



# N61 BOYLE TO ATHLONE

Reclassification of the N61 to National Primary Status

February 2024

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National Primary Status





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# Cathaoirleach and Chief Executive Statement

Roscommon County is currently undergoing substantial development and transformation, marked by a population growth surpassing that of the State average.

The county is well positioned as a strategic central hub and is well placed to take advantage of the development of Athlone and Sligo as Regional Growth Centres.

Given the lack of public transport in the region, the road network is seen as the key economic driver for the continued development of the county and wider region.

The N61 National Secondary Route forms the central transportation spine through the county and is of critical significance to ensure the continued growth of the county and region by complying with the Regional Connectivity Objectives set out in the National Planning Framework (NPF).

The recent publications of National Roads 2040 and the Department of Transport Speed Limit Review documents as set out effectively downgrades the strategic importance of the N61 to perform its connectivity role between the Regional Growth Centres of Athlone and Sligo.

Roscommon County Council see this a retrograde step for the county and the region and seeks to redress this imbalance by pursuing the reclassification of the N61 route between Boyle and Athlone to National Primary Status in the interests of transportation safety, balanced regional development and appropriate fit for purpose connectivity that the county and region deserves.

*Cllr. John Keogh, Cathaoirleach*

Roscommon County Council set out an objective in its 2002 County Development Plan (CDP) to seek the upgrade of the N61 National Secondary Route to National Primary Status in recognition of its strategic function. This objective has been carried through every subsequent CDP.

In addition this objective has been identified in several editions of the Northern and Western Regional Assembly (NWRA) Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Northern and Western Region. The RSES provides regional level strategic planning and economic policy in support of the implementation the National Planning Framework (NPF).

The governing policy document sets out the strategic importance of the N61 route to the county and the northwest region, in harmony with local, regional and national planning policy.

In order to recognise the strategic function of the N61 for regional connectivity both now and in the future following the policy led growth in the regional centres and key towns, it is essential that the N61 is re-classified to National Primary status to reflect the local, regional, national and sustainable strategic importance of this key road through Roscommon.

*Shane Tiernan, Chief Executive*



# Executive Summary

The National Roads network in Ireland plays a vital role in the nation's economy and the daily lives of the people of Ireland. From an economic perspective it provides access to markets both nationally and internationally via our Ports and Airports, carries the vast majority of freight and provides access to jobs. It also provides access to healthcare, childcare, education and retail and allows for social interaction, all of which affect people's daily lives. In addition National Roads are key to the functioning and success of tourism across the Island.

## Government Policy & General Background

Ireland is split into three Regional Assemblies (Northern & Western, Southern and Eastern & Midland) in order to promote the co-ordination of public services and to monitor the delivery of European Structural and Investment Funds. There is currently a very significant (and growing) economic gap between the Northern & Western Region and the other two Regions. The Northern & Western Region is currently classed as a 'Lagging Region' by the European Commission, in recognition of falling significantly behind the other two Regions across a number of key indicators.

As of 2021, the gap between the Northern and Western Region of Ireland (as a percentage of the State average) and the Eastern and Midland Region of Ireland was 25 percentage points in terms of disposable income per head of population, which was much wider than the corresponding gap in 2010 (which was 10 percentage points) and in the mid to late 2000s, where such a gap ranged from 11 to 14 percentage points (i.e. 2004-2009)<sup>1</sup>.

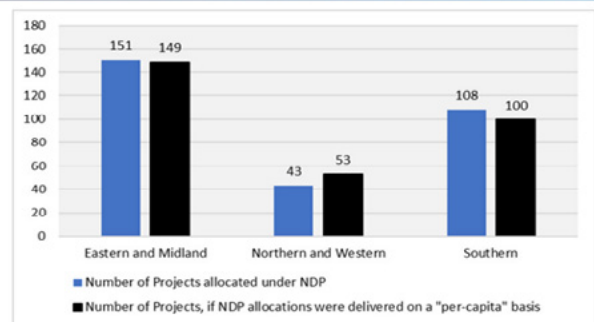
The Eastern and Midland Region of Ireland accounted for 55 per cent of all population growth in Ireland between 2016 and 2022<sup>2</sup>, with the Northern and Western Region and the Southern Region of Ireland collectively accounting for 45 per cent of growth during this time period. Given that the National Planning Framework (NPF) acknowledges that the Greater Dublin Area, and to a lesser extent the wider Eastern and Midland Region, has witnessed an overconcentration of population, homes and jobs, it is clear that the distribution of growth is contrary to the vision and objectives of the National Planning Framework (NPF). Specifically, such growth rates are contrary to National Policy Objective (NPO) 1a of the NPF, which aims to ensure that the "projected level of population and employment growth in the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly area will be at least matched by that of the Northern and Western and Southern Regional Assembly areas combined"<sup>3</sup>.

A key objective under the NPF is to ensure balanced regional development, counter-balancing the Dublin and Eastern and Midland Region, delivered through targeted investment and development in other regions. Investment in infrastructure

can facilitate regional balance and deliver economic and social benefits at a local, regional and national level. Nevertheless, as seen in Figure A, the National Development Plan (NDP) allocation of projects has a significant deficit for the Northern and Western Region when compared to the other regions in Ireland, further hindering the target of balanced development for this region.

In addition to the NPF, the Climate Action Plan (CAP) contains a key target to reduce vehicle kilometres of travel by 20%. This can be facilitated by increasing local employment and access to local/regional markets within the regions, leading to a reduction in long distance commuting and increased opportunities for shorter commutes that can feasibly be undertaken by active travel or public transport.

Figure 6: Allocation of projects that will cost more than €20 million or significant projects below €20 million, under the NDP, by the NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland



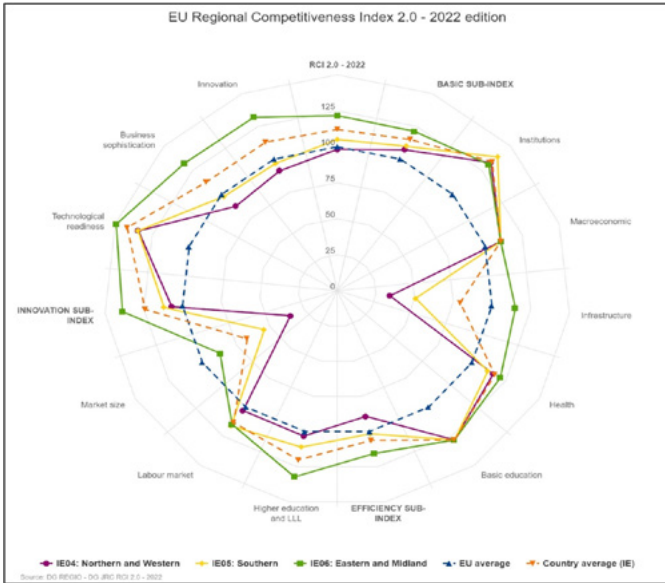
Source: Northern and Western Regional Assembly's calculations using data from DPFR's "Investment Tracker" (February 2023)

Figure A NDP Project Allocation by Region

Figure B compares the European Commission's 'Regional Competitive Index' for the three Regional Assemblies, the average for Ireland and the EU. The Figure shows that the Northern and Western Region scores lower across a range of areas, in particular in relation to Infrastructure, where it remains very significantly behind the rest of the Country and EU average. The Northern and Western Region is ranked 218<sup>th</sup> out of 234 regions in the EU under the heading of Infrastructure, with a ranking that is lower than all of Hungary and many regions of Romania.

It is the clear view of Roscommon County Council, other Local Authorities in the region and the Regional Assembly that, to achieve the objectives for balanced regional growth within the NPF, this persistent and pronounced gap must be meaningfully tackled across all of Government, particularly in the Transport sector. This will require a review of National Roads to upgrade Inter Urban Priority Routes within the Northern and Western Region, with an associated reallocation of schemes within the NDP. To improve this infrastructure deficit will require the reclassification of some routes, such as the N61 to reflect the strategic importance of links within the region.

<sup>1</sup>Table 5.1a: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cirgdp/countyincomesandregionalgdp2020/data/>  
<sup>2</sup><https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/populationchanges/>  
<sup>3</sup><https://www.npf.ie/wp-content/uploads/Project-Ireland-2040-NPF.pdf>



**Figure B:** Index scores of the NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland in the European Commission's 2022 "Regional Competitiveness Index", (Blue line = EU27 average) **Source:** European Commission

The recently published North-West Regional Enterprise Plan (NWREP) Action 3.1 recognises the unfortunate unique position the Northwest Region is in, wherein the opportunity to leverage significant economic growth is being inhibited by the deficiencies in critical enabling infrastructure. This is further highlighted in the statutory Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy of the Northern and Western Region, which implements and supports Project Ireland 2040 (NPF and NDP). This Action 3.1 is targeted at addressing this issue of regional concern and highlights the issue as opportunities arise. The inclusion of an action within the NWREP addressing infrastructure is unique only to the Northwest, due to the sheer scale of infrastructure deficits which exists in this region.

Amongst other concerns, the Northwest region is the only region now not to have a motorway to it. As such, the N61 link through the central spine of Roscommon provides critical connectivity both within the wider Northern and Western region and to the east-west major inter-urban network that it intersects.

**N61 National Secondary Road**

N61 National Secondary road between Boyle and Athlone in Co. Roscommon is 75km in length and forms the primary North-South connector through Co. Roscommon (as illustrated in Figure C). As with any section of the National Roads network, the role that it plays is unique to its location, the people and industries it serves and the wider region. It is

important to view National Roads not just in the context of their end-to-end points and onward strategic connections, but also the interaction between the local settlements and local economies which depend upon them as outlined below for the N61.

**From a local perspective of the N61:**

- provides the main arterial route through Co. Roscommon, providing direct access between Athlone, Roscommon town, Tulsk and Boyle. providing access to jobs, education, healthcare, etc. for residents of these towns and villages.
- is the main National Road connection for Roscommon town, which is the county town of Co. Roscommon.
- provides access to Roscommon's main industrial area in Monksland, north of Athlone.
- connects the N4, N5 and N/M6 TEN-T comprehensive network in a north south direction in the middle of the country.

**From a regional/national perspective the N61:**

- provides a strategic connection between Athlone and Sligo both of which are classified as regional centres under the NPF.
- provides an opportunity to influence and support balanced regional development, which is a key objective of the NPF.
- provides an opportunity to connect and support growth between local/regional markets as part of a central spine between Athlone and Sligo, and onward via the N62 to the Southern Region.

**From a sustainability perspective the N61:**

- provides a direct connection between Athlone and Sligo. While other routes do exist (e.g. via the N4 and N55) these routes are longer and would lead to the generation of additional vehicle kilometres of travel, which is contrary to the targets in the CAP.

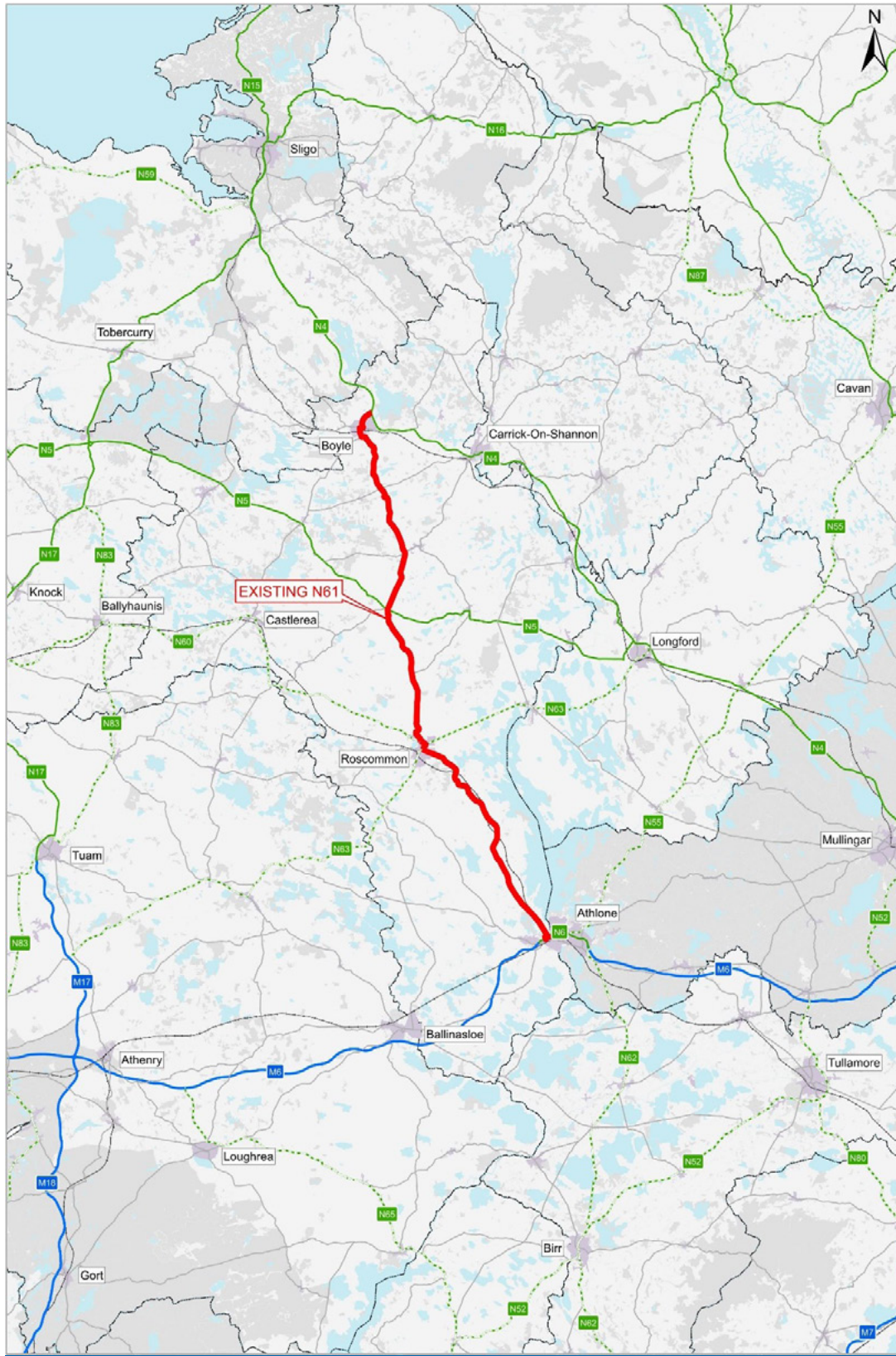


Figure A N61 National Secondary Road (Athlone - Boyle)



### TII National Roads 2040 & DoT Speed Limit Review

Previous discussions between Roscommon County Council and the Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) have considered the need to re-classify the N61 as a National Primary Road in recognition of its strategic function. However, at that time it was considered that the N61 would have better access to funding for the necessary upgrades to support its role as a strategic National Secondary Road, rather than as a National Primary Road.

Recent publications such as National Roads 2040 by TII and the Speed Limit Review by Department of Transport (DoT) have the potential to diminish the importance and strategic role of N61 and bring an urgent need to consider the re-classification of the N61 as a National Primary Road in order to protect and ensure its importance to both Roscommon and the wider region. A brief overview of these publications and their potential impact on the N61 is outlined as follows:

- **DoT Speed Limit Review** proposes to reduce the speed limit on National Secondary Roads to 80km/h, and in doing so, classifying them as local links to the National Primary Road network. This will lead to longer journey times on the N61 corridor, with the potential for increased driver frustration and associated safety concerns, as several sections of the N61 are designed to 100kph design standards
- **TII National Roads 2040 (NR2040)** identifies the section of the N61 from Roscommon town north to the existing N5 as an arterial road but does not appear to recognise the strategic nature of the N61 as a whole, classifying the sections north of the N5 and south of Roscommon town as 'collectors'. Consequently NR2040 ranks the N61 equally with most other National Secondary Routes. This does not give the N61 the importance it requires and deserves with respect to its strategic function. Appendices A1.4.8 and B2.1 of this report specifically address the mis-classification of the N61 within NR2040.

As with any strategic plan, it is challenging to take all local impacts into consideration and this is certainly the case with the N61 in relation to the DoT Speed Limit Review and TII NR2040. This report presents evidence for protecting the strategic function of the N61 taking into context its local, regional and national role and makes recommendation on this basis for the re-classification of the N61 corridor to a National Primary Route.

### Recommendations

In order to recognise the strategic function of the N61 for regional connectivity both now and in the future following policy led growth in the regional centres and key towns, it is essential that the N61 is re-classified as a National Primary Road. Such re-classification would:

- Reflect the strategic function of the N61 as the north-south spine through County Roscommon in accordance with local planning policy;
- Support Regional and National planning policy to encourage growth in the regional centres and major towns, with particular emphasis on the Northern and Western Region;
- Reflect the National Planning Framework and NR2040 objectives to target an average 90km/h for inter-urban journeys between regional centres;
- Avoid the significant journey time and agglomeration dis-benefits that would arise should the speed limit on the N61 be reduced in accordance with the DoT Speed Limit Review 2023; and
- Provide the policy support to continue the ongoing programme of improvements to provide a safe inter-urban connection between the Regional Centres.

Following re-classification of the N61 as a National Primary Road, NR2040 should be updated by TII to reflect its strategic function within the National Roads network. Such an update would:

- Recognise the carbon dis-benefits of encouraging traffic to divert via a significantly longer route;
- Enable investment to be focussed on achieving safety and journey time benefits by improving the direct route of choice, rather than on the extensive traffic calming measures that would be required to reduce speeds and encourage drivers to divert onto the longer route.





# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Context

The N61 National Secondary route performs a central role Locally, Regionally and Nationally. Locally the N61, links Roscommon's industrial base at Monksland, Hodson Bay, Lecarrow, Knockcroghery, Roscommon town, Tulsk and Boyle. Regionally and Nationally the N61 provides the strategic link between the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo and connects the N4, N5 and N/M6 TEN-T comprehensive network in a north south direction in the middle of the country.

The risks from not achieving an effective regional balance are recognised in the National Planning Framework (NPF) and National Development Plan (NDP). The N61 in conjunction with the N62 as a key central spine can have a significant influence on regional growth and regional balance, improving connectivity for the Northern and Western Region to the remainder of the country.

Local, Regional and National Policy recognises the importance of the N61 to support the anticipated 30% growth of Roscommon town and 40% growth of the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo in terms of population by 2040<sup>4</sup>. In the six years since the 2016 census, Roscommon town has experienced an 11.5% increase in population, exceeding planning expectations.

Previous discussions between Roscommon County Council and Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) have considered the need to re-classify the N61 as a National Primary route in recognition of its strategic function. However, at that time it was considered that the N61 would have better access to funding for the necessary upgrades as a strategic National Secondary route, rather than as a National Primary route.

Contrary to all preceding local, regional and national policy, the recent TII National Roads 2040 (NR2040) only identifies the section of the N61 from Roscommon town to the existing N5 as an arterial road but does not appear to recognise the strategic nature of the N61 as a whole, classifying the sections north of the N5 and south of Roscommon town as 'collectors'. Consequently NR2040 ranks the N61 equally with most other National Secondary Routes. This does not give the N61 the importance it requires and deserves with respect to its strategic function. Appendices A1.4.8 and B2.1 of this report specifically addresses the mis-classification of the N61 within NR2040.

The recent Department of Transport Speed Limit Review proposes to reduce the speed limit on National Secondary routes to 80km/h, and in doing so, classifying them as local links to the National Primary Road network. This highlights the need to urgently consider the re-classification of the N61 as a National Primary Road.

