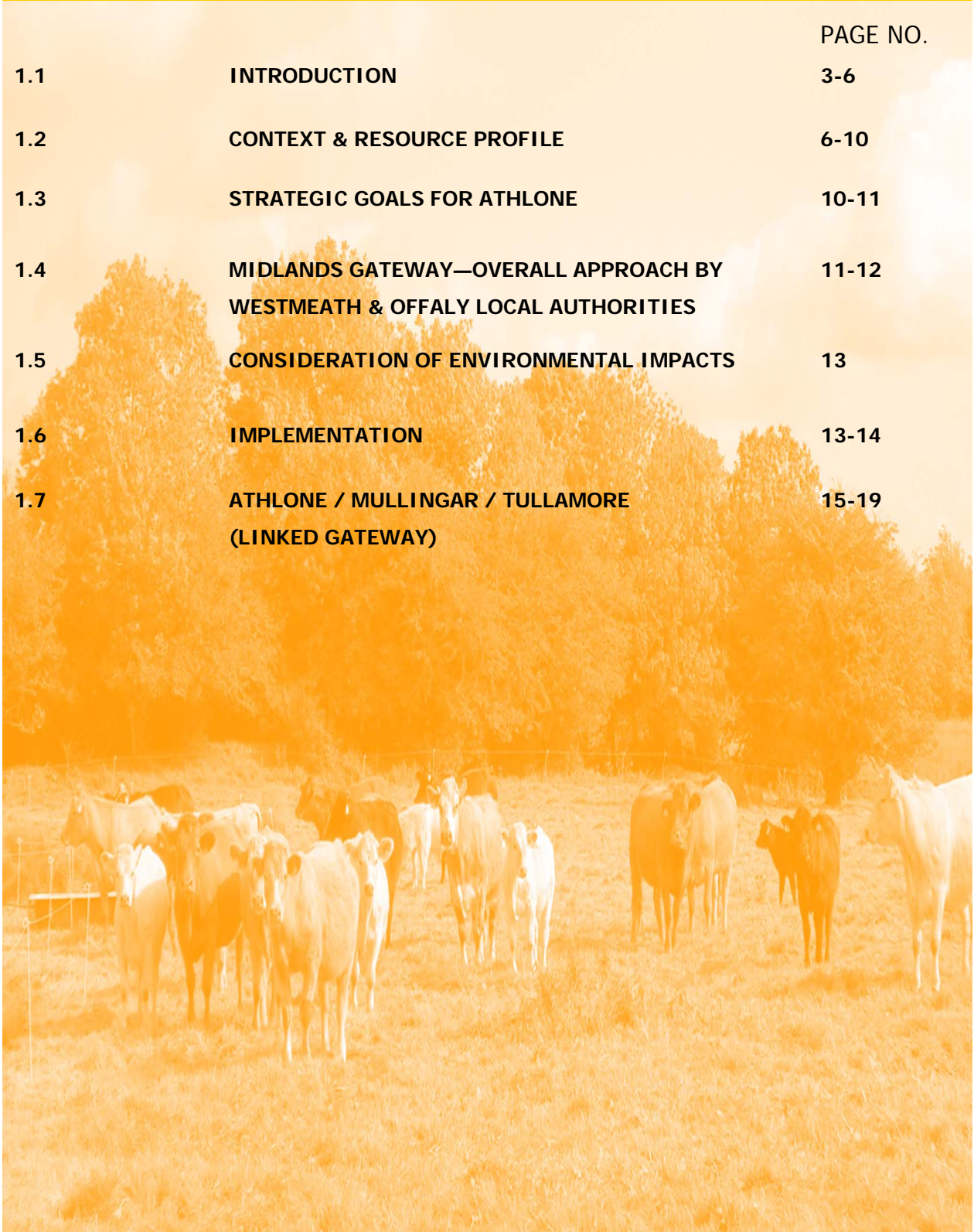


PART ONE: CONTEXT

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Council's planning objective setting, strategy formulation, and policy generation functions are designed to control and manage the use of land and development for everyone's benefit. The Athlone Town Development Plan's written statement, schedules, maps, and current and future supplementary 'advice notes' will help ensure that all stakeholders will have equity in the future development of the Town.

The 'mission statement' of Athlone Town Council, as the statutory Planning Authority, is to develop and manage the resources of the town maximising the benefit and minimising the cost for all, for now and for the future in the interests of the common good. This mission statement still underlies the development strategy of the Town Council.

Review of Athlone Development Plan 2002

The aim of the 2002 Athlone Town Development Plan was to set out a framework for the sustainable development of Athlone. This was in order that growth would take place in an orderly and co-ordinated manner having regard to the fact that the town of Athlone includes areas within County Roscommon and County Westmeath, outside the Town, while ensuring the conservation and protection of the built environment. The Plan also aimed to consider the needs of all groups and individuals within Athlone and to promote equal opportunities.

The Athlone Town Development Plan 2008-2014 builds on the policy and aspirations of the previous plan, and advances policy and objectives in new areas of importance as reflected during the public consultation phase, and responding to the national and regional policy context.

Achievements of the Town Development Plan 2002

- Established framework for the orderly development of the Town and its Environs.
- Conservation of the natural environment including Shannon wet lands and callows.
- Protection of the towns built and archaeological heritage.
- Served to co-ordinate activities of sectors, within local authorities, including roads, water services and housing.
- Emphasized the importance of building critical mass to enable Athlone to fulfill its role as a strategically important spatial centre, leading to growth of employment, educational (incl. 3rd level), retail and housing sectors.
- In advancing policies and objectives serving the regeneration of the town centre, the plan established planning context for the delivery of the Town Centre Re-development Scheme, including civic offices and the creation of a new civic plaza.
- Set objectives for preparation of Local Area Plans ensuring preparation and adoption of framework plans for Cornamaddy, and Lissywollen North providing for coordinated delivery of development of these areas.
- Attributing importance to public realm, now becoming evident in enhancing environmental schemes and transport planning within the town.
- Introduced policies which promoted management of the River Shannon and Riverine urban environment as a key resource for the town, as a basis for sustainable tourism and recreational enterprises and activities.
- Identified importance to the town's economy of supporting and facilitating growth of Athlone IT and its innovation infrastructure, including links with other colleges and the enterprise sector.

