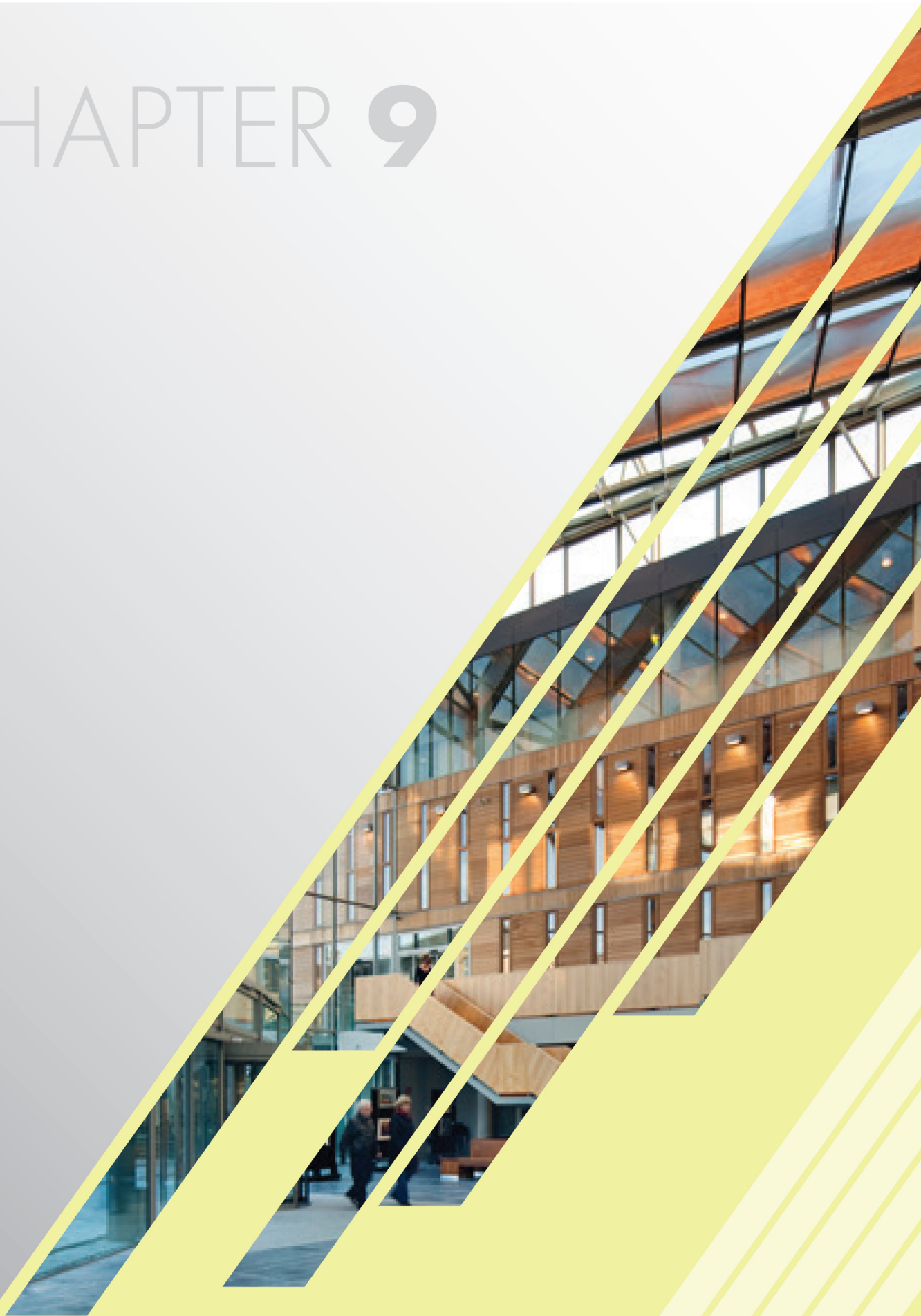


CHAPTER 9



CHAPTER 9 Rural Westmeath

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9.1 Aim

Support the role of rural areas in maintaining a stable population base through a strong network of villages and small towns and strengthening rural communities by supporting a resilient rural economy and the sustainable management of land and resources.

9.2 Background

Rural Westmeath is home to a diverse range of land uses including agriculture and equine industries, centres of local food production, recreational and tourist activities, established villages and rural housing. These combine to provide both residents and visitors with a quality environment to live, work and recreate. Traditionally rural areas have been largely dependent on farming, but this is no longer the case.

The facilitation of sustainable sources of income and enterprise such as rural tourism (which has significant potential for growth due to a range of recreational activities and outdoor pursuits), farm diversification, forestry, rural based enterprise to complement the agri-food sector and an increasing potential for the growth of the renewable energy sector is encouraged. Furthermore, enhanced connectivity through the roll-out of broadband provision in rural Westmeath provides access to national and international markets.

In terms of rural settlement, the Westmeath countryside is a living and lived-in landscape with supporting rural economies and rural communities. There is a continuing need to balance housing need for people to live and work in the countryside, while at the same time avoiding unsustainable patterns of development and protecting environmental qualities. Encouragement and support for restoration and refurbishment of the existing built fabric in rural areas is essential to retain its core identity.

This Chapter sets out the policy objectives required for the sustainable development of rural Westmeath, in a manner that is consistent with the guidance, strategies and policies at national and regional level based on the following principles:

- A focus on supporting vibrant rural communities centred around a network of rural towns and villages
- The requirement to transition to a low carbon and climate resilient society, necessitates consideration of the spatial pattern of development focusing on avoidance of unnecessary trips.
- Support of Rural Westmeath as an important national and international tourism and heritage asset and protection of its natural and environmental assets
- The need to provide for a resilient rural economy.
- Accommodation of specific land use requirements of agricultural activity as a first priority.

- Enhancement of the competitiveness of rural areas by supporting innovation in rural economic development and enterprise through the diversification of the rural economy into new sectors and services

9.3 Legislative and Policy Context

9.3.1 Project Ireland 2040 - National Planning Framework

The National Planning Framework (NPF) acknowledges that “rural areas have a major role to play in Ireland 2040 and encourages Local Authorities to ensure that connectivity gaps are addressed and that planning and investment policies support job creation in the rural economy”.

