2010 to 2022

Vol. 1

REGIONAL PLANNING GUIDELINES

for the Midland Region

LAOIS

OFFALY

WESTMEATH

LONGFORD

MIDLAND REGIONAL AUTHORITY
Údarás Réigiúnach Lár na Tíre

The Regional Planning Guidelines 2010-2022 for the Midland Region were adopted by the Midland Regional Authority on the 20th July 2010.

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Foreword

The Regional Planning Guidelines 2010-2022 for the Midland Region have been prepared at a time of unprecedented change, both in global and national economic terms, coupled with changes in both environmental and planning legislation. This time of transition, presents challenges in the way we plan for our future, and offers opportunities to examine innovative ways, and means of achieving a bright future for the citizens of the Midland Region.

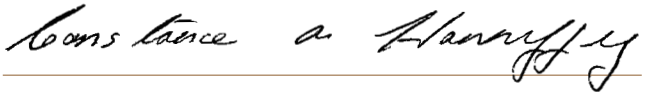
These Regional Planning Guidelines are a long term strategic planning framework that will direct the future physical, economic and social development of the Midland Region over the medium to long term. They provide a clear policy link between national policies, the National Spatial Strategy and the National Development Plan, and Local Authorities planning policies and decisions.

The Guidelines will act as a robust planning framework to proactively facilitate sustainable development, protect and improve our amenities, and quality of life and, provide greater certainty and direction to our citizens. In addition, these Regional Planning Guidelines will form the foundation upon which, consistent County Development Plans will be developed by the planning authorities in the Midland Region.

These Regional Planning Guidelines build upon the experience and progress made under the previous Guidelines and support the need to establish a strong spatial hierarchy centred on the linked gateway of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar, supported by the principal towns of Longford and Portlaoise. The sustainable development of the region is a key theme of the Regional Planning Guidelines, and is integrated into the strategies relating to the development of the regional economy, location of future housing, provision of critical infrastructure, and protection of the natural environment.

The vision for the region could not have come about without the valuable input and experience of the relevant governmental agencies, and departments, and the support and cooperation of the constituent Local Authorities of the Midland Region. It is also important to recognise the valued input and broad experience of interest groups and individuals, whose contributions, through the public consultation processes, informed the preparation of Regional Planning Guidelines 2010-2022 for the Midland Region.

Regional planning on a 'whole of region' basis recognises that there are significant opportunities at this level, to better integrate land use, and infrastructure planning. Finally, these Regional Planning Guidelines have been prepared in a way that recognises that each county has its own strengths to build upon, its own place within the region and that together we can develop a vibrant region that is far greater than the sum of its parts.



Cllr. Constance Hanniffy
Cathaoirleach, Midland Regional Authority

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Glossary of Terms

AIT	Athlone Institute of Technology
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CDA	Central Development Area
CEB	County Enterprise Boards
CFRAM	Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCENR	Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources
DoEHLG	Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government
DoT	Department of Transport
EDA	Eastern Development Area
ED's	Electoral Divisions
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
ESDP	European Spatial Development Perspective
ETS	Emissions Trading Scheme
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FRA	Flood Risk Assessment
GDA	Greater Dublin Area
GDI	Gateway Development Index
GHG	Green House Gas
GIS	Geographical Information System
GMIT	Galway Mayo Institute of Technology
GSI	Geological Survey of Ireland
GVA	Gross Value Added

HDA	Habitats Directive Assessment
HEI	Higher Education Institutes
HLR	Housing Land Requirement
ICT	Information Communication Technologies
IoT	Institute of Technology
IRBD	International River Basin Districts
IT	Information Technology
ITS	Internationally Traded Services
LA	Local Authorities
LCA	Landscape Character Assessment
LUTS	Land Use and Transportation Study
MANs	Metropolitan Area Networks
MEA	Midland Energy Agency
MIRC	Midlands Innovation and Research Centre
MRA	Midland Regional Authority
NBS	National Broadband Scheme
NCPF	National Cycle Policy Framework
NDA	Northern Development Area
NDP	National Development Plan
NHA	National Heritage Area
NPWS	National Parks and Wildlife Service
NRA	National Roads Authority
NSS	National Spatial Strategy

NUTS	Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics
NTA	National Transport Authority
OPW	Office of Public Works
QNHS	Quarterly National Household Survey
R&D	Research and Development
RBD	River Basin Districts
RBMPs	River Basin Management Plans
RFRA	Regional Flood Risk Appraisal
RPGs	Regional Planning Guidelines
SACs	Special Areas of Conservation
SDA	Southern Development Area
SDZ	Strategic Development Zone
SEA	Strategic Environmental Assessment
SFRA	Strategic Flood Risk Assessment
SME	Small and Medium Enterprises
SPAs	Special Protection Areas
SUDS	Sustainable Urban Drainage System
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Science and Cultural Organisation
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
WDA	Western Development Area
WFD	Water Framework Directive

COUNTY LONGFORD

The Mall, Longford

Turraun Wetlands, Lough Boora Parklands, County Offaly

1

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

COUNTY OFFALY

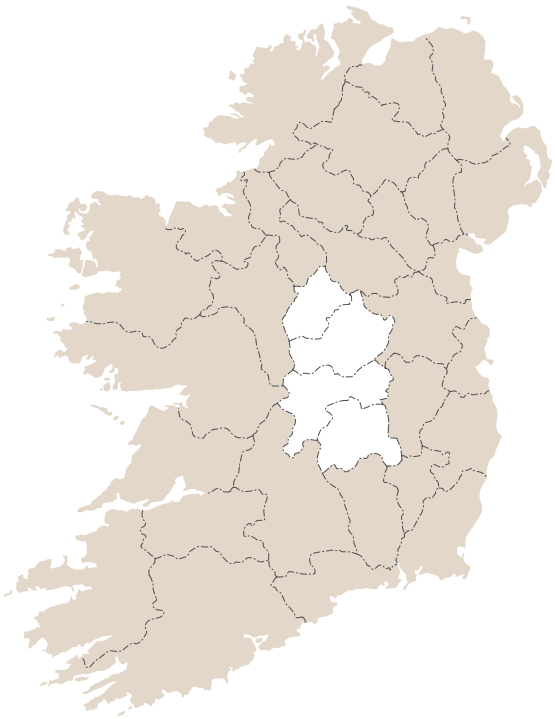
Charleville Demense, Tullamore

1.1 Regional Planning Guidelines

The Regional Planning Guidelines (RPGs) set the long-term strategic planning framework which aims to direct the future growth of the Midland Region over the medium to long term and works to implement national policy as set out in the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) published in 2002.

The RPGs represent a new tier in the spatial planning hierarchy introduced in 2004, to ensure the coordination of national policy at regional level and informing policy formulation at county and local levels. This is achieved through integrating spatial policy, investment decisions, and environmental priorities at a national level and translating these to the region, taking account of demographic change and economic trends. A strategic focus is maintained that can then be distilled to provide direction at county and local level.

Figure 1.1: Location of the Midland Region



The Midland Region categorised as a NUTS III region[1] comprises the counties of Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath as set out in Figure 1.1. The Midland Regional Authority (MRA) was established under the Local Government Act, 1991. The role of the Regional Authority is to promote the co-ordination of the provision of public services in the Midland Region. The MRA also reviews the development needs of the region, contributing to the preparation of the National Development Plan (NDP) and other strategies at national and regional level.
In accordance with Section 26 of the Planning and Development Acts 2000-2007 and the Planning and Development Regulations 2001-2009, the MRA has prepared the RPGs for the Midland Region 2010-2022.

A key aspect of the RPGs is about building on and enhancing the competitiveness and attractiveness of the region within a spatial planning hierarchy.

This will be achieved by focussing on:

- Building up the "critical mass" of the region in terms of its economic strength, employment, education and population.
- Developing an Economic Development Strategy.
- Developing and strengthening the identity of the region.
- Providing better transport and communications connections within the region and between the region and other regions.
- Ensuring both rural and urban areas play their full roles in driving the development of the region in a balanced and sustainable way.

[1] NUTS - The Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics was established by Eurostat for the production of regional statistics for the EU.

The RPGs will be implemented in partnership by the planning authorities, government departments and public agencies and will be influenced by a wide range of international, national and regional level plans, programmes and legislation.

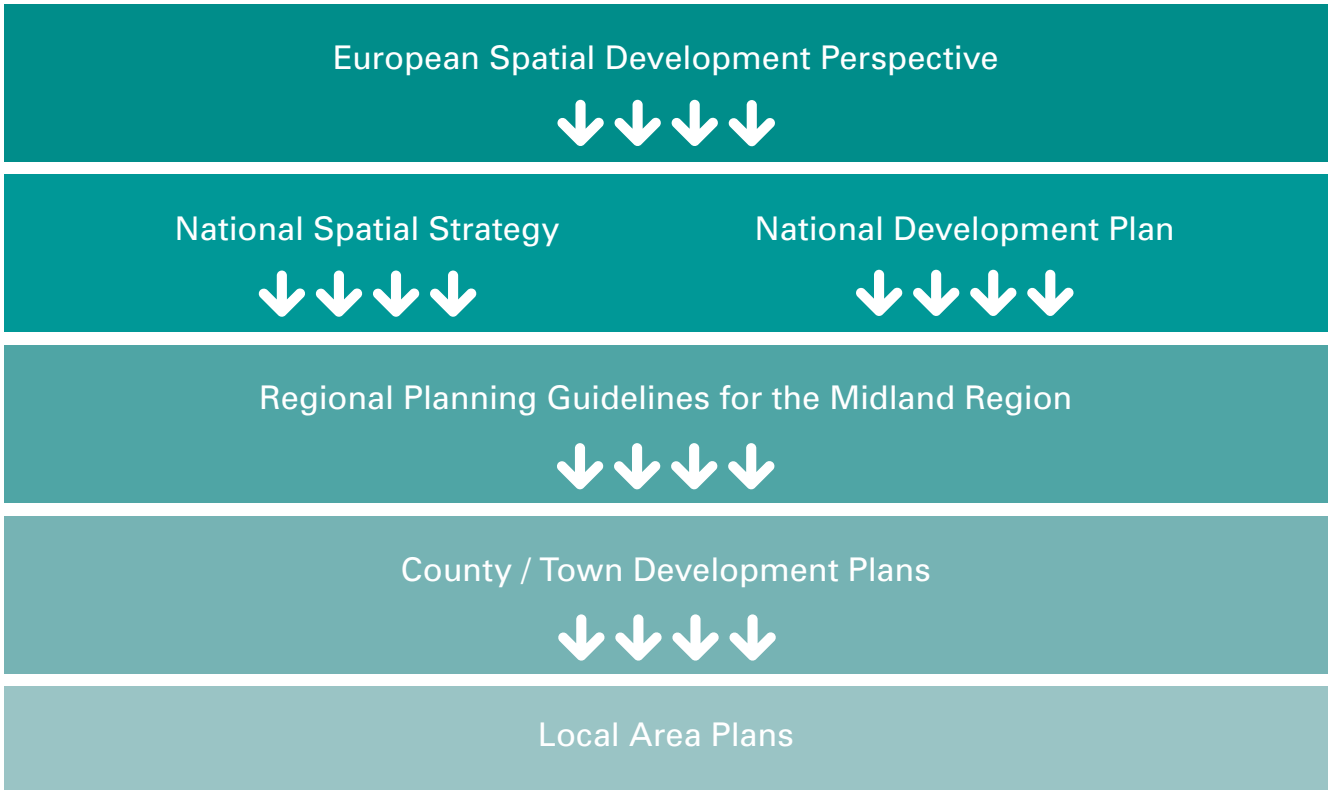
1.2 European, National, Regional and Local Policy

Set within the context of key European and national level policy frameworks, the RPGs primarily respond to the NSS, which subsequently directs the focus of objectives outlined within the NDP. A key role of the RPGs is therefore to ensure the integration of plans at national, regional, county, and local levels in order to achieve balanced regional development.

1.2.1 European Policy Context

In order to address the significant social economic and spatial differences across the European Union, the European Commission published the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) in 1999. The ESDP sought balanced and sustainable development[2] across the EU territory through common objectives and concepts for future development. The three fundamental goals are economic and social cohesion, conservation and management of natural resources and cultural heritage, and more balanced competitiveness of the European territory. Figure 1.2 outlined below identifies the position of the RPGs in the planning hierarchy.

Figure 1.2: Planning Hierarchy



[2] Sustainable development is defined as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Brundtland (1987), Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, United Nations.

1.2.2 National Policy Context

1.2.2.1 The National Spatial Strategy

The NSS was introduced in 2002 and sets out the spatial planning framework for the country. The strategy consists of a twenty year planning framework designed to achieve a better balance of social, economic, and physical development and population growth between regions in Ireland, and to assist in the implementation of the NDP. Its focus is on people and places, and on building communities. Through closer matching of where people live and where they work, different parts of Ireland will be able to sustain a better quality of life, a strong competitive economic position, and an environment of the highest quality.

The NSS has established a platform upon which policies can be put in place to ensure that more balanced development is achieved, within a well-planned spatial structure of attractive, competitive and innovative places.

Gateways and the Midland Region

A key concept of the NSS is the development of potential and critical mass around a series of "gateways" and "hubs". Gateways are centres with a strategic location, nationally and relative to their surrounding areas, providing national-scale social and economic infrastructure and support services. The NSS identifies the linked gateway of Athlone, Tullamore, and Mullingar as an area whose further development is a key component of the NSS.

The principal messages within the NSS of particular relevance to the Midland Region can be summarised as follows:

- There is a need to boost critical mass to create more self-sustaining development in the region building on its central location, its proximity to Dublin and its quality of life and natural and cultural heritage attributes.
- There is a need to focus on the implementation of the linked gateway of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar, to deliver the level of critical mass needed to create more self-sustaining patterns of development where people both live and work within the region avoiding long distance commuting to Dublin.
- The role of the linked gateway needs to be partnered by a focus on the development role of the principal towns in the region and these towns need to be supported in acting as engines of growth locally, but also well connected to the linked gateway to support it and benefit from it.
- The region benefits strongly from improving transport, communications, and energy infrastructure that passes through the region.
- The rural areas in the region are experiencing significant changes but the nature of these changes varies from place to place. Policies must be tailored to local conditions to ensure that the vitality of rural communities is maintained in tandem with a strengthened network of towns and villages and in a way that is sustainable in social, economic, and environmental terms.

1.2.2.2. The National Development Plan 2007-2013

The NDP supports the NSS, and is the key financing mechanism for the promotion of balanced regional development. It aligns with the objectives of the NSS and prioritises capital investment to deliver more balanced social, economic, and physical development between the regions. One of its general goals is to integrate regional development within the framework of gateway cities and hub towns to achieve economic growth in the regions and provide for major investment in the rural economy. The RPGs set out a framework for the utilisation of funds through the identification of priorities in line with the vision for the region as set out in the NSS. Given the current challenging economic climate, it is likely that much of the investment outlined in the current NDP will be constrained, however, it is also recognised that the critical enabling investment priorities identified in the RPGs have a role in the regeneration and recovery of the national economy.

A *State of the Regions* report was published by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DoEHLG) in 2009 which outlines the progress of the NSS in each of the regions from its inception. This report has also informed the RPG document.

1.2.3 Regional and Local Policy Context

The RPGs integrate and co-ordinate local level policies and plans within an overall vision for the region providing a clear policy link between national policies and local authority planning policies and decisions.

The RPGs will inform and direct County Development Plans of each of the planning authorities in the Midland Region by setting clear objectives and targets in relation to future population, settlement strategy, development distribution and infrastructure investment priorities.

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Habitats Directive Assessment (HDA), and Regional Flood Risk Appraisal (RFRA) carried out as part of these RPGs will also inform planning policies and decisions at local authority level.

1.3 Legislative Context

1.3.1 Planning Act Framework

The Planning and Development Act, 2000 (as amended) Part II, Chapter III provides for the adoption of RPGs. The RPGs 2004-2010 are being reviewed in accordance with Section 26(1), the Ministerial Direction (15th December, 2008) and the Planning and Development (Regional Planning Guidelines) Regulations 2009.

1.3.2 Planning and Development Bill 2009

The Planning and Development Bill 2009[3] proposes to introduce a number of key changes to the Planning Code with the principal aim of supporting economic renewal and promoting sustainable development. A key element of the proposed Bill is the introduction of a requirement for an evidence based core strategy in County Development Plans and local area plans which will provide relevant information as to how the plan and the housing strategy are consistent with both RPGs and the NSS. Heretofore, Development Plans had to have due regard for the RPGs.

The Bill proposes that in the preparation, making, and variation of a Development Plan, the Manager's Report must clearly indicate the extent to which the draft plan complies with the NSS and RPGs; amendments to a draft development or local area plan which have been the subject of public consultation may only be modified in minor respects.

1.3.3 Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Habitats Directive Assessment (HDA) and Regional Flood Risk Appraisal (RFRA)

1.3.3.1 Strategic Environmental Assessment

In accordance with EU Directives and national legislation a formal separate process of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) has been carried out as part of the preparation of the RPGs. SEA is a systematic process of predicting and evaluating the likely environmental effects of implementing a proposed plan, or other strategic action, in order to ensure that these effects are appropriately addressed at the earliest stage of the decision-making

[3] Published on May 28th 2009 and it is anticipated that this will be enacted in 2010.

on a par with economic and social considerations. This is the first time that an SEA has been undertaken at regional level in the Midland Region and the SEA Environmental Report and the SEA Statement are separate documents which should be read and considered in parallel with the RPGs (Vol. 2).

1.3.3.2 Habitats Directive Assessment (Appropriate Assessment)[4]

The purpose of the HDA is to determine whether the RPGs have implications for any Natura 2000 sites in the Midland Region and to ascertain whether there will be adverse impacts on the integrity of these sites. The HDA follows guidance from the European Commission and directions from the DoEHLG. The methodology followed in the HDA is adapted from the methodology laid out in the EU and National Guidance. These are:

Stage 1: Screening.

Stage 2: Appropriate Assessment.

Stage 3: Assessment of alternative solutions.

Stage 4: Assessment where no alternative solutions exist and where adverse impacts remain.

Though the HDA complements aspects of the SEA they are separate assessments. Stage 1 Screening of the HDA process is contained within Volume 3 of the RPGs.

1.3.3.3 Regional Flood Risk Appraisal

A RFRA has also been carried out which indicates how flood risk affects the region in the context of the RPGs. It presents and analyses available flood related data at regional level to identify regional flood risk management priorities and includes strategic policies and measures to be implemented in lower level plans. Details relating to the RFRA have been included within Chapter 6 Environment and Amenities Strategy of the RPGs with the full RFRA included as a separate document within Volume 3 of the RPGs.

1.3.3.4 Integration of RPGs and SEA, HDA and RFRA Processes

In early 2009, SEA, HDA and RFRA were determined as being mandatory for the review of the RPGs 2004 for the Midland Region and preparation of revised RPGs 2010-2022 for the Midland Region.

Scoping and consultations with the relevant environmental authorities were undertaken for the SEA, HDA and RFRA. The findings of the SEA, HDA and RFRA processes informed each other and the preparation of the RPGs on an ongoing basis. All of the development scenarios for the RPGs were evaluated for environmental and planning effects which in turn informed the selection of the chosen development scenario. Environmental considerations were integrated into the RPGs through the SEA, HDA and RFRA processes through the early identification and communication of environmental sensitivities and through the augmentation and addition of certain policies and objectives.

The Draft RPGs and Draft SEA Environmental Report HDA and RFRA were considered by the MRA. Changes to the Draft RPGs were taken into account by the SEA Environmental Report, HDA and RFRA. The Draft RPGs, SEA Environmental Report, HDA and RFRA were placed on public display and submissions and observations were received.

The Director's Report which made recommendations to the draft RPGs on foot of submissions received and issues raised during the consultation process was presented to the MRA for their consideration. Addendum II to the SEA Environmental Report, HDA and RFRA set out the environmental consequences of the Directors recommendations regarding proposed amendments to the RPGs.

The SEA Environmental Report, HDA and RFRA were updated on the making of the RPGs, taking into account Addendum II to the SEA Environmental Report, HDA and RFRA. An SEA Statement which reports on how environmental considerations have been integrated into the RPGs was prepared and accompanies these RPGs.

1.3.3.5 Lower Tier Assessment

The SEA, HDA and RFRA processes as listed in Sections 1.3.3 provide for further assessment of lower tier plans and/or projects which may be undertaken at regional, county or local level.

[4] Habitats Directive Assessment also known as Appropriate Assessment.

1.4 The Midland Region Today

The 2004 RPGs for the Midland Region were adopted at a time when the Irish economy was achieving remarkable rates of economic growth. It was estimated in 2004 that the economic growth rate could reach 5.4% GNP towards 2010. Considerable changes are now taking place in terms of the dynamics that shape and drive the Irish economy with the economy facing significant challenges. No clear trends are yet emerging and as such, it is important that the RPGs provide a positive yet flexible framework that can be easily adapted in light of changing economic conditions.

1.4.1 Profile of the Midland Region

The Midland Region encompasses the four counties of Laois, Longford, Offaly, and Westmeath. The region covers an area of around 6,524 square kilometres and accounts for 9.5% of the total area of the state.

1.4.2 Natural Environment

There is a wealth of biodiversity and ecological sites in the region including those of international and national importance. Designated ecological sites in the region include Natura 2000 sites, Ramsar Sites[5], Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs), Nature Reserves and Salmonid Waters. Protected habitats and species occur outside of designated sites across the region.

Regionally important macro-corridors and contiguous areas of habitat include the region's rivers, lakes, uplands and peatlands. Water-based habitats are the principal ecological resources in the Midland Region. They vary considerably in their character and extent ranging from the very extensive Shannon system and the Midland peatlands to the much smaller scale lakes and rivers. However, all ecological systems are interconnected and inter-dependant, the peatlands to a lesser extent, pointing to the need to consider problems and solutions at a regional scale.

The RPGs are set out so that their implementation will contribute towards the protection and management, as relevant and appropriate, of the region's biodiversity resource.

1.4.3 Population and Settlement Patterns

The NSS State of the Regions Report[6] analysed major trends in regional population and settlement since the NSS was introduced in 2002 up to April 2009. The major trends identified in the Midland Region can be summarised as follows:

- Between 2002-2006 the population of the Midland Region grew by 11.6%. In 2006 the region had a population of 251,664 (CSO, 2006) which represents 6% of the total population of Ireland.
- The strongest growth occurred in the east of the region which is located in proximity to the Greater Dublin Area (GDA). Census figures (2006) show up to 20- 30% of residents in areas located to the east of the region travel further than 30km to work each day.
- Between 2002 and 2006 Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar, the linked gateway exhibited the second fastest growth of all gateways (after Letterkenny).
- The 2006 census indicated that 149,945 of the region's population reside in rural areas and that it had the second lowest population density at 38 persons per square kilometre.

The patterns outlined above indicate that there has been some influence from the NSS as translated by the RPGs, particularly in terms of the strengthening of the urban hierarchy. As this is the second RPG process and given the economic climate and natural development lag, also the fact that the last full census was carried out in 2006, the figures above alone may not represent a complete picture of policy performance at local level.

1.4.4 Employment

The highest level of employment in the region was achieved in 2007 when there were 127,000[7] people employed. In terms of absolute employment the public sector was the largest employer (22.4%), while the manufacturing sector was the second largest employer (15.9%) followed by construction (15.7%) and wholesale/ retail (13.4%).

[5] Ramsar Sites designated internationally for the conservation of wetlands, particularly those of importance to waterfowl under The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance.

[6] National Spatial Strategy – State of the Regions Report, DoEHLG, 2009.

[7] QNHS, Q3, 2007.

Employment grew by 44.7% in the Midland Region between 1998 and 2008 and all sectors recorded increases, with the exception of agriculture. However due to the economic downturn, by 2009 there was a decline in employment levels to 108,200[8].

Despite the declining proportion of employment in manufacturing, the Midland Region still retains a proportionately larger share in this sector than in the case nationally (17.5% vs 13.1%). The decline in the construction sector has had disproportionately high negative impact on the Midland Region given its reliance on the sector in the period up to 2007. In 2007 there were 19,900[9] persons employed in the construction however by the fourth quarter of 2009 it had fallen 46.7% to 10,600[10].

In terms of foreign direct investment and expansion activity, the med tech sector (along with Pharmaceuticals) has been the most productive in employment terms. Growth in internationally traded services in the region has been modest and well below national levels.

In 2008, agency supported employment stood at 13,000[11], representing approximately 11% of total employment in the region, compared to a national average of approximately 14.5%. The largest agency supported sector in employment terms, is the food and drinks sector which accounts for more than a fifth of all agency supported jobs in the region.

Unemployment trends in the region, combined with the high number of jobs lost in specific sectors, in a region with one of the lowest average wages in the country over the 'celtic tiger' period mean that the Midland Region now faces specific challenges that need to be addressed from several fronts in a co-ordinated multi-agency approach.

1.4.5 Infrastructure

1.4.5.1 Transport

The Midland Region is traversed by motorway corridors (M4, M6, M7 and M8) as well as rail lines radiating from Dublin to Sligo, Galway and Limerick and Cork, the social and economic arteries of the country upon which the region has yet to fully capitalise. Within the region, transport links between the towns of the linked gateway and the principal towns remain weak and a barrier to the Midland Region achieving its full potential.

Close proximity to Dublin Airport and good connections to it present a convenient entry point for international business connections.

1.4.5.2 Communications

- Metropolitan Area Networks (MANs) are in place and operational in the linked gateway and principal towns. MANs are also in place in Edenderry, Birr and Banagher.

1.4.5.3 Water and Waste Water

- At present, treated water supply and sewerage treatment in the linked gateway is primarily undertaken at a local level, with sources of water supply including Lough Owel, the River Shannon and ground water.

1.4.5.4 Energy

- The main Dublin-Galway gas transmission pipeline serves the Midland Region including the towns of Athlone, Tullamore, Kinnegad and Mullingar.
- There are three peat-burning electricity generating stations at Lanesboro, Shannonbridge and Edenderry.

1.4.5.5 Waste

The four counties in the region together with North Tipperary have a Regional Waste Management Plan in place. The plan recognises the necessity for adequate waste management infrastructure within the region.

EMPLOYMENT GREW BY 44.7% IN THE MIDLAND REGION BETWEEN 1998 AND 2008.

[8] QNHS, Q4, 2009.
[9] QNHS, Q3, 2007, CSO.
[10] QNHS, Q4, 2009, CSO.
[11] Forfas Regional Competitiveness Agenda – Baseline Analysis – Midlands, 2009.

Figure 1.3: The Midland Region – Inter-regional Links

Northern Ireland

- No geographical boundary with Midland Region
- Links through Royal Canal/Shannon-Erne navigation system.
- Opportunity to enhance trading links with growing socio-economic linkages and enhanced transport links.
- Northern-most point of the Midland Region is within 30km of Northern Ireland.

Border Region

Key Linkages/Challenges/Opportunities:

- Geographical boundaries with Longford and Westmeath.
- Transportation linkages of regional and national importance with the Border Region: M4 to Sligo, N52 Birr to Ardee, N55 Athlone-Cavan, Dublin-Sligo rail corridor.
- It is important to strengthen and improve the transport corridors with the Border Region as stronger north south transport links within Ireland are required and it will extend to enhanced economic activity with Northern Ireland.

Dublin Mid-East Region

Key Linkages/Challenges/Opportunities:

- Geographical boundaries with Laois, Offaly and Westmeath.
- Important transportation linkages of regional, national and international status.
- National Primary Routes M4/M6 and M7
- Rail linkages between Dublin–Sligo and Dublin-Galway.
- Dublin Airport is a little over 1 hour drive away.
- Links to passenger and freight shipping routes Dublin and Dun Laoghaire.
- Commuting resident workforce to Dublin and Mid-East Region.
- Strong socio-economic linkages with Dublin as a "World City".
- Outflow of disposable income from comparison goods shopping to Greater Dublin Area.

West Region

Key Linkages/Challenges/Opportunities:

- Geographical boundaries with Longford, Westmeath and Offaly.
- Transportation linkages of regional and national importance with West Region.
- N4/N5 Castlebar, N4/N6 Dublin-Galway, N63 Longford-Roscommon, N61 Athlone-Sligo.
- Dublin-Galway rail corridor, Dublin-Westport/ Ballina rail line.
- Athlone has strong socio-economic linkages with Longford and Roscommon and its environs including Monskland. As a commercial centre it has a sphere of influence, which impacts upon the West Region.
- Shared access, tourist and environmental protection opportunities with Roscommon and Galway along the banks of the River Shannon.

Mid–West Region

Key Linkages/Challenges/Opportunities:

- Geographical boundaries with Offaly and Laois.
- Important transportation linkages of regional, national and international status:
- M7 Dublin-Limerick linking to Shannon Airport, N62 Thurles-Athlone.
- Strong tourist route linkages with Shannon Waterway.

South–East Region Key

Linkages/Challenges/Opportunities:

- Geographical boundary with Laois.
- Important transportation linkages of regional importance: N80 Carlow -Moate , N78 Athy-Kilkenny, N77 Kilkenny - Portlaoise.
- Links to passenger and freight shipping routes to Rosslare Port.
- Strong socio-economic linkages with Carlow in particular Graiguecullen.
- Strong sphere of influence in Laois.

South-West Region

Key Linkages:

- Transportation linkages of national importance: M8 Portlaoise-Cork, Dublin-Cork rail corridor.
- No geographical boundary between the South West Region and the Midland Region.

1.5 Midland Region and Inter–Regional Links

The Midland Region because of its central location, borders five of the other seven regions in the state. Its strong relationships with adjacent regions and the maintenance of inter-regional connectivity is pivotal to the success of the region. Figure 1.3 The Midland Region – Inter-regional Links displays the key linkages, challenges and opportunities between the Midland Region and other regions.

1.6 Progress in Implementation of the RPG's 2004

It should be emphasised that this is the first revision of the RPG process and this Section should be read in conjunction with Section 1.4 of this document. However due to the absence of up to date census data and the impact of the recent economic downturn, the following trends and figures may not represent a complete picture of policy performance at regional and local level.

Linked Gateway and Principal Towns

Westmeath and Offaly Local Authorities are working together to maximise the potential of the linked gateway. Both Local Authorities jointly commissioned Indecon International Economic Consultants to prepare a Strategic Development Framework for the Midlands Gateway which was published in November 2006.

The Gateway Implementation Forum[12] was established on an inter agency basis to implement the recommendations of the Indecon Report. The Forum has progressed the implementation of a number of the Indecon recommendations including the completion of a skills audit to establish the skills needs and deficit across the Midland Region.

A Local Area Plan was prepared for Portlaoise 2006-2012. This has developed policies and objectives in line with the NSS and the RPGs to recognise the potential of Portlaoise as a key national transport node with the capacity for associated economic and logistics activities. Furthermore a Masterplan has been developed for the Togher Inland Port. In addition to the preparation of the Longford Town Development Plan 2009-2015, Local Area Plans have been prepared for the Northern and Southern Environs of Longford Town. Both Local Area Plans have developed land use zonings for both areas in conjunction with infrastructure provision. The Northern Environs Plan has outlined the provision of a road network in consultation with the National Roads Authority (NRA) and DoEHLG. A Land Use and Transportation Study (LUTS) is also underway encompassing the town and its environs with a view towards coordinating policy across plan areas and policy sectors in order to facilitate the provision of commercial and residential development in appropriate areas to consolidate and strengthen the role of Longford as a principal town.

[12] The Gateway Implementation Forum comprises of Offaly and Westmeath Local Authorities, MRA, IDA Ireland, the Midland Gateway Chamber of Commerce, DoEHLG, Health Service Executive, AIT, Fáilte Ireland and FAS.

Settlement Pattern

The 2004 RPG's set out a settlement hierarchy, which was viewed as critical in the achievement of balanced and sustainable population growth for the region. The settlement hierarchy was based around the development of five spatial components or 'Development Areas' within the region, with primary focus on the development of a five town polycentric model.

The Development Areas have experienced different levels of population growth since adoption. The linked gateway of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar which is located in the Central Development Area (CDA) has experienced the second fastest growth of all gateways nationally.[13]

Of the defined development areas, the strongest population growth occurred in the Eastern Development Area (EDA). This represents a continuation of previous trends and reflects the continued influence of the GDA on this part of the region.

The pattern of settlement growth indicates that the fastest growth between 2002 and 2006 took place in the towns in the 1,500 and 10,000 population range. The rate in this case was substantially above the national rate for these size towns making it on a national basis, the region with by far the fastest rate of growth in towns in this range. This strengthening of the urban hierarchy can be attributed to a number of factors but is in line with RPG policy provisions.

Since the adoption of the 2004 RPGs each of the Local Authorities of the Midland Region through their respective Development Plans have acknowledged and have had due regard to the 2004 RPGs in the development of their settlement and housing strategies. However focusing regional development in a balanced manner within the five town polycentric model has proved a challenge due to the continued development pressure arising from the regions proximity to the GDA.

Regional Competitiveness

In relation to office and service type functions, the Midland Region has been successful in attracting investment as a result of improved accessibility, the availability of a skilled workforce and a high quality of life coupled with lower land and accommodation costs compared to the GDA.

Major investment in retail development has been ongoing in strengthening the retail offer in the region with major developments approved, under construction and completed. A Strategic Development Zone (SDZ) as identified in the Midland RPGs 2004 has not yet been formally designated.

In co-operation with the NRA and the DoEHLG, Laois County Council prepared a Masterplan for the Inland Port in Portlaoise so as to fulfil its role as designated in the NSS.

The Midlands Innovation and Research Centre (MIRC) together with Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) is an important focal point for the development and strengthening of industry and higher education links in research and development (R&D).

AIT continues to grow and develop a wide range of courses in the region and has strong outreach links. Research areas include nanotechnology, science and software.

Georgia Tech Ireland is an applied research institute which has a base in Athlone. It conducts joint research programmes with partner institutions including AIT. Its research and development activities in areas such as wireless sensors, digital media health systems, medical supply chains and sustainable energy make it an important strategic resource for the Midland Region.

[13] NSS – State of the Regions Report, DoEHLG. 2009.

Integrated Landuse Planning

All planning authorities have prepared County/Town and lower level landuse plans which incorporated policies of the RPGs to ensure that new development occurs in appropriate areas alongside supporting physical and social infrastructure.

The RPG Technical Working Group (see Appendix A) which meets under the auspices of the MRA has kept a range of landuse, transportation, and environmental protection policies under review.

Infrastructure

Road

- Road access to the region has progressed significantly with many large-scale projects completed or nearing completion. Intra and inter-regional transport connectivity has been enhanced considerably by the completion of the M6 and the M8 interurban routes. It is expected by late 2010 that the M7 inter- urban route will be completed and further improvements are proposed to the M4 interurban route. These improvements include a realignment of the current N4 from Mullingar to Rooskey which will significantly enhance connectivity between the linked gateway and the principal town of Longford and inter-regional links toward the Border Region.
- The N5 western bypass of Longford is at an advanced planning stage.
- Road access between the linked gateway has been enhanced by the completion of the M6 inter-urban route and the realignment of Sections of the N52 including the completion of the N52 Tullamore bypass. Connectivity between the linked gateway and the principal towns remains an issue.

Rail

- Major investment in the renewal of rail lines, signalling and station infrastructure coupled with the complete renewal of rolling stock and introduction of faster and more frequent services has enhanced the quality of rail services throughout the region.

Ports and Airports

- Recent improvements in national primary routes have enhanced access to Dublin Airport and Dublin Port from the region.
- Completion of the M7 inter-urban route will improve connectivity between the southern part of the region and Shannon Airport.

Infrastructure continued

Water/Wastewater

- Substantial investment in the region's water and wastewater infrastructure has been undertaken in recent years by individual Local Authorities.

