

National Transport Authority

Belfield / Blackrock to City Centre Core Bus Corridor Scheme

Appropriate Assessment Screening Determination

The National Transport Authority (the "NTA") is proposing to carry out the Belfield / Blackrock to City Centre Core Bus Corridor Scheme (the "Proposed Scheme").

The Belfield / Blackrock to City Centre Core Bus Corridor Scheme is comprised of two main alignments in terms of the route it follows, from Blackrock to the City Centre and along Nutley Lane. The Blackrock to City Centre section commences on the R113 at Temple Hill, approximately 80m to the north of the R827 Stradbrook Road, travel along the N31 Frascati Road, the R118 Rock Road / Merrion Road / Pembroke Road, the R816 Pembroke Road / Baggot Street Upper / Baggot Street Lower, turn onto Fitzwilliam Street Lower and terminate at the junction of Mount Street Upper / Merrion Square South / Merrion Square East. The Nutley Lane section of the Proposed Scheme will commence at the tie-in with the signalised junction on the R138 Stillorgan road on the southern end of Nutley Lane, travel along Nutley Lane and terminate at the junction with the R118 Merrion Road. The Proposed Scheme, which will provide segregated cycling facilities, bus priority infrastructure and improvement pedestrian facilities, is within the Dublin City Council (DCC) and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council (DLRCC) administrative areas.

Scott Cawley Limited were instructed to prepare an Appropriate Assessment Screening Report for the Proposed Scheme to consider, analyse and assess whether in view of best scientific knowledge and objective information and the conservation objectives of the European site(s) (which are discussed further below), if the Proposed Scheme individually or in combination with other plans or projects is likely to have a significant effect on a European Site(s).

The NTA has received and read the Appropriate Assessment Screening Report and has considered its content and its conclusions and recommendation set out therein. Having done this, the NTA agrees with the conclusions and recommendation set out in the Appropriate Assessment Screening Report.

AA Screening Determination

The NTA has determined that an Appropriate Assessment of the Proposed Scheme is required as it cannot exclude, in view of best scientific knowledge and on the basis of objective scientific information, following the screening that the NTA has carried out, that the Proposed Scheme, either individually or in combination with other plans or projects, in the absence of mitigation, will have a significant effect on the following 18 European Site(s) (6 SACs and 12 SPAs) in view of the conservation objectives of those site(s):-

1. North Dublin Bay SAC;
2. South Dublin Bay SAC;
3. Howth Head SAC;
4. Rockabill to Dalkey Island SAC;

5. Lambay Island SAC;
6. Wicklow Mountains SAC;
7. Howth Head Coast SPA;
8. Dalkey Islands SPA;
9. Rockabill SPA;
10. North Bull Island SPA;
11. South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA;
12. Ireland's Eye SPA;
13. Malahide Estuary SPA;
14. Baldoyle Bay SPA;
15. Rogerstown Estuary SPA;
16. Skerries Islands SPA;
17. Lambay Island SPA; and,
18. The Murrough SPA.

The NTA has made this determination on the basis of having considered the baseline ecological environment; the extent and characteristics of the Proposed Scheme and having identified the following potential impacts:

- Habitat loss and fragmentation;
- Habitat degradation/effects on Qualifying Interests (QI) / Special Conservation Interest (SCI) species as a result of hydrological impacts;
- Habitat degradation as a result of hydrogeological impacts;
- Habitat degradation as a result of introducing/spreading non-native invasive species;
- Habitat degradation as a result of air quality impacts; and
- Disturbance and displacement impacts.

Further detail is provided below on each of the potential impacts identified.

Habitat loss and fragmentation

The Proposed Scheme runs immediately alongside two single European sites, namely South Dublin Bay SAC at the Merrion Gates and South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA at Booterstown Marsh. The Proposed Scheme boundary overlaps the SAC and SPA boundaries by 2.7m² and 4.3m² respectively. Where the SAC boundary overlap occurs with the Proposed Scheme application boundary areas, this minor overlapped area comprises of pre-existing hardstanding surfaces, which are of low ecological value and are not listed on Annex I of the Directive. The pre-existing hardstanding areas impacted, will be replaced by new road surface, i.e. equivalent to what is being lost. With regard to the South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA, the area of overlap, c. 4.3m², does not contain any wetland or saltmarsh habitat for which the site is designated nor does the area of overlap represent important wetland habitat for wintering bird species, a finding that was confirmed during wintering bird surveys.

