

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Policy frameworks at the national, regional and local policy levels inform the preparation of a retail strategy. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the principle documents guiding the development of the county, and in particular, any significant changes which have taken place in policy context since the adoption of the current Retail Strategy. Existing and emerging plans, policies and proposals that are relevant to the review of Retail Strategy are identified and reviewed in the following order:

- National;
- Regional; and
- Local.

2.1 NATIONAL

Three national level plans, strategies and guidelines are of particular relevance to the shape and direction of the strategy. These are:

- National Spatial Strategy 2002 – 2020
- National Development Plan 2007 – 2013
- Retail Planning Guidelines for Local Authorities

Two national level strategies must also be considered in respect of formulating a comprehensive retail strategy for the county. These are namely:

- Sustainable Development: A Strategy for Ireland
- Transport 21

2.1.1 National Spatial Strategy 2002 – 2020

In November 2002, the Department of the Environment and Local Government issued the National Spatial Strategy for Ireland 2002-2020 (hereafter the NSS). The Strategy is a strategic planning framework document providing guidance for future development throughout the country. The principal aim of the NSS is to promote and achieve more balanced regional development. The NSS details opportunities for each region in the Country to develop its potential, while also providing strategic planning guidance for Government policy making, regional and local plans.

The NSS is described as:

‘...a twenty year planning framework designed to achieve a better balance of social, economic, physical development and population growth between regions. Its focus is on people, on places and on building communities. Through closer matching of where people live with where they work, different parts of Ireland will for the future be able to sustain a better quality of

life, a strong competitive economic position and an environment of the highest quality.’ (NSS: 2002: p.10.)

The NSS promotes the concept of balanced regional development. It sets out the government’s policy of encouraging more sustainable development by avoiding excessive suburbanisation, by promoting the consolidation of existing towns and serviced villages to counter excessive suburbanisation, by protecting existing green areas and ensuring that a high quality of life is promoted.

Regarding the ongoing development of urban areas, the NSS states:

‘Ireland needs to renew, consolidate and develop its existing cities, towns and villages – i.e., keeping them as physically compact and public transport friendly as possible and minimising urban sprawl, while also achieving a high quality of design in new development and refurbishment. (NSS: 2002: p. 11.)

The NSS declares that in order to achieve balanced regional development a greater share of economic activity must take place outside the Greater Dublin Area (GDA). Founded on these principles, the NSS has selected a number of strategic centres throughout the country with the potential to be drivers of development both at national level and within their own regions. These centres have been designated and divided into Gateways and Hubs, including a number of ‘Linked Gateways’ and ‘Linked Hubs’.

More specifically, the NSS has identified Mullingar, Athlone and Tullamore as a new linked ‘Gateway’, one of only nine urban settlements so designated (See Figure 2.1). This in turn has important implications for Longford County, and in particular Longford Town, which along with Portlaoise provides a strategically placed supporting role in strengthening the Midlands Gateway. In particular, the NSS states:

‘Enhancing the level of critical mass in the Midlands Region (Counties Laois, Offaly, Westmeath and **Longford**), by combining the complementary strengths of Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore as a gateway at the heart of the region, is essential to boosting the region’s overall economic strength. It will also be important to build on the central location of the Midlands and the key towns at the intersection of national road and rail routes, the attractiveness of the village structure in the Midlands and the natural and other resources of more rural areas. The gateway in the region will help to position other areas to benefit from the strength of that gateway, but those other areas will need to put plans in place to ensure that this takes place.’ [Our emphasis.] (NSS: 2002: p 80.)

The current review and update of the County Retail Strategy represents a commitment on the part of both Longford County Council and Longford Town Council to ensure the development of the Midlands Region in a manner commensurate with the national planning framework.

The NSS states that in support of the Midlands Gateway role, other county and large towns, such as Longford Town, which are strategically placed on national road and rail links, can be enhanced in competitive terms to drive development at a county level.

The NSS also stresses that smaller towns in the midlands can be enhanced through physical and townscape improvements, water services, facilities for smaller enterprises and enhancements to road and bus networks. This will offer an attractive environment for residential, employment, retailing and service functions.

The lowest tiers of settlements addressed in the NSS are 'villages and rural areas'. It states that these should be enhanced as residential locations and locations for other functions drawn to the Region by the Gateway and larger towns. Initiatives promoted in the NSS to develop the roles and functions of these smaller centres include local infrastructure, servicing programmes either by local authorities or in partnership with the private sector, the acquisition of key sites that unlock potential for back-land development and complementary policies to encourage people to live in villages.

Specifically, the NSS notes that the historically strong agriculture and natural resources sector, such as peat extraction and energy production, has supported an extensive village structure throughout the Midlands. This structure, with its established residential, service and employment functions, can be supported by necessary investment in key services. Demand for housing within easy reach of larger towns can be harnessed positively to strengthen the residential and other functions of smaller towns. This can be achieved by enabling villages to attract residential and other developments through availability of land and capacity of services.



