

CHAPTER 1



CHAPTER 1 Introduction

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1.1 Introduction

The Draft Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027 sets out the Council's proposed policies and objectives for the development of the County over the Plan period. The Development Plan seeks to develop and improve, in a sustainable manner, the social, economic, environmental and cultural assets of the County.

Located in the heart of Ireland, County Westmeath covers an area of 1,756 square kilometres and is historically known as the 'Lake County', rich in arts, culture, heritage and natural amenities. These many natural amenities include the Hill of Uisneach, the mythological and sacred centre of Ireland, the River Shannon and Lough Ree, adjacent to Athlone, the River Brosna, Lough Owel and Lough Ennell, adjacent to Mullingar, with Lough Derravaragh, Lough Lene and Lough Sheelin in the north of the County. In terms of national and international tourism promotion, Westmeath's appeal is recognised and benefits from the dual promotion of Fáilte Ireland's 'Ancient East' brand proposition to the east of the County and 'Ireland's Hidden Heartlands' to the west.

Westmeath has an array of attractive towns and villages ranging from the thriving Regional Centre of Athlone, the County town of Mullingar, to the strong market towns of Moate and Kinnegad and the quaint and historical villages such as Multyfarnham, Glasson and Tyrrellspass.

The M4/N4 which traverses the County in a north-westerly direction offers the County ease of access to the greater Dublin area, with Dublin Airport and Dublin Port just one hour's drive from Mullingar. The M6 from Kinnegad, through Athlone provides further connection to Galway and the West. The N52, an important national secondary route traversing the County, further connects the north east with the Munster region. Significant rail infrastructure enhances this connectivity, with the Dublin-Sligo railway line serving Mullingar and the Dublin-Westport/Dublin-Galway line serving Athlone. Westmeath is also home to a strategic section of the Galway to Dublin National Cycle Network (NCN.) Extending across the County from the Meath County Boundary along the existing Royal Canal Greenway to Mullingar before connecting to 'The Old Rail Trail' for 42km to the town of Athlone.

There are four electoral areas in the County, Mullingar, Kinnegad, Moate and Athlone which in turn form the Mullingar-Kinnegad and Athlone-Moate Municipal Districts through which many of the local services are delivered by the Council.

