

Gort Biogas Concern Group CLG
Observations/Submissions

In reference to:

Draft Gort Local Area Plan 2025-2031

For the attention of:

Forward Planning Section
Galway County Council

20.02.2025

To:
Forward Planning Section,
Galway County Council

Re: Observations/submissions on the draft Local Area Plan for Gort 2025-2031

A chairde,

The Gort Biogas Concern group has laid out its observations below for consideration in the formulation of the new Local Area Plan.

We look forward to ongoing communications and involvement in the process.

Regards,

Ciaran O'Donnell

Chair: Gort Biogas Concern Group

Background

As you are aware, Gort town has a very active and vibrant community, with many volunteer groups working hard to make Gort a wonderful place to live, work, and visit. Coupled to this, is a strong community focus on protecting the local environment, maintaining the town's strong heritage, and promoting sustainable growth.

Community groups within Gort have been actively engaged with our local Councillors on the development of the new LAP for Gort since 2023, through a number of focused meetings with Councillors, public meetings and direct communication with Forward Planning at the Council (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of timeline of engagement in LAP process (2025-2031).

Date	Event	Organiser	Location
06.09.2023	Roundtable discussion with Cllrs on new LAP for Gort	GBCG	Gort Townhall
18.12.2023	Email to Forward planning RE: pre-draft consultation process	Joint statement	Email
16.01.2024	Community meeting in prep for LAP	BLL	Sullivan's Hotel

The process began in 2023, when the Gort Biogas Concern Group (GBCG) held a roundtable discussion with locally elected representatives on the process, structure and format of the development of a LAP. This was a very informative meeting with input from all seven Councillors present.

Following on from this, a joint statement representing five local community groups (Burren Lowlans CLG, Tidy Towns, Gort Resource Centre, Gort Biogas Concern Group CLG and Gort Town Team) was sent to the Forward planning section of Galway County Council requesting information on the opening of the *pre-draft community consultation process* as outlined in the guidelines¹ These community groups felt it critical to have meaningful engagement with the planners in the ***pre-draft phase*** to ensure input into process.

A community meeting was held in January, 2024. Community groups were invited to a Gort Local Area Plan pre-draft meeting, with the intention of aligning vision and to identify key points. This followed on from the extensive work undertaken on the development of Gort Town Plan.

Given the buy-in from community groups and the prolonged period in regards to the draft plan publication, we feel it would have been entirely feasible to undertake the pre-draft consultation period with community groups (Figure 1). We felt, at the least, our communications warranted a response as to why this would not be possible. Although a non-statutory process, we were collectively disappointed that there was no engagement in this process.

