

Appropriate Assessment Screening for Ardagh Station House Site

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Executive Summary

The current report determines, through the Appropriate Assessment process, that work that has been suggested at the Ardagh Station House, Ardagh will not have a significant impact on any SAC's or SPA's in the area.

Introduction

Rory Dalton was appointed by Limerick City and County Council to undertake an Appropriate Assessment Screening for work to be completed at Ardagh Station House.

This Screening Statement outlines the results of a Habitats Directive Stage 1 Screening Assessment for the proposed work. This is a Screening Statement of the proposed project and has been undertaken in order to comply with the requirements of the Habitats Directive Article 6(3). The function of this Screening Statement is to provide information that will facilitate the competent authority in completing a Stage 1 Screening Assessment of the proposed project's potential to result in likely significant effects to the Conservation Objectives of Natura 2000 Sites.

Appropriate Assessment Process

An Appropriate Assessment is undertaken to establish if any proposed plan or project is likely to have a significant effect or impact on any site that has been designated under: the E.U. Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) i.e. SAC; or the E.U. Birds Directive (79/409/EEC as amended 2009/147/EC) i.e. SPA. Collectively, SAC's and SPA's are known as Natura 2000 sites. The need to undertake one or more stages of this process has arisen from Articles 6(3) and 6(4) of the aforementioned Habitats Directive; where the former Article is primarily concerned with the protection of sites from likely significant effects and the latter allows derogation from such protection in very specific circumstances involving imperative reasons of overriding public interest.

Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive requires that:

“Any plan or project not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site but likely to have a significant effect thereon, either individually or in combination with other plans or projects, shall be subject to appropriate assessment of its implications for the site in view of the site's conservation objectives. In the light of the conclusions of the assessment of the implications for the site and subject to the provisions of paragraph 4, the competent national authorities shall agree to the plan or project only after having ascertained that it will not adversely affect the integrity of the site concerned and, if appropriate, after having obtained the opinion of the general public.”

And Article 6(4) of the Habitats Directive requires that:

“If, in spite of a negative assessment of the implications for the site and in the absence of alternative solutions, a plan or project must nevertheless be carried out for imperative reasons of overriding public interest, including those of a social or economic nature, the Member State shall take all compensatory measures necessary to ensure that the overall coherence of Natura 2000 is protected. It shall inform the Commission of the compensatory measures adopted.”

In Stage 1, a screening process is undertaken to identify whether significant impacts on a Natura 2000 site are likely to arise from the project or plan in question. If significant impacts are likely to occur or if it is unclear whether significant impacts are likely to occur, then the process moves on to Stage 2 where an AA considers potential mitigation measures for adverse impacts. If it is considered that mitigation measures will not be able to satisfactorily reduce potential adverse impact on a Natura 2000 site then an assessment of alternative solutions is considered in Stage 3. This is then followed by Stage 4 in the event that adverse impacts remain and the proposed activity or development is deemed to be of Imperative Reasons of Overriding Public Interest (IROPI), allowing an assessment of compensatory measures to be considered. The outcome of a Stage 2 and higher assessment is presented in a report known as a Natura Impact Statement (NIS). While an AA NIS is provided by the advocate of the plan or project in question, the AA NIS itself is undertaken by the competent authority.

Methodology

Documents associated with the proposed project and relevant ecology databases were consulted as part of this assessment, with a site walkover also undertaken. Furthermore, the following guidelines were used in the completion of this assessment;

- Assessment of Plans and Projects Significantly Affecting Natura 2000 Sites – European Commission Methodical Guidance on the provisions of Article 6(3) and 6(4) of the ‘Habitats’ Directive 92/43/EEC (European Commission 2001)
- Integrated Biodiversity Impact Assessment – Streamlining AA, SEA and EIA Processes: Practitioner’s Manual (EPA 2013)
- Appropriate Assessment of Plans and Projects in Ireland – Guidance for Planning Authorities (DoEHLG 2009)

The Screening Stage of Appropriate Assessment is used to identify whether the Plan, either alone or in combination with other plans or projects, is likely to have a significant effect on a Natura 2000 site. This report follows European Commission (2001) guidance which recommends that screening should follow a four step process as outlined below:

1. : Determine whether the plan is directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site. If it is, then no further assessment is necessary.
2. : Describe the plan and other plans and projects that, ‘in combination’, have the potential to have significant effects on a European site.
3. : Identify the potential effects on the European site.
4. : Assess the significance of any effects on the European site.

