



# Tionól Reigiúnach Oirthir agus Lár-Tíre Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly

3ú Uirlár ó Thuaidh | Ionad Cathartha | An tSráid Mhór | Baile Munna | Baile Átha Cliath 9  
3rd Floor North | Ballymun Civic Centre | Main Street | Ballymun | Dublin 9



## Pre-Draft Consultation Strategic Issues Paper for the Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan (JUAP) 2024-2030

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly notes that Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils have published a pre-draft public consultation Strategic Issues Paper in preparation for the Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan (JUAP) 2024-2030. This submission on the pre-draft public consultation of the Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan (JUAP) 2024-2030 has been prepared by the executive and approved by the Cathaoirleach of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly.

### 1.0 Legislative Context

Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils intend to prepare a joint urban area plan for Athlone covering the period 2024-2030. As part of the first stage of this process the Local Authorities have prepared and published a pre-draft public consultation Strategic Issues Paper containing a number of key issues and topics to be covered within the joint urban area plan, and is now engaging in pre-draft public consultation.

The role and function of the Regional Assembly, including the scope of the RSES, is currently provided for in the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended). The Regional Assembly is not required under Section 27 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended), to prepare a submission and observations on a local area plan prepared by a local authority as is the case for a development plan, or variation thereof, however the Regional Assembly considers that regionally important and strategic plans should be commented upon by the Assembly, and in this case a plan for a designated Regional Growth Centre is considered as such.

It should be noted that this legislation is currently under review, with the new Planning and Development Bill 2023 approved by Cabinet on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2023 and published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on 21<sup>st</sup> November 2023.

### 2.0 Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES)

The RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region, which was made by the Members of the Assembly on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2019, is a strategic plan and investment framework to shape future growth throughout the Region. In line with the provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, the

Planning Authority shall ensure that a local area plan is consistent with the objectives of the development plan, its core strategy, and the Regional and Spatial Economic Strategy, thus ensuring full alignment between local, regional and national planning policy.

Athlone is located within the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly area (EMRA) and the Northern and Western Regional Assembly area (NWRA), both of which are aligned in facilitating the sustainable and compact growth of Athlone as a Regional Growth Centre.

The RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region states that the JUAP for Athlone should provide a strategic vision for the future development of Athlone as a Regional Growth Centre, including the development of critical mass and should set out an overarching land use framework which will form the basis for deciding on appropriate locations for future development in the area.

The Growth Strategy of the RSES identifies Athlone as located inside the Gateway Region and is identified as a Regional Growth Centre in Table 4.2 Settlement Hierarchy. Regional Growth Centres are large towns with a high level of self-sustaining employment and services that act as regional economic drivers and play a significant role for a wide catchment area. The RSES supports the direction of significant population and economic growth towards the key Regional Growth Centres of Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk. These towns, located outside the Dublin Metropolitan Area are, in addition to Dublin, critical to the implementation of effective regional development as set out in the NPF and will accommodate significant new investment in housing, transport and employment generating activity.

The RSES states that key priorities for Athlone are to promote the continued sustainable and compact growth of Athlone as a regional driver, with a target population of 30,000 up to 2031, providing for an enhanced public realm and regeneration in the town centre, along with significant employment growth, building on the town's existing strong economic base and enterprise clusters. The RSES states that in order to enhance co-ordination of development in Athlone, where the town and its environs lie within the combined functional area of two local authorities and two regional assemblies, the preparation and adoption of a Joint Urban Area Plan (JUAP) will be vital for Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils.

### **3.0 Submission**

The Strategic Issues Paper presents an overview of the main issues and challenges affecting Athlone and sets out by theme some of the key issues that may need to be addressed by the JUAP. The Strategic Issues Paper includes eight key topics to be addressed which include:-

- 1) Population and Housing
- 2) Sustainable Communities and Social Infrastructure
- 3) Placemaking and the Built Environment
- 4) Climate Action and Resilience

- 5) Economic Development and Employment
- 6) Transport and Movement
- 7) Heritage and Amenity
- 8) Enabling Infrastructure

The Assembly considers that these areas of focus align well with the three key principles of the RSES (Healthy Placemaking, Climate Action and Economic Opportunity) and the sixteen Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSOs), outlined in Section 2.3 of the RSES. The Regional Assembly also considers that these key themes give a broad overview of the key issues facing Athlone.

