



CLIENT: Longford County Council

PROJECT: Aghafad Pedestrian & Cycle Scheme, Co.
Longford

Screening for Appropriate Assessment
Report.

Prepared by: AONA Environmental Consulting Ltd.

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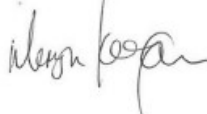
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1 INTRODUCTION

AONA Environmental Consulting Ltd. was commissioned by CST Engineers on behalf of Longford County Council to complete a Stage 1 Screening for Appropriate Assessment report under Article 6 of the EU Habitats Directive, for the proposed Aghafad Pedestrian & Cycle Scheme in Co Longford.

Screening for Appropriate Assessment is required under Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (the Habitats Directive). Where it cannot be excluded that a project or plan, either alone or in combination with other projects or plans, would have a significant effect on a European Site then same shall be subject to an appropriate assessment of its implications for the site in view of the site's conservation objectives. The current project is not directly connected with, or necessary for, the management of any European Site consequently the project has been subject to the Appropriate Assessment Screening process.

This document provides background information to assist the planning authority with a *Screening for Appropriate Assessment* exercise for the proposed development. It includes a description of the proposed development, a review of the Site's environmental setting, details of Natura 2000 sites within the potential zone of impact, an appraisal of *source-pathway-receptor* relationships, and an assessment of potential impacts in the absence of any best practice, mitigation or preventative measures.

This report was written by Olivia Maguire an experienced and qualified ecologist. She has a BSc in Geography and an MSc in Environmental Science from Queens University Belfast. She is a member of the Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management and operates in accordance with their code of professional conduct. She undertakes Appropriate Assessments for developments throughout Ireland and Northern Ireland, including infrastructural projects (roads, greenways, trails etc.), and a range of residential and commercial developments.

2 THE APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Legislative Context

Appropriate Assessment (AA) is an assessment of whether a plan or project, alone and in combination with other plans or projects, has the potential for significant effects on a designated European Site in view of the site's conservation objectives. The assessment of impacts on designated European sites i.e. Special Protection Areas for birds (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), derives from the EU Directive on the Conservation of Habitats, Flora and Fauna (92/43/EEC), more commonly known as the '*The Habitats Directive*' which provides legal protection for habitats and species of European importance. SPAs and SACs are sites that form

part of a network, known as Natura 2000 sites, designated across Europe in order to protect biodiversity within the European Union (EU).

Articles 6(3) and 6(4) of the Habitats Directive set out the decision-making tests for plans and projects likely to affect Natura 2000 sites. Article 6(3) establishes the requirement for Appropriate Assessment: *'Any plan or project not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the [Natura 2000] site but likely to have a significant effect thereon, either individually or in combination with other plans or projects, shall be subjected to appropriate assessment of its implications for the site in view of the site's conservation objectives. In 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 concerned and, if appropriate, after having obtained the opinion of the general public.'*

Article 6(4) states: *'If, in spite of a negative assessment of the implications for the [Natura 2000] 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, Member States 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.'*

Appropriate Assessment Methodology

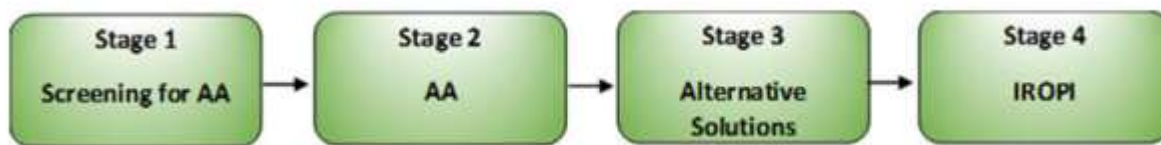
Article 6(3) of the EU Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) defines the requirement for Appropriate Assessment of certain plans and projects. In order to inform the requirements of this Screening Report the following guidance documents have been referred to:

- *Appropriate Assessment of Plans and Projects in Ireland - Guidance for Planning Authorities.* (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2010 revision);
- *Appropriate Assessment under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive: Guidance for Planning Authorities.* Circular NPWS 1/10 & PSSP 2/10;
- *Assessment of Plans and Projects Significantly Affecting Natura 2000 sites: Methodological Guidance on the Provisions of Article 6(3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC* (European Commission, 2001);
- *Managing Natura 2000 Sites: The Provisions of Article 6 of the Habitat's Directive 92/43/EEC* (European Commission, 2018);
- *Nature and Biodiversity Cases: Ruling of the European Court of Justice* (European Commission, 2006);

- *Guidance Document on Article 6(4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC. Clarification of the Concepts of Alternative Solutions, Imperative Reasons of Overriding Public Interest, Compensatory Measures, Overall Coherence.* Opinion of the European Commission (European Commission, 2007);
- *Guidance document on assessment of plans and projects in relation to Natura 2000 sites: a summary,* (European Commission, Directorate-General for Environment , 2022)

The Guidance documents outlines the European Commission’s methodological guidance, which promotes a four-stage process in completing an AA and outlines the issues and tests at each stage. An important aspect of the process is that the outcome at each successive stage determines whether a further stage in the process is required.

Appropriate Assessment Process (Source: DEHLG, 2009)



Stage 1: Screening - Screening is the process that addresses and records the reasoning and conclusions in relation to the first two tests of Article 6(3):

- whether a plan or project is directly connected to or necessary for the management of the site, and
- whether a plan or project, alone or in combination with other plans and projects, is likely to have significant effects on a Natura 2000 site in view of its conservation objectives.

