

# CHAPTER 13



CHAPTER **13**

Landscape and Lake Management

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### 13.1 Aim

To improve the knowledge and understanding of the County's landscape and lakelands, and enhance the overall characteristics, qualities and diversity of landscape character, its sense of place and local distinctiveness in recognition of the amenity potential of the County.

### 13.2 Background

Westmeath is known as the Lakeland County, but its landscape includes a diversity of landscape types, ranging from rolling hills and lakes to peatlands, grasslands, woodlands, eskers and wetlands. The range of different landscapes found in Westmeath each have varying visual and amenity values, topography, exposure and contain a variety of habitats. Each landscape type also has a varying capacity to absorb development relative to its overall sensitivity.

The Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended) requires that planning authorities, make provision in their development plans for the protection of landscape character including the preservation of views and prospects and the amenities of places and features of natural beauty and interest.

It is recognised that our landscape and lakes are key assets in sustaining a high quality of life for the residents of the County and an important sustainable tourism resource. The protection and management of the County's natural heritage is a shared responsibility. Westmeath County Council is therefore committed to working with relevant agencies, communities and individuals to ensure the conservation, protection and enhancement of our landscape and lakes can be realised.

### 13.3 National Landscape Strategy

The objective of the National Landscape Strategy (NLS) is to provide a high-level policy framework to achieve balance between the protection, management and planning of the landscape by way of supporting actions. The NLS recognises the importance of landscape protection and its interconnectivity with biodiversity and climate change. A core objective of the strategy is to develop a national Landscape Character Assessment, to provide a framework for greater consistency in the approach to landscape classification and assessment to ensure the conservation of special landscape areas, which by their nature often extend across administrative boundaries. It also sets out specific measures to integrate and embed landscape considerations in all sectors which influence the landscape and improve and enhance the quality of decision-making by those who have an impact on it.

### 13.4 National Planning Framework – Project Ireland 2040

The NPF acknowledges the value of landscape which offers a wealth of natural and cultural assets which in turn support our quality of life and our visitor economy. It aims to facilitate landscape protection, management and change through the preparation of a National Landscape Character Map and development of guidance on local landscape character assessments, (including historic landscape

characterisation) to ensure a consistent approach to landscape character assessment, particularly across planning and administrative boundaries. The NPF also seeks to protect and promote the sense of place and culture and the quality, character and distinctiveness of the Irish rural landscape that make Ireland's rural areas authentic and attractive as places to live, work and visit.

### **13.5 Eastern and Midland Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy**

The RSES recognises the importance of landscape considerations, particularly in the context of placemaking, culture and attractiveness. It acknowledges the diverse range of scenic landscapes across the Region and aims to promote a wider concept of the landscape as defined by the interaction of both human and natural, covering urban, peri-urban and rural areas as well as land, inland waters, coastal and marine areas. A strong emphasis is placed in the strategy on the value of blueways which are particularly important for water quality, fisheries and ecological habitats, and for activities such as kayaking and snorkelling.

The RSES supports the preparation of a national landscape character assessment, which will provide a framework for regional and local landscape character assessments. Specifically, RPO 7.27 commits, following the adoption of a national landscape character assessment, to the preparation of a Regional Landscape Character Assessment to promote better landscape management and planning in the Region.

### **13.6 Westmeath Landscape Character Assessment**

A Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) of the County has been undertaken which provides an understanding of the value and sensitivity of the County's landscapes and its future management needs. The LCA is a tool for identifying the features that give a specific area its 'sense of place' and also provides policy recommendations relating to each landscape type. The LCA will inform decision making in relation to the protection of the environment, natural resources and heritage and will be used to guide development. The Landscape Character Assessment for Westmeath defines 11 Landscape Character Areas (LCAs) within the County as follows:

- Northern Hills and Lakes
- Inny River Lowlands
- River Deel Lowlands
- Central Hills and Lakes
- Royal Canal Corridor
- Lough Ree/Shannon Corridor
- Western Lowlands
- South Central Hills
- Uisneach
- Lough Ennell and South Eastern Corridor
- South Westmeath Eskers

