CLIENT: CST Engineers, Sligo

PROJECT: Drumshanbo Narrow Gauge Trail

Screening for Appropriate Assessment Report.

Prepared by: AONA Environmental Consulting Ltd.

Date: May 2023

REPORT CONTROL

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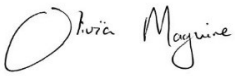
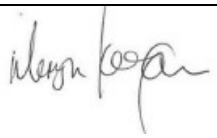
Author:	Olivia Maguire, B.Sc, M.Sc.	Signed:	
Review By:	Mervyn Keegan, B.Sc, M.Sc.	Signed:	

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1 INTRODUCTION

AONA Environmental Consulting Ltd. was commissioned by CST Engineers Sligo, on behalf of Leitrim County Council to complete a Stage 1 Screening for Appropriate Assessment report under Article 6 of the EU Habitats Directive, for the proposed Drumshanbo Narrow Gauge Trail in Drumshanbo, Co Leitrim.

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 project. It includes a description of the proposed project, 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.

1.1 Statement of Authority

This report was written by Olivia Maguire (B.Sc., M.Sc.)an experienced and qualified ecologist and reviewed by Mervyn Keegan (B.Sc., M.Sc.) who is a Director with AONA Environmental Consulting Ltd. Olivia has over 17 years of experience in Environmental Consultancy. She has a BSc in Hons Geography and a MSc in Applied Environmental Science from Queens University, Belfast and a BSc in Occupational Health and Safety from Atlantic University, Sligo. Olivia is a member of the Institute of Environmental Management & Assessment and the Occupational Hygiene Society of Ireland and operates in accordance with their respective codes of professional conduct. Olivia's role involves the delivery of a wide range of environmental and occupational health & safety consultancy services to public and private sector clients in the following areas;

- Environmental Impact Assessment in accordance with relevant legislation & guidance
- Appropriate Assessment in accordance with the Habitats Directive.
- Environmental Noise & Air Quality Surveys & Impact Assessment.
- Occupational Health Assessments including noise at work and indoor air quality surveys.

2 THE APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

2.1 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.'*

2.2 Guidance and Approach

This Appropriate Assessment Screening has been prepared having regard to the following guidance documents:

European Commission Guidance:

- *Guidance document on assessment of plans and projects in relation to Natura 2000 sites: a summary*, (European Commission, 2022)
- *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, 2019)
- *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, January 2007).
- *Article 6 of the Habitats Directive – Rulings of the European Court of Justice* (European Commission Final Draft September 2014

National Guidance:

- *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 (NPWS, 2010)
- *Guidelines for Ecological Impact Assessment in the UK and Ireland: Terrestrial, Freshwater and Coastal* (Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management, 2019)
- *Guidelines on the Information to be contained in Environmental Impact Assessment Reports* (EPA, August 2017)

2.2.1 Desk Study

The following documents were referenced during the desk-top study 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) – G9711 and (ITM) – G9710. Results found no records of any

species for which the Cuilcagh -Anierin Uplands SAC (000584), is designated within the project site[1]. 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.
- Leitrim County Development Plan 2023-2029

2.2.2 Field Survey

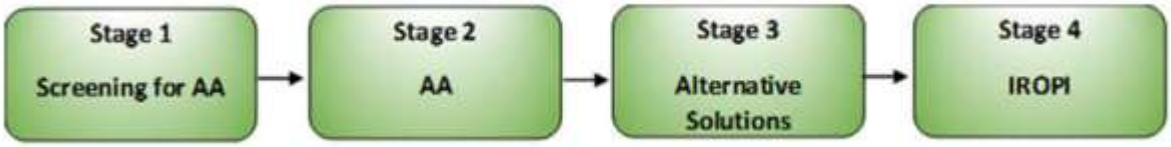
A field survey was carried out along the proposed route on 23rd April 2023 and 14th May 2023. The survey was undertaken by Olivia Maguire (AONA).The aim of the field survey was to map the habitats and record plant, bird and mammal species within the study area, while highlighting habitats and species of particular importance (e.g. rare or protected, invasive, etc.).

Incidental sightings or evidence of birds, mammals or amphibians were also noted during the habitat survey and the habitats within the study area were evaluated for their potential to support protected species. Evidence of use of the area by mammals, including signs such as droppings, footprints, potential dwellings (holts/setts/warrens, *etc*.), latrines, tracks and feeding signs were noted where they occurred within the study area. Trees or structures which may be suitable for bat roosts and potential suitable bat foraging were noted where they occurred within the study area. Potential roosts / roost features and bat foraging habitat were evaluated using the criteria set out in the Bat Conservation Trust (BCT) guidelines (Collins 2016).

2.3 Appropriate Assessment Process

The Department of the Environment Heritage and Local Government Guidelines (DELHG, 2009), outlines the European Commission's methodological guidance (EC, 2002). This guidance 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)



2.3.1 Stage 1: Screening

Initial 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.

[1] www.biodiversity.ie accessed 18th May 2023

For those sites where potential adverse impacts are identified, either alone or in combination with other plans or projects, further assessment is necessary to determine if the proposals will have an adverse impact on the integrity of a European designated site, in view of the site's conservation objectives (i.e. the process proceeds to Stage 2).

2.3.2 Stage 2: Appropriate Assessment

This stage requires a more in-depth evaluation of the plan or project, and the potential direct and indirect impacts of them on the integrity and interest features of the European designated site(s), alone and in-combination with other plans and projects, taking into account the site's structure, function and conservation objectives. Where required, mitigation or avoidance measures will be suggested.

The competent authority can only agree to the plan or project after having ascertained that it will not adversely affect the integrity of the site(s) concerned. If this cannot be determined, and where mitigation cannot be achieved, then alternative solutions will need to be considered (i.e. the process proceeds to Stage 3).

2.3.3 Stage 3: Alternative Solutions

Where adverse impacts on the integrity of Natura 2000 sites are identified, and mitigation cannot be satisfactorily implemented, alternative ways of achieving the objectives of the plan or project that avoid adverse impacts need to be considered. If none can be found, the process proceeds to Stage 4.

2.3.4 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

3 PROPOSED PROJECT

3.1 Description of Proposed Project

The Cavan and Leitrim Railway operated from 1887 to 1959 and was known locally as 'The Narrowgauge'. The proposal is to develop a scenic recreational trail along the route of the Narrow-Gauge Railway which ran from Arigna to Ballinamore and closed in 1959. It is the intention to extend a trail along the route of the Narrow-Gauge Railway from the R207 (Dowra approach Road), across the Church Road and link back to the R208 (Ballinamore approach road). The trail would complete a walking loop of Drumshanbo. This route would allow walkers and cyclists to travel a circular route of the town in a series of short walks with different terrain & scenery. They range from the Canal Bank walk to the Convent Wall walk, the Rockwell walk, the Lake Shore walk & the Blueway Boardwalk.

Leitrim County Council proposes a linear trail for walkers and cyclists, of approx. 1km as shown in Figure 3.1. The project will be phased construction. Phase 1 section is depicted in Figures 3.2 and 3.3. Phase 2 section is depicted in Figures 3.4 and 3.5.

Phase 1 is from R207 Dowra Rd to the L3306 Convent Avenue (Church Road) along the old railway line. This will be a 2.75m wide trail with a bituminous macadam finish with low level lighting. The lighting will be on bollards or 4m high columns. Excavation will be required at the start of the route, adjacent to the Dowra Road. The trail will be at a 1 in 12 maximum gradient with the cut section continuing east for c.50 - 60m. Native hedgerow will be planted on the north bank in this cut section. A linear land drain designed in short sections, is proposed for the southern side of the trail to prevent ponding of runoff water. The outfall will be to existing field drainage. The project will also involve the construction of a footpath for c. 40m along the Dowra Road, and provision of a raised controlled Zebra crossing and metal railing.

