

# Inspector's Report ABP-312051-21

**Development** Section 254 Licence for a

telecommunications structure to

address identified mobile and mobile

broadband coverage blackspots

**Location** Grass Verge on the Portrane Road

(R126) (adjacent Bus Stop), Portrane,

Co. Dublin

Planning Authority Fingal County Council

Planning Authority Reg. Ref. S254/01/21

**Applicant(s)** Cignal Infrastructure Ltd.

Type of Application Section 254 Licence

Planning Authority Decision Refuse Licence

Type of Appeal First Party

**Appellant(s)** Cignal Infrastructure Ltd.

Observer(s) None

**Date of Site Inspection** 1st March 2022

**Inspector** lan Boyle

# 1.0 Site Location and Description

- 1.1. The appeal site is located on the southern side of Portrane Road (R126) in Portrane, Co. Dublin. It comprises a small grass verge area at the side of the public road. The site is near an existing covered bus stop and close to the entrance to St. Ita's Hospital. The grounds of St. Ita's Hospital are directly to the south and are accessed via Portrane Avenue.
- 1.2. A public footpath runs alongside the road and travels in an east west direction. The distance between the edge of the road and boundary wall of St. Ita's is relatively wide at this point at approximately 6.5m. The grass verge is roughly 4.5m wide.
- 1.3. The surrounding area to the east and north is mainly characterised by existing residential housing. Longstone Park is to the north and there is a public park situated between it and the appeal site. Further to the west is mainly agricultural farming land.
- 1.4. The town centre of Portrane (where Quay Road meets Burrow Road) is approximately 300m to the east. Donabate, which is the next nearest town, is roughly 3km to the west.

# 2.0 **Proposed Development**

- 2.1. The Applicant is seeking approval for a Section 254 Licence, comprising an 18m high freestanding galvanised telecommunications monopole together with antenna, internal cabling, dish, and ancillary cabinet and operating works.
- 2.2. The monopole would be 0.4m at its thickest point, which is at the top, where the antenna is housed, and the dish would be 300mm in diameter.
- 2.3. The purpose of the proposed infrastructure is to provide improved, high quality network coverage for the surrounding area.

# 3.0 Planning Authority Decision

#### 3.1. **Decision**

The Planning Authority refused the Section 254 Licence for one reason, which was, having regard to the height and prominent location of the proposed development near the entrance to St. Ita's Hospital complex, that it would be visually obtrusive and seriously injurious to and detract from the visual amenity of the area and the Portrane ACA, and that it would be contrary to the objectives of the Fingal County Development Plan 2017-2023.

## 3.2. Planning Authority Reports

## 3.3. Planning Reports

The Planner's Report formed the basis for the Planning Authority's Decision. Having examined the application and having considered the impacts of the development and the relevant policies of County Development Plan, the Planner recommended a refusal for the reason set out in the Decision above.

The following main comments were made in the analysis section of the Report:

- The proposed development would have a negative impact on the visual amenity of the area and adjacent Portrane ACA.
- The submitted Visual Impact Assessment (VIA) showing 'before' and 'after' images was received by internal Council Departments, including the Parks and Green Infrastructure Division and Conservation Officer, which were not in favour of the proposal. It was considered that the proposed monopole would be visually obtrusive, intrusive and dominant in this prominent location. The Planner agreed with this position.
- The proposed monopole at 18m is significant and would be visible from a
  wide area. Notwithstanding its slim, contemporary design, and that it would
  provide significant benefit to the area through improved mobile and wireless
  broadband, which would address an existing blackspot, this must be balanced

against its significant impact on visual amenity of the area and the Portrane ACA.

The issues raised by the Council's Transportation Planning Section, which
include setting back the monopole so that adequate sightlines can be
achieved, would be able to be addressed via condition.

## 3.4. Other Technical Reports

Transportation Planning Section: No objection, subject to conditions, including that (i) the proposed cabinet should not be within 600mm of the pedestrian footpath, (ii) details of the location of the unit and concrete base must be agreed with the Planning Authority prior to works being undertaken, (iii) the proposed monopole and cabinet must not be located with the visibility envelope of the adjacent road (Portrane Avenue), and iv) works to be carried out to the satisfaction of the Planning Authority.