Roscommon town has the dubious status of being one of only two county towns not connected to the National Primary Road network, Tullamore being the other on the N52. If the N61 is downgraded to a local connector function with an 80km/h speed restriction, this will negatively impact on the prosperity and hinder development within Roscommon town. Regionally and nationally this would result in both journey time and agglomeration dis-benefits between the Regional Centres of Sligo and Athlone, and between Athlone and its hinterland

## 1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this document is to highlight the strategic importance of the N61 National route to the County, to the Northern and Western Region's transport network and for the proper planning and sustainable development of County Roscommon. Roscommon County Council therefore request that the route is upgraded to National Primary status which would: -

- be consistent with National, Regional and Local policy all of which recognise the strategic importance of connectivity between Regional Centres, surrounding urban centres and their rural hinterlands;
- assist in preventing further deterioration of the infrastructure deficit in the Northern and Western Region and promote regional balance;
- support County Roscommon in achieving its full potential on a local, regional and national scale;
- protect journey times on those sections of this strategic route that have already been upgraded to 100km/h design speed; and
- ensure that planned and future upgrades to this strategic route continue to be designed to deliver the target average interurban speed of 90km/h between Regional Centres, as required by both the NPF and NR2040.

<sup>4</sup> Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy 2020-2032 – Northern and Western Regional Assembly



## 2. Background

Roscommon is a rural county dotted with towns and villages that support vibrant communities with residential, retail, commercial opportunities and education and leisure facilities. The county is linear in nature being nearly three times as long in the north south direction as it is wide in the east west direction. Roscommon town is the principal town and administrative centre with a population of 5,876 and a county population of 70,259<sup>5</sup> up 9% on the 2016 census figures.

The county is well positioned as a strategic central hub and is well placed to take advantage of the development of Athlone as a Regional Growth Centre and beyond. In addition, the county has easy access to third level institutions and is served by road, rail and international airports (including Ireland West Airport, Knock, via the N61 & N5). Roscommon's unrivalled location is complimented by the superior quality of life, clean green environment, extensive forests, amenity parks, walks, cycle routes and water-based activities.

### 2.1 Road Network

The road network is of critical significance for the future development of the county and to ensure sufficient connectivity within the county, as well as wider regional and national connectivity, as advocated in Growth Ambition 3 (Connected Region) of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy 2020-2032 (RSES).

Figure 2.1 overleaf highlights the cities and regional centres identified in the National Planning Framework in relation to Roscommon town. This figure also highlights the Motorway and National Primary Road Network highlighting the connectivity between these cities and regional Centres. From this figure, it can be seen that there is a deficit in the linkages between the regional centres of Sligo and Athlone when compared to the other Cities and Regional Centres on the island of Ireland.

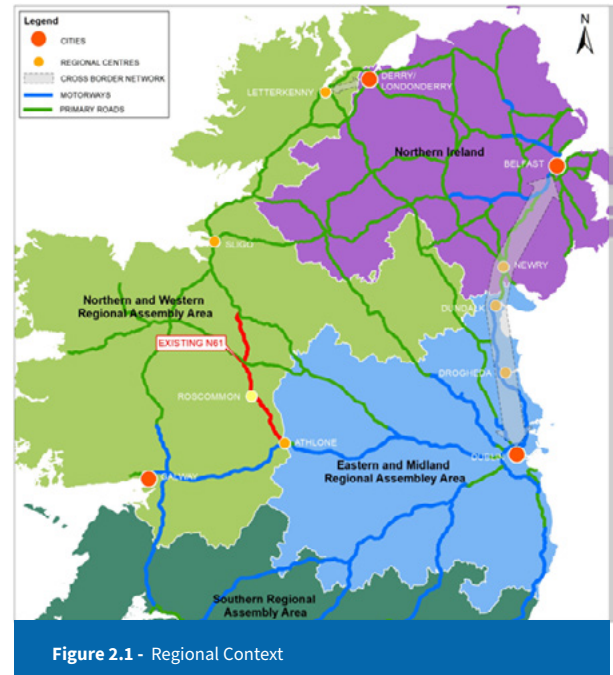


Figure 2.1 - Regional Context

In addition, the N61 links to the N62 via the N6 at Athlone, forming a central spine through the country, linking the N4, N5, N/M6, M7 and M8 providing a direct connection between the Regional Centres of Sligo and Athlone to the Southern Region. Maintaining and improving this route could have a significant benefit in reducing traffic volumes on the already congested M4, M7 and M50 close to Dublin.

Due to its location in the centre of the country, Roscommon is traversed in an east west direction by three National Primary routes, the N4, N5, N/M6. However the county town has the unfortunate distinction of being one of only two county towns not served by the national primary road network. The strategic road network which underpins the connectivity of the county extends to approx. 254km, consisting of 20km of Motorway (M6 Galway-Kinnegad), 86km of National Primary Road (N4, N5 and N6) and 148km of National Secondary Road (N60, N61, N63 and N83).

Figure 2.2 overleaf outlines the national road network within the county with the N4, N5 and M6/N6 routes traversing generally east-west across the county. Similarly the N60 & N63 traverse the middle of the county through Roscommon town. The N61 connects all these routes travelling in a north-south direction through the county.

<sup>5</sup>2022 Census

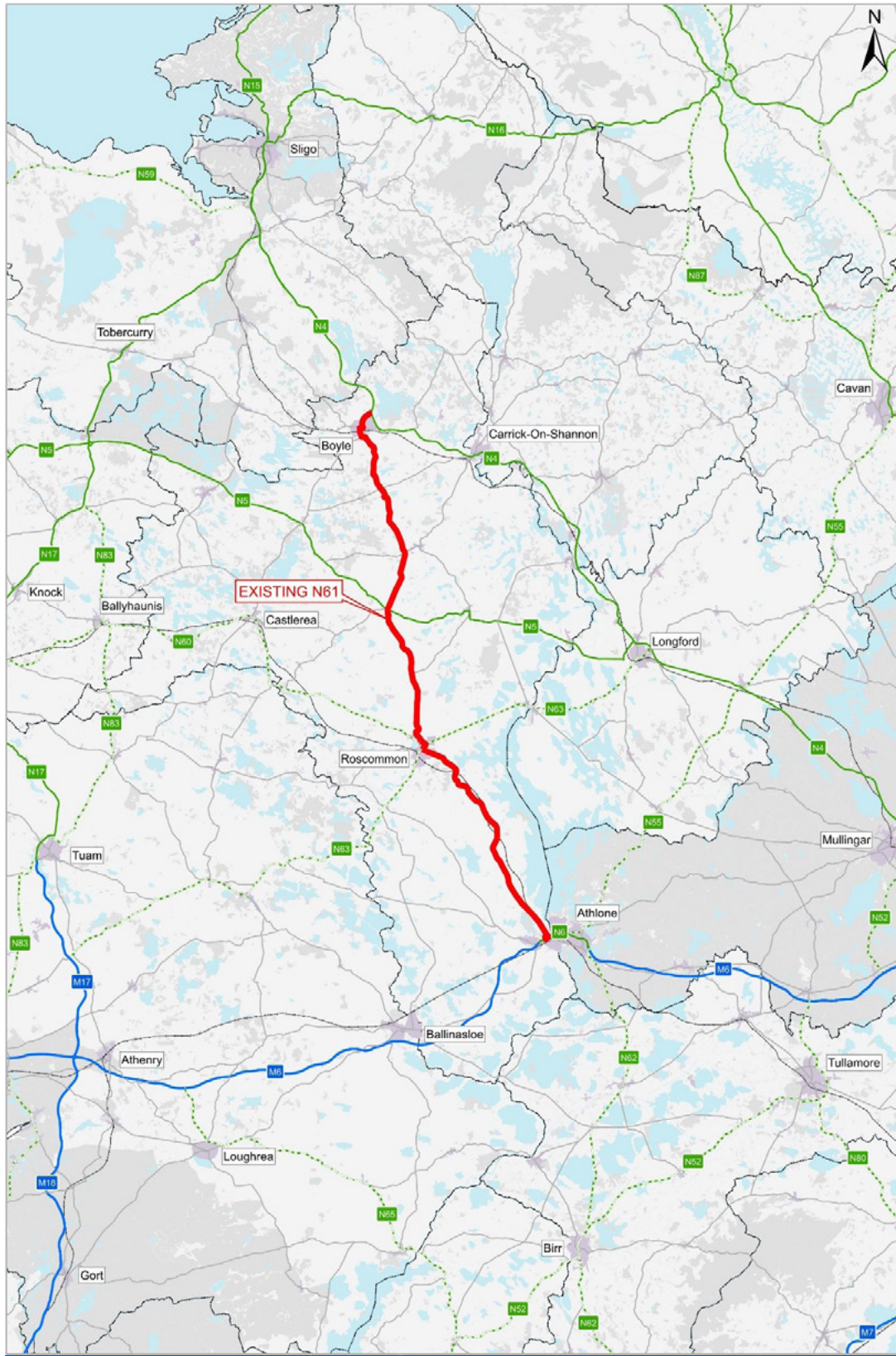


Figure 2.2 - Road Network West Region



## 2.2 Overview of N61

The N61 National Secondary route is approximately 75km in length and is contained entirely within County Roscommon (See Figure 2.2). This route is the major north - south arterial route through County Roscommon commencing at the N4 approx. 1.6kms north of Boyle town and terminating at the N61/N6 junction (No. 12) northwest of Athlone. It is the primary artery that connects the towns and villages of Boyle, Tulsk, Roscommon, Knockcroghery, Lecarrow, Hodson Bay and Athlone.

The N61 corridor is on the direct route linking the Sligo and Athlone Regional Centres intersecting the N4, N5 and N/M6 National Primary routes which form part of the EU TEN-T Comprehensive Road network. As such the N61 facilitates links to and between the education, healthcare, employment and enterprise facilities in the two regional growth centres including:

- Atlantic Technological University Sligo;
- Sligo College of Further Education;
- Technological University of the Shannon in Athlone;
- Sligo Hospital;
- Major employers based in Athlone, such as: Alkermes, Alienware, Athlone Extrusions, Bioclin, Ericsson, ICT Eurotel, Tyco Healthcare and Utah Medical;
- Major employers in Sligo, such as: Abbott (Ireland), AbbVie, Braun Hospicare, Avenue, Philips Medisize.

The N61 is a primary economic corridor connecting the county town, Roscommon, to its main industrial base in Monksland / Bellanamullia, west of Athlone and to the wider economy and other markets via the motorway and primary road network. In addition it provides connectivity in terms of tourism and recreational benefits, in particular to Lough Ree, St. Brigid's and St. Dominic's GAA clubs and St. John's Amateur Football Club.

At Roscommon town, the N61 intersects the N63 National Secondary route thereby connecting Lanesborough to Athlone and meets the N60 National Secondary route, thereby connecting Castlerea and Ballyhaunis to Athlone.

The N61 carries a broad range of traffic volumes; from 2,500 AADT<sup>6</sup> in Boyle, to 7,700 AADT in Roscommon town and to almost 14,000 AADT at Athlone, with between 5-6% HGV's.

The section immediately north of Athlone generally has a Type 1 single carriageway cross section. Numerous sections further north have been upgraded or have current plans

for upgrading to Type 1 or Type 2 single carriageway as appropriate. Further details of which are provided in section 2.3 below.

## 2.3 Changes to the Existing Road Network

There are a number of roads projects that have been constructed or are being progressed through various stages of design and planning that could impact on the traffic patterns of the N61. The projects have sought to improve the geometric alignment of the N61, whilst also improving the cross-section and providing a forgiving roadside. These have been developed in line with TII Publication Standards for a design speed of 100km/h and would therefore be appropriately designed in the event of reclassification to National Primary Road status.

The road projects implemented, or in planning and design represent upgrading a total of 32km (43%) of the 75km length of the N61 and are shown on Figure 2.3 below.

In addition, the Roscommon Town Approaches and Movement Study (RTAMS) published in February 2023 recommends the implementation of an N61 Bypass of Circular Road, among other active travel and public transport enhancements to Roscommon town which have been brought into the Roscommon town Local Area Plan 2024-2030.

<sup>6</sup>The traffic volumes quoted are obtained from available traffic studies on sections of the N61 route and TII Traffic Counters

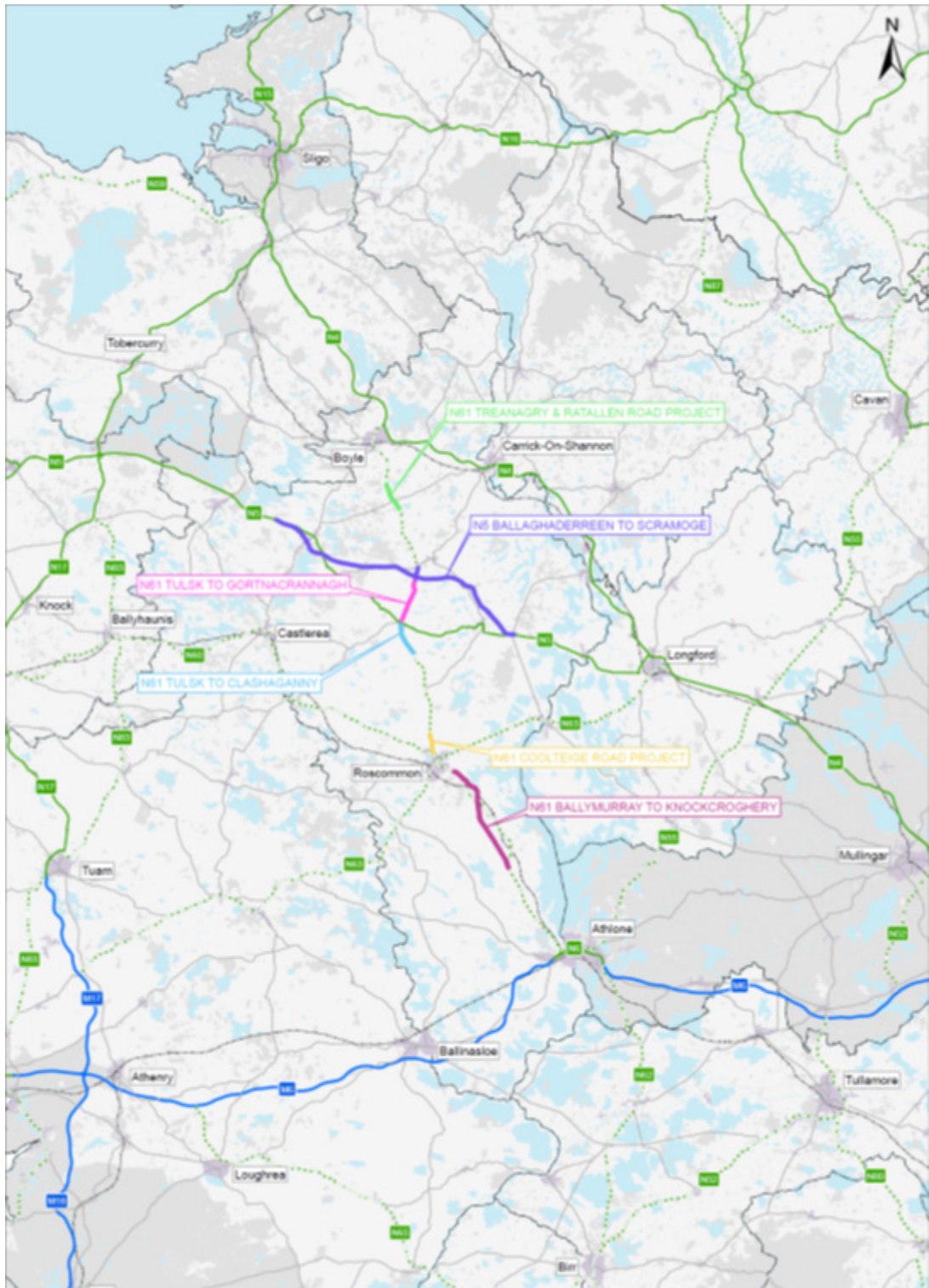


Figure 2.3 Road Project Upgrades to the N61



## 2.4 Population Demographics

The population demographics have been summarised in this Section 2.4. Full details, including maps are provided in Appendix C

### 2.4.1 Population Density

The most densely populated areas are concentrated on the urban areas of Athlone, Roscommon town, Boyle, Lanesborough and Castlerea with low densities reported in the rural areas along the route, which generally showing a population density of less than 50 people per sq.km. This also corresponds with job density, which is also highest in these urban areas. Education facilities and Fáilte Ireland registered accommodation distributed is along the N61, but again more concentrated on the urban centres (shown in Figures C1.1 to C1.4 Appendix C).

It is clear that the N61 plays an important role as a connection between Boyle, Roscommon town and Athlone and also as an access route to the larger towns for those living in the less dense, rural areas between Roscommon town and Athlone to access these employment and education facilities.

### 2.4.2 Commuting Patterns

The car remains the most popular mode of transport and it has a significantly higher proportion of the mode share in the study area for both work and school trip purposes than any other mode. A lower rate of car usage is seen in the urban areas. The cycling proportion in the rural area is extremely low, with most of the areas having less than a 1% mode share for commuting trips. Walking as a means of commuting to work or school within the rural areas again recorded low figures, with less than 5% walking to work or school. This increases in the urban areas, with up to 40% walking to work or school in Roscommon town, Boyle and Athlone. Maps showing the commuting modes are shown on Figures C1.5 to C1.7 in Appendix C.

The low levels of walking and cycling along the N61 is likely connected to the dispersed nature of the development in this rural area where homes are further from work, school or college destinations, combined with a lack of active mode infrastructure on the N61. It is important to note that this census question only captures active mode use for commutes and as such the levels of active mode use along this road could be higher when accounting for trips made for leisure purposes.

## 2.5 Transport Options

### 2.5.1 Rail

With the exception of stations in Athlone, Roscommon town and Castlerea, the N61 corridor is not served by rail based public transport, with the rail line heading in a westerly direction from Roscommon town, more broadly following the N60 corridor to link Castlebar, Westport and Ballina in county Mayo.

Usage surveys as part of the National Rail Census Report (2022) indicate that at Roscommon town, usage numbers have steadily increased from 80 daily boardings in 2013 to 104 daily boardings in 2022, with alightings also showing a similar increase from 84 in 2013 to 112 in 2022. These figures are presented in a northbound / southbound direction, indicating greater patronage from Roscommon town towards Mayo (104 n/b vs 10 s/b boardings) possibly indicating a higher percentage of tourist journeys rather than utilisation as a form of commuting to/from Athlone.

There is no direct rail connection between the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo, with services between Athlone and Dublin (Heuston), then Dublin (Connolly) and Sligo required to commute between these regional centres. This is a journey of approximately 7 hours 40 minutes, requiring three separate train journeys.

In the absence of a feasible existing rail connection between the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo, or from the county town of Roscommon to Sligo and the low density population distribution as detailed in Section 2.4.1 above, it is unlikely that a new rail line would be economically viable. The All-Island Strategic Rail Review (2023) does not recommend the provision of a rail connection between the regional centres of Athlone and Sligo. Accordingly, it appears to be the reality that rail as a modal option will not be available along the N61 catchments in the decades ahead.



### 2.5.2 Bus

The N61 corridor is served by a number of bus links between Roscommon town and Athlone, or Roscommon to Boyle, however there is no direct bus service between the Regional Centres of Sligo and Athlone, or from Roscommon town to Sligo. Boyle is served by Bus Éireann service 23 which runs between Dublin Airport and Sligo along the N4 corridor, which allows interchange between Roscommon-Boyle bus service.

From Athlone, the shortest journey listed on the Transport for Ireland journey planner is 2 hours 47 minutes, via Longford town, requiring a change of bus at Longford

From Roscommon town, this journey is via the 570 Roscommon to Boyle local link bus service which has three buses in each direction per day. This requires a change in Boyle to the 23 bus, resulting in an overall journey time of 2 hours 28 minutes.

The lack of bus services on the N61 corridor and in particular linking the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo, increases the reliance of private vehicles to undertake this journey.

### 2.5.3 Alternative Routes

The N61 is the most direct link between the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo with a distance of 115km from the R446 River Shannon crossing in Athlone to the Garvogue bridge in Sligo. This route has an anticipated journey time of approximately one hour 33 minutes.

