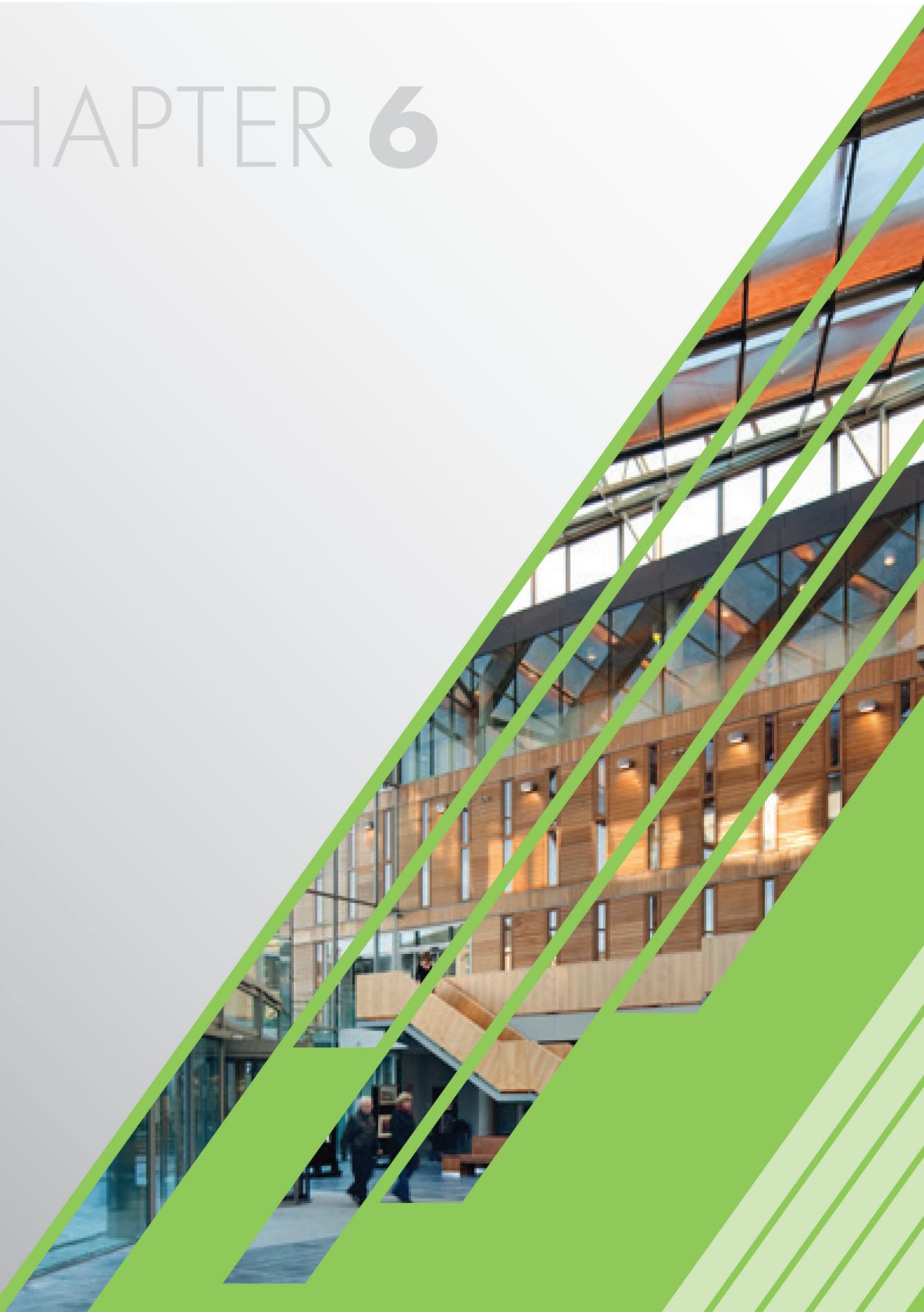


CHAPTER 6



CHAPTER 6 Tourism

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6.1 Aim

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.

6.2 Background

6.2.1 Tourism in Ireland

The tourism sector in Ireland has experienced strong growth in the past decade and is now one of our largest national indigenous industries, supporting an estimated 270,000 jobs. 2018 continued the upwards trend in Irish tourism, with a rise in overseas visitor numbers by 6.9% and over €5 billion in revenue generated to the national economy. Tourism is now considered to be one of the country's most important economic sectors, particularly in rural areas where other employment sources are limited and it has been credited with playing a significant role in the economic recovery in recent years.

National tourism policy falls within the remit of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and national agencies, Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland, deliver and implement the adopted policy. The sector is continually evolving and our national bodies carry out research with domestic and international markets to ensure that policy is reflective of these changes. Ireland is promoted nationally and internationally using 'Brand Ireland', under which four distinct experience propositions are used to define the appealing characteristics of each region. Westmeath sits within two of these regional experience brands, 'Ireland's Ancient East' to the east, including Mullingar and the newest of the four brands, 'Ireland's Hidden Heartlands' to the west, including Athlone.



