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Appropriate Assessment Screening Report

PRESENTED TO

Offaly County Council
NOISE ACTION PLAN (NAP) 2024-2028

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Environmental Consultancy Services

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Enviroguide Consulting was commissioned by Offaly County Council to prepare an Appropriate Assessment Screening Report for the Offaly Noise Action Plan 2024-2028, hereafter referred to as 'NAP'.

This report contains information to enable the Competent Authority to undertake Stage 1 Appropriate Assessment (AA) screening in respect of the NAP.

1.2 Quality Assurance and Competence

Enviroguide Consulting is multi-disciplinary consultancy specialising in the areas of the Environment, Waste Management and Planning. All Enviroguide consultants carry scientific or engineering qualifications and have a wealth of experience working within the Environmental Consultancy sectors, having undergone extensive training and continued professional development.

Enviroguide Consulting as a company remains fully briefed in European and Irish environmental policy and legislation. Enviroguide staff members are highly qualified in their field. Professional memberships include the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management (CIWM), the Irish Environmental Law Association and Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM).

All surveying and reporting have been carried out by qualified and experienced ecologists and environmental consultants. SH, ecologist with Enviroguide, undertook the desk study and authored this report.

SH has a B.Sc. (Hons) in Zoology and a Ph.D. in Marine Ecology from University College Dublin, and a wealth of experience in desktop research, bioinformatics analyses, literature review and reporting, as well as practical field and laboratory experience including habitat mapping, invasive species surveys, freshwater and marine fish surveys and environmental DNA analysis. SH has prepared several Stage I and Stage II Appropriate Assessment Reports and Ecological Impact Assessments. Additionally, SH has authored and supported the preparations of a number of Biodiversity Chapters for Environmental Impact Assessment Reports.

1.3 Description of the Offaly Noise Action Plan 2024-2028

1.3.1 Legislative and Regulatory Background - Summary

The Environmental Noise Directive ("END") (2002/49/EC) aims to put in place a European wide system for identifying sources of environmental noise, informing the public about relevant noise data and taking the necessary steps to avoid, prevent or reduce noise exposure.

All member states are required to prepare strategic noise maps to identify populations exposed to environmental noise emanating from transport (road, rail and air traffic) and

industrial activities. These maps will be the basis for illustrating to the public such information and as a tool to prepare Noise Action Plans by the responsible authorities.

The END was transposed into Irish Law by the Environmental Noise Regulations 2006 (S.I. 140/2006) (the "Regulations"). The Regulations were revised by the European Communities (Environmental Noise) Regulations 2018 (S.I. 549/2018) and amended through the European Communities (Environmental Noise) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 (S.I. 663/2021).

1.3.2 Objectives

The objective of the NAP is to avoid, prevent and reduce, where necessary, on a prioritised basis, the harmful effects, including annoyance, due to long term exposure to environmental noise. This will be achieved by taking a strategic approach to managing environmental noise.

This approach promotes action on environmental noise through three avenues, these being noise reduction at source, land use planning adapted to noise goals and procedures to reduce noise impact.

This NAP (Round 4) (R4) primarily considers the long-term environmental noise impact from road traffic sources and sets out an approach to review noise impact levels near to the major sources assessed during the strategic noise mapping in 2021 with a view to identifying locations where noise reduction is deemed necessary in the first instance.

This version of the NAP is the fourth edition and reports the findings of the Strategic Noise Mapping for sections of major roads, above a flow threshold of 3 million vehicles per annum, prepared in consultation with Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The results of this assessment have been presented as maps and summary tables of statistics showing the estimated area, number of dwellings and people exposed to long term road traffic noise within the area covered by the noise maps. This Noise Action Plan is supported by a four-year programme for implementation, with progress reported to the EPA on an annual basis.

1.3.3 Actions

The Regulations require that "priorities" and "the most important area or areas" are to be addressed within a NAP. A three-step approach was implemented to identify the highest priority areas for attention and inclusion in the Round 4 NAP.

- Identify Important Areas (IAs) across the county based on the exposure to environmental noise which may be harmful to human health, as indicated by World Health Organisation (WHO) guidance.
- Identify a sub-set of Most Important Areas (MIAs), where the health effects are highest, typically through a product of noise exposure levels and the number of people exposed to noise.
- Identify Priority Important Areas (PIAs) following a review of the MIA's.
- Assess PIA's during NAP lifetime; design and apply appropriate mitigation measures.

- Identify and designate Quiet Areas to preserve them from effects of environmental noise.

1.3.3.1 Programme of Works

The Noise Action Plan is to be implemented through a staged process over a period of 4 years:

- **Year 1:** Identify priority areas for possible noise mitigation and preservation, based on the results of the strategic noise maps and liaise with interested parties and other stakeholders.
- **Year 2:** Evaluate the actual noise impact at creche buildings or locations identified in NAP4.
- **Year 3:** Commence implementation of appropriate noise management actions, where necessary. Ensure adoption of action planning measures and best practice noise policy outlined in County Development Plan.
- **Year 4:** Continue with implementation of appropriate noise management actions. Evaluate effectiveness of any noise reduction measures and review impact and success of action plan. Continue to incorporate action planning measures and best practice noise policy in any new County Development Plans. Undertake traffic counts on Regional Roads around Offaly to help support the R5 strategic noise mapping in 2028.

1.3.3.2 Priority Important Areas

Ten PIAs were identified by the strategic noise mapping exercise and Offaly County Council's review. These are located within the townlands of Tullamore and Edenderry.

For each PIA, the relevant noise management measure will be identified and evaluated using processes such as cost-benefit analysis and quantification of health benefits. The evaluation of the PIAs will be undertaken as part of the implementation of the NAP.

The following are an indication of the types of measures which may be relevant to consider for noise sensitive locations exposed to noise from road sources:

- Earthworks, such as earth bunds, mounds or cuttings;
- Coverage, including baffles or tunnels;
- Acoustic windows or secondary glazing;
- Acoustics ventilation, passive or active;
- Chimney caps and dampers;
- Acoustic roadside barriers; and
- Landscaping and planting.

