

Strategic Environmental Assessment Screening Report and Determination for Variation No. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Longford County Council has prepared a Variation (no. 3) of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021. Under the requirements of the SEA Directive (2001/42/EC), transposed onto Irish legislation by the European Communities (Environmental Assessment of Certain Plans and Programmes) Regulations 2004 – 2011, certain plans or programmes are subject to SEA prior to their adoption and implementation. The SEA Directive requires, inter alia, that SEA is undertaken for certain plans, programs or variations to these. Under Article 7 (13K) of the Planning and Development (SEA) Regulations 2004 (SI No. 436 of 2004) as amended by the Planning and Development (SEA)(Amendment) Regulations 2011 (SI no. 201 of 2011), Longford County Council is required to determine whether any Variation needs to be subject to SEA screening. Screening is the process for determining whether a particular Plan or Variation to a Plan, other than those for which SEA is mandatory, would be likely to have significant environmental effects, and would thus warrant SEA. This report provides the findings of the evaluation of the requirement for SEA to be undertaken on the Variation to the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021.

2.0 DESCRIPTION OF VARIATION

In accordance with Section 13 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended), Longford County Council as the component authority, has made Variation no. 3 to the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021. The Variation consists under section '5.5.2.3 *Alternative Energy Developments*' of additional text relating to Government energy policy and legislation as follows:-

The Government White Paper '*Ireland's Transition to a Low Carbon Energy Future 2015-2030*', published by the then Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (now Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment) states that a low carbon future will involve "*moving to lower emissions fuels (e.g. moving from peat and coal to gas), and ultimately away from fossil fuels altogether...In the short to medium-term, the mix of non-renewables will shift away from more carbon-intensive fuels, like peat and coal, to lower-carbon fuels like natural gas*". The Planning Guidelines for the Midland Region 2010-2022 promote the delivery of renewable energy throughout the Midland Region (Goal 8 and TIP33),

and specifically as per Section 5.8.2 and Policy TIP 35, seek to promote the expansion of the existing gas network throughout the Midland Region’.

and the addition of the following related **Policy AED1:-**

‘New housing schemes and large developments in towns and villages will be encouraged to source their heating and energy requirements from the Natural Gas network where available’.

3.0 REASON FOR VARIATION NO. 3

Dealing with Climate Change means ensuring the efficient use of available energy and placing maximum priority on saving energy. Longford County Council has an important role in encouraging every individual and community within the County to play their respective part in promotion of climate protection. The reason for Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 is in order to support on an ongoing basis the Government Programme for the development of energy policy and legislation through the implement of supporting policies, particularly those promoting use of low carbon energy sources such as natural gas, renewable energy sources, energy efficiency, sustainable transport and land use planning.

4.0 STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (SEA) SCREENING

4.1 Requirement for SEA of Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021

A screening procedure is required to determine whether a plan or programme is likely to have significant environmental effects. As such the Policy contained in Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 has been assessed against the relevant environmental criteria which relate to the characteristics of the Variation itself and to the characteristics of the effects of implementation of the Variation and of the area likely to be affected as set out in Schedule 2A of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 (as amended).

4.2 Assessment of Proposed Variation no. 3 against Schedule 2A Criteria of Planning and Development Regulations 2001 (as amended)

4.2.1 The Characteristics of the Proposed Variation having regard, in particular to -

4.2.1.1 *The degree to which the plan sets the framework for projects and other activities with regard to location, nature, size, operating conditions or by allocating resources*

The Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 already provides for renewable energy provisions. The Variation, which is policy focused, further contributes towards such provisions and provides additional detail on this issue. The emphasis of the Variation is to advocate a policy of promoting more energy efficient options and as such the Variation does not specify the framework for other projects or activities in terms of their location, nature, size, operating conditions or allocation of resources.

The Development Plan SEA process has successfully facilitated the integration of mitigation into the Plan in order to contribute towards the protection of the Environment. Positive effects arising from the use of renewable energy has already been considered and this Variation will further contribute towards same.