Phase 2 is the remainder of the trail, east of Convent Road. This section of trail will run through woodland vegetation and agricultural fields and will be a 2.75m trail with a bituminous macadam finish.

The initial section follows the footprint of the old railway line under the old railway bridge and through a wooded ravine, south of the new Cemetery on Convent road. At the end of this ravine, the route will turn 90 degrees and continue west up the incline of a field, south of the existing hedgerow. The proposed route will once more turn 90 degrees and proceed south, west of the existing hedgerow, to meet the regional road R208.

The removal of trees and trimming of any overhanging branches that fall within the working area will be required. Proposed landscaping for the site outlines that native trees and other native vegetation will be planted in order to replace any habitat being removed thereby improving wildlife corridors and limiting potential impacts to the commuting/foraging areas of bat species, birds and mammals. The proposed works are unlikely to cause any significant habitat fragmentation.

3.2 Construction Methodology

The construction phase will be c.12 weeks from commencement and in accordance with low impact principles. Construction will concur with Leitrim County Council appropriate Health and Safety standards and Safety Management Systems.

A site compound shall be established at the start of Phase 2, in the area of amenity grassland between Convent Road and the cemetery. The compound shall be stripped of vegetation and a stone base laid. This area shall be secured with a silt fence and all construction materials shall be stored in this defined area.
Machinery used in construction will be mostly lightweight excavators and dumpers with a suitable excavator used in cut and fill areas near the Dowra road at the start of Phase 1, and in part of Phase 2 where the route runs east to west up the incline of the field.

