

5. Urban Centre and Retailing

Aim: To protect and enhance the primacy and character of the town centre, so that it remains attractive to businesses and meets the retailing and service needs of the town and its surrounding hinterland, whilst also offering an attractive environment for shopping, business and living as well as becoming a visitor destination.

5.1 Town Centre

Athy Town Centre maintains its role as the established commercial core of the town. Offering a range of key retail, financial and leisure services, it is also a hub of employment. However, it has also witnessed sustained and ongoing challenges, which threaten the viability of many activities operating in the commercial core. This can be seen in the high levels of long term commercial vacancies where numerous buildings are in a poor state of repair (see Appendix 1, Section 2.5.2).

It is noted that the extent of the town centre closely correlates with that of the historic core (i.e. Athy Architectural Conservation Area). Accordingly, there is an opportunity to respond to the ongoing weaknesses within the town centre by adopting an asset-based approach to development within the town centre. This approach, which is central to the Plan's Economic Development Strategy (refer to Section 6.3), places particular emphasis on utilising the built and natural heritage assets within the town centre to develop its tourism and amenity infrastructure and enhance the overall visitor experience.

While it is important to acknowledge that the Plan will continue to prioritise the commercial core as the primary retail area of the town, it is considered that developing and promoting Athy as a visitor destination, along with other measures to increase unit occupancy, will play an essential role in the rejuvenation of Athy and contribute to the long-term viability of the town centre of Athy.

5.2 Athy Urban Regeneration Framework

An Urban Regeneration Framework for Athy was prepared in tandem with the Local Area Plan (published as Appendix 1 of this Plan) in order to develop a comprehensive and integrated strategy to rejuvenate the town and provide for its long-term sustainable development. The Framework seeks to advance the Vision and Key Development Principles outlined in Section 2.3 of this plan by providing a platform which guides and co-ordinates various projects which will help initiate an economic rejuvenation of Athy increasing the quality of life and health of its residents, whilst also providing for a memorable visitor experience.

Accordingly, the Athy Urban Regeneration Framework has sought to;

- Incorporate the existing policy context and research background including previous studies and proposals for the town;
- Identify and provide an analysis of existing challenges, constraints and opportunities facing the future development of the town;
- Provide a framework for the rejuvenation and development of Athy based on heritage-led regeneration and placemaking projects. Such projects seek to:
 - Enhance the tourist and amenity infrastructure of the town to develop Athy as an

important visitor and tourist destination in the county.

- Promote Athy as a 'living town' by examining the potential of underutilised sites within the town centre and explore alternative functions for existing vacant and derelict buildings.
- Enhance the public realm of the town, particularly throughout its historic core, to improve the overall experience of the pedestrian shopper and visitor.
- Integrate sustainable movement routes and connections, where appropriate, into the urban structure to create a more inclusive town, providing a healthy and safe alternative to car-based journeys to identified key destinations within the town.

5.2.1 Land Uses and Activities within the Town Centre

A key aim of the Urban Regeneration Framework is to tackle the number of vacant units and rejuvenate brownfield sites within the town centre. New and alternative uses need to be found for vacant commercial units, where, in a number of instances, original uses are no longer viable. Section 3.4 of the Urban Regeneration Framework outlines specific measures that will be taken to encourage the reuse of existing buildings and the development of alternative uses in vacant commercial units.

Kildare County Council has proactively engaged with property owners of vacant and inactive sites throughout the town, whilst placing a particular emphasis on strategic locations within the town centre. In this regard, the main focus of this contact has been to get an understanding of the current status of sites/properties and to establish whether the owner has any plans for development or refurbishment. The problems that have been encountered include sites where there is a debt to be discharged or instances where the owner does not have access to funds to carry out redevelopment works. It is acknowledged that further work is needed particularly in terms of continuing to engage with property owners and their representatives to encourage redevelopment/refurbishment and the Council is committed to assist where possible in this regard.

