



# Ecological Appraisal Report Response to AECOM

PROJECT NUMBER: 60666971

**Application Reference: LA05/2022/0033/F**

Planning Portal November 3 2023

## Abstract

This report critically assesses AECOM's Ecological Appraisal Report on the Lagan Valley Regional Park (LVRP), highlighting concerns about inadequate site visit details and a misinterpretation of the park's ecological significance. The report questions the reliance on a survey conducted by a developer with a financial interest in the project, emphasizing the need for an independent evaluation that considers environmental enhancement possibilities.



*Long Eared Owl Photographed Quarterlands Road 1.12.2023*

## Contents

Response to Ecological Appraisal Report by AECOM: by Quarterlands Group .....	4
1. The Lagan Valley Regional Park .....	4
• Inadequate Site Visit Details: .....	4
• Misinterpretation of LAGAN VALLEY REGIONAL PARK Significance: .....	4
NOTE: Buried within AECOM's report is a striking omission .....	4
2. QUALITY ASSURANCE .....	5
2. The Grassland/Wetland .....	5
• Selective Observation of Water Conditions: .....	5
3. The Hedgerow .....	5
• Scoring System Flaws: .....	5
• Selective Emphasis on Landscape Value: .....	5
• Historical Mapping Inconsistencies: .....	6
• Habitats: .....	6
• Having scored 4 - Highly significant .....	6

- The Central Hedge has a “high proportion of species typical of nutrient rich conditions” .... 6
- The Roots and mycelium networks..... 6
- Hedgerows provide a wildlife corridor ..... 6
- The absence of discussion regarding the substantial time gap ..... 6
- The hedgerows have been growing there for many years, 165 at least, ..... 6
- The notion that the surrounding areas offer ample foraging..... 7
- DAERA Guidance defines hedgerow ..... 7
- Hedgerows are a Priority Habitat for many species ..... 7
- PLEASE NOTE:..... 8

4. Hedgehogs ..... 8

- Inadequate Consideration: ..... 8
- The PEA concluded..... 8

5. Bats..... 9

- *The transect for Bat Activity*..... 9
- The report lacks crucial details, such as an insect count, ..... 9
- A Night Vision Camera survey carried out by a local conservationist ..... 9

6. Barn Owls ..... 10

- There is evidence of Barn Owls within the proposed development..... 10
- A Night Vision Camera survey..... 10
- A local resident and his wife have recently observed ..... 10

7. Badgers 4.2.5..... 11

- An adult Badger was observed ..... 11
- The travelling range of a Badger is certainly greater than 30 meters ( ..... 11
- The survey carried out by AECOM only provides only a ‘snapshot’ ..... 11

8. Site Location..... 11

There are NO hedgerow boundaries anywhere in this FIRST EDITION..... 12

- AECOM's report (Section 3.1.3) highlights the use of historical mapping on PRONI’s website  
12
- The Second edition OS Map 1858 shows the presence of northern, western, and eastern  
field boundaries, as well as the Hedgerow boundary ..... 12

The field boundaries and the central Hawthorne Hedgerow are clearly in place in 1858. .... 13

9. Field Surveys ..... 13

- A Freedom of Information ..... 13
- Daylight surveys for nocturnal animals..... 13
- Conducting surveys in correct light conditions is essential ..... 13

10. AECOM Limitations of Desk survey .....	14
• Despite objections from.....	14
• Ecosystem Services are of vital importance.....	14
• As a result of continued development.....	14
• There is ample evidence that priority/protected species such as Barn Owls.....	14
• While it is appreciated that approved methodologies were employed .....	15
• The survey carried out by AECOM only provides at best a ‘snapshot’ .....	15
• The disclaimer from AECOM Limited .....	15
• In summary, AECOM has taken steps to limit its responsibility and liability,.....	15
11. CeDAR – Data Request .....	16
• How would residents have known that recording of species biodiversity .....	16
• Hedgehogs are observed regularly, .....	16
• Priority protected species of moth - Ghost Moth have been photographed within the site	
16	
• It is a criminal offence to harm a statutorily protected species. ....	16
11. Habitats .....	16
12. The Wider Environmental Impact .....	18
• Neglect of Buffer Zone Significance: .....	18
Conclusion:.....	18

# Response to Ecological Appraisal Report by AECOM:

by Quarterlands Group

## 1. The Lagan Valley Regional Park

- Inadequate Site Visit Details: The AECOM report's site visit lacks specific information, raising concerns about the comprehensiveness of the ecological assessment.
  - Assessments for the species we have **eye witness reports** of can only be done over time and not in an hour or from a desktop miles away.
- Misinterpretation of LAGAN VALLEY REGIONAL PARK Significance: AECOM incorrectly downplays the ecological importance of the Lagan Valley Regional Park (LVRP) by suggesting it is primarily a landscape designation. The LAGAN VALLEY REGIONAL PARK Management Plan clearly emphasizes proactive conservation of biodiversity.
  - On Page 10 they define the LVRP correctly from the Aim of LVRP Management Plan 2023-2028 as to *“pro-actively conserve and manage the biodiversity in the Regional Park”* whilst in the previous sentence they indicate that LVRP is *“strictly a landscape designation (rather than an ecological designation)”* - the inference being that Landscape significance is not directly related to Ecological importance or significance (P30).
  - You cannot have landscape and exclude the ecology present in the Lagan Valley Regional Park. It is an AONB with widespread biodiversity. In the LDP 2032 adopted by LCCC in September 2023 the aim is stated to be to protect and conserve its unique landscape character, enhance the Park's Biodiversity, cultural heritage and promote its benefit to visitors and the community.

