

**The NRA, The M3  
and Archaeology**  
*The Facts*



## It is planned that actual construction work on the approved M3 Motorway will begin in 2006

Currently the National Roads Authority (NRA), the organisation responsible for the delivery of the M3 scheme, is seeking tenders from four international consortia for the construction work.

The M3 which has full planning approval from An Bord Pleanála has been the subject of a great deal of discussion and publicity, particularly recently in relation to the archaeological sites that have been found along the approved route.

It is perhaps easy to forget that many of those archaeological sites at the centre of the debate have been identified by teams of archaeologists working on behalf of the NRA, and that these sites were not known to exist prior to the NRA's work.

Given the interest in the project and the amount of misinformation that at times has circulated about the NRA's work, the NRA has produced this booklet.

It is intended to give you some background on the work of the NRA; about the M3; and more specifically about the NRA's policy in relation to archaeology and how this relates to the archaeological finds along the route of the M3.

## What is the NRA and what does it do?



The National Roads Authority (NRA) was set up in 1993 in response to the growing acceptance that our national roads network needed significant investment and upgrading. The NRA is funded under the National Development Plan (NDP) and through the Public Private Partnership (PPP) process.

Following its establishment, the NRA commissioned a National Road Needs study to allow it to formulate the best possible strategic approach to providing Ireland with safer and better roads.

This study showed that, without investment, over 60% of our national roads network would have deteriorated to an unacceptable standard by 2019, and serious traffic congestion would occur on an extensive scale.

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The task then facing the NRA was to upgrade the existing network and provide Ireland with a new set of key roads in keeping with our business, social and tourism requirements.

Facilitating safer and quicker travel is the primary objective of the NRA.

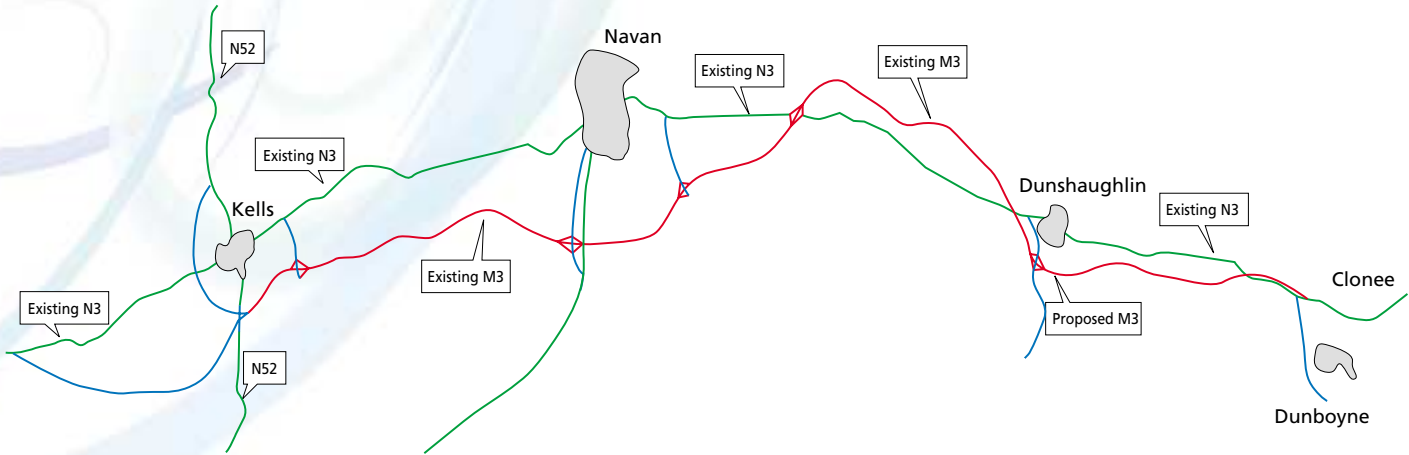
Recently opened sections of the M1 and M7 motorways are just some of the tangible examples of the impact that NDP investment has made on making travel by car and bus easier in Ireland.

Freight and commercial traffic volumes have grown substantially during the past decade, further increasing the pressures on the road network. The NRA is also aware of the overall economic benefit of catering for commercial traffic. Investment in the network is essential so that freight can be transported to Irish consumers as well as ports and airports.

The NRA, under the NDP, has been assigned the task of providing some 900 kilometres of new motorway and dual carriageway.

