

Gas Networks Ireland
Network Development Plan
Report for the Purposes of
Appropriate Assessment Screening

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Findings of No Significant Effects

1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Gas Networks Ireland (referred to hereinafter as GNI) is in the process of preparing the 2021 ten-year Network Development Plan (referred to hereinafter as the NDP). The NDP provides a view of how the gas network may develop over a ten-year period. It is based on current supply and demand for gas, as well as projections for growth in gas consumption and development of infrastructure over the time period of the plan.

Arup has been commissioned by GNI to prepare a Report for the Purposes of Appropriate Assessment (AA) Screening with regards to the NDP.

Specifically, this report contains information required for the competent authority, to undertake an AA Screening Assessment of the NDP. The aims of this report are to:

- Provide information on, and assess the potential for the proposed plan to significantly effect Natura 2000 Sites (also known as European sites);
- Determine whether the proposed plan is directly connected with, or necessary to, the conservation management of any Natura 2000 sites; *and*
- Determine whether it can be excluded, on the basis of objective information and beyond reasonable scientific doubt, that the proposed plan, alone or in combination with other plans or projects, will have significant effect on any Natura 2000 sites in view of their conservation objectives.

1.2 The Requirement for Habitats Directive Assessment

Habitats Directive Assessment (HDA), also known as Appropriate Assessment, is a requirement under the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC. The Habitats Directive indicates the need for plans and projects to be subject to Appropriate Assessment if the plan or project is not directly connected with or necessary to the management of a Natura 2000 site but is likely to have a significant effect either individually or in combination with other plans or projects on Natura 2000 sites.

1.3 The Purpose of Appropriate Assessment

The purpose of Appropriate Assessment is to identify the possible effects of implementing a plan (or project) on the conservation status of designated Natura 2000 sites within the sphere of influence of the plan (or project).

Directive 92/43/EEC on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and Wild Flora and Fauna – the ‘Habitats Directive’ provides legal protection for habitats and species of European importance. Article 2 of the Habitats Directive requires the maintenance or restoration of habitats and species of interest to the EU in a

favourable condition. The Directive was transposed into Irish law by the European Communities (Natural Habitats) Regulations, SI 94/1997.

Under Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive an Appropriate Assessment must be undertaken for any plan or program that is likely to have a significant effect on the conservation objectives of a Natura 2000 site. Article 6 paragraph 3 states:

“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.”

Therefore, an AA is an evaluation of the potential impacts of a plan on the conservation objectives of a Natura 2000 site, and the development, where necessary, of mitigation or avoidance measures to preclude adverse effects. In a situation where it is not possible to fully demonstrate that adverse effects on the site integrity would occur, options must be explored so that any risk of damaging designated sites is avoided.

Plans can only be adopted after having ascertained that there will be no significant adverse effects on the integrity of the sites in question.

1.4 Habitats Directive Assessment Process in relation to the Preparation of the NDP

In the preparation of this Report for the Purposes of Appropriate Assessment (AA) Screening which provides the information required by the competent authority to carry out an AA Screening Assessment, the following documents have been reviewed:

- Appropriate Assessment of Plans and Projects in Ireland – Guidance for Planning Authorities (2009);
- European Commissions: Managing Natura 2000 Sites. The provisions of Article 6, of the ‘Habitats’ Directive 92/43/EEC;
- European Commission: 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;
- Guidance document on Article 6(4) of 'Habitats Directive' 92/43/EEC; and
- Department of the Environment Heritage and Local Government (DEHLG) Circular letter SEA 1/08 & NPWS 1/08 dated 15 February 2008.

A full bibliography of material referenced and researched in preparation of this report is included in the references section at the end of this report.

The European Commission's Methodological Guidance recommends a four-stage approach to Appropriate Assessment:

Stage 1 Screening:

Determining whether the plan 'either alone or in combination with other plans or projects' is likely to have a significant effect on a Natura 2000 site.

Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment:

Determining whether, in view of the site's conservation objectives, the plan 'either alone or in combination with other plans or projects' would have an adverse effect (or risk of this) on the integrity of the site. If not, the plan can proceed.

Stage 3: Assessment of Alternative Solutions:

Where it has not been proven that measures considered will not avoid or mitigate the adverse effect on the Natura 2000 site, then an assessment of the alternatives will be required; and if none are acceptable then stage 4 is required to be considered.

Stage 4: Assessment where no Alternative Solutions Exist and where Adverse Impacts Remain

This will involve assessment where the Plan is considered to result in adverse impacts on the Natura 2000 site and no alternative solutions remain – the imperative reasons of overriding public interest (IROPI) test must be met before authorisation, permission or adoption of the Plan is agreed. This includes the agreement of compensatory measures.

This is based on available ecological information and an adequate description of the plan and its likely effects. It also takes into account any policies or proposals that will set the terms for future development. The AA Screening Assessment determination by the competent authority, will also be recorded and made available to the public.

In any case where, following screening, it is found that the draft NDP or amendment may have an impact on the conservation objectives of a Natura 2000 site or that such an impact cannot be ruled out, adopting a precautionary approach, a Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment of the NDP must be carried out and - in any case where a strategic environmental assessment (SEA) would not otherwise be required, it must also be carried out.

When the results of the Stage 2 AA under Article 6(3) indicate that there is a likelihood for adverse environmental effects, or where the findings are uncertain, then the provisions of Article 6(4) of the Habitats Directive apply. That is, where:

- The plan or project will adversely affect the integrity of the site; and,
- Doubts remain as to the absence of adverse effects on the integrity of the site linked to the plan or project concerned.

1.5 Overview of Stage One Screening

The Screening Stage of the report is used to identify whether the Plan, either alone or in combination with other plans or projects, is likely to have a significant effect on a Natura 2000 site. This report follows European Commission (2001) guidance which recommends that screening should follow a four-step process as outlined below:

- Determine whether the plan is directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site. If it is, then no further assessment is necessary;
- Describe the plan and other plans and projects that, ‘in combination’, have the potential to have significant effects on a European site;
- Identify the potential effects on the European site; and
- Assess the significance of any effects on the European site.

The key to deciding if an AA of a plan would be required is determined by an assessment of whether the plan and its policies and objectives are likely to have a significant effect on a Natura 2000 site. The decision should not be determined by the size of the plan area alone. It will also be influenced by the nature and extent of the development likely to be proposed in the plan, and the plan area’s *in situ, ex situ* and in combination relationship to adjoining Natura 2000 sites and the wider Natura 2000 network.

