

# Ireland 2040: National Planning Framework



## Submission from Roscommon County Council



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## Executive Summary

In Ireland the non-uniform pace of urbanisation has led to spatial and economic imbalances with an increasing concentration of population and economic activity in the east of the country. Within this trend a tendency has emerged for the most acute pressure for new housing and infrastructure provision to occur at the periphery rather than the inner city of the Dublin Metropolitan area. The picture is manifestly different outside of the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) particularly in the more peripheral, western midlands, northwest and border regions which do not feel the influence of a proximate centre of population and economic development. Addressing this longstanding inertia will be a key challenge for the forthcoming National Planning Framework (NPF).

While the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) was an important ideological progression in giving Ireland a spatial planning model for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the experience of the NSS has highlighted that polycentrism whilst an undoubtedly good model for correcting regional spatial imbalance, becomes ineffective when diluted to the level of 'linked gateways' of the scale of Athlone/Tullamore/Mullingar (ATM). This is due to the failure of necessary economies of scale to emerge, the reality that real linkages and synergies between each centre may not transpire as envisaged, and the tendency for a spirit of competition rather than co-operation to emerge between centres. The reality that the regional 'hubs' identified in the NSS tended, in practice, to be undistinguishable from other county towns is a further indication that we should be cautious in the NPF about diluting the impact of growth centre designation.

In setting a framework aimed at resolving the spatial and economic imbalances discussed above and establishing a healthier national growth balance, it is crucial that the NPF sets realistic yet ambitious targets with a strong bias in emphasis to the vision for an Ireland of 2040 rather than today. All of the indicators suggest that the Ireland of 2040 will be an increasingly urbanised, energy and resource efficient society.

A successful model for the spatial development of Ireland must also address the dominance of suburban living as a lifestyle choice and explore options for making town and city centre living a more attractive alternative. It must tackle the public perception that higher density development results in reduced quality in the urban environment. The NPF offers the opportunity to establish a national 'Town Centre First' policy which, if framed in a concise manner, can be exceptionally effective in driving sustainable national economic development.

The model set out in this submission outlines a number of concepts which should underpin a new national framework for the Ireland of 2040 including:

- Dublin City retaining its dominance with a new emphasis on enhancing city centre life whilst looking for capacity to increase city centre density thus providing a framework for cost effective mass transit.
- Due to their existing strengths the regional cities of Cork, Galway and Limerick developing as part of a connected polycentric city region, along with Waterford City as a regional growth centre in its own right, being given heightened significance as growth centres.

- A key new role in the NPF for Athlone as a regional City.

Any framework aimed at rebalancing the economic decline in the midlands and north-west, and pull of the youth demographic and commuting patterns from the midlands and north-west, must concentrate its effect and designate a single regional centre in the midlands, to develop as a regional city. Athlone is ideally placed to fulfil this role.

Athlone, straddling the Northern and Western and Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly areas, has, despite its comparatively peripheral location in relation to the Greater Dublin Area and the growing tourism resources of the west coast, prospered, as an accessible and attractive employment, shopping and population centre of regional significance. Building upon these key strengths and its central location within the island of Ireland, it is envisaged Athlone will have consolidated its place as a regional city, and an economic engine for the midlands and northwest by 2040, becoming an increasingly attractive work and life choice for the people of the midlands west and north-west.

Athlone today has enormous natural capacity to develop the critical mass to become a settlement of approximately 50,000 people by 2040, without any policy framework or development incentives for its designation as a growth centre. The challenge for Athlone will be in channelling future population growth such that it makes a real contribution to the sustainable urban development of Athlone whilst also moving towards a more sustainable mobility model.

The model advanced herein advocates the principle that the first priority should be the exploration of town centre and public transportation corridor capacity along with that associated with existing vacancy. The designation of Athlone as a regional city as part of the NPF and a population growth centre would create the opportunities for greater efficiencies in the use of brownfield land and address the unsustainably low density pattern of development which has emerged in Athlone. A preferable population density model for Athlone would be that of Swords or Bray in the east of the country. A model which if applied to Athlone would result in the emergence of an Athlone regional city of approximately 65,000 people by 2040.

The model also proposes the creation of an alternative fulcrum or pivot at Athlone, from which to direct future transportation infrastructural investment, providing a framework for a healthier national growth balance. A central principle of this model would be infrastructural economy and the creation of efficiencies and cost savings through the development of Athlone as a regional transportation hub in a manner which maximises and builds upon existing public transportation links with Dublin City.

As Athlone assumes the role of a compact regional city of 65,000 people and moves towards a more sustainable mobility model, there is a significant opportunity given its key 'green' and 'blue' assets and its growth capacity, for the regional city to become the most people friendly and age friendly city in Ireland by 2040.

# Athlone 2040 - A Regional City in the Midlands

The economic crisis of 2008 and subsequent decade of uncertainty, contraction of economic activity and retrenchment of investment has led to calls for economic and spatial planning reform. It has also resulted in a national appetite for new ideas and an unprecedented public openness to change how we plan where we live and work. In this period there has been some criticism of the effectiveness of the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) in redressing the broad spatial and economic disparities between the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) and other parts of the country, particularly the Midlands, West and Border regions. Criticism has also been levelled at the ability of the NSS and planning system generally, to address more localised centripetal pressures, pushing residential development to increasingly peripheral locations from centres of employment and community.

These same pressures had however been developing in Ireland for over a century, driven initially by ideologies such as the Garden City movement, which took hold in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century as a reaction to the squalor and pollution in UK Victorian cities. Later, various ideologies within the Modern movement sought to dispense with traditional urban life in favour of a 'brave new world' which prompted the creation of new, spatially expansive, course grained and primarily car dependent settlements on greenfield sites, and a general separation of uses, fuelling the need to travel.

In Ireland there has traditionally been a strong tendency to frame policy to accommodate rather than to alter, established patterns of development, focussing instead on retrospective infrastructural provision which fuelled and perpetuated, rather than reversed existing development patterns. This approach broadly prevailed in Ireland until the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, culminating in the acceptance of the Myles Wright Report '*The Dublin Region*' of 1967. This model proposed four 'New Towns' to the west of Dublin at Tallaght, Lucan, Clondalkan and Blanchardstown, as well as further expansion in the northern and southern suburbs (rather than the more balanced Buchanan Report of 1968), much of which was implemented through the Dublin County Development Plan 1971. This inertia likely played a significant role in diluting potential for a compact Dublin city centre with the critical mass to support a fully integrated public transportation network, which would have eliminated many of the issues which we must seek to address in the upcoming National Planning Framework. The reversal of this longstanding inertia in the period between the publication of the NSS and the economic crisis was not a realistic public expectation, particularly in the absence of aligned economic development planning.

The NSS was an important ideological progression in giving Ireland a spatial planning model for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and a break with unsustainable ideologies of the past. The experience of the NSS has however highlighted that polycentrism whilst an undoubtedly good model for correcting regional spatial imbalance, becomes ineffective when diluted to the level of 'linked gateways' of the scale of Athlone/Tullamore/Mullingar (ATM). This is due to the failure of necessary economies of scale to emerge, the reality that real linkages and synergies between each centre may not transpire as envisaged, and the tendency for a spirit of competition rather than co-operation to emerge between centres. The reality that the regional 'hubs' identified in the NSS tended, in practice, to be undistinguishable from other county towns is a further indication that we should be cautious in the NPF about diluting the impact of growth centre designation.

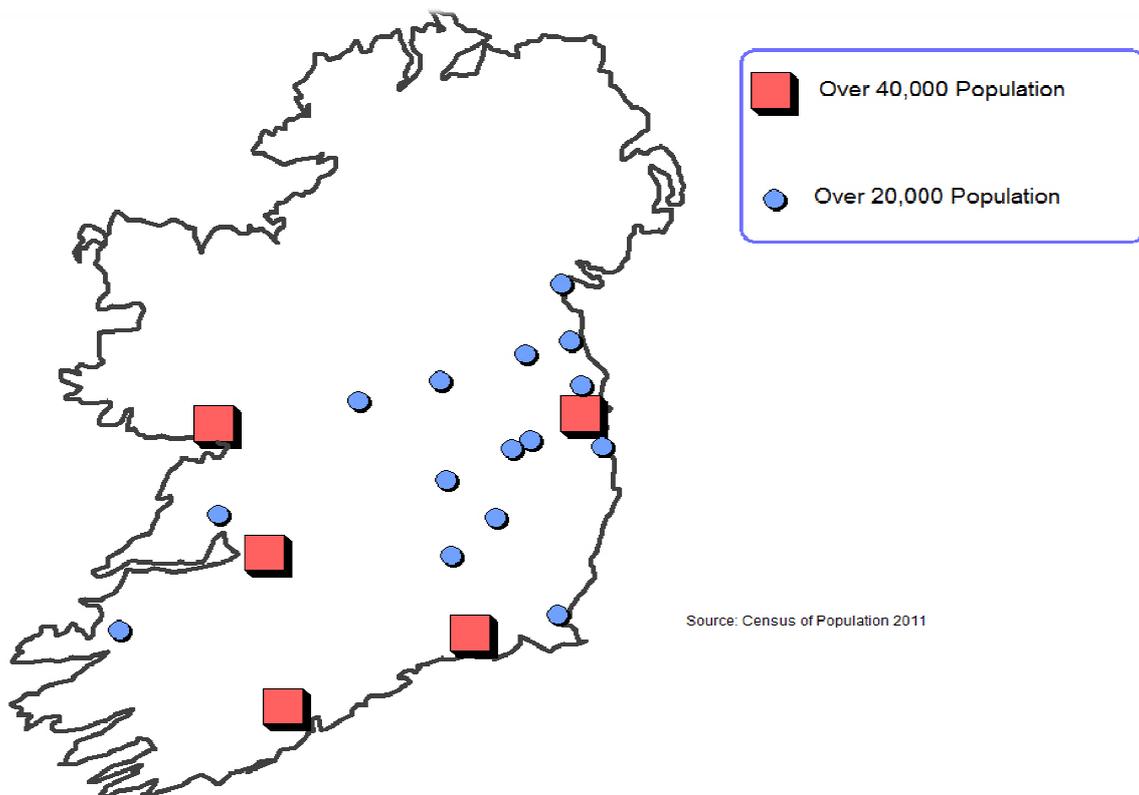
## Developing A Model for Ireland 2040

As we enter a period of great change in Ireland, there are strong indicators that we have learned as a nation from the economic difficulties we have encountered during the last decade. Out of this period has emerged a more pragmatic, yet enterprising and change orientated spirit. We must however manage the legacies of the past as we plan for the future.

### The Ireland of 2017

Increasing urbanisation is an inevitable aspect of progress. Over half of the world population today lives in towns or cities, compared to one tenth at the turn of the Century, and urbanised societies are more prosperous and developed societies.

