

26th March 2024

OPR Ref: IP-003-24

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Meath County Council,
Buvinda House, Dublin Road,
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Re: Issues Paper for the Drogheda Joint Local Area Plan

A chara,

Thank you for both your authorities' work in preparing the Issues Paper (the Issues Paper) for the proposed Drogheda Joint Local Area Plan (the JLAP).

The Office of the Planning Regulator (the Office) welcomes the publishing of an Issues Paper for the JLAP by Louth County Council and Meath County Council, and commends the planning authorities for engaging proactively with the public and for notifying the Office of their intention to prepare the draft JLAP.

In accordance with the provisions of section 31AO of the *Planning and Development Act* 2000, as amended (the Act), the Office is obliged to evaluate and assess local area plans to ensure alignment with national and regional planning policy and the objectives of your county development plans.

The Office has set out some broad issues relevant to the preparation of local area plans, in addition to some specific issues of particular relevance to the preparation of the JLAP, under the following headings:

- 1. Strategic policy framework
- 2. Development plan and core strategy



- 3. Zoning, compact growth and infrastructural services
- 4. Regeneration
- 5. Education, social and community amenities
- 6. Economic development, employment and retail
- 7. Transport and mobility
- 8. Flood risk management
- 9. Climate action
- 10. Environment, built and natural heritage
- 11. Implementation and monitoring

The comments are offered without prejudice to any observations and recommendations by the Office at future stages of the plan-making process. They also do not affect the obligation on your planning authorities to comply with the relevant legislative requirements, or to be consistent with the fullness of the detailed policy context of the higher order plans and strategies and Ministerial guidelines.

1. Strategic policy framework

Section 20(5) of the Act requires the JLAP to be consistent with the objectives of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES), *National Planning Framework* (NPF), the specific planning policy requirements (SPPRs) of section 28 guidelines and the relevant development plan.

Of particular relevance is RPO 4.11 that supports the preparation of the JLAP to develop Drogheda as an attractive, vibrant and highly accessible Regional Centre and Economic Driver. Your authorities will also be aware of RPOs 4.12 - 4.18 which set out particular guidance for the development of Drogheda. Each of these RPOs will be discussed in detail in the relevant sections below.

The Office encourages the planning authorities to liaise with the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly in preparation of the draft JLAP, particularly where clarity is required on how the objectives and guiding principles set out in the RSES relate to the JLAP.



2. Development plan and core strategy

Section 19(2)(b) of the Act requires the JLAP to be consistent with the objectives of the relevant development plans and their core strategies. This is also a key message of the section 28 *Local Area Plans, Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (2013) (LAP Guidelines).

In this regard, the Office notes that the core strategy of the Meath County Development Plan 2021 - 2027 (the Meath Development Plan) provides for a population increase of 3,300 persons with a requirement for 1,631 housing units and 57.09 hectares of residential land over the plan period; and the core strategy of the Louth County Development Plan 2021-2027 (the Louth Development Plan) provides for an increase of 6,914 persons with a requirement for 3,043 housing units and 270 hectares of residential land over the development plan period.

A key part of the Office's assessment of the draft JLAP is to consider whether the objectives and zoning provisions of the draft JLAP are consistent with the level of growth set out in the core strategy for the settlement for Drogheda. In this regard the draft JLAP should ensure land use zoning is consistent with the relevant core strategy.

3. Zoning, compact growth and infrastructural services

Where proposed, our assessment will carefully consider whether zoning objectives are consistent with the core strategy and objectives of the development plans and whether they can demonstrate consistency with the objectives for compact growth and densification¹ under the NPF (NPO 3 and NPO 35) and the RSES (RPO 3.2). The implementation of effective compact growth to avoid urban sprawl also plays a key role in climate change mitigation.

Zoning objectives should also be consistent with any strategic development sites for the delivery of residential, employment or other uses identified in the RSES. The JLAP area has been zoned under both the Louth Development Plan and the Meath Development Plan. The Office notes, however that the Louth Development Plan Policy Objective CS 8 seeks to review the lands zoned A2 New Residential as part of the preparation of the JLAP. As per the requirements of section 19(2)(b) of the Act, the planning authorities need

¹ Including through reductions in vacancy, re-use of existing buildings, infill development, area or site-based regeneration and increase building heights.



to ensure that any zoning objectives proposed in the JLAP are consistent with the objectives of the relevant development plans and their core strategy.

Where proposed, land use zoning should follow a sequential approach so that the development of lands closest to the town centre are prioritised over lands on the outskirts of the town, as set out under section 6.2.3 and the associated policy and objective of the *Development Plans, Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (2022) (the Development Plans Guidelines).

