

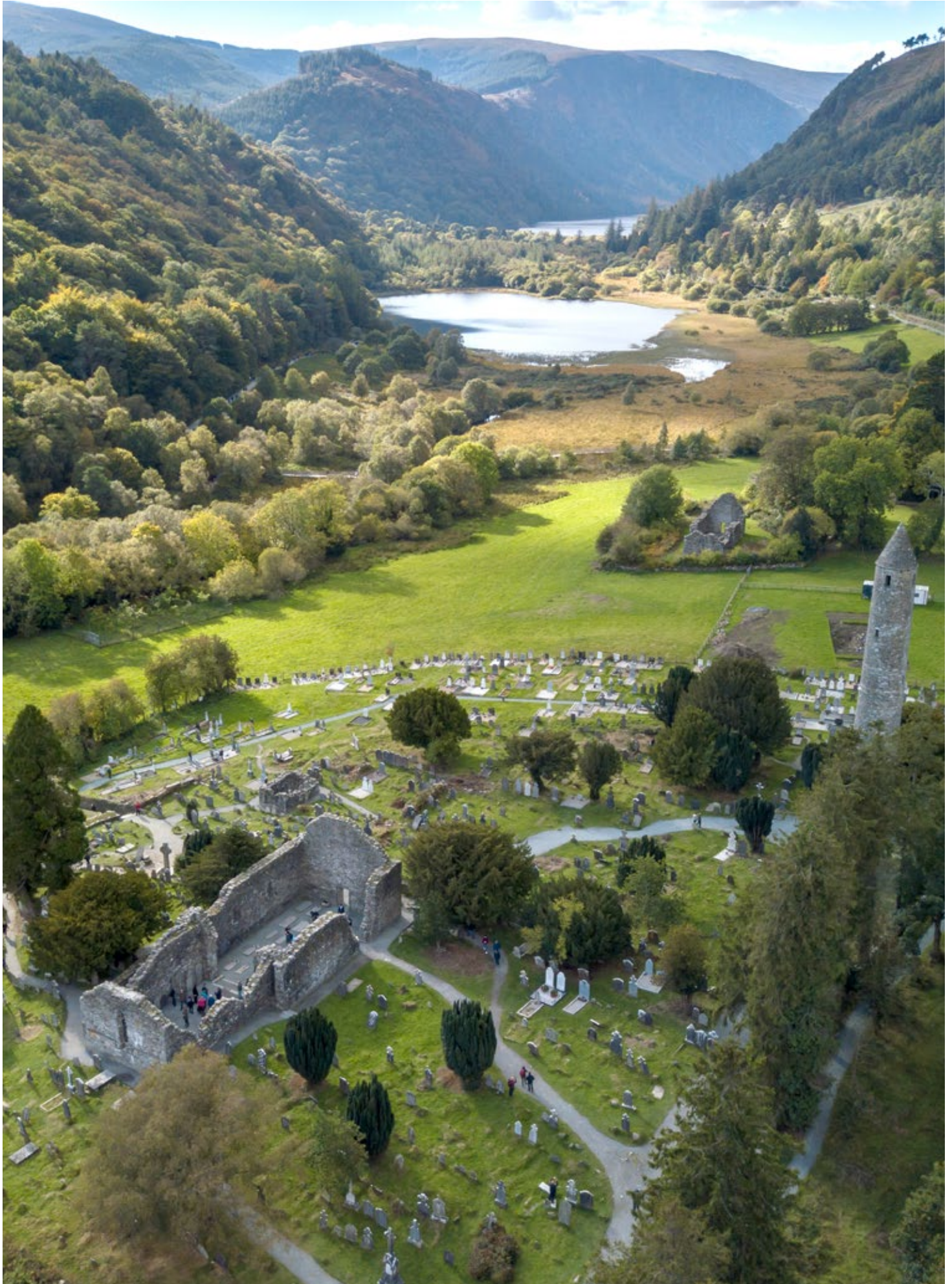


Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly

Monitoring Report 2021



Tionól Reigiúnach Oirthir agus Lár-Tíre
Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly



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Director's Foreword

This is the first Monitoring Report of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly that presents the progress made in securing the overall objectives of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES).

This Monitoring Report marks two years since the finalisation of the RSES in June 2019, which was a significant policy milestone for Regional Government in Ireland as Members from the 12 local authorities that constitute the Region, came together as an Assembly to make, for the first time, an overarching strategy that benefits the entire Region.

In line with the statutory requirements of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, The Assembly is required to prepare this report and submit it to the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC). NOAC shall consider the Monitoring Report and may make recommendations to the Minister in relation to relevant measures to further support the implementation of the RSES.