In Ireland the non-uniform pace of this urbanisation has led to spatial and economic imbalances with an increasing concentration of population and economic activity in the east of the country, with the most acute pressure for new housing and infrastructure provision occurring at the periphery, rather than the inner city of the Dublin Metropolitan area. Indeed, one of the few development trends common to all regions is the general tendency for the location of employment to become more centralised and the location of housing more peripheral and dispersed. Population growth has resulted in unprecedented change to settlements within the Greater Dublin Area such as Navan, Swords and Bray, each of which now rival Waterford City as centres of population in their own right.



The progressive outward expansion of typically low density development from the east has created the present unmanageable sprawl of low density housing development, competition for increasingly expensive housing at more and more peripheral locations, increasingly scattered, low output

employment functions leading to car based commuting, congested roads, over expanding suburbs and infrastructural deficit, all of which place significant impacts on quality of life.

The picture is manifestly different outside of the GDA particularly in the more peripheral, western midlands, northwest and border regions which do not feel the influence of a proximate centre of population and economic development. These regions are now often characterised by population stagnation or decline, residential vacancy, under-utilised infrastructure, acute ‘hollowing out’ in town centres and a failure to compete effectively with the GDA or the four larger regional cities in attracting inward investment. Another worrying characteristic of more peripheral regions is a failure to retain existing youth populations due a combination of diminishing pride of place and the centrifugal forces exerted by the GDA.

**The Cities:**

Dublin	Cork	Limerick	Galway	Waterford
1,110,000	199,000	91,000	77,000	52,000

2011 City & Suburbs Population (rounded to nearest 000): Source CSO.ie.

**The Next Five Centres of Population:**

Drogheda	Dundalk	Swords	Bray	Navan
38,578	37,816	36,924	31,872	28,559

2011 Town and urban environs population: Source: CSO.ie.

What has emerged therefore, from the perspective of the peripheral regions, is a sense of an Ireland characterised by an over-heating Greater Dublin Area, with stagnation and untapped potential in the west, north-west and border regions. It is clear that the circumstances that have emerged benefit neither the GDA nor the more peripheral regions.

**New Realities for a New Ireland:**

Whilst tackling the legacy issues of the past, when planning for an Ireland of 2040, we must also face a number of new realities including a changing society requiring an increased proportion of one and two person residential units, an older population demographically, and a looming energy crisis. Traditional, high labour intensive, low output employment sectors are likely to continue to decline with increased employment in higher skilled areas such as ICT, technology, life sciences and leisure/tourism. There will be a need to optimise the use of land and other resources at our disposal with the global population reaching 9 billion by 2040, placing unprecedented demands on land, energy, infrastructure and resources which we have traditionally taken for granted. In short we must plan for the society of tomorrow, rather than that of today, and we need to become competent at doing more with finite resources.

With this challenge, will come benefits for Ireland which still has a comparatively low population density, abundant resources and unspoilt environment, in an international context. The weak urban structure, peripheral location and rural nature of our regions, which we tend to regard as competitive weaknesses today could quickly become our biggest assets. We need to have a national strategy for the marketing of these circumstances as assets which strengthen the competitive advantage of our peripheral regions in a world where access to nature, including ‘green’ and ‘blue’ spaces within urban environments increasingly defines quality of life and personal wellbeing.

A successful and sustainable Ireland of 2040 will have embarked on a markedly different route to that referred to in 'Ireland 2040 – Our Plan' (2017), as the 'Business as Usual' approach in favour of an altogether healthier national growth balance.

# A New Spatial & Economic Planning Model for Ireland 2040

In setting a framework aimed at resolving the spatial and economic imbalances discussed above, it is crucial that the NPF sets realistic yet ambitious targets with a strong bias in emphasis to the vision for an Ireland of 2040 rather than today. All of the indicators suggest that the Ireland of 2040 will be an increasingly urbanised, energy and resource efficient society. The following model outlines a number of concepts which it is proposed should underpin a new framework for the Ireland of 2040:

## **Dublin City: Retaining Dominance with New Spatial Emphasis**

The economic success of Dublin City is critical to the economic success of the country and the proposed model would see Dublin City continuing to lead the economic development of the country whilst maintaining and enhancing its role as a growth centre of international significance. The negative centripetal pressures in terms of urban sprawl, increasingly peripheral housing and infrastructure, and associated unsustainable commuting patterns are not a function of the population of Dublin metropolitan area but rather, the spatial distribution and movement of this population. It would be naïve to believe that the population of Dublin city will not continue to grow irrespective of any planned regional rebalancing model. This fact should not deter us in planning for a sustainable development model for 2040, as the success of any such model will not hinge on population growth in the capital. Indeed there is no reason why, in the future, a Dublin City in excess of 8 million people could not be more sustainable than the Dublin City of today. The challenge for Dublin City is the development of a more mature spatial policy which befits its ambition.

In contrast to its socio-economic perspective, Dublin's spatial policy must have an inward focus, one based upon efficient use of existing resources, if it is to be sustainable. When expressed spatially the sustainability model advocated for Dublin herein is one of consolidation. It is envisaged however that this spatial consolidation would result in sustainable growth and the necessary economies of scale that have eluded the city centre in planning for efficient and cost effective mass transit. Dublin City does not need more land to accommodate its existing or future metropolitan populations and their activities. There is a clear need however to re-think how we plan for mobility, sustainable city centre communities and urban design. In this context, future city centre framework plans, such as the 'Dublin One' framework planned for the city centre must be both ambitious in terms of the benefit it can bring to city centre communities, and land resource efficient.

## **The Regional Cities: Priority Growth Centres**

Building upon existing strengths and prior investment, the regional cities of Cork, Limerick, Galway, and Waterford must be, through deliberate and specific interventions, given heightened roles as population and employment centres. Direct intervention is required in order that these centres can either individually or collectively achieve a critical mass whereby they would function as the spatial and functional counter magnet to Dublin, necessary to rebalance the present spatial and economic disparities between the GDA and the regions. While these cities have experienced significant population and economic growth in recent decades, it has not been at the scale required to offset the overheating of the GDA. In simple terms, we have tended to plan our regional cities as regional towns until critical mass dictated that we can no longer take this approach. We must start planning

today for larger, connected regional cities of a nature and scale which would allow them to act as a realistic counter magnet to the Greater Dublin Area.

### The Galway/Limerick Cork Polycentric City Region

This model advocates working to our national strengths, capitalising on prior investment and economy in future infrastructural investment and therefore envisages that due to their existing strengths, the settlements of Cork, Galway and Limerick, among the regional cities, be given heightened significance as growth centres. As much as one-third of the projected national population growth of approximately one million people should be within this city region if it is to establish itself as a city region capable of rebalancing the dominance of the GDA.

If the Galway-Limerick-Cork axis is to emerge as a realistic counter-magnet to the greater Dublin area, the focus must not be solely on population growth, but also the essential infrastructural improvements necessary to make this axis function as a polycentric city region. It is therefore envisaged that synergies and linkages between the three cities be enhanced to ensure that they begin to develop the attributes of a connected polycentric city region. A key focus in this regard should be the improvement of both service frequency and rail speeds between Galway, Limerick and Cork. Today's rail service between the city centres of Galway and Limerick is a two hour trip, while Galway to Cork is a four hour trip. National investment in essential infrastructure aimed at improving ease of movement, such as the Galway/Limerick/Cork rail network (with the longer term objective that the inter-city service between the three cities becomes a high speed rail corridor) is critical. In addition, National road improvements to the N18/M18 (Galway to Limerick) and N20 (Limerick to Cork) routes, with the ultimate aim of bringing these routes up to motorway standard, should be given national priority.

The challenge at individual city level will be the consolidation of development within the walking catchment of the city centre public transportation hubs thus building up critical mass and ensuring the long term cost effectiveness and sustainability of public transportation investment. When planning within these city centres and particularly close to inter-city public transportation hubs, there is an obvious need to think about capacity finding, density and design in new ways.

### Waterford City

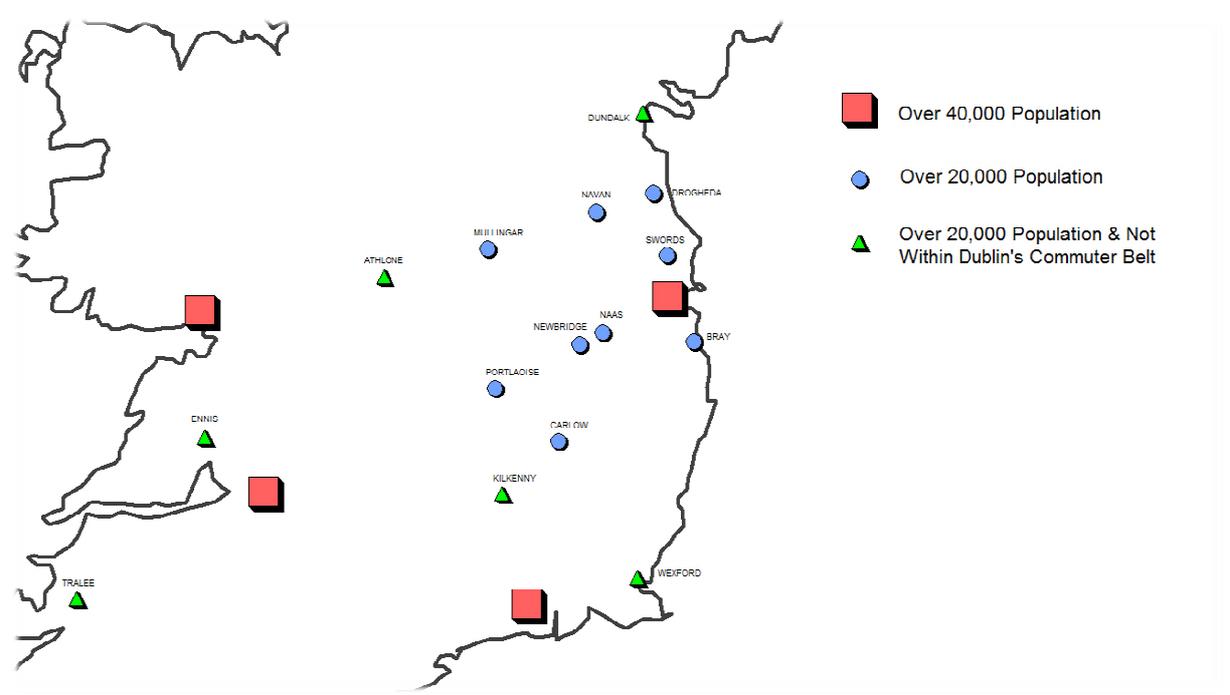
Waterford city today has a population and regional functions similar to that envisaged for an Athlone City of 2040. It is envisaged that Waterford City would continue to build upon its existing role as an economic engine and employment and population centre in an economically strong and comparatively self-sustaining south-east region.

