1: Introduction

As outlined in Figure 1, the Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs) are a part of the overarching policy framework of Project Ireland 2040, which includes the National Planning Framework (NPF), the National Development Plan (NDP), the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES) and County and City Development Plans.

Within this policy framework, the specific purpose of the LECPs is to set out the objectives and actions needed to promote and support economic and community development within the relevant Local Authority area over the next six-year period,¹ as provided for in the Local Government Reform Act 2014. In doing so, the LECPs are one of the primary mechanisms – at local level – to bring forward relevant actions arising from national and regional strategies and policies that have a local remit.

Figure 1: Policy structure of Project Ireland 2040

Source: Local Economic and Community Plans Guidelines 2021

As noted in the 2021 guidelines of the LECPs – and in line with the Local Government Reform Act 2014 – the LECPs must be consistent with the appropriate RSESs and City and County Development Plans. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, there was a limited level of up-to-date data specifically for the Donegal County Council area, with limitations in this regard credited to the latest Census being delayed due to the outbreak of COVID-19.

Although data with respect to Donegal is available from Census 2016, such information is quite dated and the forthcoming Census 2022 results - which are due to be released next year - will provide significant insights to Donegal County Council with respect to the implementation of their Development Plan and their LECP. Considering this policy requirement and mindful of the lack of up-to-date data on Donegal, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly has prepared this “LECP Briefing Note” ; the purpose of which is to highlight up-to-date county socio-economic indicators that are available and which will help inform the objectives and actions of the LECP. In this regard, this “LECP Briefing Note” outlines the performance and data source of socio-economic indicators related to Donegal in the following three areas, namely:

- Economic indicators
- Quality of life indicators
- Environmental and low carbon economy indicators

It is also important to note that the data that is presented in the “LECP Briefing Note” for Donegal County Council will be available through the “Regional Development Monitor”, which is currently being prepared by the three Regional Assemblies of Ireland in partnership with the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO) in Maynooth University.

Specifically, the “Regional Development Monitor” will be available online, free of charge and will monitor around 60 socio-economic indicators under the following four themes, namely:

- Our People and Places
- Our Green and Sustainable Future
- Our Region’s Economy
- Our All-Island Perspective

The majority of socio-economic indicators that will be monitored in the “Regional Development Monitor” meet the following three principles:

- The data is provided by a reliable source
- The data can be updated every year, which allows for annual evaluations outside of the Census
- The data is as up-to-date as possible

In doing so, the “Regional Development Monitor” will be an important online data platform that will monitor national, regional and county trends on key socio-economic indicators and will be a useful policy tool for Local Authorities in preparing their LECPs and monitoring up-to-date trends in their respective Local Authority areas.
2: Regional Strategic Context

The RSES is crafted on the principle that it wants to work collaboratively to deliver effective regional development for all our communities, regardless of administrative boundaries. This means that we need to understand their catchments and their potential and to enable the spatial development opportunities specific to each of the sub-regions.²

The RSES aims to be responsive to trends – such as urbanisation, digitisation and globalisation – whilst also interpreting socio-economic and environment risks by connecting our plans to the United Nation’s (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the EU’s Growth Strategy (including the EU Green Deal) and the National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs) of the NPF.

At its core, the RSES recognises the weak urban infrastructure in the Northern and Western Region and that this region has not prospered economically compared to the other two NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland. This is evident from the reclassification of the Northern and Western Region by the European Commission from a ‘More Developed Region’ to a ‘Transition Region’ for the funding period of 2021 to 2027³ with other economic challenges also highlighted in the NWRA’s recent publication ‘A Region in Transition: The Way Forward’.⁴ Furthermore, the European Parliament’s Committee on Regional Development has categorised the region as a “Lagging Region”, which is a region characterised by extremely low growth which is divergent from the rest of its country;⁵ while the European Commission’s 2021 ‘Regional Innovation Scoreboard’ classified the Northern and Western Region as a ‘Moderate Innovator’; the only region on the island of Ireland to hold such a status.⁶

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³ Sub-regions available via Figure 2 of the RSES: [https://www.nwra.ie/pdfs/NWRA-RSES-2020-2032.pdf](https://www.nwra.ie/pdfs/NWRA-RSES-2020-2032.pdf)


Within this context, the RSES responded by adopting a clear strategy that aims to deliver on the key elements known to inform business location choices, namely:

**KEY BUSINESS ELEMENTS**

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 (including national and international), 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 with capacity, resilience and quality.

5. Growing our third level infrastructures, access to skills and research, development and innovation.


7. Co-location or dynamic clustering, enabling connectivity and linkages within and between suppliers and purchasers, between enterprises and Higher Education Institutes (HEIs).

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.

Furthermore, the RSES has also introduced the concept of a ‘Growth Framework’ that links strategic and operational challenges with prioritised capital interventions. The ‘Growth Framework’ will be the basis for determining metrics, linking with NSOs and assessing the region’s actual contribution to the UN’s SDGs. The Growth framework incorporates five ‘Growth Ambitions’ that define each priority and how they are mutually complementary with a focus on ‘People and Places’. In this regard, our ambition is for a region that is "Vibrant", "Natural", "Connected", "Inclusive" and a “Great Place to Live”, consolidated by a strong settlement strategy focusing on “People and Places”.