The Strategic Issues Paper outlines the strategic policy framework, which highlights that the JUAP sits within and will be informed by a hierarchy of planning guidance including the National Planning Framework, the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies for both the Eastern and Midland Region and the Northern and Western Region, and the Westmeath and Roscommon County Development Plans. The Strategic Issues Paper states that the JUAP will be informed by multi-disciplinary assessments, including an Economic Strategy for the Regional Centre of Athlone (2022), the Athlone Joint Retail Strategy 2019-2026, the Athlone Area Based Transport Plan (under preparation) and the Athlone Urban Design and Regeneration Framework (under preparation).

In order to assist the Local Authorities in ensuring that the JUAP is consistent with the RSES, the following are the key areas and Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs) of the RSES, that the Regional Assembly would like to bring attention to in order to inform the preparation of the draft JUAP.

### **3.1 Population and Housing**

The Strategic Issues Paper indicates that the JUAP will build on the progress made under the Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 and Monksland/Bellanamullia Local Area Plan 2016-2022, and will set a direction and vision for the future growth of Athlone.

The Strategic Issues Paper outlines that according to the 2022 Census there are 22,869 persons living in Athlone, therefore a key role of the JUAP will be the identification of sufficient land to accommodate population targets and housing demand, delivered in tandem with accessible social infrastructure. The Strategic Issues Paper states that it is a priority to ensure that resilience is built into Athlone's housing stock through the provision of an adequate range of housing types, sizes and tenures for both renters and owner-occupiers.

The RSES identifies a target population of 30,000 up to 2031 for Athlone, and it states that the key to the success of Athlone is the availability of zoned and serviced lands within the existing built-up area to facilitate significant population growth. It states that the development of lands at Curragh Lissywollen, Lissywollen South, Cornamagh, Cornamaddy and Monksland / Bellanamullia, have the potential to deliver the population targets identified in the RSES. In particular, the development of the strategic landbank at Lissywollen South, also offers the opportunity to develop a new urban quarter

extending from the town centre, while the development of Monksland/Bellanamullia lands supports the continued development of the Athlone West area. The RSES states that vital to the growth of Athlone as a Regional Growth Centre is the provision of high-quality, well-designed housing development that ensures a mixture of housing types and meets the needs of a variety of households, which is essential to support all of the residents of Athlone, including the current and future employment base thus strengthening the economic potential of the settlement. Table 4.3 of the RSES sets out the Region's settlement typologies and policy responses with a particular focus on socio-economic functions, transport profile and policy response relevant to Regional Growth Centres. The preparation of the JUAP achieves RPO 4.4 of the RSES and supports the development of Athlone as an attractive, vibrant and highly accessible regional centre and economic driver.

### **3.2 Sustainable Communities and Social Infrastructure**

The Strategic Issues Paper outlines that a key characteristic of sustainable communities is high permeability with the surrounding built environment and it states that focusing on the '10 Minute City' concept, ease of access to essential employment, recreational and social services within a 10-minute walk or bicycle journey of one's home can positively contribute to health, wellbeing and quality of life, social inclusion and improved opportunities to encourage sustainable mobility patterns.

The Strategic Issues Paper identifies that social infrastructure for Athlone includes healthcare, education, religion, community centres, libraries, swimming pools, public spaces, childcare services, recreational facilities and parks/ playgrounds. Art and cultural institutions, such as the Dean Crowe and Athlone Little Theatres, also contribute to Athlone's social capital. The Strategic Issues Paper outlines that the JUAP will set out a policy framework guiding the alignment of new development, sustainable transport modes and social/community infrastructure in order to ensure Athlone's growth is balanced and socially inclusive.

