



Submission to the Public Consultation on the Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy

Northern and Western Regional Assembly

February 2019

The All Ireland Smart Cities Forum (AISCF) welcomes the publication of the Northern and Western Regional Assembly's Draft *Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy* (RSES). As a new concept in Irish planning, this document plays a key role in setting out the future direction of the region in its own right, but also in terms of its relations with neighbouring Assembly areas and also Northern Ireland. This rounded and joined-up approach is to be welcomed.

The AISCF welcomes the dedication of a chapter within the draft RSES to 'All Island Cohesion' and the strong links between the NWR and Northern Ireland. The North West-City Region, a partnership between Donegal County Council and Derry City and Strabane District Council (the latter being a member of the AISCF) is a strategic cross-jurisdictional gateway supporting economic competitiveness, collaboration and best practice in planning and development. Within the uncertainties resulting from the UK's proposed exit from the EU, the need to work together on a cross-border basis is more important than ever. Following decades of under-investment, there is a need for continued investment in transport connectivity, the interconnection of electricity grids and telecommunications networks, together with R&D, innovation and skills in the Irish border region.

The recognition of the positive role that the smart city concept can make to regional development is well received. The work of AISCF members, including Galway City, is a clear demonstrator of what can be achieved in this space – and the role 'smart' can play in addressing key social, economic and environmental challenges faced by policy-makers at all levels. The broader objective of delivering a smart region through high-tech digital infrastructure will only be achievable through taking a more rounded approach that moves beyond the digital infrastructure only and encapsulates the links with R&D, Innovation Centres, higher education training and talent, building and urban design. In addition, there is a need to focus-in on the retention of (IT) skills – particularly in emerging clusters/agglomerations – thus contributing to the resiliency of the region.

The development of the smart region should be tied into the Atlantic Economic Corridor initiative, ensuring that any infrastructural improvements along this corridor includes the relevant ducting/digital infrastructure to improve connectivity across the region. That almost 25% of the Region's population currently has no access to broadband for example, is a real concern. Clarifications continue to be sought on the future of the National Broadband Plan – and when/if it will be delivered. Such challenges – and solutions for - must be picked up in the emerging new National Digital Strategy.

The Smart City Concept offers opportunities for living labs, test-beds and the deployment of disruptive technologies. In addition to supporting the Galway Metropolitan Area, consideration needs to be given to how this concept can support the development of the Regional Growth centres – with links to the local Universities and Research Centres.

The region is already home to a number of industries which have not only the potential to accelerate the regional economy but also further lead to innovations in technology or embrace emerging technological developments - from agri-food to creative industries (film, gaming), to life sciences, to med-tech, to advanced manufacturing, to marine renewables, to engineering, etc.

The commitment within the National Development Plan to the establishment of Technology and Innovation Poles (TIPs) in association with the Institutes of Technology, is welcomed by the AISCF. This gives rise to the potential for four TIPs across the Metropolitan and Regional Growth Centres in the NWRA – in Athlone, Galway/Mayo, Sligo and Letterkenny; offering a strategic spatial coverage. Strategically, it may also be appropriate that these TIPs are established as the Smart Region Hubs as envisaged in Regional Policy 155.

In terms of the smart agenda, we welcome the consideration being given to its potential role in rural development. The EU are actively investigating the role of smart towns and villages in local and regional development policy and practice – an initiative being led by the Committee of the Regions. In late 2018, Leitrim County Council hosted the first National Smart Towns and Villages Conference, an event which demonstrated the currently latent potential of this concept. We would welcome the NWRA embracing a role in the diffusion of ‘smart’ beyond our urban centres. The Forum will support any such initiatives where we can.

The impact of connectivity on quality of life cannot be under-estimated. This includes access to a high quality integrated public transport system and digital networks. A major challenge for the region is providing alternatives to the car – a shift that can only be achieved by realising a better balance in the distribution of activity and ensuring people can live close to where they work. Promotion of the concept of compact growth will go some way to alleviating this over-dependence and encourage more active modes of travel. To this end, the AISCF, welcomes the commitment to growing the network of walkways, greenways and cycleways. There is also the potential to invest in the greening of the infrastructure along these routes – smart lighting, smart bins, smart benches, etc.

The promotion of green infrastructure and the transition to a low carbon economy are ambitious goals for a region so heavily dependent on the private car. As a counter-balance to the vast array of pressures being experienced in the Greater Dublin Region, achieving a better geographical spread of population and job growth, leading to a better proximity between where people live and work, must be a core objective for the NWRA. The role of technology in achieving this goal cannot be under-estimated.

Linked to environmental quality, and shifting to a low-carbon economy, is the concept of e-mobility and e-cars. There is a need for a regional conversation on the future of e-mobility in this region, and the provision of the infrastructure needed to enable this shift away from the traditional car. And this is not only about cars – but also public transport, trucks/vans, last mile delivery, etc.

Opportunities for expanding the public transport fleet across such a rural region, with a widely dispersed population are limited; thus requiring new thinking around car-share schemes, uber-type models for rural areas, etc. While not directly within this region, Clare County Council received funding under an SBIR Challenge in 2018 to consider new solutions to the rural transport dilemma – with systems under consideration including an Uber-style app to allow for ride-sharing transport, and the use of autonomous cars.

In terms of a clean and healthy environment, it is striking how smart technologies are currently being piloted by a number of Councils across the State to improve air quality, water quality, flood management, etc. – with clear potential there for this to be expanded to noise and light

pollution through the SBIR Challenges operated by Enterprise Ireland. The AISCF welcomes the funding award to Donegal County Council this week to use special sensors to monitor rivers, air quality, traffic, recycling and road temperatures (Department of Rural and Community Affairs' Digital Innovation Programme).

Climate change is a reality, with diverse and wide-ranging impacts. Becoming a low-carbon economy through the reduction of greenhouse gases, minimising energy demand and waste is key to reducing the effects of climate change. This requires a shift to clean mobility and a reduction in car-demand (commuting).

A resilient supply of energy is also critical for the future growth of the region. The North/South Interconnector is a key project to ensure continued supply for the growth envisioned – and more. There is a dependence on electricity and, to a lesser extent, gas at present, and this needs to be diversified to include renewable energies – wind, solar, marine, bio-fuels. The promotion of Smart Grids and Smart electricity management are two initiatives that need to be actioned across the region as a whole.

The acknowledgement of the changing demographic profile of the region – and the implications of this for future housing supply, access to services, access to transport – is to be welcomed. Planning for age and families is an increasingly critical objective of the planning system, and a space in which technology can play a key role.

Appendix 1: All Ireland Smart Cities Forum (AISCF)

The All Ireland Smart Cities Forum is a community of practice focused on the advancement of cities in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland through the deployment of, and value creation from, technology enabled urban services (i.e. smart programmes). It is characterised by practitioners with a common sense of purpose who agree to work together to solve problems, share knowledge, cultivate best practice and foster innovation. The cities involved in the Forum are:

- Smart Dublin (represented by the four local authorities)
- Waterford City and County
- Cork City and Cork Smart Gateway
- Limerick City and County
- Galway City
- Derry City and Strabane
- Newry
- Belfast City

Each city is represented by one senior official from the relevant local authority and/or a representative from their smart city programme office or equivalent.

The use of technology is viewed as an enabler of social and economic good and, as such, city participants will, through this Forum, represent their perspectives irrespective of their own functional expertise. It is recognised that there is a diversity in cities across the island of Ireland in terms of urban and or regional responsibilities.

The main principle of the Forum is to be citizen-focused. All objectives and tasks originating from the Forum will adhere to the principle of: city users as customers.

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