

Athenry Playground FORMAL OBJECTION

To the Proposed Cashla Peaker Power Plant, Athenry. App no. 324113

Submitted by; The Athenry Community Playground Committee, Michelle McMahon, Treasurer, Bridge Street, Athenry.

To; An Coimisiún Pleanála 64 Marlborough Street Dublin 1 D01 V902

Reference: Athenry Town Centre First Plan (TCF Plan, 2024), commissioned by Galway County Council and prepared in collaboration with the Athenry Town Team and local community.

We, the Athenry Community Playground Committee, and stakeholders of Athenry Playground, formally and unequivocally object to the proposed development of the Cashla Peaker Power Plant. This objection is grounded in the irreversible and catastrophic impact such an industrial facility would have upon the character, heritage, identity, and long-term vision for Athenry as a thriving medieval market town.

Athenry is one of Ireland's most exceptional and best-preserved medieval towns, with a history stretching back to the 13th century. Its Castle, Dominican Priory, Market Cross, North Gate, and Town Walls are not merely tourist attractions — they are the living fabric of a community's identity. The proposed power plant would not only desecrate the visual and sensory landscape of this historic settlement, but would permanently and irreparably destroy the character and heritage of a town that has survived nearly eight centuries of history.

We call upon An Coimisiún to refuse this application in its entirety.

1. The €200,000 Playground Rebuild: Community Investment That Would Be Undone

One of the most concrete and community-driven investments currently planned for Athenry is the rebuild and renewal of the town's community playground and park facilities, at a cost of €200,000. The construction work will begin in June 2026.

This investment is not an abstract policy objective — it is a direct response to the clearly expressed needs of Athenry's families, children, young people, and older residents, as documented throughout the Town Centre First Plan consultation process.

The TCF Plan records that the existing playground is tired and requires renovation to make the play facilities safe for all. It further notes that 90% of school survey respondents said there were not enough places for young people to gather in the town centre — a failing that has led to teenagers occupying spaces intended for younger children, making those younger users feel unwelcome and unsafe. The closure of previous youth-focused facilities such as the youth centre and snooker hall has compounded this gap. The community survey placed Young People as the highest priority group for new amenities.

The proposed renovation is not a luxury — it is an urgent social necessity backed by overwhelming community evidence. The TCF Plan envisions the reimagined community park as a safe, welcoming, year-round destination with diverse play and sensory planting; a multi-generational facility offering play equipment, sheltered gathering areas, outdoor gym, and

walking routes; and a heritage-integrated space designed with medieval themes, linking the park sensitively to the Castle, Abbey, Town Walls, and River Clarin.

This investment — carefully planned, community-led, and heritage-sensitive — represents exactly the kind of measured, place-appropriate development that Athenry needs and deserves. It would serve children, teenagers, families, older people, and visitors alike. It would bind generations together in a shared space that also celebrates the medieval heritage at the heart of the town.

The Cashla Peaker Power Plant would override and nullify all of this good work. No family will bring their children to play beside an industrial power generation facility. No heritage trail can weave meaningfully through an industrialised landscape. The noise, air pollution, visual intrusion, and reputational damage brought by the power plant would deter the very families and visitors the playground is designed to attract — rendering the community investment not merely wasted, but actively and irreversibly undermined.

It is deeply unjust that community members — parents, teachers, youth workers, and local volunteers — should advocate, plan, and fundraise for a safe playground for Athenry's children, only to have that work erased by an industrial development that serves no local need and offers no local benefit commensurate with the destruction it would cause.

The planning authority must consider whether it is proportionate, just, or consistent with any policy framework to approve a development that would directly negate €200,000 of community-led investment and destroy the social and environmental conditions that investment was designed to create.

2. Athenry: A Town of Irreplaceable Heritage

The Athenry Town Centre First Plan (2024) — a document commissioned by Galway County Council and shaped directly by the local community — clearly articulates the singular importance of Athenry's heritage to its identity, economy, and future. It describes the town as possessing:

- *"Rich medieval history with several distinctive landmarks and listed structures, many of which are still well preserved and make Athenry one of Ireland's most unique towns."*
- *A retained "distinctive and original 13th century street pattern" — an urban fabric that is exceptionally rare in the Irish context.*
- National Monuments including Athenry Castle, the Dominican Priory, Athenry House, and St. Mary's Collegiate Church, all protected by national legislation and local planning policy.

Athenry was founded in 1235 by Meiler de Bermingham and enclosed within a fortified stone wall — portions of which stand to this day. It gained a royal charter in 1310, hosted the Dominican Priory from 1241, and survived centuries of conflict including the Cromwellian conquest and the 1597 sacking by Red Hugh O'Donnell. What centuries of war and conquest could not erase, an industrial power plant must not be permitted to destroy.

The town is also internationally celebrated as the setting of "The Fields of Athenry", one of Ireland's most beloved ballads, which draws visitors and reinforces Athenry's unique cultural resonance. Athenry Castle alone welcomed 15,154 visitors in 2023. This is not a dormant heritage site — it is a living, breathing economic and cultural asset.

3. Destruction of Town Character

The TCF Plan sets out with great clarity that Athenry's character is defined by its compact medieval urban grain, its landmark spires, towers, and walls, and by key views that allow visitors and residents alike to read the town's ancient form. It notes that:

"The urban form of Athenry stems from its medieval fabric. Numerous medieval buildings and features remain in the town and are contained within the historic town walls and the 'compact' town centre."

The TCF Plan also identifies that the town's visual experience of its heritage landmarks is already under pressure from vehicle dominance and poor-quality public realm. The introduction of a large-scale industrial peaker power plant — with its associated infrastructure, flue stacks, transmission equipment, heavy vehicle access, noise, light pollution, and emissions — would constitute a catastrophic and permanent assault on this character.

