



An
Coimisiún
Pleanála

Inspector's Report

PL-501450-LH-26

Development

Permission for change of the former Station Master's dwelling from a library to a gym/fitness facility, internal alterations to the building and all associated site works, within the curtilage of a protected structure ref. no 13830005.

Location

Station Master's Dwelling, Former Railway Station, Battsland, Dunleer, County Louth.

Planning Authority

Louth County Council

Planning Authority Reg. Ref.

2560584

Applicant(s)

Ruairi Crofts.

Type of Application

Permission

Planning Authority Decision

Grant Permission

Type of Appeal

Third Party v Grant

Appellant(s)

Aiden Torris

Observer(s)

None

Date of Site Inspection

4th day of August 2026

Inspector

Fergal Ó Bric

1.0 Site Location and Description

- 1.1 The appeal site is located on the western side of the Dublin Belfast railway line on a site which forms part of the former Dunleer rail station, and which is no longer operational (since 1984). The development pertains to a change of use of the former Station Master's dwelling which was last used as the local public library, which is stated to have relocated to the Main Street in the town. The Station Master's dwelling is a three bay, two-storey dwelling with a pitched slate roof and single storey wings on each side. There is a ramped access to the front door of the building. Further north within the subject site is a single storey red bricked building which was the former railway station building, designated as a protected structure of regional importance within the current Louth County Development Plan. The window and door openings of the former railway building have been blocked up within this building and there is some scaffold erected at the entrance area to the former railway building. There is a telecommunications structure located further north-west of the former library building within the curtilage of the telecoms exchange building.
- 1.2 To the front (west) of the former library is an open area which is used for parking/turning of vehicles and a five metre wide access way (approximately 180 metres in length) connecting the subject site to the Upper Main Street (R132-70) in the centre of Dunleer. There are recycling receptors (for the recycling of glass and clothes) located within the open area in front of the railway buildings. This access way also acts as an access to the site immediately south of the appeal site which comprises former railway compound building and where railway maintenance machinery, railway sleepers and hardcore materials are stored. There is also a telecommunications structure located within the former railway compound area.

2.0 Proposed Development

- 2.1 Planning permission is sought for a change of use of the former Station Master's dwelling from a library to a gym/fitness facility, internal alterations to the building and all associated site works. The development is within the curtilage of a protected structure (reference number 13830005) which is the former Dunleer railway station

building. The change of use relates to both ground and first floor levels within the building.

3.0 Planning Authority Decision

3.1 Decision

By Order dated 7th day of May 2026 Louth County Council granted planning permission for the subject development subject to eight planning conditions which include the following:

Condition No 2: Temporary permission for a period of five years.

Condition No 3: Copy of written agreement from Iarnród Eireann for the development, submission of an operation and maintenance plan for the development, submission of a risk assessment and method statement, submission of lease agreement with the IE property group.

Condition No. 4: external finishes.

Condition No 5: Site development and building works hours

Condition No 7: Connection agreements with Uisce Eireann.

Condition No 8-Monitoring and recording of noise levels.

3.2 Planning Authority Reports

3.2.1 First Planning Report dated 23/10/25

The planning report forms the basis of the assessment and the recommendation.

The following substantive points are noted:

- The subject site is located within the designated urban settlement of Dunleer as set out within the current Louth County Development Plan 2021-2027.
- The subject site has the benefit of a B1-Town or Village Centre zoning where the zoning objective is 'To support the development, improvement and expansion of town or village centre activities'.

- Part of the subject site is located within the Zone of Archaeological potential (Map 9-Dunleer) however, the former station master's dwelling is located outside of the designated archaeological zone.
- The subject site incorporates a protected structure, which pertains to the adjoining former railway station building, now vacant.
- The internal works proposed within the former station master's dwelling would result in the creation of three new internal door openings, two at ground floor level and one at first floor level.
- No structural partitions would be removed and no proposals to alter the external appearance or principal architectural features of the building are proposed. All existing materials and features will be maintained and the barge boards will be cleaned and painted.
- The project statement submitted by the applicant sets out that the overall works are minimal, reversible and conservation-led, safeguarding the building's continued role as an integral part of Dunleer's historic railway heritage.
- Three submissions were received, including one from the owner of the site, that being Iarnród Éireann (IE).
- No Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) nor Appropriate Assessment (AA) issues arise due to the limited nature and scale of the proposed works and absence of connectivity to any sensitive location.
- The change of use proposal is from a library to a gym/fitness facility is not specifically referenced in the land use zoning matrix and will be considered on its individual planning merits.
- There is a simultaneous planning application under planning reference number 25/60570 in relation to works within the adjacent former rail station building (protected structure) to form part of a gym/fitness facility. (This application was subsequently withdrawn by the applicant).
- The proposal would not contravene any of the built heritage policy objectives within the current Louth County Development Plan nor adversely impact the adjacent protected structure.
- The proposal would involve the utilisation of a building which is presently vacant.

