

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT REPORT FOR THE DEMOLITION OF AGRICULTURAL STRUCTURES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MATERIALS RECOVERY FACILITY AT DERRYARKIN, RHODE, CO. OFFALY

VOLUME 2 – MAIN BODY OF THE EIAR

CHAPTER 15 – LANDSCAPE & VISUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

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15. LANDSCAPE AND VISUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

15.1 Introduction

The proposed development is defined in Chapter 1 and a detailed description of the proposed development is set out in Chapter 4: Description of the Existing and Proposed Development.

Macro Works Ltd. has been commissioned to carry out a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (“LVIA”) for the proposed development.

The LVIA describes the landscape context of the proposed development and assesses the likely landscape and visual impacts of the proposed development on the receiving environment. Although closely linked, landscape and visual impacts are assessed separately.

Landscape Impact Assessment (LIA) relates to assessing effects of a development on the landscape as a resource in its own right and is concerned with how the proposal will affect the elements that make up the landscape, the aesthetic and perceptual aspects of the landscape and its distinctive character.

Visual Impact Assessment (VIA) relates to assessing effects of a development on specific views and on the general visual amenity experienced by people. This deals with how the surroundings of individuals or groups of people may be specifically affected by changes in the content and character of views as a result of the change or loss of existing elements of the landscape and/or introduction of new elements. Visual impacts may occur from; Visual Obstruction (blocking of a view, be it full, partial or intermittent) or Visual Intrusion (interruption of a view without blocking).

Cumulative landscape and visual impact assessment is concerned with additional changes to the landscape or visual amenity caused by the proposed development in conjunction with other developments (associated or separate to it), or actions that occurred in the past, present or are likely to occur in the foreseeable future.

In addition to the EIAR related guidance outlined in Chapter 1 Introduction, this LVIA uses methodology as prescribed in the following guidance document:

- Landscape Institute and the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment publication entitled Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (2013).

15.1.1 Statement of Competency

This LVIA was prepared by Macro Works Ltd. of Cherrywood Business Park, Loughlinstown, Dublin 18; a consultancy firm specialising in Landscape and Visual Assessment and associated maps, graphics and verified photomontages. Relevant experience includes a vast range of infrastructural, industrial and commercial projects since 1999. This chapter has been authored by Jamie Ball, Senior Landscape Architect at Macro Works Ltd, who qualified with a BA Hons in Landscape Architect in 1998 and is a full member of the Irish Landscape Institute (ILI).



15.2 Assessment Methodology

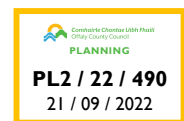
Production of this Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment involved:

- A desktop study to establish an appropriate study area, relevant landscape and visual designations in the Offaly County Development Plan as well as other sensitive visual receptors. This stage culminates in the selection of a set of potential viewpoints from which to study the effects of the proposal;
- Fieldwork to establish the landscape character of the receiving environment and to confirm and refine the set of viewpoints to be used for the visual assessment stage;
- Assessment of the significance of the landscape impact of the Development as a function of landscape sensitivity weighed against the magnitude of the landscape impact;
- Assessment of the significance of the visual impact of the development as a function of visual receptor sensitivity weighed against the magnitude of the visual impact. This aspect of the assessment is supported by photomontages prepared in respect of the selected viewpoints.

15.2.1 Landscape Impact Assessment Criteria

When assessing the potential impacts on the landscape resulting from a proposed development, the following criteria are considered:

- Landscape character, value and sensitivity;
- Magnitude of likely impacts;
- Significance of landscape effects.



The sensitivity of the landscape to change is the degree to which a particular landscape receptor (Landscape Character Area (LCA) or feature) can accommodate changes or new elements without unacceptable detrimental effects to its essential characteristics. Landscape Value and Sensitivity is classified using the following criteria set out in Table 15.1:

Table 15.1: Landscape Value and Sensitivity

Sensitivity	Description
Very High	Areas where the landscape character exhibits a very low capacity for change in the form of development. Examples of which are high value landscapes, protected at an international or national level (World Heritage Site/National Park), where the principal management objectives are likely to be protection of the existing character.
High	Areas where the landscape character exhibits a low capacity for change in the form of development. Examples of which are high value landscapes, protected at a national or regional level (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty), where the principal management objectives are likely to be considered conservation of the existing character.
Medium	Areas where the landscape character exhibits some capacity and scope for development. Examples of which are landscapes, which have a designation of protection at a county level or at non-designated local level where there is evidence of local value and use.



Sensitivity	Description
Low	Areas where the landscape character exhibits a higher capacity for change from development. Typically this would include lower value, non-designated landscapes that may also have some elements or features of recognisable quality, where landscape management objectives include, enhancement, repair and restoration.
Negligible	Areas of landscape character that include derelict, mining, industrial land or are part of the urban fringe where there would be a reasonable capacity to embrace change or the capacity to include the development proposals. Management objectives in such areas could be focused on change, creation of landscape improvements and/or restoration to realise a higher landscape value.

The magnitude of a predicted landscape impact is a product of the scale, extent or degree of change that is likely to be experienced as a result of the proposed development. The magnitude takes into account whether there is a direct physical impact resulting from the loss of landscape components and/or a change that extends beyond the site boundary that may have an effect on the landscape character of the area. Table 15.2 refers:

Table 15.2: Magnitude of Landscape Impacts

Magnitude of Impact	Description
Very High	Change that would be large in extent and scale with the loss of critically important landscape elements and features, which may also involve the introduction of new uncharacteristic elements or features that contribute to an overall change of the landscape in terms of character, value and quality.
High	Change that would be more limited in extent and scale with the loss of important landscape elements and features, which may also involve the introduction of new uncharacteristic elements or features that contribute to an overall change of the landscape in terms of character, value and quality.
Medium	Changes that are modest in extent and scale involving the loss of landscape characteristics or elements that may also involve the introduction of new uncharacteristic elements or features that would lead to changes in landscape character, and quality.
Low	Changes affecting small areas of landscape character and quality, together with the loss of some less characteristic landscape elements or the addition of new features or elements.
Negligible	Changes affecting small or very restricted areas of landscape character. This may include the limited loss of some elements or the addition of some new features or elements that are characteristic of the existing landscape or are hardly perceivable.

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The significance of a landscape impact is based on a balance between the sensitivity of the landscape receptor and the magnitude of the impact. The significance of landscape impacts is arrived at using the following matrix set out in Table 15.3 below:

Table 15.3: Impact Significance Matrix

Scale/Magnitude	Sensitivity of Receptor				
	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Negligible
Very High	Profound	Profound-substantial	Substantial	Moderate	Minor
High	Profound-substantial	Substantial	Substantial-moderate	Moderate-slight	Slight-imperceptible
Medium	Substantial	Substantial-moderate	Moderate	Slight	Imperceptible
Low	Moderate	Moderate-slight	Slight	Slight-imperceptible	Imperceptible
Negligible	Slight	Slight-imperceptible	Imperceptible	Imperceptible	Imperceptible

Note: The significance matrix provides an indicative framework from which the significance of impact is derived. The significance judgement is ultimately determined by the assessor using professional judgement. Due to nuances within the constituent sensitivity and magnitude judgements, this may be up to one category higher or lower than indicated by the matrix. Judgements indicated in orange are considered to be 'significant impacts' in EIA terms.

Note: Judgements deemed 'substantial' and above are considered to be 'significant impacts' in EIA terms.