Figure 3.1: Proposed Narrow Gauge Trail

Figure 3.2: Phase 1 – Dowra Road to Convent Road

Figure 3.3: Cross section through Trail in Phase 1, with Macadam Finish

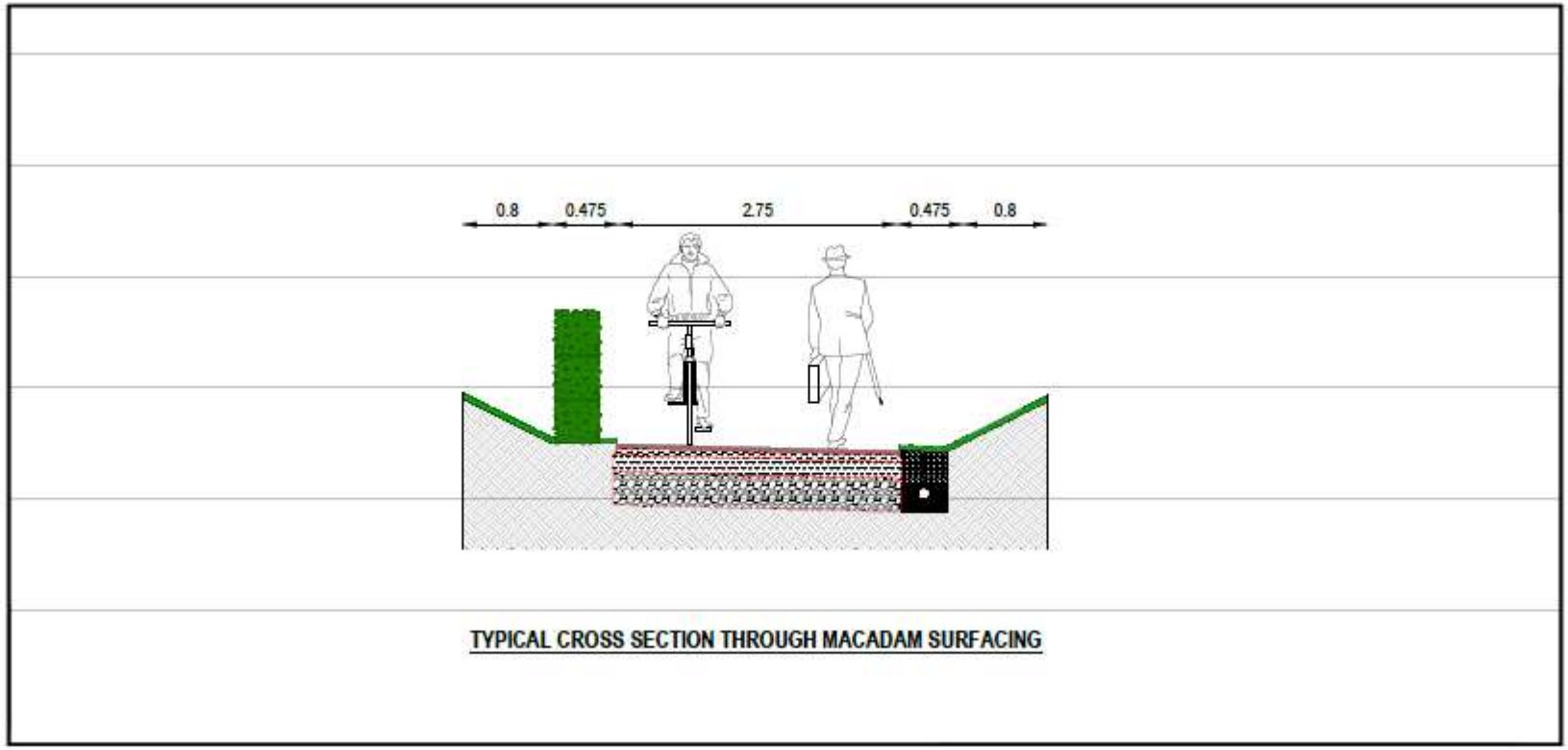


Figure 3.4: Phase 2 - Convent Road to R208

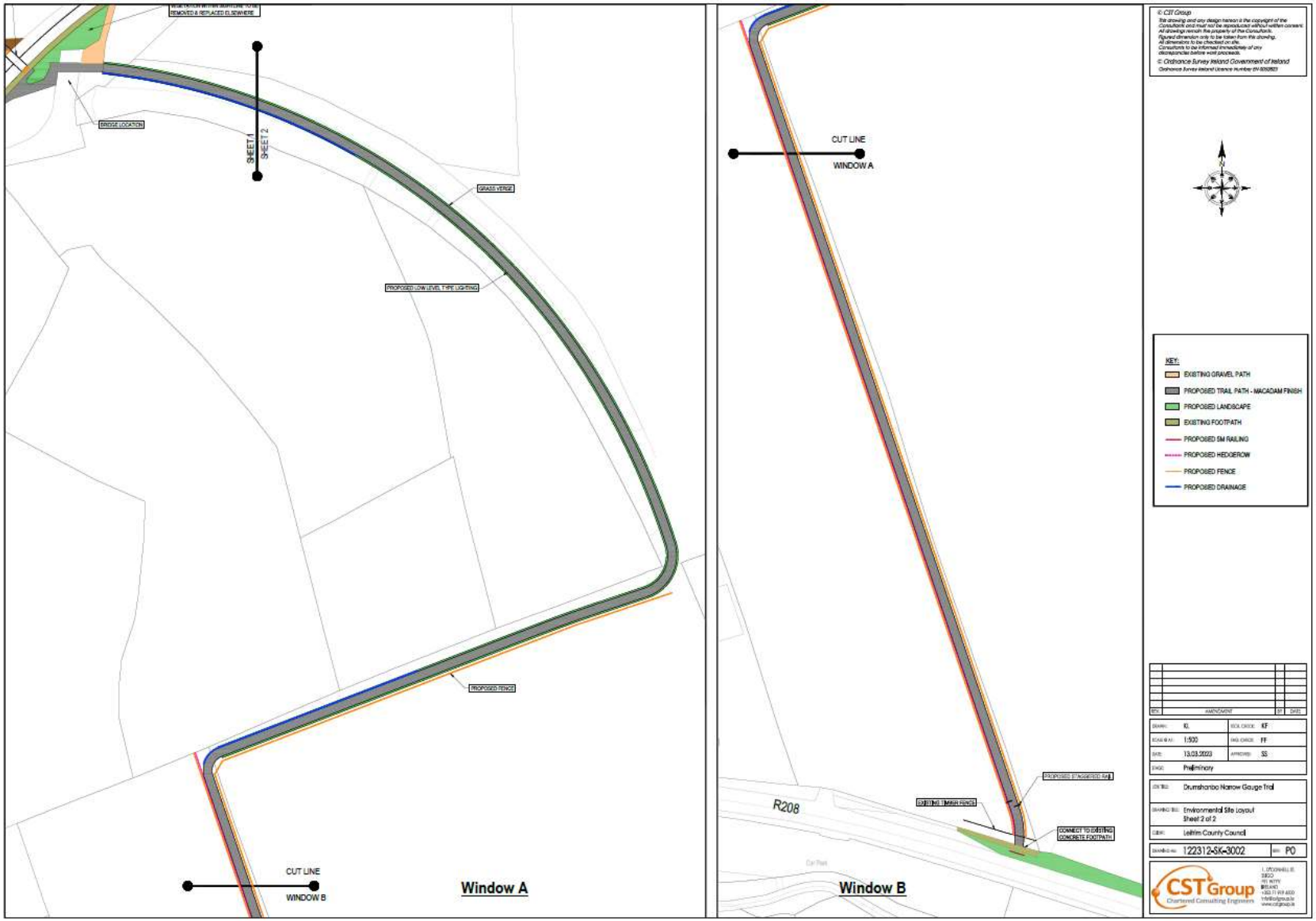
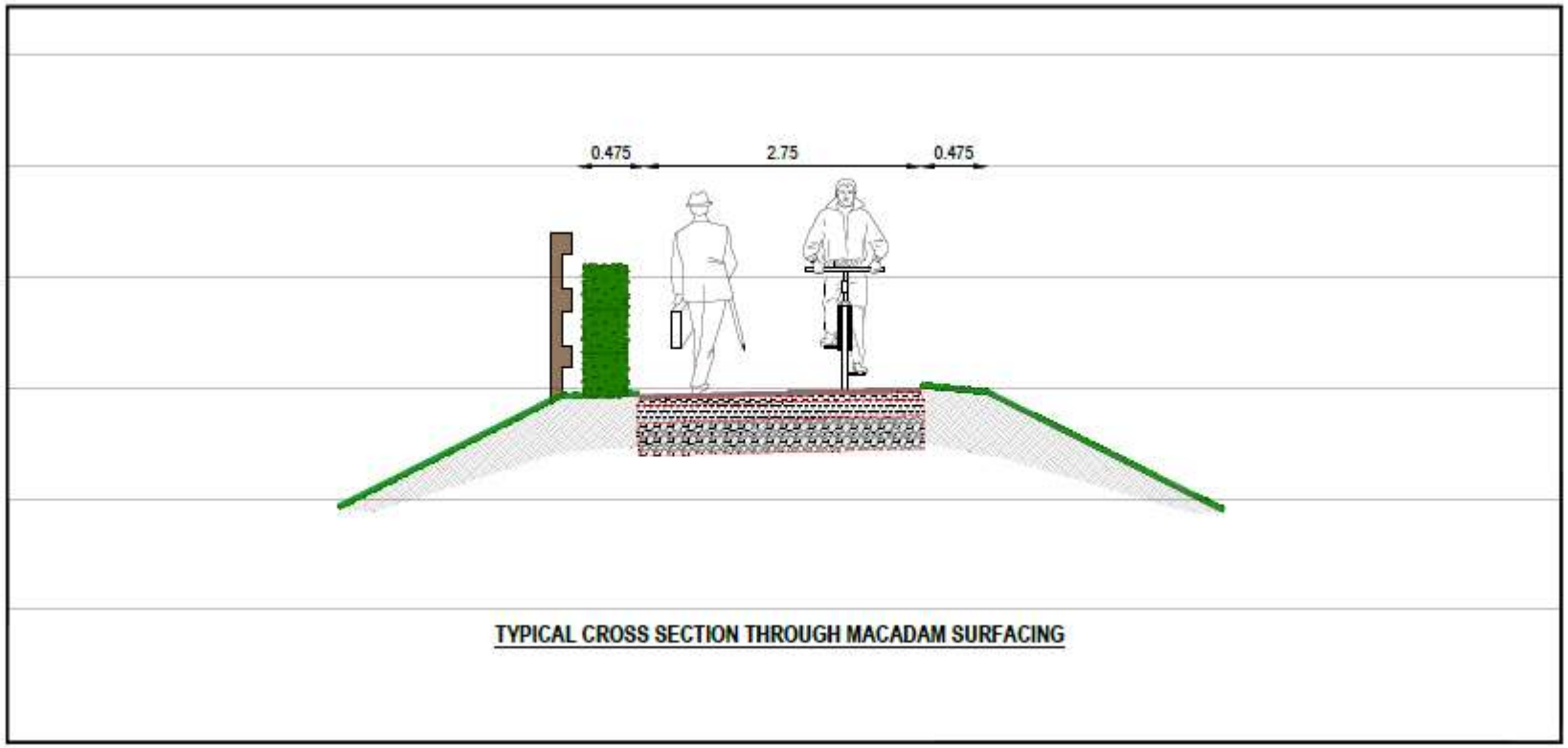


Figure 3.5: Cross section through Trail in Phase 2, with Macadam Finish



4 DESCRIPTION OF RECEIVING ENVIRONMENT

A site survey of the proposed project site was undertaken on 23rd April 2023 and 14th May 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. Findings of the ecological survey were augmented by desktop research and review of available information. An Ecological Impact assessment (EcIA) has been prepared to accompany this AA Screening report as part of planning documentation. This report should be read in conjunction with this document.

4.1 Habitats

The ecological survey did not identify any habitat which corresponds with Annex I habitat. The habitat types identified within the proposed project boundary and immediate surrounding area are summarised in Table 4.1 below. A habitat map, which extends beyond the proposed redline boundary, is provided as Figure 4.1 in Appendix 1. The land-use surrounding the proposed project includes buildings and artificial surfaces along with hedgerows and treelines, amenity grassland and agricultural grassland.

Table 4.1: Habitat types identified within and surrounding the proposed project boundary.

