



West Tyrone Area Plan 2019 Public and Community Consultation Stage I Report

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I. Introduction

The West Tyrone Area Plan 2019 when complete will replace the Strabane Area Plan 2001 and the Omagh Area Plan 2002.

Preparation and production of the Plan is the responsibility of the Planning Service, particularly the Omagh Divisional Office Area Plan Team with input from the Development Plan Research Team in Headquarters.

The Planning Service is at an early stage of this preparation, having gathered initial views from the two councils and other interested parties in the two districts, and is moving towards the publication of the preliminary consultation document, the West Tyrone Area Plan Issues Paper.

Community Technical Aid (CTA) was appointed by the Planning Service after a tendering process to undertake public and community consultation in the West Tyrone Area. This is in line with previous Area Plan consultation and is in keeping with consultation good practice guidelines. Such guidelines, particularly those issued by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and the Equality Commission, dictate that early and timely consultation with all parties in a process is important. In particular there is an emphasis placed on ensuring those most disadvantaged in our society are proactively and innovatively engaged in consultation processes. CTA has always adopted the principles of equity and social inclusion, when reaching out to excluded groups and endeavouring to ensure that there is a more level playing field so that all parties can engage in consultation processes on an equal basis.

On this basis we welcome the appointment by the Planning Service and the approach agreed to by it in undertaking this consultation. This report is an account of the first stage of the consultation - an early "pre-consultation" stage wherein, again in keeping with good practice, all parties affected by the Area Plan are given an opportunity to shape the outcomes of that plan preparation process right at the beginning.

From March 2005 to June 2005 we designed, planned and carried out the first stage of the consultation and this report is an account of the findings of this first stage.

This report was submitted on 10 June 2005 to the Planning Service to inform the preparation of the Issues Paper which is due for publication in September or October 2005. Thereafter the report was issued to all participants as feedback and a record of the findings to date.

2. Methodology

The process was divided into two stages: Stage 1 as the pre-consultation stage and Stage 2, which will commence in September or October 2005 and run until December 2005 or January 2006. The second stage will involve extensive consultation with the community sector and will be widened to include members of the public.

The main tasks and steps undertaken during Stage 1 have included:

- identification of community, voluntary, environmental and equality groupings within the Omagh and Strabane District Council areas using CTA's database, District Council, and regional and sub-regional community sector sources;
- preparation of briefing papers from Planning Service and CTA to assist groups in their understanding of the process and how to get involved;
- writing to 240 groups in the two council areas in March 2005 encouraging them to get involved and register their interest in the process;
- contacting representative organisations for the nine equality groupings (Section 75 groups);
- organising and holding six community information exchange meetings in April and May 2005 to facilitate the initial dialogue between the Planning Service and the strategic community groups so that the main issues could be gathered; and
- holding outreach and education sessions with a number of groups operating in areas of weak community infrastructure to raise awareness and further understanding of the process.

CTA was keen to ensure that the consultation with the community sector was as focused as possible. We therefore, after an initial mail out to all groups identified in the two council areas of Omagh and Strabane, concentrated specific attention on the more strategic community and voluntary groups in the area. They were invited to six community information exchange meetings which were held in April and May 2005 (see Appendix 1 for list of dates and venues and Appendix 2 for participants). Feedback from these meetings, together with outreach sessions with groups in areas of weak community infrastructure, discussions with organisations representing Section 75 interests, and analysis of written submissions sent to us from community and voluntary groups has provided the main information sources for the views comments and issues recorded and reported in this report.

Throughout this stage in the process we worked closely with the umbrella networks that assisted with the identification of the strategic groups and the groups who could benefit from outreach. These networks: Omagh Forum for Rural Associations; FOCUS; The Strabane and District Community Network; Villages Together and the Mourneberg Partnership, were invaluable in terms of providing guidance and assistance on these matters and we are most grateful for their input.

All of the views, comments and issues either discussed, written or sent by email during Stage 1 have been collated and summarised. They are reported under the four headings of:

- area-wide issues (views and comments of a strategic nature relevant to both Omagh and Strabane);
- locational issues (covering specific towns, villages and other small settlements or locations within Omagh and Strabane);
- written submissions (received following our request for groups to submit information on the issues and needs of communities in the Area Plan area); and
- consultation with equality groupings;

in the following sections of the report.

3. Area-wide Issues

3.1 Housing

General Issues

The issue of housing dominated the debate throughout all aspects of the consultation. It is one of the most important features of the Area Plan process and therefore generated considerable commentary. At one level participants said there needs to be more housing in parts of both districts in order to support and encourage the survival of rural communities. At another level some parts of the West Tyrone area were said to be under pressure and not as able to cope with more housing development.

Housing development should respect the character and tradition of settlements that exist in this area and the Area Plan should recognise and value the importance of tradition and local identity and include design guidelines which respect and enhance vernacular building styles. Otherwise, it was feared that suburban type developments more suited to other parts of the region would begin to dominate the landscape and detrimentally alter the character of the West Tyrone countryside.

Housing developments of a sizeable nature which are going to change the size of settlements in Omagh and Strabane should also provide for community facilities and services and not allow settlements to expand with little or no attention paid to their sustainability.

Communities are not in favour of widespread housing in the open countryside. They do not want to see West Tyrone following the house building trends seen in Fermanagh and the area north of Strabane.

Housing Growth Indicators

There were several queries regarding the analysis of the Regional Development Strategy's Housing Growth Indicator figures and how the Area Plan Team might allocate the figures across the two districts. Some participants believed a fairer system might involve a separation of the urban from the rural areas at the outset of the process to ensure a fair and equitable housing distribution for the rural areas.

