

Heather Cooke

From: Stephen Purcell <stephen.purcell@futureanalytics.ie>
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Cc: Robert Farrell
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Mr. Jim Conway
Director
Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly
3rd Floor North
Ballymun Civic Centre
Main Street
Ballymun
Dublin
D09 C8P5

Good afternoon Jim,

I trust you are keeping well.

On behalf of Destination Athlone an industry Group supported by Local Government and key stakeholders in Athlone-Midlands Region (Chaired by John O'Sullivan, Chairman, Hodson Bay Group, Roscommon Road, Athlone, N37 XR82), Future Analytics Consulting (23 Fitzwilliam Square South, Dublin 2), Chartered Town Planning and Development Consultants, wish to submit the attached submission. The submission relates to the public consultation of the Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region published by the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA).

The submission advocates for the reaffirming of Athlone's central role in driving the socio-economic development of the Midland Region, and sets out key recommendations for consideration by the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly in finalising the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region. It is prudent to note that a comprehensive submission will also be made to the Northern and Western Regional Assembly before 08 February (when their public consultation process concludes).

We look forward to an acknowledgement receipt relating to this submission.

Given the hugely important role that Athlone will play in the future of the Midland Region, and as the only major settlement to be part of 2 no. Regional Assembly areas, should EMRA find it beneficial to meet with Destination Athlone to discuss their ambitions for Athlone and how its potential can be truly capitalised upon in a plan-led manner, please do not hesitate to make contact with me.

Many thanks in advance for your consideration of this submission.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen

Stephen M. Purcell

BSc. (Hons) MRUP PG DIP IS MIP1 FSCSI FRICS
Director



Disclaimer

Future Analytics Consulting
Ltd.
23 Fitzwilliam Square (South)
Dublin 2, D02RV08
Ireland

T +353 (0) 1 639 4836
M +353 (0) 87 63 44 507
E stephen.purcell@futureanalytics.ie
S stephen.m.purcell

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Athlone:

A Regional Centre Submission to the EMRA's Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy

January 2019

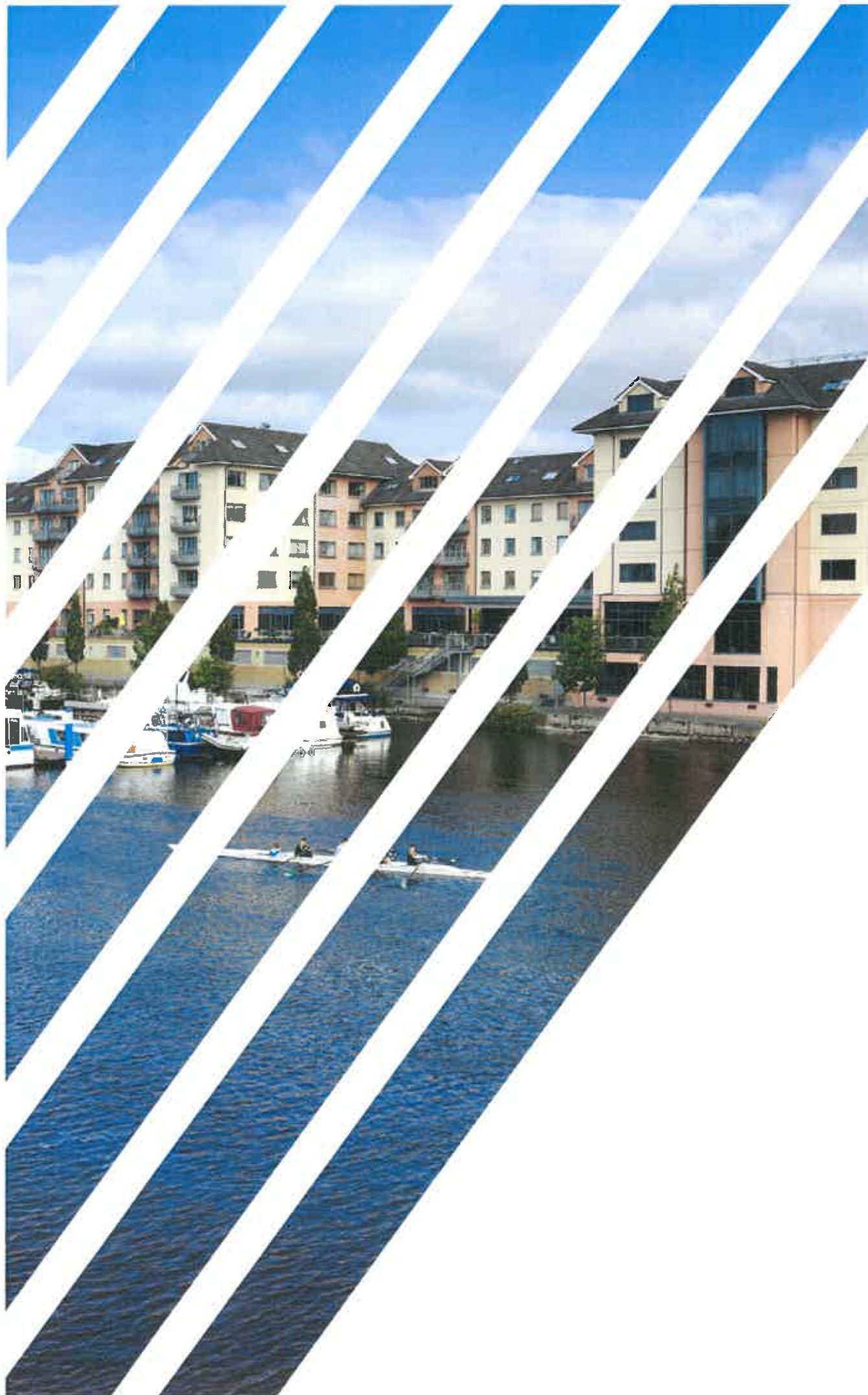
Prepared by



Future Analytics

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Contents

Executive Summary	II
1. Introduction	2
1.1 Overview	2
1.2 Destination Athlone	2
2. Athlone: At the Heart of Ireland	3
2.1 Context	3
2.2 Profile	4
3. Ireland's Spatial Policies	12
3.1 National Planning Framework	12
3.2 National Development Plan 2018 – 2027	14
3.3 Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies	15
3.4 Athlone Development Plan	22
3.5 Local Area Plans	25
3.6 Midland Region: Action Plan for Jobs 2015-2017	28
4. Athlone: Regional Centre	31
4.1 A Regional Counterweight	31
4.2 The Criteria for Growth	32
5. Recommendations	49
6. Concluding Remarks	51

Executive Summary

National Planning Framework: Project Ireland 2040, National Policy Objective 2b:

*"The **regional roles of Athlone in the Midlands, Sligo and Letterkenny in the North-West and the Letterkenny-Derry and Drogheda- Dundalk-Newry cross-border networks will be identified and supported in the relevant Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy.**"*

As outlined in the NPF, Athlone is recognised as a 'Regional Centre' that plays a key role as a regional driver for the Midlands. Recognition as such has emerged from the bountiful sources of evidence and data that signify Athlone is a settlement with a dynamic economy and the necessary critical mass to grow. As the Midland's largest town, with a young, vibrant and growing population, along with the required infrastructure and services to maintain its position of strength, Athlone offers the Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly (EMRA) a location that has the capacity to act as a counterweight to Dublin's dominance. The NPF acknowledges this and calls on the RSES to identify and support the continued growth and development of Athlone as a Regional Centre.

This submission, which is made on behalf of Destination Athlone's core Industry group, and supported by the wider interest group, aims to reinforce the regional significance of Athlone. This will be undertaken not only to ensure Athlone retains its Regional Centre designation, but also receives the necessary statutory provisions and infrastructure support to achieve its ambitions of being a true economic driver for the entire Midlands Region.

A Regional Centre for Industry

There are very few regions outside Dublin that are fortunate enough to possess **an agglomeration of significant industry groups** and enterprises such as those found in Athlone. An enviable collection of **indigenous and international companies and corporations**, working in the manufacturing, pharmaceutical, R&D, medical devices, telecommunications and software development sectors are located in Athlone.

This clustering of specialist industries collectively employs in excess of 5,000 people, the majority of whom are well-educated and highly skilled. This affords Athlone with a skilled workforce and a strong base of specialised employers. The potential for enhanced clustering of industries is significant, as companies operating in these sectors regularly seek out **co-location opportunities** where a suitably **skilled workforce** and the required logistical conditions exist.

The industry group are concerned that if **adequate population allocations** are not provided for Athlone in the RSES, it will limit the town's ability to grow, which will in-turn limit the existing industries' ability to employ suitably skilled workers and expand their operations. Industry are committed to growing their businesses in Athlone, with the potential to **double the workforce to roughly 11,000**, if the scope to do so is provided.

Similarly, without the delivery of the **required infrastructure** and associated amenities, industrial expansion is constrained. The designation of Athlone as a key Regional Centre in both the NPF and Draft RSES will amount to very little unless it is afforded the **statutory support and financial backing** that is needed to progress the stated objectives of such a designation.

Considering the significant role that these high-tech industries play in Athlone, the wider Midland's economy, and the potential for expansion they possess, it should be a priority of the RSES to support and exploit the growth potential. Some key steps are required which would facilitate this growth:

- The provision of **additional serviced lands** and industrial space, in central locations, that have infrastructure similar to that found on the IDA's Dublin Road site.
- Large-scale delivery of **residential developments**, to suit all needs, in attractive, well-connected locations throughout Athlone. In particular, 'city-centre' mixed-use apartments and 'executive-style' housing is key.
- **Enhance the public realm** and urban environment of Athlone to make it an attractive location that appeals to young, educated people.
- **Target**, and provide for, **more ambitious levels of population growth** as this would allow existing and potential future enterprises and industries access to a larger workforce.'

A Regional Centre for Education

Athlone possesses a young and highly educated population, which should come as no surprise considering the siting of the Midland's only tertiary education institute in the town. Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) has seen continual growth since its establishment and has gone from strength to strength each year. This existence of AIT provides Athlone with a significant advantage when compared to other similarly sized settlements throughout Ireland. The future growth and development of Athlone is interlinked with the expansion and development of AIT, for the following reasons:

- AIT has seen the announcement of investment in infrastructure and facilities, such as the **state-of-the-art 'STEM' facility** which will include science labs, lecture theatres, classrooms and other facilities. This provides AIT with a facility that is specifically focused on the development of skills in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields.
- The direction AIT is taking, with focus placed on **practical skills** in key sectors of employment, means that its students are fully prepared to enter the workforce of specialised, high-tech industries such as those located in Athlone. This will **prove attractive** to more enterprises and companies seeking out skilled labour.
- AIT already has **strong links to industry**, with collaborative projects underway with the IDA, Enterprise Ireland and the potential for more with local industry groups.
- AIT are in the advanced stages of preparing an application that would, if successful, see them receive **'Technological University'** status. This would dramatically enhance the attractiveness of the institute for prospective students and boost Athlone's reputation as a 'University Town'.

A Regional Centre for Tourism

As the Midland's major tourist destination, Athlone already capitalises on the vast array of **natural and cultural heritage amenities** that exist in the surrounding hinterlands. Its central location coupled with its excellent levels of connectivity ensure that Athlone is easily accessible for tourists and recreational visitors. It also acts as a central base from which visitors can explore all that the Midlands has to offer. With the current levels of **facilities and attractions** already proving hugely successful for visitors, there is huge potential to expand the offerings Athlone can provide. The following are seen as key developments in the enhancement of Athlone's tourism potential:

- Fáilte Ireland's '**Hidden Heartlands**' branding exercise for the Midlands region is set to boost the tourism industry in the region and has named Athlone as a Key Tourist Hub for the region. If it manages to mirror the success of previous initiatives (Wild Atlantic Way and Ancient East) it will prove a major boost to the local economy.
- Waterways Ireland are currently developing a Masterplan for the **Shannon Blueway** which will expand on the Shannon's already significant offerings. This strategic plan will seek to build upon the existing potential of the Shannon as a key location for recreational and navigational purposes, while protecting the natural environment.
- The **Dublin to Galway National Cycleway** is a cycle route that spans over 200 kilometers, running through Athlone and connecting the cities of Dublin and Galway. This will form part of the European-wide EuroVelo network and bring a cycle route of international significance to the Midlands.
- The various monastic settlements and ancient heritage sites that are dotted throughout Athlone's surrounding landscape offer the Midlands the opportunity to develop a truly original experience targeted at international visitors. Globally recognised sites such as **Clonmacnoise** could form part of a wider experience that brings further keen visitors to the Midlands. This concept is fully supported by Destination Athlone and should be explored further.

Priorities for the Regional Spatial Economic Strategies

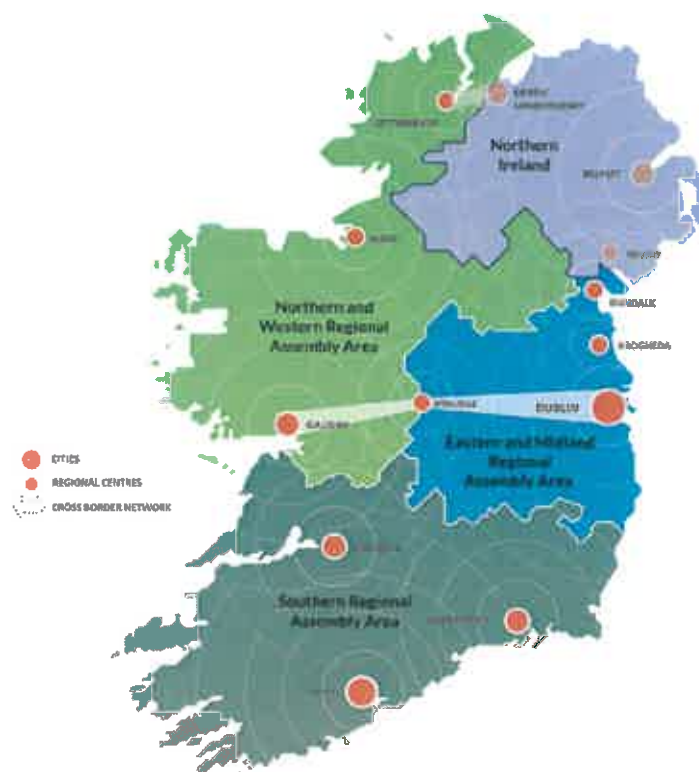
The Draft RSES builds upon the objectives set out in the National Planning Framework (NPF) and uses an evidence-based approach to identify locations for future growth that meet the pre-determined criteria for analysis. Athlone is shown to meet these criteria; hence its designation as a Regional Centre. It is acknowledged that in their draft form, each RSES is still far from the finished article. However, Destination Athlone have several concerns in relation to the current composition of these drafts, particularly the EMRA and NWRA versions.

- The NPF identified the key Regional Centres (Athlone, Drogheda, Dundalk, Letterkenny and Sligo) that are to have fundamental roles to play in the future sustainable growth of this country. It affords **equal status to each of the five Regional Centres** and requires the RSEs to do the same. This has not occurred and must be resolved.
- The criteria for, and levels of, analysis provided for each Regional Centre differs dramatically between both the EMRA and NWRA Draft RSEs. The **consistency between strategies** required by the NPF does not exist and should be restored.
- The **status afforded to Regional Centres** such as Sligo and Letterkenny in the NWRA's Draft RSES must also be **provided for Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk** in the RSES for EMRA.
- The identification of specific sites for development is considered limiting and contrary to the dynamics of economic growth. Instead, it is suggested that a high-level statement which conveys the message that **suitable sites and locations exist within Athlone** to accommodate both **residential and commercial** developments is made. This would provide adequate assurances that the delivery of compact, sustainable growth can occur.

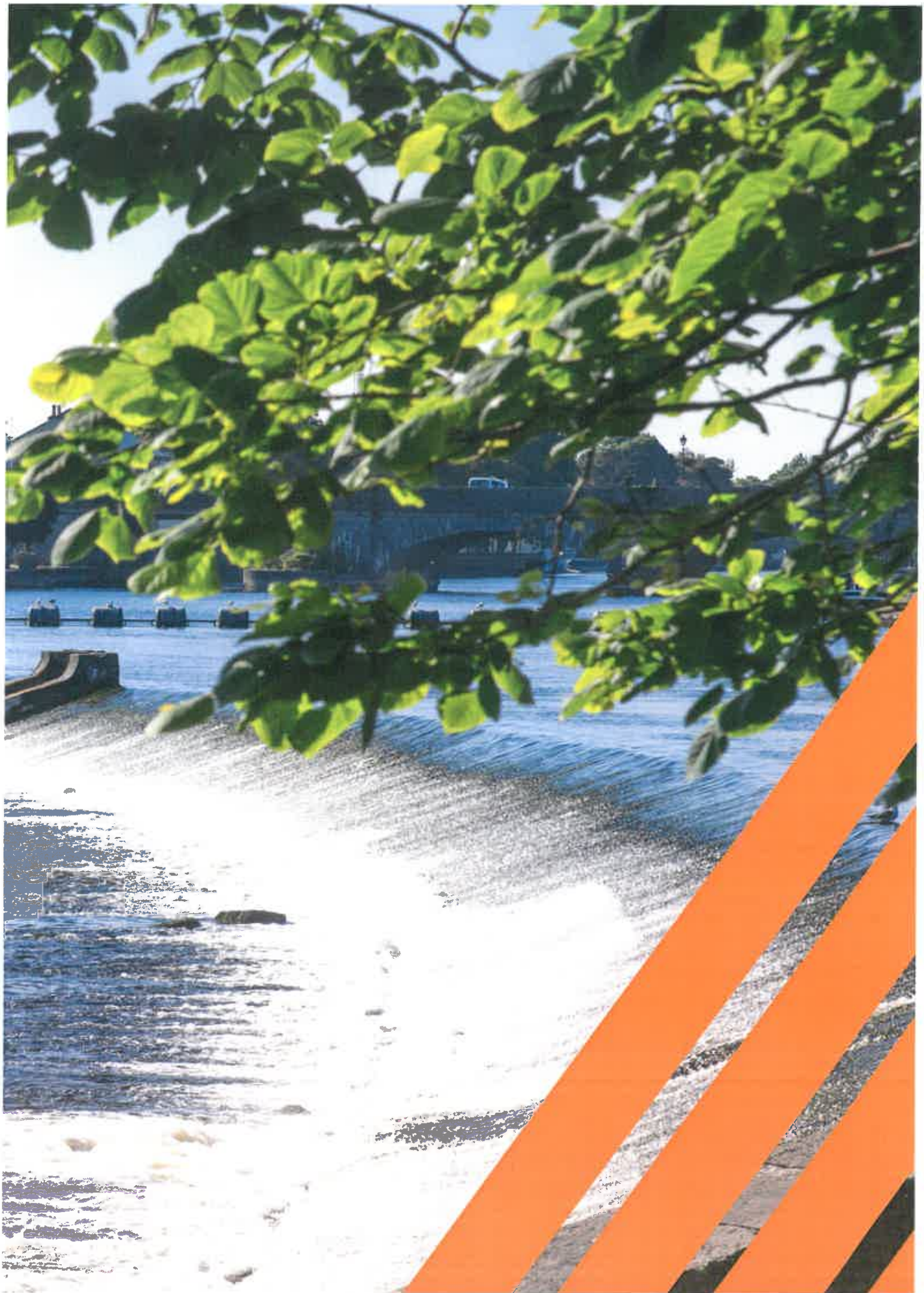
Coordinated, Collaborative Action

The requirement for a 'joint urban plan' has been acknowledged in multiple government policy reports and strategies. Such plans are structured in a similar manner to Local Area Plans and utilise the same statutory mechanisms to function. They are intended for use in areas where settlements cross boundaries and require the collaborative efforts of multiple local authorities.

