Meath County Council Draft Variation 6 to County Development Plan 2021-2030 Strategic Environmental Assessment

Strategic Environmental Assessment – Non-Technical Summary

Meath County Council

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SLR Project No.: 425.069056.00001

20 November 2026

Revision: 2

Revision Record

Revision	Date	Prepared By	Checked By	Authorised By
1	18 November 2026	CT	JM	JM
2	20 November 2026	LJ	KH	KH
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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Overview

Meath County Council (MCC) has prepared proposed Draft Variation No. 6 to the Meath County Development Plan (CDP) 2021-2030 ('Variation No.6'). The Meath County Development Plan 2021-2030 (the Meath CDP / CDP) was adopted in September 2021 and came into effect in November 2021. The CDP is divided into four volumes. Volume 1 of the CDP sets out the policies and objectives and the overall strategy for the development of the County over the plan period 2021-2030. Volume 2 of the CDP includes written statements and accompanying maps for all settlements within the county and sets out development and land use zoning objectives for each area. Volume 3 of the CDP includes a book of maps for the county. Volume 4 includes the Environmental Assessments.

A Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of the proposed Variation No.6 of the Meath CDP 2021-2030 has been undertaken to support the development of the Variation No.6.

1.2 The Draft Variation No.6

The purpose of Draft Variation No. 6 is to establish a plan-led, evidence-based approach to protecting existing energy infrastructure assets across the County and supporting their co-location with large energy users, helping to enable the transition to a low-carbon economy at commercial, industrial and community scales.

MCC is providing a policy framework for the protection of existing infrastructure assets and is identifying a potential strategic site where co-location with a large energy user would strengthen the national grid and help in the transition to a low to zero carbon economy.

The Variation No.6 includes changes to Chapter 6: Infrastructure Strategy, including 6 new objectives, and changes to Chapter 11, including three new objectives, and the addition of Map 12 to Volume 3.

Further details on the Variation No.6 can be found in **Section 2** of the **main SEA report**.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 What is SEA?

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is a systematic process for identifying, describing and evaluating the likely significant environmental effects of implementing a plan or programme (P/Ps) against its reasonable alternatives. The process, which also meets the requirements of the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Regulations, assesses the likely effects of the Plan on the environment, communities and the economy. It helps identify opportunities to improve outcomes and ways to avoid or reduce any potential negative effects.

The Variation No. 6 and alternatives are appraised against a set of objectives to identify whether there is the potential for significant effects (either positive, negative or uncertain) and recommendations are put forward to mitigate any significant negative and uncertain effects.

2.2 SEA Methodology

2.2.1 Key SEA Stages

The SEA process ensures that sustainability issues are considered in a clear and transparent manner. In particular, the SEA process ensures a structured and systematic consideration of sustainability issues through its focus on testing and comparing the merits of different plan alternatives as well as consultation with key stakeholders.

The SEA process typically comprises the following key stages:

- **Stage 1:** Screening, to determine whether SEA is required;
- **Stage 2:** Scoping, including consultation with the prescribed environmental authorities and establishment of the scope and level of detail of the assessment;
- **Stage 3 (Current Stage):** Preparation of the Environmental Report, including the assessment of the likely significant environmental effects of the draft plan or programme and reasonable alternatives;

- **Stage 4:** Public and statutory authority consultation on the draft plan and Environmental Report;
- **Stage 5:** Consideration of submissions, SEA findings and environmental considerations before adoption of the plan, including the preparation of an SEA Statement; and
- **Stage 6:** Monitoring of the significant environmental effects arising from implementation of the adopted plan.

2.2.2 Development of the SEA Framework

SEA Scoping (Stage 2) has been undertaken for consideration of the range and level of detail of the information to be included in the SEA Environmental Report.

The SEA Scoping (Stage 2) reviewed relevant plans, policies and programmes, and brought together information on the current social, economic and environmental conditions in the County.

