



An
Bord
Pleanála

Inspector's Report ABP317512-23

Development

21m high monopole telecommunications structure (with 3 no. 3.9m high omni antennae giving an overall height of 24.9m) together with panel antennae, dishes and associated telecommunications equipment, and remove a 15m high monopole telecommunications structure.

Location

Eir Exchange, Gorticmeelra Townland, Donamon, Co. Roscommon.

Planning Authority

Roscommon County Council.

Planning Authority Reg. Ref.

PD/22/573.

Applicant(s)

Eircom Limited.

Type of Application

Permission.

Planning Authority Decision

Grant permission with conditions.

Type of Appeal

Third Party

Appellant(s)

Michael and Claire Hussey.

Observer(s)

None on file.

Date of Site Inspection

26th September 2023.

Inspector

Des Johnson.

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1.0 Site Location and Description of the N60 National Road.

- 1.1. The site is located in the townland of Gorticmeelra, Donamon, Co. Roscommon. The site fronts on to the east side of the L-1629 local road, approximately 250m south of its junction with the N60, 1km south of Oran, and 4km north of Donamon. The site is rectangular in shape with a frontage to the L-1629 of approximately 13500 and a depth of 20500. There is a pull-in space between the fenced front boundary of the site and the public carriageway.
- 1.2. There is an exchange facility located roughly centrally on the site, and a 15m monopole mast, surrounded by wooden fencing, in the north eastern corner of the site. Three 3.9m antennae, serving emergency services, are mounted on top of the mast. A wooden pole carrying overhead wires is located approximately half way along the northern site boundary.
- 1.3. Bordering to the south of the site, there is a farmyard complex. There are mature deciduous trees along the boundary between the farmyard and the subject appeal site. A single storey outbuilding and farm lands separate the subject appeal site from a dwelling house approximately 40m to the south of the southern boundary of the appeal site.
- 1.4. The wider area is agricultural in character with a dispersed settlement pattern.

2.0 Proposed Development

- 2.1. The proposal is to erect a 21m high monopole telecommunications structure (with 3 no. 3.9m high omni antennae giving an overall height of 24.9m) together with panel antennae, dishes and associated telecommunications equipment, and to remove a 15m high monopole telecommunications structure.
- 2.2. The applicants indicate that the proposal addresses a requirement to significantly improve services in the townland of Gorticmeelra, including Lisanskey National School, local businesses and dwellings, as well as the surrounding road network including a section of the N60 national road.
- 2.3. Further Information was submitted on 15th May 2023, in the form of a Site Justification Report. This indicates that the proposed development would provide an

upgraded service to the N60, Dublin-Westport Railway and surrounding rural areas. Maps are submitted showing coverage levels in the surrounding area.

2.4. The site area is stated to be 0.0069ha.

3.0 Planning Authority Decision

3.1. Decision

By Order number PL/548/23, dated 9th June 2023, the planning authority decided to grant permission subject to 5 conditions. Condition 1 relates to standard compliance (including further information), Condition 2 requires the removal of the existing 15m high structure on the site, Condition 3 refers to the transmission power output, Condition 4 requires the removal of the structure within 6 months of permanent cessation of use, and Condition 5 requires notification of any change in ownership or transfer to a new operator.

3.2. Planning Authority Reports

3.2.1. Planning Reports

The Report records that 4 valid submissions were received raising issues of negative visual impact, proximity to residences and national school, absence of demand and inadequate technical justification, lack of information on the amount of antennae and dishes proposed, impact on biodiversity, and query as to whether or not the existing mast is authorised. These issues were taken into consideration. The proposal is considered a more appropriate resolution to improving service in the area than building an additional structure on a new site. While there would be local visual impacts, this is not an elevated site and the structure would not be unduly intrusive on the landscape. It is evident that there is a coverage deficit in the area and, following the submission of further information, there is sufficient technical justification for the development.

3.2.2. Other Technical Reports

The Irish Aviation Authority has no requirement for obstacle lighting on the structure.

