



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

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Draft Westmeath Local Economic and Community Plan 2023-2028

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly notes the publication of the draft Westmeath Local Economic and Community Plan 2023-2028 and sets out hereunder observations on behalf of the Regional 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 12th April 2024.

1.0 Overall Context

1.1 Role and Function of the Regional Assembly

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) is part of the regional tier of governance in Ireland. It is primarily focused on driving regional development through the formulation, adoption and implementation of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES), oversight and coordination of County Development Plans and Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs), management of EU Programmes, EU project participation, implementation of national economic policy and additional functions working with the National Oversight and Audit Commission. As a strategic policy body, EMRA also participates in the consultation process of other relevant strategic plans and policies.

This submission relates to the statutory role of the Assembly regarding the Westmeath Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP).

1.2 Legislative Context

Section 44 of the Local Government Reform Act 2014 (amending Section 66C of the Local Government Act 2001), provides that every Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) shall be consistent with any Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy as well as the City/County Development Plan that applies to the area of the LECP. It also states that the local authority shall submit a draft of the economic and community elements of the LECP to the Regional Assembly and it shall adopt a statement on the draft Plan for consideration by the elected members of that local authority.

The Act requires that the consideration of a draft plan by the Regional Assembly, shall relate to its consistency with –

- (i) The core strategy and the objectives of the development plan of the local authority concerned,

- (ii) Any regional spatial and economic strategy that may apply, and
- (iii) The need to consider consistency between the economic and community elements of the draft plan.

The Local Economic and Community Plans (LECP) Guidelines, published in November 2021, assist with the preparation of the draft LECPs, with a key focus on sustainability, consultation and engagement with local communities and businesses. The guidelines also require local authorities to consider housing needs when formulating both the economic and community elements of their LECPs in accordance with the commitment in Housing for All, the Government's national plan for housing to 2030.

The LECP process consists of two parts: the development of an overall LECP framework detailing the High-Level Goals and sustainable community and economic objectives, including outcomes for a six-year period; and the development of Implementation Plans of the objectives of the LECP.

1.3 The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Region

The RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region was made by the Members of the Assembly in June 2019 and is a strategic plan and investment framework to shape future growth throughout the Region. The overall vision of the Strategy is to create a sustainable and competitive Region that supports the health and wellbeing of our people and places, from urban to rural, with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunity for all. The vision is supported by sixteen Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSOs) that are framed around the three Key Principles of Healthy Placemaking, Climate Action and Economic Opportunity.

A primary statutory objective of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) is to support the implementation of the National Planning Framework (NPF), alignment with the investment priorities of the National Development Plan 2021-2030 (and thus Project Ireland 2040), by coupling new development with the requisite investment in services and infrastructure. The RSES is of critical importance for the delivery of Project Ireland 2040, given that it is the succeeding tier of policy delivery in Ireland.

The RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region presents a Spatial Strategy, devised and informed by a complementary Economic Strategy, which provides a framework for future growth, ensuring the delivery of effective regional development through the realisation of viable and vital places. This includes championing the capital city of Dublin as a smart, climate resilient and global city region; identifying Regional Growth Centres which act as regional economic drivers and supports for their wider catchment areas; and promoting a network of large economically active Key Towns that provide employment and services to their surrounding areas. All of this is supported by Self-Sustaining Growth Towns, Self-Sustaining Towns and a network of multifaceted Rural Places. The RSES identifies Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns within the Region, however Self-Sustaining Growth Towns, Self-Sustaining Towns and Rural areas are to be defined by Development Plans.

In relation to County Westmeath, the RSES identifies Athlone as a Regional Growth Centre and Mullingar as a Key Town, both of which are located in the Gateway Region as set out in the RSES settlement and growth strategies.

Athlone is strategically located in the centre of Ireland as a gateway to the west between Dublin and Galway. The RSES states that it is a key node between Dublin and Galway on the River Shannon, with direct national connectivity to towns such as Longford, Mullingar, Tullamore, Maynooth, Portlaoise, Ballinasloe and Roscommon. Due to its scale of population, employment and services, Athlone acts as a key regional centre for an extensive catchment that extends into the Northern and Western Region. Athlone's employment and housing potential, historic centre and cultural assets, along with its attractive natural environment along the banks of the River Shannon, provide for significant tourism opportunities and an enhanced quality of life for both residents and visitors to the town.