The main output of this stage is the SEA Framework, which sets out the key sustainability objectives used to assess the Variation. The SA Framework objectives are:

- **B_1 (Biodiversity (Flora and Fauna)):** Preserve, protect, maintain and where appropriate restore the terrestrial, aquatic and soil biodiversity, including internationally, EU and nationally designated sites and protected species.
- **PHH_1 (Population):** Provide high quality residential, community, working and recreational environments with access to sustainable transport options.
- **PHH_2 (Human Health):** Protect human health and wellbeing.
- **SG_1 (Soils and Geology):** Safeguard sensitive soil resources.
- **W_1 (Water Quality):** Protect and where necessary improve and maintain water quality and the management of watercourses, groundwater and the marine environment, in compliance with the requirements of the WFD objectives and measures.

- **AN_1 (Air Quality):** Minimise emissions of pollutants to air associated with transport.
- **AN_2 (Noise):** Minimise noise emissions associated with traffic and transport.
- **CC_1 (Climate Change):** Minimise contribution to Climate Change by adopting adaptation and mitigation measures.
- **MA_1 (Material Assets):** Make best use of existing infrastructure and promote the sustainable development of new infrastructure to meet the needs of the county's and Meath's population.
- **CH_1 (Cultural Heritage):** Protect places, features, buildings and landscapes of cultural, archaeological and/or architectural heritage from impact as a result of development.
- **LV_1 (Landscape and Visual):** Protect and maintain the special qualities of the landscape character including coastal character within Meath.

3.0 SEA Assessment Findings

3.1 Introduction

The Variation No.6 has been assessed against the SEA Framework to establish potential significant effects that may arise as a result of the Variation No.6. Full details of the assessment of the draft Variation No.6 can be found in **Section 5** of the **main SEA Report**.

The key to significance of effects is shown in **Table 3-1**.

Table 3-1: Key to Significance of Effects

Significance	Definitions of Effects
Significant positive effects	There is potential for significant positive effects upon receptors as a result of the plan / policy.
Minor positive effects	There is potential for minor positive effects upon receptors as a result of the plan / policy.
Mixed positive and negative effects	There is potential for mixed minor positive and minor negative effects upon receptors as a result of the plan / policy.
Minor negative effects	There is potential for minor negative effects upon receptors as a result of the plan / policy.
Significant negative effects	There is potential for significant negative effects upon receptors as a result of the plan / policy.
Uncertain effects	Uncertain or insufficient information on which to determine the appraisal at this stage.
Neutral	No effects are anticipated at this stage.

3.2 Assessment of Variation No.6

The assessment of the Variation No.6 was carried out against the SEA Framework. A summary of the potential significant effects is provided in **Table 3-2.** below. Further details on the assessment of the Variation No.6 can be found within **Section 5** of the **main SEA Report** and **Appendix B** to the **main SEA Report**.

Table 3-2: Summary of Potential Significant Effects

SA Objective	Number of Significant Effects			Summary of Effects
	Significant Positive	Significant Negative	Uncertain	
B_1: Biodiversity	1	0	1	Potential significant positive effects have been identified where objectives contribute directly to protecting habitats, and species, as well as safeguarding ecological connectivity. Uncertain effects have been identified where effects upon biodiversity are likely to be determined by the location and scale of development that may arise.
PHH_1: Population	1	0	0	Potential significant positive effects have been identified where objectives contribute to benefitting the community through mitigating noise and traffic impacts, providing employment opportunities and recreational opportunities.
PHH_2: Human Health	0	0	0	No significant effects have been identified for human health.

