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21st January, 2019

**Re: Draft RSES for the Eastern and Midlands Region
Draft RSES for the Northern & Western Region**

Dear David/Jim,

Both Westmeath County Council (WCC) and Roscommon County Council (RCC) welcome and support the development of the Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midlands Region and Northern and Western Region. We appreciate the opportunity to further participate in and reinforce the important lead role of Athlone Regional Centre (with reference included to the functional area extending into Co. Roscommon) in the future growth and development of the region. In light of the interlinkages, it is essential that there is absolute clarity and consistency in the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies produced by EMRA and NWRA, in respect of the future vision for Athlone as a Regional Centre.

The broad range of issues which have been outlined in both Draft RSESs are valued and both Councils are fully committed to contributing to the future sustainable development of the region. The NPF recognizes the extent to which Athlone fulfills the role of regional centre and acknowledges the importance of the RSESs in promoting regional centers of population and employment growth to deliver accessible centers of scale.

The intention of the draft strategies to improve the potential of Athlone to become a better economic driver for its catchment with a focus on issues such as economic, residential, amenity, tourism, retail, infrastructure and Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) are noted, however, it is submitted that both strategies should contain enhanced, Joint Regional Objectives for Athlone. In this regard a copy of the joint submission provided to EMRA from Westmeath and Roscommon County Council's in July 2018, which provides a detailed overview of issues and opportunities for Athlone, as a Regional Centre, is included for consideration.

1. Consistency & Compatibility between EMRA and NWRA RSESs

Whilst the recognition of the status of Athlone as a Regional driver in both strategies is acknowledged, greater recognition to the role that Athlone plays in the region should be set out. In relation to section 3.6 (d) of the NWRA strategy pertaining to the Athlone Regional Growth Strategic Plan, it is submitted that the provisions included for Athlone are inadequate to support the delivery of a Regional Centre, as envisioned under the NPF. It is noted in the strategy that the Regional Policy Objectives prescribed for Athlone only relate to the parts of Athlone within the North-Western Region. Further, it is suggested, disappointingly, that strategic policy proposed for Athlone is inferior and appears secondary when considered in the context of that provided elsewhere in the Strategy for other designated regional centres in the NWA.

Accordingly, due consideration should also be given across both strategies to the terminology and methodologies employed in association with identified regional centres of Athlone, Letterkenny, Sligo, Drogheda and Dundalk and in terms of identification of plan extents, vision and scope. There is need to ensure that a consistent approach is afforded to all regional centers as set out in the NPF and that consistent terminologies are used, zones of influence identified and parameters prescribed for the preparation of future planning frameworks associated with these Regional Centres. With regard to the proposed policy to prepare Metropolitan Strategic Area Plans (MASP) plans for Sligo and Letterkenny, it is noted that the NPF prescribes the preparation of MASPs for Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford Metropolitan areas only. A joint approach between the NWRA and EMRA is essential in this regard.

It is necessary that a joint approach and shared vision (including associated housing targets) is delivered for Athlone as reflected in both regional strategies for the North Western Regional Assembly and the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly. Alignment and consistency between both RSESs is fundamental in this regard and steps should be taken to ensure this outcome. WCC and RCC consider that both RSES's must adopt a holistic approach to the comprehensive development of Athlone and its western environs.

2. Enhanced Policy Provision

Given that Athlone is a designated regional driver, it is imperative that RSES strategic policy is supplemented to adequately reflect the town's status, equivalent to other designated Regional Centres. The success of regional centres is not based merely on scale but rather is due to a combination of, inter alia, accessibility factors, critical mass, provision of a skilled labour force, social and community infrastructure and housing provision. It is vital that the RSES provides the platform for all of these elements to be supported and delivered in achieving the NPFs vision for Athlone as a Regional Centre.

In order for this potential to be achieved, investment in crucial infrastructure is necessary to underpin and support the future development of the Region. This investment needs to be promoted for delivery in advance or in tandem with development. Further policy is also necessary in terms of enabling the delivery of critical mass with regards employment and housing together with the

necessary social and community infrastructure and public realm initiatives.

At present EMRA's Draft RSES refers to Athlone becoming a Regional Growth Centre "with a population target in the region of 30,000 by 2031." While the NWRA's Draft RSES in its section on Athlone Regional Centre appears consistent on the subject of the population target (stating that "a population target of 30,000 for Athlone has been set in the Draft RSES for EMRA" - pg.136) it lacks reference to the applicable time period. However, a table is included in Section 3.4 of the NWRA's Draft RSES¹ setting out the proposed population uplift in the relevant Regional Growth Centres (including Athlone) in the short, medium and long term i.e. to 2026, 2031 and to 2040. In contrast, the approach taken in EMRA's RSES is less prescriptive and does not include a short, medium or long term breakdown.

An agreed method to population allocation in both strategies should be prescribed to facilitate the preparation and adoption of a Joint Urban Area Plan for Athlone. In this regard it is submitted that, as per the Implementation Roadmap for the NPF which sets the parameters for regional strategies, the figure of 30,000 people by 2031 should be frontloaded for inclusion as a target under the initial iteration of the Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan.

Retention of the SDZ identified in the Midlands Regional Planning Guidelines 2010-2022 to the east of Athlone at Creggan, including AIT campus, is essential in delivering Athlone as a regional centre wherein the achievement of this critical mass is fundamental to the economic growth of the region. The SDZ offers potential to accommodate the development of major employment and enterprise activities, in association with AIT, building on the existing base of knowledge-based enterprise clusters in Athlone. The SDZ will benefit from a large and skilled population, proximity to national communication and energy networks such as motorways, rail routes, electricity, gas and broadband networks.

Brief reference is made in the Draft strategies to Athlone having an established economic base. Given the importance of this economic base both at the present time and as one of the key strands of the future growth strategy of Athlone as a regional centre, it is suggested that further elaboration is warranted on this. As outlined above, information has previously been provided to EMRA on this subject matter, in the joint submission from Westmeath and Roscommon County Council's in July 2018.² Section 2.2 of said submission addresses 'Economic Development and Employment' providing details of the primary employment types (including manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, research and development, medical devices, telecommunications and software development) highlighting the existence of geographic clusters of industry in Athlone, with such clusters predominantly accommodating distinct industrial sectors. It is the intention of both Local Authorities, as previously stated, to capitalise, in a Joint Urban Area Plan, on these established distinctive industrial specialisms and their cluster areas.

Accordingly, more specific and tailored policy is required across both strategies to ensure the delivery of the NPF vision to achieve 'more effective strategic planning and coordination of the future development of ... regionally strategic locations at points that straddle boundaries between this and neighbouring regions as in the example of Athlone, which is a focal point for an area

¹ Pg. 59. Section 3.4 – Urban Places of Regional Scale.

² 'Athlone – A Key Regional Centre' (July 2018).

reaching into much of this and neighbouring regions in economic and employment, transport, education and public service delivery and retailing terms'. The aim is to support the continued growth and success of Athlone as a town of scale and a principal economic driver, by securing the investment necessary to fulfill its role as a key regional centre. It is further stated that the Draft RSES should provide a policy context and guidance in relation to the content of the Urban Area Plan for Athlone.

With this in mind, it is considered that enhanced policy should be provided for Athlone which:

- Provides for a Joint Strategic Vision for the future development of Athlone as a Regional Centre including the development of critical mass to reflect its role as a Regional Driver.
- Supports the preparation of a long term Joint Economic Strategy to inform future development of Athlone.
- Supports the delivery of strategic needs related to employment, public realm and environment, quality built form as well as housing and public transport (policy in terms of housing delivery should not be area specific at regional level – precise locations should be determined at appropriate Urban Area Plan stage).
- Prioritises infrastructural investment for Athlone to facilitate the delivery of a Regional centre.
- Ensures that water supply and wastewater needs are met by new national projects to enhance Athlone's water supply and increase waste water treatment capacity.
- Promotes a joint up cross sectoral approach to the delivery of key enabling infrastructure.
- Support the role of Athlone Institute of Technology as a centre of excellence for education and in achieving its status as a Technological University.
- Designates an SDZ at Creggan to include AIT campus.
- Acknowledges that Foreign Direct Investment and associated economic activity should base in Athlone as the primary location for such investment in the Midlands Region.
- Provides for the capitalisation of existing employment clusters and distinct industrial sectors, through the identification and provision of tailored policy for existing established distinctive industrial specialisms and their cluster areas.
- Realises the potential of established and successful Business Parks such as Monksland and Garrycastle in reinforcing Athlone's primacy and status in the region as a base for international business.
- Designates 'Technology and Innovation Poles' (TIPs) in Athlone to be developed through Enterprise Ireland and the Industrial Development Authority (IDA) to drive regional and rural development.
- Supports research, innovation and EU funding opportunities.
- Supports the delivery of an Open Space Strategy with provision for a public park, recreational and amenity spaces.
- Supports the preparation of Regeneration Master Plans within Athlone and support for associated funding proposals under the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund.
- Promotes the concept of 'Smart Cities' in Athlone to boost the location's attractiveness for people and business and in the interests of innovation.
- Encourages a cross-sectoral approach to maximising the tourist potential of the River Shannon and Lough Ree involving Westmeath County Council, Roscommon County Council

and Longford County Council and relevant stakeholders.

- Supports Athlone as a priority location for development. Any policy that encourages/facilitates regional spillage or undermines the ability of Athlone to achieve its Regional Centre growth needs in terms of critical mass for employment, housing etc. should be discouraged.
- Focuses on continuous regeneration and achieving compact growth via development of existing built-up areas, and availing of new urban regeneration and development funds.

The above policy should supplement, rather than replace, existing Regional Policy Objectives associated with Athlone as already set out in both draft strategies.

3. Addressing Infrastructural Bottlenecks and Increase Housing Supply in the Right Locations

It is imperative that both RSES provides the necessary policy to ensure that the water supply and wastewater (network and treatment) needs of Athlone are met. In particular prioritisation of new national projects to enhance Athlone's water supply and increase waste water treatment capacity should be promoted in the strategy.

In order to ensure that the transport needs of the promoted growth scenarios are provided for, the RSES policy provision for the preparation of a transport plan associated with the ongoing development of Athlone is welcomed and accepted as a necessary and logical step in planning for the development of the Regional Centre. Focus should also be provided on the necessity for enhanced public transport linkages between these Athlone and its supporting towns as well as the need for wider regional and interregional connectivity to centers such as Roscommon, Portlaoise, Sligo and Letterkenny. There is also need for an emphasis to be placed on the potential to build upon the competitive advantage of Athlone's road connectivity by way of enhanced access and connectivity to be provided to regional assets such as Athlone Institute of Technology.

WCC and RCC endorse the preparation of a Local Level Transportation Plan for Athlone and are currently in the process of initiating this process in consultation with key stakeholders such as TII, NTA, bus operators.

Given the geographic location of Athlone at a central and pivotal point in the country, the adequacy of transport infrastructure to serve the Regional Centre is of immense importance. The M6/N6 is a strategic transport corridor linking Dublin to Galway and thus provides a gateway to the North - Western region. The RSESs has identified the importance of enhanced transport connectivity as a key factor in accessing employment and attracting (and retaining) skilled labour to the region. Whilst it is acknowledged that the *National Development Plan 2018 – 2027* does not identify any projects for the M6 / N6 in the vicinity of Athlone, it is nonetheless considered vital that appropriate reference is included in the RSESs to highlight the significant role that this infrastructure has as Athlone transforms into a Regional Growth Centre, and that there is a clear expression of support in the RSES for necessary measures to alleviate any perceived constraints, which may otherwise become an impediment to the development of Athlone.