Figure 2.1
Midlands Linked gateway & Supporting Settlements

The NSS promotes sustainable development and identifies a number of desirable outcomes that are of relevance to the review and update of the County Retail Strategy; including:

- 'Maximising access to and encouraging use of public transport, cycling and walking.'
- 'Developing sustainable urban and rural settlement patterns and communities to reduce distance from employment, services and leisure facilities and to make better use of existing and future investments in public services including public transport.'
- 'Contributing to the evolution of socially integrated communities in both urban and rural areas.'
- 'Ensuring that construction design is of a high quality and appropriate to the scale and context of its surroundings'. (NSS: 2002: p. 13.)

In summary, the NSS provides part of the necessary framework for the preparation of the National Development Plans and the Regional Planning Guidelines by each Regional Authority in the State. Of particular importance to the review is that, so far as is practicable, Section 9(6) of the Planning Act 2000 requires development plans to be consistent with the NSS and this has been fully embraced in the preparation of this update and review of the Retail Strategy.

2.1.2 National Development Plan 2007 – 2013

The National Development Plan: Transforming Ireland — A Better Quality of Life for All (hereafter the NDP), sets out the future development strategy for the Country over the period 2007 to 2013 with a corresponding annual investment commitment. The Plan continues the guidance provided by the previous National Development Plan 2000-2006, and addresses significant areas of future development in the different regions of the country, including economic and social infrastructural development, as well as employment and human resources development. The plan states that the rapid advancement of the country from one of Europe's poorest nations to one of the Union's most affluent states will continue throughout the life of the plan and that this transformation will be driven largely by ongoing increases in the nation's population.

The NDP has a number of national objectives, including, but not limited to:

- Resolving structural infrastructure deficits that continue to impact on competitiveness, regional development and general quality of life and to meet the demands of the increasing population;
- Integrate regional development within the National Spatial Strategy framework of Gateway cities and Hub towns to achieve the goals of economic growth in the regions and provide for major investment in the rural economy.

The NDP recognises that economic development in all countries, including Ireland, invariably occurs at a different pace in different regions. The rate and location of regional economic development reflects many different factors, some of which can be directly influenced by Government policy, some of which reflect the inherent characteristics and potential of different regions and some of which reflect the natural growth of the private sector. Regional economic development can also have a close relationship with population distribution. Strong clusters of population can themselves be a driver for regional development while in turn being the result of economic expansion in the related regions. The NDP also notes that all regions (defined in terms of the 8 Regional Authority areas), of Ireland have enjoyed spectacular economic and social progress over recent years. Nonetheless, the NDP concedes that a pro-active and focused approach to balanced regional development continues to be necessary. Specifically, the NDP states that while the economic success of the GDA has made a major contribution to the success of Ireland as a whole, it has also brought challenges, particularly in the area of infrastructure. The GDA has experienced heavy pressures in the areas of transport, housing and environmental services. In response, the NDP stresses the importance of developing regions outside the GDA, asserting that such regional development will not only help fulfil the economic potential of the regions outside the GDA, it will also ease the pressures still evident in the GDA. The NDP outlines how promoting the economic development of the regions outside the GDA will assist the objective of a more balanced distribution of population in the country as a whole. The role of investment policy under the NDP is therefore to build on the existing strengths of all the regions and address their particular development deficits, particularly in the area of infrastructure.

Specifically, the NDP seeks to build upon the strengths of the Midland's Gateway and its supporting settlements, such as Longford Town. The NDP identifies these strengths as being:

- its strategic location in the centre of the country; its relative proximity to Dublin on newly completed national road (M/N/4/6);
- the prospect of excellent road connections to Cork, Limerick and Galway when the major inter-urban routes are completed by 2010;
- upgraded rail links to Dublin;
- improving social infrastructure, especially healthcare facilities such as the Midlands Regional Hospital; and,
- the Athlone Institute of Technology.

However, the NDP concedes that there are a number of development challenges for the region. These development challenges are centred around the relatively small size of towns in the region and implementing an agreed development strategy for regional settlements on a shared basis. Key development issues and investment requirements

relevant to County Longford have been identified and targeted for action over the period of the NDP. These include:

- Strengthening the R&D capacity of Athlone Institute of Technology and its linkages to industry/employers in the Region;
- Development of strategic local roads and water services capacity to facilitate and attract development to the towns in the Gateway;
- Enhancement of tourist facilities and amenities, building on the natural heritage of the midlands and the potential of the inland waterways network;
- Development of Strategic Sites as part of IDA Ireland's Strategic Sites Initiative;
- Implementation of the Strategic Development Framework for the Gateway drawn up by the Local Authorities, including the establishment of a Gateway Coordination Unit

The NDP acknowledges that in addition to the network of designated Hubs and Gateways, there are other strategically positioned county towns and other large towns, such as Longford Town, Ballymahon and Granard, whose continued development must be facilitated so that they play an important role in ensuring that balanced development takes place within, as well as between, regions. The further development of these and other similar locations will be encouraged through effective local planning and leveraging wider public and private investment.