In relation to residential development, any provisions or standards for density or building height in the JLAP is required to have regard to relevant section 28 guidelines and to comply with any SPPRs therein, including, in particular:

- Sustainable Residential Development and Compact Settlements, Guidelines for Planning Authorities (2024);
- Urban Development and Building Heights, Guidelines for Planning Authorities (2018); and
- Sustainable Urban Housing: Design Standards for New Apartments, Guidelines for Planning Authorities (2023).

The Office notes from the Issues Paper that sites within Drogheda have been put forward for consideration under the *Opportunities for Transport Orientated Development (TOD) in Major Urban Centres* (2023) initiative. The Office welcomes the integration of land use and transport planning in this regard.

It is an objective (CS 9) of the Louth Development Plan to review the Infrastructure Assessment and Land Use Evaluation (IALUE) as part of the JLAP preparation. In this regard, the Office notes that the IALUE prepared for the Louth Development Plan identified a limited number of sites which could not be serviced during the period of the plan. Further, no detailed infrastructure assessment informed the zoning of land in the Meath Development Plan.

Having regard to NPO 72 a-c of the NPF and the policy and objective concerning requirement for a Settlement Capacity Audit under section 4.5.2 of the Development Plans Guidelines, it is necessary that any proposed zoning objectives in the future JLAP should be informed by infrastructure assessment and that lands that cannot be serviced during



the plan period are not zoned consistent with the tiered approach to zoning. Where land has already been zoned under the respective county development plan, an infrastructure assessment report that considers a reasonable estimation of timing and cost of infrastructure delivery, consistent with NPO 72 a-c, would assist the planning authorities in determining the delivery of development lands as part of an active land management approach, including the phased development of land. In this regard, the tiered approach to zoning applies to all land use zoning objectives.

Uisce Éireann, in its submission, has identified headroom availability for wastewater services to support the development plans' targets. In relation to water supply, capacity is available, however some service improvements may be required in some areas. The planning authorities are therefore advised to liaise closely with Uisce Éireann concerning the delivery of essential services and infrastructure.

4. Regeneration

Both the NPF (NPO 4 urban places; NPO 6 urban regeneration; NPO 18a proportionate growth; NPO 18b new homes and NPO 35 increasing residential use) and the policy objectives of the RSES (RPO 9.8), emphasise the importance of opportunities for urban and village regeneration to create attractive, liveable, and high quality urban places. The reuse of brownfield sites and vacant buildings will also contribute to climate change mitigation. Specifically, RPO 4.16 supports the revitalisation of Drogheda through regeneration planning, investment and community development.

The Meath Development Plan identifies B1 Commercial/Town or Village Centre and C1 Mixed Use zones as regeneration lands. Objective SH OBJ 21 of the Meath Development Plan also promotes the development of vacant sites for regeneration. As referred to in the Issues Paper, the Louth Development Plan identifies 3 areas for regeneration in Drogheda - the Docklands area, Westgate area and the Former Quarry – supported by specific Policy Objectives SS 6 and SS7. The JLAP should recognise and support the development of these regeneration areas through appropriate policies and objectives.

The Development Plans Guidelines advise that larger settlements normally have certain development sites that play a critical role in achieving the core strategy and NPF policy objectives for consolidation and compact growth. These sites should be specifically identified as Settlement Consolidation Sites and integrated into the wider regeneration



strategy for the settlement. The JLAP should also identify and support the development of Opportunity Sites to support regeneration of the settlement.

Where such sites are identified, the planning authorities should prepare a development framework for future development with appropriate guidance regarding layout, massing, permeability, green infrastructure and *Sustainable urban Drainage Systems* (SuDS) etc., as set out in section 5.7 of the LAP Guidelines.

As noted in the Issues Paper, funding for the Westgate Vision has been received under the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund to tackle high vacancy rates in the town centre. The Office recommends that the JLAP includes a strong policy framework to support the delivery of this project, with supportive policies and objectives to encourage utilisation of existing buildings, brownfield/infill sites, and derelict and underutilised sites.

The planning authorities should consider proactive land activation measures including the planning authorities' powers for land acquisition/compulsory purchase and derelict sites and vacant land. The JLAP should also align with sources of funding to facilitate key regeneration projects such as the recently announced *Croi Cónaithe (Towns) Fund Scheme*, and Town Centre First-aligned funding streams under the Government's *Town Centre First: A Policy Approach for Irish Towns* (2022).

