



TUS

Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta na Sionainne:
Lár Tíre, An tIarthar Láir
Technological University of the Shannon:
Midlands Midwest

Forward Planning Department

Westmeath County Council & Roscommon County Council

Submission by online consultation portal: www.athlonejointplan.ie

01st February 2024

Re: PREPARATION OF THE ATHLONE JOINT URBAN AREA PLAN 2024-2030

A chara,

I refer you to the enclosed submission prepared on behalf of TUS in respect to the preparation of the Athlone Joint Area Plan for your consideration.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to discuss any aspect of this submission further.

Is mise, le meas,

Cormac Cloonan

Head of Capital Development



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Re: PREPARATION OF THE ATHLONE JOINT URBAN AREA PLAN 2024-2030

Dear Sir/Madam,

HRA PLANNING Chartered Town Planning Consultants has been retained by Technological University Shannin (“TUS”) to make this submission to Westmeath County Council & Roscommon County Council in its preparation of a new Joint Urban Area Plan for Athlone.

TUS provides leading student-centred higher education that is research-informed, regionally-relevant and accessible to all. TUS welcomes this joint arrangement and the pursuit by the joint authorities to set out a vision for the future growth of Athlone. As an established educational authority providing third-level educational requirements for students from both within the town and the region, TUS considered that it has a valuable contribution to make in the formulation of spatial policy and the land use framework for the town in the context of National, Regional and local educational requirements.

In parallel, TUS is in the process of finalising its own *master-planning* exercise in respect to the TUS Athlone Campus which is situated on ‘University Road’ and expects this to be completed in Quarter 2 of 2024.

TUS has set out in this submission, a number of recommendations for the consideration by the joint authorities. These recommendations are considered material in the context of the preparation of the spatial planning framework for the town. In parallel TUS is currently reviewing its own masterplan plan and examining options to enhance and expand the TUS Athlone campus and educational offer in the Region.



The context of these recommendations is set out briefly under the following headings:

TUS Athlone – The Educational Context

TUS Athlone (formerly 'Athlone Institute of Technology') is one of 5 campuses (including Limerick City, Clonmel, Ennis, and Thurles) which collectively constitute **Technological University of the Shannon (TUS)**.

TUS was formed following a merger of Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) and Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT) in 2019 under the Technical Universities Act 2018 forming a Technological University for the mid-west and midlands regions centred on the 'River Shannon.

Since 2021, TUS is now established as one of five established technological universities in Ireland which include also; Technical University Dublin, Munster Technological University (Cork), Atlantic Technological University (Sligo), and South East Technological University (Waterford).

TUS (as all Technological Universities) place an emphasis on delivery of education programmes at level 6 to 10. The first '**TUS Strategic Plan 2023-2026**' sets out strategic priorities for the; provision of a high-quality education offering within the region with a focus on science and technology programmes that are vocationally and professionally oriented; delivery of applied research, development and innovation; and contribution toward sustainable development of the regions.

The strategic function and importance of TUS in delivery of higher education is based in 'The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 - Report of the Strategy Group' where increased demand for higher education has been attributed to inter-alia; expansion of second-level education, growing demand for upskilling/re-skilling as part of the knowledge economy, and necessity for educational infrastructure to support career transition and progression.

The Strategic Planning Context

The National Planning Framework (NPF) **National Policy Objective 31** advocates the *expansion and consolidation of Higher Education facilities, particularly where this will contribute to wider regional development* as part of the creation of sustainable communities and aligned with planned population and employment growth.

Further to that, the consolidation of Athlone IT as TUS, has given effect to Regional Planning **Objective RPO 3.7.6** of the Northern & Western REGIONAL SPATIAL AND ECONOMIC STRATEGY 2020-2032 and **Objective 5.37** of the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027 where both objectives support the proposal to make Athlone AIT a Technological

University for the development of a 'smart cities' approach to drive research, innovation in Athlone.