A particularly valuable benefit in providing such new roads is the improvement in safety.

Independent consultants, commissioned by the NRA, have estimated that up to 50 lives a year will be saved by the completion of the planned modern road network.



## What exactly is the M3 Motorway and why is it necessary?

The M3 Motorway is a key part of the plan to upgrade the overall roads network for the country. It will significantly improve road transport connections between the North West and the East of the country. The mainline section of the scheme, which commences at the end of the existing N3 dual carriageway at Clonee and rejoins the existing N3 north of Kells, is 59 km long.

The entire scheme, when completed, will actually take in 110 kilometres of public roads and a further 34 kilometres of access roads serving individual farms and houses.

The transport corridor that links the North-West, Cavan and North Meath with Dublin City is one of the busiest in the country. The existing road is struggling to cope with the hugely increased volumes brought about by the population explosion in towns such as Dunshaughlin, Navan and Kells, as well as other areas of County Meath.

## Will journey times be reduced along the route and if so, by how much?

When complete the M3 will enable motorists to by-pass those towns. The road will also cater for the traffic from all of these towns and from other towns such as Trim and Dunboyne. In this way, the M3 will make life better both for those living in the towns and the motorists using the roads.

The M3 will, on opening, provide safer, faster travel for approximately 22,000 vehicles daily. This figure is in fact predicted to more than double in the ten years after its construction.

If the road is not built now the situation on the existing road will continue to deteriorate, becoming less safe, more congested and, ultimately unsustainable.

The new road will bring significant lifestyle improvements to users. It will allow road users and commuters to avoid traditional traffic blackspots like Dunshaughlin, Navan and Kells.

It is estimated that as traffic volumes continue to grow, between 30 minutes and one hour will be knocked off peak journey times between Kells and Clonee, as a result of the construction of the scheme.

Life will be transformed for those living in the towns along the existing N3. These people will no longer have to cope with a constant stream of traffic passing through their main streets. It is anticipated that through-traffic will be reduced by 75% in Dunshaughlin, 78% in Navan, and 90% in Kells.

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## When will the road be completed?

The M3 scheme is a major construction project consisting of over 110 kilometres of public road and a further 34 kilometres of access roads.

Once planning approval was received the NRA sought expressions of interest from suitably qualified companies in relation to the construction of the road scheme.

Four consortia comprising renowned Irish and international companies have now been selected and they have been issued with tender documents.

The tendering process will take approximately one year. It is hoped to start construction in Spring 2006.

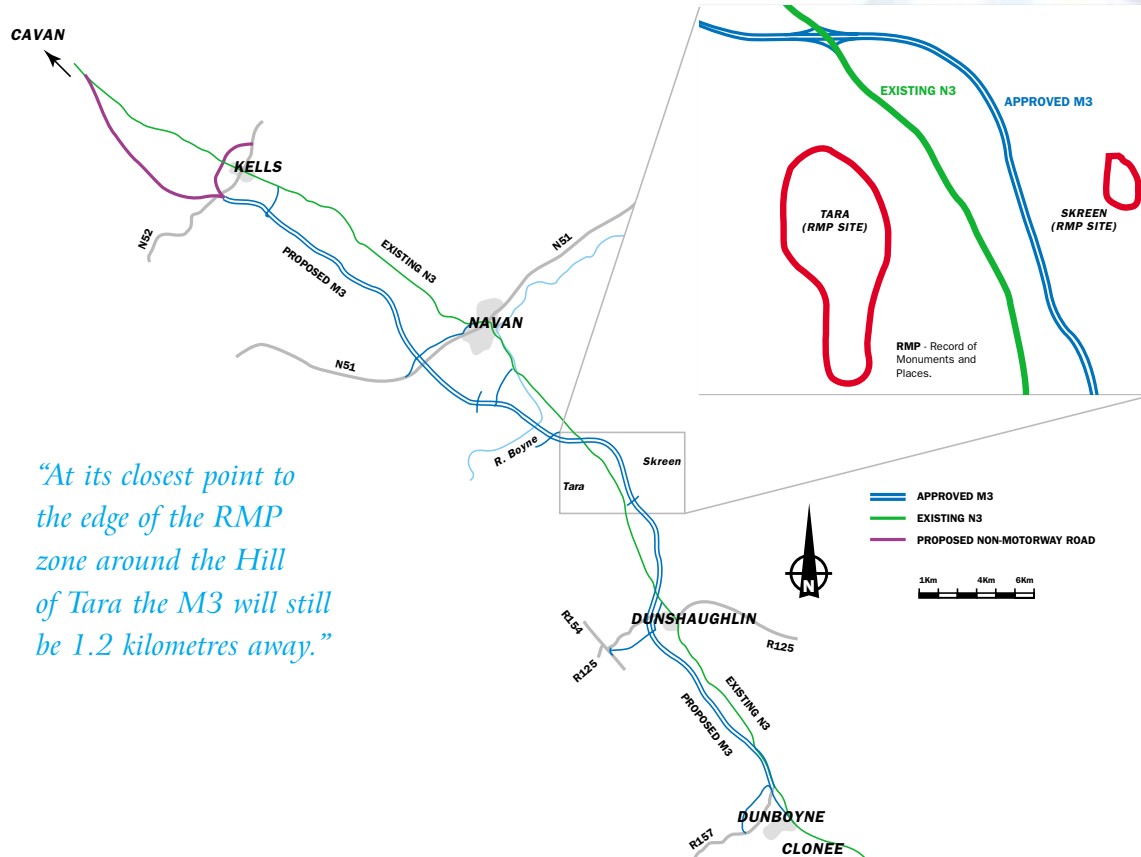
While it is difficult to give a completion date at this point in the process it is expected that construction will take between three and four years.

