



Tiane Ltd Submission on Draft National Planning Framework – Ireland 2040

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Authors:

Ken Swaby / Ben Waite

Approved By:

Christy O'Sullivan

ILTP Project Code & Reference:

GOLDENATH

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**Department of
Housing, Planning,
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Government**

Tiane Ltd

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

- 1.1.1 In February 2017 the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government published the Issues Paper for the National Planning Framework – Ireland 2040 and invited submissions or observations on the proposed policy document.
- 1.1.2 ILTP Consulting have been commissioned by Tiane Ltd. to advise them in relation to the proposed new policy document, and to make a submission on their behalf. Tiane Ltd own various development sites in Athlone Town which they are planning to put forward for development in the short term.
- 1.1.3 The proposal to replace the existing National Spatial Strategy (NSS) is broadly welcomed by our client. In particular, the NSS failed to deliver balanced economic and population growth throughout the state, and we have experienced in recent years significant increases in population and employment in the Greater Dublin Area and further marginalisation of the midlands and peripheral locations of Ireland.
- 1.1.4 ILTP on behalf of our client have undertaken a review of the development potential of Athlone in order to rebalance future development and to relieve pressure on the Greater Dublin Area whilst also complementing the key role played by the capital.

2 REVIEW OF ATHLONE TOWN IN CONTEXT OF NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK

2.1 Overview of Athlone – Location and Connectivity

- 2.1.1 Athlone is one of the most centrally located large towns in Ireland, situated on the River Shannon within 125km from Dublin City Centre and 85km from Galway along the M6 / N6 National Route.
- 2.1.2 Athlone is a major strategically located transport exchange for the state, connecting the cities of Ireland via road, rail, and inland waterways. This level of connectivity offers a unique advantage to Athlone particularly given the extensive catchment area for the town in the centre of Ireland.
- 2.1.3 The road, rail and waterways infrastructure passing through Athlone are shown in Figure 2.1.

