REGIONAL SPATIAL AND ECONOMIC STRATEGY 2020-2032

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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The purpose of the Executive Summary is to give a brief overview of the RSES to enable the reader to become acquainted with it. The NWRA seeks to ensure that the information published in this Executive Summary is accurate. However, the Executive Summary should not be relied upon in interpreting the provisions of the RSES – the RSES is the statutory document with legal effect. Where any difference arises between the Executive Summary and the wording of the RSES, the wording of the RSES shall at all times apply.
Introduction

Successful places around the world exhibit four key ingredients - innovation, diversity, creativity and tolerance. Our region has these traits in abundance, but it also has the capability to be a leader in sustainability and consolidate its reputation as one of the best places in Ireland to live and work.

Our RSES is built on the strategic assumption that sustainability will be the future and the fifth differential. It is a new ingredient for successful ‘Places’. The vision to achieve that is set out in this RSES.

There is not one single transformation but an integration of key policies and practices. Our RSES introduces the concept of a Growth Framework to achieve this integration, because regional growth cannot be achieved in linear steps. It’s a symbiotic process.

The strategy aims to be responsive to trends (e.g. urbanisation, digitisation and globalisation) whilst also interpreting risk (e.g. climate, global economic challenges, future of work and population health outbreaks like Covid-19) by connecting our plans to the Sustainable Development Goals, the EU Growth Strategy and the National Strategic Outcomes (NPF).
At its core the RSES recognises the weak urban infrastructure in our region and that this region has not prospered economically compared to the other two regions of Ireland, as evidenced by reclassification of the region by the European Commission from a ‘More Developed Region’ to a ‘Transition Region’ for the Post 2020 (2021-2027) funding period. This is a call to action by Government to positively discriminate in favour of this region.

The RSES is responding by adopting a clear strategy for compact growth and delivering those key elements known to inform business location choices. This compact growth strategy is focused on a Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) for Galway and tailored Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plans for Sligo, Athlone and Letterkenny (incorporating the strategic cross-border partnership with Derry-Strabane). These are new departures and the expected outcome is a region that is smarter, greener, more specialised and connected, with a stronger and more compact urban network.
What is a Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy?

The world is rapidly changing. Ireland is too. Our population, nationally, is expected to grow by approximately one million people over the next twenty years.

Demographic projections for this region expect a growth of over 180,000 people, with the creation of 115,000 new jobs. This requires a strategic perspective on housing, transport, health, education, environment and our approach to land-use.

The primary statutory purpose of the Strategy is to support the implementation of Project Ireland 2040 – which links planning and investment through the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the ten year National Development Plan (NDP) – including the economic and climate policies of the Government by providing a long-term strategic planning and economic framework for the region.

The regional tier of governance in Ireland sits in the middle of the planning hierarchy and the development objectives of the RSES will be implemented and amplified through the review by local authorities of all development plans and Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs), to ensure their consistency with the RSES. In addition, key state agencies and sectoral bodies will review their strategies and investment plans in light of the adoption of the RSES, ensuring consistency with it.
Why do we need a Regional Spatial and Economic Plan?

We need regional planning, for two main reasons.

Firstly, from an intra-regional perspective, our analysis has concluded that if we don’t plan strategically and make decisions collectively, based on new trends and evidence, then this region risks continuing a vicious cycle of regional economic decline.

The RSES sets out how we must move away from the current, ‘business as usual’ pattern of development. This means that it is necessary to disrupt trends that have been apparent for the last fifty years and that have accelerated over the past twenty.

Evidence of this is demonstrated with the:

- Continuation of sprawling growth
- Ongoing shift of people and jobs to Dublin and the east coast
- A degrading environment
- The continuing disparity between where people live and work, with increased commuting times
- Exacerbation of rural and village decline
- Urban areas being under-served.

Secondly, to achieve more effective and balanced national development we need to find a satisfactory relationship between people and jobs. This region has several historical challenges impacting on its competitiveness and sustainability. Most notably is the comparably lower level of investment in enabling infrastructures such as ports, harbours, roads, rail and utilities.

The resulting impact has created a profile of a region addressing matters such as:

- Distance and scale
- Skills retention and development
- Generating greater value from our Knowledge and Innovation system
- Access to capital to fund innovation
- Infrastructure and accessibility.

THE BIG CHALLENGE

Greater Value Added 2005-2016
Our RSES introduces the concept of a Growth Framework that links strategic and operational challenges with prioritised capital interventions. The intention is that it becomes a living framework, which will be supported as required by detailed action plans, investment proposals and delivery partnerships. The Framework will be the basis for determining metrics, linking with National Strategic Outcomes and assessing the region’s actual contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals.
Compact growth will be pursued to ensure sustainable growth of more compact urban and rural settlements, supported by jobs, houses, services and amenities, rather than continued sprawl and unplanned, uneconomic growth.

The NWRA believes that strong economic growth, which creates permanent, sustainable jobs, is best achieved by building a competitive and productive economy. Focusing policies on scale, investing in connectivity and our people whilst aggressively pursuing a low carbon approach to enhance our differentiation.

