

# CHAPTER 7



## CHAPTER 7 Urban Centres & Place-making

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## 7.1 Aim

To protect and enhance the unique identity and character of Westmeath's towns and villages and improve quality of life and wellbeing through the application of Healthy Placemaking, underpinned by good urban design, with the creation of attractive public spaces that are vibrant, distinctive, safe and accessible and which promote and facilitate positive social interaction.

## 7.2 Introduction

Town centres are important hubs of activity. Successful town centres are the chosen destinations that attract a variety of people offering retail, business, hospitality and a range of amenities and services thus playing an important and influential role in supporting and promoting local economic growth.

County Westmeath has a unique urban structure with two influential designated towns, namely Athlone, a regional growth centre and Mullingar, a Key Town. Both towns are strategically located and served by national rail and road networks – the M4 and M6. Westmeath is further supported by a plethora of smaller towns and villages that are evenly distributed across the County.

This Development Plan supports the hierarchy of high quality, vibrant, consolidated and attractive urban settlements and aims to improve the quality of Westmeath's towns and villages by applying the principles of placemaking. Placemaking is multidimensional and represents the connection between people and place; it is an essential link between spatial planning and facilitating improvements to people's quality of life and influences where people choose to live, visit and invest. Placemaking represents the umbrella of positive best practice planning that serves to create and support sustainable communities by providing accessible, safe and distinct built environments reflective of the character, heritage and identity of each individual settlement supported by the creation of qualitative safe and attractive public spaces.

## 7.3 Policy Context

### 7.3.1 National Planning Framework (NPF) 2018 and the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly Spatial Economic Strategy (RSES)

The National Planning Framework (NPF) and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) place a new policy emphasis on renewing and developing existing urban settlements. Regeneration and rejuvenation are central components identified to achieve the NPF strategic objectives with compact growth identified as a positive alternative to urban sprawl.

Westmeath County Council is committed to ensuring a plan-led and delivery focused approach to securing compact sustainable growth centred on the principles of regeneration and the achievement of successful and sustainable communities in line with the shared vision of the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the Eastern and Midlands Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) and to accelerate a transition to a greener, low carbon and climate resilient county.

The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) emphasises the concept of Placemaking as a tool to enable sustained economic growth and employment including the integration of better urban design, public realm, amenities and heritage to create attractive and liveable places that support active lifestyles and human health.

## 7.4 What is Placemaking?

Placemaking relates to the interrelationship and connection between people and the space they use. Placemaking as a concept goes beyond the physical fabric of place, by strengthening the connection between people and space, merging the social and physical fabric of our living environments and helping to define character and identity of place.

Healthy placemaking seeks to protect and enhance the unique identity and character of places and to facilitate improvements to human wellbeing and the quality of life that comes from the interaction of people and their environment. Placemaking is underpinned by good urban design, which seeks to create public spaces that are vibrant, distinctive, safe and accessible and which promote and facilitate social interaction. Figure 7.1 below sets out the principle considerations in contributing to attractive places.



*Fig. 7.1 – Key Design Principles of Quality Placemaking*

### 7.4.1 Achieving Good Placemaking

Placemaking in the planning process relates to the positive interventions that help to shape, develop and foster activity in our shared public spaces. Successful public spaces are multi-dimensional - they appeal to people of all abilities, young and old, for a variety of reasons and for a variety of purposes with a central focus on improving the quality of life for the communities they serve.

It is an objective of this Development Plan to improve the quality of Westmeath's urban and rural environments by promoting a high standard of design for all new developments. Adhering to the principles of placemaking will achieve accessible, safe and sustainable built and natural environments, which reflect the special character and heritage of the County and its varied townscape and landscapes.