Telecommunications

- Metropolitan Area Networks (MANs) are in place and operational in the linked gateway and principal towns. MANs are in place in Edenderry, Birr, and Banagher.

Promotion of the Region

Westmeath and Offaly Local Authorities are working together to maximise the potential of the linked gateway. They commissioned a Strategic Development Framework for the linked gateway which was carried out by Indecon International Economic Consultants and published in November 2006.

The Gateway Implementation Forum has established three sub-groups as follows: Competitiveness Sub-Group, Midlands Ambassadors Sub-Group, and a Branding Sub-Group. The Branding Sub Group is currently developing a Midland website.

1.7 The Region – Key Planning and Development Issues

1.7.1 Economic Development

The key economic development issues for the Midland Region are:

- The need to accelerate the development of the linked gateway, Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar, in a structured and cohesive way recognising its importance as a key driver of growth in the region as a counterbalance to the GDA.
- The need to further develop and diversify the economy at a regional and local level.
- The need to actively encourage the development of the region's potential growth areas and target the development of activities which capitalise on the existing and emerging strengths in each of the linked gateway and principal towns.
- The need to provide the critical enabling infrastructure needed to attract further investment into the region.
- The need to engage actively with development agencies to promote the development of both foreign owned companies and indigenous companies with particular emphasis on higher value-added knowledge based industrial and international traded activities.
- The need to support innovation in order to translate ideas into high value products and services and to align education provision with industry needs.
- The need to develop the tourism potential of the region while protecting the natural resources on which it relies.
- The need to facilitate the appropriate development of the rural economy.

1.7.2 Future Development Patterns

The key issues associated with future development patterns are related to the Regional Settlement Strategy and in particular to:

- The need to strengthen the critical mass of the region's urban structure by prioritising the development of the linked gateway of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar with the support of the principal towns of Longford and Portlaoise as part of a five town polycentric model.

- The need to establish a policy framework for the five interrelated "Development Areas", harnessing the unique development potential of each Development Area including its urban and rural components.
- The need to sustain and revitalise rural areas by building up towns and villages as "local growth engines and service providers" and identifying development opportunities in rural areas that will deliver a more diversified economic base.

1.7.3 Future Investment Priorities

The key investment priorities are set out as follows:

- Investment in water and waste water services in accordance with the defined Regional Settlement Strategy and in particular that which is associated with the linked gateway of Athlone, Tullamore, Mullingar and principal towns of Longford and Portlaoise.
- Prioritisation of the national secondary road network connecting the linked gateway towns of Athlone, Tullamore, and Mullingar as the initial focus with additional concentration on enhancing links between the linked gateway and the principle towns of Longford and Portlaoise.
- The provision of a public transport system between the linked gateway and principal towns, including their co-ordination with inter-regional rail and express bus connections and investment in the double tracking of the Dublin to Sligo and Dublin to Galway rail lines. The reinstatement of the rail link between Athlone and Mullingar would significantly enhance connectivity of the rail network by connecting the Sligo, Mayo and Galway lines.
- A targeted land servicing measure, in terms of water services, access investments, telecommunications and energy to release key serviced land for residential, industrial and commercial purposes in the linked gateway and principle towns of Athlone, Tullamore, Mullingar, Longford and Portlaoise.
- Targeted investment to develop the innovation potential of the Midland Region, including enhancing entrepreneurship and developing existing economic sectors within the region.
- Targeting and maximising social inclusion, education and training budgets available from various sources to service providers across the Midland Region by means of greater coordination of measures aimed at increasing educational attainment across all levels of education.
- Continued development of AIT as a key driver in the region of skills, education, innovation and development, through a renewed focused investment in basic and applied science and technology, such as in Information Communication Technology (ICT), pharmaceutical-medical technology and other high tech sectors likely to contribute to realisation of the economic potential of the region.
- The roll out of broadband services across the region and in particular broadband services within the linked gateway and principal towns.
- Targeted investment in key tourism infrastructure, developing a network of regional and national scale visitor attractions, including focused investment on the inland waterways within the context of a wider urban/rural renewal and recreational facility aimed at developing the full potential of canal and lake harbour areas throughout the region.
- Reinforcing linkages between the Midland, Border, Mid West and West Regions by strengthening the N55/N62 (Longford/Athlone/Birr).

1.7.4 Conserving and Enhancing Environmental Qualities

The key issues associated with conserving and enhancing the environmental qualities of the region relate to:

- The promotion and enhancement of the various elements that make up the landscape of the Midland Region.
- The conservation and enhancement of the nature conservation resources of the Midland Region, including the peatlands, the waterways, the River Shannon, Lough Ree and the Slieve Bloom Mountains.
- The conservation, protection, and enhancement of the architectural heritage of the Midland Region for future generations.
- Ensuring that the strategic development of the region is both informed by, and protects the integrity of important habitats and natural areas such as the Natura 2000 sites and NHAs.
- The protection and enhancement of water quality within the region in line with the Water Framework Directive.

Lough Owel, County Westmeath

2

VISION FOR THE REGION

COUNTY WESTMEATH

Tudenham, Lough Ennell

2.1 Strategic Vision

The overall aim of the RPGs is to ensure the successful implementation of NSS at regional, county, and local level. The 2004 RPGs for the Midland Region set out a strategic vision along with strategic goals through which the vision is to be achieved. This vision remains an appropriate vision for the region and the goals have been refined to have regard to significant changes which have taken place since 2004.

VISION:

By 2022, the Midland Region will be a successful, sustainable and equitable region full of opportunities for its expanded population achieved through:

- Enhancing the critical mass of the region by combining the strengths of the linked gateway of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar, as envisaged in the NSS with those of the principal towns of Longford and Portlaoise.
- Developing the full potential of rural areas in the region in a manner that is compatible with the strengthening of the urban structure of the region.
- Offering a distinctive lifestyle rooted in a high quality living environment, rich in heritage and landscape value.
- Harnessing the central geographical location of the region at the "heart" of Ireland with more inter-regional links than any other region in Ireland, to build a strategically focused network of transport and communications links.
- Ensuring that the natural environment of the region such as water quality, landscape, and biodiversity is protected, maintained, and enhanced, where appropriate, as a basis for future sustainable development in the region.

2.2 Goals

It is proposed to meet this vision through the following strategic goals:

GOAL 1	To drive the implementation of the linked gateway, envisaged in the NSS for the Midland Region, within a broader context of a polycentric model centred on the linked gateway and principal towns in the region.
GOAL 2	To provide a comprehensive sustainable spatial policy framework, supported by the necessary implementation structures to harness the strengths of the Midland Region.
GOAL 3	To achieve a regional population of the order of 317,100 by 2022 building on individual strengths of the linked gateway and the principal towns, while maintaining and supporting the viability of smaller town's villages and rural areas.
GOAL 4	To ensure that the strategic development of the region works to conserve and enhance the natural and environmental qualities of the region, its biodiversity and habitats.
GOAL 5	To upgrade and augment strategic physical and social infrastructure in the region to attract the target population and sustain critical mass and regional competitiveness.
GOAL 6	To promote the economic development of the region through the sustainable development of the social, economic and physical infrastructure demanded by foreign and indigenous industry. Regional education provision and research and development capability should be aligned with industry needs.
GOAL 7	To expand the tourism sector by creating an integrated approach to facilitate the development of the Midland Region as a unique visitor destination, promoting and developing all areas in a balanced and sustainable manner.
GOAL 8	To promote the delivery of renewable energy particularly in the context of the existing energy infrastructure in the Midland Region.
GOAL 9	To structure the region in a manner that integrates high quality built and physical environment with essential physical and social infrastructure such as transport and water services as well as schools, retail, community, healthcare and recreation/sporting facilities.
GOAL 10	To co-ordinate and target key transport and communications investments within the region in order to create sustainable effective communication links and improve intra and inter-regional connectivity.
GOAL 11	To develop and market a distinctly unique image and identity for the region that will attract investment and economic activity to the region.
GOAL 12	To strengthen and sustain rural communities in order to complement urban centres, and contribute to the distinct identity of the region.
GOAL 13	To identify and expand on the opportunities and linkages that exist between the Midland Region and adjoining regions.

COUNTY OFFALY

Tullamore

Finesse Medical Ltd., Longford, County Longford

MIDLAND REGIONAL AUTHORITY

3

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

COUNTY LONGFORD

Irish Prison Headquarters, Longford

3.1 Introduction

The sustainable development of the Midland Region into the future requires a strong economy which must be built on sound principles and the specific strengths and advantages inherent in the region, while strengthening key areas in which the region is weak. A sound Economic Development Strategy provides direction and a framework to guide future policy formulation and decision making at appropriate levels.

In this regard, the Economic Development Strategy sets out Key Strategic Issues that need to be addressed to drive the region's economy and identifies the elements required to increase productivity in the region. Arising from this analysis, the strategy identifies the key sectoral opportunities and their potential to provide a basis for growth and secure future economic development. The importance of maintaining a strong and vibrant rural economy is also acknowledged and developed.

The focus of the Economic Development Strategy therefore, is to enhance those areas where the region has preformed less well and to concentrate on those sectors of economic activity where for reasons of location, infrastructure or natural resources, it has a competitive advantage.

3.2 Context

The Economic Development Strategy for the Midland Region has been guided and informed by the Strategic Development Framework for the Midlands Gateway (Indecon Report), The Horizon 2020 Strategy by IDA Ireland and work by Forfás on the Regional Competitiveness Agenda.

The Midland Region retains a proportionately larger share in the manufacturing sector than the national average (17.5% vs 13.1%). Although manufacturing is in decline nationally, the key sectors in the Midland Region are Food/Drink, Engineering (metal products and equipment), Life Sciences (especially medical technologies) and ICT/Software which are more stable in terms of their ability to relocate to less developed economies due to their specific labour force, services and infrastructural requirements.

The region experienced high growth in employment in the construction sector over the past decade, considerably more than the national average. However the current economic downturn, which has had a dramatic impact on the sector nationally, has resulted in a decline in construction related employment of 46.7% in the Midland Region from 2007 to 2009.

Amongst agency supported firms, the most prominent in employment terms are the food sector followed by the medical technology sector. The med-tech sector is one of the largest employers in the Midland Region. It is reliant on a small number of large companies, in terms of foreign direct investment and expansion activity. The med-tech sector along with pharmaceuticals has been the most productive in employment terms. Growth in Internationally Traded Services (ITS) in the region has been modest and well below national levels. Employment in ITS in the region remains mostly in manufacturing activity.

Gross Value Added (GVA)[14] statistics, which are the lowest in the country, indicate that the region is lacking in higher value-added activities. GVA per capita levels in the Midland Region may be impacted by a lower proportion of foreign and internationally trading companies and may also be affected due to the commuting population who live in the Midland Region but whose productivity is measured outside the region.

[14] GVA is a measure of the value of goods and services produced in a region.

3.2.1 Strengths and Challenges

The following strengths and challenges are specific to the Midland Region and have informed the formulation of the Key Sectoral Opportunities that are discussed further in this Chapter.

Strengths

- The region is strategically located in proximity to major ports and airports supported by road and rail network. Excellent progress has been made in terms of developing major inter-urban routes, enhancing inter-regional links and intra-regional connectivity between the regions linked gateway and the principal towns.
- The growth potential of the linked gateway as a driver of regional growth and the established fora in place to progress the linked gateway potential.
- Availability of skilled workforce, suitable designated development lands and supporting infrastructure.
- The opportunity of the region to harness the potential for renewable energy development arising from the presence of cutaway bogs.
- Potential to significantly grow the tourism sector based on unique attractions of the region and the potential for the development of a network of attractions.
- Strategic assets in support of innovative activity, including AIT, which have important links to other Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) including NUI Galway, NUI Maynooth and Carlow Institute of Technology, the MIRC, Georgia Tech Ireland and others.
- The Midland Region has unique assets in terms of the diverse nature and quality of its rural environment and the individual contributions of the main urban centres, contributing to a high quality of life.
- Advances made in terms of publishing the Strategic Development Framework for the Midlands Gateway, the formation of the Midlands Gateway Implementation Forum and the establishment of the Midland Gateway Chamber recognising, identifying and developing the leadership and strategic capacity of the region.
- Important indigenous enterprise base including engineering, food/drink, life sciences and ICT/software that offer potential for growth.
- Potential for the development of a SDZ to generate employment and further enhance the regions enterprise sector as recommended in the Indecon Report.
- Central location of the region for the location of an Inland Port at Portlaoise supported by the Togher Masterplan.

Challenges

- To identify and address skill development needs of employers in the region.
- To avail of skilled workforce through the creation of employment opportunities and re-skilling of labour where appropriate.
- To provide suitable employment opportunities for the resident workforce and to enhance the regions productivity as expressed through the regions GVA, and per capita GVA indices.
- To address the need to broaden a range of employment opportunities, balance the sectoral offer and thereby offset the over reliance on the construction sector within the region.
- To develop higher value added, knowledge based activities within the manufacturing sector.
- To create an identity for the linked gateway and the Midland Region as the "heart" of Ireland.
- Develop the rural economy in an appropriate manner.

AS THE CONCEPT OF REGIONAL PLANNING IS A NEW ONE IN AN IRISH CONTEXT, A BRIDGE BETWEEN LOCAL AND NATIONAL, THIS REQUIRES **A NEW SENSE OF COMMUNAL IDENTITY.**

3.3 Key Strategic Issues

There are five overarching and interrelated strategic issues that must be considered in order to drive the regions economy and enhance the overall business environment of the region. These key strategic issues are as follows:

- Create a Strong Regional Identity.
- Build the Critical Mass of the Linked Gateway and Principal Towns.
- Establish a Strategic Development Zone East of Athlone.
- Promote the Rural Economy.
- Increase Regional Productivity and Enhance Competitiveness.

3.3.1 Regional Identity

The two specific and important elements of regional identity in an economic sense, relate to the awareness of the region as a functioning economic unit by those who live within it, and the branding of the region in order to attract and retain population and investment.

As the concept of regional planning is a new one in an Irish context, a bridge between local and national, this requires a new sense of communal identity that is fostered on a cross sectoral basis. The four counties of the Midland Region have strong individual identities based on social, cultural, economic and geographical associations forged over millennia. One of the greatest challenges faced by regional planning is to foster recognition of common issues across county boundaries and a realisation that the planned, sustainable development of the region as a whole will be to the benefit of all constituent parts.

On a national level, IDA Ireland have branded Ireland under the theme *Innovation Comes Naturally* (Horizon 2020 Strategy) to promote economic investment by providing a distinct and positive identity on a global scale. The creation of an identity is only being addressed in terms of a branding strategy for the linked gateway at present. A similar approach is considered appropriate for the region as a whole in order to harness its full economic potential. The development of this branding strategy would capitalise on the central geographical location of the region in its entirety, its high quality of life and attractiveness as place to live, work and visit.

The RPGs recognise that the Gateway Implementation Forum has significantly progressed the branding strategy for the linked gateway. In that regard it is proposed that the Gateway Implementation Forum is the most appropriate forum to develop a regional brand thereby avoiding duplication. Developing a strong regional brand identity will communicate the potential of the region as a destination in which to live, visit and invest based on the specific attributes that are explored further in this economic strategy.

3.3.2 Critical Mass

The core concept of the regional model is the establishment of a strong spatial hierarchy centred on the linked gateway of Athlone, Tullamore, and Mullingar as identified in the NSS, supported by the principal towns of Longford and Portlaoise.

The linked gateway is centrally located within the region and, as such, the role of Longford in the north and Portlaoise in the south as drivers and administrative centres and in terms of identity as outlined above, are critical in terms of the delivery of this goal. This polycentric spatial settlement model allows interaction in both directions across the urban hierarchy providing a base upon which stronger physical, economic, social and administrative networks can be developed, facilitating enhanced economic activity and the development and retention of critical mass.

Enhancing the attractiveness of the Midland Region for enterprise development and employment creation is critical for the region to grow. Building critical mass of the linked gateway and the principal towns is crucial to developing and sustaining enterprise and employment in the region whilst also contributing to the conditions necessary to achieve a strong regional economy.

3.3.3 Strategic Development Zone

As outlined above, the achievement of critical mass in the linked gateway is fundamental to the future economic growth of the region as a whole. The establishment of an SDZ, as identified within the Strategic Development Framework for the Midlands Gateway, to foster economic development and supporting services, is essential to facilitate and retain critical mass. It is considered appropriate that an SDZ is developed within the Midland

Region over the lifetime of these RPGs, influencing all spatial sectors of the region and their economic, social and administrative activities.

The SDZ offers potential to accommodate the development of major employment and enterprise activities including the economic sectors as outlined in Section 3.4. Such zones have significant physical and social infrastructure requirements including proximity to third level centres of learning (with related research and development capabilities) as well as a large and skilled population, proximity to national communication and energy networks such as motorways, rail routes, electricity, gas and broadband networks. Having considered the infrastructural distribution and the ability of existing infrastructure to expand sufficiently, the aforementioned report suggests that the preferred location for a SDZ is to the east of Athlone (given the presence of AIT), between Athlone and Tullamore with linkages to Mullingar and the principal towns via high capacity road links, enhanced public transport options and world-class communications networks.

3.3.4 Rural Economy

While the development of the linked gateway and principal towns are important in the achievement of balanced regional development at a national level, the rural areas of the region have skill sets, community resources, and a broad knowledge base that has the potential to provide significant social and economic benefit to the region.

For the purposes of this Section, "rural" is considered to encompass all those areas, both settlements and countryside, outside established urban areas with a population of less than 1,500 people.

3.3.4.1 The Future of the Rural Economy

The Midland Region contains many areas of high-quality agricultural land as well as land better suited to forestry. A significant component of the rural Midland Region is the extensive industrial peatlands that have exerted considerable influence over the economy, built heritage and settlement pattern of the region, recognition of their importance is in the detail afforded to peatlands in this Chapter and in Chapters 6 and 7.

European agricultural policy has had profound effects on the practice of agriculture nationally, effects that are rapidly seen in the rural economy and landscape as a consequence when policies change. The role of the RPGs is not to anticipate such change but to provide the framework for a mechanism that will help rural communities to be better insulated from this uncertainty through the development of a more self-sustaining and tailored economy.

Agriculture has traditionally been the mainstay of rural economies and will continue to play a major role, as such, it is essential that the productive lands of the Midland Region are recognised as a resource in their own right and their agricultural potential maximised in the interests of the region and the nation as a whole. The farming sector and the farm family have been, are, and should continue to be a central part of sustainable rural communities. Without this sector rural communities would lose their connection to their setting and those around them and their basic functionality as communities as a result. In this regard, the eventual shape of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in the post-2013 period should recognise that it is critical for Ireland and the Midland Region that direct support for farmers is maintained at a high level. It is considered that direct supports are the best means of underpinning the viability of the farm structure, particularly small family farms. Therefore it is vital that any reform of CAP should provide sufficient incentives to farmers to ensure that they maintain a strong production base which will in turn will ensure that strong rural communities are retained.

Modern agriculture has become much more complex, and aside from agricultural land being used for the production and processing of goods it is competing with other uses such as housing, tourism and recreation. The decline of agriculture on marginal land also signals the need for recognition of agriculture as the primary agent of land management outside of the urban areas.

Extractive industries such as peat and quarrying are also rural activities for which substantial regulation exists in current legislation. Occasionally industries associated with these sectors benefit the local economy by co-location in close proximity to the resource.

Improvements in communications technology, the rollout or broadband in particular, has made it possible for businesses to locate in rural areas that hitherto would not have considered or been considered in a non-urban location. In some instances, these operations can enhance the rural economy where the labour force and service

infrastructure is community based and does not result in urban level infrastructure demands, which are unsustainable to provide from both an economic and environmental point of view.

Larger scale enterprises without rural connections or community base are generally discouraged due to their unsustainable demands on rural services and the potential extent to which they can compromise their setting.

It is not possible to prescribe in these RPGs what the nature of the balance between these considerations should be in every situation. However, Development Plan policies should incorporate all these considerations and should identify the basis on which balanced decisions will be taken. Such models of decision making might have regard to the circumstances of the community affected, the fragility and uniqueness of the natural resource involved, the capacity to mitigate negative impacts, the extent to which the proposal is likely to bring social and economic benefit to an area and the implications for those who will not benefit directly from the decision being taken.

The rural economy should be supported and developed in the interests of the many communities that inhabit these areas as well as in the interests of the wider society and managed in a way that is sustainable into the future. The concept of sustainability is a complex one seeking as it does a balance between social and economic development, environmental protection, the minimisation of the use of scarce, non-renewable natural resources and underpinned by the concept of social equity. The following Sections address economic areas that have potential to sustainably expand the rural economy.

3.3.4.2 Agri Food

The agriculture and food industry is Ireland's largest indigenous sector, employing circa 155,000[15] people and accounting for over half of the country's indigenous exports. Smaller scale artisan producers are also emerging in the region many of whom have developed alternative farm enterprises. The 'Offaly Delicious' artisan food network, is an example of the range of high quality niche food producers in the region. Farmers markets are also making an important contribution to the food sector within the region with numerous markets held throughout each county on a weekly basis.

Teagasc[16] predicts that the agri-food sector is likely to become even more important in the coming years, which could provide significant longer term opportunity for the Midland Region, given its agricultural capacity. The sector should be considered as part of a wider 'bio-economy', as scientific advances, consumer trends and market developments create novel and non-traditional uses for natural resources (including agri-environmental products and services, as well as energy and bio-processing).

The collection of agri-food related assets within the Midland Region indicate potential in a number of areas namely:

- Further growth in niche consumer foods.
- Opportunity to diversify building on existing markets.
- Diversification from traditional farming activities.

To remain competitive in today's challenging economic conditions the agri-food industry needs to increase its value added, diversify its markets and increase productivity. It is essential that productivity and business processes are improved for the agri-food sector, including the ability to identify and interpret consumer trends, through R&D programmes and portfolio management, design engineering, branding and packaging technologies.

[15] Regional Competitiveness Agenda – Volume II – Realising Potential Midlands, 2009.

[16] Towards 2030 Teagasc's Role in Transforming Ireland's Agri-Food Sector and the Wider Bio-economy, Teagasc, 2008.

3.3.4.3 Non Agricultural Rural Enterprise

The development of diversified employment and enterprise opportunities are essential in sustaining rural areas and promoting future economic potential. While the traditional skills and resources remain important, newer emerging technologies provide enhanced opportunities for rural areas. In particular new communication technologies and newer forms of enterprise and manufacture which are small scale, low-volume and high-value in nature, present opportunities for the development of SMEs and micro-enterprise in rural areas, where these have a restricted environmental footprint and low demand on rural infrastructure and services.

3.3.4.4 Rural Tourism

An overall Tourism Strategy for the Midland Region is contained in Chapter 7, which sets out strategic policies and objectives relating to the potential development of tourism in the region.

While the Tourism Strategy is significant in terms of tourism development in the region, there is a need to identify at a micro level where tourism can play a strong role in stimulating the rural economy. Tourism growth for the rural areas of the Midland Region is dependent on enhancing the quality and supporting the development of the rural tourism product on offer, including the development of walks, water based activities, tourism infrastructure (including the provision of accommodation) and rural led initiatives. These actions will stimulate local and wider markets, spreading the benefits and increasing citizen awareness and appreciation of their natural environment. Alongside this, it is critical to ensure that increasing pressures of commercialisation and development do not serve to undermine rural ecosystems, landscapes and conservation areas thus endangering what makes such destinations attractive and special places to visit.

The balancing of resource protection with the provisions of the Regional Settlement and Economic Development Strategy means that the majority of infrastructure intensive tourism development in rural areas will be channelled toward local service settlements where the required supporting infrastructure exists.

3.3.4.5 Industrial Peatlands

Bord na Mona, as the major owner of industrial peatlands owns approximately 43,000 hectares in the Midland Region, 54% of its total land holding. The RPGs recognise that peat is a finite resource and that there will be a requirement to identify alternative uses for large areas of cutaway peatlands which have significant potential to contribute to the diversification of the rural economy.

Bord na Mona has identified the need to diversify from peat extraction to sustainable enterprises such as wind energy, biomass, environmental products, resource recovery and eco tourism, which are addressed in this Section.

The potential of the peatlands and associated cutaway to accommodate large scale energy production in the form of wind farms and bioenergy fuel sources is acknowledged. There is also the potential to create new wetland based habitats on worked out peatlands and allied to this, provide a unique tourist product. There is also significant potential for the utilisation of peatland areas for educational and research purposes and to further develop a range of outdoor amenities further addressed in Chapter 7.

In identifying such uses, it is recognised that the peatland areas require a holistic management approach to set out the potential landuses having regard to their protection through international and national designations. This approach must achieve a balance between facilitating development in a vulnerable landscape whilst protecting the environmental and heritage value of these areas.

The RPGs therefore support the preparation of a Holistic Management Plan that will address the future uses of worked out industrial peatlands.

3.3.4.6 Renewable Energy

Renewable energy in all its forms offers significant potential for the development of the rural economy, including wind energy potential, the growing of energy crops and ancillary supporting infrastructure within the broader objective of reducing carbon emissions and developing alternative renewable energy sources.

Wind farm technology also provides a new source of income for farmers with turbines within farms both serving the farms energy needs and also exporting to the national grid where feasible. Development of new turbines needs to take place within the context of clear development plan policies and the DoEHLG Wind Energy Development Guidelines[17].

Worked out peatland areas, offer potential for renewable energy installations including wind energy. With a strong history of energy production and an extensive electricity transmission network in place, the potential exists for a smooth transition to renewable energy from fossil fuels. This opportunity can result in related employment opportunities in manufacturing, servicing and research and development activities.

3.3.4.7 Forestry

Afforestation has become a significant feature in the region over the last decade as a result of targeted grant aid schemes. It is considered that the continued development of this sector should be promoted in a sustainable manner, compatible with the protection of the environment.

The potential for afforestation in conjunction with a species diversity programme favouring the planting of native broad leaf trees, carried out in tandem with the development of amenity leisure walks and trails, could become a realistic alternative to mono-species coniferous developments.

Forestry offers potential to the rural economy in a number of ways:

- Afforested areas provide one of the most suitable locations for a variety of rural recreational activities including trails of all types, mountain biking, nature walks, orienteering and hiking.
- Forestry provides some opportunities for employment in maintenance, felling and re-planting and the services associated with those activities.
- Forestry provides an opportunity for the downstream processing of the timber for a variety of purposes including bio-mass, fibreboard manufacture, construction material production and so on. While the large-scale manufacturing potential in Ireland is likely to be limited to a small number of locations in the short-term, the potential for more small-scale, targeted processing enterprises is significant.

3.3.4.8 Key requirements for the Future of the Rural Economy

The above outlines some of the key considerations regarding the development of a healthy and sustainable rural economy in the Midland Region. A number of strategic developments will be required to deliver this.

- The adoption of a post-2013 CAP system that will support agricultural production.
- The delivery of high quality, cost-effective broadband to all parts of the region.
- The development of a Holistic Management Plan for the Industrial Peatlands.
- The adoption by planning authorities of appropriate policies regarding rural enterprise within their Development Plans.
- Participation by rural communities and entrepreneurs in the economic diversification and social development of their area through a suite of funding and mentoring supports provided by Integrated Local Development Companies.
- The establishment of Community Based Enterprise Centres to act as a stimulus to local enterprise.
- Collaborative engagement by all those involved in the development of the rural areas of the region in providing a coherent, consistent context within which such development can take place.

[17] DoEHLG Wind Energy Development Guidelines, Guidelines for Planning Authorities (June 2006).

3.3.5 Increasing Regional Productivity and Enhancing Competitiveness

It is paramount in the economic development of the region that it strives to increase its productivity and improve its competitiveness in the current challenging global economic climate. The following enabling elements have been identified as essential in achieving an enhanced business and commercial environment in the region.

3.3.5.1 Skills Base, Education and Training

The key sectoral opportunities within the region have been identified, which will provide a basis for growth and the potential to attract high value added activities within and to the region. The challenge for the development of these sectoral opportunities will be the availability of suitably qualified and skilled personnel with a range of generic and transferable skills. To deliver the required skills base, a concerted approach will be required to align education provision with industry needs. In this regard, AIT has a strong research and innovation agenda and has already formed a number of strategic alliances with businesses and other HEIs in Ireland and internationally.

A number of training agencies including FÁS and Vocational Education Committees (VECs) contribute to the development of skills and provision of training. The Midland Region is faced with the additional challenge of retraining unemployed people, formerly involved in the construction industry. Many of these people were self-employed with specific skills in certain areas, particularly entrepreneurial skills and innovative ideas. Tailored approaches are required in this area as simple re-skilling would ignore this important resource set. The region needs to cultivate entrepreneurship which begins in the cradle and needs to be followed through primary and secondary school programmes.

The enterprise development agencies along with education and training providers must continue to co-ordinate their services to encourage the entrepreneurial potential within this group. Third level institutions should be encouraged to develop outreach training which could facilitate access to appropriate, tailored third level courses.

3.3.5.2 Innovation, Research and Development

It is recognised that the promotion of innovation is essential in order to enhance entrepreneurship and develop the existing economic sectors within the region, in order to translate ideas into high value products and services. AIT through MIRC has made a positive contribution in that regard by incubating and developing innovative enterprises across the Midland Region.

The relatively low levels of expenditure on R&D activity within the region, highlights the importance of AITs R&D agenda and the importance of maximising the potential offered by the presence of the internationally renowned Georgia Tech Ireland in Athlone. The low level of R&D activity also highlights the requirement to further support and develop links between HEIs including AIT, Carlow IT, NUI Maynooth, NUI Galway, Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) and University of Limerick and align with industrial requirements.

3.3.5.3 Leadership and Strategic Capacity

The importance of local leadership in driving regional development is well recognised internationally, (Porter, 1998, Putnam, 2000, Skidmore, 2001) and is a critical factor in progressing the development of key infrastructures, building critical mass, ensuring well planned urban development, and building 'clusters' of enterprise activity that serve to stimulate investment and innovation. Throughout the Midland Region there are a wide range of agencies, groups and organisations at regional, county and sub-county level that promote local and regional development and provide support to business. It is important that this existing network is co-ordinated and utilised rather than reinvented.

The coming together collectively of the 'key' regional partners such as infrastructure providers, semi-state bodies and community and voluntary groups from across the region has the potential to provide the leadership and strategic capacity that is required to advance the regional development agenda. Such a pooling of resources will lift the entire region and ensure the attainment of the goals required in the short, medium, and long term to increase the attractiveness of the Midland Region.

The Gateway Implementation Forum is a good example of a collaborative network with Local Authorities, public agencies and the Midland Gateway Chamber of Commerce

coming together to assist in the progression and development of the linked gateway. Apart from formulating proposals and programmes to advance the linked gateway they have undertaken a skills audit of existing enterprises and advanced a branding strategy for the linked gateway. The Gateway Implementation Forum is a critical component in assisting the linked gateway achieve its potential as envisaged in the NSS.

With fewer employment opportunities available, many consider entrepreneurship to be a realistic option. It is therefore an imperative that leadership and entrepreneurship are fully supported as they will be central to driving the regions recovery. Existing resources should be identified, recognised and utilised where available, including a skills base of existing entrepreneurs that can be utilised to mentor, inspire and support a new generation of innovative thinkers. To that end the Midland Region needs to ensure that it facilitates ease of access to the 'right' expertise and information to enable the leaders and entrepreneurs in our region to realise their potential. The roll-out of national and local programmes in support of entrepreneurship by Enterprise Ireland, County Enterprise Boards (CEBs) and Integrated Local Development Companies has resulted in strengthening business support structures within the region and should be continued.

3.3.5.4 Critical Infrastructure

Progress has been made in terms of the development of the major inter-urban routes which traverse the Midland Region and other projects such as the N52 Tullamore by-pass. The development of such infrastructures has had the effect of not only enhancing inter-regional links with the GDA, westwards to Galway and south/west to Limerick and Cork, but also improving intra-regional link-up between the linked gateway towns and other regional centres. However, weaknesses remain such as the route from Portlaoise to Tullamore (N80) and connectivity to Longford (N55, N4).

The development of improved physical infrastructure, including roads, water/waste water services, broadband and utilities will be paramount for the development of the region's economy in line with the identified priorities.

3.3.5.5 Quality of Life

Enhancing and promoting quality of life within the region is essential, in order to attract mobile investment, the required labour and skills, to the region and to retain these advantages. Quality of life impacts all aspects of productivity and competitiveness and is critical to their enhancement. This inter-relationship is expressed in the following issues:

- Creating the conditions to foster and support innovation, creativity and knowledge generation/ transfer, sufficient provision of education and other support services, reduction in travel to work times/distances and enhanced diversity in terms of live/ work options.
- Attracting and retaining skilled people, particularly internationally mobile skilled labour, requiring high quality urban centres, a high level of service provision and accessible rural areas with diverse, attractive landscapes and a broad range of outdoor activities.
- Attracting knowledge intensive internationally mobile foreign direct investment, including research and innovation activities, availability of a broad range of easily accessible accommodation and conferencing facilities, high quality public transport and high speed networking capabilities.

The Midland Region has unique assets in terms of the diverse nature and largely unspoilt quality of its rural environment, combined with the individual contributions of the main urban centres. This suite of elements, collectively form an attractive living environment, which are important elements for those deciding to settle, invest and remain in the region.

3.4 Key Sectoral Opportunities

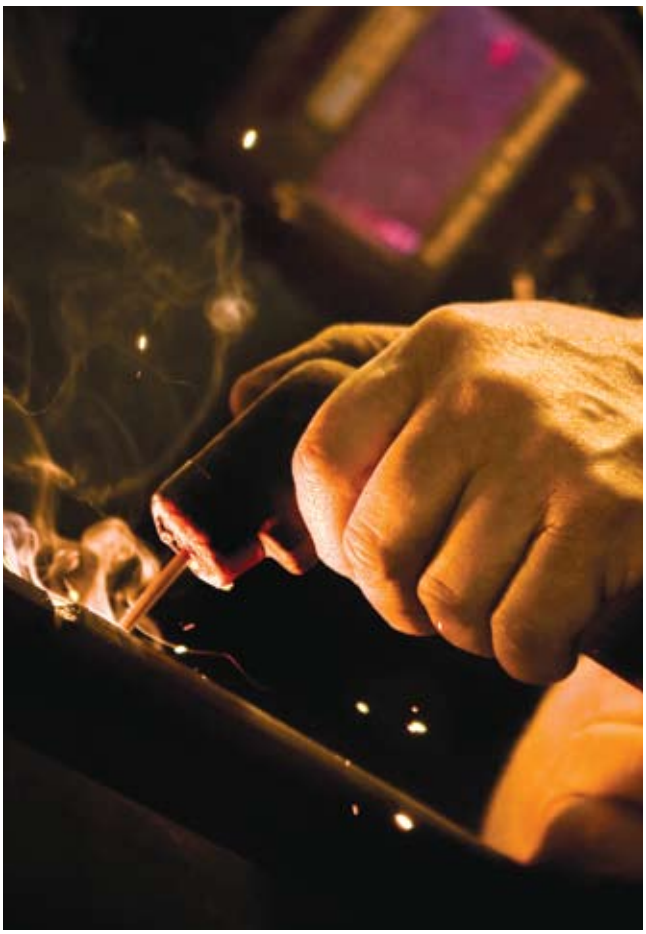
This Section considers the assets of the Midland Region and how they might be harnessed to further develop the existing enterprise base and to avail of future opportunities. The challenge over the next decade is to shift growth toward export oriented sectors and activities.

The outline for each sector identified in Table 3.1 demonstrates the suite of assets that provide a platform for growth: for attracting investment, stimulating entrepreneurship and enabling companies based in Ireland to grow and target international markets. Although the focus is on identifying key assets within the region, it is also important to look beyond the regional boundaries to develop key strategic sectoral alliances.

