

## 6. Economic Development, Enterprise and Tourism

### *Aims:*

- *To provide for the future well-being of the residents of Athy by adopting an asset-based approach to economic and employment growth in accordance with the principles of sustainable development.*
- *To achieve a reduction in the levels of commuting from the town by ensuring that lands are appropriately zoned, and a framework is in place to attract greater employment opportunities including in the sectors identified for growth by fostering competitiveness and innovation within a high quality physical environment.*
- *To provide a greater focus on social infrastructure and the quality of life of the residents of Athy in order to increase the attractiveness of the town as a place to live, work, visit and invest in.*
- *To provide for an improved 'tourist offer' and associated entrepreneurial spin-offs by identifying and supporting targeted areas for investment over the life of the Plan and beyond.*

### 6.1 Policy Context

The National Planning Framework (NPF) sets out the development of a strong economy supported by enterprise, innovation and skills as a National Strategic Outcome (NSO5) that will depend on creating places that foster enterprise and innovation and attract investment and talent and states that this can be achieved by building regional economic drivers. The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) expands on this aim by encouraging an asset-based approach to development and outlining various 'growth enablers' for the Core Region in which Athy is located. This approach, which is central to the Economic Development Strategy (see Section 6.3), places emphasis on utilising the town's existing built and natural heritage assets to develop its tourism and recreation sector.

*Growth enablers* include the following:

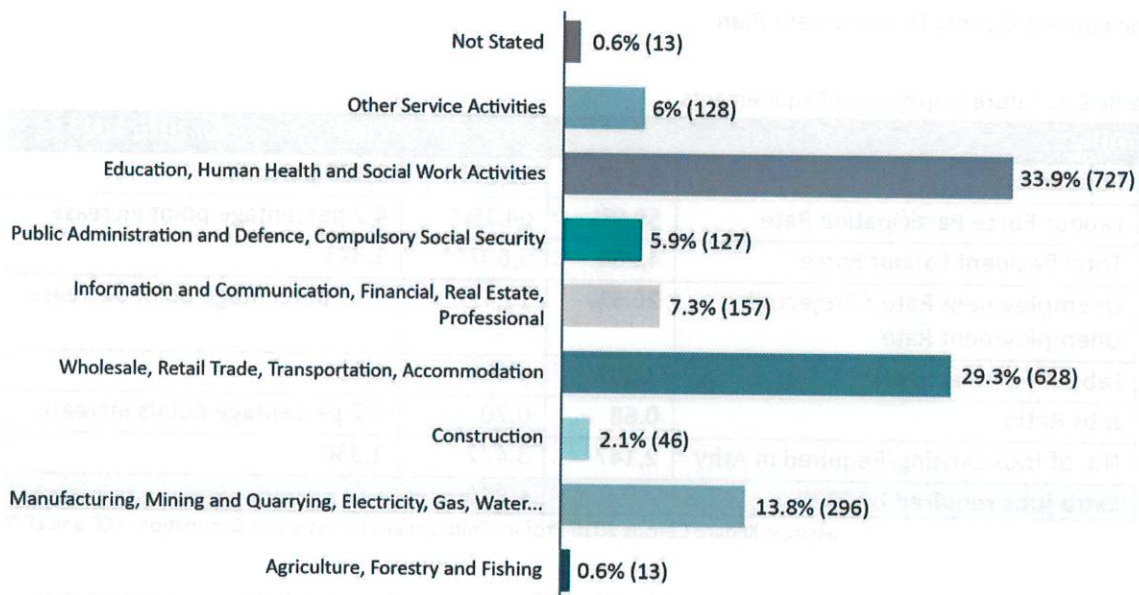
- The promotion of continued growth, while providing for increased employment and improved local economies, services and functions to allow towns to become more self-sustaining and to create the quality of life necessary to attract investment.
- 'Catch-up' investment to promote consolidation and improvement in the sustainability of those areas that have experienced significant population growth but have a weak level of services and employment for their residents.
- Diversification and specialisation of local economies with a focus on clustering, smart specialisation, placemaking and urban regeneration to create the quality of life to attract 'Foreign Direct Investment' and indigenous investment and increase high value knowledge-based employment including second site and relocation opportunities.
- The promotion of tourism, leisure and recreational activities including development of an integrated greenway network.

The Economic Development Hierarchy as outlined in the Kildare County Development Plan has described Self-Sustaining Growth Towns like Athy as having a moderate level of jobs and services. In order to promote future economic development and employment growth it has identified specific sectoral opportunities for the town in the areas of tourism, bloodstock, manufacturing, logistics and food and beverage products.

## 6.2 Employment Profile

Census 2016 recorded that there were 2,147 jobs based in Athy which accounts for 3.4% of all jobs in the county. Employment in Athy ranges across various sectors with the largest being recorded in the area of Education, Human Health and Social Work Activities, providing 33.9% of all jobs in the town in 2016 (see Figure 6.1 below). This is followed by employment in the Wholesale, Retail Trade, Transportation and Accommodation Sector at 29.3%. Together these sectors reflect Athy’s status as an important retail and service centre in south Kildare. Significant manufacturing employers in the town include Tegral Building Products Limited, Minch Malt and Athy International Concentrates.