Some debated the low figures allocated in the Housing Growth Indicators and said they should be uplifted even beyond the Planning Service's anticipated uplift. There was a real fear that if a substantial proportion of the housing allocation has already been used (which is the case in some places already), that community housing needs will not be met. The Area Plan Team was urged to highlight this point in the Issues Paper.

Rural Housing

This particular aspect of the housing debate dominated much of the discussion. There was a lot of emotion and support for the introduction of a specific rural policy that will positively encourage and facilitate the rural population in terms of obtaining planning permission for housing for local people. This was seen as the biggest single issue facing the rural community in West Tyrone at present.

Farming families feel unable to survive, not only because of the agricultural decline that has taken place across the country, but because they very often find it difficult to get new housing on their land to support the farm. They want to keep their young people in the locality and they do not understand why planning policies have to be applied so rigidly. On this basis they urged the West Tyrone Area Plan to more adequately and innovatively address this issue - by building exceptions into the Plan policies that will "positively discriminate" in favour of local people. Through the use of occupancy and proof of residency conditions they believe the planning system has the ability to overcome these issues and overcome them in such a way as to ensure the sustainability and vitality of rural areas is supported, encouraged and revitalised. The Plan has a vital role to play in this regard and the opportunity for innovation and real change must be grasped.

Affordable and Social Housing

Although in parts of the two districts house prices are affordable when compared with other districts participants did stress the importance of ensuring that this remains the case. This could be done by factoring into the Plan a policy which will insist developers provide a range of housing types and prices into developments over a certain size. Those settlements which are experiencing some pressure in this regard and those within commuting distance of the main urban areas and employment locations of Omagh town, Strabane and Derry could benefit from such a policy.

Young people throughout the region are finding it increasingly difficult to 'get on to the property ladder' and young people in West Tyrone are no exception to this, participants said. The Plan can address this issue effectively and the Issues Paper needs to encourage further debate on the subject.

On the issue of social housing the general point made was that pockets of social housing need exist in various parts of the two districts. The Plan must recognise this fact and through a thorough assessment of the true picture of need, cater for meeting that need in the housing zonings and policies in the Plan.

Specialist Housing

There is a need for specialist housing and fold type accommodation throughout the rural area. Older people have housing needs beyond what is currently being offered on the private market and communities believe that the appropriate statutory agencies need to take account of this.

3.2 Rural Services

Linked with the range of housing and rural housing issues discussed was the comment that rural services are very much in decline. Schools, for example, are closing in many places primarily because there is an insufficient and inequitable distribution of housing land in the two districts. While some areas and settlements have adequate housing and therefore people to support community services and facilities, many other areas do not.

The Area Plan Team was urged to take a holistic view of the rural area and ensure that through policies and equitable housing zonings rural communities continue to

be sustainable and services like schools, shops, churches and transport are supported.

3.3 Farm Diversification

In line with the commonly discussed theme of rural isolation, deprivation and a declining rural economy and rural community, participants at all meetings stressed the need for an approach in the Plan that would support and enable rural diversification. This does not have to be large scale industry, it was said, but even through the designation of small, carefully chosen business locations the rural economy could diversify and consolidate. Some asked that a policy be included in the Plan to support such diversification on farms as well.

3.4 Dispersed Rural Communities

Participants referred to the traditional clachan style development which would at one time have existed across the area. This type of development - groups of five or six houses clustered together and sharing one access lane - was said to be a more sustainable and acceptable form of housing development and one which the Area Plan should support. The designation of Dispersed Rural Communities (DRCs) is one related option available to the Area Plan Team and one which participants believed the Omagh and Strabane areas could benefit from. The use of DRC designations could help support the parts of the countryside which are suffering from population and economic decline. If designated as DRCs these declining areas could attract more people who in turn would assist with their socio-economic improvement.

3.5 Conservation of the Natural Environment

Local people believe that the native species in the countryside are being compromised by intensive planting of non-native species such as Sitka spruce. This type of tree has been especially planted by the Forest Service and it was stressed that the detrimental effect on vast areas of the landscape could be prevented if the Area Plan contained a general policy on the planting of native species which could then be applied in the development control process.

There were conflicting views on whether the countryside in the West Tyrone area has been afforded enough or too much protection. Some said that there is adequate protection of the countryside, especially with the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and green belt designations - where it was said that the difficulties involved in getting planning permission for houses is stifling growth - and the special protection afforded to peat bogs and wetland areas. Others said that the beauty and unique qualities of the natural environment is what makes the West Tyrone so special and that a balance must be struck between protection, sustainability and encouraging new development and growth into the two council areas.

3.6 Renewable Energy

There was considerable debate on the subject of renewable energy and wind farms. There are a number of wind farms in the area, especially in the Omagh district. The size and location of these wind farms was often a controversial issue and one which community groups said local people were aggrieved at.

The main issue centred on the location of the turbines with participants saying that many had been sited in scenic areas and had in their opinion resulted in a "blot on the landscape". Furthermore it was said that there appeared to be inconsistencies in terms of the application of the planning policy on this issue, ie that some wind turbines are located in suitable locations, others are not.

By contrast, some participants did urge the Area Plan Team to consider the use of more sustainable forms of energy generation and to reflect this in the Issues Paper as a growth area and one to be welcomed.

3.7 Infrastructure and Sewerage

Many housing developments, particularly in the Omagh district, were said to have developed without adequate infrastructure upgrades and improvements, especially sewage systems and that this issue needs to be addressed and recognised in the Issues Paper.

