



**THORNTON O'CONNOR**  
TOWN PLANNING

# **Social Infrastructure Audit (Incl. Childcare and Schools)**

**In Respect of a Proposed Residential Development at  
a Site of 6.05 Ha in Blessington Demesne, Blessington  
Co. Wicklow**

**Prepared on Behalf of Marshall Yards Development  
Company Limited**

September 2024

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This Social Infrastructure Audit (SIA) (incl. Childcare and Schools) has been prepared by Thornton O'Connor Town Planning on behalf of Marshall Yards Development Company Limited in support of a Planning Application for a Residential Development proposed at a site of 6.05 Ha in Blessington Demesne, Blessington, Co. Wicklow. The *Wicklow County Development Plan 2022-2028* includes policy objective CPO 7.5 which requires that Applicants of large-scale developments submit Social Infrastructure Audits (SIA) as part of their Planning Applications. The Report provides a detailed review of the statutory, strategic and policy context that relates to the provision of Social Infrastructure with the following aims:

- To provide a survey and audit of existing Community and Social Infrastructure, Open Space and Amenities serving the identified Study Area and the subject site;
- Catalogue all infrastructure under the facilities categories identified through policy guidance;
- Establish if suitable Social Infrastructure is provided in the area to support the needs of the existing population; and
- Assess the nature of the infrastructure and likelihood of the capacity of the existing facilities to support the needs of future residents.

This Report, therefore, identifies existing Community Facilities in the local area and includes an analysis and identification of potential shortfalls in infrastructure.

### 1.1 Approach

As part of this Planning Application, an assessment of the existing facilities in the area has been carried out in order to assess the need for Social and Community Infrastructure. A desktop study was used to collect the baseline information. The facilities in each category were recorded in an Excel Table, and then mapped using the ArcGIS Ecosystem. A large number of public and private geospatial datasets were used in the course of the survey, including but not limited to:

- 2024 Google Places Dataset;
- 2024 ESRI and Mapbox Ireland Basemaps;
- 2011, 2016 and 2022 Census Boundaries and Small Area Population Statistics;
- 2010-2024 Department of Education and Skills – Irish Schools;
- 2024 Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Register of Private Higher Education Institutions in Ireland;
- 2024 Tusla Early Years Inspectorate Reports – Registered Childcare Facilities; and
- 2024 HSE – 'Find Your Local Health Service'.

Social Infrastructure (SI) includes a range of services and facilities that contribute to quality of life. SI is a key part of the fabric of an area, not just in terms of wellbeing, but also in terms of creating a sense of place for the population of the area and forming a part of the local identity. For the purpose of this Report, the array of services and facilities defined as Social Infrastructure have been categorised into a defined number of typologies that correspond to those generally set out in Chapter 7 of the *Wicklow County Development Plan 2022-2028* (Table 1.1).

A radius of 1 km from the subject site was used as the focus for this assessment as it is considered a relatively short distance for residents to access via foot, or cycle. It is also aligned with the principles of the policy objectives for SIAs detailed in Section 7.2 of the *Wicklow County*

*Development Plan 2022-2028* (outlined in greater detail in Section 2.0). An additional 10-minute drivetime catchment area was defined for the study based on Hierarchy Model outlined in Table 7.1 of the *Wicklow County Development Plan 2022-2028*. An assessment of assets within this secondary catchment has also been conducted (where relevant).

Category	Facility Type
Education and Training Services	Primary, Post-Primary, Third Level, Further Education, Other Lifelong Training Centres
Childcare Facilities	Registered Childcare Facilities Incl. Full Day, Part-Time and Sessional Services
Social, Community, Arts and Faith Facilities	Community Centres, Libraries, Senior and Youth Centres, Post Offices, Banks and Credit Unions, Museums, Galleries, Theatres, Cinemas, Music Venues, Historical Cultural Sites, Areas of Worship, Churches, Cemeteries
Healthcare and Emergency Services	Hospitals, Health Centres, Primary Care Centres, Doctors and Specialty Clinics, Dental, Physiotherapy, Counselling, Optician, Pharmacy, Garda Stations, Fire Stations
Open Space and Recreation	Parks, Playing Pitches, Playgrounds, Sports Centres and Clubs, Leisure Centres, Gyms and Training Facilities, Swimming Pools
Transport	Bus Routes, Cycle Routes, Green Infrastructure, Road Networks, Pedestrian Pathways

**Table 1.1 Social and Community Infrastructure Categories Applied to Audit**

(Source: Thornton O'Connor Town Planning, 2024)

## 1.2 Study Area and Accessibility

The subject site, which measures 6.05 Ha in area, is situated in Blessington Demesne, Blessington, Co. Wicklow. Blessington, is designated as a Self-Sustaining Growth Town within the 'Core Region' in the *Wicklow County Development Plan 2022-2028*, and is located on the Kildare/Wicklow border approximately 27km south-west of Dublin and 11km from Naas, the County town of Kildare. It serves as a vibrant service hub for a wide rural area encompassing neighbouring villages such as Hollywood, Manor Kilbride, Lackan, Ballyknockan, Dunlavin, Donard, and Valleymount in County Wicklow, along with Rathmore, Eadestown, and Ballymore in County Kildare, and Brittas in County Dublin. Positioned along the N81, Blessington holds a strategic location near the Dublin metropolitan area and serves as the gateway to the west of the County. To the east and south, Blessington is bordered by the Poulaphouca Reservoir SPA, formed by damming the River Liffey in the 1940s. This reservoir, supplying water to the Dublin region and generating hydroelectricity, is a designated conservation site and a recreational asset for the town. The Blessington Greenway, linking the town to Russborough House, has completed its first phase and plans for its expansion around the entirety of Poulaphouca Reservoir are underway, offering tourism opportunities.

The subject site is bounded by residential development at the north-east and south-west, there is a shopping centre and crèche (Cocoon Childcare) to the south-east, and a new park and residential development to the north-west. Blessington, and the proposed development, are adequately served by public transport with access to a number of bus stops within walking distance from the site along the Main Street;



- Route No. 65 (and 65A) – Blessington to Poolbeg Street (Dublin City)
- Route No. 132 – Bunclody/Rosslare/Tullow to Dublin City Centre
- Route No. 183 – Arklow to Sallins
- Route No. 885 – Baltinglass to Sallins
- Route No. 863 – Blessington to Pearse Station (Dublin City)

The Blessington Inner Relief Road (BIRR) runs along the western boundary of the site. There are schools and a wide range of services in the vicinity including schools, Dunnes Stores, a theatre, Main Street, medical facilities, sporting and outdoor activities.

The site is greenfield in nature and principally accessible via road frontage to its north-west, south-west and south-east. A link road forms the site's south-western perimeter and an area of greenfield land (to be a town park) adjoins the site to the north-west on the opposite side of the Blessington Inner Relief Road. The subject site is located just outside, but directly adjoining, the boundary for the town of Blessington as defined by the Census 2022, and the proposed development would be located within walking distance of major public transport infrastructure links, as well as social and community infrastructure within the settlement boundary.



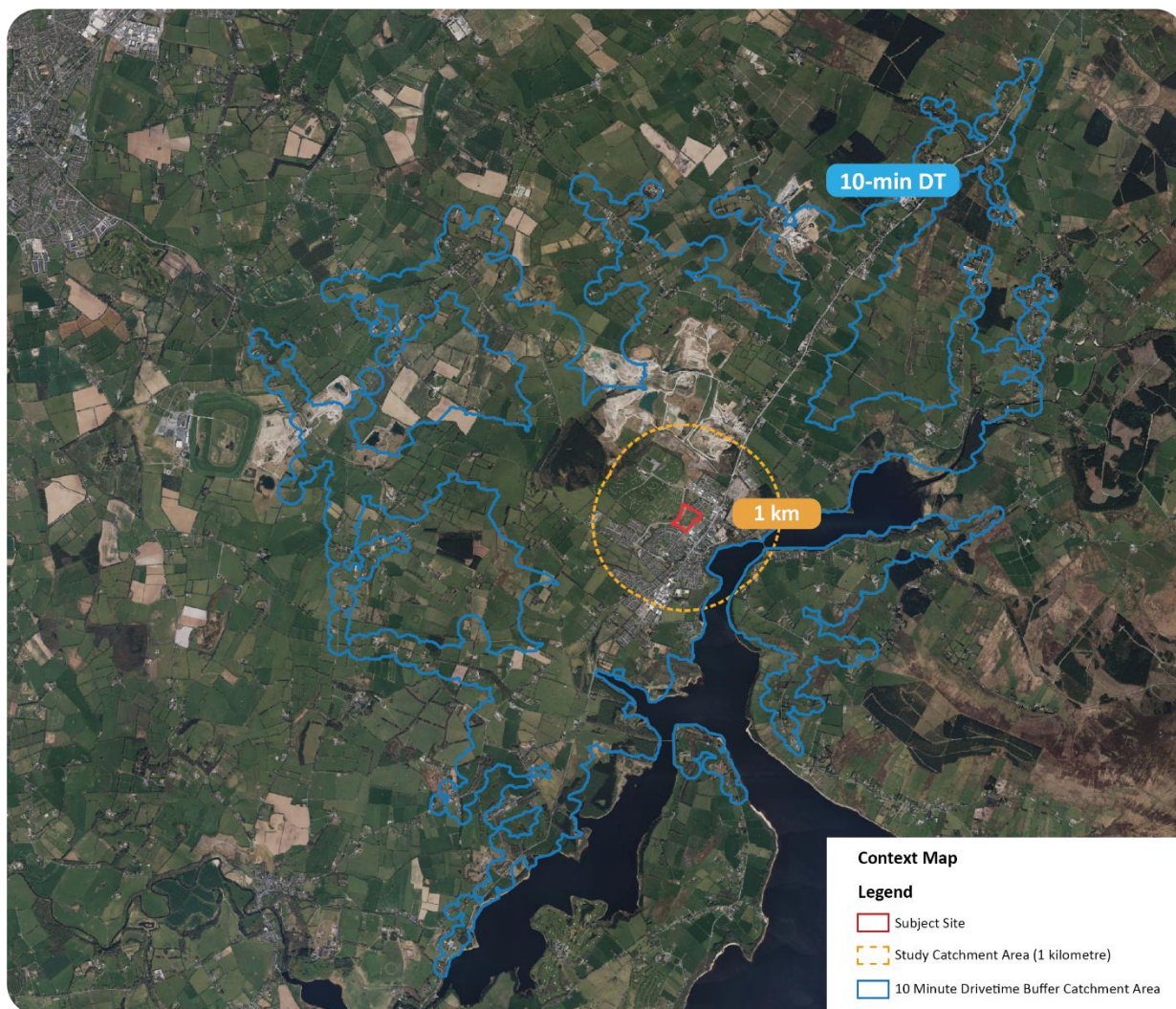
**Figure 1.1: Site Location**

(Source: Bing Maps, Annotated By Thornton O'Connor Town Planning, 2024)

The Study Area for this Assessment is defined by a 1 km radius of the subject site, equivalent to a c. 12- to 14-minute walking distance, which is considered accessible to future residents of the proposed development. Given that the subject site is located at the edge of a growing settlement, an additional 10-minute drivetime catchment area was defined for the study based on the Community Faculties Hierarchy Model outlined in Table 7.1 of the *Wicklow County Development*



*Plan 2022-2028*. These catchments areas are used throughout the analysis to capture, survey and include relevant infrastructure that lies tangent to, or immediately outside of, this Study Area but is directly relevant to assessing future needs of the settlement of Blessington.



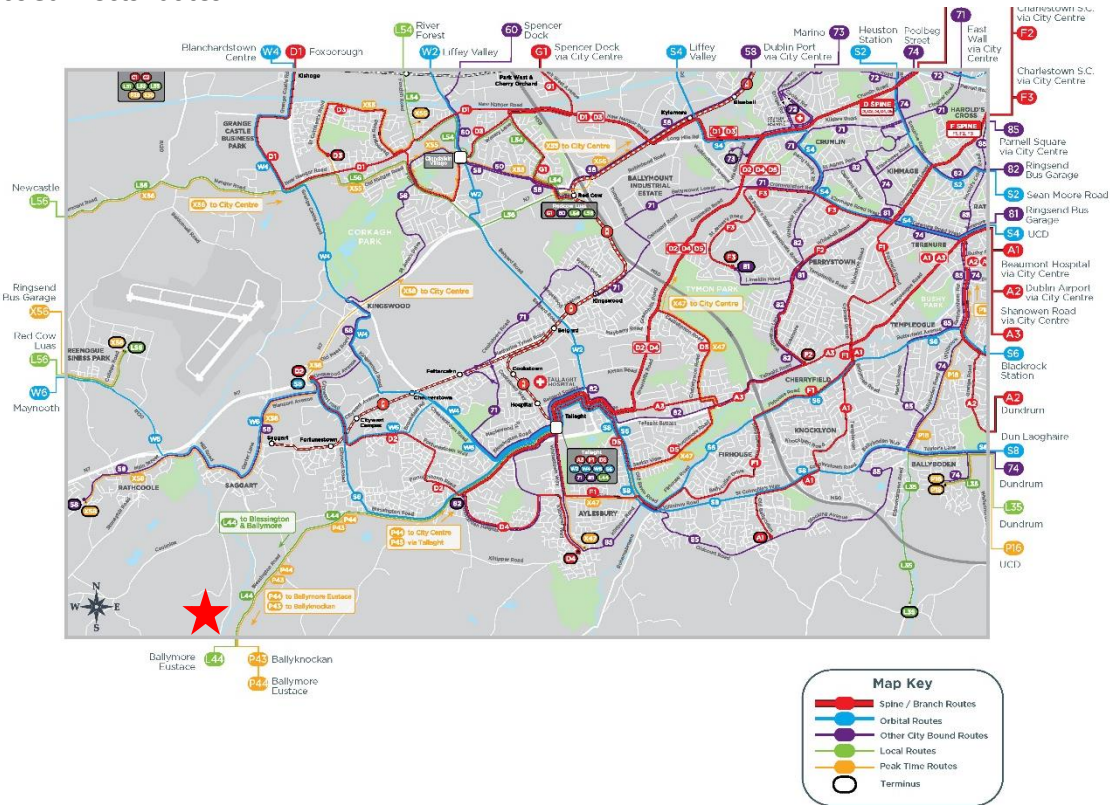
**Figure 1.2: Study Area**

(Source: Bing Maps, Annotated By Thornton O'Connor Town Planning, 2024)

Blessington is served by Dublin Bus No. 65 to Tallaght, Terenure, Rathmines and Dublin City. Bus Eireann also serves Blessington with connections to Tallaght and Dublin as well as Baltinglass, Tullow, Ballon, Kildavin and Bunclody to the south. Local Links were also identified in the town through the route number 885 and number 183 provides a connection between Blessington and Sallins Rail station between Monday and Friday. All routes bus stops are located within a 250 metre distance from the subject site, which is equivalent to less than a 5-minute walk. In addition to the existing bus stops located in Blessington, 2 No. bus stops along the Blessington Inner Relief Road have been built although they are not understood to currently be in use. The bus stops located west of the site, will offer greater accessibility to public transport from the site once operated.

Under various plans and programmes, there are emerging transport developments that will positively impact the sustainable transport and mobility options to and from the subject site. As part of the GDA Cycle Network, secondary routes are proposed in the immediate vicinity of the subject site along Oak Drive and the Inner Relief Road. Additional secondary routes are proposed along both the R410 Naas Road and N81 Main Street, which both connect to Blessington Town

Centre. Branching off these secondary routes are a number of inter urban routes and leisure greenways. BusConnects is the National Transport Authority's (NTA) programme to greatly improve bus and sustainable transport services across the Dublin Region. Under BusConnects the subject site will benefit from the implementation of the local route L44 servicing between Ballymore Eustace-Blessington – Tallaght. The route will operate 7 days a week with a frequency of 60 minutes. The route will form part of an interchange with the Luas red line and additional BusConnects routes.



**Figure 1.3: BusConnects Network (Indicative Direction of the Subject Site Denoted By Red Star)**

(Source: BusConnects.ie, Annotated By Thornton O'Connor Town Planning, 2024)

### 1.3 Proposed Development

Permission is sought by Marshall Yards Development Company Limited for the following:

*'Marshall Yards Development Company Ltd intend to apply for permission for a Large-Scale Residential Development at this site of 6.05 hectares at Blessington Demesne, Blessington, Co. Wicklow. The site is generally bound: to the north-east by undeveloped land and Oak Drive; to the south-east by Saint Mary's Senior National School, Cocoon Childcare and Newtown Centre (across a local street); to the south-west by Downshire Park (across a local street); and to the north-west by the Blessington Inner Relief Road.*

*The proposed development principally comprises the construction of a mixed-use development with a gross floor area of 23,219.1 square metres and ranging in height from 1 No. to 5 No. storeys that includes: 233 No. residential dwellings (24 No. 1-bed, 103 No. 2-bed, 94 No. 3-bed and 12 No. 4-bed), of which 185 No. are houses (103 No. 2-bed, 70 No. 3-bed and 12 No. 4-bed) and 48 No. are apartments/duplexes (24 No. 1-bed and 24 No. 3-bed); 36 No. 'later living'*



dwellings (12 No. 1-bed and 24 No. 2-bed), of which 12 No. are houses (all 2-bed) and 24 No. are apartments (12 No. 1-bed and 12 No. 2-bed); a medical centre (224 sq m); a pharmacy (115 sq m); and a café (60 sq m).

The development also comprises: 2 No. multi-modal entrances/exits with junctions at Blessington Inner Relief Road to the north-west and the local street to the south-west; a new pedestrian/cycle crossing to the south-east at the local street; upgrades to the Blessington Inner Relief Road roundabout to the west, including pedestrian/cycle crossings; new pedestrian/cycle crossing at Blessington Inner Relief Road to the north-west; 341 No. car parking space; cycle parking; hard and soft landscaping including public open space, communal amenity space and private amenity space (as gardens, balconies and terraces facing all directions); boundary treatments; 3 No. sub-stations; bin stores; public lighting; PV arrays atop all dwellings; PV array, lift overrun and plant atop the 5-storey mixed-use building; and all associated works above and below ground.'

