

ATHLONE WAYFINDING &
INTERPRETATION STRATEGY AND
CASTLE ENVIRONS PUBLIC REALM
ENHANCEMENT SCHEME

Screening Report for Appropriate
Assessment

MEC Ltd.

2023

Screening Report in support of Appropriate Assessment

This report has been prepared by Minogue Environmental Consulting Ltd with all reasonable skill, care and diligence. Information reported herein is based on the interpretation of data collected and has been accepted in good faith as being accurate and valid. This report is prepared for Westmeath County Council, we accept no responsibility to third parties to whom this report, or any part thereof, is made known. Any such party relies on the report at their own risk.

Contents

<u>1</u>	<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	<u>4</u>
1.1	LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT	4
1.1.1	REQUIREMENT FOR AN ASSESSMENT UNDER ARTICLE 6 OF THE HABITATS DIRECTIVE	4
<u>2</u>	<u>SCREENING METHODOLOGY</u>	<u>7</u>
2.1	INTRODUCTION	7
2.1.1	SOURCES OF INFORMATION USED	8
2.1.2	SITE VISIT	8
2.1.3	MITIGATION MEASURES	8
<u>3</u>	<u>PROJECT DESCRIPTION</u>	<u>10</u>
3.1	OVERVIEW	10
<u>4</u>	<u>DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT SITE LOCATION</u>	<u>12</u>
4.1	BASELINE CONDITIONS	12
4.1.1	NATURA IMPACT STATEMENT FOR RIVER SHANNON CROSSING	14
4.2	IS THE PROJECT NECESSARY FOR THE CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT OF NATURA 2000 SITES.	15
<u>5</u>	<u>IDENTIFICATION OF NATURA 2000 SITES WITHIN THE ZONE OF INFLUENCE OF THE PROJECT</u>	<u>16</u>
5.1	INTRODUCTION	16
5.2	OVERVIEW OF NATURA 2000 SITES WITHIN THE ZONE OF INFLUENCE OF THE PROJECT	27
5.2.1	RIVER SHANNON CALLOWS SAC	27
5.2.2	DOCUMENTED THREATS & PRESSURES TO RIVER SHANNON CALLOWS SAC	27
5.3	MIDDLE SHANNON CALLOWS SPA	27
5.3.1	DOCUMENTED THREATS & PRESSURES TO MIDDLE SHANNON CALLOWS SPA	28
5.4	CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES	28
<u>6</u>	<u>IDENTIFICATION AND ASSESSMENT OF POTENTIAL EFFECTS TO NATURA 2000 SITES</u>	<u>30</u>
6.1	INTRODUCTION	30
6.2	ASSESSMENT OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS	30
6.3	CUMULATIVE EFFECTS	32
6.4	SCREENING MATRIX	35
<u>7</u>	<u>SCREENING CONCLUSION</u>	<u>38</u>
	<u>REFERENCES</u>	<u>39</u>
	<u>PHOTOS FROM SITE VISIT JANUARY 2022</u>	<u>40</u>

1 Introduction

MEC Ltd have been commissioned by the Urban Agency on behalf of Westmeath County Council (the authority), to undertake an Appropriate Assessment (AA) screening exercise in relation to the *Athlone Castle Public Realm Enhancement Scheme (the project)*.

This Screening Report for Appropriate Assessment forms Stage 1 of the Habitats Directive Assessment process and is being undertaken to comply with the requirements of the Habitats Directive Article 6(3). The function of this Screening Report is to identify the potential for the project to result in likely significant effects to Natura 2000 sites and to provide information so that the competent authority can determine whether a Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment is required for the project.

1.1 LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT

This Screening Report for Appropriate Assessment is being prepared to enable the competent authority to comply with Article 6(3) of Council Directive 92/43/EEC (The Habitats Directive). It is prepared to assess whether the project alone or in combination with other plans and projects is likely to have a significant effect on any Natura 2000 site in view of best scientific knowledge and in view of the conservation objectives of the Natura 2000 sites and specifically on the habitats and species for which the sites have been designated.

1.1.1 Requirement for an Assessment under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive

According to Regulation 42(1) of the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 – 2015, the competent authority has a duty to:

- Determine whether the proposed Project is directly connected to or necessary for the management of one of more Natura 2000 sites; and, if not,
- Determine if the Project, either individually or in combination with other plans or projects, would be likely to have a significant effect on the Natura 2000 site(s) in view of best scientific knowledge and the Conservation Objectives of the site(s).

This report contains a Screening for Appropriate Assessment and is intended to assess and address all issues regarding the installation / construction and operation of the Project and to inform and allow the competent authority to comply with the Habitats Directive. Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive defines the requirements for assessment of projects and plans for which likely significant effects on Natura 2000 sites may arise. The European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations, 2011 – 2015 (the Habitats Regulations) transpose into Irish law Directive 2009/147/EC (the Birds Directive) and Council Directive 92/43/EEC (the Habitats Directive) lists habitats and species that are of international importance for conservation and require protection. The Habitats legislation requires competent authorities, to carry out a Screening for Appropriate Assessment of plans and projects that, alone or in combination with other plans or projects, would be likely to have significant effects on Natura 2000 sites in view of best scientific knowledge and the Site's conservation objectives. This requirement is transposed into Irish Law by Part 5 of the Habitats Regulations and Part XAB of the Planning and Development Act, 2000 (as amended).

Figure 1-1 Site Location

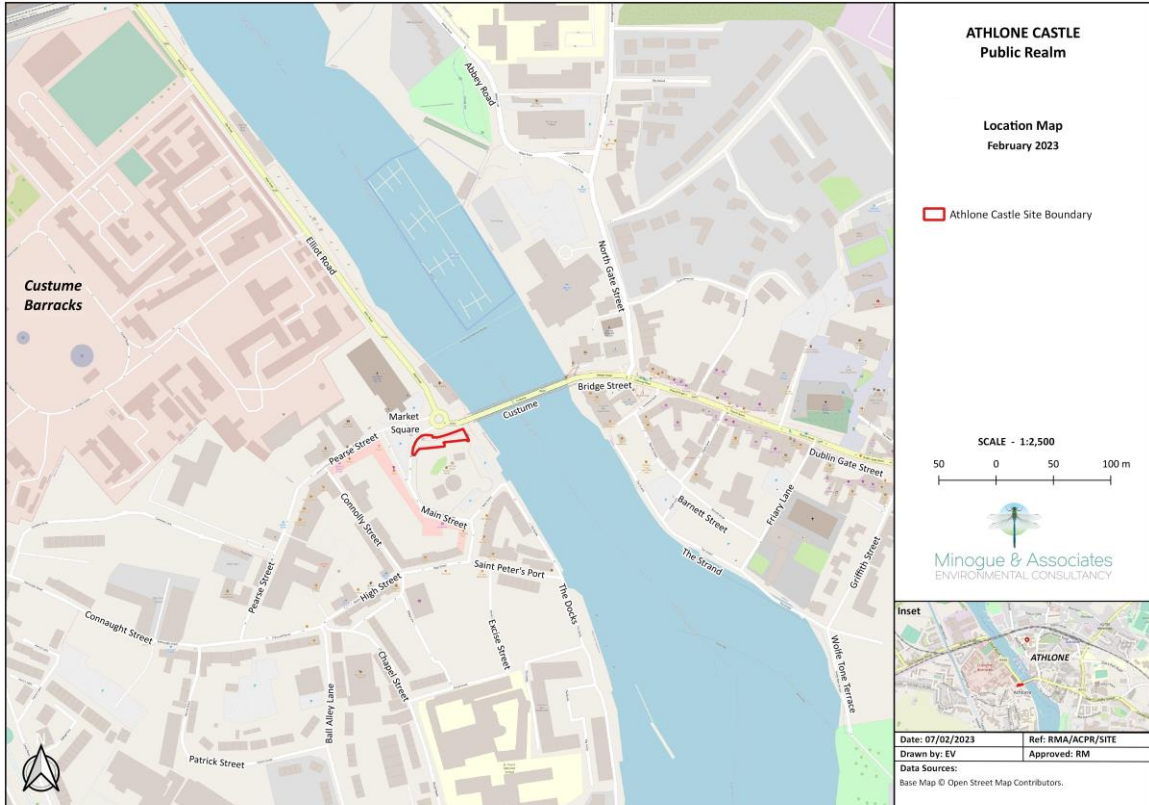
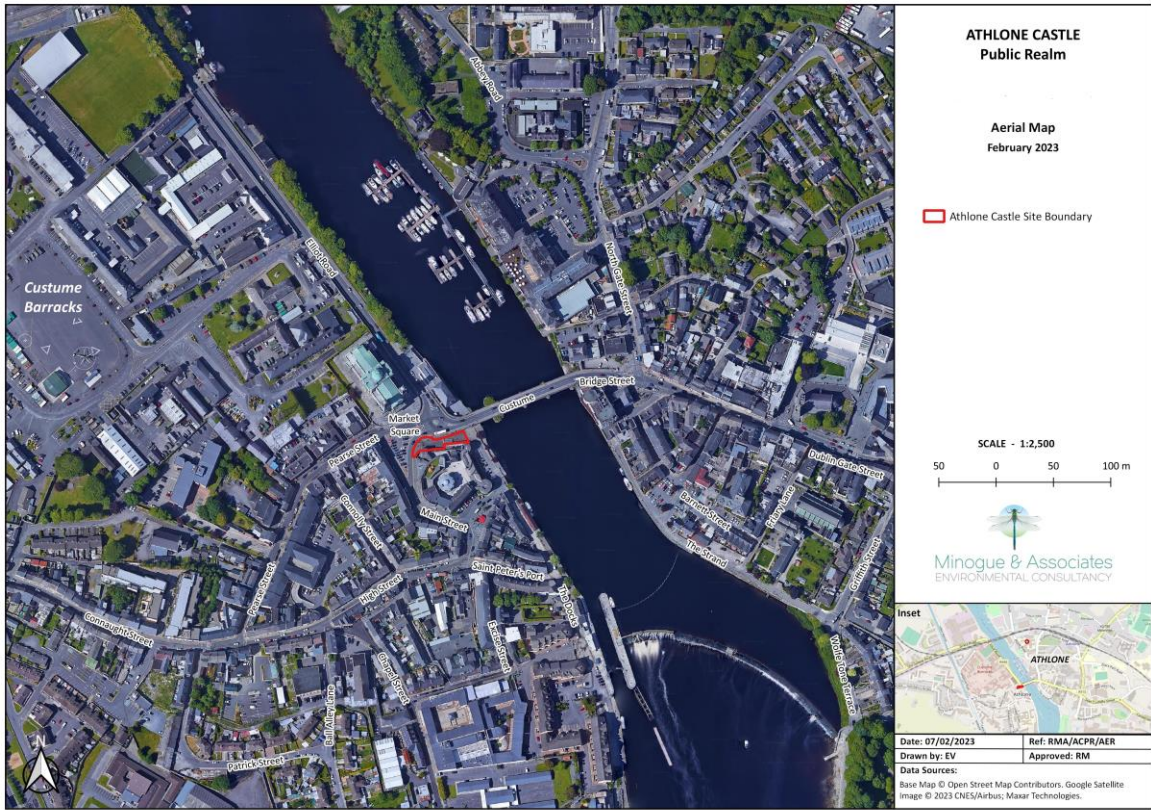


