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Re: Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan 2024-2030 – Pre-Draft Consultation Strategic Issues Paper

Dear Sir/Madam,

The National Transport Authority ('the NTA') welcomes the opportunity to comment on the *Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan 2024-2030 – Pre-Draft Consultation Strategic Issues Paper*. These comments are based on prevailing national policy and the manner in which the NTA would envisage these being implemented at the local level in Athlone. These comments also have regard to the work which has been undertaken to date on an Area Based Transport Assessment ("ABTA") for the plan area and its potential adaptation into a Local Transport Plan ("LTP") as part of the JUAP.

1. Guiding Principles

The NTA recommends that the preparation of the Draft Joint Urban Area Plan should be guided by, and include, land use policies and objectives, which support the consolidation of urban-generated development within existing urban areas, in complement with the integration of land use and transport planning, as follows:

- The development of Athlone should be based on the "Avoid-Shift-Improve" principle; the "Decide and Provide" approach to the planning and design of transport networks; and the general objectives of the 10-minute town concept;
- In accordance with the NPF and RSES, development patterns which seek to consolidate development should be supported and prioritised as a means of preventing urban sprawl, reducing the demand for long-distance travel and maximising the use of existing transport infrastructure and services;
- The location of development should be guided by the 'sequential approach' whereby development is located within the town core in the first instance and on lands where the resulting travel demand can be met by walking, cycling and public transport;
- Major new "out-of-town" retail developments should not be supported;

- Trip intensive development, such as large-scale office developments, should not be supported at more peripheral and / or less accessible locations;
- Land use policies which seek to provide for an appropriate mix of uses at the district and neighbourhood level should be supported;
- The Joint Urban Area Plan should ensure that the road and street networks in new development areas are designed on the basis of providing for filtered permeability, and should incorporate measures which deliver filtered permeability in existing neighbourhoods;
- The Joint Urban Area Plan should ensure that access by walking, cycling and public transport is a key determinant in the location of local services such as schools, retail and leisure facilities;
- Planning for local services should ensure that the detailed design is undertaken in a manner which maximises priority for pedestrians and cyclists. Access, footpaths, cycle parking and car parking (if required) should all be arranged so as to eliminate, as far as practicable, interference and conflict between pedestrians, cyclists and motorists;
- Where car parking is provided it should be located and designed in a manner that reduces the potential for safety hazards and to reduce the visual dominance of cars within the environment and on the streetscape around local service centres;
- Set down or drop-off areas are not encouraged in close proximity to schools, unless there is no safe alternative area, including on the public road, within a short walk where cars can park safely and with a footpath link to the school; and
- Planning applications for new schools or the expansion of existing schools should only be supported where it has been demonstrated that the road network in the vicinity of the proposed development facilitates, or is planned to facilitate, safe and convenient walking and cycling access to the school.

2. National Policy Context

Under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, emissions are required to be reduced by 51% by 2030, setting a path towards a zero net-emissions scenario by 2050. The transport sector is committed to meeting those targets in full. For transport, there are three main actions required that should inform the policies, objectives and measures of the Joint Urban Area Plan, namely:

- Reducing the demand for travel;
- Increasing use of public transport, walking and cycling and a reduction in trips by car;
- Conversion of the transport fleet to zero emissions vehicles.

The *National Sustainable Mobility Policy*, sets out a strategic framework to 2030 for active travel and public transport to support Ireland's overall requirement to achieve a 51% reduction in carbon emissions by the end of this decade. The Policy sets out to deliver at least 500,000 additional daily active travel and public transport journeys and a 10% reduction in kilometres driven by fossil fuelled cars by 2030.

