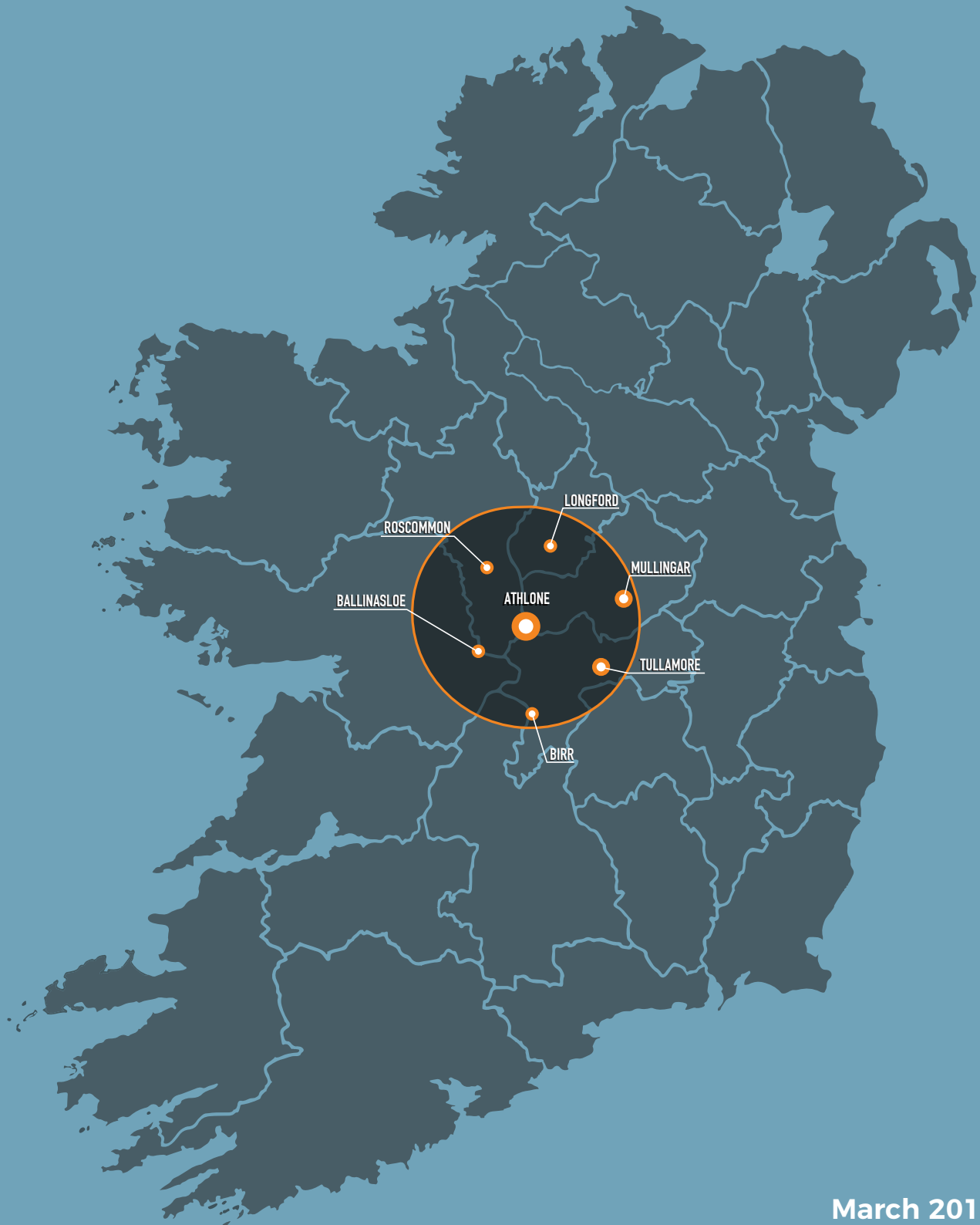# ATHLONE 2040

A REGIONAL CITY IN THE MIDLANDS

Submission to Ireland 2040, Our Plan, National Planning Framework

LONGFORD

ROSCOMMON

MULLINGAR

ATHLONE

BALLINASLOE

TULLAMORE

BIRR

March 2017

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FOREWORD

The vision for the Irish Midlands is to optimise the opportunity that Athlone brings to the Region. As per the report of the NSS Expert Review Group, the Gateways are, to a great extent, self-selecting, including Athlone, given their extensive positive attributes.

>>> *"We favour continuing with each of the National Gateways adopted in the first NSS **with the exception of the linked Midlands Gateway**. We propose instead that **Athlone should be recognised as the Midlands Gateway,** because the linked centres approach has not been sufficiently established, diffuses focus, and has proven to be of little substance or value in practice. To a great extent, the Gateways are self-selecting (and this is the case with Athlone) as they have the largest populations, 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"**.*

Athlone will serve as a key enabler for a new **Regional City** benefitting the wider Midlands Region, an exemplar for social, economic, physical and environmental development. The new **Regional City** will be sustainable and healthy, with a vibrant economy and outstanding quality of life for all. This new **Regional City** serves to reimagine and redefine the attractive offer the Midlands can make to inward investment, to kick-start and sustain the regional economy, and to provide the supporting infrastructure, services and facilities needed to safeguard quality of life and the environment.
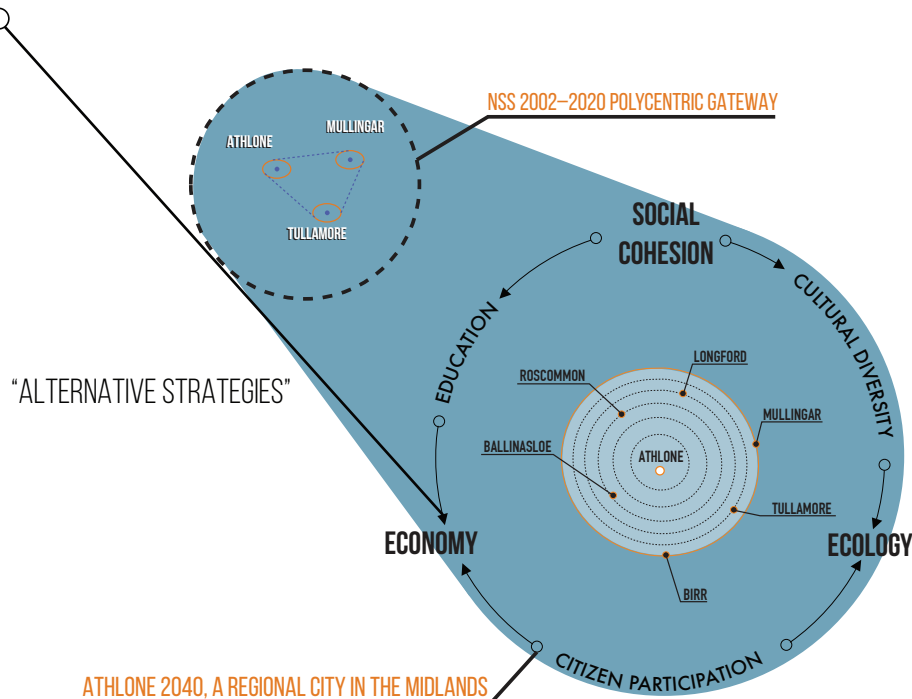
Athlone, as a new **Regional City** is conducive to achieving ambitions which align with overarching objectives of the National Planning Framework, which include a desire to:

> 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.

CONTENTS

1.0
INTRODUCTION

1.1 SUBMISSION OVERVIEW

This Submission has been prepared by **Future Analytics Consulting Ltd**. (FAC) and **MOLA Architecture** on behalf of **Destination Athlone**, in response to the publication of the NPF 'Ireland 2040, Our Plan, National Planning Framework'. The purpose of initial consultation document is to set out the main issues and possible choices for the development of Ireland over the next twenty years or more, to 2040 and is the first major step towards the preparation of a national spatial plan for the Country. It is acknowledged that in order to ensure that positive outcomes arising from national growth can be shared by people throughout Ireland, **the potential of all areas will need to be realised**, relative to their capacity for sustainable development.

Ireland's first national spatial plan, the 'NSS' was prepared in 2002 following a period of unprecedented rapid economic expansion in Ireland. This growth established a platform upon which policies were put in place which were designed to ensure that more balanced development was achieved, within a well-planned spatial structure of attractive, competitive and innovative places. The overarching objective of the NSS was to achieve a better balance of social, economic, physical development and population growth between regions. It advocated that through closer matching of where people live with where they work, different parts of Ireland will for the future be able to sustain:

> a better quality of life for people;
> a strong, competitive economic position; and,
> an environment of the highest quality

The NSS adopted a polycentric development model for the Midland Gateway, focusing on the towns of Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore. Polycentric development involves linking and integrating the development of a number of urban centres in a way that combines their strengths in terms of infrastructure co-ordination, business promotion, innovation and cultural ties and the Midland Gateway was modelled on the '**Triangle Region**' in Denmark. This region which was established in 1993 as a collaboration between eight municipalities comprising 225,000 people over a 60km radius at a strategic location within Denmark's national transport structure. In 2000, the region was identified as a new national centre by the Danish Government which has had positive implications for the type of activities and functions being supported by Government in various areas such as transport, education etc.[1]. Today, 415,000 people live in the **'Triangle Region'**, and the region is home to over 22,300 companies in more than 70 different fields.

However, **the adoption of a polycentric model for the Midland Gateway was flawed.** With some settlements exceeding 60,000 people, the spatial structure of the **'Triangle Region'** was much stronger than the Midland Gateway. The governance of the Midland's Gateway also lacked the required level of cooperation and collaboration at **National level** which was at the heart of the **'Triangle Region's'** success. The **'Triangle Region'** itself was seen more as a process of interaction, sharing of resources, marketing etc. than a de facto city.

An alternative strategy to the NSS polycentric model is now required, once which includes a specific focus on 'collaboration'. Collaboration is the glue that brings sustainable competitiveness projects together and is pivotal for the sustainable competitiveness of cities. Good collaboration;

> Requires trust, mutual understanding and flexibility/capacity to try out new approaches;
> Allows projects to reach other dimensions and domains; and,
> Contributes to mobilising complementary resources such as knowledge, finance, support and legitimacy. [2]

The preparation of the NPF provides an opportunity to create a new **Regional City** in the Midlands, one which crosses boundaries and calls for collaboration from all stakeholders. This emphasis on collaboration, firmly aligns with the principles of sustainable urban development, an approach which places a focus on the fundamental structure of society i.e. economics, ecology, education and culture.
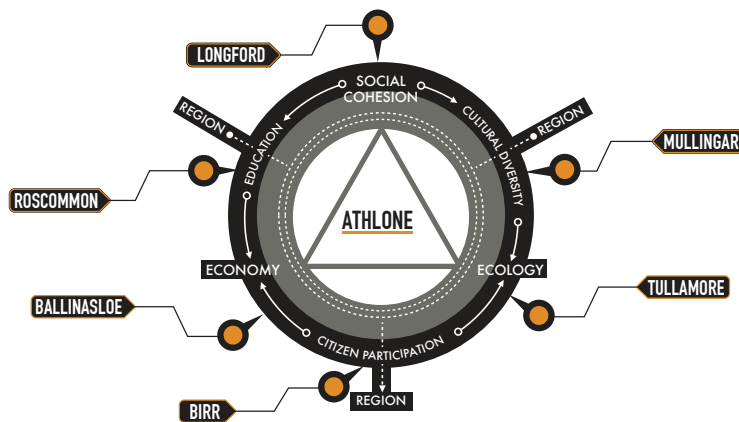
The driver and catalyst for growth and development in the midlands is Athlone. Athlone is acknowledged as having the population base, the transport connections, the level of economic activity and the critical mass of key services which are highlighted as being **key to regional and national success** [3]. For the purposes of this stage of the consultative process, it is proposed to articulate Athlone's inherent strategic, environmental, social and cultural strengths, which are many, while setting out an "agenda", which might inform a "vision" befitting its future as a catalyst for its development as a new **Regional City.** The following sections set out in more detail the rationale and justification for a new **Regional City** in the Midlands, and the collective benefits of redefining Athlone as an enabler and driver for this vision.

[1] The National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020, Appendix 4, Department of Environment, Housing and Local Government.

[2] Innovative City Strategies for Delivering Sustainable Competitiveness, iUrban, 2014

[3] Review of the National Spatial Strategy, Views of the Expert Group, 2014
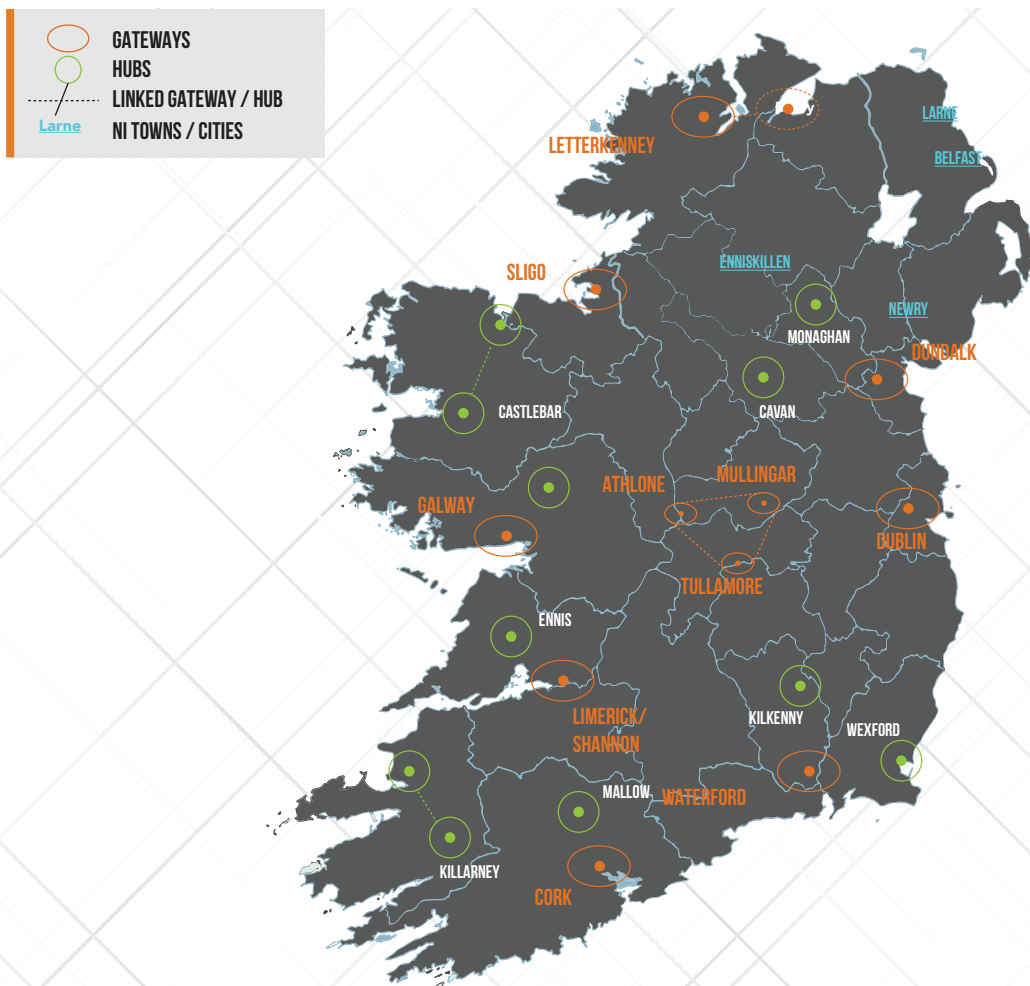
2.0
IRELANDS NATIONAL PLANNING CHALLENGES

2.1 ATHLONE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MIDLAND GATEWAY AND THE NSS

As part of the principal national strategic planning framework for Ireland, the National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 (NSS), Athlone formed a core component of the Midland Gateway. The Midland Gateway was one of nine Gateways, each of which was intended to develop as the primary driver of sustainable economic and spatial development within their respective region. The nine Gateways included Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick, Waterford, Dundalk, Sligo, Letterkenny/Derry, Athlone/Tullamore/Mullingar all of which were intended to have populations exceeding 100,000 which would provide the *"critical mass necessary to sustain strong levels of job growth in the regions"* [4]. In addition to the nine Gateways, nine strategically located, medium sized Hubs were designated with the task of driving development in their catchments, linking out to rural areas, while also supporting the activities of the Gateways. The Hubs included Cavan, Ennis, Kilkenny, Mallow, Monaghan, Tuam and Wexford, along with the linked hubs of Ballina-Castlebar and Tralee-Killarney.

The Midland Gateway was the fifth largest Gateway in terms of population and was unique among the Gateways in that it comprised the three linked towns of Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore. Historically, all three towns had developed around the traditional east-west transport axis that traverses the Irish Midlands. Athlone was described as having a wide catchment area which extends westward into Roscommon and East Galway. Whilst Mullingar, on the other hand would generally have a more easterly focus towards the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) for employment. In contrast, the smaller town of Tullamore would have strong links southwards toward Portlaoise. As a result of this, there was clear challenges in bringing these distinct functional areas together to form a cohesive linked Gateway. Straddling the joint jurisdiction of five local authorities (three town and two county councils) also added to the challenges of administering the coordinated development of the linked-Gateway.

While the strategy emphasised the need for future development to be linked to, or concentrated within, primarily the gateways and hubs, it was not given a legislative basis and was therefore viewed as merely a framework document that offered guidance to planners and policymakers[5].

2.2   A REGIONAL CITY IN THE MIDLANDS – A FRESH OPPORTUNITY

As indicated in the document Towards a *National Planning Framework; a Road Map for the Delivery of the National Planning Framework*, the NSS's five zones will become three regions comprising eight Strategic Planning Areas (SPAs):

> Northern and Western Region: Donegal, Sligo. Monaghan, Leitrim, Cavan (Border SPA) Mayo, Roscommon and Galway (West SPA);

> Eastern and Midland Region: Dublin City, South Dublin, Fingal, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown (Dublin SPA); Kildare, Wicklow, Meath (Eastern SPA); Westmeath, Offaly, Laois, Longford and Louth (Midland SPA);

> Southern Region: Wexford, Waterford, Carlow, Kilkenny (South East SPA); Cork and Kerry (South West SPA); Limerick, Clare, and Tipperary (Mid-West SPA).

The rationale for the NPF is broadly the same as the NSS. It is to coordinate spatially the development of sectoral areas (economy, transport, housing, energy, education, health) and guide and drive balanced regional development as the population continues to grow. The initial consultation document (Ireland 2040, Our Plan, Issues and Choices[6]) on the NPF purports that if development is not managed and it is left to the 'business as usual' scenario, then Dublin will continue to expand, the regional cities will have modest growth, and smaller towns and rural areas will stagnate or decline. The consultation document argues that there needs to be:

[5] Meredith and van Egeraat (2013) in Revisiting the National Spatial Strategy - ten years on (Administration vol. 60, no. 3 (2013), pp. 3–9)

> a **coordinated, strategic approach** with a twenty-year time horizon;
> this approach needs to be **backed by government across departments/agencies;**
> be **aligned with public/private investment**, including capital spend;
> a focus on **health and well-being, the environment, North-South 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;
> 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;
> include a particular focus on **implementation and evaluation, with capacity for review**[7].