Improved coordination of existing investment programmes dealing with social inclusion, rural development and town and village renewal are sought, as is planning for the future growth and development of rural areas. In terms of rural housing, the NPF distinguishes between commuter areas and other rural regions throughout the Country.

The NPF recognises the “significant pressures from urban generated pressures in commuter areas and highlights how commuter-generated housing in rural areas accessible to cities and towns, has affected the character and cohesion of some locations. It seeks to manage the growth of areas that are under strong urban influence to avoid over-development, while sustaining vibrant rural communities.”

9.3.2 Sustainable Rural Housing, Guidelines for Planning Authorities, 2005

The Circular letter PL2/2017, issued by the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government in May 2017, advised local authorities that the Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines are currently being revised to ensure the rural housing policies and objectives contained in local authority development plans comply with Article 43 of the EU Treaty on the freedom of movement of citizens.

9.3.3 Eastern and Midlands Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy

The Eastern and Midlands Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) recognises the major contribution that rural areas make towards regional and national development in economic, social and environmental terms. The RSES aims to strengthen the fabric of rural Ireland, supporting rural towns and communities as well as the open countryside, improving connectivity, and supporting job creation, particularly in a more diverse range of sectors.

The RSES supports the consolidation of the town and village network, to ensure that development proceeds sustainably and at an appropriate scale, level and pace in line with the Core Strategies of County Development Plans.

The RSES requires that planning for rural areas must provide a balance between managing demand in the most accessible rural areas in proximity to larger towns, whilst supporting the sustainable growth of rural economics and rural communities. It requires that Core Strategies for County Development Plans identify areas under strong urban influence in the hinterlands of settlements and set the

appropriate rural housing policy response to avoid ribbon and over spill development from urban areas, support revitalised towns and villages, achieve sustainable compact growth targets and protect the rural resource for rural communities.

It also highlights the fundamental importance of planning the distribution of activity (for example where people live and work) in a manner which reduces the need to travel and achieves a move towards a low carbon society having regard to the impact which transport has on carbon emissions.

9.3.4 Realising our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development

This government strategy introduced in 2017 (Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs) is aimed at delivering real change for people living and working in rural Ireland. The objective of the Action Plan for Rural Development is to “unlock the potential of rural Ireland through a framework of supports, at national and local level, which will ensure that people who live in rural areas have increased opportunities for employment locally, and access to public services and social networks”.

A number of key initiatives proposed as part of the Strategy include the Town and Village Renewal Scheme and the delivery of the 2014-2020 EU LEADER Programme. The Action Plan for Rural Ireland builds on the commitments contained in the Charter for Rural Ireland (referenced below) and sets out a clear roadmap for its implementation.

9.3.5 Rural Economic Development

The Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA) was established in 2012 following the severe impact of the economic downturn on rural areas. The REDZ (Rural Economic Development Zone) initiative was a recommendation contained within the CEDRA and is intended to complement the Town and Village Renewal Scheme and cater for projects between the towns and surrounding hinterland that maximise local assets in areas such as tourism, culture, heritage and other areas that support rural economic activity.

9.3.6 Food Wise 2025

Food Wise 2025 sets out a strategic plan for the development of the agri-food (including seafood) sector for the period up to 2025 and is the successor to the Food Harvest 2020 strategy. Food Wise 2025 identifies growth projections for the sector including:

- 85% increase in the value of agri-food exports to €19 billion;
- 70% increase in value added in the agri-food, fisheries and wood products sector to in excess of €13 billion;
- 65% increase in the value of Primary Production to almost €10 billion;
- 23,000 additional direct jobs in the agri-food sector all along the supply chain from primary production to high valued added product development. Food Wise 2025 has five cross-cutting themes: sustainability, human capital, market development, competitiveness and innovation.

Sustainability is key to the strategy, which states that: *“environmental protection and economic competitiveness are equal and complementary – one cannot be achieved at the expense of the other”*. Food Wise also supports technology and processes that result in a more efficient use of resources.

9.4 Rural Settlement Strategy

Section 2.4 of the Core Strategy of this plan sets out the overall development strategy for the County including rural Westmeath. It is Council policy to support the sustainable development of rural areas in Westmeath by encouraging growth and arresting decline in areas that have experienced low population growth or decline in recent decades and by managing the growth of areas that are under strong urban influence to avoid over-development, while sustaining vibrant rural communities.