Within the RSES, the 10-minute settlement concept is outlined in the guiding principles for statutory land use plans, relating to the integration of land use and transport, whereby services are accessible in short walking and cycling timeframes or accessible by high quality public transport. It is noted that RSO 1 in the RSES relates to sustainable settlement patterns which aim to develop Athlone and a number of key growth settlements of sufficient scale to be drivers of regional growth. The Regional Assembly would also like to highlight RPOs 9.1 and 9.2 in the RSES which relate to a diverse and inclusive region.

### **3.3 Placemaking and the Built Environment**

The Strategic Issues Paper states that the emerging Athlone Urban Design and Regeneration Framework and the draft Sustainable and Compact Settlements Guidelines for Planning Authorities will inform the JUAP in guiding placemaking for future development and key design principles of quality placemaking (it is noted that the draft Sustainable and Compact Settlements Guidelines for Planning Authorities were recently adopted). It notes that successful regeneration requires broad partnerships with national land activation measures such as Town Centre First and Croí Cónaithe

(Towns) Fund, the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, the European Regional Development Fund and the Just Transition Fund. The Strategic Issues Paper outlines that to date, the Local Authorities have secured substantial funding to support the delivery of projects, such as the 'Putting the Heart Back into Monksland', the Athlone Urban Design and Regeneration Framework, Church Street Enhancement, Athlone Town Centre Public Realm Enhancement, the multi-million euro cycleway bridge across the Shannon as part of the Dublin–Galway cycleway, Monksland Town and Village Recreation Park and Loughanaskin Regeneration Masterplan. The Strategic Issues Paper states that ensuring consistency with the principles set out in the Government's Town Centre First policy, the JUAP will set out a strong policy framework to utilise and rejuvenate existing buildings and brownfield/infill sites and sustainably manage urban dereliction. The Strategic Issues Paper also states that the ongoing identification of opportunity sites will be a catalyst for the strategic regeneration of Athlone's derelict properties and streetscapes with considerable potential identified for the Connacht Street and Pearse Street environs and secondary side streets such as Lloyd's Lane and Friary Lane.

The Regional Assembly welcomes reference in the Strategic Issues Paper on the emphasis to be provided on regeneration in order to provide more vibrant and sustainable communities, as the promotion of town centre enhancements and public realm improvements contribute to the sustainability of the town centre and improve opportunities for sustainable transport choices. In this respect, this aligns with RPO 4.8 of the RSES which supports the regeneration of underused town centre and brownfield/infill lands to facilitate population growth and to achieve 30% compact growth targets.

The RSES also states that future development required to achieve the vision for Athlone includes the regeneration of underused, vacant or derelict lands in the town centre; in this respect the renewal of lands at Loughanaskin provide an opportunity to consolidate the commercial core of Athlone and enhance the physical character of the area. The RSES states that the delivery of enhanced public realm in the town centre and along the River Shannon's waterfront, including the development of the Western Bank as a cultural quarter, will contribute to overall placemaking and will support further amenity, recreation and tourist related development. Furthermore, the RSES notes that additional opportunity exists for rejuvenation at sites including Station Road, the Texas, Irishtown and Dunnes Stores sites and that the public realm may be enhanced further by improving connectivity between Athlone town centre and Golden Island Shopping Centre. The RSES outlines that regeneration opportunities are to be identified as part of the JUAP, through an integrated master planning approach, which can further support funding proposals under the Project Ireland 2040 Urban Regeneration and Development Fund and associated funding mechanisms.

### **3.4 Climate Action and Resilience**

The Strategic Issues Paper states that the role of the JUAP is to translate high-level Green House Gas (GHG) targets and climate strategies into localised policies aimed at transitioning Athlone towards a 'low carbon economy' and developing climate resilience. It states that climate action measures in

Athlone will be achieved through a range of mechanisms including local authority led initiatives and the national Community Climate Action Programme which seeks to support and empower communities to build low carbon sustainable communities. It notes that collaboration and partnership with the Technical University of the Shannon (TUS), a leader in climate and sustainability research and innovation, also presents opportunities for developing climate action capacity in the Local Authorities and positioning Athlone as a lab for new and emerging practice.