<u>Parks and Green Infrastructure Division:</u> The proposed structure is visually obtrusive at this location on the grass verge and adjacent the bus stop. An alternative location behind the bus stop is recommended if permission is granted.

Conservation Officer: The proposed development would negatively impact the Portrane ACA, and several nearby Protected Structures, including Stella's Tower, Burrow Road, Portrane (RPS Ref. 521), St. Catherine's Church, Burrow Road, Portrane (RPS Ref. 522) and The Farm, Portrane Road, Portrane (RPS Ref. 523). While the proposed monopole has a slim and sleek contemporary design that is less intrusive than other types of antennae and masts, it is still very tall. The Applicant has not completed an assessment of potential impact on the surrounding architectural heritage of the area. The proposed location needs to be re-examined. Any revised location should take account of the adjoining architectural heritage.

<u>Public Lighting Section:</u> No report received.

Broadband Officer: No report received.

# 4.0 Planning History

None.

# 5.0 Policy Context

- 5.1. Planning Authorities on Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures issued (1996)
- 5.1.1. The 'Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures' (1996) set out government policy for the assessment of proposed new telecommunications structures ('the 1996 Guidelines'). The Guidelines state that the rapid expansion of mobile telephone services in Ireland has required the construction of base station towers in urban and rural areas across the country. This are an essential feature of all modern telecommunications networks. In many suburban situations, because of the low rise nature of buildings and structures, a supporting mast or tower is needed.
- 5.1.2. Section 4.3 of the Guidelines refers to visual impact and states that only as a last resort should free-standing masts be located within, or in the immediate surrounds, of smaller towns or villages. If such locations should become necessary, sites already developed for utilities should be considered, and masts and antennae should be designed and adapted for the specific location. The support structure should be kept to the minimum height consistent with effective operation. The Guidelines also state that visual impact is among the more important considerations that should be considered assessing a particular application. In most cases, the Applicant will only have limited flexibility as regards location, given the constraints arising from radio planning parameters, etc. Visual impact will, by definition, vary with the general context of the proposed development.
- 5.1.3. The Guidelines state that the approach will vary depending on whether a proposed development is in:
  - a rural/agricultural area;
  - an upland/hilly, mountainous area;
  - a smaller settlement/village;
  - an industrial area/industrially zoned land; or
  - a suburban area of a larger town or city.

5.1.4. The Guidelines state that some masts will remain quite noticeable despite best precautions. For example, there will be local factors which have to be taken into account in determining the extent to which an object is noticeable or intrusive. This may include intermediate objects (buildings or trees), topography, the scale of the object in the wider landscape, the multiplicity of other objects in the wider panorama, the position of the object with respect to the skyline, weather, lighting conditions, etc. Softening of the visual impact can be achieved through a judicious choice of colour scheme and through the planting of shrubs, trees etc as a screen or backdrop.

#### 5.2. Circular Letter PL07/12

Circular Letter PL07/12 revised elements of the 1996 Guidelines under Section 2.2 to 2.7. It advises Planning Authorities to:

- Cease attaching time limiting conditions or issuing temporary durations to telecommunications masts, except in exceptional circumstances.
- Avoid including minimum separation distances between masts or schools and houses in Development Plans.
- Omit conditions on planning permissions requiring security in the form of a bond/cash deposit.
- Not include monitoring arrangements on health and safety or to determine planning applications on health grounds.
- Include waivers on future development contribution schemes for the provision of broadband infrastructure.

#### 5.3. Circular Letter PL11/2020

- 5.3.1. Circular Letter PL11/2020 'Telecommunications Services Planning Exemptions and Section 254 Licences' was issued in December 2020. It advises Planning Authorities that:
  - Section 254 of the Act outlines the provisions in relation to the licensing of appliances and cables etc on public roads. Where development of a type specified in section 254(1) of the Act is proposed to be carried out on a public

road, approval for the works is required from a Planning Authority by means of the obtaining of a section 254 licence.

- A Section 254 Licence is required for overground electronic communications infrastructure and its associated works, and that such works are exempt from planning permission.
- The exemptions for telecommunications infrastructure along public roads do not apply:
  - (a) where the proposed development is in sensitive areas where there is a requirement for Appropriate Assessment.
  - (b) where the proposed development would endanger public safety by reason of traffic hazard or obstruction of road users.