Habitat Name	Fossitt Code	Description
Amenity Grassland	GA2	At the beginning of Phase 1, the earth bank will require excavation. The initial cut section will continue for 50-60m. Approximately 5/6 trees including 3 x white willow (Salix alba), fir (*Abies* sp.)and alder (*Alnus glutinosa*).will require felling to allow for construction. This area of amenity grassland includes perennial ryegrass (*Lolium perenne*), yorkshire fog (*Holcus lanatus*), creeping buttercup (*Ranunculus repens*), primrose (*Primula vulgaris*, spear thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*), dandelion (*Taraxacum vulgare*), Clover (*Trifolium* spp.) and frequent mosses. At the start of Phase 2, east of convent road is an area of GA2 with occasional silver birch (*Betula pendula*). The site compound will be located here.
Flower beds and Borders	BC4	In Phase 2, within the amenity grassland described above is an area of ornamental planting, adjacent to the old railway bridge. This flower beds contain heather (*Calluna* sp.) and abundant horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*) and immature ornamental trees.
Dry meadows and grassy verges	GS2	Grassy verges occur on both the Dowra road and Convent road. On Dowra road the grass has been mown recently. North of Convent road at the end of Phase 1/start of Phase 2, is an area of GS2, with small pockets of willow scrub and occasional snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*). Three clumps of well-established Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*), approximately 3x3 metres in size, were noted here. Winter heliotrope (*Petasites pyrenaicu*s is also present throughout, with frequent grasses, willowherb, primrose (*Primula vulgaris*), bramble (*Rubus fruticous*) and buttercup (*Ranunculus repens*).
Treelines	WL2	Treelines are present along most of the proposed project. In Phase 1, on the north bank A tree line comprises ivy covered alder and willow trees with a sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*), blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) and hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) understorey and bramble (*Rubus fruticous*) dominated ground flora. As the trail proceeds east a row of semi mature evergreen trees, followed by a thicket of Blackthorn encompasses the tree line. In Phase 2, at the start of the proposed route is a line of trees comprise Willow (*Salix cineria, Salix viminalis*) with occasional hawthorn and holly. Ground flora contains dandelion (*Taraxacum vulgaria*), nettle, dock (*Rumex obtusifolius*), buttercup, wood avens (*Geum urbanum*), herb Robert (*Geranium robertianum*) and butterbur (*Petasites hybridus*).
Hedgerows	WL1	Hedgerows are linear strips of shrubs, often with occasional trees. In Phase 1, the south bank contains a hedgerow less than 4m wide on a low level bank.

		This hedgerow comprises willow, blackthorn, and hawthorn. Ground vegetation consists of lords and ladies (*Arum maculatum*), nettle (*Urtica dioica*), lesser celandine (*Ficaria verna*), meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), sycamore seedlings, bramble and cleavers (*Galium aparine*). In the latter part of Phase 2, the route runs parallel to hedgerow along the boundaries of agricultural grassland (GS4). The hedgerows contain blackthorn, hawthorn, holly, elder (*Sambucus nigra*) and willow with bramble and honeysuckle (*Lonicera* sp.) and occasional semi mature beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), ash and sycamore.
Oak-ash-hazel woodland	WN2	In phase 1, proceeding east the treeline develops into a narrow, linear strip of semi natural woodland, containing willow, ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), holly (*Ilex acquifolium*) and blackthorn. Ground flora here contains Yorkshire fog, meadowsweet, hairy sedge (C*arex hirta*) and buttercup. This woodland has affinities with the Oak-Ash-Holly (WN2) Fossitt (2000) classification but lacks oak in the canopy. Ash trees were showing signs of Ash dieback.
Wet willow-alder-ash woodland	WN6	In Phase 2, following the footprint of the old railway line, is a steep sided ravine, heavily shaded with overhanging vegetation. Semi mature and mature trees including alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) and willow (Salix spp.) with occasional ash (showing signs of die-back), are present along the banks of the ravine and occasionally at the base of the ravine. Many of the trees are multi stemmed with dense ivy coverage. According to Fossitt (2000), the WN6 broad category includes woodlands of permanently waterlogged sites that are dominated by willows, alder or ash, or by various combinations of some or all of these trees. Although this damp area is not permanently waterlogged and does not contain ground flora species typical of WN6 woodland, the canopy species are similar to this classification. The base of the ravine is damp with pooling water in places. There are occasional open areas with little ground floor vegetation present. In other areas dense bramble makes it impassable. Bank side vegetation comprises hawthorn, willow and ash with male fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*) and bramble dominating the ground flora. Some dumping was noted, including garden waste and rubble from the adjoining cemetery and silage bales from surrounding agricultural fields.
Wet Grassland	GS4	The wet grassland that the proposed route traverses is dominated by soft rush (*Juncus effusus*) with yorkshire fog, creeping bent-grass (*Agrostis stolonifera*), creeping butter-cup, thistle (*Cirsium* spp.), nettle and Curled Dock (*Rumex crispus*). Agricultural grassland in the surrounding areas is predominantly GS4 grassland.
Drainage Ditches	FW4	This category includes linear water bodies or wet channels that are entirely artificial in origin, and some sections of natural watercourses that have been excavated or modified to enhance drainage and control the flow of water. Drainage ditches either contained water (flowing or stagnant) but they did not support wetland vegetation.
Buildings and other artificial surfaces	BL3	The proposed project traverses existing roads. A triple span, stone and mortar railway bridge is crossed at the start of Phase 2 – the structure will not be directly affected as route travels underneath one of the spans. Commercial buildings are present north of Phase 1.

4.2 Invasive Species

A review of NBDC online mapping returned records of one invasive plant species and one invasive mammal species listed as Third Schedule listed species under Regulations 49 & 50 in the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 within or adjacent (1km) to the

proposed scheme, namely Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*) and Grey Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*).

Japanese knotweed was observed within the proposed project area during the ecological walkover, at the end of Phase 1, bordering Convent Road (see Target Note - TN1 on habitat map). Three clumps of Japanese knotweed were noted here, approximately 3 x 3 metres at time of survey. Leitrim County Council has a program in place to deal with Japanese Knotweed on National and Regional roads throughout the county.

Other invasive plants observed:

- Winter Heliotrope (*Petasites pyrenaicus*) - Dense stands noted alongside the Japanese Knotweed (see Target Note 1 on habitat map). Dense stands were noted , excluding native vegetation and possibly hiding the extent of Japanese Knotweed rhizomes. (see Target Note - TN1 on habitat map)
- Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*) - Present at the end of Phase 1, bordering Convent Road with Japanese Knotweed and Winter Heliotrope. (see Target Note - TN1 on habitat map)

4.3 Protected Species

4.3.1 Plants

No rare or protected plants were recorded in the course of the current survey. A full list of species recorded are available in Appendix II.

4.3.2 Terrestrial Mammals

A review of NBDC online mapping revealed records of protected terrestrial mammals within the proposed project scheme and adjacent (1km).

There are records of otter (*Lutra lutra*) within 1km of the proposed scheme. There is very little potential for otter to use the habitats within the survey area.

No other records of Annex II terrestrial mammal species were found during the desktop search.

Other species protected under the Wildlife Act (1976 as amended) recorded include red squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*). No sightings of terrestrial mammals were recorded on day of survey. Mammal paths were evident in numerous places along the woodlands, treelines and hedgerows. So it is assumed species likely to occur, include badger *(Meles meles*), Pine martin (*Martes martes*), fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), wood mouse (*Apodemus sylvaticus*) and hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*). No evidence of badger setts was noted within the survey area.

4.3.3 Bats

All bat species in Ireland are protected under both national legislation – (Wildlife Act, 1976, as amended in 2017) and European legislation – (Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC).

A review of NBDC online mapping showed no records of bat species in the 1km grid squares, G9710 or G9711. The five-point scale bat habitat suitability index available from NBDC online mapping was utilised to assess the importance of the study area for bat species. This index ranges from 0 to 100 with 0 being least favourable and 100 most favourable for bats. For all bat species an Index number of 27.22 was returned indicating moderate potential. The soprano pipistrelle (*Pipstrellus pygmaeus*) returned the highest score at 40 while the score for the Annex II bat lesser horseshoe bat (*Rhinolophus hipposideros*) is 3.

