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Aras an Chontae  
Roscommon  
County Roscommon  
F42 VR98

Via portal: [athlonejointplan.ie](http://athlonejointplan.ie)

30/01/2024

## RE: ATHLONE JOINT URBAN AREA PLAN 2024 - 2030

A Chara,

I refer to your notification on 14 December 2023 of Westmeath County Council and Roscommon County Council's preparation of a new Joint Urban Area Plan for Athlone. The Northern and Western Regional Assembly ('the Assembly') wish to thank you for the opportunity to make this submission and set out below its report together with recommendations and observations in respect of the Draft Plan. This submission will comment upon the Issues papers for the proposed Draft Plan in the context of achieving consistency with relevant objectives in the RSES. The plan making process will review and build on the progress made under the Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 and Monksland/Bellanamullia Local Area Plan 2016-2022. This approach is welcomed by the Northern & Western Regional Assembly (NWRA) as it reflects the ambition of RPO 3.7.1 of the RSES (Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy), whereby a future vision for Athlone would be mapped out by both Local Authorities.

The NWRA also notes that a bespoke website ([www.athlonejointareaplan.ie](http://www.athlonejointareaplan.ie)) has been set up for the plan making process and this is welcomed as it provides an online user-friendly platform for the process.

It is worth highlighting at the outset the NWRA via its Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) produced a detailed Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plan for Athlone, which was in effect a framework for the growth of the Town over the next 2 decades. This was also the case for other Regional Growth Centre's designated within the NPF, i.e. Sligo and Letterkenny. The RSES for the East & Midlands Region also set out a number of principles for Athlone.

### STRATEGIC ISSUES PAPER

A Strategic Issues Paper (SIP) containing 12 Chapters, has been prepared to stimulate thought and encourage discussion and involvement from the public. It includes several trends and challenges that will be addressed in the draft Plan, along with thought provoking questions at the end of each Chapter. This submission outlines the NWRA's findings, recommendations, and general observations for consideration/inclusion in the draft Plan, with a focus on compliance with the Athlone Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plan in the RSES.

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## Chapter 1 - Introduction

This chapter clearly and succinctly outlines the intent to make a joint urban area plan for Athlone, the legal and policy context in which the Plan is made and the plan-making process. It outlines that the pre-draft non-statutory consultation phase offers everyone an opportunity for having their ideas, opinions and suggestions heard. This approach lies at the core of bottom-up planning and decision making and is welcomed.

## Chapter 2 – Strategic Planning Framework

This chapter outlines the strategic planning framework in Ireland. The NWRA note that the “*key strategic issues for Athlone as introduced under the RSES*” are included in the form of a diagram in the SIP and are generally reflective of the RSES. It is stated that the Joint Urban Area Plan will be informed by multi-disciplinary assessments, including an Economic Strategy for the Regional Centre of Athlone (2022), Athlone Joint Retail Strategy 2019-2026 (2019), Athlone Area Based Transport Plan and Athlone ‘Urban Design & Regeneration Framework’.

## Chapter 3 Emerging Vision

It is recognised that since the adoption of the Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 and Monksland/ Bellanamullia Local Area Plan 2016-2022, the policy and regulatory framework for land use planning and development in Athlone and the broader region has undergone significant changes in response to shifting population demographics, sustained economic recovery and improved understanding and awareness of climate change. It is also acknowledged that Athlone is now designated as a Regional Growth Centre and this confers significant scope to position the town as a dynamic hub for new and expanding communities, business and enterprise, sustainable transport, tourism, and heritage as well as a platform for new joint initiatives between Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils. New opportunities will also present themselves in association with the town’s projected population growth and economic development. It is also stated that a new strategic vision, informed by all those who live, experience, and contribute to Athlone, is required. The NWRA commend this recognition, acknowledgement, and approach.

The NWRA are of the opinion that of particular importance is creating sustainable critical mass and compact growth, along with job retention and creation within the Athlone Regional Growth Centre. With the recent change in the corporate tax regime in Ireland, it is imperative that the country has substance to attract and retain new multi-national and domestic companies that will fall under the scheme. All infrastructure must be in place including water services, energy, transportation, housing, education, and social infrastructure. The Key Business Elements in the table below are understood to inform business location choices and hence their delivery is key in this regard.

### KEY BUSINESS ELEMENTS

1. Development of compact urban centres with critical mass in population; encouraging the revitalisation of urban areas and reinhabitation of urban cores.
2. Provision of connectivity and access (including national and international), enabled by physical and technology infrastructures with capacity resilience and quality especially post-Brexit.
3. Establishment of competitive, smart and integrated public transport networks within and between cities and urban areas.
4. Nurturing of world-class infrastructure and competitive services with capacity, resilience and quality.
5. Growing our third level infrastructures, access to skills and research, development and innovation.
6. Availability of property solutions – including 'ready-to-go' commercial properties, 'landing spaces', co-working spaces and flexible property solutions and affordable housing.
7. Co-location or dynamic clustering, enabling connectivity and linkages within and between suppliers and purchasers, between enterprises and Higher Education Institutes (HEIs).
8. Development of quality of life factors and sense of Place, including harnessing the social, and cultural dimensions of the living experience of communities, including the unique social, linguistic and cultural dimensions of our Gaeltacht communities.