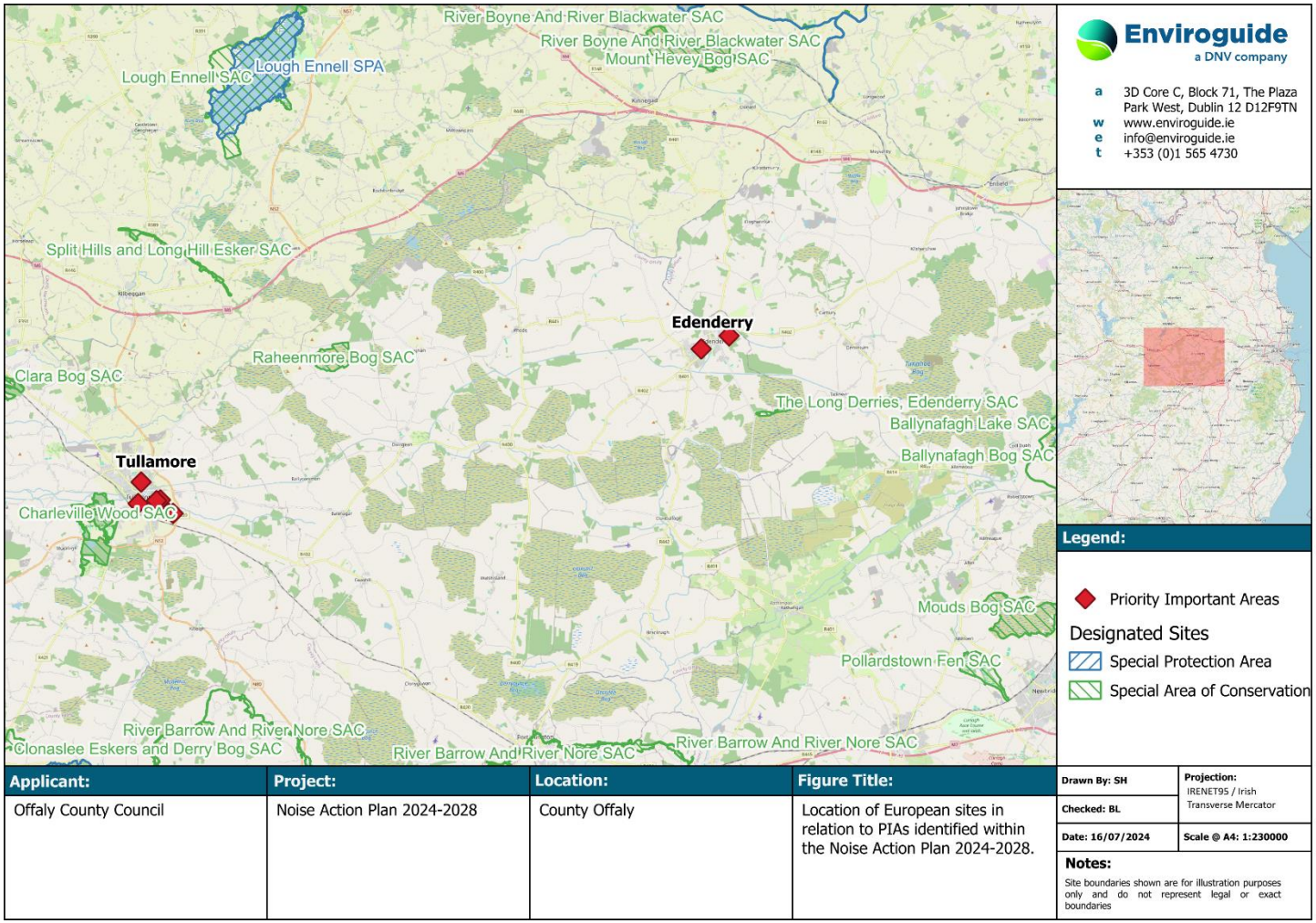

FIGURE 1: LOCATION OF PRIORITY IMPOARTANT AREAS (PIAS) IDENTIFIED IN NAP 2024-2028, IN RELATION TO EUROPEAN SITES IN PROXIMITY.

2 LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY CONTEXT

2.1 Legislative Background

The Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) seeks to conserve natural habitats and wild fauna and flora by the designation of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and the Birds Directive (2009/147/EC) seeks to protect birds of special importance by the designation of Special Protection Areas (SPAs). The Habitats Directive has been transposed into Irish law through the EC (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 (SI 477 of 2011).

It is the responsibility of each Member State to designate SPAs and SACs, both of which will form part of the Natura 2000 Network, a network of protected sites throughout the European Community. These designated sites are referred to as "Natura 2000 sites" or "European sites". SACs are selected for the conservation of Annex I habitats (including priority types which are in danger of disappearance) and Annex II species (other than birds). SPAs are selected for the conservation of Annex I birds and other regularly occurring migratory birds and their habitats. The annexed habitats and species for which each site is selected correspond to the Qualifying Interests (QIs) and Special Conservation Interests (SCIs) of the sites; from these the conservation objectives of the site are derived.

An AA is a required assessment to determine the likelihood of significant effects, based on best scientific knowledge, of any plans or projects on European sites. A screening for AA determines whether a plan or project, either alone or in combination with other plans and projects, is likely to have significant effects on a European site, in view of its conservation objectives.

This AA Screening has been undertaken to determine the potential for significant effects on relevant European sites. The purpose of this assessment is to determine, the appropriateness, or otherwise, of the Proposed Development in the context of the conservation objectives of such sites.

2.1.1 Legislative Context

The obligations in relation to Appropriate Assessment have been implemented in Ireland under Part XAB of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended ("the 2000 Act"), and in particular Section 177U and Section 177V thereof. The relevant provisions of Section 177U in relation to AA screening have been set out below:

"***177U.—*** *(1) A screening for appropriate assessment of a draft Land use plan or application for consent for proposed development shall be carried out by the competent authority to assess, in view of best scientific knowledge, if that Land use plan or proposed development, individually or in combination with another plan or project is likely to have a significant effect on the European site.*

(2)…

(3)…

(4) The competent authority shall determine that an appropriate assessment of a draft Land use plan or a proposed development, as the case may be, is required if it cannot be excluded, on the basis of objective information, that the draft Land use plan or proposed development,

individually or in combination with other plans or projects, will have a significant effect on a European site.

(5) The competent authority shall determine that an appropriate assessment of a draft Land use plan or a proposed development, as the case may be, is not required if it can be excluded, on the basis of objective information, that the draft Land use plan or proposed development, individually or in combination with other plans or projects, will have a significant effect on a European site."

An Appropriate Assessment is required under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive where a project or plan may give rise to significant effects upon a European site. Paragraph 3 states that:

"*6(3) Any plan or project not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site but likely to have a significant effect thereon, either individually or in combination with other plans or projects, shall be subject to appropriate assessment of its implications for the site, in view of the site's conservation objectives. In the light of the conclusions of the assessment of the implications for the site and subject to the provisions of paragraph 4, the competent national authorities shall agree to the plan or project only after having ascertained that it will not adversely affect the integrity of the site concerned and, if appropriate, after having obtained the opinion of the general public."*

According to the ruling delivered in open court in Luxembourg on 15th June 2023 regarding the interpretation of Article 6(3) of Directive 92/43, the Article must be interpreted as meaning that:

"In order to determine whether it is necessary to carry out an appropriate assessment of the implications of a plan or project for a site, account may be taken of the features of that plan or project which involve the removal of contaminants and which therefore may have the effect of reducing the harmful effects of the plan or project on that site, where those features have been incorporated into that plan or project as standard features, inherent in such a plan or project, irrespective of any effect on the site".

As such, standardised embedded mitigation (such as the use of Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) in large-scale residential developments), that are incorporated into the design of a proposal or project and which may result in a reduction of effects impacting European sites, but where the primary reason of the embedded mitigation is not to protect a European site, are permitted for consideration during the undertaking of AA.