The regional policy approach promoted by the NDP also embraces the role of other smaller towns, villages and rural areas with proposed investment in improvements to access via the non-national roads network, rural public transport initiatives, investment in water services, rural broadband, community services, housing etc. so that they can attract development and investment.

Thus, since the 2004-2009 County Retail Strategy was published there has been significant progress with, and updating of, the NDP. This as a whole is of great benefit to the County. Of particular importance is strengthening the Midlands Gateway and the improving accessibility to the region, thereby helping to enhance its attraction for living, working and leisure with consequential impacts on the expenditure potential to sustain additional retail floorspace.

2.1.3 The Retail Planning Guidelines for Local Authorities

The Retail Planning Guidelines for Planning Authorities (hereafter RPGs), were revised in January 2005. The revision solely relates to the cap of 6,000m² gross on the size of individual retail warehouse units in Integrated Area Plan areas within NSS Gateways. Although there may be future indirect effects should Integrated Area Plans be produced for areas within the Linked Midlands Regional Gateway, this is currently not the case. Thus, the revised sections of the RPGs have no direct implications for the review of the

Longford County Retail Strategy as all other parts of the 2000 RPGs, under which the 2004-2009 Retail Strategy was prepared, remain in force.

The RPGs were prepared in response to the increasing pressure for retail development in the previous decade. They identify the factors influencing this increased pressure as:

- Sustained economic growth, particularly in GDP which closely mirrors growth in spending.
- Consumer spending is fuelled by a number of economic and demographic factors such as:
 - An economy that is at almost full employment, with an increasing female participation rate and hence available expenditure.
 - Net in-migration of people within the professional, managerial and skilled category of the workforce.
 - Growth in household formation as a result of increasing population levels, changing demographic profiles, and smaller household sizes.
 - The greater proportion of the population in the economically active cohorts and a reduction in unemployment levels.

The Guidelines establish five key objectives in an endeavour to establish the optimum location for new retail development which is accessible to all sections of society and is of a scale which allows the continued prosperity of traditional town centres.

1. The first objective is to ensure that all development plans incorporate clear policies and proposals for retail development.
2. The Guideline's second objective is to facilitate a competitive and healthy environment for the retail industry of the future. In forwarding this aim, the RPGs acknowledge that it is not the purpose of the planning system to inhibit competition, preserve existing commercial interests or prevent innovation. Thus, they stress that in interpreting the objectives of the guidelines, local authorities should avoid taking actions which would adversely affect competition in the retail market.
3. The third key objective of the RPGs is to ensure that future retail development is accessible to its users, is well located within its catchment area and is easily accessed both by public transport and the private car. The Guidelines promote multi-purpose shopping, business and leisure trips on the same journey.

4. Consequently, the fourth objective is to support the continuing role of town and district centres. In order to achieve this objective, the RPGs encourage the use of the sequential test approach in relation to the assessment of retail applications, with the focus on town centres as the preferred location for new retail development. Where there are no town centre sites available, the next preferred option is edge of centre sites. If there are no development sites available within a town centre then the next preference should be a location on the edge of the town centre. Only where there are no sites, or potential sites, within a town centre or on its edge, or satisfactory transport accessibility (including park and ride) realistically cannot be ensured within a reasonable period of time, should out of centre development be contemplated.
5. The fifth and final objective of the RPGs is a presumption against large retail centres located adjacent or close to existing, new or planned national roads/motorways. Such centres can lead to an inefficient use of costly and valuable infrastructure and may have the potential to undermine the regional/national transport role of the roads concerned.

The RPGs therefore provide a comprehensive framework to enable future retail development to be accommodated in an 'efficient, equitable and sustainable' manner. This is performed by means of a National Retail Hierarchy of centres deemed to have the necessary critical mass to support varying degrees of retail quantum and variety. The retail hierarchy as set out in out in the RPGs locates Longford Town within the third tier of the level two retail centres. Thus, while effectively at the third level of the retail hierarchy, Paragraph 10 of the RPGs qualifies its lower position (third tier, level 2) compared to other centres located at this level of the hierarchy by stating that centres such as Longford Town operate 'to a more limited extent' than other centres at this level of the hierarchy.

The fundamental function of the RPGs is thus to assist local authorities in preparing development plans and assessing planning applications for retail development, and also to help retailers and developers in formulating development proposals. Consequently, the RPGs are a central reference document in the update and review of the Longford County Retail Strategy.

2.1.4 Sustainable Development: A Strategy for Ireland

In 1997, the Department of the Environment published its policy document on sustainable development: *Sustainable Development: A Strategy for Ireland*. It outlines objectives, strategies, and implementation proposals for the incorporation of sustainable development principles into a variety of areas of national importance, including transportation and land-use planning. Therefore, both of these constituent elements will need to be considered in the update and review of the County Retail Strategy.

Regarding sustainable development, this national guidance document promotes the co-ordination of land use and transportation in order to increase the use and efficiency of public transport, rather than private cars. It also seeks higher density development on brownfield sites and improved public transportation linkages to areas that are capable of

higher density development. Retail development can contribute to the drive for more sustainable development through the appropriate development of new retail services at scales and locations which serve to reduce the need to travel while concurrently fulfilling the social requirements of the community in a manner that represents efficient land use practice.

