



Comhairle Contae
Ros Comáin
Roscommon
County Council



**Mr. Jim Conway,
Director,
Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly,
3rd Floor North,
Ballymun Civic Centre,
Main Street,
Ballymun,
Dublin 9,
D09 C8P5**

22nd January 2019

Re: Draft RSES for the Eastern and Midlands Region

Dear Mr. Conway,

Roscommon County Council welcomes the opportunity to engage in the consultation process on EMRA's Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy. At the outset, I wish to congratulate the Regional Assembly on the Draft RSES, and in particular on the clear, concise and logical format of the document.

A Holistic Vision for Athlone

Whilst County Roscommon is not within the Midlands Region, the county's geographic location and its proximity to the Midlands will undoubtedly result in it being significantly influenced as the Eastern and Midlands region develops over the coming years. The development of Athlone as a Regional Growth Centre will be a key influence on large parts of County Roscommon, with the growth centre encompassing the Monksland / Bellanamullia area of Athlone, which lies within County Roscommon and the Northern and Western Regional Assembly area. Roscommon County Council welcomes EMRA's recognition of this intra-regional relationship in the Draft RSES. A greater appreciation of the need to deal with Athlone in a holistic manner is evident in EMRA's Strategy than in the NWRA's Strategy, and this is a matter which Roscommon County Council will be pursuing in a detailed submission to the NWRA.

During the course of this current public consultation process on the Draft RSES's for the two regions, Roscommon County Council has engaged with Westmeath County Council, primarily in relation to the treatment of the Regional Growth Centre of Athlone in the each of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies. To this end, the two Authorities have prepared a joint submission to issue to each of the Regional Assemblies. This current submission from Roscommon County Council should therefore be considered alongside the aforementioned joint submission, and should be considered a re-emphasis of key points from a Roscommon County Council perspective.



My Authority will also be making a detailed submission to the Northern and Western Regional Assembly on the NWRA RSES on a wide range of matters, and will within that highlight the necessity to ensure that both RSES's provide a shared and consistent vision and development objectives in respect of the Regional Growth Centre of Athlone. In this regard, I would consider that close liaising between the respective Assembly officials is warranted in devising a consistent and sufficiently detailed approach on this.

Joint Urban Area Plan

The requirement expressed in EMRA's Draft RSES for Westmeath and Roscommon County Council's to prepare and adopt a Joint Urban Area Plan (UAP) for Athlone is noted. Roscommon County Council is committed to this joint process and looks forward to advancing the preparation of the joint UAP as soon as possible following the adoption of the RSES's for the Eastern and Midlands Region and the Northern and Western Region.

Population Allocation

You will be aware that Roscommon County Council, throughout the consultation process on the National Planning Framework, strongly advocated the recognition of Athlone as a major national growth centre, and its eventual designation in the NPF as a 'Regional Growth Centre' was very much welcomed. Given its strategic geographic location and its pivotal position straddling the Midlands and the West, it is vital that the EMRA's RSES provides a strong vision for the development of Athlone as a regional centre, and assigns a sufficient population allocation to enable it to grow to achieve the necessary critical mass to succeed at the forefront of the Midlands region (and as part of this, growth will also encompass the Athlone West area i.e. Monksland / Bellanamullia, in Co. Roscommon). It is noted that both RSES's refer to a population target of 30,000, and it is assumed that this applies to the period to 2031, as set out in EMRA's Draft RSES (although not explicitly mentioned in the NWRA's section on 'Athlone Regional Centre' but with further detail contained elsewhere in the document in tabular form¹, for 'population uplift' to 2026, 2031 and to 2040). In its section on Athlone Regional Centre, the NWRA sets out that the division of the population target of 30,000 will be determined as part of the joint UAP, but also states that it will "generally be in proportion to existing population." Roscommon County Council consider the division of population growth in this manner to be practical and sustainable. Nonetheless, given the absence of detail on population division in EMRA's document, it is considered imperative that both Regional Strategies include clear expression of the intended methodology of accommodating anticipated population growth. This is an issue which is most appropriately addressed at the inter-regional level, in order to provide certainty for both constituent Authorities at the time of preparing the UAP. Such a core issue should not, in my view, be left to interpretation or negotiation at the future stage of the preparation of a joint Urban Area Plan for Athlone.

¹ NWRA Draft RSES – pg. 59.



Increased Emphasis on Economic Development

Given the existing economic strengths of Athlone, and the need to ensure that the future growth strategy for the Regional Centre capitalises and expands on those, it is considered that the section of the Draft RSES dealing with Athlone as a Regional Growth Centre² should include significantly expanded detail. To assist in this, I would suggest that reference be had to the previous joint submission on Athlone (prepared by Westmeath and Roscommon County Council in July 2018), which provided details of primary employment types and highlighted the existence of geographic clusters of industry, with those clusters predominantly accommodating distinct industrial sectors – from the perspective of Co. Roscommon for example, the pharmaceutical sector has a strong presence in Monksland, and the reputation of this area as a hub for this specialism should be emphasised in the RSES.

Infrastructure

The adequacy of infrastructure is also a key factor in facilitating the successful future growth of Athlone as a Regional Centre. The recognition in the RSES of the importance of enhanced transport connectivity is welcomed. However, I have significant concerns that there is insufficient reference to or recognition of the role of the M6 / N6, and I would suggest that it is imperative that the RSES includes an expression of clear support for the delivery of enhanced road infrastructure to ensure that any current constraints in the road network are alleviated, and do not become an impediment to the development of Athlone.

Concluding Comments

I look forward to the finalisation of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies from the Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly and the Northern and Western Regional Assembly. As I have stated in previous correspondence to you, I believe that consistency in the vision to be achieved and a collaborative approach between the relevant Regional Assemblies and Local Authorities is vital, and will pay dividends in the future.

Yours sincerely,

Eugene Cummins,
Chief Executive,
Roscommon County Council.

² Pgs. 45 - 47