2.2 Policy Context

2.2.1 Offaly County Development Plan (2021 – 2027)

Policies and objectives of the Offaly County Development Plan 2021 – 2027 that are of relevance to this Screening Report include the following chapters, outlined in further detail in Appendix I and listed below:

- **Chapter 3:** Climate Action & Energy
- **Chapter 4:** Biodiversity & Landscape
- **Chapter 13:** Development Management Standards

2.2.2 Offaly Heritage Plan 2023 – 2027

The Offaly Heritage Plan sets out the work of Offaly County Council working in partnership with groups ad agencies to deliver heritage projects within the county. The Biodiversity Action Plan for County Offaly is incorporated into the Heritage plan.

The Heritage Plan is underpinned by the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate crisis. For Biodiversity, the following actions are proposed within the plan:

- Active management of Council owned lands for biodiversity enhancement
- Promoting the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan
- Supporting the recording and submitting of records to the NBDC
- Control of invasive species

It is anticipated that a specific biodiversity action plan will be prepared following the appointment of a Biodiversity Officer for Offaly County.

2.3 Stages of Appropriate Assessment

This AA Screening Report (the 'Screening Report') has been prepared by Enviroguide Consulting. It considers whether the Proposed Development is likely to have a significant effect on a European site and whether a Stage 2 AA is required.

The AA process is a four-stage process. Each stage requires different considerations, assessments and tests to ultimately arrive at the relevant conclusion for each stage. An important aspect of the process is that the outcome at each successive stage determines whether a further stage in the process is required.

The four stages of an AA, can be summarised as follows:

- **Stage 1: *Screening*.** The Screening for AA considers whether a plan or project is directly connected to or necessary for the management of a European site, or whether a plan or project, alone or in combination with other plans and projects, is likely to have significant effects on a European site in view of its conservation objectives.
- **Stage 2: *Natura Impact Statement (NIS).*** Where Stage 1 determines that significant effects are likely, uncertain or unknown, the preparation of a NIS is required. The NIS must include a scientific examination of evidence and data to classify potential impacts on any European site(s) in view of their conservation objectives in the absence of mitigation. The NIS will identify appropriate mitigation to remove the potential for likely significant adverse effects on any European site(s). If the competent authority determines that the plan or project would have an adverse effect on the integrity of any European site(s) despite mitigation, it can only grant consent after proceeding through stages 3 and 4.
- **Stage 3: *Assessment of alternative solutions***. If the outcome of Stage 2 is negative i.e., adverse impacts to the sites cannot be scientifically ruled out, despite mitigation, the plan or project should proceed to Stage 3 or be abandoned. This stage examines alternative solutions to the proposal.
- **Stage 4: *Assessment where no alternative solutions exist and where adverse impacts remain***. The final stage is the main derogation process examining whether

there are imperative reasons of overriding public interest (IROPI) for allowing a plan or project to adversely affect a European site, where no less damaging solution exists.

The Habitats Directive promotes a hierarchy of avoidance, mitigation, and compensatory measures. First the project should aim to avoid any negative effects on European sites by identifying possible effects early in the planning stage and designing the project to avoid such effects. Second, mitigation measures should be applied, if necessary, during the AA process to the point where no adverse impacts on the site(s) remain. If the project is still likely to result in adverse effects, and no further practicable mitigation is possible, a refusal for planning permission may be recommended. In this case, the project will generally only be considered where no alternative solutions are identified and the project is required for IROPI, or, in the case of priority habitats, considerations of health or safety, or beneficial consequences of primary importance for the environment or to other IROPI. Then compensation measures are required for any remaining adverse effects.

3 AA SCREENING METHODOLOGY

3.1 Guidance

This Screening Report has been undertaken in accordance with the following guidance:

- *Appropriate Assessment of Plans and Projects in Ireland - Guidance for Planning Authorities.* (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2010 revision);
- *Appropriate Assessment under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive: Guidance for Planning Authorities.* Circular NPW 1/10 & PSSP 2/10;
- *Communication from the Commission on the precautionary principle* (European Commission, 2000);
- *Managing Natura 2000 Sites: The Provisions of Article 6 of the Habitat's Directive 92/43/EEC* (European Commission, 2019);
- *Assessment of plans and projects in relation to Natura 2000 sites - Methodological guidance on Article 6(3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC* Brussels, 28.9.2021 C (European Commission, 2021); and
- *Appropriate Assessment Screening for Development Management, OPR Practice Note PN01, Office of the Planning Regulator March 2021.*

3.2 Screening Steps

Screening for AA involves the following steps:

- Establish whether the plan or project is directly connected with or necessary for the management of a European site;
- Description of the baseline existing environment at the Site of the Proposed Development;
- Identification of relevant European site(s) potentially affected;
- Identification and description of potential effects on the relevant European site(s);
- Assessment of the likely significance of the effects identified on the relevant European site(s);
- Description and characterisation of other projects or plans that in combination with the Proposed Development have the potential for having significant effects on the European site; and
- Exclusion of sites where it can be objectively concluded that there will be no significant effects.

It should be noted that any targeted ecological mitigation measures and/or measures intended or included for the purposes of avoiding adverse effects arising as a result of the Proposed Development on any European site **have not been considered** as part of this Screening Report.

3.3 Desk Study

A desktop study was carried out in July 2024 to collate and review available information, datasets and documentation sources relevant for the completion of this Screening Report. The desktop study relied on the following sources:

- Information on the network of European Sites, boundaries, QIs and conservation objectives, obtained from the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) at *www.npws.ie*;
- Text summaries of the relevant European sites taken from the respective Standard Data Forms (available at *https://natura2000.eea.europa.eu/*) and Site Synopses (available at *www.npws.ie*);
- Information on waterbodies, catchment areas and hydrological connections obtained from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) at www.*gis.epa.ie*;
- Information on bedrock, groundwater, aquifers and their statuses, obtained from Geological Survey Ireland (GSI) at *www.gsi.ie*;
- Satellite imagery and mapping obtained from various sources and dates including Google, Digital Globe, Bing and Ordnance Survey Ireland; and
- Information on the existence of permitted developments, or developments awaiting decision, in the vicinity of the Proposed Development from the Offaly County Council online planning database (Planning Search - Offaly County Council Offaly County Council) and the National Planning Database (DHLGH, 2024).

For a complete list of the documents consulted as part of this assessment, see *Section 6 References*.

3.4 Field surveys

No field surveys were deemed necessary for the preparation of this report.

3.5 Identification of Relevant European sites

The Zone of Influence (ZOI) for a project is the area over which ecological features may be affected by changes as a result of a development and associated activities. This is likely to extend beyond the development site, for example where there are ecological or hydrological links beyond the site boundaries (CIEEM, 2018). Furthermore, ZOI in relation to European sites is described as follows in the 'OPR Practice Note PN01 - Appropriate Assessment Screening for Development Management' (OPR, 2021):

> "*The zone of influence of a proposed development is the geographical area over which it could affect the receiving environment in a way that could have significant effects on the Qualifying Interests of a European site. This should be established on a case-by-case basis using the Source-Pathway-Receptor framework and not by arbitrary distances (such as 15 km).*"

Thus, to identify the European sites that potentially lie within the ZOI of the Proposed Development, a Source-Path-Receptor (S-P-R) method was adopted, as described in OPR

PN01 (OPR 2021). This note was published to provide guidance on screening for AA during the planning process, and although it focuses on the approach a planning authority should take in screening for AA, the methodology is also readily applied in the preparation of Screening Reports such as this.

