

Midlands Gateway Implementation Forum Annual Report 2008

Introduction and Background

The National Spatial Strategy identified the linked Gateway of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar as a strategic growth centre. In terms of the Gateways identified within the National Spatial Strategy, the polycentric planning model envisaged by the Midland Gateway gives rise to the most significant planning challenge in terms of its delivery. The Gateway Investment priority study commissioned by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and Forfas identified in the context of Gateway requirements the necessity for a three dimensional approach to the delivery of the Gateway concept. This approach included an executive function located within the Local Authority, an appropriate local backup liaison structure linked to those bodies, including public sector agencies and an upward liaison function linking to the key relevant national departments. This particular theme was taken up by Indecon, International Economic Consultants in their Report commissioned by Westmeath and Offaly County Councils, in which they outlined the strategic development framework for the Midlands Gateway. It recommended a similar three-tier approach based on a Midland Implementation Team, an implementation forum and a networked vertical relationship with the relevant Interdepartmental Spatial Planning coordination teams.

In response to this recommendation, Westmeath County Council as lead Authority for the Midland Gateway has established the Midland Implementation Forum, which consists of the two Local Authorities, Athlone IT, the Midland Gateway Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise Ireland, FAS, IDA, The HSE, Failte Ireland and the Midland Regional Authority. More recently Mr Niall Cussan of the Spatial Planning Unit of the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government has joined the Forum, which in addition to providing valuable individual input will also provide an opportunity for vertical integration in the context of establishing potential reporting relationships with central Government Departments via the National Spatial Unit.

The Forum was launched by An, Taoiseach, Mr Brian Cowen on the 1st October 2007 and this its first Annual Report seeks to set out in broad terms the focus of its activity over the initial twelve month period during which it convened a total of eight times.

Strategic Development Framework for the Midlands Gateway

Prior to the establishment of the Forum, Offaly and Westmeath Local Authorities commissioned Indecon International Consultants to prepare a strategy designed to create and deliver on the concept of an integrated linked gateway comprising Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar. The strategy which was finalised in early 2007 and incorporated into the National Development Plan review Process has effectively set the Agenda for the work of the Local Authorities, the other State Agencies and the Gateway Implementation Forum. The Forum for its part seeks to provide and promote an interagency focus on the progression of the Indecon recommendations. In this context, this Report follows the format of the key elements identified in Indecon for the strategic development plan for the Midlands Gateway.

Population Growth and Critical Mass

If the objective of the Midland Gateway is to be achieved, population growth and the establishment of critical mass within the three towns is a fundamental requirement. The National Spatial Strategy and the Regional Planning Guidelines in broad terms envisage a doubling of population within the towns and the forward planning framework is required to support this. In the context of forward planning both Westmeath and Offaly County Councils reviewed their County Development Plans during this reporting period. Both reviews were conducted in the context of the National Spatial Strategy and the demographic projections contained in the Regional Planning Guidelines. In addition to the County Development Plan Review Process both parties have undertaken a number of local area plans to further animate forward planning objectives. In particular plans were prepared for the Grand Canal Quarter in Tullamore, Robinstown and Marlinstown in Mullingar, Cornamaddy and Lissywollen North and South in Athlone.

In December 2007, Minister Batt O’Keeffe launched the developing areas initiative. In essence, this initiative identified discreet core areas within each Gateway where the combined development potential exceeds 1,000 residential units. Mr O’Keeffe established a dedicated developing area team whose core function is to work across Government to ensure the seamless delivery of infrastructure and services in a coherent manner within the developing areas in conjunction with the Local Authorities involved. In the case of the Midlands Gateway, Creggan in Athlone, the Grand Canal Quarter Area in Tullamore and Robinstown in Mullingar have been identified as developing areas.

Infrastructure and Connectivity

The Indecon Report identified investment in infrastructure and connectivity as key components of Gateway Development. It identified road infrastructure as a key priority but also emphasised the importance of investment in education, R & D infrastructure, water and sewerage and social infrastructure. Education and R & D will be dealt with elsewhere in this Report with this section dealing with Roads and Water and Sewerage elements.

The completion of the Kinnegad – Athlone section of the M6 was a key strategic milestone in the delivery of road infrastructure for the Midlands. The remaining element of this project will be completed between Athlone and Galway in the period up to 2010. In conjunction with this project an initial portion of the N52 between Tullamore and Kilbeggan was upgraded while the remaining elements of this key link are at an advanced stage of planning. In Tullamore the construction of the eastern by-pass continued during 2008 while a route selection process for the Tullamore – Kilbeggan link road was completed during 2008. In terms of Gateway Town Connectivity these latter projects are of significance importance. The connectivity of Athlone and Mullingar via the M6 and the N52 remains the preferred position of the NRA although this position has not been formalised. Further preliminary studies were carried out by Iarnród Éireann on the potential re-opening of the Mullingar – Athlone Railway Link which is seen as a medium term project requiring substantial investment and subject to cost benefit analysis.