The habitats within the SAC/SPA overlapped areas do not currently correspond to QI habitats, and / or habitats on which QI / SCI species of nearby habitats rely on for foraging, resting / roosting and / or commuting on.

Therefore, although there is a small overlap with the boundaries of the South Dublin Bay SAC and the South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA, the Proposed Scheme boundary does not overlap with any Annex I habitats listed as a Qualifying Interest of the SAC, or habitats considered to support the SCI species of the SPAs or have an impact on the conservation objectives of these, or any other, European sites.

The Proposed Scheme will result in the permanent loss of sites suitable to support breeding gull and wintering bird species at Blackrock Park. Therefore, there is potential (albeit limited) for impacts on SCI species associated with SPAs to occur as a result of habitat loss/fragmentation. Therefore, there is potential for in combination effects to occur.

Habitat degradation / effects on QI / SCI species as a result of hydrological impacts

The Proposed Scheme is hydrologically connected to Dublin Bay via the Dodder_050, Brewery Stream_010, Grand Canal, and Booterstown marsh and Nutley Stream as well as a network of interconnecting and established surface or combined sewer/surface water pipes. The release of contaminated surface water runoff and/or an accidental spillage or pollution event into any surface water features during construction, or operation, has the potential to affect water quality in the receiving aquatic environment. It should be noted that a highly substantial event/events would be required to generate such quantities, which is not deemed likely. Such a potential pollution event may include: the release of sediment into receiving waters and the subsequent increase in mobilised suspended solids; and the accidental spillage and/or leaks of contaminants into receiving waters. This occurrence could happen at any time during construction but could potentially be exacerbated by the removal of vegetation. In the absence of mitigation, the associated effects of a reduction of surface water quality could potentially extend for a considerable distance downstream of the discharge point or location of the accidental pollution event. Such an occurrence, of a sufficient magnitude, either alone or in combination with other pressures on water quality, could undermine the conservation objectives of the European sites downstream in Dublin Bay (i.e. North Dublin Bay SAC, South Dublin Bay SAC, Howth Head SAC, Rockabill to Dalkey Island SAC, North Bull Island SPA, South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA and Dalkey Islands SPA).

In a potential worst case scenario, the release of contaminated surface water runoff and/or an accidental spillage or pollution event into any surface water features during construction, or operation, also has the potential to affect SCI bird species and QI mammal species that commute, forage and loaf in Booterstown Marsh and Dublin Bay i.e. birds associated with Skerries Islands SPA, Rockabill SPA and Lambay Island SPA, Ireland's Eye SPA, North Dublin Bay SPA, South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA, Baldoyle Bay SPA, Malahide Estuary SPA, Rogerstown SPA, Dalkey Islands SPA, Murrough SPA, and marine mammals associated with Rockabill to Dalkey Island SAC and Lambay Island SAC. This reduction in water quality (either alone or in combination with other pressures on water quality) could result in the degradation of sensitive habitats present downstream, which in turn could negatively affect the SCI bird species that rely upon these habitats as foraging and/or roosting habitat. It could also negatively affect the quantity and quality of prey available to SCI and QI populations. In a worst-case scenario these potential impacts could occur to such a degree that the conservation objectives of the Skerries Islands SPA, Rockabill SPA and Lambay Island SPA, Ireland's Eye SPA, North Dublin Bay SPA, South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA, Baldoyle Bay SPA, Malahide Estuary SPA, Rogerstown SPA, Dalkey Islands SPA, Murrough SPA, Rockabill to Dalkey Island SAC and Lambay Island SAC are undermined.

As the Proposed Scheme has the potential to result in habitat degradation and effects on the qualifying/special conservation interest species of European sites as the result of hydrological impacts, there is the potential for in combination effects to occur.

