

Athlone Town
Development Plan
2014-2020

Volume 3
SEA Environmental
Report

Strategic Environmental Assessment

Environmental Report

of the

Draft Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020

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1 NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction

Athlone Town Council in conjunction with Westmeath County Council have prepared a Draft Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 for Athlone towns and its environs. It has been determined by the Councils that it is appropriate to carry out a Strategic Environmental Assessment of the draft plan.

1.2 SEA Process

The requirement and mechanism for the Strategic Environmental Assessment of the development plan review process is set out in the Planning and Development (Strategic Environmental Assessment) Regulations 2004-2011. The purpose of the Environmental Report is to evaluate the likely significant environmental effects of implementing a plan and to identify possible alternatives and mitigation measures. It is a systematic, on-going process for evaluating, at the earliest possible stage, the environmental quality and consequences of implementing the Draft Plan on the environment.

1.3 The Draft Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020

The Draft Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 will provide for and manage the physical, economic and social development of the town in a sustainable manner, in the interests of the overall common good, whilst protecting and enhancing the cultural and environmental assets of the town. The plan will also be used by both Athlone Town Council and Westmeath County Council to guide priorities for investment during the lifetime of the plan.

1.4 Planning & Policy Context

The Draft Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 sits within a hierarchy of plans and strategies at international, national, regional and local level. The plan must also take into account a range of EU and National legislation and guidelines.

1.5 Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Methodology

The SEA methodology is based on legislative requirements under the SEA Directive and DoECLG/EPA guidance. The process involves scoping the environmental issues to be included in the report, undertaking an analysis of the existing state of the environment within the study area, the consideration of alternative plans, the environmental assessment of the preferred plan, and devising measures to mitigate negative environmental effects. Finally, monitoring proposals are identified in the event that any significant environmental effects have not been anticipated.

1.6 Characteristics of the Existing Environment in Athlone

This process involves establishing the effects of the plan on the existing environment in terms of its biodiversity, population and human health, flora and fauna, soil, water, air, climatic factors, material assets, cultural heritage including architectural and archaeological heritage, landscape, and the interrelationship between these factors.

1.7 SEA Objectives, Targets, Indicators

The SEA is designed to assess the potential environmental impact of the proposed Development Plan and its associated policies and objectives against the environmental baselines established. The plan policies and objectives are assessed against a range of established environmental objectives and targets. Indicators that are recommended in the SEA are utilised over the lifetime of the Development Plan to quantify the level of impact that the policies and objectives have on the environment. This enables measurement of whether they were successful in promoting the sustainable development of Athlone.

1.8 Assessment of the effects of the plan including measures to prevent, reduce or off-set significant adverse effects

The environmental impacts of the proposed Development Plan policies and objectives were assessed with respect to the existing environmental baseline and the environmental objectives. As the policies included in the Development Plan have been designed to promote sustainability and to protect the environment, the majority of recommendations have positive impacts when assessed against the environmental objectives. A matrix was prepared to highlight these potential impacts in accordance with the Guidelines issued to Planning Authorities.

1.9 Consideration of Alternatives

Of the four alternative strategies considered, the preferred alternative is the consolidation of the urban core and the plan led expansion of the inner edge and environs of the town. This preferred alternative would allow for the Town to grow to provide for the needs of the linked Gateway status, in a sustainable and sequential plan led manner, restrict development on those areas liable to flooding and protect the natural and historic areas of the town and rural areas. It would allow for the promotion of sustainable travel and channel development in those areas with the available social and physical infrastructure and transport facilities and services.

1.10 Monitoring

Article 10 of the SEA Directive requires that monitoring should be carried out in order to identify at an early stage any unforeseen adverse impacts associated with the implementation of the plan or programme. No significant impacts have been identified as part of the SEA process. Consequently it has been determined that no additional monitoring is required.

2 INTRODUCTION

Athlone Town Council in conjunction with Westmeath County Council advertised the start of the review of the Athlone Town Plan 2008-2014 and the Athlone Environs Plan 2008-2014 and the preparation of a unitary Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 on 22nd Feb 2012.

As part of this review process and the preparation of the new development plan, Athlone Town Council and Westmeath County Council were obliged to prepare this Environmental Report of the likely significant effects on the environment of implementation of the plan. The Planning Authority took account of this Environmental Report along with the Appropriate Assessment and all submissions and observations made during the preparation and adoption of the Athlone Town Development Plan.

The environmental report is required to include the information that may reasonably be required, taking into account-

- Current knowledge and methods of assessment,
- The contents and level of detail in the plan
- The stage of the plan in the decision making process, and
- The extent to which certain matters are more appropriately assessed at different levels in the decision making process in order to avoid duplication of environmental assessment

This document has been prepared taking account of the Council's statutory obligations and responses received from both public and statutory consultees to the Scoping Report. This report should be read in conjunction with the Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020, and with the Appropriate Assessment Report prepared in parallel to this report.

2.1 Strategic Environmental Assessment Process

Article 2 of the EU Directive defines environmental assessment as *"the preparation of an environmental report, the carrying out of consultations, the taking into account of the environmental report and the results of consultations in decision making and the provision of information on the decision...."*

The requirement and mechanism for the Strategic Environmental Assessment of the development plan review process is set out in the Planning and Development (Strategic Environmental Assessment) Regulations 2004-2011. The purpose of the Environmental Report is to evaluate the likely significant environmental effects of implementing a plan and to identify possible alternatives and mitigation measures. The information to be provided in the Environmental Report is described in Annex I of the SEA Directive and can be summarised as follows:

- An outline of the contents and objectives of the plan or programme, and its relationship with other plans and programmes;
- Existing environmental conditions of the study area, including existing environmental problems, and the likely evolution of this area in the absence of the programme or plan;
- Environmental characteristics of the areas to be significantly affected;
- Likely significant effects on the environment, including issues such as bio-diversity, population, human health, flora and fauna, soil, water, air, climatic factors, material assets, cultural heritage including architectural and archaeological, landscape, and the interrelationship between these factors;
- Mitigation Measures
- Reasons for the selection of alternatives considered, and the methods of assessment undertaken;

- Description of monitoring measures, and
- Non-technical summary

Prior to adoption, a draft plan and associated Environmental Report must be made available to the general public, prescribed environmental authorities, and where necessary, affected Member States, and submissions invited. A statement demonstrating how environmental considerations have been integrated into the plan, how the Environmental Report and the outcome of submissions were taken into account, and the reasons for selecting the plan as adopted in light of other reasonable alternatives must also be provided.

2.2 The Draft Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020

Athlone is a large urban centre in the Midlands and is strategically positioned in the centre of Ireland, at a crossing point along the River Shannon. The growth of the town has evolved on an east west axis historically, following the construction of major road infrastructure through the town.

Athlone Town plan extends beyond the boundaries of Athlone Town Council's functional area and into the administrative area of Westmeath County Council. In the interests of the proper planning and sustainable development of the area, Athlone Town Council and Westmeath County Council, collectively referred to as the Councils, have come together to make a joint plan for Athlone Town Council area and environs. The boundary of the plan covers approximately 1,597 hectares. This Plan covers the Electoral Districts of Athlone East Rural, Athlone East Urban, Athlone West Urban and parts of Tubritt and Moydrum, on the western side of the Shannon. Part of the environs of Athlone is located within the jurisdiction of Roscommon County Council.

The Draft Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 will provide for and manage the physical, economic and social development of the town in a sustainable manner, in the interests of the overall common good, whilst protecting and enhancing the cultural and environmental assets of the town. The plan also provides an opportunity to reaffirm and realise the role of Athlone as a driver of growth at local, regional and national level, commensurate with the status of the town as a "Linked Gateway". The strategic aims underpinning the policies and objectives of the plan, and the focus of new development in the town shall be on:

- Promoting and facilitating the development of critical mass, employment, enterprise and economic activity in Athlone, commensurate with its status as a Linked Gateway Town.
- Promoting the town as a premier destination for Foreign Direct Investment and Retailing.
- Continuing to respect the primacy of the town centre including prioritising the improvement and enhancement of the public realm.
- Supporting continued public capital investment in enabling infrastructure and achieving economies of scale for services and infrastructure in the town.
- Facilitating, supporting and protecting national public investment in infrastructure (such as transport, water services, housing, environment and community services) to achieve sustainable development of Athlone in accordance with an agreed planning framework.

- Promoting economic development and employment creation, within defined economic clusters in established Business Parks such as Garrycastle, Blyry, Athlone Business Park and the Strategic Gateway Zone.
- Supporting and promoting the development of Athlone as an international tourist destination through the continued advancement of the “Destination Athlone” initiative.
- Protecting the town’s natural assets by preserving the quality of the River Shannon and its callows, landscape, parks, open spaces and the architectural, archaeological and cultural heritage of Athlone.
- Promoting social inclusion and the creation of sustainable communities.
- Supporting the development and expansion of AIT.
- Advancing the development of the Strategic Gateway Zone.
- Supporting and incentivising economic development and regeneration of brownfield and under-utilised areas in the town centre.
- Enhancing competitiveness and stimulating economic recovery and job creation across all sectors of the town’s economy.
- Facilitating the development of identified opportunity sites in the town.
- Ensuring that vacancy and dereliction are minimised, particularly in the town centre area.
- Continuing to develop Athlone as a national centre for sport and recreation.
- Promoting the town as a premier destination for Foreign Direct Investment and Retailing.

The Draft Athlone Town Plan 2014-2020 includes the mandatory objectives prescribed in the Planning & Development Acts 2000-2010 as amended including the provision of a Core Strategy. The purpose of the Core Strategy is to set out a medium to longer term quantitatively based strategy for the development of the plan area and to demonstrate that the Development Plan and its objectives are consistent with the National Spatial Strategy and the Midland Regional Planning Guidelines 2010-2022. The Core Strategy for Athlone has been prepared taking account of the population target for the town prescribed in the RPG’s for 2020 which is 24,809. The Regional Planning Guidelines set out development policy within a 5 tiered Hierarchy of settlements set within 5 broad development areas. Athlone is located in the Central Development Area. RPG Development Area policies affecting Athlone include appropriate development to be channelled and concentrated towards the Linked Gateway.

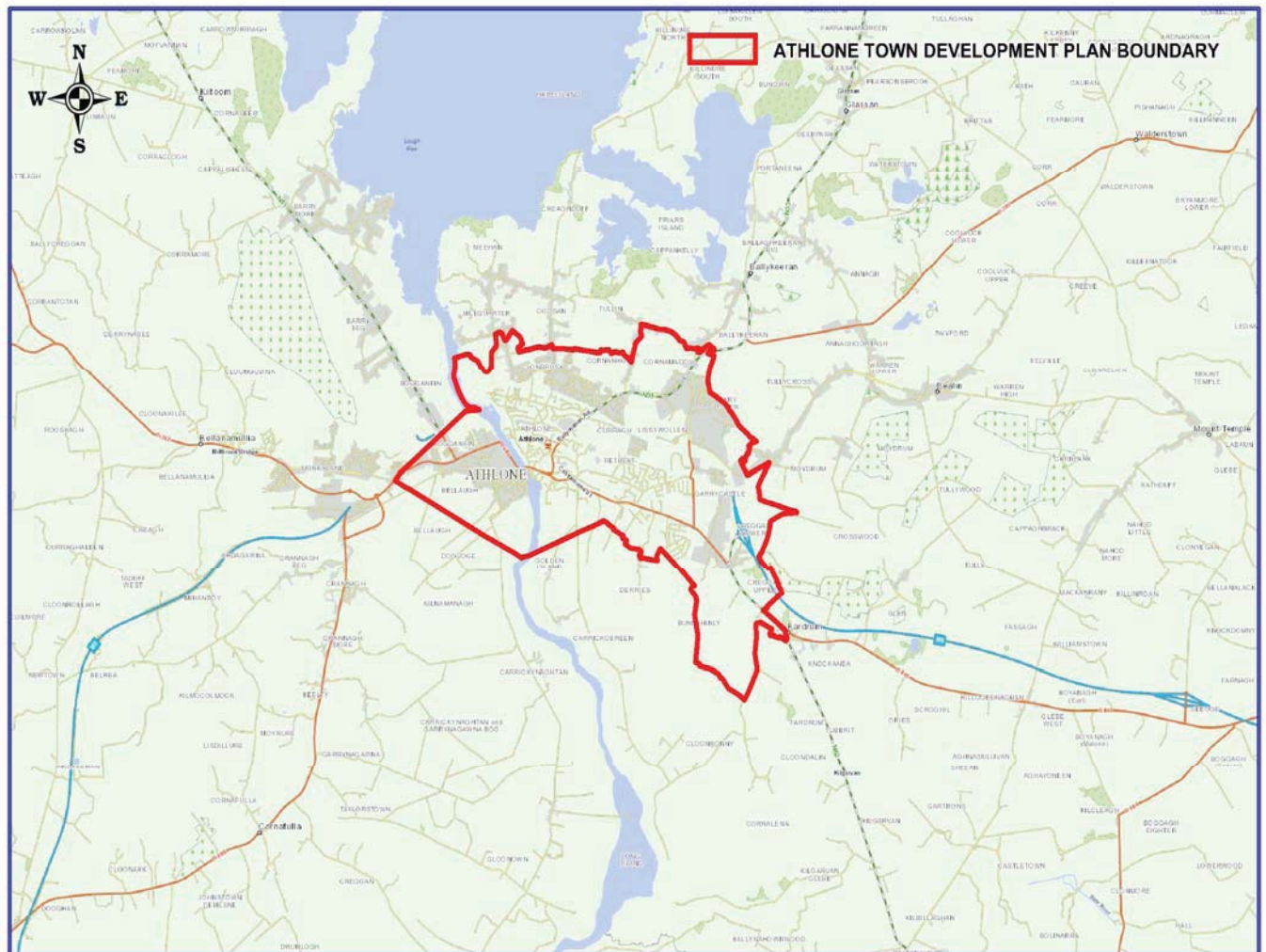


Figure 2.1 Extent of Athlone Town Development Plan lands

2.3 Planning Context

The Draft Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 sits within a hierarchy of national, regional and local plans. These include the National Spatial Strategy, Midland Regional Planning Guidelines, the Draft Westmeath County Development Plan 2014-2020 and other Local Area Plans. The plan must also take into account a range of EU and National legislation and Guidelines. Athlone, together with Mullingar and Tullamore, is designated as a Linked Gateway in the National Spatial Strategy and the Regional Planning Guidelines. The aim of the strategy and guidelines is to develop the gateway taking advantage of its strategic location and connections. In this regard, it is a goal of the Draft Plan to promote and facilitate the development of critical mass, employment, enterprise and economic activity in Athlone, commensurate with its status as a Linked Gateway Town, in accordance with the National Spatial Strategy designation for the town. Related goals seek to ensure that strategic development of the region works to conserve its biodiversity and habitats, and to integrate high quality built and physical environment with supporting physical and social infrastructure.

2.4 Spatial and Environmental Policy Hierarchy Context of the ATP 2014-2020

The SEA Directive requires an analysis of the Draft Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 relationship with other relevant plans and programmes (Annex 1a), and of the 'environmental protection objectives....which are relevant to the plan or programme and the way those objectives and any environmental considerations have been taken into account during its preparation' (Annex 1e). A list of the relevant policies, plans and Environmental Protection objectives was compiled and their requirements analysed in this report. The Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Draft Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 shall be informed and carried out in the context of the following Policies, Plans and Strategies as appropriate.

International

Water Framework Directive & associated Directives
 SEA Directive
 Floods Directive
 Groundwater Directive
 Habitats Directive
 Birds Directive
 Freshwater Fish Directive
 Shell fish Directive
 Drinking Water Directive
 Bathing Water Directive
 Environmental Impact Assessment Directive
 Seveso Directive
 Sewage Sludge Directive
 Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive
 Waste Framework Directive
 Nitrates Directive
 Soils Directive
 Air Quality Directives including Framework Directive
 National Emissions Ceiling Directive
 Environmental Noise Directive
 Climate Change Programme (ECCP II)
 IPPC Directive
 EU Reach Initiative
 European Landscape Convention
 UN Convention of Biological Diversity, 1992
 Kyoto Protocol
 Stockholm Convention
 Valetta Convention
 Ramsar Convention
 OSPAR Convention
 MARPOL Convention
 Granada Convention
 Gothenburg Strategy

National

National Climate Change Strategy 2007-2012

Delivering a Sustainable Energy Future for Ireland - The Energy Policy Framework 2007-2020

National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020

National Development Plan 2007-2013

Transport 21

Smarter Travel

Sustainable Development – A Strategy for Ireland (1997)

National Biodiversity Plan (2002)

Our Sustainable future – A Framework for Sustainable Development for Ireland (DoECLG, 2012)

Guidance by DoECLG including those issued under Section 28 of Planning and Development Act:
River Basin Management Planning, A practical Guide for Planning Authorities, June 2008

- Architectural Heritage Protection for Places of Worship
- Best Practice Urban Design Manual (May 09) - Part 1
- Best Practice Urban Design Manual (May 09) - Part 2
- Childcare Facilities Guidelines
- Design Standards for New Apartments
- Development Contribution Scheme for Planning Authorities - Circular PD 5/2007
- Development Contribution Scheme for Planning Authorities - Circular PD4/2003
- Development Management Guidelines -June 2007
- Development Plans Guidelines -June 2007
- Funfair Guidance
- Implementing Regional Planning Guidelines- Best Practice Guidance
- Implementation of new EPA Code of Practice on WasteWater Treatment and Disposal Systems Serving Single Houses - Circular PSSP1/10)
- Landscape and Landscape Assessment (doc, 84kb)
- Planning & Development(Amendment)(No2)Regulations 2011 - Circular PSSP 7/11
- Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2010 (Circular PPL 1/2010)
- Provision of Schools and the Planning System (2008)
- Quarries and Ancillary Activities
- Redevelopment of Certain Lands in the Dublin area primarily for Affordable Housing
- Retail Planning Guidelines (April 2012)
- Retail Design Manual (April 2012)
- Rural Housing Policies and Local Need Criteria in Development Plans - Circular Letter SP/5/08
- Section 261A of Planning & Development Act 2000 Guidelines (January 2012)
- Spatial Planning and National Roads Guidelines (Jan 2012)
- Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) (2004)
- Sustainable Rural Housing Development Guidelines (2005)
- Sustainable Residential Development in Urban Areas (May 2009)
- Taking in Charge of Housing Estates / Management Companies
- Taking in Charge of Residential Developments Circular Letter PD 1/08
- Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures (1996)
- The Planning System and Flood Risk Management - Guidelines for Local Authorities (Nov 09)
- The Planning System and Flood Risk Management - Technical Appendices (Nov 09)
- Tree Preservation Guidelines
- Waste Water Discharge (Authorisation) Regulations - Circular PD 7/09
- Wind Energy Development (2006)
- Appropriate Assessment of Plans & Projects in Ireland - Guidance for Planning Authorities 2009

- Guidance for Planning Authorities on Drainage and Reclamation of Wetlands - consultation draft 21/09/2011

Regional

Regional Planning Guidelines for the Midland Region 2010-2022
 Regional Planning Guidelines for the West Region 2010-2022
 Midlands Waste Management Plan 2005-2010 (current status unclear particularly with regard to SEA and AA).
 Shannon International River Basin Management Plan 2009-2015
 Catchment Flood Risk Assessment & Management Programme

Local

Draft Westmeath County Development Plan 2014-2020
 Roscommon County Development Plan 2008-2014
 Westmeath Retail Strategy 2007
 Westmeath Hedgerow Survey 2005
 Westmeath Esker Study 2006
 Westmeath Fen Study
 Athlone Waterfront Study 2011
 Irishtown Framework Plan 2009
 Loughanaskin Framework Plan
 Monksland/Belllannamullia Local Area Plan 2010-2016
 Creggan Local Area Plan 2010-2025
 Curragh Lissywollen LAP2006
 Cornamaddy LAP 2005
 Cornamagh LAP 2009
 Lissywollen South LAP 2008
 Westmeath Local Authorities Retail Strategy 2007
 Westmeath Rural Design Guidelines 2005 inc Addendum 2008
 Westmeath Groundwater Protection Schemes
 Heritage Plan for County Westmeath 2010

3 SEA METHODOLOGY

The requirements for SEA in Ireland are set out in the national legislation as follows:

- European Communities (Environmental Assessment of Certain Plans and Programmes) Regulations (S.I. No. 435 of 2004) as amended by European Communities (Environmental Assessment of Certain Plans and Programmes) (Amendment) Regulations (S.I. No. 200 of 2011).
- Planning and Development (Strategic Environmental Assessment) Regulations (S.I. No. 436 of 2004) as amended by the Planning and Development (Strategic Environmental Assessment) (Amendment) Regulations (S.I. No.201 of 2011).

