



Local Development Plan

High Sperrins and Slieve Beagh Special Countryside Area (SCA)

Special Countryside Area (SCA) – High Sperrins and Slieve Beagh

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this paper is to provide the background, rationale and methodology for the designation of a Special Countryside Area (SCA) in the High Sperrins and at Slieve Beagh

2.0 Background

- 2.1 The Regional Development Strategy requires the protection of designated areas of countryside from inappropriate development. One of the central objectives of the RDS is the protection and enhancement of the environment through an approach to development and policy formulation, which has the condition of the environment as a central deciding factor. The RDS points out that the introduction of specific designations is an effective way of ensuring nature conservation interests are protected
- 2.2 The concept of an SCA is introduced within the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS). The SPPS highlights that some areas of the countryside exhibit exceptional landscapes, such as mountains and certain views or vistas, wherein the quality of the landscape and unique amenity value is such that development should only be permitted in exceptional circumstances. The SPPS goes on to state that where appropriate these areas should be designated as SCAs in Local Development Plans, and appropriate policies brought forward to ensure their protection from unnecessary and inappropriate development.¹
- 2.3 A key aim of MUDC Community Plan is to increase the protection of our natural environment through the improvement of our air and water quality, whilst simultaneously allowing for greater access to and development of our natural assets including the Sperrins, Beaghmore and our forests.
- 2.4 The Community plan recognises how our natural assets contribute to the health and well-being of our local community. The intrinsic value to health and well-being of such assets relates to their potential to provide opportunities for physical activity such as walking and cycling; and improve quality of mental health. The Community Plan also recognises the important role our environment has to play by encouraging the sustainable development of our natural heritage assets as part of the District's green and blue infrastructure.
- 2.5 The 'Environment' chapter of the MUDC Preferred Option Paper (POP) emphasises the importance of giving appropriate consideration to environmental issues in the allocation of land for future development. The Councils preferred approach for protecting the districts environmental assets is by setting out clear constraints at a strategy level and providing a balanced approach by delivering key policies to control development in a consistent and sustainable manner. The POP highlights 6 key environment measures for the district, including the following two;

¹ *Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland*, Department of the Environment, September 2017, para 6.75, page 55.

- *'Manage Development in the Sperrins to protect open vista and bogland whilst accommodating sensitive development to meet the needs of local residents and visitors'*
 - *'Protect the Clogher Valley and other important ridgelines and river valleys from obtrusive development whilst maximising recreation and leisure opportunities'*
- 2.6 In line with the Council's preferred designation approach, the POP suggested the introduction of an Area of Constraint on Wind Turbines and High Structures (ACWTHS) in the Sperrin Mountains and at Clogher Valley, including Slieve Beagh, and a Special Countryside Area (SCA) at the Lough Shore. Further research and site surveying carried out since the publication of the POP suggests that parts of the Sperrins and Slieve Beagh warrant similar policy controls to that at the Lough Shore to protect it from inappropriate development i.e. an SCA. This approach in the High Sperrins has been supported by NIEA Natural Environment Division as part of their POP consultation response, where they have advised that there are parts of the Sperrins where 'the introduction of any development would be inappropriate, given landscape sensitivities'. In their response to the POP, RSPB also indicated their support for the introduction of an SCA designation within Slieve Beagh, due to its importance to the local bird population.
- 2.7 The proposed introduction of an SCA in these areas is consistent with the Council's key environment measures and the LDP's 14th objective; *'The need to protect and enhance the natural and built environment to achieve biodiversity, quality design, enhanced leisure and economic opportunity and promote health and wellbeing.'* The introduction of a SCA also gives effect to LDP Strategic Planning Guideline 10 (SPG 10) which aims to *'Facilitate the protection of vulnerable landscapes and conservation interests, from inappropriate and over dominant development while promoting adequate provision of open space and landscaping integrated with broader green and blue infrastructure systems'*.
- 2.8 The proposed policy wording for identified Special Countryside Areas (SCA's) is suggested as follows:

POLICY SCA 1– SPECIAL COUNTRYSIDE AREAS

The LDP will introduce Special Countryside Areas, at Lough Neagh / Lough Beg, at Slieve Beagh and in the High Sperrins (see Map A). Within these SCA's there will be a presumption against all new development in order to protect the quality and unique amenity value of these unique landscapes.

Within the Special Countryside Areas, new development will conflict with the plan except where it comprises one of the following exceptions;

- *ancillary open development relating to appropriate recreation / open space uses, which have been demonstrated to be in the wider public interest; or*
- *in-situ replacement of an existing building of a similar size and character.*
- *communications apparatus to serve a recognised 'not spot'.*

Within the Lough Neagh / Lough Beg SCA the policy will allow for consolidation or minor expansion of existing development relating to the commercial fishing industry, including jetties, slipways, and ancillary buildings, where it has been demonstrated that it is essential for the efficient operation of an active and established commercial fishing enterprise (for criteria refer to relevant Housing Countryside Policy).

Within the Slieve Beagh and High Sperrins SCA's the policy will allow for the provision of essential electricity transmission or supply infrastructure of demonstrable regional importance.

3.0 Justification of Special Countryside Area boundary

- 3.1 Within proposed SCA's planning permission will only be granted for development proposals which meet the relevant exceptions as set out in proposed **Policy SCA1** above. The proposed High Sperrin's and Slieve Beagh SCA's typically include remote, scenic and unspoilt areas that are highly sensitive with little capacity to absorb development (See SCA Context 'Map A'). Although largely self-protecting due to their altitude, topography and remoteness, it is considered that these areas should be kept free from potential development unless it can be clearly established to be in the public interest. The Council therefore proposes to designate these areas as SCA's in order to protect their scenic quality and landscape sensitivity.
- 3.2 In order to establish the boundaries of the Sperrins and Slieve Beagh SCA, a desktop study was carried out in February/March 2018. This study took account of the NILCA 2000, the Regional Landscape Character Assessment 2016, MUDC Landscape Assessment (2016), MUDC Rural Pressure analysis (2016), the MUDC Landscape Review (2018), Corine Landcover Map and the NIEA Map viewer.
- 3.3 Informed by the above, an initial line was plotted on Geographical Information Systems (GIS). This was overlain on the most up-to-date OSNI ortho-photography, along with other GIS shapefile environmental data including international, national and local environmental designations such as Sperrins AONB, SAC's, SPA's, ASSI's, SLNCIs, and AoHSV's. A desktop visual assessment was carried out and a second SCA boundary line was deduced utilising identifiable natural features to inform boundary

definition. This line formed the basis for subsequent field survey work to determine the exact delineation of the proposed SCA boundary.