An alternative route would be the N4, N55 corridor, via Carrick-on-Shannon, Longford, Edgeworthstown, Ballymahon to Athlone. This route however is 142km in length, with a projected travel time of 2 hours. The N55 is to a lower standard than the N61 currently provides, making this route less attractive to vehicular traffic, in particular HGVs.

The lack of suitable alternative routes of comparable journey times and lengths highlights the importance of the N61, in particular for freight traffic, where greater consideration is given to journey times and route lengths. The significant differences in length and time will also influence driver choices for non-freight traffic, making the N61 the primary route between the regional centres. Consideration of operational carbon emissions supports priority being given to encourage traffic of all types to take the shorter route.

### 2.5.4 Transport Options Summary

When considering the lack of rail and bus connectivity between the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo and considering the increased journey length and time of alternative routes, this highlights the importance of the N61 as a critical link for County Roscommon and the wider Midlands and Northern and Western Regions.



# 3. Policy Context

## 3.1 Overview

The N61 is of strategic importance to County Roscommon and the wider region and its improvement has for many years, and continues to be, strongly supported in Local, Regional and National planning policy. This is summarised in the following sections 3.2 to 3.4, with full detail provided in Appendix A.

Local Policy Context:

- Roscommon County Development Plan 2022 – 2028

Regional Policy Context:

- Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Northern and Western Regions (RSES)
- Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024-West
- Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024-North-West

National Policy Context:

- Project Ireland 2040 – National Planning Framework
- The National Development Plan 2021 – 2030
- National Sustainable Mobility Policy 2022
- National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland 2021
- Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan 2021
- Road Safety Strategy 2021 – 2030
- Climate Action Plan 2024
- National Roads 2040

## 3.2 Local Policy Context

The Roscommon County Development Plan (CDP) 2022-2028 outlines that *“the N61 is particularly critical in terms of wider connectivity, linking the Regional Growth Centres of Athlone and Sligo and is highlighted in the RSES as a priority project in the region. This route is essential in providing regional connectivity, addressing peripherality and facilitating links to services such as education, healthcare, employment and enterprise. Improving the road network is central to this as well as maintaining strategic links between urban centres that have been identified as key economic drivers. Planned road improvements during the lifetime of the Plan are detailed in Table 7.2 and Table 7.3.”* The first planned improvement to the N61 listed in Table 7.2 is to seek reclassification of this route to National Primary Status, before then going on to list specific targeted sections for improvement.

## 3.3 Regional Policy Context

There is currently a very significant (and growing) economic gap between the Northern & Western Region and the other two regions in the country. The Region is currently classed as a ‘Lagging Region’ by the European Commission, in recognition of the Northern and Western Region falling significantly behind the other two regions across a number of key indicators.

As of 2021, the gap between the Northern and Western Region of Ireland (as a percentage of the State average) and the Eastern and Midland Region of Ireland was 25 percentage points in terms of disposable income per head of population, which was much wider than the corresponding gap in 2010 (which was 10 percentage points) and in the mid to late 2000s, where such a gap ranged from 11 to 14 percentage points (i.e. 2004-2009)<sup>7</sup>.

The Eastern and Midland Region of Ireland accounted for 55 per cent of all population growth in Ireland between 2016 and 2022<sup>8</sup>, with the Northern and Western Region and the Southern Region of Ireland collectively accounting for 45 per cent of growth during this time period. Given that the NPF acknowledges that the Greater Dublin Area, and to a lesser extent the wider Eastern and Midland Region, has witnessed an overconcentration of population, homes and jobs, it is clear that the distribution of growth is contrary to the vision and objectives of the NPF. Specifically, such growth rates are contrary to National Policy Objective (NPO) 1a of the NPF, which aims to ensure that the *“projected level of population and employment growth in the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly area will be at least matched by that of the Northern and Western and Southern Regional Assembly areas combined”*<sup>9</sup>.

A key objective under the NPF is to ensure balanced regional development, counter-balancing the Dublin and Eastern and Midland Region, is delivered through targeted investment and development in other regions.

The Northern and Western Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) identifies Roscommon town as a ‘Key Town’ within the Region, strategically located in relation to the Regional Centres of Sligo and Athlone. The RSES envisages 30% growth in key town of Roscommon and 40% growth in the regional centres of Sligo and Athlone by 2040. To facilitate its expansion, key future investment priorities have been identified, including:

<sup>7</sup>Table 5.1a: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cirgdp/countyincomesandregionalgdp2020/data/>  
<sup>8</sup><https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/populationchanges/>  
<sup>9</sup><https://www.npf.ie/wp-content/uploads/Project-Ireland-2040-NPF.pdf>



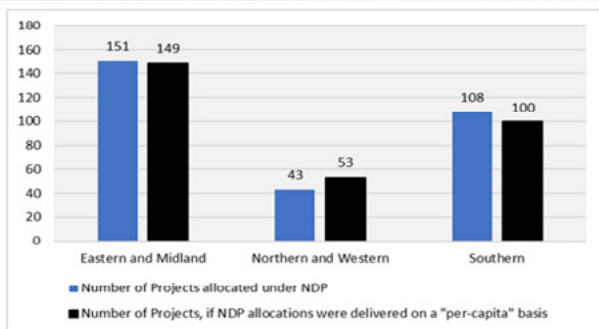


- *“To pursue the delivery of infrastructure improvements on the transport network, particularly the upgrading of the N61 national route between the Regional Centre of Athlone and Boyle Town and also the potential linkages, both bus and rail, between main urban centres linked to Roscommon.” (Refers, RPO 6.3)*

The RSES recognises that such significant population growth will have an impact on the towns and their surrounding hinterland, stating that: *“These targets need to be matched by the delivery of critical enabling infrastructure and services, thus ensuring that these places grow as successful significant employment centres and service locations not only for the urban areas themselves but, importantly, for their extensive hinterlands that include smaller towns, villages and rural areas.”*

However, as can be seen in Figure 3.1, the NDP allocation of projects has a significant deficit for the Northern and Western Region when compared to the other regions in Ireland, further hindering the development of this region.

**Figure 6:** Allocation of projects that will cost more than €20 million or significant projects below €20 million, under the NDP, by the NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland



Source: Northern and Western Regional Assembly's calculations using data from DPERS "Investment Tracker" (February 2023)

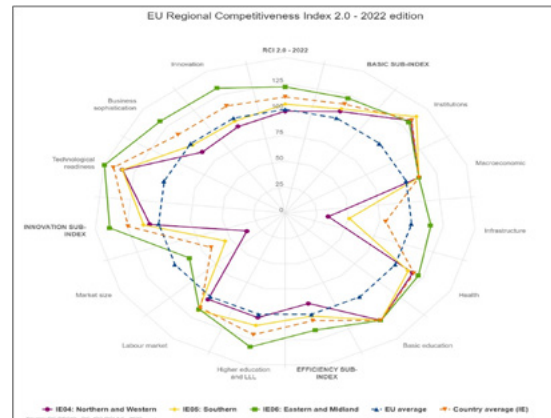
**Figure 3.1** NDP Project Allocation by Region

In addition to the NPF, the Climate Action Plan (CAP) contains a key target to reduce vehicle kilometres of travel by 20%. This can be facilitated by increasing local employment and access to local/regional markets within the regions, leading to a reduction in long distance commuting and increased opportunities for shorter commutes that can feasibly be undertaken by active travel or public transport.

The gap between the Northern & Western Region also pertains to infrastructure, where Northern and Western Region remains very significantly behind the rest of the Country and other European Regions as illustrated in Figure 3.2. The Northern and Western Region is ranked 218<sup>th</sup> out of 234 regions in the EU under the heading of Infrastructure, with a ranking that is lower than all of Hungary and many regions of Romania.

This persistent and pronounced gap must be meaningfully tackled across Government, particularly in the Transport sector, to achieve the objectives for balanced regional growth within the NPF. This will require a review of National Roads,

to upgrade Inter Urban Priority Routes within the Northern and Western Region, with an associated reallocation of schemes within the NDP. To improve this infrastructure deficit will require the reclassification of some routes, such as the N61 to reflect the strategic importance of links within the region.



**Figure 3.2:** Index scores of the NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland in the European Commission's 2022 "Regional Competitiveness Index", (Blue line = EU27 average) Source: European Commission

Both the West and North-West Regional Enterprise Plans to 2024 (WREP & NWREP) aim to provide assistance for enterprise creation and development to enable growth in employment. The plan recognises the impact of pharmaceutical, MedTech, agri-food sectors and tourism within the region and seeks to enhance the attractiveness of the region through innovation and smart strategies for Roscommon town, Boyle, Castlerea and Ballaghaderreen.

Action 3.1 of the NWREP recognises the unfortunate unique position the Northwest region is in. The opportunity to leverage significant economic growth is being inhibited by the deficiencies in critical enabling infrastructure as highlighted in the statutory Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy of the Northern and Western Region, which implements and supports Project Ireland 2040 (NPF and NDP). This action 3.1 is targeted at addressing this issue of regional concern and highlights the issue as opportunities arise. The inclusion of an action within the NWREP addressing infrastructure is unique only to the Northwest, due to the sheer scale of infrastructure deficits which exists in this region. Amongst other concerns, the Northwest region is the only region now not to have a motorway to it, as such the N61 link through the central spine of Roscommon provides critical connectivity for the wider Northern and Western Region.

The proposed road reclassification will be key to supporting the planned growth within the Northern and Western Region recognised as necessary by the RSES in support of the NPF and NDP. It will accommodate growth in residents, tourists, enterprise and employment in the Key Town of Roscommon and facilitate improved connectivity for the movement of goods and people in a north south direction through County Roscommon and its connectivity of the Regional Centres of Sligo and Athlone for employment, education and recreation.



### 3.4 National Policy Context

Project Ireland 2040 comprises the National Planning Framework 2018 (NPF) along with the updated National Development Plan 2021-2030 (NDP) to align Ireland's Investment Strategy with its National Strategic Planning policies.

The overarching ambition of the NPF is to *“to create a single vision, a shared set of goals for every community across the country”* through several goals. These include population growth of 1 million extra people with 50% of growth to occur in key regional centres, towns, villages and rural areas, regeneration of rural Ireland, better distribution of regional growth, in terms of jobs and prosperity and co-ordinated delivery of infrastructure and services in tandem with growth.

These goals are aligned with ten National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs) supported by a series of National Policy Objectives (NPOs) recognising that the regions need to be served by accessible centres of employment and services. The NPF recognises the Northern and Western region due to a *“historically lower level of urbanisation compared to other regions”* and acknowledges that the majority of Roscommon functionally operates as part of the Midland region with a focus on the Regional Centre of Athlone. The northern part of the county is influenced by proximity to the regional centre of Sligo and the NPF recognises the importance of improved connectivity between the Regional Centres highlighting that *“Accessibility from the north-west of Ireland and between centres of scale separate from Dublin will be significantly improved, focused on cities and larger regionally distributed centres and on key east-west and north-south routes.”*

With regard to inter-urban roads, the following NPF objectives apply to the N61 National Road:

- Maintaining the strategic capacity and safety of the national roads network including planning for future capacity enhancements; and
- Improving average journey times targeting an average inter-urban speed of 90kph.

The National Development Plan (NDP) 2021 – 2030 supports the NSO's in the NPF and identifies priorities for public capital investment. The NSO 2 of the NPF, supported by the NDP for Enhanced Regional Accessibility *“seeks to enhance intra-regional accessibility through improving transport links between key urban centres of population and their respective regions, as well as improving transport links between the regions themselves”*. The NDP also states that *“The Department of Transport's National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland (NIFTI) will set out the prioritisation for future investment in the land transport network to support the delivery of the NPF”*.

NIFTI seeks to prioritise future investment in the land transport network to support the delivery of the National Strategic Outcomes of the NPF. Although NIFTI generally applies to future projects, rather than classification of the road network, it recognises the importance of the regional centres of Athlone and Sligo.

The National Roads 2040 (NR2040) is TII's strategy to enable the implementation of Project Ireland 2040, seeking to respond to evolving national policy and align with NIFTI. NR2040 sets out four investment priorities which are reinforced by a series of TII commitments, addressing the strategic issues facing the National Roads network in the coming years, stating that *“In line with the NPF and NIFTI, TII will work to achieve average inter-urban speeds of 90km/h on National Road corridors between Ireland's five cities (Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick, and Waterford) and five regional centres (Letterkenny, Drogheda, Dundalk, Sligo and Athlone). In some instances, this will mean the development of new infrastructure or upgrading of existing infrastructure to deliver on this NPF and NIFTI inter-urban accessibility objective”* and *“TII will work towards improving regional and rural accessibility in line with the NPF and NIFTI.”*

Figure 5.3 from NR2040 has been reproduced overleaf (Figure 3.3) highlights those routes where intervention is required to support the NPF/NIFTI 90km/h target. This highlights the N55 and N4 corridor as the main corridor for future investment to achieve the average interurban speeds of 90km/h. The absence of application of the NPF/NIFTI interurban target of 90km/h to the N61 as a whole will hinder the economic development of Roscommon town and the rural hinterland served by the N61. This region, except for Roscommon Rural, Kiltoom and Athlone West Rural Electoral Divisions is classified as a CLÁR region, therefore any reduction in accessibility and hinderance to journey times/distances will further negatively impact on the deprivation experienced in these regions.

The classification of the N4/N55 corridor as the targeted route between the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo as indicated in Figure 3.3 will increase journey lengths by approximately 27km (24% increase) and journey times by approximately 25 minutes compared to the N61 (ignoring any potential reduction in speed limits from the National Speed Limit Review). This would lead to a greater number of vehicle kilometres travelled, which would be contrary to the sustainability commitments in NR2040 and the Climate Action Plan 2024 target which seeks a 20% reduction in total vehicle kilometres. In this regard the selection of the N4/ N55 as the preferred route to connect the regional centres is considered fundamentally flawed as demonstrated by the traffic analysis specific to route choice which highlights a clear preference for the N61.

Figure 5.3 Interurban Connectivity

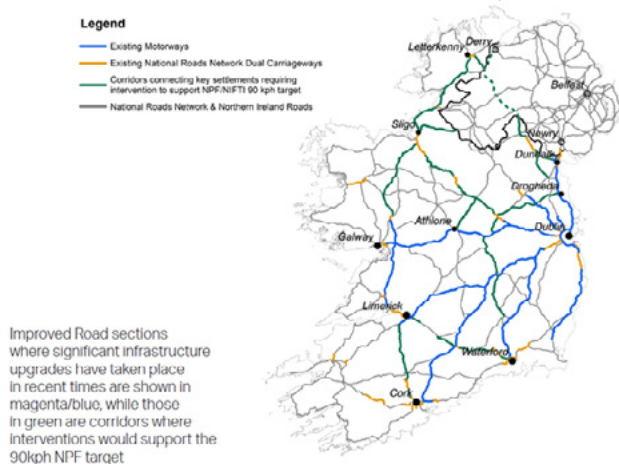


Figure 5.3 from NR2040 – Interurban Connectivity

NR2040 recognises the varying roles of the NS Road Network and that they can form key transport links. TII has categorised the NS Network into three functions, namely Lifeline, Arterial and Collector. NR2040 states “*Arterial National Secondary roads cater for high travel demand and are in close proximity to large urban centres. Arterial National Secondary Roads corridors have a similar role to certain National Primary corridors in terms of moving people and freight. Arterial roads are subject to increased demand for movement of people and goods and will likely require interventions.*” The N61 is classified as an Arterial Road (see Figure A1.3 in Appendix A) between Roscommon town and the existing N5, which is expected to be extended north to meet the TEN-T designated N5 national primary route currently under construction following the opening of this project. This will maintain the status of the north-south connection from the Roscommon town to the major east-west TEN-T national primary road corridor of the N5.

As recognised by the NR2040 part classification as an Arterial Road, the N61 performs a key strategic function in connecting the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo, together with providing connectivity for the rural population of County Roscommon that the N61 passes through. The N61 corridor is poorly served by public transport, particularly north of Roscommon town, due to the absence of rail infrastructure and minimal bus services. This highlights the reliance on the N61 as the main form of north / south mobility within the county for economic prosperity and for the efficient movements of goods and people.

To respect the Climate Action Plan target and the wider planning policy that seeks improved connectivity between regional centres, whilst taking cognisance of NR2040’s classification of the N61 as a combination of Arterial and Collector Road, it is necessary to reclassify the N61 as National Primary Road. NR2040 should then be updated to recognise the strategic importance of the N61, including the need to deliver the NPF/NIFTI interurban target of 90km/h between the Regional Centres of Sligo and Athlone.

The Climate Action Plan 2024 aims to achieve 50% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, and zero net emissions by 2050. While e-to-e journeys, fleet electrification, renewable fuel blend for heavy goods sector, can deliver a positive result in reducing emissions and go some way to achieving the target of a 50% reduction in fuel usage, the N61 provides the most direct connection between the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo, more readily meeting the Plans key target of a 20% reduction in vehicle kilometres travelled.

The Government’s Road Safety Strategy, 2021-2030, seeks to build on its predecessor, which saw Ireland achieve the lowest number of annual road deaths since records began by reducing deaths on Ireland’s roads from 144 to 72 or lower by the year 2030. The Strategy seeks to provide safe roads and roadsides, focusing on embedding the Safe System approach into the national, regional and local road networks. The current and planned upgrades to the N61 as detailed in Section 2.3 provide safe roads and roadsides, which if implemented, will result in over 40% of the N61 meeting the goals of the Road Safety Strategy.

The Department of Transport, in conjunction with other agencies have recently completed a review of national speed limits, with the overarching objective of the Review to improve road safety, whilst also considering carbon emissions and driver compliance. One of the recommendations of the Review is to reduce the national speed limit on national secondary roads to 80km/h, accepting that most of these roads perform the function of local connections to the national primary road network and that to achieve a safe system of travel at 100km/h throughout the national secondary network would not be feasible.

The introduction of a reduced speed limit as a result of the National Speed Limit Review, in conjunction with the effective downgrading of the N61 in NR2040 will significantly hinder the economic development of Roscommon town and not only reduce connectivity from this Key Town to the Regional Centre of Athlone and Roscommon’s industrial base at Monksland/Bellanamullia, but also reduce connectivity between the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo and onward to the Southern Region. Connectivity between the regional centres is highlighted in overarching national policy, namely Project Ireland 2040, the NPF and the NDP as a key for sustainable development. Regional policy supports this, with 30% growth envisaged in the RSES for Roscommon town and 40% growth in the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo. NR2040 is the only policy which seeks to develop an alternative route between the regional centres, via the N4/ N55 corridors, which is contrary to the Climate Action Plan targets to reduce vehicle kilometres by 20% and which does not recognise the importance of the N61 despite the higher classification of the N61 over the N55 as an Arterial Route north of Roscommon town.

The reclassification of the N61 therefore supports the objectives of National, Regional and Local policy objectives.



## 4. Traffic analysis of N61 and N55 between the N4 and N6

### 4.1 Introduction

The following sections provide a brief overview of traffic analysis on the N61 and wider road network, full details are provided in Appendix B – Traffic Analysis.

TII installs and maintains a network of Traffic Monitoring Units (TMUs) across the country. Six of these are within the proposed study area, located on the N61, N55 and N4. The site with the highest AADT on the N4 just south of Longford town, recorded an AADT of 12,758 in 2022. The site with the lowest AADT of 4,186 (2022) is located on the N55 north of Ballymahon.

An analysis of the trips between Sligo and Athlone has been undertaken utilising TII's 2022 National Transport Model (NTpM) to examine the modelled AADT on all links within the area, rather than just the singular points of where the TMUs are located. The NTpM is re-calibrated annually using data from the TMUs, however as the model only uses TMU data for calibration, this results in data being quite coarse and lacking the detail of a local area model that would use more detailed traffic survey data

### 4.2 Athlone to Sligo Route Choice

NR2040 strategy targets reduced journey times between the five cities and five regional centres, which includes between the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo, achieving an inter-urban speed of above 90km/h. Analysis from the 2022 NTpM, highlights a clear preference for vehicles to use the N61 between the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo rather than the N55 & N4 alternative contained in NR2040.

