



Planning Department
Roscommon County Council
Áras an Chontae
Roscommon
F42 VR98

Dear Ms Robinson,

Roscommon County Council notified the NWRA on 27th March 2020 that a Strategic Issues Paper in advance of the proposed Draft Roscommon County Development Plan had now been published, and inviting submissions. We understand that the closing date for receipt of submissions has been extended to 30th July 2020.

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly wish to commend Roscommon County Council on the publication and format of the Issues Paper. It is a compact and informative document that sets out the process clearly and succinctly informs the public on many of the questions that need to be addressed. This submission is made in accordance with Section 27A of the planning and Development Acts. The Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, requires that the Planning Authority ensure, when making or varying the County Development Plan, that it is consistent with the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the area of the plan, thus enabling full alignment between local, regional and national planning policy. This submission was considered by the Assembly at its meeting held on 24th July 2020.

It is the role of the Regional Assemblies to provide leadership and to identify regional development objectives and coordinating initiatives that support the delivery and implementation of national planning and economic policy. This is primarily achieved through the preparation and implementation of Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES) that are bespoke to the region and which implement and amplify the National Policy Objectives and National Strategic Outcomes of the National Planning Framework (NPF). The Northern and Western Regional Assembly adopted the Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy 2020 – 2032 (RSES) for the Northern and Western Region in January 2020. We would like to take this opportunity to thank

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Roscommon County Council for their collaborative input to this strategy as a constituent local authority. The Strategy along with companion documents is available on our website www.nwra.ie/rses

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

One of the shared sub-regions we have in the region is Athlone, which straddles the Westmeath / Roscommon county boundary and whose influence stretches into the adjoining counties of Galway, Offaly and Longford.

The RSES is responsive to trends (eg. urbanisation, digitisation and globalisation) whilst also interpreting risk (e.g. climate, global economic challenges, future of work and population health outbreaks like Covid-19) by connecting our plans to the Sustainable Development Goals, the EU Growth Strategy (including the EU Green Deal) and the National Strategic Outcomes (NPF). At its core the RSES recognises the weak urban infrastructure in our region and that this region has not prospered as well economically when compared to the other two regions of Ireland. This is evidenced by reclassification of the region by the European Commission from a 'More Developed Region' to a 'Transition Region' for the Post 2020 (2021-2027) funding period – see also a recent publication 'A Region in Transition: The Way Forward' published by the NWRA.



Our RSES is responding by adopting a clear strategy that delivers key business elements known to inform their location of choice, namely:

1. Development of compact urban centres with critical mass in population; encouraging the revitalisation of urban areas and regeneration 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.

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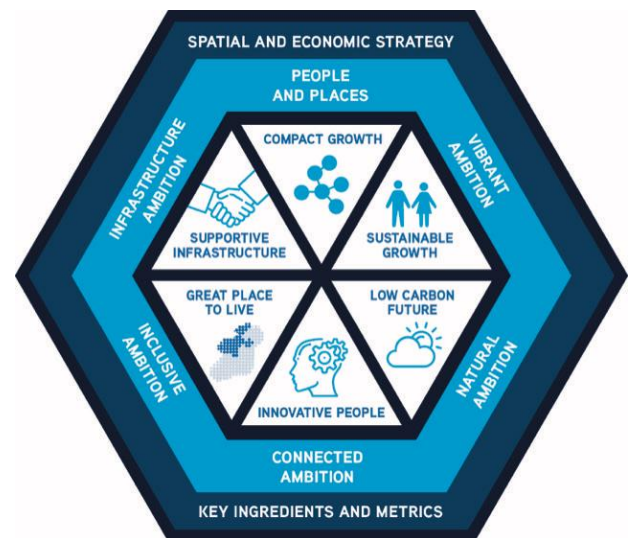


4. Nurturing of world-class infrastructure and competitive services with capacity, resilience and quality.
5. Growing our third level infrastructures, access to skills and research, development and innovation.
6. Availability of property solutions – including ‘ready-to-go’ commercial properties, ‘landing spaces’, co-working spaces and flexible property solutions and affordable housing.
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.

Growth Framework: The strategy has introduced the concept of a Growth Framework that links strategic and operational challenges with prioritised capital interventions. The Framework will be the basis for determining metrics, linking with National Strategic Outcomes and assessing the region’s actual contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Growth framework incorporates ‘Five Growth Ambitions’ that define each priority and how they are mutually complementary with a focus on ‘People and Places’.