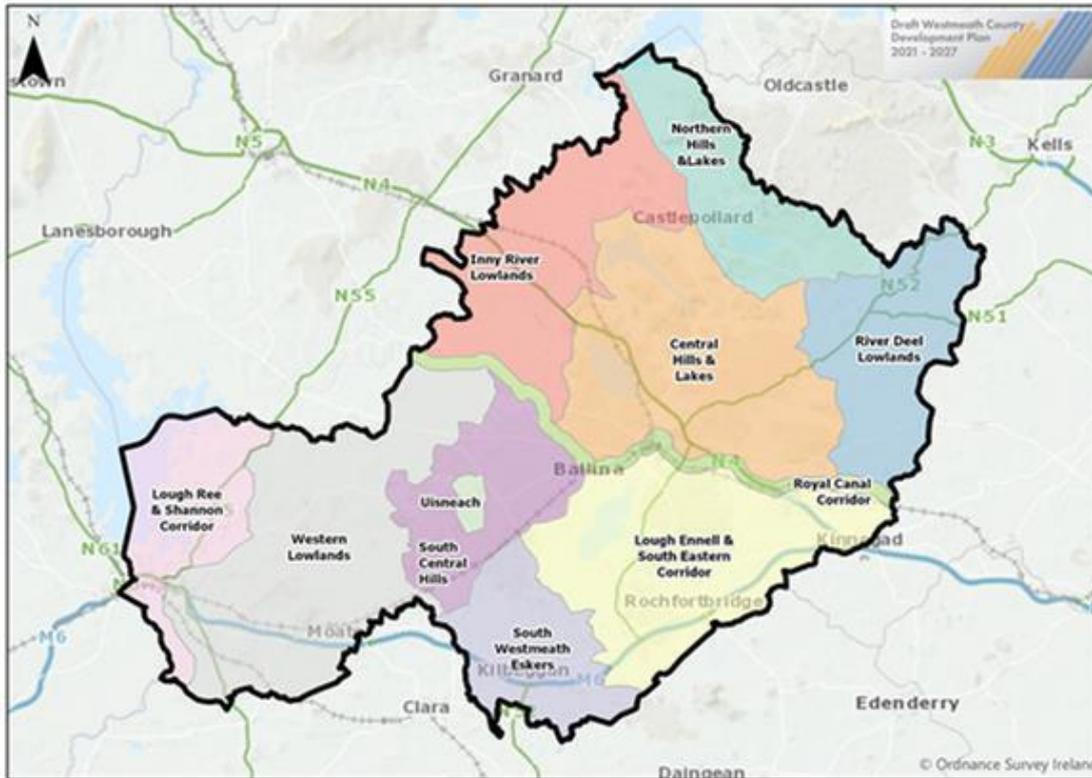


Figure 13.1 Landscape Character Assessment Map

In line with the Westmeath Landscape Character Assessment, the value of Westmeath’s landscape which offers a wealth of natural and cultural assets supporting quality of life and tourism is recognised.

Landscape and Lake Amenities Policy Objectives	
It is a policy of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 13.1	Support the implementation of the National Landscape Strategy.
CPO 13.2	Protect the distinctiveness, value and sensitivity of County Westmeath’s landscapes and lakelands by recognising their capacity to sustainably integrate development.
CPO 13.3	Support and implement objectives contained in any Regional Landscape Character Assessment.
CPO 13.4	Conserve and enhance the high nature conservation value of the Landscape Character Areas in order to create/protect ecologically resilient and varied landscapes.
CPO 13.5	Identify and integrate new green and blue infrastructure networks within the existing landscape character areas in the interests of biodiversity and climate change and in recognition of the tourism potential of these assets.
CPO 13.6	Require that development is sensitively designed, so as to minimise its visual impact on the landscape, nature conservation, archaeology and groundwater quality.

### 13.7 Character Area 1 Northern Hills and Lakes

This Landscape Character Area consists of prominent hills topped with chert or cherty limestone with enclosed lakes and areas of peat deposits, mostly fen. A rural landscape of particularly high scenic quality containing a number of lakes with several preserved views, Lough Lene Area of High Amenity and Fore Special Heritage Area.

The area is also of high nature conservation value with many NHAs and SACs and there is an extensive beech plantation at Mullaghmeen. Dispersed glacial deposits occur and there are a number of quarries operating in the area.

Settlements within this landscape area include Finnea, Castlepollard, Collinstown and Drumcree. The historic settlement of Fore is of high cultural significance due to its monastic origins including many features of built and cultural interest around the site.

### 13.8 Character Area 2 Inny River Lowlands

The Inny River Lowlands cover the low-lying ground around the Inny River from Finnea to Ballynacarrigy and the Royal Canal including pastoral landscapes, extensive areas of cutaway bog, industrial peat production and conifer plantations. This area also includes the N4 corridor and wetland areas of nature conservation interest such as Glen Lough, Lough Iron, Lough Garr and Garriskil Bog. The area contains some preserved views including a panoramic view of the countryside looking northwest from the N4 near Bunbrosna, panoramic views of Lough Iron and the surrounding countryside at Balrath and views of Glen Lough.

Settlements within this area include Lismacaffrey, Streete, Coole, Rathowen and Ballinalack. The area between Lough Iron and Ballynacarrigy is of historical significance with the presence of Tristernagh Abbey dating from the twelfth century and in Kilbixy the remains of a deserted medieval settlement include a ruinous castle and a Leper hospital, dating from the medieval period. The present church dates from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A number of fine historic houses and demesnes also occur in this area.

Given the rich archaeological and cultural heritage within this area, considerable potential exists to capitalise upon this asset and develop the River Inny basin as a nature conservation and biodiversity area. This would involve exploring the potential of developing a blueway along the River Inny.

### 13.9 Character Area 3 River Deel and Lowlands

The River Deel, the Stonyford River and their hinterlands form this landscape character area typified by low-lying pasture punctuated with small lakes which are flanked by scrub and wet woodland. These rivers form part of the River Boyne and Blackwater SAC complex. The area east of Delvin and running south along the Meath Border is characterised by cutover, cutaway bogs and small tracts of intact bog.

Settlements within this area include Clonmellon, Delvin, Killucan-Rathwire and Raharney which

are located within the eastern commuter belt to Dublin. This part of the county has a strong historic landscape component with several demesne landscapes occurring within the area. Two main road corridors the N51 and N52 traverse the area. A number of quarries are also operational in the area.

### **13.10 Character Area 4 Central Hills and Lakes**

The Central Hills and Lakes Character Area is located to the north of the centre of the county. This area is typified by undulating hills and lakes, the most prominent of which are Lough Derravaragh and Lough Owel. These lakes are designated Areas of High Amenity, SAC and SPA. A number of fens occur throughout the area, the most notable being Scragh Bog which is of international importance. The high scenic quality and amenity value of this area is reflected by the high number of preserved views. There are a number of demesne landscapes in the area and associated valuable areas of semi-natural woodland, including oak on some upland areas, such as around Lough Derravaragh at Knockeyon and Crookedwood.

This area has a number of small settlements such as Crookedwood, Multyfarnham and the larger settlement of Castlepollard. The Character Area reflects the historic landscape from Bronze Age Sites on Lough Derravaragh and Frewin Hill at Lough Owel to the monastic associations of Portloman Abbey and the Franciscan Friary at Multyfarnham. The lake edges are attractive locations for recreation and amenity.