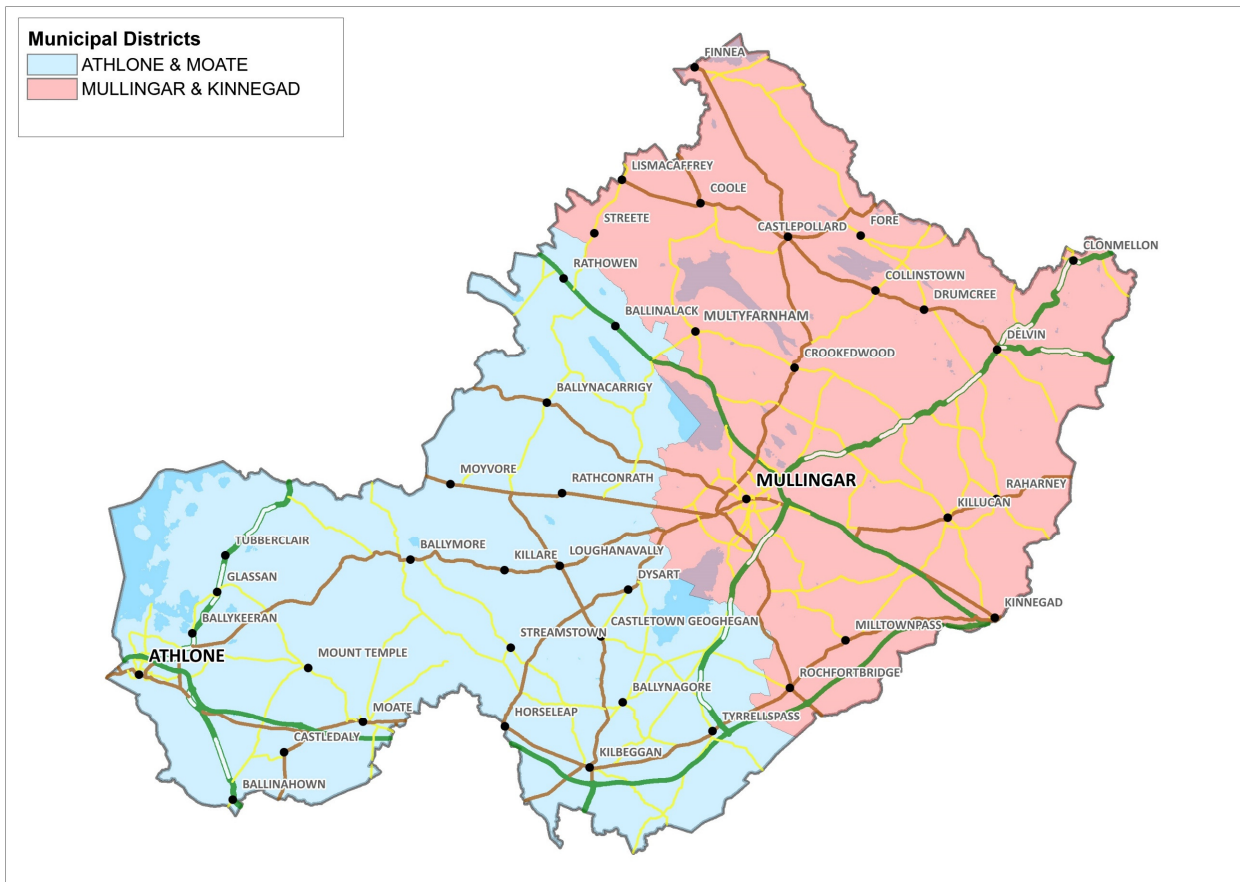


Figure 1.1 Map of Municipal Districts in Westmeath

1.2 Strategic Context

Under the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended) each Planning Authority is obliged to prepare a development plan for its functional area every six years. The Development Plan is designed to set out the key policy context for the development of the county and is set within a hierarchy of national and regional spatial plans and guidelines and provides a detailed strategic landuse framework for each local authority.

The current Plan was adopted on 21st January 2014 and came into effect on the 18th February 2014. The Planning and Development Act 2000 as amended, requires a planning authority to review its existing Development Plan and prepare a new one for its area not later than 4 years after the making of a Development Plan.

In accordance with Section 11 (1)(a) of the Planning & Development Act 2000 as amended, the review of the existing Development Plan and preparation of a new Development Plan by the planning authority is required to be strategic in nature for the purposes of developing—

- (a) the objectives and policies to deliver an overall strategy for the proper planning and sustainable development of the area of the Development Plan, and
- (b) the core strategy, and
- (c) shall take account of the statutory obligations of any local authority in the area and any relevant policies or objectives for the time being of the Government or of any Minister of the Government.

In accordance with Section 10 (2) of this Act a development plan is required to include the following objectives (please note this list is not exhaustive):

- Zoning of land for the use solely or primarily of particular areas for particular purposes;
- Transport, energy and communication facilities;
- Water supplies and waste water services;
- The promotion of sustainable settlement and transportation strategies;
- Address the necessity of adaptation to climate change; in particular, having regard to location, layout and design of new development;
- Reduce energy demand and reduce anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions;
- Conservation and protection of the environment.

The Draft Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027 is in accordance with the requirement of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended).

- The zoning of land for the use solely or primarily of particular areas for particular purposes.
- The provision or facilitation of the provision of infrastructure including transport, energy and communication facilities.
- Water supplies, and waste water services.
- The conservation and protection of the environment including, in particular, the archaeological and natural heritage.
- The encouragement, pursuant to Article 10 of the Habitats Directive, of the management of features of the landscape, such as traditional field boundaries, important for the ecological coherence of the Natura 2000 network and essential for the migration, dispersal and genetic exchange of wild species.
- The integration of the planning and sustainable development of the area with the social, community and cultural requirements of the area and its population.
- The preservation of the character of the landscape.
- The protection of structures, or parts of structures, which are of special architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, social or technical interest.
- The preservation of the character of architectural conservation areas.

