

CHAPTER 5



CHAPTER 5 Economy & Employment

Table of Contents

5.1	Aim	92
5.2	Background	92
5.3	Westmeath's Economic Profile	92
5.4	Employment	96
5.5	Educational Trends.....	104
5.6	Commuting in Westmeath.....	107
5.7	Policy Context	108
5.8	National Policy Context.....	109
5.9	Regional Policy Context.....	111
5.10	Local Policy Context Westmeath Local Economic and Community Plan (WLECP)	112
5.11	The Role of the County Development Plan.....	114
5.12	Key Stakeholders in the Economic growth of Westmeath	114
5.13	Economic Development Strategy (EDS)	114
5.14	Retail	129

5.1 Aim

Facilitate the economic development of Westmeath to create a viable and favourable economic environment for business and enterprise whilst delivering sustainable jobs, employment opportunity and an enriched standard of living for everyone, both within the County and beyond.

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.

5.2 Background

Economic development and growth in employment within County Westmeath is achieved by way of a collaborative approach between the business communities, education institutes, and national agencies with the Council, as main driver in facilitating, enabling and promoting economic growth within the County. The context for enterprise development has changed, with an increased need to focus on collaboration and additionality, by way of a 'bottom-up' approach to the creation and delivery of sustainable employment.

This Plan, being a statutory plan, will also inform effective planning and investments in placemaking throughout Westmeath that facilitate enterprise development. Following an overview of the economic profile of the county, relevant economic policies are highlighted before setting out an Economic Development Strategy (EDS) for the duration of the Plan period.

5.3 Westmeath's Economic Profile

The following section provides a brief overview of the economic profile of County Westmeath. It presents data from a number of key indicators that help to paint a picture of the economic profile of County Westmeath and the information has been used to inform economic policy making as part of the Plan.

5.3.1 An Economic Profile of Westmeath

Located in the centre of the midlands, Westmeath, as illustrated at Figure 5.1, lies on the arteries of the road network of the M6 to the West and M4 to the Northwest. In addition, the Dublin-Galway and Dublin-Sligo railway routes pass through the County, with stops in Athlone and Mullingar. Through these quality transport connections, Westmeath has high accessibility to Dublin from a majority of its towns. This has helped the County grow with businesses, providing new opportunities for existing businesses and attracting new industries seeking to capitalise on knowledge sectors across the County.

Westmeath is in the 'Midland Region' of the Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly (EMRA) administrative area, which is projected to have a population increase of between 37,000 to 44,500 by 2030. Its location outside the Metropolitan area of the region affords Westmeath an important position at a regional level, a counterweight to the dominance of Dublin in the EMRA. In this regard, the key towns of Athlone and Mullingar offer population centres of a sufficient scale that can offer viable alternative employment bases to Dublin in the region (which itself must also continue to accommodate growth). The economic profile of these two important centres for the County are outlined below.

Athlone is designated as a 'Regional Growth Centre', one of only three in the EMRA region alongside Drogheda and Dundalk. 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"*. Further, Mullingar is designated as a 'Key Town' described as *"large economically active service and/or county towns that provide employment for their surrounding areas and with high-quality transport links and the capacity to act as growth drivers to complement the Regional Growth Centres"*.

These designations mean that Athlone and Mullingar together will be the focus of much of the projected population growth for the County for the period of this Plan.

Economic Context

Westmeath

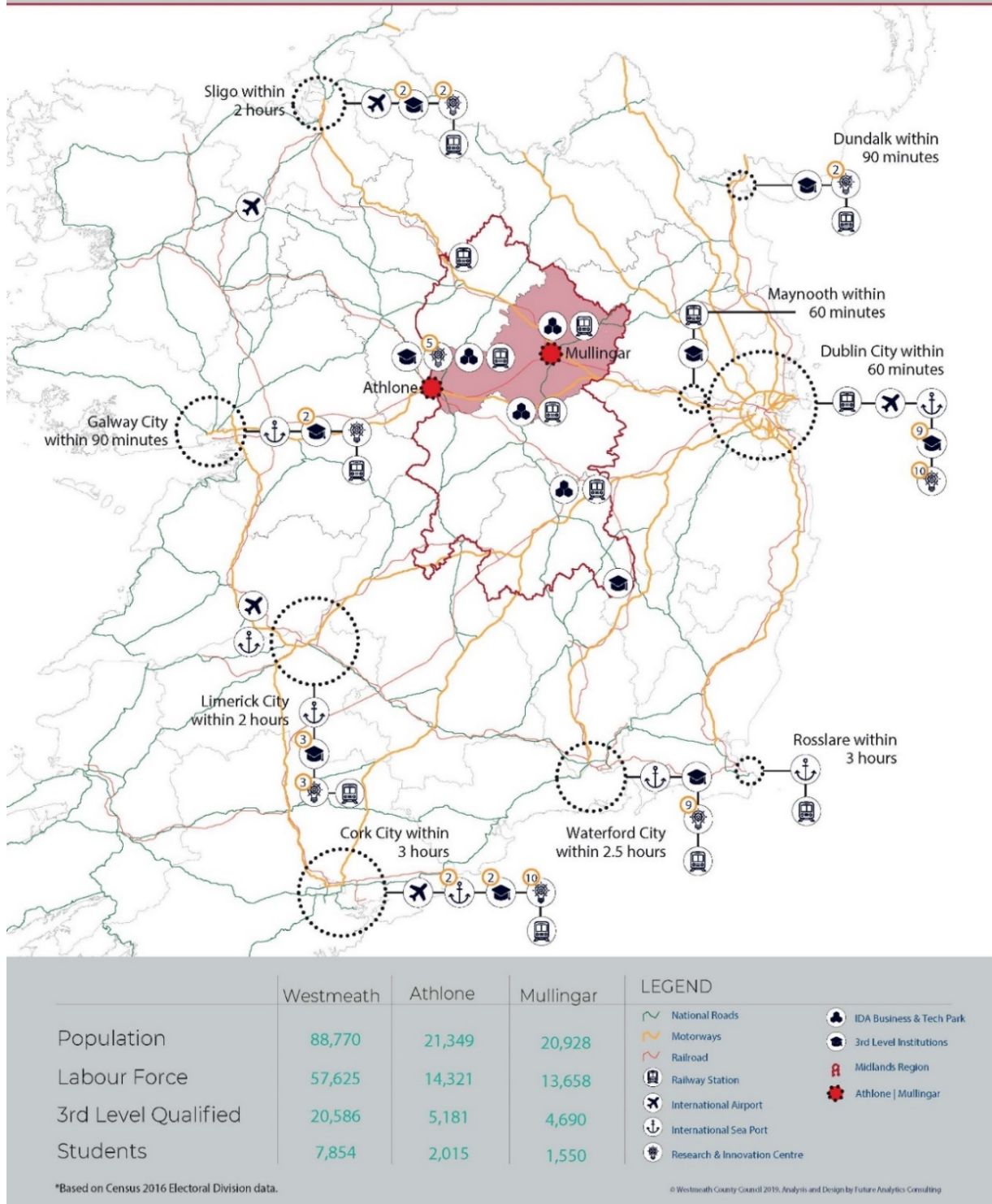


Figure 5.1 Westmeath Economic Context

5.3.2 Demographic Trends

According to the Census of 2016, Westmeath has a population of 88,770 persons. The County has experienced steady population growth across each intercensal period, with significant growth in the twenty years between 1996, where the population was 63,314 persons. In the period between the 2011 census and 2016 census, Westmeath's population increased by approximately 3%, roughly similar to the national average growth rate, with 2,606 new residents residing in the County.

The County has an average age of 36.3 years, with a substantial proportion of its population, almost 65%, of working age (persons aged 15 to 64). There is a large proportion of younger residents, with 22.3% of residents aged 0 to 14 years old. As of 2016, the largest cohort of the population was aged 30 to 39, representing over 15% of the total population. This would indicate a County with a strong working age population, essential for a thriving economy. It is also worth noting the next largest cohort are those aged 0 to 9 years old. Again, this is extremely positive for the County as it highlights the relative youthfulness of Westmeath.

Westmeath is also a County in which most of the population considers themselves to be in good health. The Census poses this question to respondents, with 87.3% of people in Westmeath stating their health is either 'good' or 'very good'.

5.3.3 Economic Trends

Ireland's economy continues to grow at a robust rate, with the ESRI projecting that the domestic economy will grow by 5 per cent in 2019 and 3.1% in 2020 despite a considerable degree of uncertainty in the economy (notably Brexit)¹. Employment in Ireland is at its highest ever level, with 2.3 million people at work and the lowest unemployment rate in 14 years. ESRI (2019) considers that despite personal consumption and business expenditure below predictions and the need for clarity on Brexit, the Irish economy appears to be operating at its full potential level. The growth in personal consumption and business expenditure will have direct implications for the economic development of Westmeath and the wider economy.

Westmeath plays a core role in a vibrant and compact Midlands, with each of the region's other key towns within a 30-60 minute drive. Internally, the core towns of Westmeath are interconnected by road networks which provides good connectivity between the key settlements of Athlone and Mullingar. Westmeath's centrality ensures it is an open and accessible place, ideally located in the heart of Ireland.

Furthermore, Westmeath is a relatively well-connected County in respect of internet connectivity, something that is becoming increasingly important in today's economy. Approximately 65% of all households in the County have broadband connection. In Athlone the proportion of households with broadband is almost 71%, whereas in Mullingar this increases to 72.5% of households.

¹ Economic and Social Research Institute, Quarterly Economic Commentary Autumn 2019
Draft Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027

5.3.3.1 Active Enterprises and Employment

In Westmeath, the census recorded that since 2011 the total number of ‘active enterprises’ has increased from 4,481 to 4,786 in 2017². The latest figures for 2017 are higher than those recorded in 2008 (4,679 active enterprises), which was the beginning of the global economic downturn. This would indicate that there has been a return to, and improvement on, pre-crash levels of enterprise.

The numbers of employees would also suggest significant improvements in recent years, with 2011 figures totalling 12,976 persons, whereas the figures for 2017 show 17,054 persons employed. Figures for 2017 suggest that companies operating in the ‘business economy’ are the major employers, with 17,054 employees. Manufacturing plays a significant role, with its employee total reaching 4,434, making it the next largest.

5.3.3.2 Disposable Income

Disposable income is also a useful barometer of how well the economy is performing in a particular region. CSO estimates of disposable income in 2017 show that Westmeath has an average of €18,692 per person³. This estimate is higher than the averages for each of the other Midlands counties (Laois, Longford and Offaly), where the average is €17,923 per person. Indeed, Westmeath has a higher average disposable income than the combined averages for the Border region (€17,382) and the West region (€18,607).

Household median gross income differs in different parts of County Westmeath, with Electoral Divisions (EDs) located near the larger settlements of Athlone and Mullingar performing better than more remote EDs. This is to be expected as rural areas, both nationally and internationally, tend to have lower average incomes than their urban counterparts. The average household income in Westmeath is €46,196, which places it at 2.1% higher than the State figure of €45,256.

5.4 Employment

Live register figures are available at sub-regional level on a monthly basis⁴. For the Midlands region, there has been a consistent drop in the numbers of persons on the live register since before 2016. In January 2016 the total for the Midlands was 26,320 persons. By January 2017 this reduced to 22,642 persons, falling further to 18,798 persons in January 2018. Figures for the Midlands live register in June of 2019 recorded a total of 15,463 persons. In 2016, Westmeath had an unemployment level of 9.7% while 51.1% of working age residents were employed, according to the Census of 2016.

