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Natura Impact Statement for a proposed hotel development at

Marsh Road (to the east of Scotch Hall Shopping Centre), Drogheda, Co. Louth

Compiled by OPENFIELD Ecological Services

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For Hallscotch Venture 2 Ltd.

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The Purpose of this document

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This document provides information to allow the planning authority (Louth County Council) to carry out an Appropriate Assessment of the proposed project. This document will assess whether adverse 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 significant effects to the River Boyne and River Blackwater SAC, the Boyne Coast and Estuary SAC and the Boyne Coast 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

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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:

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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)

This document provides for the analysis of a proposed development at a site in Drogheda. The project is described here as per the planning application:

A six-storey hotel comprising 107 no. bedrooms, lobby, bar and dining area and associated service areas, together with all associated site development works, at Marsh Road (to the east of Scotch Hall Shopping Centre), Drogheda, Co. Louth. The proposed development will include vehicular (servicing and drop-off) and pedestrian access via New Road (to the east of Scotch Hall Shopping Centre, off Marsh Road), provision of reserved car parking spaces within the existing Scotch Hall Shopping Centre car park, 22 no. bicycle parking spaces, and an enclosed pedestrian bridge connection from Level 1 (first floor) of the proposed hotel to the eastern end of the Shopping Centre Mall at Level 1.

The development is located at a brown field site on the south side of Drogheda. The site is close to the River Boyne, the banks of which are composed of artificial quay walls and embankments through the town.

Mapping from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) shows that the River Boyne flows c.70m north of the development site boundary. The Boyne at this point is tidally influenced and falls within the River Boyne and River Blackwater SAC. An SPA of the same name lies upstream, within the freshwater portion of the river, while c.2.5km downstream the Boyne Coast and Estuary SAC and Boyne Estuary SPA can be found.

This development site location is shown in figure 1 while the boundary is shown in figure 2.

A site survey was carried out on February 2nd 2025 in accordance with best practice standards (Smith et al., 2011) for a previous development application on this site. The site was also surveyed by Wildlife Surveys Ireland on May 22nd/23rd 2025 (primarily for bat and bird activity). Habitats are described here in accordance with standard classifications (Fossitt, 2000). It found that the development site is entirely composed of **artificial surfaces – BL3** which includes areas of car park and some built development.

Vegetation is minimal and ruderal in nature with abundant Butterfly-bush *Buddleja davidii* but also Brambles *Rubus fruticosus agg.,* Canadian Fleabane *Conyza canadensis,* Fern-grass *Catapodium rigidum*, Red Valerian *Centranthus ruber,* Himalayan Honeysuckle *Leycesteria Formosa* and Grey Willow *Salix cinerea*.

The River Boyne to the north is composed of an artificial wall which impounds the river as it runs through Drogheda. This is a **tidal river – CW2** in this location.

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Although plants on the site are mostly non-native in origin, there is none which is an alien invasive species as listed in SI No. 374 of 2024.

Other than the River Boyne, there are no water courses on the development site, no drainage ditches and no habitats which could be described as wetlands or bodies of open water.

The proposed development is for the construction of a new hotel on the lands as described. It will see preparation of the site and a construction phase to include connection to drainage infrastructure.

Currently, rainwater flows off hard surfaces to the River Boyne, either directly or via surface sewers. As the development site is already of hard standing, there can be no negative effect to the quantity or quality of surface water run-off arising from the proposal. Run off form the new development will pass to an attenuation tank, via a petrol interceptor. The water will be discharged at a rate of 2/l/s per hectare (c. 3l/s) via the existing outfall in the quay wall.

Foul wastewater from the proposed development will be sent to the wastewater treatment plant for Drogheda which is operated by Uisce Éireann under licence from the Environmental Protection Agency (licence no. D0041-01). It has a capacity to treat wastewater from a population equivalent (P.E.) of 101,600. The Annual Environmental Report (AER) for 2024 stated that the plant was operating within capacity but was not compliant with emission limit standards for that period.