Brief Description of the Sites and Proposed works

Site Description and Location

Ardagh is a village in the South West area of County Limerick, situated three miles from Newcastle West. The Ardagh Station House is located on the perimeter of the village ITM Co-ordinates E 528371 N 638543. The Ardagh former train station was once an important stop along the Great Southern Railway’s Limerick to Tralee line, which is also known as the ‘North Kerry Line’. In 1880 the line from Limerick to Barnagh and onto Tralee opened providing a link for the transport of both passengers and goods. The North Kerry Line ceased to carry passengers in 1963, however the line continued to carry goods traffic until 1977. The tracks of the Limerick to Tralee line were finally removed in 1988.

The Ardagh Station building is a two-bay two-storey with dormer attic structure. It is gable-fronted with pitched slate roofs, rusticated limestone chimney-stacks and decorative timber barge-boards. The building has rusticated limestone walls and six-over-six pane timber sliding sash windows with limestone sills. The Ardagh station is now derelict and in a very poor state of repair.

Site Visit

A site visit was carried out on the 4/09/2020 by Independent Ecologist Rory Dalton. The existing environment was studied in relation to the proposed works put forward by the Limerick County Council.

Proposed Works

The proposed works aim to refurbish the buildings and immediate surrounding area of the site to create a space that can be utilised by locals and also users of the Great Southern Greenway. The gate to the area will be retained while the road will be resurfaced with a gravel or macadam finish. A playground will be built measuring 1000sqm to the East of the Station House with the area local to the station house being paved in suitable material to allow for an outdoor seating and bike stand area. Regarding the Station House itself, it is to be refurbished for commercial and/or community use. The single story lean-to to the west of the building will be demolished completely with a single story extension built on to the east side of the building. There will be a primary access point established from the Greenway on to the site with a post and rail fence otherwise along the boundary. The existing remains of the old platform will be retained and rebuilt where necessary with vegetation removed and existing remains of platform graded down to floor level to open up views of the Station House from the Greenway. The existing good shed will be refurbished with a single story toilet and services block built beside it. There will be an additional hard standing area of the site constructed to provide parking for cars and camper-vans.

Brief Description of Local Natura 2000 Sites and the Potential for Negative Effects

Natura Site	Distance	Conservation Interests	Inclusion in the current Screening
Stack's to Mullaghareirk Mountains, West Limerick Hills and Mount Eagle SPA (004161)	Proposed works would be, at closest point, 1.7km from this SPA	(A082) Hen Harrier	Proposed works within 15km of the protected area
Askeaton Fen Complex SAC (0002279)	Proposed works would be 10.7km from this SAC	[7210] Calcareous fens with Cladium mariscus and species of the Caricion davallianae [7230] Alkaline fens	Proposed works within 15km of the SAC
Barrigone SAC (000432)	Proposed works would be 11.3km from this SAC	[5130] Juniperus communis formations on heaths or calcareous grasslands [6210] Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies on calcareous substrates (Festuco-Brometalia) (* important orchid sites) [8240] Limestone pavements [1065] Euphydryas aurinia (Marsh Fritillary)	Proposed works within 15km of the SAC

Stack's to Mullaghareirk Mountains, West Limerick Hills and Mount Eagle SPA Site Synopsis