A project may be “screened-in” if there is a possibility or uncertainty of significant adverse effects upon the European site, thus the process must proceed to Stage 2 (AA). If there is no evidence to suggest significant effects due to the proposed plan or development the project is “screened-out”, and AA is not required. This screening report provides the necessary information to enable the Competent Authority (Sligo Co Co) to screen the proposed project for the requirement to proceed to Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment.

Stage 2: Appropriate Assessment (AA) - This stage considers whether the plan or project, alone or in combination with other projects or plans, will have adverse effects on the integrity of a Natura 2000 site, and includes any mitigation measures necessary to avoid, reduce or offset negative effects. A Natura Impact Statement (NIS) containing a professional scientific examination of the proposal is produced and includes any mitigation measures to avoid, reduce or offset negative impacts.

Stage 3: Alternative Solutions - Where adverse effects on a European Site are identified in the AA process (detailed in the NIS), despite the prescription of mitigation, this third stage examines alternative ways of achieving the objectives of the project or plan that avoid adverse impacts on the integrity of the European Site.

Stage 4: Imperative Reasons of Overriding Public Interest (IROPI)/Derogation - This stage is required where an alternative solution is not available. In this situation, the project can only proceed for Imperative Reasons of Overriding Public Interest (IROPI), despite the plan or project resulting in adverse effects on European Site(s). This stage provides for an assessment of compensation measures to maintain or enhance the overall coherence of the Natura 2000 network. The Commission must be informed of the compensatory measures. Compensatory measures must be practical, implementable, likely to succeed, proportionate and enforceable, and they must be approved by the Minister.

In accordance with Section 3.2 of *Appropriate Assessment of Plans and Projects in Ireland*, a screening exercise comprises the following steps:

1. Description of the project and local site characteristics
2. Identification of relevant Natura 2000 sites, and compilation of information on their qualifying interests and conservation objectives
3. Assessment of potential impacts upon Natura 2000 sites, including:
 - Direct impacts (e.g. loss of habitat area, fragmentation)
 - Indirect impacts (e.g. disturbance of fauna, pollution of surface water)
 - Cumulative / 'in-combination' effects associated with other concurrent projects
4. Screening Statement with conclusions

Desktop Review

The following documents were referenced during the desk-top study in April 2023 to inform the Appropriate Assessment and the baseline ecology information:

- Online data available on European sites and habitats/species as held by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) from www.npws.ie, including conservation objectives documents
- Online data available on protected species as held by the National Biodiversity Data Centre (NBDC) from www.biodiversityireland.ie, specifically related to the records recorded within the 1 km grid squares (ITM) – N1373 and N1374 where the proposed works will occur. Protected species and invasive species were noted.
- Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland (Gilbert et al, 2021), available at <https://birdwatchireland.ie/birds-of-conservation-concern-in-ireland/>

- Information on the surface water network and surface water quality in the area available from www.epa.ie
- Information on soils, geology and hydrogeology in the area available from the Geological Survey Ireland (GSI) online Spatial Resources service. Available from <https://www.gsi.ie/en-ie/data-and-maps/Pages/Groundwater.aspx>
- Ordnance Survey of Ireland mapping and aerial photography available from www.osi.ie
- GeoHive online mapping (<https://geohive.ie/index.html>)
- Information on the proposed project supplied by CST Engineers Sligo, consultant engineers for the project.
- Longford County Development Plan 2021-2027
- County Longford heritage Plan 2019-2024, incorporating the Longford Biodiversity Action Plan
- Longford County Council Planning Portal

Ecological Walkover Survey

A site survey of the proposed project was undertaken on 26th April 2023 in which habitats on site were assessed and the suitability of the site to support plants, animals or habitats of note was also considered. The findings of the ecological survey were augmented by desktop research and review of available information.

3 DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED PROJECT

The active travel programme aims to develop high quality walking and cycling facilities to encourage more people to switch to active travel, thereby increasing health and lowering carbon emissions. One of several such active travel projects proposed for Longford County is the Aghafad pedestrian and cycle scheme.

Longford Town has grown significantly in recent decades indicative of a net-inflow of workers into the settlement owing to its robust employment base. The Council recognises the fundamental contribution cycling and walking to the overall wellbeing and quality of life aspects of residents, in addition to its environmental benefits. The Council will encourage and support the delivery of a high quality, permeable and attractive pedestrian and cycling network that allows for multiple direct connections between key destinations.

The proposed project (hereafter referred to as the scheme) covers a linear route of approx. 755 metres as shown in Figure 1. The scheme starts at a location on the L1127 Longford to Killashee road, opposite the premises of Cameron Ireland Limited. It continues east for approx. 470 metres adjoining the road, continuing south of the car park of Gaelscoil an Longfoirt, Longford Slashers GAA Club and the Backstage Theatre (See Figures 2 and 3). It then turns north, proceeding down

an existing asphalt track, east of Longford Slashers GAA pitches. This track is known as Prospect Woods (See Figure 3). The proposed scheme terminates at a watercourse known as the Royal Canal Way, where it joins with the existing cycle/pedestrian infrastructure running both sides of the canal. The proposed scheme will provide an important connection to this infrastructure and to the paths that run along the L1227 road into the town centre.