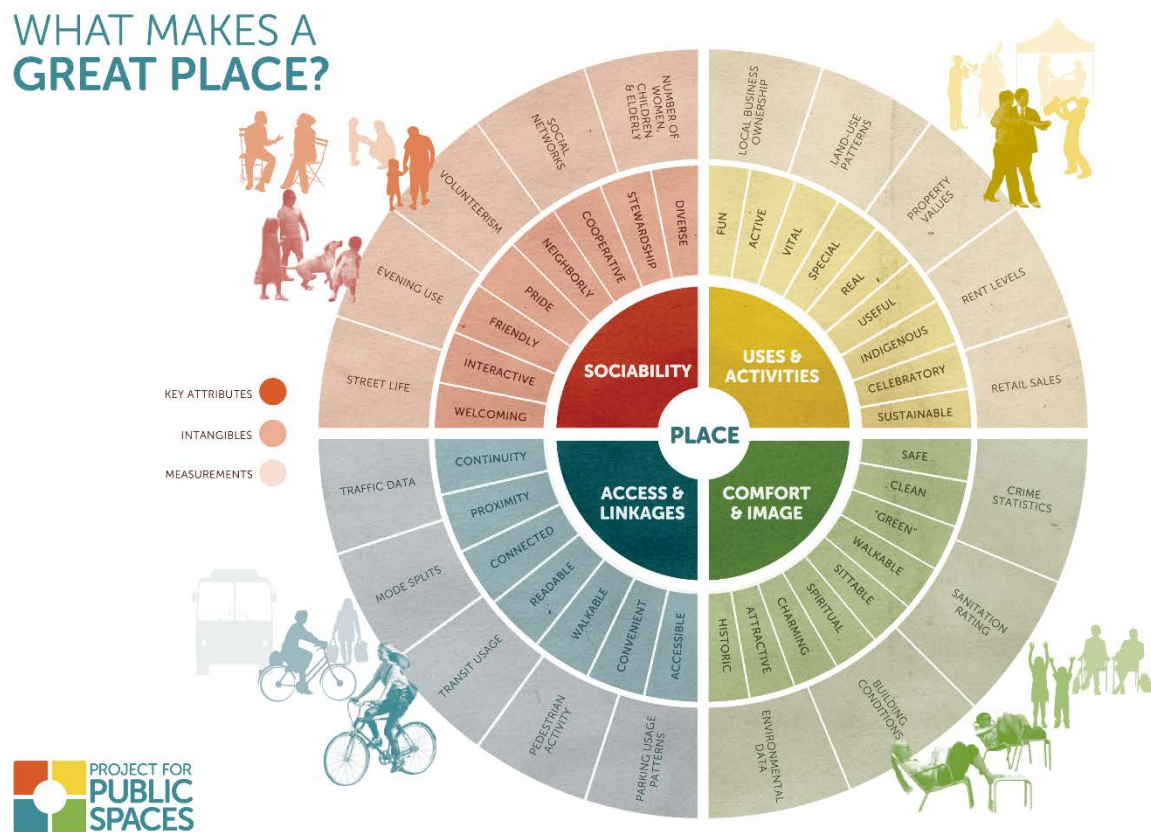


Fig 7.2. – The 'Place' Diagram



### 7.4.2 Public Realm and Placemaking

Public realm comprises of the public outdoor spaces accessible to everyone, from squares, parks and open spaces to the footpaths and the streets that link them. High-quality public realm facilitates a positive environment in which to live, work and visit and provides for an improved quality of life for everyone.

Positive interventions to improve the public realm of Westmeath's towns and villages can begin with simple measures such as landscaping, paving, street lighting and furniture. However, a vibrant public realm is not simply the result of high-quality design interventions - the built environment affects how people feel and respond, both physically and psychologically. Proposals for development should contribute to the creation of a distinct sense of place and identity that not only facilitates but encourages and creates opportunities for activity and interaction, from simple day to day activity to social, seasonal and planned events.

It is increasingly recognised that public realm plays a vital role in presenting the identity, character, image and 'atmosphere' of our towns and villages and that while social activity in the public realm is heavily dependent on the quality of the built environment, it is essential when designing and developing our public spaces that proposals respond to, and contributes to the local context, character and civic identity rather seeking a purely aesthetic result.

Similarly, poorly considered infrastructure such as overhead wiring, excessive or garish signage and advertising and an array of street furniture styles can be detrimental to the visual amenity of public spaces. It is essential that a consistent approach is maintained in the selection of street furniture, materials and installations rather than an ad-hoc mix of styles. A simple, uncluttered and consistent design approach is considered as the key to success. For example, in historic quarters, traditional signage, lighting columns and benches may be more appropriate whereas a more contemporary modern approach would be suited for new innovative developments.

Effective public realm interventions can dramatically improve human wellbeing and are also a key factor in enhancing the attractiveness of places for talent and business investment as well as for residents, workers and visitors.

#### Public Realm and Place making Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 7.1	Provide for a high-quality public realm and public spaces by promoting quality urban design that accommodates creative patterns of use having regard to the physical, cultural, and social identities of individual settlements.
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CPO 7.2	<p>Apply the following key attributes when considering public realm and public space enhancements:</p> <p><b>Accessible</b> - connected and linked permeable spaces to ensure ease of movement.</p> <p><b>Functional</b> - safe, adaptable and social environments to attract and foster activity.</p> <p><b>Attractive</b> - visually pleasing spaces with high quality design, materials and installations (lighting, furniture and signage) based on a singular common design theme.</p> <p><b>Distinctive</b> - reference to local context and building on the character and identity of place.</p>
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### 7.4.3 Creative places

