

Reference: Submission on the Athlone Joint Urban Action Plan Issues Paper:

From: Athlone Industry Group

Date : 01/02/2024

The Athlone Industry Group broadly welcome the publication of the Issues Paper as part of the ongoing creation of the Athlone Joint Urban Action Plan.

We also acknowledge the progress made in the last 5 years with developments such as the flooding relief works, the Athlone Main Drainage works, the development of a new IDA park, the public realm improvements in the town centre area and the Monksland Innovation Hub. These are all visible signs of progress in the development of Athlone as a Regional Growth Centre as called out in the 2040 National Development Plan.

As a group, we strongly believe that the implementation of the Joint Urban Action Plan for Athlone is vital for the social and economic development of the area. It will enable the industry partners in the area to continue to prosper and crucially create new employment opportunities.

It is 5 years since Athlone was called out as a Regional Growth Centre in the NDP and when both Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils were tasked with developing the Joint Economic Development Plan. We acknowledge the spirit of co-operation that is evident between the two Councils in developing the plan. However we do have a serious concern at the pace in which the Plan is being developed and call on both Councils to ensure the appropriate resources are assigned to the development of the Plan and that there is a heightened sense of urgency to complete it.

We are fortunate that the industrial base in Athlone continues to grow with very significant presence in MedTech, Pharma and IT sectors. Athlone is a powerful employment engine for the Midlands region and beyond and all the evidence is this base will continue to provide more employment opportunities. We are concerned that the pace of social and physical infrastructural development of the town is not aligned to what is required to support further employment growth.

The strategic pillars outlined in the Issues Paper are in line with our own thinking and we would love to see the aspirations as outlined become a reality. To this end we would like to see what are the short, medium and long term deliverables required to fulfil those aspirations.

Earlier we acknowledged the improvements in the public realm in the town centre. Westmeath County Council have clearly invested in this but we are disappointed that the physical improvements have not yielded the desired improvement in vibrancy of the town centre. Vacant properties remain a problem and are increasing, there are no standards imposed on the look and appearance of buildings in our own town centre.

Having a vibrant town which is a great place to live, work and visit is very important to the industry group. We need to attract and retain people to take up the employment opportunities we are creating.

We see very good models for what Athlone could be in similar sized towns and cities such as Waterford and Kilkenny and would encourage both Councils to emulate the factors behind the success of these towns/ cities .

We would like to see a sustained and resourced effort to have a calendar of events and festivals for Athlone running through the year. We believe that a fulltime paid co-ordinator would be a critical success factor working with all stakeholders, businesses, community and activity groups.

The economic development of Athlone has a high dependency on non-nationals, the JUAP should recognize this and we should do all in our powers to ensure Athlone is a welcoming and supportive place for our non-national communities.

We welcome some of the recent housing developments in progress in the Athlone area. More housing is required to meet the population target of 30,000 for Athlone by 2030 and would encourage the local authorities to remove unnecessary delays in the planning process. Lack of available housing and rented accommodation is a constant theme with Industry Group employees.

The JUAP should factor in the success and likely growth of TUS Athlone, its current student population of 14,000 and the accommodation requirements to match that population.

In summary, the Athlone Industry Group believe that Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils have identified correctly in the Issues Paper what needs to be done , have a good understanding of the relevant issues and will create an excellent JUAP.

We are very interested stakeholders in the process, offer our continued support and as outlined previously, would encourage the next phase of the plan to show more visibility on what it proposes to deliver over certain time scales including the resources required to achieve the urgent completion of the plan.

- short term 1-5 year
- medium term 5- 10 year
- longer term 10 years and beyond .

John Mee

On behalf of Athlone Industry Group

[The Athlone Industry Group is made up of local representatives drawn from major private sector employers in Athlone including Medtec, Pharma, IT, Hospitality sectors among others. The aim of the group is to advocate for the enhancement of the social, infrastructural and economic fabric in Athlone supporting the development of local industry]