15.2.2 Visual Impact Assessment Criteria

As with the landscape impact, the visual impact of the proposed development will be assessed as a function of sensitivity versus magnitude. In this instance, the sensitivity of the visual receptor, weighed against the magnitude of the visual effect.

15.2.2.1 Sensitivity of Visual Receptors

Unlike landscape sensitivity, the sensitivity of visual receptors has an anthropocentric basis. It considers factors such as the perceived quality and values associated with the view, the landscape context of the viewer, the likely activity they are engaged in and whether this heightens their awareness of the surrounding landscape. A list of the factors considered by the assessor in estimating the level of sensitivity for a particular visual receptor is outlined below and used in **Table 15-5** to establish visual receptor sensitivity at each VRP:

- Susceptibility of Receptors** - In accordance with the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment (IEMA) Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Assessment (3rd edition 2013) visual receptors most susceptible to changes in views and visual amenity are:
 - “Residents at home;





- *People, whether residents or visitors, who are engaged in outdoor recreation, including use of public rights of way, whose attention or interest is likely to be focussed on the landscape and on particular views;*
- *Visitors to heritage assets, or to other attractions, where views of the surroundings are an important contributor to the experience;*
- *Communities where views contribute to the landscape setting enjoyed by residents in the area; and*
- *Travellers on road rail or other transport routes where such travel involves recognised scenic routes and awareness of views is likely to be heightened”.*

Visual receptors that are less susceptible to changes in views and visual amenity include:

- *“People engaged in outdoor sport or recreation, which does not involve or depend upon appreciation of views of the landscape; and*
 - *People at their place of work whose attention may be focussed on their work or activity, not their surroundings and where the setting is not important to the quality of working life”.*
2. **Recognised scenic value of the view** (County Development Plan designations, guidebooks, touring maps, postcards etc). These represent a consensus in terms of which scenic views and routes within an area are strongly valued by the population because in the case of County Development Plans, for example, a public consultation process is required;
 3. **Views from within highly sensitive landscape areas.** Again, highly sensitive landscape designations are usually part of a county’s Landscape Character Assessment, which is then incorporated within the County Development Plan and is therefore subject to the public consultation process. Viewers within such areas are likely to be highly attuned to the landscape around them;
 4. **Primary views from dwellings.** A proposed development might be seen from anywhere within a particular residential property with varying degrees of sensitivity. Therefore, this category is reserved for those instances in which the design of dwellings or housing estates, has been influenced by the desire to take in a particular view. This might involve the use of a slope or the specific orientation of a house and/or its internal social rooms and exterior spaces;
 5. **Intensity of use, popularity.** This relates to the number of viewers likely to experience a view on a regular basis and whether this is significant at county or regional scale;
 6. **Connection with the landscape.** This considers whether or not receptors are likely to be highly attuned to views of the landscape i.e. commuters hurriedly driving on busy national route versus hill walkers directly engaged with the landscape enjoying changing sequential views over it;
 7. **Provision of elevated panoramic views.** This relates to the extent of the view on offer and the tendency for receptors to become more attuned to the surrounding landscape at locations that afford broad vistas;
 8. **Sense of remoteness and/or tranquillity.** Receptors taking in a remote and tranquil scene, which is likely to be fairly static, are likely to be more receptive to changes in the view than those taking in the view of a busy street scene, for example;



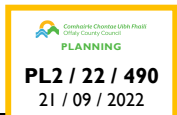
9. **Degree of perceived naturalness.** Where a view is valued for the sense of naturalness of the surrounding landscape it is likely to be highly sensitive to visual intrusion by distinctly manmade features;
10. **Historical, cultural and / or spiritual significance.** Such attributes may be evident or sensed by receptors at certain viewing locations, which may attract visitors for the purposes of contemplation or reflection heightening the sense of their surroundings;
11. **Rarity or uniqueness of the view.** This might include the noteworthy representativeness of a certain landscape type and considers whether the receptor could take in similar views anywhere in the broader region or the country;
12. **Integrity of the landscape character.** This looks at the condition and intactness of the landscape in view and whether the landscape pattern is a regular one of few strongly related components or an irregular one containing a variety of disparate components;
13. **Sense of place.** This considers whether there is special sense of wholeness and harmony at the viewing location; and

Those locations which are deemed to satisfy many of the above criteria are likely to be of higher sensitivity. No relative importance is inferred by the order of listing in the **Table 15.5** below. Overall sensitivity may be a result of a number of these factors or, alternatively, a strong association with one or two in particular.

15.2.2.2 Visual Impact Magnitude

The magnitude of visual effects is determined on the basis of two factors; the visual presence (relative visual dominance) of the proposal and its effect on visual amenity. The magnitude of visual impacts is classified in Table 15.4:

Table 15.4: Magnitude of Visual Impact



Criteria	Description
Very High	The proposal intrudes into a large proportion or critical part of the available vista and is without question the most noticeable element. A high degree of visual clutter or disharmony is also generated, strongly reducing the visual amenity of the scene
High	The proposal intrudes into a significant proportion or important part of the available vista and is one of the most noticeable elements. A considerable degree of visual clutter or disharmony is also likely to be generated, appreciably reducing the visual amenity of the scene
Medium	The proposal represents a moderate intrusion into the available vista, is a readily noticeable element and/or it may generate a degree of visual clutter or disharmony, thereby reducing the visual amenity of the scene. Alternatively, it may represent a balance of higher and lower order estimates in relation to visual presence and visual amenity
Low	The proposal intrudes to a minor extent into the available vista and may not be noticed by a casual observer and/or the proposal would not have a marked effect on the visual amenity of the scene
Negligible	The proposal would be barely discernible within the available vista and/or it would not detract from, and may even enhance, the visual amenity of the scene



15.2.2.3 Visual Impact Significance

As stated above, the significance of visual impacts is a function of visual receptor sensitivity and visual impact magnitude. This relationship is expressed in the same significance matrix and applies the same EPA definitions of significance as used earlier in respect of landscape impacts (Table 15.3 refers).

15.2.2.4 Quality of Effects

In addition to assessing the significance of landscape/townscape effects and visual effects, EPA Guidance for EIAs requires that the quality of the effects is also determined. This could be negative/adverse, neutral, or positive/beneficial. In this instance, the proposed development relates to the introduction of new Materials Recovery Facility into a rural setting. As such a development is highly unlikely to result in a positive or even neutral quality of effect, all associated impacts can be considered to be of a 'negative' quality of effect, unless otherwise stated.

15.2.3 Extent of Study Area

Within this relatively flat landscape setting the proposed development is likely to be difficult to discern beyond approximately 3km, due to screening afforded by intervening vegetation. Even if discernible from greater distances, it is not likely to give rise to significant landscape or visual impacts beyond this threshold. However, in the interests of a comprehensive appraisal, a 5km radius study area is used in this instance.