It brings a new “place-based” approach that involves tapping into the economic potential that remains unused, so that all parts of the Northern and Western Region – whether they be cities, towns, or their rural hinterlands – can contribute to national development.

“The LECPs of the Northern and Western Region have an opportunity to deliver on the vision and objectives outlined within the RSES.”
Section 3 of this briefing note analyses economic indicators, specifically focusing on trends in the following areas:

- Disposable income per capita
- Enterprise base
- COVID-19 employment impact
- Employment supported by Enterprise Agencies
- Human capital profile
- Project Ireland 2040 funds
- Sectoral specialisms

### 3.1: Disposable Income Per Capita

A key indication of the economic wellbeing of a geographical area is the level of disposable income per head of population, which is essentially the average person’s income after deducting taxes and social contributions and including social benefits.

As evident from Figure 3, average disposable income per head of population in Donegal was estimated to be €18,656 in 2020, which was below the State average of €23,615. Although average disposable income levels in Donegal have recovered from the previous financial crisis, it should be noted that the gap in disposable income levels between Donegal and the State average has progressively increased over the past decade, rising from a gap of €2,869 per head of population in 2010 to €4,959 in 2020.

### 3.2: Enterprise Base

The vibrancy of a geographical area’s commercial environment is a significant factor in determining its economic wellbeing. International institutions such as the OECD have stated that the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals can only be achieved if countries manage to build up a strong enterprise base – particularly SMEs – thereby highlighting their importance to regional economic development.7

Commercial vacancy rates provide a general indication of the level of commercial vibrancy and activity within a geographical area. Based on GeoDirectory data, the commercial vacancy rate in Donegal stood at 14.8 per cent as of December 2021, which was 3.1 percentage points higher than the State average of 11.7 per cent.

In terms of the higher level towns and villages that have been highlighted in the current Donegal County Development Plan, An Bun Beag-Doiri Beaga had the highest commercial vacancy rate in Donegal as of December 2021, with a rate of 31.5 per cent. Further information in this regard is available via Figure 4.

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7 [https://oecd-development-matters.org/2017/04/03/unlocking-the-potential-of-smes-for-the-sdgs/]
Figure 3: Disposable income per capita for Donegal and the State Average, 2000-2020*

Source: CSO. *2020 is based on an estimate from the CSO

Figure 4: Commercial vacancy rates of the higher-level towns and villages of Donegal, December 2021

Source: GeoDirectory®

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Data provided by GeoDirectory through a data license agreement with the 3 Regional Assemblies of Ireland
3.3: COVID-19 Employment Impact

As a result of the public health measures needed to control the spread of COVID-19, Ireland’s labour market was severely impacted, with the State’s unemployment rate rising substantially in a short period of time. Inevitably such developments also severely affected the labour market of Donegal.

To evaluate the extent of this impact, Figure 5 shows the number of people in Donegal that were either in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) or the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), using CSO data. The number of residents in Donegal in receipt of either the PUP, TWSS or the EWSS peaked at 30,408 as of the 3rd of May 2020, with the number of recipients in Donegal progressively falling between February 2021 and April 2022. The latest available figures show that 7,972 people in Donegal were in receipt of either the PUP, TWSS or the EWSS as of the 24th of April 2022.

Figure 5: The number of people in Donegal on the Live Register, that were in receipt of the PUP or supported by the TWSS / EWSS, March 2020 – April 2022

Source: CSO
3.4: Employment Supported by Enterprise Agencies

The total number of IDA Ireland client companies based in Donegal amounted to 17 in 2021, representing 1 per cent of the total stock of IDA Ireland client companies. Between 2011 and 2021, the number of companies operating within Donegal rose, increasing from 13 IDA Ireland client companies in 2011 to 17 in 2021. In terms of direct employment, IDA Ireland client companies based in Donegal employed 3,647 people in 2021, albeit there hasn’t been any net job growth since 2019.

![Figure 6: The number of jobs supported from IDA Ireland client companies located in Donegal, 2010-2021.](source: IDA Ireland)

Similar trends were also evident with respect to client companies that are supported by Enterprise Ireland. In 2021, a total of 4,209 jobs were supported by Enterprise Ireland client companies that were located in Donegal.10

Following Enterprise Ireland’s new strategy, a revision of the population of companies included in the Annual Employment Survey was undertaken, including companies recently acquired or those whose strategy or need to engage with Enterprise Ireland had changed.

As a result of this revision, the changes to the baseline survey population reduced the total employment in client companies supported by Enterprise Ireland in 2021. Due to these changes, the 2021 employment data for client companies supported by Enterprise Ireland was not comparable to the corresponding data in previous years. Nevertheless, direct employment in client companies supported by Enterprise Ireland and based in Donegal rose between 2010 and 2020, rising from 3,353 people employed in 2010 to 4,148 in 2020. Furthermore, the number of people employed in client companies supported by the Donegal Local Enterprise Office amounted to 1,283 in 2020.11

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10 [https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2022-02-08/175/](https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2022-02-08/175/)
3.5: Human Capital Profile

Human capital is central to Ireland’s economic success and social development, with the availability of well-educated, skilled and knowledgeable citizens acting a fundamental driver of regional economic development and social progress.