This section highlights how the SEA has been undertaken, for the proposed Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020. The SEA methodology is based on legislative requirements and DoECLG/EPA guidance and will ensure compliance with the SEA Directive and associated legislation.

The key stages outlined in Figure 3.1 were identified and are discussed in the following sections.

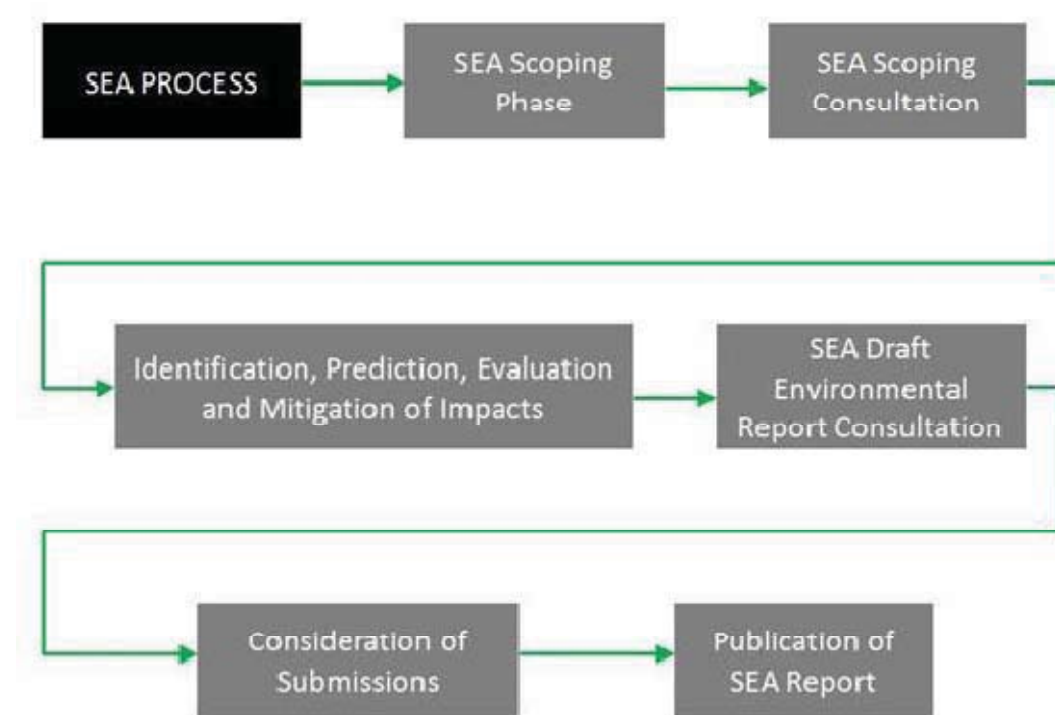


Figure 3.1 Key Stages of the SEA Process

The methodology employed for the purposes of the assessment is derived from the requirements of the SEA Directive as transposed into Irish law and the Guidelines for Regional Authorities and Planning Authorities on the implementation of the SEA Directive published by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government. This process involved scoping the environmental issues to be included in the report, undertaking a baseline study on the existing state of the environment within the study area, the consideration of alternatives, the environmental assessment of the preferred alternative, and devising measures to mitigate negative environmental effects. Finally, monitoring proposals were devised in the event that any significant environmental effects have not been anticipated.

3.1 Screening

Screening is the process for deciding whether a particular plan would warrant SEA. An SEA screening assessment was undertaken as part of this SEA process to determine if the proposed Athlone Town Development Plan required an SEA. It determined that a mandatory SEA was required given that the 2011 census recorded that 15,558 people were living within the legally defined town boundary of Athlone Town. In addition, the screening process determined that a number of the proposed policies which were being considered for the new development plan had the potential to cause significant environmental effects including policies related to water supply, wastewater treatment capacity, provision of access to SAC/SPA lands, rezoning of land, flood risk and archaeological protection. Consequently, it was recommended that a full SEA be carried out for the plan.

3.2 Scoping

Scoping the contents of the Environmental Report involved consulting with the prescribed Environmental Authorities and considering their recommendations on the contents of the Environmental Report.

A Scoping Document was issued to the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG) and the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR). A written submission was received on the scope of the SEA from the EPA.

In addition, the Councils' intention to carry out SEA as part of the review of the Development Plan was identified during the consultation process on the preparation of the new Development Plan. An Issues paper on both SEA and AA were prepared as part of the public consultation process. All submissions that were received relating to environmental issues and concerns informed the SEA process. The findings of the SEA were communicated to the plan making team on an ongoing basis from the outset in order to allow for their integration into the Development Plan, thus minimising the potential for significant negative environmental effects arising from implementation of the Plan.

3.3 Baseline Study

The SEA process is informed by the environmental baseline (i.e. the current state of the environment – flora and fauna, soil, water, cultural heritage etc.) to facilitate: the identification and evaluation of the likely significant environmental effects of implementing the Plan and the alternatives; and, the subsequent monitoring of the effects of the Plan as adopted. Data was collected to describe the environmental baseline and its likely evolution without implementation of the Plan. The information collated is primarily based on existing data available at the time of the report. Key sources include national and local statistical information including census data, reports from environmental and archaeological agencies, local studies prepared by or on behalf of the Local Authority, including reports which informed Framework Plans within the Plan area.

3.4 Environmental Criteria

The Environmental Assessment process ran in parallel to the development of the Draft Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020, preparation of the Draft Strategic Flood Risk Assessment and Draft Appropriate Assessment. The environmental assessment process was undertaken in accordance with best practice SEA principles and guidance. This included desk reviews of all of the available GIS data and recommendations for suitable mitigatory measures.

3.5 Consideration of Alternatives

The SEA Directive requires that reasonable alternatives (taking into account the objectives and the geographical scope of the plan or programme) are identified, described and evaluated for their likely significant effects on the environment. Taking into account the objectives and the geographical scope of the Plan, alternatives were formulated as follows:

Alternative A: Do Nothing Scenario

Alternative B: Promote the Gateway Status of the Town

Alternative C: Greenfield expansion at outer periphery

Alternative D: Consolidation of urban core and plan led expansion of inner edge and environs

These alternatives are considered in more detail in Section 7 of the Report.

3.6 Environmental Assessment of the Plan

The main objective of this report is to assess the likely significant environmental impacts on implementation of the Draft Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020. This process involves establishing the effects of the plan on the existing agricultural environment in terms of bio-diversity, population, human health, flora and fauna, soil, water, air, climatic factors, material assets, cultural heritage including architectural and archaeological, landscape, and the interrelationship between these factors. These assessments are presented as a series of tables that establish the compatibility of the Draft Plan with environmental criteria formulated for the area.

3.7 Difficulties Encountered

The SEA Guidelines state that the SEA process “does not require major new research”. As such, the Environmental Report was prepared and informed by available data sources and published reports. Areas where there was insufficient data available or where the level of detail is not sufficient for the purpose of detailed or quantifiable assessment are as follows:

- Preliminary Flood Risk Assessment data only available
- Limited transportation analysis and data available
- Detailed human health data unavailable
- 2011 POWCAR data unavailable at time of writing
- Detailed Commercial and retail activity levels in town centre area unavailable (available retail data relates to 2007)

Other constraints included:

Limited resources and time were available for carrying out the SEA, including GIS mapping.

4 ATHLONE CURRENT STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

This section of the report describes the existing state of the environment within the Draft Athlone Town Development Plan area. The purpose of this description is to establish the broad environmental context from which environmental criteria can be assessed. The environmental baseline as described is in line with the legislative requirements, encompassing the following components – biodiversity (flora and fauna), population & human health, soil & geology, water, air and climatic factors, material assets, cultural heritage, landscape and the interrelationship between these components. Thereafter significant environmental issues associated with the above factors are discussed followed by an analysis of the evolution of each factor in the absence of a Development Plan.

4.1 Introduction

Athlone is located on the southern shore of Lough Ree. The town was regarded as the principal crossing point on the Shannon and developed as an Anglo-Norman settlement around a castle built for King John in 1210. The town has a largely waterlogged hinterland of glacial and later deposits resting on a bedrock of carboniferous limestone. The broad and slow-moving River Shannon dissects Athlone and is flanked by an extensive floodplain or callows which emerge to dominate the landscape to the north and south of the town, with numerous peat bogs to the east and west. The surrounding flat landscape is punctuated by esker ridges of sand and gravel which run east west across the countryside, before terminating the town close to the Shannon Crossing.

4.2 Biodiversity (Flora & Fauna)

Biodiversity can be defined as the variability among living organisms including terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems. It includes the genetic, organism, community, and ecosystem level; and loss of biodiversity reduces an ecosystem's ability to recover from natural or human impacts. Areas of value have been afforded protection under the Habitats and Birds Directives. In addition to the protected sites referred to, biodiversity also includes species, habitats and ecosystems, which are not designated, such as aquatic species in the Shannon and grasslands, eskers, trees and hedges habitats. The value of these habitats includes amenity and the provision of ecological corridors, allowing movement of wildlife through the area. The natural heritage and biodiversity of Athlone provides a valued physical, social and economic asset for those living and visiting the area and is integral to the image of the town.

Details of Athlone's natural heritage in terms of biodiversity, flora and fauna in Section 4.2.1 by habitat type.

4.2.1 Protected habitats / Natura 2000 sites

There are a total of 18 Natura 2000 sites affecting the Athlone Town Development Plan area. These consist of four sites within the plan area, one site immediately adjoining the plan area and 13 sites contained within a 15km inclusion zone in surrounding counties. These include 4 Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and 14 Special Areas of Conservation (SACs).

SAC's in and within 15km of Athlone

Site Code	Site Name	Distance from Draft ATP boundary	Site specific plans by the competent authority (NPWS)
000216	River Shannon Callows	0 km	Generic Conservation Objectives
000575	Ferbane Bog	12.02km	Conservation Plan 2005-2010 Generic Conservation Objectives
000576	Fin Lough (Offaly)	9.03km	Conservation Plan 2006-2011 Generic Conservation Objectives
000580	Mongan Bog	7.38km	Conservation Plan 2005-2010 Generic Conservation Objectives
000581	Moyclare Bog	13.08km	Generic Conservation Objectives
000610	Lough Croan Turlough	14.3km	Generic Conservation Objectives
000611	Lough Funshinagh	10.6km	Generic Conservation Objectives
001625	Castlesampson Esker	6.33km	Generic Conservation Objectives
001776	Pilgrim's Road Esker	6.93km	Generic Conservation Objectives
002336	Carn Park Bog	2.3km	Generic Conservation Objectives
002337	Crosswood Bog	0 km	Generic Conservation Objectives
002339	Ballynamona Bog and Corkip Lough	7.12km	Generic Conservation Objectives
000440	Lough Ree	0 km	Generic Conservation Objectives

SPA's in and within 15km of Athlone

Sitecode	Site Name	Site specific plans by the competent Authority (NPWS)
004017	Mongan Bog SPA	No data available
004064	Lough Ree SPA	Generic Conservation Objectives
004096	Middle Shannon Callows SPA	Generic Conservation Objectives
004139	Lough Croan Turlough SPA	Generic Conservation Objectives

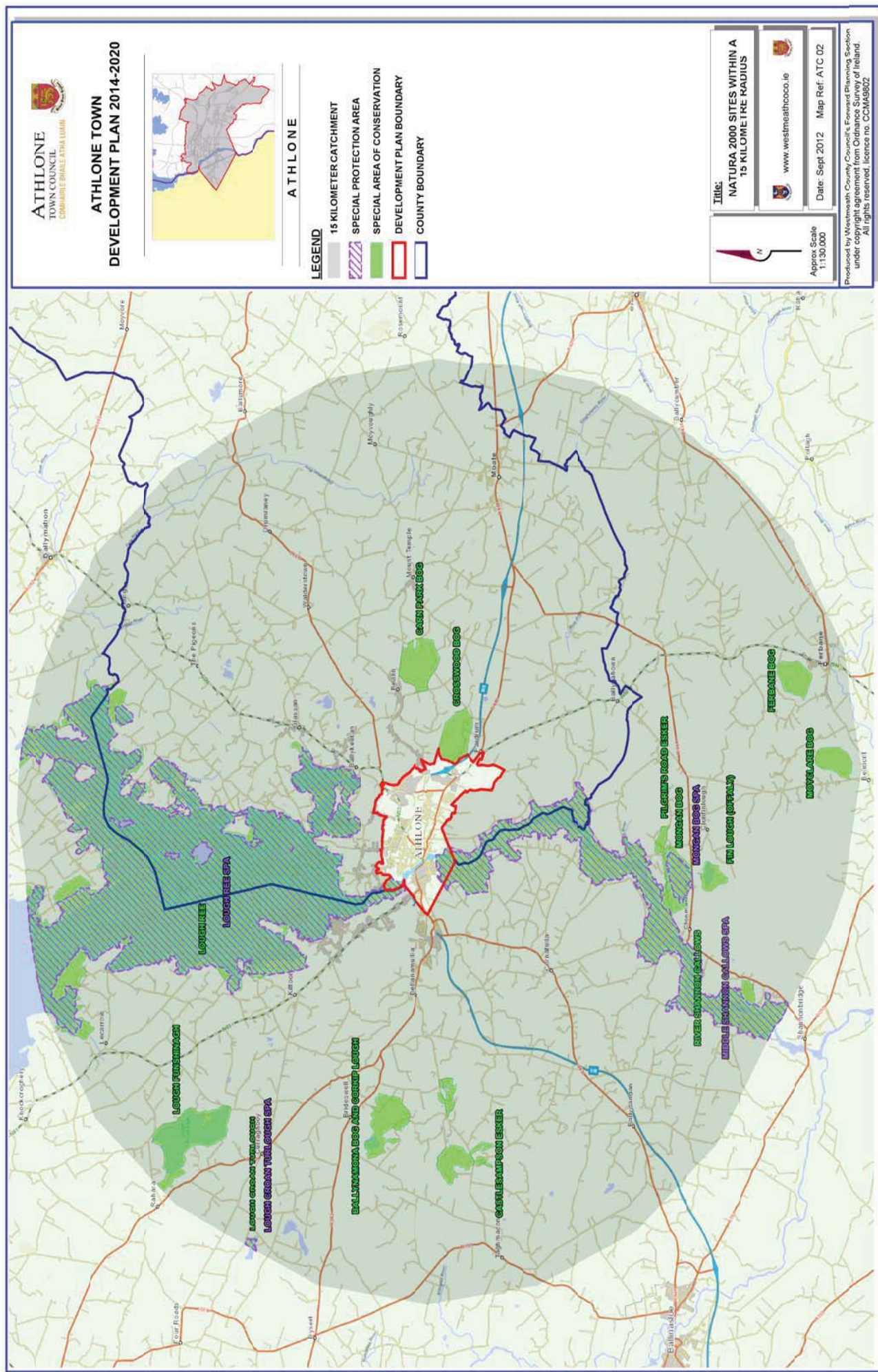


Figure 4.1 Natura 2000 sites in and within 15km of Athlone Town Boundary

4.2.2 Adjacent Natura 2000 sites

The most important ecologically sensitive sites within and surrounding the Draft Athlone Town Development Plan area are as follows.

Crosswood Bog - Code (002337)

Crosswood Bog is a (c)SAC selected for active raised bog and degraded raised bog, habitats that are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. Active raised bog comprises areas of high bog that are wet and actively peat-forming, where the percentage cover of bog mosses (*Sphagnum* spp.) is high, and where some or all of the following features occur: hummocks, pools, wet flats, *Sphagnum* lawns, flushes and soaks. Degraded raised bog corresponds to those areas of high bog whose hydrology has been adversely affected by peat cutting, drainage and other land use activities, but which are capable of regeneration. The site consists of a quaking bog, with a well-developed sequence of pools, hollows and hummocks, and a flush supporting woodland. Cutover occurs on all margins of the bog. Current land use on the site consists of peat-cutting around the edge of the high bog; it is more intensively cut on the western and southern margins. While the northern margin has drains that extend into the intact bog it is relatively protected from development due to the proximity to the Dublin – Galway railway line along the northern boundary. Forestry is found to the south of the site on areas of cutover bog. Some fields on old cutover are used for pasture and are presently undergoing further reclamation.

River Shannon Callows SAC – Code (000216)

The River Shannon Callows which are located approximately 1.2Km from the Plan area, are designated for the presence of lowland hay meadows, *Molinia* meadows on calcareous, peaty or clayey-silt-laden soils, alluvial forests with *Alnus glutinosa* and *Fraxinus excelsior* and limestone pavements. It is also designated for the presence of otter (*Lutra lutra*). The Shannon Callows has by far the largest area of lowland semi-natural grassland and associated aquatic habitats in Ireland and one in which there is least disturbance of natural wetland processes. Botanically, it is extremely diverse with two legally protected species of plants and many scarce species. The site is seasonally flooded, along and beside the river between the towns of Athlone and Portumna. The callows begin immediately south of Athlone. Important areas of callows within the immediate vicinity of Athlone occur at Big Meadow, Golden Island, Carrickynachtan, Creggan and Long island.

