**The evaluation of the processes involved in Chapter 9 the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment for the development of the Destination Hillend Project**

Rural Planning and EIA essay

BSc Environmental Resource Management Year 3

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**Introduction**

An Environmental Impact Assessment/EIA is a tool used to help determine the likes environmental, social and economic impacts of a project proposal in advance to final decision making for the proposal (Portal Planning 2020).

Destination Hillend is a proposed project that will be home to Midlothian Snowsports Centre located at the outskirts of southern Edinburgh and expected to be completed and opened for business by 2022 (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

The need for the project is huge because it will have the potential to create new jobs for locals boosting economic growth and benefits for the whole Midlothian Snowsports Centre as well as providing new exciting leisure opportunities for locals and tourists to enjoy.

Visitors will be able to enjoy winter sports for leisure all-year-round including skiing and sledging. The project will include a zipline with a starting and landing point at either end, skiing and sledging slopes and alpine coaster. Hotel development and wigwam accommodation for glampers will be built to support the number of overnight tourists (Midlothian Council 2020).

The proposal could bring improvement to current staff at the snowsports centre as sessions for learning to ski for all age groups is also planned meaning trained staff will need to be employed enhancing the job benefits of the proposal and ensuring the safety of staff and those learning to ski and improving the quality of the current staff at the Snowsports Centre (Midlothian Council 2020).

The project could also provide a new reception for the Snowsports Centre and introduce infrastructure upgrades like additional car parking and additional road lanes for easier access reducing traffic to the site (Midlothian Council 2020).

More shops, retail space and other open planning for additional space will help contribute to the creation of jobs at Hillend (Midlothian Council 2020).

Because of this councillors from Midlothian Council have already enhanced this by promising to invest £13.8 million worth of funding to help contribute to the development of the project (Midlothian Council 2020).

However, the new establishment of the whole project can and will bring along other environmental consequence like tree loss for space of the new development causing habitat loss and impacts to the looks and beauty of the surrounding landscape (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

To help ensure the development of the project can be completed sustainably without too much of an impact to the looks and environment of the landscape certain processes within each chapter of the project have to take place. This includes the processes that take place in Chapter 9, the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment or LVIA for the development of the Hillend project consisting of processes to minimise the proposal’s likely visual and environmental impacts to the landscape (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

The aim is to find out which process is the most important in the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment for being sufficient in addressing environmental sustainability for the development and proposals of Destination Hillend.

One very important process of the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment for the project is the Methodology and can be considered at the most sufficient process for addressing the environmental sustainability of the proposal.

Other processes like Significant Effects and Mitigation and Enhancement Measures should also be considered.

**Methodology**

One Important process involved in the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment that could be sufficient to address environmental sustainability of the proposal is Methodology.

Methodology is needed for the assessment as this will focus on identifying the likely landscape and visual impacts of the Hillend development and this will then help local councillors and the developers of the site work out how to address, balance and limit these impacts so that the project can still go ahead (Midlothian Council 2020).

The methodology process in this chapter of the project involves assessing the landscape for the potential visual affects of the development in relation to scopes like visual effects witnessed due to the construction of the project and during the opening of the development and after being opened. (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

All these could help address environmental issues associated with the proposed development because regards to the scope of the development, this will help lead to the first year of the completed development to be open for business by 2022 where mitigation planting techniques is expected to be immature before heading up to 15 year after being opened where planting trees near or at the attraction to mitigate it’s environmental impacts is expected to be more necessary as by then could help reduce or prevent adverse environmental effects identified during the first year of being open (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

However, despite the assessment of the potential environmental effects of opening the development and mitigation techniques like plating the trees to minimise them the midlothian council has claimed the development is unlikely, when open, to be willing to rely on planting new trees for mitigation purposes and will consider the two-stage assessment of the development’s effects not necessary as planting and other environmental impact mitigations will require more money the development will have to invest in to apply them and the development is also focused on saving money so that job creation and other economic benefits from the new development can also be promised (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

Also, in comparison to other projects in Scotland the Queensferry Crossing Land and Visual impacts considerations section of the Jacobs report (MINTEL Forth Replacement Crossing Managed Crossing Scheme 2009) stated that the connecting road footprint would be reduced thanks to the Managed Crossing Scheme which lies within Full Corridor Scheme but doesn’t extend as long therefore minimising the scheme’s environmental impacts as well as impacts on the surrounding landscape and visual beauty of it (MINTEL Forth Replacement Crossing Managed Crossing Scheme 2009). Land use impacts at the forth bridge would also be reduced by the Managed crossing scheme regards to direct loss and severance (MINTEL Forth Replacement Crossing Managed Crossing Scheme 2009). So there are other project proposals in Scotland that could have better methodologies than the Hillend’s.

