APPENDIX 2

Athlone Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plan

Context & Vision

The National Planning Framework (NPF) identifies Athlone as the Key Regional Growth Centre in the Midlands. It is one of five towns nationally that have been designated as a Regional Growth Centre, on the basis that it functions in a similar manner, but at a different scale to the bigger cities. The NPF has identified the urban structure within the Northern and Western Region to be weak. As a means to addressing this weak urban structure, this RSES targets at least 40% population growth in the Regional Growth Centres of Letterkenny, Sligo and Athlone, with a further 30% population growth target (minimum) targeted for the designated Towns. This RSES provides a Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plan for Letterkenny and Sligo and whilst Athlone is substantively within the Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly Area, a joint approach has been taken to identify shared Key Regional objectives for Athlone within the respective Strategies. Notwithstanding, this strategy provides additional context through this strategic framework for Athlone, reflecting that it is a regional driver in the same way as Sligo and Letterkenny are regional drivers for their respective catchments.

The strategic plan will deliver a roadmap for the continuation of Athlone, and its closest serviced satellite villages of Hudson Bay and Glasson, as the regional flagship for industry, retail services, educational facilities, tourism and residential development in the Midlands. It will also recognise the potential of its community, culture, heritage and landscape to generate an excellent quality of life for future generations. Athlone has direct national connectivity to Dublin and within a one-hour drive is Galway City and towns such as Longford, Mullingar, Maynooth, Portlaoise, Ballinasloe and Roscommon. The proximity of these settlements provides Athlone and its hinterland with potential to develop residential and employment uses which will place and maintain Athlone at the forefront in the goal to develop a modern resilient example of integrated development in 21st century Ireland.
Strategic Growth Areas

(a) Housing and Regeneration

The RSES for the Eastern and Midlands region envisages a population target of 30,000 for the entire settlement of Athlone up to 2031. This includes lands within the combined functional area of the two Local Authorities of Westmeath and Roscommon. The preparation and adoption of a Joint Development/Local Area Plan shall be a priority for Westmeath and Roscommon County Council. The joint Development/Local Area Plan under agreement of both local authorities is the appropriate mechanism to determine the functional urban area and plan boundary along with the distribution of population which should be generally in proportion to existing population levels in each local authority area, subject to agreement of each local authority and both Regional Assembly and ensuring that the proportion enables the other minimum population growth targets stipulated for settlements within the RSES for the Northern and Western Region to be achieved. In determining the extent of the Strategic Plan boundaries, the following criteria should be considered:

- The principle urban area of Athlone, as defined by the CSO defined town boundary, including any existing areas with a dense concentration of population, employment or service provision that is contiguous to it;
- Inclusion of those areas where >60% of the workforce commute to the defined principle urban area of Athlone;
- The principle urban area population of Athlone should account for at least 75% of the total population of the regional centre plan area;
- The existence of environmentally designated areas in the vicinity;
- The existence of transport strategies; and
- The existence of future development opportunities, including phasing and prioritisation of development infrastructure;
- Physical features and compact growth.

The delineation of Athlone as a regional growth centre should be ambitious and incorporate the satellite villages such as Hodson Bay and Glasson, which operate as part of the regional centre and are the nearest fully serviced and zoned areas to the town. These may provide alternative residential and employment options but the main growth driver will remain the principal urban area of Athlone, to support the achievement of compact growth targets with a minimum of 30% of new homes to be built within the existing built up area, supported by the planned delivery of existing Local Area Plan (LAP) lands at Curragh Lissywollen, Cornamagh, Cornamaddy and Monksland / Bellanamullia.

**RPO Athlone** : A cross-boundary Joint Development/Local Area Plan shall be prepared by Westmeath County Council and Roscommon County Council in collaboration with the two Regional Assemblies to provide a coordinated planning framework for the future physical, economic and social development of Athlone. The plan shall identify Athlone’s functional urban area and adopt a boundary for the plan area in addition to the identification of strategic housing and employment development areas and infrastructure and investment requirements to promote greater coordination and sequential delivery of serviced lands for development, in order to realise Athlone’s status as a Regional Growth Centre.

The areas outlined above and in Fig.2 have the capacity to deliver on the population growth targets referred to above. The plan for the Regional Centre will provide additional refinement and prioritisation on the release of service land. In addition, regeneration areas in St. Mels and Loughanaskin are identified for mixed use development. In light of promoting and delivering the concept of compact development an objective to prepare a Building Heights Strategy for Athlone would be opportune.