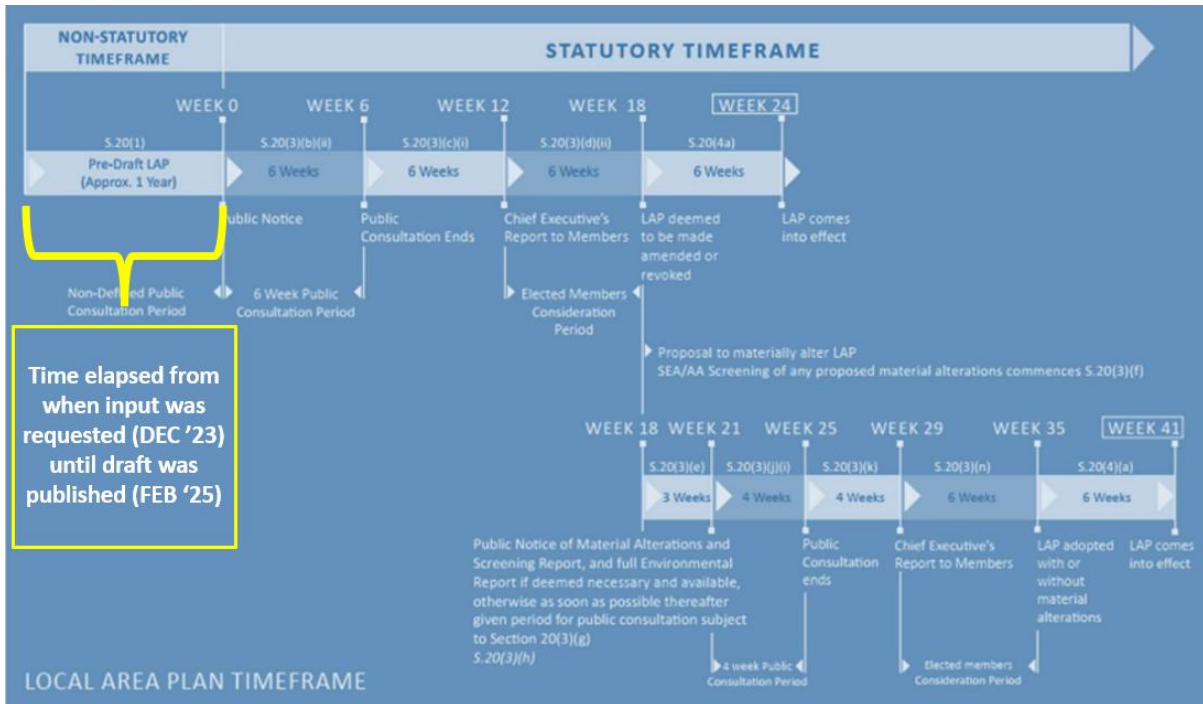


Figure 1. Process flow of the local area plan. Highlighted is the time period from when a formal request from community groups was sent to the Council to when the draft LAP was published. No engagement was facilitated during this period.

¹ [Guidelines for Planning Authorities](#), 2013 (Chapter 3, Section 3.2 pp. 17 & Chapter 4, Section 4.1 pp. 24) for reference.

Change of classification

A key difference in the existing LAP (2013-2023) and the new draft LAP (2025-2031) is the change in classification of Gort from a **Key Town** to a **Self-sustaining town** as set out in the County development plan (CDP) 2022-2028 (Table 2). The new strategy describing Gort as a described as:

A Self-Sustaining Town is characterized by high population growth but limited employment opportunities, meaning it depends on nearby urban centres for jobs and services.

The 2025-2031 LAP promotes Gort as a **business destination**, leveraging connectivity improvements such as the **M18 motorway** and **rail links**.

Table 2. Key differences between proposed and new LAP for Gort.

Aspect	Key Town (2013-2023 LAP)	Self-Sustaining Town (2025-2031 LAP)
Growth Model	Expansion-based growth, more land zoned for housing and industry	Compact growth, prioritizing infill and brownfield sites
Employment Role	Aims to be a regional employment hub	Recognizes limited local employment and dependency on other areas
Transport Focus	Car-oriented expansion along approach roads	Sustainable mobility (walking, cycling, public transport)
Zoning Approach	Large-scale residential & commercial zoning	Phased residential growth with strict land use planning
Economic Vision	Attracting external investment & industry	Supporting local businesses and tourism

Recommendation

We feel that **clear definition** should be included on the type of business/industry type most suited to ensuring delivery of the LAP. If the proposed strategy now **prioritises balanced, compact, and phased development**, focusing on local economic growth, town centre revitalisation, and sustainable transport rather than large-scale expansion. Then it is important to define the size, type and scale of industry that will fit into this model.

Gort with its proximity to national transport infrastructure (motorway, Shannon airport), public transport links (rail network) and digital connectivity (fibre broadband) lends itself perfectly to **low impact/light industry and technology parks**. Industry, of course, is a vital component to any town. However, **large scale industrial developments do not fit with this proposed strategy** and is in exact opposition to developing the town centre, realising heritage and unlocking tourism potential.

The TCP plan clearly highlighted the threats of such large-scale industrial developments in the SCOT analysis and this is clearly lacking in draft LAP SCOT analysis. We feel that such developments pose **a real and serious threat to the delivery of the LAP**, and as a result **should be included in the SCOT analysis in the LAP document**.

Linkage to CDP and NDP

The draft LAP lacks the linkages between CDP and NDP goals and policies, something that was clearly identifiable in the previous LAP.

Recommendation

The document would greatly benefit from the addition of **clear links to the parent documents CDP ad NDP** under each heading.

Architectural Conservation Area

Archaeological, architectural and heritage assets within Gort contribute to the character and local distinctiveness of the area. For a town of its size, Gort contains a significant number of buildings of national or regional significance.

Gort town centre has a designated Architectural Conservation Area (ACA). The draft LAP recognises the value of built heritage in Gort and expresses the commitment to the protection and enhancement of the town's heritage.

Recommendation

The boundary of the **ACA needs to be extended to include all of the previous Gort Castle and Cavalry Barracks land** to guide appropriate development on those lands, recognising the cultural significance of intact walls to retain the character therein (Figure 2).