- The development and renewal of areas identified having regard to the core strategy, that are in need of regeneration.
- The promotion of sustainable settlement and transportation strategies in urban and rural areas including the promotion of measures to:
 - (i) Reduce energy demand in response to the likelihood of increases in energy and other costs due to long-term decline in non-renewable resources.
 - (ii) Reduce anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions.
 - (iii) Address the necessity of adaptation to climate change; in particular, having regard to location, layout and design of new development.

The Draft Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027 is in accordance with the requirement of Section 10 (2) the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended).

1.3 Synopsis of Process undertaken in the Preparation of the CDP 2021-2027

Westmeath County Council commenced the County Development Plan review process on 16th February 2018 with a public submission period up until the 20th April 2018.

In accordance with Section 11 (1)(b) (ii) of the Planning & Development Act 2000 as amended, the development plan review was suspended until after the making of the regional spatial and economic strategy (RSES).

The RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region was subsequently adopted and effective from 28th June 2019 further to which Westmeath County Council recommenced the review of the existing Westmeath County Development Plan 2014 – 2020 with the preparation of the draft County Development Plan 2021-2027.

The submission date for the preliminary public consultation was extended until 20th April 2018. A Consultation Issues paper was prepared in advance of the consultation period and featured the following topics for consideration:-

- Strategic Planning
- Settlement Strategy & Housing
- Urban Design, Place-making & Sustainable Communities
- Economic Development
- Transport & Movement
- Infrastructure
- Green Infrastructure
- Natural, Built & Cultural Heritage
- Rural Development
- Tourism
- Environment- AA, SEA, SFRA

Ninety-three submissions were received during the pre-Draft consultation period. The opinions, views and ideas set out in the written submissions, and of those expressed and recorded at the public consultation events/stakeholder meetings, were considered in the preparation of this Draft Plan.

Three Public Consultation Evenings were hosted in the Council Offices of Mullingar, Athlone and Castlepollard in April 2018.

In addition to the above meetings, Council officials also met with the following stakeholders/groups during the consultation period:

- Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA)
- Westmeath Community Childcare
- Youth Work Ireland, Midlands
- Age Friendly Alliance
- Waterways Ireland
- Comhairle Na Nog
- Westmeath branch of Irish Farmers Association
- Dept of Education & Skills

A Chief Executive's Report on submissions received during the Pre-Draft consultation phase issued to Members for their consideration on June 1st 2018. Following consideration of this Report, Members were given the opportunity to issue directions regarding the preparation of the Draft Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027. Such directions were required to be strategic in nature and take account of any relevant policies or objectives for the time being of the Government or of any Minister of the Government. Members subsequently considered and approved the Chief Executive Report, together with Draft Strategic Directions having regard to the Pre-Draft consultation.

The recommendations contained within the Chief Executive's Report, including the Strategic Directions of the Members, have informed the preparation of this Draft Plan.



1.4 Structure of the County Development Plan 2021-2027

The Draft Westmeath County Development Plan 2021– 2027 has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Planning and Development Act, 2000 (as amended). This Plan, once adopted, replaces the Westmeath Development Plan 2014 – 2020 and consists of a Written Statement including specific policy objectives supported with Maps and Appendices.

The Written Statement is divided into 16 separate chapters setting out the vision, strategic context, aims, goals and the settlement and core strategies for the County. The format of the plan is as follows:

- Chapter 1 Introduction
- Chapter 2 Core Strategy
- Chapter 3 Housing Strategy
- Chapter 4 Sustainable Communities
- Chapter 5 Economy & Employment
- Chapter 6 Tourism
- Chapter 7 Urban Centres & Place-making
- Chapter 8 Settlement Plans
- Chapter 9 Rural Westmeath

- Chapter 10 Transport, Infrastructure & Energy
- Chapter 11 Climate Action
- Chapter 12 Natural Heritage & Green Infrastructure
- Chapter 13 Landscape & Lake Amenities
- Chapter 14 Cultural Heritage
- Chapter 15 Land Use Objectives
- Chapter 16 Development Management Standards

The Appendices include the Council's Housing Strategy, a statement detailing implementation of Ministerial Guidelines, County Westmeath Retail Strategy, List of Protected Views, List of Public Rights of Way, Trees & Woodland subject to Tree Preservation Orders, and Map Based Local Objectives (to be read in conjunction with the Development Plan Maps).

