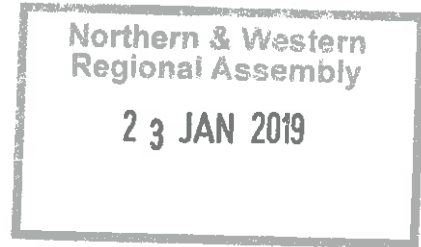


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**21<sup>st</sup> January, 2019**

**Re: Draft RSES for the Eastern and Midlands Region**  
**Draft RSES for the Northern & Western Region**

Dear David/Jim,

Both Westmeath County Council (WCC) and Roscommon County Council (RCC) welcome and support the development of the Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midlands Region and Northern and Western Region. We appreciate the opportunity to further participate in and reinforce the important lead role of Athlone Regional Centre (with reference included to the functional area extending into Co. Roscommon) in the future growth and development of the region. In light of the interlinkages, it is essential that there is absolute clarity and consistency in the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies produced by EMRA and NWRA, in respect of the future vision for Athlone as a Regional Centre.

The broad range of issues which have been outlined in both Draft RSEs are valued and both Councils are fully committed to contributing to the future sustainable development of the region. The NPF recognizes the extent to which Athlone fulfills the role of regional centre and acknowledges the importance of the RSEs in promoting regional centers of population and employment growth to deliver accessible centers of scale.

The intention of the draft strategies to improve the potential of Athlone to become a better economic driver for its catchment with a focus on issues such as economic, residential, amenity, tourism, retail, infrastructure and Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) are noted, however, it is submitted that both strategies should contain enhanced, Joint Regional Objectives for Athlone. In this regard a copy of the joint submission provided to EMRA from Westmeath and Roscommon County Council's in July 2018, which provides a detailed overview of issues and opportunities for Athlone, as a Regional Centre, is included for consideration.



## 1. Consistency & Compatibility between EMRA and NWRA RSESs

Whilst the recognition of the status of Athlone as a Regional driver in both strategies is acknowledged, greater recognition to the role that Athlone plays in the region should be set out. In relation to section 3.6 (d) of the NWRA strategy pertaining to the Athlone Regional Growth Strategic Plan, it is submitted that the provisions included for Athlone are inadequate to support the delivery of a Regional Centre, as envisioned under the NPF. It is noted in the strategy that the Regional Policy Objectives prescribed for Athlone only relate to the parts of Athlone within the North-Western Region. Further, it is suggested, disappointingly, that strategic policy proposed for Athlone is inferior and appears secondary when considered in the context of that provided elsewhere in the Strategy for other designated regional centres in the NWA.

Accordingly, due consideration should also be given across both strategies to the terminology and methodologies employed in association with identified regional centres of Athlone, Letterkenny, Sligo, Drogheda and Dundalk and in terms of identification of plan extents, vision and scope. There is need to ensure that a consistent approach is afforded to all regional centers as set out in the NPF and that consistent terminologies are used, zones of influence identified and parameters prescribed for the preparation of future planning frameworks associated with these Regional Centres. With regard to the proposed policy to prepare Metropolitan Strategic Area Plans (MASP) plans for Sligo and Letterkenny, it is noted that the NPF prescribes the preparation of MASPs for Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford Metropolitan areas only. A joint approach between the NWRA and EMRA is essential in this regard.

It is necessary that a joint approach and shared vision (including associated housing targets) is delivered for Athlone as reflected in both regional strategies for the North Western Regional Assembly and the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly. Alignment and consistency between both RSESs is fundamental in this regard and steps should be taken to ensure this outcome. WCC and RCC consider that both RSES's must adopt a holistic approach to the comprehensive development of Athlone and its western environs.

## 2. Enhanced Policy Provision

Given that Athlone is a designated regional driver, it is imperative that RSES strategic policy is supplemented to adequately reflect the town's status, equivalent to other designated Regional Centres. The success of regional centres is not based merely on scale but rather is due to a combination of, inter alia, accessibility factors, critical mass, provision of a skilled labour force, social and community infrastructure and housing provision. It is vital that the RSES provides the platform for all of these elements to be supported and delivered in achieving the NPFs vision for Athlone as a Regional Centre.

In order for this potential to be achieved, investment in crucial infrastructure is necessary to underpin and support the future development of the Region. This investment needs to be promoted for delivery in advance or in tandem with development. Further policy is also necessary in terms of enabling the delivery of critical mass with regards employment and housing together with the



necessary social and community infrastructure and public realm initiatives.

At present EMRA's Draft RSES refers to Athlone becoming a Regional Growth Centre "with a population target in the region of 30,000 by 2031." While the NWRA's Draft RSES in its section on Athlone Regional Centre appears consistent on the subject of the population target (stating that "a population target of 30,000 for Athlone has been set in the Draft RSES for EMRA" - pg.136) it lacks reference to the applicable time period. However, a table is included in Section 3.4 of the NWRA's Draft RSES<sup>1</sup> setting out the proposed population uplift in the relevant Regional Growth Centres (including Athlone) in the short, medium and long term i.e. to 2026, 2031 and to 2040. In contrast, the approach taken in EMRA's RSES is less prescriptive and does not include a short, medium or long term breakdown.