The Report details the great progress that has been made by many over the last two years and outlines RSES implementation, including specific actions and outcomes, across the three principles of the RSES of Healthy Placemaking, Climate Action and Economic Opportunity. This Report specifically identifies the progress made in implementing the RSES by Local Authorities, Public Bodies and their agencies, and the Regional Assembly.

This Report has provided an opportunity to reflect on what is working well and areas that need to be addressed. It is encouraging to note the numerous, positive examples of implementation progress documented in this Report, noting in particular the use of funding, including the Project Ireland Funds, to deliver tangible change on the ground throughout the Region. The Report also provides opening for further examination of the progress documented and brings into focus areas where improvement is required. Accordingly, a number of recommendations for consideration by NOAC, are provided in order to improve the implementation of the RSES.



I acknowledge the investment of time and resources from local authorities and many public bodies, in contributing to this Report, and I consider this to have been extremely worthwhile and necessary. I feel it is important to highlight the volume of information that was shared with the Regional Assembly in order to prepare this report and I wish to express my gratitude to the Chief Executives of the Local Authorities and their staff, and, to the public bodies and agencies that have supported the Regional Assembly in producing this Report.

I would also like to thank the elected members for their ongoing commitment to the Assembly and the RSES, and the staff of the Assembly for the valuable and extensive work that has been carried out to date.

Finally, it is important to highlight that work is continuing in order to deliver the RSES, providing certainty, sustainability and opportunity for the Region. I look forward to the production of the Regional Data Hub towards the end of this year, that will help to monitor the performance of the RSES further. I also look forward to the ongoing work of the Assembly in driving regional development and to the implementation progress that will be made over the coming years.

Jim Conway
Director

Cathaoirleach's Message

On behalf of the members of the Regional Assembly, I am pleased to present this Monitoring Report for the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly.

This Monitoring Report is the first to be prepared and demonstrates the extensive work that is taking place to deliver the RSES across the Region, since its finalisation in June 2019.

The purpose of this report is to set out the progress that has been made in order to realise the overall objectives of the RSES for our Region. This includes progress made by relevant Government Departments, their agencies, and each local authority in the Regional Assembly area. Indeed, the detailed and voluminous contributions by many stakeholders to this process, demonstrates the far-reaching implications and overarching role that the RSES of the Regional Assembly plays in setting out and driving the sustainable development of the Region, addressing healthy placemaking, climate action and economic opportunity. I welcome the detailed progress documented in this report and also recognise the opportunity it provides to identify where additional focus is required.

I would like to thank my colleagues from the 12 local authorities represented on this Assembly, who, over the past two years, have embraced the RSES and made significant strides to ensure its delivery. This includes driving the implementation of the Dublin Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) through the MASP Committee, championing critical issues such as a Just Transition for the wider Midlands, and support for the delivery of timely economic reports, such as the Co-working analysis and the Covid-19 Regional Economic Analysis, to guide stakeholders in these challenging times.



I would also like to show appreciation to the Local Authorities, Government Departments and agencies, and the numerous individuals that have supported the Regional Assembly over the past two years. Likewise, I am grateful to the staff of the Regional Assembly for their hard work, dedication and support provided during this time.

In the immediate future, I welcome any future interactions with the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) relating to securing the overall objectives of the RSES. As the implementation of the Strategy progresses in the coming years, I look forward to continuing work with our stakeholders, local authorities, government departments and agencies, private and community sectors to deliver on the vision of the RSES, which is to create a sustainable and competitive Region that supports the health and wellbeing of our people and places, from urban to rural, with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunities for all.

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Cathaoirleach

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Longford County Council

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Westmeath County Council

Paddy Hill
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Laois County Council

Caroline Dwane Stanley
Catherine Fitzgerald
Aisling Moran

Executive Summary

This report, known as a 'Monitoring Report', monitors progress made in implementing the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Region (EMR) over the last two years.

The purpose of the Report is to specify the progress made in securing the overall objectives of the RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region, including progress made by relevant public bodies and each local authority in the Regional Assembly area.

The report is a statutory report and the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly are required to submit this Monitoring Report to the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC). NOAC shall consider the Monitoring Report of the Regional Assembly and may make recommendations to the Minister in relation to relevant measures to further support the implementation of the RSES.

The information contained in this report is relevant to the Regional Assembly as it allows the Assembly to track the progress of the RSES over time. It is also relevant to the Local Authorities and Public bodies, and indeed the wider public, in tracking progress relating to RSES implementation.