Unit Type	'Standard' Units	'Later Living' Units	Total (No.)	% of Total
1-Bedroom Units	24	12	36	13.4%
2-Bedroom Units	103	24	127	47.2%
3-Bedroom Units	94	0	94	34.9%
4-Bedroom Units	12	0	12	4.5%
Total No. of Units	233	36	269	100.0%

Table 1.2: Schedule of Accommodation

(Source: Deady Gahan Architects, 2024)

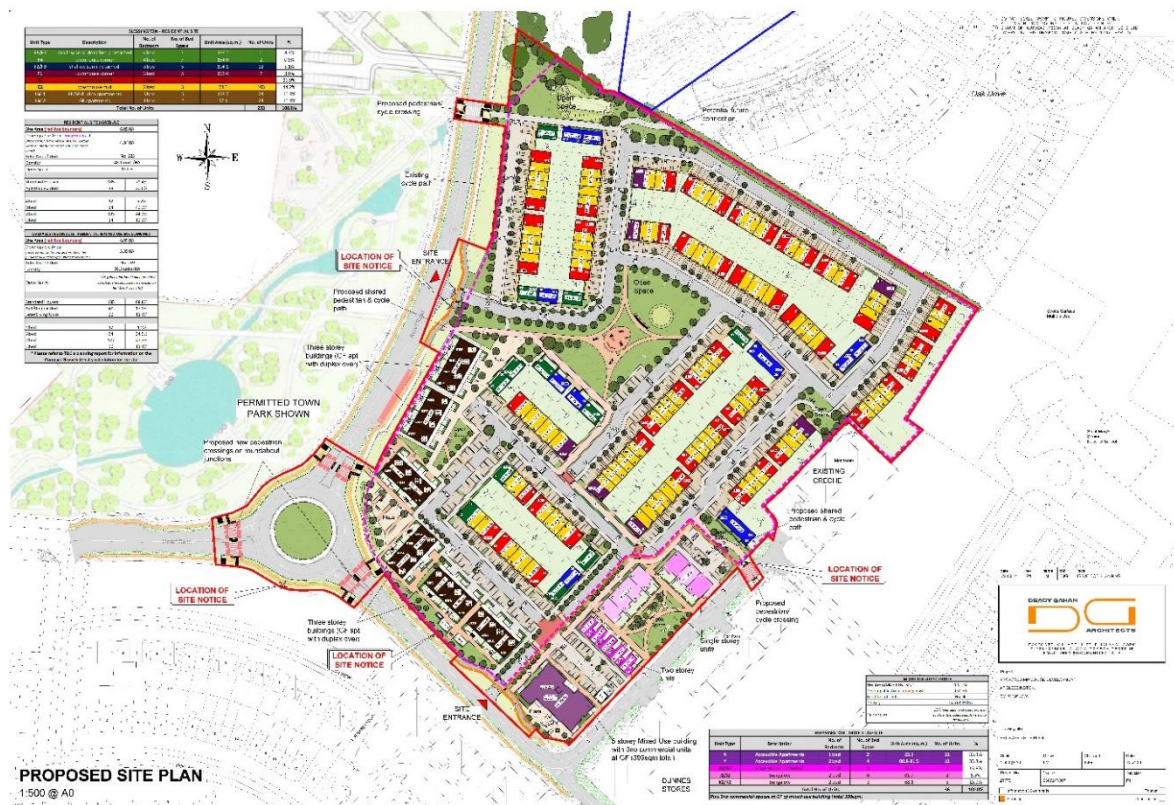


Figure 1.4: Proposed Site Layout

(Source: Deady Gahan Architects, 2024)



## 1.4 Layout of this Report

The remaining Sections of this Report will follow the approach outlined in Section 1.1 as a structural framework with a demographic analysis that provides valuable insight into the characteristics of the population of the Study Area, followed by the identification and categorisation of all current Community, Recreational and Social Infrastructure in the area, prior to determining the potential demand impacts of the proposed development. The Report will comprise a further four Sections:

- **Section 2.0** provides the policy context and considers standards against which provision can be assessed;
- **Section 3.0** provides an overview of the population and demographic profile of the Study Area and assesses the likely future demographic trends as a result of the implementation of the proposed development;
- **Section 4.0** reviews existing local Community, Recreational and Social Infrastructure; and
- **Section 5.0** identifies gaps in the existing provision of Community Infrastructure and makes recommendations to address deficiencies.

## 2.0 RELEVANT POLICY GUIDANCE

For the purposes of this SIA, a range of National, Regional and Local Planning Policies relating to SI have been reviewed, including those within the *Wicklow County Development Plan 2022-2028*. These documents provide guidance with respect to the provision of new social and community facilities in residential development areas in a number of categories, including education and childcare services, healthcare facilities, cultural institutions, recreational facilities and other key services. The key points relating to this study, as derived from each policy document, will be highlighted in this Section.

### 2.1 National Planning Policy

#### 2.1.1 *National Planning Framework – Project Ireland 2040*

The *National Planning Framework – Project Ireland 2040* ('NPF') sets a vision for the planning and development of Ireland to 2040 which is to be implemented through Regional, County and Local Plans. The NPF sets out 50% of future population is to be accommodated within the existing footprint of Dublin and the four other cities.

A key focus of the NPF is on sustainable and compact development within pre-existing urban areas and the provision of accessible services and facilities for all communities. Chapter 6 of the NPF states that the "ability to access services and amenities, such as education and healthcare, shops and parks, the leisure and social interactions available to us and the prospect of securing employment" is intrinsic to providing a good quality of life for new and existing communities.

The NPF includes National Strategic Outcome 10 which seeks to provide access to quality childcare, education and health services. This requires an evidence-led planning approach. While there is no guidance on what infrastructure is required to service developments of different sizes, the NPF does provide a hierarchy of settlements and related infrastructure.

With the lack of alternative guidance and in order to provide a policy and evidence-based approach to the Assessment, within this Report we use the NPF hierarchy to assess the infrastructure but defer to catchment specification prescribed in Local Development Plan Policy.

#### 2.1.2 *Sustainable Residential Development and Compact Settlements Guidelines for Planning Authorities (January 2024)*

The *Sustainable Residential Development and Compact Settlements Guidelines for Planning Authorities* provide national planning policy and guidance on sustainable residential development and the creation of compact settlements in both urban and rural areas in Ireland. The aim is to promote environmentally friendly practices, efficient land-use and community-focused development. The Guidelines recognise the importance of compact growth in urban areas and the importance of walkable well-designed neighbourhoods that can meet day-to-day needs of residents within a short 10- to 15-minute walk of homes. These day-to-day needs refer to social infrastructure, including access to educational facilities and childcare, as being essential to good quality of life, and state that new development should take into consideration the SI needs of the community and the existing provision of same. Under the chapter titled 'Sustainable and Compact Settlements', the process for the delivery of successful quality placemaking is reviewed and the provision of key facilities such as amenities, schools, crèches and other community services are

referenced as forming essential elements.

The Guidelines promote a move away from segregated land-use areas (residential, commercial and employment) that have reinforced unsustainable travel in favour of mixed-use neighbourhoods. Ensuring that there is a good mix and distribution of activities around a hierarchy of centres has many benefits in terms of reducing the need to travel and creating active and vibrant places. It states that specific key principles (noted below) should be applied in the preparation of local plans and in the consideration of individual planning applications:

- a) *"In city and town centres and at high capacity public transport nodes and interchanges (defined in Table 3.8), development should consist of high intensity mix-use development (residential, commercial, retail, cultural and community uses) that responds in scale and intensity to the level of accessibility. At major transport interchanges, uses should be planned in accordance with the principles of Transport Orientated Development.*
- b) *In city and town centres, planning authorities should plan for a diverse range of uses including retail, cultural and residential uses and for the adaption and re-use of the existing building stock (e.g. over the shop living). It is also important to plan for the activation of outdoor spaces and the public realm to promote more liveable city and town centres. Much of this can be achieved through the implementation of urban enhancement and traffic demand management measures that work together to free up space for active travel and create spaces that invite people to meet, mingle and dwell within centres.*
- c) *In areas that are less central, the mix of uses should cater for local services and amenities focused around a hierarchy of local centres that support residential communities and with opportunities for suitable non-residential development throughout.*
- d) *In all urban areas, planning authorities should actively promote and support opportunities for intensification. This could include initiatives that support the more intensive use of existing buildings (including adaption and extension) and under-used lands (including for example the repurposing of car parks at highly accessible urban locations that no longer require a high level of private car access).*
- e) *It will be important to align the integration of land uses and centres with public transport in order to maximise the benefits of public transport.*
- f) *The creation of sustainable communities also requires a diverse mix of housing and variety in residential densities across settlements. This will require a focus on the delivery of innovative housing types that can facilitate compact growth and provide greater housing choice that responds to the needs of single people, families, older people and people with disabilities, informed by a Housing Needs Demand Assessment (HNDA) where possible. Development plans may specify a mix for apartment and other housing developments, but this should be further to an evidence-based Housing Needs and Demand Assessment."*

This audit has regard to these Guidelines which set out the distribution of uses and community infrastructure as being most relevant in the development of new residential areas. These criteria were considered in the development of the comprehensive infrastructure categories applied during the course of the Study Area audit.

### **2.1.3 Sustainable Urban Housing: Design Standards for New Apartments (July 2023)**

*The Sustainable Urban Housing: Design Standards for New Apartments Guidelines for Planning Authorities (July 2023)* also includes specific guidance with respect to childcare provision in the design and development of apartment schemes, as follows:

*"Notwithstanding the Planning Guidelines for Childcare Facilities (2001), in respect of which*



*a review is to be progressed, and which recommend the provision of one child-care facility (equivalent to a minimum of 20 child places) for every 75 dwelling units, the threshold for provision of any such facilities in apartment schemes should be established having regard to the scale and unit mix of the proposed development and the existing geographical distribution of childcare facilities and the emerging demographic profile of the area.*

*One-bedroom or studio type units should not generally be considered to contribute to a requirement for any childcare provision and subject to location, this may also apply in part or whole, to units with two or more bedrooms.”*

The document specifies the provision of 1 No. childcare facility (equivalent to a minimum of 20 No. child places) for every 75 No. proposed residential units. The application of this standard is, however, informed by the demographic profile of the area and the existing capacity of childcare facilities.

In line with the above National Guidelines, all the one-bedroom units within the proposed development have been discounted in estimating the total number of minors (children aged 0–4 years) and school going children (5–18 years) expected to reside within the development. Additionally, all of the LLUs have been excluded, as their residents are highly unlikely to include children requiring childcare or schools places. Instead, the 209 No. two, three, and four bedroom units have been included. The estimation of children population and the likely demand for childcare services arising from them has been further detailed in the Audit in Section 4.0.

#### **2.1.4 Action Plan for Education (Statement of Strategy 2023–2025)**

The Department of Education has operated an *Action Planning Framework* to provide an overview of the activity associated with the strategic progress of the 2021–2023 strategy and priorities since 2021. The plan sets out key priorities on an annual basis, with the most recent Plan published in September 2023. This Plan translates the strategic priorities to actions and makes progress towards achieving the high-level goals for the Department and the sector. The high-level roadmap of how to achieve the Department’s priorities over 2023–2025 are:

1. Enable the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all children and young people, in schools and early learning and care settings;
2. Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all children and young people are supported to fulfil their potential;
3. Together with our partners, provide strategic leadership and support for the delivery of the right systems and infrastructure for the sector;
4. Organisational Excellence and Innovation

The *Action Plan for Education (Statement of Strategy 2023–2025)* provides useful insights into the requirements for new schooling infrastructure and the standards to ensure high-quality learning for all students.

#### **2.1.5 The Provision of Schools and the Planning System: A Code of Practice**

*The Provision of Schools and the Planning System: A Code of Practice* is part of a wider package of initiatives designed to facilitate the provision of schools and schools-related infrastructure within the planning system and in line with the principles of proper planning and sustainable development. The following core objectives aim to provide an effective integration of schools in

relation to the planning system:

1. Schools provision should be an integral part of the evolution of compact sustainable urban development and the development of sustainable communities;
2. The provision of any new schools (both primary and post-primary) should be driven by and emerge from an integrated approach between the planning functions of Planning Authorities and the Department of Education; and
3. Local Authorities, as Planning Authorities, will support and assist the Department in ensuring the timely provision of school sites.

The document provides guidance when assessing future development potential of certain areas and establishing demand for schools. This document states that in some cases it *"may be more complex as it involves not just an assessment of likely population growth but also an appraisal of the capacity of existing post-primary schools, coupled with an assessment of the enrolment patterns in existing and anticipated 'feeder' national schools."*

The Code of Practice stipulates the methodology for forecasting future education demand. Identification of future primary school demands should be based upon:

- *"The anticipated increase in overall population for the city/county plan area over the next nine years (as set out in relevant development or local area plans);*
- *The current school-going population based on school returns;*
- *The increase in school going population, assuming that an average of 12% of the population are expected to present for primary education; and*
- *The number of classrooms required in total derived from the above."*

The Report addresses reasonable estimates of future demand based on the influx of population arising from the proposed development in a manner that is consistent with national and regional estimates sourced by CSO results.

#### **2.1.6 Childcare Facilities: Guidelines for Planning Authorities (2001)**

Appendix 2 of the *Childcare Facilities: Guidelines for Planning Authorities (2001)* produced by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government state the following with respect to the provision of new communities/larger new housing developments (Paragraphs 2.4 and 3.3.1 also refer to this standard):

*"Planning authorities should require the provision of at least one childcare facility for new housing areas unless there are significant reasons to the contrary for example, development consisting of single bed apartments or where there are adequate childcare facilities in adjoining developments. For new housing areas, an average of one childcare facility for each 75 dwellings would be appropriate [...]"*

*The threshold for provision should be established having regard to the existing geographical distribution of childcare facilities and the emerging demographic profile of areas."*

This document establishes an indicative standard of 1 No. childcare facility per 75 No. dwellings in new housing areas, where the facility provides a minimum of 20 No. childcare places. However, the guidance acknowledges that other case-specific insights may lead to an increase or decrease in this requirement. Appendix 2 of the Guidelines states that the threshold and level of potential provision should be established having regard to the existing geographical distribution of

childcare facilities and the emerging demographic profile of an area.

The results of any childcare needs analysis carried out as part of a County Childcare Strategy should also be considered.

## 2.2 Regional Planning Policy

### 2.2.1 *Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region*

The *Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy* (Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly) ('RSES') states that Social Infrastructure plays an important role in developing strong and inclusive communities. Section 9.1 of the *RSES* details that the availability of, and access to, services and facilities, inclusive of healthcare services, education facilities and community/recreational facilities is key to creating healthier places. The *RSES* includes the following Regional Policy Objectives which relate to access to SI and its overall improvement:

**RPO 9.14** – *"Local authorities shall seek to support the planned provision of easily accessible social, community, cultural and recreational facilities and ensure that all communities have access to a range of facilities that meet the needs of the communities they serve."*

**RPO 9.18** – *"Support the implementation of local authority Local Economic and Community Plans, in collaboration with Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) and through the use of spatial planning policies, to seek to reduce the number of people in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the Region."*

**RPO 9.19** – *"EMRA shall work collaboratively with stakeholders including the wide range of service providers through the LECs to effectively plan for social infrastructure needs."*

Regarding childcare facilities and schools, the *RSES* states that Local Authorities should consider demographic trends and patterns when carrying out an assessment of the need for Social Infrastructure.

**RPO 9.20** – *"Support investment in the sustainable development of the Region's childcare services as an integral part of regional infrastructure to include:*

- *Support the Affordable Childcare Scheme.*
- *Quality and supply of sufficient childcare places.*
- *Support initiatives under a cross Government Early Years Strategy.*
- *Youth services that support and target disadvantaged young people and improve their employability."*

**RPO 9.27** – *"In areas where significant new housing is proposed, an assessment of need regarding schools provision should be carried out in collaboration with the Department of Education and Skills and the statutory plans shall designate new school sites at accessible, pedestrian, cycle and public transport friendly locations."*

Section 9.7 highlights that SI should be easily accessible by walking, cycling and public transport. Shared use and co-location of facilities should be encouraged, in order to align service provision, use land more efficiently and facilitate opportunities for further inclusion and community participation.



The *RSES* has been consulted in this Social Infrastructure Audit to ensure the range of services, community facilities, and standards deemed to improve quality of life are considered.

## 2.3 Local Planning Policy

### 2.3.1 Wicklow County Development Plan 2022-2028

The Development Plan sets out the strategic spatial context for the delivery of infrastructure in tandem with developments in County Wicklow. It is reflective of higher-level policies namely the *NPF* and the *RSES*. The Settlement Hierarchy identifies Blessington as a Level 3, Self-Sustaining Growth Towns within the Core Region. Such towns are defined as having a moderate level of jobs and services and include sub-county towns and commuter towns with good transport links and capacity for continued growth to become more self-sustaining. Under Section 7.2, the Development Plan sets out what should be considered in the preparation of an SIA, specifically:

- Transport (bus routes, cycle routes, green infrastructure, road networks, pedestrian pathways);
- Education (third level, post-primary, primary and creche facilities);
- Health (primary health care. Care homes, doctor surgery, GP, dentist facilities and pharmacies);
- Community facilities (places of worship, burial grounds, community halls and sports facilities).

The plan considers that in recognition of the impact large-scale developments may have on the receiving environment, those should cater for social infrastructure in the locality they are located when it has established there would be deficiencies. In addition, Applicants should identify how the deficiency will be addressed, by whom and when. The plan also includes relevant policy objectives as follows:

**CPO 6.20** – *"Housing development shall be managed and phased to ensure that infrastructure is adequate or is being provided to match the needs of new residents.*

*New significant residential or mixed use development proposals (of which residential development forms a component), shall be required to be accompanied by a Social Infrastructure Audit, to determine if social and community facilities in the area are sufficient to provide for the needs of the future residents. Where deficiencies are identified, proposals will be required to either rectify the deficiency, or suitable restrict or phase the development in accordance with the capacity of existing or planned services.*

*New significant residential or mixed use development proposals shall be required to be accompanied by an 'Accessibility Report' that demonstrates that new residents /occupants / employees (including children and those with special mobility needs) will be able to safely access through means other than the private car:*

- Local services including shops, schools, health care and recreational facilities, and
- Public transport services.