Figure 1-2 Site Location and indicative site boundary aerial imagery



2 SCREENING METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction

This Screening Report has been prepared to comply with the legislative requirements outlined in Section 1.1 above and aims to establish whether or not the proposed project, alone or in combination with other plans or projects, would be likely to have significant effects on Natura 2000 sites in view of best scientific knowledge and the Site's conservation objectives. In this context "likely" means a risk or possibility of effects occurring that cannot be ruled out based on objective information and "significant" means an effect that would undermine the conservation objectives of the Natura 2000 sites, either alone or in-combination with other plans and projects (Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR), 2021).

The nature of the likely interactions between the Plan and the Conservation Objectives of Natura 2000 sites will depend upon the:

- the ecological characteristics of the species or habitat, including their structure, function, conservation status and sensitivity to change; and/or
- the character, magnitude, duration, consequences, and probability of the impacts arising from land use activities associated with the plan, in combination with other plans and projects.

This Screening Report for Appropriate Assessment has been undertaken with reference to respective National and European guidance documents: Appropriate Assessment of Plans and Projects in Ireland: Guidance for Planning Authorities (DEHLG 2010) and Assessment of Plans and Projects Significantly Affecting Natura 2000 sites – Methodological Guidance of the Provisions of Article 6(3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC; Office of the Planning Regulator – OPR Practice Note PN01: Appropriate Assessment Screening for Development Management, and recent European and National case law. The following guidance documents were also of relevance during the preparation of this Screening Report:

- A guide for competent authorities. Environment and Heritage Service, Sept 2002. Appropriate Assessment of Plans and Projects in Ireland – Guidance for Planning Authorities (2010). DEHLG.
- Assessment of Plans and Projects Significantly Affecting Natura 2000 Sites – Methodological Guidance of the Provisions of Article 6(3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive 92/42/EEC. European Commission (2021).
- Managing Natura 2000 Sites – The provisions of Article 6 of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC. European commission (2018).

The EC (2001) guidelines outline the stages involved in undertaking a Screening Report for Appropriate Assessment for projects. The methodology adopted during the preparation of this Screening Report is informed by these guidelines and was undertaken in the following stages:

- 1) Describe the project and determine whether it is necessary for the conservation management of Natura 2000 sites;
- 2) Identify Natura 2000 sites that could be influenced by the project;
- 3) Where Natura 2000 sites are identified as occurring within the zone of influence of the project identify potential effects arising from the project and screen the potential for such effects to negatively affect Natura 2000 sites identified under Point 2 above;
- 4) and identify other plans or projects that, in combination with the project, have the potential to affect Natura 2000 sites.

2.1.1 Sources of Information used

Information relied upon included the following information sources, which included maps, ecological and water quality data as preliminary insights:

- Ordnance Survey of Ireland mapping and aerial photography available from www.osi.ie ;
- Online data available on Natura 2000 sites as held by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) from www.npws.ie;
- Information on land-use zoning from the online mapping of the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government <http://www.myplan.ie/en/index.html>;
- Information on water quality in the area available from www.epa.ie;
- Information on the River Basin Management Plan and water quality from <https://www.catchments.ie/>
- Information on soils, geology and hydrogeology in the area available from www.gsi.ie ;
- Information on the status of EU protected habitats in Ireland (National Parks & Wildlife Service, 2019 Volumes 1-3);
- Natura Impact Report for the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2028
- Part 8 Planning Application including EIA and AA Screening for Flood Cell 3 Athlone Flood Relief Scheme, 2017
- Ecological Impact Assessment of Athlone Main Drainage Shannon Crossing, Irish Water 2022
- Natura Impact Statement of Athlone Main Drainage Shannon Crossing, Irish Water 2022.
- EIA Screening Report of Athlone Main Drainage Shannon Crossing, Irish Water 2022

2.1.2 Site Visit

The Screening Report has been informed by a site survey at the project site, which was completed on the on 31st January 2022 by Ruth Minogue as part of a multi-disciplinary walkover. The site visit involved identifying the habitats occurring on site to level 3 of Fossitt's Guide to Habitats in Ireland and searching the site for field signs indicating the presence of protected flora or fauna on site. In addition, the site was appraised for its potential to support qualifying species of Natura 2000 sites in the wider surrounding area in particular wetland and waterbirds. This was based on identifying the presence of habitats within the project site that are known to be relied upon by such species and observing bird activity during low tide.

2.1.3 Mitigation Measures

There has been considerable controversy and debate over recent years as to what extent, if any, to which it is permissible for the competent authority to take mitigation measures into account in reaching its screening determination. It can be argued that it is sometimes difficult to draw a meaningful distinction between

- (i) a mitigation measure, and
- (ii) a feature which is an integral part of the design of the project.

This controversy has recently been resolved by the CJEU in its judgement in Case C-323/17 People Over Wind. The case concerned a proposed grid connection works, i.e., the laying of a cable to

connect a wind farm to the national electricity grid. The High Court (Barrett J.) referred the question to the CJEU as to whether, or in what circumstances, mitigation measures can be considered when carrying out screening for appropriate assessment under Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive. The CJEU noted that the concept of “mitigation measures” is not referenced in the Habitats Directive, and that the measures at issue in the proceedings should instead be understood as denoting measures that are intended to avoid or reduce the harmful effects of the proposed project on the site concerned.

The court held that Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive must be interpreted as meaning that, in order to determine whether it is necessary to carry out, subsequently, an appropriate assessment of the implications, for a site concerned, of a plan or project, it is not proper, at the screening stage, to take account of the measures intended to avoid or reduce the harmful effects of the plan or project on that site.

3 Project Description

3.1 Overview

The proposed works are anticipated to take place over 14 weeks in duration. The footprint of the proposed development is as follows:

PART XI OF THE PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT ACT, 2000 (as amended)

PART 8 OF THE PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT REGULATIONS, 2001 (as amended)

Pursuant to the requirements of the above, Westmeath County Council proposes to undertake the following works:

Public Realm Enhancement and Associated Works within 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 (Athlone Town), Athlone, Co. Westmeath. The proposed development will consist of works at the northwest and proximate to the main entrance to Athlone Castle and 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

The site is bounded by Athlone Castle to the South, Athlone Town bridge, also known as Shannon Road Bridge (a regional Monument and protected structure - Reference Number RPS 004) to the North, The Shannon quays to the East and Market Place to the West.

The project is to be completed in one phase as detailed below:

Pre-Construction & Removal Phase – Site clearance

- Site set-up, hoarding, temporary services.
- Ground works and landscaping.
- Removal of existing structures that do not form part of the fabric of the original structure

Phase 1 – Construction

- Installation of street lighting, vegetation and decorative landscape architecture pieces.
- Construction of the steps leading from Market Square/ Castle Street down to Quay Street
- Decorative paving pattern with granite or similar steps

Ancillary Works – which will consist of:

- Drainage networks. Currently there are no stormwater drainage on the project site, and the project will connect into the new drainage network being constructed under Planning Reference: 17-177182, Irish Water)
- Street lighting
- Landscaping

Pre-Construction Activities The main contractor will establish site setup, appropriate signing, hoarding, security fencing and welfare facilities.

Site Set-Up and Hoarding Perimeter hoarding will be provided around the site to provide a barrier against unauthorised access from the public areas. Controlled access points to the site, in the form of gates or doors, will be kept locked during any time that these areas are not monitored (e.g., outside working hours).

4 Description of the Project Site Location

4.1 Baseline Conditions

The site is located at Athlone Castle, fronting the River Shannon and adjacent to the Athlone Bridge. The site is surrounded on three sides by built land including the castle and the structures associated with the River Shannon that is canalised at this section of the town centre.