**NOTE: Buried within AECOM's report is a striking omission, a lapse that places the very essence of the Lagan Valley Regional Park (LVRP) in jeopardy. The report glaringly sidesteps a fundamental truth: in the LVRP, landscape and biodiversity are inseparable. Without the presence of our regional plants, birds, mammals, butterflies, and more, what remains is not a picturesque landscape but a desolate pointless desert.**

**This omission isn't merely an oversight; it's a disservice to the integrity of the Lagan Valley Regional Park, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. AECOM's failure to acknowledge this critical connection raises questions about the depth of their ecological assessment.**

**The LVRP is more than a scenic backdrop; it's a thriving ecosystem where every element plays a vital role. Stripping away this diverse life turns it from a vibrant haven into a lifeless canvas. AECOM, in treating the LAGAN VALLEY REGIONAL PARK as a mere canvas, neglects the life forms that give it true meaning. This oversight not only compromises their assessment's accuracy but also reflects a concerning indifference to preserving a living natural treasure.**

**It could be argued that, considering the importance of hedgerows and grasslands, it is unsuitable to depend on a survey conducted by a developer who has a financial stake in the project.**

**Decisions of such irreversible nature necessitate an independent evaluation that also considers the potential for environmental enhancement.**

**The disclaimer in the AECOM report, as well as the lack of evidence verifying the information contained within the report leads to deep unease as to how this report should be viewed. Furthermore, the report does not provide specifics about the information supplied by the client or third parties.**

**As stewards of our environment, we must demand a thorough acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of landscape and biodiversity.**

**Anything less is a disservice to the Lagan Valley Regional Park and a betrayal of our responsibility to protect the rich tapestry of life it encapsulates for the generations to come.**

## 2. QUALITY ASSURANCE

- Page 2, They exhort their professionalism, objectivity, technical excellence etc., but no Eye Witness Testimonials have been recorded in this report.
- On page 3, 2.2.1 Regional Development Strategy for N. Ireland 2035 provides regional guidance to conserve, protect and where possible enhance our natural environment.
- Page 4. LCCC have adopted their LDP 2032 in September 2023, and thereby have promised **to protect, enhance and promote biodiversity within the Lagan Valley Regional Park (LVRP)** which includes all wild life as opposed to AECOM's view which is "not essentially a nature conservation designation for the Lagan Valley Regional Park"

## 2. The Grassland/Wetland

- Selective Observation of Water Conditions: AECOM's contradiction regarding standing water and dry ditches indicates incomplete field surveys. The documented waterlogged areas conflict with claims of no standing water.
  - (Page 17) they state, *"No standing water was present, although some low-lying areas of the fields were observed to be waterlogged underfoot with abundant species on site which indicated frequently damp year-round conditions."* This is followed up by (Page 18) and the Statement *"All ditches were dry at the time of survey despite heavy rainfall from a previous storm."*

## 3. The Hedgerow

- Scoring System Flaws: The scoring system underplays the ecological significance of the central hedgerow, contradicting its Heritage Hedgerow classification in the HAS Report.
- Selective Emphasis on Landscape Value: AECOM dismisses the central hedgerow's Heritage Hedgerow classification, ignoring the HAS Report's emphasis on a cumulative score of 4 – highly significant, which our hedgerow achieves.

- Historical Mapping Inconsistencies: AECOM's reliance on historical mapping raises questions about accuracy, requiring verification from PRONI to ensure the true historical context of the hedgerows.
- Habitats: both the central Hedgerow at 165+ years old and the Scrub Grassland are accepted as Priority and Protected habitats of significant ecological interest Page 29, yet on the scoring system they used under Historical all hedges only scored 1/4. This points to the scoring system used as incorrect, not the Hedge.
- Having scored 4 - Highly significant in the Landscape section as assessed by AECOM, the 165+ year old hedgerow qualifies as a **Heritage Hedgerow** and thus according to the authors of the **HAS (Hedgerow Appraisal System)** should be considered as High Priority in terms of Retention.
- The Central Hedge has a “high proportion of species typical of nutrient rich conditions” as stated on page 21 - yet they describe the Hedge as in a poor condition (unfavourable Condition) on Page 22.
- The Roots and mycelium networks from the hedges and indigenous plant networks thus formed and maintained for hundreds of years have had no assessment or comments by these Professionals.
  - **It is well known that the *ecological systems underground* are more than above ground. Allowing for the age of at least 165 years of these hedges, the underground roots and network produced could cover the entire site with an undisturbed wildlife world constantly removing Carbon from the Atmosphere and operating as a vast soakaway for the standing water on these wetlands.**
- Hedgerows provide a wildlife corridor but what has not been mentioned is that alongside the destruction of these ancient habitats according to the developers documents this site will be fenced in greater than ¾ of its area and in some of these areas 6Ft high Horizontal wooden slat fencing and walls will be used. How will the wildlife use any hedges that are created when they are barricaded.
- The absence of discussion regarding the substantial time gap between the removal of the Central Hedge and Scrub Grassland and the attainment of significant tree and hedge maturity in the Buffer Zone is glaring. During this period, the entire biodiversity will be killed off. The habitats deemed of significant priority and those slated for protection will experience irreversible destruction.
- The hedgerows have been growing there for many years, 165 at least, the biodiversity has been left to develop in a natural way, unlike most of the surrounding area which is usually over cultivated. The hedges are full of life throughout and including their root systems. A living habitat for hedgehogs, bats, barn owls, badgers, small birds, song birds, birds, mice and many of our indigenous species of plant and insect.
- The statement in the AECOM report: ‘No further surveys are considered necessary for hedgerows or other habitats. The retention of hedgerows around the site boundary will retain connectivity around the site and will provide food resources for a variety of animals