5. Education, social and community amenities

Access to quality childcare, education and health services is a National Strategic Outcome of the NPF. The JLAP should therefore seek to align population growth with investment in childcare and education facilities on well-located sites within or close to the existing built-up areas, to meet the diverse needs of local populations as set out under the Louth Development Plan Policy Objective SS 11 and the Meath Development Plan Objective SOC OBJ 12.

As such, the JLAP should be informed by a social or civic infrastructure audit to establish the capacity of existing facilities, including community centres, leisure, amenity and cultural facilities to serve existing and future residents, and identify the need for any additional facilities.

It is also important that access to existing and proposed facilities by walking or cycling is prioritised, consistent with the sustainable approach to settlement and mobility discussed below.



Specifically, in relation to schools, the planning authorities should consult with the Forward Planning Section and Site Acquisition and Property Management Section of the Department of Education.

The Meath Local Economic and Community Plan 2023-2029 and the County Louth Local Economic and Community Plan 2016-2022, together with the Meath Traveller Accommodation Programme 2019-2024 and the Louth Traveller Accommodation Programme 2019-2024 should also inform the JLAP to provide for the co-ordinated spatial planning of housing and community services for the area.

6. Economic development, employment and retail

The NPF, RSES and section 28 guidelines emphasise the need to take an evidence-based approach to the inclusion of objectives for employment and other commercial uses.

The Issues Paper recognises that Drogheda is strategically located on the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor to accommodate future economic growth. In this regard, the JLAP should be aligned with the detailed economic strategy and all relevant guiding principles of the RSES, specifically RPO 4.14 and RPO 4.18, in addition to any objectives concerning strategic enterprise/employment development along the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor including RPO 6.3.

The Meath Development Plan identifies the IDA Business Park as a strategic employment land-bank for Drogheda, which is supported by Objective STH DRO OBJ 2. The Louth Development Plan also identifies large areas of employment lands to the east and west of the town which are supported by Strategic Settlement Strategy Policy Objectives SS1 and SS2. While these lands are already zoned, the servicing of these sites by sustainable and active modes will be a critical consideration for the JLAP. In addition, the JLAP should ensure that essential infrastructure will be put in place to facilitate development of such lands during the plan period.

The Issues Paper refers to an additional 'strategic landbank' recently acquired by the IDA to the north of the town centre, stating that the two planning authorities shall continue to promote, support and develop all lands for economic and employment related development. Having regard to section 6.2.5 of the Development Plans Guidelines, it is important that the zoning of additional lands for enterprise and employment uses in the JLAP is supported by an appropriate evidence-based analysis, including taking account of



all lands zoned for such uses under the existing development plans. Further, in accordance with section 19(2)(b) of the Act, the planning authorities should also ensure that any objectives proposed in the JLAP for these lands are consistent with the objectives in the relevant development plans.

As noted above, the tiered approach to zoning applies to all land use zoning objectives and the Office advises that the preparation of a detailed infrastructure assessment of land use zoning objectives relating to employment and enterprise will greatly assist the planning authorities in planning for and delivering enterprise and employment development for Drogheda during the plan period.

In terms of identifying the optimal locations for employment zonings, the key criteria should be: compact growth; the sequential approach to development; prioritising the reuse of appropriately located brownfield lands/vacant premises; and the options for sustainable and active transport having regard to the obligation to mitigate climate change. As employment sites are major generators and attractors of traffic, such sites in particular, will need to be considered in detail where a Local Transport Plan (LTP) is prepared to inform the JLAP to inform an integrated approach to land use and transport planning.

The Issues Paper notes there has been significant displacement of retail from the town centre to edge of centre retail parks. The JLAP should explore how best to support and encourage retail and associated uses within the town centre to serve a growing population, and ensure that the town centre is not undermined by retail uses on the periphery. Particular regard should be given to the sequential approach to the location of retail development and other provisions of the *Retail Planning Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (2012), and the position of the town in the retail hierarchy of the relevant development plans.

7. Transport and mobility

The Climate Action Plan 2024 (Climate Action Plan) identifies the need to significantly reduce car kilometres and increase sustainable journeys, guided by the National Sustainable Mobility Policy (2022) (NSMP) and the proposed National Demand Management Strategy, in order to meet the targets for greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, as amended (the Climate Act).



The integration of land use and transportation is centrally important to this objective and to the objectives and provisions of the NPF (NPO 27 alternatives to the car; NPO 33 location of new homes and NPO 64 air quality, among others) and the RSES.

The RSES identifies the requirement for an LTP for the settlement under RPO 8.6. The Louth Development Plan Policy Objective CS 7 and CS 13 and the Meath Development Plan Objective MOV OBJ 1 and STH DRO OBJ 3 also commit to the preparation of an LTP to inform the JLAP. The acknowledgement of the preparation of an LTP in the Issues Paper is noted and welcomed.

