



17 July 2023

Cathaoirleach and Each Member of Westmeath County Council

Westmeath County Council Local Authority Development - File Ref. LA(A)-01 2023

Public Realm Enhancement Works to the Northern Side of Athlone Castle (a national monument and protected structure), Athlone, Co. Westmeath.

Dear Cathaoirleach and Members, please see below,

Planning Report in Accordance with Section 179 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended) and Part 8 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 (as amended)

Project Background

Further to recent public realm enhancements in the centre Athlone, Athlone Moate Municipal District (AMMD) have put forward a Part 8 proposal for the development of public realm enhancement works at the northern side of Athlone Castle (a national monument and protected structure) in Athlone. It is indicated that the design approach for the proposal is to improve the public realm associated with Athlone Castle through public realm enhancements which provides passive surveillance and enhances accessibility, maintains the view of the River Shannon from the Market Square and encourages access to the castle.

Section 1

1.0 Site Overview

The project works proposed relate to an area encompassing c.0.0425ha immediately to the north of Athlone Castle (a National Monument and protected structure [Reference Number RPS 070]) and within an Architectural Conservation Area (ACA) (Athlone Town) in Athlone, Co. Westmeath. The subject area lies adjacent to the Athlone Town Bridge and the R446 and leads to a pedestrian area adjacent to the river and to the Castle entrance. The lower level and area utilised for surface parking

at Athlone Castle are both linked via steps. There is a level difference of approximately 5 metres from the Shannon Quays to the higher level at market square.



Map 1: Site Location Map

1.1 Origins of Funding

WCC was successful in an application for funding under the Fáilte Ireland Destination Towns Scheme (2019/2020) for the proposed project works.

1.2 Advertising and Referrals

A public notice in respect of this Part 8 was placed in the Westmeath Independent (circulated 20 May 2023). Site notices were also erected on the subject lands in accordance with legislative requirements. The application was referred to the following prescribed bodies and internal sections within WCC:

Referrals:	Response Received
External Bodies	
Development Applications Unit	
An Taisce	
The Heritage Council	
Irish Water	√
The Arts Council	

Transport Infrastructure Ireland	√
Gas Networks Ireland	
Faite Ireland	
Office of Public Works	
Waterways Ireland	
Irish Rail	
Internal Sections	
District Engineer	√
WCC Architect	√

1.3 Consultation Process

This Part 8 was placed on public display during the period 22 May 2023 to 5 July 2023 (both dates inclusive) at the following locations:

- Online Consultation Portal <http://consult.westmeathcoco.ie/en>
- Áras an Chontae, Mount Street, Mullingar, Co. Westmeath

