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ANNEX 2 **RURAL DESIGN GUIDE**

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ANNEX 2

Introduction

This design guide has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Longford County Development Plan, 2009-2015 and the Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Sustainable Rural Housing, published by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

These guidelines are not intended as a set of rigid, prescriptive rules to which all new development must adhere, but a guiding set of principles that will act as an aid to potential developers, particularly in the early stages of the planning process.

Longford County has a unique and strong identity and character. One of the principal aims of this guide is to retain and strengthen this character for the benefit of its population and future generations. This does not mean that the countryside should be static or decline, it simply means that care should be exercised in the location and siting of developments in the Countryside.

This document has been compiled in the form of sections that follow a logical sequence in the establishment of a dwelling, from concept phase onto location and through to layout and detailed house design.

Photographs are provided throughout to illustrate points made in the text. These photos are from the draft National Inventory of Architectural Heritage for County Longford and as such, have a particular

significance for the County.

It should be noted that pre-planning meetings are always advised in the case of applications for the development of houses in rural County Longford to discuss potential issues and prevent delays in the planning process once initiated.

Stage 1 - Basic Concepts

The basic requirements of the end user should be considered prior to the drawing up of detailed plans for the development of a dwelling in rural County Longford. It is recommended that the potential applicant engage the services of a suitably qualified professional at this stage.

These requirements will have significant implications for the location, design, layout and appearance of the finished dwelling and should be carefully considered. They will include, but are not limited to, the following issues:

Need Type

There are many categories of home owner and the house location, siting and design should be chosen to reflect this need. These include owners with young families, empty-nesters, holiday homeowners, home-office users and those with sheltered housing requirements. The category of user should be reflected in the design process.

Longevity and adaptability

The ability of the dwelling to accommodate the changing needs of a household, thereby allowing a family to reside in it over a lifetime, changing and adapting as needs change.

Sustainability

This incorporates the concepts outlined above, combined with location, siting, choice of building materials and finishes and the use of design initiatives and technology to reduce dependence on fossil fuels.

The location of the dwelling in relation to places of work, education, recreation and other activities is a consideration, as is the siting of the dwelling to achieve maximum shelter from prevailing winds and rain while benefiting from solar energy.

Choice of materials is important in terms of the sustainability of their production methods, how they are delivered from their place of manufacture and their inherent sustainability, i.e. how well do they wear and can they be repaired/maintained.

The use of alternative energy sources such as solar cells, geothermal solutions and wind energy should be considered at this point as it is much more efficient for these elements to be integrated into the overall house design rather than attempt to retrofit at a later date.

Budget

Transport, fuel requirements, decoration and furnishing, boundary and surface treatments are some of the many details that contribute to the ongoing development costs that may be hidden at the preliminary stages.

Stage 2 - Site Selection

Careful site selection can address many issues that could otherwise prove costly and time consuming to resolve at a later time in the design process. Developments should be integrated into and work with the landscape as opposed to dominating it, for example, sites with natural screening and shelter provided by hedgerows, trees and topography should be utilised to reduce the impact of the proposal in the wider landscape and preserve privacy.

Site selection with a view towards the utilisation of natural features will also reduce the need for costly earthworks and landscaping and increase the sustainability of the project (see Site Layout and Landscaping Sections in Stage 3).

The potential for the development to benefit from passive heat and solar energy through appropriate orientation should also be maximised, an important consideration at site selection stage.

Road safety is an important concern. Sites with poor access/sightlines or those that require the removal of significant amounts of roadside



Site selection that maximises the use of existing features will help to create an appropriate backdrop for a development, providing visual integration with its setting, privacy and shelter.



Hedgerows, ditches and other established roadside boundaries are important landscape elements that significantly contribute to the visual amenity and biodiversity of an area.

hedgerow should be avoided. New accesses onto National roads are generally not permitted.

