



**Roinn Sláinte Poiblí –
FSS Bhaile Átha Cliath agus Lár na Tíre**

Baile Átha Cliath Theas, Cill Dara, Iarthar Chill Mhantáin
Ospidéal an Dr Steeven, Baile Átha Cliath 8, D08 W2A8.

Laois, Uíbh Fhailí, An Iarmhí, An Longfort
Oifig Ceantar FSS, Bóthar Ardáin, Tulach Mhór,
Co. Uíbh Fhailí, R35 TY28.

**Department of Public Health –
HSE Dublin and Midlands**

Dublin South, Kildare, West Wicklow
Dr Steevens' Hospital, Dublin 8, D08 W2A8.

Laois, Offaly, Westmeath, Longford
HSE Area Office, Arden Road, Tullamore,
Co. Offaly, R35 TY28.

T. 057 9359891 | E. PublicHealth.AreaB@hse.ie | www.hse.ie/publichealth | X [@PublicHealthDM](https://twitter.com/PublicHealthDM)

Date 29.01.2024

To whom it concerns

Submission on Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan Strategic Issues Paper

We very much welcome this invitation to submit to this important urban planning process. Under the Medical Officer of Health legislation, the Department of Public Health HSE-Area Dublin and the Midlands has responsibility for identifying the public health needs of the population within its area, which includes the population resident in Athlone. A key objective of the Department of Public Health, is health promotion for the population living in the region. In addition to health promotion, the Department of Public Health, Midlands have particular expertise in environment and health and evidence-based design.

In Athlone, according to the most recent census, relative to the national average, fewer people rate their general health as very good, and a higher proportion of the population rate their health as poor or very poor.¹ We thus welcome this plan as a key opportunity to input to the planning process to work together with our partners and the community towards improving the health of the people of Athlone.

1. Population and Housing:

We welcome the inclusion of population and housing as a key strategic issue for Athlone. As per the strategic issues paper, Athlone's population is projected to grow, with a strategic population target of >30,000 by 2031. This growth is likely to be driven by inward migration due to urbanisation which is a global and national trend, and increased net migration to Ireland.(1)(2)

- Urban planning should enhance people's ability to make choices to live healthier lives. Examples include access to services and public spaces, taking into account the need for people to be able to access local amenities by walking. Vulnerable populations such as older populations and resources that support health are not distributed evenly within the Athlone urban area. Engaging with census and health data can assist in identifying where better connections need to be made.(3)
 - Athlone is a **university town** and planning should consider the needs of students. Given the current student housing crisis at national level – adequate levels of quality student housing will make the town more attractive to students and decrease pressure on the overall housing stock and house rental market.
- We suggest the strategic issues paper should not only consider the *net increase* in population but also the expected *demographic change*. Ireland has an **aging population** and in terms of local population data this trend will also be expected in the Athlone urban area.¹ Housing should be designed in a way that allows people to remain living at home, in their communities as they age.

October 2023:

Our name has been changed from Public Health Area B to Department of Public Health - HSE Dublin and Midlands. For continuity of communication our email address remains PublicHealth.AreaB@hse.ie

¹Source: Health Atlas <https://www.healthatlasireland.ie/>

2. Sustainable Communities and Social Infrastructure

We support the strategic emphasis on planning more socially inclusive places. There should be a continued focus on achieving equity in political, social, cultural and economic structures of the town. Leadership from groups often marginalized, for example by age, gender or ethnicity, is important.

- Athlone has invested in excellent facilities for children and families on the outskirts of the urban centre. However, town centre amenities for children, including playgrounds, require significant investment and upgrading. There also evidence to suggest the importance of *proximity* to aesthetically pleasing, safe urban infrastructure for children in encouraging use.⁽⁴⁾⁽⁵⁾
 - We recommend a focus on **developing child friendly, accessible, aesthetically pleasing infrastructure** in urban Athlone.
 - Additionally, we recommend that there should be a continued focus on enhancement of the Tourism and Cultural quarter as part of urban regeneration. This space can be used for festivals and events which bring the people of Athlone together and makes the town more attractive as a destination for tourism.

3. Transport & Movement

We welcome the inclusion of transport and movement as a key strategic issue for Athlone.

- **Active travel** networks should be implemented in the planning of all new public amenities or housing developments in the Athlone Urban Area. These cycle networks could, where possible, have connectivity to green space such as the Old Rail Train greenway to maximise recreational use of this amenity.
- Active travel ameliorates air quality and climate change by reducing vehicular emissions. Active travel also reduces sedentary lifestyles which are linked to poorer health outcomes like obesity, hypertension and heart disease. Those who participate in travel via cycling or walking could potentially reach or exceed the WHO physical activity targets through active travel alone.
 - We suggest an ambitious approach to **safe walking and cycling infrastructure**, including detailed plans for increased access to safe, continuous, segregated cycle and walking infrastructure. We suggest that **progress on increasing the cycle network not only be in measured in the number of linear metres added but also in connectivity to existing infrastructure**, and number of kilometres that are fully segregated. Cycle lanes which end abruptly should be an initial target for connection.
- Planning more compact places as is suggested in the strategic issues paper supports active travel as distances will be shorter and also promotes social interactions and community engagement. Spatial policy should be age-friendly in line with expected population demographic change. Features of such a policy could include age-friendly pavements, safe pedestrian crossings and plenty of places to rest such as benches. This would promote walking among the more aged population. For more information the [WHO age friendly cities framework](#) can be consulted.
 - We would like to see the plan include the **introduction of restrictions to private transport** in the urban centre, and concurrent development and expansion of bus networks.
 - Given Athlone is to be promoted as a Regional Growth Centre, park and ride option or park and cycle options should be considered for those travelling from outside the urban area, with the aim of reducing traffic and the associated air and noise pollution in the urban centre.