## Why is the M3 Motorway being built so close to the Hill of Tara?

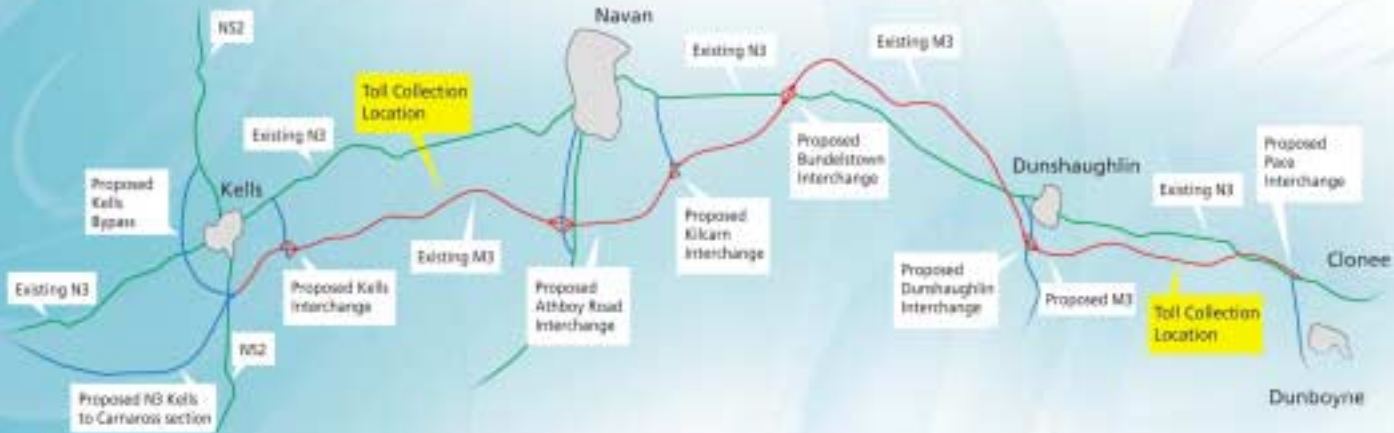
The monuments on the Hill of Tara are surrounded by a zone of protection recorded on the State's Record of Monuments and Places (RMP). The M3 is 1.5km east of this zone. In fact the M3 is further away from the Hill of Tara than the existing road.

At its closest point to the edge of the RMP zone around the Hill of Tara the M3 will still be 1.2 kilometres away.

# The NRA, The M3 and Archaeology – The Facts



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## Why was this route chosen?

Meath County Council and the NRA selected the approved route as being the most suitable when all relevant factors were taken into consideration. Broadly, these factors fall into the categories of engineering, environment and economics, and include safety, cost and technical issues as well as environmental and archaeological sensitivities.

Exhaustive research was carried out to assess the feasible route options along the various sections of the project. For example on the Dunshaughlin-Navan section of the scheme, the section closest to the Hill of Tara, 10 potential routes were identified and considered.

