

Roscommon Town Draft Local Area Plan

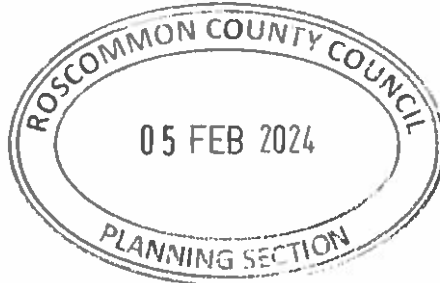
Forward Planning Section

Roscommon County Council

Áras and Chontae

Roscommon

F42 VR98



5<sup>th</sup> February 2024

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: Submission to the draft Roscommon Town Local Area Plan 2024-2030**

I welcome the opportunity to comment on the draft Roscommon Town Local Area Plan (LAP) 2024-2030. I recently returned home to live in Roscommon town after leaving to go to university over 23 years ago. My return was only made possible by the new hybrid working environment introduced post-Covid. I was one of the fortunate few to be able to purchase a suitable house in Roscommon town with my wife to raise our 3 young children. Roscommon Town is a great small town to live in with all the modern facilities and amenities of a larger town. I know of many families, similar to ourselves, looking to move to Roscommon but unfortunately finding it very difficult to either find a suitable existing house or build a house in Roscommon Town and environs.

Personally I never thought I would get an opportunity to move home to Roscommon to raise my family. A global pandemic and the changing working environment has given me that opportunity. For me in writing this submission, rather than relying on a global pandemic in the future, I want my children to have an opportunity to stay in Roscommon following their education and for them to be able to live and work as young adults in the town.

**1.0 Vision and Strategic Objectives**

The Strategic Vision in the draft LAP sets out to 'Allow Roscommon to harness its unique heritage and logistically advantageous location in order to develop as a vibrant destination, capable of attracting new enterprise, new residents and new employment opportunities. Roscommon town will serve as an exemplar sustainable community, where civic pride and carbon reduction are promoted, to create a modern, accessible and liveable town centre which respects its heritage and embraces its future'.

This is a strong vision, however whilst the draft LAP identifies high level themes and proposes land zoning, I consider that there is further opportunity to outline a clearer 5-year plan to tackle emerging challenges and opportunities that are specific to Roscommon Town and deliver on the ambitious vision. There is a need to do more to grow the role of Roscommon town as a driver of economic development for the county and region and to reverse some worrying trends in census and other state body reports. There is a need to attract young professionals and young families to the town. In a time of a housing crisis, the Roscommon Local Area Plan should be looking to new opportunities rather than solely relying on private developers to provide housing.

There is enormous potential for Roscommon Town to grow and develop to its full potential as an economic driver for the county and region whilst providing a quality of life to all the people who live, work and visit. Roscommon is in a great central location in the country with 100,000 people living within 30 minute drive and over 10 towns with population greater than 10,000 people within 60

minute drive. The town is located twenty minutes from Athlone, one of the four 'Regional Growth Centres' in the Government's 'Ireland 2040' National Planning Framework. Athlone has experienced accelerated growth in recent years with population over 50% greater than 2011 and Roscommon can benefit from this rapid growth.

The new hybrid working environment has changed the way the world works for a large number of workers in the country. This change represents a huge opportunity to further build on recent infrastructural improvements in Roscommon town and firmly establish the town as a great place to live. Roscommon town offers a good work-life balance with a strong mix of affordable housing, leisure facilities and amenities, retail, cafes, good connectivity and plenty of green spaces.

The Plan should be the overarching blueprint with targeted projects/developments to achieve the key objectives over a 5-year timeline to ensure that Roscommon thrives into the future.

### 1.1 State Body Collaboration

It does not appear that the draft LAP has considered some recent State Body proposed infrastructural projects e.g. Cycle connects, TII Cycle Network, Area based transport plan. The draft Plan does not clearly identify the recently completed and proposed infrastructural improvements (as summarised in Section 2.3 below). There are no clear policies or projects identified to grow tourism in the town. Similarly there is no specific transport measures proposed to improve linkages to major urban centres.