When screening the plan and its policies and objectives there are two possible outcomes:

- the plan poses no risk of a significant effect and as such requires no further assessment; and
- the plan has potential to have a significant effect (or this is uncertain) and AA of the plan is necessary.

Screening can be used to establish which policies and objectives have potential to have significant effects, and therefore the ones that require further attention at the AA stage.

An important element of the AA process is the identification of the “Conservation Objectives”, “Qualifying Interests” (QIs) and/ or “Special Conservation Interests” (SCIs) of European sites requiring assessment. QIs are the habitat features and species listed in Annexes I and II of the Habitats Directive for which each European site has been designated and afforded protection. SCIs are wetland habitats and bird species listed within Annexes I and II of the Birds Directive.

It is also vital that the threats to the ecological/environmental conditions that are required to support QIs and SCIs are considered as part of the assessment.

Site-Specific Conservation Objectives (SSCOs) have been designed to define favourable conservation status for a particular habitat or species at that site. According to the European Commission interpretation document ‘Managing Natura 2000 sites: The provisions of Article 6 of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC’, paragraph 4.6(3) states:

“The integrity of a site involves its ecological functions. The decision as to whether it is adversely affected should focus on and be limited to the site’s conservation objectives.”

The screening stage of the AA takes account of the elements as relevant with regard to the details and characteristics of the draft NDP to determine if potential for significant effects on European sites are likely.

1.6 Appropriate Assessment Process in Tandem with NDP Progression

As the NDP is progressed through the plan making process, the AA process will be continued by the competent authority, GNI, in tandem and will inform the decision-making process in terms of any likely significant impacts arising from the NDP on Natura 2000 sites.

This report contains the findings of the assessment which was carried out on the draft NDP.

1.7 Data Sources

This Report for the Purposes of Appropriate Assessment (AA) Screening in relation to the NDP is based on a review of information relating to relevant European and Natura sites and to the habitats and species that they support. Information relied upon includes the following information sources, which included maps, ecological and water quality data:

- Ordnance Survey of Ireland mapping and aerial photography available from www.osi.ie;
- Online data available on European sites as held by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) from www.npws.ie;
- Information on land-use zoning from the online mapping of the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government <http://www.myplan.ie/en/index.html>;
- Information on water quality in the area available from www.epa.ie;
- Information on soils, geology and hydrogeology in the area available from www.gsi.ie;
- Information on the status of EU protected habitats in Ireland (National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2013a and 2013b);
- National Biodiversity Data Centre - Biodiversity Maps;

2 Description of the NDP and other Plans and Projects

2.1 Legislative Background

GNI is a wholly owned subsidiary of Ervia and was established in accordance with the Gas Regulation Act 2013, as amended. It owns and operates the natural gas transmission and distribution networks in Ireland.

As Ireland's gas Transmission System Operator (TSO), GNI is required to submit a ten-year NDP to the Commission of Regulation of Utilities (CRU) in accordance with Article 22 of EU Directive 2009/73/EC and Article 11 of the EC (Internal Market in Natural Gas and Electricity) (Amendment) Regulations 2015.

GNI is also obliged to submit a long-term development statement to the CRU in accordance with condition 11 of its Transmission System Operator (TSO) and Distribution System Operator (DSO) licences.

The publication of the NDP also satisfies the requirements of Section 19 of the Gas (Interim) (Regulations) Act 2002, as amended by the European Communities (Security of Natural Gas Supply) Regulations 2007 (S.I. No. 697 of 2007). This requires the CRU to monitor and publish a report outlining gas supply and demand in Ireland over a seven-year period.

2.2 Plan Overview

2.2.1 Gas Trends in Ireland 2020/2021

Annual ROI gas demands for 2020/21 are anticipated to be 1.6% below 2019/20 demands. This contrasts with increases of 1.5% in 2019/20 over 2018/19 and 2% in 2018/19 over 2017/18, as shown in Figure 5-2. In the Power Generation sector, annual gas demand for 2020/21 is projected to show a decrease of 4% below 2019/20, contrasting with a 3.5% increase the previous year. This decrease in Power Generation gas demand in 2020/21 is predominantly related to enduring outages at several large gas-fired generators throughout the year which are due back online in 2021/22.

Over the longer-term, Power Generation sector gas demand has increased by 31% when compared to 2014/15. The increase in power sector gas demands in this period, despite growth in wind capacity, can be attributed to increasing electricity demand, reduced electricity interconnector imports from GB, and more recently carbon prices favouring gas-fired generation ahead of coal for electricity generation. Following the introduction of updates to the wholesale electricity market in October 2018, electrical interconnector behaviour has generally been efficient in that the interconnectors are mainly importing to Ireland when Irish electricity prices are higher than GB markets and exporting at times of high wind when Irish electricity prices are lower than in GB. Following the exit of the UK from the EU in January 2021, interconnectors had not been participating the Day-Ahead market in the I-SEM, resulting in a reduction in their utilisation in the early

part of 2021. However, interconnector utilisation has recovered since March 2021 with both EWIC and Moyle operating as net importers up to July 2021.

The Industrial & Commercial sector annual gas demand for 2020/21 is anticipated to be the same as 2019/20. While a reduction in demand in this sector was experienced in the first half of 2020/2021 (3.3% based on year-on-year comparison of October – March period), driven by restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, a recovery in Industrial and Commercial gas demand occurred in second half of the gas year, with growth of 4% anticipated in this half.

Within the Industrial and Commercial sector, Daily Metered (DM)¹ demand is projected to increase by 1.8% in 2020/21, while the Non-Daily Metered² (NDM) portion of Industrial and Commercial demand is anticipated to decrease by 4.5%. It is worth noting that the NDM sector is heavily influenced by weather.

Residential demand is projected to increase by 5.6% for 2020/21, showing a similar trend to the previous year. Composite Weather Variable and Degree Day are approximately the same year-on-year for the first half of 2020/21 (October 2020 to March 2021), which correlates with the fact that Residential demand for these months was only 0.7% lower than the same period in 2019/20. The second half of 2020/21 is anticipated to see a Residential demand 29% higher than the previous year, driven by large increases in demand in both April and May 2021.

Transport sector gas demand is projected to increase by 92% in 2020/21, as the roll-out of a nationwide Compressed National Gas (CNG) fuelling network continues.

