



RSES Submissions  
By email [rses@nwra.ie](mailto:rses@nwra.ie)

8<sup>th</sup> February 2019

**Our Ref:**

170204b

**Re: Submission to the Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy on behalf of Sligo BID  
(Business Improvement District) CLG**

Dear Sir/Madam,

We have been instructed by our client **Sligo BID (Business Improvement District) CLG** to make a submission to the 'Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy' (RSES) consultation, following its recent publication on the 19<sup>th</sup> November 2018.

Sligo has been designated as a key regional centre for the North West and Ireland in the 'National Planning Framework' (NPF). Given this designation and the emphasis on the role Sligo plays in the North-West region, the RSES must provide an ambitious framework for Sligo to fully realise its potential. We do not believe that the RSES, as it is currently drafted meets that objective, and we herein set out our position on proposed revisions to the RSES,

The following policy objectives from the NPF relate to Sligo:

***"National Policy Objective 2b***

*The regional roles of Athlone in the Midlands, Sligo and Letterkenny in the North-West and the Letterkenny-Derry and Drogheda/Dundalk-Newry cross-border networks will be identified and supported in the relevant Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy.*

***National Policy Objective 2c***

*Accessibility from the north-west of Ireland and between centres of scale separate from Dublin will be significantly improved, focused on cities and larger regionally distributed centres and on key east-west and north/south routes".*

Both the draft RSES and the NPF acknowledges the role that Sligo plays already as a regional centre, serving a large hinterland that extends beyond County Sligo and into surrounding counties, to include parts of Donegal, Leitrim, Mayo and Roscommon. It lends particular support to its nearby county towns. Sligo's significance as a centre of employment and services is much greater than its population would on first glance reveal. Sligo wishes to be "*an enterprising, inclusive, resilient and environmentally sustainable place, which values and celebrates its unique landscape and rich culture and heritage, and where the wellbeing of future generations is central to everything we do*" (Local Economic and Community Plan 2016). The Northern & Western Regional Assembly must

follow this blueprint, and in this regard Sligo BID (Business Improvement District) CLG have recognised the following issues to be addressed in the draft RSES:

### **Population**

Section 1.9 of the Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy identifies Sligo County as having a population of 65,500 in 2016, and an anticipated population of 71,500-72,500 in 2026 and 74,000-75,500 in 2031. These figures amount to a 15% growth in population over the course of a 15 year period. On the basis of such figures, this would see Sligo grow by the equivalent of around 10,000 people or by 500 people per annum. This level of growth is insufficient to enable Sligo to fully establish itself as the economic hub required in the North West. Arbitrary capping the level of growth that is promised for Sligo, will only serve to stifle its development into the future. Plainly put, Sligo's actual growth potential allows for a far greater increase in population than 10,000. The Sligo and Environs Development Plan 2017-2023, which is the current statutory planning document for the town, identifies sufficient lands zoned in the settlement (including the strategic land reserve) for the provision of housing for up to 26,000 new residents. Furthermore, Sligo's Main Drainage Scheme, a 50,000-PE wastewater treatment plant completed in 2008, has the capacity for expansion to serve 80,000 PE. Failure to utilise this capacity, where it already exists, amounts to a contravention of the principles of proper planning and sustainable development and would be detrimental to Sligo and the North-West region as a whole.

In addition, the cost of living in Sligo is considerably lower than in the other regional centres and particularly when compared to Dublin. Rents and house prices are comparatively affordable as against Dublin and some of the other city settlements. The cost of doing business is also lower than the other city settlements with rates and commercial rents which are affordable.

It is considered that the RSES should allow for ambitious population growth in Sligo given its capacity for growth and prominent position on the western seaboard.

### **Section 3.6 (C) Strategic Plan for Sligo: Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plan Strategic Plan Area**

Section 3.6 (C) of the draft RSES outlines the Strategic Plan Area of the Sligo Metropolitan Area. The plan states that the boundary of the Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) is based on the CSO's Small Areas, which were selected to include all major employers and educational institutions, in addition to Sligo and its closest satellite settlements of Ballysadare, Strandhill and Rosses Point. The MASP boundary which is outlined on page 113 of the draft RSES does not appropriately demonstrate or outline an area which is conducive to the economic growth and development of the Sligo Metropolitan Area. The MASP map should be extended to include the village of Collonney (as annotated in figure 1) which has a total electoral division population of 2,742 according to the 2016 census. In addition, the boundary of the MASP extends through Lough Gill. As outlined in Figure 2 below, Lough Gill is a designated SAC and is therefore a significant constraint from the point of view of planning Sligo's growth. In reality, the likelihood of development in the Lough Gill area would be severely restricted by this designation. Hence, the MASP boundary, as it is currently drawn, jars on a number of fronts.