Regional Strategic Outcome 5 as set out under the EMRA RSES provides for the creation of 'Creative Places' with the aim to 'enhance, integrate and protect our arts, culture and heritage assets to promote creative places and heritage led regeneration'. The RSES acknowledges that positive placemaking cannot be achieved by physical intervention alone. The overall quality of our built environment is enriched by details, quite often subtle components of the public realm, while not immediately obvious, serve to reinforce the identity of a place and enhance its overall quality and atmosphere, either on an individual or collective basis. It is important therefore that proposals for development show regard to existing features of interest and incorporate such features into design proposals. The concept of creative placemaking presents an opportunity to evolve our existing urban spaces to create attractive and memorable places that interweave and showcase Westmeath's arts, culture and heritage as part of the urban fabric. Additionally, the installation of Public Art can provide for interesting and creative focal points within our towns and villages. In this regard large scale projects such as Strategic Housing Developments and urban regeneration developments will be required to provide a public art installation.

### 7.4.4 Healthy Placemaking

Healthy placemaking highlights the connection between people and place and importantly, how people interact with and use the everyday places of the built environment that surrounds them. Thus, it is essential to protect and enhance the unique identity and character of places and to facilitate improvements to human wellbeing and the quality of life that comes from the interaction of people and their environment.

A key element of healthy placemaking is the need to ensure alternatives to the car in the design of streets and public spaces and to prioritise and promote cycling and walking as active transport modes. The provision of high-quality public transport, greenways and cycleways can enhance areas,

contributing to more attractive places and creating opportunities to be physically active and reduce the necessity for car-based commuting.

Healthy Placemaking features as one of 3 cross-cutting Key Principles that reflects the three pillars of sustainability; Social, Environmental and Economic. The central requirement to successfully achieve Healthy Placemaking is to ensure that policy objectives are people focussed, as 'quality of life' encapsulates strong economic output and stability, good environmental performance and a good standard of living for all.

<b>Healthy Placemaking Policy Objectives</b>	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 7.3	Encourage transition towards sustainable and low carbon transport modes through the promotion of alternative modes of transport and 'walkable communities' whereby a range of facilities and services will be accessible within short walking or cycling distance.
CPO 7.4	Support the objectives of public health policy including Healthy Ireland and the National Physical Activity Plan, through integrating such policies, where appropriate and at the applicable scale, with planning policies contained in development plans.
CPO 7.5	Support the vision and objectives of the National Sports Policy, including working with local sports partnerships, clubs, communities and partnerships within and beyond sport, to increase sport and physical activity participation levels locally
CPO 7.6	Promote the development of healthy and attractive places by ensuring: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good urban design principles are integrated into the layout and design of new development;</li> <li>• Future development prioritises the need for people to be physically active in their daily lives and promote walking and cycling in the design of streets and public spaces</li> <li>• New schools and workplaces are linked to walking and cycling networks</li> <li>• The provision of open space considers different types of recreation and amenity uses with connectivity by way of safe, secure walking and cycling routes.</li> <li>• Developments are planned for on a multi-functional basis incorporating ecosystem services, climate change measures, Green Infrastructure and key landscape features in their design.</li> </ul>



### 7.4.5 Sustainable Communities

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to support the development of socially and economically balanced sustainable communities and assist in the actions and implementation of the Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) 2015 – 2020.

The Westmeath Local Economic and Community Plan 2015 together with policy objectives outlined in this Development Plan provides an opportunity to identify and chart a course of action that will support economic and community development that renders Westmeath a better place where a higher quality of life is available to all the people of the County. It is important that the Plan provides for enhanced well-being and quality of life for the people of Westmeath through sustainable economic and community development.

<b>Sustainable Communities Policy Objectives</b>	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 7.7	Enhance the well-being and quality of life of the people of Westmeath through sustainable economic and community development.
CPO 7.8	Support the implementation of Local Authority Local Economic and Community Plans, in collaboration with Local and Economic Development Committees (LDCs) and through the use of spatial planning policies, to seek to reduce the number of people in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the County.
CPO 7.9	Support the planned provision of easily accessible social, community, cultural and recreational facilities and ensure that all communities have access to a range of facilities that meet the needs of the communities they serve.
CPO 7.10	Support the development of sport and recreational facilities and community-related projects through the Council's Capital Programme.

### 7.4.6 Universal Design – Places for everyone

Universal Design refers to the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by everyone. This includes public places in the built environment such as buildings, streets or spaces that the public have access to including products and services provided in those places and systems that are available including information and communications technology.

According to Census 2016, the population aged 65 years and over in County Westmeath accounted for 11,370 of the total population of 88,770 equating to an increase of 16.1% since 2011 Census. There were 11,887 people registered as living with a disability in Westmeath equating to 13.4% of the County's population, compared with 13.5% at national level.