² Central Statistics Office – Business Demography

³ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/cirgdp/countyincomesandregionalgdp2016/>

⁴ CSO – Persons on the Live Register by sex, region, age group and month

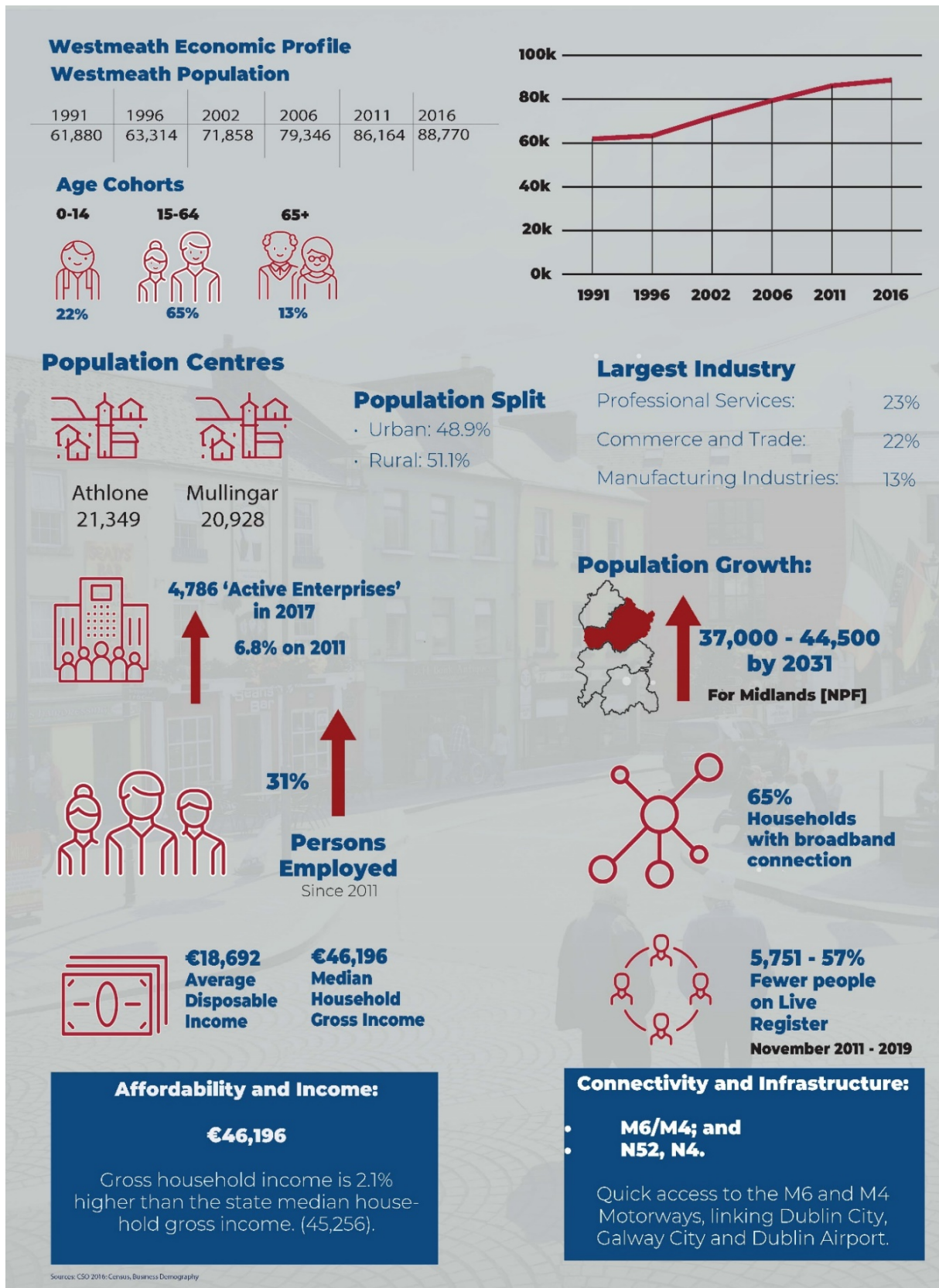


Figure 5.2. Westmeath Economic Profile

5.4.1.1 Labour force participation rate

The labour force participation rate, as defined by the CSO, expresses the labour force (i.e. those at work, looking for their first regular job and unemployed) as a percentage of the total population aged 15 years and over. It is another indicator of unemployment levels, with the State recording a rate of 61.4% in 2016, lowering from 61.9% in 2011, a decline of 0.5%. Westmeath's labour force participation rate has seen minor decline of 0.6% from 2011 to 2016. The labour force for Westmeath in 2016 comprised 41,955 persons and had a participation rate of 60.8%⁵.

The Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan states the intention of government to bring and/or maintain unemployment levels in each region to within a single percentage point of the State average.

5.4.2 Employment Sectors

Westmeath is a focal point for economic development and modern industry within the Midlands. It provides a strong economic centre for the region and province, with employment largely centred in Professional Services (23%), Commerce and Trade (22%) and Manufacturing Industries (13%). Table 5.1 below illustrates jobs by industry in Westmeath compared to Region and State figures.

	Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing	Manufacturing	Construction	Wholesale, Retail etc.	ICT etc	Public Admin	Education, Health etc.	Other Services
State 1,579,837	4.2	13.0	2.8	25.7	20.3	6.0	22.8	4.3
EMRA 829,520	1.9	9.9	2.7	25.3	26.2	6.5	21.9	4.5
Westmeath	5.3	13.8	2.6	27.4	12.5	8.4	25.1	3.7

Table 5. 1 Local Jobs by Industry (%) in Comparison with the Region and State, Census 2016

⁵ Census 2016: Table EB016: Labour Force Participation and Unemployment Rate of Population Aged 15 Years and Over 2011 to 2016 by County and City, Sex, Age Group, Statistical Indicator and Census Year

Table 5.2 illustrates a breakdown on the County's labour force by broad industrial group over this period 2011-2016. It illustrates a growth in the labour force in the majority of industrial groups with notable changes in administrative and support service activities, construction and Information and communication groupings. Figure 5.3 compares the employment sectors between the County overall, Athlone and Mullingar.

Westmeath Population (Aged 15+) in the Labour Force 2011 to 2016 by Broad Industrial Group				
Industrial Group	2011	2016	Change	Difference
Information & Communication	867	1,182	36%	315
Electricity, Gas, Steam and Air Conditioning Supply	152	193	27%	41
Activities of Extraterritorial organisations and bodies	4	5	25%	1
Construction	1,696	2,008	18%	312
Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities	1,272	1,480	16%	208
Human Health and Social Work Activities	3,631	4,203	16%	572
Administrative and support service Activities	854	948	11%	94
Accommodation and Food Service Activities	1,808	1,980	10%	172
Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	449	491	9%	42
Real Estate Activities	124	133	7%	9
Manufacturing	3,831	4,085	7%	254
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	1,854	1,944	5%	90
Transportation and Storage	1,200	1,244	4%	44
Other Service Activities	695	719	3%	24
Wholesale and Retail Trade	5,041	5,154	2%	113
Education	3,088	3,118	1%	30
Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	168	163	-3%	-5
Financial & Insurance Activities	971	896	-8%	-75
Public administration and Defense	2,475	2,223	-10%	-252
Mining and Quarrying	153	130	-15%	-23
Unemployed looking for first regular job	666	700	5%	34
Activities of Households as Employers Producing Activities of Households for Own Use	27	38	41%	11
Industry not stated	1,959	2,950	51%	991
Unemployed, having lost/given up previous job	7,971	5,966	-25%	-2005
Total	40,956	41,955	2%	999

Table 5.2 Westmeath Population (Aged 15+) in the Labour Force 2011 to 2016 by Broad Industrial Group

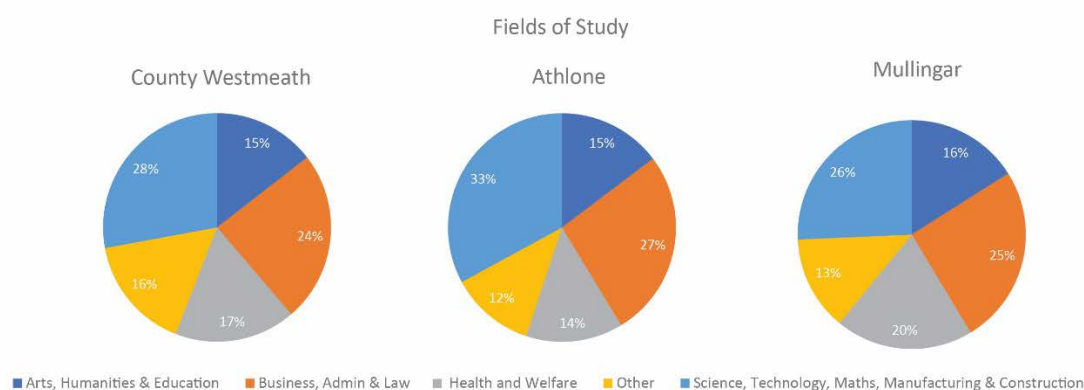


Figure 5.3 Employment by industry for Westmeath, Athlone and Mullingar

5.4.3 Locations of Employment

In terms of locations of employment, the CSO's POWSCAR data offers a valuable insight. Typically, population centres tend to also provide employment centres. Larger settlements, such as Athlone and Mullingar, would usually provide higher numbers of jobs when compared to the rest of the County. This is both expected and necessary, as a critical mass of population is needed for services and employment, with clusters of businesses often co-locating. The map below provides a visual indication on the major areas of employment. It highlights the areas where there are higher proportions of 'workers' as compared to the usual 'daytime population'. Darker shaded areas are those where there is a higher proportion of persons employed, relative to residents. Workplace zones in, or adjacent to, larger settlements show higher concentrations of employees. However, there are several rural workplace zones that also record high proportions of workers.

