

## 6 ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

### 6.1 Introduction

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The A6 between Toome and Castledawson is situated in County Londonderry, swathing through a landscape that has been moulded and changed over time by many factors. More recently, human activity has greatly altered the visual appearance of this wetland area, particularly through activities associated with the extraction and utilisation of its natural resources. Diatomite, and Sand & Gravel deposits have encouraged sustained development in this area over time, employing significant numbers of local people and contributing greatly to the local economy. Fishing is also a major local employer with significant international exports from the eel fishery. Due to the dominance of other industries, agricultural production in this area is not as significant, with farm holdings tending to be small to very small. Reductions in agricultural incomes, demographic shifts and farm diversification is lessening the impact that agricultural activities has on this environment but it still plays a part in shaping the character of this area, maintaining landscapes and habitats.

Situated almost in the centre of Northern Ireland, northwest of the shores of Lough Neagh and bounding the lower reaches of the Moyola River, it is a landscape representative of a mix of anthropogenic activities that is under significant development pressure. It is a relatively flat landscape which is important not only for its scenic quality but also for its wetland habitat, nature conservation and archaeological interests. The key characteristics of this landscape is that it has shallow drumlins surrounded by flat, open pastures consisting of a diverse landscape pattern, with individual farmsteads and mature trees. There are large open fields on floodplains often surrounded by straight drainage ditches. Some of the areas within the farmland are poorly drained with large wet woodlands and bog on more extensive low-lying land. Extensive ribbon development has occurred along straight roads and laneways, which often end at farms towards the fringes of Lough Neagh and Lough Beg. Mature hedgerow oak trees are prominent features in a well-connected network of field boundaries.

The area is vulnerable to development pressure, particularly nearer Toome, where this flat floodplain landscape consists of a more open terrain and therefore has less capacity to absorb development. This has resulted in out-of-character buildings being erected within the wetlands, damaging rural character and visual amenity.

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.

#### 6.1.2 Local Context

The village of Toome is located some 6 kilometres east of Castledawson, where the A6 linking Belfast to Londonderry crosses over the Lower River Bann at the northern end of Lough Neagh, and occupies low-lying land. It is the crossroads between the main A6 from Belfast to the northwest and the Lower Bann. 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 area continues to experience development, with the creation of Toome Business Park and Creagh Business Park, west of the River Bann.

The village of Castledawson is located adjacent to the main A6 from Belfast to Londonderry, approximately 4 kilometres northeast of Magherafelt. It is set in a landscape of low rolling hills and flat meadowlands, on the banks of the Moyola River. The river and the mature woodland and parkland of the Moyola Park estate contribute much to the character and setting of the village. Castledawson, or Dawson's Bridge, appears to have assumed its present form and name in the year 1710 and originally consisted of two principal and some smaller streets. It further developed along Main Street, then expanded to the south, away from the river and estate lands. Modern development has resulted in the village expanding further southwards, where it now bounds the Castledawson bypass, which became operational in 1992. Castledawson is a service centre with a wide range of facilities including several places of worship, community halls, variety of shops, garage and a golf course. The village's industrial base includes a furniture factory, timber yard and engineering works.

#### 6.1.3 Industry

The broader area has suffered from the decline in traditional industries, such as textiles and clothing but *Invest Northern Ireland* hopes with the acquisition of approximately 20 hectares of land in the Creagh area, that the new industrial estate will attract high-tech manufacturing and knowledge-led industries. The Business Park was located strategically close to the North Western Key Transport Corridor (NWKTC), and the park is considered invaluable to local economic prosperity. There are already approximately 67 hectares of industrial land around the Creagh, hosting a number of other industrial activities including: Creagh Concrete Products, Scott Roofing and Tiles, Scott Sand and Gravel Extraction and Macretes precast concrete. Of significant local and international importance is the Toome Eel Fishery. Lough Neagh is Europe's major commercial wild eel fishery, producing 700 tons of wild eels each year: 550 tons of Brown Eels caught by local fishermen and 150 tons of mature Silver Eels caught at the eel weirs on the Lower Bann at Toomebridge and Kilrea. A range of other business activities also operate in the surrounding hinterland, including SDC Trailers, the Elk Inn, Nugent Engineering, the Old Thatch Inn, Readymix, Acheson & Glover, and McCann's Sand for example.

#### 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:

- 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
- The Honourable The Irish Society and Bann System Ltd
- Housing Executive
- Lady Moyola
- Londonderry Chamber of Commerce
- Lough Neagh & Lower Bann Advisory Committee
- Magherafelt District Council
- Moyola Angling Association
- The National Trust
- Northern Ireland's Agricultural Producers Association
- Rivers Agency (Headquarters)
- Rivers Agency (Omagh)
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
- Sustrans Cycle Network Charity
- Ulster Angling Federation (UAF)
- Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU)
- Ulster Wildlife Trust (UWT)
- Wetlands & Wildfowl Trust (WWT)
- The Woodland Trust.