



ATHLONE JOINT URBAN AREA PLAN 2024-2030

Strategic Issues Paper



Comhairle Contae
Ros Comáin
Roscommon
County Council



WESTMEATH COUNTY COUNCIL
Comhairle Chontae na hIarmhí



1

Introduction

Westmeath County Council and Roscommon County Council are commencing the preparation of a new Joint Urban Area Plan for Athlone. 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, and in collaboration with local communities and individuals, will set a direction and vision for the future growth of Athlone.





Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan - Looking Towards 2030

A Joint Urban Area Plan (JUAP) is a functional planning policy document used to guide development and implement a vision for how an urban area should grow and evolve into a sustainable and resilient place of residence, employment, community, tourism, leisure and recreation, culture and education.

The Athlone JUAP will comprise a series of chapters that cover the broad aims of Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils, cross-cutting themes drawn from national and regional planning frameworks and bespoke policy objectives and management measures regarding the future development of Athlone.

The JUAP will also set out an overarching land use framework which will form the basis for deciding the appropriate locations for different types of future development of the area.

The Plan will be prepared in the context of the framework of national, regional and County strategies and guidelines and must be prepared in accordance with the provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended).

“

In collaboration with local communities and individuals, the plan will set a direction and vision for the future growth of Athlone.

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Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan

The Plan-Making Process

The preparation of the Athlone JUAP has now commenced and will incorporate three stages in the plan preparation process, as set out in the table below, with public consultation undertaken and submissions welcomed at each stage.

Submission Period				
Stage 1 Pre-Draft	Non-statutory consultation period (Strategic Issues Paper)	Consideration of Pre-Draft submissions received and preparation of the Draft Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan		
Stage 2 Draft Plan	Public Consultation (Draft Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan)	Chief Executive's Report on Submissions received on Draft Plan	Consideration of Chief Executive's Report by Elected Members of Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils	If resolved by Elected Members - Material Alterations to the Draft Plan
Stage 3 Proposed Material Alterations to Draft Plan	Public Consultation (Material Alterations to Draft Plan)	Chief Executive's Report on submissions received on Material Alterations to Draft Plan	Consideration of Chief Executive's Report by Elected Members of Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils	Adoption/ Making of the Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan

This Strategic Issues Paper has been prepared to inform the first stage of public consultation in relation to the Athlone JUAP. It presents a broad overview of some of the key issues and challenges affecting Athlone which may need to be addressed by the new Plan. The Strategic Issues Paper is intended to stimulate thought and encourage discussion and involvement from the general public as we plan for the future development of Athlone. Please note that the focus at this stage is on strategic and/or high-level issues pertaining to Athlone.

During this initial public consultation period, it is important that all stakeholders, including local residents, youth groups, children and those representing children, retailers, institutions and businesses as well as community and sporting groups, submit suggestions and ideas on how Athlone should develop and how we should respond to the trends and challenges identified in this paper.

Join the Conversation



A successful Joint Urban Area Plan is one that provides a robust forward-facing development framework, guides quality planning outcomes, and importantly, enjoys broad-based community support. In order to identify the issues most pertinent to those living, working and visiting Athlone, we want to hear your ideas, opinions and suggestions on the future of Athlone. Everyone is welcome to make a submission (including youth groups, children and those representing children). Please note:

- o Your name and address should be provided on a separate cover page as part of your submission / observation.
- o All submissions will be posted on the Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan's dedicated website within 10 days of receipt and will include the name of the individual(s) or organisation who made the submission. Any other identifying details will be removed in line with General Data Protection Regulations.

Submissions / observations may be made in writing (from Thursday 07 December 2023 until Thursday 01 February 2024). Submissions / observations may be made as follows:

1. **Online** via the Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan's consultation portal: www.athlonejointplan.ie



or

2. **By Post** marked "Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan" and sent to either of the following addresses:



- o Administrative Officer, Forward Planning, Westmeath County Council, Áras An Chontae, Mount Street, Mullingar, N91 FH4N, Co. Westmeath
- o Forward Planning, Planning Department, Roscommon County Council, Aras An Chontae, Roscommon, F42 VR98

Please note that emailed submissions will not be accepted.

Please ensure that your submission is lodged by **one medium only** (i.e. posted hard copy or via the online consultation portal) as this will avoid the duplication of submission reference numbers and will streamline the consultation process.

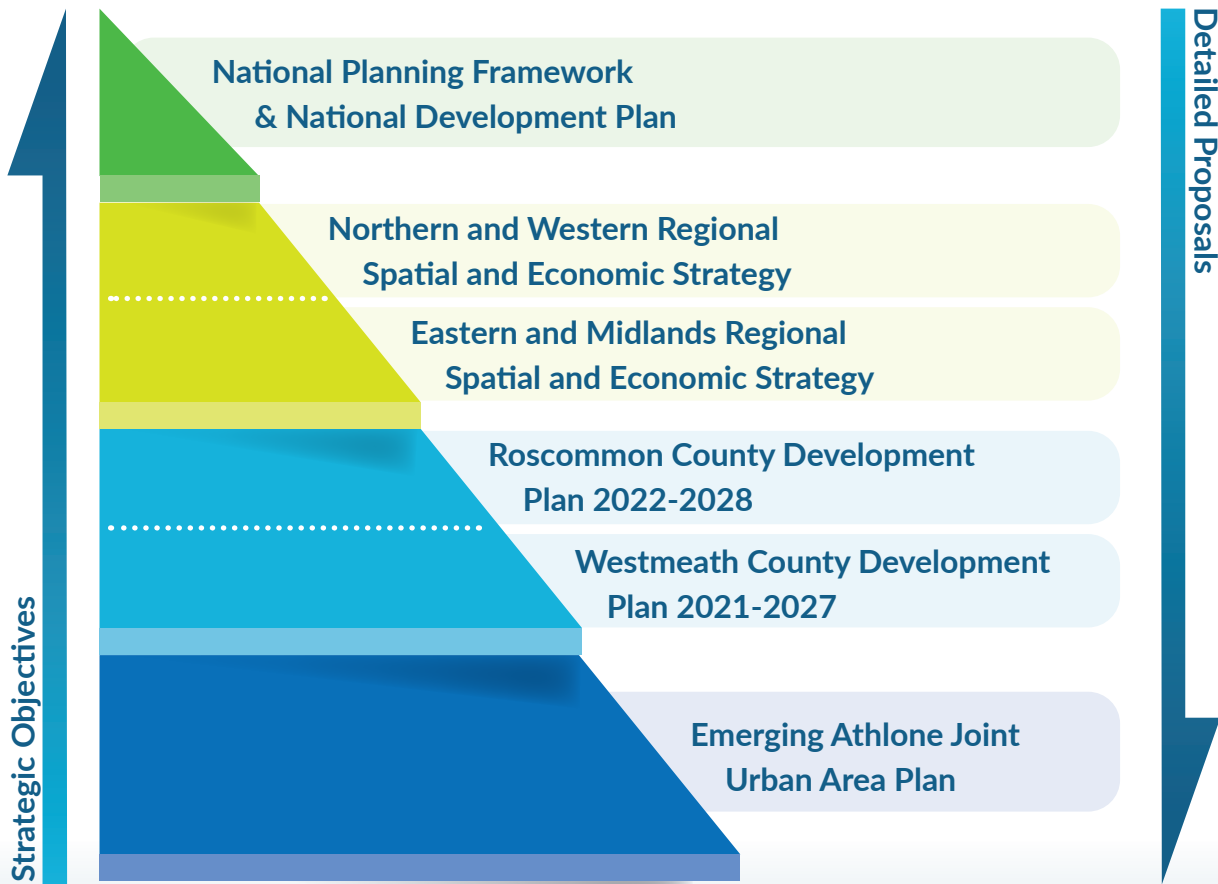
All submissions / observations will be made publicly available on the Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan's dedicated website and at the offices of the Westmeath and Roscommon Planning Departments.