Key views identified in the TCF Plan — including views toward Athenry Castle from the R347, and northward along Cross Street toward the Heritage Centre spire — would be permanently compromised. These are not aesthetic preferences; they are the visual corridors through which residents and visitors experience a town whose skyline has remained largely unchanged for seven centuries.

The TCF Plan explicitly identifies as a significant threat: "Large scale development impacting on the intimate character of the town." The Cashla Peaker Power Plant is precisely the type of large-scale development that this analysis forewarns against. It would shatter the scale, atmosphere, and coherence of a settlement that has retained its intimate medieval character against all odds.

4. Irreversible Loss of Heritage — What Cannot Be Restored

We draw the planning authority's attention to a fundamental and non-negotiable truth: once the heritage character of Athenry is destroyed, it cannot be restored. Unlike a commercial building that can be demolished and replaced, or a road that can be re-routed, the sense of place, the visual harmony, the atmospheric integrity, and the cultural resonance of a medieval town cannot be recreated once they are gone.

4.1 Protected Structures and Conservation Areas

Much of Athenry town centre is covered by an Architectural Conservation Area (ACA) and an Archaeological Zone of Notification. The Athenry Local Area Plan (2024–2030) includes a buffer zone extending 30 metres internally and externally from the line of the Town Walls, within which no development is permitted. Policy ASP 39 and Policy ASP 40 of that plan explicitly require:

- The protection of structures of special architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, social, or technical interest, together with the integrity of their character and setting.
- The conservation and enhancement of the essential character of the Athenry ACA, including the management and control of the design, location and layout of new development, and the protection of surviving historic plots and street patterns.

The proposed Cashla Peaker Power Plant is fundamentally incompatible with these binding policy requirements. Granting permission for this development would place the planning

authority in direct conflict with adopted local area plan policy and national heritage protection legislation.

4.2 The Community's Vision Cannot Coexist with This Development

The vision set out in the TCF Plan — developed through extensive community engagement, stakeholder consultation, and professional analysis — states clearly that Athenry aims to be:

"A vibrant and welcoming town which cherishes and celebrates its unique and well preserved heritage. The growth of Athenry should be as a greener, more accessible destination, driven by a diverse economy with the local community and culture at its heart."

This vision — endorsed by Galway County Council, the Athenry Town Team, community groups, local businesses, and residents — is categorically incompatible with the siting of a large industrial peaker power plant in or near the town. A gas- or oil-fired peaking facility belches pollutants, generates constant low-level noise, requires heavy vehicle access routes, is lit throughout the night, and by its very industrial nature, represents the antithesis of the greener, heritage-led, community-centred future that Athenry has collectively chosen.

4.3 Tourism Economy at Risk

The TCF Plan identifies tourism as one of Athenry's greatest unrealised opportunities, noting that the town's heritage assets are central to its tourism offering. Athenry Castle is a nationally significant visitor attraction; the town is a member of the Irish Walled Towns Network; and the plan identifies specific projects including a Heritage Trail, Town Wall Walk, and enhancement of heritage event spaces.

The plan further notes that Galway County Council has allocated €3,554,000 for the creation of a tourism centre. Significant public investment is being channelled into realising Athenry's tourism potential. The construction and operation of a power plant in proximity to this heritage environment would directly undermine this investment, deter visitors, devalue the tourism brand of the town, and erode the economic case for future heritage-led development.

What takes generations to build — a reputation, a character, a sense of place — can be destroyed in a planning decision. It cannot be rebuilt by any amount of financial compensation or mitigation.

5. Community Voice Is Clear

The community consultation conducted as part of the TCF Plan was extensive and unambiguous. Residents and stakeholders identified Athenry's heritage as its greatest strength and expressed deep concern about threats to it. The consultation recorded the following as key threats:

- *"Unsympathetic development of vacant plots and properties which detract from the historical significance of the town."*
- *"Large scale development impacting on the intimate character of the town."*
- *"Inappropriate shop frontages threatening the preservation of the rich architectural heritage."*

If the community's concern extends to inappropriate shop frontages, it is beyond question that a large-scale industrial power generation facility represents an existential threat to everything the community has said it values. This is not a development that can be mitigated

by landscaping or screening. No hedge, no berm, no acoustic fence can restore the medieval skyline of Athenry once it has been industrialised.

7. Conclusion and Grounds for Refusal

We respectfully but firmly submit that planning permission for the Cashla Peaker Power Plant should be refused on the following grounds:

- **The proposed development would cause irreversible destruction of Athenry's unique medieval character and townscape, which cannot be restored or compensated for.**
- **The development is fundamentally incompatible with the vision for Athenry as set out in the community-led Town Centre First Plan (2024), adopted planning policy, and the Athenry Local Area Plan 2024–2030.**
- **The development would grievously undermine the tourism economy of the town, destroying the heritage-led destination potential that both community and public investment are actively building.**
- **The development runs counter to national heritage policy (Heritage Ireland 2030), the RSES 2020–2032, and the Government's Town Centre First Policy.**
- **The community of Athenry has clearly and consistently articulated that large-scale unsympathetic development threatening the intimate character and heritage of the town is unacceptable. The planning authority is obligated to give full weight to this expressed community view.**

Athenry has survived sieges, rebellions, the Cromwellian conquest, and the Great Famine. Its walls, its castle, its priory, and its streets have endured for nearly eight centuries. This generation must not be the one that allows a planning decision to accomplish what centuries of history could not — the destruction of Athenry's irreplaceable character and heritage.

We urge the planning authority to refuse this application.

Submitted by Athenry Community Playground, County Galway.

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Date: _____ 19/04/2026 _____