Amongst other factors, human capital is generally nurtured through the provision of high quality graduates from Higher Education and Further Education and Training (FET) institutions, with the latest data showing positive trends for Donegal. According to the Higher Education Authority, a total of 2,244 students – that were originally from Donegal – graduated from Higher Education Institutes in Ireland in 2020, representing growth of 4.4 per cent relative to the base year of 2018. Of the 2,244 graduates that were originally from Donegal, 41 per cent graduated from Letterkenny IT.\(^{12}\)

In conjunction to this, the Department of Education also provides data on the number of FET beneficiaries\(^{13}\) who are enrolled in each Education and Training Board (ETB) in Ireland. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, the number of FET beneficiaries registered in the Donegal ETB amounted to 11,350 in 2019, with this figure dropping to 7,409 in 2020, with the impact of COVID-19 being credited to this year-on-year decline.\(^{14}\)

\[
\text{Figure 7: The number of FET beneficiaries in the Donegal ETB, 2014-2020}
\]

Source: Department of Education\(^{15}\)

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\(^{12}\) Access our Data – Graduates | Statistics | Higher Education Authority (hea.ie)

\(^{13}\) Beneficiaries metric records an individual learner based on the number of FET courses they have been registered in the declared year.

\(^{14}\) Consultations with the Department of Education suggest that this decline can be attributed to the fact that some courses simply couldn’t be held remotely, or some users didn’t want to learn online.

\(^{15}\) Data provided to the Northern and Western Regional Assembly through a private request to the Department of Education
3.6: Project Ireland 2040 Funds

There are four designated funds that aim to support the implementation of the vision and objectives of Project Ireland 2040, namely:

- The Urban Regeneration Development Fund (URDF)
- The Rural Regeneration Development Fund (RRDF)
- The Climate Action Fund
- The Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund

In terms of the URDF, a total of €15.7 million has been allocated to Donegal under Calls 1 and 2 of the URDF, with the specific projects supported outlined in Table 1. Donegal accounted for 1 per cent of the national allocation of the URDF and the county accounted for 7.4 per cent of the Northern and Western Region’s total allocation under this fund as of July 2022.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Project</th>
<th>Funding Allocation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Letterkenny 2040 (Public Realm and Site Acquisition)</td>
<td>€2,119,583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letterkenny 2040 Phase 1: Re-Energise and Connect the Historic Town Centre</td>
<td>€13,599,433</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Housing, Heritage and Local Government

With respect to the RRDF, €30.6 million has been allocated to projects located in Donegal between 2018 and 2022, with a year-on-year breakdown provided in Figure 8. Between 2018 and 2022, Donegal accounted for 11.1 per cent of the national allocation under the calls from the RRDF and 26.5 per cent of the Northern and Western Region’s total allocation under this fund as of June 2022.

At the time of writing, data with respect to the geographical distribution of funding of the Climate Action Fund and the Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund was not available.
3.7: Sectoral Specialisms

On a regional level – and based on stakeholder consultations and research involved in the development of the RSES – the key sectors of the Northern and Western Region include:

- Tourism
- Renewable Energy and Low Carbon Economy
- Marine and Blue Economy
- ICT and Life Sciences
- Agri-Tech and Agri-Food
- Retail
- Advance Manufacturing and Engineering

These high-level sectors have an array of assets, skillsets and capabilities which are instrumental to supporting the Northern and Western Region’s economy, and whose growth will be key to achieving balanced regional development in line with the NPF and the RSES.

Taking these regional sectoral strengths into account, it is also important to identify and provide more detail on the sub-sectoral specialisms that exist in Donegal. Using Census 2016 NACE Code employment data, and Location Quotients (LQ) scores, this sub-section provides greater detail of the sub-sectoral specialisms that existed in Donegal at the time of Census 2016. It should be noted that LQ scores act as a method in identifying sectors that are specialized in a regional or local economy, relative to the national norm. For example, in this case:

- An LQ score of 1.0 shows that a geographical area has the same proportion of employment involved in a sub-sector, relative to the national norm.
- An LQ score greater than 1.0 shows that a geographical area has an above average proportion of employment involved in a sub-sector, relative to the national norm.
- An LQ score greater than 1.25 shows that a geographical area has a strong specialization in a sub-sector.
- A LQ score lower than 1 shows that a geographical area has a below average proportion of employment involved in a sub-sector, relative to the national norm.

Using Census 2016 sub-sectoral employment data, Donegal’s LQ Scores that were greater than 1 have been categorised by their respective 1 digit NACE Code and presented in Table 2, thereby showing the sub-sectoral specialisms that existed in the county at the time of the Census. As evident from Table 2, a wide range of sub-sectoral specialisms have been identified across the high-level sectors (1 digit NACE Codes) in Donegal. For example, in the Manufacturing sector, sub-sectoral specialisms that recorded high LQ scores (i.e. greater than 1.25) in Donegal included but were not limited to:

- Processing and preserving of fish and fish products (LQ score of 10.92)
- Manufacture of textiles (4.76)
- Manufacture of clothes, dressing and dyeing of fur (3.49)
- Processing and preserving of fruit and vegetables (3.33)
- Manufacture of other transport equipment (3.18)
- Manufacture of bakery and farinaceous products (1.61)
- Manufacture of rubber and plastic products (1.43)
Outside of the Manufacturing sector, other strong specialisms in Donegal were also evident across a wide range sub-sectors as evident from Table 2.