It has been identified that more strategic actions are required to prepare the region for what is to come and highlights the need to create a combined long term vision for the future of both energy supply and our ability to use renewable energy. To address our energy requirements our RSES emphasises the need for coordination, new thinking, investment and skills to implement change. All considerations need to be cognisant of our natural resources, landscape and heritage (natural, social and cultural).

Accessibility and mobility within the region have a direct effect on the region’s economic competitiveness. It also has an effect on the attractiveness of the region as a favourable living and visiting environment. The RSES will support further investment in sustainable transport measures. In addition, to achieve our Vision for the region we need to strengthen our digital network and enable new technologies to work by ensuring that policies and systems are in place that can help people transition to a world much more digitally connected.

One of the strongest foundations and emerging propositions this region has to build on is its ‘livability’. The region aspires to be one of the most livable places in Europe with a commitment to sustainable and inclusive growth.

Provision and maintenance of economic infrastructure, such as energy, water, and wastewater, are key to delivering compact growth and a connected, vibrant, inclusive, resilient and smart region.
Growth Tactic: People and Place

We have a diverse region with distinct spatial patterns and diverse geographical propositions. Historically these patterns reflect the variation in the endowment and scale of human, physical, natural and most importantly capital resources.

From a development perspective, investment in the creation of ‘place’ is key to realising regional potential. Examples exist across the region that portray our people and our places as global leaders in energy, business, tourism, technology, entrepreneurship, industry, education, craft, heritage and culture.

A new emphasis on placemaking is the priority approach in this strategy. Placemaking includes tapping into the economic potential that remains unused, so that all parts of cities and regions can contribute to the quality of life. To ensure continued success we need to move to a more sustainable model.

This means:

› Moving away from fossil fuels towards a greener and low carbon society
› Building the capacity of our human capital to move away from traditional ICT towards biotech / advanced technology
› Transforming from a dual economy to an inclusive economic model focusing on resilience and sustainability
› Promoting circular practices with an ecological principle around replenishment
› Provision of key elements that inform business location choices.
# Transitioning Region

## Energy
- **From** High Carbon, fossil fuel and inefficient
- **To** Low carbon, green and renewable

## Technology
- **From** ICT and traditional platforms
- **To** Bio Tech and advanced technology

## Social
- **From** Commuter led, disconnected and unhealthy
- **To** Urban, networked, digitally smart and vibrant rural communities

## Economic
- **From** Dual economy / old economy
- **To** Inclusive and sustainable

## Spatial
- **From** Road transport, low density, private transport
- **To** Rail and public transport, high density and cycling / walking

## Ecological
- **From** Extractive
- **To** Replenishing
In our fast-changing world, Ireland is facing pressing challenges – environmental degradation and climate change, the digital revolution, demographic transition, migration and social inequalities – and urban areas are often in the frontline to deliver solutions.

According to Census 2016 the population of the Northern and Western Region was 847,442. The population is dispersed unevenly, and our region has historically had a lower level of urbanisation compared to the other two regions.

The NPF identifies a suite of objectives that are to be delivered through this RSES, including targets for population, employment and the development of new housing on infill/brownfield sites. This means encouraging more people, jobs and activity generally within our existing urban areas, rather than mainly on ‘greenfield’ sites and this requires a significant change in the approach historically taken in many places.

Our region has a weak urban structure, with Galway being the only city of scale. This weak urban structure places the region at a distinct disadvantage in attracting businesses but it should be understood that it masks that Galway is the fastest growing city in Ireland over the past 50 years; that Letterkenny and Derry in reality function as a cross-border city region; and that Letterkenny, Sligo and Athlone perform functions not dissimilar to bigger cities, albeit at a different scale. We also have a number of key towns that perform higher order functions to towns of a similar scale elsewhere.

In order to achieve the NPF targets and importantly to address the weak urban structure, the RSES growth strategy has taken a strategic approach to, in summary, develop urban places of regional-scale through:

- Delivering on the population targets for the Metropolitan and Regional Growth Centres through compact growth
- Delivering significant compact growth in Key Towns
- Developing derelict and underutilised sites, with an initial focus within the footprint of urban areas
- Delivering critical enabling infrastructure and services.
Compact urban growth does not dispense with appropriate standards being achieved but rather will require imaginative high-quality architectural bespoke solutions to be developed to provide for high-quality desirable places that can attract more people, and generate new employment opportunities within the existing footprint of our cities, towns and villages.

This region is defined by its strong connection to our rural areas, which provide for the economic, social, cultural and environmental well-being of our communities, both urban and rural. This requires the careful management and encouragement of appropriate development within rural areas to ensure that they remain and grow as vibrant communities.
GALWAY MASP & REGIONAL GROWTH CENTRES

14. Galway Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP)
18. Athlone Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plan
20. Letterkenny Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plan
22. Sligo Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plan
Metropolitan regions are becoming an increasingly important planning and development tool. Successful metropolitan areas need a vibrant lifestyle, an engaged community confident in their culture and the capacity to build local, national and global connections. These elements exist in Galway and will be optimised if growth is well planned and coordinated.

A planned approach will improve infrastructure and land-use sequencing to capitalise on the opportunities for new economy jobs and support housing for the growing population.

As the only city, Galway has a pivotal function in the development of the region. It is a centre of employment, innovation, industry and creativity. It is, and has been, a rapidly growing settlement.