No dedicated bat survey was carried out as part of this survey. No evidence of bat use was noted on the bridge structure but cannot be ruled out. The proposed project route will have an impact on the linear landscape features in the area as some selective felling of trees and tree limbs in

Phase 1 and a felling of c.25-30 immature to semi-mature trees in the woodland in Phase 2 will be necessary to facilitate the trail construction. Generally, the trees which may be felled do not have suitable holes, crevices, snagged or broken limbs which are useful for bat roosts. However, many of the trees are densely covered in ivy which means they have some potential for roosting bat species. A standing dead tree noted also displays good bat potential. (see Target Note - TN2 on habitat map). The linear woodland and treeline/hedgerow habitats along the route have moderate-high potential to support foraging bats. Small sections (3.7m in length) of treelines/hedgerow will be removed to facilitate the trail. The removal of these sections is unlikely to result in adverse impacts on foraging bats as the main linear features will remain intact. The selective felling of trees within the ravine is also unlikely to impact on foraging bats as the linear corridor will remain. A bat survey is recommended before construction works commence of the trees proposed for felling and of any trees where limbs may be cut back.

4.3.4 Birds

The nearest European sites protected for birds is Lough Arrow SPA (004030) which is c. 16 km west of the proposed project. The SPA is protected for Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) [A004] and Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*) [A061] as well as wetland and waterbird habitats.

The bird species noted during the ecological survey on the 23rd April 2023 and 14th May 2023 are listed in **Table 4.2** below. The birds observed are considered to be common within the wider landscape. No species are SCIs of any European site.

Table 4.2: List of bird species noted within and adjacent to proposed project site.

Common Name	Latin name
Wren	*Troglodytes troglodytes*
Robin	*Erithacus rubecula*
Woodpigeon	*Columba palumbus*
Blackbird	*Turdus merula*
Blue tit	*Cyanistes caeruleus*
Chaffinch	*Fingilla coelebs*
Song Thrush	*Turdus philomelos*

4.4 Geology and Soils

According to GSI online mapping, the underlying soils for the best part of the footprint of the proposed project are shales and sandstones till with cutover peat in the wooded ravine section of Phase 2. The groundwater aquifer is classified as regionally important with groundwater flowing through conduits. Groundwater that readily and quickly receives water (and contaminants) from the land surface is considered to be more vulnerable than groundwater that receives water (and contaminants) more slowly, and consequently in lower quantities. Also, the slower the movement and the longer the pathway, the greater is the potential for attenuation of many contaminants. Groundwater is most at risk where the subsoils are absent or thin and in areas of karstic limestone, where surface streams sink underground at swallow holes. Groundwater vulnerability for the most part is classified as low with very small sections of Phase 1 and at the end of phase 2 being classified as moderate and high.

4.5 Hydrology

The proposed project is located within the Upper Shannon Hydrometric Area and Catchment and Yellow [Ballinaglera]_SC_010 Sub-Catchment, the Drumshanbo Stream River Sub-Basin and the Geevagh groundwater catchment. Rivers and streams (those included on the EPA-MAPS database) were reviewed in the vicinity of the proposed project. There are no drains or streams evident within the study area. Drumshanbo Stream is located to the west (45m at closest point) and to

the south (30m at closest point) of the proposed project. It has been assigned 'Moderate' WFD Status (2016-2021) and classified as being 'At Risk' of failing to achieve WFD objectives.

Water Framework Directive (WFD) Priority Areas for Action are areas where action will be carried out in the River Basin Management Plan (RBMP). The Areas for Action (AFA)were selected based on the priorities in the RBMB, the evidence from the WFD characterisation process, and the expertise, data and knowledge of public body staff with responsibilities for water and the different pressure types. The Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO) conduct assessment work within the Area for Action. In total, 10 Areas for Action (AFA) within County Leitrim are recommended in the draft 3rd Cycle RBMP. The Drumshanbo Stream_010 water body forms part of the Lough Allan AFA. This watercourse is not designated as a Salmonid River under the Salmonid Regulations (S.I. 293 EC(Quality of Salmonid Waters) Regulations, 1988). The proposed trail does not cross this watercourse at any point and no watercourse was found on the day of survey to connect with this watercourse. Field drainage ditches were observed in the study area.

5 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.

5.1 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 (SACs and SPAs) within a distance of 15km from the proposed project site were identified to assess for potential impacts as displayed in Figure 5.1. It is common practise to use a 15 km buffer around the proposed project to screen potential off-site impacts on 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. 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.

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).

One Natura 2000 site within an area extending 15km around the proposed project has been considered for potential impacts, specifically Cuilcagh-Anierin Uplands SAC. Its conservation interests and the potential for interactions leading to significant adverse effects arising from the proposed project is identified in Table 5.1.

Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs) and Proposed Natural Heritage Areas (pNHAs) are designated under the Wildlife Acts 1976 to 2012 and are subject to the full protections provided by this legislation. pNHAs have not been fully designated and therefore have no statutory protection but are often considered in County Development Plans. These sites do not form part of the Natura 2000 network and the AA process, or screening for same, does not apply to NHAs or pNHAs. These sites are displayed in Figure 5.1.

Several NHA and pNHA are located within the 15km Zone of Influence from the proposed project . These are:

- Kilronan Mountain Bog NHA (000617) – 5.7km
- Corry Mountain Bog NHA (002321) – 8.3km
- Carrane Hill Bog NHA (002415) – 12.7km
- Lough Allen South End and Parts pNHA (000427) – 3.17km
- Carrickaport Lough pNHA (001920) - 3.2km
- Sheemore Wood pNHA (001421) - 5.68km
- Drumhierny Wood pNHA (001412) - 5.9km
- Lough Drumharlow pNHA (001643) - 7.65km
- Annaghearly Lough pNHA (001402) - 6.85km
- Kilgarriff Marsh pNHA (000426) - 11.5
- Fin Lough pNHA (001636) - 13km
- Owengar Wood pNHA (001419) - 13.8km

Given the relatively modest nature and scale of the proposed project and the associated construction activities, and available separation distances of the above NHAs and pNHAs, it is envisaged that none of the above would be impacted on.