The key priorities identified in the RSES for Athlone are to promote the continued sustainable and compact growth of the town as a regional driver, with a target population of 30,000 up to 2031, providing for an enhanced public realm and regeneration in the town centre along with significant employment growth linked to the further development of Athlone Institute of Technology (officially dissolved and succeeded by the Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest (TUS) on the 16th of July 2021) and building on the town's existing strong economic base and enterprise clusters. In order to enhance co-ordination of development in Athlone, where the town and its environs lie within the combined functional area of two local authorities and two regional assemblies, the RSES considers the preparation and adoption of a Joint Urban Area Plan (UAP) to be vital for Westmeath County Council and Roscommon County Council.

The Key Town of Mullingar, with a population of 20,928 in 2016, is located on the Dublin to Sligo rail line and M4 motorway. The RSES recognises that the town provides an essential role in supporting population and job growth and acts as a crucial economic centre for the surrounding hinterland. The key priorities for the town of Mullingar, as outlined in the RSES, are the advancement of the town through the promotion of economic development and employment creation; the development of the town's assets in built and natural heritage; continued investment in arts, culture and outdoor recreational activities; and continued development of the tourist economy.

Section 3.1 of the RSES outlines the Growth Strategy for the overall Eastern and Midland Region which includes a number of measures relevant to County Westmeath as follows;

- Target growth of the Regional Growth Centres of Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk as regional drivers.
- Support vibrant rural areas with a network of towns and villages.
- Embed a network of Key Towns through the Region to deliver sustainable regional development.
- Support the transition to a low carbon, climate resilient and environmentally sustainable Region.

Section 3.2 of the RSES identifies the key Growth Enablers for the Region which include a number of measures relevant to County Westmeath as follows;

- Promote global connectivity and regional accessibility as part of an integrated land use and transport strategy, with a focus on protecting national assets and enhanced inter-regional connectivity.
- Target significant growth in the Regional Growth Centres of Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk to enable them to act as regional drivers, with a focus on improving local economies and quality of life to attract investment and the preparation of urban area plans (UAPs).
- Promote compact urban growth to realise targets of at least 50% of all new homes to be built, to be within or contiguous to the existing built-up area of Dublin city and suburbs and a target of at least 30% for other urban areas.
- Embed a network of Key Towns throughout the Region, which have the capacity to deliver sustainable compact growth and employment for their catchments in tandem with enabling public transport, infrastructure and services.
- Promote balanced growth in a limited number of economically active settlements which have the identified capacity and potential for self-sustaining growth.
- Promote targeted ‘catch up’ investment to support self-sustaining local employment, and in services, sustainable transport and amenities in places that have experienced rapid commuter driven population growth.
- Promote regeneration and revitalisation of small towns and villages and support local enterprise and employment opportunities to ensure their viability as service centres for their surrounding rural areas.
- Support rural areas by harnessing natural resources to develop renewables, recreation and tourism opportunities including green infrastructure planning and the development of an integrated network of greenways, blueways and peatways.

In addition to the above, Section 3.2 of the RSES specifies key Growth Enablers for the Gateway Region which include a number of measures relevant to County Westmeath as follows;

- Support continued growth of Athlone, with a focus on quality of life and securing the investment to fulfil its role as a key Regional Growth Centre and economic driver in the centre of Ireland.
- ‘Catch up’ investment to promote consolidation and improvement in the sustainability of those areas that have experienced significant population growth but have a weak level of services and employment for their residents.
- Regeneration of small towns and villages, with a focus on the identification of rural town, village and rural regeneration priorities to bring vibrancy to these areas.
- Diversification and growth of smart specialisation of local economies with a strong focus on clustering including sustainable farming and food production, tourism, marine, energy and renewables, bioeconomy and circular economy, with a focus on publicly owned peatlands in the midlands, to support a ‘Just’ transition and realise the benefits of green technologies.
- Promote the Region as a key destination for tourism, leisure and recreation activities and

support the development of an integrated network of greenways, blueways and peatways while ensuring that high value assets and amenities are protected and enhanced.

The Economic Strategy of the RSES has five key principles which include smart specialisation, clustering, placemaking, orderly growth and future proof. This Strategy includes a retail hierarchy for the Region, as outlined in the RSES under Chapter 6 Table 6.1. This identifies Athlone and Mullingar as Level 2 (Major Town Centres and County Town Centres), and Castlepollard as a Level 3 (Town and/or District Centres and Sub-County Town Centres) of the retail hierarchy.