The availability of services for the site should be considered as part of the site selection process and included in the budgeting phase. The visual impact of service/access provision can sometimes be greater than that of the development itself, i.e. overhead wiring, access roads cutting through contours, masts and aerials for T.V./broadband connection.

At this stage, potential applicants should consult the Longford County Development Plan for potential locational issues in terms of landscape vulnerability, which can include areas of archaeological, ecological and visual sensitivity. Other areas such as infrastructural study corridors and areas of known aquifer vulnerability may be best avoided.

Stage 3 – Site Layout

A well considered site layout will maximise the benefits of choosing the appropriate site as outlined above. The layout will need to accommodate all aspects of the development, including domestic effluent disposal, site services and access.

Existing site features such as topography and landcover, farm buildings, walls etc. should be used to maximise privacy, screening and shelter. Avoid breaking the skyline in elevated areas as this adds significantly to visual impact.

The proposed dwelling should be located away from areas prone to flooding, where the water table is close to the surface or where drainage appears sluggish, as indicated by ground conditions such as seasonal ponding, poaching by livestock and a visual inspection of dominant vegetation types.

Developments should be carefully located on sloping sites to minimise cut and fill requirements.

Care should be taken to avoid vulnerable features such as wells and watercourses and potentially sensitive archaeological areas.

Maximising passive (and active) solar gain is an important element of the site layout process. Generally, glazing should be minimised on northern elevations to conserve heat and maximised on southern facades to capture solar gain (this issue will be addressed further in *Stage 4 – House Design*).

Access and Roadside Frontage

The majority of dwellings in rural County Longford are located along public roadsides. Traditionally, these dwellings were located on the roadside edge, many at a 90 degree angle, sometimes with outbuildings opposite, creating a street-like relationship with the carriageway.



The advent of high speed vehicles and the necessary accompanying road safety standards has abolished this practice in the development of new dwellings.

Dwellings now tend to be set-back, with a large front lawn, running parallel to the road frontage with the original boundary treatment removed and a straight tarmac driveway cutting across contours from the entrance back to the dwelling.

Driveways and entrances create a significant visual impact, particularly in upland areas and roadsides with well established hedgerows and a high level of visual enclosure.

Access roads should be unobtrusively located and designed to follow, as opposed to cut across, land

contours. Driveway design should incorporate surface water drainage provisions to prevent run-off on to adjacent roadways and subsequent surface damage.

Hard surfaces and parking areas should be screened from view where possible, preferably to the rear of the building(s).



A combination of sympathetic boundary treatment, good site selection and appropriate driveway design enhances an attractive rural setting.

Accesses and front boundary treatments should aim to minimise removal of existing hedgerows, ditches and stone walls, which are often significant contributors to the character and biodiversity of a rural area. The maintenance of the hedgerow at a suitable height or the relocation of the proposed entrance to a more appropriate position should be considered above removal.



Whitewashed, barrel-style piers with stone wall splays on each side form an attractive entranceway commonly seen in rural areas.



Care should be taken at design stage to ensure adequate sightlines are achieved by maintaining walls and vegetation below 1.2m for required distances. There are a broad range of traditional entrance treatments in County Longford, some of which are pictured here.



Where removal is unavoidable, sensitive set-back replacement should be carried out to reflect the original treatment and retain the boundary as a functioning wildlife corridor where possible.

Proposed new boundary treatments and accesses should take cognisance of traditional practice in the area and aim to enhance, rather than detract from the existing roadside character.



Stone walls are commonly used, into which features and detailing have often been inserted to add interest and break monotony. Backplanting with vegetation and/or the use of native climbing species can be used to soften the effect of a development from the roadside.



Pedestrian gates were once a common and attractive feature of front boundary walls that have waned in popularity as vehicles have become more prolific. Painted wrought iron gates and associated steps, piers and stiles are recognisable features throughout the rural area that create interest and variety in frontage treatments. Front boundary walls, where blockwork is used, should always be plastered/rendered and/or painted and capped.