In keeping with the Plan's active land management provisions, the entire town centre has been designated a regeneration area for the purposes of applying the Vacant Site Levy. It is intended that the Vacant Site mechanism will be used in the first instance to address prominent and problematic sites within the town centre, helping to achieve the target of having at least 10% of all new builds in the period to 2027 developed on town centre lands. Two opportunity sites have also been identified in the Urban Regeneration Framework, the development or redevelopment of which would provide a much-needed boost to the town's attractiveness as a vibrant and active commercial centre.

This chapter and other chapters within this Local Area Plan such as *Chapter 6: Economic Development, Enterprise and Tourism* contain a number of objectives which are specifically tailored to support the rejuvenation of land uses within the town centre and assist in the implementation of the Urban Regeneration Framework.

5.2.1 Public Realm Strategy

The quality of public realm is a key factor in underpinning the overall liveability and quality of life of a town. A high-quality and bespoke public realm provides the basis for a people-centred, age friendly

town and greatly assists in the development of integrated communities, whilst also supporting businesses through the increased footfall in the commercial core that results in creating an attractive, safe and universally accessible urban destination.

Section 2.7 of the Urban Regeneration Framework includes an in-depth urban quality survey analysing the current state of the town's public realm. This assessment concluded that the quality of the public realm was poor and required a coordinated programme of investment to help maximise the benefits of the Athy Distributor Road when complete, and the consequent reduction of traffic travelling through the town centre. Such works to the public realm are also needed in order to integrate with and maximise the potential socio-economic benefits of the Barrow Blueway and other key areas of investment proposed within the town.

Accordingly, the Urban Regeneration Framework proposes the preparation of a comprehensive Public Realm Strategy for the town, to be commenced within 12 months of the adoption of the Plan. Section 3.5 of the Framework provides specific guidance on the provisions of such a strategy and is supported by Objective UCRO1.10 of the Plan.

Policy UCR1 – Urban Regeneration and Development

UCR1 *It is the policy of the Council to support the implementation of the Athy Urban Regeneration Framework to maximise the potential of Athy's unique built and natural assets in order to instigate transformative place-based change in the town, where a revitalised town centre becomes a major visitor destination and contributes to a model of low carbon development and the creation of a climate resilient, healthy, connected and more inclusive settlement.*

Objectives

It is an objective of the Council to:

- UCRO1.1** Support the implementation of the Athy Urban Regeneration Framework and seek funding from relevant agencies and Government sources including the Rural/Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF/URDF) to secure financial support for all regeneration and urban development projects in Athy.
- UCRO1.2** Promote the town centre as the priority location for commercial, civic, social and cultural development and to promote new infill and backland development that consolidates and regenerates the existing urban core.
- UCRO1.3** Improve the quality, ambience, vitality and vibrancy of the town centre, through the following:
 - (i) Promotion of an appropriate mix of day and night time uses.
 - (ii) Facilitation of development that will attract and retain commercial and retail activities in the town centre.
 - (iii) Encouragement of alternative uses and functions as outlined in **Section 3.4** of the Urban Regeneration Framework for vacant units within the town centre.
- UCRO1.4** Continue to actively engage with the community, landowners, developers and other agencies to secure resources for the enhancement, renewal and regeneration of Athy town centre.
- UCRO1.5** Encourage the full utilisation of buildings and sites, in particular the use of upper floors and backlands where appropriate, with due regard to the quality of urban design, integration and linkages.
- UCRO1.6** Ensure that regeneration and new development enhances the character of the townscape and the quality of the public realm. Such development shall also be in