**Figure 6.1:** Employment by Category for the Settlement of Athy in 2016



Source: Kildare Census 2016 Profile: Commuting (KCC and LCDC)

Of the 3,157 people that Census 2016 recorded to be in employment and living in Athy, 29% work in the town, 21% work elsewhere in the county and 28% commute out of Kildare. An additional 1,242 workers commute into Athy for employment every day. Of these, 25% (542) commute from elsewhere in Kildare and the 33% (700) commute from outside the county. In this regard, it is noted that Athy is relatively proximate to several neighbouring employment centres such as Carlow, Portlaoise and Kilkenny.

Census 2016 Athy recorded a net daily loss in working population of -1,010 workers indicating the town’s jobs ratio to be 0.68. This is the fourth highest for any settlement in the county after Naas, Maynooth and Leixlip<sup>14</sup>. However, represents a small decline on the level recorded by Census 2011 when the jobs ratio was found to be 0.73. Furthermore, this figure it

### What is a jobs ratio?

The term jobs ratio relates to the number of jobs based in a settlement area divided by the resident workforce; it does not factor in employees commuting in or out of the town to work. For example, a jobs ratio of 1 for a town would theoretically mean that there was one job available for every resident worker.

<sup>14</sup> Source: National Planning Framework, 2018, Appendix 2: Population and Employment in Urban Settlements in the Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly Area, Census of Population 2016.

should be noted that there are this figure indicates that there are not enough jobs for every worker living in the town i.e. for every 100 workers there was only 63 jobs based in the town in 2016.

### 6.3 Economic Development Strategy

A key principle underpinning this Plan is the pursuit of sustainable economic development opportunities to provide for an increase in the number of jobs based in the town. For Athy to fulfil its designated role in the economic hierarchy of the county and become a more self-sustaining settlement, the town must aim to increase its jobs ratio over the longer term. Therefore, the Economic Development Strategy targets 1,330 extra jobs and a projected jobs ratio target of 0.70 for the town by 2027. The jobs ratio aligns with the 0.70 jobs ratio target for the county as outlined in the current County Development Plan.

**Table 6.1:** Future Employment Requirements

| Athy  | 2016  | 2027         | Change between 2016-2027       |
|---|-------|--------------|--------------------------------|
| Population                                      | 9,677 | 11,837       | 2,160 persons                  |
| Labour Force Participation Rate                 | 59.9% | 64.1%*       | 4.2 percentage point increase  |
| Total Resident Labour Force                     | 4,284 | 5,607**      | 1,323                          |
| Unemployment Rate / Projected Unemployment Rate | 26.6% | 11.4%        | 16.6 percentage point decrease |
| Labour Force at Work                            | 3,157 | 4,968        | 1,331                          |
| Jobs Ratio                                      | 0.68  | 0.70         | 0.2 percentage points increase |
| No. of Jobs Existing/Required in Athy           | 2,147 | 3,477        | 1,330                          |
| <b>Extra jobs required by 2027</b>              | -     | <b>1,330</b> | -                              |

Source: Kildare Census 2016 Profile: Employment Industry and Occupation (KCC and LCDC)

\* The projected labour force participation of 64.1% for 2027 was based on a targeted average participation rate recorded for County Kildare in Census 2016.

\*\* Represents a proportional increase as a derivative of population growth whilst also incorporating a 4.2 percentage point increase in the labour force participation rate.

\*\*\* This figure is calculated by applying a targeted 11.4% unemployment rate and a 0.70 jobs ratio to the projected total resident labour force of 5,607. It is noted that the unemployment rate for Athy in 2016 was recorded in the Census as 26.6%, a figure far exceeding the county average of 11.4% in 2016. It is projected that this figure will fall to the 2016 county average by 2027.

Whilst all employment generating activities in the town will be encouraged, the key areas of focus for development opportunities will be in the sectors of tourism, bloodstock, manufacturing, logistics, and food/beverage products, as provided for in the County Development Plan.

The envisaged level of employment along with the targeted jobs ratio of the town in 2027, outlined in the Economic Development Strategy for Athy will be achieved by:

- Providing the infrastructure and zoned land necessary to attract economic development. The plan has designated **15.2 ha** of undeveloped land zoned for Q: Enterprise and Employment use and **37.1 ha** undeveloped land for H: Industrial and Warehousing use.
- Supporting the intensification, renewal and modernisation of existing industrial and business floorspace where this accords with the proper planning and sustainable development of the town.

- Ensuring new industrial or business floorspace will allow for future flexibility, including future subdivision and/or amalgamation to provide for a range of accommodation, particularly for small/medium businesses.
- Capitalising on the development of new servicing infrastructure within the town such as the Athy Distributor Road.
- Rejuvenating the town centre for the provision of retail and commercial functions as well as providing for alternative functions and activities.
- Recognising and expanding the tourism offer in Athy by investing in appropriate tourism developments and supporting associated spin-off enterprises.
- Supporting the development of dedicated Incubation Units / Workshops / Business Starter Units within the town centre.
- Continuing to develop Athy as a *Level 3, Town and Sub-County Centre (Key Service Centre)* in accordance with the County Retail Hierarchy, by consolidating the retail offer and improving the urban fabric and public realm of the town centre.
- Supporting the development and enhancement of the further education and training infrastructure of the town.
- Supporting the development of research and innovation activities in the town including the development of Athy Food, Drinks and Skills Hub at the former Model School.
- Facilitating all forms of employment generation subject to environmental and other relevant planning considerations.