- 3.4 The boundaries of the proposed SCA are mainly defined by physical features such as field patterns, streams, drainage ditches, hedgerows, changes in ground level, tree lines and topography. Wherever possible, cultivated land and any existing development were excluded from the proposed SCA. In cases where a physical limit was difficult to establish the boundary coincides with a known contour line or the edge of a recognised land cover line such as a natural grassland or peatland areas, or aligns with an existing designation such as a Special Protection Area (SPA) or Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI).

The High Sperrins Special Countryside Area

- 4.1 The Sperrins AONB, designated in 2008 under the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (NI) Order 1985 encompasses a largely mountainous area of spectacular scenery and nature conservation value, which straddles 4 districts, including our own. Within Mid Ulster the proposed High Sperrins SCA comprises mountain peaks and areas of elevated peatland, natural grassland, moors and heathland (see Proposed SAC context 'Map A' and Mid Ulster Land Cover 'Map C').
- 4.2 The proposed High Sperrins SCA consists of two parts - the mountainous landscapes in the northwest of the district, and the distinctive summit of Slieve Gallion north of Cookstown. In the northwest of the district the High Sperrins provide a dramatic skyline and strong sense of enclosure. The proposed SCA designation hugs the district boundary with neighbouring councils Causeway Coast and Glens, Derry and Strabane, and Fermanagh and Omagh extending somewhere between 300m's and 3 km's into our district. It stretches from from European designated site Carn-Glenishane Pass SAC in the very north of the district as far south as Broughderg Dispersed Rural Community (DRC). The proposed High Sperrins SCA also includes the easily recognisable landmark of Slieve Gallion summit. Typically, the contours of the proposed SCA's outer boundary, range between 200m and 300m up to heights of 560m's, including the peaks of Slieve Gallion (528m), Crockbrack Rock Hill (526m's) and Carntogher (465m's).
- 4.3 All of the High Sperrins SCA falls within the 'Sperrins' Regional Landscape Character Area (RLCA 7) as defined within the NI Regional landscape Character Assessment (the NIRLCA). In this document it advises that 'substantial development in the uplands, of any form, could represent a significant change in this landscape'. It also recognises the 'significant wildness character' of its mountains and upper glens which are considered to be a 'dark sky resource'.
- 4.4 The proposed High Sperrins SCA also lies within 5 different Landscape Character Areas (LCA's) as defined in the Northern Ireland Landscape Character Assessment (NILCA) 2000 (See LCA Map 'Map B'). They are the Glenshane Slopes, Binevenagh, Sperrin Mountains, South Sperrins and Slieve Gallion. The Glenshane Slopes and Binevenagh LCA's are described in NILCA as the 'prominent and sensitive ridgelines of the upland landscapes which enclose the district to the west'. The highest summit Carntogher (465m's) which straddles the district boundary with Causeway Coast and Glens, towers over the Glenshane Pass forming a dramatic gateway to the Sperrins when approached from the east, along the A6. The moorland landscape of the Glenshane Slopes is considered to be 'extremely sensitive to change' where even 'relatively small elements such as electricity pylons or a single building can be viewed over long distances'. NILCA states that 'any buildings or infrastructure (such as

windfarm developments) on the upper slopes would be extremely visually intrusive and would threaten its intrinsic qualities of wild remoteness and isolation'. This part of the SCA also includes European Designated site Carn Glenshane Pass (SAC), a large area of intact blanket bog, part of which defines its outer boundary.

- 4.5 The proposed SCA also includes the elevated parts of the Binevenagh LCA where the 'distinctive slope profile of the escarpment summits are landmarks for mile around' and where any built development would 'represent an intrusion' (see photo 1 below).



Photo 1- Taken from the main Draperstown- Tobermore Road, showing Moydamlaght forest on the summit of Mullaghmore (Binevenagh LCA) and Coolnasillagh mountain (Glenshane Slopes LCA) stretching to the right,

- 4.6 The line of the proposed SCA continues across the Moneyneaney Road incorporating the elevated natural grassland areas that characterise the summits of Crockbrack Rock Hill and Crocknmore. NILCA 2000 describes these landscapes as 'extremely sensitive to change, where even relatively small elements, such as electricity pylons or a single building are visible over long distances'. This is an area of high scenic quality valued for its sense of remoteness (see photo 2 below).



Photo 2. Taken from Sixmilestraight looking east towards Crockmore and Crockbrack Rock hill to the left and Craigagh Hill to the right.

- 4.7 The proposed SAC line traverses the Glenelly Road into the South Sperrins LCA continuing as far as Broughderg DRC which defines its southern boundary. NILCA describes this area as 'extremely sensitive to changes that would affect its unspoilt character and the transition from the secluded valley landscape pattern to that of the upland summits'. It is an upland area, predominantly characterised by moors and heathland, natural grassland and traditional wood land scrub.
- 4.8 The High Sperrins SCA also includes the summit of Slieve Gallion. Slieve Gallion is the most easterly peak of the whole Sperrins and has a major presence within the district. It has a distinctive profile, with a steep sided, flatter summit than the surrounding mountains and an uneven slope profile. Its summit and steep slopes are extremely sensitive to change and are prominent in views throughout the lowlands on the western shores of Lough Neagh. NILCA 2000 advises that 'any building or additional tall masts on the open slopes or summit of Slieve Gallion would be extremely prominent and potentially intrusive' (see photo below). It is an area characterised by natural grassland cover with moors and heathland on its northern side. LCA development pressure analysis maps would indicate that this area is beginning to experience pressure from wind energy development, particularly on the north-western slopes.