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Strategic Planning Framework

The Irish Planning System operates through a hierarchy of plans with the National Planning Framework (2018), as supported by the National Development Plan, being the overarching strategy document.



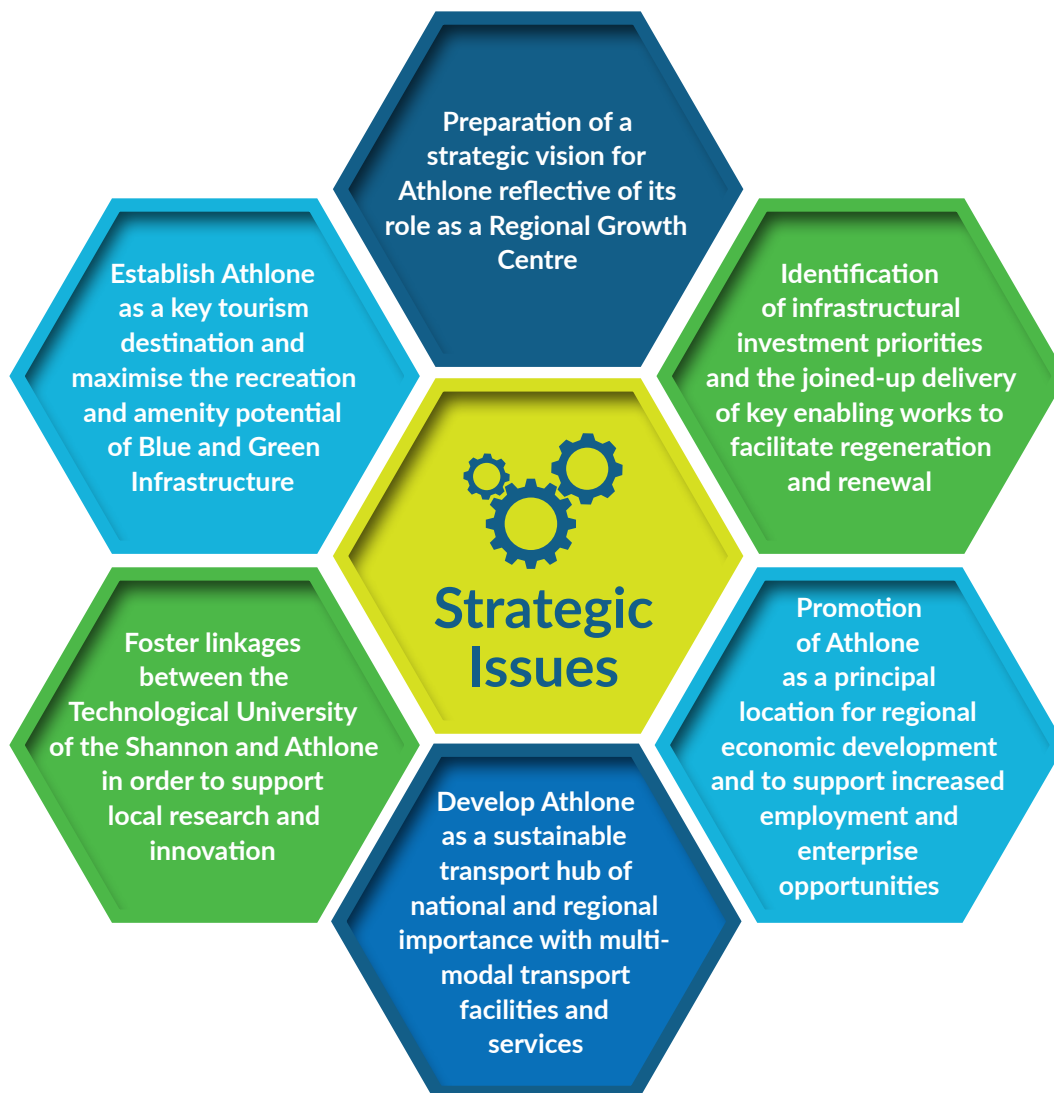
A key component of Ireland's 2040 growth strategy is the establishment, and effective use of, *Regional Centres of Scale* as focal points for employment, services and investment. The National Planning Framework (NPF) has designated Athlone as being a regional centre serving central Ireland due to its strategic location, scale and regional influence.



Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES) set out the mechanisms for delivering the NPF objectives and growth / settlement strategy at the regional level. Athlone is located within the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly Area (EMRA) and Northern and Western Regional Assembly Area (NWRA), both of which are aligned in facilitating the sustainable and compact growth of Athlone as a **Regional Growth Centre**, defined below:

“Regional Growth Centres are large towns with a high level of self-sustaining employment and services that act as regional economic drivers and play a significant role for a wide catchment area”

It is envisaged that Regional Growth Centres, such as Athlone, will be a focus for significant growth and investment to enable them to serve as regional economic drivers as envisioned in the NPF. Key strategic issues for Athlone, as introduced under the RSESs, are outlined below.



The Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027 and Roscommon County Development Plan 2022-2028 establish the overall strategies for the development of Co. Westmeath and Co. Roscommon. Both Local Authorities incorporate policy objectives within their respective development plans to prepare a statutory Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan. Several other overarching objectives for Athlone pertain to the promotion of the town as a sustainable transport hub as well as a key location for regional economic development.

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*, *Athlone 'Urban Design & Regeneration Framework'* and will set out a tailored planning framework for Athlone.