2.1.5 Transport 21

Transport 21 is the capital investment framework through which the transport system in Ireland will be developed, over the period 2006 to 2015. This framework will address the twin challenges of past investment backlogs and continuing growth in transport demand. The projects and programmes that make up Transport 21 will aim to:

- increase accessibility;
- ensure sustainability;
- expand capacity;
- increase use; and
- enhance quality.

The Government has agreed a total investment framework of €34 billion over the period 2006 to 2015. The Transport 21 Programme has two separate strands: a Greater Dublin Area Programme and a National Programme. For the latter, the focus is on the national roads network, public transport network, and improved regional and local public transport.

The programme contains a number of elements influencing the transportation network in County Longford which include:

- Intercity Rolling Stock: Since 2002, Iarnród Éireann has ordered new intercity railcars and carriages for the national rail service. In late 2005, an order was placed for 30 railcars to facilitate the expansion and extension of improvements in Intercity rail services on the Rosslare and Sligo lines.
- The placing of the Rural Transport Initiative on a permanent footing from 2007 onwards.
- Completion of the M/N4 Dublin to Sligo by 2015. Already major sections of this route have been upgraded to motorway or high quality dual carriageway standard. Journey times have been substantially reduced along the route while safety has also noticeably improved. A bypass of Edgeworthstown, and the Sligo Inner Relief Road have already been delivered. Further improvements currently in planning stage, include a bypass of Carrick-on-Shannon, Cloonmahon/Castlebaldwin and a three-part programme (of which Dromod/Roosky is the first part) to upgrade the road between Longford and Drumsna.

2.2 REGIONAL

2.2.1 The Midlands Regional Planning Guidelines

The Midlands Regional Authority Regional Planning Guidelines (hereafter MRPGs), were adopted in May 2004 and translate the provisions of the NSS at the regional level. The MRPGs provides a framework for the development of the region and endeavour to ensure that by 2020, the Midlands Region will be a successful, sustainable and equitable region full of opportunities for its expanded population. The MRPGs will achieve this objective through:

- Enhancing the critical mass of the region by combining the strengths of the linked gateway and those of the principal towns of Portlaoise and Longford within a broader polycentric model;
- Developing the full potential of rural areas in the region in a manner that is compatible with the strengthening of the urban structure of the region;
- Offering a distinctive lifestyle rooted in a high quality living environment, rich in heritage and landscape value;
- Harnessing the central geographical location of the region at the “heart” of Ireland with more inter-regional links than any other region in Ireland to build a strategically focused network of transport and communications links.

The task for the Regional Planning Guidelines is to set out how this vision will be achieved through a policy framework for the co-ordination of the planning and development activities of the planning authorities, other public authorities and agencies and the wider community and business sectors. Considering their strategic nature, along with the statutory requirement that development plans reflect the objectives and policies contained within them, the MRPGs play a fundamental role in guiding the development of Longford Town and County.

The Midlands Region covers an area of around 6,500 square kilometres and accounts for 9.5% of the total area of the state, being at the extremes 130 km from north to south and 70 km from east to west. It encompasses four counties: Laois, Offaly, Longford and Westmeath. It spans the catchments of the River Shannon to the West and the Rivers Boyne and Barrow to the East. An important feature of the Midlands Region is that it borders five of the seven other regions in the State. Thus, the maintenance of a high level of inter-regional connectivity is pivotal to the success and delivery of goods and services to neighbouring regions so as to achieve the NSS aim of balanced regional growth. Longford Town, as one of the region's Principal Towns and key supporting element in the Midlands Regional Gateway, provides a crucial inter-regional link with the Mid-Western, Western, Border and Dublin/Mid-East Regions. The further spread of the influence of the GDA and the regional inter-linking function of the Longford is reflected in the daily commuter train service now in operation between Longford Town/Edgeworthstown and Dublin.