In catering for this cohort, it is important to recognise that successful public realms should not only be attractive but should serve a functional purpose that is easily accessible to everyone, regardless of age or ability. It is therefore important in the creation of new or adapted public spaces that an inclusive universal design approach is undertaken.



*Fig 7.3 Universal Design*

Designing for everyone does not necessitate complex design solutions; simple and considered design interventions can result in solutions that address the needs of many others. For example:

- Elimination of stepped features to facilitate wheelchair users also assists people with prams, suitcases or shopping trolleys, people using walking or mobility aids and people with impaired vision.
- Clear, well-placed signage and way-marking using recognised symbols or pictograms and visual supports helps the visually impaired and people with reading or cognitive difficulties and can be understood by different language speakers.
- Sensory-friendly designs and layouts provide for a highly functional environment while also creating interesting spaces with considered lighting and wayfinding installations together with sensory sensitive physical spaces to provide an inclusive and autism friendly environment.

<b>Universal Design Policy Objectives</b>	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 7.11	Require proposals for public realm enhancements to include inclusive universal design principles.
CPO 7.12	Require that new social infrastructure developments are accessible and inclusive for a range of users and provide for an age friendly society in which people of all ages and abilities can live full, active, valued and healthy lives.
CPO 7.13	Require that all new developments, including public open spaces, cater for disability needs by way of appropriate design of the built environment.

#### 7.4.7 Placemaking for Climate Change

Adapting our built environments to overcome the consequences associated with climate change is becoming more prevalent. The long-term impact of built-up urban environments with impermeable surfaces such as roads and pavements have resulted in many of our towns becoming increasingly vulnerable to urban flooding, reduced air quality and poor quality 'grey' environments. Consequently, it is imperative that climate adaptation infrastructure is accommodated in a sensitively designed manner in order to integrate with urban settings to positively contribute to the public realm. Simple incremental measures present opportunities to enhance the attractiveness of our urban spaces in response to our environmental and social needs through incorporation, for example, of tree planting and soft landscaping.

All new developments will be required to incorporate placemaking design proposals that support the transition to a low carbon, climate resilient and sustainable environments in line with the policy objectives as set out at Chapter 11 Climate Action.

<b>Placemaking for Climate Change Policy Objective</b>	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 7.14	Require the incorporation of adaptable multi-functional and sensitive design solutions that supports the transition to low carbon, carbon resilient, sustainable and attractive environments.

## 7.5 Role of the Town Centre

The importance of our Town Centres cannot be underestimated. They are the destinations that represent the social and economic heartbeat of our towns with an active role in retaining the vibrancy and vitality of the urban fabric. The economic and social benefit of positive public realm is widely recognised. The public realm acts as the platform on which to showcase each town's competitive edge and unique selling point and is thus considered to be a pivotal component in achieving economic success and wellbeing. It is essential that Westmeath's towns and villages are given the appropriate platform on which to thrive as vibrant and welcoming town centres. In this regard, public realm and placemaking play a vital role in defining our towns, villages and neighbourhoods by projecting a positive image as attractive locations for people to live, work and visit.

The Ministerial *'Framework for Town Centre Renewal'* 2017 sets out key characteristics of a successful town centre and includes an Action Plan for Town Centre Renewal. The Framework also identifies a list of 11 'Key Attributes' for successful town centres which include, inter alia:

- **A Place Making Strategy** –to ensure that a town positions itself as an attractive location for investment, for talent and as a place to enjoy a good quality of life and the need for planning policy to place greater emphasis on place making for town centres at the key stages of development of Local Area Plans and Development Plans.
- **Visual Appearance Strategy** –to ensure that town centres are attractive places to visit if they are to succeed and thrive and in particular the importance of revitalising existing spaces incrementally rather than depending on large-scale redevelopment.

Given the varied nature and attributes of the town and village centres in Westmeath, Chapter 8 – Settlement Plans provides a framework to guide new development, regeneration and renewal of our Towns and Villages. It is envisaged that the Settlement Plans will be supported by public realm strategies to enhance the unique characteristics and assets of selected towns and villages. Positive interventions to improve the public realm of Westmeath's towns and villages can begin with simple measures such as landscaping, paving, street lighting and furniture as part of a long-term vision. In certain instances, improvements to public realm can be delivered incrementally rather than being dependent on large budget projects. However, in such circumstances, care needs to be taken to ensure that works are undertaken as part of an overall long-term enhancement programme and not on an ad hoc basis.

<b>Town Centres Policy Objectives</b>	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 7.15	Support the use of targeted financial incentives to re-establish the role of town centres and encourage a greater take up of town centre development opportunities for retail, residential, commercial and leisure uses.
CPO 7.16	Seek funding to support the preparation of site-specific Public Realm Strategies to enhance the unique characteristics and assets of Westmeath's towns and villages.