Figure 6.1 Source: www.failteireland.ie 'Brand Architecture' 2018

6.2.2 Tourism in Westmeath

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. Historical Fáilte Ireland and CSO visitor research has included County Westmeath as part of the Midlands region, which has not experienced a growth in visitor numbers commensurate to our coastal counterparts. The county itself however has been out-performing some of our neighbouring counties, due to a number of strong visitor attractions and a critical mass of visitor services concentrated in the towns of Athlone and Mullingar. 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.

Ireland's Ancient East, launched in 2015, is the third regional experience brand from Fáilte Ireland and includes the majority of County Westmeath, from Moate eastwards. In line with this brand, Westmeath offers a rich heritage, with local storytellers who provide unforgettable tours of our ancient sites. Attractions include the Hill of Uisneach, Belvedere House, Gardens and Park, Kilbeggan Distillery, Tullyally Castle gardens and Fore Abbey. The lakes and waterways of Westmeath are also connected with a rich heritage, including the famous legend of the Children of Lir associated with Lough Derravarragh. The Royal Canal traverses the county, with many preserved original bridges and

locks visible to those who travel this route by boat, bike or foot and the Old Rail Trail Greenway brings visitors along the historic Great Western Railway line through the scenic Midlands landscape.

Westmeath is also part of Ireland's newest and fourth regional tourism brand, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, launched in 2018, which includes Athlone and the area surrounding the River Shannon and Lough Ree. It promises visitors a slow-paced experience, immersed in the natural environment and culture of the region. Activities such as walking, cycling, boat tours on the iconic River Shannon, bird-watching, fishing, and watersports are central to this theme, along with the chance for visitors to engage with local communities, their culture, crafts and local food.



Source: Visit Westmeath Map Guide, www.visitwestmeath.ie, 2018

High levels of investment in tourism development have taken place in recent years, with capital works undertaken to develop and enhance attractions such as Athlone Castle, the Luan Gallery, the Hill of Uisneach Visitor Centre and Belvedere House, Gardens and Park. The recreational tourism offering has also received significant investment, with greenways developed along the Royal Canal and historical Old Rail Trail "Midlands Great Western Greenway" from Mullingar to Athlone. These

greenways will form part of the first coast-to-coast greenway from Dublin to Galway, to be completed in the coming years. Private sector investment has also been significant in recent years, including a range of visitor accommodation and other services. Communities have also contributed greatly, leading projects to enhance public areas along with the development of community tourism attractions such as Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park, Moate.

6.3 Policy Context

6.3.1 People, Place and Policy: Growing Tourism to 2025, Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 2015

This National Strategy aims “to facilitate a vibrant, attractive tourism sector that makes a significant contribution to employment across the country; is economically, socially and environmentally sustainable; helps promote a positive image of Ireland overseas, and is a sector in which people want to work”. Implementation of this strategy is being realised through a series of Three-Year Action Plans.

6.3.2 Tourism Action Plan 2019-2021, Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 2018.

The current National Tourism Action Plan 2019-2021 places an emphasis on regional growth and season extension and on helping to build the attractiveness of some of our less well-known attractions and regions internationally, thereby creating a more even spread of tourism growth across the country and supporting less-developed tourism areas.

6.3.3 Tourism Development & Innovation, A Strategy for Investment 2016-2022, Fáilte Ireland, 2016.

This Strategy includes a strong focus on building memorable visitor experiences, developing a world-class industry, and creating visitor-friendly infrastructure and communities throughout the country. Much of the capital investment nationally is focused on the four regional experience brands, with an emphasis on increased revenue generation from tourism and alignment with the brands.

6.3.4 National Planning Framework 2040

Tourism is part of National Strategic Outcome 7, ‘Enhanced Amenities and Heritage’ which requires investment in well-designed public realm, recreational infrastructure and rural amenities including activity-based tourism and trails such as greenways, blueways and peatways, with the development of a strategic national network of these trails highlighted as a priority. Our built, cultural and natural heritage is identified for its intrinsic value in defining the character of urban and rural areas and adding to their attractiveness and sense of place.

