

### 3. Tier 1 Settlement- Gateway



## Tier 1 Settlement - Gateway

### 3.1 Letterkenny



#### Context

Letterkenny is designated as a linked Gateway within the National Spatial Strategy 2002 – 2020 (NSS), this status identifies Letterkenny in association with the city of Derry as the primary economic and employment centre for the northwest. Letterkenny is a key economic engine of the northwest region and a natural location for business and economic growth. It possesses important, key strengths including its natural environment, location, entrepreneurial culture and a well-educated and adaptable workforce. Letterkenny has a strong and varied existing industrial base supported by traditional and emerging innovative industries, resultantly in recent years this has contributed to a significant volume of inward investment and associated growth.

Letterkenny is also the primary retail centre in the county with a number of national, international and independent local retailers. The retail sector is concentrated in and around the town centre; the traditional retail core of the town is stretched along main street with mostly traditional scale premises and openings, more recent and modern retail developments has been within the edge of the retail centre within custom made buildings offering a greater floor space. In particular the area south east of the Pearse Road boasts a range of branded comparison retailing formats including inter alia: Tempest, Next, TX Maxx, Argos, Marks and Spencers, Halfords, Homebase and Dunnes and has significant unused capacity to attract additional stores of a similar format. The growth of the discount food store sector has also been evident with both Lidl and Aldi now operating in the town.

#### History, Culture and Heritage



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## Built heritage

St Eunans Cathedral is a dominant and iconic building within the town; it is situated on higher ground than the rest of Letterkenny to the west of the Main street and is visible from the rural surround forming a landmark building within the wider landscape. Castlegrove house and demesne, Ballymacool house and Rockhill house are all important local landmarks on the outskirts of the main built up area that contribute to the uniqueness and distinctiveness to this landscape.

Built heritage is an important and defining factor within Letterkenny and an Architectural Conservation Area has been designated in the current Letterkenny and Environs Development Plan that also identifies an historic streetscape network along with identified 'historic buildings' and 'historic residential' areas. There are 19 buildings on the Record of Protected Structures, and 109 on the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage in and around the town.



## Natural heritage

Another defining feature of the town is the River Swilly that flows along a low plain, east to west towards a large tidal estuary at the mouth of Lough Swilly. Significant areas of established woodland are located at Kilty, Gortlee and Ballymacool and undeveloped lands have retained substantial levels of biodiversity and traditional rural form.

There are a number of environmental designations within and around the town; these are listed below, the detail of which can be sourced at [www.npws.ie](http://www.npws.ie).

**Lough Swilly- Special Protection Area: Site Code: 004075**

**Lough Swilly- Special Area Conservation: Site Code: 002287**

**Lough Swilly, Big Isle, Blanket Nook, Inch Lake- Natural Heritage Area: Site Code 00166.**

**River Swilly valley Woods- Natural Heritage Area: Site Code: 002011.**

Tree planting at Market Square provides niche habitat for passerine birds. Older buildings provide a nesting habitat for house martins, swallows and swifts during the summer period. Urban Feral pigeon found to be rare therefore reducing avian competition for passerine birds. Area around St Eunan's Cathedral retains original rock outcrop and upland shrub character with gorse shrub and native trees retained.

### **Three Special areas of biodiversity-**

1. Kilty Woods is semi natural woodland located at the East northeast boundary of Letterkenny. The woods tree structure is of local provenance. The tree canopy is loose knit allowing sunlight to filter through to the woodland floor providing a sound under canopy growth of shrub and ground flora. Birch found to be the dominant tree species with Willow, Elder, Blackthorn, Hawthorn, Alder and Oak frequent. The woodlands were managed by coppicing in the past, a traditional woodland management that has declined over the past twenty years. The woodland area is high in biodiversity providing an important habitat for small passerine bird species within an urban environment. The woodlands also provide habitat for small animals such as rabbit, stoat, badger and possibly squirrel. Consists of linear hedge, tree line and dry meadow.
2. **Ballymacool Woods, Whinney Hill, Rodgers Burn, Drum Hill:** Whinney Hill is an upland meadow grassland habitat with a high percentage of gorse shrub and consisting of a steep gradient. The area is moderately diverse in its ecological diversity and retains the old traditional field boundaries and trees. Drum Hill is the site of a Mass Rock. Rodgers Burn is a fast flowing mountain stream that rises in the upland of Ballymacool and enters the River Swilly close to the GAA playing fields on the banks of the Swilly. The area of Ballymacool once held a small area of oak woodland which has been partially felled at the Ballymacool estate and the existing woodland is a designated NHA. A new town park is currently under development. The park retains the old hedgerow boundary and standalone trees as part of the featured town landscape. The area consists of linear hedge, tree line, dry humid acid grassland, scrub, semi improved grassland, hedgerow with trees, scattered shrub, mesotrophic running water. Dominant site habitat is semi- improved pasture fields enclosed to the traditional stone ditch and hedgerow boundaries with scattered trees.
3. **River Swilly** - River consists of dyke/pollard Dutch engineered system as rail embankment and flood defence system within the area of the Swilly alluvial plain. The dyke and pollard system were introduced in the circa of the 18th century with the introduction of the Donegal railway and traditionally provided three distinct roles namely (a) A rampart for the railway tract along the river embankment (b) A flood plain defence system and (c) Wet meadow management system for early grass production.