With the implementation of the NPF, an opportunity now exists to deliver sustainable growth across the midlands region. While the NSS focused on the evenly spread, balanced growth and development of the Gateway towns of Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore, this submission focuses on a wider geographical area, one which crosses the administrative boundaries of the **Eastern and Midland and the Northern and Western Regional Assembly areas**[8], forming a new **Regional City** in the midlands. Athlone town will act as the driver and catalyst of growth in this region over the next twenty years with the support its sister settlements of Mullingar, Longford Town, Roscommon Town, Tullamore, Ballinasloe and Birr. A proposition that firmly aligns with the Expert Group recommendations based on their review of the NSS:


*"We favour continuing with each of the National Gateways adopted in the first NSS **with the exception of the linked Midlands Gateway**. We propose instead that **Athlone should be recognised as the Midlands Gateway**, because the linked centres approach has not been sufficiently established, diffuses focus, and has proven to be of little substance or value in practice. To a great extent, the Gateways are self-selecting (and this is the case with Athlone) as they have the largest populations, 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"** [9].*

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[6] Ireland 2040, Our Plan, Issues and Choices, Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, February 2017.

[7] Thoughts on the initial consultation document for 'Ireland 2040: National Planning Framework', Ireland after NAMA, Rob Kitchen

[8] Taking in the counties of Westmeath, Roscommon, Longford and Offaly

[9] Review of the National Spatial Strategy, Views of the Expert Group, 2014
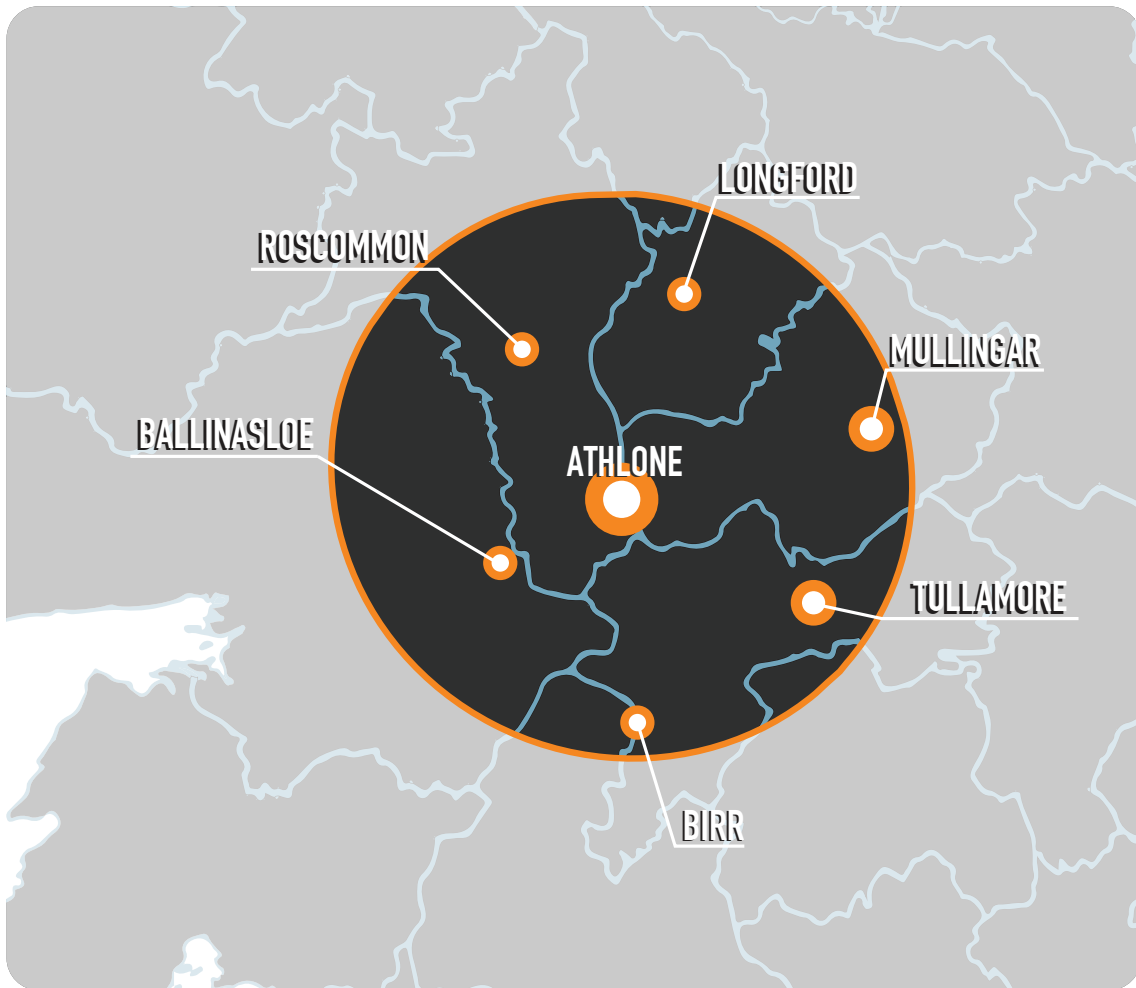
The failure of the Midlands Gateway in securing balanced growth across each of the settlements requires a fresh approach, one which is based and underpinned by the principles of sustainable urban development, referred to as *'The Magic Triangle'* of urban development [10]. This approach places a focus on the fundamental structure of society i.e. economics, ecology, education and culture.

[10] The Freiburg Charter for Sustainable Urbanism, Learning from Place, The Academy of Urbanism. The Freiburg Charter strives to achieve the following objectives, which should be at the forefront of every responsible urban development project:
- The conservation of identity, the strengthening of neighbourhood and the encouragement of cultural diversity and distinctiveness.
- The expansion of the public transport system and its interconnection with existing and new developments.
- The wise use of resources, the minimisation of additional land-take and the encouragement of moderate degrees of urban density.
- The safeguarding and interconnection of green spaces and networks working towards quality standards and the conservation of public spaces.
- The assurance of social harmony and the advancement of social and functional interaction.
- The safeguading of existing jobs and the creation of new and innovative ones.
- The advancement of a culture of discourse.
- The creation of long-term partnerships between the community and the public and private sectors.
- The participation in life-long learning processes - seeing urban life in its wider context.
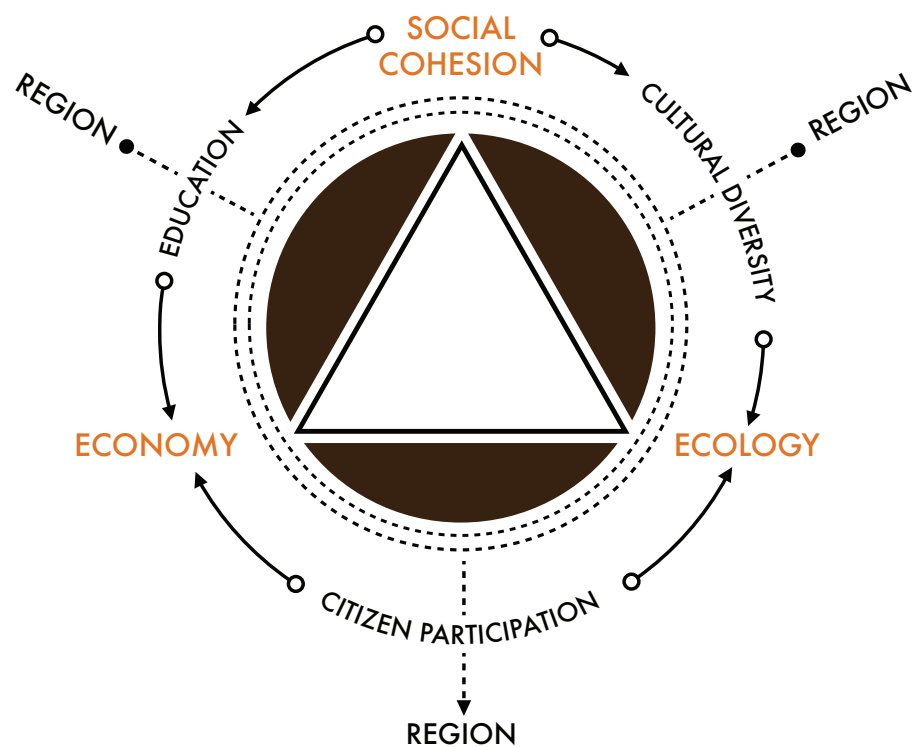
Figure 2.3 – "The Magic Triangle" of urban development

The initial NPF consultation paper recommends moving away from the 'Business as Usual' approach to consider **alternative strategies** to enable improved performance at a national scale which at its core must include the following objectives:

> *Facilitate improvements to people's **quality of life and well-being;***
>
> *Prevent further overdevelopment and sprawl;*
>
> *Encourage population growth closer to where employment is located and is likely to be;*
>
> *Identify and **support employment potential throughout Ireland, including greater regional employment growth;***
>
> *Identify measures to encourage both rural and urban regeneration to address decline;*
>
> *Achieve **effective regional development;***
>
> ***Relieve development pressure** on the Eastern part of the Country whilst protecting the key role played by Dublin;*
>
> ***Ensure good environmental stewardship** by avoiding any further deterioration and addressing existing deficiencies;*
>
> *Reduce carbon emissions;*
>
> *Prioritise the development of infrastructure that can **deliver national benefit** – including renewable energies;*
>
> *Harness the planning system in order to maximise the role it can play in relation to climate change and renewable energy obligations;*
>
> *Manage the planning and development process so that the right development occurs in the most suitable places and at the right time, ensuring sustainability and best use of scarce resources [11].*

The development of a new **Regional City** in the midlands is considered to be aligned closely with the core objectives of the consultation document which seeks to facilitate balanced regional development. At a national level, the development of Athlone as this new **Regional City** will act as the catalyst for economic development and employment generation in the wider midlands, an outcome which actively '***supports employment potential throughout Ireland''*** and can assist in relieving '***development pressure on the Eastern part of the Country'***[12].

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[11] Ireland 2040, Our Plan, Issues and Choices, Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, February 2017
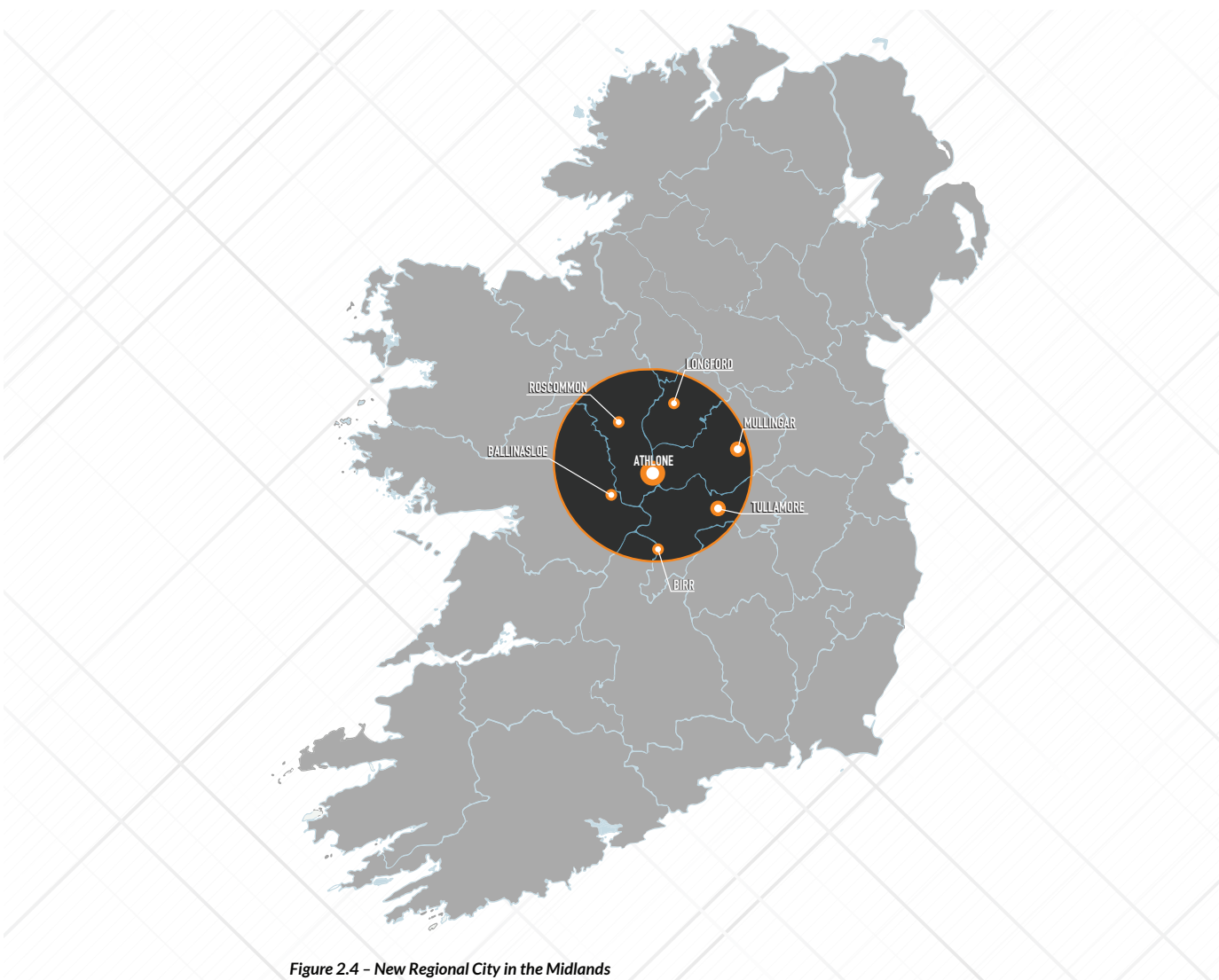
[12] Ibid

Figure 2.4 – New Regional City in the Midlands

Imagining Athlone's role as this new **Regional City** requires that Athlone's contemporary strategic strengths be revisited and framed in the context of the challenges presented in Ireland 2040 – the NPF. For the purposes of this stage of the consultative process, it is proposed to articulate Athlone's inherent strategic, environmental, social and cultural strengths, which are many, while setting out an "agenda", which may inform a "vision" befitting its future as a catalyst for this new **Regional City** in the midlands.

It is also recognised that the process of transformation and evolution, to 2040, will present socio-political, economic and cultural challenges, nationally and at the scale of pivotal urban centres such as Athlone. That being said, at this embryonic stage of a challenging process, it is considered appropriate to set out, albeit at high level, a "beginning" short list of strategic principles, objectives and concepts, which might underpin Athlone's evolution to its position as a catalyst for this new **Regional City**.

The midlands have the capacity to accommodate a substantial quotient of the islands projected population growth between now and 2040. In doing so, it's "receiving environment" will need to adapt, in a manner that offers a presence not only of an exceptional quality of life to potential investors and inhabitants, but critically, a future predicated on a clear long term vision and principles which will under pin its evolution and sustainability. The vision and the process of the "journey" should and can be central to "promoting marketing" and "branding" the midlands and Athlone as its catalyst.

3.0
WHY A NEW REGIONAL CITY

3.1   OVERVIEW

Section 3 of the NPF consultation document acknowledges that there is a view that the NPF will be a Government document comprising policy measures that do not necessarily relate to people's everyday lives within our working, living or community environments. It is highlighted in the consultation document that the adoption of the 'Business as Usual' approach would more than likely cause quality of life and overall societal wellbeing to deteriorate. A number of alternative approaches have been highlighted within the consultation document centring on the **creation of sustainable communities, greater policy integration, the fostering of an improved 'quality of life', improved living environments and plan led development.**

The failure of the Midlands Gateway to deliver balanced regional development has been widely acknowledged and this submission postulates the need to imagine a transformed landscape, where the regions strengths are harnessed to meet and indeed exceed the objectives of the NPF. In doing so, the new **Regional City's** unique attributes would be galvanised and its identity reinforced and promoted. The region's settlements will require engagement in **collaborative** dialogue focused on mutuality of interests and advancement of future NPF objectives.

The midlands, while centred on the Shannon and its tributaries, is a diverse cultural, social and topographic canvas, unfairly portrayed as being part of the flat and featureless midlands, just as Athlone was seen as a place "to pass through" – westwards or eastwards. These perceptions are now hopefully tired "clichés" and recent decades have seen a significant increase in both the promotion of and public engagement with the many attractions the region offers. FDI and indigenousness investment testify to its strengths and the recent investment by Center Parcs in a "forest" tourism destination in Longford is testimony to the untapped tourism potential of the region.

The creation of a new **Regional City** in the midlands in line with the NPF's core principles will create an enhanced living and working environment contributing to the overall health and wellbeing of the region's inhabitants. The following sections look specifically at the region's key driver, **Athlone**. The town is viewed as being **key to regional and national success**[13] and has the all attributes which make it a sought-after place to live (its population profile), work/invest in (labour force, education, FDI) and visit (tourism offer).

3.2   A PLACE TO LIVE IN

The town of Athlone is located on the River Shannon close to the southern shore of Lough Ree, straddling the administrative boundaries of both Westmeath and Roscommon County Council. As of the 2011 Census (2016 census figures yet to be released at settlement level), the town of Athlone had a population of 20,153. This represents an increase of approximately 15% (2,609 people) in the course of 5 years since the 2006 census. This level of growth is considered in part, facilitated and enhanced by the improvements to roads and public transport, including upgrades to the N6/M6 motorways as well as to the Dublin-Galway railway service.

A population projection for 2016 for Athlone has been undertaken by FAC. FAC's projection of population is underpinned by the application of the demographic cohort component methodology; the same methodology as used by the Central Statistics Office in preparing the national projections. Census 2011 data is used as baseline, and therefore, the projection is not as aligned as it could be to Census 2016, due to the required level of data not yet being available. The projection is an indication of broad patterns of change expected in the town, and should be interpreted as such. The projection shows that population in 2016 has again increased by over 4% (or 878 people) to 21,031 in the 5 years since the 2011 census.
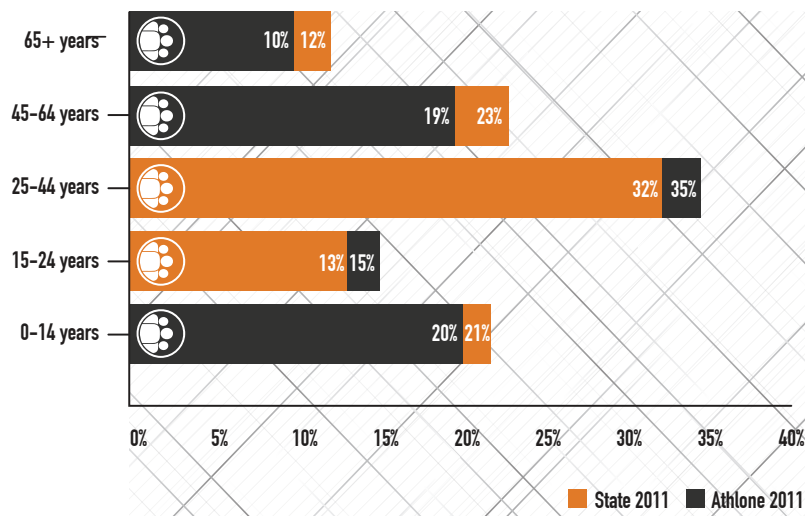

Figure 3.1 – Age profile of Athlone and State

As highlighted in Figure 3.1, proportionally, Athlone's population in the 24-44 years of age categories is higher than the State. The markedly smaller proportion of the population aged 65 years and over and the fact that the population bulges in the aforementioned categories suggests the presence of young, emerging families in Athlone.