3

Emerging Vision

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.





Athlone is now designated as a Regional Growth Centre which 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 in association with the town's projected population growth and economic development. In this regard, Athlone's regional connectivity, robust economy and diverse social capital reflect in part the strengths and attributes required to achieve these strategic outcomes in a sustainable and healthy manner.

A new strategic vision, informed by all those who live, experience and contribute to Athlone, is required to set out a forward-facing approach to maximising our strengths, addressing constraints and identifying new cross-cutting opportunities for growth and improvement which will allow Athlone to realise its potential as a Regional Growth Centre up to 2030 and beyond.

What are the strengths and challenges you associate with Athlone?

What initiatives should be considered to support Athlone's role as a Regional Growth Centre?

What is your vision for the future of Athlone?

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Population & Housing

Athlone has experienced sustained population growth since 2016 with 22,869 persons living in the urban area in 2022. This positive growth trend aligns with the town’s strategic population target of +30,000 persons by 2031. The Joint Urban Area Plan will have a strategic role in setting out sufficient amounts of land, including the identification of appropriate locations, to accommodate this population target and associated housing demand.

A key parameter for the future development of Athlone is the effective implementation of compact growth. Compact growth seeks to consolidate the urban built environment in order to develop more integrated and connected settlements with improved integration between land uses, social / community infrastructure and services and sustainable modes of travel.

Compact settlement strategies, such as the provision of 30% (minimum) of new residential development on existing brownfield / infill sites within Athlone, promote healthy place-making, the delivery of liveable neighbourhoods, encourage sustainable travel modes and reduce negative environmental impacts (e.g. improved climate resilience). As informed by public engagement, the Joint Urban Area Plan will address appropriate residential densities and building heights and identify infill / brownfield development opportunities to consolidate development in Athlone.

It is also 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-occupiers alike and the prioritisation of universal designs, lifetime adaptability and energy efficiency measures. In this respect, adequate supplies of high quality and inclusive housing will be crucial for delivering liveable neighbourhoods and sustainable communities.

Established urban framework areas such as Monksland / Bellanamullia, Curragh / Lissywollen, Lissywollen South and Cornamagh, in conjunction with a range of potential opportunity sites, have capacity to cater for a significant extent of residential development in the Plan area.





Where should additional population be focused within the functional boundary of the Athlone JUAP?

How can this Plan facilitate the development of brownfield / derelict / under-utilised sites to support future residential development?

What kind of housing / accommodation mix is required to address all sectors of our community?

How can this Plan support and encourage innovative housing solutions, e.g. 'Over the shop' accommodation and town centre living, in tandem with traditional private and social schemes?

How, and where, should new residential developments provide for taller and higher density compact growth?



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Sustainable Communities & Social Infrastructure

As we prepare for significant population growth and changing demographics that will see an increasingly diverse and multi-cultural population with different requirements for Athlone, we need to consider how best to plan for new, expanding and emerging communities within the urban area.

Liveable neighbourhoods, those which provide an appropriate mix of adaptable and inclusive housing options and social / community infrastructure, will set the foundation for delivering Athlone's sustainable communities. Sustainable communities are places of resilience, where the needs of everyone in the community are met, the economy is robust with economic security established and the natural environment is protected. A key characteristic of sustainable communities is high permeability with the surrounding built environment. Drawing from the '10 Minute City' concept, ease of access to essential employment, recreational and social services within a 10-minute walk or bicycle journey of one's home can positively contribute to health, wellbeing and quality of life, social inclusion and improved opportunities to encourage sustainable mobility patterns.

Permeability through place-making and compact growth can also facilitate the provision of additional useable green space for neighbourhoods and communities. Open /amenity and recreational spaces are key components in the delivery of sustainable communities with respect to physical and mental health benefits such as increasing physical activity, enhancing mental wellbeing and providing spaces for social interaction.



The delivery of liveable neighbourhoods and sustainable communities requires us to consider the matter of social inclusion and how we can contribute to creating places that everyone, irrespective of age, ethnicity, background or circumstance, has equal access to the services and facilities they need to achieve their aspirations.

Social infrastructure refers to the facilities and institutions required by communities to satisfy their social, health, economic and cultural needs. Examples of social infrastructure include healthcare, education, religion, community centres, libraries, swimming pools, public spaces, childcare services, recreational facilities and parks / playgrounds. Art and cultural institutions, such as the Dean Crowe and Athlone Little Theatres, also contribute to Athlone’s social capital with regard to strengthening connections amongst diverse groups and supporting community pride and cohesion. In this regard, social / community infrastructure will often provide a natural platform for community and social interaction, and consequently, form an essential part of liveable neighbourhoods and sustainable communities.



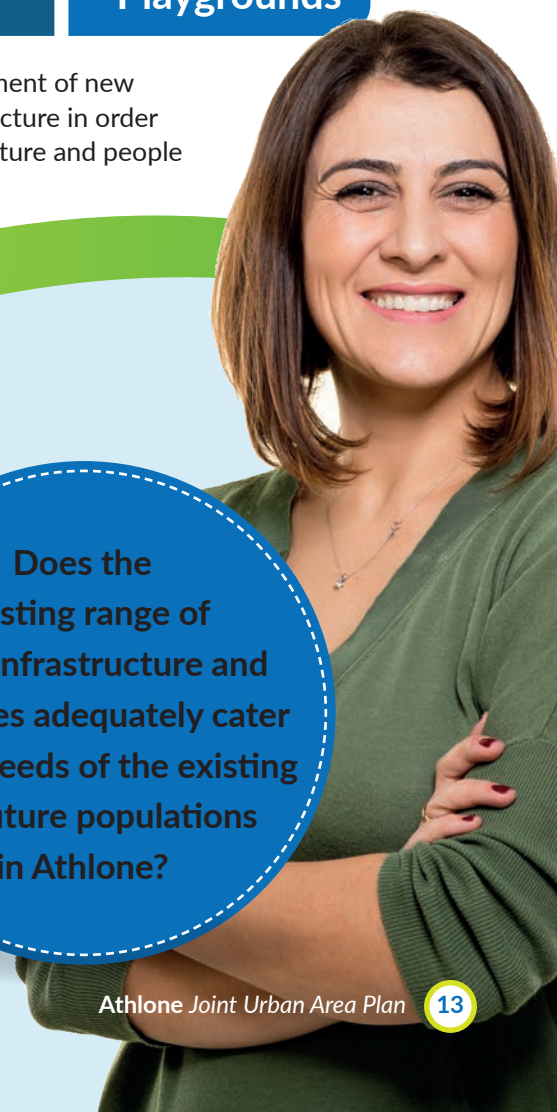
The Joint Urban Area Plan will set out a policy framework guiding the alignment of new development, sustainable transport modes and social / community infrastructure in order to ensure Athlone’s growth is balanced, socially inclusive with respect to culture and people and meets the current and future needs of Athlone’s neighbourhoods and communities.

