Destination Hillend:

A Critical Evaluation of Chapter 9 ‘Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment’ from Destination Hillends Environmental Impact Assessment Report

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# Introduction to the Midlothian Snowsports Centre Redevelopment Proposal

In 1965 the Midlothian Snowsports Centre, Hillend, Edinburgh opened its doors to the public providing people with the opportunity to utilise its facilities for both recreational and educational purposes. The centre is renowned for having Britain’s longest dry ski slope and is commonly used by Scottish Olympians as a national training facility for winter sports. Despite the many years of services and benefits the site had provided though, in 2010 the permanent closure of the centre was under consideration as it was falling short financially. Fortunately for the centre and the many who continued to utilise it, the Midlothian Council authorised the centre to continue to operate due to the sale of an area of land nearby and an investment by sportscotland (Scotland’s leading administrative for sport (sportscotland, 2016)), which provided financial support for the continued functioning of the centre (The Scotsman, 2010).

Although the investment enabled the centre to remain open, an appeal for further funding was put forward in 2019 to enhance the economic potential the centre could provide for Midlothian. ‘Destination Hilend’ was the proposal put forward to Midlothian Council, which would require investment to redevelop the centre. The initial concept for the proposal featured plans that would develop the current Snowsports centre by incorporating additional features to enhance the leisure experience for partakers by providing a range of different leisure opportunities. In addition to this, the introduction of a hotel suite, dining and retail amenities were also proposed to be included (Midlothian Council, 2018).

In 2019 the Midlothian Council agreed to back the proposal and announced that they would invest £13.8 million in it. Following the approval by the Midlothian Council, further plans for the development to potentially incorporate a zip line, an alpine coaster, a ‘glamp’ site and a new reception space are now also being considered. It has been predicted that the development will potentially generate 30 jobs under the council’s administration and potentially an additional 50 jobs out with the council for the other amenities such as the dining and retail facilities (Jackson, 2019). The development is in keeping with the Midlothian Local Development Plan (2017), specifically section 4 ‘Promoting Economic Growth’ as this too has a focus on the redevelopment of existing amenities, ‘Promoting Business Growth’ and ‘Tourism Development’. Under the segment on ‘Tourism Development’ there is a specific policy (Policy VIS3) assigned to the Midlothian SnowSport Centre to prevent any detrimental impacts on the environment except for if measures to mitigate such impacts are deemed appropriate or acceptable by Midlothian Council (Midlothian Planning, 2017).

# Background to the ‘Destination Hillend’ EIA and an Introduction to Chapter 9 ‘Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment’

Following the submission of the ‘pre-application’ proposal for the redevelopment of the Midlothian Snowsport Centre at the end of 2018, councillors stated their initial impressions, suggesting that an EIA may be appropriate to analyse the apparent potential environmental impacts. In March 2019, Midlothian Council recruited Sweco a European engineering consultancy company to conduct an Environmental Impact Assessment and produce a report on potential environmental impacts the redevelopment could have (Midlothian Planning Committee, 2019). An EIA essentially aims to prevent adverse impacts to the environment that could arise from a development. An EIA is usually categorised as either being a Schedule 1 or Schedule 2 project. A Schedule 1 Project is when it is apparent a development will ultimately have serious adverse impacts on the environment such as an oil refinery development, therefore, an EIA is essential. A Schedule 2 is used when it is not so obvious if the environmental impacts will be severe, therefore, an EIA is not essential but advised (iema, 2011). It is therefore apparent that Destinations Hillend EIA was a Schedule 2 Project as it was only advised not a necessity.

The following section of this essay will evaluate the effectiveness of the EIA in relation to the Landscape concerns highlighted in the Midlothian Local Development Plan (2017), focusing in on Chapter 9 ‘Landscape and Visual Technical Chapters’.