Westmeath: Workplace Zones

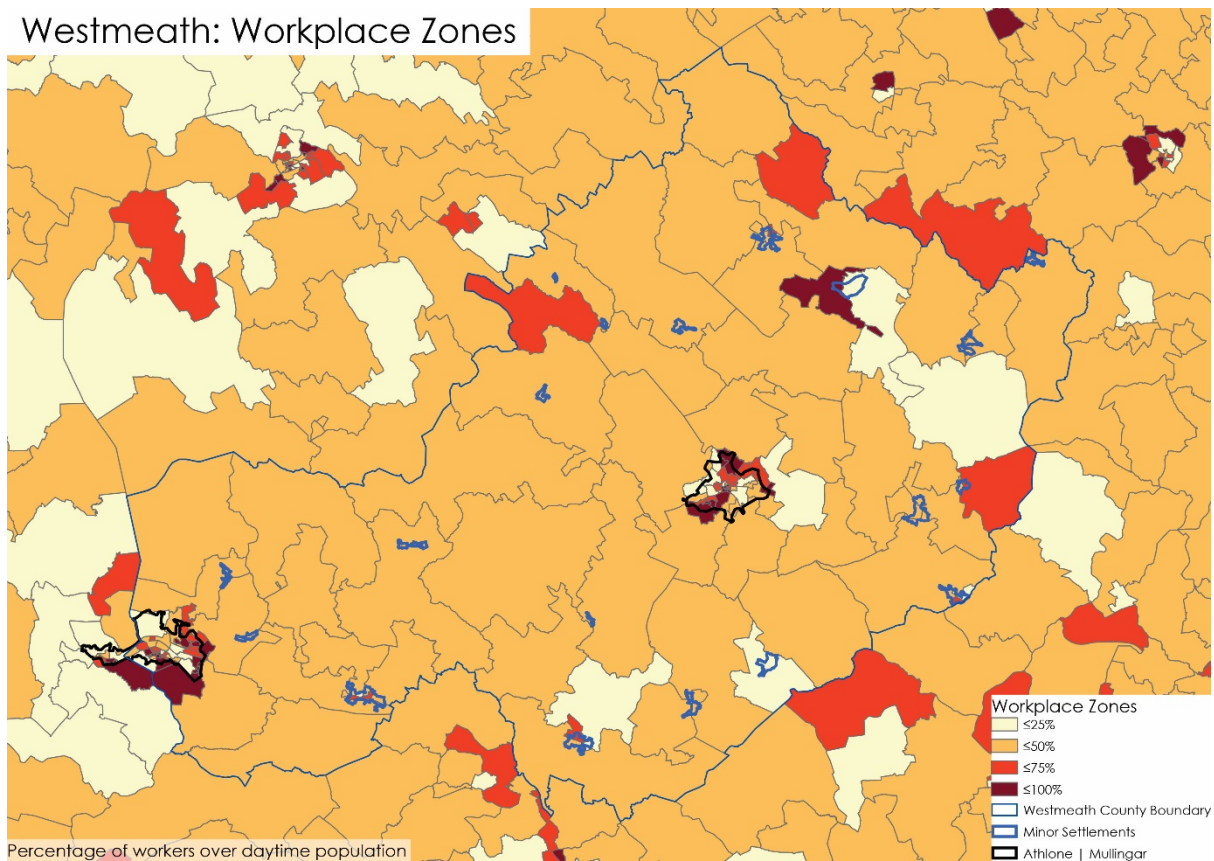


Figure 5.4 Concentration of daytime population by workplace zone

5.4.3.1 Socio-Economic Profile of People Working in Westmeath

Table 5.3 breaks down the Westmeath workforce by socio-economic groupings of workers. It illustrates that there is a strong representation at employer, managerial and higher professional levels. There is also a high level of manual skilled and semi-skilled reflecting the strength of the manufacturing sector in the County.

Westmeath Socio-Economic Profile – Persons at Work (2016)	
Employers and Managers	4,845
Higher Professional	2,417
Lower Professional	5,513
Non-Manual	8,769
Manual Skilled	3,032
Semi-Skilled	3,723
Unskilled	1,113
Own Account Workers	1,703
Farmers	1,698
Agricultural Workers	236
All others gainfully occupied and unknown	2,240
Total	35,289

Table 5.3 Westmeath Socio-economic Profile

5.4.4 Athlone

Athlone is home to 21,349 people and is connected to Ireland's largest population centres by excellent road and rail infrastructure; with Dublin City & Airport, Galway City and Shannon Airport each within a 60-90 min. drive.

Athlone's designation in national planning as a 'Regional Centre' earmarks it for the highest levels of population and employment growth in the Midlands region (with a target of reaching 30,000 people by 2031). This is reflective of how its size and composition has changed in recent years already; growing by nearly 6% over the past five years alone; a faster rate than the national average (4% between 2011-2016). The town's age profile illustrates that it is home to a very young demographic, largely under 35 years of age (53%); surpassing the national average (47%). This holds true within 60 minutes drive from the town (48%).

Multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism are hallmarks for the town, with 23% of its resident population being of a non-Irish nationality (vs. 12% nationally). This highlights the impact of Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) and multi-national companies in attracting students and workers from overseas. This will be further enhanced as AIT and Limerick IT bid to form a new Technological University for the Midlands and Mid-West.

Both domestic and international enterprise have come to Athlone to capitalise on the emerging research and development scene - which centres around AIT and its multiple research institutes (including 'MRI' for Polymer Materials, 'BRI' for bioscience R&D and 'SRI' for software innovation) and two Technology Gateways (APT and COMAND). Acting alongside applied industry partners and coupled with Garrycastle IDA Business and Technology Park, Athlone has established itself as an emerging hub for Life Sciences, Technology and Global Business Service providers. Athlone has a highly skilled workforce, with 30% of people having attained qualifications at 3rd level or above.

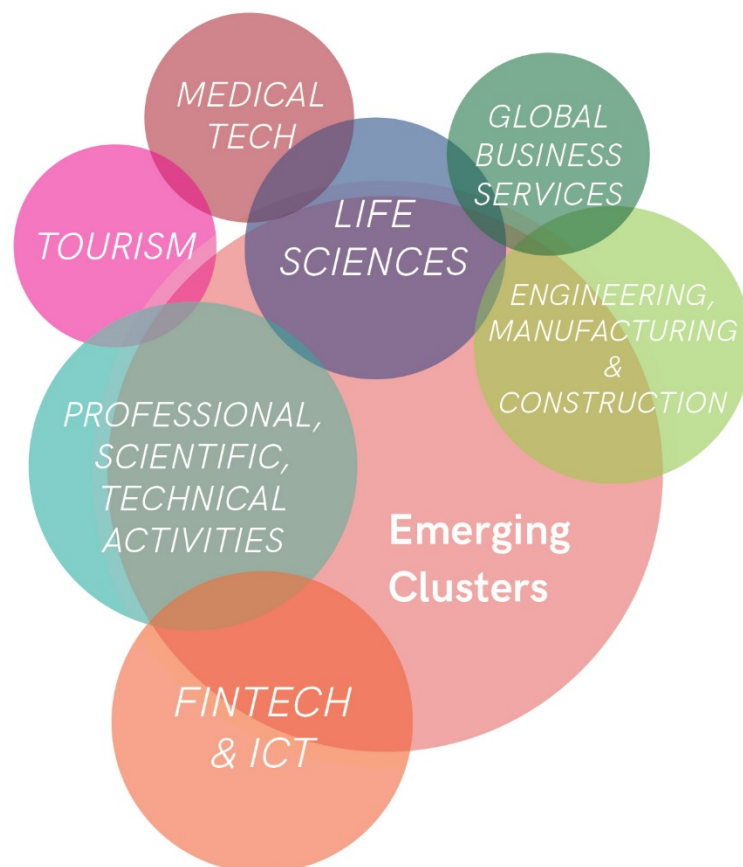
The town is also an affordable place to live and work in, particularly compared to Dublin City; with residents enjoying both shorter commute times and excellent schools, shopping and childcare facilities. The town also has numerous sports, recreation and natural amenities nearby.

5.4.4.1 Business Activity and Clustering

There are almost 1,115 active businesses within 5km of Athlone, employing over 13,100 people from the town and the wider region. 24% of these businesses are in less conventional sectors, where emerging business clusters can often be found. These include the increasing presence of industry in the Life Sciences, R&D, Med-Tech and Global Business Services sectors.

Athlone uniquely serves as an economic anchor for the region in attracting such employment and providing the necessary infrastructure to sustain it. The town's Economic Strategy produced jointly by Westmeath County Council and Roscommon County Council (due to Athlone being located in both counties) ensures that growth is aligned with a strategic vision for the town's future economic, social and physical development.

Athlone Business Activity and Clustering



5.4.5 Mullingar

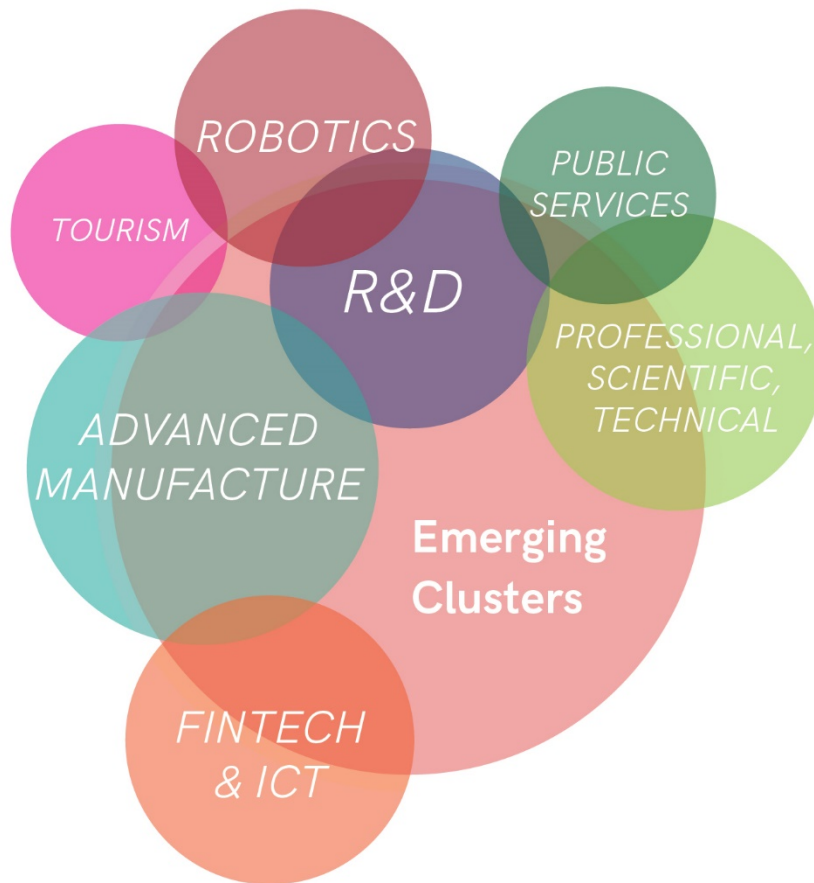
Mullingar is a focal point for economic development and modern industry within the Midlands. Home to 20,928 people, it is one of the region's largest key towns and has a young and skilled workforce. Situated close to both the M4 and M6 motorways, Mullingar is highly accessible to Dublin City (within 60 minutes drive) providing new opportunities for existing business and attracting new industries seeking to capitalise upon the town's advanced manufacturing specialism.

More than half of the population of Mullingar (52%) are aged under 35 years; and almost half again are aged under 15. This places Mullingar ahead of the state average and denotes it as having a very young population. When coupled with the fact that over 25% of residents have attained a third level qualification or higher, it is clear to see how Mullingar's skilled workforce has been successful in attracting inward investment in the form of R&D, manufacturing and financial services. Indeed the town itself is home to 'Irish Manufacturing Research' (IMR), a not-for-profit research centre committed to delivering solutions to advanced manufacturing challenges by working with industry and academia to push the boundaries of R&D an attractive resource for further businesses seeking to capitalise on co-location.

Living in Mullingar is much more affordable than living in Dublin (renting is twice as affordable), and median household incomes in Westmeath are over €41k per year; relatively high for the region. There is a fantastic selection of local amenities, from watersports to heritage sites to visit and the town is well served with schools, healthcare and childcare facilities.

Mullingar provides a strong economic centre for the region, with employment largely centred in professional services (26%), manufacturing (17%), and commerce & trade sectors (24%). Mullingar is a part of the vibrant and compact Midlands, with each of the region's other key towns within a 30-60 minute drive.

Mullingar Business Activity and Clustering



There are over 1,410 active businesses within 5km of Mullingar, employing over 5,050 people from the town itself and from the wider region.

28% of these businesses are in less conventional sectors, where emerging business clusters can often be found. These include Engineering, ICT, FinTech, Robotics, Advanced Manufacturing and R&D. Indeed, many companies in these sectors, both indigenous and international, who have located here have done so in order to avail of the excellent research and collaborative opportunities made available through the IMR and the availability of talent. Professional and public services, manufacturing and construction and a growing tourism sector, comprise the town's other key industries and supplement its broad commercial base of activity.

5.5 Educational Trends

The population of Westmeath are relatively well-educated, with over 36% of them having completed a course ranked as a Level 6 or higher on the National Framework of Qualifications. Almost 8% of the

population have attained a Masters level course (Level 9), which again reinforces the perception of Westmeath as a county with a highly skilled and educated workforce.