The Maps provide a graphic representation of the proposals of the Plan indicating land use zoning and other objectives of the Council. They do not purport to be accurate survey maps from which site dimensions or other survey data can be determined. Should any conflict arise between the Written Statement and the Maps, the Written Statement shall prevail. Should any conflict arise between the print and electronic version of the Plan the print version shall prevail.

1.5 Legislative Context

This plan should be read in the hierarchical context of legislation and plans that exist at International, National and Regional level. Since the adoption of the Westmeath County Development Plan 2014 – 2020 there have been significant developments at national and regional level in terms of strategic economic and planning policy - in particular, the publication of the National Planning Framework – Ireland 2040 (NPF), the National Development Plan 2018-2027 (NDP) and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) 2019 – 2031.

- **The National Planning Framework (NPF)**

The NPF is the overarching planning policy for the state (published in February 2018 under Project 2040) and contains ten National Strategic Outcomes and 75 National Policy Objectives. This planning framework sets out where development and investment should be guided to shape the national, regional and local spatial development in economic, environmental and social terms to 2040.

- **The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) 2019**

The principal statutory purpose of the RSES is to support the implementation of Project Ireland 2040 and the economic policies and objectives of the Government by providing a long-term strategic planning and economic framework for the development of the Eastern and Midland Region.

- **Ministerial Guidelines**

Ministerial Guidelines issued to Planning Authorities regarding their functions under the Planning Acts have been considered in the making of this Plan in accordance with Section 28 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000 (as amended).

The draft plan policy context is primarily guided and informed by NPF and the RSES in addition to the requirements of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended) and the relevant Ministerial guidelines. Incorporating the national and regional strategic vision and policy objectives, the completed County Development Plan shall consist of a written statement including a Vision Statement, key policy objectives with supporting maps and appendices to present Westmeath County Councils proposals to facilitate and achieve balanced and sustainable growth in the county over the plan period and beyond.

Additionally, the following environmental assessments have been undertaken to inform the Draft Plan:-

- **Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)**

SEA is the formal, systematic evaluation of the likely significant environmental effects of implementing a plan or programme before a decision is made to adopt it. SEA is required by the EU SEA Directive as transposed into Irish law through the Planning and Development (Strategic Environmental Assessment) Regulations 2004 (SI No. 436 of 2004) as amended.

The findings of the SEA are included in the SEA Environmental Report that accompanies the Draft Plan. That report provides a clear understanding of the likely environmental consequences of decisions regarding the adoption and implementation of the Plan. All SEA recommendations have been integrated into the Draft Plan.

- **Appropriate Assessment (AA)**

AA is a focused and detailed impact assessment of the implications of a plan or project on European Sites designated for habitats or species. AA is required by the EU Habitats Directive as transposed into Irish law through the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended). The findings of the AA are included in the AA Natura Impact Report that accompanies the Draft Plan. That report provides a clear understanding of the likely consequences of the Draft Plan on European Sites.

All AA recommendations have been integrated into the Draft Plan. The emerging conclusion of the AA is that the Plan will not affect the integrity of the European Sites, alone or in combination with other plans or projects.

- **Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA)**

SFRA is an assessment of flood risk and includes mapped boundaries for Flood Risk Zones, taking into account factors including local knowledge, site walkovers and flood risk indicators. SFRA is required under 'The Planning System and Flood Risk Management Guidelines for Planning Authorities' (Department of Environment and Office of Public Works, 2009) and associated Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government Circular PL2/2014. All SFRA recommendations have been integrated into the Draft Plan.