The actions set out in the Variation are consistent with the Core Strategy of the Longford County Development Plan 2015 – 2021. The Variation and associated policy will be implemented in accordance with the relevant statutory planning and environmental legislation and higher level plans, including the County Development Plan. All actions will be required to comply with the County Development Plan policies and objectives, including those on Industrial, Commercial and Business Development, Transportation, Energy, and Natural Heritage and Biodiversity.

4.2.1.2 *The Degree of influence on other plans, including those in a hierarchy*

The Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 is influenced by a hierarchy of international, national, and regional level plans, strategies and legislation, to which consideration was given throughout the preparation of the Variation. The Variation no. 3 of the Longford County

Development Plan 2015-2021 will assist in the achievement of common goals, but sits below the relevant statutory legislation and plans. The role of the Variation and associated policy is therefore complementary to, rather than having significant influence on, other Plans. The Variation, which is policy focused, further contributes towards such provisions and provides additional detail on this issue.

4.2.1.3 *The Relevance for integration of environmental considerations in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development*

The use of the gas networks as a source of heating for new housing schemes and large developments in towns and villages will minimise increases in energy usage and emissions to air, including greenhouse gas emissions and other emissions, thereby avoiding potential adverse effects on various environmental components and contributing towards sustainable development.

The Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 is consistent with the policies and objectives of higher level plans. The County Development Plan was subject to Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Appropriate Assessment (AA) to ensure that environmental considerations were fully integrated into the plan during its preparation. The Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 is consistent with the County Development Plan in its consideration of sustainable development. The Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 already provides for renewable energy provisions. The Variation, which is policy focused, further contributes towards such provisions and provides additional detail on this issue.

4.2.1.4 *Environmental problems relevant to the Variation*

The use of the gas networks as a source of heating for new housing schemes and large developments in towns and villages will minimise increases in energy usage and emissions to air, including greenhouse gas emissions and other emissions, thereby avoiding potential adverse effects on various environmental components and contributing towards sustainable development. The Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 already provides for renewable energy provisions. The Variation, which is policy focused, contributes towards such provisions and provides additional detail on this issue.

The Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 is subject to a number of high level environmental protection policies and objectives with which it must comply, including those which have been identified as Strategic Environmental Objectives (SEO'S) (Table 1). These were developed from international and national policies which generally govern environmental protection objectives. Such policies include those of various European Directives which have been transposed into Irish law and which are intended to be implemented within the Plan area.

Table1: Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 - Strategic Environmental Objectives

B1	To ensure compliance with the Habitats and Birds Directives with regard to the protection of Natura 2000 Sites and Annexed habitats and species.
B2	To ensure compliance with Article 10 of the Habitats Directive with regard to the management of features of the landscape which - by virtue of their linear and continuous structure or their function act as stepping stones - are of major importance for wild fauna and flora and essential for the migration, dispersal and genetic exchange of wild species.
B3	To avoid significant impacts on relevant habitats, species, environmental features or other sustaining resources in Wildlife Sites and to ensure compliance with the Wildlife Acts 1976-2010 with regard to the protection of species listed on Schedule 5 of the principal act.
B4	To sustain existing sustainable rural management practices - and the communities who support them - to ensure the continuation of long established managed landscapes and the flora and fauna that they contain.
PHH1	To protect populations and human health from exposure to incompatible land uses.
S1	To avoid damage to the hydrogeological and ecological function of the soil resource in County Longford.
W1	To maintain and improve, where possible, the quality and status of surface waters.
W2	To prevent pollution and contamination of ground water.
W3	To comply as appropriate with the provisions of the Planning System and Flood Risk Management: Guidelines for Planning Authorities (DEHLG, 2009).
M1	To serve new development with adequate and appropriate waste water treatment.
M2	To serve new development with adequate drinking water that is both wholesome and clean.
M3	To reduce waste volumes, minimise waste to landfill and increase recycling and reuse.
C1	To reduce travel related emissions to air and to encourage modal change from car to more sustainable forms of transport.
CH1	To protect archaeological heritage including entries to the Record of Monuments and Places and/or their context.
CH2	To protect as appropriate architectural heritage including entries to the Record of Protected Structures and their context and Architectural Conservation Areas.
L1	To avoid significant adverse impacts on the landscape, especially with regard to protected views and prospects and broad zones including lakes, rivers, canals and deciduous woodlands.

