

# ATHLONE 2040

## Enabling a Successful Midlands Region

Submission to the Draft  
'Ireland 2040 —  
Our Plan' National  
Planning Framework

**November 2017**

Prepared by:

 **Future Analytics**  
Planning | Research | Economics

On behalf of

Destination Athlone

**Ireland  
2040  
Our Plan**   
NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK





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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, and specifically has failed to recognise the compelling submission made to the NPF Issues Paper consultation.



# Contents

Executive Summary

1.0 Introduction

2.0 Athlone 2040: A Vision for Sustainable Growth

3.0 Key Future Growth Enablers for Athlone 2040

4.0 The National Importance of Athlone 2040

5.0 Effective Regional Development: Athlone 2040 and the Midlands Region

6.0 Implementation: Building a Stronger Region

7.0 Closing Remarks

Appendix

# Executive Summary

**The vision** for Athlone 2040: Enabling a Successful Midlands Region 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.”

## Realising the Vision

The regional dependency on **Athlone** is key to its success to-date and the presence of key infrastructure in the areas of transport (roads and rail), education provision, natural resources, population base along with its ideal location on Irelands, **East West Economic Corridor** will enable effective urbanisation and maximum return on investment. The ‘**Whole of the midlands**’ approach will maximise the resource that is the Midlands infrastructural, economic, educational, population and natural resource powerhouse – Athlone and at the same time sustain, what has been accepted as a challenge, a vast geographical area containing **rural communities within its inter - regional catchment**.

Athlone over the next decades to 2040 has the potential to become a vibrant rapidly growing metropolitan area both in terms of population and economic activity. Given its increasingly strong links to other midlands towns such as Ballinasloe, Roscommon, Longford, Mullingar, Tullamore, Portlaoise and Birr and given that much of its consequent catchment area is truly rural in nature, this emerging metropolitan area has the potential to connect not only east and west but urban and rural. The key element of this vision is to not just think in terms of a counter pole to Dublin and Galway but to build an economic corridor linking east and west with the consequent emergence of a vibrant metropolitan area cantered around Athlone and linked to other midland towns. Without such a vibrant corridor economic activity will flow towards the capital and the west/Midlands is in danger of low population growth and static economic activity.

In this vision Athlone has the potential to grow rapidly with a population in the range of 40,000 to 50,000 by 2040 (compared to 21,500 in 2016). This plan has the potential to reverse the trend of recent years where many of the workforce who live in the midlands work in Dublin. This will have a very positive effect on the quality of life of many people and will ease the burden on our current road and rail infrastructure.

The key to making this happen is twofold:

- 1 Delivery on the set of key enablers outlined below, and
- 2 The preparation of a truly innovative plan that will chart the course of this development out to 2040 and beyond (2070). To deliver on this challenging vision will require a paradigm shift in how we think about and plan such a development. We need new, bold thinking to make this happen.

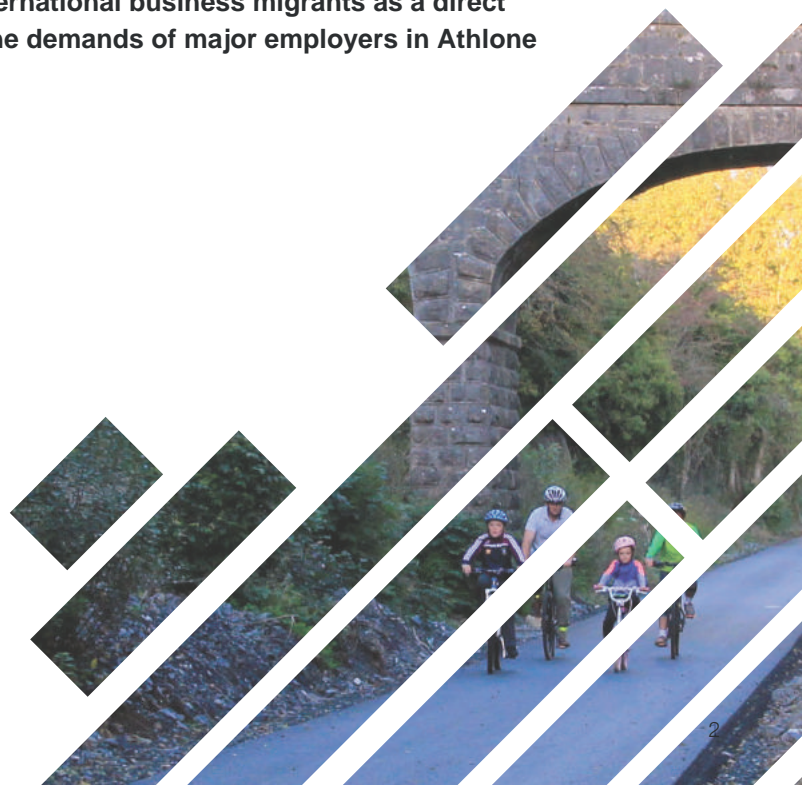
The presence of an economic powerhouse in the midlands will create a sustainable East West economic corridor where distance disjoint becomes less. The provision of expensive infrastructure is shared and cost/benefit results improved drastically. The disjoint between three European regions and the need for a strong tie between these in locations is key. The fact that the roads, rail, gas, water, natural resource and population catchment are already present makes Athlone a “low hanging fruit” opportunity in this NPF 2040

## Overview of Key Enablers

Athlone is the fulcrum of connectivity for the Midlands Region. In order to drive Athlone’s continued growth and regional development in the Midlands, ongoing investment in key infrastructure in is required. Some key enablers include:

- Delivery of the €35m Irish Water upgrade for Athlone as committed to and at tender stage. This will allow significant population uplift through Tier 1 and Priority 1 zoned lands as to be outlined in the upcoming Westmeath County Development Plan 2020-2026. Ahead of this, delivering existing serviced residential land banks will consolidate Athlone’s connected urban form;**
- Athlone to Portarlington Railway Dual Track Upgrade is a “game changer” for the Midlands Region. This upgrade would significantly improve train speeds, frequency and efficiency, on a service with a demonstrated high demand;**
- Athlone Railway Station upgrades would be a practical investment, allowing for ease of transfer from the Dublin-Galway line to and from the Westport line;**
- Electrification of East West rail corridor and connectivity within Dublin i.e. Heuston-Connolly and Dublin Airport, thereby supporting inter-regional investment and growth.**
- Continual upgrading of the National Secondary Road Routes connecting the Midlands Region including Mullingar, Tullamore, Birr, Longford, Roscommon and Ballinasloe, which serve the National Primary Road Network.**
- A new ‘Regional/City Innovation District’ through efficient utilisation of Athlone HSE lands (together with the Ramparts, and further development on the west side), providing opportunities for enterprise start-ups, creative industries and life sciences for the Midlands Region – capitalising on attractive central location and building linkages to similar spaces in regional towns including Roscommon, etc.;**

- **Athlone Institute of Technology's (AIT) transition to Technological University Status as per the Technological Universities Bill, 2015. This ambition is stated in AIT's Strategic Plan and the President of AIT is determined to make this happen, stating: "We are well advanced in terms of meeting the criteria necessary to achieve TU status, which we believe will considerably strengthen the educational and research infrastructure of the region";**
- **Identification of a Regional Hospital Site providing for first class hospital services akin to the Galway Clinic.**
- **Progress Athlone as a test bed for advanced energy saving technologies. District heating and utilisation of government incentives and maximising benefit from the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme and recently formed semi-state entity Bord na Mona Bioenergy. Harnessing solar power, bioenergy, wind power as well as hydropower.**
- **Provision of additional IDA lands to meet the continued demand for Foreign Direct Investment;**
- **The creation of a "Regional International School" in Athlone and Executive Housing to cater for the influx of international business migrants as a direct impact of Brexit, and to recognise the demands of major employers in Athlone and across the Midlands Region.**
- **A new 'Regional/City Innovation District' through efficient utilisation of Athlone HSE lands (together with the Ramparts, and further development on the west side), providing opportunities for enterprise start-ups, creative industries and life sciences for the Midlands Region – capitalising on attractive central location and building linkages to similar spaces in regional towns including Roscommon, etc.;**
- **The creation of a "Regional International School" in Athlone and Executive Housing to cater for the influx of international business migrants as a direct impact of Brexit, and to recognise the demands of major employers in Athlone and across the Midlands Region.**