Figure 4.1 presents what is known as a “flow bundle” which shows all of the possible routes chosen by vehicles within a traffic model, either through a certain link or for Origin-Destination pairs. This figure shows the flow bundle between Athlone and Sligo from the 2022 NTpM, and the only route chosen by vehicles is the N61

When considering the trip using the “Shortest Path Search” tool to calculate journey times and average speeds between Boyle and Athlone, this highlights that there is a significant difference between the N61 route and the alternative N4 & N55 proposed in NR2040. Analysis shows between a 38.9%

and 42.4% journey time saving using the N61 route with broadly similar average speeds (to within +/- 1.1%) for the two route choices. This indicates a clear preference for the N61 route, with journey times 23-26 minutes shorter and distances 27km (24%) less via the N61 route compared to the N4/N55 route

The average speed on the N4/N55 currently ranges between 73-77 km/h. In the event that upgrades to the N4/N55 are implemented to meet the NR2040 target of 90 km/h, the N61 would still be the best route choice between Athlone and Sligo as the journey would still be quicker and a shorter distance



Figure 4.1 2022 NTPM Flow Bundle Analysis



# 5. Conclusions and Recommendation

## 5.1 Strategic Function of the N61

Chapter 2 provides background information that demonstrates the strategic function of the N61 as the north-south spine road through County Roscommon, connecting the county town to all the other population centres within the county, to the county's industrial base in Monksland and to the education, healthcare employment and enterprise located in the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo. Regionally the N61 connects the N4, N5 and N/M6 National Primary routes and the N60 and N63 National Secondary routes, all of which cross the county in an east-west direction. Significant investment has been and continues to be made in upgrading the N61 to enable it to serve its strategic function.

The relatively dispersed rural population of County Roscommon and the lack of alternative transport modes dictates that road transport is and will remain the dominant mode for the majority of journeys within the county, in most cases through connections via the N61.

## 5.2 Planning Context

Chapter 3 and Appendix A reviews the local, regional and national planning policy in relation to the N61, all of which target growth of 40% in the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo and 30% in the key town of Roscommon in the Northern and Western region. Roscommon town has already seen an 11.5% increase in population over the past 6 years, exceeding the projected planning horizon. In order to support this growth all of the planning policy documents recognise the importance of providing reliable, safe transport links to and between the regional centres, and in the case of the Climate Action Plan promoting travel by the shortest route. The transport sections of both the local and regional policy documents specifically reference the need to protect and enhance the strategic function of the N61.

The one exception to all of the other policy documents is the section of NR2040 which, while recognising the section of the N61 between Roscommon town and the N5 as an arterial route, classifies the remaining sections as collectors, with the function of connecting local populations to the national primary network. In doing so NR2040 selects the N55 as the corridor connecting key settlements requiring intervention to support the national Planning Framework and NIFTI inter-urban target of 90km/h. Furthermore, the recent DoT Speed Limit Review (2023) recommendation to reduce the national speed limit on national secondary roads to 80km/h reflects their function as local connectors to the national primary road network. When taken together these two recent documents fail to recognise the strategic inter-urban function of the N61, which connects two Regional Growth Centres (Sligo & Athlone), as designated in the NPF, through a sub region which is not served by rail, either existing or proposed, a region that is recognised at EU level as having a

significant infrastructure deficit. This analysis runs entirely contrary to the goals, and the demands of all other planning policy in relation to the N61 to provide for high quality direct connectivity between the regional centres and major towns.

## 5.3 Traffic Analysis

Chapter 4 and Appendix B provides a detailed analysis of traffic patterns on the N61 and the alternative N4/N55 connection between the Regional Centres of Sligo and Athlone proposed in NR2040. This clearly demonstrates that the N61 is both the shortest and the quickest route. Furthermore, it is found that even following improvement of the N4 and N55 to the target 90km/hr inter-urban average speed, the N61 will remain the quickest route and therefore traffic will continue to choose the N61. As such NR2040, as it stands, will fail to achieve its objective of achieving the average inter-urban speeds of 90km/h between the regional centres of Sligo and Athlone, as required by the National Planning Framework. Any signage or traffic calming initiatives that are undertaken to encourage diversion onto the N4/N55 route will both reduce connectivity and increase carbon emissions due to the 27km (24%) increase in journey length

## 5.4 Recommendations

In order to recognise the strategic function of the N61 for regional connectivity both now and in the future following the policy led growth in the regional centres and key towns, it is essential that the N61 is re-classified as a National Primary Road. Such re-classification would:

- Reflect the National and Regional Spatial Planning ambitions to 2040, which places a priority on enhancing Inter Urban Connectivity, and reduce journey times, in this case as the main transport link between the Regional Growth Centre's of Athlone and Sligo, as designated in the NPF and RSES.
- Contribute towards the bridging of the pronounced and unsustainable infrastructure deficit across the Northern & Western Region of the Country, which is reflected in its designation as a 'Lagging Region', and its Infrastructure Score as 17<sup>th</sup> worst Region (218<sup>th</sup> out of 234 in the European Commissions 'Regional Competitiveness Index 2022'), which is lower than all of Hungary and many regions in Romania;
- Reflect the strategic function of the N61 as the north-south spine through County Roscommon in accordance with local planning policy;
- Reflect the National Planning Framework and NR2040 objectives to target an average 90km/h for inter-urban journeys between regional centres; and
- Avoid the serious journey time and agglomeration dis-benefits that would arise should the speed limit on the N61 be reduced in accordance with the Speed Limit Review 2023.



Following re-classification of the N61 as a National Primary Road, NR2040 should be updated to reflect its strategic function within the national road network. Such an update would:

- Recognise the carbon dis-benefits of encouraging traffic to divert via a significantly longer route; and
- Enable investment to be focussed on achieving safety and journey time benefits by improving the direct route of choice, rather than on the extensive traffic calming measures that would be required to reduce speeds and encourage drivers to divert onto the longer route.



# **APPENDIX A**

## **POLICY CONTEXT**





# A1. Policy Context

## A1.1. Overview

The N61 is of strategic importance to County Roscommon and the wider region and its improvement has for many years and continues to be strongly supported in Local, Regional and National planning policy. This is as detailed below.

### Local Policy Context:

- Roscommon County Development Plan 2022 – 2028

### Regional Policy Context:

- Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Northern and Western Regions (RSES)
- Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024 - West
- Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024 - North - West

### National Policy Context:

- Project Ireland 2040 – National Planning Framework
- The National Development Plan 2021 – 2030
- National Sustainable Mobility Policy 2022
- National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland 2021
- Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan 2021
- Road Safety Strategy 2021 – 2030
- Climate Action Plan 2024
- National Roads 2040

## A1.2. Local Policy Context

### A1.2.1. Roscommon County Development Plan 2022-2028

The Roscommon County Development Plan (CDP) 2022-2028 sets out the overall strategy and vision for the proper planning and sustainable development of County Roscommon. The Strategic Vision of the Plan is as follows:

*“Roscommon County Council is committed to working for the common good of the people of County Roscommon, and through this County Development Plan will set out a positive and sustainable approach to developing the county economically, socially and culturally for the benefit of current and future generations.”*

Census 2022 recorded a population of 70,259 persons in the county, which represented a population increase of 9% on the 2016 census figures. Approx. 73% of the population live in rural areas i.e. outside of aggregate towns. The population density of the county is 25.33 persons / km<sup>2</sup>, which is substantially lower than the State average of 70 persons /km<sup>2</sup>

The Plan identifies that the public road network in Roscommon extends to approximately 4,000km, with over 233km of National Primary and Secondary roads. While this Plan promotes and supports a modal shift to more sustainable modes of transport it is also acknowledged that improvements to the existing road infrastructure are required to improve connectivity and support economic development.

The Plan outlines that *“the N61 is particularly critical in terms of wider connectivity, linking the Regional Growth Centres of Athlone and Sligo and is highlighted in the RSES as a priority project in the region. This route is essential in providing regional connectivity, addressing peripherality and facilitating links to services such as education, healthcare, employment and enterprise. Improving the road network is central to this as well as maintaining strategic links between urban centres that have been identified as key economic drivers. Planned road improvements during the lifetime of the Plan are detailed in Table 7.2 and Table 7.3.”* The first planned improvement to the N61 listed in Table 7.2 is to seek reclassification of this route to National Primary Status, before then going on to list specific targeted sections for improvement.

The plan sets out several objectives in relation to infrastructure, transport and communications, including the objective ITC 7.12 which is to: *“Provide a safe and modern road network throughout the county, having regards to national and regional policies and guidelines as well as liaising with national and regional policies and guidelines as well as liaising with national agencies.”*

It is estimated over the lifetime of the plan, that 31 new primary classrooms and 536 new secondary places will be required to cater for population growth. This will likely require construction of *“new schools, or extension to existing schools being needed in Monkstown / Bellanamullia, Roscommon, Boyle, Castlerea and Ballaghaderreen”*.

Noting that RSES indicates that by 2032 there will be a significant increase in the number of people with the 15 to 24 age bracket, which will lead for a greater demand for third level education, the Couthy Development Plan considers Roscommon town to be *“a prime location in the county”* to provide a third level education as identified in:



**Policy Objective SCCD 11.7** *“Support the potential development of an off campus third level facility in Roscommon town, in order to facilitate the delivery of third-level courses, possibly in collaboration with Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT)”.*

The reclassification of the N61 as a National Primary Road will ensure the future provision of an efficient road network that is imperative to provide safe efficient access to these community facilities that will facilitate the future growth expected within the County. The N61 supports this by directly and in-directly connecting four of the five locations identified for primary and secondary school places and directly connects a potential off-campus facility in Roscommon town to the Technological University of the Shannon (Athlone Institute of Technology).

### A1.3. Regional Policy Context

#### A1.3.1. Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Northern and Western Regions (RSES)

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly compiled the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Northern and Western Region to provide regional level strategic planning and economic policy in support of the implementation the National Planning Framework (NPF).

The region covers eight counties including Roscommon and represents 36.2% of the landmass of the Republic of Ireland, and 17.8% (847,442) of the population and has been identified at EU level as lagging, ranking 218<sup>th</sup> out of 234 regions in the EU for infrastructure.

Roscommon town in County Roscommon is categorised as a ‘Key Town’ within the Northern and Western Region. It is strategically located in relation to the Galway Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) and the Regional Centres of Sligo and Athlone. The town is predicted to develop further and have a positive influence on its hinterlands. To continue its development, key future investment priorities have been identified, including

*“To pursue the delivery of infrastructure improvements on the transport network, particularly the upgrading of the N61 national route between the Regional Centre of Athlone and Boyle Town and also the potential linkages, both bus and rail, between main urban centres linked to Roscommon.”*

Additionally, several specific regional policy objectives in relation to road infrastructure are listed under Section 6.3 of the RSES. Under Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs) for National Roads, RPO 6.8, states:

*“The delivery of the following projects shall be pursued in consultation with and subject to the agreement of TII through pre-appraisal, early planning and to construction as priority projects to be delivered to an appropriate level of service in the*

*medium term.”* The objective specifically then references the “N61 Athlone to Boyle improvement”.

The RSES envisages 30% growth in the key towns, including Roscommon town, with the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo expected to see 40% growth. In the six years since the 2016 census, Roscommon town has experienced an 11.5% increase in population, as such the 30% increase in population by 2040 envisaged in the plan is likely to be exceeded

The RSES recognises that such significant population growth will have an impact on the towns and their surrounding hinterland, stating that: *“These targets need to be matched by the delivery of critical enabling infrastructure and services, thus ensuring that these places grow as successful significant employment centres and service locations not only for the urban areas themselves but, importantly, for their extensive hinterlands that include smaller towns, villages and rural areas.”*

The RSES recognises the strengths of the regional economy, encouraging a diversification of the indigenous economic activity to enable greater economic development. It has identified six sub-regions based on geography and other socio-economic factors within the Northern and Western Region. This includes the Sligo Catchment, which extends to North Roscommon and the Athlone Catchment which extends into significant areas of Mid and South Roscommon. This recognises the importance of the MedTech industry, where significant pharmaceutical plants located on the edge of Athlone in the Monksland area of County Roscommon provide significant employment opportunities in the region. The Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) figures from the IDA for 2022 show FDI provides for over 39,000 direct jobs in the Midlands and West Regions. This is an increase of 10.5% and 7.3% respectively

Roscommon and the surrounding counties are benefiting from the launch of Failte Irelands latest tourism drive for the region, namely Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands initiative which was launched in 2018. This has seen a steady growth in tourist visiting Roscommon and the surrounding counties in 2019, with approximately 450,000 overseas and 780,000 domestic tourists visiting the region.

The proposed road reclassification will be key to enabling the planned growth in residents, tourists, enterprise and employment in the Key Town of Roscommon and facilitate improved movement of goods and people in a north south direction through County Roscommon and its connectivity of the Regional Centres of Sligo and Athlone

#### A1.3.2. Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024 - West

The Regional Enterprise Plan 2024 for the western region consisting of Roscommon, Mayo and Galway aims to provide a best value-added assistance for enterprise creation and development to enable growth in employment.



The objectives of the Plan are as follows:

- **Strategic Objective 1:** Advance the development of the regional entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystem.
- **Strategic Objective 2:** Strengthen and harness the cultural and creative sector to attract new investment commercialisation, and collaboration opportunities.
- **Strategic Objective 3:** Realise the Atlantic West Region’s potential for enterprise and job creation in the Renewable Energy sector.
- **Strategic Objective 4:** Drive the global competitiveness of the Life-Sciences sector underpinned by an expanded regional footprint and coordination
- **Strategic Objective 5:** Grow the AgriTech and Food sector in the West, underpinned by an integrated innovation network, facilitating the transition towards a sustainable Bioeconomy.
- **Strategic Objective 6:** Expand prospects for sustainable entrepreneurship, employment and upskilling in Tourism.
- **Strategic Objective 7:** Facilitate an equitable digital and green transformation in the West.

In relation to Roscommon, the Plan states that it *“exhibits several centres of growth, with ambitious innovation and smart specialisation strategies developed for Roscommon town, Boyle, Castlerea and Ballaghaderreen, and significant growth potential existing within the metropolitan area of Athlone”*.

Prevalence of pharmaceutical and MedTech is also seen in Roscommon, with Jazz Pharmaceuticals, Alkermes and Alexion operating out of the county. There is further prevalence of Pharma, MedTech and other services, with Ericsson, Medtronic, the Department for Education, 3M all with significant facilities within Athlone

The agri-food sector is also a major industry in the western region. In Roscommon, there are large food companies (e.g. Kepak and Aurivo), which mostly involve primary processing, as well as a comprehensive array of smaller added-value food producers and artisans.

Tourism is also an important asset of the western region. Roscommon is a county of lakes, with the River Shannon and Lough Ree flowing along the eastern border, with several larger lakes also found within. Furthermore, a number of nature walkways and parks are found within the county, which also have tourism development potential.

The upgrade of the N61 to a National Primary Status will improve connectivity along the route to places of employment, education, recreation as well as tourism destinations by improving the efficiency of the road network.

## A1.4. National Policy Context

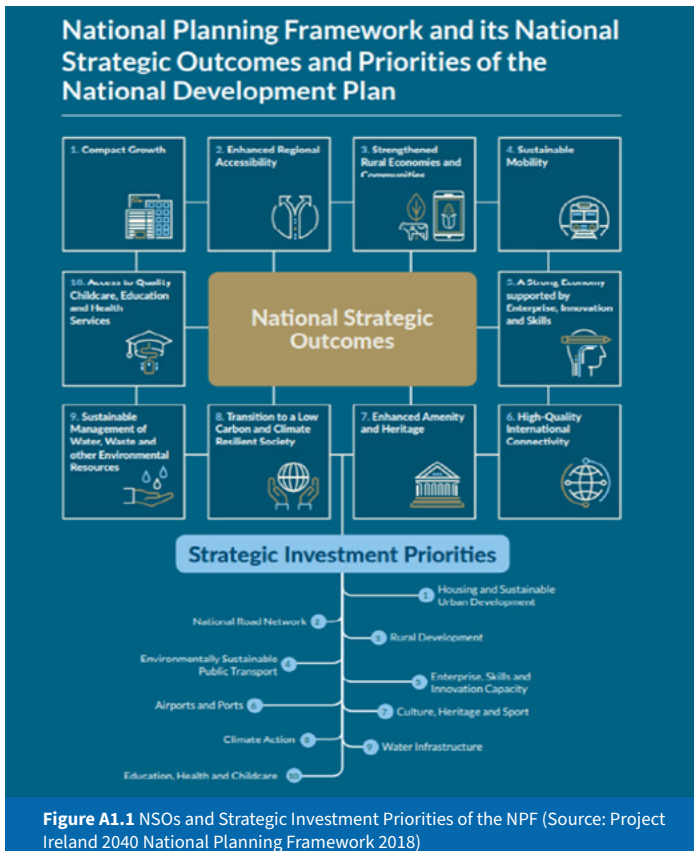
### A1.4.1. Project Ireland 2040 – National Planning Framework

Project Ireland 2040 was launched by the Government in February 2018 and comprises the National Planning Framework 2018 (NPF) along with the updated National Development Plan 2021-2030 (NDP) to align Ireland’s Investment Strategy with its National Strategic Planning policies.

The NPF succeeded the previous National Spatial Strategy and has a statutory basis. It is the Government’s high-level strategic plan for shaping the future growth and development of Ireland out to the year 2040. The overarching ambition of the NPF is to *“to create a single vision, a shared set of goals for every community across the country”* by achieving several goals including, but not limited to the following:

- Guide the future development of Ireland, considering a projected 1 million increase in our population by 2040.
- Of the 1 million extra people, 50% of growth to occur in key regional centres, towns, villages and rural areas, to be determined in the regional plans – Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES).
- Regenerate rural Ireland by promoting environmentally sustainable growth patterns;
- Plan for and implement a better distribution of regional growth, in terms of jobs and prosperity;
- Co-ordinate delivery of infrastructure and services in tandem with growth, through joined-up NPF/National Investment Plan and consistent sectoral plans, which will help to manage this growth and tackle congestion and quality of life issues in Dublin and elsewhere.

These goals are expressed in the Framework across ten National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs), as illustrated in Figure A1.1 below and have considered the overarching themes of wellbeing, equality and opportunity. To deliver the desired NSOs, the Framework developed a series of National Policy Objectives (NPOs) that will set a new way forward for regional and local planning and sustainable development policy in Ireland.



Project Ireland 2040 recognises that it is critical that the regions are served by accessible centres of employment and services that can be a focal point for investment and have the widest possible influence. In the Midlands, the NPF recognises that Athlone fulfils this role as a regional centre for growth. The NPF also envisages the complementary development of towns in a regionally co-ordinated manner.

The NPF has a particular focus on the Northern and Western region due to a “historically lower level of urbanisation compared to other regions”. The Western regional area consists of counties Galway, Mayo and Roscommon. In relation to County Roscommon, the NPF acknowledges that the majority of the county functionally operates as part of the Midland region with a focus on Athlone. The northern part of the county, however, is influenced by proximity to Sligo and Leitrim.

Through the implementation of policies and investment identified in the Framework, the region will grow to more than 1 million people by 2040, 180,000 more than presently. According to the NPF, the greatest challenge the region faces is the implementation of actions focussed on “building up its urban structure, diversify and strengthen its rural areas as they transition towards a more broadly based mix of economic activities sufficient to underpin long term self-sustaining local communities”. The aforementioned actions will be complemented by improved accessibility.