Table 2: LQ Scores of Donegal for the sub-sectors with a score greater than 1, by their appropriate high-level sector (i.e. 1 digit NACE Code), Census 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 Digit NACE Code (sky blue label) and sub-sectors (white label)</th>
<th>LQ Score (Employment)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strong Sub-Sectoral Specialism (LQ Score greater than 1.25)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Above Average Sub-Sectoral Specialism (LQ Score greater than 1 but less than or equal to 1.25)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agriculture, forestry and fishing</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farming (farming of animals, mixed farming)</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forestry and logging</td>
<td>1.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fishing and aquaculture</td>
<td>9.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mining and quarrying</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other mining and quarrying (08)</td>
<td>2.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining support service activities</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Manufacturing</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processing and preserving of fish and fish products</td>
<td>10.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processing and preserving of fruit and vegetables</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacture of bakery and farinaceous products</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacture of textiles</td>
<td>4.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacture of clothes; dressing and dyeing of fur</td>
<td>3.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacture of rubber and plastic products</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other manufacture of other non-metallic mineral products</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacture of electrical equipment</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacture of other transport equipment</td>
<td>3.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacture of furniture</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electric power generation, transmission and distribution</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Construction</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of building projects and construction of residential and non-residential buildings</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil engineering</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demolition and site preparation</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plumbing, heat and air-conditioning installation</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building completion and finishing</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other specialised construction activities</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale and retail trade and repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale of wood, construction materials and sanitary equipment</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail sale in non-specialized stores with food, beverages or tobacco predomi-nating</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail sale of food, beverages or tobacco in specialised stores</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail sale of automotive fuel in specialised stores</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail sale of electrical household appliances in specialised stores</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail sale of furniture, lighting equipment and household articles n.e.c.</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail sale of footwear and leather goods in specialised stores</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry Category</td>
<td>Sub-Category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation and storage</td>
<td>Other passenger land transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freight transport by road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation and food service activities</td>
<td>Hotels and similar accommodation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other provision of short-stay accommodation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Restaurants and mobile food service activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beverage serving activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial and insurance activities</td>
<td>Insurance, reinsurance and pension funding, except compulsory social security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Activities auxiliary to insurance and pension funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative and support service activities</td>
<td>Miscellaneous office and business activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public administration and defence; compulsory social security</td>
<td>Defence activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All other public administration; compulsory social security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Pre-primary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult and other education not elsewhere classified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human health and social work activities</td>
<td>Hospital activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medical practice activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other human health activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Residential care and social work activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts, entertainment and recreation</td>
<td>Creative arts and entertainment activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Libraries, archives, museums and other cultural activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sports activities and amusement and recreation activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other service activities</td>
<td>Activities of membership organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hairdressing and other beauty treatment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Northern and Western Regional Assembly calculations using CSO Census data

The Census 2022 Summary Report will be published in April 2023, with further results expected to be published up to December 2023. These results will examine a range of topics such as population, housing, health, education and employment.
Section 4 of the “LECP Briefing Note” analyses quality of life indicators, specifically focusing on trends in the following areas:

- Population growth
- First buyer affordability
- Renter affordability
- New dwelling completions
- Residential vacancy
- Homelessness
- Litter pollution
- Library service usage

### 4.1: Population Growth

According to the preliminary results of the CSO’s Census of Population 2022, the population of Donegal amounted to 166,321 people in April 2022. Relative to the previous Census, the population of Donegal expanded by 4.5 per cent, which was below the corresponding national growth rate of 7.6 per cent.

Of the 149 Electoral Divisions that are located in Donegal, 115 recorded population growth between 2016 and 2022, with 34 Electoral Divisions either recording a decline or zero growth in population during this time. The Electoral Divisions that recorded the highest population growth rate included Bundoran Urban (23.4%), Loch Aiscagh (22.8%), Grianfort (22.1%), Maol Mosóg (21%), Caisleán na dTuath (19.4%), Tieveskeelta (19.2%), Bundoran Rural (18%), Ballymacool (16.8%), Letterkenny Urban (15.6%), Críoch na Sméar (15.5%) and Malin (14.1%). Further detail on the Electoral Divisions of Donegal can be found on the CSO’s website.

### 4.2: First-Time Buyer Affordability

Housing affordability research recommends that households keep their housing costs to 30 per cent of their net income, as anything above this ratio begins to affect a household’s ability to save and cover other essential costs. By adopting a similar methodology to previous studies on housing affordability, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly has estimated the average mortgage repayment to net income ratio for first time buyers located in the Northern and Western Region.