The Stack's to Mullaghareirk Mountains, West Limerick Hills and Mount Eagle SPA is a very large site centred on the borders between the counties of Cork, Kerry and Limerick. The site is skirted by the towns of Newcastle West, Ballydesmond, Castleisland, Tralee and Abbeyfeale. The mountain peaks included in the site are not notably high or indeed pronounced, the highest being at Knockfeha (451 m). Other mountains included are Mount Eagle, Knockanefune, Garraunbaun, Taur, Rock Hill, Knockacummer, Mullaghmuish, Knight's Mt, Ballincollig Hill, Beennageeha Mt, Sugar Hill, Knockanimpuba and Knockathea, amongst others. Many rivers rise within the site, notably the Blackwater, Owentaraglin, Owenkeal, Glenlara, Feale, Clydagh, Allaghaun, Allow, Oolagh, Galey and Smerlagh. The site consists of a variety of upland habitats, though almost half is afforested. The coniferous forests include first and second rotation plantations, with both pre-thicket and post-thicket stands present. Substantial areas of clear-fell are also present at any one time. The principal tree species present are Sitka Spruce (*Picea sitchensis*) and Lodgepole Pine (*Pinus contorta*). A substantial part (28%) of the site is unplanted blanket bog and heath, with both wet and dry heath present. The vegetation of these habitats is characterised by such species as Ling Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*), Common Cottongrass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*), Hare's-tail Cottongrass (*Eriophorum vaginatum*), Deergrass (*Scirpus cespitosus*) and Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*). The remainder of the site is mostly rough grassland that is used for hill farming. This varies in composition and includes some wet areas with rushes (*Juncus* spp.) and some areas subject to scrub encroachment. The site is a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the E.U. Birds Directive, of special conservation interest for Hen Harrier. This SPA is a stronghold for Hen Harrier and supports the largest concentration of the species in the country. A survey in 2005 recorded 45 pairs, which represents over 20% of the all-Ireland total. A similar number of pairs had been recorded in the 1998-2000 period. The mix of forestry and open areas provides optimum habitat conditions for this rare bird, which is listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. The early stages of new and second-rotation conifer plantations are the most frequently used nesting sites, though some pairs may still nest in tall heather of unplanted bogs and heath. Hen Harriers will forage up to c. 5 km from the nest site, utilising open bog and moorland, young conifer plantations and hill farmland that is not too rank. Birds will often forage in openings and gaps within forests. In Ireland, small birds and small mammals appear to be the most frequently taken prey. Short-eared Owl, a very rare species in Ireland, has been known to breed within the site. Nesting certainly occurred in the late 1970s and birds have been recorded intermittently since. The owls are considered to favour this site due to the presence of Bank Voles, a favoured prey item. Merlin also breed within the site but the size of the population is not known. Red Grouse is found on some of the unplanted areas of bog and heath – this is a species that has declined in Ireland and is now Red-listed. The Stack's to Mullaghareirk Mountains, West Limerick Hills and Mount Eagle SPA is of ornithological importance because it provides excellent nesting and foraging habitat for breeding Hen Harrier and is one the top sites in the country for the species. The

presence of three species, Hen Harrier, Merlin and Short-eared Owl, which are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive is of note.

Askeaton Fen Complex SAC Site Synopsis

Askeaton Fen Complex consists of a number of small fen areas to the east and southeast of Askeaton in Co. Limerick. This area has a number of undulating hills, some of which are quite steep, and is underlain by Lower Carboniferous Limestone. At the base of the hills a series of fens/reedbeds/loughs can be found, often in association with marl or peat deposits. At the south-east of Askeaton, both Cappagh and Ballymorisheen fens are surrounded by large cliff-like rocky limestone outcrops.

In Askeaton Fen Complex SAC a diversity of fen types are represented in a gradation from open water to drier seepage areas. One of the more important fen types, Cladium fen, which contains Great Fen-sedge (*Cladium mariscus*), occurs in various forms and is the most common fen type within the SAC. It is associated with wet conditions generally not >25 cm deep and can be found in mono-dominant stands growing on a marl base, such as at Feereagh and Mornane Loughs, and in the fen in the townland of Mornane. It can also be co-dominant with Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) in slightly drier conditions, such as in Deegerty, Blind Lough and Dromlohan. It is also found in association with alkaline fen species such as Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*) where it grows on a peaty substrate. Cladium fen is indicative of extremely base rich conditions. Typical species seen growing with the Great Fen-sedge include pondweeds (*Potamogeton* spp.), Marsh Horsetail (*Equisetum palustre*), Water Horsetail (*E. fluviatile*), Lesser Water-parsnip (*Berula erecta*), Lesser Marshwort (*Apium inundatum*), Bottle Sedge (*Carex rostrata*), particularly where marl is present, and Water Mint (*Mentha aquatica*). One such area of fen within the site is the only known location in Ireland for the water beetle *Hygrotus decoratus* and is also known to contain *Hydroporus scalesianus*, a rare water beetle indicative of undisturbed fens. At the edge of some of the Great Fen-sedge fens, particularly where improved grassland is not present, there is typically found a gradation to wet marsh, which in turn grades into wet grassland. These transition habitats add to the ecological diversity of the site. Alkaline fen is characterised by the presence of Black Bog-rush in association with brown mosses and a small sedge community. The soil is permanently waterlogged but generally not flooded unless for a short period. Examples of this fen type are found at the edge of almost all the sites, but its extent is much less than the Great Fen-sedge fen type within the SAC. The fen in the townlands of Moig West and Graigues is a good example of alkaline fen. Species seen growing with Black Bogrush include Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*), Long-stalked Yellow-sedge (*Carex lepidocarpa*), Carnation Sedge (*C. panicea*), rushes (*Juncus* spp.) and an abundance of brown mosses, including *Campylium stellatum*, *Ctenidium molluscum*, *Calliargon cuspidatum* and *Bryum pseudotriquetrum*. This fen type also grades into marsh and wet grassland. Scrub and woodland is present on high ground in some areas, such as Ballymorisheen, Blind Lough, Ballyvogue, Dromlohan and Lough Feereagh. Species include Hawthorn