TUS Athlone will continue to play a significant role in the spatial development of Athlone and contribution to creation of sustainable development and an inclusive community. This and those associated opportunities are reflected in the **Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027** and specifically the following objectives in that Plan:

- **CPO 5.13** : *Support the role of Athlone Institute of Technology as a center of excellence for education and in achieving its status as a Technological University.*
- **CPO 5.37**: *Support a multi-partner approach to the provision of a 'Midlands Technology Campus' to AIT. The delivery and implementation of this campus will assist in building regional competitiveness and innovation capacity within the region.*
- **CPO 5.39** : *Engage with innovative industries and networks to leverage the Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund and support and identify flagship projects that would benefit from public-private partnerships involving experiments with emerging technologies.*
- **CPO 15.4** : *Protect, provide and improve community, civic and educational facilities and to preserve the open character of institutional lands and the setting of heritage buildings contained within such lands.*
- **CPO 4.31** : *Support in conjunction with the relevant agencies, the provision of Third Level facilities, Youth Outreach, Adult and Further Education facilities within the County.*

TUS Athlone - Existing spatial arrangement

TUS Athlone comprises an existing campus situated to the eastern extremity of the Town between the University Road R446 to the south and the Rail line to the North. The campus comprises a cluster of several buildings with playing fields to the rear (north). All building footprints are essential to the continued function of TUS, however, additional infrastructural requirements have been identified for the TUS Athlone Campus to facilitate planned expansion and growth.

TUS very much believes that creating institutions of scale and strength – such as the Athlone Campus - will bring greater social and economic benefits to the region through a strengthened role in research and innovation and the delivery of a broad range of high quality education and training in each of their campuses.

TUS is currently reviewing its own Athlone campus masterplan in order to facilitate effective and efficient use of existing land assets and infrastructure, facilitate planned expansion, and improve internal circulation and movement.

Whilst there are some opportunities for campus growth such on-campus spatial opportunities are limited, requiring broader evaluation of options beyond the immediate confines of the main campus and specifically for student accommodation. Current analysis includes town centre site and specifically its Northgate Street within the town centre and consideration of options presented by the 'Green Quarter' (Development) to the north of the TUS Campus. That said, there is still considerable scope for further opportunities within the town that will require recognition and support within the new Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan in order to provide a degree of clarity and certainty for prospective users, for investors, and the wider community.

Emerging Trends – Student Housing

Growth in higher education – as experienced in recent years, can bring many economic and societal benefits. This can include the physical renewal and, the economic activity that takes place and societal benefits through the development of local urban areas in less commercially attractive areas. However, TUS recognises that this is resulting in increased pressure to an already pressurised housing market nationally. Demand for student bedspace is predicated to grow¹ and this is likely to place additional demand particularly on the private rental sector.

Increased provision of designated student housing accommodation or, opportunity for student housing accommodation close to education centres, will therefore ease pressures on the private rental sector. Options can include both on-campus and off-campus opportunities. On-campus options can contribute to improved student retention rates as well as reduced congestion in urban areas generated from commuter students. Off-campus opportunities can contribute to active use or revitalisation or areas particularly town centre areas. Thus, in the context of planned growth for TUS Athlone, there is duty and opportunity to consider and plan for this as part of the sustainable development framework for Athlone.

Observations/Recommendations:

In light of the above observations, and in addition to the objectives set out in the Westmeath County Development Plan, TUS would welcome the following as part of the preparation of the draft Joint Urban Area Plan:

¹ REPORT ON STUDENT ACCOMMODATION: DEMAND & SUPPLY, Higher Education Authority

Strategic Function

1. To include an objective to ensure that the settlement strategy set out in the UAP recognises the strategic social, economic and employment role of TUS Athlone within the town, its provision of higher education services within the region; and, the support for the expansion of that higher education service. TUS submits that this would align with and contribute to the strategic objectives for Athlone set out in the Northern & Western Regional Economic Spatial Strategy (RSES) for a 'Technology and Innovation Pole' in Athlone as noted in the separate submission made by that Regional Authority.

Mandatory Objective

2. The inclusion in the UAP of a **mandatory objective** that **supports the provision and growth of higher education 'Infrastructure'** within Athlone to serve the region - pursuant to the current provisions of Section 10(2)(b) of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended), or if applicable at the time of adoption, the provisions of Section 68.1(c) of the Planning and Development Bill 2022 in respect to "community facilities".