- keeping with the relevant provisions of the Athy Urban Regeneration Framework.
- UCRO1.7** Ensure that development in the town centre will only be permitted where it conserves or enhances the existing character of the area and where it is demonstrated that it is of high architectural quality; providing a strong vertical emphasis along key streets and incorporating a fine urban grain, with active frontages at ground floor level where appropriate.
- UCRO1.8** Require that new development facilitates a connected network of streets and spaces which prioritises pedestrians and cyclists and provides for the possibility of connections to future development on adjacent lands.
- UCRO1.9** Prioritise the enhancement of the streetscape and heritage assets of the town centre, to continue environmental improvements, to sustain and improve its attraction for living, working, visiting and investment.
- UCRO1.10** Commence the preparation of a Public Realm Strategy for Athy within twelve months of the adoption of this plan. The strategy should be developed in accordance with the provisions of the Athy Urban Regeneration Framework and implemented on a phased basis over the lifetime of the Plan and beyond. The Strategy should also address the following issues:
- (i) Ensure that the town centre is accessible to all members of the community, including people with disabilities, the elderly and people with young children.
 - (ii) Support and facilitate the delivery of age friendly seating, bus stops and other public realm initiatives identified in the Athy Public Realm Strategy.
 - (iii) Develop a comprehensive car parking plan for the town which will balance the needs of vehicular access to the town centre without compromising the overall quality and visitor experience of the public realm.
 - (iv) Seek to reduce the use of line marking, signage and overhead wiring in the town centre of Athy.

Actions:

- Apply for funding for all urban regeneration and development projects identified in the Athy Urban Regeneration Framework as opportunities/funding streams arise.
- Prepare a Public Realm Strategy for Athy and implement its recommendations on a phased basis over the lifetime of the Plan and beyond.
- Work with the owners of White Castle with a view to providing public access to this historic building as a tourist and heritage destination (see Chapter 8, Objective BH1.8)
- Seek to update the Town Centre Land Use Survey on a biennial basis during the lifetime of the Plan.
- To investigate the feasibility of appointing an Athy Town Centre Coordinator.
- To explore the possibility of the Local Authority acquiring a vacant commercial unit within the town centre (or in partnership with a landowner) in order to demonstrate as a 'pilot project' the feasibility of repurposing the building for alternative uses as outlined in Section 3.4 of the Athy Urban Regeneration Framework.

5.3 Retailing

Athy is designated a *Level 3, Town and Sub-County Centre (Key Service Centre)* in the County Retail Hierarchy as outlined in the Kildare County Development Plan. The range of retailing which is deemed appropriate in the County Retail Strategy for centres at this level is large scale convenience and middle order comparison. This however does not exclude higher order comparison, particularly that relate to the tourism economy.

An important priority for the Plan is to ensure that Athy fulfils its designated role as a Key Service Centre within the County Retail Hierarchy. However, it is recognised that there are long standing deficiencies in Athy's retail offer which is undermining the town's potential in fulfilling its strategic role. Furthermore, changing retail trends and habits over the past decade, including the rise of online shopping and an increasing level of retail leakage to other urban centres such as Carlow and Newbridge have resulted in a high number of vacant commercial units within the town centre and an increase in lower order units (charity shops etc.).

It therefore should be acknowledged that many commercial units, which previously housed viable retail businesses in the town will never return and there is a need to put a framework in place which focuses on the adaptability of the town centre to accommodate changing roles and functions in order to ensure it retains its role as the commercial centre of the town. For such a rejuvenation and repurposing to be successful it will require the urban core to increase both its residential population and levels of employment activity, whilst also providing enhanced levels of social and community infrastructure and a high quality of design.

5.3.1 The Retail Offer

The analysis carried out on the trading retail floorspace in 2016 for the preparation of the County Development Plan 2017-2023 noted that Athy ranked 5 in the county, with a total of 5.5% of all retail floor space. While Athy's overall ranking is in line with its status within both the Retail Hierarchy and the settlement hierarchy, it is noted that both Kildare Town¹³ (ranked 4) and Maynooth (ranked 3) have more than double the amount of trading space of Athy, with Kildare Town having 11.5% and Maynooth having 12.1% of all trading space in the county.