The Strategic Issues Paper states that the following climate action measures for Athlone have been achieved to date:

- Work in partnership with the OPW to implement the Athlone Flood Alleviation Scheme.
- Funding secured for projects under the URDF providing for climate resilient development.
- Four Sustainable Energy Community Networks operating in partnership with the SEAI to implement climate action projects.
- Public lighting upgraded to LED standards as part of the Local Authority's implementation of the Climate Adaptation Strategies 2019-2024.
- Retrofitting existing residential units by local authorities under the Energy Efficiency Retrofitting Programme and Midlands Retrofit Programme.

Furthermore, the Strategic Issues Paper states that ongoing progress towards the decarbonisation of Athlone's transport sector includes significant investment in the development of a 47km greenway from Mullingar to Athlone, the electrification of Athlone's Bus Éireann local bus fleet under the Government's Pathfinder Programme, and a new bike sharing scheme launched in Athlone in 2022.

Climate Action is one of the three key principles of the RSES, and RSOs 6-11 relate specifically to Climate Action. These are concerned with integrating transport and land use, the sustainable management of water, waste and other environmental resources, building climate resilience, supporting the transition to low carbon and clean energy, enhancing green infrastructure and conserving and enhancing biodiversity and natural heritage. The focus of climate action is also highlighted in Figure 7.4 Climate Strategy of the RSES. The Regional Assembly also draws the Local Authorities attention to the Regional Development Monitor which hosts a range of environmental indicators for counties within the Region.

### **3.5 Economic Development and Employment**

The Strategic Issues Paper outlines that according to research conducted by midlandsireland.ie, there are over 1,100 active enterprises within a 5km radius of Athlone which employ over 13,000 people, and Athlone's employment profile largely comprises of professional services, information and communication, retail and manufacturing with other key sectors being public administration, transportation, accommodation and food. The Strategic Issues Paper states that the JUAP, aligned with the Economic Strategy for the Regional Centre of Athlone, will guide economic development to ensure future investment and growth opportunities target locations in line with other cross-cutting development principles pertaining to compact growth, climate resilience and sustainable travel. The

Strategic Issues Paper acknowledges that whilst benefitting from strategic land reserves in areas such as Monksland and Creggan, new economic opportunities will need to be identified for Athlone to attract inward investment and remain competitive; examples of future enterprise start-ups and drivers include a Life Sciences Innovation Hub in Monksland and the Loughanaskin Urban Quarter. The Strategic Issues Paper also outlines that the JUAP will support the Technological University of the Shannon's strategic role in Athlone to promote a 'Knowledge-Based Economy'.

The RSES states that Athlone has an established economic base with significant administrative, retail, industrial, tourism and services employment, which serves an extensive catchment area and that the development of Athlone as a Regional Growth Centre offers an opportunity to maximise its central location and to build on the resilience of its local employment base that includes existing economic clusters of indigenous and international companies in the manufacturing, pharmaceutical, research and development, medical devices, ICT and software development sectors. It states that Athlone's success in attracting Foreign Direct Investment makes it an optimal location for future investment.

The RSES notes that in line with the smart specialisation approach, there is further potential to build links with industry to develop a pipeline of employment focussed skills to enter the workforce of specialised, high-tech industries, to boost Athlone's reputation as a university town and to increase its attractiveness as a location for talent and investment. In addition, RPO 4.5 of the RSES promotes Athlone as a key location for regional economic development, supporting the provision of increased employment through the expansion of the existing enterprise ecosystem in Athlone and smart specialisation. The diversification and growth of smart specialisation of local economies with a strong focus on clustering is a growth enabler for the Gateway Region in the RSES.

The RSES outlines that the Midlands Innovation and Research Centre (MIRC) together with the Technological University of the Shannon and Athlone Business and Technology Park are important focal points for the development of industry and higher education links in research and development. It is noted that RPO 4.6 of the RSES has now been achieved which supported the role of Athlone Institute of Technology as a centre of excellence for education and in achieving its status as a Technological University.