The Assembly’s methodology for calculating the average mortgage repayment to net income ratio for first time buyers is outlined in Appendix A. In this regard, Donegal recorded an average mortgage repayment to net income ratio for first time buyers of 18 per cent in 2020, which was below the affordability mark of 30 per cent and the corresponding State average of 29 per cent.
4.3: Renter Affordability

The provision of affordable rental accommodation will be a key component to supporting the quality of life offering of Donegal. The Northern and Western Regional Assembly has estimated the average rental payment to net income ratio for renters located in Donegal and the methodology involved in calculating this ratio has been outlined in Appendix A. In this regard, Donegal registered an average rental payment to net income ratio for renters of 23 per cent in 2020, which was below the standard affordability mark of 30 per cent.

4.4: New Dwelling Completions

The delivery of new housing will be fundamental to enhancing the quality of life offering of Donegal. Figure 10 shows the absolute number of new dwelling completions in Donegal, between 2016—which represents the base year of the National Planning Framework and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy of the Northern and Western Region—and 2021, which represents the latest full year dataset.

In 2016, 290 new dwellings were completed in Donegal, with completions eventually rising to a recent high of 575 in 2020 before dropping to 477 in 2021, as can be seen from Figure 10.

Relative to the previous year, new dwelling completions in Donegal were down 17 per cent relative to the previous year. Notably, this decline in new dwelling completions in 2021 was evident in the majority of CSO defined settlements in Donegal, with most towns or villages either recording a decline or zero growth in completions in 2021. Only 11 towns and villages in Donegal recorded year-on-year growth in new dwelling completions in 2021.
Figure 10: Absolute number of new dwelling completions in Donegal, 2016-2021

![Bar chart showing new dwelling completions in Donegal from 2016 to 2021.](https://data.cso.ie/product/ndc)

Source: CSO

Figure 11: CSO defined settlements of Donegal to record the largest decline in new dwelling completions, 2020-2021

![Bar chart showing the largest decline in new dwelling completions in CSO defined settlements in Donegal from 2020 to 2021.](https://data.cso.ie/product/ndc)

Source: CSO

24 https://data.cso.ie/product/ndc
25 https://data.cso.ie/product/ndc
4.5: Residential Vacancy

Residential vacancy rates provide a general indication of the level of housing activity and vibrancy within a geographical area. Based on GeoDirectory data, the residential vacancy and dereliction rate in Donegal stood at 10.3 per cent as of September 2020, which was higher than the State average of 4.9 per cent.\(^{26}\) In absolute terms, the number of vacant or derelict residential properties in Donegal amounted to 8,565 as of September 2020.

4.6: Homelessness

According to data from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the absolute number of adults accessing homeless services in both Donegal and Leitrim has progressively risen over the past number of years, rising from 17 in 2016 to a recent high of 31 in 2022.\(^{27}\)

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\(^{26}\) Data provided by GeoDirectory through a data license agreement with the 3 Regional Assemblies of Ireland

\(^{27}\) May data (2016-2021)

\(^{28}\) [gov.ie - Homelessness data](www.gov.ie)
4.7: Litter Pollution

The National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) – through their Local Authority performance indicator report29 – evaluates the environmental performance of Local Authorities by carrying out a variety of surveys. One of these surveys examines the level of litter pollution across each Local Authority area, with the degree of pollution evaluated across five different categories, namely:

- Unpolluted or litter free
- Slightly polluted
- Moderately polluted
- Significantly polluted
- Grossly polluted.

As evident from Figure 13, the national median figure for areas classified as being unpolluted or litter free was 22 per cent in 2020, with Donegal recording a corresponding ratio of 49 per cent. The percentage of Donegal that was classified as slightly polluted was 38 per cent in 2020, which was lower than the national median of 62 per cent. Furthermore, the percentage of Donegal that was considered moderately polluted was 11 per cent, which was 6 percentage points lower than the national median of 17 per cent.

![Figure 13: Percentage of Donegal and Ireland within the 5 levels of litter pollution, 2020](image)

Source: NOAC. Some percentages shares do not sum to 100% due to rounding issues

4.8: Library Service Usage

According to data from NOAC,30 the average number of library visits per head of population was 1.05 in Ireland in 2020. This was higher than the corresponding average for Donegal which was 0.77 library visits per head of population.

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Section 5 of the “LECP Briefing Note” analyses indicators related to the environment and the transition to a low carbon economy, specifically focusing on trends in the following areas:

- Wastewater capacity
- Ecological status of rivers and lakes
- Electrical vehicles
- EV charging infrastructure
- Wind energy
- Building energy ratings
- Afforestation

5.1: Wastewater Capacity

The provision of wastewater infrastructure will be crucial to supporting future population and employment growth in towns and villages across Donegal. Based on Irish Water data, 19 of Donegal’s CSO defined settlements were operating above its capacity in 2021. In this regard, wastewater capacity and the load that is received is defined in terms of population equivalents. 11 of Donegal’s CSO defined settlements do not have a wastewater treatment plant in 2021. Currently 5 of Donegal’s CSO defined settlements are not compliant with Waste Water Discharge Licence emission limit values but are capable of achieving at least Urban Waste Water standards.

