



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

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Pre-Draft Consultation Strategic Issues Paper for the Mullingar Local Area Plan (LAP) 2024-2030

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly notes that Westmeath County Council has published a pre-draft public consultation Strategic Issues Paper in preparation for the Mullingar Local Area Plan (LAP) 2024-2030. This submission on the pre-draft public consultation of the Mullingar Local Area Plan (LAP) 2024-2030 has been prepared by the executive and approved by the Cathaoirleach of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly.

1.0 Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES)

The RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region, which was made by the Members of the Assembly on 28th 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 of the Eastern and Midland Region, thus ensuring full alignment between local, regional and national planning policy.

2.0 Mullingar Local Area Plan 2024-2030

Westmeath County Council intends to prepare a local area plan for Mullingar covering the period 2024-2030. As part of the first stage of this process the Local Authority has prepared and published a pre-draft public consultation Strategic Issues Paper containing a number of key issues and topics to be covered within the local area plan and is now engaging in pre-draft public consultation. It is indicated that the local area plan, in collaboration with local communities and key stakeholders, will set a direction and vision for the future growth of Mullingar. The LAP will also set out an overarching landuse framework which will form the basis for deciding on appropriate locations for future development in the area.

3.0 Submission

The Strategic Issues Paper presents an overview of the main issues and challenges affecting Mullingar and sets out by theme some of the key issues that may need to be addressed by the Mullingar LAP. The Strategic Issues Paper includes eight key topics to be addressed in the new local area plan which

include 1) housing and sustainable communities, 2) economic development and employment, 3) regeneration and placemaking, 4) cultural heritage and tourism, 5) transport and mobility, 6) green blue infrastructure, 7) enabling infrastructure and 8) climate action. 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, 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 Mullingar town.

The Strategic Issues Paper outlines the strategic policy framework which highlights that the Mullingar LAP 2024-2030 sits within and will be informed by a hierarchy of planning guidance including the National Planning Framework, the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region and the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027.

In order to assist the Local Authority in ensuring that the Mullingar LAP 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 LAP.

3.1 Growth Strategy

In the Growth Strategy of the RSES (Chapter 3), Mullingar is located inside the Gateway Region of the settlement strategy and is identified as a Key Town. The Key Towns in the Gateway Region provide important connections with adjoining regions and have capacity and future growth potential to accommodate above average growth in tandem with the requisite investment in employment creation, services, amenities and sustainable transport. The Gateway Region contains a strong network of large economically active towns that have a good level of local employment, services and amenities, which serve not just their resident populations but a wider catchment area; these include Longford town, Mullingar, Tullamore, Portlaoise and Graiguecullen (Carlow).

3.2 Housing and Sustainable Communities

The Strategic Issues Paper identifies Mullingar as a Key Town (as stated in Table 4.2 Settlement Hierarchy) in the RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region. Key Towns within the RSES are identified as towns serving as large economically active service and/or county towns, that provide employment for their surrounding areas, with high-quality transport links and the capacity to act as growth drivers to complement the Regional Growth Centres. As outlined in the RSES, the Key Town of Mullingar provides functions at a much higher level than its resident population, providing key employment and services for its extensive hinterland.

The RSES identifies that Mullingar town, as a Key Town, is strategically located on the Dublin to Sligo rail line and M4 motorway, and it provides an essential role in supporting population and job growth and acts as a crucial centre for the surrounding hinterland. 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 Key Towns. Chapter 4 of the RSES provides a regional

profile for Mullingar, highlighting priorities and areas of strength and outlines that it is essential to ensure an effective supply of land for the provision of housing. It states that a range of well-designed housing types that meet the needs of a variety of households will help to sustain and enhance the settlement, contributing to the creation of a high-quality place.

The Strategic Issues Paper outlines that according to the 2022 Census there are 22,667 persons living in Mullingar town therefore a key role of the LAP will be the identification of sufficient land to accommodate population targets and housing demand, delivered in tandem with accessible social infrastructure. It is envisaged that future residential development will predominantly be located within the areas of Robinstown, Mullingar South, Ardmore/Marlinstown, and the western environs of the town. This aligns with the RSES which states that to facilitate compact growth, 30% of new homes need to be situated within the existing built-up area and town/village centres. The Strategic Issues Paper states that the LAP will target Mullingar's existing brownfields and backlands, building heights/densities, transport links and public realms when developing a framework for compact growth. This is welcomed by the Regional Assembly.