This unique natural environment, as well as supporting rich biodiversity and offering a great amenity value, is one of the foundation stones of local identity and sense of place in Letterkenny. It contributes to the quality of life of local people and provides a unique attraction for visitors in the region.

### **The 'Ecclesiastical Quarter' ACA:**

St Eunan's Cathedral provides a dominant feature in the landscape on the top of the 'Hillside of the O' Cannons' and forming an important integral feature informing the character of the Architectural Conservation Area referred to as the Ecclesiastical Quarter.

The Cathedral is a large cruciform church of the French Gothic style built of Mountcharles squared coursed rubble freestone with a polygonal choir, ambulatory, lady chapel, and an offset south spire flanking the side of the spire of orthodox design, a five bay nave with aisles and two bay transepts, save the reversed orientation.

The Cathedral is serviced by the Bishops Palace to the rear right hand side, a substantial three storey stone block structure built in squared boulder faced sandstone, with segment-headed windows and gables, providing a powerful setting overlooking the Cathedral and town.

The Cathedral is neighboured by two schools, the boys primary school to the facing right and the collection of buildings forming the girls Loreto Convent to the south west. Across from the Cathedral is the Church of Ireland Conwall Parish Church dating from the eighteenth century and described by Lewis as 'a small plain structure with a spire' rubble built of minimal gothic style. The forecourt of the Cathedral and Church provides for car parking servicing the churches which is accessed via Sentry Hill Road, Castle Street, Church Lane and Ard O'Donnell Road framing views to and from the Cathedral specifically along Church Lane and Ard O'Donnell Road.

The stepped and sweeping line of terrace along Church Lane in particular eclipses a view of the Cathedral spire. The line, profile, scale and proportion of the buildings along both sides of Church Lane provide for a pleasant and harmonious progression looking towards the Cathedral.

### **Landscape characteristics**

Letterkenny is located within LCA Unit 15 Letterkenny Estuary and Farmland which is characterised by a wide, fertile valley of the River Swilly flowing east towards Lough Swilly, a large intertidal estuary encircled by higher hills and mountains to the north and south and rolling arable lands in the east; Letterkenny town sprawls out from its historic core in the centre of this LCA in all directions, only somewhat curtailed by the floodplains of the River Swilly and steep rugged land to the north and west of the town. The area is accessible from all directions via a good network of National Primary, Regional and county roads. Image units include the reclaimed agricultural flat lands and flat estuarine lands which are a significant feature within this part of the seascape unit is the mature demense landscape of Castlegrove house and Letterkenny Golf club on the western edge of Lough Swilly.

Letterkenny sits a few km from the mouth of the River Swilly, within the Letterkenny Estuary and Farmland LCA which shores Lough Swilly for a stretch along the eastern boundary. The primary use in this area is agricultural although there is a proliferation of isolated rural dwellings within this landscape.

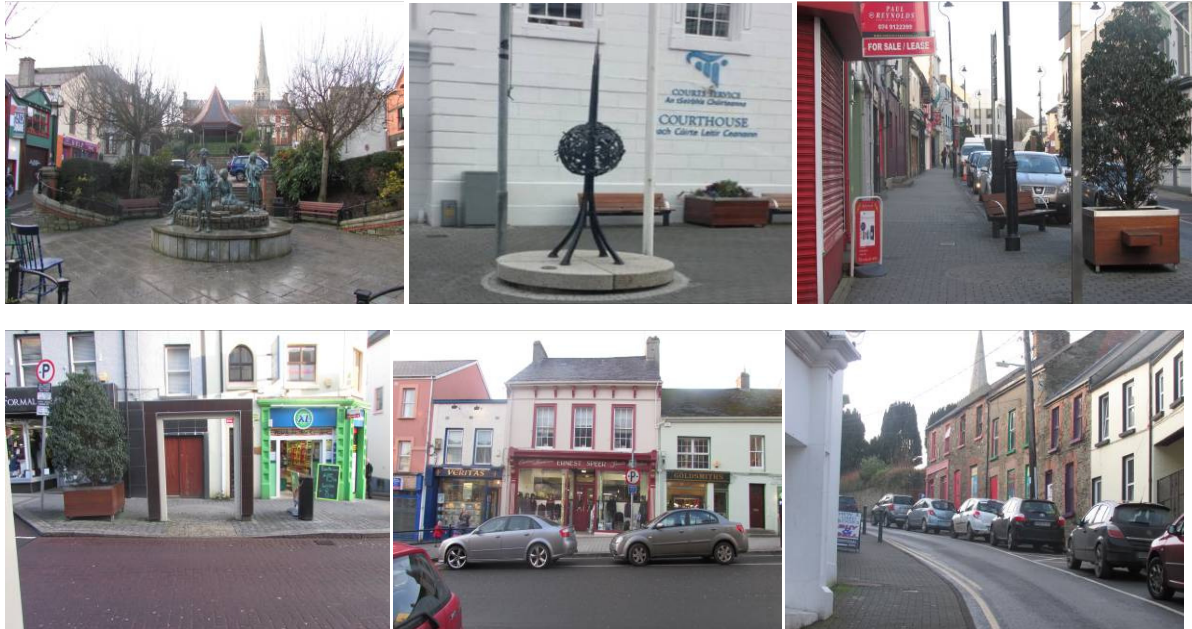
The landscape of Letterkenny is rich and varied. It comprises a valley settlement with surrounding local hillocks making up the Swilly Valley's sloping sides. The landscape in the environs of the town is significantly undeveloped on lands intervening the development along the key arterial roads. This land is largely agricultural in nature. The landscape has retained a significant level of tree cover through both the retention of existing trees and hedgerows and as a result of existing dense woodlands at Kiltoy and Ballymacool. The surrounding valley hillsides with elevated slopes and ridges provide a strong enclosed setting for the town.

