

6 ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

6.1 Introduction

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The A6 between Randalstown and Toome is situated in County Antrim, swathing through an environment predominantly dominated and sculpted by past and recent agricultural activities. Situated almost in the centre of Northern Ireland, north of Lough Neagh, this area embodies the characteristics and attributes of agricultural production in this country where land is mainly farmed grassland, supporting cattle. This area encapsulates a vibrant farming community, which have had and continue to have a marked visual impact on the character of this landscape. The farming community is largely responsible for the maintenance of this landscape and its built environment, and has done for many generations but of late, farm diversification, increased competition and demographic shifts may potentially have far-reaching, implications for the overall landscape character of the area in future years. This is a result of reductions in agricultural incomes and farm subsidies, diminishing the financial viability of some farm units. Therefore some farmers subsidise their incomes by other part-time or full-time work or selling plots of land for potential development, thus may not have the time or man power to maintain this environment in its current state.

Generally, the area to the south, situated between the A6 and the northern shores of Lough Neagh, comprises a three to four kilometre wide belt of flat land rising from the Lough into a gentle sloping hinterland which has a diverse, irregular field pattern of land cover, including marshy areas, backed by extensive flat pasturelands with large open fields, broken hedges and straight drainage ditches. The hedgerows are generally hawthorn and vary in condition. Settlements are predominantly small and isolated with houses more common on farmland. North of the A6, the area merges seamlessly with the lower slopes of the Long Mountain Ridge (nearer Randalstown). Here the landscape is more undulating but again dominated by gentle hills and large fertile grass fields, bounded by hawthorn hedgerows. Trees are prevalent in the hedges and whilst woodland is sparse, there are isolated pockets of trees providing shelter. Small settlements such as Moneynick, and individual houses, are frequent and regularly distributed, often on raised features.

The human impacts in this area have produced a rich archaeological heritage due to the strategic position of this area and its proximity to Lough Neagh, the largest body of freshwater in the British Isles. With Toome being a natural crossing point of the Lower Bann River, this area is known to contain some of the earliest evidence of human life in Ireland. Recent archaeological works associated with the construction of the Toome bypass unearthed artefacts suggesting that the first farms began to appear here 200 years before previous estimates.

In short, this landscape is intensively used as an agricultural resource especially in regards to dairying, with isolated dwellings and farmsteads. It is a simple landscape making it fairly resilient to change but there is a risk that large structures and large-scale development would be particularly prominent in this

rural landscape setting. With attention to detail and appropriate mitigation, the construction of a dual carriageway could easily be absorbed into the landscape and only be visible in certain areas.

6.1.2 Local Context

Situated on the River Main, Randalstown is located at the end of the M22 where the North Western Key Transport Corridor connecting Belfast to Londonderry reduces to single carriageway. The origin of the town is uncertain but it is believed to have been the site of extensive iron works in the 17th Century. In 1666, Rose Ann O'Neill of Shane's Castle renamed the town after her husband Randall M^cDonnell. The town, formally a renowned centre for the production of linen since 1854, has suffered from the recent decline in the textile industry. Randalstown was designated a conservation area in 1996 as a typical 19th Century Ulster town. It still retains its original street layout and many of the original buildings and structures from the 18th and 19th centuries, including the railway viaduct built by Charles Lanyon in the 1850's.

The village of Toome is located some 8 kilometres west of Randalstown, where the A6 linking Belfast to Londonderry crosses over the Lower River Bann, at the northern end of Lough Neagh. This strategic position has made it an important place throughout history, with the area being rich in flora and fauna with Lough Beg to the North and Lough Neagh to the immediate South. It is a modern village with a range of business interests, one of the largest industries being the eel fishery, supplying the continental market. Eels have been fished at Toome ever since the first settlers arrived. Artefacts that have been discovered here have proven that Toome has been populated from before the Sixth Century A.D. A variety of shops, businesses and other enterprises operate both within the village and surrounding district.

The hamlet of Moneynick meaning '*thicket of the hill*', is situated along the North Western Key Transport Corridor, between Randalstown and Toome and consists of several residential properties and farmsteads, along with a primary school, an animal feed manufacturer and a furniture sales showroom.

6.1.3 Industry

Industry in the area is predominantly agricultural, mainly as farmed grassland supporting cattle, with McLarnon Animal Feeds at Moneynick being one of the most significant and prominent commercial operations. Nevertheless, a range of other business activities also operate in the surrounding hinterland, including Carson's furniture showroom, Moneynick Service Station and Restaurant, Drumderg Joinery Works, The Potting Shed (Market Garden), McKee's Agricultural Engineers & Farrier Services, McCauley Trailers, Alexander Tractors, and Ross Engineering.

6.1.4 Consultations

An integral element of the environmental assessment procedure includes consultation with statutory authorities and various other interested bodies. The following bodies have been consulted in the course of this approved options assessment:

- Antrim Borough Council
- Council for Nature Conservation & the Countryside (CNCC)
- Centre for Environmental Data and Recording (CEDAR)
- Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) – Countryside Management Branch
- Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) – Director of Policy
- Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) - Environmental Policy Division
- Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) – Grants and Subsidies (Payments) Division
- Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) – Quality Assurance Branch
- Department of Culture Arts & Leisure (DCAL) – Inland Fisheries
- Department of Culture Arts & Leisure (DCAL) – Central Management
- Department of the Environment (DoE) - Planning Service (Ballymena)
- Department of the Environment (DoE) - Planning Service (Ballymena, Tree Preservation Orders)
- Department of the Environment (DoE) - Planning Service (Minerals Unit)
- Environment & Heritage Service – Built Heritage (Historic Buildings)
- Environment & Heritage Service – Built Heritage (Historic Monuments)
- Environment & Heritage Service – Environmental Protection (Air & Environmental Quality)
- Environment & Heritage Service – Environmental Protection (Waste Management & Contaminated Land Unit)
- Environment & Heritage Service – Natural Heritage
- Environment & Heritage Service – Environmental Protection (Water Management Unit)
- Fisheries Conservancy Board
- Geological Survey of Northern Ireland (GSNI)
- Historic Buildings Council
- Historic Monuments Council
- Housing Executive
- The Honourable The Irish Society and Bann System Ltd
- Londonderry Chamber of Commerce
- Lough Neagh & Lower Bann Advisory Committee
- The National Trust
- Northern Ireland's Agricultural Producers Association
- Randalstown Angling Club
- Rivers Agency (Headquarters)
- Rivers Agency (Omagh)
- Rivers Agency (Coleraine)
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
- Sustrans Cycle Network Charity
- Ulster Angling Federation (UAF)
- Ulster Farmers Union (UFU)
- Ulster Wildlife Trust (UWT)
- The Woodland Trust.