



Tionól Reigiúnach Oirthir agus Lár-Tíre Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly

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Roscommon County Development Plan 2021-2027: Issues Paper

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly notes the publication of the 'Issues Paper' to inform the preparation of the Roscommon County Development Plan 2021-2027 and sets out hereunder observations on behalf of the Assembly. The submission has been prepared by the executive and approved by the members of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly at the meeting of 10th July 2020.

Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES)

The Council will be aware of the finalisation of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Region which was made on 28th June 2019. The RSES, prepared in accordance with the National Planning Framework, sets the context for each local authority within our Region to develop their county and city development plans in a manner that will ensure national, regional and local plans align. The RSES identifies regional assets, opportunities and pressures and provides appropriate policy responses in the form of Regional Policy Objectives. At this strategic level it provides a framework for investment to better manage spatial planning and economic development throughout the Region.

In line with the provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, the Planning Authority shall ensure, when making or varying the County Development Plan, that it is consistent with the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy, thus ensuring full alignment between local, regional and national planning policy. In this regard, the Assembly welcomes the publication of the Issues Paper to the public consultation of the Roscommon County Development Plan 2021-2027.

Legislative Context

As required by Section 11(2) of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, the Regional Assembly received notice from the Council on March 27th 2020, of its intention to review its existing County Development Plan and to prepare a new County Development Plan for its area.

Under Section 27A of the Planning & Development Act, 2000 (as inserted by Section 17 of the Planning and Development Act, 2010) the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly, is obliged to prepare submissions / observations to be submitted to the relevant Planning Authority and copied to the Office of the Planning Regulator.

The submission of the Regional Assembly shall include, but shall not be limited to, recommendations regarding a number of matters including, policies or objectives of the Government in relation to national and regional population targets and the best distribution of residential development and related employment development with a view to promoting consistency with the RSES and assisting in drafting the Core Strategy; promoting regional development through maximising the potential of the region; planning for the best use of land having regard to location, scale and density of new development to benefit from investment of public funds in transport infrastructure and public transport services; and collaboration between the Planning Authority and the Regional Assembly in respect of integrated planning for transport and land use, and the promotion of sustainable transportation strategies in urban and rural areas, including the promotion of measures to reduce anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions and address the necessity of adaptation to climate change.

Whilst the comprehensive list of issues under the various themes of the Issues Paper are fully noted, the scope of this submission mainly focuses on issues directly linked to the Eastern and Midland Region, along with recommendations as required under Section 27A of the Planning and Development Act 2000 as amended.

Consistency and Alignment with Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies

The Issues Paper states that the development plan sets out the overall strategy and vision for the proper planning and sustainable development of the county over the 6 year plan period, and that the Plan will be prepared in the context of the framework of national and regional strategies and guidelines, and must be in accordance with the provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended). County Roscommon borders the Eastern and Midland Region and therefore shall be cognisant of the long-term strategic planning and economic framework of the adjoining Eastern and Midland Region as expressed in the EMRA RSES.

Core Strategy and Settlement Policy

The Regional Assembly note the section of the Issues Paper devoted to the Core Strategy and Settlement Policy. Project Ireland 2040 – The National Planning Framework (NPF) defines Athlone as a key Regional Centre and this designation has been reinforced through both the RSES for the Northern and Western Region and the Eastern and Midland Region. In formulating the Core Strategy and related settlement policy, the Council are required to ensure consistency with the RSES and NPF in this regard.

Indeed, the NPF and the aforementioned Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies recognise the strategic location and scale of population, employment and services within Athlone. Furthermore, it is recognised that Athlone has an influence across regional assembly areas. Given the importance of this, a key objective of the County Development Plan will be to prioritise the preparation of the joint Urban Area Plan for Athlone in tandem with Westmeath County Council, to ensure that the town and environs has the capacity to grow sustainably and to secure investment, as the key regional centre in the Midlands. The RSES identifies a number of issues that should be supported and provided for as part of the Joint Urban Area Plan. This includes, for instance; the development of a vision; determination of a plan boundary that supports the achievement of compact growth targets and delivery of key land banks (including Monksland/Bellanamullia); a collaborative economic strategy; regeneration of town centre lands; identification of infrastructure and transport priorities; maximising the tourism potential of the Shannon and Lough Ree; development of an Athlone Waterfront Strategy and an open space strategy.

In addition to the preparation of the Joint Urban Area Plan for Athlone, there are a number of key Regional Policy Objectives contained as part of the RSES, that should be supported as part of the Roscommon County Development Plan. This includes; the promotion of Athlone as a key location for regional economic development; support for the role of Athlone IT, including achieving its status as a Technological University; the promotion of Athlone as a key tourism destination; support and delivery of ongoing flood relief works and; support for the development of joint economic, transport and retail plans for Athlone in a coordinated manner.

Other Related Areas

The RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region identifies the potential for linked tourism opportunities with County Roscommon. In particular, potential exists to develop a cross sectoral approach to maximise the tourism potential of the River Shannon and Lough Ree, involving Westmeath, Roscommon and Longford County Councils with other relevant stakeholders. The RSES also identifies the opportunity to develop a National Park based on the raised bog peatlands of the Midlands in the emerging Lough Ree and Mid-Shannon Wilderness Park that could act as an economic driver in the area focusing on eco-tourism and addressing climate change adaptation and mitigation whilst also acting as an important nature reserve addressing conservation and biodiversity.

From an economic perspective, the RSES identifies that Cross-boundary and inter-regional partnerships should be prioritised and nurtured, and references the Upper Shannon Erne Future Economic Project in this regard. The Upper Shannon Erne Future Economic Project, which is a collaboration between the Cavan, Leitrim, Longford and Roscommon local authorities with ESB and Bord na Móna, provides the opportunity to deliver cross regional economic projects, exploring and developing opportunities in renewable energy, tourism, and digital strategies.

Conclusion

The Regional Assembly welcome the publication of the Issues Paper which marks the beginning of the alignment of planning policy at county and local levels with Regional and National Policy. The Assembly look forward to corresponding with the Council on the forthcoming stages of the County Development Plan process.

It should also be noted that the officials of the Regional Assembly are available to discuss the matters raised above and will be available throughout the County Development Plan process.

Regards,



Jim Conway

Director

Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly

14th July 2020