## Summary of this submission

- Recognise and harness Athlone’s clear potential** and utilise its strategic location in a national context **to grow by 30-40,000+ additional persons over the life of the NPF** (and reach city status by 2040);
- The Midlands Region should be recognised by the NPF **based on its unique spatial qualities for inter-regional development, leveraging off Athlone as a ‘regional connector’** for an all-island framework;
- The **Draft NPF has weakened the position of Athlone and the Midlands Region** by removing its current status, ignoring the NSS-Review Expert Group’s advice and leaving Athlone’s future uncertain;
- The Expert Group determined that **“Athlone should be recognised as the Midlands Gateway”**;

The Expert Group noted how **Athlone is self-selecting to be designated a ‘Gateway’ and driver for regional growth as it has “the largest populations, the best transport connections, the highest levels of economic activity and the critical mass of key services such as education and health – they are the key to regional and national success”**;
- The Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly (EMRA), support the need for a regional driver in the Midlands Strategic Planning Area “...in order to realise ‘Effective Regional Development’ the suggestion **of a city within the Midlands Strategic Planning Area, as a regional city driver, is welcome**” (EMRA, 2017);
- EMRA explain that this can bring “determinants of regional growth that are required such as **human capital, critical mass of population, density, frequency of large urban centres and infrastructure**”;
- The NPF should be truly forward-looking for Athlone, and **by 2040, Athlone should be a city that is 100% renewable and a test bed for innovation and technology; an internationally recognised centre for creativity, innovation and design**; a city that is **vibrant, connected and healthy**;
- The **NPF’s statutory footing**, together with a **National Investment Plan** and **Smart Growth Initiative**, should facilitate a coordinated strategic approach to capitalise on Athlone 2040 and the reimagined Midlands Region;

- Athlone 2040 is wholly **capable of resolving the urban vs. rural 'divide', by reducing disparities, strengthening the success of Athlone and its supporting settlements** across the Midlands Region;
- This submission **strongly advocates amending the Draft NPF** to provide a clear vision and strategic **roadmap that embraces the importance of Athlone 2040**: Enabling a Successful Midlands Region;
- The forthcoming NPF **must provide the policies, objectives and supports (through designation) and invest** in the sustainable development of Athlone 2040, as the enabler for the Midlands Region.
- The success of Athlone 2040 must start with the NPF. The preparation of a truly innovative plan will chart the course out to 2040 and beyond (2070). To deliver on this challenging vision will require a paradigm shift in how Ireland thinks about and plans such a development.

# 1.0 Introduction

“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.”

## 1.1 Overview

This submission, from Destination Athlone, is made to the Draft “Ireland 2040 - Our Plan” National Planning Framework (Draft NPF).

The submission follows on from Destination Athlone’s detailed submission, to the Issues Paper stage back in March 2017, entitled **ATHLONE 2040: A REGIONAL CITY IN THE MIDLANDS - Imagining a New Collaborative City Region**, Submission to Ireland 2040 - Our Plan”. A copy of the earlier submission is contained in Appendix 1.

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.

## 1.2 About Destination Athlone

Destination Athlone is an active group of businesses, supported by a Steering Group represented by Westmeath, Longford and Roscommon County Councils, Athlone Chamber of Commerce, Fáilte Ireland and Lakelands & Inland Waterways and chaired by Mr. John O'Sullivan, Chairman of the Hodson Bay Group.

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](http://www.athlone.ie) actively promotes the entire region as a great place to visit, live, work and play. Its members include, 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; ALKERMES, wider industry and Hodson Bay Group.

## 2.0 Athlone 2040: A Vision for Sustainable Growth

“Athlone and the Midlands Region benefit from unique spatial qualities as a ‘regional connector’ for an all-island planning framework, and Athlone specifically has a clear capacity for growth, combined with its economic and educational profile and future potential.”

### 2.1 Context

Athlone has long been recognised as an important element in Ireland’s overall spatial strategy. As one of the three settlements comprising the NSS’s “Midlands Gateway”, the polycentric model was intended to develop as the primary driver of sustainable economic and spatial development within the region. In essence, the Gateway was intended to have a population exceeding 100,000 which would provide the “critical mass necessary to sustain strong levels of job growth in the regions”.

It has been widely documented why the Midlands Gateway failed, most notably by the Expert Group appointed to provide recommendations in learning from the NSS. The Expert Group highlighted that the “linked centres approach has not been sufficiently established, diffuses focus, and has proven to be of little substance or value in practice”. A fresh, evidence-led solution should be reflected in the NPF’s treatment and future visioning for the Midlands Region. Per the comprehensive submission made by Destination Athlone in March 2017 (in Appendix to this current submission), there is a compelling rationale and justification for Athlone to serve as a driver for growth in the NPF.

Athlone and the Midlands Region benefit from unique spatial qualities as a ‘regional connector’ for an all-island planning framework, and Athlone specifically has a clear capacity for growth, combined with its economic and educational profile and future potential.

The NPF must show commitment and support to realise Athlone’s potential, and its selection as a designated growth settlement and driving force for the future of the Midlands Region (indeed, supported by the sustainable growth of key settlements across the Midlands). Reflecting this approach in the NPF would ensure the creation of a coherent axis with Dublin and harness Athlone and the Midlands Region unique proposition as an inter-regional connector and integrator for more efficient and effective regional development.

## 2.2 Vision

“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”

As a vision submitted in March 2017 during the earlier consultation cycle, this now takes on a greater significance in the context of the Draft NPF as Athlone is strategically located in relation to all 5 cities, specifically spans regions and has strong North South and East West linkages.

The pursuit of this vision, together with the investment and political supports that it warrants, would ensure Athlone reaches growth of some 30-40,000+ additional persons over the life of the NPF (to reach a population threshold for city status, in accordance with European norms), with over 100,000+ persons residing in the collaborative regional towns surrounding Athlone, if the NPF strategy for these towns is sufficiently ambitious (noting the Draft NPF looks to limit growth of 25% and 15% for towns with population above 10,000 and below 10,000 respectively).

The next tier of settlements throughout the Midlands Region therefore could see a population of some 450,000 persons. As such, it is imperative that the NPF recognises and supports Athlone in reaching its potential as a major settlement, and as a driver for the Midlands Region. The Athlone Midlands Region is primed as a vibrant connector between the Western Region, the Northern Region, the Eastern Region and the Southern Region – it is a direct facilitator for inter-regional development. Importantly, the Athlone Midlands Region represents a model for ‘inclusive’ planning wherein all settlements across the Midlands Region will be contributors to sustainable regional growth. The National Smart Growth Initiative should support such development and leverage both public and provide investment as part of the ten-year national investment plan.

The vision for the Athlone Midlands Region will see a “critical mass” for the region in terms of its economic strength, employment, education and population - key metrics for foreign direct and indigenous investment – and the delivery levels of locally available employment will serve to support a more vibrant community.



The realisation of this vision does not require a complete overhaul. Indeed, Athlone benefits from a number of key enablers which together can support the achievement of this vision.