1.1 Strategic Guiding Principles & Processes for the Development Plan

Legislative Context

The Planning and Development Acts 2000-2006 requires that a Development Plan shall, so far as practical, be consistent with national plans, policies and strategies, which relate to the proper planning and sustainable development of an area covered by the Plan. Furthermore, Developments Plans should have regard to any guidelines issued by the Minister for Environment, Heritage and Local Government which would have a bearing on proper planning and sustainable development.

Policy Context

The following policy documents have been identified as containing key guiding principles and processes to influence the preparation of this Plan:

The National Development Plan (NDP)2000-2006

The NDP is an ambitious investment plan for Ireland, involving an investment of over €52 billion of Public, Private and EU funds (in 1999 prices) over the period 2000-2006. The Plan involves significant investment in health services, social housing, education, roads, public transport, rural development, industry, water and waste, social housing services, childcare and local development and has important implications for infrastructure development.

A new NDP has been published covering the period 2007-2013. The €184 billion investment plan builds on the significant social and economic achievements of the previous NDP. Launched in January 2007, and entitled 'Transforming Ireland - A Better Quality of Life for All', this seven year plan is envisaged as a major milestone in building a prosperous Ireland for all its people, characterised by sustainable economic growth, greater social inclusion and balanced regional development.

The National Spatial Strategy (NSS) 2002

The NSS aims to achieve a better balance of social, economic and physical development and population between regions in Ireland. It aims to achieve this by bringing people, employment and services closer together to create a better quality of life, consolidation of towns and villages, less congestion, less long distance commuting, more regard to the quality of the environment and increased access to services like health, education and leisure.

The Midland Region, including Athlone and Westmeath, is identified as being an area intended to play a "reinforcing" role, where the key considerations are the creation (based on the Athlone-Mullingar-Tullamore Gateway) of a critical mass necessary to enhance the powers of attraction of the Midlands, strengthening the network of towns and villages in support of this, and supporting rural areas to complement settlements. High urban design quality, effective water services and clear local development frameworks will be necessary to ensure this.

Sustainable Development; A Strategy for Ireland (1997)

The National Strategy for sustainable development provides a framework for the achievement of sustainability at the local level. It calls on planning authorities to incorporate the principles of sustainability into their Development Plans and to ensure that planning policies support its achievement.

Towards Sustainable Local Communities: Guidelines on Local Agenda 21, 2001

Local Agenda 21 aims to promote sustainable development at local and regional level. Land use policy and controls are central to the achievement of sustainability at the local level. These guidelines set out a range of options for action covering economic, social and environmental issues which should be considered by Local Authorities.

Midland Regional Planning Guidelines, 2004

This document has been prepared to implement the NSS in the Midlands region. This is to be achieved through developing the full potential of rural areas in the region in a manner that is compatible with the strengthening of the urban structure of the region, while ensuring a high quality living environment that is rich in heritage and landscape value. The RPG's also acknowledge the environmental advantages of the Midlands in creating better quality of life and promoting economic growth.

Midlands Waste Management Plan 2005-2010

The Midlands Waste Management Plan sets out a programme for the provision of waste infrastructure for the region. It is based on the waste hierarchy of prevention, reuse, recycling and energy recovery ahead of landfill, utilising principles such as the 'polluter pays' and 'proximity' principle.

County Development Board Strategy 2002-2012

The County Development Board Strategy sets an overall framework within which public bodies in the County will deliver their range of services over the term of the strategy. The goals of the strategy are set out under nine themes, which include ensuring

- Effective planning and land use
- Social inclusion
- Maintaining a sustainable environment
- Developing the wider economy
- Integrating housing, youth, social and community development
- Promoting health, education and security

Athlone Town as part of the greater Athlone Area

Athlone Town is in the administrative area of Athlone Town Council and is part of the greater Athlone settlement, which in addition includes environs areas within County Westmeath and County Roscommon. The Athlone Environs Plan (Athlone Environs in Co. Westmeath) is dealt with in the County Development Plan which is concurrent with this plan and is being carried out in tandem with this Plan.

The physical and economic development of the Town is not solely influenced by the policies and objectives setting of Athlone Town Council or indeed Westmeath County Council but is also influenced by other authorities and agencies outside the County and Region. In particular, development in the environs of Athlone within the administrative area of Roscommon County Council is influenced by the Western Regional Planning Guidelines, the Roscommon County Development Plan 2002, the Athlone Environs Development Plan 2002 and the Athlone Environs Specific Objective 1 Local Area Plan which all relate to the western environs of the town.

With reference to the Environs area within County Roscommon, in preparing this Athlone Town Development Plan the Town Council has had regard to the following policy documents:-

Western Regional Planning Guidelines

The Western Regional Planning Guidelines emphasise that the West region is influenced by other locations outside its area. This includes the Linked Gateway of Athlone/Tullamore/Mullingar to the east. Co-operation and coordination of policies and measures are required between regions to fully implement the National Spatial Strategy, and acknowledging the influences that exist are also required. The linked gateway of Athlone/Mullingar/Tullamore has a significant connection with the southern section of Roscommon to which it is contiguous. Co-ordination of policy in such

sectors as retailing guidelines, residential development, and possible industrial locations is paramount for the successful implementation of regional planning guidelines.