It would be good if the LAP could provide a more cohesive plan with all state bodies consulted.

### 2.0 Challenges

- Census 2022 data identified Roscommon as the County with the second oldest population, with an increase in average age of over 2 years since the census of 2011.
- The age dependency (proportion of people both under 15 and over 64 years with the working age population) is 62.9% up from 55.9% in 2011. Roscommon Town has the 'biggest percentage of adults living with their parents – 11%'.  
Roscommon has the second lowest percentage working from home of 26.5% compared with the national average of 32.2%.  
Roscommon has the second highest proportion of people driving to work.  
Housing Completion data showed only 7 units completed in Roscommon Town in 2022 – a significant increase in housing supply output is required to attract young adults and young families to Roscommon. The LAP should be identifying opportunities and setting out an overall strategy for the proposed planning and sustainable development of Roscommon town and its people.
- No foreign direct investment or technologies investment in business park/IDA sites. In order to attract foreign direct investment, there is a need to demonstrate ability to attract and develop appropriate skills (talent); The existence of clusters in specific industry sectors/activities; Regional infrastructure and place-making, including social and cultural capital; Availability of suitable property solutions.

Roscommon Town should be the setting itself up to be the main driver in trying to reverse the adverse trends above for Roscommon County.

### 2.1 Sustainable Mobility / Transport Infrastructure Review

In 2022 the Western Development Commission (WDC) developed a Sustainability Mobility Index for 35 rural towns in the seven county Western Region (Refer to Appendix A). This report presents the Sustainability Mobility Index to provide a better understanding of active modes and public transport in a rural context with an aim to move to more sustainable and active travel and reduce carbon emissions from personal transport. Roscommon Town scores in top three towns in this comparison.



The table below highlights key opportunities to further strengthen Roscommon's sustainable mobility and transport links.

WDC Mobility Index Category	Opportunities / Lowest scoring areas
Readiness for Low Carbon Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of active travel (walking, cycling) and public transport to secondary school (score 3 out of 10)</li> <li>• Cycle parking at public transport and in town (score 4 out of 10)</li> <li>• Cycle paths or marked cycle lanes (score 0 out of 10)</li> </ul>
Access to Services and Social Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evening public transport service to and from 10k town</li> <li>• Use of active travel and public transport to primary school (1 out of 10)</li> <li>• No. of publicly provided disabled parking spaces (2 out of 10)</li> <li>• Public transport travel time to international airport (5 out of 10)</li> </ul>
Access to Employment and Economic Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public transport level of service to 10k town (2 out of 10)</li> <li>• Use of active travel and public transport to work (4 out of 10)</li> </ul>

The report identified two major shortcomings – i.e., no motorway and no national primary road through the town.

N61 realignment – two lane carriageway or minimal 2+1 lane upgrade is required to improve connectivity to Athlone and M6 Dublin/Galway/Limerick. Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Region identifies need for infrastructural upgrades between Athlone and the Key Towns of the area namely Longford, Mullingar, Tullamore, Portlaoise and Roscommon will serve to create a more cohesive region and allow for the Key Towns to capitalise on Athlone's role as a Regional Growth Centre.'

Unfortunately, the new route selected for the re-alignment of the Ballaghaderreen to Scramoge Road will see the N5 move the road 6km further away from Roscommon Town. This decision by Roscommon County Council/TII will unfortunately reduce long-term economic benefits to Roscommon town and connectivity to Ireland West Airport at Knock. Roscommon County Council and TII need to fast-track an improved road link to the realigned N5.

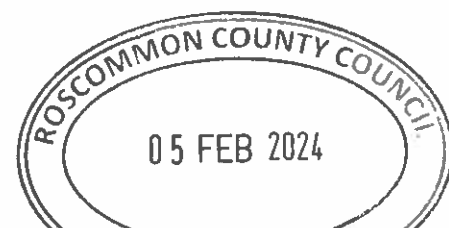
Upgrading of N63 to M17 Motorway also recommended to improve access to Galway City, Limerick City and Shannon Airport.