## 5.4. Other National and Regional Policy

- Project Ireland 2040 The National Planning Framework (NPF), 2018
- The East and Midlands Regional Spatial Economic Strategy (RSES), 2019
- Architectural Heritage Protection: Guidelines for Planning Authorities,
   Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2011

# 5.5. Fingal County Development Plan 2017-2023

#### Zoning

The appeal site is not zoned and is located on the edge of a public road.

#### Portrane ACA

The site adjoins the Portrane Architectural Conservation Area (ACA), which is to the south.

#### <u>Movement and Infrastructure – Chapter 7</u>

'Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures' (Section 7.4)

Objective IT01

Promote and facilitate the sustainable delivery of a high-quality ICT infrastructure network throughout the County taking account of the need to protect the countryside

and the urban environment together with seeking to achieve balanced social and economic development.

Objective IT05

Provide the necessary telecommunications infrastructure throughout the County in accordance with the requirements of the Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures Guidelines for Planning Authorities July 1996 except where they conflict with Circular Letter PL07/12 which shall take precedence, and any subsequent revisions or additional guidelines in this area.

Objective IT07

Require best practice in siting and design in relation to the erection of communication antennae.

Objective IT08

Secure a high quality of design of masts, towers and antennae and other such infrastructure in the interests of visual amenity and the protection of sensitive landscapes, subject to radio and engineering parameters.

#### **Development Management Standards**

DMS143

Require the co-location of antennae on existing support structures and where this is not feasible require documentary evidence as to the non-availability of this option in proposals for new structures.

DMS144

Encourage the location of telecommunications based services at appropriate locations within the County, subject to environmental considerations and avoid the location of structures in fragile landscapes, in nature conservation areas, in highly sensitive landscapes and where views are to be preserved.

DMS145

Require the following information with respect to telecommunications structures at application stage:

- Demonstrate compliance with Telecommunications Antennae and Support
   Structures Guidelines for Planning Authorities issued by the Department of
   the Environment in July 1996 and / or to any subsequent amendments, Code
   of Practice on Sharing of Radio Sites issued by the Commission for
   Communications Regulation and to such other publications and material as
   maybe relevant in the circumstances.
- Demonstrate the significance of the proposed development as part of a national telecommunications network.
- Indicate on a map the location of all existing telecommunications structures (whether operated by the applicant or a competing company) within a 1km radius of the proposed site.
- Where sharing is not proposed, submit documentary evidence clearly stating the reasons why it is not feasible to share existing facilities bearing in mind the Code of Practice on Sharing of Radio Sites issued by the Commission for Communications Regulation.
- Demonstrate to what degree there is an impact on public safety, landscape, vistas and ecology.
- Identify any mitigation measure.

## 5.6. Other National and Regional Policy

- Project Ireland 2040 The National Planning Framework (NPF), 2018
- The East and Midlands Regional Spatial Economic Strategy (RSES), 2019
- Architectural Heritage Protection: Guidelines for Planning Authorities,
   Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2011

## 5.7. Natural Heritage Designations

No designations apply to the subject site.

The nearest European Site is Rogerstown Estuary SAC (Site Code: 000208), which is approximately 380m to the east. The site is also a pNHA.

The Rogerstown Estuary SPA (Site Code: 004015) is roughly 410m to the east.

# 6.0 The Appeal

# 6.1. **Grounds of Appeal**

The main grounds of appeal can be summarised as follows:

- The proposed development is located on a grass verge and so will not interfere with the use of the public footpath.
- The development would blend in with the existing environment,
- The development is required to improve network coverage in the area.
- The Applicant has completed a 'Street Works Site Justification Form'. The proposed location was selected as it is within the applicable 200m search ring.
- A number of alternative locations were examined by the Applicant. However, these were not suitable or acceptable for various reasons.
- As part of the technical justification for the proposed development two maps are provided at Figure 4 ('Existing Indoor Coverage) and Figure 5 ('Proposed Indoor Coverage'). The predicted network improvement is shown in blue in Figure 6 ('Comparison Coverage'). It is anticipated that the existing network coverage problems would be significantly improved by the installation of the proposed infrastructure.
- The Applicant references various supporting policy objectives from the County Development Plan, including Objectives IT07, IT08, DMS143, DMS144, DMS145, and national and regional policy documents.
- There are no protected scenic routes or amenity designations that apply to the site. The site adjoins an ACA to the south. However, the Visual Impact Assessment (VIA) and CGI images demonstrate that there would be no detriment to the visual amenities of the surrounding area.
- The established backdrop of development and street lighting would absorb the proposed structure from various viewpoints.
- The proposed development is a modern streamlined version of the required equipment.