4.0 Planning History

ABP 20.230660 – Permission granted by An Bord Pleanála, dated 18th February 2009, for proposed development consisting of a 25m support pole to carry 3 no. radio aerials for use by the Emergency Services, together with associated equipment and fencing for a new National Digital Radio Service. Condition 2 is worded as follows:

Prior to commencement of development, revised plans and particulars to appropriate scale, shall be submitted to the planning authority for written agreement incorporating the following requirements and revisions to the development –

- (a) No other equipment shall be attached to the pole hereby permitted,*
- (b) Reduction in height to a 15m support pole, with three 3.9 metres emergency radio aerials attached, and*
- (c) The support pole shall be moved to the southern boundary of the site. (This was later clarified to read **northern** boundary)*

Reason: *In the interest of visual and residential amenity, and to ensure a proper standard of development.*

Condition 3 restricts the duration of the permission to ten years for reason of enabling the impact of the development to be re-assessed, having regard to changes in technology and design ... and to circumstances then prevailing.

ABP 304418-19 – Permission granted (dated 27th August 2019) for retention of existing telecommunications installation comprised of a 15m support structure, antennae, associated equipment and fencing used by the Emergency Services, and permission for future additional telecommunications antennae, dishes, associated equipment cabinets and fencing.

5.0 Policy and Context

5.1. National Policy

National Planning Framework

National Policy Objective 24 – support and facilitate delivery of the National Broadband Plan as a means of developing further opportunities for enterprise, employment, education, innovation, and skills development for those who live and work in rural areas.

Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures – Guidelines for Planning Authorities. 1996.

The 1996 Guidelines are generally supportive of the development and maintenance of a high quality telecommunications service. Visual impact is identified as among the more important considerations which must be taken into account and visual impact will vary with the general visual context of the proposed development. Great care is needed when dealing with fragile or sensitive landscapes, and with other areas designated or scheduled under planning or other legislation. In most cases the applicant will only have limited flexibility as regards location, given the constraints arising from radio planning parameters. In terms of design, support structures should be kept to the minimum height consistent with effective operation, and should be monopole (or poles) rather than a latticed tripod or square structure. Sharing of facilities is to be encouraged and applicants should satisfy the authority that they have made a reasonable effort to share.

Circular Letter PL07/12, issued on 19th October 2012, revise sections of the 1996 Guidelines. The Circular Letter refers to a growing trend for Development Plans to specify minimum distances between telecommunications structures and houses and schools. This does not allow for flexibility on a case by case basis, and can make the identification of new infrastructure very difficult. Separation distances should not be specified in Development Plans. Section 2.6 of the Circular letter refers to Health and Safety Aspects and reiterates the advice of the 1996 Guidelines that planning

authorities should not include monitoring arrangements as part of planning permission conditions nor determine planning applications on health grounds. Planning authorities should be primarily concerned with the appropriate location and design of telecommunications structures. Health issues are regulated by other codes and such matters should not be additionally regulated by the planning process

5.2. Development Plan

Roscommon County Development Plan 2022-2028 came into effect on 19th April 2022.

Plan policy encourages co-sharing and clustering of masts, rather than single user infrastructure in widely dispersed locations. Relevant policy objectives may be summarised as follows:

ITC 7.62 – co-operate in improving high quality broadband infrastructure throughout the county and support the delivery of the National Broadband Plan

ITC 7.63 – promote and facilitate the sustainable development of a high quality ITC network throughout the county in accordance with the 1996 Guidelines in order to achieve balanced social and economic development, whilst protecting the amenities of urban and rural areas

ITC 7.64 – support the delivery of high capacity Information Communications Technology Infrastructure, broadband connectivity and digital broadcasting, throughout the county, in order to ensure economic competitiveness for the enterprise and commercial sectors and in enabling more flexible work practices

ITC 7.65 – encourage co-location of antennae on existing telecommunications structures

ITC 7.66 – ensure that telecommunications structures are located to minimise and/or mitigate any adverse impacts on communities, public rights of way and the built or natural environment.