The Strategic Issues Paper also outlines that a social infrastructure audit is underway to determine requirements in relation to the provision of services for education, childcare, sports, arts, culture and healthcare. This aligns with Mullingar Key Town RPO 4.66 in the RSES which aims to support the development and expansion of the Midlands Regional Hospital including necessary supporting infrastructure.

The Strategic Issues Paper also outlines support for increased safe permeability through placemaking and supports the '10-minute town' concept, which seeks to have infrastructure and facilities within a ten-minute walk or cycle from homes. This concept is also outlined in the guiding principles in the RSES for statutory land use plans, relating to the integration of land use and transport in order to support the '10-minute' settlement concept whereby services are accessible in short walking and cycling timeframes or accessible by high quality public transport to these services in larger settlements.

3.3 Economic Development and Employment

The Strategic Issues Paper outlines that according to research conducted by midlandsireland.ie, there are over 1,410 active businesses within 5km of Mullingar which employ over 5,050 people from the town and wider region. The Strategic Issues Paper further states that Mullingar's employment profile largely comprises professional services, manufacturing and commerce and trade sectors with construction and tourism representing the town's other key industries. Significant growth has also been seen in sectoral specialisms such as Engineering, ICT, FinTech, Robotics, Advanced Manufacturing and Research and Development, together with new and emerging businesses such as the film industry. The Strategic Issues Paper also refers to strategic landholdings in the National Science Park, IDA Park and Forest Park Business Campus which offer opportunities to drive enterprise.

The RSES acknowledges that Mullingar operates as a strong economic driver covering a relatively wide catchment, with opportunity to capitalise upon and augment the high ratio of jobs to resident workers. The RSES states that the economic role of Mullingar can be supported through mechanisms such as realising the potential of the existing IDA presence and property, advance development of high-quality enterprise and employment zones including existing business parks; and support and promotion within sectors such as engineering and ICT, consumer products, financial services, shared services (multi-lingual), Research and Development, robotics and advanced manufacturing.

The RSES outlines a growth enabler for the Gateway Region area in relation to the diversification and growth of smart specialization of local economies with a strong focus on clustering including sustainable farming and food production, tourism, marine, energy and renewables, bioeconomy and circular economy. Specifically relating to economic development, the Regional Assembly draws attention to RPO 4.67 which supports Mullingar's role as an important employment hub by promoting economic development and clustering of related enterprises and RPO 4.27 which outlines that Key Towns shall act as economic drivers and provide for strategic employment locations to improve their economic base by increasing the ratio of jobs to workers.

In relation to retail the Regional Assembly draws attention to Table 6.1 Retail Hierarchy for the Region in the RSES which outlines Mullingar under Level 2 of the retail hierarchy entitled 'Major Town Centres and County (Principal) Town Centres' and this should be clearly outlined in the Mullingar LAP.

3.4 Regeneration and Placemaking

The Strategic Issues Paper notes that successful regeneration requires broad partnerships between stakeholders and a combination of private and public sector measures such as Town Centre First and Croí Cónaithe (Towns) Fund, the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, the European Regional Development Fund and the Just Transition Fund. The Strategic Issues Paper further notes that early engagement with stakeholders, businesses and members of the community as part of the Mullingar Town Centre Health Check indicates a strong desire for public realm improvements such as increased outdoor seating, meeting spaces and better quality signage on shop fronts. It states that to date, Westmeath County Council has secured funding to support the delivery of projects such as the Blackhall Urban Quarter, Canal Avenue and Environs Regeneration Project and urban realm improvement works encompassing Mount Street, Pearse Street and Oliver Plunkett Street.