Figure 5.1: Designated sites within a 15km buffer zone

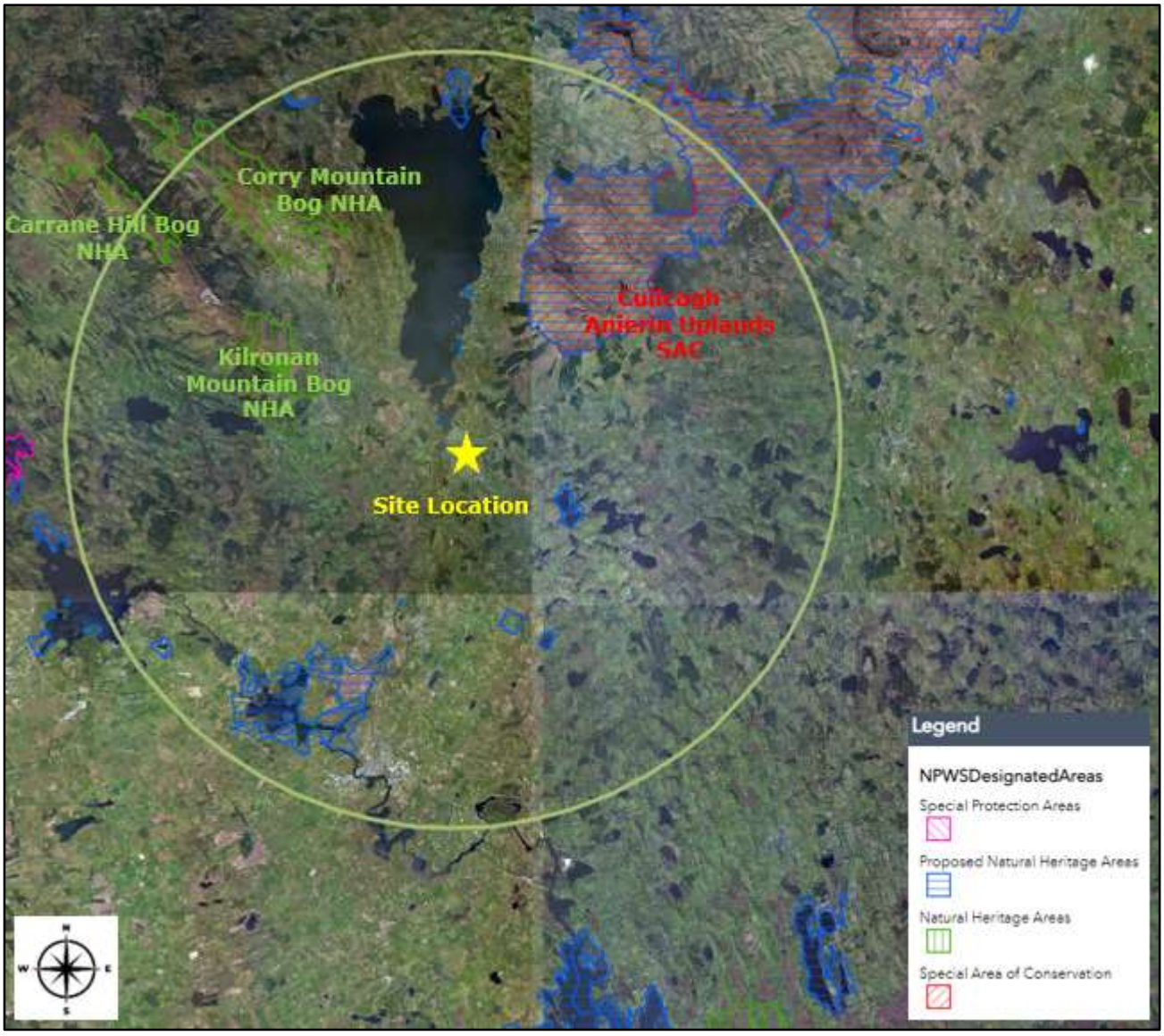


Table 5.1: Designated Natura 2000 sites which are located within a 15km radius of the proposed site.

Natura 2000 Site [Site Code]	Distance From Proposed Project (Km)	Qualifying Interest (* Denotes A Priority Habitat)	Potential For Impacts Identified
Cuilcagh - Anierin Uplands SAC (000584)	4.7 KM	**Habitats** 3110 Oligotrophic waters containing very few minerals of sandy plains (Littorelletalia uniflorae) 3160 Natural dystrophic lakes and ponds 4010 Northern Atlantic wet heaths with Erica tetralix 4030 European dry heaths 4060 Alpine and Boreal heaths 6230 Species-rich Nardus grasslands, on siliceous substrates in mountain areas (and submountain areas, in Continental Europe)* 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active bog) 7140 Transition mires and quaking bogs 7220 Petrifying springs with tufa formation (Cratoneurion)* 8110 Siliceous scree of the montane to snow levels (Androsacetalia alpinae and Galeopsietalia ladani) 8220 Siliceous rocky slopes with chasmophytic vegetation **Species** 6216 Slender Green Feather-moss *(Hamatocaulis vernicosus)*	The proposed project is not located within or adjacent to this SAC therefore there will be no direct disturbance of the Qualifying Interests

5.2 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."*

6 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 the 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 with the exception of those incorporated in the design stage.

The following potential impacts as a result of the construction and/or operation of the proposed scheme are discussed:

- Habitat loss or fragmentation
- Disturbance via noise, lighting, vibration or human presence
- Spread of invasive species
- Potential changes in water quality
- In-combination effects

6.1 Habitat Loss or Fragmentation

The proposed scheme is located 4.7km (as the crow flies) from the boundary of Cuilcagh -Anierin Uplands SAC (000584). This site is of special interest because of its geology, physiography and upland flora and fauna.

The habitats recorded within the proposed project boundary and adjacent environs do not correspond to habitats listed on Annex I of the Habitats Directive. The ecological survey did not identify any qualifying habitat for which this SAC is designated within the proposed project boundary or surrounding environs. Habitats within the proposed project are considered to be common within the wider landscape and of Local Importance. Therefore, the proposed project will not result in the loss or fragmentation of any habitat supporting Special Conservation Interests of Cuilcagh -Anierin Uplands SAC or any Annex I habitat as these habitats are not present within the proposed project boundary or adjacent area.

There will be a requirement to remove some trees and overhanging vegetation at the beginning of Phase 1 and throughout the linear woodland in phase 2. Some hedgerow removal will be required in Phase 2. Removal of vegetation should not significantly impact on linear landscape features. Proposed landscaping for the site outlines that native trees and other native vegetation will be planted in order to replace any habitat being removed. The proposed works are unlikely to cause any significant habitat fragmentation.

6.2 Disturbance via Noise, Lighting, Vibration or Human Presence

The proposed scheme is located 4.7km (as the crow flies) from the boundary of Cuilcagh -Anierin Uplands SAC. The SAC is designated for its Annex 1 habitats and the plants species, *Hamatocaulis vernicosus* (Slender Green Feather-moss) [6216]. However, the site provides good habitat for breeding wading birds, with Curlew, Golden Plover and Dunlin nesting in small numbers. Other typical upland bird species such as Peregrine, Merlin and Ring Ouzel are also present. Golden Plover, Peregrine and Merlin are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive and, along with Dunlin and Ring Ouzel, are Red Data Book species. Red Grouse, also a Red-listed species, is present on the site. Owing to this distance it is considered that there will be no direct disturbance to any species found within the SAC. The ecological survey did not identify any supporting habitat within/adjacent to the proposed project site.

6.3 Spread of Invasive Species

The proposed scheme is located 4.7km (as the crow flies) from the boundary of Cuilcagh -Anierin Uplands SAC. The existing road drainage discharges to the Drumshanbo Stream. The ecological survey noted the invasive plant species, Japanese Knotweed which is listed as a Third Schedule species.

Japanese knotweed can spread easily when its underground rhizomes are disturbed. Rhizomes can grow up to 7m from the plant and the knotweed identified during the ecology survey is located within 7m of proposed works. During construction there is potential for disturbance of rhizomes (machinery, human disturbance). During operation there is also potential for disturbance of knotweed (e.g. machinery during landscaping activities, human disturbance). There is potential for these disturbed rhizomes to spread downstream via the road drainage system.

In accordance with S.I. No. 477/2011 - European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 measures must be taken to avoid the spread of any Third schedule species. These measures are not considered mitigation in the context of this AA Screening as they are not included to reduce or avoid any effect to a European site. The chances of knotweed spreading to the SAC via road drainage is considered to be zero given the location of the SAC being upstream from the proposed project site.