### 6.3.1 Asset-Based Approach to Development

Key to the delivery of the Economic Development Strategy for Athy is the pursuit of an asset-based approach to development, where the town's social, economic and natural/built heritage capital are viewed as existing environmental resources. These assets have the ability to accommodate changing roles and functions, which, if fully utilised and subject to targeted investment, can sustainably support an increased level of residential population and employment activity, whilst also providing an enhanced level of social infrastructure, amenity, and design quality.

#### What does an asset-based approach to development mean?

An asset-based approach to development identifies and builds on a combination of the social, economic and natural assets that are available within a settlement, in order to establish an overall growth strategy. This holistic circular economic approach to development recognises the change required to ensure that growth is sustainable in the long term and that such growth is accompanied by the necessary investment in infrastructure and services.

Such an approach to development is multi-faceted in nature, ranging from supporting the full utilisation of existing brownfield lands and vacant buildings to promoting the expansion of further education and training facilities, a key piece of existing social infrastructure in the town. Whilst the Plan incorporates a series of measures to support the aforementioned areas, the primary focus of this asset-based approach to development will be on the rejuvenation of the town centre and on improving Athy's tourist and amenity infrastructure.

In many ways the regeneration of the town centre and the development of the tourist offer and amenity infrastructure in the town are interlinked. For example, a transformed public realm in the

historic core will improve its attractiveness to both residents and visitors alike, whilst the development of the Barrow Blueway route will not only attract tourists but also provide an important local amenity. Such proposals are discussed in more detail in Section 6.5, Section 9.4 and in Appendix 1: Athy Urban Regeneration Framework.

### 6.3.2 Availability of Zoned Land

One of the key enablers in attracting potential investment and employment to Athy will be the availability of appropriately zoned lands. Under the Athy Town Development Plan (TDP) 2012 – 2018 approximately 105.2 hectares of land is zoned for employment, industry and enterprise purposes in Athy. This figure does not include such land uses as Town Centre, Retail, Leisure and Amenity which would also provide an element of employment generation. According to a survey conducted for the preparation of the Plan, 62.3 hectares of lands zoned for employment purposes in the Town Development Plan remain undeveloped. This figure solely relates to lands zoned for employment such as industrial warehousing and commercial uses.

**Table 6.2:** Survey of Employment Lands zoned under the Athy TDP 2012-18

|   |          |
|---|----------|
| Area in hectares (ha) zoned for employment uses*  | 105.2 ha |
| Area zoned for employment uses undeveloped  | 62.3 ha  |
| Area zoned for employment uses undeveloped (%)  | 59.2%    |
| Area zoned for employment uses which have been developed but are currently unoccupied** | 1.72 ha  |

Source: KCC Planning Department Survey, August 2020

\*The term 'employment uses' relates to the lands zoned Q: Enterprise and Employment, R: Retail and Commercial, H, H1, H2, H4: Industrial and Warehousing and H3: Light Industrial and Commercial in the Athy Town Development Plan 2012 – 2018.

\*\* This figure includes the developed part of Athy Business Campus, Kilkenny Road (2.02 ha) which was determined to have a vacancy rate of circa 50% (i.e. 1.01 ha).

Having regard to;

- (a) the quantum of lands built-out;
- (b) the level of occupancy as noted in **Table 6.2**;
- (c) the projected increase in employment of 1,330 persons to the end of the plan period in 2027; and
- (d) providing that all lands are developed for low-medium density type employment (40m<sup>2</sup> per employee),

It is projected that Athy will require 53.2 hectares of undeveloped land to be zoned for employment purposes<sup>15</sup>. This figure solely relates to lands zoned for employment such as industrial warehousing and commercial and does not consider potential job creation on other lands zoned for town centre, retail or leisure and amenity uses.

**Table 6.3** provides further information in relation to the location of the main employment areas in Athy and the quantity of zoned undeveloped land available for employment uses. As noted previously, in addition to the main employment zoning categories such as Enterprise, Industry and

<sup>15</sup> Note: A substantial majority the employment lands zoned under this Local Area Plan have previously been zoned under the Athy Town Development Plan 2012-2018.

Warehousing, there are other zoning categories which allow for employment creation in relation to leisure activities and various commercial uses. Reference should be made to **Chapter 11** for further detail in relation to the individual land use zonings throughout the town.