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. In this respect, the LAP will also look to further identify potential sites in town for focused regeneration, which is welcomed by the Regional Assembly. As outlined in the RSES, the consolidation and regeneration of Mullingar is a key priority to support the overall role and function of the town therefore attention is drawn to the Regeneration RPOs in the RSES, listed as RPOs 9.7 - 9.9. The RSES states that strategic sites that provide regeneration opportunity include Columb Barracks and St. Loman's along with the town centre sites of Blackhall, Grove Street, the Harbour Street car park and

the Dunnes Stores car park. The promotion of town centre enhancements and public realm improvements will contribute to the sustainability of the town centre and improve opportunities for sustainable transport choices. The Regional Assembly welcomes such urban regeneration and public realm improvement measures that enhance the economic and tourism potential of Mullingar. These measures will also align with Mullingar Key Town RPO 4.65 of the RSES which aims to promote the plan-led development and regeneration of publicly-owned land banks in the town for employment, education, community, cultural and recreational opportunities and to support the economic development and regeneration of the town centre.

3.5 Cultural Heritage and Tourism

The Strategic Issues Paper identifies that Mullingar is part of Fáilte Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand, and in this respect, it acknowledges that Mullingar has significant protected structures and six architectural conservation areas. Many of the buildings in the centre of Mullingar date from the eighteenth and nineteenth century set in a typical Irish town layout which contributes significantly to the town's character, of note are the protected complexes of Columb Barracks and St. Loman's Hospital. The Strategic Issues Paper also refers to Mullingar's musical heritage which has been identified as a unique selling point for the town as it hosts 'Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann', Ireland's annual celebration of traditional music. The Issues Paper identifies that Mullingar has significant amenity resources such as the Royal Canal, Lough Ennell and Lough Owel and these support recreational tourism. The Old Rail Trail (43km) between Athlone and Mullingar is also a considerable greenway asset, in addition to the Royal Canal Greenway, and the greenway from Mullingar to Lough Owel and to Lough Ennell. Another visitor attraction in proximity to Mullingar that can be developed further includes Belvedere House and Gardens.

The RSES identifies that Mullingar has a rich built heritage in keeping with its historic commercial importance as a market town. Furthermore, the RSES outlines a growth enabler for the Gateway Region area to promote the Region as a key destination for tourism, leisure and recreation activities and support the development of an integrated network of greenways, blueways and peatways while ensuring that high value assets and amenities are protected and enhanced. Mullingar Key Town RPO 4.64 in the RSES aims to support Mullingar's role as a tourism hub having regard to its accessibility to key tourist destinations in the Region including proximity to natural amenities and recreational opportunities including the Galway to Dublin Greenway. Also, RPO 6.19 in the RSES supports the local strategies that are already in place to link the River Shannon Blueway, the Royal and Grand Canal Greenways and the proposed Barrow Blueway right across the Midlands, incorporating the town of Mullingar.

3.6 Transport and Mobility

The Strategic Issues Paper states that Mullingar is strategically located on the N4/M4 from Dublin to Sligo, with a national road/N55 to Athlone in close proximity, and an enhanced rail service on the Sligo rail line. The Strategic Issues Paper also notes that the Mullingar Town Centre Health Check survey findings indicate that improved provision of traffic management measures, public transport

services and sustainable mobility infrastructure is required to realise any future modal shift from the private car. In this respect Westmeath County Council has successfully secured Active Travel Investment Grants from the National Transport Authority with a total of €3.9m allocated to the County in 2023.

The Strategic Issues Paper states that the LAP will be informed by a Mullingar Area Based Transport Assessment (ABTA) to ensure integration of land use and transport planning and that a key component of the transport plan will be to provide and encourage sustainable travel modes in order to reduce carbon emissions and contribute to a low carbon society in conjunction with delivering appropriate levels of development to support Mullingar's sustained growth as a Key Town. It is noted that an ABTA is the methodology involved in the preparation of a Local Transport Plan (LTP). This aligns with Section 8.3 of the RSES and RPO 8.6 that there is a requirement to prepare a Local Transport Plan for selected settlements in the Region which should include the transport priorities for the settlement in terms of public transport infrastructure and services, cycle investment, improvements to the pedestrian environment and road enhancements. The guidance provided in relation to Local Transport Plans in the RSES 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.