4. Place-making and the Built Environment

We welcome the focus on identifying areas of Athlone which should be identified for regeneration.

- According to the most recent geodirectory report Westmeath has a rate of dereliction and housing vacancy higher than the national average.(6) Recent evidence suggests that perceived urban disorder (to which greater urban dereliction may contribute) is associated with poorer mental health outcomes, substance abuse, and overall measures of general health. (7)
- The Institute of Public Health in Ireland note that housing and regeneration initiatives are key determinants of health.(8) UCL Institute of Health Equity note that urban neighbourhoods and the surrounding environments play a critical role in people’s experiences of home and in how they interact with the surrounding area.(9)If safe, attractive and conveniently located outside spaces or local destinations are not available this may change how people use their home for example increasing time spent indoors. This may have particularly influence the health of children for whom more time spent indoors may negatively impact levels of physical activity, social development and mental health.(8)
 - In line with international evidence, including the highly influential 2010 Marmot review (10) (again UCL Institute of Health Equity), we recommend that this plan seeks to support locally developed and evidence-based community regeneration programmes that encourage **community participation and action.**
- According to the most recent census permanent Athlone has lower rates of home ownership and higher rates of occupancy in rented accommodation compared to the national average.¹ Those in rented accommodation may be at greater risk of sub-standard and insecure accommodation.(9) UCL institute of Health Equity has also highlighted the importance of affordable and social housing to maintaining individual *and community* health and wellbeing. From a public health perspective adequate housing must be considered as a fundamental to maintaining health and wellbeing.(9)
 - We recommend a focus on investment in social housing. Further planned housing initiatives should avoid creating areas of deprivation by mixing social housing with private housing, known as ‘mixed tenure’, which is supported by national policies such as the Social Housing Strategy 2020 as this has been shown to improve community cohesion in other settings and community sustainability.

¹Source: Health Atlas <https://www.healthatlasireland.ie/>

5. Climate Action & Resilience

We welcome the aim of the plan to identify specific climate mitigation and adaptation measures that should be incorporated in this Plan to support the transition to a climate resilient and sustainable regional growth centre.

- The air quality monitoring station is in Athlone at the West Meath County Council office (Athlone Civic Centre & Library). Monitoring is carried out using a continuous monitor for particulate matter. Monitoring is important in understanding the quality of the air to which the people of Athlone are exposed.
- During the winter months in both 2023 and 2024 the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has recorded air quality levels as being poor or very poor in several towns in the Midlands, including in Athlone. These poor air quality readings are likely due to a combination of factors including the burning of solid fuels in homes and recent cold calm weather conditions which can keep air pollution close to the ground.
- Exposure to very high levels of air pollution can cause acute health problems – particularly for people who have heart conditions or lung conditions such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). There are also health risks associated with chronic exposure to poor air quality.
- In Athlone according to the most recent census the proportion of people who depend on peat, coal or oil to heat their home is higher than the national average; over 1% of the population report that they have no central heating.¹ Of the houses in Athlone area, over 40% depend on coal, oil or peat as their main source of heating with the majority of these relying on oil to heat their homes.¹
- The department of Public Health are working to increase awareness of an air quality issues in towns in the midlands, and advising people of the actions they can take to protect themselves to reduce their exposure. People can also help to improve air quality where they live by avoiding burning smoky fuels where possible.(11)
 - We recommend however that air quality in Athlone should be a key consideration for the new plan. For example, it is essential that new planning takes into account air quality - as well as ways to ensure a **just transition** for all of the population in Athlone to move to more sustainable ways to heat our homes.
- The European Environment Agency recommends the establishment of [‘clean air zones’](#) around schools to reduce the concentration of pollutants found there. Lower pollution levels can be achieved through restrictions on traffic, such as no-idling zones around schools, ‘school streets’ (i.e. with a traffic ban at the start and end of the school day in the immediate vicinity of the school), or relocation of drop off/pick up points away from school entrances.
- We recommend that consideration is given to initiatives such as ‘clean air zones’ in the Plan as a nudge away from private transport towards more active travel.
- Furthermore, air quality should also be considered in all planning decisions e.g. to consider to include risk to health from location of housing, schools and health centres in proximity to large transport infrastructure and industry.
 - We particularly welcome the proposal for systems for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of climate action policies to ensure Athlone’s long term success in responding to climate change.