Habitat degradation as a result of hydrogeological impacts

The potential for hydrogeological impacts are highly variable depending on the nature of the proposed works at specific locations and the receiving environment ground conditions. The unmitigated hydrogeological Zone of Influence of the Proposed Scheme is not considered to extend to any groundwater dependent terrestrial ecosystems linked to European sites. However, it may extend into Booterstown Marsh wetland habitat, which is a constituent element of South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA.

As the Proposed Scheme has the potential to result in habitat degradation of the qualifying interest species/special conservation interest supporting habitat of a European site as the result of hydrogeological impacts there is potential for in combination effects to occur in that regard.

Habitat degradation as a result of introducing/spreading non-native invasive species

A single area of three-cornered garlic *Allium triquetrum*, a species listed on the Third Schedule of the (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations present within, or in close proximity to, the Proposed Scheme. A second non-native species common cordgrass *Spartina anglica* is known to be locally present on exposed muds within the saline parts of Booterstown marsh. This coastal species, often associated with saltmarsh habitats is outside the footprint of the Proposed Scheme. In the absence of mitigation, there is potential for this or other invasive species to spread or be introduced, during construction and/or routine maintenance/management works, to terrestrial and habitat areas in European sites downstream in Dublin Bay (i.e., North Dublin Bay SAC, South Dublin Bay SAC, North Bull Island SPA and South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA). These in turn may result in the degradation of the existing habitats and therefore undermine the conservation objectives of these European sites.

Habitat degradation as a result of air quality impacts

A reduction in air quality within the immediate vicinity of the construction works for the Proposed Scheme may occur as a consequence of dust deposition associated with the construction activities. This includes a reduction in photosynthesis due to smothering from dust on the plants and chemical changes such as acidity to soils. Furthermore, emissions from car exhausts, and the deposition of particulate matter and heavy metals produced by engine, brake and tyre wear, can contribute to increased deposition of pollutants such as oxides of nitrogen (NO_x, NO_s), volatile organic compounds (VOCs), particulate matter (PM), heavy metals (HM) and ammonia (NH₄) in the vicinity of a road carriageway. This can affect the ecosystems and vegetation present, influencing plant growth rates and species composition, diversity, and abundance.

A change in AADT (Annual Average Daily Traffic) flows greater than 1,000 is predicted to occur on Rock Road. This lies adjacent to South Dublin Bay SAC and South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA. As such the Proposed Scheme has the potential to result in habitat degradation of the qualifying / special conservation interest species / habitats of South Dublin Bay SAC and South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA during the Operational Phase of the Proposed Scheme.

Disturbance and displacement impacts

A temporary and/or permanent increase in noise, vibration and/or human activity levels during the Construction Phase of the Proposed Scheme could result in the disturbance to and/or displacement of fauna species present within the vicinity of the Proposed Scheme. In addition to South Dublin Bay and River Tolka SPA, which is immediately adjacent to the Proposed Scheme at Booterstown Marsh, there are a number of SPAs located in relatively close proximity to the Proposed Scheme which are designated for SCI species that are known to forage and/or roost at inland sites, such as amenity grassland playing pitches i.e. Malahide Estuary SPA, Baldoyle Bay SPA, North Bull Island SPA, and Rogerstown Estuary SPA, Skerries Islands SPA, Ireland's Eye SPA and Lambay Island SPA, as well as The Murrough SPA (a distal site outside the typical 20km range but nonetheless supporting Brent Geese and a number of other SCI species that are recorded from Dublin Bay).

As the Proposed Scheme has the potential to result in the disturbance/displacement of the qualifying/special conservation interest species of any European site, there is the potential for in combination effects to occur in association with other activities/plans/projects.

Summary

The hydrological, hydrogeological, non-native invasive species, air quality and disturbance and displacement impacts associated with the Proposed Scheme have the potential to affect the receiving environment and, consequently, have the potential to affect the conservation objectives supporting the QI /SCI of a European site(s). Therefore, the potential for the Proposed Scheme to have likely significant effects on a European site(s) cannot be excluded.