- ✦ The NPF acknowledges the importance of such a concept and states that it is necessary to "*prepare a **coordinated strategy for Athlone at both regional and town level, to ensure the town and environs has the capacity to grow sustainably and to secure investment, as the key regional centre in the midlands***".
- Likewise, the Draft RSES calls for a similar undertaking to commence. Regional Policy Objective 4.4 explicitly states that it is a policy of the EMRA to see that "A cross-boundary **Joint Urban Area Plan (UAP)** shall be prepared by Westmeath County Council and Roscommon County Council..." for Athlone.
- ✦ The objectives of both the NPF and Draft RSES must be supported and **statutory provisions** made to ensure the timely delivery of a Joint Urban Area Plan for Athlone. As per the recommendations of the Draft RSES, a Joint Urban Area Plan is to be prepared by "Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils following adoption of the RSES".
- ✦ Similarly, it is imperative that an appropriate **Transport Strategy** is provided for Athlone, which accounts for its cross-border reach. The UAP could act as a 'sister document' to such a strategy which would again require the collaborative efforts of both Westmeath and Roscommon Councils.
- ✦ The current mechanisms that exist to provide the scope and statutory backing for Local Area Plans are deemed to be too restrictive for the purposes of a **Joint Urban Area Plan** for Athlone. Therefore, it is requested that the **scope be extended** to ensure that Athlone's regional influence is accounted for, as per the recommendation of the NPF. This could allow for consideration of Athlone's far-reaching catchment and include a more **conceptual, ambitious strategy** that facilitates Athlone's functioning as a truly 'regional' settlement.







1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

This report has been prepared by Future Analytics Consulting Ltd. (FAC) on behalf of Destination Athlone as a submission to the Draft Regional and Spatial Economic Strategy (Draft RSES) developed by the Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly (EMRA).

Firstly, Destination Athlone would like to commend the Eastern and Midlands Assembly on the publication of the Draft RSES. As the strategy that identifies assets and opportunities at the regional level and forms a series of policy objectives based on this, it offers a framework for the management of spatial planning and economic development in the region over a twelve-year period. The Draft RSES acts as the 'follow-up' strategy to the NPF, with a regional level focus, therefore it must promote and support the same core objectives and policies of the NPF.

As such, the Draft RSES is a document of major significance for the region and its citizens. It provides a blueprint for the future growth and development of the region and sets out the steps required to fulfil regional ambitions. Athlone, as one of the region's major urban centres, will play a key role and this is recognised in both the NPF and Draft RSES, where the town has received the designation of a key Regional Centre. The fundamental message this submission aims to convey is that it is imperative Athlone retains this designation as a key Regional Centre and provisions are made to drive and support implementation. It is important that the mistakes of the past, such as those that followed the National Spatial Strategy (NSS), do not occur again.

Destination Athlone are pleased to see that Athlone has been recognised as an essential part of the region's ambitions to grow and develop in a sustainable manner. The Regional Centre designation allows Athlone to fulfil its potential and it is the group's hope that such a designation is sufficiently supported by the required statutory instruments.

This submission is supported by the entire Destination Athlone Group; however, the primary driver is the industry sub-group. The industry group represent a range of key employers within Athlone who, collectively, employ approximately 5,500 staff from the surrounding areas. They are, therefore, a significant player in the economy of Athlone and the Midlands, and as such are keen to see Athlone develop, prosper and achieve the critical mass its potential would allow.

1.2 Destination Athlone

Destination Athlone, which has been in existence for over 3 years, is a collaborative network Group including Local Authorities (Westmeath, Roscommon & Longford co co) Statutory Bodies (IDA, Failte Ireland & Waterways Ireland) Education Providers (AIT), Tourism Providers, Retail Groups, Chamber of Commerce and several Major Employers in Industry Group employing over 5,500 workers (ERICSSON, Medtronic, Jazz Pharmaceuticals, Athlone Extrusions Ltd, Teleflex, ALKERMES, Panelto, Sidero, Neueda, Acelity). It is chaired by Mr. John O'Sullivan, Chairman of the Hodson Bay Group.

Destination Athlone provide strategic advice and direction and is dedicated to promoting the sustainable development of Athlone and enhancing the role it can play in delivering new opportunities for the Midlands Region.

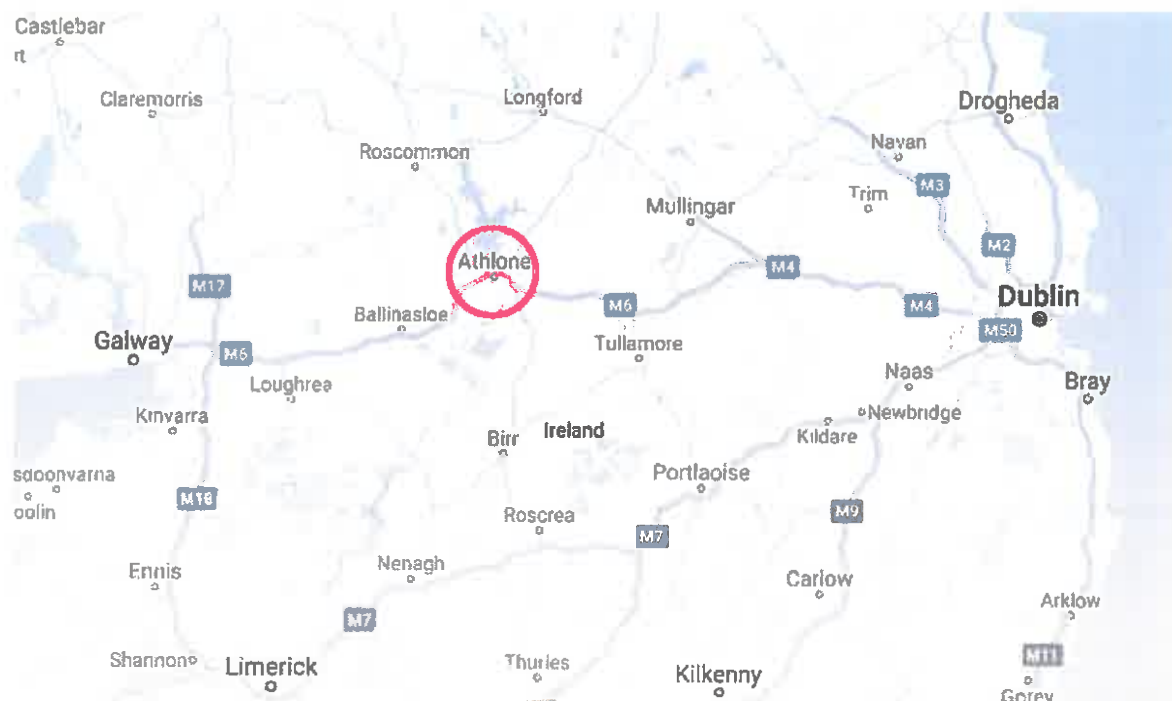
It's digital platform www.athlone.ie actively promotes the region as a great place to live work and play.'

2. Athlone: At the Heart of Ireland

2.1 Context

Athlone is centrally located within the heart of Ireland, situated on the border between counties Westmeath and Roscommon. The River Shannon passes through the town, with Lough Ree immediately north, and provides Athlone with a direct and historic connection to both Limerick and the Atlantic Ocean.

Its geographic centrality, coupled with the access it has to the vast Shannon waterways, means that Athlone has existed as a key strategic trading hub for centuries. One of the aims of this submission is to highlight the continued relevance of Athlone as a significant economic and trading hub, to this day.



2.2 Profile

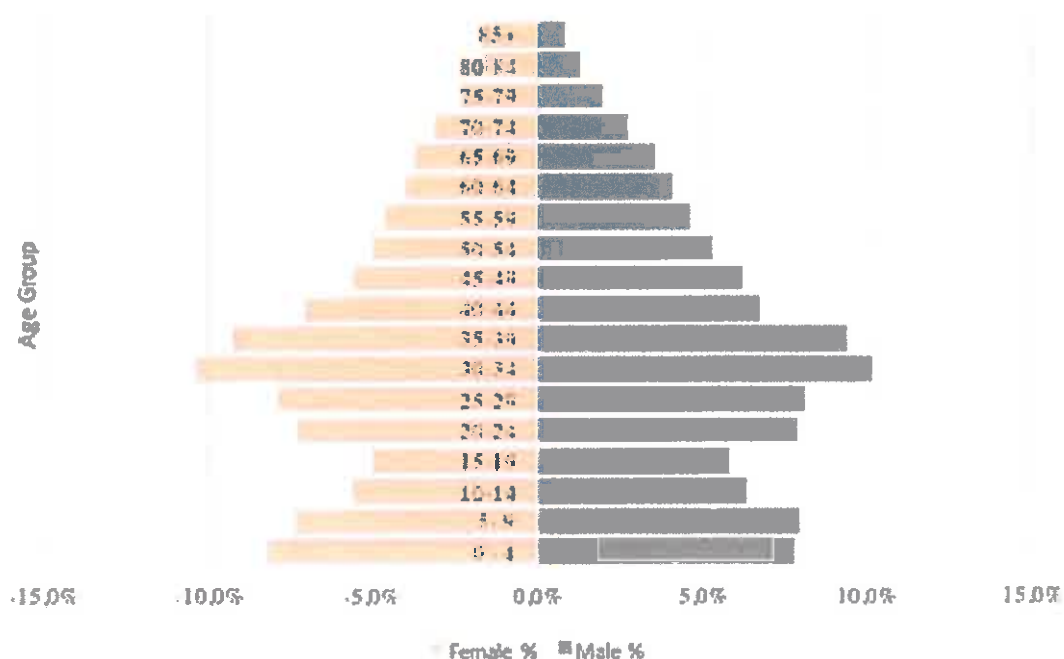
Population

Athlone's population was recorded as 21,349 persons, according to the results of the 2016 census. This is an increase of 1,196 people from the census of 2011, where there was 20,153 persons recorded. It amounts to a 6% increase approximately, which is a continuation of a trend in Athlone's growth as the settlement also saw a 15% increase between the 2006 and 2011 census results. Clearly Athlone has remained an attractive location for people to live, with continued population growth, even in the face of challenging externalities, such as the 'draw' of Dublin and economic recession.

The wider Midlands region, of which Athlone is a key settlement, has a combined population of 292,301. It can be said that Athlone represents roughly 7% of the total population, although a portion of the settlement of Athlone exists within the boundaries of the West region. Nonetheless, the population of Athlone comprises a significant proportion of the total population of the Midlands region.

Figure 1 provides a visual overview of the population breakdown within Athlone, based on gender and age categories. What is clear from this is that Athlone possesses a relatively young population with the two largest categories for both males and females found in the 30-34 bracket and 35-39 bracket. The average age of the total population in Athlone is 34.7 years, with Males averaging 34.1 years and Females 35.3 years.

Figure 1: Population Breakdown by Age Group and Gender



To provide further context, Table 1 outlines how Athlone compares to the State average, the EMRA, the Midlands sub-region, and the County average. Commonly used terms such as; 'Silent Generation' (Age 73 to 90), 'Baby-Boomers' (Age 54 to 72), 'Generation X' (Age 38 to 53), Millennials (Age 22 to 37), and 'Generation Z' (Age 0 to 21) are utilised to act as tangible age cohorts for comparison purposes.

Table 1: Breakdown of population by age cohort

Cohort	Athlone	Westmeath	Midlands	EMRA	State
Silent (73 – 90)	4.7%	5.3%	5.2%	5.0%	5.5%
'Boomers' (54 – 72)	15.2%	18.2%	18.2%	17.0%	18.5%
Gen X (38 – 53)	17.9%	20.8%	20.7%	20.5%	20.7%
Millennials (22 – 37)	35.1%	26.6%	26.0%	30.3%	27.8%
'Gen Z' (0 – 21)	27.0%	29.0%	29.8%	27.3%	27.5%

As the table shows, Athlone possesses a desirable demographic split, with a significantly higher proportion of 'Millennials' (35.1%) when compared to State or Regional averages. It could be argued that this cohort is the most important in terms of economic growth. Their age range and assumed skill-sets and recent education mean that this grouping will comprise the core of the workforce for several decades. This cohort will be the primary drivers of the economy for the foreseeable future, which affords them an enhanced level of importance.

The opposite is also true, with the proportion of Athlone's population categorised as either 'Boomers' or 'Silent Generation' lower than the State and regional averages. A generalisation can be made that these two generations are close to, or already are, of retirement age. In socio-economic studies persons of retirement age are usually considered a burden on the economy due to the perceived lack of income that can be taxed. In other words, the higher the proportion of this cohort, the bigger the burden placed upon those of working age.

It is clear, therefore, that Athlone possesses both a young and growing population. Rates of urbanisation are increasing across the globe, with Ireland no exception. Rural and peripheral locations in Ireland are suffering the unintended outcomes of dramatic urbanisation, with population stagnation having knock-on effects such as the closure of local businesses and lack of skilled workers for local industries. Athlone is in an enviable position where it does not need to be concerned with population stagnation, instead, it can seek to build upon its growing and skilled population base.



Education

In terms of educational attainment levels, as recorded in the census of 2016 by the CSO, Athlone's population aged 15 or over compare favourably against County, sub-region, EMRA and State averages. Although the Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly area has the highest proportion of its population with a Level 7 degree or higher (31.9%), Athlone scores well in this measure. Indeed, it is clear that Athlone, relative to the State, sub-region and County, has an above-average proportion of highly skilled and educated persons.

Table 2: Educational attainment levels – CSO 2016

Educational Attainment	Athlone	Westmeath	Midlands	EMRA	State
Masters or higher	10.3%	7.9%	6.5%	12.1%	10.1%
Tertiary (Level 7+)	29.6%	24.7%	21.5%	31.9%	28.5%
Post-Secondary (Level 6+)	39.2%	36.3%	33.0%	42.2%	39.3%
Leaving Cert	45.0%	48.2%	50.9%	42.4%	45.5%
Primary or no formal education	12.6%	13.1%	14.2%	11.3%	12.5%

It should come as no surprise that Athlone has a large population possessing a tertiary education considering the siting of the Midlands' only dedicated third level institution in the town. Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) is located on the Dublin Road at the town's eastern fringe. It is situated in the centre of what has been termed the "knowledge corridor", an East-West axis running along the M4 and M6 that contains a host of Ireland's top third level institutes and universities.

AIT has seen a steady increase in the total number of students enrolled in the institute. The latest figures available indicate there are 3,731 full-time students and a further 1,494 part-time and e-learning students¹. This is a total of 5,225 students enrolled, according to figures obtained.