SA Objective	Number of Significant Effects			Summary of Effects
	Significant Positive	Significant Negative	Uncertain	
SG_1: Soils and Geology	0	0	0	No significant effects have been identified for soils and geology.
W_1: Water Quality	1	0	0	Potential significant positive effects have been identified where objectives result in the preservation of local water quality.
AN_1: Air Quality	0	0	0	No significant effects have been identified for air quality.
AN_2: Noise	0	0	0	No significant effects have been identified for noise.
CC_1: Climate Change	4	0	0	Potential significant positive effects have been identified where objectives contribute to safeguarding critical infrastructure, improving climatic resilience.
MA_1: Material Assets	5	0	0	Potential significant positive effects have been identified where objectives safeguard, maintain, and enhance strategic high-voltage energy transmission infrastructure.

SA Objective	Number of Significant Effects			Summary of Effects
	Significant Positive	Significant Negative	Uncertain	
CH_1: Cultural Heritage	0	0	2	Uncertain effects have been identified where there is potential for development and expansion of energy infrastructure to result in effects upon heritage assets depending upon the location and expansion of infrastructure.
LV_1: Landscape and Visual	0	0	1	Uncertain effects have been identified where there is potential for alterations to local landscape character, however, effects are likely to be determined by individual scheme design.

3.2.1 Assessment of Alternatives

The SEA Regulations require an assessment of the plan and its “reasonable alternatives”. The assessment of reasonable alternatives does not need include all possible alternatives, but only those that are realistic.

As part of the development of the Variation No. 6, MCC commissioned an assessment to establish optimum location to position a potential Energy Park.

Following an initial assessment, four sites were identified for detailed study:

- Woodland;
- Kinnegad;
- Meath Hill;
- and Gorman.

The assessment of alternative sites has been undertaken utilising the same method and level of detail as the preferred site allocations. Findings of the alternatives site assessment have been summarised below and presented in full in **Section 5.2** of the **main SEA Report** and **Appendix B**.

Overall, the assessment of alternative sites has resulted in fewer significant positive effects when compared to the Woodlands location. In line with this, there are more significant negative effects as a result of the alternative sites. In line with this, there are also more minor negative effects associated with alternative sites, and fewer minor positive effects associated with alternative sites in comparison to the preferred Woodlands site.

4.0 Cumulative Effects

A cumulative effects assessment was undertaken for the SEA. This looked at two different types of cumulative effects – Intra-plan and Inter-plan and project. These are defined as follows:

- Consideration of how different proposed policies and sites within the Variation No. 6 may interact and cause cumulative effects on a receptor (Intra-plan effects); and
- How the proposed policies and sites within the Variation No.6 could cause cumulative effects in association with other plans, policies and projects in the surrounding area (Inter-plan effects).

Further details on the assessment of cumulative effects can be found in **Section 6** of the **main SEA Report**.

4.1 Intra-plan effects

The intra-project cumulative effects resulting from the Variation No.6 have been outlined below. Further details on the assessment of the inter-project cumulative effects can be found within **Section 6.2** of the **main SEA Report**.

Positive effects have been identified for population, water quality, climate change, and material assets. This is particularly in relation to the potential for the development of the Green Energy Park, alongside other CDP development, to improve infrastructure capacity and support communities in Meath and surrounding counties.

Negative effects have been identified for soils and geology and water quality as there is potential for the development of the new Green Energy Park, alongside other CDP development, to result in increased land take of greenfield land and result in increased pressure on soil resources. Additionally, development at the site is anticipated to result in increased surface runoff, as well as increasing pressure on water resources through activities at the site.



Uncertain effects have been identified for biodiversity and cultural heritage as there is potential for development arising from Variation No.6 and CDP policies to result in disturbance to protected species and designated habitats and heritage assets, depending on the location and scale of development. Uncertain effects have also been identified for climate change as there is potential for Variation No.6 to interact with other policies within the CDP, which may result in increased fossil fuel usage, greenhouse gases and reduced climate resilience.

4.2 Inter-plan and project effects

An assessment of the potential cumulative effects of the Variation No.6 in association with other plans, policies and projects in the surrounding area was completed, looking at potential cumulative impacts at a strategic level. Further details on the assessment of the inter-project cumulative effects can be found within **Section 6.3** of the **main SEA Report**.