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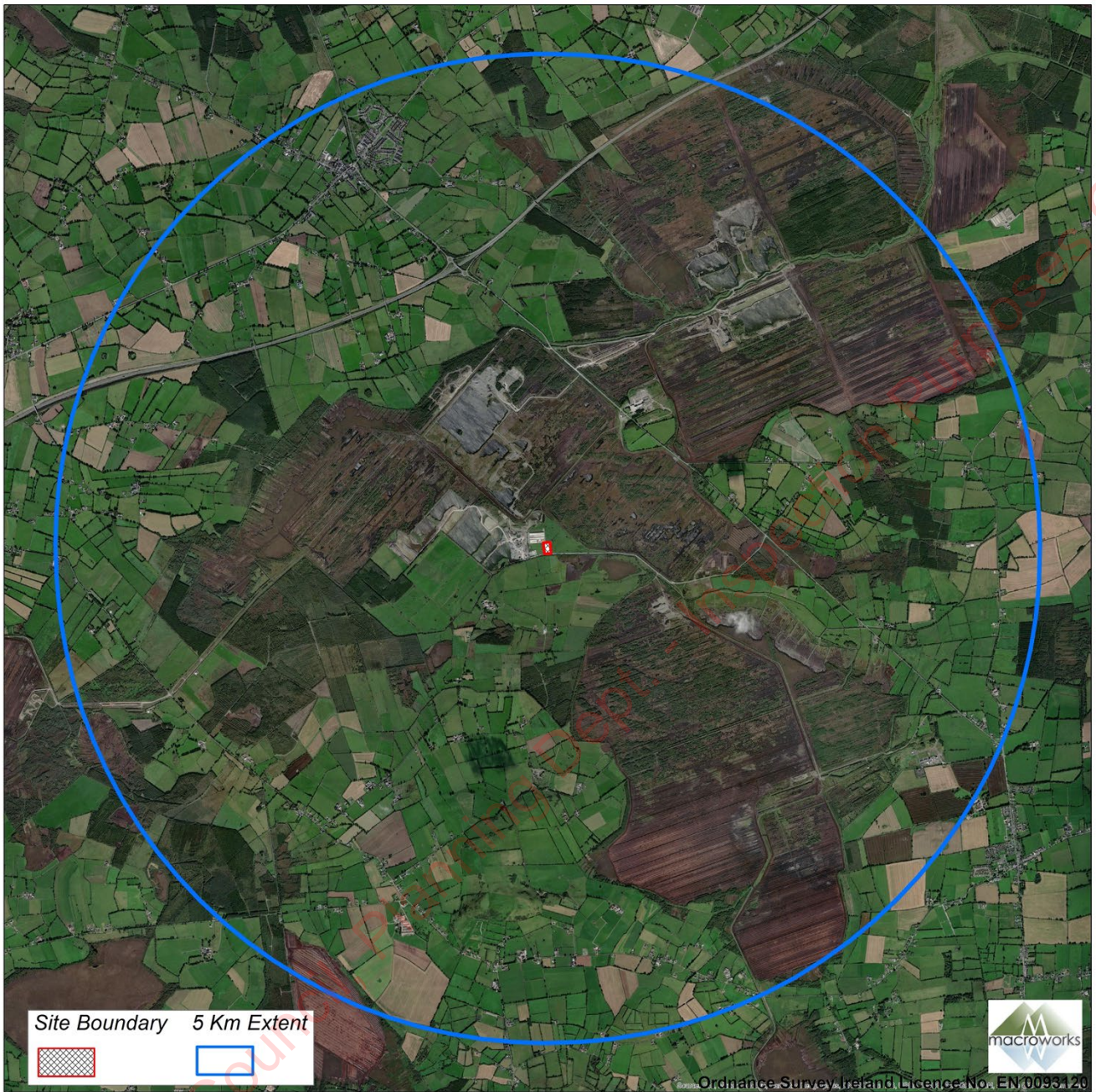


Figure 15-1: Study Area extents

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15.3 Baseline Environment

15.3.1 Landscape and Visual Baseline

The landscape baseline represents the existing landscape context and is the scenario against which any changes to the landscape and visual context brought about by the development will be assessed.

A description of the landscape context of the proposed application site and wider study area is provided below under the headings of landform and drainage, vegetation and land use, centres of population and houses, transport routes and public amenities and facilities and the site context. Although this description forms part of the landscape baseline, many of the landscape elements identified also relate to visual receptors i.e., places and transport routes from which viewers can potentially see the proposed development. The visual resource will be described in greater detail in Section 15.3.3.

15.3.1.1 *Landform and Drainage*

The landscape of the study area is, for the most part, relatively flat and/or gently undulating. The vast majority of the study area lies between 80-100m AOD, including the site itself, as much of the surrounding landscape comprises of ostensibly flat peatbogs. However, in the southwest there is a notable hill (Croghan Hill), which rises up to 234m AOD. The distinct landform of this hill is not just an anomaly for the study area but the wider locality. However, in the north-western fringe of the study area, land lifts to over 130m AOD.



Figure 15-2: Croghan Hill rises up to 234m AOD in an otherwise ostensibly flat landscape

There are a number of small rivers in the study area, including the Yellow River (located within 850m southeast of the site), Big River and Mongagh River. Otherwise, there are a number of straight, drainage canals associated with the area, which spread radially out from the cutaway bogs populating much of the area within 2-3km of the site.



15.3.1.2 Vegetation and Land Use

The predominant land use within the study area is that of agricultural farmland, which mostly comprises of medium-sized geometric pastoral fields that are often bound by mature tree lined hedgerows. Another notable land use within the study area is large cutaway peat bogs, many of which are in advanced state of regeneration. The nearest of such regenerating bogs is situated within 300m to the northeast of the site, while others are located within 1.5km to the southeast and northwest of the site. Much of these areas (i.e., within 1.5km of the site) take the form of water retaining hollows of considerable area.

In areas in the western periphery of the study area, there are blocks of young-mid growth deciduous and/or native woodland, while there are several mid-scale conifer forest plantations also dotted throughout the study area, particularly in the southwest of the study area. Quarrying and/or extractive industries are also palpable in numerous locations, with the nearest being an opencast quarry and sand & gravel/readymix blocks business less than 100m west of the site.



Figure 15-3: Regenerating cutaway bogland near the site



Figure 15-4: Harvested cutaway bog in the southwest of the study area

In terms of the immediate surrounds of the site, this area is of low landscape value, owing to highly mechanised and altered conditions and/or lack of integrity in the immediate context. A large commercial piggery, Derryarkin Pig Farm, adjoins the northern site boundary, with its (private) access avenue aligning the site's eastern boundary. Separated by a small, fallow field, Kilmurray's sand & gravel pit and BD Flood (readymix blocks) is located less than 100m west of the site (see Figure 15.5 & 15.6, below). In addition, there is considerable quarrying activity to the immediate east of the site (see Figure 15.7, below).



Figure 15-5: Aerial view of site, adjoined by a sand & gravel pit and Derryarkin Pig Farm

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Figure 15-6: View from the west of the site towards the sand & gravel pit and readymix blocks plant



Figure 15-7: There is considerable quarrying activities to the immediate west of the site



In terms of the site, it is at an elevation of c.80m AOD and is c. 0.79 ha in area. Access to the site is via a dead-end private access road from the R400 regional road (which is located approximately 2.2 km east of the site), while there are no residences along this private access road, nor within 750 m of the site. The site is made up of dilapidated, large and mostly obsolete agricultural buildings and structures, including shed units, an underground slurry tank, hard stand areas, a large feed silo, an oil storage tank, as well as other ancillary elements. There is a large concrete yard to the rear of the sheds, bound by a large earthen mound. A small amount of mature non-native conifers is found along sections of the south-west of the site boundary, as well as a considerable degree of regenerating, scrub vegetation. Overhead power lines run along the western boundary of the site, while a separate one traverses the south eastern section of the site.