**Table 6.3:** Development of Employment Lands zoned under the Athy TDP 2021 – 2027

| Location of employment lands    | Employment Opportunities/Sectoral Strengths   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <b>Town Centre</b>              | <p>Capacity for retail and residential development, office and small-medium sized enterprise. Also, capacity for innovative retail/tourism/mixed use/cultural development in brownfield town centre sites.</p> <p>Promotion of live/work units is encouraged as well as the purposing of existing and vacant buildings as incubation/start-up units.</p>  |
| <b>Woodstock South Bleach</b>   | <p><i>Q: Enterprise and Employment</i> zoned greenfield sites in Woodstock South have been identified for medium/large scale new enterprise and employment growth and are intended to play a pivotal role in future enterprise and employment development within the town. Opportunities include development of higher quality knowledge based enterprises focusing on ICT, R&amp;D, offices, office based industry, telemarketing and some manufacturing.</p> <p>Development comprising of both brownfield and infill sites on ‘Q’ zoned lands’, should seek to increase the density of employment in the area. There is capacity for significant infill industrial development and re-development of brownfield sites.</p> <p><i>H: Industrial &amp; Warehousing</i> zoned greenfield sites in Woodstock South have been identified as suitable for generally less employment intensive activities. There are opportunities for high value added manufacturing and small – medium enterprise (SME) development on these sites.</p> <p>The plan seeks to consolidate the employment base within the Athy Business Campus which is noted to have a c. 50% occupancy and is unfinished. Accordingly, other uses ancillary or similar to industry and warehousing including office, office based industry; professional and medical services will normally be acceptable subject to the provision of appropriate service infrastructure and car parking to support such uses.</p> |
| <b>Townparks Shamrock Lodge</b> | <p>Development in these areas will be focused on improvement/consolidation of existing permitted established uses, and/or the provision of new office, light industrial development. Development on these sites, comprising both brownfield and greenfield sites, should increase the density of employment in the area.</p>  |
| <b>Gallowshill</b>              | <p>The lands zoned H: Industry and Warehousing are located at the eastern entrance to the town and sited prominently on key routes such as the Kilcullen, Dublin, Castledermot and N78 (Motorway link) roads. Accordingly, a high standard of quality in terms of design, layout and finish along with hard and soft landscaping will be required in order</p>  |

|   |   |
|---|---|
|   | allow such development to announce the entry to the town.<br><br>Future development will be for lower-density employment of the light industrial and related uses.        |
| <b>Lands zoned I: Agricultural</b>        | Lands zoned 'I' in the immediate rural hinterland of the built-up areas should be reserved for agriculture, rural enterprise, horticulture and equine related activities. |
| <b>Lands zoned L: Leisure and Amenity</b> | These lands relate to the Clanard Court Hotel and should be reserved for leisure and amenity related activities.  |

**Note:** This table is indicative of the main employment zones and their employment opportunities. For further detail in relation to zoned land, refer to **Chapter 11: Implementation** and **Map 6: Land Use Zoning Objectives**.

### 6.3.3 Industrial Development

There continues to be a need for a diverse range of employment opportunities in Athy including in the area of manufacturing. It is therefore important to retain existing established industrial based development and also to expand further industrial activities appropriate to the town. The industrial and warehousing zoning objective allows for industrial development and a range of related uses that could be suitably located within industrial estates and enterprise lands within the town.

### 6.3.4 Small and Medium Enterprise (SME)

The development of small and medium scale projects with longer-term employment potential are essential to the future development of Athy. Emphasis should be placed on recognised best practice approaches to stimulating SME activity include incubation units, clustering of similar such enterprises and networking. Small and medium enterprises may include manufacturing, food and beverage production, services, repairs, agriculturally related enterprises and logistics.

### 6.3.5 Home-Based Economic Activity

Working from home can make a very positive contribution towards reducing car travel and increasing the vibrancy of an area and in recent times, with the increasing availability of high-speed broadband, this has become a more viable and popular option for many people. While this Plan supports the concept of home working, it is important that such activity does not result in the disamenity of a predominantly residential area and therefore employment use in a dwelling should be restricted to the occupier(s) of the dwelling and such use should be subordinate to the main use of the dwelling as a residence.

In addition to home working, this Plan supports the concept of a live-work unit which can be defined as a single unit within a building that is both a place to live and a place of business or commerce. The development of live-work units can lead to a more sustainable land use pattern, by providing for a mix of uses, ensuring a balance between day and nighttime activity and reducing commuting.

### 6.3.6 Incubation Units / Workshops / Business Starter Units

The provision of appropriate infrastructure is important in creating the conditions conducive to enterprise and employment creation. Incubation units, workshops and business starter units provide small and medium businesses with a base to engage in the production, research and development

and enterprise activities. Having regard to current trends and forecasts it is considered that there will be demand for smaller units c.50-80m<sup>2</sup> providing for greater letting ability and lower rents. Kildare County Council will continue to work pro-actively with national, regional and local development bodies and agencies including the Local Enterprise Office and the Kildare Local Community Development Committee to support such start-up enterprises.

### 6.3.7 Athy Food, Drink and Skills Innovation Hub

Athy Food, Drinks and Skills Innovation Hub is one of ten connected co-working zones in the Mid-East Region and is a flagship project of Kildare Community Network Co. Ltd, a Kildare County Council not for profit enterprise development company. The initiative was set-up as a response to the announcement in 2018 that Coca Cola would close its Athy production facility with the loss of 85 jobs. In establishing the Hub, Kildare County Council and County Kildare Community Network Co. Ltd with the support from Coca Cola will seek to fill the employment void in the town but also address the lack of food incubation space in the county. Accordingly, the project aims to develop an innovation-rich environment to accelerate job creation and enterprise development through investment in people, collaboration and clustering, thereby facilitating the development of scalable, sustainable and profitable food businesses across the region.

