



Chapter seven Retail strategy

7.1 Background

Athy is an attractive historic market town named after a second century chieftain. It is located on the River Barrow and the Grand Canal with both being key drivers over the centuries for the town's economic expansion, the relicts of which can be seen along the two waterways. The town centre is characterised by an extended linear street structure centred on the impressive Heritage Centre located in Emily Square. Athy developed out from the river crossing in a southern and northern direction along Leinster Street and Duke Street. This street was gradually developed in the 18th and 19th centuries with impressive two and three storey buildings with long and originally intensively used back areas.

It is a congested town centre due to its location on the N78 and R471 routes. The proposed Athy Inner Relief Street and the Southern Distributor Road however will relieve congestion in the town centre. The proposed Inner Relief Street is an immediate priority. This route will provide greater permeability through the town and will create opportunities to redevelop the existing streetscape of Leinster Street and Duke Street. The proposed one-way system on Leinster Street and Duke Street will allow for the expansion of footpaths and the provision of an element of on street parking which would enhance the attractiveness of the retail core of Athy. The construction of the Inner Relief Street will also open up various sites for town centre development.

Goal

To promote and encourage major enhancement and expansion of the retail floorspace and town centre functions of Athy, to further develop its competitiveness with nearby towns such as Carlow and Portlaoise and its importance as a Sub-County town centre in the County and wider Greater Dublin Area and to promote greater social inclusion.

Objectives

To achieve the overall goal, the following strategic objectives are set out to provide the framework for the specific policy programmes and to set a clear definition of what the Development Plan seeks to achieve. These objectives are as follows:

- (1) To ensure an efficient, equitable and sustainable spatial distribution of retail centres in and around the town.
- (2) To make an important contribution to sustaining and improving the retail profile and competitiveness of County Kildare within the retail economy of the GDA and beyond.
- (3) To address leakage of retail expenditure from the town and its catchment by facilitating the strengthening of the range and quality of its retail offer.
- (4) To establish clear principles and guidance on where various forms of new retail floorspace would be acceptable.

- (5) To ensure that the retail needs of the Athy catchment area are met as fully as possible to promote social inclusion within the town and take due cognisance of the GDA retail hierarchy.
- (6) To provide the criteria for the assessment of retail development proposals. (Schedule 1, at end of this chapter).

7.2 Retail Classification

The Retail Planning Guidelines for planning authorities published by the Department of the Environment Heritage and Local Government (DoEHLG) in December 2000 and amended in January 2005 requires planning authorities to prepare a Retail Strategy for their administrative area. The Draft Kildare County Retail Strategy 2005 informed the policies within this chapter.

Athy is classified as a Level 3 Sub County town centre in the GDA retail hierarchy. Its attributes and potential were confirmed by this designation within the County Retail Hierarchy also. It is a busy town centre serving a wide rural catchment area. In the "Retail Planning Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area a designated Sub-County town's retail offer would usually be anchored by convenience shopping, offer lower order comparison retailing and have a more limited service role than Major Town Centres.

7.3 Retail Surveys

In depth surveys have been conducted in order to assess the retail floorspace provision in Athy, consumer retail patterns and consumer satisfaction with the retail provision in the town. The surveys conducted included the following:

1. A retail floorspace survey (survey of quantity and type of existing retail provision in the town) was carried out in 2001,
2. Household surveys (101 telephone interviews covering a catchment of 15 minute drive-time of Athy) were carried out in December 2004,
3. Shopper surveys (165 on street face to face interviews conducted along Duke Street and Leinster Street in Athy) were carried out in December 2004.

7.3.1 Retail floor space surveys

A survey of retail floorspace carried out in 2001, as part of the Draft County Retail Strategy, indicated that 50.5% of retail floorspace for comparison goods was characterised generally by independent operators. Some 41.7% of its floorspace is convenience, comprising a mix of chain stores and local independents. Retail warehousing in and around the town is limited. Vacant floorspace in the town stood at 7.7% at the time of survey.