The Applicant refers to a previous appeal case involving Galway City Council
in 2020 where the Board's Inspector referenced the proposed telecoms mast
as having a 'nondescript character and design that is not dissimilar to a lamp
standard or traffic light pole'. The proposed development was recommended
to be granted by the Inspector and ultimately permitted by the Board (ABP
Ref. PL.61.306440).

#### 6.2. Planning Authority Response

 It remains the view of the Planning Authority that the proposal would be visually obtrusive and seriously injurious to and detract from the visual amenity of the area of the Portrane ACA and, as such, would be contrary to the objectives of the County Development Plan.

#### 6.3. **Observations**

None.

#### 7.0 Assessment

The main planning considerations relevant to this appeal case are:

- Built Heritage and Visual Impact
- Site Selection (Alternatives Considered)
- Other Issues
- Appropriate Assessment

## 7.1. Built Heritage and Visual Impact

- 7.1.1. The Planning Authority's reason for refusal is due to the height and prominent location of the proposed development and that it would be visually obtrusive and seriously injurious to, and detract from, the visual amenity of the area and the adjacent Architectural Conservation Area.
- 7.1.2. The extent of the ACA is wide-ranging and it encompasses a large physical area covering the grounds of St. Ita's Hospital. The Statement of Character for the ACA

states that it covers the same area as the townland of Portrane Demesne, excluding the former burial ground of the hospital, in the north-eastern corner, and an area around it which has been carved out of the demesne and developed for housing. The demesne stretches east from Donabate south of the R126 road to Portrane. It does not include the easternmost tip of the peninsula but extends on to the coastline on its southeastern side. The south-western boundary of the demesne runs through farmland to the south of the original house of Portrane Demesne following the line of the field boundaries.

- 7.1.3. It is acknowledged that the proposed telecommunications facility would likely have some potential impact on its local environment, including the ACA, by virtue of its height and potential for visual intrusion. Sites such as this, located in small towns and villages, are accepted as particularly sensitive, as referenced in Section 4.3 in the 1996 Guidelines and Objective IT01 of the County Development Plan. Accordingly, it is stated that fragile landscapes must be treated sensitively, scenic views preserved, archaeological/geological sites and monuments and buildings of historical and architectural interest protected, and sacred areas respected.
- 7.1.4. The Applicant has submitted a Visual Impact Statement in the form of a series of photomontages comprising closeup and longer views of the development proposed. It provides an evaluation of the visibility and prominence of the proposal against its immediate environs, but also the wider context of the surrounding vicinity, including from both inside and outside the abutting ACA, which is exclusively to the south.
- 7.1.5. The assessment comprises 6 no. Visual Reference Points (VRPs), including 3 no. viewpoints along Portrane Road to the east, 2 no. viewspoints to the west, and 2 no. viewpoints from the south. The viewpoints to the south are from within the Portrane ACA. Having physically visited the site, and completed a visual inspection up close, and from the surrounding vicinity, I consider that the photomontages are an accurate description of how the proposed development would appear as constructed.
- 7.1.6. The proposed monopole and equipment cabinet would take up a relatively small footprint and many of the views towards it would be impeded by existing, mature trees, the topography of the surrounding area, and existing development in the vicinity. This is particularly the case for longer views from the south from within the ACA, which includes VPR Nos. 6 and 7. In many other cases, only the top of the