It should be noted that the Councils endorse the policy which supports the upgrade of the capacity

of the Athlone-Athenry-Galway rail line, including the provision of dual tracks and support provision of increased service stops between Athlone and Galway.

The Councils also endorse the upgrade of the N61 from Athlone to Boyle (as part of the wider objective to provide enhanced regional connectivity to Roscommon), however, in terms of the strategic road network and connectivity within the region, it should be noted that the significant Regional Road Schemes listed for EMRA at Table 8.4 'Road Projects for the Region' is deficient in that it does not include a complete overview of regional road priorities (with local improvement schemes also listed). In the absence of a comprehensive list of regional road schemes, consideration should be given to the inclusion of a new high level Regional Policy Objective to support the overall development and upgrade of strategic regional routes to enhance the connectivity of the region.

4. Concluding Remarks

It is important that the policy set out in both RSESs is supplemented through the provision of enhanced, tailored policy, at a strategic level, commensurate with the NPF vision for Athlone as a regionally strategic location and a viable alternative to Dublin (accepting that Dublin must also continue to accommodate growth). Suggested supplementary Joint Regional Policy Objectives are set out in bullet point form under *Section 2. Enhanced Policy Provision*, above, with both RCC and WCC already engaged in and committed to the joint delivery of a strategic planning framework to guide the future growth of Athlone as a Regional Centre.

As suggested at Section 2, it is submitted that both RSESs should make provision for the preparation of a long term Economic (and Spatial) Strategy as a framework for economic renewal both by way of public sector action and private sector investment. It is envisaged that the strategy would take a broad view of the region (including neighboring counties) and investigate how Athlone should be positioned in order to take advantage of economic opportunities, create employment and attract investment to support envisaged increase in critical mass. The Plan should build on existing efforts of RCC and WCC in revitalising and redeveloping Athlone and provide recommendations for its marketing as a Regional Centre.


It is imperative that this joint approach and shared vision is delivered for Athlone, at a Regional level, and mirrored in both the RSES for the North Western Regional Assembly and the Eastern and Midland Regional. Alignment and consistency between both RSESs is fundamental in this regard and steps should be taken to ensure this outcome. The ability to achieve the NPF vision for Athlone is dependent on both RSES's adopting a holistic approach to delivering consistent strategies for Athlone and its western environs. Further, consistency should also be provided across all regional spatial and economic frameworks (across EMRA, NWRA and the Southern Regional Assembly) pertaining to the status and future development of the Regional Centers prescribed in the NPF.

It is requested that both Assemblies take on board the issues raised in this submission and we would welcome the opportunity to further discuss or expand on the matters raised above, if you so wish.

Yours sincerely,


Pat Gallagher
Westmeath County Council




Eugene Cummins
Roscommon County Council



Athlone

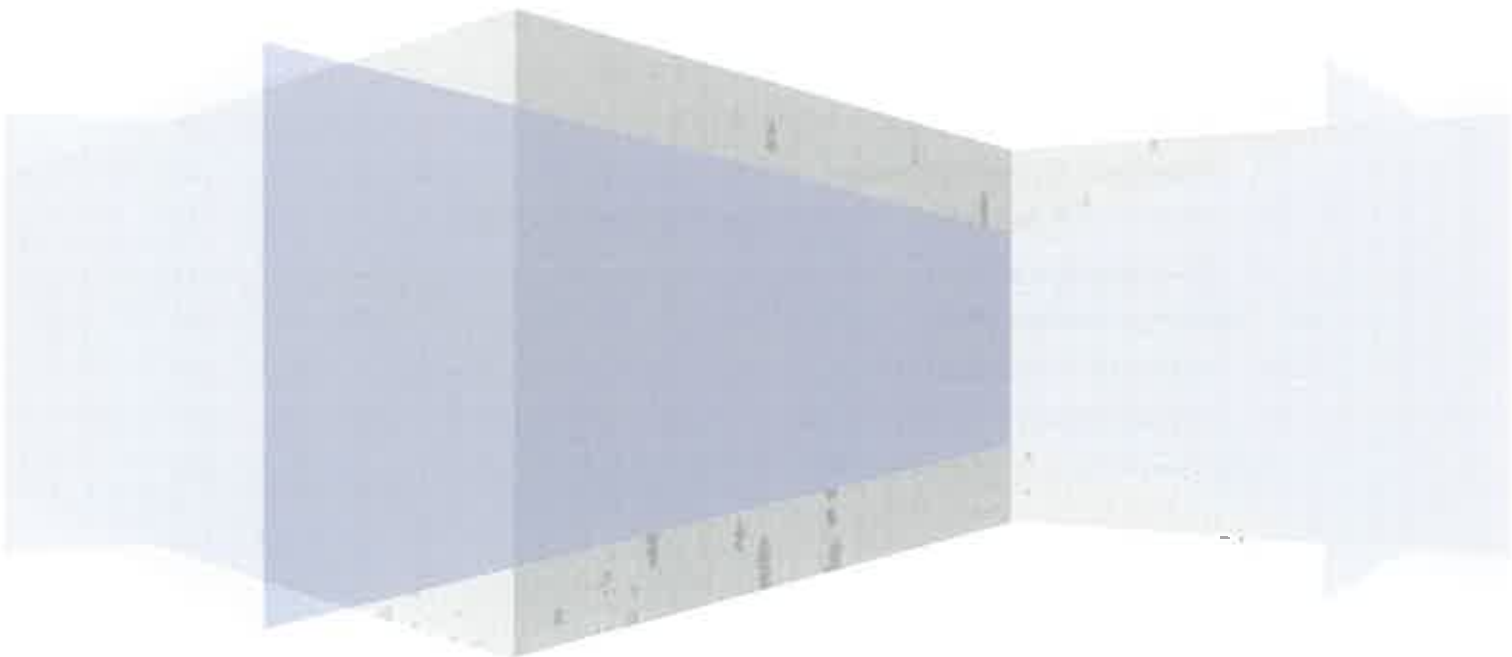
A Key Regional Centre



Comhairle Contae
Ros Comáin
Roscommon
County Council

Athlone

A Key Regional Centre



Contents

1.0	Introduction/Context	4
1.1	Context	5
1.2	Spatial definition	5
1.3	Profile	5
1.4	Vision	6
2.0	Making the Vision a Reality	6
2.1	Housing	7
2.2	Economic Development & Employment	10
2.2.1	Primary Employment Areas in Athlone	11
	IDA Park/Garrycastle	12
	Blyry	12
	Creggan	12
	Monksland	12
2.2.2	Retail	12
2.3	Amenities	14
2.3.1	Environment and Recreation	15
2.3.2	Arts & Culture	16
	The Western Bank Area within the Town Centre of Athlone	17
2.3.3	Monksland / Bellanamullia (Athlone West)	18
2.4	Flagship Projects/Opportunities within Regional Centre / wider Region	20
1.	Transportation Fulcrum	20
2.	Wilderness Park Project	20
3.	National Sports Centre	20
4.	Interlinkages with Athlone Institute of Technology and Roscommon Town	20
5.	Community/Social Infrastructure Strategy for Athlone	20
6.	Provision of an Urban Space Strategy for the Town	20
7.	Provision of Greenway/Blueway Amenities	21
8.	Connections to the Galway – Dublin National Cycle Network (NCN)	21
9.	Walking/Cycling Links	21
3.0	Delivery of Strategic Sites	22
3.1	Criteria for selection of sites	22
3.2	Map and priorities	22
3.2.1	Texas - Proposed 'Opportunity Site'	21

3.2.2 Irishtown - Proposed 'Opportunity Site'	22
3.2.3 Dunnes Stores - Proposed 'Opportunity Site'	23
3.2.4 The Strand - Proposed 'Opportunity Site'	24
3.2.5 ST. MEL'S LOUGHANASKIN - Proposed 'Opportunity Site'	25
3.2.6 Existing Bus Garage and Adjoining CIE Lands - Proposed 'Opportunity Site'	26
3.2.7 Ranelegh - Proposed 'Opportunity Site'	27
3.3 Additional Proposed Strategic Opportunities	28
3.3.1 Lissywollen South Framework Plan	28
3.3.2 Merchant/ Shopping Quarter	28
3.3.3 Monksland	28

Executive Summary

Athlone has been identified as a 'Key Regional Centre' in Project Ireland 2040. Its primacy in the region for public services administration, retail and economy is recognised within its designation as a 'Key Regional Centre'. In this regard, its role and importance for the continued development and prosperity within the region is identified and supported within this national Strategy by setting out a strategic development framework for its future growth which will allow Athlone to reach a sufficient scale to allow it to further develop as a key driver of growth within the region and allow the entire region to benefit as a whole.

Athlone's uniqueness in the manner with which the town geographically encompasses lands within two Counties (i.e. Co. Westmeath and Co. Roscommon) is further exemplified by its location and regional significance within two Regional Assemblies', namely the Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly and the Northern and Western Regional Assembly. The National Planning Framework-Project Ireland 2040 identified that a co-ordinated approach between these two regions is required, and that a cross-boundary Urban Area Plan be undertaken for Athlone in its entirety, to ensure that the town and environs has the capacity to grow sustainably and to secure investment, as the Key Regional Centre in the Midlands.

The purpose of this Strategic Urban Area Plan for Athlone is to engage a collaborative approach between both Westmeath County Council and Roscommon County Council providing an overall vision for the future growth of Athlone in its entirety, to ensure that the town and environs has the capacity to grow sustainably and to secure investment, as the key regional centre in the Midlands.

1.0 Introduction/Context

Athlone is a 'key regional centre' for the Midland Strategic Planning Area within the Eastern and Midland Region and due to its central location, it also has a significant functional aspect for the Northern and Western Region, demonstrating linkages into Longford, Roscommon and east Galway. Given its location which transcends two county boundaries, its development in recent decades has been primarily guided in a plan-led manner by two statutory landuse plans i.e. Athlone Town Development Plan (in the case of lands within the administrative area of Co. Westmeath and Monksland-Bellanamullia Local Area Plan (in the case of lands within the administrative area of Co. Roscommon).

Its form and function has continued to evolve and its designated role within the National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 as a 'Gateway Town' forming part of the Midlands Linked Gateway with Mullingar and Tullamore was further enhanced under Project Ireland 2040, with Athlone now prioritised as an integral growth area within the region and in particular, within the Midlands Strategic Planning Area.

Key sectors such as ICT, pharmaceuticals, education, engineering, services, public administration, tourism and retail currently provide for a significant employment base within Athlone whilst Athlone Institute of Technology provides valuable Third Level Education and is a recognised leader in driving market-informed research in collaboration with industry partners (in particular, with respect to Materials, Bioscience and Software Research). Two Enterprise Ireland funded Technology Gateways namely Applied Polymer Technologies and Connected Media Application Design and Delivery are also located within AIT, as is the Midlands Innovation Research Centre.

1.1 Context

The Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 and Monksland-Bellanamullia Local Area Plan 2015-2021 are the two statutory landuse plans which provide a spatial planning framework and vision for the development of Athlone over the respective plan periods and beyond.

