12. LANDSCAPE AND VISUAL

12.1 Introduction

This chapter of the rEIAR addresses the landscape and visual effects of the peat extraction activities and all ancillary works that took place at the Application Site which is the subject of this Substitute Consent Application submitted to An Bord Pleanála (hereafter referred to as 'the Board' or 'ABP'), in accordance with Section 177E (Application for Substitute Consent) of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended) and under Part 19 of the Planning and Development Regulations, 2001 (as amended).

As reported in Chapter 4, the assessments in this rEIAR address the environmental impacts of peat extraction activities and all ancillary works occurring at the Application Site. The assessments in this chapter will determine the landscape and visual effects that occurred (or are likely to occur) during three differing timeframes termed 'phases' (as described in Chapter 4):

- **Peat Extraction Phase:** The significance of landscape and visual effects that occurred at the Application Site between July 1988 and June 2020.
- **Current Phase:** The significance of landscape and visual effects that occurred at the Application Site since the termination of peat extraction activities and all ancillary works in June 2020 to present day.
- **Remedial Phase:** The significance of landscape and visual effects that are likely to occur during future plans to restore the Application Site.

The emphasis in this chapter is on the (likely) significant direct and indirect landscape and visual effects during each of the Project phases reported above, as well as the potential for cumulative landscape and visual effects. This chapter includes the following:

- **Introduction** – Includes a description of the Application Site, its location and essential aspects of the peat extraction activities and all ancillary works during various Project phases requiring the most consideration from a landscape and visual assessment (LVIA) perspective.
- **Methodology and Assessment Criteria** – An outline of the methodology and guidance used to conduct the LVIA.
- **Landscape Baseline and Landscape Evolution** - Establishment of the conditions and character of the landscape at the Application Site and its wider landscape setting in 1988 and throughout both the Peat Extraction Phase and Current Phase. This includes a review of the landscape policy context and landscape designations pertinent to the Application Site from 1988 to present day.
- **Visibility Appraisal** – An appraisal of likely visibility of the Application Site from prominent visual receptors in proximity to the Application Site from sensitive visual receptors in the wider landscape.
- **Cumulative Baseline** – Identification and description of other sites of peat extraction in the wider landscape where the cumulative or in combination landscape and visual effects may potentially exist.
- **Landscape and Visual Effects** - A determination of the significance of landscape and visual effects during the three differing phases (Peat Extraction Phase; Current Phase; Remedial Phase), including an assessment of likely cumulative and in-combination effects. Assessment of effects is informed by site visits, review of historic satellite imagery and photography.

12.1.1 Statement of Authority

This chapter was written by Jack Workman. Jack Workman MSc, TMLI, is a Technician Member with the British Landscape Institute (TMLI). Jack is the Landscape & Visual Team manager at MKO, he is an Environmental Scientist and Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) specialist. Since joining MKO, Jack has conducted and project managed all aspects of LVIA for a broad range of commercial infrastructure developments including wind and solar energy projects, grid infrastructure, extraction industry and Strategic Housing Developments. Jack holds an MSc. in Coastal and Marine Environments and a BSc. in Psychology, he is a member of the Landscape Research Group, as well as holding a membership with the Chartered Institute of Water and Environmental Management.

This chapter was reviewed by Michael Watson. Michael is Project Director and head of the Environmental Team at MKO, an Irish planning and environmental consultancy with wind energy a company specialism. Michael has extensive expertise conducting LVIAs for wind farm developments and 20 years' professional consultancy experience as a project director, project manager and lead coordinator of environmental impact assessments for wind energy and other large-scale infrastructure projects.

12.1.2 Description of the Application Site & Activities Occurring During the Various Phases

The Application Site comprises five bogs located at the Westmeath-Meath County border. The bogs include: Ballivor, Carranstown, Bracklin, Lisclogher and Lisclogher West, with the total Application Site area comprising 2,421 hectares (ha). The site is located 2.5 km south-southeast of Delvin, 3.7 km east of Raharney and 2.2 km west of Ballivor Village. The Application Site measures approximately 9.27 km in length from north to south, and approximately 7.0 kilometres from east to west, at its widest point. Grid Reference co-ordinates for the approximate site centre are E263560, N257213. Under the Water Framework Directive (WFD), the Application Site is located within the Boyne_SC_040 and Boyne_SC_050 sub catchments and the Boyne (Catchment ID 07).

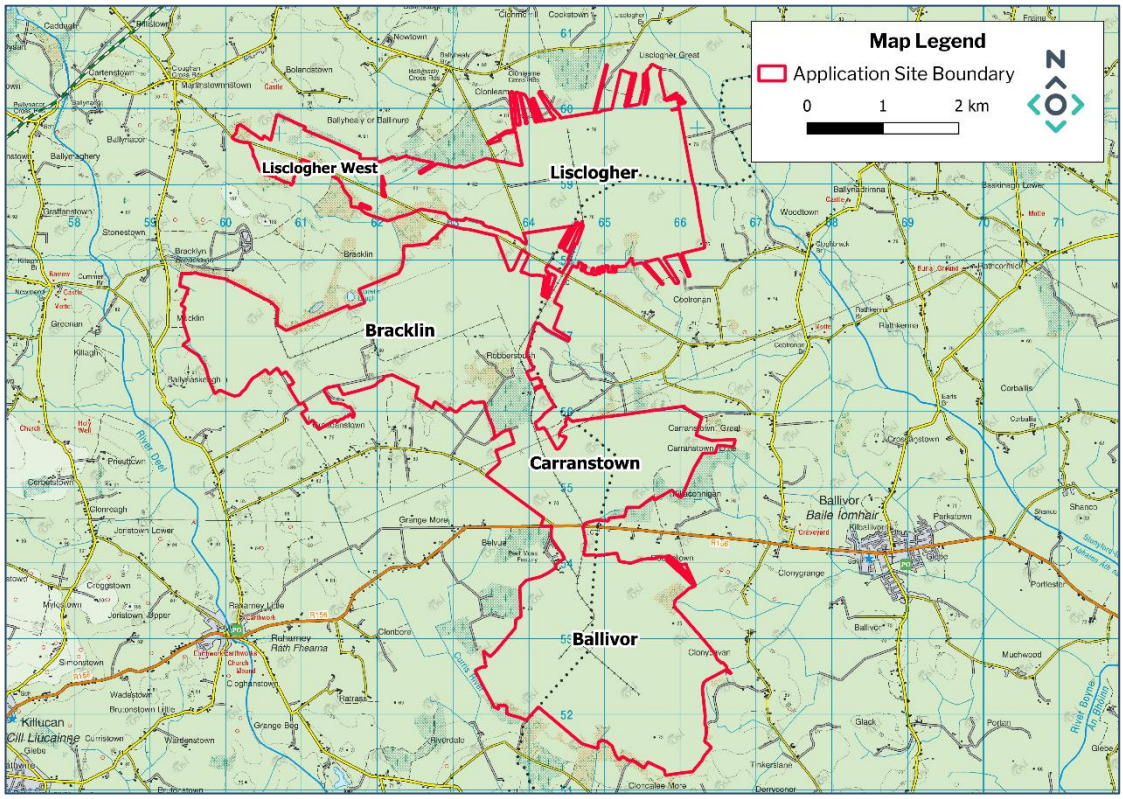

Figure 12-1 Location of the Application Site

The Application Site is accessed via the R156 Regional Road, which bisects the Application Site. The main site access points include a northern and southern entrance off the R156 Regional Road into Carranstown Bog and Ballivor Bog, respectively. Access to the remaining bogs is possible through Carranstown Bog and via local roads off the N52, N51 and N4 such as the L4106, L4101.

The following sections (Section 12.1.2.2, Section 12.1.2.4, Section 12.1.2.5) give an overview of the activities occurring at the Application Site throughout the various phases under assessment in this chapter. A comprehensive description of these phases and historic activities are reported in Chapter 4 of the EIAR.

12.1.2.1 The Baseline Assessment Year (1988)

The Peat Extraction Phase includes all peat extraction activities and all ancillary works occurring at the Application Site between 1988 and 2020. Chapter 4 provides a timeline of peat extraction activities and all ancillary works throughout the Peat Extraction Phase. The baseline conditions of the landscape of the Application Site in 1988 are illustrated in Figure 12-2, which shows the baseline status and extent of peat extraction activities and all ancillary works at differing areas of the Application Site in 1988. Figure 12-2 shows areas 'Subject to Peat Extraction' (represented as pink hatching on the map), which were areas actively subject to peat extraction in 1988. Areas that had drainage installed but which weren't subject to peat extraction in 1988 area mapped as 'Drained - Not Subject to Peat Extraction' (represented as pink cross hatching on the map), and areas 'Neither Drained nor Subject to Peat Extraction' (represented with orange hatching on the map).

As illustrated by Figure 12-2, peat extraction activity was occurring in:

- Ballivor Bog.
- Lisclogher Bog,
- the western extent of Carranstown Bog.
- A large proportion of Bracklin Bog and the southern extent of Bracklin Bog.

As indicated by Figure 12-2, a large proportion of Carranstown Bog to the east and the north-western extent of Bracklin Bog had been drained in 1988 but were Not Subject to Peat Extraction. Peripheral boundary areas of Ballivor Bog (southerly perimeter), Lisclogher Bog (northern and southern perimeter) and Bracklin Bog (northern and southern perimeter) were drained but Not Subject to Peat Extraction in 1988. Drainage was installed in Lisclogher West Bog between 1973 and 1995. However, Lisclogher West Bog, the bog was never subject to industrial peat extraction.

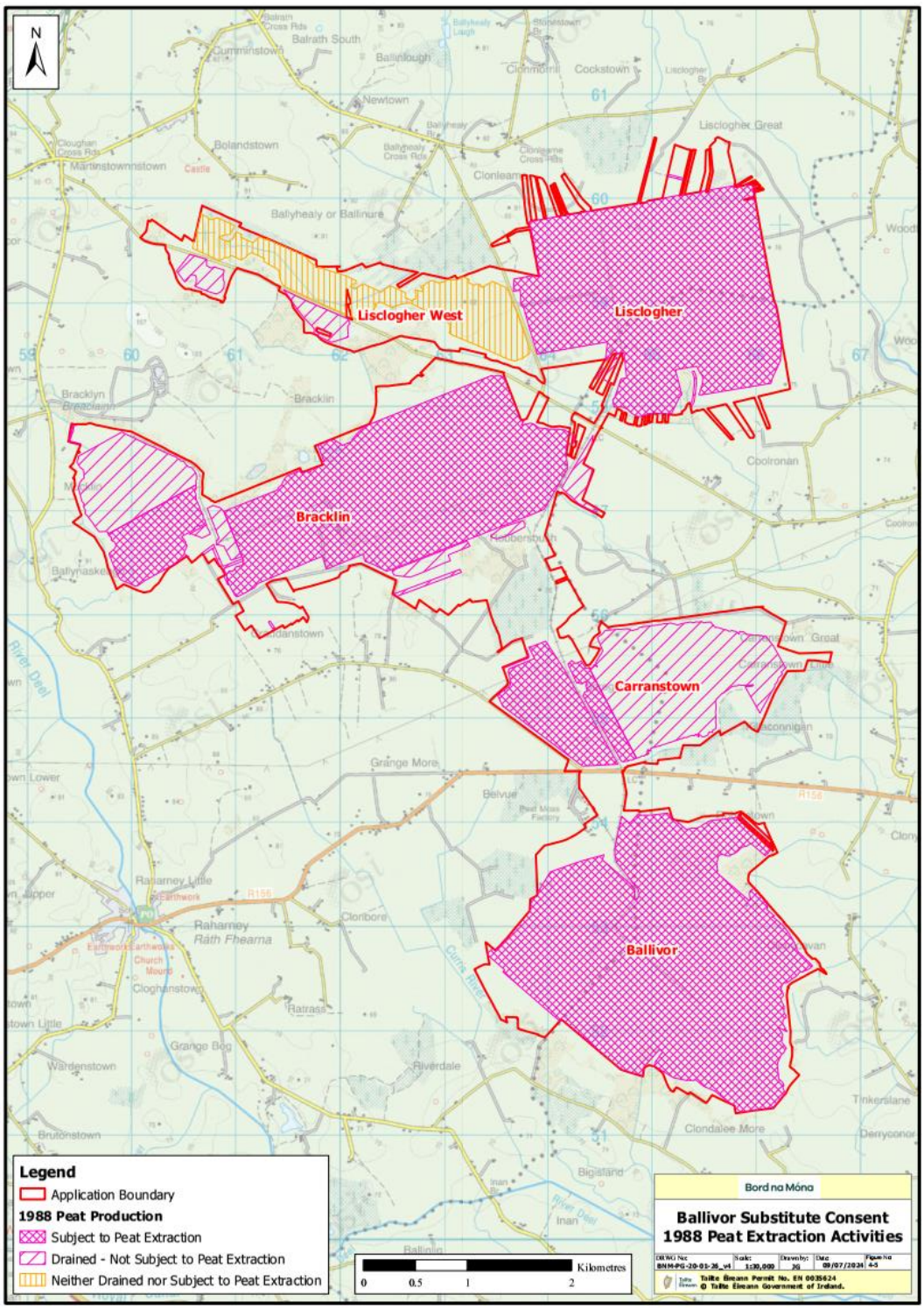

Figure 12-2 Ballivor Substitute Consent Peat Extraction Activities 1988 (Source - Bord na Móna, 2024)

12.1.2.2 Peat Extraction Phase (July 1988-June 2020)

Ballivor Bog

As shown below in **Error! Reference source not found.** below, most of Ballivor Bog was subject to Peat E xtraction in 1988 and it would have been a landscape of cut-over peatland. A large area to the south-west and a small section to the north of Ballivor Bog was Drained – Not Subject to Peat Extraction. By

2020, only a linear tract in the centre of Ballivor Bog and a tract along the western boundary of the bog were subject to peat extraction until all peat extraction activity ceased.

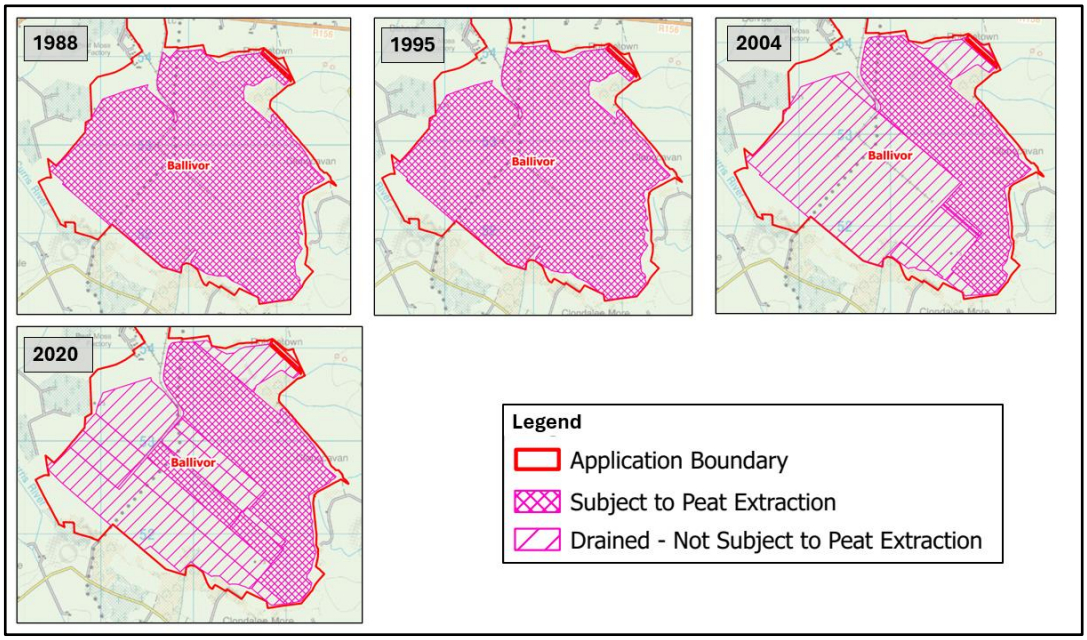

Figure 12-3 Evolution of Peat Extraction Activities at Ballivor Bog during the 'Peat Extraction Phase' (Figure produced from extracts of Peat Extraction Activities maps provided by Bord na Móna, 2024)

Carranstown Bog

Figure 12-4 (below) shows the change in the peat extraction activities at Carranstown Bog between 1988 and 2020. Several areas in the eastern portion of Carranstown Bog transitioned from 'Drained - Not Subject to Peat Extraction' to 'Subject to Peat Extraction' areas between 1988 and 2004. Between 1998 and 2004, peat extraction occurred in some areas in the centre of Carranstown Bog of previously drained bog, which was not subject to peat extraction, and some 'Subject to Peat Extraction' areas became 'Drained – Not Subject to Peat Extraction', particularly to the west of the bog. Most of the central area of Carranstown Bog was Subject to Peat Extraction between 2004 and 2020.