Analysis of age dependency illustrates a higher total age dependency (Old Age and Youth Age) in the State in comparison to Athlone (49% and 44% respectively), however, the margin is reduced when assessing the youth age dependency in Athlone in comparison to the State (29% and 32% respectively). This analysis further illustrates the youthful composition of the local population and the need to ensure the provision of employment opportunities in the future, as well as social and community services and facilities.
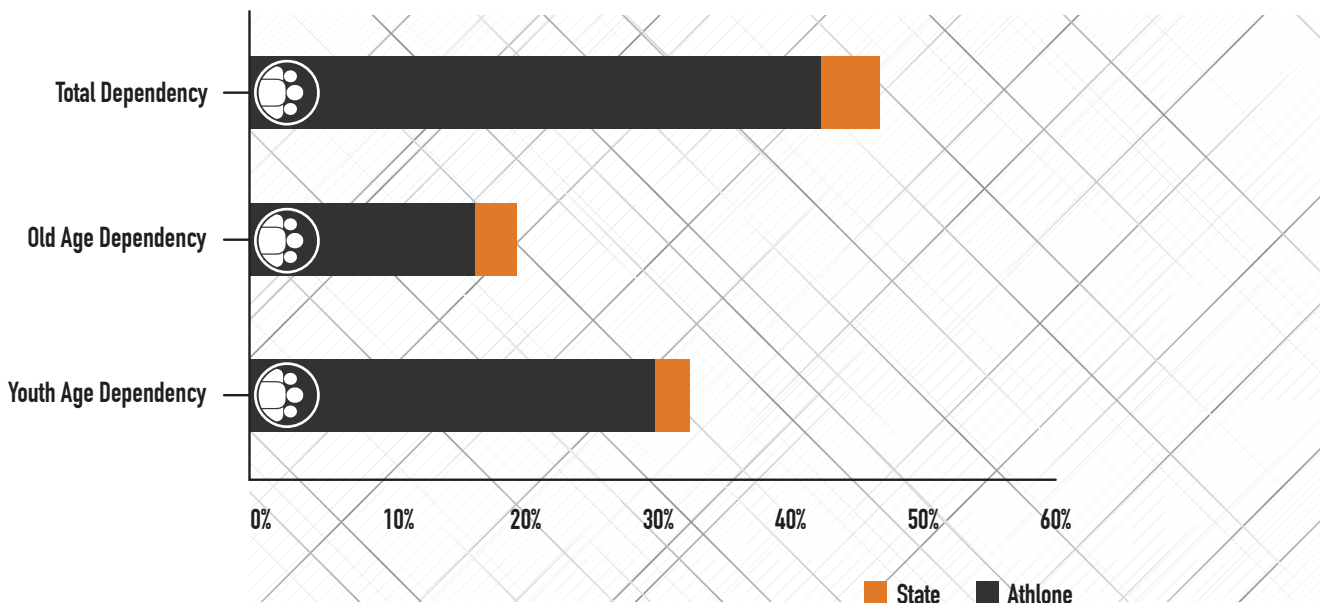

Figure 3.2 – Age dependency of Athlone and the State

Athlone has the largest population in the midland's region. Based on the 2011 census results, the second largest settlement in terms of population is Mullingar followed by Tullamore, Longford Town, Ballinasloe, Roscommon Town Birr.
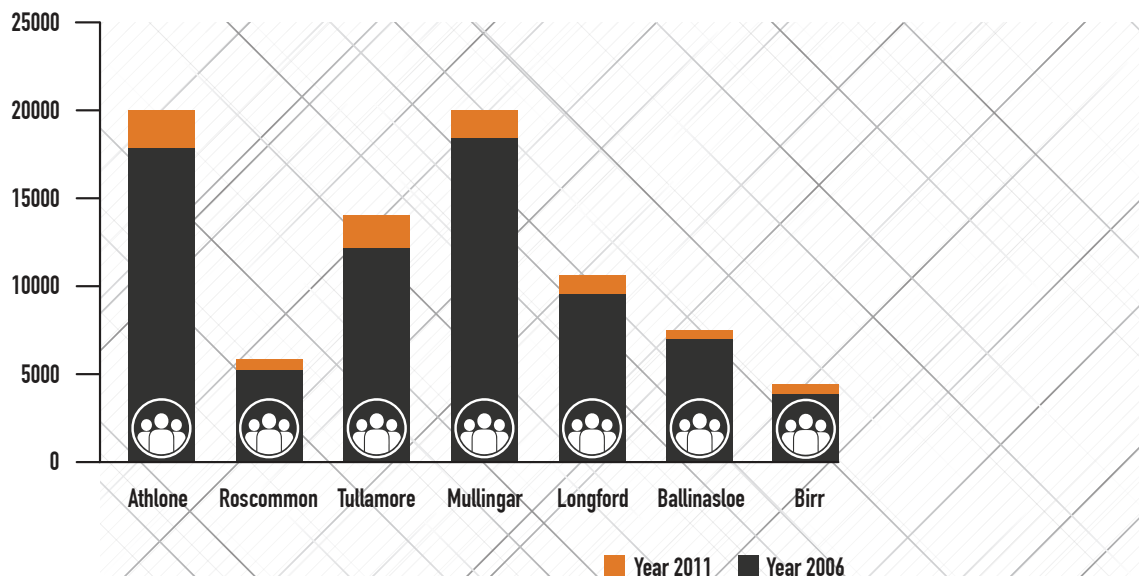
Figure 3.3 – Population profile of principle settlements

To provide a demographic analysis of the region, we have examined the 2016 Census Preliminary Results which have been released at County Level for each of the core counties which are considered to be within the sphere of influence (i.e. Westmeath, Roscommon, Offaly and Longford) of this new **Regional City**.

Figure 3.1 – Pop horizon for the Midlands Region

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
TOTAL	220,363	271,645				320,648	404,896

As identified in Table 3.1 above, each county has experienced varying levels of population growth. The levels of growth ranged from between approximately 20% in Roscommon to a growth rate of 31% in Longford between 2002 and 2016[14]. A similar rate of growth to what was experienced between 2002-2016 has been adopted as a means to provide a conceptual horizon as to how Midlands may develop in the future. This percentage rate of growth has been projected forward for each County year-on-year up until 2040. The projection demonstrates that population of the region has the potential to grow by almost 50% over NPF plan period, exceeding 400,000 people within its direct sphere of influence.

Within the horizon of the NPF period, the Midlands with Athlone as its driver has the potential to have a population base which is within the same sphere as many existing, self-sustaining European cities such Lyon, Toulouse, Hanover, The Hague, Helsinki, Granada, Palma and Lisbon as well as defined 'city regions' such as the **'Triangle Region'** in Denmark. As per the OECD-EC definition, the Midlands has the potential to be classified as a 'large' urban centre[15], and with this comes a need for a strong policy framework to guide how the region develops, ensuring the region is self-sustaining and capable of functioning independently whilst complementing the role of other regions, particularly Dublin in the East.

[14] An intercensal period which includes recorded economic growth and decline.

[15] Cities in Europe, The New OECD-EC Deinition, Regional and Urban Policy, European Commission

In early 2014, the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, in conjunction with Local Authority Planning Departments, carried out a national survey of all lands zoned for residential development in statutory local authority development plans and local area plans across Ireland to determine the location and quantity of lands that may be regarded as being undeveloped and available for residential development purposes as of the 31st March 2014.

On the basis of this information, an assessment of the residential capacity of the lands designated for residential development in the Region has been undertaken. Table 3.2 below provides an overview of the extent of 'Stage 2' lands within each respective county. 'Stage 2' lands are classified as serviced lands with the requisite infrastructure to enable the delivery of housing[16]. Table 3.2 demonstrates that there is sufficient 'Stage 2' land zoned available to accommodate an additional 25,112 units within the Midlands region.

[16] Stage 2: Local Authorities identified from the parcels of land identified in Stage 1 those lands which were potentially available for development in relation to the order or priority or phasing indicated under the relevant Development or Local Area Plan period.

Table 3.2 – Serviced Residential Lands in the New Collaborative City Region. Source: DHPLG, 2016

COUNTY	AREA (HA.)	POTENTIAL NO. OF DWELLINGS
LAOIS	336	5,162
LONGFORD	194	2,955
ROSCOMMON	540	9,041
WESTMEATH	278	7,954
TOTAL	1,348	25,112

Table 3.3 below outlines the potential residential development that the 'Stage 1' lands within the Midlands may accommodate. It should be noted that 'Stage 1' lands are not serviced, consequently the delivery of housing on these sites should be considered as a long-term prospect.

Table 3.3 – 'Stage 1' Lands in the New Collaborative City Region. Source: DHPLG, 2016

COUNTY	AREA (HA.)	POTENTIAL NO. OF DWELLINGS
LAOIS	336	5,162
LONGFORD	696	9,320
ROSCOMMON	779	13,190
WESTMEATH	290	8,077
TOTAL	2,101	35,749

Applying the assumed average household size contained within the County Development Plans of each of the respective counties of Westmeath, Longford, Roscommon and Offaly (2.8, 2.4, 2.5 and 2.56) up to 2040, it is projected that there is a requirement for an additional 51,620 units by the year 2040. This demonstrates that there is currently a sufficient level of 'Stage 1' and 'Stage 2' residential zoned land to accommodate the projected population growth within the midlands region.

Table 3.4 – Projected number of new dwellings based on average household size.

COUNTY	AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD SIZE	INCREASE IN POPULATION 2016 –2040	REQUIRED NO. OF DWELLINGS BY 2040
LONGFORD	2.4	28,636	11,931
OFFALY	2.56	36,410	14,222
ROSCOMMON	2.5	25,868	10,347
WESTMEATH	2.8	42,337	15,120
TOTAL		133,251	51,620

3.3 A PLACE TO WORK/INVEST IN

Athlone's location is also strategic in the context of education and knowledge making it an attractive location for people to work in and companies to invest and do business in. The M4-M6 'knowledge corridor' extends east to west along the motorway and contains a host of top universities, institutes of technology and other higher level educational institutions (Figure 3.4). This affords all industrial sectors with the opportunity to avail of a highly educated and motivated workforce.
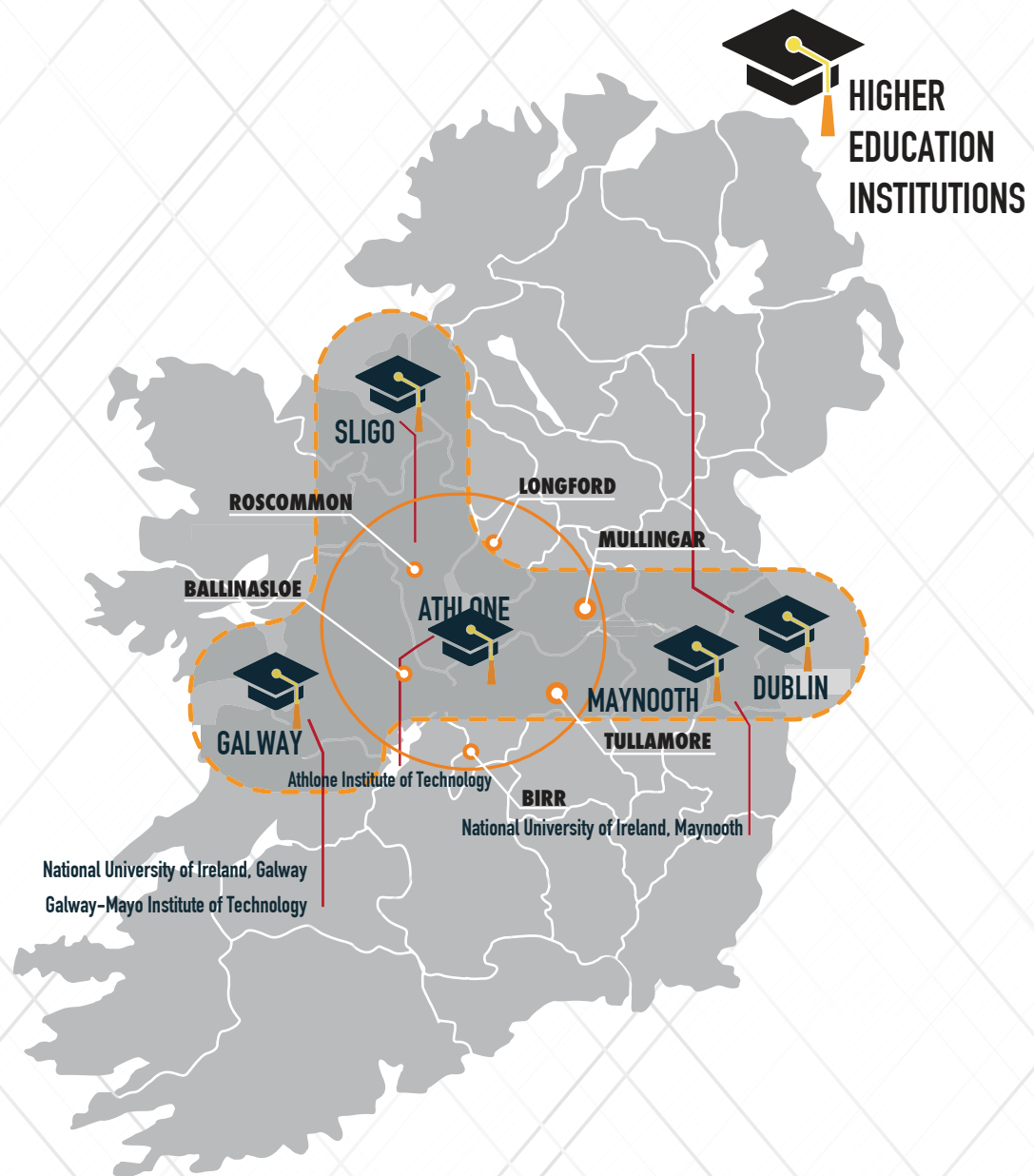

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

SLIGO

ROSCOMMON

LONGFORD

MULLINGAR

BALLINASLOE

ATHLONE

MAYNOOTH

DUBLIN

GALWAY

Athlone Institute of Technology

TULLAMORE

BIRR

National University of Ireland, Maynooth

National University of Ireland, Galway

Galway–Mayo Institute of Technology

Figure 3.4 – Location of the new Regional City in the context of the "Knowledge Corridor"

Located at the centre of the 'knowledge corridor', is the midlands only third level education institution, the Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT). AIT currently has approximately 5,000 students engaged in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes across Business, Humanities, Engineering and Science. This award-winning, cutting-edge institution has three strategic research institutes in Materials (MRI), Biosciences (BRI) and Software (SRI). The Institute also has an Industrial Polymer Solution and Design Centre specialising in the testing and development of chemical and polymeric systems. Analytical laboratories are also made available to local industry for research and development purposes.

There have been significant increases in the demand for higher level education in Ireland in the last few decades. As of the 2014/2015 academic year, the institutions in Figure 3.5 above had total full and part time enrolments in excess of 125,000. This accounts for 59% of the 210,624 third level students (full and part-time) attending institutions funded by the Department of Education and Skills (DES). DES projections indicate that demand for full-time third level education will reach 207,500 by 2029, representing a 20% increase over 14 years. Similar growth has also been recorded in AIT, and in 2015/2016, enrolments have increased by 36% since 2000[17], a trend which is expected to continue with its capacity for future expansion being recognised in the Local Economic Community Plan (LECP) for Westmeath[18]. In addition to AIT, ten primary schools and four secondary schools are located within Athlone and its immediate hinterland as illustrated in Figure 3.5 below.
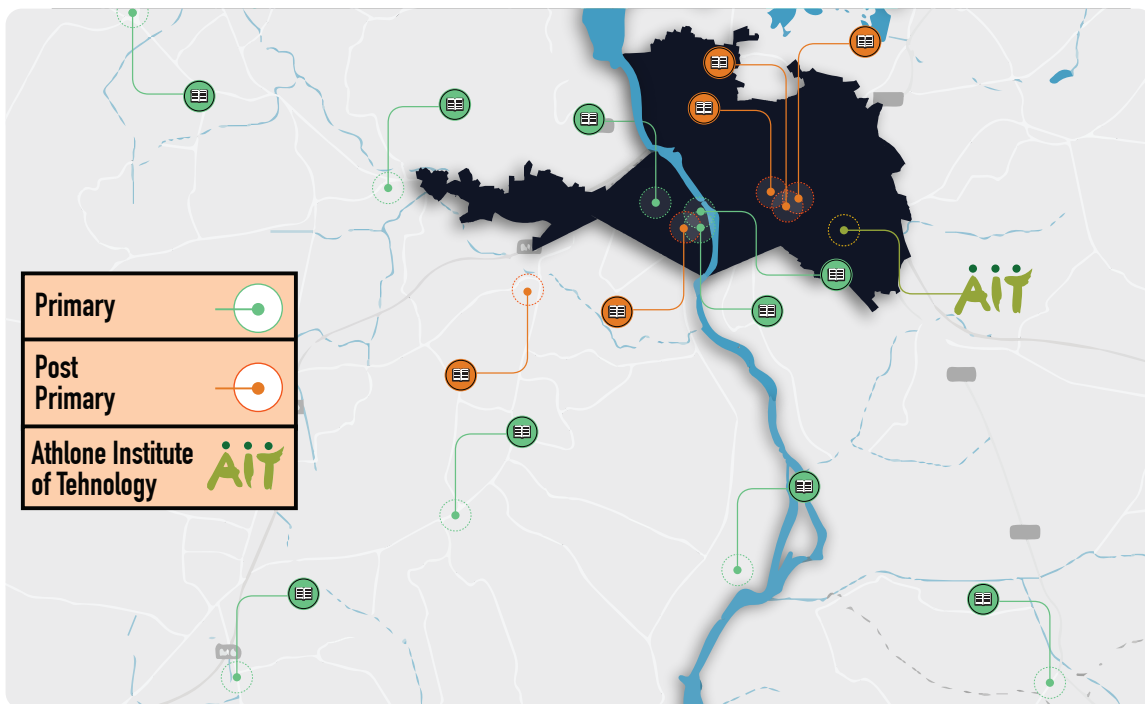

Figure 3.5 – Educational institutions within Athlone

[17] Department of Education and Science (2000) Statistical Report 1999-2000. Department of Education and Skills (2016) Statistical Report 2015-2016
[18] Westmeath, LECP 2016-2021, Westmeath County Council

