

**12 September 2024**

**Re: Westmeath County Council (WCC) submission on the First Revision to the National Planning Framework (NPF)**

Dear Sir,

Westmeath County Council (WCC) welcome the timely publication of the revised National Planning Framework and appreciate the opportunity to further participate in and contribute towards setting the strategic planning context for Westmeath, aligned to national objectives and priorities. The broad range of issues which have been outlined in the publication are valued.

Since the adoption of the NPF in 2018, the policy and regulatory framework for land use planning and development in Ireland has undergone significant changes in response to shifting population demographics, sustained economic recovery and improved understanding and awareness of climate change. The manner in which the revised NPF addresses these matters will have significant bearing on the future growth and development of Westmeath including Athlone, a strategic Regional Growth Centre, Mullingar, a Key Town of the region together with Westmeath's network of vibrant towns and villages. The draft publication has been reviewed in this context with the following observations set out below:

**Implementing Effective Regional Development**

The revised NPF states that an average of approximately 50,000 new housing units per annum will be required to meet our needs over the coming years. It is anticipated that the population of the Eastern and Midland Region will increase by 470,000 by 2040 to c. 3 million. WCC are fully committed to contributing to the region's long-term sustainable development and achieving regional parity. While this presents a clear opportunity for Athlone (Regional Growth Centre) and Mullingar (Key Town), it may also serve as a challenge for WCC in the absence of adequate funding and the necessary frameworks for implementing plans and projects.

Athlone, Mullingar and the county's rural community network are experiencing heightened demand from prospective homebuyers. As we seek to sustainably accelerate the growth of these settlements in accordance with population projections and market demand, the practicality of compact / sequential growth is often determined by the availability of funding for improved transportation systems, capital improvement works and enabling infrastructure. Furthermore, these same place-making elements exert similar influence on Athlone or

Mullingar’s ability to attract, retain and sustain prospective employers, investment and economic opportunities. In a scenario where employment begins to lag behind population growth with commuter patterns reinforced, existing pressures on service provision across settlements will be heightened, particularly in the Midlands.

The forthcoming Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan and Mullingar Local Area Plan will address these particular matters in a localised context; however, it would be beneficial for the Draft First Revision to provide clear policy support acknowledging the critical role Westmeath will play in accommodating future population growth across the Eastern and Midland Region.

WCC also advocates for the delivery of appropriately scaled (commensurate with function) yet adequate housing provision across all areas of Westmeath. Such provision is necessary in order to support future economic development in a balanced manner, and it is important that the NPF does not introduce any artificial constraints that might constrain such growth.

#### **Delivering on Athlone as a Regional Centre**

Athlone has experienced sustained population growth since 2016 with 22,869 persons now living in the urban area as of 2022. This positive growth trend aligns with the town’s population target of +30,000 persons by 2031. Athlone is strategically positioned to serve as a dynamic hub for new and expanding communities, business and enterprise, 3<sup>rd</sup> level education and the ‘Knowledge Economy’, tourism and heritage. WCC working with Roscommon County Council have reinforced Athlone’s strategic role as a Regional Growth Centre, which has an influence that extends to all three Regional Assembly areas, by delivering such projects as the Athlone Urban Design and Regeneration Framework, Church Street Enhancement, the Athlone Town Centre Public Realm Enhancement, installation of the Athlone Greenway Bridge, significant flood relief works, Loughanaskin Regeneration Masterplan, and the ‘Putting the Heart Back into Monksland’ project.

There remains, however, distinct challenges facing the town such as housing delivery, developing a responsive transportation network, invigorating the local economy and tackling commercial vacancies and sustainably promoting the River Shannon’s tourism potential.

In this regard, WCC has devised a series of ‘Pipeline Projects’ on identified brownfield opportunity sites that are considered to have the potential for regenerative development of a nature and scale required to realise the ambition for Athlone as a driver of growth in accordance with its status as a “Regional Growth Centre”. Enhanced support and funding streams will be crucial to realising this vision and facilitating medium-to-long term growth in a sustainable manner.

#### **Mullingar – a Key Town of the Region**

Mullingar serves the region as a focal point for economic development, employment generation and service provision. Occupying a strategic location along the N4 & N52, with excellent inter-urban links to the capital and international airport by motorway and rail, the town has experienced success in fostering new enterprises and employment opportunities, and in particular, advanced manufacturing specialisms. The establishment of the Irish

Manufacturing Research, Ireland's leading research centre for manufacturing, at the National Science Park is indicative of this momentum. Supported by IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and local stakeholders, an increasing number of companies have located to the town. Specifically, there were over 1,410 businesses operating within 5km of Mullingar, providing approx. 9,828 jobs and employing c. 7,380 resident workers. The town's 2022 labour force participation rate was 62.1% with an employment-to-population ratio of 1.33, one of the highest overall ratios in the region.

As a Key Town, it is important that Mullingar has the ability to seek commensurate population and employment growth on high quality public transport corridors, coupled with investment in services, amenities and sustainable transport.

The availability of and for development, together facilitated by the delivery of critical strategic infrastructure, is essential to the sustainable growth of Mullingar in the future. Currently, there are environmental constraints on facilitating an additional water supply to the town. To secure a long-term supply for Mullingar, it is imperative that investment is made in the Water Supply Project and that it is delivered in a timely manner. This connection will ensure the growth potential of Mullingar is realised.

