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St. Ita's & St. Mary's Special Schools

Planning Report

for

Louth County Council

7th July 2023

Job ref: 2575

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 General

This report supports the drawings and documents listed in the Schedule of Planning documents included in **Appendix A**, in the application for Planning Permission for the development of a new school building for St. Ita's and St. Mary's Special Schools at Cement Road, Mell, Drogheda, Co. Louth.

Drogheda is classified as a Regional Growth Centre with a population in 2016 of 41,000 making it the largest town in Ireland at the time. Supporting this population, is a wide range of services and amenities including an extensive convenience and comparison retail portfolio in town centre and edge of centre locations, a regional hospital at Our Lady of Lourdes, primary and secondary schools, an adult education facility, community centres, play parks, and open spaces, as well as a range of local and international businesses, production, and manufacturing facilities located in the business and enterprise parks in the town.

The development will consist of a new special school campus for St. Ita's and St Mary's Special Schools, provided in a part single, two and three-storey building arranged as 2 linked blocks, including upgraded access road to be constructed for the shared use with the adjacent Pitch & Putt club. The proposed building will contain 20 no. classrooms for St. Ita's, 17 no. classrooms for St. Mary's, associated clinician and educational support rooms, hydrotherapy pool and all ancillary spaces with total floor area of circa 9586m².

The applicant is The Department of Education (DoE). Louth County Council (LCC) are the legal owners of the proposed school site which will ultimately be transferred to DoE ownership once planning permission is obtained. Works are also proposed to the shared parking area provided adjacent to the Pitch & Putt Club on lands which are in the ownership of Irish Cement. Letters of consent from LCC and Irish Cement are provided in respect of this land and forms part of this planning submission – refer to **Appendix B**.

Furthermore, to facilitate the development it is necessary to carry out some additional works outside the site boundary, within the public realm. These works include the provision of an upgraded pedestrian crossing point along Cement Road at the entrance to the development site and the adjacent Drogheda Hire entrance. Further detailed information is contained in the civil engineers planning documentation prepared by O'Connor Sutton Cronin Consulting Engineers (OCSC).

St. Ita's Special School is currently located at Crushrod Avenue, Drogheda, Co. Louth and St. Mary's Special School is currently located in Drumcar, Dunleer, Co. Louth.

2.0 Site and Planning Context

2.1 Site Location

The site for St. Mary's and St. Ita's Special Schools is located to the north-west of Drogheda along the southern side of Cement Road with shared access provided to the development site and the adjacent Killineer Pitch & Putt Club.