Spatial Planning Framework

3. To include as an objective within the UAP, for an active **land management approach** by the joint Authorities that identifies undeveloped areas, vacancy or underutilisation of land throughout the Urban Area, to promote co-ordinated development of lands and opportunities that are sufficiently flexible to facilitate growth in higher education, research and development as well as other appropriate compatible landuse activities.

Growth and Expansion of TUS Athlone

4. To provide a landuse zoning provision or special site-specific development objective applicable to the existing **TUS Athlone campus** and adjacent lands to the north and east (Figure 1 attached refers) and its Town Centre '**Northgate Street premisses**' that would; support and facilitate the use of that land for complimentary education, research and development and/or innovative uses in a campus park setting as part of the integrated overall strategy for the proper planning and sustainable development of the Urban Area Plan. The provision of such objectives should also indicate the appropriateness of those areas, and such zoning objectives for provision of student accommodation.
5. That objectives applicable to the TUS Athlone site support the existing TUS prepared campus Masterplan (figure 2 attached) and an update of that Masterplan currently under preparation by TUS.

6. The inclusion of objectives that would provide for appropriate level of sporting facilities including pitches responsive to the demand of TUS and other sports users in response to an identified need and provision assessment of 'community infrastructure' in consultation with those sports and recreation providers.

Identification of Education Opportunities throughout the Town

7. The inclusion of a landuse zoning objective **to support the use and development of sites within and throughout the town** and particularly on land zoned within a defined 'Town Centre'/'mixed-use' or, within other areas designated 'existing residential areas', **for higher educational use** and, as part of urban regeneration/renewal objectives, subject to appropriate qualitative and amenity safeguards and the 'Town Centre' first approach.

8. That the inclusion of a **land use zoning matrix** within the UAP indicates favourable consideration in principle, for 'student housing' on lands which are zoned for: 'Education', 'Research', 'Innovation'; 'Mixed-Use'; 'Town-Centre'; or as zoned for all other forms of 'residential' use.

Efficiency in Appropriate Application of Building Height

9. That any spatial development objectives applicable to the TUS Campus or lands at that location zoned for education, research and or innovation (including student housing) recognise the potential efficiency in landuse through use of increased building height consistent with the approach set out in the Building Height Guidelines for Planning Authorities' which acknowledges that taller buildings can bring much needed additional housing and economic development to well-located urban areas.

Provision of Student Accommodation

10. That objectives in the UAP in respect to provision of **housing** acknowledge the unique subset requirements for 'student housing' and support the provision of both on-campus and off-campus accommodation and particularly opportunities to contribute to urban regeneration/renewal and redress of vacant sites.

Incentivisation for Effective Implementation – Development Contribution Scheme

11. For the joint authorities to undertake a review of the Westmeath Development Contribution Scheme (2022) as follows:
 - a. Section 7.2 Housing. The extension of the waiver of development contributions set out in this section, **to apply also to** the development of

student specific accommodation which is advanced by, on behalf of, or in partnership with TUS;


- b. Section 7.9 Economic Development. The extension of the 33% reduction of development contribution application to the IDA Business Park set out in this section, **to apply also to** development within the TUS Athlone Campus given the economic benefit of that activity to the town and the synergy of activities and location between TUS and the IDA Business Park.
- c. Section 7.11. The 33% reduction applicable to 'retail development' as set out in this section, **to apply also to** development undertaken by, on behalf of, or in partnership with TUS within or adjacent to the 'retail core area' and surrounding commercial area for the purpose of TUS related education, research or innovation given that such activity may have a same or increased benefit to the vitality of the town centre, or in the regeneration and activation of derelict or underutilised property within the Town Centre as a retail use.

Sustainable Transport and Connectivity

- 12. For the UAP to include an objective for the provision of improved pedestrian and or cycle connectivity between the TUS Campus and Athlone Town Centre with assigned timescale, responsibility and monitoring/review mechanism to assist the delivery of same during the lifetime of the UAP.