The initiative has selected the former Model School as the future home for hub and has recently been awarded funding by the Regional Development Enterprise Fund (RDEF) to progress to the design and planning stage. It is considered that this is a critical project for the town, not only in fostering regeneration and economic development but also finding a high quality use for what is a prominent historic building and a protected structure in Athy.

### 6.3.8 Equine Industry

The equine industry represents a significant employment generator in County Kildare. The Council recognises the importance of the bloodstock and sport horse industry in the county and will encourage its further development in the Athy area.

### 6.3.9 Improving Quality of Life in Athy

Quality of life issues are increasingly being viewed as an important consideration for both multinational and indigenous companies investing in new enterprise operations. The IDA recognises the potential of placemaking in helping to enhance Ireland's attractiveness to foreign direct investment (FDI). Indeed, the agency notes that *'the creation of urban environments that offer good quality of life is important in allowing investors to attract and retain the talent necessary to support their establishment and growth. Placemaking offers the opportunity to differentiate Ireland from other locations by delivering attractive urban areas in which to reside.'*<sup>16</sup>

Factors that make a town attractive for both businesses and their employees are therefore considered to play a determining part in securing the delivery of inward investment to the town, consequently realising the successful implementation of the Economic Development Strategy.

---

<sup>16</sup> Source: IDA Press Statement, 6<sup>th</sup> March 2020 [online] available from <https://www.idaireland.com/newsroom/importance-of-placemaking-highlighted-local-auth>



Specific actions to improve quality of life for the residents of the town include:

- Providing high quality residential developments with supporting social and community facilities.
- Ensuring a vibrant town centre with a high quality public realm.
- Creating an attractive urban environment to facilitate residency of the projected labour force.
- Ensuring the appearance of development complements existing environments and is of the highest quality.
- Seeking the upgrade of transport infrastructure together with the improvement of interurban non-national roads and supporting the shift to more sustainable modes of transport.
- Increasing and improving the range and quality of recreational, amenity and cultural facilities.
- Improve access to the range of further educational, training and research and innovation facilities within the town, and support the development of Athy Food, Drinks and Skills Innovation Hub at the former Model School.

### **Policy EDT1 – Economic Development**

**EDT1** *It is the policy of the Council to support the development of Athy as the enterprise and employment hub for south County Kildare, increase employment located within the town, reduce rates of commuting and ensure new employment development contributes towards reducing carbon output.*

#### **Objectives**

It is an objective of the Council to:

- EDTO1.1** Encourage economic development and employment growth in Athy in accordance with its designation as a 'Self-Sustaining Growth Town' while adhering to the overall Economic Development Strategy of this Plan.
- EDTO1.2** Ensure that an appropriate quantum of land is zoned for employment generating uses in Athy. Such lands will, notwithstanding exceptional circumstances, be protected from inappropriate development that would prejudice any long-term development for these uses.
- EDTO1.3** Ensure the provision of adequate and appropriate water, wastewater treatment and waste management facilities to accommodate future economic growth of the town.
- EDTO1.4** Acquire and develop suitable land/properties, subject to the availability of funding, to stimulate and support creative and innovative entrepreneurial initiatives.
- EDTO1.5** Encourage the development of existing manufacturing industries in the town while establishing and expanding new categories of business in Athy and support their development in a phased and sustainable manner.
- EDTO1.6** Support IDA Ireland in the attraction of high value added manufacturing sectors and internationally traded sectors to Athy.
- EDTO1.7** Actively encourage the appropriate redevelopment of brownfield sites and re-use of disused buildings for enterprise and employment creation, when such development is compliant with the policies and objectives of this Plan.
- EDTO1.8** Promote employment in Athy in order to reduce the need to travel and the dependence on private transport.
- EDTO1.9** Support the appropriate development of a high quality built environment to attract and sustain enterprise and employment.
- EDTO1.10** Promote innovative economic sectors and encourage business clusters that exploit links with one another and with third level education facilities.
- EDTO1.11** Promote the establishment of entrepreneurial start-up businesses and small scale employment generating activities and to apply a flexible approach to zoning where it can

- be demonstrated that the proposed use would have minimal impact on adjoining uses, particularly residential.
- EDTO1.12** Support the development of Athy Food, Drinks and Skills Innovation Hub at the former Model School and support the initiative in its remit to accelerate job creation and create an innovation-rich environment which will facilitate the development of scalable and sustainable food businesses. To support any ancillary education and training activities taking place on the former Model School site.
- EDTO1.13** Promote the provision of incubation/start-up units suitable for small businesses and start-up companies in general, and with particular emphasis on their provision within the town centre.
- EDTO1.14** Facilitate home-working and other innovative forms of working which reduce the need to travel but are subordinate to the main residential use of the dwelling and do not result in a disamenity in an area.
- EDTO1.15** Encourage the provision of live-work units as part of mixed-use developments in appropriate locations (particularly at ground floor level within the town centre).
- EDTO1.16** Encourage the provision of remote working hubs within the town centre.
- EDTO1.17** Support and protect the development of agriculture within the agricultural zone in Athy and to protect agricultural and equine uses, from encroachment by urban development uses beyond that needed to cater for the orderly expansion of the town.
- EDTO1.18** Encourage agri-businesses appropriate to the area which are directly related to the local horticultural or agricultural sectors in areas zoned for agricultural purposes.
- EDTO1.19** Encourage the development of equine related enterprises on agricultural zoned lands within the local area plan boundary.