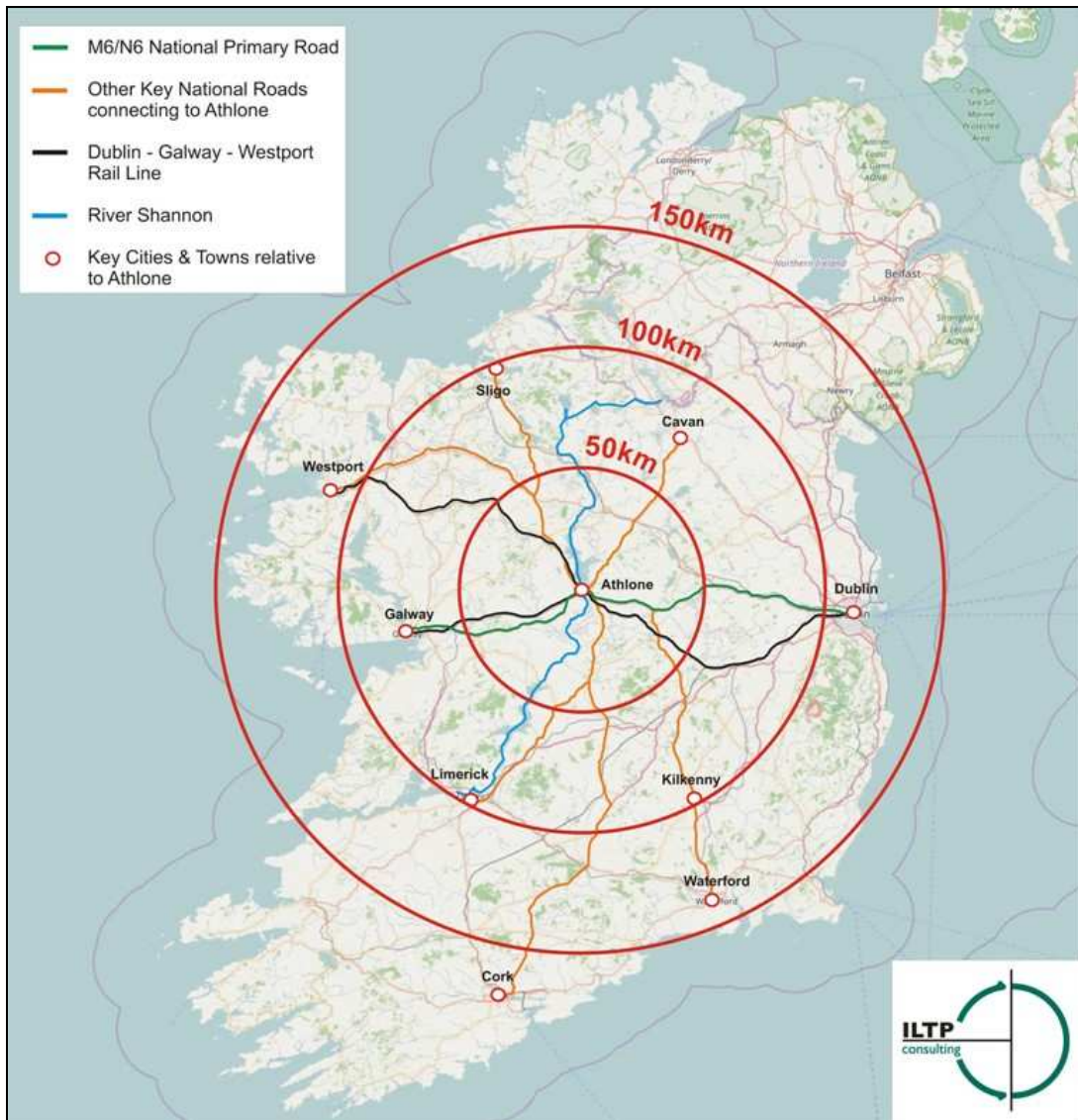


Figure 2.1: Location of Athlone and Existing Transport Infrastructure relative to Key Cities and Towns in Ireland

2.1.4 As shown in Figure 2.1 Athlone is also strategically located in a national context, and is within 1 to 1.5 hours drive from the majority of cities and towns in Ireland, including Dublin, Galway, Limerick, Waterford, Kilkenny, Sligo, and Westport.

2.2 Review of Road Connectivity

2.2.1 Athlone is centrally located on the main M6 / N6 route approximately 1 hour's drive from Galway and 1.5 hours from Dublin. It is unique to many towns in Ireland in that the main N6 passes directly through the town boundary, with 6 no. exits off the dual carriageway connecting to the town. This high level of connectivity provides shorter and more reliable trips in and out of the urban centre and minimises traffic congestion within the town centre.

2.2.2 Athlone is a principle bus hub for the state. Bus Eireann operate a number of intercity / town services from Athlone Bus Station. This includes regular services to the main cities including Dublin, Cork, Galway & Limerick and the neighbouring towns including Mullingar and Ballinasloe. There are hourly services in each direction along the Dublin Galway route where recent competition has led to excellent levels of services and highly competitive fares. The services to Limerick & Mullingar operate 5 times a day, whilst other services operate up to 3 times a day.

2.3 Review of Rail Infrastructure

2.3.1 Athlone is also a major intercity rail node located at the junction between the railway lines of Dublin-Galway and Dublin-Westport.

2.3.2 Athlone railway station is located adjacent to Athlone Town centre. Dublin to Athlone is served 13 times a day in a westbound direction and 11 times per day in an eastbound direction. There are two trains in the morning and evening peak hours (08:00 and 18:00) with one train per hour in each direction thereafter.

2.3.3 Adjacent destinations served by Athlone Railway station include Ballinasloe, Athenry, Oranmore, Galway city, Tullamore, Portarlinton, Monasterevin, Kildare, Newbridge and Dublin Heuston.

2.4 Review of Connectivity via River Shannon

2.4.1 In addition to extensive road and rail connectivity the River Shannon passes through Athlone town centre, which is the hub of Ireland's inland waterways and provides a central stop-off for boat-trips and cruises on the Shannon.

2.5 Review of Key Attributes of Athlone Town

2.5.1 Athlone is also part of Ireland's Ancient East which is a major tourism incentive for the east and midlands of the country (see Figure 2.2).

