

ATHLONE TOWN CENTRE PUBLIC REALM ENHANCEMENT WORKS



PART VIII PLANNING REPORT



Quality Control Sheet

Issue Date	Revision	Status	Purpose of Issue	Prepared By	Check By	Approved By
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Executive Summary

The following report relates to the development by Westmeath County Council of a proposed public realm enhancement scheme in Athlone Town Centre in the Athlone-Moate Municipal District of County Westmeath. The report sets out a description of the nature and extent of the Proposed Development (the development) and the principal features thereof.

This report provides a background to the development, the nature and extent of the works being proposed and key features of the development.

The report is prepared in accordance with Part VIII of the Planning & Development Regulations 2001 (as amended).

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Proposal Description

The Development of Public Realm Enhancement Works, encompassing approximately 0.6HA at Mardyke St, Pump Lane and Sean Costello St, Athlone, Co. Westmeath, including the following public realm improvements:

- Provision of upgraded footpaths and realignment of existing carriage way along Mardyke Street, including 120m of a shared surface and pedestrianisation of 90m of Sean Costello Street, from its junction with Pump Lane to its junction with Mardyke Street, to take account of the access needs of pedestrians, mobility impaired persons and service vehicles;
- Provision of an enhanced public realm and landscape improvements, including street furniture, incidental play equipment, cycle parking, trees, and soft landscaping to enhance biodiversity;
- Provision of a priority signalised junction, including enhanced pedestrian facilities, at the junction of Mardyke Street, Gleeson Street, Pump Lane, and St Mary's Square;
- Upgrade to public lighting, including focal lighting to Sean Costello Street; and
- And all necessary accommodation works, including utility provision, drainage, signage, and other ancillary works.

1.2 Project Background and Need for the Development

In 2018 Westmeath County Council commenced significant street enhancement works as part of the €4 million Athlone Church Street Enhancement regeneration project. The works, co-funded by the EU Urban Designated Fund and Westmeath County Council, were undertaken as a necessary intervention to bolster activity in the town centre by creating an attractive and pedestrian friendly environment, enabling increased footfall and ease of access to shops and businesses by way of positive place making, street enhancement and public realm works and strategic traffic management.

Westmeath County Council have since secured 75% funding of €4,125,000.00 from The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (The Department), through their Urban Regeneration Development Fund (URDF). Westmeath County Council are committed to matching this funding, bringing the estimated project total to €5,500,000. The approved programme, Athlone Town Centre Regeneration and Enhancement, comprises distinct projects within the town centre:

1. Athlone Town Centre Public Realm Enhancement, (the subject of this application)
2. Athlone Town Centre Derelict Site land acquisition and remediation and marketing

These projects will holistically enhance the approach to Town Centre and create an inviting gateway to the town.

The Need for the Athlone Town Centre Public Realm Enhancement Works (the development) is to 'seamlessly extend' the previously implemented public realm on Church Street along Dublin Gate Street, continuing onto Mardyke Street and Sean Costello Street to form a

gateway that defines the Town Centre core. Alongside this key project objective is the requirement to unlock the currently derelict site located at this prominent gateway into the Town Centre.

As well as marking this gateway into the Town centre, the development must also promote important connections between the traditional retail core / street network with the two shopping centres, namely Athlone Town Centre and Golden Island Shopping Centre.

1.2.1.1 Site Description

The Athlone Town Centre Public Realm Enhancement Works' site boundary extends east from the newly enhanced Church Street along Dublin Gate Street, diverging along Mardyke Street and Sean Costello Street and along Pump Lane, completing the triangular enclosure. Mardyke Street and Sean Costello Street are the principal approaches to the town centre from the east. Each of the three streets are characterised by narrow footpaths, with uneven surfaces, a range of inconsistent paving materials and surface finishes. The environment is not welcoming nor aesthetically pleasing. All streets are dominated by vehicular traffic, with a prevalence of car-parking along Mardyke Street and a predominance of bollards along Sean Costello Street, introduced in 2019 to create a segregated cycle route and increase space for non-motorised users.

1.3 Project Specific Aims and Objectives

1.3.1.1 Aims

Westmeath County Council is committed to building on Athlone's status as a regional driver in the Midlands. Whilst the €4million regeneration and enhancements works under the Church Street Public Realm Enhancement Works have been completed, these works were a first step which this project will build on and collectively deliver balanced development and transformational place making.

The Athlone Town Centre Enhancement Scheme (the development) has a compelling rationale as it aims to realise:

1.3.1.2 Connectivity

This proposal directly addresses the disconnect between Athlone's traditional core shopping streets that struggle for footfall and spending power, with the high-quality urban spaces of Athlone Town Centre Shopping Centre, Athlone Civic Centre, Civic Square and Main Street.

The development aims to:

- create a loop that physically defines the principal east side approaches to the town's Main Street
- to improve connectivity and interaction of pedestrian footfall between the traditional street network and Athlone Town Centre Shopping Centre as well as to the Golden Island Shopping Centre and Dunnes Stores
- influence retail activity back into the town centre contributing to the vitality of the town centre.

1.3.1.3 Vibrancy

The recession in the early 2010s had a devastating impact on the retail fabric of Athlone. While two flagship shopping centres attract large numbers, landlords on traditional shopping streets struggle to attract sustainable occupancy while town centre retailers also struggle to attract sustainable footfall.

The development actions will ensure that vibrancy is enabled throughout Athlone's traditional core shopping streets. The town core will be enhanced, presenting an attractive, pedestrian friendly central point for the town which shall, in turn, act as a catalyst in supporting and attracting business, retail and leisure interests into the area. A vibrant retail sector supports a vibrant community and helps to make a place attractive to live in, to invest in and to visit.

1.3.1.4 Build Upon Athlone's Strong Tourism Performance

In terms of tourism profile, Fáilte Ireland's brand, "**Ireland's Hidden Heartlands**" and Destination Athlone's brand, "**Athlone At the Heart of it**" market Athlone as a vibrant and inviting town offering good food, and accommodation at the centre of Ireland. Through their **Destination Towns** initiative, Fáilte Ireland have approved funding to improve the tourism infrastructure in the town, including the rollout of wayfinding signage and infrastructure. The development of Athlone as a strong international visitor destination is also a principal priority of the current **County Westmeath Tourism Strategy**. Further, the fast-paced emergence of Athlone as a tourism destination, together with the recent rise of the 'stay-cations' giving rise to greater local competitiveness, emphasises the importance of this public realm enhancement scheme in creating an attractive and desirable town centre and destination that will entice people to visit.