Figure 1: Site Location



Figure 2: Site Layout 1

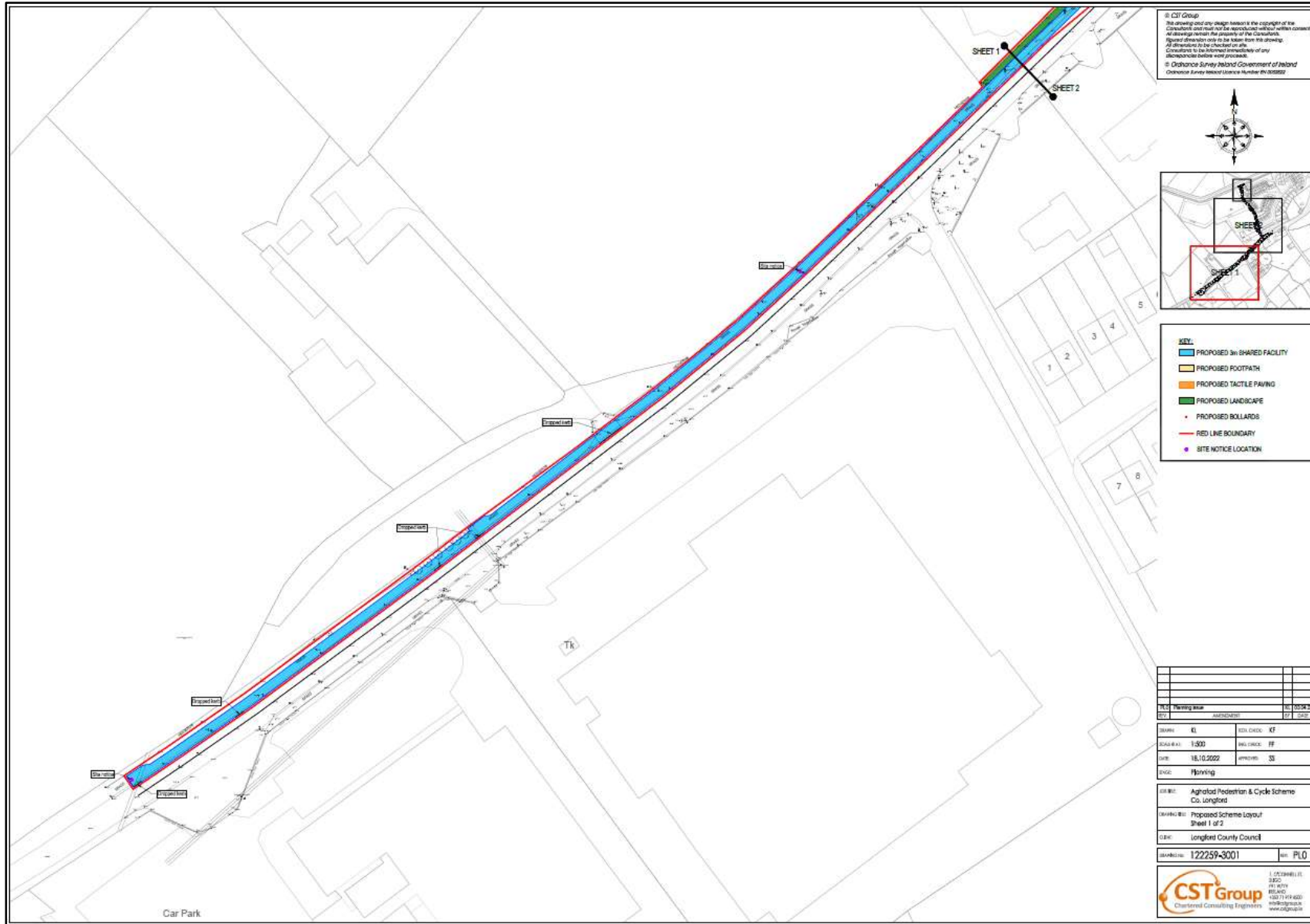
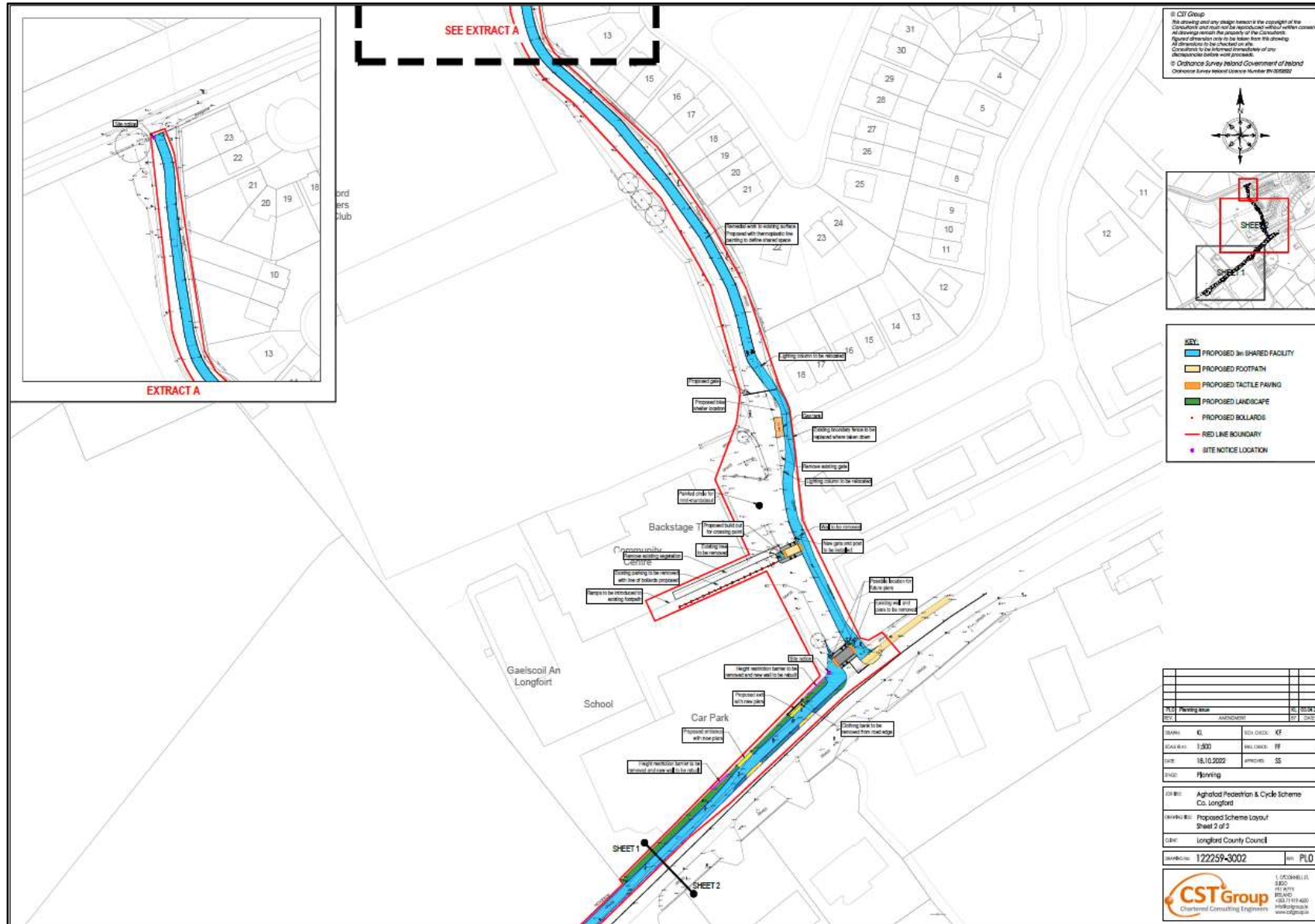


