Inspector's Report ABP-322958-25

Development	Link road, expansion of bus depot, culverting of drain, revised roads access, active travel upgrades and associated development
Location	Bus Éireann Depot, The Crescent Junction and Coosan Point Road / Southern Station Road, Athlone, County Westmeath
Local Authority	Westmeath County Council
Type of Application	Application for approval made under Section 177AE of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended
Prescribed Bodies	Uisce Éireann Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage
Observers	Anne Hanley Barry Flannery Eileen Gallagher Joseph Gallagher Louise Heavin

	Noreen Flannery
	Thomas and Anne Curley
	Tim Curley
	Tony and Elizabeth Lillis
	Turlough McCormack
Date of Site Inspection	25th November 2025
Inspector	Colm McLoughlin

Contents

1.0 Introduction

1.1. Under the provisions of Section 177AE of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (hereinafter 'the Act of 2000'), Westmeath County Council has made an application to An Coimisiún Pleanála (ACP) for a Local Authority development comprising the construction of a link road generally consisting of lands within a Bus Éireann depot situated between Ballymahon Road (R915 regional road) and Coosan Point Road in Athlone, County Westmeath. The Local Authority has determined that the proposed development would be likely to have significant effects on the integrity of three European Sites in view of their conservation objectives, and, accordingly, an Appropriate Assessment (AA) of the development would be required.

1.2. Under the provisions set out in section 177AE(2) of the Act of 2000, should a proposed development require an AA it shall not be carried out unless the Commission has approved it, with or without modifications. Furthermore, section 177V of the Act of 2000 requires a determination by the Commission as to whether or not the proposed development would adversely affect the integrity of a European Site and an AA shall be carried out by the Commission before consent is given for the proposed development.

1.3. Westmeath County Council state that they have an agreement in principle with Córas Iompair Éireann (CIÉ) Group, to acquire lands in their ownership that form part of the subject site.

2.0 Site Location

2.1. The application site comprises the Bus Éireann Athlone depot, as well as areas currently accommodating roads infrastructure and adjoining verge areas on the northern side of Athlone town centre, including Southern Station Road, a section of Coosan Point Road and roads approaching The Crescent junction (R915 regional road). The application site area is stated to amount to 3.6ha.

2.2. The current access to the bus depot is from Southern Station Road to a hard surfaced yard area featuring maintenance and administrative buildings. The western half of the depot lands are undeveloped, with unmaintained vegetation dominating this area and drainage channels meandering through this green space. Southern

Station Road comprises two traffic lanes with adjoining footpaths on both sides and signal-controlled traffic lights at The Crescent and Coosan Point Road junctions.

2.3. Athlone railway and bus station is situated on elevated ground forming the northern backdrop to the subject lands. To the west of the site is a medical complex, including St. Vincent's Care Centre, with accesses off Coosan Point Road and Northgate Street. A mature residential area dominates the lands to the immediate south of the site, including detached housing along two cul de sacs off Northgate Street known as The Manse and rows of terraced housing along St. Francis' Terrace. A rear service lane separates housing along St. Francis' Terrace from the bus depot lands.

3.0 Proposed Development

3.1. The proposed development would comprise the following:

- construction of a link road measuring approximately 350m in length across bus depot lands situated between Coosan Point Road / Northgate Street and Ballymahon Road (R915 regional road), primarily featuring two-way vehicular traffic lanes expanding to between four and five traffic lanes at the tie ins;
- provision of a two-way cycle lane and footpaths parallel with the southern side of the link road;
- provision of a bus gate Southern Station Road between Coosan Point Road and the exit to the railway / bus station car park;
- provision of a two-way cycle lane replacing the footpath running along the northern side of Southern Station Road west of the railway / bus station;
- upgrading of the footpath along the southern side of Southern Station Road between Coosan Point Road and the railway / bus station car park;
- replacement of the footpath along the south side of Southern Station Road; between the railway / bus station and Ballymahon Road with a shared cycle / pedestrian path;
- construction of a cycle shelter adjacent to the south of the bus depot entrance on Southern Station Road;

- culverting of drainage channels to the west of the site to facilitate an extended hard surface yard to the bus depot, providing for a minimum of 44 bus parking spaces and relocation of a tyre storage building;
- formation of a wetland area at the junction of the proposed link road and the western end of Southern Station Road;
- boundary treatments, including walls of varying heights along the link road and repaired walls along the southside of Southern Station Road;
- revisions to traffic lanes, including right-turning lane onto Southern Station Road from The Crescent and right-turning lane from Southern Station Road onto The Crescent, and the removal of left-turning lane and traffic island at The Crescent junction;
- connections and extensions to existing foul and storm water sewer networks, as well as attenuation measures / stormwater storage infrastructures;
- all ancillary works including signage, lighting, hard and soft landscaping.

3.2. In addition to the standard contents, the application was accompanied by various technical reports with appendices and drawings, including the following:

- Planning Report;
- Natura Impact Statement;
- Environmental Impact Assessment Screening Report;
- Ecological Impact Assessment;
- Stage 1 / 2 Combined Road Safety Audit Report;
- Quality Audit Report;
- Preliminary Construction Environmental Management Plan;
- Drainage Design Report (July 2025);
- Outline Surface Water Management Plan;
- Lighting Design Report.

3.3. As part of a response to a request for further information, the following reports were also submitted with the application:

- Drainage Design Report (March 2026);
- Site Specific Flood Risk Assessment;
- Cultural Heritage Impact Assessment;
- Archaeological Monitoring.

4.0 Planning History

4.1. Application Site

4.1.1. The applicant states that the initial phase 1 section of the link road project, which the subject proposals would connect into along the eastern side of the site, was subject of a 'Part 8' application procedure, with permission granted by Athlone Town Council in March 2004.

4.1.2. The Westmeath County Council (WCC) planning register includes numerous applications relating to a property known as 'The Dell' along Southern Station Road, which was situated on the eastern end of the subject site and has been removed to facilitate slips roads and part of the bus depot. Housing along St. Francis' Terrace and The Manse adjoining the site has been subject of numerous minor domestic-scale development proposals. The following applications relate to the subject bus depot lands:

- WCC ref. 22/9 – permission granted by the Planning Authority in July 2022 to construct an electrical substation, electrical building and associated ductwork to facilitate the charging of electric buses;
- WCC ref. 24/28 – permission granted by the Planning Authority in October 2024 to construct a bus-wash facility, plantroom, water-storage tank and associated works.

4.2. Surrounding Sites

4.2.1. Planning applications in the immediate area surrounding the application site primarily relate to alterations to various domestic and commercial properties, as well as residential and mixed-use developments.

5.0 Legislative and Policy Context

5.1. Legislative provisions

The European Union (EU) Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC)

5.1.1. This Directive deals with the conservation of natural habitats, as well as wild fauna and flora throughout the EU. Articles 6(3) and 6(4) require an AA of the likely significant effects of a proposed development on its own and in combination with other plans and projects that may have an effect on a European Site.

European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011

5.1.2. These Regulations consolidate the European Communities (Natural Habitats) Regulations 1997 to 2005 and the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) (Control of Recreational Activities) Regulations 2010, as well as addressing transposition failures identified in judgements of the Court of Justice of the EU. Regulation 42(21) requires that where an AA has already been carried out by a 'first' public authority for the same project (under a separate code of legislation), then a 'second' public authority considering that project for AA under its own code of legislation is required to take account of the AA of the 'first' public authority.

National Nature Conservation Designations

5.1.3. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, alongside the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), are responsible for the designation of conservation sites in Ireland, which comprise Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs), with the latter two forming part of the European 'Natura 2000' network (European Sites). European Sites located in proximity to the application site are listed in table 1 below.

Table 1. Neighbouring European Sites

Site Code	Site Name	Distance	Direction
000216	River Shannon Callows SAC	0.8km	south
004096	Middle Shannon Callows SPA	0.8km	south
000440	Lough Ree SAC	1.3km	northwest
004064	Lough Ree SPA	1.3km	southeast

002337	Crosswood Bog SAC	3.8km	east
002336	Carn Park Bog SAC	6.2km	east
001625	Castlesampson Esker SAC	9.0km	west
002339	Ballynamona Bog and Corkip Lough SAC	9.3km	west
001776	Pilgrim's Road Esker SAC	10.0km	south
000580	Mongan Bog SAC	10.3km	south
004017	Mongan Bog SPA	10.5km	south

Planning and Development Acts 2000, as amended

5.1.4. As stated above, section 177AE of the Act of 2000 sets out the requirements for AA of developments proposed to be carried out by or on behalf of Local Authorities. The Act of 2000 requires the Commission to determine whether a proposed Local Authority development would or would not adversely affect the integrity of a European Site and in doing so the Commission shall consider the application NIS, any submissions or observations received, and any other information relating to the likely effects on the environment, the likely consequences for the proper planning and sustainable development of the area and the likely significant effects on a European Site. Assessments in this regard are undertaken in sections 7, 8 and 9 below.

Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Amendment Act 2021

5.1.5. This legislation requires the Commission, in so far as practicable, to perform its functions in a manner consistent with the Climate Action Plan 2024 and the Climate Action Plan 2025, the national long-term climate action strategy, the national adaptation framework, and any approved sectoral adaptation plans set out in those plans, in the furtherance of the objective of mitigating greenhouse-gas emissions and adapting to the effects of climate change in the State.

5.2. National & Regional Policy

Project Ireland 2040 - National Planning Framework

5.2.1. Project Ireland 2040 links planning and investment in Ireland through the National Planning Framework (NPF 2025) and a ten-year National Development Plan (NDP 2025). The NPF encapsulates the Government's high-level strategic plan for

shaping the future growth and development of Ireland to the year 2040. National strategic outcome (NSO) 5 of the NPF supports sustainable mobility, including reference to the provision of public transport infrastructure, the establishment of safe cycle and pedestrian routes, reallocation of road space and more effective traffic management in urban centres. NSO 7 supports creation of attractive places, with integrated transport systems and 'green' modes of movement integral to this.

Climate Action Plan 2024 and Climate Action Plan 2025

5.2.2. The Climate Action Plan 2024 is the third statutory annual update to Ireland's Climate Action Plan. The 2024 and 2025 Action Plans are prepared under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 and follow the introduction of economy-wide carbon budgets and sectoral emissions ceilings in 2022. The Climate Action Plan 2025 builds upon the 2024 Plan by refining and updating measures and actions required to deliver the carbon budgets and sectoral emissions ceilings.

Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy 2019-2031

5.2.3. The 'Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) 2019-2031' supports the implementation of Project Ireland 2040 and the economic and climate policies of the Government, by providing a long-term strategic planning and economic framework for the region. According to the RSES, Athlone is a key regional growth centre that is to be targeted for development. In supporting Roscommon and Westmeath County Councils preparing a joint Urban Area Plan for Athlone, the RSES encourages promotion of Athlone as a sustainable transport hub, with a Local Transport Plan to improve sustainable mobility in the town identified as being a key requirement of this Plan. Regional Planning Objective (RPO) 4.8 supports the regeneration of underused town centre and brownfield / infill lands.

5.3. Planning Guidelines

5.3.1. The following other planning policy and guidance documents are considered relevant to this application:

- Water Action Plan 2024 - A River Basin Management Plan for Ireland;

- Nature Based Management of Urban Rainwater and Urban Surface Water Discharges - A National Strategy (2024);
- Cycle Design Manual (2023);
- National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023-2030;
- National Sustainable Mobility Policy (2022);
- National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland (2021);
- Road Safety Strategy 2021-2030 (2021);
- Appropriate Assessment Screening for Development Management - OPR Practice Note PN01 (2021);
- Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets (DMURS) (2019);
- Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines for Planning Authorities (2011);
- The Planning System and Flood Risk Management - Guidelines for Planning Authorities, including the associated Technical Appendices (2009);
- Appropriate Assessment of Plans and Projects in Ireland - Guidance for Planning Authorities (2009);
- Framework and Principles for the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage (1999).

5.3.2. Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) also provide a range of documents featuring design standards and guidelines in the assessment of transport and infrastructural elements of projects, including 'Road Safety Audits' (2017), 'Traffic and Transport Assessment Guidelines' (2014) and the National Roads Authority 'Design Manual for Roads and Bridges' (2013).

5.4. Local Plans

Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027

5.4.1. Athlone is identified in the County Development Plan as a regional growth centre with a high level of self-sustaining employment and services. The Development Plan reaffirms objectives set out in the RSES, including the preparation of joint urban and transport plans for Athlone. Chapter 10 of the Development Plan includes policy

objectives with respect to transport and infrastructure, including policy objective CPO 10.52 aiming to safeguard the carrying capacity of regional and local roads, CPO 10.56 seeking to reduce through-traffic in town centres and CPO 10.58 promoting road safety measures. Policy objective CPO 10.62 refers to the need for traffic and transport assessments and road safety audits to accompany proposals for significant development.

5.4.2. Chapter 16 of the Development Plan sets out development standards, with policy objective CPO 16.35 outlining road safety requirements for developments, including compliance with the DMURS and the undertaking of safety assessments, audits and mobility management plans.

5.4.3. Other Development Plan policy objectives relevant to the subject proposals and site comprise CPO 10.106 requiring flood risk assessments to be carried out for any development proposals within 200m of a watercourse and at risk of flooding, CPO 14.12, which aims to ensure that archaeological excavation is carried out in accordance with best practice as outlined by the National Monuments Service (NMS) and CPOs 7.1 and 7.2 promoting quality urban design in development.

5.4.4. The terrace of properties on Garden Vale is included in the Record of Protected Structures (RPS) appended to the Development Plan under references 137 to 140 inclusive. The other closest Protected Structures to the application site are located within the railway / bus station complex to the immediate north of the site (RPS refs. 145 to 147 inclusive), Coosan Point Road single-span railway bridge (RPS ref. 144) and the former ballroom complex (RPS ref. 141) at The Crescent junction.

Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020

5.4.5. The site was situated in the area covered by Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020, a Plan that has since expired, and which was not incorporated into the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027. Within this expired Plan the Bus Éireann depot forming part of the application site was identified as a key opportunity site (6) for the town, while also being zoned for 'Commercial' development. The completion of the 'rail link road' between Coosan Road and The Crescent junction was included as a road improvement scheme in the Plan under objective O-TM19. The Town Plan identified a 'transport hub' along the rail line corridor immediately west of Coosan Point Road and a walking route traversed the application site

following Coosan Point Road, Southern Station Road and Ballymahon Road (R915 regional road), the latter of which was also recognised as an inter-city bus route.

5.4.6. An Architectural Conservation Area (ACA) for Athlone was included in the Town Plan, including the town centre streets, St. Bridget's Terrace and the aforementioned Garden Vale terrace along Ballymahon Road, however, the application site is not situated in the area that the ACA covered.

5.4.7. The western edge of the subject site along Coosan Point Road / Northgate Street junction was identified as being within a flood risk area and the expired Plan identified five important views or panoramas traversing the site, generally following roads.

Athlone Area-Based Transport Assessment 2023

5.4.8. The Athlone Area-Based Transport Assessment was undertaken to determine the transport networks and supporting measures required for Athlone to perform sustainably, in accordance with national, regional and local policies, including several of the policies referenced above. The Transport Assessment sets out key infrastructure measures and transport policies required for Athlone and its environs, which are intended to tackle constraints in transport capacity, to plan for appropriate levels of development to facilitate projected growth and to encourage sustainable mobility, while supporting climate change targets and a shift towards more sustainable transport modes.

5.4.9. The 'Athlone link road' project, connecting between Coosan Point Road and Ballymahon Road, is included in the implementation plan forming table 47 to the Transport Assessment, along with a four-arm signalised junction at the Coosan Point Road / Southern Station Road, and an east-west priority junction at the Ballymahon Road / Southern Station Road junction. This new link road was chosen as part of the emerging preferred strategy for roads infrastructure and it is intended to feature pedestrian and cycle facilities and the accommodation of public transport and taxis along Southern Station Road.

6.0 Consultations

6.1. Notified Bodies

6.1.1. The Local Authority state that they notified the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport, the Minister for Transport, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly, the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, CIÉ, the Health Service Executive (HSE), Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI), the NTA, The Heritage Council, An Taisce, Uisce Éireann, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Fáilte Ireland and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, including the NMS and the NPWS.

6.1.2. The Commission received submissions within the appropriate period from Uisce Éireann and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (NMS and NPWS), and these submissions can be summarised as follows:

- Uisce Éireann – measures are recommended to protect water and wastewater facilities;
- Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (NMS) – an archaeological impact assessment is necessary, including a programme of test excavations and reporting;
- Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (NPWS) – all mitigation measures listed in the Ecological Impact Assessment and Natura Impact Statement (NIS) should be strictly adhered to and an Ecological Clerk of Works engaged to oversee implementation of mitigation measures. The maintaining of vegetation would be more preferable than discontinuity in the availability of suitable breeding / roosting habitat. Pre-construction ecological surveys, as per the application CEMP, tree felling outside of the bird-nesting season, surveying within the optimal time period for bat detection and the incorporation of swift nest boxes into the development are necessary.

6.2. Observations

6.2.1. A total of ten observations from other parties were received by the Commission within the prescribed period, nine of which are stated to be from residents of the immediate area to the application site. The observations were accompanied by a

technical note in relation to flood risk, photographs of the area, copies of correspondence with Athlone Town Council and extracts from the application. The issues raised in the observations can be collectively summarised as follows:

Planning Principles

- an alternative site outside the town centre should be sought for the bus depot, as was supported in the Athlone Town Development Plan;
- the loss of green space to facilitate the development is contrary to planning policy;

Traffic

- the link road is unnecessary as it would simply duplicate an existing road and there are more pressing projects in the town that could be undertaken;
- a new footpath with trees cut back would only be necessary;
- the proposals would not resolve traffic congestion, as they would add to this issue and would result in safety concerns;
- proposals are outdated, failing to address the known pinch points for motorists within the town centre 'orange' loop and they would do little to prioritise pedestrian and cycle movements;
- a traffic impact assessment addressing the additional road infrastructure and the new junctions has not been undertaken in line with guidelines, resulting in potential for the project to lead to unintended consequences;
- traffic safety impacts at the entrance to The Manse are noted in the road safety audit, with relocation of the entrance advised to address the identified risks, as per previous engagements with the Local Authority;
- a signal-controlled junction and a crossing is required along the entrance to The Manse on Northgate Street;

Public Transport and Active Travel

- the expansion of the bus depot is not aligned with the expansion of bus services;

- the proposals are lacking in detail with respect to bus-stop infrastructure, car park access, and the drop-off and pick-up facilities at the railway / bus station;
- proposals feature a poor location for unsecured cycle storage and they would result in difficulties for vulnerable-road users along the footpaths, with a hostile, car-dominated environment being created;

Residential Amenities

- the proposed link road would be too close to houses;
- loss of privacy and light intrusion would arise for properties neighbouring the development;
- a works programme should be agreed with local residents prior to the commencement of the development;
- noise impacts would arise from traffic movements along the proposed link road and from the parking of buses within the expanded bus depot;
- to reduce the impacts on amenities enjoyed by residents of The Manse and those using a property for counselling services, the boundary wall along The Manse should be increased to a height of 2.4m / 3m, the houses should be insulated and all windows in the houses should be replaced with triple-glazing;
- construction should only take place during daylight hours, as per the Environmental Noise Regulations 2006 (S.I. 140 of 2006);
- only high-level, noise-reducing road surface materials should be employed;
- the means of operating access restrictions at the bus depot are not clear;
- impacts would arise for air quality from the operation of an expanded bus depot;
- local air quality monitoring indicates that the particulate matter content of air samples exceeds World Health Organisation safety guidelines for a six-month period and for daily averages;

Biodiversity

- in addition to the species identified in the Ecological Impact Assessment as using the site, it is also frequented by stoat, badger, pine marten, wood mouse, red squirrel, rabbits and moorhen;
- proposals would result in significant avoidable negative impacts for local biodiversity and the loss of an important remaining urban habitat;

Trees

- excessive loss of trees is proposed, which would increase noise impacts and light intrusion to neighbouring properties;
- the intended removal of hardwood native trees conflicts with the provisions of the National Biodiversity Action Plan;
- there are conflicts between the details within the vegetation to be removed drawing (no.120278-5001) and the habitats drawing in the NIS;

Drainage

- the field that the link road would run through is swampland;
- details of surface water drainage have not been provided and, as such, do not inform the management of flood risk;
- the proposed increase in impermeable surfaces would result in a substantive increase in stormwater flows to the stream flowing through the site;

Flood Risk

- the project would increase the risk of flooding to other areas, including Coosan Road, Abbey Road and Abbey Grove west of the site along the Shannon;
- the site is within the 'Marine View' (cell 5) flood risk management catchment to Athlone, which has a 37.243 mean high-water, datum-capping level, and the subject proposals have not factored in this, while the design of the flood defences for this catchment do not factor in the subject proposals;
- according to the application details, during flood events in excess of a 30-year storm, water levels may overtop the discharge control mechanism

(hydrobrake) resulting in uncontrolled flows through the culvert discharging from the site, which would be of concern to downstream properties between Southern Station Road and the river Shannon;

- the extent of existing and proposed impermeable surfaces, previous flood events, climate change and the proposed culverting of a 65m-long stretch of a stream with a 1.2m-diameter pipe, would increase the risk of flooding to a low-lying commercial property on Coosan Road during extreme rainfall events, including where event durations and intensities exceed a 30-year flood event;
- additional flood risk preventative and protection measures should be considered for the project, including a review of the storm return period, an increase in attenuation capacity and installation of a permanent automatic pump at the outfall of the drainage catchment to the river Shannon;

Urban Design

- the project features poor urban design, impacting the local character and heritage of the town;
- the proposed road would prove to be visually intrusive and it would impact on the townscape;

Other Matters

- part of the site at the junction of The Manse, featuring part of a boundary wall and mature trees, is in private ownership;
- there would be an increased risk of fire arising from buses parking in the expanded bus depot;
- proposals would impact on the security of properties;
- proposals would result in increased potential for littering and vermin in the area;
- the proposals would decrease the value of neighbouring property.