Significant progress was made on the augmentation of water services capacity in the three towns during 2008. In the case of Tullamore, the tender process for the upgrade of the Tullamore Wastewater Treatment Plant was completed by year-end while the contract for the Mullingar Sewerage Scheme got underway. In the case of Athlone, the selection of design consultants is at an advanced stage. In all of these cases the contracts in question would deliver the necessary wastewater treatment capacity to allow the towns fulfil their roles in the Midland Gateway. In the case of water provision, Athlone Town increased its capacity by 50% from 2 million to 3 million gallons per day during the course of 2008.

In summary subject to the satisfactory progression of the schemes mentioned there are no short-term capacity issues in the area of Water Services.

Productivity Gap

The Midland Region has the lowest level of output per head of population of any of the regions at 36.8% below the national average. This presents a significant productivity / economic challenge. Indecon in their reflection on this noted the comparative lack of very high valued-added knowledge-based industries. In the context of productivity generally, the IDA and Enterprise Ireland have been identified as the Agencies best positioned to take a leadership role in this regard. Both Agencies are actively involved in the Midlands Region together with FAS, Chambers of Commerce, Local Authorities and the Educational Institutions to promote innovation and job creation at every opportunity.

During 2008 IDA approved projects included three in Athlone with significant potential. The Abiomed, PPD, and BioClin Research have the capacity to deliver circa 600 jobs in the next five years. While a number of itineraries have visited both Mullingar and Tullamore no definite outcomes materialised during the year. On the downside Boston Scientific closed its Tullamore facility with a loss of 250 jobs which represents a significant challenge in terms of securing a replacement industry. In terms of future capacity IDA are in discussions with Offaly County Council over the potential development of a 60-acre land bank on a joint venture basis while the IDA itself is currently assessing a number of land banks as to their suitability for the development of a large scale business and technology park in the Midland Region.

A substantial land bank exists in Mullingar. In addition, IDA continues to promote significant development lands in Tullamore, Athlone, Portlaoise, and Roscommon.

Enterprise Ireland's focus in the midlands is on the continued acceleration of the development of Irish Companies including the continued support of existing companies on a one to one and group basis. In addition Enterprise Ireland continues to develop enterprise space with communities including:

- a) New 200,000 square foot Enterprise Centre in Mullingar in conjunction with the County Enterprise Board and Westmeath County Council.
- b) Enterprise Ireland also continues to partner with Athlone IT in the enhancement of research and innovation capacity. In all Enterprise Ireland has invested in excess of €4 million in research facilities on the College Campus. Enterprise Ireland is currently working closely with AIT on a proposal for Research Funds (PRTL) that would realise an expansion of the Midlands Innovation and Research Centre as well as delivering a Research and Development Campus.

Education / Attainment and Skills Base

A specific challenge facing the Midlands Gateway and the surrounding area concerns the education and skills base within the region. In particular statistics available clearly indicate that the proportion of population with third level education is substantially lower than across the state. Indecon placed a particular emphasis on the role of AIT in addressing this problem, which has historical foundations in the nature of employment primarily available in the Midlands.

In this context AIT in consultation and in co-operation with its partners on the Gateway Implementation Forum have progressed a number of initiatives including expanding its programme offerings to support market conditions, as well as developing new modes of programme delivery. In addition, it is re-focusing its three research (bio-science, software and materials) centres to facilitate new areas of innovation and research within the Midlands Region and advanced its plans in association with the Georgia Tech Institute to explore collaborate research and educational opportunities including joint research programmes as well as ongoing collaboration on the development of a Midlands Gateway Research and Innovation Centre.

In line with the move to a smart knowledge based economy, AIT has expanded and improved its provision at post graduate level. A new post graduate research hub will accommodate sixty research masters and doctoral students, two major equipment platform laboratories in the area of imaging and materials, as well as ancillary supporting facilities. Similarly, AIT is a partner with thirteen other higher education institutions and industry bodies on an internationally-based structured doctoral programme in micro and nano engineering.

Outreach education opportunities are an important conduit for the engagement of the broader population in third level participation. It is proposed that Outreach facilities be established by AIT in both Tullamore and Mullingar. Such a proposal was the subject of a Gateway Innovation Fund bid and it is now hoped to progress the initiative independently of the Gateway Innovation Fund in conjunction with the Local Authorities.