1.3.1.5 Build on Initial Investment

To ensure the success of the €4m Church Street Enhancement scheme expands and is reinforced, additional investment is required to unify and define the town core and to avoid a fragmented piecemeal approach. The development shall serve to:

- complement the Church Street regeneration works;
- Respect the primacy of the civic core, centred on the Civic Square and Church Street; and
- act as a transformational catalyst in defining the physical presence of the town centre core.

1.3.1.6 Objectives / Outcomes

The objectives and outcomes of prioritising the improvement and enhancement of the public realm includes:

- Increasing footfall, visitor numbers, visitor dwell time and consumer spend
- Decreasing commercial vacancies
- Supporting local enterprises – sustained and new retail operators
- Levering private investment; and
- Enhancing pedestrian prioritisation and vulnerable road user safety.

2 PLANNING POLICY DOCUMENTS, GUIDELINES AND LEGISLATION

The following sections describe a non-exhaustive list of National, Regional and Local Policy Documents and Guidelines which contain clear policy objectives to promote and develop public realm enhancement initiatives such as the Athlone Public Realm Enhancement Works.

2.1 National Policy and Guidelines

2.1.1.1 *Project Ireland 2040 National Planning Framework and National Development Plan 2018-2027*

Project Ireland 2040 is the Irish Government's overarching policy initiative for the long-term planning of the State. It is informed by the Programme for a Partnership Government 2016, which recognises that economic and social progress go hand in hand and is made up of the "National Planning Framework to 2040" and the "National Development Plan 2018-2027".

The **National Planning Framework to 2040** is the Government's high-level strategic plan for shaping the future growth and development of the country out to the year 2040. It seeks to achieve ten **National Strategic Outcomes** (NSOs).

The Athlone Town Centre Enhancement Works (the development) demonstrates compatibility to the following NSOs:

2.1.1.1.1 NSO1 Compact Growth

The development will contribute to the sustainable compact growth of the town by adding value and creating a more attractive town centre through public realm interventions to encourage activity back into town centre site and strengthen the profile of Athlone as a designated regional driver.

The evolving nature of Athlone's attributes have occurred incrementally and progressively; the development is considered as another critical 'piece of the jigsaw' in the built, social and economic fabric of Athlone, expanding the successful Church Street public realm enhancement to complement and complete the historic town centre.

The collective proposed interventions and the development will aim to attract new businesses and activity, by adding value to the town centre and creating a more attractive place in which people can live and work. The subsequent positive effects aim to reimagine the town centre, attract new business, consolidate growth and bring new life into the town centre aligning with the NSO 1, Compact Growth.

Westmeath County Council is committed to enabling positive regeneration in order to consolidate and manage the sustainable growth of Athlone while adding value to the urban fabric through the creation of more attractive places in which people choose to live and work.

Liveability of place is a key component in the long-term regeneration strategy for Athlone with the investment in public realm, place making and streetscape enhancement acting as a platform to attract inward investment and activity while supporting sustainable urban communities. Activating such strategic areas and achieving effective density and consolidation, rather than more sprawl of urban development, is a top priority of National Strategic Objective NSO1 Compact Growth.

2.1.1.1.2 NSO7 Amenity and Heritage

Athlone benefits from the dual Fáilte Ireland international marketing brand destinations of **Ireland's Ancient East** and **Ireland's Hidden Heartlands**. It is a medieval town and the historic core of Athlone remains one of the best examples of medieval street patterns and settlement formation in the country. Athlone Castle has been strongly promoted as part of Ireland's Ancient East top attractions; the Castle attracted 30,000 visitors in 2017, 41% of whom were from overseas. Hence it is vital that the proposed regeneration project serves to increase the attractiveness of the urban core of Athlone by investing in all elements of living space including streets, public spaces and built heritage, to capitalise on the tourism assets unique to the town.

Both the Church Street public realm enhancement and this project are located within a designated Architectural Conservation Area (ACA). This area is characterised by a compact form and narrow medieval streets dotted with buildings of interest and Protected Structures. The Athlone Public Realm Enhancement Works project involves the expansion of the positive public realm beyond Church Street and, critically, will positively enhance the Architectural Conservation Area that suffered the loss of a Protected Structure and neighbouring building through fire.

2.1.1.1.3 NSO 4: Sustainable Mobility

The development is designed to deliver pedestrian priority and mobility access. Thus, the development will contribute towards the development of a low carbon transport system in Athlone by continuing to promote modal shift from private car use towards increased use of more sustainable forms of transport such as cycling, walking and public transport.

2.1.1.1.4 NSO 8: Transition to a low carbon and climate resilient society

The public realm enhancements will contribute towards the reduction of the carbon footprint and the associated measures proposed aim to reverse the vacancies of commercial properties within the town centre and contribute to the more sustainable use of land by promoting town centre communities.

2.2 Regional Policy and Guidelines

2.2.1.1 Regional Assembly Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES)

This section refers to the **Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES), 2019 to 2031**. The combined elements of this urban renewal and placemaking programme collectively aligns with the three overarching Key Principles of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy:

- Healthy Placemaking;
- Climate Action;
- Economic Opportunity.

The development has been designed to further strengthen the retail and commercial function of Athlone town centre through the expansion of the successful streetscape enhancement and public realm works. Aligning with the RSES, the components of this programme shall collectively serve to enhance the vitality and viability of the town centre.

The delivery of lasting and positive placemaking interventions, such as the pedestrianisation of Sean Costello Street, will create a solid platform for the town centre to thrive and present a refreshed economic opportunity and contribute to the overall attractiveness of Athlone, as a place in which to live, work and play.

The RSES identifies that investment in the creation of place is key to realising regional potential, thus, the resultant qualitative urban renewal and place-making development aims to propel activity back into the town centre, attract new businesses, contribute to the delivery of new jobs and thus ensure the sustainable long-term viability of a successful town centre.