*Where deficiencies are identified, proposals will be required to either rectify the deficiency, or suitably restrict or phase the development in accordance with the capacity / quality of existing or planned linkages."*

Other objectives relevant to the preparation of an SIA include:

**CPO 7.6** – *"To require as part of any Social Infrastructure Audit process that the cumulative effects of similar large scale developments be appropriately factored as part of the audit when determining the capacity of the assessed infrastructure that will be affected by the increase in population. This is to ensure that the compounding effects of any such large scale increase to a local population will be adequately serviced with community infrastructure."*

**CPO 7.7** - *"To require that as part of Social Infrastructure Audit the applicant submit supporting documentation from any social / community infrastructure providers, educational institutions, community organisations and other social service providers, verifying the assessment set out in the audit."*

**CPO 7.14** - *"Where practicable, education, community, recreational and open space facilities shall be clustered. However, schools shall continue to make provision for their own recreational facilities as appropriate. The need for schools to have access to local sports and swimming facilities is also recognised and will be taken into account when considering the need and planning and development of such facilities."*

**CPO 7.28** - *"To facilitate the provision of childcare in a manner, which is compatible with land-use and transportation policies and adheres to the principles of sustainable development."*

**CPO 7.30** - *"Where considered necessary by the Planning Authority, to require the provision of childcare facilities in all residential developments comprising 75 houses or more (including local authority and social housing schemes). In accordance with Department of Environment, Heritage & Local Government guidelines, childcare places shall be provided at a ratio of 20 places per 75 residential units, having regard to cumulative effects of permitted development, (unless it can be demonstrated that having regard to the existing geographic distribution of childcare facilities and the emerging demographic profile of the area that this level of childcare facilities is not required). Without substantial cause, it is the policy of the Planning Authority not to allow a change of use of these premises within five years."*

**CPO 7.34** - *"In all new residential development in excess of 50 units, where considered necessary by the Planning Authority, the developer shall provide, in the residential public open space area, a dedicated children's play area, of a type and with such features to be determined following consultation with Community, Cultural & Social Development Office of Wicklow County Council. The location of any such proposal shall be situated within a centrally located area capable of being passively supervised by surrounding developments."*

**CPO 7.37** - *"In accordance with Objective CPO 7.5, where a deficiency in facilities for teenagers/young adults and/or indoor community space is identified in an area, the proposed development should include proposals to address this deficiency in consultation with young people and appropriate stakeholders. "*

**CPO 7.43** - *"The development of new sports or active open space zones shall be accompanied by appropriate infrastructure including:*

- *Fully accessible changing rooms and drinking water fountains;*
- *Car parking with EV charge points;*
- *Pedestrian / cycling access and facilities; linkages to public transport. "*

**CPO 7.44** - "To prioritise, facilitate and support the development of a community swimming pool facility and a sports complex within the western region of the County, so located to achieve maximum accessibility to the residents of West Wicklow. "

With respect to new significant development and SI provision, the Development Plan states that it should only take place where sufficient schools, parks and other resources are already in place or are proposed for development. The proposed development is consistent with the abovementioned Policy Objectives. It provides for high-quality housing, on lands zoned for residential use, in accordance with the Core Strategy of the Development Plan, and in close proximity to the full range of Social and Community Infrastructure. The proposed development will provide much needed housing development to support the existing, emerging and future population of Blessington.

### **2.3.2 Blessington Local Area Plan 2013-2019**

Under Section 6 of the *Blessington Local Area Plan 2013-2019* (LAP), the Plan references the per capita need for social infrastructure under a number of key headings. These headings broadly align with those identified by the Council within the *Wicklow County Development Plan 2022-2028*, relating to schools provision, community, open space and sporting facilities, alongside cultural facilities.

In relation to the Application lands, Table 5.1 sets out active open space provision to include specifically 0.781 ha which would consist of tennis courts and bowling green. This new town park will be located directly adjacent the subject site and is currently under construction. Phase 1 of the park will deliver landscaping, tennis courts, green play areas, walkways, bowling courts, and a fully accessible playground, while Phase 2 of the park, tied in with the recently granted Planning Application (April 2024), will deliver large untouched areas with walkways for the local community. When completed, these active open spaces and play spaces will make significant progress towards meeting and improving the SI needs of Blessington and its population.

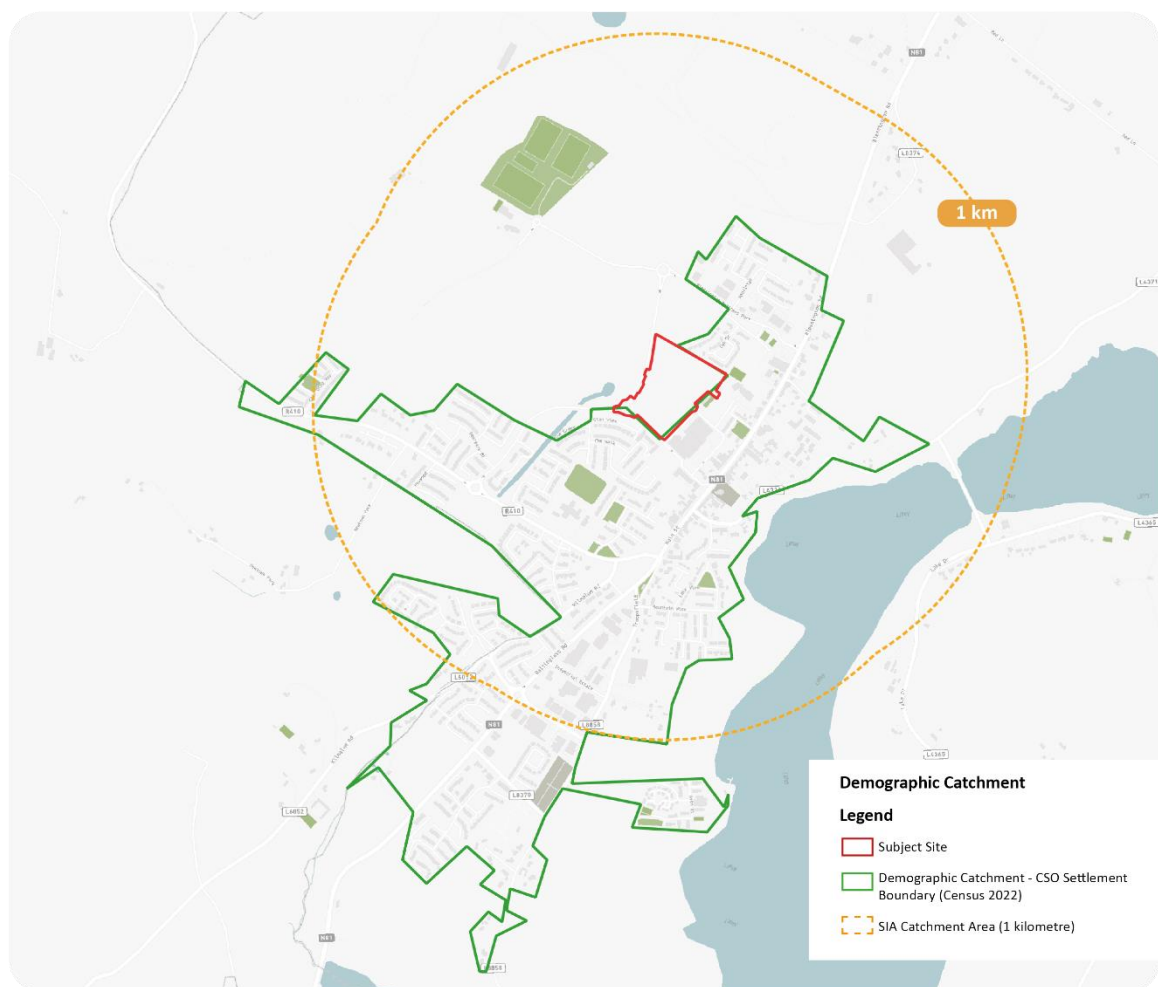
Each of the relevant National, Regional and Local Guidelines and Policy Documents outlined above have been consulted in the development of this SIA to review the existing capacity of community facilities within the Study Area.



### 3.0 DEMOGRAPHIC ASSESSMENT

The demographic profile of the area was examined using the results from Census 2016 and 2022 (the latest available on the CSO website). The scope of the assessment is determined by overlaying the 1 km radius buffer zone over the subject site and assessing the relevant spatial unit in demographic analysis. For the subject site, given its location and relevance to the wider settlement, the CSO defined Settlement of Blessington boundary (as outlined in green in Figure 3.1) was selected as the statistical unit.

This Study Area provides insight into the composition of the local population and relevant demographic trends. Specifically, the study reviews the population's age profile, educational attainment and economic status to best understand the needs of the population regarding social and community services and facilities. This Study Area (based on the CSO Settlement Area) is also compared to wider trends within Wicklow County.



**Figure 3.1: Extent of Demographic Study Area Comprising the CSO Defined Settlement of Blessington**

(Source: CSO, 2022, and Thornton O'Connor Town Planning, 2024)

### 3.1 Demographic Drivers

To fulfil the strategic priorities of Wicklow County Council, it is essential that all areas have a strong sense of community, provide access to natural surroundings, and are well integrated with essential services, public amenities and open spaces. This will contribute to fostering a healthy, resilient and sustainable community. To gain insights into the specific requirements of the local residents, an in-depth examination of the demographic features of both the Study Area and the broader Wicklow County has been conducted using data from the Census of 2016 and 2022. This analysis aims to identify the significant traits of the local population.

According to Census2022 findings, Ireland's population reached 5,149,139 in April 2022 – representing growth of 8.1% from the previous Census in 2016. Wicklow's population stood at 155,851 at the time, an increase from 2016 of 9.4%, or just over 13,000 people. The County hence accounts for 3.0% of Ireland's population. Wicklow's population is expected to continue to grow with the *Wicklow Development Plan 2022–2028* forecasting that the County's population will increase by up to 17,649 people by 2031 (+11.3% versus 2022). Between 2016 and 2022, Wicklow was the eight fastest growing County in Ireland by percentage growth, and eleventh by absolute growth. Further breakdowns show that 26.3% of the Wicklow's population was under 18 years old in 2022, while 57,822 people (37.1%) were under 30 years. This compares to 27.9% of the population under 18 years old and 39.1% under 30 years old in 2016. The number of people aged 65 years and over continues to grow. This age group increased by 27% to 23,661 in Wicklow, and by 22% to 776,315 at a national level since 2016. Some 35% of Wicklow's residents (54,192 people) were born in the county. A further 48% (74,277) were born elsewhere in the State. The remaining 17% (25,962) were born outside the State, which was up from 15% in 2016.

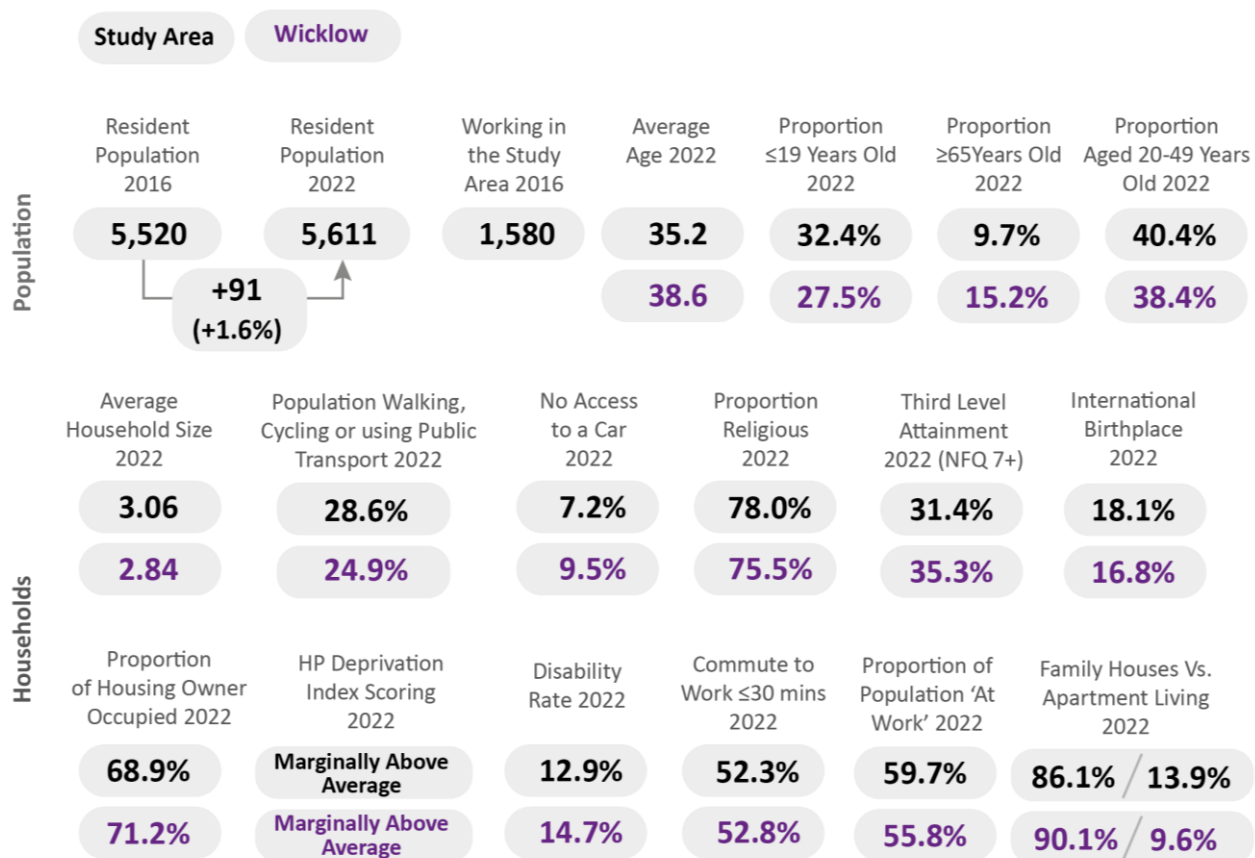
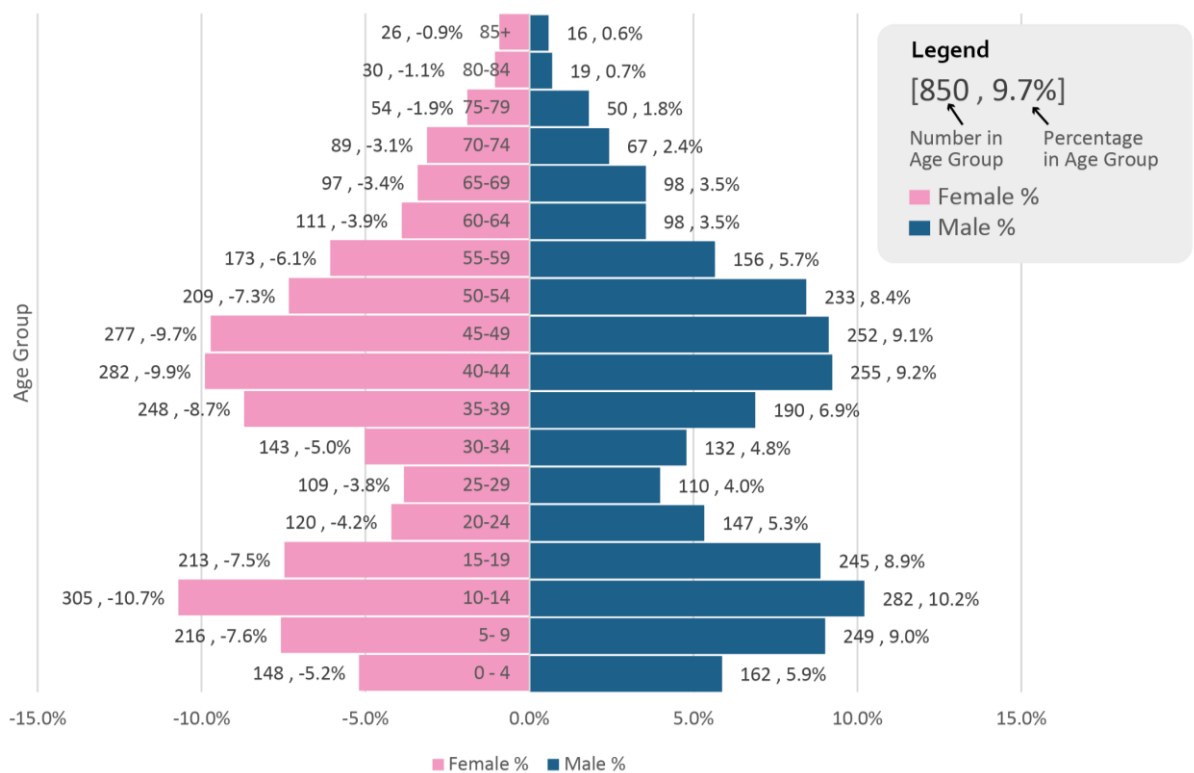


Figure 3.2: Summary Demographic Findings of Study Area and Wicklow County  
(Source: CSO, 2022, developed by Thornton O'Connor Town Planning, 2024)

Over the same period, the population within the Study Area grew at a significantly lower rate of 1.6% (91 No. additional persons). The analysis of the CSO data illustrates a strong representation of working age population within the 20–65 years age groupings, with 57.8% of the total resident population classified within these age cohorts. The 20–49 age cohort further highlights this concentration of young professionals, with 40.4% of the total population classified in this group. The area has a low average age at 35.2 years with a lower proportion of population older age cohorts. Some 24.3% of the population is aged under 14 years old, while just 9.7% of the population are aged over 65 years old.