Skills Levels and Educational Attainment

A Sub-Group of the Gateway Implementation Forum has been established to examine the skills base within the region. It has recently completed and initial study examining attitudinal issues among existing companies towards the enhancement of skills and personal development. Further studies by this Sub-Group will be undertaken with particular reference to the increasing numbers on the live Register and the appropriateness of the skills base relative to historical opportunities for employment within the Midlands Region.

- FÁS Employment Services Unit provides, on an annual basis, a guidance and training/job placement services to an estimated 41,000 clients.

Services will include:

- Information and advice, occupational guidance, assessment needs, development of career/occupational/employment action plan.
- Access to FÁS training and other labour market interventions including job placement.
- Referral to other services e.g. AIT, VEC, Enterprise Boards, FÁS Job Clubs, Work Experience Programmes and other non-FÁS Labour Market Activities, as well as a tailor made service to those who experience redundancy.

- FAS Services to Business Unit currently provides training/up-skilling to in excess of 4000 people employed largely in Small to Medium-Sized Enterprises.

Tourism Development

The Strategic Development Framework identified tourism as an area capable of further exploitation with particular emphasis on product development, hotel accommodation, water based activities, and on a short stay breaks. The Planning Authorities in the regions have been proactive in promoting tourism and have worked closely with Failte Ireland in this regard. Hotel accommodation has been increased with the expansion of the Tullamore Court Hotel and the opening of the Sheraton and Athlone Springs Hotels in Athlone. At the present time there is an acceptance that hotel accommodation and conference facilities in the gateway towns are sufficient to meet current demand and expectations.

In the context of product development, Failte Ireland have re-branded the Midland Area as part of the Lakelands Brand which is seen as a considerable advantage in the context of a broader audience and catchment. This re-branding exercise was successfully completed during 2008. The introduction by Government of the Mid-Shannon Tax Incentive Scheme to promote tourism developments in the Mid-Shannon area is a valuable support which has of yet been under utilised. In the context of a contracting economic environment it would be desirable to have the time line for this scheme extended.

Business and Retail

The Tullamore, Athlone and Mullingar Chambers of Commerce have successfully established a Midland Chamber of Commerce with its own Executive which co-ordinates chamber activity across the three towns and has in place a number of active sub committees engaged in policy research which feeds into the work into the Gateway Implementation Forum.

In the context of the strategic recommendation from Indecon to promote the Midlands Gateway Towns as locations for large-scale retail establishments and distribution centres, significant advancements have been made in this regard. The Athlone Town Centre Shopping Development opened in April 2008, which expands the retail footprint of Athlone by 250,000 square foot. In addition a 250,000 square foot retail park was permitted in Athlone during the year. In Tullamore, two major town centre developments comprising of 57,234 square meters were permitted during the course of the 2008, while a 27,000 square meter retail and mixed use development was permitted in Mullingar during the course of the year. While it is unlikely that the permitted retail developments will proceed in the short-term due to banking and business constraints there is little doubt that the progression of the schemes as permitted would expand the retail offer in the Midland Gateway Towns to a level that would satisfy demand for the foreseeable future.

In the context of distribution activities the respective Planning Authorities are satisfied that sufficient lands are zoned to avail of any opportunities arising in this sector.

Quality of Life

In terms of quality of life this is an all-embracing issue, which incorporates many of the issues discussed heretofore. The specific recommendations made by Indecon related to the provision of social infrastructure and in particular to the role of Offaly and Westmeath County Councils in this regard with necessary support being provided by Government for any gaps in local funding.

In the context of direct Local Authority involvement Offaly County Council have during 2008 invested heavily in the re-development of Tullamore Town Park and opened an €7-million integrated leisure facility catering for the town and its environs. In addition Tullamore Town Football Club opened new facilities comprising of football pitches, clubhouse, dressing rooms etc which add considerably to the extensive sporting facilities in the Town.

Westmeath County Council commenced the roll out of Playground Provision Scheme during 2008 with 6 playgrounds having been provided. In partnership with the Football Association of Ireland it provided 4 integrated All-Weather Multi-Sport Areas and progressed to design stage the development of a €20 million Integrated Sports and Leisure Facility in Mullingar. This latter proposal was the subject of an application for funding to the Gateway Innovation Fund. Athlone Town Council expanded its facilities at the Regional Sports Centre in Athlone. Regrettably at this time funding sources in the context of sports and recreation have been severely curtailed which is an important consideration for the future.

Education provision is seen as an important contributor to quality of life. In this regard new schools under the auspices of Educate Together were opened in Tullamore and Mullingar during the year. A protocol for the development of schools sites and the advancement of school development was agreed between the Local government Sector and the Department of Education during the course of the year which together with the developing areas initiatives will greatly facilitate the advance planning of education provision in the Gateway Towns into the future.