The development is fully consistent with the RSES that stipulates as follows:

*Key priorities are to promote the continued sustainable and compact growth of Athlone as a regional driver, with a target population of 30,000 up to 2031, **providing for an enhanced public realm and regeneration in the town centre** along with significant employment growth linked to the further development of Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) and building on the town's existing strong economic base and enterprise clusters.*

2.2.1.2 Regeneration

Future development required to achieve the vision for Athlone includes the regeneration of underused, vacant or derelict lands in the town centre, to facilitate population growth and to strengthen the retail and commercial functions of the Regional Centre. The renewal of lands at Loughanaskin provide opportunity to consolidate the commercial core of Athlone, reinforce neighbourhood identity and enhance the physical character of the area. The delivery of enhanced public realm in the town centre and along the River Shannon's waterfront will support further amenity, recreation and tourist related development within the settlement along with the development of the Western Bank as a Cultural Quarter. Additional opportunity exists for rejuvenation at sites including Station Road, the Texas Centre, Irishtown and Dunnes Stores sites.

Improving connectivity within the Regional Centre, including between Athlone Town Centre and Golden Island Shopping Centre, provides opportunity to enhance the public realm and to contribute to overall placemaking, impacting positively on the convenience, image and function of Athlone town centre. In addition to the much-needed visual upgrade through public realm investment, it is important to note that the frontage along the derelict site represents one of the main pedestrian footfalls between the two shopping centres that are the key retail locations in Athlone; the Athlone Town Centre Shopping Centre and the Golden Island Shopping Centre. However, there is little connectivity between them with each shopping centres serving as destinations that fail to attract a footfall of shoppers into the traditional town centre.

2.2.1.3 Regional Policy Objective (RPO) 4.4 - Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan (UAP)

RPO 4.4 outlines the requirement for a cross boundary statutory **Joint Urban Area Plan (UAP)** for the **Regional Growth Centre of Athlone** [that] shall be jointly prepared by

Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils in collaboration with Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) and Northern and Western Regional Assembly (NWRA).

The RSES envisages a population target of 30,000 for the entire settlement of Athlone up to 2031. This includes lands within the combined functional area of the two local authorities of Westmeath and Roscommon. The preparation and adoption of a statutory Joint Urban Area Plan (UAP) by Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils is to be a priority. In tandem with the requirements outlined in the Implementation Roadmap for the National Planning Framework, the joint UAP for the Regional Growth Centre of Athlone should endeavour to support and provide for the following:

'The regeneration of underused, vacant or derelict town centre lands and the consolidation of retail and commercial functions in line with a joint Retail Strategy prepared by the local authorities'

2.2.1.4 Regional Policy Objective RPO 6.13

Local authorities shall support the preparation of Design Guidelines to provide for improvements in the appearance of streetscapes and for revitalising vacant spaces for example with cost effective, temporary uses that build on the longer-term vision for space.

2.2.1.5 Regional Policy Objective RPO 6.14

The EMRA will support the use of targeted financial incentives to re-establish the dominant role of town centres provided for in planning policy to encourage a greater take up of town centre development opportunities for retail, residential, commercial, and leisure uses.

The public realm enhancement works align with RPO 6.13 and 6.14 and equate to an essential component in the overall concept of placemaking and in turn, economic opportunity. The proposed development will improve the aesthetics of the town centre, increase the safety of pedestrians, increase footfall, improve access to shops and businesses and ultimately, influence retail activity back into the town centre contributing to its vitality and vibrancy.

2.2.1.6 Strategic Vision and Sustainability

Westmeath County Council is committed to building on Athlone's status as a Regional Driver in the Midlands. The development is designed to expand and complement the successfully completed €4million Church Street regeneration and enhancements works that have been undertaken in the town centre. These transformational works presented the first step in an overall and long-term Urban Regeneration plan to develop a pipeline of projects that yield balanced development through strategic town centre management and transformational placemaking. The Athlone Town Centre Enhancement Works (the development) has a compelling vision as it will realise the benefits of active land management and collaborative positive placemaking to achieve transformational change.

2.2.1.7 *Town Centre Management and Placemaking*

Like many traditional towns, the town centre of Athlone has faced challenges presented by the ever-changing and evolving shopping patterns, particularly in the age of on-line consumerism and more recently through the impacts of COVID-19. Westmeath County Council recognise that healthy and attractive places require ongoing improvements to the physical and social infrastructure of its urban centres in the knowledge that successful town centres are people-orientated places that present attractive and welcoming destinations. Successful town centres are places where residents and visitors can enjoy a safe, pleasant and vibrant destination and where businesses can thrive, in turn adding value to the vitality and vibrancy.

This development is deemed necessary to redress a disconnect between Athlone's traditional core shopping streets (e.g. Church Street, Mardyke Street), that struggle for footfall and spending power, with the high-quality urban spaces of Athlone Town Centre Shopping Centre. Crucially, this development will physically and visually bridge the gap of pedestrian footfall between the traditional street network of the town centre, Athlone Town Centre Shopping Centre and Golden Island Shopping Centre as the linkages between each are poor. These actions will influence retail activity back into the town centre contributing to its vitality and vibrancy. Thus, it is essential that the traditional town centre of Athlone continues to evolve and deliver more than the traditional 'high street' retail offering.

Through strategic visioning to enable, and importantly to maintain, activity in the town centre of Athlone, Westmeath County Council have been proactive in the delivery of a high-quality strategic vision to create a vibrant town centre through positive placemaking by way of public realm and streetscape enhancement works. The combination of these works is designed to bolster civic pride among the businesses community who will benefit from the capital public realm works in a similar fashion to the response and collaboration of businesses in Athlone's Cultural Quarter, where public realm works were previously undertaken. The combination of public realm intervention and the enhancement of shopfronts is a necessary measure to visually enhance the overall aesthetics of the urban fabric as successfully evidenced in the Cultural Quarter. Collectively, these positive interventions are designed to sustain and attract a competitive mix of compatible uses, including retail and non-retail/entertainment (cafés, bars, restaurants) to facilitate the development of a bustling vibrant atmosphere attracting people to work, live and recreate in the same area.

