



Grid Link: response from Mountaineering Ireland to public consultation on route corridor options

January 2014

(revised submission, replaces December 2013 submission)

1. Introduction

Mountaineering Ireland is aware of the widespread concern about the Grid link Project. In this submission we wish to bring attention to the impact that the proposed high voltage overhead power line would have on sensitive upland and rural landscapes, and the experience of those who use Ireland's mountains for recreation.

2. Mountaineering Ireland

Mountaineering Ireland is the representative body for walkers and climbers on the island of Ireland. Mountaineering Ireland is recognised as the National Governing Body for the sport of mountaineering by both the Irish Sports Council and Sport Northern Ireland. The term mountaineering refers to a wide spectrum of activities that includes walking, rambling, hillwalking, rock and ice-climbing, bouldering and alpinism. Mountaineering Ireland has over 11,500 members, comprising 161 clubs and approximately 1300 individual members (October 2013).

The work of Mountaineering Ireland includes:

- Representing the interests of walkers and climbers;
- Providing a comprehensive range of services to members;
- Improving and securing access to Ireland's mountains, hills, forests, crags, and coast;
- Promoting conservation and responsible use of the upland environment;
- Encouraging safe practice and promoting skills and leadership training.

3. Context for submission

Mountaineering Ireland, as the representative body for walkers and climbers in Ireland, has a particular interest in the upland environment - hills, mountains, forests, bogland, sea cliffs and associated areas. While restricted in their extent, the uplands are very significant elements in Ireland's landscape, providing defining geographic features, some of our most beautiful scenery and our largest areas of relatively wild land.

Ireland has a very limited stock of wild areas, and we are using these up at an alarming rate. Within the scope of limited resources, Mountaineering Ireland examines development proposals which may further erode the remoteness and natural beauty of our upland landscapes. It is Mountaineering Ireland's assertion that protecting the natural and undeveloped character of Ireland's upland environment should be a key concern in the identification of the least constrained corridor for the Grid Link Project.

In the absence of a coherent landscape policy for Ireland, major infrastructural projects such as Grid Link, which affect a number of different counties, with varying degrees of landscape protection, require extremely careful consideration.

Sparsely populated rural landscapes are particularly vulnerable as there are fewer people to argue for their protection. Yet the small area of undeveloped upland landscape or wild land which remains in Ireland is a priceless national asset, the enjoyment of which for recreational or other sustainable uses, is vital to the physical, mental, recreational, emotional and spiritual well-being of the nation as a whole. Research by Fáilte Ireland amongst overseas visitors consistently shows that Ireland's people, and our beautiful scenery, remain our main competitive advantages when compared with other destinations (Fáilte Ireland, 2013). This national capital could easily be squandered by the location of industrial infrastructure which should be sited elsewhere in more appropriate and less damaging locations.

4. Mountaineering Ireland's view on the corridor options

Mountaineering Ireland's main concerns when considering the Grid Link route options were how the 400kv power line will:

1. Affect sensitive upland and rural landscapes;
2. Impact on the experiences of walkers and climbers.

Mountaineering Ireland makes the following comments with regard to the route corridor options:

K9 and K10 route options – impact on the Comeragh Mountains

The Comeragh Mountains dominate the landscape of County Waterford and consequently they hold a special place in the hearts and minds of visitors and locals. The Comeraghs represent Waterford's greatest visual and recreational asset. The K9 and K10 route options are very much within the apron of the Comeragh Mountains, and as such would detract from the landscape and tourism value of the area.

The K9 route option which runs southwards from Rathgormack to join with the K10 route at Mahon Bridge passes within a couple of kilometres of the steep east wall of the Comeragh Mountains, and within 3km of Coumshingaun, a very popular recreation area and reputed to be the finest glacial corrie in Ireland or Britain.

The K10 route would be within four kilometres of the viewing points on the road to the Mahon Falls, one of Waterford's premier tourist attractions.

The landscape impact of the K9 route would be particularly acute where it rises to cross the ridge between Kilclooney Bridge and Croughaun Hill as the pylons would be highly visible on the skyline. The impact would not be nearly so great were the corridor to run to the eastern side of Croughaun Hill.

While the impact of the pylons would be noticeable when viewed from the R676 (the scenic Comeragh Drive), the N25 south of Lemybrien and other roads in the area, it is also important to consider that views are experienced from places other than public roads.

Where pylon lines run below steep mountains they make a strong line against a varied landscape, resulting in a jarring impact when looked down upon from the hills above. The harsh, straight lines of the nearby power line would detract from the quality of the views experienced by hillwalkers, all the way from Farbreaga at the southern end of the range to the northern end of the Knockanaffrin Ridge. This includes such iconic points as the top of the Mahon Falls, the circuit around Coumshingaun and Crotty's Rock.

The Comeraghs is one of Ireland's most popular mountain ranges, with Mountaineering Ireland clubs from Cork to Dublin all including this area in their walking programme. In addition to the impact on hillwalkers, the pylon line would also be sharply visible from the main rock-climbing crags in the Comeraghs - Coumshingaun, Foill an Priosun, Fauscoum, Crotty's Rock and the crags in the Mahon Valley and Coum Tay.

