

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Despite been a Principal Town in the polycentric model that incorporates the Midlands Gateway and recent progress in attracting new employment opportunities to Longford Town, the economic profile of the county remains one characteristic of a continued reliance on the agricultural sector, which is experiencing national decline as the state aligns itself with more advanced international economies focused on the tertiary services, research and high-end manufacturing sectors. Whereas people in Longford attach a high significance to education, Longford has no third level educational establishment. This has necessitated people moving outside the county in order to obtain higher education. Once having left the county many of these people do not return.

An essential element in reversing these negative demographic and economic trends is providing an attractive high quality retail environment that encourages both investors and those who have become accustomed to a superior shopping environment to remain in, or move to, the county.

In recognition of this, Longford County Council commissioned *Cunnane Stratton Reynolds* to undertake a review and update of the existing 2004-2009 County Retail Strategy in order to ensure that the various retail related policies for the county, and in particular, Longford Town, comply with all county, regional and national framing policy documents, while concurrently allowing for future shopping requirements for the period from 2007 to 2015.

1.1 THIS REPORT

This is the Draft Report of the reviewed 2004-2009 County Longford Retail Strategy (the strategy). It updates the strategy up to 2015. This document has been prepared following consultation with relevant officers of Longford County Council. Considerable efforts have been made to ensure that all agreed comments have been incorporated into the report.

1.2 CONTEXT

The context for the update and review of the 2004-2009 County Longford Retail Strategy is set by the following:

1. The Department of the Environment and Local Government (DoELG and now the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DoEHLG)) Retail Planning Guidelines for Planning Authorities, December 2000, subsequently revised in January 2005; and
2. The 2003-2009 County Longford Retail Strategy, as adopted into the County and Longford Town Development Plans.

A number of key documents were taken into account and used in the preparation of this report. These included:

- The National Development Plan 2007-2013
- The National Spatial Strategy (NSS) 2002-2020
- Sustainable Development: A Strategy for Ireland 1999
- The Retail Planning Guidelines for Planning Authorities (RPG), 2005
- The Midlands Regional Planning Guidelines 2004

Since the 2004-2009 County Longford Retail Strategy was adopted, a number of key data and other guiding documents have been issued which have implications for the retail planning and potential of the county. These must be considered in the review and update of the strategy. They include:

- The 2006 Preliminary Census Results;
- More up to date economic and demographic data from the Central Statistics Office.

The decision to update and review the strategy reflects a recognition by Longford County and Town Council's that the retail sector is one of great dynamism in both the national and county economies, and that there is a clear need to ensure that planning policies, and the baseline information upon which they were based, remain current.

1.3 SCOPE OF THIS REVIEW AND UPDATE REPORT

This report addresses the requirements of Paragraph 36 of the Retail Planning Guidelines. These are namely:

- (i). Confirmation of the retail hierarchy, the role of centres and the size of the main town centres;
- (ii). Definition in the development plans of the boundaries of the core shopping area of town centres;
- (iii). A broad assessment of the requirement for additional retail floorspace;
- (iv). Strategic guidance on the location and scale of retail development;
- (v). Preparation of policies and action initiatives to encourage the improvement of town centres; and,
- (vi). Identification of criteria for the assessment of retail developments.

In reviewing and updating the existing County Retail Strategy, it should be noted that Longford is one of the least urban counties in the country, and as such, the provisions of Paragraph 47 of the Retail Planning Guidelines in respect of 'general retail strategies' apply. Paragraph 47 states:

In addressing items (iii) and (iv) it should be not be necessary to estimate in any detail the future requirement for additional development. A broad assessment of requirements for additional development reflecting the local evidence of market interest and the need to provide good opportunities for retail provision to serve the main population centres in the county ought to be sufficient in order to formulate appropriate policies and criteria for dealing with new development proposals.

In light of the above, this report has sought to balance the provision of a comprehensive review and update of the county's additional retail requirements against the assessment directions of the Retail Planning Guidelines.

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT

The structure of the remainder of the report is as follows:

- Section 2: Provides an overview of the policy framework underpinning the updated and reviewed County Retail Strategy.
- Section 3: Outlines the economic and retailing trends against which this review is set.
- Section 4: Outlines the baseline information (population trends, scenarios and forecasts etc) that will have an influence on the findings of the capacity assessment.
- Section 5: Provides an updated floorspace capacity assessment.
- Section 6: Outlines updated health checks of the main centres in the county.
- Section 7: Examines the basis of the county retail hierarchy and specifies the core retail areas before making recommendations as to the strategic framework, policies and proposals of the reviewed and updated County Retail Strategy.