The cause of non-compliance is attributed to a number of sources including WWTP “upgrade required to meet ELV”. Ambient monitoring of the receiving environment is carried out and the AER states that:

Based on the effluent compliance results, the discharge from the wastewater treatment plant may be having an observable negative impact on the WaterFramework Directive status downstream of the WWTP. It should be noted however that the current WFD status is Moderate both upstream and downstream of the WWTP.

According to the Uisce Éireann website (November 2025) works are currently underway to upgrade the plant and are “expected to be completed by December 2025.”

There are no other discharges from this operation.

Water will be supplied from a mains supply which originates from an extraction point along the River Boyne.

The development site is close to urban developments which are associated with noise and artificial lighting.

There will be no direct loss or disturbance of semi-natural habitats that may act as ecological corridors to Natura 2000 sites. The surface water drainage system will require no works at, or near, the River Boyne.

During the construction phase there will be some disturbance of ground although, large quantities of soil will not be exposed as the lands are already built up. Due to the absence of any water courses in this vicinity, the risk of pollution is very low.

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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
Because no construction will take place within any Natura 2000 site, there is no pathway for direct loss or disturbance of habitats or species listed as qualifying interests or other semi-natural habitats that may act as ecological corridors for important species associated with them.

No significant effects are likely to arise to Natura 2000 sites from habitat loss.

Habitat disturbance/Ex-situ impacts
Although close to the River Boyne, the development site is located in a heavily urbanised environment close to significant noise and artificial light sources. This development cannot contribute to potential disturbance impacts to habitats for which Natura 2000 sites have been designated due to the nature of this location and the artificial manner of the riparian zone of the Boyne through Drogheda. Intertidal habitats are not a qualifying interest of the River Boyne and River Blackwater SAC.

The development site does not provide suitable habitat for wetland/wading/wintering birds which may be associated with Natura 2000 sites. No ex-situ impacts can arise.

During construction there will be a requirement for artificial lighting and this may spill onto the adjacent River Boyne and so the River Boyne and River Blackwater SAC. The river is used by Otter, a qualifying interest of the SAC and although this is a robust species, there may be temporary disturbance to commuting or feeding habitats arising from this source.

For this reason, the potential for significant effects to this SAC cannot be ruled out.

Hydrological pathways
There is a pathway from the development site via wastewater and surface water flows to the Boyne Estuary, via the Drogheda wastewater treatment plant and the surface drainage network respectively.

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- **Pollution during operation – wastewater**

While the Drogheda wastewater treatment plant is not operating to a high standard, upgrade works are underway which are expected to be completed by the end of 2025. Non-compliance issues are not related to the overall treatment capacity at the plant and according to the AER, capacity at the plant is not likely to be exceeded within the next three years (i.e. from 2024).

Therefore, the additional loading from the proposed project will not affect the quality of the discharge. No significant effects to Natura 2000 sites are likely to arise from this source.

- **Pollution during operation - surface water**

Because there will be no change to the extent of hard surfacing arising from the proposed development, there can be no negative effect to surface water quality or quantity leaving the site.

Discharges of wastewater and surface water from this project are not likely to result in significant effects to any Natura 2000 site.

- **Pollution during construction**

Pollutants arising from surface water run-off typically comprise of sediment and small quantities of hydrocarbon residues. During construction projects this can also include cement and other substances which are toxic to aquatic life. In this case the risk of pollution from this source is moderate to high as construction works will take place directly adjacent to the River Boyne.

Pollution could affect invertebrate life in intertidal habitats including estuaries and mudflats. The River Boyne and River Blackwater SAC does not have qualifying interest habitats in the intertidal zone however these habitats are qualifying interests of the Boyne Coast and Estuary SAC which lies c.2.5km downstream. Impacts to invertebrate life could have knock on (indirect) effects to birdlife using the Boyne Coast SPA which is also 2.5km downstream. Although the risk of pollution at this distance downstream is diminished, taking a precautionary approach, negative effects to the Boyne Coast and Estuary SAC and the Boyne Coast SPA cannot be ruled out.

Due to the physical distance as well as the enormous dilution effect of the Irish Sea, and considering it qualifying interests, no significant effects to the North West Irish Sea are likely to occur.