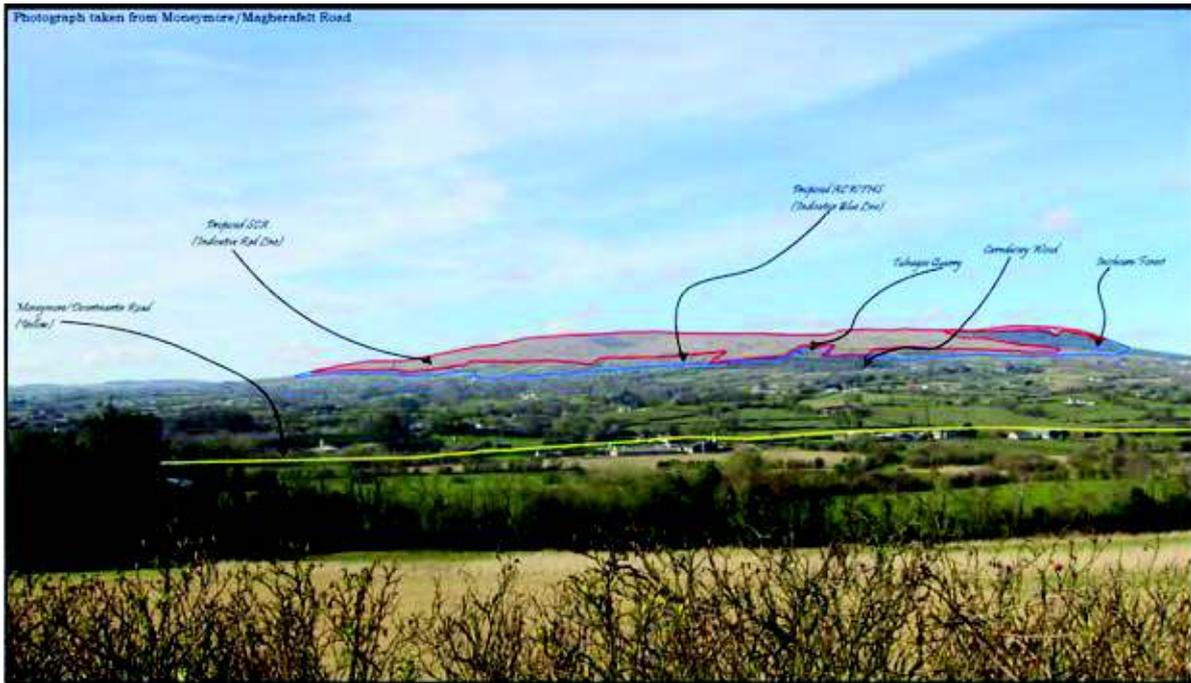


Photo 3: View from Moneymore/Magherafelt road (A31) looking west towards Slieve Gallion.