Lough Ree

Lough Ree is also designated SAC status; code 000440 and the boundary of the designated site extends into Athlone to the north of the town. Lough Ree and its adjacent habitats are of major ecological significance. Some of the woodlands around the lake are of excellent quality and include some of the best examples of this habitat in Ireland and are a stronghold of the Garden Warbler (74 territories in 1997), a bird species mainly confined to the Shannon Lakes in Ireland. The lake itself is an excellent example of a mesotrophic to moderate-eutrophic system, supporting a rare fish species and a good diversity of breeding and wintering birds. There is a population of Otters around the lake. This species is listed in the Red Data Book as being threatened in Europe and is protected under Annex II of the European Habitats Directive.

NHA's

There are two proposed NHA's within the Athlone Development Plan area, namely River Shannon Callows and Lough Ree.

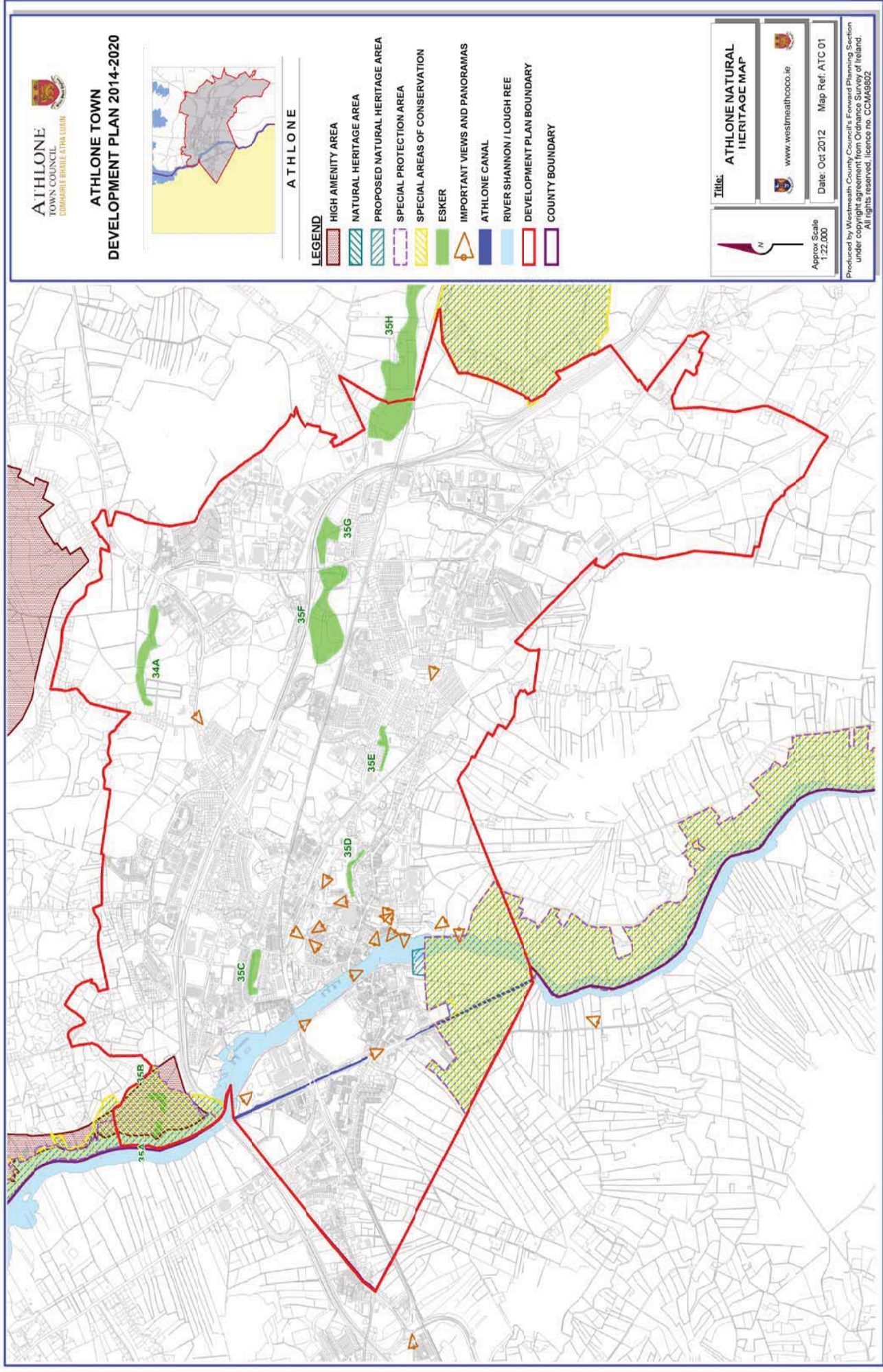


Figure 4.2 Natural Heritage Features within Athlone Town Plan Area

4.2.3 Grassland & Marsh

The Shannon Callows, on the floodplain of the River Shannon south of Athlone town, is a unique wetland resource in the Irish Midlands of international importance and has been afforded EU designations of SAC and SPA in this regard. In the winter months, as the river swells with the winter rains, it floods the grassland alongside. This large expanse of shallow water welcomes thousands of wintering waterfowl and waders every year, including Whooper Swan, Bewick's Swan, Wigeon, Golden Plover, Lapwing and Black-tailed Godwit. When the floodwaters recede, in summer, they reveal lush, botanically-rich meadows which are either cut for hay or grazed by cattle. The Corncrake, now globally endangered, has been recorded here, and other rare birds may also breed here, such as Shoveler and Quail. Waders such as Curlew, Redshank, Snipe and Lapwing are regular breeders. Hen Harrier and Merlin may be seen occasionally, hunting during the breeding season. The Callows extend through Westmeath, Offaly, Galway and Roscommon and have been designated as a Special Area of Conservation. The continuation of this habitat is dependent on seasonal flooding, low intensity agriculture and the cutting of hay over silage production.

4.2.4 Esker woodland habitat

The relationship of the Shannon and the local esker system has contributed to and dictated Athlone's position and its development, and resulted in defining the town's character and distinctiveness. There are areas of undisturbed esker in the town that remain undeveloped, in part due to access constraints. The undisturbed eskers have facilitated flora growth and habitat creation that may not typically be found elsewhere in the town or county. The esker network in the town has amenity, heritage and cultural value.

The Councils undertook an Esker Survey of the town which identified the nature, extent and condition of eskers and the conservation value of each of those Esker Systems. Athlone Town contains seven segments of an overall extensive esker system that runs from the River Shannon to Mount Temple and Moate. These esker segments offer spectacular views over the town and provide important habitats for esker biodiversity.

Figure 4.3 List of Esker Sites within Athlone Town Development Plan Area

Site Code	Site Name
34a	Cornamaddy Low hill
35a	River Shannon Part of SAC
35b	River Shannon Part of SAC
35c	Beside Fire Station Dry grassland and scrub
35d	St. Mary's Place Dry grassland and scrub
35e	Aghacocora Dry Calcareous Grassland, Scrub, semi natural woodland
35f	Kilnafadoge Low hills
35g	Kilnafadoge Low Hills

4.2.5 Trees & Hedgerows

Athlone contains many large trees and groups of trees of considerable heritage value, which enhance the urban fabric of the town, e.g. mature tree stand along the waterfront in Burgess Park. Notwithstanding, there is only one Tree Preservation Order in the town. Trees to the south of the N55 at Curragh, Athlone are subject to a Tree Preservation Order. A high proportion of hedgerows in the Athlone area are classed as 'species rich hedges' with some 'species poor hawthorn hedges'.

A serious side effect of development, especially of a scale to allow urban expansion, is the removal of hedgerows and hence, the removal of valuable wildlife habitats. Hedgerows are under threat both qualitatively and quantitatively. Townland boundary hedges and species rich hedges are particularly at risk. The National Biodiversity Plan states, “for the future, the overall goal should be no net loss of the hedgerow resource.

4.2.6 Ecological Networks

Article 10 of the Habitats Directive recognises the importance of ecological networks as corridors and stepping stones for wildlife, including for migration, dispersal and genetic exchange of species of flora and fauna. The Directive requires that ecological connectivity and areas of ecological value outside the Natura 2000 network of designated ecological sites are maintained and it recognises the need for the management of these areas through land use planning and development policies. Ecological networks are important in connecting areas of local biodiversity with each other and with nearby designated sites so as to prevent islands of habitat from being isolated entities. Within and surrounding Athlone town, the ecological networks are made up of components including the Shannon and its callows, the Canal, the AI and Clonbonny Rivers, the railway lines, Burgess Park and gardens within and surrounding the Plan area and lands used for agriculture. Parks and open spaces provide for a range of habitats for various species within the Plan area and facilitate linkages to the surrounding countryside for flora and fauna.

4.2.7 Other features of Natural Heritage

Mushroom Stones are “water worn limestone blocks, eroded up to a certain height by the solvent action of former lake water”. An example of a mushroom stone is located near Athlone at Loughandonning and this shows “the level at which Lough Ree once stood, 10 to 15 feet higher than its present summer level”. This example, along with others in the region, show that the lake waters once spread over a large area, “probably over the whole of that now occupied by bog”. Mushroom Stones are an important feature of geological and landscape heritage. They are important geomorphological features because of the information they contain about past landscapes and landscape change. However despite this they enjoy no formal protection of their own.

4.2.8 Identification of potential environmental issues relating to Natural Heritage

- With regard to Crosswood Bog, damaging activities on site include drainage throughout the site (both old and recent) and extensive burning of the high bog. These are activities that have resulted in loss of habitat and damage to the hydrological status of the site, and pose a continuing threat to its viability.
- Potential threats to the Shannon Callows arise through alterations in the hydrology of the system, such as drainage, flood relief works, engineering works, or from diffuse or point sources pollution from agriculture and municipal discharge. The River Shannon is used extensively for recreation, which can result in disturbance to wildlife or habitat degradation. Alterations to existing habitat management can result in habitat loss, degradation or fragmentation. Changes in management can include fertilizing botanically-rich fields, the use of herbicides, reversion of hay meadow to pasture, neglect of pasture and hay meadow. The maintenance of generally high water levels in winter and spring benefits all aspects of the flora and fauna, but in this regard, summer flooding is a threat to breeding birds, and may cause neglect of farming. To maintain the diversity of waterfowl and wetland plants in the Callows, it is essential that annual winter and spring flooding is maintained. Apart from damage posed by over fertilising and over stocking, the biggest threat to the wet meadows is drainage. The floodplain is under pressure from development where it is directly adjacent to existing built form.

- According to the NPWS site synopsis, the main threat to the aquatic life in Lough Ree comes from artificial enrichment of the waters by agricultural and domestic waste, and also by peat silt in suspension which is increasingly limiting the light penetration, thus restricting aquatic flora to shallower waters.
- Agricultural and domestic development in the rural environs of Athlone present an ongoing challenge to the retention of hedgerows. Hedgerows are under threat both qualitatively and quantitatively. Townland boundary hedges and species rich hedges are particularly at risk.
- Exploitation of eskers for development of housing and agricultural development present significant environmental issues.
- Unrestrained development can have a direct impact on water dependent and rare habitats. Abstractions for potable water can result in a direct impact on rivers and lakes and their associated flora and fauna and on groundwater dependent habitats. The water quality status of the River Shannon in 2011 was poor and there is concern with regard to meeting legislative water quality objectives under the Water Framework Directive.
- Development of the Shannon floodplain can also lead to habitat loss.

Increased recreational pressure on River Shannon and Lough Ree.

- Invasive non-native plant and animal species are one of the greatest threats to biodiversity. Invasive alien species negatively impact biodiversity through competition, predation, habitat alteration and introduction of parasites or pathogens that pose a risk to the genetic integrity of native species.

4.2.9 Evolution of Biodiversity and Flora and Fauna in the absence of a Development Plan

In the absence of a Development Plan for Athlone, it is likely that developments near ecologically important sites may become more widespread due to the absence of strategic planning and development management. This may be more of an issue for areas outside designated sites such as NHAs, SACs and SPAs which are protected by legislation. Development along or adjacent to the banks of rivers, most notably along the Shannon could adversely impact upon the ecology of existing habitats. Pollution of water bodies as a result of any future development along river catchments would be likely to adversely impact aquatic biodiversity and flora and fauna. Beneficial effects upon biodiversity and flora and fauna which would be likely to arise out of the specific policies and objectives included in the Athlone Development Plan would be unlikely to be achieved in the absence of the Plan, eg policies to control invasive species or to protect riparian areas of water courses and rivers. The Draft Plan also includes a list of trees of merit in the town worthy of protection. A Development Plan provides an opportunity to integrate the ecological protection measures required by the Habitats Directive with the planning or development management of vulnerable areas, which might not be present in the absence of a Development Plan.

4.3 Population & Human Health

Athlone has been through a period of significant change in recent decades with a population increase of almost 47% over the twenty year period from 1991 to 2011. According to the 2011 census, there were 20,153 people living in the greater Athlone area, with 15,558 living within the legally defined town boundary and the remaining 4,595 comprised of people living in the town environs including parts of the town within the jurisdiction of Roscommon County Council.

Athlone comprises of 18.1% of the county's population. The town's population comprised of 7,722 males and 7,836 females in 2011.

The town and its environs have increased in population by 14.9% since the previous census in 2006. In actual terms, there was an increase of 1,211 people within the legal defined Athlone town boundary and 1,398 in the town environs. Most notably the largest increase in population occurred in the ED of Moydrum (Part Urban), which grew by 38% between 2006 and 2011.

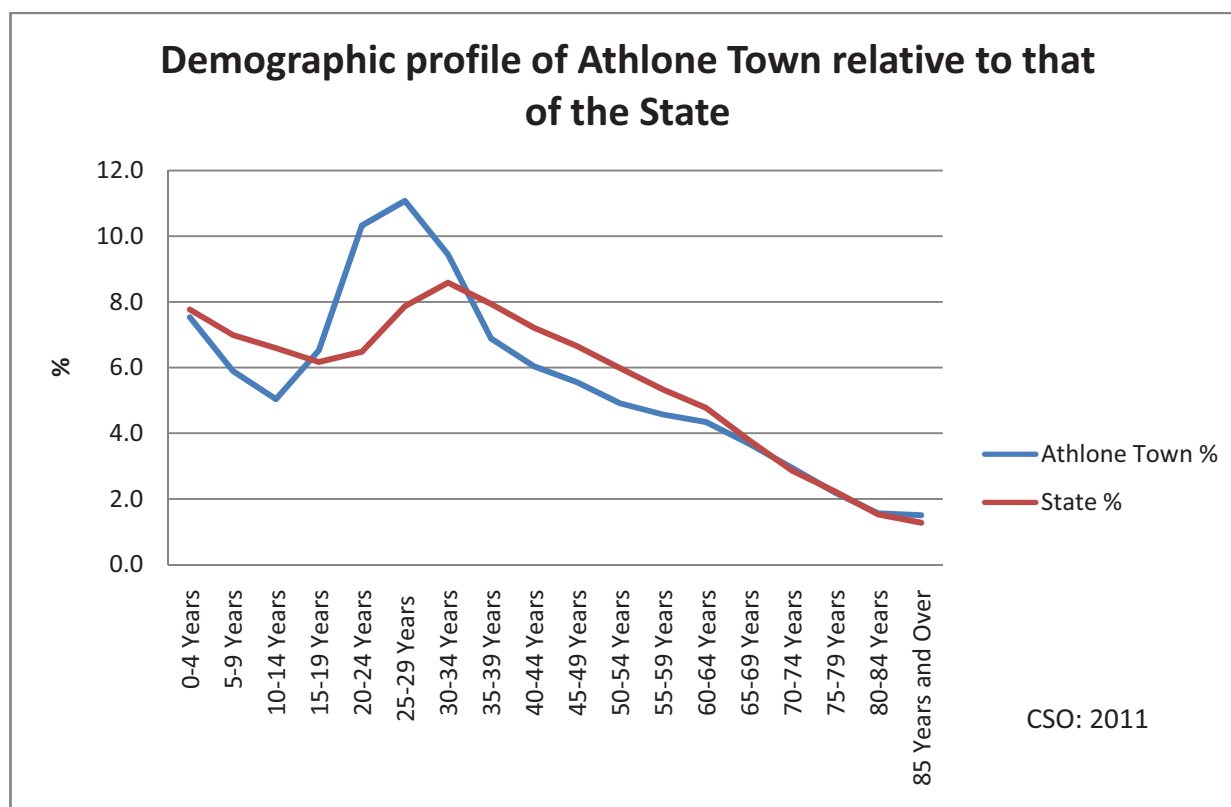


Figure 4.4 Demographic profile of Athlone Town relative to the state

Figure 4.4 indicates the demographic profile of Athlone. According to the 2011 census, the largest component of the population comprises people in the 20-24 and 25-29 age cohorts, equating to 10.3% and 11.1% of the towns' population. This compares to 6.5% and 7.9% for the corresponding age group for the state. This is most likely to be indicative of the student population and number of young professionals working in the town. Dependency groups within the town are also increasing in numbers. Athlone has a smaller proportion of children in both the 5-9 and the 10-14 age cohorts compared to the state average.