- Residential amenities of adjacent dwellings would not be adversely impacted by the development. The nearest residential property to the subject building is located 53 metres removed from the subject site within the Woodgrove Heights residential development, which is on the opposite side of the rail line.
- The Planner was not satisfied that sufficient on-site car parking provision (5 no. spaces) has been provided to serve the proposed gym/fitness facility uses within the subject building and the adjoining protected structure and would represent a shortfall in the number of spaces as per the car parking standards set out within the current LCDP.
- A change of use within an existing building would not result in any disturbance to archaeological remains.
- The subject building has the benefit of existing connections to the public watermains and foul sewer networks.
- A letter of consent from the landowner (Iarnród Éireann-IE) to make the planning application has been submitted by the applicant.
- Further information was requested in relation to the following matters:
Whether the proposed change of use is temporary or permanent and details of consent received from the landowner (IE), details of any external lighting and/or signage proposed, details of window openings onto the railway platform, the submission of an operational and maintenance plan and a risk assessment and method statement for the works, the submission of car parking proposals in accordance with the current LCDP standards and details of unrestricted access to the adjoining IE railway compound, confirmation of feasibility from Uisce Éireann regarding access to public water services.

3.2.2 Second Planning Report dated 5/5/2026 assessing the further information response

- The applicant submitted his further information response to the Planning Authority on the 21/4/2026 and included a cover letter from his architects, including revised Site Plan drawings and elevation plans including details of signage and lighting. Correspondence from the landowners (IE) was also submitted.

- Correspondence from IE was submitted by the applicant where they state that the former library building and former railway building are not suitable for purpose and that newer structures would be required in the event that the Dunleer rail station is to be opened up in the future. This would be in compliance with policy objective MOV19. IE also state that the proposed change of use of the former station master's dwelling would not preclude or negatively impact any future station reopening in Dunleer. From the information submitted, the PA considered that a temporary five-year permission would be appropriate to allow for a re-assessment of the rail situation in Dunleer in light of the circumstances at that time.
- It is considered that the external wall mounted lighting on the front (south-western elevation) and stainless steel lettering above the front entrance would not adversely affect the character of the subject building nor the setting of the adjacent protected structure.
- Details of an Operational and Maintenance plan and Risk Assessment and Method Statement are to be conditioned in.
- An amended Site Layout Plan was submitted as part of the further information response illustrating nine car parking spaces to serve the overall gym/fitness facility to serve the subject building and the adjacent protected structure. A bicycle rack is also proposed adjacent to the proposed car parking spaces.
- Confirmation of feasibility regarding water service connections from Uisce Eireann is something that can be conditioned in the event that a grant of planning permission is being recommended.
- The Environment and Major Capital Projects and Infrastructure Delivery Sections within Louth County Council outlined no objections to the proposals subject to a number of conditions.
- The proposed development would not adversely impact the visual or residential amenities of the area and would accord with the provisions of the Louth County development plan 2021-2027.

3.2.3 Other Technical Reports

Environment Section: No objections subject to conditions.

Major Capital Projects and Infrastructure Section: No objections subject to conditions.

3.3 Prescribed Bodies

No comments received.

3.4 Third Party Observations

Three received. The main issues raised within the submissions related to the following matters:

- Dunleer has grown as a commuter town, and the re-opening of the train station should be a top priority.
- Permission should not be granted for the proposed commercial development until the re-opening on the Dunleer rail stop has been agreed.
- If permission is granted for the development, the rail station would be permanently lost and would be costly to reinstate if the railway buildings are re-purposed.
- The Dunleer railway should be retained as a potential public transport corridor in line with national and regional public transport objectives.
- The development has the potential to encroach upon security of the railway boundary or to cause a danger or hazard to railway operations.
- Given that Dunleer library has relocated from the former station master's dwelling after a twenty eight year period, the current proposals should be acted upon to ensure that vacancy within the building is not sustained for an extended period of time.
- The proposals will generate additional car parking demands within the site.

4.0 Planning History

The following is considered to be the relevant planning history associated with the subject site.