In relation to community development, the RSES outlines support for community and adult education providers who are already providing formal and non-formal education to targeted disadvantaged groups and who have already identified the barriers to participation in lifelong learning such as childcare, transport and rural isolation to increase participation rates and support progression into further education and employment. The RSES also highlights the importance of recreation and sporting facilities including blueways and greenways, including the development of the Old Rail Trail between Athlone to Mullingar, which highlights the potential to develop disused railway lines in the Region.

The draft LECP submitted outlines the principal statutory purpose of the RSES to support the implementation of Project Ireland 2040 and the economic policies and objectives of the Government. It is further stated that the Westmeath LECP supports the Regional Strategic Outcomes of the RSES, which is welcomed by the Regional Assembly. This is discussed further in Section 3 of this submission.

2.0 Overview of the draft Framework LECP

The draft Framework document for the Westmeath LECP was received on 26th February 2024 and contains the following sections:

- Foreword (TBC)
- LECP Preparation
- Socio-economic Statement and High-Level Goals
- Consultation Report
- Action and Implementation Plan
- Monitoring, Evaluation and Review
- Appendices

The draft LECP sets out the following vision statement for County Westmeath:

“To create and facilitate sustainable economic and community development throughout the County that supports the health and well-being of the people of Westmeath, providing an attractive destination, as a place in which to live, work, invest, do business and visit, offering high quality employment and educational opportunities within sustainable communities whilst safeguarding the environmental, culture, heritage and tourism assets of the County.”

The strategy of the draft LECP is guided by six High-Level Goals which are supported by eighteen objectives. The six High-Level Goals are as follows:

HLG 1	Support a proactive response to the challenge of climate change.
HLG 2	Develop an inclusive and equitable society that supports our vibrant urban and rural communities.
HLG 3	Improve health and well-being of our citizens.
HLG 4	Support sustainable economic activity, employment and education towards a smart green economy.
HLG 5	Enhance economic and social infrastructure, including housing.
HLG 6	Promote and protect our rich culture and heritage and realise our tourism potential.

The draft LECP indicates that these High-Level Goals, which set the direction of the LECP, were devised based on a review of international, national, regional and local policies and strategies. The content of the draft LECP, including the High-Level Goals, will be discussed in the following sections of this report.

3.0 Evaluation of Consistency with the RSES

The draft LECP document states that the Westmeath LECP considered the framework included in the Local Economic and Community Plan Guidelines 2021 for the preparation, consultation, development of objectives and outcomes, finalisation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the plan. In this regard, the following are noted from the draft document submitted to EMRA for consideration.

3.1 Policy Context

Section 1.2 of the draft LECP ‘Policy Framework’ notes that the LECP Guidelines 2021 require LECP alignment with a range of policies and strategies. Summary outlines of international, national, regional and local policies and strategies that were considered in the development of the Westmeath LECP 2023–2028 are provided. These include the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the European Green Deal, the National Planning Framework and the National Development Plan under Project Ireland 2040, Climate Action Plan 2021, the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region, the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027 and, the Westmeath Climate Change Adaptation Strategy 2019-2024. Appendix 1 of the draft LECP also includes a high-level policy and strategy reference list.

While the designation of Athlone as a Regional Growth Centre and the identification of Mullingar as a Key Town is referred to under the summary outline of *Project Ireland 2040 – National Development Plan (NDP) 2021-2030* in Section 1.2 of the draft LECP, the importance of Athlone as Regional Growth Centre and Mullingar as a Key Town as set out in the RSES settlement and growth strategies should be afforded greater emphasis in the final LECP. Furthermore, the draft LECP incorrectly states that Mullingar was identified as a Key Town in the National Planning Framework. It is the relevant regional

spatial and economic strategy that identifies and designates any Key Towns. The final LECP should refer appropriately to the designation of Mullingar as a Key Town in the Gateway Region as set out in Table 4.2 of the RSES - Settlement Hierarchy and explicitly reference the key priorities of the RSES in relation to County Westmeath. The Regional Assembly further considers that the draft LECP could be enhanced by setting out the retail hierarchy for the Region, as outlined in the RSES under Chapter 6, Table 6.1 which identifies Athlone and Mullingar as Level 2 (Major Town Centres and County Town Centres), and Castlepollard as Level 3 (Town and/or District Centres and Sub-County Town Centres) within the retail hierarchy.

Overall, however, the Regional Assembly considers that the policy considerations are in line with the LECP ministerial guidelines and are consistent with the policies and objectives of the RSES in so far as it relates to the administrative area of Westmeath County Council. Regarding the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027, the draft LECP states that the LECP is consistent with the County Development Plan. Notwithstanding, it is considered that more in-depth commentary should be provided in order to clearly demonstrate that the LECP is consistent with the core strategy and objectives of the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027, in accordance with the LECP Guidelines 2021.