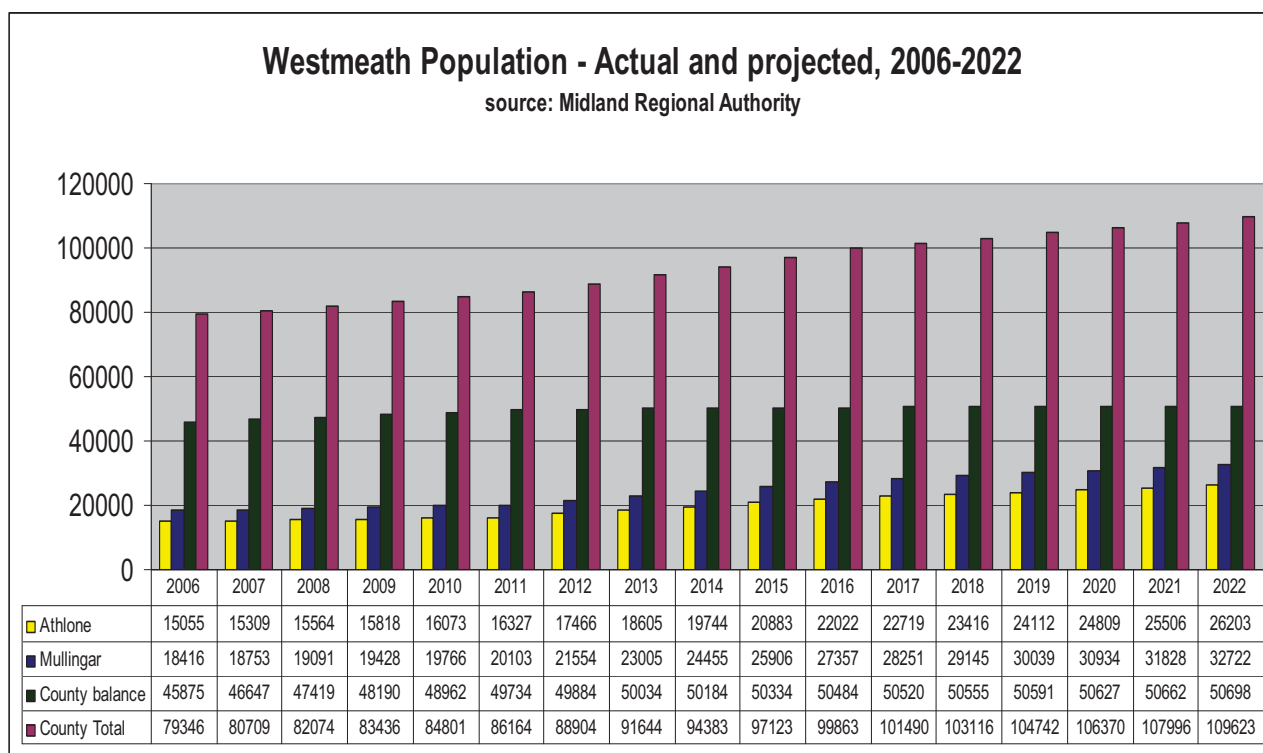


Figure 4.5 Population Targets prescribed by the Midland Regional Planning Authority, Actual and Projected 2006-2022

The 2010 – 2022 Midlands Regional Planning Guidelines (RPG's) have set target populations for Athlone. The RPGs state that the population target figures shall be reviewed in the 2016 RPG review and may be revised following the 2011 census. The population target for Athlone for 2016 is 22,022 and 26,203 by 2022. Much of the projected growth has been provided for in Local Area Plans in the Town.

Local Area Plans

A number of Local Area Plans have been completed for Athlone, under the spatial planning framework established by the Athlone Town Development Plan 2008-2014 as follows:

Cornamagh LAP -

- Cornamaddy LAP makes provision for residential development for a population of between 2,930 and 5,003 people.

Curragh-Lissywollen LAP

- Will accommodate a potential population of between 1,280 and 1,850 people.

Lissywollen South LAP

- The indicative development capacity for this area is between 1,000 and 1,500 residential units.

4.3.1 Human Health

Human Health Issues in Athlone are generally concerned with the quality of drinking water and air quality and also to the quality of life of Athlone's citizens, which can be affected by factors such as commuting patterns and the provision for recreation and amenity. The provision of a range of services and facilities including education, healthcare, housing, childcare and access to entertainment and amenity facilities can affect the quality of life in an area and the attractiveness of that area for people to live and work. The Athlone area is fortunate in that it has a variety of settlements and housing types, various employment sectors, excellent transport links, good air quality and water quality and access to green space.

According to the census 2011, the population of Athlone Town, i.e. the legal defined town boundary is 15,558 and the number of existing households in the town is 7,616. In addition, the census recorded 15.8% of the 7,616 houses in Athlone town were vacant on census night, which would account for 1,210 dwellings.

4.3.2 Identification of potential environmental issues relating to Population & Human Health

- The most significant issues pertaining to SEA and population relate to environmental carrying capacity impacts on resources such as water supply and waste water disposal.
- The increase in the population of Athlone has also had the effect of placing many of the social assets of the town under significant pressure, including education, healthcare and childcare facilities.
- 2011 Census data indicates a general trend that commuting to work by car is increasing, particularly from lower density suburban areas and rural areas to the town. This has a negative effect on quality of life.
- Major changes have taken place to the housing market given the economic downturn and trends such as a reduction in housing completions and rising vacancy rates are evident.
- Given the economic uncertainty which is prevailing during the preparation of the Athlone Plan, it is difficult to forecast development trends over the plan period.

4.3.3 Evolution of Population & Human Health in the absence of a Development Plan

In the absence of a Development Plan for the area, there would be no integrated framework for the provision of infrastructure and services to serve existing and future development in Athlone. A lack of controlled development would put pressure on adequate service provisions and infrastructural facilities, thus affecting the natural environment in which the population lives leading to human health and quality of life issues.

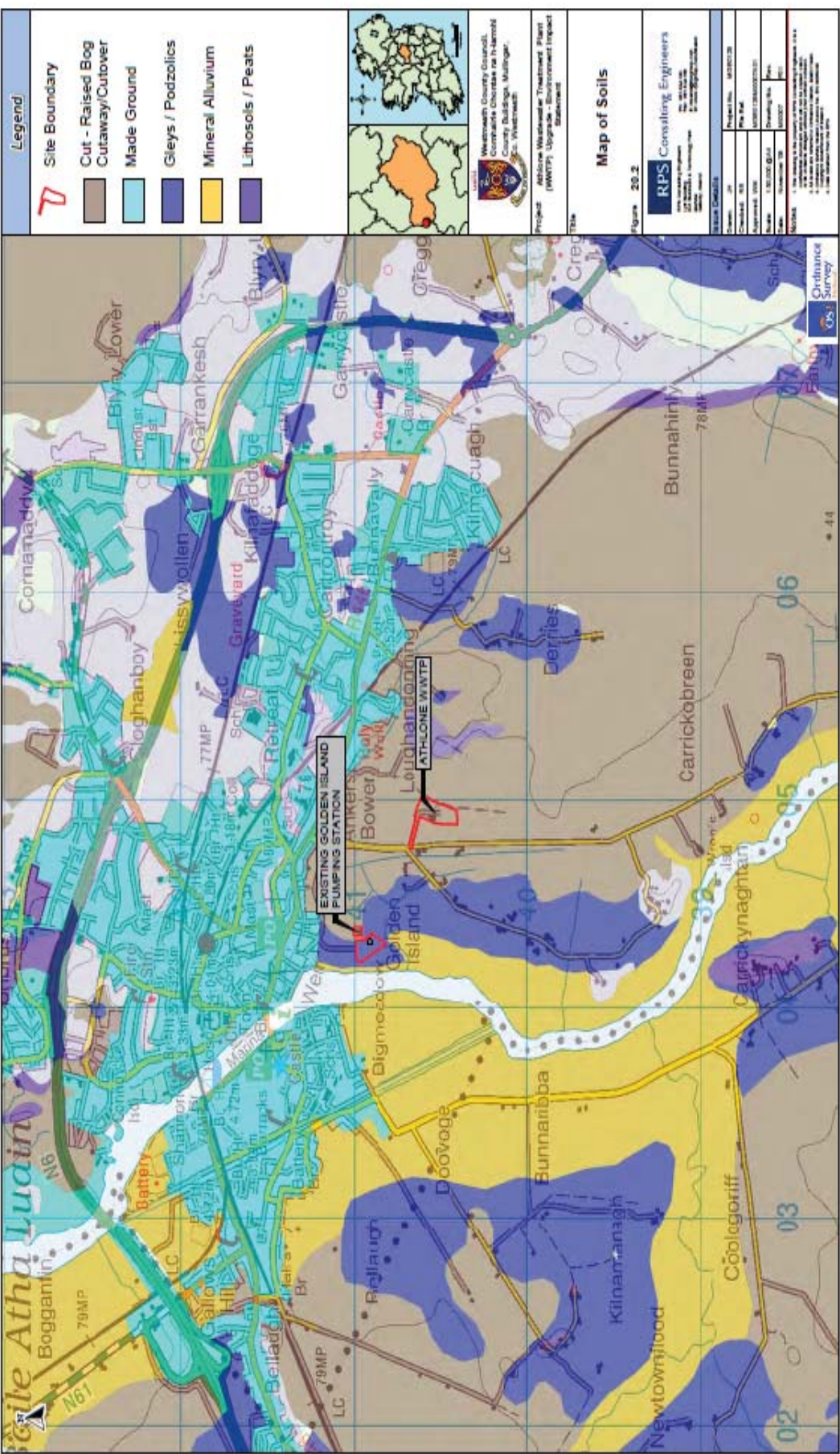


Figure 4.6 Soil Map of Athlone – Source: Athlone Wastewater Treatment Plant Upgrade EIS

4.4 Soils & Geology

According to the above Teagasc Soils and Subsoils map (fig. 4.6), the land cover in Athlone is mainly man made due to the built up nature of the area, although there are some gleys/podzolics principally to the south of the town and within the Creggan area. Mineral alluvium soils exist along the floodplain of the River Shannon. These soils can be impacted upon by water quality and contamination of soils can impact upon water quality. The Geological Survey of Ireland (GSI) describes the bedrock of Athlone as Carboniferous Walsortian Limestone comprising of massive unbedded limestones that are sometimes dolomitised. There is an area of lucan formation along the eastern boundary of the plan area. A major feature of geological interest existing in the Plan area is eskers. Eskers were created from sands and gravels which were laid down in rivers of meltwater that covered much of Ireland at the end of the Ice Age about ten thousand years ago. Eskers support their own unique flora and fauna and also have archaeological significance. A number of eskers run across the middle of the plan area.

4.4.1 Identification of potential environmental issues relating to Soil & Geology

- Eroded soil washed into rivers has the potential to increase nutrient content leading to alteration of surface water nutrient balances which can further lead to the eutrophication of rivers and lakes. If contaminated soils are eroded and transported to watercourses, aquatic plants and animals can be severely damaged.
- Soil has the potential to be polluted and contaminated as a result of pollution from development which is not serviced by appropriate waste water infrastructure and from agricultural sources.

4.4.2 Evolution of Soils & Geology in the absence of a Development Plan

In the absence of a Development Plan for Athlone, the environmental quality of soil and geology will likely to be diminished.

4.5 Water Resources

4.5.1 Water Supply

The current demand for water in Athlone is approx. 9 million litres per day (MLD), which is 2 million gallons per day (MGD) and is sourced from the River Shannon. The capacity of the Athlone water treatment plant is approx. 13.6MLD (3MGD), so current demand is being met.

4.5.2 Surface Water

The plan area is within the River Shannon catchment. The main threat to water quality in the Shannon arises from over-enrichment from point (such as waste water treatment plants) and diffuse sources such as agriculture and urban land uses. Surface water quality within the plan area is good.

4.5.3 Groundwater

The Council has not developed a formal Groundwater Protection Plan, but has the necessary tools and information to develop such a plan; in particular, Groundwater Vulnerability Maps have been prepared for the town, which can be used to compile a Groundwater Protection Plan, focussing on resource protection rather than just source protection.

4.5.4 Flooding

There is a history of flood events associated with the River Shannon. The Shannon flood event in November 2009, is the most recent flood event affecting Athlone town. A paper by Cunnane & Cawley delivered at the Irish National Hydrology Conference in Athlone on 16th November 2010, identified the November 2009 flood event as representing the historic maximum flood levels in the River Shannon for the area between Lough Allen and Lough Derg. On 25th November 2009, the level

on the River Shannon peaked at Athlone providing the highest level on record. The estimated return period was in excess of 150yrs.

The other source of flooding in Athlone is from the AI River. A number of studies have been commissioned by the Council with regard to the management of the AI River as follows:

- “Westmeath County Council AI River Improvement Preliminary Report” by PH McCarthy & Partners, July 2002.
- “Westmeath County Council Golden Island Action Area Report on Development Constraints” by PH McCarthy & Partners, July 2002.
- Westmeath County Council Athlone Main Drainage – Stage 3 AI River Improvements Scheme Report” by Jennings O’Donovan & Partners & J.B. Barry & Partners Ltd.

These reports highlight the need to incorporate the use of Suds (Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems) into any approach to managing the AI River and recommend diversion of part of the river channel. The preferred approach for mitigating against the risk of flooding from AI River is the creation of an overflow supply channel.

Surface Water Network Projects at AI River, Roslevin Lawns and Retreat Road were identified under the Athlone Sewerage Improvement Scheme to alleviate surface water run-off and potential flooding.

The Draft Athlone Town Development Plan has been subject to a Strategic Flood Risk Assessment.

4.5.5 Identification of potential environmental issues relating to Water Resources

There are a range of existing pressures on the water resources in Athlone. In general these pressures apply directly to quality, quantity and supply and demand of water resources with indirect pressure on other environmental features.

4.6 Air & Climatic Factors

Emissions to air can arise from waste management and this can be either due to direct emissions (landfill, thermal treatment, composting, anaerobic digestion) or indirect emissions (transports associated with waste collection or disposal). Types of emissions include landfill gas (methane, carbon dioxide), dust (including bioaerosols from composting), odour and noise. There are no current EPA licenced/ IPPC or Waste facilities within the plan area. There are no quarries operating in the study area. In addition, there are no Seveso sites within the plan area. The Elan site was previously listed as a Seveso site in 2009 and 2010. However, Alkermes (formerly Elan) which is located within Co. Roscommon was not listed in the HSA website as a Notified Seveso Establishment in 2011.

Of Ireland’s four air quality zones, Athlone Town is predominantly situated within Zone C. Lands to the east and south of Athlone Town are best represented by Zone D (rural). EPA air quality monitoring in Athlone in 2003 indicates that the town experienced good air quality. Currently there are no significant concerns with regard to air quality in the town. The most significant contribution to greenhouse gases in Athlone is transportation. There are likely to be slightly elevated levels of vehicle emissions within the town centre and along the M6/N6.

The existing climate for Athlone corresponds with the general climatic conditions for the whole country. Consequently, the region does not suffer from extremes of temperature. Climate change refers to any change in climate over time, whether due to natural variability or as a result of human activity. The release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere as a result of human activities adds

to natural climate variability by increasing the naturally occurring greenhouse effect. Climate change is not limited to changes in temperatures or weather - it can also mean changes in the occurrence of extreme and unstable weather conditions, storms and floods and droughts.

4.6.1 Identification of potential environmental issues relating to Air/Climatic Factors

- Unsustainable travel patterns within and out of Athlone are likely to be the most significant environmental issue with regard to the Town Development Plan.
- Increased frequency of extreme weather events have the potential to increase the frequency and extent of flooding and erosion in the town, thus impacting upon a wide range of eco-systems and the local economy.

4.6.2 Evolution of Air and Climatic Factors in the absence of a Development Plan

In the absence of a Development Plan for Athlone, the realisation of objectives relating to energy efficiency, promotion of public transport including provision of walking and cycle infrastructure would not materialise. In addition, the new Town Development Plan includes policies in relation to areas at risk of flooding and a Strategic Flood Risk Assessment have been incorporated into the plan. The Development Plan provides an opportunity to regenerate Opportunity Sites within the town which are close to existing and proposed high quality public transport linkages, in particular the Loughanaskin site. In the absence of a Development Plan, regeneration would be unlikely to be achieved and an opportunity to prevent the generation of future transport related greenhouse gas emissions would be missed. The new Town Plan also includes measures to protect, mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

4.7 Material Assets

The term 'Material Assets' refers to all infrastructure and local services including, transportation, water supply, waste-water treatment and discharge, waste management services, electricity supply, telecommunications etc. The current usage of the land within the development plan area is predominantly urban fabric, industrial developments and undeveloped grassland.

4.7.1 Water Supply

As outlined previously in Section 4.5.1 the water treatment plant in Athlone abstracts approximately 500m³/hr, or 3 million gallons per day (MGD) which is distributed to the four main reservoirs at Annagh, Ardnaglug, Battery Heights and Coosan.

4.7.2 Wastewater Treatment

The Athlone Wastewater Treatment Plant, which is located in the townlands of Loughandonning and Ankers Bower, serves the town and has a design capacity of 30,000 population equivalent. The loading of the plant as of 2009-2010 was 23,000 pe. The organic loading at the WWTP in 2011 was approximately 34,694 p.e. Treated effluent is discharged into the River Shannon which has a water quality status as moderate. The current exceeding organic capacity of the WWTP is 2,632 p.e.

4.7.3 Transport Infrastructure

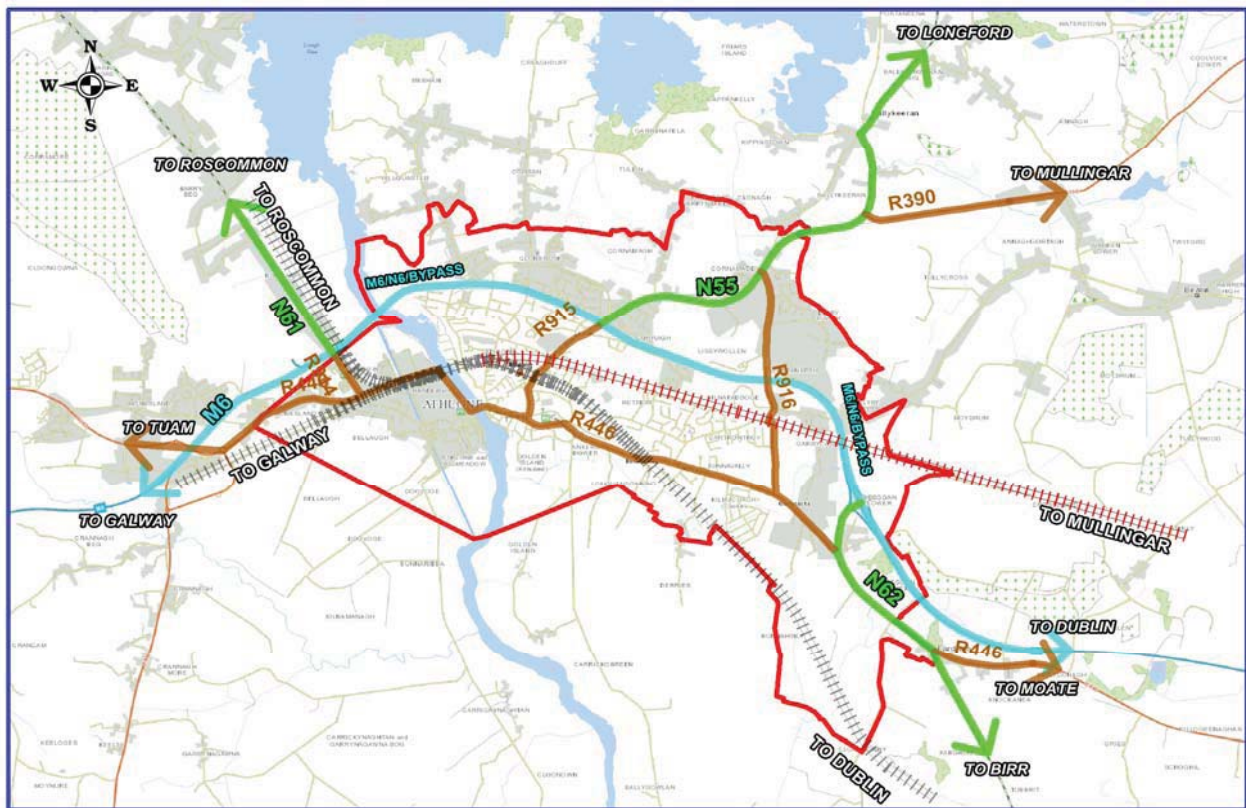


Figure 4.7 Road and Railway Network Athlone

Athlone occupies a central position and is served by a number of strategic national routes namely M6, N55, N61 and N62. The town is positioned on the Galway/Dublin/Westport rail line and wherein commuter, intercity and inter regional services are provided. The disused Mullingar Athlone railway line also traverses the plan area. Athlone is also a major national hub for public bus services.