Roscommon County Development Plan 2002

The Roscommon County Development Plan was adopted shortly after the Athlone Town Plan and Westmeath County Development Plan in 2002, therefore, the life of the subject plans are similar. The primary aim of the Roscommon County Development Plan 2002 is to consolidate the County as an attractive place in which to live, work and recreate, and to facilitate the achievement of a high quality of life for residents and visitors through the sustainable development of further economic and social activities in a quality environment. The Plan seeks to achieve this aim through the development of all parts of the county including:

- Economic and social development in the towns and villages, where most new development will be channelled and where it can bring benefits both to these settlements themselves and to their rural hinterlands; and
- Growth and diversification in rural areas, especially where there has been an underlying trend of population decline.

The Roscommon County Development Plan 2002 is currently under review.

Roscommon County Council: Athlone Environs Development Plan 2002

As part of the Roscommon County Development Plan an Athlone Environs Plan was adopted. The Athlone Environs Development Plan 2002 aims to establish a framework for the planned, co-ordinated and sustainable development of the Athlone Environs area, for the conservation of the natural environment and built environment. The Plan sets out the objectives and policies of Roscommon County Council. This is in respect of physical planning, as well as coordinating the activities of the Council as housing, sanitary and roads authority. The Plan relates to the western environs of Athlone within County Roscommon. This development plan contains three specific objectives which relates to the preparation of Local Area Plans within the Environs area.

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| OS 1 | To develop the lands zoned G (To provide for Business Park, commercial, warehouse, hotel/leisure and associated uses) and other lands in the vicinity of the junction of the N6 and the N61 in accordance with the provisions of a Local Area Plan. |
| OS 2 | To prepare a Local area Plan for the Hodson Bay/Barrymore area. |
| OS 3 | To prepare a Local Area Plan for lands along and adjoining the Duvoige Road in and adjoining Baylough. |

Roscommon County Council: Athlone Environs Specific Objective 1, 2006-2012

The Specific Objective LAP became effective on the 31 August 2006. The SO1 lands are located in Bogganfin/Monksland Townland in the Western Environs of Athlone Town at the junction of the N6 and N61 in the south east of County Roscommon.

Other documents such as the various Guidelines for Planning Authorities issued by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government are dealt with in the relevant Chapter of the Plan. A more comprehensive list is given in Appendix 4.2.1.

1.2 Context & Resource Profile

The previous Town Plan (2002), was primarily concerned with managing development in a very constrained urban area. Much of the residential development added to the areas population and much of the enterprise development added to town's economic growth, took place in the environs of the Town in both Westmeath County Council and Roscommon County Council administrative areas.

This Plan requires a more comprehensive development management approach, following the extension of the Athlone Town boundary in 2004. It requires policies that will facilitate and guide development over a much larger urban area and into the rural environs of the Town, into lands that were previously under the administration of Westmeath County Council. It is acknowledged that part of Athlone is within the Roscommon County Council administrative area, this Plan has regard to that but does not devise policies for that area.

Population Trends

The latest available census information provides population statistics from 2006, though detailed breakdowns were not available at the time of writing this report. Population growth in the region between 2002 and 2006 was 11.5%, and population growth in County Westmeath over the same period was 10.5%, both above the State average of 8.1%. Population assessments and projections that have informed the Town Plan, Westmeath County Development Plan and the Housing Strategy for Athlone and Westmeath are detailed in Appendix 4.2.3, at the end of this document.

A portion of the population increase can be attributable to natural increase, a significant proportion results from inward migration. Population growth both county wide and regionally was concentrated to the areas proximate and accessible to the Greater Dublin Area. Athlone experienced a slight decline in population of -0.1%, the most pronounced decline was experienced in the Athlone Urban area to the west of the Shannon, -12%.

The population decline can be attributed to the limited extent of lands within a constrained urban boundary, and the availability of lands in the environs of the Town within the Roscommon and Westmeath County Council administrative areas. 'Take up' of serviced available land in the Athlone West Urban Area was also slower than within the eastern urban area. The decline mirrors a similar fall in population between 1991 and 1996 before an intercensal increase between 1996 – 2002.

It is envisaged that this trend of decline will be reversed over the current Plan period. A number of developments have been granted permission within the Urban West Area and some are under construction. However, Plan policies should be tailored to facilitate population growth of the urban area over the term of the Plan.

Population Projections

Traditionally, population assessment and subsequent projections were based primarily on historic trends, both locally and nationally, and assumptions were made with regard to fertility, mortality and migration. While such assessments provide a starting point and allows Athlone to be considered in it's current context, regard has to be had to the proposed future growth of the Town, given the effect of the Regional Planning Guidelines and the unprecedented levels of inward migration.

The Regional Planning Guidelines envisage a population growth for the Midlands Region from a level of 225,600 based on 2002 Census statistics to an overall population of 325,000 by 2020, a substantial proportion of this growth, 55,000 - 60,000, is directed to the central area containing the linked gateway of Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore. Therefore, population projections must account for this anticipated growth and development policies and objectives developed accordingly. Anticipated population growth over the term of the Plan, up to 2014, is detailed in Table 1, below.

For the purposes of clarification, in all assessments of population and projections, Athlone population figures comprise the DED's of Athlone East and West Urban Areas and Athlone East Rural Area. It is acknowledged that a small portion of the Town Council area also falls into Moydrum and the catchment of Athlone extends into County Roscommon, but these figures are used for consistency with the County Housing Strategy.

Table 1 Population assessment 1991 – 2006, actual, 2008 – 2014 estimated

	1991	1996	2002	2006	2014
Athlone Town	13,676	13,419	13,787	13,774	22,774*

*This is the projected population for the urban area of Athlone within County Westmeath.

Land Needs

Provision of land for housing and employment uses needs to be considered in tandem with the population projection. Table 2 below shows that there is currently, in the existing plans, Athlone Town and Athlone Environs (Westmeath), adequate land zoned to accommodate demand.