The application site is within the Upper Shannon Catchment (26G). This is summarised below:

“This small catchment covers an area of 383km² and is comprised of the catchment area from Athlone to Shannonbridge. The catchment is characterised by flat topography and expanses of poorly drained boggy and flood prone areas. The area of the catchment located northwest of Athlone is underlain by highly karstified rock with surface and groundwater drainage closely connected in this region. The Shannon flows into the catchment through Athlone, heading south before being joined from the west by the Cross River. This river drains the karstified part of the catchment from Lough Funshinagh to Athlone. Lough Funshinagh is located north of Curraghboy and does not have a surface outflow channel. Underground flow has been identified from this lake to the Cross River near Brideswell. Continuing south, the Shannon is then joined from the east by the westerly flowing Cloonbonny and Boor Rivers, which drain the eastern part of the catchment. The Shannon then veers southwest and is joined from the west by a series of small tributaries, the largest of which is the Ballydangan River, before flowing out of the catchment at Shannonbridge.”

The project site is situated within the Shannon Upper Subcatchment (SC100). This part of the River Shannon is at risk of not meeting Water Framework Directive objectives of good status by 2027 due to its current poor status. Peat harvesting and hydro morphology have been identified as significant pressures and further investigation needed to clarify why there is poor biological community in this waterbody. Water quality is poor at the River Shannon in this area (EPA catchments WFD Data 2013-2018).

A review of the first edition 6-inch map from 1832 indicates that the project site was used as an area of open space between a barracks (which was located to the north of the castle) and the castle. The 25-inch map from 1888 also indicates that the project site was used as an area of open space, with it being labelled on the map as a “market place”. By this time the barrack to the north was removed, presumably to accommodate access to the Town Bridge which was built between 1840 – 1845 (subsequent to the publication of the first edition 6-inch map. The last edition 6-inch map from 1915 indicates the open space nature of the project site and its continued use as a market place, as labelled on this map.

Given the urban character of the project site, the dominant habitat on site is BL3, Built Land and Artificial Surfaces. The River Shannon is adjacent to the site and is classified as FW2 Depositing/Lowland River. A small area at the front of the castle comprises grass and ornamental planting and may be considered as ornamental planting (WS3/BC4).

No evidence indicating the presence of protected ground dwelling mammals was identified on site during the site survey on the 31st of January 2022. A search of Biodiversity Ireland’s database of 1km grid N0341 identified the following records of fauna that are listed under Annex II or Annex IV of the EU Habitats Directive or EU Birds Directive.

Figure 4-1 Grid N0341 records -national biodiversity data centre, accessed 28.07.2022

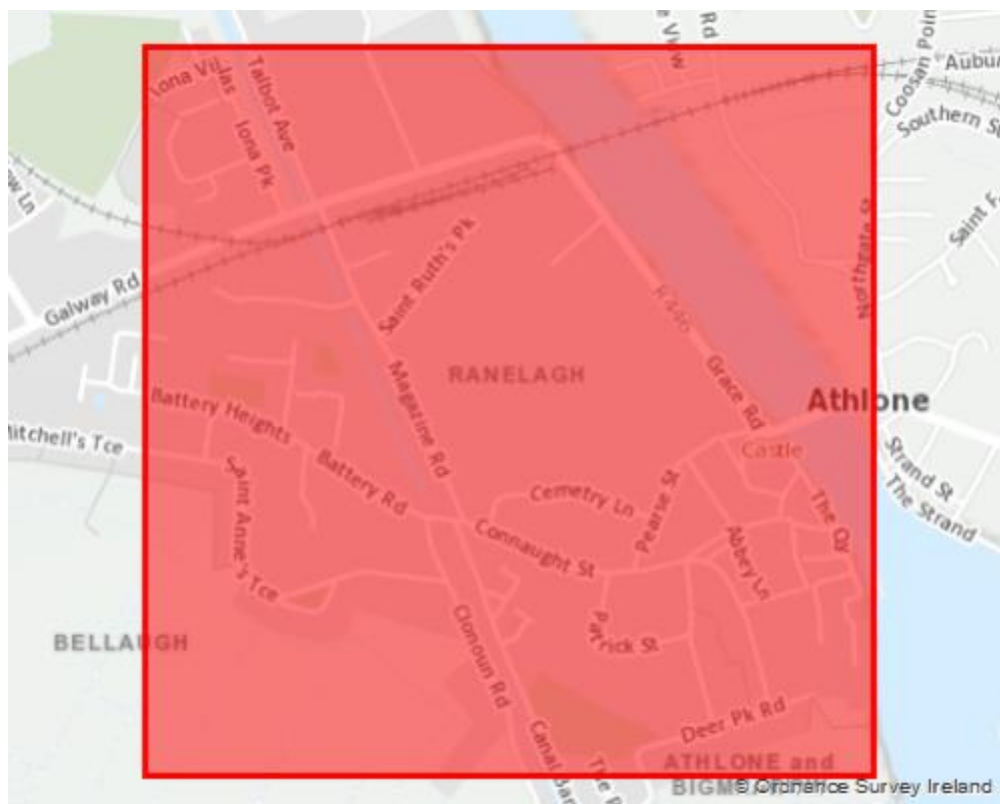


Table 4-1 Records of Mammal Species within a 2km grid search (Biodiversity Ireland).

Species name	Record county	Date of last record	Designation
European Otter (<i>Lutra lutra</i>)	1	13/01/1980	Protected Species: EU Habitats Directive Protected Species: EU Habitats Directive >> Annex II Protected Species: EU Habitats Directive >> Annex IV Protected Species: Wildlife Acts

Table 4-2 Record of bird species within 1km grid search (Biodiversity Ireland)

Species name	Record count	Date of last record	Designation
Common Wood Pigeon (<i>Columba palumbus</i>)	1	06/03/2018	Protected Species: Wildlife Acts Protected Species: EU Birds Directive Protected Species: EU Birds Directive >> Annex II, Section I Bird Species Protected Species: EU Birds Directive >> Annex III, Section I Bird Species

Species name	Record count	Date of last record	Designation
Eurasian Curlew (Numenius arquata)	1	31/05/2020	Protected Species: Wildlife Acts Protected Species: EU Birds Directive Protected Species: EU Birds Directive >> Annex II, Section II Bird Species Threatened Species: Birds of Conservation Concern Threatened Species: Birds of Conservation Concern >> Birds of Conservation Concern - Red List
Mallard (Anas platyrhynchos)	1	11/07/2017	Protected Species: Wildlife Acts Protected Species: EU Birds Directive Protected Species: EU Birds Directive >> Annex II, Section I Bird Species Protected Species: EU Birds Directive >> Annex III, Section I Bird Species
Whooper Swan (Cygnus cygnus)	1	13/10/2019	Protected Species: Wildlife Acts Protected Species: EU Birds Directive Protected Species: EU Birds Directive >> Annex I Bird Species Threatened Species: Birds of Conservation Concern Threatened Species: Birds of Conservation Concern >> Birds of Conservation Concern - Amber List

4.1.1 Natura Impact Statement for River Shannon Crossing¹

Irish Water (2022) applied for planning permission for a tunnel sewer and associated shafts crossing under the River Shannon in Athlone Townland and Athlone and Bigmeadow Townland, Athlone Town Centre between The Quay Road on the western side of the river to The Strand Carpark southwest of Strand St. on the eastern side of the river including works on The Quay Road and in the Strand Carpark. The upper Shannon crossing is located approximately 130m southwest of the project site. The results from the survey work relating to the Irish Water application are summarised below:

“No habitats recorded within the footprint of the proposed works correspond to Annex I habitats listed on the EU Habitats Directive. No suitable habitat for breeding waders was recorded within the SPA close to where the works are proposed with tall, dense stands of Reed Canary Grass being dominant at this location. No evidence of Otter (Lutra lutra), a QI two nearby SACs, was identified during the field survey. No floral species listed under the EU Habitats Directive, Flora (Protection) Order or Red-list species, were recorded within or adjacent to the footprint of the proposed work.”

“Records of birds seen and heard along the proposed works route were taken during the field surveys. Several common bird species were recorded during the field surveys including blackbird (Turdus merula), black-headed gull (Chroicocephalus ridibundus), swallow (Hirundo rustica), mallard (Anas platyrhynchos), wren (Troglodytes troglodytes), house sparrow (Passer domesticus), goldfinch

¹ Natura Impact Statement Athlone Main Drainage –Shannon Crossings, Irish Water 2022 (prepared by MKOS).

(Carduelis carduelis), moorhen (Gallinula chloropus) and starling (Sturnus vulgaris). Black-headed gull and mallard are a SCI of the nearby Middle Shannon Callows and Lough Ree SPA respectively.

Corncrake (Crex crex), a species which is of European Conservation Concern, and which is protected under Annex I of the EU Birds Directive, was previously recorded within the Big Meadow which occurs to the south of the West Side Sewer route and Lower River Shannon Crossing. There have been no records of this species in this area since 2014 when a single male was heard calling, but suitable habitat exists within the Big Meadow. The big meadow was not flooded during any of the site visits, though there was some pooling on the field during the visit on the 13th of February 2022. No suitable habitat for breeding waders was recorded within the SPA close to where the works are proposed with tall, dense stands of Reed Canary Grass being dominant at this location.”

“No evidence of mammals of conservation concern such as Otter (Lutra lutra) or Badger (Meles meles) was identified during the field survey. Otter, an Annex II species, is known to occur within the River Shannon and Athlone Canal (NBDC, 2017) and is a QI of the River Shannon Callows SAC. It is likely that species such as Fox (Vulpes vulpes), Brown Rat (Rattus norvegicus) and Pygmy Shrew (Sorex minutus) occur within the footprint of the proposed works, at least on occasion. However, no evidence of these species or other mammals was identified during the field surveys.”

4.2 Is the project Necessary for the conservation Management of Natura 2000 sites

The project has been described in Section 3 of the Screening Report and it is clear from the description provided that the project is not directly connected with or necessary for the future conservation management of any Natura 2000 sites.

