

Screening for Appropriate Assessment: DRUMSHANBO to BATTLEBRIDGE BLUEWAY

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1 Introduction

BEC Consultants Ltd was contracted by Waterways Ireland to carry out ecological work in relation to a proposed walkway development along the Lough Allen Canal and Acres Lake, Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim. The ecological work included habitat mapping and a flora and fauna survey, as well as the preparation of an Appropriate Assessment as required by the Habitats Directive (92/42/EEC).

This Appropriate Assessment was prepared in line with the following guidance:

- DEHLG (2009) Appropriate Assessment of Plans and Projects in Ireland Guidance for Planning Authorities. Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Dublin, Ireland.
- EC (2002) 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. European Commission.

As stated in the above guidance, Appropriate Assessment is a staged process. A conclusion is made at the end of each stage of the assessment as to whether the project should proceed to the next stage.

- Stage 1: Screening - This stage determines whether Appropriate Assessment is necessary. The proposed project is defined and an assessment is made of the potential for significant effects upon the Natura 2000 network, either alone or in combination with other projects. Plans or projects directly connected with, or necessary to the nature conservation management of the site do not require an Appropriate Assessment.
- Stage 2: Appropriate Assessment - If there is potential for a significant effect on the Natura 2000 network an Appropriate Assessment is required. During this stage the impact of the project on the Conservation Objectives of the Natura 2000 sites is assessed and measures are proposed to avoid or reduce these impacts such that they do not result in a significant impact. The outcome of the assessment establishes whether the plan or project will have a significant adverse effect on the integrity of the Natura 2000 site, its Qualifying Interests and associated Conservation Objectives. Factors such as the magnitude, extent, duration and reversibility of the effect are considered in this assessment.
- Stage 3: Alternative Solutions - Before a project that has adverse effects on a Natura 2000 site can proceed for imperative reasons of overriding public interest it must be objectively concluded that no less-damaging alternative solutions exist.

- Stage 4: Imperative Reasons for Overriding Public Interest ("IROPI") - Where no alternative options exist and adverse impacts remain but imperative reasons of overriding public interest for the project exist compensatory measures must be implemented to ensure the overall coherence of the Natura 2000 site.

This report covers Stage 1 of the Appropriate Assessment process: Screening.

Note: The convention of left and right bank assigned while facing downstream will be used throughout this report.

2 Project background

2.1 Project description

Waterways Ireland proposes:

1. To construct a new multi-use boardwalk enhancement at Acres Lake, Drumshanbo, Co Leitrim.
2. To improve the east bank (left) of the canal from Drumleague Lock to Acres Lake using stone surfacing.
3. To continue Waterways Ireland's back drain maintenance programme.

The project will also see the existing crushed stone paths from Battle Bridge to Drumleague Lock and from Drumshanbo Lock to Acres Lake connected in as part of the Blueway, with a change-of-use application.

Once operational, maintenance of the new towpath walkway will differ from the existing maintenance regime by the inclusion of regular surface agitation and rolling of stoned surface, and bi-annual spraying of herbicide.

The project is not directly connected with, or necessary to, the management of a Natura 2000 site and, as such, is not excluded from the Appropriate Assessment process on that basis.

2.2 Study area

The proposed works are to be carried out on the left bank of the Lough Allen Canal from Drumleague Lock to Acres Lake, and the south side of Acres Lake, extending to the existing path from Drumshanbo Lock to Acres Lake (via Acres Cove Marina). The survey encompassed the canal and Acres Lake from Drumshanbo Lock down to Battle Bridge.

2.3 Local site characteristics

The area of the proposed works is the towpath of an operational canal providing a navigable channel from Lough Allen at Drumshanbo to the River Shannon at Battle Bridge. The right bank towpath between Battle Bridge and Drumleague Lock is comprised of a crushed stone maintenance track (Spoil and bare ground - ED2), while the left towpath has been developed as a local public road. Between Drumleague Lock and Drumhauver Bridge, the towpath of the left side of the canal comprises a mown grass path for its entire extent. The right towpath on this section comprises a mown grass path for most of the section, with approximately 600 m of local road running along the canal bank on the approach to Drumhauver Bridge.