# Evaluations of the Processes Utilised for ‘Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment’ Chapter 9 of ‘Destination Hilends’ EIA

First and foremost, it is noted under the ‘Competence’ section of Chapter 9 that the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment was conducted by ‘Chartered Landscape Architectures’ reassuring that all those assessing the landscape and visual impacts are in fact qualified to do so effectively. Not only does this conform to the Landscape Institutes guidance (which has also been stated in chapter 9 as a method of guidance for the assessors) that developers should utilise ‘competent experts’, it also is an indication that the results and conclusions should be considerably reliable which is extremely necessary and relevant in this case as the location of the redevelopment is designated as a Special Landscape Area. It is detailed in chapter 9 that the redevelopment proposal is in fact located on a Special Landscape Area which is a good indication of competence.

Another aspect of the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment that was addressed sufficiently was how the assessors acted in accordance with policies and public body guidance. Policies utilised as guidance included The Scottish Government (2014) Third National Planning Framework (NPF3). The NPF3 highlights that the environment is a crucial factor that positively influences the health and well-being of people. In addition to this the NPF3 advocates practices that encourage the participation of outdoor recreational and sporting activities which is relevant to the Midlothian Snowsports Centre redevelopment proposal as it will be providing opportunities for the public to engaging in outdoor recreational and sport activities (Scottish Government 2014). Another policy utilised was the Policy ENV6: Special Landscape Areas, which only give consent to development proposals that fall within Special Landscape Areas if they are not predicted to have objectional impacts to the characteristics of the site (City of Edinburgh Council, 2010). Similar Guidance is given in Policy ENV7 Landscape Character, which was also used for guidance. The Midlothian Local Development Plan (2017) was made use of for being relevant Local Planning Policy. The policy states that any proposals for the redevelopment of the Midlothian Snowsport Centre should be considerate of the environmental and landscape characteristics of Pentland Hills and the Hillend Country Park where it is located. This directs the developers to put forward designs that are in keeping with the surrounding landscape, principally because the Hilend Country Park is recognised as a Special Landscape Area. It advises that visually the landscape should not be drastically altered from how it currently looks in order to have minimal impacts on the landscape. The assessors will have needed to take into consideration these key points of the Midlothian Local Development Plan when making their conclusions. Finally, the Scottish Planning Policy was another Policy taken into consideration by the assessors which advises that developments should have as little impact as possible landscape in addition to pursuing prospects that will be of value for the environment.

In order to assess how visually the development would potentially impact different receptors; viewpoints were established to effectively examine the visual impacts at various locations. Prior to the conduction of the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, eight viewpoints were submitted to the Midlothian Council for their opinions. The Landscape Officer at Midlothian Council advised that two new viewpoints should be included to demonstrate how other recreational sites (Arthurs Seat and the Braid Hills) commonly utilised for their ‘panoramic’ views would be impacted. In addition to this, it was advised that one of the viewpoints should be repositioned to Swaston a conservation area. These changes were in fact made, composing ten appropriate viewpoints to which the visual impacts were effectively assessed. This meant that eight out of the ten viewpoints were to determine residential visual impact and the remaining two viewpoints determined the visual impacts from two popular recreational locations in Edinburgh. However, all the viewpoint locations were within a 7.0 kilometres radius, whereas the current ski facility is known to be visible from as far as 25 kilometres away. Although it has been established in Chapter 9 that the main focus is on locations within a 2 kilometre study area, because anything out with is perceived as significantly uninfluenced, excluding the two recreational viewpoints out with the 2 kilometre radius, it may have been worth examining viewpoints further afield. This could have improved the thoroughness of the assessment and increasing the potential for the assessment to be unbiased as it would be assessing all possibilities for any visual impacts. Overall though, details of the reasoning for choosing the selected ten viewpoints were comprehensive in the Methodology, Visual Baseline and the Landscape Designations sections of Chapter 9.

Under the Significant Effects section of Chapter 9 it is explained that the due to the development site already having existing buildings and snow sport facilities there would be no major notable differences in comparison to how the site currently looks.

It is stated that the proposal for additional buildings and car parking facilities would be located at the base of the hillside surrounding the present buildings of the centre. Additionally, this will be amid woodland subject to landform screening to have as minimal an impact as possible on the wider landscape. It has also been determined that there will be little visual impact from vegetation disturbance due to the majority of site being located on ‘hard land’ or ‘grassland’ and only a minute amount of vegetational woodland would be cleared therefore it would not be that significant.