## 6.4 Non-Conforming Uses

Throughout the town there are uses that do not conform to the zoning objectives for that area.

These are uses which:

1. Were in existence on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1964,
2. Have valid permissions or,
3. Have no permission and which may or may not be the subject of enforcement proceedings.

Extensions to and improvement of existing small scale commercial/employment uses referred to in Categories 1 and 2 above may be permitted in principle where such uses contribute to the economic and social well-being of the area as a whole and do not inhibit the development of adjoining lands in conformance with the land use zoning objective. Where the continued expansion or operation of such uses is incompatible with the predominant land use zoning of the area, they will be encouraged by the planning authority to relocate to more suitably zoned land.

### Policy EDT2 – Non-Conforming Uses

**EDT2** *It is the policy of the Council, where commercial and industrial enterprises exist as non-conforming but long established uses, to support their continued operation and reasonable expansion, save where such a use would impact negatively on the economic and social well-being of the area and inhibits development that is in conformance with the land use zoning objective.*

#### Objectives

It is an objective of the Council:

- EDTO2.1** To support the continued operation and reasonable expansion of existing non-conforming uses, provided they do not:
- Result in loss of amenity to adjoining properties;
  - Cause adverse impact on the environment;
  - Cause adverse impact on the visual amenity or character of the area; or
  - Inhibit the development of adjoining land in conformance with its land use zoning objective.

## 6.5 Tourism

Considering the richness of Athy's built and natural heritage and its highly accessible location by road, rail and canal, the town is in an excellent position to pursue the principle of asset-based development (see section 6.3) to develop its tourism potential and provide for locally based employment opportunities. The development of tourism amenity infrastructure in Athy will also contribute to improving the quality of life of its residents by assisting in the regeneration of the historic urban core as well as the protection and enhancement of the town's green infrastructure.

**Figure 6.1:** Image of Late Medieval Athy in the 1500's



Credit: Mark A. Guernon (2013)

Kildare County Council will seek to leverage the economic and social opportunity which the growth of the tourism sector can bring to both Athy and the wider surrounding rural hinterland. Accordingly, the Council will look favourably on tourism development proposals and especially on supporting tourism infrastructure, which is consistent with the proper planning and sustainable development of the town. For this reason, the Local Area Plan has incorporated the Clanard Court Hotel into the plan area and designated the site for Tourism purposes under the land use zoning matrix (see Chapter 11). Furthermore, the Council recognises that there are particular opportunities within the town to develop niche tourism including water sports, walking, angling, eco-tourism, heritage tourism, golfing, culinary tourism and other leisure pursuits including passive recreation.

### 6.5.1 Waterways Tourism – Boating, Fishing, Walking, Cycling, Canoeing and Nature

Given the location, extent and quality of both the River Barrow and the Grand Canal Barrow Line, there is enormous potential for the development of waterways tourism throughout the town and in the surrounding areas to harness the benefits of the proposed projects such as the Barrow Blueway. This route will initially run alongside the existing Barrow Line of the Grand Canal from Lowtown to Athy, a distance of 45 km with 9 locks<sup>17</sup>.

#### What are Blueways?

Blueways are a network of trails running on and alongside lakes, canals and rivers which can be explored by canoe, bike or on foot. The Barrow Blueway is proposed to consist of the development of a multi-use shared leisure route on the existing navigation towpath, which is a National Waymarked Route. This will include tailored surface finishes, information, directional, and safety signage, and all other associated ancillary works.

The development of the Barrow Blueway is being led by Waterways Ireland and follows the preparation of several environmental and economic studies into the development of waterways tourism along the River Barrow. *The Barrow Corridor*

<sup>17</sup> The proposed Barrow Blueway extends for 115 kms to St. Mullins in Co. Carlow. As of late 2020 planning permission has been secured for the sections of the Barrow Blueway in Co. Kildare (47 km) and Co. Laois (16 km).

*Recreational, Tourism and Commercial Product Identification Study (2012)* noted the ‘undeveloped potential’ of the Grand Canal – Barrow Navigation as a multi-use tourism resource. The study identifies the importance of Athy as a key destination along the river and sets out recommendations for the development of activity hubs and tourism trails. Such Activity Hubs are places where visitors can access a range of activities including water contact sports and swimming. The study proposes the development of looped walks and cycle trails from the hubs along with the development of canoe guiding on the river/canal. The study notes the proximity of Athy Heritage Centre to the river and advocates the development of mooring facilities and jetty and the provision of a greater sense of welcome to Athy including information about the heritage centre.