As such the Variation will also be subject to a number of high level environmental protection policies and objectives with which it must comply. It is considered that the Variation will not involve any considerable impact outside the Strategic Environmental Objectives identified in the Development Plan and that the associated mitigation measures detailed in the Development Plan will apply.

4.2.1.5 *The relevance for implementation of EU legislation on the environment*

Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 builds upon other existing strategies and plans. The Plan will not impact on the implementation of EU legislation on the environment. The policies and objectives of the County Development Plan which seek to protect and conserve environmentally sensitive areas will not be altered or affected by the proposed Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021. The Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 already provides for renewable energy provisions. The Variation, which is policy focused, further contributes towards such provisions and provides additional detail on this issue.

4.2.2 *Characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected*

4.2.2.1 *The probability, duration, frequency and reversibility of the effects*

The focus of the Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 is on policy. Any actions that result in the development of new projects must be carried out in compliance with the statutory planning and environmental framework and higher level plans, including the County Development Plan, which has been subject to SEA and AA.

Furthermore under this policy all such projects will be screened for the need to undertake Appropriate Assessment under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive and will also be required to comply with statutory Environmental Impact Assessment requirements where relevant.

4.2.2.2 *The cumulative nature of the effects*

Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 aims to deliver positive changes, thereby creating an overall positive cumulative effect for the

people of Co. Longford. This Variation is also policy based. Furthermore it includes provision that all such projects will be screened for the need to undertake Appropriate Assessment under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive and will also be required to comply with statutory Environmental Impact Assessment requirements where relevant.

4.2.2.3 *The transboundary nature of the effects*

Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 has a focus on policy. No transboundary effects are identified as a result of implementation of the Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021. Implementation of Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 will be subject to the environmental protection policies and objectives set out in the County Development Plan, which has been subject to SEA and AA to ensure that negative transboundary effects do not occur.

4.2.2.4 *The risks to human health or the environment (e.g. due to accidents)*

Implementation of Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 will not create any risks to human health or the environment. Implementation of the Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 will have regard to the County Development Plan, which requires the Council to assess applications for new development taking account of The Major Accidents Directive (Seveso Directive) and the possible impact on public health and safety.

4.2.2.5 *Magnitude and spatial extent of the effects (geographical area and size of the population likely to be affected)*

Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 relates to policy and does not zone additional lands, and any relevant projects will be subject to the statutory planning and environmental framework and higher level plans, including other relevant policies and objectives in the County Development Plan. All such projects will be screened for the need to undertake Appropriate Assessment under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive and will also be required to comply with statutory Environmental Impact Assessment requirements where relevant.

4.2.2.6 *The value and vulnerability of the area likely to be affected due to:*

- a) Special natural characteristics or cultural heritage,
- b) Exceeded environmental quality standards or limit values,
- c) Intensive land-use

Co. Longford contains areas of special natural characteristics and cultural heritage. Implementation of Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 will have no impact on these areas, as all actions will be carried out in compliance with the County Development Plan. An Appropriate Assessment screening of Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 has been carried out (see accompanying AA Screening Document), and concluded that implementation of the Variation does not have the potential to give rise to impacts on the conservation objectives of any Natura 2000 site i.e. Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) or Special Protection Areas (SPAs).

The Variation does not set the framework for any specific projects or activities that will result in the exceedance of environmental quality standards/limit values, or affect any areas of intensive land-use. The framework for such projects is set by higher-tier land-use plans, including the County Development Plan, which has been subject to SEA and AA to ensure the integration of environmental considerations into its preparation.