Abstraction

Abstraction is not identified by the EPA as a significant pressure on any waterbody in the Boyne/Blackwater catchment. No significant effects to Natura 2000 sites are likely to arise from this source.

Light and noise during operation

The project will result in some additional noise and lighting against the existing baseline which is urbanised in character.

As during the construction phase, additional illumination of the River Boyne could result in negative effects to Otter.

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Significant effects to the River Boyne and River Blackwater SAC from this source therefore cannot be ruled out.

In combination effects
Are there other projects or plans that together with the project or plan being assessed could affect the site?

Implementation of the WFD will ensure that improvements to water quality in the River Boyne and its estuary are achieved although the latest assessment of the status of the Boyne Estuary shows a deterioration in water quality.

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 there will be no negative impacts to surface water quality/quantity as there will be no change to the extent of hard surfaces.

In March 2005 the Greater Dublin Drainage Study (GDDS) was published as a policy document designed to provide for future drainage infrastructure. The implementation of this policy (which has been applied beyond Dublin) will see broad compliance with environmental and planning requirements in an integrated manner. This is likely to result in a long-term improvement to the quality and quantity of storm water run-off in urban areas.

Development is Drogheda is provided for under the Drogheda Joint Area Plan 2021 – 2027. This has undergone AA by the competent authority and this concluded that adverse effects to the integrity of Natura 2000 sites would not arise from its implementation.

An upgrade to the Drogheda wastewater treatment plant is expected to be completed by the end of 2025 and will provide compliance with the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive.

This proposal can be seen in combination with a planning application on lands directly to the east and north for a Largescale Residential Development (LRD) including 172 apartments (Pl. Ref.: 2560671). This proposal was accompanied by a Natura Impact Statement to address similar issues to those discussed in this AA Screening.

In the event that this LRD is under construction at the same time as the current proposal, there is a risk that pollution effects could act in combination to result in significant effects to Natura 2000 sites. Similarly, lighting during the operation phase, when both developments are complete, could act in combination to result in significant effects to Natura 2000 sites. These effects are addressed in the NIS that accompanies this application.

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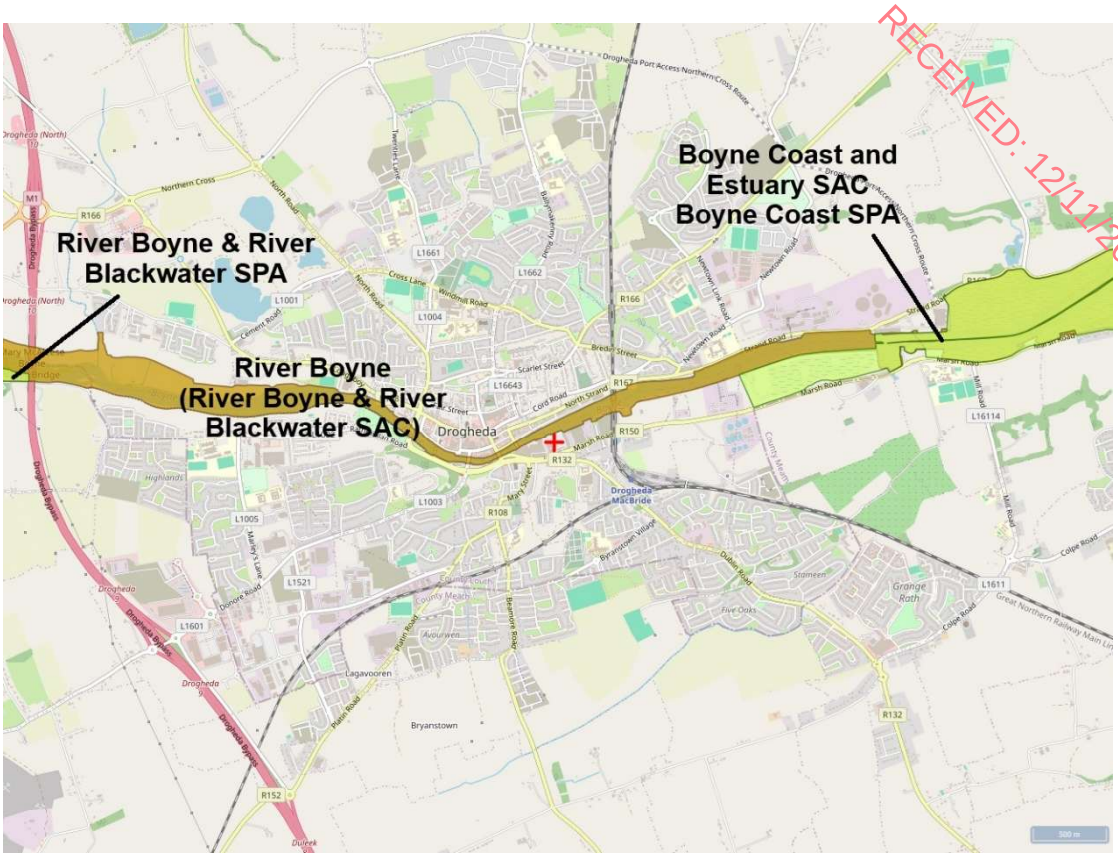