Appeal Site

Planning reference number 25/60570-A concurrent planning application was made to LCC relating to the redevelopment of the former railway station building (protected structure 13830005) for a change of use to accommodate a gym/fitness facility use, internal refurbishment and minor alterations to the layout, renovation and repair of the external envelope and interiors, repair of existing windows and doors, reopening or previously blocked up original window openings and fitting them with windows and all associated site works. This application was subsequently withdrawn by the applicant in July 2026.

5.0 Policy Context

5.1 Development Plan

5.1.1 Louth County Development Plan 2021-2027:

The subject site is located within the self-sustaining growth settlement of Dunleer as set out within Volume 2 of the Louth County Development Plan (LCDP) 2021-2027. The subject site is zoned B1-Town and Village Centre where the zoning objective is to support the development, improvement and expansion of town or village centre activities'. The subject site partly falls within the zone of archaeological potential, but the subject building is located outside of the designated archaeological zone for the town of Dunleer (See ZAP Map 9-Dunleer). The subject site also incorporates a protected structure, in the form of the adjacent former railway building which is now vacant,

Volume 1-Written Statement:

Chapter 5: Economy and Employment

The following policy objectives are considered relevant to the current proposals:

EE22- To recognise the importance of and to encourage and facilitate the growth and development of local indigenous enterprises in appropriate locations in the County.

EE24- To support home based economic activity where it can be demonstrated the nature of the business operation is of an appropriate scale for its location and would not be detrimental to the character or amenities of the area.

Chapter 7-Movement

MOV19- To secure, in co-operation with Iarnród Éireann and the National Transport Authority, improved rail services for the mid and south Louth areas and in particular to seek to examine the feasibility of re opening the rail station in Dunleer and providing additional new rail stations for north Drogheda, south Dundalk and the mid-Louth area.

Chapter 9-Built Heritage and Culture

BHC2- To protect the built heritage assets of the county and ensure they are managed and preserved in a manner that does not adversely impact on the intrinsic value of these assets whilst supporting economic renewal and sustainable development.

BHC 20- To ensure that any development, modification, alteration, or extension affecting a protected structure and / or its setting is sensitively sited and designed, is compatible with the special character and is appropriate in terms of the proposed scale, mass, density, layout, and materials of the protected structure. Policy Objective

BHC 21- The form and structural integrity of the protected structure and its setting shall be retained and the relationship between the protected structure, its curtilage and any complex of adjoining buildings, designed landscape features, designed views or vistas from or to the structure shall be protected.

BHC 22- To prohibit inappropriate development within the curtilage and/or attendant grounds of a protected structure. Any proposed development within the curtilage and/or attendant grounds must demonstrate that it is part of an overall strategy for the future conservation of the entire complex including the structures, demesne and/or attendant grounds.

BHC26- To encourage the retention, sympathetic reuse and rehabilitation of protected structures and their settings where appropriate and where the proposal is compatible with their character and significance. In certain cases, development management guidelines may be relaxed in order to secure the conservation of the protected structure and architectural features of special interest.

BHC28- To ensure the protection of architectural features of special interest as part of any proposed re-development where there is conflict with other development plan requirements such as open space, car parking etc.

Chapter 10-Infrastructure and Utilities

IU6- To require all new developments connect to the public supply where public water and wastewater infrastructure is available or likely to be available, and which has sufficient capacity.

IU13- To require that all development taking place within an area served by a public wastewater treatment system connects to that system.

5.2 National Policy

National Planning Framework 'Project Ireland 2040'-First Revision- 2025

National Strategic Outcome 2-Enhanced Regional Accessibility

'Enhancing connectivity between centres of population of scale will support the objectives of National Planning Framework... The interurban rail network plays a key role in offering sustainable travel alternatives to private car travel and broadens labour catchments'.

5.3 Natural Heritage Designations

The nearest European sites are the Stabannon-Braganstown SPA (Site Code 004091) which is located approximately 5.6 kilometres north-west of the subject site and the Dundalk Bay SPA and SAC (site codes 004026 and 000455) located approximately 5.9 kilometres north-east of the appeal site.

The Barmeath Woods pNHA is located approximately 2.45 kilometres east of the appeal site- Site Code 001801.

5.4 EIA Screening

Please see Appendix 1 at the end of this report. Having regard to the limited nature and scale of the development which relates to a change of use of an existing vacant building on a site that is fully serviced in terms of piped water services and the absence of any significant environmental sensitivity in the vicinity of the site, as well as the criteria set out in Schedule 7 of the Planning and Development Regulations, 2001, as amended, there is no real likelihood of significant effects on the environment arising from the proposed development.