6.3. Local Authority Response to Observations

6.3.1. On the 12th day of September 2025, in the interest of justice the Commission offered the Local Authority the opportunity to respond to the observations received. A

response was received from the Local Authority on the 9th day of October, 2025, clarifying the following:

Planning Principles

- the link between the proposed road and the train / bus station aligns with policy in the National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland, the National Sustainable Mobility Policy and the Climate Action Plan, integrating active travel with public transport to promote a modal shift from private vehicles;
- the link road is supported by the provisions within objective O-TM2 of the Athlone Town Development Plan;
- the project forms the catalyst to the achievement of strategic regeneration and compact growth objectives for Athlone town centre, unlocking a brownfield redevelopment opportunity, allowing for the free-flow of traffic within the town centre and facilitating the orderly development of the town centre, including public realm improvements and intensified land use;
- relocating the bus station outside the town centre would be unsustainable, although the development would not curtail this, should this be required in the future;
- the proposals support provisions within the Athlone Town Development Plan, including policy P-OC1 and objective O-OC1 by enabling development of the bus depot opportunity site;
- the project would provide a key piece of transport infrastructure, while also enabling alternative sustainable planning objectives to be achieved;
- any land acquisition requirements would be dealt with subject to receipt of planning permission;

Traffic

- the subject project features active travel, public transport, junction and vehicular network elements provided for in the Athlone Area-Based Transport Assessment;

- in 2017 the ‘orange’ town-centre traffic loop was approved by the Local Authority as a ‘Part 8’ scheme;
- the proposed link road would replace the Southern Station Road and would form a strategic section of the ‘orange’ town-centre traffic loop with optimised junctions to increase traffic efficiency, more efficient use of the loop and reduced journey times for public transport users;
- traffic accessing the railway / bus station from the west side of town would continue to do so via Coosan Point Road and the proposed road;
- the junction at The Crescent and the proposed link road would be amended from a four-arm junction to a five-arm junction to provide for a dedicated public transport arm to and from the railway / bus station, which would improve journey times for public transport users;
- the Traffic Management Guidelines only require transport assessments, where development would result in traffic exceeding 5% of the traffic flow on an adjoining road where congestion exists or where the location is sensitive;
- a signal-controlled junction is proposed at the entrance to The Manse and the closure of this vehicular access from Northgate Street would not be appropriate, as it would require an alternative access off the proposed link road, which would not be safe to provide;
- the correspondence from Athlone Town Council that was submitted by observers dates from 2004 and referred to a previous Part 8 application;
- any changes in speed limits would be subject to a formal review process;

<u>Public Transport and Active Travel</u>

- the project presents an opportunity for the Local Authority to reallocate road space in favour of public transport and active-travel infrastructure;
- the project would provide a more convenient, attractive, direct and level two-way cycle track and pedestrian footpath;
- only traffic accessing the railway / bus station would use Southern Station Road, with the current drop-off and pick-up arrangements remaining largely

unchanged, albeit with significant safety improvements arising from the reduced level of traffic on this road;

- the existing 53 bus parking spaces in the depot are not anticipated to increase to facilitate the transport infrastructure, with 20 of the 44 spaces to be fitted with electric-vehicle charging points and an increase in buses using this facility is not proposed;
- the bus gate would operate using a fob system, which would not impede access to and from the railway / bus station car park;

Residential Amenities

- proposals aim to balance the privacy and sense of security enjoyed by neighbouring residents to the scheme, with a requirement of the DMURS to avoid a hostile streetscape for pedestrians and cyclists. This approach led to the proposals featuring provision of a boundary wall with a height of 1.53m;
- traffic noise impacts are intended to be reduced via boundary treatments, noise-reducing road surface materials, for example stone-mastic asphalt, and a future reduction in the urban speed limit;
- construction working hours are proposed between 0800 to 1900 hours on weekdays and between 0800 to 1400 hours on Saturdays, subject to conditions;
- as per the preliminary Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP), adjacent neighbours would be kept informed of the expected construction works programme;
- project lighting has been designed to address potential light nuisance or trespass to neighbouring residential properties;
- with no expected increase in buses using the depot, air quality and other emissions would not be expected to increase from the operation of this facility;
- any previous commitments to residents' groups would be honoured;

Trees and Biodiversity

- mitigation measures set out in the Ecological Impact Assessment would address impacts on wildlife;

- tree removal has been addressed as part of the Ecological Impact Assessment;
- tree removal has been kept to a minimum, with several trees required to be removed to facilitate boundary wall construction;
- replacement tree planting would be undertaken along the project boundaries and green spaces, including the wetland area to the west of the site;

Drainage and Flood Risk

- surface water runoff would be limited to pre-development greenfield runoff rates;
- the proposed underground attenuation tanks would incorporate discharge controls (hydrobrake) to limit flows to greenfield runoff equivalents at the discharge points (see drawing no.120278501);
- works along Coosan Road / Abbey Grove properties are to be undertaken as part of a separate project, the Athlone Flood Alleviation Scheme, which is to be carried out by the Office of Public Works (OPW);

Archaeology

- based on ordnance survey first edition mapping, the subject area was outside the historic boundary walls for Athlone town;
- a condition requiring an Archaeological Impact Assessment to be carried out would be acceptable;

Other Matters

- the layout of the bus depot has been carried out in accordance with current standards;
- litter management would be dealt with in the usual manner.

7.0 Assessment

7.1. Introduction

7.1.1. Prior to making a decision in relation to a Local Authority development, section 177AE (6) of the Act of 2000 requires that the Commission consider:

- the likely consequences for the proper planning and sustainable development in the area;
- the likely effects on the environment;
- the likely significant effects of the proposed development upon a European Site.

7.1.2. This planning assessment section of my report addresses the likely consequences of the proposed development on the proper planning and sustainable development of the area. While some overlapping of themes occurs, the likely effects on the environment are primarily considered under section 8 below when addressing EIA Screening. Section 9 below considers the likely significant effects of the proposed development on European Sites and section 10 addresses the requirements of the Water Framework Directive (WFD).

7.1.3. In assessing the proposed development impacts on the proper planning and sustainable development of the area, I consider the substantive issues arising from the application and the submissions received, relate to the following:

- Development Principles;
- Traffic and Transport;
- Impacts on Residential Amenities;
- Biodiversity;
- Drainage and Flood Risk;
- Urban Design;
- Cultural Heritage.

7.2. Development Principles

Land-Use Zoning Objectives

7.2.1. Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027 does not include specific land-use objectives relating to the application site and as noted above, the Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 was not incorporated into this County Development Plan and has since expired. The Bus Éireann depot, including adjacent undeveloped lands to the west along the south side of Southern Station Road, was identified in the Town Plan as key opportunity site no.6 for Athlone. In describing the opportunity site lands, the Town Plan referred to the existing land uses, a drainage channel running through the site and the context relative to features of conservation heritage status. It was also noted that the site was identified for a new road. In reference to the primary objective to redevelop this opportunity site, the Town Plan supported facilitating employment uses and maximising connectivity and permeability between the railway / bus station and the town. In achieving this objective, the Town Plan referred to the option of relocating the bus garage out of the town centre. The expired Town Plan also noted that in a previous plan for Athlone dating from 1998, the site was identified for residential and commercial uses, and the accommodation of a new road.

7.2.2. The land-use zoning map accompanying the Town Plan identified the bus depot site, including the undeveloped area to the west, as featuring a 'Commercial' zoning. The Town Plan stated that the objective (O-LZ5) for these lands was to provide for commercial development that does not need to be located in the town centre or in a retail warehousing zone. The land-use zoning matrix included within chapter 13 of the Town Plan indicates that a transport depot use would be open for consideration on 'Commercial' zoned land. The Town Plan does not provide a means of identifying how an open for consideration use could be considered permissible when assessing development proposals. Notwithstanding this, it was stated in the Town Plan that the 'commercial' zoning provided for expansion of existing and commercial uses, as well as new uses.

7.2.3. The completion of a new road between Coosan Road and Crescent Junction, known as the 'rail link road' was included in Town Plan as a committed road improvement scheme under objective O-TM19 of table 6.1. The applicant asserts that this

demonstrates that the road has been subject to proper planning assessment and is recognised as a necessary piece of infrastructure for the town's development.

7.2.4. From the outset it is imperative to acknowledge that there is not a strict statutory obligation to apply the objectives of the Athlone Town Development Plan when assessing the subject proposals, including land-use zoning objectives. However, as the most recent plan that sets out land-use zoning objectives for Athlone, this expired Town Plan does serve as an indicative blueprint detailing what reasonably could be anticipated to be provided for on the subject lands.

7.2.5. The third parties assert that an alternative site outside the town centre should be sought for the bus depot, as they state that this had been previously mooted in the Town Plan. In response to this, the applicant states that relocating the bus depot outside the town centre would be unsustainable, although the subject proposals would not curtail this from occurring, should this be required in the future. I am not aware of any proposals to relocate Athlone bus depot from this current location to an alternative location.

7.2.6. The hard surfaced area for the bus depot appears to have expanded in recent years along the rear of the service lane to St. Francis' Terrace via clearance of vegetated areas, including trees, primarily to facilitate additional space for buses to park. As part of the subject proposals it is intended to expand this hard surface area further by approximately 0.7ha, although approximately 0.5ha of the existing hard surfaced area would be removed from the depot to facilitate the new road infrastructure, a cycle shelter and green areas. As a result, there would be limited expansion of 0.2ha in the hard surface area serving the bus depot. I accept that the expired Town Plan included an objective to relocate the subject bus garage outside of the town centre, however, it also referred to scope for expansion of existing uses within 'commercial' zoned land. Accordingly, I am satisfied that the expansion of the yard space for the bus depot on the subject lands, largely to compensate for the provision of a new road, would not appear to conflict with land-use zoning objectives envisaged in the since expired Town Plan. Furthermore, the provision of a new road on the subject lands was also envisaged for these lands in the former Town Plan.

7.2.7. Third parties assert that the loss of the green space to facilitate the development is contrary to planning policy. In response to this, the Local Authority assert that the

project would support policy P-OC1 and objective O-OC1 of the expired Town Plan, which encouraged the development of opportunity sites in the town centre area based on detailed briefs. I am not aware of any land-use planning objectives strictly restricting the principle of using the green space on the application site to facilitate the proposed transport infrastructure and bus depot expansion. The objectives included within the expired Town Plan supported use of the subject green space for development purposes, primarily due to their location between the town centre and the railway / bus station.

Climate Change

7.2.8. Section 15 of the Climate Action & Low Carbon Development Act 2015, as amended, states that a relevant body shall, in so far as practicable, perform its functions in a manner consistent with -

- (a) the most recent approved climate action plan,
- (b) the most recent approved national long term climate action strategy,
- (c) the most recent approved national adaptation framework and approved sectoral adaptation plans,
- (d) the furtherance of the national climate objective, and
- (e) the objective of mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to the effects of climate change in the State

7.2.9. As a relevant body, An Coimisiún Pleanála is required to exercise its function in a manner consistent with the applicable climate objectives, in so far as is practicable, and I have set out the following consideration to enable the Commission make their decision within that framework. The Development Plan includes a host of policy objectives addressing the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate change, including policy objectives CPO 7.6, CPO 7.14, CPO 10.140 and CPO 16.61.

7.2.10. The development would result in an increase in greenhouse gas emissions over the construction period, although this would have negligible impact on the climate given the proportionate impact relative to national emissions limits. Given that vehicular traffic is not anticipated to substantively increase as a result of the proposed development, only limited potential for increased greenhouse gas emissions to arise

from the operation of the development is expected. Notwithstanding this, there is not an obligation under climate legislation to refuse permission for developments that cause emissions, otherwise objectives in other plans and regulations, such as the Athlone Area-Based Transport Assessment infrastructure objectives, would not be achievable, and as the net zero emissions targeted in climate plans and strategies envisage a transition. Projects may still be permitted while broader targeted measures to ensure full adaptation can be rolled out and implemented, including transitions to zero-emission vehicles and fleets.

7.2.11. Having considered the matters set out in section 15 of the Climate Act, I consider that a decision by the Commission to grant permission for the proposed development would comply with the climate change provisions within the Development Plan, would be consistent with its duties under the Climate Act and would not deter the State in meeting its national climate objectives.

Land Ownership

7.2.12. According to a third-party objecting to the proposed development, part of the subject site at the entrance to The Manse is in private ownership, therefore, the applicant does not have control over the entire works area. The area in question concerns a triangular piece of the road serving houses at the entrance to The Manse off Northgate Street, as well as a boundary wall and a planting area immediately inside this. The applicant states that any land acquisition requirements would be dealt with subject to receipt of planning permission. I note that the disputed area comprises approximately 7sq.m of a 3.6ha site, and it is intended to provide additional footpath in this space. It is matter for the Local Authority to ensure that they have the necessary legal entitlements to undertake the works. If this disputed area was not included as part of the site, it would have negligible impacts in the implementation of the overall development, with the existing footpath remaining allowing safe passage for pedestrians along the existing street and signalisation of the junction providing potential for reduced road safety risks based on the applicant's Stage 1 / 2 Road Safety Audit, as discussed further below. Accordingly, I do not consider that this matter places substantive impediment in the granting of planning permission for the proposed development.

Conclusion

7.2.13. In conclusion, I am satisfied that the principle of providing transport infrastructure and expanded bus depot on the application site would generally accord with what had been envisaged for the site based on the since expired Town Plan and it would not conflict with land-use objectives contained in the County Development Plan. While more intensive brownfield development might be mooted for the subject lands in the furtherance of enabling compact and sustainable growth of Athlone, there still remains a need for transport infrastructure in town centres, as set out in NSO 5 of the NPF, including the need for effective traffic management in urban centres. The construction of the link road would not substantially impede an alternative more intensive use for the remainder of the bus depot lands, should the need for same arise in the future. Further consideration with respect to the appropriateness of the land uses relative to planning policy objectives is addressed in the proceeding sections of my report, including consideration regarding traffic.

7.3. Traffic and Transport

7.3.1. Third-party observers assert that the proposed link road element of the project is outdated and unnecessary, as it merely duplicates the traffic-route function provided by the Southern Station Road and as it would not prioritise pedestrian and cycle movements. It is further asserted that the new link road would exacerbate traffic congestion in the town centre.

7.3.2. The applicant outlines that the initial link road project culminated from a previous broader traffic management plan for Athlone, which supported altering Church Street to the south of the site, one of the main streets in Athlone, to a one-way street, thus requiring some looped trafficking arrangement to facilitate the free-flow of vehicular movement. As Southern Station Road is on elevated ground and caters for railway / bus station traffic, the applicant states that it was considered more appropriate to construct a new link road on lower ground to the rear of St. Francis' Terrace. According to the applicant, phase 1 of this 'rail link road' project was completed in 2007 and this generally comprised the road infrastructure at The Crescent junction and St. Francis' Terrace connecting into Ballymahon Road. The applicant further highlights that in 2017 a traffic management scheme was approved by the Local Authority under a 'Part 8' application procedure, directing vehicular traffic in a

clockwise ‘orange’ signposted route around the town centre, prohibiting movements eastwards along Church Street and allowing movement eastwards along Southern Station Road. All elements of the subject proposed transport infrastructure are asserted by the applicant to have been provided for in the Athlone Area-Based Transport Assessment and the proposed link road would sit into the ‘orange’ traffic loop, providing for more efficient operation of junctions, reduced travel times and reduced need for private motor vehicles to travel along Southern Station Road, which could be more effectively utilised as a public transport node.

7.3.3. The Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027 acknowledges the role played by land use and transportation strategies in developing urban centres, with policy objective CPO 10.8 of the Development Plan specifically supporting the preparation of an area-based transport plan for Athlone to facilitate its growth as a regional economic driver. The Athlone Area-Based Transport Assessment was subsequently finalised in 2023 with actions and projects indicated to overcome key transport deficiencies in the town, including the ‘Athlone link road’ project, connecting between Coosan Point Road and Ballymahon Road. The Transport Assessment clarified various attributes that the road would need to feature, including pedestrian and cycle facilities and the accommodation of public transport and taxis along Southern Station Road.

7.3.4. Notwithstanding the expiry of the Town Plan, I am satisfied that the proposals form part of a coherent strategy to cater for transport in Athlone town centre, cognisant of the need to facilitate public transport and to tie in with active travel infrastructures. The project is not intended to solely provide new road infrastructure or to encourage additional traffic onto the town centre road network. While it would provide for a shortened looped-circulation route for vehicular traffic within the town centre, harnessing elements of the previously permitted and constructed phase 1 link road tie ins along Ballymahon Road, it would also provide a new dedicated route for buses along the public transport interchange and active travel paths that would connect into the broader network. I am satisfied that the proposed new link road and associated infrastructures are designed to align with the objectives within the DMURS, with the street fronting the railway / bus station upgraded to better cater for public transport users, as opposed to private vehicular movements. Along the proposed new link road active travel routes for cyclists and pedestrians would also

be provided. While the vast majority of the works entailed in the project would entail the construction of a new road, by providing same the project would directly and indirectly promote active travel and a shift away from private motor vehicle journeys.

Traffic Impacts

7.3.5. Third-party observers assert that a traffic impact assessment should have been provided as part of the application to fully assess the likely impacts of the development, including junction analysis. A traffic and transport impact assessment did not accompany the application. The applicant asserts that traffic congestion would be relieved by the junction upgrade works and the construction of the new link road.

7.3.6. Policy objective CPO 10.49 of the Development Plan requires all applications for significant development proposals to be accompanied by a Traffic and Transport Assessment carried out by suitably-competent persons, in accordance with the TII's Traffic and Transport Assessment Guidelines (2014). I note that in table 2.1 of the Traffic and Transport Assessment Guidelines specific scales of development requiring traffic and transport assessments are referred to, where such developments would be likely to generate additional trips on adjoining transport infrastructure. Five of the development types referred to in table 2.1 relate to developments that would feature additional floor areas or residential developments featuring in excess of 200 dwellings. It is also stated that where traffic to and from a development exceeds 10% of the traffic flow on the adjoining road or 5% of the traffic flow on the adjoining road where congestion exists or the location is sensitive, transport impact assessments would be required. According to the applicant, the proposed development would not result in traffic exceeding 5% of the traffic flow on the adjoining roads, where congestion exists or where the location is sensitive.

7.3.7. Having visited the area during the morning period when trips to schools and businesses would generally be at a peak, there was evidence of the local streets approaching the town centre, including Coosan Point Road and Ballymahon Road, being reasonably congested with traffic. The subject project does entail a development that would feature additional floor area or residential units, and it is not a type of development that would attract more vehicular traffic flows, given that it is primarily intended to replace an existing piece of road infrastructure. The Traffic and

Transport Assessment Guidelines support the preparation of area-based transport assessments in identifying high-level impacts of proposed broad locations for development in transport terms, as well as strategic and local transport interventions required to support population and employment growth in an area. The Athlone Area-Based Transport Assessment was prepared by a team of transport engineers and consultants on behalf of Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils, with a local area model prepared based on information collated relating to modal share, trip-distribution patterns, active travel levels and the uptake of public transport. Future-year transport scenarios were identified in the transport assessment, with the subject link road project supported as part of the stage 3 emerging preferred strategy for the town vehicular, active travel and public transport networks. The traffic impacts of the development, alongside other projects that form part of the preferred transport strategy for Athlone, has been undertaken in the area-based transport assessment.