Figure 15-8: View of the site from the private access road to its south




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Figure 15-9: Large concrete yard to the rear of the sheds



Figure 15-10: Portal frame shed with concrete slatted floor, underground slurry storage tanks



15.3.1.3 Centres of Population and Houses

The most notable centre of population in the study area is the settlement of, Rochfortbridge, Co. Westmeath, over 4km northwest of the site. This is a large village/small town of approx. 1,500 residents and experienced considerable expansion over the last quarter century as the town became a commuter hub for those residents working in Dublin. In the far south of the study area is the petite crossroads village of Croghan, at the southern base of Croghan Hill. Aside from the immediate surrounds of the large-scale peatbogs within the study area, which are typically sparsely populated areas, there is also a modest rural population along isolated farmsteads and small linear clusters of dwellings. The nearest dwellings to the proposed development are located more than 750m from it.

15.3.1.4 Transport Routes

The site is 3km south of the M6 motorway; the largest transport route in the study area. There are two regional roads: the R446 in the far northwest of the study area, and the R400, a long, straight road dissecting the study area, which is located approximately 2.2km east of the site. Separating the site from this road is a dead-end private access road that is not and never was in public use but is shared by several land/business owners and their employees (e.g., the aforementioned piggery, sand & gravel pit, ready mix block manufacturers etc.). There are some local roads in the study area, although fewer than most rural areas of this size, owing to the scale of large cutaway bogs. These bogs are criss-crossed by a series of mostly obsolete Bord na Mona industrial railways (i.e., not for public use).

15.3.1.5 Public Amenities and Heritage Features

Owing, again, to the scale of large, cutaway bogs with no public access, there is a limited degree of public facilities in most of the study area. The most notable of these is Croghan Hill, approx. 3.5km south/southwest of the site. Croghan Hill has a waymarked trail leading to its summit (234m AOD) and is crowned with an ancient (subterranean) burial mound and in early Christian times, both St. Bridget & St. Patrick have had associations with it. Owing to the considerable degree of flat terrain spreading extensively from this hill, it is alleged that views of nine different countries can be attained from its summit. An ancient burial ground is located on its upper eastern slope, while St. Patrick's Well is located further north. On St. Patrick's Day each year, tradition bestows local people climb the hill to set fire to the furze/gorse; an age-old tradition that attracts considerable numbers upon the hill.

15.3.2 Planning Policy Context

15.3.2.1 *Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027*

Although a landscape character assessment has not currently been completed for County Offaly and Landscape of the current Offaly County Development Plan (CDP) 2021-2027, the current CDP identifies a number of general landscape units and their associated sensitivity designations (see Figure 15.11, below).



Figure 15-11: Map showing the Proposed Development site in relation to landscape sensitivity designations in County Offaly, within the study area

Offaly CDP Sensitivity Classification:

“Low Sensitivity: Low sensitivity areas are robust landscapes which are tolerant to change, such as the county’s main urban and farming areas, which have the ability to accommodate development.

Moderate Sensitivity: Moderate sensitivity areas can accommodate development pressure but with limitations in the scale and magnitude. In this category of sensitivity, elements of the landscape can accept some changes while others are more vulnerable to change.

High Sensitivity: High Sensitivity Areas are vulnerable landscapes with the ability to accommodate limited development pressure. In this category of landscape, landscape elements are highly sensitive to certain types of change. If pressure for development exceeds the landscapes limitations the character of the landscape may change. The following include identified features or areas of natural beauty or interest which have extremely low capacity to absorb new development. Areas included within this class are designated Areas of High Amenity.”



The proposed development is located in a 'Low Sensitivity Area' (see Figure 15.11, above). This is described as:

'Predominantly flat and undulating agricultural landscape coupled with a peatland landscape. Field boundaries, particularly along roadside verges which are primarily composed of mature hedgerows typify the county's rural landscape.' These areas are noted for being able to "absorb quite effectively, appropriately designed and located development in all categories (including: telecommunication masts and wind energy installations, afforestation and agricultural structures).'

A number of 'Moderate Sensitivity Areas' also exist in close proximity to the site and relate to large scale peat bogs and conifer forest plantations, whilst a 'High Sensitivity Area' occurs over 2km south of the site and relates to Croghan Hill and its environs, the details of which are as follows:

Characteristics:

- *"Croghan Hill and its environs including Raheenmore Bog (which was designated a nature reserve under the Wildlife Act 1976) and Cannakill Deserted Medieval Village, are the main elements of this high amenity area.*
- *Croghan Hill is an extinct volcano which lies 234 meters above sea level and commands views over north and east Offaly and the surrounding counties."*

Sensitivities:

- *"This is an area of archaeological and high amenity value and is highly sensitive to new developments.*
- *Croghan Hill, due to its elevated nature in comparison to its surrounding flat landscape, impacts on the visual quality of the surrounding area and is highly sensitive to developments of any nature, in particular sand and gravel extraction."*

It should be noted that with the CDP, Offaly County Council also recognises the scenic quality and recreational value of the Croghan Hill area including Croghan Hill, Raheenmore Bog and Cannakill Deserted Medieval Village. An extensive list of landscape and amenity policies and objectives are also outlined in sub-section 7.13 and 7.14 of the current CDP.

Section 4.13 of the current Offaly CDP relates to 'Areas of High Amenity' in County Offaly which are also identified on Map 4.18 and mirror the 'areas of high sensitivity'. One high amenity designation occurs within the study area, relating to Croghan Hill to the south.

'The Council, through its development management function, will seek to preserve the scenic amenity and recreational potential of this area and to protect it from development that would damage or diminish its overall attractiveness and character.'

Policy and objectives relating to areas of high amenity are outlined within the development plan in sub-section 4.16 and 4.17 of the County Development Plan. However, as previously stated, this pertains to an area more than 2km from the site.



15.3.2.2 Draft Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027

The draft CDP is in final stages and due to be adopted in May, therefore the following features and designations are referred to here as representative of Westmeath County Council's intent.

Whilst the proposal site is wholly contained within County Offaly, the Westmeath county border is just over 1.5km northwest of the site at its nearest point. Chapter 13 of the Westmeath CDP outlines the landscape character areas and areas of amenity. Those sections of the study area within Co. Westmeath are designated as being within the 'Lough Ennell and South Eastern Corridor' landscape character area. Furthermore, there are no areas of high amenity within the study area.

Within the study area there is one protected view within Co. Westmeath. This 'No. 13,' which is a panoramic view from Garrane Hill on the R446 across the surrounding landscape and is deemed to be of county level significance (i.e., lower than regional, higher than local). Thus, the following CDP policy applies to all such protected views within Co. Westmeath:

"Protect and sustain the established appearance and character of views listed in Appendix 5 of this plan that contribute to the distinctive quality of the landscape from inappropriate development."

15.3.2.3 National Parks & Wildlife Services (NPWS)

There are no NPWS designations within the 5km study radius.

15.3.3 Zone of Theoretical Visibility (ZTV)

A computer-generated Zone of Theoretical Visibility (ZTV) map has been prepared to illustrate where the proposed Development is potentially visible from. The ZTV map is based solely on terrain data (bare ground visibility), and ignores features such as trees, hedges or buildings, which may screen views. Given the complex vegetation patterns within this landscape, the main value of this form of ZTV mapping is to determine those parts of the landscape from which the proposed development will definitely not be visible, due to terrain screening within the 5km study area.