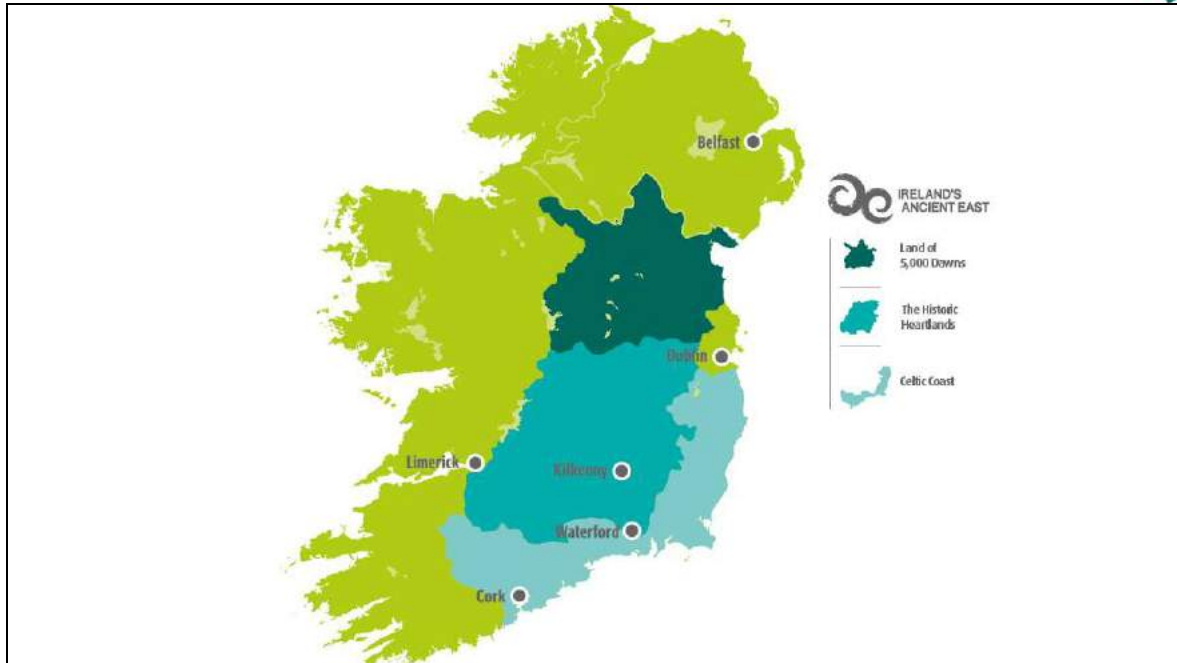


Figure 2.2: Ireland's Ancient East (Source: Ireland.com)

- 2.5.2 Athlone is a major employment centre with largescale multinational companies operating from the various industrial parks in the town, including major employers such as Ericsson, Alexion Pharmaceuticals and Alkermes Pharma Ireland Ltd.
- 2.5.3 Athlone Institute of Technology is the largest third level institution in the midlands and plays a fundamental role to the economic and social development of the town. AIT currently has plans in place to further expand the institution. This is an attractive incentive to employers or industries seeking to establish in a well connected region with a highly skilled workforce.

2.6 Review of Growth Potential of Athlone Town

- 2.6.1 Athlone town has substantial capacity for largescale growth in population and employment. The current Athlone Town Development Plan includes large areas of zoned land for future development, including strategic development sites in and around the town centre, such as around the rail station and Golden Island Shopping Centre.
- 2.6.2 This confirms that Athlone is a location where sustainable new development adjacent to existing public transport could be accommodated. Indeed there are few towns outside of the Greater Dublin Area that are as appropriately located and well developed in terms of infrastructure to accommodate such a significant level of population growth as Athlone town.

2.7 Review of Athlone in the context of the wider Midlands Region

- 2.7.1 The National Spatial Strategy aimed to address the contrast between rapid development in the east of the country and slower rates of growth in other areas such as the Midlands Region. To attempt to redress this imbalance, the Strategy identified gateways and hubs that have the capacity to support the stronger urban-rural structure needed to drive the development of these regions. Athlone was designated as a linked gateway with Mullingar and Tullamore in the midlands. It was considered in the Strategy that combining the complementary strengths of the three towns as a gateway at the heart of the region was essential to boosting the region's overall strength. These three towns were identified as 'engines of growth' with a key role in achieving balanced regional development in the midlands region.