3.2 Socio-Economic Profile, Consultation Process and SCOT Analysis

Socio-Economic Profile

Section 3 of the draft LECP provides information regarding the socio-economic profile of County Westmeath. It is noted that a proportion of the information and figures provided arise from information gathered from the most recent CSO Census 2022 as follows:

- The Preliminary Results from Census 2022 record the Westmeath population at 95,840. The population of the county is steadily increasing, with a growth rate of 8% (7,070 persons) between the census period 2016-2022. This accounts for a natural increase of 3,721 and an estimated net inward migration of 3,349. It is noted in the draft LECP that this growth rate is in line with NPF and RSES projections for 2031.
- Census 2022 recorded 31,813 private households in the county, with an average household size of 2.8 persons.
- CSO figures for June 2022 recorded the total housing stock for Westmeath at 38,411 units. This represents an increase of 1,521 (+4.1%) since 2016. There were 3,193 vacant dwellings, 535 fewer than in 2016 (-14.4%). This figure does not include holiday homes, of which there were 334.

Further recent information included in the socio-economic analysis include figures for homelessness and housing completions in the county, along with regional level employment rates for the Midlands Region. This up-to-date authoritative information is welcomed by the Regional Assembly and provides a robust evidence base for the socio-economic profile of the county. Notwithstanding, the information provided in relation to county level employment, economy, educational attainment, community wellbeing, deprivation, poverty, social exclusion, transport and infrastructure is somewhat outdated, relying on 2016 Census information. It is further noted that no information is provided in the socio-economic profile in relation to enterprise or Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the county. In this

respect the Regional Assembly recommends that up-to-date authoritative public information should be included, where available, in line with the stated aim of the LECP to ‘conduct socio-economic analysis based on the best available evidence and relevant, comprehensive statistical data while considering the targets identified in key policies.’ Furthermore, it is noted that the socio-economic analysis makes no reference to Athlone Institute of Technology/TUS in the socio-economic analysis, despite its importance as the only third level institution in the county and its importance to the overall economic development of County Westmeath.

Consultation Process

Stage 2 of LECP development as set out in Figure 2.1 of the draft LECP involved public consultation. The draft LECP explicitly sets out the commitment of the local authority to carry out an inclusive consultation process by providing a variety of opportunities for engagement.

As set out in Section 3.11 of the draft LECP, members of the public, businesses and community groups were invited to respond to an online public consultation questionnaire between the 30th of May and the 30th of June 2023. There was a total of 96 responses to the questionnaire. The questionnaire template is included as Appendix 3 of the draft LECP document and an overview of the findings of the questionnaire are included in the draft LECP at Section 4.2.

Seven public consultation workshops were organised between the 30th of May and the 20th of June 2023, six of which were in-person in Mullingar, Castlepollard, Athlone, Moate, Kilbeggan and Kinnegad, and one was held online. The draft LECP notes that a total of 120 attendees participated in the focus groups. An additional agency workshop was held on the 27th of June 2023. The prioritised objectives attained from the focus groups were collated and analysed and lead agencies for delivering the key outcomes under each HLG was identified. The draft LECP also notes that the findings and analysis will also help to inform the LECP Advisory Steering Group in the development and implementation of the LECP.

The Regional Assembly considers that the public consultation stage as set out was satisfactorily carried out and in accordance with the LECP Guidelines 2021 which require the public consultation phase to take into account different stakeholder needs across both the economic and community sectors. The Regional Assembly notes that as required by Section 66C (2)(a)(i)(I) and Section 66C (3)(a)(i)(I) of the Local Government Reform Act 2014, a report should be included in the LECP on this stage. In this respect, in addition to the public consultation information provided at Section 4.0 of the draft LECP ‘Consultation Report’, the final LECP should include a list of (any) written submissions and the membership of relevant structures (LCDC, SPC) as detailed in Appendix 2 of the LECP Guidelines 2021.

Further to the socio-economic analysis and the consultation process, a SCOT analysis which identifies the economic and community Strengths, Challenges, Opportunities and Threats (SCOT) for County Westmeath has also been outlined at Section 4.4 of the draft LECP, which is welcomed by the Regional Assembly.