### Athlone 2040: A Regional City in the Midlands

The model set out above focuses on rebalancing the regional disparities between the GDA and the rest of the country, by focusing on our existing strengths and infrastructural investment. The central aspect of this rebalancing model is the emergence of a polycentric city region in the west/south-west of the country. This model would be incomplete however, in that it would fail to address the centrifugal forces which draw upon the structurally and economically weaker midlands and northwest of the country.

This matter can only be tackled effectively through the designation of a regional city in the midlands. This centre must have sufficient critical mass to provide a realistic counter balancing force to the dominance of the GDA and that envisaged to emerge in the Galway/Limerick/Cork polycentric city region. Even with the emergence of a strong Galway/Limerick/Cork re-balancing force in the south-west, prevailing centrifugal forces would continue to hinder the peripheral midlands and north-west. The designation of a midland regional city, with sufficient critical mass would, however, reduce the need to travel from the midlands and north-west, to the GDA for work and recreation. This is the only sustainable method of reversing present patterns of resettlement from the midlands and north-west to the GDA, with a midland city providing the benefits which the GDA offers today for midland and north western communities.

If we look at the centres of population today, and based on the ‘using existing strengths’ model, those which have the greatest potential to become the regional cities of the future, we see a clear eastern bias in the centres of population over 20,000<sup>1</sup>.



Source: CSO.ie.

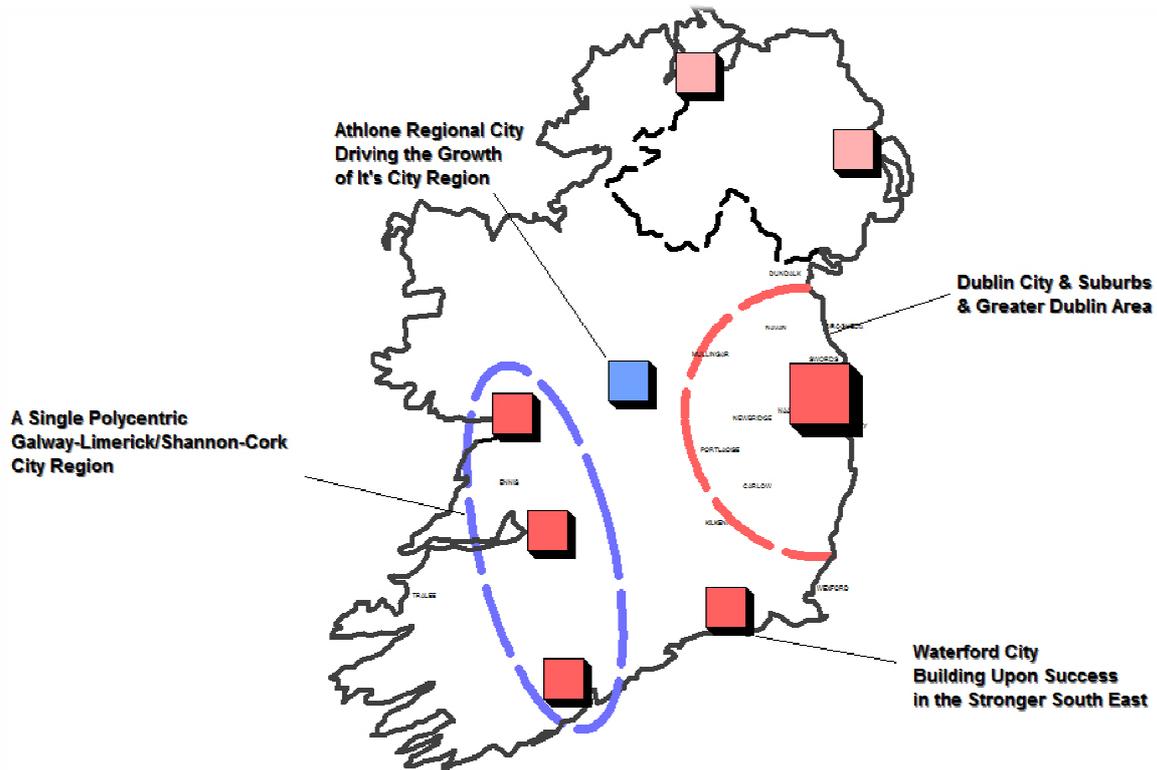
It is also clear that whilst many of these centres of population could develop the critical mass to function as regional centres, those within or in close proximity to (within the Dublin region commuter belt) the GDA could not play a positive role in rebalancing the spatial and economic dominance of the GDA. Of those outside of the GDA, only Athlone has the central location which could extend the positive influences of the GDA to the west and north west, whilst providing a central focus for population and thereby reducing the need to travel to the east.

<sup>1</sup> CSO.ie

The 15 Larger Centres	2011 Population	Dublin Commuter Zone	Spatial Planning Area & Spatial Context
<b>Drogheda</b>	38,578	<b>Yes</b>	Eastern SPA, Immediately Adjacent GDA
<b>Dundalk</b>	37,816	No	Eastern SPA, Distant from GDA
<b>Swords</b>	36,924	<b>Yes</b>	Eastern SPA, Within GDA
<b>Bray</b>	31,872	<b>Yes</b>	Eastern SPA, Within GDA
<b>Navan</b>	28,559	<b>Yes</b>	Eastern SPA, Within GDA
<b>Ennis</b>	25,360	No	Mid-West SPA, Distant from GDA
<b>Kilkenny City</b>	24,423	No	South-East SPA, More Distant from GDA
<b>Tralee</b>	23,693	No	South-West SPA, Distant from GDA
<b>Carlow</b>	23,030	<b>Yes</b>	Immediately Adjacent GDA
<b>Newbridge</b>	21,561	<b>Yes</b>	Eastern SPA, Within GDA
<b>Naas</b>	20,713	<b>Yes</b>	Eastern SPA, Within GDA
<b>Athlone</b>	20,153	No	West and Midland SPA, More Distant from GDA
<b>Portlaoise</b>	20,145	<b>Yes</b>	Midland SPA, Immediately Adjacent GDA
<b>Mullingar</b>	20,103	<b>Yes</b>	Midland SPA, Adjacent to GDA
<b>Wexford</b>	20,072	No	South-East SPA, Distant from GDA

The Next Tier: Source: CSO.ie

The NSS clearly recognised the crucial importance of a strong regional centre in the midlands, and nothing in the intervening period since the publication of the NSS would suggest that this position should change. Clearly, however the ATM (Athlone-Tullamore-Mullingar) linked gateway has, for many reasons not lived up to the expectations envisaged for the linked gateway in the NSS. One key reason however is the failure of the designated settlements to achieve the necessary critical mass to function as a regional gateway due to the dilution of the growth centre effect among too many settlements. Any framework aimed at rebalancing the economic decline in the midlands and north-west, and pull of the youth demographic and commuting patterns from the midlands and north-west, must concentrate its effect and designate a single regional centre in the midlands, to develop as a regional city. Athlone is ideally placed to fulfil this role.



### The Advantage of Density: Making City Living An Attractive Lifestyle Choice

A successful model for the spatial development of Ireland must address the dominance of suburban living as a lifestyle choice and explore options for making town and city centre living a more attractive alternative. Qualities such as attractiveness, safety and pedestrian mobility are increasingly reliable indicators of the economic success and sustainability of the modern city. Heightened emphasis must be placed on importance of urban design in planning these cities as we look towards finding capacity within more central, confined and complex urban spaces, in place-making and re-imagining our city centres as urban spaces to be enjoyed by our residents and in planting the seeds for the future emergence of metropolitan public transportation networks.

The NPF must tackle the public perception that higher density development results in reduced quality in the urban environment. There is little to substantiate that high density by itself has any undermining effect on the quality of the urban environment or city centre life. Indeed, there is a clear positive to higher density cities in that such densities provide the critical mass of population to justify significant investment in public realm enhancement, public recreation space and high quality urban design. Higher density cities bring people and investment together.

### **Our Regional and County Towns:**

Many towns outside the orbit of major cities will increasingly stagnate and decline, whilst those within will develop in an unsustainable way, without interventions at both national and local level. Important strides have been made in the area of addressing rural stagnation with the publication of *'Realising our Rural Potential – Action Plan for Rural Development'* (DAHRRG, 2017), however this must be supported by a clear spatial planning framework.

Smaller towns due to their comparatively low population, small economy and critical mass cannot realistically play a significant role individually in national spatial and economic rebalancing. We must think instead of the collective contribution to be made to the national economy, as smaller towns develop as thriving county towns, driving the economic development of their rural hinterlands as envisaged in the CEDRA Report '*Energising Irelands Rural Economy*' (2014). With the correct spatial development model the economic development of these towns will also be increasingly supplemented by proximity to one of a number of regional cities. The challenge will be planning to ensure that the immediate needs of these settlements can be met without undermining their economic growth and future sustainable development.

The NPF must deliver concise and simple messages if it is to align effectively with economic planning. The primary focus of the document should be on the rebalancing of the broader regional disparities discussed above. As there are few commonalities between settlements below the level of the regional cities, the sustainable development of each will require a myriad of different and often contrasting approaches. This will, in practice be a complex and incremental process, will take unexpected directions, and will be difficult to plan for at national level. A set of spatial policies for Navan town would, for example have few real world applications for the town of Boyle, in County Roscommon, which has, in recent times, been subject to very different local pressures. Much of the finer detail in terms of policy making for sustainable towns and rural areas must therefore be carried out at local community level, in a 'bottom up' approach, with local solutions arrived at with a strong town centre first emphasis, driven by national policy, driving local sustainability.

Clearly however, the NPF has a crucial role to play in setting a framework for the future development of county towns and rural Ireland. The key opportunity in this area for the NPF, and one that the NPF cannot fail to address, will be in setting out clear policies on the small number of issues which are common to all towns of this scale irrespective of populations or economic functions, and letting local communities get on with planning the future of their towns and rural hinterlands within these parameters.

The most fundamentally undermining factor for the continued sustainable development of all Irish towns irrespective of size, population or economic successes, has been the pursuit of low density housing development at locations increasingly peripheral from centres of employment and civic and community life. In the case of larger settlements in economically strong regions such as the Greater Dublin Area this has had the effect of creating pressures such as urban sprawl, inefficiencies in terms of infrastructure provision and reduced quality of life and public interaction. It has also had the effect of 'hollowing out' populations and economic activity from traditional town centres in favour of easier, low cost greenfield development, with town centre development being undermined by that occurring at the periphery, and sub-optimum as a result. The latter effect has had a detrimental impact on many Irish towns in the peripheral west midlands, northwest and border regions particularly.

The NPF offers the opportunity to establish a national 'Town Centre First' policy which, if framed in a concise manner, such as has been the case recently in Scotland, and implemented by local communities, as a central tenant permeating all Irish spatial and economic planning policy, supported by targeted development incentives and investment, can be exceptionally effective in driving the sustainable economic development of these settlements. The 'Town Centre First' policy

could, for example, influence not just spatial development plans but also; the location and design of public and private sector housing development, age friendly strategies, public transportation initiatives, development incentive and investment programmes, job creation strategies, public realm enhancement investment, marketing etc. Linked to this policy could be a framework for the evaluation of town centre capacity, as well as how the town centre interacts within its rural hinterland on a practical level.