## 2.2 Strengths and Opportunities

Roscommon is a Key Destination Town in the RSES. Roscommon has an advantageous geographical location in the country.

Roscommon Town scores highly using work-life balance metrics as recently identified in Switcher.ie survey of towns greater than 10,000 population.

- ✓ Broadband speeds and 5G mobile coverage
- ✓ Green space – historical landmarks, public parks and garden
- ✓ Office - Commercial vacancy rates are high in the town. Considerable number of commercial properties that could be ideal location for overseas company post-brexit or Semi-State company looking for hybrid working base for relocated workforce



- ✓ 4 hectares of land available in Roscommon Business Parks
- ✓ Transport options – proximity to major roads and bus stops
- ✓ Access to medical care - GP Surgeries
- ✓ Access to house – cheap place to live – average house price is 38% lower than average price nationwide.
- ✓ Sport Facilities and Leisure centres
- ✓ Café, coffee shops nearby
- ✓ Primary schools
- ✓ Crime rate – Roscommon and Provision should be made for suitably located and zoned land to accommodate a large industry/enterprise locating to the town.

### 2.3 Recent and Proposed Infrastructural Improvements

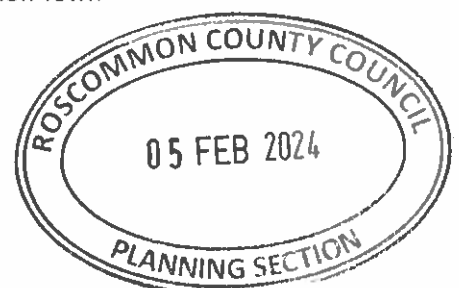
Lists below are not exhaustive but indicative of significant infrastructural projects.

#### Positive Developments:

- 53 Social Housing Units on the Walk,
- Development of Public Realm/ Civic Square
- Indigenous Industry/Commercial Development –Liden Designs, Mark Lohan Kitchens, etc.
- Fibre Broadband to Roscommon Town
- Mayo Roscommon Hospice Facility
- Uisce Éireann €20m investment in town's sewerage and stormwater network
- Roscommon Gaels – Lisnamult Pitch Development
- Dr. Hyde Park GAA Stadium Upgrade
- Kiltewan Recreational Walks
- Leisure Centre Upgrade
- OPW - Opening of South-West Tower of Roscommon Castle for a small number of days, repair works at castle.
- Sacred Heart Church Refurbishment
- Community Events – Roscommon Sports Sponsorship, St. Stephen's Day Western Alzheimer's Society, Roscommon Gaels Stand Opening, Roscommon Harriers Race Events, Roscommon Community Challenge by Roscommon Sports Partnership
- Festivals - Christmas Lights Committee, Roscommon Town Team Christmas Festival, Country and Western Concert at Racecourse, Arts Festival
- Lisnamult Residents Association Ltd promotion and development of the local community. They have undertaken a number of successful projects such as the building of the Lisnamult Community Centre, Development of Youth and Sports activities, development of a Playground, Greenfields Childcare facility.

#### Challenges / issues:

- Closure of high-profile businesses in central location business in 2024 - Ulster Bank, Post Office and long-term family business e.g. Eight til Late, MJ Farrell Jewellers
- Closure of Local privately owned Creche
- Closing of public access to walks at Rindoon Castle / Deserted Medieval Town
- Lamb Festival discontinued.
- N5 Realignment Route Selection
- TII N61 Ballymurray to Knockcroghery Road deferment by TII despite a number of safety issues on the N61 plus route exceeding its capacity.
- Proposed location of CycleConnects route outside of Roscommon Town



### **Future Positive Developments Planned (as per Local Media)**

- GRETB Training Centre Proposal
- Roscommon GAA Centre of Excellence
- Roscommon Community – Athletics Track
- In 2021, iRos Sport Centre on grounds of Roscommon Convent Grounds – major indoor centre and outdoor sports park
- New Footpath / cycle track linking Golf Club and Athlone Road
- Creation of pedestrian and cycle routes to create a low-carbon transport town.
- Sacred Heart Hospital New Unit
- New Park and Cycle ways along the Circular Road from the Lanesboro Street Roundabout to the Athlone Roundabout
- In 2022, Part 8 Planning for new Cycle and Walkway Links - Public realm improvement works are also part of the plans on Church Street, Goff Street, the N61 and N63, as well as on Main Street
- Upgrade of Loughnanene Park Playground
- Mote Park Playscape and Sensory Trail
- six-year lease of the venue, which is known locally as 'The Lough' to Cricket Club by Roscommon County Council