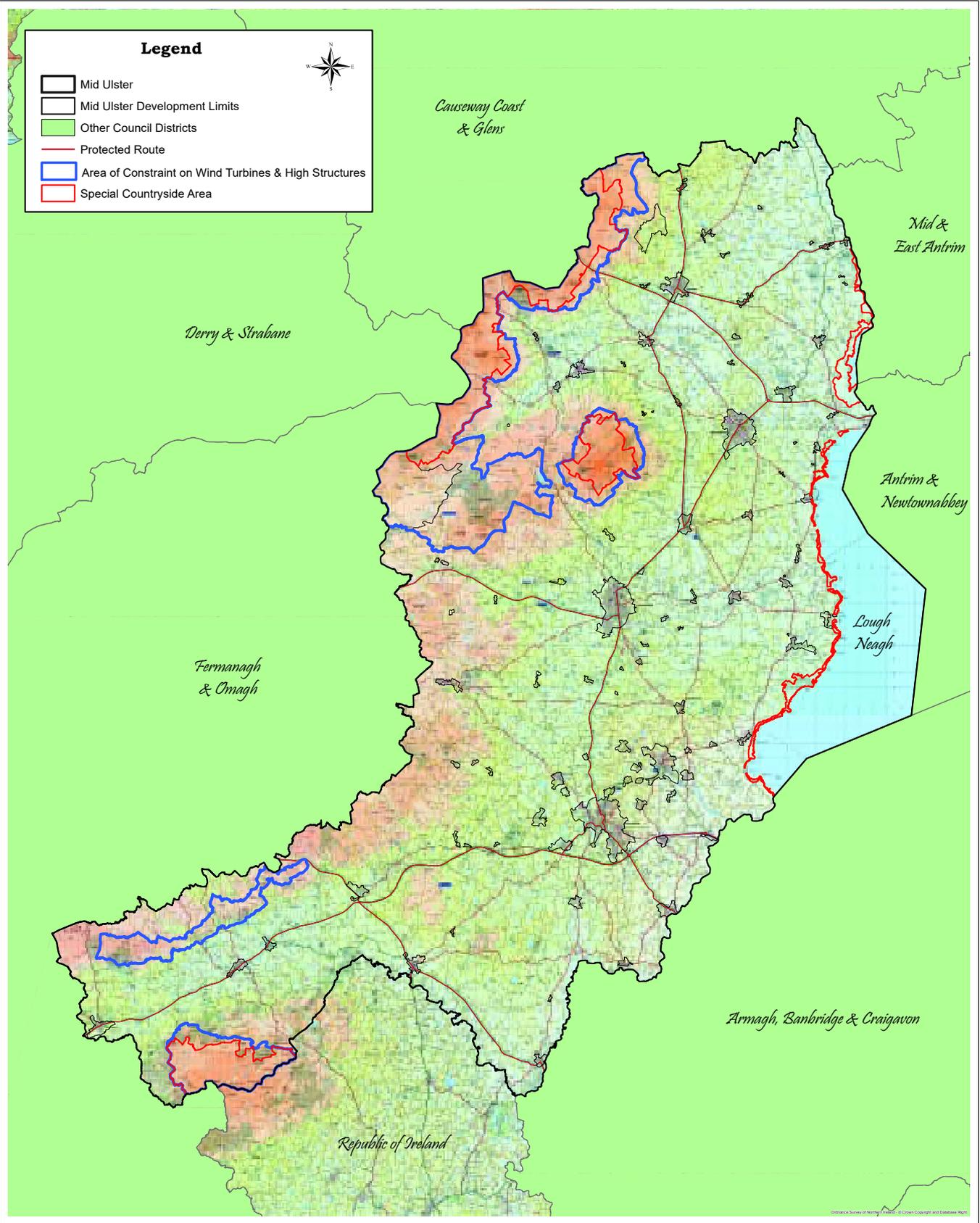
Slieve Beagh SCA

- 5.1 The proposed SCA also includes lands at Slieve Beagh in the south of the district (See Appendix 1 Map 6). Slieve Beagh is already afforded a degree of protection through the numerous existing non-planning designations, namely; Special Area of Conservation (SAC) Ramsar, Special Protection Area (SPA) and Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI). Importantly however, these designations do not confer absolute protection against development. The purpose of the SCA is to ensure that nature conservation considerations are taken into account before any decision affecting their future is made. The designation of an SCA in this area will help safeguard the unique ecology and scenic quality of Slieve Beagh and protect it from inappropriate development.
- 5.2 The area to be protected includes all of the existing Slieve Beagh SAC blanket bog European designation. This area of blanket bog straddles the district boundary into Fermanagh and Omagh and Monaghan County council in the Republic of Ireland. The proposed SCA also includes lands lying outside of this SAC designation which have similar characteristics and which fall within Slieve Beagh Ramsar, SPA and ASSI designations.
- 5.3 The western boundary and part of the northern boundary of the SCA are defined by the outer limits of the existing European SAC designation for Slieve Beagh. Its eastern boundary and the remainder of its northern boundary are defined by a combination of streams, ditches and the edges of tree covered/woodland areas. The southern boundary is defined by the district boundary with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and Monaghan County Council in the Republic where the landscape rises to its highest point of approximately 370ms.

6.0 Summary

- 3.1 In the context of the regional policy and the analysis of landscape character, landscape sensitivity, nature conservation interests and potential development pressures, Council considers that the Special Countryside Area designation in the High Sperrins and Slieve Beagh (as indicated Maps No.'s 1-6) to be justified in order to exercise control over new development and to meet the objectives of regional planning policy.
- 3.2 The Council considers that the Special Countryside Area (SCA) designation is necessary to protect this valued landscape of recognised local, national and international landscape quality from inappropriate development and to maintain its unique amenity value.

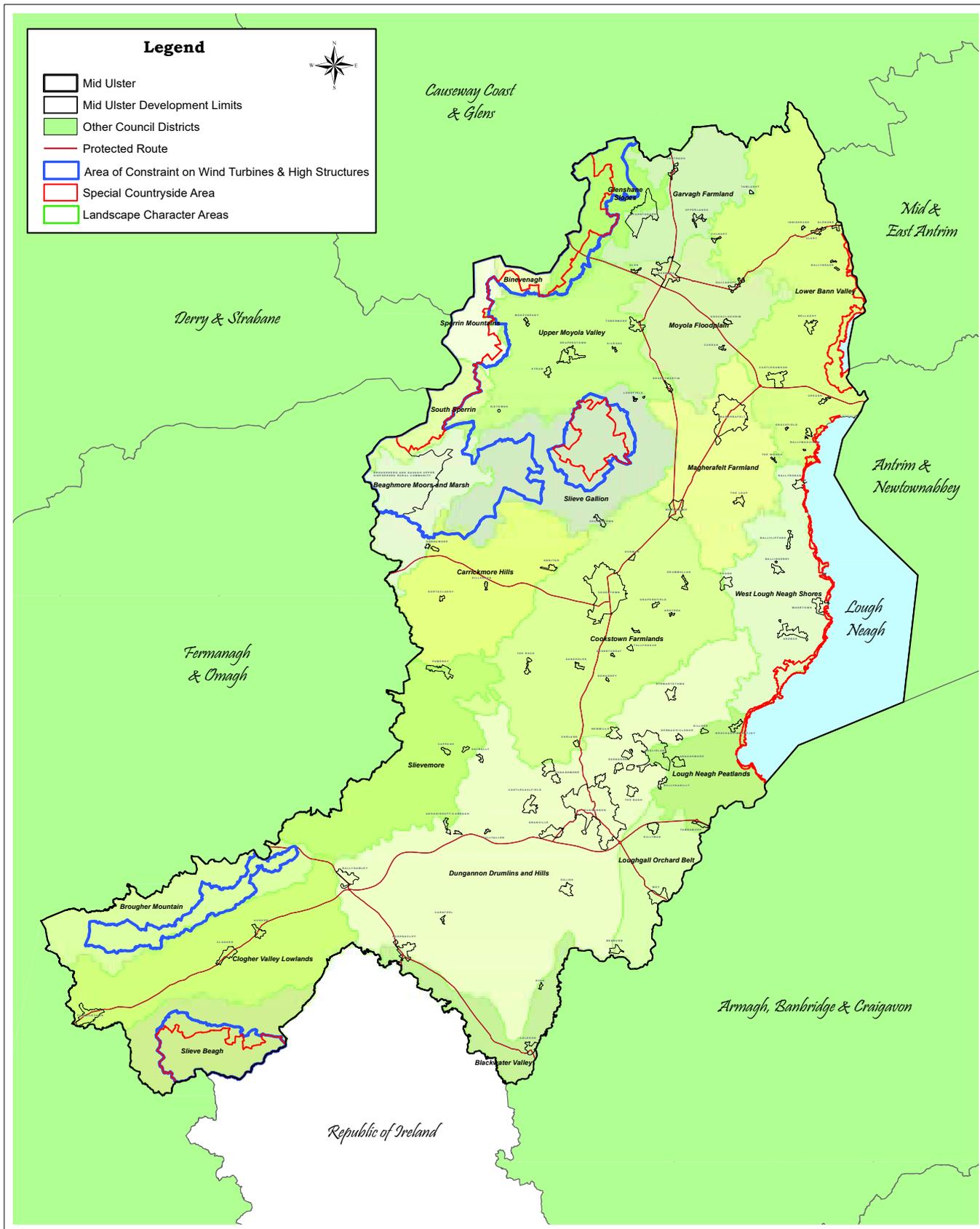
Map A
Mid Ulster Area of Constraint on Wind Turbines & High Structures and Special Countryside Area