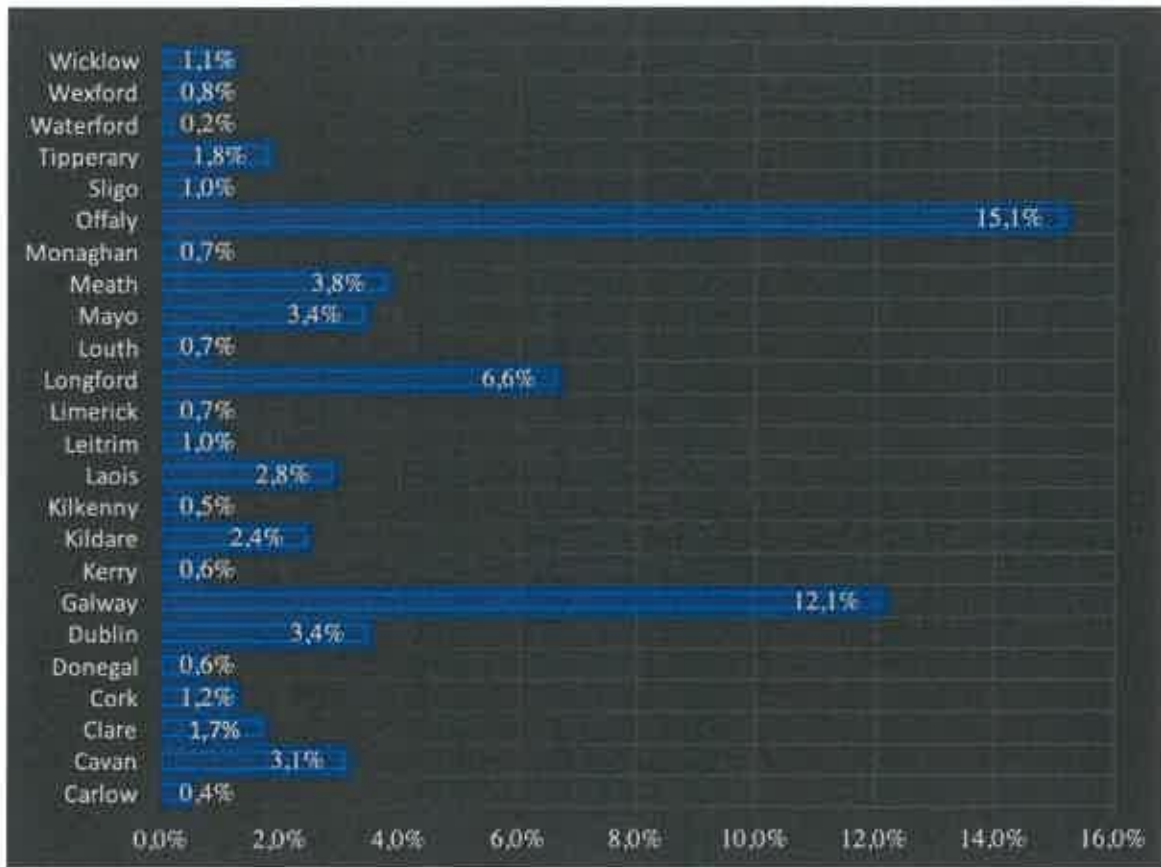
Table 3 offers an indication of the geographical reach that AIT has. It shows the proportion of full-time students per each County of origin, excluding both Westmeath and Roscommon². Counties Offaly, Galway and Longford have the highest representation, with 15.1% (491), 12.1% (392) and 6.6% (215) respectively. While Meath, Mayo, Dublin and Cavan all have over 100 students attending each.

Such figures highlight the regional-level catchment area that AIT possesses and show that Athlone has the ability and potential to continue to attract young students to study. Furthermore, recently released plans by the institute presented future growth scenarios that would see the student population increase by another 1,300.

¹ Enrolment figures are for the 2017/2018 academic year and were provided by Athlone Institute of Technology.

² Westmeath and Roscommon are excluded in order to illustrate the range of students that originate from areas outside of local counties. These figures are derived from the Higher Education Authority statistical release for the 2014/2015 academic year.

Figure 1: Average Student Population by County (Source: RA)



New investment on infrastructure and facilities has also been agreed with the development of a state-of-the-art 'STEM' facility which will include science labs, lecture theatres, classrooms and other facilities. This new building will help AIT focus on the development of skills in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics field, offering students a practical education in increasingly important sectors. This reinforces the awareness of the huge potential that AIT, and Athlone itself, possesses and ensures that the institution and town are both primed for further skilled growth.

Employment and Economy

The census of 2016 records there being a total of 16,737 persons aged 15 or over, which it then categorises based upon principal economic status. This affords a broad understanding of the composition of the workforce, based upon pre-defined categories. Approximately 8,500 persons stated they were employed, while a further 1,600 were unemployed, but available to work, meaning there is workforce of roughly 10,000 available. Athlone also has a significant resident student population, with over 2,000 people recorded as such. This would indicate that there is a large, 'ready-made' labour force for potential employers to tap into.

Figure 2: Principal Economic Status (CSO 2016)

Principal Economic Status of Persons Aged 15 or Over

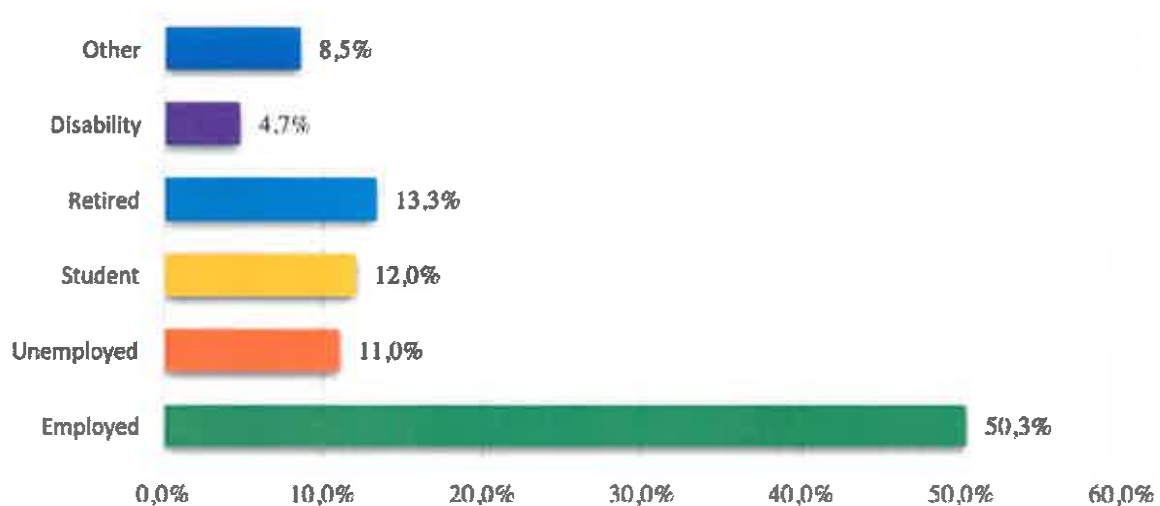
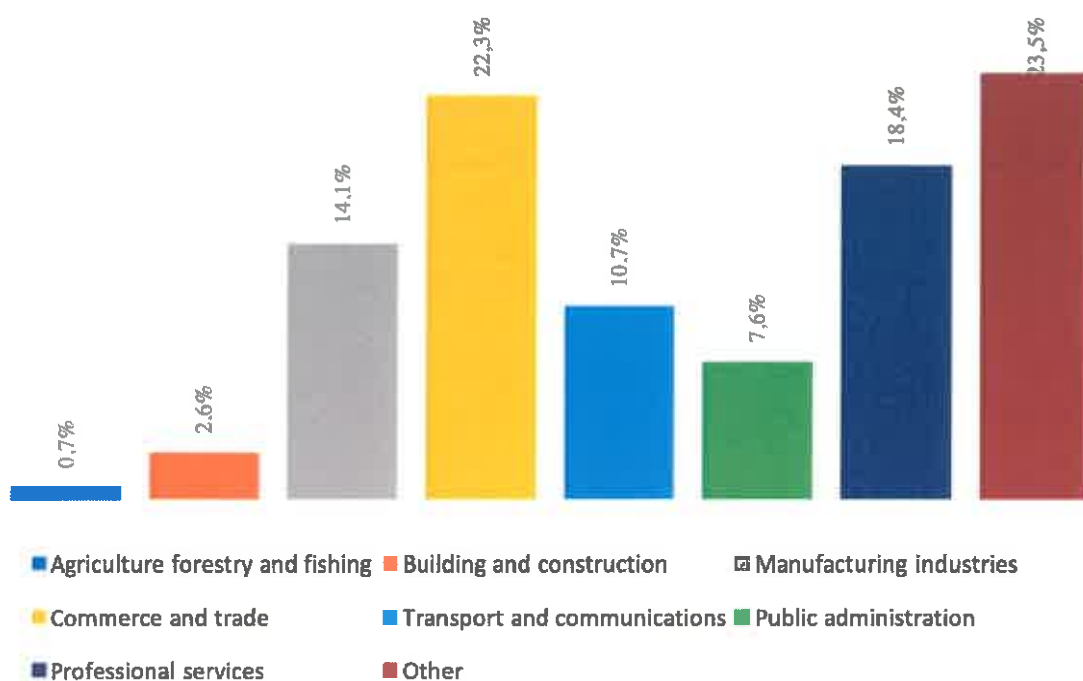


Figure 3 shows the stated industries of employment for those that responded to the Census questions. This chart provides an interesting overview of the broad industrial sectors that comprise Athlone's employment base. Aside from the 'Other' grouping, the largest industry of employment is the 'Commerce and Trade' sector, which represents 22.3% of the total, or 1,880 people. 'Professional Services' represents 18.4% of the total, which amounts to 1,553 people, and is the second largest industry. The manufacturing industry is the third largest, employing 14% of the total.

Figure 3: Industry of Employment (CSO 2016)

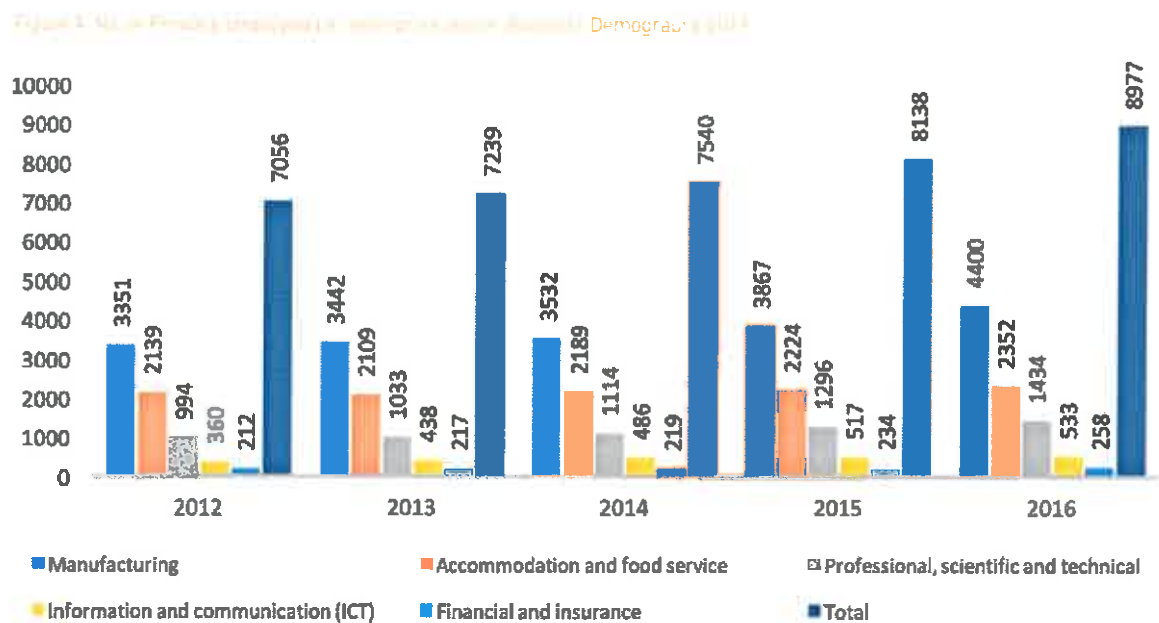


Athlone has historically been a centre for economic activity and trade, owing to its location in the heart of Ireland where ancient land routes crossed the extensive Shannon waterways. To this day it remains an important hub for economic activity. It possesses an enviable collection of indigenous and international companies and corporations who are based in the manufacturing, tourism, pharmaceutical, R&D, medical devices, telecommunications and software development sectors.



There are 10,274 persons listed as within the labour force (CSO, 2016) and although a detailed sectoral breakdown is not available publicly, it is possible to gain an understanding of sectoral employment at County level. The CSO 'Business Demography' provides sectoral information on enterprise and employment to county levels. Figure 4 is a visual representation of data from the CSO release and it shows the total numbers employed in five select sectors from 2012 to 2016. Each year sees a steady increase in the total numbers employed in these categories, which combined account for approximately 53% of the total employees recorded³. This shows the importance of these sectors to the economy of Westmeath, and with several major companies from each located in Athlone, it is clear the town acts as an economic driver for Westmeath.

³ CSO Business Demography is an annual release. Employees are calculated through annual Revenue returns and the enterprise they work in is based on the registered address of the head/primary office/facility.



Environment

With the River Shannon flowing through the heart of Athlone, there exists a wealth of opportunities to capitalise on the rich environmental assets on offer. Lough Ree lies immediately north of Athlone, while the river continues south towards Lough Derg and on further through Limerick and into the Atlantic. On its course lies heritage sites of international significance, such as the famous Clonmacnoise. The significance of the Shannon as a natural asset cannot be overstated. It offers Athlone access to Ireland's longest river system, connecting Cavan to Limerick by way of over 250 kilometres of meandering waterways. The Shannon has historically acted as a key transport artery, and to this day is still used for navigation purposes.

It is the natural environment that has led to the development of Athlone as a settlement. Its location ensured its importance and to this day the natural environment has drawn people to the area. The tourism potential of Athlone and its surroundings has long been known, indeed the situating of international brand hotels, the Radisson and Sheraton, along with several smaller hotels, B&Bs and guesthouses is proof of this. Athlone already utilises its environmental assets to good measure, yet there is the potential for even more.

When completed the National Cycleway route from Dublin to Galway, which passes through the town, will be a major piece of infrastructure that has huge potential to bring increasing numbers of visitors. Similarly, the Centre Parcs facility, located in Longford but only a mere 25 kilometres north of Athlone, is opening in the summer of 2019 and again could prove a major draw for tourists to the Midlands. Athlone, therefore, is ideally placed to capitalise on a range of existing and new natural amenities.

3. Ireland's Spatial Policies

3.1 National Planning Framework

In 2018 the Government launched their blueprint for the future growth and development of the country, entitled 'Project Ireland 2040: National Planning Framework'.

"The purpose of the National Planning Framework is to enable all parts of Ireland, whether rural or urban, to successfully accommodate growth and change, by facilitating a shift towards Ireland's regions and cities other than Dublin, while also recognising Dublin's ongoing key role."

The quoted text provides an idea of what is the fundamental essence of the NPF's objective, namely, to counter the unplanned growth and development patterns this island has seen in recent decades. Dublin, and those counties that lie immediately adjacent to the capital, have grown at a rate that has far surpassed the rest of the country. It is widely acknowledged that a continuation of the status quo is neither acceptable or sustainable and alternative growth patterns must be offered. This is why a rebalancing of growth has been proposed in the NPF, where the other major urban settlements will assume roles as alternative growth centres.

The NPF essentially acts as the successor to the National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 (NSS). The NSS was touted as being Ireland's first truly transformative, strategic blueprint for sustainable future growth. Its underlying conceptual framework revolved around the idea of 'polycentric development' which sought to identify a series of 'Gateways and Hubs' that would act as regional drivers and provide alternative growth locations to Dublin. The trio of Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore were designated as a "linked-gateway" and would provide the Midlands with a gateway of sufficient critical mass. However, it is now commonly accepted that the NSS failed in its objectives and the discourse of today would suggest that there were excessive designations of settlements that, effectively, diluted the potential positive impacts of the strategy.

The NSS has been made redundant by the release of the NPF, which seeks to make right the "wrongs" that were attributed to the failure of the NSS and the delivery of its objectives. An 'Expert Group' undertook an analysis of the NSS and released a summary report of this analysis. It is worth noting one of their recommendations:

"We favour continuing with each of the National Gateways adopted in the first NSS with the exception of the linked Midlands Gateway. We propose instead that Athlone should be recognised as the Midlands Gateway, because the linked centres approach has not been sufficiently established, diffuses focus, and has

proven to be of little substance or value in practice. To a great extent, the Gateways are self-selecting (and this is the case with Athlone) as they have the largest populations, the best transport connections, the highest levels of economic activity and the critical mass of key services such as education and health. They are the key to regional and national success”

In the Draft stage of the NPF, only four cities and Dublin received reference as key drivers for the country. The subsequent adopted framework has acknowledged that the influence of these five cities cannot, and does not, extend to the entire country, in particular the North-West and Midlands regions. These regions require their own focal points for investment and employment and, as is stated in the NPF, it is **“apparent that Sligo in the North-West and Athlone in the Midlands, fulfil these roles to a greater extent than elsewhere”**. This realisation of the important role that Athlone plays, and will continue to play, led to the inclusion of the following objective:

National Policy Objective 2b

The regional roles of Athlone in the Midlands, Sligo and Letterkenny in the North-West and the Letterkenny-Derry and Drogheda-Dundalk-Newry cross-border networks will be identified and supported in the relevant Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy.

Athlone is deemed to possess a strategic location with influence that extends into all three regional assembly areas. This cross-regional influence means there is a necessity **“to prepare a *coordinated strategy for Athlone* at both regional and town level, to ensure the town and environs has the capacity to grow sustainably and to secure investment, as the key regional centre in the midlands”**. This is an important point as it makes clear the level to which Athlone must aspire to and has the potential to reach. Not only is it an important location for those that live within its boundaries, it is also a key regional driver and requires a regional level strategy to support this.

This position as a strategic focal point is further reinforced under the regional priorities outlined in the sections that focus on the Regional Assemblies and their functioning. Here there is a call for more effective strategic planning and coordination of future development at areas that straddle boundaries. This particular point is important as it highlights the awareness of national government for appropriate strategic planning and coordination in those areas that play an inter-regional role, as Athlone does.

National Policy Objective 7

Strengthening Ireland's overall urban structure, particularly in the Northern and Western and Midland Regions, to include the regional centres of Sligo and Letterkenny in the North-West, Athlone in the Midlands and cross-border networks focused on the Letterkenny-Derry North-West Gateway Initiative and Drogheda-Dundalk-Newry on the Dublin-Belfast corridor.

In terms of the delivery of the NPF's goals, 10 "national strategic outcomes" are provided which are intended to provide the strategic direction of all subsequent policy measures, along with informing future development patterns. These strategic outcomes are as follows:

- 1 Compact Growth
- 2 Enhanced Regional Accessibility
- 3 Strengthened Rural Economics and Communities
- 4 Sustainable Mobility
- 5 Strong Economy supported by Enterprise, Innovation and Skills
- 6 High Quality International Connectivity
- 7 Enhanced Amenity and Heritage
- 8 Transition to a Low Carbon and Climate Resilient Society
- 9 Sustainable Management of Water, Waste and other Environmental Resources
- 10 Access to Quality Childcare, Education and Health Service

3.2 National Development Plan 2018 – 2027

In order to progress the objectives of the NPF, the National Development Plan (NDP) was developed in conjunction with the NPF and published subsequently. The NDP is a capital expenditure plan that sets out the government's investment priorities over a ten-year period, allocating funds to deliver upon these priorities. It can be read as a supporting document to the NPF but is important as it sets out defined and costed projects that will be progressed during the plan's lifetime. The following projects have been earmarked for Athlone.