### **13.11 Character Area 5 Royal Canal Corridor**

The Royal Canal has been a historic feature of the Westmeath landscape since the early 1800's, flowing east to west through the county and is an important amenity feature. The canal flows through low-lying areas with the surrounding corridor typified by grassland, peatland and some areas of conifer plantation. The canal corridor is largely rural in nature, apart from the urban centre of Mullingar. To the west of Mullingar, the canal traverses a rural landscape of high scenic quality with undulating landform and a mature vegetation cover of hedgerows and trees. Some large conifer plantations border the canal towpath and dominate the visual corridor where present. The canal corridor includes features of vernacular architecture and industrial heritage such as stone bridges, lock keeper's cottages, lock gates and milestones which enhance the waterway. Westmeath County Council in cooperation with Waterways Ireland and funding from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport have developed a 47.6km length of the Royal Canal towpath as a walking and cycling route which extends to the County boundaries of Meath and Longford.

### **13.12 Character Area 6 Lough Ree/Shannon Corridor**

This area includes Lough Ree, the Shannon corridor both north and south of Athlone and associated callows. To the east of the area, Waterstown Lake, Lough Mareegan and the lakeside

villages of Ballykeeran, Glasson and Tubberclare are also included. Areas of pastureland are scattered throughout the remainder of the area along with small patches of inland marshes, coniferous forestry and other agricultural uses. A significant area of intact bog remains to the southeast of Athlone and worked out peatland areas are located to the north and south of the Character Area, adjacent to the callows and Lough Ree.

The area has significant conservation status, as SPA, SAC and NHA are all present therein. The Shannon and Lough Ree are important in terms of their recreational and amenity value, as well as their natural heritage importance, thus the quality of these assets must be protected. As development pressure increases around the lakeshore and floodplain, the risk of landscape deterioration also increases.

### **13.13 Character Area 7 Western Lowlands**

The character of this area contains a variety of landscape features including eskers, lakes and bogs. This landscape is generally low-lying but is characterised by a gently undulating topography, particularly around Mount Temple and to the northwest of Moate. Visual containment in the landscape is created by elevated areas and glacial kames, irregular ridges or mounds of gravel deposited by melting glaciers feature at intervals. Low-lying areas, however, are generally contained visually due to high quality, species rich hedges that dominate field boundaries in the area, limiting the extent of views across the landscape. This area includes the settlements of Moyvore, Ballymore, Mount Temple, Moate and Ballinahown and is bounded to the east by the change in topography that characterises the South-Central Hills Character Area at Ballymore and west of Rosemount.

### **13.14 Character Area 8 South Central Hills**

This Character Area includes the hilly pasture land that exists to the east of Ballymore, stretching almost as far as Lough Ennell, north as far as the Royal Canal Corridor and is bounded to the south by an area predominantly characterised by esker systems. The area is typified by smooth, gentle hills and undulating pastures, with occasional northwest, south-east ridges. The highest point within this area is 200 metres, which is at Knockastia, Coolatore, a volcanic outcrop just south of the Hill of Uisneach, which also has the steepest slopes in the Landscape Character area. This hilltop allows panoramic views across neighbouring counties and the approach to the hill, particularly from the Ballymore Road offers impressive opportunities to appreciate its scale. The Character Area also includes part of a system of eskers at Streamstown, which are displayed though a series of low ridges traversing the landscape in a northerly direction, resulting in a rural feel to these local roads as the land rises on either side. The area contains a number of small villages and clustered settlements but has remained quite rural in nature.

### 13.15 Character Area 9 Hill of Uisneach

The Hill of Uisneach, a nationally significant archaeological landscape, is located 14.5 Kilometres west of Mullingar, north of the Mullingar to Ballymore Road. It has a central place, historically, geographically and metaphorically in the annals of Ireland and is internationally considered to be an important cultural landscape.

The Character Area includes the area surrounding the hill, from Killare and south to include the cultural landscape of features including the deserted 'famine village' and also incorporating a number of recorded monuments and the zone of archaeological potential around Uisneach. The land in the vicinity is in agricultural use and land cover on, and surrounding the Hill is predominantly that of pastureland with species rich hedges acting as field boundaries.

Traditionally Uisneach was the epicentre of Ireland where the five provinces met and legend has it that Ireland was divided from this point in ancient times. The large stone on the side of the hill is known as The Stone of Divisions or 'Ail na Mireann'. This stone is said to be at the exact centre of Ireland and the boundary lines of the provinces were said to meet here.

In recognition of the exceptional archaeological and cultural significance of the Hill of Uisneach, the site has been designated as a High Amenity Area. The elevation of the Hill of Uisneach confers both panoramic views, as well as visual prominence, which ensures that the site and its immediate context is very sensitive to adverse visual impacts. The Council recognise the significance and sensitivity of the Hill of Uisneach and given that the site is listed on the tentative list for UNESCO status since 2010, further protection has been afforded to the site by designating the area as a High Amenity Area with views from the perimeter skyline ridge identified as a Protected Panoramic View. Figure 13.2 below indicates the protected panoramic view indicated by the red dash line and arrows.