2.2.1.8 *Build on Athlone's Strong Tourism Performance*

The **Destination Athlone Marketing Group** is an award winning and ambitious industry led tourism marketing structure and campaign that aims to develop and promote Athlone as a regional destination and tourist hub for a range of stand-out visitor experiences in and surrounding the town under the brand '**Athlone at the Heart of It**'. The core platform for the brand's expression is the website www.athlone.ie and plans are underway to evolve the brand and activities of Destination Athlone in line with Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and more recently, Fáilte Ireland's 'Destination Towns' initiative. Their professional involvement and collaboration shall assist in the development of Athlone as a destination of choice in the region to achieve greater tourism spending power arising from increasing visitor numbers and importantly, increased visitor dwell time. Thus, the intended outcome of the development is to enhance and develop the visual, physical and social fabric of Athlone's historic town centre as a welcoming and attractive destination and in turn, to capitalise on increased visitor numbers and associated spending power.

2.2.1.9 Sustainability and Value for Money

The completed development will significantly advance the ongoing and positive transformation of Athlone and is considered as a pivotal component in achieving long term socio-economic success and wellbeing in this unique and historic town centre. Westmeath County Council is committed to building on and strengthening Athlone's growing reputation that has witnessed the incremental transformation of Athlone into a premier shopping and tourism destination over the years. The focus now is to strengthen the traditional town centre and attract shoppers and visitors beyond the confines of the shopping malls by transforming the town centre area into a desirable and aesthetically pleasing destination with a mix of day and evening activities.

To regenerate and, importantly, to sustain activity in Athlone town centre that has endured repeated cycles of vacancy, it is essential that the town centre evolves and offers more than the traditional 'high street' retail offering. Town centres represent the social and economic heartbeat of our urban settlements and wider regions and play an active role in retaining the vibrancy and vitality of the urban fabric. The economic and social benefit of positive public realm is widely recognised and acts the platform on which to showcase each town's competitive edge and unique selling point and is thus considered a key component in achieving economic success and well-being. Thus, the development proposal to advance the enhancement of the public realm and streetscapes shall have a lasting positive impact that will pay dividends on the initial investment.

2.2.1.10 Building on initial investment

The development will seamlessly extend the successful initial investment of €4million Church Street public realm enhancement works recently completed in the town centre.

2.2.1.11 Investment in Public Realm

The economic and social benefits of positive public realm is widely acknowledged; public realm acts as the platform to attract and showcase a competitive mix of compatible uses, including retail and non-retail/entertainment (cafés, bars, restaurants) to create a bustling and vibrant atmosphere attracting people to work, live and recreate in the same area. The National Planning Framework places a strong emphasis on 'liveability' and quality of life, of urban places; how people experience living in cities, towns and villages. This includes the quality of the built environment, including the public realm, traffic, access to amenities and a sense of personal safety and well-being. Acknowledging and responding to the benefits of healthy placemaking, the progressive transformation of Athlone town centre led by Westmeath County Council is ongoing in recognition of the importance of the traditional town centre as the social and economic heartbeat of the town and the wider region. To ensure that the successful interventions to date progress further, the development will unify and define the town core and avoid a fragmented piecemeal approach to the regeneration of Athlone. The development shall serve to complement the previous Church Street regeneration works and act as a transformational catalyst in defining and significantly improving the aesthetics and the physical presence of the town centre.

2.2.1.12 Qualitative Lasting Impact Beyond the Life of the development

The development will outweigh and outlast the initial public investment by significantly contributing to the ongoing transformation of Athlone as a premier retail destination and as a 'Destination Town'. Fáilte Ireland's extensive research and marketing identifies specifically,

'What Tourists to Ireland are Looking For' and the factors which make a good place for tourists are generally the factors that make a town a quality place for residents and include:

- Strong character and sense of place;
- Rich diversity of functions and activities;
- Adaptable urban structure to accommodate longer term changes;
- Well-connected network of streets;
- Priority in town centre environments for pedestrians;
- Coherent, legible and attractive streetscapes;
- Good quality and attractive public realm;
- Survival of the main street;
- Unlocking under-used and vacant sites;
- Ensuring a clean and safe environment;
- Addressing traffic congestion; and
- Integration of green spaces and linkages within and around the town.

Positive public realm and placemaking plays a significant role in the delivery of tourism. Fáilte Ireland's criteria for 'Destination Town' identifies how public realm supports public interaction, contributes to 'place making' and can transform towns into high-quality places to live, visit and invest, encouraging day and evening economies. It has socio-economic, environmental and cultural benefits including:

- Increased pedestrian flow enhancing the vitality and vibrancy of the town;
- Increased dwell time by visitors leading to increased spend in local businesses;
- Increased rents and property values leading to enhanced viability;
- Increased street activity through retail, cafés and on-street performance making the town more attractive for visitors;
- Reduction in accidents and crime, due to the increase of people on the street; and
- Decreased noise/pollution, due to better traffic management.

Thus, the completed development will significantly advance the ongoing and positive transformation of Athlone and is considered as a pivotal component in achieving self-sustaining and long-term socio-economic success by further strengthening the physical and social fabric of this unique historic town centre. The focus now is to capitalize on the regeneration to date and strengthen the traditional town centre to attract shoppers and visitors beyond the confines of the shopping malls, essentially to develop the town centre as a desirable 'go-to' destination. The extended public realm and streetscape enhancement and the Shop Front Enhancement Scheme aim to collectively act as the necessary catalyst to encourage visitors to 'linger longer' in the otherwise unattractive thoroughfares in the centre of Athlone and to draw activity back into the traditional town centre and main street. The proposal to enhance the public realm shall not only improve the visual attractiveness of the area but will create a safer environment and bolster civic pride among businesses. The strategic vision of the development is to promote urban life beyond 'shopping' and seasonal tourism activity and to create a positive social space to encourage activity by attracting and

sustaining a vibrant mix of uses to foster evening and night-time activity beyond 'normal' business hours bringing social, economic, environmental and physical benefits.

This Project marks another progressive step in the evolving profile of Athlone that provides for a strong contribution, not only to the built fabric and character of the town centre, but in terms of its economic and social profile. Thus, it is considered imperative that the committed efforts to regenerate Athlone continue to ensure that Athlone sustains and enhances its status as a Regional Driver and as a key retail and tourism destination in the region.