Table 3.1: Key Sectoral Opportunities

Internationally Traded Services (including ICT and Software)
Life Sciences
Food
Tourism and Leisure
Engineering
Green Enterprise
Logistics and Distribution
International Trading
Public Sector
Retail

ENHANCING AND PROMOTING QUALITY OF LIFE WITHIN THE REGION IS ESSENTIAL IN ORDER TO ATTRACT MOBILE INVESTMENT.



3.4.1 Internationally Traded Services (including Software and ICT)

A wide variety of services are now traded internationally including activities such as finance, insurance, computer related activities, R&D, advertising, marketing, accounting and consultancy. Globalisation along with the enabling technologies that underpin it has increased investment activity in business services to manage more complex global corporate activities and structures, such as shared services, customer support and customer management, business process outsourcing, supply chain procurement, Information Technology (IT) operations, human resources and finance/transaction processing.

The needs of this sector should be identified and addressed in terms of the regions competitiveness, availability of a skilled workforce, sufficient broadband capacity, conferencing and meeting facilities and enhancement of national and international connectivity.

3.4.1.1 Software and ICT

Road infrastructure enhancements have helped to strengthen the value proposition for international services in the Midland Region and some significant investments have been attracted to the region for example Teleflex (shared services operation), AXA (computer support centre) and PPD (contract research organisation) which join companies such as Capmark Services (commercial mortgage administration).

The Midland Region is developing strong expertise in telecommunications and software development, not least through the presence of the large Ericsson software development centre in Athlone and also growing research and commercialisation activity within AIT's Software Research Institute with links to Carlow IoT, NUI Maynooth and NUI Galway, Georgia Tech Research Institute and the MIRC. Strategic collaborative alliances with partners in industry and higher education sector within and outside the region could see the region building on the successes already achieved in the emergence of small technology companies with potential for growth.

The presence of ITS (including Software and ICT) within the region indicates potential in a number of areas namely:

- Attractive proposition for ITS companies and activities given the location of the Midlands (relative to Dublin in particular).
- Opportunity to take advantage of specific areas by stimulating entrepreneurship/new firm formation/ growth of existing indigenous companies through building on the region's emerging strengths in software development.
- Potential for locally traded services to grow and establish operations for trading in overseas markets leading to the internationalisation of locally traded companies.

In order to realise the potential as outlined above specific regional focus should be placed on skills development, education and training networks and HEI/ industry links and the availability of advanced broadband telecommunications services.

The **Software Research Institute** at AIT specialises in applied research in the wireless domain and has collaborated with start-ups, SMEs and multi-national companies with the focus on bringing leading edge research to the market-place. Current research projects are focused on (i) mobile applications (adaptive mobility), (ii) the long term evolution and competitiveness of 3G, (iii) Integrated Multimedia Streaming.

Georgia Tech Research Institute Ireland, is the Institute's first applied research facility outside the United States. Georgia Tech is currently developing research test beds and initiating work in four strategic research areas including (i) radio frequency identification, (ii) Interactive media, (iii) sustainable energy and (iv) healthcare technologies.

The **Midlands Innovation and Research Centre (MIRC)** is a campus incubation centre, providing facilities for innovative and knowledge-based enterprise, an enterprise programme for entrepreneurs and start-ups, and makes available the resources an expertise of AIT to support client companies.

3.4.2 Life Sciences

'Life Sciences'[18] refers to the health sciences sectors of pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, medical technologies/ devices and includes functional foods/nutraceuticals[19]. It also takes into account the increasing convergence across these formerly discrete sub-sectors, and the convergence with ICT together with the supporting industry specific research, technology and services.

The sector has enjoyed significant growth in the region over the past decade (30% growth in employment[20] between 1998 and 2008)[21] and includes internationally renowned companies such as Abbott Ireland. Recent investments from overseas companies are expected to create significant additional employment (KCI, Teleflex, Abiomed and PPD). The sector is dominated by firms involved in medical devices manufacturing activities including Irish owned companies such as Finesse Medical Ltd. The profile is shifting to include activities such as shared services (e.g. Teleflex) and contract research (e.g. Intertek – formerly Irish company BioClin, Isotron, and PPD). High potential start-up companies supported by Enterprise Ireland in the Midland Region over the last two years have included a number of Life Science companies.

Growth potential for this sector in the Midland Region stems from a number of strategic assets that will support the sector into the future. These assets include:

- The existing Life Science companies in the Midland Region provide a strong base for attracting further investment.
- Existing investment and co-operation from research and analytical facilities, potential for further development of a concentration of activity in the region.
- Various established research institutions e.g. Georgia Tech and AIT.
- Greater accessibility through significant improvements in road access infrastructure.
- Improving public transport facilities as outlined at national level in the Smarter Travel Policy as outlined in Chapter 5.

This collection of life sciences related assets within the Midland Region indicates potential in a number of areas namely:

- Further growth in research and development functions of existing and new Life Science companies in the region complimented by the strong manufacturing base.
- Further growth in the area of contract research and analytical services, building on the existing company base through additional foreign direct investment (FDI) and stimulating new firm formation.
- Increased research and ultimate commercialisation in the area of convergent medical products, applying multiple technologies such as software development (including wireless application), materials research and biosciences.

Supporting further diversification of the sector into a broader range of activities in the Midland Region will require a multifaceted approach: development of appropriate high level skills with a focus in tertiary level basic science, HEI industry links and critical infrastructure (including advanced telecommunications networks and services). It will involve further development of existing relationships and networks between stakeholders based in the Midland Region with those in other regions in order to build and benefit from critical mass in certain activities including skills, networks, advanced broadband infrastructure/services and sites/facilities.

THE EXISTING LIFE SCIENCE COMPANIES IN THE MIDLAND REGION PROVIDE A **STRONG BASE FOR ATTRACTING FURTHER INVESTMENT.**

[18] Life Sciences' defined as per Forfas Regional Competitiveness Agenda.

[19] Nutraceuticals: Food or food product that provides health and medical benefits.

[20] Annual Employment Survey, Forfas, 2008.

[21] Elan and Athlone Pharmaceuticals, located on the outskirts of Athlone in Co. Roscommon (West region) are included.

3.4.3 Food

The food sector accounts for just over one-fifth of the total employed in agency-supported enterprises in the Midland Region. It is a sector that has exhibited strong employment growth over the last decade expanding by almost 48%[22]. The agency supported food sector is predominantly indigenous in origin and includes some relatively large employers such as Rosderra Irish Meats and Carroll Cuisine (Offaly), Dawn Meats (Laois), C&D Foods, Pat the Baker and Green Isle Foods (Longford) and Dunbia (Westmeath).

The dynamic for the food industry has changed significantly in recent years, from being largely production-led, to now being led by market demand. A number of indigenous start-ups have emerged in the region, that are focused on niche consumer foods, typically built around locally sourced ingredients and aimed at higher value markets e.g. Panelto Foods, Mr. Crumb, Glenisk and Festa Foods.

The knowledge and skills base, established suppliers and support industries for the food sector that exist in the Midland Region provides a strong foundation for further development.

3.4.4 Tourism and Leisure

The Tourism Strategy for the Midland Region in Chapter 7 sets out strategic policies and objectives relating to the potential development of tourism in the region.

It is recognised that the Midland Region is primarily an outdoor activities region and it needs to focus on the utilisation of waterways and cultural heritage. The strategic assets considered to support the sector are identified as follows:

- Unspoilt landscape and Lakelands/Waterways including the River Shannon, Lough Ree, Royal Canal, Grand Canal and the Slieve Bloom Mountains.
- Heritage including monastic and historic trails and heritage estates and towns.
- Exploit the tourism potential of the region based on its proximity to Dublin.
- Central and accessible location nationally.
- Events e.g Electric Picnic, Johnny Keenan International Banjo Festival and triAthlone.

This collection of tourism related assets within the Midland Region indicates potential in a number of areas namely:

- Development and promotion of the region as a high quality, short stay destination for domestic visitors.
- Improved access to Dublin and strengthen intra and inter-regional transport connections, capitalise on central position as an asset in itself.
- The promotion and realisation of the Lakelands and Inland Waterways brand for tourism in the region as identified by Fáilte Ireland.
- Potential to enhance the tourist offer by further development of tourism facilities and alignment of tourism with environmental protection, green enterprise, and diversification of the rural economy, as addressed in Chapter 7.

3.4.5 Engineering

This Section focuses on the range of companies in the Midland Region involved in engineering related activities, which account for a significant proportion of overall employment in agency supported firms in the region.

[22] Regional Competitiveness Agenda – Volume II – Realising Potential Midlands, 2009.

There are a number of specialist high end engineering firms present within the region.

The strategic assets considered to support the engineering sector in the Midland Region can be identified as follows:

- A strong base of companies involved in a range of engineering related activities.
- An expanding life sciences sector, adding a newer dimension to the longer established engineering competency base in the region.
- Growth of complementary higher education and research capabilities in the engineering sector, this includes the establishment of new engineering blocks within AIT with an estimated value of €40 million.

The presence of these assets within the region indicates potential in a number of areas namely:

- Potential for smaller scale companies to develop the characteristics of high value creating manufacturing firms.
- Continue to grow the existing network of engineering companies in Longford and Westmeath that focus on knowledge sharing and skills development.
- Develop a concerted regional approach involving engineering companies, knowledge and education providers that could achieve economies of scale and a more competitive engineering sector.

3.4.6 Green Enterprise

Following international energy and climate change agreements (Kyoto Protocol) Governments across the world are now working to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to tackle climate change (See Table 3.2, pg 50). As a result businesses across the globe are searching for more efficient ways of operating in terms of a reduction in their carbon footprint, energy and material costs. The development of new solutions in this arena has been termed "green technology".

The green enterprise sector, encompassing a broad range of activities, has the potential to enhance the region's economy by creating employment and export opportunities. One of the key recommendations of the Green Enterprise 'High Level Action Group' established under the Governments Framework for Sustainable Economic Renewal (Building Ireland's Smart Economy) is to promote key sectors that can drive exports and job creation. These sectors include Renewable Energy and Efficient Energy Use and Management.

The region offers significant potential to develop green enterprise including:

- The development of renewable energy such as wind and biomass/biofuels, given the rural nature of the landscape, which includes worked out areas of peatlands.

- To retrain and up skill construction workers so that they can take advantage of the opportunities that exist in eco construction.
- To broaden the efficient energy use and management role of the Midland Energy Agency (MEA) to all public agencies that operate in the region.

3.4.6.1 Renewable Energy

Renewable energies are defined as products, systems and services for the generation and collection of energy from all renewable sources including biomass / biofuels, hydro, solar, wind and geothermal sources.

The Midland Region is well placed for the development of renewable energy such as wind and biomass/biofuels given the predominantly rural nature of the landscape which includes large expanses of worked out peatland.

The renewable energy sector has the potential to create high value jobs, but it also has the potential to result in spin off development in manufacturing, servicing and research and development activities.

The RPGs support the development of wind energy generation throughout the region, subject to appropriate siting considerations as set out in the Wind Energy Development Guidelines, DoEHLG (2006), Local Authority Wind Strategies and compliance with environmental and landscape designations. The development of the renewable energy sector in the Midland Region will significantly contribute to the national target of generating 40% electricity from renewable sources by 2020.

The Midland Region also offers significant potential for the growth and development of biomass and biofuels as sustainable sources of energy, both in worked out peatland areas and on agricultural land. Biomass crops such as coppice willow and oil seed rape are well suited to the midland soils. The processing of raw biomass material into fuel (e.g. wood chips, biodiesel etc) or energy (heat, power) also present opportunities for enterprise development and job creation within the region.

The Midland Region which has three peat-burning power stations at Lanesboro, Shannonbridge and Edenderry is well placed to assist in achieving the target of using 30% biomass to co-fire peat power plants by 2020. The development of this sector will greatly assist in the conversion from peat to biomass/biofuel. The existing peat-fired stations also have an infrastructural network in place accessing these peatlands, working independently from existing road network, which is a significant advantage in the transport of high bulk, low energy biomass from harvest to power station.

3.4.6.2 Efficient Energy Use and Management

Increasing energy prices, stringent national and international emission reduction targets and a generally heightened public awareness of climate change are driving demand in this sector. The government has set an ambitious target for a 20% energy efficiency improvement across the economy by 2020. This target has presented significant opportunities for the Midland Region in the eco construction area.

Eco-construction involves using smart design and integrating technologies within new and existing buildings for the purposes of minimising energy loss and maximising energy efficiency and use of ambient energy sources. A number of companies in the region are already providing products which increase efficiency such as thermal heat insulation products and building integrated systems (including solar panels, geothermal and air heat pumps etc).

Given the high levels of unemployment in the construction sector in the Midland Region there is an opportunity to retrain and up skill the labour force so that they can take advantage of opportunities in energy efficient new build projects and retrofitting of existing built stock to the current high energy-efficiency standards.

The MEA established in December 2007 has reduced energy expenditure in the four Midland Local Authorities that it serves through the implementation of efficient energy use and management improvement programmes. Under the National Climate Change Strategy, each local authority must make energy savings of 33% by 2020 and the MEA will assist in achieving this reduction.

Table 3.2: Energy and Climate Targets – National and International Commitments

Kyoto Protocol

- Limit the increase in Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions to 13% above 1990 levels by 2012.
- New targets may emerge from UN Copenhagen Conference in December 2009.

EU Commission Post-Kyoto Targets for 2020

- Reduce emissions in the non-trading sectors (agriculture, transport, residential, commerce, waste) by 20% from 2005 base.
- Reduce emissions in the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) sector by 21% from 2005 base.

National and EU Targets

- Renewable sources to contribute 16% of final energy consumption (electricity, heat and transport) by 2020.
- 15% of electricity generation from renewable sources by 2010: 40% by 2020.

THE MIDLAND REGION OFFERS SIGNIFICANT POTENTIAL FOR THE **DEVELOPMENT OF THE LOGISTICS AND DISTRIBUTION SECTOR.**

3.4.7 Logistics and Distribution

The Midland Region offers significant potential for the development of the Logistics and Distribution sector having regard to its strategic location and strong transport connectivity. The sector has developed extensively in recent years with well established companies currently operating including Flancare, located in both Athlone and Longford. The south of the region offers a unique opportunity for development of the sector with Portlaoise being identified within the NSS as a location for a transport node (inland port).

The potential exists in this sector namely in:

- Togher Inland Port – The designation of Portlaoise as an inland port offers significant potential for growth of distribution, logistics and warehouse uses within the town which links appropriately with its strong transport connectivity. The development of this transport node has the potential to be a major boost to the economy of Portlaoise, a principal town, thus contributing to the growth of the region as a whole.
- Togher Inland Port provides the potential to create an area within the region that acts as a national location at road/rail intersections with optimum opportunities for trade, commerce and supply chains.
- The success of this development will have a major impact on much needed job creation. The development by Iarnród Eireann of a National Traincare Depot in the transport node will have a knock-on effect on service industries.

3.4.8 International Trading

In a global context, international trading has emerged as a growing economic sector. This concept refers to the trading of goods and services across international territories and borders and is conducted from a central point of exchange. Ireland's strategic location as a gateway to the European market presents an opportunity to develop this sector and thereby contribute significantly to the local, regional and national economy.

The linked gateway offers potential for the establishment of international trading having regard to its central location, high levels of accessibility including motorway access to the airport in Dublin, public transport connections by road and rail and broadband infrastructure availability.

The Midland Region offers the following potential to develop this sector:

- Strategic location of linked gateway towns offers a central and attractive location for development of international trading.
- AIT and other educational institutions offer potential to provide the skills necessary to develop this sector.
- Designation of SDZ would provide the necessary collection of skills, education, services and infrastructure to foster the development of a specific and dedicated centre in this sector.

3.4.9 Public Sector

In terms of absolute employment levels the largest employer in the Midland Region is the public sector which accounts for 25.7% of employment (2008). During the period 1998-2008 the main source of growth for the region's employment came from the public sector which expanded by 87.6% and accounted for 33.5%[23] of the overall increase in employment. The region accommodates employment amongst varied government departments including Department of Agriculture in Portlaoise and Department of Education in Athlone and Tullamore, state prison in Portlaoise, hospitals in Portlaoise, Mullingar and Tullamore, defence forces in Athlone and Mullingar and a third level institution in Athlone. The importance of the public sector as a strong employer within the Midland Region is acknowledged and development of further employment opportunities should be explored and supported with the region.

The significant employment within the public sector throughout the Midland Region indicates potential in a number of areas namely:

- Greater co-ordination and co-operation of public sector at regional level leading to enhanced service provision.
- Availability of skilled workforce, suitably designated lands and supporting infrastructure capacity presents opportunity to further develop public sector employment within the Midland Region.

3.4.10 Retail

As stated previously, the wholesale and retail sector, is a valuable growing sector within the regional economy which accounted for 26.3% of new employment within the Midland Region between 1998–2008. The linked gateway and principal towns of Longford and Portlaoise dominate the retail hierarchy within the region. Retail Strategies have been prepared for the constituent Local Authorities in accordance with the Planning and Development Act 2000 and the requirements of the Retail Planning Guidelines for Planning Authorities (2005). The MRA supports the sequential approach to the provision of retail within the region. This approach assists in promoting both the vitality and viability of existing centres, which has positive quality of life implications and in turn supports the objective of developing sustainable travel and transport measures.

The MRA supports the preparation of joint retail strategies for Athlone by Westmeath/ Roscommon Local Authorities and for Carlow/Graiguecullen by Laois/Carlow Local Authorities.

[23] Regional Competitiveness Agenda – Volume 1 – Baseline Data and Analysis, Forfas, 2009.

3.5 Economic Development Policies

EDP.1 Promote and diversify the economy at a regional and local level in accordance with the Regional Settlement Hierarchy according to the following:

- Identified role of the settlement within the region.
- Existing size of the settlement.
- Existing function of the settlement.

Adequate areas, including provision for the use and or re-use of existing brownfield sites and vacant structures should be identified and reserved by each of the four constituent counties of the Midland Region to accommodate and facilitate the development of employment generating uses. Within the five town polycentric model there should be an adequate amount and mix of available land to cater for a diverse range of future employment generating uses.

EDP.2 Accelerate the sustainable development of the linked gateway of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar, in a structured and cohesive way, recognising its importance as a key driver of growth for the region. This requires a continuance of the coordinated approach by the constituent Local Authorities. In this respect, funding initiatives with respect to the development of the linked gateway should continue to be pursued, as and when they become available.

EDP.3 Actively encourage the sustainable development of the region's sectoral opportunities including: Internationally Traded Services, Life Sciences, Food, Tourism and Leisure, Engineering, Green Enterprise, Logistics and Distribution, International Trading, Public Sector, Retail and the Rural Economy through the following measures:

- Cooperation with the relevant education training, employment, enterprise and development support agencies that serve the region.
- Identification of suitable lands where appropriate in accordance with proper planning and sustainable development to cater for the growth of the above mentioned sectors.
- Facilitate the provision of the necessary infrastructure for the development of the lands identified for the sectoral opportunities.

EDP.4 Priority to be given to targeting the development of activities which capitalise on existing and emerging strengths in each of the linked gateway towns in addition to promoting the development of all sectors within the linked gateway and principal towns throughout the region:

Athlone

- ICT-related activities.
- Pharmaceuticals and related activities.
- Education.
- International Trading.
- Shared Services (multi-lingual).
- R&D.

Tullamore

- Medical Devices/Medical Services.
- Other Medtech.
- Consumer Foods.
- Shared Services (multi-lingual).
- R&D.

Mullingar

- Engineering and ICT.
- Consumer Products.
- Financial Services.
- Shared Services (multi-lingual).
- R&D.

EDP.5 Priority should be given to the development and support of the engineering sector within Longford in particular, where a strong established base already exists and also further promote the expansion of the established pharmaceuticals and food industries base.

EDP.6 Priority should be given to targeting the development and support the progression of the logistics and distribution sector, in particular the development of the 'Togher Inland Port' in Portlaoise.

EDP.7 Facilitate development agencies such as IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and where appropriate, Shannon Development, to promote development of foreign-owned and indigenous sector higher value-added, knowledge based industrial and internationally traded activities in the Midland Region.

EDP.8 Actively engage with County Enterprise Boards at key stages in the plan-making process to ensure that issues relating to the development of the local economy are addressed appropriately, where feasible.

EDP.9 Engage with and facilitate, where appropriate, the key infrastructure providers, in order to meet the efficient and timely delivery of key infrastructure, in a sustainable manner, necessary to support the region's growing and diversifying economy.

EDP.10 Further promote the availability of high quality business and technology parks for new developments, thereby ensuring a choice in locations across the Midland Region.

EDP.11 Support innovation through the development of research and development opportunities throughout the region, particularly where linkages can be strengthened at an inter-regional and an intra regional level.

EDP.12 Support the continued expansion and diversification of Athlone Institute of Technology and other third and fourth level institutes that have linkages to the region. Support the development of other outreach educational facilities particularly in Tullamore and Mullingar. Investment in third and fourth level education is to be availed of where possible and considered for the towns of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar.

EDP.13 Encourage and support the sustainable diversification of the rural economy throughout the region, in a manner that sustains the attractiveness and status of the rural environment.

EDP.14 Support and encourage the continuation of agriculture as a contributory means of maintaining population in the rural area and sustaining the rural economy, whilst maintaining and enhancing the standing of the rural environment.

EDP. 15 Encourage and support the agencies and stakeholders involved in the management of the industrial peatlands to develop a holistic plan that meets the environmental economic and social needs of these areas.

3.6 Economic Development Objectives

EDO1	Develop the Strategic Development Zone, in a sustainable manner, located to the east of Athlone (given the presence of AIT), between Athlone and Tullamore with linkages to Mullingar. The nature of the Strategic Development Zone should be such that it will generate employment, foster innovation, engender research and development opportunities and strengthen linkages both inter-regionally and intra regionally.
EDO2	In partnership with the Gateway Implementation Forum develop a regional brand to capitalise on the central geographical location of the region in its entirety and complete the branding strategy for the linked gateway.
EDO3	Support the preparation of a sustainable Holistic Management Plan for the future use of the industrial Peatlands.
EDO4	Facilitate the development of the 'Togher Inland Port' at Portlaoise through the delivery of the provisions of the Togher Masterplan ensuring that employment and enterprise opportunities are fully maximised through promotion and relevant inter-agency collaboration.

3.7 Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation

In order to ensure the delivery of the Economic Development Strategy of the Midland RPGs the following high level objectives, targets and indicators have been defined to facilitate its implementation:

Topic	Objective	Target	Indicators
Economy 1	To promote a balanced spread of economic development across the region focused on the linked gateway and principal towns as the main centres for economic generation. **(EDO1, EDO2, EDO4)**	Increased employment opportunities within the linked gateway and principle towns.	• Job creation (actual) within the region. • Planned investment in the linked gateway and principle town areas as a result of enterprise agency activity. • The median weekly earnings of full-time employees. • Establishment of a Strategic Development Zone in the linked gateway. • Development of the Midland Gateway brand. • Establishment of an Inland Port in Togher, Portlaoise. • Growth in the tourism sector including increased visitor numbers and the creation of jobs in this sector.
Economy 2	To continue to create and sustain an attractive and unique rural environment with a diversified economy in the interests of the rural community and the region as a whole. **(EDO3)**	Maintain population stability and future support for rural communities and services.	• Job creation (actual) in rural enterprise/agriculture. • Preparation of a Holistic Management Plan for Industrial Peatlands. • Percentage tourists visiting the region.

Central Business Park, Tullamore, County Offaly

4

REGIONAL SETTLEMENT STRATEGY

COUNTY LAOIS
Kilminchy, Portlaoise

4.1 Introduction

The following Section provides spatial guidance on (i) population distribution, (ii) settlement hierarchy, (iii) settlement role, (iv) settlement size and (v) housing land requirements within the Midland Region. This Section provides guidance for each local authority on population targets and distribution to inform their respective Development Plans. The Regional Settlement Strategy is based on NSS policy and through the following policies and objectives, seeks to achieve the Vision for the RPGs as outlined in Chapter 2.

4.2 Regional Settlement Trends

In 2006 the Midland Region had a population of 251,664 which represents 6% of the total population of Ireland. Between 2002 and 2006 the regional population grew by 11.6% which is the second only to the Mid East Region[24] in terms of growth.

While the region is fast growing, as Table 4.1 below indicates, most of the significant growth in the region has taken place in, around the main urban centres such as the linked gateway and principal towns and also along the main national and regional commuter routes and other smaller towns close to Dublin. Census figures (CSO, 2006) highlight that 20-30% of residents in areas located to the east of the region travel further than 30km to work each day.

Table 4.1: Population change within the Midland Region 2002-2006[25]

	Persons 2002	Persons 2006	Actual change	% change
Laois	58,774	67,059	8,285	14.1
Offaly	63,663	70,868	7,205	11.3
Westmeath	71,858	79,346	7,488	10.4
Longford	31,068	34,391	3,323	10.7
Total	**225,363**	**251,664**	**26,301**	**11.6**

The trends apparent looking at the 2002-2006 period are, in the main, a continuation of previous trends albeit with the increasingly strong performance of the linked gateway towns becoming apparent in more recent years and since the development of RPGs in 2004. The 2004 RPG's described the varying development trends across the regions in terms of five "Development Areas".

Some parts of the region lie close to the GDA and its associated radial road and rail lines and are effectively a part of the GDA's economic sphere of influence and therefore continue to experience rapid growth. Other parts of the region are more remote, are more dependent on the rural economy and have experienced population decline.

Development trends in different parts of the Midland Region are thus being increasingly driven by strategic and spatial development trends across administrative boundaries.

[24] Mid East Region – counties of Kildare, Meath and Wicklow.

[25] Volume 1, Table 1, Census 2006, CSO.

The Development Areas and key development trends since 2002 are summarised as follows:

Central Development Area (CDA)	Covering the area principally associated with the towns designated as part of the linked gateway of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar, which over the 2002-2006 period was the second fastest growing linked gateway in the country. Other towns close to the linked gateway have also experienced rapid population and housing growth. Overall, the area experienced one of the highest growth rates with a population increase in its towns of 5,369[26]. Collectively, the linked gateway of Athlone, Tullamore, and Mullingar had a combined population in 2006 of 46,398.
Eastern Development Area (EDA)	Includes those parts of the region closest to the GDA and associated radial road and rail routes. This area of the region continued to experience rapid population and housing growth but has experienced a rapid fall-off in development as a consequence of the 2009 downturn.
Southern Development Area (SDA)	Includes the bulk of County Laois (aside from Portarlington, which is in the Eastern Development Area) including the parts of the region along the M7/8 road and rail routes associated with Portlaoise. Patterns of development in this area have been consistent with the 2004 RPG's with Portlaoise being a particular focus for development.
Northern Development Area (NDA)	Encompasses County Longford and a number of Electoral Divisions (EDs) from north Westmeath that have a strong connectivity to the wider northwest and border areas. Development and growth patterns in this area have been more mixed because of the relative remoteness of this area of the region to the GDA, its more traditional dependence on agriculture and the rural economy, with fast growing areas including Longford town, previously benefiting from the Upper Shannon Tax Incentive Scheme, now adversely affected by the 2009 downturn.
Western Development Area (WDA)	Includes those parts of the region associated with Birr and with close links to the Mid West and West Regions. Development and growth patterns in this area have also been more mixed because of the relative remoteness of this area of the region to the GDA and its traditional dependence on agriculture, extractive industries such as peat harvesting and the rural economy. A more focused tourism sector related tax incentive scheme has been announced for this area and other parts of the Midland Region.

From an overall perspective, a key challenge for the RPGs is to structure population growth throughout the region in a more balanced manner and facilitate more self-sustaining growth within the region, which is essentially the goal of bringing people and jobs together as promoted by the NSS.

[26] Volume 1, Table 5, Census 2006, CSO.

4.3 Regional Population Targets

The RPGs 2010-2022 for the Midland Region sit within an overall national policy context, namely the NSS and establish a framework for the co-ordination of Development Plans of the constituent planning authorities within the region.

In this regard, a key instrument for co-ordination is the setting of regional targets for future population and housing growth. To ensure overall consistency of approach at national level, the DoEHLG issued guidance in October 2009 which set population targets for 2016 and 2022 for each of the eight regional authorities within the state. The RPGs are bound by these population figures, which when issued had taken account of the emerging changes to economic and demographic trends. The population target for the Midland Region, as set out in Table 4.2 below, forms the basis for the 2010-2022 RPGs. It should be noted that the 2022 figures will be revised as part of the 2016 RPG review and figures may be adjusted upon publication of the 2011 Census and / or as part of the ongoing monitoring of the RPGs.

Working within the DoEHLG target population figures, these 2010-2022 RPGs set out a Regional Settlement Strategy, identifying the hierarchy of settlements within the five Development Areas, including projections at regional, linked gateway and principal town level and addressing the balance of county areas in relation to both population and housing.

It will then be a function of the individual County and Town Development Plan of each planning authority to work within the population targets and develop their own core settlement strategy within this regional context.

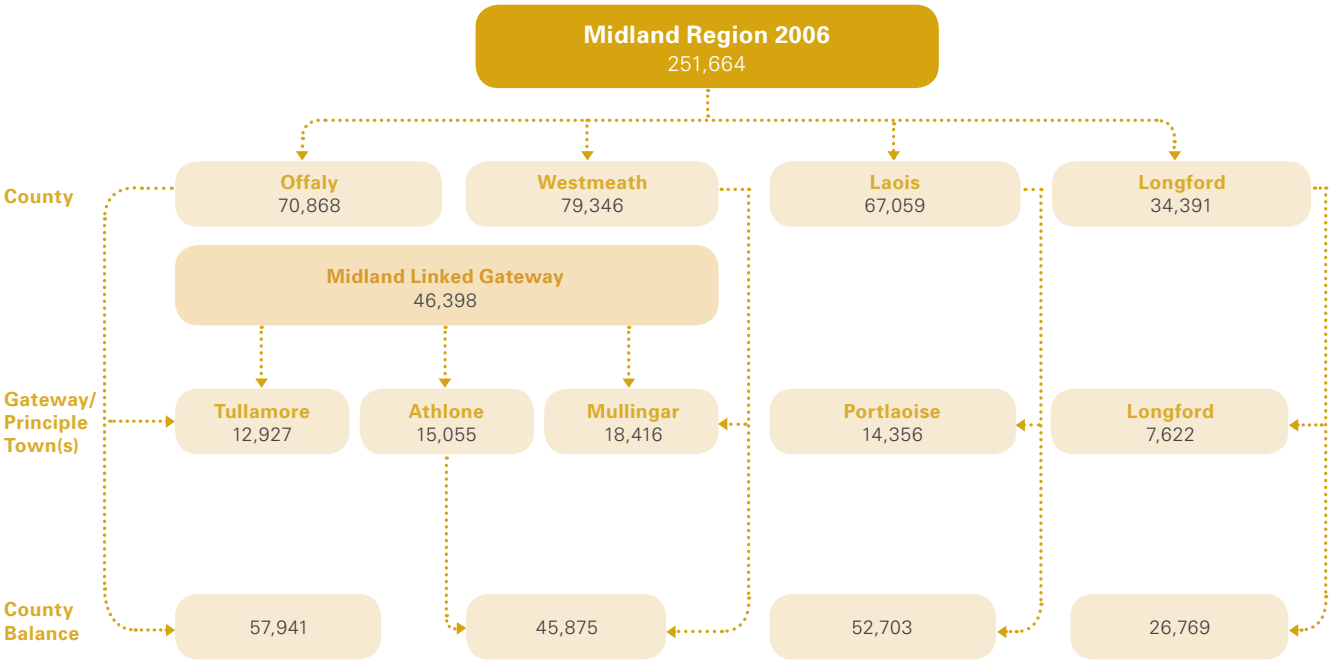
Working within the population targets for 2016 and 2022 as set out below, these RPGs breakdown population targets at linked gateway, principal town and county level and are summarised in Figures 4.2 and 4.3 which follow.

Table 4.2: Midland Region and State Population 2006 (CSO) and Population Targets 2016 and 2022

	CSO	Population Targets	
	2006	2016	2022
Midland	251,664	297,300	317,100
State	4,239,848	4,997,000	5,375,200

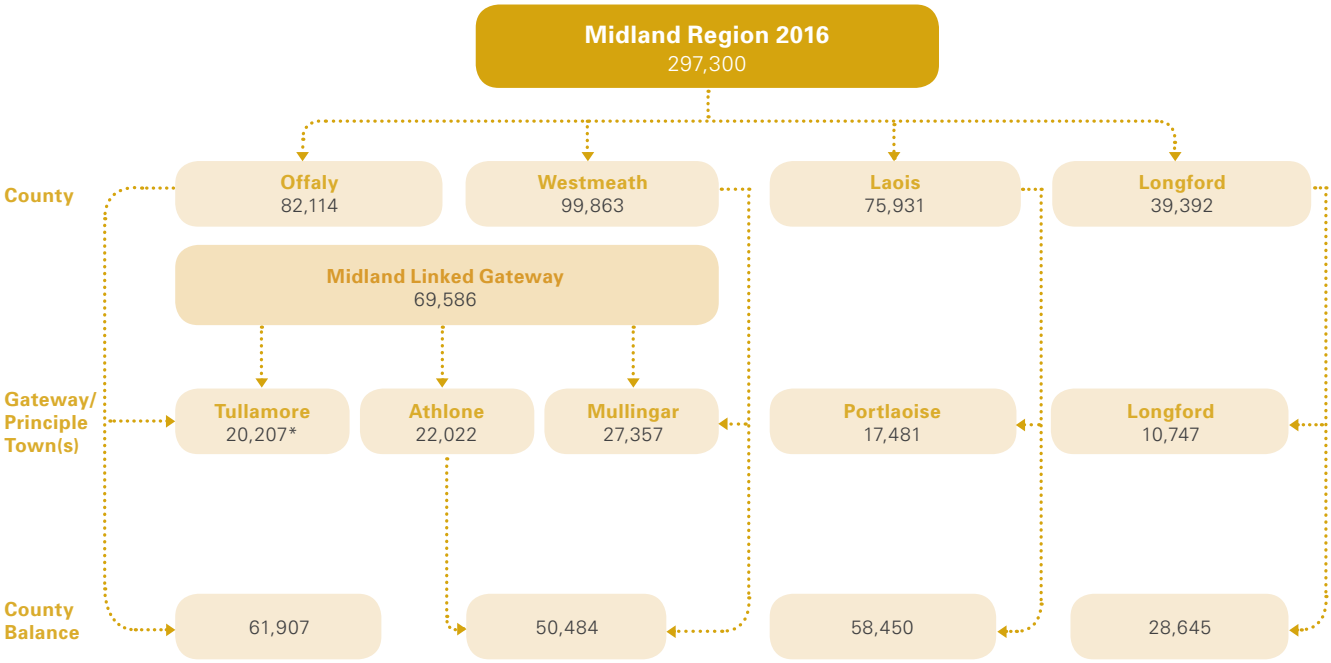
A KEY INSTRUMENT FOR CO-ORDINATION IS THE SETTING OF **REGIONAL TARGETS FOR FUTURE POPULATION** AND HOUSING GROWTH.

Figure 4.1: Midland Region Population 2006 (CSO)



Note:
1. The regional population figure at the top of the table is equal to the sum of the population figures at county level.

