

Re: Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan 2024-2030 Strategic Issues Paper

1 February 2024

Dear Sir/Madam

Ibec, the group that represents Irish business, welcomes the commencement of the preparation of a Joint Urban Area Plan (JUAP) for Athlone. In submissions to the NPF and RSES planning process, Ibec highlighted that inter-regional challenges must not hold back Athlone. The unique case of overlapping boundaries for planning and governance considerations requires special attention. It is the only urban centre in the country where this occurs. The JUAP must address the unique challenge that this presents so it can fulfil its role as regional growth centre.

The JUAP must support the development of Athlone as an attractive, vibrant and highly accessible Regional Centre and economic driver for the centre of the Country. It must be based on similar criteria for the development of the Metropolitan Area and must satisfy Athlone's potential and aspirations to grow into a city region of scale. Emphasis must be placed on securing the critical mass and strong urban economy of scale required to contribute to national development and competitiveness. It must set out a clear strategic purpose and provide a coordinated planning framework to identify and deliver strategic sites and regeneration areas for the future physical, economic and social development of the area consistent with compact, sustainable growth, and the role of Athlone as a Regional Growth Centre.

The Strategic Issues Paper highlights that Athlone has experienced sustained population growth since 2016 with 22,869 persons living in the urban area in 2022 and that this positive growth trend aligns with the town's strategic population target of +30,000 persons by 2031. The review of the NPF is expected to result in a significant revision upwards of demographic and population projections, which will result in revisions to local population, employment, and other growth targets. Local authorities will be expected to revisit recent zoning decisions to ensure the availability of more zoned and serviceable land for development, as well as undertaking new housing needs demand assessments. Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils, supported by the two regional assemblies, will have to incorporate flexibility into the development of the JUAP to ensure that it is responsive to forthcoming changes stemming from the NPF review.

The rate of population growth will lead to a steady increase in demand for travel and a consequent need for more compact urban development served by an efficient public transport network. The Plan should include policies and objectives to improve both rail and bus services and infrastructure including facilities to improve the passenger experience and improve efficiency and effectiveness of the services. The Plan must also focus on the identification of the required networks and measures to bring about improvements in walking and cycling modes. It must ensure that access by walking, cycling and public transport is a key determinant in the location of local services such as schools, retail and leisure facilities.

Athlone is critically located in the country and on the national road and Ten-T networks. It is traversed by the M/N6 into which the N55, N61 and N62 national secondary routes travel in the vicinity of Athlone. The JUAP must continue to develop the road network and support the delivery of strategic road links within and surrounding Athlone to improve the quality of life of commuters and local residents and support economic growth. There is a need to manage and protect the national roads of M/N6, N55, N61 and N62 and associated junctions in line with official policy and national objectives in relation to spatial planning and national roads. The road network plays a key strategic role in catering for inter-urban and inter-regional transport requirements that will serve economic competitiveness and regional accessibility, and this must be reflected in the JUAP.

Key to the future of Athlone is the availability of zoned and serviced lands within the existing built-up area to facilitate significant population growth. It is important to ensure that the JUAP zones land to facilitate the future growth targets in a sustainable and compact manner, and in accordance with the settlement hierarchy set out in the Development Plans' core strategies and RSEs. The JUAP should also promote residential development that contributes to the urban regeneration of town centre sites at appropriate densities in areas that are or will be well-served by walking and cycling facilities.

The creation of additional high-value employment in the Athlone environs will require forward planning. Sustainable and resilient planning will require sufficient focus on allowing people to live close to where they work. The JUAP must ensure that growth targets address enterprise and employment, in addition housing. There must be an adequate supply of zoned land for industrial, commercial and other enterprise use in the JUAP designated area. The delivery of necessary infrastructure and property solutions that are appropriately established and zoned are prerequisites to facilitate expansions and winning new investment. Enterprise and employment considerations must be a key component of the JUAP. The continued growth of the Monksland biopharma industry cluster will be an important enabler to the sustained growth of Athlone.

The coordination of land use planning and transportation will be critical to achieving the complementary objectives of compact urban growth. An integrated approach to the design of development areas in Athlone should include a set of principles and criteria designed to ensure a high standard of access by public transport, foot, and private car so that the variety of residential, enterprise and employment areas can be easily accessible by all modes of transport and all sections of society.

Vital to the growth of Athlone as a Regional Centre is the provision of high-quality, well-designed housing development that ensures a mixture of housing types and meets the needs of a variety of households. This is essential to support the residents of Athlone, including the current and future employment base thus strengthening the economic potential of the area.

The future development of Athlone must be infrastructure-led. Key enabling infrastructure for growth must be clearly identified and prioritised. Delivering on the Centre's growth potential requires the advancement of key projects with a strong focus on transport, energy, water, waste, education and social infrastructure.

The development of the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) will be a major driver of growth. It has come into existence since the publication of the NPF and it is necessary that the importance of the TUS is fully reflected in the JUAP. The JUAP must facilitate the development and continued growth of the TUS, which will maximise the benefits to the local and regional economy. We welcome the commitment in the Issues Paper to support the TUS's strategic role in Athlone to promote a 'Knowledge-Based Economy', capitalise on emerging synergies and enable new clustering opportunities whilst investing in the skills, talent and services that attract employers to Athlone.

The future growth and development of TUS and planning for future capacity enhancements must be factored into the JUAP. The on-campus developments will deliver capacity for growth in response to the university's academic needs, however there is a need for TUS to expand beyond its current campus boundaries to deliver student accommodation, research capacity and other key functions. Careful consideration of land re-zoning is required to ensure the TUS ability to grow is not unnecessarily restricted. In addition, enhanced and improved transport and mobility infrastructure connecting the TUS campus and premises to the town of Athlone should be a priority.

To cater for projected population growth, the Plan must support the provision of adequate and suitable school accommodation at both primary and post primary level, including ensuring sufficient land is zoned for this purpose in existing built-up areas, within Athlone.

Athlone's planned future development requires strong coordination between Local Authorities and a joint approach between Westmeath County Council and Roscommon County Council is welcome. This is an important next step in the statutory planning framework for the Regional Growth Centre of Athlone and will play a particularly important role in guiding its future growth and development. It will be important to provide for monitoring and implementation of the various policies, objectives and actions in the JUAP.

Finally, clarification is needed on the development of the JUAP in terms of the proposed changes to area-based planning under the Planning and Development Bill 2023. The new planning legislation proposes to introduce new area-based plans (Urban Area Plans, Priority Area Plans, and Coordinated Area Plans). Is the preparation of the JUAP permissible at this stage given that the area-based plans under the current planning legislative framework are to be replaced? If the process is to be paused, which new scheme would apply for Athlone? For example, Urban Area Plans are to be introduced for regional growth centres under the NPF, but Coordinated Area Plans involve two or more local authorities for the development of a settlement that straddles their functional area. There are other changes in the Planning and Development Bill that would impact local plan-making, such as housing strategies, which could result in an early variation of the JUAP.

Ibec looks forward to reviewing the draft Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan and to further consultation and continued positive engagement during the plan preparation process.

Yours sincerely

Helen Leahy

Head of Regional Policy and Engagement