Overall, methodology of the Landscape and Visual Impact assessment was sufficient in addressing the project’s environmental issues because even though the Queensferry Crossingproposal was able to reduce its connecting road footprint that bridge since it opened in August 2017 has already been closed before due to environmental related reasons like severe and stormy weather conditions and the ability to support traffic due to main suspension cables (Transport Scotland 2009), and even during the development of the bridge it’s designers claimed it would not get closed due to harsh weather and so have been incorrect when unexpected, dangerous ice conditions also occurred causing accidents in congested traffic at the time (Brocklehurst, S. 2020)**.**

The EIA assessment for the Hillend Project on the other hand has considered strategies with support from the Lothian councils to help stay open and mitigate all likely traffic problems by expecting harsh weather conditions like ice and snow in winter more regularly after opening as these conditions would be more ideal for a snow sporting place (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

Conditions in higher ground landscapes are also often more windy than at ground level so the project should also be designed to withstand these conditions due to the altitude its situated on the landscape (Met office 2020).

Remaining open in severe whether will mean they can still benefit from visitors socially and economically (Met Office 2020).

It is a more sufficient process than the significant effects process because this process has still lead to visual impacts of the site to an extent due to the proposed zipline and alpine still being visible east of the already existing ski slopes despite the screening from intervening tree cover hiding the extended new ski slopes at the base (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

**Significant Effects**

Another important process involved in the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment that could be sufficient to address environmental sustainability of the proposal is considering the Significant Effects.

Such effects to the site may occur during the construction stage of the development between now and by 2022 (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

In terms of construction effects it has been assumed that the development of Destination Hillend will require a crane that will help with the construction of the proposed buildings including a hotel and facilities to store winter sport equipment. Due to the need of the crane and the size it is it is likely to impact the current routes people should be able to use to either access the site or to drive pass to get anywhere else (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

Operational visual effects have considered and evaluated aspects of the new site in relation too the current presence of the Midlothian Snowsports Centre carefully such as where good views from nearby people of the development would be possible without the fear of visual pollution and local residents being able to continue to make use of the recreational routes for hiking or dog walking within and surrounding the new site without the new development spoiling the look of the scenery (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

These two effects help make the whole effects process sufficient in addressing environmental sustainability because in operational visual effects even though a certain amount of adverse visual effects will be created as a consequence of the new project the developers concluded that the presence of the Midlothian Snowsports Centre will in different ways be able to reduce these new visual impacts such as the new ski slopes blending in with the current centre limiting visual impacts to nice views out towards the area and the centre itself limiting and camouflaging the most significant visual impacts of the project for recreational route users (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

Regards to construction effects the developer’s response to the route impacts of using the crane is to display warning road signs in advance in an attempt to warn as many locals as possible about the schedule of using the crane and it’s impacts on the surrounding roads so that they can plan their future travels around it all better (Transport Scotland 2009).

However, in considering operational landscape effects, one of the Edinburgh City council’s landscape character areas, the Pentland Heights Landscape Character Assessment assessed by council for sensitivity of the landscape also has a more open landcover and consists of Caerketton Hill which offers beautiful views for visors of Edinburgh and the Lothians but also where the project could be located on, due to this the area inmates a high sensitivity to visual and landscape impacts of the project despite the positive influences of taking advantage of the Snowsports Centre”s presence (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

Overall, Significant Effects was sufficient in addressing environmental sustainability because even though vegetation clearance is also expected to be required the proposed project will also be located on hardstanding ground and main grassland which will also limit the notable vegetation identified to be cleared for the development minimising the overall visual and environmental impacts of the project (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

Considering Significant Effects is not as sufficient in addressing environmental sustainability as the Methodology and Mitigation processes because in comparison to landscape assessments carried out in other places like at the Cairngorms National Park, their Guidance for Landscape Change also assess the sensitivity of their landscape when changing it using Land Use Sensitivity Mapping where they use proposed developments such as proposed woodland expansions to create a more biodiverse park and then use sensitivity maps to colour this prosed area representing the degree of sensitivity to the landscape, the darker the colours the higher the sensitivity (Cairngorms National Park 2015).

They can use mapping like this to monitor significant effects of landscape change more closely and take more account of cumulative effects than other landscape assessments can do before deciding if it is worth changing their landscape for new developments causing further landscape or visual negative impacts (Cairngorms National Park 2015).

**Mitigation and Enhancement Measures**

Another process involved in Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment that could be sufficient to address environmental sustainability of the proposal is Mitigation and Enhancement Measures.

Such strategies planned to put in action while developing the Hillend project while mitigating the environmental impacts of the development at the same time include a soft landscape scheme for the development at the hillside’s base consisting of a hotel, dining area and retail units (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

In relation to most visible objects of the development in views from the north where the ski slopes are easily seen no additional mitigation strategies, like planting new trees, have been put in these areas neither is it all planned as part of the proposal (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2020).