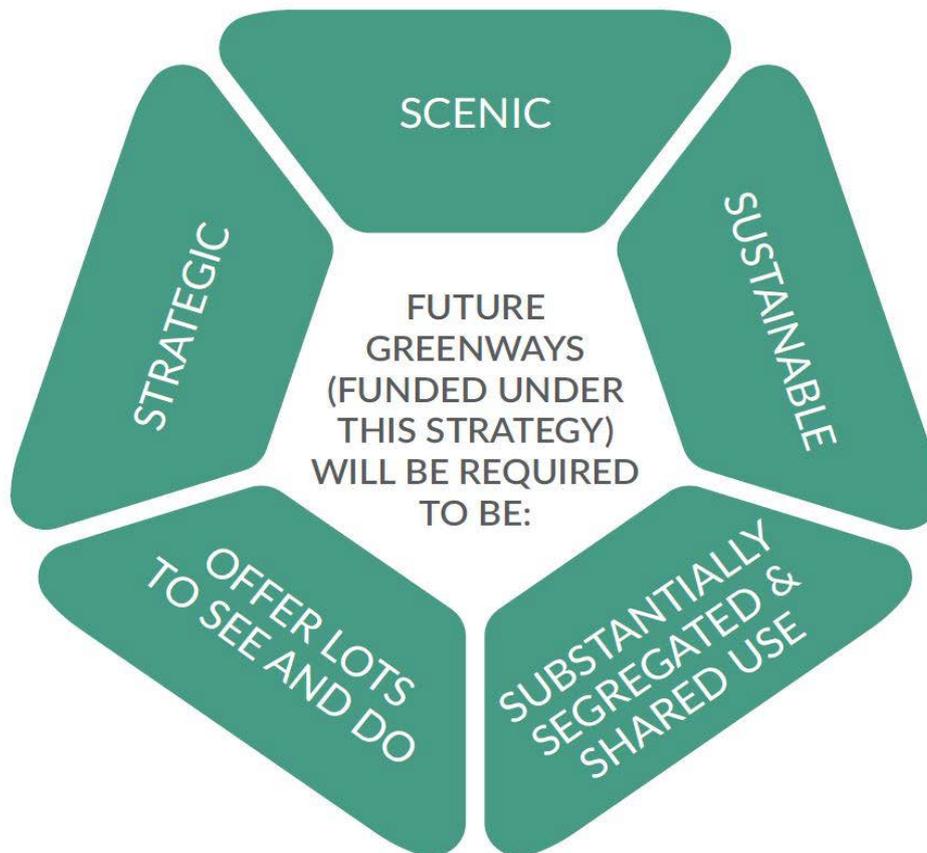
6.3.5 Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy, Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly, 2019

This Strategy specifically highlights the region as a “key destination for tourism, leisure and recreation activities”, with a policy to support the development of an integrated network of greenways, blueways and peatways, while ensuring that high value assets and amenities are protected and enhanced.

Athlone is emphasised as a visitor destination town with particular potential as a base to explore the Hidden Heartlands, while Mullingar is described as a potential ‘tourism hub’.

6.3.6 Strategy for the Future Development of National and Regional Greenways, Department of Tourism, Transport and Sport, 2018

This strategy recognises the high potential of Greenways as economic contributors to rural communities through increased tourism. In order to ensure the maximum benefit in this regard, future greenways funded under this strategy will be required to be strategic, scenic, sustainable, offer lots to see and do and substantially segregated from vehicular traffic and offering shared use between pedestrians and cyclists”.



Source: Strategy for the Future Development of National and Regional Greenways, DTTAS, 2018

6.3.7. Action Plan for Rural Development, Realising our Rural Potential

This plan highlights the potential of activity tourism to contribute to economic growth in rural areas.

6.3.7 Westmeath County Tourism Strategy 2016-2020

This Strategy focuses on three distinct propositions, through which to concentrate action. These are the development and promotion of the visitor destination towns of Athlone and Mullingar and developments which will realise the tourism potential of the county’s Greenways and Blueways.

6.4 Policy Objectives

6.4.1 General Tourism Development

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, including Destination Athlone. 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 these assets.

Council policy is to support tourism while also facilitating the protection of the County's environmental assets that tourism is dependent upon including lakes green infrastructure and places of cultural heritage which are further outlined in Chapters 10,12 13 and 14 of this plan.

The potential environmental effects of a likely increase in tourists/tourism-related traffic volumes shall be considered and mitigated as appropriate. Such a consideration should include potential impacts on existing infrastructure (including drinking water, wastewater, waste and transport) resulting from tourism proposals.

General Tourism Development Policy Objectives	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 6.1	Engage and collaborate with key stakeholders, relevant agencies, sectoral representatives and local communities to develop the tourism sector in Westmeath, to ensure that the economic potential of the tourism sector is secured for the local economy.
CPO 6.2	Promote the development and strengthening of the overall value of Westmeath as a tourist destination by encouraging the enhancement and development of sustainable and high-quality visitor attractions, activities and infrastructure, enabling an increase in the overall capacity and long-term development of the county's tourism industry, subject to appropriate siting and design criteria and the protection of environmentally sensitive areas.
CPO 6.3	Continue to work closely with Fáilte Ireland to maximise the benefit of national and regional initiatives for the county, with a particular emphasis on initiatives which will increase the economic benefit from tourism, support local business development and encourage new enterprise opportunities.