including invertebrates.' Does this mean the existing hedgerows will be maintained? If so by whom and how?

- The notion that the surrounding areas offer ample foraging opportunities for Bats, Barn Owls, etc., while downplaying the Central Hedge's crucial role, along with the Scrub Grassland, in providing foraging grounds, shelter, nesting, and wildlife corridors, is, at the very least, provocative. **There has been no assessment done of these resources external to the site.** This oversight leaves critical aspects unaddressed, undermining the report and its true impact on the existing wildlife and the essential habitats that sustain it.
- DAERA Guidance defines hedgerow 'as any boundary line of trees or shrubs over 20m long and less than 5m wide at the base, and where any gaps between the trees or shrub species are less than 20m wide. **Any bank, wall, ditch or tree within 2m of the centre of the hedgerow is part of the hedgerow habitat, as is the herbaceous vegetation within 2m of the centre of the hedgerow. All hedgerows consisting predominantly (i.e., 80% or more cover) of at least one woody UK native species\* are covered by this priority habitat.'**
- Hedgerows are a Priority Habitat for many species providing foraging, protection, and connectivity to the wider environment (DAERA, 2020c). This site consists of "2 semi-improved fields" separated by a 165-Year-old hawthorn hedge that provides critically important ecosystem services below the ground as well as above ground. Any mitigating planting cannot replace what is already established over sixteen decades and all the invertebrates, birds and mammals that have come to rely on same will be greatly impacted by its destruction.
- Page 7. Under the BAT Activity Survey AECOM states that 'as a single hedgerow is required to be removed', on that basis it was considered the BAT activity surveys were not required due to the size and scale of the proposed development and the retention and enhancement of boundary features for commuting and foraging. This would result in only minor impacts that are not significant. As this hedge is over 165 years old and a Heritage Hedge of major significance with high priority for retention and protection this AECOM statement is at variance with assessment by HAS. Nevertheless, despite this view they carried out two BAT activity surveys to provide as they call it "approach and to provide extra reassurance". These comments are amazing from a Professional group who undoubtedly understand the meaning of a Heritage Hedge with a high priority for retention along with scrub grassland of high ecological value.
- Our 165 yr. old Hedge scored 4 in the Landscape section assessed by AECOM and qualifies as a Heritage Hedgerow and thus according to the authors of the HAS Report should be considered as High Priority in terms of Retention.
- This important comment is also documented on P6 AECOM report. However, in Section 4.2.2.1 AECOM where is documented the scoring system of HAS no emphasis is placed on the 4 scoring for Landscape which renders the Hedgerow a Heritage Hedgerow with high Priority for Retention



- On page 25 AECOM report they state that within the site 1.1 Ha of our site there is 1 Ha of type 1 Habitat which is a Priority Habitat.
- On page 5 the Hedgerow Appraisal System (HAS): Best practice guidance on hedgerow surveying, Data collection and Appraisal (Foulkes et al 2013) was used by AECOM. The HAS method aims to identify hedgerows of historical, ecological and/or landscape significance and assess their condition.
- Page 6. Under landscape Assessment they indicate a score of 4 is highly significant in any of the significance categories (Heritage Hedgerow). Therefore, by their assessment our Heritage Hedgerows should be considered High Priority in terms of Retention, Management action and Protection (HAS Foulkes et al 2013).
- PLEASE NOTE: It has been experienced frequently and recently in other locations within LVRP where planning authorities have allowed the destruction of these very special and important habitats. Developer contractors under the cover of darkness have moved in and destroyed vital hedgerows before it could be prevented with no consequences for the developer. There is no clarification in the updated EA as to how much of this precious hedgerow will be removed? It is likely that the same fate will be afforded to this Priority Habitat Hedgerow unless the Planning authority can utilize its powers to protect it.