3.3 High-Level Goals, Objectives and Outcomes

Section 3.10 of the draft LECP lists the six High-Level Goals of the LECP. It is stated that the goals of the previous LECP have been reflected upon in order to assess ongoing work and to address matters

including the prioritisation of goals where appropriate. It is noted in the draft LECP that the success of the LECP will be determined by setting realistic, relevant, achievable and aspirational goals through a collaborative process in line with the LECP Guidelines 2021 and that stakeholder engagement will ultimately provide for better outcomes where all citizens can enjoy a better quality of life to live, work and invest in the county. It is further noted that the six High-Level Goals have been identified by the Advisory Steering Group, the Local Community Development Committee and the Economic Development Enterprise and Tourism Strategic Policy Committee, who have overall responsibility for the plan.

As set out in Section 4.3 of the draft LECP, eighteen key priority objectives (three under each HLG) were selected through a prioritisation exercise undertaken as part of the public consultation process.

The LECP Guidelines 2021 recommend that High-Level Goals should be achievable and realistic. These are discussed in detail below, including an evaluation of consistency with the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES).

Overall, the Regional Assembly is satisfied with the selection of the six High-Level Goals and the stated objectives and outcomes. The Regional Assembly is satisfied that the chosen goals align with the 3 Key Principles of the RSES (Healthy Placemaking, Economic Opportunity and Climate Action), the 16 Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSOs) of the RSES and with a number of relevant Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs) of the RSES as highlighted in this section of the report. It is however noted that the draft LECP refers to objectives under the High-Level Goals rather than being categorised as Sustainable Economic Development Objectives (SEDOs) and Sustainable Community Objectives (SCOs) as per the recommendations of the LECP Guidelines 2021. The draft LECP should be reviewed to ensure that the objectives are suitably categorised in the final LECP, in accordance with the recommendations of the LECP Guidelines 2021.

Each High-Level Goal is discussed in more detail below:

HLG 1: Support a proactive response to the challenge of climate change.

This goal contains three priority objectives that support climate change mitigation and adaptation measures focusing on buildings and transportation and raising awareness of the link between climate change and biodiversity and to support related measures.

Objective 1.1	Support, advise and assist local communities seeking to increase building energy efficiency and carbon reduction through retrofitting and installation of renewable energy sources.
Objective 1.2	Provision of infrastructural resources to assist with reducing public dependence on private vehicle use and decreasing the number of high emission vehicles travelling on our roads.
Objective 1.3	Raise awareness of the intrinsic link between climate change and biodiversity. Support initiatives that have a positive impact on climate and biodiversity.

The draft High-Level Goal and objectives outlined above support the Key Principles of Climate Action, Economic Opportunity and Healthy Placemaking as outlined in the RSES, including Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSOs) of the RSES in relation to integrated transport and land use (RSO 6), building climate

resilience (RSO 8), supporting the transition to low carbon and clean energy (RSO 9) and biodiversity and natural heritage (RSO 11). They also demonstrate consistency with a range of RPOs including RPOs 7.32 and 7.33 relating to climate mitigation and adaptation measures; RPO 7.40 relating to energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy sources in existing buildings, and RPO 7.42 in relation to decarbonising transport.

HLG 2: Develop an inclusive and equitable society that supports our vibrant urban and rural communities.

This goal contains three priority objectives that aim to reduce the number of vacant and derelict properties, increase the capacity of community groups to participate in public fora and improve access to training, education and the labour market.

Objective 2.1	Tackle dereliction.
Objective 2.2	Increase representation of all communities on statutory bodies, agencies and committees.
Objective 2.3	Provision of an affordable and efficient public transport system.

The draft High-Level Goal and objectives outlined above support the Key Principles of Healthy Placemaking, Economic Opportunity and Climate Action as outlined in the RSES. This includes RSOs in relation to sustainable settlement patterns (RSO 1); compact growth and urban regeneration (RSO 2); improving education, skills and social inclusion (RSO 13) and, integrated transport and land use (RSO 6). In addition, they also demonstrate consistency with a range of RPOs of the RSES including RPOs 6.25 and 6.27 in relation to skills and innovation; RPO 6.38 in relation to anticipating economic structural changes, particularly in relation to lifelong learning programmes and upskilling, and; RPO 9.2 which supports investment in youth services that support and target disadvantaged young people and improve their employability. Objective 2.1 also supports the Guiding Principles to deal with the complexities of brownfield and infill sites as detailed in the Growth Strategy of the RSES.

HLG 3: Improve health and well-being of our citizens.

This goal contains three priority objectives that support improved health and well-being and social inclusion.