Furthermore, the RSES (page 76) sets out criteria for consideration in determining the plan boundaries and these should be applied by the local authorities in determining the draft Plan boundary.

#### Chapter 4 Population and Housing

It is stated that Athlone has experienced sustained population growth since 2016 with 22,869 persons living in the urban area in 2022. This growth trend aligns with the town's strategic population target of +30,000 persons by 2031. The population targets set out in the NPF and RSES are minimum targets – and will be the focus of some examination in the review / refresh of the NPF in the context of Urban growth and demographic / housing units' performance since 2018. Any new targets should be reflected in the draft Plan and the NWRA encourage the planning authorities to be ambitious in this regard. The NWRA highlight that current population targets for the area of Athlone in the NWRA region is at least 1,500 by 2031 (and 1,800 by 2040).

It is also recognised by the planning authorities that a key parameter for the future development of Athlone is the effective implementation of compact growth including the provision of 30% (minimum) of new residential development on existing brownfield / infill sites within Athlone (within the Regional Growth Centres of Sligo and Letterkenny it is 40%). This is welcomed by the NWRA as it contributes toward compliance with RPOs 3.7.2 and 3.7.15 of the RSES. The NWRA reiterate a core tenet within the RSES of achieving compact growth with a minimum of 30% of new homes to be built within the existing built-up area, supported by lands at Curragh, Lissywollen, Cornamanagh, Cornamaddy and Monksland/Bellanamullia - with a sequential delivery of serviced lands.

While it is stated the Plan will address appropriate residential densities and building heights and identify infill / brownfield development opportunities to consolidate development in Athlone, RPO 3.7.17 in the RSES supports the preparation of a Building Heights Study with guidance on same.

It is noted that it is a priority to ensure that resilience is built into Athlone's housing stock through the provision of an adequate range of housing types, sizes and tenures for both renters and owner-

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occupiers alike and the prioritisation of universal designs, lifetime adaptability and energy efficiency measures. This is welcomed, in addition, the Assembly see the expansion of the Technological Universities as a Regional asset, and therefore it is important to include student accommodation (both university campus and other private rental) in housing and zoned land provision. Consideration should also be given to identifying suitable land for providing serviced sites within the draft Plan area.

### **Chapter 5 – Sustainable Communities and Social Infrastructure**

It is noted that the planning authorities are preparing for significant population growth and changing demographics that will see an increasingly diverse and multi-cultural population with different requirements for Athlone, and will consider how best to plan for new, expanding and emerging communities within the urban area. The proposal to draw on “liveable neighbourhoods”, “sustainable communities” and “10 Minute City” along with social inclusion and provision of social infrastructure is welcomed.

The RSES notes that there is no hospital in, or in close proximity to, Athlone and the provision of a hospital would complement the status of the town as a Regional Growth Centre. While there is no specific RPO in the RSES, there is a statement supporting the investigation of the feasibility of providing a modern hospital in Athlone that would serve the needs of 130,000 population which reside within the one-hour commuting catchment.

### **Chapter 6 – Place-making and Built Environment**

It is noted that a key consideration for place-making in Athlone will be how more intensive forms of development are incorporated. An emerging Athlone ‘Urban Design & Regeneration Framework’ and ‘Draft Sustainable and Compact Settlements Guidelines for Planning Authorities’ will inform the draft Plan in guiding place-making and preparing the appropriate criteria for future developments.

It is noted that the planning authorities have secured substantial funding that is considered crucial in facilitating regeneration projects in Athlone. The NWRA consider that it is crucial that projects in receipt of this funding are delivered prior to or within the lifetime of the adopted Plan.

### **Chapter 7 Climate Action & Resilience**

It is evident from this Chapter that both Local Authorities have been active around climate action and resilience in Athlone. Several measures have been delivered to date, with an intent to build on this through including policy objectives on compact and mixed-use development, urban renewal, sustainable mobility, Green & Blue Infrastructure, Flood Risk Management, Circular Economies and Renewable Energy in the draft Plan. Also of note is the intended collaboration and partnership with the Technical University of the Shannon, a leader in climate and sustainability research and innovation, for developing climate action capacity in the Local Authorities and positioning Athlone as a lab for new and emerging practice. A specific objective should be included in the draft Plan to strengthen this intent. Comments by the NWRA in relation to flood risk management are included in Chapter 12 below.