Table 2 Summary of Land availability

	2002	2006	Undeveloped zoned residential land June 2006	Units per hectare	Equivalent Residential Units (Less 10% open space)	Population Equivalent*	2014 (E)	Enterprise
Athlone	13,787	13,774 (18.2)	198 (Ha)	35	6,237	Additional population which can be accommodated 18,586	22,774 i.e. additional 9,000	160 (ha)

E = estimated

*Household size = 2.98

Household Requirements

The population projections detailed in Table 1 for the years 2010 and 2014 are based on elements of natural population increase, and accounting for the growth envisaged by the Regional Planning Guidelines. Taking an average household size of 2.6 persons in 2006 declining to 2.3 in 2014, the number of additional households that need to be provided for in the Plan period (2008 – 2014) can be calculated as 3,256; a detailed breakdown is provided in Table 3, below.

Table 3 Household requirements 2006 – 2020

	2006	2008	2014
Athlone	13,774	16,348	22,774
Average household size	2.56	2.46	2.3
Households	5,380	6,646	9,902

There still remain extensive areas of land within the extended Town Council Area to provide for the projected population growth of the Town over the Plan period. 198 hectares of undeveloped serviced land is currently available for residential use. This would provide for an additional 6,000

new households and is sufficient to accommodate the estimated population growth over the current Plan period.

It is anticipated that given the scale of development envisaged over the Plan period and beyond, it is vitally important that this takes place in a Plan led manner which involves carrying out detailed framework plans, in particular for new areas identified for development. Future growth will be most effectively delivered and coordinated at a local level through the adoption and implementation of detailed, design led, mixed use Local Area Plans based on the neighbourhood concept. To accommodate development up to 2020 and the estimated population growth, further zoning will be required. In the interests of sustainable development, it is envisaged that this is facilitated by the provision of local area plans to co-ordinate the continued growth of the Town beyond 2014.

Employment and Workforce Trends

While the Census records the employment status of residents in the industrial areas and environs, Athlone serves a much wider employment catchment. Much of the town's employment generating land uses are located outside its administrative boundary, and those employed in the Athlone Town Council Area are not necessarily residents of the Town. This makes accurate assessment of employment numbers difficult and has obvious knock on effects for likely projections.

Within the Town Council Area, primary concentration of employment is obviously within the town centre area, but there are also enterprise zones located at the Diskin Centre off Grace Road, adjacent to Golden Island and at the Arcadia Centre. The Department of Defence is also a significant employer in the local economy. The major supply of employment generating land use is in the environs of the town, both to the east within the functional area of Westmeath County Council, and to the west within the functional area of Roscommon County Council.

Table 4 gives a detailed breakdown of the numbers employed, by sector, in Athlone and its urban environs for 1996 and 2002. The latest census figures for 2006 are not yet available, but it is expected that the trends evident between 1996 and 2002 will be similar for 2006, if not more pronounced in some sectors.

Table 4 Occupation Groups 1996 and 2002 (Source: CSO)

Occupational Group	1996	2002
Farming, Fishing and Forestry	53	33
Manufacturing	928	848
Building and Construction	375	395
Clerical, Managing and Government	908	1,175
Communication and Transport	330	355
Sales and Commerce	919	1,192
Professional, Technical and Health	1,091	1,289
Service Workers	1,173	1,061
Other fields (incl. unstated)	426	859
Looking for first regular job	162	94
Total in labour force	6,365	7,301

Typically, traditional rural employment types represent a small and declining proportion of the employed workforce, manufacturing also demonstrates a declining workforce which is consistent with national trends. Professional, technical, sales and service sectors account for the majority of the workforce. It is anticipated that growth in these areas will continue and policies should be developed to reflect this.

Athlone has traditionally performed strongly in attracting multinational companies, which provide a significant employment base for the town. Examples of companies currently operating in the Town include Ericsson, Elan Corporation, Tyco Mallinckrodt, ICT Eurotel and Georgia tech. (Source: IDA Ireland). It is important to supplement the strong multinational showing with provision for innovative indigenous companies. Athlone IT is a major employer in the town

Permanent employment in IDA Ireland-assisted companies totals over 2,000 persons and is concentrated in the ICT, Pharmaceuticals and Medical Technologies sectors. In addition, foreign-owned companies in the international services/engineering and consumer products sectors employ over 150 persons and over 100 persons respectively in the town. Existing serviced lands are available on the environs of the town to accommodate the continued growth of employment and enterprise, such as Athlone Business & Technology Park at Garrycastle, and a strategic enterprise zoned identified in the Athlone Environs Plan of Westmeath County Council. The Town Council will liaise with both Westmeath County Council and Roscommon County Council, to ensure the availability of sufficient enterprise lands to facilitate the growing employment resource in the Town.

The total on the live register in Athlone in October 2006 was 1,447, representing a district that extended from Moate to half way to Ballinasloe. The 2002 Plan identified pockets of high unemployment in the town. Policies are devised to create employment opportunities within communities with higher incidence of unemployment. For the purposes of clarity, the live register does not just detail unemployment levels but it also includes, inter-alia, those that may be working part time.

1.3 Strategic Goals for Athlone

Athlone is strategically located in the centre of Ireland and is identified as a part of the linked Midlands Gateway in the NSS. This designation has forged a path for the future development of the town. The development of the gateway is a central aim of the NSS and the Midlands Regional Planning Guidelines. This is critical to the delivery of a balanced regional economy and requires targeting investment in enabling key infrastructure provision and supporting services. The development of strong transport links within Athlone and to the other Gateway towns in the region is also imperative in order to establish the gateway, and build on the existing infrastructure and enterprise base and its potential to fuel the growth and development of the region as a whole.

Having regard to the profile and resource base that can contribute to the sustainable development and growth of the town, within a framework of national, regional and local policy documents, and in response to the Town's designation as a linked gateway and an important economic driver in the region, the Town Council have devised the following main aims, as detailed in the Managers Report, to present the basis for policy development in the Plan;

- To promote sustainable development and social inclusion.
- To achieve a higher quality of life for the residents of Athlone.
- To work in partnership with Westmeath County Council and Offaly County Council to ensure that the linked Gateway, Athlone-Tullamore-Mullingar, will achieve the critical mass of population, services and infrastructure, and complementary strengths and attractions to enable the centres to fulfill their combined role as centres for growth, in accordance with National and Regional strategies.
- To promote the balanced distribution of economic and social growth in the Town.
- To ensure an adequate supply of zoned lands at an appropriate rate to meet forecasted and anticipated economic and social need.