Figure 1 – Site location (red cross). SAC boundaries are shown in tan while SPAs are shown in green. There is some overlap between SACs and SPAs in this vicinity (from www.epa.ie).

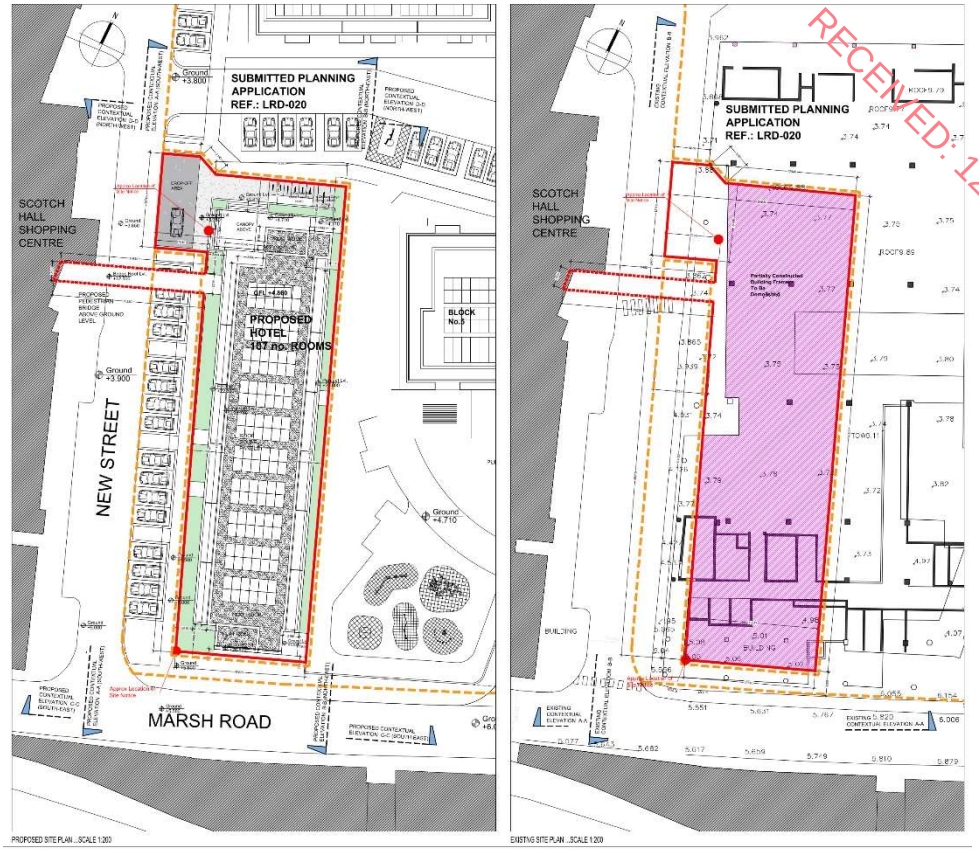

Figure 2 – Site layout; proposed (left) and existing (right)