The ATP refers to the majority of lands sited within Athlone town and environs, whilst the Monksland-Bellanamullia LAP refers to lands located west of the River Shannon and encompass the western quadrant of Athlone.

A number of LAPs which collectively set the framework for the overall development of lands within Athlone, Co. Westmeath have been adopted to further guide its spatial development within a more focused, concentrated manner. These LAPs provide specific visions, policies and objectives for a network of communities, employment & business areas and amenity areas within each identified area, and all plans are consistent with the overall vision for Athlone as a 'key regional centre'.

The LAPs prepared for quadrants within Athlone include:

- Lissywollen South Framework Plan 2018
- Curragh Lissywollen LAP 2006
- Cornamagh LAP 2009
- Creggan LAP 2010.

The latter three LAP's were subsumed in the Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020.

Additionally, Westmeath County Council carried out a masterplan for lands sited within the core area/town centre of Athlone referred to as the Loughanskin Masterplan (2007). The rationale in undertaking this LAP was to provide a plan-led approach to the regeneration of this strategically located land bank adjoining the town centre. It is considered that the implementation of this masterplan is vital to the successful future growth and development of Athlone and its ability to achieve its identified role as a 'Key Regional Centre' for the region.

1.2 Spatial definition

Athlone is strategically located within the centre of Ireland, with excellent accessibility in terms of both rail and road. The River Shannon is a dominant factor in dictating its settlement form and compact settlements have evolved on both sides of the river. Its medieval centre remains largely intact and large scale historic developments (including Custume Barracks, Athlone Castle and St. Peter and St. Paul's Cathedral) dominate the landscape on the western bank of the town centre). In more recent years, new residential development has predominantly developed within concentrated areas located to the east (i.e. Coosan, Cornamaddy, Clonbrusk) and west (i.e. Monksland & Ardnaglug, Kilmacuagh), with large scale employment areas and business parks sited in Garrycastle, Blyry and Monklans areas.

1.3 Profile

Historical: The name Athlone (in Irish Áth Luain) literally means 'The ford of Lúain'. The town was regarded as the principal crossing point on the Shannon connecting the provinces of Connacht and Leinster. The town itself developed as an Anglo-Norman settlement around a castle built for King John in 1210. From the mid-thirteenth century Athlone was a walled town and comprised of numerous defensive structures such as castles, medieval bridges and a motte and bailey.

Evolution & Form: Athlone's medieval urban grain remains largely intact, with narrow streets radiating from the historical focal points of the town, and enclosed vistas adding a great deal of character and a distinctive sense of place to the town. The historic core of Athlone remains one of

the best examples of such street patterns and settlement formation in the country. The western bank of the town centre is representative of large-scale historic developments, whilst in more recent decades new residential development has primarily been concentrated to the east of the town (in areas such as Coosan, Cornamaddy and Clonbrusk) and within the west of the town (in areas such as Ardnaglug, Kilmacuagh and Monksland). The distribution of industrial development within the town has occurred in designated Industrial Parks namely IDA Business Park, Garrycastle, Blyry Business Park, the Athlone Business Park and Monksland.

Physical Context: The topography of Athlone town is predominantly flat, and contains an extensive floodplain and Callows associated with the River Shannon. These glacial and later deposits rest on a bedrock of carboniferous limestone. The immediate surrounding lands are typified by a mix of rich agricultural lands, numerous peat bogs to the east and west and esker ridges which traverse lands in an east-west direction. Currently, significant Flood Relief Works are being undertaken on lands within proximity to the River Shannon.

Current Economic Profile: According to CSO 2016, the population of Athlone is 21,349, which defines it as the largest town within the Midlands Strategic Planning Area. This key regional centre features an extensive industrial base, which supports a number of pharmaceutical, medical devices and information technology companies (both manufacturing and service support related). It also plays host to the Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT), an important third level education institution for the region with c. 5,000 enrolled students and programme offerings in business, humanities, engineering and science. In addition the Midlands Innovation and Research Centre which is based at AIT, is a hub for research and innovation and enterprise development in the Midland Region. Also present within Athlone is Georgia Tech Ireland, which operates an applied research centre based in the IDA campus since 2006 and a joint initiative between Georgia Tech (USA) and the Irish State.

Athlone has continuously been successful in attracting both Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and indigenous companies to establish and sustain operations within its functional area, including Ericsson (ICT), Covidien KCI and Alkermes.

1.4 Vision

"To provide for the development of Athlone as a driver of sustainable economic growth, commensurate with its status as a Regional Centre in the NPF, whilst balancing the need to safeguard the town's inherent environmental assets with the creation of appropriate development opportunities and amenities, thereby developing Athlone as a vibrant and dynamic regional centre in which to live, work, do business and visit".

2.0 Making the Vision a Reality

A collaborative approach between key stakeholders, including Roscommon County Council, Westmeath County Council, the regional assemblies and other interest groups (including business interests, IDA, voluntary and non-voluntary parties) is required in order for the identified vision for Athlone to be achieved. The primary areas which collectively will allow for the delivery of this vision include;

- Housing
- Economic Development & Employment
- Retail

➤ Amenities/Environment/Culture

2.1 Housing

Emphasis will be placed on increasing housing supply within Athlone, in a sequential manner and consolidating the development of predominantly residential areas of Athlone, such as Ardnaglug, Kilmacuagh and Monksland, which grew rapidly over the past decade, resulting in some instances in an unsustainably low density pattern of development. Future residential development in the key regional centre of Athlone will be guided by the identification of and creation of opportunities for greater efficiencies in the use of brownfield land, with a focus on town centre and local centre¹ development and along key public transportation corridors which provide connectivity between these locations. Place making will be a strong theme in the future residential development of Athlone, and it will be essential that attractive places are created in order to encourage people to live, study, work and invest in this key regional centre.

The previous predominance of suburban living will be re-dressed, with the new approach emphasising and demanding high quality urban design, in which higher densities can be accommodated at core locations and will be proven to create desirable urban environments in which to live. An essential element to ensure the success of this approach towards residential development is the provision of significant investment in public realm enhancement and the development of a network of aesthetically pleasing, and functional public recreation spaces at key locations.

The following sections provide details of the residential development strategy to date across the two Local Authority areas which will comprise the future 'Athlone key regional centre.'

Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 (Co. Westmeath)

This Town Development Plan, which encompasses lands within the administrative area of Co. Westmeath provides for a total of **129.2ha** of residential zoned. At an average density of 35 units per hectare, the target population increase would imply a projected increase in households of 3,310 units over the Plan period and beyond, developing land reserves in a sequential basis.

- **Lissywollen South**

The Lissywollen South Framework Plan (2018) contains a strategic land bank of **20 ha** which is zoned and available for residential development. This land bank which is proximate to the town centre represents a considerable resource, not only in the context of the Plan area, but in the context of Athlone in realising and achieving the population targets prescribed for this overall regional centre in a sustainable manner. The plan presents an opportunity to develop this strategically located land bank as a highly sustainable and integrated new urban quarter extending from the town centre of Athlone. It contains a robust and adaptable development framework in line with best practice in sustainable urban planning to meet the needs of existing and future residents. This Plan will also provide site development frameworks aimed at kick-starting the development of a substantial and sustainable residential community within Lissywollen South.

¹ Monksland is an example of a distinct geographic area, with a growing community and a commensurate need to create an strong central core, to serve as a self sustaining local centre for its immediate population base and workforce.

- **Curragh Lissywollen**

The Curragh Lissywollen LAP (2006) provides for an opportunity to develop a **c.85ha** land bank located immediately north of the N6/M6 Athlone by-pass as prominent gateway to Athlone where people can live, work, leisure and access various local services within a well-defined quarter.

- **Cornamagh**

The Cornamagh LAP (2009) comprises approx. **57.5 ha** (142 acres). The concept of the Cornamagh LAP is to ensure coordinated growth and the creation of a sustainable urban community by providing appropriately coordinated residential accommodation, employment, leisure and social and community infrastructure.

- **Cornamaddy**

The Cornamaddy Action Area Plan (2005) contains a total area of **85.6 ha** of land. This land parcel is located to the northeast of Athlone, c.1.5 miles from the town centre of Athlone, and in this regard, is strategically located in terms of its proximity to the town centre and national transport links.

Monksland / Bellanamullia (Athlone West) LAP (2016-2022) (Co. Roscommon)

The Monksland / Bellanamullia LAP (2016-2022) was developed in accordance with the Core Strategy as set out in the *Roscommon County Development Plan 2014-2020*. The extent of lands zoned for residential development was significantly reduced from the extent of similarly zoned lands within the previous Monksland/Bellanamullia (Athlone West) LAP 2010-2016². A total of **27.03ha** are currently zoned for residential development, of which **23.20ha** has been identified as 'New Residential' to accommodate development within the lifetime of the current Plan, while the remaining **3.84ha** has been identified as 'Strategic Residential Reserve' i.e. will be considered suitable for housing development when either (a) all lands zoned 'New Residential' have been developed or (b) all lands zoned 'New Residential' are the subject of a grant of planning permission (extant planning permission) and there is a demonstrable demand, supported by factual evidence, for further new residential development.



Existing lower density housing developments in Monksland

² Approximately 157 HA. of land, for residential development over three phases (36.89 HA. for the lifetime of the Plan; 53.57 HA. for years 6-15; and 66.91 HA. for years 12-33); with the potential to accommodate a population of 7,850 persons.

The lands currently zoned as 'New Residential' comprise of Greenfield sites, of which the majority are located within 750 metres of the 'District Centre' in the vicinity of the Super Valu / River Village commercial development or on infill development sites.

The extent of land zoned for residential development was based on the need to accommodate a projected population growth target of 538 persons, with development densities being 20 per hectare. Having regard to the strong focus in the National Planning Framework on achieving compact growth within and close to the existing footprint of built up areas, one of the key areas in Monksland in which to accommodate this is on the centrally positioned lands which are zoned 'District Centre.' Alongside the approach advocated in the current plan in relation to the development of the 'District Centre' lands which promotes the area for the development of a range of retail and non retail service functions (including social and community functions) at a level which will serve the population of the (current) Plan area, it is considered that there is capacity to accommodate an increased level of residential development, at significantly increased density levels, and within mixed use developments.

Brownfield/regeneration land

- **Loughanaskin**

The St.Mel's and Loughanaskin areas of Athlone town were identified as key priority areas for urban renewal following prolonged degeneration over the years, substandard housing and dereliction, despite its central location in proximity to services and amenities. The urban renewal proposals are designed to optimise the potential of a town centre site, to facilitate a mixed residential scheme which will support the commercial core of the town, reinforce neighbourhood identity and enhance the physical character and provide a focus for the area.

The Loughanaskin Masterplan was adopted for the area in 2007 and provides guidance for the regeneration and urban renewal of a Town Centre Neighbourhood.

Objectives for the Loughanaskin lands include, but are not limited to the following:

- Support the town's capacity for innovation and development;
- Facilitate the development of a mixed use scheme which will support the commercial core of the town centre;
- Optimise the potential on this town centre site;
- Facilitate the development of a mixed residential scheme with appropriate densities and with supporting services and facilities



Graphic: Illustrating the Loughanaskin Masterplan

2.2 Economic Development & Employment

Identified as a Key Regional Centre supported by the RSES, Athlone is the reigning leader in the region for public services administration, retail and enterprise & employment, with a thriving tourism industry. Athlone benefits from its strategic central and accessible location and is host to key employment bodies such as IDA, ICT enterprises, global pharmaceuticals, engineering and public administration, all of which provide for a significant employment platform and a key driver for the growth and development. In terms of education, progressive third level education resources and facilities at the Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) underline the capacity and potential to develop further as a centre of excellence and to progress to Technological University Status while improving synergies and sharing knowledge with existing research facilities.