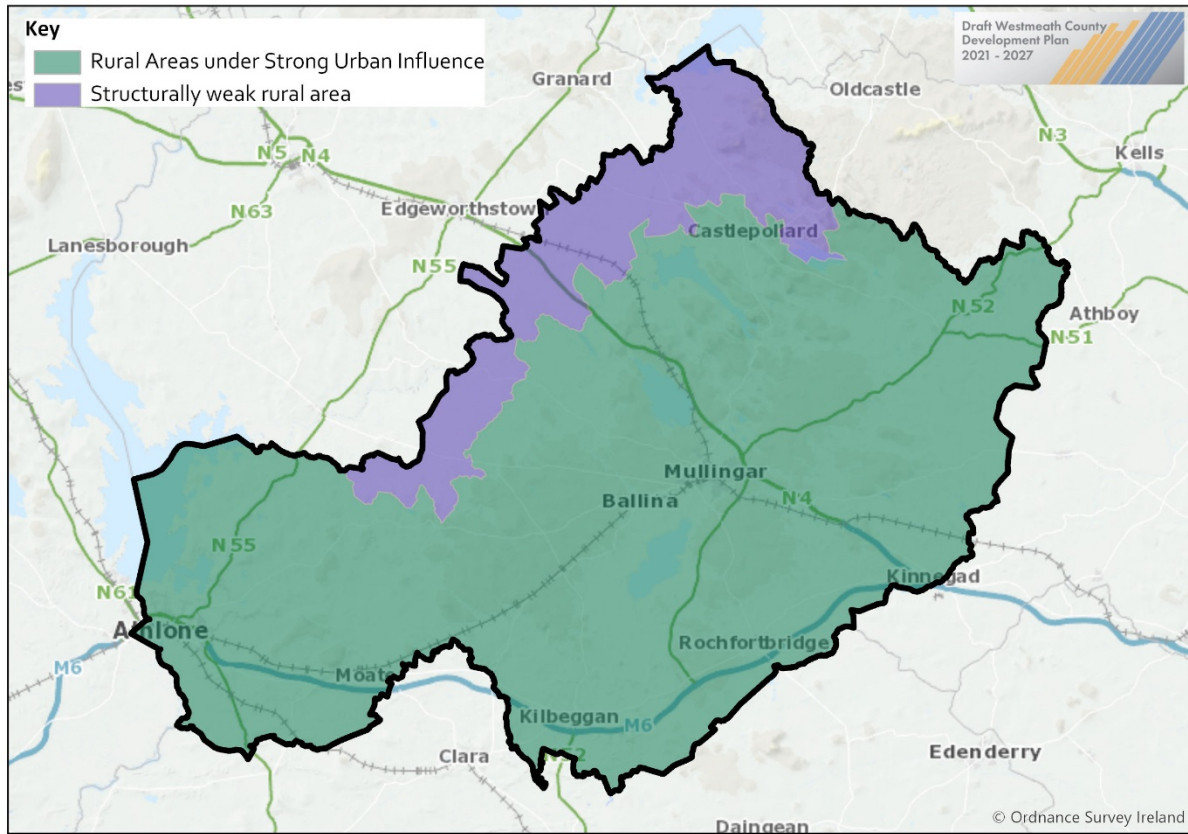
The NPF prescribes national policy in relation to the development of rural housing and requires that a distinction is made between areas under urban influence and rural areas elsewhere. The RSES sets out regional policy that requires Local Authorities to *‘manage urban generated growth in Rural Areas Under Strong Urban Influence (i.e. the commuter catchment of Dublin, large towns and centres of employment) and Stronger Rural Areas by ensuring that in these areas the provision of single houses in the open countryside is based on the core consideration of demonstrable economic or social need to live in a rural area, and compliance with statutory guidelines and plans, having regard to the viability of smaller towns and rural settlements’*.

Having regard to this, a rural typology has been undertaken for Co. Westmeath, which is consistent with national and regional policy. This typology is premised largely on two categories as follows:

- Rural Areas under Strong Urban Influence
- Structurally Weak Areas

Definitions of both areas are prescribed in Sections 2.14.1 and 2.14.2 of the Core Strategy.

The Rural Typology Map for Co. Westmeath (Map 9.1) below highlights the extent of lands which are encompassed within these defined areas, for the purposes of informing policy in relation to the delivery of rural housing over the plan period.



Map 9.1 Rural Typology Co. Westmeath

The Council will manage sustainable growth in designated 'Rural Areas Under Strong Urban Influence' and facilitate the provision of single houses in the countryside based on the core consideration of demonstrable economic or social need to live in a rural area, siting and design criteria for rural housing and compliance with statutory guidelines and plans, having regard to the viability of smaller towns and rural settlements.

The aim is to support the desire of individual applicants with strong links and a need to settle in that area and to encourage people with no such links to settle in the identified extensive network of towns, villages and rural nodes. Such persons would normally have spent substantial periods of their lives living in the rural area as part of the established rural community e.g. people employed in the rural area including farmers and their sons and daughters, people originally from the rural area and wishing to return, people wishing to reside near elderly parents to provide security and care, elderly parents wishing to live near other family members, people who would have grown up in rural areas seeking to build their home close to other family members, people working in rural areas such as teachers in rural schools.

Rural Housing Need Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 9.1

Areas Under Strong Urban Influence

To accommodate demand from individuals for permanent residential development in defined 'Rural Areas Under Strong Urban Influence' who have strong links to the area and who are an intrinsic part of the rural community, subject to good planning practice, environmental carrying capacity and landscape protection considerations.

Local Housing Need

Permit residential development in areas defined 'Rural Areas Under Strong Urban Influence and Stronger Rural Areas' subject to the following circumstances:

1. Persons who are actively engaged in agriculture, horticulture, forestry, bloodstock and peat industry,
2. Members of farm families seeking to build on the family farm,
3. Landowners for this purpose being defined as persons who own the land 5 years prior to the date of planning application.
4. Persons employed locally whose employment would provide a service to the local community,
5. Persons who have personal, family or economic ties within the area, including returning emigrants
6. Persons who wish to return to farming and who buy or inherit a substantial farm-holding which is kept intact as an established farm unit, will be considered by the Council to be farmers and will be open to consideration for a rural house, as farmers. Where there is already a house on the holding, refurbishment or replacement of this house is the preferred option.

The local area for the purpose of this policy is defined as the area generally within a 10km radius of the applicant's family home.

9.4.1 Structurally Weak Areas

This designation refers to all lands for the purposes of Local Housing Need Policy which have experienced significant population decline or stagnation and have a weaker population structure than the 'Area under Strong Urban Influence'.

These 'Structurally Weak Rural Areas' are concentrated in a few areas located in the north and west of the county as defined under the Core Strategy.

The aim is to accommodate rural housing demand from individuals for permanent residential development subject to good planning practice by applying a more flexible approach in the assessment of planning applications which is primarily based on good planning practice (appropriate siting and design) and no local housing need applies. This approach will assist in revitalising and sustaining these more fragile, rural communities, by way of facilitating the expansion of the rural population and the maintenance of essential local services within these structurally weak rural areas.

Notwithstanding, there is a requirement to distinguish between speculative house building and genuine long-term commitment to the area in the interest of development management and the overall development of the area.

Rural Housing Need - Structurally Weak Areas Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 9.2	Accommodate demand from individuals for permanent residential development within defined structurally weak areas, subject to good planning practice.
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9.4.2 Rural Nodes

Rural nodes comprise a defined network of small, generally unserved settlements throughout the County which provide an alternative to one-off housing in the open countryside. The function and objective of the rural nodes is twofold, firstly to sustain the existing rural facilities i.e. school, shop etc. in a sustainable manner and secondly to cater for the demand for the one-off houses that do not meet the local need criteria or do not wish to be located within the larger towns and villages under the settlement hierarchy. There rural nodes in the County are identified on Map Nos.33-37 in Volume 2 of the plan.