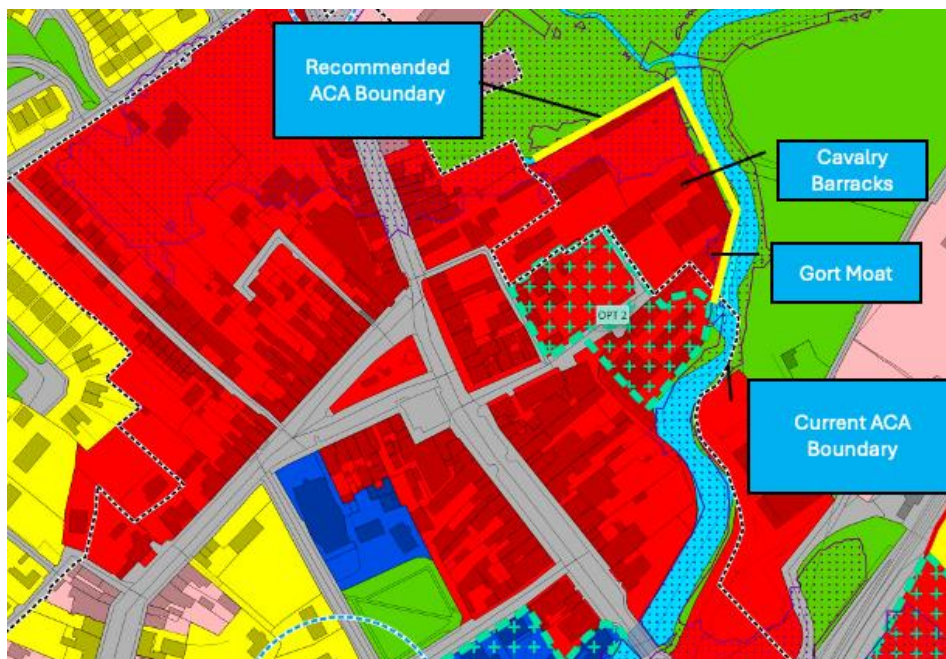


Figure 2. Architectural Conservation Area (ACA) map showing proposed revised boundary (yellow line) that would provide protection to existing intact walls of the Gort Castle and Cavalry Barracks land.

Justification

Recognizing Cultural & Historical Significance (Galway County Development Plan & Gort LAP 2025-2031)

- The Galway County Development Plan 2022-2028 emphasizes the protection of historic sites and landscapes to safeguard local identity.
- The Gort LAP 2025-2031 highlights the importance of heritage-led regeneration, ensuring that development respects existing historic structures.

- The intact barracks walls, castle remains, and military history form a key part of Gort's built heritage and should be protected from inappropriate development. The old Gort moat should also be fully included in the ACA.

Preventing Visual & Environmental Intrusions (Strategic Environmental Assessment & Gort Town Centre First Plan)

- The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of the LAP acknowledges the need to protect historic landscapes from intrusive developments.
- Increasing the ACA boundary would prevent visually disruptive structures (e.g., tall telecommunication masts) from undermining the historic Gort River Walk and townscape views.
- The Gort Town Centre First Plan prioritizes public realm enhancements and recognizes the value of historic sites in reinforcing the town's identity.

Supporting Sustainable & Appropriate Development (Gort LAP & Galway County Development Plan)

- An ACA designation would ensure that future development is guided by conservation principles, maintaining the architectural character of the area.
- This aligns with national planning policies that require new developments within historic settings to be context-sensitive and compatible with existing heritage assets.
- Protecting the barracks walls and historical footprint could also facilitate adaptive reuse projects for community, tourism, or cultural purposes.

It should be noted that planning permission was refused by Galway County Council for a 30m tall telecommunication mast and the Gort River Walk Group submitted an observation that a tower of this height in the Town Centre would be highly visible from Gort River Walk, especially considering future integration with the Galway-Dublin Cycleway, this would be one of the first visible features of Gort Town.

This proposal therefore aligns with local, county, and national planning strategies, ensuring that Gort's historical core remains an asset for future generations

Local Area Plan needs to consider the wider area

While it is welcome to see the Gort Inse Guaire Town Centre First Plan interwoven in the draft LAP, it appears no consideration is given to the wider catchment area outside of the town.

Large scale developments in close proximity to the town have the potential to seriously disrupt the delivery of elements outlined in the Strategic Vision for Gort. Community groups, and our elected representatives have been consistent and clear in their opposition to such developments. It would be remiss not to take this into consideration in the LAP. The TCP plan clearly highlighted the threats of such large-scale industrial developments in the SCOT analysis and this is clearly **lacking in draft LAP SCOT analysis**.

Developments in the immediate surrounds of the town have the potential to seriously impact the delivery of the LAP and the day-to-day operation of the town in terms of **Adverse traffic impacts** and realising **Economic growth and Tourism potential**.