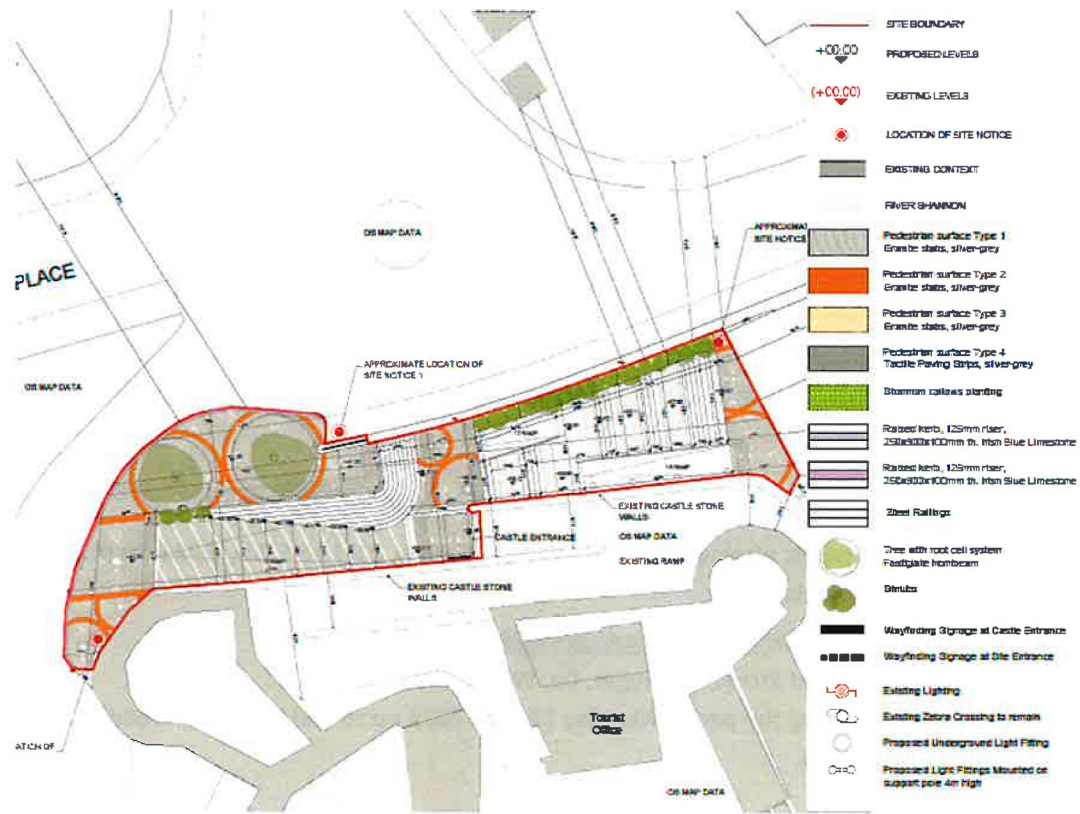
Submissions were invited during the period Monday 22 May 2023 up to and including Wednesday 5 July 2023 (both dates inclusive).

1.4 Description and extent of the development proposed

The proposed development of Public Realm Enhancement Works to the northwest and proximate to the main entrance to Athlone Castle to include the following:

1. Removal of existing ramps, steps, railings, and relocation of public lighting
2. Public Realm enhancement to include hard and soft landscaping, footpaths, ramps, steps and public lighting
3. Signage
4. Accommodation works (including utility provision, drainage, and services)
5. Other associated works.

PART 8 PUBLIC REALM ENHANCEMENT ATHLONE



Map 2: Proposed Site Layout Plan



Figure 1: Illustration of Proposed Works

1.5 Documentation Included with Part 8 Proposal

- Newspaper Notice/Site Notice
- Environmental Impact Assessment Screening Report

- Appropriate Assessment Screening Report
- Plans and Particulars (including Planning Pack Map, Site Location Map, Drawing Register, Architectural and Landscape Drawings, Planning Report)
- Existing and Proposed Drainage Drawings
- Outline Traffic Management Plan
- Construction Environmental Management Plan
- Proposed Electrical Lighting Layout
- Archaeological Assessment
- Architectural Heritage Impact Assessment.

1.6 Relevant Planning History

Other Public Realm Enhancement Projects in the vicinity.

Part 8 LA(A)-01 2021 Public Realm Enhancement Works at Mardyke Street, Pump Lane and Sean Costello Street, Athlone, Co. Westmeath (Approved 2021)

Part 8 LA(A)-01 2016 Athlone Town Centre Enhancement including traffic calming of Church Street and the junctions with Northgate Street, Custume Place, Church Street and the Bawn, Mardyke Street and Dublin Gate Street intersections; the paving of Church Street; the provision of new street furniture, soft landscaping and trees and the installation of new route signage (Approved 2017).

ANBP 25.HA0051 Section 51 of the Roads Act 1993 (as amended) – approval for the construction of a pedestrian and cycleway bridge crossing the River Shannon and associated works (Dublin to Galway Cycle Route, Whitegates to Athlone Castle Cycleway Link).

1.7 Policy Context

1.7.1 National & Regional Policy Context

Project Ireland 2040 - National Planning Framework 2018-2027 (NPF). The NPF sets out a high-level strategic plan for shaping the future growth and development of the Country to the year 2040.