**Figure 3.3: Population of the Study Area by Age – 2022**

(Source: CSO, 2022)

Notably, while the proportion of population under 14 years of age has decreased in the period since 2016, the population under 6 years of age has dramatically decreased by 318 No. persons (39.8%), indicating a sustained but potentially a lowering demand for childcare infrastructure into the future. By contrast, the population aged between 5–18 years of age has increased by 88 No. persons (6.5%), indicating a continued demand for school infrastructure in the town.

	Blessington 2016	Blessington 2022	Change 2016-2022	Percentage Change
Age 0-6	798	480	- 318	-39.8%
Age 5-18	1,344	1,432	88	6.5%
Total	5,520	5,611	91	1.6%

**Table 3.1: Study Area – Changes to Age Cohorts – 2016-2022**

(Source: CSO, 2022)

While the area immediately around Blessington would not be classified as a major centre of employment, given the proximity of the Study Area to Dublin and Naas, the increase in the population of working age is likely to continue into the future. Higher concentrations of population in younger age groups would indicate an increasing demand for facilities and services such as schools and sport and recreation. A lower proportion of population in older age groups indicates lower relative demand for health facilities and aged care in the Study Area.

The Study Area predominantly consists of houses with 86.1% of dwelling units in 2022 registered as such. The average household size in 2022 was 3.06 persons per household, above the average for Wicklow County. Some 15.7% of all households consist of 1 No. person, with 39.1% of all households consisting of 4 No. or more persons living together.

Household Type	Study Area Households 2022	Wicklow County Households 2022
1 Person Households	15.7%	5.1%
2 Person Households	25.6%	16.7%
3 Person Households	19.7%	19.3%
4 Person Households	22.4%	29.3%
5+ Person Households	16.7%	29.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

**Table 3.2: Persons Per Household in the Study Area and Wicklow County – 2022**

(Source: CSO, 2022)

Compositional data indicates that 79.3% of all households have children, with a further 19.4% of all households consisting of either a 'single' person, or 'non-related' persons living in Group Accommodation (Shared). Taken collectively, the data suggests that the unit typology of the catchment area are persons living in family arrangements, predominantly in the pre-family stage, or families with children.

The economic profile, based on Census 2022, suggests a relatively young population within the active workforce age bracket, with a higher percentage at work, and lower retired and student percentages. The majority of the population over 15 years of age are categorised as 'At Work' in 2022 (59.7%). The percentage of people unemployed in the area is lower (4.6%) than Wicklow County (5.1%). The number of people retired in the Study Area is lower (11.3%) than Wicklow County (16.0%). The percentage of students (12.2%) in the Study Area is higher than the percentage of students in Wicklow County (10.6%).

When reviewing the levels of educational attainment, the largest proportion of residents had completed 'Third Level' education (44.9%) in 2022. This is higher than the levels of educational attainment in Wicklow County, with 42.8% of the population having completed 'Third Level' education, and is higher than the national average (40.0%). It should be noted that a further 10.2% of the population have also completed 'Post-Graduate Education or Higher' at the time of the Census, compared to 12.8% in Wicklow County, and just 1.6% were recorded as having 'No Formal Education'. Taken together, these figures indicate an extremely well educated population in the Study Area, that surpasses attainment in the wider county and nationally.



Education Level	Study Area	% of Total	Wicklow County	% of Total
No Formal Education	54	1.6%	2,490	2.4%
Primary Education	195	5.7%	6,861	6.7%
Secondary Education	1,179	34.4%	31,687	30.7%
Third Level Education (Any Level)	1,539	44.9%	44,121	42.8%
Postgraduate or Higher	349	10.2%	13,172	12.8%
Not Stated	111	3.2%	4,755	4.6%
Total	3,427	100.0%	103,086	100.0%

**Table 3.3: Population Aged 15+ Years by Highest Level of Education Completed**

(Source: CSO, 2022)

The purpose of an affluence and deprivation index is to assess social conditions using a single indicator. The Pobal HP Deprivation Index (2022) is used by public bodies across Ireland to identify potentially disadvantaged communities and target investment/policy to improve the quality of life and access to opportunities for those living in them. The subject site is located in an area (based on Small Areas) that is classified as 'Marginally Above Average' indicating that the area is prosperous with higher than average educational attainment, low unemployment, low age dependency, lower rates of disability, etc. relative to other parts of the country.

Within the Study Area, just 19.7% of the population identify as 'Not Religious' with the remaining 75.5%<sup>1</sup> identifying as religious and likely have some need for religious place of worship. Equally, ensuring there is adequate SI to help diverse communities feel included and empowered is critical. The Study Area has a larger than average sizable international community with 18.1% of the local population born outside of Ireland.

Some 24.9% of people rely on green modes of transport for daily activities, with 'Bike' (1.3%), 'Walking' (12.1%), and 'Public Transport' (11.5%) making up this portion of transportation, indicating the area is largely dependent on car transportation. Daily commuting patterns show 52.8% of trips to work/school are under 30 minutes, with just 14.2% indicating a travel time of over an hour. Trips by 'Private Car (Driver or Passenger)' constitute a comparably higher 60.8% of all daily movements.

The daytime population of the Study Area was registered at 4,359 No. persons in 2016. This refers to those persons that are typically located within the area during the daytime hours for (1) school, (2) work or (3) living and not leaving for work. Some 1,580 No. persons are employed within the Study Area, classifying it a smaller employment destination in Wicklow County. Those working in the area largely do so in either manufacturing, mining and quarrying' (22.6%), 'wholesale, retail trade' (26.6%), or 'education, human health and social work activities' (14.9%).

### 3.2 Summary

The majority of the population in the catchment of the Study Area are living in lower density family housing estates. They are more likely to live in owner-occupied family houses, rather than private or socially renting, than recorded nationally. Population growth in the catchment has been relatively static over the past 6 years, increasing by just 91 No. persons, largely living within

<sup>1</sup> 4.8% of the population did not state their religion in 2022, which constitutes the remaining percentage value.

the 24 No. new units recorded as completed since 2016. The population has a higher than average ethnic diversity, with an above average number of residents from Poland, EU accession countries and countries outside of Europe, aligning with a lower than average proportion of persons stating their country of birth as Ireland.

The population of the Study Area is characterised by a young population within the active workforce age bracket, and a large minority are young families with children. Jobs in the catchment reflect the major employers in the area (mining, schools and retail) requiring a mix of lower skilled residents and those with higher educational attainment. The resident population of the catchment is very highly educated with a plurality commuting outside of Blessington to Dublin and nearby employment centres for work. The area is classified as 'Marginally Above Average' in terms of affluence and deprivation, signifying high average rates of educational attainment, employment, within stable family structures, and usually indicates higher disposable income, demand for SI, but also greater social mobility and means to travel.

The demographic assessment indicates that a higher proportion of community facilities may be required for the working population and families with school-aged children in this area than other demographic groups.

## 4.0 FACILITIES AUDIT

As stated previously, the subject site, measuring 6.05 Ha, is situated in Blessington Demesne, Blessington, Co. Wicklow. Blessington, is designated as a Self-Sustaining Growth Town within the Core Region in the *Wicklow County Development Plan 2022-2028*, and is located on the Kildare/Wicklow border approximately 27km south-west of Dublin and 11km from Naas, the County town of Kildare.

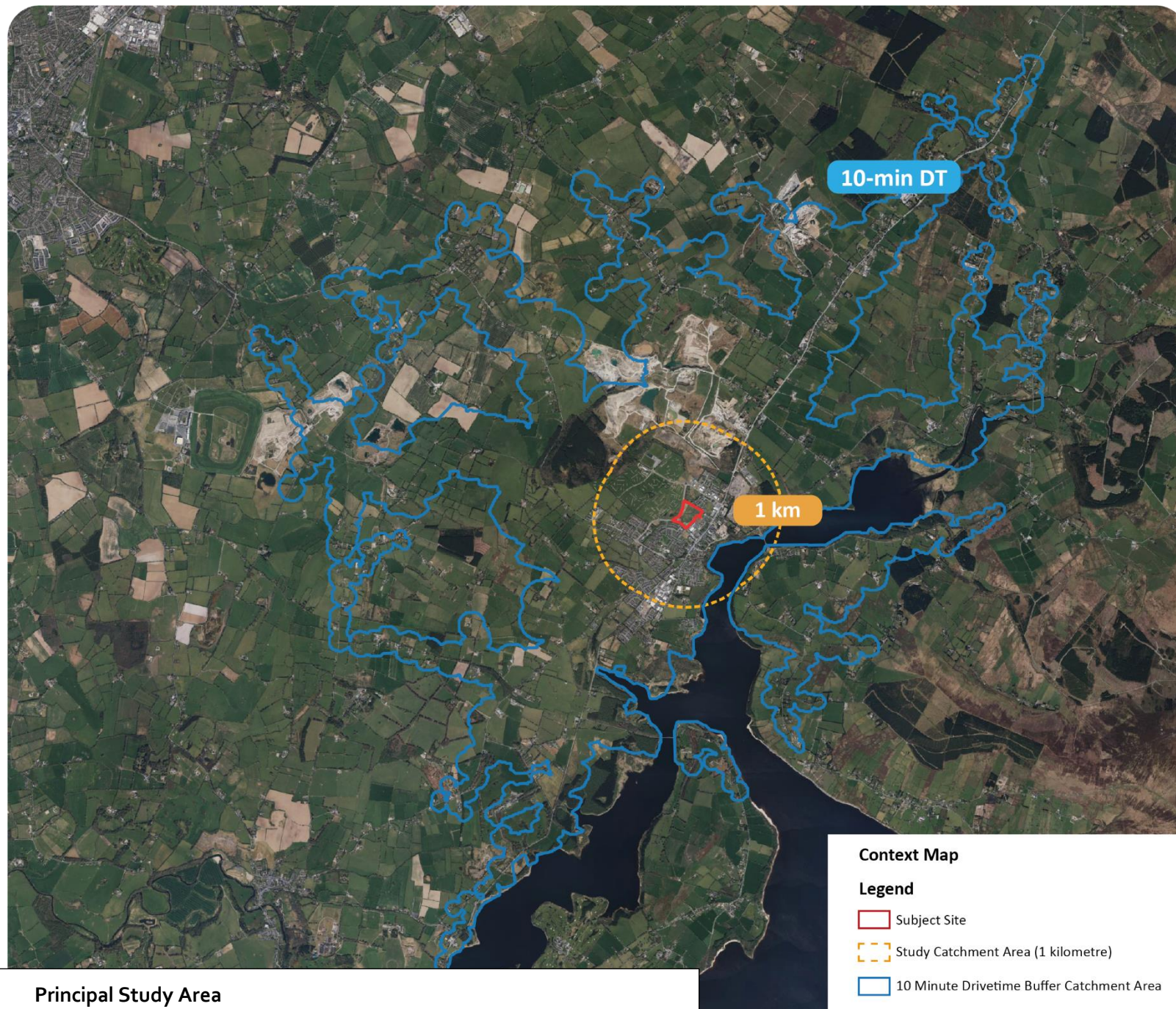
The Study Area for this Assessment is defined by a 1 km radius of the subject site, equivalent to a c. 12- to 14-minute walking distance, which is considered accessible to future residents of the proposed development. Given that the subject site is located at the edge of a growing settlement, an additional 10-minute drivetime catchment area was defined for the study based on the Community Faculties Hierarchy Model outlined in Table 7.1 of the *Wicklow County Development Plan 2022-2028*.

The survey identified a large range of community facilities within the Study Area. A total of 6 No. categories of facilities that align with the Policies set out in the *Development Plan* were utilised for this Audit. Some 53 No. social infrastructure facilities were identified as part of this Audit within a radius of 1 km of the subject site (45 No. excluding schools and childcare). An additional 16 No. key social infrastructure assets were identified within a 10-minute drivetime of the subject site. The majority of these assets are located within the settlement of Blessington but outside the 1 km catchment and still considered relevant to the study.

Category	Facility Type
<b>Education and Training Services</b>	Primary, Post-Primary, Third Level, Further Education, Other Lifelong Training Centres
<b>Childcare Facilities</b>	Registered Childcare Facilities Incl. Full Day, Part-Time and Sessional Services
<b>Social, Community, Arts and Faith Facilities</b>	Community Centres, Libraries, Senior and Youth Centres, Post Offices, Banks and Credit Unions, Museums, Galleries, Theatres, Cinemas, Music Venues, Historical Cultural Sites, Areas of Worship, Churches, Cemeteries
<b>Healthcare and Emergency Services</b>	Hospitals, Health Centres, Primary Care Centres, Doctors and Specialty Clinics, Dental, Physiotherapy, Counselling, Optician, Pharmacy, Garda/Fire Stations
<b>Open Space and Recreation</b>	Parks, Playing Pitches, Playgrounds, Sports Centres and Clubs, Leisure Centres, Gyms and Training Facilities, Swimming Pools
<b>Transport</b>	Bus Routes, Cycle Routes, Green Infrastructure, Road Networks, Pedestrian Pathways

**Table 4.1: Community Infrastructure Categories Applied to Audit**  
**Source: Thornton O'Connor Town Planning, 2024)**





**Figure 4.1: Principal Study Area**

(Source: Bing Maps, Annotated By Thornton O'Connor Town Planning, 2024)



#### 4.1 Education Facilities

A Schools Demand Assessment has been carried out to examine the capacity of existing primary and post-primary school facilities located in the vicinity of the subject site, alongside demographic demands, to understand the direction of demand and the resulting need for additional schooling infrastructure in the future.

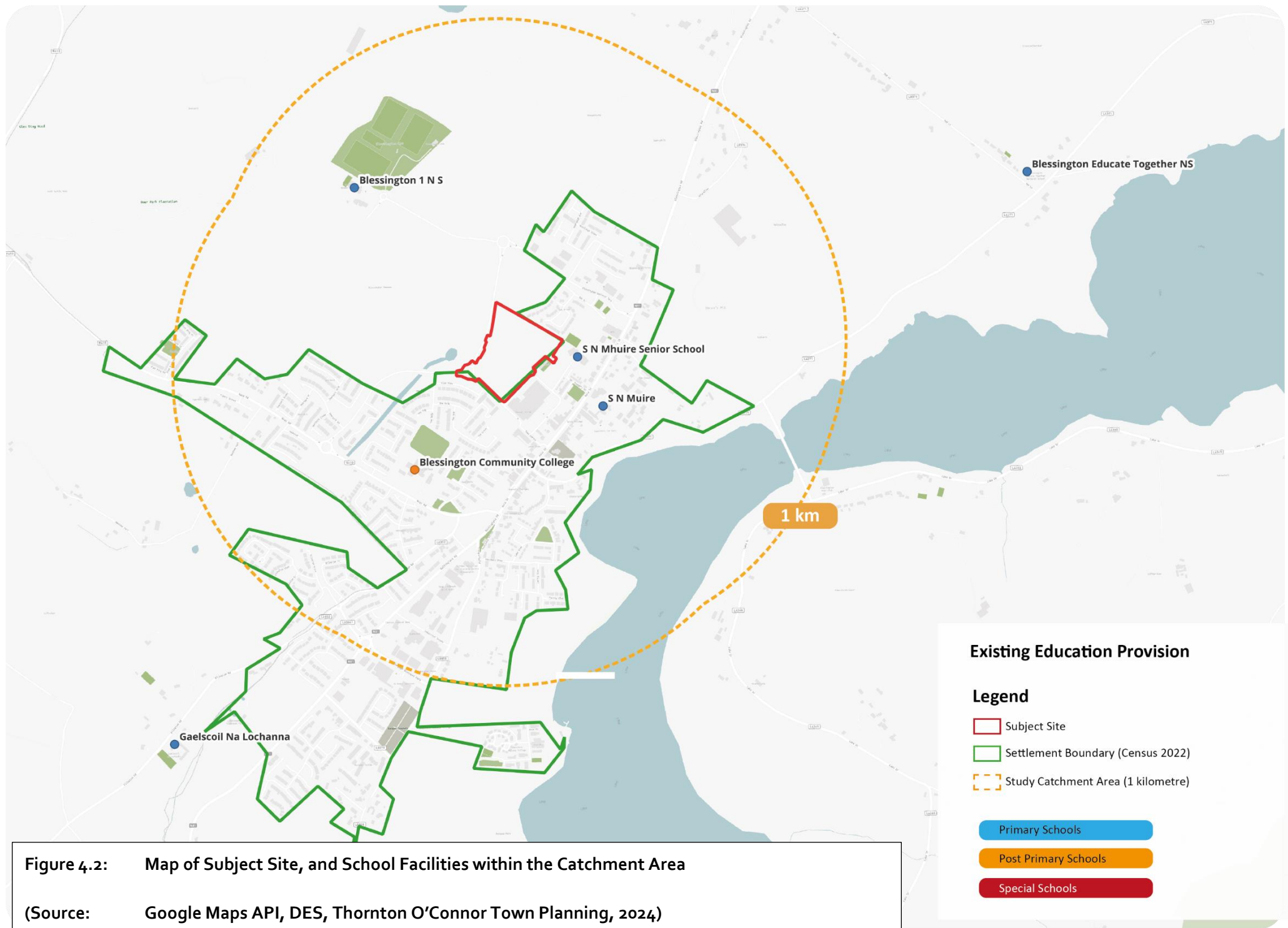
A methodology for the assessment of educational facilities and schools has been developed in accordance with the directions provided in planning policy, and it involves the following steps:

1. Defining a Study Area using relevant spatial jurisdictions;
2. A demographic and socio-economic evaluation of the composition of population within the Study Area;
3. Determining the extent and provision of existing educational facilities and schools within the Study Area; and
4. Estimating the level of demand for schools that may arise from the development proposal **and** other permitted residential developments in the area.

In accordance with current guidelines, the following Section provides an examination of local need for educational facilities at the subject site and its wider surroundings. Accordingly, the latest data was obtained from the Department of Education and Skills, Primary Online Database (POD)<sup>2</sup> and the National School Census, for existing educational facilities in the locality. Reporting also provides detail on the current and future capacity of existing and planned schools in the area. The aim of this assessment is to establish projected demand for school places within the existing schools network generated by the proposed development.