**It is necessary for Athlone to further strengthen its position as the principal settlement within the Region and to continue to address the legacy of underinvestment and insufficient political support for the Region to reach its true potential.**

By building on and enhancing the competitiveness and attractiveness of Athlone and the Midlands Region within a spatial planning hierarchy in the NPF, the wider Region can be self-sustaining, economically vibrant, and supportive of sustainable growth (with a highly educated workforce) through local employment opportunities and the creation of sustainable communities that capitalise on the existing assets and resources of Athlone.

The NPF needs to acknowledge the opportunity which Athlone represents for the Midlands Region to develop and strengthen both its identity and its future prospects for investment. For example, investment in regional infrastructure within Athlone and the wider Midlands Region has a direct return for national connectivity, which in turn drives the development of the region and between regions in a balanced and sustainable manner. The National Investment Plan, to be published with the NPF, must reflect the strategic role played by Athlone and the wider Midlands Region.

### 2.3 Athlone 2040: Harnessing Athlone's Unique Potential

“For the NPF to recognise and harness Athlone's clear potential and to utilise its strategic location in a national context to grow by 50-60,000+ persons over the life of the NPF,”

The NPF should serve as a key forward planning instrument such that Athlone works towards city status (in line with accepted norms across Europe) during the lifetime of the NPF.

## 2.4 Athlone 2040: A Connected Midlands Region

“For the Midlands Region to be recognised by the NPF based on its unique spatial qualities for inter-regional development, leveraging off Athlone as a ‘regional connector’ for an all-island planning framework;

The NPF should specifically recognise Athlone’s growth potential through a stated population target designation - it has a clear capacity for growth and, combined with its economic and educational profile, it can serve as the driver for the sustainable growth of the Midlands Region.

In spatial terms, the NPF will represent a vision for the future development patterns across Ireland up to 2040 and beyond. **By formally recognising Athlone as a driver for the Midlands Region, together with a clearer statutory and regional underpinning for implementation, the failings of the NSS can be addressed.** Athlone and the Midlands Region serve as a geographical point of connection and integration between the Border and Western Regions, between the Western and Eastern Region, and between the Border and Southern Region.

The Midlands Region, enabled by Athlone as a driver for growth, **provides the opportunity to unlock the potential for ALL regions to contribute to their fullest extent** possible towards the continuing prosperity of the country;

## 2.4 Athlone 2040: A Connected Midlands Region

The NPF must reflect on the shortcomings of our failed National Spatial Strategy (NSS). The NSS-Review Expert Group reported how “the Midlands Gateway...linked centres approach has not been sufficiently established, diffuses focus, and has proven to be of little substance or value in practice”.

The Draft NPF fails to recognise the potential of Athlone as the central driver of the Midlands Region. In fact, the Draft NPF has weakened the position of Athlone and the Midlands Region by removing its current status, ignoring the advice of the NSS Review Expert Group and leaving Athlone’s future designation uncertain in terms of structure, execution and timeframe.

The Expert Review Group tasked with reviewing the National Spatial Strategy back in 2014 specifically highlighted that **“Athlone should be recognised as the Midlands Gateway”**;

In addition, the **Expert Group noted how Athlone is self-selecting to be designated a ‘Gateway’ and driver for regional growth as it has “the largest populations, the best transport connections, the highest levels of economic activity and the critical mass of key services such as education and health** – they are the key to regional and national success”.



## 2.6 Cohesive and Collaborative Regional Planning

The **Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly (EMRA)**, in their submission to the NPF Issues Paper in March 2017, **support the need for a regional driver in the Midlands Strategic Planning Area**, noting that, “Whilst Dublin is recognised as the primary city and driver for the Region, in order to realise ‘Effective Regional Development’ the suggestion of a city within the Midlands Strategic Planning Area, as a regional city driver, is welcome”.

EMRA explain the rationale for this spatial planning direction as **“this will help to deliver the determinants of regional growth that are required such as human capital, critical mass of population, density, frequency of large urban centres and infrastructure”**.

## 2.7 Reimagining and redefining: Athlone 2040’s Value Proposition

Supported by the existing assets of the Midlands Region, Athlone can enable the Region to develop a vibrant economy and outstanding quality of life for all, by encouraging inward investment, reigniting and sustaining the Midlands economy, and capitalising on the existing and future supporting infrastructure, services and facilities benefitting Athlone and the Midlands Region.

The NPF should be truly forward-looking for Athlone, and by 2040, Athlone should be a city that is 100% renewable and a test bed for innovation and technology; an internationally recognised centre for creativity, innovation and design; a city that is vibrant, connected and healthy:

### Vibrant

Easy access to high-quality jobs, services, housing, recreation, shopping, transport options, brimming with arts and culture; making efficient use of public and private assets, resources and investment; an attractive city;

### Connected

Athlone 2040 will be supported by the wider Midlands Region, a region connected by corridors with multi-modal transport choice, attractive to sustainable development patterns, connecting residents to local jobs and services; the city of Athlone, and the Midlands Region, will foster inter-regional development across Ireland;

### Healthy

A city and region that creates real economic, social and environmental value for its resident population, businesses and communities. A green, sustainable and collaborative region that promotes healthy lifestyles and healthy placemaking.

Designating Athlone as a “city region” for the Midlands is about far more than a designation for Athlone. **It is a necessity to acknowledge Athlone as the primary focal point for the future development of the collaborative Midlands Region, supported by a statutory footing and political oversight** - there needs to be a Regional “champion” or “catalyst” and Athlone is a clear choice in this regard;

## 2.8 Evidence-Led Investment

The NPF's statutory footing, together with a National Investment Plan and Smart Growth Initiative, can and **should facilitate a coordinated, inter-regional and strategic approach to capitalise on Athlone's potential to serve as this obvious catalyst for a reimagined Midlands Region;**

**Athlone has the existing infrastructure** in support of its strategically important spatial profile, in a national context, **to serve as an exemplar for social, economic, physical and environmental development;**

Athlone 2040 is wholly capable of reconnecting the disparate urban vs. rural 'divide', by reducing disparities, strengthening the viability and vitality of Athlone and its supporting settlements across the Midlands Region.

## 2.9 Practical Implementation: A National Planning Framework that embraces Athlone 2040


This submission strongly advocates for the Draft NPF to be amended to provide a clear vision and strategic roadmap that embraces the importance of Athlone 2040: Enabling a Successful Midlands Region, and which:

- Outlines the enablers, initiatives and investment that will facilitate the growth of Athlone for the benefit of the Midlands Region, in parallel with the growth of the existing city regions across Ireland, and safeguarding the future of our towns, villages and rural hinterland;
- Capitalises on positioning Athlone as an accessible urban centre of scale, and leveraging the Midlands Region as a connector for more efficient and effective inter-regional development;
- Enables Athlone to be an exemplar for the Midlands Region and for Ireland in the Global Economy as a coordinated and effectively planned innovative city, supported by quality infrastructural investment and delivery - for the benefit of its communities and the environment.

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.

## 3.0 Key Future Growth Enablers for Athlone 2040

Unlocking the Athlone Midlands Region can be encapsulated in the consideration of practical implementation, i.e. supporting the Athlone Midlands Region through investment and political oversight. In order to harness the potential of the Athlone Midlands Region, the Draft NPF needs to have further regard to the Destination Athlone submission from March 2017 (see Appendix), which set out a wide number of thematic opportunities. For the purposes of the current submission, we have confined commentary to three key sub-categories:

-  **Key infrastructure**, which will not only benefit the Athlone Midlands Region but will also have a direct and significant return on investment by connecting regions;
-  **Innovation, education and employment**, based on the recognition that a successful regional economy underpins wider sustainable development and quality of life principles;
-  **Tourism and sport**, noting the existing tourism assets within Athlone and across the Midlands Region, and the major potential for future economic development in this arena.