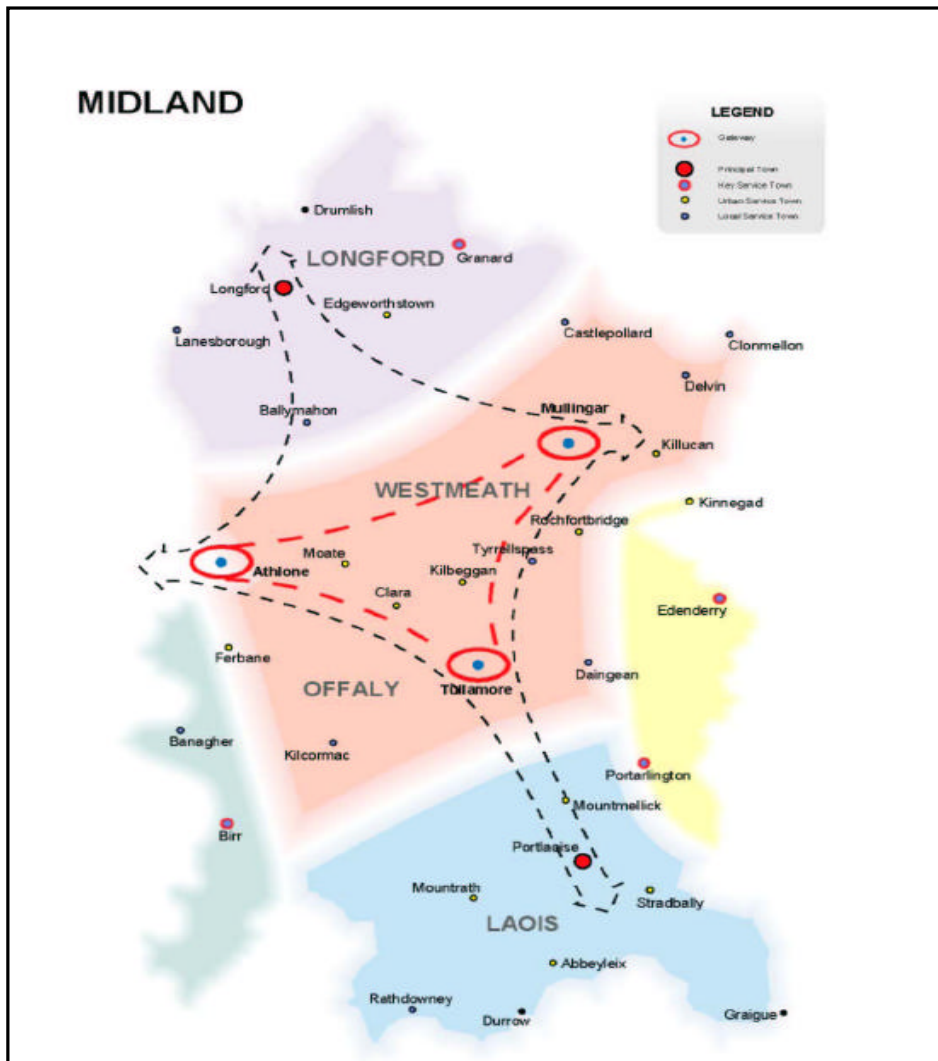


Figure 2.2
Strategic Framework Map
Source: MRPGs

The Midlands Region has undergone dynamic changes in its demographic and economic structure, development trends, and infrastructure pressure since 1996. In particular, population has increased by over 20,000 in the period 1996-2002 and by 26,017 between 2002 and 2006. Interestingly 70% of the increase between the 2002-2006 inter-censal period was due to net immigration to the region. Indeed, while the population increased in all of the regional authority areas between 2002 and 2006, the influence of net migration (in-migration less out-migration) on overall growth was greatest in the West and Midlands, and least in Dublin. An overview of the demographic profile of the state over the decade spanning the 1996 to the 2006 census, illustrates that the Midlands has shown the most significant change in its growth pattern, from being second slowest in the 1991-1996 period to being the fastest growing region over the 2002-2006 period.

Table 2.1				
Regional Share of State Population (%): 1991-2006				
Region	1991	1996	2002	2006
Border	11.43	11.23	11.04	11.04
Dublin	29.08	29.18	28.66	28.01
Mid-East	9.23	9.68	10.53	11.22
GDA	38.31	38.77	39.20	39.23
Midlands	5.76	5.57	5.75	6.94
Mid-West	8.81	8.74	8.67	8.52
South-East	10.87	10.80	10.81	10.87
South West	15.10	15.08	14.82	14.65
West	9.73	9.72	9.71	9.76
State	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: CSO; February 2007: Preliminary 2006 Census Results

Table 2.2			
Population Increase by Regional Authority: 2002-2006			
Region	2006 Population	Increase since 2002	% of increase due to net in-migration
Border	467,327	34,793	69
Dublin	1,186,000	63,338	34
Mid-East	475,026	62,401	65
GDA	1,61,000	125,739	50
Midlands	251,380	26,017	70
Mid-West	360,651	21,060	52
South-East	460,474	36,858	63
South West	620,525	40,169	60
West	413,383	33,086	72

Source: CSO; February 2007: Preliminary 2006 Census Results

In seeking to accommodate this high degree of change in a sustainable manner, the MRPGs stress the need to develop a well-defined urban system to build on the strengths of existing settlements, support the continued vitality of established urban and rural areas and provide for the continued balanced evolution of the region.

In addition to the linked gateway and principal towns, the MRPGs acknowledge that there are a number of smaller towns, which will continue to contribute to the growth and development of the region. Significant population, employment and commercial enterprise already exist in these areas and can be consolidated to assist in achieving the required critical mass within the region. The existing network of villages completes the "regional mesh" and improves the inter-connectivity with the wider urban network and the rural area. The support of this village network is important for the promotion of locally based enterprise and commercial development, which has the potential to revitalise the villages and their outlying rural communities. Under this settlement

strategy both Granard and Edgeworthstown are both designated as areas of targeted growth, while Granard is identified as a 'key service town' and Edgeworthstown as a 'service town'.