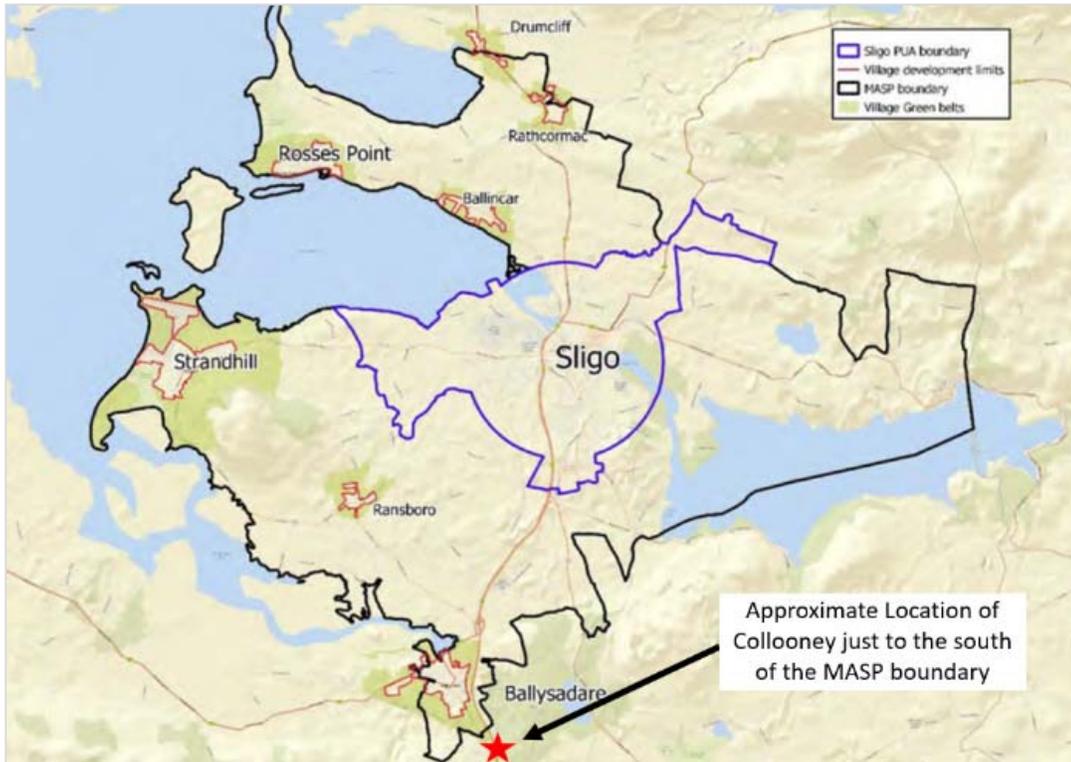


Figure 2: Collooney in relation to the MASP Boundary (Source: Draft RSES NWRA 2018)

