

*Evaluation of Landscaspe Character Assessment in Hillend development proposal and brief of Environmental Impact Assessment Processes*

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# 1. About the project

The Hillend Ski Centre is one of the largest dry ski slopes in Europe. The centre was opened in the 1960’s and renovated a few times with minor changes done to the area. The area is located in the Northern part of the Pentland hills and lies within city of Edinburgh boundary. The peaks of the hills are visible from central Edinburgh and are already a big feature in the surrounding landscape. The proposal, Destination Hillend Multi-activity centre is an extension of the existing development. It is proposed to turn it into an all-year round multi-activity leisure centre. The area is highly used as a public sports venue and is also used by local schools. In 2015 the proposed application for planning permission for a major development with the demolition of the existing dwelling house, erection of a hotel and house and instead proposed, three house plots, car parking. Redevelopment of the existing snowsports centre to include leisure facilities such as, tourist accommodation hotel, ancillary retail, glamping sites, food courts, café facilities, soft play, construction of better access routes and alpine coaster. Councillors agreed to invest 13.8 million pounds into developing Midlothian Snowsports centre to help increase income for the council to generate public sector funding (Midlothian Council, 2019). It will create potential for new jobs and increase economic growth. Strategic Development Planning Authority for Edinburgh and South East of Scotland’s objective in planning is to create “a place to do business”. One of the aims of Strategic Development Plan is to increase economic growth.

The Midlothian Local Development Plan identifies this area as essential for purpose to use this area for recreation, tourism and other rural activities. This development is designed to promote business growth and more opportunities which supports economic activity and employment.

National Planning Framework (NPF3) encourages using all the possible opportunities for outdoor sports and recreation whilst increasing the quality of the environment to improve people’s health and wellbeing**.** Strategic Green network framework is part of National Development and is created to benefit people and wildlife. The NPF requires that local planning authorities should contribute to the creation and delivery of this network. Strategic Developing Plan’s main aim includes conservation and enhancement of the natural and built environment. There is a demand for recreation from in and around Edinburgh because of increasing population numbers. Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) states that developments should seek environmental enhancement and should minimise any adverse impacts on the landscape.

Details of development include:

The proposed development will happen in 15 ha of overall 43 ha site size.

80% of increase in present hardstanding surface.

# 2. Evaluation of the processes used in LCA

Landscape and visual impacts was scoped in within assessment. The landscape is as an environmental resource needed to be taken in as an important consideration. Chapter 9: Landscape and visual included Landscape Character Assessment (LCA). EIA was carried and Environmental statement was produced by Sweco engineering, environment and design consultancy firm.

Assessment based on principles established and broad approaches recommended based on two documents: The Landscape Institute and Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment (2013) Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, Third Edition (GLVIA3) and Scottish National Heritage and the Countryside Agency (2002) Landscape Character Assessment: Guidance for England and Scotland (SWECO, 2019).

Following policies *Policy ENV6: Special Landscape Areas Special landscape area (SLA) should not impact special landscape qualities of the area.*

*Policy ENV7: Landscape character scale, sitting, and design will not have effect on landscape character.*

*Policy ENV11: Woodland, trees and hedges, damage or loss vegetation any effect on vegetation woodlands, direct loss or damage to plants. (SWECO, 2019)*

The Cities of European Landscape Convection (2000) sets duty for authorities to define framework for ensuring landscape quality. The Scottish Planning Policy requires (2010, para 127) that design of the development and related assessments need to follow Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment (Scotland) Regulations 2017). Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) is to determine significant landscape and visual effects of the development. The main aim of the assessment is identification of aspects of the development which might have significant effects on landscape resources and visual amenity, potential landscape and visual effects experienced due to the construction of the Development and effects experiencing during operational period from opening to completion (SWECO, 2019).

Development is in the Pentland Hills Regional Park, in the area designated as an Area of Great Landscape Value in Midlothian Council, on a boundary with Edinburgh Council. Landscape Character Area is Pentland Heights and Landscape Character Type - Pentland Hills Upper slope and summits (see appendix). The Landscape falls into the character types Upland Hills Lothian but is just on a border to the Urban Edinburgh landscape type. Being Northern, part of Pentland Hills, which lie in with Edinburgh city boundaries and peaks visible from many places in Edinburgh. Broadly north facing slope expansive lowland plain, steep escarpment of the well-defined shapely northern peaks, which abut the edge of Edinburgh. Key issues in this development is co-ordinating multiple developments in a sensitive landscape. Overall being in open upland character with very little of man -made elements gives a strong perception of naturalness. Maintaining naturalness ‘was considered an important factor in regard to other uses of the site. The study area is in the landscape that demonstrates the areas of open countryside and green space so SWECO chosen landscape character assessment appropriately with taken into consideration townscape context.