Higher educational attainment levels are linked with higher employment rates. 24.6 per cent of persons (i.e. 13,978) within the County are educated to third level (honours bachelor's degree or higher). The advancement of AIT as a leading third level education provider, being named Institute of Technology of the Year 2020 and also soon to gain Technological University status, is expected to enhance these figures over the coming years.

5.5.1 Knowledge Sectors

The 2016 Census identifies the fields of study by the regional population. In the case of Westmeath there are three clear knowledge sectors:

- Social sciences, business and law (6,640 – 12%)
- Engineering, manufacturing and construction (5,234 – 9%)
- Health and welfare (4,722 – 8%)

Table 5.4 illustrates the fields of study of the Westmeath population (over 150). Figure 5.5 compares county data with that for Athlone and Mullingar.

Population aged 15 years and over by field of study	People
Social sciences Business and Law	6,640
Engineering Manufacturing and Construction	5,231
Health and Welfare	4,722
Services	2,560
Science Mathematics and Computing	2,421
Education and teacher training	2,367
Agriculture and Veterinary	1,819
Arts	807
Humanities	806
Other subjects	58
Not Stated (incl. unknown)	29,253
Total	56,684

Table 5.4 Westmeath population aged 15 years and over by field of study

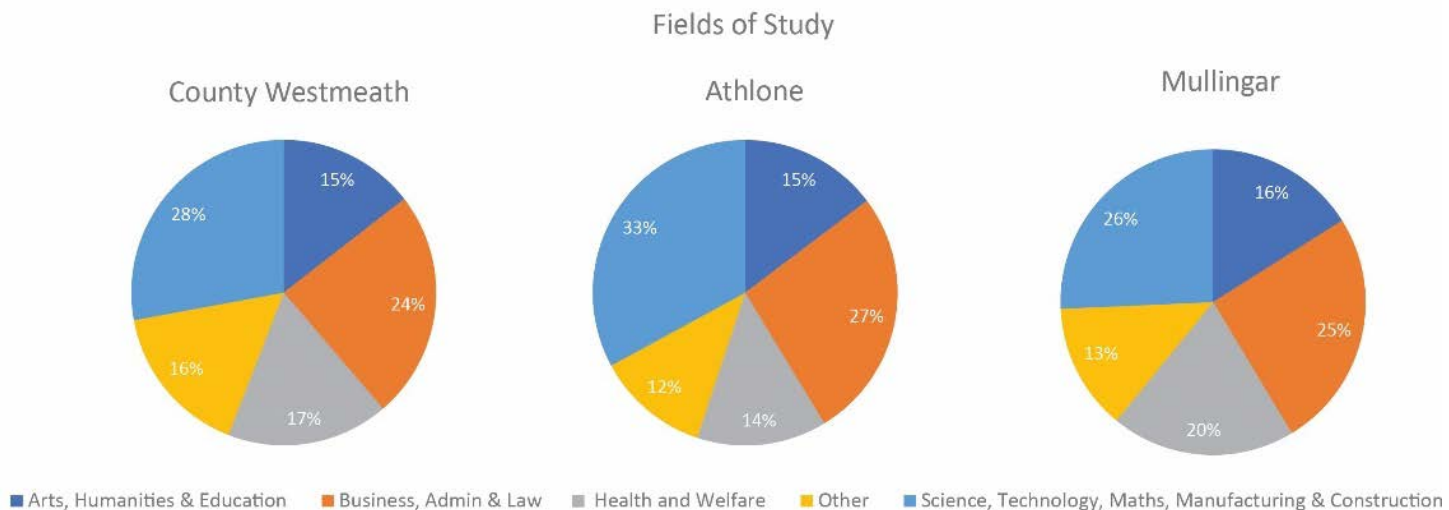


Figure 5.5 Westmeath, Athlone and Mullingar population aged 15 years and over by field of study

5.5.2 Athlone - Education and Research

Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) is a vibrant, contemporary third level institute committed to academic excellence in teaching, learning and research. AIT is also home to three strategic research institutes in Materials, Bioscience, and Software - along with two Technology Gateways (APT and COMAND) - which drive market-informed research in collaboration with industry partners.

Home to 6,000 students AIT offers 200+ industry-focused programmes on a full and part-time basis. It has the authority to award at PhD level in the areas of Microbiology, Toxicology, Polymer Engineering and Software ICT.

The Midlands Innovation and Research Centre, the institute's campus business incubator, provides incubation facilities and business development support for knowledge-based start-ups. AIT is currently in the process of achieving technological university designation which will leverage the Midlands region and ensure its continued growth and success. AIT works closely with local businesses to achieve innovation and ensure industry areas are reflected in course content. It has repeatedly secured prestigious accolades including 'Institute of Technology of the Year', and the U-Multirank award for being within the 'Top 25 Performing Universities in the World'.

5.5.3 Mullingar - Advanced Manufacturing Research

Mullingar is home to IMR or 'Irish Manufacturing Research'. IMR is an independent not-for-profit manufacturing and industrial research organisation focused on delivering solutions to advanced manufacturing challenges.

IMR demystifies, de-risks and delivers solutions for and with industry, with support from government and academic partners, to make Ireland a world leader in advanced manufacturing operations such as 3D printing, collaborative robotics, AR, cyber security, manufacturing informatics, and sustainable

manufacturing. IMR aims to improve productivity, efficiency and outcomes in applied manufacturing applications.

Manufacturing industries are faced with significant paradigm shifts with the advent of the 4th industrial revolution. The introduction of game-changing ways to design and manufacture products such as additive manufacturing, industrial IoT, and others coupled with a continuous drive for sustainable manufacturing requires focused collaborative research to allow companies embrace these technologies.

5.6 Commuting in Westmeath

There are **55,793** commuters in Westmeath. Table 5.5 below outlines travel patterns including journey times for commuters within County Westmeath.

Commuting and Travel Patterns	
Public Transport	5,257
Walking	6,838
Cycling	735
Car (Driver)	23,320
Car (Passenger)	12,256
Total Number Commuting	55,793

Journey Time	
<less than 30 minutes	66%
> In excess of 30 minutes	26.3%

Table 5.5 Commuting in Westmeath

An analysis of POWSCAR data for Westmeath provides an indication of the hotspots of employment and education. The image below offers a visual representation of this data, with darker shaded Electoral Divisions (EDs) those where there is a significant number of inward commuting taking place. Athlone East has the highest number of inward commuters, with over 9,000 travelling to this ED for work, school or college. Mullingar North sees the second highest number of daily commuters, with 6,433 persons travelling to this ED. Adjacent EDs in both towns also provide the following four highest zones of commuting.

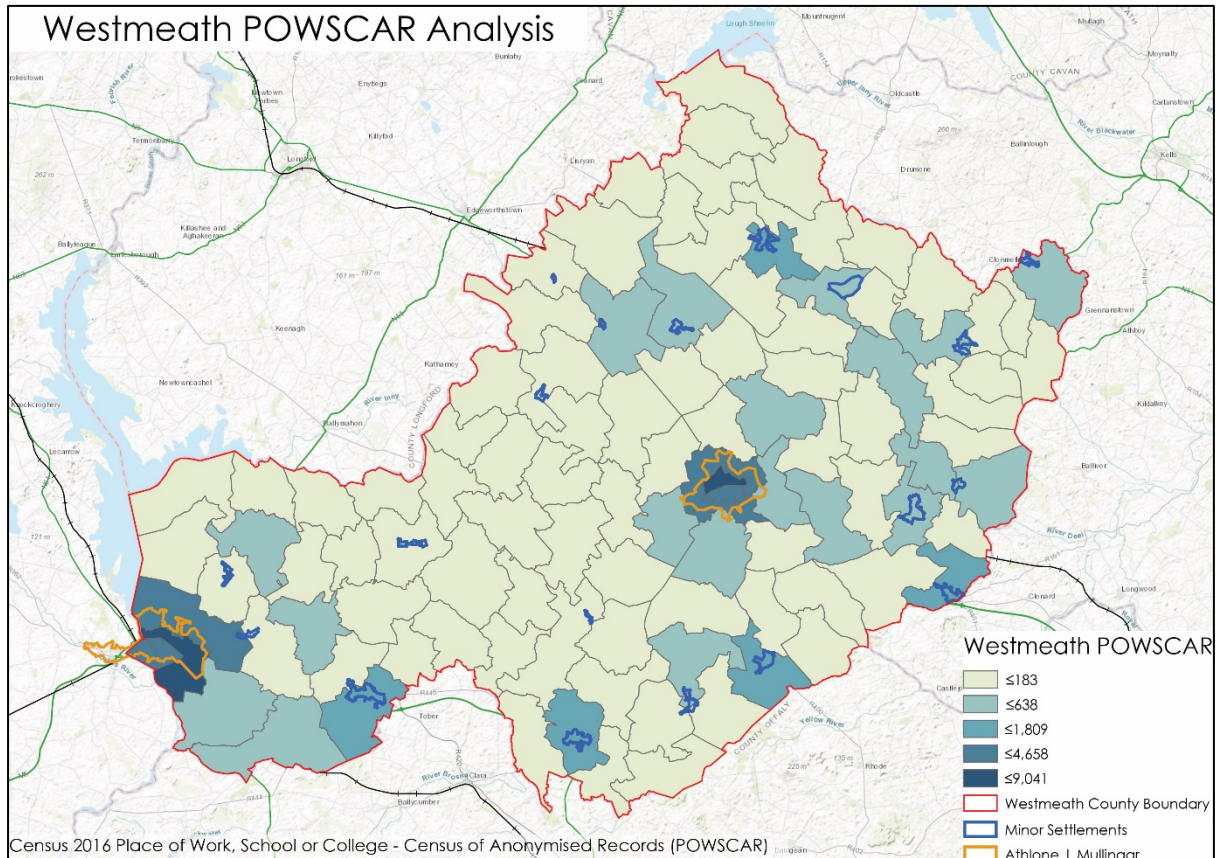


Figure 5.6 Westmeath Powscar Analysis of commuting

5.7 Policy Context

5.7.1 Overview

The increasing importance afforded to economic development by the government is reflected in the suite of policies and programmes which have developed in recent years at a national and regional level. Each of these policies and programmes are integral to the broader policy system which aims at driving economic growth and sustaining better standards of living throughout Ireland. A ‘top-down approach’ to enterprise development is provided at a national level under *Enterprise 2025 Renewed*, whilst in contrast to this, a ‘bottom-up approach’ is set out at a regional level under the *Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan to 2020* in terms of its strategic objectives and the delivery of same by way of collaborative engagement, additionality and the delivery of measurable actions.