Our Vision is for a region that is smarter, greener, more specialised and connected, with a stronger and more compact urban network, 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 regions, be they cities, towns or their rural hinterlands, can contribute to national development. From an enterprise development perspective, investment in the creation of ‘place’ is key to delivering the key elements that inform business location choices.



People and Places: The settlement strategy is focused on a Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) for Galway and tailored Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plans for Sligo, Athlone and Letterkenny. The intention is that these strategic plans become a living framework, which will be supported as required by detailed action

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plans, investment proposals and delivery partnerships (e.g. The Exchequer (PI2040), EU Investment Programmes, Financial Instruments, Community and Local Authority investment, Private Investment).

Athlone is unique as it straddles two county council and two Regional Assembly functional areas. Importantly, a Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plan has been prepared by the NWRA and it forms an integral component of the RSES. It has taken due cognisance of the RSES strategy prepared in parallel by EMRA and there is indeed a high level of consistency between both documents in how the future development of Athlone is portrayed and examined. We hope that this convergence is further developed during the preparation of lower order plans in the planning hierarchy. The NWRA's RSES identifies Regional Planning Objectives (RPOs) in the Athlone Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plan and it provides a high level framework to guide lower level plans – including CDPs, LECPs and the proposed Joint Plan for Athlone - and it prioritises future investment interventions for Athlone. The NWRA has taken into account the Roadmap for the Implementation of the NPF in formulating its Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plans. It has planned for a 40% population increase up to 2040 for all our regional growth centres (Athlone, Sligo and Letterkenny).

Section 3.7 (a) of our RSES has translated the global figure above into a population target of at least 1,500 by 2031 for the western part of Athlone (within the functional area of Roscommon). We ask that in making the Draft that full consideration is given to the above target and incorporate it into the County Development Plan. This will enable a continued collaborative approach to the development of Athlone to be navigated as the Roscommon CDP review is progressed and a new Joint Plan for Athlone is subsequently made. This Assembly is available to engage further on this should you consider it beneficial to the future success and completion of your plan making process.

The RSES has also designated Key Towns in the Region, these comprise county towns and towns with a population greater than 10,000. It has set population growth targets of 30% on the 2016 Census for Key Towns. In relation to the preparation of the Draft we ask that these targets be considered in formulating plans for Roscommon and relevant parts of Ballinasloe and Carrick-on-Shannon.

There is an opportunity to also reflect the rural nature of settlement patterns across the county and how it proposes to balance the needs of all places, including the rural towns, villages and rural areas. In this regard the plan should reflect on providing for vibrancy and vitality of rural areas, how to realise their potential and to re-imagine these areas as referenced in section 3.5 of the RSES. The plan should consider measures that support the role of smaller and medium sized towns (See RPO3.13) and to support the regeneration of serviced sites within towns, villages and rural areas – thus realising RPOs 3.3, 3.8 and 3.9.

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The Growth Ambitions of the RSES will also offer opportunities to inform the development plan, both urban and rural.

Growth Ambition 1 - Vibrant Region: The NWRA believes that strong economic growth, which creates permanent, sustainable jobs, is best achieved by building a competitive and productive economy. Focusing policies on scale, investing in connectivity and our people whilst aggressively pursuing a low carbon approach to enhance our differentiation. Under this Growth Ambition, the RSES gives recognition to the importance of place-based networks such as the Upper Shannon Erne Future Economy Project and it is hoped that the draft CDP shares this position. The RSES reinforces the provision of a sustainable framework for tourism development and it is hoped that the Draft CDP avails of the opportunity to enable a collaborative approach to be further developed at a more local level, sharing our ethos that adverse impacts upon local communities, archaeology, built heritage, landscapes and habitats are minimised while at the same time ensuring economic benefits accruing to local economies are maximised. The RSES recognises that Roscommon has other thriving sectors such as Agri-Food, ICT and MedTECH and Retail. We ask that the Draft take due cognisance of the suite of relevant Regional Development Objectives in our strategy.

The RSES encourages policies that support the development of local entrepreneurial ecosystems through local clustering and smart specialisation (S3). The priorities for action and recommendations contained in the RSES are based on the very significant potential for the region to generate further value from its Research and Innovation investments, within national policy and the EU's strengthening S3 agenda. There is significant capacity to achieve this and to position R&I at the forefront of enabling policies to achieve sustainable growth in population.

We would encourage the County Council to further consider policies aligned with S3 that would further harness the capacity of local innovation centres.

The RSES confirms that the agri-food sector is vital to the region and the stimulation of gastronomy as part of our cultural heritage is something that continues to offer opportunities for local economies and this is to be encouraged. The development plan provides an opportunity to reflect how to best support this sector through delivery of the regional development objectives RPOs 4.23-4.26. In addition, the opportunity to support the bioeconomy should be articulated through the development plan.