#### 4. Hedgehogs

- Inadequate Consideration: On P34 is the only reference to a fence where the ecologists suggest that Hedgehog Highways are provided throughout the site during operation with holes provided in the bottom of the fences. There is no mention of the fact that Hedgehogs are nocturnal and Hibernate during the winter months.
- The PEA concluded that “there was no evidence of hedgehog was noted during survey; however, the site contains good habitat cover for hedgehog”. Hedgehog is a Priority Species and should be preserved. It is well evidenced that there are hedgehogs on site and the mature hedgerow provides perfect habitat. The loss of this hedgerow would have a detrimental impact to the local Hedgehog population.
- Rural populations of these mammals have plummeted by as much as 75% in the last 20 years. The construction of this development will lead to further habitat loss and will negatively impact conservation of the hedgehog population. An Environmental Impact Assessment is requested to address this matter.
- The site survey was only one day and is not representative of the hedgehog population on site and seasonal conditions have not been taken into consideration. While the consultants carrying out the site survey may be suitably qualified, the generic survey is in no way adequate to represent the biodiversity within this ANOB and only designated Regional Park in Northern Ireland. A bespoke impartial in-depth seasonal survey should be carried out, therefore. An Environmental Impact Assessment is requested to address this matter.

## 5. Bats

- *AECOM claims in Section 4.2.4.2 regarding Bat Activity raise notable concerns regarding the methodology and coverage of the survey.*
- *The transect for Bat Activity involved walking around the site on two occasions, in September 2021 and September 2023, under suitable weather conditions. As residents we know this is not optimum time to see bats on this site.*
- The site's considerable size and challenging terrain—uneven ground, tussocks of grass, overgrowth, and high moisture levels—are acknowledged. This poses potential limitations that warrant further exploration.
- The report lacks crucial details, such as an insect count, measurement of water on the site, and information on the organisms present. This information gap raises serious questions about the lack of scope of the ecological assessment.
- A Night Vision Camera survey carried out by a local conservationist and resident of Quarterlands in December 2022 observed numerous potential bat roosting sites in trees within the site. They also saw prey species for Owls and Buzzards including small roosting birds.
- Many of the Bat records from Northern Ireland Bat Group are associated with Drumbeg in which the site lies backing up our Eye Witness accounts.
- While it is appreciated that approved methodologies were employed, the small number of hours taken to complete the survey is insufficient to truly capture the compliment of wildlife particularly Bats on-site. The findings of the survey therefore are not representative, particularly since seasonal and nocturnal habits have not been taken into consideration.
- The survey carried out by AECOM only provides only a 'snapshot' of the biodiversity in the area so cannot be considered as adequate given the nature and classification of LVRP wherein the site is located. At least an impartial Impact Assessment is requested to address these matters  
Page 22 /23 Bat activity assessed 25th September 23 sunset 19.16 hours. Sunset was 7.24pm that day, after the assessment finished.
- Start of assessment 19.16 hours end 21.18 hours. Four bat species recorded on site. Commentary on the number of Bat Passes, AECOM found the majority of activity located at field boundaries. This however was a snapshot on 25/09/23 and not repeated. It cannot be said that the Central Hedge did not form a significant linear commuting feature for Bats with only one snapshot assessment carried out. Bats are nocturnal creatures and most likely have multiple pathways within this site.

## 6. Barn Owls

- There is evidence of Barn Owls within the proposed development area, reported to LCCC Planners and CeDAR as recently as September 2023. While the updated EA refers to the Barn Owl as 'illusive'. **Ulster Wildlife Barn Owl Officers** have carried out a survey on 12th August 2022 and are content that the site is being used by Barn Owls.
- A Night Vision Camera survey carried out by a local conservationist and Quarterlands resident in December 2022 observed a foraging Barn Owl in the field adjacent to the site.
- A local resident and his wife have recently observed a Barn Owl from their back garden at Zenda Park which is within the development site. (Aug/Sept 2022) The resident is submitting this sighting to Ulster Wildlife.
- The minimum time taken to complete the survey is insufficient to truly capture the compliment of Barn Owls on-site. The findings of the survey therefore are not representative, particularly since seasonal changes have not been taken into consideration.
- The survey carried out by AECOM only provides only a 'snapshot' of the biodiversity in the area so cannot be considered as adequate given the nature and classification of LVRP wherein the site is located. An Environmental Impact Assessment is requested to address this matter.
- It is well known that Barn Owls forage over a significant area. Their hunting area equates to over 7,100 football pitches.
- P25 Barn Owl – the rough grassland provides optimal foraging habitat for Barn Owls within the site. They eat shrews, field mice and rats all found on rough grassland. The site is 1.1 Ha and with it 1 Ha is rough grassland i.e., type 1 Habitat. Type 1 Habitat is optimal Barn Owl Habitat and even the remaining type 2 Habitat is of intermediate value.
- Page 15. Ulster Wildlife Records document three Barn Owl sightings within 50 meters of the site – two of the three records relate to a property adjacent to the site.
- P33. Barn Owls. Despite Katy Bell of Ulster Wildlife suggesting the putting up of boxes to encourage breeding of Barn Owls this has not been undertaken. Undoubtedly from eye witness accounts there are Barn Owls in the area which must be encouraged this is not an argument as to whether they exist.
- The site size (1.1 Ha) has type 1 Habitat of 1Ha ideal for foraging Barn Owls. These species of birds are easily disturbed and need to have retention of their common areas for foraging. To suggest that Barn Owls are not considered to pose a constraint to the proposed development despite the advice from Katy Bell of Ulster Wildlife is in direct opposition to the Barn Owl expert views.