6.4 Potential Changes in Water Quality

The proposed scheme is located 4.7km (as the crow flies) from the boundary of Cuilcagh -Anierin Uplands SAC. The existing road drainage discharges to the Drumshanbo steam and the proposed project will utilise this drainage system. The Drumshanbo stream is at its closet 30m and 45m from either end of the proposed trail. The potential for pollutants (sediment and/or other toxic material) to enter this stream during construction/operation is considered.

There is no hydrological connection to this SAC via the Drumshanbo steam. Cuilcagh -Anierin Uplands SAC is upstream from the proposed project site. The nearest Natura 2000 site hydrologically linked is Lough Forbes SAC which is c.30km (as the crow flies) from the proposed project site. Taking the small scale, nature and location of the proposed project, relative to the qualifying interests of a Natural 2000 site, it is considered that surface water runoff during construction of the proposed project will not give rise to likely significant effects upon a Natura 2000 site.

During operation of the proposed project, surface runoff will be to filter drains, designed in short sections along the trail, with outfall to existing field drainage and to the existing road drainage system where the trail is adjacent. The project will not involve any substantial changes to the drainage network, so there will be no change from the baseline scenario. The project will not generate any foul water, so this can be screened out of the assessment.

6.5 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.

Leitrim Council planning portal was consulted to identify proposed or permitted projects which may give rise to in-combination effects within the last 5 years. EPA online mapping portal was consulted to review any potential activities in the vicinity of the proposed scheme which may result in an in combination effect (e.g., licenced discharges, industrial facilities, extraction activities and/or waste disposal sites). The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage EIA portal was consulted to search for any development within the area that required an EIA.

6.5.1 Planning Portal

A review of planning applications within 500 metres of the site for the past 5 years, indicates that there are no significant development proposals within the vicinity of the site that could act in cumulation with the project. In addition, the small-scale nature and operation of the proposed project is unlikely give rise to any significant cumulative environmental effects.

It is acknowledged, Leitrim County Council are in the process of a Part 8 planning application, seeking permission to develop a facility centre for water sports at Acres Lake in Drumshanbo as well as a 70 space car park and a pedestrian cross on the R207. It is reasonable to assume that this application and any future development applications will be subject to Appropriate Assessment as required under Articles 6(3) of the Habitats Directive. This current project 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).

6.5.2 Leitrim County Development Plan 2023 – 2029

Under the Leitrim County Development Plan 2023-2029 these lands are zoned partly within the project envelope boundary. Part of Phase 1 is zoned 'Enterprise and Employment and Part of phase 2 is zoned 'Agriculture' and part 'Social and Community'.

Drumshanbo has seen the development of several cycling and walking routes. It is the aim of the Council to build upon these successful routes and to promote the continued development of a more integrated and coherent cycling and walking network throughout the town. In accordance with developing more active means of travel and greater recreational facilities, a key development for Drumshanbo will be the provision of a greenway route within the town which can cater for its inhabitants as well as further enhancing the tourism offer in Drumshanbo for visitors. The route of the former Cavan-Leitrim narrow gauge railway is identified as the preferred route for facilitating such a greenway.

It is the County Policy Objective to:
DSO 33: Support and develop the tourism product of Drumshanbo having regard to its accessibility to important tourist destinations in the region including proximity to natural amenities and recreational opportunities including the Shannon Blueway and Lough Allen.

DSO 34: Provide for the enhancement of tourism and amenity facilities within Drumshanbo where appropriate and to facilitate leisure tourism/amenity proposals subject to the preservation of the natural amenity of the area. Ensure that project proposals do not give rise to adverse impacts on the receiving environment.

DSO 35: Seek to advance through planning and detailed design the development of a greenway (walking/cycling route) along the former narrow gauge rail line and to integrate this infrastructure with other existing/proposed walking routes/footpaths around the town.

In addition, It is the aim of the Council to conserve, sustainably manage and enhance the county's natural heritage and biodiversity and to promote understanding of and sustainable access to it. There are a number of objectives and policies 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.

Biodiversity Outside of Habitats Designated for Nature Conservation it is an aim of the council To protect ecological networks linking protected and designated important sites within the county, in accordance with Article 10 of the Habitats Directive. And to protect and where possible enhance

wildlife habitats and landscape features which act as ecological corridors/networks and stepping stones, such as river corridors, hedgerows and road verges, and to minimise the loss of habitats and features of the wider countryside (such as ponds, wetlands and trees) which are not within designated sites.

The potential impact of this plan on the proposed project is deemed to be positive.

7 CONCLUSIONS

To determine the potential impacts, if any, of the proposed project 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 project. 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 nearby NHAs and pNHAs were also considered. Given the relatively modest nature and scale of the proposed project and the associated construction activities, and available separation distances of the NHAs and pNHAs, it is envisaged that none of these designated sites would be impacted on.

Following a source-pathway-receptor model the potential impacts of the proposed project have been considered in the context of the Special Conservation Interests and their conservation objectives for Cuilcagh and Anierin Uplands SAC.

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 Cuilcagh and Anierin Uplands SAC. In accordance with the OPR 2021 guidance, we note that no mitigation measures have been considered when reaching this conclusion. While best practice construction methods will be employed these are not required to avoid or reduce any effects on Cuilcagh and Anierin Uplands SAC. These measures are not relied upon to reach a conclusion.

In conclusion, this Screening Assessment demonstrated that the proposed project will not pose significant threat to the integrity of Cuilcagh and Anierin Uplands SAC, and its 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 (Leitrim County Council).