The relevant European sites were identified based on the following:

- Identification of potential sources of effects based on the Proposed Development description and details, including changes to potentially suitable ex-situ habitats at the Site (i.e., habitats utilised by SCI bird species outside of their designated SPAs);
- Use of up-to-date GIS spatial datasets for European designated sites and water catchments – downloaded from the NPWS website (*www.npws.ie*) and the EPA website (*www.epa.ie*) to identify European sites which could potentially be affected by the Proposed Development; and
- Identification of potential pathways between the Site of the Proposed Development and any European sites within the ZOI of any of the identified sources of impacts.
    - The catchment data were used to establish or discount potential hydrological connectivity between the Proposed Development and any European sites.
    - Groundwater, soils, and bedrock information used to establish or discount potential hydrogeological connectivity between the Proposed Development and any European sites.
    - Air and land connectivity assessed based on Proposed Development details and proximity to European sites.
    - Consideration of potential indirect pathways, e.g., impacts to flight paths, *ex-situ* habitats, etc.
- Defining the likely ZOI based on the identified sources of effects and potential pathways between the Proposed Development and any European sites.

3.6 Assessment of Significant Effects

The conservation objectives of the European sites identified to lie within the ZOI were reviewed and assessed in order to establish whether the construction and operation of the Proposed Development has the potential to have a negative impact on any of the QIs and/or conservation objectives listed for the site.

The assessment framework is taken from the best practice guidelines issued by the European Commission, i.e., "*Assessment of plans and projects significantly affecting Natura 2000 sites – Methodological guidance on the provisions of Article 6(3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC*".

The potential for significant effects that may arise from the Proposed Development was considered through the use of key indicators:

- Habitat loss or alteration.
- Habitat/species fragmentation.

- Disturbance and/or displacement of species.
- Changes in population density.
- Changes in water quality and resource.

In addition, information pertaining to the conservation objectives of the European sites, the ecology of the designated habitats and species and known or perceived sensitivities of the habitats and species were considered.

3.7 Limitations

No limitations were encountered which would prevent robust conclusions from being drawn as to the potential impacts of the Proposed Development and therefore the likely significant effects on the European site, in view of the site's conservation objectives.

4 STAGE 1 SCREENING ASSESSMENT

4.1 Existing Environment

4.1.1 Desk Study Results

4.1.1.1 Tullamore – Overview of Hydrology, Geology and Hydrogeology

Tullamore town is located in the Lower Shannon Catchment (Catchment I.D. 25A) and in the Tullamore_SC_010 Sub-catchment (Sub-catchment I.D. 25A_4) (EPA, 2024).

The Tullamore River (Water Framework Directive (WFD) name: TULLAMORE_030) runs through the town of Tullamore from east to west, continuing through the Charleville Wood SAC located approx. 500m west of Tullamore town. Within Tullamore town, this river is considered to have *Poor* ecological status, and is assessed as being *At risk* of not achieving its WFD objectives (EPA, 2024). The Tullamore Wastewater Treatment Plant (WwTP) discharges its effluent to the Tullamore River just downstream of Tullamore town. In addition, the Grand Canal runs through the town.

Tullamore town is situated over two groundwater bodies (GWBs); the Tullamore (IE_SH_G_232) and the Geashill GWB (IE_SH_G_103). The Groundwater Vulnerability Rating assigned to groundwater beneath the town varies between *Moderate*, *High* and *Extreme* (GSI, 2024). Both GWBs underlying Tullamore town were assessed as having *Good* status in the last WFD cycle (2016-2021), and are considered to be *Not at Risk* of not achieving their WFD objectives (EPA, 2024).

The bedrock aquifer identified beneath the town is mapped as *Regionally Important Aquifer - Karstified (diffuse)* (Rkd) (GSI, 2024). The soil beneath the majority of the town is mapped as *Made* described as *Man made*, with pockets of *Alluvium* type soils (described as *The subsoils alluvium: post glacial sand and gravel deposits*) towards the west of town, following the Tullamore river and Grand Canal (GSI, 2024).

4.1.1.2 Edenderry – Overview of Hydrology, Geology and Hydrogeology

Edenderry town is located in the Boyne Catchment (Catchment I.D. 07) and in the Boyne_SC_010 Sub-catchment (Sub-catchment I.D. 07_4) (EPA, 2024).

The Boyne River (WFD name: BOYNE_020) flows around the town of Edenderry, flowing northward just east of the town, then turning to flow in a westerly direction along the northern limits of the town. Two small tributaries of the Boyne River originate within Edenderry town. These are all assessed in the WFD under the same entity: BOYNE_020. The ecological status of the river in proximity to Edenderry town is assessed as *Poor*, and it is considered to be *At Risk* of not achieving its WFD objectives (EPA, 2024). Additionally, the Grand Canal runs just south of Edenderry town.

Edenderry town is situated on the Trim (IE_EA_G_002) GWB. The Groundwater Vulnerability Rating assigned to groundwater beneath the town varies between *Moderate*, *High, Extreme* and *X – Rock at or Near Surface* (GSI, 2024). This GWB was assessed as having *Good* status in the last WFD cycle (2016-2021), however is considered to be A*t Risk* of not achieving its WFD objectives (EPA, 2024).

Two types of bedrock aquifer are identified beneath the town: majority is mapped as *Locally Important Aquifer - Bedrock which is Generally Moderately Productive,* while small pockets of *Locally Important Aquifer - Bedrock which is Moderately Productive only in Local Zones* are found in the town centre and under the western part of the town. Additionally, *Limestone till (Carboniferous)* and *Cutover Peat* soil types are mapped within and around the periphery of the town.

4.2 Identification of Relevant European Sites

4.2.1 Potential Sources of Effects

The Proposed Development is not directly connected with or necessary to the management of European sites. In addition, the NAP 2024-2028 is designed to inform responses throughout the local authority to the effects of Environmental Noise and does not identify specific measures for mitigating noise impacts. Any future projects resulting from the objectives laid out in the NAP will need to comply with the relative legislation in relation to Appropriate Assessment, where appropriate.

The NAP lists several potential measures for noise mitigation that may be implemented at any of the PIAs identified (see section 1.3.3.2). These measures are localised and likely to result only in small scale works, however the following potential sources of effects were identified from these measures:

- Uncontrolled releases of soil, silt and/or sediments into the surface water network;
- Uncontrolled releases of pollutants into the surface water network and/or groundwater;
- Spread of invasive flora species via land.

4.2.2 Potential Pathways to European Sites

For the above listed potential sources of effects to have the potential to cause likely significant effects on any European site, a pathway between the source of potential effects (i.e., the Site of the Proposed Development) and the receptor is required. Potential impact pathways are discussed in the following sections in the context of the identified impact sources as identified in section 4.2.1.

4.2.2.1 Direct Pathways

4.2.2.1.1 Hydrological pathways

The Tullamore River provides a direct hydrological pathway from Tullamore town to **Charleville Wood SAC (000571)**, over approx. 1-2km of river. The potential for impacts via this pathway is therefore assessed further in this report.