Rural nodes are designated for limited development at a sustainable scale through the development of clusters. It is anticipated that each rural node can cater for a small population increase from their current population base over the period of the Plan.

Consideration of planning applications for development within the nodes will have regard to the role and form of the node within the wider rural area with particular care being taken that these settlements do not compete with designated rural towns and villages in the services they provide or the role and function they play within the rural area.

Rural Nodes Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 9.3	Within the designated development limits of the rural nodes (Map Nos 33-37 Volume 2), development will be permitted where it involves infilling, conversion, single site housing development, or the use of derelict or underused land or premises, subject to siting, design, protection of residential amenities and normal development management criteria.
CPO 9.4	In addition to complying with the most up-to-date EPA Code of Practice for Wastewater Treatment and Disposal Systems Serving Single Houses, proposals for development in rural nodes shall include an assessment undertaken by a qualified hydrologist, that demonstrates that the outfall from the septic tank will not, in combination with other septic tanks within the node and wider area, contribute towards any surface or ground water body not meeting the objective of good status under the Water Framework Directive.

CPO 9.5	Continue to monitor and review rural nodes in the County, across the lifetime of the Plan, in order to ensure compatibility with environmental protection objectives.
CPO 9.6	Support the roll out of sustainable transport options within the boundaries of rural nodes including segregated walking and cycle paths and provisions for rural public transport.

9.5 Environmental Capacity

Wastewater treatment facilities in rural areas should be located, constructed and maintained to the highest standards to ensure minimal impacts on water quality and particularly groundwater quality. The Council will seek to direct rural housing to areas where acceptable wastewater treatment and disposal facilities can be provided and avoid sites that are prone to extreme high-water tables, flooding, are subject to impeded drainage or where ground water is at risk of contamination.

Rural Housing Criteria Policy Objectives	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 9.7	Ensure that, in permitting one-off rural housing, key rural assets such as water, natural and cultural heritage and landscape quality are protected and maintained.
CPO 9.8	Protect the natural assets of the county including ground and surface water and ensure that physical standards are met including soil conditions suitable for effluent disposal and the avoidance of flood areas.
CPO 9.9	Protect the integrity of the landscapes as identified in the Landscape Character Assessment and protected views.
CPO 9.10	Seek that all proposed on-site wastewater treatment systems for single dwellings and extensions which will increase the population equivalent loading shall comply with the EPA Code of Practice for Wastewater Treatment and disposal Systems serving Single Houses (2009) and any revision thereof.
CPO 9.11	Seek to ensure that waste water treatment systems are installed by competent persons with regular monitoring and testing carried out on the treatment system, in accordance with the planning permission.
CPO 9.12	Have regard to the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government's Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines 2005, and any subsequent amendment in the assessment of applications for rural housing.

9.5.1 Rural Housing Siting and Design

Dwellings and structures in the countryside need to be sited and designed to impact minimally on their setting. The utilisation of existing features, natural and manmade, can assist in integrating new development into its established setting. All rural development will be expected to adhere to this basic principle. Design standards are outlined in Chapter 16 Development Management standards of the plan and supplementary planning guidance contained in the Westmeath Rural Design Guidelines (2005) or any revisions thereof. Furthermore, the Landscape Character Assessment prepared for the

county assesses the sensitivity and capacity of the different character areas to absorb and facilitate rural residential development.

Where a number of houses are proposed in an area, (e.g. a number from the same family), it is preferable that these would be clustered, well set back from the public road and served by a single entrance rather than set out in a line along a roadside. However, these clusters must be of a small scale.

9.6 Development within the hinterland of Settlements

The aim of policy in these areas is to avoid undesirable ribbon development on the approaches to settlements and to protect the fabric of settlements by restricting development on the outskirts of the regional centre, towns and villages. Provision will be made for farmers, members of farm families and people that have spent substantial parts of their lives as part of the established rural community building their first home.

Proposals shall in all instances, except for reasons of traffic safety, design or other environmental consideration, be clustered with the existing family home or if farm buildings are isolated from the family dwelling, consideration can be given to grouping with farm structures.

Development within the hinterland of Settlements Policy Objectives	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 9.13	It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council that development within the hinterland of settlements will be assessed having regard to the following: Promote the clustering of houses particularly on the same landholding or for the same family and promote shared accesses to minimise hedgerow removal.
CPO 9.14	Control ribbon development, particularly on approach roads into the county's regional centre, self-sustaining growth towns and self-sustaining towns.
CPO 9.15	Generally, resist new accesses for single houses onto regional roads, where the 80km per hour limit applies, to safeguard the carrying capacity and safety of these roads.
CPO 9.16	Ensure that the road network is adequate to cater for the development and that the traffic movements generated by the development will not give rise to a traffic hazard.
CPO 9.17	Retain, insofar as practicable, existing hedgerows and trees on new house sites. Replacement trees and hedgerows should be of native species.
CPO 9.18	Generally, resist urban generated and speculative residential development outside the settlement hierarchy.
CPO 9.19	Encourage innovative design, and layouts that promote solar gain subject to protecting the character of the landscape.
CPO 9.20	Undertake a review of the Westmeath Rural Housing Design Guidelines.

9.7 Rural Areas Subject to Sensitive Resource Designation

Water catchment areas are designated around Lough Owel and Lough Lene in recognition of the important role of these lakes in the supply of public water for much of the county. Applications for all developments in the catchment areas will be examined in detail and development in such areas will not be permitted, if it is considered that the proposal would be liable to give rise to pollution of the water source.

Attention will also be given to proximity of houses to spawning streams in the county and consultations with Inland Fisheries Ireland will be undertaken in cases where it is felt that development would be a threat to fish and fish life in important spawning and nursery areas.

It is an objective of the Council to prohibit the land spreading of animal slurries or other liquid wastes from intensive agricultural developments on lands within the catchment areas of public water supplies.

Water Catchment Areas Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 9.21	<p>Restrict residential development not related to farming or forestry practices in defined water catchment areas of Lough Owel and Lough Lene, with the exception of the erection of a house for a member of an existing residential farm family who will inherit the farm, or another member of the family, provided that not more than two dwellings (existing and proposed) be permitted on any farm holding within the water catchment and only where this relates to the first dwelling for the applicant and no alternative site is available outside the water catchment.</p> <p>Where there is a conflict with CPO 9.22 below, this policy shall take precedence.</p>
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9.8 Areas of High Amenity

The Areas of High Amenity are associated with the county's major lakes and the River Shannon and are designated due to their amenity value and recreational potential. The Council aims to protect against housing developments which are urban-generated or speculative in designated Areas of High Amenity.