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Education and Skills – National School Annual Census for 2023/2024, which is returned via the Primary Online Database (POD). This includes both the Census and the Special School Annual Census. Only schools aided by the Department of Education and Skills are included in this list. Data was published March 2024.



#### 4.1.1 Primary Schools

The 5 No. existing primary schools identified within Blessington or its immediate environs held a combined provisional enrolment of 999 No. students during the 2023/2024 school year as per the Department of Education and Skills (DES) records. All 5 No. schools identified are co-educational (mixed) schools. The primary school that is located nearest to the subject site (S N MHUIRE SENIOR National School – identified in blue in Table 4.2) is the largest school in the town, and held a co-educational enrolment of 308 No. students in 2023/2024.

Supplementary to the enrolment information acquired from the DES, a review of the schools' websites and the 2024/2025 Schools' Admission Notice was carried out in April 2024 by Thornton O'Connor Town Planning to ensure that available spaces in classes are captured in this Audit. Table 4.2 provides a detailed breakdown of this available capacity per school. As per Section 63 of the *Education (Admissions to School) Act 2018*<sup>3</sup>, schools are required to publish an Annual Admissions Notice each year with key information about the annual admissions process.

This review helped determine the trend in schools for admitting students into the classes each year. For the 2024/2025 academic year, the Admissions Notices for primary schools indicated a total enrolment capacity of 112 No. students in the catchment (106 No. spaces for Junior Infants, and 6 No. spaces for Other Years). These 106 No. places refer to the places made available each academic cycle resulting from graduating students, while the 6 No. spaces reflect additional capacity within the overall schooling infrastructure. Where schools have not provided sufficient information on their intake for the next academic year, these have been assumed to be zero.

No.	Roll No.	School Name	Distance from Site (km)	Females	Males	2023-2024 Enrolment	Available Capacity per School Websites (2024/2025)		
							Junior Infants	Other Years	Total
1	06176U	BLESSINGTON 1 N S	0.7	96	105	201	25	0	25
2	17091A	S N MUIRE	0.2	117	125	242	30	0	30
3	20110S	S N MHUIRE SENIOR SCHOOL	0.1	147	161	308	39	0	39
4	20242M	Blessington Educate Together NS	1.6	42	54	96	12	6	18
5	20243O	Gaelscoil na Lochanna	1.8	79	73	152	18	0	18
Total				481	518	999	106	6	112

**Table 4.2: Recorded Enrolments for Primary Schools**

(Source: DES, 2023, and Individual School Admission Notices, 2024)

Table 4.3 below provides information on each of the primary schools, inclusive of their enrolment numbers for the previous 5 No. academic years (2019–2020 to 2023–2024). The overall enrolment figure associated with the 5 No. primary schools within the catchment has decreased over the past 5 No. years (65 No. fewer children, -7.0%), but appears to have stabilised somewhat.

<sup>3</sup> Section 62 of this Act requires that, from 1<sup>st</sup> February 2020, Boards of Management have 3 No. months to revise their Admission Policies in line with the commenced provisions of the Act.

School	Roll No.	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
BLESSINGTON 1 N S	06176U	215	199	192	203	201
S N MUIRE	17091A	273	254	240	236	242
S N MHUIRE SENIOR SCHOOL	20110S	335	325	326	317	308
Blessington Educate Together NS	20242M	53	53	74	90	96
Gaelscoil na Lochanna	20243O	198	184	169	163	152
<b>Total</b>		<b>1,074</b>	<b>1,015</b>	<b>1,001</b>	<b>1,009</b>	<b>999</b>

**Table 4.3: Existing Primary Schools: Enrolment Figures 2019–2020 to 2023–2024**

(Source: DES, 2023)

#### 4.1.2 Post-Primary Schools

There was 1 No. post-primary school identified within Blessington which held a co-educational enrolment of 702 No. students during the 2023–2024 school year, as per the Department of Education and Skills (DES) records. The post-primary school, Blessington Community College, is a mixed/co-educational school located in the centre of the settlement, c. 400 metres from the subject site.

Supplementary to the enrolment information acquired from the DES, a review of the schools' website and the 2024/2025 Schools' Admission Notice was carried out in April 2024 by Thornton O'Connor Town Planning to ensure that available spaces in classes are captured in this Audit. Table 4.4 provides a detailed breakdown of this available capacity. As per Section 63 of the *Education (Admissions to School) Act 2018*, schools are required to publish an Annual Admissions Notice each year with key information about the annual admissions process.

This review helped determine the trend in the school for admitting students into the classes each year. For the 2024/2025 academic year, the Admissions Notice for the post-primary school indicated a total enrolment capacity of 120 No. students (120 No. spaces for First Years, and 0 No. spaces for Other Years). These 120 No. places refer to the places made available each academic cycle resulting from graduating students, rather than any additional capacity to the overall schooling infrastructure.

No.	Roll No.	School Name	Distance from Site (km)	Females	Males	2023–2024 Enrolment	Available Capacity per School Websites (2024/25)		
							First Years	Other Years	Total
1	70760S	Blessington Community College	0.4km	372	330	702	120	0	120
<b>Total</b>				372	330	702	<b>120</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>120</b>

**Table 4.4: Recorded Enrolments for Post-Primary School**

(Source: DES, 2023, and Individual School Admission Notice, 2024)



Table 4.5 provides an overview of the post-primary school within the catchment, inclusive of its enrolment numbers according to data published by the DES for the academic years 2019–2020 to 2023–2024. As highlighted in Table 4.5, the overall enrolment figure associated with the 1 No. post-primary school in the catchment area has increased during this period from 511 No. to 702 No. pupils; 191 No. additional pupils (37.4%). This indicates recent growth in demand for post-primary SI within the catchment.

School	Roll No.	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
70760S	Blessington Community College	511	564	584	627	702
<b>Total</b>		511	564	584	627	702

**Table 4.5: Existing Post-Primary School: Enrolment Figures 2019–2020 to 2023–2024**

(Source: DES, 2023)

### 4.1.3 Further Education

One further education facility was identified. The Blessington Further Education and Training Centre provides training courses for adults returning to education and sessional classes in gardening, art and other hobbies. There were 564 enrolments in the school in September 2021.

### 4.1.4 Future Demand Analysis

#### 4.1.4.1 Demographic Growth Projection

In November 2021, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) reported that enrolment figures for primary schools in Ireland were likely to have reached peak levels in 2019, and will fall gradually to a low point in 2033 (see Figure 4.3), in line with revised migration and fertility assumptions for the country as a whole. The latest statistical release<sup>4</sup> by the DES in this respect states:

*"Enrolments in primary schools in Ireland in 2020 stood at 561,411 down by almost 6,000 on 2019 (567,716). Enrolments are now projected to fall over the coming years under all scenarios, and under the M1F2<sup>5</sup> scenario will reach a low point of 440,551 by 2033. This is 120,860 lower than today's figure. Enrolments will rise again thereafter and are projected to stand at 474,888 by 2040, a rise of some 34,300 over the seven years 2033 to 2040."*

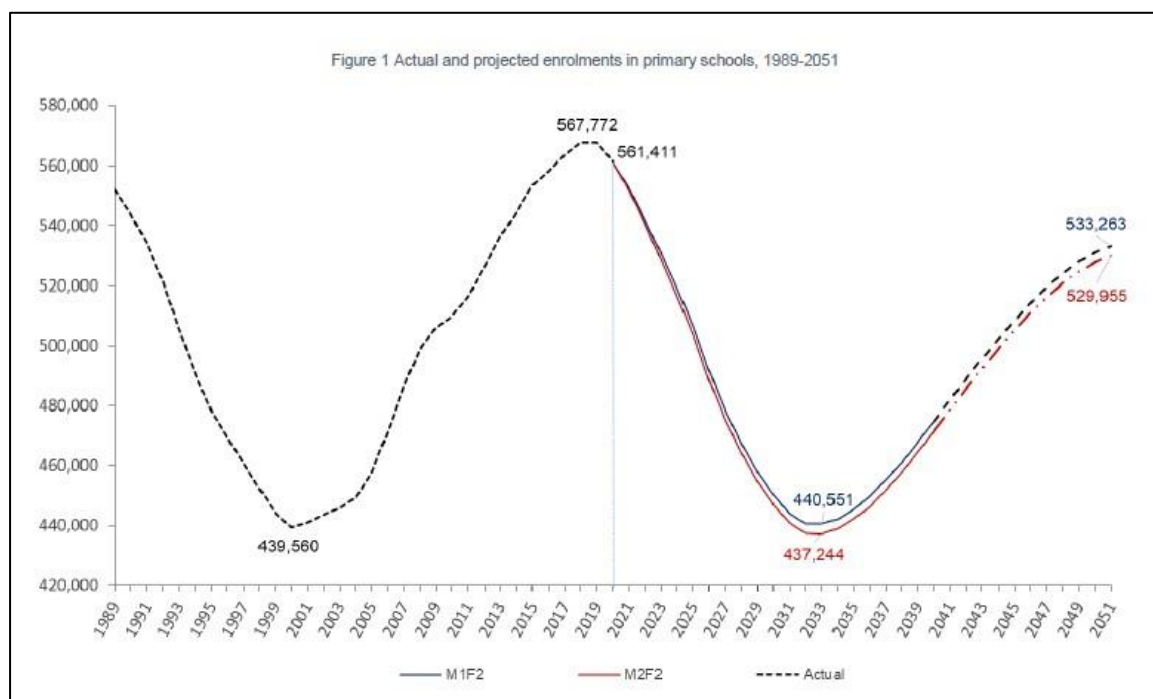
The study also concluded that post-primary school enrolments, however, will continue to rise in the short-term and will likely reach peak enrolment levels in 2024 (see Figure 4.4). The DES Report<sup>6</sup> states:

*"Enrolments in post-primary schools have risen by 26,923 (8%) over the past five years and are projected to continue rising over the short term. Under M1F2 they are projected to peak in 2024 with 408,794 pupils, some 29,610 higher than in 2020."*

<sup>4</sup> Source: *Projections of Full-Time Enrolment: Primary and Second Level, 2021–2040* (DES, November 2021), pg. 6.

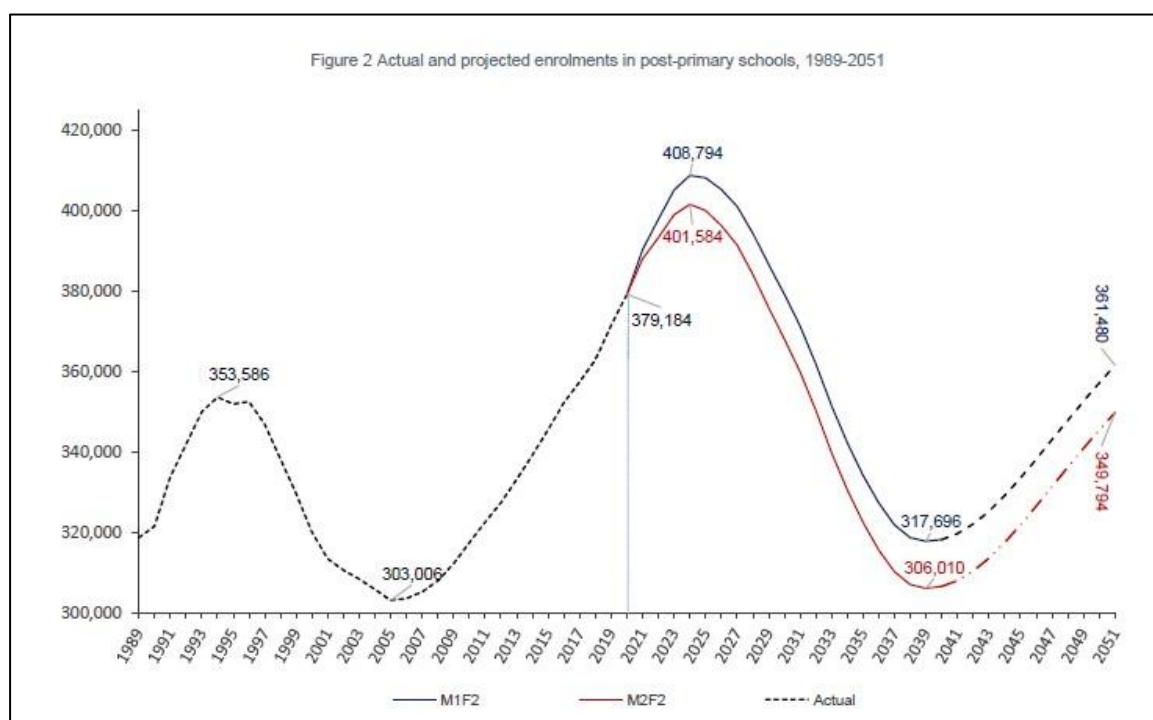
<sup>5</sup> The CSO's Regional Population Projections utilise six variant scenarios with relative assumptions in relation to regional fertility, mortality trends and external migration from and to each region. The Department of Education and Skills anticipates that M1F2 is the most likely scenario regarding migration and fertility, which encompasses the assumption of high migration and low fertility falling from 1.8 to 1.6 by 2031.

<sup>6</sup> Source: *Projections of Full-Time Enrolment: Primary and Second Level, 2021–2040* (DES, November 2021), pg. 11.



**Figure 4.3: Actual and Projected Enrolments in Primary Schools, 1989–2051, Organised by Growth Projection Scenarios Created by the CSO**

(Source: DES, 2021)



**Figure 4.4: Actual and Projected Enrolments in Post-Primary Schools, 1989–2051, Organised by Growth Projection Scenarios Created by the CSO**

(Source: DES, 2021)

#### 4.1.4.2 Potential Impact on Catchment Schools

Using the projected enrolment figures<sup>7</sup> for the Mid-east Region, as set out in the Department of Education and Skills' *Projections for Full-Time Enrolment: Primary and Second Level, 2021–2040*, this study can extrapolate future enrolment for the 2027/2028 academic year for Blessington. The 2027/2028 academic year has been selected in this study as the year the proposed development should be completed and occupied. The Report projects the enrolment figures in primary schools within the Mid-east Region to drop by 9.4% between the academic years 2023/2024 and 2027/2028 (4 year period). Applying this future projection figure to the current enrolment figures within Blessington it is estimated that enrolments in the 5 No. primary schools identified in the Assessment are set to reduce by 94 No. spaces by the 2027/2028 academic year.

At the post-primary level, the Report projects the enrolment figures to decrease marginally by 2.1% between the 4 academic years from 2023/2024 to 2027/2028. This would result in an decrease of 15 No. children in the 1 No. post-primary school identified within the catchment by the 2027/2028 academic year.

Catchment	Enrolment Year		% Change Estimate	Change
	23/24	27/28		
Primary Schools (5 No.)	999	905	-9.4% decrease	-94
Post-Primary Schools (1 No.)	702	687	-2.1% decrease	-15

**Table 4.6: Projected Enrolment Trends – 2023 to 2028**

(Source: DES, 2023)

We note that the indicative change figures provided are an estimate of potential enrolments based on the regional population projections included in the DES Report<sup>8</sup> and do not represent localised values; however, they are useful benchmark. While the latest demographic profile of Blessington (2022), carried out as part of this assessment, supports the above hypothesis, it is important to recognise the growth potential and recent residential planning applications for future development in the town will increase the student population of the town.

#### 4.1.4.3 Projected Demand Generated by Proposed Development (and Other Local Developments)

The proposed development comprises 265 No. units, of which 209 No. units can reasonably accommodate families. For this assessment, it is assumed that only units greater than 1-bedroom can reasonably accommodate families and all LLUs have been excluded. The average household size in the Study Area recorded by the 2022 Census was 3.06 No. persons per household, which generates a total indicative population of 640 No. persons when applied to the proposed development.

The average number of children per family recorded in the State in Census 2022 was 1.34 No. children<sup>9</sup>, which generates an indicative population of 280 No. children (between the ages of 0–18 years) when applied to the number of units that can accommodate families within the proposed development. Of this figure, an estimated 209 No. children would be considered school age (including 127 No. primary school children and 82 No. post-primary school children), as per

<sup>7</sup> Source: *Projections of Full-Time Enrolment: Primary and Second Level, 2021–2040* (DES, 2021), Table 4.

<sup>8</sup> Source: *Projections of Full-Time Enrolment: Primary and Second Level, 2021–2040* (DES, 2021), Table 7.

<sup>9</sup> Source: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp3/censusofpopulation2022profile3-householdsfamiliesandchildcare/>

the age cohorts recorded for Wicklow<sup>10</sup> in the Census 2022 (Table 4.7).

Age Group	Pre-School Children (0–4 years)	Primary School Children (5–12 years)	Post-Primary School Children (13–18 years)	All Children (0–18 years)
Wicklow 2022 Population	10,173	17,984	11,585	39,742
% of Total Cohort	25.60%	45.25%	29.15%	100%

**Table 4.7: Breakdown of 0–18 Year Age Cohort for Wicklow County Council**

(Source: CSO, 2022)

In order to gain an understanding of cumulative impacts, this report has identified other similar large-scale residential developments which could, together with the subject development, weigh on the capacity of the facilities identified in this report.

- PA.Reg.Ref.20/1146 for 91 units at Blessington Demesne.
- Plans Applied: PA.Reg.Ref.23/689 for 307 units at Blessington Demesne (22 No. 1-beds excluded from assessment).
- PA.Reg.Ref.21/1404 for 86 units at Burgage More (20 No. 1-beds excluded from assessment).
- PA.Reg.Ref.21/1068 for 62 units at Kilmalum (7 No. 1-beds excluded from assessment).

Cumulatively, these four applications would yield 546 units. It is assumed that these sites could yield an indicative population 1,671 persons. Using the same methodology, there would be an estimated 545 No. children would be considered school age (including 331 No. primary school children and 214 No. post-primary school children), as per the age cohorts recorded for Wicklow<sup>11</sup> in the Census 2022 (Table 4.7) by 2028 if all granted schemes are completed.