- To provide physical and social infrastructure to support the population of the Town and to ensure its competitiveness.
- To utilise the surrounding natural environment and natural resources, to the benefit of the Town, in a managed way that does not compromise these resources.
- To ensure the highest quality living environments and town centre.
- To protect and enhance the identity of the Town through the conservation and enhancement of its built and natural heritage and its culture.

1.4 Midlands Gateway – Overall Approach by Westmeath and Offaly Local Authorities

Building on the NSS, regional planning guidelines and ongoing investment under the National Development Plan 2007-2013, the Westmeath and Offaly Local Authorities are working together:

- To maximise the development potential of the Midlands Gateway of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar.
- To ensure that the linked Gateway will have the critical mass of population services and infrastructure, the complementary strengths and attractions and the dynamic leadership to compete with other gateway cities and towns on the island of Ireland.

The Local Authorities agree that one of the key challenges that the Midlands region faces is generating self sustaining as opposed to commuter led growth, and that creating more self sustaining growth drawing from the potential and capabilities of the region will be achieved through:

- Building up a strong critical mass of population within the linked gateway towns at the heart of the region, with an aim to reach a combined population of 100,000 in the period to 2020 and beyond through a prudent and structured approach to development of county wide land banks;
- Harnessing the potential of the Midland region's third level knowledge and innovation infrastructure, including development of linkages with other regions' third level facilities and to the enterprise sectors;
- Assisting the move towards a highly productive and diversified economic base with strong representation from the value added sectors including innovative property solutions such as a Strategic Development Zone;
- Improving the physical infrastructure of the gateway towns in preparation for their accelerated development, including better roads and public transport links between the towns that will place the Gateway and the region at the heart of the physical territory of the state;
- Conserving the natural and cultural heritage of the region, its constituent counties and the gateway towns in particular including where appropriate, integration with necessary new development, in order to offer a high quality of life and a distinctive basis for tourism based enterprise;
- Ensuring that the development of the gateway is effectively linked to other parts of the counties and the region overall, through enhanced local transport and the complementary development of other towns, villages and rural areas.

To energise the promotion and development of the Midlands Gateway, Westmeath and Offaly Local Authorities commissioned a Strategic Development Framework for the Midlands Gateway whose publication in November 2006 represented a major step forward in collaboration between the local authorities. Looking to the findings and conclusions of the framework and what is required to implement those conclusions, the Westmeath and Offaly Local Authorities agree on three key implementation priorities for the Midlands Gateway;

1. The development of the Midlands Gateway will be driven forward by the relevant local authorities in a strategic and co-ordinated manner that clearly demonstrates vision, leadership and a regional perspective in vigorously implementing the concept. Specifically, the local authorities are establishing mechanisms to deliver such co-ordination through, for example, a joint Gateway Co-ordination Office to work within and between the various local authority structures, local stakeholders such as the private sector, as well as Government Departments and Agencies.
2. Collaborative action in implementing the gateway concept, will embrace a coordinated approach amongst the local authorities to key gateway issues such as the preparation of urban design frameworks for each of the gateway towns, as well as a co-ordinated approach to Housing and Retail Strategies, and combined efforts to secure funding for iconic gateway projects such as the early delivery of major improvements to the roads and public transport connectivity between the gateway towns.
3. A visionary and joined up approach to Gateway development by the Westmeath and Offaly Local Authorities, will be complemented by effective linkages with relevant private sector and community interests through the establishment of, for example, a joint Gateway Sub-committee of the Westmeath and Offaly County Development Boards. Private sector participation in the gateway project is a vital component for success in winning investment. The local authorities, working with business and community interests, will encourage a strategic approach to be taken in agreeing planning and development policies and investment priorities that will deliver the critical mass and complementary attractions across the three towns of the Midlands Linked Gateway.

Therefore, in overall terms the approach of the Westmeath and Offaly Local Authorities in implementing the gateway concept will ensure that:

- There is strong local driver for the gateway concept
- There is agreement on the key complementary policies for the gateway towns in matters such as housing, commercial development, transport connectivity and the treatment of intervening areas
- There is effective partnership between the policies of the local authorities, and the community and private sector interests so as to maximise investment potential.

Under the NDP 2007-2013, an unprecedented level of capital investment is ongoing across the country, and in the Midlands Gateway the Westmeath and Offaly Local Authorities recognise that there is now a need for co-ordinated planning and investment strategies to deliver long term and self sustaining growth. Funding under the NDP Gateways Innovation Fund (GIF), will be sought for specific measures to release blockages in the development of strategic sites within the gateway towns, for urban regeneration and consolidation projects on key sites in the three towns, and enhanced connectivity improvements between the towns additional to the Transport 21 investment programme.

1.5 Consideration of Environmental Impacts

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA); (Directive 2001/42/EC which came into effect on the 1st of July 2004, through the European Communities (Environmental Assessment of Certain Plans and Programmes) Regulations 2004 (S.I. 435 of 2004) and the Planning and Development (Strategic Environmental Assessment) Regulations 2004 (S.I. 436 of 2004). It is now a necessary part of plan making “to provide for a high level of protection of the environment and to contribute to the integration of environmental considerations into the preparation and adoption of plans and programmes with a view to promoting sustainable development, by ensuring that an environmental assessment is carried out of certain plans and programmes which are likely to have significant effects on the environment”.

Strategic Environmental Assessment of a Development Plan involves the preparation of an Environmental Report, the carrying out of consultations and the taking into account of these consultations in decision-making that must then be reported on publicly. Measures envisaged for the monitoring of the significant environmental effects on the implementation of plans/programmes must be included in the Environmental Report. Environmental authorities must (by reason of their specific environmental responsibilities) be consulted in carrying out the Strategic Environmental Assessment. For this Town Development Plan review, the authorities that were consulted are the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources. Additionally, the Environmental Report on the draft County Development Plan 2008 – 2014 was placed on public display.