The National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs) which are particularly relevant to the proposed project are as follows:

NSO 7 Enhanced Amenity and Heritage: Ensuring towns are attractive and can offer a good quality of life through well-designed public realm, linked to and integrated with built, cultural and natural heritage, which has intrinsic value in defining the character of urban areas, adding to their attractiveness and sense of place.

NPO 28: Plan for a more diverse and socially inclusive society that targets equality of opportunity and a better quality of life for all citizens, through improved integration and greater accessibility in the delivery of sustainable communities and the provision of associated services.

Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region 2019-2031 (RSES). The proposed project enhancement works align with the three overarching key principles of the RSES i.e. healthy placemaking, climate action and economic opportunity.

Athlone is designated as a 'Regional Centre' under the RSES with opportunity identified to enhance the public realm and to contribute to overall placemaking within the Regional Centre impacting positively on the convenience, image and function of Athlone as a Regional Centre.

The RSES promotes the Region for tourism, leisure and recreational activities while seeking to ensure that high value assets and amenities are protected and enhanced. In this regard, the proposal aligns with the 'Healthy Placemaking' principles of the RSES which aims to 'improve both physical and social infrastructure to create places that are healthy and attractive to live, work, visit and invest.

The RSES seeks to:

Realise sustained economic growth and employment including the integration of better urban design, public realm, amenities, and heritage to create attractive places to live, work, visit and invest in. Focus on placemaking to create attractive and sustainable communities to support active lifestyles including walking and cycling.

Provide for improvements in the appearance of streetscapes and for revitalising vacant spaces.

Use targeted financial incentives to re-establish the dominant role of town centres provided for in planning policy.

Support the planned provision of easily accessible social, community, cultural and recreational facilities and ensure that all communities have access to a range of facilities that meet the needs of the communities they serve.

The public realm enhancement works proposed will promote placemaking by way of improving the aesthetics of the centre of Athlone, increasing pedestrian safety and footfall, improving access to a key tourism asset (Athlone Castle) and providing the potential to attract additional footfall into Athlone, thereby contributing to its vitality and vibrancy.

1.7.3 Local Policy

Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027 (WCDP)

The WCDP identifies Athlone as a Regional Centre, forming the upper two tiers in the settlement hierarchy presented in the RSES. Regional Growth Centres, as they are referred to in the RSES, are 'large towns with a high level of self-sustaining employment and services that act as regional economic drivers and play a significant role for a wide catchment area'. Athlone's strategic location in the centre of Ireland is acknowledged in the strategy, with reference made to its position as a key node between Dublin and Galway on the River Shannon.

The Plan recognises the role that cultural amenities such as Athlone Castle play in Westmeath and commits to 'support the commercial development of theatres, cinemas and other cultural and entertainment uses, including facilities of national and regional importance in the County's designated settlements of Athlone and Mullingar'. In this regard CPO 6.36 seeks to promote the

enhancement and development of Athlone Castle Visitor Centre as a world-class visitor attraction, enabling visitors to have an enjoyable and engaging experience, while protecting its cultural heritage, natural environment and landscape value.

The Development Plan further sets out a series of relevant key aims as follows:

Urban Centres & Placemaking: To protect and enhance the unique identity and character of Westmeath's towns and villages and improve quality of life and wellbeing through the application of Healthy Placemaking, underpinned by good urban design, with the creation of attractive public spaces that are vibrant, distinctive, safe and accessible and which promote and facilitate positive social interaction.

Cultural Heritage: Westmeath County Council recognises the importance of identifying, valuing and safeguarding our archaeological, architectural and cultural heritage for future generations and aims to do so by means of proper management, sensitive enhancement and/or appropriate development of this resource.

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Athlone Town Development Plan (ATDP).

The ATDP recognises Athlone Castle as a major tourist attraction in the town, housing the Tourist Office and visitor's centre'. In this regard it is policy, P-AC11, 'to promote and develop Athlone Castle as a flagship international tourist attraction'.

