

Natura Impact Statement of
proposed development at
St. Michael's College, Nutley Lane,
Ballsbridge, Dublin 4

Pl. Ref.: WEB5883/25

Compiled by OPENFIELD Ecological Services

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For St. Michael's College



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The Purpose of this document

This document provides information to allow the planning authority (Dublin City Council) to carry out an Appropriate Assessment of the proposed project. This document will assess whether significant effects to the integrity of the Natura 2000 network are likely to occur as a result of granting planning permission in accordance with Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive and the Planning and Development (Amendment) Acts. It will determine whether mitigation measures are required to ensure that negative effects can be avoided to the Natura 2000 network.

This report is based on a separate Screening Report for AA which has been prepared by Openfield Ecological Services and which concluded that, in the absence of mitigation measures, significant effects to the South Dublin Bay & River Tolka Estuary SPA and the North Bull Island SPA could not be ruled out.

Under the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats Regulations) 2011 an NIS:

...means a report comprising the scientific examination of a plan or project and the relevant European Site or European Sites, to identify and characterise any possible implications of the plan or project individually or in combination with other plans or projects in view of the conservation objectives of the site or sites, and any further information including, but not limited to, any plans, maps or drawings, scientific information or data required to enable the carrying out of an Appropriate Assessment.

It should be noted that under Article 42(1) of the aforementioned legislation it is the relevant competent authority, in this case Louth County Council, which carries out any AA or screening for AA, stating:

A screening for Appropriate Assessment of a plan or project for which an application for consent is received, or which a public authority wishes to undertake or adopt, and which is not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site as a European Site, shall be carried out by the public authority to assess, in view of best scientific knowledge and in view of the conservation objectives of the site, if that plan or project, individually or in combination with other plans or projects is likely to have a significant effect on the European site.

This NIS therefore aids in the decision-making process.

It should be noted that there is no prescribed format for an NIS. This report therefore follows the generally accepted format for AA provided by the European Commission.

Methodology

The methodology used for this assessment is set out in a document prepared for the Environment DG of the European Commission entitled 'Assessment of plans and projects significantly affecting Natura 2000 sites 'Methodological guidance on the provisions of Article 6(3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC' (Oxford Brookes University, 2001). Chapter 3, part 1, of this document deals specifically with screening while Annex 2 provides the template for an AA report to be used.

In accordance with this guidance, the following methodology has been used to produce this screening statement:

Step 1: Information Required

This assesses whether adequate information is available in order to complete the AA or if, taking the Precautionary Principle into account, additional data are required.

Step 2: Impact Prediction

This identifies the likely impacts that may arise as a result of the project.

Step 3: Conservation Objectives

An assessment of whether or not there will be adverse effects on the integrity of the Natura 2000 site as defined by the conservation objectives and status of the site.

Step 4: Mitigation Measures

Mitigation through avoidance of adverse effects must be proposed. Where it is likely that significant effects will remain despite mitigation then a full assessment of alternative options must be undertaken and an application for the project to proceed made under Article 6(4) of the Habitats Directive: Imperative Reasons of Overriding Public Interest.

The steps are compiled into an AA report, a template of which is provided in Appendix II of the EU methodology.

Reference is also made to guidelines for Local Authorities from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DoEHLG, 2009).

A full list of literature sources that have been consulted for this study is given in the References section to this report while individual references are cited within the text where relevant.

AA Report (Natura Impact Statement) as per Annex 2 of EU methodology:

Step 1 – Information Required

Describe the elements of the project (alone or in combination with other projects or plans) that are likely to give rise to significant effects on the Natura 2000 site (from the screening report prepared by Openfield)

The proposed development is for flood lighting to the two synthetic pitches and grass pitch on the School Campus. The proposed installation is for 5 no. 18m floodlighting poles to pitch no 1, 6 no. 18m poles to pitch no. 2 and 4.no 15m poles to pitch no. 3.