1.6 Profile for County Westmeath

The designation of Athlone as a Regional Growth Centre supported by the identification of Mullingar as a Key Town in the National Planning Framework has elevated Westmeath's position in the Midlands region and represents a significant advancement for the County with a focus on improving local economies and quality of life to attract investment supported by sustainable communities. The inclusion of Athlone as regional driver will provide for increased employment and investment opportunities supported by the strong tourism assets identified throughout the County and targeted regeneration projects.

The Core Strategy (Chapter 3) identifies the population trends and targets for Westmeath together with the settlement hierarchy in accordance with the NPF and RSES.

Census 2016 recorded a population of 88,770 in Westmeath consisting of 44,688 females and 44,082 males, an increase of 3% since the previous census in 2011. 48.9% (43,435 persons) of the County's population were recorded as living in urban areas and 51.1% (45,335 persons) living in rural areas. During the period 2011-2016 the two main towns, Athlone and Mullingar, experienced a population increase of 5.9% (20,153 to 21,349) and 4.1% (20,103 to 20,928) respectively.

Population trends, economic trends and societal changes as outlined in the below infographic influence the decision-making process and service delivery planning. Having awareness and understanding of these societal changes is critical in determining future strategic objectives. As the main provider of local services, we must be aware of these changes and adopt strategies and plans to meet changing societal needs.



Population By Town

Town	Population
Athlone (Monksland/Bealnamullia)	21,349
Mullingar	20,928
Castlepollard	1,163
Moate	2,763
Kinnegad	2,745
Kilbeggan	1,199

Top 3 Non-Irish Nationalities in Westmeath



Population of Westmeath
88,770

Average Age of Population



31,813 Private Households in the county

Average no. of persons per household
2.8



Population By Geographical Area

48.9% living in town



51.1% living in rural area



Total persons living alone in the County in 2016 was 7,482

i.e. 8.5% of all those living in private households



11,370 aged 65 and over in Westmeath



Average disposable income of €18,430

the highest average in the midlands



87% of the Population recorded as having good and very good health as per the latest CSO figure



WHERE WE WORK

34,935 persons resident in the county who were 'working'

A total of 4,786 businesses in Westmeath*

*CSO 2017

5,154
Wholesale and Retail Trade

14.6%

4,203
Health & Social Work

11.9%



4,085
Manufacturing

11.6%



3,118
Education

8.8%



2,223
Public Administration & Defence

6.3%

Average travel time of commuting workers

28.8 minutes



WALKED

8.4%



USED PUBLIC TRANSPORT

3.6%



TRAVEL BY CAR

72.9%



CYCLED

1.4%

GETTING TO WORK

EDUCATION ATTAINMENT

13.9%
Primary

16.4%
Secondary (lower)

30.9%
Secondary (upper)

38.8%
Third Level



census 2016 RESULTS
www.cso.ie

Education figures relate to those over 15 years of age only

1.7 Strategic Vision

“To create and facilitate sustainable competitive growth throughout the County that supports the health and wellbeing of the people of Westmeath, providing an attractive destination, as a place in which to live, work, invest, do business and visit, offering high quality employment and educational opportunities within sustainable communities whilst safeguarding the environmental, cultural, heritage and tourism assets of the County”.