A key role for the NPF would also be setting a framework for promoting town centre pride of place, town centre living and live-work communities as the lifestyle of choice, and an attractive alternative to individual rural housing or suburban life.

The NPF can also have a key role in setting parameters for re-visioning what the strengths of the Irish town will be in the in a mid 21<sup>st</sup> Century Ireland as 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century market towns take on new 21<sup>st</sup> Century roles, in which new assets such as cultural heritage, convivial Irish town character, rural setting and environment outstrip many of their traditional strengths.



# Athlone 2040: A Model & Value Proposition

Athlone, straddling the Northern and Western and Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly areas, has, despite its comparatively peripheral location in relation to the Greater Dublin Area and the growing tourism resources of the west coast, prospered, as an accessible and attractive employment, shopping and population centre of regional significance. Building upon these key strengths and its central location within the island of Ireland, it is envisaged Athlone will have consolidated its place as a regional city, and an economic engine for the midlands and northwest by 2040, becoming an increasingly attractive work and life choice for the people of the midlands west and north-west. The vision this model presents for the Athlone of 2040 is:

## **A Compact & Sustainable City of 65,000 People**

### **Driving the Economy of a Strong City Region**

### **Ireland's 'Enterprising Centre'**

### **A Central Transportation Fulcrum for Ireland**

### **The People City**

#### **Athlone 2040: The Compact Sustainable City of 65,000 People**

Athlone today is a town experiencing rapid population growth. Athlone Town including its environs had a population in 2011 of 21,138 which represented 26.4% growth in the period between 2002 and 2011, or approximately 2.934% population growth per annum. This is a key indicator of the natural capacity for Athlone to develop the critical mass to become a settlement of approximately 50,000 people by 2040, without any policy framework or development incentives for its designation as a growth centre. In addition a significant portion of this period coincided with a time of unprecedented economic uncertainty, low construction sector productivity and property market stagnation, which suggests that as these sectors improve, natural population growth could exceed this rate without intervention.

#### **Projecting recent year on year % population growth forward**

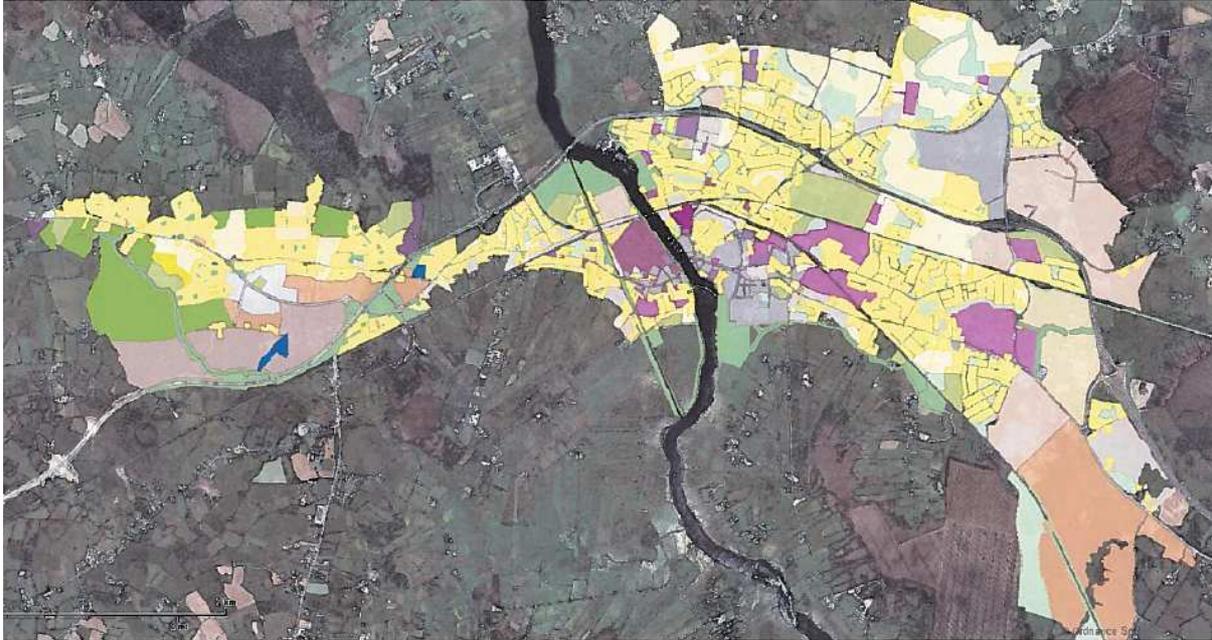
<b>2017</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2025</b>	<b>2030</b>	<b>2035</b>	<b>2040</b>
25,142	27,421	31,616	36,616	42,312	48,894

Source: CSO.ie

The key challenge for Athlone will be in channelling this population growth such that it makes a real contribution to the sustainable urban development of Athlone whilst also moving towards a more sustainable mobility model. This will involve positive and imaginative planning responses to the challenge of ensuring the emergence of a vibrant, and high density Athlone city centre. This will necessitate the emergence of a new perspective on the areas of town centre and public transportation corridor capacity study.

## Looking At Density and the Resource of Capacity

As Ireland emerges from a period of economic instability and attempts to move away from past unsustainable development patterns, capacity will become a crucial resource. With the increasing importance of energy and resource efficiency as Ireland adapts to this new reality, the efficient use of serviced or partially serviced 'brownfield' urban land will become critical.



Source Myplan.ie

Athlone has developed as a comparatively low density settlement and has abundant capacity to absorb new residential and commercial development, on both the east and west of the River Shannon. As a new spatial planning paradigm focussed on a new sustainable urbanism emerges, this capacity is a crucial resource.

Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 Land Use Zones	Area (Hectares)	Monksland LAP 2016-2022 Land Use Zones	Area (Hectares)
Proposed Residential	129.2	New Residential(Reserve)	23.2 (3.84)

If we look at the volume of land zoned for residential development in Athlone and its urban environs for the short term, we develop a picture of the capacity on offer. Athlone, despite its successes had 1,765 unoccupied dwellings in 2011. A total of 156.2 Hectares of land has been zoned for residential development in the short term which would, by itself generate an additional 7,810 residential units if developed to an average density of 50 units per hectare (a density which must be aspired to for a regional city) which could, by itself accommodate an additional 19,525 people. The model advanced herein however advocates the principle that the first priority should be the exploration of town centre and public transportation corridor capacity along with that associated with existing vacancy, in a local application of the 'town centre first' approach discussed above.

Athlone and its urban environs covers an area of approximately 17.33Km<sup>2</sup> which must be regarded as low density even on a national level for a settlement of its present population, with only 1,163 persons per km<sup>2</sup>.



The designation of Athlone<sup>2</sup> as a regional city and a population growth centre as part of the NPF would create the opportunities for greater efficiencies in the use of brownfield land and address the unsustainably low density pattern of development which has emerged in Athlone. A preferable population density model for Athlone would be that of Swords or Bray in the east of the country. These have urban environs little more than half the area of the Athlone urban agglomeration at 10.2km<sup>2</sup> and 9.2km<sup>2</sup> respectively, accommodating urban populations of 36,924 and 31,872 respectively. This density model, is considered more sustainable and one which Athlone has the capacity to adopt.

If Athlone were to develop as a regional city, to a density model such as has emerged in Swords, for example, (3,615 persons per km<sup>2</sup>) using existing capacity to achieve this density, a population of almost 63,000 people could be accommodated within the existing urban environs of Athlone without the need for further outward expansion. This model proposes that through a mix of creative town centre and transportation corridor capacity study, and a general increase in efficiency of use of land, including increased residential density befitting a regional city, that a compact Athlone regional city of 65,000 people by 2040 is entirely feasible, if correctly incentivised. The application of this model focusing on making efficient use of existing resources would have the added benefit of ensuring a more vibrant city centre with greater numbers of people living in the immediate vicinity of the city centre thus heightening individual interactions with direct benefits for the vibrancy and life of the city.

#### Planting the Seeds: A New Focus on City Centre Life

The concept of finding city centre capacity, building sustainable urban communities and the 'town centre first' principle are central messages of the Athlone 2040 model. Looking for city centre capacity for the propagation of new life (housing and cultural activities) and work functions in the new city centre, is a key first step in the implementation of this model. The model advocates the

<sup>2</sup> References to Athlone include the Monksland/Bellanamullia Area which is envisaged to develop as an integral part of the city.

idea that we start planning today for a vibrant Athlone city centre which is an attractive community and economic focal point.

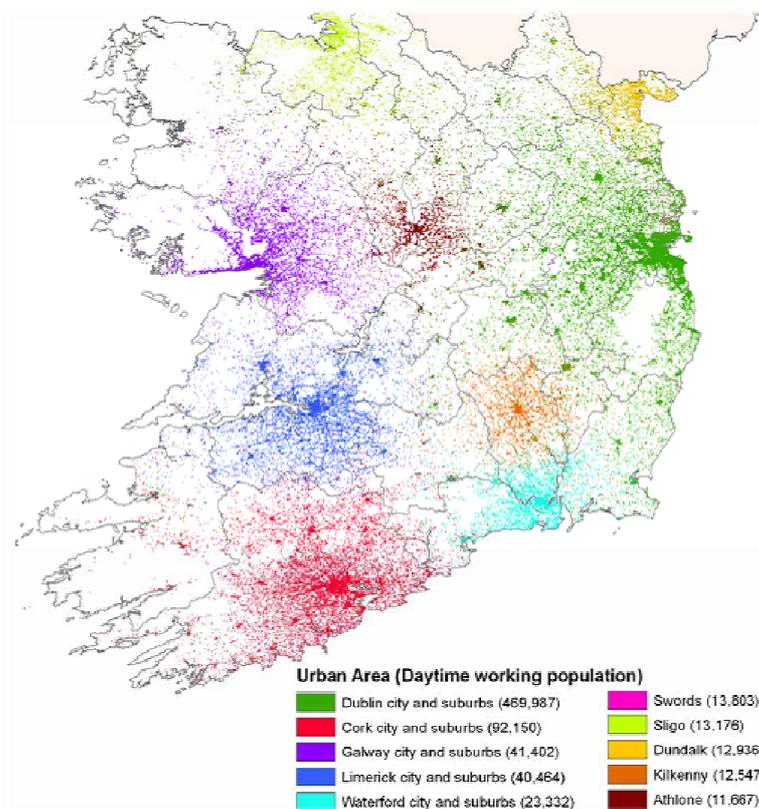
The fortunes of Athlone town centre have improved during the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in the areas discussed above in recent years. Development at increasingly peripheral locations during the later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, primarily residential housing estates and out-of-centre shopping and retail warehousing development had led to significant urban decline in what would traditionally have been the main streets of Athlone by the 1990's due to hollowing out of the resident town centre population and leaking of expenditure out of the town centre.