CPO 6.4	Identify all opportunities for funding, including LEADER, national and European funding schemes and seek to maximise the benefit of such funding opportunities to the county.
CPO 6.5	Continue to support the implementation of the County's Tourism Strategy in line with national and regional policy, tourism trends and identified challenges, in collaboration with Fáilte Ireland, Waterways Ireland, tourism businesses and communities and other supporting agencies.
CPO 6.6	Utilise the region's natural and heritage resources to foster the development of tourism as a viable sector of the economy in a sustainable manner which complements the scale, quality and unique features of the region.
CPO 6.7	Protect and conserve the natural, built and cultural heritage features which add value to the visitor experience in Westmeath and seek to restrict developments which would damage or detract from the quality of scenic areas and identified natural and cultural heritage assets.
CPO 6.8	Support actions to increase access to state and semi-state lands such as National Parks, Forest Parks, Waterways, etc., together with Monuments and Historic Properties, for recreation and tourism purposes, subject to the requirements of the Habitats Directive, National Monuments Act and other provisions and policies to protect and safeguard these resources and subject to the ability of local infrastructure to support the resulting increased tourism.
CPO 6.9	Continue to support the development and expansion of tourism-related enterprise including visitor attractions, services and accommodation and food and craft businesses, particularly those offering a visitor experience, such as tastings, tours and demonstrations.
CPO 6.10	Encourage local industry and community engagement with all relevant Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland initiatives to maximise benefit to the county and continue to work with Fáilte Ireland to build our visitor offering in line with established regional experience brands.
CPO 6.11	Improve the quality of visitor data collection, in conjunction with Fáilte Ireland and the county's attractions and accommodation providers, including visitor numbers, footfall and origin and characteristics of visitors, to enable monitoring of trends and better provision for tourism growth into the future.
CPO 6.12	Prepare and update a comprehensive tourism signage plan for the county, in collaboration with Fáilte Ireland, ensuring that old and obsolete signage is removed and new signage is consistent and complementary to signage associated with Ireland's Ancient East and Ireland's Hidden Heartlands Regional Experience Brands.

CPO 6.13	Support opportunities for increased tourism as a result of warmer summers, within limits of existing infrastructure and sensitive habitats.
CPO 6.14	Integrate climate change adaptation measures into future tourism plans.
CPO 6.15	Monitor and manage any increase in visitor numbers and/or any change in visitor behaviour in order to avoid significant effects, including loss of habitat and disturbance. Visitor/Habitat Management Plans will be required for proposed projects as relevant and appropriate.

6.4.2. Destination Towns

In planning their trip, visitors need reassurance that there will be plenty of quality things to see and do both in the day time and evening, along with a range of accommodation options and restaurants. The most effective and efficient way to deliver this for visitors is through destination towns. Athlone and Mullingar both offer high-quality visitor services including a range of accommodation, restaurants, cafes, visitor attractions and guided tours. Current provision enables both towns to serve tourism to the range of surrounding attractions and amenities.

The picturesque town of Athlone is the destination of choice for many holiday makers to this region, known for a strong arts and culture scene, along with must-visit attractions such as Athlone Castle Visitor Centre, Sean's Bar Ireland's Oldest Pub and the Luan Gallery, a contemporary art gallery with breathtaking views. High-quality local food is also renowned in this area, with a concentration of award-winning restaurants. A creative culture is fostered through the Luan Gallery, Abbey Road Arts Studios, various theatres and festivals. A crossing point on the River Shannon, Athlone is a base for cruising, boat tours, angling and other water-based activities.

The vibrant market town of Mullingar is known as the birthplace of Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann and for the many talented musicians who have originated there. This musical heritage is considered to be a significant growth enabler for visitors into the future and is a great source of pride for the local community. Belvedere House, Gardens and Park is a visitor attraction of regional importance, combining heritage with natural lakeshore scenery. Mullingar is almost encircled by the Royal Canal Greenway and Blueway, creating an off-road link to Longford in the west and Maynooth to the east, with a section to Dublin city nearing completion. Since 2015, Mullingar and Athlone are linked by the Old Rail Trail Greenway, soon to be part of the larger scale Galway to Dublin Route.

Recently completed streetscape enhancements in both destination towns and further planned works offer the opportunity to improve the visitor experience, by creating a stronger sense of place through highlighting the unique characteristics of the towns. Ancillary infrastructure such as seating and provision for outdoor events, along with well-placed and designed lighting and wayfinding, can greatly enhance a visitor's enjoyment of our public realm and encourage increased dwell time and repeat visits.

Strong character & sense of place	Rich diversity of functions and activities	Adaptable urban structure to accommodate longer term changes	Well-connected network of streets
Priority in town centre for pedestrians	Coherent, legible and attractive streetscapes	Good quality and attractive public realm ⁵	Survival of the main street
Unlocking under-used and vacant sites	Ensuring clean and safe environment	Addressing traffic and congestion	Integration of green spaces & linkages, within and around the town

Source: *What Tourists are Looking For: Development Guidelines for Tourism Destination Towns*, Fáilte Ireland, 2019

Destination Towns Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 6.16	Continue to support the promotion of Athlone and Mullingar as urban tourism destinations, providing memorable and high-quality visitor experiences in their own right and providing services for visitors to the range of attractions and activities in the surrounding region.
CPO 6.17	Support industry collaboration in Athlone and Mullingar to collectively promote these destination towns, maximising the impact of marketing through sharing resources.
CPO 6.18	Support the development of a cross sectoral approach to promote Athlone as the principle visitor services centre and hub for Fáilte Ireland's Hidden Heartlands 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 6.19	Support Mullingar to become an important destination for visitors to Ireland's Ancient East, having regard to its accessibility to natural amenities and recreational opportunities such as the Royal Canal, Dublin Galway National Cycle Network and nearby lakes, together with focussing on its proud musical heritage, along with legends associated with local heritage attractions.