SEA is part of this Town Development Plan review. It has highlighted environmental conflicts or inconsistencies during the formulation of policies and objectives so that they may be considered as part of the process of informed decision making. The Environmental Report accompanies this Development Plan.

1.6 Implementation

Resources

The primary function of the Athlone Town Development Plan is promoting, facilitating and guiding the development and use of land in the Town. Once the Town Development Plan is adopted, it will be used as a basis for guiding investment decisions of the public and private sector. While Athlone Town Council has a key role in implementing the policies and objectives in the Plan, it is constrained in its efforts by limited resources. This factor underlies the need to maximise both financial and human resources, amongst other organisations and individuals. The Planning Authority can however fulfil the pivotal role of the ‘enabler’, contributing its own resources, and creating conditions where proposals can be brought to fruition and the objectives of the Plan realised. The Plan will be implemented by a combination of encouraging and supporting public, private and voluntary sector investment. The role of the complementary functions of Planning Enforcement and Development Management will also play an important part in achieving proper and sustainable development of the County with regard to realising the policies and objectives in the Development Plan. The Town Council may also initiate Compulsory Purchase Orders in order to alleviate constraints on development potential, where necessary.

There are many proposals set out in this Plan over which the Town Council will have no direct responsibility or control. The expansion of educational facilities, both second and third level for example, is essentially the responsibility of the Department of Education and Science while the provision of public transport falls within the remit of Iarnród Éireann, Bus Éireann and other private providers. While the Town Council will make every effort it can to facilitate the provision of social and community facilities, transport infrastructure and facilities and other necessary services, in many instances it is not the direct provider of such services.

Enabling & Securing Development

The Planning Authority recognises that in making decisions to allocate land or to determine planning applications, it will need to take account of all material considerations including the

provision of infrastructure necessary to support development, and the reasonable needs for amenities and facilities arising as a direct result of the development. In light of the resource framework highlighted above, the Planning Authority and service providers have found it increasingly difficult to provide infrastructure and amenities for new development. It is the Planning Authority's view, that developers and landowners should make the necessary and appropriate provision for infrastructure, services and amenities including community facilities, where the need for these arises as a direct result of the proposed development.

Provision of satisfactory infrastructure is essential to the proper implementation of the Plan's policies and objectives. Development of land often increases the burden on existing infrastructure that has insufficient capacity to enable significant developments to proceed, and can also worsen conditions for existing users of the infrastructure and services. Thus developers may be reasonably expected to pay for, or contribute to the cost of infrastructure which would not have been necessary but for their development. Developers may therefore be requested, to submit information and assessments to assist the Planning Authority in determining what infrastructure should be provided and the phasing of its provision.

Development Contributions

The Planning and Development Acts 2000 – 2006 provides for the adoption of a development contribution scheme, which must be the basis for charging development contributions. For public infrastructure and facilities, Section 48 of the Planning and Development Acts 2000 - 2006 sets out the requirements for making a development contribution scheme. S 48 (2) (c) provides for special contributions towards exceptional costs not covered by the scheme in respect of public infrastructure and facilities benefiting the proposed development. S 49 provides for supplementary contribution schemes in respect of any public infrastructure service or project. Athlone Town Council will use all of these provisions as appropriate.

In the case of new development proposals, development contributions may be sought from developers in respect of: public infrastructure and facilities, and any public infrastructure service or project, as provided for by Sections 48 and 49 of the Planning and Development Acts 2000 – 2006.

Monitoring & Progress Review

Within two years of the adoption of this Plan, the manager will report to the members on progress achieved in securing the objectives of the Plan. The Council produces a series of regular monitoring reports in addition to other planning related data as required by the Government. These relate to the key areas of:

- Housing – the monitoring of residential land availability, the supply of housing land and affordable housing
- Employment – the monitoring of employment land availability and the supply of strategic employment land
- Planning application statistics

The Planning Authority will continue to monitor the effectiveness of policies and objectives in the Plan, and will take account of the changing circumstances in the physical, social and economic environment in order to review and update the Plan.

As part of the Strategic Environmental Assessment process, measures envisaged for monitoring the likely significant effects of implementing the Plan have been included in the Environmental Report, which accompanies this Plan. The two-year progress review of Development Plan implementation will include monitoring of significant environmental effects.

1.7 Athlone/Mullingar/Tullamore (Linked Gateway)

The 2000-06 NDP designated the five existing cities as Gateways to drive future growth, with the intention, that a small number of additional regional Gateways be identified by the NSS, and promoted over the period of the plan as “urban growth centres that could complement the existing Gateways and drive development throughout the regions”. The NSS identified Dundalk, Sligo, Letterkenny (linked to Derry) and the Midland-linked Gateway of Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore as the four additional Gateways.

The designation of Athlone has significant implications for formulating policy at a local level to address and facilitate anticipated growth. On a wider basis, Athlone Town Council, Westmeath County Council and Offaly County Council must co-ordinate Plans to ensure the effective delivery of the Gateway principle. The following text has been drafted, in recognition of the important complementary role that Athlone and Mullingar play, both in the context of County Westmeath and the Midlands Region. Offaly in the review of their Development Plan will have to have regard to the same national and regional policy context.

Gateways Infrastructural Needs and Context

Gateways are described in the NSS as having a “strategic location, nationally and relative to their surrounding areas, and providing national scale social, economic and support services”. Key to the development of the Gateways is enhancement of their critical physical, social and knowledge capital in order to support their expanded roles as strategic development centres. The NSS also sets out a series of key characteristics of Gateways in an Irish context that need to exist or be achieved over the period of the NSS:

- A large urban population set in a large urban and rural hinterland.
- Wide ranges of primary/secondary education facilities and national or regional third-level centres of learning.
- Large clusters of national/international scale enterprises, including those involved in advance sectors.
- A focal point in transportation and communication terms: (a) on the national roads and rail networks, (b) within one hour of an airport, either with international access or linking to one with such access, (c) adequate, reliable, cost-effective and efficient access to port facilities and (d) effective, competitive broadband access.