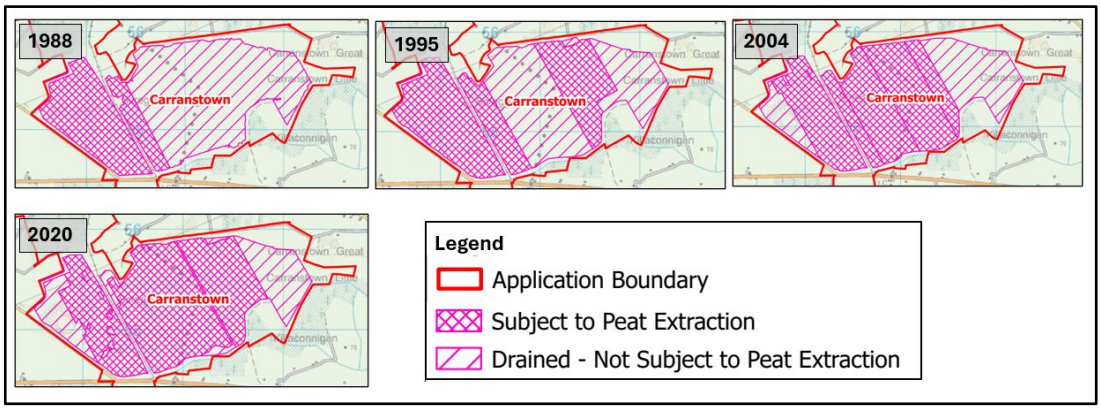

Figure 12-4 Evolution of Peat Extraction Activities at Carranstown Bog during the 'Peat Extraction Phase' (Figure produced from extracts of Peat Extraction Activities maps provided by Bord na Móna, 2024)

Bracklin Bog

As shown in Figure 12-5 below, the north-western portion of Bracklin Bog transitioned to a 'Subject to Peat Extraction' area from a 'Drained – Not Subject to Peat Extraction' area between 1988 and 1995. The entire western extent of Bracklin Bog was subject to peat extraction from 1995 until June 2020.

Between 1995 and 2020 the central and eastern portions of Bracklin Bog became Drained – Not Subject to Peat Extraction.

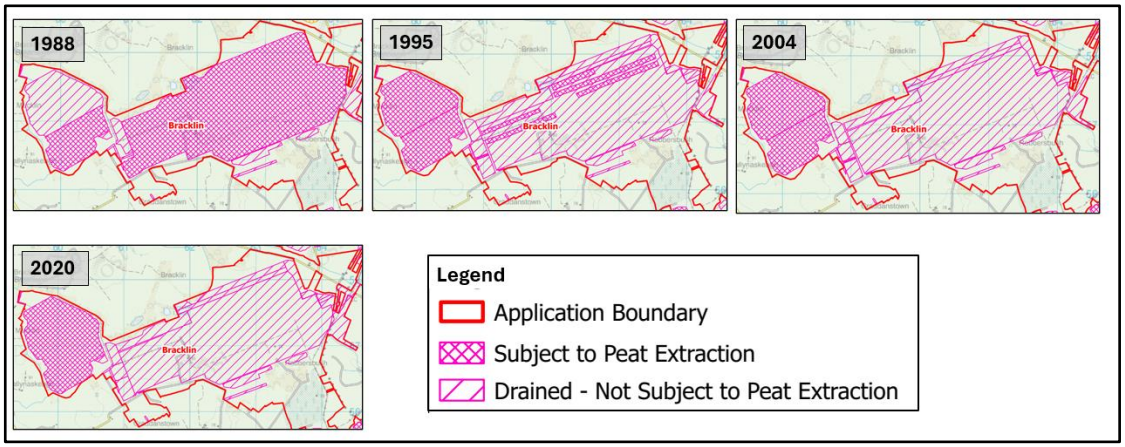

Figure 12-5 Evolution of Peat Extraction Activities at Bracklin Bog during the 'Peat Extraction Phase' (Figure produced from extracts of Peat Extraction Activities maps provided by Bord na Móna, 2024)

Lisclogher Bog

As shown in **Error! Reference source not found.** below, most of Lisclogher Bog was Subject to Peat Extraction during the 1988 baseline. From 2004, most of the bog was Drained – Not Subject to Peat Extraction through to 2020, except for some sections to the north of the bog which remained Subject to Peat Extraction in 2004.

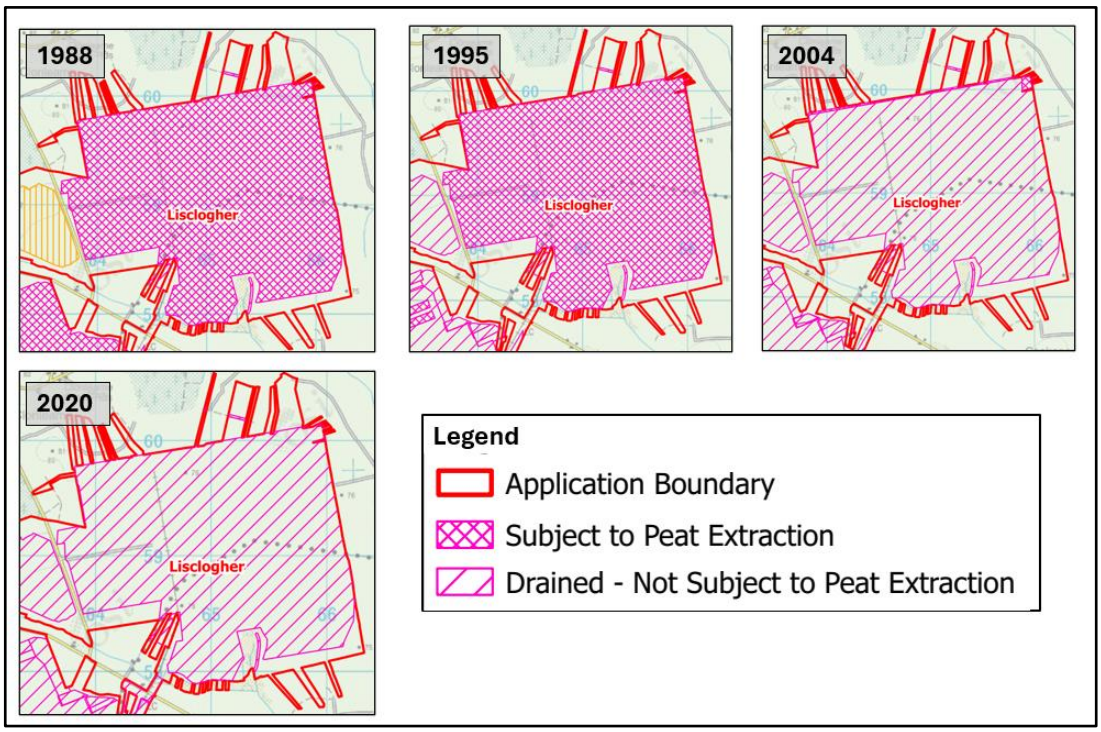

Figure 12-6 Evolution of Peat Extraction Activities at Lisclogher Bog during the 'Peat Extraction Phase' (Figure produced from extracts of Peat Extraction Activities maps provided by Bord na Móna, 2024)

Lisclogher West Bog

As shown in Figure 12-7 below (and as depicted in Table 4-2 of Chapter 4), main drainage was installed pre-1988 and drainage was complete post 1988 (as detailed in Section 4.3.2). The majority of the bog was neither drained nor subject to peat extraction in the 1988 baseline, except for a small area in the

southern section of the bog that was drained, but not subject to peat extraction. Drainage was complete in 1995 but the bog was never subject to industrial peat extraction.

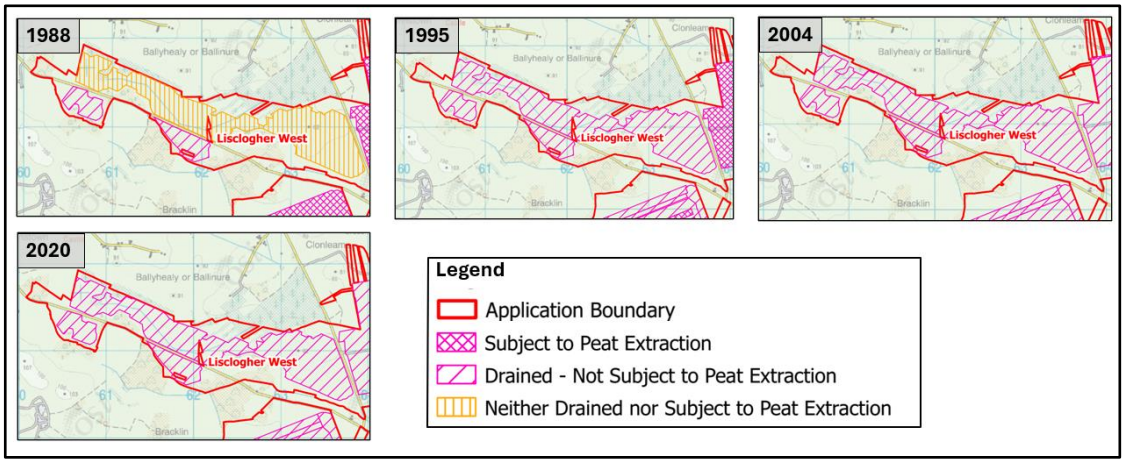

Figure 12-7 Evolution of Peat Extraction Activities at Lisclogher West during the 'Peat Extraction Phase' (Figure produced from extracts of Peat Extraction Activities maps provided by Bord na Móna, 2024)

12.1.2.3 Landscape & Visual Assessment of the Peat Extraction Phase

As described above and shown in the mapping figures, some areas of the Application Site remained 'Subject to Peat-Extraction' until extraction ceased in 2020 and peat extraction ceased in other areas of the Application Site as those areas became commercially unviable for continued peat extraction. A description of the changes in the landscape of the Application Site throughout the Peat Extraction Phase based upon a review of historic satellite imagery, in combination with the mapping figures above is included in Section 12.3 – *Landscape Baseline & Landscape Evolution.*

Best practice guidance for LVIA (GLVIA3, 2013) states that *"it is important to make sure that the project description provides all the information needed to identify its effects on particular aspects of the environment. For LVIA it is important to understand, from the project description, the essential aspects of the scheme that will potentially give rise to its effects on the landscape and visual amenity".*

From a landscape and visual perspective, the essential aspects of activity and landscape change under assessment during the Peat Extraction Phase are the direct effects on the landscape, most notably:

- The stripping of natural vegetated ground cover.
- Change to the landform from the extraction of material from the ground for both peat extraction, as well as creation of drainage channels; and,
- Fragmentation of former areas of intact raised bog due to further establishment of drainage at Lisclogher West.

Other elements of the Peat Extraction Phase likely to cause landscape and visual effects include:

- Alterations to the visual aesthetic of the Application Site as it changes from a mosaic of bog habitat to a visually homogenous landscape of bare cutaway peat.
- Minor modification of ancillary extraction infrastructure such as machine pass routes and peat stockpiles.
- Use of industrial extraction machinery and vehicles; and,
- Indirect effects result from the change in drainage regimes.

12.1.2.4 Current Phase (June 2020 – Present Day)

Peat extraction activities and all ancillary works at the Application Site ceased in June 2020. Since 2020 the Application Site has been part of an on-going decommissioning programme in accordance with the IPC licence conditions, although minor non-extractive activities have occurred on site, such as:

- Movement and processing of peat stockpiles. All stockpiles from Ballivor were removed by June 2022, with the remainder of peat stockpiles removed from the Application Site by the end of 2023.
- Environmental mitigation and monitoring measures (such as noise, dust, surface water) have been in operation at the application site since April 2000, in accordance with the IPC Licence conditions; and,
- Peatland Climate Action Scheme (PCAS): The PCAS scheme commenced at the eastern side of Carranstown Bog in 2022, and in Lisclogher West in 2023. The Peatland Climate Action Scheme (PCAS) is a programme of enhanced peatland rehabilitation measures designed to exceed/meet the standard stabilisation requirements as defined by the IPC Licence and to enhance the ecosystem services in the Ballivor Bog Group, principally optimising climate action benefits. PCAS is in addition to the IPC Licence measures, and does not form part of this substitute consent application Please see Chapter 4 and the dedicated PCAS website at the following link: https://www.bnmpcas.ie/ for details.

The potential Landscape and Visual impact associated with the activities mentioned above are inherently minor, particularly in comparison with activities occurring during the Peat Extraction Phase. Other change has occurred at the Application Site since 2020 as the landscape has started to revegetate since peat extraction ceased. A comprehensive description of the landscape of the Application Site in its current state is presented in Section 12-3 – *Landscape Baseline & Landscape Evolution*.

12.1.2.5 Remedial Phase

Bord na Móna have produced Cutaway Bog Decommissioning and Rehabilitation Plans for all 5 no. bogs of the Application Site, and it is the intention of the Applicant to rehabilitate the bogs in a phased approach under condition 10 of the IPC licence. Please see Appendix 4-2 for details.

Decommissioning activities include removing/disposing/recovering, equipment, waste etc from the Application Site. From a landscape and visual perspective, the essential aspect of this will be the removal of infrastructure such as equipment and facilities.

The Cutaway Bog Decommissioning and Rehabilitation Plans involves the re-wetting of parts of the cutover peatlands as appropriate of the Application Site with an aim of achieving environmental stabilisation and biodiversity colonisation. Re-wetted areas will require low level, intermittent groundworks for activities such as plugging and blocking existing drainage. The Cutaway Bog Decommissioning and Rehabilitation Plans also include targeted revegetation where appropriate. It is anticipated it will take up to 30 years for naturally functioning wetland and peatland ecosystems to fully re-establish.

12.1.2.6 Potential Future Use – Proposed Ballivor Wind Farm

As detailed in Section 4.10 in Chapter 4, Bord na Móna Powergen Ltd lodged a planning application to An Bord Pleanála (Ref. PA25M.316212) for a development consisting of 26 no. wind turbines and associated works at the Ballivor Bog Group, known as Ballivor Wind Farm (https://www.ballivorwindfarm.ie/). The proposed wind farm is located on Ballivor bog, Carranstown bog, Bracklin bog, Lisclogher bog and agricultural land adjacent to Bracklin bog. The likely significant landscape and visual effects of the proposed Ballivor Wind Farm proposal are comprehensively assessed and reported within the EIAR accompanying the submitted planning application. The assessments in this chapter of this EIAR are cognisant of the likely significant landscape and visual

effects of the proposed Ballivor Wind Farm in the context of potential for cumulative interactions between the works and activities required for implementation of the Remedial Phase and the likely effects resulting from the construction and operation of a wind farm at the Application Site.

12.2 Methodology & Assessment Criteria

This section broadly outlines the methodology used to undertake the landscape and visual impact assessment of the activities (outlined in the previous section under the three differing phases) including a description of the following:

- Guidance and Reference material used to conduct the LVIA.
- Methods for determining the Landscape Baseline and Landscape Evolution; and,
- Methods for Assessing Landscape & Visual Effects.

12.2.1 Guidance and Reference Materials

In 2000, the Department of the Environment and Local Government (DoEHLG) published 'Landscape and Landscape Assessment: Consultation Draft of Guidelines for Planning Authorities', which recommended that all local authorities adopt a standardised approach to landscape assessment for incorporation into development plans and consideration as part of the planning process. This document remains in Draft.

In 2002, Ireland signed and ratified the European Landscape Convention (ELC). This introduced a pan-European concept that centres on the quality of landscape protection, management and planning. The Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht published a National Landscape Strategy for Ireland in 2015. The strategy aims to ensure compliance with the ELC and contains six main objectives, including undertaking a National Landscape Character Assessment and developing landscape policies.

Although the DoEHLG 2000 guidance remains in draft form, this section of the LVIA has been informed by the landscape assessment guidelines presented in the DoEHLG document as well as other guidelines, such as:

- Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment Third Edition (GLVIA3) (The Landscape Institute/Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment, UK, 2013) - also referred to as GLVIA3 (LI & IEMA, 2013); and,
- Guidelines on the information to be contained in Environmental Impact Assessment Reports (EPA 2022).

12.2.2 Methods for Establishing the Landscape Baseline & Landscape Evolution

In order to establish the landscape and visual conditions at the Application Site throughout the various phases under assessment in this rEIAR, a desk study was undertaken which identified relevant landscape policy relating to the Application Site. This comprises a review of current and previous county development plans for both County Westmeath and County Meath with regards to landscape character areas, designated landscapes, protected viewpoints and scenic routes. The County Development Plans (CDPs) used to inform the assessment include:

- Westmeath County Development Plan 2002-2008
- Westmeath County Development Plan 2008-2014
- Westmeath County Development Plan 2014-2020
- Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027
- Meath County Development Plan 2001-2007
- Meath County Development Plan 2007-2013

- Meath County Development Plan 2013-2019
- Meath County Development Plan 2021-2027

Section 2.3.4 in Chapter 2 of this rEIAR also provides a summary of historic County Development Plans for County Meath and County Westmeath dated from 1981 onwards, along with the Ballivor Development Plan form 1993.

A review of historic aerial imagery and mapping, Bord na Móna Annual Reports and all publicly available information on land use were also used to establish the baseline characteristics of the Landscape of the Application Site and its evolution between 1988 and present day. A site visit was conducted on the 13th of October 2020 and 6th of August 2020 to determine the condition and characteristics of the Landscape in the 'Current Phase', as well as determining the likely visibility of the Application Site (and likely visibility of extraction activities) from visual receptors in the wider landscape setting.

These investigations (i.e. review of policy, aerial imagery, mapping, reporting, site visit and visibility appraisal) informed the assessment of Landscape and Visual effects.

12.2.3 Methods for Assessing Landscape & Visual Effects

The LVIA methodology used in this chapter utilises clearly documented methods based on the GLVIA3 (LI & IEMA, 2013) guidelines. Due to the nature of activities under assessment across differing timelines (phases), qualitative methods have been employed based upon the information gathered and presented in the Landscape Baseline and Landscape Evolution Section. As part of the assessment, landscape and visual sensitivity is balanced with the magnitude of the change to assess the significance of landscape and visual effects. Residual landscape and visual effects are graded upon an 'impact assessment classification of significance' scale, as defined by the Environmental Protection Agency of Ireland (EPA, 2022).

12.2.3.1 Assessing Landscape Effects

The methodology uses qualitative methods in order to arrive at an assessment, which is based on the Landscape and Landscape Assessment (DoEHLG, 2000) Guidelines as well as the GLVIA3 (LI and IEMA, 2013).

