

## Governance

Athlone town has suffered greatly over the past century from the lack of a single local authority taking responsibility for the area. Instead, we have currently 2 and previously 3 competing authorities, Westmeath CO. Co., Roscommon Co. Co., and previously Athlone U.D.C. all with their own agenda and each trying to outdo the other.

The result is plain to see, the heart has been torn out of the town, from the west end of Church St., once the premier street in the town, to Pearse St. and Connacht St. is a line of closed and boarded up premises while the new retail centre has been dragged out to Golden Island and to a lesser extent, Monksland. The Town Centre shopping centre is an exception and is centrally located with reasonable access.

Having identified and developed the new retail areas, the local authority has now proceeded to curtail car traffic to the principal area with the disastrous one way system, compounded by an ill conceived pedestrian area. The authority rightly commenced the one-way system with a pilot/testing period but then completely ignored the outcome of this trial when it became clear the system was causing more problems than it solved. The result is clear to everyone who continues to attempt to do their weekly shopping in the area, long extended queues of cars on the Ballymahon and Dublin roads, unable to reach their destination in a reasonable timeframe. No alternative route was provided to reach the supermarkets and people do not do their weekly grocery shopping on foot.

The bus system has been enhanced but really does not provide a viable alternative and should be considered for greater improvement or would a light rail system be out of the question?

I fully support the implementation of pedestrianisation, but it is difficult to see how the current system being implemented represents the results of any joined up strategic thinking. We have a beautiful pedestrian/cycle bridge (hurray!) which is completely disconnected from the new pedestrian system. Where is the planning here?

There are many more examples where the town suffers from a lack of unity, the GAA and other sporting bodies, provision of services and facilities, etc.

It is clear that there has been some very good work done in the town, but the lack of strategic planning and co-ordinated implementation has resulted in a town which has been divided and lacks integration.

This current initiative, developing a Joint Urban Area Plan under the auspices of Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils is to be greatly welcomed, as is the commitment of both councils to underpin strategic objectives in the planning process.

This initiative is to be supported, but I fear the outcomes may ultimately suffer from the same competing objectives of the two councils, whose main priority is the development of their counties, not Athlone. No major change can be successfully implemented in any area or organisation unless it has a secure foundation and supported by competent and professional structures.

The development of Athlone needs a proper governance structure, established in legislation and responsible for the entire area identified in this paper. This body will require powers similar to any other local authority and the ability to plan, make decisions and implement strategy without reference, permission or indeed agreement from the 2 Councils.

I appreciate that this requires legislative change and as part of their activities, I suggest the joint planning should include a submission to the Minister in this regard. The achievement of 30K+ population and the eventual attainment of city status depend upon it.