For this section, each of those 10 routes was professionally evaluated with reference to the key factors listed above and the impact that the

road might potentially have on an area of immense historical importance.

It was only when all of these factors were assessed by the team of professionals, that the route was chosen.

The route concerned was considered to be the best route not alone in terms of servicing traffic demands, but also as regards its impact on properties and local communities as well as its overall impact on the local environment.

The chosen route was then considered by An Bord Pleanála as part of the planning approval process. The Board conducted what was the most extensive oral hearing in the history of the State for a road scheme, lasting 28 days, before planning approval was finally given.

## Who was consulted in relation to the route?

Meath County Council undertook an extensive consultation process over a three year period. While consultation is, of course, required under planning law, Meath County Council went a great deal further than is legally required.

The project team wanted to ensure that everyone who might be impacted in any way by the new road; or anyone who had a view on the road, whether or not they might personally be impacted, would have the chance to have their voice heard.

The consultation process was advertised extensively and was also conducted locally in Co Meath.

Over 4,000 people visited public consultation meetings at a variety of venues and their inputs were recorded and considered.

In addition to the public consultation process the project team also commissioned an independent and comprehensive Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the approved road.

This EIS collates all of the work that was carried out to identify the route for the scheme

and assesses the impacts that the road will have during its construction and operation.

As part of the consultation process, a wide number of professionals including members of the archaeological profession, Dúchas, and, in the case of Tara, the Discovery Programme were consulted and their inputs sought.

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## The Importance of Archaeology

Ireland has a rich archaeological heritage. The earliest known occupation of the island dates back to over 7000 years BC. Evidence for Ireland's rich archaeological heritage is visible in the number of monuments across the landscape.

The official Record of Monuments and Places contains over 120,000 archaeological sites and features spread throughout the country. And these are only the tip of the iceberg – a greater number of sites probably exist unknown and unrecorded.

New sites are regularly being discovered as necessary work on all kinds of developments, including roads, proceeds throughout the country.

The importance of our past is recognised within the development process. No major developments can take place in Ireland without an archaeological study being carried out in advance. This is enshrined in the planning

process and it is taken into consideration by An Bord Pleanála before it decides whether or not schemes such as the M3 can proceed to construction

Official state policy holds that, where possible, no development should impinge on visible, standing archaeological sites.

In the case of motorways such as the M3, the NRA and the Local Authority employs a team of archaeologists to work in advance of a route being chosen. The objective of this is to ensure that the potential impact on any such archaeological sites is minimised.

For every proposed new major road an environmental study is undertaken and as part of this archaeologists assess the archaeological impact of the development.

Prior to construction the road route is thoroughly assessed by archaeological and geophysical study and by test excavation. In this way a great deal of additional knowledge is gleaned about our history. It is interesting to note that in the case of the M3 a test trench was

excavated along the centreline of the whole 59km of the length of the route with cross trenches being dug every 20 metres. This extensive trenching work allows the NRA to identify unknown sites in advance of the actual construction commencing.

Such archaeological work is invaluable in helping understand our rich heritage. For instance, in the case of the M3, teams of archaeologists, working on behalf of the NRA, discovered an additional 28 sites of archaeological interest on the approved Dunshaughlin to Navan section of the motorway. All of the site types are familiar from other excavations around the country and include isolated prehistoric burial sites and medieval settlement sites. Most of the sites are very common but nevertheless interesting such as fulachta fiadh or ‘ancient cooking places’ and 19th century cottage remains.

All of these sites that cannot be preserved in situ will be thoroughly investigated and recorded in advance of the M3 being built.

In relation to the M3, Meath County Council gave a commitment at the Bord Pleanála oral hearing that sufficient time and resources would be made available to ensure that any archaeology impacted upon would be excavated in advance of construction.

They also confirmed that all results will be made publicly available – as is normal NRA policy.

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## When do Archaeologists first enter into the process?

Archaeology is considered from the very beginning. It is one of the criteria that is used in the evaluation of any proposed new road scheme.

The NRA is conscious of the need to protect our past while also conscious of the need to provide better and safer roads. For this reason professional archaeologists are employed in-house to work closely with the road design team to ensure that archaeology is considered from the very beginning of road planning.

