



Northern & Western  
Regional Assembly

---

# More Urban, More Smart, More Specialised, More Green

---

## Submission on the Partnership Agreement 2021-2027



Ireland's European Structural and  
Investment Funds Programmes  
2014-2020

Co-funded by the Irish Government  
and the European Union



European Union  
European Regional  
Development Fund



The Northern and Western Region published its Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy in January 2020 (<https://www.nwra.ie/rses/>). It adopts a “place-based” approach and involves attempts to tap into the economic potential that remains unused and not identifiable to outside agencies, so that all parts of regions, be they cities, towns or their rural hinterlands, can contribute to national development.

Key Regional Needs:

1. Development of compact urban centres with critical mass in population; encouraging the revitalisation of urban areas and reinhabitation of urban cores.
2. Provision of connectivity and access, enabled by physical and technology infrastructures with capacity resilience and quality especially post-BREXIT.
3. Establishment of competitive, smart and integrated public transport networks within and between cities and urban areas.
4. Nurturing of world-class infrastructure and competitive services.
5. Growing our third level infrastructures, access to skills and research, and innovation.
6. Availability of property solutions – including ‘ready-to-go’ commercial properties, ‘landing spaces’, co-working spaces and flexible property solutions.
7. Co-location or dynamic clustering, enabling connectivity and linkages within and between suppliers and purchasers, between enterprises and Higher Education Institutes.
8. Development of quality of life factors and sense of Place, including harnessing the social, and cultural dimensions of the living experience of communities, including the unique social, linguistic and cultural dimensions of our Gaeltacht communities.

Therefore, the collective policy framework and priorities of both the NPF and the NWRA’s RSES are aligned with the principle of Policy Objectives (PO) of the ERDF and the ESF, namely:

- PO1: A Smart Europe by promoting innovative and smart economic transformation
- PO2: A greener, low carbon Europe by promoting clean and fair energy transition, green and blue investment, the circular economy, climate adaptation and risk prevention and management
- PO4: A more social Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights

Furthermore, we acknowledge PO5 which seeks “A Europe closer to citizens”, with a minimum of 6% of the ERDF resources earmarked for initiatives aimed at sustainable urban and rural development.

### Regional Response

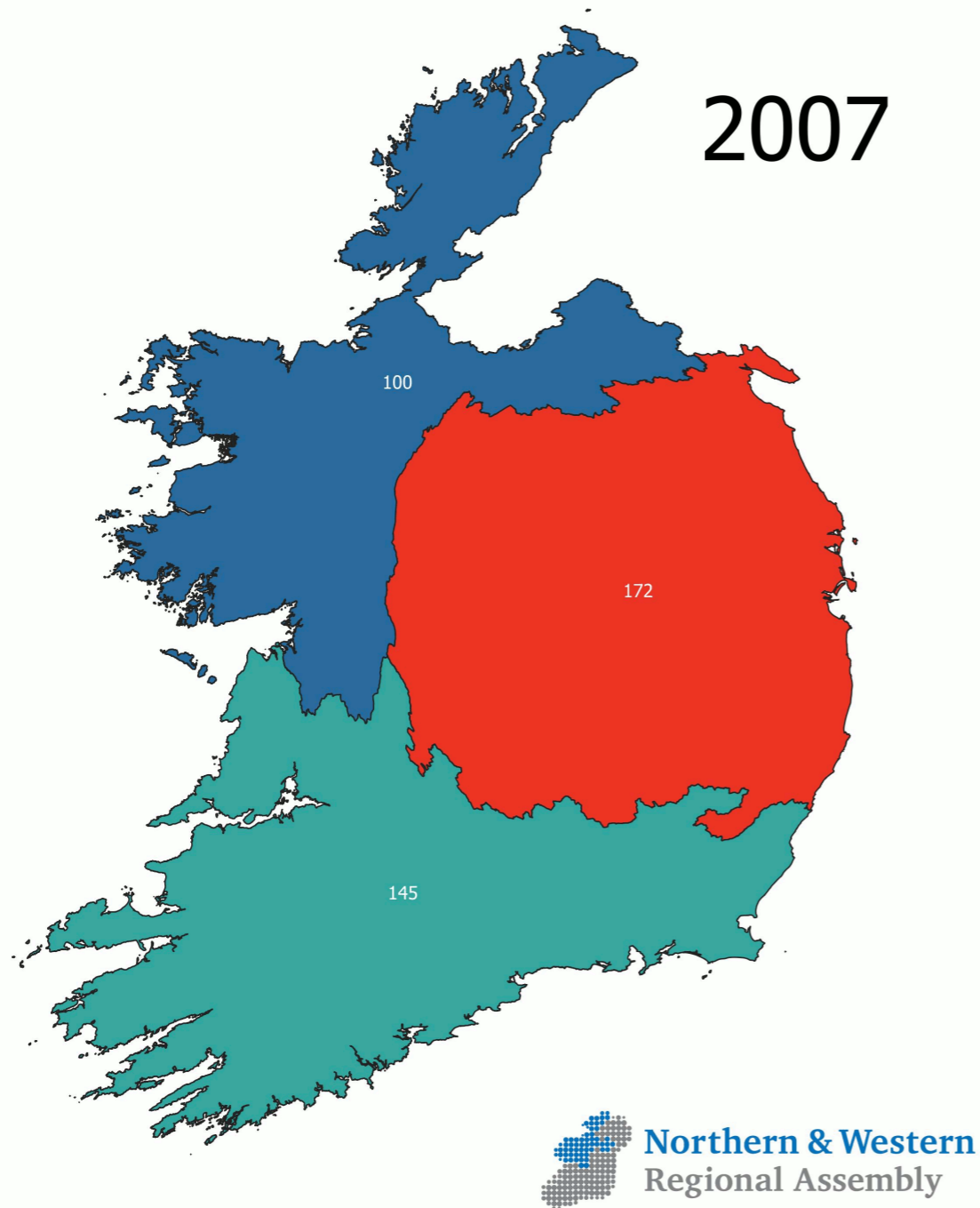
The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) provides a high-level development framework for the Northern and Western Region that supports the implementation of the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the relevant economic policies and objectives of Government. It provides a 12-year strategy to deliver the transformational change that is necessary to achieve the objectives and vision for the region.

