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Considerable information has been collected by the Consultants and their specialist Sub-consultants which will guide the development of route options. The River Barrow valley comprises the majority of the northern study area with the upper reaches of the River Dinin and the River Nore forming part of the study area around Castlecomer and Kilkenny.

The topography is generally flat with good soils which are intensively used for agricultural purposes. The existing road and rail network generally follows the north-south axis of the River Barrow. High ground is reserved for areas to the east of the study area and the Castlecomer Plateau.

Accidents records indicate a number of fatalities on the N9 in the period 1996 to 1999.

The geological and hydrogeological study has shown up potential local areas of difficulty for road construction but, generally, the geology is not a significant constraint to the route of the road.

The two principal centres in the northern study area are Kilkenny City (population approaching 20,000) and Carlow Town (in excess of 15,000). Athy (population in excess of 5,000) is designated a Secondary Development Centre in the Strategic Planning Guidelines for the Greater Dublin Area. These towns are the most important locations for economic activity. The northern part of the study area has a stronger manufacturing base and is more accessible to Dublin for employment whereas the southern part is rural with the economy of Kilkenny City more focused on services and tourism than manufacturing.

There is one proposed candidate Special Area of Conservation (pcSAC) and thirteen proposed National Heritage Areas (pNHA) within the study area. The pcSAC within the study area is the River Nore north-west of Kilkenny City. In addition 124 sites of ecological value have been identified, mostly concentrated in upland areas and along river corridors. Most of the watercourses in the study area are important for fisheries.

The study area is also rich in archaeology. There are 1360 known archaeological sites and areas of potential within the study area. Sites of architectural and industrial archaeological significance have also been documented.

All the study area, except for a small highland area north of Kilkenny City, has the benefit of highly fertile soils and is a highly productive agricultural area. The area is intensively farmed with specialist sugar beet, cereal, dairy, stud, beef and sheep farms throughout the area.

The information collected is both wide ranging and comprehensive and will provide a sound basis for the development of route options. Data collection will continue through the route selection stage and beyond concentrating on the route corridors and on the Preferred Route corridor when it is identified.