Landscape effects can be described as changes which affect the landscape as a resource. This includes how activities affect the elements that make up the landscape, the aesthetic and perceptual aspects and its landscape character. Landscape effects also relate to changes in the structure of the landscape. Under the GLVIA3 (2013) guidance, the assessment of likely significant effects on landscape receptors includes a judgement on both the sensitivity of the receptor as well as magnitude of the change.

Assessing Landscape Sensitivity

Landscape Sensitivity, which is described in the GLVIA3 (2013) as a combination of the landscape's susceptibility to change as well as the value attached to the landscape. Susceptibility to change can be described as the ability of the landscape receptor (either the overall character, quality of the landscape or a particular landscape feature) to accommodate the development without undue consequences for the maintenance of the baseline (existing) landscape and/or the aims of landscape planning policies and strategies. Landscape value is the importance attributed to a specific landscape receptor or feature. Landscape value is determined through baseline assessments considering a combination of criteria such as designations and local characteristics.

For the purposes of this chapter and the assessment of landscape sensitivity, the following landscape sensitivity ratings are assigned to receptors based upon investigations determined by the investigations included in the Landscape Baseline and Landscape Evolution Section:

- Very High
- High
- Medium
- Low

Assessing Magnitude of Change in the Landscape

The magnitude of change occurring within a landscape is a combination of the visual presence - size and scale - of the change, the extent of the area to be affected, and the duration and reversibility of the effect. The magnitude of change for differing landscape receptors was assessed using the definitions outlined in Table 12-1 below.

Table 12-1 Magnitude of Landscape Change Assessment Criteria

Magnitude of Change	Description
Substantial	Where a landscape will experience the loss of key landscape features or the introduction of uncharacteristic additions over a large area. The changes to the landscape are prominent and large in scale. The level of change has an effect on the overall landscape character. The effects are likely long term and may be irreversible.
Moderate	A more limited loss of or change to landscape features over a medium extent which will result in some change to landscape features and aesthetics. Could include the addition of some new uncharacteristic features or elements that would lead to the potential for change in landscape character in a localised area or part of a landscape character area. Would include moderate effects on the overall landscape character that do not affect key characteristics. The effects could be long to medium term and/or partially reversible.
Slight	The loss of or change to landscape features of limited extent, or changes to landscape character in smaller areas. Changes would not affect key characteristics. The addition of any new features or elements to the landscape would only result in low-level changes to the overall aesthetics of the landscapes. Changes to the landscape are more evident at a local level and not over a wide geographical area. The effects could potentially be medium to short term and/or reversible.
Negligible	A change affecting smaller areas of landscape character including the loss of some landscape elements or the addition of features or elements which are either of low value or hardly noticeable. The effects could be short term and/or reversible.

Landscape Effects Assessment Matrix

The significance of landscape effects was arrived at by combining the magnitude and sensitivity classifications, using the assessment matrix in Table 12-2 below, where landscape sensitivity is shown in the left-hand first column and magnitude of change is shown in the first row at the top of the table.

Table 12-2 Landscape effects significance assessment matrix

	Substantial	Moderate	Slight	Negligible
Very High	Major	Major/Moderate	Moderate	Moderate/Minor
High	Major/Moderate	Moderate	Moderate/Minor	Minor
Medium	Moderate	Moderate/Minor	Minor	Minor/Negligible
Low	Moderate/Minor	Minor	Minor/Negligible	Negligible

The determination of significance uses a seven-point scale, ranging from Major to Negligible. This seven-point scale is translated to the EPA (2022) impact assessment classifications of significance, as outlined in Table 12-6 in Section 12.2.3.2.

12.2.3.2 Assessing Visual Effects

Visual effects relate to changes in views and visual amenity of the surroundings of individuals or groups of people – termed 'visual receptors'. These may result from changes in content and character of views as a result in changes to the landscape. The significance of the effect on visual amenity is a combination of the sensitivity of the receptor balanced with the magnitude of the change occurring within a view.

Visual Receptor Sensitivity

Visual sensitivity balances the sensitivity and susceptibility of the receptor (people or groups of people) as well as the amenity value of the view on offer at a particular location. Visual receptor sensitivity depends on the occupation or activity of the people, as well the extent to which the attention is focused on views and visual amenity, according to the GLVIA Guidelines (2013). Visual receptor sensitivity is assessed as either being Very High, High, Medium or Low, based on the definition of descriptions and examples set out in Table 12-3 below.

Table 12-3 Visual Receptor Sensitivity Assessment Criteria

Sensitivity of Visual Receptor(s)	Description
Very High	Included in this category are viewers that are primarily focused on views from this particular location, such as visitors to popular destinations identified for their outstanding views. Residents in close proximity who have primary views of a scenic quality in the direction of the Application Site.
High	Includes viewers at designated views or landscapes. Viewers such as residents in close proximity to the viewpoint who have primary views that will be in the direction of the Application Site that may not necessarily be of a particularly scenic quality; viewers at well-known heritage or popular tourist or recreational areas, viewers along scenic or tourist routes.
Medium	Includes viewers who may have some susceptibility to a change in view. Viewers such as residents in medium proximity but who do not have views focused in the direction of the Application Site or whose views are not of a particularly scenic quality; those from views which are not designated but may have local recreational uses or those travelling along routes or at view which are considered moderately scenic.

Sensitivity of Visual Receptor(s)	Description
Low	Includes viewers engaged in activities where the focus is not on the landscape or view. These including those travelling along a busy route, viewers at work or engaged in sport not related to views or experience of the landscape.

Magnitude of Visual Change

The magnitude of the visual change considers a combination of scale of the change, the extent of the area to be affected and the duration and reversibility of the effect, determined by review of the activities conducted at the Application Site, desk studies, as well as the visibility appraisal conducted during a site visit on the 13th of October 2020 and 6th of August 2020. The magnitude of change is determined in accordance with the definitions and descriptions included in Table 12-4 below.

Table 12-4 Magnitude of Visual Change Assessment Criteria

Magnitude of Change	Description
Substantial	Substantial change, where activities (or proposals) result in large-scale, prominent or very prominent change, leading to substantial obstruction of existing view or complete change in character and composition of the baseline though removal of key elements or addition of uncharacteristic elements which may or may not be visually discordant. This includes instances where activities under assessment (e.g. Peat extraction & associated activities at the Application Site) are fully or almost fully visible over a wide extent, at close proximity to the viewer. This change could be long term or of a long duration.
Moderate	The change in the view may involve partial obstruction of existing view or partial change in character and composition of the baseline through the introduction of new elements or removal of existing elements. Likely to occur at locations where activities under assessment (e.g. Peat extraction & associated activities at the Application Site) is partially visible over a moderate or medium extent, and which are not in close proximity to the Application Site. Change may be readily noticeable but not substantially different in scale and character from the surroundings and wider setting.
Slight	The activities under assessment (e.g. Peat extraction & associated activities at the Application Site) would be partially visible or visible at sufficient distance to be perceptible and result in a low level of change in the view and its composition and a low degree of contrast. The character of the view may be altered but will remain similar to the baseline existing situation. This change could be short term or of a short duration.
Negligible	Any change would only be barely distinguishable from the status quo "do-nothing scenario" in the surroundings. The composition and character of the view would be substantially unaltered, approximating to little or no change.

Visual Effects Assessment Matrix

Table 12-5 below shows the significance of visual effects, arrived at by combining the visual receptor sensitivity and the magnitude of change classifications. Visual receptor sensitivity is shown in the left-hand first column and magnitude of visual change is shown in the first row at the top of the table. This table is used as an indicative tool to assist in determining the significance of visual effects. The significance of visual effect is arrived at using a combination of the matrix shown in

Table 12-5.

Table 12-5 Visual effects significance assessment matrix

	Substantial	Moderate	Slight	Negligible
Very High	Major	Major/Moderate	Moderate	Moderate/Minor
High	Major/Moderate	Moderate	Moderate/Minor	Minor
Medium	Moderate	Moderate/Minor	Minor	Minor/Negligible
Low	Moderate/Minor	Minor	Minor/Negligible	Negligible

The determination of significance uses a seven-point scale, ranging from Major to Negligible. This seven-point scale is translated to the EPA impact assessment classifications of significance (EPA, 2022), as outlined in Table 12-6 below.

Table 12-6 EPA Impact Assessment Significance Classification for Landscape and Visual Effects

Matrix Classification Significance	EPA Significance Classification	EPA (2022) Definition of Significance
Major	Profound	An effect which obliterates sensitive characteristics
Major/Moderate	Very significant	An effect, which by its character, magnitude, duration or intensity alters most of a sensitive aspect of the environment
Moderate	Significant	An effect, which by its character, magnitude, duration or intensity alters a sensitive aspect of the environment.
Moderate/Minor	Moderate	An effect that alters the character of the environment in a manner consistent with existing and emerging baseline trends
Minor	Slight	An effect which causes noticeable changes in the character of the environment without affecting its sensitivities
Minor/Negligible	Not Significant	An effect which causes noticeable changes in the character of the environment but without significant consequences.

Matrix Classification Significance	EPA Significance Classification	EPA (2022) Definition of Significance
Negligible	Imperceptible	An effect capable of measurement but without significant consequences

After determining the significance of the visual effect using the above visual effects assessment matrix, mitigating factors are taken into consideration to arrive at the final residual effect.

12.3 Landscape Baseline & Landscape Evolution

This Section establishes the conditions and character of the landscape at the Application Site and its wider landscape setting in 1988 and throughout both the Peat Extraction Phase and Current Phase. This includes a review of the landscape policy context and landscape designations pertinent to the Application Site from 1988 to present.

12.3.1 1988 Landscape Baseline – Landscape Character

A description of the baseline condition and extraction activities occurring within each specific bog of the Application Site in 1988 is included in Section 4.4 of Chapter 4 as well as an overview in Section 12.1.2.2. The following text establishes the landscape conditions of the various bogs that make up the Application Site in 1988 and the factors that contribute to their landscape character, landscape value and landscape sensitivity at that time.

In 1988, all of the 'Subject to Peat Extraction' areas of the Application Site (Ballivor Bog; the western portion Carranstown Bog; Bracklin Bog; Lisclogher Bog) included stripped and drained peatland where peat extraction was well-established. The groundcover of these 'Subject to Peat Extraction' areas comprised bare cutover peat and it is likely that the character of the landscape in these areas was similar to that shown below in Plate 12-1 (captured during site visits conducted on the 13th of October 2020 and 6th of August 2020). As discussed in Chapter 7 – *Lands Soils and Geology*, the topographical elevation of bare cutaway peat landscape was at a greater elevation in 1988 than it is currently. The material extracted throughout the Peat Extraction Phase (July 1988 – June 2020) has lowered the landform relative to the surrounding landscape and relative to the baseline profile in 1988.

Plate 12-1 View of the existing site conditions (present day) within the site boundary.

The greatest landscape and visual effects arising from these areas 'Subject to Peat Extraction' had already occurred prior to the baseline of 1988, where the upper acrotelm layer (which comprises the biologically active component of the bog) was removed during the stripping process and drainage ditches were cut. In this regard it is deemed that in 1988 the 'Subject to Peat Extraction' areas of the Application Site were a degraded and modified landscape utilised for peat extraction making them of low landscape value and of low landscape sensitivity.

Several peat extraction areas of the Application Site were not under extraction by 1988. As detailed in Section 12.1.2.2 previously, satellite imagery, mapping and reports from that time indicate that Lisclogher West bog has undergone drainage works prior to the baseline (pre-1988), which were completed post 1988, however, the bog was never subject to industrial peat extraction.

In 1988 the eastern extent of Carranstown Bog and the northwestern extent of Bracklin Bog had been drained, but no vegetation clearance had occurred. Drainage ditches had been created previously (prior to 1988) to drain the upper surface of these bogs by lowering the local water table in order to facilitate commercial peat extraction. Drainage ditches are deep, linear topographical grooves that cut across the landscape of the Application Site. Insertion of drainage ditches, such as those in existence on the Application Site would have slightly altered the physical characteristics of a landscape that would previously have been a raised bog. Altering the drainage regime via insertion of a drainage ditch would dry the topsoil and would ultimately have a knock-on effect on the assemblages of species existent within the peatland habitat, bringing about further minor and localised change in the appearance of the bog and a slight change (although potentially imperceptible) to landscape character. Although the drainage regimes had been altered in Carranstown Bog (east) and Bracklin Bog (north-west) by 1988, the acrotelm layer had not yet been removed at this time. Therefore, these areas would still have had ground cover of high ecological value. On balance, the landscape value and landscape sensitivity of these areas that are 'drained', but not 'stripped' or 'Subject to Peat Extraction' is deemed to be Medium.

In a general sense, the Application Site in 1988 was a highly managed landscape utilised for industrial peat extraction. The character of landscape was heavily influenced by this industry. As well as the expansive areas of bare cutover peat, the Application Site included ancillary infrastructure and features

to facilitate the land use such as railway infrastructure, a peat processing plant, canteen, storage sheds, maintenance buildings, internal machine passes/tracks, 20kV power lines, pumps, silt ponds and drains.

Aerial imagery and reports from 1988 indicate that the perimeter of the Application Site was likely bounded by mature vegetation such as hedgerows, broadleaf woodland and pockets of coniferous forestry as it is today, as well as remnant uncut bog around the edges of the 'Subject to Peat Extraction' areas. The aerial imagery also indicates that the surrounding landscape setting in 1988 comprised an agricultural as well as a scattering of residential settlements aligned along the local road network. In this regard, it is anticipated that the nature and extent of visual screening surrounding the Application Site (boundary vegetation) and nature of the visual receptors present in 1988 was very similar to that which exist today. An appraisal of the visibility of the Application Site from visual receptors in the surrounding landscape was conducted on the 13th of October 2020 and 6th of August 2020 and is reported in Section 12.4 - *Visibility Appraisal*.

12.3.2 Landscape Evolution – Landscape Character of the Application Site During the Peat Extraction Phase (1988 - 2020)

As described above, the Application Site was a managed system in 1988 for industrial peat extraction, this continued throughout the Peat Extraction Phase until peat extraction ceased in 2020. Therefore, all areas subject to Peat Extraction of the Application Site had no opportunity to revegetate, re-wet and mitigate landscape and visual impacts of historic peat extraction activities over time. As detailed in Section 4.5.1.1 of Chapter 4, the total volume of peat extracted from July 1988 to June 2020 is estimated to be 2,400,815 tonnes. The removal of this volume of material caused a substantial direct change on the landscape throughout this phase, as the physical landform was materially altered, gradually the surface of the landscape was reduced to a lower elevation year on year.

As detailed in Section 12.1.2.2, one of the greatest changes to the landscape occurred in Carranstown Bog (east) between 1988 and 1995, and then in the northwest of Bracklin Bog between 1988 and 1995. The vegetated ground cover was stripped from these drained peatlands, and they became active peat extraction areas. The landscape in these areas then transitioned to a landscape of bare cutover peat as the natural ground cover was removed. Peat extraction occurred throughout the Application Site and limited change will have occurred to the character or visual aesthetic of areas Subject to Peat Extraction at the Application Site from the 1988 baseline. In some areas of the Application Site and the following areas were drained and no longer Subject to Peat Extraction:

- West of Ballivor Bog from 2004 onwards, and the majority of the bog by the year 2020
- Majority of the area to the east of Bracklin Bog in 1995, then all except the western area was Drained – Not Subject to Peat Extraction from 2003 onwards.
- Most of Lisclogher Bog was 'Drained-Not Subject to Peat Extraction' from 1995 onwards and the entire bog was drained and Not Subject to Peat Extraction from March 2003 onwards.

The landscape in these 'Drained – Not Subject to Peat Extraction' areas was able to revegetate over time, altering the character of the bare cutover peatland landscape.

A selection of Aerial imagery of the Application Site captured in 1995 and 2004 are presented below and are presented in Appendix 4-4. The imagery indicates the morphology of the Application Site throughout the operational lifecycle of these peatlands as managed, working landscapes for the commercial production of peat.