Key future growth enablers for the Athlone Midlands Region include:

### 3.1 Key Infrastructure

Athlone is the fulcrum of connectivity for the Midlands Region. In order to drive Athlone's continued growth and regional development in the Midlands, ongoing investment in key infrastructure is required. Some key enablers include:



**Delivery of the €35m Irish Water upgrade for Athlone** as committed to and at tender stage. This will allow significant population uplift through Tier 1 and Priority 1 zoned lands as to be outlined in the upcoming Westmeath County Development Plan 2020-2026. Ahead of this, **delivering existing serviced residential land banks** will consolidate Athlone's connected urban form;



**Athlone to Portarlington Railway Dual Track Upgrade** is a "game changer" for the Midlands Region. This upgrade would significantly improve train speeds, frequency and efficiency, on a service with a demonstrated high demand;



**Athlone Railway Station upgrades** would be a practical investment, allowing for ease of transfer from the Dublin-Galway line to and from the Westport line;



**Reopening of Athlone to Mullingar Railway line** to provide greater regional connections to the west and north of the country (Dublin/Sligo rail line);

**Continual upgrading of the National Secondary Road Routes connecting the Midlands Region including Mullingar, Tullamore, Birr, Longford, Roscommon and Ballinasloe, which serve the National Primary Road Network.**

**Identification of a Regional Hospital Site providing for first class hospital services akin to the Galway Clinic.**

### 3.2 Innovation, Education, Employment

Athlone is recognised as possessing unique selling points including renowned third-level education and a focus on high-end employment. Continued investment and nurturing of these are essential to driving the Midlands Region to a new level and attracting key employers. Some typical enablers include:



**A new ‘Regional/City Innovation District’ through efficient utilisation of Athlone HSE lands (together with the Ramparts, and further development on the west side)**, providing opportunities for enterprise start-ups, creative industries and life sciences for the Midlands Region – capitalising on attractive central location and building linkages to similar spaces in regional towns including Roscommon, etc.;



**Athlone Institute of Technology’s (AIT) transition to Technological University Status** as per the Technological Universities Bill, 2015. This ambition is stated in AIT’s Strategic Plan and the President of AIT is determined to make this happen, stating: “We are well advanced in terms of meeting the criteria necessary to achieve TU status, which we believe will considerably strengthen the educational and research infrastructure of the region”;



**Provision of additional IDA lands** to meet the continued demand for Foreign Direct Investment;



**The creation of a “Regional International School” in Athlone and Executive Housing** to cater for the influx of international business migrants as a direct impact of Brexit, and to recognise the demands of major employers in Athlone and across the Midlands Region.

**Progress Athlone as a test bed for advanced energy saving technologies. District heating and utilisation of government incentives and maximising benefit from the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme and recently formed semi-state entity Bord na Mona Bioenergy. Harnessing solar power, bioenergy, wind power as well as hydropower.**

### 3.3 Tourism and Sport

Athlone and its rural hinterland is highly connected by road, rail and water and it continues to be an exemplar in quality of life and an attractor of tourism through built and natural heritage assets. Continued strategic investment in this along with continued promotion of the town is critical to driving growth in the Athlone Midlands Region. Some important enablers include:



**Upgrading of the Regional Sports Centre** including the construction of the LIHAF funded Brawny Road to the south of the N6, and associated public realm improvements;



**The creation of a new Waterway Entertainment Quarter** including river boardwalks, high quality food and beverage outlets, executive housing and promotion of existing Blueway and flagship tourism;

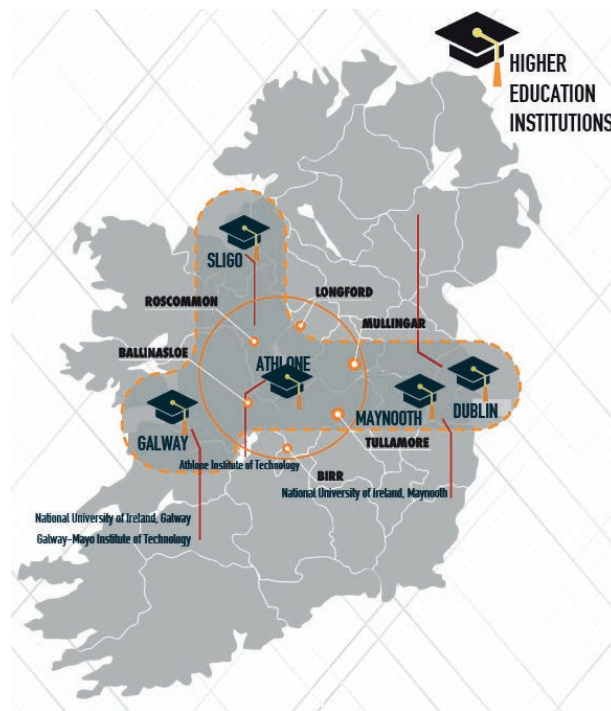


**Continued promotion of Athlone Castle** and the medieval walled town to consolidate Athlone’s place in the visitor landscape;