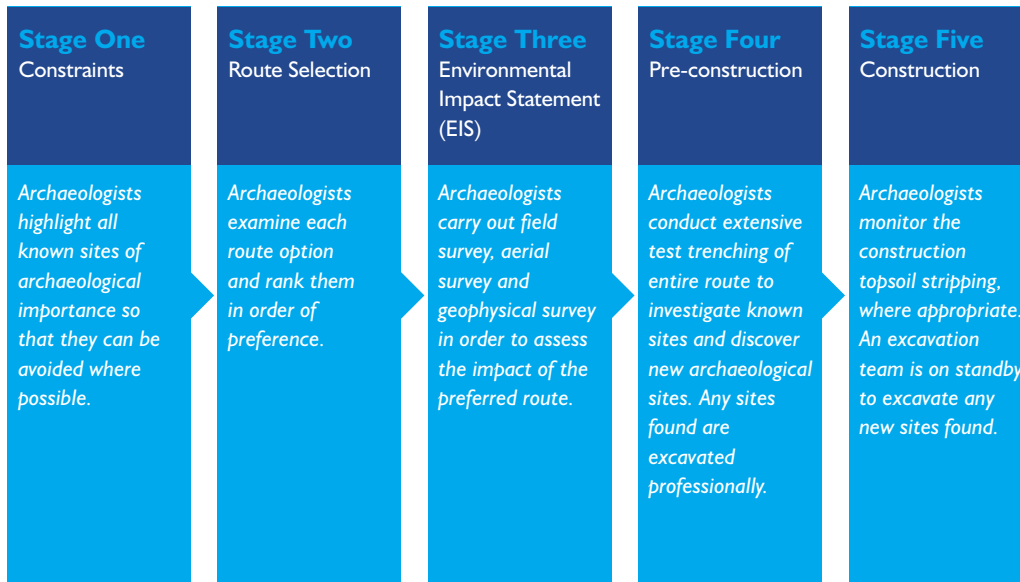
The level of archaeological work carried out grows as a project develops.

Initially, all known sites of importance are highlighted so that they can be avoided, where

possible. Once a route is chosen teams of archaeologists assess the route through a combination of techniques such as field survey, geophysical survey and aerial survey. Where possible the road design is modified to avoid any new sites found by these studies. Once a route is approved extensive test trenching is carried out leading to full excavation of any sites that cannot be preserved in situ.

Archaeologists are an integral part of the road building process from the planning stages through to the on site construction phases. Most of the archaeological work is carried out however, prior to construction work commencing.

*From drawing board to roadway –  
how the NRA's archaeological policy works.*



## What is meant by archaeological excavations?

Archaeological excavation involves the systematic, scientific removal and recording of the material remains of human activity.

Sometimes these remains are exciting or precious artefacts like weapons or jewellery. More often excavation is like a form of forensic detective work – the careful investigation of apparently ordinary materials such as burnt soil and stone that can reveal the answers to questions about what people did in the past.

## What happens when a site is excavated?

All such sites are excavated on behalf of the NRA and the County Council by a team of qualified archaeologists. Their work is to obtain knowledge of the past. The preservation of such knowledge by record is the real value of excavation. Their work is carried out under standards set by the regulatory authorities – that is the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the National Museum of Ireland.

All findings from the site are recorded while all artefacts are removed, conserved and passed to the National Museum for safe keeping.

It is important to remember that excavation is only a technique, a way of recovering data. It is the interpretation and publication of that data that helps create a better understanding of the past.

The NRA realises that all such information needs to be made more publicly accessible and it is part of its brief to ensure that all such information reaches as wide an audience as is possible.

## What happens to artefacts that are discovered during this process?

All archaeological finds unearthed by the NRA's archaeology team are carefully removed, catalogued and then sent to specialists for study as part of the post excavation process. Once this is completed the artefacts are then sent to the National Museum of Ireland to be put on display where appropriate.

## What constitutes a site of archaeological importance?

For the archaeologist all sites that have the potential to reveal interesting and valuable information about our past are important. However, it is sometimes only by archaeological excavation that the importance of many sites can be revealed.

Sometimes, however, on rare lucky occasions a new site or artefact type is found that is completely unique in Ireland. Such a site, which can totally change our understanding of the past in a dramatic way, is undoubtedly significant.

