest of clarity.</p>
2.	<p>Details of the proposed colour scheme for the telecommunications structure, ancillary structures, fencing and gates shall be submitted to and agreed in writing with the planning authority prior to commencement of development.</p> <p>Reason: In the interest of the visual amenities of the area.</p>

3.	<p>Landscaping of the site shall be carried out in accordance with a landscaping scheme, which shall be submitted to and agreed in writing with the planning authority prior to the commencement of development.</p> <p>Reason: In the interest of the visual amenities of the area.</p>
4.	<p>The construction of the development shall be managed in accordance with a Construction Management Plan, which shall be submitted to, and agreed in writing with, the planning authority prior to commencement of development. This plan shall provide details of intended construction practice for the development, including hours of working, noise management measures, site-specific measures for handling surface water, and traffic management measures.</p> <p>Reason: In the interests of public safety and residential amenity.</p>

Hugh D. Morrison
Planning Inspector

4th June 2021