Areas of High Amenity Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 9.22	<p>Restrict development not related to farming practices and tourism in all High Amenity Areas, with the exception of housing for the immediate family (son/daughter) of established residents living on landholdings, who demonstrate a housing need and have long-term intrinsic links with the area. The entire landholding will be demonstrated to have been in the resident's ownership 5 years prior to the date of application.</p>
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9.9 Refurbishment and Extensions of Existing Structures

The Council will facilitate the reuse and refurbishment of vacant traditional farm buildings which are no longer suitable for modern farm practices and derelict houses in the countryside. (Refer Chapter 16 Development Management Standards)

When assessing proposals to convert, re-use and/or adapt traditional buildings in rural areas, it is a requirement that:

- The structure is substantially intact.
- The design, scale and materials used in the refurbishment and extension are in keeping and sympathetic with the existing structure.
- The size of any house extension takes account of the siting and size of the existing dwelling and that the character of the original structures is respected.
- The design of the proposal does not erode the siting and design qualities of the building and its setting which makes it attractive in the first instance.
- Mature landscape features are retained and enhanced with landscape proposals.

Refurbishment and Extension of Existing Structures Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 9.23	Assess the refurbishment and extensions of existing structures having regard to the following: To favourably consider applications for the conversion and reuse of existing traditional farm buildings or rural houses, without applying the local housing need requirement. These properties should be structurally intact and exhibit the essential physical characteristics of a dwelling house.
CPO 9.24	To generally resist the demolition and replacement of traditional or vernacular rural housing, whose character merits retention, in order to protect the varied types of housing stock in the rural area and to preserve the rich built heritage in rural parts of the county.
CPO 9.25	To require an assessment of the existing waste water treatment system by an assessor in the event of a large extension to a property, to ensure the system meets the EPA Code of Practice for wastewater treatment 2009 and any revisions thereof.

9.10 Rural Enterprise and Economy

The Council will continue to support the role of rural areas and the countryside in sustaining the rural economy and its role as a key resource for agriculture and agri-food, forestry, energy production and carbon reduction, tourism, recreation, mineral extraction and/or other new and emerging rural based enterprises.

In accordance with the Economic Strategy for the overall county, employment servicing the rural areas, should in general, be directed to local employment centres, small towns and villages catering for local investment and small-scale industry. Within the rural settlements and countryside, agriculture, horticulture, forestry, tourism and rural resources based enterprise should be facilitated.

The promotion and facilitation of micro enterprises (up to a maximum of 5 employees) is a key area for sustainable employment opportunities in rural areas. The Council will seek to facilitate the development of this sector by ensuring that incubator units for micro enterprises are provided in lower tier centres (Small Towns and Villages). In particular, the reuse of redundant agricultural buildings and the development of new buildings to accommodate such diversification/enterprise within an overall farmyard complex will be considered on their individual merits.

Where established authorised rural based enterprises seek to expand beyond their existing capacity and, in the opinion of the Planning Authority, the expansion proposed would seriously affect the rural nature or amenity of the rural areas and surrounding countryside, they will generally be encouraged to locate in serviced zoned lands.

It is acknowledged that some enterprise and employment uses may not always be appropriately located on Enterprise and Employment Zoned lands. In this regard, some new enterprise and employment projects may require sites outside settlements because of their size, type or specific site requirements. Such developments will be subject to policy objectives in relation to development accessing National Roads, in the context of traffic safety and the protection of the National Road Network.

9.10.1 EWorking / Tele-Networking and Home-Based Economic Activity in Rural Areas

The trend of people working from home is continuing to increase, either through e-working or through setting up a home-based economic activity. E-working can be defined as “any business function that is conducted away from the office using modern communications and information technologies”. The popularity of working from home has increased due to advances in technology and the savings achieved in terms of time and commuting costs. This trend is likely to grow during the lifetime of the plan.

Applications for small-scale home-based economic activity in rural areas where the occupants of an existing dwelling are employed at home will be positively considered. Home based economic activity should be sited either in converted existing farm buildings located adjacent to the main dwelling house or within the house where the use is compatible with and ancillary to the use of the dwelling as a home. Home based businesses, which wish to expand beyond employing the household on site, will be required to locate in a village or other area suitable to the use proposed.

9.10.2 Rural Tourism

The Council will seek to harness the potential that rural tourism has in Westmeath, having regard to the natural assets that the county possesses, the quality of the landscape, and the rivers and heritage, in order to offer support to the rural economy. Rural tourism is based on local amenities, natural

heritage and farm diversification projects which enhance the local rural economy and involves rural activities and services including accommodation facilities. Tourism-related opportunities within rural Westmeath include eco-tourism, sports, passive recreation, and activities related to the biodiversity of the area.

9.11 Agriculture

County Westmeath is a largely rural county, with agriculture being the primary land use. Approximately 70% of the total land area of the county is agriculture. Despite a reduction in employment within the agricultural sector in recent decades, the 2016 Census recorded a marginal increase of the working population within the County were engaged in full-time employment in agriculture, forestry or fishing from previous intercensal period (i.e. 5.5% (1,944 persons) of the working population are currently working in agriculture, forestry and fishing). Irish agriculture in its entirety has experienced something of a resurgence in recent years, boosted, in particular, by the abolition of milk quotas in 2015 which has led to an expansion in dairy output.

Agriculture therefore remains an important part of the economic life of the county. In addition to its productive employment aspect, the practice of agriculture still largely manages the rural environment and landscape and provides an amenity for the enjoyment of the general population. The county supports a wide variety of farming types.

The continued sustaining and growth of the agricultural sector must adapt to the challenges posed including modernisation, restructuring, market development and the increasing importance of environmental issues and climate change. In response to these challenges, the Council will continue to support initiatives which will sustain rural communities in the changing economic climate through farm diversification and new employment opportunities.