5.2: Ecological Status of Rivers and Lakes

Amongst other things, the LECPs provide an opportunity for Local Authorities to support projects that can enhance and protect the ecosystem of local communities, with these ecosystems among the most widely applicable, economically viable and effective tools in protecting and growing the biodiversity profile of Donegal.

Support in this regard could not be more important as the EPA’s “Water Quality in Ireland 2013-2018” publication found that 53 per cent of river water bodies in Ireland were considered to have a satisfactory ecological status (i.e. high or good river water quality), with the corresponding ratio for Donegal being 51 per cent. The EPA also monitored the ecological status of monitored lake water bodies between 2013 and 2018, with 50 per cent of lake water bodies in Ireland recording a satisfactory ecological status, with the corresponding ratio for Donegal being 79 per cent.

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21 Data provided to the Northern and Western Regional Assembly through a private request
5.3: Electrical Vehicles (EVs)

The uptake of EVs will be a major factor in transitioning the Northern and Western Region to a low carbon economy. Based on the latest full year statistics, the absolute number of EVs licensed in Donegal was 139 in 2021. EVs in Donegal accounted for only 2.2 per cent of all new and second-hand private cars licensed for the first time, which was below the national average of 5.3 per cent in 2021.

Between January and May 2022, EVs in Donegal accounted for 4.4 per cent of all new and second-hand private cars licensed for the first time, which was above the corresponding State average of 10.2 per cent.

5.4: EV Charging Infrastructure

The availability of EV charging infrastructure in Donegal – amongst other things – will support the widespread adoption of EVs in the county. Up-to-date data is available through “Open Charge Map”, which provides information on the number of public and private EV bays / stations and through the ESB’s real time map.

5.5: Renewable Energy

Among the most important measures in the Climate Action Plan is to increase the proportion of renewable electricity to up to 80 per cent by 2030, with the uptake of technologies with respect to wind and solar energy considered instrumental to delivering on this target.

At the moment, wind energy is considered the dominant renewable energy source, and Donegal had an installed wind energy capacity of 453 MW as of October 2021, representing 10.4 per cent of the total installed wind energy capacity in the State, with a total of 32 wind farms located in the county. As a result of this installed capacity, the wind energy sector currently makes a significant contribution to the commercial rates of Donegal County Council. Based on data from Wind Energy Ireland, €3.1 million of commercial rates were payable to Donegal County Council as a result of the onshore wind energy sector, accounting for 8.6 per cent of total rates accumulated by the County Council in 2020.

The generation of renewable energy through solar panel technologies will also be an important element in delivering on the objectives of the Climate Action Plan, however – at the time of writing – data on the level of energy produced by solar panels by county was not available.

5.6: Building Energy Ratings

Assisting households and businesses in improving their Building Energy Ratings (BER) will support the region’s transition to a low carbon economy. Between 2009 and Q1-2022, 21 per cent of the residential dwellings audited in Ireland registered a BER between “A” and “B”. Of the audited residential dwellings based in Donegal, 13 per cent recorded a BER between “A” and “B”.

Likewise, between 2009 and Q1-2022, 15 per cent of non-residential dwellings audited in Ireland registered a BER between “A” and “B”. Of the audited non-residential dwellings based in Donegal, 19 per cent recorded a BER between “A” and “B”.

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34 Data sourced privately from the CSO
35 Charge Point Map (esb.ie)
36 https://www.chargepointmap.org/site
38 Data sourced from Wind Energy Ireland
39 Information sourced from Wind Energy Ireland and prepared by Eamon Halpin & Co
40 https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/dber/domesticbuildingenergyratingsquarter12022/
41 https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/ndber/non-domesticbuildingenergyratingsq12022/
5.7: Afforestation

Figure 14 displays the total afforestation in Hectares (ha) in Donegal for each year between 2007 and 2021. Having reached a high of an afforestation area of 321 ha in 2007, the level of afforestation in Donegal has fallen notably in recent years, dropping to a low of 22 ha in 2021, with the size of afforestation dropping in every year since 2018.

Figure 14: Total Afforestation (ha) in Donegal, 2007 to 2021

According to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the total amount of forest area in Donegal amounted to 57,155 ha in 2022, with forest cover amounting to 11.8 per cent in the county.

Source: CSO

6: Areas of Consideration for the LECP

In preparing the LECP, consideration should be given to the RSES of the Northern and Western Region\(^3\) which includes a suite of Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs) for the region. Section 6 of this briefing note highlights the RPOs that this LECP could potentially support, with these objectives categorised by the appropriate chapter headings in the RSES, namely:

- Chapter 3 – People and Places
- Chapter 4 – Vibrant Region
- Chapter 5 – Natural Region
- Chapter 6 – Connected Region
- Chapter 7 – Inclusive Region

6.1: People and Places (Chapter 3)