The left bank of the canal from Drumhauver Bridge to Acres Lake consists partially of a crushed stone path, extending approximately 250 m, before turning into Wet grassland (GS4).

The landward side of the towpath generally supports Treelines (WL2) and areas of woodland, while the canal bank supports Treelines (WL2) or Wet grassland (GS4).

A total of 22 habitats classified under Fossitt (2000) were recorded in the study area. This included the Annex I habitats [6430] Hydrophilous tall herb fringe communities of plains and of the montane to alpine level and [91E0] Alluvial forests with *Alnus glutinosa* and *Fraxinus excelsior* (Alno-Padion, Alnion incanae, Salicion albae) (NPWS, 2013, O'Neill and Barron, 2013). The Hydrophilous tall herb community was found along the shore of Acres Lake, while the alluvial woodland was found in a number of locations along the canal, but not on the towpath itself.

Two species listed under Annex II of the Habitats Directive were recorded in the course of the survey. Otter (*Lutra lutra*) spraint was recorded on the left bank of the Lough Allen Canal just upstream of Acres Lake, adjacent to Acres Cove Marina. A kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) was recorded flying upstream at Drumshanbo Lock towards Lough Allen.

3 Natura 2000 sites

3.1 Identification of Natura 2000 sites

DEHLG (2009) recommends the use of a 15 km radius around a plan area to identify Natura 2000 sites that should be considered when screening for Appropriate Assessment. For projects, the distance can be much less than 15 km, but this must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis with reference to the nature, size and location of the project, the sensitivities of the ecological receptors and the potential for in-combination effects. The locations of Natura 2000 sites within 15 km of the development site were viewed using ArcGIS (Figure 1). Table 1 lists the Natura 2000 sites within 15 km of the project and also whether each of these sites was considered further in this report and the reason this decision was made.

Table 1. List of Natura 2000 sites within 15 km of the proposed development

Site name	Code	Distance (km)	Considered further?	Reason
Cuilcagh - Anierin Uplands SAC	000584	6	No	Too distant and no potential for a significant adverse effect due to mainly terrestrial habitats and lack of pathway
Lough Arrow SAC	001673	14	No	Too distant, with no hydrological connection and no potential for a significant adverse effect
Lough Arrow SPA	004050	14	No	Too distant, with no hydrological connection and no potential for a significant adverse effect