## 7. Badgers 4.2.5

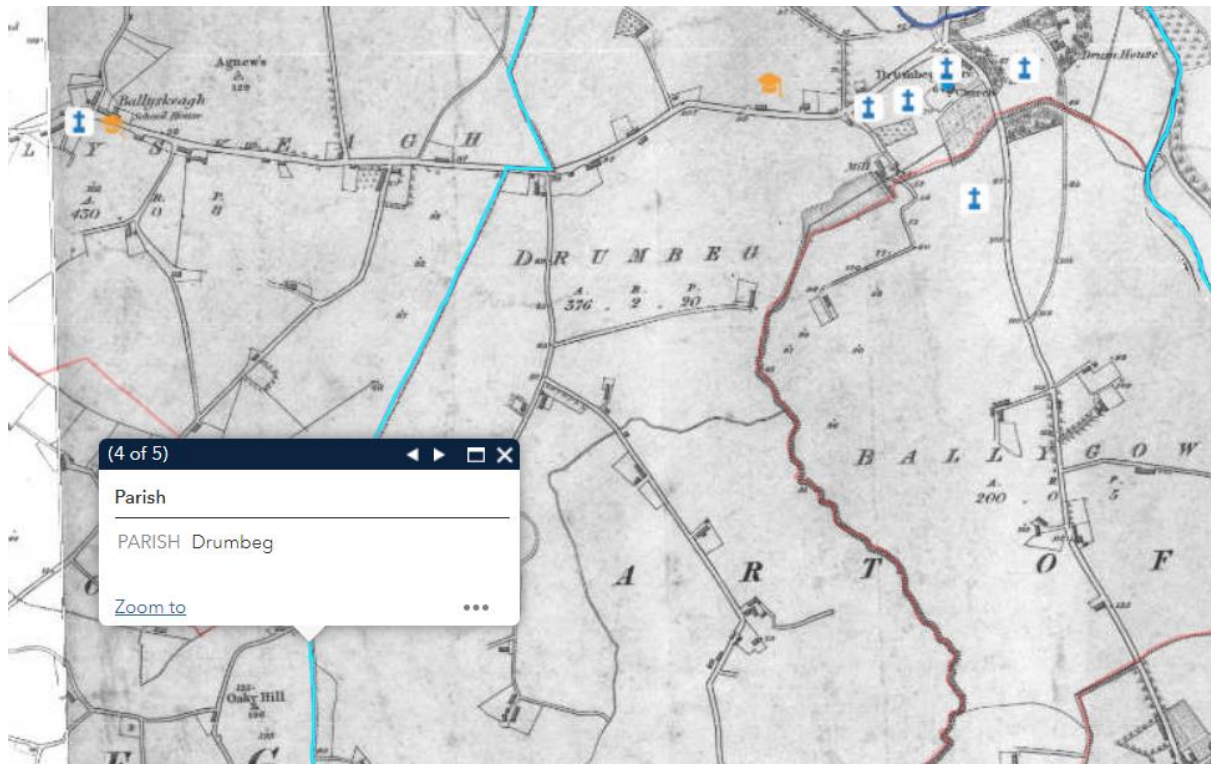
- AECOM states *“The site contains some suitable habitat for foraging badger, and habitat with potential for sett creation such as hedgerows. However, no evidence of badger was found on site or within 30 m of the site.”*
- An adult Badger was observed crossing the Drumbeg road to the fields in Quarterlands below the site on the evening 30th October 2022. This has been recorded with CEDaR. Several Dead Badgers have been observed in 2023 on the Drumbeg and Hillhall roads which are adjacent the site.
- The travelling range of a Badger is certainly greater than 30 meters (amended range referred to in the current PEA from the previous PEA allowing an additional 5 meters for foraging) and this is not representative of a Badgers range and potential presence on the site. The mature woodland at the rear of the proposed site and the 165-year-old hawthorn hedgerow could provide suitable habitat and wildlife corridor for Badgers.
- Territories for badgers of 20 to 50 hectares (49–124 acres) are common in rich habitats, covering areas as large as 165 ha (370 acres or half sq.-mile) or more in poorer regions.
- While it is appreciated that approved methodologies were employed, the minimal time taken to complete the survey is insufficient to truly capture the compliment of Badgers on-site. The findings of the survey therefore are not representative, particularly since seasonal changes have not been taken into consideration.
- The survey carried out by AECOM only provides only a ‘snapshot’ of the biodiversity in the area and cannot be considered as adequate given the nature and classification of LVRP.