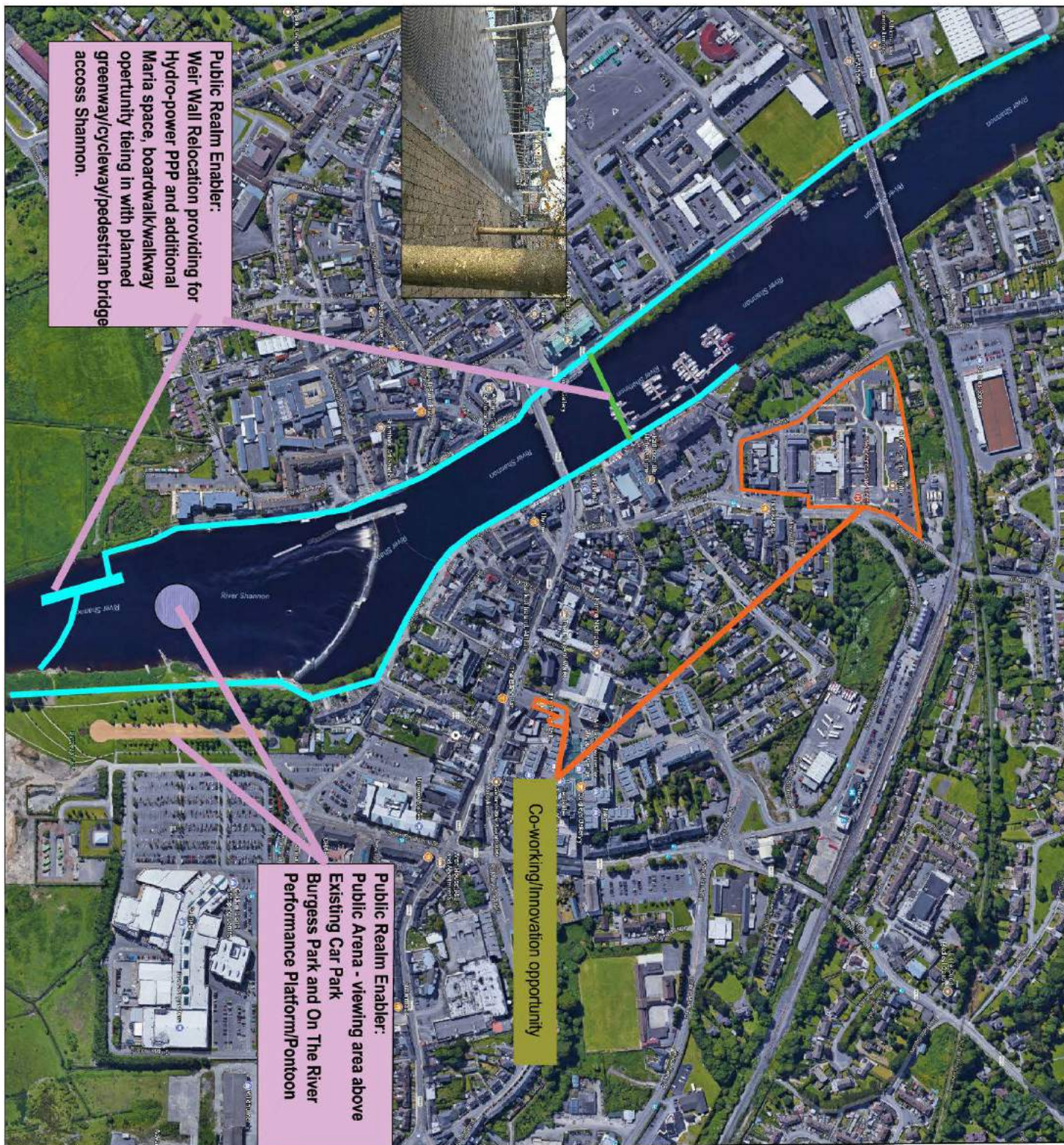


**Building upon the success of the Shannon Blueway** including development of a canoe trail with associated infrastructure.

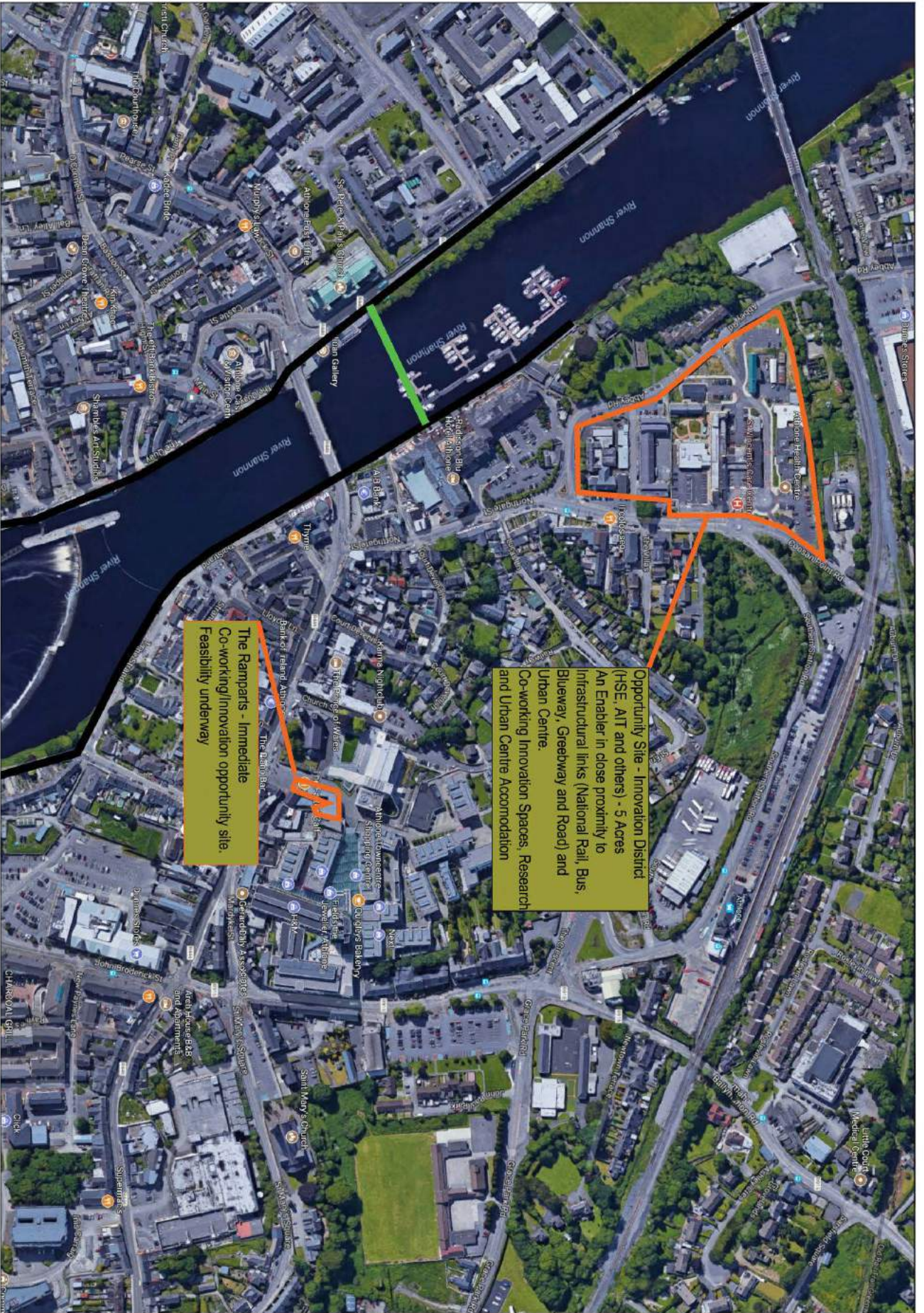
Figure 5: Athlone as a key conduit for the "Knowledge Corridor"



# Indicative Enablers for Future Sustainable Growth of Athlone as a driver for the Midlands Region







**The Ramparts - Immediate**  
Co-working/Innovation opportunity site.  
Feasibility underway

**Opportunity Site - Innovation District**  
(HSE, AIT and others) - 5 Acres  
An Enabler in close proximity to  
Infrastructural links (National Rail, Bus,  
Blueway, Greebway and Road) and  
Urban Centre.  
Co-working Innovation Spaces, Research  
and Urban Centre Accommodation



## 4.0 The National Importance of Athlone 2040

“Destination Athlone feel strongly that omitting Athlone as a key regional centre is a missed opportunity given its regional influence and capacity for growth. Athlone is suitably positioned to grow by some 50-60,000 persons over the life of the NPF, which would touch a population threshold warranting city status.”

### 4.1 Reappraising the Draft NPF

The Draft NPF places a focus on directing future population growth in Ireland to the five city regions, with Dublin and Cork acknowledged as established and emerging centres of scale, while Limerick, Cork and Galway are identified as key regional centres.

Destination Athlone feel strongly that omitting Athlone as a key regional centre is a missed opportunity given its regional influence and capacity for growth. Athlone is suitably positioned to grow by some 30-40,000 additional persons over the life of the NPF, which would touch a population threshold warranting city status. In addition, the composite population growth of the main Midlands towns could total a further 100,000+ persons (if the NPF strategy for these towns was to be sufficiently ambitious as opposed to the Draft NPF content), with distributed sustainable growth across the smaller towns and villages throughout the Midlands Region.

Table 2.1 of the Draft NPF fails to address the Midlands Region, which makes the NPF a “Coastal Plan” omitting the opportunities that the Midlands can have in acting as a conduit for growth of the main cities. The following may be a suitable amendment to Table 2.1:

Growth of Athlone by 20,000 - 30,000 (100% or more) while increasing the interregional Midland principle towns of Mullingar, Tullamore, Birr, Roscommon, Longford, Portlaois, Ballinasloe by 40% centred on the inter-regional spatial strategy for Athlone.

Allowing for an overall population for the five Midland counties of 358,000 with 64,000 for Roscommon, 90,000 for Westmeath, 78,000 for Offaly, 41,000 for Longford and 84,000 for Laois.

This will be anchored by town population of 40,000-50,000 for Athlone, which is 10% of the total allocated to the Eastern and Midland Region. This will allow for an additional 29,000 for Mullingar, 25,000 for Tullamore, 14,000 for Longford, 8,000 for Roscommon, and 31,000 for Portlaoise.