Figure 4.2: Midland Region Population Targets for 2016

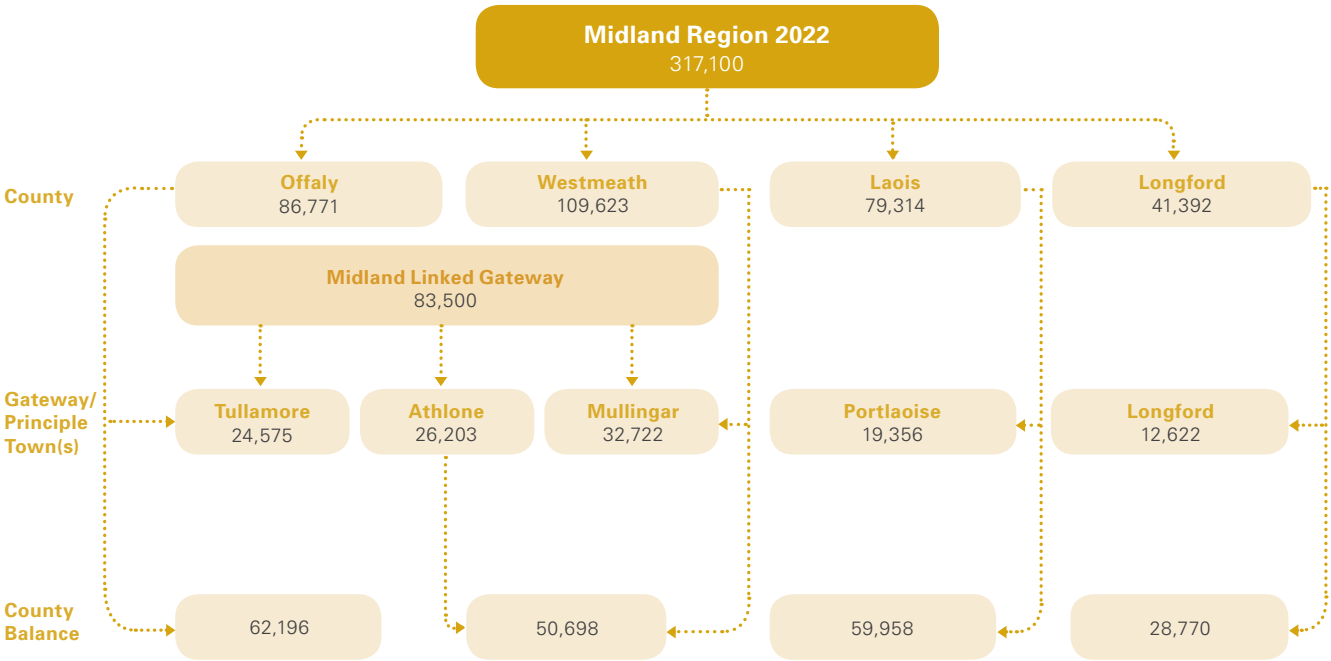


Notes:

1. The regional population figure at the top of the table is equal to the sum of the population figures at county level.

** c 1,000 of the target population of 20,207 for Tullamore was estimated (during the preparation of the Tullamore Town and Environs Development Plan 2010-2016) to have been achieved during the period May 2006 (census date) – December 2009. This resulted in the Tullamore Plan using a target population of 19,250 by 2016.*

Figure 4.3: Midland Region Population Targets for 2022.



Note:

1. The regional population figure at the top of the table is equal to the sum of the population figures at county level.

4.4 Future Housing and Development Land Requirements

In accordance with Figure 4.1 Population 2006 (CSO) and Figure 4.2 Population Targets 2016, Table 4.3 sets out an indicative housing and housing land requirement (HLR) up to 2016 for the Midland Region including the linked gateway, principal towns and remaining county balance. Due to the prevailing economic outlook, the housing land requirement is only identified up to 2016. Based on population analysis it is considered that the housing and housing land requirement figures set out, represent an upper limit of demand likely to arise during the period 2006-2016.

The densities applied in calculation of the HLR figures take account of the overall rural nature of the region with variation applied having regard to the differing characteristics of the counties.

Table 4.3: Future Housing Land Requirements 2016.

	Target Population Growth 2006-2016	Projected number of units (at average household size 2.4*)	Projected no. of units for balance of county including units in the open Countryside[27]**	Density*** per Hectare	Hectares of Housing Land Required 2016 (incorporating 50% headroom in accordance with DoEHLG Development Plans Guidelines[28]
Portlaoise	3,125	1,302	–	35	56
County Balance	5,747	2,394	2,394	12	300
Laois	**8,872**	**3,696**	–	–	**356**
Longford Town	3,125	1,302	–	30	65
County Balance	1,876	782	782	12	98
Longford	**5,001**	**2,084**	–	–	**163**
Athlone	6,967	2,903	–	35	124
Mullingar	8,941	3,725	–	35	159
County Balance	4,609	1,920	1,920	12	240
Westmeath	**20,517**	**8,549**	–	–	**523**
Tullamore	7,280	3,033	–	35	129
County Balance	3,966	1,653	1,653	12	207
Offaly	**11,246**	**4,686**	–	–	**336**
Midland Region	45,636	19,015	6,749	–	1,378

* *In line with national trends it is expected that the average household size will fall to 2.4 by 2016.*

** *The figure for unserviced units in Open Countryside is assumed to be 40% of the County Balance.*

*** *A Net density figure has been applied which excludes: major and local distributor roads; primary schools, churches, local shopping etc.; open spaces serving a wider area; and significant landscape buffer strips (DoEHLG Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Sustainable Residential Development in Urban Areas (Cities, Towns and Village). A density of 35 units per hectare has been applied to the linked gateway towns and the principal town of Portlaoise with 30 units per hectare applied to Longford town. An average density of 12 units per hectare has been applied to all settlements outside the linked gateway and principal towns. Consideration should be given to the DoEHLG Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Sustainable Residential Development in Urban Areas (Cities, Towns and Villages) May 2009.*

[27] Subsidiary Plans shall contribute towards adherence to the EPA Code of Practice: Wastewater Treatment and Disposal Systems Serving Single Houses (p.e. ≤ 10) (EPA, 2009).

[28] Development Plans, Guidelines for Planning Authorities, DoEHLG June 2007.

In summary the parameters which are taken into account in identifying the likely housing and housing land requirement are as follows:

- The likely decline in average household size.
- Each county within the region is different in terms of its urban structure.
- Each county has different zoning objectives and provides for different variations of densities.
- The need for a range of densities at different locations in each county.
- The likelihood that a demand for housing in open countryside will arise. In that regard an allocation of 40% of total units has been assigned to development of units in the open countryside within the county balance figure.

It is acknowledged in these RPGs, that it is appropriate in terms of housing densities that they should increase. However, these increases in density must also recognise existing urban and village character and the importance of protecting and preserving this character. There are many examples of attempts to develop high-density developments in rural villages which have not been successful either in their impact on the village character or on the levels of occupancy they have exhibited. In addition, it is becoming clear that enhancing the quality of smaller towns and villages and providing opportunities for lower density developments is one of the mechanisms which will help to address the demand for housing that is located in the countryside.

4.4.1 Vacancy Rates

Vacancy rates have not been reflected in the calculation of housing and HLR figures as outlined in Table 4.3 as no data exists on a regional basis. Whilst the DoEHLG are currently carrying out a national audit of multi unit developments there is a clear need to establish vacancy rates so as to accurately inform lower tier plans. Given the lack of data on vacancy rates it is considered prudent that each local authority should establish vacancy rates so that they can be factored into their respective housing strategies, County and Town Development Plans.

[29] In addition the Local Authorities should be aware of the requirement to comply with relevant legislative provisions and guidelines including the Habitats Directive, the Water Framework Directive and the DoEHLG's "The Planning System and Flood Risk Management Guidelines".

4.5 Policy Framework for Land Use Zoning

The following table sets out a policy framework to be factored into the land use zoning decision making process during the preparation of Development Plans[29].

Table 4.4: Policy Framework for Land Use Zoning

1. The focus of major population growth within the region will be prioritised in settlements where the appropriate treatment of wastewater is feasible. Therefore, policies for the development of housing in such areas must be contingent on the provision of waste-water treatment systems that ensure no negative impact on receiving waters.
2. Land-use zoning for residential purposes by planning authorities should take account of: • The sequential development of land. • The development of land to make efficient use of existing and proposed infrastructure such as roads and water services. • The making available of sufficient land for development to ensure that the market for development land performs effectively, and • Ensuring that the wasteful over provision of zoned land is avoided so that investment priorities in the provision of physical and social infrastructure such as water services, transport, schools and amenities, which are essential to achieving sustainable communities, can be easily identified and co-ordinated.
3. Development plans shall be consistent with population targets, projected unit requirement, housing demand and projected housing land requirements as defined in the Regional Settlement Strategy contained within these RPGs.
4. Where required, subsidiary plans should adopt a phased approach to land use zoning thus facilitating a flexible response to population movements. Variations to population distribution should be regularly considered by the RPG Implementation Steering Group and adjusted on review to respond to changing population trends.

4.6 Regional Settlement Strategy Scenarios

National and DoEHLG population figures set a wider development context for the Midland Region, so that its development can be compatible with the development of the other Regional Authority areas.

Working within the population figures set out in Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.3, a Regional Settlement Strategy that could facilitate the growth of the region to a population of 317,100 by 2022 had to be developed. In light of the nature and structure of the region, there are three plausible scenarios that could be pursued. In that regard three future strategic development scenarios were explored and are as follows:

1. Continuation of Historical Development Trends.
2. Exclusively Linked Gateway Focused Development.
3. Balanced Development of the Region.

4.6.1 Scenario 1 – Continuation of Historical Development Trends

A scenario for the Regional Settlement Strategy would be to support the continuation of prevailing trends and the broad preference of the development market. Under this regional strategic settlement scenario, if economic recovery and growth in the future were to resume, population growth would continue, predominantly in the eastern part of the region, with settlement dispersed through urban and rural locations and following the principal radial transport infrastructure from Dublin in an east-west direction.

However, dispersed settlement undermines the establishment of a sufficient concentration of population in the main towns, failing to create the conditions necessary to attract significant levels of investment for infrastructure or facilities, thereby leading to deficiencies in capacities in water services, social and community support services and traffic congestion.

Accordingly, economic activity would be drained from the region as commuters living in the Midland Region continue to shop and utilise the services of the GDA. The recent pattern of development activity and market-led bias towards the eastern areas of the region would be perpetuated and the GDA would continue to be the dominant attractive economic and business location.

Rural communities would continue to decline and become less viable. The daytime countryside is empty of people as commuters replace farmers and bring their children to school in the neighbouring centres of population. Marginalised sectors of rural society become increasingly excluded as reliance on car-borne transportation increases and the prospect of public transport provision less viable.

Growth would be concentrated in those areas that are "infrastructure poor" as opposed to areas that have more developed infrastructure and the potential to increase capacities in line with development, such as the linked gateway and principal towns. A strong spatial differentiation would emerge in the following manner:

- The EDA, while having an increased population level, would not see the benefit as economic activities are carried out towards the GDA and dispersed settlement drains limited resources in the form of additional infrastructure and service provision.
- The WDA, particularly the rural area, would fall into a cycle of decline as services in these areas become less viable.

The SEA Environmental Report (Vol. 2) outlines that this development scenario also carries the risk of increased dispersal of potential environmental degradation if there is weak development management, although it is likely to occur in an area of the region that is more environmentally robust. In summary, this scenario is considered unacceptable for the following reasons:

- This scenario would promote a distinct division between the EDA and WDA of the region, not recognising the importance or functionality of the NDA, WDA or SDA or the strengths of the CDA.
- The urban and village structure throughout the region would remain ill defined, with poor connectivity and cohesion across the region. Certain rural areas, particularly in the north and west of the region would experience further loss of services and population decline, while others, particularly in the east, would experience excessive growth, over and above the capacity of their infrastructure facilities and support services.
- Negative impacts on the competitiveness of the region due to a lack of critical mass in appropriate areas to attract investment.
- A pronounced reduction in the potential viability of augmenting and improving the public transport system in the region.
- Risks of increased dispersal of potential environmental degradation if there is weak development management.

4.6.2 Scenario 2 – Exclusively Linked Gateway Focused Development

The NSS envisages the complimentary development of a three town linked gateway of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar as the main element of building up the critical mass of the region. In this development scenario, the focus for new development and population growth in the region would be exclusively focused on the linked gateway.

This strategic regional settlement scenario would involve a major reversal of current population trends. Development and investment would be limited to the linked gateway. This scenario has the potential, in theory, to achieve the critical mass required for the linked gateway quickly, but at the expense of the supporting towns, villages and rural areas within the region. The urban structure would remain poorly defined and ill equipped to spread the benefits of increased growth in the linked gateway on a broader regional basis.

The identity and character of the region, which requires consolidation and promotion under the goals, is derived from this network of supporting towns and villages, in conjunction with the environmental quality and vibrancy of the rural area and its communities. Concentration of all efforts on the linked gateway would result in an imbalanced region, with a distinct division into three zones:

- Concentration of growth and development in the CDA.
- Continuing unmanaged growth in the EDA as the proximity of the GDA remains the dominant influence.
- Decline in the NDA, SDA and WDA areas, most predominant in rural areas where the weak urban and village structure would result in decline of services to rural communities.

This scenario would also have a negative impact on inter and intra-regional linkages which have the potential to contribute to accelerated growth in appropriate areas.

Longford and Portlaoise are two strong towns in the relatively weak urban structure of the Midland Region. Located on the southern and northern periphery of the region, these settlements provide vital links with the adjoining regions in terms of employment, trade and services. They also provide vital support to outlying local settlements and rural areas that depend on them for higher order services, administrative functions and employment.

Portlaoise was identified as a national transport node by the NSS in recognition of its importance in terms of the national transport network. Longford is also located on strategic national infrastructure. Failure to build on the strengths and development potential of these settlements and other key service towns in the region would hinder the achievement of critical mass, regional competitiveness and balanced regional development.

In addition, the SEA Environmental Report (Vol. 2) that accompanies these RPGs has indicated that this model, although in theory, appears to have advantages, in practice it has the potential to give rise to significant environmental effects that would be difficult to mitigate against. The

principle environmental disadvantage of focusing the entire population growth within the linked gateway is the likely limiting factors of the assimilative capacity of the receiving waters for the treated effluents of Tullamore and Mullingar in particular.

This scenario would not fully progress the strategic goals and strategic planning considerations. In summary, this scenario is considered unacceptable for the following reasons:

- The scenario would give rise to unbalanced development within the region, with a strong CDA, weak NDA, SDA and WDA and continued leakage of economic benefit from the east towards the GDA.
- The scenario would fail to secure the maintenance of vibrant rural villages and support for the rural community. Disadvantage in peripheral areas within the region would perpetuate and population would remain static or continue to decline.
- The scenario in focusing the entire population of the region into the linked gateway would, in an environmental context, have potential to give rise to significant environmental effects that will be difficult to mitigate.

4.6.3 Scenario 3 – Balanced Development of the Region

Under this strategic regional settlement scenario, the focus will be on the implementation of the linked gateway supported by the principal towns acting as engines of growth locally but well connected to the linked gateway to benefit from it. Five Development Areas are proposed to assist in the delivery of balanced regional development by serving their urban and rural areas. The CDA includes the linked gateway towns of Athlone, Tullamore, and Mullingar whilst the NDA and SDA include the principal towns of Longford and Portlaoise, respectively. The role of each of the Development Areas in realising this scenario is outlined as follows:

- **CDA**
  Includes the linked gateway and acts as a driver of economic growth in the region, with strong links to all the other spatial elements through a well developed urban hierarchy which will deliver the benefits of growth to the region as a whole.
- **EDA**
  Consolidation and strengthening of its urban network provides enhanced lifestyle choices as realistic alternatives to commuting and facilitates opportunities for its population to participate in the local and regional economy.
- **SDA**
  Focus on the principal town of Portlaoise with its innate strengths, particularly in the transport area, and enhanced links to the linked gateway.
- **NDA**
  Development will be promoted to strengthen the existing urban network in support of the principal town of Longford, with strong links to the CDA.
- **WDA**
  The urban hierarchy of the western area will be strengthened with an emphasis on Birr. Rural services will be provided through the enhanced village network, which also disperses the benefits of growth in the CDA.

This scenario correlates well with the strategic goals and strategic planning considerations outlined. It will help implement the NSS linked gateway concept and secure a balance in the relationship between urban and rural areas, and a more sustainable pattern of development throughout the region. This scenario also provides better linkages and relationships with adjacent regions, through the support of drivers at strategic locations with improved infrastructure capacity and a high standard of communications facilities.

The development of the main settlements and their respective supporting towns and villages will facilitate the delivery of infrastructure and services in a manner and scale relative to their standing and importance within the overall urban hierarchy. This will help in the promotion of social inclusion and facilitate equality of access to services.

The SEA Environmental Report (Vol. 2) that accompanies these RPGs outlines that this development scenario gives rise to similar risks as outlined in the previous development scenario, mainly from concentrating growth into settlements that are situated on receiving waters with limited assimilative capacity. However, the wider spatial distribution of population allocation, meaning a slower and more evenly distributed population growth, is likely to

mean a delay in exceeding the assimilative capacity constraint imposed by sensitive rivers. This will potentially allow for further investigation and provision of necessary mitigating measures.

In summary, this scenario is considered most desirable for the following reasons:

- This scenario recognises the diverse functions of the spatial elements within the region and the need for a strong urban structure.
- Retains necessary focus on strategic investment to key locations.
- Improves linkages with adjoining regions.
- Creates sustainable relationship between urban and rural areas.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LINKED GATEWAY OF ATHLONE, TULLAMORE AND MULLINGAR, AND THE PRINCIPAL TOWNS OF LONGFORD AND PORTLAOISE AS PART OF A **FIVE TOWN POLYCENTRIC MODEL.**

4.7 Regional Settlement Strategy

Having considered all three scenarios it is proposed that scenario 3 'Balanced Development of the Region', which is similar to the option used in the 2004 RPGs, be implemented.

The key aim of the Regional Settlement Strategy in this scenario is as follows:

- Strengthening the critical mass of the region's urban structure by prioritising major regional population and housing requirements around the development of the linked gateway of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar, and the principal towns of Longford and Portlaoise as part of a five town polycentric model.
- Establishing a policy framework for the five interrelated Development Areas, harnessing the unique development potential of each Development Area including its urban and rural components.

Sustaining and revitalising rural areas by building up towns and villages as "local growth engines and service providers" and identifying development opportunities in rural areas that will deliver a more diversified economic base.

This scenario proposes to strengthen the urban structure of the region by promoting the growth of specific groups of settlements with defined strategic roles including:

1. Linked Gateway.
2. Principal Towns.
3. Key Service Towns.
4. Service Towns.
5. Local Service Towns.

4.7.1 Linked Gateway – Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar

The NSS designated Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar as a linked gateway which is located within the CDA. The linked gateway towns are defined as the areas indicated within the Development Plans for the three towns, which are administered by the Town Councils (Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar) and the County Councils (Westmeath and

Offaly). The environs of Athlone in County Roscommon (Monksland) are catered for in the RPGs for the West Regional Authority.

Identified as a 'driver' for regional growth, the linked gateway is the focus for the bulk of the Midland Regions target population for the period 2010 to 2022. This concentration is essential in order to generate the critical mass necessary to sustain the services and infrastructure required to enable the linked gateway to perform and compete in a national context.

The individual Development Plans and housing strategies for the linked gateway must be integrated and co-ordinated to cater for a horizon population of 83,500 persons in 2022.

A Strategic Development Framework for the Midlands Gateway was commissioned by Offaly and Westmeath Local Authorities to support the implementation of the linked gateway, and this document will act as a broader organisational framework to progress the linked gateway concept.

4.7.2 Principal Towns – Longford and Portlaoise

The principal towns are part of the broader polycentric settlement model, centred on the linked gateway. Longford and Portlaoise are the major urban centres and economic drivers at the north and south of the Midland Region with distinct local economies and strong links to the adjacent regions.

In addition to functioning as sub-regional drivers, it is anticipated that these towns will channel social and administrative functions and economic activity upward and downward through the linked gateway. In order to fulfill this role, the principal towns are a significant focus for future population growth in the Regional Settlement Strategy.

4.7.3 Key Service Towns: Birr, Edenderry, Portarlington, Granard and Castlepollard

Distributed throughout the region, key service towns act as important drivers for local economies in areas that are comparatively more remote from the main population centres of the region. Well established economic, administrative and social functions are provided in these settlements at levels commensurate with their position on the urban hierarchy. The RPGs envisage that the development of these towns will be closely linked with the development of principal towns and the linked gateway.

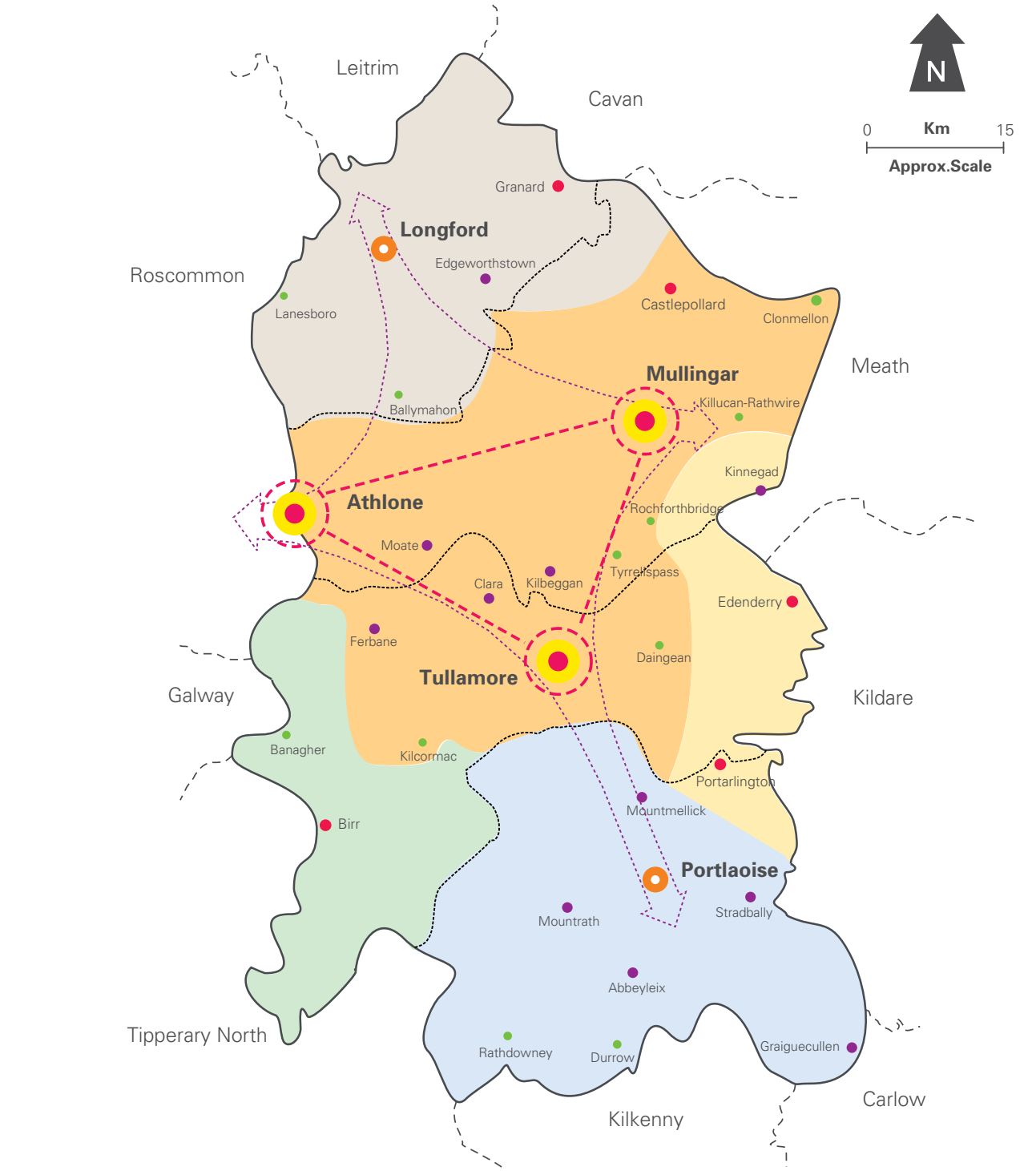
4.7.4 Service Towns: Abbeyleix, Clara, Edgeworthstown, Ferbane, Graiguecullen, Kilbeggan, Kinnegad, Moate, Mountmellick, Mountrath and Stradbally

These towns perform important retail, residential, service and amenity functions for local rural hinterlands and support the upper tiers of the urban hierarchy including the linked gateway and principal towns. Many of these towns have experienced high levels of population growth over the last census period, in some cases without the necessary supporting services. As a result, the RPGs envisage that the development of these towns needs to be increasingly aimed at consolidating growth within the service town and better matching to the development of relevant supporting physical and social infrastructure.

4.7.5 Local Service Towns: Ballymahon, Banagher, Daingean, Kilcormac, Lanesboro, Durrow, Rathdowney, Clonmellon, Killucan-Rathwire, Rochfortbridge and Tyrrellspass

Local service towns are more remote from the linked gateway and principal towns and the RPGs envisage them performing important local level residential, retailing, social and leisure functions and providing appropriate local services to a wider rural hinterland. They have attractive streetscapes, physical settings and heritage buildings that present a strong visual character.

Figure 4.4: Midland Region – Spatial Settlement Strategy



4.8 Joint Local Area Plans

There are settlements within the region that straddle administrative boundaries thereby requiring a joined up planning approach so as to ensure the proper planning and sustainable development occurs.

Three settlements that have been identified in the Midland Region as requiring a joined up planning approach[30] include (i) Athlone Monksland/Bealnamulla, (ii) Carlow/ Graiguecullen and (iii) Portarlington. These settlements present specific challenges and opportunities that require a focused approach and coordinated action amongst Local Authorities. The RPGs support the preparation of joint local area plans for areas that straddle administrative boundaries in order to provide a coordinated framework for the sustainable physical development of the area having regard to the respective housing, retail and other Local Authority strategies that may be in place. The need for a coordinated approach between Local Authorities in all aspects of administration in these areas should also be recognised, particularly in the provision of services and in the preparation of submissions to departments for infrastructural funding.

4.9 Development Areas

The five 'Development Areas' are outlined below. These areas were defined in order to formulate an appropriate common policy response to distinct development trends and opportunities in specific areas.

Some parts of the region lie close to the GDA and have experienced rapid growth in recent years while other parts of the region are more remote and have under utilised infrastructure. The 'Development Areas' concept provides a policy framework to guide decision making in lower tier plans.

The five Development Areas are as follows:

CENTRAL
Covering the area principally associated with the linked gateway towns.

EASTERN
Including those parts of the region closest to the GDA and associated radial road and rail routes and experiencing the most rapid population growth in the region.

SOUTHERN
Covering the parts of the region along the M7/8 national primary routes and rail routes and under the urban influence of the principal town of Portlaoise.

NORTHERN
Encompassing those parts of the region under the influence of the principal town of Longford and with links to the wider Northwest and Border areas.

WESTERN
Encompassing those parts of the region associated with Birr and with close links to the Mid West Region.

[30] See Local Area Plans Section 18.(2) Planning and Development Act, 2000.

4.9.1. Development Area Population Targets

The following table summarises the population targets for each Development Area over the period of the RPG's.

Table 4.5: Development Area Population Targets

	2006	2016	2022
Midland Region	251,664	297,300	317,100
Central Development Area	110,338	139,463	153,368
Eastern Development Area	27,038	29,373	30,027
Southern Development Area	59,796	67,695	70,702
Northen Development Area	36,006	41,117	43,156
Western Development Area	18,486	19,652	19,847

4.9.2 Development Area Policies

In addition to defining the future population distribution of the region, policies have been developed to capitalise on the individual strengths of each Development Area, to promote appropriate and sustainable physical, social and economic development over the RPG period, forming a planning framework to inform lower tier plans. The implementation of these policies will assist in the delivery of the Regional Settlement Strategy i.e 'Balanced Development of the Region'.

THE 'DEVELOPMENT AREAS' CONCEPT PROVIDES A POLICY FRAMEWORK TO **GUIDE DECISION MAKING IN LOWER TIER PLANS.**

4.9.2.1 Central Development Area

Settlement Hierarchy

Urban Core	
Linked Gateway Towns	Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar
Settlements and Rural Areas	
Key Service Town	Castlepollard
Service Towns	Kilbeggan, Moate, Clara and Ferbane
Local Service Towns	Clonmellon, Daingean, Kilcormac, Killucan- Rathwire, Rochfortbridge Tyrrellspass
Rural Hinterland	Other Towns, Villages and Open Countryside

The CDA consists of portions of County Offaly and County Westmeath and contains the linked gateway towns of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar. The linked gateway towns are the focus for employment, business and commercial activity, social and administrative functions and dominate the urban network of the area. Located centrally within the CDA, the linked gateway is also the principal urban driver of the region. This role requires policy protection to ensure that sufficient and appropriate development is channelled and concentrated towards the linked gateway to safeguard the development of critical mass, allowing the linked gateway to fulfil its assigned role.

The CDA has the strongest and most defined urban and village network, with all levels of the settlement hierarchy strongly represented. The lower tiers of this hierarchy have come under significant development pressure over recent years and it is essential that roles as defined above are maintained in order to protect of the primacy of the linked gateway in the Midland urban network. The service towns of Ferbane, Moate, Clara and Kilbeggan in particular, and how they relate to their surrounding rural area, have a crucial role in this regard.

Significant transport infrastructure exists in the region, however specific and focused improvements need to be made to support the development of the linked gateway and allow it to function as an entity. This will require investment in enhanced road and rail access between the linked gateway towns, connected to the wider urban and village network and particularly with regard to the provision of a modern, efficient public transport system (this is discussed further in Chapter 5).

Many of the local service towns in the eastern portion of the CDA fall under the influence of the GDA and these are the areas where the negative effects of economic uncertainty are most keenly manifested. One of the challenges facing this area is how this influence can be reduced or redirected through consolidation, focus on community building and sustainable and innovative employment solutions.

Strong rural areas, as discussed in Chapter 3, have a role in supporting the settlement strategy by ensuring that development in these areas does not compromise the integrity of the defined urban and village roles by maintaining sustainable, rural level infrastructural demands. Significant potential exists in the CDA for the development of landscape and heritage based resources as further developed in the Tourism Strategy in Chapter 7.

Central Development Area: Development Area Policies

Settlement and Population

CDA P1 The linked gateway should address the need to plan for a population increase of around 37,102 people with 5,928 to be distributed to the remainder of the CDA area by 2022.

CDA P2 Support the preparation of Joint Local Area Plans amongst relevant Local Authorities to provide a planning framework for the future physical, economic and social development of Athlone and the Monksland/Bealnamulla area.

Enterprise and Economy

CDA P3 Support the implementation of the Strategic Development Framework for the Midlands Gateway entitled – 'Developing a World Class Knowledge based Competitive Gateway', published in 2006 (Indecon).

CDA P4 Support the development of the Strategic Development Zone within the CDA to generate employment and foster innovation for the linked gateway and the wider region.

CDA P5 Ensure that the availability of appropriate land for employment is allied to development needs and promote the expansion of enterprise centres and industrial parks to serve indigenous industries.

CDA P6 Promote the expansion of Business and Technology Parks for Athlone, Tullamore, and Mullingar in collaboration with the relevant enterprise agencies.

Transportation and Infrastructure

CDA P7 Support the provision of improved public transport provision within and between the designated linked gateway towns of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar and linkages to the principal towns.

Rural Development

CDA P8 Manage the development of the rural environs of the linked gateway to conserve the qualities of the rural environment and protect the integrity of the linked gateway.

CDA P9 Support effective transport linkages and social and administrative facilities between the linked gateway and rural areas through the urban and village network to ensure that the established population benefits from the development of the linked gateway.

Tourism

CDA P10 Build on the amenity potential of the inland waterways, the River Shannon and the built heritage of the region.

4.9.2.2 Eastern Development Area

Settlement Hierarchy

Settlements and Rural Areas	
Key Service Towns	Edenderry, Portarlington
Service Town	Kinnegad
Rural Hinterland	Other Towns, Villages and Open Countryside

The EDA is located on the border with the GDA and has experienced significant growth approximately 23% over the last census period and accounts for over 10% of the overall population of the region (CSO, 2006).

Patterns of development and growth within this Development Area in the last inter censal period (between 2002 and 2006) have been heavily influenced by housing availability and affordability in the GDA. This resulted in rapid growth of a wide range of smaller towns and villages located on or near the main radial road and rail routes connecting Dublin to the regions with resultant severe pressure on existing social and physical infrastructure. This pressure is enhanced as it is largely due to the commuter population that operate primarily in the economic sphere of the GDA but rely on infrastructure and services provided by the Midland Region. The economic downturn has compounded this imbalance as unemployment rates and pressure for services rise, without commensurate benefits for the local economy.

There is potential for growth in employment generation in the context of workforce availability within this area. One of the key priorities should be to resist any further development of large-scale residential development and to avoid over development of towns and settlements. The provision of necessary social and community infrastructure to serve resident populations should be a priority.

Rural areas in this area play an important role in the settlement strategy and are strategically placed adjacent to a high density population centre to benefit from improvements in the tourism product of the region, discussed further in Chapter 7.

Eastern Development Area: Development Area Policies

Settlement and Population

EDA P1 Consolidate the development of previously fast growing towns and villages, ensuring a sequential approach to development.

EDA P2 Support the preparation of Joint Local Area Plans amongst Offaly and Laois Local Authorities to provide a planning framework for the future physical, economic, and social development of Portarlington.

EDA P3 The EDA should plan for a future population growth by 2022 in the order of 2,989 persons.

Enterprise and Economy

EDA P4 Support employment generation, including upskilling and training, to create more self sustaining development for the population currently residing in the area, providing an alternative to commuting to the GDA for employment.

Transport and Infrastructure

EDA P5 Support the improvement of transport links to the linked gateway, principal towns and national primary network.

EDA P6 Support the upgrading of water and waste water infrastructure to serve the key service towns of Portarlington and Edenderry.

Social and Community Development

EDA P7 Support the relevant agencies and departments in addressing the social and economic needs in areas such as school, healthcare and recreation provision.

EDA P8 Support the provision of outreach programmes from Higher Education Institutes and appropriate retraining schemes.

Rural Development

EDA P9 Support the creation of employment opportunities for those living and working in rural areas in order to revitalise and sustain rural communities.

4.9.2.3 Southern Development Area

Settlement Hierarchy

Urban Core	
Principle Town	Portlaoise
Settlements and Rural Hinterland	
Service Towns	Mountmellick, Mountrath, Abbeyleix, Stradbally, Graiguecullen
Local Service Towns	Rathdowney and Durrow
Rural Hinterland	Other Towns, Villages and Open Countryside

The SDA borders the South East Region and the Mid West Region and encompasses County Laois (aside from Portarlington, which is included in the EDA). The SDA accounts for approximately 24% (CS0, 2006) of the Midland Region's population.

The SDA retains strong links with GDA and is serviced by national road and rail routes. The influence of the GDA impacts on the commuting and employment patterns in this Development Area. The SDA has a well-defined hierarchical settlement structure, with Portlaoise, as the principal town, acting as the predominant urban structure and the driver of growth within this area. Service employment in numerous state, semi-state and local government organisations is significant, particularly in Portlaoise.

Portlaoise is supported by a strong network of smaller rural towns and villages which provide vital support services to the surrounding hinterland whilst retaining strong local identities but which have experienced strong development pressures in the recent past.

The strategic centrality and prominence of Portlaoise is recognised in NSS which envisages the town as having strong national development potential as a major transport hub and distribution centre. Major improvements have been made and are ongoing in road and rail infrastructure maximising the accessibility of the town.

The consistent, sequential, and sustainable growth of Portlaoise will remain the focus and the priority for the SDA in order to ensure that its role as a principal town is maximised, to support and contribute to the delivery of a successful urban network in association with the linked gateway. Future population growth, taking account of both recent trends and the wider regional strategic goals for this Development Area indicate that Development Plans should make provision for an overall population growth of the area of around 10,906 persons, of which 5,000 is required for the principal town of Portlaoise in the period to 2022. Accommodating this housing requirement will need to be phased to match provision of other essential physical infrastructure such as water services and social facilities such as schools etc.