Athlone has a number of key attributes that make it a key which may be summarised as follows:

- Designated as a Key Regional Centre in Project Ireland 2040;
- Strategic location along the M6, with excellent inter-urban links to the capital and international airport;
- Advanced infrastructure network, in terms of both road & rail connections and energy and communications;
- Expanding Third level education base;
- Highly Skilled Workforce;

- Existing base of leading international companies at the forefront of their field in areas such as pharmaceutical, R&D, medical devices and life sciences and telecommunication software; and
- Established administrative centre for national and regional services.
- Excellent broadband and telecommunications infrastructure
- The River Shannon and a high quality natural environment

To strengthen and reinforce the economic profile for Athlone and the region(s), there needs to be a focus on the employment profile of Athlone that comprises of an established tradition of manufacturing, pharmaceutical, research and development, medical devices, engineering, telecommunications/software industries and retailing. The presence of an established and successful IDA Business Park in Athlone is a vital component in reinforcing Athlone's primacy and status in the region as a base for international business.

Additionally, expansion of Athlone Institute of Technology to Technological University Status should be supported not only to broaden the Third Level education platform in Athlone, but to facilitate, encourage and improve synergy with local research and business enterprises.

2.2.1 Primary Employment Areas in Athlone

Athlone has a long and well established base in manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, research and development, medical devices, telecommunications, software development and has been successful in attracting world class multinational companies in their respective fields such as Ericsson, Alkermes, Alexion, Covidien etc, which provide a significant employment base (see Athlone's FDI companies below).



Much of the industrial / manufacturing activity is located within geographic clusters, with each cluster predominantly accommodating distinct industrial sectors. A joint Urban Area Plan will focus on the established geographical industrial clusters (as well as promote the development of the Creggan area as a further area of industrial potential), and will highlight and seek to capitalise on the distinctive industrial specialisms which have developed within each distinct cluster. This will not however preclude positive consideration in any of the industrial locations in the event that wider industrial development opportunities present themselves. There are four principal Industrial /Business Areas within Athlone as follows:

- Garrycastle IDA
- Blyry
- Creggan
- Monksland

IDA Park/Garrycastle

The IDA Park in Garrycastle comprises an established business & technology campus extending to **55 ha** in area to the east of Athlone. It adjoins AIT and currently hosts many businesses in a myriad of sectors such as pharmaceutical, medical, life sciences, R&D etc. The linkage between the AIT campus and Garrycastle Business Park is critical for the synergy and spin-offs required to fulfil the overall vision to develop a centre of excellence for education, research, enterprise and innovation at this location.

Blyry

The Athlone and Blyry Business Parks accommodate a large proportion of the indigenous industries in the town. Further to this, Blyry Business Park also accommodates Ericsson which is a world-leading provider of telecommunications equipment and related services to mobile and fixed network operators which employs c.1,000 people at its campus. It is one of the longest-standing technology companies to base itself in Ireland, having established its first operations in 1957 with the facilities in Athlone established in 1974. Its facility comprises a campus-style development that occupies in excess of **15.2 acres**.

Creggan

The Creggan area comprises a strategic land bank to the south east of the town has been earmarked for an innovative business park to capitalise on Athlone's growing economy and designation as a Regional Centre in the NPF. Creggan is strategically sited in proximity to both AIT and the IDA Park, has excellent links to the M6 motorway. This large greenfield parcel presents a unique opportunity to develop a purpose built landscaped business campus with supporting social infrastructure.

Monksland

Monksland is a vital driver of economic development, with beneficial effects for Athlone and the surrounding area, and makes a key contribution to the economy of Co. Roscommon. The area serves as an important economic base, accommodating a range of industrial activities, and in particular having developed a strong pharmaceutical presence.³ The continued development of the industrial sector in this location, with an emphasis on the fields of pharmaceuticals and ICT, is an important tenet of further development of the economic and employment opportunities in the context of the regional centre and also in the context of the economy of Co. Roscommon.

2.2.2 Retail

Athlone Joint Retail Strategy 2017 – 2026

The Athlone Joint Retail Strategy was prepared in accordance with one of the key recommendations of the *Report of the Athlone Boundary Review Committee 2016* wherein it was recommended 'a new programme of structured cooperation be immediately initiated by both local authorities to develop an innovative governance system for Athlone – Monksland/Bellanamullia matters.'

³ Established pharmaceutical enterprises in the area include Alkermes, Alexion and Jazz Pharmaceuticals.

Aim: *To promote the development of a vibrant and competitive retail sector within Athlone Town and its environs, whilst protecting the integrity, vibrancy and viability of the town centre of Athlone.*

The priority for Athlone is to continue to grow and enhance the convenience and mainstream comparison shopping in the town centre. The nationally recognised profile of Athlone, through the combination of the Athlone Town Centre and Golden Island Shopping Centres has reinforced the strategic retail function/profile of Athlone in the shopping patterns in both Roscommon and Westmeath and their respective regions. It has been secured and sustained throughout the period of economic recession the country has faced. This performance and potential requires to be built upon recognising that, due to the fine grain morphology of the Core Retail Area of the town, then this would be difficult to achieve solely within the Core Retail Area of the town centre of Athlone. However, through a suite of development opportunity sites, this can be redressed and underpin further growing Athlone's retail role, potential and profile within edge-of-centre sites in the Eastern Bank of the town centre on lands as follows:-

- Adjacent to Southern Station Road
- Loughanaskin
- Former Shopping centre off St Mary's Square (Texas Site)
- Between Sean Costello St and John Broderick St
- The Dunnes site and car park (Irishtown)
- Lloyds Lane and the Strand
- Golden Island

The Strategy recognises that while the Athlone Town Centre and Golden Island Shopping Centre are the key retail locations in the town centre, there is little connectivity between them. As such, they serve as destination centres in their own right. A key strand in looking forward must be to overcome this to help strengthen the retail and commercial function and coherence of the town centre.

Furthermore, **Golden Island Shopping Centre** is an older shopping centre complex surrounded by extensive surface car parking and adjacent to a mix of retail, commercial and industrial buildings with many buildings in poor condition, set in a generally degraded environment. Given the area's proximity to the Core Retail Area and its profile on the major amenity and tourism asset of the Shannon, it should be a priority that a strategic environmental enhancement and upgrading of this area is undertaken.

Roscommon and Westmeath County Council commissioned consultants to undertake the preparation of a joint Retail Strategy for Athlone, the purpose of which is *'to continue to sustain and improve the retail profile and competitiveness of County Westmeath, through the consolidation and environmental enhancement of town centres and settlements and by improving the quality and choice of retail developments on offer'*. This Strategy is currently being progressed and it is intended that it will be incorporated into the respective statutory plans by way of a proposed Amendment to the Monksland/Bellanamullia Local Area Plan and Variation to the Athlone Town Development Plan, following the completion of the statutory process in the near future.

Monksland / Bellanamullia (Athlone West) – in the context of the Athlone Joint Retail Strategy

In respect of the 'Athlone West' area the *Athlone Joint Retail Strategy* indicates as part of Policy RP9 that:

"It is the policy of the Councils to sustain and enhance the retail, services and community offer of Monksland/Bellanamullia as a more fully integrated part of Athlone Town and its environs, ensuring local needs are better met but without potentially having an adverse impact on the vitality and viability of the town centre of Athlone."

The Strategy reinforced that the area needs to “*evolve from an essentially suburban type area/centre into the dynamic heart of the community, while respecting the priority of the primacy of the town centre of Athlone.*”

Consistent with the policies set out in the *Athlone Joint Retail Strategy* and with the approach already set out in the *Monksland / Bellanamullia (Athlone West) Local Area Plan 2016-2022*, it is intended that there will be further “*densification and diversification of retail, non-retail services, commercial and community uses in the River Village commercial area⁴.....to better meet local needs with the scale and nature of proposals determined to not have an adverse impact on the vitality and viability of the town centre of Athlone.*”⁵ An Urban Area Plan which will set out a framework for the overall development of this area will be undertaken jointly with Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils following the adoption of the RSES.

Together with the focus being on the development of local facilities and services in the core area of Monksland, there will also continue to be a presumption against new retail warehousing proposals and strong encouragement of the utilisation of existing vacant units.

2.3 Amenities

The provision of amenities is a necessity for local people and visitors and is a further mechanism which if employed appropriately will attract both business and tourist interests and assist in ensuring the future growth of Athlone. The Westmeath Tourism Strategy 2016 - 2020 sets out opportunities to further develop upon the profile of Athlone. Athlone has sustained its national and regional tourist and business centre role, demonstrated in part with the location of leading international hotel operators (Radisson and Sheraton) within its centre, together with long-established local hoteliers.

There has been a long-term commitment to address, remodel and significantly enhance the public realm of the town centre of Athlone (i.e. Church Street). Recently, public realm enhancement works have commenced under the €3million Church St. Enhancement Scheme (jointly funded by the European Union and Westmeath County Council). The works include the introduction of a one-way traffic system along Church Street; incorporation of traffic calming measures within adjoining streets, paving, provision of new street furniture, soft landscaping, and trees. These works will act as a catalyst in encouraging the upgrading of adjoining streets within the core area which collectively will improve the visual profile and overall competitiveness of Athlone.

Integral to this, the identified need for the development of a parallel ‘Interpretation and Signage Strategy’ for Athlone is required. In order to create a sense of cohesiveness across the entirety of Athlone regional centre, collaborative initiatives will be developed by Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils to ensure the adoption of similar approaches on public realm works, in terms of concept, design and standards (including material finishes).

⁴ The area in the vicinity of the Athlone Springs Hotel and Super Valu.

⁵ Policy RP10 – Athlone Joint Retail Strategy.



Selection of Hotel Provision within Athlone

2.3.1 Environment and Recreation

Protection and enhancement of the physical environment is of primary importance to Athlone. In this regard, it is considered that a balance is required between conservation and development of/within proximity to natural heritage assets (including the River Shannon and Lough Ree)

Waterfront Strategy: The Council published the Athlone Waterfront Strategy in April 2011. This strategy focuses on both sides of the River Shannon, stretching from the points of the Shannon past the N6 Athlone by-pass bridge on the western side and from the Town Park past the N6 Athlone by-pass bridge, on the eastern side. The aim of the plan is to provide a strategic approach to the future development of this area incorporating waterfront management, amenity provision, and environmental awareness.

The Athlone Waterfront Strategy also identifies opportunities for tourist related developments associated with the river and the need for additional berthage and mooring facilities.

Approval was granted from An Bord Pleanála for the construction of a new pedestrian and cycleway bridge across the River Shannon in Athlone, which will link the Marina to the recently refurbished Athlone Castle, and form part of the Galway to Dublin National Cycle Network.

2.3.2 Arts & Culture

Athlone is a nationally recognized cultural hub within the region and its creativity attributes are particularly apparent within the music, visual arts and performing arts spheres.