Section 12.22 relates to Telecommunications. This recognises that the location of telecommunication infrastructure is dictated by service provision and that each application has to be determined on its own merits. Planning applications relating to the erection of antennae and support structures shall be accompanied by

- a reasoned justification for need for the development in the context of the operator's overall plans for the county having regard to coverage
- details of all other sites or locations considered and technical justification to clarify why sites were discounted
- detailed proposals to mitigate visual impact. Where possible location should benefit from screening afforded by existing tree belts, topography or buildings.

5.3. **Natural Heritage Designations**

- River Suck Callows SPA – located c. 7km south-east of the site
- Corliskea/Trien/Cloonfelliv Bog SAC and Kilsallagh Bog SAC - located c. 10km north-west of the site
- Ballinturly Turlough SAC – located c. 10km south-east of the site
- Lisnageeragh Bog and Ballinastack Turlough SAC – located c. 12km south-west of the site
- Lough Lurgeen Bog/Glenamaddy Turlough SAC – located c. 14.2km south-west of the site.

5.4. **EIA Screening**

5.5. Having regard to the nature and scale of the proposed development, its location in a rural area and the likely emissions arising from the construction and operation of the development, it is possible to conclude that the proposed development is not likely to give rise to significant environmental impacts alone or in combination with other projects, and the requirement for submission of an EIAR and carrying out of an EIA may be set aside at a preliminary stage.

6.0 **The Appeal**

6.1. **Grounds of Appeal**

These are submitted by Michael and Claire Hussey, Villa Maria, Ballydoorley, Donamon, Co. Roscommon, and may be summarised as follows:

1. The history of this site goes back to 2008 (Ref:08/178) and an application for a 25m mast for use by the emergency services network. Roscommon County Council previously refused permission for a 25m mast on this site for the primary reason of proximity to the appellants' dwellinghouse and associated properties.
2. There is no necessity to replace the existing mast as not being fit for purpose for emergency services does not arise. The system has presumably been operating efficiently for over 13 years. It is not clear from the application that the emergency system needs to be upgraded.
3. The proposal is for a speculative commercial development which cannot operate from an unsuitable 15m mast.
4. The impacts of the proposed development on residential amenities are not considered. Statutory guidelines state that residential area locations should only be used as a last resort. This is a sensitive location bounding the appellants' dwelling and private open space. Tree screening referred to is less than 12m in height. More suitable locations must be available.
5. The further information sought, and submitted, was significant and should have been re-advertised and open to third party input. Drawings submitted by way of further information were not scaled and cannot be interrogated. The contention that there is poor coverage in the area is not scientifically proven. There are no coverage blackspots west of Roscommon town. There is resistance to this proposal from local businesses and residences.
6. There is a history of unauthorised development on this site and this has not been disclosed.

6.2. Applicant Response

This may be summarised as follows:

1. The telecommunications market has seen huge changes since 2008. The 15m high structure is not high enough or structurally capable of accommodating the necessary operator's equipment. Failure to secure the proposed development will result in a loss of services for the future economy of the area. Changes in the market will impact services with inadequate 4G and 5G services such as

Donamon and its environs. The demand within mobile and broadband networks is continuing to grow at an exponential pace, and the existing infrastructure must be expanded and upgraded to ensure high-quality, high-speed service.

2. This area is known for weak coverage. Infrastructure is inadequate to fulfil the current and forecast demand for new technologies and communication services. ComReg outdoor coverage maps are submitted by way of illustration. Current customer demand is not being met.
3. The current Roscommon County Development Plan 2022-2028 highlights the importance of telecommunications infrastructure in ensuring social and economic progress and sustaining residential amenity.
4. The subject site is not within any primary or secondary special amenity area, does not affect protected views and will not impact on National Monuments. This is an established telecommunications and exchange site.
5. There are mature trees along the property boundary to the south minimising visual impact on the farmstead on that side. The immediate buildings are farm sheds. The site is well away from other farmsteads, residential properties, and the village. Visual impact would be minimal. No new access is required.
6. The proposal complies with National policy as expressed in the National Planning Framework, the National Development Plan 2018-2027, and Rural Development Policy 2021-2025.
7. This is not a speculative venture and it is a minimalistic monopole style design.
8. The maps submitted to the planning authority are computer generated digital coverage plots, and are to scale.
9. It is the applicant's intention that the existing 15m monopole structure would be removed once the new monopole is operational. Condition 2 needs clarification.