While it is considered that the existing school network would have the capacity to support the proposed development (in isolation), given the extent of future planned residential growth around the town, it is expected that the cumulative demand will surpass the existing capacity. This level of growth indicates the need for additional schools at primary and post-primary level in Blessington. Having regard to the foregoing, the proposed development, alongside the 4 No. other permitted housing developments in Blessington have the potential to generate an additional 2,950 No. persons within the area, including an estimated 753 No. children (including **458 No. primary school children and 295 No. post-primary school children**), when fully occupied.

#### 4.1.5 Completed and Planned Infrastructure

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) announced in April 2018, as part of their School Building Programme, that more than 40 No. new primary and post-primary schools were to be established throughout the country by 2022. Since 2018, over 40 No. new schools have been completed across the country. Subsequent additions to the School Building Programme list have been announced each year between 2018 and 2024 in line with demographic and local needs analyses. A small number of the 42 No. schools from the original list have not been completed as

<sup>10</sup> Source: <https://www.cso.ie/px/pxeirestat/Statire/SelectVarVal/Define.asp?maintable=E3003&PLanguage=o>

<sup>11</sup> Source: <https://www.cso.ie/px/pxeirestat/Statire/SelectVarVal/Define.asp?maintable=E3003&PLanguage=o>



of 2024, or have been deferred for a variety of reasons (i.e planning, phasing, or demographics). As of March 2024, there were 16 No. new school buildings or extensions to existing schools proposed across the county according to the latest School Building Programme Release. We note that there are 2 No. pipeline primary schools and post-primary schools at varying stages of development as of March 2024 proposed for Blessington.

The LAP states a need for up to 1,352 primary school places by 2022. However, the actual number of children enrolled in the 5 primary schools is below this projected figure. Furthermore, in cases such as Blessington Educate Together National School it was noted that the school can be expanded at its existing premises. Planning permission was granted in July 2021 for a single storey extension incorporating a one classroom Special Needs base and one mainstream classroom at the Blessington Educate Together National School (PA.Reg.Ref.21/617). Additionally, Gaelscoil na Lochanna is due to relocate to a new site where its capacity would be capable of accommodating 448 pupils (up from 152 currently). The planned new Gaelscoil na Lochanna primary school will greatly increase the capacity of the town in the near future. Planning permission was granted for the proposed primary school (2,334.7 sqm) which would accommodate a maximum of 448 pupils and 30 no. teachers at Kilmalum Road (Burgage More), Blessington, Co. Wicklow (PA.Reg.Ref.21/1068). Gaelscoil na Lochanna is also listed on the Department's building programme as pre-stage 1 (as of March 2024).

Under the Department of Education's list of large-scale project there is 1 No. new post-primary school planned for Blessington in the near future. This new school will replace and modernise the existing Blessington Community College (Roll No.70760S) and was listed at Stage 2b (Detailed Design) as of March 2024. Further desktop research shows that the planning application for the proposed new 3-storey school (capable of increasing enrolment to 1,000 pupils) was submitted in November 2023 and is currently at RFI as of April 2024 with Wicklow County Council. The Department of Education indicate that it is expected that the start date for its construction will be September 2025.

### Summary of Planned Expansion of School Network in Blessington:

#### Primary Level

- New school – c. 300 No. additional net student capacity at new Gaelscoil na Lochanna school
- School Expansion - Planned expansion of Blessington Educate Together National School (c. 80 places)
- Reduced Local Demand - 9.4% reduction in existing demand (c. 100 places)
- ***Total Additional Future Capacity of 480 places***

#### Post-primary Level

- New school – 1,000 No. student capacity at Blessington Community College (c. 298 net additional places)
- Reduced Local Demand – 2.1% reduction in existing demand (c. 15 places)
- ***Total Additional Future Capacity of 313 places***

#### 4.1.6 Conclusion

There are 5 No. existing primary schools, and 1 No. existing post-primary school in the catchment area, to which the subject site belongs. These facilities cater to a student population of 999 No. primary school students and 702 No. post-primary school students and have demonstrated different levels of growth in the recent 5-year period, with primary school enrolments decreasing by 7.0% and post-primary school enrolments increasing by 37.4% over the same period.

Admissions Notices from schools within the catchment indicate a healthy combined total of **112 No. spaces available** for incoming Junior Infants/First Years, of which 193 No. spaces are available in primary schools and 120 No. spaces are available in post-primary schools.

With respect to future enrolments, it is noted that a c. 9.4% decrease in primary school enrolments and a c. 2.1% decrease in post-primary school enrolments is anticipated between the academic years 2023/2024 and 2027/2028, but will fall gradually to a low point by 2039 (Figure 4.4), with respect to the most recent regional population projections published by the DES. **The visible decline in enrolments at primary school level is in line with government demographic projections, and is expected to continue to 2033. Post-primary school enrolments are projected to peak in 2024/2025, and it is thus likely that Wicklow will see a significant reduction in the need for places into the remainder of the decade.**

The *Department of Education* has 2 no. planned sites for 1 No. primary school and 1 No. post primary school to meet the needs of future residents in Blessington. The additional capacity being provided by these projects is being considered in the context of the projected future requirements in the area. Moreover, the planned infrastructure for Wicklow has already been specifically earmarked as a result of the demographic modelling carried out by the DES across various national, regional and local levels to cater for demand over the next 20 No. years.

**Primary Level Assessment:** The visible decline in enrolments at primary level in all local schools over the past 5 years, alongside the expected future decline based on local demographic profiling (2022), in addition to the planned expansion of existing and a new school (Gaelscoil na Lochanna) to be developed in the town in the near term, will create capacity to support all granted residential developments in the town, alongside the proposed development (Analysis carried out in Section 4.1.4.3 and 4.1.5)

**Post-primary Level Assessment:** The rise in enrolments at post-primary level in Blessington Community College over the past 5 years is in line with DES projections. While this growth is expected to peak next year and begin declining, the planned residential expansion of the town is likely to create a continued increase in demand for post-primary places supplemented by new starter homes. It will be essential that the proposed new 3-storey school (capable of increasing enrolment from 700 to 1,000 pupils) be developed in the town in the near term which will create capacity to support all granted residential developments in the town, alongside the proposed development (Analysis carried out in Section 4.1.4.3 and 4.1.5).

## 4.2 Childcare

This Assessment identifies 4 No. TUSLA registered childcare facilities within a 1 km radius of the subject site, and illustrates their maximum potential capacities based on the latest TUSLA inspection data, and their levels of accessibility with respect to walkable distances from the subject site. These facilities were reported as having a combined total enrolment of 187 No. childcare places at the time of the survey (April 2024). However, based on the results of the audit, these facilities were reported as having a combined total physical enrolment capacity of 236 No. childcare places. The demographic profile of this area provided in Section 3.0 also provides a baseline for understanding the pre-school age population and the emerging demand for childcare facilities in the area.

As part of the data discovery process, each of the relevant TUSLA childcare facilities were contacted via email to gather information on enrolment and vacancy in April 2024. We also note that the Wicklow Childcare Committee was consulted in the course of this Assessment but was not able to provide any recent childcare capacity analysis for the Study Area at the time of the consultation. As a result, an independent audit of services has been conducted.

As stated previously in Section 2.0, the *Childcare Facilities: Guidelines for Planning Authorities (2001)* recommend that a crèche or childcare facility with capacity for 20 No. children should generally be provided for every 75 No. dwellings within new residential developments. However, both the Guidelines and Wicklow County Council further advise that regard should be had to existing childcare provision when considering the delivery of new facilities as part of residential development in order to avoid over or underprovision, with the Development Plan highlighting that *"unless it can be demonstrated that having regard to the existing geographic distribution of childcare facilities and the emerging demographic profile of the area that this level of childcare facilities is not required."*

This Assessment aims to determine what the nature of local supply and demand is within the catchment, in parallel with the estimation of 0–6-year-old residents that may reside in the proposed development. The proposed development comprises 265 No. units, of which 209 No. units can reasonably accommodate families. For this assessment, it is assumed that only units greater than 1-bedroom can reasonably accommodate families and all LLUs have been excluded. In order to calculate the number of 0–6-year-old residents in the proposed development, the study utilises 3 No. key number of indicators:

1. The proposed unit mix of the development;
2. Persons per unit proposed (this is calculated by using the average household size within the Study Area, established as 3.06 No. persons per unit<sup>12</sup> using the Census 2022); and
3. Proportion of the Study Area's population within the 0–6 years age cohort (determined as 8.55% using Census 2022 data).

Analysis of these factors allows for a determination of the total number of 0–6-year-old residents in the proposed development. As highlighted in Table 4.8, it is estimated that 55 No. children aged 0–6 years may reside in the proposed development (rounded from 54.7).

<sup>12</sup> CSO statistics record a total of 5,653 No. residents in 1,851 No. households within the catchment in 2022.

Description	No.	Value	Method
Units in Proposed Development <sup>13</sup>	a	209	a
Average Household Size	b	3.06	b
Potential Residents (Number)	c	640	a * b = c
0–6 Years (% of Total Population)	d	8.55%	d
Potential 0–6 Years (Number)	e	54.7	d * c = e

**Table 4.8: Estimation of Children Aged 0–6 Years in the Proposed Development**

(Source: Thornton O'Connor Town Planning, 2024)

#### 4.2.1 Estimated Childcare Demand Generated

In 2023, the Central Statistics Office, as part of the latest Census release, provided a detailed statistical module<sup>14</sup> on the rates of take-up for childcare at a national and county level for 2022. This analysis highlighted that almost one-third (331,783) of children under the age of 15 in the State were in some form of formal childcare. This release is relevant for this Assessment as it indicates the extent to which childcare facilities are utilised by the general population. An adaption of a table found within this module (Table 4.9) shows the range of methods parents use for the purposes of childcare for their pre-school attending children in the State and at county level.

Type of Childcare	Parent/ Partner	Unpaid Relative/Friend	Paid Relative/ Friend	Childminder/ Au-Pair/Nanny	Childcare Facility	Other
Wicklow	56%	10%	3%	10%	20%	1%
State	55%	10%	2%	10%	22%	1%

**Table 4.9: Type of Childcare Utilised By Parents of Pre-School Children**

(Source: CSO, 2023)

The Study indicates that the vast majority of pre-school children across Ireland are cared for by their parents or partners of their parents, while 22% of pre-school children attend a childcare facility nationally, and 20% in Wicklow. This module from the CSO is not an approximation or a random sample survey, but a direct representation of the population in 2022. Since the previous analysis carried out in 2016, the level of pre-school children attending a childcare facility has not materially increased (increased in raw numbers, decreased in proportion). Table 4.10 applies the CSO's 20% figure to the estimated number of residents aged 0–6 years old<sup>15</sup> in the proposed development, as determined under the quantitative demographic analysis above. The results indicate a potential need for c. 11 No. childcare places to be available to support the additional local need (value rounded from 10.9).

<sup>13</sup> In line with Policy, a figure of 209 No. units was used in the calculations, discounting those units with only 1-bedroom.

<sup>14</sup> CSO Census of Population, 2022. <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp3/censusofpopulation2022profile3-householdsfamiliesandchildcare/childcare/>

<sup>15</sup> This analysis adopts the rate of formal childcare utilisation for children aged 0–8 years old for County Wicklow. While a like-for-like analysis of those aged 0–6 would be ideal, the CSO only provides outputs for specific cohorts (specifically, 0–2, 3–4, 5–8, 9–14, and under age 15 cohorts). In order to capture the key demographic of formal childcare take-up for those children aged 5–6, the percentage rate of take-up for all children aged 0–8 was selected and applied to the study.



Description	Ref.	Value	Method
Units in Proposed Development*	a	209	A
o-6 Years (Number)	b	54.7	B
o-6 Years Total at 20%	c	10.9	b *20% = c

**Table 4.10: Number of Pre-School Children Requiring Access to Childcare Facilities**

(Source: Thornton O'Connor Town Planning, 2024)

In order to gain an understanding of cumulative impacts, this report has identified other similar large-scale residential developments which could, together with the subject development, weigh on the capacity of the facilities identified in this report.

- PA.Reg.Ref.20/1146 for 91 units at Blessington Demesne.
- Plans Applied: PA.Reg.Ref.23/689 for 307 units at Blessington Demesne (22 No. 1-beds excluded from assessment).
- PA.Reg.Ref.21/1404 for 86 units at Burgage More (20 No. 1-beds excluded from assessment).
- PA.Reg.Ref.21/1068 for 62 units at Kilmalum (7 No. 1-beds excluded from assessment).

Cumulatively, these four applications would yield 546 units. It is assumed that these sites could yield an indicative population of 1,671 persons. Using the same methodology, there would be an estimated 143 No. children aged between 0 and 6 years by 2028 if all granted schemes are completed. Based on the same methodology used above, the results indicate a potential need for c. 29 No. childcare places to be available to support the additional local demand (value rounded from 28.6).

As the permitted new residential schemes are completed in Blessington it is likely that there will be a need to increase the supply of childcare capacity to meet the extent of future population growth in the town. Having regard to the foregoing, the proposed development, alongside the 4 No. other permitted housing developments in Blessington have the potential to generate an additional 755 units within the area (excluding 1-bed units), which is likely to contain 198 No. children aged 0-6 years old. It's estimated 40 No. children will have a requirement for childcare within a childcare facility, when all of the units are fully occupied by 2028.

#### 4.2.2 Existing Childcare Facilities and Population

Table 4.11 below provides facility-level detail for each of the existing childcare facilities identified in the study alongside indicative capacity. Figure 4.5 identifies each of these facilities on a map as they relate to the subject site. This assessment identifies 4 No. TUSLA registered childcare facilities within a 1 km radius of the subject site, it illustrates their maximum potential capacities based on the latest TUSLA inspection data, and their levels of accessibility with respect to walkable distances from the subject site. These facilities were reported as having a combined total capacity of 236 No. childcare places at the time of the survey (April 2024).

TUSLA ID	Childcare Facility	Distance (km)	Service Type	Current Enrolment	Spare Capacity
TU2015WW257	Blath na hOige Montessori	0.20	Sessional	39	0
TU2015WW187	Sakura Montessori & Playschool	0.20	Full Time	49	3
TU2015WW176	Cocoon Childcare- Blessington	0.05	Full Time	77	46
TU2015WW107	Happy Faces Playgroup	0.60	Sessional	22	0
			<b>Total (Within Catchment)</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>49</b>

\* Source: Combination of: TUSLA Inspections (Based on AM) and TUSLA Listing (April 2024) Provided By Wicklow County Council.

**Table 4.11: Current Enrolments and Capacity of Existing Childcare Facilities in the Study Area**

(Source: **TUSLA Inspections (Based on AM) and TUSLA Listing (April 2024) Provided By Wicklow County Council, Thornton O'Connor Town Planning, 2024)**

Consultation with each of the childcare facilities in the catchment area highlighted spare capacity for new enrolments as of April 2024. While there are constraints in relation to staffing of facilities, most of the facilities that were contacted have reached floorspace limits and would need additional floorspace to expand services. However, significant additional capacity was identified in the Cocoon Childcare facility bordering the subject site (current enrolment was 77, but the facility has insured physical capacity to support 145 children, as identified through TUSLA). Consultation with the Wicklow Childcare Committee conducted in April 2024 reinforced this position of capacity constraint at a County-level but had no data available at a local level. Taken together, the analysis of existing capacity indicates: a strong need for additional childcare facilities to be provided at a county-level, a strong ratio of existing childcare places to the number of children in the town, and an expected increase in demand for childcare based on population increases resulting from a number of large residential development planned for the town.

**Notably, while the population of the catchment area increased by 91 No. persons between 2016 and 2022, the number of children aged between 0- and 6-years only has dropped significantly by 39.8%, or there are 318 less children aged 0-6 than in 2016. There are now just 480 No. children aged between 0- and 6-years only in Blessington. Based on average take-up rates, Blessington has an excellent proportion of childcare places per capita.**

Age	Population, 2016	2016 (% Total)	Population, 2022	2022 (% Total)
Age 0	95	1.72%	62	1.10%
Age 1	102	1.85%	60	1.07%
Age 2	104	1.88%	55	0.98%
Age 3	111	2.01%	63	1.12%
Age 4	103	1.87%	70	1.25%
Age 5	150	2.72%	69	1.23%
Age 6	133	2.41%	101	1.80%
<b>Total</b>	<b>798</b>	<b>14.46%</b>	<b>480</b>	<b>8.55%</b>

**Table 4.12: Number and Percentage of the Total Population Aged 0-6 by Year 2016-2022.**

(Source: **CSO, 2022)**

#### **4.2.3 Planned Facilities Network**

An examination of Wicklow County Council's Online Planning Register showed the childcare planning and development pipeline to consist of 2 No. Planning Applications in the Study Area (Table 4.13) as of April 2024. If all of the developments currently within the planning and development pipeline are delivered, they will create a considerable additional childcare capacity of 130 No. childcare spaces in the Study Area, and in particular within a 1 km radius of the subject

site.

As illustrated in Table 4.13 below, the proposed childcare facilities largely relate to new operations in large residential developments. Whilst it is acknowledged that many of these spaces will be occupied by residents of planned and existing developments, it is not unreasonable to assume that there will be sufficient capacity in both the existing and planned network to accommodate the minor uplift in demand generated by the proposed development.