Support for this proposal is also set out under the ATDP as follows:

A Strategic aim of the ATDP is to focus development on *"continuing to respect the primacy of the town centre, including prioritising the improvement and enhancement of the public realm"*.

It is an aim of the Council, as set out at section 5.4, *"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"*.

It is a policy of the Council (P-EC13), as set out at section 2.11, *"to promote, protect, improve, encourage and facilitate the development of tourism in Athlone as an important contributor to job creation in the town"*.

1.8 Services Provision

No water or foul water connection is required in association with the proposed works. The surface water outfall is proposed to discharge to the existing combined wastewater system. It is indicated that ongoing consultation with utility providers will be conducted through the detailed design stage to ensure that all utility works are co-ordinated as part of the scheme design and construction delivery programme. In this context, prior to construction stage, further engagement with IW

should be undertaken in relation to potential requirements for diversion works of existing services, if required. This matter should be resolved prior to the commencement of any construction works.

1.9 Urban Design and Landscaping

The proposal is accompanied by an 'Architectural Strategy – Part 8 Planning Report Athlone Public Realm' prepared by Urban Agency which sets out the design approach for this scheme and design objectives.

It is indicated that the design objectives are to achieve the following:

- Unobstructed view of the Castle from the bridge
- Passive surveillance
- Maintain the view of the River Shannon from the Market Square
- Provide an easily accessible user experience
- Encourage access to castle visitor experience

An Architectural Heritage Impact Assessment undertaken by Patrick Dunne Architects Ltd. indicates that the existing site comprises primarily paving and surface parking from the late 20th century. It is indicated that these surfaces are ageing and are not in themselves of historic or architectural value. The report considers that the late 20th century / early 21st century interventions (including cobble surface and steel ramps and railings) are largely piecemeal and are detracting from the visual impact of the historic structure.

The report references that existing hard landscaped surfaces to be removed to accommodate the proposed works include:

- Tarmacadam
- Brick pavers
- Modern stone faced wall at quays (likely blockwork core and a concrete footing)
- Modern brick planter at south end of parking area on west side of the site
- Modern additions around the castle entrance to improve pedestrian access including steps and access ramps (1990s or 2000s) finished in liscannor stone, limestone, and in situ concrete capping
- Tubular steel railings with galvanized or black painted finish.

It is indicated that the existing low stone wall and iron railing to the east of the castle, adjacent to the car parking is to be retained.

Proposed Lighting: Lighting is proposed to highlight the tunnel under the Shannon Bridge and to highlight the proposed trees. It is outlined that lighting should not compete with the castle walls for prominence but should be subservient to the castle floodlights. Cable runs are located in new work as opposed to on historic structures, however ongoing consideration is required at detailed design stage so as to ensure that lighting is to be as unobtrusive as possible to potential archaeology on the site.

Potential concealed features underground: The scheme documentation indicates that due to the layered historical development of the site including a historical curtain wall, enclosing several buildings

within a castle bailey, that there is a potential for concealed, historical features underground not uncovered in recent landscaping works. It is indicated that the proposed works are not likely to dig to a depth lower than that already disturbed in recent decades.

The urban design and landscaping measures proposed are acceptable in principle, however, it is considered that final details in respect of hard and soft landscaping and lighting detail appropriate to the setting of the works proposed, character of the ACA and archaeology should be agreed in writing with the Planning Authority in advance of the commencement of project works.

1.10 Archaeology

An Archaeological Assessment prepared by Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd. accompanies this Part 8 proposal. The assessment indicates that the development is located within the Zone of Archaeological Potential for Athlone, with the historic town a recorded monument with statutory protection (WM029-0042002). Given previous archaeological investigations in the vicinity and finds including the foundations of tower wall to the east of the castle, alluvial deposits 1.5m – 1.6m below current ground level and remains of an earlier quay or possible foundations of the 16th century bridge (WM029-042004), it is considered that there is high archaeological potential within this area.