**National Policy Objective 2c states that:**

“Accessibility from the north-west of Ireland and between centres of scale separate from Dublin will be significantly improved, focused on cities and larger regionally distributed centres and on key east-west and north-south routes.” (p. 27)

With regard to inter-urban roads, the following NPF objectives apply to the N61 National Road:

- Maintaining the strategic capacity and safety of the national roads network including planning for future capacity enhancements; and
- Improving average journey times targeting an average inter-urban speed of 90kph.

NSO No. 6: **High Quality International Connectivity**, one of the key actions is to continue the investment in Ireland West Airport Knock which is situated accessing from the N5 via the N61 from the Regional Centre of Athlone and Roscommon town.

Reclassification of the N61 as a National Primary Route is consistent with the overall NPF Strategy due to the following:

- The N61 (and via the N5 and N4) route is strategically located to serve the Northern and Western region linking the principal towns and population centres with the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo.
- National Primary status will protect journey times on those sections of the N61 that have previously been upgraded to a 100km/h design speed and facilitate continued investment to achieve the objectives set out in the NPF to deliver an average interurban speed of 90km/h, thereby maintaining and enhancing regional connectivity.
- The N61 provides the north south link to and between the three European TEN-T Roads Network in the region, namely, the N4, N5 and N6.
- Protection and further enhancement of journey times on the N61 would maintain and improve the critical mass in the Northern and Western Region, its access to market, travel costs, productivity and connectivity to Ireland West Knock Airport and via the TEN-T Road Network to Dublin Port.
- Re-classification as a National Primary route would recognise the strategic function of the N61 as the major economic corridor connecting the County town of Roscommon with both the county’s major industrial and commercial hub at Monksland and the nearest major population, employment, economic, transportation hub, cultural, and education centre serving the west midlands, the Regional Centre of Athlone.

**A1.4.2. The National Development Plan 2021 – 2030**

The updated National Development Plan (NDP) 2021 – 2030, is a ten-year strategy identifying priorities for public capital investment across all sectors, including transport. The total



investment is estimated at €165 Billion over the next decade. The NDP has been designed to support the 10 National Strategic Outcomes in the National Planning Framework (NPF).

The NDP considers the 10-year period of the NDP in two periods of five years, namely, 2021-2025 and 2026-2030. It is intended that €2,400 million will be allocated to the TII over the period 2021-2025 broken down as follows:

- Protection and Renewal: approximately €1,300 million; and
- New Roads, approximately €1,100 million.

In addition, a further €5,600 million will be allocated to cover the period 2026-2030.

The National Strategic Outcome 2 for Enhanced Regional Accessibility in the NPF is supported by the NDP. This National Strategic Outcome “seeks to enhance intra-regional accessibility through improving transport links between key urban centres of population and their respective regions, as well as improving transport links between the regions themselves”. The NDP also states that “The Department of Transport’s National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland (NIFTI) will set out the prioritisation for future investment in the land transport network to support the delivery of the NPF”.

Projects going forward will be required to demonstrate how the project impacts on the National Strategic Outcomes, including how the potential negative impacts will be mitigated and how the project aligns with one or more of the NIFTI priorities. Details of how the reclassification to National Primary Status aligns with NIFTI is set out in Section A1.4.4 below.

The recent and ongoing investment in upgrading sections of the N61 to 100km/h design speed is consistent with the objectives of the National Development Plan. The proposed upgrade of the N61 to National Primary status would protect the journey time benefits that justified previous investment and support future investment to further enhance and strengthen the objectives set out in the NPF & NDP by improving the connectivity of the Northern and Western Region to the Midland Region and connecting the county town of Roscommon to its main industrial base of Monksland and further afield to Dublin via the N61/M6/M4 route corridor

#### A1.4.3. National Sustainable Mobility Policy 2022

The National Sustainable Mobility Policy (NSMP) was published in April 2022 and its vision is “to connect people and places with sustainable mobility that is safe, green, accessible and efficient”.

The policy is guided by three key principles which are underpinned by 10 high level goals to promote safe, green, people focussed integrated mobility. The reclassification of the N61 and any further improvements that might follow will

support the existing road based public transport services and encourage the development of better services to and between the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo, a key connection that is not served by the rail network

#### A1.4.4. National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland 2021

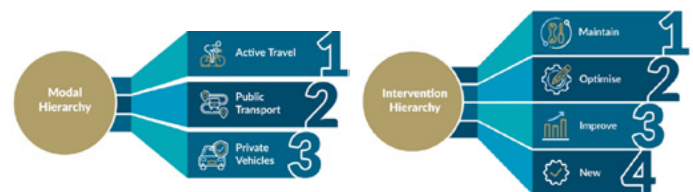
The National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland (NIFTI) seeks to prioritise future investment in the land transport network to support the delivery of the National Strategic Outcomes of the National Planning Framework (NPF).

To address the challenges, NIFTI establishes four investment priorities that future transport projects must align with to secure funding, namely:

- Decarbonisation;
- Protection and Renewal;
- Mobility of People and Goods in Urban Areas; and
- Enhanced Regional and Rural Connectivity.



In addition, NIFTI also contains a Modal Hierarchy, and Intervention Hierarchy as indicated below.



Modal Hierarchy seeks to promote active travel measures above public transport and private vehicles, while Intervention Hierarchy aims to maintain the existing assets over optimising, improving or new construction.

Although NIFTI generally applies to future projects, rather than classification of the road network, it recognises the importance of the regional centres of Athlone and Sligo. The NPF targets 40% of all new housing will be delivered within the footprints of these existing settlements, which highlights the need for enhanced regional connectivity between these two regional centres.

The reclassification of the N61 to a National Primary Status will maintain the existing connectivity to and between the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo and facilitate further journey time improvements for public transport on this strategic link that is not served by the rail network.



#### **A1.4.5. Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan 2021**

The Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan is a major national public transport initiative developed by the National Transport Authority (NTA), with the aim of increasing connectivity, particularly for people living outside our major cities and towns.

The plan aims to improve mobility in rural areas by providing better connections between villages and towns and linking these areas with an enhanced regional network connecting cities and regional centres nationwide.

Connecting Ireland seeks to make public transport for rural communities more useful for more people by:

- Improving existing services;
- Adding new services; and
- Enhancing the current Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) network which meets the transport needs of people who live in remote locations.

With 4 out of 10 villages not connected to a nearby big town, the NTA plans to address this with 100 new local connections. The Rural Mobility Plan sets out the existing public transport routes for each county along with proposed additional routes. At present the N61 is served by Transport for Ireland Local Link No. 570 which connects Roscommon town to Boyle via Strokestown and Tulsk with three daily services. While there are plans to provide additional services on the N61 between Athlone and Roscommon town and on to Castlerea via the N60, there is no provision for additional services on the N61 between Roscommon town and Boyle. However, the NTA will be looking at improving existing services as part of this plan.

Given the dispersed nature of rural populations and the greater distances often involved, it is likely that there is less potential for changing transport mode in rural areas. Significantly expanding the provision of alternative public transport services is unlikely to be financially viable and active travel measures are likely to be impractical for longer journeys, however improving the existing infrastructure will enhance and support public transport services.

The reclassification of the N61 to a Primary National Road will support the objectives of Connecting Ireland by protecting journey times on those sections that have already been upgraded to 100km/h design speed and supporting future investment to remove constraints and improve accessibility on the N61 for local services between Boyle and Athlone locally and on a regional context to Sligo and the Northwest Region.

#### **A1.4.6. Road Safety Strategy 2021 – 2030**

The Government's road safety strategy 'Road Safety Strategy, 2021-2030', seeks to build on its predecessor, which saw Ireland achieve the lowest number of annual road deaths since records began and the second lowest rate of road deaths in the EU in 2019.

The new strategy is deemed to be the first step in achieving the 2020 Programme for Government commitment of bringing Ireland to 'Vision Zero' – eliminating all road deaths and serious injuries on Irish roads by the year 2050.

The plan seeks to reduce the deaths on Ireland's roads from 144 to 72 or lower by the year 2030. The plan also seeks to reduce serious injuries from 1,259 to 630 or lower by the same year. The Strategy outlines a Safe System approach with seven areas of intervention to achieve the targets as follows

- Safe roads and roadsides;
- Safe speeds;
- Safe vehicles;
- Safe road use;
- Post-crash response;
- Safe and healthy modes of travel; and
- Safe work-related road use.

The actions outlined for Safe roads and roadsides will focus on progressively embedding the Safe System approach into the national, regional and local road networks over the next decade and will be achieved by assessing the safety quality of Ireland's road network and implementing priority engineering treatments to reduce fatalities and serious injuries.

Given the strategic function of the N61, seeking to address safety concerns by applying reduced speed limits would be counter to the wider planning context and policy. The reclassification of the N61 to National Primary Road status would protect the connectivity benefits of previous and ongoing investment in safe roads and roadsides along this strategic route and support further investment to enhance both safety and connectivity on the un-improved sections

#### **A1.4.7. Climate Action Plan 2024**

The Climate Action Plan 2024 is an update to Ireland's Climate Action Plan 2023 that has been influenced by two main analyses conducted on the Irish transport system in the year 2022; the OECD's Redesigning Irish Transport review; and the National Transport Authority's modelling of transport decarbonisation pathways.

The plan aims to achieve 50% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, and zero net emissions by 2050.

To meet these targets, 67 actions have been developed under the headings of:

- Enhanced Governance and Accelerated Implementation;
- Communication Strategy;
- Haulage and Logistics;
- Enhanced Spatial and Land Use Planning;
- Strategic Transport Planning;
- Demand Management Strategy;
- Road Space Allocation;
- Active Travel Infrastructure Programme;



- Major Public Transport Infrastructure Programme;
- Public Transport Services and Escort to Education Journeys;
- Smart, Shared and Integrated Mobility;
- ZEV and Electrification Strategy;
- Renewable Fuels for Transport; and
- Transport Adaption for Enhanced Climate Resilience.

The steps involving in promoting more sustainable transportation system, including e-to-e journeys, fleet electrification, renewable fuel blend for heavy goods sector, can deliver a positive result in reducing emissions in the neighbouring areas of the N61.

The reclassification of the N61 to a National Primary Route would cement the N61's position as the strategic route between the Regional Centres of Sligo and Athlone and thereby support the wider spatial and land use planning policies that seek to concentrate population growth in the regional centres and major towns served by the N61

As highlighted in Section 2.5, it is unlikely that rail based public transport would be economically viable on the N61 corridor, as such improvements in public transport serving this region are likely to be road-based public transport solutions that will benefit from the N61 reclassification.

#### A1.4.8. National Roads 2040

The National Roads 2040 (NR2040) is Transport Infrastructure Ireland's (TII) strategy to enable the implementation of Project Ireland 2040, seeking to respond to evolving national policy and align with the Department of Transport's National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland (NIFTI). NR2040 also endeavours to align with the commitments of DoT's National Sustainable Mobility Policy. TII's vision for the twenty-year period strategy is for National Roads to support 'an evolving transport system which has safety, innovation and accessibility at its core.'

The key objectives from NR2040 are for the National Roads network to be:

- Safe and efficient transport network for people and goods;
- Environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable;
- Tailored for different customers in different places; and
- Managed and improved as a key public asset.

NR2040 sets out four investment priorities under the headings of:

- Decarbonisation;
- Protection and Renewal;
- Mobility of People and Goods in Urban Areas;
- Enhanced Regional and Rural Connectivity.

The NR2040 Investment Priorities are reinforced by a series of TII commitments, further addressing the strategic issues

facing the National Roads network in the coming years. The specific issues identified are:

- Future Demographic Growth Trends
- Decarbonisation
- Climate Adaption and Resilience
- Sustainability
- Road Safety
- Movement of People
- Movement of Goods and Services
- Urban Congestion

Under movement of goods and services, the applicable commitments are:

*"In line with the NPF and NIFTI, TII will work to achieve average inter-urban speeds of 90km/h on National Road corridors between Ireland's five cities (Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick, and Waterford) and five regional centres (Letterkenny, Drogheda, Dundalk, Sligo and Athlone). In some instances, this will mean the development of new infrastructure or upgrading of existing infrastructure to deliver on this NPF and NIFTI inter-urban accessibility objective" and "TII will work towards improving regional and rural accessibility in line with the NPF and NIFTI."*

Figure 5.3 from NR2040 has been reproduced below as Figure A1.2 which highlights those routes where intervention is required to support the NPF/NIFTI 90km/h target. This highlights the N55 and N4 corridor as the main corridor for future investment to achieve the average interurban speeds of 90km/h.

Figure 5.3 Interurban Connectivity

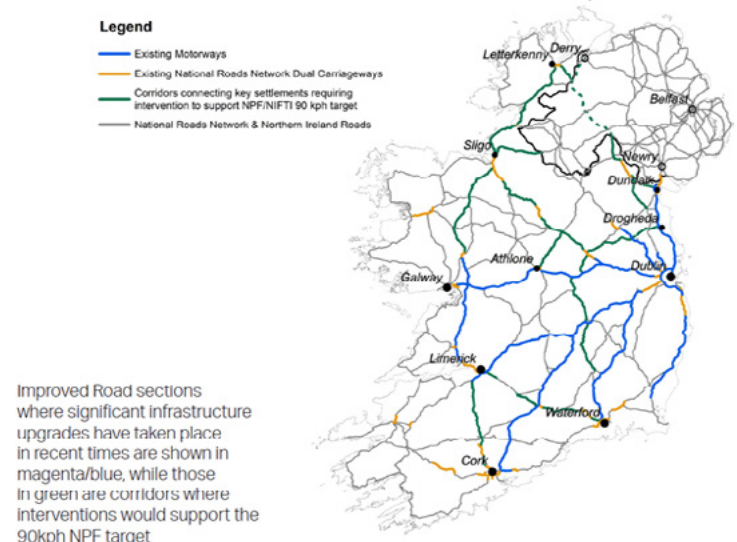


Figure A1.2 Figure 5.3 from NR2040 – Interurban Connectivity



When considering the “Enhanced Regional and Rural Connectivity” investment priority for the National Secondary Network, NR 2040 states:

*“The National Secondary Network must respond to a wide variety of needs, as it performs different functions in different locations. Certain National Secondary Roads provide inter-urban connectivity to the five cities and five regional centres, as shown in Figure 5.5. Other Secondary Roads form key transport links for surrounding areas and have an important function for the community.”*

*“Based on detailed analysis, conducted by TII, the National Secondary Road network has been categorised into three functions: Lifeline, Arterial and Collector, to guide investment.”*

Figure 5.5 from NR2040 has been reproduced below as Figure A1.3.

Figure 5.5 Dominant function of National Secondary Roads

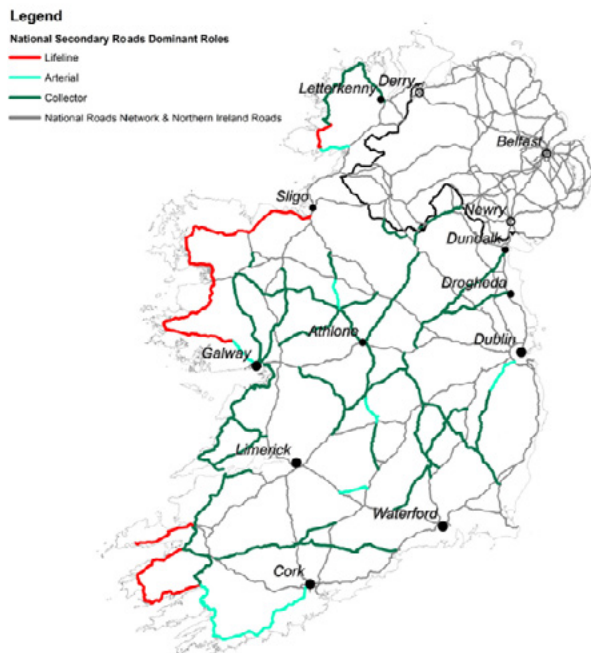


Figure A1.3 Dominant Function of National Secondary Roads

As can be seen from Figure A1.3 above, the N61 is classified as an Arterial Road between Roscommon town and the existing N5. It is expected that the Arterial Road status will be extended north to meet the TEN-T designated N5 national primary route currently under construction following opening of this project, thereby maintaining the status of the north-south connection from the Roscommon town to the major east-west national primary road corridor of the N5. The remaining sections of the N61 are classified as Collector Roads. NR2040 states for Arterial Road that:

*“Arterial National Secondary roads cater for high travel demand and are in close proximity to large urban centres. Arterial National Secondary Roads corridors have a similar*

*role to certain National Primary corridors in terms of moving people and freight. Arterial roads are subject to increased demand for movement of people and goods and will likely require interventions.”*

The N61 performs a key strategic function in connecting the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo, together with providing connectivity for the rural population of County Roscommon that the N61 passes through. This is partially recognised within NR2040 with the part classification as an Arterial Road, which acknowledges that Arterial National Secondary Roads have a similar role to certain National Primary Roads. As highlighted in Section 2.5, the N61 corridor is poorly served by public transport, particularly north of Roscommon town, due to the absence of rail infrastructure and minimal bus services. This highlights the reliance on the N61 as the main form of north / south mobility within the county for economic prosperity and for the efficient movements of goods and people.

Not applying the NPF/NIFTI interurban target of 90km/h to the N61 as a whole will hinder the economic development of Roscommon town and the rural hinterland served by the N61. This region, except for Roscommon Rural, Kiltoom and Athlone West Rural Electoral Divisions is all classified as a CLÁR region, therefore any reduction in accessibility and hinderance to journey times/distances will further negatively impact on the deprivation experienced in these regions.

The classification of the N4/N55 corridor as the targeted route between the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo as indicated in Figure A1.2 above will increase journey lengths by approximately 27km (24% increase) and journey times by approximately 25 minutes when compared to current conditions (ignoring any potential reduction in speed limits on the N61). This would lead to a greater number of vehicle kilometres travelled, which would be contrary to the sustainability commitments in NR2040 and the Climate Action Plan 2024 target which seeks a 20% reduction in total vehicle kilometres. In this regard the selection of the N4/ N55 as the preferred route to connect the regional centres is considered to be fundamentally flawed. Appendix B provides a traffic analysis specific to this route choice that demonstrates a clear preference for the N61.

To respect the Climate Action Plan target, the wider planning policy that seeks improved connectivity between regional centres and taking cognisance of NR2040’s classification of the N61 as a combination of Arterial and Collector Road, it is necessary to reclassify the N61 as National Primary Road. NR2040 should then be updated to recognise the strategic importance of the N61, including the need to deliver the NPF/ NIFTI interurban target of 90km/h between the Regional Centres of Sligo and Athlone.





#### **A1.4.9. Speed Limit Review 2023**

In accordance with the Road Safety Strategy 2021-2030 a working party co-chaired by the Department of Transport and the Road Safety Authority, with representatives from An Garda Síochána, the National Transport Authority, Transport Infrastructure Ireland and the City & County Management Association have recently completed a review of national speed limits. The overarching objective of the review was to improve road safety, with consideration also given to vehicular carbon emissions and driver compliance. One of the recommendations of the review is to reduce the national speed limit on national secondary roads to 80km/h, accepting that most of these roads perform the function of local connections to the national primary road network and that to achieve a safe system of travel at 100km/h throughout the national secondary network would not be feasible.

As discussed above, wider planning policy demands a high quality connection to and between the regional centres of Sligo and Athlone and the major towns in-between. This function is currently provided by a combination of the N4 (north of Boyle) and the N61 (south of Boyle). The N61 therefore forms a critical element of the strategic road network, as opposed to a local connection to the national primary road network. In the light of the Speed Limit Review it is therefore essential that the strategic function of the N61 is recognised by re-classifying it as a National Primary Road.