‘It has been well documented that the Northern & Western region has not performed economically as well as its fellow regions in Ireland and relative to the EU norm. As a result of the regions poor economic performance, the European Commission has downgraded the region from a “More Developed Region” to a “Transition Region” post 2020’. ERDF / ESF has a significant role to play addressing this.

A coherent approach to ERDF / ESF Operational Programmes could accelerate growth in the region. Key enablers in pursuit of this vision are **priorities** that make the region:

1. **More Urban** - Stronger urban infrastructure through policies encouraging more compact growth and creating a built environment conducive to sustainable growth.
2. **More Smart** - Smart Region will create new know-how, business and jobs by utilizing openness, digitalization and innovative partnerships. This can be developed regionally or nationally (across 3 Regional Assemblies) and tailored to enhance the green and specialised transition.
3. **More Specialised** - Simultaneously, throughout our extensive consultation, and according to the regional innovation actors, increased collaboration and enhanced entrepreneurial discovery processes are essential, in order to realise the full potential of regional collaborative innovation (smart specialisation).
4. **More Green** - Climate Transition is identified as a regional priority focusing on decarbonisation, circular efficiency and climate adaptation.

Purchasing power standard (PPS, EU27 from 2019), per inhabitant in percentage of the EU27 (from 2019) average



## Regional Disparity

**KEY ISSUE:** Identified by the National Planning Framework, Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy, National Development Plan, EU Country Specific Report



