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Stage 1 Pre-draft Consultation stage of the Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan

To whom it may concern,

Athlone Chamber of Commerce is a member driven organisation dedicated to promotion of commerce and industry in the greater Athlone region. We are pleased to present our submission to the Stage 1 Pre-draft Consultation stage of the Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan.

Introduction

The following submission is made against the backdrop of Athlone being designated a Regional Growth Centre under the National Planning Framework in addition to a growing population of 22,869 (2022). We outline a number of issues of a strategic nature

Transportation:

Traffic is crucial for our county's economic vitality, ensuring the seamless movement of goods and people. A well-functioning transportation system is the lifeline of commerce, supporting businesses, and enhancing overall connectivity.

Given our obligations to reduce carbon emission by 51% by 2030 and to address growing traffic congestion at peak times, it is important that a strategic approach to transport planning is taken.

We believe that further enhancement of the public transportation system is necessary, including improved and expanded bus routes and active travel infrastructure, however policies and road infrastructure needs to change to accommodate these changes. Greater priority must be given to public transport in the Athlone area to gradually replace the car in the suburbs where congestion is becoming most prevalent. We recommend the provision of Park and Ride facilities at strategic locations on the fringes of the town, to accommodate a significant cohort of daily commuters travelling to Athlone for work on all main approach roads. The provision of regular free shuttle services from these Park and Ride facilities to work / schools etc can replace a large number of cars from within the zone of critical traffic congestion.

We encourage continued collaboration between both Local Authorities, National Transportation Authority and Transport Infrastructure Ireland to develop these systems and to ensure and protect Athlone's strategic location on the national transport network.

Tourism:

Tourism is a vital economic engine, bringing in revenue and creating jobs. Our region's unique attractions, diverse culture, and scenic landscapes make it an enticing destination, contributing significantly to the local economy and showcasing the richness of our community.

We have a sustainable competitive advantage in the region with the river Shannon running through the town. Exploiting Athlone's natural features is pivotal to unlocking our potential as a premier tourism destination. Athlone Chamber of Commerce supports sustainable development practices that highlight and preserve our scenic landscapes and heritage. This includes the creation of recreational areas, hiking trails, and informational signage to showcase the unique attributes of our locale. Collaborations with local businesses can further promote eco-friendly tourism initiatives.

Managing waste water in the Athlone region is critical to preserving the river Shannon as a natural resource that is central to our tourism strategy. Investment in this area is welcome and the current investment by Irish Water is welcome.

Amenities provided on the river Shannon in Athlone should be considered in a strategic way. River tourism must continue to be encouraged and supported. A plan specifically focused on the further development of water based attractions in Athlone would be welcome. This is where the future of tourism lies, combined with a plethora of other existing heritage and historic sites that play such a huge role in this area.

Housing:

Housing is fundamental to community stability and growth. A well-balanced housing sector, offering diverse options, ensures that residents have access to suitable living arrangements, fostering a sense of belonging and contributing to overall social well-being.

In addressing the housing aspect of the Joint Urban Area Plan, it is imperative to highlight the significance of a well-thought-out zoning strategy. Collaboration among stakeholders is essential to ensure the clear demarcation of commercial and residential zones, preventing potential encroachment that could compromise the quality of life for residents. Zoning for commercial activities should be distinctly separated from residential areas, preserving the tranquillity of neighbourhoods and fostering a conducive living environment.

Housing and transportation also need to be considered in tandem and not in isolation to each other. It is of critical importance that both Local Authorities work together in this regard.

The dereliction and vacancy issues within our town centre contributes to urban sprawl on the fringes. To counteract this trend, we encourage revitalisation efforts in the town centre. This involves a review of the incentives to property owners to refurbish vacant structures, encouraging overhead residential and creating a vibrant, attractive central hub. The implementation of existing laws with regard to dereliction of properties in strategic town centre locations needs to be robust and rigorous. By addressing dereliction in the town centre, we can discourage sprawl, making the most of existing

infrastructure and promoting a sustainable urban environment. A joined approach from both Local Authorities is required here.

Collaborative efforts will be key to the successful implementation of these housing and zoning measures. Through cooperation, we can create a thriving town centre landscape that balances residential needs, commercial interests, and overall community well-being.

University - TUS:

A local university plays a pivotal role in shaping the next generation and driving innovation. It serves as an educational beacon, attracting talent, and contributing to the intellectual and cultural fabric of the community.

Athlone is privileged to host a university with faculties in business, hospitality and tourism, and engineering. Leveraging these educational resources is key to our region's success. We propose establishing partnerships between the local authorities, local businesses and university departments to foster innovation and research, creating a vibrant ecosystem that attracts both students and businesses alike. Retention of graduates in the region is also an imperative and initiatives by both councils should be sought out to encourage these graduates to stay.

The University Campus needs to be supported in their endeavours to expand and ensure that the community of students and local residents live in a University District that reflects the ethos of education and growth. Accommodation and traffic management are key considerations and an Area Plan developed by the Local Authority would assist in creating a road map.

Foreign Direct Investment

Foreign direct investment injects vitality into the local economy, fostering business expansion, job creation, and technological advancements. Welcoming international investments enhances our competitiveness on the global stage, ensuring sustained economic development and prosperity.

To continue to make Athlone attractive to Foreign Direct Investment, our proposal emphasises the importance of a business-friendly environment. This includes the adequate provision of housing, schools, transport and facilitating networking opportunities between local businesses and potential foreign investors. The university can play a pivotal role in producing a skilled workforce, thereby enhancing the town's appeal for FDI. IDA Ireland as the key player in this field, has performed strongly and it is important that industry expansion to the west and east is facilitated through adequate land zoning, combined with Area Plans to bring certainty to future growth and expansion.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Athlone Chamber of Commerce Joint Urban Area Plan submission seeks to address issues we believe curtail our economic development while also promoting sustainability for future generations. We look forward to collaborating with the Local Authorities and other stakeholders for the benefit of our community.

Yours faithfully,

Alan Shaw,

President

Tommy Hogan,

Chief Executive Officer



WESTMEATH COUNTY COUNCIL
Comhairle Chontae na hIarmhí



Comhairle Contae
Ros Comáin
Roscommon
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