The Boyne River flows in a northeasterly direction after Edenderry town, and ultimately leads to the **River Boyne and River Blackwater SPA (004232) and SAC (002299)**, approx. 20 km downstream along the river. Due to distance and considering the likely small scale of works required, this pathway is considered to be insignificant.

No other European sites are linked to the identified PIAs via hydrological pathways.

4.2.2.1.2 Hydrogeological pathways

Should any groundworks be required during implementation of noise mitigation measures, the ground will be exposed and any potential accidental discharges to ground could potentially migrate vertically downward to the underlying bedrock aquifer and migrate laterally within the GWB to nearby European sites.

In Tullamore, the majority of the identified PIAs are located on the Geashill GWB, which also underlies the Charleville Wood SAC. The Summary of Initial Characterisation (GSI, 2003) of this GWB states that flow paths within the aquifer are short, 30-300m. The nearest point of the Charleville Wood SAC to a PIA located on the same GWB is approx. 2km, as seen in Figure 2 below. Therefore, this pathway is considered to be insignificant.

Edenderry is underlain by the Trim GWB, and the nearest European site within the same GWB is the **Long Derries, Edenderry SAC (000925)**, located approx. 4km south of Edenderry town, as seen in Figure 3 below. Due to the complexity of the GWB, the Summary of Initial Characterisation does not outline typical flow lengths within the aquifer. However, taking into consideration the distance between the nearest PIA within the same GWB, the expected small scale of works, and the fact that Long Derries, Edenderry SAC is not designated for any groundwater dependent habitats, it is deemed that no hydrogeological pathway exists between the PIAs in Edenderry to any European sites.

4.2.2.1.3 Air and land pathways

The likely ZOI via air and land pathways is considered to be limited to surrounding areas within approx. 200-300m from the Site boundary for any noise and dust sources, depending on prevailing weather conditions. Additionally, light spill is considered to be limited to areas within the Site and habitats immediately adjacent to the boundaries of any works to be undertaken to implement noise mitigation measures.

The nearest European site (Charleville Wood SAC) is located over 1km from the nearest PIA (PIA ID: OYC_07), as outlined in Figure 2 below. Depending on the noise mitigation measures that will be applied here, there is potential for propagation of impacts via land channels, such as e.g., via work vehicles spreading invasive flora if driving through the SAC. Therefore, a potential land pathway between the PIAs in Tullamore and the Charleville Wood SAC exists.

4.2.2.2 Indirect Pathways

Due to the small scale of potentially required works, no indirect pathways (e.g., disruptions to migratory paths) were identified.

4.2.3 Relevant European sites

A European site will only be at risk from likely significant effects where a S-P- R link exists between the Proposed Development Site and the European site. All of the European sites considered under the S-P-R method are listed in

Table 1, however only one European site was identified to have a S-P-R link of note to the Proposed Development Site, namely the **Charleville Wood SAC (000571).** This site is highlighted in green in the below.

TABLE 1. EUROPEAN SITES CONSIDERED WITH THE SOURCE-PATHWAY-RECEPTOR (S-P-R) METHOD TO ESTABLISH NOTABLE LINKS BETWEEN THE SOURCES OF EFFECTS ARISING FROM THE PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT, AND ANY RELEVANT EUROPEAN SITES. THOSE SITES WITH NOTABLE S-P-R LINKS ARE HIGHLIGHTED IN GREEN (IF ANY). QUALIFYING INTERESTS (QIS) TAKEN FROM THE RELEVANT CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES DOCUMENTS (AS REFERENCED) AND/OR THE STANDARD DATA FORMS (EEA, 2024)[1].

Site Name & Site Code	Qualifying Interests (*= priority habitats)	Potential Pathways
Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)		
Charleville Wood SAC (000571) Linear Distance to nearest PIA: approx. 1.2km W	• Alluvial forests with *Alnus glutinosa* and *Fraxinus excelsior* (*Alno-Padion, Alnion incanae, Salicion albae*)* [91E0] • Desmoulin's Whorl Snail (*Vertigo moulinsiana)*[1016]	Direct hydrological and land pathways. No other pathways identified.
River Boyne and River Blackwater SAC (002299) Linear Distance to nearest PIA: approx. 13km NNE	• Alkaline fens [7230] • Alluvial forests with *Alnus glutinosa* and *Fraxinus excelsior* (*Alno-Padion, Alnion incanae, Salicion albae*) [91E0] • *Lampetra fluviatilis* (River Lamprey) [1099] • *Salmo salar* (Salmon) [1106] • *Lutra lutra* (Otter) [1355]	No potential pathways identified.
The Long Derries, Edenderry SAC (000925) Linear Distance to nearest PIA: approx. 4.2km SSE	• Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies on calcareous substrates (Festuco-Brometalia) (* important orchid sites) [6210]	
Special Protection Areas (SPAs)		
River Boyne and River Blackwater SPA (004232) Linear Distance to nearest PIA: approx. 13km NNE	• Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) [A229]	No potential pathways identified.

[1] Where applicable, the full species list included in this table is as per the latest updated information as indicated, so either the Conservation Objectives (CO) document for the site, or the latest Standard Data Form (SDF) (EEA, 2024). For SDF updates, CO are not yet available for the newly added species but are assumed, for the purposes of assessment, to follow the same format as for other feature species.