The National Transport Authority's (NTA) *Area Based Transport Assessment Advice Note* (2018) (ABTA) and *ABTA How to Guide, Guidance Document Pilot Methodology* (2021) as well as Transport Infrastructure Ireland's (TII) *Area Based Transport Assessment (ABTA) Guidance Notes* (2018) should be considered by the planning authorities in preparing the LTP. The LTP should inform the preparation of the JLAP and, in particular, the zoning provisions. Close consultation with the NTA and TII in the preparation of the LTP is strongly advised in order to achieve the best outcomes and to avail of funding for LTP preparation.

The Louth Development Plan Policy Objective SS17 seeks to implement an integrated pedestrian and cycle network throughout Drogheda. In this regard, the JLAP should set out an ambitious (but realistic) modal shift target for the JLAP area, based on the LTP. In order to increase the potential for trips to be made on foot, bicycle or public transport, the JLAP should demonstrate consistency with the Avoid-Shift-Improve principle and the 10-minute town concept, as well as providing for the proactive implementation of the *Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets* (revised 2019) and the NTA's *Permeability Best Practice Guide*.

The Issues Paper states that sites within Drogheda have been put forward for consideration under the TOD initiative. This approach has the potential to provide for a greater level of integration of land use and transport planning and would be a welcome initiative in the JLAP. The planning authorities should consider the potential for the TOD approach to be applied generally across the JLAP area.

RPO 8.8 supports the delivery of rail projects including the DART+ Programme, which is reinforced by the Meath Development Plan Objective MOV OBJ 7 and Louth Development



Plan Policy Objective SS 13. This project is also supported by Measure RAIL1 - DART+ of the NTA's *Greater Dublin Area Transport Strategy 2022-2042*. The JLAP should therefore ensure integration of these strategic rail projects with the LTP to inform the overall sustainable transport strategy for the area.

The Issues Paper supports the progression of Port Access Northern Cross Route, the first phase of which has recently opened. While the Office notes that this route is supported by RPO 4.12 and Louth Development Plan Policy Objective SS 12, the planning authorities should ensure that the proposed progressing of this route is consistent with the Climate Action Plan and the Department of Transport's current policy approach, as set out under the *National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland* (2021), in addition to the NSMP.

8. Flood risk management

Having regard to the location of Drogheda along the River Boyne, flood risk management will be the most critical climate change adaptation measure to be addressed in the JLAP, informed by a Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA).

The JLAP should be consistent with NPO 57 by avoiding inappropriate development in areas at risk of flooding, in accordance with the detailed requirements and provisions of section 28 *The Planning System and Flood Risk Management Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (2009) (Flood Guidelines). These guidelines require a staged approach to flood risk assessment and, in particular, the application of the sequential approach and the requirement to carry out the plan-making justification test where appropriate. The Office welcomes the advancement of the Drogheda and Baltray Flood Relief Scheme as noted in the Issues Paper. The JLAP should ensure the development of this scheme is supported consistent with RPO 4.17.

Flood risk zones should also be clearly overlaid on any proposed land use zoning maps to illustrate the potential flood risk arising and to demonstrate how the sequential approach has been applied. A copy of digital mapping data should be made available to the Office and to the Office of Public Works (OPW) to facilitate assessment.

Engagement with the OPW is strongly advised in the early stages of preparing the SFRA to avoid issues arising at draft JLAP stage. In particular, it should be noted that the



Preliminary Flood Risk Area maps are preliminary assessments and should not be relied upon to inform zoning decisions.

In accordance with NPO 57, the JLAP is required to integrate sustainable water management solutions, such as SuDS. In this regard, the Office draws the planning authorities' attention to *Nature-based Solutions to the Management of Rainwater and Surface Water Runoff in Urban Areas, Water Sensitive Urban Design, Best Practice Interim Guidance Document* (2022). The planning authorities are advised to consult with the Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO) in devising its policy approach in the JLAP to surface water runoff and rainwater management.

9. Climate action

It is a National Strategic Outcome of the NPF to transition to a low carbon climate resilient society. The effective implementation of climate mitigation objectives through the JLAP are critical to the achievement of the Government's GHG emissions reduction target to mitigate climate change under the Climate Act.

The efficient use of land, including through infill development and brownfield development consistent with compact growth, will ensure consistency with NPO 53 (land use). An integrated approach to land use and transport planning will help ensure that climate action is integral to the JLAP in support of national mitigation targets (NPO 54) under the Climate Act. The JLAP should also consider how development in the area might best contribute to the delivery of renewable energy consistent with NPO 55. These NPOs, together with the relevant objectives of the RSES and development plans, will be of particular importance in this respect.