5 Identification of Natura 2000 sites within the zone of influence of the project

5.1 Introduction

Current guidance informing the approach to screening for Appropriate Assessment defines the zone of influence of a proposed development as the geographical area over which it could affect the receiving environment in a way that could have significant effects on the Qualifying Interests of a Natura 2000 site. It is recommended that this is established on a case-by-case basis using the Source-Pathway-Receptor (SPR) framework.

The result of this preliminary screening concluded that there is a total of ten SACs and three SPAs located within the ZOI of the Proposed Development Site. The distances to each site listed are taken from the nearest possible point of the Proposed Development Site boundary to nearest possible point of each Natura 2000 site (Table 1).

The site synopses and conservation objectives of these sites, as per the NPWS website (www.npws.ie), were consulted and reviewed at the time of preparing this report in August 2022. Where potential pathways for significant effects are identified, the site is included within the ZOI of the Proposed Development and further assessment is required.

A source-pathway-receptor model has been used to establish which Natura 2000 sites could occur within the zone of influence of potential indirect impacts. Under such a model the project, as described above, represents the source.

Potential impact pathways are restricted to hydrological pathways. No other pathways such as noise disturbance, or emissions to atmosphere will arise due to the small-scale nature of the project works, which will not generate any significant noise, visual or atmospheric emissions that will result in a perceptible change in baseline conditions in the vicinity of any Natura 2000 sites in the wider surrounding area. This is considered to be particularly the case given the location of the project site in an urban, town centre environment, that is subject to consistent high levels of human activity.

Mobile species pathways (i.e., where mobile species of SACs or SPA might rely on the project site for breeding, resting, or foraging) can also connect a project, development site to Natura 2000 sites. However given the habitats occurring within the site and its location within an urban town centre setting, there is no potential for mobile species associated with Natura 2000 sites in the surrounding area to rely on the project site.

The receptors represent Natura 2000 sites and their associated qualifying features of interest.

Table 5.1 provides a determination as to whether each Natura 2000 site within a 15km buffer distance of the project site occur within the zone of influence of the project. This determination has been undertaken in line with the following assessment questions:

- Is there a hydrological pathway link between the Project site and Natura 2000 sites?
- Does the hydrological pathway establish a connection between qualifying habitats of these Natura 2000 sites and the project site?
- Does the hydrological pathway establish a connection between qualifying species of these Natura 2000 sites or is there potential for mobile species of Natura 2000 sites to occur at or in the vicinity of the project site locations

Figure 5-1 Special Areas of Conservation within 15km buffer

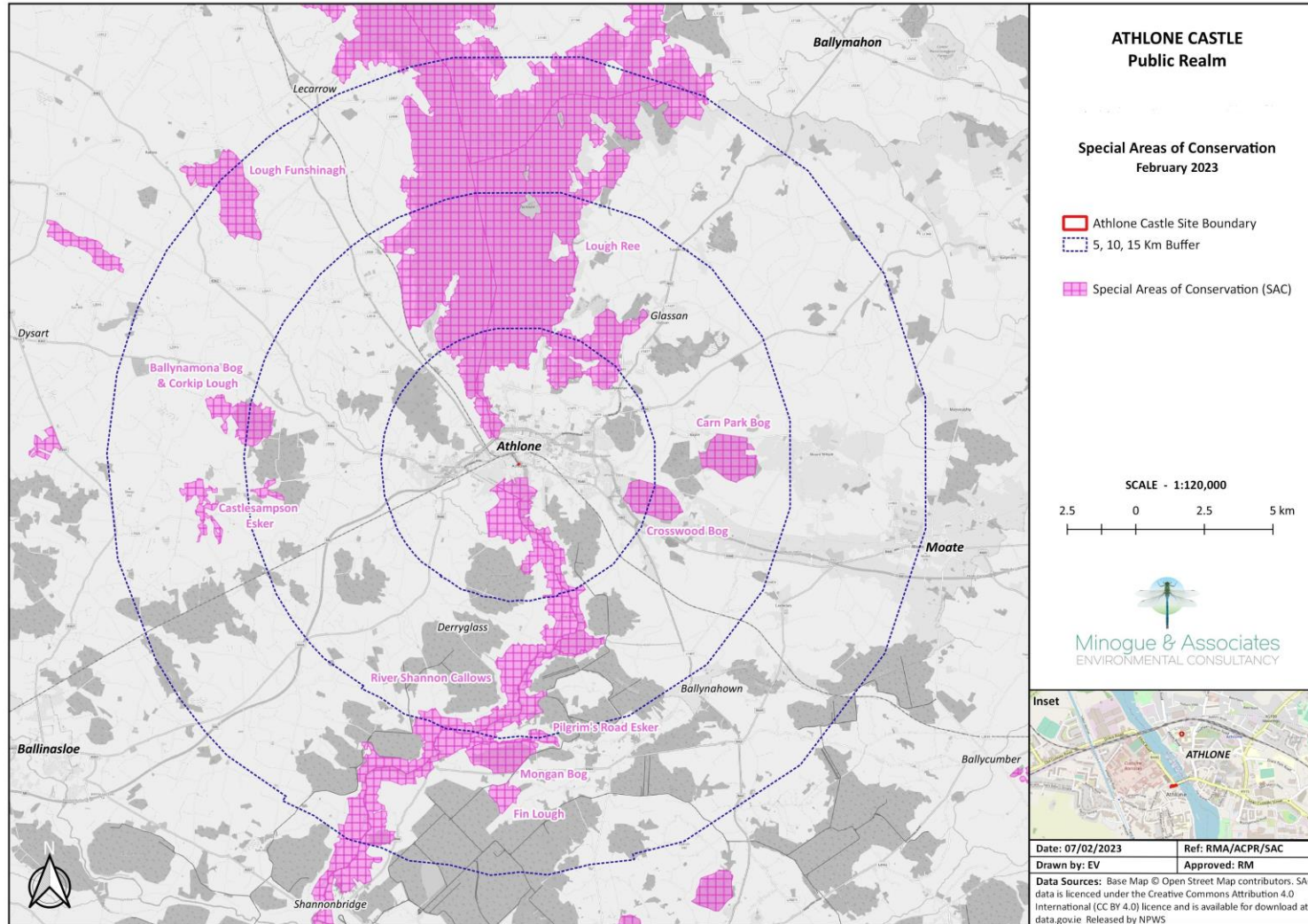


Figure 5-2 Special Protection Areas within 15km buffer.