How can health, well-being and quality of life in Athlone be improved for all communities and individuals?

Are the needs of different cultural, ethnic, youth, elderly and disabled groups being accommodated in our community?

Is there an adequate quantity and quality of community, play, open space and recreational facilities in your area?

Does the existing range of social infrastructure and amenities adequately cater for the needs of the existing and future populations in Athlone?



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Place-making and the Built Environment

Healthy place-making, a multi-disciplinary approach to planning, public collaboration, urban design and the use of the built environment, can create attractive and distinct places as well as improve well-being and quality of life.



Key Design Principles of Quality Placemaking

How we define 'great' places will vary between individuals; however, the successful delivery of such places will broadly consider such attributes as 'movement', 'buildings' including use and replace with sociability and 'open space and landscape'. A 'great place' will provide shared value, benefitting people of all demographics for a variety of reasons and purposes, as well as community pride. In this respect, effective place-making addresses the physical and social connections between people and the spaces they use.



Movement

This is a place that is easily accessible, visible and permeable on an inclusive basis with strong connectivity to the built environment by a variety of sustainable mobility modes.



Open Space and Landscape

The layout and composition of this place promotes a safe, clean and comfortable environment.



Use & Activities

This is a place that is actively managed to support a range of activities.



Sociability

This is a place that encourages frequent visitation, healthy interactions between users

A key consideration for place-making in Athlone will be how we incorporate more intensive forms of development. The emerging Athlone *'Urban Design & Regeneration Framework'* and *'Draft Sustainable and Compact Settlements Guidelines for Planning Authorities'* will inform the Joint Urban Area Plan in guiding place-making and preparing the appropriate criteria for future developments.

Part-and-parcel to effective place-making is urban regeneration, a multi-dimensional process which aims to promote economic development, as well as quality of life improvements, through the renewal of the built environment. Regeneration projects can reinvigorate and promote town centres and the public realm, create distinctive urban quarters that encourage more diverse economies such as *'Night Economies'* and drive initiatives to address dereliction and poor-quality environments.

Successful regeneration requires broad partnerships with national land activation measures such as *Town Centre First and Croí Cónaithe (Towns) Fund, Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF), Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF), European Regional Development Fund and Just Transition funding* crucial in facilitating regeneration projects in Athlone. To date, the Local Authorities have secured substantial funding to support the delivery of such projects as the *'Putting the Heart Back into Monksland'*, the Athlone Urban Design and Regeneration Framework, Church Street Enhancement, Athlone Town Centre Public Realm Enhancement, installation of a multi-million euro cycleway bridge across the Shannon as part of the Dublin – Galway cycleway, Monksland Town and Village Recreation Park and Loughanaskin Regeneration Masterplan.

The on-going identification of opportunity sites, and the iterative assessment of targeted pipeline projects, will be catalysts for the strategic regeneration of Athlone's derelict properties and streetscapes with considerable potential identified for the Connacht Street and Pearse Street environs and the town's network of secondary side streets such as Lloyd's Lane and Friary Lane.

Achieving a quality built environment is essential to supporting healthy communities, sustainable mobility, climate resilience, and overall, successful urban living. Ensuring consistency with the principles set out in the Government's Town Centre First policy, the Joint Urban Area Plan will set out a strong policy framework to utilise and rejuvenate existing buildings and brownfield/infill sites and sustainably manage urban dereliction.

How would you define an attractive place to live, work and visit? Does Athlone meet those criteria, and if not, what is required to bridge this gap?

What are the unique features of Athlone urban environment that should be enhanced and promoted?

What areas of Athlone should be identified for regeneration? Are there specific regeneration works / projects that could be transformative for Athlone?

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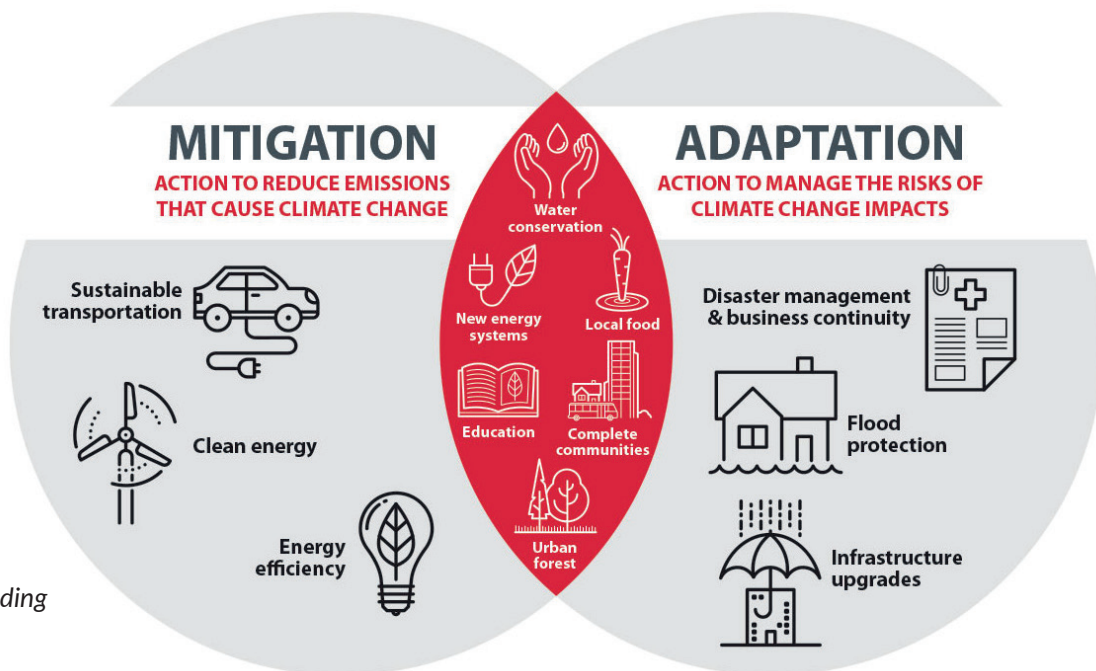
Climate Action & Resilience

It is accepted that the world's climate is changing rapidly. Athlone has experienced the effects of this change, and the adverse consequences, such as flooding, have been evident across Athlone on an increasingly regular basis.