The importance attributed to metropolitan areas for the development of the regions requires the preparation and delivery of a Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP).

This new focus on urban led growth offers an opportunity to build a new dynamism in residential, commercial, social, educational, recreational and infrastructural development.

The delivery of compact growth will be achieved through collaboration between all stakeholders in the community. The MASP is the template, the ownership of the plan will be taken by the local authorities through their development plans and local area plans which will provide the fine grain for the detailed development for all areas in the MASP.
Galway Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP)

**VISION**

The MASP provides a strategic focus on the City and environs and sets out how it is envisaged the NPF will be implemented in the regional context of the RSES. The vision for Galway is that it will be a leading European city renowned for its quality of life, its history, its culture and its people.

Galway will be a place that embraces modern technologies, high standards of education, competitive and sustainable enterprises. The challenges to the city’s development will be met by the integrated and timely provision of infrastructure much of which is included in this strategy.

**DRIVERS OF GROWTH**

Galway Metropolitan Area has a considerable land capacity that can significantly contribute to meeting the housing demands based on population targets set out in the NPF and the RSES.

The targets are that:

1. The population of Galway MASP to grow by 27,500 to 2026 and by a further 14,500 to 2031 with the population of the city and suburbs accommodating 23,000 to 2026 and a further 12,000 to 2031

2. Deliver at least half (50%) of all new homes that are targeted within the MASP to be within the existing built-up footprint.
LAND USE

The policy framework is to meet this projected demand through promoting the development of sustainable high-quality neighbourhoods, sustainable densities incorporating high design standards and key urban design principles.

A number of strategic locations have been identified that present the opportunity and capacity to deliver the necessary quantum of housing to facilitate targeted growth. A number of strategic employment locations have also been identified that are integrated with the strategy for sustainable transportation and coordinated with the settlement strategy. There is a strong emphasis provided upon the development of lands identified for regeneration and renewal.

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<tr>
<th>LAND CAPACITY - LANDS AVAILABLE FOR HOUSING</th>
<th>APPROXIMATE LAND AREA</th>
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<tr>
<td>City Residential zoned lands – high density</td>
<td>172 ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regeneration Lands – min 30% residential content</td>
<td>10 ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ardaun LAP Phase 1</td>
<td>49 ha</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ardaun LAP Phase 2</td>
<td>61 ha</td>
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<tr>
<td>Murrough LAP (one-third mixed-use)</td>
<td>11 ha</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eyre Square East Quarter</td>
<td>2 ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baile Chláir</td>
<td>7 ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bearná</td>
<td>14 ha</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oranmore</td>
<td>33 ha</td>
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CONNECTIVITY

Inter-urban and inter-regional connectivity has progressed in recent years. The completion of the M6 motorway considerably reduced travel times from Dublin to Galway and has made the city more accessible nationally. At a sub-regional level, the completion of the M17/M18 has added to the accessibility of Galway. However, traffic congestion is a major issue and a key objective is to deliver the various components of the Galway Transport Strategy and the City Centre Transport Management Plan, including the N6 Galway City Ring Road.

TALENT

The National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) and Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) are huge assets to the city, with the latter having the potential to develop as a Technological University as part of the Connacht /Ulster Alliance, which is supported in the MASP. They provide talent pools through their world-leading learning that adds significant value to the attractiveness of Galway in terms of being a significant employer, playing a major role in education provision and through the development of a knowledge economy.

Both NUIG and GMIT have collaborative research and training roles with industry which is supported also by national investment research programmes such as REMEDI and GMedTech. Research competencies have been growing particularly in the life sciences area in NUIG and also in the medical technologies research group at GMIT. Furthermore, the Marine Institute at Oranmore contributes significantly to the research and innovation reputation of the city, being responsible for marine research, technology development and innovation in Ireland and through its collaborative partnerships with NUIG and GMIT.

HEALTHCARE

A significant element of employment in the city is concentrated in the healthcare sector. Galway is a centre for regional health care services for the whole region with Galway University Hospitals (Merlin and UHG) providing a secondary, regional and supra-regional service in respect of cardiology and cancer services. They are also one of eight major academic teaching hospitals in Ireland. The MASP supports the delivery of enhanced regional healthcare service, including a modern hospital at Merlin Park.

CULTURE

Culture and creativity is at the heart of life in Galway City and County. It has a global reputation as the home of Druid Theatre Company, Galway International Arts Festival and Macnas. There is also a vibrant community arts sector that gives a strong cultural identity to the city and the county. In addition, Galway is a bilingual city and is a service centre for the Connemara Gaeltacht. The use of the Irish language is part of everyday life in Galway, with a significant area of the MASP having Gaeltacht status - parts of the city, Bearna and Baile Chláir.

ENTREPRENEURIAL DRIVE

Galway will increasingly attract business and skilled workers internationally and across Ireland with its business flexibility and enviable coastal lifestyle around some of the best tourist attractions in the country. As national and international investment grows, so will the metropolitan area’s identity as a global leader in the new economy, entrepreneurship and technological innovation.