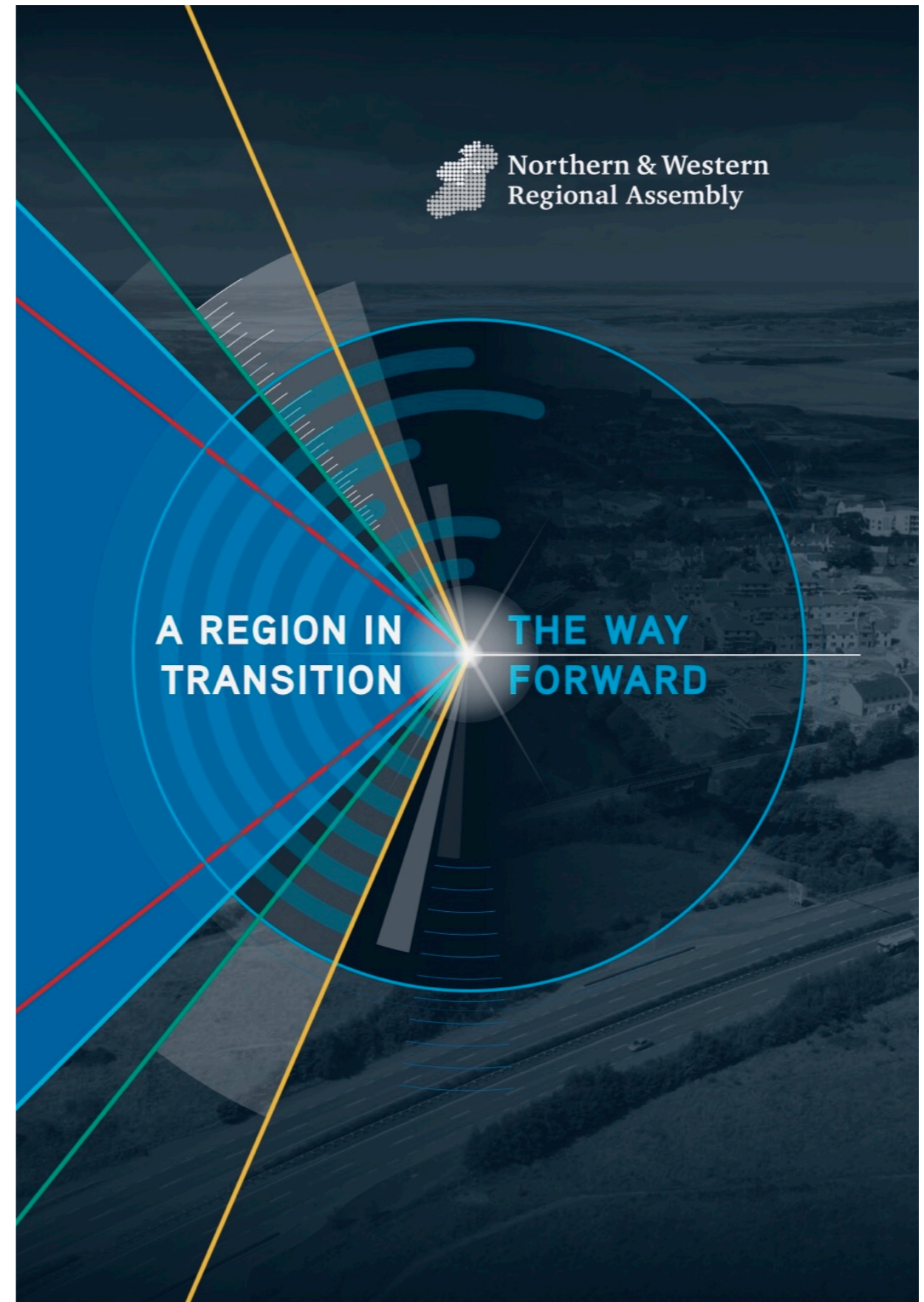
# Profile

As of Q3 2019, there was a total of 397,000 people employed in the Northern & Western region. The West accounted for 55.4% of the region's overall labour market, followed by the Border region at 44.6%. In 2018, the median household income in the Northern & Western region was €34,396, below the State average of €42,183. On a sub-regional level, the West had the highest median household income at €36,590, followed by the Border region at €32,884, which was the lowest out of all the NUTS 3 regions of Ireland.

In terms of its enterprise base, the Northern & Western region has been able to develop and attract a number of firms involved in **Technology and Knowledge Intensive** economy, with employment in these sectors accounting for 40.8% of the labour market in the region in 2018; 5.3 percentage points below the corresponding share for the EU28. Such a share reflects the rural structure of the region, with Manufacturing, Wholesale and Retail, Agriculture and Fishing representing some of the most important sectors in its economy. Nevertheless, Galway City, Sligo and Letterkenny are home to prominent multinational companies operating in sectors such as life science, ICT, engineering, financial services and the creative industries.

Instrumental to ensuring the future development of these kind of sectors across the region, will be the ability of each sub region to cultivate an ecosystem that grows its own human capital base, an essential component for regional growth in an increasingly knowledge driven economy. In this regard, investment in lifelong learning, digital access, education, research & development and SMEs will be key. The region has had varying degrees of success in developing these areas in recent years.

For the Northern & Western region, the percentage of adults aged 25 to 64 years old participating in **lifelong learning** activities stood at 10.4% in 2018; 4.6 percentage point off the EU's 2020 target of 15%, with recent national improvements in this area recognised by the Commission's "Semester: Country Report – Ireland". However, the degree of success has been quite mixed when examined on a sub-regional level, with participation rates ranging from 13% in the West, to a low of 8% in the Border region, as of Q4 2018. In terms of **educational standards**, 47% and 37% of adults aged 25 to 64 years old in the West and the Border region had a third level qualification respectively, compared to the corresponding State average of 47%.



# Profile cont....

Additionally, 10% of adults aged 25 to 64 years old in the Border region only had a primary level education or no formal education in 2019, with the equivalent State average being 5%. In contrast, 5% of people aged 25 to 64 years old in the West only had a primary level education or no formal education.