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Map B
Mid Ulster Landscape Character Areas



Comhairle Ceantair
Lár Uladh
Mid Ulster
District Council

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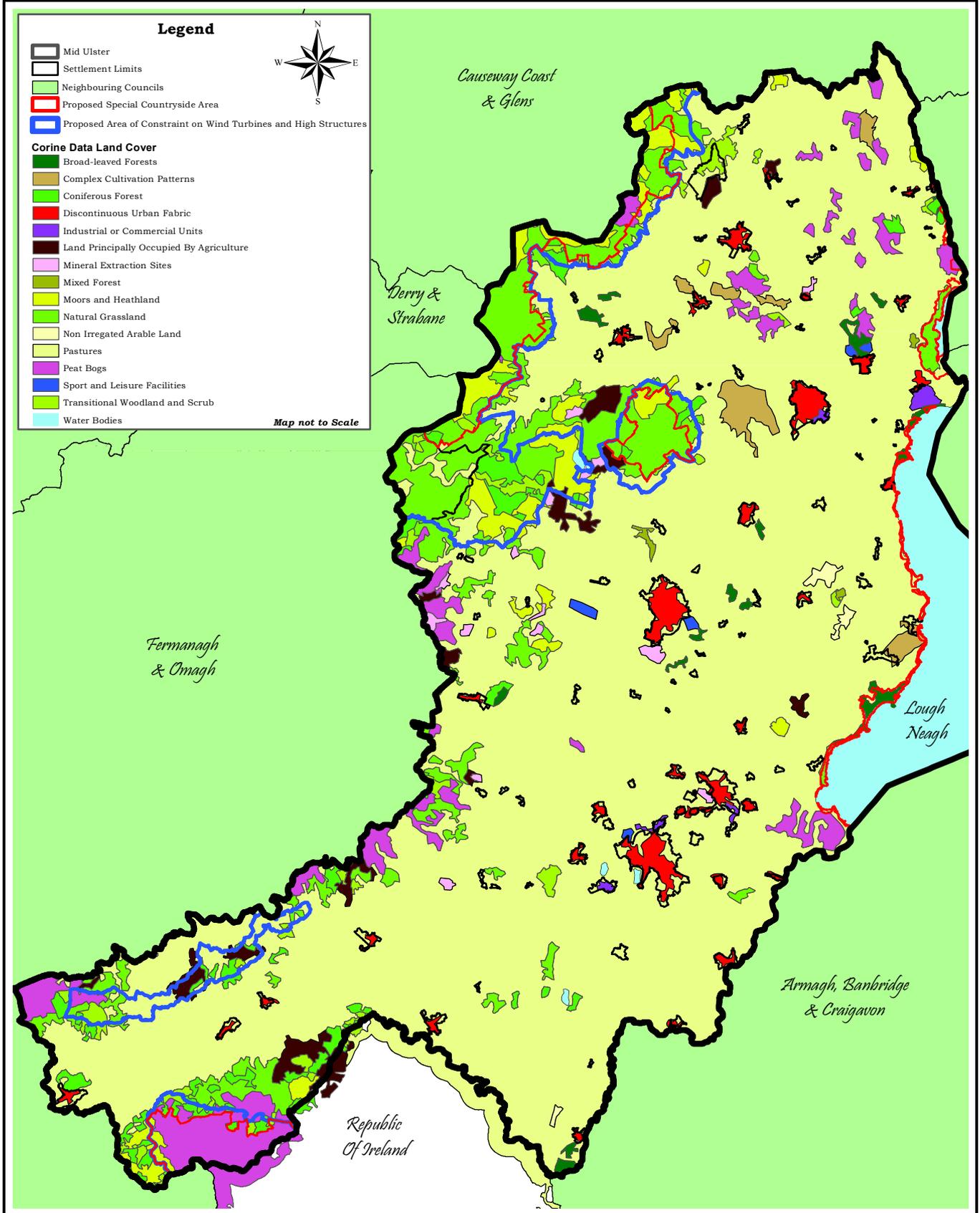
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Map C - Mid Ulster CORINE Land Cover Map