5.5 **WFD Screening:** The nearest water body to the appeal site is the White River located approximately 120 metres north-west of the subject building.

The development relates to a change of use within an existing vacant building. The detailed development description is set out within Section 2.0 of my report above.

Surface water discharge is stated to be to the existing public surface water sewer. No issue in this regard was raised within the appeal.

I have assessed the planning documentation and have considered the objectives as set out in Article 4 of the Water Framework Directive which seeks to protect and, where necessary, restore surface & ground water bodies in order to reach good status (meaning both good chemical and good ecological status), and to prevent deterioration. Having considered the relatively minor nature, scale, and location of the project, I am satisfied that it can be eliminated from further assessment because there is no conceivable risk to any surface and/or groundwater water bodies either qualitatively or quantitatively.

The reason for this conclusion is as follows:

- Having regard to the relatively minor scale and nature of the development,
- The separation distance between the appeal site and the nearest watercourse,
- The existing connections to the public surface water sewer, not proposed to be altered as part of the proposed development.

Conclusion

I conclude that on the basis of objective information, the proposed development will not result in a risk of deterioration on any water body (groundwaters, transitional and coastal) either qualitatively or quantitatively or on a temporary or permanent basis or otherwise jeopardise any water body in reaching its WFD objectives and consequently can be excluded from further assessment.

6.0 The Appeal

6.1 Grounds of Appeal

The main grounds of the third-party appeal submission can be summarised as follows:

- The proposed development would be contrary to the principles of proper planning and sustainable development as set out within Section 34 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, (as amended).
- The proposal would be contrary to national planning policy in promoting sustainable mobility and rail infrastructure,
- The proposals would be contrary to the long term transport strategy objectives,
- The proposed development would be contrary to the protection of strategic transport infrastructure and railway heritage assets.
- The Coimisiún should adopt a precautionary approach in relation to strategic planning in circumstances where future rail demand may increase, transport decarbonisation policy continues to intensify and national policy increasingly prioritises modal shift towards public transport approach,
- The proposals would prejudice future transport infrastructure opportunities, sterilise a strategically located former station facility, undermine sustainable transport objectives and prioritise a private commercial user over potential future public transport infrastructure,
- The proposals conflict with the key principles as set out within the National Planning Framework (NPF) specifically in terms of compact settlement growth, sustainable mobility, integrated land use and transport planning, reduced car dependency and enhancement of regional accessibility.
- The retention and protection of the former rail station infrastructure aligns more closely with the NPF objectives rather than the conversion of the railway buildings to a commercial use.
- National climate policy increasingly requires prioritisation of public transport infrastructure and reduction in transport related emissions.
- The reopening of railway stations in expanding commuter settlements represents a sustainable planning objective consistent with national climate obligations

- A development that could inhibit future station reinstatement is, therefore, contrary to wider state policy objectives in relation to decarbonisation, modal shift and sustainable settlement planning
- The proposals are considered premature as the transport demands in Dunleer are evolving rapidly, population growth is ever increasing and future rail service requirements may emerge over the lifetime of the proposed development
- The Coimisiún should avoid permitting development which may complicate future station reopening, increase acquisition costs, generate operational conflicts, create legal and practical barriers to future public transport infrastructure delivery.
- The former rail station retains historic significance as part of the railway heritage of County Louth,
- The proposed development risks weakening the authenticity and long-term interpretive value of the historic railway infrastructure,
- It is considered the proposed development would materially conflict with the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

6.2 Planning Authority Response

Response received. The Planning Authority (PA) set out the following in relation to the third party appeal submission.

- The Planning Authority note the grounds of the third-party appeal submission made to the Coimisiún,
- The Planning Authority have recommended a grant of planning permission for a temporary five year period to enable the re-assessment of the situation in light of circumstances at the end of the five year period.
- The PA requests that the Coimisiún consider the information as set out within the two planning reports prepared by them which provide a justification for the grant of planning permission and to uphold the decision of the PA.