The site location is shown in figures 1 and 2 while the proposed layout is given in figure 3.

The main phases of this project include:

- Site preparation and removal of small quantities of inert waste material by a licenced contractor
- A construction phase using standard building materials.
- An operation phase whereby the new lighting will facilitate use of the pitches after hours.

The development site is not located within or directly adjacent to any Natura 2000 site (SAC or SPA). This part of south Dublin is a built-up business, residential and commercial zone and is predominantly composed of artificial surfaces although parks and gardens do provide some semi-natural habitat.

Mapping from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) indicates no water courses in this vicinity. However, a drainage ditch, flows along the northern site boundary. This ditch is not mapped by the EPA but is presumed to enter Dublin Bay either directly or via the Elm Park Stream/Nutley Stream. Rainwater run-off is presumed to soak to ground or enter Dublin Bay via artificial drains. The development site itself is occupied by a playing pitch.

There are presently no surface water attenuation measures in place and rain runs-off to nearby drains or soaks to ground. This project will not result in any change to the extent of hard surfacing and so no changes to existing drainage are proposed.

Small quantities of inert construction and demolition waste will be removed by a licenced contractor and disposed of in accordance with the Waste Management Act.

Currently the supply of freshwater for St. Michael's College originates from a well on the site. This project will not result in any change to the level of water demand.

The proposed development will not generate any wastewater and no works to the foul sewers are to be undertaken.

The operation phase of the project will see the lighting used for sporting activities during hours of darkness, especially winter months. During the darkest period (December/January) it can be expected that lighting will be used from 1600 – 2200.

A site survey was undertaken for this study on June 17th 2025, which is within the optimal period for general habitat survey (Smith et al., 2011). The area in which works are to be undertaken, and habitats in the immediate vicinity, are entirely composed of hard surfacing or artificial habitats which are of negligible biodiversity value. Only pitch 2 is composed of a semi-natural grass surface. Jackdaw *Corvus monedula* were noted foraging on this area. No other birds were recorded on this date.

From January to April 2022 a series of winter bird surveys were carried out by ornithologist John Fox and which concluded that “During the survey period Light-bellied Brent Goose, Oystercatcher Curlew or some other waterbirds were observed on the St Michael’s College playing pitch during all visits, including the final visit on 7th April 2022.”

Relevant extracts of this report include:

“Light-bellied Brent Geese (*Branta bernicula hrota*) were observed on the St Michael’s Playing Pitch lands on two occasions only. Their maximum numbers varied from of 172 birds on 4th of December 2022 to 155 on 9th of March 2022. See Table 1. The average maximum number of Light-bellied Brent geese observed over the 8 visits therefore was just 41 birds. The total population of Light-bellied Brent Geese wintering in Dublin Bay in the winter of 2021 to 2022 was 7658 birds based on a census carried out as part of The Dublin Bay Bird Project, at dawn on 3rd February 2022. (Per com H. Boland, Dublin Bay Bird Project). Therefore, the observed maximum percentage of the Dublin Bay’s population of Light-bellied Brent Geese using the site at one time was 2.2% and an average maximum figure of just 0.53% was recorded over the 8 survey days.

Light-bellied Brent Geese behaviour observed while on the St Michael’s playing pitch lands included foraging, preening, resting (sitting down), and interacting. Foraging was the primary activity observed. Preening, resting and interacting were interspersed within the foraging periods. Interactions observed were mainly aggression between individual birds or groups of birds and were very brief.

Almost all parts of the playing pitch areas were used by the Light-bellied Brent Geese on which to forage at some time. The exception to this being the extreme edges of the site where the geese were not observed, and droppings were not found. A zone of perhaps 3 to 6 metres around the edges of the grassed area appeared to be un-grazed by the geese.

The duration that the Light-bellied Brent Geese were observed as present on the lands varied from zero hours on several dates to at least 4 hours and 10

minutes on 4th December 2022. On that date 172 geese were still present on the surveyor's departure from the site at 13.50.