Arts and cultural facilities contribute towards the intellectual, artistic and social quality of life of people in a town. The creation and enhancement of public spaces, pedestrian routes and buildings can incorporate art into all aspects of their design and development.

In this regard, it is a policy of the Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 *“To continue to encourage the provision of new, or improved arts, cultural and entertainment facilities, particularly in the parts of the Town where there is a deficiency in such provision”* (Policy P-AC1).

In this context of Athlone, arts, cultural and entertainment facilities are wide ranging, including Athlone Castle, Arts Centre, Artists Studios, theatres, museum, cinema, library etc. The town hosts many popular cultural events and festivals, including seasonal performances by Athlone Little Theatre, Passionfruit Athlone Musical Society, Athlone Choral Society and the Athlone Town Pipe Band. In addition, local and travelling productions, concerts and small-scale exhibitions are hosted in the Dean Crowe Theatre and Arts Centre. The town has also shown its capacity to host significant national and international events, including the European Triathlon Championships, the RTE Drama Festival and the National Community Games. Triathlon has grown in popularity since the first event was held in 2006, which attracted 640 competitors. It now attracts over 2,500 competitors and is one of Ireland’s biggest Triathlons generating a welcome boost to the local economy.

Athlone Art and Heritage Ltd

Athlone Art and Heritage Ltd is an initiative of Athlone Town Council set up to manage a number of Art and Heritage sites, facilities and amenities in Athlone. These include Abbey Road Artists’ Studios, Luan Art Gallery, Athlone Castle and the proposed John McCormack Museum.

Athlone Castle

Athlone Castle is a major tourist attraction in the town, housing the Tourist Office and visitor’s centre. Major renovation works to the Castle were completed in 2012. The facilities have been re-developed to bring the standards of interpretation and display in line with the visitor expectations of the twenty-first century. The Keep of the Castle is used to tell the dramatic story of the famous Siege of Athlone, while the other buildings house a modern interpretative centre focusing on Athlone, the Castle and the periods both before and after the siege.

Visual Arts – The Luan Gallery and Abbey Road Artists Studios are two important visual art spaces, which are both carried out by Athlone Arts and Tourism Ltd.

Luan Gallery

The Luan Gallery is a purpose built modern facility incorporating an old building, sympathetically restored, with a modern glass section over a boardwalk area. It will cater primarily but not exclusively for the visual arts, with an emphasis on meeting local audience needs in terms of art exhibitions and engagement. It will also target national/international projects.

Music – Athlone has a rich cultural heritage in music, and it is noteworthy that the town is the birthplace of Count John McCormack, a famous tenor.

The Councils will protect the context of all Arts and Cultural areas within Athlone and support appropriate development of places and cultural associations through its Arts Programme.

The Western Bank Area within the Town Centre of Athlone

The Athlone Joint Retail Strategy has identified the designation of lands on the Western Bank as a **Cultural and Tourism Quarter** noting that the area will not become a prime retail location within the town centre of Athlone context but rather, as yet the untapped Cultural and Tourism Quarter within the heart of the town.



Athlone Castle



Athlone's Western Quarter

This Strategy cited that a long-term vision is required for the designated Western Bank Cultural and Tourism Quarter which is premised on the heritage asset and tourism potential of the area, which is nucleated in and around the Castle and Sean's Bar.

The potential of this area needs to be further harnessed and developed with key issues such as existing traffic issues and improvement to the public realm in respect of the triangular car park at Barrack Street and Castle Street.

Works have recently commenced on the €12m Flood Relief Scheme along the River Shannon, which is designed to protect the town from fluvial flood risk. The Quay is an established main tourist thoroughfare within Athlone. Given the substantial investment in Athlone Castle in 2012, it is considered that a public realm enhancement scheme should be undertaken along the River Shannon's waterfront at both 'The Quay' and along 'The Strand' to maximize tourist footfall along the River and provide opportunities for increasing the tourist offering at this location.

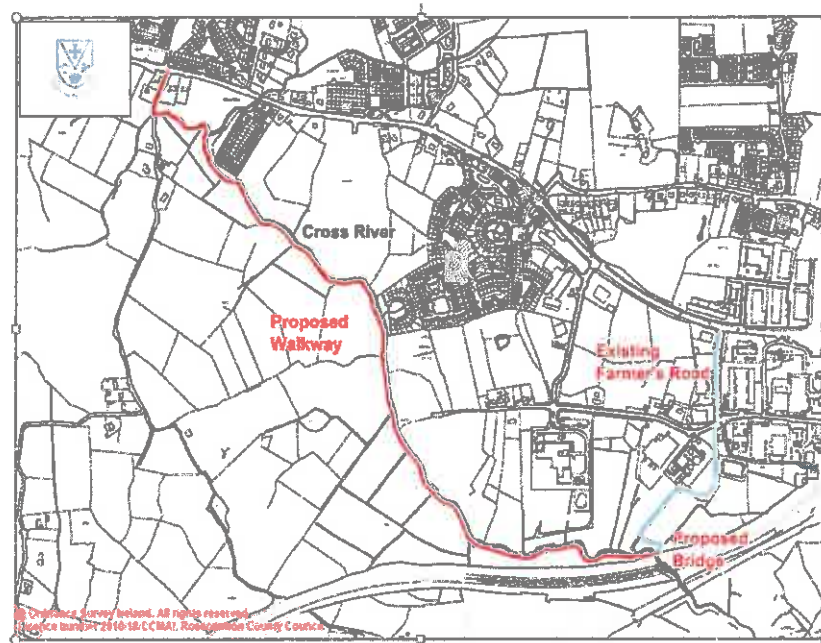
2.3.3 Monksland / Bellanamullia (Athlone West)

As noted in foregoing sections, the development of an identifiable core area at the heart of Athlone West is identified as a key element of the current *Monksland / Bellanamullia (Athlone West) LAP*, and remains a vital component in the future development of this area. The LAP detailed a clear strategy involving the consolidation of commercial development into a single 'District Centre', which would be purpose design and built to accord with guidance contained in a Framework Plan for the lands. The Framework Plan is currently in the course of preparation in relation to the lands which comprise 'District Centre' and 'Recreation and Amenity' zonings. One of the key aspects of the plan (as already noted in the LAP) is the provision of a publically accessible green space, in the form of a public park, centrally located within the 'District Centre', which would provide facilities for all age groups. The provision of an amenity facility of this nature is considered to be a vital element in uniting the local communities of Monksland and Bellanamullia and will provide a 'sense of place' and central focus for residents of the area. The location of the public park will lend itself to passive surveillance and public interaction within the 'District Centre', and is intended to have a mix of hard and soft landscaping which will contribute towards the creation of a high quality public realm for this overall central area.



Approximate location of 'District Centre' and 'Recreation and Amenity' lands in Monksland

Plans are also at an advanced stage for the creation of a Walkway and Nature Park adjacent to the Cross River. This project will involve the construction of a pedestrian walkway and fishing access approximately 2.3km in length along the banks of the Cross River from the L7581 Mihanboy Road to a point opposite the Alkermes/Alexion Complex. A new pedestrian bridge will facilitate access to the existing public Farmers Road that joins the L7584 Monksland Industrial Road. An area 2.178ha in size at the southern end of the proposed walkway is in the ownership of Roscommon County Council. It is proposed that this area be landscaped to provide a Nature Park for leisure use.



Cross River Walkway

It is likely, further to the development of this local level amenity, that the wider area offers potential in which to develop further wider amenity links in the form of walkways / cycleways towards the core area of Athlone and also crucially providing links to the Dublin to Galway Greenway.

2.4 Flagship Projects/Opportunities within Regional Centre / wider Region

Given Athlone's enviable setting along the River Shannon, its high quality built and natural environment including proximity to Lough Ree coupled with existing attractive amenities, considerable potential exists for collaborative developments to be undertaken between Westmeath and Roscommon County Council's, to further enhance Athlone as a Key Regional Centre and an ideal location to live, work and leisure as follows:

1. Transportation Fulcrum

Promotion of Athlone as a 'transportation fulcrum' due to its strategic location within Ireland. In this regard, A Sustainable Transport Plan is required to be undertaken for Athlone to guide and inform policy in the progression of sustainable transport, to assist in creating a positive modal shift to sustainable transport together with prioritisation and direction of key transport related investment decisions for the town and its environs.

2. Wilderness Park Project

The Shannon Wilderness Park Project, centred on the Lough Ree and Mid Shannon Wetlands, should be undertaken as a collaborative regional approach, and will further enhance the region's potential to establish itself as a world class outdoor activity tourism / leisure base. Such a collaborative approach shall be undertaken in conjunction with both Council's together with Offaly and Longford County Council's.

3. National Sports Centre

Consideration should be given to developing the Regional Sports Centre as a National Sports facility and associated Centre of Excellence (National Sports Arena) in conjunction with AIT. There is an identified need to consolidate and introduce new sports facilities of a calibre befitting of a national sports arena. Considerable potential exists to provide complimentary facilities to the first-rate sports facilities hosted by AIT, and thus, enable both institutions to compete for the staging of national and international sports events in Athlone.

4. Interlinkages with Athlone Institute of Technology and Roscommon Town

Consideration should be given to developing interlinkages between Athlone Institute of Technology and appropriate locations in the surrounding region, with specific consideration given to the development of off-site campus locations within the county town of each respective county within the region.

5. Community/Social Infrastructure Strategy for Athlone

Consideration should be given to the preparation of a Community/Social Infrastructure Strategy for Athlone to examine the current context with respect to social infrastructure provision in the town, to determine future requirements and make recommendations on priority areas for investment. Given the designation of Athlone as a regional centre in the NPF, it is imperative that the planned growth and economic aims for the town are appropriately counterbalanced and supported by social aspects to ensure that Athlone is a liveable, healthy and enjoyable place to work and reside.

6. Provision of an Urban Space Strategy for the Town

Urban parks and green spaces are an essential part of the urban heritage and infrastructure, being a strong element in the architectural and landscape character of towns and cities,

providing a sense of place and engendering civic pride. They are important for enabling social interaction and fostering community development. The Strategy would include an audit of all existing open spaces within Athlone and identify existing gaps in provision including proposals for retrofitting parks and play areas in established areas, together with provision of new parks in new development areas within the town and environs. In particular, potential exists to extend Burgess Park and incorporate a walkway along the River Shannon in accordance with objectives contained in the Athlone Waterfront Strategy. Consideration could also be given to the provision of a new public park and playing fields at Bogganafin which shall extend to an area of 14 hectares along both sides of the canal, thus providing an opportunity to promote the recreational potential of the canal.

7. Provision of Greenway/Blueway Amenities

Amenity links – provision to be made for co-ordinated initiatives to be developed between Counties Westmeath, Roscommon, Longford and Offaly, with a significant focus to be on ‘greenway’ and ‘blueway’ amenities. Projects which may be either progressed in the lifetime of a new Urban Plan for Athlone or which would require feasibility investigations.

8. Connections to the Galway – Dublin National Cycle Network (NCN).

A key strategic asset of Athlone is its central location within Ireland, on the River Shannon and the future potential arising from the Galway – Dublin National Cycle Network (NCN). In terms of amenity offerings, it is imperative that Athlone capitalises on the amenities offered by the River Shannon and the NCN and progresses in a combined offering of Blueway and Greenway amenities. Further progression of the National Cycle Network on the western side of the River Shannon, with associated initiatives to be developed to enable the creation of links at key locations to the Monksland / Bellanamullia (Athlone West) area; Urban amenity Park /Walkway (along the River Shannon).