6.3 Applicant Response to third party appeal submission

- The proposals will have no impact on the future railway infrastructure reopening in Dunleer.
- This assertion has been refuted by the statutory owners of the rail infrastructure, Iarnród Éireann (IE).
- As part of the further information response, Iarnród Éireann stated that the existing station buildings in Dunleer are not considered feasible to be used as a functioning station due to the building's age, physical condition and absence of modern accessibility compliance and that the existing buildings could not serve as a modern rail facility.
- IE have confirmed that if rail services are reintroduced to Dunleer that entirely new compliant structures would be required to be constructed. IE confirmed that there remains considerable platform frontage and sufficient lands within IE's ownership at Dunleer to accommodate newly constructed facilities.
- IE acknowledges that a change of use at the former station building will not in any way preclude or negatively impact any future station reopening at Dunleer.
- The appellant's claim that the proposed development compromises future public transport delivery is factually unfounded.
- The project proposals are entirely sustainable given that vacant structure (Former Station Master's dwelling) would be brought back into use supporting the principles of compact growth and integrated land use by utilising existing town centre assets.
- The facility will use existing water and foul water network connections without introducing any significant load increase onto Uisce Éireann networks.
- The former station master's dwelling is itself not a protected structure but lies within the curtilage of a protected structure, that being the vacant railway station building. The former station master's dwelling was substantially renovated in the 1990's and retains very little in terms of the original internal features. The current proposals would involve minor internal and external

alterations which have been specifically designed to ensure minimal physical and visual impact on the character of the former Station Master's dwelling.

- By securing a viable lease-back commercial tenant is the most effective method of ensuring the long-term maintenance, structural integrity and survival of this heritage asset, preventing it from falling into dereliction.
- In terms of the operational requirements, parking for IE staff and track safety, these matters are strictly bound within the formal lease/licence agreement between the applicant and IE.
- The amended Site Plan (submitted as part of the further information response) provides for nine dedicated car parking spaces with adequate turning points to cater for heavy traffic operations safely.
- The technical, legal and operational realities of the site demonstrate that the development would bring a valued community amenity to Dunleer without compromising future rail infrastructure in any capacity.
- We request that the Coimisiún uphold the decision of the PA and grant permission for the development.

7.0 Assessment

Having examined the application details and all other documentation on file, including the third-party submission received in relation to the appeal, the reports of the local authority, and having inspected the site, and having regard to the relevant local/regional/national policies and guidance, I consider that the substantive issues in this appeal to be considered are as follows:

- Principle of Development
- National and local public transport policy
- Railway Infrastructure Heritage
- Other Matters
- Appropriate Assessment

7.1 Principle of Development

- 7.1.1 Under the current proposals the applicant is seeking to change the use of a building, the former library and station master's dwelling to use as a gym/fitness facility within a vacant two-storey building within the curtilage of the former railway station east of the town centre of Dunleer at Upper Main Street
- 7.1.2 The Planning Authority assessed this application and following the receipt of a further information response decided to grant a temporary planning permission for a period of five years subject to eight planning conditions.
- 7.1.3 Dunleer is classified as a tier 2 settlement-a self-sustaining growth town within the Core Strategy as set out within Section 2 of the current Louth County Development Plan (LCDP) 2021-2027. Self-sustaining growth towns are envisaged as having 'a moderate level of jobs and services – includes sub-county market towns and commuter towns with good transport links and capacity for continued commensurate growth to become more self-sustaining'. The subject site is zoned B1-town and village centre where the zoning objective is 'To support and consolidate town centre activities'. The Louth County Development Plan 2021-2027 (LCDP) has been adopted and is the operative plan which has had regard to current national and regional policies. It is, therefore, a requirement to have regard to the policies and objectives as set out in the current LCDP.
- 7.1.4 In relation to same, I note that the Planning Authority within their report state that the appeal site is located within town and village centre zoned lands. The proposed gym/fitness facility would be located within the vacant former library building and the adjacent former railway building (not subject to this appeal) approximately 180 metres east of Upper Main Street and is presently vacant. The former library building comprises a stated floor area of 136 m².
- 7.1.5 The LCDP includes a zoning matrix whereby specific uses that are permitted, not permitted, or open for consideration. A gym/fitness facility is not specifically referenced within the zoning matrix. Notwithstanding the lack of such guidance under the Development Plan, the Development Plan does not preclude specific uses from the town and village centre zoning and the proposals will be assessed on its planning merits as provided for under Section 13.21.2.3 within the Plan.

7.1.6 In conclusion, having regard to the sites' location, adjacent to Upper Main Street, Dunleer, given that the building is presently vacant and does not contribute to the vitality and viability of the town centre in its current vacant state. I consider that the existing building would represent an appropriate location for a gym/fitness facility and accord with economic policy objectives EE22 and EE24 in relation to encouraging and facilitating local indigenous enterprise and supporting home based economic activity as set out within Chapter 5 of the current Louth County Development Plan. The use would be contained within an existing vacant building. I consider the principle of the development to be acceptable at this central urban location adjacent to Upper Main Street on town and village centre zoned lands.