Oystercatcher, (*Haematopus ostralegus*), is Red Listed by Birdwatch Ireland as a species of high conservation concern and is also a bird species for which both North Bull Island SPA (Site Code 004006) and South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA (Site Code 4024) get their designations. Oystercatchers were recorded foraging on the St Michael's Playing Pitch lands during 6 of the 8 visits. Numbers peaked on 9th March 2022 when a maximum of 60 Oystercatchers were recorded foraging there.

Black-headed Gull, (*Croicocephalus ridibundus*), is Amber Listed by Birdwatch Ireland as a species of medium conservation concern and is a bird species for which both North Bull Island SPA (Site Code 004006) and South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA (Site Code 4024) get their designations. Black-headed gulls were recorded foraging on the St Michaels College lands during 6 of the 8 visits. Numbers recorded were small however with a maximum figure of just 12 Black-headed Gulls present on 27th January 2022.

Curlew, (*Numenius arquata*), another waterbird wader species that was regularly recorded foraging and occasionally roosting on the St Michael's playing pitch lands. Curlew however is not a bird species for which both North Bull Island SPA (Site Code 004006) and South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA (Site Code 4024) get their designations. That said they are Red Listed by Birdwatch Ireland as a species of high conservation concern. They were recorded present on the St Michael's Playing Pitch lands during five of the eight visits. Their numbers peaked on 16th of February when 42 birds were observed foraging there.

Another three Amber listed Gull species were recorded foraging on the St Michael's College pitch lands. These species were Mediterranean Gull, (*Larus melanocephalus*), Herring Gull, (*Larus argentatus*), and Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*). Mediterranean Gull was recorded just once on 16th of February when a single bird spent about 15 minutes foraging on the pitch. Herring Gull was observed on the pitch during 7 of the 8 visits with a maximum number of 44 observed on 16th of February 2022. Lesser Black-backed Gull was observed on the pitch on two out of the eight visits with a maximum of just 4 birds recorded on the 9th of March 2022."

A survey was carried out for a previous planning application on December 3rd 2021 by Openfield Ecological Services and this noted that:

"A flock of approximately 30 Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* were noted to be feeding.

Light-bellied Brent Goose, Oystercatcher and Black-headed Gull are qualifying interests of both the South Dublin Bay & River Tolka Estuary SPA and the North Bull Island SPA. Curlew is a qualifying interest of the North Bull Island SPA.

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which works are to be undertaken, and habitats in the immediate vicinity, are entirely composed of hard surfacing or artificial habitats which are of negligible biodiversity value. Only pitch 2 is composed of a semi-natural grass surface. Jackdaw *Corvus monedula* were noted foraging on this area. No other birds were recorded on this date.

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As part of the FI response a further wintering bird survey was carried out by John Fox between February and April 2026. The following extracts are taken from this report (which is presented in full under separate cover):

"During the survey period in 2026 no Light-bellied Brent Geese, Oystercatchers, Curlews or other waterbirds other than a few gulls were observed on the St Michael's College playing pitch. [...]

During each of the visit's no waterbirds other than Herring and Black-headed Gulls were observed foraging on the St Michael's playing pitch lands.

Light-bellied Brent Geese droppings were found on the lands during the first visit on 17th of February 2026. No Brent Geese droppings were found on the site during the following three visits. The presence of droppings is considered evidence that geese have been foraging on the lands recently. The droppings found during the February 2026 visit were extensive and quite recent, suggesting that geese had been present no more than a few days prior to that visit, in good numbers.

The only waterbird species recorded on the sites were just two Gull species. No wader species or Light-bellied Brent Geese were found during any of the visits. The Gulls observed were Black-headed Gull, and Herring Gull. All the gulls present were observed foraging on the lands and on a few occasions, individuals were also observed roosting or preening.