### 7.5.1 Town Centre Management and Placemaking

Town centres are facing challenges presented by ever-changing and evolving shopping patterns particularly in the age of on-line consumerism, thus, it is essential that our town centres offer more than the traditional 'high street' retail offering. The creation and maintenance of healthy and attractive places requires ongoing improvements to the physical and social infrastructure of our urban centres. Successful town centres are people-orientated places - they present attractive and welcoming destinations, where residents and visitors can enjoy a safe, pleasant and vibrant destination and where businesses can thrive – in turn adding value to the vitality and vibrancy. To maintain activity in our town centres, it is important to provide a competitive mix of compatible uses, including retail and non-retail/entertainment (café's, bars, restaurants) providing for a bustling vibrant atmosphere attracting people to work, live and recreate in the same area.

Further, the Town Centre Renewal Framework (2017) outlines the key attributes of a successful town centre and identifies existing supports and best practice examples from around the country. The Framework includes an Action Plan for Town Centre Renewal which is intended to be a blueprint for towns and villages that also provides a structure for collaborative partnerships among stakeholders to achieve successful town centre renewal, whether a large town or small village

<b>Town Centre Management and Place-making Policy Objectives</b>	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 7.17	Prepare and deliver Place-making and Visual Appearance Strategies for Athlone and Mullingar, in order to support their roles as a Regional Centre and Key Town respectively.
CPO 7.18	Promote the value of placemaking in town centres, by preparing a Placemaking Strategy for the towns of Castlepollard, Kilbeggan, Moate and Kinnegad.

CPO 7.19	Provide for improvements to the appearance of streetscapes and revitalising of public spaces for example with cost effective, temporary uses that build on the longer-term vision for space.
CPO 7.20	Support investment in town and village centres so that they can become more diverse, sustainable and thriving places for communities to live, work and enjoy.
CPO 7.21	Ensure the best quality of design is achieved for all new commercial and residential development and that design respects and enhances the specific characteristics of the different towns and villages in the County.
CPO 7.22	Provide for, protect and strengthen the vitality and viability of town centres, through consolidating development, encouraging a mix of uses and maximising the use of land.
CPO 7.23	Support and sustain the vitality and viability of town and village centres by ensuring that retail proposals enhance and positively reinforce the public realm.
CPO 7.24	Support the key attributes and strategies as detailed in the Framework for Town Centre Renewal 2017.

## 7.6 Urban Regeneration and Sustainable Development in Urban Areas

Urban Regeneration and Compact Growth are key focus areas within this Plan, supported with a central objective to regenerate the County's towns and villages by making better use of under-used land and buildings within the existing built-up urban footprint and to drive the delivery of quality housing and employment choice.

### 7.6.1 Compact Urban Centres

The National Planning Framework (NPF) and the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (EMRA-RSES) identifies 'Compact Growth' as the means to deliver sustainable growth in our urban settlements through consolidation, rather than the continued sprawl of urban development into the countryside, at the expense of town centres and smaller villages.

Westmeath County Council is committed to delivering compact growth through active land management together with the positive regeneration of urban areas and settlements. To facilitate population growth, a significant proportion of urban development will be accommodated on infill/brownfield sites through the redevelopment and regeneration of underused, vacant or derelict town centre and urban lands. It is an objective of the Council to facilitate the continuous regeneration and redevelopment of existing built up areas as equally attractive and as viable as greenfield development to create more desirable places in which people can live and work. Further, it is a priority of the Council to enable infill and appropriate brownfield redevelopment in order to maximise the efficient use of existing infrastructure and services and promote a positive modal shift towards sustainable transport use.



### Urban Regeneration and Sustainable Development in Urban Areas Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 7.25	Support and facilitate the ambitious regeneration of underused town centre and brownfield/infill lands along with the delivery of existing zoned and serviced lands.
CPO 7.26	Facilitate the delivery of sustainable, compact, sequential growth and urban regeneration in the town core of Key Towns by consolidating the built footprint through a focus on regeneration and development of identified key town centre infill/brownfield/back land sites promoting sustainable higher densities.
CPO 7.27	Combine active land management with best practice planning policies to deliver compact urban growth through the delivery of innovative adaptable urban schemes.
CPO 7.28	Facilitate higher and increased building heights at suitable locations and in accordance with settlement hierarchy.
CPO 7.29	Promote regeneration and revitalisation of small towns and villages and support local enterprise and employment opportunities to ensure their viability as service centres for their surrounding rural areas.

#### ▪ **Brownfield Sites**

Brownfield sites are classified as any land which has been subjected to building, engineering or other operations excluding temporary uses or urban green spaces. These sites generally comprise of redundant lands and/or buildings.

