

NPF Submissions
Forward Planning Section
Department of Housing, Planning,
Community and Local Government
Custom House
Dublin
D01 W6X0

10 November 2017

**Re: Submission to the Draft 'Ireland 2040 – Our Plan' National Planning Framework
Submission: Athlone 2040: Enabling a Successful Midlands Region
Regional Champion: Destination Athlone**

Dear Madam/Sir,

Introduction

Future Analytics Consulting Ltd., Chartered Planning, Development and Socio-Economic Research Consultants, wish to make the enclosed submission to the National Planning Framework (NPF) Consultation Process, on behalf of Destination Athlone.

Following an earlier submission in March 2017 (Athlone 2040: A Regional City in the Midlands - a copy of which is resubmitted in the enclosed pack), Destination Athlone have carefully reflected on the emerging direction contained in the Draft NPF, and wish to respectfully request that the Department incorporate the Athlone 2040 vision and wider spatial planning strategy outlined for the Midlands Region, in the forthcoming NPF and related National Investment Plan.

The Athlone 2040 proposal aligns with the views and recommendations of the Expert Group tasked with the Review of the National Spatial Strategy in 2014:

“We favour continuing with each of the National Gateways adopted in the first NSS with the exception of the linked Midlands Gateway. **We propose instead that Athlone should be recognised as the Midlands Gateway**, because the linked centres approach has not been sufficiently established, diffuses focus, and has proven to be of little substance or value in practice. To a great extent, **the Gateways are self-selecting (and this is the case with Athlone) as they have the largest populations (270,000 people within 45-minutes of Athlone, and over 550,000 within 1-hour, currently), the best transport connections (Athlone is served by 4 strategic national routes, 29 daily rail connections, continuous bus connections), the highest levels of economic activity and the critical mass of key services such as education (over 5,000 students, over 100 programmes across 4 leading faculties) and health (Athlone has direct access to 4 regional hospitals). They are the key to regional and national success**” (Note: Our additions underlined)

Benefitting the wider Midlands Region, the spatial planning strategy promotes **Athlone as a key enabler for a reimagined and revitalised Midlands Region.**

Vision for Athlone 2040

Under this strategy, the vision is that:

“Athlone will be a key enabler for a revitalised Midlands, that spans Ireland’s regions and links the heart of Ireland to the 5 Cities supported in the National Planning Framework. It will be an exemplar for social, economic, physical and environmental development in the Midlands Region, a Region that is connected, sustainable and healthy, with a vibrant economy and outstanding quality of life for all”

Athlone 2040 will be sustainable and healthy, with a vibrant economy and outstanding quality of life for all. It will serve to reimagine and redefine the attractive offer the Midlands Region can make to inward investment, to kick-start and sustain the regional economy, and to provide the supporting infrastructure, services and facilities needed to safeguard quality of life and the environment.

Destination Athlone

Destination Athlone (Chaired by Mr. John O’Sullivan, Chairman of the Hodson Bay Group) is a collaborative network of Local Authorities, Statutory Bodies, Education Providers, Chamber of Commerce and Major Employers in Industry across the wider Midlands Region.

Destination Athlone is dedicated to promoting the sustainable development of Athlone, and enhancing the role it can play in delivering new opportunities for all the surrounding towns in the Midlands Region. Its digital platform www.athlone.ie actively promotes the entire region as a great place to visit, live, work and play.

The enclosed submission is made on behalf of all members and is being directly supported by:

- Westmeath County Council
- Roscommon County Council
- Longford County Council
- IDA
- Fáilte Ireland
- Waterways Ireland,
- Athlone Chamber of Commerce,
- Athlone Institute of Technology,
- ERICSSON,
- Medtronic,
- Jazz Pharmaceuticals,
- Athlone Extrusions Ltd,
- Teleflex,
- ALKERMES,
- Hodson Bay Group
- And wider industry.

Reflection on the Draft NPF

As a hugely important blueprint for Ireland’s future growth and sustainable development, Destination Athlone remain extremely concerned that the Draft NPF fails to set out a coherent vision for the future planning and development of the Midlands Region. Collectively, the members of Destination Athlone are disappointed by the Draft NPF, which also fails to recognise the potential of Athlone as the central driver of the Midlands Region.

Specifically, the Draft NPF has failed to recognise the compelling submission made to the Issues Paper consultation stage, which strongly advocates for Athlone to be designated as the driver for the Midlands Region, in line with the recommendations of the National Spatial Strategy Review Expert Group appointed by the Irish Government.

In fact, the Draft NPF risks weakening the status of Athlone and the Region by removing its current status, ignoring the advice of the expert review group on the NSS and leaving its future designation uncertain in terms of execution and timeframe. This can undo the success of existing clusters and the capacity to build on these, and the set back and loss of momentum would be a major opportunity cost to the hoped-for success of the NPF.

The Draft NPF has left the entire Midlands Region in a poor position at risk of economic decline and depopulation. Indeed, the uncertainty that the Draft NPF brings, in terms of Ireland’s commitment to sustainable growth in the Midlands Region, has seen two major regional employers freeze their expansion plans.

Notwithstanding the earlier submission, Destination Athlone feel it is crucial that the forthcoming NPF provides the policies, objectives and commitment to support and invest in the sustainable development of the Midlands Region, with Athlone serving as the key enabler to achieve this.

Yours sincerely,

(electronic submission and so no signature is applied)

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Encl.