THE SDA HAS A WELL-DEFINED HIERARCHICAL SETTLEMENT STRUCTURE, WITH PORTLAOISE, AS THE PRINCIPAL TOWN, ACTING AS THE **PREDOMINANT URBAN STRUCTURE AND THE DRIVER OF GROWTH** WITHIN THIS AREA.

The future development of the SDA will require the strengthening and consolidation of the existing infrastructure that forms an important element in the prosperity of the region. Innate strengths should be built upon, including opportunities in transport based industries such as freight and logistics. The development of a strategically located landbank at Portlaoise is being progressed and will continue to facilitate the realisation of the concept of the distribution hub role for Portlaoise as envisaged in the NSS, acting as a catalyst for the economic growth of the SDA and the wider region.

Graiguecullen is located in the extreme southern tip of the SDA and is heavily linked and connected to Carlow and the adjacent South East Region for the majority of its services. In the case of the preparation of any plans for Graiguecullen, these RPGs support and acknowledge the necessary cooperation required between not only the Local Authorities (Carlow and Laois) and other relevant agencies and bodies but also the Regional Authorities concerned. These RPGs recommend that a Joint Local Area Plan for Carlow and its Environs, including Graiguecullen, be prepared with the respective elements in each planning authority being adopted by the respective councils.

Having regard to the recently established M7 / M8 motorway infrastructure, the southern area of Laois should be utilised to support economic development of the SDA of the region, in contributing to balanced sustainable economic development.

Southern Development Area: Development Area Policies

Settlement and Population:

SDA P1 Portlaoise as a principal town should plan for targeted growth with a population increase by 2022 in the order of 5,000 and build on its inherent strengths as a transportation hub in the southeast of the region with important interregional links.

SDA P2 The SDA should plan for a future population growth by 2022 in the order of 10,906.

SDA P3 Support the consolidation of the town and village network to ensure that development proceeds sustainably and at an appropriate scale, level and pace.

SDA P4 Support the preparation of Joint Local Area Plans amongst the relevant Local Authorities to provide a planning framework for the future physical, economic and social development of Carlow/Graiguecullen.

Enterprise and Economy

SDA P5 Create the conditions necessary to cater for targeted employment generation, having particular regard to the location of this Development Area within the region and its innate strengths.

SDA P6 Fulfill the potential of Portlaoise and Togher Inland Port to become a major transport hub and distribution centre, by building on its strategic location at the intersection of key national road and rail routes.

SDA P7 Focused development, promotion and expansion of Business and Technology Parks and local industrial parks in association with interagency collaboration to serve indigenous industries should also be pursued throughout the SDA.

Transport and Infrastructure

SDA P8 Improve transport system particularly the N80 linking the principal town of Portlaoise to the linked gateway, Portlaoise to Carlow and the ports in the South East Region. Upgrades to the M7 Motorway interchanges at Portlaoise will be necessary to facilitate the future development of Portlaoise in order to minimise impact on the national road network. A key priority action in this Development Area is the development of a public transport hub, incorporating inter modal transport node with Park and Ride facilities.

Social and Community Development

SDA P9 Support and cooperate with the relevant agencies and departments to address any identified physical social and economic needs within the SDA.

Rural Development

SDA P10 Support the rural economy and initiatives in relation to diversification, rural tourism and renewable energy so as to sustain employment opportunities in rural areas[31].

[31] Subject to compliance with the Habitats Directive.

4.9.2.4 Northern Development Area

Settlement Hierarchy

Urban Core	
Principle Town	Longford
Settlements and Rural Hinterland	
Key Service Town	Granard
Service Town	Edgeworthstown
Local Service Towns	Ballymahon and Lanesboro
Rural Hinterland	Other Towns, Villages and Open Countryside

The NDA contains the principal town of Longford and has strong links with the adjacent Border and West Regions. Further removed from the influence of the GDA, than much of the region, the NDA is characterised by a relatively weak urban settlement structure dominated by Longford Town. Longford Town has a long tradition as an important manufacturing centre, with established industries that include precision engineering to the more recent medical industrial developments, along with substantial indigenous industries.

Longford Town functions as the main driver of development in the NDA, with substantial retail and administrative functions and considerable social infrastructure serving a broad, cross-regional hinterland. The position of Longford Town on the junction of two national primary routes creates a position of strategic regional and national importance, with infrastructural improvements addressing regional needs in the Midland, Border and West and the requirement in the NSS to provide a counterbalance to the GDA.

The orderly and sequential development of Longford Town is a key priority. Local Area Plans have been prepared for the northern and southern environs of the town to ensure Longford fulfils its role as a driver of development in the northern area in the five town polycentric model for the Midland Region. In order to ensure that this role is fulfilled, road and public transport links toward the linked gateway in particular, need to be improved (discussed further in Chapter 5).

The NDA has a strong rural community that has the potential to significantly enhance the settlement strategy through appropriately scaled and sustainable, resource related development as outlined in Chapter 3. This includes an array of natural, built heritage and archaeological assets, including the Royal Canal, Lough Ree, Ardagh and Corlea Trackway, which area addressed further in Chapter 7.

LONGFORD TOWN FUNCTIONS AS THE MAIN DRIVER OF DEVELOPMENT IN THE NDA, WITH **SUBSTANTIAL RETAIL AND ADMINISTRATIVE FUNCTIONS AND CONSIDERABLE SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE** SERVING A BROAD, CROSS-REGIONAL HINTERLAND.

Northern Development Area: Development Area Policies

Settlement and Population

NDA P1 Longford as a principal town should plan for targeted growth with a population increase by 2022 in the order of 5,000. Longford Town should focus on urban consolidation, with future sequentially based development in association with transportation priorities outlined in the LUTS study in order to fulfil its role as a principal town within the five-town polycentric model for the region.

NDA P2 The NDA should plan for a future population growth by 2022 in the order of 7,150. Urban development within the smaller town and village network should be consolidated with the provision of physical, social and community infrastructure a priority.

Enterprise and Economy

NDA P3 Build upon existing strong businesses in the food, engineering and medical device sectors.

NDA P4 Create the conditions necessary to cater for employment generation with a focus on inward economic development at Longford Business and Technology Park.

NDA P5 Expand on linkages with the Border and West Regions, in cooperation with the relevant agencies and bodies, to establish strong inter-regional partnerships which have the potential to create opportunities for enterprise and employment within the Midland Region.

Transportation and Infrastructure

NDA P6 The environmental, economic and technical feasibility of the following projects will be evaluated, including their compliance with the requirements of the Habitats Directive. Those that satisfy statutory and other relevant requirements will be pursued: N4 – Rooskey to Mullingar, N4 Edgewortstown Bypass, N5 Longford Town Bypass, N55 Granard Bypass, N55 Athlone Granard Bypass, N55 Edgewortstown Bypass.

Social and Community Development

NDA P7 Engage and cooperate, as required, with the relevant agencies and departments to address any identified social and economic needs within this NDA in areas such as school provision.

NDA P8 Through consultation with local businesses and enterprises, identify and address skills deficits in the local labour force to facilitate the provision of appropriate retraining programmes and outreach provision from Higher Education Institutes.

NDA P9 Identify and implement measures to combat rural isolation and maintain rural communities.

Tourism

NDA P10 Focused promotion and marketing of the natural heritage and cultural resources of the area and its associated high quality of life, which is vital for its development and a valuable contribution towards the identity of the region as a whole.

4.9.2.5 Western Development Area

Settlement Hierarchy

Settlements and Rural Areas	
Key Service Town	Birr
Local Service Town	Banagher
Rural Hinterland	Other Towns, Villages and Open Countryside

The WDA is a primarily rural part of the region, with a distinctive landscape that includes the River Shannon and the Slieve Bloom Mountains. The WDA is furthest removed from the influence of the GDA in the Midland Region, and as such has experienced considerably lower levels of development pressure over the recent past than much of the region.

Bordered to the west by the River Shannon, and encompassing a significant length of navigable inland waterways, this predominantly rural area has potential for a dedicated amenity and leisure industry. With a landscape backdrop of the Slieve Blooms, and the wide range of heritage, artefacts and attractions the resource and activity based development potential of this area is significant. Birr, with its substantial built heritage and strong links to the Mid West and West regions, is an obvious base in this regard and a primary focus for development in the WDA. These aspects are addressed further in Chapter 7.

Traditional Bord na Móna and ESB activity within the WDA has reduced considerably, which in turn has impacted on population levels in the area, leading to pockets of population decline. Revitalisation of the area presents particular challenges. There is potential for diversification of peat-based industries into alternative energy sources and for tourism and amenity installations. The potential of this sector is discussed in detail in Section 3.3.4 Rural Economy.

The strengthening of the urban network in the WDA is a priority in order to revitalise rural communities through the provision of access to a broad range of services and facilities. The village network, in particular, is a strong settlement asset that should be recognised and consolidated to address the needs of surrounding rural communities.

Future population growth, taking account of recent trends and the strategic goals, this Development Area would need to grow by 1,361 in the period to 2022.

The bulk of this growth will be channelled to Birr town and Local Development Plans and housing strategies will accommodate anticipated needs for housing. The requirement to develop housing should be based on a 'needs-driven' basis to be informed through respective housing strategies and should account for the number of existing vacant units available. Accommodating this housing requirement will need to be phased to match provision of other essential physical infrastructure such as water services and social facilities such as schools etc.

Future plans for settlements within the WDA will take into account and carefully consider the amount of existing lands zoned for development and ensure that a sequential approach is applied to any lands identified for future development.

The heritage and amenity potential of the area is considerable and should be utilised to its fullest in conjunction with the development of the area. Co-ordinated promotion and marketing of the inland waterways, walking and cycling trails and historical assets of the area will be essential in this regard in association with the Tourism Strategy outlined in Chapter 7.

Western Development Area: Development Area Policies

Settlement and Population

WDA P1 Prioritise the strengthening of the urban network in the WDA in order to revitalise rural communities through the provision of access to an appropriate level of services and facilities.

WDA P2 The WDA should plan for a future population growth by 2022 in the order of 1,361.

Enterprise and Economy

WDA P3 Fully develop the heritage and amenity potential of the WDA and ensure a co-ordinated approach to the development promotion and marketing of the Slieve Bloom area and the inland waterways, walking and cycling and historical assets.

WDA P4 Support the diversification of peat based industries into alternative energy sources and for tourism and amenity installations[32].

Transportation and Infrastructure

WDA P5 Support the upgrades to the N52 and N62 national secondary routes so as to provide improved inter and intra regional connectivity.[33]

Tourism and Rural Economy

WDA P6 Develop the potential for a dedicated amenity and leisure industry, with particular focus on the Slieve Blooms Mountains and the wide range of local heritage facilities.

WDA P7 Support the heritage town of Birr as a significant tourism centre within the WDA and build on its strong links to the Mid West Region, particularly Roscrea.

[32] Subject to compliance with the Habitats Directive.

[33] ibid.

4.10 Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring of the implementation of the Regional Settlement Strategy will be undertaken by the MRA in conjunction with each of the 4 constituent Local Authorities. In order to ensure the delivery of the Regional Settlement Strategy of the Midland RPGs the following high level objectives, targets and indicators have been defined to facilitate its implementation:

Topic	Objective	Target	Indicators
Regional Settlement Strategy	To ensure the provision of a balanced and sustainable regional development model in accordance with the defined Regional Settlement Strategy.	• Ensure that growth levels reach the necessary critical mass and that this growth occurs principally in the linked gateway, complimented by the principal towns which in turn will support the overall region. • Ensure that all subsidiary Development Plans comply with the population targets and housing land requirements as set out in the RPGs Regional Settlement Strategy.	• Actual population growth in the linked gateway, principal towns and region. • Performance of linked gateway using Gateway Development Index (GDI) Score. • Sufficient serviced zoned lands to support population growth in the appropriate areas (Housing land availability returns). • County Development Plan Core Strategies (ensuring consistency with RPGs).

M6, Clara Interchange, County Offaly

MIDLAND REGIONAL AUTHORITY

5

TRANSPORT AND INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGY

COUNTY LAOIS

Irish Rail Train Care Depot, Portlaoise

5.1 Introduction

Targeted investment in transport and infrastructure is a fundamental element in the creation of a more competitive, sustainable region with an improved quality of life for all.

Investment in walking and cycling routes, national roads, public transport, energy, water, waste, telecommunications and social infrastructure is being rolled out in line with the following national policy documents:

- National Development Plan (NDP) 2007-2013.
- Transport 21.
- Smarter Travel – A Sustainable Transport Future.
- National Broadband Scheme (NBS).

In tandem with the Economic Development and Regional Settlement Strategies outlined in Chapters 3 and 4, this strategy highlights priority infrastructure investments and measures required to enhance: regional competitiveness, the sustainability of development and to improve quality of life by improving accessibility and reducing travel times.

The key strategic issues for the Midland Region as outlined in detail in Section 3.3 require targeted infrastructural investment for the following reasons:

- Regional identity will be consolidated by stronger relationships between the major settlements, based on ease of access and reduced travel times between the linked gateway and principal towns.
- To attract and retain critical mass, requires a suite of sustainable, efficient transport modes between the linked gateway towns.
- The designation and establishment of an SDZ (as outlined at Section 3.3.3) requires targeted investment in specific infrastructure to concentrate and sustain the necessary development levels.
- The development of the rural economy in key areas such as tourism, agri-food and green enterprise requires targeted investment in regional infrastructure.

It is important to acknowledge the current economic climate and potential investment constraints over the medium term when outlining the central issues of this Chapter. These challenges, in the provision of transportation infrastructure in particular must be addressed and overcome to improve mobility, increase travel choice, reduce congestion, improve reliability of travel and allow for a more competitive and sustainable region.

All transport and infrastructure projects are evaluated having regard to their technical feasibility and potential impacts on the environment. Compliance to the requirements of the Habitats Directive and potential implications of development on any Natura 2000 sites are also evaluated under current legislative provisions.

5.2 Sustainable Transport

The provision of sustainable transport is essential in improving the quality of life on offer in the Midland Region. Transport is a complex issue requiring assessment at a number of levels, including movements into and out of, within and through the region and by a number of modes, sometimes interlinked and connected to achieve the most efficient and sustainable results.

Smarter Travel – A Sustainable Transport Future, the policy document published by the Department of Transport in 2009 is reflected in this RPG strategy which aims to establish sustainable transport patterns by the following methods:

- Reducing the need to travel.
- Providing alternatives to the car.
- Improving fuel and energy efficiency.

The strategy encompasses all transport movements in the region, and considers movements at all levels. Figure 5.1 below outlines the Sustainable Transport Hierarchy which proposes a Co-ordinated Sustainable Transport Plan for the Midland Region.

5.2.1 Co-ordinated Sustainable Transport Plan

The MRA in partnership with its constituent Local Authorities will prepare a Co-ordinated Sustainable Transport Plan for the region. This plan will ensure that future investment in transport measures and initiatives are delivered in an integrated fashion and are focused on promoting sustainable travel.

The Co-ordinated Sustainable Transport Plan will set out high-level targets for shifts to sustainable travel modes for the region, identify potential areas for integrated interchange facilities, set out the walking and cycling linkages between the key towns in the region and provide a guide by which the Local Authorities will develop their own locally tailored plans.

In addition the Co-ordinated Sustainable Transport Plan will seek to:

- Promote the continued roll-out of LUTS type studies, particularly for the linked gateway and principal towns.
- Further develop investment priorities that will enhance accessibility to and within the region.
- Identify potential barriers to movement associated with the connectivity of the five town polycentric model, focusing primarily on the linked gateway and define policies to address these.

Figure 5.1: Sustainable Transport Hierarchy

National Policies	National Spatial Strategy, National Development Plan, Transport 21, Smarter Travel – A Sustainable Transport Future, National Cycle Policy Framework
Regional Level	Co-ordinated Sustainable Transport Plan
County Level	Development Plans Local Transport Plans
Local Level	Land Use and Transportation Studies Walking and Cycling Strategies

- Establish priorities for improvements in public transport, cycling and walking facilities.
- Identify opportunities to reduce travel demand.
- Identify important linkages with the Country's ports and airports and how these links can be better utilised and improved.
- Protect the carrying capacity of our existing transport infrastructure.

THE CO-ORDINATED SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT PLAN WILL **SET OUT HIGH-LEVEL TARGETS FOR SHIFTS TO SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL MODES FOR THE REGION,** IDENTIFY POTENTIAL AREAS FOR INTEGRATED INTERCHANGE FACILITIES.

5.2.2 Measures to Reduce Travel Demand

In supporting sustainable transport for the region, all Local Authorities will prepare Local Transport Plans, incorporating a package of measures to promote Smarter Travel alternatives where available such as walking, cycling, public transport and sustainable car use tailored to local needs. These plans will identify infrastructural improvements along with other 'softer' initiatives such as the provision of bicycle training schemes, Green School Travel Plans, Workplace Travel Plans and greater information on walking/cycling routes and maps.

These plans, will complement and inform Development Plans, will be developed in the context of the overall Co-ordinated Sustainable Transport Plan for the region and will set out how the Local Authorities will achieve the overarching targets for sustainable travel and transport services in their areas.

Ensuring better integration of land use planning and transport policies is of critical importance in the development of land use plans throughout the region. LUTS have a vital role in this regard and the rollout of LUTS should be promoted. Focusing developments and higher densities on strong existing/future public transport corridors will support the viability of public transport services on these routes and help to improve their frequency and level of service. Future significant housing and employment should have good transport connections and safe routes for walking and cycling.

In order to reduce the distance travelled by private car, the Government have identified the creation of e-working centres on a regional basis as an action within the Smarter Travel Policy. The MRA supports this action and creation of an e-working centre in the region, in tandem with enhanced broadband speed and efficiency under the National Broadband Scheme (NBS) and other telecommunications initiatives.

5.2.3 Cycling and Pedestrian Movement

The MRA supports the Government's Smarter Travel Policy and the National Cycle Policy Framework (NCPF) and will encourage the policies outlined in these documents. The aim is to develop a strong culture of walking and cycling which is key in the development of an overall sustainable transport strategy. Contributing to sustainability of the region, enhancing quality of life, increased walking and cycling facilities, integration with public transport modes in the region, will also enhance tourism offer, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

The NCPF sets a national target of 10% of all trips being made by bike in 2020. Achieving these targets will require, in particular, road and cycleway improvements within the urban areas, including revisions to speed limits, junction improvements and the reallocation of road space to safely accommodate cyclists. Educational and marketing programmes aimed at promoting the health and economic benefits of walking and cycling will help encourage the mindset shift required to achieve this aim.

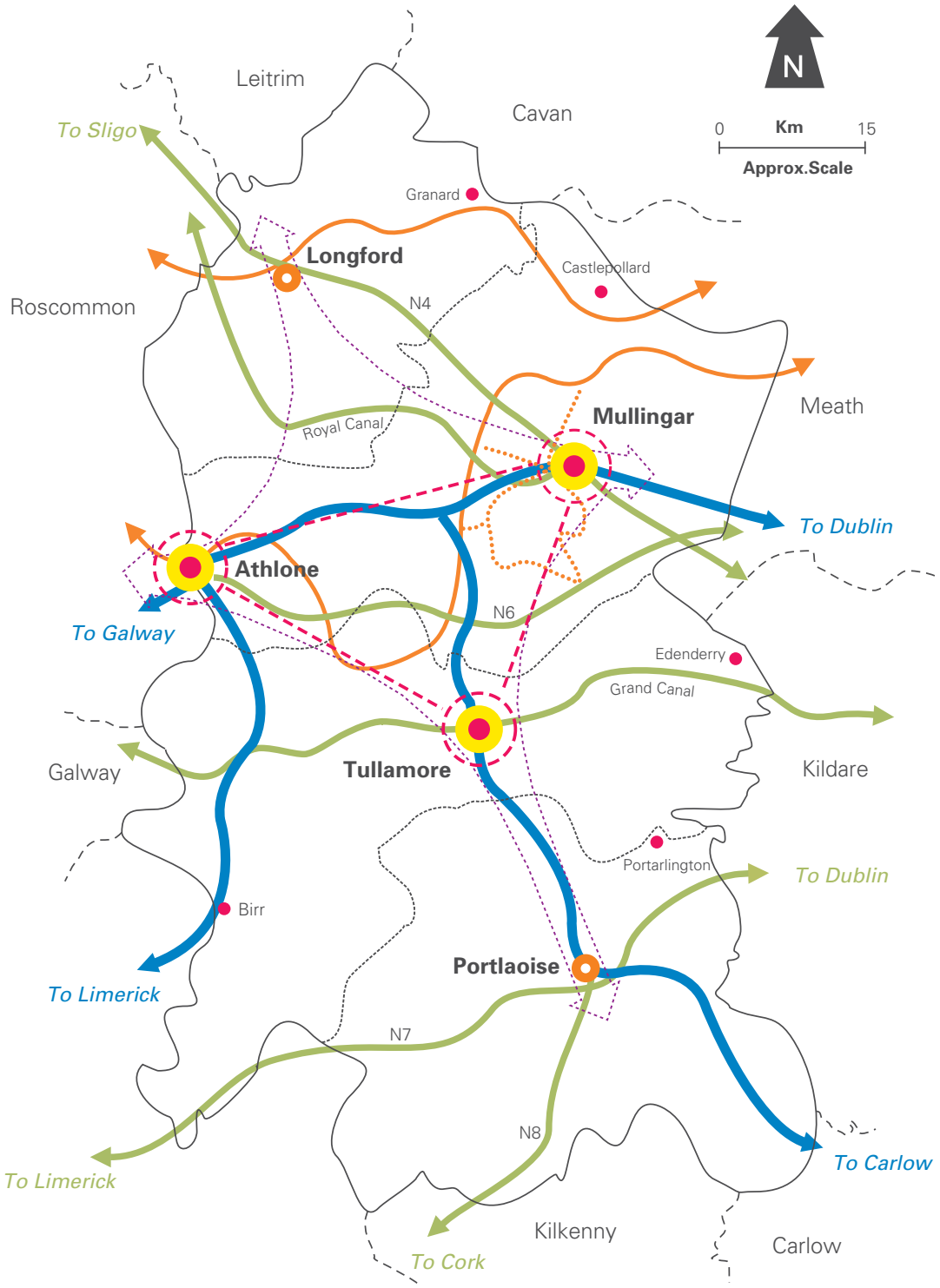
The promotion of walking and cycling will be focused not just on measures for travel to work/school purposes, but will also focus on the development of routes for leisure and tourism purposes, with a particular focus on the uniqueness of the region, particularly in terms of the lakes, waterways and canals that traverse the region, and integration with the existing public transport facilities.

Investments in the national road network have resulted in the reclassification of Sections of national routes to regional routes. These routes, in particular the N4, N6, N7 and N8 are characterised by wide cross-Sections and the redistribution of this space would provide the opportunity to create quality cycle routes within and through the region as outlined in Figure 5.2. In addition to these routes, it is proposed to develop regional cycling routes along both the Grand and Royal Canals.

Fáilte Ireland's *Strategy for the Development of Irish Cycle Tourism* identifies the extension and improvements to the Táin Trail[34] cycling route with the creation of Mullingar as a cycling hub for this trail and the development of loop routes around Lough Owel, Lough Ennell. The National Cycle Network, currently being developed by the Department of Transport (DoT), includes for the creation of a Dublin-Galway cycle route, with a section connecting Mullingar to Athlone. This network also includes a link from the Dublin-Galway route to Carlow, connecting Tullamore and Portlaoise and a link from Athlone to Limerick as outlined in Figure 5.2.

[34] The Táin Trail cycle route retraces the route of the Táin Bó Cuailnge (Cattle Raid of Cooley) and currently runs through Rathcroghan in the west to the Cooley Peninsula on the east coast.

Figure 5.2 Midland Region: Cycle Network Strategy



In ensuring that walking and cycling improvements are delivered within a structured framework and that a targeted implementation plan is developed for the key urban areas, Local Authorities will develop Walking and Cycling Strategies for the linked gateway and principal towns in the region. These strategies would allow for the identification of priority improvements aimed at removing barriers to movement and providing the necessary skills and facilities to create real shift towards these sustainable travel modes. These strategies will be required to include linkages that support the function of the polycentric settlement model outlined in Chapter 4, in particular, enhancing accessibility between the five towns within this model.

The design development of the cycle networks, within the urban areas, should be done in accordance with the design philosophy outlined in the NCPF.

5.2.4 Public Transport

The provision of an integrated public transport network is critical to achieving a high quality of life in the region and in providing viable and sustainable alternative transport modes as outlined within the Smarter Travel Policy. Ensuring better integration between land use planning and public transport will be of critical importance in supporting the development of the public transport network in the region.

The LUTS for the areas will identify appropriate future land uses, in tandem with the consideration of how these uses can be aligned with the provision of public transport to ensure that investment is maximised.

Public transport in the area is primarily focussed on the east/west radial transport corridors, with limited services running in a north-south direction. This situation needs to be addressed if the Economic Development and Regional Settlement Strategies outlined in Chapters 3 and 4 are to be realised, particularly with regard to public transport links between the linked gateway and principal towns.

Under this strategy, the Local Authorities will develop a co-ordinated review of local passenger transport services to support the development of a comprehensive local passenger service in the region. This review will identify effective ways of improving access to important services and identify opportunities for rationalisation and redeployment of existing resources. This review should be undertaken in conjunction with National Transport Authority (NTA) and the Department of Transport (DoT).

5.2.4.1 Strategic Transport Nodes

The creation of strategic transport nodes to combine quality interchange facilities at the linked gateway and principal towns is required to maximise the benefits of the national transport infrastructure that traverses the region. These nodes would create opportunities to integrate public transport networks providing an enhanced service.

Portlaoise, located at the intersection of the Dublin-Cork/Limerick (N7/N8), the cross-county Mayo/Athlone/Rosslare (N80) road routes and three strategic rail corridors, is a key national transport node, identified in the NSS. Given the transport infrastructure that traverses the region, the creation of strategic transport nodes that combine quality interchange facilities at the linked gateway and principal towns would provide the opportunity to integrate the existing and future public transport networks to provide for improved accessibility and a more comprehensive service. Such facilities would also provide for improved connectivity and interchange possibilities for the national transport network linking the east/west radial transport corridors to a north/south axis, as advocated within the NSS.

5.2.4.2 Rail

The region is well served with national rail services. National rail routes radiate out of Dublin and connect the capital with:

- Longford and Mullingar on the Sligo line.
- Athlone, Clara, Tullamore and Portarlington on the Galway and Mayo lines.
- Portlaoise and Portarlington on the Cork line.

A number of commuter services have been put in place including Athlone-Galway, Athlone-Dublin, Portlaoise-Dublin and Longford-Mullingar-Dublin. Investment in the renewal of rail lines, signalling and station infrastructure, the renewal of rolling stock and introduction of faster and more frequent services has enhanced the quality of rail services throughout the Midland Region.

Rail routes would significantly improve the public transport offer in the region if connected at strategic points. The reinstatement of the rail link between Athlone and Mullingar would serve to further strengthen public transport interconnectivity in the Midland Region by connecting the Galway/Mayo rail line with the Sligo rail line and provide an additional line option for the Galway-Dublin service. This would also facilitate greater connectivity not just within the region but also on a national level providing improved cross linkages, with services to the two main stations in the capital and enabling increases on Galway Dublin rail line.

5.2.4.3 Bus

Public bus services within the region are currently operated by Bus Eireann and private operators essentially mirroring the various primary road networks traversing the region in an east-west fashion. In addition, since 2002, the Department of Transport has been funding the nationwide Rural Transport Programme providing passenger transport services in rural areas enabling access to essential public services. It is essential that this initiative is retained within the Midland Region in order to enhance the development of the region as a whole and maintaining access to public services for all citizens. Opportunities to develop more effective usage of existing services, including integration with other transport modes and well considered timetabling should be explored to ensure that the services are delivered in a co-ordinated manner.

While good connectivity exists between the region and Dublin, Limerick, Cork, Galway and Sligo with interchange possibilities through locations such as Athlone and Portlaoise, there is a recognised deficit within the region in terms of the availability of frequent public bus services and integration with the rail network. In particular, the bus service from Tullamore is limited in comparison with the other linked gateway and principal towns and therefore the provision of additional bus services to this linked gateway town should be encouraged. The provision of more north/south services will be required to improve accessibility between the key towns supporting the polycentric model.

The key role of the linked gateway and principal towns in the enhancement of connectivity across the wider regional and national networks and in the provision of important social and economic services should be further developed. In turn, the linked gateway concept is dependent on the availability of such connectivity. The level of inter-urban and regional services that connect to the gateways provides the opportunity to develop a hub and spoke type network with semi-fixed routes acting as feeder services to inter-urban and regional level services. This should be further developed in conjunction with the other initiatives identified under the Co-ordinated Sustainable Transport Plan.

THE PROVISION OF AN INTEGRATED PUBLIC TRANSPORT NETWORK IS CRITICAL TO ACHIEVING A **HIGH QUALITY OF LIFE IN THE REGION** AND IN PROVIDING VIABLE AND SUSTAINABLE ALTERNATIVE TRANSPORT MODES AS OUTLINED WITHIN THE SMARTER TRAVEL POLICY.

5.3 Roads

The linked gateway towns of Athlone, Tullamore, and Mullingar have a key role in the development of the region, supported by the two principal towns of Longford and Portlaoise. Road access to the region has been significantly improved over the past number of years with many large-scale projects completed, nearing completion and in design stages.

5.3.1 Inter and Intra Regional Links

Inter and intra regional transport connectivity has been enhanced considerably by development of the major inter-urban routes as follows:

- **M4:** Dublin to Sligo
- **M6:** Dublin to Galway
- **M7:** Dublin to Limerick
- **M8:** Dublin to Cork

5.3.1.1 Inter-Regional Links

It is essential that the inter-regional road links are optimised at a national level to realise the strategies as set out in this policy document. While some progress has been made on upgrading National Primary Routes throughout the region over the previous RPG period the completion of the balance of the national primary network (N4, N5) and the upgrading of national secondary routes is imperative to improve both inter and intra regional links and realise the vision for the Midland Region as set out in the NSS. This is particularly important given the role that the secondary routes play in providing an important links to the national primary road network.

Key Inter-Regional Road Investment Priorities

Having regard to the above the key inter-regional road investment priorities and their significance to the region are detailed as follows:

N4 The N4 runs from Dublin through the Midland Region to Sligo. The N4 also serves as an arterial route for traffic between Dublin and Galway as the M6 diverges from the M4 at Kinnegad. The N5 route to Westport connects from the N4 at Longford (the N26 route to Ballina in Mayo connects from the N5).

There has been significant invesment in the M/ N4 to date and a planned programme of further works west of the Mullingar bypass to the Longford border will provide the necessary capacity to accommodate the function of the polycentric model within the region and the function of the gateways and hubs along the northwestern seaboard.

N5 The N5 connects Longford town with Westport. The road diverges from the N4 Dublin / Sligo route at Longford town and from there serves as a direct route to Mayo. The proposed N5 Longford Bypass scheme provides for a bypass to the north-west of Longford town nearing construction phase. The bypass will provide linkages and enhance connectivity between Dublin and the West Region and significantly reduce volumes of Dublin/Mayo bound traffic traversing through Longford town which acts as a significant bottleneck and barrier to the development of industry and commerce in a western direction. Longford acts as an economic driver for the Northern Development Area of the Midland Region. Provision of the N5 bypass at this location will enhance inter-regional links between the town itself and both the Western and Eastern Regions.

N51 The N51 route commences at its junction with the N52 in Delvin and runs in an easterly direction passing through Navan before crossing the M1 motorway and terminating near Drogheda. The N51, in conjunction with the N52 has a role in the development of road links in a north-south direction across the region.

N52 The N52 runs in a north easterly direction from the N7 in Nenagh, County Tipperary to the M1 National primary route north of Dundalk, traversing through Counties Offaly and Westmeath, bypassing Tullamore and Mullingar en route. It is considered that this road provides a fundamental link between the two linked gateway towns of Mullingar and Tullamore and has been identified within Transport 21, as a national secondary route for targeted improvements given the importance the route has for regional development.

N55 The N55 route runs in a north easterly direction from Athlone to Cavan, traversing County Longford through the settlements of Ballymahon, Edgeworthstown and Granard. The route provides key links between the linked gateway and the Northern Development Area and is also an important link for connectivity to the Border Region and on into Northern Ireland.

N61 The N61 route runs from the west junction of the M6 at Athlone, traversing through Roscommon intersecting the N5 at Tulsk continuing to Boyle and its terminus with the N4.

N62 The N62 route runs from the east junction of the M6 at Athlone, traversing through Birr, Roscrea and Thurles enroute. The route is of regional significance linking Athlone (M6) to the M8 south of Thurles.

N63 The N63 runs in a north easterly direction linking the N17 north east of Galway, to the N5 national primary road in Longford, traversing through Roscommon Town en route. It provides a critical link between the Midland Region (particularly the Northern Development Area) and the West Region and also provides an important alternative link to the Atlantic Corridor.

N77 The N77 route links the N10 national primary on the ring road south of Kilkenny and traverses through Ballyragget and Durrow to its terminus at the M7 motorway south of Portlaoise in County Laois.

N80 The N80 forms part of a national strategic linking corridor called the Central Spine as outlined in Transport 21 and the NSS. It is an important strategic route running in a south westerly direction from Moate, joining the N52 at the Tullamore bypass, travelling on to Portlaoise and further beyond to County Wexford. The route provides significant links within the region between the linked gateway town of Tullamore and the principal town of Portlaoise and also provides vital linkages with Rosslare and the South East Region.

N78 The N78 route commences at its junction with the N77 near Kilkenny and runs in a northerly direction traversing through Castlecomer, Ballylinan in County Laois and Athy. It intersects the N80 near Ballylinan and its terminus is the M9 near Kilcullen.