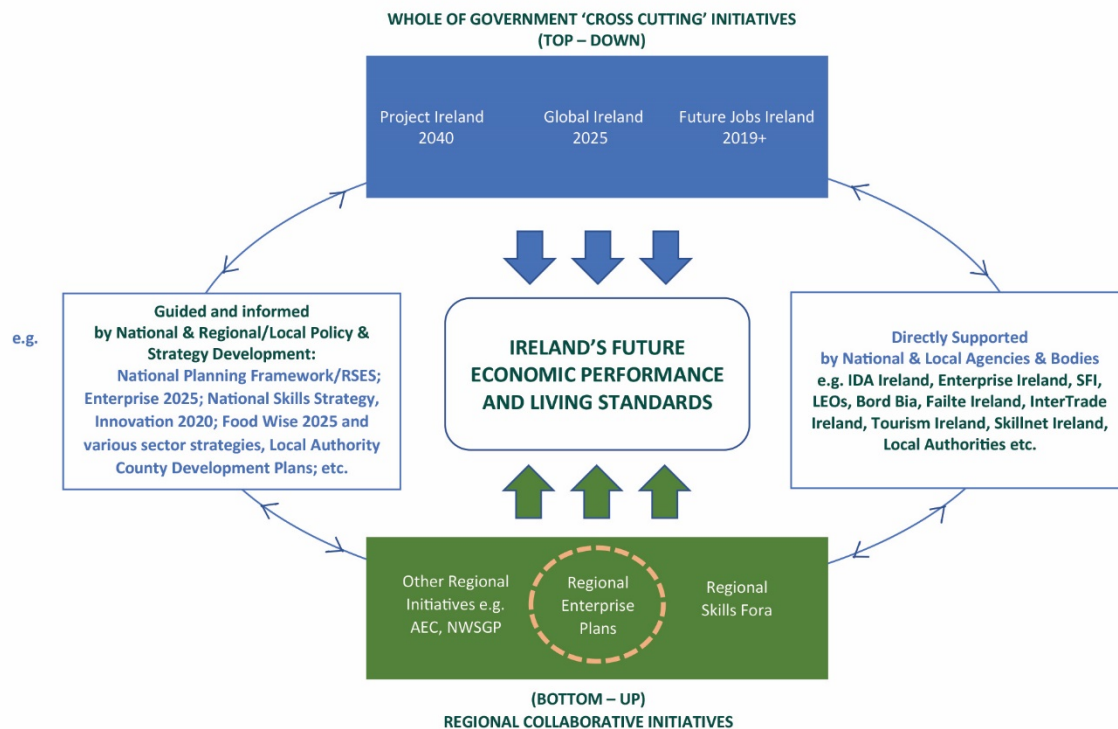


Figure 5.7. Policy system aimed at driving economic growth and sustaining better standards of living throughout Ireland
Source: Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation 2019, Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan to 2020, p.5.

5.8 National Policy Context

5.8.1 Enterprise 2025 Renewed

Enterprise 2025 Renewed is Ireland's national enterprise policy document and sets out a 'Top Down' approach aimed at increasing economic growth and sustaining better standards of living nationally. The RSES sets out 'Key national economic priorities in Enterprise 2025 that set the parameters for the development of the RSES growth strategy include to;

- 1) increase the emphasis on developing Irish owned enterprises, embedding resilience in our enterprise base, enhancing productivity and delivering quality jobs (including supporting companies to navigate their way through Brexit).
- 2) harness the distinctive characteristics of foreign and Irish owned enterprise mix through collaboration and clustering.
- 3) place a spotlight on innovation and talent and leverage strengths in disruptive technologies so as to achieve our ambition with more enterprises developing new products, services and solutions to compete effectively against international competition.
- 4) realise the full potential of the Regions through investments in placemaking - developing places that are attractive for business investment and for people to live and work.
- 5) develop international relationships and strengthen economic diplomacy to raise Ireland's visibility, protect Ireland's reputation and provide opportunities for our enterprises'.

5.8.2 National Planning Framework 2040 (2018)

The National Planning Framework 2018 (NPF) identifies Enterprise, Skills and Innovation Capacity as a strategic investment priority. The NPF also provides national strategic outcomes which are of relevance and inform regional and local policy as follows:

A Strong Economy supported by Enterprise, Innovation and Skills (NSO 6)

Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities: Promoting new economic activities arising from digital connectivity and indigenous innovation and enterprise as well as more traditional natural and resource assets (e.g. food, energy, tourism underpinned by the quality of life offering) (NSO 3)

The NPF sets out a 'Twin Strategy' which identifies the importance of both the scale of concentration of activity and the relative distance, or ease of accessibility, to larger centres of population and employment (i.e. 'centres of scale'). A key element of the NPF is compact growth and the distribution of future growth, in combination with building scale and accessibility.

5.8.3 National Development Plan 2018 - 2027

The National Planning Framework (NPF) provides the framework for the government's capital expenditure in alignment with the National Development Plan (and the RSES) under the umbrella of Project Ireland 2040. Government Departments are required to align their spending plans over the coming years with the ambition and desired outcomes set out in the NPF. This will be achieved through effective governance and coordinated implementation, ensuring prioritisation of investments that deliver impact and value for money, taking account of regional development objectives and realities. The four Project Ireland 2040 funds, comprising the Climate Action Fund, Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund, the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, will have a collective budget amounting to an estimated €4 billion over the ten-year period of Project Ireland 2040. Each of the four funds has been established to pursue distinct objectives, which must also be aligned with the strategic investment priorities and the National Strategic Outcomes of Project Ireland 2040.

5.8.4 Future Jobs Ireland 2019

Future Jobs Ireland 2019 is part of a multi-annual framework which gives effect to national enterprise policy objectives and leverages all policy areas which relate to job creation and labour force participation, talent development, enterprise growth, innovation and competitiveness and transition to a low-carbon economy are on the agenda for the Country's future enterprise and economic needs.

5.9 Regional Policy Context

5.9.1 Eastern and Midlands Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (2019)

The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) contains an Economic Strategy that builds on the identified strengths of the region and seeks to sustain a strong economy and support the creation of quality jobs that ensure a good living standard for all.

The RSES integrates spatial and economic policy and sets out a number of Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSOs) which will assist in informing and guiding spatial policy and the economic growth of the region.

This is to be achieved by:

- building a **resilient** economic base by means of promoting innovation and entrepreneurship;
- developing and enhancing regional accessibility and connectivity;
- providing a regional framework for collaboration and partnerships;
- improving education skills and social inclusion; and
- the promotion of creative places.

The RSES ensures that investment is targeted towards identified policy and objectives by way of its alignment with European and National policy.

The key elements of the growth strategy identified within the NPF and RSES, which establish the baseline for the economic development strategy for Westmeath include:

Regional concentration toward cities and some regionally important larger settlements. A Strong Economy supported by Enterprise, Innovation and Skills

Sequential provision of infrastructure with some critical infrastructure in place to promote investment

A comprehensive approach to rural fabric supporting sustainable growth and reversing decline

In terms of Economic Development, the RSES highlights that Athlone has a particularly high ratio of jobs to resident workers with significant in-commuting and employment in sectors such as advanced manufacturing, pharma and agri-food. The planned development of a creative and innovation hub and co-working space on the Main Street offers a further opportunity to drive enterprise development and entrepreneurship in the town. It highlights the Upper Shannon Erne Future Economic Project provides the opportunity to deliver cross regional economic projects, as well as synergy with the nearby flagship Centre Parc's holiday village and investment by the Local Authority in tourism and recreational infrastructure.

The RSES highlights that Mullingar operates as a strong economic driver covering a relatively wide catchment, with opportunity to capitalise upon and augment the high ratio of jobs to resident workers. It is considered that the economic role of Mullingar can be supported by realising the potential of the existing IDA presence and property, advance development of high quality enterprise and employment zones including existing business parks; and support and promotion within sectors such as engineering and ICT, consumer products, financial services, shared services (multi-lingual), R&D, robotics and advanced manufacturing. Recognition of the settlement's potential for tourism and eventing is also supported.

5.9.2 Regional Enterprise Plan to 2020 Midlands (2019)

The Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan (REP) prepared by The Midlands Regional Steering Committee under the auspices of the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation supersedes the Midlands Regional Action Plan for Jobs (2015–2017). This Regional Enterprise Plan complements national level policies and programmes emanating from the 'top-down' and, there is strong alignment with Ireland's national enterprise policy, Enterprise 2025 Renewed and the Future Jobs Ireland initiative.

The diversification of rural economies is an important objective of Project Ireland 2040 and this is supported in the REP. It includes several Strategic Objectives which are relevant to the economic development of Westmeath.

- Ensure that the Midlands is well positioned to address the challenges posed by the transition to a low carbon economy and renewable energy
- Strategic Objective 3 Position and support the Midlands as an advanced manufacturing centre of excellence
- Strategic Objective 4 Enhance the collective offering of the Midlands as a place to live, work, and invest in
- Strategic Objective 5: Strengthen the attractiveness of the Midlands as a destination to visit
- Strategic Objective 6: Harness the potential of the food and beverage industry in the Midlands
- Strategic Objective 7: Ensure the availability of skills and talent to realise the region's economic potential and address upskilling requirements

5.10 Local Policy Context Westmeath Local Economic and Community Plan (WLECP)

Economic development at a local level is addressed in two statutory plans i.e. Westmeath Local Economic and Community Plan (WLECP) and Westmeath County Development Plan (CDP). The Westmeath Local Economic and Community Plan 2016-2021 (LECP) is an integrated statutory plan that is reviewed and adopted by the Council every 6 years. The County Development Plan informs the content of the LECP, and the content of the LECP must be consistent with the Development Plan. In this regard, both plans are interdependent in setting out the strategic vision for the economic growth of the County, accompanied by supporting policies and objectives to be employed in securing this vision.

The Mission Statement of the LECP is *‘To enhance the well-being and quality of life of the people of Westmeath through sustainable economic and community development’*. At the core of the Plan are key principals of working for the public interest, efficiency, sustainability, consultation, equality and human rights. The action plan sets out a range of integrated collective actions to secure sustainable economic and community development in the county. The Plan consists of two parts:

- An economic element - to be developed by the Economic Enterprise and Tourism Strategic Policy Committee (SPC).
- A community element – to be developed by the Westmeath Local Community Development Committee (LCDC).

The LECP provides a mechanism for all local agencies involved in economic and community development to link their strategies and plans and to combine investment and resources to achieve a common agreed objective.

The Goals of the Plan are set as follows:

- **Goal 1: Economic Development** To create employment opportunities through sustainable economic development in Westmeath.
- **Goal 2: Integrated Economic and Community Development** To secure sustainable economic and community development through the maximisation of educational opportunities and the provision of essential social and physical infrastructure.
- **Goal 3: Community Development** To secure the creation of vibrant communities in County Westmeath through community development and quality of life initiatives.

5.10.1 The Westmeath Local Enterprise Office

The Local Enterprise Office (LEO) is the ‘first-stop-shop’ for providing advice and guidance, financial assistance and other supports to those wishing to start or grow their own businesses. Its objective is *to promote entrepreneurship, foster business start-ups and develop existing micro and small businesses to drive job creation and to provide accessible high quality supports for business ideas*.

The focus of the LEO is with businesses who employ 10 or less employees. In the first instance, the LEO provides a ‘signposting’ service in relation to all relevant State supports. The LEO can also offer advice and guidance in areas such as Local Authority rates, public procurement and other regulations affecting business. The core supports provided by Westmeath Local Enterprise Office include:

- Financial Assistance
- Provision of Business Information and Advice
- Business Training
- Encouraging Enterprise Development in County Westmeath

The LEO has also assisted businesses with trade show costs, website development, new product development and research, specialised mentoring, marketing, recruitment, re-location, advice on expansion, networking and sales development. Each year, approximately 750 people avail of training courses on a range of business topics.