2.7.2 The National Spatial Strategy linked gateway of Athlone – Tullamore – Mullingar is shown in Figure 2.3.

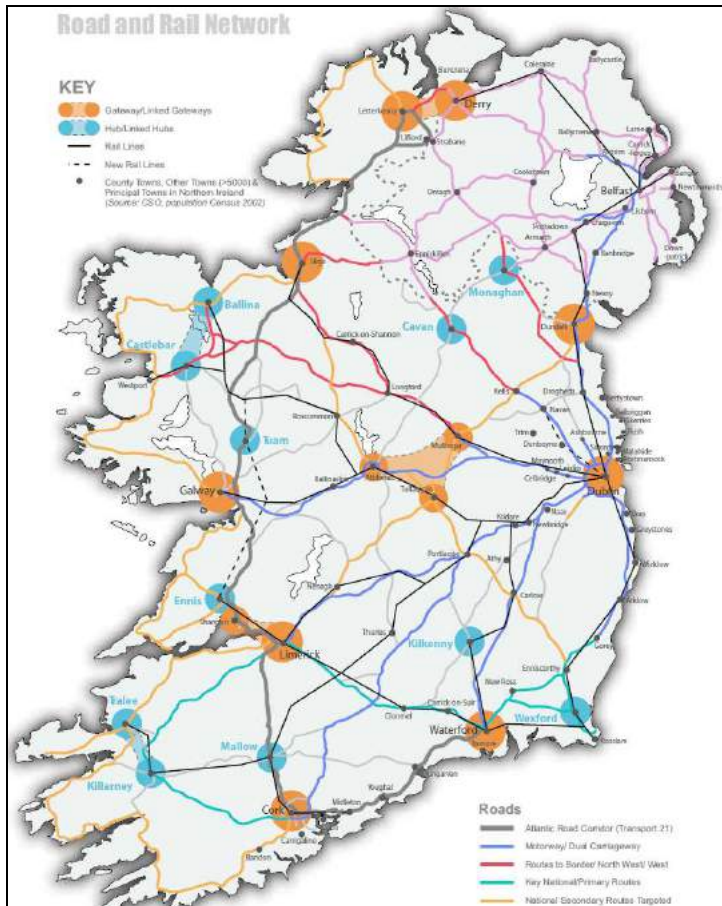


Figure 2.3: Athlone / Mullingar / Tullamore Linked Gateway (Source: NSS)

2.7.3 The current linked gateway of Athlone-Tullamore-Mullingar in the National Spatial Strategy was unsuccessful however in achieving balanced growth in the midlands relative to Dublin and the eastern regions.

2.7.4 The National Spatial Strategy at best promoted moderate disjointed growth in the towns of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar post 2002, but did little to incentivise targeted cooperative development in the midlands anywhere near the scale of the cities of the state. This has been verified by the overall relatively low levels of growth in population in the midlands post 2002, as confirmed by 2016 Census figures (see Table 2.1). This is a significant contrast with the population growth in numbers in Dublin and large urban centres in the country.

Table 2.1: Population Growth of Key Midlands Towns 2002 - 2016

	2002 Census	2011 Census	2016 Census	Overall Change 2002 - 2016	% Change 2002 - 2016
Athlone	15,936	19,718	20,646	4,710	30%
Tullamore	11,098	11,346	11,444	346	3%
Mullingar	15,621	19,770	20,747	5,126	33%

- 2.7.5 As an alternative to targeting low levels of growth in numerous midlands towns all in close proximity it is considered that future development should be prioritised and concentrated within Athlone Town which has, relative to nearby towns, higher levels of existing infrastructure and services. This includes high capacity road and rail connections, Athlone Institute of Technology, major employment centres, extensive retail outlets, the River Shannon and major tourism attractions and facilities (see Table 2.2). This would incentivise even further inward investment and occupation in the town.