The RSES supports the preparation of a wider collaborative Economic Development Strategy to promote increased employment and enterprise opportunities in Athlone, ensuring the sequential delivery of serviced sites in central accessible locations, including Garrycastle IDA, Blyry, Creggan and Monksland.

Regarding retail, the RSES states that it is important to acknowledge the strong economic and employment role that the retail sector within Athlone provides and that it is considered that the Joint Retail Strategy by Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils will augment the development of Athlone as a regional shopping destination. The Regional Assembly draws attention to Table 6.1 Retail Hierarchy for the Region in the RSES which outlines Athlone under Level 2 of the retail hierarchy



entitled *‘Major Town Centres and County (Principal) Town Centres’*. This should be clearly outlined in the JUAP.

### **3.6 Transport and Movement**

The Strategic Issues Paper notes that Athlone is strategically located on the national road network with existing connectivity to the N6/M6, the N62, the N55 and the N61, is located on the Dublin-Galway and Dublin-Westport rail lines and is within a ninety-minute drive of Dublin, Shannon and Knock airports. The Strategic Issues Paper states that the Athlone Town Centre Public Realm Enhancement Works encourage active mobility and support social engagement. The Strategic Issues Paper confirms that the JUAP will be informed by the Athlone Area-Based Transport Assessment (ABTA) and this ABTA indicates that Athlone’s travel mode share is generally distributed across private cars (70%), public transportation (10%) and active travel (20%). It is noted that an ABTA is the methodology involved in the preparation of a Local Transport Plan (LTP) and in this respect the RSES supports the preparation of a Local Transport Plan, prepared jointly by Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils and in collaboration with the relevant transport agencies. This aligns with Section 8.3 and RPOs 4.10 and 8.6 of the RSES. The guidance provided in the RSES in relation to Local Transport Plans also suggests that Local Link Offices (Transport Coordination Units) should be consulted in the development of LTPs. The policies, objectives and measures which emerge from the LTP are required to be incorporated into the relevant statutory land use plans pertaining to each settlement.

### **3.7 Heritage and Amenity**

The Strategic Issues Paper states that the JUAP, in conjunction with other tourism strategies such as the Roscommon and Westmeath County Tourism Strategies and the Shannon Tourism Masterplan 2020-2030, will support and promote Athlone as a regional destination and tourism hub. The Strategic Issues Paper acknowledges that Athlone is recognised for a vibrant arts and culture scene, including Dean Crowe and Athlone Little Theatres, and a diverse heritage offering. Associated attractions such as Athlone Castle, the Luan Gallery and Hodson Bay are also outlined in the Strategic Issues Paper and it is noted that Athlone’s section of the Galway to Dublin Cycleway includes a new contemporary pedestrian/cycleway bridge over the River Shannon which it states will become an iconic attraction of the cycleway. The Strategic Issues Paper outlines that the JUAP will seek to address potential barriers to the integration of green and blue networks and identify opportunities to develop improved linkages within the urban area and hinterland, such as Lough Ree and the broader Galway-Athlone greenway/cycleway.

The RSES outlines a growth enabler for the Gateway Region area is to promote the Region as a key destination for tourism, leisure and recreation activities and supports the development of an integrated network of greenways, blueways and peatways. The development of the recreation potential of waterways and the greenway network, including the Galway to Dublin cycleway, is outlined in RPO 4.7 of the RSES. In order to assist in the making of any Green Blue Infrastructure Strategy to inform the JUAP, the Local Authorities should note the guiding principles for the preparation of Green Infrastructure strategies as set out in Section 7.7 of the RSES, and should align



with RPO 7.22 in relation to green infrastructure. In addition, the RSES states that the JUAP should support the development of an Open Space Strategy with provision for a park in Monksland and the provision of sustainable transport, recreation and amenity spaces to support existing and future populations.