Total Gas Networks Ireland annual system gas demand for 2020/21 is anticipated to increase by 0.2% over the previous year's gas demand. As noted in Section 5.2, ROI gas demand is projected to fall by 1.6% in 2020/21 vs. the previous year. In contrast NI and IOM gas demand is anticipated to increase by 6.4% against 2019/20. The historic gas demand is presented in Figure 5-2. The overall throughput for ROI in 2020/21 is projected to be 57,405 GWh or approximately 5.3 bcm.

2.2.2 Future Forecasts

In order to inform how the gas network may develop over a ten-year period, and to provide a comprehensive analysis, Gas Networks Ireland has developed three gas demand scenarios for the period 2020/21 to 2029/30, namely Low, Best Estimate and High demand scenarios. These scenarios are designed to represent a broad range of likely outcomes and are informed by a range of external and internal factors. The NDP Best Estimate scenario is aligned to the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Gas (ENTSOG) / European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity (ENTSOE) Ten-Year Network Development Plan (TYNDP) Best Estimate and National Trends scenarios.

¹ In this instance Daily Metered (DM) customers refers to Daily Metered (DM) and Large Daily Metered (LDM) customers i.e. any customer which consumes over 5.55 GWh annually

² The Non-Daily Metered (NDM) sector refers to those who consume less than 5.55 GWh of gas annually. This covers small I/C and residential properties.

In the Best Estimate demand scenario, annual ROI gas demand is expected to grow by 15% between 2020/21 and 2029/30 with 4% growth forecast in the Low demand scenario and growth of 27% forecast in the High demand scenarios respectively over the same horizon. These trends are dominated by the strong continued requirement for gas-fired power generation in the electricity system to meet the projected levels of electricity demand growth.

It is notable that medium-term Best Estimate growth is projected at 28% over the first seven years of the horizon, where there is a more direct tracking of gas demand to electricity demand growth, ahead of projected build out of offshore wind generation. Towards the latter end of the horizon, a negative annual growth trend is observed. This trend is linked to an ambitious build-out target assumed for offshore wind generation in Ireland. Assumptions for wind capacity development rates are based on the build-out profiles provided in the EirGrid / SONI All-Island Generation Capacity Statement (GCS) 2021-2030. Should these challenging targets not be met as assumed in the NDP modelling, the result would be an increase in annual gas demand growth in all scenarios, relative to the growth projections presented above.

2.2.3 Positioning of the NDP in the GNI Plan Framework

As previously described, the NDP is an annual rolling document prepared by GNI each year, which provides a view of how the gas network may develop over a ten-year period.

The NDP outlines a number of capital investment projects which will be delivered over the coming years (in the short, medium and long-term), including future proposed large capital projects and proposed new technologies. The NDP is a strategic plan which is high-level in nature.

In 2020 GNI prepared a second plan, the Network Implementation Plan (NIP). The purpose of the NIP is to set out in more detail, the manner in which the short-term capital investment proposals identified in the NDP may be developed in the Plan area over the three-year plan period 2020 - 2023. This includes greater detail on the capital investment proposals included in the NDP, including their locations, nature, extent etc. The Plan provides for short term capital investment projects including the provision of AGI (Above Ground Installation) upgrade works, new AGIs, CGI (Centralised Gas Injection) and CNG (Compressed Natural Gas) facilities. The NIP is publicly available on Gas Networks Ireland's website³.

³ Gas Networks Ireland Network Implementation Plan
<https://www.gasnetworks.ie/corporate/docs/network-implementation-plan-2020/GNI-NIP-2020.pdf>

The 2020 NIP was subject to full AA in compliance with S.I. No. 477/2011- European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations, as amended (“AA Regulations”).

Refer to Figure 4.1 for the relationship between the NDP and NIP.

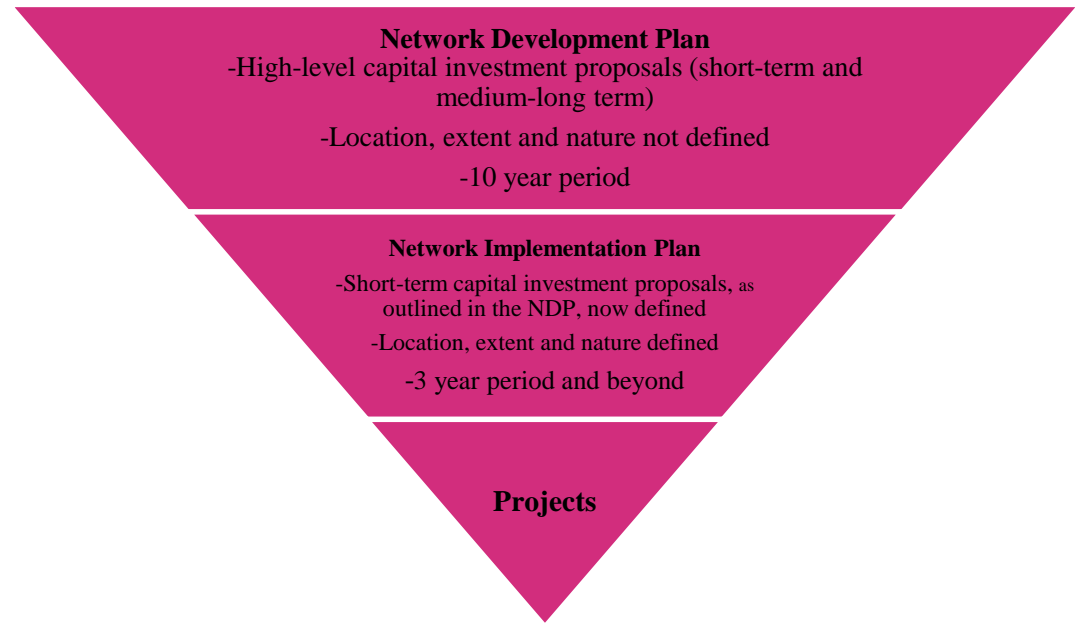


Figure 4.1: Plan Hierarchy (relationship between the NDP and NIP)

2.2.4 Plan Area

GNI maintains over 14,617km of gas pipelines and two sub-sea interconnectors.

The GNI transmission network includes onshore Scotland, interconnectors and the onshore ROI network.