Detailed findings of this report are set out in section 5, which documents RSES implementation progress by local authorities, public bodies and the Regional Assembly.

Overall, the twelve local authorities of the Region have shown progress through outlining their work related to;

- Planning Policy Alignment with the RSES
- Delivering the Spatial Strategy of the RSES
- Funding- the ambition and interaction of each Local Authority with Funding Mechanisms
- Local Economic and Community Plans

Nine of the fourteen¹ public bodies submitted a response to the Regional Assembly outlining the progress they had made in securing the overall objectives of the RSES, through outlining;

- Progress made in supporting the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation
- Progress made by agencies that operate under the aegis of each Department, in supporting the objectives of the RSES
- Details of any policy initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation
- Details of any funding competitions/initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation
- Details of the funding programmes administered by each Department (and agencies under the aegis of each department), over the last two years, which have been awarded within the Eastern and Midland Region

Finally, the Regional Assembly outlined the progress it has made over the last two years in implementing the RSES through;

- Establishment of Governance Structures for RSES Implementation
- Ensuring Consistency with the RSES
- Dublin MASP Implementation
- Policy Development and Research
- Development of a Regional Development Monitor as Ireland's Regional Data Hub
- National Funding Programmes
- EU Projects
- The Just Transition Process- EMRA's Role
- EU Programming and Funding
- Website Development

¹ Responses were received from The Minister for Education, The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, The Minister for Finance, The Minister for Rural and Community Development, The Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications, The Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. It should also be noted that responses were received by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment following the approval and finalisation of this Report by the members of the Regional Assembly.

The detailed analysis at Section 5 outlines numerous examples of progress over the past two years by local authorities and public bodies that is worthy of note. This includes, for instance, the work carried out by local authorities to align their planning policy with the RSES and engage with the Regional Assembly in this regard, as well as the ongoing work that has happened across the Region by local authorities, in enhancing the newly designated Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns. Likewise, the work carried out to date of the MASP Implementation Group is significant in progressing the implementation of the Dublin MASP.

Furthermore, implementation progress of the public bodies is also noteworthy in securing the overall objectives of the RSES. This includes, for instance, the work of the Department of Rural and Community Development, through the use of the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, to assist in the regeneration of rural towns and villages thus strengthening rural economies and communities. Likewise, the indication from the Climate Governance Division in the Department of Environment, Climate and Communities that the Climate Action Fund, was established on a statutory basis with effect from 1 August 2020, with a key objective of providing support for projects, initiatives

and research that contribute to the achievement of Ireland's climate and energy targets, and for projects and initiatives in regions of the State, and within sectors of the economy, impacted by the transition to a low carbon economy.

There are, however, always areas for improvement and Section 6.0 of this report provides a number of recommendations for consideration by NOAC, that are believed will improve the implementation progress of the RSES. These recommendations are also listed below for convenience. Specifically, this includes recommendations to address the Assembly's concern that a number of key and relevant public bodies did not engage with this process.

The recommendations for consideration by NOAC are based upon the information requested and subsequently provided by local authorities and public bodies. They are provided for local authorities under the headings of Planning Policy Alignment, Delivering the Spatial Strategy, Funding Ambition, and Recommendations of the Local Authorities. Recommendations relating to public bodies are provided for under the heading Engagement with the Regional Assembly, and under the name of each public body that responded.

Recommendations for Consideration by NOAC

Topic	Recommendation(s)
Local Authority Planning Policy Alignment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Supports should be identified and provided to enable Local Authorities to deliver planning alignment with the RSES through Urban Area Plans and Local Area Plans for the Region's Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns. 2. That Regional Assemblies should have a statutory function, under Section 27 of the Act, with regard to material alterations of a Draft Development Plan, for consistency with their functions on submissions on the pre-draft plan consultations and on the draft plan consultations.
Delivering the Spatial Strategy of the RSES	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In consultation with Local Authorities, research should be undertaken to identify mechanisms which enable the implementation of the RSES by Local Authorities. Without further consultation with Local Authorities, it would be premature for the Regional Assembly to speculate as to how this should be carried out at this stage.
Funding- Ambition and Interaction with Funding Mechanisms	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Refresh the bidding process for the URDF to provide enhanced and ring-fenced funding for complex and larger regeneration projects in the Dublin Metropolitan Area and the designated Regional Growth Centres (Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk) and Key Towns of the Region. Increased and ring-fenced funding sources will be instrumental in ensuring delivery of the spatial strategy of the RSES and that urban renewal schemes are adequately utilised in a manner that supports compact growth targets that have been outlined in the RSES. 2. Enhance the position and ability of local authorities to prepare successful funding applications. In recent years, it has become clear that the ability of Local Authorities to prepare successful applications for funding have mainly become resource-dependent, with funding being distributed in a manner that is not wholly aligned to the spatial objectives of the NPF and the RSES. It has been noted in discussions with our stakeholders that local authorities may be in a better position to achieve the opportunities available, particularly the national funds, if the requisite resources were available to prepare comprehensive applications for funding under the current competitive process. 3. That Local Authorities are supported in engaging with EU Programming and Funding with a national approach to budgeting for matched funding.
Recommendations and Comments of the Local Authorities that are considered would facilitate the Process	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Consideration is given to identifying and, where appropriate, implementing measures that enable local authorities to engage in meaningful implementation of the RSES in their area.