For example, an analysis of the demand methodology developed by Cairn Homes Ltd for their large-scale residential development (PA Ref: 221191) indicates that their planned childcare facility, capable of accommodating 100 No. children, is estimated based on the premise that 100% of children aged 0-4 in the new development will require childcare. **Based on existing county-level uptake, and the significant reduction in existing population aged 0-6 in the settlement since 2016, this ratio of 1:1 is likely to create a significant oversupply of childcare places in the settlement when complete.**

Plan Ref.	Status	Location	Final Grant Date	Description	Residential Units	Operator Estimated Capacity
221191 <sup>16</sup>	Granted	Blessington Demesne	14/01/2023	1 No. Childcare Facility (538 sq m)	430	100
211404	Granted	Burgage More, Blessington,	27/01/2022	1 No. Childcare Facility (200 sq m)	106	30

**Table 4.13: Childcare Planning and Development Pipeline – April 2024 in the Study Area**

(Source: Wicklow County Council – April 2024)

Details related to the aforementioned childcare facilities in the locality are set out below:

- PA.Reg.Ref.22/1191: The first creche was permitted under PA.Reg.Ref.20/1146 on lands immediately to the north of the proposed residential development. The creche was specifically proposed to cater for the needs of the permitted Blessington Phase 1 residential development and the Phase 2 residential development. This application was amended by the applicant in 2022 to increase the size and capacity of the creche permitted from 304 sq m to 538 sq m to cater for the increased childcare demand resulting from a larger proposed Phase 2 scheme (c. 450 No. total combined residential units). The application was approved for a revised creche with the capacity to support 100 children.
- PA.Reg.Ref.211404: A further creche is planned at Burgage More as part of a development of 106 social housing units. The creche was approved under the Part 8 process (PA.Reg.Ref.211404) and seeks to cater primarily for the needs arising from that development. This creche is c 200 sq m in size and has the potential to accommodate c. 30 children.

#### **4.2.4 County Childcare Facilities (Enrolments and Vacancy)**

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability Integration and Youth was contacted during this analysis who directed us to the 'Early Years Sector Profile Report 2020/2021' (May 2022)<sup>17</sup> which

<sup>16</sup> A revised application (Ref: 22/1191) was approved in 2023 to increase the size and capacity of the crèche permitted originally under Ref: 20/1146.

<sup>17</sup> Early Years Sector Profile Report 2020/2021: [https://www.roscommonchildcare.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Pobal\\_22\\_EY\\_20-21-Report\\_final\\_21.pdf](https://www.roscommonchildcare.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Pobal_22_EY_20-21-Report_final_21.pdf)

provides detail in relation to childcare capacity in the County. Surveys carried out as part of this Report illustrated that, at the time of the Survey, there were 181,565 No. children enrolled across early years services in the country, a 12% decrease on the previous release (from 2018/2019), with a total national capacity for 220,500 No. children. At the time of the Survey, services reported that the number of vacant places tripled since 2018/2019 to 38,935 No. in 2021<sup>18</sup>. By comparison, the number of children enrolled decreased by 24,736 No. in the same period. The average number of children per service stood at 41 No.

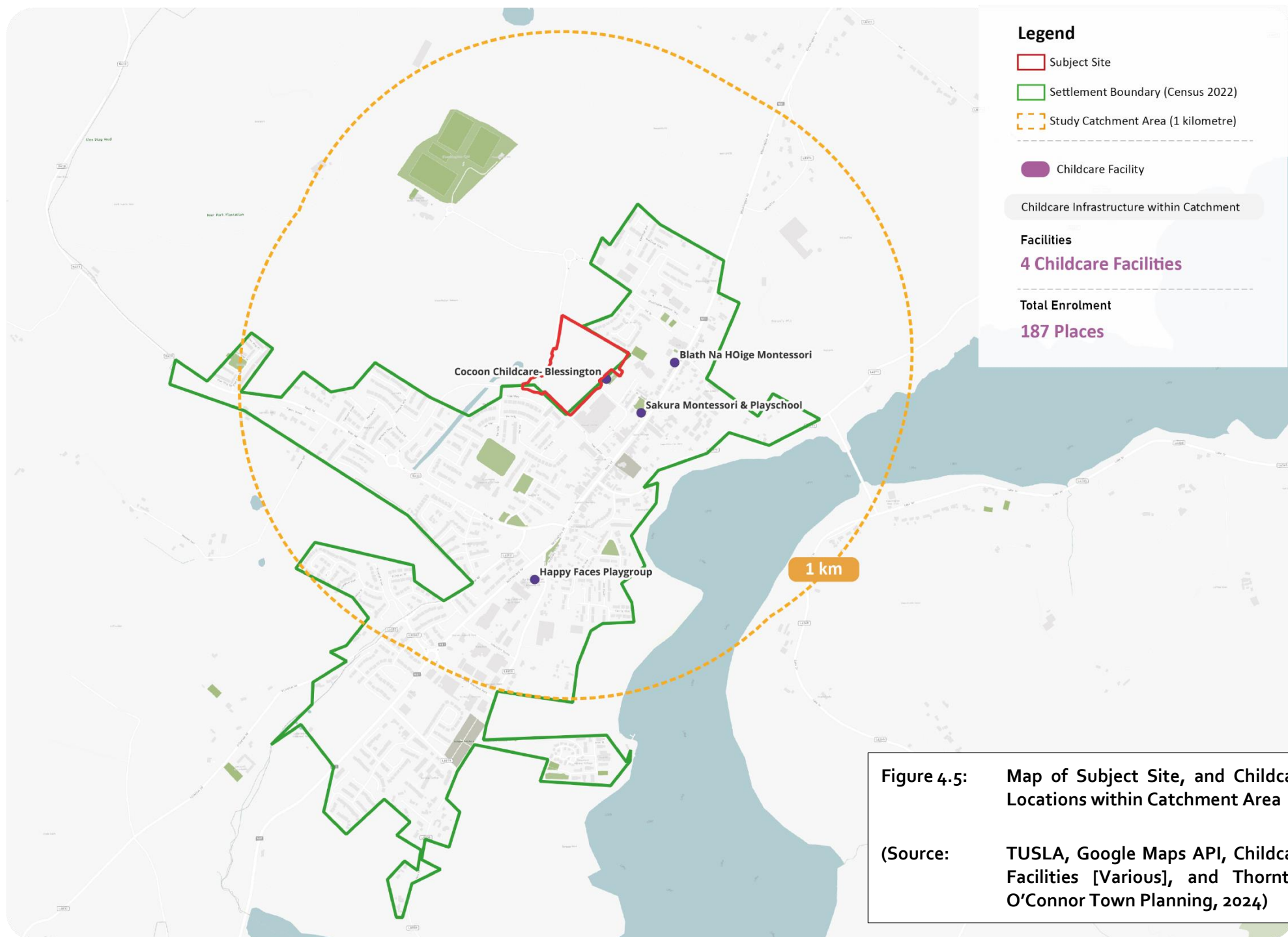
There were 2,518 No. children enrolled across early years services in Wicklow in 2021, a 31.5% decrease on the previous release (from 2018/2019), with a total capacity for 2,928 No. children at the end of 2021. Table 4.14 below highlights the current capacity and vacancy at the time of the survey within the childcare infrastructure in Wicklow. At the end of 2021, there was a c. 16% rate of vacancy, with 410 No. places available for incoming students.

Area	Capacity	Enrolled	Vacant places	Vacancy rate
Wicklow	2,928	2,518	410	16%

**Table 4.14: County Breakdown of Wicklow Childcare Enrolments – 2021**

(Source: Department of Children, Equality, Disability Integration and Youth)

<sup>18</sup> While the document makes reference to the potential impact that Covid-19 may have had on vacancy, it similarly notes that the majority of the falloff in demand is within older cohorts (aged 4–6+) more likely indicating the impact of households being able to leverage the flexibility of work from home arrangements into workable childcare systems.





#### 4.2.5 Conclusion

This Section provides an estimation of the potential number of 0–6-year-old children that may reside in the proposed development and may require a space in a childcare facility. Over the past 6 No. years (between 2016–2022), the population of the Study Area increased by 1.6% to 5,611 No. In 2022, the proportion of the population aged between 0–6-years old was estimated to be 8.55%. The Study uses this proportion to estimate the number of 0–6-year-olds that could potentially reside in the proposed development. Using the average household size (3.06 No. persons per household) and the percentage of 0–6-year-olds (8.55%) in the Study Area, a calculation was made to estimate that the proposed development could generate 55 No. 0–6-year-old children. Further analysis released by the CSO, based on Census 2022, indicated that 20% of children in Wicklow attend a childcare facility. This would mean that from the potential 55 No. 0–6-year-olds residing at the proposed development, **only 11 No. children would attend a childcare facility**. Notably, while the population of the catchment area increased by 91 No. persons between 2016 and 2022, the number of children aged between 0- and 6-years only has dropped significantly by 39.8%, or there are 318 less children aged 0-6 than in 2016.

The Survey conducted in this study for Blessington did not identify a shortfall in available childcare places, and currently has the capacity to meet the existing demands of the town in April 2024. Population has not grown significantly over the past 5 No. years and childcare facilities have not struggled to meet the demands of local residents.

Given the extent of future planned residential growth around the town, it is likely that the cumulative demand will surpass the existing 2024 capacity, and additional childcare capacity will need to be added to the town to support future populations. Having regard to the foregoing, the proposed development, alongside the 4 No. other permitted housing developments in Blessington have the potential to generate an additional 755 units within the area (excluding 1-bed units), which is likely to contain 198 No. children aged 0-6 years old. **It is estimated 40 No. children will have a requirement for childcare within a childcare facility, when all of the units are fully occupied by 2028.**

Notwithstanding existing provision and the expected low demand generated by the proposed development, we note that the Audit also identified 2 No. Planning Applications for 2 No. childcare facilities which would be expected to add significant further capacity to the 1 km catchment (130 No. childcare places) when completed. The Residential Development to the immediate north of the subject site (Reg. Ref 221191) comprises a crèche of a Gross Floor Area to meet the childcare demand generated by their planned development but will certainly provide additional capacity for the town alongside the demands of this development.

The proposed development comprises 265 No. units, of which 209 No. units can reasonably accommodate families. For this assessment, it is assumed that only units greater than 1-bedroom can reasonably accommodate families and all LLUs have been excluded. The potential childcare uptake of the proposal is likely to be 11 No. places, and the local childcare network has an indicative maximum capacity of 236 No. spaces. The childcare planning and development pipeline also indicates a significant future pipeline of an additional 130 No. childcare places within the catchment area. The cumulative demand for all future residential development has also been assessed and it is judged that the planned childcare capacity will be able to meet total demand. The survey did not identify any deficit in available childcare places in April 2024, and given the level of planned childcare facilities, and the minimal childcare demand generated by the proposed development, it is considered that additional childcare facilities at this location would not be necessary, and can be effectively absorbed by the existing and planned facilities network.

### 4.3 Introduction – SIA

The Study Area for this Assessment is defined by a 1 km radius of the subject site, equivalent to a c. 12- to 14-minute walking distance, which is considered accessible to future residents of the proposed development. Given that the subject site is located at the edge of a growing settlement, an additional 10-minute drivetime catchment area was defined for the study based on the Community Faculties Hierarchy Model outlined in Table 7.1 of the *Wicklow County Development Plan 2022-2028*. The majority of infrastructure identified as part of the audit is located within 1km or just adjacent this catchment. The wider 10-minute drivetime catchment was useful in adding supplementary sports clubs and green infrastructure (which are often sited outside settlements) connected to the Blessington area.

The survey identified a large range of community facilities within the Study Area. Some 53 No. social infrastructure facilities were identified as part of this Audit within a radius of 1 km of the subject site (45 No. excluding schools and childcare). An additional 16 No. key social infrastructure assets were identified within a 10-minute drivetime of the subject site. The majority of these assets are located within the settlement of Blessington but outside the 1 km catchment and still considered relevant to the study. These facilities (excluding schools and childcare), are mapped in Figure 4.6 overleaf.

No.	Name of Asset	Facility Type
1	Blessington Family Practice	Healthcare and Emergency Services
2	McGreals Blessington Pharmacy	Healthcare and Emergency Services
3	Philip Trueman Amatsu Therapist	Healthcare and Emergency Services
4	Blessington Primary Care	Healthcare and Emergency Services
5	Novaerus Pharmacy At McGreals	Healthcare and Emergency Services
6	Blessington Dental	Healthcare and Emergency Services
7	Method Physiotherapy	Healthcare and Emergency Services
8	Centric Mental Health @ Blessington Medical	Healthcare and Emergency Services
9	Pharmacy 1st	Healthcare and Emergency Services
10	McGreals Opticians and Hearing Centre	Healthcare and Emergency Services
11	ALDI	Retail Centres and Services
12	Dunnes Stores	Retail Centres and Services
13	Kenny's SuperValu Blessington	Retail Centres and Services
14	Maxol Service Station Blessington	Retail Centres and Services
15	Texaco N81	Retail Centres and Services
16	MACE Blessington	Retail Centres and Services
17	All In Fitness	Open Space and Recreation
18	Blessington Boxing Club	Open Space and Recreation
19	Blessington Playground	Open Space and Recreation
20	Blessington Greenway Trail	Open Space and Recreation
21	Blessington GAA Ground	Open Space and Recreation
22	High Definition Fitness	Open Space and Recreation
23	DanceTrax Studios (Ruth Shine School of Dance)	Open Space and Recreation
24	Blessington Music, Music School & Shop	Open Space and Recreation
25	The Avon Resort	Open Space and Recreation
26	Blessingtoun Rowing Club	Open Space and Recreation
27	Splash N Dash Adventure Race	Open Space and Recreation

No.	Name of Asset	Facility Type
28	Peter Finnegan Park	Open Space and Recreation
29	Blessington Skatepark	Open Space and Recreation
30	Blessington Fitness Hub	Open Space and Recreation
31	Fight Fit Dojo	Open Space and Recreation
32	Eadestown GAA	Open Space and Recreation
33	Burgage Castle	Open Space and Recreation
34	CP Adventure	Open Space and Recreation
35	Russborough House & Park	Open Space and Recreation
36	Glending Forest	Open Space and Recreation
37	Kilbride GAA Club	Open Space and Recreation
38	Blessington Football Club	Open Space and Recreation
39	Blessington Credit Union	Social, Community and Culture Facilities
40	Work Hub Wicklow	Social, Community and Culture Facilities
41	Coimín Centre	Social, Community and Culture Facilities
42	St Joseph's Hall	Social, Community and Culture Facilities
43	Tramway Theatre Blessington Wicklow Ireland	Social, Community and Culture Facilities
44	St Kevin's Community Centre	Social, Community and Culture Facilities
45	Blessington Garda Station	Social, Community and Culture Facilities
46	Blessington Post Office	Social, Community and Culture Facilities
47	Clothing bank	Social, Community and Culture Facilities
48	Wicklow County Council	Social, Community and Culture Facilities
49	Blessington Fire Station	Social, Community and Culture Facilities
50	Blessington Men's Shed	Social, Community and Culture Facilities
51	West Wicklow House Blessington	Social, Community and Culture Facilities
52	Blessington Library	Social, Community and Culture Facilities
53	Manor Kilbride Community Hall	Social, Community and Culture Facilities
54	Burgage Cemetery	Faith
55	St. Mary's Church of Ireland	Faith
56	Church of Our Lady	Faith
57	Church of the Immaculate Conception	Faith
58	St. John's Church	Faith
59	St. Brigid's Church	Faith

**Table 4.15: Social and Community Infrastructure within c. 1 km Radius of the Subject Site (also certain key assets within a 10 minute drivetime)**

(Source: Thornton O'Connor Town Planning, 2024)

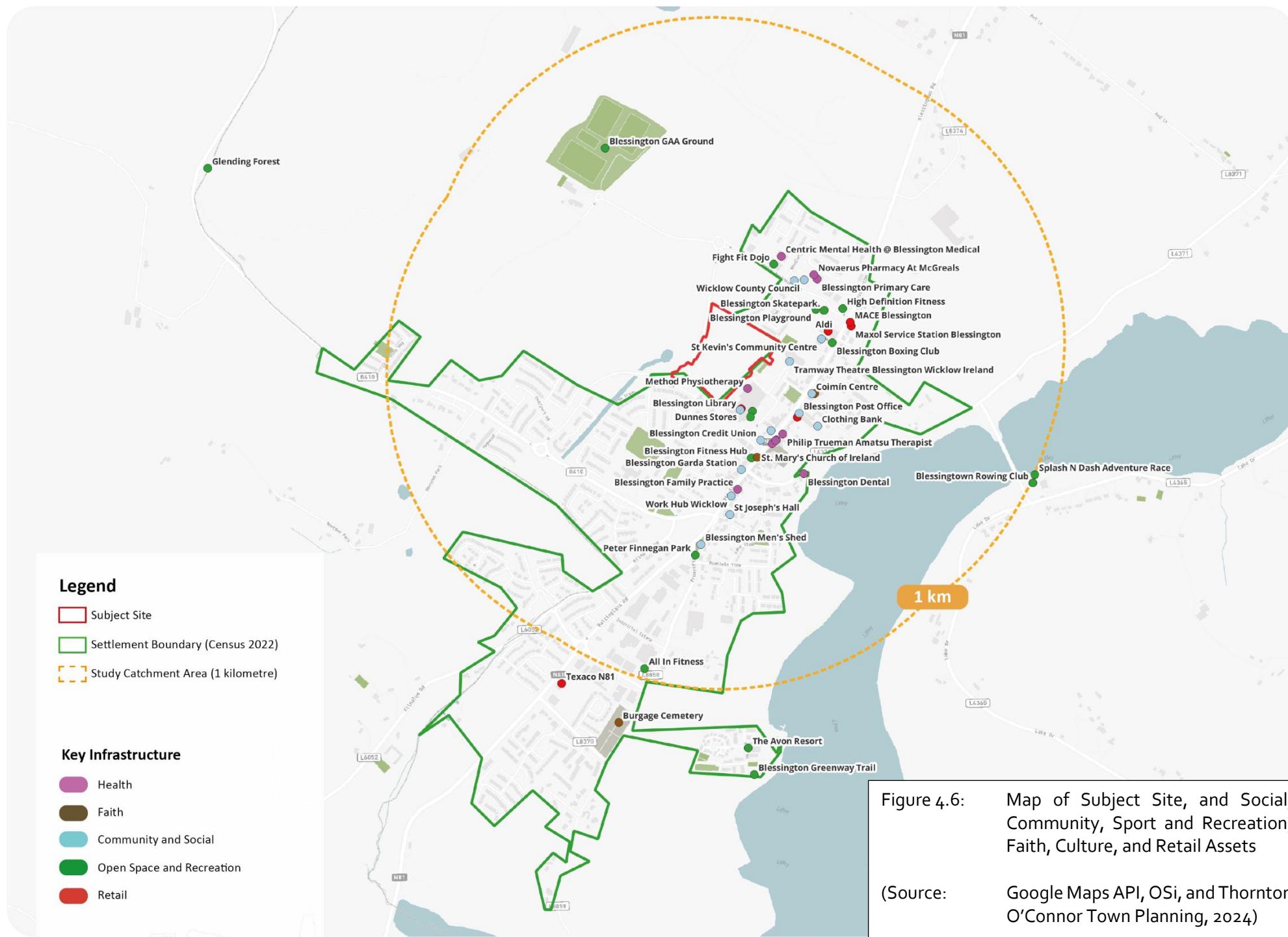


Figure 4.6: Map of Subject Site, and Social, Community, Sport and Recreation, Faith, Culture, and Retail Assets

(Source: Google Maps API, OSi, and Thornton O'Connor Town Planning, 2024)

#### 4.4 Social, Community and Culture Facilities

Access to quality community services and facilities can have a significant bearing on the quality of life and health and well-being of a community, by encouraging social interaction, promoting learning and providing support services for those living, working and visiting an area. An urban neighbourhood should be big enough to support a range of services and small enough to foster a sense of belonging and community; it should be sufficiently dense to enable all of its essential facilities to be within easy walking distance of the urban centre.