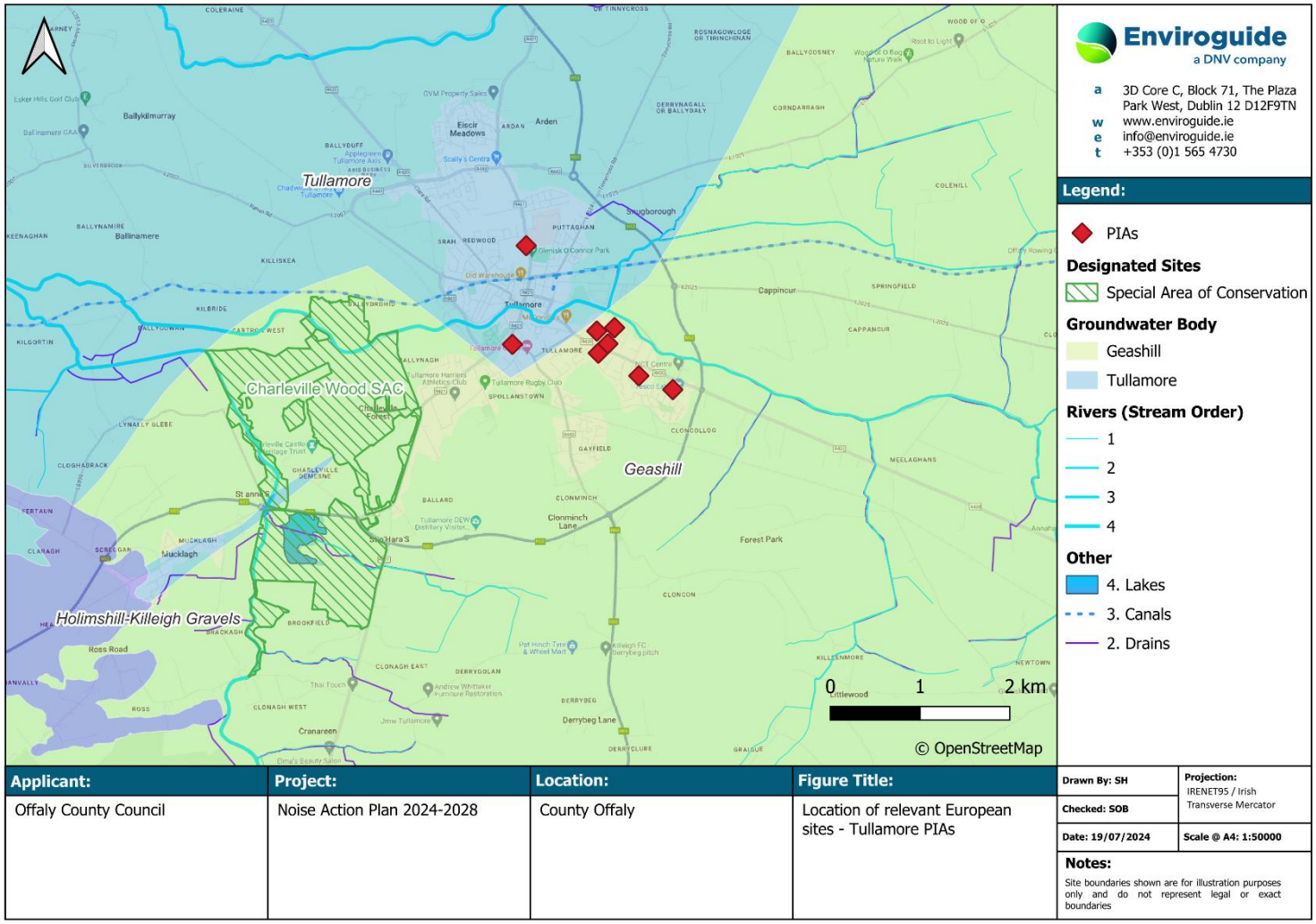

FIGURE 2. LOCATION OF EUROPEAN SITES RELATIVE TO THE IDENTIFIED PIAS IN TULLAMORE.

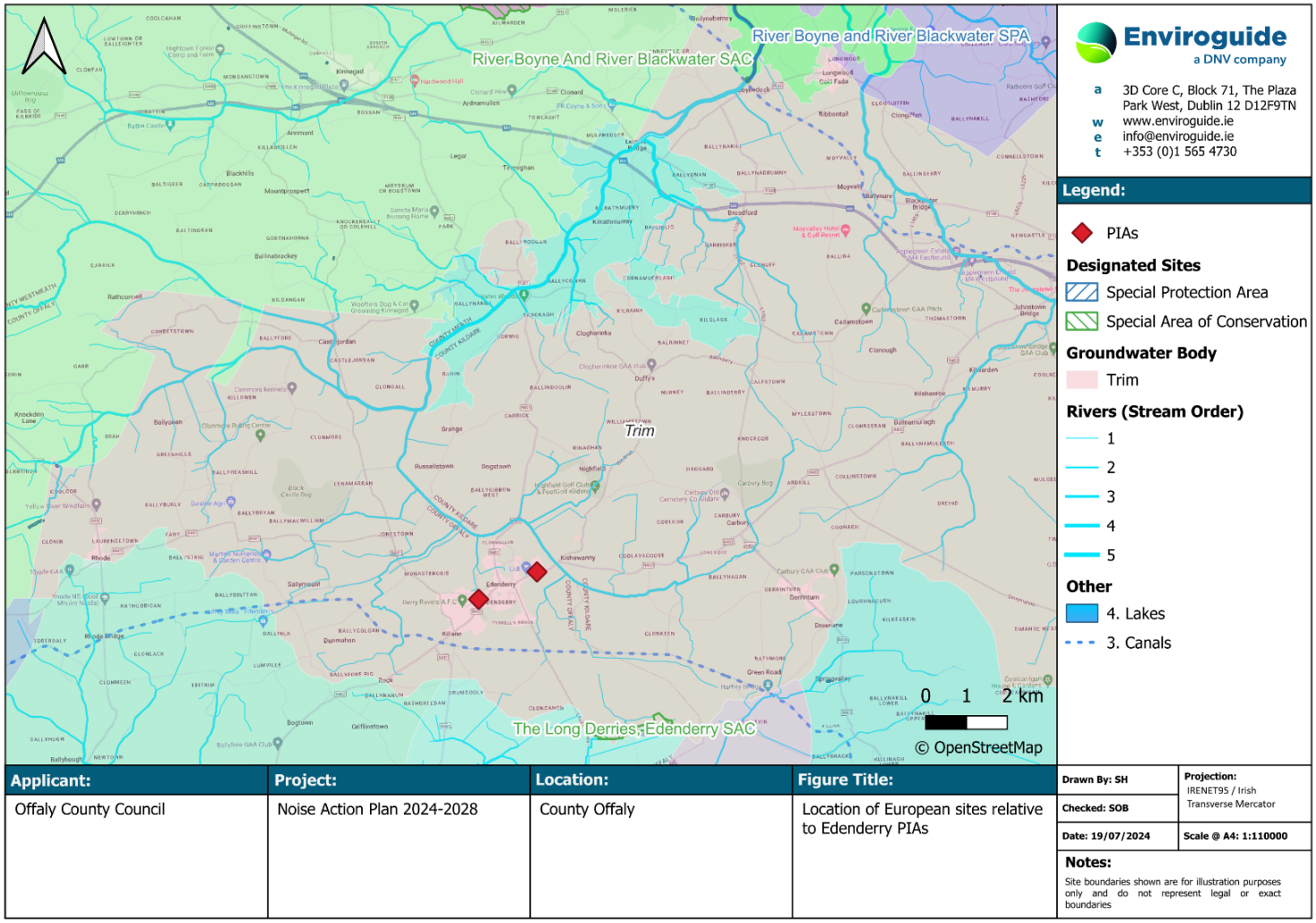

FIGURE 3. LOCATION OF EUROPEAN SITES RELATIVE TO THE IDENTIFIED PIAS IN EDENDERRY.