Landscaping

The primary purpose of landscaping in these guidelines is to link the proposed dwelling with its surrounding countryside. As discussed in previous sections, mature trees and hedgerows on or adjacent to the site should be retained where possible.

Additional planting should utilise native species indigenous to the area in order to help the proposal blend effectively. Large expanses of “pool table” lawns, edged with exotic species and highly visible against surrounding agricultural landscapes, should be avoided. Plant groupings should form organic shapes and soften building lines from external view points.

Planting of shelter belts using species indigenous to the local area can be useful in buffering high winds, creating shelter from driving rain and shade from strong sunshine, as well as increasing the privacy of dwelling and its attendant spaces.

The promotion of biodiversity and retention of wildlife corridors is an important consideration, particularly in or adjacent to protected habitats or other ecologically sensitive areas. Block planting of suitable native woodland species can address these issues.



Earthworks such as cut and fill should aim for gentle, natural looking slopes (Diagram 1) rather than truncated shelf-like projections with an artificial appearance (Diagram 2).



Excavated material should be spread to mould with and softly curve around the original contours. Additional planting should be utilised to further soften the outline of the dwelling against the face of the cut, thereby blending the development into the hillside.

Stage 4 - Detailed House Design

House design should be a detailed response to the specific conditions of the site, combined with the basic concepts identified at Stage 1.

Shape and form

Simple shapes work best in the Countryside. New developments should take their cues from the vernacular architecture that exists in the area. Bulky forms should be avoided or mitigated where possible by appropriate roof design and detailing (see Diagram) – long plans may prove a suitable alternative.



The roof profile, chimney positioning, porch detailing and window treatment on the house marked (1) above emphasises horizontal bulk and is at odds with traditional proportions and appearance.

Simple amendments such as those illustrated above (2) successfully address the balance and create a dwelling much more in keeping with County Longford vernacular building tradition.

Simple, clean roof lines are preferable to fussy complicated shapes. Pitches should generally fall in the range of 40° - 45°

Proportions are particularly important in rural situations in terms of visual impact. Care should be taken to preserve vertical emphasis on the front or visible elevation, and maintaining a high solid to void ratio (i.e. more wall than opening).

Distinctions are generally not made between single and two-storey dwellings, except where there are potential privacy/overlooking issues, where the dwelling is proposed in an elevated area and/or where the construction of a particular type prevails.



The labourer's cottage, pictured above, is a distinctive feature of Longford's rural environment and but one example of vernacular building type. These dwellings were constructed from the 1880's on and many remain in existence today, particularly in the south and east of the County and in the vicinity of the Canal.

These dwellings consist of a simple plan with the bedroom contained in the attic space. Simple roof profiles and horizontally emphasised proportions dominate the appearance.

Annexes and Garages

Annexes such as conservatories, sun-rooms and garages should appear as forms similar but subordinate to the main form of the dwelling. Materials used should reflect those of the main dwelling.

Garages should generally be separate from the main dwelling or appear so through appropriate setback.

Outbuildings were commonly grouped around the main dwelling, creating a courtyard or street-like enclosure or grouping of buildings. This clustering effect is more desirable than the establishment of large, stand alone double garage structures that compete with the main dwelling for visual dominance.

Materials and finishes

Traditionally, natural and locally sourced materials were favoured in dwelling construction. Traditional building forms, materials and detailing were designed as a response to local climatic conditions, reducing exposure to the elements and thereby minimising heat loss and water ingress.

Natural and traditional materials such as wood and stone also facilitate repair rather than replacement, e.g. uPVC versus wooden windows and doors, an important consideration in the sustainability of a development. uPVC does not lend itself to many of

the forms and designs found in its timber counterparts. In this regard uPVC doors and windows can appear overly emphasised and bulky in the context of a façade and should be avoided where possible.

Modern materials and heating methods have allowed a greater range of finishes and detailing, many of which can look incongruous and ill-suited to countryside situations.