- » Under the title of 'Sustainable Management of Water and other Environmental Resources', the Athlone Main Drainage Project is identified as a major national project due for delivery. It is a €36 million project that will increase wastewater network capacity, protect the environment and allow for future development.
- » Investment will be provided to assist in the development of the STEM building at AIT which "directly responds to the skills needs of the life sciences cluster in the midlands and will further strengthen the role of AIT as a driver of economic development in its region".

- The nationwide flood risk management plan will be further advanced, and the completion of Athlone's Flood Relief Scheme will be achieved.
- Significant work involving Athlone's Garda Station is promised to allow Government to meet the requirements of An Garda Síochána's Policing Plan.

3.3 Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies

With the adoption and enactment of the Local Government Reform Act 2014 three new regional assemblies were formed; the Northern and Western, the Eastern and Midlands, and the Southern Assemblies. These Assemblies assumed several functions, with perhaps their most important being the preparation of a Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for their respective administrative zones.

Each RSES seeks to provide a long-term strategic and economic framework for the growth and development of their respective regions. Importantly, the RSES' should support and build upon the stated aims and objectives of the National Planning Framework, effectively acting as the modes of delivery at a regional scale. Currently, the Draft versions of all three strategies are at public consultation phase.

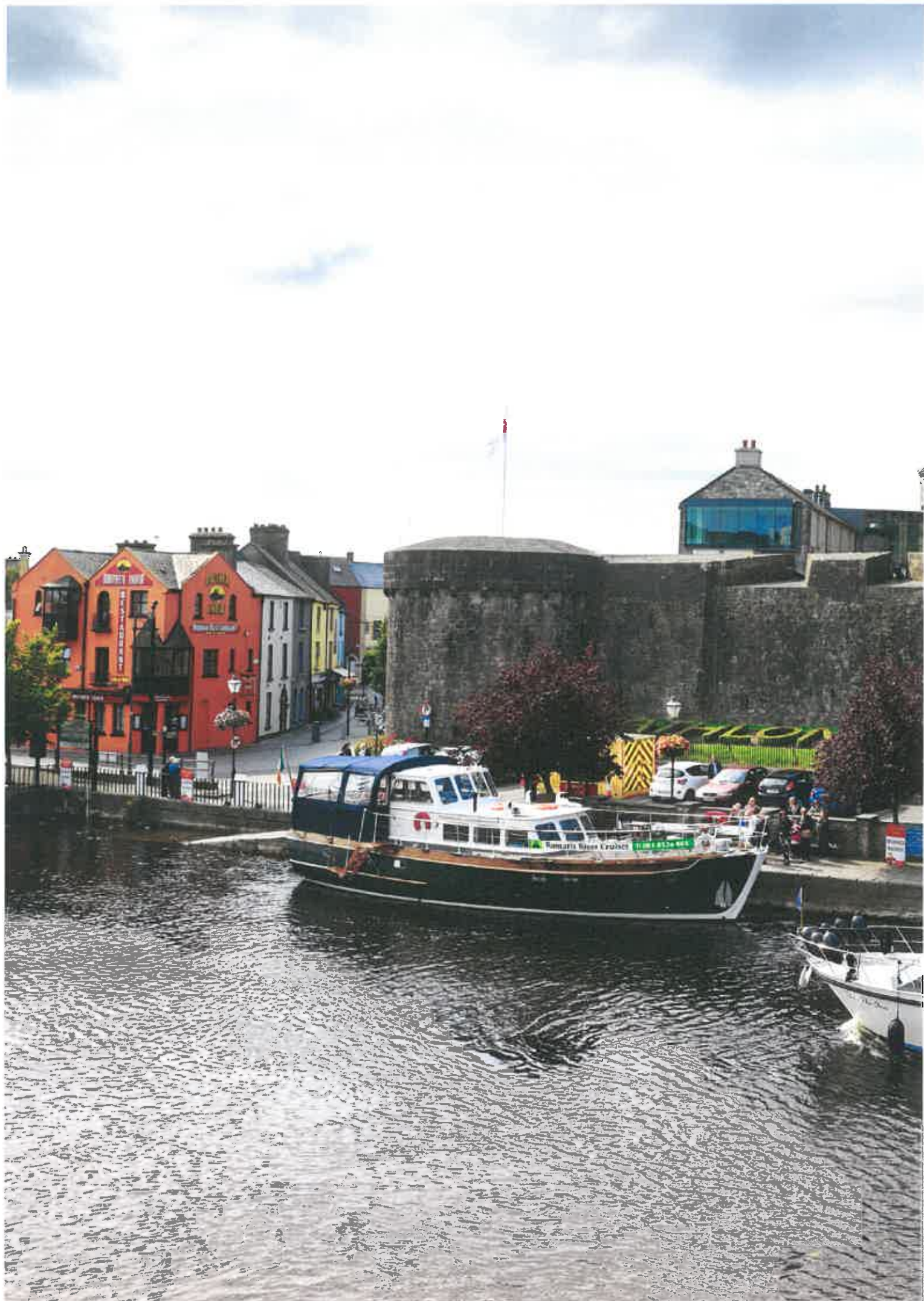
Athlone's location at the heart of Ireland places it on the border between the Northern and Western Assembly and the Eastern and Midlands Assembly. This means that both Assemblies have responsibility for setting out the future spatial and economic development of the town. Of course, considering Athlone lies primarily within the Westmeath administrative boundary, there is perhaps more responsibility placed upon the EMRA to deliver Athlone's long-term sustainable growth.

Each RSES should address the location and provision of: Employment; Retail; Housing; Transport; Water services; Energy and Communications; Waste Management; Education, Health, Sports and Community Facilities; Environment and Heritage; Landscape; Sustainable Development and Climate Change. The EMRA's Draft RSES outlines the following vision for the region:

"To create a sustainable and competitive region that supports the health and wellbeing of our people and places, from urban to rural, with access to quality housing, travel and employment for all."

The primary method of achieving this vision is through the creation of a series of 'Regional Strategic Outcomes' (RSOs) that address three core areas of economic opportunity, healthy placemaking and climate action. Figure 5 is a graphic taken from the Draft RSES outlining the RSOs.





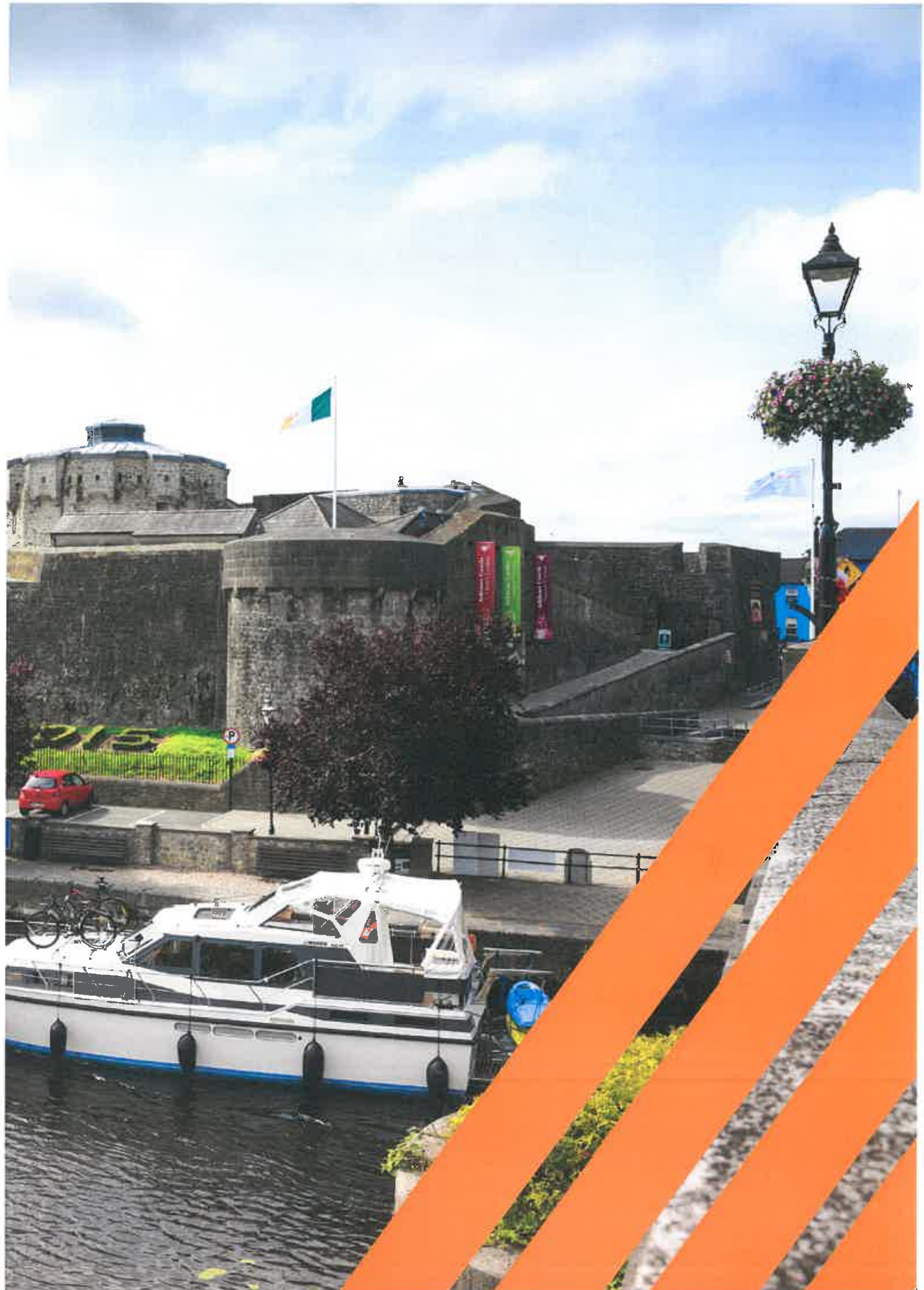


Figure 1: Regional Strategic Outcomes (Draft RSES 2019)



Future economic and spatial development in the region is to be directed by the Draft RSES' growth strategy. The growth strategy of the RSES aims to accommodate the projections made in the NPF. Four core areas are identified in the region, namely: Dublin City and Suburbs; the Metropolitan Area; the Hinterland; and, the Outer region.

- Athlone is located within the "Outer Region" and the stated strategy for this region is to:
- "Promote Athlone and Dundalk as self-sustaining regional drivers supported by key towns and a focus on the regeneration of small towns and villages and their surrounding rural areas."
- A key element of EMRA's growth strategy is a focus on an asset and/or potential based criteria approach. This concept sees the integration of an evidence-based approach with the identification of settlements that possess a capacity for growth.
- Athlone is one of those locations that has been identified as possessing the potential to support future growth, and indeed this is stated in the Draft RSES, with Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk considered 'regional drivers'.

The growth strategy employs an 'evidence-based approach' to the selection and designation of areas for development, and informed the selection of Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk as key "Regional Growth Centres". The criteria for analysis are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4. Criteria for the analysis of growth centres

Criteria	Conditions
Scale	Centres of scale which have the critical mass to drive growth
Function	Functional role and level of services including provision of employment
Human Capital	Talent attraction and skills development
Placemaking	High quality, vibrant public spaces and enhanced quality of life
Eco-system Enterprise	Enterprise clusters and networks
Connectivity	Transport capacity, accessibility and communications
Natural Capital	Environmental sensitivities and assets
Infrastructure	Enabling infrastructure to drive regional growth

The Draft RSES does not set out population targets for settlements, however it does use the NPF methodology to provide a range at County level. Westmeath is set to grow to between 96,500 and 98,500 by 2026 and continue to between 100,000 to 102,500 by 2031. The table below offers an oversight of this, with the lower and higher estimates indicated.

Table 5. Growth scenarios

Westmeath Population targets	2016	2026	2031
Low Growth	89,000	96,500	100,000
High Growth	89,000	98,500	102,500

Under the low growth scenario, Westmeath is projected to see a population increase of 7,500 by 2026 and an increase of 11,000 to 2031.

Under the high growth scenario, Westmeath is projected to see a population increase of 9,500 to 2026, and an increase of 13,500 to 2031.

There are several Regional Policy Objectives (RPO) specific to Athlone, and they are as follows

RPO 4.4:

A cross-boundary Joint Urban Area Plan (UAP) shall be prepared by Westmeath County Council and Roscommon County Council to provide a coordinated planning framework to identify and deliver strategic sites and regeneration areas for the future physical, economic and social development of Athlone and the Monksland/ Bealnamulla area. The Joint UAP shall ensure that Athlone achieves targeted compact brownfield / infill growth of a minimum of 30%. The Joint UAP shall identify a boundary for the plan area and strategic housing and employment development areas and infrastructure investment requirements to promote greater co-ordination and sequential delivery of serviced lands for development.

A key message from the Draft RSES is the need to produce a Joint Urban Area Plan for Athlone. An awareness of the need for "joint or unitary local areal plans" has existed for many years, with the 2013 'Guidelines for Planning Authorities – Local Area Plans' calling for such. However, the necessary backing for such plans has rarely materialised. The Draft RSES, through RPO 4.4, at least attempts to change this. It sees collaboration as key for the efficient growth of the region and states that it will "ensure that joint urban area plans are delivered for the Regional Growth Centres".

It calls for the preparation and adoption of a '**Joint Urban Area Plan**' to be prioritised by both Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils. This plan should identify strategic sites and regeneration areas that will allow the minimum of 30% compact growth to be achieved. Furthermore, this Joint UAP should "support and provide for an enhanced urban environment and improve sustainable modes of transport". The focus will be placed upon public realm improvements, implementing the 'Athlone Waterfront Strategy (2011)' and developing a pedestrian bridge as part of the Greenway route.

RPO 4.5:

Promote the expansion of the existing enterprise ecosystem in Athlone and creation or expansion of distinct industrial specialisms that have developed through collaboration with the relevant enterprise agencies including AIT, IDA and the Midlands Innovation and Research Centre and support the provision of physical infrastructure and zoned lands to realise this objective. In this regard, recognise the following strategic economic areas:

- *Garrycastle IDA as a centre of excellence for education, research, enterprise and innovation with potential for clustering with Athlone Institute of Technology*
- *Blyry – incorporating indigenous and existing industries*
- *Creggan – greenfield site identified for future development of an innovative business park*
- *Moakstand – support the continued development of the existing industrial sectors at this location.*

As previously outlined, Athlone possesses multiple strategic sites within or adjacent to the town boundary and they offer huge potential for the future growth of enterprise and industry. In conjunction with the already existing facilities and industries, it is reasonable to claim that Athlone has the potential to become Ireland's foremost location for innovative, high-tech industry, outside of Dublin. RPO 4.5 supports this ambition and identifies some of the sites upon which future growth could be centred.

RPO 4.6:

Support the role of Athlone Institute of Technology as a centre of excellence for education and in achieving its status as a Technological University.

AIT offers Athlone with a significant advantage when compared to other settlements in the Midlands. As the only third level institute in the region, AIT acts as a magnet for young students. It's collaborative efforts with local businesses and the IDA also mean it is ingrained within the local economy. Currently preparations are being made to develop an application for Technological University status, and if successful this would only further enhance the 'pulling-power' of the institute and Athlone town. RPO 4.6 supports these ambitions.

RPO 4.7:

Promote Athlone as an urban tourism destination while protecting the natural resources on which it relies with a particular focus on capitalising on the following assets:

- *Amenity potential of the waterways including the River Shannon and Lough Ree*
- *Athlone's attractive built and cultural heritage including the Western bank of the river as a cultural and tourism quarter*
- *Fáilte Ireland Lakelands and Ireland's Hidden Heartlands designations*
- *Existing and planned Greenways and Blueways including the Galway to Dublin Cycleway*

Tourism is a key component of Athlone's economy. The extent of natural amenities found in proximity to the town mean that it has always provided excellent reasons to visit, with the Shannon arguably acting as the biggest tourism draw. RPO 4.7 acknowledges the importance of the natural environment for tourism and also stresses the need to protect it. The Cultural heritage that exists in the town, along with newer developments such as the Hidden Heartlands designation and the Greenway offer further reason to be optimistic about Athlone's tourism market.

3.4 Athlone Development Plan

The most recent, and final, development plan for Athlone covers the 2014 to 2020 period. With the dissolution of Town Councils and the reorganisation of local governance in Ireland, town development plans have ceased to be commissioned, however, they still inform the details of subsequent County Development Plans. The Athlone Development Plan 2014 – 2020 (ADP) is, therefore, the final development plan prepared at settlement level and offers valuable insights into the intended future growth of Athlone. This development plan was also created with the NSS Gateway designations still in mind. Therefore, the Athlone-Tullamore-Mullingar linked-gateway is heavily mentioned throughout. In this regard, the development plan is a mis-match with current policy. The vision for Athlone was set out in the development plan and reads as follows:

"To provide for the development of Athlone as a driver of sustainable economic growth, commensurate with the Linked Gateway status of the town, whilst balancing the need to safeguard the town's inherent environmental assets with the creation of appropriate development opportunities. To develop Athlone as a vibrant and dynamic town in which to live, work, do business and visit, offering high quality employment, educational, sporting and tourism facilities, together with sustainable communities."

Housing requirements set out in the ADP are derived from the now redundant Regional Planning Guidelines (RPGs), which estimated household size as 2.4 persons per dwelling and applied this to a density of 35 units per hectare. This led to an estimate of 3,310 units up to 2020 which would allow Athlone to reach the targets set out in the Midland Regional Planning Guidelines 2010-2022.

The following table is adapted from the ADP and shows the population targets and housing allocations, as derived from the RPG, and associated residential land requirements.

