

An  
Bord  
Pleanála

## Inspector's Report

**ABP-321564-24**

### Development

A 250MW Data Centre which will source its primary power from a collocated flexible Decentralised Energy Resource (DER). Solid Oxide Fuel Cell Power System, Battery Energy Storage System, Solar PV Installation and Grid connection

### Location

located in the townlands of Kiltotan & Collinstown, Oldtown & Farthingstown, Co. Westmeath

### Planning Authority

Westmeath County Council

### Prospective Applicant

Red Admiral DC

### Type of Application

Pre-Application Consultation under Section 37B of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended

### Date of Site Inspection

2<sup>nd</sup> May 2025

### Inspector

Tomás Bradley

## 1.0 Introduction

Under the provisions of Section 37B of the *Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended* (PDA), Red Admiral DC (the applicant) has made a pre-application request to An Bord Pleanála (the Board) as to whether the development of wind farm consisting of a 250MW Data Centre which will source its primary power from a collocated flexible Decentralised Energy Resource (DER), Solid Oxide Fuel Cell Power System, Battery Energy Storage System (BESS), Solar PV Installation and grid connection in the townlands of Kiltotan & Collinstown, Oldtown & Farthingstown, Co. Westmeath constitutes Strategic Infrastructure Development (SID). The proposed development is in the local authority of Westmeath County Council (WCC). The Board is requested to determine whether the proposed development constitutes SID. This report concludes by recommending that the that the proposed development does not constitute SID.

## 2.0 Site Location and Description

The site, which extends to 225 hectares, is located in the townlands of in the townlands of Kiltotan & Collinstown, Oldtown & Farthingstown, Co. Westmeath. It is immediately south-west of the settlement of Rochfortbridge, Co. Westmeath and occupies land either side of the R446 Regional Road and M6 Motorway.

The site is accessed from the R446 Regional Road which is the former main N6 national road between Dublin and Galway and a minor local roads (L51251) via an overbridge at the motorway to access lands to the south. There are existing internal tracks within the site.

The site is largely in agricultural lands with a field pattern defined by trees and hedgerows. It is largely flat and low rolling terrain There are agricultural yards in different locations throughout the site. The southern side of the site is bounded by forestry and a peatland complex. The Monagh River (Castlejordan 07) bounds the northern side of the site. There is residential dwellings located in a linear form along the roads and lanes that are in proximity to the site. An existing transmission station, Castlelost 220 kV Station located centrally within the site. The corresponding 220 kV overhead line approaches from the north-west.

There are no natural heritage designations in proximity to the site. There are numerous Sites and Monuments Records (SMR) throughout the site which are largely identified as ringforts. There are no known flood issues associated with the site. There are no protected structures, protected views & prospects.

### **3.0 Proposed Development**

The proposed development includes:

- a Data Centre (located on a 48 ha site) which includes six two storey data halls positioned within a secure data centre campus zone. Each data hall building measures 225 m (length) x 65 m (width) x 22 m (height). The campus adjoins the Castlelost Flexgen Power Plant and Castlelost 220kV Gas Insulated Switchgear (GIS) Electrical Substation. These developments are currently under construction and due to be operational in Q3 of 2025.
- a Decentralised Energy Resource (DER) which comprises a number of power assets and technologies which will generate, store and manage electricity close to the Data Centre, rather than relying on the existing electricity network. The DER will result in reduced transmission losses, reduced emissions and improved cost and operational efficiencies. This will enable the Data Centre campus to support decarbonisation through digitalisation and support a climate neutral economy. The DER comprises the following assets:
  - Solid Oxide Fuel Cell (SOFC) Power System (hereafter referred to as Fuel Cell)<sup>1</sup>, with a capacity of 160 Megawatt equivalent (MWe),
  - Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) with a capacity of 250 MW,
  - Solar PV installation with a capacity of 120 MW and
  - 220 kV grid connection via the Castlelost GIS substation.

The DER has been designed to replace conventional standby diesel generators which are typically used for back-up supply.

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<sup>1</sup> The technology generates electricity using natural gas from the gas grid (available at the site) in an electrochemical process without combustion. The energy conversion process has an efficiency of approximately 60%.

## 4.0 Planning History

A review of the WCC Planning Portal and the Board's case files was carried out the on the 30th of April 2025 to collate any relevant planning history for the site. Notable applications within and adjacent include:

- the alteration of the 220 kV line to facilitate the motorway in 2004 (04/4133);
- the development of and alteration to a 275MWe reserve gas-fired generator (24/60053, 23/60442, 21/515,
- a BESS facility in 2021 (21/532)

There are numerous planning applications within and adjoining the site in respect of residential, commercial and agricultural developments which is to be expected in a such a rural location.

## 5.0 Precedent

A review of the Board's case files was carried out the on the 30th of April 2025 to collate any relevant planning precedent cases for this class of development. None are directly relevant to such a campus development. Data Centres, BESS and solar farms are generally not considered SID and transmission infrastructure, while generally SID, falls under a different section of the PDA.

## 6.0 Submission of the Prospective Applicant

An initial submission dated December 2024 prepared by Halston, on behalf of the prospective applicant, accompanied the application in respect of the SID case file. The submission considered the development location and summary of key sensitivities, development description, need for the proposed development, legislative provisions and the applicant's consideration of SID types and criteria.

A meeting was held with the prospective applicant on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 2025. The details of this meeting are set out in the record contained on the file. The Board should note that a revised presentation was submitted following the meeting of 12<sup>th</sup> of February 2025, clarifying the prospective applicant's view that the proposed development does not constitutes SID under the relevant thresholds of the Seventh Schedule of the PDA. In particular, clarification was provided on the heat output from the facility.