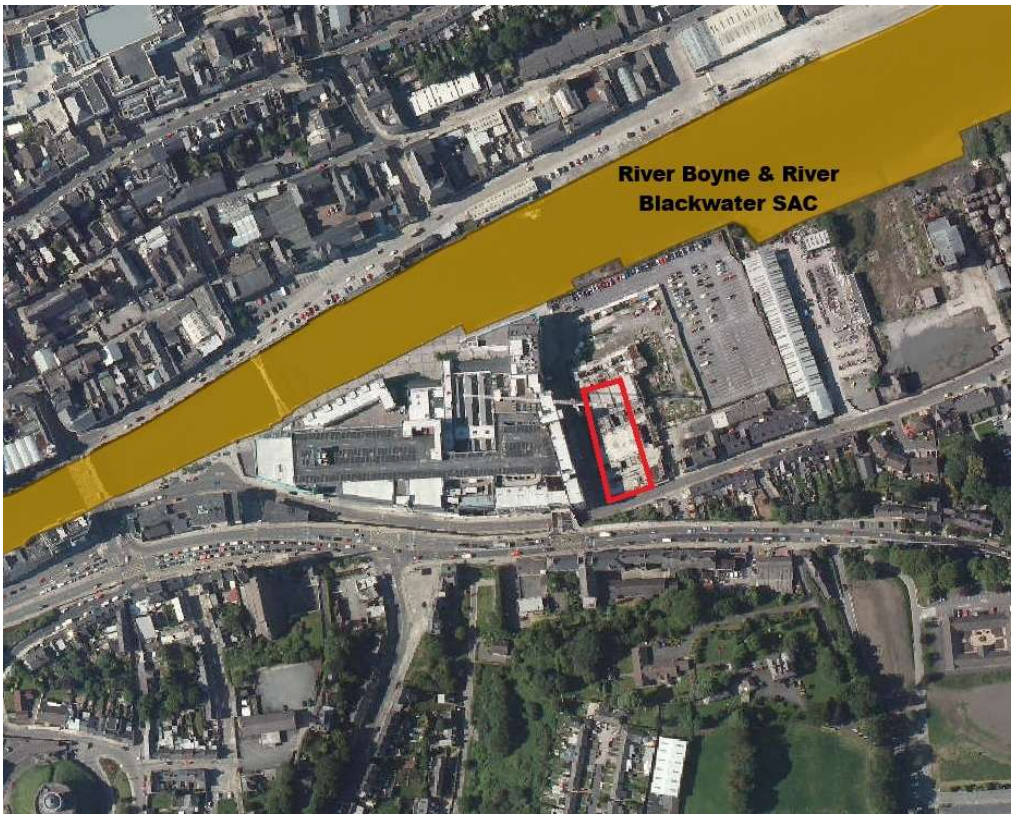

Figure 3 – Indicative boundary of the development site relative to Natura 2000 sites.

Step 3 – Conservation Objectives
Set out the conservation objectives of the site

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The River Boyne in Drogheda is home to Otter, a qualifying interest of the River Boyne and River Blackwater SAC. Its conservation objectives are:

Otter
No significant decline in distribution; no significant decline in terrestrial/estuarine/freshwater/lake habitat; no significant decline in couching sites or holts; no decline in available fish biomass.

There are no pathways to other qualifying interests of this SAC.

Approximately 2.5km downstream can be found the Boyne Coast and Estuary SAC and the Boyne Coast SPA. Qualifying interests which may be affected via hydrological pathways from the development project include mudflats and estuaries. The conservation objectives for these features are:

Mudflats (code 1140)
Permanent habitat area stable or increasing (estimated at 1,027 hectares); estuarine muds dominated by polychaetes and crustaceans community complex maintained in a natural condition.

Estuaries (code: 1130)
Permanent habitat area stable or increasing (estimated at 403 hectares); estuarine muds dominated by polychaetes and crustaceans community complex maintained in a natural condition

There are no pathways to other qualifying interests of this SAC.