These helps this mitigation process address environmental sustainability of the development because the development of the soft landscape scene will help the development integrate into the new and sudden setting and any loss in the current tree cover at the location during construction of the buildings and car park will be kept to a minimum and at least compromised (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

The avoidance of adding further landscape mitigation strategies also helps address sustainability because the presence of new trees or other plants planted for mitigation of environmental impacts could also risk appearing more distinctive within the surrounding visual context potentially spoiling the beauty of the landscape (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

However, this mitigation process of the Landscape and Visual Impact Chapter may also not address environmental sustainability enough as a whole either because in other projects in Scotland like mitigation strategies from Highland council their mitigation strategies in theirLocal Highland Biodiversity Action Plan have similar to the Hillend’s as mentioned previously as well as aims to deliver new protects such as establishing new renewable energy across the Highlands to reduce Scotland’s energy demand and very significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions from burning fossil fuels by 2050 (Scott, R. 2013), but at the same time, do this in a way it protects and supports the local biodiversity on top.

For example establishing wind farms, such as Bhlaraidh Wind Farm in the Great Glen (Todd, E. 2020), or in more open landscapes and far away from trees or other habitats where they are more exposed to wind to generate electricity and less likely to be seen by many humans who think the beauty of the landscape will be spoiled by their presence and harm any birds that fly through them (Scott, R. 2013).

Hillend’s landscape and visual impact assessment is more focused on establishing the development without spoiling the look of landscape and cutting down any necessary trees and other habitats to help achieve this (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

Overall, the Mitigation and Enhancement measures process was not sufficient in addressing environmental sustainability of the Hillend project because the developers of the project are clearly not in favour of putting in any further mitigation strategies to reduce the project’s potential environmental impacts as they don’t want them to add incongruous looks within the beauty of the local landscape and even though the soft landscape scheme will help blend the development into the natural setting and compensate any tree loss for it, tree loss is still necessary for it threatening any habitats within the tress (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

The mitigation process is not as sufficient in addressing environmental sustainability as the methodology process because the assessment is also based on following highly recommended principles set by the Scottish Natural Heritage and the Countryside Agency like encouraging the project to promote and care during construction and maintenance of the development the surrounding landscape’s biodiversity elements like the flora, fauna, geological concepts and ecosystems so that visitors here can enjoy the nature of the project and the landscape its located on leisurely and responsibly (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019, Scottish Natural Heritage 2020).

**Conclusion and Discussions**

In conclusion, the Methodology process used scopes like examining the potential visual effects to the landscape during construction to identify the likely negative impacts to landscape and beauty of it and then take action after doing so to find ways to mitigate the likely impacts so that it can be open for business by their official deadline in 2022, also tried to design the site in a way it will cope in extreme weather conditions as heavy snow is ideal for the site’s proposed sports likely so that they can safely stay open whatever the weather and money here can be made all year round (Midlothian Council 2020).

Significant effects clearly showed that the Midlothian Snowsports Centre was designed in a way where it’s presence will be nicely blended into the surrounding landscape limiting visibility of the Centre from visitor’s views leisurely passing nearby preventing bad looks to the beauty of the landscape and less likely to disturb any local wildlife (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

Mitigation and Enhancement measures included using the soft landscape scheme where dining rooms and a hotel can be built for visitor relaxation purposes without clearing out too many trees to keep landscape visual impacts to a minimum but tree loss is still necessary to put this into place meaning environmental damage and habitat loss could still be caused as a consequence of only trying mitigate the landscape’s visual impacts of constructing the development (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

Overall the most important process for addressing the environmental sustainability of the set is Methodology because in other chapters in the project’s Environmental Impact Assessment like the Cultural Heritage Assessment, it’s Methodology process is focusing on possible issues arising from the scoping, consulting and establishment of the development along with what necessary actions to take like Archeologists working for the East Lothian Council or ELC raising the issues of impacts to the current cultural heritage of the location identified through a Desk-Based Assessment/DBA and walk over survey like asking locals, current employees of the Snowsports Centre or regular visitors to the Midlothian Snowsports Centre how well they know and how they care about the current presence of the centre and what they think of the proposed project, how it will affect how they use to remember it, impacts on their children or family member’s on how they know it and how it will possibly impact or benefit them in terms of new jobs, more wages, beauty of the area to them (House, J. 2020).

Actions would then be taken after going through all stages of these surveying, assessment and walkover techniques to come up any compensations to mitigate or prevent any negative impacts to the society. But so far, little or no negatives or limitations affecting the reliability of the DBA and walk-over survey or the current relationship between the project proposal, Snowsports Centre and it’s current visitors and employees have been identified hence not much actions identified for mitigation, whereas the methodology of the Landscape and Visual Chapter has identified many more impacts of the development like the clearance of the landscape’s vegetation and impact on current biodiversity making the methodology process even more sufficient for addressing environmental sustainability of the project compared to the other Chapter’s methodologies (MINTEL Destination Hillend EIAR 2019).

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