No comments on archaeology were received as part of the statutory consultation process. It is considered that given the proposed works replace recent works carried out in this area which does not include significant excavation, it is considered that there is unlikely to be any disturbance to archaeology. However, the Archaeological Assessment submitted highlights that monitoring of all sub-surface groundworks by an archaeologist under ministerial consent is required and that further archaeological mitigation may be required if any features of archaeological potential are discovered. This matter to be satisfactorily addressed in the event of part 8 approval.

1.11 Architectural Heritage

An Architectural Heritage Impact Assessment (AHIA) carried out by Patrick Dunne Architects Ltd. informed the submitted Part 8 application. This assessment considered the proposed project works in respect of its current context and the condition of the area and sets out a number of conclusions and recommendations. It states that new hard landscaping surfaces are replacing work from recent decades with a higher standard of design than the existing and with appropriate, high-quality materials.

It is considered that subject to strict conservation principles being applied in association with all works, that the proposal will enhance rather than detract from or adversely affect the special character of the area and setting of Athlone Castle (a protected structure and national monument) and the ACA.

1.12 Environmental Impact Assessment

An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Screening Report accompanies this Part 8. The EIA Screening Report determined that the development does not exceed the thresholds that trigger

the mandatory requirement for EIA/EIAR and therefore it has been screened out in accordance with Schedule 7A.

The development works do not fall within the scope of the infrastructure project types prescribed. In this regard and having considered the appropriate criteria, it is considered that there is no real likelihood of significant effects on the environment arising from the development and that an EIA is therefore not required.

1.13 Appropriate Assessment

Appropriate Assessment is a standard legal requirement for all plans and projects likely to have a significant impact on European sites i.e. Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) or Special Protection Areas (SPA). There are 13 (no.) Natura 2000 within a 15km radius of the project site, with the nearest being the River Shannon Callows SAC and the Middle Shannon Callows SPA located less than 500metres from the proposed works.

A Stage 1 Screening for Appropriate Assessment for the proposed project, prepared by MEC Ltd. accompanies this application. An assessment of potential effects arising from both the construction and operation stages of the development has been undertaken. The project works are not directly connected with or necessary to the management of a Natura 2000 site. It is indicated that the enhancement works and the surrounding urban area will continue to be served by an existing stormwater sewer system. 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, resulting in no direct hydrological links with the Middle Shannon Callows SPA or Lough Ree SAC and SPA.

Having regard to the conservation objectives associated with the European sites within the zone of influence and given the nature of the development, together with the existence of the existing built realm and associated infrastructure and absence of direct hydrological links from same to any European site(s), it is considered that the proposed development, including construction stage works, either in combination or alone, will not give rise to significant adverse direct, indirect or secondary impacts on the integrity of any Natura 2000 sites having regard to their conservation objectives.

SECTION 2

2.0 Internal Reports and Prescribed Bodies Submissions

Internal Reports Received

District Engineer: No objection, subject to the works being carried out in accordance with the plans and particulars submitted.

Conservation Architect: Raises no concerns with regard to project works proposed in relation to built heritage. Suggests that when the palette of materials, lighting, etc. are further developed for approval, the symbolic colour scheme associated with wayfinding proposals should have regard to the historic context of the area. States that given there will be no loss of historic material, the net intervention should be generally positive.

Prescribed Bodies Reports Received

Two submissions were received from prescribed bodies as follows:

Uisce Éireann: References that there is an existing watermain & sewer pipeline within / near the development site. States that Uisce Éireann does not permit build over of its assets and the separation distances as per Uisce Éireann's Standards Codes and Practices must be achieved. Therefore, requests that a diversion enquiry be sent to Uisce Éireann Diversions Section prior any construction works commencing onsite and that this detail be sought by way of further information.

Prior to construction stage, further engagement with IW should be undertaken in relation to potential requirements for diversion works of existing services, if required. This matter should be resolved prior to the commencement of any construction works.