The main areas believed to potentially cause the greatest visual impact is the proposed introduction of a zipline and alpine coaster. By assessing the viewpoints, it has been determined that the visual impacts of the development would mostly affect residential areas within the northern extent of the study area due to the slopes being north facing. However, it is noted that it would not be much different from the current Midlothian SnowSports Centre. Furthermore, the visual impacts during the construction phase of the development would be limited therefore predicted to have a small amount of visual impact or alterations to the landscape. The assessors reached these conclusions based on the viewpoints representing how receptors would be impacted was by using a system that rated the significance rated by being of high, medium, low or negligible significance. The assessors clearly define the thresholds of significance making their conclusions sufficiently reliable.

The proposed methods of mitigation for the significant effects are certainly appropriate for the development based on the significance levels of the visual impacts. It was suggested that a soft landscape approach at the base of the hillside where the retail, dining and hotel facilities would be located, would be applicable. In addition to this no mitigation for the alpine coaster and zipline were suggested as it was explained that the planting of new vegetation such as trees would be incoherent with the current and surrounding landscape. Overall, the methods of mitigation are sufficient in terms of advising on what would be suitable for the site. They are also in keeping with policy guidance, specifically the Midlothian Local Development Plan that requires the development to be considerate of the surrounding environmental and landscape characteristics.

# How Sufficient the EIA Process is in Addressing Environmental Sustainability

If executed properly and efficiently by qualified professionals, an Environmental Impact Assessment can be effective at addressing environmental sustainability when considering development proposals. Environmental protection, social and economic sustainability constitute to the three pillars of sustainability (United Nations General Assembly, 2005). With regards to the three pillars of sustainability an environmental Impact Assessment can be extremely useful in determining the key principals of a development influenced by an equal assessment of the economic, environmental and societal benefits or impacts of said development. To expand on this, it is the role of an EIA to report the potential environmental impacts a development could have and advise on the best ways to mitigate these impacts, providing local authorities with guidance on whether a development is suitable to go ahead or not. Those qualified to perform an EIA play a crucial role in connecting concerns by local communities and concerns for the environment to the developers and those with the authority to approve the development. This essentially allows the assessors to integrate the three pillars of sustainability into their proposals based on their findings from the communications that have taken place, incorporating both social and economic principles whilst having a minimal impact on the natural environment (iema, 2011).

The EIA for ‘Destination Hillend’ is an example of an EIA that has been proficient in addressing environmental sustainability in its assessment. This is because the processes utilised are thorough and reliable. Each chapter of the EIA for ‘Destination Hillend’ is verified to have been carried out by an expert for the individual chapters for specific environmental concerns. Therefore, any suggestions made with regards to protecting the environment are done so constructively. Similarly, the assessment of each specific environmental concern has been conducted following the guidance of policy relevant to sustainability i.e. the Scottish Planning Policy. The Scottish Planning Policy is relevant to Environmental Sustainability as it has a key focus on “creating a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth” (The Scottish Government, 2014, p.9).

Furthermore, each chapter of ‘Destination Hilends’ EIA includes a Mitigation and Enhancement Measures section, which act as a guide on how to reduce any adverse impacts of a development on the environment that may arise.

Sometimes though, an EIAs progress in addressing environmental sustainability can be restricted due to deficiencies in additional assessments as well as responses. The Scottish Governments Guidance on the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment (Scotland) Regulations 2017 explains that the validity of a development having to comply with the measures highlighted in an EIA to reduce adverse environmental impacts only happens occasionally and if the EIA mitigation measures stated were ‘exceptional in the precision’ ( The Scottish Government, 2017). This demonstrates that although an EIA may give guidance on how to mitigate environmental impacts to be in keeping with environmental sustainability goals it is not always necessary that developers need to address these mitigation methods and therefore their performance falls short in terms of addressing environmental sustainability.

However, overall, EIAs are effective in drawing attention to important environmental issues, which developers and those that authorise developments, if environmentally cautious, can take on board the advice of the EIA and effectively improve keep impacts to a minimum.

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