9. Walking/Cycling Links

- Exploration for the potential development of a long distance walking / cycling trail linking Athlone, via the River Shannon and Lough Ree shoreline to the Centre Parcs development in Co. Longford and Lough Boora Parklands in Co. Offaly.
- Feasibility study and potential development of a circular walkway connecting central Athlone to Monksland along a northerly route, with the return route being via the Cross River Walkway and eastwards towards the River Shannon.
- Feasibility study and potential development of a walkway linking Athlone to Hodson Bay.
- Feasibility study and potential development of a cycleway/walkway link (bridge) from Coosan Point to Killinure Point and to link same with Lough Ree east area.

3.0 Delivery of Strategic Sites

3.1 Criteria for selection of sites

The Athlone Town Development Plan 2014 – 2020 identifies seven specific 'Opportunity Sites', which if developed, would facilitate the regeneration of existing under-utilised brownfield lands and assist in sustaining and enhancing the future vitality and viability of Athlone's core area and achieving its role as a 'Key Regional Centre'. In addition, lands located to the east of the core area have been identified within the Lissywollen Framework Plan (July 2018) as a strategic land bank which will support the sustainable expansion of Athlone in a sequential manner. Approval of a Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund (LIHAF) grant aid in 2018 will facilitate the potential development of c.600 residential units and supporting uses (including employment and recreational) within this Lissywollen South area in the short-medium term. These identified sites comprise a mix of infill, vacant, backland and/or underutilised lands for regeneration in order to contribute to the rejuvenation and revitalisation of the centre of Athlone.

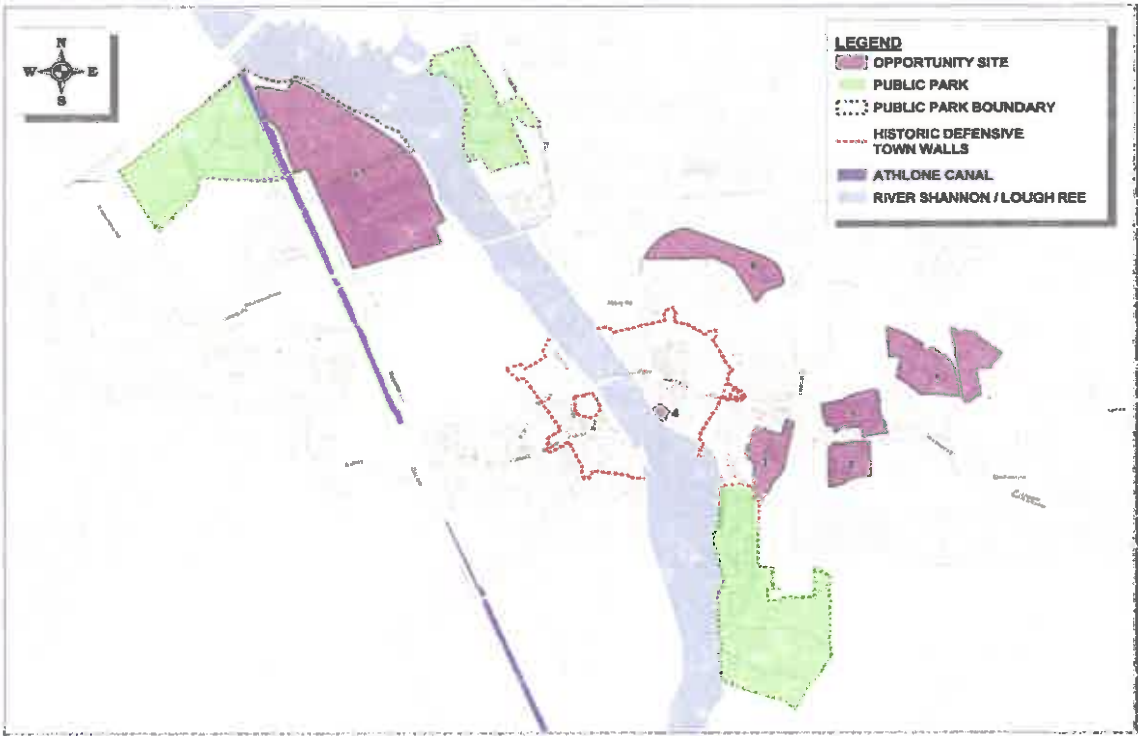
The regeneration of these Opportunity Sites are guided by site specific policies and objectives which are prescribed within the Town Development Plan for Athlone. Further to this, the Town Development Plan contains a number of strategic policies and objectives which specifically set out the Council's position in respect of these identified 'Opportunity Sites' including:

- It is Council policy to encourage the development of infill and under-utilised sites in the town centre area, where the commercial or residential function of the town will be strengthened (P-OC1).
- It is Council policy to retain buildings and streetscapes of character in the town and that all new development will be required to enhance streetscapes and retain features of interest and vernacular detailing (P-OC2).
- It is a Council objective to prepare detailed development briefs for the opportunity sites identified in the Plan (O-OC1).
- It is a Council objective to investigate designating further areas of the town and individual sites particularly on the west side of the river, to facilitate and encourage development for the purposes of regeneration (O-OC2).

Section 3.2 below provides maps and identifies the priorities associated with these lands.

3.2 Map and priorities

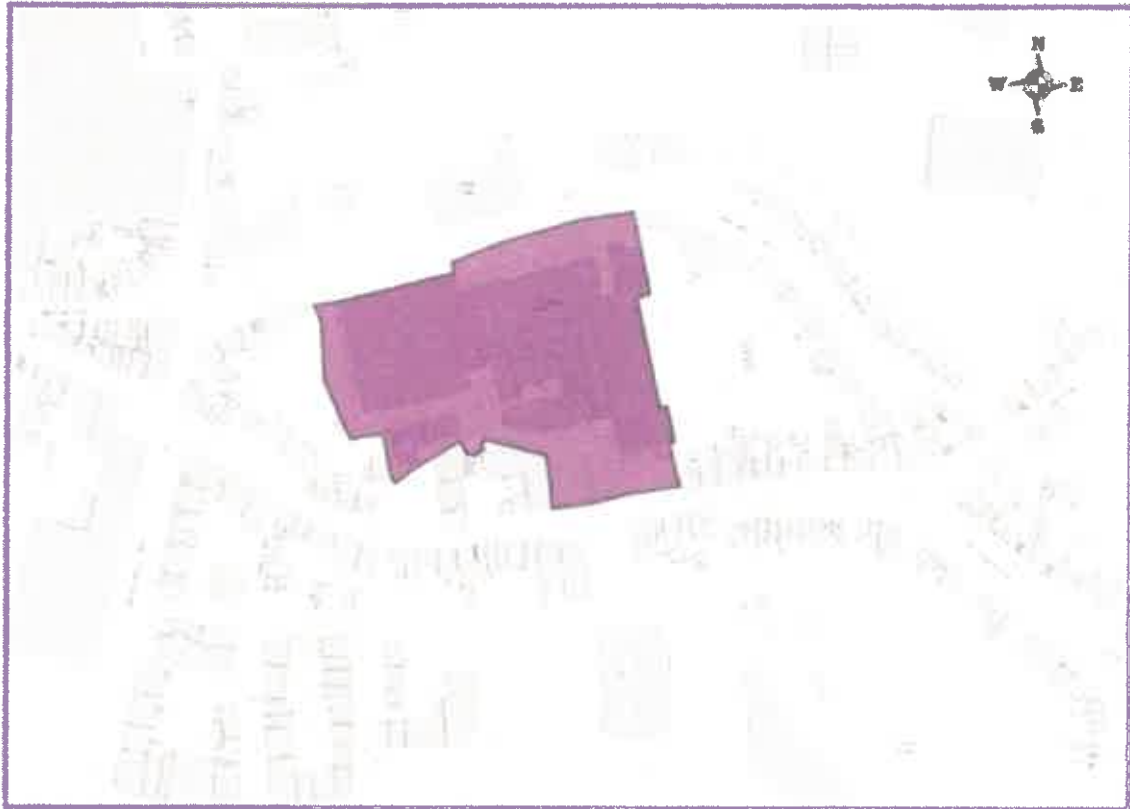
Map 3.2.1 below highlights the siting, size and strategic importance associated with the potential regeneration and development of these identified Strategic/Opportunity Sites in context with the medieval centre of Athlone. It should be noted that these 'opportunity sites' are included within the Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020. A synopsis is provided on each identified site, in respect of its built form, existing zoning and potential future development.



Map 3.2.1

3.2.1 Texas - Proposed 'Opportunity Site'

This site is located within the edge of the retail core and comprises an area of 1.339 ha. Currently, it is an underutilised site occupied by a vacant retail store with car parking. The site lies within the zone of archaeological potential and town centre conservation area.



Map 3.2.2 Texas Site

Objective for the Site:

To refurbish or redevelop this site to enhance the core area of Athlone's appearance and contribute to the creation of an attractive frontage onto St. Mary's Place. This will assist in securing the vitality and viability of this core area and enhance retail choice, enhance the associated conservation area and improve the public domain at this location.

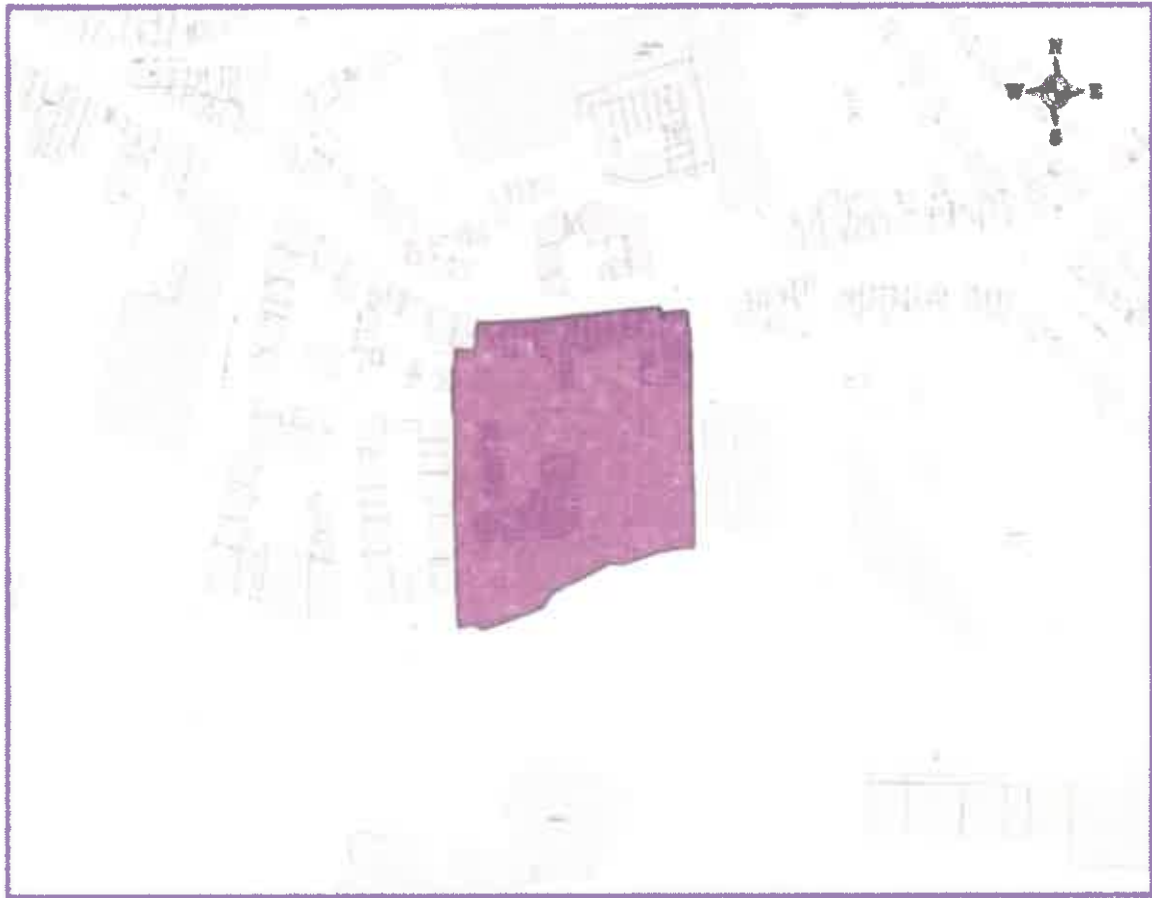
Potential Future Use(s):

The site is zoned for commercial use.