7.2 National and local public transport policy:

7.2.1 The appellant raises the issue that the proposed development would prevent the former Dunleer rail station from re-opening as the building would be required in the event that the Dunleer rail station was to re-open at some stage in the future. I acknowledge that there are many policy objectives within the National Planning Framework (NPF) in relation to modal shift and developing our rail passenger infrastructure and facilities including National Strategic Outcome 2 (NSO2) regarding regional accessibility and strengthening public transport connectivity and the MOV 19 policy objective within the current LCDP which seeks 'To secure, in co-operation with Iarnród Éireann and the National Transport Authority, improved rail services for the mid and south Louth areas and in particular to seek to examine the feasibility of re-opening the rail station in Dunleer and providing additional new rail stations in north Drogheda, south Dundalk and mid-Louth areas'. Therefore, it is very clear from these national and local policy objectives that the re-opening of the rail station at Dunleer amongst other areas remains a key policy objective. I consider that Iarnród Éireann and the National Transport Authority in conjunction with Louth County Council would be the key stakeholders in terms of the realisation of this policy objective.

7.2.2 I note that the Planning Authority issued a temporary five-year planning permission, specifically set out within condition number two of the Planning Authority decision. The Planning Authority in setting out the reason behind this condition stated that it is to 'cater for the orderly development of the area, in accordance with the Louth County Development Plan 2021-2027, as varied and to permit the Planning Authority to re-

assess the situation in light of the circumstances at this time' (after the five years)'. I consider this to be a pragmatic approach that the PA has adopted towards the development proposals in this instance, particularly having regard to the provisions of the MOV19 policy objective in relation to examining the feasibility of re-opening the Dunleer rail station. I also note from the further information response submitted by the applicant, which included correspondence from the landowners (Iarnród Éireann) dated the 25th day of February 2026 where they state that the 'existing station buildings (which would include the former library building) the subject of this current appeal in Dunleer are not considered feasible to be used as a functioning station due to the building's age, physical condition and absence of modern accessibility compliance and that the existing buildings could not serve a modern rail facility'. The landowners have also confirmed that if rail services are reintroduced to Dunleer, that entirely new complaint structures would be constructed. IE also confirmed that there remains considerable platform frontage and sufficient lands within their ownership at Dunleer to accommodate new constructed facilities. Finally, IE also acknowledged that a change of use at the former station building will not in any way preclude or negatively impact any future station reopening at Dunleer and, therefore, would not compromise the realisation of the MOV19 policy objective.

7.2.3 Based on the information submitted by the applicant, Iarnród Éireann (as the landowner) and the Planning Authority, I am satisfied that the proposed change of use of the former library building, presently vacant, will not compromise the ability of IE to re-open the rail station in Dunleer should they decide to do so in the future, even though IE set out within their correspondence that there are no plans to re-open the Dunleer rail station in the short to medium term. However, I acknowledge the provisions of the MOV19 Policy objective within the LCDP and the realisation of same should in no way be compromised. and NSO2 in the NPF seeking the improvement of connectivity between our urban areas. With this in mind, I consider it prudent that a five-year planning permission be recommended, so that the situation regarding the potential re-opening of the Dunleer rail station is in no way compromised.

7.2.4 Therefore, on balance, I do not consider that the proposal would be in accordance with the transport policy provision as set out in the form of NSO2 within the NPF and policy objective MOV19 within the current LCDP and permitting the proposed change of use

would contribute towards the realisation of these policy objectives and goals and would accord with the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

7.3 Railway Infrastructure Heritage

- 7.3.1 The appellant has raised the issue that by permitting the proposed change of use, that the railway infrastructure heritage would be compromised. The applicants submitted a project statement as part of their planning documentation prepared by their architects. This statement identified the internal alterations proposed (opening of three new door openings) and the conservation principles that will be incorporated within the proposed works. Existing services and access will be maintained, given the building had been in use up to the last few years. The applicant states that the building was substantially renovated in the 1990's by a previous occupier and retains very little in the form of original internal features. The applicant as part of their further information response provided details of the external wall mounted lighting along the front (south-western) elevation of the building and the stainless steel lettering for the proposed signage which is to be positioned above the front entrance.
- 7.3.2 In terms of built heritage principles, I consider that the relatively minor nature and scale of the proposals are reversible. I also consider that the proposed external lighting and signage and internal door openings would not adversely impact the character of the former library building, notwithstanding its location within the curtilage of the adjacent protected structure, the former railway building.
- 7.3.3 There are a number of built heritage policy objectives set out within the current LCDP 2021-2027, including BHC2 BHC 20 and BHC22 in relation to protecting built heritage assets, ensuring that modification, alteration or extension is sensitively designed and prohibiting inappropriate development within the curtilage of protected structures. I consider that the current proposals would be in compliance with these built heritage policy objectives and the key conservation principles as set out within the current Development Plan and within the Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines 2011 in relation to re-use of a building and the reversibility of the alterations proposed.
- 7.3.4 In conclusion, I consider that the proposals comply with key conservation objectives in terms of reuse of a vacant building and that the minor alterations proposed to the former library building are reversible in the event that the building being required to be