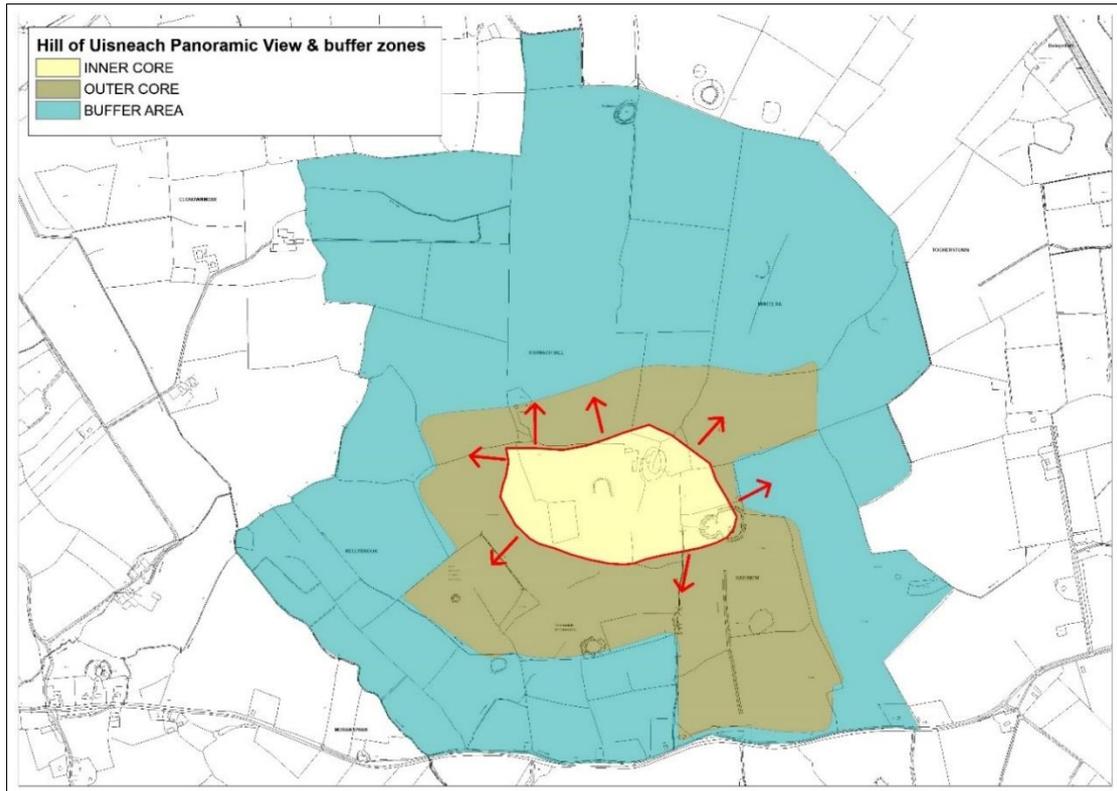


Figure 13.2 Hill of Uisneach panoramic view and visual buffer zones.

The extent of the High Amenity Area at the Hill of Uisneach is highlighted in turquoise above and contains Core and Buffer Areas with associated protective policies. From a landscape perspective, core and buffer areas are identified as locations where any development is likely to significantly alter the appearance and context of monuments [Core] and areas where developments should be carefully scrutinised to anticipate and avoid significant changes to landscape context of the monuments or to the inter-relationship between the core area and relevant monuments in the surrounding landscape.

- An Inner Core High Amenity Area [yellow shaded area] that comprises the interior of the hilltop plateau that is visually isolated from the surrounding countryside.
- An Outer Core High Amenity Area [olive shaded area] that contains the majority of monuments can be readily identified by observing the field boundaries that enclose areas above the 160m contour.
- A High Amenity Buffer Area [turquoise shaded area] can be identified within the adjoining townland boundaries as follows:
  - Ushnagh Hill
  - Mweelra
  - Rathnew
  - Kellybrook

See Section 14.5 in relation to the Hill of Uisneach and the UNESCO bid.

### 13.16 Character Area 10 Lough Ennell and South East Corridor

This Character Area comprises pasture land of mixed productivity. Lough Ennell is situated to the western side of this Landscape Character Area (LCA) and is designated as an Area of High Amenity, SPA and SAC. A number of preserved views are listed from the R446 between Tyrrellspass and Rochfortbridge. The area around Lough Ennell and particularly to the south of the lake is characterised by scrub land with a mixture of marsh, bog and poor pasture land. There is also a large tract of bog to the east of Rochfortbridge and Milltownpass along the county boundary. The bog areas in this LCA are mainly exploited but some have been left intact. This area has a large number of old demesnes, which are easily recognisable in the landscape with the existence of fine mature hardwood trees and estate walls in some cases.

Settlements within this landscape have developed mainly along the main road network. These include Kinnefad, Milltownpass, Rochfortbridge, and Tyrrellspass along the former N6. Recreational areas have been developed on the shores of Lough Ennell including Ladestown, Lilliput and Tudenham. The M6 traverses the southern part of the LCA. The N52 By-Pass has also added to the transport corridor around Mullingar.

### 13.17 Character Area 11 South Westmeath Eskers

This landscape type occupies the southernmost area of the County and is distinguished by the prevalence of esker ridges. The area extends from Castletown-Geoghegan to Ballinagore, Rahugh and Horseleap. The area is bisected by the former N6 and the M6. Apart from the N6/M6 and the Ballinagore - Kilbeggan road, the area is traversed by a network of tertiary roads which in places run parallel to the esker ridges and create an enclosed and intimate landscape. See Section 12.13 in relation to policy context for geological sites.

Specific objectives in relation to the Landscape Character Assessment are set out hereunder.

<b>Landscape Character Assessment Policy Objectives</b>	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 13.7	Protect the landscapes and natural environments of the County by ensuring that any new developments do not detrimentally impact on the character, integrity, distinctiveness or scenic value of their area. Any development which could unduly impact upon such landscapes will not be permitted.
CPO 13.8	Ensure the preservation of the uniqueness of a landscape character type by having regard to the character, value and sensitivity of a landscape in new development proposals.
CPO 13.9	Ensure development reflects and, where possible, reinforces the distinctiveness and sense of place of the landscape character types, including the retention of important features or characteristics, taking into account the various elements which contribute to their distinctiveness.