An agreed method to population allocation in both strategies should be prescribed to facilitate the preparation and adoption of a Joint Urban Area Plan for Athlone. In this regard it is submitted that, as per the Implementation Roadmap for the NPF which sets the parameters for regional strategies, the figure of 30,000 people by 2031 should be frontloaded for inclusion as a target under the initial iteration of the Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan.

Retention of the SDZ identified in the Midlands Regional Planning Guidelines 2010-2022 to the east of Athlone at Creggan, including AIT campus, is essential in delivering Athlone as a regional centre wherein the achievement of this critical mass is fundamental to the economic growth of the region. The SDZ offers potential to accommodate the development of major employment and enterprise activities, in association with AIT, building on the existing base of knowledge-based enterprise clusters in Athlone. The SDZ will benefit from a large and skilled population, proximity to national communication and energy networks such as motorways, rail routes, electricity, gas and broadband networks.

Brief reference is made in the Draft strategies to Athlone having an established economic base. Given the importance of this economic base both at the present time and as one of the key strands of the future growth strategy of Athlone as a regional centre, it is suggested that further elaboration is warranted on this. As outlined above, information has previously been provided to EMRA on this subject matter, in the joint submission from Westmeath and Roscommon County Council's in July 2018.<sup>2</sup> Section 2.2 of said submission addresses 'Economic Development and Employment' providing details of the primary employment types (including manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, research and development, medical devices, telecommunications and software development) highlighting the existence of geographic clusters of industry in Athlone, with such clusters predominantly accommodating distinct industrial sectors. It is the intention of both Local Authorities, as previously stated, to capitalise, in a Joint Urban Area Plan, on these established distinctive industrial specialisms and their cluster areas.

Accordingly, more specific and tailored policy is required across both strategies to ensure the delivery of the NPF vision to achieve 'more effective strategic planning and coordination of the future development of ... regionally strategic locations at points that straddle boundaries between this and neighbouring regions as in the example of Athlone, which is a focal point for an area

<sup>1</sup> Pg. 59. Section 3.4 – Urban Places of Regional Scale.

<sup>2</sup> 'Athlone – A Key Regional Centre' (July 2018).



reaching into much of this and neighbouring regions in economic and employment, transport, education and public service delivery and retailing terms'. The aim is to support the continued growth and success of Athlone as a town of scale and a principal economic driver, by securing the investment necessary to fulfill its role as a key regional centre. It is further stated that the Draft RSES should provide a policy context and guidance in relation to the content of the Urban Area Plan for Athlone.

With this in mind, it is considered that enhanced policy should be provided for Athlone which:

- Provides for a Joint Strategic Vision for the future development of Athlone as a Regional Centre including the development of critical mass to reflect its role as a Regional Driver.
- Supports the preparation of a long term Joint Economic Strategy to inform future development of Athlone.
- Supports the delivery of strategic needs related to employment, public realm and environment, quality built form as well as housing and public transport (policy in terms of housing delivery should not be area specific at regional level – precise locations should be determined at appropriate Urban Area Plan stage).
- Prioritises infrastructural investment for Athlone to facilitate the delivery of a Regional centre.
- Ensures that water supply and wastewater needs are met by new national projects to enhance Athlone's water supply and increase waste water treatment capacity.
- Promotes a joint up cross sectoral approach to the delivery of key enabling infrastructure.
- Support the role of Athlone Institute of Technology as a centre of excellence for education and in achieving its status as a Technological University.
- Designates an SDZ at Creggan to include AIT campus.
- Acknowledges that Foreign Direct Investment and associated economic activity should base in Athlone as the primary location for such investment in the Midlands Region.
- Provides for the capitalisation of existing employment clusters and distinct industrial sectors, through the identification and provision of tailored policy for existing established distinctive industrial specialisms and their cluster areas.
- Realises the potential of established and successful Business Parks such as Monksland and Garrycastle in reinforcing Athlone's primacy and status in the region as a base for international business.
- Designates 'Technology and Innovation Poles' (TIPs) in Athlone to be developed through Enterprise Ireland and the Industrial Development Authority (IDA) to drive regional and rural development.
- Supports research, innovation and EU funding opportunities.
- Supports the delivery of an Open Space Strategy with provision for a public park, recreational and amenity spaces.
- Supports the preparation of Regeneration Master Plans within Athlone and support for associated funding proposals under the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund.
- Promotes the concept of 'Smart Cities' in Athlone to boost the location's attractiveness for people and business and in the interests of innovation.
- Encourages a cross-sectoral approach to maximising the tourist potential of the River Shannon and Lough Ree involving Westmeath County Council, Roscommon County Council





and Longford County Council and relevant stakeholders.