Table 6. Population target and housing allocation ADP

	2011 Census	Population 2020	Population Increase 2011-2020	Zoning Requirement (ha) 2011 - 2020
Population	16,327	24,809	8,482	151
Housing Allocation	7,616 units		3,310 additional units	

Provisions for residential unit densities are made within the ADP and reflect the Department of the Environment, Housing and Local Government's (DEHLG) 2009 Guidelines on 'Sustainable Residential Development in Urban Areas'. It could be argued that these guidelines are no longer fit for purpose, particularly in the current landscape where the NPF and subsequent ministerial policy directions are advocating increased flexibility in the planning process and higher densities in all urban locations. In keeping with the NPF's objective of achieving 'compact growth' in our key urban locations, consideration to higher densities should be given in locations such as Athlone.



Table 7 Land-use zonings: Athlone

Land Use	Ha
Commercial	49.5
Enterprise & Employment	115.5
Agricultural	4.7
Innovation Technology	41.4
Mixed Use	74.6
Open Space	164.3
Existing Residential	287.4
Proposed Residential	129.2
Retail Warehousing	10.9
Sporting Recreational	48.5
Strategic Gateway Zoning	112.9
Comm, Educational, Institutional	85.4
Total Amount of Zoned Land	1,124.3 Ha

It is worthwhile studying the entire land-use zonings that were created for the ADP as it offers a useful oversight of the quantum of available lands by category. Table 7 is adapted from the ADP and showcases the available zoned land as of adoption stage of the ADP. A total of 1,124 hectares of zoned land exist in Athlone, with 115.5 hectares zoned as enterprise and employment, 41.4 hectares zoned as 'innovation technology' and 112.9 zoned for 'strategic gateway zoning'. The latter is located to the east of the town, in the Creggan LAP area. It offers Athlone a location that is geared towards the situating of internationally traded businesses and 'flagship enterprises'. While a substantial quantum of zoned lands exist in line with the NPF vision for Athlone, there are however, issues around infrastructure and servicing which need to be addressed and supported in terms of funding.

Potential for economic growth was highlighted in the ICT, Pharmaceutical, Education, Trading, Shared services, and R&D sectors. Industry collaboration on R&D with Athlone IT is stated in the plan, something that this submission would be supportive of. Partnerships between third-level institutions and industry offers huge potential for future growth as it ensures the learned skillsets of graduates is tailored to the specific needs of industry, thereby improving employment opportunities and resulting in further economic growth through clustering potential.

The ADP provides a focus on economic development and its symbiotic relationship with population growth and the concept of critical mass. One of the key aims of the plan is to:

“promote and facilitate the development of critical mass, employment and sustainable economic activity in Athlone commensurate with the status of the town as a Linked Gateway town”

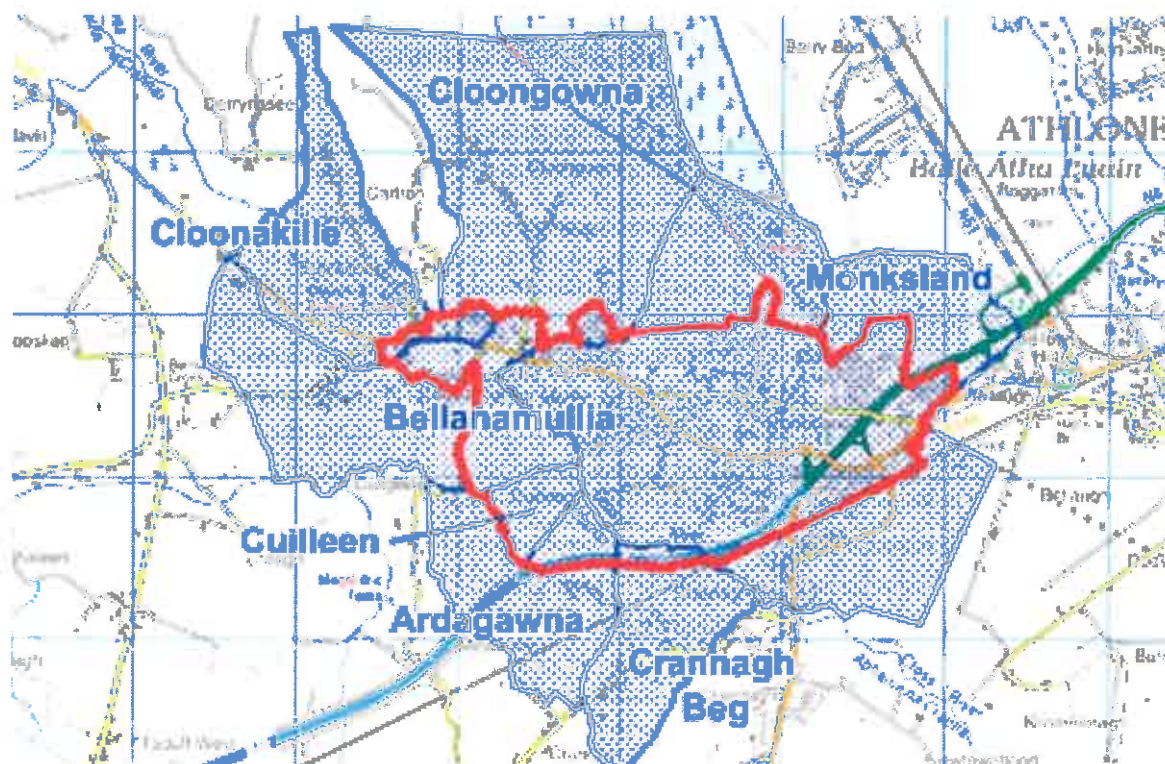
Although the linked gateway concept is no longer considered appropriate, Athlone has been recognised as a key Regional Centre' in the NDP and therefore, this aim is of even more pertinence. Creating the critical mass required for Athlone to remain the region's key economic driver is vital and requires large-scale investment and support. The lack of appropriate supports, or the failure to implement the policies contained within the NDP and RSES, could result in Athlone failing to meet its undoubted potential as a key Regional Centre.

3.5 Local Area Plans

Several Local Area Plans exist for lands that fall within or in proximity to Athlone and the key objectives of each are still of relevance for the future development of Athlone. It is worth noting some of the objectives and zonings in these plans as they can provide direction for the future growth and development of the town.

Monksland/Bellanamullia Local Area Plan 2016-2022 is the only LAP included in this list to have been prepared by Roscommon County Council. It encompasses the lands in Athlone West, which are of key strategic importance. Overall, the LAP covers an area of approximately 360 hectares that comprise of multiple land uses and zonings. The development strategy for the LAP area is to prioritise commercial, industrial and residential development in Monksland whilst allowing the area to expand outward in a phased manner.

Figure 6. Monksland/Bellanamullia LAP boundary



Cornamagh Local Area Plan 2009 is the most recent LAP developed for the Cornamagh area located to the north of Athlone Town Centre. It represents an area of approximately 57 hectares which, at the time of publication, was primarily greenfield lands. Cornamagh is earmarked for future residential development where five phased development cells have been identified.

Figure 7. Cornamagh LAP boundary



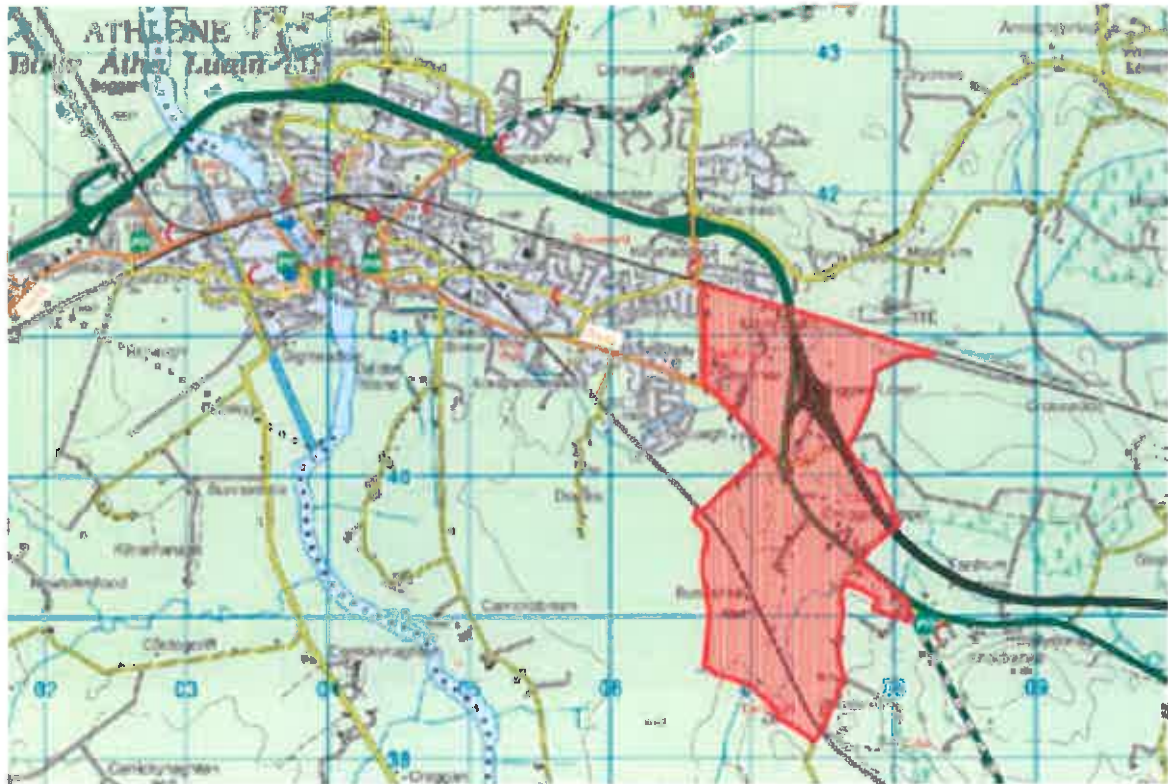
The Lissywollen South Framework Plan 2018 – 2024 is the most recent area plan that exists for any of the townlands found in this section and is, arguably, the most strategically important considering its location immediately adjacent to Athlone Town Centre. It covers an area of approximately 78 hectares and is bounded by the N6 to the north and the Dublin to Galway Cycle Network route to the south, ensuring the lands are highly accessible by both green and conventional modes.

Figure 8. Lissywollen LAP



Creggan Local Area Plan 2010 – 2025 covers an area of approximately 302 hectares found to the east of Athlone. Its most westerly point corresponds to the location of Athlone Institute of Technology and affords the area with a key asset, while the IDA Business Park is also found within the lands. Crosswood Bog lies directly to the east of the LAP lands, offering both a key natural asset, but also a candidate special area of conservation. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the LAP is the designation of lands for a 'Strategic Gateway Zone' that would facilitate the locating of flagship enterprises.

Figure 9. Creggan LAP boundary



3.6 Midland Region: Action Plan for Jobs 2015-2017

The government's Action Plan for Jobs, introduced in 2012, is a "whole-of-government" instrument that sees all departments and agencies work together to define and deliver upon key actions for the subsequent year. Its over-arching aim, as the title suggests, is to support job creation. The Action Plans are set at the national level, however there was deemed to be a requirement to provide more detail at the regional scale, leading to the release of eight 'Regional Action Plans for Jobs', including one for the Midlands region.

The Midlands Region Action Plan for Jobs (RAPJ) provides an audit of the region's assets and areas of competitive advantage. It found that the existing enterprise agencies in the Region support 1,052 enterprises that employ 17,961 people, adding over 1,000 jobs since the first national Action Plan for Jobs was launched in 2012.

Key strengths identified in the 'Midlands enterprise base' include:

- Strong, indigenous manufacturing sector (non-food)
- Large food manufacturing sector that employs approximately 4,000 people
- Rapidly growing internationally traded service sector
- Presence of key players in Ireland's "Green Economy" (Bord na Mona, Coillte and ESB)
- Substantial tourism assets with great potential for growth

While the Midlands holds a strategically important location at the heart of the country between Dublin and Galway, the RAPJ calls for "greater cohesion to maximise its assets and competitive strengths".

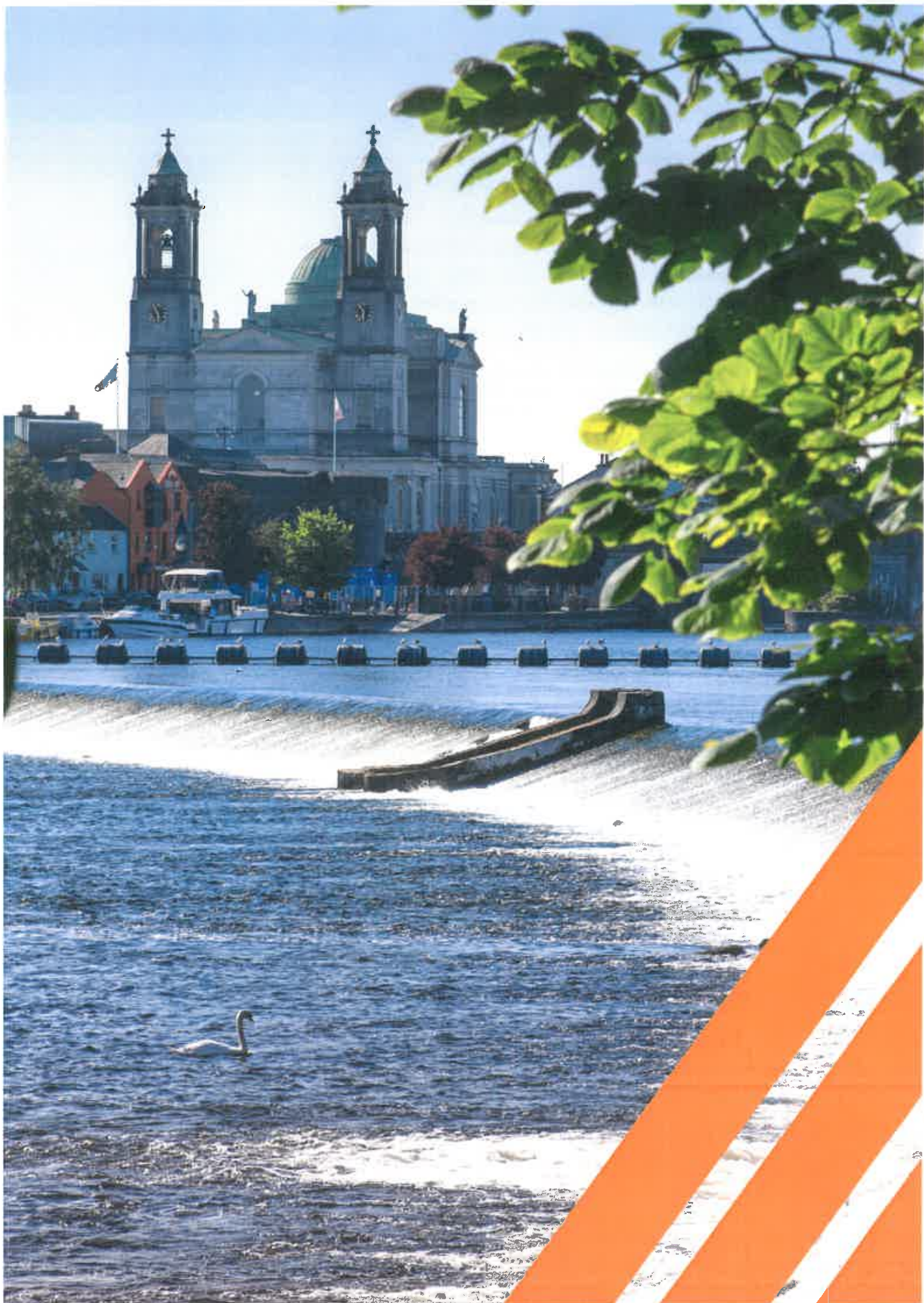
The RAPJ outlines a series of ambitions for the Region:

- Increase start-ups by 25% by developing pipeline of potential start-ups, increasing their successful flows through enterprise hubs and onto Enterprise Ireland's competitive programmes
- Support existing agency supported companies to create new job opportunities representing 10-20% of existing employment base through scale-up, new market openings, innovation investment, building skills and improving process/business models
- Strengthen regional capacity to attract new external investment and increase IDA investments by 30-40%
- Develop the talent base of the region as a driver of enterprise growth
- Position the Midlands as a 'Centre of Excellence' for advanced manufacturing processes and technologies
- Position the Midlands to become a regional hub for energy
- Develop a strategy to strengthen the emerging clusters in the internationally traded services and food sector
- Develop activity-based tourism and integrate available tourism services in a strong and coherent offer to attract visitors

In addition to the key ambitions for the region, the RAPJ lists several high-profile projects and actions that have significant potential to drive regional job and enterprise growth:

- Target at least 25 additional FDI investment projects over the next five years
- Creation of a new IDA Advanced Technology facility in Athlone
- Market the Midlands as a dynamic region with unparalleled national interconnectivity
- Establish a Skills Forum connecting education providers with employers to develop key skills in the region
- Develop the Midlands Manufacturing Technologies Campus to provide dynamic industry-focused R&D for high-end manufacturing and industrial design, co-locating industry with academia
- Possibility of hosting a next-generation radio telescope in Birr, stimulating a data-analytics hub
- The development of Center Parcs in Longford
- Further development of cycling, canoeing and walking trails along the region's waterways

While the RAPJ sets out a number of ambitions that correspond to the overall objectives of the Draft RSES, there is perhaps more focus on Athlone required, particularly considering the town's enhanced status as a key Regional Centre.



4. Athlone: Regional Centre

The following section will outline precisely how Athlone already functions as a key Regional Centre, and when pipeline developments, opportunity sites and additional supports are all delivered it can continue to thrive and develop into a key settlement at a national scale. It utilises the Draft RSES's 'criteria for analysis' that was developed to provide an evidence-based approach to the selection and designation of areas for future growth.