The Regional Assembly also brings attention to Table 8.4 of the RSES, Road Projects for the Region which states that planned infrastructure upgrades include the N4 from Mullingar to Longford.

3.7 Green Blue Infrastructure

The Strategic Issues Paper outlines that together with Mullingar's lakes and the Royal Canal Blueway, other noteworthy wildlife habitat corridors in the vicinity include Lacy's Canal, the River Brosna, the Old Rail Trail / Dublin-Galway Cycleway and the Town Park. The Strategic Issues Paper states that a Green Blue Infrastructure Strategy will be undertaken by the Local Authority to support the promotion and sustainable expansion of Mullingar's natural heritage assets, and the LAP will be informed by this, including investigating opportunities for new green amenity spaces such as a town park and/or a linear park along the River Brosna. To assist in the making of any Green Blue Infrastructure Strategy to inform the LAP, the Local Authority should note the guiding principles for the preparation of Green Infrastructure strategies as set out in Section 7.7 of the RSES. In addition, RPOs 7.22 and 7.23 of the RSES note the importance of the identification, protection, enhancement and management of Green Infrastructure in an integrated and coherent manner and the further development of Green Infrastructure policies. The Regional Assembly welcomes the focus on Green and Blue Infrastructure in the LAP.

3.8 Enabling Infrastructure

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 Mullingar. This aligns with RPOs 6.5 and 8.25 in the RSES in relation to the promotion of ICT-based industries and a high-quality ICT network throughout the Region.

The Strategic Issues Paper also notes that in 2022, Uisce Éireann upgraded critical infrastructure at the Portloman Water Treatment Plant to provide a safe and reliable water supply to existing homes and businesses. The RSES promotes maximising return on existing and planned infrastructural investments in keeping with Mullingar's role as a Key Town and County Town for Westmeath. In this regard, 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 Uisce Éireann's investments and other relevant 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. Furthermore, the RSES states that significant Government spending in recent years has seen the Mullingar Main Drainage Scheme upgraded at a cost of €39m and it notes that the water supply to Mullingar town in the long-term will be provided by the South Westmeath Scheme which will provide an interconnector between Athlone and Mullingar or through connection to a feeder from the Dublin Water Supply Scheme.

3.9 Climate Action

The Strategic Issues Paper states that the LAP will set out the policy framework for a place-based approach to Climate Action focused on action areas of transport, building upgrades, green infrastructure, land and environmental designations, air quality, waste management, integrated policy and community activation. As outlined in the Strategic Issues Paper the national Community Climate Action Programme seeks to support and empower communities and key stakeholders to build low carbon sustainable communities. The Strategic Issues Paper states that the role of the Mullingar LAP is to translate high-level Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emission targets and climate strategies into localised policies aimed at transitioning Mullingar towards a 'low carbon economy' and developing climate resilience by implementing mitigation and adaptation measures. Furthermore, Westmeath County Council aims to reduce existing levels of GHG emissions by improving sustainable mobility and focussing on the delivery of active travel projects, including a greenway from Mullingar to Athlone, and a greenway link from Mullingar to Lough Owel.

The Strategic Issues Paper also refers to Mullingar's recent designation as a Decarbonisation Zone; a spatial area in which a range of climate mitigation, adaptation and biodiversity measures and actions are identified to address local low carbon energy, greenhouse gas emissions and climate needs to contribute to national climate action targets. The Strategic Issues Paper states that systems for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of climate action policies will be investigated to ensure Mullingar's long-term success in responding to climate change. In this regard, the Regional Assembly draws the Local Authority's attention to the Regional Development Monitor which hosts a range of environmental indicators for counties within the Region.

4.0 Environmental Assessments - SEA, AA and Flood Risk Assessment

As part of the overall process, the Strategic Issues Paper states that the Local Area Plan will require a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and an Appropriate Assessment (AA), which is 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 LAP 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 Authority 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. It is also recommended that the most up-to-date flood mapping should inform the preparation of the LAP.

5.0 Conclusion

The Regional Assembly welcomes the publication of the Pre-Draft Consultation Strategic Issues Paper for the Mullingar LAP 2024-2030 and looks forward to engaging with the Local Authority on the forthcoming stages of the Local 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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