This reversal of fortunes has been due, in part, to the delivery of key redevelopment projects in the town centre, such as the new Westmeath County Council Civic Offices in Athlone and 'Athlone Towncentre Shopping Centre' and associated areas, and more recently the Luan Gallery Development and public realm improvements around Athlone Castle and Athlone Town Walls. These recent successes, as well as an ambitious framework plan for Monksland District Centre currently being prepared by Roscommon County Council, provide an important tread-stone for the development of a compact high density city from Athlone city centre outwards.

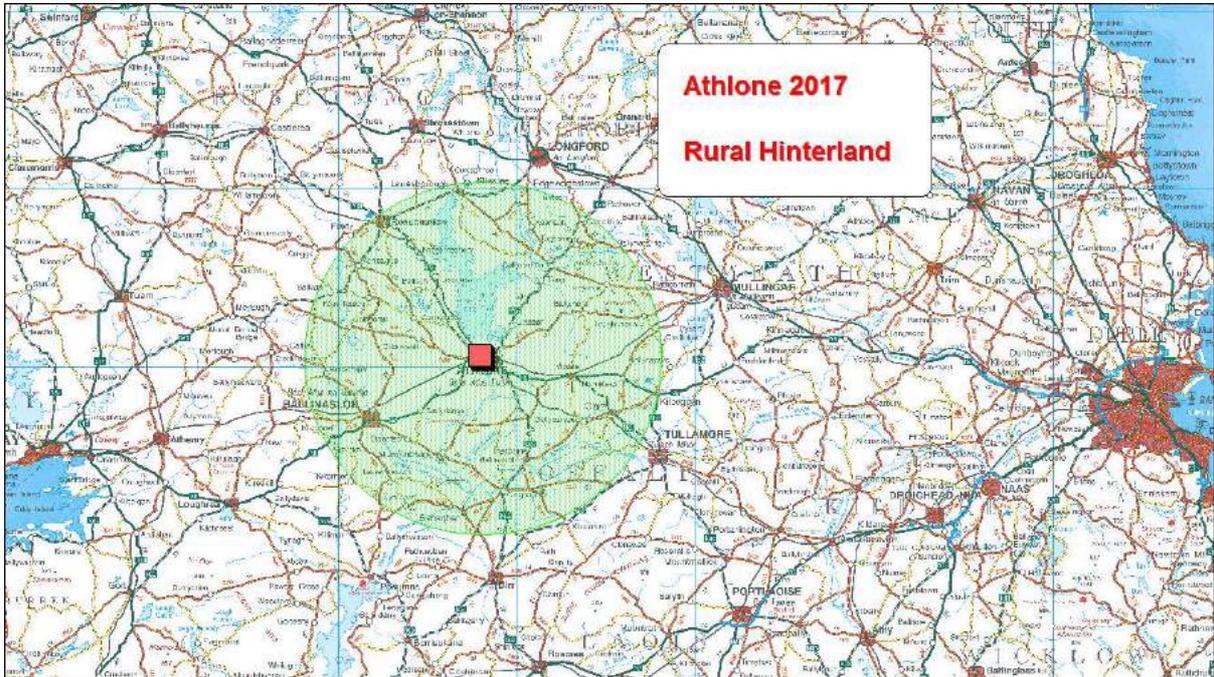
Driving the Economy of a Strong Athlone City Region

The settlement of Athlone today, due to its central location and general accessibility to the town centre in almost all orientations, has a wide and relatively uniformly distributed hinterland. The graphic below illustrates the daytime working catchment which extends approximately 30km in a radial pattern.

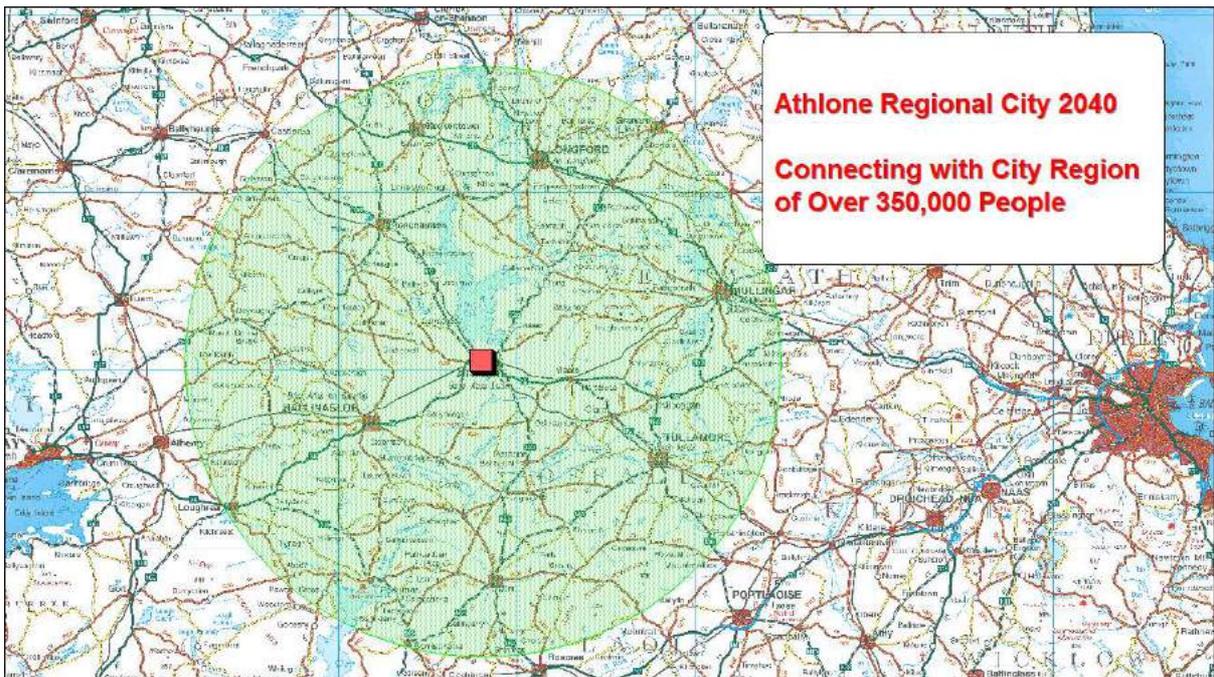
**Daytime working catchment of Athlone (coloured brown):**



Athlone is however a popular shopping destination in the midlands and north-west and for some purposes its catchment is already likely closer to 50km (e.g. comparison retailing).



In the Athlone 2040 model, where the population of Athlone has grown to 65,000 people, as part of a sustainable growth model, and where this growth is matched by inward investment and job creation, it would be perfectly feasible that a well-connected Athlone City of 65,000 people would have the critical mass to form strong connections with a rural hinterland of 50km, (i.e. 45 minute travel time by public transport or car).



This model would see the Athlone regional city of 2040 connect with a city region which today has a population of 300,000 people, and with population growth in Athlone projected by the Athlone 2040 model, together with natural growth within the city region, exceed 350,000 people by 2040. There is strong potential for economic growth within the wider city region, and for the development of a strong 'Athlone City Region' brand, which markets the key assets of the region, through initiatives such as *'The Lough Ree and Mid Shannon Tourism Project'*. The model envisages the city of Athlone becoming the central economic engine of a vibrant city region which itself has a strong network of county towns, such as Roscommon Town, playing significantly greater roles as functional hubs, driving the economic growth of their respective rural hinterlands.

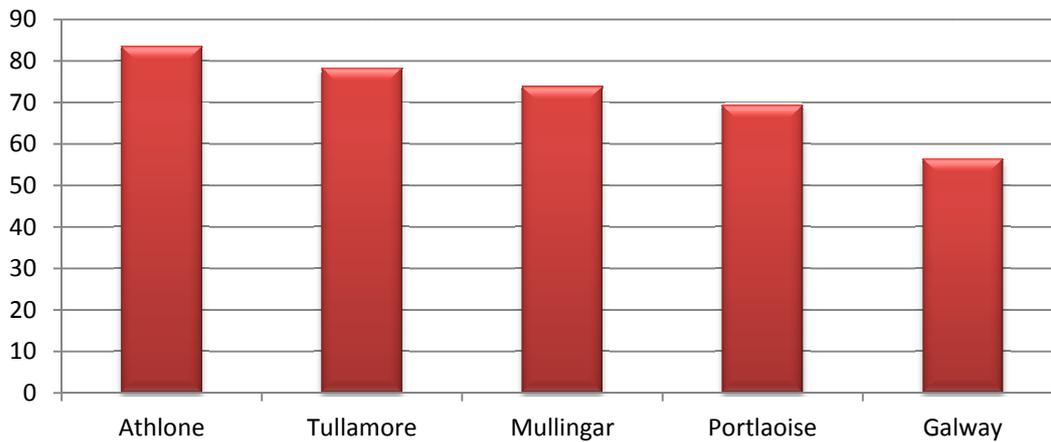
## Athlone 2040: Ireland’s Enterprising Centre

Athlone offers all of the strategic benefits of being centrally located in Ireland but without the high land and property prices associated with the larger cities. As Athlone fulfils its role as a regional city it is envisaged that it can provide ‘big city opportunities’ whilst retaining a convivial rural feel. Businesses here can enjoy a competitive commercial environment in a beautiful setting along with a first class quality of life. As a candidate for regional city status Athlone is a highly attractive option for both foreign and domestic business whether locating, relocating or investing.

### Competitive Advantage 1: Central and Accessible

Athlone is ideally central and well connected. It is little more than a one hour drive from Dublin City, two of the four existing regional cities and three international airports. The centre is also extremely accessible and almost 85% of the 5,200 commuters who enter the town to work can do so in less than half an hour. This compares favourably to the GDA where the average commute in 2011 was 50 minutes and Galway where it was 27 minutes.

**Percentage Journey Time To Work < 1/2 Hour**



### Competitive Advantage 2: Working to Our Strengths

Athlone has a long and well established base in: manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, research and development, medical devices, telecommunications, software development and retailing. It is a regional centre for a number of state and semi-state organisations which contribute substantially to the commercial ethos of the town. The State Examinations Commission, Revenue Commissioners, SOLAS, Midlands Region, Bus Éireann, Iarnród Éireann, IDA Ireland, and Enterprise Ireland all have bases in the town. It has been successful in attracting world class multinational companies in their respective fields such as Ericsson, Alkermes, Alexion etc, which provide a significant employment base.