Table 7.1, Composition of Net Retail Floorspace in Athy, 2001

Athy	Metres Squared
Convenience	3,362
Comparison	4,080
Retail Warehousing	-
Total Trading Retail Floorspace	7,442
Vacant	626
Total	8,068

Source: Draft County Retail Strategy 2005

7.3.2 Household and Shopper Surveys

A household and shopper survey was conducted in December 2004 to examine the retail strengths and weaknesses of Athy town centre in relation to its role as the key Sub-County town centre in the south of the County. The survey results reveal the shopping patterns of residents within its immediate catchment area and the attractiveness of the town as a place to shop and visit.

Table 7.2, Location for Main Food Shopping

Origins	Athy	Carlow	Newbridge	Portlaoise	Kilkenny
% of Respondents	76%	15%	6%	2%	1%

Source: Household Shopper Surveys conducted by DTZ Pida Consulting in December 2004

The survey results indicate that Athy is the primary location for local residents' main food shopping (76% of respondents) and top up shopping (85% of respondents). The town displays a high level of convenience expenditure retention, however there is scope for a slight improvement in shopper retention. Factors that will influence this include improvements to the retail offer and easier accessibility to convenience stores in and around the town centre. Of the 24% of the main food shoppers going to other centres some 15% go to nearby Carlow, which is an expanding and continuously improving County Town. National road improvements, additional convenience floorspace and ease of access to the main food stores in Carlow Town Centre are likely to encourage an increase in customer leakage to Carlow unless there is added convenience floorspace investment in Athy.

Table 7.3, Locations for Clothing & Footwear Shopping

Origins	Athy	Carlow	Newbridge	Dublin	Kilkenny
% of Respondents	31%	30%	16%	16%	4%

Source: Household Shopper Surveys conducted by DTZ Pida Consulting in December 2004

As would be expected given Athy's position in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) and County Retail Hierarchies, it is not a strong comparison centre. Nearly 70% of respondents in the catchment area travel to other locations for clothing and footwear shopping and 50% of respondents travel elsewhere for bulky goods shopping. Carlow is again seen to be the main alternative for both clothing and footwear (according to 30% of respondents) and bulky goods (according to 18% of respondents). Newbridge is another town, seen as an alternative for local residents for clothing and footwear (16%) and bulky goods shopping (18%). As with convenience shopping, there is considerable potential that Carlow could further increase its market share of shopping from the south of the County. Road improvements and the proposals in the pipeline for Kildare town, Naas and Newbridge should however see the County as a whole improving its share of retail expenditure.

Table 7.4, Principle Attractions of Athy

Reason	Proximity	Easy Access	Range of goods/ shops/services	Attractive Environment	Presence of a particular store
% of Respondents	63%	17%	10%	3%	2%

Source: Household Shopper Surveys conducted by DTZ Pida Consulting in December 2004

The principal attractions for shopping in Athy are proximity, access and the range of goods, shops and services. In both the household and shopper surveys, the key reason/attraction of Athy for shopping was its proximity to home and work. The range of goods/shops/services only accounted for 10% of the respondent's view of the attraction of the town.

The key improvement that local people seek is an improvement to shopping in the town as found in both the household (61%) and shopper (44%) surveys. A key part of this is improvement in the quality of the retail offer. Improvements to access to the town centre also featured highly on the list in both surveys with 20% and 49% from the household and shopper surveys. Improvements identified included parking, a town bypass/relief road, pedestrianised zones and fewer traffic lights. This also has to be set in the context that 86% and 84% of respondents to the household and shopper surveys respectively, identified that congestion was a deterrent to shopping in Athy.

7.3.3 *Conclusion of Household & Shopper Surveys*

The survey results confirm Athy's role as a Sub-County town centre in the County Retail Hierarchy. They also identify that whilst Athy is an important town in the south of the County, there is leakage of expenditure from this part of Kildare. This is largely due to the retail offer of the town and the need for local people to travel to larger centres for both higher order convenience and comparison-shopping. Carlow is identified as the main centre that is drawing trade from Athy. It is located just 20 kilometres from Athy and is a rapidly expanding and improving centre. The aim of this Development Plans' Retail and Town Centre policies is to harness the strengths and address the weaknesses of Athy's retailing environment.

7.4 Strategic Policy Framework

The strategic policy framework that underpins the specific retail policies and proposals of the Development Plan addresses the specific requirements and guidance of the RPG's and the objectives set out above. It comprises:

- County Retail Hierarchy
- Sequential Approach
- Core Retail Area

7.4.1 *County Retail Hierarchy*

As a Level 3 Sub County town centre in the Greater Dublin Area and County Retail Hierarchy, there is a need for Athy to grow into a centre of greater regional importance in order for the County to have a greater retention of spending and in parallel, to significantly improve the town's attraction for visitor and tourism expenditure.