The National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland (NIFTI) is the strategic framework for future investment decision making in land transport. It will guide transport investment in the years ahead to enable the National Planning Framework, support the Climate Action Plan, and promote positive social, environmental and economic outcomes throughout Ireland. NIFTI sets out the road user modal hierarchy in Ireland as: 1. *Active Travel (Walking & Cycling)*; 2. *Public Transport*; 3. *Private Vehicles*. It also outlines an intervention hierarchy which is: 1. Maintain; 2. Optimise; 3. Improve; 4. New.

The Draft JUAP should align with these national policy documents and should seek the reallocation of road space in appropriate locations in accordance with the road user hierarchy, in order to prioritise walking, cycling and public transport use and prioritise the placemaking functions of the urban street network.

3. Sustainable Mobility and the Athlone Local Transport Plan

The NTA welcomes the engagement to date on the *Area Based Transport Assessment (ABTA)* process and recommends that the progress and publication of the Draft JUAP is accompanied by the preparation and publication of a formal Local Transport Plan (LTP), as per section 4.5 of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy, which refers to the Athlone JUAP. Such an LTP would represent the lowest tier of the NPF's framework for the integration of land use and transport planning and the achievement of compact smart growth as it would apply to Athlone. The NTA is satisfied that the ABTA report prepared in 2023 would form the basis for the LTP, subject to further engagement.

It is critical that the adaptation of the ABTA report into an LTP is not carried out in isolation from the JUAP and that the Draft JUAP reflects the analysis undertaken and the recommendations emerging from the ABTA process as expressed in the LTP, subject to the NTA's review.

It is anticipated that the local transport issues set out below will be addressed as part of the JUAP review process.

3.1 Walking and Cycling

In order to realise the required modal shift to sustainable modes, appropriate policies and objectives need to be carried through at a local level where specific measures can be identified. The JUAP should focus on the identification of the required networks and measures to bring about improvements for walking and cycling modes.

The NTA would support emphasis being placed on the importance of permeability, place-making and in providing access to services in the Draft JUAP. The LTP can identify measures such as permeability and junction improvements and footpath and cycle track upgrades required. The measures identified in the LTP should be incorporated into the Draft JUAP.

At a national level, there are several funding streams which specifically target improvements for walking, cycling and other public realm interventions. One such funding stream is the Safe Routes to Schools programme, which aims to make the journey to school by sustainable modes a safe and attractive choice for students and their parents. The importance of the journey to school and enabling this journey to be completed by walking and cycling should be a key priority in for the JUAP.

3.2 Athlone Town Bus Service

The NTA will undertake a review of Athlone's town bus service over the coming years in order to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the service. An objective to support the development of this service should be included in the Draft JUAP.

It is also recommended that the Draft JUAP includes policies and objectives to support this including any requirements the NTA may identify for bus stops / shelters, interchange facilities, layover, welfare and depot facilities, including additional infrastructure for charging electric buses.

3.3 Connecting Ireland and Local Link

Athlone will continue to be a large draw for the rural hinterland and neighbouring towns. The *Connecting Ireland: Rural Mobility Plan* is a major national public transport initiative that will increase connectivity, particularly for people living outside the major cities. The plan aims to improve mobility in rural areas. It will provide better connections between villages and towns by linking these with an enhanced regional network connecting cities and regional centres nationwide. Connecting Ireland will seek to improve the current transport network by:

- Enhancing existing services;
- Adding new services; and
- Enhancing the current Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) network.

The NTA continues to provide rural transport services through the Local Link Rural Transport Programme. The key priorities of this programme continue to be directed at addressing rural social exclusion and the integration of rural transport services with other public transport services. The programme mission statement is 'to provide a quality nationwide community based public transport system in rural Ireland which responds to local needs'.

The NTA will develop and expand the Local Link Rural Transport Programme in the following manner:

- Seek further integration with other public transport services, including HSE and school transport;
- Ensure fully accessible vehicles operate on all services;
- Enhance the customer experience;
- Increase patronage among children and young people; and
- Encourage innovation in the service.