7.3.8. I am satisfied that there would not be a strict requirement for a traffic and transport impact assessment to have accompanied the subject application, given the stated provisions of the Traffic and Transport Guidelines (2014), with the Athlone Area-Based Transport Assessment providing rationale for the proposed infrastructure and justifying its intended function as part of the management of traffic in the town centre.

7.3.9. Third parties also refer to the proposals as limiting vehicular traffic movements accessing the railway / bus station from the west side of town, however, I fail to see how this can be concluded given that vehicular access would be available from Coosan Point Road / Northgate Street junction to the proposed link road, and from the proposed link road onto Southern Station Road leading to the railway / bus station.

7.3.10. Traffic congestion at peak periods in urban areas occurs intermittently and temporarily, and various measures and design features have been set out within the application to support the use of public transport, cycling and walking, as alternatives to the use of private vehicles. All road networks feature limited capacity in terms of the accommodation of private cars and the subject proposals are not envisaged to substantially add to existing congestion occurring in the area.

Road Safety

7.3.11. According to third-party observers, the proposals would result in safety concerns. The DMURS sets out that a link road in an urban neighbourhood should be designed with a speed limit of 30 to 50km/hr, with standard lane widths in the range of 2.75m to 3.5m for arterial or link streets. The proposed lane widths would measure 3.1m within the preferred range set out in the DMURS and the two-way cycleway would be segregated from the carriageway for safety purposes by a 0.5m-wide raised kerb.

7.3.12. Policy objective CPO 10.49 of the Development Plan requires all applications for significant development proposals to be accompanied by a Road Safety Audit. The applicant has submitted a Stage 1 / 2 Combined Road Safety Audit Report, which identified nine problems along Southern Station Road, five problems along The Crescent junction and five problems along the link road and Coosan Point Road junction. The audit includes recommendations in relation to how the various problems can be rectified, which would not require substantive changes to the development proposals, including additional signage and revised layouts. Deficiencies in carriageway widths, radii and stopping distances are noted by the applicant to currently arise along Southern Station Road.

7.3.13. Several third parties have raised traffic safety concerns in using the private access road serving The Manse off Northgate Street, asserting that a signal-controlled junction and a crossing is required at this vehicular entrance or an alternative vehicular entrance to serve the private access road off the proposed link road. The road safety audit highlighted the entrance to The Manse as featuring restricted visibility for vehicles emerging from a private access that is located at or near the junction stop line. The Stage 1 / 2 Road Safety Audit stated that, where feasible, the vehicular access serving The Manse should be relocated or restricted to avoid direct interaction with the stop line and if relocation is not feasible, mitigation measures such as improved visibility splays, mirror installations, advanced warning signage or controlled access, for example entry-only or timed operation, should be considered.

7.3.14. The application site layout plan drawing (no.120278-4001 Revision PL4) indicates the location of traffic signal infrastructure at junctions along the road network and crossing points. At the entrance road to The Manse, this drawing suggests some form of traffic signal infrastructure directed east towards traffic approaching

Northgate Street on The Manse. In response to third-party concerns, the applicant confirmed that this entrance onto the junction would be signal-controlled. This would appear a more preferable scenario for those exiting The Manse, as currently the entrance from The Manse is not signal controlled, thereby presenting greater risk for motorists exiting onto Northgate Street.

7.3.15. The applicant also asserted that the provision of an alternative access to serve The Manse from the link road to the north would not be safe to provide. I note that a vehicular access from The Manse would be required to traverse a footpath and a two-way cycle lane immediately prior to accessing the link road. At present vehicular access to The Manse off Northgate Street is only required to traverse a footpath. If an alternative access was provided vehicles waiting to access the link road from The Manse could potentially restrict movement along the active travel infrastructures and place undue risks on the safety of those using this infrastructure. The alternative suggested vehicular access would also require vehicles to stall along the link road when attempting to traverse the active travel infrastructure to enter The Manse. This situation would clearly necessitate a new junction on the link road to address the road safety concerns highlighted above. This new junction would need to be situated between 10m and 60m from the proposed link road junction with Northgate Street / Coosan Point Road. It is difficult to foresee the benefits in providing an additional new junction to serve The Manse off the proposed link road given that it would necessitate vehicular movements over a wider transport corridor, and as signalisation at the entrance would offer substantive improvements to the present situation.

7.3.16. As mentioned, the audit submitted also referred to the possibility of improving the existing visibility splays at the entrance to The Manse. Sight-line visibility splays for vehicular entrances in an urban context are set out in the DMURS, which require minimum sight-line visibility of 45m at a 2.4m setback along the mid-point of a proposed vehicular access. Visibility splays have not been illustrated on the application drawings. At present a telecoms service pole and a boundary wall with hedgerow planting enclosing a front garden restrict visibility in a southerly direction from The Manse vehicular entrance, and this would remain the case under the subject proposals. A wall with planting inside this currently restricts visibility in a northern direction from this vehicular entrance. The applicant has proposed to

remove part of this boundary wall and the planting inside this as part of the subject proposals, which I note would improve visibility northwards when exiting The Manse. As noted above, an observer has contested removal of part of this boundary wall and planting as they assert that it is not in control of the applicant and is in private ownership.

7.3.17. The proposed development would not intensify traffic movements into and out of The Manse and it is not intended to increase traffic along Northgate Street as part of the proposals. Furthermore, the construction of the proposed link road connecting with Coosan Point Road / Northgate Street would not result in a road junction encroaching substantively closer to the entrance to The Manse. Clearly there are substantive technical access limitations at the existing vehicular entrance to The Manse, however, the DMURS highlights that a degree of flexibility is required when designing streets and particularly when dealing with retrofitting of existing streets. Following the mitigation recommended within the road safety audit, the applicant has sought to improve the situation by installing a signalised junction at The Manse and by increasing visibility splays in a northerly direction. Accordingly, I am satisfied that this element of the project would not increase road safety risks and would not be contrary to planning provisions. The applicant has considered the technical requirements for the transport infrastructure and further audits of the scheme can be undertaken, as would be typical for a project of this nature, to fully address any currently unforeseen road safety concerns.

Active Travel

7.3.18. The expired Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 had stated that opportunity site no.6, comprising the bus depot landholding, should be developed with the key objective to address connectivity between the town centre and the railway / bus station. Furthermore, the Town Plan had set out that the layout of any proposals should seek to improve legibility and permeability through the provision of new high quality, convenient, safe and well-lit pedestrian connections and cycle routes. Maps accompanying the Town Plan indicated walking routes traversing the application site and following Coosan Point Road, Southern Station Road and Ballymahon Road (R915 regional road). Policy objectives CPO 10.12 and CPO 10.30 of the County Development Plan aim to improve pedestrian and cycle connectivity to stations and other public transport interchanges. The Athlone Area-Based Transport Assessment

identified the need for a travel plan to be prepared for the railway station, to include amongst other elements improved walking and cycling links to the station, cycle parking and wayfinding. The applicant's drawing (no.120278-4501 Revision PL2) titled 'Athlone Active Travel Routes' illustrates how the proposed active travel routes would tie in with existing active travel infrastructure, including connections with the town centre and the railway / bus station.

7.3.19. As part of the project, pedestrian and cycle links would be constructed along existing streets and the proposed link road. Third parties assert that the proposals would present difficulties for vulnerable-road users along the footpaths. The NTA did not submit comments regarding the proposed development to the Commission. The applicant undertook a Quality Audit of the proposed infrastructures to identify any shortcomings based on Building Regulations, the DMURS and other best practice guidance with respect to access and mobility. The majority of issues to be addressed from the Quality Audit relate to matters that would be addressed at detailed design stage, such as gully positions, paving materials, constructed gradients, avoidance of conflicts between cycle and pedestrian movements, lighting, seating, visibility and signage. Based on the applicant's road longitudinal section drawing (no.120278-705 Revision PL1), the finished levels (situated between 37.2m and 39.6m over surveyed datum level) for the active travel paths along the link road would vary by 2.4m, thereby only requiring gentle change in path surface levels over the 350m length of the new link. This would allow for compliance with desirable gradient provisions within the Cycle Design Manual.

7.3.20. Retrofitting active travel infrastructure into existing junctions and roads, including Southern Station Road, may not precisely meet all standards, however, as noted above arising from the DMURS, a degree of flexibility needs to be applied in relation to this. The Cycle Design Manual also note that cycle paths along existing streets will generally be dictated by existing topography. More stringent application of standards is necessary with respect to new infrastructure routes. The two-way cycle track along the new link road would measure 2.75m in width, and a 1.8m-wide footpath would be situated outside of this. The Cycle Design Manual supports absolute minimum widths of 2m or desirable minimum widths of 3m for two-way cycle tracks that are envisaged to accommodate less than 300 cycle movements during peak hours. The Cycle Design Manual stipulates that desirable minimum

widths should be used when calculating the required widths of infrastructures. The applicant has not detailed their rationale for a 2.75m-wide two-way cycle track. The number of cycle or other movements expected to be accommodated on the link road during peak hours are not listed in the application. The Athlone Area-Based Transport Assessment forecasted the total demand desire lines for traffic traversing the town and environs over a 24-hour period in 2040, however, this assessment, including the estimated modal split comprising 71% cars, 7% public transport and 22% walking and cycling in Athlone in 2040, does not enable the precise number of cycle movements along the active travel route adjoining the new link road to be estimated. Notwithstanding this, based on my visit to the area, including Southern Station Road, where I noticed only limited cycle movements, it is difficult to foresee more than 300 cycle movements along the link road route during peak hours. As such, there would appear to be merit in allowing the two-way cycle path to be marginally under the desirable minimum width stipulated in the Cycle Design Manual. An overengineered design for the active travel infrastructure would not represent an efficient use of inner-urban land, and the achievement of compact urban development as sought under various planning policy provisions.

7.3.21. The proposed development would improve cycle and pedestrian links to the railway / bus station. Furthermore, the installation of direction signage for pedestrians is listed as an action in the applicant's Quality Audit. A cycle parking shelter covering an area measuring 60sq.m would be provided adjacent to the shared cycle and pedestrian route that is proposed along Southern Station Road approaching the railway / bus station. The observers assert that this cycle shelter would be in a poor, unsecure location. Policy objective CPO 10.70 of the Development Plan requires the provision of bicycle parking facilities in convenient, secure locations, as close as possible to principal destinations. At present there is a paved area with stands for docking rental bicycles within a traffic island at The Crescent junction. There are also secure cycle lockers and a cycle shelter within the car park area serving the railway station. The proposed cycle shelter would offer an alternative to the other existing facilities, which appear to be in high demand based on my visit to the area. The shelter would be positioned a distance of only 50m from the railway / bus station, the principal destination it would serve, with a connection along a proposed shared pedestrian / cycle path. It would, therefore, be conveniently located to the

railway / bus station. As supported in the Cycle Design Manual, good natural surveillance from passers-by and overlooking from the windows of adjacent buildings along Southern Station Road would be available for the cycle shelter.

7.3.22. By integrating active travel with public transport, the applicant asserts that the proposed active travel infrastructures connecting from the link road to the railway / bus station comply with provisions within the National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland, the National Sustainable Mobility Policy and the Climate Action Plan. The Climate Action Plan 2024 aims to achieve a 50% increase in daily active travel journeys by 2030. I am satisfied that the improved and integrated active travel infrastructures, as well as the supporting facilities, such as the proposed cycle shelter, would support policy objectives CPO 10.2 and 10.70 of the Development Plan, which aim to promote sustainable transport options as an alternative to the private car.

7.3.23. The design and location of the proposed active travel infrastructures would be likely to encourage a shift towards more sustainable transport patterns given that they would offer more convenient and safer routes between neighbouring communities, the railway / bus station and the town centre. Accordingly, the proposed development would support the pedestrian and cycle connectivity sought under policy objectives CPO 10.12 and CPO 10.30 of the County Development Plan and the achievement of active travel journeys supported in the Climate Action Plan 2024.

Public Transport

7.3.24. The Town Plan also identified a ‘transport hub’ along the rail line corridor immediately west of Coosan Point Road and an inter-city bus route along Ballymahon Road. The Athlone Area-Based Transport Assessment identified the need for a travel plan to be prepared for the railway station, to include amongst other elements improved walking and cycling links to the station, cycle parking, wayfinding and a bus interchange. The County Development Plan includes various measures to enhance public transport services within the county, including policy objective CPO 10.34 supporting the operation of existing bus services and facilitating the provision of improved facilities for bus users in towns and villages, including the provision, in collaboration with the relevant agencies, of set down areas for coaches and bus shelters for passengers.

7.3.25. Third parties assert that the proposals are lacking in detail with respect to bus-stop infrastructure, car park access, drop-off and pick-up facilities at the railway / bus station. The applicant states that in January 2023 there were 10,000 passengers per week using Athlone's bus services, which represented a 20% increase on 2019 'pre-Covid' figures. The applicant asserts that enhancing the infrastructure surrounding the railway / bus station aims to serve the growing demand for public transport, reducing traffic congestion in the surrounding area and allowing for upscaling of bus routes through Athlone town and the rural hinterland. The proposed development would result in alterations to the function and layout of roads serving the railway / bus station, as well as revisions to the bus depot. The applicant highlights that Southern Station Road would only serve traffic accessing the railway / bus station, with the current drop-off and pick-up arrangements at the station remaining largely unchanged, albeit with significant safety improvements arising from the reduced level of traffic on this road.

7.3.26. Access to and from the railway / bus station for private motor vehicles would be restricted to the eastern stretch of Southern Station Road. Drivers would use the existing segregated entrance and exit to and from the railway / bus station car park as passage along the western stretch of Southern Station Road would be restricted by the proposed bus gate, which the applicant states would be operated via a fob system. While upgraded and additional active travel infrastructures are proposed along Southern Station Road, this would not interfere with the set-down parking or bus stops available fronting the station. The applicant states that an additional traffic lane at The Crescent junction would provide a dedicated turning lane for vehicles accessing the railway / bus station, which would improve bus journey times. I also note an additional right-turning lane would be provided for traffic exiting Southern Station Road onto The Crescent junction. In restricting access along the western stretch of Southern Station Road to buses, the proposed development would provide for more convenient access for public bus services to and from the transport interchange.

7.3.27. Third-party observers object to the expansion of the bus depot as part of the project, because they consider this to be unnecessary as it would not align with the expansion of bus services. In response to this the applicant states that the existing bus depot can accommodate 53 bus parking spaces and that the revised layout for

the bus depot is not anticipated to increase parking for buses in the depot. The existing operational area utilised as part of the bus depot would appear to amount to approximately 1.1ha, while the proposals would result in a revised operational area of 1.3ha for the bus depot. The revised layout for the bus depot would provide a coherent layout for the bus depot, with 44 parking spaces indicated, although I acknowledge that there would be scope for additional informal parking of buses. Notwithstanding this, the revisions to the bus depot would not lead to a substantive increase in the operational area available to serve the bus depot and, accordingly, there would only be limited capacity to cater for an increase in buses using the facility or significant intensification of its use.

7.3.28. While the proposals would not provide substantial changes to the railway / bus station, the displacement of through vehicular traffic from Southern Station Road would be likely to provide for more efficient operation of the public transport interchange, thereby improving facilities for bus passengers, which would support provisions within policy objective CPO 10.34 of the Development Plan.

Conclusions

7.3.29. The assessment of the transport and traffic impacts of the project generally overlap with the need and justification for the project. The vast majority of the proposed works intended to take place as part of the subject development relate to the construction of a new stretch of roads infrastructure that would clearly cater for private motor vehicles, although this is not anticipated to increase vehicular traffic movements, as it would replace an existing segment of the town centre 'orange' traffic circulation route. Notwithstanding this, the rationale for the development is not solely focussed on any potential benefits in the movement of private motor vehicles within the town centre, as there would be broader societal and environmental benefits in providing additional active travel routes tying into existing active travel routes and in upgrading public transport facilities and access at the bus depot and railway / bus station.

7.3.30. The proposed development features a vehicular route and junctions, as well as active travel infrastructures and public transport elements that are envisaged to be necessary as part of the integration of land use and transport in the Athlone Area-Based Transport Assessment. The development would support various stated policy

objectives in the County Development Plan and it would provide an opportunity to continue to address traffic management within the town centre, while encouraging a modal shift from private vehicle use via provision of improved connectivity between the railway / bus station to additional and upgraded pedestrian and cycle infrastructures.

7.4. Impacts on Residential Amenities

7.4.1. Observations raise concerns with respect to the proximity of the development to residential properties, which would potentially result in impacts on the amenities enjoyed by neighbouring residents. The Development Plan includes provisions with respect to the protection of residential amenities and the DMURS also provide guidance in addressing impacts of urban transport projects on neighbouring amenities. From the outset I note that the provision of the proposed transport infrastructure could reasonably be considered to have benefits for the residents of Athlone by improving access and circulation within the town. The proposed link road is referred to as phase 2 of a road project, with phase 1 in situ along The Crescent junction connecting between Southern Station Road and Ballymahon Road. Given the background to the project, residents of the area may have had some appreciation that a new link road was envisaged to connect between The Crescent and Coosan Point Road / Northgate Street, although I do accept that progress with this project has been staggered over a long period of time.

Context

7.4.2. The closest residential property to the proposed construction works comprise the houses along St. Francis' Terrace, The Manse, the eastern stretch of Southern Station Road and The Crescent. A cross-section drawing (no.120278-725 PL3) illustrating the development context relative to neighbouring residences was submitted in response to a further information request.

7.4.3. Rows of two-storey terraced housing along St. Francis' Terrace back onto a 4m-wide service lane that would adjoin the new link road corridor. The proposed link road carriageway would be a minimum of approximately 11m from the rear boundaries of the closest houses in St. Francis' Terrace. With the exception of the eastern detached building along the northern side of The Manse known as Bunslí (Eircode

N37 Y3C4), a private access road and landscaped verge totalling approximately 7m in width would separate these properties from the proposed link road. The proposed link road would be approximately 13m to 20m from the elevation of the closest houses in The Manse. Revised road layouts, including active travel infrastructures, would be constructed along the front boundaries of residential properties on the south side of The Crescent junction. Works along Southern Station Road would be on the opposite side of the road to the existing residential properties along this street.

Overlooking

7.4.4. Third parties raise concerns with respect to the potential for neighbouring residents to suffer a loss of privacy due to the development encroaching on their boundaries. The applicant asserts that the potential for loss of privacy to arise was considered as part of the design of the development. The operational bus depot area presently extends up to the boundary with the rear service lane serving St. Francis' Terrace. On the western side of the site, the private access road serving The Manse and the garden serving Bunslí adjoin an undeveloped green space. As noted above, the proposed development would result in the link road running close to the residential properties, with potential to impact on the privacy enjoyed by residents of these houses via overlooking by passing traffic. There are no strict guidelines with respect to separation distances to be achieved between residential properties and public transport infrastructure in an urban context. To address impacts on privacy and security, third parties state that the boundary between the link road and The Manse should measure between 2.4m and 3m in height.

7.4.5. I am satisfied that the stated rear service lane and private access road would serve as buffers separating the residential properties and the link road, limiting views into the properties from the link road. This context would also result in the proposals avoiding impacts on the security of the adjoining residential properties. Accordingly, it would only be the privacy and security of the property known as Bunslí that could be substantively impacted by the proposals. The applicant has proposed addressing this by providing a 1.53m-high wall along the southern boundary of the link road corridor extending from Northgate Street to The Crescent. The applicant states that provision of a higher wall would potentially result in a hostile streetscape along the link road. I am satisfied that the proposed boundary wall would be a welcome

measure in safeguarding the enjoyment of the property known as Bunslí. The surface level along The Manse and the area immediately inside the adjoining site boundary are quite similar and I do not consider it necessary to increase the height of the proposed boundary wall, as it would not have any substantive additional benefits in restricting views from the link road towards the neighbouring properties or addressing the security and privacy concerns raised.

Lighting

7.4.6. Third parties also assert that the development would result in artificial light intrusion to neighbouring properties, including via the removal of trees. Section 10.20 of the Development Plan addresses light pollution, including policy objective CPO 10.135 requiring the control of lighting in order to minimise impacts on residential amenity, as well as biodiversity. The DMURS note the need for lighting as part of urban transport infrastructure, with standards to be based on British Standard (BS) Code of Practice for the Design of Road Lighting (BS 5489), including the type of light source, height of lampposts, consideration of context, pedestrian flows and light position. The avoidance of obtrusive light spill is supported in the DMURS.