Aerial Imagery 1995 (Source – Ordnance Survey of Ireland)

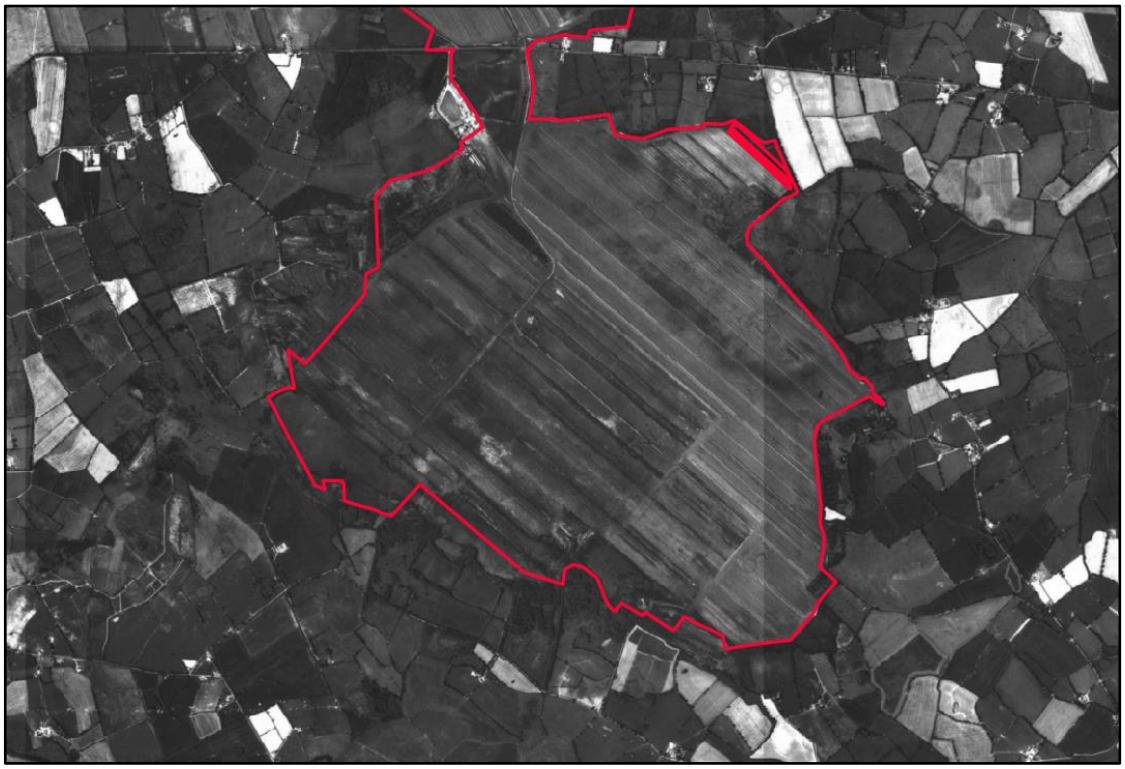

Plate 12-2 Aerial Image of Ballivor Bog 1995 – Osi

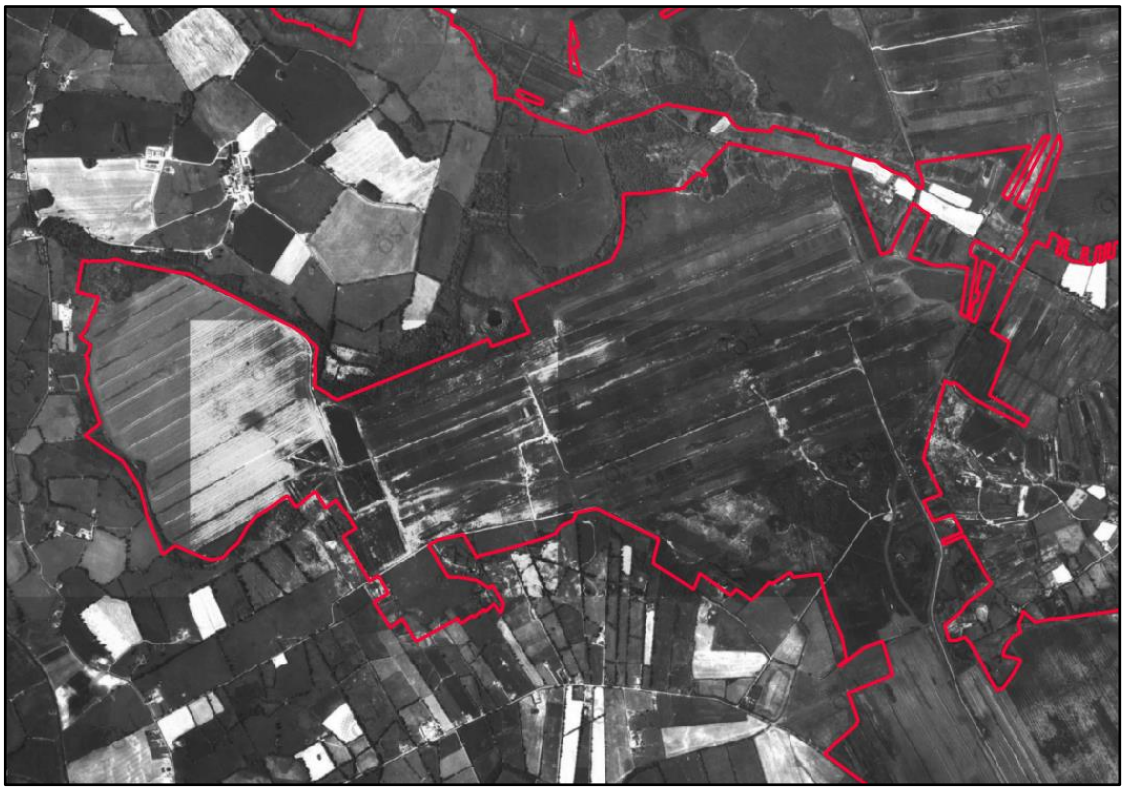

Plate 12-3 Aerial Image of Bracklin Bog 1995 – Osi

Plate 12-4 Aerial Image of Carranstown Bog 1995 – Osi

Plate 12-5 Aerial Image of Lisclogher Bog 1995 – Osi

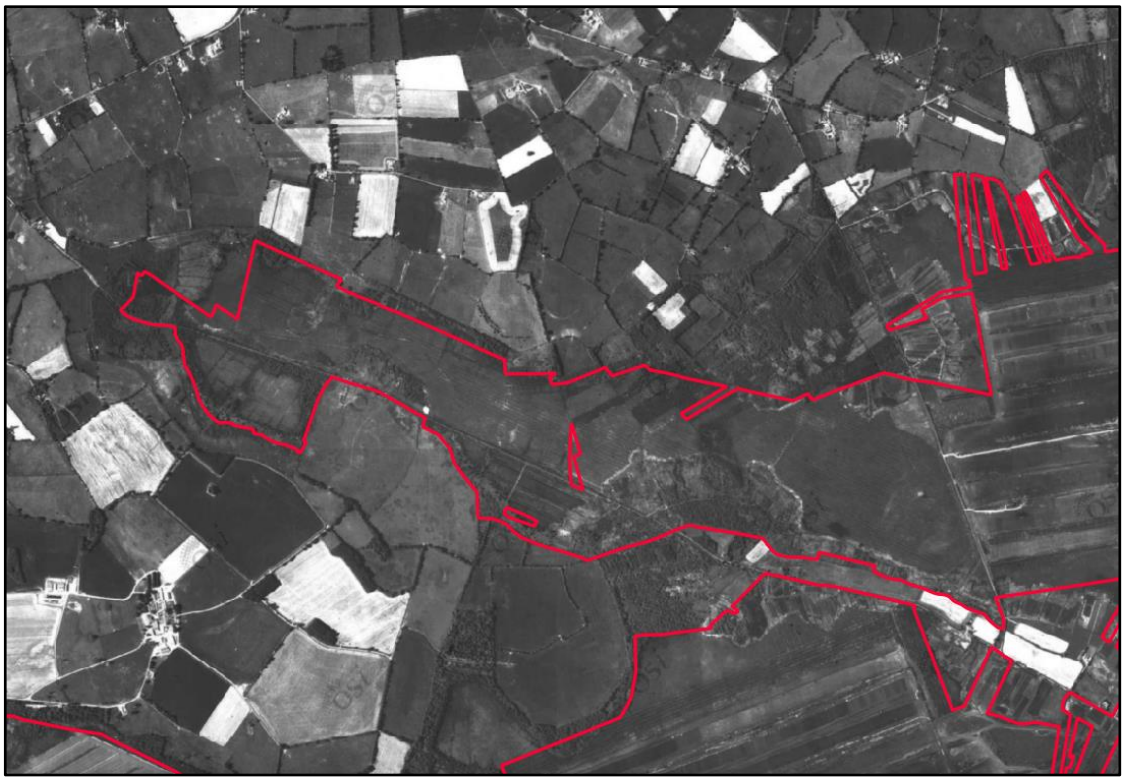

Plate 12-6 Aerial Image of Lisclogher West Bog 1995 – Osi

The Aerial imagery of the Application Site captured in 1995 is shown above. The imagery shows the boglands are an ordered working landscape with well-established extraction areas and deep drainage and transport networks visible within the aerials. Excepting Lisclogher West Bog (Plate 12-6), the aerial imagery from 1995 shows that the surface area of peat extraction includes almost all available areas of the peatlands within the Application Site.

Aerial Imagery 2004 (Source – Bord na Mona, 2024)

The aerial imagery from 2004 (Plate 12-7 to Plate 12-11 below and presented in Appendix 4-4) shows the extent of the Application Site in contrast to the surrounding agricultural landscape. The areas of the Application Site shown in a light brown/yellow colour can be identified as 'Subject to Peat Extraction' areas during 2004 where the upper layers of peat are being extracted. Whereas areas 'Drained-Not Subject to Peat Extraction' in 2004 appear to be a lot darker where lower layers of peat have already been extracted. Often green strips are visible within the imagery where vegetation colonisation is seen to appear along drainage features.

Plate 12-7 Aerial Image of Ballivor Bog 2004 – Osi (Source - Bord na Móna, 2024)

In 2004, the eastern extent of Ballivor Bog is Subject to Peat Extraction, while the western extent of the bog is Drained – Not Subject to Peat Extraction, as shown in the image above and indicated by the peat extraction mapping previously.

Plate 12-8 Aerial Image of Carranstown Bog 2004 – Osi (Source - Bord na Móna, 2024)

The east of Carranstown Bog was drained but never Subject to Peat Extraction, this is indicated by the very dark area on the aerial image above. The remaining area of the bog was subject to peat extraction, as shown in the 2004 aerial image above and the peat extraction mapping previously.

Plate 12-9 Aerial Image of Bracklin Bog 2004 – Osi (Source - Bord na Móna, 2024)

Higher resolution colour aerial imagery of the Application Site captured in 2004 is shown above and below. Due to differences in image quality, it is difficult to directly compare these images with the imagery captured in 1995. However, the imagery indicates that vegetation colonisation is evident across the boglands particularly along drainage corridors or areas where extraction operations have ceased.

Plate 12-9 shows the contrast between the various stages of peat extraction activity occurring in Bracklin Bog in 2004. In the western portion of Bracklin Bog, the uppermost layers are subject to peat extraction, illustrated by the lighter brown colour, whereas the rest of Bracklin Bog has been drained and Not Subject to Peat Extraction. for 1 year at this time and the lower layers of peat have been extracted as illustrated by the darker brown colour.

The image below (Plate 12-10) shows the darker ground cover at Lisclogher Bog which was not Subject to Peat Extraction in 2004. Lisclogher West Bog was drained but never Subject to Peat Extraction and as the natural ground cover remained relatively in-tact it is seen as a dark and homogenous block of land in the aerial imagery below (Plate 12-11).

Plate 12-10 Aerial Image of Lisclogher Bog 2004 – Osi (Source - Bord na Móna, 2024)

Plate 12-11 Aerial Image of Lisclogher West Bog 2004 – Osi (Source - Bord na Móna, 2024)

12.3.3 Landscape Character of the Application Site - Current Phase (2020 - Present)

A site visit was conducted on the 13th of October 2020 and 6th of August 2020 to ascertain the landscape character and condition of the Application Site in the Current Phase. Landscape character refers to the distinct and recognisable pattern of elements that occurs consistently in a particular type of landscape, and how people perceive this. It reflects particular combinations of geology, landform, soils, vegetation, land use and human settlement, and creates the particular sense of place found in different areas.

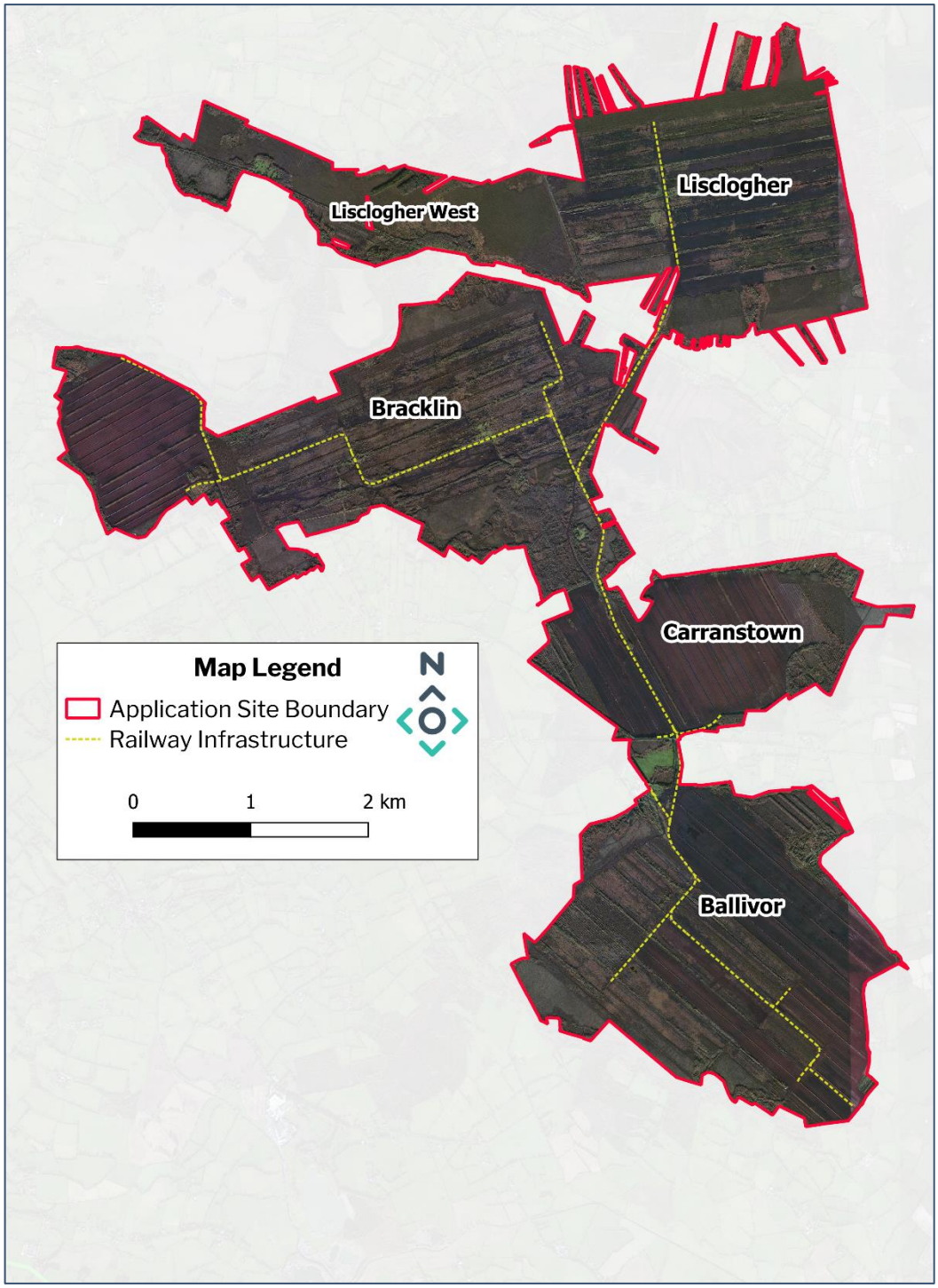

Figure 12-8 Map of the Application Site Boundary overlaid Aerial Imagery Captured in the Current Phase.

Landcover

The landcover within the Application Site comprises a mix of bare cutaway peat, re-vegetated peat, degraded bog, scrub, low woodland, remnants of high bog and a very small area of conifer plantation. Industrial features that facilitated historic peat extraction activities are still evident throughout the Application Site. Industrial elements within the Application Site boundary such as railways infrastructure, and elements outside the Application Site boundary such as the peat processing centre contribute to the industrialised landcover and character of the landscape.

The images below show a variety of vegetation establishment that have occurred in areas of the Application Site where peat extraction has ceased. A variety of ground cover types other than bare cutaway peat (scrub, re-vegetated peat, degraded bog or transitional woodland) commonly occur along corridors where infrastructure such as drains and access roads exist, as well as along extraction plot boundaries were peat banks form elevated berms.

Plate 12-12 Existing conditions at the Application Site, showing the railway track traversing a drained area of cutover bog.

Plate 12-13 Peat Processing centre at the Application Site.

The five subject bogs of the Application Site are narrowly separated by the road network, woodland, linear strips of agricultural land as well as residential properties. The peatlands are inter-connected by a railway that previously serviced peat extraction activities. Although these differing bogs have their own distinctive landscape attributes (e.g. scale, shape and orientation), the general character of the current landscape is very similar within each bog except Lisclogher West Bog.

Lisclogher West Bog

The peatlands of Lisclogher West Bog has never been subject to peat extraction and therefore, the area does not comprise bare cutaway peat or industrial infrastructure. Similar to the rest of the peatlands within the Application Site, the peatlands at Lisclogher West were subject to drainage and therefore its current condition is not that of an unspoiled raised bog in its natural wetland state. However, the vegetation has never been removed and the absence of peat extraction has meant that Lisclogher West has retained many of its natural raised bog features, although there is evidence of degradation, and the high bog is relatively dry with deep field drains. Although there has been no industrial peat extraction on Lisclogher West Bog, northern areas of this peatland are a managed and modified landscape where tracts of commercial coniferous forestry currently exist, which are located outside of the Application Site boundary. A small grass runway and car parking area has been built on the bog which is utilised in a recreational capacity by model aeroplane enthusiasts.

The Bogs of Ballivor, Bracklin, Carranstown and Lisclogher

Plate 12-14 (below) is a typical view across the Application Site in its current condition where relatively recent peat extraction has occurred. The landscape comprises a flat, open and expansive area of bare cutaway peat. A drainage ditch and machine passes visible in the foreground are common features of the landscape of the Application Site. The perimeter of the Application Site is typically bounded by mature mixed woodland as seen across the background of the image below.

Plate 12-14 View of the existing site conditions (present day) within the Application Site.

As shown in the images below, tree colonisation is prevalent throughout the Application Site (particularly on Bracklin Bog) where peat extraction ceased earlier than other areas of the Application Site. This is particularly evident along drainage corridors, where pioneer species such as birch encroach upon the peatland landscape. For a comprehensive description of the existing flora and fauna on the Application Site see Chapter 6 – *Biodiversity (including Ornithology)*.