**RPO Athlone** : Support the regeneration of underused town centre and brownfield / infill lands along with the delivery of existing zoned and serviced lands to facilitate significant population growth and achieve sustainable compact growth target of 40% of all new homes to be built within the existing built up urban area.
(b) Enterprise and Employment Uses

Athlone already has significant administrative, retail, industrial, tourism and services employment. In order to cater for the employment demands arising from increased population targets discussed above there are 4 specific areas identified. These are:

1. IDA Park/Garrycastle
2. Blyry
3. Creggan
4. Monksland

These areas comprise over 300 Ha. of undeveloped land and rather like the residential lands referred to above a prioritisation process for development and release of serviced areas may need to be considered for inclusion at joint Development/Local Area Plan level.

Athlone has a track record in manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, medical devices, telecommunications and ICT. The consolidation and expansion of these areas will build on the success of Athlone.

These industries employ upwards of 5,000 people, many of them of high economic value and highly skilled. The qualities of life in Athlone is an attraction that needs to be nurtured and improved to give these industry groups the impetus to attract more highly skilled people to the area.

In tandem with these quality of life goals the delivery of the infrastructure projects outlined later in this section is an imperative to maintain the towns progress, potential and presence as the lead centre in the midlands.

Athlone is a regional growth centre for convenience and comparison shopping. This position has been retained through the economic downturn. There are a number of town centre sites that have...
the potential to maintain the retail status of the town, these include inter alia Station road, Loughanaskin and Lloyds Lane.

A Retail Strategy is to be prepared jointly by Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils is at an advanced stage of preparation and is presently in the consultation process. The study area should be informed by the reach of Athlone and should also inform policy for the joint Development/Local Area Plan. The concept of compact growth and how this will influence future retail facilities is a feature that needs to be considered. The availability of existing floor space especially in premises that are vacant could meet much of the future demand. Retail is the largest employment type (25% of jobs) in the town and its importance to the regional economy is therefore significant.

**RPO Athlone** : Promote Athlone as a key location for regional economic development supporting the provision of increased employment through the expansion of the existing enterprise ecosystem in Athlone and creation or expansion of distinct industrial specialisms that have developed through collaboration with the relevant enterprise agencies including the IDA, Athlone Institute of Technology and the Midlands Innovation and Research Centre and support the provision of physical infrastructure and zoned lands to realise the phased delivery of strategic employment lands in central accessible locations.

![Fig 3. Influence of Athlone](image_url)

### Strategic Infrastructure.

**Health and Education**
Athlone is the only designated regional centre that does not have a hospital, or a hospital in close proximity. The provision of a new hospital would complement the status of the town as a regional centre and an attractive urban area in which to live. The Assemblies support an investigation of the feasibility of providing a modern hospital in Athlone which would serve the needs of the over 130,000 population which reside within the 45 minute drive catchment.

Fig 4. Education Facilities

A new primary care centre has operated in Athlone over the last few years, this is an addition to the various GP practices in the town. Athlone also has St Vincent’s Hospital which operates primarily as a care facility for the elderly.

Athlone has the leading third level institute in the midlands, Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT). There are over 5000 students (full time and part time) presently attending/participating in courses. It is not surprising therefore in terms of education attainment Athlone contains more graduates as a percentage of population than other areas in the midlands. AIT serves many of the surrounding counties and outside of Roscommon and Westmeath, students from Offaly, Galway and Longford form a significant portion of the student body.

There is an ambition to make AIT a technological University, this is fully supported by both Assemblies. AIT is an important community asset, the number of part time and mature students is indicative of its reach into the community. The institute has research capability in materials, bioscience and software, these are complementary to many of the industries in the Athlone area and is a strength that can be built on.

Athlone is also a regional centre for 2nd level education. There are nearly 3,000 students attending the four secondary schools in town, recent consolidation resulted in reduction of schools from 5 to 4. A Local Transport Plan for Athlone should be taken as an opportunity to improve sustainable
travel patterns and infrastructure, the various schools throughout the town would be good starting points for the delivery of better and healthier ways of life and travel.