3.8 Roads, Traffic and Parking

The roads in the two districts were said to be in very poor condition and that this, together with poor infrastructure, is having serious detrimental effects on the economy. Congestion problems in towns and villages are said to be adversely affecting retail trade and the Area Plan was urged to address this problem particularly in terms of facilitating parking in town centres.

Alternatives to the car, including cycling and walking, were mentioned as needing support in the Plan, with a greater emphasis being placed on healthier methods of travel. An increasing number of people cycle in and out of Omagh and Strabane to work and shop and it was felt that the Area Plan could promote and facilitate the development of a network of safe cycle ways and shared paths to help reduce the number of unnecessary car journeys in the two districts.

Some participants said the communities they represent are in favour of more bypass and through pass schemes for towns in the two districts. Others however said that some of the schemes have been put in place too late and should have been constructed when they were first planned 20 to 30 years ago.

Participants described the difficulties involved in accessing services and facilities because of a lack of adequate rural transport. Despite the rural transport schemes in operation there is a need for more road upgrading schemes and more rural transport schemes.

3.9 Industry

Industrial zonings in towns and villages across the two districts were said to be much needed. However participants also said that in terms of encouraging agricultural diversification and enabling small businesses to establish outside the main urban areas, there should be provision made for small business units. Community representatives said that industrial growth does not have to be concentrated into one or two large industrial areas but should be more evenly distributed throughout the countryside and the settlements in the Plan area.

3.10 Built Environment

While limited, there was some discussion on the protection and conservation of important buildings. It was stressed that the Issues Paper should highlight the fact that while not all aspects of the built environment can be afforded the protection given by listed building status, it is important to recognise that the character of settlements is enhanced by traditional buildings.

The West Tyrone Area Plan has a critical role to play here in terms of protecting important aspects of the built environment and built heritage of the area. Mill buildings were singled out as buildings in need of specific protection, especially as there are so few of them left.

Participants stressed that overall protection and wise conservation of the built environment will assist with the preservation of Omagh and Strabane's local history.

3.11 Tourism

Tourism projects and the encouragement of development which supports the growth of tourism in the area should be factored into the Plan. Sustainable tourism is regarded as a better way forward so that development does not compromise the countryside and the preservation of the natural resources of Omagh and Strabane. While there is more limited demand for tourism in Strabane compared to Omagh, there is still the potential for growth in this sector in Strabane. The rural economy is not necessarily dependent upon tourism for income but this is changing and needs some vision and planning.

A balance needs to be struck between protection of the environment, tourism and the need for housing.

3.12 Mineral Extraction

West Tyrone has excellent mineral resources with deposits of stone, gravel and sand. The community wishes to see adequate protection of the countryside through effective planning controls over mining; a restriction on the number of sites permitted to mine; and where mining does occur that adequate landscaping and natural screening is put in place as well as planning conditions requiring that when mining operations cease the area is restored and enhanced.

3.13 Open Space, Sport and Recreation

There is a general lack of open space in urban housing areas and developments in both council areas. Many participants cited examples of housing developments being completed and not having provided adequate areas of open and green space. While there was an appreciation that these issues are addressed through the development control process and the application specifically of Planning Policy Statement 7 - Quality Residential Environments, it was stressed that the Plan has a strategic role to play here in insisting that high standards of design and key site requirements for all housing development schemes include sufficient provision for open space, green areas, recreation and other appropriate community facilities.

3.14 Community Facilities

There are numerous community facilities in the towns in Omagh and Strabane but smaller settlements and villages need support in this regard. While no specific zonings and designations for community use are possible at this scale, a policy stating that community development projects that meet identified community needs will be given priority in the Plan would be a welcome addition and improvement for community groups which have often been struggling to improve and develop community facilities for their areas.

3.15 Equality and New Targeting Social Need

Equality issues raised by participants ranged from the closure of acute services at the Omagh Hospital and the adverse impact this will have on vulnerable groups and the rural population in Omagh, to the range of issues associated with increasing numbers of people from eastern Europe moving into Omagh and Strabane and working and living locally.

Participants appreciated that the hospital closure is not within the Area Plan remit and function and is a decision being taken elsewhere, but they nonetheless stressed the social, economic and physical impacts that this decision will have on the area. These impacts, it was said, are relevant to the Area Plan and will have far-reaching implications for the future development of the Omagh area and the population changes that will inevitably result.

Participants asked that the Issues Paper highlight this important factor and at least provide the opportunity for a discussion of the effects the closure will have on the physical land use patterns in the area. Physical planning will, in the community's opinion, have to take account of a change as substantial as a hospital closure, even from the point of view of future housing zonings.

The number of ethnic minority groups migrating to both Strabane and Omagh is increasing, especially to key employment locations with jobs in mining, quarrying, engineering, meat processing and mushroom farming.

Communities welcome the arrival of people with different cultures and backgrounds to the locality. However they do see the potential for the rights of these people to be exploited and believe that the Area Plan should take account of their specific housing, employment and transportation needs.

Participants, especially in the Strabane area, stressed the need for the principles of New TSN to be applied properly and with more effect. From a planning point of view they believed this should result, for example, in industrial zonings and economic development policies matched to the areas of greatest deprivation and economic need.

3.16 Planning Process and Consultation Process

In terms of the processes involved in preparing the Area Plan and the impact on the Plan of the Review of Public Administration (RPA), participants sought assurances that policy and legislative changes elsewhere would be taken account of at this early stage in the Plan's preparation so that key details, facts and figures would not have to change at a later date.