**APPENDIX B**  
**TRAFFIC ANALYSIS**

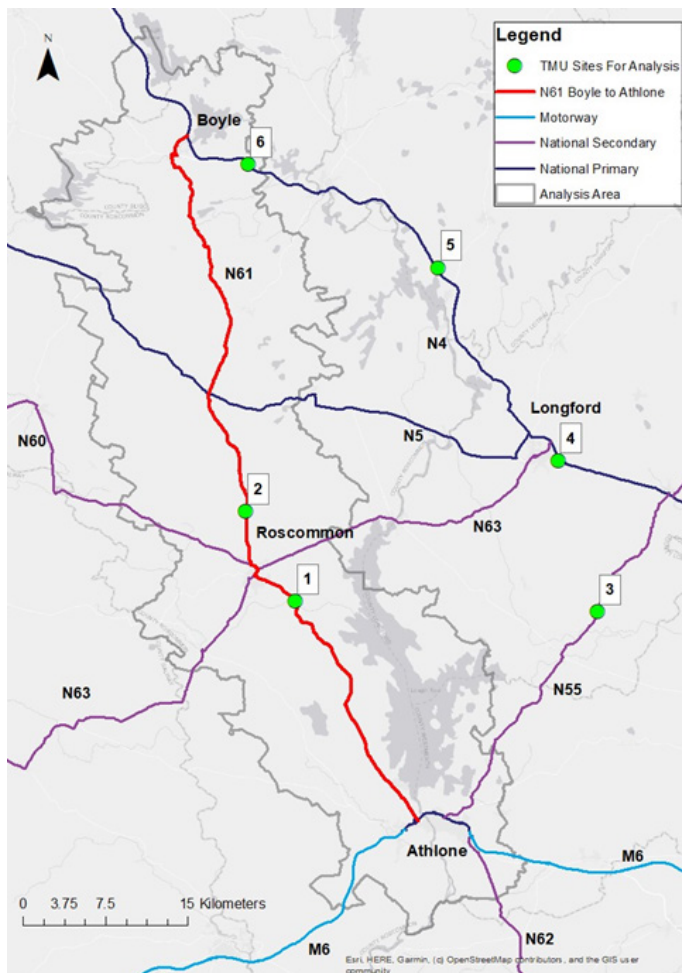


# Traffic Analysis of N61 and N55 between the N4 and N6

## B1.1 Analysis of Sligo to Athlone Trips

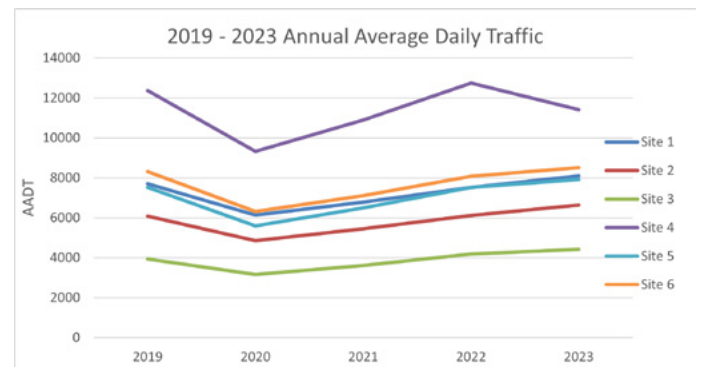
### TMU Analysis

Figure B1.1 shows the location of six Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) Traffic Monitoring Units (TMUs) that are positioned on the N61, N55 and N4. Data has been extracted from these sites for the period of 2019-2022 and 2023.



**Figure B1.1** TII Traffic Monitoring Units located on the N61, N55 and N4 for Analysis.

The Average Annual Daily Traffic (AADT) flows are presented in Figure B1.2. In 2020, there was a significant drop in AADT levels across all sites as a result of government-imposed restrictions in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The site with the highest AADT on the N4 in this area is Site 4 which is located on the N4 just south of Longford Town, with an AADT of 12,758 in 2022. The site with the lowest AADT is Site 3 on the N55 approaching Athlone. The site with the highest AADT on the N61 is Site 1 located just south of Roscommon Town, with an AADT of 7,524 in 2022.



**Figure B1.2** Historical Annual Average Daily Traffic for Each TMU

### B1.1.2 NTpM Analysis

TII's 2022 National Transport Model (NTpM) was used to examine the modelled AADT on all links within the area, rather than just the singular points of where the TMUs are located. The NTpM was developed for a base year of 2016, and has been re-calibrated annually using data from the TMUs. It should be noted that although the model has been re-calibrated to reflect 2022 traffic conditions, the model only uses TMU data for calibration, meaning that the data can be quite coarse and would not have the detail of a local area model that would use more detailed traffic survey data. Figure B1.3 and Figure B1.4 present the modelled AADTs from the 2022 NTpM on the N6, N4 and N55.

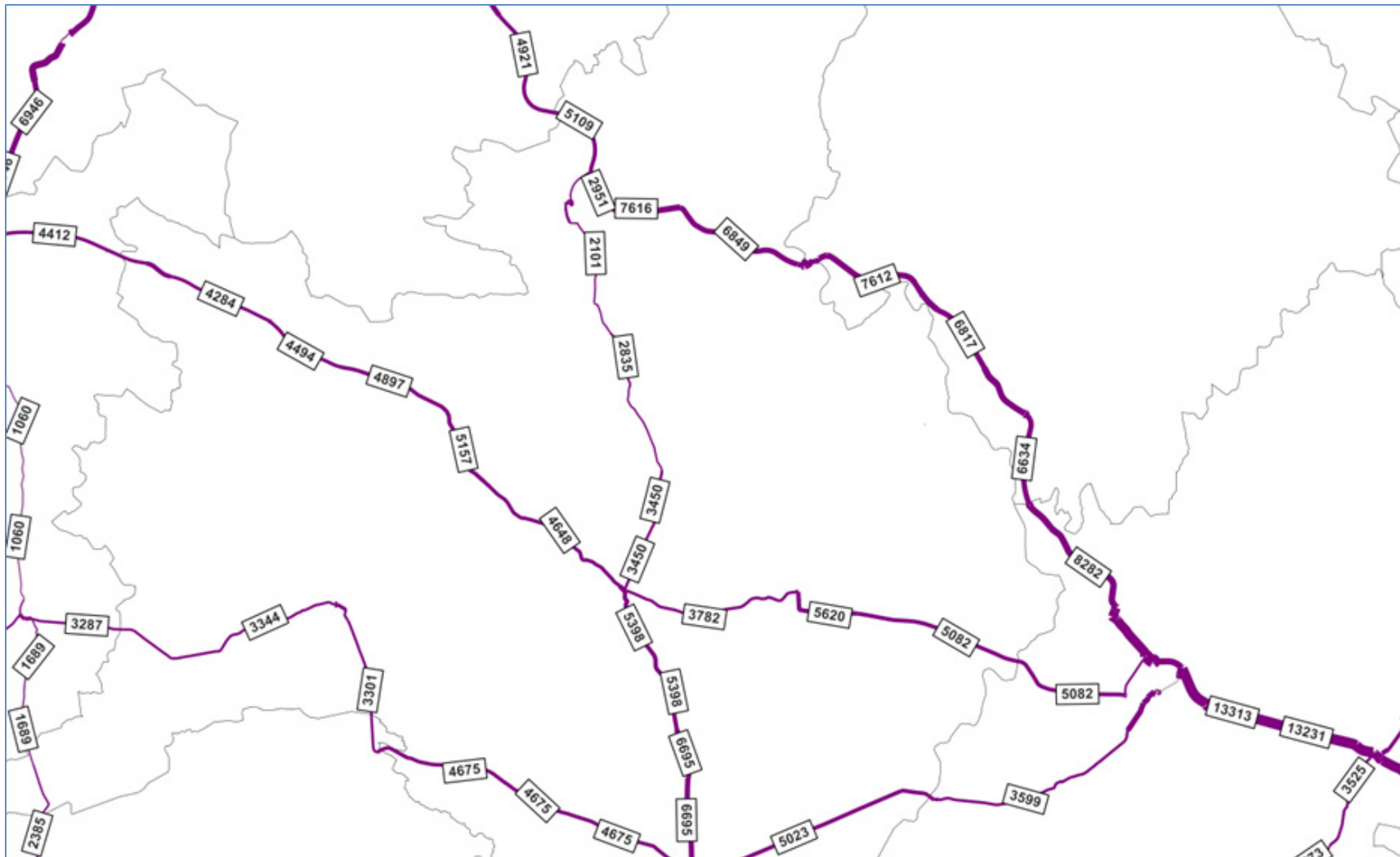
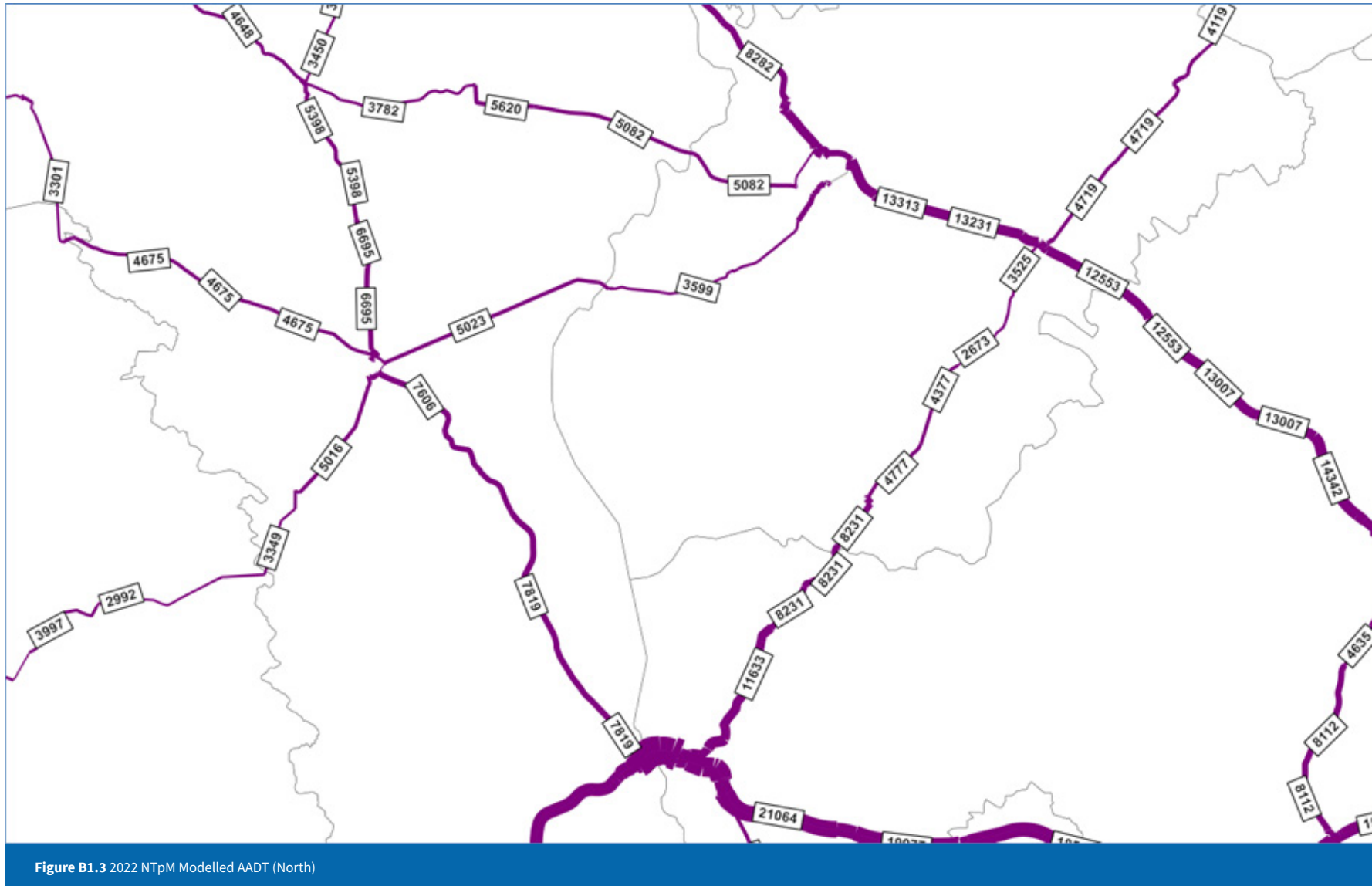


Figure B1.3 2022 NTpM Modelled AADT (North)





### **N61 Ballymurray to Knockcroghery**

As part of a previous project, a 2017 base year traffic model was developed for a potential upgrade of the N61 Ballymurray to Knockcroghery section of the N61 using traffic surveys and TII TMU data. Traffic surveys included Automatic Traffic Counts (ATC), Junction Turning Counts (JTC), Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) and TMU data which were utilised to develop the traffic model.

The ATC surveys were conducted at 19 sites along the N61, shown in Figure B1.5, for a two-week period in October 2017. To update the 2017 data to 2022 values, the AADT in 2022 was divided by the AADT in 2017 to obtain a factor of 0.971. This factor was then multiplied by the 2017 ATC data to forecast values for 2022. It should be noted that the factor falls below 1, indicating that traffic levels in 2022 had not returned to their previous volume since the Covid-19 pandemic. Traffic figures from the TII TMU indicates that traffic for 2023 now exceeds that for 2018 and 2019. Figure B1.6 and Figure B1.7 illustrate the 2022 AADT values at the 19 sites on the N61. The figures also include the percentage of HGVs detected at each of the sites.

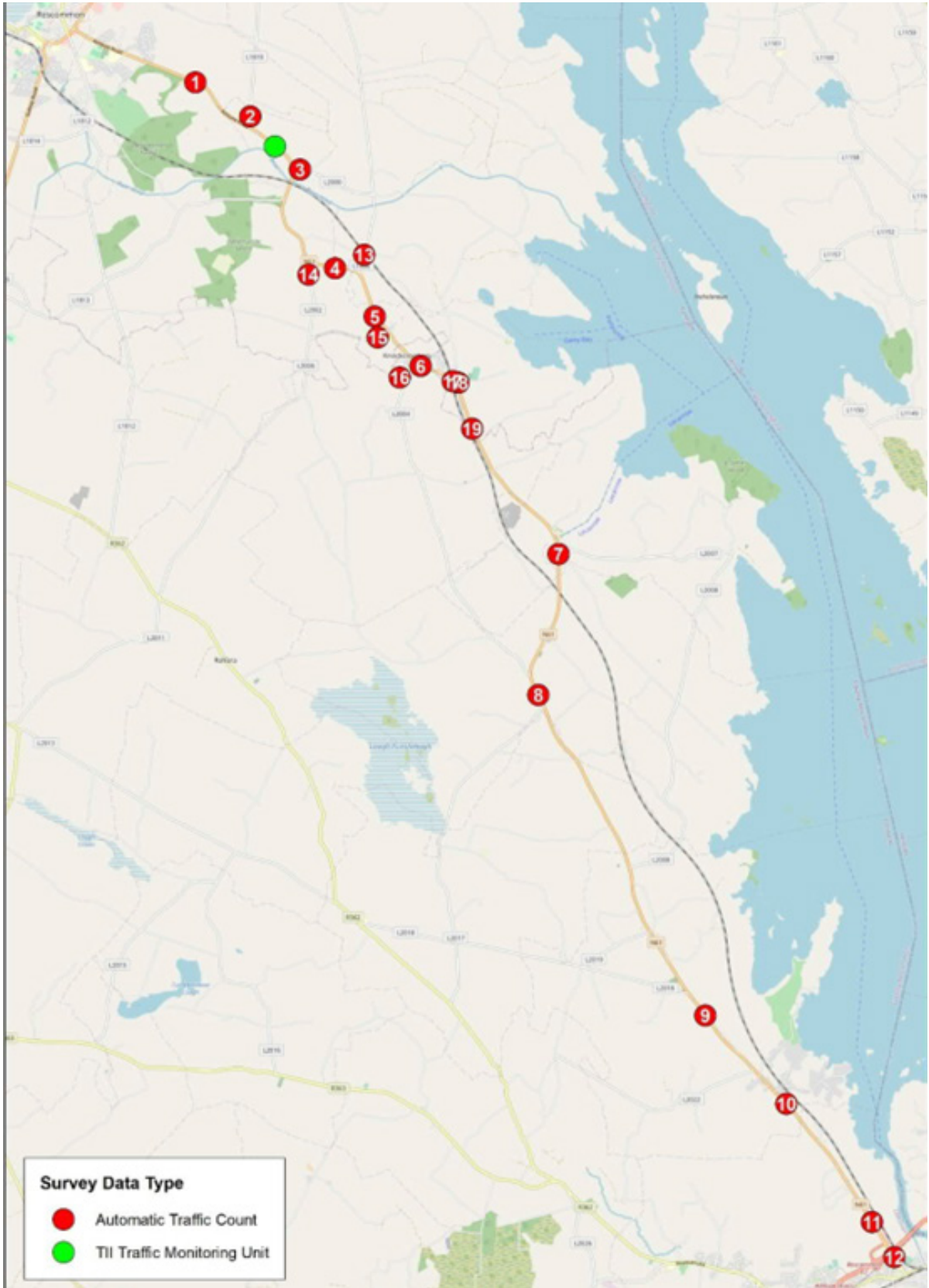


Figure B1.5 ATC and TII TMU survey locations on the N61

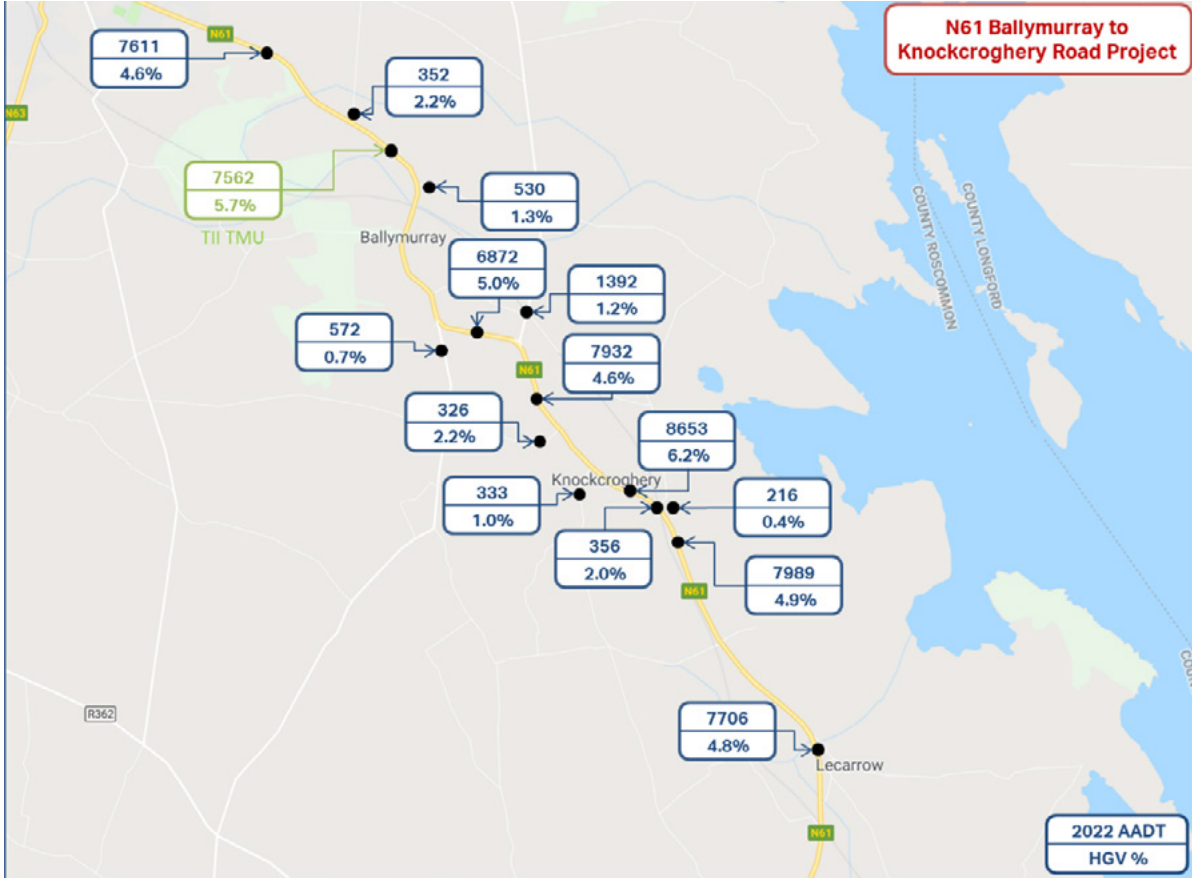


Figure B1.6 AADT and HGV % at 19 ATC sites on the N61 Ballymurray to Knockcroghery



Figure B1.7 2022 AADT and HGV % at 19 ATC sites on the N61 Ballymurray to Knockcroghery





**Monksland/Athlone LUTS Study Findings**

An ATC survey was conducted in 2017 on the N61, shown in Figure B1.8. The survey was carried out for a one-week period from 23rd – 29th of May. To account for seasonality, a factor of 0.954 was derived by dividing the average 12-month traffic flow provided by the TMU in 2017 by the TMU data for the same week in May (23rd – 29th), 2017. The factor was multiplied by the total average 7-day traffic flow recorded by the ATC to yield the predicted 2017 AADT at the ATC site.