Policy Statement

It is the policy of the Council:

- RS 1 To guide major retail development in accordance with the framework provided by the County Retail Hierarchy to enable an efficient, equitable and sustainable spatial distribution of floorspace throughout the County.

7.4.2 *Sequential Approach*

The Sequential Approach is incorporated into the strategic policy framework to guide the location of new retail development in the Development Plan. It recognises the importance of sustaining the vitality and viability of town and district centres. Proposals for major retail schemes in Athy are required to take due cognisance of this as follows:

- a) In the first instance, the priority should be in locating new retail development within the town centre (or district centres),
- b) If town centre locations are not readily available within a reasonable and realistic timescale then edge of centre sites should be considered. In the Retail Planning Guidelines, edge of centre sites are defined as sites that comprise 300-400 metres of the Core Retail Area,
- c) Only after the options for town centre and edge of centre are exhausted should out of centre locations and sites be considered.

7.4.3 *Core Retail Area*

The core retail area of Athy is illustrated in Map 1, to provide guidance on the application of the Sequential Approach.

Policy Statement

It is the policy of the Council:

- RS 2 To guide retail development where practical and viable in accordance with the framework provided by the Sequential Approach, to enable the vitality and viability of the town centre and district centres to be sustained and strengthened.

7.5 Specific Retail Policies for Athy

7.5.1 Retail Development & Enhancement

The importance of the environment has been recognised in attracting trade and sustaining the vitality and viability of centres. Urban renewal and environmental improvement is a continuous requirement if the attraction of the town centre is to be maintained and mechanisms are required to be put in place to ensure that performance is monitored. Importantly, enhancement can also be achieved through ensuring quality of design in all new retail development and this should be a key criterion in the assessment of proposals.

Policy Statements

It is the policy of the Council:

- RS 3 To promote and encourage major enhancement and expansion of the retail offer and town center retail functions of Athy to develop its importance as Sub-County town centre within the south of the County whilst ensuring high quality design in all retail proposals.
- RS 4 To promote the potential of Athy town for additional convenience floorspace at appropriate locations such as the area to the north of Edmund Rice Square.
- RS 5 To promote the potential of Athy town for additional comparison floorspace at appropriate locations.
- RS 6 To promote retail warehousing to the southeast of the town (zoned H2 Industrial & Warehousing) in order to meet, more sustainably the needs in this sector of the market in the South of the County.
- RS 7 To recognise the tradition of Athy as a Market town and to encourage the continuation of the "Athy Town Market" and the development of a high quality "Farmers Market" at the proposed new civic square to the north of Edmund Rice Square.
- RS 8 To encourage and facilitate the development of strong linkages between retail, tourism and leisure sectors through the development of a continuous walkway along the River Barrow and the Canal.
- RS 9 To encourage and facilitate the delivery of tourism related retail developments and initiatives in and around Athy town centre, such as at the Marina site.

7.5.2 Neighbourhood Centres

The increase in the town's population has brought considerable expansion of the suburbs of the town. Athy town centre is a constrained and congested centre that has not been able to respond to the needs of the expanding population in a way that is equitable, efficient and sustainable. To achieve this and to be consistent with the Retail Planning Guidelines (as amended), there is a need to provide new neighbourhood centres within existing or emerging major residential areas. For the purposes of this Plan, neighbourhood centres shall comprise small groups of shops, typically to include a newsagent, small supermarket/general grocery store, sub-post office and other small shops of a local nature serving a small, localised catchment population. In parallel, the emphasis for Athy town centre will be to meet the middle and higher order comparison needs of the town and its catchment area.

No single shop unit shall be greater than 1500sq.m gross floor area. This threshold shall be monitored over the period of this Plan.

Policy Statements

- RS 10 It is the policy of the Council to carry out a special study to identify strategic sites for retailing within Athy, focusing firstly on the town centre and applying a sequential approach, as per the Retail Planning Guidelines. Subsequent to such a study the Council will actively pursue the development of identified sites in order to enhance the retail provision in the town. The study will be completed within the calendar year 2006.