A cornerstone of the National Spatial Strategy – the Government’s framework for achieving more balanced regional development – is therefore development of nine large urban centres or networks of urban centres as “Gateways”. These Gateways have been identified as fundamental to the economic development of the regions in which they are strategically positioned. Two recurring themes have been identified where the pace of development and implementation needs to be urgently increased:

- Improved investment prioritisation and funding availability in favour of the Gateways.
- Improved co-ordination of Gateway planning and investment within and between the local, regional and national levels.

Development of the Gateways therefore requires funding commitments, at both local and national levels, to deliver the prioritized investments identified in a focused and timely manner. The new 2007-13 NDP represents an historic opportunity to make the NSS a reality as the framework for regional investment and development. The next NDP should therefore contain a reaffirmation of the role of Gateways as the drivers of growth in their regions, and explicit commitment to meeting their prioritised investment needs.

Gateway development involves not just physical infrastructure, but also a range of inter-linked factors that make for a dynamic, vibrant and attractive urban location. These factors are central to good planning and include the development of the overall physical environment, of the enterprise and economic base, labour force participation and skills, research and development, and cultural and recreational infrastructures. Quality urban centres and streetscape, quality physical environment generally, good physical planning, and absence of crime are key determinants of quality of life and are a good basis for further economic advancement.

Significant investment in roads is needed in the Gateway towns to open up strategically placed land banks for planned development. There is a need to address the planning and provision of local public transport. This could be addressed through public transport partnerships created at local level, involving local authorities, private operators, CIE and others, and supported by appropriate transport planning capacity within the local authorities. Delivering on reform of the bus licensing system is an important facilitating factor in this regard.

There is a role for highly targeted investment and incentives to support the re-development of strategically located brownfield sites in both of the Gateway towns, and for continued significant investment in urban renewal and improvement activities.

It is critical for balanced economic growth that the Gateways are developed in a focused and cohesive way so that they provide a competitive base for the growth of the indigenous sector and the attraction of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). The enterprise and tourism development agencies have a role to play in identifying the needs of current and future enterprise, based on their knowledge, plans and assessments for the Gateway, so that these can be embedded fully in implementation arrangements.

Sectors such as retailing, tourism and local market services contain untapped potential in strengthening the local economy. As part of the economic development and planning brief, the Council will engage in a co-ordinated and focused effort to bring together all the key stakeholders – institutes, enterprises, agencies and other stakeholders to formulate shared innovation strategies, building on existing strengths and outlining their respective roles within this process. The potential to include other RTDI assets (Research & Technological Development & Innovation) will be explicitly considered, including, for example, the regional hospital. New priorities will merit attention, including institutions in other Gateways and more collegiate working across individual, smaller Institutes of Technology and developing strategic alliances between universities.

In tandem with growth in population and employment, there will be a need to ensure that the provision of community and social infrastructure such as schools, playing areas, and community and sports halls takes place in an integrated manner. Social inclusion is an important issue for the Gateways. Significant investment in the renewal and upgrading of social housing and community facilities needs to be sustained.

The Council will work with Departments and agencies in leveraging the necessary infrastructure to carry through the Implementation Plan for the Midland Gateway. This includes such areas as non-national roads, water services, schools, amenities and cultural facilities, public transport, energy and communications. It will also seek to ensure that the NDP 2007-13 contains a reaffirmation of the role of the Gateway as drivers of growth in their regional economies and in the national economy with an explicit commitment to meeting their realistic investment needs.

The Council acknowledges that much modern economic growth is urban-led. This is because urban centres contain the key ingredients of this growth including international transport access, higher education institutions, globally trading firms, specialist support services, highly educated workforces, and the amenities which these workforces need for quality lifestyles. Knowledge-based enterprise, clusters mainly around cities and other urban areas.

The Midland Gateway is regarded as the most innovative as well as the most challenging of the Gateways. It's strengths include it's strategic location in the centre of the country, it's relative proximity to Dublin and the east coast population and economic centres and facilities, and a high quality of life within the three towns that make up the Gateway. Short-term needs include developing and branding the Gateway concept, development of road and public transport links between the towns, and developing the concept in terms of an appropriate and agreed planning and development strategy.

Short-term Investment Priorities

- Investment in a significant research capacity institute, to support the current function of Athlone IT, the region's enterprise base, and to attract and support economic activity into the Midland region;
- Strategic transport routes to enhance links within the Gateway of Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore as well as links to other Gateways. This includes investment in the N80 and the N52 routes; investment in an integrated bus-based public transport system within and between each of the Gateway towns is also a key priority;
- Strengthening of basic infrastructure such as water supply, wastewater and solid waste is required to avoid development constraints for the expanding population and it's service requirements.

The Council will seek enhanced co-ordination between Local Authorities (Westmeath County Council, Athlone Town Council, Offaly County Council, Roscommon County Council) and the relevant departments and Government agencies in the provision of social infrastructure such as schools, community facilities and amenities as an integral component of the process of developing large new residential areas. Development of public transport linkages between the Gateway towns and their hinterlands has already been identified as an important infrastructure goal. This includes the re-opening of the Mullingar-Athlone railway line.

Critical enabling investment priorities identified in the RPG's include:

- Improvement of strategic transportation corridors.
- Implementation of sustainable transport policies, such as improved public transport.
- Enhancement of existing airport access.
- Improvement of strategic rail routes such as the Western Rail including Athlone-Mullingar railway.
- Promotion of linkages to other Gateways and Strategic Development Corridors.
- Attraction of indigenous investment and inward investment.