7.4.7. The applicant asserts that the project lighting has been designed to address potential light nuisance and trespass to neighbouring residential properties. A technical report detailing the lighting proposals for the project, including three luminaire types, was submitted with the application. This is accompanied by a proposed lighting layout plan drawing, with 28 locations for light stands that are intended to serve the link road and the adjoining active travel paths, as well as the bus depot. The lighting report refers to the achievement of standards in the aforementioned BS 5489-1:2020 and the details submitted indicate that light overspill to neighbouring residences would be limited by the positioning, orientation and downward direction of light stands. The taller light stands in the bus depot would be positioned furthest from residential properties. Lights from passing traffic would not be fixed directly on the windows of neighbouring residences, as is discernible from the submitted cross section drawing (no.120278-725 PL3). The extent of lighting that would be introduced to the area as part of the development would be similar to public lighting in the immediate area and I am satisfied that it would not be excessive in this urban context. Accordingly, undue impacts on the amenities of neighbouring properties

would not arise from light pollution and the proposals would not conflict with the provisions in Development Plan policy objective CPO 10.135.

Noise

7.4.8. Concerns are also raised by third parties with respect to the potential for the project to result in excessive noise to neighbouring properties. The third parties refer to the potential noise sources as arising from traffic movements and buses within an expanded bus depot, and they consider the removal of trees would increase noise to neighbouring properties. The third parties suggest use of noise-reducing surface materials to limit noise levels along the road and the provision of additional insulation and replacement windows to houses as a means of mitigating the noise impacts arising from the project. Section 10.19 of the Development Plan refers to the potential for measures to be employed as part of projects to address noise pollution, including design, layout and attenuation mechanisms. Reference is made in the Development Plan to international standards, the Environmental Noise Regulations 2006 and the Westmeath Noise Action Plan 2013-2018 or any revisions of this plan. The Westmeath Noise Action Plan 2024-2028 has since been prepared and I note that the nearest priority area identified in the plan for noise mitigation is centred on the Radisson Blu hotel on Northgate Street to the southwest of the site. The DMURS notes that traffic volume, speed, levels of congestion and the proportion of heavy-goods vehicles (HGVs) are the main factors influencing the level of road noise, as well as air quality.

7.4.9. The DMURS highlight that mitigation measures can be employed to address noise levels. As requested by the third parties, traffic noise impacts are intended to be reduced by the applicant via boundary treatments, noise-reducing road surface materials and a future reduction in the urban speed limit. While the project would result in traffic passing closer to some residential properties, the extent of traffic in the wider urban street network is not intended to increase as part of the proposals. As part of the town centre circulation loop, the extent of HGV traffic would be limited, and the urban speed limits are presently limited to between 50 and 60km/hr. In addition to the proposed noise-reducing, road-surface materials, the 1.53m-high boundary walls along the southern side of the link road corridor would limit noise to housing areas to the south from vehicular traffic movements. The proposed development would not result in the operational area of the bus depot being situated

closer to residences than presently occurs, with the link road providing a buffer along the southern side. Third parties raised concerns regarding the potential for fire to arise in the bus depot. The stated development context would not suggest an increased fire risk for neighbouring properties arising from the revised footprint for the bus depot and its ongoing operation. Any specific issues regarding compliance with Building Regulations (fire safety) would need to be evaluated under a separate legal code.

7.4.10. In conclusion, the proposed development would not be likely to substantively impact on the amenities of neighbouring properties as a result of noise emissions at the operational stage and I am satisfied that the request for insulation of neighbouring houses, as well as installation of replacement windows, would not be a matter to be addressed in this assessment.

Air Quality

7.4.11. The impacts of the development on local air quality were cited as a concern in the third-party observations, with particular focus on the bus depot operations. Section 10.18 of the Development Plan addresses air quality, noting the emissions arising from road transport and featuring policy objective CPO 10.130 promoting the preservation of air quality and supporting compliance with air quality directives and regulations. As stated above, factors influencing air pollution are identified in the DMURS.

7.4.12. In response to the concerns raised by third parties, the applicant states that an increase in buses using the depot is not anticipated to arise, therefore, air quality and other emissions would not be expected to increase from the operation of this facility. I also note that the proposed expansion of the bus depot would not bring buses any closer to residential properties than the present scenario. As noted throughout the assessment, the development would not be likely to result in a significant increase in traffic in the immediate area, given that it does not feature a substantive trip-generating development, given that it would provide a replacement link along the town centre circulation route and given the alternative active travel infrastructures to be provided and supported.

7.4.13. Third parties refer to the results of air quality monitoring for the immediate area, citing concerns with respect to particulate matter content and World Health

Organisation safety guidelines. Any ongoing ambient air quality issues are not matters that can be resolved as part of the assessment of the subject proposed development, which I am satisfied would not be likely to result in substantive impacts on air quality local to the development.

Construction Phase Impacts

7.4.14. Based on various standards and legislative requirements, the Preliminary CEMP submitted with the application sets out the intended measures for the project construction phase to address emergencies, surface water, soil, noise and vibration, dust, ecology and traffic, including pollution prevention measures. A 12 to 18-month construction period for the project is estimated by the applicant in their Preliminary CEMP and NIS, with the link road element to be initially undertaken, followed by the bus depot works. Third parties raise concerns regarding the potential for increased littering and vermin to arise as a result of the development. General management and environmental rules would be employed during the course of the works, including avoidance of littering and making available the details of emergency contacts.

7.4.15. Third parties request that the proposed construction works only take place during daylight hours based on the provisions of the Environmental Noise Regulations 2006 (S.I. 140 of 2006). The applicant states that the construction works would take place between the hours of 0800 to 1900 Mondays to Fridays inclusive and between 0800 to 1400 hours on Saturdays. I note that these hours would extend beyond daylight hours, particularly during the winter months, however, the hours proposed are standard construction hours that would normally not present undue impacts on the amenities enjoyed by neighbouring residents. The Regulations referenced by third parties do not set out standard construction works hours, but they do refer to the need to manage environmental noise below certain levels during specific periods of the day. The applicant refers to the intention to comply with BS 5228:2009+A1:2014 in relation to the control of noise on the construction site. The construction phase impacts of the project would only be of a temporary nature and would also be subject of a finalised project CEMP requiring compliance with various standards.

7.4.16. The third parties also request that the construction works programme is agreed with residents prior to the commencement of the development. In response to this the

applicant highlights that the preliminary CEMP sets out that adjacent neighbours would be kept informed of the expected construction works programme and that a person would be engaged to address any noise complaints. I am satisfied that this would be a reasonable and standard approach to take in the circumstances. The site is within a built-up area where construction projects constantly arise as part of the ever-evolving and transforming urban environment.

7.4.17. Mitigation measures to address identified risks are set out, including noise minimisation measures, dust suppression measures, waste management and disposal, controlled storage and use of potential pollutants, sediment-control measures and implementation of a construction traffic management plan by the assigned contractor. The efficacy of the measures set out in the preliminary CEMP are widely acknowledged in successfully ensuring emissions and impacts during construction phase activities are kept within reasonable limits. I am satisfied that the proposed development should not be refused permission consequent to the potential nuisance or other impacts to neighbouring residents during the construction phase of the project.

Conclusions

7.4.18. Having regard to the assessments and conclusions set out above, I am satisfied that the proposed development should not be refused permission for reasons relating to the potential impacts of the development on the amenities enjoyed by neighbouring residents. Arising from this and the absence of information to the contrary, notwithstanding the assertions of third parties I am satisfied that the proposed development would not be likely to result in substantive decreases in property values in the neighbouring area.

7.5. Biodiversity

Local Ecology

7.5.1. This site lies within an urban area, with the current land uses in the vicinity of the site detailed in section 2 above. Chapter 12 of the Development Plan includes policy objectives relating to the provision of green infrastructure and the protection of biodiversity and natural heritage. Policy objectives are set out in the Development Plan to protect ecological habitats and species, including European Sites and their

qualifying interest or special conservation interest species. Third parties assert that the proposals would result in significant avoidable negative impacts for local biodiversity and the loss of an important remaining urban habitat. In response to this the applicant referred to mitigation measures set out in their Ecological Impact Assessment that they consider to address potential impacts on wildlife.

7.5.2. The applicant's Ecological Impact Assessment report dated July 2025 refers to the various ecological surveys undertaken and the habitats and species identified, as well as referring to designated sites for nature conservation in the vicinity, including the River Shannon Callows SAC, Middle Shannon Callows SPA, Lough Ree SAC and Lough Ree SPA. The applicant also noted the potential for impacts to arise from the project for Lough Ree proposed Natural Heritage Area (pNHA). The habitats recorded on site are stated to comprise buildings and artificial surfaces overlapping the bus depot lands, with the undeveloped green area to the west featuring a variety of habitat, including wet grassland, scrub, mixed woodland, wet woodland, tall-herb swamp, lowland stream, dry meadow and grassy verges. Boundary areas to the site are also noted to feature non-native ornamental planting, recolonising bare ground and treelines. The habitats identified were considered by the applicant to be of local importance only and of lower or higher value, with 'Annex I' habitats not identified.

7.5.3. During the ecological surveys plants protected under the Flora (Protection) Order 2015 were not recorded within the works area of the subject site. Invasive plant species listed in the Third Schedule of the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011, such as Japanese Knotweed, were not recorded on site, however, medium impact non-native species comprising Cherry laurel, Butterfly bush, Pheasant berry and Old man's beard were recorded within the site. Mammal tracks were identified through the green area of the site, and with the use of a trail camera a fox den was identified close to the centre of the green undeveloped area of the site. Surveys identified 24 bird species at the site, including Swift. In addition to the species identified by the applicant during surveys, third parties state that stoat, badger, pine marten, wood mouse, red squirrel and rabbits use the green area of the site. The applicant's surveys did not identify these species using the site, although the habitats identified on site were considered suitable to support badger, as well as other mammal species that were not recorded. Potential for frog and common lizard to use the site was not discounted, although they were not observed on site.

7.5.4. Threatened or protected invertebrates were not identified during the project ecological surveys. The drainage channel running through the site was noted to feature shallow depths of approximately 20cm, with the downstream and upstream ends culverted. A review of historical maps from this area suggests that this channel did not form part of the natural drainage of the area during the collation of first edition Ordnance Survey maps (1829-1841), but that it was in situ during compiling of the second edition of these maps in the latter half of the nineteenth century following the construction of the extensively banked railway corridor and station facilities to the north. Several macrophytes and a moorhen were observed in the drainage channel, but no fish were recorded within this feature. Connectivity of this water feature with the River Shannon approximately 350m to the west was noted.

7.5.5. To address potential ecological impacts of the project an Ecological Clerk of Works would be assigned to ensure that the methodology and measures in preventing silt mobilisation are effective and to confirm the efficacy of all mitigation measures. Measures to prevent silt and pollutants entering surface waters are listed to safeguard downstream water quality and the associated designated sites, with specific reference to the project Preliminary CEMP. Biosecurity practices would be undertaken for the site works to ensure minimal risk in the spread of invasive species. Eradication of identified invasive species would also be undertaken. Tree felling as part of the project would only take place outside of the bird-breeding season. Replacement planting is proposed along fringe areas to the link road and several hedgerows and treelines would remain as part of the project. A wetland area would be maintained on the western end of the site to support species currently using this habitat. Despite not being identified during surveys, a precautionary approach with respect to certain species would be followed, with pre-commencement surveys for mammals and nesting birds, and any deep excavations would be covered when not in use. As discussed further below, sensitive lighting would be employed to avoid excessive light spilling into hedgerows and treelines.

7.5.6. Temporary displacement of local breeding birds during the construction stage is acknowledged as a residual impact of the development. As requested by the NPWS, swift nest boxes are to be installed as part of the project to attract these birds to nest in the area. While the family of foxes recorded using the site are acknowledged, there is no requirements from a planning perspective to withhold

planning permission due to their presence on the site. Prior to site clearance works and during the autumn / early winter months prior to the breeding season (December to June), the Local Authority intend to close the fox den. Section 10 of my report highlights that the proposed development would not result in a risk of deterioration on any waterbody either qualitatively or quantitatively, temporarily or permanently. Based on the information submitted and available, I am satisfied that there would not be significant residual impacts from the project for ecological receptors that would restrict granting planning permission in this case. Impacts on bats and trees are considered separately below.

Bats

7.5.7. The Development Plan includes policy objective CPO 12.21 aiming to ensure that lighting suitable for bats are used as part of developments. Ground-based bat roost surveys were undertaken as part of the project in March 2023 and activity surveys were carried out in June 2023 focussing on hedgerows and treelines. The NPWS noted that the roost surveys were outside of the optimal period for detecting active bat sites. I note that the bat detector surveys were within the optimal survey period and these indicated limited bat activity along the perimeter of the site, with recordings of Soprano pipistrelle, pipistrelles and Leisler bat collated. Furthermore, potential roosting features for bats were not identified in the trees on site and a single existing building would be subject of works as part of the development, and this relates to a modular tyre-store building that would be repositioned within the site (see drawings included as part of the further information response). There will be a loss of woodland and hedgerow habitats used as foraging and commuting lines by bats. Noise and light could impact on local bat species as a result of the construction and operation of the development.

7.5.8. While the proposals would increase lighting in the area, this would be kept to a minimum by using specific light treatments, LED luminaires and by curtailing light overspill to hedgerows and treelines. Other light pollution reduction measures would be employed, including motion sensors to switch off lights when they are not required. To address peak periods for bat foraging, the applicant proposes that construction works do not take place during the hours of darkness. Further to this, if roosting bats are identified on site during the construction phase, all works would cease in order to allow mitigation measures to be employed. The ecological clerk of

works would oversee the felling of trees and a soft-felling technique would be employed as a precautionary measure, via gradual removal of tree limbs.

7.5.9. The applicant intends mounting four to six bat boxes in suitable locations on site to address potential impacts on bats. Maintenance of treelines and hedgerows, as well as new planting, is considered another means of addressing potential impacts on bats, with some displacement of commuting and foraging bats considered likely to occur as a result of the loss of the wetland and treeline / hedgerow habitat.

7.5.10. Having regard to the foregoing, including measures to mitigate the potential impacts on bats and the ecological value of habitat on site for bats, with recordings primarily indicating limited commuting and foraging of bats along the perimeter of the site within an existing built-up urban area and limited potential to impact on bat roosts, I am satisfied that the proposed development would not be likely to have significant effects on bat species.

Trees

7.5.11. Policy objective CPO 12.37 of the Development Plan seeks to preserve and enhance amenity and biodiversity by promoting the protection of trees, groups of trees and ancient woodlands of significant amenity value, especially native and broadleaf species. Other policy objectives of the Development Plan provide for the additional protection of trees subject to tree preservation orders and trees along roadsides, townland boundaries or in demesne landscapes. The Development Plan also states that, where necessary, a tree management plan should be undertaken as part of new development proposals, potentially incorporating and protecting established trees as part of developments.

7.5.12. Third parties assert that the extent of trees to be removed as part of the proposals would be excessive. In response to this, the applicant states that the proposed tree removal has been kept to a minimum, with several trees required to be removed to facilitate boundary wall construction. Third parties refer to the removal of hardwood native trees as conflicting with the provisions of the National Biodiversity Action Plan. I am not aware of this specific provision in the National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023-2030, although I do note its continued support for native tree planting.

7.5.13. A line of trees along the southern boundary of the site with The Manse and within the southeast confines of the bus depot are identified in the applicant's Ecological

Impact Assessment as consisting of Ash and Sycamore. A line of Leylandii mark the southern boundary of the site with the rear service lane to St. Francis' Terrrace. A more diverse range of tree species are recorded along the northern boundaries of the site with Southern Station Road, including Ash, Sycamore, Elder, Willow, Poplar, Hawthorn and Alder. The applicant's Preliminary CEMP notes that some trees were felled on the site in 2017.

7.5.14. According to third parties there are conflicts between the details within the 'vegetation to be removed' drawing (no.120278-5001) and the habitats drawing in the application NIS. I am satisfied that any asserted conflicts between the details of the drawings would not have a material bearing on this assessment, given that one drawing illustrates habitats recorded on the site at the time of the ecological surveys, while the other identifies trees, groups of trees and hedgerows to be removed to facilitate the development. The location of an individual tree or other vegetation may be indicative of the type of habitat present, however, such details are not the only details used in the assignment of a habitat type.

7.5.15. The 'vegetation to be removed' drawing identifies those trees, treelines and hedgerows to be maintained, including three mature trees along the boundary with The Manse, the line of Leylandii along the boundary with St. Francis' Terrace and the shrubs and trees along the steep embankment falling off Southern Station Road. The applicant also proposes planting within any existing gaps in the hedgerow along the boundary with Southern Station Road. To offset the loss of trees along the southern boundary, the applicant proposes replacement native tree planting along the verges of the proposed link road, including the wetland pocket park on the western boundary of the site. As part of the construction, the applicant's Preliminary CEMP notes the need to remove trees that are only required to be removed and the need for sapling trees to be planted as part of the landscape works.

7.5.16. The applicant's proposals provide for the protection of trees where possible. The extent of trees to be felled and removed would be reasonable, with important tree stands maintained where they provide a physical buffer between the site and the immediate properties. The loss of trees has been addressed in a reasonable manner in the application by the proposals for replacement native trees to be planted and hedgerows to be augmented. I am not aware of any trees marking townland boundaries or being subject of any other additional preservation status arising from

planning provisions. Accordingly, I am satisfied that the proposed development would not conflict with tree protection provisions of the Development Plan, including policy objective CPO 12.37.

7.6. Drainage and Flood Risk

7.6.1. The application was accompanied by an Outline Surface Water Management Plan and a Drainage Design Report that was updated as part of the applicant's further information response, which set out how it is intended to drain the subject development and connect into existing services. The drainage layout drawing (no.120278-501 Revision PL3) was also updated as part of the further information response and this illustrates the proposed drainage networks that serve the area and the infrastructure proposed as part of the development.

Water Supply

7.6.2. Uisce Éireann, who maintain and manage water supply infrastructure, refer to the need for the applicant to enter into an agreement with Uisce Éireann should they intend connecting to a public water network. Existing water supplies serving the bus depot would remain unaltered and the remainder of the development would not be one that typically requires a water supply. The applicant acknowledges the observations from Uisce Éireann, which refers to the need for the development to be carried out in compliance with Uisce Éireann standards and code of practices. This is a standard requirement that can be reaffirmed in a condition of a permission.

Wastewater Services

7.6.3. According to the applicant there are existing foul sewers running through the bus depot and along the northern side of The Crescent junction with Southern Station Road. The applicant proposes installing a new foul sewer under the northern traffic lane to the link road. This proposed foul sewer would connect into an existing foul sewer on Northgate Street fronting the vehicular entrance to The Manse. It is also proposed to install a connection to this new sewer line from an existing sewer within the bus depot. Calculations for the foul drainage proposals are contained in appendix E to the Drainage Report.

7.6.4. As with water supply, Uisce Éireann maintain and manage the existing wastewater services infrastructure. The proposals would not be expected to increase loadings

on the local wastewater network and the detailed specifications for the infrastructure have not been raised as an issue by Uisce Éireann.

Drainage

7.6.5. Within their Drainage Report the applicant sets out that the site currently drains towards the river Shannon. The western end of the site that is undeveloped is stated to feature shallow open drains that collect surface waters that flow towards a culvert under Southern Station Road. This undeveloped area is noted by the applicant to be subject of occasional flooding. Observers refer to this area as featuring swampland. Waters draining through the culvert under Southern Station Road are stated to flow into an open drain running between an oil depot and St. Vincent's Care Centre on Coosan Point Road. The open drain flows under Abbey Road and proceeds westwards before discharging into the river Shannon. As noted above, this drainage channel traversing the western end of the site appeared in maps during the latter half of the nineteenth century following major railway infrastructural works in the immediate area. According to the applicant, the site, as well as the residential area to the south and the railway / bus facilities to the north, drain into this channel.

7.6.6. A stormwater sewer is identified by the applicant in the drainage layout drawing (no.120278-501 Revision PL3), as running parallel with a foul sewer along the junction of The Crescent and Southern Station Road. There are also stormwater sewers within the bus depot yard and running along the neighbouring network of roads.

7.6.7. Policy objectives CPO 10.116, CPO 10.120 and CPO 10.121 of the County Development Plan support the improvement of drainage services, the use of sustainable urban drainage systems (SUDS) and the avoidance of increased flood risks as part of new developments. The Development Plan notes that rain falling on impervious surfaces was traditionally directed into receiving watercourses through surface water drainage systems. Such systems are deemed effective at transferring surface water quickly, but in doing so they provide only limited attenuation causing the volume of water in the receiving watercourse to increase more rapidly, thereby increasing flood risk.