The development brings added value and builds on the significant investment to date in placemaking and tourism related projects in Athlone. In 2010, the extensive regeneration of Athlone Castle commenced at a cost of €4.2million; €2.07million funded under the Fáilte Ireland Capital Grant with the balance funded by Athlone Town Council. Investment in the Luan Gallery redevelopment was supported by €1.45million European Regional Development Fund in addition to €650,000 from the Department of Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht. The strategic central location of Athlone also sees the town benefit as an important trailhead of the proposed **Galway to Dublin National Cycleway** route, running through the town centre and crossing the River Shannon. There has been significant cycleway investment in the order of €10M to date in the county of Westmeath alone, with design under way for the construction of the Athlone Pedestrian and Cycleway Bridge in the heart of Athlone. These investment projects represent just some of the significant advancements and investments undertaken in Athlone, continually building on Athlone's status as a reigning leader in the Midlands region.

2.2.1.13 Local Policy

Westmeath County Council aspires to reinforce the physical definition of Athlone town centre, through the development of high-quality public realm enhancements that respect and showcase the unique character of Athlone town centre and its extant medieval urban grain; the historic core of Athlone is one of the best surviving examples of medieval street patterns and settlement formation, nationally.

2.2.1.14 Athlone Town Development Plan 2014 -2020

In the Athlone Town Development Plan, Westmeath County Council set out its policy for the Athlone Town Centre Public Realm Enhancement stating:

- The strategic aim for Athlone is to focus development on “continuing to respect the primacy of the town centre, including prioritising the improvement and enhancement of the public realm”
- The objective to “prioritise the improvement and enhancement of the public realm, as a support to a vibrant retail sector”
- The aim “to promote quality of the public realm: public spaces and routes that are attractive, safe and uncluttered and work effectively for all in society including people with disabilities and elderly people
- The objective “to prepare and implement a Public Realm Strategy for the town centre area”
- The policy “to promote the enhancement of the public realm [...], through the continued maintenance and provision of trees in the urban environment”.

2.2.1.15 Athlone Town Regeneration Study, 2007-2010

The Athlone Town Regeneration Study set out an integrated design strategy for the improvement of the town's urban core. The strategy seeks to both protect and exploit the individuality of Athlone Town Centre's unique setting straddling the River Shannon. The strategy sets out ten integrated Public Realm Proposals that seek to create greater connectivity between the east and west and between the traditional shopping streets, Athlone Town Centre Shopping Centre and Golden Island Shopping Centre, the Civic offices and Civic Plaza, thereby defining to the Town Centre Core.



Figure 1 Athlone Town Regeneration Study, 2007-2010

2.2.1.16 Church Street Enhancement

Having previously delivered The West Side Area 2: Castle Street/Main Street Enhancement Scheme in 2014, Westmeath County Council, with the support of the EU Urban Designated Fund, completed the €4 million Church Street Enhancement regeneration project. The introduction of the one-way traffic system facilitated the street enhancement works that have improved the aesthetics of the town centre, increased the safety of pedestrians, increased footfall, improved access to shops and businesses and ultimately, to revitalised and improved the urban environment of the traditional main street.

2.2.1.17 Biodiversity Action Plan

The **County Westmeath Biodiversity Action Plan 2014-2020** examines concepts and issues in biodiversity and sets out a list of 102 non-statutory actions for implementation in the long, medium and short term over the 2014-2020 duration of the plan. The actions aim to conserve and enhance the biodiversity of County Westmeath by prioritising, coordinating and

initiating actions to ensure effective conservation and enhancement in our county and raising awareness of biodiversity in partnership with local communities.

Through the Development proposals, significant areas of planting are proposed with the aim of creating a new type of dwell space within the town centre, but also as an opportunity to introduce a diverse range of plant species that will further the aims of the County Westmeath Biodiversity Action Plan 2014-2020 and will bring a biodiverse environment into what is an otherwise hard town centre public realm environment. This also provides a learning opportunity and can increase awareness of issues relating to habitat and biodiversity.

2.3 Relevant Legislation

Statutory approval for the development will be in accordance with the procedures identified in Part VIII of:

- The Planning and Development Act, 2000 (as amended).
- The Planning and Development Regulations, 2001 (as amended).

3 PROPOSED SCHEME

3.1 Description of Existing Infrastructure

The existing infrastructure consists of a series of one-way streets within a retail led town centre environment. The streets generally consist of a footway on each side with a single direction carriageway providing access for vehicles from Gleeson Street / Pump Lane / John Broderick Street to the recently upgraded Church Street.

At Sean Costello St, a series of bollards were introduced in 2019 to provide a segregated space for cyclists within the road carriageway and to allow for additional space for pedestrian movement along a narrow section of footway. The bollards also serve to control vehicle speed through the creation of a reduced width carriageway.

Asphalt carriageways are defined with a pre-cast concrete upstand kerb which forms the edge to footways which are surfaced in in-situ concrete, concrete / clay pavements or natural stone slabs at the interface with the Church Street improvements.

Alongside the streetscape environment there are three spaces within the Development boundary:

- 'Sweeny Corner' bounded by Mardyke Street and Sean Costello Street: This is defined by a stone wall with an associated block painted railing on the south side which defines a level change between the space and Sean Costello Street. A set of steps provides access between the space and Sean Costello Street. The space is paved in small natural stone cubes.
- The space at Dunnes Stores bounded by Sean Costello Street and John Broderick Street: This space is defined by the Dunnes Store frontage and the gable of Flannery's Bar. It is paved in concrete setts laid in a 'bogen' pattern and contains two trees located within cast iron grilles. There are shallow steps between the space and John Broderick Street. The space is protected by bollards along the back of the road kerb, but there are gaps at the pedestrian crossings and evidence of parking within the space.
- Space bounded by Gleeson Street and St Mary's Square: This space provides a location for the 'Marist Brother Memorial Statue' which commemorates the contribution made by the Marist Brothers to education, culture and sport over the past 125 years. This was unveiled on the 28th May 2012. The statue is located within a series of ramps, steps and low retaining walls that negotiate the level change between Gleeson Street and St Mary's Square. The retaining walls include a series of galvanized mild steel railings and handrails which dominate the space and setting of the statue. Feature lighting is included at the base of the statue. Surfacing is predominantly concrete setts with an asphalt footpath adjacent to the road.

Time restricted parking is provided on Mardyke Street and loading provision is included on Mardyke Street and Dublin Gate Street. A single disabled parking space is provided on Mardyke Street. Parking elsewhere is restricted through measures including double yellow lines. Formalised pedestrian crossings are provided at the signalised junction of Sean Costello Street / Irishtown / St Mary's Place, with a further controlled crossing on Dublin Gate Street opposite the Athlone Town Centre Shopping Centre.