It is considered that a longstanding obstacle to achieving improved utilisation of the waterways in the town is the deficit in safe and convenient mooring facilities. Boats and barges are being restricted in their ability to moor in Athy and this is a major disincentive to considering the town as a stopover location. The development of a marina, or at least the expansion of the existing mooring facilities is an essential piece of infrastructure that is required in order to maximise the possibilities presented by the increase of tourism activities based around Athy’s waterways with the completion of the Barrow Blueway.

Kildare County Council is committed to working with Waterways Ireland and the National Parks and Wildlife Service in order to sensitively and appropriately harness the potential of the canal and river Barrow as a tourist attraction to local, national and international boat users and for fishing and walking/cycling and nature enthusiasts.

The Council will support Waterways Ireland to develop the Barrow Blueway along the full length of the Barrow Line and the Barrow Navigation system in County Kildare. However, it is noted that should any works be required in order to provide amenity infrastructure and other facilities along the river and canal banks that a full Appropriate Assessment (AA) may need to be carried out<sup>18</sup>.

### **Proposed Barrow Blueway Sports Hub / Education Centre**

The proposed masterplan for the Dominican Lands (identified as Priority Project 4 in the Athy Urban Regeneration Strategy, see Appendix 1) also includes provision for the development of a blueway sports hub and education centre which would act as an attraction and visitor destination for many different user groups including:

- Daytrippers and tourists using the Waterways or Barrow Blueway
- Local clubs such as the Canoeing Club, Angling Club, Triathlon Club, etc.
- Locals availing of the proposed Ecopark and looped walks
- Climbing enthusiasts

It is envisaged that the hub could feature facilities such as a café, training rooms, changing facilities, a climbing wall, and boat storage, along with much need jetties and a slipway. A level of ancillary car parking would also be provided. This plan supports the development of such a facility on the lands subject to the appropriate environmental assessments.

<sup>18</sup> The River Barrow forms part of the Barrow and Nore Special Area of Conservation. Consequently, all development proposals are required to be screened for Appropriate Assessment (AA) as per the requirements of the EU Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC.

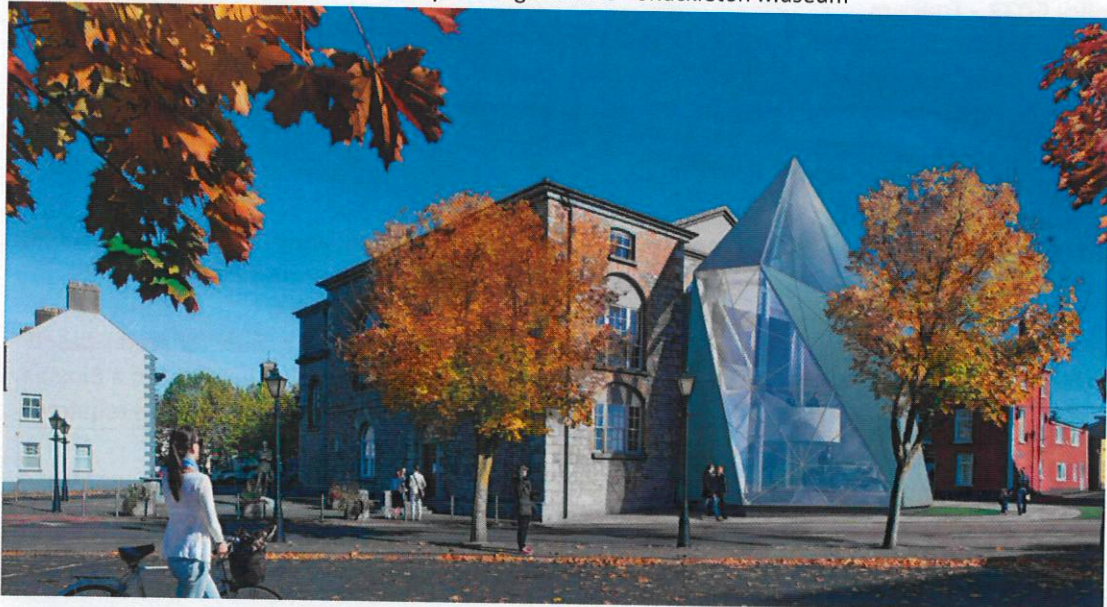
### 6.5.2 Cultural and Heritage Tourism

Athy boasts a vibrant arts and culture sector with the Heritage Centre on Emily Square hosting regular exhibitions and cultural events along with the Community Arts Facility in the Methodist Church on Woodstock Street. Another key cultural event is the Bluegrass Jamboree held in the town every July. Now extending over three days this celebration of bluegrass music has been taking place since 1991. Kildare County Council through its Arts Office will continue to support the arts and cultural development within the town over the lifetime of the Plan and beyond.

Athy is located within Ireland's Ancient East; Fáilte Ireland's marketing platform which promotes the 15 eastern counties of Ireland as a unique destination steeped in 5,000 years of history and culture. The town's medieval street layout and architectural character provides a solid basis for the development of heritage-based tourism, an activity which according to Fáilte Ireland, the majority of tourists coming from overseas partake.

A key destination is the Heritage Centre – Shackleton Museum, which is home to the only permanent exhibition anywhere devoted to Ernest Shackleton, the famous Antarctic explorer. Plans are being progressed to redevelop and extend the Heritage Centre to provide an enhanced visitor experience (see Figure 6.2 below). This project is very important in terms of improving the tourism offer of the town and creating synergies with the water-based activities that will increase with the development of the Barrow Blueway.