The effective implementation of climate adaption objectives through the JLAP will be essential to ensure Drogheda is climate resilient into the future. The Office welcomes the commitment to engage with the Climate Action Regional Office to assist in the preparation of the draft JLAP as noted in the Issues Paper.

The Office also acknowledges reference to adaptation measures in the Issues Paper including flood risk management, enhancement of green infrastructure and biodiversity and promoting energy conservation and renewable methods. The National Adaptation



Framework (2018)² (NAF) specifies the national strategy for the application of adaptation measures in different sectors and by local authorities in their administrative areas in order to reduce the vulnerability of the State to the negative effects of climate change and to avail of any positive effects that may occur.

10. Environment, built and natural heritage

Planning authorities are the competent authoritiesy for Strategic Environmental Assessment and Appropriate Assessment, and will be aware of the *Strategic Environmental Assessment Guidelines for Regional Assemblies and Planning Authorities* (2022) issued under section 28 of the Act and the *Appropriate Assessment of Plans and Projects in Ireland, Guidance for Planning Authorities* (2010).

The JLAP should be consistent with objectives of the NPF and RSES concerning environmental protection.

Planning for green and blue infrastructure can contribute to climate change adaptation, in particular flood risk management through nature-based solutions (NPO 57 and NPO 63). It can also make a positive contribution to climate mitigation and have positive impacts on biodiversity and clean air (NPO 64). Louth Development Plan Policy Objective SS18 supports the provision of a greenway along the River Boyne. In this regard, the Office highlights the importance of integrating green and blue infrastructure into the JLAP consistent with NPO 58 and planning for greenbelts (NPO 62).

Regarding built-heritage, as noted in the Issues Paper, Drogheda contains rich built heritage. In this regard, the JLAP should incorporate appropriate policies and objectives to support the natural and built heritage as identified in RPO 4.15, to support the town as a tourist destination. Accordingly, the planning authorities should have regard to the *Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (2011).

11. Implementation and monitoring

The NPF and the RSES place increased emphasis on the importance of monitoring the implementation of statutory strategies and plans to measure plan effectiveness and to continually update a relevant evidence base to inform future planning strategies.

² A new NAF is under development and will be submitted to Government for approval in early 2024.



The JLAP should therefore set out specific provisions for monitoring the implementation of the objectives of the JLAP, having regard to the provisions of the Development Plans Guidelines and the LAP Guidelines.

Summary

In summary, the Office commends the planning authorities for the preparation of this Issues Paper. The Office advises the planning authorities to pay particular attention to the following issues in the preparation of the JLAP:

- the delivery of housing on serviced or serviceable lands should be informed by an
 infrastructure assessment/settlement capacity audit and be consistent with compact
 growth, the sequential approach and with the respective core strategies;
- the prioritisation of regeneration, development of infill/brownfield sites and reuse of vacant and/or derelict buildings, in particular the Docklands, Westgate and the Former Quarry, should be supported by appropriate policies and objectives and by a detailed active land management strategy;
- the inclusion of employment and enterprise policies and objectives that build on the town's strategic location along the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor in a manner consistent with compact growth, accessibility by public transport, walking and cycling, and where lands are serviced or serviceable within the plan period. A strong evidence-based approach is required in this respect;
- the inclusion of retail policies to support and encourage retail and associated uses within the town centre to serve a growing population, and ensure that the town centre is not undermined by retail uses on the periphery;
- the integration of land use and transport planning in the JLAP should be informed by an LTP prepared in consultation with the NTA and TII, having regard to Department of Transport policy, and should include modal share targets to be achieved during the plan period;
- the JLAP and associated zoning objectives, should be informed by an SFRA
 prepared having regard to the Flood Guidelines, in consultation with the OPW, and
 should include relevant policies and objectives to deliver SuDS and nature-based
 solutions to surface water run-off and rainwater management in consultation with
 LAWPRO; and



 the unique built heritage and sensitive environmental heritage of Drogheda should be supported, protected and enhanced through strong policies and objectives, which may also support development of the town as a tourist destination.

The Office looks forward to reviewing the future draft JLAP and to continued positive engagement with your authorities in the implementation of national and regional policies at the county and local level.

Please feel free to contact the staff of the Office in the context of your authorities' responses to the above, which we would be happy to facilitate. Contact can be initiated through the undersigned or at plans@opr.ie.

Is mise le meas.

Anne Marie O'Connor

Deputy Regulator and Director of Plans Evaluations