

Athlone Arts & Tourism

CORPORATE PLAN

2017 | 2020

“To develop and promote
recognisable Arts, Heritage & Cultural Tourism sites and programmes
that will foster increased local appreciation, engagement with the arts and
heritage and greater visitor numbers thus contributing to the development
and marketing of Athlone as a quality
cultural visitor destination.”

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Foreword

The establishment of Athlone Arts and Tourism represents a major strategic investment in cultural tourism infrastructure in Athlone and County Westmeath. With the growth of Athlone and its environs as a major economic and tourism hub, Athlone Arts & Tourism ensures that Athlone's cultural offering is unparalleled in the Midlands region. It also provides the potential to significantly enhance the cultural dimension and life of the area for both locals and visitors.

The commitment by Athlone Municipal Council and Westmeath County Council to redevelop Athlone Castle Visitor Centre and Museum and to develop and operate professionally managed, purpose-built gallery facilities and associated artists' studio facilities is a progressive and sustainable measure for the development of the arts, heritage and cultural tourism in the town, county and region.

Athlone Arts & Tourism will complement and benefit the on-going activities of Destination Athlone, Irelands Ancient East and the visual arts, tourism, heritage and other programmes of Westmeath Local Authorities. The policies and strategies of Athlone Arts & Tourism will be driven by Westmeath County Council and national policies and objectives for the development of cultural tourism, artists and audiences.

The corporate strategy is designed to strategically and effectively apply the available resources of Athlone Arts & Tourism for the maximum positive impact for cultural tourism, artists, audiences and the public.

The Directors and staff are fully committed to the implementation of the plan and look forward to contributing to the ongoing development of cultural tourism in Athlone.



Barry Kehoe,
Chairperson
Athlone Arts and Tourism



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Introduction

Athlone Arts & Tourism is a management company established by Westmeath County Council in 2014. The company manages three of Athlone's landmark cultural tourism assets; Athlone Castle Visitor Centre & Museum, Luan Gallery and Abbey Road Artists' Studios. The company plays a crucial role in the development, promotion, appreciation and engagement of the cultural landscape of Athlone, Westmeath and the greater Midlands region.

Background

Athlone Arts & Tourism replaced two former companies owned by Athlone Town Council. Further to a review of operations in 2013 the members of Athlone Town Council agreed to establish a new company; Athlone Arts & Tourism Ltd., with responsibility for the merged transfer of functions and operations of Athlone Art & Heritage Ltd. and Athlone eCom Ltd. This process enabled the Council to reduce overhead costs while achieving a good synergy between the objectives of the two companies.

The Directors of Athlone Arts & Tourism agreed to a proposal from the Destination Athlone Tourism Development Group to take over the redevelopment, ongoing management and promotion of athlone.ie as a visitor destination offering. The removal of this website function in 2015 has enabled the company to focus on the operations, ongoing development and promotion of the three sites.

Organisation Structure

1. **Members** — The company members are:
 - a) Chief Executive of Westmeath County Council
 - b) Director of Services, Westmeath County Council
 - c) Municipal District Manager
 - d) All Elected Members of Westmeath County Council
2. **Board of Directors** — The Board of Directors are:
 - a) Chief Executive of Westmeath County Council
 - b) Director of Services, Westmeath County Council
 - c) Municipal District Manager
 - d) 2 x elected members nominated by Westmeath County Council
3. **Committee** — An advisory committee was formed to provide expertise and advice to the directors and manager.
4. **Manager** — The manager reports to the Board of Directors and engages with the committee.
5. **Gallery Exhibitions Panel** — To ensure fairness and transparency in the gallery programming process the services of an independent selection panel is engaged to act as a steering group. The panel is comprised of invited representatives with arts expertise including the County Arts Officer.
6. **Staff** — A staffing complement with a mixed skills base is spread across venues. A combination of permanent, fixed term and seasonal contracts is currently in place.
7. **Volunteers** — 9 volunteers currently assist with visitor welcome, engagement, guiding and invigilation.

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Sites

Two of the sites managed by the company; Athlone Castle and Luan Gallery are located on the west bank of the River Shannon overlooking the bridge of Athlone and are immersed in rich heritage, cultural and architectural history.