6.3. Planning Authority Response

None on file.

6.4. **Observations**

None on file.

6.5. **Further Responses**

None on file.

7.0 **Assessment**

7.1. The proposal is to replace an existing 15m high monopole telecommunications structure with a 21m high monopole telecommunications structure (with 3.9m high omni antennae giving an overall height of 24.9m), together with panel antennae, dishes and associated telecommunications equipment, at an existing eir Exchange. The existing monopole has three 3900mm high emergency services antennae on top (giving an overall height of 18900mm), and an aircraft warning light. It is located next to the northern boundary of the site. The proposed monopole structure is larger in height and profile than the existing structure and would be set back approximately 7m from the northern site boundary. The existing structure would be removed when the proposed mast is constructed and becomes operational.

7.2. I submit that the proposed development should be assessed under the following headings:

- The receiving environment
- Policy issues
- Planning history
- Justification for proposed development
- Visual impact
- Access
- Other issues
- Appropriate Assessment
- Conclusion

7.3. The receiving environment

The site is generally flat and is currently used for telecommunications purposes with an existing 15m mast (with three 3900mm antennae on top) and associated building. The mast is set back from the public carriageway by approximately 21m (the western site boundary is set back approximately 3m from the carriageway). It is located adjacent to the northern site boundary. The wider area is predominantly rural and agricultural in character, with a dispersed settlement pattern, and the surrounding topography is relatively flat. There is a farm complex, (including farmhouse) a short distance to the south of the appeal site. The L-1629, onto which the site fronts, has mature hedgerows either side. There is a continuous white line along the centre of the carriageway along this stretch of the L-1629. The surrounding landscape is not given any specific amenity designation in the current Roscommon County Development Plan, and there are no listed views of special amenity value listed from the public road across the site.

7.4. Policy

The National Planning Framework, approved in 2018, includes a national policy objective to support and facilitate delivery of the National Broadband Plan.

The 1996 Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures Guidelines are generally supportive of the development and maintenance of a high quality telecommunications service. Visual impact is identified as an important consideration when assessing proposed developments, with great care needed when dealing with fragile or sensitive landscapes. The Guidelines state that in most cases there may be limited flexibility as regards location, support structures should be kept to the minimum height consistent with effective operation, and should preferably be monopole in design. Sharing of facilities is encouraged.

Circular Letter PL07/12, issued in October 2012, revised sections of the 1996 Guidelines. This states that separation distances should not be specified in Development Plans and should be considered on a case-by-case basis. The Circular Letter states that health issues relating to masts are regulated through other codes and should not be additionally regulated through the planning process.

The Roscommon County Development Plan 2022-2028 is supportive of promoting and facilitating the sustainable development of a high-quality ICT network, while

encouraging co-sharing and clustering of masts rather than single user infrastructure in widely dispersed locations. The Plan recognises that the location of telecommunications infrastructure is dictated by service provision and that reasonable justification as to need for a particular development should be provided. The Plan states that each application should be determined on its own merits and considered in the context of protecting the amenities of urban and rural areas.

I submit that the proposed development is consistent with National and County Development Plan policy as outlined. Potential impacts on the amenities of this rural area, and the adjacent residential property is assessed later in this assessment.