4.2.3.1 Charleville Wood SAC (000571)

The following descriptions of the Charleville Wood SAC are extracted from the Site Synopsis (NPWS 2021) for the site:

> "*Charleville Wood is a large woodland surrounded by estate parkland and agricultural grassland located about 3 km south-west of Tullamore in Co. Offaly. The site, which is underlain by deep glacial deposits, includes a small lake with a wooded island, and a stream runs along the western perimeter. The woodland is one of very few ancient woodlands remaining in Ireland, with some parts undisturbed for at least 200 years.*
>
> *Wet alluvial forest is found around the lake. It is dominated by Grey Willow (Salix cinerea) with Alder (Alnus glutinosa) and Ash. The ground flora is dominated by Common Reed (Phragmites australis) with Marsh-marigold (Caltha palustris), sedges (Carex spp.), Meadowsweet (Filipendula ulmaria), Yellow Iris (Iris pseudacorus), Gipsywort (Lycopus europaeus) and Water Mint (Mentha aquatica) present.*
>
> *Extensive swamps of Bulrush (Typha latifolia) and Bottle Sedge (Carex rostrata) have developed in the lake shallows. The wooded island at its centre is famed for its long history of non-disturbance. Hazel, Spindle (Euonymus europaeus) and Ivy (Hedera helix) reach remarkable sizes here.*
>
> *The lake is an important wildfowl habitat - it supports populations of Mute and Whooper Swan and a number of duck species, including Teal, Wigeon, Shoveler, Pochard and Tufted Duck.*
>
> *A number of unusual insects have been recorded in Charleville Wood, notably Mycetobia obscura (Order Diptera), a species known from only one other site in Ireland. The site is also notable for the presence of a large population of the rare snail species, Vertigo moulinsiana.*
>
> *Charleville Wood is one of the most important ancient woodland sites in Ireland. The woodland has a varied age structure and is relatively intact with areas of both closed and open canopy. The understorey and ground layers are also well-represented. Alluvial forest is a priority habitat listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, while the rare snail species, Vertigo moulinsiana, is listed on Annex II of this Directive. The wetland areas, with their associated bird populations, rare insect and Myxomycete species, contribute further to the conservation significance of the site."*

4.2.3.2 Qualifying Interests and Conservation Objectives

The QIs/SCIs and their respective conservation objectives for each of the relevant European site(s) are detailed in

Table 2 below.

TABLE 2. QUALIFYING INTERESTS (QIS) / SPECIAL CONSERVATION INTERESTS (SCIS) AND THEIR CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES FOR THE RELEVANT EUROPEAN SITES. THE CONSERVATION STATUS OF EACH QI / SCI WAS SOURCED FROM THE RELEVANT STANDARD DATA FORM(S) (SOURCE: EEA (2024)), AND THE LATEST NATIONAL STATUS IS TAKEN FROM THE LATEST ARTICLE 17 REPORT (NPWS, 2019A & 2019B) AND BOCCI[2] RESPECTIVELY.

QI / SCI (* = priority habitat)	Conservation Status	National Status	Conservation Objective
Charleville Wood SAC (000571)			
Alluvial forests with *Alnus glutinosa* and *Fraxinus excelsior* (*Alno-Padion, Alnion incanae, Salicion albae*)* [91E0]	C – Average or Reduced conservation	Bad	To restore the favourable conservation condition of this habitat in Charleville Wood SAC.
Desmoulin's Whorl Snail *Vertigo moulinsiana* [1016]	B - Good conservation	Inadequate	To maintain the favourable conservation condition of this species in Charleville Wood SAC.

[2] Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland (BOCCI) 2020-2026 (Gilbert, Stanbury & Lewis, 2021). The colours represent the species designation on the various BOCCI lists.

4.3 Assessment of Likely Significant Effects

The following sections discuss the potential for likely significant effects on the relevant European site(s), taking into consideration the QIs, SCIs and SSCOs (where available), and assesses whether the potential noise mitigation works have the capacity to adversely affect the integrity of the relevant European site. Furthermore, due consideration shall be given to species not formally identified but which may be present in the relevant European site and adversely effected by the potential works for noise mitigation for the identified PIAs, provided that those potential impacts are likely to affect the conservation objectives of the designated site. The potential for significant effects that may arise from the Proposed Development was considered through the use of key indicators as detailed in section 3.6.

4.3.1 Habitat Loss and Alteration

The identified PIAs are not within close proximity to any European sites and as such any potential works are not going to result in direct loss or alteration of habitats within same. However, deterioration of water quality could lead to indirect habitat loss and alteration within the Charleville Wood SAC. The potential for likely significant impacts on water quality is discussed in section 4.3.3.

Additionally, invasive species introductions may lead to habitat loss and alteration. Invasive species could be spread to nearby designated sites e.g., via works vehicles, if invasive species are being removed or planted as part of the noise mitigation works. However, the County Development Plan specifically addresses the prevention, control and eradication of invasive species (Policy BLP-34). Thus, it is considered that biosecurity measures are a general best practice measure when it comes to any noise mitigation measures the county council may carry out as part of the NAP, and therefore can be taken into account in this AA Screening. As such, it is considered that no potential for likely significant impacts via spread of invasive species exists.

4.3.2 Habitat / Species Fragmentation

The identified PIAs are not within close proximity to any European sites and as such any potential works are not going to result in direct fragmentation of habitats within same. However, deterioration of water quality could lead to changes in habitats and species within the Charleville Wood SAC. The potential for likely significant impacts on water quality is discussed in section 4.3.3.

4.3.3 Changes in Water Quality and Resource

The PIAs identified in the NAP range from residential areas to healthcare settings, and those connected via hydrological pathways to Charleville Wood SAC are all located within Tullamore town. The NAP Round 4 includes investigation of which mitigation measures will be implemented for each of the identified PIAs, thus the full extent of works is not known at this time.

None of the PIAs are located directly adjacent to the Tullamore River, and they are assumed to be linked to the river via surface water sewers that discharge to it. Additionally, it can be assumed that any works will follow best practice guidance in terms of surface water protection, which limits the potential for any pollutants from

future works entering the surface water network and thus the Tullamore River and downstream Charleville Wood SAC. Finally, any works will need to comply with the relative legislation in relation to Appropriate Assessment, where appropriate.

Considering the above and taking into account the expected scale of any works, it is considered that there is no likelihood of potential significant effects on the Charleville Wood SAC and its QIs as a result of changes in water quality and resource.

4.3.4 Disturbance and / or Displacement of Species

The identified PIAs are not within close proximity to any European sites designated for habitats or species sensitive to disturbance from anthropogenic factors (e.g., noise) and as such any potential works are not going to result in direct disturbance or displacement of species within same. However, deterioration of water quality could lead to species disturbance within the Charleville Wood SAC. The potential for likely significant impacts on water quality is discussed in section 4.3.3.

4.3.5 Changes in Population Density

The identified PIAs are not within close proximity to any European sites and as such any potential works are not going to result in direct changes in population density of any species within same. However, deterioration of water quality could indirectly affect population density of relevant species within the Charleville Wood SAC. The potential for likely significant impacts on water quality is discussed in section 4.3.3.

4.3.6 Potential for In-combination Effects

4.3.6.1 Existing Planning Permissions

A search of planning applications located within Tullamore town and Edenderry town was conducted using online planning resources such as the National Planning Application Database (NPAD) (MyPlan.ie) and Offaly County Council Planning Applications online map. Any planning applications listed as granted or decision pending from within the last five years were assessed for their potential to act in-combination with the potential works implemented as part of the NAP and cause likely significant effects on the relevant European sites. Long-term developments granted outside of this time period were also considered where applicable.

It is noted that the majority of the few developments within the vicinity of the identified PIAs are applications granted for alterations or extensions to dwellings. No notable developments within proximity to the Tullamore River within Tullamore town were identified that could have the potential to act in-combination with the potential works resulting from the implementation of the NAP.