7.6.8. The applicant outlined the surface water drainage options that they considered for the development, noting the need for the drainage solution not to affect drainage

proposals being undertaken by others as part of the Athlone Main Drainage Scheme. Infiltration to ground was discounted as a drainage option based on inspection of trial pits and local knowledge that suggested soakaways would not be viable. Observers assert that the increase in impermeable surfaces proposed as part of the development would result in a substantive increase in stormwater flows to the drainage channels running through the site. The applicant accepted that the increased runoff to the culvert under Southern Station Road from the additional hard surfaces proposed as part of the development would need to be controlled to pre-development greenfield runoff rates. To replicate existing runoff rates to the culvert, on-site attenuation is proposed, with a restrictor prior to the outfall to ensure runoff is controlled to pre-development rates. This proposed drainage attenuation system that was revised in response to a further information request, would have capacity to cater for 1 in 100-year storm events plus a 20% climate change allowance factor, without surface water leaving the site. Conventional, gravity-piped drainage would initially collect and convey surface water, and in order to address the fact that the drainage infrastructure would be situated under the bus depot and link road, lands in control of two different parties, separate flow controls would be employed on the landholdings. High-box culverts would be installed within the bus depot and along an active travel path to the proposed link road to align with existing drains traversing the lands. Surplus stormwater flows would back up in the underground attenuation tank proposed under the bus depot yard. The drainage channel discharging from the boundary with St. Francis' Terrace would be directed to a proposed lagoon feature within a wetland pocket park situated along the west end of the link road, with an overflow connection to the culvert under Southern Station Road. The applicant's Outline Surface Water Management Plan sets out how the various elements of the drainage system would be installed during the construction phase.

7.6.9. A hydrobrake would limit flows to the outfall culvert to greenfield run-off rates. Roadside gullies would collect hydrocarbons, detritus and silts entering the underground drainage system, and the applicant states that regular maintenance of these conventional infrastructure would be necessary to restrict excess contaminants entering receiving water. A fuel interceptor is proposed within the bus depot to address the higher risk of hydrocarbons from parked buses entering the surface

water drainage system. This equipment would also need to be subject of regular maintenance.

7.6.10. The observers assert that surface water drainage details for the development have not been provided, however, this is not the case. I am satisfied that the approach undertaken by the applicant in identifying suitable surface water drainage measures for the development based on site conditions would appear reasonable, including the use of attenuation tanks and a wetland lagoon. I am satisfied that a reasonable approach to addressing surface water drainage has been proposed as part of the application and standard stormwater audits can be requested via condition to ensure the satisfactory undertaking and operation of the installed system.

Flood Risk

7.6.11. Concerns have been raised by observers with respect to the potential for the development to lead to an increased risk of flooding downstream of the site, including properties closer to the river Shannon. The Core Strategy Map and Flood Risk Map contained in the book of maps accompanying the expired Town Plan, indicated that the western edge of the site along The Manse and at the junction of Southern Station Road and Coosan Point Road, is within a 1 in 100-year fluvial flood risk event area. This flood risk area extends along the river Shannon and several of its tributaries. The closest flood event to the application site was identified as arising at the railway bridge on Coosan Point Road. Section 11.6 of the County Development Plan notes that Athlone has been subject to a number of historical flood events and that this is being addressed through the implementation of the Shannon Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management Study (CFRAM), including flood defences for eight specific cells. The Athlone Flood Alleviation Scheme comprising the installation of flood walls and raised embankments along the River Shannon is noted to have been recently completed along the Shannon.

7.6.12. Policy objective CPO 10.105 of the Development Plan requires justification tests in accordance with the criteria set out under 'The Planning System and Flood Risk Management Guidelines for Planning Authorities' (2009) and policy objective CPO 10.106 states that a flood risk assessment should be carried out for any development proposal within 200m of a watercourse and at risk of flooding. The aforementioned Flood Risk Guidelines outline the stages involved in preparing a

flood risk assessment, including identification of any flooding or surface water management issues, followed by initial assessment of sources, surveys, flood protection schemes and the likely extent of flood risk. The final stage should comprise detailed flood risk assessment appraising the potential flood risk impact, including hydraulic modelling.

7.6.13. The applicant's revised Drainage Report and Site Specific Flood Risk Assessment provide extracts from the Office of Public Works (OPW) CFRAM flood maps, which do not identify a risk of fluvial flooding on the application lands. The CFRAM maps identify 0.1% and 1% annual exceedance probability (AEP) flood event extents along the downstream element of the channel draining the application lands west of the oil depot on Coosan Point Road. The fluvial flood risk for the site is calculated as arising during flood events with greater than a 1-in-1,000 chance of occurring in a given year (0.1% AEP).

7.6.14. Tall herb swamp, wet grassland and wet woodland habitats are identified in the application Ecological Impact Assessment and this suggest that these habitat areas following the drainage channel and generally occupying the lower part of the site are prone to flooding. The Archaeological Monitoring report dating from 2005 that was submitted with the application in response to a further information request referred to much of the undeveloped land being submerged under shallow water at the time of fieldwork during early March. The applicant has noted that the subject lands are prone to flooding along the drainage channel, although this flooding is intended to be addressed via the stormwater drainage system. The Flood Risk Guidelines designate all lands into three flood zones based on their probability to coastal or fluvial flood risk. 'Flood zone A' comprises land susceptible to the highest risk of flooding and 'flood zone C' comprises land susceptible to the lowest risk of flooding. Based on the information available, the application site includes an area with a high probability of flooding. The applicant refers to this flooding as arising from pluvial sources; however, this is clearly compounded by the lack of capacity in the drainage channels meandering through the site to accommodate flood waters, resulting in inundation of the respective habitat areas on the site.

7.6.15. Following a precautionary approach, as supported in the Flood Risk Guidelines, the risk of flooding on site arises from both pluvial and fluvial sources and the chances of this flooding occurring is relatively high. I am satisfied that lower areas of the site

along the drainage channel feature can be categorised as falling into 'flood zone A'. The remainder of the site would be at low risk of flooding, and as asserted by the applicant, falls into 'flood zone C'. The Flood Risk Guidelines identify specific categories of development that are appropriate in each of these flood zones. The proposed local transport infrastructure and bus depot facility would best be categorised as 'less-vulnerable development' based on development typologies in the Flood Risk Guidelines, with, 'flood zone A' only appropriate for 'water-compatible development', such as recreation and amenity space.

7.6.16. The sequential approach required under the Flood Risk Guidelines generally aims to avoid certain incompatible development types in areas at risk of flooding. The proposed link road is intended to connect between two road junctions within the town centre, therefore, a realistic alternative or scope to avoid the lands subject of the proposed link road would not be possible. As the proposals would not consist of 'water-compatible development' and part of the development would take place in a high probability 'flood zone A', the Flood Risk Guidelines require this less vulnerable development to meet a justification test.

7.6.17. As part of their Site Specific Flood Risk Assessment the applicant has not addressed the justification test to allow for the local transport infrastructure and bus depot extension on this site. Notwithstanding this, I am satisfied that the information required to undertake this test was provided within the reports presented as part of the application, including the revised Drainage Report. As noted above, the land-use zoning objectives for the site do not constrain the proposed provision of local transport infrastructure and a bus depot extension in this location and the proposed development would support wider transport planning objectives for the town.

7.6.18. According to the applicant, the proposed storm water drainage system for the development was revised in response to a further information request to accommodate rainfall runoff from events up to and including a 1-in-100 year flood event (or a 1% AEP event). A hydrobrake would be installed at the outfall to the culvert on the western boundary of the site with Southern Station Road to limit the discharge to greenfield runoff rates. Within their revised Drainage Report the applicant notes that during exceptional events exceeding a 1-in-100 year flood, water may overtop the hydrobrake and result in short term uncontrolled flows towards the culvert, although they state that this overtopping would not impact the surrounding

residential dwellings. The restriction of the discharge to greenfield rates would result in the post-development peak flows at the culvert being lower than the undeveloped peak flow for all storm events exceeding the mean annual event. Accordingly, the applicant asserts that this provides hydraulic betterment in terms of peak discharge and therefore will not exacerbate or increase downstream flood risk.

7.6.19. The use of topographical and other data, as well as hydraulic analysis, has allowed the applicant to calculate the infrastructures required to store and discharge surface and storm water from the site, in a manner that would alleviate the flood risk that occurs on site to greater than a 1-in-100 year flood event (or a 1% AEP event). As a result of this, the site would comprise lands within 'flood zone B' and 'flood zone C'. Based on the provisions within table 3.2 of the Flood Risk Guidelines, proposals comprising 'less vulnerable development' in flood zones B and C would be appropriate on this site.

7.6.20. I am satisfied that based on the information available, with the implementation of the proposed drainage works, the proposed development would not be at substantive risk of flooding and would not present a substantive additional risk of flooding to other lands, with various precautionary measures included as part of the revised development design. Additional measures to address flooding, other than those proposed, are not required as part of the project. In conclusion, the proposed development would be justified in this location and would comply with the relevant policy objectives and development standard provisions set out in the Development Plan, as well as the provisions of The Planning System and Flood Risk Management Guidelines for Planning Authorities (2009).

Conclusion

7.6.21. In conclusion, subject to conditions, I consider the water supply, wastewater and surface water drainage proposals to serve the proposed development are satisfactory, with sufficient details provided to allow for this conclusion to be reached. The proposed development would not be at substantive risk of flooding and it would not present substantive risk of flooding to other lands.

7.7. Urban Design

7.7.1. Third parties assert that the development would result in a visually-intrusive, hostile, car-dominated environment and that the development features poor urban design, which would result in negative impacts on the character of the area and the townscape.

Planning Provisions

7.7.2. Section 16.2 of the Development Plan requires the submission of Design Statements for significant developments based on their scale and / or site sensitivity. As part of the application a Planning Report was submitted setting out the background and rationale for the development and listing the key objectives in undertaking the scheme, including the intended route function. The revised Drainage Report, the Outline Surface Water Management Plan and Quality Audit also set out the applicant's rationale in arriving at the subject proposals, including elements addressed as part of refining the scheme. The development is of reasonable scale and the applicant has provided sufficient design information as part of the application documentation.

7.7.3. Policy objectives CPO 7.1 and CPO 7.2 of the County Development Plan promote the provision of quality urban design in developments, including creating accessible, functional, attractive and distinctive places. The book of maps that accompanied the expired Town Plan identified various designations and visual sensitivities in Athlone and its environs. Of note the Town Plan 'Natural Heritage Map' indicated an important view and panorama fronting the railway / bus station on Southern Station Road overlooking the bus depot and town centre to the south. This important view and panorama also appears in the 'Building Heights Policy Map' that was included in the Town Plan, along with other important views and panoramas that traverse the application site, including two views looking northwest and northeast along both sections of St. Francis' Terrace, a view along Ballymahon Road and Southern Station Road towards the railway / bus station and a view northwest from Grace Park Road towards the bus depot. A specific character area is not assigned to the application site or its adjoining area within the Town Plan 'Character Area Map'. Appendix 5 to the County Development Plan identifies scenic routes and protected

views outside of Athlone. Under the provisions of policy objective CPO 13.8, the County Development Plan looks to protect the landscapes of Westmeath.

Visual Impacts

7.7.4. Policy objective CPO 13.12 of the County Development Plan refers to the need for landscape and visual impact assessments to be undertaken where a proposed development would have potential to impact on significant landscape features. Other than the standard application drawings, the applicant did not provide any visual representations of the proposed development in situ or a visual assessment of the impacts of the development on the landscape. Notwithstanding this, I do not consider this to restrict conclusions regarding the potential visual impacts of the development. The immediate site area comprises a collection of buildings and structures of varying ages, which are typical of an inner-urban neighbourhood on the fringes of a town centre. The vast majority of the proposed works would entail subsurface and surface level infrastructures that would not impede views across the site. Based on the site context and the nature of the development, limited impacts on landscape and visual amenities could only arise.

7.7.5. The most pronounced visual change arising from the development would occur at the construction phase, with the felling of trees, the removal of vegetation and the other initial site clearance works. As per the Preliminary CEMP submitted, the construction of the link road would take place behind security hoarding / fencing, which would restrict views of this element of the project. The works to expand the depot would take place on ground set below Southern Station Road, with the boundary planting largely remaining in situ and augmented to provide screening of the depot. The maintaining of trees along the site boundaries and the provision of green spaces bordering the link road, including a wetland pocket park and amenity space, would soften the appearance of the development and would allow it to sit relatively comfortably into this urban environment. The width of the link road at the tie in with Ballymahon Road, featuring four to five traffic lanes, is largely dictated by the existing and proposed junction arrangements. The development would be continuing the existing functions and use of land in this area, and, as such, once operational it would not be out of character with the general appearance of the area.

Appearance

7.7.6. As regards structural elements that would project above ground, the proposed development would feature a repositioned tyre store within the expanded bus depot and a cycle shelter along Southern Station Road. These are buildings of modest scale with limited scope to impact on the appearance of the area. The tyre store would be situated within the bus depot complex on ground level below Southern Station Road where it would be largely screened from views external to the depot by planting and boundary treatments. The cycle shelter would feature a cantilever form and would have a lightweight appearance onto Southern Station Road. These structures would sit comfortably into the immediate urban environs and would not substantially interfere with views, panoramas or the townscape.

7.7.7. The DMURS discusses the need to design new roads in a manner that would encourage pedestrians to use these spaces. The boundary with the bus depot was reduced in height as part of the applicant's further information response to feature a 2.2m-high capped boundary wall, with a 0.7m-high rail on top of this splayed into the bus depot (see drawing no.120278-725 Revision PL3). This boundary would screen views into the expanded bus depot, while also securing the depot compound and mitigating impacts on the amenities of neighbouring residents. A 1m-wide landscape strip would separate the carriageway from the 3.2m-high bus depot boundary. The opposite side of the road would feature a 2.75m-wide cycle path and a 1.8m-wide footpath, with a green strip of varying widths (1m to 4m) provided along the boundary with The Manse and the rear service lane to St. Francis Terrace. I am satisfied that the reduced heights for the boundary treatment along the bus depot would ensure that this would not present an excessively overbearing impact on the new link road, while securing the bus depot compound and screening views into this facility.

7.7.8. Limited details of the landscaping have been provided with the application. Notwithstanding this, I am satisfied that there would be sufficient scope within the allocated green verges along both sides of the link road to soften the appearance of this new infrastructure and the segregation of the cycle path and footpath from the carriageway would encourage use of this new route by active travel patrons. I also acknowledge that there would be limited scope for surveillance of the new link road from neighbouring properties, however, the volume of traffic on this town centre

circulation route and the differing modes that would use it should provide sufficient activity to provide a reasonable level of surveillance.

Conclusion

7.7.9. Visual impacts on the townscape from neighbouring residences, intermittent sections of the immediate transport network and within the site, would be reduced where screening is available, maintained and proposed, with viewers becoming accustomed to the appearance of the development overtime. I am satisfied that the proposed development, including the reduced height for the proposed bus depot boundary treatment onto the link road, would be in keeping with provisions within policy objectives CPO 7.1 and CPO 7.2 of the Development Plan promoting quality urban design in new developments.

7.8. Cultural Heritage

Built Heritage

7.8.1. Third parties assert that the development would impact on the heritage of the town. As part of the applicant's further information response, a Cultural Heritage Impact Assessment was provided, with reference to the built heritage of the area. The terrace of buildings at nos. 137 to 140 Garden Vale comprise the closest buildings to the development site that are included in the Record of Protected Structures appended to the County Development Plan. Other Protected Structures recorded in the Plan that are in the immediate area to the site include the railway / bus station complex (RPS refs. 145 / 147) and a post box (RPS ref. 146) to the immediate north of the site, Coosan Point Road single-span railway bridge (RPS ref. 144) and the former ballroom complex (RPS ref. 141) at The Crescent junction. With the exception of the former ballroom complex, these neighbouring Protected Structures are also included in the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (NIAH). Policy objective 14.27 of the Development Plan includes various provisions with respect to protecting and conserving Protected Structures.

7.8.2. An ACA for Athlone was included in the expired Town Plan, including the town centre streets, St. Bridget's Terrace and Garden Vale terrace along Ballymahon Road. This ACA was referenced in section 14.8 of the Development Plan, which includes policy objectives CPOs 14.39 and 14.42 requiring the character of ACAs to

be protected where new development is proposed. The site would adjoin the ACA at The Crescent junction.

7.8.3. The nature of the proposed development primarily comprising surface level transport infrastructure where closest to the identified built heritage features, limits scope for the proposed development to interfere with the setting or character of neighbouring Protected Structure and the Athlone ACA. The proposed cycle shelter would be of modest scale and positioned 40m from the closest Protected Structure; the former ballroom complex (RPS ref. 141). This separation distance and the buffer provided by the road would substantively limit scope for the proposed shelter to interfere with the character and setting of the neighbouring Protected Structure and the proposed development would not substantially interfere with the built heritage of the area. Accordingly, I am satisfied that the proposed development would not conflict with the stated built heritage protection provisions within the County Development Plan.

Archaeology

7.8.4. Policy objective CPO 14.12 of the Development Plan aims to ensure that archaeological excavation is carried out according to best practice as outlined by the NMS. In their submission, the NMS stated that based on section 3.6 of their 'Framework and Principles for the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage' (1999) an archaeological impact assessment of the site would be necessary, including a programme of research, test excavations and reporting. The NMS Framework states that if archaeological assessment is appropriate, a report on the assessment, including a report on test excavation if such was undertaken, should accompany an application to undertake a development. Furthermore, the Framework states that archaeological assessment should be carried out for extensive sites. Following a request for further information, a cultural heritage impact assessment report accompanied by an archaeological monitoring report were submitted with the application assessing the archaeological heritage of the area.

7.8.5. The expired Town Plan identified a zone of archaeological potential encompassing the central core of Athlone town, generally following the zone of notification for sites within the Record of Monuments and Places (RMPs), which is based on the sites and monuments record (SMR). The application site is not within this zone and does not feature sites or monuments included in the SMR. The closest known

archaeological sites that are included in the SMR relate to the medieval town walls and defences (SMR refs. WM029-042068, WM029-042020 and WM029-042067) located a stated 133m to the south of the site.

7.8.6. The applicant undertook a review of the site and its environs from the Mesolithic period to the late-medieval period, and following this referred to cartographic and aerial photography as sources of evidence in identifying any archaeological features within or adjoining the site. Sites or features of heritage value were not identified as part of the desktop review. The applicant refers to the absence of LiDAR imagery for the site, although, the Site Specific Flood Risk Assessment submitted with the application includes this imagery and further images for this area are available to the public from the Geological Survey of Ireland (GSI). The Archaeological Monitoring report provided by the applicant refers to archaeological requirements set out in 2005 by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government for the link road project. This referred to the need for archaeological assessment, test trenches, reporting and monitoring as part of the project. I also note that the NMS Framework outlines the sources and research that might be used as part of archaeological assessment, including testing via excavations.

7.8.7. As part of the two licenced archaeological investigations that took place within the site in 2005 and 2007, the applicant refers to the monitoring of six trial pits excavated along the route of the proposed link road and review of topsoil stripping on the eastern end of the bus depot lands. The previous archaeological investigations as part of the initial phases of the project did not uncover archaeological remains on the application site. Visual investigation of any suspect anomalies observed in the desktop assessment and previous monitoring was undertaken in March 2026 and this did not result in identification of features of archaeological or historical significance on site, other than a field boundary.

7.8.8. The development would be a substantive distance from known features of archaeological heritage significance. Notwithstanding the results of the archaeological assessment and substantial areas of the site that would not be subject to any excavation work or works that could impact on unknown subsurface archaeology, there remains potential for unknown archaeological remains to be found on site. Section 3.6.1 of the Framework clarifies the rationale for archaeological assessment, including consideration of the potential that development

works or longer-term effects may have on elements of archaeological heritage not identified prior to the commencement of development works. During the construction phase, the applicant has set out standard measures with respect to further archaeological assessment, including test excavations, monitoring, recording and recovery of material of interest, which can be further clarified in line with the NMS requirements, as a condition in the event of a grant of planning permission for the development

7.8.9. I am satisfied that based on the information presented, the proposals do not result in a situation that would preclude the granting of permission for substantive archaeological reasons and the proposed development would not be contrary to Development Plan policy objective CPO 14.5, which aims to protect archaeological heritage.

7.9. Conclusions

7.9.1. The principle of providing transport infrastructure and an expanded bus depot on the application site would not conflict with planning policy. The roads infrastructure element of the project forms part of the long-established proposals to allow for convenient movement of traffic through the two centre, tying in with broader transport proposals for the town as set out within the Athlone Transport Assessment Plan, including upgraded and expanded active travel infrastructures. The development has been designed to alleviate flood risk that presently occurs on the site and in doing so would provide reduced risk for flooding downstream of the site. In assessing the proposals with respect to impacts on the visual and residential amenities, local ecology and cultural heritage, it was not found that the proposals would have significant undue impacts.