The Board should also note that the applicant made several comments in respect of the Record of the Meeting of 12<sup>th</sup> of February 2025 which are noted, however, not considered material to the ultimate recommendation below. A copy of the applicants comments is available on the file for reference.

The prospective applicant sought closure of the consultation on the 28<sup>th</sup> of April.

## 7.0 Legislative Context

In the context of the prospective development, Section 2 (1) of the PDA defines 'strategic infrastructure' as including, *inter alia*:

- (a) *any proposed development in respect of which a notice has been served under section 37B(4)(a)*

Section 37A of the PDA states that:

- (1) *An application for permission for any development specified in the Seventh Schedule (inserted by the Planning and Development (Strategic Infrastructure) Act 2006) shall, if the following condition is satisfied, be made to the Board under section 37E and not to a planning authority.*
- (2) *That condition is that, following consultations under section 37B, the Board serves on the prospective applicant a notice in writing under that section stating that, in the opinion of the Board, the proposed development would, if carried out, fall within one or more Of the following paragraphs, namely—*
  - (a) *the development would be of strategic economic or social importance to the State or the region in which it would be situate,*
  - (b) *the development would contribute substantially to the fulfilment of any of the objectives in the National Planning Framework or in any regional spatial and economic strategy in force in respect of the area or areas in which it would be situate,*
  - (c) *the development would have a significant effect on the area of more than one planning authority.*

The Seventh Schedule which sets out infrastructure developments for the purposes of Sections 37A and 37B and includes:

### *Energy Infrastructure*

1.— *Development comprising or for the purposes of any of the following:*

.....

- *An industrial installation for the production of electricity, steam or hot water with a heat output of 300 megawatts or more.*

The Board should note that there is a prospective class of development provided for in the *Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2018* (16/2018) relating to communication and data infrastructure. However, this provision has not been commenced. The Board should confirm this provision will not have commenced prior to the making of its determination.

*A facility consisting of one or more than one structure, the combined gross floor space of which exceeds 10,000 square metres, used primarily for the storage, management and dissemination of data, and the provision of associated electricity connections infrastructure.*

## 8.0 Assessment

The proposed development comprises a Data Centre Campus which will source its primary power from a collocated flexible Decentralised Energy Resource (DER). The prospective applicant has presented the masterplan for the proposed development, however, there is no direct provision under the Seventh Schedule for such a campus development.

The proposed development is made up of a number of components which primarily support the operation of a data centre. These are addressed individually below to ascertain whether any component may meet the meaning of SID. I have considered all other infrastructure developments under the Seventh Schedule and am satisfied that none apply.

<b>Data Centre</b>	<p>Section 49 of the <i>Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2018</i> (16/2018) which will amend the Seventh Schedule of the PDA and relates to communications and data infrastructure is. At the time of this report, this provision in the Act was uncommenced.</p> <p>Therefore, the Data Centre <b><u>is not a development</u></b> for the purposes of SID.</p>
<b>Solid Oxide Fuel Cell (SOFC) Power System</b>	<p>The heat output of the fuel cell is expected to be 107 Megawatt thermal (MWth). This nominal output would not meet the 300 MW heat output threshold for an industrial installation for the production of electricity, steam or hot water. It is also worth noting that the BESS has a heat output of ~ 44 MWth. However, even cumulatively, it would not meet the threshold.</p> <p>Therefore, the Fuel Cell <b><u>is not a development</u></b> for the purposes of SID.</p>

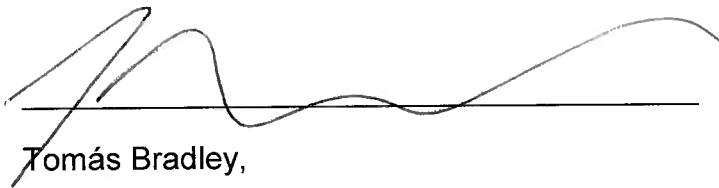
<b>Battery Energy Storage System (BESS)</b>	<p>There is no provision in the PDA related to BESS. The heat output, even cumulatively with other components, would not meet any threshold.</p> <p>Therefore, the BESS <b><u>is not a development</u></b> for the purposes of SID.</p>
<b>Solar PV Installation</b>	<p>There is no provision in the PDA related to solar installations. It does not have a heat output.</p> <p>Therefore, the solar installation <b><u>is not a development</u></b> for the purposes of SID.</p>
<b>Grid Connection</b>	<p>The grid connection, which will be underground, is at a nominal voltage of 220 kV. However, there is no component of the proposed development applicable under Section 37A.</p> <p>Therefore, the Grid Connection <b><u>is not a development</u></b> for the purposes of SID (under Section 37A specifically).</p> <p>It should be noted that the applicant was advised that this component may constitute SID under Section 182A of the PDA and a separate request would need to be made under Section 182E of the PDA to determine this. Such an pre-application request (ABP-322430-25) was received by the Board on the 1st of May 2025.</p>

## 10.0 Recommendation

I recommend that Red Admiral DC be informed that the proposed development comprising the development of a 250 MW Data Centre which will source its primary power from a collocated flexible Decentralised Energy Resource (DER). Solid Oxide Fuel Cell Power System, Battery Energy Storage System, Solar PV Installation and Grid connection as set out in the plans and particulars received by An Bord Pleanála on the 23rd of December 2024 and at the meeting of 12<sup>th</sup> February 2025 does not meet a threshold set out in the Seventh Schedule of the *Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended*, and therefore does not come under Section 37A (1) of the *Planning and Development Act, 2000, as amended*, for consideration. A planning application should be made in the first instance to Westmeath County Council.

Professional Declaration

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.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke, positioned above a solid horizontal line.

Tomás Bradley,

Senior Planning Inspector

7<sup>th</sup> May 2025