The baseline study undertaken identified 15 No. community and social services and facilities in the Audit, including a community centre, parish hall, and public library. The St. Kevin's Community Centre, Coimín Centre and St. Josephs Hall & Parish Centre provide for a range of community activities including arts and culture. Many of these services can expand to accommodate future demand from the proposed developments. There is a range of community groups active in Blessington to cover a variety of interests including but not limited to retirement groups, book club, bridge, etc. The centres are multi-purpose facilities catering for a wide range of community needs, including:

- Montessori School, Brownies, Girl guides, Ladybirds, Fencing, Parent & Toddler Group, Women's Shed, Coffee morning older persons, KWETB training, Bowls Club, All Star Dancing, Craft Market, Car Boot Sale, Junior Rugby training, Irish Dancing, Rehearsal space 2 Theatre groups, AA, INSINK youth group, Meetings Yoga, Daycare Elderly 2 days/week, historical group, Cancer support, Meeting rooms for rent with fully equipped kitchen.

The audit has identified a range of services and activities available specifically for young people. Insync is a rural youth project that seeks to provide a service that supports young people aged between 10-24 years in Blessington and the wider area of West Wicklow. The project provides counselling, support and skills services. In addition, West Wicklow Youthreach offers an alternative education and training programme for early school leavers aged between 16-21 years. The programme is 2 years full-time with a range of exciting course modules to capture all interests in areas such as Health & Fitness, Healthy Eating & Cooking, Science, Art & Design, Sustainable Education, and Technology.

In addition to key community facilities, sustainable communities require a range of ancillary facilities and services (e.g. credit unions, retail centres, recycling facilities, post offices and cultural facilities). Blessington Town has a post office, library and credit union. Blessington Library hosts a range of activities and services for all population cohorts and abilities, for example, they host a Lego club, autism support and citizens advice among its services. The Tramway Theatre provides a venue for local theatre, choral and other performance. The Theatre opened in 2007. Two local theatre groups use the local hall at St. Joseph's to rehearse. The Blessington Youth Theatre holds weekly drama and singing classes, in addition to regular youth group productions at the Tramway Theatre. Local Fire Station and Garda Station were identified in the Study Area during the baseline survey. Both of these facilities would provide necessary emergency provisions as needed and are sufficient to support the needs of current and future residents.

Analysis of convenience retailing indicates that there is adequate provision within the Study Area. The offering within 1 km is largely classified as cafes, restaurants, take-aways, a butcher, chemists and personal services like hairdressers and post offices serving a localised catchment population (within walking distance of the site), but also includes a large SuperValu, Dunnes Stores and Aldi for a full convenience retail experience. The Mall New Town Centre, which includes Dunnes Stores and a range of shops is located just over 70 m from the site. Aldi is located



250m away and Supervalu 250m away.

The Development plan identifies Blessington as a Level 3 town in the retail hierarchy of the county. This means that in a market town like Blessington serving a wide catchment including the surrounding rural population it is the principal shopping destination in the area. The plan states that a good range of comparison shopping with a mix of retail types, leisure / cultural facilities and a range of cafes and restaurants will be provided. For a population of 10,000-40,000 the guideline of lettable retail space would be 10,000-25,000 sqm. A survey conducted in 2020 reports that shoppers are satisfied with the convenience shopping on offer but there is a demand for comparison shops and particularly cafes and restaurants in the town.

Blessington is well supplied in terms of retail services and facilities. The town includes commercial, shops, cafes and restaurants. The entertainment possibilities are also well provided for. Moreover, it is considered that increasing the level of residential development in the area would contribute to the sustainability and viability of local businesses in the area. On this basis, it is considered that there is sufficient to cater for local resident need in Blessington.

The catchment area offers a number of community spaces catering for local populations and also acts as attractions to those from outside the locality to explore it as an amenity. Although a range of community assets was identified as part of this Audit, there is need to emphasise the ongoing and continued demand for new and improved community infrastructure in the area. Participation in community activities contributes to social cohesion, reduces isolation and enriches the lives of residents. As such, community infrastructure is a key social asset, and Audits such as this provide visibility on current assets, as well as potential gaps for the local area.

#### **4.5 Healthcare and Emergency Services**

Supported and facilitated by Local Authorities, access to quality health services and facilities is a key element to creating sustainable neighbourhoods. A total of 10 No. health services and facilities, comprising 2 No. General Practitioner and Health Centres, 1 No. Physiotherapy, 1 No. Optician, 1 No. Counselling and Therapy Practices, 3 No. Pharmacies and 1 No. Dental Care Practices, were identified within and bordering the Study Area during the baseline survey.

A significant concentration of health facilities and infrastructure is located closer to the centre of the town, much of which is within walking distance to the subject site. These centres provide for an extensive range of services, including general medical, surgery and physiotherapy services. For specific specialist services, individuals may be willing to travel farther. The proposed development is located in close proximity to Dublin's wide range of health facilities. Blessington is located around 18km south from Tallaght Hospital using the N81. It is also accessible by public transport with the Dublin Bus no. 65. Tallaght University Hospital offers a wide range of services, including emergency services. There is also a hospital in Naas, Co. Kildare, just under 14km north west of Blessington. Overall, there is an established network of health care facilities in existence to date. This provides access to national public hospitals, private hospitals, high-tech hospitals, accident and emergency services, psychiatric hospitals, rehabilitation centres, orthopaedic hospitals and hospices.

Some 11 No. GPs are located in the various GP Practices and Medical Centre serving a population of 5,611 No. residents in 2022. This provides a healthy GP to resident population ratio of 1 GP for every 510 No. residents. The latest research published by the ESRI<sup>19</sup> (in April 2024) looks to establish new standards for housing and healthcare planning. In this research they estimate annual demand for almost 11,000 general practitioner (GP) visits within a 1,000 home development. Based upon current national demand to GP supply ratios, this demand would require 1.5 GP whole time equivalents (WTEs) to provide that care. Using this standard as a benchmark for Blessington, the area should have 1.5 GPs per 1,000 of resident population. In the case of Blessington, the current population easily meets this threshold. Moreover, assuming a significant population expansion in the coming years (to 7,500 residents) the current GP provision still comfortably meets this threshold of care. Thus, general practice medical provision is considered very high and likely also caters for resident populations from the surrounding area.

As the demographic profile of the Study Area continues to change, it will be critical to ensure that the provision of health services and facilities takes into consideration not only the needs of the existing population but future demand for such services and facilities. As illustrated above, a range of health services and facilities are available within the Study Area. Irrespective of demographic change, the population increase that would occur as a result of the proposed development is unlikely to place any undue stress on the extensive range of health services and facilities available within and bordering the Study Area.

## 4.6 Open Space and Recreation

The town of Blessington has a range of open space areas suitable for cycling, running and walking. For the purposes of this Study, open space and recreation facilities are considered to include parks, playgrounds, multi-use games areas, gyms, and sports pitches.

The availability of, and access to, affordable sports and recreation facilities that are within easy reach by walking, cycling and public transport is of considerable importance. In total, 22 No. sports and recreation facilities were identified in and around the Study Area during the baseline survey which include a wide range of sports clubs, a playground, a gym, outdoor amenity and trails, and a recreation centre. Given the population and age profile of the Study Area there will be a continued requirement to provide a variety of sports and recreation facilities to cater for the needs of children, adults and the elderly. All of the facilities identified in the Audit seem to be of good quality and there are no known capacity issues at present.

Blessington is located beside the Poulaphouca Reservoir commonly known as the Blessington Lakes, at the foot of the Wicklow mountains in an area of natural beauty. The Blessington Greenway has been partially completed to 6.5 kms of shared cycle and walkway designed for leisure and family users. The 6.5 km trail walk loops from the town, through woodland to Russborough House. The Greenway is to be developed to 43 kilometres of cycle and walking routes that loop from Blessington around the Lake, through the villages of Ballyknockan, Vallemount and Lacken and will be a valuable resource to the residents for recreation and leisure activity. The grounds of Russborough House with a 200-acre estate is owned and run by the Alfred Beit foundation is available for public access but there are fees to access some activities and full access of the grounds.

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<sup>19</sup>"Effects of new residential developments on local healthcare demand and workforce: evidence from primary and acute public hospital care in Ireland" Source: <https://www.esri.ie/publications/effects-of-new-residential-developments-on-local-healthcare-demand-and-workforce> <https://www.esri.ie/publications/effects-of-new-residential-developments-on-local-healthcare-demand-and-workforce>

Outdoor recreation amenities in the town include a playground with outdoor fitness equipment and a skatepark. These amenities are located adjacent to the Aldi carpark and the industrial park. The Avon holiday resort and outdoor activity centre has been developed to take advantage of the natural assets and recreation potential in the area. The centre is privately run, and charges apply for access to the many outdoor activities (mostly water-based) that are on offer.

In addition, the new c. 15 Ha Town Park (currently under construction, PA.Reg.Ref.22/1191) will contain an informal grass playing field, a bowling green and tennis court, in addition to a large playground located directly adjacent the subject site. This town park is a long standing objective of the Blessington Local Area Plan. The park, in this regard, will positively assist in satisfying the open space and green space needs of the future residents and of the existing residents of Blessington. St Kevin's Hall and St Joseph's Hall also host a range of sports and community. There are several specific clubs and leisure facilities in Blessington, including a GAA club with 8 Ha of playing pitches located close to the site. The Blessington AFC pitches and club is located 4.6 km north of town centre at Crosschapel off the N81. The club has 2 playing pitches and 1 training pitch.

Alongside the existing amenity, and that which is under construction, there are also a number of planning permissions in place for new, and improvements to existing, open space and sporting infrastructure. Specifically:

- There is the permitted Glen Ding Greenway, which was permitted under PA.Reg.Ref.20/1146. This greenway is earmarked in the Blessington LAP.
- There is a pending application under section 177AE of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, for the provision of the Blessington Greenway (ABP.Ref.312479), which would consist of 33 km of walking and cycling paths around the Poulaphouca Reservoir/Blessington Lake. A decision was due by 25<sup>th</sup> October 2022 but has been date delayed.
- A football field was granted planning permission (PA.Reg.Ref.21/192) in Manor Kilbride to the Lacken Kilbride Gaelic Football Club. A second permission was granted for the provision of all-weather pitch at the same location (PA.Reg.Ref.2250). It also includes a playground area. Permission was granted on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2022.
- Planning permission was granted at Avon Rí for an outdoor activity area comprising a zipline and climbing wall, archery area and a general activity space (PA.Reg.Ref.21/967). Permission was granted on 19<sup>th</sup> September 2021.
- Planning permission was granted to the Blessington GAA club for the construction of 2 no. changing rooms with toilets and shower facilities, a referee's room with changing facilities and public toilets (PA.Reg.Ref.22/1175). Permission was granted in January 2023.

On this basis, it is considered that the development would not add undue pressure on the existing facilities in Blessington.

#### **4.7 Faith Institutions**

The predominant religion in the Republic of Ireland is Christianity, with the largest denomination being Catholicism. The second largest Christian denomination, the Church of Ireland (Anglican) has more recently experienced an increase, as have other small Christian denominations.

Within the Study Area 78.0% of the population identify as religious, and 69.7% within the Catholic faith. The timely provision of faith facilities is of considerable importance to ensuring the religious needs of the existing and future population are met. A total of 5 No. places of worship were

identified within the Study Area during the baseline survey. All of these faith facilities appear to be in good condition and there are no reported capacity issues and no specified unmet needs of note at present. However, the changing cultural profile of Ireland means that Local Authorities may need to facilitate the development of additional places of worship to accommodate different religions in the future.

It is not considered necessary to provide for religious facilities as part of this application.

## 4.8 Transport

The census 2022 had found that over 60.6% of respondents travelled to work, school or college by car or van, compared to 58.0% nationally. In 2022, 17.3% of residents walked to work, school or college but only 1.2% travelled by bicycle. Only 10.1% of residents travelled to work, school or college via public means on the bus or train compared to 11.3% nationally.

The main street through the centre of Blessington town is a key route used by commuters to Dublin and other road users. A study commissioned by Blessington District Forum and Wicklow County Council (Blessington Health Check, 2020) found that Naas and Tallaght are important in terms of education, employment and leisure but traffic congestion can increase drivetimes to these towns especially at peak travel times.

Blessington is served by Dublin Bus No. 65 to Tallaght, Terenure, Rathmines and Dublin City. Bus Eireann also services Blessington with connections to Tallaght and Dublin as well as Baltinglass, Tullow, Ballon, Kildavin and Bunclody to the south. Local Links were also identified in the town through the route number 885 provides a connection between Blessington and Sallins Rail station between Monday and Friday. All routes bus stops are located within a 250 metre distance from the subject site, which is equivalent to less than a 5-minute walk. In addition to the existing bus stops located in Blessington, two bus stops along the Blessington Inner Relief Road have been built although they are not currently in use. The bus stops located west of the site will offer greater accessibility to public transport from the site once they become operational.

Under various plans and programmes, there are emerging transport developments that will positively impact the sustainable transport and mobility options to and from the subject site. As part of the GDA Cycle Network, secondary routes are proposed in the immediate vicinity of the subject site along Oak Drive and the Inner Relief Road. Additional secondary routes are proposed along both the R410 Naas Road and N81 Main Street, which both connect to Blessington Town Centre. Branching off these secondary routes are a number of inter urban routes and leisure greenways. BusConnects is the National Transport Authority's (NTA) programme to greatly improve bus and sustainable transport services across the Dublin Region. Under BusConnects the subject site will benefit from the implementation of the local route L44 servicing between Ballymore Eustace-Blessington – Tallaght. The route will operate 7 days a week with a frequency of 60 minutes. The route will form part of an interchange with the Luas red line and additional BusConnects routes.

A continuous footpath bounds the residential site to the north and west on Oak Drive and Red Lane. This would allow prospective residents of the development to walk safely from the site to any other part of Main Street. The entire frontage of the park along the BIRR has a footpath. This would ensure that the new town park (opposite the site) is accessible to the Main street and subject site. It is therefore expected that, in theory, all parts of Blessington would be accessible on foot owing to improved pedestrian infrastructure.

Parking is free in the town, with much of the parking spaces used by shoppers and commuters to Dublin (Blessington Heath check, 2020).



## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In our opinion, there is a sufficient existing provision of social infrastructure in the vicinity of the subject site (i.e. within a c. 1 km radius) to support the proposed development. As the above survey demonstrates, there is an adequate supply of childcare, healthcare, and community facilities within reasonable walking distance of the subject site, as well as a number of parks and amenity areas, playing pitches and sporting facilities available to local residents. The proposed development will stitch into an already established neighbourhood with adequate and improving local facilities.

The baseline study undertaken identified a significant range of services and facilities which contribute to quality of life for local residents. Some 53 No. social infrastructure facilities were identified as part of this Audit within a radius of 1 km of the subject site (45 No. excluding schools and childcare). An additional 16 No. key social infrastructure assets were identified within a 10 minute drivetime of the subject site. The Study Area is particularly well served in terms of healthcare provision, faith infrastructure, and retailing amenities.

Overall, the town is set to experience further growth in the coming years as new housing developments are completed. It is critical as part of these housing developments that the primary and post-primary school infrastructure is provided in tandem. Given the extent of residential development, the new planned primary and post-primary schools be a requirement in the coming years. While ample childcare spaces were identified in the childcare survey, it is expected that the granted pipeline of new housing development may put pressure on existing services. It is expected that the 2 No. granted childcare facilities will further increase the capacity of the town by 130 No. places, and address any surplus requirement that may arise. It is judged that this quantum of additional spaces will address any shortfall into the future based on the current pipeline of residential development (including the proposed development). The proposed development also includes passive and active open spaces as well as pedestrian and cycle links throughout the site. Having regard to the above we submit that the Blessington area provides a wide range of existing social and community infrastructure to support the development and this is an ideal location for the proposed residential development.

This *Social Infrastructure Audit* has been completed with regard to National, Regional and Local policy relating to the provision of suitable community facilities. Consideration has also been made to the policies on social and community infrastructure in the *Wicklow Development Plan 2022–2028*. The recommended types of facilities have been examined and the result of this *Social Infrastructure Audit* has identified that there is adequate existing capacity of these services and facilities within a reasonable catchment of the subject site. It is concluded that the existing school provision in the area is sufficient to cater for the needs of the current and future population of the area and the proposed development will be adequately catered for both in terms of school and childcare provision.

Despite this, it is important to continually ensure good accessibility to quality services and facilities, inclusive of but not limited to health services and facilities, education facilities, community facilities and sports and recreation facilities. **The size of the proposed development is unlikely to impact on the quality of services and facilities currently available in the locality.**