7.9.2. Having regard to the planning policy provisions relating to this site and the proposed form of development, I am satisfied that subject to compliance with conditions, the likely consequences of the proposed development for the proper planning and sustainable development of the area would be acceptable.

8.0 Environmental Impact Assessment Screening

Introduction

8.1.1. This section of my report considers the likely effects of the proposed development on the environment and should be read in conjunction with the EIA screening forming appendix A to this report. An EIA Screening Report was submitted with the application. Schedule 5 of Part 2 to the Planning and Development Regulations 2001-2025, provides that mandatory EIA is required for the following classes of development:

- 10(dd) – all private roads which would exceed 2,000 metres in length;
- 10(a)(iv) - urban development that would involve an area greater than 2ha in the case of a business district, 10ha in the case of other parts of a built-up area and 20ha elsewhere ('business district' means a district within a city or town in which the predominant land use is retail or commercial use);
- 15 - any project listed in this Part which does not exceed a quantity, area or other limit specified in this Part in respect of the relevant class of development but which would be likely to have significant effects on the environment, having regard to the criteria set out in Schedule 7.

8.1.2. Section 50 of the Roads Act 1993 also requires mandatory EIA for Roads Authorities undertaking road developments listed in the Roads Regulations, 1994, including:

- (*a*) the construction of a new road of four or more lanes, or the realignment or widening of an existing road so as to provide four or more lanes, where such new, realigned or widened road would be eight kilometres or more in length in a rural area, or 500 metres or more in length in an urban area.

Project Thresholds

8.1.3. The link road element of the project, measuring approximately 350m in length and for public use, does not comply with thresholds or requirements in class 10(dd). The 3.6ha area of the site, located in a built-up urban area, is below thresholds in class 10(a)(iv). Further to this, I do not consider the application site to be within a 'business district' given its context outside of the commercial core of Athlone and given the immediate and on-site land uses, broadly consisting of transport

infrastructures and utilities, open undeveloped ground, residential uses, institutional uses and a limited mix of commercial premises. Further consideration with respect to the type of project listed in class 15 is undertaken below.

8.1.4. The proposed link road in an urban area to be undertaken by a Roads Authority would feature four to five traffic lanes at the tie-ins with existing roads, however, it would be less than 500m in length and would narrow to two traffic lanes for the most part.

Project Characteristics, Location and Potential Impacts

8.1.5. The provision of a new road and expanded bus deport within an urban area has been concluded in section 7.4 above to not be likely to have adverse impacts on the immediate surrounding residential properties. Furthermore, in expanding established uses, the development would be in keeping with surrounding land uses. It is noted in section 7.7 above that the development would not be likely to impact on views, features or landscapes of particular merit in the area. Cultural heritage matters have been considered in section 7.8 above and I am satisfied that this highlights that the cultural heritage of the area would not be likely to be significantly affected by the proposed development. Matters with respect to flooding and potential flood risks have been considered in section 7.6 above, where it is concluded that the development would address flood risks on the site and that it would not increase risk of flooding to other areas primarily due to the stormwater drainage infrastructure to be incorporated into the development.

8.1.6. Following various ecological surveys, Annex I habitats were not recorded within the application site and only limited use of the application site by flora and fauna was identified within the applicant's Ecological Impact Assessment, although precautionary measures are set out with respect to potential for impacts to particular species, including swifts, foxes and bats. As concluded in section 7.5 of my report, I am satisfied that the information available and provided with the application reveals that the proposed development would not have any likely significant effects on biodiversity. The development is not associated with any significant loss of habitat that could act in a cumulative manner to result in significant negative effects to any ecological site. Section 9 below addresses whether or not the subject proposals would adversely affect the integrity of European sites. The proposed development

would not give rise to substantive waste, and measures and features would be put in place to prevent pollution and limit disturbance, as per the Preliminary CEMP submitted with the application.

8.1.7. Construction of the proposed development would be of a temporary nature and short-term, with best practice construction measures to be employed as part of an adaptive project Preliminary CEMP. The implementation of standard best practice methodologies during the construction and operation phase of the proposed development will effectively reduce the potential impacts and mitigate against any likely significant effects on the environment. Should the Commission be minded to grant approval for the development, the additional requirements to comply with the conditions recommended below have been factored into the assessment of likely effects on the environment.

Conclusion

8.1.8. Having regard to the matters considered in sections 7 and 9 of my report, the EIA Screening Report document submitted with the application and the submissions on the file, and when considering the characteristics and location of the proposed development and the types and characteristics of potential impacts, it is considered unlikely that there would be significant effects on the environment arising from the proposed development.

9.0 Appropriate Assessment

9.1.1. This section of my report considers the likely significant effects of the proposed development on European Sites and should be read in conjunction with appendix B to this report.

9.1.2. In screening the need for Appropriate Assessment, it was determined that the proposed development could result in significant effects on European Site No. 00000216 (River Shannon Callows SAC) and European Site No. 004096 (Middle Shannon Callows SPA) in view of the conservation objectives of those sites and that Appropriate Assessment under the provisions of section 177AE of the Act of 2000 was required.

9.1.3. Following an examination, analysis and evaluation of the NIS and all associated material submitted, and taking into account the observation from the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, I consider that adverse effects on the integrity of European Site No. 00000216 (River Shannon Callows SAC) and European Site No. 004096 (Middle Shannon Callows SPA) can be excluded in view of the conservation objectives of these sites and that no reasonable scientific doubt remains as to the absence of such effects. This conclusion is based on a complete assessment of all aspects of the project and the following:

- detailed assessment of construction and operational impacts;
- the proposed development will not affect the attainment of conservation objectives of European Site No. 00000216 (River Shannon Callows SAC), including maintaining the favourable conservation condition of Otter. Furthermore, the proposed development will not affect the attainment of conservation objectives to maintain or restore the favourable conservation condition for special conservation interest bird species associated with European Site No. 004096 (Middle Shannon Callows SPA);
- the effectiveness of mitigation measures proposed in the NIS, the Outline Surface Water Management Plan and the adoption of the project Preliminary CEMP;
- the application of planning conditions to require the implementation of mitigation measures detailed in the project Preliminary CEMP and NIS.

10.0 Water Framework Directive Assessment

10.1. Appendix C of this report screens the impact of the proposed development with respect to the provisions of the Water Framework Directive (WFD). I have assessed the proposed development and have considered the objectives as set out in Article 4 of the WFD, which seek to protect and, where necessary, restore surface water and groundwater bodies in order to reach good chemical and ecological status, and to prevent their deterioration. Having considered the nature, scale and location of the project, I am satisfied that it can be eliminated from further assessment because there is no conceivable qualitative or quantitative risk to any surface water or groundwater bodies. The reasons for coming to this conclusion is as follows:

- the implementation of the measures outlined in the project Preliminary CEMP, the revised Drainage Report (March 2026) and the Outline Surface Water Management Plan;
- to the measures proposed to protect the drainage channels traversing the site during the construction phase, such as the maintenance of buffers from the channels, and to the installation of silt and pollution-control measures;
- to the implementation and maintenance of stormwater drainage systems during the operational phase.

10.2. I conclude that on the basis of objective information, that the proposed development would not result in a risk of deterioration on any waterbody (rivers, lakes, groundwater, transitional and coastal), either qualitatively or quantitatively, temporarily or permanently, or otherwise jeopardise a waterbody in reaching the respective WFD objectives and, consequently, the proposed development can be excluded from further assessment.

11.0 Recommendation

11.1. Following the assessments above, I recommend that the Commission approve the proposed development for the reasons and considerations set out below, albeit subject to conditions, including the requirement to comply with the submitted details and with the mitigation measures set out in the Natura Impact Statement.

11.2. The proposed development would provide an additional section of inner-urban transport infrastructure tying in with an existing looped town centre traffic system, that would improve access at a public transport node and serve to facilitate improved active travel infrastructures connecting with this node and the wider town centre area. The proposed development would also serve to address flooding that is known to occur on the site, and in doing so further alleviate the risk of flooding elsewhere.

11.3. I confirm that this report represents my professional planning assessment, judgement and opinion on the matter assigned to me and that no person has influenced or sought to influence me, directly or indirectly, following my professional assessment and recommendation set out in my report in an improper or inappropriate way.

12.0 Reasons and Considerations

In performing its functions in relation to the making of its decision, the Commission had regard to Section 15(1) of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, as amended by Section 17 of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, and the requirement to, in so far as practicable, perform its functions in a manner consistent with the Climate Action Plan 2024, the Climate Action Plan 2025, the relevant provisions of Ireland's Long-term Strategy on Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reductions 2024, the National Adaptation Framework Planning for a Climate Resilient Ireland 2024, including the relevant sectoral adaptation plans as they relate to biodiversity, and in the furtherance of the objective of mitigating greenhouse-gas emissions and adapting to the effects of climate change in the State.

In coming to its decision, the Commission also had regard to the following:

- the EU Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC);
- the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations, 2011 (as amended);
- the likely consequences for the environment and the proper planning and sustainable development of the area in which it is proposed to carry out the proposed development and the likely significant effects of the proposed development on European Sites;
- the conservation objectives and qualifying interests for the River Shannon Callows Special Area of Conservation (European Site No. 00000216) and Middle Shannon Callows Special Protection Area (European Site No. 004096);
- the policies and objectives of the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027;
- the provisions of the Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets (DMURS) issued by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government in 2019;

- the provisions of the Planning System and Flood Risk Management Guidelines for Planning Authorities (including the associated Technical Appendices) issued by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government in 2009;
- the nature and extent of the proposed works, as set out in the application for approval;
- the information submitted in relation to the potential impacts on habitats, flora and fauna, including the Ecological Impact Assessment and the Natura Impact Statement;
- the submissions received in relation to the proposed development, and,
- the report and recommendation of the person appointed by the Commission to make a report and a recommendation on this matter.

Appropriate Assessment – Stage 1

The Commission agreed with and adopted the screening assessment and conclusion arrived at in the Planning Inspector's report that the River Shannon Callows Special Area of Conservation (European Site No. 00000216) and the Middle Shannon Callows Special Protection Area (European Site No. 004096) are the only European Sites in respect of which the proposed development has the potential to have a significant effect.

Appropriate Assessment – Stage 2

The Commission considered the Natura Impact Statement and the associated documentation submitted with the application for approval, the mitigation measures contained therein, the submissions on file, and the Planning Inspector's assessment and carried out an appropriate assessment of the implications of the proposed development for the River Shannon Callows Special Area of Conservation (European Site No. 00000216) and the Middle Shannon Callows Special Protection Area (European Site No. 004096), in view of the Sites' conservation objectives. The Commission considered that the information before it was adequate to allow the carrying out of an appropriate assessment. In completing the appropriate assessment, the Commission considered, in particular, the following:

(i) the likely direct and indirect impacts arising from the proposed development, both individually or in combination with other plans or projects,

(ii) the mitigation measures that are included as part of the current proposal, and

(iii) the Conservation Objectives for the European Sites.

In completing the appropriate assessment, the Commission accepted and adopted the appropriate assessment carried out in the Planning Inspector's report in respect of the potential effects of the proposed development on the integrity of the aforementioned European Sites, having regard to the Sites' conservation objectives.

In conclusion, the Commission was satisfied that the proposed development, by itself or in combination with other plans or projects, would not adversely affect the integrity of the European Sites, in view of the Sites' conservation objectives.

Environmental Impact Assessment Screening

The Commission completed an environmental impact assessment screening of the proposed development and considered that the Environmental Impact Assessment Screening Report and other documents and drawings submitted by the Local Authority identifies and describes adequately the direct, indirect, secondary and cumulative effects of the proposed development on the environment.

Having regard to:

1. the criteria set out in Schedule 7 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as revised;

(a) the design of the proposed transport infrastructure and the proposals to address drainage channels traversing the site;

(b) the policy objectives contained in the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027, which the subject proposals would not conflict with, and the results of the Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027;

(c) the location of the development, which would not result in any significant effects on any sensitive location specified in Article 109(4)(a) of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as revised;

(d) the absence of any potential for significant cumulative effects.

2. the results of relevant surveys and assessments submitted by the applicant of the effects of the proposed development on the environment;

3. the features and measures embedded in the design of the proposed development or proposed by the applicant to avoid or prevent what might otherwise be significant effects on the environment, including features and measures identified in the project Preliminary Construction Environmental Management Plan, the Natura Impact Statement, the Outline Surface Water Management Plan, the Drainage Report (March 2026) and the Ecological Impact Assessment.

It is considered that the proposed development would not be likely to have significant effects on the environment and that the preparation and submission of an environmental impact assessment report would not, therefore, be required.

Proper Planning and Sustainable Development / Likely Effects on the Environment

It is considered that, subject to compliance with the conditions set out below, the proposed development would provide transport infrastructure benefitting access and services at the Athlone railway / bus station and enhancing active travel infrastructures connecting with the wider network. The proposed development would address known flooding that occurs on the site and would alleviate the risk of flooding downstream. The proposed development would not be likely to have significant effects on the environment, would not seriously injure the visual amenities of the area or the amenities of property in the area, would be acceptable in terms of traffic and pedestrian safety, would not adversely affect the cultural heritage of the area, would constitute an appropriate form of development at this location and would be in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027. The proposed development would, therefore, be in accordance with the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

13.0 Conditions

1. The development shall be carried out and completed in accordance with the plans and particulars lodged with the application, as amended by the further plans and particulars received by An Coimisiún Pleanála on the 30th day of March, 2026, except as may otherwise be required in order to comply with the following conditions. Where any mitigation measures set out in the Natura Impact Statement or any conditions of approval require further details to be prepared by or on behalf of the local authority, these details shall be placed on the file and retained as part of the public record.

Reason: In the interest of clarity and the proper planning and sustainable development of the area and to ensure the protection of the environment.

2. The mitigation and monitoring measures outlined in the Natura Impact Statement submitted with the application, shall be carried out and implemented in full. Prior to the commencement of the development, details of a time schedule for implementation of the mitigation measures and associated monitoring shall be prepared by the Local Authority, placed on file and retained as part of the public record.

Reason: In the interest of protecting the environment and the protection of European Sites.

3. A suitably-qualified ecologist shall be retained by the Local Authority to oversee the site set up and construction of the proposed development, including implementation of the mitigation measures relating to ecology. The ecologist shall be present during the works. Within two months of the completion of works, an ecological report of the site works shall be prepared by the appointed ecologist, placed on file and retained as part of the public record.

Reason: In the interest of nature conservation and biodiversity.

4. Prior to the commencement of development, the local authority, or any agent acting on its behalf, shall prepare in consultation with the project ecologist and relevant statutory agencies, an updated Construction Environmental Management Plan for the development, demonstrating the proposals adhere to best practice and protocols. The Construction Environmental Management Plan shall be placed on file, retained as part of the public record and shall include:

a) all mitigation and monitoring measures to be implemented under condition 2;

b) the locations and extent of silt-control measures to be installed on the site;

c) specific proposals as to how the measures outlined in the Construction Environmental Management Plan will be measured and monitored for their effectiveness;

d) a Construction Traffic Management Plan.

Reason: In the interest of protecting the environment, European Sites, public health and road safety.

5. The following nature conservation requirements shall be complied with:

(a) prior to the commencement of development, details of measures to protect water quality of the catchment shall be outlined and placed on file. Full regard shall be had to Inland Fisheries Ireland 'Guidelines on Protection of Fisheries during Construction Works in and adjacent to Waters' (2016). A programme of water-quality monitoring shall be prepared in consultation with the project ecological clerk of works and relevant statutory agencies, and the programme shall be implemented in full thereafter, placed on file and retained as part of the public record;

(b) vegetation removal shall not take place during the period between the 1st day of March and the 31st day of August, inclusive, without

the written approval of the project ecologist. Any approval arising shall be placed on file and retained as part of the public record;

(c) the results of pre-construction surveys for mammals, which shall be carried out by a suitably qualified ecologist, shall be placed on file and retained as part of the public record.

Reason: In the interests of biodiversity and nature conservation.

6. The landscaping scheme shown on the site plan drawing number 120278-4001 Revision PL4 submitted with the application on the 7th day of July, 2025, shall be carried out within the first planting season following substantial completion of the construction works. Only indigenous tree species should be planted as part of the overall landscaping scheme, including as part of the augmented boundary planting to the bus depot facility.

Reason: In the interests of visual amenity.

7. A Quality Audit (which shall include a road safety audit, an access audit, a cycle audit and a walking audit) shall be carried out at Stage 2 for the detailed design stage and at Stage 3 for the post-construction stage. All audits shall be carried out at the Local Authority's expense in accordance with the Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets guidance and Transport Infrastructure Ireland standards. Details of the independent audit team(s) shall be prepared, placed on the file and retained as part of the public record and all measures recommended by the auditor(s) shall be implemented unless there are exceptional circumstances allowing for deviation. The Stage 2 Audit reports shall be prepared, placed on the file and retained as part of the public record prior to the commencement of development.

Reason: In the interest of traffic safety and the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

8. All mitigation measures in relation to archaeology and cultural heritage as set out in the Cultural Heritage Impact Assessment prepared by Moore Group and dated 25th day of March, 2026, shall be implemented in full.

The Local Authority shall engage a suitably-qualified (licence-eligible) archaeologist to carry out an archaeological impact assessment following consultation with the National Monument Service in advance of any site preparation works and groundworks, including site investigation works, topsoil stripping, site clearance and excavation works.

The archaeological impact assessment shall involve an examination of all development layout / design drawings, completion of documentary / cartographic / photographic research and fieldwork, the latter to include, where applicable metal detection survey and archaeological testing (consent / licensed as required under the National Monuments Acts). The archaeologist shall prepare a comprehensive report, including an archaeological impact statement and mitigation strategy, to be placed on the file and retained as part of the public record in advance of any site preparation works, groundworks and / or construction works.

Where archaeological remains are shown to be present, preservation in-situ, establishment of 'buffer zones', preservation by record (archaeological excavation) or archaeological monitoring may be required and mitigatory measures to ensure the preservation and / or recording of archaeological remains shall be included in the archaeological impact assessment. Any further archaeological mitigation requirements specified following consultation with the National Monuments Service, shall be complied with by the Local Authority.

The National Monuments Service shall be furnished with a final archaeological report describing the results of any subsequent archaeological investigative works and / or monitoring following the completion of all archaeological work on site and the completion of any

necessary post-excavation work. All resulting and associated archaeological costs shall be borne by the Local Authority.

Reason: To ensure the continued preservation either in situ or by record of places, caves, sites, features or other objects of archaeological interest.

9. Prior to commencement of development, the Local Authority shall enter into water and wastewater connection agreement(s) with Uisce Éireann.

Reason: In the interest of public health.

10. (a) Prior to commencement of development the Local Authority shall prepare a Stage 2 - Detailed Design Stage Storm Water Audit, which shall be placed on the file and retained as part of the public record.

(b) Upon Completion of the development, a Stage 3 Completion Stormwater Audit to demonstrate Sustainable Urban Drainage System measures have been installed and are working as designed and that there has been no misconnections or damage to storm water drainage infrastructure during construction, shall be prepared, placed on the file and retained as part of the public record.

(c) Prior to the operation of the development, a maintenance policy to include regular operational inspection and maintenance of the Sustainable Urban Drainage System infrastructure and the fuel interceptors shall be prepared, placed on the file, retained as part of the public record and implemented in full.

Reason: In the interest of public health and surface water management.

11. Site development and building works shall be carried out only between the hours of 0800 to 1900 Mondays to Fridays inclusive, between 0800 to 1400 hours on Saturdays and not at all on Sundays and public holidays. Deviation from these times will only be allowed in exceptional circumstances.

Reason: In the interest of clarity and in order to safeguard the residential amenities of property in the vicinity.