Figure 5.1: Athy with the Kildare County Retail Hierarchy



¹³ It is noted the high ranking for Kildare Town is due to the presence of the Kildare Village Retail Outlet.

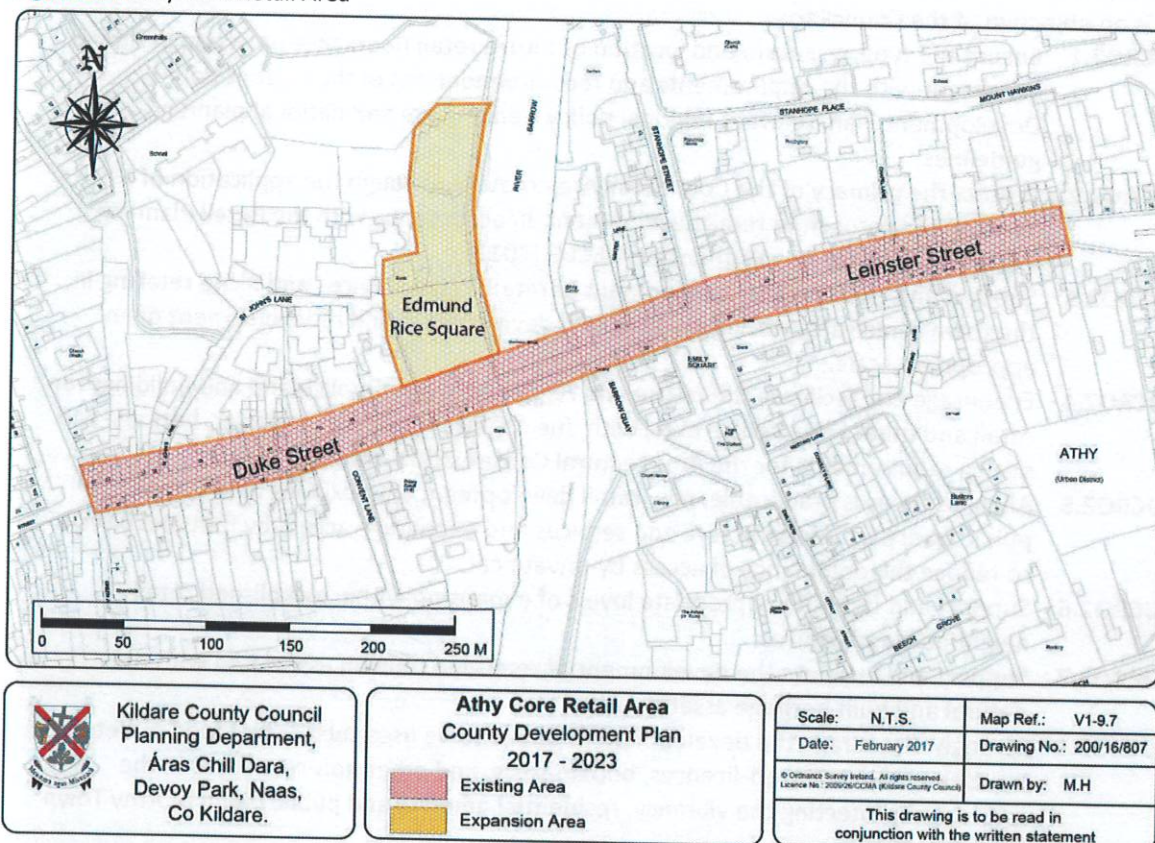
Table 5.1: Athy Net Retail Floorspace Trading in 2016 (m²)

Convenience	Comparison	Retail Warehousing	Total	Ranking in County
5,620	4,864	0	10,484	5

A further examination of the figures shows that overall, the town is well serviced in the area of convenience retail having 8.9% of the county total. Conversely, the town is home to only 5.3% of comparison retail floorspace. It is further noted that the 2016 survey showed that there is no retail warehousing in the town.