There were specific queries regarding the impact of the RPA proposals to return planning powers to the re-configured councils and what eventual impact this will have on the West Tyrone Area Plan, particularly if the Plan is not finalised in time for the implementation of the RPA proposals.

Some participants asked what "conformity with the RDS" really means. This was raised in the context of the West Tyrone Area Plan having to be in general conformity with the RDS and yet having to accurately reflect the true house building figures and not what is dictated by Housing Growth Indicator figures for the two districts.

On a more specific point, there was some discussion on the Planning Service and its accountability and willingness to genuinely engage and listen to communities. Some communities, it was stressed, are sceptical of the planning system in terms of its accessibility to communities. Many people who have experience of the planning system have unfortunately had a negative experience and therefore have some difficulty in believing that this process of engagement is genuine and is representative of the move away from consultation to participation.

4. Locational Issues

4.1 Omagh District Council Area

Omagh Town

Omagh town has specific needs relating to the need for better quality housing developments, open space, and traffic, transportation and parking issues.

There has been a substantial increase in the number of housing developments in the town in recent years. However, these developments are not, in the community's opinion, of a high standard and are detracting both visually and physically from the town. Some people from the town believe that there has been enough housing development and that the Plan now needs to rationalise the real need for more housing against what speculators might want to build especially as the sewerage infrastructure in some instances (for example at Retreat Manor and Retreat Heights) cannot support the new housing. There is a specific problem in the Campsie end of the town where over-development has led to the creation of a 'concrete jungle' with little open space or parking for residents.

Community groups asked if the Area Plan could go further than existing planning policy and limit the density of housing developments and thus provide more comprehensive and well-planned housing areas which cater for the needs of their residents especially in terms of open space and adequate sewerage infrastructure.

Participants highlighted the need for more social housing in the town as the waiting lists and levels of demand are quite high. The Hospital Road estate, for example, has been partially demolished by the Housing Executive with no re-building plans.

Affordable housing for young people in the town is also important especially as more and more recent private developments have been expensive and beyond the budget of most first time buyers.

The town centre has a range of traffic and transportation problems which, in the view of the community and retailers, is hampering economic growth in the town. More car parking spaces are needed in the town centre to attract shoppers back from the edge of town centres where shopping (and parking) is more convenient.

Congestion and traffic flows also need eased in the town particularly if the local market is to be re-introduced, an issue which provoked a mixed welcome from local people.

The provision and support for cycling and walking routes as an alternative to the car (and its associated problems) was offered as one solution to the town's congestion problems. The facilitation of such sustainable alternatives is within the Area Plan's remit and a tool which should be used effectively by the Area Plan Team.

On a more strategic point, there was some mention of the poor road infrastructure linking Omagh with Enniskillen. Participants said this will worsen if the decision to close the acute services at Omagh Hospital goes ahead and the people of Omagh especially will suffer the adverse impacts. Connected to this was the belief that the

countryside between Omagh and Enniskillen would come under pressure for more housing to service commuters.

Specific mention was made of an area of council-owned land behind Riverview Park in the town which is worthy of protection and which has the potential for development as a community garden or play space. The river in this area should also be developed and provision for improvements to the river (such as a walkway and provision of wheelchair access) should be facilitated by the Plan.

Carrickmore

Carrickmore needs more land for housing as most of the existing land within the development limit in the town has already been developed. Communities stressed the importance of adequately assessing the needs of a hinterland town such as Carrickmore, expressing concern that the interests and needs of the community there (as in other hinterland locations) could be lost in the emphasis on the larger urban centres.

Participants also mentioned that existing industrial land has been developed and that there is now a need for more zonings for industrial and business use in the town.

Drumquin

Drumquin village has experienced considerable expansion in recent years, mostly due to its short commuting distance from Omagh town. While additional housing development is welcomed, local people are not always able to purchase the houses as demand is pushing up prices.

The community asked if kinship ties or proof of residency conditions could be introduced to overcome the difficulty of obtaining planning permission for single houses.

The village needs more areas of open space and sports facilities as there is limited space there at present. A local community association is interested in, for example, developing a park project at the lake just on the edge of the village in an attempt to enhance the community facilities in the area and asked that the Area Plan supports and encourages this type of improvement in the village.

The location, siting and design of wind farms and turbines is a particularly contentious issue in Drumquin. While some of these farms are not criticised, others (especially at Lack and Bessy Bell) are. The criticisms centre on issues of visual intrusion, lack of integration and perceived incorrect siting of the turbines. Participants stressed the importance of a policy in the Area Plan which would provide clear and consistent advice on the design and siting of such facilities.

On a final point, participants mentioned the road between Omagh town and Drumquin which is heavily used and in poor condition. Roads Service should be encouraged via the Area Plan process to examine the upgrading of roads such as this one which links major employment and service centres with dormitory settlements and where traffic levels are set to continue increasing.

Loughmacrory

Loughmacrory has experienced considerable development in recent years and there were conflicting views expressed during the consultation as to whether it can take more. Some participants believe that the village is almost at capacity, others (including the local community development association) believe that it needs more as the infrastructure, services and facilities are ideally placed and suited to more development and expansion.

The community in Loughmacrory does not want the village to be marginalised in the Area Plan process and stressed the importance of an indepth analysis of the needs and issues there.

In the past young people left the village in search of housing and employment. Recent development and growth in the village has fortunately reversed this trend and local people want to see this continued and further supported by the Plan. There is also a need for expanded industrial zonings to facilitate the growth in this sector in the village.

Creggan

The community in Creggan does not want to suffer the same over-development that has been occurring in other villages and small settlements in the district. Participants urged the Area Plan Team to consider the use of residency conditions which would favour planning permission for dwellings for local people over dwellings for people from outside the area. In this way the community believes that at the end of the Plan period Creggan should not be suffering the ill effects suffered by other commuter towns.