Figure 3.6 combines the data on educational attainment, illustrating that Athlone has a particularly well-educated population. 30% of those residing in Athlone have completed education of Level 7 (Ordinary Degree) or higher. This compares with 29% for the State. Those with 'No Formal Education' or 'Primary Education' account for only 14% of Athlone's population, versus 15% for the State.
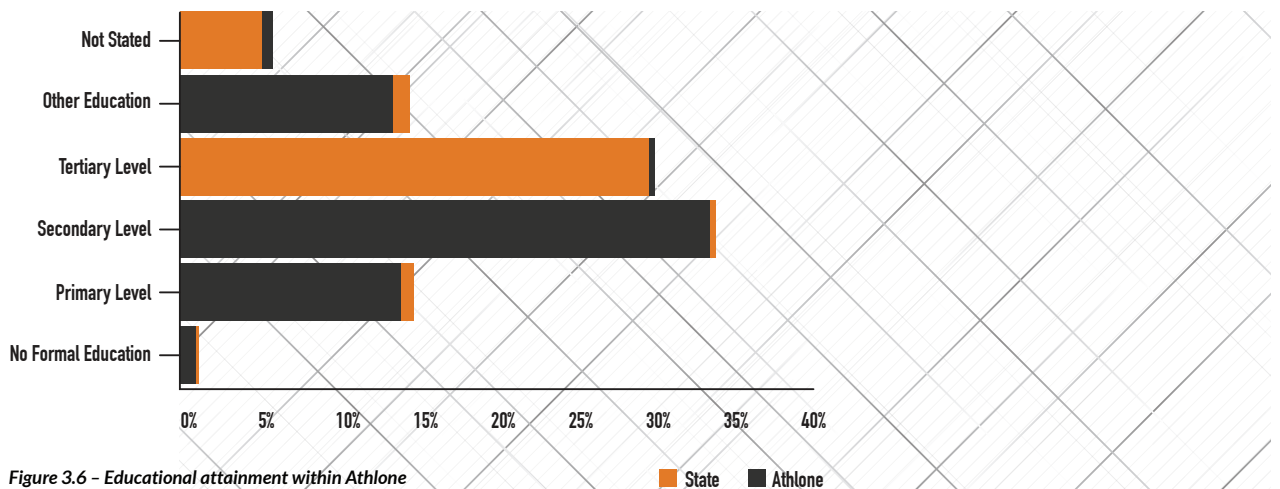

Figure 3.6 – Educational attainment within Athlone

State   Athlone

The well-educated local and national workforces are recognised as having studied in a range of different fields, many of which are those that currently drive the Irish economy. Science, Mathematics and Computing graduates are proportionally more numerous in Athlone (7%) than in the rest of the country (4%). The percentage of those who studied in the fields of engineering, manufacturing and construction (9%) is proportionally consistent with the state figure (9%). Those who studied subjects in the area of services are proportionally more numerous in Athlone. Conversely, there are fewer graduates of social science, business and law in comparison to the rest of the State.
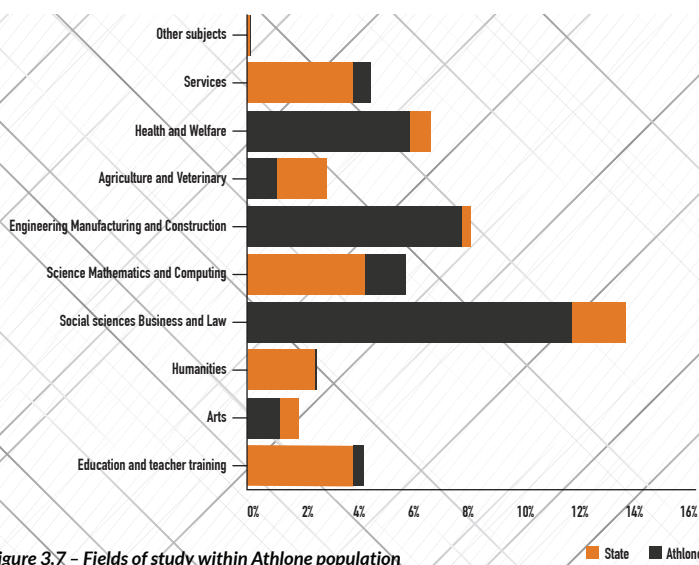

Figure 3.7 – Fields of study within Athlone population

State   Athlone

The 2011 census identified a similar trend in terms of those in Athlone aged 15 years or over who were at work – 48% – compared with 50% for the State (Figure 3.8). Conversely, a greater proportion of the population over 15 years of age in Athlone were 'students' (14%) in comparison to the figures recorded across the state (11%). These 'at work' and 'student' figures reflect the demographic analysis undertaken, indicating a youthful population in Athlone.
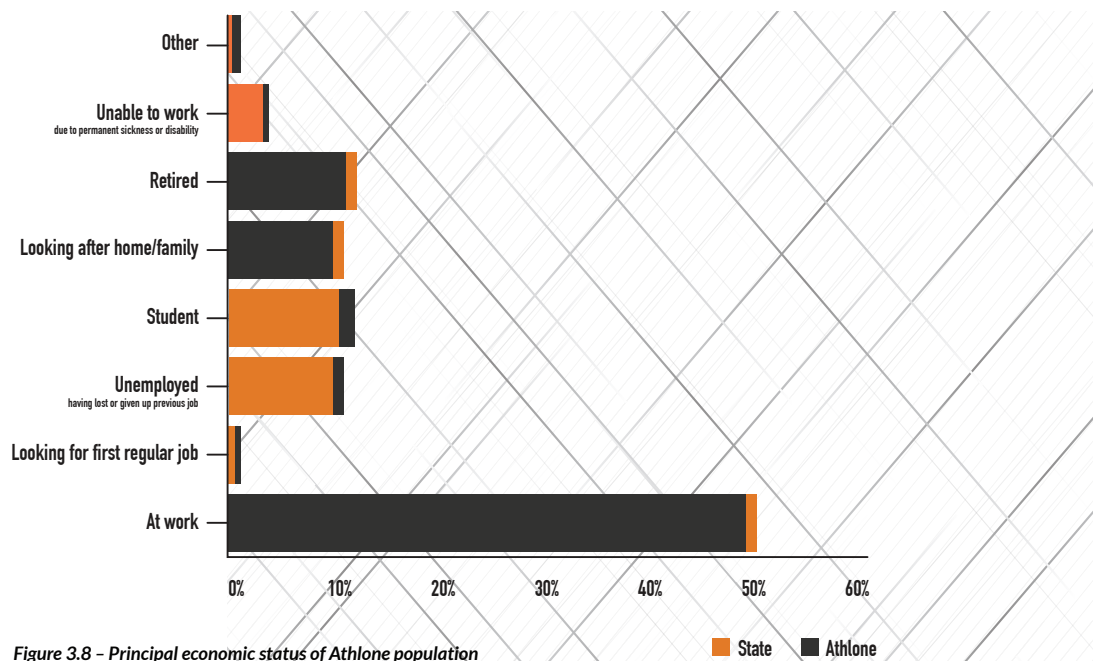
Figure 3.8 – Principal economic status of Athlone population

State ■ Athlone

Analysis of the employment sectors (Figure 3.9) suggests greater proportions of Athlone's population in employment working in the areas of manufacturing (17%), when compared with the State (12%). However, the professional services sector and the commerce and trade sector, accounting for 24% and 25% respectively of those at work, employs proportionally more people across the State than in Athlone. For Athlone and the State, similar proportions of those in employment working in the sectors of 'Building and construction' (3% and 5% respectively) and 'Transport and Communications' (9% and 8% respectively) is evidenced. Less than 1% of Athlone's workforce is employed in agriculture, forestry and fishing, compared with 5% of the population of the State which is reflective of the limited number that undertook education in these areas.

Figure 3.9 – Composition of population by industry

Legend: State, Athlone
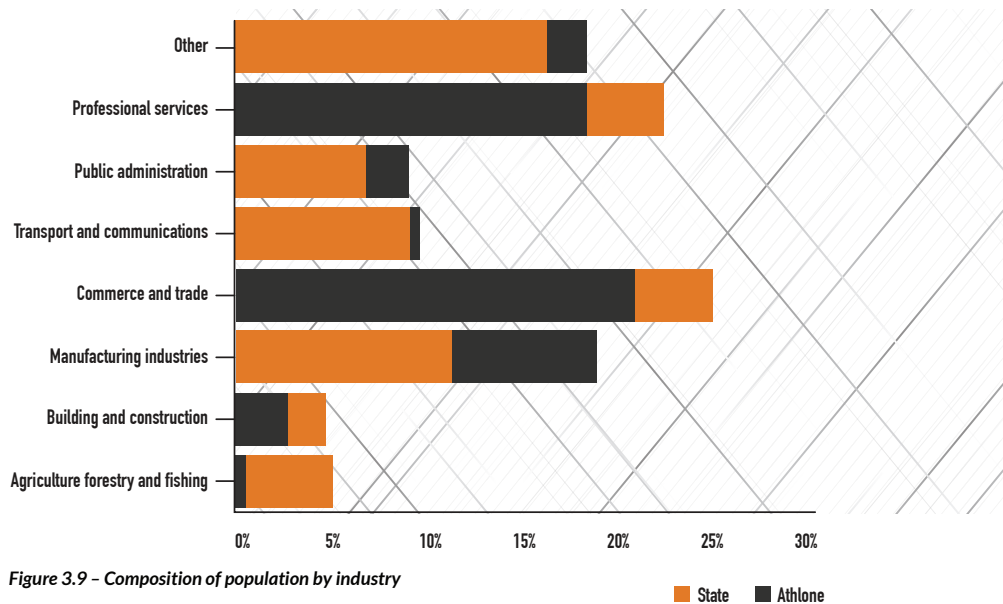
As indicated in the above analysis, a large proportion of Athlone's workforce are employed in the areas of 'manufacturing industries'. IDA Ireland actively promotes the Midlands as a thriving, vibrant region which offers an attractive cluster of Life Science and Business Services companies. Athlone is at the centre of this offer, owing largely to the presence of AIT, its strong talent pool and its strategic location, benefiting from excellent transport infrastructure linkages. Athlone has the largest proportion of IDA international businesses in the Midlands region, playing host to companies such as **Ericsson, Alkermes, Alexion and Telefex Medical** to name a few.

Recent developments in Athlone include the first directly owned, managed and operated manufacturing facility built by **Jazz Pharmaceuticals** which was officially opened in August 2016. Jazz Pharmaceuticals is an international biopharmaceutical company focused on improving patients' lives by identifying, developing and commercializing meaningful products that address unmet medical needs. The company has invested approximately €50 million in its development, which commenced in February 2014 and is expected to employ up to 50 people within three years. **Aerie Pharmaceuticals** has also recently entered into a lease agreement with IDA Ireland to establish a new manufacturing plant in the recently constructed 2,650m² IDA Advanced Technology Building in Athlone. The Athlone facility will house Aerie's first manufacturing plant and the estimated project-wide construction and equipment costs are expected to total approximately €25 million (excluding ongoing labor-related and lease expenses). Aerie has commenced its design plan for the facility and expects to begin internal construction in early 2017. The company will initially create up to 50 new jobs in sterile manufacturing, quality, engineering and other support capabilities.

The geographic spread of the IDA international businesses located in Athlone is illustrated in Figure 3.10 below. It is considered that the presence of AIT will afford any incoming enterprises with the opportunity to develop strong links with this educational institution and to take advantage of a well-educated workforce. The development of 'industry-education' synergies has the potential to enhance the research practices, development and innovation of all parties.
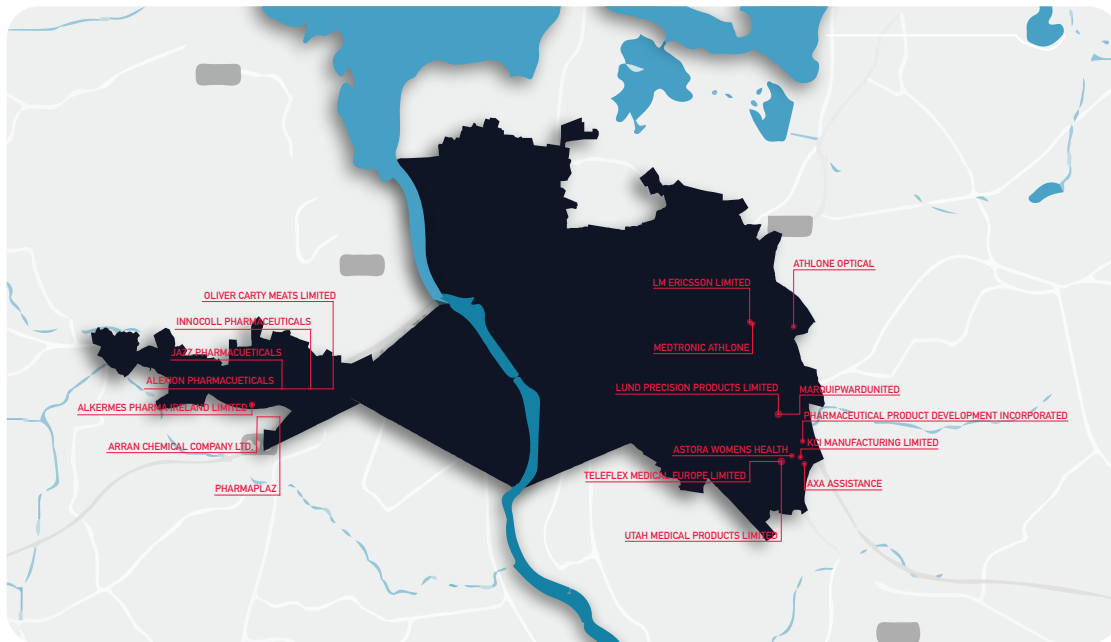

Figure 3.10 – Location of IDA businesses within Athlone

Athlone and the midlands can learn from successful international case studies which have been built on collaboration between industry and education. This will ensure the benefits of enhanced collaboration between stakeholders is not only centred on Athlone, but is spread evenly across the entire region. Once such example is the Eindhoven region in the Southeast Netherlands. This region is one of Europe's most innovative high tech centres promoted under the brand 'Brainport'. Brainport began as a collaborative initiative between government, industry, research and educational institutes who came together to transform an ailing local economy into an international high tech hotspot. Collaborative partnerships based on mutual trust is central to the success of the Brainport region with knowledge sharing and open innovation an inherent feature of the way the high-quality manufacturing organisations and entrepreneurs located in the area do business. The region fosters strong local partnerships in fields such as mechatronics, robotics and advanced materials, but is also hugely successfully in forming alliances between sectors and economic regions throughout the world. It was recently awarded the accolade of the 'World's Most Intelligent Community' by Intelligent Community Forum.
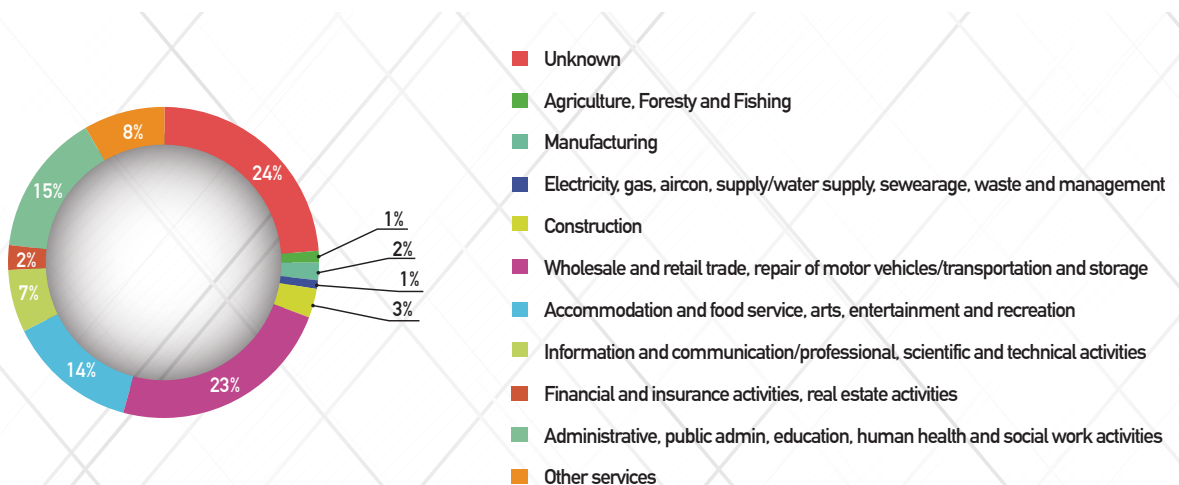
Another case study of relevance is the city of Tampere. A city located an hour and half from Helsinki in southern Finland, has successfully brought together research, business and health expertise to position itself as a globally important life science cluster. The life science cluster specialises in medicine, biomedical devices and health services. With active collaboration between all players, a diverse company base has established in the region supported by modern innovation platforms, linked service providers and cross disciplinary cooperation between students, engineers, biologists and medical specialists. The Tampere region is now the second largest growth centre in Finland with its low cost of living and comparatively low wage costs continuing to attract job seekers and investors to the region. Most recently, Tampere has focused on channeling its skills in traditional manufacturing and telecoms to take advantage of growth in sectors like gaming and the rise of Intelligent Machines.

The town of Athlone currently has 878 businesses operating within its settlement boundary, including the lands within the administrative areas of both Westmeath and Roscommon County Council. The largest proportion of businesses (i.e. 23%) are in the areas of wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles/transportation and storage. This is followed by businesses in the fields of administrative, public admin, education, human health and social work activities at 15% and Accommodation and food service, arts, entertainment and recreation at 14%. The geographic spread of these businesses is illustrated in Figure 3.11.

- Unknown
- Agriculture, Foresty and Fishing
- Manufacturing
- Electricity, gas, aircon, supply/water supply, sewearage, waste and management
- Construction
- Wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles/transportation and storage
- Accommodation and food service, arts, entertainment and recreation
- Information and communication/professional, scientific and technical activities
- Financial and insurance activities, real estate activities
- Administrative, public admin, education, human health and social work activities
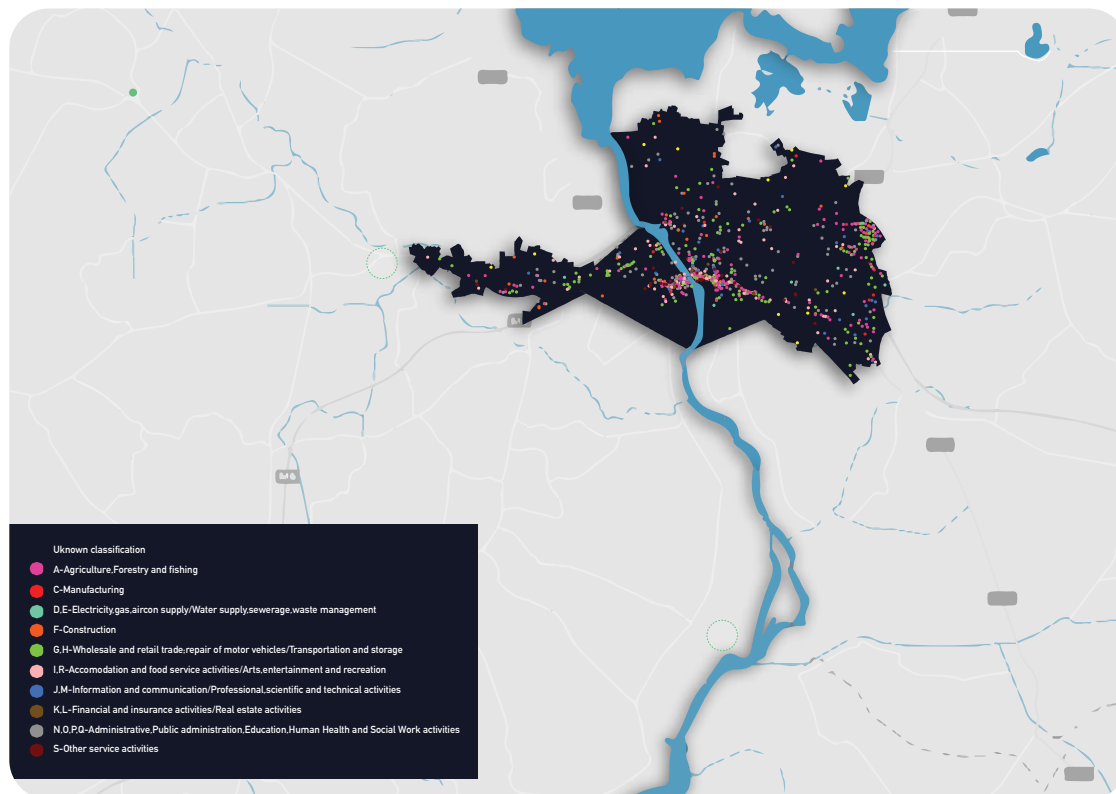- Other services

Figure 3.11 – NACE coded businesses within Athlone (Source: Geodirectory, 2016)

3.5   A PLACE TO VISIT

As the Irish and global economies recover, tourism is becoming an increasingly important part of the Irish economy, backed by substantial promotion by the government[19]. In 2013, overseas tourism accounted for €3.3 billion in earnings for Ireland's economy, increasing to €3.6 billion in 2014[20], and that number is expected to continue to grow in the future as more and more tourists arrive[21].