The first ever Galway MASP builds on a dynamic and entrepreneurial city centre, strong industrial employment base, diversified economy and desirable lifestyle. It capitalises on extensive investment from both public and private partners by coordinating and linking places and ideas. It also responds to changing global economic trends, including new smart technologies, creative and sharing economies and global connectedness.
The National Planning Framework (NPF) identifies Athlone as the Key Regional Growth Centre in the Midlands. It is one of five towns nationally that have been designated as a Regional Growth Centre, on the basis that it functions similarly, but at a different scale to the bigger cities.

**VISION**

The Strategic Plan delivers a roadmap for the continued development of Athlone as a key enabler of regional growth and prosperity across its hinterland. It will be the regional flagship for industry, retail services, educational facilities, tourism and residential development in the Midlands.

Whilst Athlone is substantively within the Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly Area, a joint approach has been taken to identify shared Key Regional Policy Objectives for Athlone within the respective Strategies.

**DRIVERS OF GROWTH**

Athlone has direct national connectivity to Dublin and within a one-hour drive is Galway City and towns such as Longford, Mullingar, Maynooth, Portlaoise, Ballinasloe and Roscommon.

The proximity of these settlements provides Athlone and its hinterland with potential to develop residential and employment uses which will place and maintain Athlone at the forefront in the goal to develop a modern resilient example of integrated development in 21st century Ireland.

The RSES for the Eastern and Midlands region envisages a population target of 30,000 for the entire settlement of Athlone up to 2031. This includes lands within the combined functional area of the two Local Authorities of Westmeath and Roscommon. The RSES for this region provides additional context and provides that growth should generally be in proportion to existing population levels in each local authority area. Having regard to the population targets this translates to targets of at least 1,500 by 2031 and 1,800 by 2040 for the areas in our region. A new joint unitary plan shall be developed for Athlone by Westmeath County Council and Roscommon County Council which shall add further detail to the objectives of this Strategy.
Athlone already has significant administrative, retail, industrial, tourism and services employment. In order to cater for the target population growth it will be necessary to plan for the provision of additional development, including residential and employment. The Growth Centre Strategic Plan, identifies a number of areas that may have the capacity to satisfy the housing and employment demands that will arise. A prioritisation process for development and release of areas identified may need to be considered for inclusion at joint plan level.

Athlone has a track record in manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, medical devices, telecommunications and ICT. The consolidation and expansion of these areas will build on the success of Athlone.

The town has the leading third-level institute in the midlands, Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT). There are over 5000 students (full time and part-time) presently attending/participating in courses. It is not surprising, that it is a strategic goal of stakeholders to make AIT a technological University, this is fully supported by both Assemblies.
This Strategic Plan for Letterkenny provides a framework for growth and investment to build its function as the primary urban centre in Donegal. It is also part of a Cross Border Network - the North West Metropolitan City Region (Letterkenny/Derry/Strabane).

This network is identified in the National Planning Framework (Ireland 2040) as being a key enabler of Regional growth, and prosperity across Donegal, Derry and Tyrone.

The Framework for the North West Metropolitan City Region is elaborated upon separately in Chapter 9. It is centred on four key strategic outcomes – closely aligned with the national strategic outcomes and priorities of the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the eight strategic aims of the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035.

Those outcomes are:

- Building Inclusive and Compact Places
- Investing in Connected and Accessible Places
- Planning for a Vibrant Economy and Nurturing Communities
- Creating Resilient Places and Low-Carbon Infrastructure

**VISION**

Between 2020 and 2040 Letterkenny will grow to a centre of at least 27,300 people, and will encompass all the key characteristics of a future city, with an expanded employment base, an additional 4,000 houses, together with an expanded offering in education, public services, civic spaces, and a regeneration and reconfiguration of the Town Centre.
**DRIVERS OF GROWTH**

The growth targets set out for Letterkenny are an overall growth in the population of 40% to a population of approximately 27,300 by 2040. In tandem to this growth, it is anticipated that employment numbers will also increase by approximately 5,000 – 6,000 additional jobs, bringing the overall number of jobs approximately to 17,000.

Employment growth in Letterkenny has continued apace over the last decade. In addition to expanded retail, and service employment, the county has experienced the emergence of an ICT cluster that includes multi-national and indigenous companies.

This cluster includes Sita, Kirchhoff, Optibelt, Pramerica, Zeus and Optum. Pramerica alone employs over 1,400 people, and there will be an opportunity to expand this cluster, with Donegal County Council, IDA and Enterprise Ireland the primary stakeholders tasked with delivering further sustainable employment for this part of the North West Region.

The targeted Areas for General Employment will include additional lands adjacent to and within the IDA Business Park along the N-56 Link, and the former Unifi lands at Kiltyo/between Carnamuggagh/ Lisnenan.
The National Planning Framework recognises Sligo’s potential to serve the North West as an accessible centre of employment and services, which can be a focal point for investment and have the widest possible regional influence.

Sligo is thus identified as a key Regional Centre, capable of leading the development of the surrounding region.

Sligo’s functional area extends far beyond the County boundaries, as demonstrated by the thousands of people who travel daily for work from Mayo, Donegal, Roscommon and Leitrim.

It has been estimated that the daytime population of Sligo RGCSP can be as high as 40,000.