Plate 12-15 Re-vegetated peatland and Birch tree colonisation on Bracklin Bog

Plate 12-16 Established vegetation along an access track.

Landscape Value and Sensitivity – Existing Conditions

As noted previously in Section 12.1.2.4 decommissioning activities are on-going and will continue into the Remedial Phase, such non-extractive activities continue to influence the character of the landscape during the Current Phase and the Application Site is still to some degree a working landscape.

The site investigation, conducted on the 13th of October 2020 and on the 6th of August 2020 determined that re-vegetation is prevalent and has accelerated throughout the Application Site since peat extraction ceased in 2020 and this has brought a sense of naturalness and wildness to this otherwise highly degraded and modified landscape. The Application Site has a slightly higher landscape value than the bare cutaway peatland that existed throughout the Application Site during the Peat Extraction Phase. However, it cannot currently be considered a wetland or peatland habitat of high biodiversity value and considering its degraded state it is still deemed to be a landscape of Low landscape value and Low landscape sensitivity.

12.3.4 Landscape Policy Context – Designated Landscape Character Areas, Scenic Routes and Views

In order to provide a comprehensive description of the historic and existing landscape conditions throughout the various Project phases, this section provides an overview of the landscape policy pertaining to the location of the Application Site within current and previous County Development Plans. Provision of the landscape policy context enables assessment of the likely impact of the activities under assessment at the Application Site on landscape policy and designated landscape and visual receptors.

The Application Site straddles the border between County Meath and County Westmeath. Multiple mapping figures presented throughout this section demonstrate the large separation distances between the Application Site and sensitive landscape designations within both counties. Designations such as landscape character areas, scenic views and prospects and landscape sensitivity areas are identified in the relevant development plans and are reported below. Westmeath County Development Plans (WCDP)s dating from 2002 to the most recent plan - 2021-2027 are reviewed. Additionally, the Meath County Development Plan (MCDP) 2001 to the most recent plan - 2021-2027 is also reviewed in this section. Consideration was also given to the historic County Development Plans (CDP) detailed in Section 2.3.4 In Chapter 2 of this rEIAR.

These historic CDPs were not considered material to the assessment of effects in this rEIAR as the landscape policy and designations within each CDP in more recent years is more articulate and defined and has evolved to be so over time. As the European Landscape Convention was only adopted in 2000 and ratified in Ireland in 2002, local landscape policy pre-dating 2002 is less defined.

12.3.4.1 County Westmeath

Westmeath County Development Plan (WCDP) 2002-2008

There are no records of landscape character areas or scenic routes for the 2002-2008 WCDP. Associated mapping was not available online.

Section 2.9.22 of the WCDP 2002-2008 lists objectives relating to landscape and development and outlines that:

> *"In order to safeguard the landscape character of the County, the Council will undertake a study of landscape value and sensitivity, as outlined in the Landscape and Landscape Assessment: Consultation Draft of Planning Authorities (DoELG, 2000). This Landscape Strategy for the County will further inform the development control process and will help to ensure that new developments (including forestry, extractive industry and wind farming for example) can be satisfactorily absorbed within the County's landscape and that degraded areas are not further threatened whilst proposing suitable restorative works."*

The WCDP 2002-2008 lists several scenic views throughout the county as well as designating the following lakeland landscapes as Areas of High Amenity:

- Lough Ree Area
- Lough Lene Area
- Lough Owel Area
- Lough Ennell Area
- Lough Derravaragh Area
- Lough Sheelin Area

The landscape of the Application Site does not comprise any of the High Amenity Areas designated in the WCDP 2002-2008 that are listed above. There are no designated scenic views in the WCDP 2002-2008 located within the Application Site, also the peatlands of the Application Site are not the object of any designated scenic view.

Westmeath County Development Plan (WCDP) 2008-2014

The following development plan for County Westmeath is the WCDP 2008-2014. *Section 2.5* of the WCDP 2008-2014 outlines policies and objectives relating to Environment and Heritage for the county and outlines the following policies relating to lake amenity and the site:

> ***"Policy A:*** *To protect the distinctiveness of Co. Westmeath's lakeside landscapes as an asset for future generations to enjoy and appreciate and to recognise their capacity to sustainably integrate appropriate development within their environs*
>
> ***Policy B:*** *To facilitate and encourage the provision of opportunities for public enjoyment of the lakes for tourism and recreational purposes together with the provision of such facilities in identified suitable locations."*

Figure 12-9 and Figure 12-10 below illustrate the Landscape Character Areas ('LCAs') and Landscape and Visual Designations as set out in the WCDP 2008-2014.

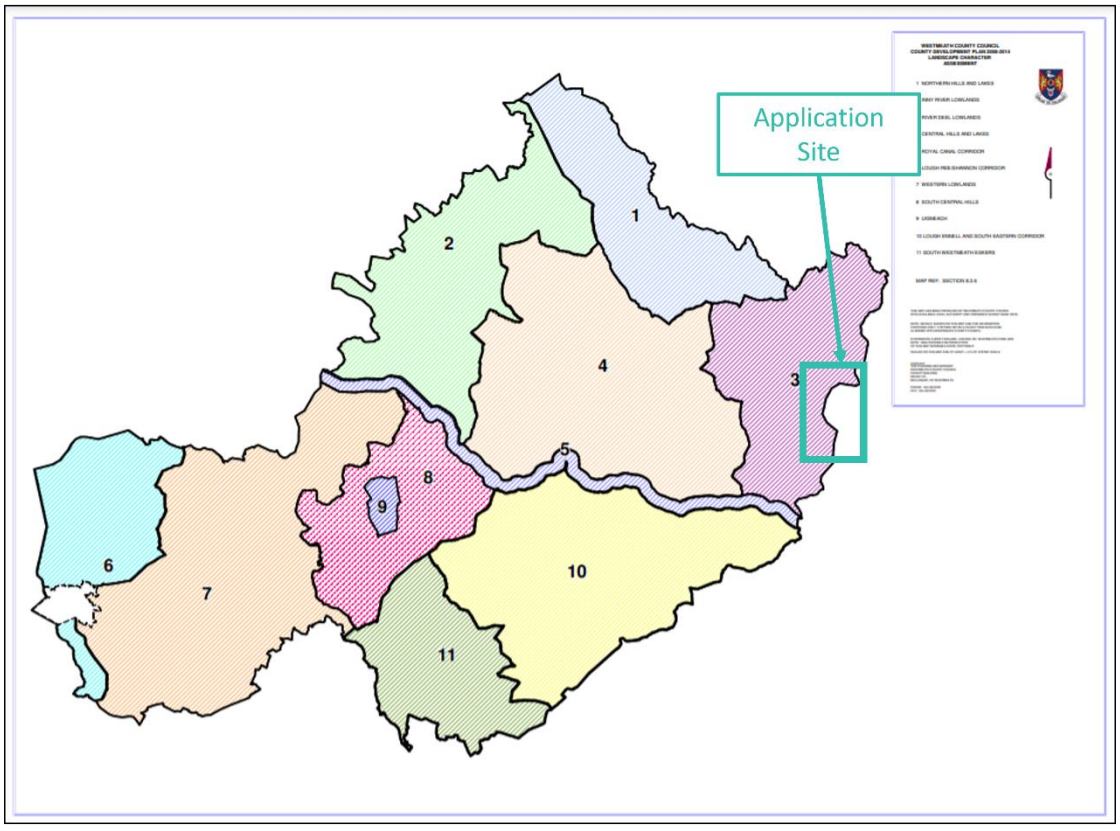

Figure 12-9 Landscape Character Areas Map extracted from the WCDP 2008-2014

As shown in Figure 12-9 above, areas of the Application Site located within County Westmeath are located within Landscape Character Area 3 – River Deel Lowlands, as it is designated in the WCDP 2008-2014. The bogs of the Applications Site contribute to the overall character of this LCA, as they are referenced within the description of LCA 3 in the WCDP 2008-2014:

> *"The area east of Delvin and running south along the Meath Border is characterised by cutover, cutaway and a small tract of intact bog".*

The WCDP 2008-2014 does not designate a sensitivity to LCA 3, and it does not comprise any of the County Westmeath High Amenity Areas. The Application Site has remained within LCA 3 – River Deel Lowlands through to the current WCDP 2021-2027 which is currently in effect.

As shown in Figure 12-10 below, the Application Site is not located in close proximity to any sensitive landscape designations (High Amenity Areas or Scenic Views) reported in the WCDP 2008-2014.

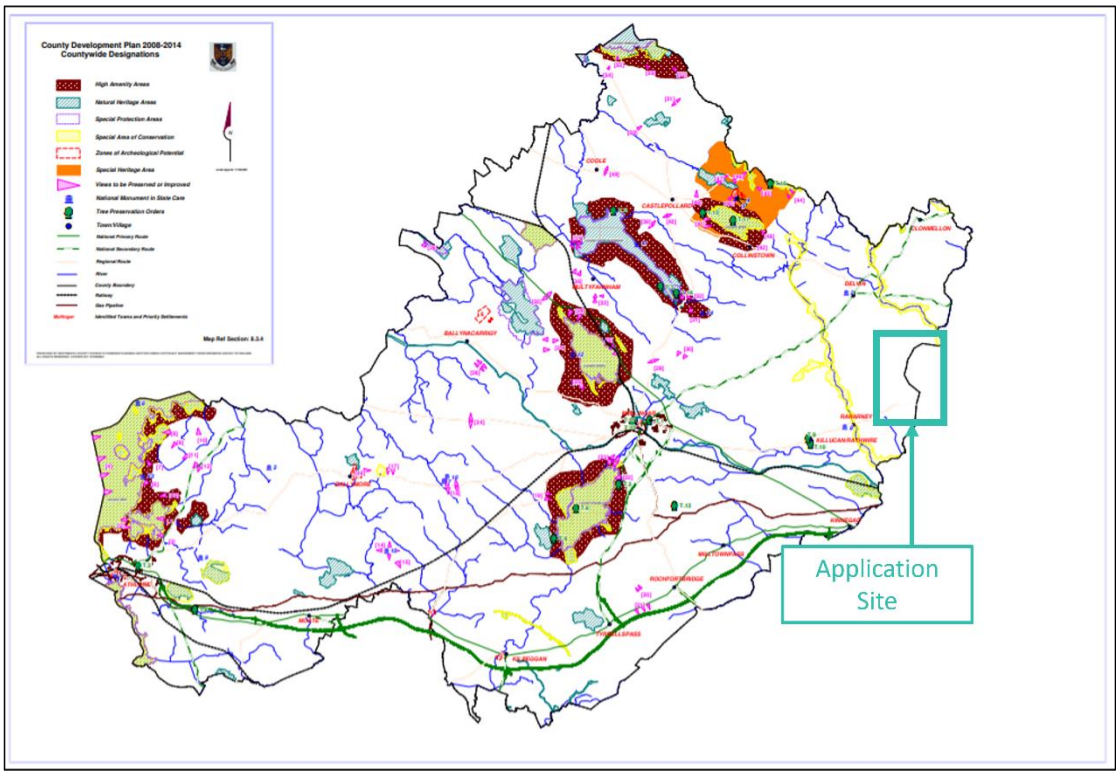

Figure 12-10 Landscape and Visual Designations Map extracted from the WCDP 2008-2014

Westmeath County Development Plan (WCDP) 2014-2020

The next available development plan for Co. Westmeath is the WCDP 2014-2020. In this plan, Westmeath County Council continue their policy regarding the protection and conservation of landscape and recreational amenity of the six lake landscapes designated as High Amenity Areas listed in the previous development plan. The landscape policy within the WCDP 2014-2020 also protects the River Shannon Corridor as well as the designated Views and Prospects which remain consistent with those in the previous development plan (WCDP 2008-2014) that are illustrated in Figure 12-10 above.

Section 6.21 of the WCDP 2014-2020 provides a landscape management policy P-LLM7 specifically related to the future management of peatlands such as that of the Application Site:

> *"To explore with the relevant agencies the future potential of cut away peatlands, including opportunities for habitat creation or amenity and recreation areas such as community woodlands or parklands."*

The Bord na Móna Cutaway Bog Decommissioning and Rehabilitation Plans are included in Appendix 4-2 of this rEIAR. Promotion of the wetlands and habitat creation is one of the primary objectives of this plan in the Remedial Phase. Implementation of the rehabilitation plan is a vital step towards achieving elements of policy objective policy P-LLM7 and effectively improving the degraded working landscape of the Application Site.

Westmeath County Development Plan (WCDP) 2021-2027

The most current development plan for Co. Westmeath is the WCDP 2021-2027. Policy *CPO 12.64* in *Chapter 12* of this plan relates to the protection and restoration of peatland landscapes such as the Application Site:

> ***"CPO12.64:*** *Protect the county's designated peatland areas and landscapes, including any ancient walkways through bogs and to conserve their ecological, archaeological, cultural, and educational heritage."*

Chapter 13 of the WCDP 2021 to 2027 relates to Landscape Character and Lake Amenities and sets out the county's policy objectives for preservation and enhancement for Areas of High Amenity related to appropriate development:

> ***Policy CPO 13.20*** *- Protect High Amenity areas from inappropriate development and reinforce their character, distinctiveness and sense of place.*

> ***Policy CPO 13.22*** *- Protect lakeshores from any inappropriate development which would detract from the natural amenity of the area.*

There are no areas of High Amenity within or in proximity the Application Site boundary. The closest Area of High Amenity is Lough Lene at 10.2 km north-west from the Application Site boundary at its closest point.

Westmeath County Council reviews and amends designated scenic amenity in the county from what was published previously in the WCDP 2014-2018. The WCDP 2021-2027 provides clear mapping and descriptions of 36 Protected Views which are categorised according to their significance within the county. *Section 13.26* of the WCDP 2021-2027 contains a number of policies and objectives relating to these designated views which are listed in *Appendix 5* of the WCDP 2021-2027 and illustrated in Figure 12-11 below.

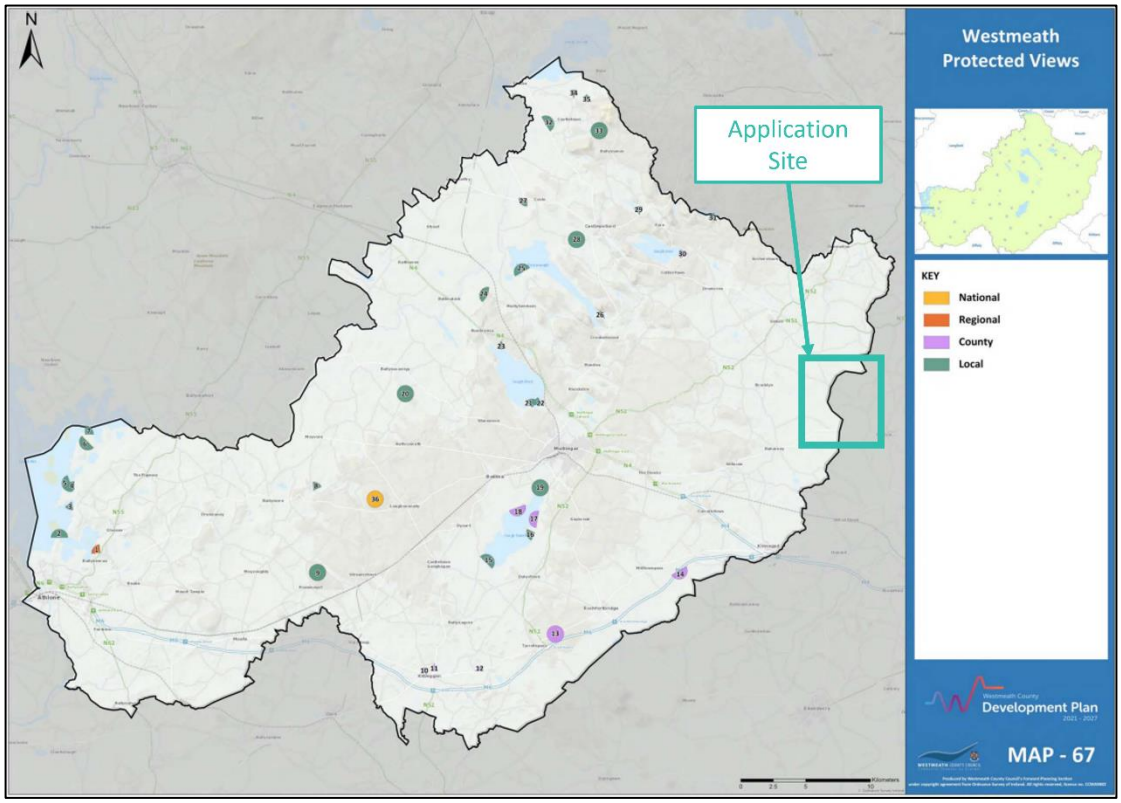

Figure 12-11 Protected Views Map extracted from the WCDP 2021-2027

In relation to Protected Views, the WCDP 2021-2027 states that it is a policy objective of the Westmeath County Council to:

> *"**Policy CPO 13.81** Protect and sustain the established appearance and character of views listed in Appendix 5 of this plan that contribute to the distinctive quality of the landscape from inappropriate development.*
>
> ***Policy CPO 13.81:** Protect and sustain the established appearance and character of views listed in Appendix 5 of this plan that contribute to the distinctive quality of the landscape from inappropriate development."*

There are no designated scenic views located in close proximity to the Application Site and none pertaining to the Application Site itself.

Section 13.26 of the WCDP 2021-2027 identifies the following scenic routes that are also mapped in *Appendix 5*:

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

None of the designated scenic routes listed above are located in close proximity to the Application Site. The nearest scenic route is the Táin Trail which starts/ends in Delvin and which is located approximately 5km north-west of the Application Site at its closest point.