4.1 A Regional Counterweight

One of the prevailing concepts that acts as a fundamental component of many of the policy measures proposed and supported by the NPF is the idea that the continued, unhindered expansion of Dublin is neither sustainable nor desirable. As Dublin has continued to grow, it has done so at the expense of other towns and cities across the country.

Dublin's development has undoubtedly resulted in dramatic economic growth for the metropolitan region, however the continuation of these positive economic trends cannot be expected to continue. A growing body of research, including papers by Brown et al. (2016)⁴, and Frick et al. (2018)⁵, suggest that the continued growth and expansion of a single, dominant city, if unchecked, will ultimately have economically and socially regressive consequences on the nation. Acute urban concentration in a country, as is the case in Ireland, eventually leads to the stagnation of economic growth and negatively impacts the lives of the ever-growing number of people forced to commute longer distances and pay higher rental and housing costs.

While early-stage economic development can be boosted by a dominant city-region, this is not the case at later stages when the excessive growth of one city becomes problematic. Therefore, there is a clear and obvious incentive to diversify the region's urban settlement landscape and promote other locations as strong secondary settlements that allow national economic growth to continue. It has been recognised that Athlone, along with Drogheda and Dundalk, offer the potential to do just that.

Brown, Z., Oueslati, W., and Silva, J. (2016). *Links between urban structure and life satisfaction in a cross-section of OECD metro areas*. Ecological Economics, Vol. 129, pp. 112-121.

Frick, S., and Rodriguez-Pose, A. (2018). Change in urban concentration and economic growth. *World Development*, Vol. 105, pp. 156-170.

4.2 The Criteria for Growth

Scale

Athlone already possesses a population of significant scale. The 21,349 people that choose to live in Athlone make it the largest town in the Midlands. However, there is still more to come, with the potential for significant increases on the horizon.

Population change over time can be modelled for by undertaking an analysis of three key components of population change: fertility, mortality and migration. This is referred to as cohort component modelling, and is the same approach utilised by statistical bodies across the world, including the Central Statistics Office (CSO). For the purpose of this submission, FAC have developed two population projections using this methodology and based on assumptions matching or aligned with those set out by the CSO. In early April 2018, a scenario was developed using the latest data available at the time. It assumed that a continuation of historic and prevailing trends would remain 'as-is' over the period.

In August 2018, new data on estimated migration levels was made available by the CSO, and an update to the scenario was subsequently made (September 2018). This new data indicates a higher net inward flow of migrants to Ireland, which translates to increased internal movement of people and impacts on the growth profile of all areas (particularly urban).

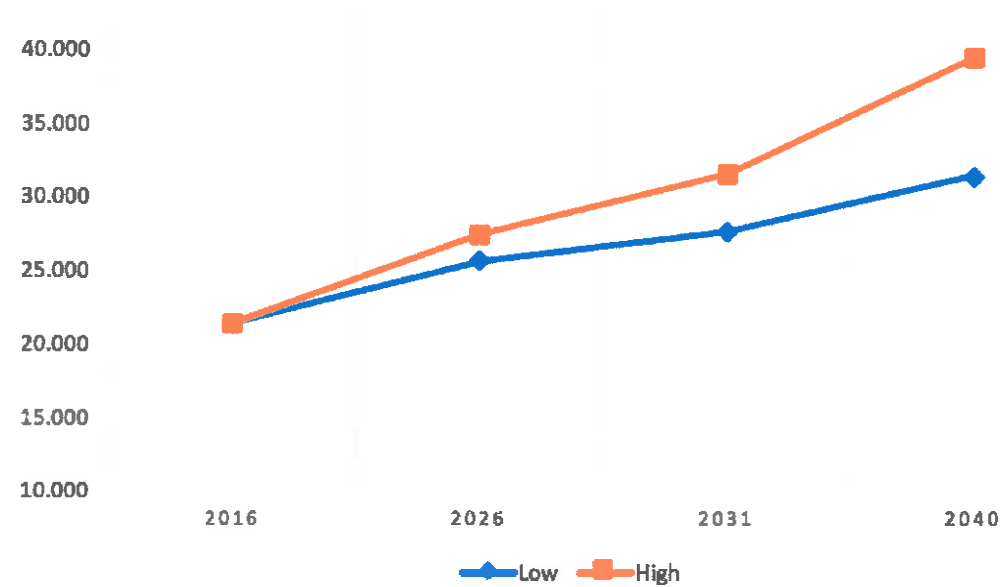
Based on the national level projections, two scenarios for Athlone up to 2040 have been modelled: M1F2, which we will call the 'Low-growth' scenario; and, M1F1aRadj which we will title the 'High-growth'. The following table provides a breakdown of both scenarios.

Projection	2016	2026	2031	2040	% Change 16-26	% Change 16-31	% Change 16-40
Low	21,349	25,506	27,572	31,354	19.5%	29.2%	46.9%
High	21,349	27,373	31,441	39,349	28.0%	47.3%	84.3%

The low growth scenario will see the population increase by 4,157 to 2026 and will increase by 6,223 by 2031. For the high growth scenario, the increases will be by 6,024 to 2026 and by 10,092 to 2031. Under the high growth scenario, it is estimated that approximately 4,000 new units will be required by 2031.

Presently there are sufficient lands available in the short-term, that if developed would meet the housing needs for either of the projected, or anticipated, population growth scenarios. However, it is estimated that in the longer-term additional residential lands would be required in order for Athlone to comfortably meet the requirements of sustained population growth.'

Figure 10: Projected Growth Scenarios



Function

The Central Statistics Office (CSO) use a variety of geographical units of measurement through which they provide data an analysis on. Aside from the commonly known units such as county boundaries and Municipal Districts, there are also units known as 'Workplace Zones' which do not correspond to any of the common boundaries or units. Workplace zones offer insights into the numbers of residents, jobs, and sectors of employment for those people recorded within each zone.

As part of the research that informs this submission a workplace-zone analysis was performed on an area that roughly corresponds to the extended Athlone settlement boundary catchment. The selected area is shown in Figure 11 and offers an insight into the levels of economic activity that exists in the wider-Athlone catchment.

Quite clearly, Athlone is not limited to the defined CSO settlement boundary, rather it functions as a regional-level economic hub. The shaded shaded areas in Figure 11 correspond to all of the selected workplace zones and have a combined population of 49,455 people. Within this zone, there are 20,242 jobs, although it must be stated that due to the methods employed by the CSO it is not possible to determine whether each job is held by a person from within the work-zones area.



Figure 11: Selected workplace zones CSU

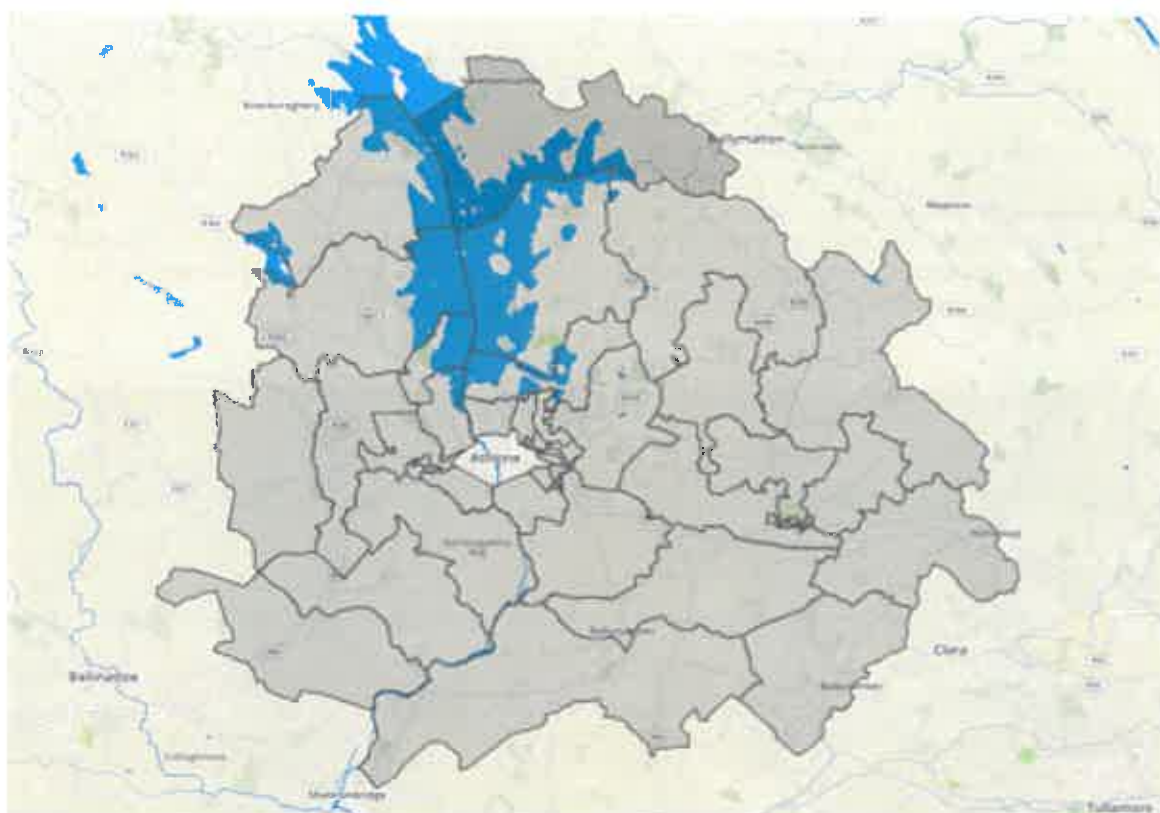


Table 9 provides a breakdown of the total number of jobs found within the selected work-zones, along with the industrial/sectoral category that they correspond to. As the table shows, Retail provides the largest proportion of jobs within this area, with a quarter of all recorded jobs. Education is the second largest, with approximately 18% of the total. Figures for the manufacturing sector prove how important this industry is in the region, with a total of 3,035 jobs recorded, or 15% of the total, while ICT and Finance are similarly significant, accounting for 14% of the total.

Table 9: Workplace zone jobs by industry

Category of Industry/Sector	Total Number of Jobs	Percentage of Total
Agriculture	935	5%
Manufacturing	3 035	15%
Construction	277	4%
Retail	5 081	25%
ICT & Finance	2 823	14%
Public Administration	898	5%
Education	3 680	18%
Other/Not Stated	2 196	11%
Total	20,424	100%

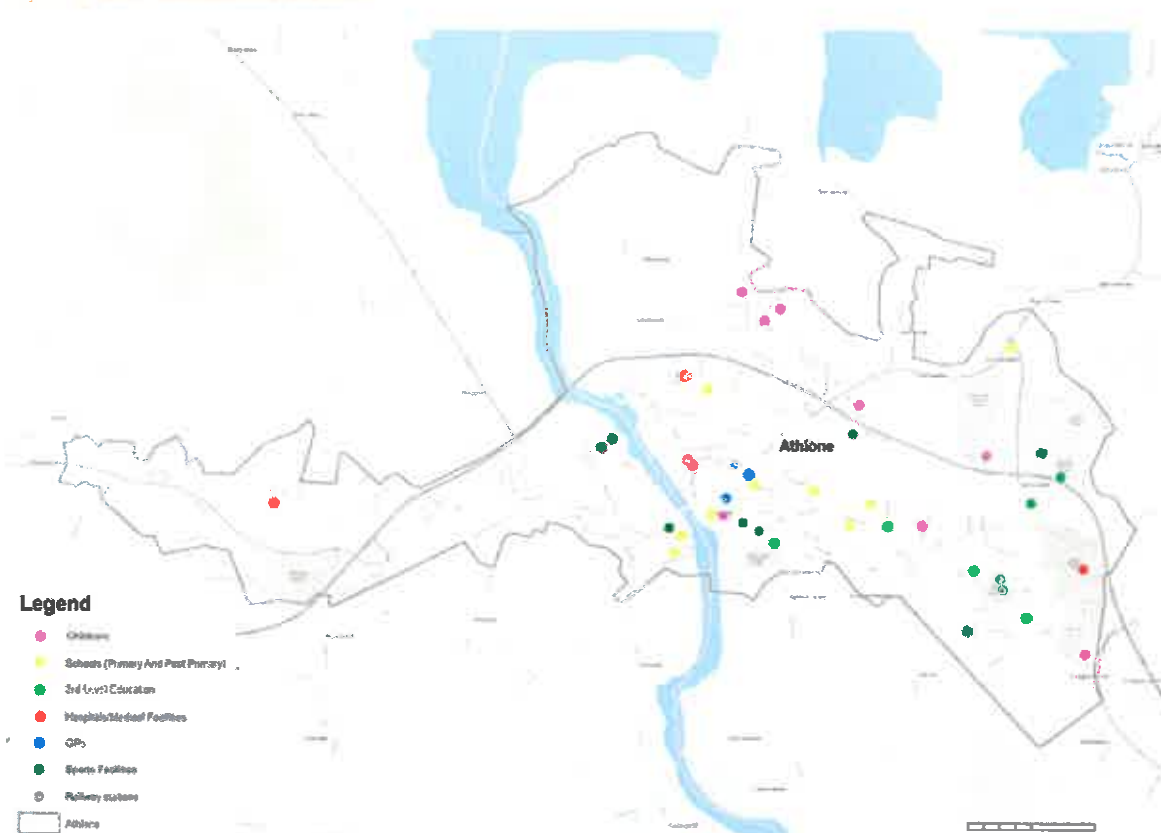
Human Capital

Athlone Institute of Technology is in advanced talks with National Government's relevant Departments about the designation of AIT as Ireland's latest Technological University (TU), with an application expected to be made in the near future. Such a designation would be a major boost for the town, and region as a whole, as it would afford the institution with greater levels of influence and an enhanced ability to attract investment and students. With student numbers set to increase and the potential future TU designation, there is a genuine opportunity for Athlone to become known as Ireland's primary 'University Town'. This would further reinforce the positive perception of Athlone as a young, vibrant and innovative destination. The application to become a Technological University is fully supported by Destination Athlone, who are pleased to see the inclusion of RPO 4.6 in the Draft RSES which calls for the same.



Already, new investment on infrastructure and facilities has been agreed with the development of a state-of-the-art 'STEM' facility which will include science labs, lecture theatres, classrooms and other facilities. This new building will help AIT focus on the development of skills in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics field, offering students a practical education in increasingly important sectors. Athlone IT also has strong links with the IDA that allow its alumni unparalleled practical experience, and offers businesses access to cutting-edge knowledge, all of which helps to attract further new businesses to the region. Infrastructure developments such as the STEM facility strengthens the ability of both AIT and the IDA to promote and sell Athlone as a centre of excellence and industry.

Figure 12 a. AMENITIES OVERSIGHT



Of equal importance to the presence of a young, skilled and talented workforce are the amenities that exist for the population to use and enjoy. Athlone, as a key urban centre in the Midlands region has the required level of amenities and social infrastructure to support this designation. Figure 12 provides an oversight of some of the amenities available to the local population. With a range of childcare facilities, primary schools, secondary schools, medical services, transport connectivity, sports amenities and a 3rd level institute, Athlone is more than capable of providing its residents with the quality of life people have now come to expect.

Place-making

Place-making deals with the creation of quality public spaces that provide residents with enhancements to their quality of life. By definition, it requires the creation of these spaces and adaptation of the built environment, however, locations can already possess characteristics that enhance quality of life. Athlone's already compact size and physical structure provides its population with certain advantages that other locations cannot offer.

The following two graphics (Figures 13 & 14) provide an overview of average commuting times and average times that respondents leave their home to travel to work, school or college. Again, comparisons are made with County, sub-region, EMRA and State averages. This data is derived from the Census 2016 information released by the CSO.