In the interests of containing development the community sees an opportunity for the designation of a Dispersed Rural Community at the Sultan Crossroads just outside Creggan. This would be suitable as a Dispersed Rural Community and therefore for more development given the cluster of dwellings there and the fact that historically this natural settlement has supported a local school. The natural landscape in this area has already been compromised and development would not necessarily further detract from the damage caused by the recent topographical changes including the removal of the esker at Sandbar Hill.

The main road infrastructure, especially the road into Creggan, needs upgrading to cope with the additional traffic developments in the area.

One of the most important community issues in the area in recent times has been the closure of the local school. The community believes that the Area Plan has an important role in terms of sustaining a local community and maintaining vital services such as a school. Through the encouragement of more housing it is hoped that the Area Plan can help to sustain Creggan and its local economy.

Stralongford

Stralongford is in need of more community facilities and an enhanced roads infrastructure. The community there also wants more housing development but has concerns about the potential for over-development and bungalow blight.

Greencastle

Participants representing the small village of Greencastle expressed concern about the potential loss of access to services which will be exacerbated with the imminent closure of acute services at Omagh Hospital.

Seskinore

There was concern expressed by some participants that the infrastructure and other needs of small villages such as Seskinore could be overlooked in the Plan preparation process.

Drumduff and Drumnakilly

The community in the Drumduff and Drumnakilly areas has identified the need for more housing (particularly in the area around the community centre); and an infrastructure upgrade especially of roads in the area. It also called for the creation of river walks and cycle paths and further employment opportunities and growth in the areas.

4.2 Strabane District Council Area

Strabane Town

Participants highlighted roads, traffic and transportation as the main problems in Strabane town both in terms of congestion and in terms of the lack of infrastructure to cope effectively with the volume of traffic in and through the town. The A5 was especially mentioned as being a dangerous and over-used road and that the road connection to Strabane to Derry needs upgrading.

Traffic problems are exacerbated by the combination of school traffic and cross-border freight traffic. Poor infrastructure, especially the road network, is having a detrimental effect on inward investment and the ability of local businesses to export and transport goods.

There are higher than average levels of economic deprivation and unemployment in the town and these are reflected in a higher level of social housing need there than in other parts of the district.

Affordability in the housing market is increasingly becoming an issue of concern to communities in the town. They believe that the increase in house prices is due to the proximity of the town to Derry City and the trend that has been emerging in recent years where commuters live in less expensive areas and travel to work in larger urban areas where housing is more expensive. The adverse impacts of this trend however is that local people are moving further out of the town in search of more affordable housing and with car ownership levels lower than the regional average this makes it more difficult for people on lower incomes to access key services and facilities.

Castledearg

Participants said the infrastructure in Castledearg is not in place to cope with more development. The roads to Castledearg are in poor condition and the volume of cross-border traffic is further exacerbating this problem. This also makes attracting investment into the area difficult.

Public transport in the area is poor and this results in local people feeling marginalised and forgotten in this isolated part of the region.

There is a need for more open space especially as green spaces are being lost to development. Equally there is a need for old buildings to be preserved such as those on the site of the workhouse and hospital. Participants said these would be particularly suitable for community development projects. The Plan should identify them as buildings worthy of protection and thereby prevent them being lost to housing developers.

Similarly an assessment should be undertaken of important buildings in the town which in the interests of preserving a record of the town's built heritage, should be afforded protection. Mill buildings in particular were mentioned, as was the Derg Hospital.

House prices in the town are less expensive than in Derry and Letterkenny and commuters to these cities are capitalising on the more affordable housing in Castledearg. The resultant increase in the number of people moving to the town but working and socialising elsewhere is contributing little to community life in Castledearg. In the interests of community sustainability the Area Plan Team was urged to address this problem.

Support for enterprise and economic growth in the town could be boosted if the Area Plan zones more land for industrial and business use. Evidence in support of a need for more industrial zonings is provided by the fact that the enterprise centre on the edge of the town is fully let. New industrial space should however integrate carefully into the existing environment, particularly in locations adjacent to residential areas. The Area Plan Team should therefore carefully select land for industrial zonings.

From an equality and New TSN perspective, community representatives in Castledearg believe that New TSN did not impact at all on the town. This should be addressed by the Area Plan.

Newtownstewart

Newtownstewart has benefited from the scheme which bypasses the town but the roads around the town are in need of improvement.

Participants identified a lack of facilities and activities for young people in the town and a need for community safety issues to be taken account of.

Sion Mills

Sion Mills is suffering in economic terms from the effects of a declining mill industry and recent job losses at Herdman's Mill.

The growth in private sector housing developments in recent times has also slowed and there is now a need for new development and growth in the town.

Participants felt community issues in Sion Mills are often overlooked and that the town can be overshadowed by its proximity to Strabane town. The Area Plan needs to encourage and direct more growth to the town.

Artigarvan

Artigarvan has social housing need as some local people experience difficulties in accessing affordable private housing. The impact of this has been the movement of young people from the village to Magheramason or Donemana.

The population of Artigarvan has increased dramatically in recent years, due particularly to the employment opportunities available in the local Leckpatrick creamery. However this population increase has not been matched by an improvement or increase in facilities or services for residents. Local roads are in poor condition, shops and social facilities are lacking and the public transport service is weak.

There is also a need for new business space in the village and the zoning of appropriate land for this use. The community believes this is important to the economic health of the village so that it does not lose out to Derry City.