CPO 6.20	Encourage the celebration of the unique attributes of towns and villages in the design and delivery of all visitor interpretation, signage and public realm schemes in order to provide tourists with a strong 'Sense of Place' and a more memorable visit.
CPO 6.21	Support industry-led collaborative tourism initiatives and community projects which aim to enhance and promote the visitor offering in towns and villages.
CPO 6.22	Facilitate the enhancement and development of Athlone's Cultural Quarter, as a location where cultural heritage and artistic visitor attractions are clustered, offering a unique and marketable tourism proposition.
CPO 6.23	Support the development of a strong evening and night-time tourism economy, in collaboration with arts and music venues, festivals and events committees and local Chambers of Commerce, including support for the Purple Flag initiative, currently successfully delivered in Mullingar.

6.5 Tourism Infrastructure and Visitor Services

The provision of sufficient, appropriate and high-quality infrastructure to meet the needs of visitors is fundamental to Westmeath reaching its potential for a thriving tourism sector. Future provision will be based on current and future projected needs and the Council will take account of tourism research and statistics available in determining such need. Services and infrastructure should be clustered in visitor destination towns and villages where possible, providing for a suitable range and critical mass of services that will strengthen visitor destinations. The Council recognises the potential for pressure being placed on the County's natural and heritage amenities through increased tourism. In this regard, it is important that the provision for increased tourism activity is in line with the provision of the required infrastructure to support such development. The Council will use the full range of its statutory procedures, particularly in relation to waste management, water and air pollution, to ensure that natural amenities remain unpolluted and visually unspoiled.

Tourism-related development proposals will be required to demonstrate a high standard of design, with strong consideration given to a proposal's potential impact on its surroundings in terms of scale and intensity and the potential for the proposal to add significantly to the quality of the visitor experience.

The Council recognises that the provision of accommodation such as hotels, guesthouses, hostels, caravan and camping sites are essential to enable growth in the tourism sector. The Council shall support the development of tourism in the county by encouraging the provision of a wide range of tourist accommodation types and restricting development that would be likely to reduce the capacity of the resource, or have a detrimental impact on the local environment. In general, such developments shall be encouraged to locate within or in close proximity to existing towns and villages where they can avail of existing public services, commercial and community facilities. The Council will support the development and upgrade of accommodation to meet Fáilte Ireland Quality Standards, subject to

development management criteria and will require that such relevant standards are met in development proposals where appropriate.

Tourism Infrastructure and Visitor Services Policy Objectives	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 6.24	Promote tourism-related developments in existing settlements within the Settlement Hierarchy, subject to existing carrying capacity.
CPO 6.25	Collaborate with tourism industry and Fáilte Ireland to identify future visitor accommodation and service requirements, taking account of existing provision and projected growth and support initiatives to proactively meet any identified requirements, subject to development management standards.
CPO 6.26	Facilitate the development of high-quality tourist accommodation such as hotels, hostels, B&B's / guesthouses, caravan and camping etc. at suitable locations, in both urban and rural settings throughout the county, subject to ensuring a high standard of design, layout, landscape and environmental protection, the provision of adequate infrastructure and compliance with best practice planning considerations.
CPO 6.27	Encourage the upgrade of existing accommodation facilities to meet Fáilte Ireland Quality and 'Welcome Standards' as appropriate, subject to development management standards, ensuring that new and existing developments do not negatively impact on sensitive environments.
CPO 6.28	Encourage that certain tourism accommodation developments comply with Fáilte Ireland quality standards, in particular caravan and camping facilities, to ensure such developments can contribute to the development of the tourism sector to their maximum potential.
CPO 6.29	Ensure that the development of visitor infrastructure linked to natural and heritage environments, does not detract from the quality and value of these environments.
CPO 6.30	Support, implement or require best-practice environmental management and climate proofing of tourism related developments and activities, such as accommodation, restaurants, activity providers, festivals and events and tourism enterprises, to include energy efficiency, waste management, procurement and recycling.
CPO 6.31	Support rural tourism initiatives such as agri-farm tourism, trekking and trails together with new opportunities to promote nature tourism, in order to sustain employment in rural areas.

6.6 History, Heritage and Ancient Sites

Westmeath is steeped in heritage and already has a strong foundation in the provision of world-class heritage tourism attractions. Heritage and cultural assets which are of significant importance and value and are already open to the public include Athlone Castle Visitor Centre, Belvedere House, Gardens and Park, the Luan Gallery, The Hill of Uisneach, Tullynally Castle Gardens, Kilbeggan Distillery and Fore Abbey. Increased investment and support is required in order to increase revenue generated to the local economy from these attractions, both directly and indirectly. The creation of stronger linkages between attractions, activities, visitor services and accommodation is critical to increasing visitor dwell time and encouraging multi-day visits to the county with resulting economic benefit.

As part of Ireland's Ancient East, Westmeath has the potential to be promoted worldwide for its authentic and memorable heritage assets, where visitors can "discover a region of legends and stories, from ancient times to modern day". In delivering the brand promise, a key challenge is to enhance the interpretation of our heritage, moving from the provision of historical information to 'storytelling interpretation', which aims to build meaningful relationships between places and communities and the people who visit them. It is important that any future interpretation of Westmeath's heritage takes account of the Ireland's Ancient East brand promise, through providing engaging, entertaining, accessible and visitor-focused content that can contribute to an authentic and memorable experience. A 'Toolkit for Storytelling Interpretation' has been produced by Fáilte Ireland to provide guidance.