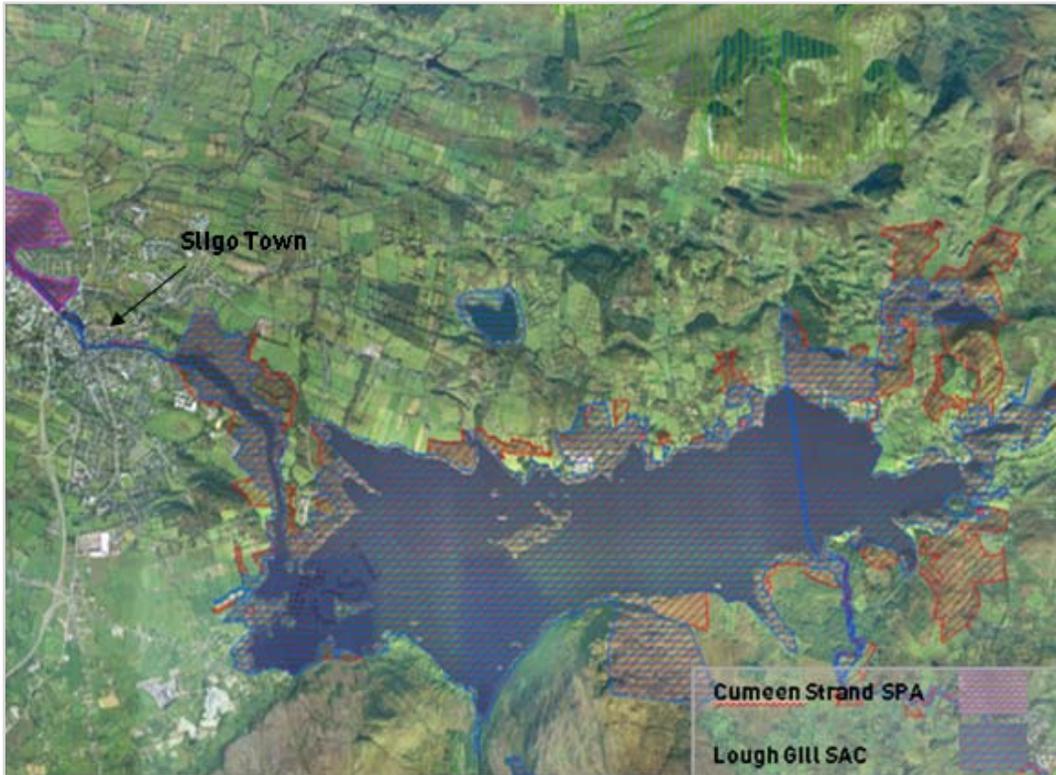


Figure 1: Designated SAC and SPA surrounding Sligo and its environs (Source: Myplan.ie)

### **Development/Regeneration**

According to the draft RSES, 43 hectares of land is currently zoned for residential and mixed-use development in the Town of Sligo. However, the quality of this zoned land may prohibit future development thereon due to land ownership issues and other various constraints. Major development opportunities are present at the backlands of existing developments along the town centre and should be examined for future opportunities. Section 3.4.1 outlines the Strategic Regeneration Sites for Sligo Town and its environs. This section of the RSES needs to specifically outline opportunities to ensure that residential use, office use and car parking is provided in the town centre. Section 3.4.4 states that *"the slow migration of retail activity to the Sligo Centre's north and west has resulted in a "shadow effect" being felt in the south-eastern area, resulting in a pressing need for regeneration."* The retail core of the town has moved to the northern side of the town with Castle Street being predominately the main retail hub with office use catered for on first floor level and above. Both Market and High Street are predominately derelict and need to be targeted for residential development in order to revitalise the centre of the town. The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund outlined in the National Development Plan, provides €2 billion, under the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, to support the co-development of the NPF's growth enablers for the five cities and other large urban centres. Sligo will be a key beneficiary of this fund and the RSES should identify the key urban regeneration and development projects in Sligo that are vying for a proportion of this fund.

The development of the IDA Business Park at Oakfield needs to be an important focus for the RSES and any subsequent economic growth strategies for Sligo town. It is paramount that funding is made available for the provision of such pieces of development if Sligo is to attract industry and help it achieve its economic and social potential. IDA land has lain undeveloped for the past two decades in Sligo town as a result of the lack of appropriate infrastructure, meaning that it was not feasible to develop these lands. It is also important that future long-term land banks are identified north of the Garavogue river to ensure that any future industrial development is balanced having regard to the site at Oakfield.

### **Amenity**

In February 2018, international design consultancy Building Design Partnership (BDP) were commissioned to prepare a public realm plan for Sligo which has now been completed. The aim of the Plan is to propose improvements to Sligo's public spaces, including streets and car parks and to enhance the town as an attractive place in which to live, work and visit. Objective O-CW-2 of the Sligo County Development Plan is to develop a cycle route from the proposed Eastern Garavogue Bridge to Hazelwood House. This greenlink is an amenity feature which should be identified in the RSES and developed in order to increase visitor numbers and tourists to the area. It is vital that more focus is placed on the River Garavogue as an amenity feature which runs all the way from the Lough Gill SAC, right through the middle of the middle of the town and meets the Atlantic at Strandhill/Rosses Point. Public realm features should complement the River where possible. The reinstatement of the historic weir, in the middle of the town, should be investigated in order to enhance the public realm and ensure river levels remain adequate.

### **Tourism**

Tourism is a critical component of the West of Ireland economy, with the accommodation and hospitality sectors as key drivers of employment. Tourism also supports the service sectors, including retail and transport, thus delivering substantial social and community benefits. (Sligo County Development Plan 2017-2023). According to the Sligo County Development Plan, there are strong indications that Sligo has not capitalised on its full tourism potential. In 2015, the county had 61 accommodation premises (of which 14 hotels) compared to 137 in Co. Donegal and 166 in Co. Mayo. There were 4,314 tourist beds in Sligo, compared to 10,288 in Donegal and 10,240 in Mayo. There is potential for a further hotel in Sligo in order to boost tourism figures, generate employment and revenue from national and international tourism in County Sligo. The County Sligo Tourism

Strategy 2018-2023 states that the tourism sector in County Sligo is an important component and driver of the economy. It contributes over €110 million annually to the local economy and generates almost 450,000 visitors. Despite having arguably more impressive and attractive, natural amenities, County Sligo only ranks mid-point in Ireland in terms of both visitor spend and visitor numbers achieved (County Sligo Tourism Strategy 2018-2023). The quality and depth of the range of visitor experience in County Sligo must be improved and broadened, ultimately leading to an increase in the overall length of visitor stay and spend.