The scope of the assessment includes potential experienced effects on a landscape and visual due to the construction of the development and potential effects from operational works during the construction period (SWECO, 2019). The Description of the baseline landscape and visual conditions included desk and site-based landscape baseline study. Ordnance Survey mapping and aerial photography, GIS, overlaying different relative information such as: drainage regime, vegetation, settlement patterns, viewpoints, plans with related landscape designations and landscape policies at a national and local level. The Conceptual Masterplan represents the future design of the development with description of the construction including landscape character information. Baseline field surveys took about 5 months in 2019 (site work). The Baseline field surveys were taken during summer months, site work involved corroboration of the findings with the desktop review adding new elements and photography from the investigative viewpoints. The Scottish National Heritage (SNH) were consulted.

The LVIA included identification of landscape and visual receptors which are, or might be effected by development. Designations for Special Landscape Areas are scoped out of 2km beyond from the study area. Focus of the assessment remains within 2km of the study area with additional consideration given for viewpoints outside the 2km study area which are very limited. Midlothian Council have been issued with eight viewpoints to comment on, they made changes and added two more view- points. The actual Sports Centre and car park are at the slower elevation of the ski slopes and visible from a much shorter distance of 0.2km.

The visual effects assessment of 10 selected representative viewpoints, 4 of the viewpoints are considered to be of high sensitivity to change. One of them is Arthur’s Seat, 7 km away and the development which will have limited visual change from this viewpoint.

Because of existing development and the visual impact it already has, the ski slopes and chair lift are the most visible from larger distance and has already became a feature and part of the landscape highly visible from the northern part of the study area. Commitment has been made that the design of the Development will avoid any visibility on the skyline in Eastern and south-eastern Edinburgh. The new infrastructure was designed to be located in the west from visible skyline (including zipline landing point) avoiding visibility to receptors to the east of the site. Limited visibility of the development is predicted from the south with identified potential for views of the development. The most visible site was decided to be where they are mostly visible in southern and western extent. Changes done because of the new building infrastructure will be visible in shorter distance and will mostly effect the view during construction period. But the design provided in masterplan is not intrusive.

The conflicts arises from development pressures and, clashes with changes with farming, bringing Influences wider societal change. Cultural services was discussed in relation to the importance of the landscape use, that unsustainable changes in use could destroy , brings changes in recreational use ,for example destroying bird populations. Some attention was obtained taken to the importance of landscape views for mental health (Anderson, 2010).

The Ski slopes are highly visible because of their location and are considered an established part of the existing view. The expansion of the centre will have discreet buildings, a low degree of landscape change (small effect on landscape). No proposed change in the maximum heights of existing buildings. The development will have a low degree of landscape change not altering the characteristics of the park but having slight adverse level of landscape effect but being not significant with no intrusive changes to the landscape. The EIA identified sensitivity to change in two areas: Pentland Heights LCA was identified as the area effected demonstrating a high sensitivity to change and North Pentland Slopes LCA identified as the area with medium sensitivity to change. Limited loss of landscape features were detected during the construction period. The only loss of vegetation was around the existing car park, with limited adverse effects on surrounding vegetation. In terms of the landscape character, construction of the development will be contained within the site. The greater effects will be predicted in the operational phase. The EIA report concludes that there will be no significant residual effects from the development (SWECO, 2019).

In comparison, the Forth Crossing Replacement development was done with two Landscape Character Assessments covering study areas including Fife LCA and Lothian LCA. They were divided into Landscape Character Areas in particular Landscape Character Types. A very detailed desk based study combined with field assessment was undertaken to define clear boundaries of LCA into a more localised scale depending on local variations in character. More effort was made in order to identify, more surveys were carried out and were undertaken by teams of landscape architects. This large scale development have much more designations applying to the study site. The study area covered many different Landscape Character Types with highly sensitive landscapes. Development included more areas which had significant effects on reduced tranquillity.

Because the development involved building new roads and roundabouts most mitigation needed to be implemented into the design of the infrastructure, key to surrounding landforms, forming naturalistic appearance in design elements, reinforcing a sense of place with local sourced materials and types of vegetation. Involves a lot of woodland planting to offset the negative effects and damage from development. Large variability in different landforms was studied from all possible areas and visual points.

# 3. Discussion on EIA processes

The Environmental Impact Assessment is designed to evaluate potential environmental impacts arising from human activities and their significance in relation to foreseeable environmental consequences. It is a key aspect of planning applications so it is very important how is delivered. EIA also provides with models linking proposed land use and management recommendations, benefits and effects, positive and negative impacts. It includes all range of different detailed critical assessments of baseline data and measures design to secure mitigation. EIA regulations comes from EU Directive required by EU law.