The Abbey Road building housing the artists' studios and community space is located on the east bank of the River Shannon opposite Abbey Road Graveyard. This too is a building steeped in history having many different functions since its origins as a Workhouse in the 1800s.



Athlone Castle

The history of Athlone Castle stretches back over 800 years. The first stone castle was built in 1210 and following many stints of occupation, attack and defence of the castle there has been many structural changes over the years. The castle we see today is a formidable structure on a mound overlooking the River Shannon.

A new state-of-the-art, interactive visitor experience was developed and opened to the public in November 2012 following major renovations totalling an investment of €4.3 million euro by Fáilte Ireland and Athlone Town Council. The new participatory experience was developed by Event Communications; the company behind the acclaimed Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre and Belfast's Titanic Museum.

An engaging, fun and unique family attraction, Athlone Castle includes eight individual galleries, each depicting a different aspect of life in Athlone down through the ages. Fun, hands-on experiences and educational narratives told through audio-visual displays, touch-screen information points, weapons replicas, dress-up areas and games for kids immerse visitors in the drama, tragedy and spectacle of Athlone's diverse and fascinating story.



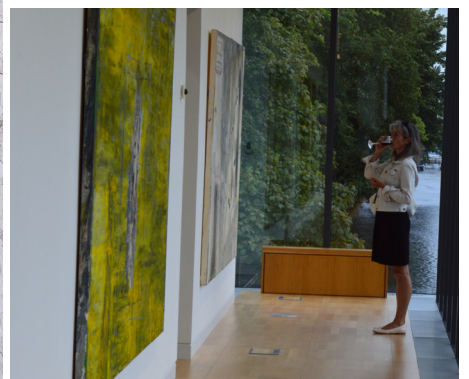
Luan Gallery

As the hub of visual arts activity in the County, Luan Gallery plays a vital role regionally and nationally by presenting a wide range of art exhibitions, projects and installations which are intrinsically linked with the studio development at Abbey Road.

It is the first purpose-built municipal visual art gallery located in the midlands, a significant development for the arts in Ireland. A total of €3.4 million was invested in the development of the gallery by the Border Midland and Western Regional Assembly, the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and Athlone Town Council.

The 575 m² gallery was designed by Keith Williams Architects who also designed the Athlone Civic Centre and the Chichester Novium Museum. The new space is located on an impressive site overlooking the River Shannon, adjacent to the town's historic bridge, Athlone Castle and the Catholic Church of St. Peter and St. Paul. The scheme adapts the town's historic 1897 Father Mathew Hall into a new gallery, adding a new wing with state-of-the-art audio visual capabilities and a riverfront gallery space overlooking the Shannon.

The aim of the space is to promote a dynamic contemporary visual art programme of both established and emerging artists from home and abroad. The Gallery aims to place visual artists at the heart of its activity and to offer visitors a unique cultural tourism experience for the community and visitors to Athlone and beyond.



Abbey Road Artists' Studios

Abbey Road Artists' Studios was launched as a joint initiative of Athlone Town Council and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. The Studios offer a dedicated space in Athlone town for local and visiting artists. Launched in 2011 Abbey Road Studios support professional contemporary artists in a welcoming environment which facilitates peer interaction and great work.

This unique building has had many different chapters since its creation in the 1800s. Most recently it housed Athlone Fire Station. Originally built as a famine workhouse in 1841, the former town fire station now houses four individual artists' studios as well as a large multi-purpose upstairs space suitable for a variety of community cultural events including exhibitions, performances, workshops, classes and creative seminars. Individual studios range in size from 16 to 20 square metres.

To date the studios have welcomed 19 resident professional artists and has been utilised by more than 10 community groups on a regular basis.



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Core Function

Athlone Arts and Tourism operates Athlone Castle Visitor Centre, Luan Gallery and Abbey Road Artists Studios.

Core Values

Our core values include but are not confined to:

- Promote access and inclusion
- Use our collection and exhibitions both of a temporary and permanent nature to inspire discourse
- Continue to be engaging and educational driven
- Demonstrate and showcase creativity
- Champion excellence

Mission

“To develop and promote recognisable Arts, Heritage & Cultural Tourism sites and programmes that will attract increased visitor numbers thus contributing to the development and marketing of Athlone as a quality cultural visitor destination.”