The interconnector (IC) sub-system comprises of two subsea interconnectors between ROI and Scotland; and compressor stations at Beattock and Brighthouse Bay. The interconnector system connects to Great Britain’s (GB) National Transmission System (NTS) at Moffat in Scotland. It also supplies gas to the Northern Ireland (NI) market at Twynholm and the Isle of Man (IOM) market via the second subsea interconnector (IC2).

The NDP Plan area is identified in **Figure 2.1**.



Figure 2.1: NDP Plan Area

2.2.5 Plan Programme

The NDP is an annual rolling document. It is updated by GNI on an annual basis, setting out a view of how the gas network may develop over the next ten-year period.

2.3 Capital Investment Proposals

The NDP outlines a number of capital projects which will be delivered over the coming years, including future proposed large capital projects and proposed new technologies. Thus, it should be examined as to whether the proposed capital investment proposals would have the potential to result in significant negative effects on Natura 2000 sites or species.

Section 10.1 of the NDP outlines the Capital Investments which are proposed to be delivered over the coming years, including future proposed large capital projects and proposed new technologies. The NDP sets out these capital investment proposals under those planned to be implemented in the ‘Short-Term’ (next 3 years), and those planned to be implemented in the ‘Long-Term’ (next 10 years). Refer to **Table 2.1** for the Capital Investment Proposals. It should be noted that none of the Capital Investment Proposals listed in the 2021 NDP are located in either Northern Ireland, or Scotland.

Table 2.1: Proposed Capital Investment Proposals in the NDP

Provisions of Section 10.1 of the NDP ‘Capital Investment’
Short-term Requirements (next 3 years)
The provision of Above Ground Installations (AGI) capacity upgrade works to: 1 No. AGI in the Northern and Western Region, 3 No. AGIs in the Eastern and Midlands Region and 1 No. AGI in the Southern Region.
The provision of 1 No. new AGI in the Eastern and Midlands Region.
The delivery of new Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) stations, located along core urban and regional road networks throughout Ireland, including: 1 No. CNG station in the Northern and Western Region. 8 No. CNG stations in the Eastern and Midland Region and 2 No. CNG stations in the Southern Region.
The provision of 1 No. new Centralised Gas Injection (CGI) facility in the Southern Region, located on the gas transmission network where Renewable Gas quality will be verified, and the grid injection process will be managed and metered
Long-term Requirements (next 10 years)
The provision of AGI capacity upgrade works to: 6 No. AGIs in the Eastern and Midlands Region and 1 No. AGI in the Southern Region.
The provision of 2 No. new AGIs in the Eastern and Midlands Region.

GNI have produced a Network Implementation Plan which sets out in more detail the manner in which the capital investment proposals identified in the NDP will be developed.

3 Natura 2000 Sites

3.1 Zone of Influence

The Zone of Influence (ZoI) comprises the area within which the plan or project may potentially affect the conservation objectives, QI's, or SCIs of a Natura 2000 site. There is no recommended zone of influence, and guidance from the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) recommends that the distance should 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 (cumulative) effects. A distance of 15 km is currently recommended in the case of plans.

As previously outlined, the GNI transmission network includes onshore Scotland, interconnectors and the onshore ROI network and these locations therefore make up the 'plan area'. However, it should be noted that the Capital Investment Proposals detailed in the 2019 NDP relate to the Republic of Ireland only. No proposals relate to Northern Ireland or Scotland.

Thus, the ZoI for the NDP is considered to be the entirety of the island of Ireland, and within 15km of the border of the Republic of Ireland. The ZoI is illustrated in **Figure 3.1**.

Natura 2000 sites (European sites) are only at risk from significant effects where a source-pathway-receptor link exists between a proposed development and a Natura 2000 site(s). This can take the form of a direct effect (e.g. where the proposed development and/or associated construction works are located within the boundary of the Natura 2000 site(s)) or an indirect effect where effects outside of the Natura 2000 site(s) affect ecological receptors within the Natura 2000 site (e.g. effects to water quality which can affect riparian habitats at a distance from the impact source). Consideration is therefore given to the source-pathway-receptor linkage and associated risks between the NDP and Natura 2000 sites.

3.2 Natura 2000 sites within the ZoI

As outlined in Section 3.1, the NDP is a National Plan. Thus, all European sites in the Republic of Ireland as well as those within 15km of the Republic of Ireland are considered to be within the ZoI for the purposes of this plan. There are some 433 No. Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and 154 No. Special Protection Areas (SPAs) within the ZoI of the NDP. European sites that occur in the Republic of Ireland are illustrated in **Figure 3.1** below.

Details on the specific qualifying interests and conservation objectives of each European site can be found on the NPWS website which has a dedicated database for European sites. NPWS data for Irish sites was reviewed and considered in the preparation of this Report for the Purposes of Appropriate Assessment (AA) Screening.

It is acknowledged that the number of European Sites designated, and their boundaries, are subject to change over time and must therefore be verified on an ongoing basis. Ireland has a higher density of Natura 2000 sites in Galway, Donegal and Mayo where habitats such as blanket bogs, semi-natural grasslands and high-quality water dependent habitats are located. Natura 2000 sites are also concentrated along major river catchments in Carlow and along the coast in Wicklow and Waterford and in the south east of Ireland.

Energy networks are extensive across Ireland and infrastructure from all sectors interact with Natura 2000 sites. Prospective energy network developments are routinely screened for Appropriate Assessment in order to determine whether there are any potential implications for Natura sites.

According to the European Commission ‘*Guidance on Energy Transmission Infrastructure and EU Nature legislation*,’ when assessing the potential impacts on nature and wildlife it is important to consider not just the main infrastructure itself, but also all associated installations and facilities such as temporary access roads, contractors facilities and equipment storage, construction compounds, concrete foundations, temporary cabling, spoils and areas for soil surplus etc. The impacts may be temporary or permanent, on-site or off-site, cumulative and may come into play at different times during the project cycle (e.g. during construction, renovation, maintenance and/or decommissioning phases). All these factors must be taken into consideration.

The EU Nature Directives’ species protection provisions must be taken into account where there is a risk that the energy infrastructure plan or project may cause the death or injury, or deliberate disturbance during breeding, rearing, hibernation and migration, or the deterioration or destruction of breeding sites or resting places of species protected under the two Directives (e.g. such as eagles and marine mammals). This strict protection regime applies across the wider countryside, i.e. both inside and outside Natura 2000 sites.