## 8. Site Location

The Ecological Appraisal Report Section 3.1.3” the site location was searched on the historical mapping on PRONI’s website to establish the extent of hedgerows and their likely historical landscape value (e.g., parish and county boundaries)

This included the First edition (1832-1846) and Second edition OS mapping (1846-1862)”. Under Section 4.1.4 they state that, *“the boundaries within the site do not appear on the First edition OS Map.”*

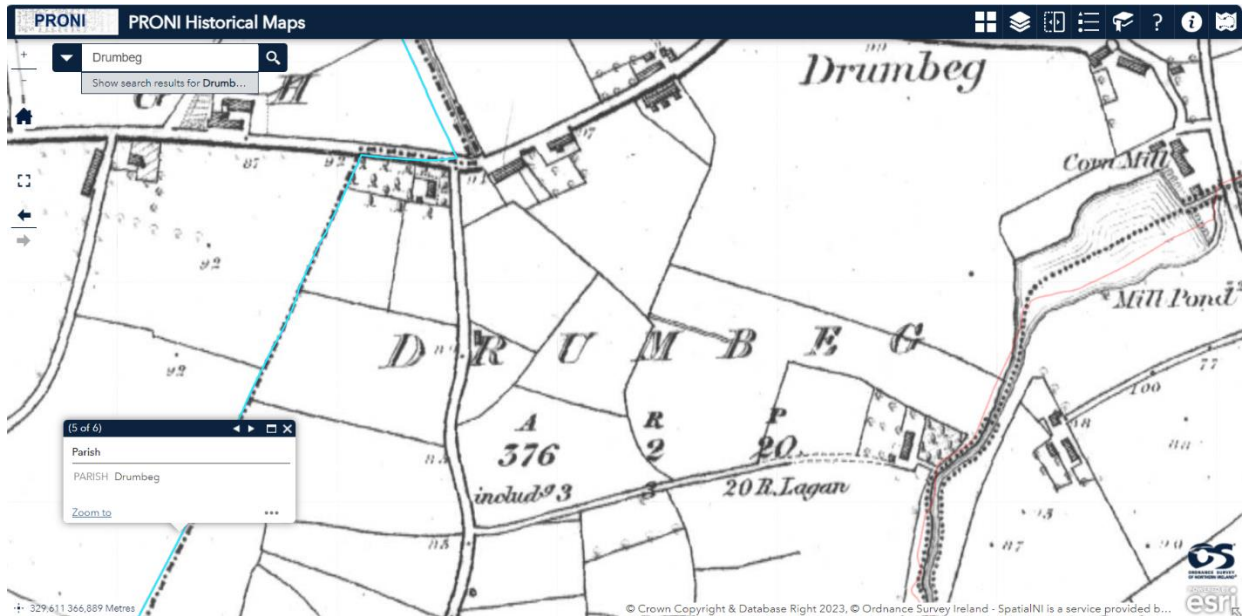
However -



There are NO hedgerow boundaries anywhere in this FIRST EDITION.

*On the second edition the Northern field boundaries of the site are present as are the southern and western field boundaries. However, they were more extensive at this time, being encroached on by housing in the second half of the 20th century. This indicates that there have been hedgerows on site since at least the mid-19th century."*

- AECOM's report (Section 3.1.3) highlights the use of historical mapping on PRONI's website to determine the extent and likely historical landscape value of hedgerows.
- Their investigation covered both the First edition (1832-1846) and Second edition OS mapping (1846-1862), indicating a comprehensive historical assessment but is misleading there are no field boundaries - marked roads, waterways and parish boundaries delineate the land. This does not mean there were no hedgerows.
- The Second edition OS Map 1858 shows the presence of northern, western, and eastern field boundaries, as well as the Hedgerow boundary **on all maps up to present day.**  
**See Below.**



The field boundaries and the central Hawthorne Hedgerow are clearly in place in 1858.

## 9. Field Surveys

- A Freedom of Information request submitted to LCCC Planning department on 19th September 2023 noting the out-of-date PEA and contained within a reference to the exact guidance information stated above (CIEEM 2019). It seems questionable that the new viable survey was carried out on the same date of the 19th of September when it was extremely wet. This FOI was withdrawn by L&CCC planning authority.
- The LCCC site visit of Councillors was 19 September 1pm the same day as the AECOM assessment was carried out. Did they meet? Did the intrusion of either party affect the assessments of wildlife present on site?
- Daylight surveys for nocturnal animals (barn owls, hedgehogs, bats) do not compromise data accuracy. Nocturnal animals exhibit their distinct behaviours and activities during nighttime. The silent nocturnal flights of barn owls and their hunting habits will be overlooked during daylight assessments.
- Conducting surveys in correct light conditions is essential for capturing the true ecological roles and population dynamics of these nocturnal species. Comprehensive understanding of nocturnal animals necessitates a survey approach aligned with their natural activity patterns.
- While the consultants carrying out the survey may be suitably qualified, the generic methodologies employed in this case are not adequate to represent the biodiversity and ecosystem services of critical importance within this ANOB (the only designated Regional Park in Northern Ireland). An impartial in-depth survey capable of reflecting seasonal variations should be required.

## 10. AECOM Limitations of Desk survey

### 3.4 Limitations

*The aim of a desk study is to help characterise the baseline context of the site and provide valuable background information that would not be captured by a single site survey alone. Information obtained during a desk study is dependent upon people and organisations having made and submitted records for the area of interest. As such, a lack of records for a habitat or species does not necessarily mean that the habitat or species do not occur in the area. Likewise, the presence of records for habitats and species does not automatically mean that these are relevant in the context of the site or proposed development.*

*Broad habitat scoping for barn owl assessment was largely carried out from vantage points and using aerial imagery. This is considered an acceptable approach and specific visits to each field parcel are not considered viable for rapid habitat assessment.*