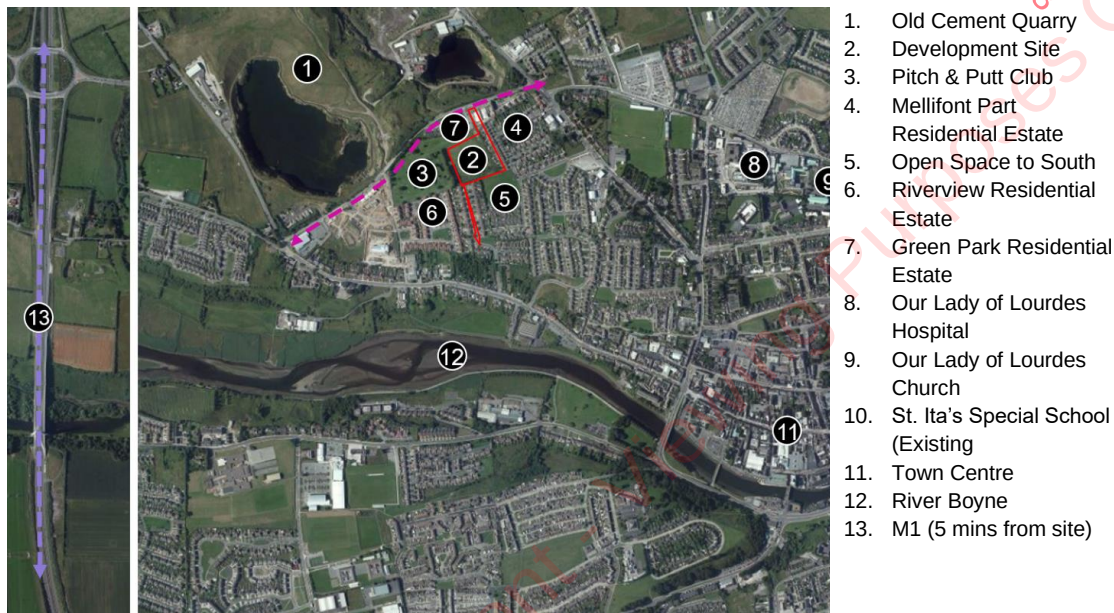


Figure 1: Site Context

2.2 Planning Context

Louth County Development Plan (2021-2027) was adopted in November 2021 and applies to the proposed development. The site is zoned G1 Community Facilities, with school developments acceptable in principle under this zoning objective.

3.0 Proposed Development

3.1 Site Description

The development site is a regular shaped greenfield site, extending to 2.28 hectares in area. The overall site is reasonably level with a continuous slope from a high point at the north-east to south-west, falling approx. 3m.

The existing access to the Pitch & Putt club off Cement Road will become a shared access route leading to the development site, which will become a public road and be taken in charge by LCC.

The site boundary to the north-east comprises existing palisade fence to the industrial area (Drogheda Hire) with the south-east and southern boundary comprising a mixture of low-level walls and fencing to the adjacent residential areas at Mellifont Park & Riverview. The western boundary comprises a high chain-link fence and existing leylandii & poplar trees against the pitch & putt club.

Existing overhead ESB lines run along the eastern and southern boundaries, which are intended to be retired and undergrounded as part of the proposed development. An existing underground combined mains sewer runs along the southern side of the site, which will also require diversion to facilitate the development. Utilities are available from Cement Road.

The surrounding lands all consist of mixture of residential areas, recreational areas in the form of the

pitch and putt to the west and the green open space to the south and light industrial use with the hire company adjacent to the junction with Cement Road.



Figure 2: View of existing parking area / site access road



Figure 3: View of main development area – currently green field



Figure 4: View of southern boundary illustrating existing overhead lines



Figure : View of existing Killineer Pitch & Putt Club to the north

3.2 Development Concept Strategy

The proposed scheme has been developed in consultation with the DoE and the Boards of Management of both St. Ita's and St. Mary's Special Schools. The proposed scheme has been developed to maximise the site potential while the landscape design has been developed to provide appropriate soft and hard play areas in accordance with DoE Design Guidelines.

The site layout has been designed to provide optimum site usage with segregated and designated staff parking, with accessible parking spaces and mini-bus set-down sited adjacent to the main entrance. The building form is used to the greatest extent possible to create distinct external spaces the south east and west, ensuring that visually intrusive boundary treatments are kept to a minimum, with good passive supervision of all areas within the site boundary. The proposed site layout and building form has been developed to provide significant setbacks from neighbouring residential development to the east and the south.



Figure 6. Development Concept Strategy

3.3 Proposed Site Strategy

The proposed site layout has been developed around a shared parking area being developed on grade toward the northern side of the site, split into two areas following the natural topography of the existing site, one which is developed between the northern boundary and into the adjacent pitch and putt, which sits at an upper level connected by steps to a lower plateau containing the set-down and queuing space, while the other parking area sits to the west of the proposed set-down / turning circle. The building addresses the covered set-down bays which are arranged across the front elevation. This arrangement allows for clear wayfinding on approach, with the entrances to both schools clearly delineated and visible from the site entrance with the covered canopy allowing clear orientation for all mini-bus arrivals to the site.

Given the constrained site, the extent of parking required, external play amenity areas associated with the two schools, the approach has been to deliver the school as a connected single, 2 & 3 storey building. This allows for a more compact footprint on the site and allows for shared synergies internally. This necessitates the provision of rooftop play spaces to allow for access to proximal external amenity space from upper floor classrooms for both St. Mary's and St. Ita's.

The main entrances to each school are clearly expressed at recessed areas captured either side of the shared General-Purpose Hall. Here a curved splayed wall with accent colour render allows for a clear legibility and identity to the two school entrances which sit at the front of the building, while being contained in a single connected block.