Figure 5.3: Midland Region – Spatial Infrastructure Strategy

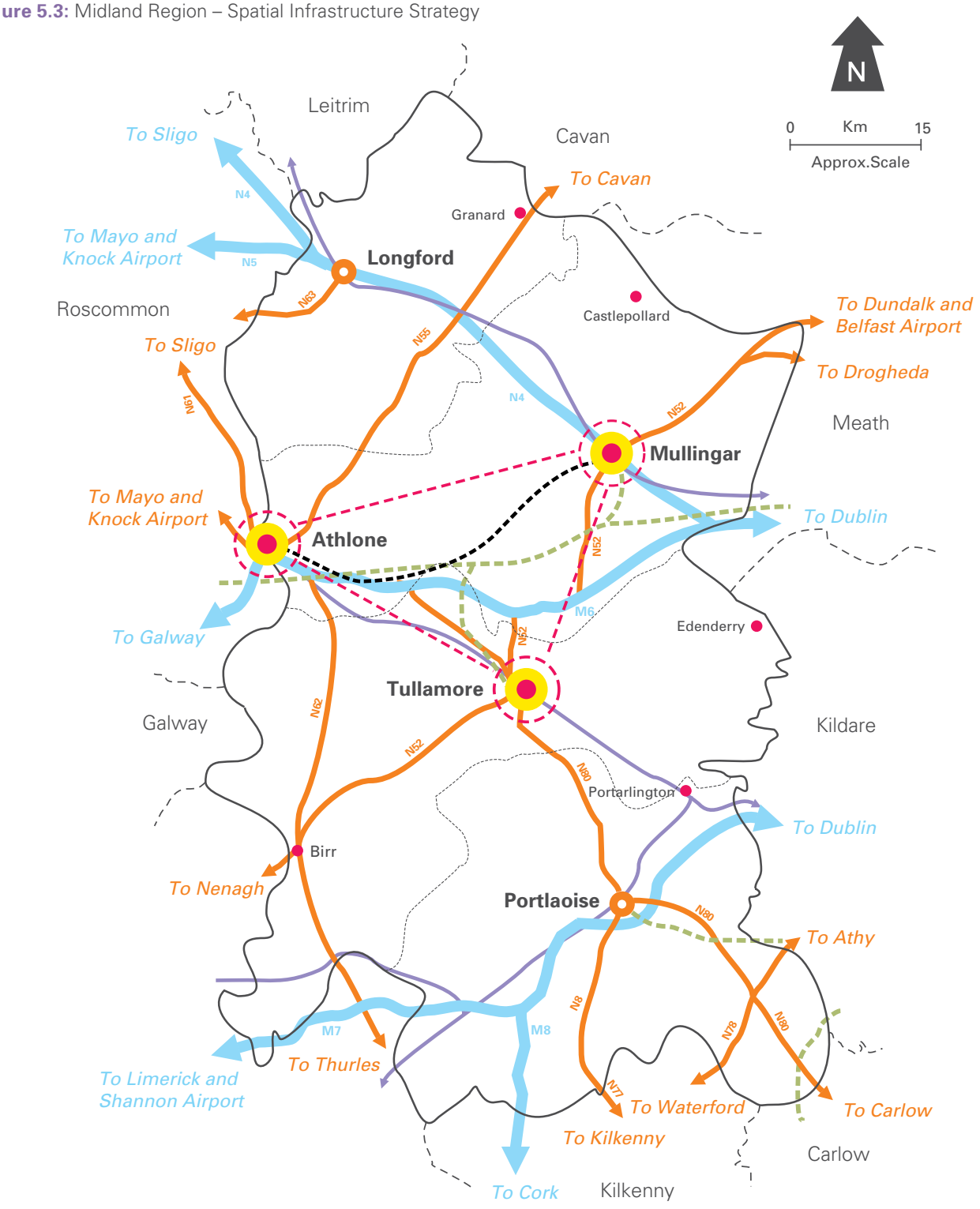


Table 5.1: Inter-regional Road Investment Priorities

N4	From the M4 West of Kinnegad (intersects the N52 and N55) to its terminus at Sligo.
N5	From the N4 Longford via Castlebar to its terminus at Westport.
N51	From junction of N52 at Delvin via Navan to its terminus near Drogheda (M3).
N52	From the N7 Nenagh (intersects the N80, N4 and N51) to its terminus at the M1 Ardee.
N55	From the M6 Athlone (intersects the N4) to its terminus at the N3 Cavan.
N61	From the M6 at Athlone to its terminus at the N4 Boyle.
N62	From the M6 Athlone (intersects the N52) to its terminus at junction 6 of the M8 Southeast of Thurles.
N63	From the N5 Longford to its terminus at the N17 North of Galway City.
N77	From south of Kilkenny to its terminus at the M7 Portlaoise, County Laois.
N78	From North of Kilkenny (intersects the N80) to its terminus at the M9 Kilcullen.
N80	From the N6 North of Tullamore (intersects the N52, M7 and N78) to its terminus at the N11 Enniscorthy.

5.3.1.2 Intra Regional Links

The enhancement of the strategic transportation routes within the Midland Region is central to the successful functioning of the Midland Region, the five town polycentric model and the delivery of the strategies contained within these RPGs. It is evident that the development of key strategic transport routes within the region will further the delivery of the objectives outlined throughout this document. In this regard the roll out and promotion of intra regional road improvements is vital.

Key Intra-Regional Road Investment Priorities

Linked Gateway Road Priorities

The linked gateway transport network is characterised by a number of nationally strategic roads (N4, M6, N52, N62, N52, N62, N55, N80) and rail routes (Dublin-Galway / Mayo and Dublin-Sligo) that traverse the Midland Region and provide key external and internal linkages for the linked gateway particularly to Dublin, Galway, Sligo, Mayo and the principal towns of Longford and Portlaoise.

The following table identifies a series of key intra regional road investment priorities that are considered to be essential to the functioning of the region's strategic road network and to enhance internal connectivity.

5.3.2 Protection of Existing and Proposed Road Infrastructure

National primary, national secondary and strategic regional roads within the region are of critical importance for the movement of goods and services and to the economic function and settlement. It is therefore essential that planning authorities make provision to protect the carrying capacity of these routes in the relevant Development Plans and do not compromise proposed road schemes, where road scheme planning has commenced.

Figure 5.2: Intra Regional Road Investment Priorities

Road Reference	Project/Location
N4	• McNeads Bridge to the Downs: Killucan Road Interchange and Closure of Median Breaks. • Mullingar-Rooskey.
N5	• Longford Bypass.
N51	• County boundary to Delvin.
N52	• County boundary (Clonmellon) to Delvin including bypasses of Clonmellon and Delvin. • Billistown to Mullingar. • Carrick to Clonfad. • Kilbeggan (M6 junction) to Tullamore. • Kilcormac Bypass. • Birr to county boundary (Riverstown.
N55	• Athlone to Longford county boundary (north of Granard) including bypasses of Ballykeeran/ Glasson, Edgeworthstown and Granard.
N62	• Athlone to Roscrea including the bypass of Birr.
N63	• Longford to Lanesboro including bypasses of Kilashee and Lanesboro.
N77	• From Portlaoise to the county boundary south of Durrow.
N78	• From county boundary north of Castlecomer to the county boundary north of Ballylinan.
N80	• Tullamore to Carlow including bypasses of Killeigh, Mountmellick, Portlaoise, Mountmellick, Stradbally, Arles and Ballickmoyler.

5.4 International Transport Connectivity

Ensuring reliable, cost effective and efficient access to nationally strategic connections is critical in ensuring global competitiveness within our economy. The transport infrastructure that traverses the Midland Region has an important role in providing connectivity between the region, and other regions and the nationally strategic access points of Dublin Airport, Dublin Port and Rosslare.

5.4.1 Ports and Airports

Ports and airports offer external linkages for the region both nationally and internationally and are critical in terms of economic growth. The Midland Region has no airport but is served by a number of airfields including Abbeyshrule in County Longford. Primary air access for the region is through Dublin Airport with airports at Shannon and Knock providing alternative facilities. It is recognised that the Midland Region would benefit by having enhanced air access and supports the development of an airport within the region.

Dublin Port offers a significant transport artery for the region being the largest port in the country in terms of throughput, access and economic contribution. The regions enhanced connectivity through its inter-urban routes has significantly reduced journey times to Dublin Port and also to the ferry port at Dun Laoghaire. The adjoining South East Region provides port access at Rosslare-Europort which is a hub of all the major RoRo[35] passenger and freight services operating the southern Irish Sea and on continental routes. The region is also served by the container and cargo terminals at Waterford/Bellview and New Ross Ports.

As detailed within the NSS, the national transport network consists of a number of strategic radial corridors, providing transport connections between Dublin and the other regions. These radial corridors are supported by strategic linking corridors which provide connectivity between the radial corridors and the between the regions.

A number of the strategic radial corridors traverse through the Midland Region and connect the West, North-West and South-West to Dublin. In addition, the Central Spine, a Strategic Linking Corridor, which runs on a north/south axis through Dundalk, Athlone/Mullingar/Tullamore, Portlaoise and Rosslare connects with the east-west radial routes in the Midland Region.

These strategic national transport corridors play a key role in the economic competitiveness of the Midland Region and other regions, by providing access to the strategic international access points of Dublin Airport, Dublin Port, Rosslare and Bellview. The MRA supports the continued development of these strategic transport corridors.

As recognised within the NSS, given Portlaoise's location at the intersection of several strategic transport corridors with quality road and rail linkages, it has strong national development potential as a transport hub and distribution centre or 'Inland Port'. A Masterplan has been developed in conjunction with the NRA and the DoEHLG to develop the role of Portlaoise as Ireland's 'Inland Port'.

THE MIDLAND LINKED GATEWAY TRANSPORT NETWORK IS CHARACTERISED BY A NUMBER OF **NATIONALLY STRATEGIC ROAD AND RAIL ROUTES.**

[35] RoRo- Roll on Roll Off

5.5 Water Resources

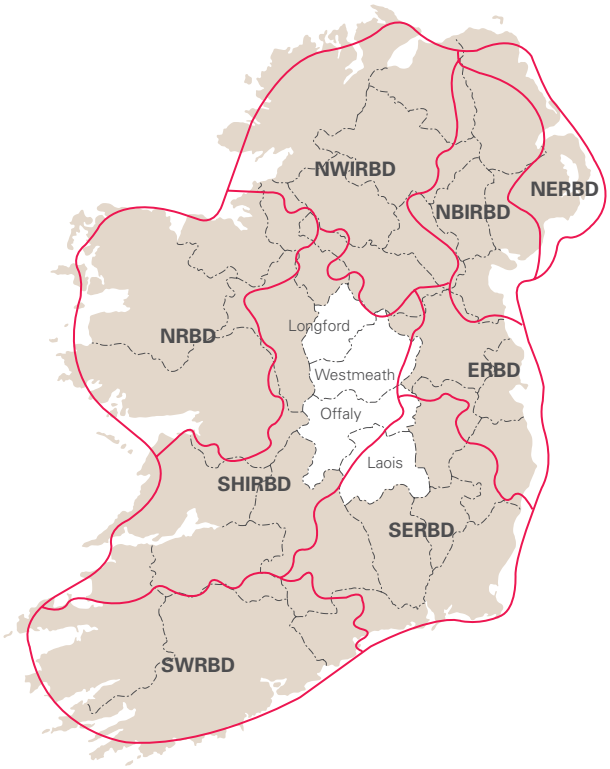
5.5.1 River Basin Management and the Water Framework Directive

The protection of our water is one of the most fundamental challenges facing this region and Ireland in the future, as it is directly related to our health, well-being and ultimately our quality of life. The quality of our water resources is vital to protect the many freshwater and marine habitats. Proper management of ground water resources is needed, not alone to maintain the quality and yield of drinking water sources, but also to ensure that groundwater is not having a detrimental impact on surface water and ecosystems that depend on water[36].

The EU Water Framework Directive (WFD)[37] sets out a new approach to the protection and enhancement of the country's water resources. The fundamental objective of the WFD is to maintain the high quality status of waters where it exists, preventing any deterioration in the existing status of waters and achieving at least "good status" in relation to all waters by 2015. The WFD is complemented by Directive (2006/118/EC) on the protection of groundwater against pollution and deterioration and Directive (2008/105/EC) on environmental quality standards in the field of water policy. For the purposes of the WFD, the island of Ireland has been divided up into eight River Basin Districts (RBDs) as identified in Figure 5.4.

The Midland Region falls to a large extent within the Shannon International River Basin District (IRBD) with Laois falling within the South East RBD. Parts of Westmeath and Offaly fall within the Eastern RBD and a small portion of north Longford falls into the North Western IRBD.

Figure 5.4: River Basin Districts



River Basin Management Plans (RBMP's) examine all of the issues impacting on water quality and bringing it to good quality status. Delivering the plans is a major challenge for each of the Local Authorities both in financial terms and also in monitoring and negotiations to bring about the necessary improvements. The impact of the RBMP's on regional planning are significant as the scale of waste water discharge and water abstraction will directly impact upon the requirements to protect water bodies from deterioration. In addition, intended development close to rivers and lakes could be impacted by the objectives of the RBMP's.

The core objectives of the RBMP's are as follows:

- Achieve protected areas objectives.
- Prevent deterioration.
- Restore good status.
- Reduce chemical pollution.

[36] Irelands Environment, EPA, 2008.

[37] Can be viewed on www.wfdireland.ie

The RPGs support the implementation of the RBMPs. In terms of the Freshwater Pearl Mussel, the DoEHLG have prepared draft management plans in accordance with Article 13(5) of the WFD. The objective of the plans is to restore the freshwater pearl mussels populations in 27 rivers or stretches of rivers that are within the boundaries of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs).

THE PROVISION OF WATER AND WASTEWATER SERVICES IS A PRE-REQUISITE IN **SUPPORTING POPULATION AND ECONOMIC GROWTH** IN THE REGION.

5.6 Water and Waste Water Infrastructure[38]

Substantial investment in the region's water and wastewater infrastructure has been undertaken in recent years through the individual Local Authorities. Continued investment in water services under the current NDP aims to address remaining capacity shortages. Groundwater within the region is the main source of drinking water and it is imperative that the Midland RPGs 2010-2022 include policies and objectives that protect this valuable resource in accordance with the provisions of the WFD outlined above.

The provision of water and wastewater services is a pre-requisite in supporting population and economic growth in the region and is one of the most important roles of Local Authorities. Rapid population growth and development pressure in many areas of the Midland Region over the past number of years have lead to an increased demand for the provision of water supply and waste water services.

At present, treated water supply and sewerage treatment in the linked gateway is primarily undertaken at a local level, with sources of water supply including Lough Owel and the River Shannon. The River Shannon offers potential as a significant water source for the region.

5.6.1 Priority Water Services Investment

The table overleaf indicates the current water and wastewater services infrastructure priorities for the linked gateway and the principal towns. These and other schemes across the region will advance over the term of these RPGs in accordance with the individual local authority 'Assessment of Needs for Water Services' and the current DoEHLG Water Services Investment Programme.

The schemes overleaf are the priority for the region and are urgently required to service the existing needs of these towns and to facilitate the growth of the region. These wastewater schemes and others across the region are also urgently required to address pollution issues and to meet Statutory Environmental or Public Health Requirements and the requirements of the RBMPs.

[38] Subsidiary Plans shall contribute towards adherence to the Department of the Environment Circular L8/08 Water Services Investment and Rural Water Programmes – Protection of Natural Heritage and National Monuments.

Table 5.3: Water and Waste Water Infrastructure Priorities

Location	Water	Wastewater
GATEWAY		
Athlone	South Westmeath Water Supply Scheme.	Athlone Sewerage Scheme.
Mullingar	Regional water supply scheme improvement incorporating Lough Ennell Abstraction.	Mullingar Sewerage Scheme. Westmeath Sludge Management Scheme.
Tullamore	Tullamore Water Supply Scheme.	Tullamore Sewerage Scheme.
PRINCIPLE TOWNS		
Longford	Longford Central Regional Water Supply Scheme.	Longford Town Sewerage Scheme.
Portlaoise	Portlaoise and Mountmellick Water Supply Scheme.	Portlaoise Sewerage Scheme incorporating Laois Sludge Management Scheme.

5.7 Waste Management

Waste Management Policy for the region is contained in the Midlands Waste Management Plan 2005-2010 (and any subsequent Plan) made jointly by the four Local Authorities and North Tipperary County Council.

5.8 Energy Provision

The Midland Region has a history of being significantly involved in energy production and transmission, particularly given the presence of the peatlands and electricity transmission network. Currently, there are three peat burning power stations in the region at Lanesboro, Shannonbridge and Edenderry.

These are of particular relevance given government policy to ensure that electricity generation from renewable energy accounts for 40% of output by 2020. In this regard, the region can avail of the opportunity to use its existing power stations to make the transition from peat to renewable energy sources. The region also has substantial renewable energy potential to accommodate large scale energy production in the form of wind farms and bio energy fuel sources. This concept has been further developed in Chapter 3.

5.8.1 Electricity Transmission

An efficient, reliable, and cost effective electricity supply is a key resource for regional development. In 'Eirgrid 25', the report outlines that without investment in the region's electricity transmission network there will be no capacity over the next five to ten years and the reliability of the supply will fall below normal international standards. Furthermore, there will be no capacity in the network, to allow further renewable generation to be connected.

In order to avoid such a scenario, Eirgrid, the national body responsible for the management of the electricity transmission network, have planned key investments, through upgrading of the transmission network and new circuit build, reinforcement, to cater for continued demand growth in the linked gateway towns of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar and principal towns of Longford and Portlaoise.

The transmission reinforcement projects in the Midland Region are, in the short-term, driven by the need to increase the security and quality of supply to key parts of the network. There is also an identified long-term need to reinforce transmission infrastructure equipment throughout the region so as to facilitate the integration of new wind generation that is associated with meeting the commitment of providing 40% of the Republic of Ireland's energy demand from renewable sources.

The potential for renewable energy generation such as wind energy will require connectivity to the electricity transmission network. Such connectivity will be required to sustain power transfers between wind generation in the West and the main load centre of Dublin. The upgrading of the transmission network will facilitate power flows from both renewable and conventional sources to maximise the use of existing power corridors. In this regard, these RPGs promote the improvement and expansion of the transmission network throughout the Midland Region.

5.8.1.1 Policy Framework for Electricity Provision

Development Plans should facilitate the sustainable provision of energy networks in principle provided that it can be demonstrated that:

- The development is required in order to facilitate the provision or retention of significant economic or social infrastructure.
- The route proposed has been identified with due consideration for social, economic, environmental and cultural impacts.
- Where impacts are inevitable mitigation features have been included.
- Where it can be shown the proposed development is consistent with international best practice.

5.8.2 Gas

The main Dublin-Galway gas transmission pipeline passes through the Midland Region close to transmission stations at Athlone, Edenderry, Kinnegad and Mullingar. These RPGs promote the expansion of this network throughout the Midland Region.

5.9 Telecommunications

Major advancements have taken place within the telecommunications sector over the last two decades. MANs for broadband communication are in place and operational in the linked gateway towns and the principal towns of Longford and Portlaoise. MANs are also in place in Birr, Banagher and Edenderry and have recently been handed over to the management services entity, E-net.

The towns serviced by the MANs network present opportunities for the development of e-working centres throughout the region in line with Smarter Travel Policy of reducing the number of journeys to work by car. The development of e-working centres throughout the region will align employment and transport policies and support uptake of the MANs network.

The existence of an effective and efficient telecommunication infrastructure[39] is an essential element in creating a competitive national and regional economy. The Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR) National Broadband Scheme (NBS) aims to extend coverage to remaining parts of the population currently without broadband services (estimated at 10%). The RPGs recognise that access to the fibre optic network is vital for the delivery of high quality broadband service in the region. In this regard, consideration should be given to installing ducting in all major civil works so as to make provision for future connection.

THE EXISTENCE OF AN **EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT TELECOMMUNICATION INFRASTRUCTURE** IS AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN CREATING A COMPETITIVE NATIONAL AND REGIONAL ECONOMY.

[39] Subject to compliance with Habitats Directive.

5.10 Transport and Infrastructure Policies

Sustainable Transport

TIP1 Development Plans should include policies and provisions which are consistent with and facilitate the implementation of the Smarter Travel Policy 'A Sustainable Transport Future, A New Transport policy for Ireland 2009-2020' and National Cycle Policy Framework 2009-2020.

TIP2 Within the preparation of Development Plans, ensure the integration of land use planning and transport policies to minimise the demand for travel and reduce the distance travelled by private car.

TIP3 Promote alternative modes of transport within the region through investment and promotion of improved public transport and walking and cycling facilities.

Walking and Cycling

TIP4 Local Authorities should support, through policies and design provisions, the development and promotion of cycling and walking facilities in the region.[40]

TIP5 Support the development of regional cycling routes in addition to the cycling routes identified in the National Cycle Policy Framework and Fáilte Ireland's 'Strategy for the Development of Irish Cycle Tourism'.

Public Transport

TIP6 Local Authorities should prioritise public transport needs within and between the linked gateway and principal towns and develop a range of transport modes which support the transport initiatives as indicated within Transport 21.

TIP7 Facilitate and encourage the provision of the critical public transport infrastructure necessary to service a designated Strategic Development Zone within the region.

TIP8 Continue to support Iarnrod Eireann's policy of protecting and where possible expanding all rail corridors, by restricting development on all existing and disused rail lines so as to offer a viable alternative to the private car.

TIP9 Support the continued integration of national, regional and local bus and rail services to ensure the delivery of a seamless and fully integrated public transport service. Local Authorities should make provision for quality bus corridors, bus stop areas and park and ride facilities where appropriate.

TIP10 Support the continued provision of the Rural Transport Programme in order to enhance connectivity throughout the region.

TIP11 Support the continued sustainable development of high quality transport links to international air and port access points.

Road Infrastructure

TIP12 Reinforce the linkages between the Midland, Border, Mid West, West, Dublin and South East Regions by strengthening routes of strategic importance within the region.[41]

TIP13 Support the sustainable development of the intra-regional road network within the region, particularly between the linked gateway, principal towns and other settlements, in order to create a successful functioning region.

TIP14 Plans and policies should identify and protect strategic road corridors and their principle function as arterial routes for the movement of goods, services and people between settlement areas within and outside the region.

[40] Subject to compliance with the Habitats Directive.

[41] ibid.

Water Quality

TIP15 Promote and enhance the quality of water in the Midland Region through ensuring the protection and preserving the quality of surface water, ground water and drinking water through adherence to relevant legislation.

TIP16 Subsidiary Plans will seek to facilitate the implementation of the relevant provisions of Water Pollution Legislation.

TIP17 Subsidiary Plans shall ensure where appropriate the implementation of policies and objectives of the Shannon International, South Eastern, Eastern and North Western International River Basin Management Plans and associated Programme of Measures and the Nore Sub Basin Management Plan for Freshwater Pearl Mussels.

TIP18 Subsidiary plans shall not give rise to the pollution of ground or surface waters.

TIP19 Relevant subsidiary plans will seek to comply with Directive 2006/7/EC on bathing water as implemented by the Bathing Water Quality Regulations 2008 (S.I. No. 79 of 2008) and particular to ensure bathing waters achieve "sufficient or better status by 2015" and increase the number of bathing waters classified as 'good' or 'excellent'.

Water and Wastewater Infrastructure

TIP20 Promote the provision of safe and secure drinking water supplies and wastewater infrastructure[42] to ensure that public health is maintained and that lack of water or wastewater treatment do not restrict the expansion and development of identified growth towns or the future needs of industry in the Midland Region.

TIP21 Ensure the consideration of necessary servicing requirements of settlements particularly with regard to zoning of additional lands.

TIP22 Public wastewater collection and treatment infrastructure - which fully complies with requirements of the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive (Council Directive 91/271/EEC of 21 May 1991 concerning urban waste-water treatment) (amended by Directive 98/15/EEC) including the need to provide secondary treatment and other treatment as required,shall be operational and with adequate capacity to accommodate waste water arising from developments occurring on foot of plans prepared under the aegis of these RPGs.

TIP23 Subsidiary plans shall implement the relevant recommendations set out in Urban Waste Water Discharges in Ireland for Population Equivalents Greater than 500 Persons – A Report for the Years 2006 and 2007 (Environmental Protection Agency, 2009).

TIP24 To coordinate the provision of water services across the region so that the need to provide for sufficient water services for both domestic and non-domestic requirements is taken into account.

TIP25 Support the preparation of Water Services Strategic Plan(s) – in compliance with the Water Services Act.

TIP26 Zoned land will not be developed until sufficient waste water treatment capacity is available to conform with the objectives of the relevant River Basin Management Plan and the Nore Sub Basin Management Plan for Freshwater Pearl Mussel.

TIP27 Subsidiary plans will seek to ensure that all drinking water supplies comply with the European Union Drinking Water Directive 98/83/EC as given effect in Irish law by the European Communities (Drinking Water) (No. 2) Regulations 2007, as may be amended.

[42] Subject to compliance with the Habitats Directive.

TIP28 Subsidiary plans will seek to ensure that all drinking water supplies conform with the relevant recommendations set out in The Provision and Quality of Drinking Water in Ireland: A Report for the Years 2007-2008 (EPA Office of Environment Enforcement, 2009).

Waste Management Infrastructure

TIP29 Waste Management Policy within the Midland Region shall be in accordance with the Midlands Waste Management Plan 2005-2010 and any subsequent update.

TIP30 Sludge Management Strategies shall be prepared and implemented by each Local Authority and these will take account of emerging waste water treatment capacities in the region.

Energy Infrastructure

TIP31 The policies, plans and programmes of the key energy agencies and the Local Authorities should be tailored to ensure that the energy needs of the future population and industry within designated growth towns and across the Midland Region can be delivered in a sustainable and timely manner.

TIP32 Support and promote the sustainable improvement and expansion of the electricity transmission and distribution network that supply the Midland Region.

TIP33 Support the sustainable development of the infrastructure[43] required to assist the Midland Region in the delivery of renewable energy particularly in the context of the existing energy infrastructure in the region and the need to make a transition from peat[44] to renewable energy.

TIP34 Support the Midland Energy Agency to assist the Local Authorities and other stakeholders in delivering energy efficiency solutions, stimulating the increased uptake of renewable energy[45] sources and the promotion of clean and sustainable transport.

TIP35 Support and promote the improvement and extension of gas infrastructure to serve the Midland's Region.

TIP36 Subsidiary Plans will seek to promote the implementation of the Government's Energy White Paper "Delivering a Sustainable Energy Future for Ireland" The Energy Policy Framework 2007-2020 (DCMNR, 2007).

TIP37 Subsidiary Plans will seek to facilitate the minimisation of emissions to the air of greenhouse gases in accordance with the Kyoto Protocol, any subsequent international agreement and the National Climate Change Strategy.

TIP38 Subsidiary Plans will seek to integrate land-use and transportation in a manner that will reduce the carbon footprint of towns within the region and facilitate access to a range of transport modes.

Telecommunications

TIP39 Support the delivery of high capacity Information Communications Technology infrastructure, broadband networks and digital broadcasting in order to ensure economic growth.

TIP40 Support the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources to achieve 100% broadband penetration across the region.

TIP41 Facilitate the provision of the MANs throughout the region.

[43] Subject to compliance with the Habitats Directive.

[44] The potential of peatlands to be developed will be significantly determined by the Habitats Directive which recognises peatlands – including degraded peatlands with a potential to be rehabilitated – as priority habitats. This factor will be taken into account in determining the range and type of future eco-tourism uses for such areas.

[45] Subject to compliance with the Habitats Directive.

TARGETED INVESTMENT IN TRANSPORT AND INFRASTRUCTURE IS A **FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENT IN THE CREATION OF A MORE COMPETITIVE, SUSTAINABLE REGION** WITH AN IMPROVED QUALITY OF LIFE FOR ALL.

5.11 Transport and Infrastructure Objectives

TIO1 Support the provision of an integrated public transport system appropriate to the needs of the linked gateway and principal towns.

TIO2 In conjunction with the National Transport Authority and Department of Transport, undertake a Review of Local Passenger Transport Services in the region to enable the identification of public transport improvements needed to create a more comprehensive passenger service to facilitate the needs of all citizens.

TIO3 In partnership with the constituent Local Authorities, prepare a Co-ordinated Sustainable Transport Plan for the Midland Region.

TIO4 Support Local Authorities in the continued roll-out of LUTS type studies and in the preparation of Local Transport Plans for their areas.

TIO5 Support the Local Authorities in the development of Walking and Cycling Strategies within and between the linked gateway and principal towns in the region.

TIO6 Support the development of commuter and leisure cycle routes of regional significance, in particular the following routes:[46]

- Sections of the National Cycle Network that pass through the region i.e. east of Mullingar to Athlone and its spur via Tullamore and Portlaoise to Carlow.
- The extension and improvements to the Táin Trail cycling route including loop routes around Lough Ennel and Lough Owel.
- The redistribution of carriageway space on the reclassified Sections of the N4, N6, N7 and N8 routes.
- The development of cycling routes along the Grand and Royal Canals.

TIO7 Support the development of the priority inter and intra national secondary routes as indicated in Table 5.1 and Table 5.2 of this Chapter.

[46] Subject to compliance with the Habitats Directive.

TIO8 Support the development of the necessary national roads infrastructure required for the national inland port in the principal town of Portlaoise.

TIO9 Promote the provision of the following rail infrastructure:[47]

- The reinstatement of the rail link between Athlone and Mullingar.
- A second line between Portarlington and Galway which will facilitate the development of towns such as Portarlington, Tullamore, Clara, Athlone and Ballinasloe.[48]
- Necessary rail improvements on the Dublin-Sligo Line including a second line between Longford and Mullingar and reopening of Killucan rail station.

TIO10 Support the sustainable development of the water and waste water infrastructure priorities as indicated in Table 5.3 of this Chapter and the other water services needs of the region.[49]

TIO11 Promote and support the sustainable provision of the following electricity transmission infrastructure:[50]

- Provide an electricity transmission network to the linked gateway of Athlone, Tullamore, and Mullingar and principle towns of Longford and Portlaoise that will provide for the future needs of the region.
- Support the proposals to reinforce all 110 KV circuits to Lanesboro and Portlaoise.

TIO12 Promote and support the sustainable provision of telecommunication infrastructure including broadband.[51]

TIO13 Ensure the sustainable provision of the critical necessary infrastructure as defined in this Chapter, to service a designated Strategic Development Zone within the region.[52]

[47] Subject to compliance with the Habitats Directive.

[48] Having regard to the ecological sensitivities that occur along much of the existing rail line, a full assessment of the impacts and appropriate mitigation measures should be identified prior to the commencement of this project.

[49] Subject to compliance with the Habitats Directive.

[50] ibid.

[51] ibid.

[52] ibid.

5.12 Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation

In order to ensure the delivery of the Transport and Infrastructure Strategy of the Midland RPGs the following high level objectives, targets and indicators have been defined to facilitate its implementation:

Topic	Objective	Target	Indicators
Transport and Infrastructure 1	To integrate land use and transport and to promote sustainable travel within the region **(TIO1, TIO2, TIO3, TIO4, TIO5).**	Improved linkage of residential, commercial, institutional facilities and services in accordance with the Regional Settlement Strategy. The creation of an improved sustainable travel network that helps create a more competitive, sustainable region with an improved quality of life for all.	• Average journey length (km) to work per person in key settlements. • Modal shift away from private car use, with subsequent increases in levels of public transport use, car-sharing, walking and cycling (CSO data and National Transport Model).
Transport and Infrastructure 2	To ensure the provision of adequate infrastructure including: road, rail, water, wastewater, energy and telecommunication within the Midland Region **(TIO6, TIO7, TIO8, TIO9, TIO10, TIO11, TIO12, TIO13).**	Ensure infrastructure supply to sufficiently support the development of the linked gateway, principal towns and wider rural areas. This includes supporting the development of the region in an economic and environmentally sound context.	• Number of key planned infrastructure investments delivered/not delivered within an expected time frame. • Water quality indicators and significant pollution incidences. • Percentage of energy generated from renewable sources within the region.

IN ORDER TO ENSURE THE DELIVERY OF THE TRANSPORT AND INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGY OF THE MIDLAND RPGs THE FOLLOWING **HIGH LEVEL OBJECTIVES, TARGETS AND INDICATORS** HAVE BEEN DEFINED TO FACILITATE ITS IMPLEMENTATION.

Ballinafid Lake, County Westmeath

MIDLAND REGIONAL AUTHORITY

6

ENVIRONMENT AND AMENITIES STRATEGY

COUNTY WESTMEATH

Kingfisher on the River Brosna

6.1 Introduction

This Chapter outlines the diverse environment, heritage and amenities of the Midland Region and their relationship to quality of life, potential tourism opportunities and contribution to the wider economy.

A number of key areas, outlined below, are discussed and referenced where necessary to Chapters where specific elements are addressed in detail:

- Landscape
- Built Heritage
- Natural Heritage
- Open Spaces and Recreation
- Flood Risk
- Social, Community and Cultural Infrastructure

THE ENVIRONMENT AND AMENITIES STRATEGY FOR THE MIDLAND REGION IS UNDERPINNED BY A **RECOGNITION AND RESPECT** FOR THE DIVERSITY OF ENVIRONMENTAL ASSETS WITHIN THE REGION.

6.2 Context

The Environment and Amenities Strategy for the Midland Region is underpinned by a recognition and respect for the diversity of environmental assets within the region and the need to have regard for and promote awareness of the complex interrelationships both between its natural and manmade elements.

"Traditionally, the environment was seen as an important input to economic progress only insofar as natural resources were raw materials for production. In recent times it has become accepted that a high quality environment is both an important dimension of quality of life and a key requirement for economic performance in a much more sophisticated way than was widely accepted in the past".

(Building Ireland's Smart Economy – A Framework for Sustainable Economic Renewal, Department of the Taoiseach, 2008).

6.3 Landscape

The landscape of the Midland Region is diverse, dominated by the River Shannon and its callows along the western boundary, interspersed with the lakes, wetlands, bogs, agricultural lands and eskers throughout the central area, the upland area of Slieve Bloom Mountains to the south and the rolling landscape of the Barrow and Nore Valley to the South East. Human influence on the landscape has produced unique and varied results across the region, telling the story of its recent and not so recent past in term of social, cultural and economic change, leaving their mark in the form of settlement, worship, transport, industry and agriculture. This story has local, national and international significance and presents opportunities for development in a number of areas which are discussed further in this Chapter and in Chapter 7.

The role of landscape character assessment (LCA) in the recognition of what is important in this landscape and in the development of policy to protect it, should be considered by planning authorities and other agencies in the formulation of plans and programmes. This policy protection is needed around the edge of linked gateway towns in particular and in other areas which are subject to high levels of development pressure. Long-term goals for landscape conservation and renewal and habitat improvement should be set and full advantage taken of agri-environmental funding and other management tools in the context of a defined framework for the protection of identified landscapes and/or landscape elements.

The following details some significant landscape elements which are further addressed in Chapter 7 in terms of the development of the tourism industry.

6.3.1 Shannon Waterway:

The River Shannon forms the western boundary of the region and is a landscape feature of national significance. The Shannon has shaped the settlement of the country in terms of transport from east to west, as settlements grew and trading flourished at crossing points. The Shannon served as an outpost in times of conflict and marked the furthest reaches of "civilised" Ireland in times past. The Shannon also served as transport artery from north to south since the time of the Vikings and beyond. These layers of human endeavour remain visible in the landscape and form an important social asset that is further addressed in Chapter 7.

Lough Ree to the northwest of the region is the second largest lake in the Shannon system and has the highest navigation use of Ireland's waterways with connection to the Erne system on to Northern Ireland. With several natural heritage designations, Lough Ree, with its diverse habitats and early Christian archaeological heritage located along its shoreline and the islands within, provides significant potential in terms of tourism development, enhanced by its proximity to the linked gateway town of Athlone. This potential is further addressed in Chapter 7.

The internationally significant, candidate World Heritage site of Clonmacnoise is located on the Mid-Shannon, a water corridor connecting Lough Derg and Lough Ree. The Shannon is joined by the Grand Canal at Shannon Harbour and has boating centres at Banagher, Shannonbridge and Shannon Harbour.

6.3.2 Lakes:

The northern part of the region is dominated by the many lakes in the counties of Longford and Westmeath rich in biodiversity, flora and fauna. The larger lakes are noted for their waders and wildfowl, while many of the lakes in the region are valued as trout fisheries. Although the lakes are rich in aquatic life, they provide a distinctive landscape with the lakeshores sustaining ecosystems.

6.3.3 Canals:

The Royal Canal extends across the northern end of the region extending through Mullingar and across County Longford with the potential to provide a navigable connection to the Shannon Navigation System. The Grand Canal to the south, extends through Tullamore to Shannon Harbour to the west. These areas are predominantly flat with scenic views provided along the canals. There is the potential to create a circuit from Waterford and Dublin along the canals to the Shannon and the Erne Waterway utilising the towpaths for walking and cycling (further discussed in Chapter 7).

6.3.4 Peatlands:

Peatlands are a characteristic part of the landscape of this region particularly the northern, eastern and central areas and include raised bog and fen, with cutover and cutaway boglands. These represent a valuable repository of the past, for their archaeology, ecological value, economic, cultural heritage and natural history and development and settlement of the landscape. Many of the bogs within the region have internationally renowned status with Clara Bog in County Offaly being a designated Ramsar site and nature reserve. Many of the large industrial bogs within the region are near the end of their harvesting lifetime and there is a potential for habitat creation such as woodlands, grasslands and wetlands on these areas such as Lough Boora Parklands in County Offaly. In this regard, peatlands have the potential to create a new landscape within the Midland Region. Peat has been industrially harvested in the Midland Region over a significant period and the associated settlements, structures and transportation networks all contribute to the identity of the region.