CPO 13.10	Explore the potential for natural resource tourism, such as fishing, boating, walking, cycling, nature trails, natural and cultural resource tourism etc., in conjunction with relevant tourism bodies such as Waterways Ireland, Fáilte Ireland, Community Development Agencies and the National Parks and Wildlife Service.
CPO 13.11	Require a Visual Impact Assessment for proposed developments with the potential to impact on significant landscape features within the County.
CPO 13.12	Landscape Character Area 1: Consider the provision of walkways around Lough Lene, subject to impacts on biodiversity being fully addressed and subject to screening for Appropriate Assessment.
CPO 13.13	Landscape Character Area 2: Explore the potential for funding to examine the feasibility of developing the River Inny basin as a biodiversity heritage area.
CPO 13.14	Landscape Character Area 5: Continue to work with Waterways Ireland to enhance and protect the visual corridor of the Royal Canal, by incorporating a visual buffer zone on each side of the bank of the canal.
CPO 13.15	Landscape Character Area 6: Explore the feasibility of promoting Lough Ree and its islands as a model for a living Biodiversity Reserve.
CPO 13.16	Minimise impact on the ecological, archaeological, biodiversity and visual amenity surrounding quarry sites and quarrying of sensitive sites within the Landscape Character Areas including the lake valley landscape, eskers and canal corridor.
CPO 13.17	Protect and enhance the setting of the Hill of Uisneach and support increased public access to the site. Only sensitive development that does not undermine the archaeological and cultural significance of the site will be permitted.
CPO 13.18	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Protect and sustain the established appearance and character of views associated with the High Amenity Area around the Hill of Uisneach.</li> <li>b. Require any development proposals within the High Amenity Area around the Hill of Uisneach to demonstrate that no adverse effects will occur on the established appearance or character of this feature as viewed from either the Protected Panoramic Views or from surrounding public roads.</li> </ol>

### 13.18 Areas of High Amenity (High Landscape Value)

Much of Westmeath's landscape, particularly its lake landscape is highly regarded for its amenity and recreational value and should be protected. In recognition of this, the Council have specifically designated the following lakes as Areas of High Amenity (HAA):-

- Lough Ree High Amenity Area
- Lough Lene High Amenity Area
- Lough Owel High Amenity Area
- Lough Ennell High Amenity Area
- Lough Derravaragh High Amenity Area

The high amenity areas are mapped in Map 42 in Volume 2. Policies in relation to the provision

of housing in High Amenity Areas is contained in Chapter 9. The Hill of Uisneach is also a designated High Amenity Area in recognition of its archaeological and cultural significance. Policies pertaining to the Hill of Uisneach HAA are contained in CPOs 13.17 and 13.18 above.

<b>High Amenity Areas Policy Objectives</b>	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 13.19	Protect High Amenity areas from inappropriate development and reinforce their character, distinctiveness and sense of place.
CPO 13.20	Protect and preserve designated High Amenity Areas from inappropriate urban generated housing development or any other development which would be injurious to or detract from the natural amenity of Areas of High Amenity.
CPO 13.21	Protect lakeshores from any inappropriate development which would detract from the natural amenity of the area.
CPO 13.22	Protect and enhance the special landscape character and exceptional landscape value of the Lough Ree Islands, including their significant archaeological, cultural and natural heritage value. Support the preparation for a Plan for the Islands in conjunction with the National Monuments Service and the National Parks and Wildlife Service.
CPO 13.23	Cooperate with adjoining Local Authorities in the preparation of Habitat Management Plans to guide future development in relation to Lough Ree and Lough Sheelin Areas of High Amenity.
CPO 13.24	Promote, in association with Fáilte Ireland, the sustainable tourism potential of Areas of High Amenity centered around the Lakelands.
CPO 13.25	Protect existing public rights of way in Areas of High Amenity.
CPO 13.26	Cooperate with Coillte, Bord na Mona, Waterways Ireland and other state agencies in establishing access ways, nature trails, etc. with a view to opening up state lands for recreational use.
CPO 13.27	Maintain existing navigation channels within Areas of High Amenity for the benefit of recreation and amenity related uses.

### 13.19 Lake Amenities

Westmeath is uniquely positioned given its majestic lakes, the River Shannon and the Royal Canal. Internationally renowned as the 'Lake County' the lakes of Westmeath are of local, national and international status and are a significant asset and resource to the county. The unprecedented growth in population and development in the last two decades in the county has placed a significant pressure on the environmental and landscape quality of the lakes.

The five most important lakes in Westmeath are Lough Ennell, Lough Owel, Lough Derravaragh, Lough Lene and Lough Ree. All of the identified lakes are within designated High Amenity Areas, Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas and Natural Heritage Areas.

Lough Ree is one of the largest lakes in Ireland and is shared between Westmeath and neighbouring counties Roscommon and Longford. Lough Owel and Lough Lene have a particularly important function as public water supply sources. Most of Westmeath's lakes are contained within the Shannon River catchment whilst Lough Lene is within the Boyne catchment.

Implementation of the lake policies listed below shall comply with the requirements of the Habitats and Birds Directives.

<b>Lake Amenities Policy Objectives</b>	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 13.28	Protect the County's lakes and their shorelines, islands, amenity and biodiversity from inappropriate development.
CPO 13.29	Protect the scenic quality of lakes from any inappropriate development between public roads and lakeshores that would interrupt a view of the lake or adversely affect its setting or its wildlife habitat. Any development in such instance must be sensitively sited and designed and screened from the lake by existing topography or vegetation.
CPO 13.30	Improve access to the lakes and around the lakeshore and increase public accessibility, subject to ecological sensitivities and constraints being addressed.
CPO 13.31	Continue to develop, in consultation with the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), the Westmeath Way to include the lakes of the County. Any proposed route in the vicinity of the White Lake will be subject to prior agreement with the NPWS and in connection with Irish Trails.
CPO 13.32	Continue to develop a connected network of greenways to the principal lakes in the County and their respective lakeshores subject to ecological sensitivities and constraints being addressed.
CPO 13.33	Continue to advance a network of navigable blueways within the County subject to ecological assessment.