Projections of future global and regional climate change indicate that continued emission of greenhouse gases (GHG) will cause further warming, and ultimately, will lead to increased risks to societies and the natural environment. Therefore, there is an onus on all of us to assist in mitigating the magnitude of long-term climate change impacts by acting now.

Climate action is a central theme underpinning the Westmeath and Roscommon County Development Plans, both of which emphasise the key role that land use, transportation and spatial planning will play in ensuring an integrated approach to addressing climate change. The role of the Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan is to translate high-level GHG targets and climate strategies into localised policies aimed at transitioning Athlone towards a 'low carbon economy' and developing climate resilience. Climate resilience, the ability to prepare for, recover from, and adapt to the impacts of climate change, requires the effective implementation of both 'Mitigation' and 'Adaptation' measures, as illustrated below

Building Climate Resilience



Understanding
Climate
Resilience

The development and implementation of climate action measures in Athlone will be achieved through a range of mechanisms including Local Authority led initiatives and the national Community Climate Action Programme which seeks to support and empower communities to build low carbon sustainable communities. Collaboration and partnership with the Technical University of the Shannon, a leader in climate and sustainability research and innovation, also presents opportunities for developing climate action capacity in the Local Authorities and positioning Athlone as a lab for new and emerging practice.

The following climate action measures for Athlone have been achieved to date:

- Working in partnership with the Office of Public Works to implement the Athlone Flood Alleviation Scheme;
- Funding secured for several projects under the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, which provide for climate resilient development;
- There are 4 no. Sustainable Energy Community Networks operating in partnership with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland to implement climate action projects / initiatives relating to energy efficiency, sustainable / low carbon communities, energy education and community energy generation;
- Public lights have been upgraded to efficient LED standards as part of the Local Authority's implementation of the Climate Adaptation Strategies 2019-2024; and
- Retrofitting of existing residential units by the Local Authorities under the *Energy Efficiency Retrofitting Programme and Midlands Retrofit Programme*.

One of the key climate issues associated with urban areas relates to the relationship between settlement growth, traffic generation and the impact of traffic growth on GHG emissions. Drawing from the findings of the Athlone Area-Based Transport Assessment, the Local Authorities aim to address these linkages and support the reduction of existing levels of GHG emissions by improving sustainable mobility. On-going progress towards the decarbonisation of Athlone's transport sector includes advances in public transportation and active travel:

- Significant investment in the development of a 47km greenway from Mullingar to Athlone, which forms part of the broader Galway to Dublin Cycleway;
- Electrification of Athlone's Bus Éireann local bus fleet under the Government's Pathfinder Programme; and
- A new bike sharing scheme was launched in Athlone on the 1st May 2022 with 1,357 no. bike rentals recorded between May and October 2022;



Policy objectives and development management standards relating to *compact and mixed-use development, urban renewal, sustainable mobility, Green & Blue Infrastructure, Flood Risk Management, Circular Economies and Renewable Energy* will assist in strengthening Athlone's climate resilience. Systems for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of climate action policies will also be investigated to ensure Athlone's long-term success in responding to climate change.

How do you suggest the transition to a low carbon economy be best achieved?

What specific climate mitigation and adaptation measures should be incorporated in this Plan to support our transition to a climate resilient and sustainable regional growth centre?

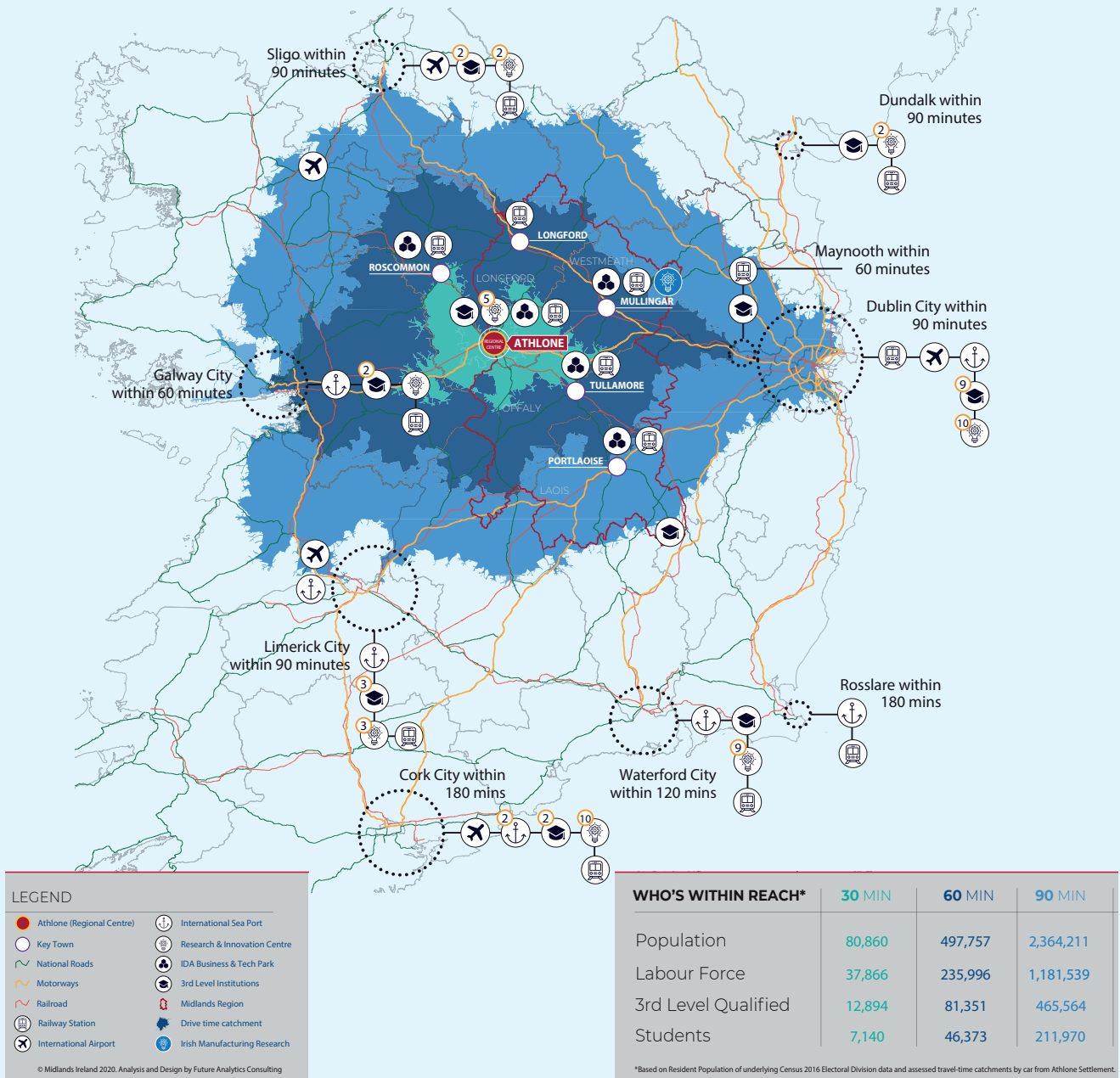
Are there any climate action initiatives that would be beneficial for your local community?