The Core Retail Area of the town is defined in the Kildare County Development Plan as focusing along an east-west axis encompassing Duke Street and Leinster Street (see Figure 5.2). This area is the preferred area for retail development. This Plan anticipates that new retail provision will be achieved through a combination of appropriate infill, regeneration and renewal of sites. A retail expansion area has also been identified which focuses on Edmund Rice Square.

Figure 5.2: Athy Core Retail Area



Source: Kildare County Development Plan 2017 – 2023, as amended

5.3.2 Edge-of-Centre

Edge-of-centre sites are identified as those that are in easy walking distance from the Core Retail Area. The *Retail Planning Guidelines for Planning Authorities (2012)* state that the distance of such sites is generally not more than 300 – 400 metres from the core retail area. Athy has a number of potential regeneration sites located in edge-of-centre locations that could provide additional

retail/commercial provision alongside other cultural, residential and amenity areas. These are outlined in Section 3.4.2 of the Athy Urban Regeneration Framework (Appendix 1).

5.3.2 Neighbourhood Centres

The Retail Guidelines (2012) define a neighbourhood centre as a small group of shops, typically comprising newsagent, small supermarket/general grocery store, sub-post office and other small shops of a local nature serving a small, localised catchment population. This Plan has zoned a number of locations to provide regular convenience and lower order comparison shopping and retail services for the needs of surrounding communities. Such retail development will have a limited retail function and will strictly be intended to serve the immediate neighbourhood in which it is located.

Policy UCR2 – Retailing

UCR2 *It is the policy of the Council to support the Level 3 Town and Sub-County Centre (Key Service Centre) retail function of Athy and to consolidate existing retail development and to develop/regenerate opportunity sites/areas within the town centre.*

Objectives

It is an objective of the Council to:

- UCRO2.1** Ensure the type, quantum and location of future retail floorspace provision in Athy is consistent with the requirements and recommendations of the current County Development Plan, relevant regional policy frameworks and national planning guidelines.
- UCRO2.2** Protect the primacy of the Core Retail Area of Athy, through the application of a sequential approach to retail development, in accordance with the Retail Planning Guidelines for Planning Authorities, DECLG (2012).
- UCRO2.3** Support and facilitate the development of retail, retail services and niche retailing in the town centre area, including new/infill development and redevelopment of an appropriate scale.
- UCRO2.4** Encourage and facilitate the re-use and regeneration of derelict land and buildings for retail and other town centre uses, with due cognisance of the character, heritage and design requirements for the Architectural Conservation Area (ACA).
- UCRO2.5** Align, as far as is practicable, new retail development with existing and proposed public transport infrastructure and services and encourage access by foot and bicycle to reduce the dominance of access by private car.
- UCRO2.6** Support and facilitate appropriate levels of expansion within established retail neighbourhood centres.
- UCRO2.7** Support and facilitate the development of retail-led tourism associated with the natural and built heritage assets of Athy.
- UCRO2.8** Strongly discourage the development of undesirable uses such as fast food outlets, amusement arcades, off-licences, bookmakers, and other non-retail uses in the interest of protecting the vibrancy, residential amenity and public realm of Athy Town Centre.
- UCRO2.9** Require applicants to indicate proposed hours of opening. Late opening of shops will only be permissible where it can be clearly demonstrated that there will be no negative impact on the residential amenity of neighbouring areas.
- UCRO2.10** Ensure that new shop front and signage design contributes positively to and enhances the streetscape and is in accordance with the guidance set out in the County Kildare Shopfront Guidelines (July 2013) and Kildare County Council Policy on Signage (April 2013).
- UCRO2.11** Recognise the tradition of Athy as a Market Town and to encourage the continuation and improvement of the 'Athy Town Market' and the continued development of a high

quality 'Farmers Market' within the town.

Actions:

- To continue to promote the Kildare County Council Shopfront Improvement and Accessibility grant scheme.
- To explore the possibility of updating the Town Centre Land Use Survey on a biennial basis during the lifetime of the Plan.