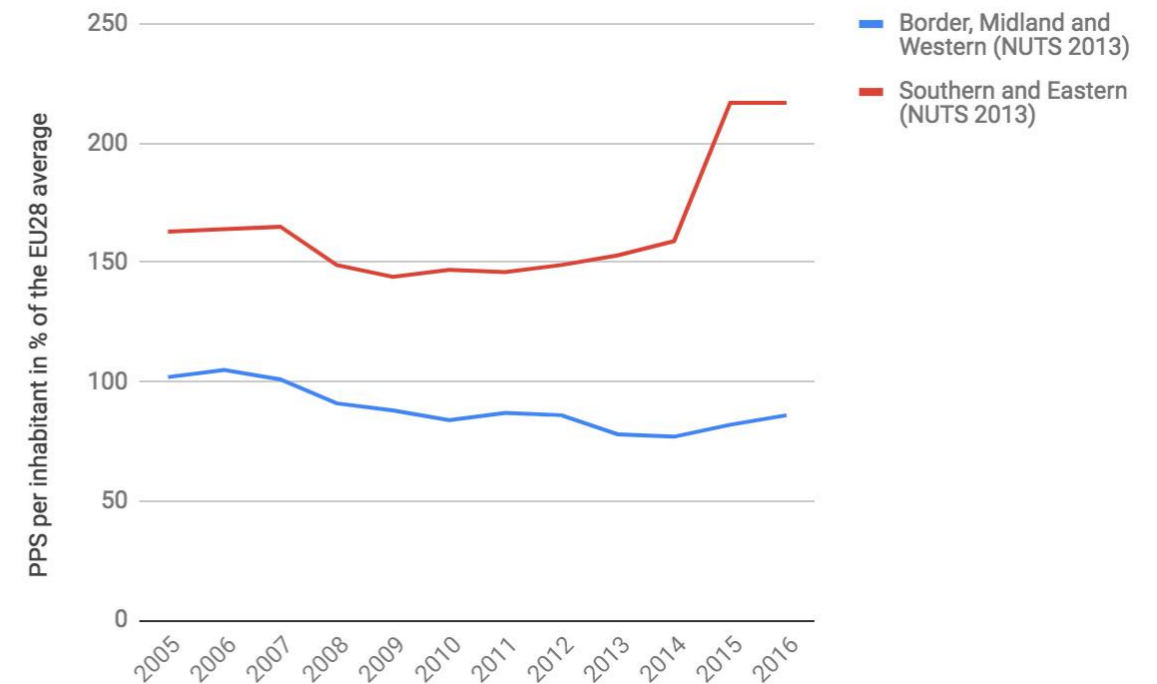
The lack of access to **high speed broadband** – particularly in rural communities – has been cited by the European Commission for regional differences in skilled labour, productivity and competitiveness, in their “Semester: Country Report – Ireland”. In the Northern & Western region, 75% of households had a fixed broadband connection in 2019, which was 11 percentage points lower than the EU28 average of 86%.

Access to fixed broadband varied somewhat on a sub-regional level, with 78% of households in the West having a fixed broadband connection, compared to the corresponding rate of 71% in the Border region.

As per the European Commission’s “Regional Innovation Scoreboard”, the region’s **innovation system** ranked as a “Strong Innovator” relative to the EU average in 2019, with its overall index score of 104.0 above the EU average index set at 100. Compared to the EU average, the region scored relatively well in key areas such as tertiary education levels (147.66), SMEs innovating in house (109.54) and Scientific Co-Publications (107.77). The region performed below average in areas such as EPO Patent Applications (60.43), Lifelong learning (66.99), R&D Public Spending (67.28), and R&D Private Spending (77.86).

## Policy Context

The National Planning Framework (NPF) states that the population of the Northern & Western Region is to increase to almost 1 million people by 2040, an increase which could range from 160,000 to 180,000 relative to current population levels. Although such growth will bring extensive opportunities it will also bring challenges. With respect to the policy objectives of the ESF and ERDF, the most pressing challenge will be developing an economy that is driven by knowledge and skills, while simultaneously ensuring an inclusive transition to a low carbon society.



In this context, the NPF seeks to target many of the factors instrumental to addressing this challenge, with investment in programmes for lifelong learning, education, skills development, innovation and entrepreneurship, all prioritised under the National Strategic Outcome (NSO) 5, while the provision of an inclusive transition to a low carbon and sustainable society is addressed via NSO 8 and 9. The region’s RSES - which was prepared to support the implementation of the NPF - seeks to determine at a regional scale appropriate policy responses to these areas, as evident from the various Regional Policy Objectives outlined in the document.

The NWRA’s RSES recognises the need for further development of the region’s research and innovation capacity, with additional investment and support advocated for the regions existing Higher Education Institutes and research assets, along with the need to develop a Technological University as part of the Connacht /Ulster Alliance. Support for skills development and training is recognised by the RSES as an essential component to inclusive growth in the future, while the roll out of the National Broadband Plan and the need to encourage greater adoption of digital technologies across the region is seen as vital to improving the region’s offering as both a place to live and work.