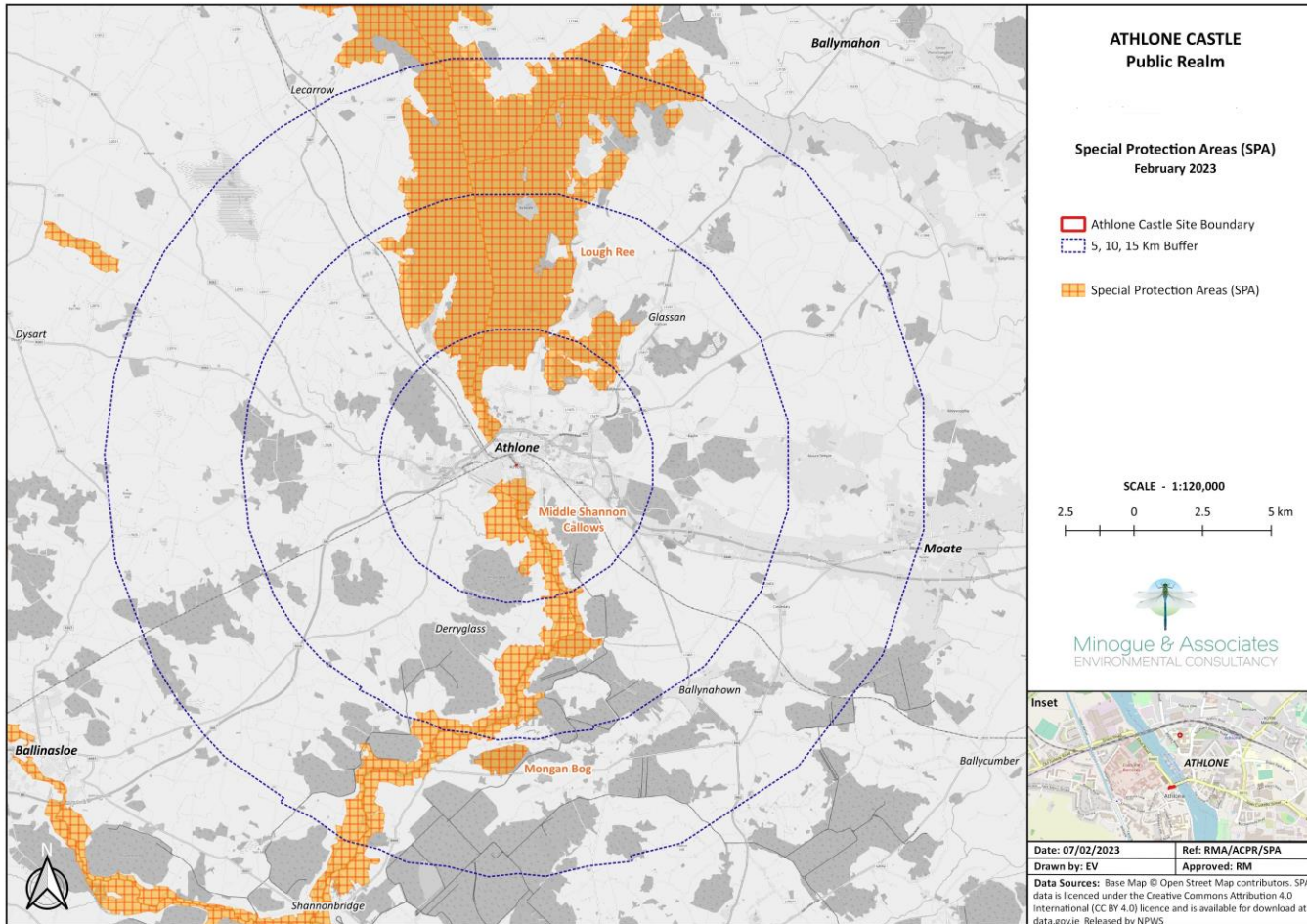


Figure 5-3 River flow

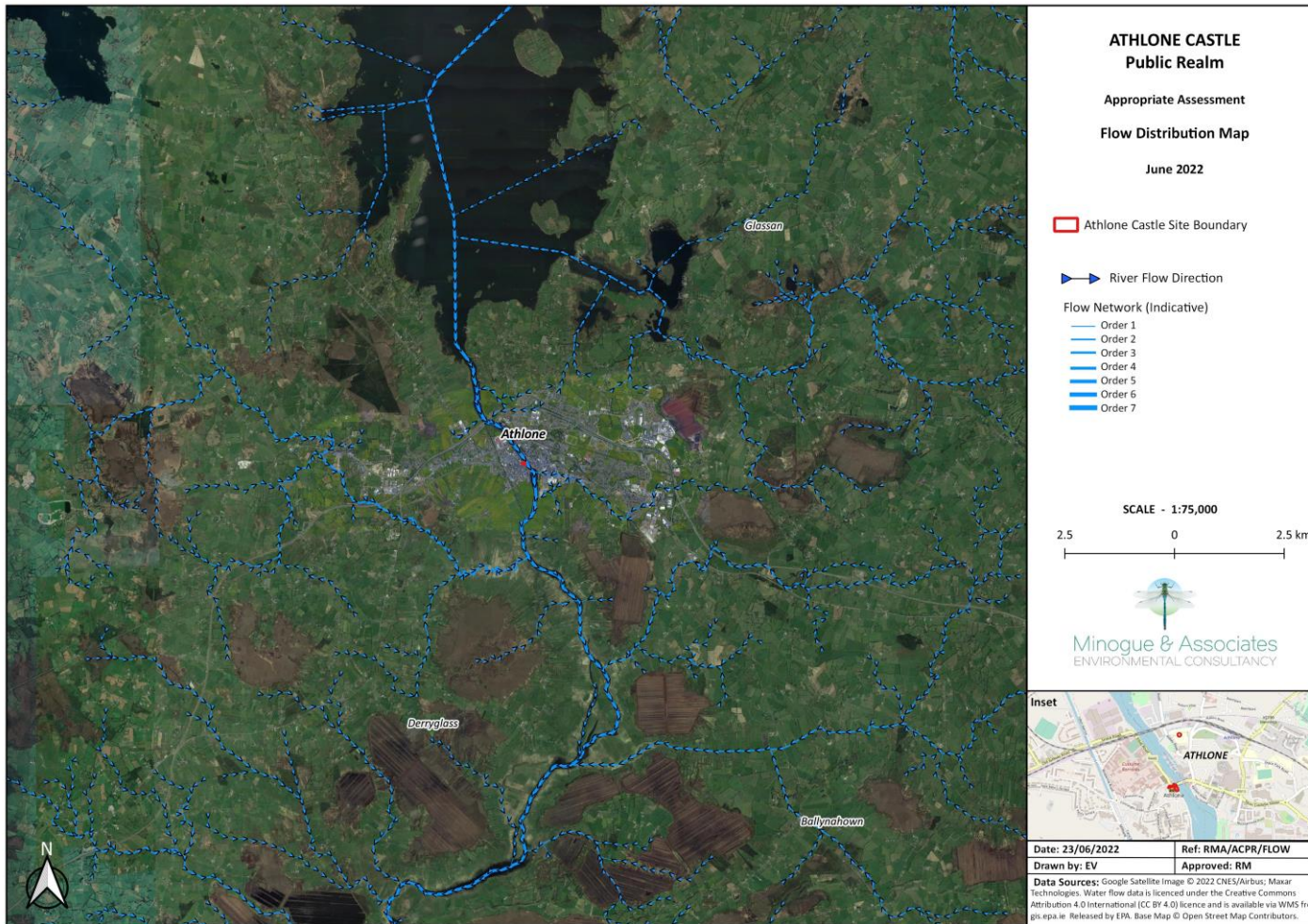


Table .5-1: Natura 2000 sites within the Project Area

Natura 2000 sites	Distance from Plan Area	Qualifying Features of Interest/Special Conservation Interests	Broad QI/SCI Category	Is there a Hydrological Pathway	Likely zone of impact determination
River Shannon Callows SAC	403m	<p>Habitats 6410 Molinia meadows on calcareous, peaty or clayey-silt-laden soils (<i>Molinia caerulea</i>) 6510 Lowland hay meadows (<i>Alopecurus pratensis</i>, <i>Sanguisorba officinalis</i>) 7230 Alkaline fens 8240 Limestone pavements* 91E0 Alluvial forests with <i>Alnus glutinosa</i> and <i>Fraxinus excelsior</i> (<i>Alno-Padion</i>, <i>Alnion incanae</i>, <i>Salicion albae</i>)* Species 1355 Otter (<i>Lutra lutra</i>)</p>	<p>Surface water dependent habitats</p> <p>Terrestrial grassland, woodland, and exposed rock habitat</p> <p>Mammals (otters)</p>	Given that the project site is located within the same sub catchment further examination of the potential for a hydrological pathway to connect the project site to this SAC is provided	The project is located outside the boundary of this SAC but is located close by (<500m). There is no potential for direct effect however, pathways for indirect connectivity via the River Shannon associated with emissions to water from construction are identified and potential indirect effects on prey and habitat quality of species including otter. The site is within the Likely Zone of Impact. The potential for significant effects on these habitats is therefore considered further in this document
Lough Ree SAC	1.26km	<p>Habitats 3150 Natural eutrophic lakes with Magnopotamion or Hydrocharition - type vegetation 6210 Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies on calcareous substrates (<i>Festuco-Brometalia</i>) (* important orchid sites) 7110 Active raised bogs* 7120 Degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration 7230 Alkaline fens 8240 Limestone pavements* 91D0 Bog woodland* 91E0 Alluvial forests with <i>Alnus glutinosa</i> and <i>Fraxinus excelsior</i></p>	<p>Surface water dependent habitats</p> <p>Terrestrial grassland, peatland, woodland, and exposed rock habitat</p> <p>Mammals (otters)</p>	No, the project site is downstream of this SAC	The project is located outside the boundary of this SAC and there is no potential for direct effect. The SAC is located upstream of the project site and is not within the Likely Zone of Impact. The potential for significant effects on these habitats or supporting species is therefore not considered further in this document

Natura 2000 sites	Distance from Plan Area	Qualifying Features of Interest/Special Conservation Interests	Broad QI/SCI Category	Is there a Hydrological Pathway	Likely zone of impact determination
		(Alno-Padion, Alnion incanae, Salicion albae)* Species 1355 Otter (<i>Lutra lutra</i>)			
Crosswood Bog SAC	3.95km	110 Active raised bogs* 7120 Degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration	Water dependant habitats, peatland habitats.	No the project is in a separate sub catchment to this SAC	The project is located outside the boundary of this SAC over 3.95km and there is no potential for direct effect. Given the distance from the SAC, no pathways for indirect effects on the SAC were identified. No pathway for effect was identified and the site is not within the Likely Zone of Impact. The potential for significant effects on these habitats is therefore not considered further in this document
Carn Park Bog SAC	6.5km	110 Active raised bogs* 7120 Degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration	Water dependent habitats, peatland habitats.	No. This Natura 2000 site is located within a separate sub-catchment to the project and there are no hydrological pathway connecting the project site to this Natura 2000 site.	The project is located 6.5km outside the boundary of this SAC. Given the distance from the SAC, no pathways for indirect effects on the SAC were identified. No pathway for effect was identified and the site is not within the Likely Zone of Impact. The potential for significant effects on these habitats is therefore not considered further in this document.

Natura 2000 sites	Distance from Plan Area	Qualifying Features of Interest/Special Conservation Interests	Broad QI/SCI Category	Is there a Hydrological Pathway	Likely zone of impact determination
Castle Sampson Esker SAC	8.6km	Habitats 3180 Turloughs* 6210 Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies on calcareous substrates (Festuco-Brometalia) (* important orchid sites)	Terrestrial grassland habitat Groundwater dependent habitat	No. This Natura 2000 site is located within a separate sub-catchment to the project and there are no hydrological pathway connecting the project site to this Natura 2000 site.	The project is located 8.6km outside the boundary of this SAC. Given the distance from the SAC, no pathways for indirect effects on the SAC were identified. No pathway for effect was identified and the site is not within the Likely Zone of Impact. The potential for significant effects on these habitats is therefore not considered further in this document
Ballynamona Bog and and Corkkip Lough SAC	9,1km	Habitats 3180 Turloughs* 7110 Active raised bogs* 7120 Degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration 7150 Depressions on peat substrates of the Rhynchosporion 91D0 Bog woodland*	Ground and surface Water dependant habitats, peatland, and woodland habitats	No. This Natura 2000 site is located upstream to the project Site.	The project is located 9.1km outside the boundary of this SAC. Given the distance from the SAC, no pathways for indirect effects on the SAC were identified. No pathway for effect was identified and the site is not within the Likely Zone of Impact. The potential for significant effects on these habitats is therefore not considered further in this document
Pilgrim's Road Esker SAC	9.9km	Habitats 6210 Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies on calcareous substrates (Festuco-Brometalia) (* important orchid sites)	Terrestrial grassland	No hydrological connection to project site	The project is located 9.9km outside the boundary of this SAC.Given the distance from the SAC, no pathways for indirect effects on the SAC were identified. No pathway for effect was identified and the site is not within the Likely Zone of Impact. The potential for significant effects

