



Westmeath County Council,
Áras An Chontae,
Mount Street,
Mullingar,
Co. Westmeath,
N91 FH4N
30th June 2020



FAO: Eamonn Brennan, Administrative Officer, Forward Planning,

Re: Observations on Draft Westmeath County Development Plan 2021 – 2027

A Chara

I refer to your letter of notification dated 28th February 2020, confirming that the Draft Westmeath County Development Plan 2021 – 2027 has been prepared and inviting submissions / observations.

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly wish to commend Westmeath County Council on the publication of the draft Plan. It is a very important and timely policy intervention that shall shape the future of the county. It is also important to areas that lie beyond the county area, including part of the administration area of the Northern and Western Regional Assembly (NWRA).

It is the role of the Regional Assemblies to provide leadership and to identify regional development objectives and coordinating initiatives that support the delivery and implementation of national planning and economic policy. This is primarily achieved through the preparation and implementation of Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES) that are bespoke to the region and which implement and amplify the National Policy Objectives and National Strategic Outcomes of the National Planning Framework (NPF). The Northern and Western Regional Assembly adopted the Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy 2020 – 2032 (RSES) for the Northern and Western Region in January 2020. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Westmeath County Council for their collaborative input to this strategy, as an adjoining local authority. The Strategy is available on our website www.nwra.ie/rses

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The RSES is of particular relevance to Westmeath as it is crafted on the principle that it wants to work collaboratively to deliver effective regional development for all our communities, regardless of administrative boundaries. This means that we need to understand their catchments and their potential and to enable the spatial development opportunities specific to each of the sub-regions (Rf Fig 2 of the RSES) – we need to connect their strengths and celebrate their unique selling points.

One of the shared sub-regions we have with the Eastern and Midlands Region is Athlone, which straddles the Westmeath / Roscommon county boundary. Importantly, Westmeath shares with us other rural catchments, networks, assets, challenges and opportunities that are also of mutual interests and our desire is for these to be addressed for the benefit of our shared communities.



The RSES aims to be responsive to trends (eg. urbanisation, digitisation and globalisation) whilst also interpreting risk (e.g. climate, global economic challenges, future of work and population health outbreaks like Covid-19) by connecting our plans to the Sustainable Development Goals, the EU Growth Strategy (including the EU Green Deal) and the National Strategic Outcomes (NPF). At its core the RSES recognises the weak urban infrastructure in our region and that this region has not prospered economically compared to the other two regions of Ireland, as evidenced by reclassification of the region by the European Commission from a 'More Developed Region' to a 'Transition Region' for the Post 2020 (2021-2027) funding period – see also a recent publication 'A Region in Transition: The Way Forward' published by the NWRA.

Our RSES is responding by adopting a clear strategy that delivers key business elements known to inform their location of choice, namely:

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.

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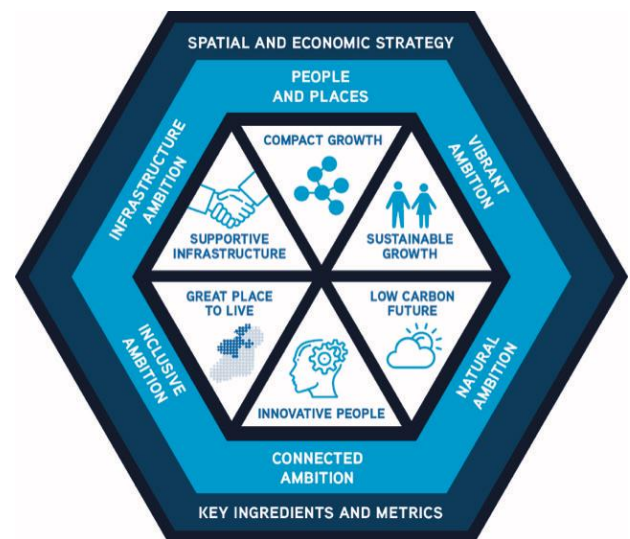


5. Growing our third level infrastructures, access to skills and research, development and innovation.
6. Availability of property solutions – including ‘ready-to-go’ commercial properties, ‘landing spaces’, co-working spaces and flexible property solutions and affordable housing.
7. Co-location or dynamic 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.

Growth Framework: The strategy has introduced the concept of a Growth Framework that links strategic and operational challenges with prioritised capital interventions. The Framework will be the basis for determining metrics, linking with National Strategic Outcomes and assessing the region’s actual contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Growth framework incorporates ‘Five Growth Ambitions’ that define each priority and how they are mutually complementary with a focus on ‘People and Places’.