(*Crataegus monogyna*), Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*), Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), willow (*Salix* sp.), Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*) and Hazel (*Corylus avellana*). This is a useful faunal habitat particularly as it is adjacent to reedbeds and fens. A small area of limestone species-rich grassland is found to the north of Balinvirick fen. Species found which are typically associated with the habitat include the Earlypurple Orchid (*Orchis mascula*), Carlina Thistle (*Carlina vulgaris*) and Mountain Everlasting (*Antennaria dioica*). Snipe use the tall marsh vegetation at the edge of the fens. Birds of prey such as Sparrowhawk feed over the reedbeds and scrubland areas of the site. Land use in the area is quite intensive, with improved grassland extending down relatively steep slopes to the edge of the fens/loughs. New drainage or the deepening of existing drains poses a threat to the aquatic habitats at the site. In some instances, the fens appear to be drying out. This site is of conservation value because it supports two fen types, each of which exhibit many sub-types. Cladium fen is listed as an Annex I priority habitat under the E.U. Habitats Directive. These wetland habitats of fen, reedbeds, open water, marsh and wet grassland are also valuable in that they supply a refuge for fauna in an otherwise intensively managed countryside.

Barrigone SAC Site Synopsis

Barrigone is situated approximately 5 km west of Askeaton, Co. Limerick. The site comprises an area of dry, species-rich, calcareous grassland and patches of scrub on a gentle, north-east-facing slope. The underlying limestone outcrops occasionally, and the proximity of the site to the Shannon Estuary adds a maritime influence.

The open calcareous grassland supports an impressive range of plant species. Cowslip (*Primula veris*), Mountain Everlasting (*Antennaria dioica*), Carlina Thistle (*Carlina vulgaris*), Wild Thyme (*Thymus praecox*), Wood Sage (*Teucrium scorodonia*) and Violets (*Viola* spp.) are present, while Burnet Rose (*Rosa pimpinellifolia*) is abundant and scattered throughout the grassland. The maritime influence is evident through the presence in the sward of Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*). The orchid flora is particularly well-developed and diverse, with eight species recorded on recent visits. These include Fragrant Orchid (*Gymnadenia conopsea*), Frog Orchid (*Coeloglossum viride*), Butterfly Orchid (*Platanthera bifolia*), Pyramidal Orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*) and the scarce Irish Orchid (*Neotinea maculata*). A range of scrub types are present, including a dense stand of Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) towards the south, and a small area dominated by Juniper (*Juniperus communis*) in the north. Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) and Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) also form scrub patches, and these tend to be less species-rich. Hairy Violet (*Viola hirta*), a species protected under the Flora (Protection) Order, 1999, occurs at Barrigone. The site also holds a large population of the Marsh Fritillary butterfly (*Euphydryas aurinia*), a species listed under Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The primary threat to this site is quarrying. Grazing is also an important factor; overgrazing would cause damage to the vegetation, while under-grazing would allow scrub encroachment at the expense of grassland

species which require more open Version date: 22.08.2013 2 of 2
 000432_Rev13.Doc conditions. A balance between scrub and grassland is also important for invertebrate species. A number of factors, including substrate, bedrock, microclimate and maritime influence, contribute to the floristic richness at Barrigone and hence to the ecological interest of this site. The presence of rare species of plant and invertebrate highlight the site's conservation value.