Objective 3.1	Create opportunities to improve health and well-being of our citizens.
Objective 3.2	Mullingar Regional Sports Complex to include a swimming pool.
Objective 3.3	Improve Physical Health and Wellbeing.

The draft High-Level Goal and objectives outlined above support the Key Principle of Healthy Placemaking outlined in the RSES, including the RSO in relation to Healthy Communities (RSO 4). They also demonstrate consistency with RPOs such as RPO 9.10 relating to the creation of healthy and attractive places, RPO 9.13 in relation to new social infrastructure developments being accessible and inclusive for a range of users, and RPOs 9.14-9.17 in relation to recreation and open space. The objectives listed above also support the Guiding Principles for the creation of healthy and attractive spaces detailed in Section 9.4 of the RSES.

HLG 4: Support sustainable economic activity, employment and education towards a smart green economy.

This goal contains three priority objectives that aim to develop a smart and green economy by attracting and retaining talent and support education and training in Westmeath.

Objective 4.1	Attract and retain graduates in Westmeath.
Objective 4.2	Support and Promote Further and Higher Education and Training in Westmeath.
Objective 4.3	Development of sustainability awards to encourage a smart green economy.

The draft High-Level Goal and objectives outlined above support the Key Principles of Economic Opportunity and Healthy Placemaking as outlined in the RSES, including RSO 12 in relation to a strong economy supported by enterprise and innovation; RSO 13 in relation to improving education skills and social inclusion, and; RSO 3 in relation to rural communities. In addition, they support RPOs of the RSES including RPO 6.23 relating to support for agencies that promote growth in green technologies; RPOs 6.25-6.27 in relation to skills and innovation; RPO 6.30 in relation to smart cities, towns and villages; RPO 6.31 relating to supporting enterprise development agencies and local enterprise offices to increase business innovation capacity in the Region; RPO 6.38 in relation to anticipating economic structural changes, particularly in relation to lifelong learning programmes and upskilling; RPO 9.2 which supports investment in youth services that support and target disadvantaged young people and improve their employability and; RPO 9.22 in relation to supporting the role of Higher Education Institutions and Educational Training Boards in addressing skills shortages and life-long learning needs in the Region.

HLG 5: Enhance economic and social infrastructure, including housing.

This goal contains three priority objectives that support the creation of new co-working and educational facilities, economic development associated with the greenways and increased publicly supported housing supply.

Objective 5.1	Additional remote working hubs.
Objective 5.2	Economic development opportunities associated with the greenways.
Objective 5.3	Social and Affordable housing supply.

The draft High-Level Goal and objectives outlined above support the Key Principles of Economic Opportunity and Healthy Placemaking as outlined in the RSES, including RSO 12 in relation to a strong economy supported by enterprise and innovation; RSO 13 in relation to improving education skills and social inclusion; RSO 15 in relation to enhanced strategic connectivity, and RSO 3 in relation to rural communities. In addition, they support RPOs of the RSES including RPOs 6.4 – 6.6 relating to the rural economy; RPOs 9.3 - 9.6 in relation to housing, and; through alignment with RPO 6.9 in relation to Regional Enterprise Plans.

HLG: 6: Promote and protect our rich culture and heritage and realise our tourism potential.

This goal contains three priority objectives that aim to enhance heritage-based tourism in Westmeath while protecting culture and heritage assets.

Objective 6.1	Create compelling reasons for tourists to visit and stay in the county.
Objective 6.2	Protect our rich culture and heritage and make it accessible to the public.
Objective 6.3	Advance collaborative marketing and promotion of tourism and heritage assets.

The draft High-Level Goal and objectives outlined above support the Key Principles of Economic Opportunity and Healthy Placemaking as outlined in the RSES including RSO 5 in relation to creative places (which includes enhancing, integrating and protecting culture and heritage assets to promote creative places and heritage led regeneration), and RSO 15 in relation to enhanced strategic connectivity (which includes building economic resilience and supporting strengthened rural communities and economies including the blue-green economy and tourism). In addition, they support the RSES growth enabler to promote the Gateway Region as a key destination for tourism, leisure and recreation activities and support the development of an integrated network of greenways, blueways and peatways while ensuring that high value assets and amenities are protected and enhanced. Furthermore, they support RPOs of the RSES including RPOs 6.4-6.8 in relation to rural economy and RPOs 9.24, 9.25, 9.27, 9.29 and 9.30 in relation to culture and heritage.