6.3.5 Eskers:

A characteristic feature of the Midland Region are eskers which are derived from glacial deposits formed during the ice age and usually consist of sorted gravel deposits, which have historically made them particularly attractive for quarrying operations. Historically used as transport carriageways, they provided a network of raised, dry routes through a flat, boggy and at stages, tree covered landscape. Eskers, along with other geological features, are characteristic of the central region's landscape and are of significance for their geological, cultural, economic and natural heritage interest. One of the most significant esker systems extends through the Midland Region known as 'the Esker Riada or Sli Mhor' a raised platform running from east to west Ireland. Offaly County Council and Westmeath County Council in conjunction with the Geological Survey of Ireland (GSI) have undertaken an esker survey of both counties to identify the nature, extent and condition of eskers. The unique importance of the regions esker landscape is thereby recognised and continuing emphasis should be place on maintaining their conservation value.

6.3.6 Built Heritage:

There is a rich and varied built heritage throughout the region, including settlements such as Birr, Clonmacnoise, Ardagh, Tullamore, Tyrrellspass, Athlone, Portarlington, Mountmellick and Abbeyleix. The region's monastic heritage is of international significance with the candidate World Heritage site of Clonmacnoise on the mid-Shannon, combined with settlements on the islands of Lough Ree and at Fore, North Westmeath. The potential for the development of a linked network of monastic sites is further developed in Chapter 7.

Our built heritage is the physical expression of the social, economic and political environment of previous generations which gives local areas distinct identity. It consists not only of the many great architecture/artistic achievements including Emo Court, Belvedere House, Birr Library and Civic Offices, the planned towns and villages, but also the established rural vernacular with the construction of hundreds of Labourers Cottages under the Local Government (Ireland) Act 1898 in reaction to political unrest, fundamentally changing the rural built character. The construction of Bord na Mona housing of the Turf

Development Act (1950) changed the character of urban areas throughout the Midland Region, examples of which include estates at Rochfortbridge and Lanesboro and the creation of new settlements such as at Derraghan in County Longford. The everyday works of craftsmen throughout the region on mill buildings, canals and railways, rural farmsteads and traditional town and village streetscapes, including public buildings, although familiar retain physical expression of past generations. In a changing world, these structures have a cultural significance which we may recognise for the first time only when individual or multiple structures of these types are lost or threatened.

6.3.7 Archaeological Heritage:

The Midland Region has a rich and varied archaeological heritage that includes two sites from the Mesolithic period, one on the north shore of Lough Derravaragh, County Westmeath, and a second found following the drainage of Lough Boora, County Offaly, (carbon dated to 7000-6500BC). One of the most characteristic archaeological structures of the Midland Region is the togher (trackway). These were constructed as routes through bogs, dating from 4500 BC to 1000AD. One of the best known examples is Corlea Trackway in County Longford, an Iron Age bog road that was built in the year 148 B.C. across the boglands of Longford, close to the River Shannon. The designation of the Clonmacnoise as a United Nations Education, Science and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage site is currently under consideration.

The scale and scope of the Midland Regions archaeological heritage are being revealed by the unprecedented growth in development led excavations over the past decade or more. Recent national estimates point to the discovery, on average, of a previously unrecorded site every two kilometres on linear infrastructural routes. Knowledge creation and dissemination are the inherent and fundamental purposes of archaeology, and should form the basis of archaeological policies.

There is a need to view archaeological sites in their wider landscape setting and to engage with the practical issues of defining and managing archaeological landscapes and their archaeological/historic character.

6.3.8 Demesne Landscape:

Demesnes have had a significant influence on the appearance of the landscape of the region, with many areas of "natural beauty" being highly designed and intricately planned. There are a significant number of demesne estates, villages and landscapes, including the planned estates of Charleville Demesne and Birr Castle. This in addition to the houses and associated gardens throughout the region which contribute to the historical landscape of the area and provide valuable amenity and recreational facilities such as Belvedere House Gardens and Park, Abbeyleix, Durrow and Emo Court.

6.3.9 Upland Areas:

The Slieve Bloom Mountains, located on the border between Laois and Offaly, in the south west of the region rise above their relatively flat surrounding area to a height of approximately 526 metres. The mountains comprise farmlands, coniferous plantations/forestry on the flanks, bog (blanket bog near the summit) and heath. The mountains contain a network of village settlements and offer spectacular views complemented by forest and riverside walks, picnic sites, historic and archaeological sites.

6.3.10 Lowlands, River Nore and Barrow Valley:

The Rivers Nore and Barrow rise in the Slieve Blooms and flow through County Laois. The River Barrow flows eastwards eventually joining the River Nore. The surrounding area is one of rolling landscape with significant heritage including alluvial wet woodlands, priority habitats, interspersed with heritage villages and estate demesnes.

6.4 Natural Heritage (Ecological Integrity)

Natural heritage embraces the combination and interrelationship of landform, habitat, wildlife and landscape. It therefore encompasses the long interaction between human communities and the land in Ireland, and as such, has important cultural and economic dimensions in addition to its intrinsic ecological and biodiversity values.

Natural heritage includes the variety of life we see around us every day, often referred to as biodiversity, its physical or geological foundation, and the landscapes which form our surroundings. Biodiversity includes everything from trees to wild flowers, from mammals to birds, from peatlands to mountain sides. Biodiversity provides us with many benefits which we need such as fertile soils, food and clean water. It is also an important part of the landscapes in which we live and which give each local area its sense of place. Protecting and enhancing our biodiversity and landscapes is vital for the quality of life of communities and distinct identity of the Midland Region.

Of particular importance within the Midland Region is the intact peatlands which have international ecological value and are therefore protected under the EU Habitats Directive. Peatland habitats have been subject to dramatic decline over the past decades mainly due to peat extraction and associated drainage.

Threats to the ecological integrity of habitats of the midlands include; reduction in habitat area, habitat or species fragmentation, disturbance of key species, reduction in species density, changes to key elements such as water quality and/or quantity, disruption or disturbance and interference with key relationships that define the structure and function of the site. These threats can be direct, indirect or cumulative and can be at a remove from a designated site. It is important that the perception of natural heritage is not limited to designated sites.

6.4.1 Designated Natural Heritage Sites of International and National Importance

A range of different sites have been designated under national and EU legislation and under the Ramsar Convention. Special Areas of Conservation (SACs and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) have been and are being designated to conserve habitats and species of European importance pursuant to the EU Habitats and Birds Directives respectively. Under the Wildlife (Amendment) Act, 2000 Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs) are being designated to conserve species and habitats of national importance and sites of geological interest. In addition, Statutory Nature Reserves and Refuges for Fauna or Flora, established under the Wildlife Acts 1976 and 2000 are sites where nature conservation is the primary objective and takes precedence over all other activities.

There are a diverse range of habitat types of heritage value throughout the region. The level of statutory protection and threat to these sites varies considerably. Volume 3 accompanies this document and provides further details on designated sites contained within the region.

NATURAL HERITAGE INCLUDES THE **VARIETY OF LIFE WE SEE AROUND US EVERY DAY**, OFTEN REFERRED TO AS BIODIVERSITY, ITS PHYSICAL OR GEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION, AND THE LANDSCAPES WHICH FORM OUR SURROUNDINGS.

6.5 Open Space and Recreation

Open spaces, sport and recreation are important in the maintenance of a high quality of life. The provision of open space, recreation and amenity facilities, catering for the demands of an increasing population and available to all sectors of society, is a central element in the delivery of sustainable communities.

Open spaces, sports and recreational facilities have a vital role to play in promoting healthy living and in the social development of children of all ages. It is important to ensure that these elements are easily accessible by walking and cycling and that more heavily used or intensive sports and recreational facilities are planned for locations well served by public transport.

Open Space:

6.5.1.1 Urban Areas:

Green spaces in urban areas perform a vital function as 'green lungs' and assist in meeting objectives to improve air quality and enhancing biodiversity and nature conservation. The ability to foster a desire for urban living is dependent upon being able to offer natural environments and open air leisure and recreational opportunities close to people's homes within urban areas. Open spaces represent a vital resource for reshaping towns and making them attractive places in which to live.

Investing in public space is a long-term investment for the region's sustainable future, creating a thriving place where people want to live, visit and work. Research has shown that proximity to well designed and managed parks and green spaces has a positive influence on business performance and investor confidence.

The quality of open space in urban areas is also related to the quality of the urban environment in general, particularly with regard to the maintenance of clean air and prevention of excessive noise in these areas.

6.5.1.2 Rural Areas:

Rights of way are important local assets which have the potential to enhance facilities for walkers, anglers, cyclists and horse-riders. Adding links to existing rights of way and the development of networks, connected through forested areas and plantations provide opportunities in this regard. In particular the Bord Na Mona Railway Corridor is a very valuable resource, with significant tourism potential. The canal towpaths area additional cycle/walking routes which are further addressed in Chapter 7.

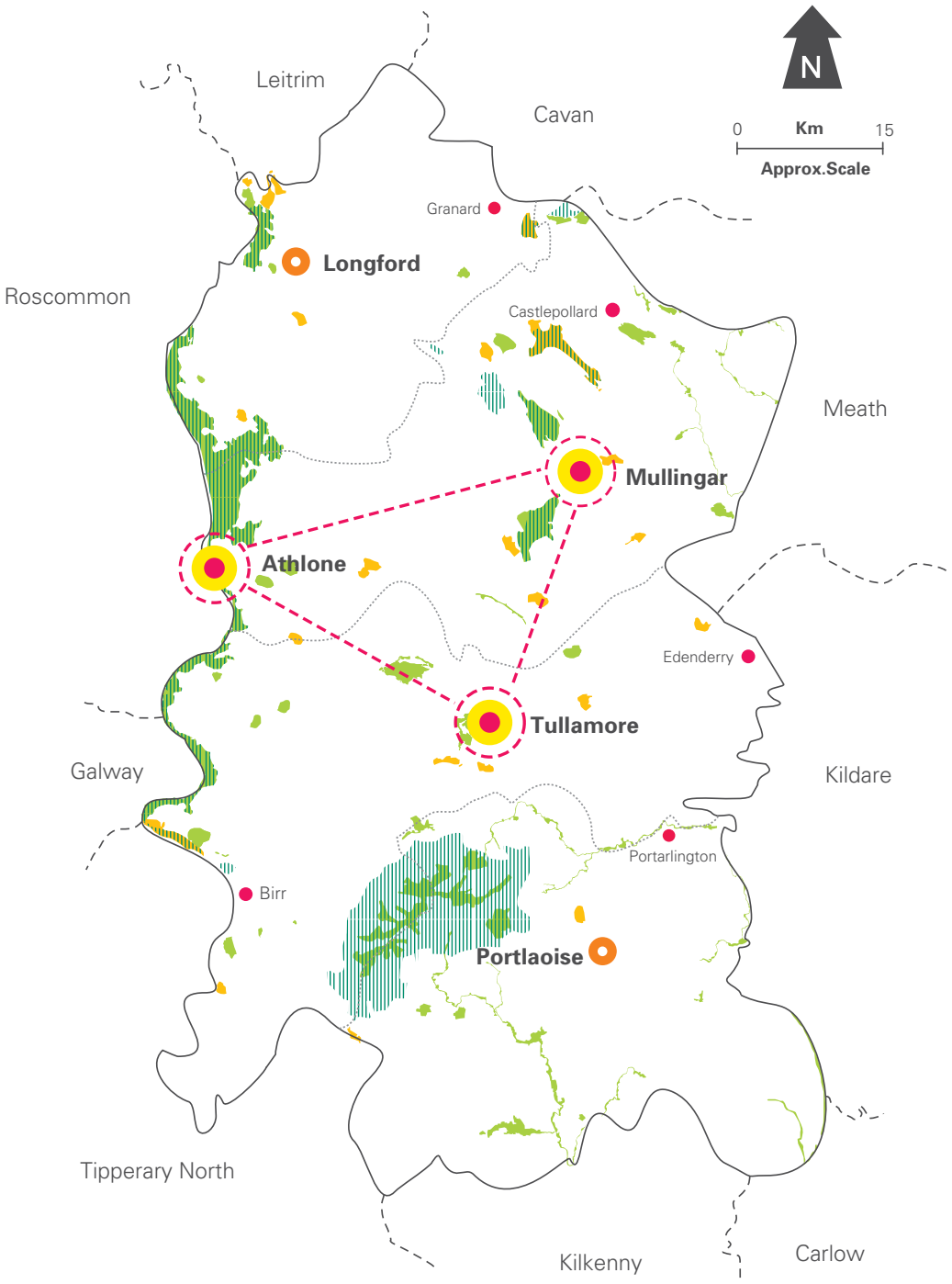
6.5.1.3 Open Space Strategies:

Significant areas of land are zoned for open space and recreation within each of the four constituent counties, however, the quality of public open space is just as important as its quantity.

The availability of a public open space hierarchy is central to the achievement of critical mass, particularly in the linked gateway. A high quality of life is required in order to encourage population to settle in an area. High quality, functional open space is a fundamental requirement in the delivery of attractive and sustainable living environments. In order to be functional, open space needs to be provided in a hierarchical form to cater for the differing needs of all sectors of the community throughout the day and into the night time. This hierarchy would include private, semi-private and public space, congregational spaces, recreational spaces facilitating active and passive users and the corridors that link these spaces, both for people and also for the maintenance and enhancement of biodiversity. Considerations such as overlooking, privacy and security are elements that need to be factored into the design and location of these spaces and the minimisation of air and noise pollution.

An open space strategy for each county would apply to all the open space in the region, including parks, open spaces in residential areas, town squares, streets, play space and the links between these spaces. The open spaces should relate to existing natural landscaping features, accessibility, security, drainage and the contours of the land and should facilitate access by cycling, walking and public transport for all sectors of society.

Figure 6.1: Midland Region – Environmental Spatial Strategy



6.5.2 Recreation:

Accessibility to local sports and recreational facilities contribute to the quality of life and well being of people who live in rural areas. Good quality sports and recreational facilities can play a major part in improving people's sense of well being in the place they live. As a focal point for community activities, they can provide opportunities for people for social interaction. It is also necessary to safeguard the amenity and continued use of existing public or private recreational facilities. In this regard, it is important that sporting and recreational areas are prioritised in areas where public transport is available or planned and that safe cycling and walking routes are available from large population centres.

6.6 Regional Flood Risk Appraisal and Management Plans

6.6.1 Introduction

This Section provides a description of the spatial distribution of flood risk at regional level. It follows the guidance provided by the DoEHLG Regional Planning Guidelines: Template for Flooding Section[53] and The Planning System and Flood Risk Management – Guidelines for Planning Authorities[54] and is based on the Regional Flood Risk Appraisal (RFRA) report which is contained within Volume 3 of the RPGs. This Section briefly describes the findings of the RFRA and sets out policies, objectives and preparatory implementation actions for regional flood risk management.

[53] Regional Planning Guidelines: Template for Flooding Section, DoEHLG May 2009.

[54] The Planning System and Flood Risk Management – Guidelines for Planning Authorities, DoEHLG November 2009.

6.6.2 Context

Flood Risk must be seen in a context of both the long history of settlement in the Midland Region and also in the context of existing and emerging policy and practice in relation to planning, development, and flooding. Flooding issues are well understood in the Midland Region with a long history of settlement and the location and layout of the region's urban areas, have historically evolved to avoid flood-prone areas. The direct impact of new urban development is generally not as significant a problem now as it was in the past because of the implementation of Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS). However vigilance is still needed at the planning and zoning stage to avoid flood risk in less well understood urban fringe areas, hence the need for flood risk appraisal of all new plans at all levels including the RPGs.

6.6.3 Areas Affected by Flood Risk

The Midland Region is drained by seven river catchments. Approximately half of the region is split between the Shannon Upper, Inny and Shannon Lower catchments all of which drain westerly to the River Shannon. The eastern and southern parts of the region are drained by the Boyne, Barrow and Nore catchments and the Erne catchment drains a small part of the north of County Longford. The seven river catchments are outlined in Figure 6.2.

The designated settlements in the region have been assessed for flood potential using a Geographical Information System (GIS) mapping system to indicate the degree of flood risk based on the occurrence of three prescribed flood risk factors:

- Recorded Flood Events[55]
- Recorded Flood Extents[56] and
- Mineral Alluvium Soils Mapping.[57]

The occurrence of these factors across the region is mapped in Figure 1 of the RFRA which is contained within Volume 3 of the RPGs and summarised in this document. The largest occurrence of *Flood Extents* in the region is along the River Shannon's floodplain which runs along most of the west of the region. Mineral Alluvial Soils which are an indication of potential flood risk are most predominant in Counties Offaly and Laois. Mineral Alluvial Soils also occur but are less predominant in Counties Longford and Westmeath. Multiple *Flood Events* have been recorded in the linked gateway towns of Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore, in the principal towns of Longford and Portlaoise and in the key service towns of Birr, Edenderry and Portarlington.

Table 6.1 in this Section also shows which flood risk factors occur at each settlement. The table then weights each settlement according to flood risk, hierarchy tier and availability of recent flood studies. The prioritisation[58] score highlights the settlements in need of flood risk assessment studies. It further identifies the settlements where Planning Authorities are required to cooperate to ensure a coordinated approach in relation to flood management.

THE MIDLAND REGION IS DRAINED BY SEVEN RIVER CATCHMENTS.

APPROXIMATELY HALF OF THE REGION IS SPLIT BETWEEN THE SHANNON UPPER, INNY AND SHANNON LOWER CATCHMENTS ALL OF WHICH DRAIN WESTERLY TO THE RIVER SHANNON.

[55] Source: OPW, 2009.

[56] ibid.

[57] Source: An Teagasc dataset.

[58] Higher number represents higher priority, which is in accordance with the *Regional Planning Guidelines: Template for Flooding Section* DoEHLG May 2009.

Figure 6.2: Towns with Potential Flood Risk

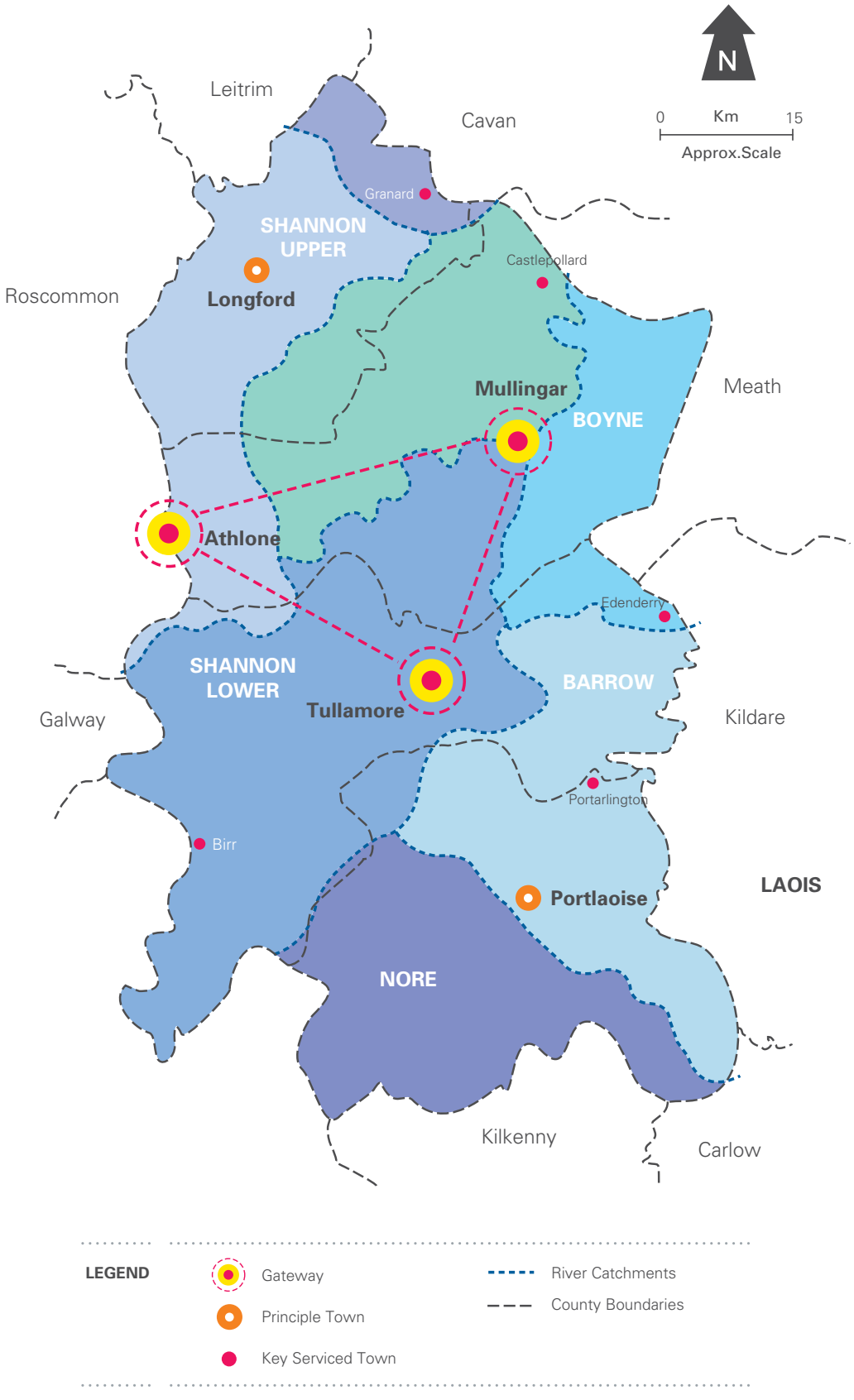


Table 6.1: Occurrence of Flood Risk Factors in Settlements and Prioritisation of Need for Consideration of Potential Flood Risk

Town Name	Settlement Hierarchy Designation	Settlement Hierarchy Score	Flood Extent	Flood Event	Mineral Soils	Flood Risk Factors Score	Available Flood Risk Studies	Risk Impact Score	Prioritisation Score[59]	Co-ordinating Local Authorities
Athlone	Gateway Town	4	Yes	Yes	No	2	No Study		4+2= **6**	Athlone TC, Westmeath CC and Roscommon CC
Mullingar	Gateway Town	4	Yes	Yes	Yes	3	Hydrological Assessment of Mullingar South Local Area Plan[60] (covers only part of the area) and Hydrological Assessment of Surface Waters and Flood Risk for Mullingar Waste Water Scheme (Robinstown Area)	-1	4+3-1= **6**	Mullingar TC and Westmeath CC
Tullamore	Gateway Town	4	Yes	Yes	Yes	3	Tullamore Flood Risk Assessment and Management (FRAM) Study[61]	-2	4+3-2= **5**	Offaly CC and Tullamore TC
Portlaoise	Principle Town	3	No	Yes	Yes	2	No Study		3+2= **5**	Portlaoise TC and Laois CC
Longford	Principle Town	3	Yes	Yes	Yes	3	River Camlin Flood Study (2002) Preliminary Report Review[62]	-2	3+3-2= **4**	Longford TC and Longford CC
Portarlington	Key Service Town	2	Yes	Yes	Yes	3	Portarlington Flood Risk and Management Study[63]	-1	2+3-1= **4**	Laois CC and Offaly CC
Birr	Key Service Town	2	No	Yes	No	1	No Study		2+1= **3**	Birr TC, North Tipperary CC and Offaly CC
Edenderry	Key Service Town	2	No	Yes	No	1	No Study		2+1= **3**	Edenderry TC and Offaly CC
Granard	Key Service Town	2	No	No	Yes	1	No Study		2+1= **3**	Granard TC and Longford CC
Castlepollard	Key Service Town	2	No	No	Yes	1	No Study		2+1= **3**	

[59] Higher number represents higher priority, which is in accordance with the Regional Planning Guidelines: Template for Flooding Section.

[60] Hydro-Environmental Ltd. on behalf of JBA Consulting, November, 2008.

[61] Tullamore Flood Risk and Assessment Management Study (OPW), 2008.

[62] Nicholas O'Dwyer Ltd. on behalf of Longford County Council, June 2008.

[63] JBA Consulting, Offaly County Council and Laois County Council, 2008.

It is emphasised that this table and the resulting prioritisation is based on the data listed in Section 2.2 of the accompanying RFRA report, combined with the RPGs Regional Settlement Hierarchy. It has not been augmented by any other studies or flood event reports, nor has it been verified on the ground. It provides a consistent regional scale prioritisation of which settlements may be in need of more detailed flood risk assessment in order to provide for the growth provided for under the Midland RPGs while complying with the flood guidelines. It should also be noted that the Local Authorities for Mullingar, Tullamore, and Portarlington have coordinated their effort to complete Flood Risk Studies.

A longer version of this table, showing data for Service Towns and Local Service Towns including those mapped on Figure 6.2 is included in the RFRA contained within Volume 3 of the RPGs.

6.6.4 Role of the Regional Authority

In implementing these RPGs the MRA will work in cooperation with the Office of Public Works (OPW), the lead agency in relation to flood risk management, and its constituent Local Authorities to apply the principle of flood risk management. In doing so we will identify priority areas for flood protection/management and where more detailed evidence of flood risk needs to be gathered. The MRA will also be involved in promoting a catchment based flood management approach and will liaise with the relevant stakeholders to ensure a coordinated approach is followed in addressing flood risk. During the lifetime of these RPGs it is proposed that structures and evidence should be put in place to facilitate the adoption of future co-ordinated polices within the region.

6.6.5 Role of Local Authorities

In order for Local Authorities to comply with DoEHLG Planning Guidelines on the Planning System and Flood Risk Management[64], it will be necessary to apply the principles of flood risk management contained therein and require Strategic Flood Risk Assessments (SFRAs) to be undertaken as relevant. Local Authorities should consult with the above referenced guidelines in order to implement their provisions.

An analysis has been carried out of schedules for the delivery of Strategic Flood Risk Assessments (SFRAs)/ Flood Risk Assessments (FRAs) for the Development Plans and local area plans that cover the region's counties and principal towns. It shows that many of these plans will be affected by the Shannon Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management Study (CFRAM). The co-ordination of these new plans with the Shannon CFRAM is therefore a high priority.

The key principles of the risk-based sequential approach to managing flood hazard and potential risk in the planning system are as follows:

1. Avoid development in areas at risk of flooding.
2. If this is not possible, consider substituting a land use that is less vulnerable to flooding.
3. Only when both avoidance and substitution cannot take place should consideration be given to mitigation and management of risks.
4. The identification of policies and practices to be adopted by planning authorities within the region during the lifetime of these RPGs, including:

- Requiring developments to comply with DoEHLG Guidelines for the Planning System and Flood Risk Management.[65]
- Requiring developments to use 'Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems' in accordance with best current practice.
- Encouraging the creation of opportunities for enhancement of bio-diversity and amenities in necessary flood risk responses.
- Identifying the extent of functional flood plains within the priority areas of the region (see Table 6.1). The development of co-ordinated flood management systems between Local Authorities to ensure the delivery of the above.

Table 6.1 prioritises the need for future consideration of flood risk within designated settlements in the region and highlights settlements where a cross Local Authority co-ordinated approach will be needed. When considering and managing flood risk in a river catchment, Local Authorities

[64] The Planning System and Flood Risk Management – Guidelines for Planning Authorities, DoEHLG November 2009.

[65] ibid.

should consult with other Local Authorities which have administrative areas within or straddling that catchment.

6.6.6 Monitoring and Review

Catchment based Flood Planning Groups are being established and should be operational within six months of the adoption of the Midland RPGs. The catchment based Flood Planning Groups will monitor and review progress in addressing flood risk in the region with reference to *The Planning System and Flood Risk Management*, the Flood Directive and the RFRA Report. They will decide on appropriate indicators, which may include:

- Number of developments located in functional flood plains and
- Number of planning consents granted during the lifetime of the Plan for new developments in functional flood plains that may exacerbate flooding.

The schedule for the delivery of SFRAs/FRAs are outlined in Table 3.1 in the RFRA report. It is proposed to review the progress of the catchment based Flood Planning Groups in carrying out and implementing SFRAs/FRAs. This review will be completed in advance of the review period of the RPGs in order to inform the RFRA process.

6.7 Social, Community and Cultural Infrastructure, Social Inclusion and Regeneration

6.7.1 Context

The NSS emphasises that sustainable development is more than an environmental concept, it also requires a combination of a dynamic economy with social inclusion giving opportunities for all in a high quality environment, including the provision of social, community, and cultural infrastructure.

6.7.2 Provision of Social, Community, and Cultural Infrastructure

Services are provided by a variety of agencies to meet the health, welfare, educational, social, religious and cultural needs of people living in the region. It is important that the diverse needs of the community and its disadvantaged groups are met. This can be facilitated by coordinating the plans and proposals of the various agencies and authorities within the region and facilitating service provision by ensuring that appropriate and sufficient land is available.

In January 2009, the four Local Authorities within the region carried out a community facilities audit (currently being considered by the DoEHLG). The review of these audits should be taken into consideration in the provision of social, community, and cultural services within the region.

6.7.3 Social Inclusion

Social inclusion is defined as a series of positive actions to achieve equality of access to goods and services, to assist all individuals to participate in their community and society, to encourage the contribution of all persons to social and cultural life and to be aware of and to challenge all forms of discrimination.

The NDP set out to optimise Ireland's choices for a long term future and identifies one of the challenges it faces is *'redistributing the product of wealth to foster an inclusive society, including adequately catering for those who have already contributed to Ireland's success over previous decades.'* Improving the quality of life for all requires an integrated approach to development and the progressing of social and economic polices within the region across all age groups and among all population cohorts.

6.7.4 Regeneration

Regeneration involves the public, private, community and voluntary sectors working together towards a clear aim to improve the quality of life for all. The involvement of local community groups in schemes through Integrated Local Development Companies and RAPID programmes are important to ensure community involvement in an area's regeneration, enhancing the opportunities for communities to participate in the strategic development of their area and ensures investment happens where it will have greatest impact. Investment has taken place through these programmes across the region with RAPID area designations within the urban settlements of Athlone, Mullingar and Longford. The prime focus for regeneration within the Midland Region should be in urban areas in order to enable greater accessibility to employment, housing, community facilities, and other essential services and facilities to avoid unnecessary travel.

REGENERATION INVOLVES THE **PUBLIC, PRIVATE, COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY SECTORS** WORKING TOGETHER TOWARDS A CLEAR AIM TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR ALL.

6.8 Environment and Amenities Policies

Landscape

EP1 With reference to the National Landscape Strategy, when published, the Midland Regional Authority will encourage and support the preparation and implementation of a Regional Landscape Character Assessment and Strategy by the Local Authorities within the region.

EP2 Support the enhancement of the landscape in the region including the various elements which together, form the landscape of the Midland Region.

EP3 To ensure that subsidiary plans require that zoning in areas likely to be significantly and adversely affected by environmental interactions with existing or disused quarries shall be assessed and mitigated to avoid such adverse interactions.

Eskers

EP4 To protect and conserve the landscape, natural heritage and geo-diversity value of the esker systems in the region.[66]

Waterways

EP5 Conserve and enhance the nature conservation resources of the waterways throughout the Midland Region, including the Shannon and Lough Ree.

Archaeology

EP6 Subsidiary plans will seek to secure the protection, including through record, of archaeological sites, monuments (including their setting) and objects including those listed in the Record of Monuments and Places as established under Section 12 of the National Monuments (Amendment) Act 1994.

EP7 To promote enhanced public access to, and understanding of, the rich archaeological heritage of the Midland Region.

EP8 Where appropriate, to promote archaeological sites across the region in accordance with the regional tourism strategy.

Architectural Heritage

EP9 To seek the conservation, protection and enhancement of the architectural heritage of the Midland Region for future generations.

EP10 To encourage the sympathetic reuse and rehabilitation of buildings of architectural heritage value in accordance with best practice.

EP11 To seek the preservation and protection of buildings of heritage value including the industrial archaeology of the Midland Region, and utilise the rich, varied and locally distinctive architecture of the Midland Region in branding and promotion of the region.

[66] Protection against inappropriate development e.g. unauthorised quarrying.

Natural Heritage

EP12 Promote the protection, conservation and enhancement of the region's biodiversity and natural and geological heritage. This includes wildlife (flora and fauna), Species protected under the Wildlife Acts and listed for strict protection on Annex IV of the Habitats Directive; and Wildlife corridors and stepping stones as envisaged under Article 10 of the Habitats Directive, habitats, sites with no statutory protection, proposed National Heritage Areas, landscapes and/or landscape features of importance to wildlife or which play a key role in the conservation and management of natural resources such as water.

EP13 Facilitate the protection of sites designated in National and European legislation, and in other relevant International Conventions, Agreements and Processes. This includes sites designated or proposed to be designated as: Ramsar sites, Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas, National Heritage Areas, nature reserves, and refuges for flora or fauna.

EP14 Subsidiary Plans shall avoid inclusion of policies that give rise to significant cumulative, direct, indirect or secondary impacts on Natura 2000 sites arising from their size or scale, resource requirements, emissions (disposal to land, water or air), transportation requirements, or from any other effects (either individually or in combination with other plans).[67]

EP15 Subsidiary Plans will be subject to Appropriate Assessment under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive, procedures to ensure compliance shall be set up to this effect.

EP16 The National Parks and Wildlife Service will be invited to prioritise the preparation of Management Plans for Natura 2000 Sites which are located within the region in consultation with the relevant planning authority. This will facilitate the examination of the sites Conservation Objectives in the context of the proper planning and sustainable development of the region.

Air and Noise

EP17 Subsidiary plans will seek to implement the provisions of National legislation and EU Directives on air and noise pollution in conjunction with other agencies as appropriate.

Open Spaces and Recreation

EP18 Support Local Authorities in the development of walking routes[68] to reflect environmental, heritage and recreational value through rural and urban areas in order to implement strategic green corridors.[69]

EP19 Promote the facilitation of open space, sports and recreational facilities, including qualitative and quantitative elements and accessibility to facilities, within the four counties of the region.

Flood Risk Management

EP20 To implement the recommendations and provisions of the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Planning Guidelines on the Planning System and Flood Risk Management.

[67] Except as provided for in Section 6(4) of the Habitats Directive, viz. There must be:
(a) no alternative solution available;
(b) imperative reasons of overriding public interest for the plan to proceed; and
(c) adequate compensatory measures in place.

[68] Subject to compliance with the Habitats Directive.

[69] Ensure that same do not impact negatively on Biodiversity corridors or Natura 2000 sites. See Section 1.3.3.5. Lower Tier Assessment.

EP21 Adopt a sequential approach to flood risk management in the making of Development Plans and Local Area Plans to guide development away from areas that have already been identified as being at risk and areas that emerge as being at risk when flood risk maps have been prepared for the region.

EP22 Local Authorities within the region shall fulfil their responsibilities under the Flood Directive and cooperate with the Office of Public Works in the development of any Catchment-based Flood Risk Management Plan as necessary. Recommendations and outputs arising from Flood Risk Management Plans will be incorporated into the lower-tier plans as relevant.

EP23 Development in areas at risk of flooding, particularly floodplains, shall be avoided by not providing for or permitting development in flood risk areas unless: it is fully justified that there are wider sustainability grounds for appropriate development; unless the flood risk can be reduced or managed to an acceptable level without increasing flood risk elsewhere; and, where possible, it reduces flood risk overall.

Social, Community and Cultural infrastructure

EP24 Ensure the timely identification of suitable sites that will facilitate the provision of necessary social, community, and cultural infrastructure throughout the region, particularly with regard to the provision of schools within each of the counties.

EP25 Where feasible, promote the facilitation of the findings of relevant community facilities audit and County Development Board Strategies throughout the counties of the region.