- Despite objections from **Lagan Valley Regional Park (LVRP), Ulster Wildlife, Friends of the Earth** and over **400 residents**, this application continues to ignore the fact that the area in question is green land within the Lagan Valley Regional Park. It is the only Regional Park in Northern Ireland and is a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and SLNCI.
- Ecosystem Services are of vital importance to LVRP as stated in SPPS 2013 3.15 Page 14. A great deal of progress has been made over recent years in understanding the role of the natural environment in contributing to our economic performance. Our environmental assets improve living standards, health and well-being, and our quality of life. A good quality environment can also help to improve resilience to climate change, as trees and other green infrastructure provide important ecosystem services that reduce the effects of flooding.
- The significance of losing foraging and commuting corridors is underscored when considering the hunting areas of the animals. To illustrate, for barn owls, the affected area spans more than 7,100 football pitches. Bat roosts involve considerable distances, with species like noctules flying over 26 km to reach feeding areas. Bats rely on multiple foraging sites each night, navigating between them to find areas with high insect densities. The NED comments for Application LA05/2022/0946/O (recently added to the portal) confirm the presence of bats and owls in the proposed site, indicating their potential foraging activities on the proposed housing site.
- As a result of continued development, the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services in this area are already severely compromised. It is well documented and evidenced that protected species/habitat are resident and present within the proposed area and should be preserved and protected, not decimated. Concreting over the existing valuable grasslands and removal of hedgerows will have a significant impact on flooding downstream at Drum Bridge.
- There is ample evidence that priority/protected species such as Barn Owls are present within the proposed development site as provided by the residents in the area. Broad habitat scoping for Barn Owls using aerial imagery is not sufficient in this case. Suitable trees

for nest boxes have been identified by Ulster Wildlife.

- While it is appreciated that approved methodologies were employed, the small number of hours taken to complete the survey is insufficient to truly capture the compliment of biodiversity and ecosystem services on-site. The findings of the survey therefore are not representative of the diversity of species and presence of protected species on site, particularly since seasonal changes have not been taken into consideration.
- The survey carried out by AECOM only provides at best a ‘snapshot’ of the biodiversity in the area cannot be considered as adequate given the nature and classification of LAGAN VALLEY REGIONAL PARK wherein the site is located. An Environmental Impact Assessment is requested to address this matter. The entire area deserves a great deal more consideration and protection.
- The disclaimer from AECOM Limited at the beginning of the report, outlines the terms and conditions of their service to Quarterlands Road Limited. Here are some key points that highlight AECOM’s avoidance of responsibility:
  - Sole Use: The report is prepared solely for Quarterlands Road Limited, and AECOM disclaims any duty, responsibility, or liability to any other party.
  - No Warranty: AECOM does not provide any warranty, expressed or implied, for the professional advice included in the report.
  - Reproduction and Disclosure: The report should not be reproduced or disclosed to any third parties without AECOM’s express written authority. If the report is disclosed, AECOM does not accept any responsibility or liability to the third party.
  - Liability Limitations: Any liability to a third party is subject to limitations included within the Appointment.
  - Client/Third Party Information: Conclusions and recommendations in the report are based on information provided by the client and/or third parties. AECOM assumes that all relevant information has been provided and is accurate. AECOM does not independently verify this information unless otherwise stated in the report.
  - No Liability for Inaccurate Information: AECOM accepts no liability for any inaccurate conclusions, assumptions, or actions taken resulting from any inaccurate information supplied by the client and/or third parties.
- In summary, AECOM has taken steps to limit its responsibility and liability, particularly towards third parties and in situations where the information provided by the client, or third parties is inaccurate.



## 11. CeDAR – Data Request

### 4.1.5.1

- Information obtained during a desk study is dependent on people and organisations having made and submitted records for the area of interest. The CeDAR internet records site is not widely known to members of the public and is therefore a ridiculously unrepresentative source of information about the biodiversity that currently exists within the area.
- How would residents have known that recording of species biodiversity for years would be essential to defending their homes and the biodiversity and environment of the Lagan Valley Regional Park.
- Hedgehogs are observed regularly, and Barn Owls have also been seen on the proposed site most recently in September 2023.
- Priority protected species of moth - Ghost Moth have been photographed within the site. As listed in the Northern Ireland Priority Protected Species list, e.g., Ghost Moth have been photographed within the site. **If a priority protected species is 'not relevant' then what can be classed as 'relevant'?**
- P11/12. The Cedar records of Priority Protected Species within 2km of the site recorded by AECOM show that of the Mammals in table 4.3 ,four of the five selected were all recorded in Drumbeg i.e., Otter, Pine marten, Badger, and Hedgehog. These are all priority protected species with the site lying within the townland/parish of Drumbeg. Of those recorded as birds Barn Owl is listed as Priority Protected Species in Drumbeg along with at least six others.
- Policy NH 2 - Species Protected by Law pg. 13 states: Development proposals are required to be sensitive to all protected species, and sited and designed to protect them, their habitats and prevent deterioration and destruction of their breeding sites or resting places. Seasonal factors will also be considered.
- It is a criminal offence to harm a statutorily protected species. **The presence of species protected by legislation is a material consideration when a planning authority is considering a development proposal that if carried out, would be likely to result in harm to the species or its habitats.**

## 11. Habitats

- Page 16 Habitats. AECOM agree that the native hedgerows on site are Priority Habitats. The site has semi-improved grassland and scattered scrub which NED describe as extant vegetation on site as of high ecological value. AECOM refers to Phase1 Habitats which should be Type1.
- The central hedgerow measuring over 100 M and 5M high along with the grassland scrub vegetation are scheduled for removal. This despite NED's recommendation that there

should be absolute minimum loss of extant hedgerow and vegetation as possible to facilitate development and retention of maximal extant vegetative biodiversity as possible.