Natura 2000 sites	Distance from Plan Area	Qualifying Features of Interest/Special Conservation Interests	Broad QI/SCI Category	Is there a Hydrological Pathway	Likely zone of impact determination
					on these habitats is therefore not considered further in this document.
Mongan Bog SAC	10.0km	Habitats 7110 Active raised bogs* 7120 Degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration 7150 Depressions on peat substrates of the Rhynchosporion	Water dependent habitats	No. This Natura 2000 site is located within a separate sub-catchment to the project and there are no hydrological pathway connecting the project site to this Natura 2000 site.	The project is located 10km outside the boundary of this SAC. Given the distance from the SAC, no pathways for indirect effects on the SAC were identified. No pathway for effect was identified and the site is not within the Likely Zone of Impact. The potential for significant effects on these habitats is therefore not considered further in this document.
Fin Lough (Offaly) SAC	11.5	Habitats 7230 Alkaline fens Species 1013 Geyer's Whorl Snail (Vertigo geyeri)	Groundwater dependent habitats Invertebrate	No. This Natura 2000 site is located within a separate sub-catchment to the project and there are no hydrological pathway connecting the project site to this	The project is located 11.5km outside the boundary of this SAC. Given the distance from the SAC, no pathways for indirect effects on the SAC were identified. No pathway for effect was identified and the site is not within the Likely Zone of Impact. The potential for significant effects on these habitats is therefore not considered further in this document

Natura 2000 sites	Distance from Plan Area	Qualifying Features of Interest/Special Conservation Interests	Broad QI/SCI Category	Is there a Hydrological Pathway	Likely zone of impact determination
				Natura 2000 site.	
Lough Funshinagh SAC	12.5	Habitats 3180 Turloughs* 3270 Rivers with muddy banks with <i>Chenopodium rubri</i> p.p. and <i>Bidention</i> p.p. vegetation	Groundwater dependent habitats	No. This Natura 2000 site is located within a separate sub-catchment to the project and there are no hydrological pathway connecting the project site to this Natura 2000 site.	The project is located 12.5km outside the boundary of this SAC. Given the distance from the SAC, no pathways for indirect effects on the SAC were identified. No pathway for effect was identified and the site is not within the Likely Zone of Impact. The potential for significant effects on these habitats is therefore not considered further in this document
Special Protection Areas					
Middle Shannon Callows SPA	428m	Birds A179 Black-headed Gull (<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>) A050 Wigeon (<i>Anas penelope</i>) A140 Golden Plover (<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>) A038 Whooper Swan (<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>) A156 Black-tailed Godwit (<i>Limosa limosa</i>) A142 Lapwing (<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>) A122 Corncrake (<i>Crex crex</i>)	Wintering water birds Breeding birds (no longer present)	Given that the project site is located within the same sub catchment further examination of the potential for a hydrological pathway to connect the	The project is located outside the boundary of this SPA but is located close by (<500m). There is no potential for direct effect however, pathways for indirect connectivity via the River Shannon associated with emissions to water from construction are identified and potential indirect effects on prey and habitat quality of bird species and potential disturbance effects.. The site is within the Likely Zone of Impact. The potential for significant effects on these habitats is therefore considered further in this document

Natura 2000 sites	Distance from Plan Area	Qualifying Features of Interest/Special Conservation Interests	Broad QI/SCI Category	Is there a Hydrological Pathway	Likely zone of impact determination
		Habitats Wetlands		project site to this SAC is provided	
Lough Ree SPA	1.35km	Birds A061 Tufted Duck (<i>Aythya fuligula</i>) A056 Shoveler (<i>Anas clypeata</i>) A142 Lapwing (<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>) A038 Whooper Swan (<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>) A140 Golden Plover (<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>) A125 Coot (<i>Fulica atra</i>) A050 Wigeon (<i>Anas penelope</i>) A067 Goldeneye (<i>Bucephala clangula</i>) A004 Little Grebe (<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>) A193 Common Tern (<i>Sterna hirundo</i>) A052 Teal (<i>Anas crecca</i>) A053 Mallard (<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>) A065 Common Scoter (<i>Melanitta nigra</i>) Habitats Wetlands	Wintering waterbirds Breeding birds Water dependent habitats	No project site is downstream of this SPA	The project is located upstream of this SPA therefore no direct or indirect effects are identified for this SPA. No habitats are identified within or immediately adjacent to the proposed development that support waterbirds or breeding birds of SCI of this SPA. The site is not within the Likely Zone of Impact. The potential for significant effects on these species or supporting habitats is therefore not considered further in this document
Mongan Bog SPA	10.1km	Birds A395 Greenland White-fronted Goose (<i>Anser albifrons flavirostris</i>)	Wintering waterbird	No. This Natura 2000 site is located within a separate sub-catchment to the project	The project is located over 10km upstream of this SPA therefore no direct or indirect effects are identified for this SPA. No habitats are identified within or immediately adjacent to the proposed development that support waterbirds or breeding birds of SCI of this SPA.

Natura 2000 sites	Distance from Plan Area	Qualifying Features of Interest/Special Conservation Interests	Broad QI/SCI Category	Is there a Hydrological Pathway	Likely zone of impact determination
				and there are no hydrological pathway connecting the project site to this Natura 2000 site.	The potential for significant effects on these species or supporting habitats is therefore not considered further in this document

5.2 Overview of Natura 2000 sites within the zone of influence of the project

5.2.1 River Shannon Callows SAC

The River Shannon Callows is a long and diverse site which consists of seasonally flooded, semi-natural, lowland wet grassland, along and beside the river between the towns of Athlone and Portumna. It is approximately 50 km long and averages about 0.75 km wide (reaching 1.5 km wide in places). Along much of its length the site is bordered by raised bogs (many, but not all, of which are subject to large-scale harvesting), esker ridges and limestone-bedrock hills. The soils grade from silty alluvial to peat. This site has a common boundary, and is closely associated, with two other sites with similar habitats, River Suck Callows and Little Brosna Callows.

5.2.2 Documented Threats & Pressures to River Shannon Callows SAC

The threats and pressures to this SAC and SPA have been documented in the Standard Natura 2000 Data Form for the site. The documented threats and pressures for the River Shannon Callows SAC are shown below in Table 5.2.

Table 5-2 Documented Threats and Pressures to River Shannon Callows SAC

Rank	Threats and Pressures		Inside/outside/both [i] [o] [b]
H	Do6	Other forms of transportation and communication	i
M	F03.01	Hunting	i
M	G01.01.02	non-motorized nautical sports	i
L	A04.03	Abandonment of pastoral systems, lack of grazing	i
L	D01.01	paths, tracks, cycling tracks	i
L	F02.03	Leisure Fishing	i
L	D01.05	Bridge, viaduct	i
L	J02.05.02	Modifying structures of inland water courses	i

5.3 Middle Shannon Callows SPA

The Middle Shannon Callows SPA is a long and diverse site which extends for approximately 50 km from the town of Athlone to the town of Portumna; it lies within Counties Galway, Roscommon, Westmeath, Offaly and Tipperary. The site averages about 0.75 km in width though in places is up to 1.5 km wide. Water levels on the site are greatly influenced by the very small fall between Athlone and Portumna and by the weir at Meelick. The site has extensive areas of callow, or seasonally flooded, semi-natural, lowland wet grassland, along both sides of the river. The callows are mainly too soft for intensive farming but are used for hay or silage or for summer grazing. Other habitats of smaller area which occur alongside the river include lowland dry grassland, freshwater marshes, reedbeds and wet woodland. The diversity of semi-natural habitats present, and the sheer size of the site attract an excellent diversity of bird species, including significant populations of several. The site is a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the E.U. Birds Directive, of special conservation interest for the following species: Whooper Swan, Wigeon, Corncrake, Golden Plover, Lapwing, Black-tailed Godwit and Black-Headed Gull. It is also of special conservation interest for holding an assemblage of over 20,000 wintering waterbirds. The E.U. Birds Directive pays particular attention to wetlands and,

as these form part of this SPA, the site and its associated waterbirds are of special conservation interest for Wetland & Waterbirds.

The Middle Shannon Callows SPA is an internationally important site that supports an assemblage of over 20,000 wintering waterbirds. It holds internationally important populations of two species - Whooper Swan and Black-tailed Godwit. In addition, there are four species that have wintering populations of national importance. The site also supports a nationally important breeding population of Corncrake. Of particular note is that several of the species which occur regularly are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive, i.e., Whooper Swan, Corncrake and Golden Plover

5.3.1 Documented Threats & Pressures to Middle Shannon Callows SPA

The threats and pressures to this SAC and SPA have been documented in the Standard Natura 2000 Data Form for the site. The documented threats and pressures for the Middle Shannon Callows SPAC are shown below in Table 5.3.

Table 5-3 Documented Threats and Pressures the Middle Shannon Callows SPA

Rank	Threats and Pressures		Inside/outside/both		
			[i]	[o]	[b]
H	A04	Grazing	i		
L	A04.03	Abandonment of pastoral systems, lack of grazing	i		
L	A08	Fertilisation	i		
M	A08	Fertilisation		o	
L	D01.01	Paths, tracks, cycling tracks	i		
H	D01.05	Bridge, viaduct	i		
H	E01	Urbanised areas, human habitation		o	
M	F02.03	Leisure fishing		i	
L	F03.01	Hunting		i	
H	G01.01	Nautical sports		i	
M	G01.02	Walking, horseriding and non-motorised vehicles		i	

5.4 Conservation Objectives

The overall aim of the Habitats Directive is to maintain or restore the favourable conservation status of habitats and species of community interest. These habitats and species are listed in the Habitats and Birds Directives and Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas are designated to afford protection to the most vulnerable of them. The maintenance of habitats and species within Natura 2000 sites at favourable conservation condition will contribute to the overall maintenance of favourable conservation status of those habitats and species at a national level.