One of the primary goals of the MRPGs is to develop a distinct identity for the region in order to attract inward investment and stimulate economic activity. The evolution of the industrial strengths of the midlands is to be based on the clustering of similar industrial activities, research and development and educational institutions. Taken together these will provide an enhanced industrial environment through the availability of a skilled workforce and the benefits of economies of scale.

The further development of the Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) and the establishment of a research centre targeted at the pharmaceutical and medical technology sector, is promoted in the guidelines as an important element in the region's ability to attract investment to the area. The expansion of the industrial profile of the midlands will be supported by the achievement of critical mass in the linked gateway of Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore along with the principal towns of Longford and Portlaoise against the backdrop of a broader polycentric model. Therefore, the strategic roles of both Longford Town and Portlaoise as important elements in the future economic development of the region is well endorsed and promoted in the guidelines.

The MRPGs also note that regional economic growth will be underpinned by the corridor linking Longford Town with Mullingar, improving the N80 link between Tullamore and Portlaoise and the continued development of the N55/N4/N5/N6 national routes which will greatly reduce travelling times from Longford town to Dublin, Mullingar, Athlone, Galway, Westport and Sligo. Other strategic infrastructural improvements include upgrading of the rail line and gas pipeline servicing County Longford, which provide greater connectivity with the Midlands Gateway by strengthening its role as the driver of development in the northern region and promoting enhanced links with adjacent regions.

With specific regard to the Northern Development Area of the region, which comprises County Longford among others, the guidelines identify Longford Town as the prime driver of development in the area, with a high degree of retail, administrative and industrial functions. They also highlight its location on strategic road and rail routes and that Longford town as the county town presents an 'urban strengthening opportunity'. Therefore, by virtue of its identification as a principal town in the polycentric model that incorporates the Midlands Gateway, both the key role and importance of Longford Town in the region has been allotted much weight in the MRPGs.

Specific proposal for the Northern Development Area include:

- Targeted infrastructure investment in Longford Town, including improved transport and communication links and the extension of the gas pipeline to the area, to consolidate, support and encourage industrial and manufacturing strengths in the area;

- The development and expansion of business and technology parks to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) and the expansion of local industrial parks to serve indigenous industries;
- The continued development of the amenity potential of the inland waterways and the utilisation of renewable energy resources to complement the existing electricity infrastructure (Lanesboro ESB Power Plant); and,
- Targeted growth of Granard and the consolidation of growth in Edgeworthstown.

2.3 LOCAL

At the County and more local level, the plans and strategies which have an influence on this review of the County Retail Strategy are:

- The Longford County Development Plan, 2003-2009
- Longford Town Development Plan, 2004-2010
- Local Area Plans
- County Development Board Strategy: The Way Forward: Strategy For Economic, Social And Cultural Development In County Longford, 2002-2011

2.3.1 The Longford County Development Plan, 2003-2009

The Longford County Development Plan (hereafter CDP) is the fundamental planning policy guidance document for development in County Longford over the 2003-2009 period. The CDP outlines the Council's vision for the future development of the county, and in doing so specifies a number of strategic objectives. These are namely:

- To provide a framework for the proper planning and sustainable development of the County over the plan period;
- To build on the unprecedented growth which has occurred over recent years and maximise the economic and social benefits that can be achieved from this in a manner which is compatible with the principles of sustainable development;
- Ensure that everybody has the opportunity of obtaining affordable housing, can enjoy safe and accessible environments, have access to employment, education and training, community services and recreational facilities, arts and culture;
- To identify, conserve, protect and enhance where appropriate, the unique natural, environmental, archaeological, cultural and built heritage of Longford County, for the benefit of its population;

- To identify, preserve, protect and enhance where appropriate, the unique landscape character of Longford County, including the preservation of views and prospects and the amenities of places and features of natural beauty or interest;
- Ensure that quality underpins all forms of development. Develop and maintain a sense of place and local distinctiveness in established and newly developing areas. That the vitality and character of established town, village centres and rural areas are maintained;
- To incorporate and implement the relevant EU, national and regional guidelines, strategies and regulations at County level;
- To integrate the proper planning and sustainable development of Longford County with the social, community and cultural requirements of the area and its population;
- Promote Longford as a local and regional centre of trade, business and tourism, while encouraging employment growth and economic activity.

In harmony with these objectives, the CDP outlines how it is the policy of the Council to encourage new developments to locate in existing towns and villages, where the basic social and infrastructural services are available and/or where such services may be provided or expanded on an economic basis. This policy is designed to enable the county's inhabitants to live and find employment in close proximity to each other. It is also intended as a means by which to strengthen the county's existing urban centres in order to enhance the vitality and viability of such settlements, thereby providing the necessary foundation upon which they can increase their retail offer.

In implementing these objectives, the CDP highlights the importance of providing a clear urban hierarchy for the county and defining the functional roles of its various settlement centres. In doing so, the CDP acknowledges that County Longford is a highly rural County, with the majority of the population living in rural areas. The Plan identifies this scenario as reflected in the County's small urban base, with Longford being the largest town. It is recognised in the CDP that this low urban base has had a detrimental impact on the development of the County in terms of the lack of the required critical mass necessary for the provision of a higher order of services, facilities and employment.