#### **Athlone’s FDI Companies:**

Company	Sector	Company	Sector
ASTORA Womens Health	Medical Technology	Alexion Monksland	Bio Pharmaceuticals
Athlone Optical	Medical Technology	Alkermes Pharma Irl Ltd	Bio Pharmaceuticals
Innocoll Pharmaceuticals	Medical Technology	Jazz Pharma Ireland Ltd	Bio Pharmaceuticals
KCI Manufacturing Ltd	Medical Technology	Pharma Product Devel.	Bio Pharmaceuticals
Medtronic Athlone	Medical Technology	Lund Precision Products Ltd	Engineering
Utah Medical Products Ltd	Medical Technology	MarquipWardUnited	Engineering
Teleflex Medical Europe Ltd	Medical Technology	LM Ericsson Limited	Software ICT

Symbiotic clusters of related businesses provide economies of scale which create efficiencies and crucially ease the transition of industry and enterprises within this sector to the region. Athlone has a strong core of primarily FDI in the medical technologies, engineering and bio-pharmaceuticals sectors and there are opportunities to build upon the successes of both indigenous and FDI sectors due to our land capacity, young and skilled workforce, lower cost of living and quality of life prospects.

### Competitive Advantage 3: Capacity for New Development

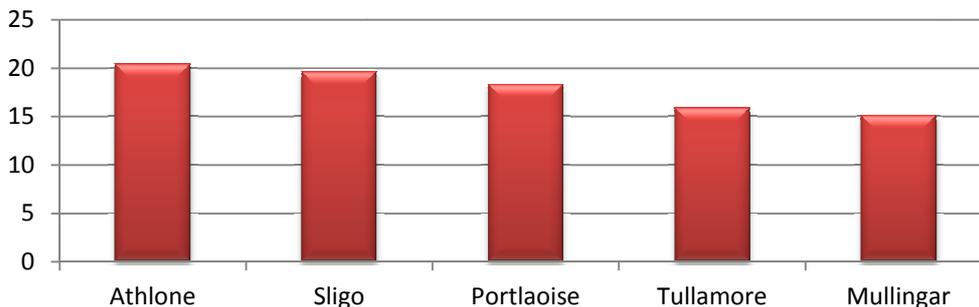
Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 and Monksland/Bellanamullia LAP 2016-2022 have a combined total of 243 Ha of Industrial, enterprise and innovation technology land use zones with a further 112.9 Ha zoned for the development of a strategic gateway zone to the east of Athlone. This substantial strategic reserve of serviced industrial and enterprise development land both east and west of the Shannon is of national significance. Furthermore, within the existing commercial property rental market, Athlone can offer significant savings on Dublin South Suburbs<sup>3</sup> where commercial rents average €269/m<sup>2</sup> or the west suburbs where they average €151/m<sup>2</sup>. Office rents by comparison average between €85/m<sup>2</sup> and €125/m<sup>2</sup> in Athlone with industrial rents averaging between €35 and €70/m<sup>2</sup>.

Athlone is envisaged as developing as a ‘work-live’ city centre, with a visible business and enterprise profile within the city centre. There is potential here, therefore, for the location of ‘centre friendly’ enterprises, particularly those attracting visiting members of the public or those requiring smaller office units which could be accommodated ‘over the shop’.

### Competitive Advantage 4: Capacity for New Ideas

Athlone has an abundant pool of young and highly skilled workers and graduates. While Athlone has a significant demographic of older people, it also has a comparatively very high proportion of its population in the 20-30 age group, increasing the pool of young workers and potential for new ideas, all of which is good for business.

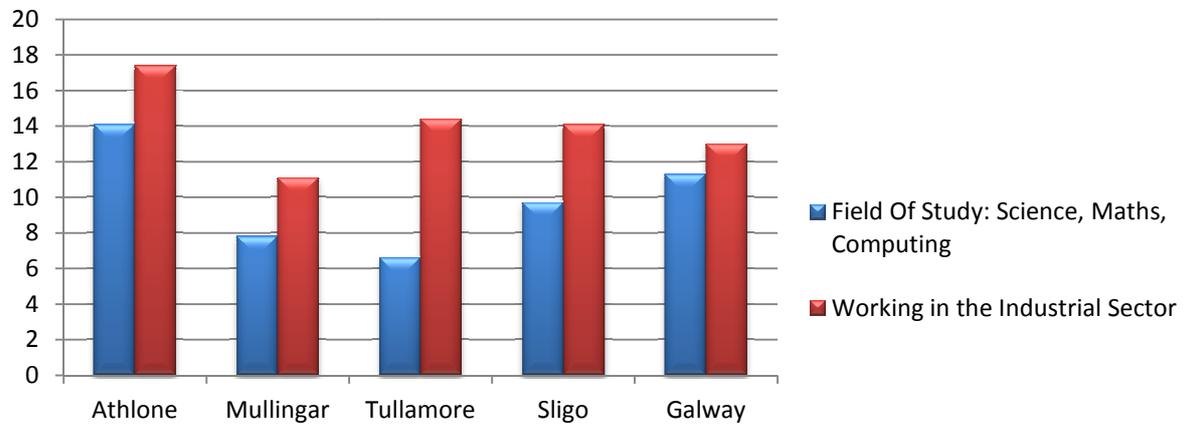
**Percentage of Town Population aged 20-30**



Athlone has also has a comparatively very high proportion of its population either working in the industrial sector or engaged in the science, maths and computing fields of study, which is suggestive of skilled, technologically orientated nature of its population. Athlone is generally recognised as a research hub, particularly in the areas of bioscience and materials. Leading this reputation, Athlone

<sup>3</sup> IDA.ie

Institute of Technology (AIT), is an internationally recognised third level educational centre, with the realistic aspiration of achieving university status. With internationally recognised excellence in the fields of polymers and materials, bioscience and software, AIT has established strategic research institutes in materials (MRI), bioscience (BRI) and software (SRI), which have which have developed international collaborations with leading multinational companies and universities in Europe, Asia and the US.



**Looking at the Percentages: Athlone’s Students and Workers**

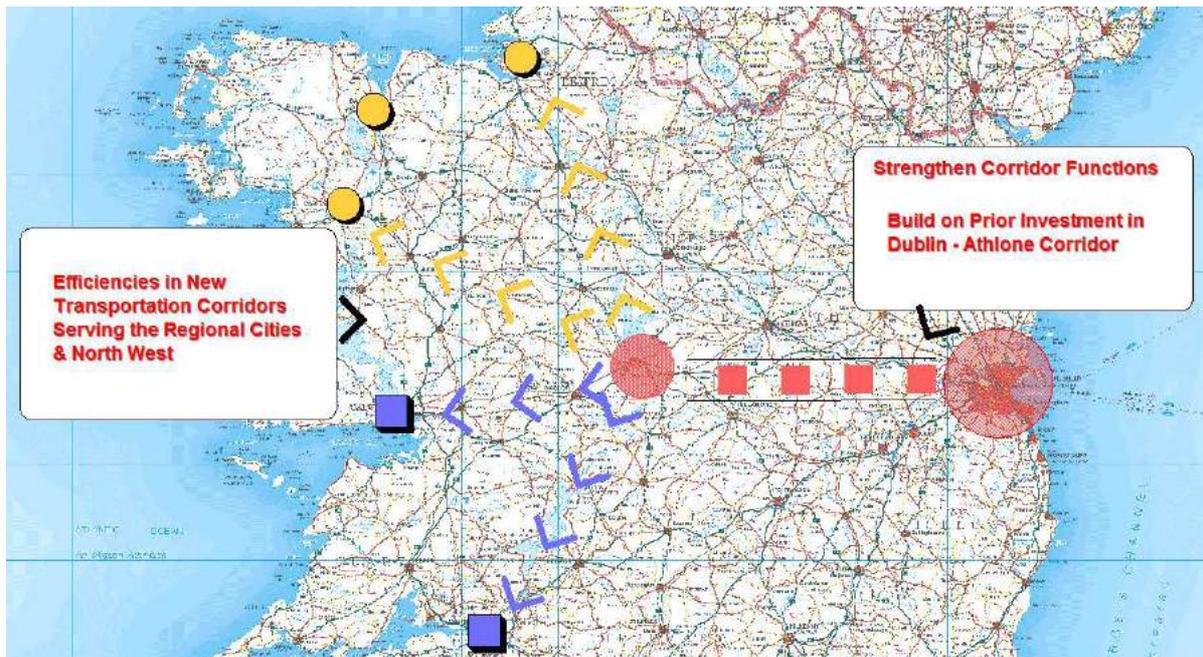
With this range of research strands and international partners, AIT is now positioning itself as partner of choice for enterprise, focusing their applied research, innovation and enterprise support activities on addressing the needs of regional and national industry by proactively collaborating with start-ups and established companies and by providing a comprehensive range of knowledge intensive services, with a focus on SMEs. AIT will now play an increasingly influential role in promoting entrepreneurship and inward investment in the Athlone and its city region going forward.

## **A Transportation Fulcrum for Ireland: Supporting Compact Settlements and Low Carbon Society**

Athlone is extremely central and well connected. It is has a very accessible town centre and is little more than a one hour drive from Dublin City, 45 minutes from Galway city via the N6/M6, and an hour and a half from Limerick via either the N18/M18 or N62/M7. It is also ideally placed on both the Dublin-Westport and Dublin-Galway inter-city rail lines. Athlone has two significant advantages on which to build a sustainable mobility strategy as it takes on the role of a regional city. Firstly; it has an excellent functional transportation corridor between Athlone and Dublin City. It is a major national hub for public bus services and the Bus Éireann City Link currently offers up to seven daily services between Dublin and Athlone. Irish Rail also operates up to thirteen daily services from Dublin to Athlone and up to fifteen services from Athlone to Dublin weekdays with a similar level of service provision at weekends. Secondly; it has a major existing town/city centre public transportation hub and all of the above services are operated from an existing bus and rail transportation hub less than 200m north of Athlone Town Centre.

The comparatively low density and dispersed nature of settlement in Ireland has tended to undermine attempts to develop efficiencies in existing public transportation hubs and corridors, As well as arguments for the development of new public transportation services. With increasing population and associated demand for energy and other resources, a key focus of the NPF, will be making use of existing infrastructure thus maximising prior infrastructural investment, and in addition maximising the impact, efficiency and cost effectiveness of future investment in infrastructure. In this context, Athlone is well placed, as it fulfils its role as a regional city, to take on the role of a central transportation fulcrum for Ireland. In this model Athlone will build upon its central location, excellent existing connectivity with Dublin City on national road and rail networks, as well as its high potential for the development of a sustainable city centre public transportation hub.

The pattern and location of infrastructure has a significant impact upon settlement patterns and the existing radial national road network pattern, centred on the M50 has fuelled the centripetal pressures exerted by the greater Dublin area. The creation of an alternative fulcrum or pivot from which to direct future transportation infrastructural investment would provide a framework for a healthier national growth balance. A central principle of this model would be infrastructural economy and the creation of efficiencies and cost savings through the development of Athlone as a regional transportation hub in a manner which maximises and builds upon existing public transportation links with Dublin City. Much of the required infrastructure is already in existence and the model would initially only involve improvements to existing services within the Dublin-Athlone corridor and a change of emphasis when planning for future infrastructural provision.