Light-bellied Brent Geese (*Branta bernicula hrota*) were not observed on the St Michael's Playing Pitch lands during any of the four visits. However, the presence and extent of Light-bellied Brent goose droppings found on the lands during the first visit indicates that Light-bellied Brent Geese, in significant numbers, did graze on the land just prior to 27th of February 2026. No information was gathered about those visiting Brent Geese flocks due to the late start date of the surveys towards the end of February 2026. [...]

It is the authors opinion therefore that the lands known as St Michael's School playing pitch lands the subject of this report have some significance as a terrestrial inland feeding site for Dublin's wintering population of Light-bellied Brent Geese, Oystercatcher and Curlew. It is also the authors opinion that the St Michael's playing pitch lands are of some but less significance as an inland feeding site for four species of Gull."

Step 2 - Impact Prediction

The AA screening report describes the elements of the project which “have the potential to cause environmental impact”. These are:

Habitat Loss

The development site is approximately 800m from the boundary of the South Dublin Bay and River Tolka estuary SPA/SAC as the crow flies and the intervening land is occupied by residential development and transport links, including the DART line. Because of the distance separating the two areas there is no pathway for loss or disturbance of habitats within any Natura 2000 site or other semi-natural habitats that may act as ecological corridors for important species associated with the qualifying interests of the Natura 2000 sites.

Habitat Disturbance

- **Ex-situ effects during operation**

The development site is located in a heavily urbanised environment close to significant noise and artificial light sources such as roads and railways.

The development site mostly does not provide suitable habitat for wintering wetland or wading birds which may be qualifying interests of coastal Natura 2000 sites (with the exception of pitch 2).

At pitch 2 wintering birds, including qualifying interests of SPAs, have been recorded. These species (Light-bellied Brent Goose, Oystercatcher, Curlew & Black-headed Gull), visit the grassland during daylight hours and return to coastal roosting sites at dusk to avoid predators. Therefore, the proposed lighting:

- a) Will not directly reduce the foraging habitat for wintering birds
- b) Will not indirectly reduce the availability of the habitat for foraging via human disturbance as lighting will only be required during hours of darkness, when wintering birds will already have left for coastal roosting sites.

Therefore, significant effects to Natura 2000 sites are not likely to arise due to ex-situ effects during operation.

- **Ex-situ effects during construction**

The construction phase does not require extensive disturbance of the site and will require no more than 30 days for laying of cables and installation of lighting posts. However, if this work is underway during winter months there may be disturbance to wintering birds; in effect, wintering birds will avoid the grassland while works are underway. Given the short duration of the event this is unlikely to result in any population level effects.

Nevertheless, taking a precautionary approach, and given that pitch 2 is used regularly, and by a range of important species, **significant effects to the South**

Dublin Bay & River Tolka Estuary SPA and the North Bull Island SPA cannot be ruled out.

Pollution

There is a pathway from the site via surface water flows to Dublin Bay via surface sewers. As the development area is already largely of hard standing, there are no changes that can arise from the project that would negatively impact upon the quality or quantity of surface run-off.

During the site clearance and construction phases it is not likely that sediment or other construction pollutants could enter any water course as there are no pathways to any water course.

There is no source of foul water or works to the foul sewer arising from this project.

No significant effects are likely to arise to Natura 2000 sites from this source.

In combination effects

Implementation of the WFD will ensure that improvements to water quality in Dublin Bay and the River Liffey are maintained or enhanced where relevant.

Environmental water quality can be impacted by the effects of surface water run-off from areas of hard standing. These impacts are particularly pronounced in urban areas and can include pollution from particulate matter and hydrocarbon residues, and downstream erosion from accelerated flows during flood events. In this case the proposed development will result in no change to the pattern of run-off.

This application can be seen in combination with other projects in and around St. Michael's School to upgrade facilities. This includes the recent completion of works to the Junior and Senior School extensions and the swimming pool currently under construction to the west of the campus. A planning application for a ball wall was also recently granted. There are no other projects in planning at the time of this application.

There are no other projects which can act in combination with this development which can give rise to significant effect to Natura 2000 sites within the zone of influence.