Figure 7. Proposed Site Plan

3.4 Access and Parking

Vehicular access to the site is provided from the upgraded shared access road to the north, which provides access to both the school site and the adjacent Pitch & Putt Club. The internal site access road is one way at the set-down, queuing spaces and turning circle. Staff / visitor parking is provided to the west and north.

While there is a drop in level from the northern parking area to the school building, the roads, paths,

parking and set down levels are designed to reduce the extent of retaining walls, and ensure access is gently sloped and accessible.

The total parking provision is 145 no. including 7 no. accessible spaces, which allows for 15 no. to be provided for the exclusive use of the Pitch & Putt Club. Staff parking has been provided in line with DoE brief requirements which allows for 70 no. parking spaces for St. Ita's, including 65 no. for staff and 5 no. for visitors and 60 no. parking spaces for St. Mary's including 55 no. for staff and 5 no. for visitors.

Due to the unique needs of the cohort of students attending each of the schools all pupils arrive to school by bus or taxi and there are no students arriving via parent drop off, walking or cycling. Given that the vast majority of students arrive to the school by mini-bus, the set-down area has been given priority and afforded the optimum relationship to the main entrance to the building. The set down area provides for 8 no. covered set down bays along the north elevation of the building, with a further 12 no. queuing spaces provided on the internal road and turning circle, to cater for the projected number of buses. The set-down spaces themselves are angled to facilitate ease of reversing manoeuvres and to reduce / avoid complex vehicular movements to access each covered bay in recognition of the fact that it may take a substantial period of time for staff to assist students to enter/exit vehicles. Cycle parking will be provided close to the entrance of the schools, which is only intended for use by staff / visitors. A Mobility Management Plan has been developed by OSCS in consultation with the Schools and is included as part of this planning application. .

3.5 New Building Massing

The new school has a compact footprint, positioned predominantly toward the centre of the site. Arranged as two intersecting blocks, the east-west orientated block is 3 storeys, with the north south block 2 storeys. The building mass relates to the existing context, reducing in scale as it nears the existing residential housing along the eastern side of the site.

The main entrance to each school is located either side of the shared General-Purpose Hall, which is expressed as a single 2 storey volume externally. This will allow for each school to be afforded their own identity along the front elevation through appropriate signage and use of colour. Both entrances relate directly to the shared set-down area along the front of the building and provide for full canopy cover to the entrance door.

Teaching spaces are generally orientated east, south or west, with accommodation generally located along both sides of the circulation spaces to ensure an efficient and compact plan. A centralised top lit dining space / atrium sits at the centre of the plan for each school, as a further focal point for each school beyond the GP hall which sits adjacent to the main entrance. This helps offer a visual connection to each floor immediately upon arrival, to aid in student / staff flow, orientation, and wayfinding.

The extensive flat roof areas proposed allow for both rooftop play area to be provided at first and second floor and the guarding has been carefully considered to prevent overlooking of the neighbouring dwellings to the east. The flat roof to the 3 storey element allows for heat pump plant, PV arrays and enclosed tank room to be provided, all served by full stairs access and collective protection in the form of a full height solid parapet / guarding affording safe access for maintenance.

The scheme provides secure play areas to the south, east and west of the new school building overlooked by teaching spaces, including 1 no. MUGA as per the brief along with additional areas of rooftop play, given the multi-storey building proposed.



Figure 8. Concept view looking toward set-down / main entrances

3.6 Material and Finishes

The proposed elevations are designed to give a robust yet welcoming exterior to the school. The buildings external envelope is traditional cavity construction finished in a combination of brick and self-coloured render in a number of different textures and colours to provide visual interest along the main elevation and distinct identities to both schools, while being appropriate to the suburban setting.

Aluminium, double glazed windows / curtain walling are proposed throughout with louvered grilles to accommodate inlets/outlets from a mechanical ventilation and heat recovery System (MVHR).

Roofs are primarily flat with a bitumen membrane roof covering are proposed to accommodate the required PV panels and the heat pump plant required at roof level. A full height solid parapet / guarding is generally provided to roof areas, affording safe access for maintenance. External aluminium rainwater goods are proposed throughout. The main 2 storey block to the east also functions as an external rooftop play space, with perimeter guarding and fencing provided.