Comhairle Ceantair
Lár Uladh
Mid Ulster
District Council

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Appendix 1 Maps 1-6

**Proposed Area of Constraint
on Wind Turbines and High
Structures (AoC) and Special
Countryside Area (SCA).**

Map 1

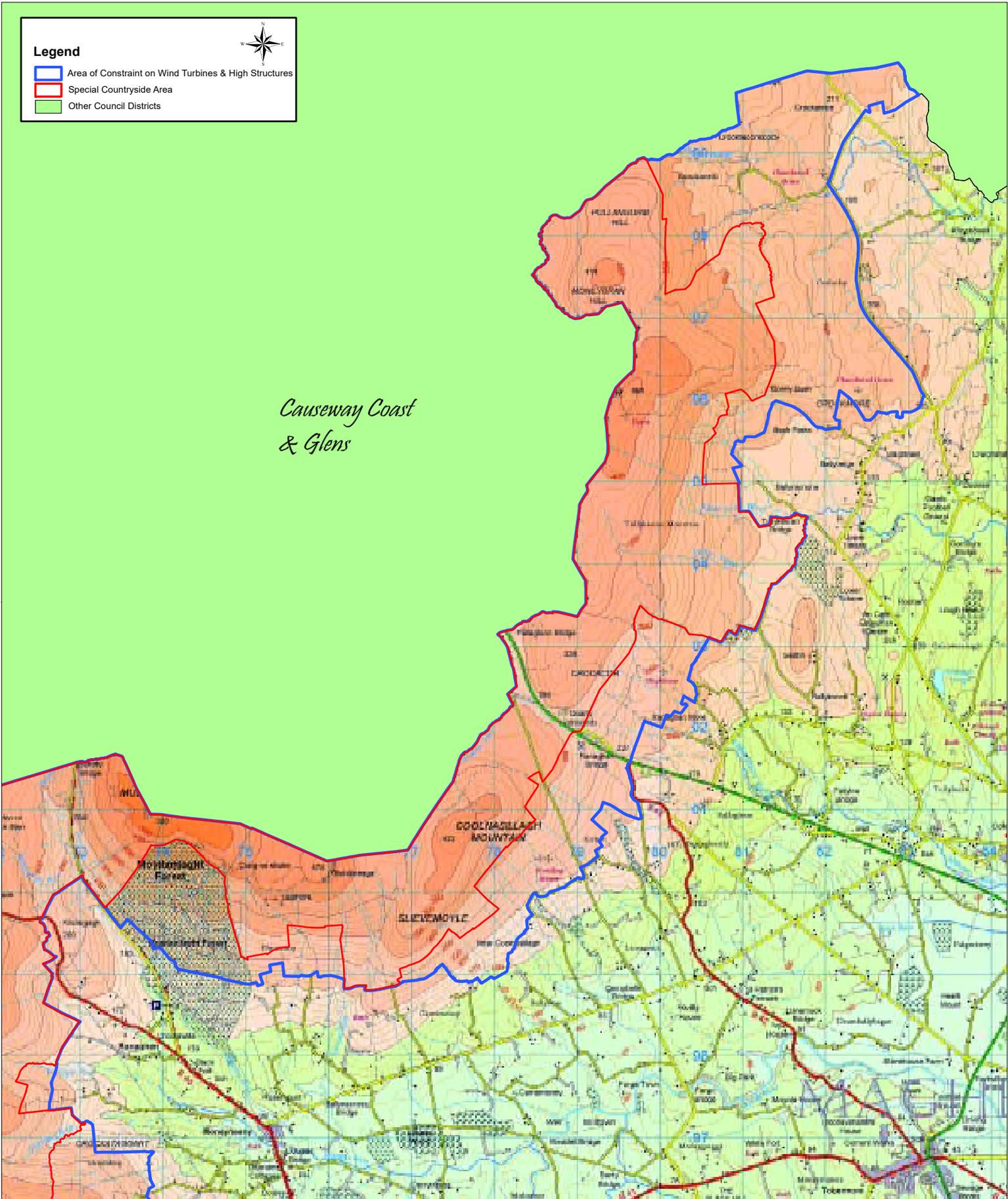
Mid Ulster Area of Constraint on Wind Turbines & High Structures and Special Countryside Area

Legend

-  Area of Constraint on Wind Turbines & High Structures
-  Special Countryside Area
-  Other Council Districts

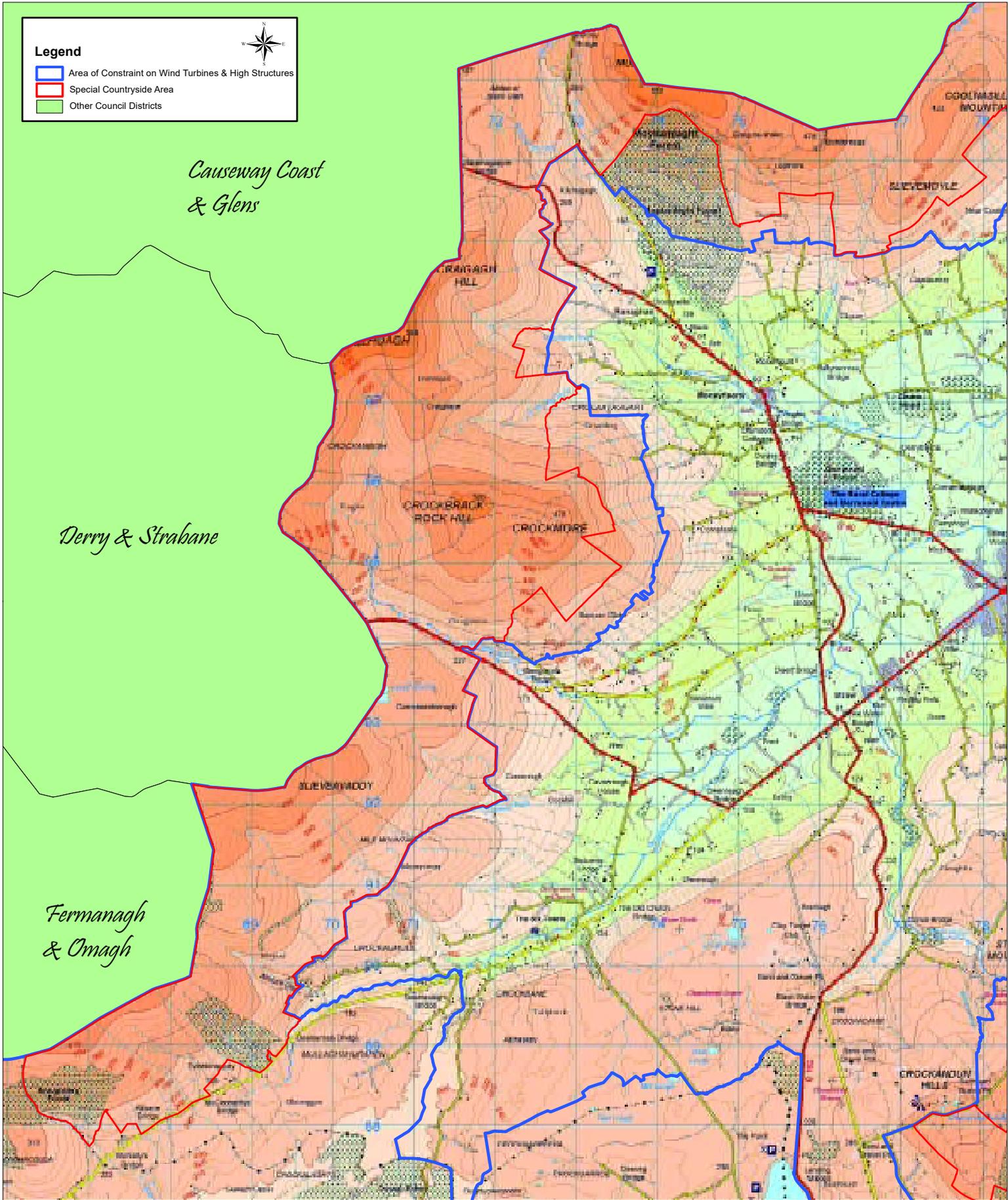


*Causeway Coast
& Glens*



Map 2

Mid Ulster Area of Constraint on Wind Turbines & High Structures and Special Countryside Area