4.7.4 Utilities

Athlone contains a substantial electricity infrastructure network comprising the 110/38kV Athlone station and the Busfield 38/20kV station, both of which have been recently redeveloped resulting in a doubling of capacity. The Dublin Galway gas pipeline traverses the south of Athlone and serves the IDA Business Park in Garrycastle.

The town is served by the Metropolitan Area Network (MAN), which represents a coverage area of 21km with the latest fibre optic technology enabling telecommunications companies to provide affordable 'always-on' high-speed access to the Internet and a range of telephony and data communications services. In addition to the MAN, the town is served by other broadband services, including mobile 3G broadband from the main carriers, DSL Broadband from up to six providers and wireless broadband from 3 providers.

4.7.5 Waste Management

The Management of waste in Athlone is governed by the Waste Management Plan for the Midlands Region 2005-2014. There is a Civic Amenity Centre at Golden Island and numerous bring bank facilities located throughout the town.

4.7.6 Identification of potential environmental issues relating to Material Assets

- Increased development including residential and industrial expansion exerts pressure on all existing material assets.
- The Council's ability to meet their commitments under the Water Framework Directive could be compromised due to shortfall in wastewater treatment capacity.

4.7.7 Evolution of Material Assets in the absence of a Development Plan

In the absence of a Development Plan for Athlone, issues such as future water demand, resource identification and protection will not be comprehensively assessed resulting in a poor level of service provision and possible degradation of important reserves. The result would be a haphazard, un-coordinated delivery of service, resulting in negative environmental impacts. Failure to provide sufficient infrastructure for development would be likely to result in significant adverse impacts, in particular upon water quality, biodiversity and flora and fauna, drinking water supplies and human health.

4.8 Cultural Heritage

Cultural Heritage for Athlone is addressed in this report under the following headings:

- Archaeological Heritage
- Architectural Heritage

4.8.1 Archaeological Heritage

The rich history of Athlone and its military heritage is still very visible today, dominating the town in the form of the Castle and upstanding remains of the Town Wall and evidenced in the street pattern and street names. Such is the importance of this heritage, that a 'Zone of Archaeological Potential' was designated around the town's historic core. A record of archaeological heritage is maintained on the '*Record of Monuments and Places*' which was established under Section 12 of the National Monuments (Amendment) Act, 1994 (No. 17 of 1994). Structures, features, objects or sites listed in this Record are known as Recorded Monuments. According to the database there are 12 Recorded Monuments within the Athlone Town Plan area. These are listed in Figure 4.8 and mapped in Figure 4.9.

Figure 4.8 Recorded Monuments within the Athlone Town Development Plan boundary

Site Code	Townland	Classification
WM029-010	Ranelagh	Battery
WM029-011	Athlone South	Fortifications Site
WM029-016	Athlone	House Site
WM029-021	Loughandonning	Holy Well
WM029-022	Retreat	Enclosure
WM029-023	Collegeland	Graveyard
WM029-024	Blyry Upper	Enclosure
WM029-025	Garrycastle	Castle
WM029-026	Garrycastle	Earthwork Site
WM029-027	Creggan Lower	Earthwork
WM029-028	Creaggan Upper	Castle
WM029-033	Clonbonny	Earthwork

4.8.3 Architectural Heritage

Athlone has a wealth of buildings of architectural merit. Despite the significant growth of the town in recent years, the town centre has generally retained its compact form and essential architectural qualities. At present, there are 41 Protected Structures in Athlone. The Draft Plan makes provision for the inclusion of 257 on the Record of Protected Structures for Athlone. The Planning & Development Act 2000 as amended places an obligation on Local Authorities to include an objective for the preservation of the character of Architectural Conservation Areas (ACAs). There are four ACA's within Athlone, namely: The Town Centre, St. Mary's Place, St. Brigid's Terrace and Garden Vale.

4.8.4 Identification of potential environmental issues relating to Cultural Heritage

- The erosion of character of buildings on the Record of Protected Structures is a significant concern, in the case of both occupied and unoccupied structures.
- The character of Architectural Conservation Areas is being eroded for a range of reasons including lack of awareness of the designation to the owners with regard to obligations arising from the designation.
- Loss of vernacular heritage as a result of evolution of society and building use.

4.8.5 Evolution of Cultural Heritage in the absence of the Plan

In the absence of a Development Plan for Athlone, structures of merit would not be proposed for inclusion on the RPS, and therefore would not be afforded due protection. The Draft Plan also promotes the development of vacant structures within the town centre.

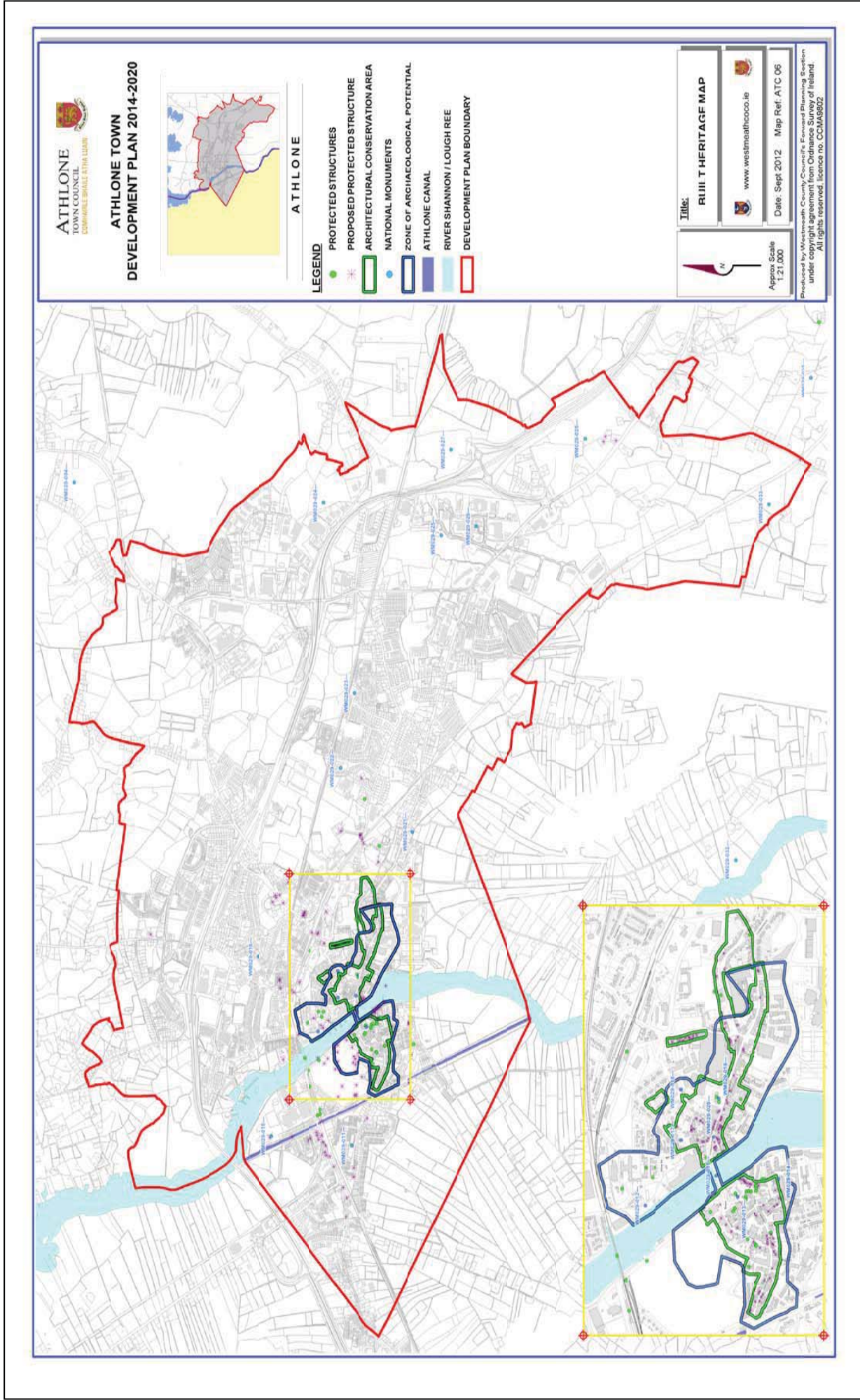


Figure 4.9 Map of Built Heritage Athlone

4.9 Landscape

Athlone is generally an urban landscape, with the exception of the Shannon corridor. The visual corridor of the Shannon is quite narrow within the urban area but opens out; to the north towards Lough Ree and as it flows south, the floodplain opens out to form the Shannon Callows. The Lough Ree/ Shannon corridor represents a distinctive landscape in terms of scale, navigational character and the unique habitat of the Shannon Callows. Athlone town is influenced by this general landscape to its north and south and to a lesser extent along the urban portion of the Shannon corridor. Athlone town originally developed in a linear form following an esker ridge to the river crossing, which remains a feature of the townscape today. The extremity of the Environs area to the north and south are rural in nature, predominantly comprises agricultural lands with low density dwelling within the open countryside. Westmeath County Council developed a landscape character assessment (LCA) in 2008. The study area is located in a landscape character area "Lough Ree / Shannon Corridor, which covers Lough Ree, the Shannon corridor north and south of Athlone and associated Callows. The aim of the River Basin Management Plan for this area, is to assist the process of achieving good water status through the implementation of the Water Framework Directive and to ensure that development will not impact on the significant conservation value of this area.

4.9.1 Identification of potential environmental issues relating to Landscape

- Impacts on designated protected landscapes, heritage landscapes and important local views as a result of development.
- Impacts due to development on the ecological components of the landscape.

4.9.2 Evolution of Landscape in the absence of the Plan

In the absence of a Development Plan for Athlone, there would be no framework for directing development outside of sensitive landscapes.

4.10 Inter-relationships between Environmental Categories

The interactions and interrelationships between the SEA environmental baseline topics is an important consideration for the environmental assessment. These potential interrelationships are taken into account throughout the assessment process. While all environmental topics interact with each other to some extent, it is considered that the most important inter-relationships occur between water (quality and quantity) and biodiversity, flora and fauna, soils and geology and human health and population. Flora and fauna rely directly on the aquatic environment as a habitat but the terrestrial environment can also be strongly influenced by the aquatic environment. A further principle interrelationship of note is between water resources and climate. Greenhouse gas emissions associated with energy use during water management activities, such as treatment of drinking water and wastewater, have the potential to negatively impact on climate through increased contribution to climate change. As a consequence, more frequent and more intense flooding can affect material assets and human health as well as biodiversity.

5 SEA OBJECTIVES, TARGETS & INDICATORS

5.1 Introduction

The use of environmental protection objectives fulfils obligations set out in Section F, Schedule 2B of the Planning and Development (Strategic Environmental Assessment) Regulations 2004 as amended. The environmental protection objectives are distinct from the Draft Plan objectives and provide a standard against which the goals, policies and objectives of the Plan can be measured in order to highlight those with the potential for environmental impact. They are used as a tool to cross check the policies of the Plan in order to maximise the environmental sustainability of the Plan. The cross checking process helps identify policies that will be likely to result in significant adverse impacts, so that alternatives may be considered or mitigation measures may be put in place.

The environmental protection objectives for the Plan have been generated from European, National and Regional Policy and Guidance. Sample objectives are given in Table 4B of the SEA Guidelines produced by the DoEHLG in 2004 and these were amended to reflect the specific issues that are considered relevant to this particular Plan and the range of issues that are significant within the Town and its environs. Scoping, public consultation processes and higher level policy informed the generation of appropriate objectives. The SEA team identified the Environmental objectives.

Biodiversity, Flora and Fauna				
Strategic Environmental Objectives	Indicators	Responsible Authority	Frequency of Monitoring	Targets
B1: Protect, conserve and enhance the diversity of habitats, species and areas of local, national or international importance, including aquatic habitats and species and promote the sustainable management of habitat networks.	Conservation status of habitats and species as assessed under Art. 17 of the Habitats directive	NPWS	6 year cycle, next report due 2014	Maintenance of favourable conservation status for all habitats and species protected under national and international legislation Compliance with WFD Shannon RBMP
B2: Ensure that on implementation, any policy or objective not directly connected with or necessary for the management of a Natura 2000 site, either individually or in combination, shall not adversely affect the integrity of a European Site.				
Population and Human Health				
Strategic Environmental Objectives	Indicators	Responsible Authority	Frequency of Monitoring	Targets
P1: Facilitate a high quality of life for Westmeath's population through ensuring high quality residential, recreational and working environments, encouraging sustainable transport patterns and minimising noise pollution	Data on commuting, education, employment and economy, housing and general health data from Census	ATC/WCC	5 year intervals	Reduction in average distance and time to travel to work school or college. Increase in educational access and opportunity. Increase in general health as recorded by Census. Improved

						recreational amenity and open space provision. Increased sustainable employment opportunities
Water Resources						
Strategic Environmental Objectives	Indicators	Responsible Authority	Frequency of Monitoring	Targets		
W1: Promote water conservation and sustainable water use based population projections and long-term projections of available water resources.	Core Strategy and Water Service Strategic Plan shall set out detail at each ATP review	WCC/ATC	6 years	Abstractions existing and proposed to be maintained within the environmental carrying capacity of the water body.		
W2: Protect the quality of surface and ground waters as sources of drinking water and as valuable assets for amenity and recreation and for the protection of habitats and species.	Water quality testing results for the full range of monitoring including WWDA's	EPA, WCC, ATC	Varies; many monthly with annual reporting and interim review/updates of RBMP's	Achieving good water status for all water bodies by 2015.		
W3: Achieve and maintain required water quality standards and reduce discharges of pollutants or contaminants to waters as required under the River Basin Management Plans and the associated programme of measures and action programme.	WFD reporting and updates, WCC and EPA Monitoring results. RBMP's to be revised in 2015.	WCC, ATC EPA		Achieving good water status for all water bodies by 2015.		

Soils				
Strategic Environmental Objectives	Indicators	Responsible Authority	Frequency of Monitoring	Targets
S1: Maximise the use of brownfield lands and the existing built environment to reduce the need to develop greenfield lands. Prioritise the re-use of structures, over demolition and replacement wherever possible	Quantity of Greenfield land developed. HLA returns and Core Strategy	ATC & WCC	HLA annual Core Strategy 6 year cycle	No Greenfield urban development outside gateways Prioritise brownfield development in Urban Areas.
S2: Maintain the quality of and access to assets such as aquifers, aggregates, motorways, open spaces, water courses and all other physical, social and green infrastructure.				
S3: Avoid flood risk in selecting sites for development and mitigate the effects of floods.	Properties and zoned lands effected by flooding or flood risk	ATC, WCC and OPW	Intermittent	No new properties to be effected by flooding.
Cultural Heritage and Landscape				
Strategic Environmental Objectives	Indicators	Responsible Authority	Frequency of Monitoring	Targets
C1: Protect and conserve the integrity and setting of features of architectural and archaeological heritage and identify other features of merit for protection where appropriate.	Proportion of NIAH recommendations on RPS	ATC & WCC	At 2 and 4 year ATP review	All ministerial recommendations to be included in RPS.
C2: Conserve and enhance valued natural and historic landscape features.	Landscape assessment completed in accordance with the character of the			All parts of the county characterised.

	European landscape convention					
	No. of ACA's Protected Trees					
C3: Enhance landscape and townscape quality and minimise negative visual impacts from development.						
C4: Protect and enhance the quality, character and features of waterways.	Lake Management Plans	ATC & WCC			All Major Lakes to Have Management Plans.	
C5: Protect and conserve the quality, character and distinctiveness of geological and geomorphological systems, sites and features.	To have a list of geomorphological sites included in the CDP for protection.	GSI/NPWS/WCC ATP	At 2 and 4 year review	CDP	To appropriately assess all applications affecting geomorphological sites	
Air and Climatic Factors						
Strategic Environmental Objectives	Indicators	Responsible Authority	Frequency of Monitoring	Targets		
A1: Reduce the need to travel.	CSO census data on travel time to school/college/work	ATC & WCC	Each Census	Reduction total numbers of long journeys		
A2: Support Implementation of the National Climate Change Strategy.			Annual Returns	As above and increase in public transport use.		
A3: Encourage energy efficiency in building design and maximise the use of renewable energy forms.			SEAI Recommendations	SEAI Targets		

5.2 Use of Environmental Protection Objectives

The above environmental protection objectives have been used to carry out the Draft Strategic Environmental Assessment in accordance with the legislation. They provide a standard against which policies of the Town Plan were measured for their environmental sustainability. A crosschecking process has been used whereby the plan policies were proofed against the Environmental protection objectives so that any policies with the potential for significant adverse environmental impacts were highlighted in addition to significant positive impacts. Alternative strategic options were considered or mitigation measures proposed to counteract any adverse environmental effects highlighted, thereby maximising the environmental sustainability of the plan that has been produced.

6 ASSESSMENT OF LIKELY SIGNIFICANT EFFECTS

6.1 Introduction

In accordance with Article 13 of the 2001- 2010 Regulations the Planning Authority shall consider whether or not the implementation of the Draft Athlone Town Plan would be likely to have significant effects on the environment taking account of the relevant criteria set out in Schedule 2A and 2B of the Planning and Development (SEA) Regulations 2004.

The criteria specified includes secondary, cumulative, synergistic, short, medium and long term, permanent, temporary, positive and negative effects on biodiversity, population, human health, fauna, flora, soil, water, air, climatic factors, material assets, cultural heritage including architectural and archaeological heritage, landscape and the interrelationship between the above factors.

It is intended that this section of the Environmental Report shall fulfil the requirements of the following sub sections of Schedule 2B of the SEA Directive (b) (c) (d) along with a broad over view of subsection (f). The objectives and policies of the Draft Plan have been assessed against the environmental objectives outlined in the previous chapter.

The key existing environmental pressures that exist within Athlone and its environs, in respect of the environmental baseline considered as part of the SEA and in the scoping document to it, are discussed below.