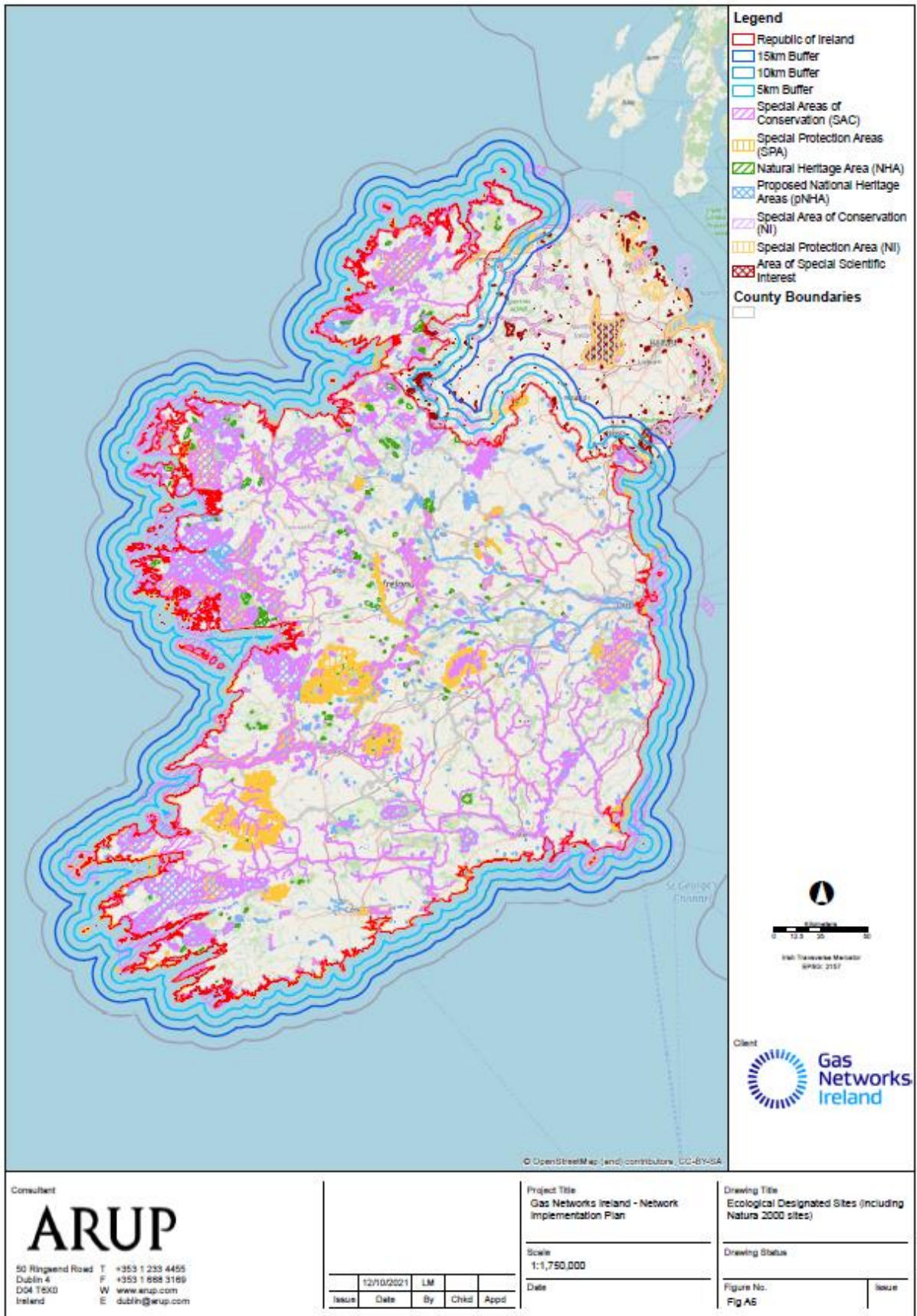


Figure 3.1: Natura 2000 Sites within the ZoI of the NDP

3.3 Assessment of Likely Effects on Natura 2000 Sites

The purpose of the 2021 NDP is to provide a view of how the gas network may develop over a ten-year period. It is based on current supply and demand for gas, as well as projections for growth in gas consumption and development of infrastructure. As outlined in Section 3.1 of the NDP, the NDP is required in order to:

- Comply with the requirement to submit a ten-year Network Development Plan to the Commission of Regulation of Utilities (CRU) in accordance with Article 22 of EU Directive 2009/73/EC and Article 11 of the EC[1] (Internal Market in Natural Gas and Electricity) (Amendment) Regulations 2015.
- Comply with the requirement to submit a long-term development statement to the CRU in accordance with condition 11 of its Transmission System Operator and Distribution System Operator licences.
- Comply the requirements of Section 19 of the Gas (Interim) (Regulations) Act 2002, as amended by the European Communities (Security of Natural Gas Supply) Regulations 2007 (S.I. No. 697 of 2007). This requires the CRU to monitor and publish a report outlining gas supply and demand in Ireland over seven years.

Section 4.3.2 of the European Commission document on managing Natura 2000 sites, *The Provisions of Article 6 of the 'Habitats' Directive 92/43/EEC* (European Communities, 2000) states that “*it does not seem appropriate to treat policy documents, which show the general political will or intention of a ministry or lower authority as 'plans' for the purpose of Article 6(3)*”. According to this guidance, this is particularly relevant if any initiatives deriving from such policy statements must pass through the intermediary of a land-use or sectoral plan.

Having reviewed the 2021 NDP, it could be considered that the NDP constitutes one such high-level policy document and therefore does not seem appropriate to treat it as a “plan” for the purpose of Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive. To further strengthen this viewpoint, it is important to note that, as outlined in Section 2.2.3, GNI has prepared a second plan, the Network Implementation Plan (NIP). The purpose of the NIP is to set out in more detail, the manner in which the short-term capital investment proposals identified in the NDP may be developed in the Plan area over the three-year plan period 2020 - 2023. This includes greater detail on the capital investment proposals included in the NDP, including their locations, nature, extent etc. The Plan provides for short term capital investment projects including the provision of AGI (Above Ground Installation) upgrade works, new AGIs, CGI (Centralised Gas Injection) and CNG (Compressed Natural Gas) facilities. The NIP has been subject to an AA and a Natura Impact Report has been prepared.

Nevertheless, having regard to the precautionary principle, and the capital investment proposals outlined in the NDP, it was considered prudent to screen the 2021 NDP as a whole, in itself, for its potential to give rise to significant effects, in accordance with the provisions of the Habitats Directive.