Table 2.2: Comparison of Existing Infrastructure in Urban Centres in Midlands Region

	Athlone	Tullamore	Mullingar
Directly served by Intercity Road Network	Y	N	Y
Intercity Rail Connection	Y	Y	N
River Connection	Y	N	N
Inland Waterway Connection	Y	Y	Y
Third Level Institution	Y	N	N

- 2.7.6 Athlone town can therefore serve as a more viable alternative to Dublin and other cities in terms of a place to live, in employment, education and in social and recreational activities. This would benefit not only Athlone town but people in the wider midlands region who can avail of the wider and more extensive facilities and opportunities in Athlone as opposed to travelling further afield.
- 2.7.7 It is therefore recommended that the linked gateway of Athlone-Tullamore-Mullingar as currently referred to in the NSS be superseded and replaced in the new National Planning Framework by Athlone as the principle Core Growth Urban Centre of the midlands, with a population target upwards of 60,000. Athlone town has significant land banks available, including in the town centre, and has extensive existing service and infrastructure provision already in place, so can readily support such an expansion while maintaining a compact town centre that remains as the economic hub of the town.

2.8 Review of Athlone in context of Consultation Documents

- 2.8.1 The National Planning Framework consultation documents state that our national economy is principally 'Dublin-led' and that there is currently a strain on the Greater Dublin Area in areas such as transport infrastructure and housing to meet the population and economic growth demands on the region.

2.8.2 The consultation documents therefore highlight the urgency for rebalancing growth and development in the state, with a particular need to strengthen other large urban centres and promote their competitiveness and attractiveness as viable alternatives to the capital in terms of places to live, work, socialise and do business.

2.8.3 The National Planning Framework consultation documents raise the need in particular to strengthen second tier cities in the state, but also emphasise the strategic role of certain large towns in complementing these cities:

“Ireland’s regional cities appear to offer significant potential to be the focal point to drive growth and development in their regions. The regional cities are all major centres of employment, third-level education and healthcare and are accessible to the motorway network and other communications infrastructure such as airports and ports. Beyond the city catchments, there is a network of towns that can play a similar role.”

2.8.4 This report has identified Athlone as a town that can play this similar role as a regional city, particularly given the extensive existing services and infrastructure in the town such as motorway, rail connections, River Shannon, third level institution, major employment opportunities, amongst other services. Furthermore, the town is located in the core of the island beyond the influence of cities, so is strategically placed to serve as the principle growth centre for the midlands region.

2.8.5 The NPF documents also raise concerns that by prioritising development in multiple towns this can negatively impact on the larger cities in the state:

“At the tier below the cities, there are a number of towns which, due to their level of service provision and extensive catchments, serve an important role for those areas that fall outside the reach and influence of the cities. In some cases, they can complement the role of the city. However, lessons from the past suggest that if we continue to focus on multiple towns, this will continue to undermine the performance and potential of our cities and ultimately the wider regions.”

2.8.6 Similarly by continuing to spread growth and development amongst numerous towns in the midlands this may inhibit and undermine the respective potential and performance of each town. Therefore it is proposed that growth and development in the wider midlands region be concentrated and prioritised in Athlone town due to its strategic location and extensive existing service provision already in place. This will support the wider competitiveness and attractiveness of the midlands, while also complementing the capital and other cities in the state.

2.9 Summary Findings

2.9.1 From the analysis undertaken it was found that Athlone town has all the attributes and infrastructure in place which is more in line with a small city. Therefore recognition of the town as a Second Tier City or at least a First Tier Growth Town should be included in the National Planning Framework and wider Government policy.

2.9.2 It is recommended that the linked gateway of Athlone-Tullamore-Mullingar as currently referred in the NSS be superseded as by continuing to spread growth and development amongst numerous towns in the midlands this may inhibit and undermine the respective potential and performance of each town. It is recommended that the linked gateway in the NSS be replaced in the new National Planning Framework by Athlone as the principle Core Growth Urban Centre of the midlands, with a population target upwards of 60,000. This will support the wider competitiveness and attractiveness of the midlands, while also complementing the capital and other cities in the state.