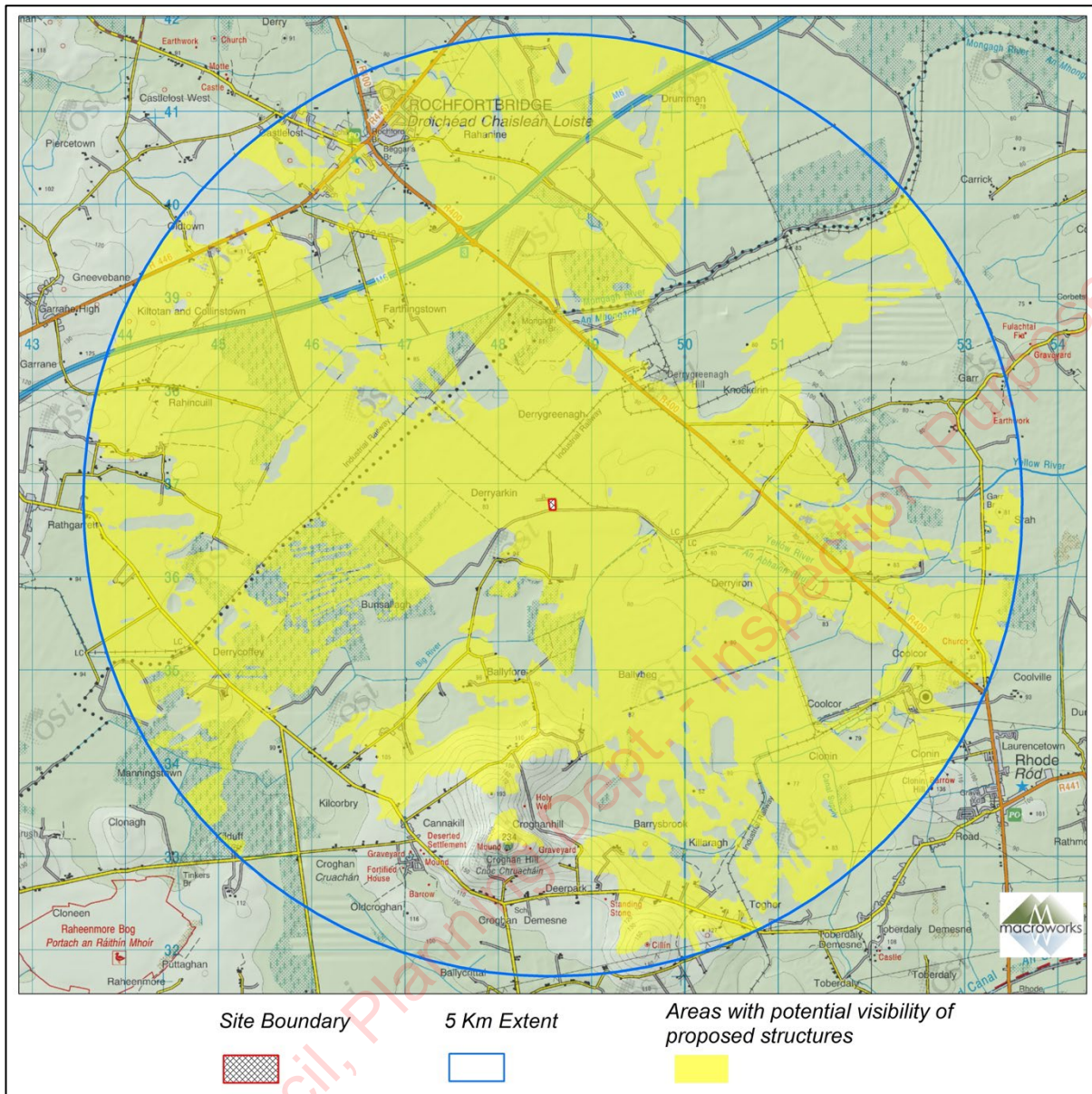
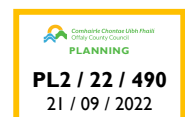


Figure 15-12: Bare-ground Zone of Theoretically Visibility (ZTV) Map.

The following key points are illustrated by the above ‘bare-ground’ ZTV map:

- The level topography of the site and surrounds results in generally high degree of visibility across the study area.
- Specific subtle undulations result in sections of no visibility to the northwest and northeast.
- The north and west of the study area have theoretical full visibility to the site, as well as the majority of the southeast.
- There are patches of screened views to the southwest, north of Croghan Hill, while the elevated, northern face of Croghan Hill has theoretical visibility. The south side of the hill is correspondingly screened by the same elevated areas which allow views to the north.





The most important point to make in respect of this ‘bare-ground’ ZTV map is that it is theoretical and does not take into consideration screening by intervening hedgerow vegetation, trees and numerous buildings, walls and embankments littered through the study area, resulting in a much lesser degree of actual visibility.

15.4 Potential Impacts

The following impacts are divided into landscape and visual impacts and addressed in according to the stage of the project as identified.

15.4.1 Landscape Impacts

15.4.1.1 *Landscape Value & Sensitivity*

The landscape of the study area comprises of a mix of agricultural farmland and large-scale peatbogs. The cutaway peatland, large scale Bord na Mona factory and other anthropogenic land uses, such as Kilmurray’s sand & gravel pit and the BD Flood facility, characterise the study area as a robust and ever-evolving working landscape with sections that are intensively managed. Such intensity is apparent in the predominant farmland in the study area, as well as the large tracts of large cutaway peat bogs; the latter engendering a post-industrial tone to most of the area within approx. 1.5km of the site. This degraded, post-industrial character is evident in the immediate surrounds of the site, where quarrying is located to the east and west of the site, with a large piggery to its immediate north. In terms of the site, it is characterised by an agri-industrial tone of decay, being made up of dilapidated, large and mostly obsolete agricultural buildings and structures of no architectural or heritage value, with wider margins of the site regenerating in scrub vegetation.

A minor sense of rural tranquillity is apparent in some aspects of the study area that are sparsely populated. However, in general, this is a landscape where landscape values are typically associated with productivity, labour and rural subsistence, rather than any sense of the rarity or the naturalistic. The terrain within the study area is typically flat and therefore views are typically restricted by the layers of dense hedgerow vegetation.

The study area is typical of many midland locations throughout the country and therefore, is not particularly rare or unique. This is also reflected in the Offaly County Development Plan (2021 – 2027) where the site and its immediate surrounds are shown to be located in a ‘*Low sensitivity*’ landscape classification. Whilst a number of ‘*Moderate sensitivity*’ areas are also located in the near vicinity of the site, these represent large scale bogs and small blocks of woodland which are also not particularly rare or distinctive on a local or regional scale. In terms of amenity value, the most notable aspect of amenity within the study area is Croghan Hill, more than 3km from the site. The wider study area is principally a productive rural landscape of reasonable integrity and one that contributes to the amenity of the surrounding rural population, although this is not true of the site or within approx. 1.5km of it. Overall, this is a landscape heavily influenced by human activity both in the past, through the harvesting of peat for fuel, and, at present, through agricultural and extractive activities.

On balance of the above reasons, the sensitivity of the receiving landscape is considered to be **Low**.



15.4.1.2 'Do Nothing' scenario

If the site remains 'as is,' and none of the proposed works are undertaken, the structural integrity of the buildings and infrastructure on site will be impacted through gradual exposure to the elements and lack of maintenance/use, while other areas will progressively be colonised by vegetation.