### 13.20 Lough Ree

Lough Ree is the second largest lake in the River Shannon System after Lough Derg. It forms part of the Shannon Navigation System within Athlone, the most important settlement and service centre on the Shannon system in the region. Lough Ree has long been recognised as a national treasure in terms of its habitat, archaeology and water-based recreation. The sheer scale of the body of water, the historical associations with its islands, the complexity of the indented and diffuse shoreline and the spatial arrangement of the more hidden inner lakes give this lake uniqueness.

The surrounding lands are composed of a matrix of wetlands, peatlands, undulating farmland, sporadic single house developments interspersed with pockets of extractive development and other small local enterprises. Lough Ree also extends into the Counties of Roscommon and

Longford. The County Westmeath part of Lough Ree can be characterised into four broadly identifiable areas:

**i. The Urban Fringe Area.**

This consists of an area of land extending from just outside the urban boundaries of Athlone. Particularly strong development pressures are a feature of this area.

**ii. The Inner Lake Area (Killinure Lough)**

Killinure Lough is a smaller water body connected to Lough Ree through a narrow strait between Killinure and Coosan points. The villages of Glasson and Ballykeeran are located within this inner lake along with some established recreational facilities.

**iii. The Area North of Killinure**

This area comprises mainly of hedgerow enclosed farmlands gradually rising from floodplains, marshlands and undulating gently into the distance. The area still retains a predominantly rural character.

**iv. The Islands**

The character and visual value of the lake's amenity is considerably embellished and enhanced by islands contained within the waterbody. The islands are generally well covered by trees and wood and have a long history of habitation, which is evident from their archaeological remains.

Lough Ree is of great significance in terms of tourism and recreation both nationally and internationally. Further built development should aim to consolidate and manage what is already in place with the enhancement of access, lakeside walkways, and the upgrading of existing infrastructure a priority. Water quality should not be further deteriorated, and the bulk of tourism related growth should be directed to Athlone. The Inner Lough's are considered to be particularly vulnerable in terms of water quality due to a slower turnover.

Given the significance and sensitivity of Lough Ree together with the existing number of Protected Views around the lake, the Council has designated a scenic driving route along Lough Ree, see Volume 2 for map of scenic route. It is Council policy to sustain the views of Lough Ree from the scenic route.

The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht acknowledge the importance of Lough Ree as a wetland area and accordingly are working with Westmeath County Council in tandem with Roscommon and Longford Local Authorities, Waterways Ireland, Coillte, Bord na Mona, OPW and Failte Ireland, to establish a UNESCO Biosphere Nature Reserve centred on Lough Ree, Athlone and Lough Key. Biosphere Reserves are areas which are internationally recognised for their biological diversity yet also actively managed to promote a positive relationship between people and nature.

**A UNESCO Biosphere has three functions:**

1. Development: fostering a sustainable economy and society for communities, people living and

working in the area (Agri-tourism and eco-tourism concept).

2. Conservation: protecting and enhancing existing biodiversity and cultural diversity and integrating them into tourism development branding and principles throughout the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.
3. Learning: facilitating education, training and research to support conservation and sustainable development.

The biosphere designation does not add or detract from the regulatory framework already in place for the lakes but is designed to assist stakeholders in finding sustainable solutions to the management of Lough Ree and Lough Key.

Such a designation would ensure a collaborative approach between all stakeholders and communities to the sustainable development, socio-economic enhanced tourism related amenities around the environs of Lough Ree and Lough Key and thus is strongly supported by the Council. The following objectives are set out in association with Lough Ree, subject to satisfaction of the requirements of the Habitat and EIA Directives.

<b>Lough Ree Policy Objectives</b>	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 13.34	Promote and support the designation of Lough Ree and Lough Key as an UNESCO Biosphere Nature Reserve.
CPO 13.35	Maintain and preserve the aesthetic value of the main lake (Lough Ree) and its shoreline from the impacts of inappropriate dispersed, highly visible development.
CPO 13.36	Consolidate and improve the existing recreational and sustainable tourism service role of the inner lakes in the Killinure Lough area, consistent with Habitat Management Plans for the area.
CPO 13.37	Promote the rural landscape northwards of Hare Island, Rinardoo Bay and Portlick for more passive amenity and recreational cycle/walking routes.
CPO 13.38	Protect the shoreline of Lough Ree from the proliferation of unregulated private jetties and similarly haphazard development.
CPO 13.39	Support the preparation of a sustainable tourism plan for existing and future tourist and recreational facilities at Lough Ree and Killinure Lough.
CPO 13.40	Explore options for a lakeside walkway from Meehan Point to Coosan Point, incorporating local features such as Bog Lough.
CPO 13.41	Improve non-car dependent accessibility to the lake and encourage access for sustainable modes of transport by supporting and facilitating walking and cycling trails to the lake.

CPO 13.42	Consolidate the existing facilities at Killinure Marina and Glasson Golf Course, consistent with Habitat Management Plans for the lake area.
CPO 13.43	Examine the possibility for a recreational link from Killinure to Portlick, consistent with Habitat Management Plans for these lake areas.
CPO 13.44	Improve the amenity area at Portlick, consistent with Habitat Management Plans for the lake areas and accessibility at Killeenmore, together with incorporating passing bays and viewing points along the Slí tour route, where feasible.
CPO 13.45	Support the preparation of a Heritage Management Plan for Lough Ree including the islands, in cooperation with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, National Monuments Service, the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and landowners.
CPO 13.46	Prepare a Habitat Management Plan for lands in Council ownership at or close to Lough Ree and improve access to the lake, in consultation with the National Parks Wildlife Service and the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.
CPO 13.47	Prepare a Village Design Statement for Ballykeeran, in consideration of its lakeside setting.
CPO 13.48	Investigate the potential of developing a greenway from Athlone along Lough Ree to the Longford County border, consistent with a Habitat Management Plan for Lough Ree.
CPO 13.49	Protect and sustain the established appearance and character of views over Killinure Lake and Lough Ree and beyond.
CPO 13.50	Support the provision and maintenance of facilities, including safe pedestrian access and/or car parking, and, where appropriate, associated seats and signs in the immediate vicinity of the amenity area at Portlick, Killeenmore and along the Slí tour route.
CPO 13.51	Ensure that development and activities that are immediately adjacent to the Lough Ree driving route, sustain the established appearance and character of views that contribute to the distinctive quality of the landscape.
CPO 13.52	Ensure that development proposals avoid significant adverse effects in the foreground of views from the Lough Ree Driving Route.
CPO 13.53	Sustain the established appearance and character of views over the surrounding countryside while facilitating the continued development of uses that sustain the activities that give rise to the appearance and character of the landscape.