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Strategic Objectives 2017–2019

1. Work with partners to develop and promote Athlone Castle Visitor Centre, Luan Gallery and Abbey Road Artists' Studios as key recognisable arts, heritage and cultural tourism products in Athlone,
2. Enhance our customer experience,
3. Develop and deliver a series of dynamic and diverse exhibitions, events and educational programmes across the facilities,
4. Care for and conserve the three physical spaces,
5. Care for and conserve the museum collection and the permanent and temporary exhibitions in the museum and gallery,
6. Increase visitor numbers to Athlone Castle and Luan Gallery,
7. Increase income generated from all three facilities,
8. Use our resources wisely, providing real value for money,
9. Invest in our people,
10. Contribute to the development of Athlone as a quality visitor destination in Ireland.

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Achievements 2012–2016

A summary of significant achievements from the opening of the facilities to 2016 are outlined below:

- The three sites opened on schedule.
- **92,186** people have visited Athlone Castle from November 2012 to December 2016.
- **60,806** people have visited Luan Gallery from November 2012 to December 2016.
- Circa **1,000** people came out to support and visit programmed activities for Culture Night 2016.
- **36** exhibitions have been held from 2012 to the end of 2016 in Luan Gallery and have included a mixture of solo, shared and group exhibitions featuring emerging, mid career and established artists.
- **19** resident artists have leased the studios at Abbey Road Artists' Studios.
- **10** Community groups using the multi-purpose space on a regular basis including; Active Age Group, Athlone Photography Club, St. Hilda's, Life drawing and Textile Club.
- Secured funding from;

The Heritage Council — €7,000 used to Host & Participate on the Irish Museum Association Museum Basics Course, Tour Guide training for staff and volunteers, and enhancing heritage interpretation at Athlone Castle

Westmeath County Council 2016 Centenary Fund and the Department of Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht — to fund a group and duo centenary themed exhibitions at Luan Gallery.

Fáilte Ireland under Ireland's Ancient East Capital Scheme — €75,000 for enhancing the visitor experience at Athlone Castle (provision of multi-lingual audio guides, a smart phone app and interpretative outdoor signage).

Westmeath Arts Office — to fund two Artists in the Community.

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- Programmed many successful and popular events such as artists' talks, historical lectures, children's storytelling, and workshops.
- The facilities have received excellent pr and media coverage since opening including; being featured in web articles, social media, competitions, Aer Lingus Inflight Magazine, Videos, Travel and Arts Programmes, National press, radio and TV coverage.
- 100s of educational groups have been welcomed to the gallery and castle.
- Facilitated and hosted community interest launches, discussions and meetings.
- The sites have been frequently used as photography and film locations.
- A guide book was published on Athlone Castle (author Dr Rory Sherlock).
- Hosted the Museums Basics Course and invited neighbouring heritage sites to participate.
- Programmed support activities for main Athlone Events i.e. RTÉ All Ireland Drama Festival, Community Games National Finals, Athlone Literary Festival and Athlone River Festival.
- Installed improved information signage on site and directional signage on approach roads for Athlone Castle.
- Improvements were put in place for visitors to access the admissions area of Athlone Castle.
- Illustrated interpretative signage was installed at the upper battlements of Athlone Castle.
- A sales and marketing plan was developed for Athlone Castle.

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Strategic Objectives for 2017 to 2019

Our Strategic Objectives have been expanded in greater detail below:

I. Partnerships

We will work with partners to develop and promote Athlone Castle Visitor Centre, Luan Gallery and Abbey Road Artists' Studios as key recognisable arts, heritage and cultural tourism products in Athlone by;

- Positioning our strategies in line with the County Arts, Tourism and Heritage Strategies.
- Working increasingly in collaboration with other agencies — tourism, heritage, education, arts, business, public bodies, non Governmental agencies etc.
- Supporting the Irish Museums Association and Visual Artists Ireland in their efforts to represent and advocate museums, galleries and artists across the Island.
- Continuing to develop our relationships with local and national third level institutions e.g. AIT, Moate College, GMIT, IADT and others.
- Partnering with national and regional galleries, institutions and organisations such as The National Gallery of Ireland, IMMA, The National Museum of Ireland, The Model, OPW, Arts Offices, Local Authorities and Guilds etc. in order to deliver a diverse programme of exhibitions at Luan Gallery and Athlone Castle.