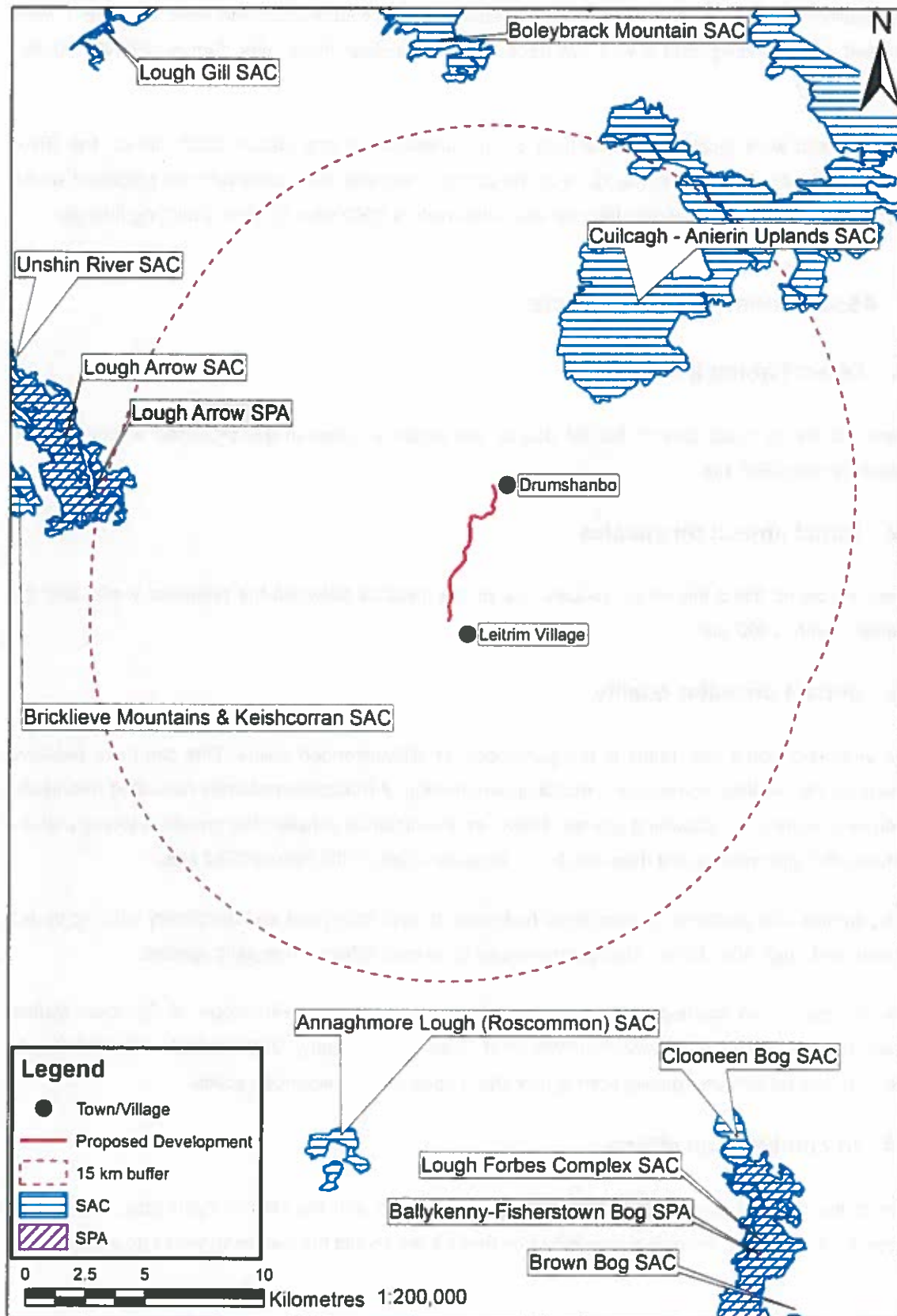


Figure 1. Map showing location of Natura 2000 sites around the development site, with 15 km buffer.

The Qualifying Interests and Conservation Objectives of the Natura 2000 site listed in Table 1 were reviewed in concluding that it was not necessary to consider these sites further (NPWS, 2015a; 2015b; 2015c).

The proposed work location is more than 30 km upstream of any Natura 2000 site on the River Shannon system. At this distance, none of the possible impacts associated with the proposed works could have a significant adverse effect on any of the Natura 2000 sites or their Qualifying Interests.

4 Assessment of likely effects

4.1 Direct habitat loss

There will be no direct loss of habitat due to the distance between the proposed works and the nearest Natura 2000 site.

4.2 Direct impact on species

There will be no direct impact on species due to the distance between the proposed works and the nearest Natura 2000 site.

4.3 Impact on water quality

The proposed works may result in the generation of silt/suspended solids. This can have negative effects on the habitats downstream, including smothering of macroinvertebrates (including freshwater pearl mussel) and fish spawning gravels. However, the distance between the proposed works and the Natura 2000 sites means that there will be no adverse effect on the Natura 2000 sites.

The potential also exists for an accidental hydrocarbon spill from plant and machinery working in and around the Lough Allen Canal. Hydrocarbons can have toxic effects on aquatic species.

The proposed work methods will follow the *Requirements for the Protection of Fisheries Habitat during Construction and Development Works at River Sites* (Murphy, 2004), which will minimise the risk of an impact on water quality from hydrocarbon spills or silt/suspended solids.

4.4 In-combination effects

Due to the distance between the proposed works location and the Natura 2000 sites, there is no scope for a significant in-combination effect on these sites should the proposed works go ahead.

5 Stage 1 screening conclusion

Based on the above assessment it is concluded that there will be no significant adverse effect on any Natura 2000 site as a result of the proposed works. Therefore the proposed works can be consented to proceed.

6 References

- DEHLG (2009) Appropriate Assessment of Plans and Projects in Ireland: Guidance for Planning Authorities. Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Dublin, Ireland. (Revised 2010).
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- O'Neill, F.H. and Barron, S.J. (2013) Results of monitoring survey of old sessile oak woods and alluvial forests. Irish Wildlife Manuals, No. 71. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Dublin, Ireland.



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