12.3.4.2 County Meath

Meath County Development Plan (MCDP) 2001-2007

The 2001 - 2007 Meath County Development Plan (MCDP) identified a number of Areas of Visual Quality (*Section 3.6.3*), and associated sensitivities, primarily on the basis of a desk top study. There are no records of landscape character areas or scenic routes for the 2001-2007 development plan for Co. Meath and associated mapping was not available online.

Meath County Development Plan (MCDP) 2007-2013

Following on from the 2001-2007 MCDP, the 2007-2013 development plan was next issued and provides a better understanding to the development and assessment of landscape character and landscape heritage for County Meath. *Chapter 8* of the MCDP 2007-2013 outlines landscape policies and objectives relating to Heritage and Landscape Character. General landscape policies reported in the MCDP 2007-2013 are listed below:

> ***"HER POL 85:** To ensure that development, particularly in sensitive landscapes, adheres to tailored design guidelines. Sensitive landscapes include demesne villages and LCAs identified as being sensitive.*
>
> ***HER POL 86:** To provide adequate protection of views and vistas that contribute to the appreciation of landscape character.*
>
> ***HER POL 87:** To maintain scenic vistas and panoramic views from key vantage points and towards key landmarks and features within the landscape.*

HER POL 88: *To maintain the visual integrity of sensitive and exceptional landscape value areas.*

HER POL 89: *To encourage the continued sustainable development of rural communities without comprising the physical, environmental, natural and heritage resources of the county.*

HER POL 90: *To protect and enhance the visual qualities of rural areas through the sensitive design of necessary development."*

Figure 12-12 below shows the Landscape Character Areas and areas of High Landscape Sensitivity for Co. Meath, as outlined in the MCDP 2007-2013. As shown in Figure 12-12 (below), where the Application Site is located in County Meath, it is located within *LCA 15 – South West Lowlands* (The LCA is also referred to as *Hill of Down* elsewhere in the MCDP 2007-2013). County Meath LCA 15 is recorded as an LCA of High Sensitivity in this map (Figure 12-12), however it is recorded as Medium sensitivity on Page 17 of the 2007 County Meath Landscape Character Assessment.

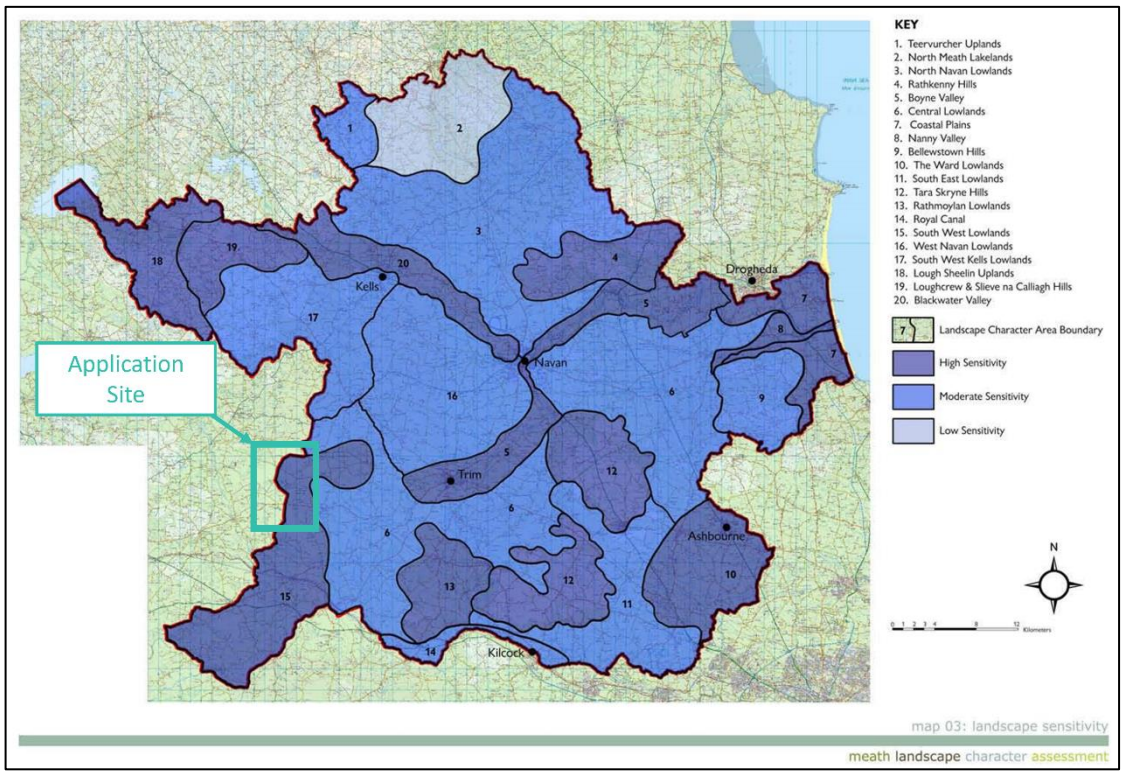

Figure 12-12 Landscape Character and Landscape Sensitivity Areas Map extracted from the MCDP 2007 – 2013

Meath County Council have attributed areas of landscape sensitivity within the county. Landscape Sensitivity is defined in the MCDP 2007-2013 as:

> *"the overall resilience of a landscape character area to sustain its character in the face of change and its ability to recuperate from loss or damage to its components. Sensitivity is evaluated from 'High' to 'Low' and is based on the interaction of individual components such as landform, amount of evident historical features (time depth) and distribution of viewers. A highly sensitive landscape is likely to be vulnerable, fragile and susceptible to change whereas a landscape with low sensitivity is likely to be more robust and/or tolerant of change."*

The Meath Landscape Character Assessment 2007 was amended slightly to form Appendix 7 of the following development plan, the MCDP 2013-2019. Amendments include a table summarising the Value, Importance and Sensitivity of each Landscape Character Area in County Meath (Page 91 of Appendix 7 of the MCDP 2013-2019). The Application Site remains in LCA 15 which is designated as

having 'High' Value, 'Regional' importance and 'Medium' sensitivity. Considering the designation of the LCA as 'Medium' sensitivity in the Landscape Character Assessment 2007 and then 'Medium' sensitivity again in the 2013-2019 MCDP, it is likely that the indication of the LCA as 'High' sensitivity in the mapping figure shown in Figure 12-12 above is likely to have been an error.

The following policy in the MCDP 2007-2013 is noted in relation to designated visual amenity:

> *"**HER POL 114:** To protect from inappropriate development the views identified on the Landscape Character Map 05: Visual Amenity, and the views and prospects as indicated on Map 8.6 (listed table on next two pages)"*

Figure 12-13 below shows Visual Amenity Map 05, as well as the location of the Application Site. As shown in Figure 12-13, there are no county Meath designated views (MCDP 2007-2013) in close proximity to the Application Site.

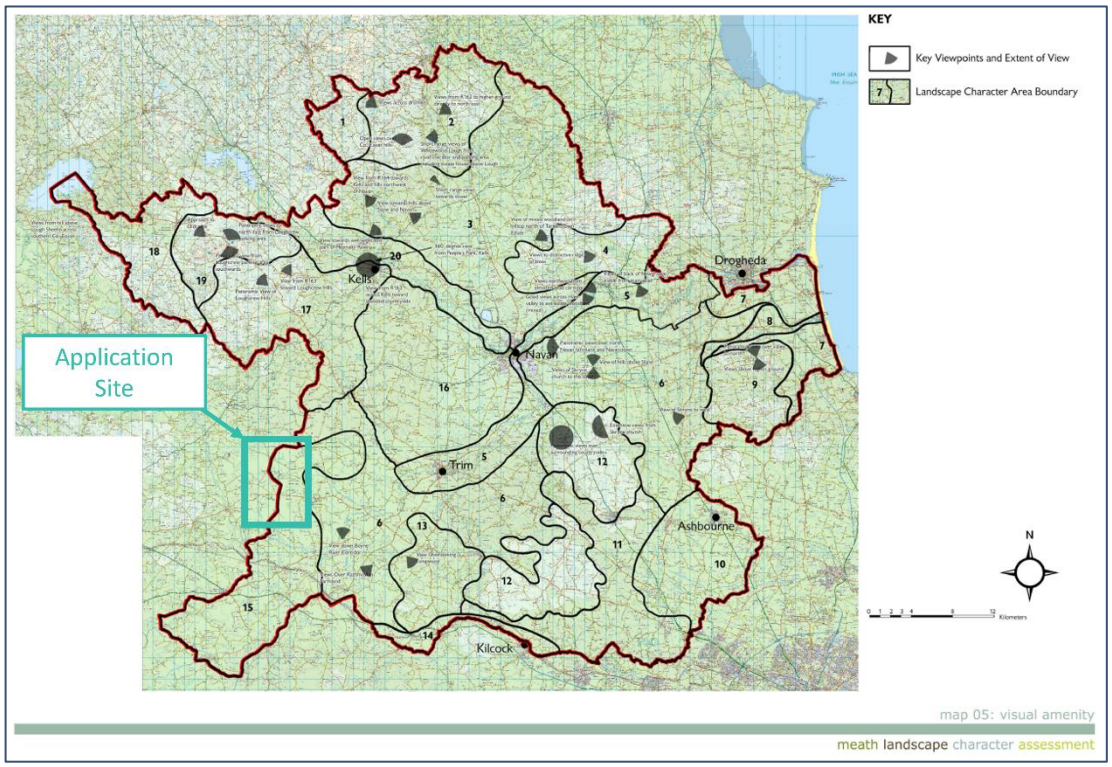

Figure 12-13 Visual Amenity Map 05 extracted from the Landscape Character Assessment 2007 (MCDP 2007-2013)

Meath County Development Plan (MCDP) 2013-2019

Chapter 9 of the MCDP 2013-2019 relates to Culture and Natural Assets and sets out the county's policies and objectives for preservation and enhancement for Areas of Landscape Sensitivity:

> *"**Policy LC SP1** - To protect the landscape character, quality, and local distinctiveness of County Meath in accordance with relevant government policy and guidelines and the recommendations included in Meath Landscape Character Assessment (2007) in Appendix 7.*
>
> ***Policy LC SP2** - To require that any necessary assessments, including landscape and visual impact assessments, are provided when undertaking, authorising, or approving development.*
>
> ***Objective LC OBJ1** - To seek to ensure the preservation of the uniqueness of all landscape character types, and to maintain the visual integrity of areas of exceptional value and high sensitivity.*

***Objective LC OBJ2** - To assess development proposals having regard to the recommendations contained in the Meath Landscape Character Assessment 2007."*

The MCDP designates vantage points from which views and prospects of great natural beauty exist. The council recognises the importance of the scenery and landscape of the county and views that are important for amenity, tourism, and economic and cultural value. The council also recognises the need to protect and conserve views and prospects adjoining public roads and from publicly accessible places throughout the county for the benefit of future generations to enjoy.

The following policy objective relates to visual amenity in the landscape of County Meath:

***Objective LC OBJ 1** - To preserve the views and prospects and the amenity of places and features of natural beauty or interest listed in Appendix 12 and shown on Map 9.5.1 from development that would interfere with the character and visual amenity of the landscape.*

Figure 12-14 below, illustrates the location of designated scenic views and their intended direction/focus of view as shown in Map 9.5.1 of the MCDP 2013-2019, as well as the location of the Application Site.

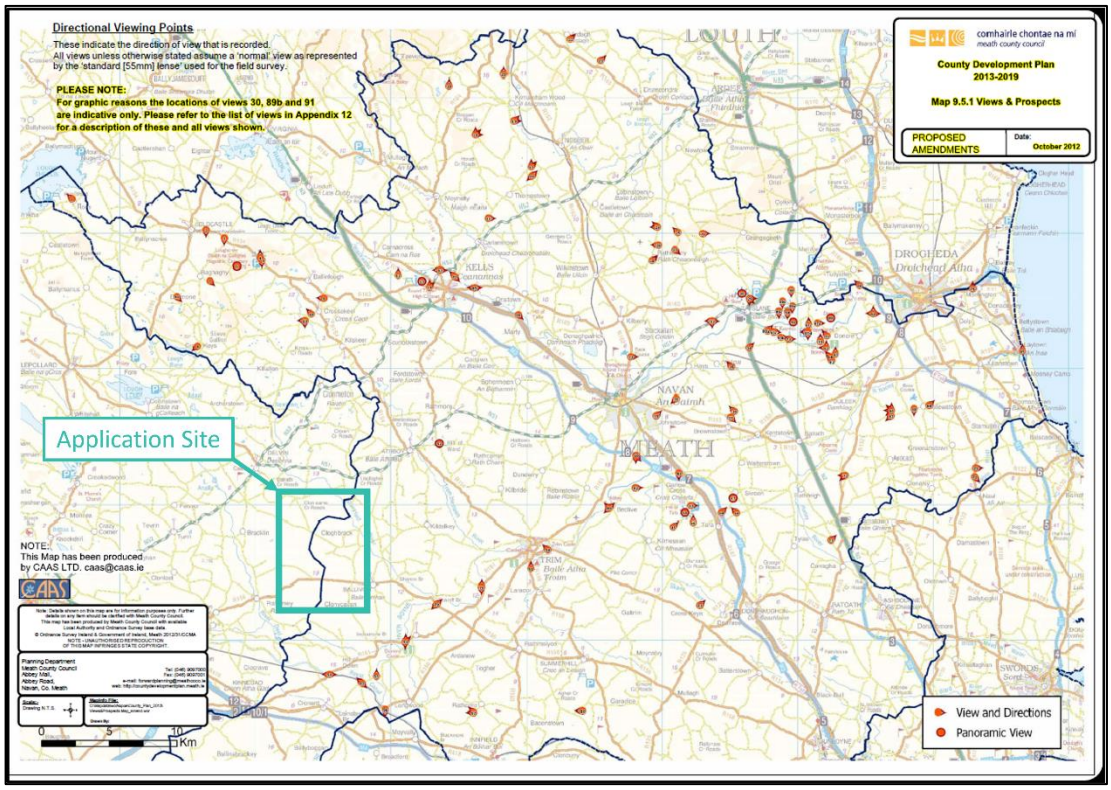

Figure 12-14 Protected Views Map extracted from the MCDP 2013-2019

As illustrated by Figure 12-14, the Application Site is not located in close proximity to any designated Protected Views in the MCDP 2013-2019.

Meath County Development Plan (MCDP) 2021-2027

The MCDP 2021-2027 was brought into effect on the 3rd of November 2021. *Chapter 8* of the current plan (MCDP2021-2017) contains a strategy for Culture and Natural Heritage where landscape policy and objectives are outlined. The landscape policy within the new plan is very similar to those outlined in previous plans, general landscape policy from the MCDP 2021-2027 that are pertinent to the Application site are reported below:

Policy HER 52 *- To protect and enhance the quality, character, and distinctiveness of the landscapes of the County in accordance with national policy and guidelines and the recommendations of the Meath Landscape Character Assessment (2007) in Appendix 5, to ensure that new development meets high standards of siting and design.*

Objective HER 49 *- To ensure that the management of development will have regard to the value of the landscape, its character, importance, sensitivity and capacity to absorb change as outlined in Appendix 5 Meath Landscape Character Assessment and its recommendations.*

Objective HER 50 *- To require landscape and visual impact assessments prepared by suitably qualified professionals be submitted with planning applications for development which may have significant impact on landscape character areas of medium or high sensitivity.*

The 2007 County Meath Landscape Character Assessment comprises *Appendix 5* of the MCDP 2021-2007. No changes have been made to the landscape character assessments or definition of landscape sensitivity reported previously in the MCDP 2007-2013. The Application Site remains in LCA 15 which is designated as a landscape of Medium sensitivity in (page 17) Appendix 5 of the current MCDP 2021-2027.

Section 8.7.4 affords special protection to the high sensitivity landscapes of Tara/Skryne, as well as Loughcrew and Slieve Na Calliagh Hills under policy HER POL 54, designating them as Landscape Conservation Areas:

> *"**HER POL 54:** To protect the archaeological heritage, rural character, setting and amenity of the Tara landscape and Loughcrew and Slieve na Calliagh Hills"*

The Application Site is located a substantial distance from these landscapes (>17 km from Slieve na Calliagh; >25 km from the Hill of Tara).

Policy and objectives relating to the protection of designated views and prospects remains very similar to that reported above from previous development plans. Although the MCDP 2021-2027 states:

> *'it is not envisaged that the designation of a protected view would prohibit all development within the view, rather any development proposed within the view should be designed and located so as not to obstruct the view or be unduly intrusive in the landscape as seen from these vantage points."*

Objective HER 56 relates to the preservation of scenic views and prospects:

> ***Objective HER 56*** *- To preserve the views and prospects listed in Appendix 10, in Volume 2 and on Map 8.6 and to protect these views from* ***inappropriate*** *development which would interfere unduly with the character and visual amenity of the landscape.*

Appendix 10 of the MCDP 2021-2027 lists 94 No. Views and Prospects, the locations of these designated views and prospects shown *Map 8.6* are almost identical to the locations shown in Figure 12-14 above from the previous development plan. There are no designated views and prospects within the immediate vicinity of the Application Site. Designated View 54 is located in closest proximity to the Application Site, as shown in Plate 12-15 Section 12.4.2, the peatlands of the Application Site are not visible from this viewpoint.