Growth Ambition 2 - Natural Region: It has been identified that more strategic actions are required to prepare the region for what is to come. These actions need to be cognisant of our natural resources, landscape and heritage (natural, social and cultural) and this ambition provides the necessary framework for the Northern and Western Region and represent a shared opportunity (See Chapter 5 of RSES).

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The NWRA is a partner in the OUR WAY INTERREG project that aims to contribute to conserving, protecting, promoting and developing natural and cultural heritage in using Greenways as sustainable and smart transportation links in rural areas. It is using this as a platform to transfer learnings at Regional and National level so as to advance the expansion of an integrated network of Greenways across the region's catchments refer RPO 5.18. This will further enable the appropriate development of local businesses and start-ups in the vicinity of greenways and blueways, which is an objective of this Growth Ambition.

The draft CDP should provide support for the integrated development of greenways, blueways and peatways across Roscommon and with those of adjoining counties.

The RSES includes reference (RPO 5.3) to the ambition to consider the zone of Lough Key as potential National Parks / National Recreation areas. Collaboration to realising this goal will be crucial, and it would be important that the Draft Plan reflects this. The creation of such a Zone / amenity area should share our ethos that adverse impacts upon local communities, archaeology, built heritage, landscapes and habitats are minimised while at the same time ensuring social and economic benefits accruing to local economies are maximised.

Growth Ambition 3 – Connected Region: Accessibility and mobility within the region have a direct effect on the region's economic competitiveness. It also has an effect on the attractiveness of the region as a favourable living and visiting environment. The RSES sets out that the provision of prudently managed transport and digital infrastructure is key to delivering our vision. The strategy outlines how we plan to better integrate land-use and transport planning and it also focuses upon how the digital economy can enable our region, growing exports, innovation, investment and productivity – attained through building new sound partnerships and facilitating mutual connections and collaboration.

It is hoped that the draft County Development Plan reflects that critical strategic national road and rail links traversing the county, facilitating the movement of strategic traffic, including freight and access for goods to market for the counties within the Northern and Western Region. It is considered that the Core Strategy would benefit from this being articulated as part of the transportation objectives that need to be included in accordance with s10(2) of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended). It could also confirm that the management of the capacity and enhancement of these transport networks that traverse the county is critical to provide improved connectivity. The RSES for the Northern and Western Region has identified interventions to enhance these links and these are prioritised within Section 6.3 of the RSES for the northern and western region.

The RSES identifies the need for enhancement of the N61 which links the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo and it would be appreciated if this aspect is referenced in the Draft.

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In addition, to achieve our Vision for the region the RSES recognises the need to strengthen our digital network and enable new technologies to work by ensuring that policies and systems are in place that can help people transition to a world much more digitally connected. RPOs 6.36 - 6.60 are tailored to promote smart places. The potential of Roscommon to promote a desirable remote working environment should be heralded in the Draft.

Growth Ambition 4: Quality of Life – Inclusive Region: One of the strongest foundations and emerging propositions this region has to build on is its ‘liveability’. The region aspires to be one of the most liveable places in Europe with a commitment to sustainable and inclusive growth. Our objectives encourage industries that provide jobs that will raise per capita incomes and improve living standards for all. This requires a specific focus upon the enablement of access to education, health, employment, recreation and opportunity for all. The coordination and delivery of infrastructure, housing and employment land in the right places at the right time is a key outcome, with homes that are affordable.

The supply and location of jobs and homes must be aligned. This includes providing homes that are affordable and accessible to house the labour force, and the provision of land and premises that meet the needs of current and future businesses, including for smart design and orientation that meet current and future energy efficiency demands. In relation to the above and the achievement of a connected region the provision of serviced sites in small towns and villages will be instrumental in having balanced and integrated development.

Growth Ambition 5– Enabling our Region: The provision and maintenance of economic infrastructure, such as energy, water, and wastewater, are key to delivering compact growth and a connected, vibrant, inclusive, resilient and smart region. The RSES identifies specific strategic infrastructure necessary to enable the vision for Regional Centres and Key Towns to be achieved and these are outlined in various sections of the RSES.

It is hoped that the above observations are of assistance in shaping the new Roscommon Draft County Development Plan in a manner that shall be of benefit to our communities. The Assembly look forward to further engagement with Roscommon County Council as the preparation of the Draft plan is progressed.

If you have any queries in respect of the above observations then do not hesitate to revert.

Is mise le meas,

David Minton,
Director

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