Ballymagorry

Traffic problems in Ballymagorry have worsened to such an extent that residents have difficulty crossing the main road safely. Transport services in and around the village are weak and the community wants to see this situation improve. Whilst acknowledging that this is outside the remit of the Area Plan, the community asked that the Area Plan Team liaise with the Roads Service on what the village needs in roads and transportation terms and how this will and needs to correspond with housing development and other Plan zonings.

Aughabrack

The population in Aughabrack has decreased in recent years. As a small settlement it therefore needs support and more housing to be sustainable. The community asked the Area Plan to consider this when allocating housing to settlements as small as Aughabrack to ensure that it is treated fairly. There is a specific need for specialist accommodation for older people and social housing in the hamlet.

Participants also identified a need for a zoning for small industrial units particularly in the area adjacent to the community hall.

Donemana

Donemana needs land zoned for small business use. Small businesses should be encouraged and facilitated in the settlement instead of what the community perceives as an emphasis on economic investment and business growth in Derry City.

The community sees recent housing development as having a detrimental effect on the viability and health of the area. Some participants said Donemana has almost reached its capacity in terms of housing development. There is however a need for housing for local people, especially young people and older people.

Given the strategic location of the settlement and the traffic which passes through the area, the community believes the roads should be improved and the Duncastle Road from Donemana to Derry in particular.

Plumbridge

Participants reported difficulties in obtaining planning permission for single houses in Plumbridge. Young people are therefore having to leave the area which is compromising the sustainability of the village.

Bready

The character and size of the hamlet of Bready is changing as a result of housing development. The 'dormitory settlement' effect is contributing to the deterioration of the social fabric of the hamlet and having a negative impact on traffic levels in the area.

Ballylaw

In the Ballylaw area farmers experience difficulties obtaining planning permission for housing for family members. This is adversely affecting the sustainability of this small yet important rural community.

5. Written Submissions

5.1 Omawest

Omawest is a community development association based in Omagh Town that covers an area representing approximately 40% of Omagh's population. The association submitted a Green Spaces and Environmental Regeneration Feasibility Study and a community audit to CTA. A number of issues relevant to the Area Plan are contained within these reports and are summarised below.

The main problems and issues in the area include housing and overdevelopment; roads; drainage; anti-social behaviour; and a general lack of play and youth facilities.

Omawest referred to the rapidly growing population associated with the increase in new housing developments in the area, which has meant that some aspects of infrastructure and service provision have not kept pace with community needs. In addition, a high level of households without access to a car has been a contributing factor to the exclusion of many from local services.

In Omagh Town the main issues highlighted by the reports are: a lack of community play areas for children and green spaces; a need for leisure and sports facilities and recreation provision for young people. Suggestions to address these problems include the provision of green spaces, the development of new recreational facilities such as a skate board park and a multi-sports area and a general increase in the provision of community play space throughout the town. The association commented that there are a number of areas of wasteland that would be ideal for the development of these much-needed community facilities.

In order to improve safety for pedestrians, there is a need for traffic calming measures and improved street lighting in certain residential areas of the town, particularly as a lack of play space for children means they often play on the streets.

From a New TSN and equality point of view Omawest's reports point to high deprivation levels and a problem with a lack of provision for unemployed people and local employment opportunities.

It was stressed that any environmental improvements need to have regard to the needs of all age groups in the area, especially as there is a lack of provision for older people. Local women were also recognised as being at a particular disadvantage, with a low level of services and facilities to support them, such as childcare and limited specialist healthcare provision.

5.2 Dunteague Residents' Association

The Dunteague and Dregish townlands in the Omagh district have been suffering population decline in recent years which is having an effect on the viability and sustainability of local services and facilities, including the local school and the local football club. The residents believe that the designation of these townlands as Dispersed Rural Communities will have a positive impact on the communities there and will help to address these problems.

5.3 Omagh Forum for Rural Associations

Omagh Forum for Rural Associations is a network organisation that acts as a rural voice and provides practical support and guidance for rural community groups. The Forum raised a number of issues in its submission. These include: rural housing; poor infrastructure; the need to support agricultural diversification; tourism; industrial development; renewable energy initiatives; rural schools and the need for additional car parking provision in Omagh Town.

The Forum stressed the need for the Plan to support the traditional settlement patterns found in rural West Tyrone of single houses in the countryside and the Dispersed Rural Community settlement pattern akin to clachans. It was also stated that the design of rural dwellings should reflect the rural character of the area.

One of the main problems experienced by the farming community in Omagh is the difficulty in securing planning permission for dwellings for their children, and it was suggested that local people should have priority over others in this respect. Furthermore there are fears that a large influx of people would be detrimental to the social fabric of the rural area and that this trend needs to be carefully controlled through the planning system.

From an environmental perspective, although it was appreciated that the countryside needs protection, there is general support for a relaxation of restrictive green belt and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty policies to give priority to a vibrant rural environment. The community feels strongly that this problem needs to be addressed so that the rural population is able to access sufficient housing to meet demand. Support for this in the Plan would therefore ensure that there is an equal and fair distribution of housing provision in towns and the rural area.

It was highlighted that the inadequacy of rural infrastructure, such as the sewerage infrastructure which has suffered from under investment, would put limitations on the potential development of rural housing which therefore needs to be addressed. It was stressed that a more relaxed policy with regard to housing in the countryside would also help to support the many rural primary schools that are at risk from closure due to falling pupil numbers which have resulted from a declining rural population, as well as other rural services such as post offices and shops.