3.4 Implementation

The draft LECP includes an Action and Implementation Plan containing the 18 no. priority objectives, 72 no. actions and associated outcomes. For each action, lead agencies and supporting partner agencies responsible for the delivery of the actions have been identified along with outputs/Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and delivery timeframes. The draft LECP also includes high-level policy references for each objective, which is welcomed by the Regional Assembly. Notwithstanding, the final LECP should ensure alignment of High-Level Goals and objectives with the National Climate Action Plan 2024 as approved by Government on 20th December 2023, in accordance with the LECP Guidelines 2021. Furthermore, the final Implementation Plan should indicate, for each action, the potential funding sources (programmes and funding streams) available, as well as the availability of other relevant resources in line with the LECP Guidelines 2021. As previously noted at section 3.3 above, the draft LECP, including the Implementation Plan, should be reviewed to ensure that the objectives are suitably categorised as SCOs or SEDOs and clearly relate to identified actions in accordance with the recommendations of the LECP Guidelines 2021.

The LECP Guidelines 2021 requires that each local authority should draw up implementation arrangements to suit the content of its plan and local circumstances. Section 6 of the draft LECP states that the Advisory Steering Group will oversee the implementation, monitoring and review of the LECP. The draft LECP outlines that in line with the LECP Guidelines 2021, implementation of the actions will be monitored on an ongoing basis through engagement with the lead agencies and supporting partners. The draft LECP further notes that the assignment of timebound economic and community KPIs to lead agencies and supporting partners will facilitate the monitoring, evaluation and review processes in achieving the desired outcomes and the overall achievement of the LECP HLGs.

The draft LECP outlines that in line with the LECP Guidelines 2021, implementation reviews will be conducted every two years (2025 and 2027). Following the reviews, a report will be submitted to the Westmeath LCDC and the Economic Development, Enterprise and Tourism Strategic Policy Committee for their consideration. The draft LECP states that these review processes will facilitate the incorporation of new information or interventions and provide assistance to the implementors. It is

noted in the draft LECP that reviews should be included in the Implementation Plan to deal with unpredicted challenges and to help implementors with difficulties that may arise with the timebound actions or resources. Further to this, the final LECP should provide more detail in relation to the monitoring, evaluation and review arrangements relating to LECP implementation.

The Regional Assembly welcomes the inclusion in the draft LECP of the Action and Implementation Plan in line with the LECP Guidelines 2021. Overall, the Regional Assembly is satisfied that the chosen actions align with the three Key Principles of the RSES, the sixteen RSOs of the RSES and with a number of relevant RPOs of the RSES.

4.0 Evaluation of Consistency with the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027

Section 44 of the Local Government Reform Act 2014 (amending Section 66C of the Local Government Act 2001) states that LECPs should be consistent with the core strategy and objectives of the Development Plan, in this respect the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021 – 2027. Given that the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027 was deemed to be consistent with the RSES, as acknowledged by the submission made by EMRA on 25th of June 2020, the Regional Assembly therefore considers that an analysis of the RSES is deemed sufficient in order to demonstrate consistency. Notwithstanding this, it is considered beneficial if the LECP Framework document could address the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021 – 2027 in more detail to demonstrate that it aligns with and complements the policies and objectives and identified priorities in the County Development Plan.

5.0 Other Considerations

A number of clerical errors and anomalies are evident in the draft LECP document. In the list of policies and strategies under Section 1.2 Policy Framework, the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Region is referenced as covering the period 2020-2032. This is incorrectly referenced as the adopted RSES covers the period 2019-2031. A number of grammatical tenses are used throughout the draft LECP document in relation to its development and content. The full text of the LECP should be checked and amended where appropriate to ensure that an appropriate and consistent grammatical tense is applied throughout the final version, and grammatical errors should be corrected.

Furthermore, while the Regional Assembly welcomes the detailed overview of consultation findings in Section 4.0, the inclusion of the full Consultation Report as part of the main body of the framework document is not required by the LECP Guidelines 2021. The suggested outline for framework LECPs included at Appendix 2 of the LECP Guidelines 2021 indicates that Public Consultation Information should be included in the Appendices of the LECP. Appendix 2 of the LECP Guidelines 2021 indicates that the introduction to the section relating to Vision, Themes, High-Level Goals and Sustainable Community Objectives can include a summary of consultation.

The above matters should be adequately addressed in the final LECP document.

6.0 Recommendation and Statement of Consistency

The Regional Assembly commends the work of Westmeath County Council to date in the preparation of the draft LECP and issues a Statement of Consistency for the Westmeath LECP as required under Section 44 of the Local Government Reform Act (as amended) subject to the following recommendations:

1. The final LECP should refer appropriately to the designation of Mullingar as a Key Town by the RSES as set out in Table 4.2 of the RSES - Settlement Hierarchy and explicitly reference the key priorities of the RSES in relation to County Westmeath.