9.11.1 Farm Diversification

County Westmeath's tradition of beef and dairy production has formed the basis of an expanding and vibrant agri-food sector. Although primary agriculture accounts for a small share of overall national output, the broader agri-food sector (including food processing) makes a sizeable output and employment contribution, particularly when assessed on a regional basis, with approximately one-in-eight jobs in the Border, Midland and West areas in the agri-food sector compared to approximately one-in twelve nationally.

As it aims to expand output in the years ahead, the agriculture sector faces a number of challenges. Low profitability of some farming activities leaves the sector exposed to potential negative shocks such as Brexit or possible future reductions in the CAP budget.

Given the potential challenges within the rural economy, including profitability, Brexit, reform of CAP and climate change, there is a need to promote farm diversification and new employment opportunities to ensure the viability and sustain existing rural communities. The Council will support diversification of the rural economy and in particular will seek to develop the potential of the agri-food sector, forestry, the sustainable exploitation of natural resources and consideration of alternative on-farm and off-farm activities.

Such development initiatives provide additional or alternative income to supplement declining incomes from agricultural outputs. Diversification will be facilitated, provided the proposal is related directly either to the agricultural operation engaged on the farm or the rural nature of the area, and provided it does not unacceptably impact on the landscape and character of the area and is compatible with the existing road infrastructure in the area.

Farm Diversification Policy Objectives	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 9.26	Support agricultural development as a contributory means of maintaining population and sustaining the rural economy, whilst maintaining and enhancing the standing of the rural environment and through application of the EU Water Framework Directive and EU Habitats Directive.
CPO 9.27	Protect the viability of farms and best quality land for agricultural and related uses, whilst at the same time supporting alternative employment in or close to rural areas to sustain rural communities.
CPO 9.28	Encourage the development of environmentally sustainable agricultural practices, to ensure that development does not impinge on the visual amenity of the countryside and that watercourses, wildlife habitats and areas of ecological importance are protected from the threat of pollution.
CPO 9.29	Facilitate the development of agriculture while ensuring that natural waters, wildlife habitats and conservation areas are protected from pollution.
CPO 9.30	Ensure that all agricultural activities comply with legislation on water quality, such as the Phosphorous Regulations, Water Framework Directive and Nitrates Directive. Support the horticulture and nursery stock industry as a means of diversifying agriculture and contributing to the maintenance of population in the rural area.
CPO 9.31	Encourage and facilitate agricultural diversification into agri-businesses such as organic foods, rural tourism and small to medium sized enterprises, subject to the retention of the holding for primarily agricultural use and the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.
CPO 9.32	Support the rural economy and initiatives in relation to diversification, agri business, rural tourism and renewable energy so as to sustain employment opportunities in rural areas.
CPO 9.33	Enhance the competitiveness of rural areas by supporting innovation in rural economic development and enterprise through the diversification of the rural economy into new sectors and services, including ICT-based industries and those addressing climate change and sustainability.
CPO 9.34	<p>The development and expansion of appropriate new businesses in rural areas will normally be encouraged where:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The scale and nature of the proposed new business are appropriate to the rural area and are in areas of low environmental sensitivity.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The development will enhance the strength and diversification of the rural economy. • The development involves the use of redundant or underused buildings that are of value to the rural area.
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9.11.2 Agricultural Waste

Agricultural activities and waste generated has the potential if not appropriately managed, particularly in respect of storage and management of waste and phosphate control measures, to impact on the environment.

S.I. No. 605 of 2017, EU Regulations on Good Agricultural Practice for Protection of Waters (2017) give effect to Ireland's Nitrates Action Programme for the protection of waters against pollution caused by agricultural sources. The set of measures in these regulations provides a basic level of protection against possible adverse impacts to waters arising from the agricultural expansion targets set under Food Harvest 2020.

The Council also has adopted Bye-Laws for the purpose of preventing or eliminating the entry of polluting matters to waters.

Agricultural Waste Policy Objectives	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 9.35	Assess agricultural developments and associated agricultural waste matters within the County in accordance with the European Union (Good Agricultural Practice for Protection of Waters) Regulations 2017 and Westmeath County Council Water Pollution (Agricultural) Bye-Laws for the purpose of preventing or eliminating the entry of polluting matters to waters.

9.12 Horticulture

In recent years there has been growth in the demand for fresh local produce. The importance of the horticultural industry to Westmeath's rural economy is recognised. Further development in horticulture and in value added food and agricultural production in the county could provide opportunities for growth. Local Country Markets are also making an important contribution to the food sector and local economy with markets held throughout the county on a weekly basis.

Horticulture Policy Objectives	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 9.36	Promote the continued development and expansion of the Agri-Food Sector.
CPO 9.37	Protect agricultural or agri-business uses from incompatible urban development.
CPO 9.38	Implement at county level provisions set out in Food Harvest 2025 subject to environmental carrying capacity constraints.

CPO 9.39	Maintain a vibrant and healthy agricultural sector based on the principles of sustainable development whilst at the same time finding alternative employment in or close to rural areas to sustain rural communities.
CPO 9.40	Protect the economic and social benefits of local country markets committed to the sale of local agricultural and craft produce and to support their role as visitor attractions.
CPO 9.41	Work with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Teagasc and all other stakeholders to support the agricultural and agri-business sector, as appropriate, to continue participation in what is likely to be a more challenging export market post Brexit.
CPO 9.42	Work with the Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly and other relevant stakeholders in identifying areas of high value agricultural land in the County to address the need for sustainable food supplies. The consideration of future climate scenarios and water availability for agricultural purposes shall form part of this assessment.

9.13 Equine Industry

The equine industry is important economically and culturally in Westmeath. Bloodstock generates employment directly across many spectrums but also indirectly through other associated enterprises and sectors such as tourism. Kilbeggan Racecourse is the only all National Hunt Racecourse within Ireland and contributes significantly to the local economy.

The plains of Westmeath are covered in calcium-rich marl, which is conducive to horse-breeding. In recognising the importance of the bloodstock industry, both in land use and in terms of direct and indirect employment generated by it, the Council will continue to support and encourage the development of a vibrant bloodstock industry, which plays a major role in the rural economy.