### 13.21 Lough Owel

Lough Owel is particularly important as it is the main source of water supply for Mullingar and beyond. The landscape surrounding the lake is the first glimpse of lakeside scenery for many visitors on their arrival into Westmeath. The lake itself is a noted angling resource and boating, angling, swimming and scuba diving are common recreational uses on Lough Owel with some related onshore facilities.

Recreational provision can be enhanced on the lake in a sustainable and sympathetic manner, by building on what is already in existence and in line with specific objectives. Accessibility may need to be improved in certain locations, whilst recreational development should be consolidated around the existing facilities on the south eastern side of the lake.

The Council has recently developed a greenway along the Feeder Canal between Mullingar to Lough Owel, and further potential exists in relation to enhancing connectivity to this greenway.

<b>Lough Owel Policy Objectives</b>	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 13.54	Enhance and link the Westmeath Way through Mullingar via the Royal Canal Feeder and further along the waterside via Tullaghan and to the north eastern side of Lough Owel, consistent with Habitat Management Plan objectives for the lake.
CPO 13.55	Support the extension of existing greenway from Lough Owel to Scragh Bog, Ballinafid and Multyfarnham, subject to addressing ecological sensitivities.
CPO 13.56	Upgrade existing and incorporate the provision of new green infrastructure as part of any future infrastructural upgrades which are within proximity to Lough Owel.
CPO 13.57	Upgrade facilities at the sailing club access and at the bathing area, consistent with Habitat Management Plan objectives for the lake.
CPO 13.58	Develop a recreational route through Coillte lands at Tullaghan, in consultation with Coillte, consistent with Habitat Management Plan objectives for the lake.
CPO 13.59	Provide a small-scale access at the Portloman side of the lake. Any development at this location needs to be extremely visually sensitive.
CPO 13.60	Examine the possibility of an informal lakeside shore walk along the eastern perimeter of Lough Owel, in consultation with the National Parks and Wildlife Service and Coillte.
CPO 13.61	Explore the possibility of negotiating a recreational link from Tormey's Pub (Bunbrosna) to the lakeside and a link with Coillte lands, subject to consultation with National Parks and Wildlife Service, Coillte and landowners.
CPO 13.62	Develop Ballinafid lake and surrounding lands as an amenity facility, incorporating links through lands in the ownership of the National Parks and Wildlife Service and Coillte, consistent with Habitat Management Plan objectives for the Lough Owel lake area. The feasibility of providing a recreational link to lands on the western side of the rail line will also be investigated.
CPO 13.63	Support the conversion of the Waterways Ireland sluice building at Lough Owel and develop the adjacent area for the provision of tourism activities associated with the lake, capitalising on its direct access to Mullingar by greenway and scenic location, subject to the protection of environmentally sensitive areas, the protection and conservation of protected structures and the requirements of the Habitats Directive.

CPO 13.64	Establish a viewing point at Frewin Hill overlooking Lough Owel.
CPO 13.65	Sustain the established appearance and character of views from the N4 to the lake and upgrade the viewing point and bathing area accessed off the N4.

### 13.22 Lough Ennell

Lough Ennell along with Lough Owel is one of the closest lakes to Mullingar. Lough Ennell is well established in terms of recreational development and is a particularly important angling resource. There is a significant range of recreational infrastructure in place including Belvedere House, Park and Gardens, caravan and camping facilities and the Lilliput Adventure Centre with potential to be further consolidated and linked via recreational greenways.

It is Council policy to connect Mullingar to Belvedere and Lough Ennell. Belvedere House and Gardens typically attract c.160,000 visitors per annum and has c.2,280 members. Currently access to this attraction is typically by car, therefore, the provision of a Greenway from Mullingar town would boost visitor numbers and would provide an invaluable amenity for residents and tourists alike.

Given the ecological sensitivity of Lough Ennell, the Council has commissioned a habitat management plan for Council owned lands at Belvedere, Tudenham, Ladestown, Butler's Bridge and Lilliput, which will form the foundation for enhancing the amenity value of Lough Ennell.

<b>Lough Ennell Policy Objectives</b>	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 13.66	Support the development of a greenway from Mullingar to Belvedere and Lough Ennell in accordance with Habitat Management Plan objectives for the lake.
CPO 13.67	Support the implementation of the Habitat Management Plan prepared for Council owned lands at Belvedere, Ladestown, Lilliput.
CPO 13.68	Prepare and implement a Lough Ennell Interpretive Plan to develop a consistent brand and messaging about the Lough and its wildlife, including the identification of a viewing hide for wildlife.
CPO 13.69	Support the preparation and implementation of a visitor management destination plan for Lilliput Adventure Centre taking account of the existing Habitat Management Plan prepared for Lough Ennell.
CPO 13.70	Continue to enhance use of the Lilliput Amenity Area and Adventure Centre, providing activities accessible to general visitors in addition to pre-booked groups, subject to the requirements of the Habitats Directive and the protection of sensitive environments.
CPO 13.71	Sustain the established appearance and character of views of Lough Ennell from the N52, Butler's Bridge and La Mancha.