The following table assesses the potential for impacts to each individual conservation interest of each Natura 2000 site within 15km of the study area and thereby determines the need for mitigation and further analysis through Stage 2 NIS

	Conservation Interest	Assessment of Potential Impacts	Mitigation required
Stack's to Mullaghareirk Mountains, West Limerick Hills and Mount Eagle SPA (004161)	Hen Harrier (Circus cyaneus) [A082]	No significant negative impacts are envisaged for this habitat. Potential nesting or foraging habitat does not exist within or adjacent to the footprint of the works.	No
Askeaton Fen Complex SAC (0002279)	[7211] Cladium Fens	No significant negative impacts are envisaged for this habitat. This habitat does not exist within the footprint of the works, nor is the site hydrologically connected to this habitat	No
	[7230] Alkaline Fens	No significant negative impacts are envisaged for this habitat. This habitat does not exist within the footprint of the works, nor is the site hydrologically connected to this habitat	No
Barrigone SAC (000432)	[5130] Juniper Scrub	No significant negative impacts are envisaged for this habitat. This habitat does not exist within the footprint of the works.	No
	[6210] Orchid-rich Calcareous Grassland*	No significant negative impacts are envisaged for this habitat. This habitat does not exist within	No

		the footprint of the works.	
	[8240] Limestone Pavement	No significant negative impacts are envisaged for this habitat. This habitat does not exist within the footprint of the works.	No
	[1065] Marsh Fritillary (Euphydryas aurinia)	No significant negative impacts are envisaged for this habitat. During the site visit, the larval food plant devils bit scabius <i>Succisa pratensis</i> did not exist within the footprint of the works.	No

Conclusion

In conclusion it has been determined that the works as outlined above in the "Proposed Works" section of this document will not have a significant negative impact on a Natura 2000 site.

Photographs and Maps



Plate 1: Distance from proposed site and the Stack's to Mullaghareirk Mountains, West Limerick Hills and Mount Eagle SPA (004161)

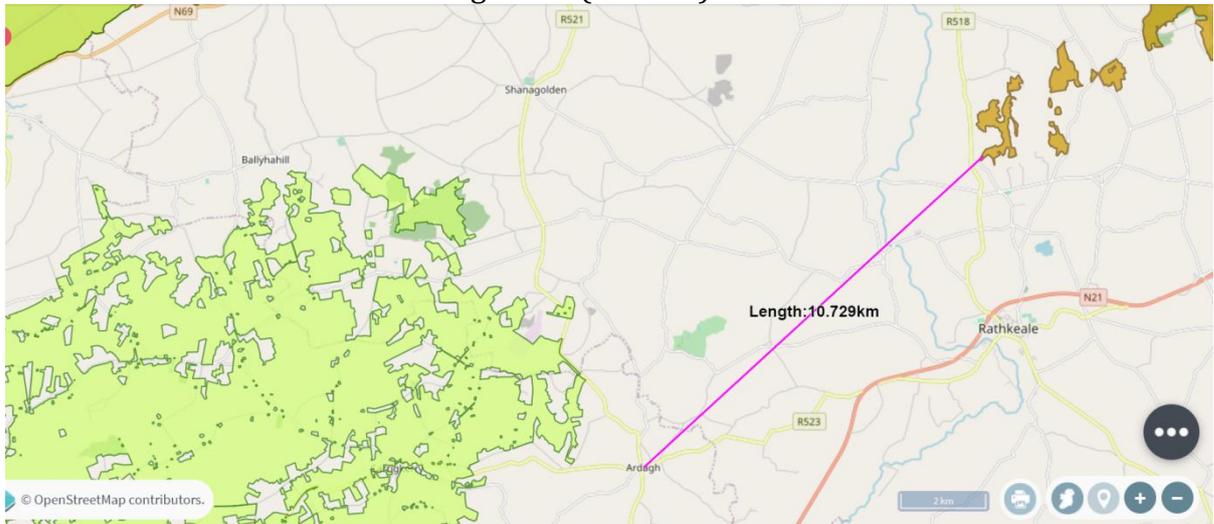


Plate 2: Distance from the proposed site and the Askeaton Fen Complex SAC (0002279)