The overarching issues facing Athlone are as follows:

- Gateway Status and growth of the Town
- The necessary physical and structural infrastructure to meet the increased demand in population.
- Planned future capacity of both water and waste water treatment.
- Flooding within the town.
- Proposed Loughandonning link road which follows the River AI flood plain and proposed road from Blyry enterprise and employment area.
- Increased access to the River Shannon for transport and proposed walkways and extension to amenity areas on SAC/SPAs.
- Footbridge over the River Shannon.
- The zoning of additional lands to the west of the Town.
- Proximity of residential lands at Hillquarter to SAC and floodplain.
- Impact on Human health and climate change with increased car usage.
- The need for a more unified approach to the planning and development of Athlone involving that area of the town in Co. Roscommon also has been identified as a major issue.

6.2 Methodology for Assessment and Determination of Significance of Effects

Matrices are the mechanism by which conflicts or potential conflicts between the policies of the Plan and the strategic environmental objectives have been identified. These matrices have been prepared as part of the SEA process. The likely significant effects of policies contained in the Plan on implementation would be likely to have on the environment were identified in this process.

The DoEHLG SEA Guidelines (Nov 2004) suggest that the assessment of likely significant effects on the environment should be carried out by the Plan team as a whole, preferably involving some external specialist advice. It was considered that advice would be best provided through the

resources and expertise available from within the Council, Environmental Authorities and Prescribed Bodies.

The following stages were followed to ensure a robust and defensible determination of significance, particularly in difficult cases such as cumulative effect of houses, or increased wastewater generation.

- Consultation with the public and relevant Authorities and gathering of baseline data was carried out to determine the significant issues facing the Town and its environs and the conclusions reached were presented to the Steering Group and the EPA and approved.
- A set of Strategic Environmental Objectives were prepared within the Forward Planning Section, which are in accordance with National and International policy and guidance and also reflective of the significant issues facing Athlone and its environs. (The environmental objectives are the standard against which the policy of the Plan will be measured).
- Each Policy and Objective proposed for inclusion in the Plan was assessed against the agreed SEA objectives. This was carried out during the preparation of the Plan and changes were made as issues arose to make the Plan produced more environmentally sustainable.
- The Plan produced was formally assessed using the matrix. The assessment of each was assigned a symbol;
 - o compatible (+),
 - o conflicting (-),
 - o no relationship or insignificant impact (/),
 - o possibly compatible or conflicting (?)
- All major issues arising in the assessment of the policies and objectives were raised for discussion with the Steering Group to ensure that significant issues were not missed or given undue consideration.
- Evaluation of significance requires consideration of various questions, which will establish the importance, or “significance”, of the predicted impact:
 1. Will the measure in the policy lead to a risk of environmental standards being breached?
 2. Could it lead to failure to achieve environmental policies or targets?
 3. Will it affect environmental resources, which are protected by laws or policies, e.g. Natura 2000 habitats, species, landscapes, water resources, agricultural resources and cultural sites, etc.?
 4. Could it lead to impacts on environmental resources, which, although not legally protected, are important or valuable?

As a follow on from the preparation and evaluation of the previous sections of the report, i.e baseline data and trends, existing significant issues, types and scale of development likely to impact on the environment, and environmental vulnerabilities, the above questions were considered in determining significance of environmental effects identified.

- Where the strategic objective or policy included in the draft plan emanates from a higher level or parallel plan; where the nature of the impact depends on decisions that have been made or will be made at:
 - A higher policy level the symbol ↑ was used (e.g. NSS, RPG, NDP, etc.)
 - A lower policy level the symbol ↓ was used (e.g. LAP, AAP, Habitat Management Plans etc.)
 - Parallel policy from other plans, the symbol → was used (e.g. Rural Water Programme, Waste Management Plan, County Development Board Strategy, etc.)
- The assessment matrices for the draft Plan was presented to the Plan team for consideration during final editing of the plan.
- Suggested alternatives, mitigation, offsetting, etc., to the potential identified significant effects were raised for discussion, with the Steering Group and amendments to the Plan were suggested were required.

6.3 Summary of Likely Significant Effects of Implementing the Plan on the Environment and Measures Proposed to Prevent, Reduce or Offset

6.3.1 Introduction

The full matrix and assessment of policies against environmental objectives has been undertaken. A summary of the outcome of this assessment for major issues arising is provided in this section.

In accordance with legislation, the likely significant effects on the environment of implementing the Plan are summarised under headings that include all of the issues specified in the legislation. Potential significant environmental effects have been highlighted as well as potential significant negative impacts and full details of these impacts can be seen in the matrices. The interrelationship between factors is given in the relevant sections.

Depending on the level of significance, which was determined based on the scale and cumulative nature of the potential impact, measures to mitigate against significant negative environmental effects have been provided. Some of the potential effects discussed below are likely to be less significant than others. For those with a higher level of significance, a recommendation has been made to remove or alter the policy so as to prevent or reduce the impact if possible.

6.3.2 Biodiversity, Flora and fauna

Gateway Status

There are several policies within the Plan to promote the growth of the town to achieve its gateway status. Large scale population and economic growth will require the development of previously undeveloped greenfield lands for the provision of housing, community, health care and amenity facilities, resulting in a loss of biodiversity, flora, fauna, hedgerows and potential habitats and species such as Cloncrow Bog, the Callows and the eskers along the northern end of the town.

The redevelopment of 16 hectares of greenfield lands at Hillquarter would impact on the biodiversity of this area, given its proximity to the SAC and SPA, during construction, use or during a flood event. Part of these land lie within the identified floodplain. It is noted in the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht submission to the scoping process that 'the distance from the site is not always reliable to screen out effects.'

There is an area of land zoned for open space within the Shannon Callows SAC and SPA. Negative impacts on biodiversity and designated sites, particularly along rivers and around lakes, can occur as a result of development such as walking routes, cycleways, seating, lighting, loss of riparian zone and mowing of riparian zone, and can lead to erosion and added disturbance by humans and dogs. Such developments along waterways for example could impact on species such as otters and bats which are strictly protected under the Habitats Directive, and kingfishers listed on Annex I of the Birds Directive. Care therefore needs to be taken to ensure any proposed walkways along rivers are located a suitable distance from the waters edge and, where such proposed developments may impact on a European (Natura 2000) site, screening for appropriate assessment would be required prior to such a development taking place.

Proposed increased recreational access to the river and other environmentally sensitive assets

Water based, walking and/or cycling access to the river and lake shores is an important element of the future development of the natural assets of Athlone however these policies and objectives have the potential for significant environmental impacts on biodiversity Flora and Fauna of Local National and International importance, as set out in the submission from NPWS and in the SEA Matrices.

Tourism Development

The policy to actively promote tourism along the River Shannon and Lough Ree would place a threat on the biodiversity of these areas. There are several unauthorised developments along Lough Ree regarding the encroachment of marinas and any further development would impact on the biodiversity of these areas. A new footbridge is proposed along the Shannon to promote the Waterfront which could impact on the rivers biodiversity and archaeology and adverse impacts on architectural heritage need to be avoided.

Economic Development

The draft plan proposes objectives for the promotion of the Strategic Gateway Zone and Strategic Development Zone. There is no identified area proposed within the Plan for the SDZ and its impact cannot be assessed. Given the nature of an SDZ its location could impact on the biodiversity of the area. The cumulative impacts of a SGZ and SDZ in terms of traffic could be significant, depending on the future location of the SDZ.

Transport

Policy P-PT7 proposes the reserving of corridors for the extension of the roads to support and promote public transport and a further objective encourages the facilitation of new road links, a new maintenance bus garage, and park and ride facilities in the town centre. These routes and locations have not been identified on the Plan. Depending on the location of these routes there could be the potential to have a significant impact on biodiversity.

Proposed Loughandonning Link Road

A route has been indicated on a map in the Plan, which represents a number of significant challenges to both flora, fauna and biodiversity. The route follows the River AI corridor which is a river with protected Lamprey eel and subject to flooding. Any development next to the river would impact on the protected species. The minimum quantity and physical quality of water required for breeding, survival and movement of this species, especially during summer drought periods is an issue. The ecological impacts of this road on the River AI need to be assessed before a route is determined.

The NPWS in a pre-draft submission to the CDP (regarding the proposed N4 route) have proposed an approach towards resolving the difficulties presented in SEA and AA as follows:

Plan level mitigation may include, among other things, setting out provisions to demonstrate that lower level plans or projects will be subject to appropriate assessment where necessary. However, if policies and objectives are made conditional on adequate evaluations and assessments being undertaken at lower plan level or at project level, it is advised that, as a minimum, these situations should be subject to preliminary examination and should be noted clearly in the plan. The proposals should:

- Include a statement of the issue being addressed (e.g. improved road link between point A and B) without favouring a specified solution (if a specified solution is put forward, appropriate assessment will be required of that solution);*
- State that issues may arise under Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive that will require assessment and that alternative solutions may need to be considered to avoid significant effects;*
- Stress that in deciding on a solution, it will be necessary to comply fully with Article 6(3) (and, if warranted, Article 6(4), including compensatory measures) of the Habitats Directive.*

The following text was included in the Draft County development Plan in that regard:

A schedule of proposed national road improvement and upgrade projects are listed in table 8.1. The council will preserve a corridor to enable design options for national road improvement and upgrade projects to be advanced. Issues may arise under article 6 (3) of the Habitats Directive that will require assessment at design stage and alternative solutions may need to be considered to avoid significant affects.

However, in this instance, the route is indicative only and is not located within any Natura 2000 sites. Potential to impact on the River AI ecosystem is acknowledged and must be fully assessed before a final route can be selected.

River Transport

Several policies and objectives within the Plan promote the use of the River Shannon and Lough Ree for transport. There is the potential to impact on the flora and fauna of the river and the river bank and to increase the spread of alien species.

Measures to Prevent, Reduce or offset

To offset the above it is recommended a policy be included in the Plan to ensure any development does not damage habitats or species of value and should be developed with minimum impact on biodiversity, flora or fauna. Any infrastructural and road related developments must reflect the local biodiversity of where they are sited and screening and planting of native species should respect the landscape character. The ecological impact of new roads, linkages and realignments should be checked to establish the extent of success of mammal mitigation measures put in place during the construction of new roads.

The spread of alien species such as Japanese Knotweed and Hogweed can be damaging to local biodiversity and a policy is required to mitigate against the accidental introduction of such species in the use of transport along the river.

The development of walkways along the river would need to be assessed for the impacts on the ecology before the walkways are identified.

The plan should be amended to contain an objective to carry out an appropriate level of analysis to identify specific locations/areas and/or specific uses for rural economic/tourism development to which a policy of the type proposed would apply thereby allowing assessment of location specific sensitivities and/or development specific issues, this evidence based approach would have the added advantage of providing some level of certainty of site viability to a proposed project which could potentially be considered under this policy.

6.4 Population and Human Health

Impacts on population and human health may occur as a result of reduction in general amenity, inadequate service provision such as wastewater treatment, water supply, public transport and deterioration in landscape quality, cultural heritage, water or air quality. In this regard, issues relating to population and human health are dealt with throughout the consideration of the majority of the other issues in this section of the Environmental Report.

Scale of Population Growth

Athlone has been identified as a Gateway town in the Midland Regional Guidelines with a population growth of 8,482 by 2020. Policies seeking to influence the scale and distribution of future population growth necessary for the provision of services including transport infrastructure, schools and health services are a critical part of the high level policy of the plan. Several masterplans have been developed for the town and its environs which would exceed the population targets as set out in the Regional Guidelines. These plans should be implemented on a phased basis to align with population targets.

The increase in population and in particular its distribution would impact on the number of cars using the roads and number of new housing required, which ultimately would determine the level of infrastructure and impact on the level of zoning and car usage. The development of greenfield lands away from public transport would result in the increase in the use of the private car which would result in further emissions and impact on human health.

LAPs	Zoned Residential lands	Population increase
Cornamagh LAP 2009-2015	43.01ha	972-1,556
Curragh/Lissywollen 2006-2012		1,280-1,850
Lissywollen South 2008-2014		2,400-3,600
Cornamaddy 2005-2011(?)	51.08ha	2,930-5,003
Loughanaskin	3.06ha	480
Hillquarter (low density)	16.272 Ha	234 – 693
Creggan	10 hectares (mixed zoning)	Unknown
Total		8,296 – 13,711

The level of zoning in the masterplans are sufficient to meet the MRA population targets on a sequential basis. There is no requirement to further zone outside the town boundary at Hillquarter, or lands to the west of the Shannon.

Measures to Prevent, Reduce or offset

Revise policy such that development takes place on a sequential basis of the town with the development of vacant, derelict, underutilised sites in close proximity to public transport given priority such as the identified town centre sites within the draft plan. The increase in population will

impact on the existing infrastructure and on water quality. Remove zoning at Hillquarter. All new residential development should comply with the evaluation criteria in the National Spatial Strategy as outlined below.

Housing Location in Urban Areas	Evaluation Considerations
Asset Test	Are there existing community resources, such as schools etc, with spare capacity?
Carrying Capacity Test	Is the environmental setting capable of absorbing development in terms of drainage etc?
Transport Test	Test Is there potential for reinforcing usage of public transport, walking and cycling?
Economic Test	Is there potential to ensure integration between the location of housing and employment?
Character Test	Will the proposal reinforce a sense of place and character?
Community Test	Will the proposal reinforce the integrity and vitality of the local community and services that can be provided?
Integration Test	Will the proposal aid an integrated approach to catering for the housing needs of all sections of society?

6.5 Water Resources

The significant issues pertaining to population relates to matching critical service infrastructure provision, including Water Supply and Waste Water Disposal.

Water Supply

Recent figures from the Water Services section of the Council indicate the current demand for water in the town is approx. 9 million litres per day (MLD) and the capacity is approx. 13.6 MLD and that current demand is being met. The proposed residential zoning would increase the population of the town and environs over the lifetime of the Plan by 50% (this does not allow for commercial/business use).

There is a proposed abstraction at Killinure Lough with an approved abstraction limit of 40.9MLD, to supply Athlone and south Westmeath however the construction has yet to be funded. This supply scheme remains under consideration whilst details of the Dublin supply scheme are determined. Killinure Lough lies within a Natura 2000 site.

Athlone Waste Water Treatment Capacity to support further development

Capacity of water courses and wastewater treatment infrastructure is of critical importance in the consideration of the settlement hierarchy considerations and in the consideration of individual land

use zoning objectives. The Athlone WWTP AER submission 2011 stated the organic capacity of the existing Waste Water treatment Plant is 30,000 p.e. The organic loading at the WWTP in 2011 was approximately 34,694 p.e. Treated effluent is discharged into the River Shannon which has a water quality status as moderate. The current exceeding organic capacity of the WWTP is 2,632 p.e. Other than in exceptional cases it is considered that policy and objectives for further development and consequent loading of the existing WWTP are limited to the capacity remaining between the design capacity P.E and the estimated average loadings. It is noted from Athlone Water Services that there is a proposal to upgrade the system to 40,000 p.e. but this is awaiting DECLG approval to proceed to tender. The EPA in their submission to the scoping document stated:

EPA submission:

1. The Plan should promote the protection of surface water and groundwater resources and their associated habitats and species.
2. It is noted that a number of Wastewater Treatment Plants in the Plan area “failed to meet the overall requirements of the Wastewater Treatment Regulations (2001)” in 2010. These include treatment plants in Athlone, Delvin, Kinnegad & Rochfortbridge.

Measures to Prevent, Reduce or offset

Water Supply:

The relationship between the demand and supply capacity for water needs to be considered in light of the level of the increase in population and future zoning for the lifetime of the Plan.

Waste Water Treatment Capacity:

Option 1:

Identify available capacity in Athlone WWTP to accommodate further development and ensure that the proposed development does not exceed this capacity.

Option 2:

Remove all land use zoning objectives that on implementation have potential to result in increased loadings to the WWTP where there is no reliable prospect of the capacity being provided.

The preparation of a water services strategic plan as set out in S. 36 of the Water Services Act 2007 would assist greatly in the resolution of the various considerations regarding spatial policy in this regard.

Water Conservation

It is estimated the current unaccounted water rate for Westmeath is 42%. Water conservation is essential to ensure optimal use of natural resources. The Council have received funding under the ERDF for watermain rehabilitation/replacement in Athlone Town which will reduce the unaccounted water for water in the town.

Water Quality

There are a number of private and commercial boat yards/harbours and ancillary uses on Lough Ree which may have the potential for significant environmental issues including impacts associated with water quality, direct land take and disruption of Natura 2000 sites both individual and cumulatively, pumping out facilitates and oil/waste storage, invasive species and general development proposals including dredging.

Groundwater

Groundwater is, at the core of the Water Framework Directive (WFD). While the focus on groundwater has been mainly concerned with its use for drinking water, the environmental value of groundwater, as well as its value as a water supply reservoir, has been recognised by the ecological

objectives of the WFD. Groundwater plays an essential role in the hydrological cycle and is critical for maintaining river flows and surface water ecosystems such as wetlands. The asset value of high quality groundwater as a resource for current and future economic development, with a particular focus on agriculture cannot be overstated.

The importance of protecting the groundwater contribution to the River Shannon as the main drinking water sources in the county cannot be overstated. Trends in water quality in recent years have been that the condition of Lough Ree has deteriorated and is at 'significant risk' from diffuse sources.

Rural Housing Policy– impact on water as a resource

The environmental carrying capacity of rural areas would need to be considered, this would be most likely carried out for vulnerability of groundwater and surface water separately. A significant number of properties are not connected to the public sewerage system. The EPA has highlighted that a significant number of septic tanks systems do not function properly. This is mainly because they have been poorly constructed, installed operated or maintained or located in areas with unsuitable sub soils or the percolation area is inadequate.

6.6 Soils and Material Assets

Material Assets

Material assets include past and future planned physical and social infrastructure from which maximum efficiencies need to be sought (Infrastructure and Capital Investment 2012-16) by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. The maximisation of the return on this investment is a critical aspect of proper planning and sustainable development.

The stock of vacant housing in the county is considered as a material asset, serviced lands in the form of incomplete developments or phases of developments with ground works completed are equally considered material assets often now embodying past public investment. The prioritisation of brown field sites and the existing built environment is expressed in strategic environmental objective S1. The zoning of greenfield sites where capacity exists to accommodate demand projected in the plan period within existing brown field sites is inconsistent with the proper planning and sustainable development of the county, and needs careful consideration.

Flood Risk

The Flood Risk Map for Athlone identifies a significant area within the town at risk of flooding, particularly along the River Shannon and River AI. Several brownfield opportunity sites have been identified in the town centre are located within the identified floodplain. Part of an area indicated for residential zoning within the town council boundary is within the area identified as liable to flooding. Residential zoning would be considered a highly vulnerable land use within such an area. Burgess Park, Bogganfin Park and Wansboro park lie within the Shannon floodplain but are considered as water compatible development within the DoEHLG Flood Risk Management Guidelines.