#### ▪ **Infill Sites**

Development within urban infill sites must consider the context of the surrounding area. Development proposals on sites within existing streetscapes should provide for active frontages and continue the established building line. On larger infill sites new development has the potential to establish a new pattern of development; it should however consider matters such as streetscape, layout, pedestrian permeability, location of car parking and service bays as well as the amenity of any adjoining buildings.

#### ▪ **Backland Development**

Backland sites are usually undeveloped parcels of land located to the rear of existing buildings. Development proposals on these lands should be prepared using the principles of master planning to ensure that large areas of land, often in multiple ownership, are appropriately planned and developed in a sustainable manner. Masterplans provide a plan-led approach and may include provision for phasing, infrastructure provision, community facilities, density, layout, open spaces, landscaping and development design briefs and statements. Piecemeal development of individual plots will generally not be permitted unless it is satisfactorily demonstrated that the development will not jeopardise the comprehensive redevelopment of surrounding lands.

### 7.6.2 Vacant Site Levy (VSL)

The Vacant Site Levy was introduced under the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015 (URHA) as a site activation measure to bring vacant and underutilised land in urban areas into beneficial use, while also ensuring a more effective return on State investment by enabling infrastructure and helping to counter unsustainable urban sprawl. The legislation also placed a statutory obligation for all Planning Authorities to identify and establish a register of vacant sites. Westmeath County Council have been identified a number of sites in Athlone and Mullingar to date. The Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015 sets out two broad categories of vacant land that the levy may apply to:

- Lands zoned primarily for residential purposes;
- Lands in need of regeneration.

Lands zoned primarily for residential purposes include:

- Proposed Residential (PR) and;
- Existing Residential (ER) zoned lands

as they have capacity to provide residential accommodation.

Lands in need of regeneration include:

- Mixed Use/Expanded Town Centre zonings as they offer opportunities to sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres and where appropriate to consolidate urban areas.
- All 'Enterprise and Employment' and 'Commercial' zoned lands contained within Tier 1 – Tier 2 of the County's settlement hierarchy.

The above land use zonings are subject to the provisions of the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015 with respect to the Vacant Site Levy for 'regeneration' purposes. (Commercial uses provide for uses including hotels, community buildings, tourism and recreation).

Further, all 'Consolidation Sites' identified within plan boundary of all towns contained within Tier 1-Tier 3 of the settlement hierarchy for County Westmeath, are subject to the provisions of the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015 with respect to the Vacant Site Levy for 'regeneration' purposes.

This Plan sets a framework to identify and secure the redevelopment and regeneration of areas in need of renewal and supports the active land management of vacant sites to address incidents of urban decay and vacancy. The primary objective is to facilitate long-term economic development in the region and the delivery of sustainable housing.

Vacant Site Policy Objective	
It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:	
CPO 7.30	Maintain and update a Vacant Sites Register in accordance with the provisions of the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015 to include Tier 1 – Tier 3 settlements within Westmeath.
CPO 7.31	Facilitate the implementation of the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015, in particular, by way of utilising site activation measures, including the provision of the Vacant Site Levy, as appropriate to assist in bringing forward vacant and/or underutilised 'residential' zoned land and 'regeneration' land into beneficial use within lands identified and zoned within the town boundary of all towns contained within Tier 1 – Tier 3 of the settlement hierarchy for Co. Westmeath.

### 7.6.3 The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF)

The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) was established to facilitate the regeneration of Ireland's large towns and cities towards more compact and sustainable urban environments in accordance with the objectives of the National Planning Framework (NPF) and National Development Plan (NDP). Its' aim is to regenerate urban areas by facilitating the redevelopment of the existing built fabric of settlements in order to strengthen and support towns and cities as attractive and vibrant destinations where people choose to live and work, as well as to invest and visit. The types of proposals eligible for funding include, but are not limited to, the following:

- ❖ Active land management, including acquisition, planning and design;
- ❖ Healthy Placemaking - Public realm, and streetscapes, public amenity and recreation;
- ❖ Improved infrastructure that enables improved accessibility and sustainable modes such as walking, cycling and public transport.
- ❖ Transition to a low carbon and climate resilient society, in an urban context.

The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government has responsibility for the implementation of the URDF that has an overall allocation of €2 billion to 2027. A first call for proposals under the fund was launched in July 2018 with successful applications announced in November 2018.

Following the first invitation for applications under this initiative, Westmeath County Council secured funding for 5 urban regeneration projects in Athlone and Mullingar as follows: -

- **Athlone Town Centre Regeneration and Enhancement** – allocated €750,000 to extend the successful public realm enhancement works in Athlone Town centre as part of a wider stimulus initiative to make the urban core of Athlone a more attractive destination where people will choose to live, work, visit, shop and socialise in a safe and inclusive environment.