- **RPOs 3.1, 3.2, 3.3.**
  In relation to RPOs 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3, how can the LECP enhance:
  i. The social, cultural and environmental quality and offering within the Letterkenny Regional Growth Centre, so that it supports the growth of the built-up footprint of the urban area.
- **RPOs 3.5, 3.6, 3.7, 3.8, 3.10.**
  In relation to the above RPOs, how can the LECP deliver on the following:
  i. Help identify ‘Vacancy Hotspots’ and implement necessary Action Plans in respect of them.
  ii. Increase the percentage of buildings with “A” or “B” Building Energy Ratings.
  iii. Develop green infrastructure

Furthermore, can the LECP support the following RPOs for the Letterkenny Regional Growth Centre, namely:

- **RPO 3.7.21** – Seek an increase in the number of jobs in the Regional Growth Centre to 17,000 by 2040.
- **RPO 3.7.33** – Develop a dedicated and integrated cycle network around Letterkenny, including the creation of a Greenway along the line of the River Swilly and oriented around the Central Linear Park Project to offer residents a viable alternative to car-based journeys.
- **RPO 3.7.36** – Deliver the Letterkenny Social Enterprise Centre and associated improved access to lands to the West of Neil T Blaney Road, as part of a wider Urban Regeneration project.

6.2: Vibrant Region (Chapter 4)

- **RPOs 4.3, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7.**
  In relation to RPOs 4.3, 4.5, 4.6 and 4.7, how can the LECP support the following:
  i. Preparation and Implementation of Visitor Experience Development Plans (VEPDs) via Failte Ireland.
  ii. Progress improved Access to Coastal Routes / Walkways / Cycling Routes (WAW)
  iii. Expand service provision in Tourism Destination Towns, including public realm
  iv. How can the LECP provide for employment opportunities for the increasing population at ratio of 0.66:1

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\(^3\) [https://www.nwra.ie/pdfs/NWRA-RSES-2020-2032.pdf](https://www.nwra.ie/pdfs/NWRA-RSES-2020-2032.pdf)
6.3: Natural Region (Chapter 5)

- **RPOs 5.1, 5.8, 5.9, 5.18.**
  In terms of the above RPOs, how can the LECP deliver on the following:
  
  i. Implementation of measures within the Local Authority Climate Action Strategy.
  
  
  iii. Deliver Greenways

6.4: Connected Region (Chapter 6)

- **RPO 6.27: Local Transport Plans.**
  With respect to RPO 6.27, how can the LECP influence the implementation of Local Transport Plans in respect of relevant settlements in your Local Authority.

- **RPOs 6.41-6.60: Smart Region**
  In terms of the above RPOs, how can the LECP deliver a “Smart Region” approach in your Local Authority.

6.5: Inclusive Region (Chapter 7)

- **RPO 7.1**
  
  i. In relation to RPO 7.1, how can the LECP assist in the co-ordination of employment skills and support the alignment of needs as identified by the Regional Skills Fora to include facilities and opportunities for disadvantaged areas and groups in the community.

- **RPO 7.2**
  
  ii. In terms of RPO 7.2, how will the LECP support disadvantaged communities, facing particular barriers to employment, including actively marketing vacancies that are relevant to them.

- **RPO 7.3**
  
  iii. With respect to RPO 7.3, demonstrate how the LECP shall promote vocational and occupational programmes and pathways for progression to a career.

- **RPO 7.5**
  
  iv. Considering RPO 7.5, how can the LECP support the requirements of emerging sectors in terms of skills needs.

- **RPO 7.11**
  
  v. With respect to RPO 7.11, can the LECP support the objectives of public health policy including Healthy Ireland and the National Physical Activity Plan and the National Obesity Plan

- **RPO 7.13**
  
  vi. In terms of RPO 7.13, are there any actions that can be taken to make this county an Age-Friendly one, recognising the demographic challenges that it faces.
Appendix A

1: Average mortgage repayment to net income ratio for first time buyers (FTB)

- This metric examines average FTB affordability by NUTS 2 Region, NUTS 3 Region and County, for 2020, with this ratio expressed as a percentage (i.e. average monthly mortgage repayment due on the average FTB priced property as a percentage of the average monthly disposable income of an FTB couple). This percentage should be compared relative to the standard affordability mark of 30% (i.e. housing costs should be below 30% of a household’s disposable income).

- By utilising data from the CSO’s “County Income and Regional GDP” publication – which provides average disposable income per capita (excluding rent) by NUTS 2 Region, NUTS 3 Region and County – and the CSO’s “Regional Property Price Index” – which provides the average property price paid by FTBs by NUTS 2 Region, NUTS 3 Region and County – we can examine average FTB affordability in each of these geographical areas.

- The CSO’s “County Income and Regional GDP” publication, provides disposable income per capita (excluding rent) for each NUTS 2 Region, NUTS 3 Region and County between 2016 and 2020. However, such incomes would reflect net earnings of individuals across a variety of age cohorts and wouldn’t solely reflect the incomes of FTBs, which tend to be of a younger demographic. To combat this, disposable incomes levels are adjusted using privately requested data from the CSO’s “Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC)”, which contains information on both income and age, allowing this analysis to proxy FTB average disposable incomes using data on the income of individuals aged 40 or under. (See 2020 ratios in Table 3 at the end of Appendix). Such ratios are available for each year between 2016 and 2020.