7.5. Planning history

A telecommunications structure has been located on this site for a considerable period of time, as detailed earlier in this report. In February 2009, An Bord Pleanála granted permission for a proposed development described as a 25m support pole to carry 3 radio aerials for use by the emergency services under Reference ABP 20.230660. Condition 2 of this permission effectively reduced the height of the structure to 15m (this was offered by the applicants during the course of the appeal to reduce, to a minimum, the impact on the adjacent dwellings). The condition also stated that the attachment of other equipment was not permitted, and the structure was to be moved to the southern boundary of the site (later clarified to read northern boundary). The Boards reason for the condition was “in the interest of visual and residential amenity, and to ensure a proper standard of development”. Condition 3 of the permission restricted the permission to 10 years for reason of enabling the impact of the development to be re-assessed, having regard to changes in technology and design ... and to circumstances then prevailing.

In August 2019, An Bord Pleanála granted permission for the retention of existing telecommunications installation comprising a 15m support structure, antennae, and associated equipment used by the emergency services, and permission for future additional telecommunications antennae, dishes, associated equipment cabinets and fencing (Reference ABP 304418).

Based on this information, I conclude that the site has been in use for telecommunications purposes for a considerable period of time, the existing structure on the site is authorised, and planning permission was granted for future additional

telecommunications antennas, dishes, and associated equipment cabinets. Whilst the 2009 permission reduced the height of the proposed 25m high support pole to 15m, the reason given by the Board for the condition refers to visual and residential amenities while clearly providing for future re-assessment of impact having regard to changes in technology and design in circumstances then prevailing.

7.6. Justification of need

The planning authority requested further information from the applicants, dated 16th December 2022. This required details, in the form of coverage maps, to demonstrate the extent of the area that would be serviced by the existing mast versus the proposed mast and its associated infrastructure. The requested further information was submitted on 9th May 2023, including a series of maps showing coverage levels. The planning authority concluded, based on the information submitted, that Gorticmeelra, the Dublin-Westport rail line, and the surrounding area has a coverage deficit which will be improved by the proposed structure and a greater service will be provided. The appellants argue that the claim that there is poor coverage in the area is not scientifically proven, and that there are no coverage blackspots west of Roscommon town. There is resistance to this proposal from local businesses and residences. The applicants responded to the grounds of appeal stating that this area is known for weak coverage, and that the existing infrastructure is inadequate to fulfil the current and forecast demand for new technologies and communication services. ComReg outdoor coverage maps are submitted illustrating 4G and 5G coverage in the area.

Based on the information on file, I agree with the planning authority's conclusion that the need for the proposed development is justified.

7.7. Visual Impact

While the site is flat and not elevated relative to its surroundings, the proposed monopole development will have a greater visual impact than the existing structure, due to its height, profile, location within the site, and the operator equipment to be mounted towards the top of the mast. The biggest impact will be experienced in the vicinity of the site, including the farm complex and existing dwellings adjacent to the south. It will also be clearly visible from the L-1629 along sections close to the site.

The proposed mast is 21m in height with three 3900 antennae on top, giving an overall height of the proposed structure of 24900. This compares to the existing mast which is 15m in height with three 3900 antennae on top, giving an overall height of 18900. The profile of the proposed mast is larger than the existing, and the proposed operator equipment to be attached to the mast above 15m will be significantly bulkier in appearance compared to the existing GPS antenna. The proposed mast is to be located approximately 5m closer to the southern site boundary with the appellants property. The existing trees along the southern site boundary are deciduous and approximately 12m in height; they offer partial screening of the existing mast.

Having regard to the existing use of the site, and the topography of the surrounding area, I submit that the proposed development would not have an unacceptable impact on the rural character of the area. This is not an area designated as being of special amenity value, and no listed views or prospects would be impacted.

The most significant visual impact would be on the appellants property to the south. The proposed mast would be higher and bulkier in appearance than the existing mast. However, there has been a telecommunications structure on this site over a considerable period. The lands immediately adjoining to the south include an agricultural out building and are also used for storage of sundry agricultural related items including wrapped bales. The closest residential building would be approximately 50m to the south.

7.8. Access

The existing site is set back approximately 3m from the carriageway of the L-1629. Having regard to the nature of the development proposed, I conclude that, subject to a traffic management plan agreed with the planning authority, no traffic or pedestrian safety issues would be likely to arise in the carrying out of the development.