Legend

-  Area of Constraint on Wind Turbines & High Structures
-  Special Countryside Area
-  Other Council Districts



*Causeway Coast
& Glens*

Derry & Strabane

*Fermanagh
& Omagh*



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Map 3

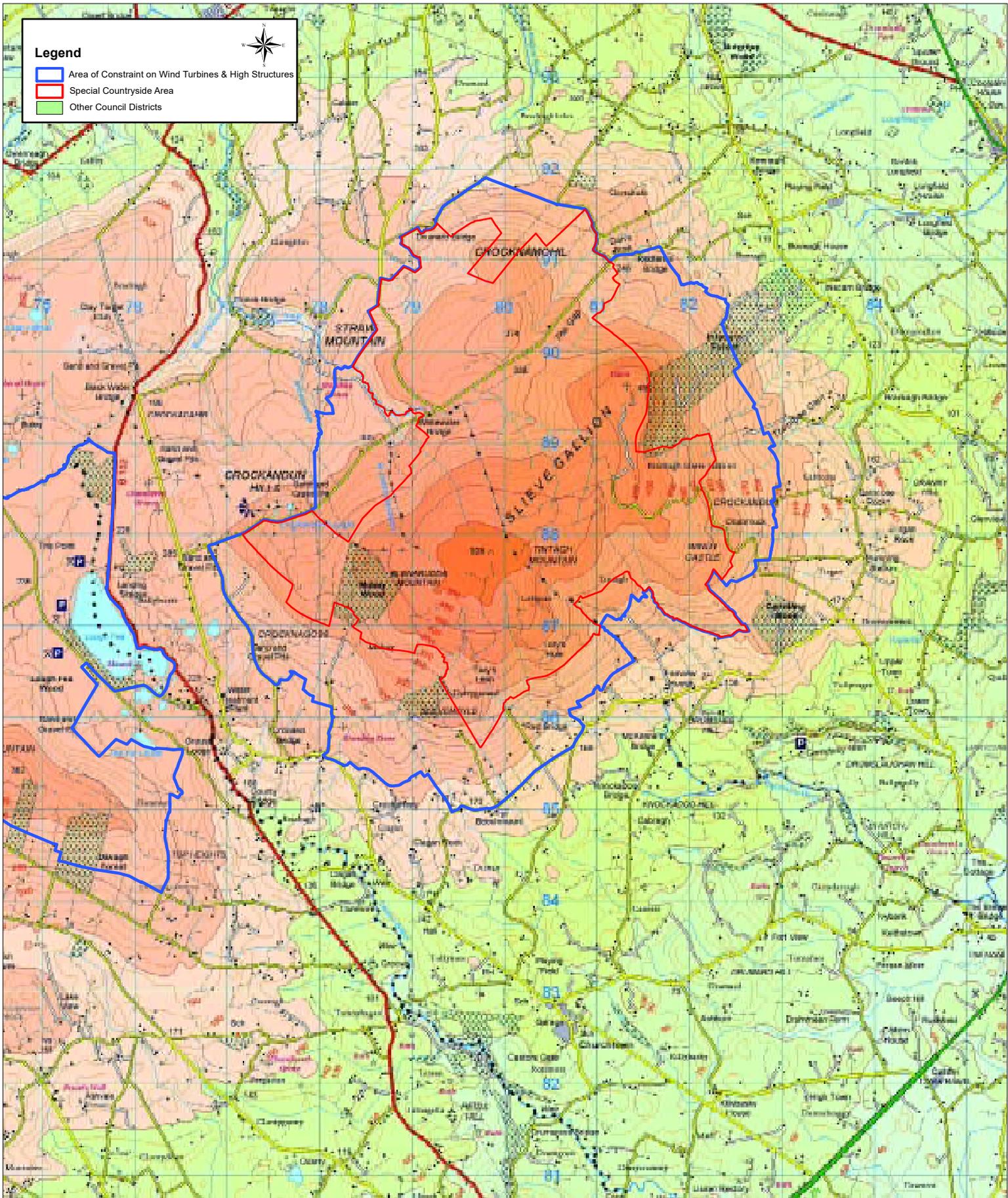
Mid Ulster Area of Constraint on Wind Turbines & High Structures and Special Countryside Area