The RSES also identifies that as a major tourist destination in the Midlands, Athlone capitalises on the rich natural and cultural heritage amenities that exist in the surrounding hinterlands, making it an ideal base to begin exploration of Ireland's 'Hidden Heartlands', which is being promoted as part of Fáilte Ireland's tourism experience brand. The RSES states that there is potential to capitalise on Athlone's urban heritage and culture, and attractive natural setting on Lough Ree which opens into the River Shannon, with links to the surrounding landscape and attractions such as the ancient monastic heritage site of Clonmacnoise and the medieval town of Rindoon. Furthermore, the RSES outlines that the JUAP should support the implementation of the Athlone Waterfront Strategy to provide for public realm enhancements and tourist related development. This is also in line with RPO 6.19 of the RSES.

### **3.8 Enabling Infrastructure**

The Strategic Issues Paper highlights that Athlone is strategically positioned in terms of regional connectivity with respect to road, rail and greenway/blueway infrastructure and that design measures such as Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SuDS) and the incorporation of nature-based surface water solutions into drainage networks will become increasingly important as climate adaptation measures when managing drainage in the urban environment. It states that Uisce Éireann is currently progressing three major capital work streams in the Athlone area; these are the Athlone Water Supply Scheme (Phase 2) Upgrade, the Athlone Main Drainage Scheme and the Athlone Mains Rehabilitation Scheme.

In relation to energy, the Strategic Issues Paper refers to the investigation of innovative renewable energy opportunities in Athlone and states that the JUAP will support the delivery of low carbon and energy efficient development through appropriate land use zoning and consolidation, sustainable design, promotion of refurbishment/retrofit incentives and the provision of renewables.

Regarding waste, the Strategic Issues Paper states that the Local Authorities will continue to facilitate the implementation of the EU Waste Hierarchy as set out in national legislation and regional waste management policies, including the relevant Eastern Midlands Region Waste Management and Connacht-Ulster Waste Management Plans and the emerging National Waste Management Plan for a Circular Economy.

Regarding ICT, the Strategic Issues Paper notes that the availability of reliable Information and Communication Technology (ICT), such as high-speed broadband and telecommunications services, will be critical to attracting investment and sustaining business in Athlone.

The RSES supports the improvement of strategic inter-regional connections to Dublin, Galway, Limerick and Sligo, along with the improvement of public transport links and notes that transport infrastructural upgrades between Athlone and the Key Towns of the area, namely Longford, Mullingar, Tullamore, Portlaoise and Roscommon will allow for the Key Towns to capitalise on Athlone's role as a Regional Growth Centre. The promotion of greenways along the canal and the new pedestrian/cycle bridge over the River Shannon is also supported by the RSES. The RSES notes that the goal of achieving compact growth will increase the need to improve sustainable transport and to provide for the requisite infrastructure to enable Athlone to develop as a Regional Growth Centre; this will include the upgrading of the water supply and the sewage treatment system in order to meet growth targets. The RSES notes that flooding associated with the River Shannon is a significant consideration for Athlone's future development therefore the JUAP should include tailored policy in this regard, including building upon existing measures under the Athlone Flood Alleviation Scheme and the Shannon Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAM) Study. It is noted that the Athlone Regional Growth Centre RPO 4.9 supports ongoing implementation of flood risk management and flood alleviation measures to facilitate the growth of Athlone.

The RSES promotes maximising return on existing and planned infrastructural investments therefore attention is drawn to RPO 10.3 in the RSES which requires the Regional Assembly and local authorities to liaise and cooperate with Uisce Éireann to ensure the delivery of the investment works programme of Uisce Éireann that will provide infrastructure to increase capacity to service settlements in accordance with the settlement strategy of the RSES and local authority core strategies and provide for long term solutions for wastewater treatment for the Region. It is noted that the wastewater infrastructure Table 10.2 in the RSES includes the Athlone Main Drainage Project, and RPO 10.11 of the RSES supports the delivery of wastewater infrastructure identified in Table 10.2.