### **Infrastructure**

In order to facilitate additional development in the town, improved access routes to the North West are necessary. The NPF seeks to provide '*progressive development of the Atlantic Economic Corridor from Galway northwards by upgrading sections of the N17 northwards, where required and upgrading the N15/N13 link.*' The National Development Plan sets out the significant level of investment, almost €116 billion, which will underpin the National Planning Framework and drive its implementation over the next ten years. Sligo is not served by a motorway. In terms of the national motorway network the nearest embarkation point is Tuam following the recent opening of the M17 between Gort and Tuam. If travelling by car from Dublin to Sligo the only feasible option is the M4-N4 route via Mullingar. In both cases the majority of the route would be on national primary roads as opposed to motorways. The National Development Plan seeks to upgrade deficient linkages so that every region and all the major urban areas, particularly those in the North-West which have been poorly served, are linked to Dublin by a high-quality road network.

The N4 between the village of Collooney and Sligo town centre is formed by Type 1 Dual Carriageway which provides an important link between Sligo and its surrounding hinterland to the south. In addition, the proposed upgrade to the N4 between Collooney to Castlebaldwin is scheduled for completion in 2020. The N4 Collooney to Castlebaldwin scheme is listed as a key project to enhance accessibility to the North West under '*National Strategic Outcome 2 - Enhanced Regional Accessibility*'. Sligo BID welcome the development of these road, however longer-term projects should also be identified and in this regard the RSES should identify an extension of the Motorway from Mullingar to Castlebaldwin as a long-term priority.

Investment need to facilitate the development of essential pieces of infrastructure that have yet to be delivered, despite being at advanced planning stages. The Eastern Garavogue Bridge and Approach Roads, a Strategic Non-National Road, will provide north-south access across the Garavogue River on the eastern side of Sligo. This scheme has all the statutory consents, the detailed design has been completed, and is also a priority for development by Sligo County Council. An ongoing funding stream from the URDF is needed to ensure delivery of the bridge.

It is noted that Rail linkages are not mentioned in the draft RSES. This is a significant omission as the Sligo to Dublin rail link is a vital transport route for many commuters in Sligo and its surrounding environs. There are eight services from Sligo to Dublin daily. However, these services are experiencing severe capacity issues. According to the Irish Rail it will be five years before increased capacity and new carriages will be provided. Increased capacity needs to be provided for and outlined in the RSES. Furthermore, train speeds on the Sligo to Dublin route are too slow to reflect the important transport artery it represents.

While Sligo Port is not identified as one of the primary ports in the State, it remains important in the regional and local economy, supporting local industry and providing an import/export transportation facility. Capital and maintenance dredging is required within the harbour in order to enhance the use and longevity of the Port, but national funding has been withheld in the past decade which has stymied the Port's natural growth trajectory. It is considered that funding should now be made available to develop the Port as prominent recreational amenity.

## **GAS**

Sligo Town is one of the largest towns in Ireland that is completely unserved in terms of piped gas. The draft RSES states that *“While Sligo is not served by gas infrastructure at present, Bord Gáis has identified Sligo as a “Phase 3: town being considered for connection to the distribution network”.* In addition, part of north Sligo towards Donegal has been identified as an *“Area location for consideration”*. An application for the local gas unit tanker in Sligo was submitted to the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) prior to the initial deadline of the 28th September 2018, however the application was not successful. The extension of the natural gas pipeline to Sligo would be a significant boost to the economic growth of the region and needs to be prioritised within the RSES.

## **Access to Services**

As the population of Sligo grows, health and education facilities need to be developed to meet the additional population’s needs. Sligo is already home to Sligo University Hospital, an acute general hospital serving the northwest of the country, however the hospital and its associated services should be designated for expansion and improvements. Similarly, additional lands for new schools need to be identified and reserved in advance any population growth being realised.

## **Summary**

It is vital that a co-ordinated strategy for Sligo at national, regional and town level is prepared to ensure that the Town can grow sustainably and secure investment as a key regional centre. The NPF supports *“enhancing the city-region like functions performed by Sligo in line with its statutory development plan”*.

The draft RSES outlines that:

*“Sligo has the vision, capacity and ambition to be the Regional Growth Centre for the North-West. In spatial terms, this vision will be supported by a sustainable approach towards the creation of a compact centre which prioritises the consolidation and regeneration of the existing urban core, along with a balanced and planned urban expansion to allow for future growth requirements.”*

The preparation of the RSES must bridge the gaps between the national and local policy, providing a tangible framework and allowing Sligo to grow and prosper as a key regional centre.

Sligo BID (Business Improvement District) CLG look forward to their continued engagement in the RSES process.

Yours sincerely,



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