The presence of strong employment sectors such as Pharma and Engineering, Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), cultural institutions and health services indicate a latent capacity for Sligo to enhance its regional role. This can be achieved through building critical mass of the population and further employment, in tandem with enhanced accessibility and quality of life.

**VISION**

Sligo’s vision is to be an inclusive place, with a human-scale urban fabric and a vibrant core, attractive streets, friendly and safe for the young and old. People should have easy access to affordable homes, education, healthcare, culture, leisure and recreation. They should enjoy multifunctional public spaces that can regenerate civic engagement, attract tourists and support adjoining businesses.
DRIVERS OF GROWTH

The Strategic Plan Area is home to 28,465 people, of which 19,413 (68%) reside within the Sligo PUA (Principal Urban Area). The Growth Centre Strategic Plan supports population growth in the principal urban area of Sligo to a level of at least 27,200 persons by 2040.

Business location choices are informed by the availability of property solutions and this makes Sligo an attractive proposition. It has the potential to deliver the quantity, quality and distribution of land necessary to meet the level of demand for a broad range of business proposals that may emerge over the lifetime of this strategy. This strategy identifies strategic areas that have significant growth potential and where critical support infrastructure exists or is planned.

The Plan sets out strategies and actions that will drive sustainable growth across a number of Strategic Goals, focused on:

- Compact Growth
- Enterprising Sligo
- Liveable Sligo
- Key Growth Areas
- Enabling Infrastructure
Key Towns are those regionally strategic employment centres of significant scale that can act as regional drivers that complement and support the higher-order urban areas within the settlement hierarchy (ie. Regional Growth Centres and Galway Metropolitan Area).

They also have the potential to accommodate a significant level of growth in population and employment through appropriate investment in infrastructure, support services and placemaking initiatives.

Key Towns identified include Ballina, Ballinasloe, Castlebar, Cavan, Carrick-on-Shannon, Monaghan, Roscommon and Tuam. Key priorities have been identified for these Towns that will unlock their latent potential and enable their sustainable growth as attractive key economic drivers for the towns and their rural hinterlands. Cross-cutting themes include a strong emphasis on place-making, compact growth, regeneration and renewal of brownfield sites. In addition there is a strong emphasis on the availability of property solutions, including provision of bespoke landing spaces and flexible property solutions. Individual enabling infrastructural projects have also been identified and will be further amplified and implemented through the development plan and local economic and community plan processes.

In addition, there are also a number of places with strategic development potential of a regional scale identified, namely Westport (Castlebar connection), Athenry, Virginia / Carrickmacross and the SDZ located at Ireland West Airport Knock.
The population living in rural towns, villages and the countryside (i.e. other than the Cities and Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns) are home to almost 80% of our region’s population and as such represent a sizeable cohort of the population and land area.

They include places that play an important role in supporting the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of not only rural communities but also the urban areas. Connectivity is a key issue for the future of these rural communities in order to enable access to employment, education and healthcare lifelines. The careful management of development within rural areas is necessary to ensure that they remain and grow as vibrant communities and the issues of connectivity and accessibility are explored in more detail within Growth Ambition 3: Connected Region.

The agriculture, forestry and fishing industries have a higher proportion of people employed within them in our region, with peatlands and wetlands being the second most widespread land cover type. In addition, our islands lying off the western seaboard and our coastal areas contain some of our most vibrant and culturally distinctive communities, with many areas forming part of the Gaeltacht. The importance of these assets to this region and their potential to be sustainably developed into the future are explored further, particularly under Growth Ambition 1: Vibrant Region and Growth Ambition 2: Natural Region.

**VIBRANCY AND VITALITY**

Whilst the vibrancy and vitality of our rural areas need to be conserved, so also does the sense of place, culture and the quality, character and distinctiveness of our landscape. It is necessary to make our rural areas more resilient to challenges they are experiencing from urban generated pressures in some locations to a declining and ageing population in others, the structure of the economy and lack of access to quality infrastructure and new technologies in others. The management of these pressures is a matter for individual local authorities through the development plan process and the preference is that all new housing will be designed to high standards of energy efficiency with an emphasis on non-fossil fuel heating systems.
REALISING OPPORTUNITIES

The emphasis of the RSES is on highlighting opportunities for the region. Employment opportunities are undergoing a fundamental and potentially radical transformation in response to the societal and technological changes of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, through changing capabilities in Artificial Intelligence, automation, digitisation, robotics and nanotechnology. This presents a significant opportunity and this strategy enables employers to plan for and adapt to changes, including the provisions of appropriate upskilling and reskilling of employees, through investment in infrastructure and education.

Our rural communities can become better equipped to be resilient and take advantage of the digital revolution. The emerging sectors such as the food economy, the green economy, circular economy and the bioeconomy provide the potential for job creation and to attract people to live and work in our rural areas. The delivery of the National Broadband Plan will be a critical enabler in this transition.

REGENERATION AND REVITALISATION

The regeneration of our smaller towns and villages is now a major priority action for our region, which provides an opportunity to address legacy issues and to turn around their fortunes. The health of our villages and towns can be significantly influenced by the delivery of new housing through the utilisation of existing buildings and brownfield/infill sites. The targeted delivery of this is an important opportunity for our smaller towns and villages and therefore it is included as a key objective.