From a tourism and recreation point of view, Omagh Forum believes that the Plan should support initiatives associated with the development of the natural assets of the Plan area, for example activities such as walking and cycling at Loughmacrory, in the Sperrins and the Gortin Glens.

5.4 Loughmacrory Community Development Association

Loughmacrory Community Development Association sent a submission to CTA and the West Tyrone Area Plan Team outlining the main issues affecting the community in Loughmacrory. These are summarised below.

- **Housing** - More housing is required in the village to meet the healthy demand and continued expansion and growth that the village has been experiencing in recent years. The Association particularly wants the Area Plan to facilitate and encourage this growth in terms of the contribution that this makes to the

viability of the local economy, school and community facilities within the village. There is a specific need for sheltered and specialist housing accommodation in the village to cater for older people and people with learning difficulties.

- **Tourism** - The Association, with support and partnership from the Water Service, has plans to develop Loughmacrory Lough as a tourist facility and resource for fishing and water sports with a walkway around the Lough. It believes the Area Plan has a critical role to play in facilitating and supporting such a community project, especially in terms of the benefits this will bring to the local economy. In the Association's opinion, it is important that the project and its outcomes are enhanced by associated services such as the provision of holiday accommodation.
- **Recreation** - While the village has a playground, football pitches and green space, the Association stressed the need for more recreation and the provision for future facilities to take account of the planned growth of the village.
- **Economic Development** - Loughmacrory is economically well positioned in terms of its proximity to Dungannon, Cookstown and Omagh. It has a history of strong economic growth with many small businesses setting up there over the years. This could be enhanced however if there were appropriate zonings which would facilitate the development of larger scale industry and businesses. In the past many businesses which have established in the village have had to relocate upon expansion and the need for larger premises. The village has an upgraded water and waste treatment system works and three phase electricity, both of which are supportive factors for the development of industry. The Association believes that if the Area Plan was to facilitate such development this would be a positive step forward for the village and would assist with government's aim of encouraging commercial and government offices to de-centralise.
- **Green Belt Boundary** - The Association would like to see the green belt boundary around the village reduced. This would ease the pressures experienced by families living near the village boundary who cannot obtain planning permission for dwellings.
- **Local Landscape Policy Area at Loughmacrory Lough** - The Community Association, in conjunction with the local Gaelic football club and the Water Service, has plans for the development of a community hall on land adjacent to Loughmacrory Lough. This hall is part of the wider tourism project which will enhance facilities at the Lough. In its opinion the land adjacent to the Lough and included in the existing Local Landscape Policy Area boundary is not particularly worthy of protection and it is keen that the Area Plan rethinks the LLPA boundary to facilitate the community hall project.

5.5 Omagh Cycling Initiative

The Omagh Cycling Initiative represents the people in Omagh who regularly cycle as a healthy, environmentally-friendly and economical method of personal transport and believe that the unnecessary use of the private car is associated with the destruction of the environment, ill health and weight problems, and a high number of premature deaths and injuries.

In order to address congestion problems the Initiative suggested that the Area Plan should take steps to encourage a reduction in the numbers of unnecessary local journeys being made by car, such as daily 'school runs', rather than facilitating and encouraging more road building. It also believes that to help encourage cycling as an alternative to car travel the Area Plan should make provisions for an increase in the number of cycle networks in Omagh town and its surrounding settlements. The Initiative stated that the Planning Service and the Omagh District Council need to support and promote a network of safe cycleways and shared paths, and ensure that this is factored into the Area Plan.

5.6 Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has listed a number of sites in the West Tyrone Plan Area which it believes should be assessed as potential Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance (SLNCI) including:

- Drumgallan North;
- Black Bog;
- Derrandoran/Teehivna;
- Loughnagin/Laght; and
- Envagh Bog.

These sites, which are mainly located along the Fairy Water River, have been surveyed by the RSPB for the presence of breeding waders such as the curlew, lapwing, redshank and snipe. Although in recent years the physical condition of these wet grassland or bog area sites may have deteriorated due to lack of management and overgrazing and drainage in use as agricultural land, a number of curlew, lapwing and snipe can still be found there. The RSPB is in support of the protection of these areas from further exploitation through the Plan, which would help ensure that these species of birds do not disappear from the area as a result of the depletion of their natural environment.

The RSPB also recommends that the following sites should be assessed so that the land within or adjacent to them (that has not qualified for inclusion within the Fairy Water Bog ASSI) should be considered for possible SLNCI designation:

- Bomackatall;
- Kilmore Robinson West;
- Kilmore Robinson East;
- Drumnafallow North; and
- Claraghmore Lough East.

6. Consultation with Equality Groupings

A number of organisations representing the nine equality groups outlined in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 were consulted. The consultation process for the West Tyrone Area Plan and the significance of being involved at this early stage was explained to these organisations. This was followed up by telephone call and by email. Representatives from a number of the organisations representing sexual orientation groups stated at the outset that they did not consider their input to be necessary or relevant at this early stage and therefore did not highlight any issues. However a number of organisations provided information on how the West Tyrone Area Plan could have a positive impact on the lives of their member groups if the policies and proposals were written in a balanced and sensitive manner. The issues raised by the organisations which responded are detailed below.