Figure 2 – Site location (red cross) in relation to Natura 2000 sites in Dublin Bay (from www.epa.ie).



Figure 3 – Overview of pitches where lighting is to be installed

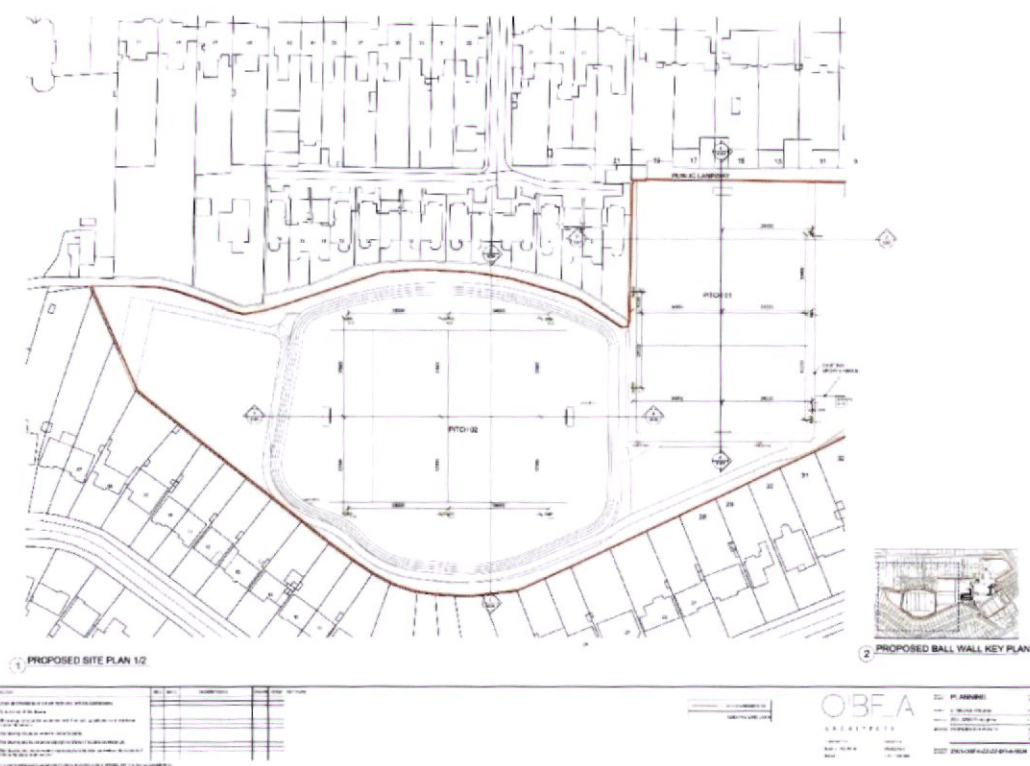
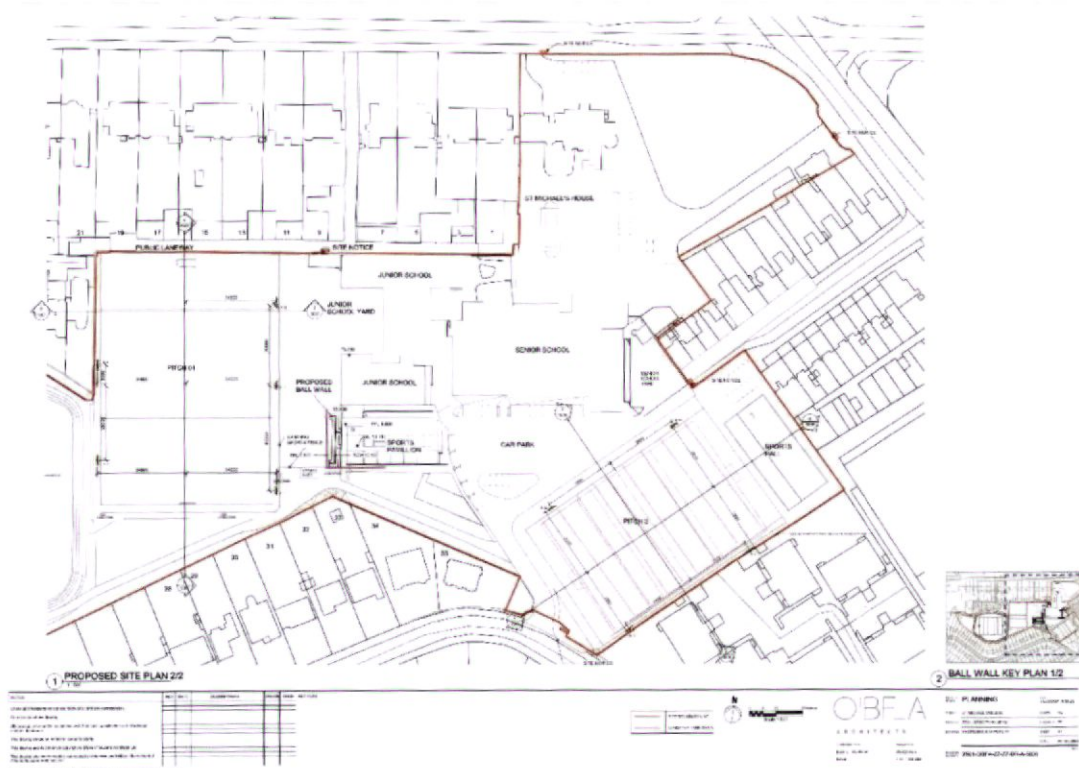