- The income of individuals aged 40 or under were considered appropriate to represent FTB incomes as the average age of FTBs outside and inside Dublin were 34 and 35 years old respectively – according to research by the Central Bank of Ireland – while a similar approach would have been used by the ESRI. Having adjusted the CSO’s average disposable income per capita (excluding rent) data to reflect average income where the individual is aged 40 or less, such figures are then multiplied by two to replicate the joint income earned by a couple per year. This annual figure is then divided by 12 (i.e. 12 months) to obtain the average monthly disposable income of a couple, aged 40 and under; which is a proxy for FTBs.

- The Assembly proceeded to calculate what the average monthly repayment in each NUTS 2 Region, NUTS 3 Region and County for the average FTB priced property in each of these areas. It is important to note that the average property price for FTBs was based on the selection of the CSO tabs “All dwellings statues”, “first time buyer households”, “mean sales price”, “executions” in the CSO table of HPA03 tabs (https://data.cso.ie/table/HPA03). Cross tabulation of HPA03 and SILC data on monthly repayments provided a numerator and denominator for the FTB affordability index.

- Considering FTB couples require a 10% deposit, these buyers would have a loan-to-value ratio of 90%.

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45 Rent obtained from landlord activities.
46 https://data.cso.ie/table/HPA03
47 All dwellings’ statues, first time buyer households, mean sales price, executions are tabs selected in the attached link: https://data.cso.ie/table/HPA03
48 As per the County incomes and Regional GDP background notes, it is stated that disposable income is defined as “Total Income minus current taxes on income (e.g. Income taxes, other current taxes) minus social insurance contributions (e.g. Employers, employees’, self-employed, etc.)”.
49 Regional ratios of average disposable income of individual aged 40 or less relative to all individuals was provided by the CSO upon request for the NUTS 2 Regions and NUTS 3 Regions. Corresponding ratios for counties are not available therefore the appropriate NUTS 3 ratio was applied to average disposable income per person for counties based within sub-region in question.
51 https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RN20190402_0.pdf
as per the Central Bank’s Macroprudential mortgage rules. By applying the average interest rate as of December of 2020 from the Central Bank of Ireland\(^{52}\) and using a standard 30 year term mortgage – in line with the approach used by the ESRI\(^{53}\) – the Assembly calculated the average monthly mortgage repayment in each NUTS 2 Region, NUTS 3 Region and County using the PMT function in Microsoft Excel.

- By combining this information with average monthly disposable income levels (adjusted to reflect individuals under the age of 40) this allowed the Assembly to calculate the Average Mortgage Repayment to Net Income Ratio for First Time Buyers.

2: Average rent to net Income ratio of renters

- This metric examines how affordable the average monthly rent would be for a couple earning the average monthly disposable income of a renter by NUTS 2 Region, NUTS 3 Region and County, for 2020, with this ratio expressed as a percentage (i.e. average monthly rent as a percentage of the average monthly disposable income of renters). This percentage should be compared relative to the standard affordability mark of 30% (i.e. housing costs should be below 30% of disposable income).

- In this regard, the Assembly adjusted the average disposable income per capita (excluding rent) data provided from the CSO’s “County Income and Regional GDP” using information from the CSO’s “SILC” to reflect the average income of households that are renters. (See 2020 ratios in Table 4 at the end of Appendix A)

- This data is provided at a NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 Regional level. The corresponding ratios for counties are not available, therefore the appropriate NUTS 3 Regional ratio was applied to counties based within the sub-region in question.

- Having adjusted the average disposable income (excluding rent) data to reflect average income where the individuals are renting, such figures are then multiplied by two to reflect the standard household income earned by a couple that are renters.

- We then express the average monthly rental payment in each NUTS 2 Region, NUTS 3 Region and county\(^{54}\) as a proportion of the average disposable income of renters in these areas, allowing the Assembly to develop an average rent to net income ratio for couples renting in these areas. The average monthly rental payment in a geographical area is based on the average rent of a 2 bed, across all property types, as per the CSO’s RTB data.

- Average disposable income levels are based on the appropriate county data, adjusted using the appropriate ratio in Table 4 below.

\(^{52}\) Table 2-b-1 “House Purchases, o/w new lending ex renegotiations”: https://www.centralbank.ie/statistics/data-and-analysis/credit-and-banking-statistics/retail-interest-rates

\(^{53}\) https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RN20190402_0.pdf

\(^{54}\) Provided by the CSO: https://data.cso.ie/table/RIA02
### Table 3: Ratio of average income of individuals aged 40 or less vs average income of all household types, 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Border</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midlands</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dublin</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-East</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-West</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-East</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-West</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWR</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRA</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMRA</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CSO SILC. Similar ratios are available for 2016-2019. E.g the average income for individuals aged 40 or under in Dublin is around 98% of the average income of all individuals in Dublin.

### Table 4: Ratio of average income of renters vs average income of all household types, 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Border</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midlands</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dublin</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-East</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-West</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-East</td>
<td>0.80</td>
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<tr>
<td>South-West</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWRA</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRA</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMRA</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CSO SILC. Similar ratios are available for 2016-2019. E.g the average income for renters in Dublin is around 80% of the average income of all individuals in Dublin.