^[1] European Commission

While the NDP does outline the capital investment proposals to be implemented over the next 10 years, including AGI upgrade works and installations, and the provision of new CNG and CGI stations, it does not define the exact location, nature, size/operating conditions of any proposals, nor does it allocate resources to a specific area in Ireland.

As outlined in the European Communities guidance, “*where one or more specific projects are included in a plan in a general way but not in terms of project details, the assessment made at plan level does not exempt the specific projects from the assessment requirements of Article 6(3) at a later stage, when much more details about them are known.*”

The capital investment proposals referred to in the NDP have themselves been separately subjected to AA at a plan level in the NIP Natura Impact Report has also been subjected to AA at a project level.

It can therefore be concluded that the provisions of the NDP, as a whole, in itself, have no potential to give rise to significant effects on Natura 2000 sites.

This screening assessment of the NDP has been carried out on the understanding that any proposals referred to in the NDP which could be considered to constitute a ‘project’ within the definition of the Habitats Directive shall be subject AA at project level, as required. Similarly, where the NDP gives rise to other plans or programmes which could be considered to constitute the definition of the same under the Habitats Directive, the plan or programme shall similarly be subject to AA prior to adoption, as required. As previously outlined, GNI has prepared a NIP which sets out in more detail the manner in which projects identified in the NDP will be developed. The NIP has been subject to AA and a Natura Impact Report has been prepared.

Thus, in considering the overall nature of the NDP as a whole, in itself, and in the understanding that this assessment does not exempt the specific projects from the assessment requirements of Article 6(3) at a later stage, no potential for significant effects on Natura 2000 sites was identified in the assessment of the draft 2021 NDP.

3.4 Potential for Cumulative Effects

The potential for cumulative effects should also be taken into consideration when determining the impacts on Natura 2000 sites, as required by Article 6.3 of the Habitats Directive. Other relevant plans and projects are considered below. It is considered extremely unlikely that significant in-combination or cumulative effects arising from interaction with other plans or projects could arise as each plan or project has either been subject to the Appropriate Assessment process or provides for appropriate biodiversity protection. Each Stage 2 AA or Stage 1 AA Screening concluded that significant effects on Natura 2000 sites arising from the plan or project in question would not occur.

National Planning Framework (Project Ireland 2040), 2018

In accordance with Regulation 42(6) of the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 as amended, RPS, on behalf of the (former)

Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government prepared a report for Appropriate Assessment for the National Planning Framework (NPF) and it was determined by the Department in July 2017 that the NPF is not directly connected with or necessary to the management of a European Site.

Notwithstanding, it could not be concluded at that stage in the process, on the basis of objective scientific information, that the NPF, would not, individually or in combination with other plans or projects, have a significant effect on a European site. As such it was concluded that AA should move to Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment and the preparation of an Natura Impact Statement (NIS).

An NIS was then prepared on the draft NPF prior to consultation. This considered the potential for the draft NPF to adversely affect any Natura 2000 site with regard to its qualifying interests, associated conservation status, structure/function of the site and overall site integrity. This pre-consultation version of the NIS concluded that, subject to the mitigation proposed being incorporated into the NPF, there would be no adverse effects on the integrity of any European Sites as a result of implementation of the draft NPF. The post-consultation NIS also concluded the National Planning Framework would not, either individually or in combination with other plans and projects, adversely affect the integrity of any designated site within the Natura 2000 network.

Given the above conclusions, no in-combination impacts with the GNI NDP are predicted as a result of its implementation.

National Adaptation Framework, 2018

The Report for the purposes of AA Screening of the National Adaptation Framework determined that *“the purpose of the framework is to set out a policy framework to be pursued in relation to climate change adaptation; it will not identify specific locations, be they Natura 2000 sites or otherwise, nor will it propose adaptation measures or projects in respect of those sites.*

Adaptation approaches and identification of locations or sites will be detailed via lower level adaptation plans and strategies which may undergo appropriate assessment, as appropriate”. It was therefore determined that Stage 2 AA was not required.

Give the above, no in-combination impacts with the NDP are predicted as a result of its implementation.

Offshore Renewable Energy Development Plan for Ireland, 2019

Initially an AA screening exercise was undertaken which identified a number of sites upon which the OREDP could potentially have a significant effect.

An NIS was then prepared for the Plan. On the basis that the mitigation measures were to be integrated into the final OREDP as specific actions for delivery, the assessment concluded that, based on the level of detail presented in the OREDP and the contents of the plan, the OREDP will not have any likely significant effects on the integrity of any Natura 2000 sites or cetaceans listed on Annex IV of the Habitats Directive.

Given the above, no in-combination impacts with the NDP are predicted as a result of its implementation.

Electricity and Gas Sector Climate Change Adaptation Plan, 2019

The Climate Change Adaptation Plan for the Electricity and Gas Networks Sector was screened for AA. According to the AA Screening Determination “*the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment has made a determination following screening that an Appropriate Assessment is not required. This determination was based on the assessment that the Plan is not directly connected with, or necessary to the management of any European Site and it can be excluded on the basis of objective scientific information that the Plan, individually or in-combination with other plans or projects will have a significant effect on a European site*”.

Given the above, no in-combination impacts with the NDP are predicted as a result of its implementation.

National Energy and Climate Plan 2021 – 2030, 2020

The National Energy and Climate Plan takes into account energy and climate policies developed to date, the levels of demographic and economic growth identified in the Project 2040 process and includes all of the climate and energy measures set out in the National Development Plan 2018 - 2027.

No publicly available data suggests that this Strategy has undergone Appropriate Assessment. However, the Plan has been reviewed and no in-combination impacts with the NDP are predicted as a result of its implementation.

National Energy Efficiency Action Plan

Article 24 of the EU Energy Efficiency Directive requires Member States to submit a National Energy Efficiency Action Plan (NEEAP) every three years. Ireland's 4th NEEAP was produced in early 2017. It provides a comprehensive overview of:

- The progress made towards the above targets;
- The measures in place to ensure the targets are met;
- The strategies and policies in place across the residential, commercial, transport and public sector.

No publicly available data suggests that this Strategy has undergone Appropriate Assessment. However, the Plan has been reviewed and no in-combination impacts with the NDP are predicted as a result of its implementation.