In addition, the RSES supports the development of ICT infrastructure, and this aligns with RPO 8.25 in the RSES in relation to the promotion of ICT-based industries and a high-quality ICT network throughout the Region.

#### **4.0 Environmental Assessments - SEA, AA and Flood Risk Assessment**

As part of the overall process, the JUAP will require a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and an Appropriate Assessment (AA), which are required under the EU SEA and Habitats Directives. The Regional Assembly recommends early engagement with the relevant bodies in this regard, including the Office of Public Works, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Environmental Protection Agency and Uisce Éireann.

The Strategic Issues Paper confirms that the JUAP will be informed by the preparation of a Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) and this aligns with RPO 7.12 of the RSES. In keeping with best practice, it is recommended that the Local Authorities take into account the recommendations of the SFRA, while also taking opportunities to enhance biodiversity and amenities, including where flood risk management measures are planned, in line with RPOs 7.14 and 7.15 of the RSES.

## 5.0 Recommendations

The Regional Assembly advises the Local Authorities to pay particular attention to the following issues in the preparation of the Athlone JUAP 2024-2030 in order to ensure consistency with the RSES, and makes the following recommendations:

- The JUAP should ensure that specific policies relating to Athlone, contained within the RSES, are considered as part of the JUAP. This includes RPOs 4.4 to 4.10 of the RSES. The Assembly notes and welcomes that some of these policy objectives have been met whilst others are still ongoing.
- The JUAP should endeavour to address the requirements of the JUAP as set out in the RSES, including those listed on p. 58 of the RSES. This includes but is not limited to;
  - Recognition of the need to grow Athlone’s population in line with the RSES and compact growth targets with a minimum of 30% of new homes to be built within the existing built-up area, supported by the large-scale delivery of lands at Curragh Lissywollen, Lissywollen South, Cornamagh, Cornamaddy and Monksland/Bellanamullia.
  - Support for the phased delivery of serviced employment lands at Garrycastle IDA, Blyry, Creggan and Monksland
  - The regeneration of underused, vacant or derelict town centre lands.
  - The consolidation of retail and commercial functions in line with a joint Retail Strategy prepared by the local authorities.
  - The identification of infrastructural investment priorities and promotion of a joined-up approach to the delivery of key enabling infrastructure to facilitate the sequential delivery of strategic residential, employment and regeneration development areas.
  - Support for a cross sectoral approach to maximise tourism potential.
  - A joint Local Transport Plan between Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils in collaboration with transport agencies and key stakeholders to improve sustainable mobility in the town.
- The JUAP should align with RPOs 9.1 and 9.2 in the RSES which relate to a diverse and inclusive region.
- Table 6.1 Retail Hierarchy for the Region in the RSES which outlines Athlone under Level 2 of the retail hierarchy entitled ‘*Major Town Centres and County (Principal) Town Centres*’ should be clearly outlined in the JUAP.
- The JUAP should align with RPO 7.22 in the RSES in relation to green infrastructure and the Guiding Principles for the preparation of Green Infrastructure Strategies as set out in Section 7.7 of the RSES.
- The JUAP should support the development of an Open Space Strategy with provision for a park in Monksland as outlined in the RSES.
- The JUAP should align with Figure 7.4 Climate Strategy of the RSES.
- The JUAP should align with RPO 6.19 of the RSES with regards to supporting the implementation of existing local strategies linking blueways and greenways.

- The JUAP should align with RPOs 7.14 and 7.15 in the RSES regarding flood risk management and RPO 4.9 which supports ongoing implementation of flood risk management and flood alleviation measures to facilitate the growth of Athlone

## 6.0 Conclusion

The Regional Assembly welcomes the publication of the Pre-Draft Consultation Strategic Issues Paper for the Athlone Joint UAP 2024-2030 and looks forward to engaging with the Local Authorities on the forthcoming stages of the Joint Urban Area Plan process, and as part of ongoing engagement activities to progress the implementation of the policies and objectives of the RSES.

Regards,



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Clare Bannon  
A/Director  
Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly  
31<sup>st</sup> January 2024