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## **Re: Athlone Joint LAP 2024-2030 – Issues Paper**

To Whom it Concerns,

Green-Schools Travel welcomes this opportunity to comment on the *Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan 2024-2030 Pre-Draft Consultation Strategic Issues Paper*. This submission relates specifically to Section 9 : Transport and Movement within the issues paper.

*Green-Schools* is a student-led environmental education programme for schools nationwide. The programme is coordinated by An Taisces Environmental Education Unit and delivered through a series of themes. Green-Schools Travel is the fourth theme in the Green-Schools programme which aims to increase the number of students and teachers who actively travel to school (walk, cycle, scoot) as well as promoting other sustainable journeys (Park and Stride, Carpool and Public Transport). The programme has been delivered to over 2,000 schools nationwide which represents 465,000 students and 36,000 teachers.

The Green-Schools Travel programme plays an active role in the delivery of national events to promote sustainable transport modes. For example, the innovative #andshecycles campaign which aims to increase the number of teenage girls who cycle to school was developed and delivered through the Green-Schools Travel programme. The campaign has achieved nationwide coverage and has reached over a million people through its social media and national campaign. The programme also runs national events – the BIG Travel Challenge, Scoot to School Week, Walk to School Week, Cycle to School Day and Clean Air Week – these annual events have supported an increase in active travel journeys to school. Further details on the programme are attached to this submission or available from [www.greenschoolsireland.org](http://www.greenschoolsireland.org).

Green-Schools Travel works directly with participating schools to complete walkability/cycleability audits with their dedicated travel officer. These are simple assessments of key routes to school where students are encouraged to consider positive and negative features from the perspective of students walking/cycling to school. They then work together to identify solutions to promote walking/cycling. Recommendations generated from this activity stimulate action within the school community (no-idling campaigns, road safety campaigns) and can sometimes include simple road maintenance requests to Local Authorities. Several schools are registered with the Green-Schools programme in the Athlone Urban Area and are working on different themes within the programme, many will be working on a Green-Schools Travel theme within the lifetime of this plan.

Responses to questions presented in the [Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan pre-consultation](#) document presented on p25 are as follows:

***How can this plan improve the safety of pedestrians and cyclists within Athlone, e.g. new/upgraded footpaths, cycleways, pedestrianised streets etc?***

- The importance of the journey to school and enabling this journey to be completed by walking and cycling should be a key priority in for the JUAP. This needs to include schools not registered with the Safe Routes to School Programme.
- Safety around the school gates and on the journey to school is a real barrier when it comes to promoting active travel. The front of school gate should be an area which is free from cars, free from congestion and child focused. The reality in most schools in Ireland is the opposite with poorly parked cars, congestion, poor air quality and a generally unsafe space for children. In addition to safety concerns outside the school gate there is also a lack of respect for the rules of the road. This leads to unsafe behaviour and as a result less parents are willing to allow their children to actively and independently travel to school. *Green-Schools Travel recommends the enforcement of traffic laws through the use of cameras at pedestrian crossings and traffic lights.*
- Ensure that the streetscape is designed in a manner that reduces the potential for safety hazards.
- Ensure that pedestrians/cyclists are prioritized at every opportunity. This incorporates the provision of controlled crossings in key locations and ensuring safe pedestrian crossing where high vehicular crossover takes place (shopping centre/retail centres).
- Ensure schools are actively engaged in any future plans for active travel in their area. It is imperative that the user – cyclists, walkers, the disabled – have a voice in the planning process so that the perspective of the child is taken into account and our communities are planned around our most vulnerable users.
- Designate the front of school environs as a car free zone where possible.
- Speeding constitutes a real barrier to active travel both outside schools and on routes to schools. Walkability audits have found that students react poorly to both perceived and cases of actual speeding. It is hard for a young child to determine the speed at which a car is travelling and therefore they cannot judge what is a safe speed. Results of Green-Schools' speed surveys to date are indicating that drivers staying at or below the allowable speed limit are more the exception than the norm (except in areas of very heavy urban congestion). Green-Schools has been working with schools and local authorities to promote the 30kph speed zones outside schools so that students, teachers and parents have a safe place to interact as well as reducing speeds on highly populated routes. Lower speed limits together with simple and relatively cost-effective engineering solutions would create a safer, welcoming and more equitable space for children and adults to actively travel to school and work. *Green-Schools Travel recommends the introduction of 30km/hr zones outside schools in*

*tandem with engineering solutions such as entry treatment, build-outs and pinch points to reduce the drivers' tendency to speed in these areas and optimise the efficacy of zones.*

- Enable the wider community to highlight issues on the Westmeath County Council website similar to the service available for Roscommon Co.Co. (Roscommon [Report It](#)) and Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Co.Co. (DLR [Report IT](#)).