The emphasis will change from place to place but in all cases, the approach should be to provide a range of attractive housing choices appropriate to the needs and character of the place, including the provision of serviced sites and to provide for low-density housing demand, as an alternative to living in one-off houses outside towns and villages. A target for 20% of rural housing to be delivered on brownfield sites is included as part of the strategy.
Ireland is an open and export-based economy and continues to grow its markets in the European Union, and beyond.

Over the course of the next 12+ years, regardless of the ultimate shape and outcome of Brexit, it will remain vital that the country and this Region retains strong links with Northern Ireland, as well as the wider UK.

The border region can largely be viewed as having three interlinked areas of strategic importance in contributing to regional and all-island economic growth, namely the North West City Region (focused on the Regional Centre of Letterkenny, Derry City and Strabane), the Dublin-Belfast corridor in the east and the Central Border Region. The RSES values this social, cultural, economic and historical interconnection, and thus dedicates a particular chapter to All Island Cohesion.

NORTH WEST METROPOLITAN AREA SPATIAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK

The North West City Region is the fourth-largest urban agglomeration on the island of Ireland. It is the only functional economic region of such scale on the island which experiences a national jurisdictional border.

The challenges that this presents can only be met, and the opportunities pursued, with a consistent and long-term approach to coordinating the development of the region. This is achieved through a new strategic planning framework for the North West City Region Metropolitan Area, which includes the Regional Growth Centre of Letterkenny. It complements the regional priorities of the North West Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP) and it represents the sub-regional integration of spatial planning, economic and community development and infrastructure investment as part of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES).

The Framework will play a key role in guiding future growth and trans-boundary investment across the inter-jurisdictional City Region, offering local, regional and national governments the opportunity to take a high-level, and long-term strategic approach to the sustainable growth of the North West City Region.
COORDINATION OF INVESTMENT

The implementation of the RSES will be supported by the Framework for Co-operation on Spatial Strategies between Ireland and Northern Ireland, which will be updated and reviewed as required.

In the context of ongoing North-South cooperation across a wide range of policy areas, there are three key categories of practical co-operation that will be of strategic significance to communities on the Island, namely:

- Working Together for Economic Advantage
- Co-ordination of Investment in Infrastructure
- Managing our Shared Environment Responsibly

The co-ordination of investments in infrastructure will provide economic, social and environmental benefits north and south and are supported within this RSES. This RSES has identified the importance of enhanced transport connectivity, to include cross-border road and rail, cycling and walking routes, as well as blueways, greenways and peatways.

MARBLE ARCH CAVES
UNESCO GLOBAL GEOPARK
(CAVAN/FERMANAGH)

The UNESCO Marble Arch Caves Global Geopark is a borderless park which is located within the counties of Cavan and Fermanagh. It is managed jointly between Fermanagh and Omagh District Council in Northern Ireland and Cavan County Council in the Republic of Ireland.

The Geopark is one of the principal tourist attractions in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, it is seen as one of the leading environmental education providers in Europe. The Geopark has strong community networks and works closely with local activity and accommodation providers to deliver a strong Geopark brand, which has grown steadily over the past number of years.
Growth Ambitions
There are considerable challenges ahead when we consider ‘Risk, Trends and the current Evidence’ of regional performance.

Technology is transforming industries, the nature of work is changing, we have to support an ageing population and transform our public services to meet changing needs. Our economic strategy though needs to be viewed through the lens of sustainability and pursuit of a low carbon future.

Enterprise 2025 Renewed (DBEI) recognise there are differences in the enterprise structure and occupational profiles of the enterprise base across regions. With that, the RSES is the first economic strategy aligned with this regional spatial direction.

Our regional economy has long-standing strengths in agri-food, life-sciences, RTDI, engineering, retail, manufacturing, service sector, energy, creative sector, tourism, marine and many more. These give us durable foundations upon which to build our future. Many of the region’s most important sectors have characteristics normally associated with clusters, meaning they are geographically concentrated and include a tailored supply chain that services the industry.

The region boasts over 140 FDI multinationals supported by the IDA employing over 26,000 people. Enterprise Ireland support SMEs employing over 20,000 people in the region, and Údarás Na Gaeltachta support enterprises that employ almost 6,000 people in Counties Mayo, Galway and Donegal.
We have a distinct region that can benefit both from a specialisation approach and increased diversification. Encouraging diversification of indigenous economic activity will help enable greater economic development. A more diversified economy that is increasing the proportion of activity in knowledge-intensive, high-value businesses will be more resilient to shocks. However, we have also witnessed the emergence of key clusters that need more specialised and tailored policy, and a more coherent approach to smart specialisation.

The focus is on things that are important at the level of the region, concentrating on:

- Place-based assets
- Specialised Sectors and Clusters

Key determinants for maximising long-term economic development have been identified through extensive public and industry engagement; and include:

- Human capital, particularly education and skills
- Sustainable communities (economically, environmentally and socially)
- Access to markets (international, national and regional)
- The comparative advantage of industry sectors, products or services and business competitiveness
- Effective cross-sectoral and intergovernmental partnerships, including through place-based approaches so widely required in the region.
Growth Ambition 2: Environment – Natural Region

This strategy outlines how communities should plan for additional population and employment growth. All places in the region have a role in accommodating growth, using sustainable and environmentally responsible development practices.