3.2 Nature and Extent of the development

The proposals are focused on improvements that will enhance the public realm creating a pedestrian priority environment and extending the recent Church Street improvement works. The enhanced public realm will facilitate and improve key connections within the town centre including those between the town centre, Golden Island Shopping Centre and the Athlone Town Centre Shopping Centre. This will include:

- Widened footways where space allows, including along Mardyke Street and Dublin Gate Street;
- The removal of vehicles (except for time restricted service access and emergency access) from Sean Costello Street in order to create a pedestrianised street;
- Junction improvement works at Mardyke Street / Gleeson Street / St Mary's Square;
- The rejuvenation of spaces at 'Sweeny's Corner', Dunnes Stores and on the corner of Gleeson Street / St Mary's Square;
- Upgrading of surface materials to continue the recent Church Street project. This will include coordination of paving, road materials, raised tables, kerbs and tactile paving details. In some areas complementary paving materials are proposed;
- The introduction of street tree planting on Dublin Gate Street and Sean Costello Street with trees located within hard paving;
- The introduction of raised planters and planting to enhance biodiversity and create a welcoming environment;
- The placement of seating both as integrated elements and standalone. This is to include seating with armrests and backrests to provide seating opportunities for all;
- The integration of playful elements to encourage family interaction; and
- Upgraded street lighting.

The proposals are intended to compliment Church Street without competing with it therefore maintaining a clear hierarchy within the town centre. The proposals will also include loading / servicing provision and disabled parking provision.

The designs have been prepared with reference to relevant design standards and guidance documents, including the following:

Title	Published By
Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets	Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government
Traffic Signs Manual	Department of Transport
Guidance on the Use of Tactile Paving Surfaces	Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions
Civil Engineering Specification for the Water Industry (CESWI) 7 th Edition	Water Research Centre
Code of Practice for Wastewater, June 2020	Irish Water

Table 1 Design Standards and Guidance Documents

3.3 Principal Features

The principle features of the proposed scheme are as follows:

3.3.1.1 Carriageways

Carriageways will follow the principles developed for Church Street and will be either:

- Asphalt with an upstand kerb. This would include a natural stone band of setts against either upstand kerb; and
- Natural stone setted carriageway that is flush with the footpaths. This will include natural stone hazard warning paving and associated bollards / street furniture to define the boundary between carriageway / footpath.

3.3.1.2 Footpaths

Footpaths will be paved in natural stone slabs coordinating with the Church Street palette and detailing. On Sean Costello Street the surfacing will be designed to promote a pedestrian priority environment while ensuring the natural stone units will withstand the required vehicle loadings.

3.3.1.3 Crossing Points

One existing crossing point at Sean Costello Street will be removed due to the proposed pedestrianisation. The remaining crossings at the signalised junction at Sean Costello Street, John Broderick Street and Pump Lane will be modified to comply with the prevailing design standards.

Two existing uncontrolled crossings and a new link east to west across Pump Lane will be incorporated into the proposed signalised junction at Mardyke Street, Gleeson Street and St. Mary's Place.

The existing pelican crossing at Mardyke Street at the entrance to the Athlone Town Centre shopping mall is proposed to be removed. This was installed when 2-way traffic was present (2-way traffic system was abandoned in 2013 on completion of Church St Public Realm). The road at this location is proposed to be narrowed with an extended raised table with a natural stone surfacing. Single lane traffic will only approach from Mardyke Street, with only occasional service traffic emerging from Sean Costello Street during restricted hours.

3.3.1.4 Access and Mobility

Principles of Inclusive Design have influenced the public realm proposals to enable the widest range of people to access the town centre regardless of age or ability. This will be an ongoing consideration through to construction detailing and implementation, to ensure the improvements enhance and facilitate the movement of mobility-impaired people. Location of street furniture, pedestrian crossing points with tactile paving, lighting and appropriate paving material and detailing will continue to be carefully considered.

3.3.1.5 Lighting

The lighting will generally coordinate with that installed recently on Church Street. This will include either column or building mounted luminaires depending on location. The lighting on Sean Costello Street will reflect the new pedestrian environment with lower columns / poles and multi-head luminaires.

3.3.1.6 Drainage

Surface water drainage will be similar to that deployed at Church Street. Surface water will be collected using road gullies, footpath gullies and linear slot drains. Existing roof drainage from adjoining buildings will be redirected using bottle gullies.

All storm water will be routed in a new dedicated storm sewer and will discharge to the Irish Water combined sewer system for onward conveyance and treatment at Athlone Wastewater Treatment Works. Connections to the Irish Water sewers will be located at Gleeson Street, Pump Lane and Sean Costello Street.

3.3.1.7 Road Markings

Adjusted road markings will be provided in line with the junction changes shown in the development plans and compliant with the Traffic Signs Manual.

The south-bound right turn lane from Gleeson Street to Mardyke Street will be removed due to the reduction in space from the introduction of a signalised junction stop line. Right turning from Gleeson Street will be controlled under traffic light phasing.

3.3.1.8 Signage

Traffic Signage will be provided for the adjusted junction at Sean Costello Street, John Broderick Street and Pump Lane and for the proposed signalised junction at Mardyke Street, Gleeson Street and St. Mary's Square. Additional signage will be provided to promote the proposed access restrictions for service deliveries on Sean Costello Street.

3.3.1.9 Landscaping

The soft landscape proposals are focused on enhancing biodiversity within the town centre and enhancing the environment, creating a place that people will want to dwell. The focus for soft landscape will be Sean Costello Street, but the proposals also include street trees along Sean Costello Street. The raised planters along Sean Costello Street will include plants to attract invertebrates (bees, butterflies, moths etc) and birds. The planting palette will be based on native species but will be supplemented with non-natives where it will bring additional seasonal interest, colour, texture or habitat benefits. Planting within the raised planters will include:

- Multistem / feathered / standard trees;
- Specimen shrubs;
- Grasses and wildflowers;
- Groundcover species; and
- Bulbs.