Transport Infrastructure Ireland: States that they have no specific observations to make in relation to the proposal as there are no direct impacts to the national road network in the area.

SECTION 3

3.0 Public Observations/Submissions Received

No public submissions were received during the statutory public consultation period.

SECTION 4

4.0 Conclusion

Westmeath County Council is committed to promoting placemaking while adding value to the urban fabric through the creation of more attractive places in which people choose to live, work and leisure.

It is considered that the proposed public realm enhancement works will enhance the prominence of Athlone Castle in the townscape and complement the recent public realm enhancement works undertaken in Athlone. Further, the works will improve the visitor experience to the area and, subject appropriate construction methods, will not adversely affect the character of the historic site (including Athlone Castle and Athlone Town) or any element of the structures which contribute to its special interest.

In this regard, the proposal is in accordance with policy, P-AC11, of the Athlone Town Development Plan, 'to promote and develop Athlone Castle as a flagship international tourist attraction'.

Having considered the plans and particulars, together with submissions received from prescribed bodies, and subject to the recommendations set out, it is considered that the proposed development:

- would not impact negatively on architectural and natural heritage
- would not seriously injure the amenities of the area or of property in the vicinity
- would not be prejudicial to public health
- would be acceptable in terms of traffic safety and convenience.

Having considered the plans and particulars, together with submissions received in association with the development proposal, it is considered that the development is consistent with national, regional and local (Westmeath County Development Plan/Athlone Town Development Plan) policy and as such is in accordance with the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

4.1 Chief Executive's Recommendation

Having regard to the above, it is considered that the proposal will provide an enhanced public realm environment, consistent with the provisions of the Westmeath County Development Plan and Athlone Town Development Plan and, as such, is considered to be in accordance with the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

Accordingly, it is recommended that the proposed public realm enhancement works proceed in accordance with the scheme documentation, except as may otherwise be necessary to comply with the following requirements:

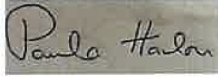
1. Archaeological Monitoring
 - i. A suitably qualified archaeologist shall be engaged to monitor and report on all sub surface groundworks associated with this development.
 - ii. The archaeologist shall notify the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in writing at least four weeks prior to the commencement of site preparations.
 - iii. The report of the archaeological monitoring shall include photographs of the area before, during and after monitoring has taken place, as well as detailed photographs of specific areas, as required.
 - iv. A key plan, clearly showing the location and direction from which photographs are taken should be included in the report (e.g. annotated site location map).
 - v. Should archaeological material be found during the course of monitoring, the archaeologist may have work on the site stopped, pending a decision as to how best to deal with the archaeology. The developer shall liaise with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and implement any necessary mitigating action.
 - vi. The Planning Authority and the Department shall be furnished with a report describing the results of the monitoring.
2. Hard & Soft Landscaping & Public Lighting:

Full final details in respect of hard and soft landscaping to include public lighting suitable to the setting of the works adjacent to Athlone Castle to be agreed in writing with the Planning Authority in advance of the commencement of project works.
3. Services Provision

Prior to construction, engagement with Irish Water should be undertaken in relation to potential requirements for diversion works of existing services associated with the subject lands. All works to be agreed in writing with Irish Water and submitted to the Planning Authority prior to the commencement of development.
4. Construction Environmental Management Plan

The construction of the development (including site clearance) shall be managed in accordance with a final Construction Environmental Management Plan, which shall be

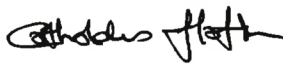
submitted to, and agreed in writing with the Planning Authority prior to commencement of development.



Paula Hanlon
Senior Executive Planner

17 July 2023

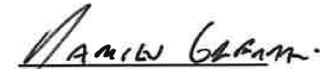
Date



Cathaldus Hartin
Senior Planner

17 July 2023

Date



Damien Grennan
A/Director of Service

20/7/2023

Date



Pat Gallagher
Chief Executive

20/07/2023

Date