Therefore, the policy of the Council as stated in the CDP is to promote the development of Longford Town as the primary County/Regional Centre for the area. Although Longford's retail core is covered by a separate Development Plan (Longford Town Development Plan 2004-2010), the CDP zones lands in appropriate locations in the County area adjacent to the town boundary that function as part of the Longford Urban Area, so as to facilitate the integrated development of this primary urban area, thus enhancing the potential of the County Town to increase its retail offer.

In addition, the CDP highlights how the other towns and villages in the County also fulfil a very important local and regional role. It is considered, subject to the availability of adequate services, that these towns and villages as listed below have the capacity for

urban development and an improved retail environment. The CDP identifies a hierarchy of settlements which can be expressed as follows:

Longford – County town of regional importance. The County's primary growth centre with a high level of access and existing services where the majority of industrial, commercial, business and retail development will be channelled.

Granard, Ballymahon and Edgeworthstown - County growth centres with a regional element. These towns serve a wide hinterland in terms of service provision and accommodation. The CDP envisages that these towns will continue to act as County service centres and build upon their strategic location on major transport nodes.

Newtownforbes, Drumlish, Lanesboro – Local growth centres. These settlements will continue to provide settlement centres for the population and local-level goods and services provision.

Areas Covered By Village Policy Statements – These are areas which are designated for the primary purpose of fulfilling local housing need. It is envisaged that these will also provide limited local level services such as post offices, neighbourhood shops, schools etc.

Carrickglass Demesne – It is planned that this walled area of land of approximately 263 hectares, 4km northeast of Longford Town will help meet the expanding residential requirements of the County Town. As with the areas covered by Village Policy Statements, it is envisaged that this will provide limited local level services such as neighbourhood shops.

The Council, by way of the CDP, aims to strengthen the fabric of these existing centres and develop settlement clusters in the county, thereby creating and maintaining vibrant and thriving urban and rural communities with a sufficient level of physical, social, economic and services infrastructure. An essential element of this is to review, and where necessary, upgrade the retailing environment of these centres.

With specific regard to retailing, the CDP states that it is the Council's aim to:

- support the continued commercial and retail development of Longford Town and recognise its importance in the commercial life of the north midlands.
- protect and promote the retail function of all the other towns and villages in the county; and,
- facilitate where possible, the development and expansion of retail facilities in appropriate areas of the County and thereby encourage the establishment and maintenance of vibrant urban and village communities, with a range of employment, goods and service facilities commensurate with their place in the settlement hierarchy.

The Council amended the Development Plan by way of a variation in September 2004 so as to include in it as Section 3.5, the 2004-2009 Longford Retail Strategy. This section of the Development Plan provides a clear strategy aimed at building upon the existing retail offer of the county and providing guidance as to future retail floorspace requirements. It outlines the core shopping and edge-of-centre areas within Longford Town and presents direction as to the most appropriate locations for future retail development.

2.3.2 Longford Town Development Plan, 2004-2010

The Town Development Plan (TDP) is the statutory Development Plan for the Town of Longford from 2004 to 2010. The overall aim of the Plan is to set out a framework for the sustainable physical development of the town, while ensuring the conservation and protection of the built and natural environment.

The TDP seeks to promote the development of Longford Town as a balanced settlement with residential areas existing in harmony with commercial and industrial activities. It seeks that Longford retains its role as the main service centre for the upper midland region. In order to facilitate future sustainable development, growth and expansion of the Town, the following are the strategies upon which this development plan has been prepared:

- To encourage and promote the economic, social and cultural development of Longford Town.
- To consolidate the land use pattern of Longford Town.
- To expand and improve the physical infrastructure of Longford Town.
- To develop the built environment and to improve the physical structure and appearance of the streetscapes and public spaces of the Town and to develop the natural environment and improve the Town structure as a place in which to live, work and recreate.

Of particular relevance to this update and review of the County Retail Strategy, the TDP aims to contain commercial development within the town centre. The use of derelict infill locations is encouraged as is the redevelopment of derelict town centre areas. Retail expansion along Dublin Street, Lower Main Street, New Street and other streets adjacent to the town's commercial core is encouraged.

So as to protect the viability and vitality of the town centre, the TDP seeks that retail activity be retained within the commercial core. However, where the required scale and design of the proposed development cannot be accommodated within this envelope, and where the proposal incorporates the principles of sustainable development, edge-of-

centre¹ sites can be considered. The TDP also encourages medium density residential development in conjunction with commercial/retail development within the town centre, in order to increase the residential population of the town core area in accordance with the principles of sustainable development. In addition, the TDP stresses the importance of ensuring the provision of adequate neighbourhood retail outlets, services, and facilities in residential areas, in order to minimise the number of journeys, particularly car borne journeys, to the town centre.