### 13.23 Lough Derravaragh

Lough Derravaragh provides one of the enduring images of County Westmeath. It has associations with the Legend of Lír where four children were banished as swans for 300 years to Derravaragh. The lake is located on the identified Táin Trail (tourist driving/cycling route) and along the proposed northern sector of the Westmeath Way (walking route) and is scenically important. Development around this lake should be strictly controlled. Leisure activities associated with the lake include fishing, canoeing and water sports. There are more passive recreational areas, which are important as more reclusive retreats for writers, artists and walkers.

The landscape around the lake has not been subject to undue development pressures and in general retains its rural character. A habitat management plan has been prepared for Council owned lands extending to 2.3ha at Coolure to the northwest of Lough Derravaragh. The plan seeks to maintain the site as a biodiversity conservation area by establishing appropriate habitat management and by increasing local appreciation of the biodiversity value of the site while also maintaining public access.

<b>Lough Derravaragh Policy Objectives</b>	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 13.72	Develop the cultural and recreational aspects of the Children of Lír Legend as a tourist attraction for the area.
CPO 13.73	Enhance the amenity facilities and public access areas to Lough Derravaragh and improve the access point at Faughalstown, consistent with Habitat Management Plan objectives for the area.
CPO 13.74	Support the implementation of actions contained in the Coolure Habitat Management Plan.
CPO 13.75	Sustain the established appearance and character of views of Lough Derravaragh from the adjacent road network.

### 13.24 Lough Lene

Lough Lene is located in the highly scenic northern section of the County in an undulating hilly landscape that typifies this area and is designated as a Special Area of Conservation. Its associations with the nearby historic monastic settlement of Fore and location on an existing tourist trail require its future development to be considered sensitively. The lake is an important stop off point on the Táin Trail (tourist cycling/driving route). Lough Lene is also an important public water supply source for the County.

Recreation in the form of angling is well renowned on Lough Lene. The lake is particularly known for its clear waters. There is a bathing area and combined boat access slip way at 'The Cut' on the eastern shore of the lake, which may offer further potential for appropriate recreational

development. Lough Lene can be considered to be located in a sensitive tourist landscape with the Fore Special Heritage Area located within close proximity to the vicinity of the lake.

<b>Lough Lene Policy Objectives</b>	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 13.76	Consider the establishment of walking routes along the northern shore of the lake, to link with Harte's Rock, Fore and Coillte lands, consistent with Habitat Management Plan objectives for the area.
CPO 13.77	Develop an amenity woodland/wetland conservation area at Lough Lene, in consultation with landowners and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, subject to ecological sensitivities being addressed and consistent with Habitat Management Plan objectives for the lake.

### 13.25 Lough Sheever/ Slevins Lough

Lough Sheever is a small lake with an estimated surface area of 500 hectares to the north of Mullingar, which is popular with anglers. The lough is particularly suited to anglers with restricted mobility given the existing double wheelchair friendly fishing stand. Boat hire is available and a boardwalk fringes Lough Sheever on its northern shoreline.

Lough Sheever Fen/Slevin's Lake and Lough Drin Lake complex is a proposed Natural Heritage Area and is a valuable site for nature conservation, due to its rich diversity of habitats and the rarity of some of the floral and invertebrate species found here. The lakes and their fringing wetland areas support an outstanding diversity of species and are a haven for wildlife.

The lake complex supports a diversity of habitats, including woodlands, lake and fens and a number of rich and botanically diverse fen habitats, including areas of Cladium Fen and Alkaline Fen, both priority conservation habitats in Europe due to their rarity.

<b>Lough Slevin Policy Objectives</b>	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 13.78	Investigate the potential of developing as part of a wider green infrastructure network access from Mullingar to Lough Sheever to Lough Owel.
CPO 13.79	Continue to promote the amenity value of Lough Sheever.

### 13.26 Views and Prospects

The Council has undertaken a review of Protected Views within the County. Appendix 5 lists 35 Protected Views in the County, which are categorised according to their significance, at a regional, county and local level. Each view is accompanied by a photograph and description for ease of reference. It is Council policy to sustain the established character of existing views and protect against development that would adversely impact upon such views. Given the archaeological significance of the Hill of Uisneach, a panoramic view has been designated at this

site. In addition, a policy has been added to protect views from the existing looped walking route at Fore Abbey. A number of different and distinctive types of scenic routes categorised as both road based and off road have been identified as follows: -

- Lough Ree Driving Route
- Mullingar Cycling Hub
- The Táin Trail
- Old Rail Trail/ Greenway
- Royal Canal Way
- Fore Walking Routes
- Westmeath Way

Protected views are under constant review and as such the list of views is not exhaustive. Additional views may be identified through the development management process, the preparation of local area plans or by way of other policy documents.

Pre-planning discussions with the Planning Authority are essential to agree suitable assessment points for views of strategic and local significance in order to enable the proper visual assessment of a development proposal.

Planning policy objectives will ensure the future protection of these views and amenity designations for existing lakes, designated scenic routes (both road and off-road routes) and the heritage areas of the Hill of Uisneach and Fore Special Heritage Area.

<b>Protected Views Policy Objectives</b>	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 13.80	Protect and sustain the established appearance and character of views listed in Appendix 5 of this plan that contribute to the distinctive quality of the landscape from inappropriate development.
CPO 13.81	Provide and maintain facilities, including safe pedestrian access and/or car parking, and where appropriate, associated seats and signs in the immediate vicinity of views that are identified in this plan
CPO 13.82	Support the restoration of derelict sites and removal of derelict structures adjacent to scenic and tourist routes, using mechanisms such as the Derelict Sites Act 1990.



**WESTMEATH COUNTY COUNCIL**  
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