In addition to visual considerations, the need for sustainable building solutions would point towards the use of locally sourced products that reduce dependence on fossil fuels in terms of their manufacture, transport and longevity.

Building features and finishes more suited to warmer climates, such as balconies and open arched porches, will be discouraged.

Natural, locally sourced stone will be considered as a finish material where appropriate, however, the use of reconstituted concrete cladding and other artificial cladding materials will be discouraged.



The above picture illustrates how annexes and extensions were addressed in their traditional form. The annexes are clearly subordinate to the main body of the dwelling, which maintains a stand alone presence and a distinct vertical emphasis in its proportions.

Windows

Painted hardwood finishes are favoured above uPVC and aluminium finishes, both in terms of appearance and sustainability.

Horizontally emphasised windows should be avoided, as should fussy uPVC glazing, particularly where sub-divided by internal glazing bars.

The windows pictured here illustrate traditional forms that exist in rural County Longford, many of which lend themselves to modern interpretation in terms of proportion and scale.

The use of plaster banding and reveals further defines the feature and creates interest. Note how division and sub-division are used to maintain a vertical emphasis in each case.

Casement windows should be designed with slender glazing members to prevent an overemphasis on the window frame to the detriment of the building as a whole. In this respect consideration should be given to the use of timber or coated aluminium as glazing materials as these appear less bulky than uPVC and offer a better visual integration than uPVC.



Doors and Porches

Doors should be simply designed and comprise a minimum of materials. Glazing should be restricted to the upper half of the door. Patio type or double doors should be avoided on the front elevation of the dwelling.

Porches and recessed doors were traditionally used to combat adverse weather conditions. Porches can also be used as a design feature to turn corners and create active frontage on two sides of a dwelling.

Fanlights and slit windows are often used to allow light in to hallways and entrance areas, usually with decorative effects such as stained glass and mullions.

The use of brightly painted hardwood doors can be a useful device for adding a splash of colour in to an otherwise neutral façade, with attractive results.



External finishes

The external finishes of a dwelling are particularly important in terms of its compatibility and ability to harmonise with the surrounding landscape. Painted nap plaster or rough/wet dash finishes are appropriate in this setting, as are coloured renders.

Large expanses of red and/or yellow brick are not appropriate in rural County Longford as they are not locally sourced, have not been traditionally used as a finish material and are more appropriate to urban locations. In certain circumstances and locations, and depending on the design of the dwelling, the limited use of brick as a detailing material only may be considered.

Dry dash finishes are difficult to maintain and have a tendency to leach minerals, leaving permanent and unsightly vertical streaks down external walls, and, as such, are not encouraged.



The use of brightly painted doors and windows can be used to brighten up a render finish.

Roofs

As discussed at *Stage 3*, roofs should be simply designed. This also follows for roofing materials which should be blue or blue/black slate or tile, with a matte or semi-matte finish. Ridge tiles should generally be of the same colour as the main roofing material, except in certain areas where terracotta/pointed ridges are part of the vernacular.

Pitched or hipped roofs are generally acceptable. Extensions or garages/outbuildings should have a similar roofing material of a similar pitch. Half-hips, Dutch gables and mansard roofs are generally not acceptable (with the exception of Ardagh village and surrounds, where half-hipped roofs are established by tradition).

The roof and roofing material is an important element in the visual impression of a dwelling, particularly in terms of how the bulk of the building is articulated. Traditional rural built forms were long in plan and appearance. Pitches are usually set between 40° - 45°.



Hipped roofs can be utilised to reduce the visual bulk of square plan houses, an effect that is negated where chimneys are placed at either gable end.

Chimneys are important visual features in a dwelling and should be located on the ridge line where possible, particularly in the case of hipped roofs, or located to the rear. The traditional style chimneys illustrated (right) are all substantial structures and read as strong design elements. Thin, insubstantial chimney structures should be avoided.

Care should be taken to create an overall design response at roof level. Aerials, satellite dishes and other receivers should be screened from view where possible.