3.3.1.10 Walls and Retaining Structures

Throughout the scheme abrupt changes in level will be avoided wherever possible in order to promote a permeable and accessible public realm. However, there are two key locations where there are existing retaining walls which will need to be accommodated within the proposals. Through the new public realm these will be integrated and 'softened' visually through the introduction of planting or seating elements. The main areas where retaining

structures exist are at ‘Sweeny Corner’ and at the corner of Gleeson Street and St Mary’s Place.

3.3.1.11 Services

Service locations have been assessed using utility provider GIS records. No significant diversions are proposed. Localised lowering of services may be required to reduce levels below proposed path construction make-up and diversions may be required to facilitate the proposed drainage including capturing downpipe discharge using new bottle gullies.

Ongoing consultations with Utility Providers will be conducted through the design stages to ensure all utility works are co-ordinated with scheme design and construction delivery programme.

3.4 Supporting Drawings

The following detailed drawings of the development are included in the appendices to this report; refer to Appendix A.

Ref	Title
ATPR-MCA-Z1-XX-DR-CE-1000	Site Location Plan
ATPR-MCA-Z1-XX-DR-CE-1001	Site Layout Plan
ATPR-OPEN-ZZ-XX-DR-LA-2000	General Arrangements Master Plan
ATPR-OPEN-ZZ-XX-DR-LA-2001	Illustrative Masterplan
ATPR-OPEN-Z1-XX-DR-LA-2010	General Arrangement SE01 Hard Landscape
ATPR-OPEN-Z2-XX-DR-LA-2011	General Arrangement SE02 Hard Landscape
ATPR-OPEN-Z1-XX-DR-LA-2012	General Arrangement SE01 Soft Landscape
ATPR-OPEN-Z2-XX-DR-LA-2013	General Arrangement SE02 Soft Landscape
ATPR-OPEN-ZZ-XX-DR-LA-2020	General Arrangement Detailed Area 01 Marist Brother Statue
ATPR-OPEN-ZZ-XX-DR-LA-2021	General Arrangement Detailed Area 02 Sweeney’s Corner
ATPR-OPEN-ZZ-XX-DR-LA-2025	Illustrative Sections
ATPR-MCA-Z1-XX-DR-CE-2110	Proposed Drainage Layout Sheet 1
ATPR-MCA-Z1-XX-DR-CE-2111	Proposed Drainage Layout Sheet 2
ATPR-TUV-Z1-XX-DR-ME-2200	Lighting Lux Levels

Table 2 List of Planning Drawings

3.5 Supporting Documents

The supporting documents to the development are included in the appendices to this report; refer to Appendix B.

Ref	Title
URDF_131_001 3.5.1	Design Report
URDF_131_001 3.5.2	Micro-simulation Traffic Modelling Report
URDF_131_001 3.5.3	Public Lighting Report

Table 3 List of Supporting Technical and Safety & Health Statements and Reports

4 Environmental Assessment

4.1 Environmental Impact Assessment Screening Report

An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Screening Report was undertaken in accordance with the Planning & Development Regulations 2001 (as amended) which transposes the requirements of European Directives 2011/92/EU and 2014/52/EU (EIA Directive). The EIA Screening Report determined that the development does not exceed the thresholds that trigger the mandatory requirement for EIA. The development is also below the 2 ha threshold set out for urban development projects in Part 2 of the Planning and Development Regulations and therefore it has been screened in accordance with Schedule 7A.

During construction there may be localised, not significant and short-term impacts which are common to any construction project and which will be managed as part of the Construction Environmental Management Plan.

The conclusion of the EIA Screening Report is that there is no real likelihood of significant effects on the environment arising from the development, therefore an EIA is not required and the application can proceed in accordance with Part VIII of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 (as amended).

4.2 Archaeological and Cultural Heritage Assessment Screening Report

An Archaeological and Cultural Heritage Impact Assessment was conducted to assess the potential impact of the development on cultural heritage. The Assessment identified that the development is located within the Zone of Archaeological Potential for Athlone as identified within the Urban Archaeological Survey for Westmeath. This area corresponds with the Zone of Notification as shown on the National Monuments Service map-viewer which represents the historic core of the town and is the area within which it would be expected that sub-surface archaeological deposits may survive.

Having assessed the potential impact upon cultural heritage, a mitigation strategy has been established and that the principal archaeological mitigation should relate to the potential for sub-surface archaeological remains to be identified during the course of the construction works. Given the high archaeological potential of this area, monitoring of all ground penetrating works should be conducted within the area of the proposed scheme.

The works are to be conducted within the National Monuments Service-Zone of Notification for the historic town of Athlone. It is recommended that in the first instance an application should be made for an archaeological licence. The licence application should be made to cover the initial Ground Investigation works as well as the proposed development. Following submission of the licence application, the National Monuments Service will advise if Ministerial Consent is required for the works. Should Ministerial Consent be required it should be applied for at least 12 weeks in advance of the site works starting. The application should include a detailed method statement setting out how the archaeological monitoring will be conducted.

Upon completion of the works a final report should be prepared detailing the findings of the monitoring and submitted to National Monuments Service.

4.3 Architectural Heritage Impact Assessment

An Architectural Heritage Impact Assessment was carried out by a Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI) Grade 1 Conservation Architectural Practice, who provided a Specialist Conservation Architect, RIBA SCA, to assess any likely impacts of proposed development in consideration of:

- the context of the area, its buildings and the contribution that they make
- the existing Protected Structures within the area
- the Architectural Conservation Area (ACA)
- the Conservation principles and policies contained within Westmeath County Council documents
- the appropriateness of the proposals and how any potential negative effects might be mitigated.

The assessment concluded that the proposed works are appropriate for both the setting of the Protected Structures within the area and also the Architectural Conservation Area. In the opinion of the Conservation Architect and Heritage Consultant, the proposed works will not cause any harm to the Architectural Conservation Area and will in fact serve to enhance it.

The proposed works will not have an adverse effect on any of the Protected Structures and will improve their overall setting and ongoing viability.

4.4 Appropriate Assessment

In accordance with Regulation 27 (1) of the European Communities (Natural Habitats) Regulations 1997, the proposed development was considered for its potential to have significant effects, either alone or in combination, (the development being neither directly connected with nor necessary to the management of the site(s)) on any Natura 2000 sites.