The following plans and projects were considered:

- Project Ireland 2040: National Planning Framework and National Development Plan;
- Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy 2019-2031 for the Eastern and Midland Region;
- National Climate Action Plan;
- National Policy Statement on Electricity Interconnection and National Energy Policy Frameworks;
- National Smart Metering programme and Grid Development Strategies (EirGrid / ESB Networks);
- River Basin Management Plan for Ireland;
- National Catchment-based Flood Risk Assessment and Management;
- Transport strategy for the Greater Dublin Area and National Sustainable Mobility Policy;
- Ireland’s National Biodiversity Action Plan;

- Neighbouring County Development Plans (full details of these can be found in **Section 6.3** of the **main SEA Report**); and
- Infrastructure projects (full details of these can be found in **Section 6.3** of the **main SEA Report**).

Positive effects have been identified for population, water quality, climate change, and material assets. Development associated with Variation No.6, alongside other CDP development, and development arising from neighbouring CDPs and infrastructure projects has potential to improve infrastructure capacity and support communities in Meath and surrounding counties.

Negative effects have been identified for soils and geology and water quality as there is potential for the development of the Variation No. 6 Green Energy Park, alongside other CDP development and development arising from neighbouring CDPs and infrastructure projects, to result in increased land take of greenfield land and result in increased pressure on soil resources. Additionally, development at the site is anticipated to result in increased surface runoff, as well as increasing pressure on water resources through activities at the site.

Uncertain effects have been identified for biodiversity and cultural heritage as there is potential for development arising from Variation No.6 and CDP policies, as well as infrastructure projects to result in disturbance to protected species and designated habitats and heritage assets, depending on the location and scale of development. Uncertain effects have also been identified for climate change as there is potential for Variation No.6 to interact with other plans and policies, as well as infrastructure developments, which may result in increased fossil fuel usage, greenhouse gases and reduced climate resilience.



5.0 Mitigation, Enhancement and Monitoring Measures

5.1 Mitigation Measures

Mitigation of significant negative and uncertain effects of the plan and enhancement of positive effects are a key purpose of SEA. The SEA Regulations require that mitigation measures are considered to prevent, reduce or offset any potential significant negative effects on the environment. Mitigation measures have been outlined in full in **Section 7** of the **main SEA Report** and **Appendix B**.

Mitigation provided by other County Development Plan policies have been outlined within **Section 7.2** of the **main SEA Report**. The following CDP policies have provided mitigation measures for Variation No.6.

- HER POL 27 - 41;
- HER OBJ 30 - 40;
- HER POL 47;
- HER POL 48;
- INF OBJ 74;
- INF OBJ 38;
- HER POL 44-46;
- HER OBJ 44-45
- INF POL 19-25;
- HER POL 1-26;
- HER OBJ 1-29;
- HER POL 49-52; and
- HER OBJ 46-50.

Proposed mitigation measures have been set out in full in **Section 7.3** of the **main SEA Report**. The preparation of Variation No. 6 was undertaken in parallel with the SEA and AA processes, ensuring that environmental considerations informed the Variation from the outset. The integrated assessments identified potential

environmental effects arising from the scale and nature of the proposed Green Energy Park and specific mitigation measures were proposed as the Variation was being drafted and are therefore included in the Draft Variation. These include:

Policy LEU POL 1

To ensure that large energy user development, including extensions and intensification of existing facilities, achieves high standards of energy and water efficiency, environmental protection and resource management.