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- Working with partnering stakeholders to support Destination Athlone marketing and development initiatives to build awareness of Athlone and to increase footfall in the Cultural Quarter of Athlone.
- Developing relationships with artists, historians, cultural groups and networks.
- Networking locally, regionally and nationally.
- Contributing to and facilitating local, regional and national conversations and policy relating to the arts and heritage sectors.
- Maintaining strong relationships with disadvantaged community networks.

2. Enhancing our customer experience

We will improve our visitors' experience by;

- Upgrading our buildings, access, displays, interpretation, language facilities, customer service, engagement, guiding, retail offering, quality and variety.
- Training and developing our staff and volunteers to deliver excellent customer service.
- Training and delivering our staff and volunteers to confidently engage with and guide our visitors through the museum and gallery spaces.
- Reviewing and revising our guiding script and delivery.
- Allocating portions of the annual capital allocation to deliver physical upgrades.
- Submitting funding applications to deliver upgrades initially for access, interpretation and language facilities.

3. a Programming

We will ensure that the exhibitions programmes will reflect our commitment to progress, strengthen and inspire audiences' engagement, perception and appreciation of traditional and modern approaches to visual art and cultural heritage by;

- Developing and delivering a varied and integrated exhibition and event based programme across all facilities.
- Devising and presenting an innovative and interactive visual arts and cultural tourism programme for Athlone in collaboration with key calendar events/festivals such as The RTÉ All Ireland Drama Festival.
- Filling temporary programming slots through diverse and varied means such as: inviting individual artists and artists' groups to exhibit, inviting touring exhibitions, selecting work from open submissions by artists, working with independent selection panels, working with curators, spearheading new projects with funding partners, collaborating on projects with funding partners, exchange programmes, loan programmes, competitions, studio residencies and multiple venue programming.



3.b Education

We will strive to ensure that education will play a fundamental part of the operation of the Castle, Gallery and Studios by;

- Developing a cohesive programme of activities that is integrated with the museum collection and gallery and museum exhibitions.
- Further developing our educational programmes.
- Providing an extensive programme of activities and resources for a wide range of audiences.
- Encouraging all schools in the Midlands Region to participate in our education programmes.
- Ensuring that our education programmes will reflect the commitment to access and develop new audiences being mindful that our most 'hard-to-reach' visitors are represented within our education and community developments.
- Delivering outreach projects associated with the studio and multi-purpose space at Abbey Road.
- Working in partnership with the local, regional and national networks of schools, colleges and voluntary sector education providers, endeavouring to maintain young people's participation with our informal education and community outreach programme.

4. Care of our Physical Buildings

We will aim to care for, maintain and conserve the physical buildings and adjoining grounds whilst providing a safe environment for our staff and visitors by;

- Managing the facilities and equipment regarding Health & Safety, maintenance and cleanliness.
- Minimising running costs and capital repairs liabilities, and continuing to develop our trading potential and visitor offer.
- Identifying and undertaking infrastructure improvements and repairs works to maintain the steady state; ensuring statutory compliance, and maintaining the normal operation of our buildings so as to ensure the safety of staff and visitors, and care of collection/exhibitions.
- Preparing and submitting an application to the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to install railings at the steps of the lower battlements and upper battlements of Athlone Castle.
- Developing an improved retail area at the gallery.
- Pursuing the possibility of a reorganisation, improvement and expansion of the castle admissions, shop and café to facilitate growing visitor numbers.
- Engaging regularly with the OPW in relation to managing, conserving and caring for the castle physical structures including the Keep, external walls and access to battlements.
- Researching and costing options and source funding to deliver the provision of storage facilities for artworks and artefacts.

- Initiating development plans for the next phase of the castle and gallery — getting ready for the Cycleway Bridge and Cycle Hub.

5. Care of our collection and exhibitions

As custodians of permanent and temporary exhibitions we are tasked with providing a best practice levels of care to the collections on display and in storage while ensuring members of the public have guided access to these valuable assets.

We will:

- Develop and implement a collections policy including acquisition, accession and disposal.
- Develop regular object audits.
- Review and update the electronic inventory of collection.
- Develop a preventative conservation procedure.
- Complete the Museum Standards Programme — start the programme in 2018. Participation on this programme will enable us to develop collection/exhibition management policies and procedures in line with best practice standards.
- Complete a risk assessment and develop a disaster plan for castle museum and gallery.
- Review and revise security procedures.
- Review and revise health & safety procedures.