The proposed strategic Loughandonning link road is located within the catchment of the River AI and is affected by an area identified as subject to flooding. The area identified within the Plan clearly marks a definitive route for the road which has not been subject to a flood risk assessment.

There is one recorded recurring flood event within the Creggan area, namely on lands to the north of the area within the catchment of the AI River. In order to alleviate the risk of flooding at this

location, a tract of land extending to 17 ha in area has been reserved free from development in the Creggan plan.

The redevelopment of existing brownfield sites within the town centre has the potential to be on polluted and potential contaminated soil as a result of pollution from a previous development. A policy is required within the Plan to require applicants to provide sufficient information in support of an application to determine the existence or otherwise of contamination, its nature and risks it may pose and whether these can be satisfactorily reduced to an acceptable level. If potential risks are identified, the contamination will need to be dealt with before development begins in order to minimise the risks posed.

The area identified as Bellaugh in the zoning map for a framework plan has experienced pluvial flooding.

Measures to Prevent, Reduce or offset

Any extension and further developments to the existing parks along the Shannon floodplain would need to have regard to the DoEHLG Flood Risk Management Guidelines. The Plan should promote the development, where appropriate, of adaptation measures to account for the likely increased risk of flooding due to Climate Change within the Plan Area. A specific Policy should be included to provide for/promote appropriate flood risk assessments to be undertaken, where development(s) and zoning are being proposed in the Plan area where there is risk of flooding.

The Flood Risk Assessment needs to have regard to those areas zoned within the Plan which will be impacted by flooding.

Option 1:

Remove land use zoning objectives where a flood risk has been identified.

Option 2:

Carry out a SFRA and justification test in accordance with The Planning System and Flood Risk Management, issued under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 as amended.

Regard has been had to the 2009 Shannon Flood Event in Athlone and the Shannon CFRAMS in the Strategic Flood Risk Assessment undertaken as part of the Plan.

The plan needs to highlight the need to incorporate the use of SuDS (Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems) into any approach to managing the AI River. Future development proposals within the vicinity of the AI River shall be subject to Flood Risk Assessment.

6.7 Cultural Heritage & Landscape

Archaeological heritage

The central core of the town lies within an Archaeological Priority Zone and places constraints on the development of the town centre given its status as a Gateway Town. The accumulative development of sites within the town centre has the potential to impact upon the cultural heritage of the Plan area.

The proposed strategic road link indicated on the Transportation Map from Blyry Industrial Estate would be positioned close to a protected national monument WMO29-024. This indicative road would need to be removed from the plan until it is assessed or be subject to archaeological assessment prior to route finalisation.

Measures to Prevent, Reduce or Offset:

Policies regarding the provision of public access to waterways need to be subject to an archaeological assessment. The proposed pedestrian footbridge over the Shannon would impact on the archaeology and architectural heritage value of the River and alternatives such as attaching a footbridge to the existing bridges along the river subject to impact on architectural heritage would be a more viable option.

Policy needs to include the redevelopment of brownfield sites as identified in the opportunity sites within the town centre to be subject to archaeological mitigation measures being applied.

Remove proposed strategic road link as indicated on the Transportation Map until impact on archaeology is assessed or require archaeological assessment prior to route finalisation.

6.8 Air and Climatic Factors**Reduce the need to travel**

The location and extent of the zoning for the town and its environs has a cumulative impact which in the long term could have negative impacts in that it will permit population growth with minimal provision for public transport use. Many of the areas within the Plan have specific LAPs which have developed a framework for the integration of housing with services. However for public transport provision to be financially viable the development of the town would need to be on a sequential basis.

Objective O-OC2 seeks to designate further areas of the town and individual sites to the west of the town. This area is subject to pluvial flooding and should be removed from the plan.

Strategic Development Zone

The development of a SDZ within the eastern area of the Plan area in addition to the SGZ would have a cumulative impact on the traffic on the area in addition to infrastructural requirements. The location of the SDZ has yet to be determined and shall be subject to full environmental and ecological assessment at plan stage.

Measures to Prevent, Reduce or offset

Future residential developments within the Plan area to be on a sequential basis to reinforce public transport usage and make it economically viable.

Policies have been included within the plan to improve public transport service provision which will improve the need to travel by car to rural enterprise areas. However the location of these areas needs to be identified to make it financially viable for services to access such areas.

Any SDZ to the east of the town would require the reopening/reuse of the existing Mullingar to Athlone railway line to service the development.

7 CONSIDERATION OF ALTERNATIVES

7.1 Introduction

The SEA Directive requires that reasonable alternatives (taking into account the objectives and the geographical scope of the plan or programme) are identified, described and evaluated for their likely significant effects on the environment. Taking into account the objectives and the geographical scope of the Plan, alternatives were formulated as follows:

7.2 Consideration of Alternative Strategies

Alternative strategies that were considered are outlined below. The 'Do Nothing Scenario', which is that which could occur in the event of non implementation of the new plan 2014-2020 and the continuation of the last plan 2008-2014 is outlined in terms of environmental implementations at the end of each of the sections of the environmental baseline in Chapter 4 above. As such it will not be discussed in this section.

The following summarises a series of alternatives of how the future development of Athlone Town and Environs might have occurred under various plans. The preparation of the Plan must demonstrate consistency with national and regional policy and guidelines. As a result alternative strategic options available for consideration in the preparation of the Plan were limited.

Alternative A: Do Nothing Scenario (discussed in Chapter 4)

Alternative B: Promote the Gateway Status of the Town

Alternative C: Greenfield expansion at outer periphery

Alternative D: Consolidation of Urban Core and plan led expansion of Inner edge and environs (De-zoning)

7.3 Alternative B: Promote the Gateway Status of the Town

Athlone Town has been identified as a Gateway town in the Regional Planning Guidelines as part of the linked Midlands Gateway. This alternative would build up the critical mass of the town in terms of its economic strength, employment, education and population. Future investment in infrastructure and public transport provision would be concentrated within the town and its environs with development occurring on a sequential basis. Increasing the population within the town would help to curtail travel demand and has the potential to create sustainable patterns of development. It allows for a more intensive use of infrastructure, mix of uses and sustain alternative modes of travel such as cycling, walking and public transport.

Development within the town is constrained to a significant extent by the River Shannon which segregates the town from the western part of the town, the rich natural, historical and archaeological character of the town and by significant areas subject to flooding. The concentration of development of the town would significantly reduce further development beyond the town and its environs and place pressure on the existing infrastructure. The concentration of development of the town would significantly reduce further development beyond the town and its environs and place pressure on the existing infrastructure.

7.4 Alternative C: Greenfield Expansion at Outer Periphery

This would permit low density development and single dwellings on unserviced lands beyond the town environs. Those areas within commuting distance to the town, and in areas of special

landscape character, would experience development with no supporting physical infrastructure or services. Consequentially existing brownfield sites within the town centre could become vacant or derelict with a decline in population and economic activity. Such an alternative would increase the reliance on the private car and travel to access employment, schools etc.. This alternative would create uncertainty for the future planning of the area with development being demand driven rather than being planned and would not support the gateway status of the town.

7.5 Alternative D: Consolidation of Urban Core and Plan Led Expansion of Inner Edge and Environs

Given the physical and environmental constraints within the town centre as outlined above a plan led approach to the development of the inner edge and the town's environs would enable the town to expand in a coordinated manner. The 5 Local Areas Plans identified in the Town Plan ensure a balanced and Plan led approach to the scale, location and nature of new development for the town in a sequential manner. The Creggan LAP on the Eastern environs of the town is primarily a plan to promote employment generation in the town given its Gateway status. The LAPs allow for the future investment in infrastructure including public transport to be planned in an orderly manner thereby avoiding a haphazard and costly approach to the provision of social and physical infrastructure.

Strategic Environmental Objectives Biodiversity, Flora & Fauna	Alternative B: Promote the Gateway Status	Alternative C: Greenfield expansion at outer periphery	Alternative D: Consolidation of Urban Core and plan led expansion of inner edge and environs
	Given the constraints of the town there may be pressure to develop on lands close to designated sites.	Expansion without consolidation on greenfield land, would fragment or cause the destruction of existing habitats and result in the further loss of control over development in these areas.	This would prevent development in areas that are deemed inappropriate such as SAC or SPA lands and would therefore have positive effects on biodiversity.
Strategic Environmental Objectives Population & Human Health	Alternative B: Promote the Gateway Status	Alternative C: Greenfield expansion at outer periphery	Alternative D: Consolidation of Urban Core and plan led expansion of inner edge and environs
	Future growth would be contained within the town, with access to health, educational and amenities being walking or cycling distance for many of the population. The concentration of the growth to the town would protect the natural heritage areas beyond the environs which would	The quality of life would be reduced with further commuting travelling, increased noise pollution and the erosion of the landscape.	This would allow for the efficient use of lands with services and infrastructure being provided at the same for the population as an area grows.

	benefit the existing population and visitors.		
Strategic Environmental Objectives Water Resources	Alternative B: Promote the Gateway Status	Alternative C: Greenfield expansion at outer periphery	Alternative D: Consolidation of Urban Core and plan led expansion of inner edge and environs
	The promotion of the gateway status would place constraints on the existing WWTP which is currently exceeding capacity.	This would encourage further development outside the existing public sewerage catchment, and development that would not be able to connect in the future. This would continue the current problems regarding diffuse pollution into the Shannon in particular.	By keeping development in areas close to the town ensures that such development can be connected to the public network when it is upgraded.
Strategic Environmental Objectives Soils	Alternative B: Promote the Gateway Status	Alternative C: Greenfield expansion at outer periphery	Alternative D: Consolidation of Urban Core and plan led expansion of inner edge and environs
	Maximises the use of brownfield lands. Development would be limited in those areas subject to flooding within the town centre or on contaminated lands. Protects undeveloped lands in the rural areas.	Unsuitable lands may continue to be developed resulting in further impact to the soil, water courses and areas affected by flooding.	Development would be concentrated in areas which have been assessed for environmental sensitivity.
Strategic Environmental Objectives Cultural Heritage & Landscape	Alternative B: Promote the Gateway Status	Alternative C: Greenfield expansion at outer periphery	Alternative D: Consolidation of Urban Core and plan led expansion of inner edge and environs
	Any new development within the town core would have to have regard to the APZ and ACA which encloses the town. New development can impact on the setting of the river Shannon and the existing historical architecture.	A lack of consolidation and low density expansion at the outer periphery of the town without due regard to the existing townscape may result in the loss of cultural and landscape heritage and historical character of the town.	The consolidation of lands would help to protect and enhance the existing townscape by concentrating development in appropriate locations. Protection should be afforded to existing heritage features within the town and environs boundary.

SEO Air & Climatic Factors	Alternative B: Promote the Gateway Status	Alternative C: Greenfield expansion at outer periphery	Alternative D: Consolidation of Urban Core and plan led expansion of inner edge and environs
	The promotion of the gateway and increasing development within the town core would provide an opportunity to achieve a critical mass to make it possible to provide more public transport and alternative forms of transport.	Greenfield expansion without the development of alternative forms of transport would result in an increase in the contribution to climate change.	The consolidation of the urban core and the plan led expansion of the inner edge and environs would need to be developed in parallel with alternative forms of transport and renewable energy forms.

7.6 Preferred Alternative

The preferred alternative as outlined above was considered in the light of the significant environmental issues for the plan area as discussed in the chapters above. It was considered the preferred alternative was that of the 'Consolidation of Urban Core and Plan led expansion of inner edge and environs'. The main features of this strategy are as follows:

- Supports the role of the town as a Midland's Linked Gateway by channelling development into the town and maximising the use of serviced land.
- Consolidates development to the town and its environs and encourages brownfield and infill development.
- The LAPs for the area allows for the coordinated and sequential development of the town and environs and maximises the use of serviced lands.
- Encourages a mix of land uses where appropriate through land use zoning and supports for sustainable transport modes to reduce unsustainable forms of travel.
- Promotes a coordinated and plan led approach to the strengthening and future development of the social, physical and economic infrastructure for the Plan area.
- Protects the rural area beyond the town's environs.
- Promotes tourism within the town while protecting the natural and built environment of the town.
- Protects the floodplains within the town from further development.

8 SEA MONITORING

8.1 Monitoring

Article 10 of the SEA Directive requires that monitoring should be carried out in order to identify at an early stage any unforeseen adverse impacts associated with the implementation of the plan or programme. A monitoring programme is developed based on the indicators selected to track progress towards achieving Strategic Environmental Objectives and reaching targets, enabling positive and negative impacts on the environment to be measured. As previously described, the environmental indicators have been developed to show changes that would be attributable to implementation of the proposed Athlone Town Development Plan. The SEA carried out has ensured that any potential significant environmental impacts have been identified and given due consideration.

The 2 year review of the Athlone Town Development Plan under Section 15(2) of the Planning and Development Acts 2000-2010 as amended shall be the main point of monitoring progress on implementation of the plan.

9. Strategic Environmental Assessment

ADDENDUM

Addendum arising from proposed amendments to the Draft Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020.



INTRODUCTION

9 AMENDMENTS TO ATHLONE DRAFT DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2014-2020

Further to presentation of the County Manager's report on submissions and observations received during the display period and consideration by the Elected Members, amendments are proposed to the Draft Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020. This report has been prepared for the purposes of assessing proposed material amendments as to how they interact/ impact on the relevant provisions of the Environmental Report for the Draft Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020. The report considers material amendments made in the County Manager's Report under Section 12(4) of the Planning and Development Act 2000-2011 and amendments proposed by resolution of the Members under Section 12(6) thereof. Comments in relation to the SEA are presented in italic text. The amendments are annotated to correspond with the chapter and paragraph numbering in the Draft Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020. The proposed amendments are cross-referenced to the issues identified in the Environmental Report; followed by Recommendation/ Comment as to consequences for SEA. This report constitutes an addendum to the Environmental Report previously prepared for the Draft Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020.

Amendment No. 1

9.1 LINKED GATEWAY TOWN OF ATHLONE

The Midland Gateway, the fifth largest Gateway in terms of population, is unique among the Gateways designated by the National Spatial Strategy in 2002, in that it comprises the three linked towns of Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore, from the neighbouring counties of Westmeath and Offaly. All three towns have developed around the traditional East-West transport axis that traverses the Irish Midlands.

The three towns that form the Midland Gateway have different natural functional areas (hinterlands). Athlone has a wide catchment area which extends westward into Roscommon and East Galway.

Athlone is marginally the largest of Midland Gateways Towns, with a population of 20,153. The town features an extensive industrial base, which supports a number of pharmaceutical, medical devices and information technology companies (both manufacturing and service support related). The town also plays host to the Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT), an important third level education institution for the Midland Gateway with more than 4,800 enrolled students and which offers programmes in business, humanities, engineering and science. In addition the Midlands Innovation and Research Centre which is based at AIT, is a hub for research and innovation and enterprise development in the Midland Region. Also present within Athlone is Georgia Tech Ireland, which operates an applied research centre based in the IDA campus since 2006 and a joint initiative between Georgia Tech (USA) and the Irish State.

All three towns, individually, have proved to be successful at attracting both FDI and indigenous companies to establish operations within their functional areas. Examples of the types of companies which Athlone has been successful in attracting include Ericsson (ICT), Covidien KCI and Alkermes (formerly Elan pharmaceuticals).

The Gateways Hubs Development Summary Report 2012 noted the following:

The Midland Gateway population has grown by 9.01% between 2006 and 2011, which is ahead of the Gateway average of 8.44%.

Third level Research and Development funding in the Athlone Gateway (€722 per enrolled student) is below the Gateway average (€2,405 per enrolled student) in 2010. This has however increased 63.05% since 2006.

The overall percentage of people within the Midland Gateway (Zones 1 and 2) who walk, cycle or use public transport to get to and from work had fallen slightly to 11.56% in 2011.

IT connectivity has grown by 43.8% across the gateway to 56.27%.

In comparison to the national Gateway average, the Midland Gateway is relatively deprived (the 6th most affluent of the nine Gateways), within negative ratings on the Affluence and Deprivation Index for both Zone 1 and Zone 2.

Recommendation/ Comment:

The proposed amendment elaborates upon Athlone's role in the linked Gateway and the context for future economic and employment growth. The amendment does not affect the overall assessment and conclusion contained in the SEA Environmental Report.

Amendment No. 2

9.2 MONITORING, REVIEW & IMPLEMENTATION

In accordance with the SEA Environmental Report, it is the intention of the Council to establish a monitoring programme based on the indicators selected to track progress towards achieving Strategic Environmental Objectives and reaching targets, enabling positive and negative impacts on the environment to be measured.

Recommendation/ Comment:

The Monitoring Programme should relate to key environmental indicators and Strategic Environmental Objectives (SEO's) set out in the Environmental Report. Frequency of monitoring and department for monitoring should be stated in the Plan.

Amendment No. 3

2 CORE STRATEGY

10 INTRODUCTION

The Guidelines provide for the establishment of a Strategic Development Zone (SDZ) for employment generating uses 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.

Athlone is marginally the largest of the Midland Gateways towns, with a population of 20,153. The town features an extensive industrial base, which supports a number of pharmaceutical, medical devices and information technology companies (both manufacturing and service support related). Athlone Institute of Technology is an important third level institution for the Midland Gateway with

more than 4,800 enrolled students and which offers programmes in Business, Humanities, Engineering and Science. In addition the Midlands Innovation and Research Centre which is based in AIT, is a hub for research and innovation and enterprise development in the Midland Region. Also present within Athlone is Georgia Tech Ireland, which operates an applied research centre based in the IDA campus since 2006 and a joint initiative between Georgia Tech (USA) and the Irish State. In addition to its hinterland in County Westmeath, Athlone has strong socio-economic linkages with Longford and Roscommon and its environs including Monksland. As a commercial centre it has a sphere of influence, which also impacts upon the West Region. The environs of Athlone in County Roscommon (Monksland) fall within the remit of the RPGs for the West Regional Authority.

The Core Strategy has been drafted for the duration of the plan and population targets and lands use zoning objectives relate to that period. The Core Strategy should be read in conjunction with the Core Strategy Map and Table contained in this chapter. The Core Strategy Map also identifies major employment areas and development nodes which are zoned in the Monksland Bellanmullia Local Area Plan 2010-2016, in addition to those in Co. Westmeath.