Tourism

Athlone is at the centre of Ireland's latest tourism experience. It is a more than suitable location to begin the exploration of Hidden Heartlands, being at the end of Lough Ree which opens into one of the country's most scenic waterways and also having its urban heritage and culture which can itself deliver a worthwhile visitor experience.

The range and scope of Athlone's attractions and its links to attractions within its hinterland for example Clonmacnoise and Rindoon to name but two make it an obvious regional centre for tourism development. This potential is recognised inter alia in the Lakelands Destination Development Plan which as a collaborative strategy is a good example of the way forward in Tourism as well as other aspects of future development including this RSES.

RPO Athlone: Support the development of a cross sectoral approach to promote Athlone as a key tourism destination in the Midlands, building on Fáilte Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands brand and the forthcoming Shannon Tourism Masterplan to develop the recreation and amenity potential of waterways including the River Shannon and Lough Ree and the development of a greenway network including the Galway to Dublin Cycleway.

Transport

The national goal of having more compact growth generally and within MASP and Regional Centres in particular will increase the need and importance of providing more sustainably forms of transport and transport infrastructure in our urban centres. There is an overarching objective within the RSES to prepare Local Transport Plans in our cities and key towns, the initial momentum in this regard should concentrate on the cities and Regional Centres.

Athlone is well serviced by the national road and rail networks and this position makes it easily accessible to over 130,000 people (within 1 hour travel time). In order to improve this basic connectivity emphasis initially on links to cities of Dublin, Galway and Limerick and the regional centre of Sligo should be targeted, this applies to both road and rail infrastructure.

The improvement of public transport links within the town and its hinterland commensurate with the projected growth in population should be a key objective for the town. This approach is fully supported by the Assemblies. The promotion of walking and cycling within and through the town is also at the forefront of sustainable development. In this regard locally a new pedestrian/cycle bridge over the Shannon would be an imperative for safe east/west. Links within the town and regionally links to sustainable travel infrastructure along the canals could be attractive propositions along with links the development of a link to Galway City.
There are a number of strategic infrastructure projects whose delivery is necessary to service the growth targets discussed above. The integrated delivery and prioritisation at a regional level is necessary to ensure that Athlone will reach its ambitions within the timeframe of the RSES. The necessary projects we included in the regional objectives are set out below.

**Regional Policy Objectives**

- Support the phased servicing and development of lands identified in the RSES for residential and employment uses.

- Support the proposal to make AIT a Technological University and for the development of a ‘smart cities’ approach to drive research, innovation and EU funding opportunities in Athlone.

- Support the integrated provision of the infrastructure projects identified in this section

- Support the promotion of Athlone as a destination centre for the development of Hidden Heartlands including the development of a Wilderness Park Project based around Lough Ree

- Support the preparation of a joint retail strategy as set out in the Retail Planning Guidelines 2012

- Support the provision of integrated signage to promote Athlone as a single clearly identified entity
• Support the implementation of the Athlone Waterfront Strategy Support to provide for public realm and amenity enhancements and tourist related developments along the waterfront.

• Support the development of an Open Space Strategy with provision for a public park in Monksland with sustainable transport links along the Cross River and connections to the remainder of the Regional Centre. The strategy to include the provision of sustainable transport, recreation and amenity spaces to support existing and future populations.

• Support the upgrading of the Water Supply System and the Sewage Treatment System (including a Drainage Area Plan) to meet the growth targets set in this strategy.

• Promote Athlone as a sustainable transport hub, of national and regional importance. The regional centre shall become a fulcrum for multi model transport facilities and services.

• Support the regeneration of underutilised town centre, Brownfield and infill sites identified in the strategy, with a target of 30% of all new homes to be constructed within the existing built-up urban area.

• Promote Athlone as a sustainable transport hub, of national and regional importance and support the preparation of a joint Local Transport Plan between Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils in collaboration with transport agencies and key stakeholders to improve sustainable mobility in the town.

5. Environment

Athlone is close to a number of designated areas and some of these are shown on the constraints map below. Their protection is inherently supported by the Assembly and the growth envisaged for the Regional Centre will take these flood risk areas fully into account. The overarching environmental regional policy objectives in section 2.4 of the RSES apply fully.

RPO Athlone: Support ongoing implementation of flood risk management and flood protection measures to facilitate the growth of Athlone subject to the outcome of appropriate environmental assessment and taking account of the proximity of sites of international nature conservation interest.