15.4.1.3 Construction Phase Impacts

There will be permanent physical effects to the land cover of this area, which are not readily reversible. During the construction stage of the proposed development, there will be intense construction-related activity within and around this area, including approach roads. This will include, but is not limited to:

- HGVs transporting materials to and from this area;
- The demolition and removal of the existing agri-industrial buildings and structures within the site;
- Movement of heavy earth-moving machinery and the erection of Materials Recovery Facility buildings/structures on-site;
- Temporary storage of materials on-site;
- Gradual emergence of the proposed buildings/structures, and associated works;
- Security fencing and site lighting.

Construction stage impacts on landscape/townscape character are likely to last for approx. 12 months. Thus, they will be 'short-term' (i.e., lasting 1-7 years), in accordance with the EPA definitions of impact duration. Furthermore, the context of this construction activity is within an urban fabric where the construction of multi-storey buildings has been long established. The removal of the existing structures may result in an increase of movement and vehicle tracking across the site, but will otherwise more likely be contained to the immediate surrounds of the site. The existing scrub vegetation which has established across the site will also be removed.

On the basis of the reasons outlined above, the magnitude of construction stage landscape impacts is deemed to be **Medium**. When combined with the Low sensitivity of the receiving landscape, **the overall significance of construction stage landscape impacts** is considered to be **Slight**, in accordance with the criteria contained in Section 15.2.

15.4.1.4 Operational/Residual Phase Impacts

Following the completion of the proposed works, landscape impacts will relate entirely to the development's impact on the character of the receiving landscape. The proposed development will represent the replacement of one set of relatively large agri-industrial buildings and structures with a comparably scaled set of industrial buildings and structure and will consequently not have a marked effect on the character of the receiving landscape. This is not just because of the nature of land use change and form within the site, but also because the receiving landscape in the immediate vicinity is one characterised by extractive activities and large agro-industrial buildings to three sides of the site, set in a wider post-industrial context of vast cutaway bogs.





On the basis of the reasons outlined above, the magnitude of operational stage landscape impacts is deemed to be **Low**. When combined with the Low sensitivity of the receiving landscape, **the overall significance of operational stage landscape impacts** is considered to be **Slight-Imperceptible**, in accordance with the criteria contained in Section 15.2.

15.4.1.5 Cumulative Impacts

In terms of the potential for cumulative impacts arising as a result of the proposed development in combination with the existing or permitted development within the study area, once more the nature of the receiving environment within the site needs to be considered. As the proposed development will represent the replacement of one set of relatively large agri-industrial buildings and structures with a comparably scaled set of industrial buildings and structure, it is unlikely to generate a palpable degree of cumulative impacts. In addition, the immediate presence of large agri-industrial buildings to its north, and sand & gravel/readymix blocks business less than 100m west of the site, will further reduce the potential for cumulative impacts to arise as a result of the proposed development. On balance, the potential for cumulative landscape impacts arising as a result of the proposed development in combination with existing urban development in the study area will not be significant.

15.4.2 Visual Impacts

15.4.2.1 'Do Nothing' scenario

If the changes to the site occur as set out in Section 15.4.1.2, above, these are not likely to be discernible to receptors. This is because as there are no residences within approx. 750m of the site and no public receptors within 1.5km, the potential for visibility of such marginal, gradual and distant changes within the site, will be highly unlikely to be discernible.

Thus, visual impacts arising from the proposed development in a 'Do Nothing' scenario are highly unlikely to be significant.

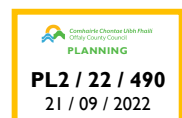
15.4.2.2 Construction Phase Impacts

As there are no residences within approx. 750 m of the site and no public receptors within 1.5km, the most sizeable visual impact during the construction phase is likely to arise from HGVs transporting materials to and from this area. In addition, where the potential for visibility of the proposed construction activities may arise from the residences and/or public receptors, any dust and associated landcover excavation disturbance is likely to visually integrate with that of the excavated pits to either side of the site.

Thus, visual impacts arising from the proposed development during the construction phase are highly unlikely to be significant.

15.4.2.3 Operational/residual Phase Impacts

The operational visual impacts of the site will be addressed though the methodology identified in Section 15.2, before assessing the visual receptor sensitivity, visual impact magnitude, and resulting significance of visual impact.





15.4.2.3.1 Identification of Viewshed Reference Points as a Basis for Assessment

Viewshed Reference Points (VRP's) are the locations used to study the visual impacts of a proposal in detail. It is not warranted to include each and every location that provides a view of a development as this would result in an unwieldy report and make it extremely difficult to draw out the key impacts arising from the proposed development. Instead, the selected viewpoints are intended to reflect a range of different receptor types, distances and angles. The visual impact of a proposed development was assessed using up to 6 no. categories of receptor type as listed below:

- Key Views (from features of national or international importance);
- Designated Scenic Routes and Views;
- Local Community views;
- Centres of Population;
- Major Routes; and,
- Amenity and heritage features.

VRP's might be relevant to more than one category and this makes them even more valid for inclusion in the assessment. The receptors that are intended to be represented by a particular VRP are listed at the beginning of each viewpoint appraisal. The Viewshed Reference Points selected in this instance are set out in the Table 15.5 and Figure 15.13 below.

Table 15.5: Outline Description of Selected Viewshed Reference Points (VRPs)

VRP No.	Location	Direction of view
VP1	Croghan Hill	N
VP2	Local road southwest of site	NE
VP3	Entrance to site from R400	W
VP4	Marginally elevated location along R400	SW
VP5	M6 Overpass	S
VP6	R446 southwest of Rochfortbridge	SE