Built Form:

This site as currently developed does not reflect the tight urban grain of the adjoining properties. Future redevelopment of this site could potentially reduce the massing currently on site and improve accessibility and permeability from John Broderick Street to the main retail core.

3.2.2 Irishtown - Proposed 'Opportunity Site'



Map 3.2.2 Irishtown Site

This site is located to the south of the Texas site and comprises approximately 1ha. A Framework Plan was adopted for this site in 2009. The site lies within the zone of archaeological potential and part of the site lies within the town centre conservation area.

Objective for the Site:

Remove extensive car parking area and improve permeability and connectivity between the main retail core and enhance the street frontage onto John Broderick Street. Provide for a new civic space at Payne's Lane and open up the view of St. Mary's Church.

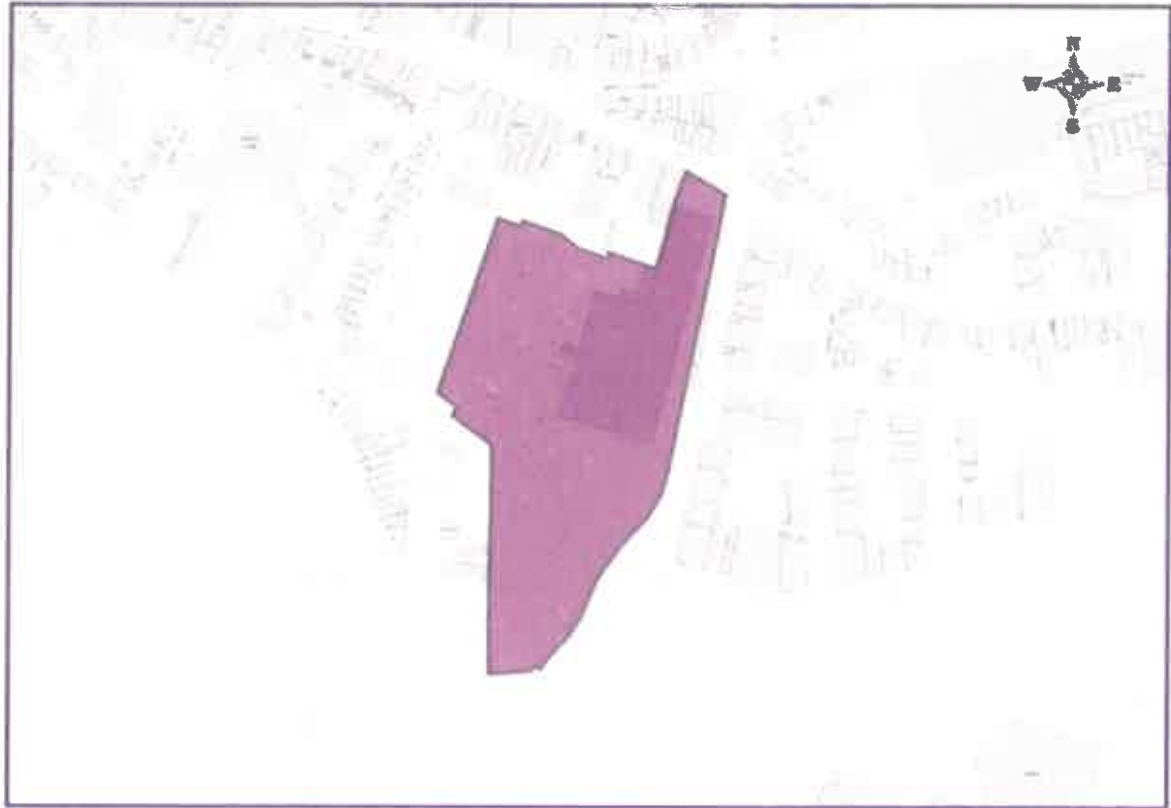
Potential Future Use(s):

The site is zoned for mixed use, including residential/commercial and retail uses.

Built Form:

The site is relatively flat and lends itself to be potentially developed as a perimeter infill development. Building heights to be determined by the surrounding area and subject to impact on residential amenity. The Framework Plan contains detail on the appropriate heights considered for the site.

3.2.3 Dunnes Stores - Proposed 'Opportunity Site'



Map 3.2.3 Dunnes Stores Site

This site is occupied by Dunnes Stores and has an area of 1.46 ha with a frontage to John Broderick Street and Dublin Gate Street. The site lies within the zone of archaeological potential with the northern part of the site lying within the town centre conservation area.

Objective for the Site:

Enhance the core area of Athlone's land use efficiency and sustainability. The redevelopment of this site with a new building /or buildings would have the potential to provide active frontages onto John Broderick Street and provide connectivity to Burgess Park and the centre of Athlone. It is further considered that a tall building(s) with increased density on this key site would define this strategic corner site within the main retail core and provide a bookend at both junctions on the adjoining streets.

Potential Future Use(s): The site is zoned for mixed use.

Built Form:

The land falls from north to south and has an irregular shape. The urban grain of the site is not reflective of the medieval plots elsewhere within the core area of Athlone and is much courser. The future appropriate design of frontages along the perimeter is vitally important on this corner site. The scale and appearance of any new development within this site should be of a high quality and respect the local distinctiveness of the core area of Athlone and that of nearby historic buildings, particularly those within the designated conservation area.

3.2.4 The Strand - Proposed 'Opportunity Site'



Map 3.2.4 The Strand

This site is currently in use as a car park area and has an area of 0.08 ha and fronts onto the River Shannon. The site lies within the zone of archaeological potential and abuts Athlone's designated conservation area. This site provides a view of the river from the core area of Athlone. There are a number of trees on the site. The site lies within the 100 and 1000 year projected flood zone, however flood relief measures have recently commenced which will afford protection to these lands.

Objective for the site:

This site was identified in the Waterfront Study for Athlone as being appropriate for the development of a high quality public realm area/civic square which could accommodate small to medium sized events/activities along the waterfront. A new building at this location would further complement the recently permitted new bridge over the River. Collectively, the envisaged regeneration works would allow for greater land use efficiency and provide for a much needed urban outdoor public space within the core area of Athlone which fronts onto the river and is adaptable to supporting public events.

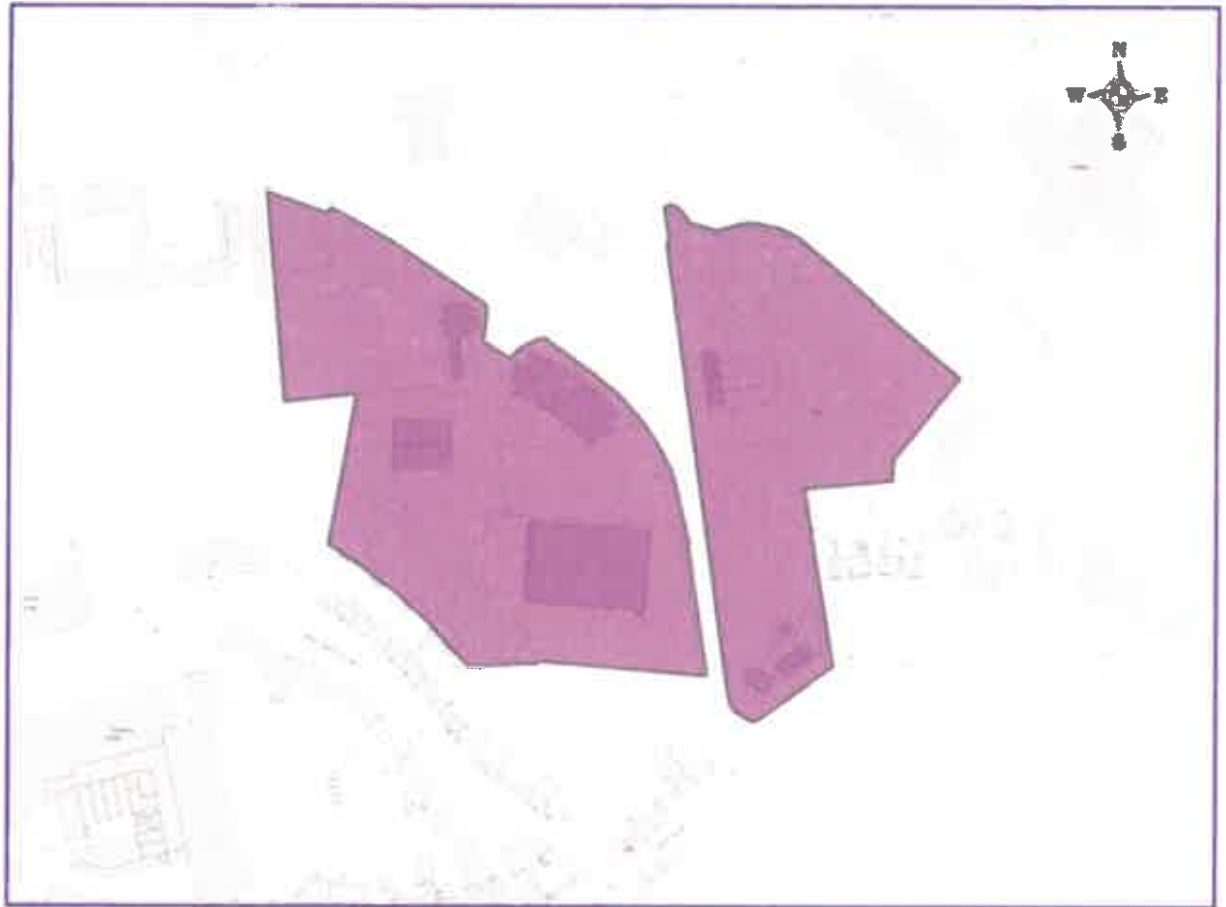
Potential Future Use(s): The site has no zoning currently.

Built Form:

The land is flat and is highly visible from the river. Water compatible development, such as docks and marinas, dockside activities that require a waterside location, amenity open space, outdoor

sports and recreation, would be considered appropriate in this zone. The scale of any development on this site would need to have regard to the adjoining residential properties.