It is recommended that the Draft JUAP acknowledges the role rural transport services can perform in providing for social and economic connectivity between small villages/rural areas and larger towns. Policies and objectives to support the role of rural transport, in particular, the Connecting Ireland plan and Local Link should be included in the Draft JUAP.

3.4 Regional and Inter-city Rail

The NTA supports investment in regional and inter-city rail services. The NTA will continue to work with Iarnród Éireann and the local authorities to make improvements to both rail services and infrastructure. As such, the Draft JUAP should seek to maximise the benefits associated with improved rail connectivity through the application of the guiding principles set out above and to facilitate improvements identified by Iarnród Éireann and the NTA as part of ongoing investment programmes, including facilities to improve the passenger experience at the train station, such as covered waiting areas and enhanced wayfinding. Athlone station has the potential to become a more important bus/rail interchange and the Draft JUAP should reflect this.

3.5 Accessibility

Enabling universal access and facilitating and promoting universal design should be a key consideration in the JUAP, as it relates to transport policies and objectives. Making the external built environment accessible to all can facilitate and promote the greater use of public transport, walking and cycling. The use of universal design in the external built environment can benefit all within society including those with specific mobility issues and requirements. Objectives which promote universal design in the external built environment can provide a safer and more attractive environment for all and should be included in the Draft JUAP.

3.6 Strategic Road Network

The NPF sets out the importance of maintaining, improving and protecting the strategic function of the key transport corridors including the imperative to improve and protect the strategic function of the TEN-T core and comprehensive network.

In this regard, National Policy Objective 74 seeks to *“Secure the alignment of the National Planning Framework and the National Development Plan through delivery of the National Strategic Outcomes”*. National Strategic Outcome 2 of the National Planning Framework indicates the need for *“Maintaining the strategic capacity and safety of the national roads network including planning for future capacity enhancements”*.

Athlone is strategically located on the national road network with existing connectivity to the N4, N52 and M6/M4. In order to protect the strategic transport function of the national road network, including motorways, the NTA recommends that development objectives should be in accordance with the DOECLG Spatial Planning and National Roads Guidelines (2012), and that this should be referenced in the Draft JUAP.

3.7 Traffic management

It is expected that the Draft JUAP will consider traffic management within the town with the objective of ensuring that the movement of people by public transport, walking and cycling, and the movement of goods are not adversely affected by private car traffic, and that the impacts of traffic congestion can be managed. The outcomes of the ABTA in this regard should be reflected in the Draft JUAP.

In particular, this should include an analysis of car parking provision within the town and the inclusion of objectives and measures to manage car parking which is a key determinant of the likelihood of someone using a car. It is recommended that following matters are taken into consideration:

- Review on-street parking with a view to its reallocation to other modes;
- The use of parking charges to ensure spaces are turned over regularly rather than being used by commuters;
- A review of the access arrangements to car parks with a view to improving the efficiency of the transport networks within the town.

4. National Transport Authority Guidance Documents

The NTA recommends that the preparation of the Draft JUAP is informed by the following NTA guidance, available on the NTA website:

- The National Cycle Manual (to be updated during the preparation of the JUAP);
- Permeability: A Best Practice Guide;
- Achieving Effective Workplace Travel Plans: Guidance for Local Authorities;

- Workplace Travel Plans: A Guide for Implementers;
- Toolkit for School Travel; and
- Guidance Note on Area Based Transport Assessment (NTA and TII).

5. Indicators – Mode Share

It is recommended that consideration is given at the JUAP level to include sustainable transport indicators, including mode share, for the purpose of monitoring the effectiveness of policies and development objectives. The NTA would be available to work with Westmeath County Council on the development and analysis of sustainable transport indicators, in conjunction with the OPR.

6. Conclusion

I trust that the views of the NTA will be taken into consideration in the preparation of the Draft Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan, and we look forward to continued engagement with the Council in relation to the matters raised in this submission.

Yours sincerely,



Michael Mac Aree
Head of Strategic Planning