It is essential for the LAP to protect not only the town centre but the surrounds also, including such important amenities as the Gort River. Thus, protecting Gort Town and surrounds from industrial developments that will significantly impact the delivery of the TCF plan. The draft Gort LAP **lacks strong policy protections** for amenity spaces, biodiversity, and environmental resilience, leaving Gort vulnerable to the negative impacts of large-scale industrial developments. Strengthening these policy objectives will ensure sustainable growth while protecting Gort's key natural assets and community well-being.

The Galway County Development Plan DM Standard 28 (Access to National and Other Restricted Roads for Commercial & Other Developments) provides a more explicit definition of the restrictions, on Class II Control Roads where commercial, industrial and community facilities development and land use ..“... shall be restricted to essential needs, in the particular locality, of agriculture, tourism infrastructure, fisheries, forestry, park and ride facilities or existing extractive industries, and where these cannot be in the opinion of the Planning Authority, be reasonably located along other non-listed regional or local roads.”

The LAP/LTP needs to ensure that 'essential needs' should be assessed against the Gort Town Centre First Plan, the related Needs and Justification Report and the Gort LAP.

Recommendation

Modify/define new objectives:

- **GSTT 9,10** – replace “vitality and viability” with “vitality, viability and sustainability”
- **GSST 22 - Protection of Gort River & Amenity Spaces**

-This plan will protect key amenity sites, including the Gort River Walk and prohibit the development of large-scale industrial facilities that can have an adverse impact on these facilities.

-This plan will ensure that any development within or adjacent to the Gort River Walk, Gort River, or associated floodplains is assessed for its environmental impact, recreational value, and compatibility with biodiversity objectives.

- **GSTT 18 Industrial**

-Promote the sustainable development of small scale industrial and industrial related uses, including manufacturing, processing of materials, warehousing and distribution on suitable lands, with adequate services and facilities and a high level of access to the major road networks and public transport facilities. Adequate boundary treatments and/or screening will be required to ensure high quality interfaces with public spaces and any adjoining residential areas or other sensitive land uses, as appropriate.

-Any proposals shall be required to comply with environmental considerations and the relevant DM Standards.

- **GSST 49** Traffic and Transport Assessment (TTA) and Road Safety Audits (RSA): Require all significant development proposals to be accompanied by a Road Safety Audit and Traffic & Transport Assessment carried out by suitably competent consultants, which are assessed in association with their cumulative impact with neighbouring developments on the road network, in accordance with the requirements contained within the TII's Traffic & Transport Assessment Guidelines (PE-PDV-02045) 2014 (including any updated/superseding document) and 'Road Safety Audit' (GE-STY-01024) December 2017.

For significant development along the R458 restricted regional road, the restrictions should include assessment of 'essential needs' against the Gort Town Centre First Plan, the referenced Needs and Justification report and the Gort LAP

Amenity networks

Galway-Athlone cycleway

The Galway-Athlone cycle way will provide a significant boost for Gort in realising its tourism potential. While realising this potential, it is important to retain existing amenity infrastructure without disruption, namely the Gort Riverwalk (GRW). Potential exists here to enhance connectivity within the town for residents, providing an alternative network and reducing the reliance on cars.

The new cycleway should not impact the GRW by adding additional and potentially disruptive volumes of cyclists to a recognised and multi-award-winning walking/cycling trail. We recommend a new and alternative route utilising the railway line.

The LAP should include alternative options to enhance connectivity and retention of existing infrastructure.

Recommendation

- Include an WC option similar to WC15 of a direct and segregated link between the cycleway and Gort Town Centre/Cycle hub/Station.
- Modify WC10 route thorough old Gort Landfill and connect to WC15/new WC

Gort Eco Park and Amenity Hub

The lands at the entrance to the GRW are currently proposed to be zoned as OS/Amenity. We recommend a re-zoning to Community & Mixed-Use to allow for the development of this land to the benefit of the community and to meet the goals as laid out in the draft LAP and TCF plans. We have a unique opportunity to develop this area that will benefit the town and aligns with the Gort Town Centre First Plan, the Gort Draft Local Area Plan (LAP) 2025-2031, and the Galway County Development Plan 2022-2028.

Recommendation

We recommend a re-zoning to Community & Mixed-Use to allow for the development of this land to the benefit of the community and to meet the goals as laid out in the draft LAP and TCF plans.

Utilising this opportunity to develop this area would significantly enhance the area and further strengthen the potential of the town to develop its **tourism and amenity potential** as part of the **Strategic Vision for Gort**.