Colm McLoughlin
Senior Planning Inspector

28th May 2026

Appendices

Appendix A. EIA Screening

EIA Pre-Screening

ACP ref.	322958-25		
Proposed Development Summary	Construction of a link road measuring approximately 350m in length, with active travel paths and upgraded active travel paths along adjoining roads, a cycle shelter, increased hardstanding to bus depot yard requiring culverting and revised alignment of drainage channels, relocation of a tyre-storage building, formation of a wetland area, boundary treatments, revised roads arrangements, connections to services, signage, lighting, hard and soft landscaping.		
Development Address	Bus Éireann Depot, The Crescent Junction and Coosan Point Road / Southern Station Road, Athlone, County Westmeath		
1. Does the proposed development come within the definition of a 'project' for the purposes of EIA? (For the purposes of the Directive, 'Project' means - the execution of construction works or of other installations or schemes, - Other interventions in the natural surroundings and landscape including those involving the extraction of mineral resources)		**Yes**	✓Proceed to Q.2
		No	No further action required
2. Is the proposed development of a CLASS specified in Part 2, Schedule 5, Planning and Development Regulations 2001 (as amended)			
Yes	✓	Planning & Development Regulations 2001, as revised Part 1, Schedule 5 Class 10(dd) All private roads which would exceed 2000 metres in length. Part 2, Schedule 5 Class 10(b)(iv) Urban development which would involve an area greater than 2 hectares in the case of a business district, 10 hectares in the case of other parts of a built-up area and 20 hectares elsewhere. Class 15 Any project listed in this Part which does not exceed a quantity, area or other limit specified	Proceed to Q.3

		in this Part in respect of the relevant class of development but which would be likely to have significant effects on the environment, having regard to the criteria set out in Schedule 7. <u>Roads Act 1993</u> Section 50(1)(a) A road authority shall prepare a statement of the likely effects on the environment (hereinafter referred to as an "environmental impact statement") of any proposed road development consisting of – (iii) any prescribed type of proposed road development consisting of the construction of a proposed public road or the improvement of an existing public road. <u>Roads Regulations, 1994</u> Article 8 The prescribed types of proposed road development for the purpose of subsection (1)(a)(iii) of section 50 of the Roads Act 1993 shall be - (*a*) the construction of a new road of four or more lanes, or the realignment or widening of an existing road so as to provide four or more lanes, where such new, realigned or widened road would be eight kilometres or more in length in a rural area, or 500 metres or more in length in an urban area.	
No			
3. Is the proposed development of a CLASS specified in Part 2, Schedule 5, Planning and Development Regulations 2001 (as amended) OR a prescribed type of proposed road development under Article 8 of Roads Regulations 1994, AND does it meet/exceed the thresholds?			
Yes, the proposed development is of a Class and meets/exceeds the threshold.			
Yes, the proposed development is of a Class but is sub-threshold.	✓	<u>Planning & Development Regulations 2001, as revised</u> Part 2, Schedule 5 The project would provide an urban development comprising a 350m-long public road.	Proceed to Q.4

		The urban development would be undertaken on a site measuring a stated 3.6ha, located in a built-up area that is not a business district. <u>Roads Regulations, 1994, Article 8</u> The project would provide a 350m-long public road that would primarily feature two traffic lanes.	
No, the development is not of a Class Specified in Part 2, Schedule 5 or a prescribed type of proposed road development under Article 8 of the Roads Regulations, 1994			

4. Has Schedule 7A information been submitted AND is the development a Class of Development for the purposes of the EIA Directive (as identified in Q3)?		
Yes	✓	EIA Screening Determination required (ACP Form 3 below)
No		Pre-screening determination conclusion remains as above (Q1 to Q3)

Inspector: _____ **Date:** _28th May 2026__

EIA Screening Determination (ACP Form 3)

A. CASE DETAILS		
ACP Reference	322958-25	
Development Summary	Construction of a link road measuring approximately 350m in length, with active travel paths and upgraded active travel paths along adjoining roads, a cycle shelter, increased hardstanding to bus depot yard requiring culverting and revised alignment of drainage channels, relocation of a tyre-storage building, formation of a wetland area, boundary treatments, revised roads arrangements, connections to services, signage, lighting, hard and soft landscaping.	
	Yes / No / N/A	**Comment (if relevant)**
1. Was a Screening Determination carried out by the PA?	N/A	Direct application
2. Has Schedule 7A information been submitted?	Yes	The application was accompanied by an EIA screening report (dated July 2025) that included Schedule 7a information.
3. Has an AA screening report or NIS been submitted?	Yes	NIS submitted.
4. Is a IED/IPC or Waste Licence (or review of licence) required from the EPA? If YES has the EPA commented on the need for an EIAR?	No	
Have any other relevant assessments of the effects on the environment which have a significant bearing on the project been carried out pursuant to other relevant Directives – for example SEA	Yes	Ecological Impact Assessment addresses the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC), Birds Directive (2009/147/EC) and Water Framework Directive 2000/60/EC.

B. EXAMINATION	Yes / No / Uncertain	Briefly describe the nature and extent and Mitigation Measures (where relevant) (having regard to the probability, magnitude, including population size affected, complexity, duration, frequency, intensity, and reversibility of impact) Mitigation Measures – Where relevant specify features or measures proposed by the applicant to avoid or prevent a significant effect	Is this likely to result in significant effects on the environment? Yes / No / Uncertain
This screening examination should be read with, and in light of, the rest of the Inspector's Report.			
1. Characteristics of proposed development (including demolition, construction, operation or decommissioning)			
1.1 Is the project significantly different in character or scale to the existing surrounding or environment?	No	The surrounding environment consists of an inner-urban area featuring a mix of uses, including transport infrastructures, residences, open space, medical institutions, schools, utilities and commercial properties. The project will introduce a new piece of local transport infrastructure that would tie in with other infrastructures along the north side of the town centre. The project would not be significantly different to the character and scale of the existing surrounding environment.	No
1.2 Will construction, operation, decommissioning or demolition works cause physical changes to the locality (topography, land use, waterbodies)?	Yes	Open drainage channels would be culverted as part of the surface drainage proposals and a wetland area would be formed. The majority of the works would utilise the existing ground level to facilitate the development with only limited excavations. The construction works are to be carried out in accordance with mitigation and monitoring measures set out in	No

		the submitted Preliminary CEMP and NIS. Decommissioning works are not proposed. A tyre shed building would be moved to an alternative location within the expanded bus depot.	
1.3 Will construction or operation of the project use natural resources such as land, soil, water, materials/minerals or energy, especially resources which are non-renewable or in short supply?	Yes	There will be an increase in the use of energy such as electrical power and fuel for construction vehicles and machinery. Limited soil and stone would be excavated for the project and only limited materials would be required for the project, such as fill rock/gravel, concrete, asphalt road surface, cycle shelter, lights, signage, service pipes and ducts.	No
1.4 Will the project involve the use, storage, transport, handling or production of substance which would be harmful to human health or the environment?	No	Operation of construction machinery and plant will require oil, fuels, lubricants and hydraulic fluids, which would be stored in bunded and secure areas away from open drainage. Storage, handling and protection measures are outlined within the Preliminary CEMP, which includes management plans and provision for an Emergency Response Plan to be prepared.	No
1.5 Will the project produce solid waste, release pollutants or any hazardous / toxic / noxious substances?	No	Limited waste would be expected from the works. The construction phase of the project would potentially result in the release of pollutants associated with the operation of machinery and equipment. The submitted Preliminary CEMP and Outline Surface Water Management Plan include measures to prevent the release of pollutants, with waste to	No

		be stored in designated areas and disposed of via waste management contractors.	
1.6 Will the project lead to risks of contamination of land or water from releases of pollutants onto the ground or into surface waters, groundwater, coastal waters or the sea?	Yes	Open drainage channels run through the site. There is potential for construction works to release pollutants into the environment which could affect the surrounding hydrology and hydrogeology; however, the development will be managed in accordance with good practice construction methods and mitigation and monitoring measures as set out in the submitted NIS, Preliminary CEMP and Outline Surface Water Management Plan. Water falling onto the proposed hard surfaces, would be collected within the surface water drainage system, which would be fitted with fuel interceptors to limit pollutants and sediment entering natural watercourses during the operation phase.	No
1.7 Will the project cause noise and vibration or release of light, heat, energy or electromagnetic radiation?	Yes	There would be some noise and vibration disturbance during the onsite construction works. As per measures outlined in the Preliminary CEMP, works will be restricted to standard construction hours, predominately taking place during daylight hours. Construction will be carried out in accordance with guidance set out in BS 5228:2009+A1:2014, with restriction of certain work timings and controls for machinery.	No
1.8 Will there be any risks to human health, for example due to water contamination or air pollution?	Yes	There is potential for emissions from on-site construction machinery and traffic-derived pollutants, such as dust particles, carbon	No

		dioxide and nitrogen dioxide to be emitted during construction, however, due to the limited scale and temporary duration of the construction works (12-18 months), as well as the proposed mitigation measures, impacts on air quality would not be anticipated to be significant. Noise and vibration levels would be controlled to remain within appropriate levels. Substantive risks to human health would not arise.	
1.9 Will there be any risk of major accidents that could affect human health or the environment?	No	The vulnerability of the development to major accidents or disasters is likely to be related to flood risk and the potential for climate change to increase this risk. A revised Drainage Report was submitted to address the potential for flooding by maintaining outflows to pre-development levels. An emergency response plan and procedures are proposed as part of the project Preliminary CEMP.	No
1.10 Will the project affect the social environment (population, employment)	Yes	The development would improve permeability in the town centre for the benefit of locals and visitors. Some disruption would be anticipated over the construction phase but this would be limited by virtue of the measures proposed as part of the project Preliminary CEMP.	No
1.11 Is the project part of a wider large scale change that could result in cumulative effects on the environment?	Yes	This is a standalone project. Table 1 of the application EIA Screening Report (p.16) listed other projects in the surrounding area. The project is not of a scale that could result in significant cumulative effects on the environment with these developments.	No

2. Location of proposed development			
2.1 Is the proposed development located on, in, adjoining or have the potential to impact on any of the following: - European site (SAC / SPA) - NHA / pNHA - Designated Nature Reserve - Designated refuge for flora or fauna - Place, site or feature of ecological interest, the preservation/conservation/ protection of which is an objective of a development plan/ LAP/ draft plan or variation of a plan	Yes	The closest European Sites and proposed Natural Heritage Areas are located 0.8km downstream of the site along the Shannon. The site is not designated as a nature reserve or a refuge for flora and fauna. The site is not specifically identified for protection in the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027. An Ecological Impact Assessment was undertaken, including surveys of the site. Annex I habitat was not identified on site. Appendix C of this report concludes that the project would not result in adverse effects for European Sites in view of their conservation objectives. Significant effects for biodiversity are not expected subject to the implementation of the mitigation, monitoring and management measures outlined in the application NIS, the Ecological Impact Assessment and the Preliminary CEMP.	No
2.2 Could any protected, important or sensitive species of flora or fauna which use areas on or around the site, for example: for breeding, nesting, foraging, resting, over-wintering, or migration, be affected by the project?	Yes	Ecological surveys have been undertaken with the species recorded listed in the Ecological Impact Assessment. The drainage channels on site were identified as being of very limited ecological value. A foxes den was identified centrally within the undeveloped area of the site. Bats were observed but bat roosting was not in evidence. Tress would be felled outside of the bird nesting season.	No

2.3 Are there any other features of landscape, historic, archaeological, or cultural importance that could be affected?	Yes	The site is not located within the ACA that was assigned in the since expired Athlone Development Town Plan 2014-2020. An assessment of cultural heritage impacts is undertaken in section 7.8 of my report, which does not indicate significant impacts for neighbouring features of heritage value.	No
2.4 Are there any areas on/around the location which contain important, high quality or scarce resources which could be affected by the project, for example: forestry, agriculture, water/coastal, fisheries, minerals?	Yes	The subject site comprises public transport infrastructure, a transport depot and undeveloped open ground, which are typical of the area and are not scarce land resources in this area.	No
2.5 Are there any water resources including surface waters, for example: rivers, lakes/ponds, coastal or groundwaters which could be affected by the project, particularly in terms of their volume and flood risk?	Yes	The site is connected to the River Shannon by open drains crossing the lands. There would be additional means of storing water on the site, with the stormwater drainage proposals designed to address known flooding within the site and, therefore, downstream flood risk arising from drainage on the site would be alleviated. Furthermore, extensive mitigation measures are proposed in the Outline Surface Water Management Plan, NIS and Preliminary CEMP to address the potential for impacts on water quality.	No
2.6 Is the location susceptible to subsidence, landslides or erosion?	Yes	There is no evidence of subsidence or landslide risks in the immediate area based on the GSI landslide database.	No
2.7 Are there any key transport routes(e.g. National primary Roads) on or around the location which are	Yes	The roads surrounding the subject site are known to intermittently experience traffic congestion. The project would not be	No

susceptible to congestion or which cause environmental problems, which could be affected by the project?		expected to substantively add to traffic congestion, as it is intended to facilitate improvements to active travel and public transport options within Athlone, as well as tie in with an existing vehicular traffic circulation route. A construction traffic management plan would be implemented as part of the final project CEMP to minimise traffic disruption during the construction phase.	
2.8 Are there existing sensitive land uses or community facilities (such as hospitals, schools etc) which could be affected by the project?	No	The site is located north of the town centre area, with a hospital located immediately to the west and schools to the east along Grace Park Road. The project would provide upgraded transport infrastructure that would indirectly benefit access to these facilities.	No
3. Any other factors that should be considered which could lead to environmental impacts?			
3.1 Cumulative Effects: Could this project together with existing and/or approved development result in cumulative effects during the construction/ operation phase?	Yes	Cumulative effects with other projects are not likely to give rise to significant impacts.	No
3.2 Transboundary Effects: Is the project likely to lead to transboundary effects?	No		
3.3 Are there any other relevant considerations?	No		
C. CONCLUSION			

No real likelihood of significant effects on the environment.	✓	EIAR Not Required
Real likelihood of significant effects on the environment.		~~EIAR Required~~

D. MAIN REASONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Having regard to -

4. the criteria set out in Schedule 7 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001-2025;

(e) the design of the proposed transport infrastructure and the proposals to address drainage channels traversing the site;

(f) the policy objectives contained in the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027, which the subject proposals would not conflict with, and the results of the Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027;

(g) the location of the development, which would not result in any significant effects on any sensitive location specified in Article 109(4)(a) of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as revised;

(h) the absence of any potential for significant cumulative effects.

5. the results of relevant surveys and assessments submitted by the applicant of the effects of the proposed development on the environment;

6. the features and measures embedded in the design of the proposed development or proposed by the applicant to avoid or prevent what might otherwise be significant effects on the environment, including features and measures identified in the project Preliminary Construction Environmental Management Plan, the Natura Impact Statement, the Outline Surface Water Management Plan, the Drainage Report (March 2026) and the Ecological Impact Assessment.

It is considered that the proposed development would not be likely to have significant effects on the environment and that the preparation and submission of an environmental impact assessment report would not, therefore, be required.

Inspector _____ **Date** _28th May 2026____
Colm McLoughlin

Approved _____ **Date** _28th May 2026____
(Assistant Director of Planning)

Appendix B. AA

The requirements of Article 6(3) as related to appropriate assessment of a project under part XAB, sections 177U and 177V of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, are considered fully in this section. The areas addressed in this section are as follows:

- compliance with Article 6(3) of the EU Habitats Directive;
- screening the need for AA;
- the NIS and associated documents;
- AA of implications of the proposed development on the integrity of European Sites.

1. Compliance with Article 6(3) of the EU Habitats Directive

The Habitats Directive deals with the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora throughout the European Union. Article 6(3) of this Directive requires that any plan or project not directly connected with or necessary to the management of a European Site but likely to have a significant effect thereon, either individually or in combination with other plans or projects shall be subject to appropriate assessment of its implications for a European Site in view of the site's conservation objectives. The competent authority must be satisfied that the proposal will not adversely affect the integrity of a European Site before consent can be given.

The proposed development is not directly connected to or necessary to the management of any European Site and therefore is subject to the provisions of Article 6(3).

2. Screening the Need for AA

2.1 Site

The site comprises development and undeveloped land parcels, with the developed area accommodating a bus depot and public transport infrastructures. Habitats identified on site are outlined in section 7.5 of the report above. Shallow drainage channels emerge in the undeveloped lands to the west of the site, draining west to a

culvert leading under Southern Station Road. As noted above, this culvert drains the land to the river Shannon located 350m to the west.

No Annex I habitats were recorded within the application site and only limited use of the site by flora and fauna was identified during the applicant's ecological surveying. Several macrophytes and moorhen were recorded using the main drainage channel running through the west of the site, resulting in this aquatic habitat being considered by the applicant to be of limited local value. A family of foxes were notable residents of the site. Bats have been recorded foraging and commuting through the application site. Evidence of badgers and otters using the site was not recorded. A total of 24 bird species were recorded at the site during surveys. Invasive species were not identified in the works areas, although several medium impact, non-native species were identified.

2.2 Project

A detailed description of the proposed development is provided in section 3 of the main report above and expanded upon below where necessary. Details of the construction phase of the development are provided throughout the application documentation, including the NIS, the Outline Surface Water Management Plan and the Preliminary CEMP, with cognisance of the site context and connections to the river Shannon. The drainage channel emerging from St. Francis' Terrace to the south of the site would be culverted and redirected towards a wetland lagoon to be constructed on the junction of the proposed link road and Southern Station Road. The other shallow drain that emerges from under the bus depot, would be culverted, with a connection to attenuation tanks to address stormwater flows and a hydrobrake to control waters draining into the culvert under Southern Station Road. Extensive clearance of vegetation and trees would be necessary, and the applicant proposes tree planting, wetland habitat, swift nest boxes and bat boxes to compensate towards the known impacts on biodiversity.

Drainage infrastructure to be used during the operational phase of the project would include a surface / stormwater water network that would be entirely separated from the wastewater sewer network. Surface water runoff from hardstanding areas would be collected by gravity into this piped network. All stormwater runoff from hard surfaces would be collected via trapped gullies to remove detritus and floating

contaminates. As part of the SUDS design there would be an attenuation system incorporated into the proposed stormwater drainage with storage tank and fuel interceptors that would be subject to regular maintenance / cleaning to ensure suitable operation is maintained long term.

2,3 Relevant Submissions

The applicant submitted a NIS dating from July 2025 prepared by Coiscéim Consulting. The NIS provides a description of the site, the receiving environment and the proposed development, as well as identifying European Sites potentially within the zone of influence of the development. The applicant concluded that the possibility of the proposed development having a significant effect on three European Sites cannot be excluded. The sites screened in for AA by the applicant comprise the River Shannon Callows SAC, Middle Shannon Callows SPA and Lough Ree SPA. With the implementation of avoidance and mitigation measures, the applicant's NIS concluded that the proposed development would not have an adverse effect on the integrity of any European Sites, individually or in combination with other plans and projects.

The submissions from third parties and prescribed bodies are summarised in section 6 of the main report above, with the NPWS requiring all mitigation measures listed in the Ecological Impact Assessment and NIS to be strictly adhered to, and an Ecological Clerk of Works engaged to oversee implementation of the mitigation measures.

2.4 Zone of Influence

The closest European Sites, including SACs and SPAs, and the direction and distance to same from the application site, are identified in table 1 of the main report above.

Table 2. European Sites within the Project Zone of Influence

Site Name / Code	Qualifying Interests (QIs) Special Conservation Interests (SCIs)	Ecological Connections
River Shannon Callows SAC 000216	Maintain or restore the favourable conservation condition of the Annex I habitat(s) and / or the Annex I species (otter) for which the SAC has been selected.	Hydrological connections exist through surface water leaving the site entering the drainage

	https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/protected-sites/conservation_objectives/CO000216.pdf Accessed 18/12/2025	channel discharging to the river Shannon. Otter was not recorded as using the drainage channels.
Middle Shannon Callows SPA 004096	Restore the favourable conservation condition of Lapwing, Black-tailed Godwit, Black-headed Gull and Wigeon. Maintain the favourable conservation condition of Whooper Swan, Golden Plover and wetlands. Review the status of Corncrake. https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/protected-sites/conservation_objectives/CO004096.pdf Accessed 18/12/2025	Hydrological connections exist through surface water leaving the site entering the drainage channel discharging to the river Shannon. SCI species not recorded on site.
Lough Ree SAC 000440	Maintain or restore the favourable conservation condition of the Annex I habitat(s) and / or the Annex I species (otter) for which the SAC has been selected. Review the status of Old sessile oak woods with Ilex and Blechnum in the British Isles https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/protected-sites/conservation_objectives/CO000440.pdf Accessed 18/12/2025	Upstream of drainage channel discharge point to the river Shannon. Otter was not recorded as using the drainage channels on site.
Lough Ree SPA 004064	To restore the favourable conservation condition of Whooper Swan, Teal, Mallard, Common Scoter, Goldeneye, Golden Plover, Lapwing, Common Tern and Wigeon. To maintain the favourable conservation condition of Little Grebe, Tufted Duck, Coot, Shoveler and Wetland. https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/protected-sites/conservation_objectives/CO004064.pdf Accessed 18/12/2025	Upstream of drainage channel discharge point to the river Shannon. Mallard duck was recorded using the site.
Crosswood Bog SAC 002337	To restore the favourable conservation condition of Active raised bogs. A conservation objective for degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration is inherently linked to that of active raised bogs (7110) and a separate conservation objective has not been set.	Upstream of drainage channel discharge point to the river Shannon.
Carn Park Bog SAC 002336	To restore the favourable conservation condition of Active raised bogs. A conservation objective for degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration is	Upstream of drainage channel discharge point to the river Shannon.

	inherently linked to that of active raised bogs (7110) and a separate conservation objective has not been set.	
Castlesampson Esker SAC 001625	To restore the favourable conservation condition of turloughs and semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies on calcareous substrates (Festuco-Brometalia) (*important orchid sites)	Downstream tributary connection to the river Shannon.
Ballynamona Bog and Corkip Lough SAC 002339	To restore the favourable conservation condition of turloughs, active raised bogs and bog woodland. A separate conservation objective has not been set for degraded raised bogs and depressions on peat substrates of the Rhynchosporion.	Downstream tributary connection to the river Shannon.
Pilgrim's Road Esker SAC 001776	To maintain the favourable conservation condition of Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies on calcareous substrates (Festuco-Brometalia) (*important orchid sites).	Downstream along the river Shannon.
Mongan Bog SAC 000580	To restore the favourable conservation condition of active raised bogs. A separate conservation objective has not been set for degraded raised bogs and depressions on peat substrates of the Rhynchosporion.	Downstream along the river Shannon.
Mongan Bog SPA 004017	To restore the Favourable conservation condition of Greenland White-fronted Goose.	Downstream along the river Shannon. Greenland White-fronted Goose was not recorded using the site.