- **LEU OBJ 3a**: To require energy-efficient design and operation, including cooling and associated plant, and demonstration of anticipated annual and peak electricity demand and energy-efficiency performance
- **LEU OBJ 3b**: To require 80% of annual operational electricity consumption in line with the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (Large Energy User Connection Policy, 2025) and compliance of emissions with legislation and EPA guidelines.
- **LEU OBJ 3c**: To require compliance with applicable electricity connection requirements while promoting measures, where feasible and consistent with grid operator requirements, to reduce reliance on fossil fuels and improve alignment with renewable generation, including appropriate storage and demand flexibility.
- **LEU OBJ 3d**: To require demonstration of sufficient electricity, water and wastewater capacity, having regard to cumulative demand from existing, permitted and reasonably foreseeable development, and to ensure that necessary infrastructure is available before the relevant phase becomes operational via engagement with relevant authorities.
- **LEU OBJ 3e**: To require cooling systems that minimize freshwater consumption and water losses through efficient design, recirculation and appropriate use of harvested rainwater or reclaimed water. System selection shall address combined water and energy performance, peak demand, drought resilience and projected climate change.



- **LEU OBJ 3f**: To require avoidance of route potable-water use for cooling unless demonstrated necessary following assessment of practicable alternatives. Water supply, abstraction and discharge shall protect community water supplies, prevent deterioration of waterbody status and safeguard ecological flows and water-dependent habitats and species, including during drought and cumulatively with other development.
- **LEU OBJ 3g**: To require recovery and beneficial use of waste heat where technically, environmentally and economically feasible. Where immediate use is not feasible, proposals shall demonstrate the reasons and safeguard practicable opportunities for future heat recovery and connection to heat networks.
- **LEU OBJ 3h**: To require measures to minimise whole-life greenhouse-gas emissions and resource consumption, including sustainable construction, equipment repair and reuse, responsible waste management, and appropriate decommissioning and site reuse or restoration.
- **LEU OBJ 3i**: To require demonstration that noise, vibration, lighting, air emissions, fuel storage and discharges will not give rise to unacceptable environmental or amenity effects, individually or cumulatively, including during generator testing and emergency operation.
- **LEU OBJ 3j**: To require measurable commitments and arrangements for monitoring electricity consumption, renewable electricity matching, greenhouse-gas emissions, water consumption and losses, and useful heat recovery, with implementation and proportionate reporting.

5.2 Residual Effects

Following the implementation of mitigation outlined above, residual significant effects have been identified in relation to:

- CC_1 (Climate Change): Uncertain effects due to the potential for use of fossil fuels by Large Energy Users.

5.3 Monitoring Measures

The SEA Regulations require that monitoring is undertaken on a plan so that the significant effects of implementation can be identified, and remedial action imposed. The purpose of the monitoring is to provide an important measure of the sustainability outcome of the final plan, and to measure the performance of the plan against sustainability objectives and targets. Monitoring is also used to manage uncertainty, improve knowledge, enhance transparency and accountability, and to manage sustainability information.

As a Variation to the County Development Plan, once adopted, monitoring will be undertaken as part of the on-going monitoring and review of the Meath County Development Plan. It is recommended that additional monitoring is undertaken to monitor the utilisation and quantities of fossil fuels used by Large Energy Users at within the Green Energy Park.

Meath County Council is responsible for monitoring and the preparation of monitoring evaluation report(s), the publication of these reports and, if necessary, the carrying out of corrective action.