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Economic Development & Employment

Economic Development

Athlone serves as the primary economic driver for the region in attracting employment and providing the necessary infrastructure to sustain business and enterprise. Athlone’s designation as a Regional Growth Centre provides exciting opportunities to capitalise upon the town’s spatial and infrastructural strengths, synergies with the Technological University of the Shannon and successes associated with sectoral clustering and attracting inward investment. As an employment hub and principal location for economic development, it is important to ensure that Athlone remains an attractive and vibrant destination for its residents while also attracting and retaining students and young professionals to the urban area.



Athlone's central location, regional transport connectivity (e.g. road, rail and public services), established infrastructure such as broadband and accessibility to other large Irish markets, such as Dublin City and Galway, have contributed to the town's robust economic base and extensive catchment area. According to research conducted by midlandsireland.ie, there are in excess of 1,100 active enterprises within 5 kilometres of Athlone which employ over 13,000 people from the regional centre and further afield. Athlone's employment profile largely centres on professional services, information & communication, retail and manufacturing with other key sectors being public administration, transportation and accommodation & food. In line with Town Centre First policy guidance, the Local Authorities acknowledge that a strong retail sector is a key attribute in maintaining the vitality of urban centres with respect to employment and economic activity.

	Athlone Core Economic Area		Athlone Functional Economic Area		State
	Persons at Work	Percentage	Persons at Work	Percentage	Percentage
Agriculture	2,888	7.2%	8,703	7.3%	4.4%
Construction	2,112	5.2%	6,674	5.6%	5.1%
Manufacturing	5,478	13.6%	16,555	13.9%	11.4%
Commerce & Trade	8,076	20.0%	24,506	20.6%	23.9%
Transport	2,604	6.5%	6,853	5.8%	8.5%
Public Admin	2,845	7.1%	7,548	6.3%	5.3%
Professional Services	9,509	23.6%	27,114	23.6%	23.5%
Other	6,798	16.9%	19,982	16.8%	17.8%
Total	40,310	100.0%	118,935	100.0%	100.0%

Population Aged 15 years & Above in the Work Force by Industry
(Economic Strategy for the Regional Centre of Athlone (2022))



Whilst benefitting from strategic land reserves in areas such as Monksland and Creggan, new economic opportunities will need to be identified and fostered for Athlone to attract inward investment and remain competitive in international and national markets. Athlone supports emerging and conventional sectoral clusters focused on Life sciences, Global Business Services, Engineering, Manufacturing & Construction, Fintech & ICT, Tourism and Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities. Examples of future enterprise start-ups and drivers include a Life Sciences Innovation Hub in Monksland and the Loughanaskin Urban Quarter.

The Joint Urban Area Plan will support the Technological University of the Shannon's strategic role in Athlone to promote a 'Knowledge-Based Economy', capitalise on emerging synergies and enable new clustering opportunities whilst investing in the skills, talent and services that attract employers to Athlone.

The Joint Urban Area Plan, aligned with the *Economic Strategy for the Regional Centre of Athlone*, will guide economic development to ensure future investment and growth opportunities target locations in line with other cross-cutting development principles pertaining to compact growth, climate resilience and sustainable travel.



Tourism

Athlone is a key Visitor Destination Town for Fáilte Ireland's Hidden Heartlands experience. There has been significant investment in Athlone to ensure the provision of services and infrastructure needed to encourage visitors to stay in the wider region. Athlone itself is recognised for a vibrant arts and culture scene, including Dean Crowe and Athlone Little Theatres, and a diverse heritage offering. A key driver underpinning Athlone's tourism sector is the town's natural heritage, such as the River Shannon and Lough Ree, and associated water-based activities and attractions such as Athlone Castle, the Luan Gallery and Hodson Bay. In addition, Athlone's section of the Dublin to Galway Cycleway includes a new contemporary pedestrian / cycleway bridge over the River Shannon which will become an iconic attraction of the cycleway.

The Joint Urban Area Plan, in conjunction with other tourism strategies such as the Roscommon and Westmeath County Tourism Strategies and the Shannon Tourism Masterplan 2020-2030, will support and promote Athlone as a regional destination and tourism hub. The expansion of Athlone's tourism sector will aid in economic growth, support primary employment and supply chain benefits and create opportunities for new service provision.



What are the Athlone's key economic strengths and competitive advantages that this Plan should promote and safeguard?

What are emerging economic opportunities in Athlone that this Plan can assist in exploiting and where should new strategic economic development be located?

How can this Plan assist in fostering synergies between Athlone and the Technological University of the Shannon?

What are the current constraints / challenges to attracting new, and expanding existing, business and enterprise in Athlone?

Are there new and/or under-utilised tourism opportunities in Athlone that should be further investigated?



9

Transport & Movement

A key consideration of urban place-making is understanding how individuals move through the built environment, and secondly, why specific modes of transport and routes are selected / preferred over others. Connectivity and the ease of movement between places of residence, employment and amenity can impact our quality of life as well as influence how we perceive the attractiveness of a place. 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.

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.



Strategically located on the national road network with existing connectivity to the N6/M6, the N62, the N55 and the N61.



Within 1.5 hours to Dublin Airport, Shannon Airport and Knock Airport



Served by national and local bus routes and is located on the Dublin-Galway and Dublin-Ballina/Westport rail lines



Forms part of the emerging 270 kilometre Galway to Dublin Cycleway



The River Shannon provides connectivity to Lough Ree and the broader Shannon Navigation system (215km)

The *Athlone Area-Based Transport Assessment (ABTA)* will guide and inform our transition towards sustainable mobility in conjunction with delivering appropriate levels of development to support Athlone's sustained growth as an urban regional centre.

Sustainable transportation refers to low emission, energy-efficient, affordable modes of transport which can include walking, cycling, public transportation including rail and car shares. A shift towards sustainable transport modes, and viable reductions in vehicular traffic, has the potential to support the economic competitiveness of Athlone, reduce the cost of congestion (CO2 emissions) and improve the attractiveness of the town centre, enhancing mobility access and retail vitality.