Figure 3: Site Layout 2



Description of Receiving Environment

The surrounding area is characterised by suburban housing estates on the east and agricultural grassland and amenity grassland (GAA pitches) on the west. The route will be located on existing public roads and paved surfaces and grassy roadside verges.

As annotated in Figures 2 and 3, the main works involved are as follows;

- Provision of a 3m wide shared facility (pedestrian/cycleway) alongside the L1227 road, and a new off-road cycle path through Prospect Woods.
- Proposed entrance and exit to the car park to be furnished with new piers.
- Height restriction barrier to be removed and new wall to be rebuilt.
- In front of Slashers GAA Club community centre and Backstage theatre it is proposed to:
 - Remove existing parking and replace with a line of bollards.
 - Remove existing vegetation.
 - Ramp installed on existing footpath.
- On Prospect woods it is proposed to:
 - Existing wall and piers to be removed and new piers installed.
 - Wall removed and new gate and post installed.
 - Lighting Columns relocated.
 - Existing gate removed.
 - Painted circle for mini roundabout.
 - Replace existing boundary fence where absent.
 - Installation of proposed bike shelter.
 - Remedial work to existing surface. Proposed with thermoplastic line painting to define shared space.

Detailed drawings and descriptions can be found elsewhere in the planning documentation. The majority of works will be on existing road surfaces and paved surfaces. Some works will require the removal of narrow strips of amenity grassland on roadside verges.

A photographic survey of the proposed scheme route (from south to north), describing the character of the route is presented below, with ecological annotation provided.



Western boundary of the L1227 road is bordered by hedgerow and fence. The hedgerow is dominated by Privet and frequent Blackthorn and Bramble, with occasional Ash and Willow tree. Overhanging limbs or tops of trees have been chopped recently, where obstructing electrical wires.
 Bordering the road is a 5-6m wide grass verge, dominated by grasses, Bramble, Dandelion, Silverweed and Hogweed with locally frequent blackthorn and willow samplings.

Capped concrete wall bordering the carpark. Road verge comprises disturbed gravel ground with occasional patches of recolonising herbs, mosses and grasses.



Existing concrete wall and piers at entrance to Prospect Woods to be removed. Gravel flower beds and wooden fence border to the east, comprising ornamental plants including New Zealand Flax, Viburnum, Cotoneaster, Berberis, Dogwood, Maple and Cypress Sp.

Ornamental vegetation in front of the Backstage Theatre to be removed including ornamental plants similar to those listed in previous photograph.

	
<p>Ornamental hedgerow and amenity grassland between proposed trail and housing estate to the east. Grassy embankment between proposed trail and Longford Slashers GAA infrastructure. As can be seen in forefront of picture the ornamental hedge changes into a native hedgerow comprising Hawthorn with Bramble and occasional Elder.</p>	<p>Looking west along the Royal Canal where the proposed trail meets the Royal Canal towpath. Numerous Moorhens and Mallards were observed in the water with a Grey Heron on the towpath guarding its chicks in the water. Other birds noted on day of survey included Song Thrush, Robin, Magpie, Stonechat, Goldfinch, Willow Warbler, Wren and Magpie.</p>

No species of concern or invasive species were noted on day of survey.