An Important first step would be improving public transportation service frequency, speed and economy in the Dublin-Athlone corridor. Further investment in this corridor could not, however, be justified without the population critical mass to make the improvements cost effective and any such improvements could only be planned as part of a wider scheme to increase critical mass within the corridor and specifically within the transportation hubs immediate hinterland, through the advocacy of high density in such locations and possibly the use of special local area plans linked to a special development contribution scheme, potentially funding pre-agreed improvements in public transportation hubs/service provision, in a manner employed in the East Cork Metropolitan Area to incentivise public transportation improvements.

Follow up initiatives could then focus on public transport and national road improvements such as fast-tracking, upgrades to the key and regionally significant, N61 and N62 routes to improve accessibility to the north-west and south respectively whilst improving inter-connections between the national primary routes.

## The People City

As Athlone assumes the role of a compact regional city of 65,000 people, and moves towards a more sustainable mobility model, there is a significant opportunity, given its key 'green' and 'blue' assets and its city centre capacity, for Athlone to set the target to become, by 2040:

## **The Most People Friendly City in Ireland & The Most Age Friendly City in Ireland**

Similar initiatives have been agreed and ultimately implemented in cities such as Copenhagen, and Melbourne in recent years with great success.

### The Age Friendly City

Ireland, and to an even greater extent the midlands and north-west, have an ageing demographic and the NPF must establish the basis of a mechanism to address this issue. Addressing this issue should not be seen as something negative that must be planned for but rather, and with the correct spatial model, a potential economic benefit.

Our ageing population can be a key asset in remaking Athlone town centre as a vibrant cultural city centre. As a demographic, older people are typically much less dependent on the car, and in designing for older people in city centre life, there is flexibility to minimise car parking and circulation requirements which hinder place-making and life in the public realm. An older demographic typically also tend to have higher average public transportation usage, require one and two bed, rather than three and four bed residential units, and are therefore more suited and adaptable to a central rather than peripheral settlement pattern. An added benefit here would be in addressing the social isolation and exclusion which suburban living inevitably brings as car usage becomes a challenge for an ageing demographic. Older people have experience and knowledge to add to town centre life and our streets and spaces require the movement of people, patronage for the cultural attractions our town centres have to offer, and design should focus in including and facilitating the movement of this demographic who have so much to offer the city centre, as part of a balanced city centre community. This initiative should not simply be about universal design and mobility but also city centre design for housing and lifestyle options for older people.

### The People Friendly City

A compact and vibrant city centre has all key the ingredients to be a people friendly city, and a great place to live, as sustainable inter-city and intra city mobility develops. As city centre density increases community led schemes to re-image a new vibrant yet people friendly Athlone city centre will be required. Creative, imaginative, and crucially, community-led planning and urban design responses will be required in this regard to offset any potentially negative (and ultimately avoidable) aspects associated with designing higher density urban environments, and ensure that design quality and vibrant and active city centre life are at the heart of this re-imagining process. These inputs would be in the areas of:

- Designing around flood risk

- City centre housing capacity study, focused on design quality and the provision of real alternatives to rural and suburban living
- Creative city centre housing design
- City centre commerce functional analysis
- Sustainable city centre mobility solutions and pedestrian and cyclist priority scheme in which the function of the main street as a traffic corridor and a pedestrian space is rebalanced in favour of the pedestrian
- Remaking the public realm for universal design
- Public realm enhancements aimed at enhancing pride of place
- City cultural centre and city brand development
- City shopfront and building design guidance

Significantly Roscommon County Council has recently established a Town Centre Planning unit which, in partnership with Monksland Town team is currently engaged in the process of re-imagining Monksland district centre using this methodology and consideration should be given to extending a similar concept to encompass the burgeoning city area.



**Proposed Shannon Cycle Bridge in Athlone**

Source: Westmeath Tourism Strategy 2016-2020

Athlone cannot achieve these ambitious targets without capitalising upon its key ‘green’ and ‘blue’ assets through the development of an integrated green and blue space network. These assets are the critical infrastructures of the future and they must be developed as an integrated network of spaces with an orientation strategy which showcases to the user the assets which Athlone has to offer, such as Athlone Castle and town walls, the Shannon network and the Athlone section of the Dublin to Galway cycle greenway which is in development. Design strategies should also be geared to both take advantage of and provide natural surveillance over these green and blue spaces. Significant ground has been made in this regard in the Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 and Monksland/Bellanamullia Local Area Plan 2016-2022.

There is also strong potential for quality of life initiatives within Athlone to foster linkages with the wider city region and the exceptional natural beauty on offer, with assets such as Lough Ree and the Shannon network in County's Roscommon and Longford being a particularly crucial resource in marketing the Athlone City region as an amenity and lifestyle choice. These 'blue' and 'green' assets have enormous untapped economic and tourism potential for the Athlone city region. Collaborative initiatives aimed at tapping the potential of these key resources are already underway, for example *'The Lough Ree and Mid Shannon Tourism Project'* which focuses on the river Shannon and Lough Ree area from Athlone to Roosky and includes the islands and adjoining bogs, rivers, the Royal Canal and wetland areas.

## County Roscommon 2040: Realising Our Potential as Part of Athlone City Region

County Roscommon is a great place to live. It is a predominantly rural county with a rich natural heritage and waterways which merit international recognition for the area as an outdoor activity destination of choice. It is however, comparatively peripheral in the context of Ireland's regional cities. The presence, by 2040, of a regional city of Athlone, and County Roscommon's participation in a connected and collaborative city region, will result in profound changes to our regional dynamics and enlarge our sphere of mutual interaction, bringing the lifestyle and economic benefits our county has to offer to a wider market. Key changes that the presence of a regional city in the South Roscommon area and participation in a collaborative city region will bring will be:

### Exposure to New Markets & New Opportunities

#### Demographic Change and Critical Mass

#### Economic Growth

Under the model set out herein, Athlone will emerge as a regional city of up to 65,000 people by 2040. There will be enormous associated benefits for its city region as it transitions from a comparatively peripheral to core city region, as part of the national spatial and economic rebalancing envisioned. As the commercial profile of the county moves from one which is peripheral, or less influenced by the economy of the regional cities and the GDA, to a more economically advantageous core region in the hinterlands of a regional city, County Roscommon will be exposed to a much greater population base. New opportunities and new markets will open up for the benefit of the economy of County Roscommon and the wider Athlone city region.

In addition, there will be associated population growth potential, in this transition, for County Roscommon, as the centrifugal pressures exerted by the city of Athlone naturally increase the population growth potential of the city region, with hinterland population being drawn to the city region to avail of the educational, employment and lifestyle benefits of regional city life.

#### Leaving the Periphery: Changing Regional Dynamics for County Roscommon

Analysis of spatial and demographic trends within Irish city regions over recent decades shows clear correlations between proximity to Dublin or a regional city and population growth within city region towns.

With few exceptions, towns in more peripheral areas, such as, for example, Castlerea and Boyle in north Roscommon, have typically experienced low population growth whilst settlements developing within the environs or city region of the regional cities have conversely experienced exponential population growth, in some cases doubling or even tripling their urban populations within the past 20 years (e.g. Oranmore, Co. Galway and Navan, Co. Meath).

#### The Influence of the Regional City: Settlements within Approx. 20km of Dublin/Regional City

Settlement	Distance and Travel Time from Dublin/Regional City	Percentage Population Growth 1991-2011
Oranmore	11km (20 min: Galway City)	303%
Carrigaline	18km (22 min: Cork City)	128%
Swords	19km (35 min: Dublin City)	141%

#### The Influence of the Regional City: Settlements within the 35km of Dublin/Regional City

Settlement	Distance and Travel Time from Dublin/Regional City	Percentage Population Growth 1991-2011
Athenry	25km (27 min: Galway City)	145%
Midleton	24km (29 min: Cork City)	102%
Naas	35km (58 min: Dublin City)	86%

#### The Influence of the Regional City: Settlements within 70km of Dublin/Regional City

Settlement	Distance and Travel Time from Dublin/Regional City	Percentage Population Growth 1991-2011
Loughrea	42km (40 min: Galway City)	55%
Clonakilty	53km (58 min: Cork City)	68%
Navan	54km (1 Hour: Dublin City)	171%

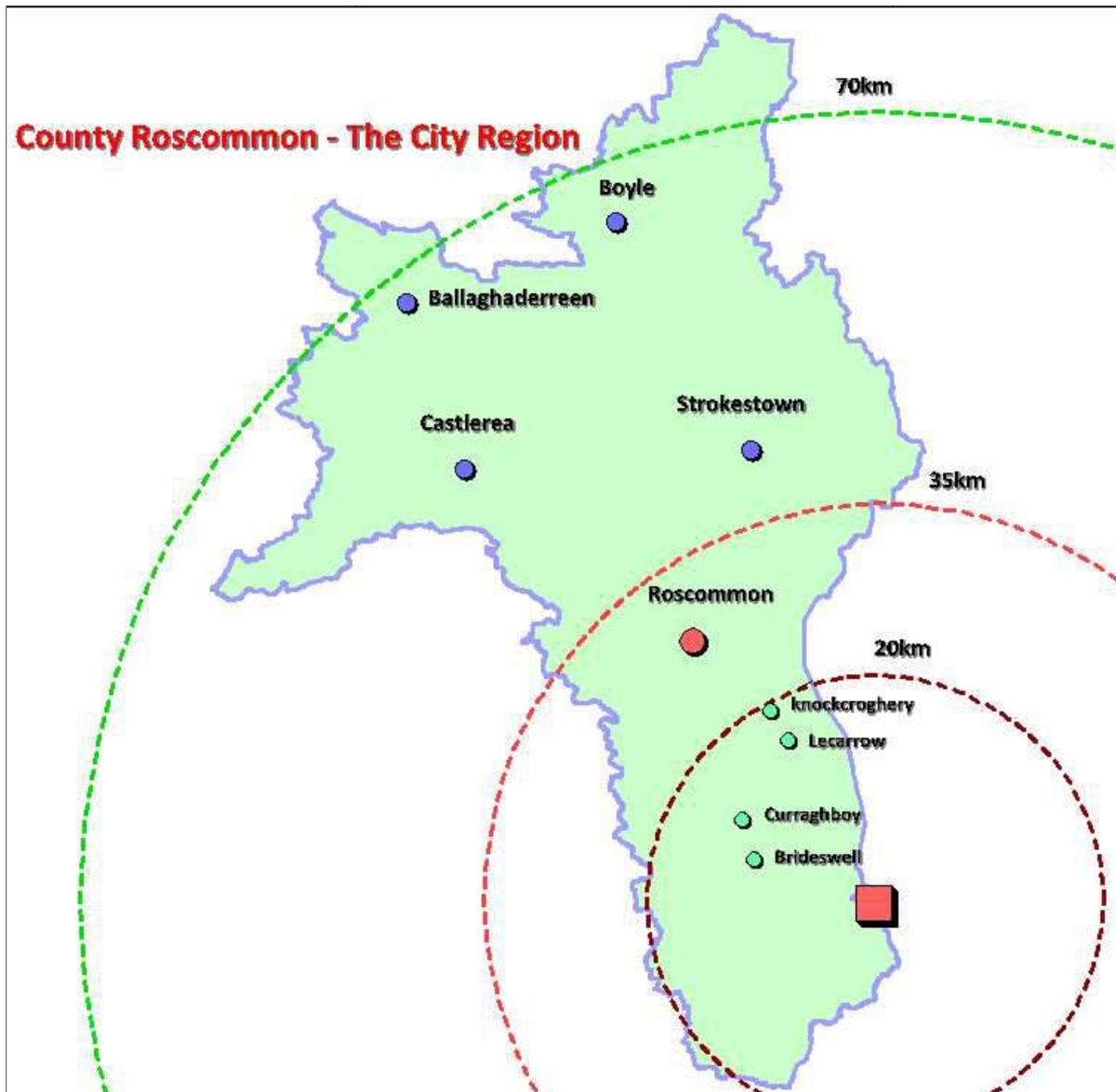
It is logical to assume that as County Roscommon transitions to this new regional dynamic, population growth potential will increase sharply within a 35km radius of the City of Athlone with this effect diminishing with growing distance from the regional city, despite transportation infrastructure improvements proposed as part of the model. This infers that the population growth potential of Roscommon town particularly, which is the priority growth centre in the Roscommon County Development Plan 2014-2020 (RCDP), and the only major designated growth centre (Tiers 1 and 2 of the RCDP settlement Hierarchy) within this radius, would be heightened significantly under this model<sup>4</sup>.