Figure 4 – Proposed lighting at pitches 1 & 2



Step 3 – Conservation Objectives

Set out the conservation objectives of the site

Site specific conservation objectives have been published for both the South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA and the North Bull Island SPA (NPWS, 2015a) and are similar for each bird species. They can be summarised as:

Birds (similar for all species)

Long term population trend stable or increasing; there should be no significant decrease in the numbers or range of areas used by waterbird species, other than that occurring from natural patterns of variation

Describe how the project will affect key species and key habitats. Acknowledge uncertainties and any gaps in information.

The construction phase of the project may introduce significant disturbance which may affect the birds' ability to use the lands. This would affect the range of areas used by waterbird species which are qualifying interests of SPAs in Dublin Bay.

Describe how the integrity of the site (determined by structure and function and conservation objectives) is likely to be affected by the project

Given the significance of the amenity grassland playing pitch for Light-bellied Brent Goose, Oystercatcher, Curlew and Black-headed Gull this could, in the absence of mitigation, contribute to a temporary decline in numbers of the aforementioned species using the bay, something which would be contrary to the conservation objectives of the SPAs.

Step 4 - Mitigation

Describe what mitigation measures are to be introduced to avoid, reduce or remedy the adverse effects on the integrity of the site. Acknowledge uncertainties and any gaps in information.

Disturbance during construction:

Construction works at pitch 2 will not occur during the wintering bird season (i.e. October to March inclusive). This will ensure that disturbance/displacement is avoided.

The Assessment of Significance of Effects – Conclusion of Stage 2

This report contains an analysis of the proposed project and its relationship with South Dublin Bay & River Tolka Estuary SPA and the North Bull Island SPA.

Pathways exist between the development site and these two SPAs and these have been described in detail. It has been concluded that significant effects to the North Bull Island SPA, the South Dublin Bay and the River Tolka Estuary SPA cannot be ruled out.

Specifically, effects may arise from the effects to the range of certain wetland/wintering bird species, specifically Light-bellied Brent Goose, Oystercatcher, Curlew and Black-headed Gull.

Arising from this assessment, mitigation has been proposed. With the implementation of this measure, adverse effects to the integrity of the SPAs can be ruled out.

These conclusions are based on best available scientific knowledge.

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