### **Chapter 8 Economic Development & Employment**

In summary, it is intended that the Joint Urban Area Plan, aligned with the Economic Strategy for the Regional Centre of Athlone will guide sustainable economic development in Athlone on appropriate lands, supporting emerging and conventional sectoral clusters focused on Life sciences, Global

Business Services, Engineering, Manufacturing & Construction, Fintech & ICT, Tourism and Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities. In addition, the Joint Urban Area Plan will support the Technological University of the Shannon's strategic role in Athlone to promote a 'Knowledge-Based Economy'. Tourism is also addressed in this Chapter of the document recognising Athlone as a key Visitor Destination Town for Fáilte Ireland's Hidden Heartlands experience, with significant investment in Athlone to ensure the provision of services and infrastructure needed to encourage visitors to stay in the wider region. The vibrant arts and culture scene, diverse heritage offering, natural heritage (River Shannon and Lough Ree) and the Dublin to Galway Cycleway traversing through Athlone are mentioned. The NWRA welcome the above, which assist in compliance with RPO 3.7.3 and 3.7.4 of the RSES. It is recommended that the planning authorities review current strategies relating to economic development and employment (e.g. Economic Strategy for the Regional Centre of Athlone (2022), Athlone Joint Retail Strategy 2019-2026, the Local Economic and Community Plans (Roscommon and Westmeath) and use updated data where available (e.g. Census 2022) to inform economic and employment policy and objectives for the draft Plan. Zoning land for economic development and employment should take into consideration regeneration and phased delivery of strategic employment lands in central accessible locations. The NWRA consider that an objective should be included that supports Athlone to be designated as a Technology and Innovation Pole as outlined on page 241 of the RSES.

The population of Athlone was 23,000 as per the 2022 Census, this represents at 1.2% per annum increase since 2016, and is possibly below the level of growth anticipated within the RSES. Nonetheless, a steady growth trajectory over the period of this Plan will bring additional employment opportunities and demands, and the jobs to population ratio espoused within the NPF (and the RSES, Sec. 3.4) of 2:3 Jobs / People should be a matter both Local Authorities consider when formulating the Draft Plan.

## Chapter 9 Transport and Movement

It is stated that Athlone is strategically positioned in terms of regional connectivity with respect to road, rail and Greenway / Blueway infrastructure and accessibility to other key urban nodes, international transportation hubs (e.g. airports) and public transportation services. It is recognised by the planning authorities that Athlone will require a co-ordinated approach to land use and transport planning to support the development of a sustainable, healthy, and low carbon urban regional centre. This is welcomed by the NWRA as it would support RPO 3.7.14 of the RSES.

The planning authorities are guided to RPO 6.8 of the RSES which lists several road projects to be pursued - of relevance to Athlone are the N55 (Cavan Town to Athlone) and N61 (Athlone to Boyle).

Regarding rail, the planning authorities are guided to RPO 3.6.9 and 6.12 which promote the upgrade of the capacity of the Athlone - Athenry - Galway rail line, including the provision of dual tracks and support provision of increased service stops between Athlone and Galway.

It is also stated that the Athlone Area-Based Transport Assessment (ABTA) will guide and inform the transition towards sustainable mobility in conjunction with delivering appropriate levels of development to support Athlone's sustained growth as an urban regional centre. Of note is the lower share of active and sustainable mobility compared to other urban areas and a higher share of private car use. It is stated that the Joint Urban Area Plan will positively consider sustainable transport and smarter travel opportunities in planning for the compact growth of the town. RPO 6.27 supports the collaborative preparation of Local Transport Plans led by local authorities in

conjunction with the National Transport Authority and other stakeholders, based on Area Based Transport Assessment (ABTA) guidance and alignment with environmental policy, for Athlone. Furthermore RPO 6.28 states that policies, objectives and measures which emerge from Local Transport Plans shall be incorporated into Development Plans, Local Area Plans, Strategic Development Zone Planning Schemes, Urban Area Plans, and other relevant planning framework documents.

Furthermore, the NIFTI (National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland) and National Sustainable Mobility Policy (2022) are instructive in framing future decisions around community development and expansion within settlements.

### **Chapter 10 Heritage and Amenity**

This Chapter briefly touches on Built Heritage and Natural Heritage outlining the built and natural heritage in and adjacent to the draft Plan area and an intent to strike a balance between the protection and enhancement of Athlone's built heritage assets while facilitating new development and appropriate redevelopment opportunities over the lifetime of the plan. This is welcomed by the NWRA.

### **Chapter 11 Enabling Infrastructure**

This Chapter includes information on water services, energy/renewable energy, waste, and ITC.