Furthermore, the RSES outlines specific areas of focus to allow for a more sustainable and low carbon society, including the development of “Smart Cities and Smart Regions”, green infrastructure, renewable energy and technology development, climate change adoption policies and future proofing of infrastructure.



# Clear Regional Ask

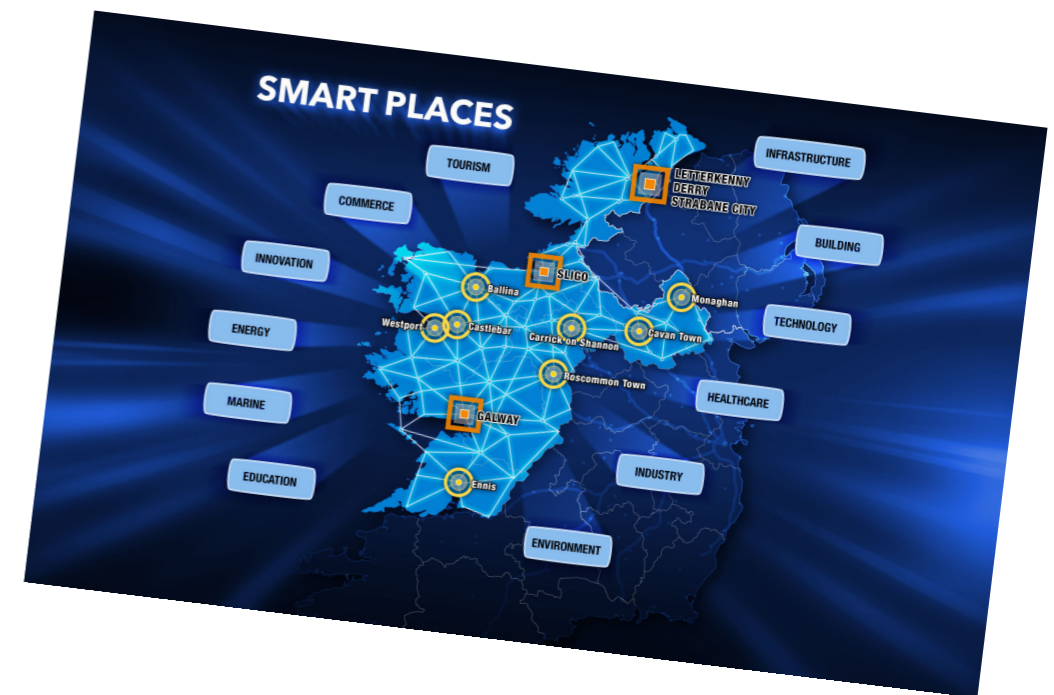
## What is it?

In conjunction to this, the RSES aims to ensure the delivery of infrastructure that will facilitate the NPF priority of “NSO1: Compact Growth” and “NSO 4: Sustainable Mobility”. To achieve this, the RSES has developed a settlement strategy for the region, which sets out the key locations for population and employment growth; consisting of the three regional growth centres of the Galway metropolitan area, Sligo and Letterkenny along with 8 key towns, with their development fundamental to ensuring balanced and sustainable population and employment growth across the region.

Therefore, the collective policy framework and priorities of both the NPF and the NWRA’s RSES are aligned with the POs of the ERDF / ESF,

### Thus we would advocate for a Regional Operational Programme tailored to:

1. **More Urban** - Stronger urban infrastructure through policies encouraging more compact growth and creating a built environment conducive to sustainable growth.
2. **More Smart** - Smart Region will create new know-how, business and jobs by utilizing openness, digitalization and innovative partnerships. This can be developed regionally or nationally (across 3 Regional Assemblies) and tailored to enhance the green and specialised transition.
3. **More Specialised** - Simultaneously, throughout our extensive consultation, and according to the regional innovation actors, increased collaboration and enhanced entrepreneurial discovery processes are essential, in order to realise the full potential of regional collaborative innovation (smart specialisation).
4. **More Green** - Climate Transition is identified as a regional priority focusing on decarbonisation, circular efficiency and climate adaptation.



# 1. More Urban

Cohesion policy is at the heart of urban sustainability. For the 2021-27 period, the European Commission proposes a stronger urban and territorial dimension by introducing a new policy objective “Europe closer to citizens” supporting a place-based approach and engagement of local authorities, civil society and citizens in delivering on local challenges. Furthermore, it proposes the launch of a new European Urban Initiative to support cities with capacity building, innovative solutions, knowledge, policy development and communication.