Geology and soils

The underlying till derived from lower palaeozoic and carboniferous sandstones and shales is a poor aquifer. Subsoils and soils are poorly drained made ground.

Hydrology

The proposed project is located within the Upper Shannon Catchment and Sub-Catchment, the Camlin River Sub-Basin and the Longford-Ballinlee ground waterbody. There are no drains or streams within the proposed site itself. Rivers and streams (those included on the EPA-MAPS database) were reviewed in the vicinity of the proposed development. The northern end of the proposed scheme will meet the Royal Canal. The Royal Canal is a man-made inland waterway stretching 121km, connecting Dublin to Longford. The canal reaches the River Shannon at Cloondara, Co Longford. There is also a spur of the canal coming into Longford Town. This Longford branch of the Royal Canal is not navigable, but a path runs the full length of it, suitable for walkers, runners, and cyclists. This section of the Royal Canal where the proposed scheme meets, holds water and is home to a considerable number of ducks, moorhens, butterflies, and dragon flies. The canal path on both sides has as a smooth tarmac surface and lightning from the centre of Longford town as far as Churchland’s bridge, a distance of 3km.

Other nearby developments (potential in-combination effects)

In accordance with the EU guidance document on Appropriate Assessment, "Assessment of Plans and Projects Significantly Affecting Natura 2000 Sites", other plans and projects in the area must be considered at the screening stage. This is required in order to identify any possible cumulative or in combination impacts of the proposed project with other plans or developments on the relevant Natura 2000 sites.

Local Area Plan (LAP) 2023-2029

Longford County Council is commencing the preparation of a six-year Local Area Plan (LAP) 2023-2029 for Longford Town. This is currently in the pre-draft stage. Important issues to be addressed in the plan are climate action, infrastructure, heritage, housing, transportation, environmental protection, employment and enterprise, community, tourism, recreation, regeneration, and retail.

Longford County Development Plan 2021 – 2027

The existing public roads, and roadside verges are not specifically zoned for development under the Longford County Development Plan 2021 – 2027. However, the area adjoining the roadside within the scheme boundary is zoned as *Social/Community/Education/Public Utility*. This zoning encompasses community uses (such as schools, churches, OPD's etc.), public utility and social / administrative designations such as the Fire and Garda Stations. Expansion of these services will be facilitated where needed and compatible with adjoining land uses. The objective in these zoned areas is to primarily provide for educational, health, social, cultural, religious and community facilities.

County Longford has seen the development of greenway routes within the County, most notably the Longford Royal Canal Greenway section which runs from Abbeyshrule to Cloondara, with a spur at Killashee to Longford Town which is immediately adjoining the proposed scheme as mentioned above. It is the aim of the Council to build upon these successful cycling and walking routes and to promote the continued development of a more integrated and coherent cycling and walking network throughout the County. It is the County Policy Objective to:

CPO 5.65: Work with the relevant statutory bodies and other relevant stakeholders, to improve on the existing level of infrastructure and facilities for walking and cycling.

CPO 5.66: Identify and implement a strategic, coherent and high-quality cycling and walking network across the County that is integrated with public transport and interconnected with cultural, recreational, retail, educational and employment destinations and attractions.

CPO 5.67: Promote the organisation of traffic in towns and villages to separate motor vehicular, bicycles and pedestrian traffic in accordance with the National Manual for the provision of Cycle Facilities in Urban Areas, the Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets and The National Cycle Manual.

CPO 5.68: Promote walking through the development and expansion of a network of safe walking trails within towns and villages and their environs. Such routes can link with existing walking trails, Sli na Slainte and the Green Infrastructure Network and existing or new public rights of way.

CPO 5.69: Adopt and implement the provisions of the Draft Longford Walking and Cycling Strategy and, where necessary and appropriate, reserve lands for the provision of off-road cycling tracks and cycling/pedestrian infrastructure as identified as part of any such cycling strategy prepared.

In addition, a number of objectives and policies are outlined in the plan to protect and maintain the favourable conservation status and conservation value of all-natural heritage sites and to promote the maintenance and, as appropriate, achievement of 'favourable conservation status' of habitats and species in association with the NPWS. Development that might be detrimental to scenic and heritage assets, in Natural Heritage Areas and along designated Scenic Routes will be strictly controlled.

The potential impact of these plans on the proposed project is deemed to be positive.

Planning applications

Planning applications in the vicinity of the proposed scheme were reviewed on the online database of Longford County Council. There have been no applications in recent years in this area. Hence no developments are considered likely to cause in-combination effects. Any future application in the area that has the potential to impact upon any Natura 2000 site will be subjected to Appropriate Assessment as required under Articles 6(3) of the Habitats Directive. This current development will have no cumulative impacts upon the SACs / SPAs identified when considered in combination with any other development that may be screened for no impacts themselves (Stage 1) or where potential impacts are mitigated against (Stage 2 AA / NIS).

4 SCREENING ASSESSMENT

This stage of the process identifies any likely significant effects upon European Sites from the proposed project, either alone or in combination with other projects or plans.

