



Westmeath County Council
Áras An Chontae,
Mount Street,
Mullingar,
Co Westmeath

Roscommon County Council,
Aras an Chontae,
Roscommon,
Co Roscommon

23rd January 2024

Re: Issues Paper – Athlone Joint LAP 2024 – 2030

Dear Sir/Madam

The Department of Education welcomes this opportunity to engage with Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils in the preparation of the Athlone Local Area Plan 2024 – 2030.

The Department notes that Local Authorities, in accordance with the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended), are obliged to make all their statutory plans consistent with the core strategies and objectives of the NPF and the relevant RSES. The Department welcomes the reference to this statement in the Issues Paper. It is noted that the current Westmeath CDP 2021-2027 designates Athlone as a 'Regional Growth Centre' and provides a population increase of 3,460 for Athlone from 2021 to 2027. It is noted that the current Roscommon CDP 2022-2028 designates Athlone (Monksland/Bellanamullia) as a 'Regional Growth Centre' and provides a population increase of 1,380 from 2022 to 2028. If these projected population increases materialise, a requirement for additional education provision at both primary and post-primary level may emerge over the lifetime of the plan.

The Department also notes in the section titled Place-making and the Built Environment the reference to the potential regeneration of existing areas within the town's core. The Department requests that the joint LAP consider the cumulative impacts of regeneration and redevelopment on existing community facilities. Population growth within the existing "built-up" footprint of the town has the potential to upset the balance of use relative to education provision in the area. The absence of specific school site provision in such locations can significantly challenge the delivery of required school places associated with intensified residential development. It is, therefore, critical that explicit provision for school development to cater for such development be made in existing "built-up" areas, within Athlone.



The Department notes in the section titled Sustainable Communities & Social Infrastructure the reference to the need to consider how best to plan for new, expanding and emerging communities within the urban area and the statement that “Sustainable communities are places of resilience, where the needs of everyone in the community are met” . Given that education is identified as one of the key elements of the Community & Social Infrastructure matrix, the Department requests that the Draft Plan would be explicit in its support for the provision of adequate and suitable school accommodation, including the development of new schools and the expansion or alteration of existing ones.

In terms of assessing current and future capacity, the Department of Education has to be mindful of potential unforeseen circumstances such as the Ukrainian crisis, which have the ability to put undue pressure on school place provision and could necessitate reassessments of school place provision from time to time. The Department will engage with the Council where the findings of an assessment require a review of existing or future school site provision within a specific location. The Department also anticipates that additional special education needs provision at both primary and post-primary level will be required in the future throughout the country and this may result in schools requiring additional accommodation to meet this growing need. The Department will consult with the Council if and when additional special education needs accommodation is required within specific locations.

Finally, the Department welcomes the continued engagement with the Councils regarding the development of both new and existing schools, as appropriate, and emphasizes the critical importance of the ongoing work of the Councils in ensuring sufficient land is zoned for this purpose.

Yours sincerely,

Mairead Garry
Statutory Plans,
Forward Planning Section