12.3.5 Overview of Landscape Characterisation & Landscape Policy

The Application Site is currently a flat peatland landscape with a character heavily influenced by the industrial peat extraction practices historically conducted at the Application Site. The character of the

wider landscape surrounding the site is typical of flat, lowland landscapes located in the midlands of Ireland. The peatlands are located within a rural agricultural landscape comprising fields of pasture, occasional forestry plantations and dispersed rural settlement. The Application Site is located 2.5 km south-southeast of Delvin, 3.7km east of Raharney and 2.2km west of Ballivor Village. The Application Site is partially located in County Westmeath LCA3 – *River Deel Lowlands* and partially located in County Meath LCA 15 - *South West Lowlands.*

The Application Site in its current condition is now an accepted part of the existing landscape character and identity. In the WCDP 2021-2027 a description of LCA 3 refers to the landscape of the Application Site:

> *"areas east of Delvin and running south along the Meath Border is characterised by cutover, cutaway bogs and small tracts of intact bog."*

The wider landscape of Westmeath LCA3 is *"typified by low-lying pasture punctuated with small lakes which are flanked by scrub and wet woodland"* as well as *"The River Deel, the Stonyford River and their hinterlands".* The MCDP 2013-2019 describes County Meath LCA 15 - South West Lowlands as being *"characterised by rolling hills interspersed with beech copses and well-wooded hedgerows dividing rough pasture.... Pasture farmland is dominant although there is rough pasture in the upland areas interspersed with a mix of woodland plantations, small copses and scrubby woodland more prevalent in the south west".* There is no reference to the cutover boglands of the Application Site located in the north-west of the LCA.

Neither County Westmeath LCA 3 or County Meath LCA15 are currently designated as landscape character areas of high sensitivity, and they do not comprise any notable landscape features of national or county importance. The Application Site is not currently located within or near any designated High Amenity landscapes or Landscape Conservation Areas.

12.4 Visibility Appraisal

Due to the large surface area of the Application Site (2,421 hectares), the peatlands and historical peat extraction activities will have been visible across an extensive portion of the local landscape. In most instances, the cutover peatlands are only visible from localised receptors in the immediate vicinity of the Application Site. The abundance of mature woodland surrounding the perimeter and margins of the peatlands screen the site from view within the wider landscape which is very flat in nature. Visibility of the Application Site was appraised during a site visit on the 13th of October 2020 and 6th of August 2020

12.4.1 Views to and from the Application Site

As shown by Plate 12-1 and Plate 12-12 in the previous section, there are long-ranging and unrestricted views across the open and flat peatlands of the Application Site, particularly where ground cover comprises bare cutaway peat. Excepting entrance routes, the Application Site is predominantly surrounded by mature treelines of broadleaf and conifer. The relatively dense woodland enclosing the Application Site acts as a physical barrier, restricting views (as well as buffering noise and dust) both into and out of the site.

During a route screening assessment conducted on the 10th and 11th of June 2021, the roads immediately surrounding the site were driven to assess visibility towards the Application Site. The Application Site and its surrounds are located within a rural landscape setting, characterised by agricultural fields outlined by field boundaries consisting of treelines and hedgerows. Views towards the site from the road network surrounding the site are shown in the images below.

Plate 12-17 shows a view from the R156 west of Carranstown Bog where views into the Application Site are restricted by the dense broadleaf woodland lining the roadway. Plate 12-18 shows a more open,

unrestricted view towards the Application Site where there is limited roadside vegetation screening. Even though roadside screening is limited (Plate 12-18), visibility of the Application Site is obscured by the intervening field and its mature boundary vegetation.

Plate 12-17 View from the R156 west of Carranstown Bog.

Plate 12-18 View towards the Application Site from local road north of the village of Ballivor

The main entrance point to the Application Site in 1988 was entrances north and south off the Ballivor-Raharney (R156) road. This site entrance still exists today and is one of the only locations where there is any extended open visibility into the Application Site from a public road. As shown below in Plate 12-20 there are open views to the north from the R157 where large areas of bare cutover peat of Carranstown bog is visible. It is noted that visual receptors travelling on the R157 would only have this view momentarily as they pass this entrance to the Application Site.

Plate 12-19 Entrance to Ballivor Bog and Carranstown Bog from the R156 Regional Road

Plate 12-20 Open views into the Application Site from the Site Entrance on the R156 regional Road.

The most sensitive visual receptors likely to have most visibility of the Application Site are local residents who live in close proximity to the site. The site visit in 2020 determined that in most instances, visibility of the Application Site was screened from view by well-established, dense boundary vegetation located both within the curtilage of local residents and along the site boundary and local field boundaries.

12.4.2 Visibility from Designated Scenic Amenity

The peatlands within the Application Site are not the subject of any designated protected views and prospects or scenic routes. Designated County Meath View 54 is located approximately 3.8 km south of Ballivor Bog. This designation is located on the R161 regional road as it crosses the Royal Canal and is the most proximate designated view to the Application Site. As shown in Figure 12-15 below, the peatlands of the Application Site are not visible from this viewpoint due to screening existent within the intervening landscape.

Figure 12-15 View towards the Application Site from County Meath Scenic View No. 54 on the R161 as it crosses the Royal Canal (image captured in 2021).

The lands of the Application Site are potentially visible from several protected views which are elevated vantage points at a substantial distance away. For instance, County Meath Designated Protected View No. 6 at Slieve Na Callaigh is a panoramic view of the landscape from an elevated location 18km north of the Application Site. A zoomed in view towards the Application Site from the designated scenic view at Slieve Na Callaigh is shown in Figure 12-16 below, the location of the peatlands within the landscape is bounded by a green and white annotation. In this instance, the peatlands of the Application Site comprise a narrow, horizonal section of the landscape visible within the panoramic view. No areas of cutover bog are visible in Figure 12-16 and it is unlikely that the boglands would be discernible with the naked eye on even the clearest day. Due to the highly vegetated nature of the flat landscape surrounding the Application Site, it is not likely that the extraction areas (cutover bog and degraded peatlands) of the Application Site will be visible from any distant scenic amenity designations, even from elevated locations as shown in Figure 12-16.

Figure 12-16 View towards the Application Site from County Meath Scenic View No. 6 at Slieve Na Cailliagh (image captured in 2021)

12.4.3 Potential Changes in Visual Amenity - Peat Extraction Phase to Current Phase

As noted previously, review of aerial mapping data and site reports indicate that visibility into the Application Site would have been very similar throughout the Peat Extraction Phase as they currently are.

Topographical Change

It is noted that the extraction activities that occurred throughout the Peat Extraction Phase have gradually lowered the base elevation of the Application Site in comparison to the flat agricultural plains surrounding the site. Therefore, the peat extraction activities and all ancillary works in 1988 and during earlier stages of the Peat Extraction Phase may have been conducted at a higher elevation and may have been marginally more visible during that time. There are multiple other factors (e.g., character and nature of views into the site) influencing likely visibility during the Peat Extraction Phase that cannot be objectively assessed retrospectively. It is likely that the change in elevation of the Application Site is so marginal in this context and will have had a negligible influence on the likely significance of visual effects relating from views into the Application Site.

Changes to the Visual Aesthetic of the Site

The visual aesthetic of the Application Site has changed since cessation of peat extraction in 2020. This is primarily attributed to the large areas of barren and bare cutover peat which have been allowed to revegetate, consequently changing the visual aesthetic to a landscape that of a more natural and wild nature. Whilst decommissioning activities are still occurring in the Current Phase, the visual effects of extraction activities in terms of extensive operation of machinery, use of railway infrastructure and associated dust have been reduced since peat extraction ceased.

12.5 Assessment of Significant Landscape and Visual Effects

The assessment of landscape and visual effects arising at the Application Site throughout the various phases reported below was determined using the Methodology reported previously in this Chapter - *Section 12.2.*

12.5.1 'Do-Nothing' Option

As outlined in the EPA Guidelines (May 2022), the description of 'Do-Nothing Effects' relates to the environment as it would be in the future should the project not be carried out. As discussed in Section 3.2.1 in Chapter 3, the assessment period of this rEIAR commenced in 1988, a time at which peat extraction was already well-established at the Application Site. In the context of this rEIAR, the Project has been ongoing since the baseline assessment year of 1988. As outlined in Section 3.2.1 in Chapter 3, peat extraction activities commenced at the Application Site in 1948 with the installation of drainage.

The 'Do-Nothing' option is defined as the Project (as described in Section 4.2 of Chapter 4) having ceased at the Application Site in 1988.

In the event of the cessation of the Project at the Application Site in 1988, it is assumed that those lands which by that point had not been subject to the installation of drainage and peat extraction would have remained as a relatively intact raised bog with varying raised bog habitats (such as bog woodland, fen, sphagnum mosses).

Subsequently, other land-use practices may also have taken place on the Application Site such as agricultural or commercial forestry, or other commercial or non-commercial uses. Alternative land uses are discussed in Chapter 3 – Alternatives. Under this 'Do-Nothing' option, the IPC licence and associated ongoing decommissioning and planned rehabilitation would not have occurred.

For those lands which as of 1988 had been subject to the installation of drainage in preparation for peat extraction but not peat extraction itself, it is assumed in the 'Do-Nothing' scenario that drainage would have remained in situ. Maintenance works to keep established drainage channels clear would have ceased as of 1988 in the 'do-nothing' scenario. It is likely that these areas would have been subject to

natural recolonisation of the bog surface. Minor third party turbary activities likely would have occurred along the intact bog edges as was common practise at sites such as the Application Site.

Peat extraction was underway at the Application Site prior to the required date for the transposition of the EIA Directive in 1988. If peat extraction and related activities ceased from 1988 onwards, then the various residual effects, described throughout this rEIAR, would not have occurred.

However, consideration must be given to the following:

- The legislative mandate given to Bord na Móna in the form of the Turf Development Act 1946, as amended) to acquire and develop peatlands; and
- The uncertainty with respect to the planning status of the activity did not arise until 2019 and was not evident in 1988.

Therefore, this 'Do-Nothing' option was not the chosen option. Peat extraction and all ancillary works have occurred at the Application Site from July 1988 onwards. A decision to cease peat extraction at the Application Site was taken in 2020 and the Application Site needs to be considered in the context of regularising (without prejudice) the planning status of the lands to facilitate future development (subject to planning consent as required). The Application Site has and will continue to revegetate, and there will be a change from areas of cutover peatland to revegetated peatland. These are described in the individual chapters of the rEIAR.

In the event that Substitute Consent is not granted in effect, the 'Do-Nothing' option represents the current situation as at the date of the application for Substitute Consent. As part of Bord na Móna's statutory obligations under IPC licence requirements, Cutaway Bog Decommissioning and Rehabilitation Plans will continue to be implemented for the Application Site separate to, and independent of, the Substitute Consent application. The implementation of the plans is included in the impact assessment below.

The role of cutaway/cutover peatlands such as the Application Site as a significant potential resource for amenity, tourism, biodiversity enhancement and conservation, improvement in air quality, climate mitigation, renewable energy development and education are part of Bord na Móna's vision for the Application Site. The regularisation of the planning status of the Application Site is a significant facilitator in ensuring the sustainable use and management of these peatlands. If this does not occur, the opportunity to continue employment and alternative use of the Application Site for the potential resources and activities mentioned above will be significantly restricted.

12.5.2 Peat Extraction Phase – Landscape and Visual Effects

Areas where Industrial Peat Extraction had occurred Prior to 1988

As established in Section 12.3.1 '1988 Landscape Baseline', the majority of the peatlands under assessment comprised of drained, stripped, bare cutover peat. Where peat extraction activities and all ancillary works had been occurring prior to the 1988 baseline, the landscape was at that time considered to be degraded and of low sensitivity. In these areas (Ballivor Bog; the western portion of Carranstown Bog; Bracklin Bog; Lisclogher Bog) the greatest landscape and visual effects had already occurred, and the only change to the baseline landscape conditions throughout the Peat Extraction Phase was the continued extraction of material.

In terms of direct landscape effects, the removal of peat from the Application Site throughout the Peat Extraction Phase changed the physical fabric of the landscape by removing material and altering the topographical profile of the landform year on year. The magnitude of this change in these areas is deemed to be 'Moderate', this is balanced with a 'Low' sensitivity, resulting in negative landscape effects of 'Slight' significance.

The degree of visual change occurring on these areas already subjected to intensive peat extraction would be 'Negligible'. Also as established in Section 12.4 of the Visibility Appraisal there is very limited visibility into the Application Site from sensitive visual receptors or any scenic amenity designations. Therefore, no significant visual effects are determined to have occurred at Ballivor Bog, the western portion of Carranstown Bog, Bracklin Bog & Lisclogher Bog during the Peat Extraction Phase.

Lisclogher West Bog

Lisclogher West Bog is deemed to be a landscape receptor of High sensitivity during the 1988 baseline, as it included large areas of intact raised bog. No industrial peat extraction activities ever occurred on the bog, but it was subject to minor drainage work pre-1988, which was completed in 1995. However, the natural vegetation cover was never cleared. The construction of drainage ditches caused a change to the landscape as ditches are cut across the bog, although this only materially altered a relatively small geographical proportion of Lisclogher West Bog. It is noted that the acrotelm layer, the biologically active part of the bog, was retained. As reported in Chapter 6 – *Biodiversity (including Ornithology)*, alteration to the drainage regimes would have an impact on the wetland habitat and the species assemblages present, consequently resulting in very minor change to the ground cover of bogland habitat and therefore an indirect effect on the landscape as well.

As reported previously in Section 12.3.3, in 2013 two small grass take-off and landing strips (150m x 7m and 75m x 7m) were laid in Lisclogher West bog for recreational use by model aeroplane enthusiasts, as well as a small car parking area.

It is considered that the drainage activities and construction of the recreational area in Lisclogher West Bog caused a 'Slight' magnitude of change during the Peat Extraction Phase. Slight is balanced with the High landscape sensitivity of this bog during the 1988 baseline (1988), therefore resulting in Negative Landscape Effects of 'Moderate' significance.

The degree of visual change in Lisclogher West bog as a result of the drainage would have been 'Slight' as drainage ditches are now seen to cut across the land. Any visual changes to the bog habitat as a result of changes in drainage and biodiversity are likely to be imperceptible to a non-specialist receptor. The on-site visibility appraisal determined that there is an absence of sensitive visual receptors (e.g. residences) in proximity to Lisclogher West Bog and the local road running along the southern perimeter is of very low traffic density. Visual receptors using the airstrip are not deemed to be of particularly high sensitivity. In a general sense, visual receptor sensitivity is deemed to be 'Low' and visibility of the bogland is very limited. Therefore, Low sensitivity and Slight magnitude of change is balanced to determine visual effects occurring in Lisclogher West Bog were 'Not Significant' during the Peat Extraction Phase.

Northwest of Bracklin Bog & East of Carranstown Bog

As reported in Section 12.1.2.2, the northwest portion of Bracklin Bog (c. 58 hectares) and the eastern portion of Carranstown Bog (c. 117 Hectares) comprised drained peatland only in the 1988 Baseline. As reported earlier in this chapter (see Section 12.3) these drained peatland landscapes (likely to be of similar condition to the current state of Lisclogher West Bog) are deemed to be of Medium landscape sensitivity in their 1988 baseline state. In the years immediately following 1988 during the Peat Extraction Phase, the bogs had their vegetation cleared and industrial peat extraction commenced and continued until 2020, although some areas of Carranstown Bog were drained and Not Subject to Peat Extraction. in that time. These bogs therefore transitioned from a drained peatland landscape (likely to be of similar condition to the current state of Lisclogher West Bog) to a landscape of bare cutover peat (much like the rest of the Application Site at that time). The loss of vegetated ground cover, extraction of material and associated extraction activities would have caused a substantial magnitude of change to the landscape of these bog areas.

Substantial change to the landscape balanced with medium sensitivity equates to 'Significant' negative, direct landscape effects. Although it is stressed that these significant direct landscape effects are localised to these boglands (northwest portion of Bracklin Bog & eastern portion of Carranstown Bog) these are the only locations within the Application Site that commenced peat extraction after 1988, and they represent a very small proportion (approximately 10%) of the overall Application Site.

With regards to visual effects, the northwest portion of Bracklin Bog is isolated from sensitive visual receptors. The 2021 visibility appraisal determined that it is currently bound by dense woodland with very limited visibility into the bog from surrounding road network and residential receptors. It is likely that viewing conditions into this area of the Application Site in 1988 (and throughout the Peat Extraction Phase) would have been very of similar to the present day. However, for the avoidance of doubt and the purposes of this assessment, it is assumed that there might be some slight visibility from low sensitivity receptors in the surrounding landscape. Although there is a substantial magnitude of change to the visual aesthetic of this northwest portion of Bracklin Bog itself, there is only likely there was a 'Slight or Moderate' change to visual amenity in the surrounding occasional intermittent views were available into the Application Site. Considering the Moderate (potentially much lower) magnitude of change and low sensitivity of receptors, it is deemed a negative visual impact of 'Slight' Significance was deemed to arise at the Northern portion of Bracklin Bog during the Peat Extraction Phase.

As shown in the images captured during the 2021 visibility Appraisal (See Section 12.4) there are open views to the north, into Carranstown Bog from the R156 Regional Road, including views of the eastern portion of Carranstown Bog. As this was also the location of the site entrance in 1988, it is assumed that the openness of views into the Application Site from this location would have been similar to current conditions, and as it was during the Peat Extraction Phase. Therefore, the transition of this drained peatland (Carranstown Bog - eastern portion) to bare cutover peatland, as well as visibility of regular peat extraction activity would cause a 'Substantial' change to views from visual receptors travelling on the R156. Visual receptors on the R157 are deemed to be of Low sensitivity. However, it is likely that some residential receptors (high sensitivity receptors) in close proximity to the eastern portion of Carranstown Bog may have had views into the Application Site in 1988 or during the Peat Extraction Phase, therefore, on balance visual receptor sensitivity is deemed to be 'Medium'. It is initially determined that a negative 'Significant' visual impact was deemed to arise at the eastern portion of Carranstown Bog during the Peat Extraction Phase.