The proposed development site is close to four “European sites” – River Shannon Callows Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Middle Shannon Callows Special Protection Area (SPA), and Lough Ree SAC and SPA. The proposed development approaches the northern boundary of the Shannon Callow European Protected Sites (EPS) to within around 280m and the southern boundary of the Lough Ree EPS to within around 720m. There is therefore a potential for effects, arising from the development, to have an impact on the designation features and/or conservation objectives of these Natura 2000 sites.

Other EPS within 15km of the proposed development, designated for their raised bog features, are Crosswood Bog SAC (4.2km to the southeast), Carn Park Bog SAC (6.4km to the east) and Ballynamona Bog and Corkip Lough SAC (8.5km to the west), and Mongan Bog (10.3km). Castlesampson Esker SAC is a grassland SAC, 7km to the west. Fin Lough (11.7km to the south) is designated for its alkaline fens and Geyer’s whorl snail, and Lough Funshinagh (12km to the north west) is a turlough. There are no likely pathways for effects on these sites arising from the development due their distance and lack of hydrological linkages through which negative impacts could occur. Thus, these sites were not considered further.

The proposed development is subject to the European Communities (Natural Habitats) Regulations 1997 (Regulation 27(1)), and as consolidated in Irish law in the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011. Therefore the precautionary

approach was applied, as set out in Commission Guidance: Managing Natura 2000 Sites and as required by the European Court of Justice in C-127/02 (Waddenzee). As such a Habitats Regulations Screening Assessment was required to be completed for the proposed development. This process followed the recommendations provided in “Appropriate Assessment of Plans and Projects in Ireland – Guidance for Planning Authorities” (DEHLG 2009, revised 2010). Regulation 27(2) of the Natural Habitats Regulations outlines the type of assessment that would be accepted as appropriate.

The Appropriate Assessment Screening investigated potential effects of the works on the designation features and conservation objectives of the EPS. Effects on all designation features were considered, arising from construction and operation stages of the development.

The assessment concluded that the proposed development is not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the Natura 2000 site.

A source of potential effects on biodiversity receptors may arise from the production of pollutants during construction, including silts, hydrocarbons and airborne emissions. The area under consideration is enclosed within the existing built realm of the town and Natura sites in the wider countryside are insulated from direct effects of the proposed works and improvements. There will be no significant change in the area of impermeable surfaces, and drainage during and following construction will use the existing network of stormwater infrastructure. Potential pollutants are therefore likely to be retained within the existing built realm and infrastructure.

The proposed development and the surrounding urban area are served by an existing stormwater sewer system; this will be retained. There will be no significant change to the area of impermeable surface or consequent runoff volume arising from the scheme, and stormwater runoff will discharge into the sewer system and thus there will be no direct input of surface water into the Shannon system.

The remoteness of the proposed development from the EPS and the absence of a likely pathway for effects means that there are unlikely to be any effects on any designated terrestrial habitats arising from the scheme. Stormwater derived from surface water runoff in the proposed development area will discharge into the existing sewer network at manholes at the junctions of Pump Lane & Sean Costello Street, and at the Mardyke Street & Pump Lane junction. Onward transfer will be via the Irish Water sewer network to the Athlone Waste Water Treatment Works and as a result, there will be no direct discharge of surface water to the River Shannon.

In addition, there will be no significant change in water quality or volume discharging into the system and as a result, there will therefore be no change from the present position with regard to effects on the Natura sites and their conservation objectives.

4.5 Ecological Impact Screening Assessment

An Ecological Impact Assessment was completed to ensure that elements of the proposed development, that may potentially affect features of conservation value, including protected sites, habitats or species, were adequately assessed. The assessment quantified any potential impacts relating to flora and fauna and identified the mitigation or design measures required to avoid, reduce and mitigate any potential impacts.

The entire proposed development site consists of artificial surfaces, namely tarmac and concrete roads and pavements, and has negligible value for nature conservation. The assessment concluded that development would have a neutral effect through upgrading the site with no net loss of biodiversity. No significant residual effects are anticipated on any faunal population following measures to avoid and mitigate against adverse effects on sensitive ecological receptors, including birds, fish, and otter.

The assessment concluded that proposed development will not result in any negative effects on the European designated sites for nature conservation hydrologically linked to the site, through use of sensitive construction methods and implementation of mitigation measures.

4.6 Environmental Assessment Reports

The following Environmental Assessments of the development are included in the appendices to this report; refer to Appendix C.

Ref	Title
URDF_131_001 4.1 EIA	Environmental Impact Screening Assessment
URDF_131_001 4.2 ACH	Archaeological and Cultural Heritage Impact Assessment
URDF_131_001 4.3 AHIA	Architectural Heritage Impact Assessment
URDF_131_001 4.4 AA	Appropriate Assessment
URDF_131_001 4.5 EclA	Ecological Impact Screening Assessment

Table 4 List of Environmental Assessments

5 Conclusion

The information contained in this report, together with the drawings provided describe the nature, extents and principal features of the development as required under Part VIII of the Planning & Development Regulations 2001.

The background of the development and its associated aims and objectives have been identified in Section 1.0 of this report.

The development is consistent with the National and Local objectives as outlined in Section 2.0 of this report.

The potential environmental impacts arising from the works have been considered in Section 4.0 of this report and it is concluded that construction works associated with the development will have no significant impact on the receiving environment if constructed in accordance with the design, recommendation from the Environmental reports, including provision of an Archaeological Watching Brief and good practice.

It is therefore concluded that the development will provide a much-improved public realm enhancement within the Athlone town centre which will seamlessly extend the previously implemented public realm on Church Street along Dublin Gate Street, continuing onto Mardyke Street and Sean Costello Street to form a gateway that defines the Town Centre core and creates a gateway marking arrival into the Town Centre.

Submissions and observations with respect to the development, may be made via the Councils Consultation Portal at <https://consult.westmeathcoco.ie/en> or written submissions or observations in relation to the development, clearly marked "Athlone Town Centre, Public Realm Enhancement", may also be submitted to **District Manager, Athlone Municipal District Office, Civic Offices, Athlone to arrive not later than 4.00 p.m. on Tuesday 12th May 2021.**

6 Appendix A: Supporting Drawings

Provided as separate documents. Refer to Section 3.4 for full list.

7 Appendix B: Supporting Technical and Safety & Health Statements and Reports

Provided as separate documents. Refer to Section 3.5 for full list.

8 Appendix C: Environmental Assessments

Provided as separate documents. Refer to Section 4.0 for full list.