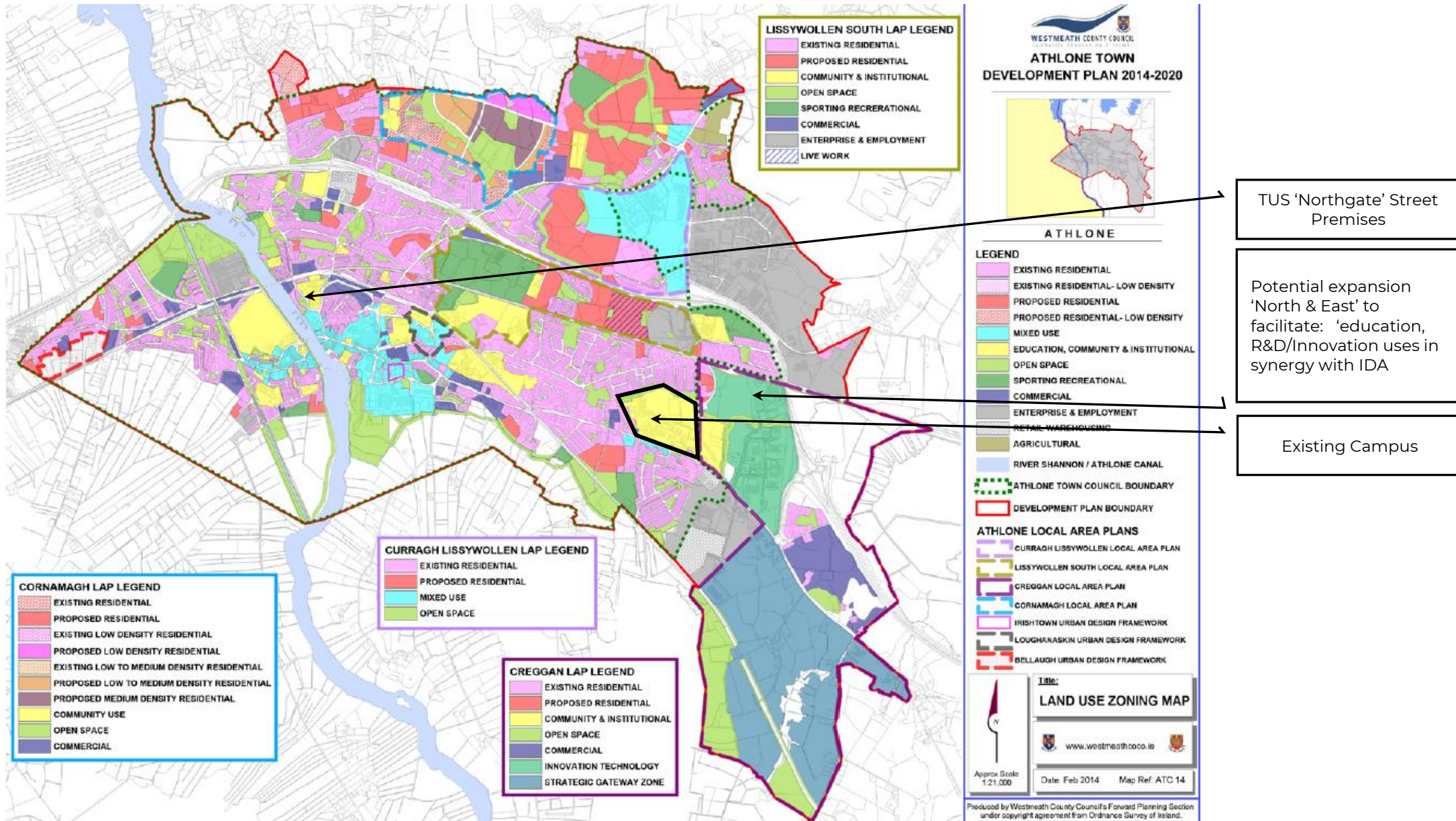
Further to the above observations and recommendations, as a strategic service provider in the Region, TUS would welcome further consultation with the joint authorities as part of the preparation of the Joint Urban Area Plan to enable the planning authority to be further informed on the overall objectives of TUS and its masterplan which might assist clarification on any of the above observations.