Westmeath's natural heritage cannot be underestimated for its tourism value. Native wildlife can be found in abundance along our waterways, lakeshores, greenways and trails. Activities such as bird-watching and foraging are becoming increasingly popular as 'slow tourism' becomes more prevalent internationally. Visitors targeted under the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand proposition are those who want this more relaxed pace of holiday, where they can attune with nature and go 'off grid'.

Adequate recognition of the value of investing in heritage conservation will reduce the potential conflict with loss of authenticity and appreciation of a place, tourism provision and more informed planning decisions. Investing in heritage in terms of placemaking will benefit not just tourism but the local citizen. The protection and conservation of the County's heritage assets and features will be of paramount importance, including natural and cultural heritage, in order to safeguard the quality of assets into the future.

History, Heritage and Ancient Sites Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 6.32	Identify locations where heritage interpretation would add to the visitor experience and take account of Fáilte Ireland's Toolkit for Storytelling Interpretation in the design and delivery of interpretation media, with a focus on animating stories and encouraging greater engagement with our heritage.
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CPO 6.33	Encourage sustainable enterprise development associated with heritage sites to gain benefit from increased visitors, subject to development management standards.
CPO 6.34	Continue to promote the Hill of Uisneach as a sustainable visitor offering and enhanced access to the site, including the creation of walking and cycling connections with the Old Rail Trail (Galway to Dublin) Greenway.
CPO 6.35	Promote the enhancement and development of Belvedere House, Gardens and Park and Athlone Castle Visitor Centre as world-class visitor attractions, enabling visitors to have an enjoyable and engaging experience, while protecting the cultural heritage, natural environment and landscape value.
CPO 6.36	Support appropriate conservation works to structures at Belvedere House, Gardens and Park and other built heritage assets, in order to safeguard these amenities for the long term.
CPO 6.37	Support the conservation of estates and demesnes by way of facilitating appropriate development that contributes to their economic viability.
CPO 6.38	Investigate the feasibility of re-locating the Tourist Information Office in Athlone, currently located in the Castle Grounds, to a suitable alternative location, in collaboration with Athlone Arts and Tourism and Fáilte Ireland.
CPO 6.39	Support the local community, the OPW and local businesses to expand and enhance the visitor offering at Fore, taking account of the archaeological heritage at this location, to animate the stories of this historical site and increase visitor dwell time.
CPO 6.40	Support sustainable initiatives and projects that enable visitors to enjoy and connect with our natural heritage, including walking or cycling trails, viewing points, facilities for bird-watching and angling, tours and events, subject to the requirement.
CPO 6.41	Support enhanced access to state and semi-state lands such as National Parks, Forest Parks, Waterways, etc., together with Monuments and Historic Properties, for recreation and tourism purposes. Access should be planned and managed in a sustainable manner that protects environmental sensitivities, ecological corridors, and the ability of local infrastructure to support increased tourism.
CPO 6.42	Continue to engage with the NPWS, Coillte, ESB, Bord Na Mona and other stakeholders and agencies with regard to tourism related uses of cut-away bogs and support the development of peatways at appropriate locations.
CPO 6.43	Support the diversification and innovation of our tourism offerings with opportunities arising for the development of new tourism offerings such as nature tourism.

6.7 Lakes and Waterways

Westmeath is known as the 'Lake County', with expansive lakes dotted throughout, including Lough Ree, Lough Ennell, Lough Owel and Lough Derravaragh. The value of the lakes from a tourism and amenity perspective is significant having regard to their scenic beauty, serene environment and natural heritage and habitat value, with wildlife in abundance. The county's waterways are also of great value, the iconic River Shannon bounds the county to the west and the River Brosna meanders southwards from Mullingar. The historic Royal Canal traverses the county on its journey from Dublin city to Longford and is navigable through the county.

Our lakes and waterways have benefited from significant public and private investment from a variety of sources in the long term, particularly in recent years. Public amenity areas have been developed at numerous locations along the lake shores, many of which include car parking, information panels, toilets and viewing points, with enhanced facilities such as diving boards, boardwalks and boat mooring at some locations. Boating facilities along the Royal Canal have been developed and the Royal Canal Blueway was launched in 2018 along a 23km stretch around Mullingar. A recent greenway link was created to connect the Royal Canal Greenway in Mullingar directly to the shores of Lough Owel. Visitors to Belvedere House, Gardens and Park can enjoy beautiful walks along the Lough Ennell shoreline within this historic estate. Portlick Millennium Forest Walks have also been developed to enable exploration of the Winning Peninsula of Lough Ree and where the iconic River Shannon flows into Lough Ree, leisurely cruises, watersports, bird watching, angling and the legendary Viking Boat Tour can be enjoyed. Lough Ennell and Lough Owel are also popular spots for watersports and angling and Lough Derravaragh is integral to Irish mythology, as the lake where the legendary tale of the Children of Lir took place.