On a national level, key tourism goals of the Government to be achieved by 2025, include reaching 10 million visits to Ireland annually, increasing revenue from overseas visitors to €5 billion and increasing employment in the tourism sector to 250,000. The Government's **People, Place and Policy, Growing Tourism to 2025** published in 2015 sets out a number of core strategies and policies to achieve this aim and highlights the market segments which are of most importance to the country, i.e. the **Culturally Curious, Great Escapers and the Social Energisers** . A core objective of the strategy was to establish a Tourism Leadership Group (TLG) to oversee the formulation of a **Tourism Action Plan** to implement the policy goals set out in this document. Published in January 2016, the Action Plan, included a total of 23 actions to be addressed within the plan period, aimed at securing continued growth in overseas tourism revenue and employment. The actions address a range of key issues, including the marketing of Ireland as a visitor destination overseas, visitor access to and within Ireland, the effective presentation of Irish culture, sport, and events to visitors, the role of Local Authorities in supporting tourism, visitor accommodation capacity, and skills development in the tourism sector.

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[19] Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, "People, Place and Policy: Growing Tourism to 2025."

[20] Fáilte Ireland (2016) "Regional Tourism Performance in 2014."

[21] CSO (2016), in "Latest CSO Travel Figures Published," Fáilte Ireland, http://www.failteireland.ie/Utility/News-Features/News-Library/Latest-CSO-Travel-Figures-Published.aspx

In Ireland as a whole, the power of tourism to create jobs is estimated as follows:

> *Every €1m of tourist expenditure helps to support 34 tourism jobs.*
> *Every 63 international tourists help support one tourism job.*
> *1,000 additional tourists support 15 jobs in the tourism industry.*

Ireland's tourism sector recent return to growth has been aided by a number of key factors. These factors include the return to overall economic growth in the country, growth in key overseas tourism markets as well as trends in exchange rate movements and inflation that have enhanced price competitiveness. In quantifying the growth in Ireland's tourism sector, the most significant growth has been recorded since 2012. Between 2012 and 2015, the total number of overseas tourist has increased by 1,750,000 visitors, representing a 27% increase on the 2012 figures. In terms of domestic trips, strong growth has also been recorded, with an increase of 834,000 visitors between 2012 and 2015, representing a growth rate of approximately 10% over that period.

Table 3.6 – Tourism numbers 2012–2015 (Souce: Fáilte Ireland)

NUMBERS (00s)	2012	2013	2014	2015
TOTAL OVERSEAS	6,286	6,686	7,105	8,036
DOMESTIC TRIPS	8,291	8,413	8,991	9,125

Tourism in Athlone has been given a welcome boost in recent years. In November 2012, Athlone Castle was re-opened with a new visitor centre following a multi-million euro renovation to transform the castle into a state-of-the-art, multi-sensory visitor experience. Also in 2012, the Luan Gallery opened following the development of a new contemporary art gallery on the banks of the River Shannon at the old Father Matthew Hall. The gallery was the first purpose-built, modern visual art gallery located in the Midlands and won 'The Best Cultural Building in Ireland' RIAI Award 2013 and the coveted 'Civic Choice' Architecture Award 2014. This dedicated art space overlooks the River Shannon adjacent to the town's historic bridge, the Athlone Castle Visitor Centre and the Catholic Church of St. Peter and St. Paul .

Athlone and County Westmeath is currently marketed on the international stage as part of the Ireland's Ancient East (IAE) proposition. The objectives of the IAE 'Brand Strategy' are to:

> *Move Ireland's Ancient East from a transit zone to a touring zone;*
> *Grow International Visitor Numbers;*
> *Grow International Revenue;*
> *Disperse visitor traffic across the area by encouraging exploration of signature and lesser known sites and stories; and,*
> *Demonstrate thought leadership on the brand.*

IAE is described as a "touring region" as opposed to a route. Unlike the Wild Atlantic Way, which has a set beginning, end and length, IAE initiative presents as a geographical area that visitors' are invited to explore at their own pace and in their own way. The focus is very much on built heritage, with 5,000 years of history ranging from passage tombs to Palladian mansions and castles. Tours, walks, festivals and events will be encouraged to tie-in and interact with the brand.

A policy document relevant to Athlone's tourism offer is the recently published *Westmeath Tourism Strategy 2016 – 2020*. This has been designed to deliver one common goal for 2020 and beyond – to develop the county as a first-choice high quality destination that provides an authentic and memorable holiday experience. The strategy proposes to develop three principal propositions that shall essentially serve as sub-products to Fáilte Ireland's primary proposition for the region – IAE. At the heart of the strategy is a focus on Athlone, and the proposition *'Destination Athlone'*. The strategy acknowledges that the tourism offering in Athlone has been, and continues to be successfully supported and promoted by the group **'Destination Athlone'** - focusing on Athlone being at the very heart of Ireland offering a wealth of quality experiences for both domestic and international visitors.

Athlone has also been identified in the tourism strategy as being a potential hub for recreational, sports and activity tourism and will form a core component of the Galway Dublin Greenway and the Shannon Blueway.

An international comparator for a successful blue and greenway development which Athlone can take inspiration from is the Austrian city of Graz. Graz is a leader in the successful development and promotion of green infrastructure. Around 40% of the city is comprised of green spaces which are linked together to form an extensive recreational network with widespread ecological and societal benefits. The network comprises playgrounds and parks weaving between residential areas and connecting urban districts with a direct link to the countryside. The green network model has played an important role in increasing land and property values and has also brought hugely positive economic benefits in supporting Graz as a tourism destination.

Athlone was awarded the European Town of Sport for 2013 by ACES Europe, the Federation for the Association of the European Capitals and Cities of Sport and it is considered that Athlone can serve as a hub, not only due to the uniqueness of location, but due to the continued success of national events such as the Tri-Athlone and Community Games. Furthermore, the sporting and recreation theme is supported by the existing sporting infrastructure including the Regional Sports Centre, the
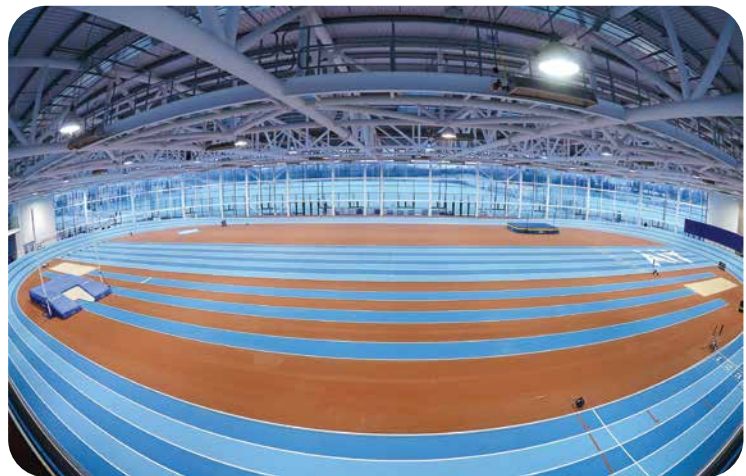
Athlone Institute of Technology €10 million International Sports Arena facility, Athlone Boating Club, the Buccaneers Rugby Club and Athlone FC which have both hosted international games, in addition to the assets of the National Cycle Network and the River Shannon.

The Tourism Strategy places a significant emphasis on 'brand development' which is considered as a critical long-term investment which will aid the target customer to easily identify who you are and what you do. A key recommendation of the strategy is that the '**Athlone at the heart of it**' branding is supported to make it recognisable and to promote Athlone in the Shannon Region. The 'at the heart of it' concept is proposed to extend countywide in conjunction with Ireland's Ancient East which will act to further bolster the local and regional tourism economy.

Athlone's role as a tourism hub will be actively supported and bolstered through other Local Authority driven tourism initiatives across the midlands. One such example is Longford County Council's **Mid Shannon Wilderness Park**. The project has a wide ranging scope, with the potential to benefit visitors to the area, local communities, schools as well as improving the tourism attractions of Longford and the wider midlands including Athlone. The initiative will combine existing natural amenity areas including Lough Ree, the Rivers Shannon, Inny and Camlin, the Royal Canal, Newcastle Wood and other forests and the future rehabilitated Bord na Móna bogs. All of which are in very close proximity to each other and can be developed and combined to create the Wilderness Park. The principles of Ecotourism providing for a destination with a set of standards based on sound environmental practices highlighting all that the region and its people has to offer will guide the development of the project.

4.0
ROLE OF ATHLONE AS THE NEW REGIONAL CITY

4.1   OVERVIEW

As outlined in the foregoing sections, Athlone as the new **Regional City** is positioned to act as the driver of economic development and employment generation within the region, given its existing population base, its strategic location and its extensive knowledge pool. All of which, contribute to making the region and Athlone a sought-after place to live, work/invest in and visit. The development of this new **Regional City**, has the potential to deliver several of the core objectives outlined in the NPF consultation document including, achieving '**effective regional development**', supporting '**employment potential throughout Ireland**'' and assisting in relieving '**development pressure on the Eastern part of the Country**'[22]. The following sections outline how Athlone, as a new **Regional City** is positioned to not only to act as catalyst for growth in the region, but has the potential to support the role of other designated regions due to its strategic positioning.

4.2   INFRASTRUCTURE AND ACCESSIBILITY

One of the key assets which will enable Athlone to act as a driver of growth within the wider region is the settlement's excellent access to high quality transport infrastructure. In terms of road connectivity, Athlone sits at the centre of an interconnected road network. The town is served by several strategic national routes namely the M6 (linking Dublin to Galway), N55 (linking Athlone to Cavan), N61 (linking Athlone, Roscommon, Tulsk, and Boyle) and the N62 (linking towns in Westmeath, Offaly and Tipperary). Significant upgrades have been undertaken to many of these routes including the M6, placing Athlone within a 1 hour driving distance of Dublin and within 50 minutes of Galway City. Continued state investment in road infrastructure in the midlands is key to to sustaining competiveness and enabling the development of this new **Regional City**.
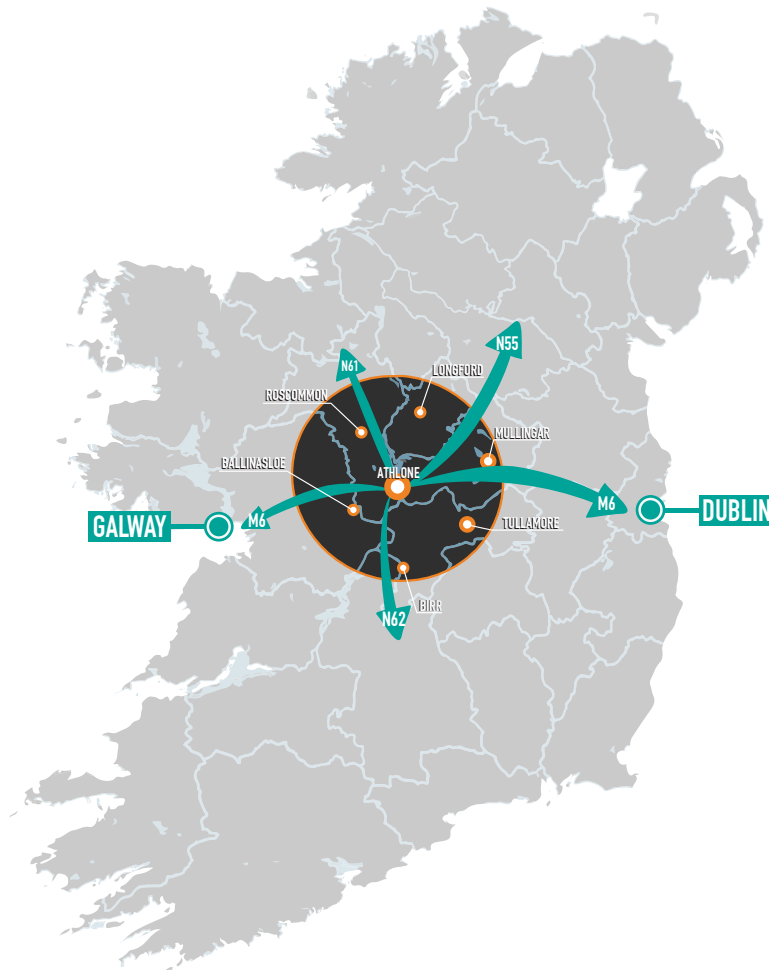

Figure 4.1 – Regional City road infrastructure

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[22] Ireland 2040, Our Plan, Issues and Choices Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, February 2017
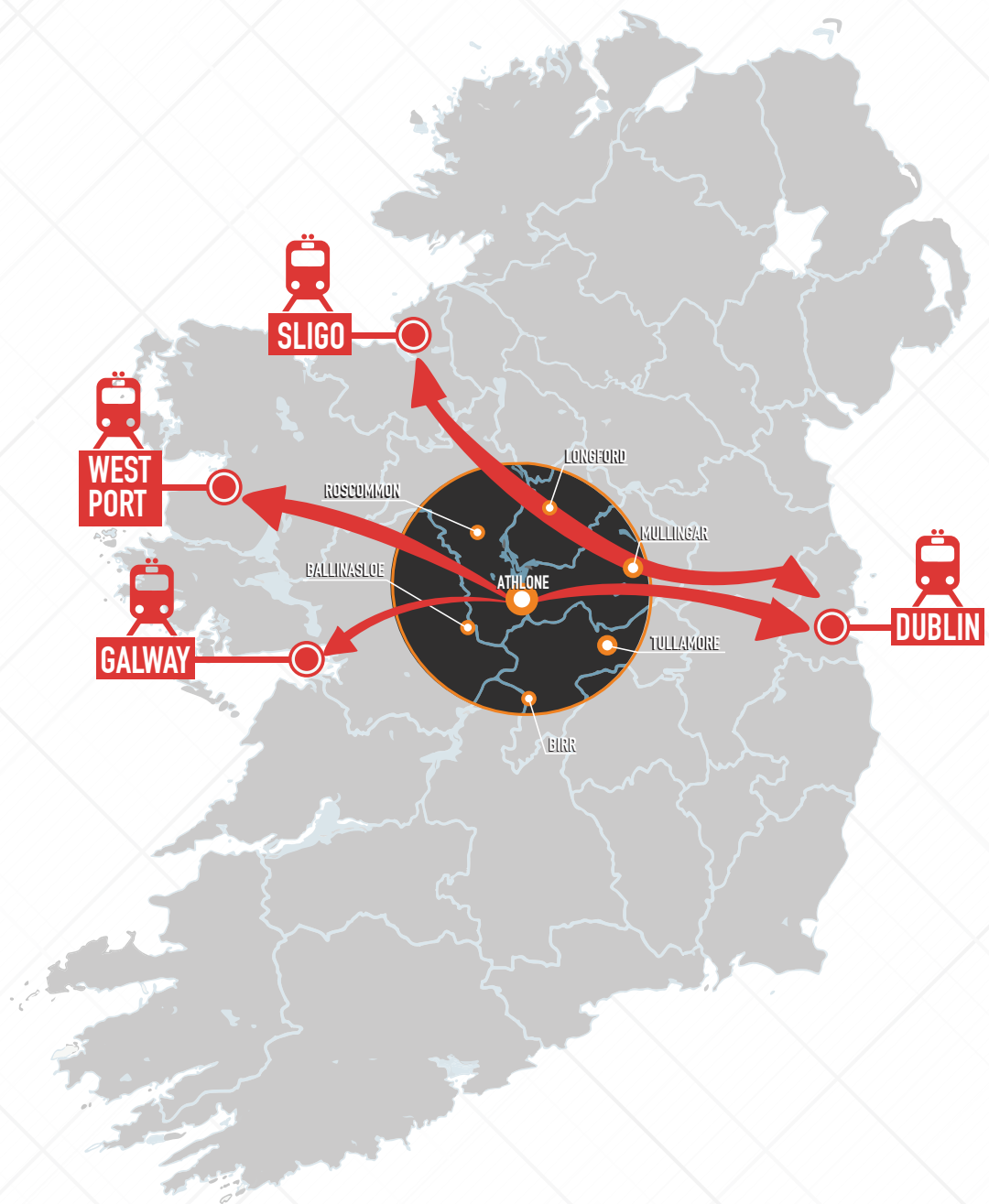
Figure 4.2 – Regional City rail infrastructure

In addition to excellent road connectivity, Athlone is positioned on the Galway/Dublin/Westport rail line, providing commuter, intercity and inter regional services with a total of 29 daily rail connections. An objective of strategic importance to Westmeath County Council is the reinstatement of the disused rail link between Athlone and Mullingar. Although this is classified as a long term objective by the Local Authority, the potential enhancement of this network to provide greater connection to the west and north of the country (Dublin/Sligo rail line) will only bolster the potential of this new **Regional City** to act as a driver of growth within the midlands.