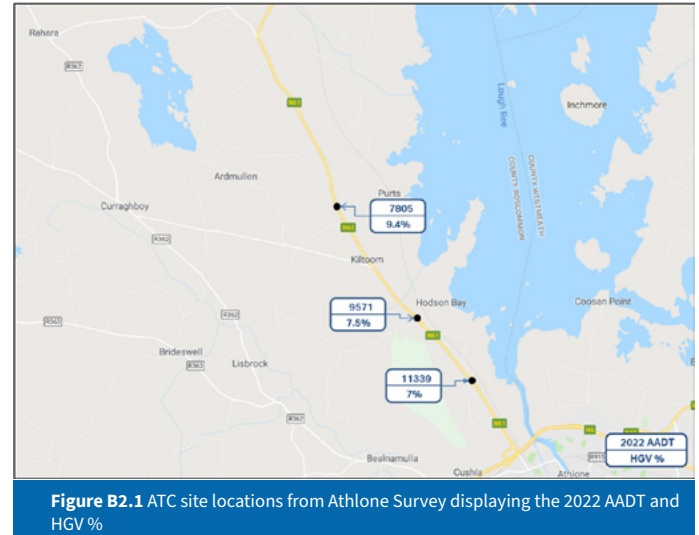
To obtain the AADT in 2022, a factor of 0.970 was calculated by dividing the average 12-month traffic flow provided by the TMU in 2022 by the average 12-month traffic flow in 2017, also obtained from the TMU. This factor was multiplied by the 2017 AADT previously calculated to yield the predicted 2022 AADT at the ATC site. Figure B1.8 illustrates the 2022 AADT value at the ATC sites. The figure also includes the percentage of HGVs detected.



**Athlone**

Data from an ATC survey conducted in 2022 was available for this analysis, where 3 ATCs were placed along the N61, as shown in Figure B1.9. The survey was carried out for a one-week period from 26th February – 4th March. To account for seasonality, a factor of 1.024 was derived by dividing the average 12-month traffic flow in 2022 (TMU data) by the average 7-day traffic flow for the same week in 2022 (23rd – 29th of May), also obtained from the TMU. The factor was multiplied by the average traffic flow recorded for the 7-day period at each of the ATCs to yield 3 AADT values for 2022.

Figure B1.9 illustrates the 2022 AADT values at the ATC sites on the N61. The figure also includes the percentage of HGVs detected.



**B2.1 Athlone to Sligo Route Choice**

National Roads 2040 (NR2040) which is TII’s strategy to enable Project Ireland 2040 targets reduced journey times between the five cities and five “centres of scale”, which include both Athlone and Sligo, and to achieve an inter-urban speed of above 90 kph. As detailed in section A1.4.8 above and as shown in Figure A1.2, the corridor between Sligo and Athlone that is identified for improvement is the N55 and N4, rather than the N61.

However, using analysis from the 2022 NTpM, there is a clear preference for vehicles to use the N61 between Athlone and Sligo rather than the N55 & N4 alternative. Figure B2.1 presents what is known as a “flow bundle” which shows all of the possible routes chosen by vehicles within a traffic model, either through a certain link or for Origin-Destination pairs. This figure shows the flow bundle between Athlone and Sligo from the 2022 NTpM, and the only route chosen by vehicles is the N61.

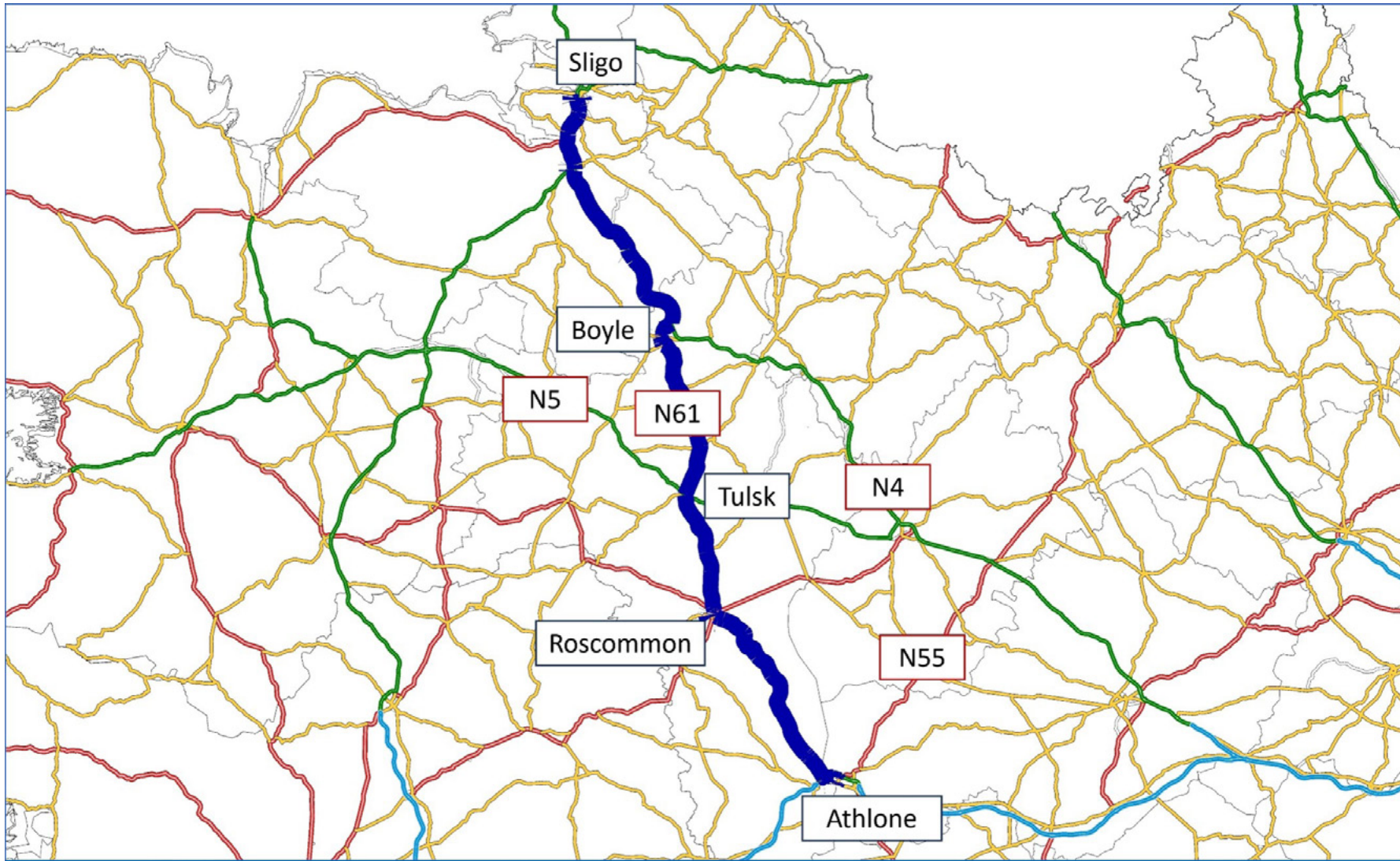


Figure B2.1 2022 NTPM Modelled AADT (North)



Another modelling tool that was used for this analysis was the “Shortest Path Search” tool which is used to calculate journey times of certain routes. Journey times and average speeds were calculated between Athlone and Boyle for both the N61 route and the alternative N4 & N55 route, for which the results are presented below in Table B2.1 and B2.2

Modelled Journey Times (hh:mm:ss)	N61	N4/N55	Absolute Difference	Percentage Difference
AM Peak Northbound	00:59:15	01:22:18	00:23:03	38.9%
AM Peak Southbound	01:01:09	01:27:06	00:25:57	42.4%
Inter Peak Northbound	00:58:49	01:23:31	00:24:42	42.0%
Inter Peak Southbound	00:59:12	01:23:07	00:23:55	40.4%

**Table B2.1** 2022 NTPM Modelled Journey Times

Modelled Speed (kph)	N61	N4/N55	Absolute Difference	Percentage Difference
AM Peak Northbound	75.6	76.4	0.8	1.1%
AM Peak Southbound	73.3	73.0	-0.3	-0.4%
Inter Peak Northbound	76.1	75.3	-0.8	-1.1%
Inter Peak Southbound	75.7	76.4	0.7	0.9%

**Table B2.2** 2022 NTPM Modelled Average Speeds

It is evident from these results that the clear route choice is the N61, as the N4/N55 alternative route takes between 23-26 minutes longer currently than the N61. As the current average speed on the N4/N55 currently ranges between 73-77 kph, it is also clear that even if the NR2040 target of 90 kph is achieved through upgrades to the N4/N55 corridor, the N61 would still be the best route choice between Athlone and Sligo as the journey would still be quicker and a shorter distance.

### B3.1 Traffic flows on the N61

Data from the two TMU sites along the N61 have been analysed. Overall, Site 1, south of Roscommon Town has higher traffic volumes than the TMU north of the town.

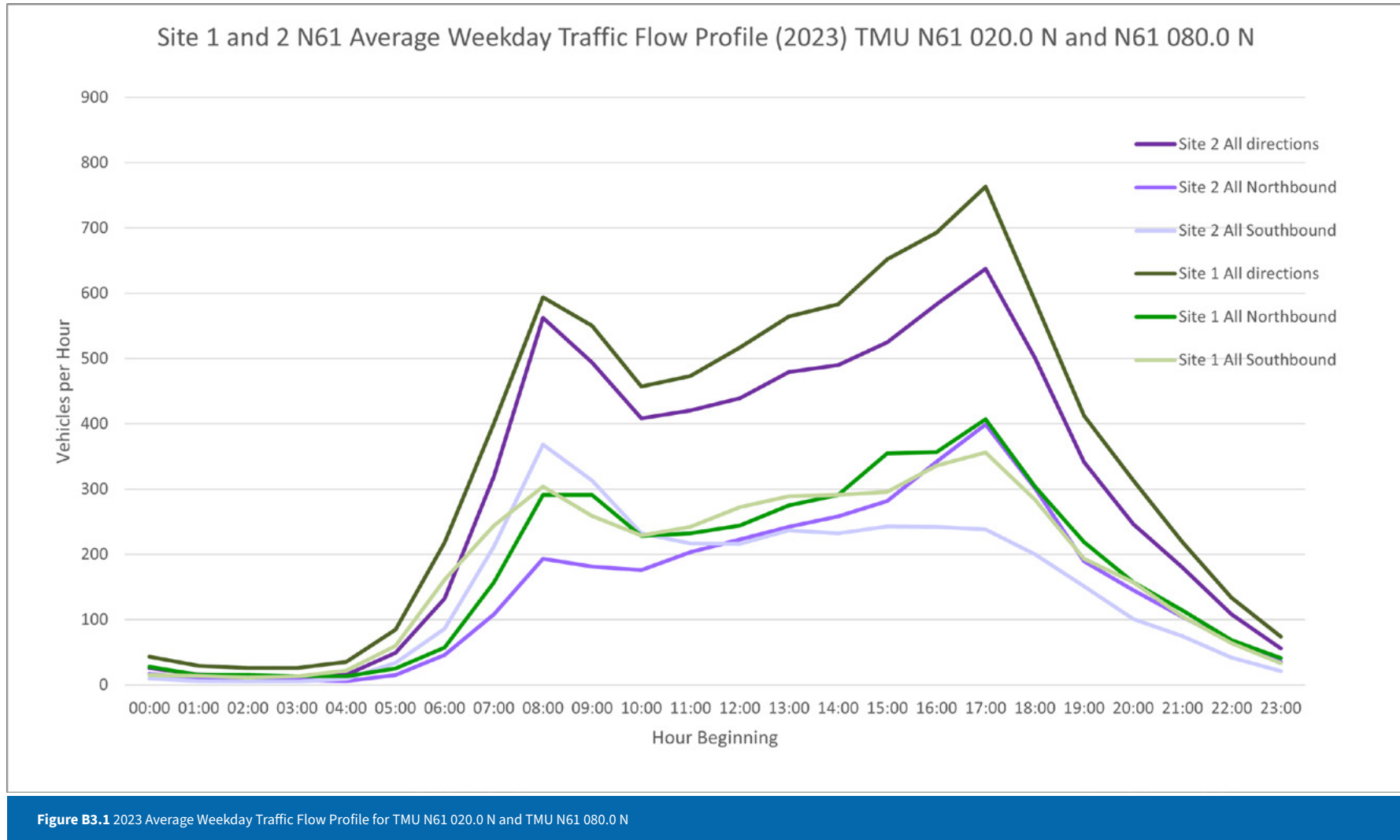
Site 1 - TMU N61 020.0 N	N61 Between Athlone and Roscommon, Newtown, Co. Roscommon				
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
24 Hr Average Daily Flow	7,699	6,135	6,783	7,524	8,068
HGVs	415	411	434	428	428

**Table B3.1** TMU N61 020.0 N Historical Annual Average Daily Traffic

Site 1 - TMU N61 020.0 N	N61 Between Athlone and Roscommon, Newtown, Co. Roscommon				
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
24 Hr Average Daily Flow	7,699	6,135	6,783	7,524	8,068
HGVs	415	411	434	428	428

**Table B3.2** TMU N61 080.0 N Historical Annual Average Daily Traffic

The graph shown in Figure B3.1 shows the average weekday traffic flows for the two TMUs on the N61. Site 1 is located just south of Roscommon Town and Site 2 is located just north of the town. The morning (AM) and evening (PM) peaks are shown clearly in the graph, the AM peak occurs between 08:00 and 10:00 and the PM peak occurs between 16:00 and 18:00. There is still a high volume of traffic between the peak hours of the day, which indicates that the road is not only used for commuting journeys





#### B4.1 Traffic flows on the N4/N55

The historical AADT for the three TMUs along the N4 and one on the N55 is shown in the following tables. There are high volumes of daily traffic along the N4, with much lower traffic recorded along the N55.

Site 3 - TMU N55 050.0 N	N55 Between Ballymahon and Edgeworthstown, Cartronfin, Co. Longford				
Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
24 Hr Average Daily Flow	3,934	3,166	3,612	4,186	4,399
HGVs	271	272	296	284	299

**Table B4.1** TMU N55 050.0 N Historical Annual Average Daily Traffic

Site 4 - TMU N04 110.0 W	N04 Between Dublin Road and Granard Road Roundabouts, Longford Bypass, Co. Longford				
Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
24 Hr Average Daily Flow	12,377	9,319	10,893	12,758	11,550
HGVs	1052	1025	1089	1071	982

**Table B4.2** TMU N04 110.0 W Historical Annual Average Daily Traffic

Site 5 - TMU N04 130.0 E	N04 Between Longford and Carrick-on-Shannon, Dromod Bypass, Co. Leitrim				
Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
24 Hr Average Daily Flow	7,528	5,603	6,496	7,515	7,852
HGVs	474	476	513	488	487

**Table B4.3** TMU N04 130.0 E Historical Annual Average Daily Traffic

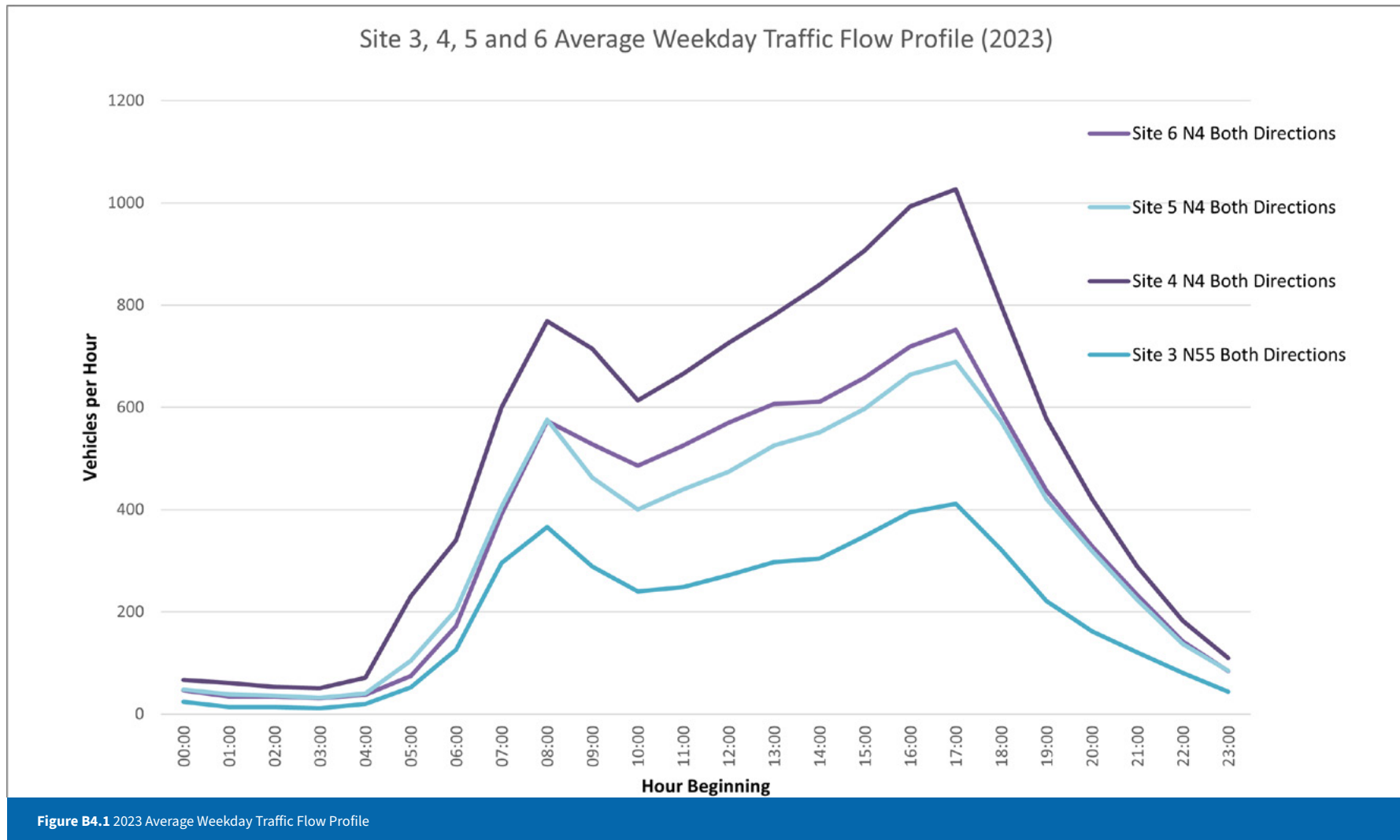
Site 6 - TMU N04 151.0 E	N04 Between Boyle and Carrick on Shannon, Usna Co Roscommon				
Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
24 Hr Average Daily Flow	8,316	6,313	7,112	8,081	8,443
HGVs	424	441	498	492	431

**Table B4.4** TMU N04 0151.0 E Historical Annual Average Daily Traffic

Figure B4.1 overleaf shows the average weekday hourly traffic flow for each of the TMU sites on the N4 and N55 for 2023. There are obvious peaks observed during the morning and evening periods, with relatively high flows still observed outside of the peak hours. This shows that both the N4 and N55 are not only used for commuting trips. The N4 just south of Longford town is the busiest section with peaks of 800 to 1000 vehicles per hour observed, compared to the TMU on the N55 at which a maximum of just over 400 vehicles per hour was observed.