WCC welcomes the focus on land activation and active land management measures contained in the document. Notwithstanding, it should be acknowledged that multi-agency collaboration is essential for unlocking the development potential of publicly owned lands. In this regard, Mullingar has two strategically positioned public land banks, namely the former Columb Barracks and the former St Loman's Psychiatric Hospital, which have remained untouched for years. It is submitted that investment support should be sought to realise the development opportunities that present on these strategic sites in a timely manner. In the absence of same, the ability of Mullingar to meet its housing targets on brownfield sites (min. 30%) within the existing urban footprint may be compromised.

While welcoming NPO Objective 21, which supports the LDA in delivering housing on state-owned land in designated settlements, it is considered, having regard to the foregoing, that this policy objective should be extended to include Key Towns. Having considered the important role that Mullingar and other similar towns across the country play, further support in terms of policy backed by funding is necessary to ensure that Key Towns can deliver regenerative development for the benefit of the wider regions they serve. This includes the provision of inclusive social, cultural and sporting infrastructure necessary to help people live healthy, fulfilling and productive lives, regardless of age, ability or background.

### **Sustainable Transport Modes**

The importance of public transport infrastructure investment and initiatives for Westmeath, and indeed the wider Midlands, to support social and economic development is emphasised.

In this regard, support should be given to the re-opening of Killucan station, re-instating the Athlone Mullingar Rail line and the development of Mullingar Transport Museum at Mullingar Train Station.

### **Peatlands & Renewable Energy**

Lands in ownership of Bord na Móna and Coillte in the Midlands Region, a percentage of which lie in County Westmeath, should be subject to a holistic land use plan(s). These plans should prioritise the rollout of appropriate renewable energy infrastructure, recreational facilities, the protection and enhancement of carbon pools and nature conservation requirements. The opportunity to create a National Park to serve the Midlands and the Greater Dublin Area should also be included as an objective in the revised NPF.

Referring to NPO 75, it is noted that the Eastern and Midland Region has the highest additional renewable power capacity allocation for onshore wind (c. 1,966MW) and the second highest for solar PV (3,294MW) despite having the least area of land coverage. In terms of the proposed Regional Renewable Electricity Strategy (RRES), which will outline the associated regional renewable electricity capacity allocations for the region and the identification of specific targets for each of the constituent local authorities (NPO 76), it is submitted that clear, up-to-date guidelines for local authorities/regional assemblies relating to renewable energy should be developed in advance of the inclusion of such a commitment in the NPF. Sufficient flexibility should also be provided to ensure capacity allocations are equitably balanced across the region, targeting areas that are most suitable for delivering these targets. In this regard, WCC stresses the importance of widespread public consultation on these guidelines and strategies. Climate resilience must be achieved in co-ordination with our communities.

### **Planning for Diverse Rural Places**

Westmeath's countryside accommodates a diverse range of rural towns and villages, all of which contribute to the unique strengths and characteristics of the County. While the revised NPF supports diverse rural places, there is a need for enhanced policy provision that supports rural diversification and job creation across a diverse range of sectors, including agriculture, forestry, tourism and rural enterprise. Given the recent success of the Town Centre First programme rollout, the possibility of extending this policy to lower tier settlements should be investigated. The establishment of Town Teams and best practice initiatives have the potential to drive future progress, which in turn will benefit surrounding rural hinterlands.

WCC acknowledges that sustainable mobility options and public transport play a key role in the creation of vibrant rural communities, particularly for older citizens living in more remote areas. In this regard, there should be greater focus on the need for enhanced public transport linkages throughout the County's network of towns and villages, as well as greater regional and interregional connectivity to centres such as Portlaoise, Sligo and Letterkenny. There is

also a need to emphasise the importance of providing enhanced access and connectivity to regional assets such as TUS Athlone and the Midlands Regional Hospital in Mullingar.

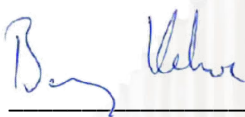
### **Funding Mechanisms**

The implementation of the revised NPF will be contingent upon the alignment of future funding streams with the national strategic objectives outlined in the revised NPF, the delivery of key enabling infrastructure and the settlement hierarchy prescribed therein. Future funding models need to expand beyond Ireland's five cities to provide specific funding allocations to Regional Growth Centres and Regional Key Towns in order to support the delivery of sustainable mobility systems, social infrastructure, enhanced green-blue infrastructure and low carbon / net zero development.

### **Conclusion**

The First Revision to the National Planning Framework represents an important milestone for Ireland, an opportunity to reaffirm our ambitions in managing the island's future growth in a sustainable and proactive manner. Westmeath County Council endorses the NPF's Vision and the various policy initiatives; however, as emphasised above, comprehensive mechanisms must be in place to support Local Authorities pursuing these ambitions in our towns and villages. Athlone and Mullingar's roles as population and economic centres will become increasingly prominent over the next few years, requiring physical and social infrastructural investment, housing delivery and environmental sustainability to support growing communities and successfully strengthen the broader Eastern and Midland Region.

It is requested that the points stated in this submission are taken into consideration as part of the final drafting of the revised NPF, and we would welcome the opportunity to further discuss or elaborate on the matters raised above, if you so wish.



Barry Kehoe

Chief Executive