3 SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

3.1 Summary

- 3.1.1 The Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government has commenced the preparation of the new National Planning Framework to replace the existing National Spatial Strategy. The Department has published an Issues Paper document inviting consultation from interested parties.
- 3.1.2 Tiane Ltd appointed ILTP Consulting to undertake an independent review of Athlone Town in the context of the *Issues Paper* and the forthcoming National Planning Framework.
- 3.1.3 The proposal to replace the existing National Spatial Strategy (NSS) is broadly welcomed by our client. In particular, the NSS failed to deliver balanced economic and population growth throughout the state, and we have experienced in recent years significant increases in population and employment in the Greater Dublin Area and further marginalisation of the midlands and peripheral locations of Ireland. The recent recovery from economic recession has been principally Dublin-led, with the greatest inward investment and housing demand in the capital. This has resulted in further social, economic and environmental issues in the capital, such as spiralling property costs, worsening traffic congestion despite major investment in public transport and overloaded public services such as healthcare.
- 3.1.4 ILTP on behalf of our client have undertaken a review of the development potential of Athlone in order to rebalance future development and to relieve pressure on the Greater Dublin Area whilst also complementing the key role played by capital.
- 3.1.5 The National Spatial Strategy designated Athlone as a linked gateway with Mullingar and Tullamore with the objective of boosting the region's overall strength. This policy has not been successful however as all three towns have in recent years experienced little economic activity and population increases, which are wholly out of balance with the sharp rises experienced in other major urban centres in the state, particularly Dublin.
- 3.1.6 ILTP are proposing that Athlone be designated as the principle growth town of the midlands to account for the extensive infrastructure already in place in the town, its strategic core location in the heart of the island and major development potential.
- 3.1.7 The review undertaken by ILTP identified the following major attributes of Athlone to serve as one of the pivotal growth centres of the state:
- Athlone is a major strategically located transport exchange for the state, connecting the cities of Ireland via road, rail, and inland waterways. This level of connectivity offers a unique advantage to Athlone particularly given the extensive catchment area for the town as the most centrally located urban centres in the state.
 - Athlone is centrally located on the main M6 / N6 route approximately 1 hour's drive from Galway and 1.5 hours from Dublin.
 - Athlone is also a major intercity rail node located at the junction between the railway lines of Dublin-Galway and Dublin-Westport. Adjacent towns and villages served by Athlone Railway station include Ballinasloe, Athenry, Oranmore, Galway city, Tullamore, Portarlinton, Monasterevin, Kildare, Newbridge and Dublin Heuston.
 - Athlone is also a principle bus hub for the state. Bus Eireann operate a number of intercity / town services from Athlone Bus Station. This includes for regular services to the main cities including Dublin, Cork, Galway & Limerick and the neighbouring towns including Mullingar and Ballinasloe.



- In addition to extensive road and rail connectivity the River Shannon passes through Athlone town centre, which is the hub of Ireland's inland waterways and provides a central stop-off for boat-trips and cruises on the Shannon.
- Athlone is a major tourism destination due in part to its core location on the River Shannon, and is also part of Ireland's Ancient East which is a major tourism incentive for the east and midlands of the country.
- Athlone is a major employment centre with largescale multinational companies operating from the various industrial parks in the town, including major employers such as Ericsson, Alexion Pharmaceuticals and Alkermes Pharma Ireland Ltd.
- Athlone Institute of Technology is the largest third level institution in the midlands and plays a fundamental role to the economic and social development of the town. AIT also currently has plans in place to further expand the institution. This is an attractive incentive to employers or industries seeking to establish in a well connected region with a highly skilled workforce.
- The town has substantial capacity for largescale growth in population and employment. The current Athlone Town Development Plan includes large areas of zoned land for future development, including strategic development sites in and around the town centre

3.1.8 This confirms that Athlone is a location where sustainable new development adjacent to existing public transport could be accommodated. Indeed there are few towns outside of the Greater Dublin Area that are as appropriately located and well developed in terms of infrastructure to accommodate such a significant level of population growth as Athlone town.