It is stated that the achievement of the >30,000 population target for Athlone by 2031, and the provision of associated residential and social development, are dependent on the necessary enabling infrastructure being delivered in a timely manner; and while the planning authorities are not directly responsible for all aspects of infrastructure provision, active engagement with external providers can inform and influence the delivery of infrastructure. It is intended that the Joint Urban Area Plan will set out a strategy for the careful management of Athlone's infrastructure to allow development to progress in a sustainable manner.

It is stated that three water service projects are currently being progressed by Uisce Éireann. The NWRA commend the local authorities and Uisce Éireann for progressing these projects as they assist in delivery of several objectives in the RSES including RPOs 8.12 - 8.21 and 3.7.13. The NWRA would encourage objectives included in the draft Plan to drive these projects forward within the lifetime of the Plan.

### **Chapter 12 – Environmental Assessment**

Strategic Environmental Assessment, Appropriate Assessment and Strategic Flood Risk Assessment will be carried out as part of the plan-making process.

Given the location of the draft plan area on the Shannon River, the NWRA would highlight the importance of the Strategic Flood Risk assessment in informing policy and objectives, including suitable zoning objectives, in the draft plan to comply with RPO 3.10 and 3.11 of the RSES. Where considered necessary, objectives for the delivery of flood defence works planned by OPW should be included in the draft Plan to comply with RPO 8.13 of the RSES.

**The Assembly would request the following matters are considered during the formulation of the Draft Joint Urban Area Plan for Athlone:**

1. The Joint Urban Area Plan should reflect the Vision set out in Sec. 3.7 (a) of the RSES, which outlines the growth ambitions for the Town, whilst Planning for the extended Urban Area, and possibly incorporating context to settlements around its fringes (e.g. Glasson and Hodson Bay). A balanced allocation of land and services is essential east and west of Athlone Town, to accommodate population growth, housing social infrastructure and economic development.
2. The Draft Plan provide for the Key Enabling Infrastructure, and associated timelines for project delivery, which is required to enable Athlone to develop its role as a Regional driver and fulfil the growth ambitions within the NPF and RSES.
3. The key business elements set out in Sec. 3.3 of the RSES (copy of image above) be considered in the formulation of policy and objectives in the draft Plan
4. Both Local Authorities give consideration to the criteria outlined for determining the Urban Boundary of Athlone as set out within Sec. 3.7(a) of the RSES.
5. A Building Heights Study be prepared to inform objectives in the draft Plan.
6. Student accommodation requirements to be factored into calculations for Residential zonings within the Core Strategy.
7. Tourist accommodation needs to be considered in the draft Plan.
8. Lands to be identified for the provision of serviced sites and relevant objectives are included in the plan to develop the lands within the lifetime of the plan, which reflects the recent funding mechanisms set out via the Croi Conaithe (Towns) Fund.
9. An objective is included in the draft Plan which assesses the feasibility of providing a new Hospital in Athlone.
10. A specific objective is included in the draft Plan for the positioning of Athlone as a lab for new and emerging climate action practice.
11. An objective is included that supports Athlone’s role within the context of Smart Regions, whereby it may be designated as a Technology and Innovation Pole as reflected in Sec. 6.6 of the RSES.
12. The Draft Plan expand upon the aims of the Athlone Waterfront Strategy, which reflect the ambition contained within RPO 3.7.11 of the RSES, which supports this project.
13. A Local Transport Plan to form a key element of the JUAP for Athlone, as envisaged under RPO 6.27 of the RSES, wherein Modal Shift, and sustainable travel options around employment and education are prioritised.
14. The Draft Plan reflect the need for the delivery of Key Regional Connectivity improvements projects, such as the N55 Upgrade (Cavan Town to Athlone) and N61 improvement scheme (Athlone to Boyle), See RPO 6.8 of the RSES.
15. The Draft Plan includes the aim of upgrading the Athlone – Athenry – Galway Rail Line to Dual Tracking, as reflected under RPO 6.12 of the RSES.
16. An objective(s) in line with RPO 3.7.12, which supports the development of an Open Space Strategy, is included in the draft Plan.

### Concluding Remarks

The NWRA note that the matters included in the Strategic Issues Paper generally reflect the central elements contained within the RSES in respect of Athlone and its wider catchment. Incorporating the above recommendations would ensure an elevated level of consistency with the RSES. The Assembly finally note the preparation of the Joint Urban Area Plan for Athlone will occur during a period of significant Policy adjustment, with the impending National Planning Framework (NPF) revision to be followed by a review and update of the Regional Spatial & Economic Strategies, the Assembly looks forward to ongoing collaboration with both Local Authorities in this regard.

I trust that the above is of assistance and the Assembly wish to thank Roscommon County Council for the opportunity given to provide this submission. If you have any queries in respect of the above, then do not hesitate to revert.

Mise le meas



**Denis Kelly**  
**Director**