Yours sincerely,



Gary Rowan MRTPI MIPI
Director HRA | PLANNING

Figure 1 TUS Athlone Campus and Assets (basemap from existing Zoning Map)



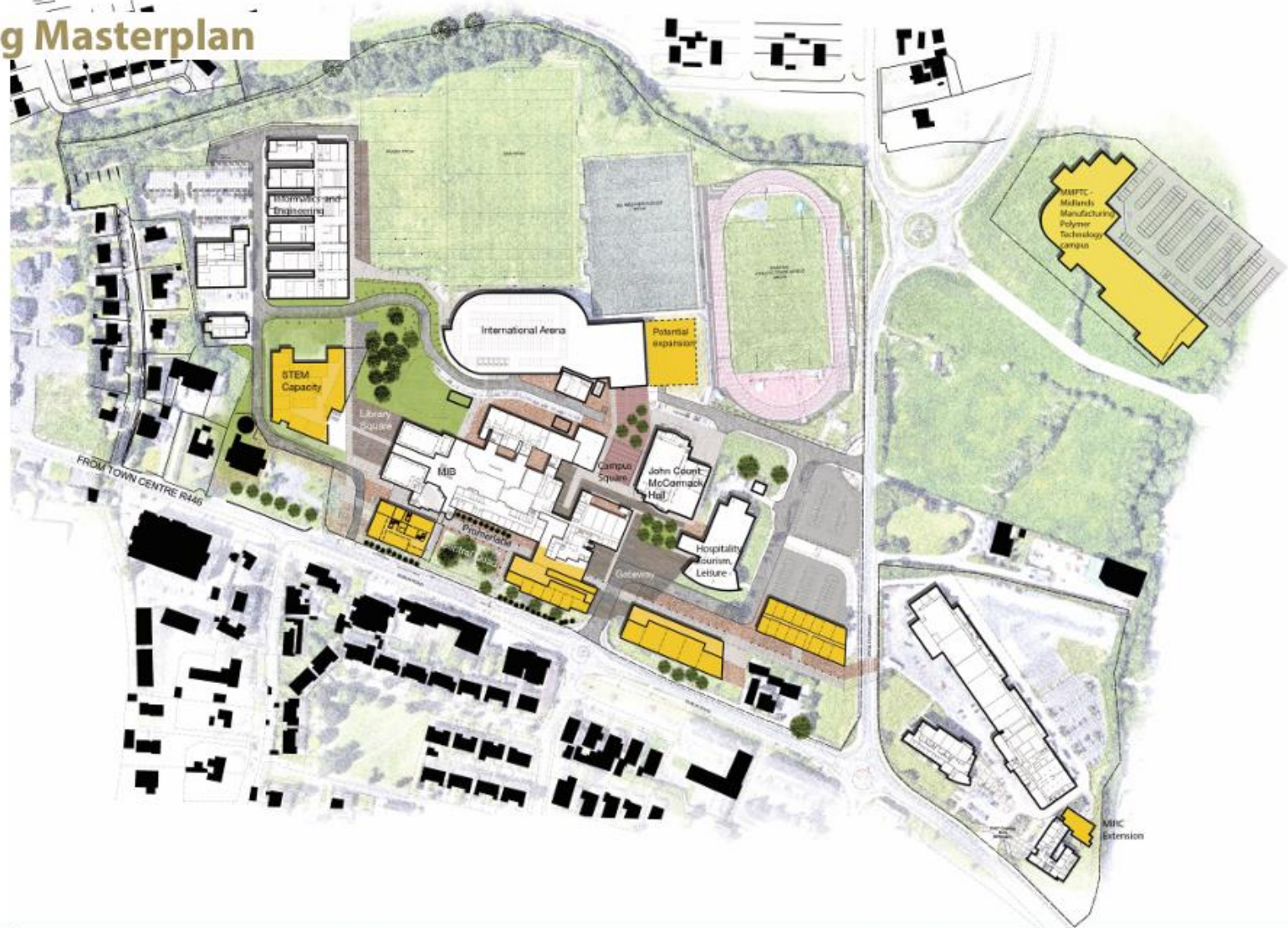
TUS 'Northgate' Street Premises

Potential expansion 'North & East' to facilitate: 'education, R&D/Innovation uses in synergy with IDA

Existing Campus

Figure 2 TUS 'EXISTING' Masterplan

Existing Masterplan



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TUS

bkdarchitects

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Athlone Campus