EP26 Consider the culturally diverse nature of the region, including ethnic minorities, in planning for the needs of the region's communities, and consult with the relevant agencies representing or working within these groups in order to promote greater social inclusion.

Regeneration

EP27 Promote the identification, regeneration and reuse of appropriate areas in order to encourage the enhancement of the socio-economic status of the region.

6.9 Environment and Amenities Objectives

EO1	Encourage the implementation of Landscape Character Assessments throughout the counties within the region using a co-ordinated approach.
EO2	Promote and explore the feasibility of Lough Ree, Mid Shannon, Slieve Blooms and Clonmacnoise being designated as a National Park.
EO3	Co-operate in conjunction with the Office of Public Works, in the establishment of catchment based Flood Planning Groups, involving all key actors including planning authorities and groups representing agriculture, forestry, water management, land management (e.g. Bord na Mona and the National Parks and Wildlife Service.
EO4	Formulate a hierarchy of Open Space provision, within the region so as to enhance quality of life.

6.10 Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation

In order to ensure the delivery of the Environment and Amenities Strategy of the Midland RPGs, the following high level objectives, targets and indicators have been defined to facilitate its implementation:

Topic	Objective	Target	Indicators
Environment and Amenities 1	Ensure the promotion of the environment as a strategic asset, facilitating its protection and management in order to ensure that it remains as the basis for a healthy society and a strong economy. **(EO1,EO3)**	• Enhancing the status and maintaining appropriate protection of the natural heritage assets of the region including, water, soil, landscape, wildlife and habitats. • Ensure protection for the important elements of built heritage including archaeological sites and structures and areas of architectural heritage.	• Air Quality. • Water Quality. • Soil Quality. • Biodiversity Quality (inc. habitats and species). • Increase in conservation awareness as a result of targeted information initiative/programmes.
Environment and Amenities 2	Facilitate the provision of adequate social, community and cultural infrastructure in a manner that promotes social inclusion and enhances the socio-economic context of the region. **(EO2, EO4)**	• Timely identification of required social and community infrastructure. • Enhanced sense of place through appropriate development to reinforce areas with a particular cultural identity. • Regeneration of derelict, brownfield and other appropriate areas to enhance the status of the region as a place to live, work, visit and invest.	• Social Conditions Indicators. • Total amount of expenditure (€) on social, community and cultural infrastructure and renewal within each local authority.

Slieve Bloom Mountains, County Laois

MIDLAND REGIONAL AUTHORITY

7

TOURISM STRATEGY

COUNTY WESTMEATH

River Shannon, Athlone

7.1 Context

The tourism industry is relatively underdeveloped in the Midland Region at present, but has the potential to become a significant contributor to the regional economy. The diverse and relatively unspoilt landscape presents a broad range of tourism related opportunities in its inland waterways, lakes, canals, rivers, mountains, forests, parks, peatlands, architecture and historical demesnes as described in Chapter 6. A strategic and coordinated, cross-sectoral and multi-agency approach will be required to capitalise on these assets and successfully realise this potential.

7.1.2 Economic Benefits – National Context

In 2008, out-of-state tourist expenditure, including spending by visitors from Northern Ireland, amounted to €4.1 billion. With a further €700 million spent by overseas visitors on fares to Irish carriers and total foreign exchange earnings were €4.8 billion. Domestic tourism expenditure amounted to €1.5 billion making tourism in total a €6.3 billion industry in 2008. Government earned estimated revenue of €1.5 billion through taxation of tourism, of which €1.1 billion came from foreign tourism. In 2008 the tourism industry accounted for 3.7% of all tax revenue collected that year.[70]

7.1.3 Direct Employment in the Tourism and Hospitality Industry

The CSO's official count of direct employment in tourism as measured by those claiming to be employed in 'Accommodation and Food Service Activities', a category which includes hotels, restaurants, bars, canteens and catering, was 120,400 in 2009 (6.4% of national employment figure). In 2009[71] the Midland Region had some 108,000 people employed, of which 6,200 or 5.7% were employed in 'Accommodation and Food Service Activities'.

THE DIVERSE AND RELATIVELY UNSPOILT LANDSCAPE PRESENTS **A BROAD RANGE OF TOURISM RELATED OPPORTUNITIES** IN ITS INLAND WATERWAYS, LAKES, CANALS, RIVERS, MOUNTAINS, FORESTS, PARKS, PEATLANDS, ARCHITECTURE AND HISTORICAL DEMESNES.

[70] Statistics referenced from Fáilte Ireland East and Midlands Regional Tourism Development Plan 2008-2010.

[71] Persons aged 15 and over in employment (ILO) classified by sex, region and NACE Rev. 2 Economic Sector October - December 2009, CSO.

7.1.4 Tourism in the Midland Region

Domestic tourism has increased within the Midland Region since 2004 with County Westmeath receiving the largest number of overseas visitors in 2008. Fáilte Ireland recorded the revenue generated by overseas visitors in the Midland Region for 2008 as follows:

Table 7.1: Revenue Generated by Overseas Visitors by County[72] – 2008

County	Total (€m)	Britain	Mainland Europe	North America	Other Areas
Laois	21.4	13.1	5.9	1.3	1.1
Longford	10.1	4.4	2.4	1.1	2.2
Offaly	21.5	10.7	6.2	2.4	2.2
Westmeath	35.5	12.2	16.4	3.0	3.9

The Midland Region has many natural and heritage assets, outlined in Chapter 6, that should be utilised to enhance the tourism offer of the region. In addition, the position of the Midland Region in the "Heart" of the country, with strong links to most regions and connecting these to Dublin, provides "passing trade" opportunities that should be exploited. The proximity of the GDA also provides opportunities in the tourism sector, with a high volume of population on the doorstep, ready for an unspoilt environment with a wide range of outdoor activities on offer.

Together, these and other characteristics combine to make the Midland Region a unique visitor destination with significant untapped potential for further tourism related growth. However, it is essential that any such growth be managed in a sustainable way. The contribution of tourism to the overall vision for the quality of life in the Midland Region can be significantly enhanced by:

- Delivering a high quality and rewarding experience for all visitors, accessible to all.
- Providing a greater variety of jobs and opportunities for training over a wide range of skill levels.
- Providing stronger support for regeneration of urban areas, especially in the linked gateway towns and improving their offer for the short break visitor in terms of activities, accommodation range, restaurants, nightlife and information provision.
- Developing and diversifying of the rural economy.
- Promoting environmental quality and local distinctiveness in town and country.
- Generating community benefits to enhance quality of life for all social groups in the region.
- Encouraging those passing through the region to spend time within the region.
- Develop and promote the quality heritage offer of the region.

The delivery of the above at regional level is the responsibility of a wide range of partners at the national, regional, and local levels, in the skills development, marketing, communications and research sectors.

The RPGs will support co-operation between the Local Authorities, Fáilte Ireland, Shannon Development, National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), Bord na Mona and the OPW in their activities to promote, enhance and protect the tourism potential of the region.

[72] Table sourced from Fáilte Ireland East and Midlands Regional Development Plan 2008-2010.

Figure 7.1: Midland Region Tourist Attractions[73]

TO SLIGO
TO CAVAN
TO MONAGHAN
TO CASTLEBAR
TO BOYLE
TO BOSCOMMON
TO GALWAY
TO NENAGH
TO LIMERICK
TO THURLES
TO CORK
TO KILKENNY
TO WATERFORD
LONGFORD
WESTMEATH
OFFALY
LAOIS
Longford
Athlone
Mullingar
Tullamore
Portlaoise
Edgeworthstown
Granard
Ballinamuck
Drumlish
Rooskey
Newtownforbes
Lanesborough
Ballymahon
Newtowncashel
Keenagh
Carrickboy
Abbeyshrule
Ballymore
Castletown Geoghegan
Rochfortbridge
Kinnegad
Killucan
Crookedwood
Delvin
Collinstown
Fore
Rathowen
Ardagh
Carlea Bog
Glasson
Hodson Bay
Hallykeeran
Ballinahown
Moate
Horseleap
Ballinagore
Kilbeggan
Tyrellspass
Clara
Edenderry
Clonmacnoise
Shannonbridge
Ferbane
Cloghan
Shannon Harbour
Banagher
Ballycumber
Dainsgen
Rathangan
Portarlington
Monasterevin
Mountmellick
Rosenallis
Clonaslee
Riverstown
Kinnity
Birr
Slieve Bloom Mountains
Vicarstown
Stradbally
Mountrath
Castletown
Timahoe
Abbeyleix
Rosrea
Borris-in-Ossory
Donaghmore
Rathdowney
Durrow
Carlow
Shinrone
Ballycumber
Lough Gowna
Lough Sheelin
Lough Ree
Lough Owel
Lough Derravaragh
Lough Lene
Lough Glore
Lough Iron
Lough Ennell
Lough Derg
Royal Canal
Grand Canal
River Shannon
River Inny
River Brosna
River Barrow
River Nore
River Suir
River Boyne
River Deel
River Tang
River Yellow
River Silver
River Camcor
River Owenass
River Triogue
River Erkina
River Oweg
River Douglas
River Fushoge
River Glore
River Glore
River Glore

7.2 Tourism Strategy

The Midland Region has a diverse range of tourist attractions which offer enormous potential to be further developed and exploited. Such areas of attraction include the regions lakelands and waterways, mountains, peatlands, the arts, sports and culture. Map 7.1 highlights the various tourist attractions within the region, which are closely related to and should be read in consultation with the landscape and amenities outlined in Chapter 6.

7.2.1 Regional Tourism Plans

There are two regional tourism plans for the Midland Region. The majority of the region is covered by Fáilte Ireland Midland East Regional Tourism Plan, whilst South West Offaly is covered by Shannon Development.

Fáilte Ireland *Regional Tourism Strategy 2008-2010* focuses developmental efforts on the lakelands proposition centred around the River Shannon, its lakes and towns. In addition it proposes regional initiatives. The key tenet of the regional plan is that Fáilte Ireland will market the East and Midland Region around four themes of Lakeland, Equestrian Ireland, Beyond Dublin and Heritage Country.

Fáilte Ireland East and Midlands is working with all local agencies to co-ordinate an integrated approach to tourism development in the region. The key funding and delivery partners will be Local Authorities, Shannon Development, Integrated Local Development Companies, County Development Boards, business and local groups and other state agencies such as Coillte and the OPW.

South West Offaly is part of the remit of Shannon Development and they are committed to developing the tourism offer in South West Offaly including the development of the Slieve Bloom and Lough Boora Parklands over the next five years.

7.2.2 Midland Strategy

Based on the regional tourism plans for the region, the following outlines the key areas in which the Midland Region exhibits strength and potential for development. Targeted proposals are indicated in specific directions to maximise opportunities in the tourism sector.

1. Lakelands and Waterways.
2. Heritage Trails.
3. Beyond Dublin.
4. Outdoor Activities and Pursuits.

These inter-related sectors require development in a co-ordinated and coherent manner involving all stakeholders and agencies to ensure maximisation of potential and protection of the resource upon which the sectors are based.

7.2.2.1 Lakelands/Waterways

The lakelands and waterways of the region offer significant potential to further develop their tourism offer in terms of amenity and leisure, from both a land based and water based perspective, natural heritage, archaeology, architecture, festivals and food are important land-based associations. Water based visitors can enjoy the Grand and Royal Canals, with links from Dublin to Tullamore and Dublin to Mullingar and Longford and on to Northern Ireland through the Shannon Erne waterway. The lakes throughout the region provide the potential for angling, fishing, walking, cycling and possess rich biodiversity value.

Lough Ree and Mid Shannon Area

- The draft Lough Ree and Mid Shannon Tourism Study highlights significant potential for tourism development within this area.
- The corridor of the River Shannon is a significant tourism asset in the region as described in Chapter 6. The corridor is substantially under used at present and offers a broad variety of different experiences for water related holidays. The potential here is particularly strong in activity based tourism, including boating, angling, canoeing, cycling, walking and wildlife watching. Lough Ree Environmental Summer School is an established event that could be broadened and combined with others such as water festivals, fair days and music events to enhance the tourism offer and reduce seasonality.
- The area is also rich in historical and heritage attractions. Potential for new products is high providing

these are closely related to specific characteristics of the area.

- Lough Ree offers significant potential for development as a National Park and Lanesboro in Longford presents an opportunity as a location for a heritage and amenity visitor centre in combination with a potential monastic trail including Clonmacnoise, Fore, Ardagh and the islands of Lough Ree.

Peatlands

- The peatlands within the region offer a unique environment for tourists. The peatlands tourism product is established in an innovative way, for tourists to interact with this unique landscape, particularly in the wetland areas in Lough Boora Parklands and the Slieve Bloom Environmental Park.

7.2.2.2 Heritage Trails

The development of defined heritage trails would have significant positive benefit for the tourism product, while consolidating an overall encompassing identity for the region. The ecclesiastical and monastic heritage of region is vast and presents just such an opportunity. Clonmacnoise, a candidate World Heritage site, would be a fundamental element in this trail, given its significance. Links are strong between these sites and their surroundings, such as Birr and its townscape, Clonmacnoise and the Shannon, Fore and its historical landscape, Ardagh and its picturesque village location and the Islands in Lough Ree, providing individuality and opportunities to further develop in their own right as a destination.

A network of supporting infrastructure needs to be put in place to facilitate the development of a heritage trail network, such as the availability of a broad range of accommodation to increase bed-nights and maximise economic and community benefit. Urban areas have a strong role to play in this regard, but there is also a role for rural areas in terms of the provision of appropriately scaled development in suitable locations with sufficient supporting services.

Themed interpretation and the potential for public transport should be explored, including the provision of parking facilities, defined routes and times, along with the management of these sites to ensure the protection of the resource.

7.2.2.3 Beyond Dublin – Midlands at the "Heart" of Ireland

The close proximity of the GDA and the city itself is an important asset that has yet to be exploited to its fullest potential with regard to marketing the Midland Region as an outdoor activity and pursuits destination. The high profile of established tourism destinations on the western seaboard are also assets in this regard when establishing the Midland Region as the "Heart" of Ireland, corridor and destination in itself.

The urban offer of the region is very different to more established urban areas, an offer that should be enhanced, celebrated and promoted, in particular, the unique concept of the linked gateway which is central to the identity of the region. This relates closely to the high quality of life referred to throughout the plan and the need to maintain this and enhance this concept in urban development through initiatives such as the urban space hierarchy set out in Chapter 6.

The Midland Region is situated on a network of strategic road and rail links, with unique accessibility afforded between Dublin and all other areas and functioning as an inter-regional corridor between the north and south of the country. This provides exceptional opportunities as a national conferencing location. This accessibility is allied with the unique combination of established tourism product available within the region, the outstanding natural environment and the wide range of music, art and cultural festivals and events on offer. A Tourism Strategy involving networks of tourist activities connected by links throughout the region offers a mechanism to exploit this exclusive potential.

This key area is closely interlinked with the others in this Section, but particularly allied with the development and promotion of year round outdoor activities in the region.

7.2.2.4 Outdoor Activities and Pursuits

The Midland Region at the "Heart" of Ireland has specific potential in the outdoor activities and pursuits sector, including equestrian activities, trekking and racing in particular, golfing, canoeing, boating, angling and cycling, activities that require varied and diverse, high quality rural landscapes. Combined with Section 7.2.2.3 above, these key areas have the potential, if supported, to broaden the

tourist base and significantly reduce seasonality of the tourism product in the region.

The provision of basic facilities such as changing and toilets, car parking and orientation/interpretation is essential in the development of this area. The potential to utilise the existing extensive network of sporting and recreational facilities at local and county level throughout the region should be recognised and explored as part of tourism development in the region. The provision of regionally themed, instantly recognisable stopping/rest areas where these facilities are consolidated, should be considered.

There are specific locations of potential under this key area, outlined below:

Slieve Blooms

- The Slieve Blooms, outlined in Chapter 6, are an important tourism product for the region, with potential to be competitive on the national and international market in particular for walking, cycling and outdoor based holidays, if the natural resource was complemented with a range of accommodation and dining options.

Lough Boora Parklands – Regional Hub for Eco Based Tourism

- Lough Boora Parklands are located in Bord na Móna's Boora bog complex near Kilcormac in County Offaly and is an excellent example of the potential to develop diverse habitats allied to various recreational activities such as fishing, bird watching, walking and cycling that can be created from emerging cutaway bogs.
- The Parklands are an area of 41.4sq km and consist of a collection of natural and manmade lakes, wetlands, woodland areas, 50km of walkways, natural recolonisation and pastureland whilst providing a new habitat for wildlife, flora and fauna.
- The Parklands has a wide range of amenities including walkways and angling lakes. The "Offaly Way", one of Irelands "way-marked walks" crosses through the site, other walks were developed along the beds of the former narrow gauge railway lines that were used for the transport of peat.

- The Parklands offer a unique visitor experience with a wide range of activities from the walkways and meadows to the extraordinary landscape.
- The Parklands host some of the most innovative land and environmental sculptures in Ireland. Artists, many of whom are internationally acclaimed, have created a series of large-scale sculptures that are now part of the Parklands.
- Lough Boora Parklands is a significant resource in terms of the provision of open space and recreation and it plays a vital role in the regeneration of the economy of its rural hinterland.
- Given the wealth of biodiversity within the Parklands visitors can experience a peaceful, natural environment and interact with art and nature in one location. Bord na Móna has adopted a substantial programme of enhancement of biodiversity in the Parklands including rehabilitation which allows for the expansion and expression of biodiversity back onto the bogs and the creation of diverse and valuable wildlife reserves. Further developments of Lough Boora aimed at enhancing the visitor experience and developing an integrated environmentally positive tourism project are under active consideration. The Parklands thereby offer an opportunity to create an awareness of the value of biodiversity of peatlands at local, regional and national level and should be developed as a hub for eco-based tourism in the region.

7.3 Tourism Policies

TP1 Promote the linked gateway and principal towns in the region both as urban tourism destinations in their own right and as access points for a collection of wider county and regional level attractions.

TP2 Identify at a broad level, parts of the region that have a particular potential for development in the waterways and eco tourism sectors.

TP3 Promote the development of key service sector employment centres, in a network of towns in the region, where there is potential for harnessing the qualities of towns with a concentration of built heritage.

Lakelands/Inland Waterways

TP4 Build on the amenity potential of the inland waterways throughout the region.

TP5 Protect access to and support proposals for upgrading inland waterways and associated facilities for recreation use in accordance with relevant management strategies and in cooperation with Waterways Ireland.

Natural Heritage

TP6 Develop and manage the tourism of the River Shannon and Lough Ree, in a sustainable manner [74], so as to upgrade facilities, promote diversity, reduce seasonality and improve access whilst retaining the natural character of the area regarding issues of capacity and environmental sensitivity.

TP7 Promote the tourism potential of the Slieve Bloom Environment Park as a major regional facility in a sustainable manner.[75]

Built Heritage

TP8 Identify actions to strengthen linkages between heritage and market towns and their hinterlands, through the provision of integrated sustainable transport and complementary product development, investment and marketing including the promotion of locally produced products, such as food and crafts.

TP9 Promote the heritage towns and villages, estate houses and gardens of the region, including Birr Castle, Belvedere House Gardens and Park and Emo Court.

Arts/Culture Entertainment:

TP10 Promote the Arts in order to preserve and develop the unique history and heritage of the region.

TP11 Ensure the Arts, Culture and Entertainment facilities and activities are accessible to all in both physical and economic terms.

TP12 Promote, facilitate and support the staging of festivals and events throughout the region.

Rural Tourism

TP13 Opportunities to promote tourism and recreation based rural diversification should be encouraged, where they provide jobs for local residents and are of a scale and type appropriate to their location.

[74] Subject to compliance with the Habitats Directive.

[75] ibid.

7.4 Tourism Objectives

TO1 Work with Fáilte Ireland, Shannon Development, Waterways Ireland and other key stakeholders to implement the objectives contained within the Regional Tourism Development Plans in a sustainable manner [76], including the promotion and reinforcement of the *'Lakelands and Inland Waterways'* brand for tourism.

T02 Promote and explore the feasibility of Lough Ree, Mid Shannon, Slieve Blooms and Clonmacnoise being designated a National Park and Lanesboro, County Longford being developed as the location for a heritage and amenity centre.

T03 Promote, in a sustainable manner [77], increases in visitor numbers within the Mid Shannon corridor based on a broader range of activities and associated accommodation, including cycling, walking, angling and rowing/canoeing.

T04 Promote and explore the designation of Lough Boora Parklands as a hub for eco tourism in light of the forthcoming Fáilte Ireland Natural Heritage and Eco Tourism Strategy. [78]

[76] Subject to compliance with the Habitats Directive.

[77] ibid.

[78] ibid.

7.5 Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation

In order to ensure the delivery of the Tourism Strategy of the Midland Regional Planning Guidelines the following high level objective, targets and indicators have been defined to facilitate its implementation.

Topic	Objective	Target	Indicators
Tourism	To utilise the region's resources to foster the development of tourism in the Midland Region as a viable sector of the economy in a sustainable manner which complements the scale, quality and unique features of the region **(T01, T02, T03, T04)**.	• To create a thriving tourism sector within the Midland Region. • Ensure appropriate protection of the natural cultural and built heritage assets of the Midland Region that contribute to the Tourism Industry.	• Revenue (€) generated from tourism within the Midland Region. • Number of people employed within the tourism sector. • Visitor numbers and type to the region.

Belvedere House Gardens and Park,
Mullingar, County Westmeath

8

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

COUNTY LAOIS

M7/M8 Motorway

8.1 General Implementation of the Strategy

The strategies contained within these RPGs are set out within the context of the NSS and the review of the 2004 RPGs.

The RPGs currently have statutory effect under the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, and it is envisaged that the current Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2009, once passed, will further reinforce the statutory authority of RPGs.

In this regard, the overarching mechanism that will facilitate the implementation of the Midland RPGs will primarily be the Development Plans of the region's Local Authorities coupled with the provision of key infrastructure within the region including transportation, water/sanitary services and other essential infrastructure. The timeline for review of the respective Development Plans of each of the Local Authorities is indicated below in chronological order:

County	County Development Plan Current Period	Statutory Review process commences (year)
Laois	2006–2012	2010
Westmeath	2008–2014	2012
Longford	2009–2015	2013
Offaly	2009–2015	2013

8.2 Investment Priorities

A key step in the implementation of the RPGs will be represented by various public funds and private interests working together to support progress on investment priorities. In this regard, it is envisaged that the NDP is central in facilitating the rollout of the essential infrastructure investments required to implement the strategies contained within these RPGs.

It is considered that the Critical Enabling Investment Priorities are as follows:

- Investment in water and waste water services in accordance with the defined Regional Settlement Strategy, in particular, that which is associated with the linked gateway of Athlone, Tullamore, Mullingar and principal towns of Longford and Portlaoise.
- Prioritisation of the national secondary road network connecting the linked gateway towns of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar as the initial focus, with additional concentration on enhancing links between the linked gateway and the principle towns of Longford and Portlaoise.
- The provision of a public transport system between the linked gateway and principal towns, including their co-ordination with inter-regional rail and express bus connections and investment in the double tracking of the Dublin to Sligo and Dublin to Galway rail lines.

The reinstatement of the rail link between Athlone and Mullingar would significantly enhance connectivity of the rail network by connecting the Sligo, Mayo and Galway lines.

- A targeted land servicing measure, in terms of water services, access investments, telecommunications and energy to release key serviced land for residential, industrial and commercial purposes in the linked gateway and principle towns of Athlone, Tullamore, Mullingar, Longford and Portlaoise.
- Targeted investment to develop the innovation potential of the Midland Region, including enhancing entrepreneurship and developing existing economic sectors within the region.
- Targeting and maximising social inclusion, education and training budgets available from various sources to service providers across the Midland Region by means of greater coordination of measures aimed at increasing educational attainment across all levels of education.
- Continued development of AIT as a key drive in the region of skills, education, innovation and development, through a renewed focused investment in basic and applied science and technology, such as in ICT, pharmaceutical-medical technology and other high tech sectors likely to contribute to realisation of the economic potential of the region.
- The roll out of broadband services across the region and in particular broadband services within the linked gateway and principal towns.
- Targeted investment in key tourism infrastructure developing a network of regional and national scale visitor attractions, including focused investment on the inland waterways within the context of a wider urban/rural renewal and recreational facility aimed at developing the full potential of canal and lake harbour areas throughout the region.
- Reinforcing linkages between the Midland, Border, Mid West and West Regions by strengthening the N55/N62 (Longford/Athlone/Birr).

8.3 Operational Implementation

In implementing the Midland RPGs, the RPG Implementation Steering Group (see Appendix A) and the RPG Technical Working Group (see Appendix A) in association with the MRA, will be responsible for progressing and reviewing the RPGs. These review structures are in place since the adoption of the 2004 Midland RPGs and it is considered that these operate satisfactorily within their remit.

The operational implementation of the Midland RPGs will be supported through co-operation of a range of executive agencies throughout the region. These include, but are not limited to:

- Local Authorities including County Development Boards.
- IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland.
- County Enterprise Boards.
- Bus Eireann.
- Athlone Institute of Technology.
- Vocational Educational Committees.
- FÁS.
- Department of Agriculture.
- Teagasc.
- Fáilte Ireland.
- Shannon Development.
- Waterways Ireland.
- Health Service Providers.

From time to time, implementation will also require co-operation of more nationally based organisations such as the NRA, other bodies and a range of Government Departments responsible for national investment decisions.

8.4 Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring the implementation of the RPGs requires the setting of targets and indicators. Targets are precise quantitative achievements that are sought, while indicators are proxy measures of the extent to which objectives are being met.

Throughout this document targets and indicators have been developed so as to assist in the operational implementation of the RPGs. These targets and indicators are suggested as examples only and are not intended to be exhaustive. They do have the advantages of being directly associated with the objectives outlined in the earlier parts of this document, of being based on data that is capable of being collected without undue difficulty, and of providing overall guidance to the various bodies that will be charged with the operational implementation of the strategy.

A key task of the review bodies will be to periodically re-examine and address the objectives of these RPGs and ensure that progress is being made in implementing the Midland RPGs.

8.4.1 Environmental Monitoring

Section 10 of the SEA Environmental Report identified indicators for monitoring the significant environmental effects of implementing the RPGs. These indicators will also be examined and monitored to inform the RPG review process.

THROUGHOUT THIS DOCUMENT **TARGETS AND INDICATORS HAVE BEEN DEVELOPED** SO AS TO ASSIST IN THE OPERATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RPGs.

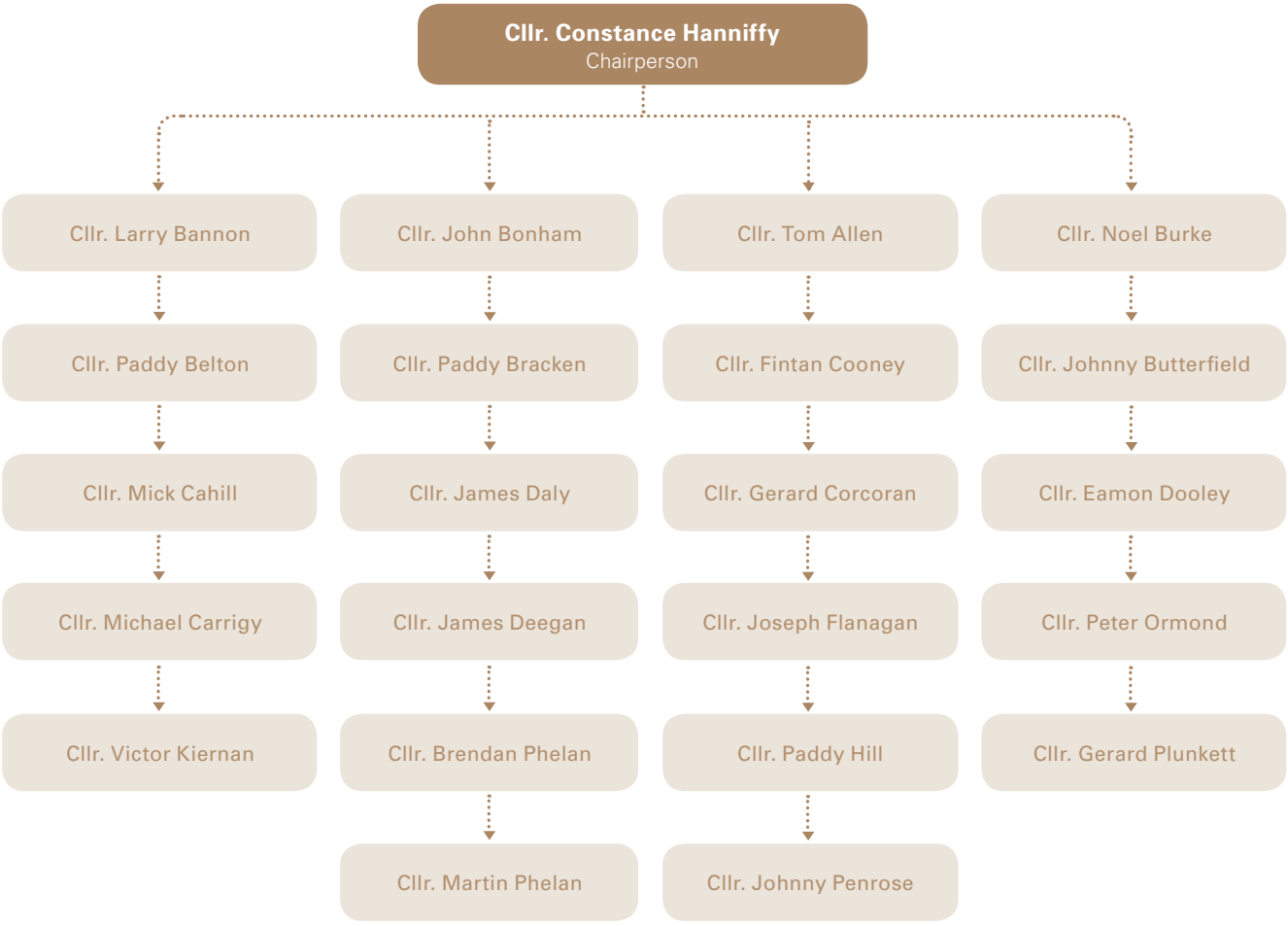
8.5 Future Review of the Regional Planning Guidelines

The review of the RPGs will be carried out on a periodic basis. The review will include amendments of the actions and objectives if required, in light of the achievement of the objectives, changing national and international circumstances, and changes in Government policies and programmes.

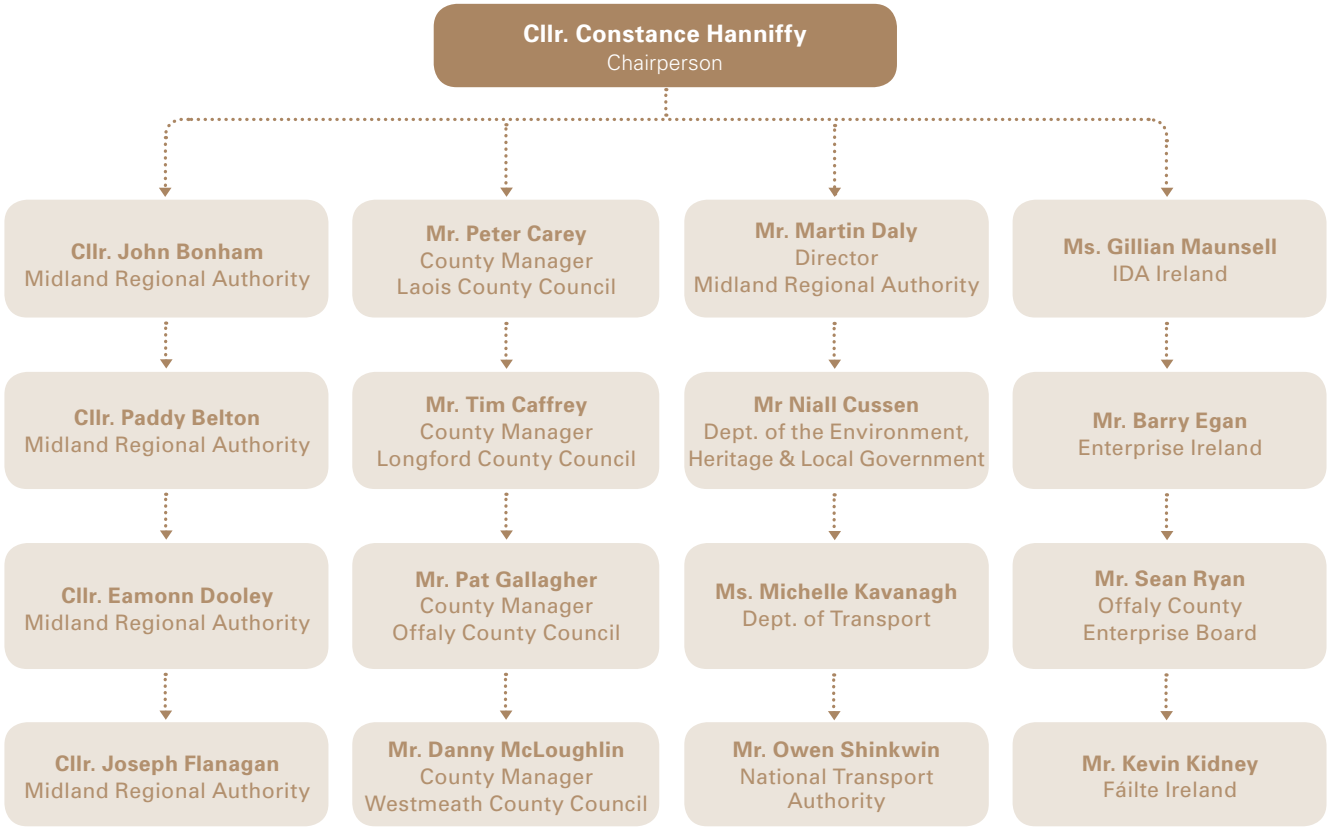
Where it is concluded that changes are necessary, these will be evaluated through a consultative process that includes the main stakeholders.

Appendix A:

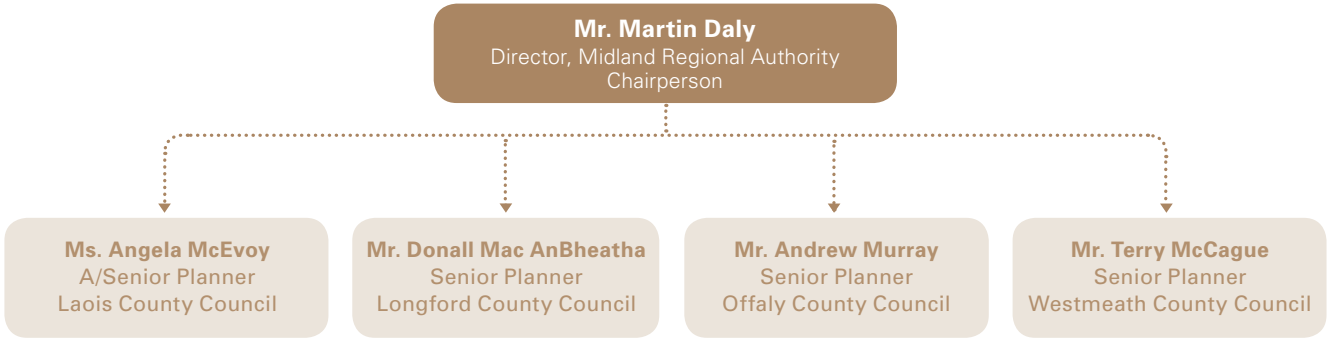
Midland Regional Authority Members



RPG Implementation Steering Group



RPG Technical Working Group



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MIDLAND REGIONAL AUTHORITY
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