- **Athlone Tourism Cultural Quarter** – allocated €750,000 to deliver Westmeath County Council's long-term vision and commitment to regenerate the west of Athlone and support its emerging cultural quarter status by combining strategic planning together with best practice planning policies and active land management.
- **Loughanaskin, Athlone** - allocated €750,000 to regenerate a unique and strategically located land reserve which has the potential to be developed into a highly sustainable and integrated new urban quarter adjoining the town centre of Athlone.
- **Blackhall Urban Quarter, Mullingar** – allocated €2,452,500 for the comprehensive redevelopment and regeneration of the Blackhall area by creating a dynamic mixed-use urban quarter, capitalising upon and extending both the commercial and civic potential of the town.
- **Canal Avenue and Environs Regeneration Project (Mullingar)** – allocated €1,706,250 to consolidate a strategic 1.1ha land bank on the edge of the town core and radically transform it into a mixed-use residential scheme which is specifically designed to meet the needs of Older Persons.

### Urban Regeneration Development Policy Objectives

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 7.32	Promote the consolidation of town centres with a focus on the regeneration of underused buildings and strategic sites and the establishment of a mix of uses to encourage greater vibrancy outside of business hours.
CPO 7.33	Promote the utilisation of available funding to support the plan led development and regeneration of publicly owned land banks.
CPO 7.34	Work with the National Land Development Agency in co-ordinating and developing large, strategically located landbanks, particularly publicly owned lands in Athlone and Mullingar.
CPO 7.35	Require all development proposals for strategic brownfield and infill sites be accompanied by a site brief and/or masterplan that sets out a phased programme for the regeneration of the site and demonstrates how the proposal will comply with National Guidelines that seek to integrate principles of good urban design, planning and placemaking.
CPO 7.36	Set out measures to reduce vacancy and the underuse of existing building stock and support initiatives that promote the reuse, refurbishment and retrofitting of existing buildings within urban centres.

CPO 7.37	Use specific powers, such as the Vacant Sites register, to address issues of vacancy and underutilisation of strategic lands in town centres, including the implementation of the Vacant Sites Levy for all vacant development sites in the County.
CPO 7.38	Encourage pilot projects for the re-use of brownfield sites and encourage active temporary uses where feasible to encourage activation of vacant sites that require longer lead in time for regeneration.

## 7.7 Rural Regeneration

Recognising the important contribution of rural areas and their communities, the Governments Action Plan for Rural Development – ‘Realising our Rural Potential’, places a focus on creating sustainable rural communities through a framework of supports at national and local level. The Action Plan takes a coordinated approach across Government to both the economic and social development of rural Ireland. The Plan, inter-alia, outlines the key requirements to strengthen rural communities by supporting agricultural diversification, tourism and opportunities for rural economic growth. It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to align with the key objectives of the plan and support rural regeneration and the viability of rural towns and villages as an attractive alternative to one-off rural housing.

### 7.7.1 The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF)

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) was established to support job creation in rural areas, address de-population of rural communities and support improvements in towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000, and outlying areas, in accordance with the objectives of the National Planning Framework and National Development Plan (NDP).

- ❖ The Government have committed €1billion to be invested in rural Ireland over the period 2019 to 2027.
- ❖ The purpose of the fund is to support job creation in rural areas, address de-population of rural communities and support improvements in our towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000, and outlying areas.
- ❖ Initial funding of €315 million has been allocated to the fund on a phased basis over the period 2019 to 2022.

Westmeath County Council were successful in securing €600,000 funding to regenerate the core area of Kinnegad town, bringing back its vitality and viability as a sustainable town which can accommodate the identified social infrastructure and economic needs of the town.

**Rural Regeneration Policy Objective**

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 7.39	Support the regeneration of rural towns and villages through identification of regeneration projects for rural villages and rural areas and promoting the utilisation of investment opportunities such as the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund.
CPO 7.40	Support the viability of small towns and villages through sustainable targeted measures that address vacant premises and deliver sustainable reuse and regeneration outcomes targeted in core areas.

**7.8 Urban – Rural interface**

The distribution and location of new development in Westmeath is guided by the Settlement Strategy and the Core Strategy. This Plan supports the hierarchy of attractive, compact and consolidated settlements from the large settlements of Athlone and Mullingar to the smaller towns and villages serving the County. It is important to ensure that the future development of the settlements in the hierarchy physically distinguishes the development envelopes of town and villages from the surrounding rural hinterland and protects against unsustainable sprawl of urban growth.

The approach views to towns and villages are important in projecting the initial image and character of place. Traditionally, the interface between urban and rural areas was clearly defined; in this regard future development must be carefully considered to ensure the protection of the distinct settings between established built-up settlements and the surrounding countryside by creating a defined urban edge.