3.1.9 From this review it is clear that Athlone as a town is strategically located on the national road, rail and waterways network. It is both necessary and appropriate during the National Planning Framework Review process that due weight is given to both the locational advantages of Athlone and the extensive level of existing infrastructure in the town. It is a significant opportunity for Government to maximise the use of existing infrastructure by promoting and planning for the largescale sustainable growth of Athlone town in line with national housing demands and Government employment targets.

3.1.10 The current linked gateway of Athlone-Tullamore-Mullingar in the National Spatial Strategy promoted moderate disjointed growth in each town, but did little to incentivise targeted cooperative development in the midlands. This has been verified by the low levels of growth in population and employment in the region.

3.1.11 As an alternative to targeting low levels of growth in numerous midlands towns all in close proximity it is considered that future development should be prioritised and concentrated within Athlone Town which has, relative to nearby towns, higher levels of existing infrastructure and services. This includes high capacity road and rail connections, Athlone Institute of Technology, major employment centres, extensive retail outlets, the River Shannon and extensive tourism attractions and facilities. This would incentivise even further inward investment and occupation in the town.

3.1.12 Athlone town can therefore serve as a more viable alternative to Dublin and other cities in terms of a place to live, in employment, education and in social and recreational activities. This would benefit not only Athlone town but people in the wider midlands region who can avail of the wider and more extensive facilities and opportunities in Athlone as opposed to travelling further afield.

- 3.1.13 It is therefore recommended that the linked gateway of Athlone-Tullamore-Mullingar as currently referred in the NSS be superseded and replaced in the new National Planning Framework by Athlone as the principle Core Growth Urban Centre of the midlands, with a population target upwards of 60,000. Athlone town has significant land banks available, including in the town centre, and the extensive existing service and infrastructure provision already in place, so can readily support such an expansion while maintaining a compact town centre that remains as the economic hub of the town.
- 3.1.14 From the analysis undertaken it was found that Athlone town has all the attributes and infrastructure in place which is more in line with a small city. Therefore recognition of the town as a Second Tier City or at least a First Tier Growth Town should be included in the National Planning Framework and wider Government policy.
- 3.1.15 This would achieve many of the core objectives set out in the ‘Executive Summary - Issues and Choices’ consultation document, particularly the following:
- *“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;*
 - *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.”*

3.2 Conclusion

- 3.2.1 This submission sets out the overall approach used to assess Athlone Town in the context of the National Planning Framework Issues Paper. Firstly a review of population growth and wider trends for the town was undertaken. The next stage was to look at infrastructure, and in particular existing public transport. This review identified Athlone as a location where a significant level of sustainable new development adjacent to existing public transport could be accommodated.
- 3.2.2 This approach identified Athlone as one of the best locations in the country to accommodate substantial population and employment growth in line with national housing demands and Government employment targets, and to maximise the use of existing infrastructure and resources.
- 3.2.3 It is recommended that the linked gateway of Athlone-Tullamore-Mullingar as currently referred in the NSS be superseded as by continuing to spread growth and development amongst numerous towns in the midlands this may inhibit and undermine the respective potential and performance of each town. It is recommended that the linked gateway in the NSS be replaced in the new National Planning Framework by Athlone as the principle Core Growth Urban Centre of the midlands with a population target upwards of 60,000. Athlone town has significant land banks available, including in the town centre, and the extensive existing service and infrastructure provision already in place, so can readily support such an expansion while maintaining a compact town centre that remains as the economic hub of the town.



- 3.2.4 This will support the wider competitiveness and attractiveness of the midlands, while also complementing the capital and other cities in the state.
- 3.2.5 Furthermore, it was found that Athlone town has all the attributes and infrastructure in place which is more in line with a small city. Therefore recognition of the town as a Second Tier City or at least a First Tier Growth Town with appropriate growth targets should be included in the National Planning Framework and wider Government policy.
- 3.2.6 From our review it is clear that the orderly expansion of Athlone as the principle Core Growth Centre of the midlands would positively address many of the opportunities and challenges set out in the *Issues Paper* that can be brought forward through the National Planning Framework Review process.
- 3.2.7 Our client would wish to continue working with the Department in further discussing and finalising the National Planning Framework to promote the orderly and proper planning and development of Athlone over the next decade.