#### B5.1 Traffic comparison of the N61 and N4/N55 routes

Traffic levels at site 1 on the N61 are similar to those at site 5 on the N4 National Primary route, while the traffic levels on the N61 at site 2 north of Roscommon town remain higher than at site 3 on the N55. Traffic levels on both the N61 and N55 increase as they approach the Regional Centre at Athlone, with the highest levels being on the short section of N55 south of its junction with the R390, which provides the shortest connection between Athlone and Mullingar.





# **APPENDIX C**

## **POPULATION DEMOGRAPHICS**



## **C1. Population Demographics**

An N61 corridor study area was created from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) Small Area Population Statistics (SAPS) 2022 boundaries by placing a 5km buffer 2.5km either side of the N61 mainline section and retaining the SAPS which intersected this buffer area. This boundary was then extended along the N63 and N60 to include the urban centres of Lanesborough and Castlerea that rely on the N61 for connectivity to Athlone. This boundary was then used for all subsequent analysis

### **C1.1 Population Density**

Figure C1.1 shows the population density per square kilometre along the N61 study area according to the CSO SAPS and the National Road network in this area. As expected, the most densely populated areas are concentrated on the urban areas of Athlone, Roscommon town, Boyle, Lanesborough and Castlerea with low densities reported in the rural SAPS along the route, generally showing a population density of less than 50 people per sq.km. It is clear that the N61 plays an important role as a connection between Boyle, Roscommon and Athlone and also as an access route to the larger towns for those living in the less dense, rural areas between Roscommon and Athlone.



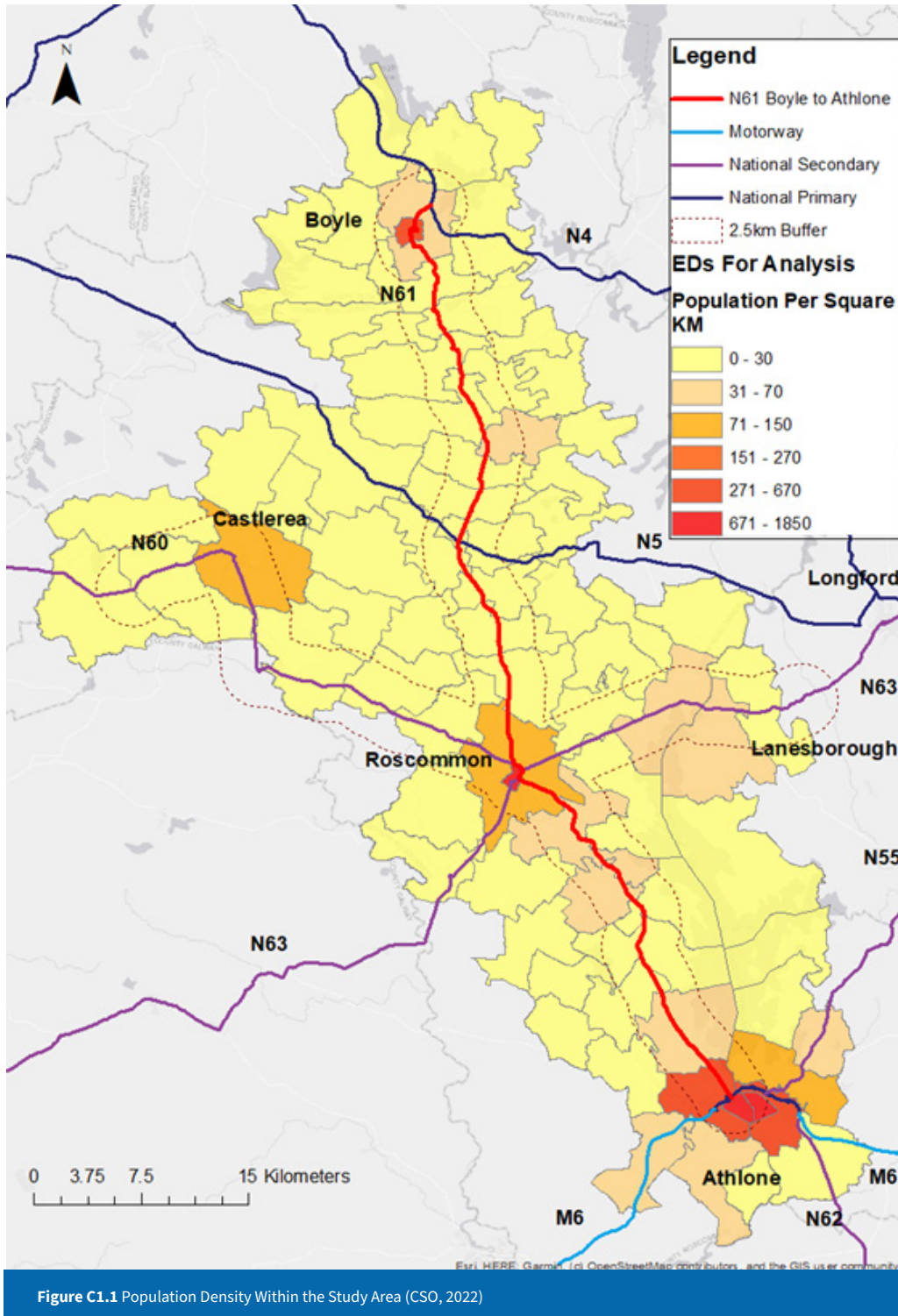
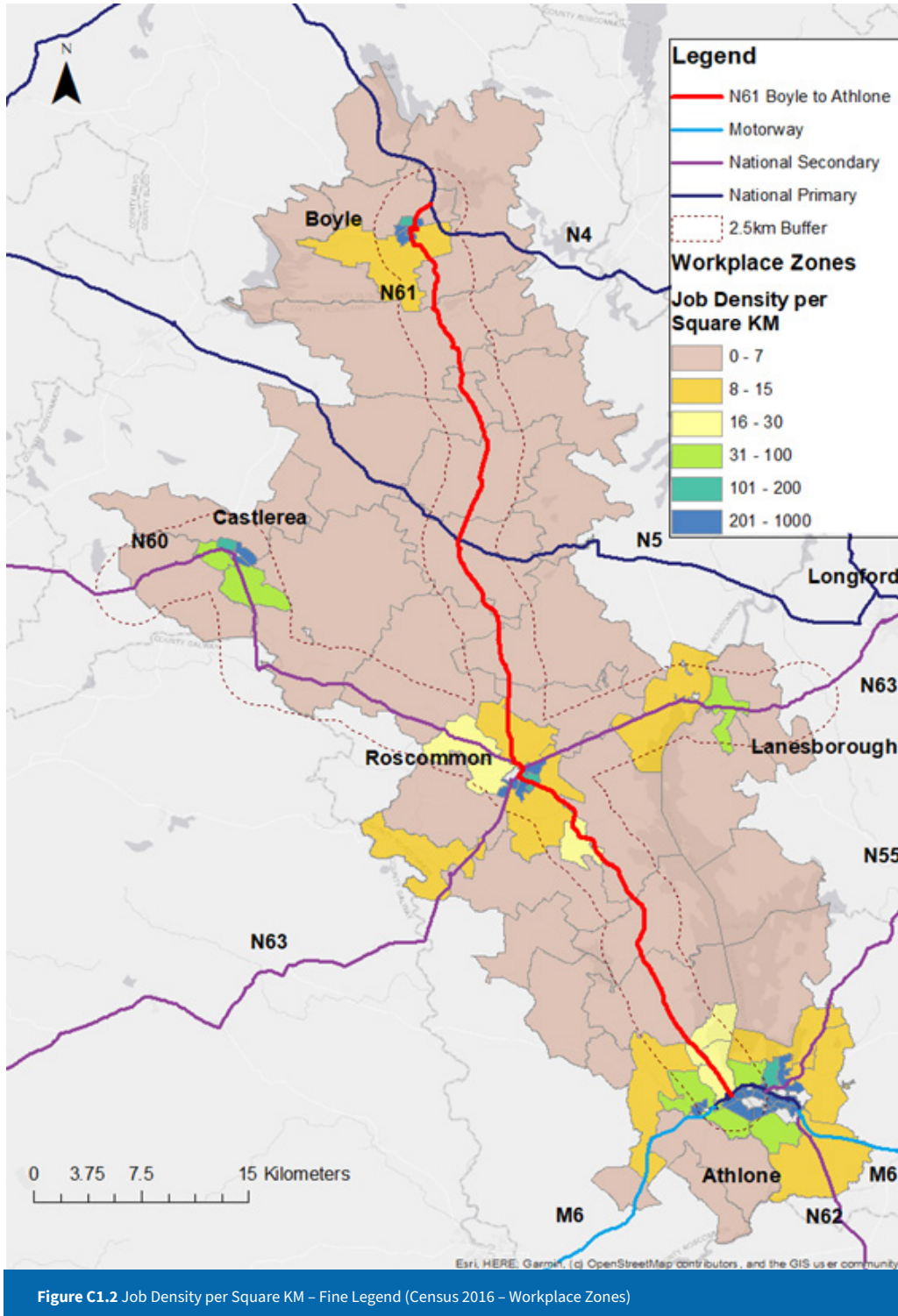


Figure C1.2 shows the job density within the study area surrounding the N61, extracted from the CSO Workplace Zone dataset from 2016<sup>10</sup>. As expected, the areas with high job densities are the urban areas of Athlone, Roscommon, Boyle, Lanesborough and Castlerea. The N61 provides key access between these centres and allows commuters from other areas to access these centres.

<sup>10</sup> The 2022 Workplace Zone data has not yet been published so the 2016 census data was used for this analysis.



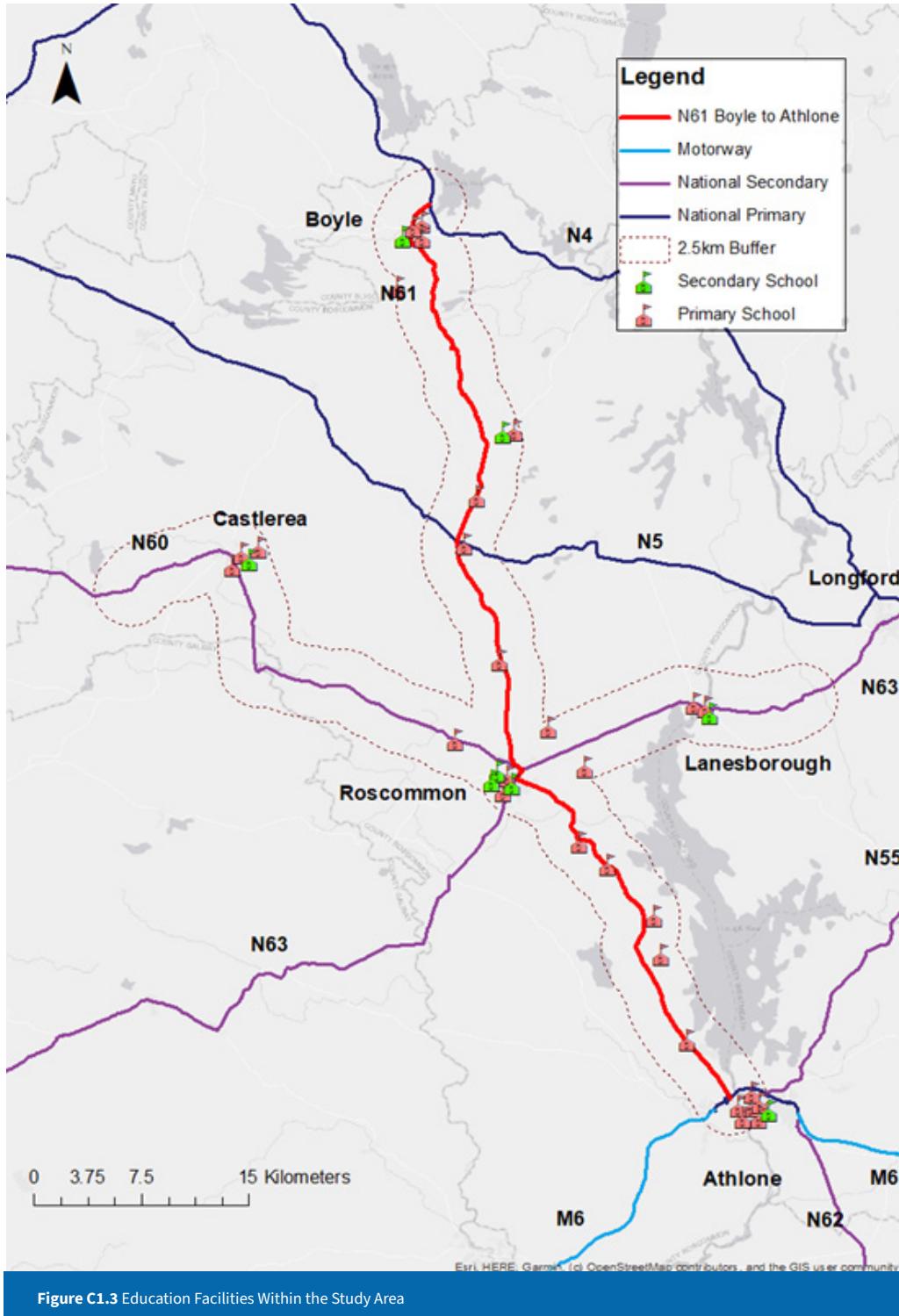
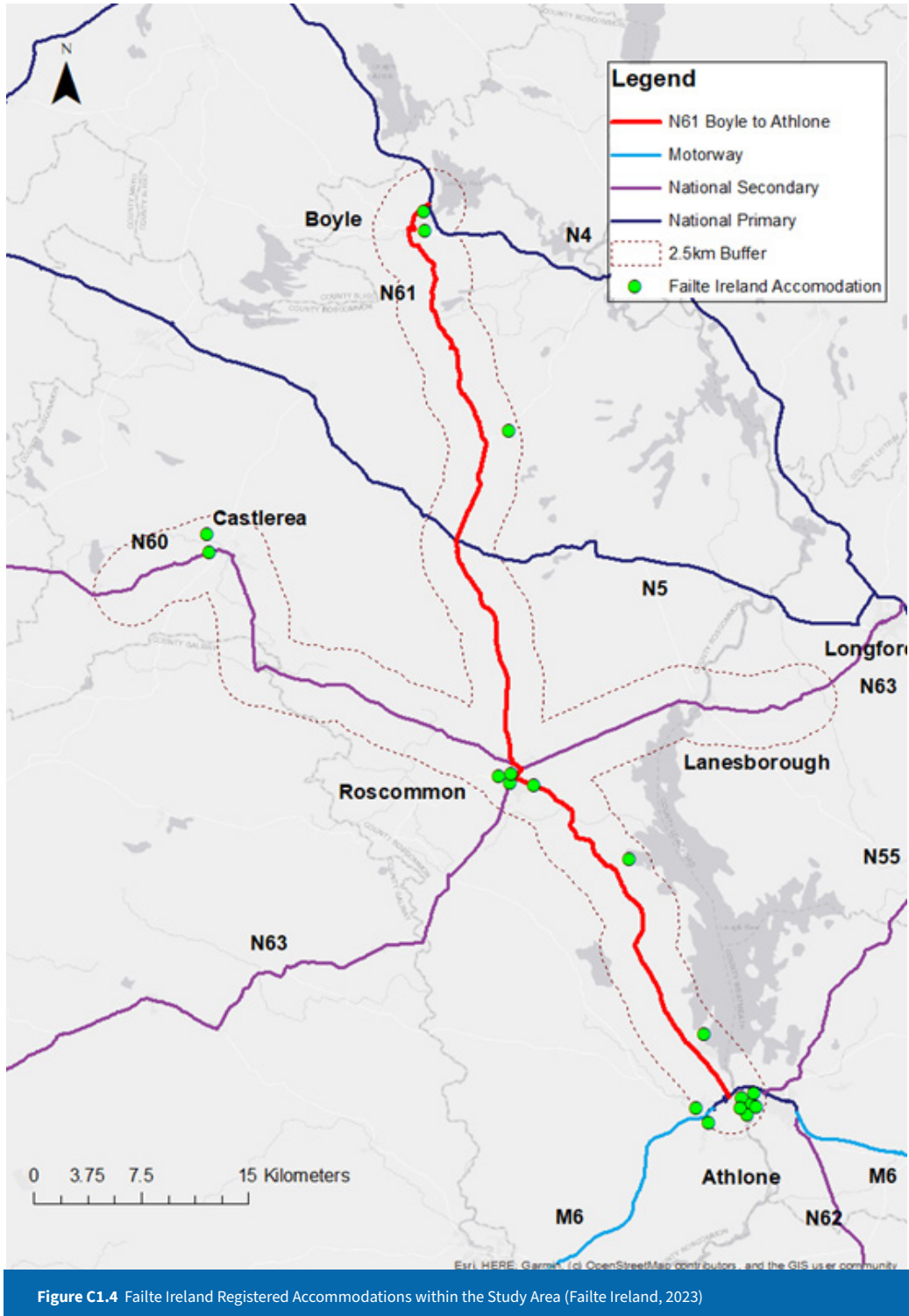


Figure C1.3 and Figure C1.4 show the education facilities and registered accommodation within the study area. The N61 provides critical access to these facilities for the population along the N61 and the surrounding areas





### **C1.1.1 Commuting Patterns**

Firstly, the car remains the most popular mode of transport and it has a significantly higher proportion of the mode share in the study area for both work and school trip purposes than any other mode. The percentage of those walking to work or school is reduced in the rural areas outside of the main built-up areas along the N61. See Figures C1.5 to C1.7.

The cycling proportion for any trip purpose in the rural area is extremely low, with most of the small areas having less than a 1% mode share for commuting trips regularly made by cycling, suggesting that cycling is not an option or at all attractive to the vast majority of the population in this area due to reasons such as journey length and lack of infrastructure.

The majority of people report using a car to get to work or school, with upwards of 65% reported in most areas. A lower rate of car usage was recorded in the town centres largely due to shorter commuting distances and alternative modes to access the facilities in the town centres, however the percentage remained high at between 40 to 65% using cars to get to work or school. In the Small Areas along the N61 between Tulsk and Athlone, car use for commuting is between 65% and 75%, which shows the importance of the N61 in providing the people in these areas with a route to education or work.

The majority of rural subset SAPS record less than 5% of people walking to work or to school. There are some areas with higher percentages, such as in the villages of Elphin for example where up to 10% of people reported walking as their means of travel to work or school, in addition to the town centres of Roscommon, Boyle and Athlone where walking was the means of travel to work, school or college for up to 40% of people.

Fewer people report cycling as their means of travel to work, school or college than walking in both the rural and urban areas of the study area. Athlone was the most popular area for cycling with some areas having up to 6% of journeys to work, school or college by bike, but most rural areas along the N61 corridor have less than 1% of these journeys by bike.

The low levels of walking and cycling along the N61 is likely connected to the dispersed nature of the population in this rural area where homes are further from work, school or college destinations, combined with a lack of active mode infrastructure on the N61. It is important to note that this census question only captures active mode use for commutes and as such the levels of active mode use along this road may be higher when accounting for trips made for leisure purposes.