¹Source: Health Atlas <https://www.healthatlasireland.ie/>

6. Economic Development & Employment

We welcome the consideration given in the plan to the possibility of further fostering the synergies between Athlone and the Technological University of the Shannon.

- We suggest that this plan consider the potential role that large local institutions can play in promoting health and sustainability in their communities. The Health Foundation defines ‘anchor’ institutions as, ‘*large organisations whose long-term sustainability is tied to the wellbeing of the populations they serve*’. (12)(13) Translated to the Irish context examples of anchor institutions include the HSE, local councils **and universities**.
- Organisations, such as universities, are ‘rooted in place’ and may be able to consider how they use their resources and manage their operations to positively influence the health and wellbeing of their local community which in turn may serve to reduce health inequalities.
 - Aligning with proposals from the National Health Service in the UK(12), we recommend giving consideration in this plan to some of the ways large local institutions, including the **Technological University of the Shannon**, could deliver on their role as an anchor institution in Athlone including(12):
 - ✓ **Widening access to quality work** – e.g. by providing training and opportunities to the local population; by ensuring all employees are paid a living wage.
 - ✓ **Purchasing for social benefit** – e.g. by using their resources to support other local companies or companies with aligned social strategies.
 - ✓ **Using buildings and spaces to support communities** – e.g. by increasing and encouraging access to the local communities to recreational spaces
 - ✓ **Reducing environmental impact** e.g. by leading on environmental and sustainable changes to energy use and waste management
 - ✓ **Working closely with communities and local partners** e.g. to better understand the local context and local need

7. Heritage & Amenity

We welcome the focus in the plan to addressing potential barriers to accessing Athlone's green and blue infrastructure networks and how accessibility and connectivity can be improved for all residents.

- A recent Public Health Scotland review highlighted that significant proportions of the population, including those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged and/or marginalised, may have less access to urban blue spaces than those who are more socioeconomically advantaged.⁽¹⁴⁾ Those who are disadvantaged may however also be the members of our community who are most likely to derive the greatest benefit from access to our urban blue spaces.
- While the evidence based is evolving, work to date suggests that the quality of urban blue spaces is important in understanding why those in more disadvantaged areas may access blue spaces less even if the quantity of blue space does not differ from more socioeconomically advantaged areas.⁷
- The recent work from Public Health Scotland also highlighted a comprehensive review of local blue space interventions which provided 172 examples of successful policy interventions.⁽¹⁴⁾ Interventions included some aiming to improve the aesthetics of the blue space (thus encouraging greater use by both tourists and the local community) and/or to encourage physical exercise (e.g. providing walkways or bicycle paths).
- Local and regional initiatives highlighted both in Europe and in the US included ⁽¹⁴⁾:
 - Lighting up promenades, docks or other infrastructure at night
 - Renovating waterfronts
 - Elevated viewpoints and blue-facing seating
 - Facilities (e.g. gyms, kayak centres) in surrounding area
 - Integrating walking and cycling paths with blue space
- We suggest the plan consider methods to promote the health benefits offered by the location of Athlone on the Shannon. The plan should prioritise **equity of access** and **equity of use** of urban blue spaces among all sections of the local community - in particular to key local blue space amenities e.g. the Athlone marina.

Summary

These suggestions are not exhaustive, but are some of the broad issues which we believe should be considered and incorporated into the Plan. We are happy to provide further information, evidence and guidance as to any of these points, and are happy to be involved in future consultations around planning the future of Athlone.

Yours sincerely,

On behalf of the Department of Public Health, HSE Dublin and Midlands.

REFERENCES (Web Links)

1. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?locations=IE>
2. <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-ieu50/irelandandtheeuat50/society/migration/#:~:text=Migration%20in%202023&text=These%20combined%20flows%20gave%20positive,51%2C700%20in%20the%20previous%20year.>
3. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240003170>
4. <https://www.arup.com/perspectives/cities-alive-urban-childhood>
5. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240003170>
6. https://www.geodirectory.ie/getmedia/5c7ef0ae-07e0-4d60-8579-c0aeb126bd5b/GeoDirectory-Residential-Report_Issue_20_Q4_2023.pdf
7. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S027795361830649X>
8. <https://www.publichealth.ie/consultation-responses/iph-response-dsd-urban-regeneration-and-community-development-policy>
9. <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/evidence-review-housing-and-health-inequalities-in-london>
10. <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review/fair-society-healthy-lives-full-report-pdf.pdf>
11. <https://www.westmeathindependent.ie/2024/01/10/public-health-alert-over-poor-air-quality-in-midland-towns/>
12. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/about/equality/equality-hub/national-healthcare-inequalities-improvement-programme/our-approach-to-reducing-healthcare-inequalities/anchors-and-social-value/#:~:text=The%20Health%20Foundation%20describes%20anchor,of%20the%20populations%20they%20serve>
13. <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/charts-and-infographics/the-nhs-as-an-anchor-institution>
14. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/inequalities-access-blue-coastal-space-scotland-research-report/pages/4/>