reused for another use, railway related or otherwise into the future. I consider that the reuse of a building is important in this instance as vacant and derelict buildings run the risk of falling into disrepair and dilapidation. Therefore, the proposed change of use is considered to be a positive step in this particular instance in terms of respecting and conserving our railway heritage infrastructure.

7.5 Other Matters

Compact Growth and Proper Planning and Sustainable Development

- 7.5.1 The appellant has set out that by permitting the proposed gym/fitness facility use, the proposal would be contrary to the planning principles of compact growth and proper planning and sustainable development. I consider that the re-use of a vacant building in close proximity to the Upper Main Street within a designated settlement (such as Dunleer) would very much accord with the principals of compact growth and proper planning and sustainable development. I acknowledge that there are national and local policies as referenced in Section 7.1 of the report above) in relation to encouraging sustainable transport modes, promoting a modal shift away from the private motor car and examining the feasibility of reopening the rail station at Dunleer. Based on the information submitted by the applicant and specifically the correspondence from IE that the proposed change of use of the former library building to a gym/fitness facility, for a temporary period of five years will not adversely impact the realisation of these national and local policy objectives and would accord with the planning principles of compact growth and proper planning and sustainable development.
- 7.5.2 The re-use of a vacant building, particularly in an urban setting, on zoned serviced lands, would represent a sustainable use of a brownfield site which again is a sustainable use of the existing built urban fabric rather than constructing a new structure for the gym/fitness facility on an unserviced greenfield site. I consider that the proposals for the reuse of the serviced building would accord with the proper planning and sustainable development of the area as per Section 34 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended.
- 7.5.3 The external elevations of the existing premises would largely remain the same. No changes arise as a result of the subject change of use proposals. I consider that advertising signage and external lighting features can be addressed by condition and

recommend inclusion of such a condition, in the event of a grant of planning permission being recommended.

8.0 **AA Screening**

8.1 I have considered the proposed development in light of the requirements of S177U the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended).

- The subject site is not located within or adjacent to any European Site.
- The closest European Sites are the are the Stabannon-Braganstown SPA (Site Code 004091) which is located approximately 5.6 kilometres north-west of the subject site and the Dundalk Bay SAC (site code 000455) located approximately 5.9 kilometres north-east of the appeal site.
- The subject site comprises an existing vacant serviced building within Dunleer town centre, approximately 180 metres east of Upper Main Street. The subject development seeks to change the use of the former Station Master's dwelling from a library use to use as a gym/fitness facility. No significant construction or ancillary works are proposed as part of the application. The subject site is presently connected to the public foul and surface water sewers and water mains.
- No nature conservation concerns were raised at planning application stage or in the planning appeal.

8.2 Having considered the nature, scale and location of the subject development, I am satisfied that it can be eliminated from further assessment as it is highly unlikely that it could have any appreciable effect on a European Site, given the absence of direct hydrological or ecological connectivity to any European site.

The reason for this conclusion is as follows:

- The nature of the development which proposes a change of use of an existing vacant building.
- The location of the development in a serviced urban area, that has the benefit of piped water and wastewater services, distance from European Sites and

urban nature of intervening habitats and the absence of ecological pathways to any European Site.

8.3 I conclude that on the basis of objective information, the proposed change of use would not have a significant effect on any European site either alone or in combination with other plans or projects. Likely significant effects are excluded and, therefore, Appropriate Assessment (Stage 2) under Section 177V of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended) is not required.

9.0 Recommendation

I recommend that planning permission be granted subject to the conditions as set out within Section 11.0 below.