The TDP seeks that major retail and commercial developments locate in or as near as possible to the town centre, so as to sustain the commercial base of the town centre and encourage additional investment. It also seeks to ensure that the existing streetscapes are not detrimentally altered and that attractive shop fronts, which enhance the visual amenity of the town, are retained/improved. Subject to financial constraints and the requirements of the National Roads Authority, Longford Town Council states its intention in the TDP to undertake a 'Streets Rejuvenation Project' involving the under grounding of cables, refurbishment of footpaths with high quality materials and the replacement of lighting. The time scale, selected streets, and scope of works shall be decided at the discretion of the Council, subject to local requirements, finance and the requirements of the NRA.

The aim of the Council to develop the centre of Longford as one of the retail, commercial and business growth centres of the upper midland region is outlined in the TDP. In order to facilitate this, the TDP seeks to ensure that the following policies are implemented:

- To encourage the expansion of the retail and commercial base of the town.
- To ensure that retail and commercial development is located in or as near as possible to the town centre.
- To identify alternative locations for retail and commercial expansion.
- To ensure that the residential population in the town centre is increased in accordance with the principles of sustainable development.
- To ensure that development which takes place compliments the existing streetscape of the area in terms of design, sitting and function.
- To encourage greater usage of back land areas for car parking, rear servicing and or additional commercial expansion, in order to strengthen the residential / commercial function of the town centre.

¹ *Edge-of-centre* is as defined in Annex 1 of the retail planning guidelines - a location within easy walking distance of the primary retail area of a town centre with parking facilities serving the core area as well as the new development, thus enabling one trip to serve several purposes.

Out-of-centre sites will be considered only where it has been demonstrated, through a sequential study carried out as part of the application for planning permission and dealing with issues such as availability, accessibility, feasibility, viability and sustainability, that there are no suitable alternative sites within the commercial core area. ("Out-of-Centre" is identified in the TDP as a location which is clearly separate from the town centre but within the urban area.)

- To encourage the usage of upper floors of existing developments and mixed-use developments, particularly in the town centre.
- To facilitate where funds permit and subject to the requirements of the National Roads Authority, the rejuvenation of the streetscape, including the undergrounding of cables, reconstruction of footpaths and installation of new lighting.
- To ensure the retention of shop fronts and elements of the streetscape which visually enhance the amenity of the town.
- To seek the removal and redesign of inappropriate shop fronts.
- To ensure that shop fronts are traditionally designed in sympathy with the surrounding streetscape and are made from natural materials and complimenting colours.
- To encourage and support measures to eliminate derelict sites in the town centre.
- To ensure that where necessary high quality decorative name plates are provided within the town. Streets/estates without name plates or with incorrect spelling/grammar will be prioritised for replacement.

So as to enhance the quality of the town centre's public realm, the TDP states that Longford Town council are committed to the following objectives:

- To ensure that new shop fronts will generally conform to the development control guidelines for shop fronts specified in the plan.
- To seek the removal of all unauthorised and unattractive signage from within the town.
- To restrict unnecessary additional lighting, including intermittent lighting and neon lighting, on any external elevation.
- To restrict the use of external security grills/shutters on shop fronts.
- To exercise Longford Town Councils powers under the Derelict Sites Act 1990, including, if necessary, compulsory acquisition of derelict sites.
- To protect the amenity of existing predominantly residential areas adjacent to the town centre, from speculative commercial development.
- To seek to provide decorative name plates for the streets and estates of the town.

2.3.3 Local Area Plans

Longford County Council has prepared a number of Local Area Plans. These Local Area Plans outline the zoning designations of lands within the settlements covered and include where appropriate, guidance on the future location of residential, commercial, industrial, public utility, educational, institutional, recreational / open spaces, churches / burial grounds, and agricultural lands. Each plan addresses the specific development context of the settlement with which it is concerned and provides guidance on the sustainable development of these centres. Settlements currently by covered Local Area Plans include:

- Granard
- Ballymahon
- Edgeworthstown
- Newtownforbes
- Lanesboro
- Drumlish
- Kenagh
- Carrickglass

2.3.4 County Development Board Strategy: The Way Forward: Strategy For Economic, Social And Cultural Development In County Longford, 2002-2011

This strategy provides a strategic and integrated response to the development challenges facing the county over the period 2002-2011 in an economic, social and cultural context across eleven key sectors. It poses the question: *“What kind of a place should Longford be to work and live in by the year 2011?”*

The strategy outlines how the continued economic performance of the county is based on a dual track approach of encouraging a strong indigenous small to medium sized enterprise sector (SME) in tandem with a proactive policy on encouraging future direct investment. Key issues tackled in the strategy are how to support existing enterprise, how to attract inward investment/job creation and the ways in which both the physical and community services infrastructure of the county can be improved. It specifies four pivotal objectives for the achievement of sustainable employment. These are namely:

1. the provision of financial support to existing business ventures so as to stimulate growth, maximise job creation and enhance competitiveness;

2. the creation of a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation in the county;
3. the marketing of Longford Town as the ideal investment location and as a centre for relocation of east coast businesses; and,
4. the development of an adequate, affordable physical infrastructure.