Equine Policy Objectives	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 9.43	Support equine related activities (e.g. farriers, bloodstock sales etc.) of an appropriate size and at suitable locations.
CPO 9.44	Ensure that equine based developments are located on suitable and viable landholdings and are subject to normal planning, siting and design considerations and related establishments.
CPO 9.45	Protect the equine industry from inappropriate development which would adversely affect its continued operation.
CPO 9.46	Protect the Kilbeggan Racecourse from any development that would interfere with its amenity value and environmental quality whilst, at the same time, promoting the enhancement of facilities for racegoers.

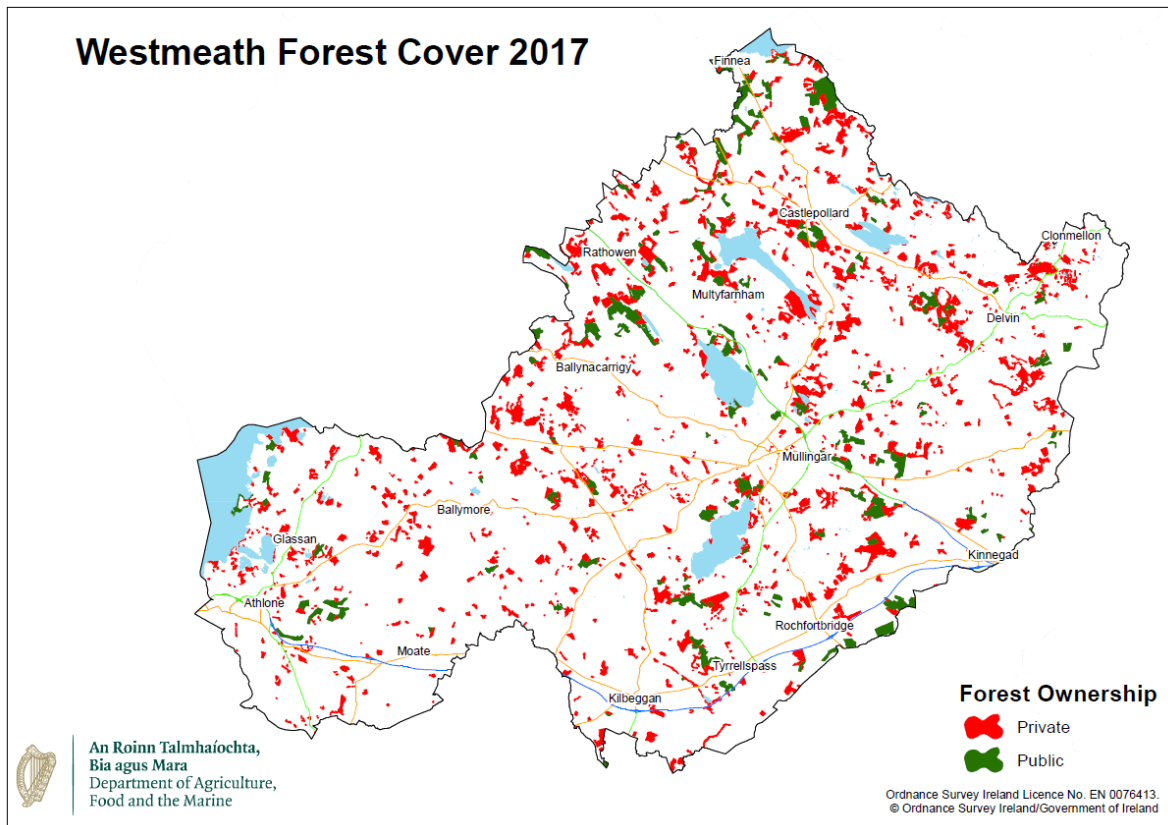
9.14 Forestry

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DoAFM) published a forest policy in 2014, 'Forests, Products and People - Ireland's Forest Policy - A Renewed Vision' sets out Government policy in relation to this sector of the rural economy. County Westmeath's landcover comprises approximately 6% of forestry, which is below the national figure of 10%. It is estimated that land area under private forestry accounts for approximately 8,882 hectares. This includes the extensive beech plantation at Mullaghmeen covering 400 hectares, which is the largest planted broadleaved forest in Ireland alongside providing an important amenity and recreation site within the county. Map 9.2 below illustrates the extent of forestry located within the County (2017).

Forests and woodlands provide important social (recreational and amenity value), economic (supporting rural employment and rural diversity) and environmental benefits (climate change management and carbon sequestration, biodiversity and as a source of renewable/alternative energy sources).

Forestry is encouraged in appropriate areas, where it will not significantly impact upon designated habitats, archaeology, interfering with high amenity areas, protected views or scenic routes, be obtrusive in the landscape or present a risk to sensitive ecosystems or water quality.

Planting of native woodlands will increase biodiversity value in the landscape. Ardan Wood is an important nature woodland in public ownership which has been leased by the Council to the Tree Council for management of the woodland. The Plan aims is to support the sustainable growth of forestry as an economic activity whilst affording maximum protection to the rural environment and landscape. This Plan acknowledges the tourism and amenity potential of Coillte Forested lands. It will therefore be an objective of this Plan to support the development of a tourism type development at this location subject to obtaining all relevant consents. In addition, the Council will encourage the provision of public access to new forests through walking and bridle paths, recreational areas and other similar facilities.



Map 9.2 Westmeath Forest Cover Source: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Forestry Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 9.47	Encourage the development of a well-managed sustainable forestry sector, which is compatible with the protection of the environment including the avoidance of likely significant effects on Natura 2000 sites (SACs and SPAs) and is planted, managed and harvested in accordance with the Forest Service Guidelines for Landscape, Forest Harvesting and Environmental, Archaeology, Biodiversity and Water Quality.
CPO 9.48	Encourage the development of forestry to a scale and in a manner, which maximises its contribution to the economic and social well-being of the County on a sustainable basis.
CPO 9.49	Encourage forestry and forestry related development, as a means of diversifying from traditional farming activity.
CPO 9.50	Promote forestry development of appropriate scale and character whilst ensuring that the development does not detract substantially from visual amenity on the countryside or cause pollution or degradation to wildlife habitats, natural waters or areas of ecological importance.
CPO 9.51	Encourage access to forestry and woodlands, including private forestry, in cooperation with stakeholders for walking routes, bridle paths, mountain biking, nature walks, orienteering, hiking, recreational areas and other similar facilities.
CPO 9.52	Retain existing public rights of way through forest lands.