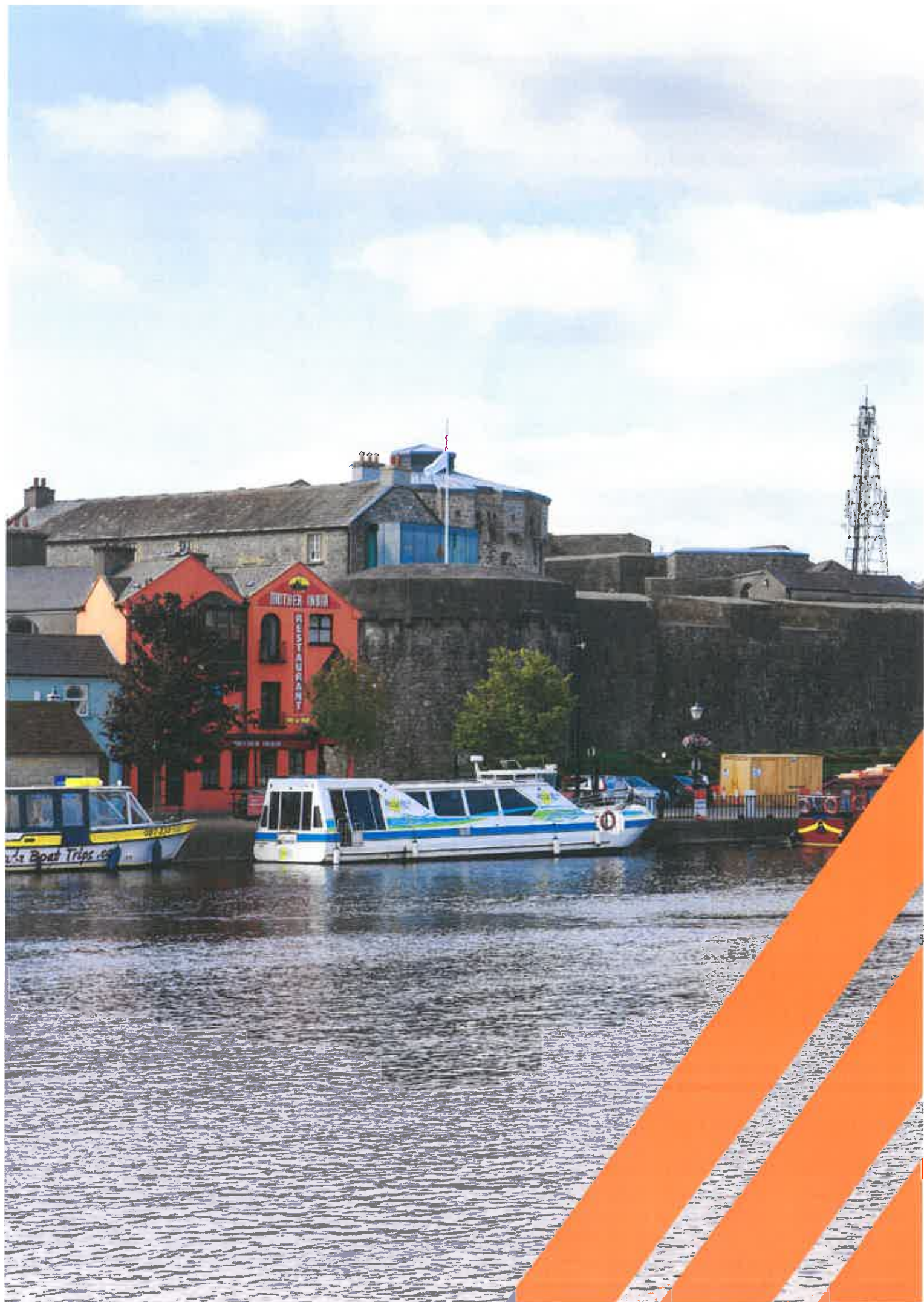
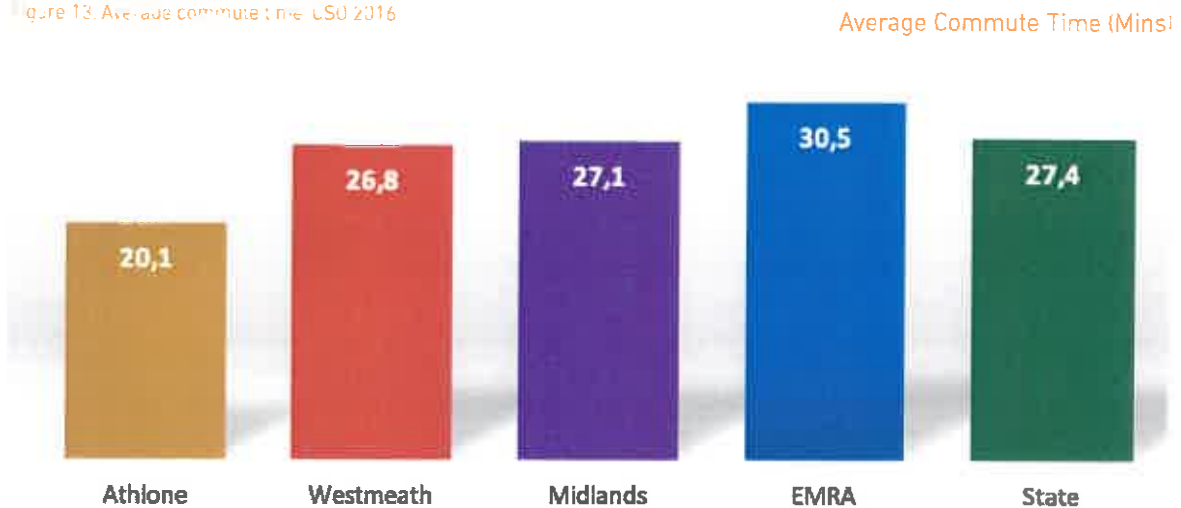
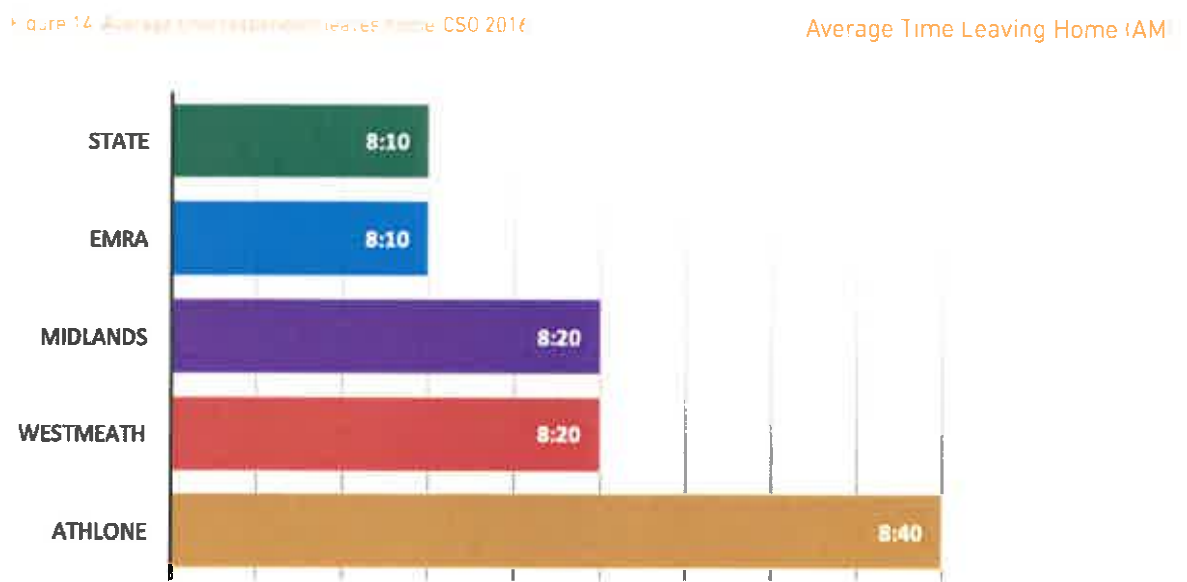


Figure 13: Average commute time CSO 2016



Although it is difficult to form too many concrete conclusions from the data provided in these graphs, it is still clear to see that Athlone performs well compared to other regions. On average, respondents in Athlone do not have to leave their homes to commute to work, school or college until approximately 08:40 am, while the average commute itself takes approximately 20 minutes. Less time spent commuting leaves more time to spend at home or with friends and family. Factors such as this play a major part in the decision-making process for young professionals seeking new locations to live and work, providing Athlone with a competitive advantage.

Figure 14: Average time respondents leave home CSO 2016



Existing conditions that allow for a better quality of life are essential as they provide a strong base from which to grow. Athlone is poised to do just that, with some major regeneration schemes planned for the near future. The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) is a key component of Project Ireland 2040 and the NDP. A total of €2 billion has been allocated to the fund up to the year 2027.

In July of 2018 it was announced that €100 million would be made available under the first round of the URDF to enable the regeneration and enhancement of the country's five cities and larger urban settlements. Effectively, the fund was created to support the aims of the NPF, namely; compact growth and sustainable development. The URDF was open to two categories of projects: Category A proposals which are "shovel ready" for 2019; and, Category B proposals are those that require further evaluation and scoping in 2019.

In November of 2018 the first round of applications to acquire funding was released and Westmeath County Council were successful in obtaining funds for three projects under category B for Athlone. The projects are:

- Athlone Town Centre Regeneration and Enhancement. This will involve public realm regeneration of Athlone Town centre and the strategic acquisition of lands that will allow future redevelopment possibilities;
- Athlone Tourism Cultural Quarter. A cultural heritage regeneration project that will seek to reinvigorate the west side of the town and tap into centuries old heritage of the area;
- Loughaniskin Urban Quarter. This will see the development of a new, mixed-use scheme at the heart of Athlone, which will support and enhance the traditional town centre offerings.

Individually, each project offers Athlone an opportunity to undergo dramatic regeneration. However, when combined, these successfully funded proposals will have a truly transformative effect on Athlone, ensuring it emerges as the region's, if not the nation's, most dynamic and rejuvenated urban settlement, further enhancing its status as a key Regional Centre.



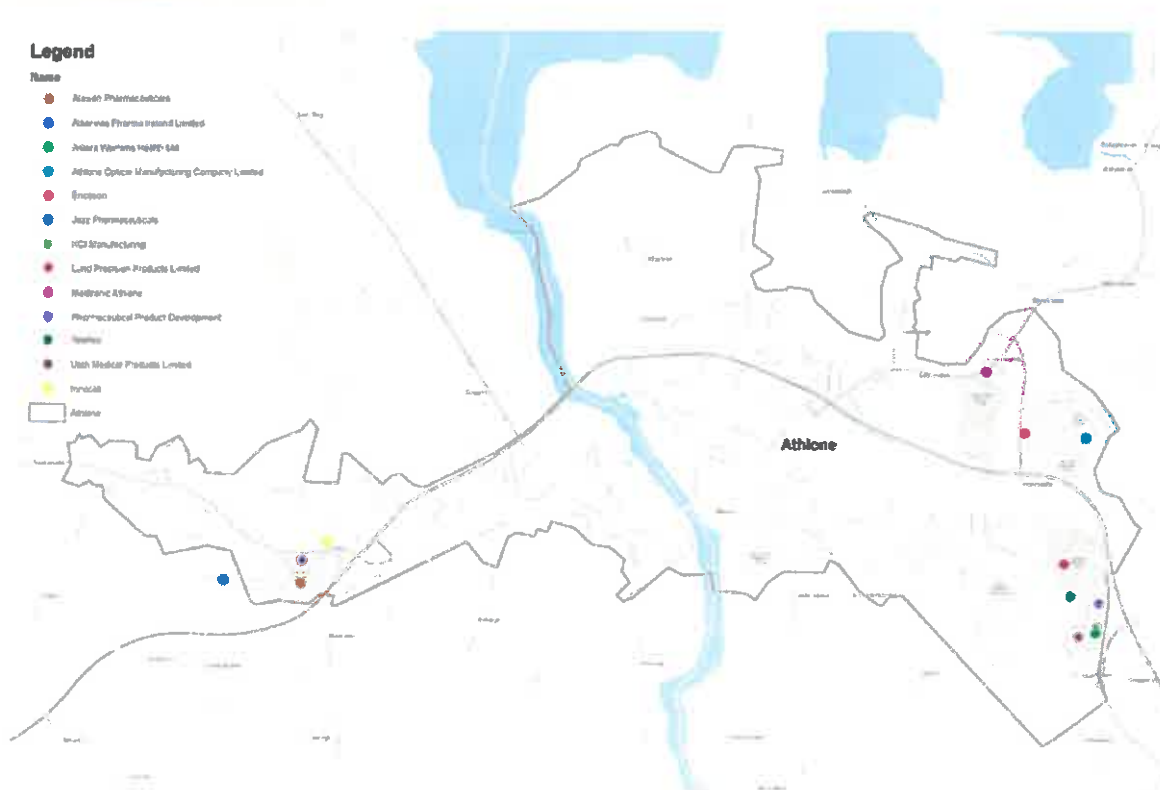
Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF)

Enterprise Eco-system

The existing industries and businesses in Athlone are primarily engaged in the ICT, Medical Devices and Pharmaceutical sectors. Many of these companies have long-established connections with the town, several of which are indigenous. Combined, businesses in these sectors directly employ approximately 5,500 people from across the region, with the potential to double this figure to 11,000, provided the appropriate infrastructural supports are allocated⁶. Furthermore, the presence of experienced, trained staff and committed employers means there already exists a minor cluster of similar companies.

This collection of similar businesses and industries offer huge potential to grow and enhance the clustering effect in Athlone, as high-tech industries have a preference to co-locate. Athlone can provide companies seeking such clusters with a suitable primed and open location. Figure 15 maps the locations of several of the major industry employers found in Athlone, with two distinct 'clusters' emerging to the east and west of the town's centre.

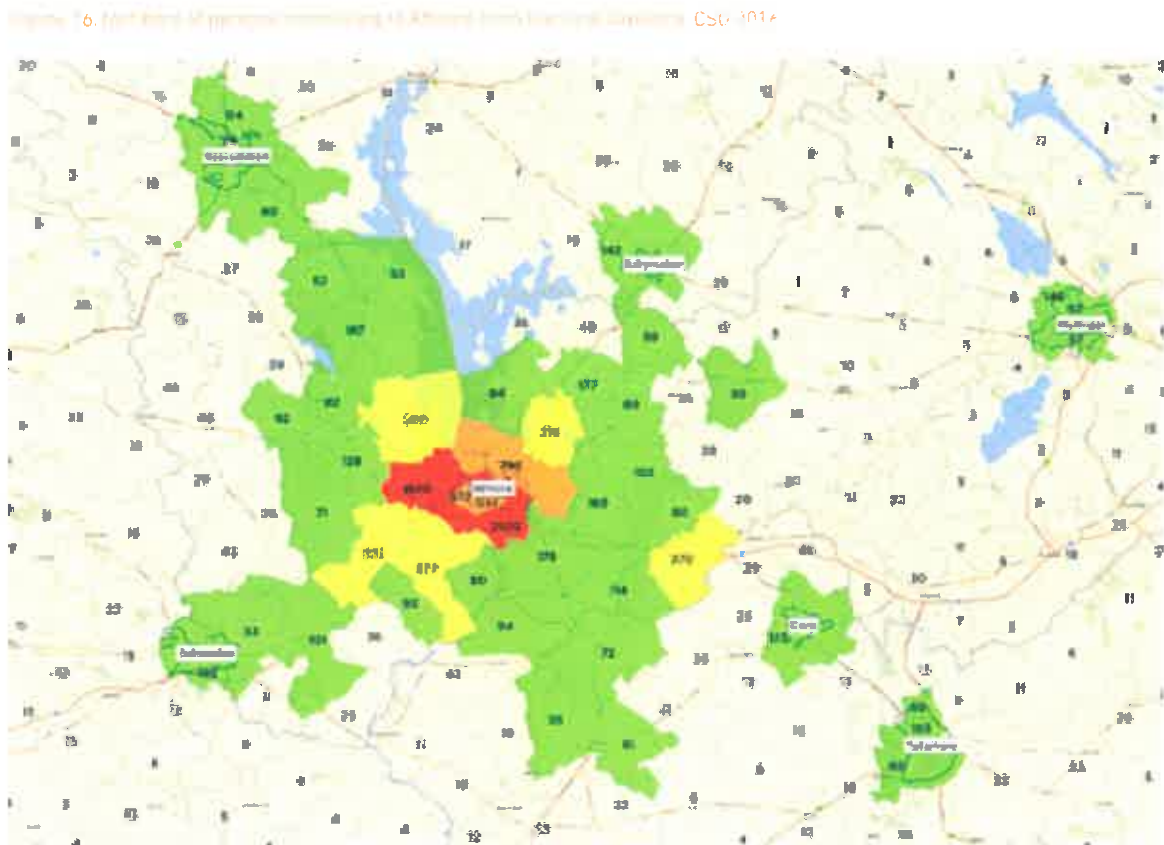
Figure 13.10 The New Industry



A collaborative venture between Enterprise Ireland and AIT has seen the opening of the Midlands Innovation and Research Centre (MIRC) which offers start-ups and budding entrepreneurs with an incubation space and access to state-of-the-art knowledge and skills. Indeed, the MIRC receives mention in the Draft RSES (RPO 4.5) as a key strategic facility that can help build upon Athlone's existing economic base. Of equal importance is the potential for the 'High Speed Enterprise Hub', which is earmarked for a site in the Monksland area, to act as a stimulus for further growth of Athlone's entrepreneurial economy. Both facilities, in addition to the already existing industries, mean Athlone is primed to become Ireland's leading innovation centre.

These figures were stated by the Industry Group supporting the Destination Athlone submission.

At its current level of economic activity, Athlone already functions as a key Regional Centre. Utilising the CSO's publicly available commuter data it is possible to provide some indication of the economic and social attractiveness of Athlone, and its dominant status as a key settlement within the Midlands region. Figure 16 is a visual reproduction of the aforementioned CSO data, and it showcases the numbers of persons commuting to the four Athlone Electoral Divisions (Urban East, Urban West, Rural East and Rural West) from surrounding electoral divisions (EDs). This provides a picture of the extent of Athlone's catchment, showing that the economy of the town is not strictly limited to the CSO defined boundary.



If further support is provided to Athlone's burgeoning enterprise eco-system, something that can be assisted with the designation as a Key Regional Centre, then there is greater opportunity for economic growth. With industry groups stating their willingness to expand if the appropriate infrastructure is provided, and Athlone's population projected to rise, then a focus on job creation must be prioritised. Without jobs there will be no population growth, and without population growth there will be limited economic development. That is why the Regional Centre designation must be backed by the necessary financial, infrastructural and political support.