While some European Sites are downstream of the application site, given the separation distance from the proposed development to the respective European Sites, the length of the hydrological link, the dilution and dispersion action of watercourses and waterbodies, the potential for significant effects on these European Sites would not be likely to arise from the proposed development. Having regard to the foregoing, my screening assessment will focus on the impact of the proposal on the conservation objectives of the River Shannon Callows SAC, Middle Shannon Callows SPA and Lough Ree SPA. Other than those sites summarised in table 3 below, I am satisfied that the project would not have potential implications for other European Sites in view of their conservation objectives.

2.5 Likely significant effects on European sites

Based on the above, including pathways and the nature of the project, the following issues are considered for examination in terms of their implications for likely significant effects on the conservation objectives of European sites within the potential zone of influence of the project:

- Effect 1 – habitat degradation as a result of hydrological impacts;

  Potential damage to riparian and river habitats associated with inadvertent spillages of hydrocarbons and / or other chemicals to water during the construction phase;

  Potential damage to the habitats and freshwater qualifying interest and special conservation interest species dependent on water quality;

  Potential negative effect on prey availability.

- Effect 2 – disturbance and / or displacement of species;

  Potential disturbance risks to special conservation interest species, which could be associated with increased noise and vibration, lighting, increased human activity at both construction and operation phases.

The Conservation Objectives for the three sites in the zone of influence are detailed in table 3 below, with discussion regarding the effects of the proposed development on these conservation objectives following the table.

Table 3 Could the Proposed Development alone undermine Conservation Objectives

Site	**Conservation Objectives (maintain or restore the favourable conservation condition of the habitats and species listed as Qualifying Interests)**	**Conservation Objectives Potentially Undermined?**		
		Effect	**1**	**2**
River Shannon Callows SAC 000216	Restore - Molinia meadows on calcareous, peaty or clayey-silt-laden soils (Molinion caeruleae) [6410]		No	No
	Restore - Lowland hay meadows (Alopecurus pratensis, Sanguisorba officinalis) [6510]		No	No
	Maintain - Alkaline fens [7230]		No	No
	Maintain - Limestone pavements [8240]		No	No

	Maintain - Alluvial forests with Alnus glutinosa and Fraxinus excelsior (Alno-Padion, Alnion incanae, Salicion albae) [91E0]		No	No
	Maintain - Lutra lutra (Otter) [1355]		**Yes**	No
Middle Shannon Callows SPA 004096	Maintain - Whooper Swan (Cygnus cygnus) [A038]		**Yes**	No
	Restore - Wigeon (Anas penelope) [A050]		**Yes**	No
	Currently under review -Corncrake (Crex crex) [A122]		**Yes**	No
	Maintain - Golden Plover (Pluvialis apricaria) [A140]		**Yes**	No
	Restore - Lapwing (Vanellus vanellus) [A142]		**Yes**	No
	Restore - Black-tailed Godwit (Limosa limosa) [A156]		**Yes**	No
	Restore - Black-headed Gull (Chroicocephalus ridibundus) [A179]		**Yes**	No
	Maintain - Wetland and Waterbirds [A999]		**Yes**	No
Lough Ree SPA 004046	Maintain - Little Grebe (Tachybaptus ruficollis) [A004]		No	No
	Restore - Whooper Swan (Cygnus cygnus) [A038]		No	No
	Restore - Wigeon (Anas penelope) [A050]		No	No
	Restore - Teal (Anas crecca) [A052]		No	No
	Restore - Mallard (Anas platyrhynchos) [A053]		No	**Yes**
	Maintain - Shoveler (Anas clypeata) [A056]		No	No
	Maintain - Tufted Duck (Aythya fuligula) [A061]		No	No
	Restore - Common Scoter (Melanitta nigra) [A065]		No	No
	Restore - Goldeneye (Bucephala clangula) [A067]		No	No
	Maintain - Coot (Fulica atra) [A125]		No	No
	Restore - Golden Plover (Pluvialis apricaria) [A140]		No	No
	Restore - Lapwing (Vanellus vanellus) [A142]		No	No
	Restore – Common Tern (Sterna Hirundo) [A193]		No	No
	Maintain - Wetland and Waterbirds [A999]		No	No

Changes in Water Quality and Resource

The most challenging elements of the proposed development from a water quality perspective would be at construction stage, primarily due to the need to culvert stretches of the drainage channels and work adjacent to these channels. The operation phase of the project would be less likely to result in pollution to receiving waters, given that the proposed transport infrastructure would feature stormwater drainage systems with means to contain hydrocarbons.

Should potential pollutants flow downstream and lead to a deterioration in water quality, this could indirectly affect the food supply and foraging habitat of bird species associated with the Middle Shannon Callows SPA and the food supply of otter associated with the River Shannon Callows SAC. This would appear a reasonably logical assessment of the potential effects of the proposed development adjacent to the river channel, as the site activities could have impacts on water quality that may influence the achievement of the site conservation objectives specifically relating to bird species and otter.

Disturbance and / or Displacement of Species

Based on the distances to the nearest European sites and the findings of ecological surveying undertaken for the project, including records of special conservation interest species using the site and the nature of the site, disturbance or displacement of Mallard associated with Lough Ree SPA could only arise from the project.

Lough Ree is one of the most important midland sites for wintering waterfowl, with nationally-important populations of various species, including 1,087 Mallard. A single Mallard was recorded during surveys at the site, a species that is common to Ireland with extensive available alternative sites in the area suitable for this duck species. I am satisfied that given the extremely limited use of the application site recorded and the nature of the habitat on site, the displacement or disturbance impacts of the project could not have likely significant effects for Mallard associated with Lough Ree SPA. I have taken into account the AA of the Local Authority in coming to this conclusion, which I consider to have been taken out of an abundance of caution.

2.6 Screening Conclusion

I conclude that the proposed development could potentially have a likely significant effect on the qualifying interests associated with European Site No. 00000216 (River Shannon Callows SAC) and European Site No. 004096 (Middle Shannon Callows SPA) from activities and works that could impact on water quality in the river Shannon. An appropriate assessment is required on the basis of these likely significant effects of the project for these two European sites.

3. Stage 2 - Appropriate Assessment

The requirements of Article 6(3) as related to appropriate assessment of a project under part XAB, section 177V of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, are considered fully in this section.

Taking account of the preceding screening determination, the following is an appropriate assessment of the implications of the proposed development in view of the relevant conservation objectives of European Site No. 00000216 (River Shannon Callows SAC) and European Site No. 004096 (Middle Shannon Callows SPA) based on scientific information provided by the applicant and considering expert opinion set out in the observation from the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (NPWS). The information relied upon includes the following:

- Natura Impact Statement prepared by Coiscéim Consulting;
- Ecological Impact Assessment prepared by Coiscéim Consulting;
- Preliminary Construction Environmental Management Plan prepared by Punch Consulting Engineers / CST Group Consulting Engineers;
- Outline Surface Water Management Plan prepared by Punch Consulting Engineers / CST Group Consulting Engineers;
- NPWS data.

I am satisfied that the information provided is adequate to allow an Appropriate Assessment to be undertaken. I am satisfied that all aspects of the project that could result in significant effects are considered and assessed in the NIS and mitigation measures designed to avoid or reduce any adverse effects on site integrity are included and assessed for effectiveness.

3.1 Test of Effects & Mitigation Measures

See table 6.1 of the NIS for a description of the effects and the mitigation measures.

Table 4 Adverse Effects on Conservation Objectives

River Shannon Callows SAC (Site Code: 000216)			
Qualifying Interest	**Conservation Objective**	**Potential Adverse Effects**	**Mitigation Measures**
Molinia meadows on calcareous, peaty or clayey-silt-laden soils (Molinion caeruleae) [6410]	Restore the favourable condition	No direct impacts predicted	N/A
Lowland hay meadows (Alopecurus pratensis, Sanguisorba officinalis) [6510]	Restore the favourable condition	No direct impacts predicted	N/A
Alkaline fens [7230]	Maintain the favourable condition	No direct impacts predicted	N/A
Limestone pavements [8240]	Maintain the favourable condition	No direct impacts predicted	N/A
Alluvial forests with Alnus glutinosa and Fraxinus excelsior (Alno-Padion, Alnion incanae, Salicion albae) [91E0]	Maintain the favourable condition	No direct impacts predicted	N/A
Lutra lutra (Otter) [1355]	Maintain the favourable condition	Change in water quality altering habitat and prey availability	Measures to prevent pollution and sediment entering receiving waters works area.
Middle Shannon Callows SPA (Site Code: 004096)			
Qualifying Interest	**Conservation Objective**	**Potential Adverse Effects**	**Mitigation Measures**
Whooper Swan (Cygnus cygnus) [A038]	Maintain the favourable condition	Change in water quality altering habitat and prey availability	Measures to prevent pollution and sediment entering receiving waters works area.

Wigeon (Anas penelope) [A050]	Restore the favourable condition	Change in water quality altering habitat and prey availability	Measures to prevent pollution and sediment entering receiving waters works area.
Corncrake (Crex crex) [A122]	Currently under review	Change in water quality altering habitat and prey availability	Measures to prevent pollution and sediment entering receiving waters works area.
Golden Plover (Pluvialis apricaria) [A140]	Maintain the favourable condition	Change in water quality altering habitat and prey availability	Measures to prevent pollution and sediment entering receiving waters works area.
Lapwing (Vanellus vanellus) [A142]	Restore the favourable condition	Change in water quality altering habitat and prey availability	Measures to prevent pollution and sediment entering receiving waters works area.
Black-tailed Godwit (Limosa limosa) [A156]	Restore the favourable condition	Change in water quality altering habitat and prey availability	Measures to prevent pollution and sediment entering receiving waters works area.
Black-headed Gull (Chroicocephalus ridibundus) [A179]	Restore the favourable condition	Change in water quality altering habitat and prey availability	Measures to prevent pollution and sediment entering receiving waters works area.
Wetland and Waterbirds [A999]	Maintain the favourable condition	Change in water quality altering habitat and prey availability	Measures to prevent pollution and sediment entering receiving waters works area.

The above table is based on the documentation and information provided on the file and I am satisfied that the submitted NIS has identified the relevant attributes and targets of the qualifying interest and special conservation interest species.

Water Quality & Resource

Management measures, including best practice control measures, application of industry standards and specific measures for this project to prevent excess sedimentation and pollution downstream affecting water quality and control of waters

discharging from the site, are outlined in section 6.2 of the applicant's NIS, including the engagement of an ecological clerk of works, as required by the NPWS. These measures would ensure that there are no adverse effects on the River Shannon and other receiving waters during the construction phase of the project, thereby avoiding negative effects on water quality and resources.

I am satisfied that with the implementation of the specific measures for the management of surface water, as outlined in the NIS, the Outline Surface Water Management Plan and the Preliminary CEMP, such as silt traps, fences and buffers, the containment of wastewater, fuels and other hydrocarbons, as well as monitoring by an ecological clerk of works and compliance in line with the aforementioned 'Guidelines on the Protection of Fisheries during Construction Works in and adjacent to Waters' (2016), the proposed works and operations would not have likely significant effects on surface water quality at the site or downstream.

3.2 In-combination Effects

In combination effects are examined within section 6.5 of the NIS submitted. The proposed works were considered in combination with the provisions of the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027. Other plans considered included 'Athlone 2040 – A Vision for Athlone' and the RSES. Current and planned development was examined in the context of in-combination effects, including proposals for a gymnasium development (WCC ref. 22/172) and an electrical substation (WCC ref. 20/473) on Grace Park Road, Athlone. As the subject project is not predicted to adversely impact on the integrity of European sites, the potential for in-combination effects with these projects and plans are not anticipated to arise.

3.3 Conclusion

The evidence available provides certainty that the project, including the mitigation measures proposed, would not result in pollution of water or significant adverse impacts for qualifying interests, and it can be concluded that the proposed development would not be likely to have significant adverse impacts on European Site No. 00000216 (River Shannon Callows SAC) and European Site No. 004096 (Middle Shannon Callows SPA), in view of the sites' conservation objectives.

I am satisfied that the development would not cause changes to the key indicators of conservation value, hence there is no potential for any adverse impacts to occur on

either the habitat or the species associated with European Site No. 00000216 (River Shannon Callows SAC) and European Site No. 004096 (Middle Shannon Callows SPA).

3.4 Appropriate Assessment – Conclusion

The applicant determined that following the implementation of mitigation measures the construction and operation of the proposed development alone, or in combination with other plans and projects, will not adversely affect the integrity of European Sites.

Based on the information provided, I am satisfied that adverse effects arising from aspects of the proposed development can be excluded for the European Sites considered in the Appropriate Assessment. No direct impacts are predicted. Indirect impacts would be temporary in nature and mitigation measures are described to prevent excess pollution and sediment to receiving waters. Monitoring measures are also proposed to ensure compliance and effective management of measures, including water quality. I am satisfied that the mitigation measures proposed to prevent adverse effects have been assessed as effective and can be implemented.

I am satisfied that in-combination effects has been assessed adequately in the NIS. The applicant has demonstrated satisfactorily that no significant residual effects would remain post the application of mitigation measures and, therefore, there would be no potential for in-combination effects. I am satisfied that no reasonable scientific doubt remains as to the absence of adverse effects.

Appendix C. WFD Screening

Step 1: Nature of the Project, the Site and Locality			
ACP ref.	322958-25	**Address**	Coosan Point Road and Ballymahon Road, Athlone, County Westmeath
Description of project	Construction of a link road measuring approximately 350m with active travel paths and upgraded active travel paths along adjoining roads, a cycle shelter, increased hardstanding to bus depot yard requiring culverting of drainage channels, relocation of a tyre-storage building, formation of a wetland area, boundary treatments, revised roads arrangements, connections to services, signage, lighting, hard and soft landscaping. The project works methods are outlined in the Preliminary CEMP, including site clearance, enabling works, underground services and construction details. The NIS, Preliminary CEMP and Outline Surface Water Management Plan submitted with the application outline the measures to be employed in relation to ground and surface water features on site.		
Brief site description (relevant to WFD Screening)	The site for the proposed link road primarily comprises urban land within the bus depot operated by Bus Éireann and lands adjoining to the west of this depot that are undeveloped and in control of Córas Iompair Éireann. There are surface water features converging on the site and these appear to drain lands to the north and south of the site. One drainage channel emerges from a culvert under the hard surface yard to the Bus Éireann depot, while another drainage channel emerges from an area along the southern boundary of the site. Central areas along the exposed stretches of the drainage channels on the western side of the site are described as comprising wet grassland, wet woodland and tall-herb swampland habitats. Soils under the site are stated by the GSI to comprise made ground. The bedrock beneath the site is mapped by GSI and consists of Dinantian pure-unbedded limestone. The underlying conditions are stated by the GSI to have high groundwater vulnerability.		
Proposed surface water details	A network of stormwater sewers is proposed along the proposed link road. The drainage channels in the development would be realigned into new drainage infrastructure, including culverts that would sit beneath the yard serving the extended bus depot. Stormwater would also collect into a low-lying wetland area in the western corner of the site. All drainage would outfall via an existing culvert that feeds under Southern Station Road.		

Proposed water supply source & available capacity	The development is not reliant on the provision of any new water supplies.
Proposed wastewater treatment system & available capacity, other issues	Wastewater infrastructure to serve the development is not required, although the existing sewer terminating at The Crescent junction would be extended westwards for a distance of 350m under the north side of the proposed link road, to connect into an existing sewer running along Northgate Street.

Step 2: Identification of relevant water bodies
&
Step 3: S-P-R connection

Identified water body	Distance to (m)	Water body name(s) (code)	WFD Status (2019-2024)	Risk of not achieving WFD Objective	Identified pressures on that water body	Pathway linkage to water feature (e.g. surface run-off, drainage, groundwater)
River Waterbody	0.2km	Shannon (Upper)_120 IE_SH_26S021800	Poor	At Risk	Hydrological, morphological, nutrients. Significant pressures peat and hydro-morphological	Drainage channels running through the site have a hydrological connection to this waterbody.
Groundwater waterbody	Underlying site	Inny IE_SH_G_110	Good	Not at risk	No pressures identified	Absence of extensive excavation works with soils offering protection to groundwater.

Step 4: Detailed description of any component of the development or activity that may cause a risk of not achieving the WFD Objectives having regard to the S-P-R linkage.							
CONSTRUCTION PHASE							
No	**Component**	**Water body receptor (EPA Code)**	**Pathway (existing and new)**	**Potential for impact**	**Screening Stage Mitigation Measure***	**Residual Risk (yes/no)**	**Determination** to proceed to Stage 2. Is there a risk to the water environment? (if 'screened' in or 'uncertain' proceed to Stage 2.**
1.	Surface water runoff to river system	Surface Shannon (Upper)_120 IE_SH_26S021800	Overland drainage channels	Potential discharge of silt and pollutants into the Shannon	Good practice construction methods outlined in Preliminary CEMP, Outline Surface Water Management Plan and NIS.	Yes (extensive works to replace existing land drains)	Screened In
2.	Groundwater discharge	Inny IE_SH_G_110	Subsoils to water table	Spillages. Discharge of contaminants during on-site works.	Good practice construction methods outlined in Preliminary CEMP, Outline Surface Water Management Plan and NIS.	No	Screened out

OPERATIONAL PHASE							
No	**Component**	**Water body receptor (EPA Code)**	**Pathway (existing and new)**	**Potential for impact**	**Screening Stage Mitigation Measure***	**Residual Risk (yes/no)**	**Determination** to proceed to Stage 2. Is there a risk to the water environment? (if 'screened' in or 'uncertain' proceed to Stage 2.**
1.	Surface water drainage	Surface Shannon (Upper)_120 IE_SH_26S021800	Overland drainage channels	Hydrocarbons	None. SUDS employed	No	Screened out
2.	Groundwater discharge	Inny IE_SH_G_110	Subsoils to water table	Hydrocarbons	None. SUDS employed	No	Screened out

STAGE 2: ASSESSMENT					
Details of Mitigation Required to Comply with WFD Objectives – Surface					
Shannon (Upper)_120 IE_SH_26S021800					
Development/ Activity e.g. culvert, bridge, other crossing, diversion, outfall, etc	**Objective 1-Surface Water** **Prevent deterioration of the status of all bodies of surface water**	**Objective 2-Surface Water** **Protect, enhance and restore all bodies of surface water with aim of achieving good status**	**Objective 3-Surface Water** **Protect and enhance all artificial and heavily modified bodies of water with aim of achieving good ecological potential and good surface water chemical status**	**Objective 4-Surface Water** **Progressively reduce pollution from priority substances and cease or phase out emission, discharges and losses of priority substances**	**Does this component comply with WFD Objectives 1, 2, 3 & 4? (if answer is no, a development cannot proceed without a derogation under art. 4.7)**

Construction works, including elimination of land drains and replacement with new surface water management proposals	Site-specific construction mitigation methods described in the Preliminary CEMP, Outline Surface Water Management Plan and NIS e.g. silt fences, settlement ponds and buffers	Site-specific construction mitigation methods described in the Preliminary CEMP, Outline Surface Water Management Plan and NIS e.g. silt fences, settlement ponds and buffers	NA	NA	YES
Stormwater drainage	Adequately designed SUDs including wetland feature, attenuation tanks and inspection of same to ensure successful implementation	Adequately designed SUDs including wetland feature, attenuation tanks and inspection of same to ensure successful implementation	NA	NA	YES