Since first time EU Directive came out four amendments was added to it. The law coming from EU takes time till it gets fully implemented in each EU Member of States. For example Scotland is developing its own direction in amending its EIA regime from EU Directive and that is due to the differences in planning system compared to other parts of the UK. Over all the EIA is still ongoing process and new regulations and updates increasing with the time. For example 2017 Regulations introduced a new requirement that environmental Statement must be prepared by “competent experts”. EIA facing many challenges with a growing field of assessments which need to be applied by law when conducting EIA. Recent developments in data and technology provided with a boost to the accessibility of the type of environmental information used for EIA processes.

The screening phase is important part of assessment in order to determine if an EIA is needed. Not all projects are subject to EIA, it gets decided by authority body. The number of EIA conducted across UK each year is relatively small in comparison with other Member of States of EU (Baxter, 2011). Scoping addresses key environmental issues and considers what level of detail the investigation need to be delivered at. Sometimes greater recognition needed amongst developers who commissioning EIA’s, it can all reflect in in the projects expense and highly depend on the individual. In the end the EIA is responsible for delivering an effective and efficient assessment of proposed development and it can be influenced by individual capital.

Number of formalised mechanisms was created to assess the quality of EIA. One of them is Lee Colley review package framework for use of assessing the quality of environmental statements. These processes are conducted by consultants which are professionals in their own field. These laws and initiatives makes sure that the chance for the best practise is in place.

SWOT analysis of strength weaknesses opportunities and threats in effectiveness of EIA in UK was studied undertaken by a researchers. Data was collected during the Survey which was carefully designed to represent a better picture, relating to the background of the participants and perception of EIA, interactive session and literature review. The results concluded that in terms of weakness it has not changed during the past few years. Environmental pressure could have a weakening impact, but consideration of the socioeconomic aspects of EIA increased (Thakur, 2016). The research also stated that some regulations are often misunderstood and there is a struggle to implement EIA related education and practice.

Compliance with new laws and legislations related to the Climate Change Scotland Act 2009 creates challenging pressures to reduce atmospheric gas emissions, pollution levels, and other climate change related issues.

It takes time to evaluate possible negative impacts from certain activities especially the ones which are new and unexperienced. Negative externalities from certain activities can be visible just in a longer time scale so assessment of those activities could be very challenging. Many EIA’s can become insufficiently researched documents that are based on previous EIA’s and could be rushed to completion to meet legislative deadlines. From wildlife perspective a focus is more on lethal takes with very little consideration of non-lethal impacts on species or habitat degradation (Wright et al., 2013). There is always a possibility that non- significant impacts can, than combined, become significant.

The positive is that EIA it does highly influence decision making processes within company’s activities. It helps to deal with effects accordingly to the impact. Another good thing about EIA is the public participation, where different technique reflecting local knowledge can be applied. The most important part of EIA is that it has influence at the start of design stage, where highest standard construction practises can be applied and all other adequate measures could be implemented within the development.

In addressing sustainability environmental consultancy focuses of long term vision and possible long term outcomes as much as possible but it could be constrained by lack of experience, funding and failure to predict the future.

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Cover Picture is by Goda Petrylaite

**Appendix**

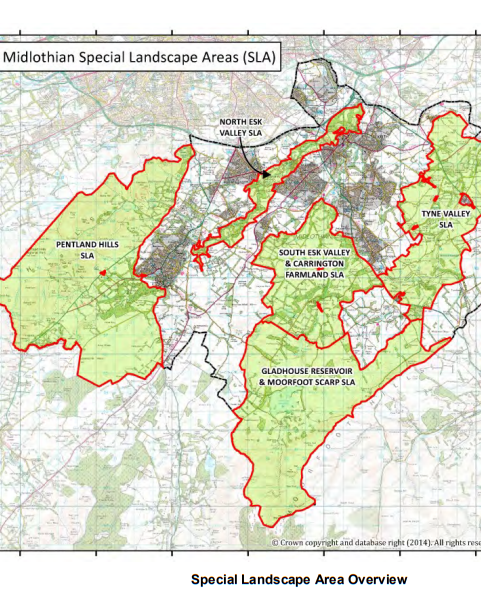


Figure 1 Shows special Lnadscape Areas in surrounding

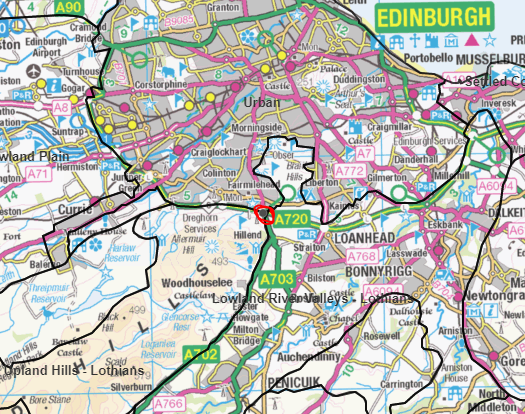


Figure 2Landscape Character Types map with identified location (SNH 2019)