1.8 Strategic Aims

- **Sustainable Communities:** To develop and support vibrant sustainable communities in Westmeath where people can live, work and enjoy access to a wide range of community, health and educational facilities and amenities, suitable for all ages and needs, in both urban and rural areas, thereby supporting a high quality of life for all to enjoy.
- **Economic Development and Employment:** To promote and assist in Westmeath’s economic development and encourage increased resilience in the County’s enterprise, underpinned by talent and innovation, thereby ensuring that Westmeath is best placed to excel in the long-term delivery of sustainable jobs and an enhanced standard of living for all.
- **Tourism:** To provide for the continued expansion of the tourism sector, with a focus on creating strong visitor destination towns and sufficient high-quality visitor services and the continued development and enhancement of visitor attractions and activities to provide memorable, immersive visitor experiences, capitalising on our natural and cultural heritage assets, whilst safeguarding these resources for future generations.
- **Urban Centres & Placemaking:** To protect and enhance the unique identity and character of Westmeath’s towns and villages and improve quality of life and wellbeing through the application of Healthy Placemaking, underpinned by good urban design, with the creation of attractive public spaces that are vibrant, distinctive, safe and accessible and which promote and facilitate positive social interaction.
- **Settlements:** To create a network of attractive, liveable towns and villages in the County with increased levels of population, employment activity and enhanced levels of amenity which support a high quality of life and well-being.
- **Rural:** To support the role of rural areas and the countryside in sustaining the rural economy and improved connectivity, broadband and rural economic development opportunities through the development of the agricultural and agri-food sector, agricultural related developments and enterprises, including diversification of the rural economy, forestry, energy production, tourism, recreation, mineral extraction and/other new and emerging rural based enterprises, all within the context of the sustainable management of land and

resources, thereby increasing the competitiveness of the rural economy, which will sustain and strengthen rural communities.

- **Transport, Infrastructure and Energy:** To achieve a sustainable, integrated and low carbon transport system with excellent connectivity within and to Westmeath by enhancing existing strategic transportation infrastructure in the County. To provide, improve and extend water, wastewater, surface water and flood alleviation services throughout the County and to prioritise the provision of water services infrastructure, to achieve improved environmental protection and to protect public health. To provide for the development of indigenous energy resources, with an emphasis on renewable energy supplies.
- **Climate Action:** To transition to a low carbon and climate resilient County, with an emphasis on reduction in energy demand and greenhouse gas emissions, through a combination of effective mitigation and adaptation responses to climate change.
- **Natural Heritage and Green Infrastructure:** Continue to protect and enhance the County's natural heritage and biodiversity and ensure that networks of green infrastructure are identified, created, protected and enhanced to provide a wide range of environmental, social and economic benefits to communities.
- **Landscape and Lake Amenities:** To improve the knowledge and understanding of the County's landscape and lakelands, and enhance the overall characteristics, qualities and diversity of landscape character, its sense of place and local distinctiveness in recognition of the amenity potential of the County.
- **Cultural Heritage:** Westmeath County Council recognises the importance of identifying, valuing and safeguarding our archaeological, architectural and cultural heritage for future generations and aims to do so by means of proper management, sensitive enhancement and/or appropriate development of this resource.

1.9 Cross Cutting Themes

The following cross-cutting themes inform the plan:

- **Healthy Placemaking** - To promote people's quality of life through the creation of healthy and attractive places to live, work, visit, invest and study in.
- **Sustainable Communities** - To develop and support vibrant sustainable communities in Westmeath where people can live, work and enjoy access to a wide range of community, health and educational facilities and amenities, suitable for all ages and needs, in both urban and rural areas, thereby supporting a high quality of life for all to enjoy.

- **Climate Action** - The need to enhance climate resilience and to accelerate a transition to a low carbon society recognising the role of natural capital and ecosystem services in achieving this.
- **Regeneration** – Urban and Rural Regeneration to capitalise on existing underutilised assets of our towns and villages to achieve compact economic growth as an alternative to unsustainable urban sprawl.
- **Green Infrastructure** – To protect and enhance the County’s natural heritage and biodiversity and ensure that networks of green infrastructure are identified, created, protected and enhanced to provide a wide range of environmental, social and economic benefits to communities.
- **Tourism** – To create strong visitor destinations, attractions and activities through high-quality visitor services to provide memorable, immersive visitor experiences, capitalising on our natural and cultural heritage assets.

These six key cross-cutting principles reflect the three pillars of sustainability; Social, Environmental and Economic. The policy context and central objective of this plan is people focussed, recognising that ‘quality of life’ encapsulates strong economic output and stability, good environmental performance and a good standard of living for all, through the creation of healthy, sustainable and attractive places.



WESTMEATH COUNTY COUNCIL
Comhairle Chontae na hIarmhí

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