(Eirgrid) Grid Implementation Plan 2017 - 2022

Screening of the Grid IP was undertaken in April 2017 and it was determined that AA was required.

Thus, the Plan was brought forward for Stage 2 AA, which concludes:

“The Grid IP has been assessed in terms of examining the likely significant effects of the plan on European Sites and where these effects could lead to adverse effects

on the integrity of European sites. Any project(s) arising from the Grid IP shall be required to conform to the mitigation measures and key principles for protecting European sites identified within this NIS.

In addition, all projects arising from the implementation of the Grid IP will themselves be subject to Screening for AA/AA when details of locations and design become known or are refined. The conclusion of the NIS for the Grid IP is that, following appropriate mitigation and following the key principles for protecting European sites, there will be no adverse effects on the integrity of any European site(s), either alone or in-combination with other plans or projects.”

Given the above, no in-combination impacts with the NDP are predicted as a result of its implementation.

Regional Planning Guidelines for the West Region, Border Region, South-East Region and South-West Region 2010 - 2022

The RPGs have undergone an AA and recommended specific conditions to protect European sites. These were incorporated into the RPGs where appropriate. No in-combination impacts with the NDP are predicted as a result of implementation.

Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies for the Eastern and Midland, Northern and Western, and Southern Regions 2019 - 2031

The RSESs have undergone an AA and recommended specific conditions to protect European sites. These were incorporated into the RSES's where appropriate. No in-combination impacts with the NDP are predicted as a result of implementation.

3.5 Potential for Transboundary Effects

As previously outlined, and as illustrated in **Figure 4.1**, the GNI transmission network includes onshore Scotland, interconnectors and the onshore ROI network and these locations therefore make up the 'plan area'. While none of the Capital Investment Proposals in the NDP relate to Northern Ireland or Scotland, consideration must be had to potential transboundary effects with the UK. In this regard, for example, there are 58 SACs and 16 SPAs in Northern Ireland.

No potential for significant transboundary effects on Natura 2000 sites or species as a result of the NDP have been identified, for the same reasons as those described in Section 3.3 pertaining to the characteristics of the NDP, and its position in the hierarchy of GNI gas network plans.

4 Screening Statement and Conclusions

The likely impacts that will arise from the NDP alone and in combination with other plans and programmes have been examined in the context of a number of factors that could potentially have a significant effect on Natura 2000 European Sites. There are some 433 No. SACs and 154 No. SPAs within the ZoI of the NDP.

Section 4.3.2 of the European Commission document on managing Natura 2000 sites, *The Provisions of Article 6 of the 'Habitats' Directive 92/43/EEC* (European Communities, 2000) states that “*it does not seem appropriate to treat policy documents, which show the general political will or intention of a ministry or lower authority as 'plans' for the purpose of Article 6(3)*”. According to this guidance, this is particularly relevant if any initiatives deriving from such policy statements must pass through the intermediary of a land-use or sectoral plan.

Having reviewed the 2021 NDP, it could be considered that the NDP constitutes one such high-level policy document and therefore does not seem appropriate to treat it as a “plan” for the purpose of Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive. To further strengthen this viewpoint, it is important to note that, as outlined in Section 2.1.3, GNI has prepared a Network Implementation Plan which has set out in more detail the manner in which capital investment proposals identified in the NDP will be developed. The NIP was subject to AA and a Natura Impact Report was prepared.

Nevertheless, having regard to the precautionary principle, and the capital investment proposals outlined in the NDP, it was considered prudent to screen the 2021 NDP as a whole, in itself, for its potential to give rise to significant effects, in accordance with the provisions of the Habitats Directive.

While the NDP does outline the capital investment proposals to be implemented over the next 10 years, including AGI upgrade works and installations, and the provision of new CNG and CGI stations, it does not define the exact location, nature, size/operating conditions of any proposals, nor does it allocate resources to a specific area in Ireland.

As outlined in the European Communities guidance, “*where one or more specific projects are included in a plan in a general way but not in terms of project details, the assessment made at plan level does not exempt the specific projects from the assessment requirements of Article 6(3) at a later stage, when much more details about them are known.*”

The capital investment proposals referred to in the NDP have themselves been separately subjected to AA in the NIP Natura Impact Report.

It can therefore be concluded that the provisions of the NDP, as a whole, in itself, have no potential to give rise to significant effects on Natura 2000 sites.

This screening assessment of the NDP has been carried out on the understanding that any proposals referred to in the NDP which could be considered to constitute a ‘project’ within the definition of the Habitats Directive shall be subject AA at project level, as required.

Similarly, where the NDP gives rise to other plans or programmes which could be considered to constitute the definition of the same under the Habitats Directive, the plan or programme shall similarly be subject to AA prior to adoption, as required. As previously outlined, GNI prepared a NIP which set out in more detail the way projects identified in the NDP will be developed. The NIP was subject to AA and a Natura Impact Report was prepared. The NIP is publicly available on GNI's website⁴

Thus, in considering the overall nature of the NDP as a whole, in itself, and in the understanding that this assessment does not exempt the specific projects from the assessment requirements of Article 6(3) at a later stage, no potential for significant effects on Natura 2000 sites was identified in the assessment of the draft 2021 NDP.

No potential for Transboundary or Cumulative effects have been identified.

On the basis of the findings of this Screening Report to inform Appropriate Assessment by the competent authority, it is concluded that the proposed NDP will not have a significant effect on the Natura 2000 network and a Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment is not required.

⁴ Gas Networks Ireland Network Implementation Plan
<https://www.gasnetworks.ie/corporate/docs/network-implementation-plan-2020/GNI-NIP-2020.pdf>

5 References

Managing Natura 2000 Sites: The Provision of Article 6 of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC (EC Environment Directorate-General, 2000); [hereafter referred to as MN 2000];

Guidance on Energy Transmission Infrastructure and EU nature legislation (European Commission, 2018)

Assessment of Plans and Projects Significantly Affecting Natura 2000 sites: Methodical Guidance on the Provisions of Article 6(3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC (European Commission Environment Directorate-General, 2001);

Guidance Document on Article 6(4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC. (European Commission, 2007);

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 and PSSP 2/10;

Guidelines for Good Practice Appropriate Assessment of Plans under Article 6(3) Habitats Directive (International Workshop on Assessment of Plans under the Habitats Directive, 2011); and

Guidelines for Ecological Impact Assessment in the UK and Ireland, Terrestrial, Freshwater, Coastal and Marine (Institute of Ecology and Environmental Assessment, September 2018).