**Figure 6.2:** Proposed Redevelopment of Athy Heritage Centre - Shackleton Museum



### 6.5.3 Sports and Recreation Tourism

The annual TriAthy event has grown in popularity since its establishment in 2006 and has become an important feature in the sporting calendar of the town. Kildare County Council through Kildare Sports Partnership supports the event's further development. Significant potential exists to develop and improve the amenities and linkages between important public open spaces in the town such as the People's Park, the lands surrounding Woodstock Castle and the Dominican lands. Such proposals

are discussed further in Section 9.4 Strategic Open Space and in the Urban Regeneration Framework (Appendix 1).

#### 6.5.4 Tourism Development Opportunities

This Plan has identified a number of projects and proposals which, if realised, over the life of the plan and beyond have the potential to have a transformative effect in the improvement of Athy's tourist offer in the town and the promotion of the town as a key visitor destination.

The Plan, through its various policies, objectives and actions supports and promotes the following tourism development projects/proposals:

- The development of the Barrow Blueway, subject to the appropriate environmental considerations and assessment.
- The rejuvenation of Athy's public realm as part of an overall Urban Regeneration Framework (see Appendix 1).
- The delivery of the masterplan proposals for the Dominican Square and Blueway Sports Hub / Education Centre.
- The enhancement of the walking routes and trails in the town including Athy Slí Na Sláinte route and the creation of other dedicated Tourist Trail(s).
- The redevelopment and expansion of Athy Heritage Centre – Shackleton Museum

#### Policy EDT3 - Tourism

**EDT3** *It is the policy of the Council to support and facilitate the development of the tourism infrastructure in Athy with particular emphasis on utilising and harnessing, in an appropriate and sustainable manner, the potential of the town's natural and built heritage assets.*

#### Objectives

It is an objective of the Council to:

- EDTO3.1** Support the development of the Barrow Blueway route along the Barrow Line of the Grand Canal and Barrow Navigation system as a multi-use tourism and amenity resource, subject to the required environmental assessments.
- EDTO3.2** Support and facilitate the development of Athy as an 'activity hub' for water-based sports and associated recreational activities including the development of a Blueway Sports Hub / Education Centre within the Dominican lands, subject to the required environmental assessments.
- EDTO3.3** Support the development of the necessary infrastructure to service the expansion of water-based activities in the town, including safe and convenient mooring facilities, subject to the required environmental assessments.
- EDTO3.4** Support and facilitate the development of an integrated network of greenways, Heritage/Tourist Trails and looped walks where appropriate, within the town centre and along the River Barrow and the Barrow Blueway route.
- EDTO3.5** Support the development of the transformational public realm projects that will enhance the aesthetics of the town's built and natural character and improve the overall ambience and visitor experience of the town.
- EDTO3.6** To support the redevelopment of Athy Heritage Centre – Shackleton Museum as a key tourism and heritage resource and visitor destination in the town and to support its board of directors in progressing related programmes and proposals including, in particular, the further development of the Ernest Shackleton theme.

- EDTO3.7** Support the development of the tourism industry by the upgrading of existing amenities in co-operation with the appropriate statutory agencies, private tourism sector and community groups.
- EDTO3.8** Protect recreational areas such as the People's Park and encourage the further development of amenity areas such as the area surrounding Woodstock Castle, the Dominican Lands and Ardreich Island.
- EDTO3.9** To facilitate the erection of bespoke signage for tourism amenities throughout the town, including interpretative panels and directional signage along designated tourist trails.
- EDTO3.10** Protect the environmental amenities of Athy from insensitive or inappropriate development, particularly any development that threatens the tourism resources of the town.
- EDTO3.11** Recognise the importance of the local golf clubs and other sports clubs and sporting events to tourism in the town and encourage their continued operation.
- EDTO3.12** Facilitate the appropriate use and development of White Castle, either fully or partially, as a tourist attraction, in order to ensure its conservation and protection.
- EDTO3.13** Recognise the importance of the malting industry to the economy of Athy and to support and encourage the development of the town's association with the malting industry as a tourist attraction.
- EDTO3.14** Support tourism initiatives including Fáilte Ireland's '*Ireland's Ancient East*' tourism marketing platform which promotes Athy as a visitor destination.
- EDTO3.15** Promote festivals and sporting events to increase the tourism, cultural and lifestyle profile of the town including the use of appropriate green areas throughout the town.
- EDTO3.16** Support tourism initiatives which develop the tourism potential of the town's rural hinterland while recognising and enhancing the quality and values of the rural area.
- EDTO3.17** Encourage the sustainable development of tourism activities such as waterways activities, agri-tourism, green/eco-tourism, niche retailing, farmers' markets, local and other craft type activities so as to diversify the tourism product in Athy.
- EDTO3.18** Promote Athy's literary, social, historical, genealogical, archaeological, architectural and natural heritage as tourism generating opportunities.

**Action**

- To continue to apply for funding from the relevant national sources to support the development of the projects/proposals outlined in Section 6.5.4 Tourism Development Opportunities.