- **People with Disabilities** - Disability Action urged the Planning Service to use Area Plan policies as a vehicle for highlighting the importance of access as a specific equality issue. It highlighted that improvements to the physical environment can have a dramatic effect on social inclusion and quality of life for people with disabilities, and stressed that the Plan policies must take their needs into account by treating access as paramount. This was said to be particularly important regarding proposals for environmental improvements and the zoning of land for different uses within the Plan area. Disability Action said that all current policies involving accessibility must be adhered to during the preparation of the West Tyrone Area Plan, and said that it supports and encourages more consultation with local access groups in the West Tyrone area to ensure that all disability and access issues of local concern are considered.
- **Religion** - The Community Relations Council acknowledged that Area Plans can play an important role in the promotion of good community relations in Northern Ireland as planning policies and their interpretation in Area Plans have the potential to encourage shared space between communities as well as increase segregation between them. The Council is committed to decreasing sectarianism and promoting good community relations and to the provision of shared education and public services and the reclaiming of shared public space, for example, for sports and recreation. It stressed that planners must have the expertise necessary and take great care when making decisions regarding the location of land use zonings in settlements within the Plan area, so that the zoned space can be shared by all sections of the community. The Community Relations Council is strongly committed to the development and maintenance of shared communities, and believes that only through integrated social housing within settlements will this be achieved. It said that the location of new housing zonings within settlements needs to be properly considered through the Area Plan preparation process so that community divisions are not allowed to develop or worsen. The Council urged the Planning Service to endorse the government's Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland - 'A Shared Future' through the policies in the West Tyrone Area Plan.
- **Young People** - Youth Action (Northern Ireland) is a youth development agency for 14 to 25 year olds. It submitted a report to CTA entitled 'A Sense of Belonging' which highlighted a number of issues that should be taken account of by the Area Plan Team including:

- the need for social and affordable housing for young people in rural communities;
 - the need for outdoor facilities to be built in rural locations so that they are accessible to young people; and
 - the need for an affordable and effective transportation system to allow young people, especially in dispersed rural areas, to be able to access services.
- **Women** - The Women's Resource and Development Agency supports women to take action to address inequalities in their communities throughout Northern Ireland. The organisation submitted a report entitled 'The Rural Women's Programme - Promoting Women's Role in Rural Development' which highlighted a number of issues which the Agency believes the West Tyrone Area Plan Team should consider. It stated that in order to serve the needs of rural communities attention needs to be given to ensuring that any new vision for rural areas is inclusive of women's priorities. Development in the West Tyrone area therefore needs to take account of women's issues.
 - **Minority Ethnic Group Issues** - There is a relatively high number of minority ethnic communities living and working in the Omagh and Strabane areas including Travellers, Indian people as well as an increasing number of people from eastern Europe. The Indian Community Centre works to build good community relations and delivers services to Indian people in Northern Ireland as well as the wider community. The Centre stressed that the Area Plan must take into account the need for community centre facilities in the Plan area for minority ethnic groupings.

7. Concluding Comments

The preliminary stage of the public and community consultation on the West Tyrone Area Plan 2019 has been both informative and participative for all involved. A wide ranging section of the communities in Omagh and Strabane came to information exchange meetings, sent in written submissions or discussed issues relevant to their areas with CTA. A number of groups operating in areas of weaker community infrastructure participated in the outreach and education sessions held and representative views from the equality groupings have also been included in this report.

A valuable insight into important community issues has thus been gained and CTA is confident that through the inclusion of this important first stage a more meaningful Issues Paper will result.

The next step involves the Planning Service considering the content of this report and reflecting it in the West Tyrone Area Plan 2019 Issues Paper.

The Issues Paper should be published by the Planning Service and available for comment in September or October 2005. CTA will then commence the second stage of the public and community consultation.

Appendix I - Consultation Events

Community Information Exchange Meetings

- Creggan - 25 April 2005
- Omagh - 26 April 2005
- Drumquin - 28 April 2005
- Strabane - 3 May 2005
- Castledearg - 4 May 2005
- Aghabrack - 9 May 2005

Appendix 2 - Participants in the Consultation

Community Information Exchange Meetings - Group Participants

- Ballymagorry and District Development Group
- Campsie Residents
- An Creggan Visitors Centre
- Derry Raphoe Action Group
- Donemana and District Community Development Association
- Drumquin Development Association
- FOCUS
- Loughmacrory Community Development Association
- Magheramason Community Development Association
- Millbrook Community Association
- Mournederg Partnership
- Omagh Cycling Initiative
- Omagh Forum for Rural Associations
- Omawest Development Association
- Plumbridge Community Toy Library
- Retreat Residents' Association
- Seskinore Rural Community Group
- Strabane and District Community Network
- Strabane Women Together
- Techno Tyrone Limited
- Termonmaguire Community Association
- Villages Together

Outreach - Group Participants

- Churchtown Community Association
- Drumduff and Drumnakilly Development Association
- Hospital Road Community Association
- Killycurragh Regeneration Group
- Leckpatrick Community Association
- Seskinore Rural Community Group
- Stralongford Education and Rural Community Help (SEARCH)

Community and Environmental Group Submissions Received

- Dunteague Residents' Association
- Loughmacrory Community Development Association
- Omagh Cycling Initiative
- Omagh Forum for Rural Associations
- Omawest Development Association
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

Section 75 Organisations Consulted

- Women's Resource and Development Agency
- Youth Action
- Gingerbread Northern Ireland
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Branch, National Union of Students
- Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities
- Traveller Movement (Northern Ireland)
- Playboard (Northern Ireland)
- Omagh Travellers Support Group
- Derry Omagh Travellers Support Group
- Chinese Welfare Association
- Disability Action
- Age Concern Northern Ireland
- Community Relations Council
- Equality Commission
- Help the Aged

Community Technical Aid is the only region-wide voluntary organisation which provides professional planning and architectural services for community and voluntary groups. We facilitate community participation in planning and support community development by assisting groups to develop the skills, knowledge and infrastructure needed to regenerate disadvantaged urban and rural areas.

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