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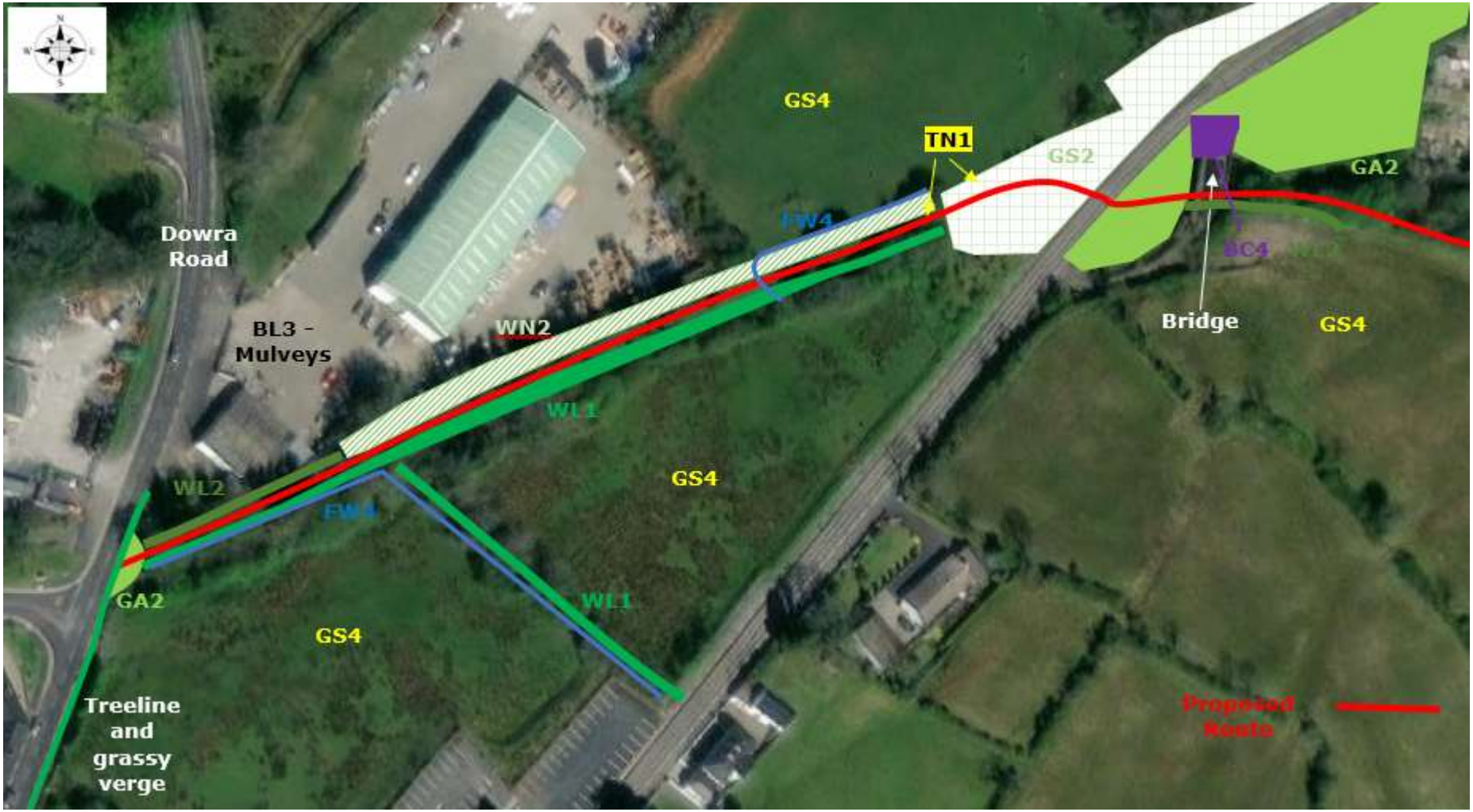
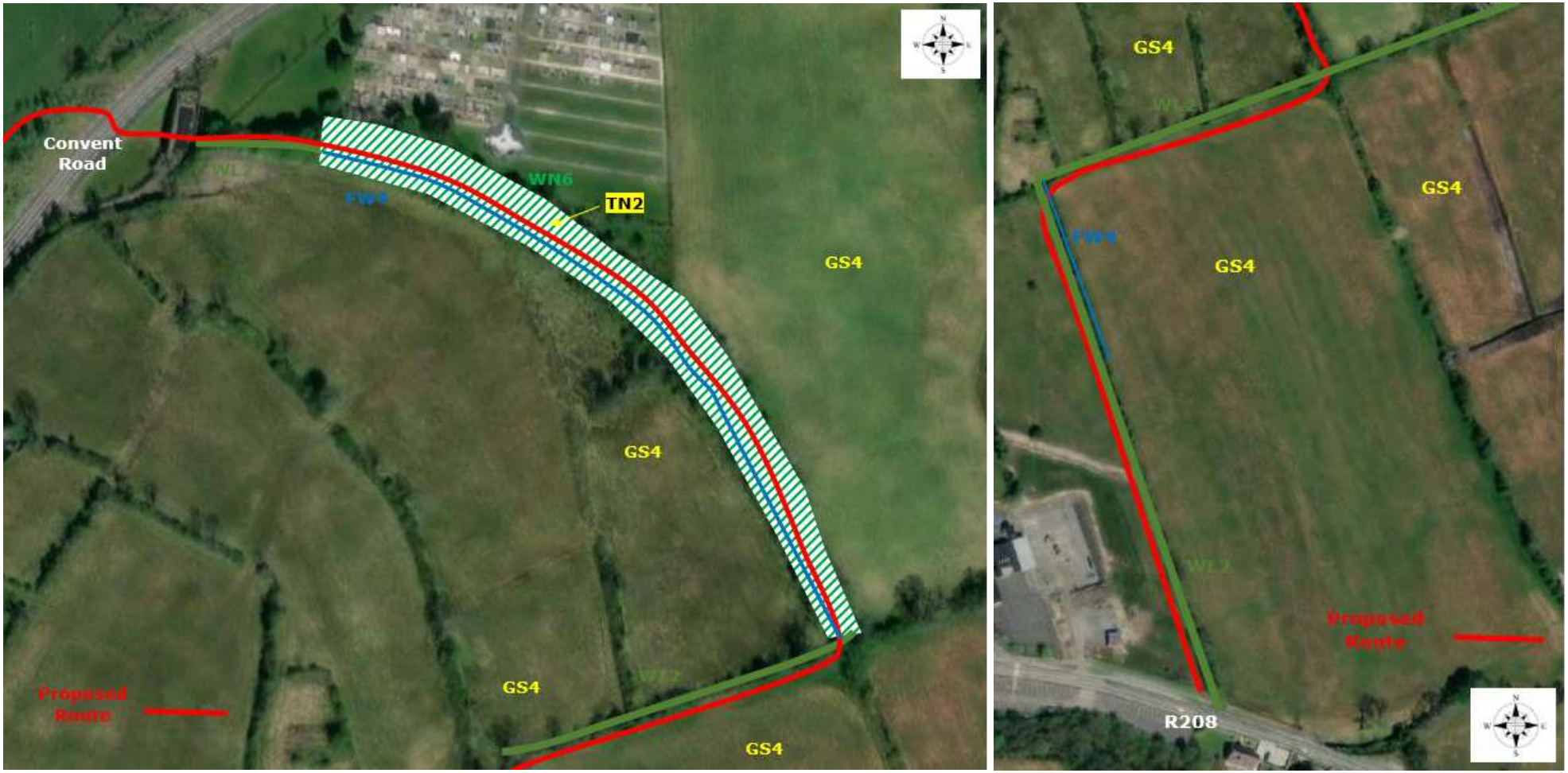
APPENDIX I
HABITAT MAP

Phase 1 Habitats



Phase 2 Habitats



APPENDIX II
SPECIES LIST

Plants

Common Name	**Scientific Name**
Alder	*Alnus glutinosa*
Ash	*Fraxinus excelsior*
Beech	*Fagus sylvatica*
Blackthorn	*Prunus spinosa*
Butterbur	*Petasites hybridus*
Buttercup	*Ranunculus repens*
Cleaver	*Galium aparine*
Clover	*Trifolium* spp
Creeping Bent-Grass	*Agrostis stolonifera*
Creeping Buttercup	*Ranunculus repens*
Dandelion	*Taraxacum vulgare*
Dock	*Rumex obtusifolius*),
Elder	*Sambucus nigra*
Fir	*Abies* sp
Hairy Sedge	*Carex hirta*
Hawthorn	*Crataegus monogyna*
Heather	*Calluna sp.*
Herb Robert	*Geranium robertianum*
Holly	*Ilex acquifolium*
Horsetail	*Equisetum arvense*
Ivy	*Hedera helix*
Japanese Knotweed	*Fallopia japonica*
Lesser Celandine	*Ficaria verna*
Lords And Ladies	*Arum maculatum*
Male Fern	*Dryopteris filix-mas*
Meadowsweet	*Filipendula ulmaria*
Nettle	*Urtica dioica*
Perennial Ryegrass	*Lolium perenne*
Primrose	*Primula vulgaris*
Snowberry	*Symphoricarpos albus*
Spear Thistle	*Cirsium vulgare*

Birds

Common Name	**Latin name**
Blackbird	*Turdus merula*
Blue tit	*Cyanistes caeruleus*
Chaffinch	*Fingilla coelebs*
Robin	Robin
Song Thrush	*Turdus philomelos*
Woodpigeon	*Columba palumbus*
Wren	*Troglodytes troglodytes*