*Fermanagh
& Omagh*

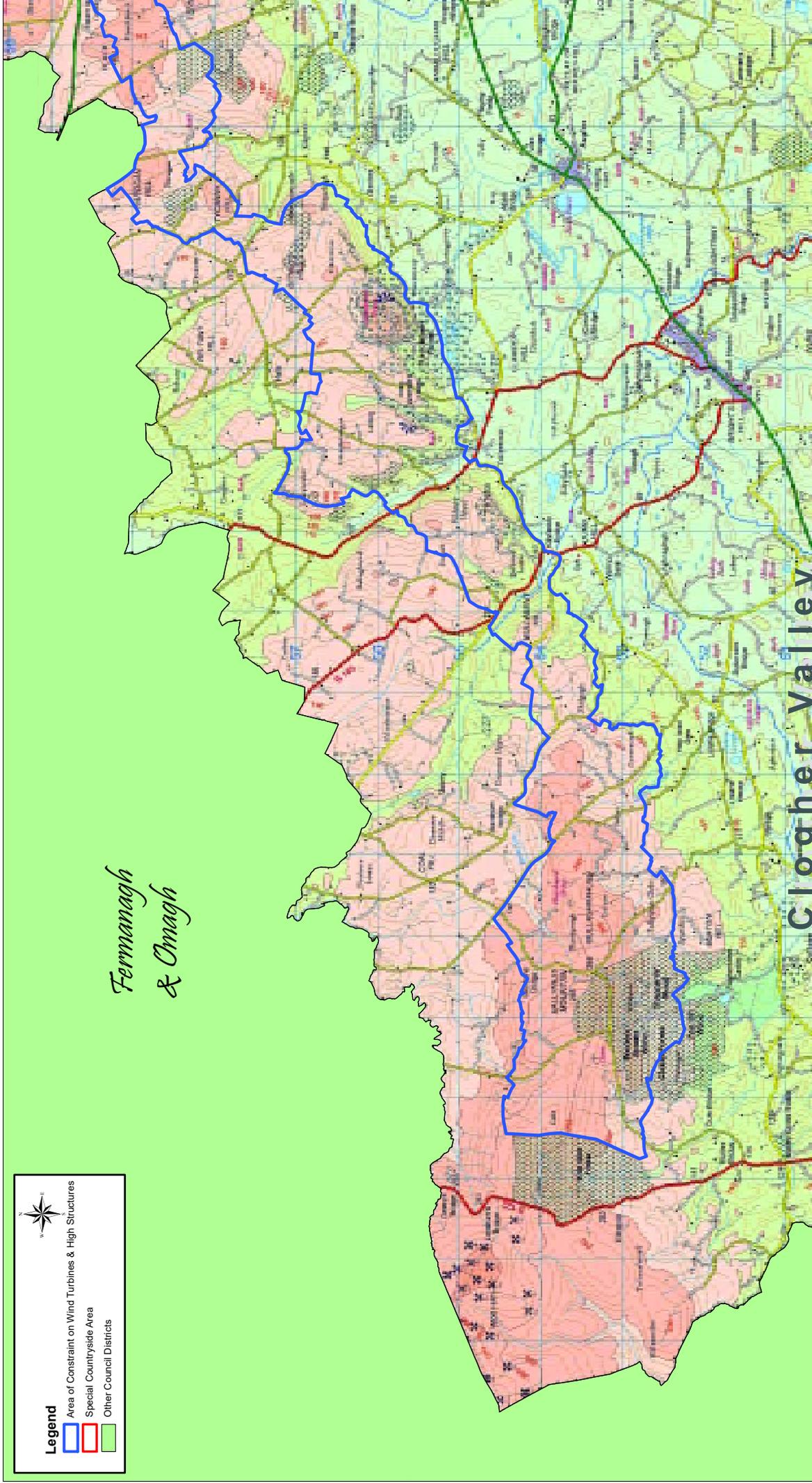
Map 4

Mid Ulster Area of Constraint on Wind Turbines & High Structures and Special Countryside Area



Map 5

Mid Ulster Area of Constraint on Wind Turbines & High Structures and Special Countryside Area



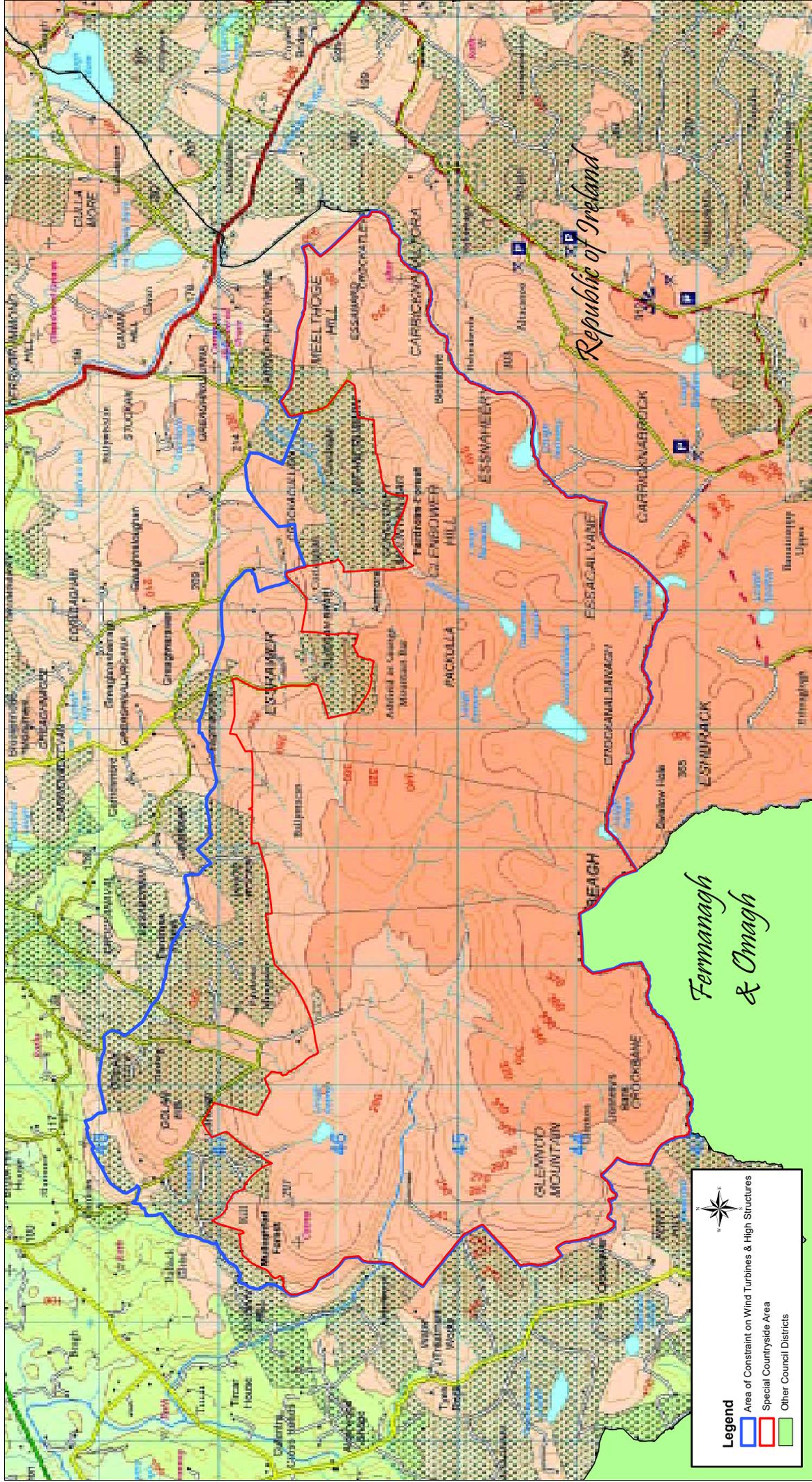
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Map 6

Mid Ulster Area of Constraint on Wind Turbines & High Structures and Special Countryside Area



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