Our Vision is for a region that is smarter, greener, more specialised and connected, with a stronger and more compact urban network, focusing on ‘People’ and ‘Places’. It brings a new “place-based” approach that involves tapping into the economic potential that remains unused, so that all parts of regions, be they cities, towns or their rural hinterlands, can contribute to national development. From an enterprise development perspective, investment in the creation of ‘place’ is key to delivering the key elements that inform business location choices.



People and Places: The settlement strategy is focused on a Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) for Galway and tailored Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plans for Sligo, Athlone and Letterkenny. The intention is that these strategic plans become a living framework, which will be supported as required by detailed action plans, investment proposals and delivery partnerships (Eg. The Exchequer (PI2040), EU Investment Programmes, Financial Instruments, Community and Local Authority investment, Private Investment).

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Athlone is unique as it straddles two county council and two Regional Assembly functional areas. Importantly, a Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plan has been prepared by the NWRA and it forms an integral component of the RSES. It has taken due cognisance of the RSES strategy prepared in parallel by EMRA and there is indeed a high level of consistency between both documents in how the future development of Athlone is portrayed and examined. We hope that this convergence is further developed during the preparation of lower order plans in the planning hierarchy. The NWRA's RSES identifies Regional Planning Objectives (RPOs) in the Athlone Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plan and it provides a high level framework to guide lower level plans – including CDPs, LECPs and the proposed Joint Plan for Athlone - and it prioritises future investment interventions for Athlone. The NWRA has taken into account the Roadmap for the Implementation of the NPF in formulating its Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plans. It has planned for a 40% population increase up to 2040 for all our regional growth centres (Athlone, Sligo and Letterkenny).

Section 3.7 (a) of our RSES has translated the global figure above into a population target of at least 1,500 by 2031 for the western part of Athlone (within our functional area). We ask that in finalising the Westmeath CDP that full consideration is given to the above target and incorporate it into the County Development Plan when dealing with and commenting on this part of the Regional Growth Centre. This will enable a continued collaborative approach to the development of Athlone to be navigated as the Roscommon CDP review is progressed and a new Joint Plan for Athlone is subsequently made. This Assembly is available to engage further on this should you consider it beneficial to the future success and completion of your plan making process.

Growth Ambition 1 - Vibrant Region: The NWRA believes that strong economic growth, which creates permanent, sustainable jobs, is best achieved by building a competitive and productive economy. Focusing policies on scale, investing in connectivity and our people whilst aggressively pursuing a low carbon approach to enhance our differentiation. Under this Growth Ambition, the RSES gives recognition to the importance of place-based networks such as the Upper Shannon Erne Future Economy Project and it is welcome that the draft CDP shares this position. The RSES reinforces the provision of a sustainable framework for tourism development and it is welcome that the draft Westmeath CDP has availed of the opportunity to enable a collaborative approach to be further developed at a more local level, sharing our ethos that adverse impacts upon local communities, archaeology, built heritage, landscapes and habitats are minimised while at the same time ensuring economic benefits accruing to local economies are maximised. Other thriving sectors that Westmeath share with the northern and western region that present mutual opportunity include, but are not limited to, Agri-Food and the Bioeconomy, ICT and MedTech sectors and Retail – further detail is available within Section 4 of the RSES, including a suite of regional development objectives, which may be of interest.

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The RSES encourages policies that support the development of local entrepreneurial ecosystems through local clustering and smart specialisation (S3). The priorities for action and recommendations contained in the RSES are based on the very significant potential for the region to generate further value from its Research and Innovation investments, within national policy and the EU's strengthening S3 agenda. Athlone has significant capacity to achieve this and to position R&I at the forefront of enabling policies to achieve sustainable growth in population. Within this context CPO 5.12 of the draft CDP is to be welcomed.

Growth Ambition 2 - Natural Region: It has been identified that more strategic actions are required to prepare the region for what is to come. These actions need to be cognisant of our natural resources, landscape and heritage (natural, social and cultural) and this ambition provides the necessary framework for the Northern and Western Region but are equally transferrable to Westmeath and represent a shared opportunity (See Chapter 5 of RSES).

The NWRA is a partner in the OUR WAY INTERREG project that aims to contribute to conserving, protecting, promoting and developing natural and cultural heritage in using Greenways as sustainable and smart transportation links in rural areas. It is using this as a platform to transfer learnings at Regional and National level so as to advance the expansion of an integrated network of Greenways across the region's catchments, including those shared with Westmeath. This will further enable the appropriate development of local businesses and start-ups in the vicinity of greenways, which is an objective of this Growth Ambition. It is noted that the draft CDP provides support for the development of the greenways, blueways and peatways and this is to be welcomed. Specifically it is welcome that CPO 12.77 is supportive of the 'development of an integrated network of blueways both within Westmeath and to adjoining counties'. However, there is an opportunity, and I would encourage consideration, to amend the wording of CPO 12.78 so that its support also extends to adjoining counties.