Viewpoint Locations

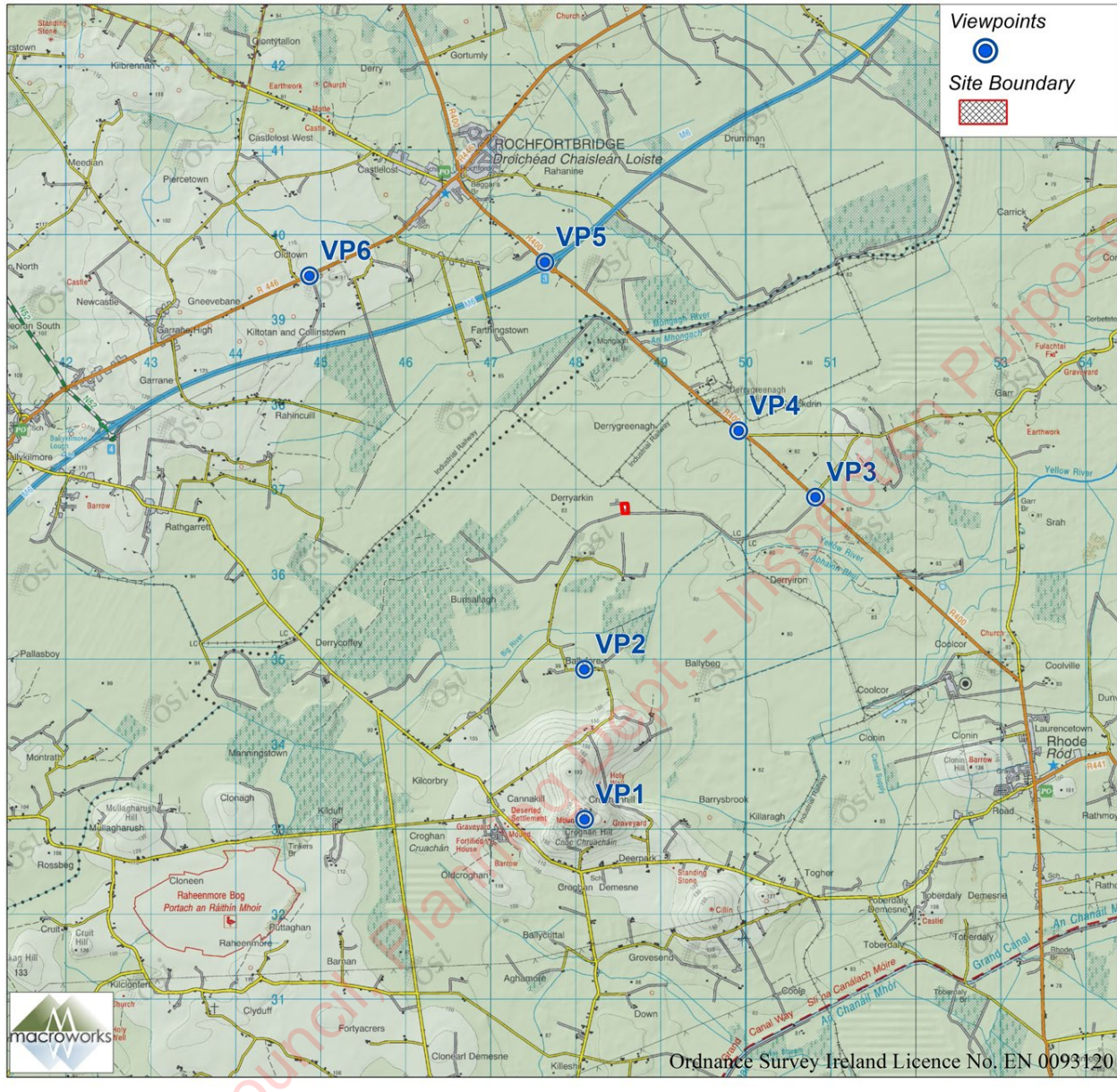


Figure 15-13: Viewpoint location map.

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Sensitivity of Visual Receptors

Analysis of Visual Receptor Sensitivity at Viewshed Reference Points

Strong association	Moderate association	Mild association	Negligible association

Values associated with the view	VP1	VP2	VP3	VP4	VP5	VP6
Susceptibility of viewers to changes in view						
Recognised scenic value of the view						
Views from within highly sensitive landscape areas						
Primary views from residences						
Intensity of use, popularity (number of viewers)						
Viewer connection with the landscape						
Provision of vast, elevated panoramic views						
Sense of remoteness / tranquillity at the viewing location						
Degree of perceived naturalness						
Presence of striking or noteworthy features						
Sense of Historical, cultural and / or spiritual significance						
Rarity or uniqueness of the view						
Integrity of the landscape character within the view						
Sense of place at the viewing location						
Sense of awe						
Overall sensitivity receptor assessment	HM	ML	ML	ML	L	M

N = Negligible; **L** = low sensitivity; **ML** = medium-low sensitivity **M** = medium sensitivity; **HM** = High-medium sensitivity; **H** = high sensitivity; **VH** = very high sensitivity



15.4.2.3.2 Magnitude of Visual Effects

The assessment of visual impacts at each of the selected viewpoints is aided by photomontages of the proposed development. Photomontages are a 'photo-real' depiction of the scheme within the view utilising a rendered three-dimensional model of the development, which has been geo-referenced to allow accurate placement and scale. Please refer to Appendix 15.1 of Volume 3 of this EIAR for the associated LVIA Photomontages considering the Proposed Development. For each viewpoint, the following images have been produced:

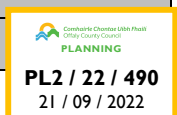
1. Existing View;
2. Outline view (yellow outline showing the extent of the development overlaid on the photograph);
3. Montage View (in the instances where the site is visible).

Viewshed Reference Point		Viewing distance to site	Direction of View
VP1	Croghan Hill	3.6km	N
Representative of:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local community views • Heritage & amenity feature 		
Receptor Sensitivity	High-medium		
Existing View	<p>This is a view from the peak of Croghan Hill, located just north of the small Croghan village. The hill has a waymarked trail leading to its summit (234m AOD) and is crowned with an ancient (subterranean) burial mound. From this location, views of several counties can be obtained in clear weather. The depicted view looks northeast across the sloping pasture and hedgerows which cloak the lower slopes of the hill in the foreground.</p> <p>Beyond this, the topography is more representative of the flat, lowland terrain of the Midlands. The dark tones of this extensive domain reflect that of vast tracts of extensive, exploited cutaway bog in various different realms of regeneration. These include large area of water-retaining/rewilding sections across these boglands, as well as numerous pockets of forestry and woodland on the bog fringes. At the centre of this view, over 3.5km away, the grey outline of the large piggery adjacent to the site is discernible, mostly owing to its light grey tone to that of the darker surrounding terrain.</p>		
Visual Impact of proposal	<p>The proposed development will be a minute inclusion adjacent to the existing built form of the piggery. The dark green tones of most of the proposed buildings will merge well with the dark, naturalistic tones of the surrounding terrain.</p> <p>The surrounding landscape of Croghan Hill is varied, and views expansive enough from it that such scenic values will not be impacted by the proposed development. Overall, the proposal would be barely discernible within the available vista and will not detract from the visual amenity of the scene.</p> <p>The magnitude of visual impact is deemed Negligible.</p>		
Summary	Based on the assessment criteria and matrices outlined in Section 1.2, the significance of residual visual impact is summarised below.		
	Visual Receptor Sensitivity	Visual Impact Magnitude	Significance of Visual Impact
	High-medium	Negligible	Imperceptible



Viewshed Reference Point		Viewing distance to site	Direction of View
VP2	Local road southwest of site	1.9km	NE
Representative of:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local community views 		
Receptor Sensitivity	Medium-Low		
Existing View	<p>This is a view from a local road in the townland Ballyfore, less than 2km southwest of the site. In that regard, it is one of the closest public roads to the site. This location is close to several rural residence within 400m of here. This view looks across a trimmed roadside hedgerow in the foreground, towards a pastoral field dissected by overhead electricity cables and bound on the opposite side by a dense tree-lined hedgerow. Further layers of hedgerow vegetation become stacked in the distance and curtail more distant views.</p>		
Visual Impact of proposal	<p>The proposed development will not be visible from here due to the dense layers of intervening hedgerow vegetation.</p> <p>Thus, the magnitude of visual impact is Negligible by default.</p>		
Summary	<p>Based on the assessment criteria and matrices outlined in Section 1.2, the significance of residual visual impact is summarised below.</p>		
	Visual Receptor Sensitivity	Visual Impact Magnitude	Significance of Visual Impact
	Medium-Low	Negligible	Imperceptible

Viewshed Reference Point		Viewing distance to site	Direction of View
VP3	Entrance to private access road off R400	2.2km	W
Representative of:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local community views Major transport route 		
Receptor Sensitivity	Medium-Low		
Existing View	<p>This is a view from the intersection of the private, dead-end access road leading to the site (among several other private properties and businesses) and the regional road, which the site and the adjacent industrial sites are accessed from. It is also the junction with a quiet local road angling east from this location, upon which is a handful of residences. This view looks west across the exploited raised boglands which surround the site. Nearer sections of those boglands are patently still being harvested, though the more distant sections are in a moderate stage of regeneration. The presence of exploited, post-industrial bogland and a gravel, roadside pile in the foreground result in a view with modest scenic value.</p>		
Visual Impact of proposal	<p>The proposed development will be barely discernible from this location. It's distance of over 2km, as well as it's relatively low profile that remains beneath the skyline at all points and its dark green tones will result in it being highly unlikely to be noticed, even by the stationary observer.</p> <p>Consequently, the magnitude of visual impact is deemed Negligible.</p>		
Summary	<p>Based on the assessment criteria and matrices outlined in Section 1.2, the significance of residual visual impact is summarised below.</p>		
	Visual Receptor Sensitivity	Visual Impact Magnitude	Significance of Visual Impact
	Medium-Low	Negligible	Imperceptible