Favourable conservation status of a habitat is achieved when:

- its natural range, and area it covers within that range, are stable or increasing, and
- the specific structure and functions which are necessary for its long-term maintenance exist and are likely to continue to exist for the foreseeable future, and
- the conservation status of its typical species is favourable.

The favourable conservation status of a species is achieved when:

- population dynamics data on the species concerned indicate that it is maintaining itself on a long-term basis as a viable component of its natural habitats,

- the natural range of the species is neither being reduced nor is likely to be reduced for the foreseeable future, and
- there is, and will probably continue to be, a sufficiently large habitat to maintain its populations on a long-term basis.

Site-specific conservation objectives have been published for the River Shannon Callows SAC and is available at:

https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/protected-sites/conservation_objectives/CO000216.pdf

Generic conservation objectives have been published for the Middle Shannon Callows SPA, and is available at:

https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/protected-sites/conservation_objectives/CO004096.pdf

6 Identification and assessment of Potential Effects to Natura 2000 Sites

6.1 Introduction

The conservation objectives of the Natura 2000 sites within the zone of influence were reviewed and assessed to establish whether the construction and operation of the project has the potential to have a negative impact on any of the qualifying interests and/or conservation objectives of the Natura 2000 sites within the zone of influence of the project. The assessment considers any potential indirect impacts of the proposal, both alone and in combination with other plans and projects, on Natura 2000 sites by virtue of the following criteria:

- size and scale,
- land-take,
- distance from the Natura 2000 site or key features of the site,
- Resource requirements,
- emissions,
- duration of installation,
- operation and decommissioning

As noted in Table 5.1 the project site is buffered from the nearest Natura 2000 site, the River Shannon Callows SAC, by 403m, and as such there will be no potential for direct impacts to this SAC and the Middle Shannon Callows SPA, as a result of land-take and direct habitat loss.

The assessment framework is taken from the best practice guidelines issued by the European Commission, i.e., *“Assessment of plans and projects significantly affecting Natura 2000 sites – Methodological guidance”*.

6.2 Assessment of potential impacts

The potential for negative impacts resulting from the Project during the Construction and Operational Phase was determined based on a range of indicators, including:

- Habitat alteration.
- Habitat/species fragmentation;
- Disturbance and/or displacement of species;
- Changes in population density; and
- Changes in water quality and resource;

The potential for effects during construction and operation were assessed for likely significant effects.

6.2.1.1 Construction Phase (estimated duration : 14 weeks)

- Uncontrolled releases of silt, sediments and/or other pollutants such as historical contaminated land to water due to earthworks
- Surface water run-off containing silt, sediments and/or other pollutants into nearby waterbodies;
- Surface water run-off containing silt, sediments and/or other pollutants into the local groundwater;
- Waste generation during the Construction Phase comprising soils, construction and removal wastes

6.2.1.2 Operational Phase (estimated duration: indefinite)

- Surface water drainage from the Site of the Proposed Development.

Please see Table 6.1 for an evaluation of the potential effects:

6.2.1.3 Construction Phase

The consideration of potential effects of the construction phase relate to the following:

- i. Surface water run off containing silts, sediments and/or other pollutants due to earthworks into nearby waterbodies
- ii. Release of fuels/hydrocarbons from construction machinery to nearby waterbodies.

To maximise the efficiency of the construction phase, minimise the duration of this phase and the restriction to public access to areas of open space within the town centre the construction phase will be undertaken following a sequential “strip and cover” approach that will expose soils and sub surface only when the replacement capping layer is ready and in-situ to be placed immediately over the exposed soils and sub-surface. This will provide for the replacement of ground cover on an ongoing basis and thereby reducing areas restricted to public access as the construction phase proceeds.

This sequential strip and cover approach will also have the derivative effect of minimising the exposure of silts, sediment and soils such that the potential for the release of such substances from the construction footprint will be negligible, thereby eliminating the potential for sediment related effects to water quality within the River Shannon and associated Natura 2000 sites.

In addition, the sequential strip and cover approach will also minimise the risk of any contaminated soil (in the unlikely event that it is present on site²) being released via hydrological emissions as the length of exposure will be brief due to the above approach for strip and cover construction methods.

It is further noted that any material to be removed from the project site will be excavated from the ground by an excavator and immediately transferred to a dumper truck (or similar), which will in turn transport it offsite for storage and disposal at a n appropriately registered facility. As such no spoil material will be stored on site, thereby eliminating the potential for runoff emissions from spoil.

In addition to the above it is noted that the volumes of surface water draining the project site represents a miniscule fraction of the volumes discharging to the River Shannon upstream of the River Shannon Callows SAC and Middle Shannon Callows SPA. This is supported by an examination of the area occupied by footprint of the project site (i.e. approximately 0.0425ha within the Upper Shannon catchment (approximately 38,300 hectares) in which the project site is located. The project site represents 0.000001% of the land surface occurring within this catchment and the runoff generated at the project site will therefore represent a miniscule extent of the runoff draining from lands within this sub-catchment. This demonstrates that the volume of runoff from the project site will be negligible with respect to runoff from

² It is noted that, as set out in Section 4.1 above, the historic use of the project site is as an area of open space. There is no evidence suggested in historical maps for the area that it was used as an area of industrial activity. Given the absence of such activity and its historic use as an area of open space, such historic land uses suggest that the risk of contaminated land occurring within the footprint of the project site will be unlikely.

the surrounding catchment area and will be diluted and dispersed within the River Shannon. As such even in the very unlikely (as per the preceding paragraphs above) worst case scenario event that contaminated waters enter the River Shannon it is considered that, based on the above, any associated pollutants will be adequately diluted and dispersed within the receiving waters.

During the construction phase cement-based products, hydrocarbons and other aqueous solutions will be required on site. All materials will be stored in a site compound and in bunded containers. Given the small scale of the project, the quantities of these materials required on site at any one time will be small and the risk of significant contamination to surface water generated within the footprint of the project site will be negligible and these potential sources of surface water runoff contamination will not pose a risk to the water quality of the River Shannon and the status of the associated Natura 2000 sites.

6.2.1.4 Operation

The potential effects of construction phase relate to the following:

- Surface water drainage from the Site of the Proposed Development.

The project will remove the existing car parking spaces to allow for pedestrian access only and this reduces the current hydrocarbon run off risk. The proposed development will provide for a new stormwater drainage to connect into the Athlone Main Drainage scheme currently under construction. Surface water runoff during the operation phase will be directed to a sewer that forms part of the main drainage and treats it before release to receiving waters, this represents an improvement on the existing situation and a positive effect.

6.3 Cumulative effects

The proposed development was considered in combination with other projects in the area that could result in cumulative effects on the environment. The Myplan online planning system was consulted on 1st March 2023 for the subject lands and immediate surrounds in particular development applications adjacent to the site within the past three years. Table 6.1 lists the projects that have been identified during this search and provides an assessment of the potential for the proposed project to combine with these other projects to result in cumulative significant effects to the environment. The assessment outlined in Table 6.1 has found that the project will not have the potential to combine with any other existing and/or approved projects to result in likely significant impacts on the environment.

Figure 6-1 Myplan.ie planning search 28th July 2022



Table 6-1 Planning applications within the site within the past 3 years (2019-2022)

Planning Ref	Description
22 170	Irish Water, apply for permission at this site for a tunnel sewer and associated shafts crossing under the River Shannon in Athlone Townland and Athlone and Bigmeadow Townland, Athlone Town Centre between The Quay Road on the western side of the river to The Strand Carpark southwest of Strand St. on the eastern side of the river including works on The Quay Road and in the Strand Carpark. The development will consist of the construction of the following: A new combined sewer (Upper Shannon Crossing), up to 1500mm diameter, tunnelled underneath the River Shannon from The Quay Road to the Strand Carpark constructed within a 10m wide construction area. 1 No.tunnel shaft on The Quay Road and all associated site works constructed within a works construction area. 1 No.tunnel shaft in the Strand Carpark and all associated site works constructed within a works construction area. Temporary works compounds at each of the 2 No. tunnel shafts. Temporary removal and reinstatement of two cast iron bollards that are listed as Protected Structures, RPS Ref No 075 and NIAH Ref. No. 15000414 along the Quay Road. Temporary carparking and occasional storage for existing commercial use located adjacent to the proposed temporary works construction compound on The Quay Road. Temporary works area up to 10m wide on a floating pontoon located on the River Shannon adjacent to the quay wall on The Quay Road. A Natura Impact Statement will be submitted to the Planning Authority with the Application.
20 741	Retention permission to regularise and retain works carried out at the premises to include changes to ground floor plan. Also, permission to develop the ground floor retail as café-takeaway including change of shop front, external signage, and all associated site works. The development will consist of work to a Protected Structure, Record of Protected Structures, Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020, Reference no.060

19 743	Permission for a change of use from ground floor retail to café-takeaway including change of shop front, external signage, and all associated site works. The development will consist of work to a Protected Structure, Record of Protected Structures, Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020, reference No.060
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The projects above primarily represent small scale development with the exception of the Athlone Flood relief works (2017 but included for cumulative effects assessment granted planning permission under planning reference: 17-17182), the Athlone Pedestrian and Cycleway Bridge and the Athlone Main Drainage Shannon Crossing planning application by Irish Water (2022).