## 4.2 Athlone 2040 and the Midlands Region as a Connecting Region

In light of the failure of the Draft NPF to recognise the critical nature of Athlone to Ireland's effective regional development objectives, Destination Athlone would like to highlight the spatial attributes that Athlone holds in connecting all of the city regions identified in the Draft NPF and as such Athlone is critical to the development of Ireland to 2040.

Athlone is at the intersection of the primary east-west transport and infrastructure corridors extending from Dublin to Galway, as well as forming a vital inter regional corridor between the north and south of the country.

Critically, Athlone's position allows for connectivity between Dublin and the northwest regional towns of Westport and Sligo, bolstering the ambition of the Draft NPF to connect the Northern and Western regions with Dublin/the Eastern Region and the South.



Figure 1: Athlone's Rail Connections

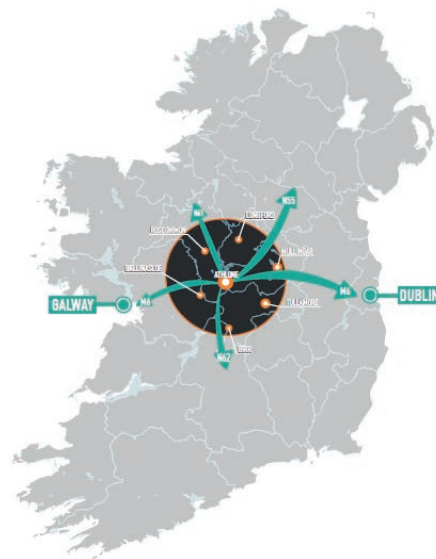


Figure 2: Athlone's Primary Road Connections

The following attributes make Athlone a key spatial connector central to Ireland's future development:

- Dublin to Galway Railway Corridor;
- Athlone to Westport Rail Corridor;
- The M6/N6 National Motorway and National Primary Road Corridor;
- The North-South Shannon River Tourism Corridor;
- Water services capacity for sustained growth; and
- Proximity to multiple towns above 10,000 in population within a 40km radius.



The Draft NPF in its current form proposes to focus investment in five cities that are on average 150km distant from one another. The Draft NPF correctly identifies that for accessible centres of scale:

...the two key variables are the scale of concentration of activity and the relative distance, or ease of accessibility, to centres of scale.

### 4.3 Supporting Change for the Betterment of the NPF

In addressing the disparate nature of the five cities identified, the NPF could recognise and provide for Athlone to be a conduit for the growth of more peripheral cities such as Galway and Limerick as well as the northwest regional towns of Sligo and Westport.

It is hugely important therefore that Athlone is nurtured with continual investment in infrastructure and population resource. The NPF must recognise and provide for Athlone as Ireland's Spatial Connector, and should designate Athlone appropriately to target future population growth and as a driver for the wider Midlands Region. Athlone 2040, as a new addition to the NPF, would be conducive to achieving ambitions which align with overarching objectives of the National Planning Framework, which include a desire to:

-  Reduce the disparities between and within the Border, Midlands and Western Region and the Southern and Eastern Region; and,
-  Develop the potential of both regions to contribute to the greatest possible extent to the continuing prosperity of the country.

Athlone's location along the East-West economic corridor will enable effective and efficient urbanisation with an enhanced return on investment in physical infrastructure. The existing assets and resources of the Midlands Region - from infrastructural, educational, workforce and wider population, natural resource availability - can be optimised to ensure that Athlone 2040 and the Midlands Region also capitalise on their unique spatial location. This includes serving as a link between the Northern-Western and the Eastern-Midlands Regions.

The provision of key infrastructure is a significant undertaking and one that will be outlined in the National Investment Plan to be published with the NPF in due course. Delivery of key infrastructure to Athlone and the Midlands Region has a national (inter-regional) uplift such that costs of investment are effectively shared and cost/benefit results improve drastically. The disjoint between three European regions and the need for a strong tie between these in location is key. The fact that the roads, rail, gas, water, natural resource and population catchment are already present makes Athlone a "low hanging fruit" opportunity for the forthcoming NPF.

“

Over the life of the NPF, Athlone can develop sustainably to become a vibrant and self-sufficient metropolitan area both in terms of population and economic activity (and thus investment). With intra-regional links to Midlands Region settlements such as Ballinasloe, Roscommon, Mullingar, Longford, Tullamore, Portlaoise, and Birr.

This emerging major urban centre has the potential to connect the Eastern and Western Regions. In addition, it can enable urban and rural parts of the Midlands Region to develop in a sustainable and mutually supportive manner. Athlone can serve as the catalyst for the renewal of the Midlands Region, and the driver of a vibrant corridor that generates strong economic activity, further supporting effective regional development and retaining economic activity rather than it migrating towards the Eastern Region, and the Western and Midlands Regions both suffering from lower order population growth than planned, and static or poor economic performance.”

”

## 5.0 Effective Regional Development: Athlone 2040 and the Midlands Region

“One of Athlone’s key economic attractors is the presence of Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT), lying in the centre of the M4-M6 “knowledge corridor”, which contains a host of top universities, institutes of technology and other higher level educational institutions.”

### 5.1 Athlone: Primary Economic Driver for the Midlands Region

Athlone is well-recognised as the primary economic driver for the Midlands Region. In a centre of such scale without administrative civic offices, Athlone is entirely self-sustaining with almost 900 separate businesses operating within its settlement boundary. Athlone has the largest proportion of IDA international businesses in the Midlands Region, playing host to companies such as **Ericsson, Alkermes, Medtronic, Jazz Pharmaceuticals, Alexion and Teleflex Medical** to name a few. Athlone also contains the “decentralised” Departments of Education and Finance as well as the **Health Service Executive**, logistics hubs such as An Post’s mail centres, as well as companies such as **Nightline Courier Services, Flancare Warehousing & Logistics Centre** and Ireland’s largest courier company **Dynamic Parcel Distribution (DPD)**.

One of Athlone’s key economic attractors is the presence of **Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT)**, lying in the centre of the M4-M6 “**knowledge corridor**”, which contains a host of top universities, institutes of technology and other higher level educational institutions. This affords all industrial sectors in the Midlands Region with the opportunity to avail of a highly educated and motivated workforce. Drawing students from all over the Midlands Region to its third level educational programmes, AIT provides Athlone with a unique selling point in terms of drawing large employers in the high technology, life science and pharmaceutical sectors.

**AIT therefore allows Athlone to compete on the international stage in attracting employers which sustain it and the region as a whole.** Please refer to the March 2017 submission enclosed which includes proposals around the distributed campus philosophy in support of Athlone 2040.

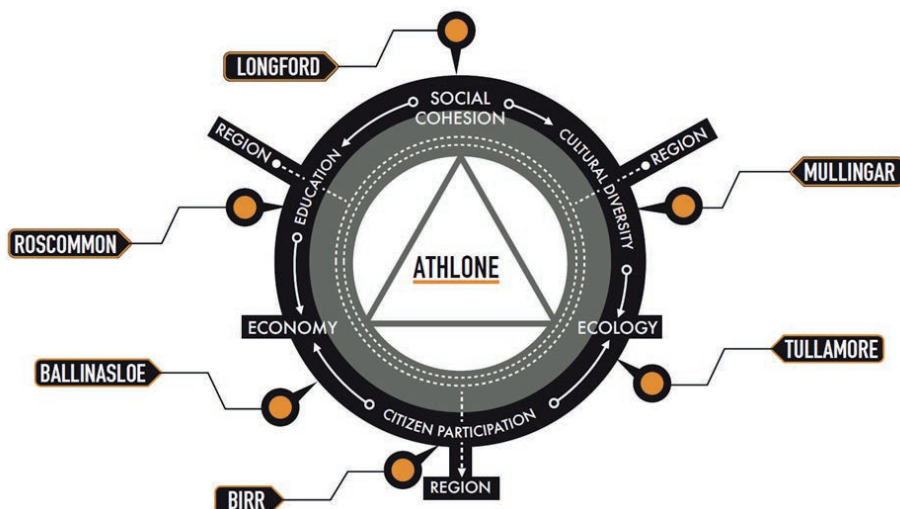


Figure 3: Athlone – A Regional City underpinned by the principles of sustainable urban development.