Identification of Relevant Natura 2000 Sites

In accordance with guidance from the *Appropriate Assessment of Plans and Projects in Ireland, Guidance for Planning Authorities* (2010), all designated sites within a distance of 15km from the proposed project site were identified to assess for potential impacts. A standard source-receptor-pathway conceptual model was used to identify 'relevant' European sites (i.e. those which could be potentially affected). For significant effects to arise, there must be a risk enabled by having a:

- Source(s) – e.g. sediment run-off from construction works at proposed project site.
- Receptor(s) – e.g. qualifying habitats and/or species of European Sites
- Pathway(s) – e.g. a watercourse connecting proposed project site to a European site.

The identification of a pathway does not automatically mean that significant effects will arise. The likelihood for significant effects will depend upon the characteristics of the source (e.g. duration of construction works), the characteristics of the pathway (e.g. water quality status of watercourse receiving run-off from construction) and the characteristics of the receptor (e.g. the sensitivities of the European site and its qualifying interests).

As part of the AA Screening prepared for the proposed Scheme, all European sites (SACs and SPAs) within the zone of influence of the proposed scheme were identified. Similarly, all Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs) and proposed Natural Heritage Areas (pNHAs) within the zone of influence of the proposed scheme that may be impacted were identified. NHAs, pNHAs and other designated sites such as Nature Reserves, Wildfowl Sanctuaries and Ramsar sites do not form part of the European site network, however they often provide an important supporting role to the network, particularly when it comes to fauna species which often do not obey site boundaries. In other words, in that example, in order to protect the Natura 2000 network it may also be important to protect the pNHA /NHA which provides a supporting role to it.

It is common practise to use a 15 km buffer around the proposed project to screen potential off-site impacts on other Natura 2000 sites (see DEHLG, 2009). However, this is an arbitrary limit and, if there is potential for secondary impacts to occur at greater distances, then such impacts must be assessed. Seven Natura 2000 sites within an area extending 15km around the proposed project have been considered for potential impacts. These sites, their conservation interests and the potential for interactions leading to significant adverse effects arising from the proposed project are identified for each site and are exhibited in Table 1 and displayed in Figure 4. It has been evaluated that a wider radius was not required in the absence of pathways identified by which sites outside of this radius could potentially be affected.

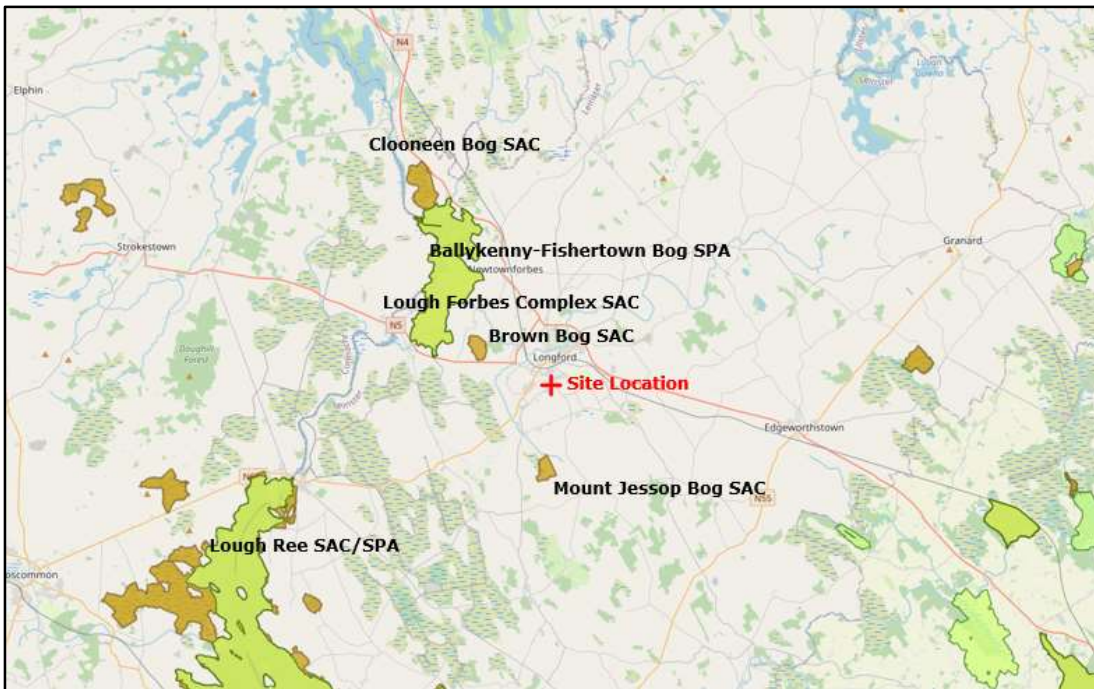
Several pNHA are located within 15km from the proposed scheme but only one is considered further in this assessment, specifically The Royal Canal pNHA as shown in Figure 5.

Table 1: Designated Natura 2000 sites which are located within a 15km radius of the proposed site. The potential for impacts affecting the qualifying interests is identified.