### **Identification of Settlement Type** (Hillside of the O'Cannons)

Letterkenny began as a market town during the Plantation and has grown rapidly in the last decade. As the largest and most populated town in Donegal with a population of 19,588 (Letterkenny urban boundary; CSO 2011), it acts as the principal economic and social centre in the county with many living around the town in the smaller commuter towns and villages.

The historic core is based around the Main Street and Market Square, with the centre expanding around this over the years. The town boasts a rich history and heritage, with many excellent examples of historic architecture such as the Cathedral, several churches and Georgian buildings, all of which are protected. Many fine examples of contemporary architecture can also be found within the area. Several archaeological monuments are located around the settlement, including standing stones and Stone Age tombs.

### Townscape features



Letterkenny is made up of a number of particular areas: the traditional town centre (north and south along Main Street and the Upper Port Road), town centre residential areas at Fortwell and Rosemount Lane, Paddy Harte Loop Road retail park extension, and an area of undeveloped lands in the vicinity of Isle Burn. The diversity of land uses exemplified within these character areas demonstrates a vibrant and fully functioning town centre. This is most evidenced though in the traditional town centre area along Main Street where there is a good mix of retail, services, entertainment and cultural activities occurring. Additional townscape features include:

- The presence of trees softens the line of buildings, act as wildlife habitats and provide scale to buildings and streets.
- Mature trees and vegetation enhance the visual amenity of the town.
- Retention of many traditional terrace buildings and their eclectic features and rooflines contribute to a stimulating environment, breaking up the elevation and adding to the towns' distinctive character.
- Mix of uses along the main street including residential, retail and commercial provide active, passive surveillance all day long contributing to sense of vitality within the settlement.
- Churches provide a focal point for residents and a landmark for visitors locating the area.
- Market Square provides a focus and identifies the core of the traditional retail area. Recent modifications including planting and the iconic sculpture by Maurice Harron, have restored this area to a qualitative public square that facilitates communal gathering.
- Topography of landscape provides open vistas, into and out of Letterkenny; of note are the vistas from the Main Street overlooking the rural landscape beyond..
- Spacious character of streetscape that has a wide street proportion.

- Variety in the nature, design and density of housing within the town.
- Main Street remains the retailing, service, entertainment, cultural and social heart of the town demonstrating a vitality, vibrancy and diversity of character.
- Traditional shop fronts and vernacular buildings add character to the streetscape.
- A variety of building materials and colours are present in both traditional and more contemporary buildings enhancing the visual experience.
- The town expresses a well defined setting and compact centre.
- Attractive pedestrian environment with streetscape elements including street lights, bollards, formal planting and street trees which contribute to a stimulating environment adding colour and life perceptually breaking up large paved areas.
- Houses within this townscape are typically terraced and closely spaced giving a high sense of enclosure to the street and provides active surveillance while businesses are closed.
- The traditional town centre of Letterkenny generally displays a high quality vernacular streetscape with a fine grain appearance.
- Letterkenny Town Park and Ballymacool Park are important recreational and amenity areas.
- The presence of long established residential areas provide a sense of identity and place, referencing and cultural and historic value.
- In terms of existing public transport provision, the town is accessible by means of the town bus service which provides 2 routes throughout the town centre exiting the centre on the main arterial routes thereby servicing the main existing residential areas of the town. Taxis contribute to the availability of public transport in Letterkenny. The main taxi rank is located at Station roundabout, opposite the bus station, with additional taxi ranks on Main Street and Market square.
- Important educational centre with third level college LYIT.

### Views and prospects



The following perspectives are considered to be of particular importance in terms of landscape setting and the protection of views:

- Views of the settlements skyline, from all approaches to the town.
- Church spires visible from outside the town form local landmarks.
- Streetscape views within, into and out of the ACA are important, particularly with reference to the character of Cathedral Square, Church Lane, and Castle Street
- Views projecting out to the Lough Swilly provide a connection with the settlement and the surrounding landscape contributing to a strong sense of place.
- Occasional views between buildings along the main street provide glimpses of the surrounding landscape setting.