The economic importance of Athlone to the Midlands Region has been recognised by The National Spatial Strategy: Views of Expert Group Study, 2014, which identified Athlone as suited to the “Midlands Gateway”, stating that the gateways selected themselves given that they show the “highest levels of economic activity and the critical mass of key services such as education and health. They are the key to regional and national success”.

Destination Athlone are seeking recognition of the pivotal role that Athlone has in driving economic development in the Midlands Region. The Draft NPF not only removes Athlone’s previous status as a gateway under the NSS, but demotes it to a population growth target of 20-25% to 2040 in a blanket approach for all towns over a threshold of 10,000 residents. It is submitted that this approach is overly blunt and negligent not only of the critical role that Athlone plays spatially and economically but of the Midlands Region as a whole.

COUNTY	2002	2016	CHANGE 02 - 16	PERCENT CHANGE	ANNUAL CHANGE	2026	2040
LONGFORD	31,068	40,810	9,742	31.36%	2.24%	50,929	69,446
OFFALY	63,663	78,003	14,340	22.52%	1.61%	91,502	114,413
ROSCOMMON	53,774	64,436	10,662	19.83%	1.42%	74,166	90,304
WESTMEATH	71,858	88,396	16,538	23.01%	1.64%	104,051	130,733
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>220,363</b>	<b>271,645</b>				<b>320,648</b>	<b>404,896</b>

Figure 4 above shows the growth in population for the Athlone Midlands Region ranging from 19% to 31% with 23% growth for County Westmeath.

With this rate accounting for rural and urban parts in aggregate, for Athlone this growth rate can be expected to be closer to 40%. **This projection would naturally increase with further capital investment in critical infrastructure should the NPF recognise and provide for the critical strategic growth of Athlone.** Given that while the cities of Galway, Limerick and Waterford are proposed in the Draft NPF to grow at over double the rate of Athlone, which will negatively impact Athlone, the Midlands Region and the spatial connectivity of Ireland’s urban landscape, Destination Athlone strongly feel that the **NPF should be amended to recognise and provide for growth and investment in Athlone as the critical economic driver for the Midlands Region.**

## 6.0 Implementation: Building a Stronger Region

### 6.1 Implementing the NPF

Effective practical implementation of the NPF requires:

- **a coordinated, strategic approach** throughout the twenty-three year time horizon;
- **a statutory footing, backed by Government** across Departments/Agencies;
- **strong alignment with public/private investment**, including capital spend; a focus on health and well-being, the environment, inter-regional development and relations, as well as economic and property development;
- a recognition that it is a strategy, not a wish list and that **it will involve making hard choices – for example, follow through on the NSS Review Expert Group** that the Midlands Gateway is removed, and a “Athlone Gateway” is incorporated as a driver for the Midlands Region;
- **address all parts of Ireland**, avoid the perception of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, but avoid unrealistically seeking to treat all parts of the Country in the same way - the Athlone Midlands Region needs to augment the five city regions in the forthcoming NPF;
- include a particular focus on **implementation and evaluation**, with capacity for review.

### 6.2 Collaborative Inter-Regional Partnerships

The Draft NPF highlights how deeply important cooperation and joint development across Regions will be in seeking to deliver the NPF and to maximise the potential of the island economy. Initiatives to improve connectivity and the integration of transport, energy and communications systems together with measures aimed at harnessing natural characteristics of areas as resources for tourism development and promotion, will be important. It is acknowledged that national investment planning, the sectoral investment and policy frameworks of departments, agencies and the local government process will be guided by NPF upon publication.

## 6.3 Governance

In learning from our past mistakes, it is positive that the NPF will have a statutory backing being put in place to not only underpin the framework and provide for its future review but also put in place new structures to assist implementation. The Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2016 will provide a legislative basis for the NPF, its monitoring and review into the future and the establishment of the Office of the Planning Regulator.

This new Office will have an independent monitoring role, advising the Minister, Government and the Oireachtas on the implementation of the NPF under the statutory planning process through Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies, Local Authority statutory planning processes and the decisions of An Bord Pleanála utilising a new set of indicators to be developed to assist effective monitoring.

**It is imperative that the NPF recognises the Athlone 2040 vision and the value it brings to the Midlands Region which, while significant, is also extremely important to the realisation of the ambitions of the other Regions. As such, the NPF should oblige Local Authorities and Regional Assemblies to collaborate effectively, and to interact for efficient cross-regional planning, the delivery of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies, and the Regional Strategic Planning Areas that follow.**

**The functional area that Athlone serves will continue to grow as it takes a strong role in guiding the development of the Midlands Region. Indeed, the Athlone 2040 submissions see a region extending to Westmeath, Longford, Laois and Offaly (Midlands SPA) but also incorporating Roscommon, which sits in the Northern and Western Region. A collaborative model for regional development will be required.**

“The NSS did not realise its potential as it was unsuccessful in matching its stated population centres with where the market delivered employment. While recognising the need for regional equity, there is a clear need to focus a significant amount of growth to where the most people can benefit and where services can be provided. In this regard there is concern about the lack of focus in the Draft NPF on the potential of the Midlands region within the dominant narrative of a ‘step change’ directing future growth away from Dublin and about the lack of economic strategy underpinning such a significant policy shift.”

The Athlone 2040 Midlands Region needs to have a stronger recognition of the existing and future needs of these people who are already living and working in the region. Key to this will be the enhancement of communities, employment opportunities and integrated transportation to reduce long commuting times, which are having a serious impact on quality of life in the Region.



## 6.4 Athlone 2040: Building a Centre of Scale - The Athlone MASP?

The Draft NPF indicates that in parallel with the preparation of the RSEs, arrangements will be put in place to enable the preparation of five coordinated metropolitan area strategic plans (MASPs) for the Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford Metropolitan areas.

The MASPs will be provided with statutory underpinning to act as twelve-year strategic planning and investment frameworks for the city metropolitan areas addressing high-level and long-term strategic development issues including:

- physical development patterns and strategic growth areas;
- strategic infrastructure, particularly in the transportation and water services areas;
- large scale regeneration and the location of housing and employment; and
- metropolitan scale amenities such as regional parks and walking and cycling networks.

MASPs will align with and inform national-level sectoral investment plans to guide and coordinate investment within the metropolitan areas, coordinating land use planning and strategic infrastructure.

**Destination Athlone strongly urges that the NPF includes provision for Athlone to be the subject of a MASP or similar variant, wherein the medium-term, sustainable yet ambitious development of Athlone and its catchment can be detailed. This would ensure that the true potential of the Midlands Region comes to the fore, in contrast to the unsuccessful Athlone-Tullamore-Mullingar NSS Gateway, which failed because there was a diffused focus, and a poorly established construct.**



## 6.5 Athlone 2040: More than an “Other Urban Area”

It is noted that the Draft NPF alludes to “better strategic planning for other urban areas”. Under this policy objective, provision will be made for urban area plans for larger towns and their environs with a population of more than 15,000 people. Furthermore, provision is also to be made for joint urban area plans where a town and environs lies within the combined functional area of more than one local authority.