Appendix A

Findings of No Significant Effects

A1 Findings of No Significant Effects

Name of Project:

Gas Networks Ireland Network Development Plan 2021

Names of Natura 2000 Sites of relevance to the proposed development:

There are some 433 No. SACs and 154 No. SPAs within the ZoI of the NDP- Refer to Figure 3.1. Detailed information on Irish Natura 2000 sites can be found on the NPWS website.

Is the project or plan directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site?

No.

Are there other projects or plans that together with the project or plan being assessed could affect the site?

No.

THE ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE OF EFFECTS

Describe how the project or plan (alone or in combination) is likely to affect the Natura 2000 site.

It has been concluded by Arup that it is possible to rule out likely significant impacts on any Natura 2000 sites.

Explain why these effects are not considered significant.

Section 4.3.2 of the European Commission document on managing Natura 2000 sites, *The Provisions of Article 6 of the 'Habitats' Directive 92/43/EEC* (European Communities, 2000) states that “*it does not seem appropriate to treat policy documents, which show the general political will or intention of a ministry or lower authority as 'plans' for the purpose of Article 6(3)*”. According to this guidance, this is particularly relevant if any initiatives deriving from such policy statements must pass through the intermediary of a land-use or sectoral plan.

Having reviewed the 2021 NDP, it could be considered that the NDP constitutes one such high-level policy document and therefore does not seem appropriate to treat it as a “plan” for the purpose of Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive. To further strengthen this viewpoint, it is important to note that, as outlined in Section 2.2.3, GNI has prepared a second plan, the Network Implementation Plan (NIP). The purpose of the NIP is to set out in more detail, the manner in which the short-term capital investment proposals identified in the NDP may be developed in the Plan area over the three-year plan period 2020 - 2023. This includes greater detail on the capital investment proposals included in the NDP, including their locations, nature, extent etc. The Plan provides for short term capital investment projects including the provision of AGI (Above Ground Installation) upgrade works, new AGIs, CGI (Centralised Gas Injection) and CNG (Compressed Natural Gas)

facilities. The NIP has been subject to an AA and a Natura Impact Report has been prepared.

Nevertheless, having regard to the precautionary principle, and the capital investment proposals outlined in the NDP, it was considered prudent to screen the 2021 NDP as a whole, in itself, for its potential to give rise to significant effects, in accordance with the provisions of the Habitats Directive.

While the NDP does outline the capital investment proposals to be implemented over the next 10 years, including AGI upgrade works and installations, and the provision of new CNG and CGI stations, it does not define the exact location, nature, size/operating conditions of any proposals, nor does it allocate resources to a specific area in Ireland.

As outlined in the European Communities guidance, *“where one or more specific projects are included in a plan in a general way but not in terms of project details, the assessment made at plan level does not exempt the specific projects from the assessment requirements of Article 6(3) at a later stage, when much more details about them are known.”*

The capital investment proposals referred to in the NDP have themselves been separately subjected to AA in the NIP Natura Impact Report.

It can therefore be concluded that the provisions of the NDP, as a whole, in itself, have no potential to give rise to significant effects on Natura 2000 sites.

This screening assessment of the NDP has been carried out on the understanding that any proposals referred to in the NDP which could be considered to constitute a ‘project’ within the definition of the Habitats Directive shall be subject AA at project level, as required. Similarly, where the NDP gives rise to other plans or programmes which could be considered to constitute the definition of the same under the Habitats Directive, the plan or programme shall similarly be subject to AA prior to adoption, as required. As previously outlined, GNI has prepared a NIP which sets out in more detail the manner in which projects identified in the NDP will be developed. The NIP has been subject to an AA screening and a Natura Impact Report prepared in addition to this.

Thus, in considering the overall nature of the NDP as a whole, in itself, and in the understanding that this assessment does not exempt the specific projects from the assessment requirements of Article 6(3) at a later stage, no potential for significant effects on Natura 2000 sites was identified in the assessment of the draft 2021 NDP.

No potential for Transboundary or Cumulative effects have been identified.

On the basis of the findings of this Screening Report to inform Appropriate Assessment by the competent authority, it is concluded that the proposed NDP will not have a significant effect on the Natura 2000 network and a Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment is not required. The findings of this assessment will enable GNI, as the competent authority, to make an AA Screening Determination.

DATA COLLECTED TO CARRY OUT THE ASSESSMENT

Who carried out the assessment?

The assessment was supervised, checked and completed by Freya Milford of Arup.

Sources of Data:

This report has been prepared with regard to the following guidance documents, where relevant:

- *Managing Natura 2000 Sites: The Provision of Article 6 of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC* (EC Environment Directorate-General, 2000); [hereafter referred to as MN 2000];
- *Assessment of Plans and Projects Significantly Affecting Natura 2000 sites: Methodical Guidance on the Provisions of Article 6(3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC* (European Commission Environment Directorate-General, 2001);
- *Guidance Document on Article 6(4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC*. (European Commission, 2007);
- *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 and PSSP 2/10*;
- *Guidelines for Good Practice Appropriate Assessment of Plans under Article 6(3) Habitats Directive* (International Workshop on Assessment of Plans under the Habitats Directive, 2011); and
- *Guidelines for Ecological Impact Assessment in the UK and Ireland, Terrestrial, Freshwater, Coastal and Marine* (Institute of Ecology and Environmental Assessment, September 2018).

Sources of information that were used to collect data on the Natura 2000 network of sites and on the existing ecological environment are listed below:

- Google aerial photography (viewed on 6th October 2021);
- National Parks and Wildlife Service online data on European Sites and (www.npws.ie) (viewed on 6th October 2021);
- National Parks and Wildlife Service online data on protected flora and fauna (viewed on 6th October 2021);
- Information on environmental quality data available from www.epa.ie (EPA Online Environmental Map Viewer) (viewed on 6th October 2021);
- Information on environmental water quality data available from (EPA, www.catchments.ie);

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

Based on the information provided above, and by applying the precautionary principle, it has been concluded by Arup that it can be excluded, on the basis of objective information and beyond a reasonable scientific doubt that the plan will have a significant effect on any Natura 2000 sites. and therefore, it is the view of Arup that it is not necessary to undertake any further stage of the Appropriate Assessment process for GNIs 2021 Network Development Plan. The findings of this assessment will enable GNI, as the competent authority, to make an AA Screening Determination.