Reason: To ensure consistency between the LECP and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region 2019-2031 as required under Section 44 of the Local Government Reform Act 2014.

2. More in-depth commentary should be provided in order to clearly demonstrate that the LECP is consistent with the core strategy and objectives of the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027.

Reason: To clearly demonstrate consistency between the LECP and the core strategy and the objectives of the development plan of the local authority as required under Section 44 of the Local Government Reform Act 2014.

3. The final LECP should make reference to the retail hierarchy for the Region, as outlined in the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy which identifies Athlone and Mullingar as Level 2 (Major Town Centres and County Town Centres), and Castlepollard as Level 3 (Town and/or District Centres and Sub-County Town Centres) within the retail hierarchy.

Reason: To ensure consistency between the Westmeath LECP and the retail hierarchy for the Region as set out in the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region 2019-2031.

4. The socio-economic profile should be updated to reference the Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest (TUS) as the only third level institution in the county and its importance to the overall economic development of County Westmeath.

Reason: As set out in the RSES, TUS (formerly Athlone Institute of Technology) plays an important role in the economic development of Athlone and the region more broadly. Furthermore, TUS is identified as lead agency and supporting partner across multiple actions in the draft Implementation Plan, but, on review, is not referenced directly in the LECP Framework document.

The following are observations by the Regional Assembly that should be incorporated into the final LECP in the interest of best practice:

1. The socio-economic profile should be updated to include up-to-date authoritative public information on county level employment, economy, educational attainment, community wellbeing, deprivation, poverty, social exclusion, transport and infrastructure.

Reason: To provide a more complete socio-economic profile for County Westmeath in line with the stated aim of the LECP to conduct socio-economic analysis based on the best available evidence and relevant, comprehensive statistical data while considering the targets identified in key policies, including the RSES.

2. The final LECP should ensure alignment of High-Level Goals and objectives with the National Climate Action Plan 2024.

Reason: The LECP Guidelines 2021 state that consideration of the role of the LECP in supporting the delivery of actions in Local and National Climate Action Plans should form part of the LECP with specific actions included in LECP Implementation Plans as appropriate.

3. The draft LECP refers to objectives under the High-Level Goals rather than being categorised as Sustainable Economic Development Objectives (SEDOs) and Sustainable Community Objectives (SCOs) as per the recommendations of the LECP Guidelines 2021. The final LECP should review the draft LECP framework document and Implementation Plan and categorise objectives as SCOs or SEDOs in accordance with the recommendations of the LECP Guidelines 2021.

Reason: To ensure that the objectives of the Westmeath LECP are suitably categorised as SCOs or SEDOs in accordance with the recommendations of the LECP Guidelines 2021.

4. The final implementation plan should also indicate, for each action, the potential funding sources (programmes and funding streams) available, as well as the availability of other relevant resources.

Reason: The LECP Guidelines 2021 recommend that the Implementation Plan should include suggestions on what funding streams may be available to support the implementation of the relevant identified prioritised actions.

5. The final LECP should provide more detail in relation to the monitoring, evaluation and review arrangements relating to LECP implementation.

Reason: To provide a more complete description of monitoring, evaluation and review arrangements in line with the LECP Guidelines 2021.

6. The appendices of the final LECP should be amended to include full details of the public consultation information, a list of written submissions and the membership of relevant structures (LCDC, SPC) as detailed in Appendix 2 of the LECP Guidelines 2021.


Reason: To ensure that the final LECP for Westmeath is consistent with Section 66C (2)(a)(i)(I) and Section 66C (3)(a)(i)(I) of the Local Government Reform Act 2014, which, as detailed in the LECP Guidelines 2021, requires that a report should be included in the LECP on this stage.

7.0 Conclusion

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) welcomes the progression of the Local Economic and Community Plan to a draft document and considers the economic and community objectives to be consistent with the RSES and the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027. However, as outlined above, it is considered that the draft LECP document could demonstrate better integration

of key references to, and stronger links, with policies and objectives of the RSES and the Westmeath CDP 2021 - 2027. Subject to the recommendations listed in Section 6.0 of this report being incorporated into the finalised LECP, the Regional Assembly considers that the document would be consistent with the policies and objectives of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy 2019-2031 and the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027.

Regards,



Clare Bannon
A/Director
Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly
12th April 2024