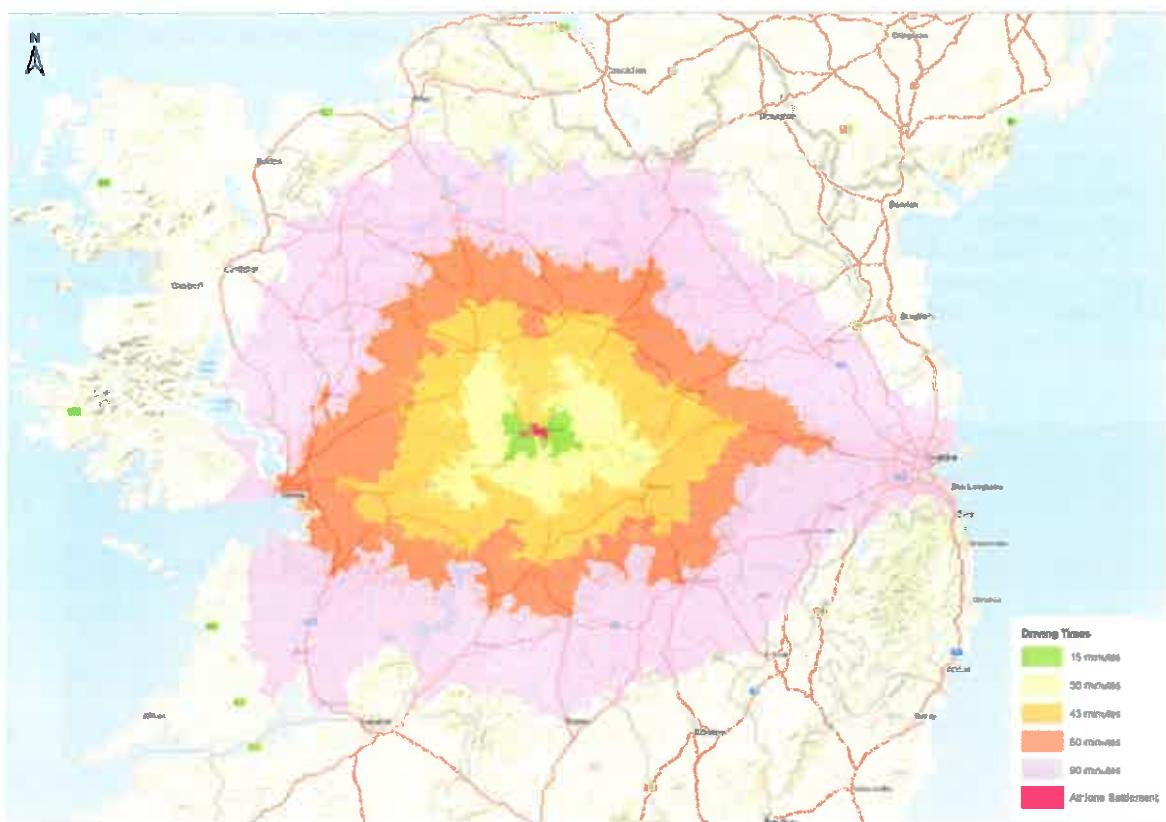
RPO 4.5 in the Draft RSES relates to the enterprise eco-system that exists in Athlone and calls for the expansion of it through enhancing specialisms and providing the appropriate infrastructure. Destination Athlone are pleased to see the inclusion of this objective and support its delivery as being the minimum level of intervention required to develop conditions for enterprise in Athlone.

Connectivity

Athlone is one of the country's most accessible and well-connected locations. Situated in the heart of the midlands, the town acts as a stop along the increasingly popular Dublin to Galway rail-line. Similarly, it is positioned along the M6 which follows a parallel route to the rail-line and connects Athlone to both Galway and Dublin. Galway is one of Ireland's fastest growing cities and has seen unprecedented, consistent growth in both its population and economy across recent decades, while Dublin is the economic powerhouse of the nation. The fact that Athlone is positioned between the two, along key transport corridors that connect both, places it in a position of strength.

In order to highlight the connectivity and accessibility of Athlone, a drive-time analysis was performed showing locations commutable from Athlone. With Roscommon, Longford, Mullingar and Tullamore all within 45 minutes, and Dublin Galway and Limerick achievable in 60 to 90 minutes, Athlone has unparalleled access to many of Ireland's major urban settlements. It is worth noting that the population found within the 45-minute catchment area totals **131,253** persons, a not insignificant number.

Figure 17: Drive-time analysis map



Iarnród Éireann's 2030 Rail Strategy discussed their intended plans and interventions. One of these interventions saw the provision of double tracking between Athlone and Portllington, which would lead to service frequency improvements. The upgrading of Athlone station to act as an interchange location was also mentioned as having the potential to be delivered provided there was a satisfactory economic return. Regarding regional development, the Athlone to Mullingar rail link is discussed as having the potential to contribute towards regional development and its reinstatement is suggested. If all three proposals were delivered upon the reliability and frequency of a key transport corridor would be dramatically improved, while an additional route would promote regional development, all of which would further enhance Athlone's connectivity.

Natural Capital

Athlone possesses an array of natural assets that makes it one of the foremost locations in Ireland for tourism, recreation and leisure. Undoubtedly, the most significant natural asset in Athlone, and arguably the entire country, is the River Shannon and its extensive system of waterways. Athlone is positioned immediately south of Lough Ree, with the Shannon running through Athlone further south towards Lough Derg and eventually into the Atlantic Ocean. Already the Shannon and its waters are being utilised for recreational and navigational purposes, yet there is still significant potential to expand this further, particularly considering the increasing focus by national bodies on developing Ireland's Blueways.

Waterways Ireland, the all-island body responsible for the maintenance, development and promotion of Ireland's inland waterways, have been consulted for the purposes of this submission. They support the aims of the submission, particularly as it seeks to consolidate Athlone's designation as a Key Regional Centre, something that reflects the status of key Tourism Hub afforded to Athlone in Fáilte Ireland's newest destination branding strategy, 'Hidden Heartlands'. Waterways Ireland are working closely with Fáilte Ireland to further develop the Shannon Blueway as a key recreational and tourism asset on both national and international scales. It is a clear statement of intent that Athlone has been identified as one of only three key tourism hubs in Hidden Heartlands. This realises the strategic importance of Athlone in the future growth of regional tourism.

Not only does Athlone straddle Ireland's most important freshwater body, it also lies at the centre-point of the country's largest greenway route. The Galway to Dublin National Cycleway is a 276-kilometre dedicated route for cyclists and walkers that stretches across the country, connecting the capital city of Dublin with the city of Galway. It forms part of the EuroVelo 2 routeway, a European supported network of dedicated cycle routes that are a combined distance of approximately 5,500 km. This will enable Athlone to promote itself at an international level, acting as the halfway point between Dublin and Galway on the Irish section of EuroVelo 2. The Athlone section has regenerated a disused section of an old rail-line and provides an excellent example of a regeneration scheme that aims to amplify an area's surrounding assets.



Figure 18. Ireland's Hidden Heartlands. Fáilte Ireland



Athlone now features alongside locations such as Galway and Kilkenny as an established visitor destination, according to statistics from Fáilte Ireland. While this is to be commended, Destination Athlone realise that there is still scope for an iconic tourist attraction to be developed, enhancing the region's competitiveness. Research commissioned by the group sought to understand the impact of, and develop concepts for, an iconic attraction. It suggested the introduction of 'Lake Surfing' to Lough Ree, as an example, which would attract surfers from across the world, transforming Athlone into a top European destination. Similarly, but separately, the development of a 'monastic' trail which capitalises on the rich cultural heritage, such as Clonmacnoise, found throughout the region could see further growth in the tourism sector.

The strategic importance of Athlone as a location for navigational, recreational and tourism purposes is obvious and undoubted. Both the Shannon Blueway and the Dublin-Galway Greenway intersect in Athlone, providing the town with an unrivalled source of natural, 'green' assets. With the continued development of the Blueway and Greenway guaranteed, and the designation of Athlone as a key Tourism Hub for the Hidden Heartlands, Athlone is set to benefit significantly from increased tourist numbers. Therefore, it is even more essential that the Regional Centre designation is maintained and supported by further investment and development, beginning with a stronger emphasis in the RSES.

Regional Planning Objective 4.7 of the Draft RSES seeks to promote Athlone as an urban tourism destination, while protecting the natural assets it has. Assets, such as those already discussed, offer Athlone unrivalled potential to attract tourists and Destination Athlone are keen to see this occurs.

Figure 4.7: Map of the Dublin-Galway Greenway route



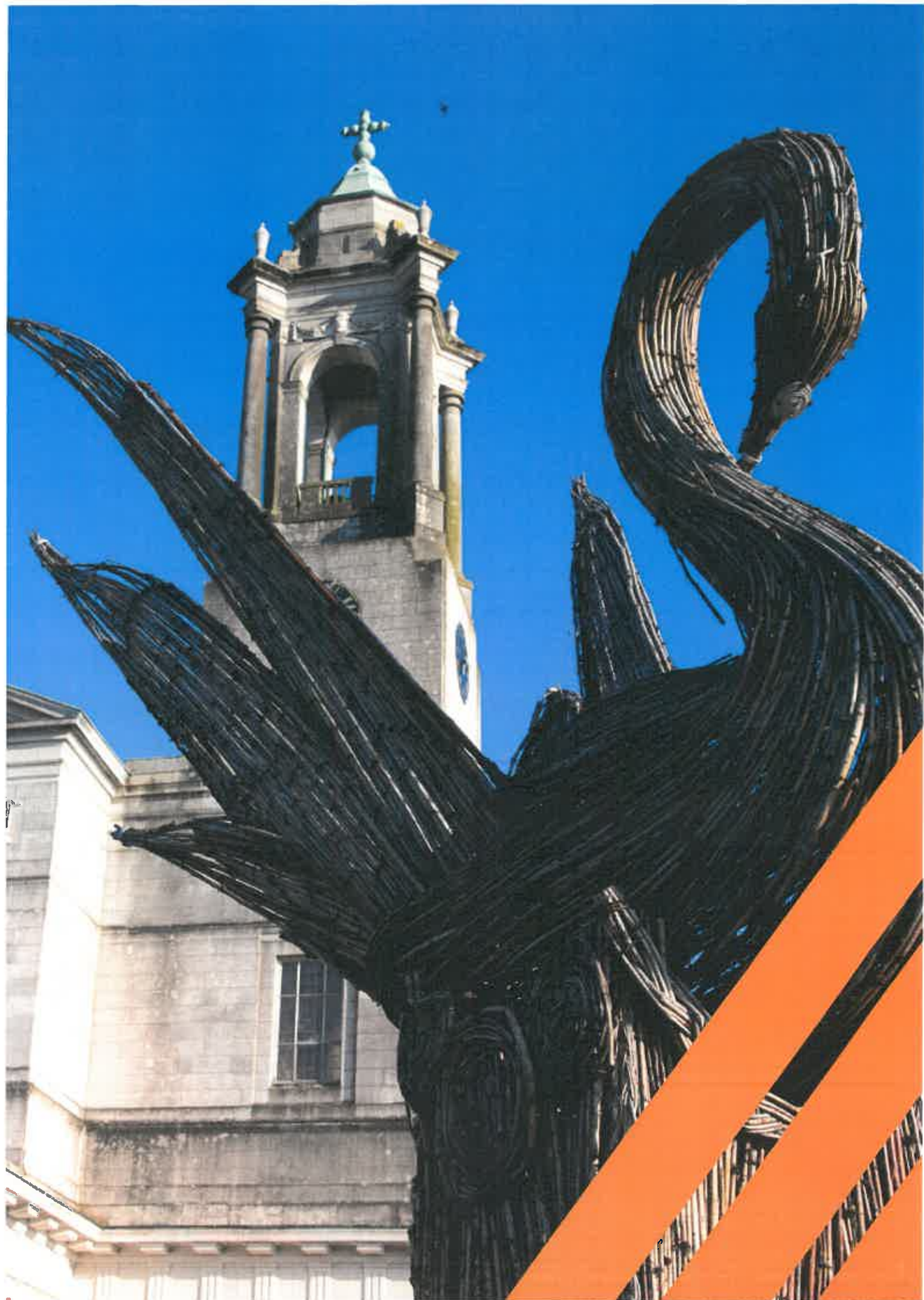
Infrastructure

Athlone is already in possession of multiple site and services that would allow it to accommodate a new influx of industry and businesses. The IDA own a 40-hectare site that is fully landscaped, occupied and serviced in Athlone, with excellent connectivity to the national road network. The Athlone Business and Technology Park also contains greenfield areas that are primed for future development. Similarly, the Midlands Innovation and Research Centre (MIRC), which is located at AIT and is a result of a partnership between the institute and Enterprise Ireland, offers innovative entrepreneurs and start-ups the opportunity to develop and grow their ideas and businesses in a cutting-edge environment. The MIRC facility acts as an incubation hub and offers business support for those that choose to locate there. These are both just two examples of pre-existing facilities that are on offer.

In addition to the facilities already available, Athlone has several key, strategic greenfield and brownfield sites that possess huge potential for development as high-tech industrial parks, cutting edge R&D facilities, and innovative business hubs. Existing lands, such as those identified in the various LAPs, have the capacity to support further enterprise and industry. These locations are primed for future investment and can accommodate an influx of new businesses and enterprises over the coming years.

If the Midlands are to meet the objectives of the RAPJ, such as: increasing start-ups by 25%; boosting IDA-backed investment by 30-40%; and, becoming a 'centre of excellence' for advanced technologies, then developing sites in Athlone should be seen as the catalyst for growth. These sites, coupled with the existing high-tech industries, innovative facilities and a proactive third level institute mean Athlone is the obvious choice to be the key economic driver in the Midlands.





5. Recommendations

- Athlone's designation as a key Regional Centre must be maintained and its importance should be reflected in both the EMRA and NWRA RSESs. Equal status must be afforded to all designated Regional Centres (Athlone, Drogheda, Dundalk, Letterkenny and Sligo), as per the recommendations of the NPF. Each RSES should be consistent in terms of the level of detail and strategic plans provided for all Regional Centres.
- A Joint Urban Area Committee comprising members of both Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils should be immediately established following the adoption of the RSES. Such a Committee should have statutory authority. This will complement the work already undertaken by both Councils to create a joint retail strategy for the Athlone-South Roscommon area, and ensure further collaborative plans and policies are delivered.
- As per Regional Policy Objective 4.4, a cross-boundary Joint Urban Area Plan (UAP) is to be developed by the Committee (and Councils), encompassing the entire settlement of Athlone, including those lands within Roscommon and incorporating all existing adjacent LAPs. It must be a statutory document that provides for the future economic, social and physical development of all of Athlone.
- A Joint Transport Strategy should be created in conjunction with the NTA to provide Athlone with a detailed strategic plan for the future development of sustainable transport offerings. Again, this endeavour will complement work already commenced by Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils, who are actively progressing a transport strategy for the Athlone-South Roscommon area.
- Although the recognition of a need for a Joint Urban Area Plan is welcomed, there is a concern that the scope of such a plan would not be of sufficient scale to account for the 'regional-level' influence that Athlone exerts. Therefore, the expansion of the UAP's remit should be made to ensure the creation of a more conceptual and ambitious strategy that truly reflects the regional role Athlone plays, as highlighted in this submission. The NPF calls for a "coordinated strategy for Athlone both at Regional and Town level", something that could be achieved if this recommendation was realised.
- The current population allocation for Athlone is deemed to be inadequate, and further revisions to this are required. As this submission has shown, Athlone is a settlement of regional importance with the potential to dramatically increase its population, and this must be reflected in the RSES.
- Athlone Institute of Technology should receive the full, public support of the Assembly in its application for Technological University status. This would provide further impetus to a trajectory that is already strong and could have a transformative effect on the region if successful. This is acknowledged in RPO 4.6 of the Draft RSES.
- Key strategic sites within, and adjacent to the town boundary that are under private ownership should be identified and the acquisition of these lands prioritised. This will ensure that the necessary available lands required for the future compact growth of town are available.
- The delivery of the three successful URDF proposals should be prioritised for the short to medium term, with additional applications to the second phase of the URDF to follow. The enhancement of Athlone's public realm will have multiple knock-on effects that make the area a more attractive and desirable place to live.

- An updated Regional Action Plan for Jobs (RAPJ) is necessary to account for the enhanced status of Athlone as the primary economic driver in the Midlands. This was an obvious oversight in the previous version and needs to be addressed.
- Equally, the objectives of the RAPJ will not be achieved unless further high-tech, fully serviced industrial parks are provided in central locations throughout Athlone. More support is required around job creation as this is essential if Athlone's population is to continue to grow. The existing industries have indicated their willingness to expand operations, but stress that this can only occur if the associated infrastructure and skilled work-force are available.
- The National Cycleway, a high-quality EuroVelo cycling and walking route that connects Dublin and the East Coast to Galway and the Western Seaboard, via Athlone, should be completed. This offers all settlements, particularly Athlone, with a world-class recreational amenity that would open further tourist markets.
- The Shannon Blueway Masterplan, which is currently in development, is expected to feature Athlone as a key settlement. This mirrors the designation of Athlone as a key Tourism Hub in Fáilte Ireland's newest branding strategy, 'Hidden Heartlands'. Athlone's role as the Midlands most significant base for tourism should be acknowledged and the infrastructure and amenities required to support further growth must be delivered.
- Proposals in the Government's document "Linking People and Places", which supports the ambitions of the NPF, discusses examining the possibility to create higher speed rails links between Dublin and Galway. This proposition should be enacted upon and a feasibility study that will detail the potential of such a project carried out in the short to medium term. Similarly, expanding this route to a double track would enhance the effectiveness of rail to act as a genuine alternative to private motor cars.



6. Concluding Remarks

This submission has sought to highlight how the focused continuation of growth in Athlone would be in accordance with the strategic outcomes that are core to the NPF. The NPF recognises the essential role that Athlone already fulfills in the Midlands region and calls upon the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies to acknowledge and support Athlone's role as a key Regional Centre.

While the Draft RSES does indeed identify Athlone's role as a key Regional Centre, it does not go to sufficient lengths to highlight the true nature and extent of Athlone's vital role in driving the region's economic prosperity. This submission has attempted to provide further in-depth analysis on the significant functions and services that Athlone provides at the regional level. It is hoped that this will offer further proof as to the appropriateness of the designation of key Regional Centre.

Athlone, Drogheda, Dundalk, Letterkenny and Sligo are each named as important regional drivers in the NPF. There is an expectation, stated in the NPF, that each receives the same level of focus in their respective region's RSESs. Each RSES should be consistent with one another, with no Regional Centre afforded preeminence over the others. It is, therefore, a concern that the level of detail and analysis provided for Sligo and Letterkenny in the NWRA's Draft RSES is not mirrored in the EMRA's Draft RSES for its three regional Centres. This submission has shown that Athlone acts as a standalone regional driver, and as such, it requires the same extensive analysis as the others.

Finally, once consistency in the analysis of Ireland's key Regional Centres is provided, it will be necessary to enable the statutory provisions that afford the Regional Centre designation with the appropriate legal backing. Without a strong legal framework in place, the designations could amount to nothing more than mere token gestures. If Ireland is to develop in a sustainable manner, with settlements of sufficient critical mass to act as a counterbalance to Dublin, then the Regional Centres must have the full support of the State. If statutory backing is provided, the essential infrastructural supports that enable Regional Centre growth will follow.