NATURA 2000 SITE [SITE CODE]	DISTANCE FROM PROPOSED PROJECT (KM)	QUALIFYING INTEREST (* denotes a priority habitat)	POTENTIAL FOR IMPACTS IDENTIFIED
Royal Canal pNHA (002103)	0 KM		Having regard to the hydrological connectivity of the proposed site to this pNHA, there is potential for impacts upon this site arising from deteriorations in water quality. Include in further assessment.
Mount Jessop Bog SAC (002202)	3.45 KM	Habitats 7120 Degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration 91D0 Bog woodland*	No significant effects upon this SAC are anticipated given the separation distance involved and the fact that there is no direct hydrological connectivity. Exclude from further assessment.
Brown Bog SAC (002346)	3.56 KM	Habitats 7110 Active raised bogs* 7120 Degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration 7150 Depressions on peat substrates of the Rhynchosporion	No significant effects upon this SAC are anticipated given the separation distance involved and the fact that there is no direct hydrological connectivity. Exclude from further assessment.
Lough Forbes Complex SAC [001818]	5.32 KM	Habitats 3150 Natural eutrophic lakes with Magnopotamion or Hydrocharition - type vegetation 7110 Active raised bogs* 7120 Degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration 7150 Depressions on peat substrates of the Rhynchosporion 91E0 Alluvial forests with Alnus glutinosa and Fraxinus excelsior (Alno-Padion, Alnion incanae, Salicion albae)*	Having regard to the hydrological connectivity of the proposed site to this SAC, there is potential for impacts upon this site arising from deteriorations in water quality. Include in further assessment.
Clooneeen Bog SAC [002348]	10.54 KM	Habitats 7110 Active raised bogs* 7120 Degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration 7150 Depressions on peat substrates of the Rhynchosporion 91D0 Bog woodland*	No significant effects upon this SAC are anticipated given the separation distance involved and the fact that there is no direct hydrological connectivity. Exclude from further assessment

Lough Ree SAC (001976)	13.54 KM	<p>Habitats</p> <p>3150 Natural eutrophic lakes with Magnopotamion or Hydrocharition - type vegetation</p> <p>6210 Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies on calcareous substrates (Festuco-Brometalia) (* important orchid sites)</p> <p>7110 Active raised bogs*</p> <p>7120 Degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration</p> <p>7230 Alkaline fens</p> <p>8240 Limestone pavements*</p> <p>91D0 Bog woodland*</p> <p>91E0 Alluvial forests with <i>Alnus glutinosa</i> and <i>Fraxinus excelsior</i> (<i>Alno-Padion</i>, <i>Alnion incanae</i>, <i>Salicion albae</i>)*</p> <p>Species</p> <p>1355 Otter (<i>Lutra lutra</i>)</p>	Having regard to the hydrological connectivity of the proposed site to this SAC, there is potential for impacts upon this site arising from deteriorations in water quality. Include in further assessment.
Ballykenny-Fishertown Bog SPA (004101)	5.32 KM	<p>Birds</p> <p>A395 Greenland White-fronted Goose (<i>Anser albifrons flavirostris</i>)</p>	Having regard to the hydrological connectivity of the proposed site to this SPA, there is potential for impacts upon this site arising from deteriorations in water quality. Include in further assessment.
Lough Ree SPA (000627)	13.56 KM	<p>Birds</p> <p>A061 Tufted Duck (<i>Aythya fuligula</i>)</p> <p>A056 Shoveler (<i>Anas clypeata</i>)</p> <p>A142 Lapwing (<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>)</p> <p>A038 Whooper Swan (<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>)</p> <p>A140 Golden Plover (<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>)</p> <p>A125 Coot (<i>Fulica atra</i>)</p> <p>A050 Wigeon (<i>Anas penelope</i>)</p> <p>A067 Goldeneye (<i>Bucephala clangula</i>)</p> <p>A004 Little Grebe (<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>)</p> <p>A193 Common Tern (<i>Sterna hirundo</i>)</p> <p>A052 Teal (<i>Anas crecca</i>)</p> <p>A053 Mallard (<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>)</p> <p>A065 Common Scoter (<i>Melanitta nigra</i>)</p> <p>Habitats</p> <p>Wetlands</p>	Having regard to the hydrological connectivity of the proposed site to this SPA, there is potential for impacts upon this site arising from deteriorations in water quality. Include in further assessment.

Figure 4: Natura 2000 sites within 15 km from Proposed Scheme



The Lough Forbes Complex SAC, Ballykenny-Fishertown Bog SPA and Lough Ree SAC and SPA appear to be hydrologically connected via the Royal Canal. The site Synopsis and information on the conservation objectives for each of these sites is available on www.npws.ie. Other Natura 2000 sites were identified within a 15 km radius of the proposed project, as shown in Table 1 above but owing to distance and lack of connectivity with the proposed project they are consequently screened out from further consideration.

Figure 5: Location of the proposed scheme in relation to the Royal Canal pNHA



The proposed scheme immediately adjoins the Royal Canal which is designated as a proposed Natural Heritage Area (pNHA) and is included in further assessment in this report. The Royal Canal pNHA comprises the central channel and the banks on either side of it. Historically, the Royal Canal featured a number of branches, including a spur to Longford town, which terminated at the former Harbour, to the rear of the Market Square and the modern-day Longford Town Council building. It is along this spur that the proposed scheme meets as shown in Figure 5.