6. Increase Audience and Visitor Numbers

We will strive to reach our annual targets of increased visitor numbers by focussing on attracting key market segments for the museum and gallery by:

- Delivering a programme of engaging exhibitions to attract local, national and international audiences.
- Developing supplementary activities to ameliorate visitor potential, visitor satisfaction and dwell time.
- Producing and designing compelling content (copy, imagery & video) to use across all platforms (online & offline) which will appeal to target markets.
- Developing a cohesive online presence across all platforms that will appeal to the target markets. Develop standalone websites and social media platforms for Athlone Castle and Luan Gallery/Abbey Road Artists website.
- Reviewing and re-designing promotional collateral specifically for key target market segments.
- Reviewing and developing multi-lingual on-site guiding material.
- Continuing to build partnerships with key Tourism stakeholders in the Athlone and environs area and within the greater Ireland's Ancient East destination region will be essential to increasing visitor numbers.
- Reviewing and revising our sales & marketing plan to drive increased visitor numbers.
- Developing 5 year plans (2018 – 2022) for Athlone Castle and Luan Gallery/Abbey Road Artists' Studios – commence the process in mid-2017.

7. Income generation

We will endeavour to increase income generated from all three facilities by;

- Continuing to develop income generation initiatives across the spaces such as continued expansion of castle merchandise, renewed merchandise display area in the castle admissions space, development of an expanded retail space in Luan Gallery.
- Working more closely with external parties, such as tourism and arts sector stakeholders in Athlone and Counties Westmeath, Roscommon, Longford and Offaly and beyond in order to increase income earning opportunities through referral schemes etc.
- Implementing a grants and donations fundraising strategy. Submit applications to Fáilte Ireland, Heritage Council and the Arts Council to deliver improved exhibition programmes and events, educational initiatives, conservation, repairs and development works.
- Identifying opportunities to garner philanthropic support for Luan Gallery through the development of long term relationships with potential donors and benefactors locally, regionally and nationally.
- Aiming to obtain corporate sponsorship, both long-term (collection and educational programmes) and specific exhibitions and events.
- Reviewing, further developing and expanding our Membership Schemes.
- Increasing cash donations from visitors through a strategically positioned donation box at Luan Gallery.

8. Efficiencies and effectiveness

We will use our resources wisely, providing real value for money by:

- Delivering annual operations in line with approved projections and Council subvention.
- Continuing energy-saving and sustainable initiatives and procedures.
- Implementing best practice procedures.
- Using IT to deliver organisational objectives and cost savings, and implement IT enhancements to drive reductions in support costs.

9. People

We will invest in our people by:

- Reviewing staffing requirements regularly and presenting findings to Directors.
- Engaging, motivating and acknowledging our staff and volunteers in a fair and affordable way.
- Training and developing our staff skills in order for them to be able to adapt to and meet our changing needs.
- Exploring how best to develop increased volunteer opportunities.
- Reviewing staff and volunteer policies.

- Reviewing internal communications methods and utilising IT software such as Basecamp to schedule all activities — familiarise and train staff.
- Providing and embedding a transparent framework for managing and directing staff performance.

10. Development of Athlone as a quality visitor destination

The company will play a key role in the development, promotion, appreciation and engagement of the cultural landscape of Athlone, Westmeath and the greater Midlands region by:

- Positioning Athlone Castle and Luan Gallery on the local, regional, national and international visitor map thus contributing to the development of Athlone as a quality cultural tourism destination.
- Building a profile of the Athlone Castle, Luan Gallery and Athlone through regional, national networking and advocacy.
- Representing the castle, gallery, studios and Athlone in the public domain including regional, national and international events.
- Supporting the marketing campaigns and work of Destination Athlone and embracing and using the #heartofit brand.
- Actively participating in Destination Athlone Committees marketing campaigns and initiatives.

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- Embracing and adopting the Ireland's Ancient East brand and core values.
- Proactively promoting the breadth of artistic, heritage and cultural offerings within the Athlone and environs area.
- Cross selling and referring our visitors to stakeholders in Athlone and beyond.