CPO 9.53	Promote in co-operation with the Forest service, Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine the preparation and adoption of an Indicative Forest Strategy for the County, as an important means of contributing to the protection and enhancement of the county's biodiversity, natural resources and landscape, as resources permit.
CPO 9.54	Promote the planting of native broadleaves of local provenance and seek to maintain a broadleaf planting target of 30-50% for the county.
CPO 9.55	Promote and continue to be involved in the NeighbourWood Scheme (2017) and to identify areas at local level that are suitable for such schemes.
CPO 9.56	Promote the avoidance of deforestation or commercial afforestation within Natura 2000 sites unless directly relating to the management of the site for its qualifying interests.
CPO 9.57	Support the development of appropriate and sustainable tourism development within forestry locations, while retaining adequate tree cover in the general area.

9.15 Extractive Industry

The County contains a variety of natural resources such as raw materials critical to the construction industry in the form of sand, gravel, stone reserves including high purity limestones and shale used in cement and magnesia manufacture and base metal deposits. The potential of these resources to underpin construction output and provide employment and economic growth in the local and regional economy is recognised as is the need to exploit such resources in an environmentally sound and sustainable manner.

Westmeath County Council acknowledges that a satisfactory balance is required between the needs of the building industry and the need to protect the environment. Section 261A of the Planning and Development Act, 2000 as amended, afforded Local Authorities an opportunity to regularise the quarry industry, with regard to compliance with Planning Legislation, Environmental Impact Assessment Directive and the Habitats Directives. The output of this assessment concluded that there are 42 quarries within the county.

The suitability of any extraction enterprise shall be assessed on the basis of the sensitivity of the local environment to such impacts, the scale of the development proposed and the capacity of the road network in the area to accommodate associated traffic. It is Council's policy to ensure that those extractions which would result in a reduction of the visual amenity of areas of high amenity or damage to areas of scientific importance or of geological, botanical, zoological and other natural significance including all designated European Sites shall not be permitted.

All extraction shall be subjected to landscaping requirements and that worked out quarries should be rehabilitated to a use agreed with the Planning Authority which could include recreational, amenity and end-of-life uses. The use of these rehabilitated sites shall be limited to inert waste as defined in the Waste Management (Licensing)(Amendment) Regulations, 2002 and shall be authorised under the provisions of the Waste Management Act, as amended.

The Planning Authority will have regard to the Department of the Environment's Guidelines for Planning Authorities for Quarries and Ancillary Activities 2004 when assessing applications relating to the extraction industry in the county. In this regard, bonds or levies will be required by the Council as a condition of any planning permission granted to ensure satisfactory reinstatement on completion of extraction. The Council will require the payment of a contribution towards the cost of road improvement and reinstatement works necessitated by permitted developments.

The geology and geomorphology of Westmeath are characterised by limestone bedrock and extensive eskers and moraines particularly in the south of the county. The wide distribution of resources is recognised and known deposits and sites were mapped by The Geological Survey of Ireland (GSI) in 2004 and updated in 2014. The GSI Aggregate Potential Mapping illustrates potential crushed rock and sand and gravel deposits. Eskers cover approximately 0.91% of the land cover of the county. There are 46 esker systems in the county and esker density is greatest in the south of the county where they cover approximately 926 hectares. The Council recognises the unique importance of Westmeath's esker landscape deriving from its scientific, botanical, archaeological and historical value. All proposals for sand and gravel extraction at eskers will be determined by reference to the need to conserve the environment, character and scientific value and the extent to which the proposed development would be damaging to these qualities.

Given the quantity of existing quarries in the county, the Council considers that there are already sufficient aggregate deposits available without requiring new or extended extraction pits in esker systems or any new quarries on greenfield lands. It is the policy of the Council to take cognisance of existing levels of extraction in considering new applications for development on greenfield sites and preference will be given to the sustainable continuation or extension of existing quarries.

Extractive Industry Policy Objectives	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 9.58	<p>Ensure that development for aggregate extraction, processing and associated concrete production does not significantly impact the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Areas of Geological interest as identified in the County Esker Survey • Existing and Candidate Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) • Special Protection Areas (SPAs) • Existing and proposed Natural Heritage Areas (pNHAs) • Other areas of importance for the conservation of flora and fauna • High Amenity Areas • Zones of archaeological potential, • Important aquifers and sensitive groundwater resources • The vicinity of a recorded monument • Sensitive landscape areas • Established rights of way and walking routes.
CPO 9.59	Facilitate adequate supplies of aggregate resources to meet the future growth needs of the County and the wider region where there is a proven need for a certain mineral/aggregate and to exercise appropriate control (including ongoing

	consideration of environmental impacts) while addressing key environmental, traffic and social impacts and details of rehabilitation.
CPO 9.60	Facilitate the exploitation of the County's natural resources and to exercise appropriate control over the types of development, including rural housing, taking place in areas containing proven deposits, whilst also ensuring that such developments are carried out in a manner which would not unduly impinge on the visual amenity or environmental quality in the area.
CPO 9.61	Ensure that extractions (quarries / sand and gravel pits) which would result in a reduction of the visual amenity of areas of high amenity or damage to designated sites, habitat types or species shall not be permitted.
CPO 9.62	Ensure that extractive developments do not adversely impact on environmental quality, including water quality, tourism value, existing infrastructure, residential amenity or the amenity value of neighbouring lands.
CPO 9.63	Ensure that all extractions shall be subjected to landscaping requirements and that worked out quarries should be rehabilitated to a use agreed with the Planning Authority which could include recreational, biodiversity, amenity or other end-of-life uses. The use of these rehabilitated sites shall be limited to inert waste and sites shall be authorised under the appropriate waste regulations.
CPO 9.64	Ensure that the extractive industry and associated development minimises adverse impacts on the road network in the area and that the full cost of road improvements, including during operations and at time of closure, which are necessary to facilitate those industries are borne by the industry itself.



WESTMEATH COUNTY COUNCIL
Comhairle Chontae na hIarmhí

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