



RESPONSE to Northern & Western Regional Assembly's

Draft Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy

The Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) is the representative body for all councils in Northern Ireland. It is currently the only functioning, constituted, all Party institution developing government policy – albeit local government policy - within NI and advocating NI's needs externally.

NILGA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Northern & Western Regional Assembly's (NWRA) draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES). We recognise that border area councils in Northern Ireland will be responding to NWRA on issues of local and regional importance, therefore our response will focus on issues of pan-regional / North – South importance.

We welcome the NWRA's ambition *'for a region that is vibrant, connected, natural, smart and a great place to live, consolidated by a strong settlement strategy focusing on 'People' and 'Places'*. The desire of the regional assembly to achieve transformational change in the region is evident. For any region, its ability to respond to global risks and to capitalise on trends & technological development is critical for its sustainability. As an island, we face short to medium term uncertainty and the NWRA has set out how it will drive inclusive & focused growth in the region.

The National Planning Framework has targeted a population growth of between 160,000 to 180,000 people by 2040 in the NWRA region, with an additional 115,000 jobs required. This will bring both significant implications and opportunities for local & regional services, infrastructure and jobs, therefore NWRA's focus to achieve this ambition, through 211 regional policy objectives is to be commended.

We welcome the strategy's focus on **all-island cohesion** and would stress that it is vital to retain strong links with neighbours to ensure the development of the economy as well as the coordination of economic and social infrastructure on energy, digital infrastructure, tourism, health, transport, environmental management and the joint funding of projects. We maintain there is a strong desire to continue the long-term history of North – South cooperation, as well as between the island and the UK – to ensure the economy and the Peace Process is protected. The interconnectedness of economic growth, industrial processes and social cohesion between the islands must be recognised and safeguarded.

Northern Ireland's councils have powerful legislation to be economic and community hubs and they want to continue to develop and secure cross-border strategic infrastructure and economic projects in order to deliver inclusive growth and sustainable places. As such, the ambition of the RSES is mutually complementary with the councils' local development plans, community plans, economic strategies and regional cooperation initiatives. The RSES intends to become an **enabler for investment** and meets a number of the EU policy objectives in this

regard – we would encourage NWRA to collaborate with NILGA and councils in Northern Ireland to investigate opportunities for joint funding of initiatives where required to deliver maximum regional benefits. Existing **cross-border partnerships**, such as the North West Strategic Growth Partnership and ICBAN as well as their member councils, can play a vital role in identifying, promoting and securing funding for such initiatives. We would also encourage NWRA to consider the role councils in Northern Ireland can play in advocating the benefits of synergies with the RSES to Northern Ireland’s government departments.

We welcome the plans for **roads infrastructure** as laid out in the RSES, including the upgrades for the N2 / A5 which will enhance connectivity in the cross-border region. However, we would emphasise that other road networks such as the N16 / A4, as well as the N2 / A29 are primary connection routes for freight and commuter traffic on an North - South and East - West basis (including onward connections to ports on the Eastern corridor which serve significant FDI and indigenous businesses). NILGA calls on NWRA to highlight the regional significance of these routes and include proposals to improve these in the RSES, since infrastructure in the wider subregion will help circular movement of freight.

We welcome the ambition to strengthen communications links to develop a stable, innovative and secure digital communications and services infrastructure on an all-island basis and to become a smart region. We recognise the importance of **digital connectivity** for the island as a whole and would encourage NWRA and both governments to examine an all-island approach to connectivity and growth, particularly where individual national plans and initiatives have failed to deliver, most notably in the border area. As the border corridor is significantly disadvantaged in terms of broadband connectivity, there will be synergy if policy makers and operators can work together to provide solutions for the border counties. Opportunities to connect to Project Kelvin and other planned full fibre networks should be explored by NWRA and the border area councils.

The RSES also identifies the opportunity to upscale existing **tourism** ventures in the region and to develop further attractions of national and international scale – indeed there are already successful examples of joint management of shared resources such as the Ulster Canal and the Marble Arch Caves UNESCO Global Geopark.

We note the synergies on infrastructure that are prevalent in all three regional assembly plans, in particular the enhancement of the road and rail network, greenways, opening of the canals network and digital connectivity investments. Addressing these issues on an all-island basis across local, regional and central government will bring greater attention, agreed prioritisation and synergies of resources. We would call on the three Regional Assemblies to work with NILGA and our councils to examine how an all-island approach can be facilitated where required. It is to our mutual advantage that regionally significant infrastructure projects on both sides of the border are completed.

The strategy notes the role of the 2010 Framework on Cooperation on Spatial Strategies between Ireland and Northern Ireland. NILGA maintains that there must be a **legal framework for all-island cooperation** and would call for an evaluation of the levels of cooperation under the 2010 Framework with a view to recommending how it can be bolstered. This should take account of:

- (a) the 2015 Review of Public Administration which conferred the responsibility for planning, creating Local Development Plans and Community Plans to councils.
- (b) Regional strategic collaboration on City & Growth Deals that councils are undertaking to develop infrastructure and economic growth in Northern Ireland, in addition to continuing to build strategic alliances and collaborate for mutual synergies across the island.

NILGA believes there are advantages to be gained if NWRA, NI councils and other agencies collaborate to determine how supply chains and businesses on each side of the border can jointly address growth challenges post-Brexit as it will be critical to transforming the region's enterprise base and to ensuring competitiveness in international markets. We would also encourage the NWRA to also reach out to the private sector and education sector in Northern Ireland since this will be critical in the development of a high growth society and can contribute to the objectives to increase the talent base.

We call on departments North and South to address absence of infrastructural development in the central border area to ensure economic opportunities are not lost and that that this area does not fall further behind. The RSES is cognisant of the risks associated with Brexit for the region – both in terms of infrastructure and growth. We would support the NWRA's call for a **ringfenced Brexit fund** for the Border region – this should be over and above any funding secured under the PEACE PLUS programme and would merit a joined-up approach between the two governments.

NILGA encourages NWRA to take account of emerging City & Growth Deals in Northern Ireland, which have the potential to maximise economic growth prospects for the island. These partnerships will accelerate delivery of economic and infrastructural projects, tackle regional inequalities and be a catalyst for social renewal and inclusive growth in Northern Ireland. Rather than an insular approach we would propose that given the interconnectedness of the economies and supply chains in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Great Britain, NILGA can act as an axis for East – West engagement with appropriate local authority groupings (in particular the Borderlands Growth Deal area) and local government associations in England, Scotland and Wales, around port infrastructure, key transport links and growth opportunities.

In the absence of the Assembly and a statutory, Ministerial Partnership Panel for Northern Ireland, the formative "*Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum*" provides political scrutiny and joint awareness on critical issues affecting the sector and more widely. The structure of the forum is illustrated in the attached appendix and NILGA would welcome dialogue and encourage the NWRA to engage with this cross-party body on issues of North - South significance.

Disclaimer: The Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) endeavours to ensure that the information contained within our Website, Policies and other communications is up to date and correct. We do not, however, make any representation that the information will be accurate, current, complete, uninterrupted or error free or that any information or other material accessible from or related to NILGA is free of viruses or other harmful components. NILGA accepts no responsibility for any erroneous information placed by or on behalf of any user or any loss by any person or user resulting from such information