5.11 The Role of the County Development Plan

This co-ordinated approach to economic development within the Council allows for greater consistency and a plan-led, sustainable approach in assisting the future economic growth of the County. This Plan is primarily focussed on spatial planning and the LECP incorporates priorities and actions on economic development. The Plan sets out a number of key functions which is important in promoting the economic growth of the County, including in particular;

- Linking the economic and spatial dimensions of the Plan by aligning economic growth with the Settlement Hierarchy focusing on key employment locations as drivers for growth and recognising the critical role of rural places in the economic development of the County
- Providing a sufficient quantum of appropriately zoned and serviced lands to facilitate enterprise opportunities and employment creation
- Ensuring that existing and planned infrastructure (including water services, public transportation and telecommunications) is maximised in the identification of zoning and servicing of lands
- Identification of key industry and business sectors supported by policy objectives to accommodate their anticipated needs, where appropriate
- Ensuring positive placemaking through the development of a network of attractive and sustainable towns, villages and rural areas throughout the County for people to live, work and leisure within.
- Promoting the creation of clusters within sectors, maximising associated economies of scale
- Futureproofing by way of a flexible policy framework supporting for example smart specialisation

5.12 Key Stakeholders in the Economic growth of Westmeath

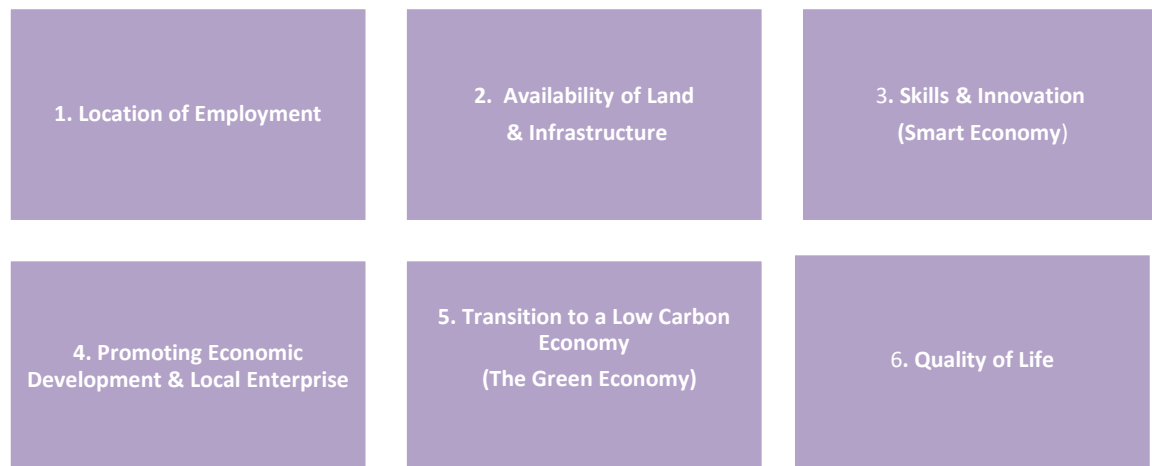
Stakeholders include: DBEI, EMRA, Westmeath County Council, LEO, the enterprise agencies (Enterprise Ireland, IDA etc), the Regional Skills Forum, tourism bodies, private sector ‘enterprise champions’, and others.

5.13 Economic Development Strategy (EDS)

The overall aim of this Economic Development Strategy (EDS) is to provide for smart, sustainable, inclusive and resilient economic growth within the County. The purpose of the EDS is to advance the County’s existing economic profile, by way of demonstrating and maximising on the County’s assets and competitive advantages in terms of its strategic central location within Ireland, infrastructural provisions in-situ and availability of a skilled and educated workforce within the County and region as a whole. This EDS has afforded due cognisance to recent economic, demographic and employment trends within the County and Region as well as the three main principles of the RSES in terms of Economic Opportunity, Climate Action and Healthy Placemaking.

It is not intended that this EDS be a single entity in outlining the County's overall economic development strategy, but rather is an overall guide which informs and assists in collaborating all facets concerning the economic growth of the County, where possible.

Westmeath's Economic Development Strategy is Structured in Broad Terms around Six Guiding Principles as follows:



5.13.1 Location of Employment (Guiding Principle 1)

The identification of appropriate locations for employment uses within Westmeath is principally determined by the principles of proper planning and sustainable development, which is a core component of the economic strategy for the County. It is also guided by the County's Settlement Hierarchy and is consistent with the NPF and RSES. The NPF identifies that the central location of the Midlands region (including Westmeath) can be leveraged to enable significant strategic investment to a greater extent than at present, supported by a sustainable pattern of population growth, with a focus on strategic national, employment and infrastructure development, quality of life and a strengthening of the urban cores of principal settlements within the County.

The optimum location for intensive employment uses within the County has been identified on lands which are appropriately zoned and serviced; brownfield sites/regeneration lands and areas where economic clustering can be delivered and/or where new clustering opportunities exist.

5.13.2 Strategic Regional Location and Status within the Hierarchy

Westmeath's core strategy and settlement hierarchy provides a quantitative vision for the overall spatial development of the County over the plan period, with Athlone Regional Growth Centre identified as the primary economic driver for the region and surrounding areas, supported by Mullingar (County Town/Key Town) and the County's Self-Sustaining Growth Towns, Self-Sustaining Towns and Rural Places.

Location of Employment - Economic Development Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 5.1	Maximise the sustainable economic potential of Westmeath, and its nationally strategic central location through sustainable means, being the County's unique strengths and its advantageous position within the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly
CPO 5.2	Facilitate the economic development of Westmeath to create a viable and favourable economic environment for business and enterprise whilst delivering sustainable jobs, employment opportunity and an enriched standard of living for everyone, both within the County and beyond.
CPO 5.3	Facilitate and support the continuation of balanced population and employment growth, with a focus on strengthening the County's urban structure in accordance with the County's settlement hierarchy.
CPO 5.4	Collaborate with key agencies in the identification, scope, development and promoting of sites as potential enterprise landing spaces throughout the County.
CPO 5.5	Ensure that there is a sufficient quantum of zoned lands to facilitate a range of enterprise across the County in line with the Settlement Hierarchy.
CPO 5.6	Support economic development at locations that maximise existing infrastructural provision, particularly in relation to locating high employee generating enterprise and industry proximate to high capacity public transport networks and links.
CPO 5.7	Identify locations for strategic employment development within Athlone and Mullingar as part of any future Urban Area Plan/Local Area Plan and support the economic development of the remaining settlements of the County in line with the relevant settlement plan for their area.
CPO 5.8	Promote quality employment and residential developments in proximity to each other in order to reduce the need to travel and ensure that suitable local accommodation is available to meet the needs of workers in the County.
CPO 5.9	Support existing successful clusters in Westmeath, such as those in the ICT, manufacturing and agri-food sectors, and promote new and emerging clustering opportunities across all economic sectors within the County.
CPO 5.10	Accommodate valid propositions for enterprise development that may emerge for which there are strong locational or asset-based drivers that do not apply to the same extent elsewhere.

5.13.3 Athlone (Tier 1 – Regional Growth Centre)

Athlone's strategic location and scale of population, employment and services has an influence which extends over two regions (EMRA and NWRA). Athlone has a high-level of self-sustaining employment and services that excels its role as an economic driver for the region and its wider catchment. Its resilient employment base includes existing economic clusters of indigenous and international companies in the manufacturing, pharmaceutical, research and development, medical devices, ICT

and software development sectors. Athlone's economic base also performs strongly in attracting and sustaining Foreign Direct Investment.

Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) and Athlone Business and Technology Park are important focal points for the development and strengthening of industry and higher education links in research and development (R&D). This has increased the attractiveness of Athlone as a location for talent, innovation and investment. It is recognised that there is further potential to build links with industry to develop a pipeline of employment focussed skills of specialised, high-tech industries for entry into the workforce.

A Joint Urban Area Plan between Westmeath County Council and Roscommon County Council is necessary to ensure that Athlone can continue to have the capacity to grow sustainably and to secure investment as the key regional centre in the Midlands.

Athlone Regional Growth Centre Economic Development Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 5.11	Provide for, as part of any future Joint Urban Area Plan (UAP) for Athlone, the development of Athlone as an attractive, vibrant and highly accessible Regional Centre and economic driver for the Region.
CPO 5.12	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 smart specialisation and support the provision of physical infrastructure and zoned lands to realise the delivery of strategic employment lands in central accessible locations.
CPO 5.13	Support the role of Athlone Institute of Technology as a center of excellence for education and in achieving its status as a Technological University.
CPO 5.14	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.
CPO 5.15	Support the development of Joint Economic, Transport and Retail Plans in collaboration with Roscommon County Council and all other relevant agencies, to facilitate the growth of Athlone as a regional economic driver.

5.13.4 Mullingar (Tier 1 –Key Town (RSES) and County Town)

Mullingar (being the County town and a designated Key Town) and its strategic central location within the County is a strong economic driver and the capacity to act as a regional drivers and complement Athlone, being a designated Regional Growth Centre.

It has potential to capitalise upon and augment the existing high ratio of jobs to resident workers within the town, subject to the requisite investment in employment creation, services, amenities and sustainable transport. The RSES identifies that the economic role of Mullingar can be supported through realising the potential of the existing IDA presence and property, advance development of high-quality enterprise and employment zones including existing business parks; and support and promotion within sectors such as engineering and ICT, consumer products, financial services, shared services (multi-lingual), R&D, robotics and advanced manufacturing. Mullingar’s potential for tourism and eventing is also supported.

A Local Area Plan for Mullingar is necessary to ensure that Mullingar can continue to have the capacity to grow sustainably and to secure investment as the key town in the Midlands.

Mullingar Key Town Economic Development Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 5.16	Provide for, as part of any future Local Area Plan (LAP) for Mullingar, the development of Mullingar as an attractive, vibrant and highly accessible Key Town and economic base for the Region.
CPO 5.17	Support Mullingar’s role as an important employment hub by promoting economic development and clustering of related enterprises. And continue to build resilience within Mullingar’s enterprise base, to allow businesses to withstand new challenges and realize sustained growth and employment creation for the longer-term.
CPO 5.18	Support Mullingar’s role as a tourism hub having regard to its accessibility to key tourist destinations in the Region including proximity to natural amenities and recreational opportunities including the Galway to Dublin Greenway.
CPO 5.19	Promote the plan led development and regeneration of publicly owned land banks in Mullingar for employment, education, community, cultural and recreational opportunities and to support the economic development and regeneration of the town centre.
CPO 5.20	Support the development and expansion of the Midlands Regional Hospital, Mullingar, including any necessary supporting infrastructure.

5.13.5 Castlepollard (Tier 2 – Self-Sustaining Growth Town)

Castlepollard is a self-Sustaining Growth Town and an important driver for the local economy of north Westmeath and its bordering counties. Opportunity exists in building upon its established economic base, in particular the strong manufacturing, retail and agricultural sectors, promoting its role as a tourism base for north Westmeath and securing benefits from spin-offs given its proximity to Mullingar (Key town).

5.13.6 Kilbeggan (Tier 2 – Self-Sustaining Growth Town)

Kilbeggan town is strategically located on the M6 Dublin-Galway motorway which is recognised as a major inter-urban transport route. It has capacity within existing Business Parks and enterprise and employment zoned lands to accommodate future economic growth. Kilbeggan is relatively self-sufficient and contained in terms of employment, commercial and social facilities. There are a significant number of employers in the town located in the existing enterprise and employment sites. The Kilbeggan Distillery and racecourse are important to the local economy as are its handful of large national and international employers.

5.13.7 Moate (Tier 2 – Self-Sustaining Growth Town)

Moate town is located within close proximity to the M6 Dublin-Galway motorway which is recognised as a major inter-urban transport route. Moate has capacity within existing Business Parks and enterprise and employment zoned lands to accommodate future economic growth and to secure benefits through spin-offs arising from its proximity to Athlone. This is reflected in a large proportion of the population commutes to Athlone on a daily basis.

5.13.8 Kinnegad (Tier 2 – Self-Sustaining Town)

Kinnegad, due to its proximity to Dublin experienced high levels of population growth in the 1990s. The provision of future economic opportunities has a key role to play in reversing commuting trends through increasing the ratio of jobs to resident workers.