Destination Athlone do not accept that this will serve as an appropriate planning model for Athlone given the regional importance of Athlone (to the Midlands Region) and given the direct contribution Athlone and the Midlands Region makes to an increasingly connected series of city regions in Ireland.

**It is imperative that Athlone and environs is afforded proportionately the same targeted growth as the other city regions across Ireland, to safeguard the Athlone 2040 ambitions and to facilitate Athlone in acting as the driver for the Midlands Region. Accordingly, we request that Athlone is afforded special designation within the NPF, and that this recognises Athlone’s capacity for future population growth, job creation and wider socio-economic development. The key enablers to future growth in Athlone should be also listed, and indeed replicated in the National Investment Plan.**

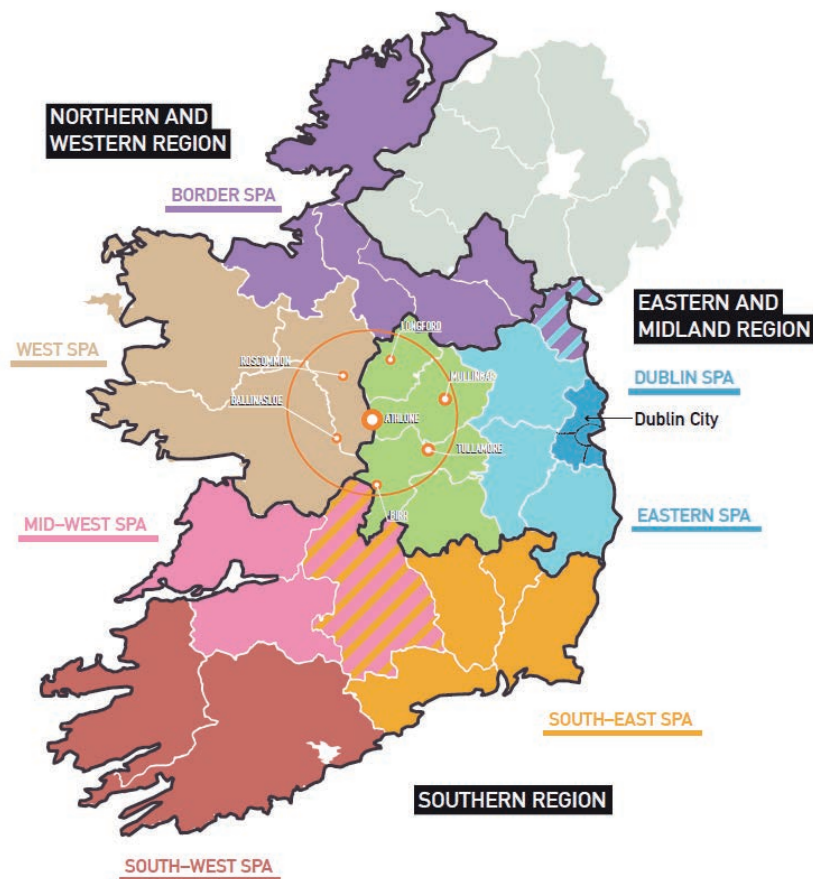


Figure 10: Athlone as a Regional Conduit

## 6.6 The National Investment Plan

Analysis undertaken for both the Draft NPF and towards the National Investment Plan highlights the risks from not securing an appropriate and effective regional balance in terms of Ireland's future economic development.

Unbalanced growth, largely focused in Dublin and the surrounding region creates a significant risk, whereby not achieving the economy's full potential will give rise to a shortfall in Ireland's economic performance with serious and long-lasting consequences for future living standards and the quality of life overall, across all regions of the country.

**Athlone 2040 sets an ambitious but achievable vision for a future Athlone, an urban centre that should be facilitated to grow to city status over the coming decade or two, i.e. in the life of the NPF delivery.**

-  From a National Investment Plan perspective, the objectives of the Draft NPF are fundamental to the achievement of long-term economic, social and environmental sustainability. The National Investment Plan will build from core elements of the Draft NPF including:
  -  Addressing the implications of an additional 1 million people and 550,000 new households by 2040, half of which will be in cities.
    -  Provision of 25,000 homes each year, half of which will be in the five cities and half of those on infill/brownfield sites.
      -  **Enabling a limited number of large towns that emerge from the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) process as potential regional growth drivers for their surrounding catchments.**
        -  Reversing small town and rural population decline (emphasis added)

**Destination Athlone strongly submit that the NPF needs to explicitly refer to Athlone as the driver for the Midlands Region, in accordance with the recommendations of the NSS-Review Expert Group. It is wholly unsuitable to "long finger" the decision-making and prolong the uncertainty concerning Athlone's development prospects until the RSES process is matured. As a case in point, it is noted that no less than 2 major FDI employers in Athlone have recently frozen plans for possible large-scale expansion, with one reason cited as political uncertainty on the future development direction of the settlement, despite its regional and national importance.**

## 7.0 Closing Remarks

“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”

The Draft NPF highlights the shortcomings of a “Business As Usual” approach compared to the benefits of a new way forward. In considering the broad direction for the Draft NPF, the ‘macro-spatial’ growth approach was considered and the preferred approach is underpinned by the following characteristics:

- Regional parity for the EMRA in relation to the NWRA and SRA combined;
- Regional concentration towards cities and potential for some regionally important larger settlements;
- A focus on contained growth and reduced sprawl by targeting infill lands, some of which will be brownfield sites, in existing built-up areas;
- Sequential provision of infrastructure with some strategic investment outcomes identified.

The Draft NPF highlights the shortcomings of a “Business As Usual” approach compared to the benefits of a new way forward. In considering the broad direction for the Draft NPF, the ‘macro-spatial’ growth approach was considered and the preferred approach is underpinned by the following characteristics:

**Destination Athlone strongly contend that regional parity for the EMRA will be at the direct expense of the Midlands Region, as the Eastern Region (Dublin) has the existing critical mass and economic dominance to continue to grow. Affording the NWRA and SRA combined parity with EMRA will not limit Dublin's (Eastern) Regional growth, but will have devastating impacts on the Midlands Region.**

**Destination Athlone remain very concerned by the failing of the Draft NPF to afford Athlone or the Midlands Region any real possibility of realising their sustainable potential. The Draft NPF appears to have effectively turned its back on the future development of the Midlands Region.**

**It is a considerable shortcoming of the Draft NPF to give such a dominant focus to the five city regions without any meaningful consideration of the Midlands Region and positioning it to best plan and grow in a sustainable manner into the future.**

**The token referencing to "potential for some regionally important larger settlements" (and similar such references throughout the Draft NPF) and "long-fingering" the decision-making process or delegating it entirely to the RSES preparation is a poorly conceived approach. The NPF must identify a driving force for the Midlands Region, and the evidence points to Athlone in this respect.**

Specifically, the failure to implement the recommendations of the NSS Review Expert Group, who sought a revised Midlands Gateway in the form of an **ATHLONE GATEWAY**, is seen as a retrograde step. Indeed, this is perhaps further compounded by not only the express removal of the former Midlands Gateway (the linked Athlone-Tullamore-Mullingar Gateway) but **with no strategic logic or solution on how the future Midlands Region will develop.**

Accordingly, we respectfully urge the Department to revisit the Athlone 2040 submission made in March 2017, and to, ultimately, designate Athlone in the NPF as the primary/gateway regional settlement for the Midlands Region.

Destination Athlone remain available to further discuss the vision for Athlone 2040: Enabling a Successful Midlands Region should it be deemed helpful.



# Appendix A

# **ATHLONE 2040**

## Enabling a Successful Midlands Region

Submission to the Draft 'Ireland 2040 —  
Our Plan' National Planning Framework

**November 2017**

**Prepared by:**



**Future Analytics**

Planning | Research | Economics

**On behalf of**

Destination Athlone