Certain mitigating factors should be considered before arising at a residual visual impact. Firstly, the open views from R156 discussed above comprise both the eastern and western portion of Carranstown Bog. In 1988, the western portion of Carranstown Bog was subject to peat extraction and bare cutover peatland would comprise a substantial part of the existing views. Therefore, the changes would be an addition to the existing trend of peat extraction within the existing views. Secondly, it is noted that visual receptors travelling the R156 Regional road would only experience momentary, intermittent views into the eastern portion of Carranstown Bog. Most residential receptors are set back from the east of Carranstown Bog and historic satellite imagery indicates that features such as forestry and woodland would screen most views into the bog as they do today. On balance, it is considered that Residual Visual effects upon this scenic amenity are of 'Moderate' significance.

Impacts on Designated Landscape Character Areas

Designated Landscape Character Areas were only established in 2008 for Co. Westmeath and 2007 for County Meath. By this time most of the Application Site was Drained and Not Subject to Peat Extraction, however, peat extraction activities and all ancillary works was continuing to occur in a few selected areas of the Application Site (approx. 27% in 2004). Therefore, no negative change occurred to the landscape character of either County Westmeath Landscape Character Area 3 – River Deel Lowlands or County Meath LCA 15 – South West Lowlands since their inception. Due to the limited visibility of the peat extraction activities and all ancillary works beyond roads and residences in the immediate vicinity of the Application Site, no significant visual effects occurred from any scenic amenity designations or any other sensitive receptors existent in the wider landscape.

12.5.3 Current Phase – Landscape and Visual Effects

Cessation of peat extraction activity in 2020 has enabled the landscape of the Application Site to continue to re-vegetate and to some degree mitigate landscape and visual effects over time. However, the landscape is still a degraded bare – cutover peat site of low sensitivity, and it is not a functioning wetland. Revegetation has caused both a 'Slight' degree of change to the landscape and 'Slight' degree of change to the visual aesthetic of the Application Site and surrounding visual amenity. Decommissioning activities are on-going causing 'Slight' landscape and visual effects to arise. On balance landscape and visual effects during the 'Current Phase' are deemed to be 'Not Significant'.

12.5.4 Remedial Phase – Likely Landscape and Visual Effects

The primary activity of the Remedial Phase is to rewet cutover peatland in order to re-establish a naturally functioning wetland and peatland ecosystem. This will require low level, intermittent groundworks for activities such as plugging and blocking existing drainage. The Cutaway Bog Decommissioning and Rehabilitation Plans also includes targeted revegetation where appropriate. Continued decommissioning works of existing peat extraction infrastructure is also included for in the Remedial Phase.

It is likely that the works required to decommission peat extraction infrastructure and implement the remedial phase will cause temporary, negative landscape and visual effects of 'Imperceptible' significance.

As the bogland is re-wetted and the peatland ecosystem re-establishes as a result of remedial works there will be a positive change to the landscape of the Application Site. The visual aesthetic of the Application Site has changed since cessation of peat extraction activities in 2020. This is primarily attributed to the large areas of bare cutover peat which have been allowed to revegetate, consequently changing the visual aesthetic to a landscape that of a more natural and wild nature. The intention of the remediation plan is to continue to encourage this process and ensure that it is successful. Provided the Cutaway Bog Decommissioning and Rehabilitation Plans are implemented, there will be a 'Slight Positive' landscape and visual impact when compared to the 1988 baseline. Even in the absence of these plans, the natural revegetation process on the bare cutover peat areas will contribute to a positive landscape and visual impact, albeit at a slower rate. This spontaneous growth of vegetation is expected to gradually improve the visual aesthetics and landscape quality of the site.

12.6 Cumulative Landscape and Visual Assessments

In this section landscape and visual impacts at the Application Site are assessed in combination with other similar peat extraction areas and industry in the wider landscape area, as well as the proposal to develop a wind farm project at the Application Site.

12.6.1 Cumulative Landscape and Visual Effects of Extraction Activity at the Application Site: 1948-1987 and Cumulative Interaction with the Extraction Phase (1988-2022)

As discussed throughout this Chapter, the greatest landscape and visual effects at the Application Site occurred prior to the baseline in 1988, therefore before the Peat Extraction Phase. These landscape and visual effects occurred from 1948 when industrial peat extraction first started, up until 1988 which is the end of a period before the 1988 baseline and start of the Peat Extraction Phase which is under assessment in this rEIAR. This section discusses cumulative landscape and visual effects and interactions which would have occurred across the two time periods (1948–1987) versus the Peat

Extraction Phase (1988-2020). The focus of the discussion below is the extent to which negative landscape and visual effects occurring in the Peat Extraction Phase contribute to effects prior to the 1988 baseline.

Cumulative Landscape and Visual Effects of Pre-1988 Extraction Areas: Ballivor, Carranstown, Bracklin & Lisclogher Bogs

As reported previously in Section 12.5.2 in relation to Ballivor Bog, the western portion of Carranstown Bog, Bracklin Bog & Lisclogher Bog, the removal of peat throughout the Peat Extraction Phase changed the physical fabric of the landscape by removing material and altering the topographical profile of the landform year on year, resulting in negative direct landscape effects of 'Slight' significance. Therefore, there is a cumulative direct landscape effect with peat extraction occurring in these areas prior to the 1988 baseline.

With regards to landscape character, these areas of the Application Site (Ballivor Bog, the western portion of Carranstown Bog, Bracklin Bog and Lisclogher Bog) were already subject to peat extraction prior to 1988 and the character of the landscape had already been substantially altered. Therefore, activity in the Peat Extraction Phase in these areas do not contribute any negative effects on landscape character and do no contribute to cumulative effects on landscape character prior to the 1988 Baseline.

As reported previously in Section 12.5.2, the degree of visual change occurring on the areas already subjected to intensive peat extraction would be 'Negligible'. Also as established during the visibility appraisal, there is very limited visibility into the Application Site from sensitive visual receptors or any scenic amenity designations. Therefore, no significant visual effects are determined to have occurred at Ballivor Bog, the western portion of Carranstown Bog, Bracklin Bog & Lisclogher Bog during the Peat Extraction Phase. In this regard, these areas have no contribution to cumulative visual effects with the change to scenic amenity that occurred as a result of the initial extraction activity which occurred in these areas prior to the 1988 Baseline.

Lisclogher West Bog – Cumulative Effects with activity prior to the 1988 Baseline (period 1948-1987)

No peat extraction activity occurred in Lisclogher West Bog prior to the 1988 baseline. Therefore, no cumulative effects occur with activity occurring in that period.

North of Bracklin West Bog & Carranstown East Bog - Cumulative Effects with activity prior to the 1988 Baseline (period 1948-1987)

As reported previously in Section 12.5.2, 'Significant' landscape effects occurred in an area in the northwest of Bracklin Bog and the eastern portion of Carranstown Bog during the Peat Extraction Phase. In combination with the extraction occurring prior to the 1988 baseline, these cumulatively extend the spatial extent of landscape effects which historically occurred across the Application Site where large scale change to the physical fabric and character of the landscape occurred.

In mind of the 'Low' sensitivity of visual receptors and visual enclosure afforded to the north of Bracklin Bog the overall negative visual effects occurring in the Peat Extraction Phase were deemed to be of 'Slight' Significance. It is considered that these effects were highly localised. Therefore, the visual effects of activities in the north of Bracklin Bog do not have a significant contribution to cumulative effects occurring in combination with the visual effects which occurred at the Application Site prior to the 1988 Baseline.

As reported previously in Section 12.5.2, it was initially determined that a negative 'significant' visual impact was deemed to arise at the eastern portion of Carranstown Bog during the Peat Extraction Phase. However, on balance considering many factors limiting visibility from visual receptors, the assessments in this Chapter determined that residual visual effects upon scenic amenity arising from the

eastern portion of Carranstown Bog are of 'Moderate' significance. These visual effects specifically relate to views from local residents and a small portion of the R156 Regional Road. The effects have a moderate contribution to cumulative visual effects with the changes to scenic amenity which occurred prior to the 1988 baseline as they slightly extend the substantial changes to landscape views as seen from visual receptors in the public realm.

12.6.2 Peat Extraction Phase: Cumulative Interactions with other Peatland extraction and relevant industries in the wider landscape (Post-1988)

Other peatland landscapes within the midlands which have been subject to industrial scale peat extraction are existent in the wider landscape surrounding the Application Site. Peat extraction at the Application Site has contributed to a cumulative impact on the wider landscape and its character. However, it is key to note that changes to landscape character as a result of peat extraction activity during the Peat Extraction Phase has been minimal since the 1988 baseline. As reported previously, in this Chapter, the greatest landscape and visual effects happened prior to the 1988 baseline. The other cutover peatlands in the wider landscape are separated from the Application Site by substantial distances, as well as being buffered by physical landscape features such as roads, agricultural land, woodland, waterbodies and settlements. The additional effects on landscape character as a result of extraction at the Application Site (during the Peat Extraction Phase) is a very minor contribution to the overall cumulative effect on designated Landscape Character Areas.

As flat features of the landscape, peatlands of the Application Site are visually separated from other sites of industrial peat extraction in the wider landscape. There may be very minor cumulative landscape and visual effects in terms of in combination visual effects when viewing expansive cutover bogs from elevated vantage points with panoramic views. However as shown in the imagery from Slieve na Cailliagh (Figure 12-16 previously) it is unlikely that peatlands are easily to distinguish in the highly vegetated, flat landscape of the Irish midlands.

Sequential cumulative visual effects occur when a receptor will experience effects of multiple developments/projects by moving from one location to another. At a macro scale, effects during the Peat Extraction Phase have contributed to sequential cumulative visual effects which where a visual receptor travels across the landscape and experiences views of multiple cutover peatland landscapes, including the Application Site.

The Application Site is located in a rural area surrounded by agricultural lands, forestry and woodlands. While there are and have been various one-off houses and individual commercial facilities in the vicinity of the Application Site (please refer to Section 2.5 Cumulative Impact Assessment in Chapter 2), these are immaterial from a cumulative landscape and visual effects perspective given the scale of the peat extraction activities and duration of the Peat Extraction Phase under assessment. The landscape within which the Application Site is located is a working landscape consisting of agricultural fields, including pasture fields, field boundaries, and commercial forestry. The peat extraction activity in combination with these activities has had a cumulative landscape and visual effect, but these are not deemed to be significant.

Summary of Cumulative Landscape Effects in the Peat Extraction Phase

With regards to direct cumulative landscape effects on the physical fabric of the landscape, there is no physical connectivity or interaction between the Application Site and any other peatlands in the wider landscape setting. Therefore, there is no potential for direct cumulative landscape effects to occur during the Peat Extraction Phase. With regards to cumulative effects on landscape character and designated LCAs, it is clearly established in Section 12.5.2 and in the text above that there was very limited visual change to the character or visual aesthetic of the landscape at a macro scale for most of the Application Site during the Peat Extraction Phase since the 1988 baseline.

As reported previously there was change to the landscape character in localised areas of the Application Site such as at Lisclogher West Bog, the northwestern portion of Bracklin Bog, and in the eastern portion of Carranstown Bog. Considering the localised nature of these changes and landscape character and enclosure of these areas by above ground landscape features in the flat landscape, there is very limited potential for there to be cumulative effects on landscape character with other peatlands in the wider landscape setting.

Summary of Cumulative Visual Effects in the Peat Extraction Phase

As reported in Section 12.5.2, any visual effects that occurred in the Peat Extraction Phase are highly localised, with limited visibility into the Application Site from any sensitive visual receptors or scenic amenity designations. The degree of visual change on the majority of these peatlands (Ballivor Bog, Carranstown Bog, Bracklin Bog and Lisclogher Bog) had occurred prior to the 1988 baseline. Therefore, excepting Lisclogher West Bog, the northwest of Bracklin Bog and the east of Carranstown Bog, most of the extraction activity at the Application Site has had no imperceptible visual effects during the Peat Extraction Phase and therefore does not have any contribution to negative cumulative visual effects with and modified elements of the wider landscape.

Considering the visual enclosure and limited visibility of effects from receptors during extraction at Lisclogher West Bog, and northwest of Bracklin Bog views, these 'Slight' visual effects have a limited contribution to cumulative visual effects with other peatlands and modified elements of the wider landscape setting.

'Moderate' residual visual effects were deemed to arise from the extraction at the east of Carranstown Bog during the Peat Extraction Phase. Whilst these visual effects are highly localised to several local residential receptors and a small portion of the R156 Regional Road, they would have contributed to sequential cumulative visual effects arising from the industrial extraction of peatlands in the wider landscape setting as visual receptors travels across the midlands of Ireland.

12.6.3 Current Phase: Cumulative Interactions

As reported previously in Section 12.5.3, no negative landscape and visual effects will occur in this phase, therefore there is no potential for cumulative landscape and visual effects with other peatland extraction or developments in the wider area.

12.6.4 Remedial Phase: Cumulative Interactions with other planned development

As reported previously in Section 12.5.4, no negative landscape and visual effects are likely to occur in this phase, therefore there is no potential for cumulative landscape and visual effects with other peatland extraction or developments in the wider area. For the avoidance of doubt, potential landscape and visual effects in the remedial phase are considered and discussed below in combination with both the proposed Ballivor Wind Farm and the permitted Bracklyn Wind Farm.

12.6.4.1 Proposed Ballivor Wind Farm

As detailed in Section 4.10 in Chapter 4, Bord na Móna Powergen Ltd lodged a planning application to An Bord Pleanála (Ref. PA25M.316212) for a development consisting of 26 no. wind turbines and associated works at the Ballivor Bog Group, known as Ballivor Wind Farm (https://www.ballivorwindfarm.ie/). The proposed wind farm is located on Ballivor bog, Carranstown bog, Bracklin bog, Lisclogher bog and agricultural land adjacent to Bracklin bog. The likely significant landscape and visual effects of the proposed Ballivor Wind Farm proposal are comprehensively assessed and reported within the EIAR accompanying the submitted planning application. As reported previously in Section 12.5.4, the activities proposed as part of the Remedial Phase will cause positive

landscape and visual effects, therefore there will be no contribution to any negative cumulative landscape and visual effects which may or may not arise as a result of the proposed Ballivor Wind Farm.

12.6.4.2 Permitted Bracklin Wind Farm

The Bracklyn Wind Farm is a 9 no. turbine project permitted by the Board in July 2022 (Ref. PA25M.311565). This wind farm is located on forestry and agricultural land south of Lisclogher West Bog and north of Bracklin Bog. As reported previously in Section 12.5.4, the activities proposed as part of the Remedial Phase will cause positive landscape and visual effects, therefore there will be no contribution to any cumulative landscape and visual effects which may arise as a result of the Bracklyn Wind Farm.

12.7 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the significance of landscape and visual effects occurring at the Application Site since the 1988 baseline. A vast majority of the Application Site was subject to peat extraction in 1988 and the greatest landscape and visual effects had already occurred prior to the 1988 baseline. No significant landscape and visual effects occurred in these areas during the Peat Extraction Phase.

The greatest landscape and visual effects during the Peat Extraction Phase occurred at the west of Bracklin Bog and east of Carranstown Bog where the lands were stripped, and industrial peat extraction occurred. These areas comprise approximately 10% of the Application Site and were areas of drained bog prior to 1988. Significant landscape effects occurred here where a substantial change occurred within the landscape; these drained peatlands of medium sensitivity transitioned to a landscape of bare cutover peat. Considering the absence of visibility of these peatlands from any high sensitivity visual receptors due to a high level of screening around the bogs, residual visual effects were deemed to be of Moderate significance.

Prior to 1988, Lisclogher West Bog included large areas of intact raised bog of high sensitivity. The installation of drainage was competed there during the peat extraction phase causing direct landscape effects of moderate significance. Due to the limited visibility of this bog from any sensitive receptors and the very slight visual change occurring as a result of the drainage activity, visual effects were deemed to be not significant.

Designated Landscape Character Areas were established in 2008 for Co. Westmeath and in 2007 for County Meath. By this time, large areas of the Application Site were not subject to peat extraction, with peat extraction was occurring in just a few selected areas of the Application Site (e.g. approx. 27% of the landcover of the Application Site in 2004). Therefore, no negative change occurred to the landscape character of either County Westmeath Landscape Character Area 3 – River Deel Lowlands or County Meath LCA 15 – South West Lowlands since their inception. Due to the limited visibility of the peat extraction activity beyond roads and residences in the immediate vicinity of the Application Site, which themselves were screened by bog boundary vegetation, no significant visual effects occurred from any scenic amenity designations or any other sensitive receptors existent in the wider landscape.

Some areas of the Application Site have not been subject to peat extraction for considerable time (e.g. peat extraction ceased in large areas of Bracklin bog by 2003, and in Lisclogher in 2003), and these areas show signs of revegetation. Peat extraction ceased at the Application Site in June 2020 which has further enabled the landscape of the entire Application Site to continue to re-vegetate. However, the landscape is still currently categorised as a degraded bare cutover peat site of low sensitivity.

On balance, landscape and visual effects during the Current Phase are deemed to be 'Not Significant'. The primary activity of the Remedial Phase is to rewet cutover peatland in order to re-establish a naturally functioning wetland and peatland ecosystem. With the full implementation of the Remedial Phase Cutaway Bog Decommissioning and Rehabilitation Plans, there will be a Slight Positive

landscape and visual impact when compared to the 1988 baseline. Very minor cumulative landscape and visual effects may arise as the works and activities required for implementation of the Remedial Phase are likely to occur within a similar timeline with the works required to construct the permitted Bracklyn wind farm (Planning Reference PA25M.311565) and if consented, the proposed Ballivor Wind Farm. (Ref. PA25M.316212).