7.9. Other Issues

The appellants argue that the Further Information submitted to the planning authority during the consideration of the application was significant and should have been re-advertised, and further third party submission permitted.. I do not agree as the information merely clarifies and expands on information submitted with the application. As such, I submit that there was no necessity to require further public notification upon receipt of the Further Information.

It is proposed to remove the existing 15m mast upon the initial operation of the proposed mast. This is required in order to prevent a break in service. I submit that this is generally acceptable and could be clarified by way of condition on any planning permission granted.

7.10. Appropriate Assessment Screening

The nearest European site is the River Suck Callows SPA and this is approximately 7km south-east of the subject site. The qualifying interests for this site relate to wetlands and waterbirds. Corliskea/Trien/Cloonfelliv Bog SAC is approximately 10km to the north-west of the site, with qualifying interests of raised bogs (active and degraded), bog woodland, and depressions on peat substrates. Ballinturly Turlough SAC is approximately 10km south-east of the site with turlough as the qualifying interest. The conservation objectives for the sites relate to the maintenance/restoration of the favourable conservation status of the qualifying interests.

Having regard to the nature and scale of the proposed development, the receiving environment, the separation distances and the absence of any pathway to European sites, it can be concluded that the proposed development, in its construction or operation, alone or in-combination with other plans or projects, would not give rise to any significant effects on any European site, having regard to their qualifying interests and associated conservation objectives. As such, there is no requirement for a Natura Impact Statement in this case.

7.11. Conclusion

I conclude that the proposed development is consistent with National and County Development Plan policies, and that the need for the proposed development has been justified by the applicant. The subject site has been in use, and continues in use for telecommunications purposes. This use has been the subject of planning permissions and is an authorised use. The benefits of delivering a high-quality ICT service outweigh the effects of increased visual impact on the rural character of the area, and property in the vicinity of the mast. The proposed development would not have a significant effect on any designated European site.

8.0 Recommendation

8.1. I recommend that planning permission be granted subject to conditions.

9.0 Reasons and Considerations

Having regard to the provisions of the National Planning Framework, the “Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures”, 1996, Circular Letter PL 07/12, the provisions of the Roscommon County Development Plan 2022-2028, the established use of the site for telecommunications purposes, and to the existing pattern of development in the area, it is considered that the proposed development, subject to compliance with the conditions set out below, would not be seriously injurious to the amenities of the area or property in the vicinity, and would be in accordance with the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

10.0 Conditions

1.	The development shall be carried out and completed in accordance with the plans and particulars lodged with the application on the 24th day of October 2022, and by the further information submitted to the planning authority on 15 th May 2023, except as may otherwise be required in order to comply with the following conditions. Reason: In the interest of clarity.
2.	The existing 15m telecommunications mast shall be disassembled and removed from the site upon the commissioning of the telecommunications mast structure hereby permitted Reason: In the interest of orderly development and the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.
3.	Details of a colour scheme for the permitted mast and antenna shall be submitted to, and agreed in writing, with the planning authority, prior to the commencement of development. The development shall be carried out in accordance with the agreed scheme. Reason: In the interest of visual amenity.

4.	<p>Prior to the commencement of development, a traffic management plan for the construction phase of the proposed development, and the removal of the decommissioned 15m mast, shall be agreed in writing with the planning authority. The development shall be carried out in accordance with the agreed plan.</p> <p>Reason: In the interest of traffic safety.</p>
5.	<p>Within 6 months of the permanent cessation of use of the telecommunications structure and associated equipment hereby permitted, all structures on the site shall be removed at the applicants/developers own expense, in accordance with a restoration plan to be submitted to and agreed in writing with the planning authority within three months of the date of this permission.</p> <p>Reason: In the interests of orderly development, visual amenity, and the proper planning and development of the area.</p>

Des Johnson
 Planning Inspector

4th October 2023.

I confirm that this report represents my professional planning assessment, judgement and opinion on the matter assigned to me and that no person has influenced or sought to influence, directly or indirectly, the exercise of my professional judgement in an improper or inappropriate way.