It is also perfectly plausible, despite the likely distance diminishing effect, as we have seen in the case of Loughrea and Clonakilty (see tables above), that the population growth potential of the key towns of Ballaghaderreen, Boyle, Castlerea and Strokestown would be boosted significantly by the presence of a regional city of the scale modelled in south Roscommon. This population growth potential would have the added effect, with the application of the 'town centre first' policy approach advocated within this submission, of addressing serious issues of urban decline which must be addressed as a national priority. This population growth potential if channelled correctly through the correct application of the 'town centre first' principle and creative planning and design, could by itself have the effect of reinstating resident town centre communities with associated increases in footfall, interactions with the town centre and business opportunities for these key towns.

<sup>4</sup> Other than the Monksland/Bellanamullia area, which it is envisaged, would develop proportionally as an integral part of the City of Athlone.

## Town Centre First: Harnessing and Channelling our Population Growth Potential

The population growth within existing city regions, illustrated in the tables above has benefitted these settlements and created prosperity. It has, however, also created many unsustainable development patterns which have impacted upon the future development potential of these settlements and quality of life.



Whilst population growth potential must be regarded as a positive for County Roscommon, there is a clear responsibility to ensure that future population growth be managed in a sustainable way, such that this resource is utilised for the long term benefit of the County. In this way, the associated unsustainable, and ultimately economically disadvantageous development pressures which have traditionally come with this growth potential can be minimised.

If we are to achieve sustainable urban development and communities within the city region, a key responsibility will be in managing the potential the presence of a proximate regional city will

generate. Roscommon County Council is committed to channelling this growth potential in manner which creates sustainable urban communities. This population growth potential will have the key benefit of re-energising Roscommon Town and the key county towns of Ballaghaderreen, Boyle, Castlerea and Strokestown, if channelled in a meaningful way.

Roscommon County Council and Roscommon Town Teams are committed to the task of re-colonising, re-visioning and energising our town centres. The task of bringing life back to rural town centres is of such magnitude and significance, that it has now become a national priority. The presence of a regional city in south Roscommon and the population growth potential this would generate within the county, is seen as a crucial resource towards this end, if harnessed and channelled in the correct manner. The meaningful application at local level, of the 'town centre first' principle, discussed above, is seen as the only sustainable means of harnessing this population growth potential and thereby ensuring that this growth potential is a resource and an asset rather than a future threat to sustainable mobility, communities and urban development. In the application of this model at local level the town centres of Roscommon Town, Ballaghaderreen, Boyle, Castlerea, and Strokestown as well as their immediate surrounds would be targeted as the priority outlet for this population growth potential. This approach is considered a more advantageous approach to the long term sustainable development of the County than the dilution of this growth potential through a myopic focus on development in the city periphery.

### **New Markets and New Opportunities**

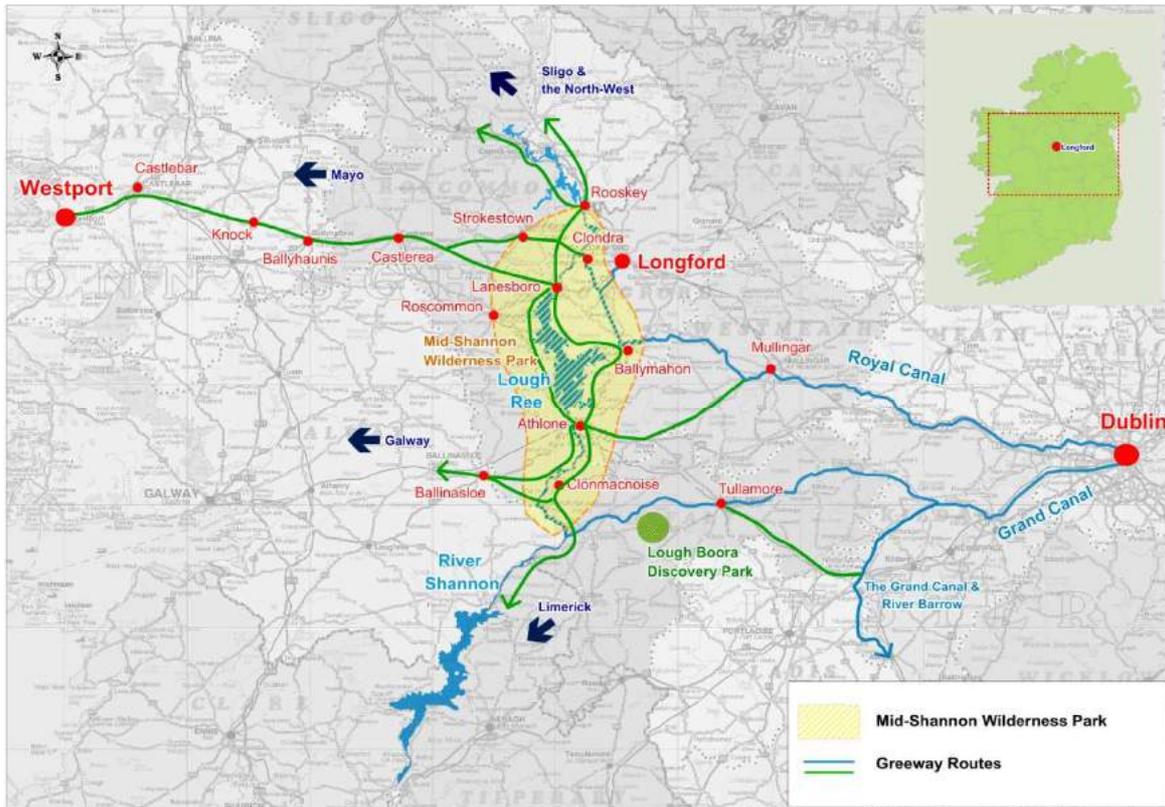
As Athlone assumes its regional city status and population growth target, County Roscommon will be exposed to a population base proportionate to a city region rather than a peripheral rural area, which will open up new opportunities and new markets for the entire county.

This access to a wider market will have a rapid scaling up effect on the economy of County Roscommon which will ultimately boost almost all sectors of its economy. At its most practical level County Roscommon also offers a large labour market for Athlone as well as an alternative lifestyle to city life in our network of county towns and easy access to Athlone. There will also be strong potential for diversification within existing sectors due to associations with a regional city. Athlone City would, for example, offer new markets for emerging initiatives in the area of energy and food production. County Roscommon is ready to capitalise upon the opportunities that participation within a city region will bring.

Aside from the associated benefits referred to above, which participation within a collaborative city region brings, County Roscommon will have exposure to a proximate community of 45,000 additional urban dwellers who have taken up residence in Athlone for, inter alia, the added value it provides in terms of access to natural environments and rural life. This would be a community who routinely use the 'green' and 'blue' infrastructure (which will have emerged as a defining part of urban life in Athlone), in their city lives, and who may, in their leisure time or for commercial reasons wish to exploit the wider benefits that these networks have to offer. Athlone City would therefore, have the potential to become a staging and orientation point from which to bring the natural attractions of the city region, including County Roscommon, to the new city region population.

All indicators point towards a world of 2040 which is significantly more urbanised and populous. In this world, wellbeing and access to natural heritage will have added value of an unprecedented scale. County Roscommon has exceptional natural heritage value and our best assets are highly accessible from Athlone, indeed, becoming more so with the infrastructural improvements recommended as part of this model.

Roscommon County Council is focussed on exploiting the huge opportunities to tap into the tourism and lifestyle benefits derived from participation in an Athlone city region, where the city of Athlone has emerged as a central hub for a ‘greenway’ and ‘blueway’ tourism market.



The Athlone 2040 model described above sets out the importance of the Dublin-Galway greenway project and the Shannon ‘blue’ network in bringing quality and wellbeing to the urban life in Athlone. These green and blue assets do not, however start and finish in Athlone town and the city should, instead be the gateway to the natural heritage attractions and amenities the city region has to offer.

From Lough Allen to Shannonbridge, Roscommon contains the longest stretch of the River Shannon of any Irish county. Ongoing ‘greenway’ and ‘blueway’ tourism initiatives and more recently the Mid Shannon Wilderness Park Project highlight the clear commitment by Roscommon County Council and other key stakeholders to the development of a world class outdoor activity tourism/leisure base in the midlands. The success of the Wild Atlantic Way in the western region of the country highlights the growing emphasis on sports and leisure activity, as well as natural heritage based tourism where the tourist experiences the natural beauty and amenities on offer, away from city life. The Shannon Wilderness Park Project centred on the Lough Ree and Mid Shannon Wetlands to be rolled out as a collaborative regional approach, is seen as a key initiative in setting a framework to tap this potential. There is also strong potential, with exposure to this new market and improved accessibility, for existing assets within the north of the County, such as Lough Key Forest and Activity Park, to capitalise on this new emphasis.

## Conclusion

In recognition of the need for a national rebalancing model which addresses the spatial and economic disparities between the GDA and the more peripheral midlands and northwest, Roscommon County Council is committed to work in collaboration with relevant stakeholders towards re-imagining, our county in a new role within an Athlone City Region.

Roscommon County Council is also committed to ensuring that it plays its part in securing the role of Athlone city region as a pivotal player in rebalancing prevailing national spatial and economic disparity, with Athlone, in its new role as a regional city, leading this transition.