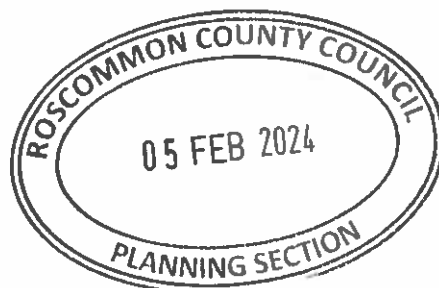
### **3.0 Recommendations – Key Strategic Initiatives**

In a time of great change, brings great opportunity for a town like Roscommon to develop an ambitious plan for Roscommon town. The mission should be to develop a great town that offers opportunities for our young people to further education and professional employment whilst offering a unique unspoiled tourism experience of the real Ireland. This is a great opportunity to make Roscommon an attractive place to live, work, invest, do business, visit and invest in, whilst ensuring a transition to a low carbon and climate resilient town.

Whilst the Plan does provide the specific policy objective base to guide its future development, I do consider that there is further opportunity to focus on the implementation of targeted measures and key priorities over the 5-year Plan. These measures should complement many of the positive initiatives completed by Roscommon County Council in recent years – Town Centre Public Realm, etc.

By provided a clarity on the targeted priorities and timelines, it will enable Roscommon County Council the foundation and pathway to effectively engage with other state and community bodies to allow Roscommon Town to flourish into the future. There is a need for an integrated approach whereby Roscommon County Council and other public bodies (TII, NTA, Uisce Éireann, etc.) can deliver on the plan over the next 5 years. A cohesive plan with alliances with key organisations like GRETB, TII, NTA and other community bodies to ensure that all organisation are co-ordinated in achieving the vision.

The LAP needs to focus on identify targeted measures and key priorities and focus on the implementation of these over the 5-year lifespan of the Plan.



Key Priorities	Targeted Measure
Availability of high-quality affordable homes for young adults and families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Need to provide home ownership opportunities for people in their twenties and thirties that are been driven out of our larger cities to Australia and abroad</li> <li>✓ In the midst housing crisis, draft LAP model is relying on housing development to be completed by private developers. This is a high-risk strategy, RCC should take more proactive approach in provision of affordable houses by providing serviced sites (as previously completed in Hawthorn Drive), reduce development rates &amp; levies, etc. in co-ordination with other state bodies and housing bodies/co-operatives.</li> <li>✓ Expand community, cultural and civil amenities – ensure enough schools, childcare and community facilities e.g. upgrade Lisnamult and Hawthorn Drive playground facilities</li> </ul>
Increase provision of open space and green infrastructure to improved health and well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Improve cycle and walking tourism/recreational infrastructure and connectivity to town centre, schools, train/bus stop,</li> <li>✓ Develop biodiversity 'haven' with greenway through flood zone along River Jiggy, etc.</li> <li>✓ Expand Loughnanene Park into 'the lough' and surrounding area</li> <li>✓ Develop cycle lanes/shared surfaces for tourism to Mote Park, Kiltewan Walks, Portun Harbour, Lecarrow, Rindoon Abandoned Medieval Village aligned with CycleConnects, National Cycle Network (there appears to be contradiction in preferred routes between NTA Cycle Connects Plan (2022) and the Department of Transport National Cycle Network Plan (2023). It is critical that any cycle infrastructure goes through Roscommon Town</li> </ul>
Build on Roscommon's central location and remove barriers to development through enhanced transport connectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Increased bus, train time frequencies to Dublin, Athlone, Galway</li> <li>✓ Upgrade vital arterial route of N61 (critical link to the Athlone Regional Town, M6 Motorway Dublin/Galway) – nearest 10k centre</li> <li>✓ Upgrade of N63 (link to Motorway M17 Limerick/Cork, Shannon Airport) – nearest 50k centre</li> <li>✓ Upgrade of the N63 – need to complete improvements to new N5 road urgently (link to N5 – with the proposed realignment of the N5 Ballaghaderreen to Scramoge will see N5 move 6km north of Tulsk and 6km further away from Roscommon town. This is a huge lost opportunity lost by Roscommon County Council. As a Mayo TD remarked the N5 is 'a game changer for Mayo industries and tourism', unfortunately the same can't be said for the benefit to Roscommon.</li> </ul>
Vibrant Town Centre with strong retail and commercial base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Roscommon need to build on the development of the public realm by offering eating, drinking, culture, sports and night-time services.</li> <li>✓ Town Centre Regeneration: Further support business and potential businesses to enable the recently development town centre realm – cafes, restaurants, – with recent closures of Ulster Bank, Eight 'til late shop, Post office closure is a significant risk to the success of the public realm.</li> <li>✓ Roscommon County Council to investigate in co-ops, profit-share partnerships with community groups and SMEs, rates for café/restaurant/bars as economy emerges from the pandemic</li> <li>✓ Taxi service urgently needed for late night economy – explore co-op or similar opportunities</li> </ul>