The Council will seek to facilitate increased visitor access and enjoyment of Westmeath's lakes and waterways, through encouraging developments which provide visitor services and / or create stronger connections with towns and villages which can provide those services. Such services may include bike, boat and watersport equipment hire, changing and toilet facilities and guided tours, along with general services such as accommodation, restaurants etc. This will require support for the establishment of small-scale enterprise development in a sustainable manner. This poses a challenge, given the inherent environmental sensitivities at such locations. However, the Council will encourage and seek to create stronger connections between water-based amenities and nearby population centres, where visitor services can be best accommodated. Where existing underused structures and infrastructure already exists at water-side locations, priority will be given to developments which maximise the use of this existing infrastructure as opposed to new developments at these locations.

The quality of our water resources is of paramount importance to realising the potential of these assets for tourism. The Blue Flag designation is an internationally recognised award and is a valuable accolade in terms of promoting the quality of our lakes and waterways for tourism. The Council will strive to attain this award for its water amenity areas and maintain or reinstate the award where appropriate. In 2019, Killinure Point was the only area with Blue Flag status in the county. All tourist related development in the vicinity of any of the lakes in the County shall be subject to the requirements of the Habitats Directive.

Lakes and Waterways Policy Objectives	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 6.44	Facilitate increased access to Westmeath's lakes and waterways, from towns and villages where visitor services are located, with an emphasis on providing a strong visitor experience associated with the lakes and waterways and their heritage and amenity value, including trails, bird hides, watersports facilities etc., subject to the protection of environmentally sensitive areas and the requirements of the Habitats Directive.
CPO 6.45	Support the provision of infrastructure to enable increased tourism activity associated with Westmeath's lakes, including boating, canoeing and angling while ensuring that such provision does not negatively impact on sensitive environments and subject to the requirements of the Habitats Directive.
CPO 6.46	Provide for small-scale enterprise development that will provide for visitor engagement in water-based activities, subject to development management principles, the requirements of the Habitats Directive and the protection of sensitive environments.
CPO 6.47	Prioritise development proposals which utilise existing infrastructure and disused structures adjacent to Westmeath's lakes and waterways for the provision of visitor services, including changing facilities, boat storage etc., where appropriate.
CPO 6.48	Support the provision of walking and cycling links between lakes and nearby villages, towns and visitor attractions, provided such developments do not negatively impact on sensitive environments.
CPO 6.49	Continue to work with Waterways Ireland and local communities in the enhancement and promotion of the Royal Canal, including the provision of ancillary infrastructure and services for Blueway and Greenway users, such as water access, bike and boat storage, rest areas, shelters, toilets, changing and other facilities which will enhance the user experience.
CPO 6.50	Continue to work closely with Fáilte Ireland, Waterways Ireland and neighbouring counties to realise the potential of Athlone, Lough Ree and the Mid-Shannon region for tourism, taking account of recommendations arising from the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands 'Shannon Masterplan' and 'Spirit Level' and the Athlone Waterfront Strategy.
CPO 6.51	Identify the potential for development of canoe trails on the inner lakes of Lough Ree and work with Waterways Ireland to develop facilities where appropriate.

CPO 6.52	Harness the tourist potential of Lough Ree Biosphere.
CPO 6.53	Seek to acquire and maintain Blue Flag status for water amenity areas throughout the county as an accolade for use in promoting the quality of these facilities.
CPO 6.54	Prepare Habitat Management Plans for Westmeath's lakes and Visitor Management Plans for particular areas most used by visitors and where particular sensitivities occur, to support the protection and conservation of our natural resources into the long term.

6.8 Greenways, Cycling and Walking

Within County Westmeath, a total of 89km of greenways have been developed for the enjoyment of walkers and cyclists. The Royal Canal Greenway traverses the county via Mullingar and Old Rail Trail Greenway links Mullingar and Athlone. Both greenways interconnect in Mullingar and will form part of the Galway to Dublin, Coast to Coast Greenway and Eurovelo 2, an international-scale tourism offering, when complete in the coming years. The Council will ensure that any future Corridor and Route Selection Process complies with the relevant greenway and blueway projects as outlined in Chapter 10 of this Plan.

Westmeath County Council, working with strategic partners at a national, regional and local level, are strongly committed to greenway development, recognising their strong potential, particularly for generating tourism activity and the resulting economic impacts. In particular, Westmeath County Council have taken a strong role in the development of the Galway to Dublin Greenway and have invested significant levels of resources in this regard. Further resources are being committed on an ongoing basis to further develop and enhance the greenways and associated infrastructure, in order to maximize the tourism potential in this regard.

At a regional level, Westmeath County Council works closely with neighbouring local authorities and strategic agencies relevant to greenway development. A joint project with Offaly County Council, the 'Royal Canal to Grand Canal' greenway link from Kilbeggan to the Offaly County boundary to Ballycommon Co. Offaly has been recently approved and awarded funding by the Department of Rural and Community Development.

Off-road looped walking trails are located at various locations in the county, including Mullaghmeen Forest, Portlick Millennium Forest, the Shannon Banks Walk, Belvedere House, Gardens and Park and St. Feichin's Way in Fore. One long-distance National Waymarked Way exists from Mullingar to Kilbeggan called the Westmeath Way, however this is fragmented and requires some work to re-route and upgrade. Excellent high quality parklands offering smaller trails for walking and cycling include Burgess Park in Athlone, Mullingar Town Park and Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park.