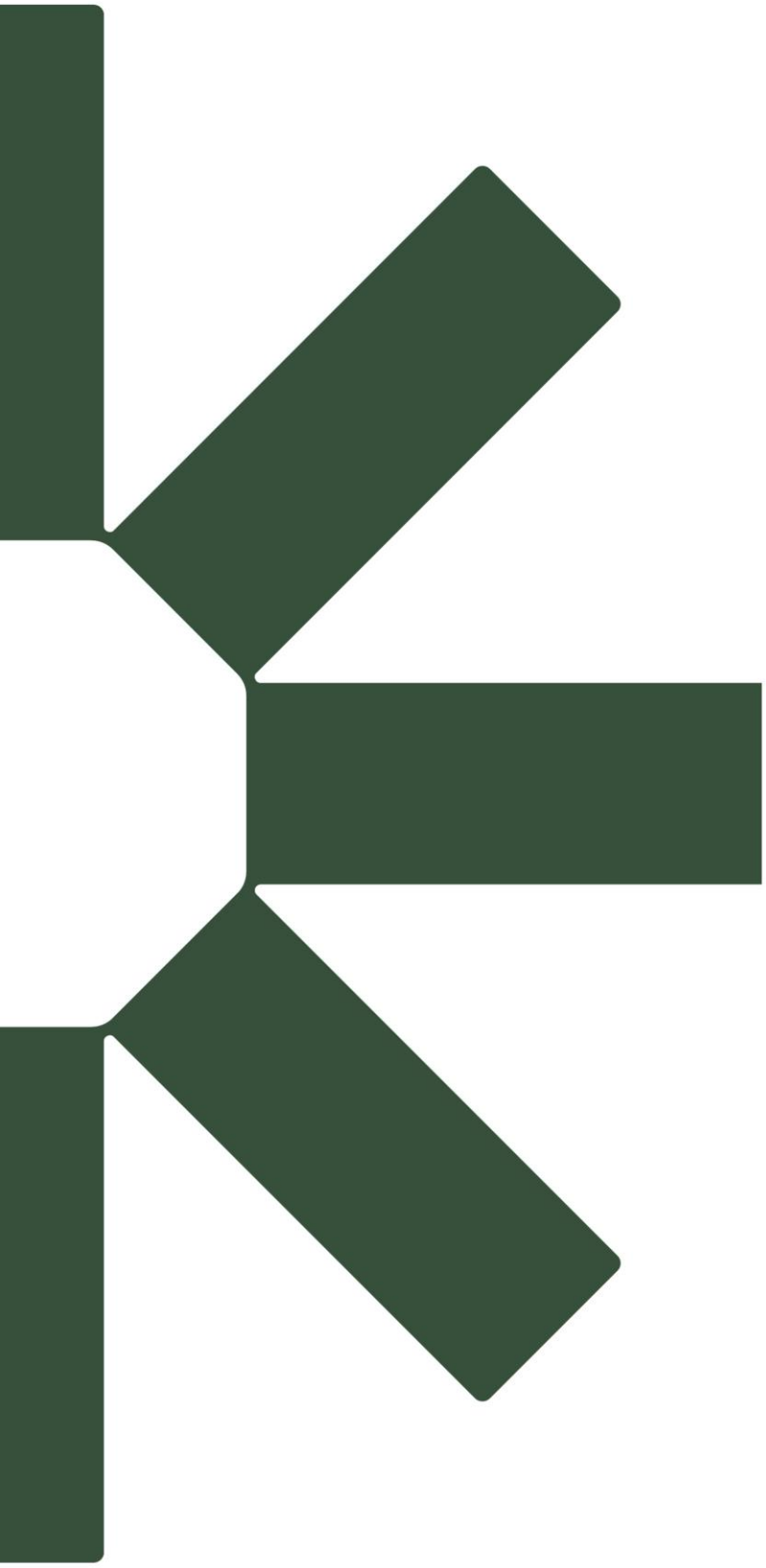
6.0 Next Steps

This SEA Report is being published for consultation for a four week period from 24th November to 22nd December. Following consultation on both this SEA Report and Draft Variation No. 6, comments received on both will be considered. Any necessary changes will be made to the SEA and to the Draft Variation No. 6 in response to consultee comments will be reflected within the next iteration of the Variation No.6 and SEA.

The Variation No. 6 is expected to be published in January 2026.

Table 6-1: Indicative Draft Variation No.6 Timetable

Local Plan Activity	Timeframe
Consultation on the Variation No. 6	November – December 2026
Adoption of Variation No. 6	January 2027
SEA Statement	Spring 2027



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