**Urban-Rural Interface Policy Objective**

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 7.41	Protect the unique setting of towns and villages by providing for the maintenance of strong defined urban edges.
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**7.9 Site specific place making****7.9.1 Placemaking for Business and Enterprise**

In an increasingly competitive business market, investing in design and innovation can serve to assist Westmeath with a comparative advantage in the region. While a range of factors is required to attract



inward investments such as good access and location, success is hugely dependent on the quality and appropriateness of the facilities provided and the attractiveness of place to a skilled work force.

In order to sustain a competitive business edge, it is important that applications for new business and enterprise sites are accompanied by a Design Statement. New developments should present a strong and positive visual presence underpinned by sustainable and energy efficient development principles. It is also essential that all new business and enterprise schemes incorporate design proposals to facilitate and promote sustainable operational practices including the promotion and use of public transport services with an emphasis on walking and cycling.

Where development is proposed on zoned greenfield sites, it will be a requirement that any new development positively responds to and integrates with the existing landscape features to create 'Urban Business/Enterprise Parks' incorporating natural features into the layout and functionality of the site.

#### Place making for Business and Enterprise Policy Objective

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 7.42	Require Design Statements for all new business and enterprise development proposals to present a strong and positive visual presence underpinned by sustainable and energy efficient development principles.
CPO 7.43	Require planning applications for business and enterprise proposals to be accompanied with a Mobility Management Plan to include a site-specific programme to facilitate and promote sustainable operational practices including the use of public transport services and an emphasis on walking and cycling.

### 7.9.2 Residential Respite and Retirement Homes (Nursing homes)

The demographic of Ireland's population is changing with an increasing aging population. By 2026 there will be 1.15 million people in Ireland aged 60 or over, representing almost one out of every four people.

The Council recognises the need to ensure the provision of appropriate care facilities and accommodation for the elderly and other vulnerable people. In addition to universal design standards, the quality of such accommodation is dependent on its location in terms of safe and convenient access to services and amenities. As such, there is a presumption against the development of Residential Respite and Retirement Homes in the open countryside for reasons relating to sustainability, poor accessibility and lack of public transport, social exclusion, isolation and safety.

Successful residential care homes/facilities are dependent on 4 key elements:



### Place making for Residential Respite and Retirement Homes Policy Objective

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

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| CPO 7.44 | <p>Implement the following criteria when designing proposals for residential care homes, retirement homes, nursing homes, retirement villages and sheltered accommodation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Location/Placemaking - Locate new developments close (walking distance) to services and amenities.</li> <li>• Physical Considerations – Employment of Universal Design standards.</li> <li>• Technology - Integrate technology into developments, enhancing safety and security, health monitoring, comfort and social connectedness.</li> <li>• Social Supports - Integrate social supports into developments, access to information, find non-health service-based solutions.</li> <li>• The potential impact on residential amenities of adjoining properties.</li> <li>• Adequate provision of open space informed by the need to cater for all levels of disability and in particular the needs of an ageing population and mobility impaired users, in line with Ministerial and Departmental guidelines.</li> <li>• Apply standards outlined in the Housing Options for Our Ageing Population and the Housing Agency document 'Thinking Ahead: Independent and Supported Housing Modes for an Aging Population'.</li> <li>• Provision of adequate parking facilities.</li> <li>• Innovative high quality design and materials.</li> </ul> |
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### 7.3.2 Quality of Place – Creating the Right Environment

Positive and progressive Placemaking represents an opportunity to develop a sustainable competitive advantage for Westmeath. Creating the right environment for enterprise and employment to thrive through targeted placemaking can deliver high-quality places, as they become attractive locations to work, live, invest, study and visit. With a focus on business location decisions and enterprise development, the RSES EMRA introduced a Health Place Audit (HPA) that provides a framework to audit the quality of specific places. The HPA is used to identify and assess whether a specific place has the features to make it attractive for business.

The application of the HPA model to selected towns and villages will benefit Westmeath by presenting:

- Systematic identification of gaps and deficits at specific locations that need to be addressed in order to facilitate attractive destinations for enterprise development.
- The formal identification of infrastructural gaps and/or poor quality environments that can be presented as priority projects for consideration in the selection/awarding criteria of competitive calls – either Regional Enterprise Development funds, the Urban Development Fund and/or EU Regional Development Funds.

#### Quality of Place Policy Objective

It is a policy objective of Westmeath County Council to:

CPO 7.45	Promote the utilisation of the available funding e.g. Regional Enterprise Development Funds, Urban Development Fund and EU Regional Development Funds to support an attractive, healthy economic environment in the County.
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**WESTMEATH COUNTY COUNCIL**  
Comhairle Chontae na hIarmhí

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