4.3.6.2 Relevant Policies and Plans

The local policies and plans detailed in section 2.2 above were reviewed and considered for possible in-combination effects with the Proposed Development. Each of these plans has undergone AA, and where potential for likely significant effects has been identified (e.g., in the case of the Offaly County Development Plan), an NIS has been prepared which identifies appropriate mitigation. As such, it is considered that the plans and policies listed will not result in in-combination effects with the potential works as part of the implementation of the NAP. The Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027 has directly addressed the protection of European sites and biodiversity

through specific objectives. The above listed plans are not being relied upon to rule out potential significant effects on European sites.

TABLE 3. SUMMARY OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT ON EUROPEAN SITES AS A RESULT OF THE PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT.

Site	Habitat Loss / Alteration	Habitat or Species Fragmentation	Disturbance and/or Displacement of Species	Changes in Population Density	Changes in Water Quality and/or Resource	In-combination effects	Stage 2 AA Required
SAC							
Charleville Wood SAC	No	No	No	None	None	None	NO
River Boyne and River Blackwater SAC	No	No	No	None	None	None	NO
Long Derries, Edenderry SAC	No	No	No	None	None	None	NO
River Boyne and River Blackwater SPA	No	No	No	None	None	None	NO

5 APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT SCREENING CONCLUSION

The Offaly Noise Action Plan 2024-2028 (Round 4) at County Offaly has been assessed taking into account:

- The nature, size and location of the proposed works and possible impacts arising from the construction works.
- The QIs and conservation objectives of the European sites
- The potential for in-combination effects arising from other plans and projects.

In conclusion, upon the examination, analysis and evaluation of the relevant information and applying the precautionary principle, it is concluded by the authors of this report that the possibility **may be excluded** that the Proposed Development will have a significant effect on any of the European sites listed below:

- Charleville Wood SAC (000571)
- River Boyne and River Blackwater SAC (002299)
- Long Derries, Edenderry SAC (000925)
- River Boyne and River Blackwater SPA (004232)

In carrying out this AA screening, any targeted ecological mitigation measures and/or measures intended or included for the purposes of avoiding adverse effects arising as a result of the Proposed Development on any European site have not been taken into account.

On the basis of the screening exercise carried out above, it can be concluded, on the basis of the best scientific knowledge available and objective information, that the possibility of any significant effects on the above listed European sites, whether arising from the project itself or in combination with other plans and projects, can be excluded in light of the above listed European sites' conservation objectives. Thus, there is no requirement to proceed to Stage 2 of the Appropriate Assessment process; and the preparation of a NIS is not required.

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APPENDIX I – POLICY CONTEXT

Chapter 3: Climate Action & Energy

- CAEP-65: It is Council policy to promote development of appropriate scale and character whilst ensuring that the development does not have a negative visual impact on the countryside or cause pollution or degradation to wildlife habitats, natural waters or European designated sites.

Chapter 4: Biodiversity & Landscape

- BLP-01: It is Council policy to protect, conserve, and seek to enhance the county's biodiversity and ecological connectivity.
- BLP-02: It is Council policy to conserve and protect habitats and species listed in the Annexes of the EU Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) (as amended) and the Birds Directive (2009/147/EC), the Wildlife Acts 1976 (as amended) and the Flora Protection Orders.
- BLP-03: It is Council policy to support and co-operate with statutory authorities and others in support of measures taken to manage proposed or designated sites in order to achieve their conservation objectives.
- BLP-05: It is Council policy to ensure that development does not have a significant adverse impact, incapable of satisfactory avoidance or mitigation, on plant, animal or bird species protected by law.
- BLP-06: It is Council policy to consult with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and take account of any licensing requirements, when undertaking, approving or authorising development which is likely to affect plant, animal or bird species protected by law.
- BLP-19: It is Council policy to protect the landscape associated with the River Shannon, including the Callows and views of special interest, and also to encourage the development of Shannonbridge, Banagher and Shannon Harbour as focal points. It will also be Council policy to investigate the possibility of providing a Linear Park based on the River Shannon from Banagher to Meelick, which takes account of the sensitive ecological nature of the Callows area.
- BLP-34: It is Council policy to continue to deliver and support measures for the prevention, control and/or eradication of invasive species within the county, and to seek details of how these species will be managed and controlled where their presence is identified.
- BLO-02: It is an objective of the Council that no plans, programmes or projects giving rise to significant cumulative, direct, indirect or secondary impacts on European sites arising from their size or scale, land take, proximity, resource requirements, emissions (disposal to land, water or air), transportation requirements, duration of construction, operation, decommissioning or from any other effects shall be permitted on the basis of this Plan (either individually or in combination with other plans, programmes, etc. or projects6).
- BLO-03: It is an objective of the Council that all projects and plans arising from this Plan7 will be screened for the need to undertake Appropriate Assessment under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive. A plan or project will only be authorised

after the competent authority has ascertained, based on scientific evidence, Screening for Appropriate Assessment, and subsequent Appropriate Assessment where necessary, that:

1. The plan or project will not give rise to significant adverse direct, indirect or secondary effects on the integrity of any European site (either individually or in combination with other plans or projects); or

2. The plan or project will have significant adverse effects on the integrity of any European site (that does not host a priority natural habitat type/and or a priority species) but there are no alternative solutions, and the plan or project must nevertheless be carried out for imperative reasons of overriding public interest, including those of a social or economic nature. In this case, it will be a requirement to follow procedures set out in legislation and agree and undertake all compensatory measures necessary to ensure the protection of the overall coherence of Natura 2000; or

3. The plan or project will have a significant adverse effect on the integrity of any European site (that hosts a natural habitat type and/or a priority species) but there are no alternative solutions and the plan or project must nevertheless be carried out for imperative reasons for overriding public interest, restricted to reasons of human health or public safety, to beneficial consequences of primary importance for the environment or, further to an opinion from the Commission, to other imperative reasons of overriding public interest. In this case, it will be a requirement to follow procedures set out in legislation and agree and undertake all compensatory measures necessary to ensure the protection of the overall coherence of Natura 2000.

- BLO-05: It is an objective of the Council in accordance with Article 4(4) of the Birds Directive and Regulation 27(4) of the European Communities (Birds and Habitats) Regulations 2011-2015 to strive to avoid pollution or deterioration of bird habitats outside Special Protection Areas.
- BLO-06: It is an objective of the Council to take account of the objective and management practices proposed in any management or related plans for European Sites (SACs and SPAs) in and adjacent to the county published by the Department including the National Raised Bog Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) Management Plan 2017-2022 and any subsequent editions.
- BLO-17: It is an objective of the Council to encourage pursuant to Article 10 of the Habitats Directive, the management of features of the landscape, such as traditional field boundaries, important for the ecological coherence of the Natura 2000 network and essential for the migration, dispersal and genetic exchange of wild species.
- BLO-20: It is an objective of the Council to require, as part of the planning application process, the appropriate eradication/control of invasive species when identified on site or in the vicinity of a site, in accordance with Regulation 49 of the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 to 2015

Chapter 13: Development Management Standards

- DMS-22: Retention and enhancement where possible of existing wetland habitat, hedgerow, woodlands, meadows and habitats of species protected under European legislation and National Wildlife Acts.

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