Figure 9. Proposed Materiality – Brick & Render with smooth textured and coloured accents

3.7 Sustainability & SuDS

Sustainability is central to the design of the proposed building. A fabric first approach has been adopted and the thermal performance of the building envelope is designed to exceed current building regulations & standards.

The elevations are designed to provide optimum natural daylight to all teaching spaces to meet the Department of Education's (DoE) technical standards. This reduces the electrical load for lighting while maximising passive solar gain. Mechanical ventilation and heat recovery (MVHR) is provided to all teaching spaces. 90% of the heating load will be from heat pump system. Arrays of photovoltaic (PV) panels for each school are provided to the flat roof of the main 3-storey block.

The SuDS approach is described in the Civil Engineering report prepared by OCSC which forms part of this planning application submission.

3.8 Landscape Design

Cunnane Stratton Reynolds Landscape Architects (CSR) have been engaged to collaborate on the project's landscape design. The design approach is to enhance the overall site strategy by providing for appropriate hard and soft play areas to the perimeter areas of the proposed building, to maximise the functionality of the various spaces, to ground the new building through appropriate soft planting and to soften the boundary treatments and internal fencing.

Soft landscape elements / planting have been incorporated throughout to aid in the development of a stimulating sensory environment for students and to help soften the appearance of any hard boundaries and divisions throughout.

The landscape scheme sees the incorporation of formal playground areas, natural play areas and outdoor classrooms and horticulture areas along with a sensory garden. Outdoor footpaths are designed to be continuous with loops to help ensure students never feel curtailed and to enhance the feeling of space within the relatively compact external environment. The design of the external spaces has extended to the rooftop play spaces provided at first and second floor, to ensure all external spaces appear cohesive.

Hard Landscape Treatments:

Internal roads are to be tarmacadam and car park spaces / set down areas are to be provided with permeable paving. The pedestrian pathways are to be concrete, with paving to key areas such as the main entrance area and other key areas to the building perimeter.

The soft play areas and rooftop play spaces will be surfaced in rubberised play / 'Wetpour' surface. The proposed trails / footpaths to the perimeter of the play spaces will be surfaced in a combination of 'Wetpour' play surface, concrete and paving.

1 set of external steps are incorporated to facilitate access from the upper shared parking area to the lower parking area adjacent to the building.

Seating will be incorporated along the footpaths to form incidental social / teaching spaces and allow for students to have availability of spaces for quiet time and rest areas away from the main activities.

The full landscape design is described in the Landscape Design Statement prepared by Cunnean Stratton Reynolds which forms part of this planning application.



Figure 10. Concept view from south west looking main block

3.9 Boundary Treatments

A description of the proposed works to the site boundaries are set out below:

Eastern Boundary:

The new eastern boundary will consist of a new 2.4m high solid timber fence to address the varying existing site boundaries in this area between the adjacent residential gardens and commercial yard. This site boundary will also be reinforced with planting to soften the visual impact - refer to landscape plan for further detail.

Southern Boundary:

The new southern site boundary will comprise a new 2.4m high metal mesh fence, which will be reinforced with planting to soften the visual impact.

Western Boundary:

The new western boundary will comprise a 2.4m high metal mesh fence, which will be reinforced with planting to soften the visual impact. An additional 6m high ball safety netting will also be provided to

prevent balls from the adjacent Pitch & Putt Club from entering the school site.

Northern Boundary:

The new northern site boundary will comprise a new pedestrian and vehicular access gates and piers adjacent to the new ESB substation. A new concrete retaining wall will extent further west to negotiate between the upper and lower car parking areas, with new 1.2m high galvanised railings on top forming a secure boundary line. A new pedestrian access gate is to be provided centrally where external steps are provided to allow for access between the two parking areas.

Site Entrance:

The new open site entrance adjacent to Cement Road will comprise a 1.8m high brick wall with concrete capping and associated signage. A further gated entrance is provided inside the site boundary at the ESB sub-station to secure the perimeter of the school site.

A drawing detailing each of the boundary treatments proposed is included with the application.

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