In **tandem** with this policy shift, Ireland through the NPF has introduced ‘Metropolitan Planning’ across our 5 Cities and larger Growth Centres (Sligo, Letterkenny and Athlone).

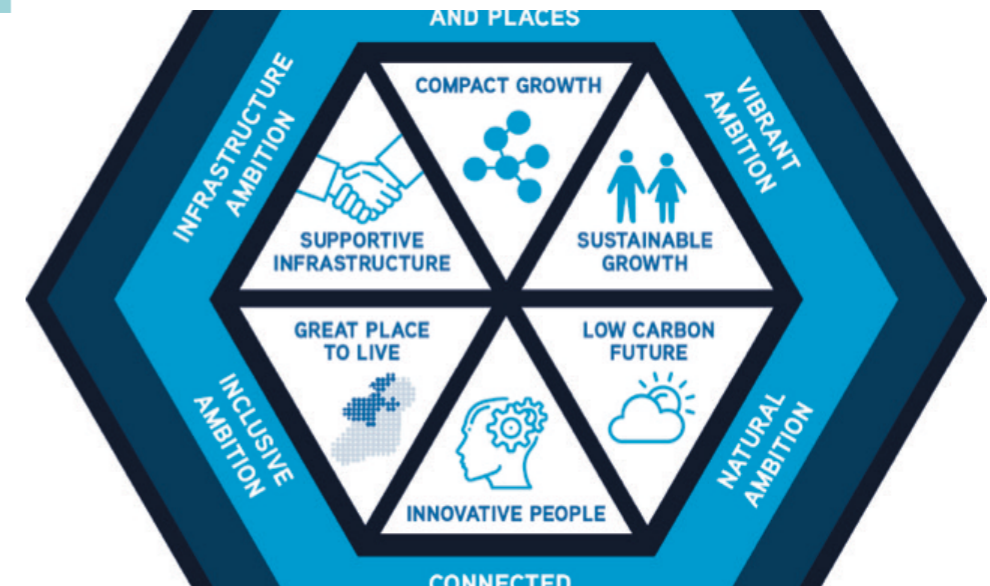
Contained in our RSES specific to this policy shift are a set of comprehensive objectives that aim to create centres of scale which have the critical mass to drive growth, with an aligned functional role and level of services that support sustainable growth. The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy contains the following urban strategies:

1. Galway Metropolitan Area Strategy
2. Sligo Growth Centre Strategy
3. Letterkenny Growth Centre Strategy
4. Athlone Growth Centre Strategy

Each of these have a common thread (below) with simultaneous implementation groupings made up of Departments, Local Authorities, State Agencies, HEI’s, Innovation actors, industry and local socio-economic groupings. Each location would have a set of ‘identified projects’ for development.

The common threads include:

1. Strategic dimension
2. Territorially focused
3. Governance arrangements
4. Cross sectoral implementation
5. Funding and finance
6. Monitoring systems



Relevant Sections contained in the RSES can be found between **Sect: 3.3 to Sect:4.0** and have objectives relevant to ESF / ERDF like:

## RPO 3.1

Develop urban places of regional-scale through: (a).Delivering on the population targets for the Metropolitan and Regional Growth Centres through compact growth: (b).Delivering significant compact growth in Key Towns; and

## RPO 3.6.4

The Assembly support the regeneration and development of city centre sites at Galway Harbour, Ceannt Station and Headford Road (S/M).

## RPO 3.7.2

Sligo County Council is in the process of preparing a roadmap to the development of Sligo as a ‘Smart City’. It will be essential to secure further investment in this process and in the infrastructure and equipment needed to bring Sligo fully into the digital age.

## RPO 4.5.2

A regional Energy Hub could be considered to integrate focus and investment for urban areas.

## RPO 6.3.7

Local Transport Plans (LTP) will be prepared for the Key Regional Centres and Towns, based on the Area Based Transport Assessment (ABTA) guidance produced by NTA and TII.

# 2. More Smart

Policy Objective 1 of the new framework for EU Cohesion Policy aims to deliver smarter Europe. 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, the RSES ensures policies and systems are in place that can help people transition to a world much more digitally connected. This has significant economic and spatial implications and if not considered strategically could exacerbate current challenges particularly in the more rural areas of the region.

The concept of Smart Region is an extension and the next phase in the development of a Smart City model, which recognises that, for the region to achieve our smart potential future, we need to consider the opportunities, benefits and challenges that smart technologies can offer beyond the traditional applications in a mostly urban context.

Adopting a Smart approach to building our regional innovation system encourages the rapid diffusion of knowledge, skills and best practice. Identified need emerging from our consultation process focuses on four key areas, and they align with programmes announced in the National Development Plan 2018.