***What are the key areas of Athlone that would benefit from improved connectivity from a public transport, cycle and walking perspective?***

Green-Schools Travel is currently working with *Our Ladys Bower, Retreat Rd., Mullingar, Co. Westmeath*. A walkability audit was conducted with students to identify barriers/solutions to sustainable travel. Green-Schools Travel would like to note the following:

- Opposite Our Lady's Bower lies, the primary bus drop/pick-up location serves three closely situated secondary schools, collectively accommodating 2,500 students. Negotiating the road amidst buses and traffic poses a challenge for Our Lady's Bower students and neighboring schools. Some means of facilitating safer road crossings and enabling convenient access to the Greenway was cited by students.
- Additionally, students walking from the Athlone side encounter difficulties due to an exposed narrow footpath on the bridge over the railway line. Given the substantial influx of students in this area, exploring the feasibility of installing a cantilever walkway on the exterior of the bridge could offer a viable solution.
- Ensure connectivity with key urban centres

Green-Schools Travel is also working with *St. Pauls National School, Lyster Street, Athlone* where issues relating to pedestrian infrastructure were noted. Limited pedestrian space along this street, poor driver behaviour (speed) and the need to improve school visibility were noted. Safety concerns were also raised for pick up times where, in the absence of suitable space to congregate, parents/guardians are forced onto the road/into the line of traffic.

***What practical measures could this plan incorporate to positively encourage increased active travel (e.g. walking, cycling and public transport use) and reduce car dependency.***

Green-Schools has been working in the area of behaviour change for over a decade and as a result has a unique perspective when it comes to what motivates people to change their habits and why. As previously stated there continues to be a number of significant barriers which limit the number of people who 'choose' to travel in an active or sustainable way. The reality is that our cities, towns and neighbourhoods have been planned without consideration for sustainable mobility and therefore people have less choice and less flexibility to change their travel habits. There are a number of opportunities along with the recommendations above that could support greater choice when it comes to travelling for school, work, shopping or recreation.

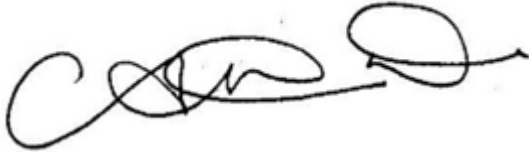
- Integrating Behaviour Change and Infrastructure – Green-Schools has been undertaking walkability and cycleability audits for over ten years. These audits are carried out by the user – the child – and give a unique insight into the pedestrian and cycling experience of our most vulnerable members of society. The audits are then submitted to local authorities for action and improvements have been made where capacity and funding are available. There is a need to fund these types of infrastructural improvements so that schools can offer sustainable travel to their students.
- Link with An Taisces Green-Schools Travel Programme for 'Call To Action' events and to communicate student walkability audit recommendations. Green-Schools Travel has worked with numerous Local Authorities to promote National Bike Week, National Walk to School

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Week, Clean Air Week, support No-Idling campaigns etc. These events are designed to positively encourage increased active travel.

- Establish formal Park & Stride locations a short distance from schools in the vicinity of school districts and incentivising uptake for school pick-up/drop off times.

Regards,



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## Overview

### About the Green-Schools Travel theme

Green-Schools Travel is a behaviour change programme which aims to promote active modes such as walking, cycling, public bus transport and park & stride for schools. The Green-Schools Travel theme is funded by the Department of Transport and supported by the National Transport Authority. The programme has worked to promote sustainable travel in Mayo since 2008 and can provide valuable insights from across the county.

Green-Schools is a student-led behaviour change programme delivered in over 3,500 schools nationwide. The Green-Schools Programme is a thematic programme where schools focus on a specific theme for a minimum of two years. Themes include waste reduction, energy conservation, water conservation, transport and biodiversity. Each of the Green-Schools themes promote positive environmental actions which are directly linked to climate action. Green-Schools works closely with Environmental Awareness Officers within Local Authorities particularly for waste, water, energy and biodiversity themes. Travel is the fourth theme in the programme where schools actively work to promote sustainable modes of transport for the school run.

In 2023, Green-Schools was selected as an [Sustainable Development Goal \(SDG\) Champion](#) by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC) as a *'good practice example of how an organisation or group can contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals and integrate the SDGs into their work activities'*. SDG 13: Climate Action is a focus goal across all Green-Schools themes but is particularly relevant for transport themes in the programme.

Schools are engaged in the following actions as part of the Green-Schools Travel theme:

- Promotion of walking/cycling/scooting/bus transport through national call to action events and individual school events
- Walkability/Cycleability audits
- Clean Air Campaigns such as no-idling outside schools.
- Climate Action Week
- Speed Week/Road safety
- Green-Schools Travel also supports schools in the delivery of Cycle Right training in schools and provides fully funded cycle and scooter parking for participating schools.
- Get in Gear cycling courses for parents in participating schools

Further information on the programme is available from [www.greenschoolsireland.org](http://www.greenschoolsireland.org)

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