Athlone's central location means that it also has access to Ireland's main international airports. Dublin, Shannon and Knock Airport are all located within a 70 minutes driving distance of Athlone. This is of particular importance to the many international businesses which rely on convenience of access, many of which are currently based in Athlone as illustrated in Section 3 of this submission.
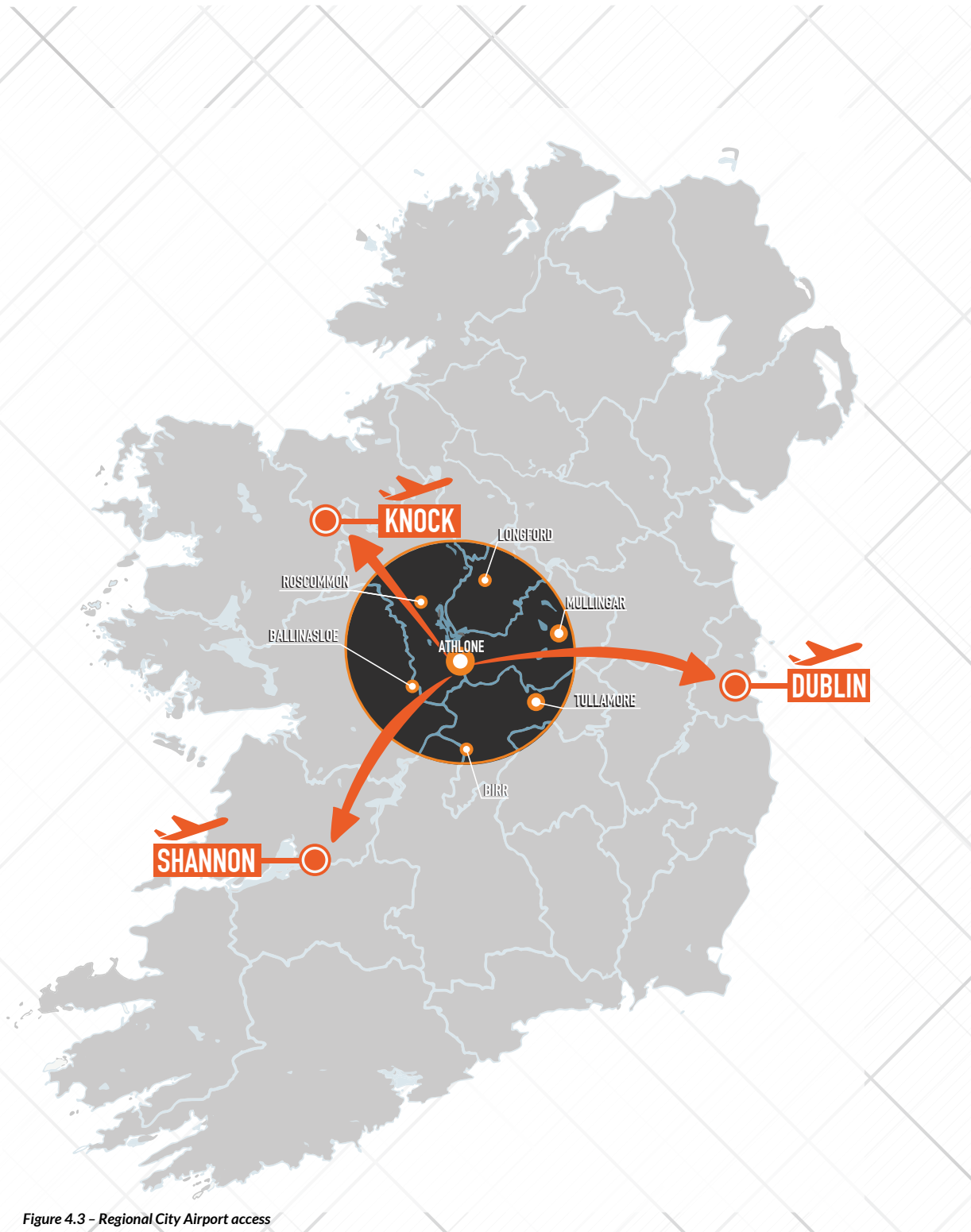

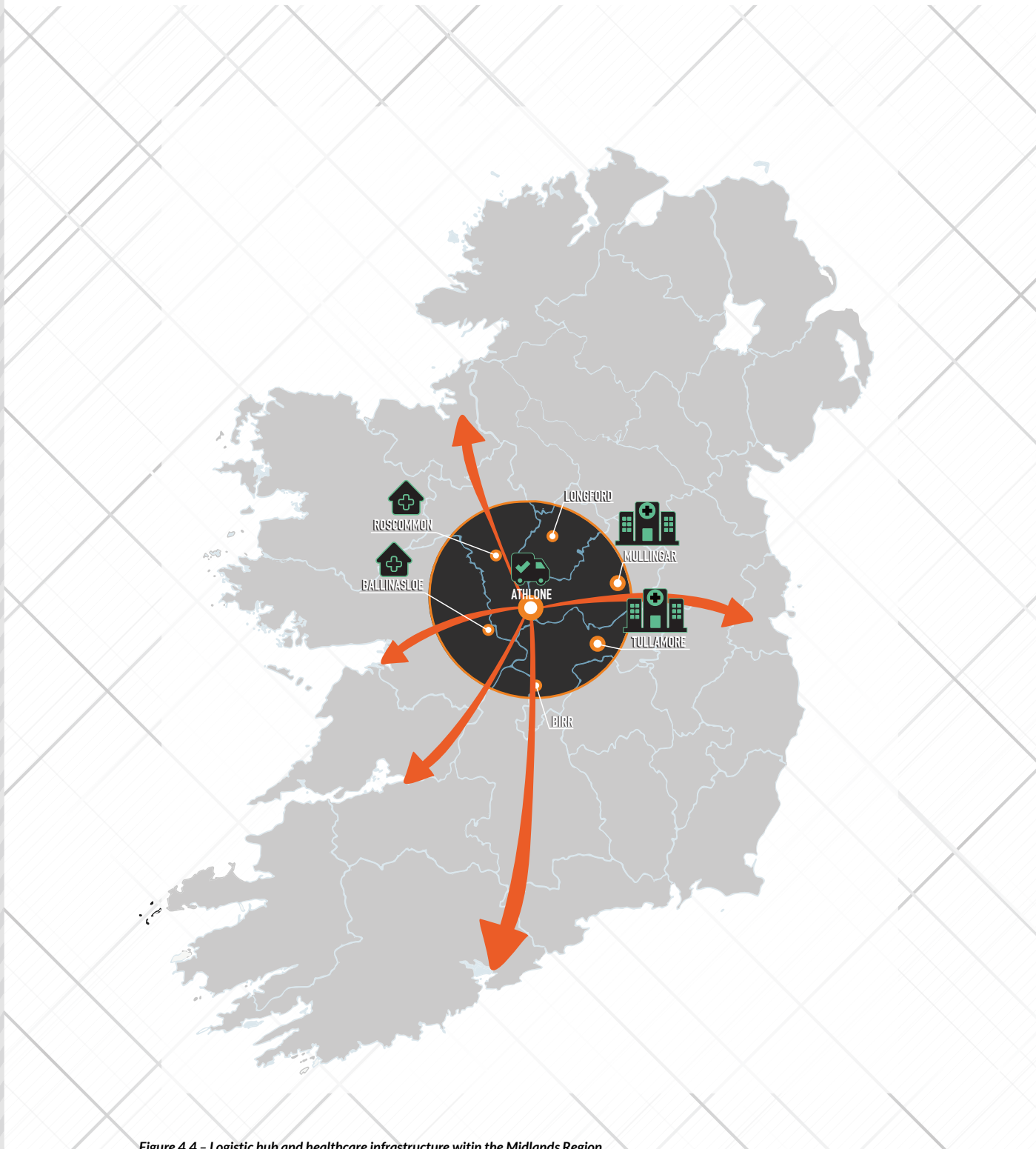*Figure 4.3 – Regional City Airport access*

Figure 4.4 – Logistic hub and healthcare infrastructure witin the Midlands Region

Strong healthcare infrastructure is often viewed as the bedrock of health care systems and analysis has showed that strong primary care has been associated with better population health; lower rates of unnecessary hospital-isations; and relatively lower socioeconomic inequality, as measured by an indicator linking education levels to self-rated health[23]. Strong healthcare infrastructure is a fundamental facet of a self-sustaining city and this new Regional City has a number of hospitals located within its direct sphere of influence including the Mullingar Midland Regional Hospital, the Tullamore Midland Regional Hospital, the Roscommon County Hospital and the Portiuncula Hospital Ballinasloe.

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[23] Europe's Strong Primary Care Systems Are Linked To Better Population Health But Also To Higher Health Spending, Kringos, Boerma, van der Zee, Groenewegen, 2012

Athlone as a **Regional City**, can also be viewed as a logistics hub given its strategic positioning within the heart of the country. Athlone is located within easy access of an extensive catchment due to its high-quality road infrastructure and is viewed a connector to other regions and cities in the south, west, north and east of the country. Athlone is home to one of four of 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).

The provision of an efficient broadband service is recognised as being critical to enable the development of a knowledge based economy. Major advancements have taken place within the telecommunications sector over the last two decades in Athlone, in particular the development of the Metropolitan Area Network (MAN) for broadband communication. The (MAN) in Athlone covers 21.7km and has enabled telecommunications companies to provide affordable 'always-on' high-speed access to the Internet and a range of telephony and data communications services which have been vital tools to allow industry, business and government to be efficient and competitive.

The MAN Infrastructure has been built using the latest fibre optic technology and has been designed in interconnected fibre rings, reducing the risk of service interruption common to other networks. The Athlone MAN Infrastructure is owned by Westmeath County Council and under the management of Enet. In addition to the MAN, the town is served by other broadband services, including mobile 4G broadband from the main carriers, DSL Broadband from up to six providers and wireless broadband from 3 providers[24].
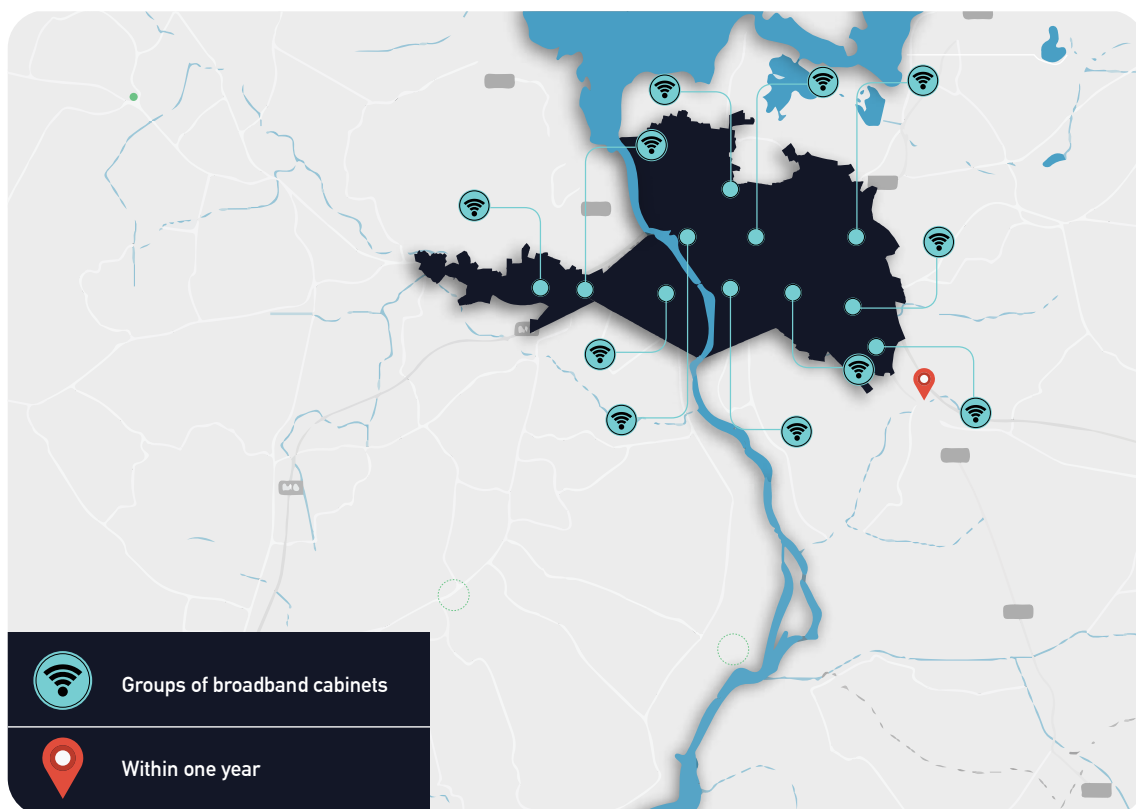

Figure 4.5 – Broadband connectivity within Athlone

[24] Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020, Westmeath County Council

4.2 ROLE AND FUNCTION OF THE NEW REGIONAL CITY IN THE CONTEXT OF OTHER REGIONS AND THE STATE

The formulation of a new **Regional City** in the Midlands will create a new distinct region where boundaries are blurred, where borders are crossed and where collaboration is fundamental to its success. As illustrated below, the new **Regional City's** direct sphere of influence will extend across the administrative boundaries of both the Northern and Western Region Assembly Area and the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly Area. It addition, the region will have a direct influence on both the West Strategic Planning Area (SPA) and the Midland SPA.

It is acknowledged that the potential for the development of economic activity at the regional level must be driven by advantages derived from exchange of information, collaboration, innovation, adoption of best practices and mobilisation of finance and skills. Given the direct linkages of the **Regional City's** sphere of influence with multiple Regional Assembly areas, it is fundamental that the NPF places a specific focus on strategies and mechanisms that will result in the formulation of effective Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES) which place the concept of collaboration at the fore. The RSES will provide a long-term regional level strategic planning and economic framework for each Regional Assembly area in support of the implementation of the NPF and will be key to ensuring how the Midlands region develops over the medium to long-term. It is therefore, fundamental that the NPF has specific regard to the facilitation of mechanisms that will enable inter region collaboration.
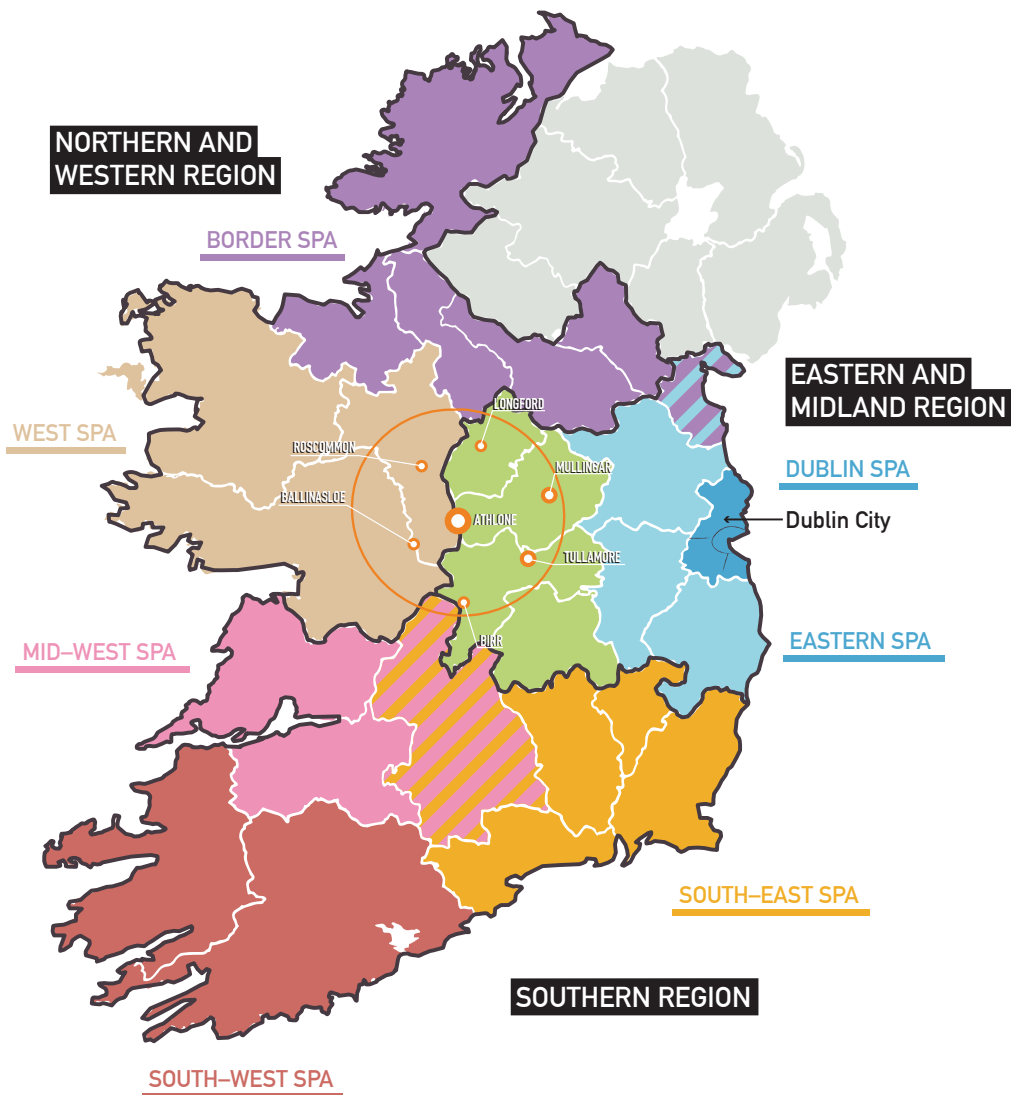

Figure 4.6 – Regional City in the context of the Regional Assembly areas

This **Regional City's** sphere of influence in fact extends well beyond the boundaries of its main settlements, largely owing to its excellent connectivity with the rest of the country, particularly its road and rail connectivity. In terms of national commuting patterns, as of the 2011 Census, 2.7m people had been recorded as commuting to either work, school or college daily. Of these working commuters, 69% travelled to work by car. The average time spent travelling to work in 2011 was 26.6 minutes, a decrease from 27.5 minutes recorded in 2006 and 26.8 minutes in 2002. In total 152,465 people travelled for 60 minutes or more to their place of work.