The Local Planning Framework for Athlone is also to be considered in the context of the Monksland Bellanmullia Local Area Plan 2010-2016, which covers the Athlone West Area located in County Roscommon. This LAP shows in a population change table that the population increased from 4035 in 2002 to 5013 in 2006 representing a 23.7% increase. Core Strategy population allocations from the Draft Roscommon CDP 2014-2020 set a population increase for the area of 538 persons and a housing allocation of 215 units. The plan strongly supports continued employment expansion in the area of medical and pharmaceutical businesses, financial services, logistics, tourism and the strengthening of links with third level institutions. Financial support for enterprise development will be sought through the Western Investment Fund (WIF). The LAP has reserved an area of approximately 130Ha for Business Enterprise and Industrial uses in the Monksland/ Bealnamullia area.

Key objectives for the town's western environs within County Roscommon relating to economic development and population growth adjacent to the linked Gateway require greater co-ordination with those for Athlone town. In order to ensure the coordinated development of the Midland Gateway it remains a Strategic Objective of Westmeath County Council and Athlone Town Council to secure the preparation and adoption of a unitary plan to be prepared in collaboration with Roscommon County Council.

This process will provide the framework for meaningful collaboration in relation to the scale of population growth for the Gateway consistent with Regional targets, Economic Development, Transportation and Land Use including the preparation of LUTS, Housing Strategy, Flood Risk Appraisal and Management, Recreational, Tourism and River Environs Management.

10.1 STRATEGIC AIMS

Prioritising sustainable development of the Gateway

Promoting sustainable economic development and employment creation, within defined economic clusters in established Business Parks such as Garrycastle, Blyry, Athlone Business Park and the Strategic Gateway Zone.

Supporting and promoting the sustainable development of Athlone as an international tourist destination through the continued advancement of the "Destination Athlone" initiative.

Securing the preparation of a unitary plan for Athlone in collaboration with Roscommon County Council in order to ensure co-ordinated development of the Gateway.

Recommendation/ Comment:

The amendment expands upon the Core Strategy in the Draft Plan, by more fully describing the Towns Economic and Employment profile, and in referring to detailed planning objectives for development of Athlone West area in County Roscommon as described in the Monksland/ Beallanmulla LAP 2010-2016. The amendment emphasises the need for a co-ordinated development framework to guide future development of the Gateway, by means of a unitary plan in collaboration with Roscommon County Council. Strategic Environmental Issues raised in the SEA Environmental Report in relation to Gateway status and growth, environmental carrying capacity, flood risk and nature conservation continue to apply.

Amendment No. 4

10.2 HOUSING REQUIREMENT

It is estimated that 3,310 housing units will be required up to 2020 to meet projected population targets.

Recommendation/ Comment:

The amendment provides an estimate of the quantum of housing units which would be required to meet RPG population targets. Environmental Carrying Capacity constraints of Athlone in achieving critical mass has been identified in the Environmental Report Concerns in relation to environmental carrying capacity raised in the Environmental Report continue to apply.

Amendment No. 5

10.3 Employment Policy

The Midland Regional Planning Guidelines 2010 to 2022, which emphasise the importance of building critical mass of population, services and infrastructure point to particular potential of employment creation in the following sectors:

ICT

Pharmaceuticals and related activities

Education

International Trading

Shared Services (multi-lingual)

R&D

Recommendation/ Comment:

The amendment prescribes, on the basis of R.P.G. appraisal of employment sector, those areas of particular potential for employment growth. Issues in relation to environmental carrying capacity referred to in the Environment Report required to meet future demand continue to apply.

Amendment No. 6

Fig. 2.4 Land Use Zoning for Athlone 2014-2020

Land Use	Ha
Commercial	49.5
Enterprise & Employment	115.5
Agricultural	4.7
Innovation Technology	41.4
Mixed Use	74.6
Open Space	164.3
Existing Residential	287.4
Proposed Residential	139.1
Retail Warehousing	10.9
Sporting Recreational	48.5
Strategic Gateway Zone	112.9
Comm, Educational, Institutional	85.4
Agricultural	4.7
Total Amount of Zoned Land	1139Ha

Recommendation/ Comment:

Table 2.4 sets out quantum of lands zoned in the Draft Development Plan for the various use categories including 139.1ha for residential. Environmental Carrying Capacity constraints of Athlone in achieving critical mass has been identified in the Environmental Report Key environmental issues raised in the Environmental Report in relation to infrastructural capacity, environmental carrying capacity, nature conservation apply to consideration of impacts on implementation of developments provided for up to 2020. The conclusions of the Environmental Report remain unaltered.

Amendment No. 7

CORE STRATEGY POLICIES

P-CS3	To promote and facilitate sustainable economic development and employment creation in the town, commensurate with Athlone's status as a Linked Gateway Town.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

The policy has been amended to include reference to term "sustainable" and does not alter conclusions of SEA Environmental Report.

Amendment No. 8

P-CS7	To ensure a sequential approach to development and promote residential development, prioritisation of infill sites / developments and the occupation of residential units in the town core, in order to promote the achievement of critical mass and protect and enhance town centre function.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

Policy is contingent upon adherence to environmental carrying capacity requirements raised in the Environmental Report. The proposed amendment does not affect conclusions of the Environmental Report.

Amendment No. 9

It is the objective of the Council:

O-CS1	To secure the preparation of a unitary plan for Athlone and in collaboration with Roscommon County Council in order to provide for the co-ordinated development of the Gateway town recognising its importance as a key driver of growth in the region.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

The unitary plan should be subject to SEA, AA and SFRA to ensure consistency in identification, assessment and mitigation of key environmental issues for Athlone. The policy should be amended such that reference is included in the Plan to the effect that such Plan be subject to SEA, AA and SFRA.

Amendment No. 10

O-CS2	To monitor Plans and development trends in the Roscommon environs of Athlone in the interests of securing co-ordinated development of the Gateway.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

Methodology for and frequency of monitoring (in combination with programme referred to in Amendment No. 2) shall be stated.

Amendment No. 11

11 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

- To facilitate sustainable economic development and regeneration.
- To promote and expand knowledge-based enterprise and innovation economy, capitalising on strong linkages between industry, AIT and existing research institutions.
- To enhance the range of functions and services, retail offer and facilities in the town, in order to support economic activity and maintenance of a suitable workforce.

Recommendation/ Comment:

The Strategy is consistent with M.R.P. Guidelines framework for economic development of the Gateway. Strategy is contingent upon environmental carrying capacity requirements raised in Environmental Report, being fully addressed. Reference to this affect should be made in the Plan.

Amendment No. 12

It is an objective of the Councils:

O-EC1	To identify and progress the establishment of a Strategic Development Zone, to the east of Athlone, subject to environmental constraints and Habitats assessment, particularly in relation to Crosswood Bog and Carn Park Bog.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

Strategic Environmental Issues associated with the proposal to establish an SDZ which were raised in the SEA Environmental Report continue to apply.

11.1 GENERAL RETAILING POLICIES & OBJECTIVES

Amendment No. 13

It is a policy of the Councils:

P-RET2	To promote retail development as a fundamental element and a potential catalyst for the promotion and enhancement of broader town centre functions. New development proposals shall protect the retail function of the core shopping area, contribute positively to the public realm and display high quality urban design and place-making attributes.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

The amendment seeks consolidation of the underpinning of the Town Centre Retail function; and promotion of higher quality design. The proposed amendment does not affect conclusions of the Environmental Report.

Amendment No. 14

P-RET5	To support the vitality and viability of existing designated centres and facilitate a competitive and healthy environment for the retailing industry into the future by ensuring that future growth in retail floorspace is in keeping with the Retail hierarchy, as prescribed in the Retail Strategy.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

Retail projections in terms of floor space requirements should be evidence based taking account of Regional Development Strategies, vacancy and current trends in retailing as regards potential for Environmental impact. The Policy is contingent upon addressing of Strategic Environmental issues identified in the Environmental Report and reference to the affect be made in the Plan.

Amendment No. 15

P-RET6	To adhere to the provisions of the Sequential Approach in the consideration of retail applications located outside of core retail area, as identified in Fig. 4.2.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

The proposed amendment does not affect conclusions of the Environmental Report.

Amendment No. 16

It is an objective of the Councils:

O-RET1	To prepare and implement a Joint Retail Strategy for the Linked Gateway Towns of Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore, in conjunction with Offaly and Roscommon County Councils in accordance with the Retail Planning Guidelines 2012.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

Retail projections in terms of floor space requirements should be evidence based taking account of Regional Development Strategies, vacancy and current trends in retailing. Achievement of the objective is contingent upon addressing of Strategic Environmental issues identified in the Environmental Report and reference to the affect be made in the Plan.

Amendment No. 17

O-RET3

To promote higher order and comparison goods retail activity in the town centre and resist the loss of retail units, to non-retail use, at pedestrian level, particularly in the primary shopping streets in Athlone which are defined as follows:
Connaught Street, O'Connell St., High St., Main St., Castle St., Pearse St., Church St., Mardyke St., and Irishtown Upper.

Recommendation/ Comment:

The objective aligns with policies to underpin the vitality and viability of the town centre through promotion of retailing function and non-retail uses. The objective which seeks the promotion of residential use and protection of residential amenity in the town centre should be included in O-RET3.

Amendment No. 18

Chapter 5

12 CHARACTER AREAS POLICIES & OBJECTIVE

It is an objective of the Councils:**O-CA1**

To examine the potential to construct a new bridge across the River Shannon linking the east and west areas of the town for pedestrians and cyclists, subject to the requirements of the Habitats Directive, Water Framework Directive, EIA Directive and other relevant EU Directives.

Recommendation/ Comment:

The Environmental Report identifies the construction of the proposed bridge as a potentially significant environmental issue. Particular Environmental sensitivities attaching to the development have been identified in the Scoping of Environmental Report for Variation No. 4 to Athlone Town Development Plan 2008-2014 and should be incorporated into the Plan.

Amendment No. 19

(Opportunity Site No. 7) – Ranelagh Site

Having regard to the risk of flooding on this site, it has been reserved in the plan for low vulnerability uses including Open Space and Enterprise and Employment, reflecting established uses. Any further development or intensification of use proposed on these lands shall be subject to a site specific Flood Risk Assessment.

Recommendation/ Comment:

The Environmental Report identifies Flood Risk as a significant environmental issue for Athlone. The Environmental Report which recommends that policy should provide for/ promote appropriate Flood Risk Assessment to be undertaken where development and zoning are being proposed in the Plan where there is a risk of flooding should be followed.

Chapter 6

Amendment No. 20

13 INTEGRATION OF LAND USE PLANNING & TRANSPORTATION

It is therefore Council policy to prepare a coordinated Transportation/ LUTS Plan for Athlone in conjunction with Roscommon County Council. The Council is committed to preparing a LUTS for Athlone and to the continued incorporation of the traffic model in conjunction with Roscommon County Council. The Plan shall in addition provide policy and a coordinated consistent approach to development affecting the M6/N6 strategic corridor.

Recommendation/ Comment:

A timeframe for completion of this study, which will promote and facilitate the integration of Land Use and Transportation Policy within the town and its environs (including those in County Roscommon) should be stated in the Plan. The proposed amendment does not affect conclusions of the Environmental Report.

13 WALKING & CYCLING POLICIES & OBJECTIVES

Amendment No. 21

It is the policy of the Councils:

P-WC6	To support and facilitate the development through Athlone of the National Cycle Route between Dublin and Galway, including the construction of a new pedestrian and cycle Bridge across the River Shannon.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

The Environmental Report identifies the construction of the proposed bridge as a potentially significant environmental issue. Particular Environmental sensitivities attaching to the development have been identified in the Scoping of Environmental Report for Variation No. 4 to Athlone Town Development Plan 2008-2014 and should be incorporated into the Plan.

Amendment No. 22

P-WC7

To support and facilitate the provision of a Cycleway and Walkway in Athlone within the corridor of the disused Mullingar to Athlone railway line, pending the re-opening of this line as a railway.

Recommendation/ Comment:

Scoping of Environmental Report for Variation No. 4 to Athlone Town Development Plan 2008-2014 has been completed. Particular Environmental sensitivities attaching to the development have been identified and should be fully addressed in Plan policy.

Amendment No. 23

It is an objective of the Councils:**O-WC3**

To provide a cycleway and walkway in the town within the corridor of the Mullingar to Athlone disused railway together with a pedestrian and cycleway link to the Roscommon County Boundary, including all related signage, waymarking and all associated site works and connections.

Recommendation/ Comment:

The Environmental Report identifies the construction of the proposed cycleway as a potentially significant environmental issue with respect to habitat conservation and flood risk policies. Particular Environmental sensitivities attaching to the development have been identified in the Scoping of Environmental Report for Variation No. 4 to Athlone Town Development Plan 2008-2014 and should be incorporated into the Plan.

Amendment No. 24

O-WC15	To provide a new pedestrian and cycleway bridge across the River Shannon, in conjunction with the development of the Dublin- Galway national cycle route, subject to habitat protection requirements.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

The Environmental Report identifies the construction of the proposed bridge as a potentially significant environmental issue. Particular Environmental sensitivities attaching to the development have been identified in the Scoping of Environmental Report for Variation No. 4 to Athlone Town Development Plan 2008-2014 and should be incorporated into the Plan.

Amendment No. 25

O-WC16	To provide a walking/cycling route from the Athlone Mullingar railway line in Athlone, to the River Shannon, via a new bridge over the Shannon to the west bank and onwards to the Roscommon county boundary, with the potential to connect to Athlone Castle and southwards around the town.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

Scoping of Environmental Report for Variation No. 4 to Athlone Town Development Plan 2008-2014 has been completed. Particular Environmental sensitivities attaching to the development have been identified and should be incorporated into the Plan. Reference to the need for S.F.R.A. should be included in the Plan.

Amendment No. 26

O-WC17	To provide a network of pedestrian and cycle routes within the town in conjunction with the development of the Dublin -Galway national cycle route, subject to habitat protection requirements.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

Scoping of Environmental Report for Variation No. 4 to Athlone Town Development Plan 2008-2014 has been completed. Particular Environmental sensitivities attaching to the development have been identified and should be incorporated into the Plan.

Amendment No. 27

It is an objective of the Council:

O-TM17	To require that any new/existing mammal mitigation measures installed during road construction /upgrades shall be managed and repairs carried out where necessary.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

The proposed amendment does not affect conclusions of the environmental report. Consultations with N.P.W.S. in regard to design and management should be undertaken.

Chapter 8

14 RENEWABLE ENERGY POLICIES & OBJECTIVES

Amendment No. 28

It is an objective of the Councils:

O-REN6	To consider local and migrating bat and bird populations in the assessment of applications for Small-Scale Wind Turbines in the town.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

The proposed amendment does not affect conclusions of the Environmental Report.

Amendment No. 29

14.1 ICT POLICIES & OBJECTIVE

P-ICT6	To facilitate the provision of telecommunications infrastructure in Athlone in accordance with the requirements of the “Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures – Guidelines for Planning Authorities” July 1996 and Circular Letter PL 07/12.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

The proposed amendment does not affect conclusions of the Environmental Report.

Chapter 9

15 TOURISM POLICIES & OBJECTIVES

Amendment No. 30

P-TRM3	To continue to encourage and promote the sustainable development of a range of quality tourism facilities, attractions and accommodation within the town.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

The policy was assessed in the Environmental Report; and should be qualified by reference to environmental and habitat protection compliance requirements refer to therein.

Amendment No. 31

It is an objective of the Councils:

O-TRM5	To explore the provision of sustainable medium- and long-distance walking routes, focusing on the River Shannon and Lough Ree, in co-operation with Roscommon County Council, subject to environmental constraints and the requirements of the Habitats Directive.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

Environmental concerns associated with the development of recreational access to the River Shannon and Lough Ree have previously been raised in the Environmental Report and the Natura Impact Report. The requirement for Habitat Management Plan preparation to proceed significant development should be appended to this objective.

Chapter 11

16 NATURAL HERITAGE POLICIES & OBJECTIVES

Amendment No. 32

It is a policy of the Councils:

P-NH10	To require Appropriate Assessment (Habitats Directive Assessment) and where relevant appropriate environmental assessment such as EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment), or ecological appraisal for developments not directly connected with or necessary to the management of a European site, and which are likely to have significant effects on the integrity of the site individually or cumulatively.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

The proposed amendment does not alter conclusions of the Environmental Report.
Amendment No. 33

It is an objective of the Councils:

It is an objective of the Councils:

O-WW4	To assess development proposals which involve lighting along water courses, rivers, streams and canal corridors, tree lines and urban woodland, in order to mitigate impacts of lighting on bats and other species.
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Recommendation/ Comment:

The proposed amendment does not affect conclusions of the Environmental Report.

Amendment No. 34

17 ENERGY

Wind energy development proposals will be considered in designated industrial, enterprise and research areas within the plan boundary.

Recommendation/ Comment:

The requirement for compliance with the Wind Energy Guidelines 2006 and the Habitat Directive should be included as a qualification to this statement.

18 LAND USE ZONING CATEGORIES**Amendment No. 35**

The following categories are to be included in the Land Use Zoning Matrix

10. Innovation & Technology

11. Strategic Gateway Zone

Recommendation/ Comment:

The proposed amendment does not affect conclusions of the Environmental Report.

Amendment No. 36/ 37

Amendments made by resolution of the elected members supported by mapped proposals.

1. 2 units in Arcadia to be zoned for commercial use. (Amendment 36)

Recommendation/ Comment:

The amendment introduces commercial uses into an area predominantly in use for retail warehousing and zoned as such and was not recommended in County Manager's Report for the purposes of clarity the amendment should include reference to the requirement for adherence to policies in the Retail Strategy for Athlone.

2. Lands to the west of L4022 at Hillquarter to be de-zoned from residential and Lands to the east of L4022 to be zoned as residential (Amendment 37)

Recommendation/ Comment:

The amendment involves 5.69 hectares located on the eastern side of L4022. Concerns raised in the Environmental Report regarding proximity to SAC, and SPA during construction, and use; still apply. The Environmental Report which recommends removal of zoning at Hill Quarter remains unaltered.

Amendment No. 38

3. Parcel of land on Dublin Road opposite AIT to be zoned for commercial use.(County Manager's Recommendation)

Recommendation/ Comment:

The amendment seeks to reflect in zoning objectives established commercial usage at this location. The proposed amendment does not affect conclusions of the environmental report.

Amendment No. 39

Proposal to remove the following structures from the Draft Record of Protected Structures:

15007075	Regional Gateway	
15007076	Regional Gatelodge	} Associated with New Court House, Ballymahon Road, Athlone
15007077	Regional House	

Additional Structures to be deleted

15000158, 15000337, 15007055 and 15009222. 15000206 and 15000209. 15000261 15003024
15003051 15003060, 15007097 and 15007098

Recommendation/ Comment:

Removal of these structures from the draft record of protected structures would conflict with a number of the Strategic Environmental Objectives of the SEA Environmental Report, including risk of loss of items of architectural heritage and/or erosion of distinctive character.