The ABTA indicates that Athlone's travel mode share is generally distributed across private cars (70%), public transportation (10%) and active travel (20%). When compared to national and urban averages, Athlone has a lower share of active and sustainable mobility compared to other urban areas and a higher share of private car use. It is acknowledged that encouraging a modal shift to sustainable transport will require an understanding of the local challenges impeding uptake. Typical challenges to implementing urban sustainable mobility may include:

- Public realm deficiencies for walking and cycling;
- Demand pressures on physical infrastructure (shared spaces); and
- Lack of available public transport services

Urban public realms, encompassing streets, laneways and open squares, have historically been designed to facilitate vehicle movement with limited consideration of the broader range of functions possible in these shared spaces. Innovative place-making and urban design principles are now challenging these standards with new emphasis on prioritising sustainable mobility, inclusivity and promotion of place in the public realm. As exemplified by the Athlone Town Centre Public Realm Enhancement works, there are opportunities throughout Athlone to encourage active mobility, improve accessibility and support social engagement in our public realms. The delivery of multi-functional public realms can benefit all residents by supporting liveable neighbourhoods and communities and promoting sustainable mobility with a wide range of positive economic, social and environmental outcomes.

The Joint Urban Area Plan will positively consider sustainable transport and smarter travel opportunities in planning for the compact growth of the town.

How can this Plan improve the safety of pedestrians and cyclists within Athlone, e.g. new/upgraded footpaths, cycleways, pedestrianised streets, etc.?

What are the key connectivity and movement issues affecting workers, residents and visitors within Athlone?

What are the key areas of Athlone that would benefit from improved connectivity from a public transport, cycle and walking perspective?

What practical measures could this Plan incorporate to positively encourage increased active travel (e.g. walking, cycling and public transport use) and reduce car dependency?

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Heritage & Amenity

The Heritage Council broadly defines heritage as what we have inherited from the past, to value and enjoy in the present, and to preserve and pass on to future generations. Heritage can encompass both the intangible (music, sport, traditions, etc.) and tangible, such as historical sites, archaeological monuments and artefacts and architecture, as well as natural features, including waterways, landscapes and biodiversity. The River Shannon's influence on the development of Athlone has resulted in unique local heritage which enhances the town's character, identity and sense of place for residents and visitors alike.

Built Heritage

Athlone features diverse architectural and archaeological heritage arising from its historic role as the principal crossing point of the River Shannon. The town core is designated as both an Architectural Conservation Area and Zone of Archaeological Potential with a large number of Recorded Monuments and Protected Structures present, including distinguished landmarks such as Athlone Castle, the Church of Saints Peter and Paul and Athlone's historic walls and defences. The Joint Urban Area Plan aims 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.



234

Protected Structures
6 National
173 Regional



8

Architectural
Conservation
Areas

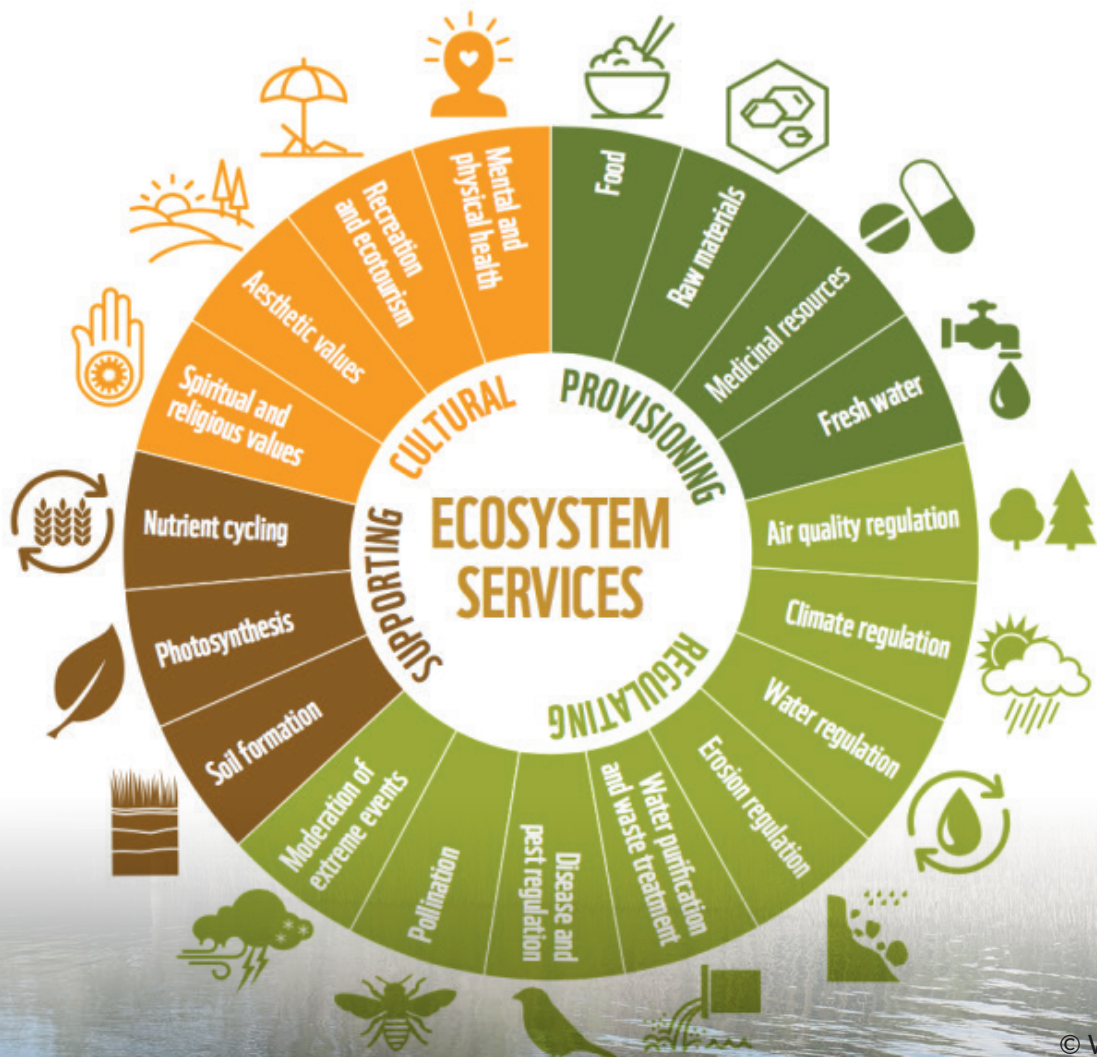


97

Recorded
Monuments

Natural Heritage

Natural heritage refers to the sum total of biodiversity, which encompasses all flora and fauna, ecosystems and physical landscape features. One of the more prominent natural heritage features within Athlone is the River Shannon, which is designated in part as the Middle Shannon Callows SPA (south of the town core) and the Lough Ree SPA & SAC (north of the town core). Natural heritage exists everywhere throughout Athlone and is not solely confined to designated sites such as local waterways, e.g. the Athlone Canal, River AI and the Cross River, and parklands including Wansboro Field and Burgess Park. Athlone also benefits from a rich hinterland encompassing Lough Ree and natural peatlands such as Crosswood Bog SAC. Under the Ecosystem Services approach, it is recognised that natural heritage assets not only enrich biodiversity but also support a wide range of natural systems. The protection and enhancement of natural heritage will need to be reflected within our land use planning policies to ensure appropriate balance with compact growth proposals.