Conservation Objectives

A Natura 2000 site's conservation objectives are defined by NPWS and are, "*intended to ensure that the relevant Annex I habitats and Annex II species present on a site are maintained in a favourable condition*" (DEHLG, 2010). The overall aim of the Habitats Directive is to maintain or restore the favourable conservation status of habitats and species of community interest. Favourable conservation status of a habitat can be described as being achieved when: "*its natural range, and area it covers within that range, is stable or increasing, and the ecological factors that are necessary for its long-term maintenance exist and are likely to continue to exist for the foreseeable future, and the conservation status of its typical species is favourable*". Favourable conservation status of a species can be described as being achieved when: "*population data on the species concerned indicate that it is maintaining itself, and the natural range of the species is neither being reduced or likely to be reduced for the foreseeable future, and there is, and will probably continue to be, a sufficiently large habitat to maintain its populations on a long-term basis.*"

5 ASSESSMENT OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS

This section documents the final stage of the screening process. It is vital that an assessment of potential source-pathway-receptor links is undertaken to assess potential impact links between the receptor (European Sites) and source (proposed works) to establish the risk of any likely significant effects. It used the information collected on the sensitivity of the Qualifying Interests of each European Site and describes any likely significant effects from the site preparation, construction and operation stages of the proposed works. This assumes the absence of mitigation measures. Direct, indirect and cumulative impacts arising from the proposed works with regard to potential impacts affecting Lough Forbes Complex SAC, Ballykenny-Fishertown Bog SPA, Lough Ree SAC and SPA and the Royal Canal pNHA are discussed.

Direct Impacts

The Site is not located within or adjacent to any Natura 2000 sites, so there is no risk of habitat loss, fragmentation or any other direct impacts.

Indirect Impacts

Potential changes in water quality (construction phase)

Construction works typically generate fine sediments and may occasionally cause accidental spills of oil or other toxic chemicals. If pollutants reach watercourses in significant quantities, they can cause impacts on riparian habitats and species downstream of the proposed site.

The construction phase will be short-term and temporary. Construction will be in accordance with low impact principles, standard operating procedures and in compliance with Longford County Council's safety management system. No site compound will be required, and no materials will be stored on-site. All plant and stone materials utilised during the construction phase will be retained only on the existing hard surface throughout.

The Prospect Woods access laneway is currently a tarmac surface and construction works proposed here involve minor works which will not result in the generation of fine sediments.

Where the proposed scheme meets the Royal Canal, the Royal Canal holds water but it is not flowing water. Further west after Faranyoogan Bridge (shown in Figure 5), there is a dam which ensures this section of the Royal Canal holds water from the local springs. It is approximately 1km from Faranyoogan Bridge to Churchlands Bridge. On day of survey water was visible on the canal bed until Churchlands Bridge. From here to the junction with the main line is dry. Therefore, there is no hydrological connectivity to Lough Forbes Complex SAC, Ballykenny-Fishertown Bog SPA and Lough Ree SAC and SPA.

It should be noted that the proposed scheme will not involve any modification of the canal or its banks, as the cycle and pedestrian facilities will be on existing path in the vicinity of the canal. It is also noted that Longford Slashers GAA grounds and the canal path itself is a busy amenity area so any impacts associated with noise during construction will be temporary and wildlife are presently accustomed to. Therefore, there is no risk of any indirect impacts on Natura 2000 sites or the pNHA during the construction of the proposed scheme.

Potential changes in water quality (operational phase)

The scheme will not involve any substantial changes to the roadside drainage network, so there will be no change from the baseline scenario. The scheme will not generate any foul water, so this can be screened out of the assessment.

Potential in-combination effects

As noted above the surrounding area is zoned as *Social/Community/Education/Public Utility*. This zoning encompasses community uses (such as schools, churches, OPD's etc.), public utility and social / administrative designations. Expansion of these services will be facilitated where needed

and compatible with adjoining land uses. Also, any future application in the area that has the potential to impact upon any Natura 2000 site will be subjected to Appropriate Assessment as required under Articles 6(3) of the Habitats Directive ensuring that any future will be screened for no impacts themselves (Stage 1) or where potential impacts will be mitigated against (Stage 2 AA / NIS).

6 CONCLUSIONS

To determine the potential impacts, if any, of the proposed scheme on nearby Natura 2000 sites, a screening process for Appropriate Assessment was undertaken.

The AA screening process considered potential impacts which may arise during the preparation, construction and operational phases of the proposed scheme. This assessment comprised an evaluation of the pathways for effects on the qualifying interests of designated European Sites, with reference to the location, size, scale, and duration (construction and operation) associated with the proposal. The effects on the adjoining Royal Canal pNHA were also assessed.

It is considered that the proposed project does not include any element that has the potential to significantly alter the favourable conservation objectives associated with the species and habitats or interfere with the key relationships that define the structure or function, either alone or in combination with other impacts, of the Natura 2000 sites or pNHA considered in this document. In accordance with the OPR 2021 guidance, we note that no mitigation measures have been considered when reaching this conclusion.

In conclusion, this Screening Assessment demonstrated that the proposed project will not pose significant threat to the integrity of Lough Forbes Complex SAC, Ballykenny-Fishertown Bog SPA, Lough Ree SAC, Lough Ree SPA and Royal Canal pNHA and their conservation objectives will remain the same as before the scheme. Consequently, this proposed project does not require a NIS or need to advance in the Appropriate Assessment process. However, a determination of the need for a Stage 2 'Appropriate Assessment and the preparation of a Natura Impact Statement will be decided upon by the Competent Authority (Longford County Council).

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