- pole would be visible, albeit I note that the closeup views of Viewpoint Nos. 2, 3 and 5 would be of the full extent of the monopole and its associated site works, including the equipment cabinet. However, this is to be expected from such close range.
- 7.1.7. In this regard, I note that the 1996 Guidelines state that some masts will remain quite noticeable despite best precautions. The proposed monopole also adopts a modern and slender appearance and is not unnecessarily bulky or tall. In my opinion, the Applicant has sought to minimise the potential for visual impact by selecting a monopole that is low to medium height and of a contemporary, slim appearance. The Guidelines state that 'the height of these structures, when the requirements of the backbone network are taken into account, can range from 12m to 60m, though most typically they will be between 20m and 40m'. The proposed monopole has an overall height of 15m.
- 7.1.8. With further regard to the ACA, I observed during my site inspection that the access road leading into the grounds of St. Ita's Hospital are lined with tall, mature trees and that there are substantial tracts of shrubbery and bushes in the northern section of the campus, near the appeal site. Despite the site visit taking place before blooming season, and that the trees were not in foliage, views of the subject site were physically impeded by this vegetation. During the summertime, this vegetative screening would be denser and thicker, particularly when the mature tree stands are in full leaf. This would serve to further decrease any visual impact on the ACA, which, as noted above, would not be significant, in my opinion, in any case.
- 7.1.9. From inspecting the drawings submitted as part of the original application, the monopole would be in a grey muted colour and the cabinet in green. Whilst this is considered generally acceptable and that the equipment can be finished in different colours, I would recommend that a suitable condition be included on any Grant of Permission that issues to ensure that the proposed colour scheme is appropriate.
- 7.1.10. In summary, whilst the proposed structure would be widely visible from numerous vantage points, up close and from further afield, I do consider that it would be so visually disruptive that it would seriously injure the visual amenity of the surrounding area, or the character of the adjacent ACA.

## 7.2. Site Selection (Alternatives Considered)

- 7.2.1. The Development Plan seeks to promote and facilitate the sustainable delivery of a high-quality ICT infrastructure network throughout the County taking account of the need to protect the countryside and the urban environment together with seeking to achieve balanced social and economic development (Objective IT01). The Plan also requires best practice in siting and design in relation to the erection of communication antennae (Objective IT07).
- 7.2.2. The Applicant states that Eir are upgrading their network in Dublin to provide customers with good quality voice and high-speed data services. I have viewed the ComReg Outdoor Coverage Map for 3G and 4G coverage for the appeal site and the surrounding vicinity. Eir's 3G coverage for the area varies between 'good' and 'fair', which means that there is a mix of strong signals and marginal data transfer with drop-outs at weaker signal levels.
- 7.2.3. The 4G Outdoor Coverage Map shows that there is a larger prevalence of the weaker 'fair' and 'fringe' coverage values and that the network is least effective in this general area towards the east, in and around Portrane town centre and within some residential housing estates. This means that most of the immediate vicinity around the appeal site, and towards the east, has sporadic access only to fast and reliable data speeds and that marginal data transfer and drop-outs are possible. It also means that for the 'fringe' areas, disconnections are likely to occur. Therefore, and having had regard to the ComReg online mapping system, it is apparent that other parts of the County, including neighbouring Donabate and Blakes Cross, have better service coverage, which generally ranges between 'very good' and 'good' and that this part of Portrane is lacking.
- 7.2.4. The *Telecommunication Guidelines and Planning Circular PL07/12* encourages colocating antennae on existing support structures and requires documentary evidence of the non-availability of this option for proposals for new structures. It also states that the shared use of existing structures will be required where there is an excessive concentration of masts located in a single area.
- 7.2.5. Telecommunication facilities are encouraged to primarily locate within existing industrial estates, or industrially zoned land, in the vicinity of larger suburban areas or towns, insofar as this is possible. There are no industrial estates in the vicinity of

the appeal site, or the surrounding area, however. There is also a general absence of other taller structures in the vicinity, which could potentially be used to accommodate the new, proposed development. I note that a total of 11 no. alternative sites were identified by the Applicant as part of their research for the proposal, including locations at St. Ita's Hospital, Portrane Athletic FC, St. Patrick's GAA, and several privately owned sites. However, for various reasons relating to failed negotiations, locations being too far removed, etc., none were deemed suitable.