CSO research has shown that a greater proportion of workers living in counties that are within commuting distance of Dublin tended to take longer to arrive at their place of employment. As shown in Figure 4.7, more than one in seven commuters residing in Fingal, Laois, Westmeath, Meath, Kildare and Wicklow had travel times of an hour or longer to their job. Over 6 per cent of persons at work who resided in Laois spent 90 minutes or more commuting, the highest share of any county, while 5 per cent of workers living in Longford, Cavan and Offaly had daily commuting times of more than an hour and a half travelling to their place of employment[25].
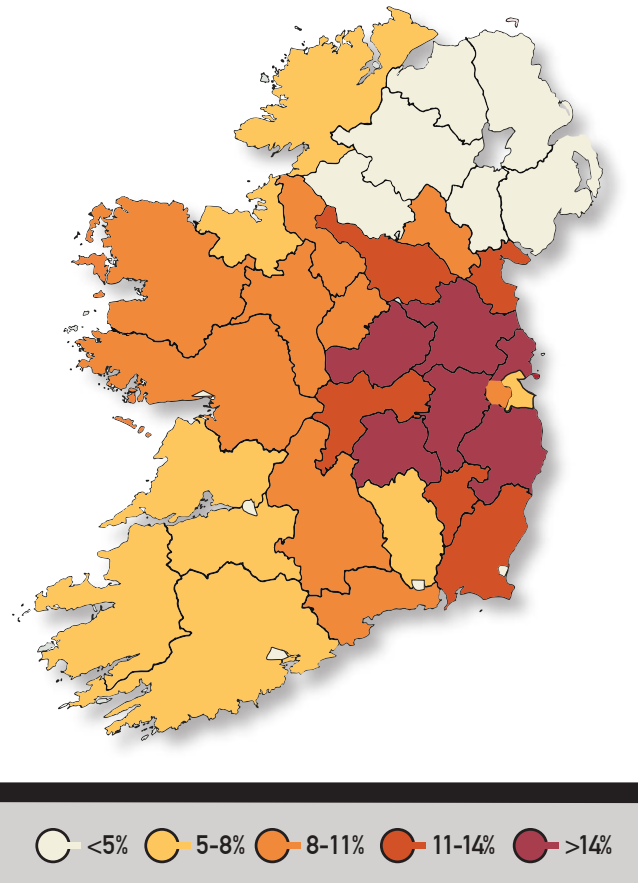

Figure 4.7 – Commuting patterns in Ireland (CSO, 2011)

Figure 4.8 – Drive time catchment analysis

The development of Athlone as a new **Regional City** has the potential to greatly alter the commuting pattern of people within its catchment, resulting in reduced commuting times, an outcome which has been strongly linked to societal benefits such as an improved overall quality of life[26]. With Athlone as the driver of growth within the midlands, opportunities for education and employment will be enhanced within the region, thereby bolstering its retention power for residents who would typically migrate to Dublin and other established cities for employment and education purposes. A drive time catchment analysis has been undertaken which illustrates the geographical extent of the country that falls within a 30 minute, 45 minute and 1 hour driving distance of Athlone. As illustrated in Figure 4.8, the 1 hour catchment is extensive and encompasses lands as far as Maynooth in the east and Galway City in the west.
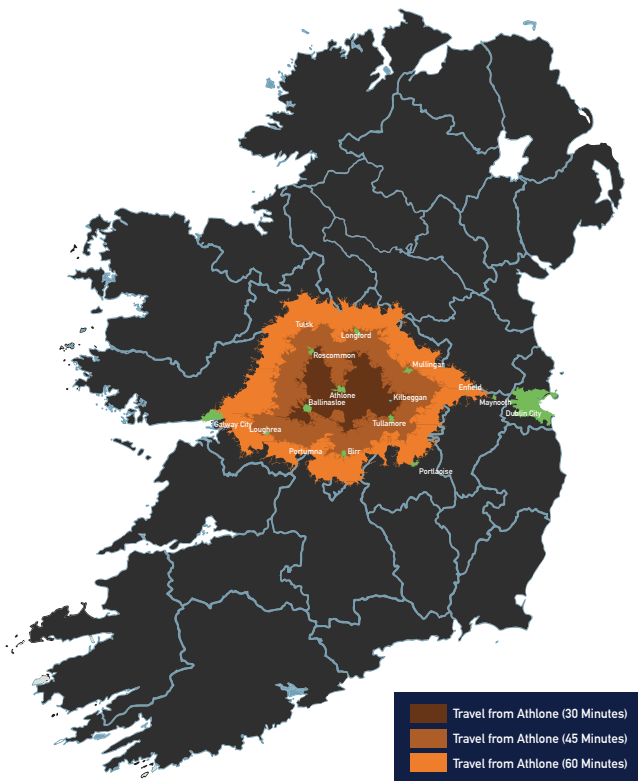
25 Commuting and well–being, Novaco, Gonzalex, UCI

As part of this submission we have undertaken a review of the 2016 Census Preliminary Results which have been released at Electoral Division (ED) Level, for all EDs that are located within the relevant catchments. Table 4.1 provides a breakdown of the total population of each catchment area and the analysis demonstrates that there are approximately 125,000 people within a 30-minute driving catchment, approximately 270,000 people within a 45-minute driving catchment and approximately **550,000** people living within a 1 hour driving catchment of Athlone. This figure alone highlights the strategic positioning of Athlone in the context of being within what is often considered an acceptable commuting time. As well as retaining its existing population and knowledge base, bolstering the role and function of Athlone has the potential to attract those residents who are typically classified as being located within the Greater Dublin Area commuter belt. This has the potential to reduce overall congestion along Dublin's arterial routes and assist in alleviating development pressure on the Eastern part of the country.

Of the 550,000 people living within a 1 hour driving catchment of Athlone, approximately 350,000 people are classified as being part of the labour force (i.e. 15-64 age group) as illustrated in Table 4.2 below. This demonstrates the strength of the potential workforce that Athlone as a Regional City has access to. Athlone currently boasts the necessary infrastructure to position itself as the catalyst for growth in the wider region, however, it is fundamental that the NPF recognises these inherent strengths through the incorporation of strategic policies that will facilitate this growth, making best use of its available labour force.

Table 4.1 – Drive time catchment

CATCHMENT	TOTAL POPULATION (2016)
60 MINUTE	549,375
45 MINUTE	267,301
30 MINUTE	125,036

Table 4.2 – Labour force

	30 MINUTE	45 MINUTE	60 MINUTE
LABOUR FORCE 15 – 64	81 ,128	172 ,429	353 ,546

The Midlands region boasts a well-educated workforce and as illustrated in Table 4.3 below, approximately 110,000 people are identified as having completed education of Level 7 (Ordinary Degree) or higher. This figure, at 32% is higher than the state average of 29%. The well-educated workforce is a key strength of the region and is a key factor in attracting investment to the region, particularly in relation foreign direct investment in form of international businesses who recognise the importance of a strong well educated workforce.

Table 4.3 – Education

CATCHMENT	NO FORMAL EDUCATION	PRIMARY	SECONDARY	TERTIARY	OTHER	NOT STATED
30 MINUTE	1,421	12 ,204	31,755	25,044	7,068	3,504
45 MINUTE	2,937	26 ,239	67,566	53,227	15 ,573	7,470
60 MINUTE	5,722	49 ,622	130,705	110 ,616	31,204	15 ,845

As illustrated in the foregoing sections, Athlone as a new Regional City is strategically positioned to deliver balanced growth across the midlands and can assist in alleviating development pressures in the east of the country. However, balanced growth can only be achieved if alternative strategies are adopted and there is clear shift away from the failed polycentric model. To do so, governance structures must be in place at local, regional and national level which will legitimise the role and function of Athlone as new ***Regional City*** in the midlands

5.0
A REGIONAL CITY WITHIN THE MIDLANDS

5.1   A REIMAGINED ATHLONE WITHIN THE MIDLANDS

Ireland's settlement patterns and urban structures are unique, being reflective of our peripherality, history, culture and importantly, - population densities. A critical consideration in re-imagining Athlone is the distribution of this population, in terms of location and density, which will inevitably impact the dynamic of this new **Regional City**. Clearly it will be critical for Athlone to consolidate its catalytic role in Midlands region. For the purposes of this submission, it is assumed that the population of Athlone, currently (approx. 21,000)

will develop to a settlement which will have at least doubled by the year 2040. How this expansion is facilitated, will be critical to its future and the success of the proposed **Regional City**. The **Regional City** is an exciting and challenging proposition, which warrants an immediate focus, both in terms of the form Athlone "2040" might take, and in turn how it will relate to the other towns within the region. It is respectfully submitted, that its success in the context of a future strategic designation, will require suspension of existing statutory and territorial boundaries, to facilitate the emergence of an

Figure 5.1

evolved and reinvigorated Athlone. Given the range of opportunities and challenges, it is premature to postulate in a definitive manner, how Athlone might respond to the exciting challenges of a 100% + population expansion. However, the context created by the NPF offers a unique visioning opportunity to plan for such a future.
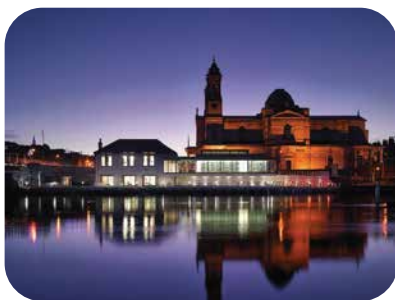

Figure 5.2

Figure 5.3

The new **Regional City** will build on, enhance and galvinise the myriad of historical and modern cultural, social, environmental and built infrastructural assets that characterise the town. These assets, along with some of the key challenges and opportunities presented by the towns social, environmental and economic profile, which must be carefully considered in the re-imagining of a future Athlone, Athlone 2040, are described below.

Athlone's historic defensive foundations still inform its character, urban grain and texture. The Shannon bestows a unique dimension to both its character and the experience of living in and visiting Athlone (Fig 5.1).

Recent decades, particularly since the town was by-passed (with the completion of the M6 Motorway in 2009), have seen significant expansion and regeneration, perhaps most notably in the historic core of the "East" bank, in which the new Civic Centre and "Town Centre" are located (Fig 5.2). It also boasts the fine new Luan Art Gallery (Fig 5.3) and a state of the art indoor athletics facility (Fig 5.4) which is part of AIT. AIT stands to play a key role in a "reimagined" **Regional City**, as a driver of education and research.

Re-imagining Athlone 2040 requires a sensitive understanding of the opportunities and challenges presented by the towns contemporary urban morphology – as illustrated in the "figure and ground" format of Fig 5.5 and 5.6. The density and grain of its urban core reflects its historic genesis, and stands in contrast to its diffused sub urban low density neighbourhoods. Its distribution of green spaces and public realm is fragmented, and this is another key consideration.
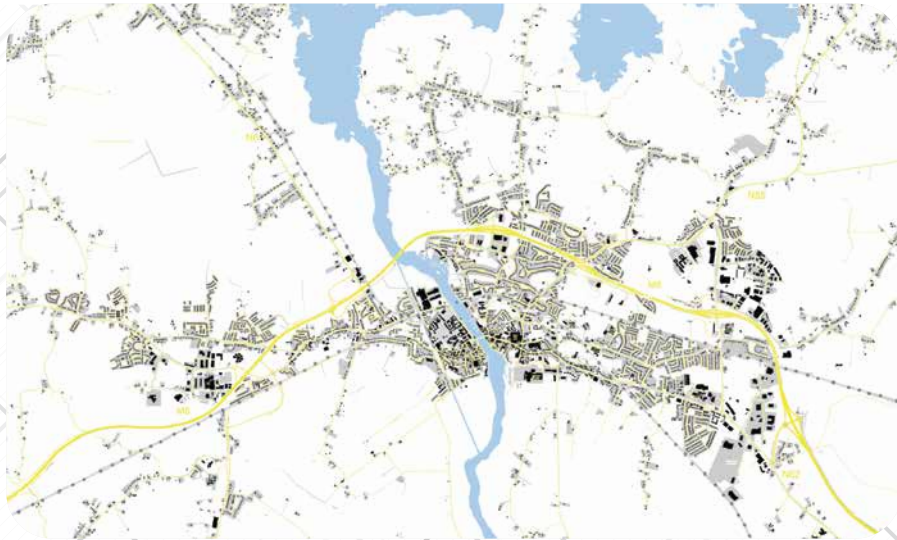

Figure 5.4

Figure 5.5

Figure 5.6

The Athlone Walkability Map (Fig 5.7) illustrates both the compactness of the historic core (on the East Bank), and the barriers posed to "walkability" and connectivity by the M3, and the Shannon, which currently has only one (pedestrian) bridge crossing. To accommodate a population of over 40,000, Athlone will require consolidation, higher density and expansion. To achieve an urban quality of life, synonymous with a compact city, current practice in respect of densities and housing typologies will require to be reconsidered.
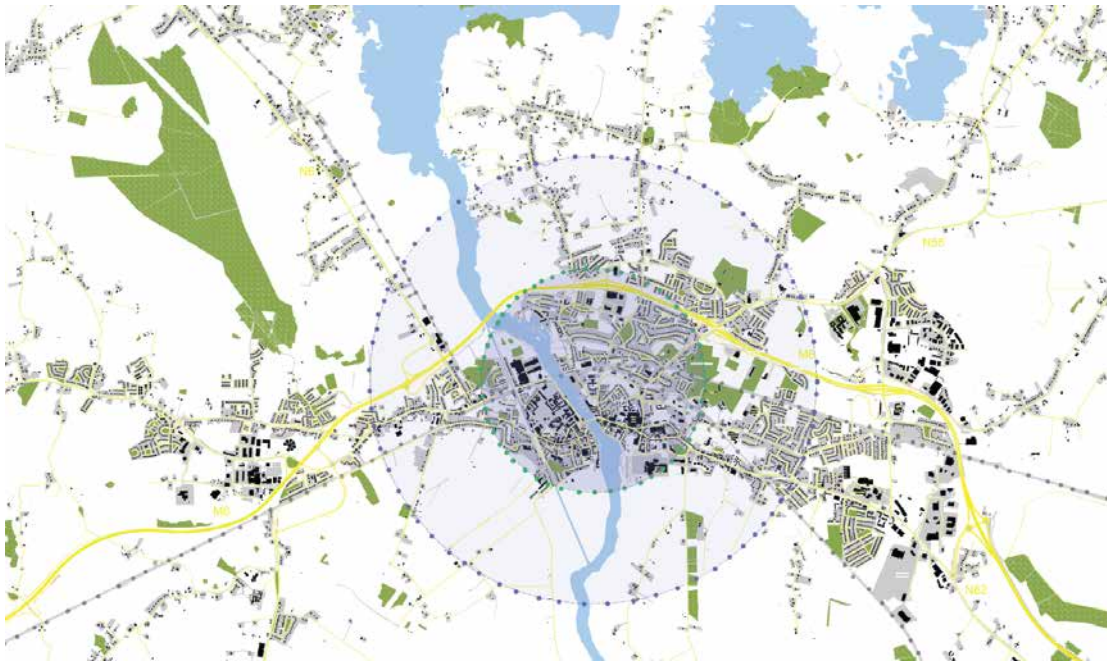
Figure 5.7

The quality of the public realm must be central to the vision. Athlone is offered a unique opportunity to plan and develop a unique urban environment. In this regard, capitalising on its riparian topography offers challenges, which could see a place uniquely characterized by extensive tree planting and wetland management, as a means of flood amelioration, becoming part of its public realm, and a major "selling point" in its branding and promotion.

Measures are currently underway, through the establishment of a partnership between the OPW and West-meath County Council which demonstrate Athlone's advocacy of best practice flood-management principles. In doing so, WCC has just appointed consultants to take the Athlone Flood Alleviation Scheme through design and planning.

Another important issue that is central to the success of Athlone 2040 is energy security. Energy certainty and cost will define Ireland's future viability. The vision for Athlone 2040, should not only acknowledge this reality, but seek to make its energy policy a global exemplar and "selling point". The process and journey toward 2040 should be viewed as an open "laboratory" in terms of how quality of urban life values, such as the Freiburg Charter exemplars referred to in Section 2.2, are pursued. Freiburg itself, is now Europe's leading centre of research, in solar energy particularly, resultant from a civic commitment to "zero energy" policies some decades ago resulting in very significant job creation.

Athlone's strategic position on the M4-M6 'knowledge corridor' described in Section 3.3, places education, and particularly 3rd level education, as a critical driver for the successful growth and development of the region. Ideally, "education" in its broadest meaning and in, the diverse means through which it can be disseminated, can become a unique feature of the Regional City's culture.

5.2   ATHLONE 2040

A short list of high-level concepts, that could, if applied in Athlone, unlock the opportunities presented by the assets summarised above, and provide responses to the challenges highlighted. These concepts illustrate how the "journey" towards 2040 might evolve. The concepts form part of an agenda to be framed by all stakeholders involved in positioning Athlone's pivotal role in a future midlands region. They evoke comparators projects in Europe to assist in articulating their strategic ambitious and in considering their high-level viability as a model for application in Athlone.

Gussing, a small town (4,000p) in a region which is the poorest in Austria, is now a global exemplar in its use of renewable energies which have radically transported it fortunes. Through a radical and integrated strategy, over little more than a decade, Gussing is now a net exporter for energy, exploiting bio mass and anaerobic digestion.
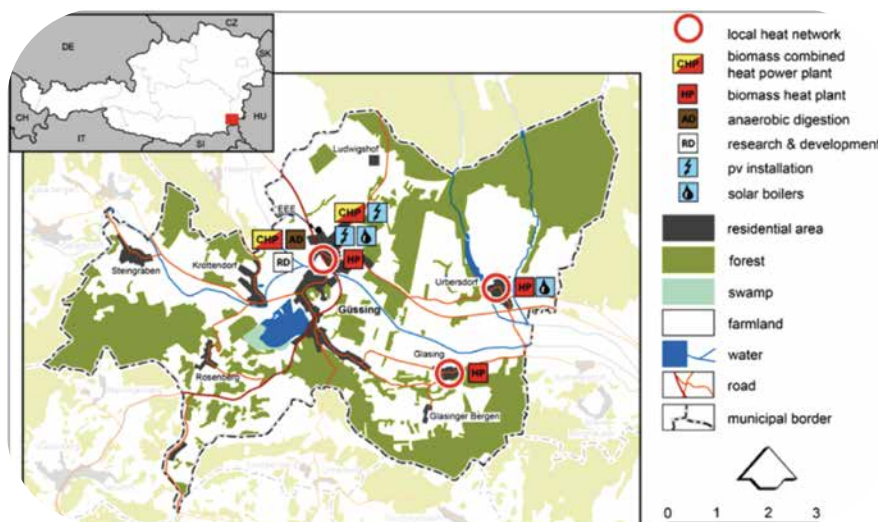
It also now converts rape seed to bio diesel, carried by all fuel stations in the region. With a careful expansion of the renewable energy sector in the region, there is no reason why the **Regional City** could not emulate the success of Gussing, and promote its credentials accordingly.

A Zero Energy Quarter

A zero energy quartet (MVRDV) is currently under construction on the left bank of the Garonne in Bordeaux. The site contains disused barracks and industrial buildings. This plan invokes the scale of Bordeaux's historic core, to intensify encounter and civic engagement, with shared surface streets. A re-imagined Monks field with similar ambitions could offer future inhabitants a unique environment. This project could for instance be the subject of an international design competition promoting Athlone on the world stage.

In 2007, the city of Frederikshavn in Northern Denmark embarked on an ambitious initiative to become the first European city powered solely by renewable energy sources by 2030. This municipal business development initiative is made possible by investment in large energy infrastructure, collaborative partnerships between energy supply companies and public transport companies, the support of politicians, public and private stakeholders, and the involvement of local communities and citizens. The initiative is guided by a Strategic Plan which sets out a series of projects to promote, facilitate and coordinate projects that can stimulate growth in the energy sector, create jobs and position the city as a world leader in the green economy. Examples of projects include a biogas fuelled public bus, free guidance on energy efficiencies for local businesses and communities, and a private energy renovation scheme. A key project is the creation of a new cluster of light engineering businesses bringing together photonics companies, research institutions and users of smart lighting technologies to explore new business opportunities in the renewable sectors and stimulate growth. The city also participates in the EU project Infinite Solutions which focuses on creating loans and financial supports for energy upgrades in private buildings.

Greening Athlone

With a 23-year time horizon, a wonderful opportunity presents itself to having the foundations for a unique "green" landscape – an urban Forest, which would exploit flood plans as attractions and create a unique amenity for walking, cycling and bio-diversity. As part of this, a new bridge crossing is proposed as illustrated in Figure 5.8.