Cost Competitiveness

The question of cost competitiveness has been raised as an issue of some importance in the context of Regional Development by Indecon. In particular initial set of costs such as development contributions have been highlighted. This issue in turn has been highlighted to Government. The Implementation Forum has established a Sub-Group on the issue of competitiveness and is working closely with Forfas and Enterprise Ireland to develop baseline data on the competitiveness agenda within the region, which will in turn inform investment decisions in this area.

Branding

Quite apart from the difficulties associated with polycentric planning it is clear that the concept of a linked gateway is difficult to market and brand and will require considerable work in order to build identity and recognition for the Gateway at national and international level. In an effort to deal with this challenge the Gateway Implementation Forum has established a branding sub group and is at present in the process of selecting Consultants to examine these issues and to develop a website portal for the marketing of the Gateway concept and related matters.

Implementation Forum Initiatives

The focus of the Report so far is reflective of the nature of the discussion that have taken place at eight Forum Meetings to date. In addition to the discussions around the integrated development of the gateway, the Forum have establishment four specific sub groups in the following areas:

- The Branding Sub Group is in the process of interviewing Consultants to develop a Midland Gateway Brand and develop a Midland Gateway Website.
- The recently established Competitiveness Sub Group will work closely with Forfas, FAS, the Education Sector and other Agencies to examine the Competitiveness Agenda within the region.
- The Skills Sub Group have already published its initial Report on the attitudinal issues surrounding skills development within established enterprises and will going forward examine deficiencies in skills associated with the profile of the current live Register.
- The Ambassadors Sub Group has been examining opportunities to spread the message regarding the Midlands Gateway concept and in this regard has successfully hosted two Midlands Gateway Gala Evenings at which Midland Champions have been honoured. The success at this particular initiative is solely attributable to the Midland Gateway Chamber of Commerce.

In order to support its initiatives the Forum has established with contributions from all the participants a seed fund of €100,000 to facilitate its research activities and to advance the branding initiative.

Gateway Innovation Fund

Indecon was one of a number of Reports, which recommended the establishment of a Gateway Innovation Fund which was taken on board by Government as part of the National Development Plan Review. An initial fund of €300 million was established for which submissions were invited on a competitiveness basis in late 2007. The Gateway Implementation Forum agreed four submissions including the Midland Innovation Centre submitted by Athlone IT, the Athlone Town East and West Regeneration Programme, the Mullingar Sports and Leisure facility and the Grand Canal Quarter master plan for Tullamore. Each of the foregoing while capable of assessment individually was submitted in the context of their respective merit and their capacity to be viewed collectively in the context of their cumulative capacity to underpin the development of the Midland Gateway.

In the context of budgetary adjustments in late 2008 the Gateway Innovation Fund initiative has been set aside in the short-term. It is hoped that the fund and the applications made on foot of it will be revisited at the earliest possible opportunity.

Overview of Immediate and Ongoing Challenges

The joint DOEHLG/Forfas Report on Gateway Investment Priorities identified the Midlands Gateway as “the most innovative as well as the most challenging of the Gateways. It is also the Gateway that is most likely to take time to fully realise”. The challenge is fundamentally about developing the critical mass necessary to create a self-sustaining linked population of 100,000 people in Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar. The proposed doubling of population in the period to 2020 is to say the least ambitious in context of current economic growth patterns.

The instruments identified necessary for delivery including the infrastructural capacity, increased productivity through innovation and enterprise, improved quality of life, improved education and attainment, and improved forward planning can and should be continued to be perused vigorously notwithstanding present difficulties. Good progress has been made in the provision and enhancement of physical and social infrastructural, which together with the additional plans and programmes in place if funded should substantially address the issues in this context. The reestablishment of the GIF will be critical in this regard.

The further enhancement of Athlone IT’s role in education provision, research and innovation is critically important in the expansion of the Midlands and every opportunity to support this objective through funding and collaboration should be exploited.

The expansion of the retail and business sector has been adequately catered for in the context of committed developments. It remains to be seen whether the financial environment will be conducive to the advancement of these developments in the short-term. There may be a requirement for a more liberal approach to the extension of planning permission in the medium term to overcome difficulties with the slow down in progressing strategic developments of this nature.

The increase in the live Register due to the downturn in the construction sector is likely to further amplify the skills deficit within the Midland Region. Substantial collaboration between State Agencies at local level and their parent departments is required to address this skills deficit in the context of re-skilling, alternative employment opportunities and the promotion of lifelong learning as an alternative to seeking moderately skilled employment.

The Gateway Implementation Forum will continue to work in a constructive manner to promote an integrated approach to the effective delivery of the Gateway Concept. Insofar as the structures are in place it will feed into the decision-making process at interdepartmental level in an effort to focus debate and resources towards the continued achievement of its objectives.

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