- 7.2.6. It is further noted that there is a general absence of existing tall buildings in the area and that alternative existing Comreg sites within 2km of the appeal site are too distant and lie outside the required search ring area. Therefore, it is not possible for the Applicant to co-locate on an existing telecommunications structure whilst also providing the required upgrades in coverage provision.
- 7.2.7. Having reviewed the information contained within the application, appeal submission and the existing coverage information that is available on the ComReg website, I am satisfied that alternative sites had been considered by the Applicant, that the proposal is justified, and that it would help to improve the existing 3G and 4G service coverage for the region.
- 7.2.8. I consider that the Applicant has provided adequate technical justification showing that there are service deficiencies in the area, which would be resolved by the proposed development. The proposal is consistent with Objectives DMS143 and DMS145 of the Development Plan, and the 1996 Guidelines, which require colocation of antennae on existing support structures, but that where this is not feasible to submit evidence of the non-availability of this option.

#### 7.3. Other Issues

#### **Protected Structures**

7.3.1. I note the Council's Conservation Officer comments in relation to the original application that the Applicant had failed to address the visual impact on nearby architectural heritage. The Applicant has sought to address this in their appeal by noting there are 3 no. Protected Structures and 2 no. Recorded Monuments in the vicinity of the site, including:

- St. Catherine's Church (RPS 522), which is c. 198 to the east.
- 'The Farm' an 18<sup>th</sup> century vernacular building complex (RPS 523), which is c. 152m to the west.
- Stella's Tower (Portrane Castle (RPS 521), which is c. 234m to the north.
- 7.3.2. The Applicant submits that the distances between the appeal site and the Protected Structures / Recorded Monuments are substantial and that there would be no material impact given the proposed slender nature of the proposed development. I would further note that intervening development lies between the appeal site, and each of the Protected Structures, so that only the top section of the proposed monopole would likely be perceptible from these locations, if at all.
- 7.3.3. The land to the north and northeast has been developed for residential purposes and accommodates the housing estate of Longstone Park. Houses encompass St. Catherine's Church on its north, east and west sides and there are three rows of terrace and semi-detached houses situated between the site and Stella's Tower to the north. In relation to the 18<sup>th</sup> century vernacular building complex, I note that the road towards the west is heavily tree-lined and that its curvature and topography would not afford any direct or clear views of the proposed development from within the farmyard complex.

#### 7.4. Appropriate Assessment

Given the nature and scale of the development proposed, which is for a telecommunications support structure and ancillary works, and separation distance from the nearest Natura 2000 site, it is considered that the proposal would not be likely to have a significant effect individually or in combination with other plans and projects on a European site and there is no requirement for a Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment.

#### 8.0 **Recommendation**

I recommend that a licence be granted subject to conditions, for the reasons and considerations as set out below.

## 9.0 Reasons and Considerations

Having regard to the provisions of the section 254 of the Planning & Development Act, 2000 (as amended), the Fingal County Development Plan 2017-2023, and the 'Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures Guidelines for Planning Authorities (1996) (as updated by Circular Letters PL 07/12 and PL11/2020, respectively); it is considered that, subject to compliance with the conditions set out below, the proposed development would not be visually obtrusive and seriously injurious to or detract from the visual amenity of the area, or the Portrane ACA, and that it would not seriously injure the amenities of the surrounding vicinity. The proposed development would, therefore, be in accordance with the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

# 10.0 Conditions

The development shall be carried out and completed in accordance with the plans and particulars lodged with the application 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.

**Reason:** In the interest of clarity.

 Prior to commencement of development, the developer shall agree details of the location of the proposed monopole, its concrete base/surround and related equipment cabinet with the Planning Authority, prior to any works being carried out.

**Reason**: In the interest of public safety and traffic safety.

3. Details of the proposed colour scheme for the telecommunications structure, ancillary structures and fencing shall be submitted to, and agreed in writing with, the planning authority prior to commencement of development.

Reason: In the interest of the visual amenities of the area.

4. A low intensity fixed red obstacle light shall be fitted as close to the top of the mast as practicable and shall be visible from all angles in azimuth. Details of this light, its location and period of operation shall be submitted to, and agreed in writing with, the planning authority prior to commencement of development.

Reason: In the interest of public safety.

lan Boyle Planning Inspector

2<sup>nd</sup> March 2022