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Green & Blue Infrastructure

Green Infrastructure is defined as interconnecting networks of natural and semi-natural terrestrial spaces such as the Old Rail Trail / Dublin-Galway Cycleway, Cushla Greenway and the Shannon Banks Nature Trail. Blue Infrastructure refers to waterways and water bodies, i.e. the River Shannon, the Athlone Canal and the Cross River. Maintaining and improving access to green and blue infrastructure from residential areas, the urban centre and transportation hubs will be crucial to providing long term benefits for Athlone such as climate resilience, quality place-making and tourism and positively influence well-being and health. The Joint Urban Area Plan will seek to address potential barriers to the integration of green and blue networks and identify opportunities to develop new and improved linkages both within the urban area and its hinterland such as Lough Ree and the broader Galway-Athlone greenway / cycleway.

How can this Plan support the protection, conservation and enhancement of Athlone's natural heritage and biodiversity?

How should we manage, enhance and safeguard our green and blue infrastructural assets as the population of the Athlone continues to grow?

What are potential barriers to accessing Athlone's green and blue infrastructure networks and how can we improve accessibility / connectivity for all residents?

How should this Plan address dereliction and encourage the active conservation of our built heritage such as sensitive reuse / renewal for residential and economic purposes?



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Enabling Infrastructure

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. While Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils are not directly responsible for all aspects of infrastructure provision (e.g. water, energy, waste, and etc), active engagement with external stakeholders, such as Uisce Éireann, the ESB and Gas Networks Ireland, can inform and influence the delivery of infrastructure through the statutory planning process. 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.

Water and Wastewater

Uisce Éireann is responsible for public water services (potable water supply and wastewater effluent drainage), including the delivery, integration and implementation of strategic projects and infrastructural improvements. Uisce Éireann is currently progressing three major capital work streams in the Athlone area: *The Athlone Water Supply Scheme (Phase 2) Upgrade, the Athlone Main Drainage Scheme and the Athlone Mains Rehabilitation Scheme*. The main drivers for these schemes are to improve water quality and resilience of supply, reduce environmental pollution and increase network capacities to support future development.

Surface water drainage is the responsibility of the Local Authorities and is overseen through the development management process. Design measures such as Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SuDS), and the incorporation of nature-based surface water solutions into drainage networks, will become increasingly important as climate adaptation measures when managing drainage in the urban environment.

Waste

Waste management is an integral component of facilitating sustainable urban development, safeguarding public health and maintaining a high-quality environment. The Local Authorities will continue to facilitate the implementation of the EU Waste Hierarchy as set out in national legislation and regional waste management policies, including the relevant Eastern Midlands Region Waste Management and Connacht-Ulster Waste Management Plans and the emerging *National Waste Management Plan for a Circular Economy*.

Waste hierarchy



The EU Waste Hierarchy

The Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan will encourage the implementation of 'circular economies' in order to improve resource management and promote more sustainable consumption patterns in Athlone.



Energy

Significant population and economic growth within Athlone will give rise to increased energy demands throughout the urban area. A safe, secure and reliable energy supply is therefore crucial to supporting Athlone's future development. Due cognisance will be given to the Climate Action Plan 2023 and the need to transition towards renewable, decarbonised and decentralised energy sources, technologies and infrastructure. The plan preparation process provides an opportunity to investigate innovative renewable energy opportunities in Athlone and to consider what is appropriate / feasible:

- **Design** (passive solar, natural ventilation, vegetation (e.g. green roofs), etc.)
- **Technology Scale** (micro, domestic, community, auto-production, commercial, etc.)
- **Technology Type** (solar, hydro, bio-energy, hydrogen, district heating / cooling, wind, storage, etc.)
- **Location**

The Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan will support and encourage the delivery of low carbon and energy efficient development through appropriate land use zoning and consolidation, sustainable design, promotion of local and national refurbishment / retrofit incentives and the integration / provision of renewables where appropriate.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

The availability of reliable Information and Communication Technology (ICT), such as high-speed broadband and telecommunications services, will be critical to attracting investment and sustaining businesses and enterprises. ICT infrastructure also benefits social / community development such as education, including associated knowledge-based economies (e.g. 'research and development' and sectoral clustering).

What infrastructure/ services need to be improved and prioritised to support Athlone's growth.

Are there any specific circular economy proposals which should be included in this Plan to improve the promotion of waste reduction?

How should renewable energy sources be encouraged and integrated within the built environment of Athlone?

The environmental assessment of the Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan, which includes consideration of the potential environmental impacts arising from the implementation of policies and objectives, is a crucial element of the plan preparation process. The assessments include a Strategic Environmental Assessment, Appropriate Assessment and Strategic Flood Risk Assessment.

Strategic Environmental Assessment

A Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), in accordance with European law (EU Directive 2001/42/EC), aims to provide a high level of protection to the receiving environment and promote sustainable development by contributing to the integration of environmental considerations into the preparation and adoption of a development plan. The SEA is carried out in parallel to the preparation of the Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan and includes a systematic evaluation of the environmental effects of implementing the plan.

Appropriate Assessment

The EU Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) aims to promote the maintenance of biodiversity through the conservation of Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats. This network of protected areas is collectively known as Natura 2000 sites, which include Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas. An Appropriate Assessment is an assessment of potential effects of a plan or project, either individually or in combination with other plans and projects, on protected European sites (Natura 2000 sites). A development plan can only be adopted if it will not have a significant effect on a Natura 2000 site(s) or adversely affect the integrity of a Natura 2000 site(s) as per the site's conservation objectives.

Strategic Flood Risk Assessment

The EU Floods Directive (2007/60/EC) and the *"Planning System and Flood Risk Management Guidelines for Planning Authorities"* (DoEHLG/OPW, 2009) set out the requirement for a plan to be accompanied by a Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA). A SFRA will provide an assessment of all types of flood risk in Athlone and will assist in making informed strategic land-use planning decisions and formulate flood risk policies.

Reports in relation to all of the above assessments will be available for public inspection in conjunction with the Draft Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan.