Figure 5.8

Culture, Water, Sport

Athlone has a rich musical and dramatic arts, and sporting heritage. AIT's indoor arena is now a venue for international events. Inspiration on how cultural, water and sports assets could be developed in a future vision of Athlone can be found in the town of Bregenz on the Austrian/German border. This town, located on Lake Constance, has centred its summer economy on its world-famous Opera Festival, staged dramatically on the lake. In time, it is possible to see Athlone as hosting such an iconic event on Lough Ree. Bregenz, is also a leader in acoustic research. It is also possible to see Athlone becoming an inland "Cowes" for International lake sailing. Eugene, Oregon – a small University City, in the US evolved to "Track Town" USA, on foot of a generation of outstanding athletes in the 1970's. In turn "Nike" shoes, a global brand was spawned there. Athlone can begin to position itself as a key venue for international indoor and outdoor athletics.
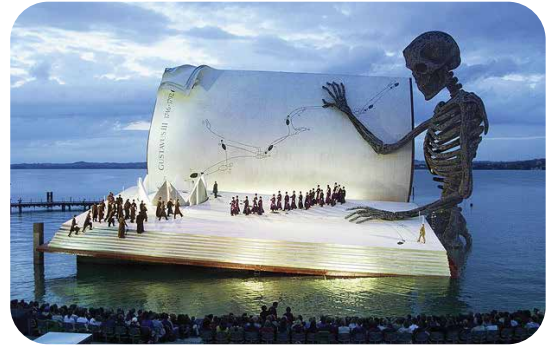
A Distributed Campus:

The role and research activities of AIT have been noted. Athlone will require expanding its educational offer in a manner that inextricably links its facilities to the fabric of the evolving town and region. Paris/Sorbonne (Denis Diderot) was a tercentennial project which sought to do precisely that, on Paris Rive Gauche where learning teaching and research coexist with living and commerce, just as does the National College of Ireland in the IFSC. Athlone will be the catalyst for "out-reach" facilities in the City Region, while animating the life of future "quarters" be they in the historic town or in Monksland.
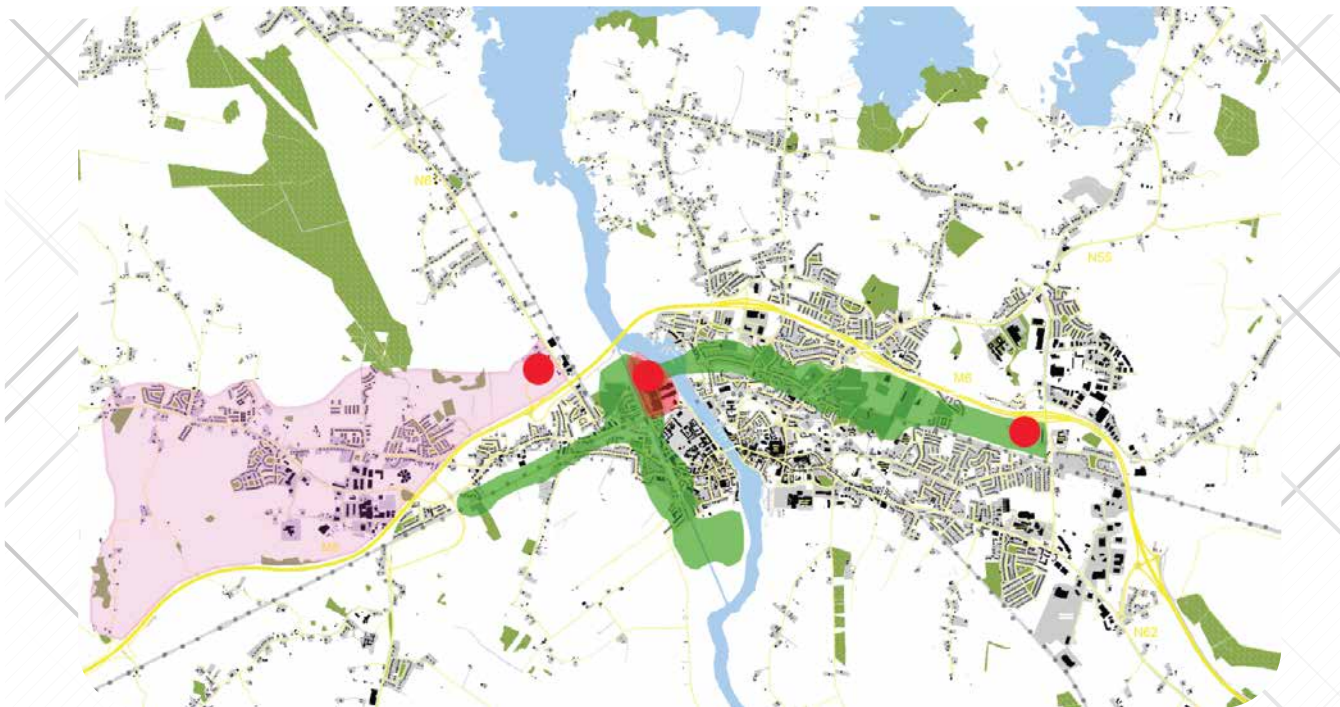

Figure 5.9

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6.0
ENABLING THE VISION

6.1   ENACTING A CHARTER

Invoking the notion of a "Charter" for a new **Regional City** is an ambitious gesture. The template offered for such a "Charter" in this submission, demonstrates how this ambition and intent can be conveyed, without prejudice to existing statutory frameworks. In turn, a "Charter" can be viewed as a means of aligning the proposition of new **Regional City** to the objectives of the NPF.

In setting out a charter template, it is not the intention to provide a final concept for all urban systems, cultures and climate zones. *The charter is offered merely as a guideline, whose principles can provide pointers and inspiration from forward looking urban developments and urban planning polices in other cities and city networks. It is within this spirit that the idea for a charter is presented below. It is intended that this template can be adapted to the proposed City Region to provide the foundation for a process, and in this instance, an agenda for collaborative dialogue on the vision for the City region.*

The template presented is the "Freiburg Charter", referred to earlier, generated by the Academy of Urbanism (of which the authors are members), on foot of Freiburg, Germany being nominated as European City of the year, 2010. The Freiburg Charter, is mindful of both the scale of cities, and importantly, the dynamic of a city and region, noting that cities and their regions are inextricably interwoven and interdependent. It is essential that common features be established and developed in order to support the viability of urban planning and development efforts. The Charter is framed by the "magic triangle" of urban development, predicated on the belief that the model for all future settlements is that of a "compact, decentralised city".

It sets out 12 principles, all of which, to a lesser or greater degree, are relevant to laying the foundations for long term planning, while being potentially central to how Athlone as a **Regional City** communicates its vision to investors, stakeholders and potential citizens

1.   City of Diversity, Safety and Tolerance

The objectives are:

> Balanced age and social structures with functioning neighbourhoods;
> Construction of varied dwellings and work facilities for all parts of the population/promotion of innovative forms of accommodation;
> Creation of manageable units and open spaces;
> Provision of public and private infrastructure, specifically for all generations;
> Care, leisure and educational services, particularly for the very young and the elderly;
> Integration of all sectors of the population taking into consideration their ethnic origin.

The Regional City will not have a "one size fits all" approach to planning – rather, its housing provision and social infrastructure will be informed by an understanding of the demographic and social profile of its citizens.

2.   City of Diversity, Safety and Tolerance

Once a city reaches a certain size, it becomes indispensable to strengthen decentralised development and to specify particular areas of autonomous responsibility. Decentralised development is particularly important for the following areas:

> living and working;
> social and care infrastructure;
> education and culture;
> leisure and recreation interconnected green areas;
> sustainable resource management.

At the same time, the preservation of a specific urban spatial identity is a precondition for viable urban development and planning.

Athlone as a new *Regional City* offers a unique opportunity to prove an urban design led development framework, for all its constituent settlements, reinforcing identity at a neighbourhood scale, which in turn will inform the character and experience of the new *Regional City*.

3.   City of Short Distances

Being able to access all essential services on foot helps minimise the use of personal means of transport, improving the immediate living environment. Public inner city transport, footpaths and cycle routes must be given priority over personal motor cars. In the long-term, personal means of transport should be switched to electric or fuel cell vehicles which exploit renewable, emission-free energy carriers. All services which are already accessible on foot in the centres of cities or neighbourhoods must be strengthened; when new ones are established they must comply with the model of a "compact, decentralised city".

Reducing commuting time, energy consumption, emissions and reliance on private transportation will be central to the planning of the new Regional City. This will present challenges, which it is submitted, are surmountable.

4.   Urban Development along Public Transportation Lines – High Density Model

Public transport must be closely tied to any urban development concept and must be given general priority over personal means of transport. The objective is to carefully and consistently increase urban density along public transport routes and to locate services around the stops of tram lines or other public transport nodes which have a central function and high user frequency.

This will be a central tenet of the new Regional City which will require to be addressed, ab initio, in a long-term planning framework.

5.   Education, Science and Culture

Universities and research institutes as well as schools and cultural venues notably contribute to making a city attractive and valuable. They have a marked influence on public life and on planning culture. In a changing society, and in the face of the current challenges posed by scarce resources and climate change, planning and the arts and sciences are inevitably becoming ever more closely intertwined. Mutual inspiration between these spheres is a key requirement for innovative planning solutions in the competition of ideas. Manifold collaborations both within research and for the development of new technical, economic and social models for urban living are needed. Cities are obliged to offer – or create – such models and to provide scope for them to develop.

Education, Science and Culture, will be key drivers of a sustainable future for the new Regional City. Athlone and the midlands offer exciting and creative opportunities for innovation and belated facilities and programmes into the fabric of the region.

6.   Commerce, Economy and Employment

In the future, the essential task of urban development will be to maintain and modernise existing developments as well as to attract pioneering, innovative businesses. The aim must be to fully exploit the maximum potential, so that jobs can be preserved while new businesses are attracted in line with the principle of a "compact, decentralised city". Industry's desire for greenfield development must be counteracted by offering a concept of in-town development. This requires an appropriate organisational structure to control such developments.

The new Regional City will place commerce, economy and employment at its heart. The new Regional City will differentiate itself by offering a diverse range of "work place" and "business" opportunities.

7.   Nature and Environment

Preserving biological diversity, conserving resources for future generations and maintaining a healthy environment and climate worth living in form central objectives of sustainable urban development. The habitats for animal and plant life, the natural quality of soil, water, air and climate, and historically grown cultural landscapes must be preserved and developed in a positive way as a living space for people.

To avoid negative consequences, all planning must start with an expert investigation into the potential impact on nature, the environment and the climate. For many reasons, the model of a "compact city where everything is close at hand" is the right model for progressing towards climate-neutral cities: it reduces the need for personal mobility, provides a decentralised, local supply of regional products and enables a sustainable way of life in individual neighbourhoods without wasting resources.

This model must be supplemented by consistently making existing buildings more energy-efficient, building more new buildings which produce energy, introducing a more efficient, interconnected energy supply and switching to renewable energy sources as part of an overall urban energy concept.

The new Regional City has the potential to be self-reliant in energy terms in the medium to long term. This potential will be realised by innovation and commitment at regional and neighbourhood scales. It can also become a global exemplar in addressing flooding and flood plain management.

8.   Quality of Design

Planning decisions impact the face of a city for generations to come. They must cultivate the unique character of a city and develop it further while complying with the highest design quality standards. Public spaces play an important role in this. Together with the buildings that surround them, they make up the face of a city. Ownership and control of public spaces must remain with the local community in order to manage claims on use and prevent misguided developments. The planning process for prominent buildings must be closely supervised – from the initial idea through to implementation by the administrative planning body (as a general contractor). Architectural competitions, multiple commissions, collaborative and/or expert processes should always be used in important construction and planning tasks – including the design of public spaces. Plot structures play a significant role in this by providing a basis for diversity. Remodelling cities will become particularly important in the decades to come.

The new Regional City has a unique opportunity to develop a "matrix" of its future form, by placing design quality at its heart. It can also communicate its vision by promoting international urban design and architectural competitions.

9.   Long-term Vision

Far-sighted urban development and planning follows a central theme which stretches back way into the city's individual past and reaches several decades into the future. The face of a city must not be subjugated to short-lived fashions and political U-turns. Cities have evolved through eras in history and must be carefully developed bearing in mind future generations. Preserve the old and dare to embrace the new! This is the only way of developing, maintaining and intensifying a city's unique quality and character. Continuity, quality, sensitivity, identity and innovation for a particular place are the tools of viable development. Careful resource management plays a key role in this.

The quality of communication, of the nee Regional City vision will be critical to its success and central to the concept of "Collaboration".

10.   Communication and Participation

A "collective vision" of the city should be continuously developed through open discourse. This vision is reflected in the public spaces and the city's structure. Extensive and ongoing communication between all players within and outside the administration, as well as the results of citizen participation, should be directly integrated into planning processes, creating transparency and preparing the way for political decisions. All groupings within an urban community, including regional players, are invited to become and to remain involved in the process – from developing a vision to planning the details, using suitable methods of participation (participation culture). There are endless options for participation; the method should always be developed and implemented taking into account the unique characteristics of each local government.

The profile of a future new Regional City administration awaits development. However, it is submitted that the constituent local authorities have a unique opportunity to define a culture of trust, collaboration and certainty.

11.   Reliability, Obligation and Fairness

City-wide concepts with binding regulations create a framework within which all parties involved in urban development can work on a level playing field. The local government takes fundamental decisions, committing itself and the administration to certain principles of urban development and planning. This makes the city a reliable partner for its citizens and private investors, giving each of them equal rights and duties. Land development principles lay down the standards for sustainable development. Guiding principles, such as that of the "city of short distances", are anchored in technical concepts such as the retail trade concept (Freiburg concept of markets and retail centres) and implemented in land use plans. A relationship of trust must be established between the administration and "those on the outside", which provides for continuity while allowing enough scope for the necessary stimuli and innovations.

Creating certainty in respect of investment, be it financial or social, will be critical to the success of the new Regional City.

12.   Co-operation, Participation and Partnership

The complex tasks of urban development and planning are shouldered by many different parties. The city is dependent on collaboration between private and public players and on the ideas contributed by them. The citizens in each neighbourhood are an indispensable part of integrative urban development. Subsidies can create incentives for private investment by providing part financing, and can also control this. (Prior) measures by the local government, for example in urban design, can instigate private activities and initiate dynamic processes. Agreements and contracts with stakeholders, as well as support and calls for civic involvement, enable comprehensive urban remodelling measures to be pursued. Research institutes, universities and industry, as well as industry associations and the urban region, become involved by sparking important ideas for innovative urban development.

Collaboration is at the heart of the Regional City vision. Unique opportunities are presented to form dynamic, inclusive partnerships, predicating on a commitment to shared values.

The Freiburg Charter is offered as a template, which can be adapted to the context of the new Regional City. For the purposes of this submission, its value is in committing to values which will underpin the new Regional City and the midland's evolution, as a shared basis for collaboration between statutory bodies, its private sector, education providers, community groups and other stakeholders. The midland's key stakeholders, both private and public entities, currently operate under a successful collaborative platform and collectively, are fully committed to the continuation of this ethos. However, support from central governance in the form of the development of an appropriate governance model, is critical to enabling this vision of a new Regional City in the midlands to be achieved.
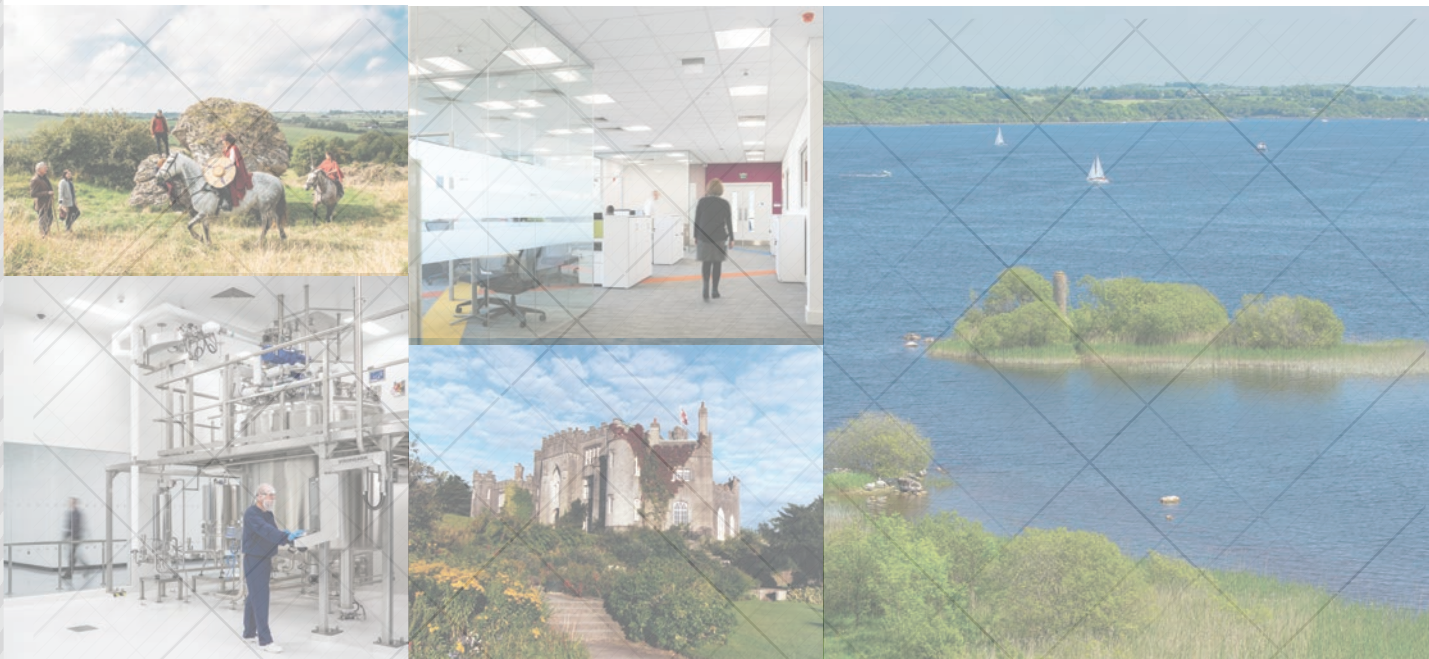
7.0
CONCLUSION

The submission builds on the expert review of the NSS that recognises the role that Athlone can play in optimising the potential of the region to form a new **Regional City** in the Midlands. Athlone will serve as a key enabler for the region, benefitting the wider Midlands creating an exemplar for social, economic, physical and environmental development.

To overcome the failings of the NSS, the initial NPF consultation document acknowledges that **alternative strategies** are now required. Although it is recognised that the groundings of the polycentric model which was advocated for the Midland's Region have merit, its adoption in the context of the Midlands was flawed, owing to the lack of strong spatial structures and a governance model which could deliver balanced growth across the region.

This new **Regional City** now serves to reimagine and redefine the attractive offer the midlands can make to inward investment, to kick-start and sustain the regional economy, and to provide the supporting infrastructure, services and facilities needed to safeguard quality of life and the environment. Athlone, as the driver and catalyst for growth and development in the Midlands, is acknowledged as having the population base, the transport connections, the level of economic activity and the critical mass of key services which are highlighted as being key to regional and national success.

This submission prepared by FAC and MOLA Architecture on behalf of **Destination Athlone** articulates Athlone's inherent strategic, environmental, social and cultural strengths, which are many, while setting out an "agenda", which informs a "vision" befitting its future as a catalyst for development of the wider region. Building on the region's existing collaborative platform, support from central governance in the form of the development of an appropriate governance model, is critical to enabling this vision of a new **Regional City** in the midlands to be achieved.

NOTES

NOTES

ATHLONE 2040
A REGIONAL CITY IN THE MIDLANDS

Submission to Ireland 2040, Our Plan, National Planning Framework

FutureAnalytics
Planning + Research + Economics

mola
architecture