<p>Become a Sustainability, Innovation Technology Hub and Hybrid Working Hub to make town more attractive for inward investment and employment opportunities for Young Adults</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Roscommon's central location in the country makes ideal base for:</li> <li>✓ Hybrid working facility that would provide serviced conference rooms, meeting room, catering facilities for large nationwide companies</li> <li>✓ Become a hub for sustainability and off-site manufacture e.g. Liden Design, Mark Lohan Kitchens. Explore opportunities under the EU Just Transition Funds (EUJTF)</li> <li>✓ RSES 'Identify opportunities to benefit from investment in recent times in modern incubation and innovation infrastructure for ICT and related companies...Roscommon town is ideally placed to benefit from further expansion</li> <li>✓ IDA Site visits – promote more IDA visits for foreign direct investment - very low number of site visits to the county in recent years</li> </ul>
<p>Promote third level education and apprenticeship opportunities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Support the development of the GRETB Training Centre proposed for apprenticeship, further education training. RSES 'pursue the development of interlinkages between third-level institutions and off-campus locations in Roscommon town'</li> <li>✓ Become an 'engine room' for training, apprenticeships etc for retrofitting homes, Modern Methods of Construction</li> </ul>
<p>Develop Roscommon Town as a multi-sports and tourism destination</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Promote Roscommon Town as 'The heart of undiscovered Ireland'</li> <li>✓ Promote wellbeing and slower pace of life in Roscommon 'wander miles of woodland trails, explore our ancient past and just enjoy time together as a family'.</li> <li>✓ 'unlock the treasures of this land of castles and ancient kings, of stately homes and wonderful landscapes, where shimmering rivers, lakes and forest parks abound' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 'access for all' similar to Ballyleague facility – footpaths, cycle lanes around the town for physically challenged, elderly and young families with buggies, etc.</li> <li>○ Cycle way to Mote Park to Portrun Harbour to Rindoon Medieval Village</li> <li>○ Roscommon Castle – open up tower permanently, build café/tourism centre. Opportunity Site 4 could be location.</li> <li>○ Tours to Strokestown Park House, Candidate UNESCO World Heritage Site of Rathcroghan Archaeological complex, Lough Ree Ameniteis</li> <li>○ Sports Destination – build on recent and proposed infrastructure in the town</li> <li>○ Festivals – Christmas Lights, Halloween (Rathcroghan/Owennagat Cave gateway to underworld, merge of easter parade &amp; Lamb festival, country and western festival</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Finally, I wish to thank Roscommon County Council for the opportunity to provide these observations on the draft LAP and I hope that they are considered when finalising the LAP.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have require any clarification on my submission.

Your sincerely,

John Hynes

B.E., CEng, FIEI