The following text is extracted from the AA Screening for the Part 8 Flood relief works:

“The screening for AA identifies and assesses potential impacts which are likely to occur as a result of the proposed works to the Natura 2000 site network within a 15km zone of influence of the study area. The screening identified three Natura 2000 sites within a radius of the proposed works, with indirect connectivity; River Shannon Callows SAC, Middle Shannon Callows SPA and Lough Ree SAC. The impacts of the proposed works have been assessed and potential indirect impacts upon the River Shannon Callows SAC, Middle Shannon Callows SPA and Lough Ree SAC have been identified. However, due to the nature of the works and the adherence of best practice construction guidelines it is not anticipated that the proposed works will negatively impact upon the designated sites. It is therefore concluded that the proposed flood alleviation works at Flood Cell 3 ‘The Quay’ either alone or in combination with other plans and projects will not have any significant effect on the integrity of Natura 2000 sites in light of their conservation objectives, therefore a Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment is not required”

The Athlone Main Drainage Shannon Crossing Natura Impact Statement provides the following conclusion:

“This NIS has provided an assessment of all potential direct or indirect adverse effects on Natura 2000 sites. Where the potential for any adverse effect on any Natura 2000 site has been identified, the pathway by which any such effect may occur has been robustly blocked through the use of avoidance, appropriate design and mitigation measures as set out within this report and its appendices. The measures ensure that the construction and operation of the proposed works does not adversely affect the integrity of Natura 2000 sites. Therefore, it can be objectively concluded that the Proposed Works, individually or in combination with other plans or projects, will not adversely affect the integrity of any Natura 2000 site.”

The comprehensive review of the Westmeath County Council planning register documented relevant general development planning applications within the vicinity of the proposed, most of which relate to the provision and/or alteration of existing buildings. The concluding statements of the above applications support a finding of no significant effects subject to full adherence of mitigation measures. It is reiterated that no in stream works is proposed as part of this proposed development

which further reduces potential risk and emissions to sensitive environmental receptors including the River Shannon.

The project will not have the potential to result in direct, indirect, or secondary impacts to Natura 2000 sites. In relation to other emissions such as noise/dust, the scale and size of the project, the distance from the nearest Natura 2000 site does not have the potential to impact on Natura 2000 sites. As there are no pathways connecting the project site to surrounding Natura 2000 sites and as the project will not result in significant negative impacts it will not have the potential to combine with other projects in the surrounding area to result in cumulative significant effects to the local environment or Natura 2000 sites occurring in the wider surrounding area.

6.4 Screening Matrix

A Screening Matrix, in line with European Commission (2021) guidelines is provided below in **Table 6.2**.

Table 6.2. Screening Matrix for the Project

Brief description of the project or plan	The project and associated activities are described in Section 3 above.
Brief description of the Natura 2000 sites	The Natura 2000 sites occurring in the wider surrounding area are identified and briefly described in Figure 4.1 and Table 5.1 above, while Appendix 1 provides a summary overview of each of these Natura 2000 sites.
Describe the individual elements of the project (either alone or in combination with other plans or projects) likely to give rise to impacts on the Natura 2000 sites.	<p>The elements of the project that could (conceivably) give rise to potential environmental effects relate to emissions from the project in the form of hydrological emissions during construction and the potential for interactions with mobile qualifying species of Natura 2000 sites. These have been examined in Table 4.1 above and there is no potential for emissions (including water, air, noise) from the project site to establish pathways between the project site and surrounding Natura 2000 sites to result in negative impacts to their conservation status.</p> <p>There are no Natura 2000 sites at risk of hydrological effects associated with the project.</p> <p>Furthermore, there is no potential for the project to interact with qualifying species of Natura 2000 sites and the habitats upon which they rely.</p>
<p>Describe any likely direct, indirect or secondary impacts of the project (either alone or in combination with other plans or projects) on the Natura 2000 sites site by virtue of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • size and scale; • land-take; • distance from the Natura 2000 site or key features of the site; 	<p>The project will not have the potential to result in direct, indirect or secondary impacts to Natura 2000 sites.</p> <p>The footprint of the project is a total area of 0.045ha.in an established urban habitat adjacent to the River Shannon.</p> <p>It is small in size, scale and development and does not overlap with any Natura 2000 site boundary. The nearest Natura 2000 site is River Shannon Callows SAC approximately 403m from the project site, and the Middle Shannon Callows SPA approximately 428m from the project site.</p> <p>All waste generated on site during the construction phase will be removed from the site as it arises and disposed of offsite at an</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • resource requirements (water abstraction etc.); • emissions (disposal to land, water or air); • excavation requirements; • transportation requirements; • duration of construction, operation, decommissioning, etc.; 	<p>appropriately licenced facility. As such the only pathway with any potential to connect the project site to the Lower River Shannon Callows will be surface and groundwater water baseflows within the sub-catchment. The approach to construction as outlined in Section 6.2.1.1 and the miniscule size of the project which represents 0.000001% of the land area within the Upper Shannon subcatchment. The runoff generated at the project site will therefore represent a miniscule extent of the runoff draining from lands within this sub-catchment. Thus even In the very unlikely, worst-case scenario event that contaminated waters enter the River Shannon it is considered that, based on the above, any associated pollutants associated with surface water runoff from the project site will be adequately diluted and dispersed within the receiving waters such that they do not have a perceptible effect on the water quality of the River Shannon.</p> <p>During the construction phase cement-based products, hydrocarbons and other aqueous solutions will be required on site. All materials will be stored in a site compound and in bunded containers. Given the small scale of the project, the quantities of these materials required on site at any one time will be small and the risk of contamination to surface water generated within the footprint of the project site will be low and will not have the potential to undermine the water quality of the River Shannon.</p> <p>Furthermore, it is considered that even in the event that minor traces of such materials were to discharge to groundwater baseflows, their concentrations would be diluted to miniscule levels such that they would be entirely attenuated and diluted in baseflows prior to discharge to the River Shannon.</p> <p>Surface water generated on site during the operation phase will be discharged to the storm water network consented and under construction as outlined in Section 3 Project Description.</p> <p>The operation phase will not involve any activities that will present a risk of generating contaminated surface water. Permeable surface paving will also allow for the infiltration of surface water to ground, reducing the volumes of runoff to the network.</p> <p>Please see Table 5.1 above for examination of cumulative effects.</p>
<p>Describe any likely changes to the site arising as a result of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduction of habitat area; • disturbance to key species; • habitat or species fragmentation; • reduction in species density; • changes in key indicators of conservation value • (water quality etc.); • climate change. 	<p>The project is not located within any Natura 2000 site and therefore there will be no loss or alteration of habitat as a result of the project. There will be no direct habitat loss within any Natura 2000 sites. As there will be no direct habitat loss within any Natura 2000 sites, it is not considered that habitat fragmentation will arise as a result of the proposal.</p> <p>As there is no construction or operational activities that could give rise to surface or ground water alterations, and no hydrological connection as a result, it is not considered that changes in water quality and resources will raise as a result of the proposal. There is no potential for the project to interact with qualifying species of Natura 2000 sites and the habitats upon which they rely. As there are no pathways between the project site and surrounding Natura 2000 sites and as the project is not predicted to result in the emission of potentially polluting substances or air and noise emissions to the surrounding environment it will not have the</p>

	potential to result in changes to qualifying habitats or qualifying species of Natura 2000 sites occurring in the wider surrounding area.
<p>Describe any likely impacts on the Natura 2000 sites site as a whole in terms of:</p> <p>interference with the key relationships that define the structure of the site;</p> <p>interference with key relationships that define the function of the site</p>	<p>For reasons set out above the project will not have the potential to interfere with key relationships that define the structure and function of Natura 2000 sites.</p> <p>Given the absence of any connections between the project site and the fifteen Natura 2000 sites in the wider surrounding area, the conservation objectives for these sites, which have been published by the NPWS, will not be undermined by the project.</p>
<p>Provide indicators of significance as a result of the identification of effects set out above in terms of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • loss; • fragmentation; • disruption; • disturbance; • change to key elements of the site (e.g. water quality etc.). 	<p>For reasons set out above the project will not have the potential to result in such effects to Natura 2000 sites.</p>
<p>Describe from the above those elements of the project or plan, or combination of elements, where the above impacts are likely to be significant or where the scale or magnitude of impacts is not known.</p>	<p>The project will not have the potential to result in likely significant effects to Natura 2000 sites.</p>

7 Screening Conclusion

During the screening of the project it was found that thirteen Natura 2000 sites occur within a 15km radius of the project site. The project site is located less than 500m from the River Shannon Callows SAC and the Middle Shannon Callows SPA.

All of these European Sites (and their associated qualifying features of interest/special conservation interests) are adjudged to be located outside the zone of influence of all activities associated with the project.

There will be no potential for impacts arising from the construction or operation phase of the project to give rise to impacts on water quality on the two identified Natura 2000 sites within the zone of influence of the project. Given the absence of impact pathways and the potential for interactions between the project and these Natura 2000 sites there will be no potential for the project to result in likely significant effects to these Natura 2000 sites.

In light of the findings of this report it is the considered view of the authors of this Screening Report for Appropriate Assessment that it can be concluded by the competent authority, Westmeath County Council that the project is not likely, alone or in-combination with other plans or projects, to have a significant effect on any Natura 2000 sites in view of their Conservation Objectives and on the basis of best scientific evidence and there is no reasonable scientific doubt as to that conclusion.

This Screening has resulted in a Finding of No Significant Effects and as such a Stage II Appropriate Assessment is not required.

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PHOTOS FROM SITE VISIT JANUARY 2022

Plate 1: Car parking at front of castle



Plate 2: view southwards from Castle across River Shannon



Plate 3: Built land around castle