3.2.5 ST. MEL'S LOUGHANASKIN - Proposed 'Opportunity Site'



Map 3.2.5 Loughanaskin

This area is located to the north east of Athlone's core area and is currently an underused site which has been identified for regeneration. Loughanaskin Masterplan was adopted for the area in 2007. The site is 3.15 ha and is divided into two parts separated by Grace Park Road. The site lies outside the zone of archaeological potential and the western part of the site abuts the town centre conservation area.

Objective for the site:

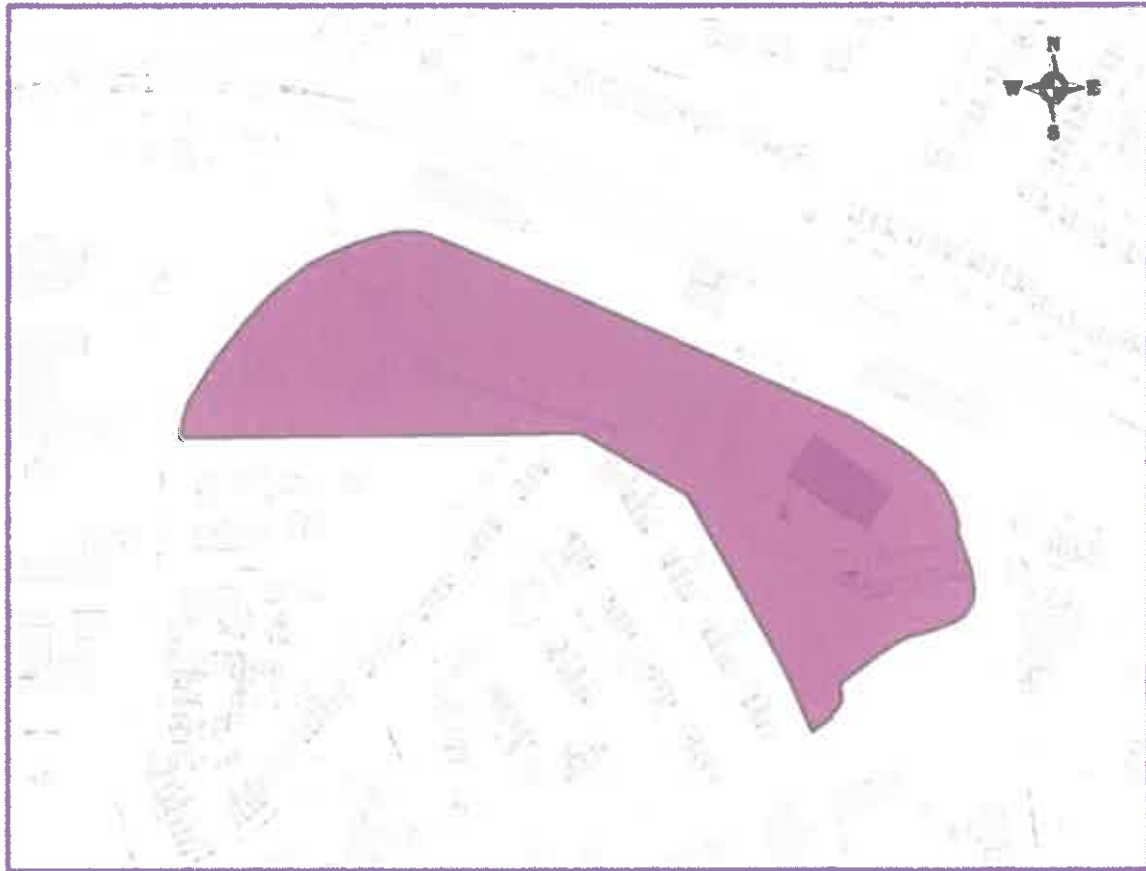
To optimise the potential of a town centre site, to facilitate a mixed residential scheme which will support the commercial core of the town, reinforce neighbourhood identity and enhance the physical character and provide a focus for the area.

Potential Future Use(s): The site is zoned residential, commercial, educational and open space.

Built Form:

The existing buildings on the site do not reflect the built form of the surrounding area which comprise enclosed blocks fronting the road. The Masterplan for the area proposes a high density mix of uses on the site in perimeter blocks fronting Grace Park Road.

3.2.6 Existing Bus Garage and Adjoining CIE Lands - Proposed 'Opportunity Site'



Map 3.2.6 Existing bus garage and adjoining CIE Lands

This site is currently occupied by the CIE bus depot and vacant under-utilised adjoining lands on the edge of the town centre next to the railway and bus station. The site is approximately 2.5 ha and the land levels fall from north to south. St. Brigid's conservation area lies to the south of the site and the railway station is a Protected Structure. A drain runs through the site. The site has been identified for a new road project.

Objective for the site:

To facilitate the development of employment uses, and maximise connectivity and permeability from the train/ bus station to the town. The objective would include the relocation of the bus garage to an out of centre location. Part of this site was identified in the Athlone Integrated Area Plan 1998 for residential and commercial uses and to accommodate a new road. The site was identified in the building heights policy as a suitable site for a tall building subject to residential amenity, views and setting of the conservation area to the south and railway building being protected.

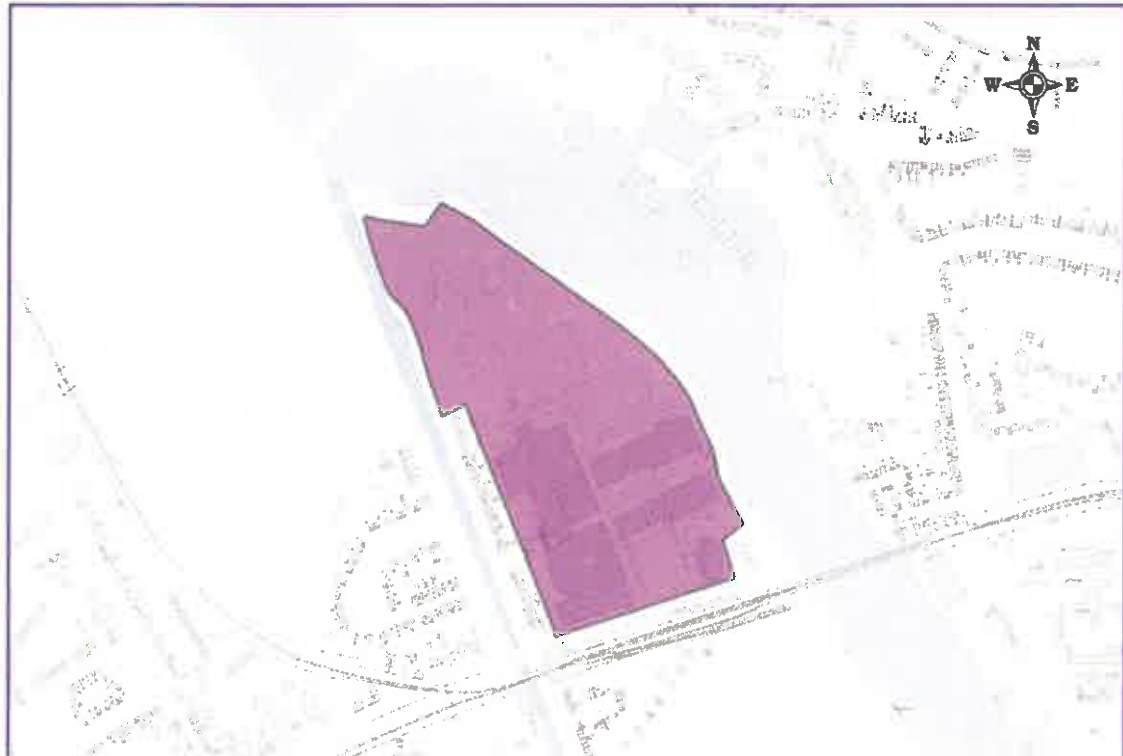
Potential Future Use(s): The site is zoned commercial.

Built Form:

Redevelopment of this site should support improved accessibility and links within the centre of Athlone, particularly to and between the railway station and the existing retail core. The layout of any proposals should therefore seek to improve pedestrian and cyclist legibility and permeability

through the provision of new high quality, convenient, safe and well lit pedestrian connections and cycle routes.

3.2.7 Ranelegh - Proposed 'Opportunity Site'



Map. 3.2.7 Ranelagh Site

This site lies outside the defined core area of Athlone but is an important edge of centre site with an area of 11.6ha which flanks the west bank of the river and the north eastern side of the canal. The southern part of the site is currently occupied by Athlone Extrusions and the northern part of the site is a public open space area with playing pitches. There are several trees on the site worthy of a Tree Protection Order. The site was the former Batteries to the Castle and there is a recorded monument on the site. The site lies outside the zone of archaeological potential and within the 100 and 1000 year projected flood zone.

Objective for the site:

This site was identified in the Waterfront Study as being an appropriate site for a new recreational zone including a riverside park and community garden which could be accompanied by a new ecology centre adjoining a new mixed use area. The site was also identified as being appropriate for a tall landmark building in the building heights policy subject to Building Heights assessment criteria being met. Having regard to the risk of flooding on this site, it has been reserved in the Plan for low vulnerability uses including open space and enterprise and employment, reflecting established uses. Any further development or intensification of use proposed on these lands shall be subject to a Site Specific Flood Risk Assessment, prepared in accordance with the Planning System and Flood Risk Management Guidelines 2009.

Potential Future Use(s): The site is zoned open space and enterprise and employment.

Built Form:

With the exception of the houses to the west of the site there is no established urban form at this site. The scale of any development on this site would need to have regard to the residential properties. The current road and public transport services are limited to the site. Pedestrian accessibility to the railway station would be improved if a pedestrian footbridge was provided along the existing bridge.

3.3 Additional Proposed Strategic Opportunities

3.3.1 Lissycowliem South Framework Plan

Westmeath County Council was successful in achieving LIHAF funding which is premised on the delivery of a significant quantum of residential units over the coming decade. This funding will assist in the establishment of a new sustainable urban quarter and associated infrastructure including the provision of a link road between the Ballymahon Road and the Garrycastle Road through Brawny. This road will 'open up' the lands sited East and West of the existing Brawny Housing Development and facilitate the potential for the provision of private and social residential development in this area. Westmeath County Council has committed to deliver the first 200 homes together with the roadway by the end of 2021 and it is envisaged that circa 600 units can be delivered over the lifetime of the Plan and beyond.

3.3.2 Merchant/ Shopping Quarter

This area forms the core of Athlone and is centred around the axis extending from Irishtown, through Dublin Gate Street/ Church Street/ Pearse Street and Connaught Street. The built form is characterised by narrow building frontages and deep plot widths. Vacancy levels are high along these central streets. In this regard, there is an identified need to carryout improvements to these streets by way of employing environmental improvements which responds positively to the towns historic character and architectural heritage, encourage the reuse of derelict and empty units and consider the introduction of an incentive scheme to refurbish shopfronts.

3.3.3 Monksland

Although the Monksland / Bellanamullia (Athlone West) LAP has not identified specific opportunity sites, the lands zoned 'District Centre', together with the adjacent 'Recreation and Amenity Lands' are considered to represent a key opportunity site in the local context. The future development of this area is intended to accommodate a mix of retail, commercial and residential units of high quality design, interspersed with areas of public open space. The area will become the central focus of the Monksland / Bellanamullia community and will create a strong 'sense of place'.