Underpinning the strategy is a comprehensive set of Objectives tailored around Smart Region that focused on mobility, environment, people & economy. Examples include:

**RPO 6.4**

Support the development of utilisation of data and insight-driven technology, sensors and the IoT in our airports, seaports/harbours in their transition towards becoming Smart Ports.

**RPO 6.55**

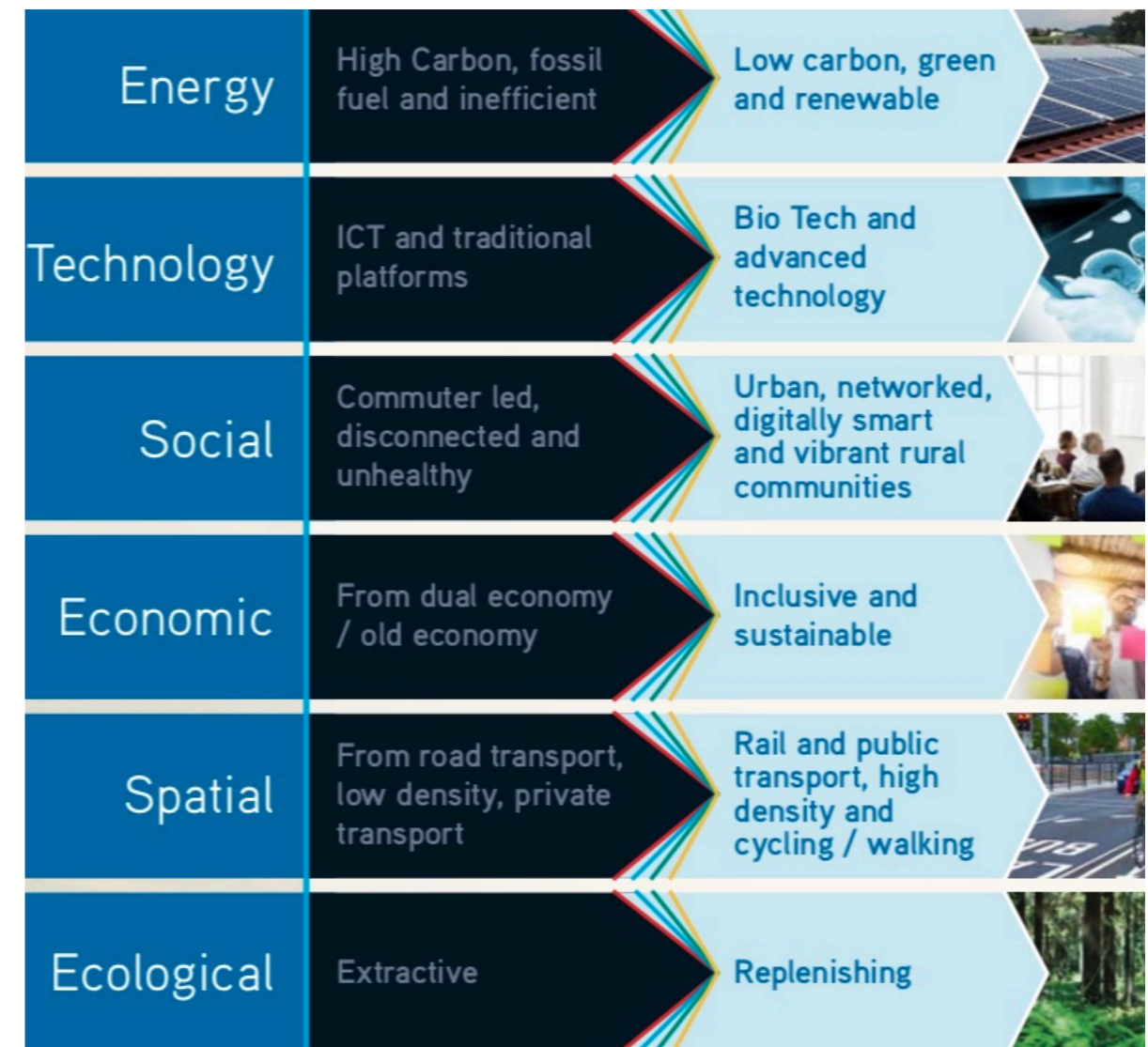
Establish a “Smart Region Hub”: Build on the Smart Places foundation to craft a vision for our sustained and integrated regional Smart future.

**RPO 6.50**

To assist in the establishment of New ‘Technology and Innovation Poles’ (TIPs) encouraged in our Metropolitan and Regional Growth centres.

**RPO 6.56**

Enable access and utilisation of public data to improve planning, stimulate economic development, encourage people into business.