By setting a clear strategic direction, through Growth Ambition 1, we can ensure that environmental impacts and issues are managed in a considered and holistic way.

Climate change represents a significant challenge for the region and the reduction in our carbon footprint must be embedded through, for example, the delivery of sustainable land use patterns, sustainable transportation initiatives, protection and enhancement of the green network and enhancement of biodiversity, approach to conservation, promotion of renewable energy technologies and Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems.

Introduced in this Growth Ambition is a unifying vision of the ways those efforts interconnect at the regional level. Justifying the integrated approach under our ‘Growth Framework’ it is necessary to consider the interdependence of population growth, economic development, resource management and environmental impacts.

Communities across the region and beyond benefit from the goods and services that our environment provides, including food, renewable energy, water purification, flood mitigation and places for recreation, education, creative thinking, health and wellbeing. Protecting and enhancing this stock of natural capital, which includes our air, land, water, soil, biodiversity, Atlantic Ocean and geological resources is fundamental to a healthy and resilient economy. It supports sectors such as agriculture, forestry, fisheries, tourism, renewables, construction and many other sectors.

The natural heritage of the region presents significant opportunities that require careful management and conservation of species. It requires a strategic approach to ensure the adequate conservation of habitats where many of our plants and animals live. To succeed in conserving our native species, we need to support and to receive the support of landowners and people who use or visit the land.
Our distinctive Cultural Heritage is a key asset that presents a competitive advantage to the region in encouraging economic activity. It has an enviable international reputation arising from the quality and originality of music, theatre, film/video, visual arts, literature, native language, song and dance.

This is reinforced through our archaeology, historic buildings and streetscapes, while the considerable infrastructure that has been created to facilitate their enjoyment by the public, such as in libraries, theatres and museums, is a source of employment and enjoyment for many thousands of the region’s inhabitants.

GREENWAYS

OUR WAY: INTERREG

OUR WAY is an INTERREG project that aims to contribute to conserving, protecting, promoting and developing natural and cultural heritage in using Greenways as sustainable and smart transportation links in rural areas. The NWRA intends to improve coordination among the different key actors; to develop governance systems to manage Greenways; to identify models and good practices for the protection and maintenance of Greenways; to identify financial instruments and funding for Greenways and to promote Greenways and product development.
Growth Ambition 3: Connectivity – Connected Region

This Growth Ambition focuses on ‘Connectivity’ and demonstrates how we plan to manage our transport and digital infrastructure over the next 20 years, to support the vision we have for the region in response to our changing environment.

The purpose of this ambition is to identify essential investments relevant to the provision of transport and digital infrastructure, the weighted benefit, and the subsequent financial implications for the next 20 years.

Economic activity is a driver of demand in the region’s transport system, whether it be for the local, regional, inter-regional, inter-island or international movement of people and goods. Our landscape and dislocation from cities of scale present challenges of transport connectivity.

The RSES Transport Investment priorities for the region are presented extensively, under the following headings:

- International Connectivity
- Road Network
- Rail Network
- Bus Network
- Rural Transport
- Walking and Cycling

ENABLING PLANS – LOCAL TRANSPORT PLANS

Major transport infrastructure investments, identified in the National Development Plan have an important role in enabling the sustainable and balanced development of the region, over the period of the RSES. High-quality accessibility to international gateways, located both within and outside of the region, for people and internationally traded goods/services is of fundamental importance to economic competitiveness at regional and national levels.

The achievement of this will be contingent on the development and improvement of critical enabling road and rail infrastructure and public transport services, for the movement of people and goods, as provided and managed through the relevant delivery agencies and service providers, including Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), Irish Rail, local authorities and licensed public transport providers.
To achieve the ambitions of our region requires a strong and prosperous regional economy that embraces the overwhelming digital trends underway globally. To make these new technologies work better for all, our RSES will need to ensure that policies and systems are in place that can help people transition to a world that is much more digitally connected.

Due to the geography and connectivity of the Northern and Western Region, it is imperative to enable a wholesale smart strategy for all and to take innovations beyond the urban areas, facilitate larger distribution of knowledge and innovation, and cater for the digital enhancement of our communities.

A failure to implement a Smart Strategy will exacerbate digital inequality and increase exclusivity investment in innovation, infrastructure and networks. A Smart Strategy is a key enabler to achieve all Ambitions in our Growth Framework.

The aim of this Smart Strategy is to produce a high-tech intensive and advanced approach that connects people, information, governance and policies using new and existing technologies to create an efficient, clean, sustainable, eco-friendly, competitive and innovative region with an enhanced quality of life. Focusing not just on intra-connectivity but urban-rural and encouraging policy alignment that enables it.
How future development in Ireland is planned will continue to be a significant determinant of people’s quality of life. Location and place have an important influence on the quality of life that people enjoy.