10.0 Reasons and Considerations

Having regard to the provisions of the Louth County Development 2021-2027, specifically policy objectives EE22 and EE24 and BHC2, BHC20 and BHC22 in relation to encouraging and facilitating local indigenous enterprise and supporting home based economic activity, protecting and preserving built heritage assets, ensuring that the development and alteration of built heritage is sensitively designed, to prohibit inappropriate development within the curtilage of a protected structure and the encouragement of the reuse of vacant buildings, to the current vacant status of the building, the nature and limited scale of the alterations to the building, it is considered that subject to compliance with the conditions set out below, the proposed development would be in accordance with the B1 town and village centre zoning objective. It is considered that the proposals would not detract from the character of the adjacent protected structure, would not impact the future re-opening of Dunleer rail station nor impede the future development of railway facilities within the subject site nor seriously injure the amenities of the area or of property in the vicinity. The proposed development would, therefore, be in accordance with the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

11.0 Conditions

1- The development shall be carried out in accordance with the plans and particulars lodged with the planning application on the 15th day of September 2025 and as amended on the 21st day of April 2026 and as per the information submitted to the Coimisiún on the 29th day of June 2026 except as may otherwise be required in order to comply with the following conditions. Where such conditions require details to be agreed with the Planning Authority, the developer shall agree such details in writing with the Planning Authority prior to commencement of development, and the development shall be carried out and completed in accordance with the agreed particulars.

Reason: In the interest of clarity.

2- This permission shall be for a period of five years from the date of this order from the Coimisiún, after which the gym/fitness facility use shall cease, unless a separate grant of planning permission has been obtained prior to the expiry of this period.

Reason: In the interest of orderly development n to comply with the provisions of the Louth County Development Plan 2021-2027.

3- Prior to the commencement of development, the applicant shall submit precise details of the following for the written agreement of the Planning Authority:

- (a) external signage and wall mounted lighting,
- (b) Details of external finishes,

Reason: In the interest of visual amenity and protecting built heritage.

4- The disposal of surface water shall comply with the requirements of the Planning Authority for such works and services. Details shall be submitted to and agreed in writing with the Planning Authority prior to the commencement of development

Reason: In the interest of public health.

5- The developer shall enter into water and/or wastewater connection agreement(s) with Uisce Eireann prior to the commencement of this development.

Reason: In the interest of public health.

6- Prior to the commencement of development the developer shall submit, for the written agreement of the Planning Authority, a detailed method statement prepared by a suitably qualified professional covering all works proposed to be carried out, including: (a) a full specification, including details of materials and methods, to ensure the development is carried out in accordance with current Conservation Guidelines issued by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, (b) methodology for the recording and/or retention of concealed features or fabric exposed during the works, (c) details of features to be temporarily removed/relocated during construction works and their final re-instatement, (d) protection of specified features during the works, (e) materials/features of architectural interest to be salvaged, (f) details of the remaining rainwater goods and bargeboard which where possible shall be repaired and reused, the replacement of which (if any) shall match the original in terms of design and materials,

Reason: In the interest of the protection of architectural heritage

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, directly or indirectly, the exercise of my professional judgement in an improper or inappropriate way.

Fergal Ó Bric

Planning Inspectorate

24th day of August 2026.

Appendix 1 - Form 1

EIA Pre-Screening

An Coimisiún Pleanála Case Reference	PL-501450-LH-26		
Proposed Development Summary	Permission for change of use from a library to a gym/fitness facility with former Station Master's Dwelling, internal alterations to building and all associated site works within curtilage of a protected structure (ref. no 13830005).		
Development Address	Former Station Master's Dwelling at the former rail station, Battsland, Dunleer, Co. Louth		
1. Does the proposed development come within the definition of a 'project' for the purposes of EIA? (that is involving construction works, demolition, or interventions in the natural surroundings)		Yes	x
		No	
2. Is the proposed development of a CLASS specified in Part 1 or Part 2, Schedule 5, Planning and Development Regulations 2001 (as amended)?			
Yes	Tick/or leave blank		
No	Tick or leave blank	A change of use from one commercial use to another within an urban settlement does not fall within a class of development as per the P & D Regulations.	x
3. Does the proposed development equal or exceed any relevant THRESHOLD set out in the relevant Class?			
Yes	Tick/or leave blank		

No	Tick/or leave blank		X
4. Is the proposed development below the relevant threshold for the Class of development [sub-threshold development]?			
Yes	Tick/or leave blank	Proposals relate to a change of use from a library to a gym/fitness facility with former Station Master's Dwelling, internal alterations to building and all associated site works within curtilage of a protected structure (ref. no 13830005).	X

5. Has Schedule 7A information been submitted?		
No	Tick/or leave blank	X
Yes		

Inspector: _____

Date: _____