- Page 20/21. Using HAS scoring the Central Hedge scored 4 out of 4 for Landscape Significance in the Lagan Valley Regional Park Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Thus this Heritage Hedgerow is of high significance with according to HAS High Priority for Retention and Protection.
- P21 – Condition Assessment. This Central Hedgerow of high significance and high priority for retention and protection scored highly favourable for height, favourable for width and adequate for profile. Considering the age of this hedge greater than 1 ½ centuries old and assessment coming into the winter it is not surprising considering height and width with lack of management the hedgerow base scored 0, >20% nutrient rich species. The other hedgerows compared against in this section were noted to be scored as N/A. This scoring as poor (0) is only in 1 of the 9 categories assessed. With lack of management, ecology underground is likely to have lain undisturbed for greater than a century and a half with underground networks developing, removing Carbon from the atmosphere and acting as a large soak-away. These contributions have not been assessed for any of the hedges. AECOM also state that if a hedgerow scores a 0 in any of the condition categories it is in an unfavourable condition, but they have not checked this site seasonally. A longer period of assessment is required before an unfavourable grade is given for this hedge which in the summer months has Green Foliage lost in the winter months as the Hedge is mainly Hawthorn.
- Of all Habitats, wetlands have the most diverse of Biodiversity.
- P27. AECOM Found no smooth newts or invertebrates however the area was not surveyed over spring or summer when invertebrates are likely to be at their peak.
- They say that the potential exceptions to the ecological desert they found are Holly Blue and Cryptic Wood White. Protected butterflies whose larval food plant species are all present on the site along with holly and ivy.
- Page 34. Invertebrates Holly Blue and Cryptic Wood White are protected, and rare species of butterfly recorded on the site. Once their habitat is removed, they will disappear. There is no suitable and immediate replacement. To say they were not seen by the ecologist on site on their two visits in September points to the lack of knowledge of these creatures.
- **P30.** This Priority habitat is a material consideration under PPS2 (NH5). **Under PPS2 permission will only be granted for a development proposal which is not likely to result in the unacceptable adverse impact on, or damage to a Priority Habitat. The Heritage Hedge estimated at 90% hawthorn is one of the highest Priority Habitats in the North of Ireland.** The statement “It is worth noting that landscape significance is not directly related to ecological importance or significance” when referring to the Heritage Hedge with high priority for retention and protection and scrub grassland of “elevated ecological importance” is somewhat of an enigma.

- To stress that this hedge is not of significance given the age and all associated other positive features is astonishing. Furthermore, it is not the volume of the buffer zone which AECOM offer to mitigate the loss of the Heritage hedge and the scrub grassland with new planting which will take at least 10 years to mature and probably a lot longer but the replacement of the loss of biodiversity during the interim period.
- To suggest that a management company can manage biodiversity is naive considering these groups in Northern Ireland are unregulated and in many areas they had to be removed. The Wayleave will be an area unmanaged after the initial planting as no one will take ownership for this area.

## 12. The Wider Environmental Impact

- Page 10/11 The ancient woodland within 1km of the site called “Grey’s Farm” has not been assessed in Table 4.2 or figure 2.
- Neglect of Buffer Zone Significance: The report fails to address the critical impact of the proposed large gap between removing the central hedgerow and scrub grassland and the maturity of trees in the buffer zone. This oversight jeopardizes the biodiversity and habitats marked as significant and protected.

### Conclusion:

The emphasis throughout this report appears to be that planning permission will be granted and the biodiversity on this site is not of great significance and that the habitats can easily be replaced.

There is no notice taken of this area being part of the LVRP with the LCCC charged (LDP2032 adopted in September 2023) with its protection, enhancement and promotion of the only regional Park in the N. Ireland inclusive of its wildlife and Priority Habitats.

**When an area has Priority and Protected Habitats and species these must be respected and not removed by an inadequate report with; field surveys of limited time, conclusions at variance with other reports, no follow up advised for the different seasons, no assessment of the wider habitats displaced wildlife is supposed to go to, no assessment of the underground networks and their importance in this time of Climate change – Based on a report by an organisation, paid by the developer, who carefully and completely absolves itself from all responsibility.**

As shown above, the AECOM report exhibits inconsistencies, oversights, and at best misinterpretation at worst bias, which undermine the integrity of this assessment. Critical aspects such as the true significance of the central hedgerow, historical mapping accuracy, and the environmental impact on the buffer zone demand further scrutiny and correction.

As responsible stewards of our environment, we urge a more thorough and unbiased assessment that genuinely considers the ecological significance of the site and aligns with the principles of sustainable development and conservation outlined in the LAGAN VALLEY REGIONAL PARK, AONB Management Plan and all relevant planning regulations.