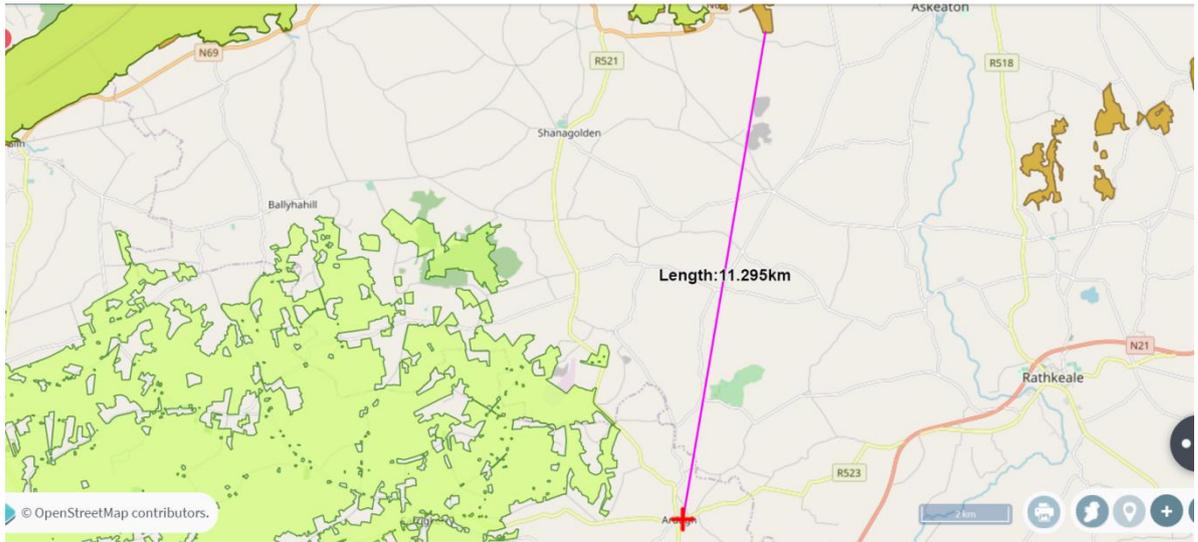


Plate 3: Distance from proposed site and Barrigone SAC (000432)



Plate 4: Ardagh Station House Layout Plan

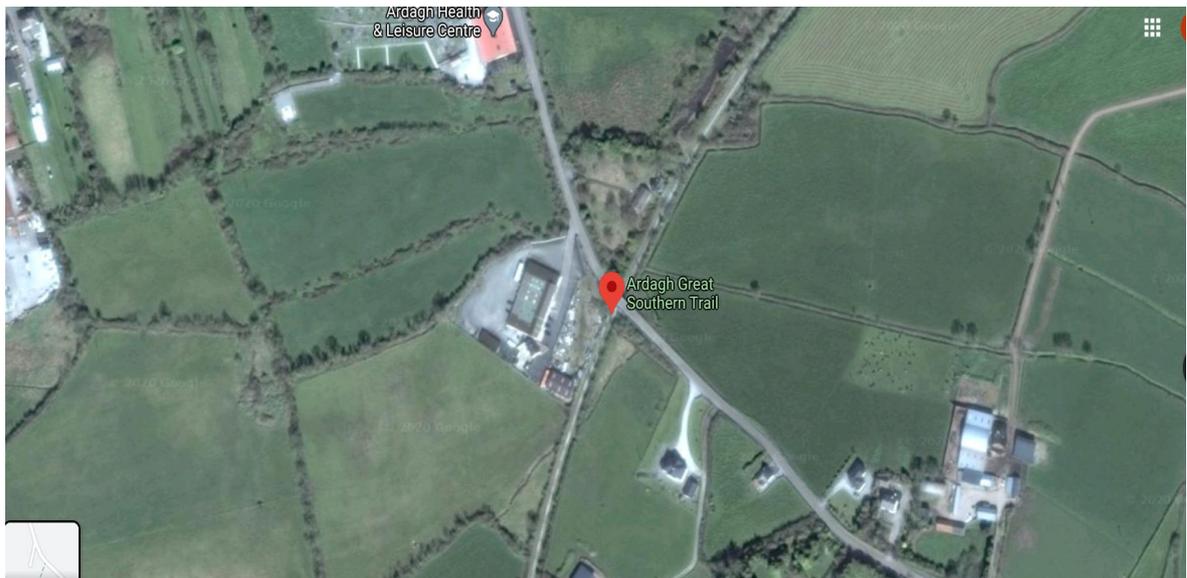


Plate 5: Location of proposed works

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