Greenways, Cycling and Walking Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 6.55	Continue to augment the visitor experience on the county's greenways, through the provision of ancillary infrastructure as required, having regard to the DTTAS 'Greenways and Cycle Routes Ancillary Infrastructure Guidelines', along with high quality signage and links to nearby visitor attractions and places of interest.
CPO 6.56	Support the provision of visitor services within existing towns and villages, such as cafes, accommodation etc, by providing linkages with greenways, trails etc where appropriate.
CPO 6.57	Continue to support the development of the Galway to Dublin Cycleway, completing the connection to the west of the River Shannon in Athlone and working with neighbouring counties and national bodies to complete and promote the entire route. The development of the cycleway shall comply with the provisions of the Habitats Directive and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport's Dublin to Galway Greenway Plan 2017 and associated measures relating to environmental management and sustainable development.
CPO 6.58	Support increased opportunities for off-road walking, including looped walks and longer distance trails, taking account of 'positive control points' in trail design, such as areas of natural beauty, lakeshores or rivers, bogs, built heritage and archaeological features and with links to towns and villages where services may be provided for walkers and hikers. In designing walking trails, the Sport Ireland Guide to Planning and Developing Recreational Trails will be consulted.
CPO 6.59	Continue to maintain and further enhance the County's walking and cycling trails, striving to achieve National Trails accreditation and other standards as set by Sport Ireland, in partnership with local communities and land owners.
CPO 6.60	Support the re-routing and upgrade the Westmeath Way walking trail, bringing it off-road and linked to scenic areas where possible, ensuring its status as an accredited National Waymarked way in the long term and exploring options such as the Walks Scheme for future maintenance.
CPO 6.61	Support the provision of visitor interpretation along walking and cycling trails, including storyboards, artworks and other media, to create a greater sense of place, connecting and immersing visitors in our local heritage and stories.

CPO 6.62	Support the provision of services for visitors using walking and cycling trails which are appropriate to the location and activity, including bike service points, picnic benches at scenic locations, public toilets in remote areas etc.
CPO 6.63	Support the provision of a greenway link from Mullingar to the Lough Ennell shoreline and to Belvedere House, Gardens and Park, subject the protection of environmentally sensitive areas and the requirements of the Habitats Directive.
CPO 6.64	Seek to improve and upgrade signage and trail infrastructure at Portlick Millennium Forest and Mullaghmeen Forest and promote these scenic looped walks.
CPO 6.65	Support the delivery of a River Shannon walking and / or trail, from Athlone to Clonmacnoise in collaboration with local communities and Offaly County Council and from Athlone to the Royal Canal at Ballymahon in collaboration with Longford County Council.
CPO 6.66	Promote the principles of 'Leave no Trace' in all trail information panels, promotional materials and events and use all statutory procedures to deter negative environmental impact resulting from use of our trails and outdoor recreation amenities.

6.9 Arts, Culture and Festivals

Westmeath is a county rich in culture and the artist expression. Facilities such as the Luan Gallery on the River Shannon banks, Mullingar Arts Centre, Ballinahown Craft Village and various theatres such as the Dean Crowe in Athlone offer the chance for visitors to enjoy displays from local talented visual artists and craft workers. Smaller galleries and craft shops are also located throughout the county, including the Genesis Gift Gallery in Mullingar. Musical talent is also on display with many music venues featuring home-grown talent concentrated in Mullingar in particular. The tradition of Irish music is celebrated county-wide, through Ceoltas Ceoltoiri hEireann centres and traditional pubs.

A number of vibrant festivals enable local communities to celebrate a valuable cultural heritage and spotlight local talent and unique local attributes. The International Drama Festival is hosted in Athlone annually, spotlighting Athlone as an important venue for the performing arts, while the Bealtaine Fire Celebration at Uisneach highlights the traditions and rituals associated with this ancient heritage site. While some festivals remain small in scale year after year, reaching only a local audience, others have the ambition to grow into larger events, capable of attracting larger numbers of visitors, resulting in a greater impact to the local economy and highlighting the festival location as one worth visiting to a wider audience. The Council will seek to support these festivals where possible, to support their growth potential, subject to event licensing and quality standards.

The Council provides support for the county's arts and cultural facilities along with assistance to groups organising festivals through its annual grants scheme and other support through its arts, tourism and heritage sections.

Arts, Culture and Festivals Policy Objectives	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 6.67	Support the continued expression of local culture, visual and performing arts and craft through the various arts, music and cultural centres, galleries and craft shops.
CPO 6.68	Continue to support activities, events and evolving visitor experiences such as the Luan Gallery as important tourist offerings.
CPO 6.69	Continue to support events and festivals in the county, with a particular focus on events which have the potential to attract a wider audience and spotlight the county as a visitor destination.
CPO 6.70	Continue to provide supports to indigenous enterprises and organisations which create locally made products and offering visitors a chance to sample our local produce and talent, through visitor centres, food and craft fairs and cultural events.
CPO 6.71	Support the 'Green your Festival' initiative and encourage and support festival and event organisers to incorporate green principles in their event planning and management.



WESTMEATH COUNTY COUNCIL
Comhairle Chontae na hIarmhí

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