Self-Sustaining Towns - Economic Development Policy Objectives	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 5.21	Seek to encourage investment in self-sustaining towns by identifying and establishing new economic roles and functions and enhancement of local infrastructure and amenities; facilitating amenities and services catch-up, jobs and/or improved sustainable transport links to surrounding settlements.
CPO 5.22	Support the proportionate economic growth of and appropriately designed development in self-sustaining towns that will contribute to their regeneration and renewal.
CPO 5.23	Seek to target investment and location of new business in the core areas of the County's settlements through sustainable targeted measures that address vacancy, encourage economic development and deliver sustainable reuse and regeneration outcomes.
CPO 5.24	Promote development that encourages more jobs and activity within existing settlements throughout the County.

5.13.9 Rural Places: Towns, Villages and the Countryside

Westmeath's rural towns, villages and the open countryside are vital to sustaining the County's wider rural hinterland, providing sustainable rural employment including local services provision, appropriate scale commercial enterprises, indigenous industry and micro-enterprise.

Self-Sustaining Towns Economic Development Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 5.25	To promote commensurate population and employment growth in the designated Self-Sustaining towns, providing for natural increases and to become more economically self-sustaining, in line with the quality and capacity of public transport, services and infrastructure available.
CPO 5.26	Seek to support the sustainability of remaining towns and villages, by supporting appropriately scaled economic development and services together with the enhancement of local infrastructure and amenities and improved sustainable transport links.
CPO 5.27	Support the proportionate economic growth of and appropriately designed development in rural towns and villages that will contribute to their regeneration and renewal.
CPO 5.28	Support the regeneration of the core areas of the County's settlements through sustainable targeted measures that address vacancy, encourage economic development and deliver sustainable reuse and regeneration outcomes.
CPO 5.29	<p>The Council will favourably consider proposals for enterprise and employment uses on their merits in rural locations and where their specific location offers amenity, environmental and economic advantage. Such enterprises or considered industrial projects, new or expanded, may sometimes require sites outside settlements because of their size or other specific site requirements. Such projects will be assessed taking account of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The contribution of the proposed development to the county's economy; • The contribution of the proposed development to the county's environment and the principles of sustainable development; • Assessment of any potential environmental effects • The economic viability and availability of alternative sites; and • National planning policy <p>It will be the responsibility of the developer to explore all environmental impacts, both local and of wider consequence. The Council will consider not only the immediate needs and benefits, but the wider long-term environmental effects of the proposal.</p>

5.13.10 Availability of Land and Supporting Infrastructure (Guiding Principle 2)

A successful and sustainable local economy is dependent upon the existence of supporting infrastructure that is of high quality and has sufficient capacity. This is particularly relevant for the provision of public transport, water and waste water services, broadband, international connectivity and energy supply. Westmeath will engage with service providers to ensure that the required infrastructure is provided in appropriate locations identified for enterprise and employment growth.

It is acknowledged that some enterprise and employment uses may not always be appropriately located on Enterprise and Employment Zoned lands. In this regard, some new enterprise and employment projects may require sites outside settlements because of their size, type or specific site requirements.

Availability of Land and Supporting Infrastructure Economic Development Policy Objectives	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 5.30	Support value proposition in the potential delivery of 'remote working hubs' and enterprise landing space for the Midlands Region.
CPO 5.31	Engage with key stakeholders and assist in leveraging opportunities in big data and data analytics, where appropriate.
CPO 5.32	Support and facilitate delivery of the National Broadband Plan as a means of developing further opportunities for enterprise, employment, education, innovation and skills development for those who live and work in rural areas throughout Westmeath, where appropriate.
CPO 5.33	Liaise and engage with all relevant public service providers to ensure that zoned lands for economic development purposes are serviced in a timely fashion to facilitate opportunities for employment and enterprise creation.

5.13.11 Skills & Innovation and The Smart Economy (Guiding Principle 3)

This EDS recognises that partnership and collaboration between business, local government and enabling agencies is at the heart of enabling a vibrant economy and sustainable economic growth. National and regional policy highlights the need to develop networks between education, research, enabling agencies and business.

The Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector encompasses software, IT services, electronics and hardware, and communications services. The sector has a manufacturing component for semi-conductors, computer hardware, microelectronics and telecommunications equipment and devices, and a strong focus on research and development. The sector has been recognised as being of national economic importance for a number of years, with national frameworks pursuing policies to attract leading multinational companies, while a strong indigenous software industry has developed in association.

In the future, there will be opportunities to build on the existing enterprise base and develop strengths in emerging digital segments and in the strategic growth area of analytics and big data. This will require a range of actions including steps to develop and attract suitable human capital and facilitation of appropriate technological infrastructure.

The REP plan highlights that the manufacturing sector is particularly important in Westmeath and is a driver of innovation and technological advancements and is an important employer accounting for 11.6 percent of employment within Westmeath, which transcends across a broad range of skills levels and generates additional indirect jobs throughout the economy.

The role of AIT in education, research, innovation and enterprise programmes and the Irish Manufacturing Research (IMR) facility (located in Mullingar) along with other large manufacturing industry is recognition that County Westmeath has the potential to develop as a centre of excellence for the development and adoption of advanced manufacturing processes and technologies within Ireland.

The development of a new 'Midlands Technology Campus' on an AIT site has the potential to support knowledge intensive enterprise and industry in the region, building skills and capabilities in companies, providing a dynamic industry focussed R&D environment, industry access to specialised equipment, conference facilities and incubation facilities supporting early stage FDI companies and second-stage indigenous companies.

The RSES places a focus on increasing the role of education institutes in economic development, and in facilitating the collaboration between such institutes and industry actors, as it supports wider, overarching aims, such as the 'smart cities' and 'smart communities' concept. The Smart Cities concept is already being developed in the region, where attempts to exploit technologies to solve everyday issues and develop policy outcomes is underway. However, 'smart' exploitation of technologies need not be limited to larger towns and cities. There is an opportunity for Westmeath to capitalise on existing key assets, that include its strong industrial base and education institutes such as Athlone IT, to develop 'smart communities' throughout the County. While not limited to the key settlements of Athlone and Mullingar, these locations can be the focal point for innovative activities and collaboration between the public sector, educational institutes and industry.

Westmeath is a part of a regional network of innovation, which enables the development of 'Disruptive Technologies' that displaces an established technology and shakes up the industry or a ground-breaking product that creates a completely new industry. The DBEI Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund (DTIF) aims to encourage collaboration in science, technology and innovation to increase our innovation capacity, and it draws from the Research Priority Areas 2018-2023. Westmeath County Council, as part of EMRA, will leverage the Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund and support and identify flagship projects that would benefit from public-private partnerships involving experiments with emerging technologies and a focus on the citizen experience. This will demonstrate ambition and showcase Ireland as a technology-rich economy in an international context.

The Council also supports Innovation and technology as vital to the diversification and strengthening of the rural economy. The Council will seek to leverage the EU Action for Smart Villages initiative which aims to develop the potential offered by improved rural connectivity and digitisation and to build on local enterprise and infrastructure assets to drive innovations around energy, transport, agri-food, tourism, e-services, remote working etc. The Council will seek to support the development of 'smart communities' by allowing use of public assets where possible, to support increased local connectivity.

Skills and Innovation - Smart Economy Economic Development Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 5.34	Engage and collaborate with key stakeholders, relevant agencies, and sectoral representatives to develop the ICT sector in Westmeath and to ensure that the economic potential of the sector is secured for the benefit of the local economy, and national economy.
CPO 5.35	Promote and support County Westmeath as an advanced manufacturing centre of excellence.
CPO 5.36	Support a multi-partner approach to the provision of a 'Midlands Technology Campus' to AIT. The delivery and implementation of this campus will assist in building regional competitiveness and innovation capacity within the region.
CPO 5.37	Assist where possible in developing a coordinated approach to advanced manufacturing, enabling deeper links with Institutes of Technology, Universities, IMR Mullingar, STREAM Creative Suite, LEO and the research and business community in its entirety.
CPO 5.38	Engage with innovative industries and networks to leverage the Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund and support and identify flagship projects that would benefit from public-private partnerships involving experiments with emerging technologies.
CPO 5.39	Support and foster the collaboration of industry and research to identify areas of research, development and innovation, and to identify projects for funding.
CPO 5.40	Support the development of sites where high-tech and high potential start-ups (HPSU29) can thrive, in conjunction with IoTs and Universities, to create collaborative and innovative growth.
CPO 5.41	Support the development of Smart City initiatives in Athlone and Mullingar
CPO 5.42	Promote the development of Smart Villages to develop and diversify the rural economy to build on local enterprise and infrastructure assets to drive innovations around energy, transport, agri-food, tourism, e-services, remote working.

5.13.12 Promoting Economic Development and Local Enterprise (Guiding Principle 4)

National enterprise policy places an increased emphasis on building resilience and to accelerate the speed at which we implement change⁶. Enterprise policy seeks to deliver quality jobs – that are sustainable over the longer term – skills-based jobs that can support productivity-led wage increases. This is designed to drive productivity growth that will deliver higher standards of living and quality of life for all and ensure that all of our citizens and our regions can benefit from economic growth.

Focused investments in infrastructures, and particularly broadband and housing, are crucial to redress constraints on growth potential and are a key focus of the recently launched National Development Plan 2018-2027. The competitive advantage Westmeath enjoys in terms of access, affordability, urban centres and networks of enterprise and skills development offer a significant opportunity for the County.

The Council recognises the opportunity to capture the benefits of Ireland’s distinctive enterprise mix through clustering, collaboration and connections. Manufacturing plays a significant role in the Westmeath economy, and the Council recognises the need to continue to support the opportunities in the manufacturing sector, thereby promoting the County as the location of choice for a range of manufacturing enterprises. In this regard the Regional Enterprise Development Fund (REDF) provides important support for major new collaborative and innovative initiatives that can make a significant impact on enterprise development.

The RSES also acknowledges the need to build the ‘third sector’ or the ‘social economy’ in seeking to address challenges which the private sector may not see a viable or profitable opportunity and in which the public sector may struggle to provide effective service delivery. The key focus of this sector is to embrace and embed collaboration, solidarity, pluralism and sustainability leading to integrated economic and community development.

5.13.12.1 Diversification of Rural Economy

The rural economy is an integral part of Westmeath’s profile with the agri-food sector playing an integral role in the national economic recovery in recent years. The sector is the country’s largest indigenous industry, with an estimated turnover of €26 billion and providing 170,000 jobs or 9% of the total employment figure. The sector makes a significant contribution to employment in rural areas, being a pivotal source of enterprise creation and opportunities.

Agricultural production, sustainability, food security and health are closely linked and there is a growing recognition on the value of agricultural land. There is a need to ensure both the protection of the agriculture industry and the rural landscape that supports it. This includes recognising the value of horticultural land, protecting the resource productivity of agricultural land.

Reflective of the growing importance and economic potential of the sector, a strong policy emphasis has been placed on the sector in recent years through a number of national frameworks issued by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine including Food Harvest 2020: A Vision for Irish agri-

⁶ Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (2018) Enterprise 2025 Renewed Building resilience in the face of global challenges

food and fisheries, Milestones for Success 2014, which charts the achievements of the former, and most recently Food Wise 2025: A 10-year Vision for the Irish agri-food industry.