## Why not move the M3 Motorway to avoid sites of archaeological importance?

*“In the case of the M3 this would simply not be practical because of the numbers of existing homes and businesses along the route and it would cause unacceptable and economically costly disruption to traffic over a long period.”*

Every effort was made to avoid all known sites during the route selection process. Extensive studies were carried out to identify any potential new sites previously unknown. Indeed, in the case of M3 the road was moved to avoid three such sites.

However, because of the density of archaeological sites surviving in Ireland it would be practically impossible to continually move the line of a road to avoid all archaeology.

## Why not simply redevelop and widen the existing road?

In the case of the M3 this would simply not be practical because of the numbers of existing homes and businesses along the route and it would cause unacceptable and economically costly disruption to traffic over a long period.

It would also present the same environmental issues as for the completely new route. There is every probability that the area of land being taken into the “widening” could contain a similar number of archaeological sites and in the case of the M3 it would not be acceptable because it would bring the development closer to the Hill of Tara - the planned M3 is further from the Hill of Tara than the existing road.

## What happens if there are new finds when construction on the road actually starts?

Full-time professionally qualified archaeologists will be on the site at all times during the critical road excavation phase of the M3. An archaeological excavation team will be on standby so that any possible find can be assessed and if necessary fully excavated and recorded.

## What happens if a site of National Archaeological Importance is unearthed during the construction phase?

An unprecedented level of archaeological study and investigation has been carried out as part of the planning process and is continuing prior to construction. It is, therefore, unlikely that any major archaeological site would be uncovered during the construction stage.

However, if that were to happen then, according to legislation recently enacted, it would be at the discretion of the Minister of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to instruct the preservation or excavation of such site.

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## Why is the NRA involved in the archaeological process - what does it know about heritage?

*“The NRA recognises that it is vitally important to continue to work closely with the archaeological profession to ensure that we add to our stock of knowledge about our rich past.”*

The remit of the NRA is to develop our national roads infrastructure. Inevitably in the course of this work there is an impact on archaeology. The NRA has always said that a balance must be struck between protecting our past and building our future, and this is exactly how it discharges its responsibilities.

A professional team of 20 archaeologists is employed by the NRA to ensure that the country’s cultural obligations and the commitment to provide safer and better roads are in harmony.

In addition the NRA works with the wider archaeological profession to ensure that its archaeological work is carried out to best practice.

The NRA recognises that it is vitally important to continue to work closely with the archaeological profession to ensure that we add to our stock of knowledge about our rich past.

## Will I be able to see the artefacts uncovered by the NRA's archaeologists?

All of the archaeological work carried out by the NRA or on behalf of the NRA is recorded and all reports filed with the Department of Environment, Heritage, and Local Government and the National Museum of Ireland.

Ultimately all artefacts are deposited in the National Museum of Ireland which is the State's repository of archaeological objects for curation, display and to be available for further research.

As Meath County Council promised at the Bord Pleanala oral hearing it is the intention to ensure that the results of all of the archaeological investigations are made public. Initially all archaeological excavation reports and photographs of artefacts uncovered will be published on the NRA website. At a later stage a series of exhibitions and publications will bring the results of any finds to the wider public.

## Will the archaeological excavations delay the opening of the M3?

There is no reason to think so. The testing results to date indicate that there is ample time to excavate all archaeological sites along the M3 in advance of construction. Of course, additional resources and time will be made available if required.

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## How is the M3 being funded?

The M3 will be funded through a mix of public funds and private finance. A significant proportion of the proposed investment in upgrading our road network is today being delivered through Public Private Partnerships which can draw in private finance.

The idea behind Public Private Partnership (PPP) is to encourage close co-operation between the private sector and the public sector to deliver the overall roads programme with the private sector helping to finance part of the cost involved. Without PPPs the road programme could not be completed and the overall objectives of regional development and economic growth would be under threat.

Roads constructed by PPP are to be tolled for a number of years so that the private sector can obtain an adequate return on its investment.

At the same time the NRA is conscious that there must be an alternative toll free road for those not willing to pay the charges.

The net result of the work being carried out by the NRA, aided by the use of the PPP mechanism, will be to provide a higher quality safer road infrastructure throughout the country in the shortest possible time.



For further information on the NRA, the M3 and also on the archaeological work being carried out by the NRA you should visit [www.nra.ie](http://www.nra.ie).

If you have any specific queries in relation to the project, particularly the archaeological works, please contact us at [info@nra.ie](mailto:info@nra.ie) or by visiting our website [www.nra.ie](http://www.nra.ie)