# 3. More Specialised

The Northern and Western Region is the perfect location for innovation and change to be embraced and to provide a collaborative platform for the development of a Smart Specialisation Strategy with stakeholders. Harnessing resources from ESF / ERDF and tailoring interventions in line with the 'More Urban', More Smart and More Green objectives.

This approach shall be an integral tool in developing the region's innovative capacity to nurture businesses, artists, creatives and innovators, thus generating economic growth in key industry sectors.

Adopting a Smart approach to building our regional innovation system encourages the rapid diffusion of knowledge, skills and best practice. Identified need emerging from our consultation process focuses on four key areas, and they align with programmes announced in the National Development Plan 2018. Provisions contained within the RSES include

1. Fostering regional Research and Development and innovation capacities in line with regional economic development objectives. Utilising industry or technology-specific competence centres, competitiveness poles involving public and private organisations, promoting technology transfer etc. New 'Technology and Innovation Poles' (TIPs) will be developed through Enterprise Ireland and the Industrial Development Authority (IDA) to drive regional and rural development. These TIPs should be considered essential designations for Galway, Athlone, Sligo and Letterkenny.
2. Stimulating innovation in SMEs by promoting 3rd level-enterprise cooperation networks particularly with Local Enterprise Offices and Local Authorities; by supporting business networks and clusters of SMEs, by facilitating SMEs' access to advanced business support services, and by improving the effectiveness of these services (networks).
3. Promoting entrepreneurship and new business development by facilitating the economic exploitation of new ideas, by fostering the creation of new business from universities, IoT's and existing enterprises,
4. Working with 3rd Level sector, Skills Fora and FET's to enhance/tailor training to the emerging innovation system and underpinning the green / smart transition.

Underpinning the strategy is a comprehensive set of Objectives tailored around the entrepreneurial discovery process with tangible projects in the pipeline. Amongst these objectives include:

## **RPO 6.45**

Leverage the Smart region approach to secure EU and private financing to accelerate business growth and economic development.

## **RPO 4.26**

Support the further development of AgInnovation clusters in the Northern and Western Region - pushing convergence between farm, research, technology and commercialisation.

## **RPO 4.5.2**

Increase cluster of R&D focused on technological application to renewable energy

## **RPO 6.46**

Actively develop the regional innovation ecosystem's capacity to nurture businesses, artists, creatives and innovators and generate economic growth in key industry sectors aligned with Enterprise 2025 Objectives and NDP investments.

## **RPO 6.47**

Promote a local and regional 'Open Data' policy and build a Regional Data Infrastructure platform - data is at the basis of the smart approach. Data infrastructure is a shared technological platform where data can be collected, processed, shared and analysed from across the region.

## **RPO6.48**

To enable Public and Private Sector creation of a digitally connected innovation corridor connecting existing, emerging and new incubation spaces (examples include: Portershed, Building Block etc.) that will attract businesses and industries working in the digital economy and creative industries.

# 4. More Green

This region has the unique natural endowment of ample carbon-neutral, energy supplies that gives us an opportunity of forging and leading the new clean economy of the future. The RSES sets out policies to address climate change across all strategic areas focusing on **decarbonisation, circular efficiency and climate adaptation**.

There are acute objectives in the RSES promoting innovative investments;

- To improve energy efficiency,
- Additional renewable energy production capacity,
- Digital management systems developed for smart grids

There are an extensive set of provisions contained within the RSES, but some include:

## RPO 4.16

The NWRA shall co-ordinate the identification of potential renewable energy sites of scale in collaboration with Local Authorities and other stakeholders within 3 years of the adoption of the RSES. The identification of such sites (which may extend to include energy storage solutions) will be based on numerous site selection criteria including environmental matters, and potential grid connections.

## RPO 5.1

The Assembly will support the preparation through CARO's and Local Authorities the preparation and implementation of Local Climate Strategies which will, inter alia, address vulnerability to climate risks and provide prioritised actions in accordance with the guiding principles of the National Adaptation Framework.

## RPO 5.18

The Regional Assembly shall collaborate with Local Authorities, Fáilte Ireland, Waterways Ireland, DTAS, and other relevant stakeholders in developing an integrated network of Greenways across the Region's catchments.

## RPO 4.20

Support and encourage the development of the bio-economy sector, and facilitate its development for energy production, heat, and storage distribution, in particular advocating Combined Heat and Power Units integrated into District Heating networks, in combination with Pyrogenic Carbon Capture and Storage (PyCCS) or Bio-Energy Carbon capture and storage (BECCS)

## RPO 4.22

Safeguard and support the strategic role and function of existing test and development sites, for example, the Atlantic Marine Energy Test Site (AMETS). The test site forms part of Ireland's Ocean Energy Strategy and is being developed following the Offshore Renewable Energy Development Plan.