Specific conservation objectives have been set for the Boyne Coast SPA (NPWS, 2013a). 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

Wetlands
The permanent area occupied by the wetland habitat should be stable and not significantly less than the area of 594ha, 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.

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Hydrological pathways exist to the River Boyne and its estuary. The conservation objective set for mudflats and estuaries, in this SAC is to maintain the invertebrate communities as described in detail in the conservation objectives. Given the potential effects to water quality during construction (particularly sediment and other construction pollution), significant effects to estuary and mudflat qualifying interests cannot be ruled out.

Any impact to invertebrate communities could have knock-on impacts to bird populations which depend upon them for food. This may affect the integrity of the Boyne Coast and Estuary SAC and the Boyne Coast SPA.

During the construction and operation phases of the project, artificial lighting could affect the behaviour of Otters along the River Boyne, a qualifying interest of the River Boyne and River Blackwater SAC. Artificial lighting could lead to avoidance of this area, effectively reducing the habitat availability for Otters.

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

Sediment is acknowledged as among the most important pollutants in river ecosystems while toxic substances can directly affect aquatic life.

Because sediment and construction pollution can impact upon the invertebrate communities in tidal sediments, the integrity of the Boyne Coast and Estuary SAC and Boyne Coast SPA could be compromised.

Because artificial lighting could displace Otters from feeding or commuting areas along the River Boyne, the effective loss of habitats, although temporary (in the case of the construction phase), the integrity of the River Boyne and River Blackwater SAC could be compromised.

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.

1. Pollution prevention during construction

Construction will follow guidance from Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI, 2016) for the protection of fish habitat. This will include the erection of a robust silt curtain (or similar barrier) along the northern boundary to prevent the ingress of silt to the River Boyne.

Water leaving the site will pass through an appropriately-sized silt trap or settlement pond so that only silt-free run-off will enter the wider environment. There will be strictly no direct discharge of surface water to the River Boyne.

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Dangerous substances, such as oils, fuels etc., will be stored in a bunded zone. Emergency contact numbers for the Local Authority Environment Section, Inland Fisheries Ireland, the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Parks and Wildlife Service will be displayed in a prominent position within the site compound. These agencies will be notified immediately in the event of a pollution incident.

Site personnel will be trained in the importance of preventing pollution and the mitigation measures described here to ensure same.

The site manager will be responsible for the implementation of these measures. They will be inspected on at least a daily basis for the duration of works, and a record of these inspections will be maintained.

2. Artificial lighting during construction

Lighting of the site during the construction phase will be controlled.

There will be no direct illumination of the River Boyne.

Lighting will be confined to working hours.

3. Artificial lighting during operation

Lighting must be cowled to prevent light overspill on to surrounding vegetation and the river Boyne

Lighting must be cowled to prevent light overspill on to surrounding vegetation and the river Boyne. Internal louvres are the most efficient means of controlling light overspill / pollution.

Lighting should be sufficiently controlled to provide for low levels at ground level. The design should strive to achieve 3 lux at ground level.

LED lights should be considered as the option for the lighting LED lights are an energy efficient and highly controllable light source, are highly adaptable in terms of direction and strength and can be timed to switch on and off as they light quickly to the level required. These should ensure energy efficiency and money-saving as well as ecological advantages.

The Assessment of Significance of Effects – Conclusion of Stage 2

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This report contains an analysis of the proposed project and its relationship with areas designated under the Habitats and Birds Directives. Pathways exist between the development site and a number of such areas and these have been described in detail in the AA Screening Report.

Following this analysis, it is concluded that significant effects to the River Boyne and River Blackwater SAC, the Boyne Estuary and Coast SAC and the Boyne Estuary SPA cannot be ruled out. Specifically, these may arise from the impact to intertidal or subtidal habitats from pollution during the construction phase as well as artificial lighting during both construction and operational phases.

Arising from this assessment, mitigation has been proposed. With the implementation of these measures adverse effects to the integrity of Natura 2000 sites will not occur. This conclusion is based on best scientific knowledge.

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