Food Wise 2025 sets out a strategic plan for the coming decade, covering the period of the Plan, and focusses on opportunities to increase primary production, exports, add value to the products within the sector, and create 23,000 additional jobs throughout the sector. Food Wise comments: 'Its strategic importance to the Irish economy, its roots in local communities and its strengthening global reach (the industry provides quality, safe and nutritious food to consumers in at least 175 countries around the world) make it a sector unlike any other'

Promoting Economic Development and Local Enterprise - Economic Development Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 5.43	Promote the need to build resilience within the County's enterprise base, to allow businesses to withstand new challenges and realise sustained growth and employment creation for the longer-term.
CPO 5.44	Support the establishment of a network of 'remote working' hubs and enterprise landing spaces within the County.
CPO 5.45	Assist in collaboration with other Local Authorities, State Agencies, local industry and other regional partners in the development of a digital marketing strategy for the region, for use domestically and internationally highlighting the attractiveness of the area as a place to live, work, study and invest.
CPO 5.46	Provide for the creation of a formal network of linked e-hubs to leverage economies of scale in research, advanced manufacturing, collaboration, training and funding applications.
CPO 5.47	Support key stakeholders, relevant agencies, sectoral representatives and local communities in sustainably developing the agri-food sector in Westmeath to ensure that the economic potential of the sector is secured for the benefit of the local economy, and national economy.
CPO 5.48	Support social enterprise practices, with a strong emphasis on collaboration.
CPO 5.49	Encourage synergy between development of agri-food sector elements of the rural economy such as rural based tourism, rural economic diversification, and enterprise in rural villages.

5.13.13 Transition to a Low Carbon Economy/Green Economy (Guiding Principle 5)

A Low Carbon Economy/Green Economy is defined as low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive, whereby growth in employment and income are driven by investment into such economic activities, infrastructure and assets that provide reduced carbon emissions and pollution, enhanced energy and resource efficiency, and prevention of the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services.

There are various government frameworks supporting the Green Economy and advocating implementation of its key principles. The Green Economy approach to economic development has been identified as an area of significant growth with potential for notable enterprise and employment creation. The 'green' potential has been identified in sectors and/or activities such as research and development, innovation, energy efficiency, transportation, agriculture, food production, marine, tourism, and procurement. The initiative supports innovative clean technologies and connects organisations that have developed clean technology products and solutions with growth opportunities.

The national Climate Action Plan 2019 commits to achieving a net zero carbon energy systems objective for Irish society and in the process, create a resilient, vibrant and sustainable country. Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement on climate change require a transformational shift of our economies and societies towards climate resilient and sustainable development. Ireland and the international community are responding to this requirement, setting out a profound change in the systems and practices which support our lifestyle.

Many of the changes that are required will have positive economic and societal co-benefits, including cleaner air, warmer homes, and a more sustainable economy for the long term. In line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, climate action must be seen as complementary to other important policy objectives, such as promoting sustainable economic development pathways, improving energy security, and addressing air pollution impacts on human health. For example, a significant shift away from internal combustion engine vehicles in the transport sector, and the retrofitting of existing buildings with electricity-powered heat pump systems, are expected to result in significant improvements in local air quality metrics and health outcome.

The transition to a low carbon economy and society also brings significant opportunities for the financial sector. Ensuring success will require technological innovation and investment. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimate that the world will need to spend around US\$900 billion annually until 2050 on energy-related mitigation investments if global warming is to be limited to 1.5 degrees.

This investment will cover a range of activities:

- 1) Developing disruptive innovations
- 2) Expanding new types of infrastructures, including for clean sources of energy

Current quantity and export driven Irish agriculture targets are set out in Food Harvest 2020 and Food Wise 2025. There is a need to align our climate targets and the future proofing of the agricultural economy and to establish sustainable farming practices and production methods. The Smart Farming programme promotes the adoption of resource efficiency measures that demonstrate both cost savings and environmental benefits.

Transition to a Low Carbon Economy/Green Economy - Economic Development Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 5.50	Ensure that the County is well positioned to capitalize on the economic benefits associated with the transition to a low carbon economy.
CPO 5.51	Support enterprise development and employment creation across all sectors of the Westmeath economy in accordance with the Green Economy national frameworks relevant to each sector.
CPO 5.52	Engage with all relevant government stakeholders, enterprise agencies and sectoral representatives in pursuing 'green' approaches to economic development, and actively collaborate with key industry and educational bodies to promote Westmeath based initiatives across the economic sectors.
CPO 5.53	Support the establishment of clusters regionally and sectorally to become centres of excellence for the adoption of low carbon technologies.
CPO 5.54	Support the delivery of quality employment and enterprise in the emerging areas of opportunity.
CPO 5.55	Support the development of industries that create and employ green technologies and take measures to accelerate the transition towards a low carbon economy and circular economy.
CPO 5.56	Support homebased economic activity that allows employers, enterprises and entrepreneurs the option of working from home or local hubs to reduce commuting and congestion.
CPO 5.57	Support rural diversification through sustainable rural development practices, investment in rural towns and villages, providing for access to technology and skills-development networks.
CPO 5.58	Support Renewable energy initiatives that supports a low carbon transition.

5.13.14 Quality of Life (Guiding Principle 6)

A Key national economic priority under Enterprise 2025 Renewed (4) is to realise the full potential of the Regions through investments in placemaking - developing places that are attractive for business investment and for people to live and work.

The REP highlights that additional measures are required to be undertaken in order to encourage and attract new businesses into the Midlands region. This includes the promotion of quality of life of persons living within the region, connectivity and access to talent, infrastructure and education.

A 'reverse commute' proposition and the location of businesses, and/or back office, or affording staff the opportunity to avail of co-working/remote working space in the region is sought to be developed under the Midlands REP.

Quality of Life - Economic Development Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 5.59	Facilitate and enhance the collective offering of Westmeath as an attractive place to live work and invest in.
CPO 5.60	Encourage local partnership, town team or community organisations to develop and implement local economic initiatives which enhance towns and villages.
CPO 5.61	Build on Westmeath profile as a county that exemplifies the essential components of Quality of Life factors, including live-work balance, strong education structures, amenity and leisure attractions combined with economic opportunity.
CPO 5.62	Realise the full potential of the County by providing for places that are attractive for business investment and for people to live and work.

Tourism: Strengthening the attractiveness of Westmeath within the Midlands region as a destination to visit.

Tourism constitutes one of Westmeath's most important economic sectors in providing business and employment opportunities leading to job creation across the spectrum of skills requirements.

Westmeath is a county with considerable heritage and cultural assets, along with a scenic and rich natural environment. Coupled with our vibrant towns and villages and easily accessible location, it is evidently a county of high potential for tourism. Annual visitors to the County reached 262,000 in 2017, of which 103,000 were from overseas. Approximately 42% of the County's overseas visitors are from Britain, 34% from mainland Europe and 18% from North America.

The tourism assets available in Westmeath and specific tourism policies are set out in detail in Chapter 6 of this Plan.

Having regard to national and regional tourism policy, the Council is committed to supporting the growth of tourism in the County, taking full advantage of national and regional initiatives and funding schemes and maximising the potential of our unique natural, heritage, cultural, and amenity assets. In reaching this potential, it is essential that a co-ordinated and collaborative approach is taken with relevant agencies, tourism businesses and communities throughout the County. The Council will continue to collaborate with relevant agencies and stakeholders through the County Tourism Steering Group and other established working groups and will continue to support collective development and marketing initiatives underway.

A strong emphasis will be placed on securing sustainable tourism growth, whereby the quality of our landscapes, natural environment and cultural heritage is protected and safeguarded for the long-term enjoyment of assets.

Tourism - Economic Development Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 5.63	Promote Tourism as an integral part of Westmeath's economic profile supporting urban and rural enterprise, recognising the key strategic location of the County and access to tourist sites and attractions.
CPO 5.64	Promote the development of sustainable tourism as part of our economy, that recognises our landscapes, our cultural heritage, our environment and our linguistic heritage.

5.14 Retail

The economic importance of the retail sector to the national economy is identified with some 300,000 jobs associated with the sector, the largest share of employment in the national economy⁷ representing over 12% of the workforce. The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation report that there are approximately 40,000 wholesale and retail businesses with that 90% of these businesses were Irish-owned.

The sector is an intrinsic component of the domestic economy as it has a direct presence in each locality and community. In this regard, the sector is crucial bringing balance to economic recovery. Retailing also supports indirect enterprise and employment opportunities associated with areas such as logistics and distribution.

The Economic Profile section of this Development Plan outlines key economic, population and demographic trends within Westmeath, many of which have direct implications for retailing policy in the Development Plan. Growth in the County's population, particularly the younger working age cohorts, development of urban areas, employment growth, vibrant enterprise and a thriving tourist sector are key economic trends that have implications for retailing policy.

Following a number of years of contraction in domestic demand that significantly dampened retail activity and spending, recent forecasts indicate recovering employment rates and increases in consumer disposable income levels.

5.14.1 Retail Planning Policy Context

The retail sector is a significant employer and economic contributor in the Region. It also plays a key role in placemaking and creating attractive liveable environments. As a significant attractor it enables the provision of strong mixed-use commercial cores throughout the network of city, towns and villages in the Region and can play a key role in the regeneration of areas.

The retail planning policy context for the Development Plan is informed by retail guidance documents at the national and regional levels. The Retail Planning Guidelines for Planning Authorities 2012 are

⁷ Action Plan for Jobs 2015, January 2015, Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, pg. 121.

designed to ensure retail development is plan-led, to promote city centre vitality through the sequential approach to development, enable good quality development in appropriate locations, facilitate a modal shift; all to deliver quality urban design outcomes.

The RSES further supports ‘the preparation of a Retail Strategy/Strategies for the Region in accordance with the Retail Planning Guidelines for Planning Authorities 2012, or any subsequent update, to update the retail hierarchy and apply floorspace requirements for the Region’. In the absence of an updated Retail Strategy, the current Strategy remains applicable for the preparation of the Development Plan.

5.14.2 Framework for Town Centre Renewal

The RSES places an increased emphasis on retail as an integral element of urban change and economic renewal. The concepts of vitality and viability are central to maintaining and enhancing town centres. Keeping a town vibrant and responsive to the needs of the community is an ongoing challenge and a greater range of supports need to be put in place to enable successful town centre renewal. These supports could include administrative supports by local authorities, training supports for town centre coordinators or other town stakeholders and financial supports such as grants for office fit outs, shop front grants, or supports for starting businesses and the Town and Village Renewal scheme and urban and rural regeneration funding.

The Framework for Town Centre Renewal (Retail Consultation Forum, 2017) sets out an action plan for Town Centre renewal which has the potential to support viable and sustainable towns and villages that meet the long-term needs of our society, economy and environment.

5.14.3 Westmeath Retail Hierarchy

The Westmeath Retail Strategy contained at Appendix 4 sets provides a framework for retail development for the duration of this Plan. The Retail Strategy;

- Outlines the retail planning policy context within which the Strategy sits;
- Presents a summary of the baseline for the Strategy;
- Provides a summary review of the progress and performance of the previous Retail Strategy and the principles and retail trends which have underpinned the preparation of the Strategy;
- Summarises the current retail potential of Athlone, Mullingar and the other main centres of the County and the implications of this for the County Retail Strategy;
- Provides the broad assessment of the potential for additional retail floorspace;
- Outlines the aim, objectives, strategic framework and policies and proposals of the Strategy

Strategic Retail Policy - Economic Development Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 5.65	Ensure that all retail development permitted accords with the relevant requirements and criteria as established within the Retail Planning Guidelines for Planning
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	Authorities 2012 and the Westmeath County Retail Strategy 2019-2026 (or any subsequent update).
CPO 5.66	Permit retail development of a size and scale which is appropriate to the level of the town/settlement area, including its population, as defined within the County Retail Hierarchy. This policy will aim to consolidate and reinforce all existing retail enterprises within the County and permit the development of additional retail floorspace where such development is deemed to be appropriate by Westmeath County Council.
CPO 5.67	Support and promote the sustainable development of the retailing sector throughout the County, with a recognition of the importance of SMEs to this domestic sector of the local economy.



WESTMEATH COUNTY COUNCIL
Comhairle Chontae na hIarmhí

www.westmeathcoco.ie

A Westmeath County Council Publication

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