Within the national primary roads programme, there is a need to consider the link between the N6 and Mullingar/Tullamore, the link between Mullingar and Athlone (Ballymahon Road); and the link between Athlone and Tullamore; all of which are crucial for development of the Gateways.

O-LG1 To prepare local area integrated land-use and transportation plans; for Mullingar by Westmeath County Council and for Athlone (in conjunction with Roscommon County Council). This will support community-based local transport services in rural areas and between the Gateway settlements.

O-LG2 To put in place the local mechanisms to implement objective O-LG1, relating not just to investment but also to housing and other major developments.

O-LG3 To implement improved planning and implementation arrangements, including public transport and transport management in Gateways.

Enterprise Ireland is already strongly involved in developing R&D capability in the IT's, and this activity is very desirable from a Gateway perspective.

The Council will promote and facilitate the achievement of:

- A quality physical environment, especially in town centres. A focus on enhancing town centre areas; protecting/underpinning their viability and vitality; and building on the character and distinctive features of these areas.
- Better traffic management, linked to greater public transport generally.
- Urban renewal, in conjunction with appropriate private sector-led developments.

P-LG1 It is the policy of this Council, that the NDP 2007-13 should contain a reaffirmation of the role of Gateways as drivers of growth in their regional economies and in the national economy, with an explicit commitment to meeting their realistic investment needs. The Development Contribution Scheme system under Sections 48 and 49 of the Planning and Development Acts 2000 - 2006 should, taking account of local economic conditions, be harnessed for investment in local infrastructure in the Gateways, complementing and extending the impact of necessary national investment. Investment financed by such contributions should be branded accordingly, to build support for future development contribution schemes.

Individual government departments should bring forward plans, within existing budgetary allocations, of capital investments and other resources to stimulate and support particularly innovative proposals for the Gateways, possibly on a competitive "challenge funding" basis. Previous examples in this regard are the Metropolitan Area Network initiative (Broadband) of the Department.

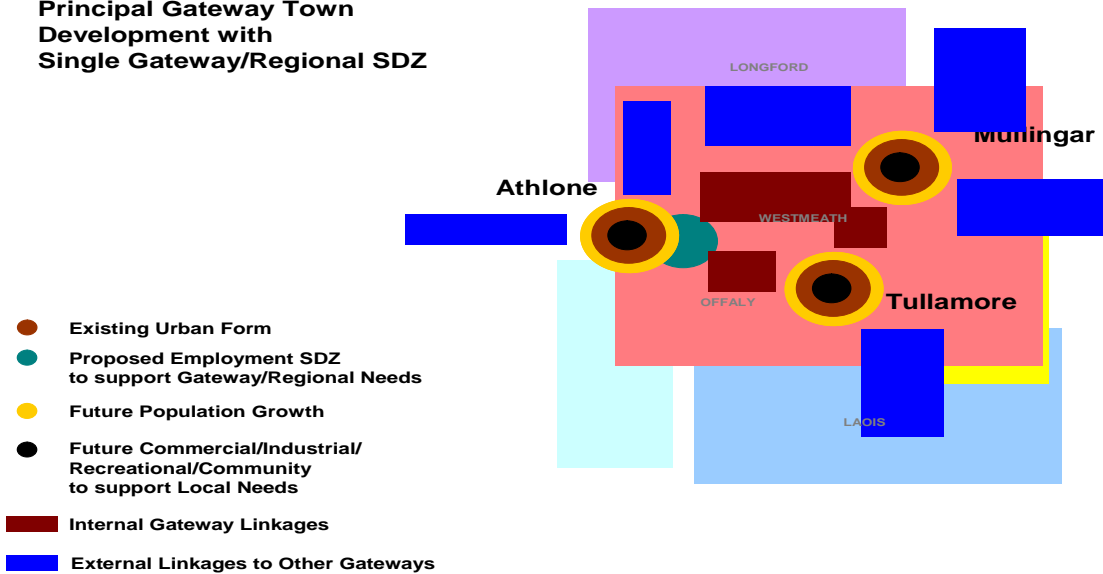
Preferred Spatial Development Option for Gateways

The recommended spatial development in the report of Indecon Consultants on a strategic development framework for the gateway (September 2006), will build on the existing urban form of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar, but will focus on ensuring that spatial planning supports an integrated Gateway. The future minimum required population growth will need to be sufficient to achieve a population of the order of 100,000 in the central area, and this will require an increase on current levels of the order of 55,000. A significant percentage of this growth will be accommodated within these towns giving them 'Large Town' status.

Each of the principal Gateway towns will provide for future commercial, industrial, recreational and community development to support local needs. They also recommend providing a new Strategic Development Zone SDZ (or some equivalent initiative) to support the Gateway and wider regional needs. This 'Gateway/SDZ' will be strategically located to ensure maximum internal and external accessibility. This will facilitate the Gateway to secure an additional 20,000 jobs. Through the proposed upgrade and development of road infrastructure, together with improvements in rail and bus services, both internal and external Gateway linkages will be significantly enhanced.

As part of the implementation for the recommended spatial development, the new SDZ should be located to the east of Athlone and between Athlone and Tullamore, with linkages to Mullingar. This strategic location will ensure maximum internal and external accessibility resulting from transportation improvements.

**Recommended Option -
Principal Gateway Town
Development with
Single Gateway/Regional SDZ**



P-LG2 The Council will pursue the designation of identified lands for an SDZ with the relevant government departments.

Given the scale of the infrastructure challenge facing the Midlands Gateway, there is a need for funding contributions to come both from central government and local funding. One area of local funding that should be considered is the role of Supplementary Development Contribution schemes. The Planning & Development Acts 2000 - 2006, provides for the drawing up of a Supplementary Development Contribution scheme, in order to facilitate a particular public infrastructure service or project, which is provided by a local authority or a private developer on behalf of and pursuant to an agreement with a local authority, (e.g. through Public Private Partnership, and which will directly benefit the development on which the levy is imposed.)