In-combination effects

There is the potential for developments planned or granted, or those implemented under a range of land use and other plans, to lie either within European sites, or be situated in a location where they may be within the ZoI of the European sites which also fall within the ZoI of the Proposed Scheme.

Key development projects with potential for in-combination effects due to their size, nature and/or location include other Core Bus Corridor Schemes, MetroLink, upgrades to or new rail infrastructure, utility infrastructure including proposed or consented water utility improvement.

The potential for in combination effects between these plans and projects and the Proposed Scheme arises via the same pathways for potential effects as identified for the Proposed Scheme (i.e. hydrological, invasive species, air quality, and disturbance and displacement effects) which could act in combination with similar effects and pathways arising from the various plans.

Therefore, the potential for the following in combination effects arising from plans and projects cannot be ruled out:

- Habitat loss and fragmentation (for example European sites at risk of ex situ habitat losses at Malahide Estuary SPA, Baldoyle Bay SPA, Rogerstown Estuary SPA, North Bull Island SPA and South Dublin Bay and River Tolka SPA, Skerries Islands SPA, Lambay Island SPA, Ireland's Eye SPA and The Murrough SPA);
- Habitat degradation/effects on QI/SCI species as a result of hydrological impacts (for example reduction in water quality in catchments draining to Dublin Bay affecting the conservation objectives supporting aquatic habitats and species in North Dublin Bay SAC, South Dublin Bay SAC, Howth Head SAC, Howth Head Coast SPA, Rockabill to Dalkey Island SAC, Lambay Island SAC, South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA, North Bull Island SPA, Dalkey Islands SPA,

Baldoyle Bay SAC, Baldoyle Bay SPA, Malahide Estuary SPA, Rogerstown Estuary SPA, Ireland's Eye SPA, Skerries Islands SPA, Rockabill SPA, Lambay Island SPA and The Murrrough SPA);

- Habitat degradation as a result of introducing/spreading non-native invasive species;
- Habitat degradation as a result of air quality impacts (for example South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA and South Dublin Bay SAC are adjacent to Rock Road which is at risk of increased traffic flows from the Proposed Scheme); and,
- Disturbance and displacement impacts (for example ex situ inland feeding sites which are utilised by SCI wintering bird species within the potential disturbance Zone of Influence of the Proposed Scheme for Malahide Estuary SPA, Baldoyle Bay SPA, Rogerstown Estuary SPA, North Bull Island SPA, South Dublin Bay and River Tolka SPA, Skerries Islands SPA, Ireland's Eye SPA, Lambay Island SPA and The Murrrough SPA).


Conclusions of Screening Assessment Process

Following an examination, analysis and evaluation of the all relevant information, in view of best scientific knowledge, and applying the precautionary principle, it can be concluded that there is the possibility for significant effects on the following European sites, in the absence of mitigation, either arising from the project alone or in combination with other plans and projects, as a result of habitat loss and fragmentation, hydrological impacts, invasive species, air quality impacts and disturbance and displacement impacts: North Dublin Bay SAC; South Dublin Bay SAC; Howth Head SAC; Rockabill to Dalkey Island SAC; Lambay Island SAC; Wicklow Mountains SAC; Howth Head Coast SPA; Dalkey Islands SPA; Rockabill SPA; North Bull Island SPA; South Dublin Bay and River Tolka Estuary SPA; Ireland's Eye SPA; Malahide Estuary SPA; Baldoyle Bay SPA; Rogerstown Estuary SPA; Skerries Islands SPA; Lambay Island SPA; and, The Murrrough SPA.

In reaching this conclusion, the nature of the project and its potential relationship with all European sites within the zone of influence, and their conservation objectives, have been fully considered.

The NTA has requested that a Natura Impact Statement be prepared and finalised for submission to An Bord Pleanála with an application for approval for the Proposed Scheme.

This determination is available for inspection at the National Transport Authority Offices, Dún Scéine, Harcourt Lane, Dublin 2, D02 WT20 and on its website at www.busconnects.ie.

Signed: 

For and on behalf of the BusConnects Programme Board of the NTA

Dated:- [13th April 2022]