Viewshed Reference Point		Viewing distance to site	Direction of View
VP4	Marginally elevated location along R400	1.56km	SW
Representative of:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local community views Major transport route 		
Receptor Sensitivity	Medium-Low		
Existing View	<p>This is a view from along a marginally elevated area of the regional road (R400), approx. 1.5km northeast of the site. The view looks southwest across regenerating, exploited boglands which surround the site, with a fairly consistent cover and age of vegetation, aside from the immediate foreground.</p> <p>It is a view with modest scenic value, where the main source of visual amenity is Croghan Hill in the distance.</p>		
Visual Impact of proposal	<p>The proposed development will not be visible from here due to the intervening vegetation across more than 1km of regenerating boglands.</p> <p>Therefore, the magnitude of visual impact is Negligible by default.</p>		
Summary	<p>Based on the assessment criteria and matrices outlined in Section 1.2, the significance of residual visual impact is summarised below.</p>		
	Visual Receptor Sensitivity	Visual Impact Magnitude	Significance of Visual Impact
	Medium-Low	Negligible	Imperceptible

Viewshed Reference Point		Viewing distance to site	Direction of View
VP5	M6 Overpass	3km	S
Representative of:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Major transport route Local community views 		
Receptor Sensitivity	Low		
Existing View	<p>This is a view from the overbridge of the R400 along the M6, 3km north of the site. The presence of the intensive, major road corridor in the foreground result in a view with little scenic value, aside from the foreground planting and the contextual feature of Croghan Hill in the distance to the southwest/right. Owing to the robustness of the motorway corridor planting, more distant views in the direction of the site tend to be curtailed.</p>		
Visual Impact of proposal	<p>A very minute segment of the proposed development will be partially visible though a gap in the foreground trees. However, it will certainly not draw the eye and will have no effect on the visual amenity of this scene.</p> <p>Consequently, the magnitude of visual impact is Negligible.</p>		
Summary	<p>Based on the assessment criteria and matrices outlined in Section 1.2, the significance of residual visual impact is summarised below.</p>		
	Visual Receptor Sensitivity	Visual Impact Magnitude	Significance of Visual Impact
	Low	Negligible	Imperceptible





Viewshed Reference Point		Viewing distance to site	Direction of View
VP6	R446 southwest of Rochfortbridge	4.57km	SE
Representative of:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local community views Major transport route Designated scenic views 		
Receptor Sensitivity	Medium		
Existing View	This is a view from the northern extent of the study area, along a busy regional road (R446) between Rochfortbridge and Tyrrellstown, that reflects the Co. Westmeath designated scenic view No. 13. The view looks across a low, roadside hedgerow and a timber post and rail fence in the foreground, which aligns a private residential entrance, alongside a pastoral field that is bound on the opposite side by a dense tree-lined hedgerow, which contains the view in a manner which is typical of the surrounds.		
Visual Impact of proposal	The proposed development will not be visible from here due to the intervening hedgerow vegetation. Therefore, the magnitude of visual impact is Negligible by default.		
Summary	Based on the assessment criteria and matrices outlined in Section 1.2, the significance of residual visual impact is summarised below.		
	Visual Receptor Sensitivity	Visual Impact Magnitude	Significance of Visual Impact
	Medium	Negligible	Imperceptible

15.4.2.4 Cumulative Impacts

As all the viewshed reference point outlined, addressed and assessed in Section 15.4.2.3, above, will result in an 'imperceptible' significance of visual impact, there will be no potential for cumulative visual impacts arising as a result of the proposed development.



15.5 Mitigation Measures

15.5.1 Construction Phase Mitigation

Due to the distinctively low level of likely visual impacts arising from this proposal, there are no mitigation measures proposed. In addition, the nearest private receptors are more than 750m distance across relatively level topography, the nearest public receptor (the R400) is more than 1.5km. In this regard, the mitigation measures are ‘embedded’ into the siting, design and location of the proposed development, so as to not need any additional mitigation measures.

15.5.2 Operational Phase Mitigation

Due to the magnitude of the impacts of this proposal, there are no mitigation measures proposed, for same reasons as expressed in Section 15.5.1, above.

15.6 Summary

15.6.1 Landscape Impacts

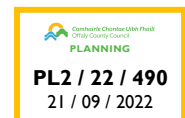
In terms of landscape sensitivity, the study area is a robust and ever-evolving working landscape with sections that are intensively managed, with a mix of agricultural farmland and large-scale peatbogs. Large cutaway peat bogs engender a post-industrial tone to most of the area within approx. 1.5km of the site. This degraded, post-industrial character is evident in the immediate surrounds of the site, where quarrying is located to the east and west of the site, with a large piggery to its immediate north. In terms of the site, it is characterised by an agri-industrial tone of decay, being made up of dilapidated, large and mostly obsolete agricultural buildings and structures of no architectural or heritage value. Thus, overall, the sensitivity of the receiving landscape was considered to be Low.

In terms of construction stage impacts, there will be intense construction-related activity within and around this area, including approach roads, and this includes the demolition and removal of the existing agri-industrial buildings and structures within the site. Thus, the overall significance of construction stage landscape impacts was considered to be Slight.

In terms of operational stage impacts, the proposed development will represent the replacement of one set of relatively large agri-industrial buildings and structures with a comparably scaled set of industrial buildings and structures, in an immediate vicinity that is characterised by extractive activities and large agro-industrial buildings, set in a wider post-industrial context of vast cutaway bogs. Thus, the overall significance of operational stage landscape impacts was considered to be Slight-imperceptible.

15.6.2 Visual Impacts

In terms of visual receptor sensitivity, 6 No, viewpoints were selected from a range of different angles, distances and contexts. These ranged from ‘Low,’ in the case of a busy motorway corridor, to ‘High-medium,’ in the case of the summit of Croghan Hill. Notably, there were no viewpoints within 1.5km of the site, which is owing to how removed and insulated the site is from public receptors and/or private residences.





In terms of visual impacts, there was a particularly low significance of visual impact arising from the six viewpoints; that of an ‘imperceptible’ impact upon the inherent visual amenity of the scene, in all six instances. This is a combination of the relatively modest visual sensitivity of most receptors, combined with the particularly low level of magnitude of visual impact that chiefly derived from the considerable distance the site is to all public receptors. Indeed, this is a strikingly low degree of likely visibility for any scheme, let alone one of this nature, and is an apt reflection of the aforementioned embedded mitigation of the proposal.

15.7 Conclusion

Overall, it is considered that the proposed development is an appropriate contribution to the receiving environment and it will not result in any significant landscape or visual impacts. Indeed, the visual impacts likely to be generated from the proposed development are all at the lowest possible end of the spectrum.

References

- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) publication ‘Guidelines on the Information to be contained in Environmental Impact Statements (revised draft 2017) and the accompanying Advice Notes on Current Practice in the Preparation of Environmental Impact Statements (revised draft 2017);
- Landscape Institute and the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment publication entitled Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (2013);
- Offaly County Development Plan (CDP) 2021-2027;
- Draft Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027.

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