- Supports Athlone as a priority location for development. Any policy that encourages/facilitates regional spillage or undermines the ability of Athlone to achieve its Regional Centre growth needs in terms of critical mass for employment, housing etc. should be discouraged.
- Focuses on continuous regeneration and achieving compact growth via development of existing built-up areas, and availing of new urban regeneration and development funds.

The above policy should supplement, rather than replace, existing Regional Policy Objectives associated with Athlone as already set out in both draft strategies.

### 3. Addressing Infrastructural Bottlenecks and Increase Housing Supply in the Right Locations

It is imperative that both RSES provides the necessary policy to ensure that the water supply and wastewater (network and treatment) needs of Athlone are met. In particular prioritisation of new national projects to enhance Athlone's water supply and increase waste water treatment capacity should be promoted in the strategy.

In order to ensure that the transport needs of the promoted growth scenarios are provided for, the RSES policy provision for the preparation of a transport plan associated with the ongoing development of Athlone is welcomed and accepted as a necessary and logical step in planning for the development of the Regional Centre. Focus should also be provided on the necessity for enhanced public transport linkages between these Athlone and its supporting towns as well as the need for wider regional and interregional connectivity to centers such as Roscommon, Portlaoise, Sligo and Letterkenny. There is also need for an emphasis to be placed on the potential to build upon the competitive advantage of Athlone's road connectivity by way of enhanced access and connectivity to be provided to regional assets such as Athlone Institute of Technology.

WCC and RCC endorse the preparation of a Local Level Transportation Plan for Athlone and are currently in the process of initiating this process in consultation with key stakeholders such as TII, NTA, bus operators.

Given the geographic location of Athlone at a central and pivotal point in the country, the adequacy of transport infrastructure to serve the Regional Centre is of immense importance. The M6/N6 is a strategic transport corridor linking Dublin to Galway and thus provides a gateway to the North - Western region. The RSESs has identified the importance of enhanced transport connectivity as a key factor in accessing employment and attracting (and retaining) skilled labour to the region. Whilst it is acknowledged that the *National Development Plan 2018 – 2027* does not identify any projects for the M6 / N6 in the vicinity of Athlone, it is nonetheless considered vital that appropriate reference is included in the RSESs to highlight the significant role that this infrastructure has as Athlone transforms into a Regional Growth Centre, and that there is a clear expression of support in the RSES for necessary measures to alleviate any perceived constraints, which may otherwise become an impediment to the development of Athlone.

It should be noted that the Councils endorse the policy which supports 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.

The Councils also endorse the upgrade of the N61 from Athlone to Boyle (as part of the wider objective to provide enhanced regional connectivity to Roscommon), however, in terms of the strategic road network and connectivity within the region, it should be noted that the significant Regional Road Schemes listed for EMRA at Table 8.4 'Road Projects for the Region' is deficient in that it does not include a complete overview of regional road priorities (with local improvement schemes also listed). In the absence of a comprehensive list of regional road schemes, consideration should be given to the inclusion of a new high level Regional Policy Objective to support the overall development and upgrade of strategic regional routes to enhance the connectivity of the region.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

It is important that the policy set out in both RSESs is supplemented through the provision of enhanced, tailored policy, at a strategic level, commensurate with the NPF vision for Athlone as a regionally strategic location and a viable alternative to Dublin (accepting that Dublin must also continue to accommodate growth). Suggested supplementary Joint Regional Policy Objectives are set out in bullet point form under *Section 2. Enhanced Policy Provision*, above, with both RCC and WCC already engaged in and committed to the joint delivery of a strategic planning framework to guide the future growth of Athlone as a Regional Centre.

As suggested at Section 2, it is submitted that both RSESs should make provision for the preparation of a long term Economic (and Spatial) Strategy as a framework for economic renewal both by way of public sector action and private sector investment. It is envisaged that the strategy would take a broad view of the region (including neighboring counties) and investigate how Athlone should be positioned in order to take advantage of economic opportunities, create employment and attract investment to support envisaged increase in critical mass. The Plan should build on existing efforts of RCC and WCC in revitalising and redeveloping Athlone and provide recommendations for its marketing as a Regional Centre.

It is imperative that this joint approach and shared vision is delivered for Athlone, at a Regional level, and mirrored in both the RSES for the North Western Regional Assembly and the Eastern and Midland Regional. Alignment and consistency between both RSESs is fundamental in this regard and steps should be taken to ensure this outcome. The ability to achieve the NPF vision for Athlone is dependent on both RSES's adopting a holistic approach to delivering consistent strategies for Athlone and its western environs. Further, consistency should also be provided across all regional spatial and economic frameworks (across EMRA, NWRA and the Southern Regional Assembly) pertaining to the status and future development of the Regional Centers prescribed in the NPF.




It is requested that both Assemblies take on board the issues raised in this submission and we would welcome the opportunity to further discuss or expand on the matters raised above, if you so wish.

Yours sincerely,

  
Pat Gallagher  
Westmeath County Council



  
Eugene Cummins  
Roscommon County Council