Strengthening local economies, meeting people’s social needs and addressing problems of poverty and social exclusion are central to building sustainable communities. The RSES aspires to reflect the OECD definition of ‘inclusive growth’:

“ECONOMIC GROWTH THAT CREATES AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL SEGMENTS OF THE POPULATION AND DISTRIBUTES THE DIVIDENDS OF INCREASED PROSPERITY, BOTH IN MONETARY AND NON-MONETARY TERMS, FAIRLY ACROSS SOCIETY”

Although sometimes described as a peripheral region, the region boasts urban growth engines and major economic assets including energy (see Growth Ambition 1). However, our workforce is ageing, mobile and our education system is not producing enough workers with appropriate skills to keep pace with the growing and changing needs of the economy. This is draining our skills base. There is also a significant deficit in skilled labour requiring policy and local response to promote ‘apprenticeships’.

Integrating this growth ambition to our vision is justified through baseline review and extensive consultation that identified:

- Many of our communities and local economies feel disconnected from the wider national growth
- Employment is no longer a guaranteed route out of poverty
- The shortcomings of getting people job-ready in a rural environment with neither employment, broadband nor an adequate transport system to enable them to access jobs in urban centres
- Economic inequalities between cities, towns and communities in the region are tangible
- Increases in poverty and unemployment impact the region’s competitiveness.
The OECD’s Framework for Policy Action on Inclusive Growth recommends investing in people and places, supporting business dynamism, and creating more inclusive labour markets, which will contribute to rebuilding trust and strengthening social cohesion.

This strategy adopts an approach that is consistent with the principles of this framework. It embraces an inclusive approach to development and also lays foundations for more sustainable growth. The RSES focuses on three horizontal aims to integrate ‘economic growth - People, Place and Resilience’.

Policies that drive this inclusive growth focus on:

- Talent and Education
- Healthy Places
- Age Friendly
- Lifelong Learning
- Housing and Childcare

IMPLEMENTATION PRIORITY

CONNACHT-ULSTER ALLIANCE

TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

The Connacht-Ulster Alliance (CUA) was established by the three Institutes of Technology of Galway, Letterkenny and Sligo in July 2012, through the signing of a formal MoU. It is envisioned that the Connacht-Ulster TU will be a complementary and stabilising factor in the communities it serves.

It will be a key producer of work-ready graduates in collaboration with employers; a key partner and driver of research and innovation; and a key attractor of investment to the region and in the retention of such investment. It will build on its current position as the national leader in blended education that combines traditional methods of delivery with state of the art online and distance learning.

It will also be a provider of education to more mature learners, a nexus of continuous professional development and the leading centre for life-long learning.
In this Growth Ambition, we focus on how we plan to manage our critically enabling infrastructure over the next 20 years, to support the vision we have for the region, and how we will deliver and manage our infrastructure assets in response to our changing environment.

The provision of prudently managed infrastructure is key to delivering a connected, vibrant, inclusive, resilient and smart region that places environmental sustainability and quality of life values at the heart of our decisions. The lack of access to the essential benefits that infrastructure provides – such as electric power, clean water, modern telecommunications, and safe & reliable transportation - impede higher living standards and present a significant obstacle to economic development.

Growth Ambition 5 focuses on:

- Electrical Grid Network
- Gas Network
- Waste Infrastructure
- Water Infrastructure

Our policy objectives seek to address these key enablers. The Gas Network operated by Gas Networks Ireland, currently extends into the East and West of our region, but does not cover Counties Sligo, Roscommon, Donegal or Leitrim.
The existing Electrical Transmission System is predominantly lower capacity 110 kV with very little higher capacity of 220 kV and 400 kV transmission infrastructure. Developing the grid will enable the transmission system to safely accommodate more diverse power flows from surplus regional generation and also facilitate future growth in electricity demand. Regionally we have a pivotal role in delivering a successful transition. There are rich renewable energy resources through wind, solar and wave (to mention but a few) along and throughout the region.

Energy is needed for economic growth, and access to affordable and reliable energy is identified as an essential enabler. Historically most incremental energy demand has been met through fossil fuels, however in future energy will have to be low-carbon and ultimately zero-carbon. Decarbonisation can and needs to happen and it is an objective of the RSES to support the national target that Ireland becomes a Low Carbon Economy by 2050. A value proposition for the region is that the Northern and Western region leads the way.
Implementing Our Ambitions

The primary purpose for implementing the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy is to bring about sustainable change for communities across the region.

The Regional Assembly is committed to working effectively to help deliver the long-term directions outlined in this strategy, accelerating our growth towards a greener and smarter future. There are many ways it will do this, some of which are set out below.

- Lead on the ongoing development and implementation of the integrated growth framework
- Identify a blend of funding instruments to accelerate implementation
- Ensure necessary monitoring and review systems are designed and prioritised
- Through collaborative leadership implement best practice and promote innovative practices
- Promote a consistent and sustainable approach to land-use planning
- Advocate policy or system change necessary to deliver on evidence based regional needs

The ambitions of this strategy require alignment and coordination between central, regional and local government, the private sector, institutions, non-government organisations and most importantly our communities.

In particular, the constituent local authorities, central government bodies and agencies shall play a key role in implementing the RSES, which provides a clear collaborative statement on investment priorities necessary to achieve the 10 National Strategic Outcomes of the National Planning Framework.