4.2.2.7 *The effects on areas or landscapes which have a recognised national, EU or international protection status*

Implementation of Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 will have no effect on areas or landscapes which have a recognised national, EU or international protection status. The Appropriate Assessment screening of the Variation concludes that implementation of the Plan does not have the potential to result in impacts on any European sites or to influence other plans or projects in a manner that could potentially impact thereon.

Any actions in the Variation that result in the development of new projects must be carried out in compliance with the statutory planning framework and higher level plans, including the County Development Plan, which has been subject to SEA and

AA. Furthermore under this policy all such projects will be screened for the need to undertake Appropriate Assessment under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive and will also be required to comply with statutory Environmental Impact Assessment requirements where relevant.

5.0 CONSULTATION

The relevant authorities were notified and submissions in relation to SEA related issues were received from the following:-

Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government

The planning authority is reminded to have regard to any observations made by the Office of Public Works, the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, the National Parks & Wildlife Service, the Environmental Protection Agency and Irish Water. In this regard, Longford County Council must satisfy itself that it has met the relevant requirements as appropriate, and that the Draft Variation No. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 is fully compliant with its obligations under planning legislation.

As part of the Strategic Environmental Assessment screening process, consultation is required with designated environmental authorities set out in the Planning and Development (Strategic Environmental Assessment) (Amendment) Regulations 2011. Any submissions received are to be taken into consideration by the County Council in determining whether or not the proposed variation would be likely to have significant effects on the environment.

Environmental Protection Agency

The requirements of the SEA, Habitats, EIA, Water Framework and Floods directives should be taken into account, as relevant and where appropriate. In this regard the proposed Variation has been subject to SEA and AA Screening.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Screening of Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 identified that implementation of the Variation will not have significant effects on the

environment and that SEA of the Variation is not required, as per the following findings:-

- The Variation does not meet Schedule 2A criteria for plans or programmes likely to have significant environmental effects.
- The Variation does not have the potential to result in impacts on any European sites or to influence other plans or projects in a manner that could potentially impact thereon, and therefore does not require a Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment under the Habitats Directive.

In assessing Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 against the required environmental criteria, it was determined that the Variation would not result in significant environmental effects, and as such does not require full Strategic Environmental Assessment.

A Screening Determination is provided overleaf:

**Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Screening Determination under:
Under Article 7 (13K) of the Planning and Development (SEA) Regulations 2004
(SI No. 436 of 2004) as amended by the Planning and Development (SEA)
(Amendment) Regulations 2011 (SI No. 201 of 2011) for:
Variation No. 3 to the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021**

Article 7 (13K) of the Planning and Development (SEA) Regulations 2004 (SI No. 436 of 2004) (as amended), requires, inter alia, a determination to be made as to whether Variation No. 3 warrants the undertaking of SEA. A Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Screening determination has been made by Longford County Council regarding Variation No. 3 to the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021. Such a determination takes into account relevant criteria set out in Schedule 2A '*Criteria for determining whether a plan is likely to have significant effects on the environment*' of the SEA Regulations, as amended.

The Variation incorporates the following under section '*5.5.2.3 Alternative Energy Developments*' into the County Development Plan:

- additional text relating to Government energy policy and legislation;
- addition of the following related **Policy AED1:-**

'New housing schemes and large developments in towns and villages will be encouraged to source their heating and energy requirements from the Natural Gas network where available'.

The SEA screening process has found that implementation of the Variation will not have significant effects on the environment and that SEA of the Variation is not required, as per the following findings:-

- The Variation does not meet Schedule 2A criteria for plans or programmes likely to have significant environmental effects.
- In assessing Variation no. 3 of the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021 against the required environmental criteria, it was determined that the Variation would not result in significant environmental effects, and as such does not require full Strategic Environmental Assessment.