K2 route option – impact on the Galtee Mountains and the Knockmealdowns

The K2 route corridor runs parallel to the main ridge of the Galtee Mountains, Ireland's highest inland mountain range, which culminates in the peak of Galtymore (919m). As with the Comeragh Mountains, the Galtees is a hugely popular range with walkers. In addition to supporting the activities of the many local walking clubs, the area hosts a number of walking festivals and challenge events annually, drawing visitors from a wide area and making a valuable contribution to local businesses.

The Vee road on the northern side of the Knockmealdown Mountains is famous for its panoramic view across the Golden Vale towards the Galtee Mountains, an image frequently used in tourist literature for the area. That iconic view would be marred by the proposed pylon line. The pylon line would also diminish the views enjoyed by walkers along the ridge of the Galtee Mountains and the Knockmealdowns.

D6/D7, D10 and D2 routes – impact on the Blackstairs Mountains

The views experienced by hillwalkers on parts of the Blackstairs Mountains would be affected in a similar way to those in the Comeraghs, with walkers looking down on harsh, straight power lines. The western side of the Blackstairs is steeper, with the views from Slievebawn (probably climbed more than any other hill in the Blackstairs), Mount Leinster, Blackstairs Mountain and the ridge to its south all being affected by the D6/D7 and D10 route options. The views south eastwards from Blackstairs Mountain would also be affected by the D2 route option. It is worth bearing in mind that this vista is important due to the presence of forestry on the eastern side of the ridge to the south of Blackstairs Mountain.

The sensitive and historic landscape to the east of St. Mullins could not easily absorb a pylon line. With its strong association with the River Barrow, and outstanding scenery, this is a regionally important corridor for tourism and recreation.

D2 route – impact on the Wicklow Way and the Shillelagh area

To the west and northwest of Shillelagh, Co. Wicklow, the D2 corridor coincides with approximately 2km of the Wicklow Way, Ireland's first waymarked trail. The Wicklow Way remains one of Ireland's most popular marked walking routes, and one of only five nationally considered to have the potential to reach international standard in the short-term (NTO, 2010, p.25). Selection of this corridor would have a major impact on the experience of walkers using this particularly peaceful section of the Wicklow Way.

The imposition of a 400kv power line would significantly alter the character of this traditional rural landscape. In addition, construction of a power line here would almost certainly result in the loss of many deciduous trees and possibly require upgrading of the narrow road network in the area.

5. General comments Grid Link and Grid25

Mountaineering Ireland urges EirGrid to evaluate the options for placing these high voltage lines underground, at least for sections of the line that run through scenic landscapes. In addition to the comments above regarding the value of Ireland's scenery to our tourism industry, it is notable that in a 2012 survey of attitudes to wind farms in the Republic of Ireland, domestic and overseas visitors gave an overwhelmingly negative response (80%) to the impact of pylons on the Irish landscape (Millward Brown Lansdowne, 2013).

Where underground is not an option, Mountaineering Ireland recommends that power lines are routed close to motorways or other major roads, where the character of the landscape has already been significantly altered by major infrastructure.

It is welcome that a range of tower designs is being considered, however it is Mountaineering Ireland's view that all the options are quite angular and will have a very significant impact in natural and rural landscapes where straight lines and tall structures are not the norm. Of the designs shown on the website, the Monopole options would seem to have slightly less visual impact. Using steel that is painted grey might help to ameliorate the landscape impact.

6. Closing comments

We are fortunate to have great diversity and rich quality in Ireland's rural landscapes. Mountaineering Ireland's particular concern is mountain and wild landscapes, which we see as being the most untouched and therefore the most worthy of protection. In situations such as this, where in the face of strong opposition, choices are being made between route options, it is imperative that the wise management and protection of Ireland's outstanding natural assets remains a priority.

We trust you will take Mountaineering Ireland's views and recommendations into consideration in the process of identifying the least constrained corridor option for the Grid Link Project.

7. Further information

Mountaineering Ireland would be happy to elaborate on, or discuss, any of the ideas contained in this submission.

Please contact:

Karl Boyle (Chief Executive Officer)

Mountaineering Ireland, Irish Sport HQ, National Sports Campus, Blanchardstown, Dublin 15.

Telephone: 0 1 6251115

E-mail: karl@mountaineering.ie

Website: www.mountaineering.ie

8. References

Fáilte Ireland (2013) *Ireland's Irish tourism at its most competitive in over a decade*, published by Fáilte Ireland, <http://www.failteireland.ie/Utility/Media-Centre/Irish-tourism-at-its-most-competitive-in-over-a-de.aspx>

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NTO (2010) *Setting New Directions – A Review of National Waymarked Ways in Ireland*, published by the National Trails Office / Irish Sports Council, available online http://www.irishtrails.ie/National_Trails_Office/Publications/Trail_Development/.