Growth Ambition 3 – Connected Region: Accessibility and mobility within the region have a direct effect on the region's economic competitiveness. It also has an effect on the attractiveness of the region as a favourable living and visiting environment. The RSES sets out that the provision of prudently managed transport and digital infrastructure is key to delivering our vision. The strategy outlines how we plan to better integrate land-use and transport planning and it also focuses upon how the digital economy can enable our region, growing exports, innovation, investment and productivity – attained through building new sound partnerships and facilitating mutual connections and collaboration.

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It is acknowledged that the draft County Development Plan reflects that critical strategic national road and rail links traverse the county, facilitating the movement of strategic traffic, including freight and access for goods to market for the counties within the Northern and Western Region. However, it is considered that the Core Strategy would benefit from this being articulated as part of the transportation objectives that need to be included in accordance with s10(2) of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended). It could also confirm that the management of the capacity and enhancement of these transport networks that traverse the county is critical to provide improved connectivity. The RSES for the Northern and Western Region has identified interventions to enhance these links and these are prioritised within Section 6.3 of the RSES for the northern and western region.

The RSES identifies the need for enhancement of the N61 which links the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo and it would be appreciated if this is referenced within the context of Athlone as a Regional Growth Centre.

In addition, to achieve our Vision for the region the RSES recognises the need to strengthen our digital network and enable new technologies to work by ensuring that policies and systems are in place that can help people transition to a world much more digitally connected. RPOs 6.36 - 6.60 are tailored to promote smart places. The support within the draft CDP for smart initiatives is welcome and they present the potential to influence other policy and programme instruments, including the LECP when reviewed.

Growth Ambition 5 – Inclusive Region: One of the strongest foundations and emerging propositions this region has to build on is its 'livability'. The region aspires to be one of the most livable places in Europe with a commitment to sustainable and inclusive growth. Our objectives encourage industries that provide jobs that will raise per capita incomes and improve living standards for all. This requires a specific focus upon the enablement of access to education, health, employment, recreation and opportunity for all. The coordination and delivery of infrastructure, housing and employment land in the right places at the right time is a key outcome, with homes that are affordable.

The supply and location of jobs and homes must be aligned. This includes providing homes that are affordable and accessible to house the labour force, and the provision of land and premises that meet the needs of current and future businesses, including for smart design and orientation that meet current and future energy efficiency demands. The draft CDP identifies a roadmap for this and has zoned lands in a range of locations but the absence of zoned lands in Athlone may present an unintended impediment to the appropriate management of development in the intervening period pending the making of a Joint Plan. This is something that may benefit from further consideration.

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Growth Ambition 6 – Enabling our Region: The provision and maintenance of economic infrastructure, such as energy, water, and wastewater, are key to delivering compact growth and a connected, vibrant, inclusive, resilient and smart region. The RSES identifies specific infrastructure necessary to enable the vision for Athlone to be achieved and these are available in section 3.7(a) of the RSES.

Conclusion

The foregoing outlines the RSES of the NWRA generally with some specific details in how it is intended that Athlone will develop over the next 12-20 years. The NWRA ask you to consider the following points as part of the plan making process.

- Acknowledge the population target set out in our RSES for Athlone, i.e. an additional 1500 by 2031.
- Provide an estimate of the actual population in 2020 and indicate how this is compatible with the population projections outlined in Table 2.6 of the Draft.
- Consider whether it is appropriate and necessary to make some interim provision for the designation of zoned land in the major urban centres until such time as fully developed plans are made and adopted. The absence of governance structures for a Joint UAP could be an additional constraint on delivery.
- Consider the inclusion of an objective to prepare a buildings height study for Athlone.
- Consider an inclusion of an objective to prepare a joint retail strategy as set out in the Retail Planning Guidelines.
- Consider the promotion and development of the N61 as a strategic link between the Regional Growth Centres of Athlone and Sligo.

I hope that the above observations are of assistance in shaping the new County Development Plan in a manner that shall be of benefit to our communities. The Assembly look forward to further engagement with Westmeath County Council as the preparation of the plan is progressed and as we move towards the preparation of a Joint Plan for Athlone. If you have any queries in respect of the above observations then do not hesitate to revert.

Yours Sincerely

David Minton, Director.

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