Topic	Recommendation(s)
Public Bodies	<p>Engagement with the Regional Assembly</p> <p>1. It is recommended that mechanisms are put in place to ensure the fulfilment by public bodies of their statutory obligations under Section 25A. of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, which require that public bodies shall, every 2 years, prepare and submit a report to the assembly setting out progress made in supporting objectives, relevant to that body, of the strategy.</p> <p>2. It is recommended that mechanisms are put in place to ensure the fulfilment by public bodies of their statutory obligations under Section 22A. of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, which require that public bodies shall assist and co-operate as far as practicable with the regional assembly in the preparation of the strategy and thereafter supporting its implementation, and, that each public body shall consult with the regional assemblies, as appropriate, when preparing its own strategies, plans and programmes and so as to ensure that they are consistent, as far as practicable, with national and regional objectives set out in the National Planning Framework and RSES.</p>
Rural and Community Development	<p>1. The Regional Assembly should inform the implementation process attached to 'Our Rural Future' to ensure that regional development occurs in a sustainable manner, which is coordinated and prioritised in line with the spatial and economic strategy defined for the Eastern and Midland Region, thus supporting and delivering on Project Ireland 2040.</p> <p>It should be noted that the Regional Assembly is already involved in supporting the review process of LECPs and the Town Centre First Approach.</p> <p>2. The Regional Assembly should inform the roll out of the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund in order to focus the delivery of funding in a coordinated manner that ensures the delivery of the spatial and economic strategy for the Region.</p> <p>It should be noted that alignment with the RSES is a key determinant for receipt of funding under the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) administered by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.</p>
Finance	<p>1. The Regional Assembly should be afforded opportunity to inform the horizontal priority of Regionalisation, as expressed in the International Financial Services Strategy 2025-Ireland for Finance, as part of the ongoing implementation process of the aforementioned strategy. This will ensure that measures directly aimed at increasing employment in the international financial services (IFS) sector of the regions is guided to appropriate locations that supports the spatial strategy of the RSES and recognises the importance of Dublin as a national economic driver; The Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor, especially in light of BREXIT and the need to develop an all-island economy; Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk as vital regional growth centres; and a number of Key Towns ².</p>
Environment, Climate and Communications	<p>1. The Regional Assembly should be considered a key stakeholder and appropriately consulted in the development of new DECC (and Agency) policies and programmes which relate to the themes sought and addressed in this report and which are aligned with RSES objectives (RSOs and RPOs)</p> <p>2. That Regional Assemblies are established as a prescribed body for submissions on climate action plans to develop cohesiveness with spatial planning - analogous to the links between spatial planning and transport planning.</p>
Agriculture, Food and the Marine	<p>1. The Regional Assembly should inform the implementation of the new Agri-Food Strategy to 2030. This will ensure that implementation measures (and in particular those centred on a climate smart, environmentally sustainable agri-food sector; viable and resilient primary producers; and an innovative, competitive and resilient sector, driven by technology and talent) are aligned to the policy contained within the RSES, which provides a framework for future growth, ensuring the delivery of effective regional development through the realisation of viable and vital places. It is essential that implementation policy and investment priorities reflect the RSES to allow managed and sustainable growth that enables each place to fulfil ambition and potential.</p>
Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media	<p>1. The Regional Assembly should be afforded opportunity to inform the implementation process of the Department's Tourism Action Plan, other relevant tourism policy documents, and at a high level the direction of funding, to ensure that tourism measures, and in particular those aimed at enhancing regional destinations, are guided to appropriate and necessary locations that support the spatial strategy of the RSES, which provides a framework for future growth, ensuring the delivery of effective regional development through the realisation of viable and vital places. This includes championing the capital city of Dublin as a smart, climate-resilient and global city region; securing Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk as Regional Growth Centres, acting as regional economic drivers and supports for their wider catchment areas; and promoting a network of large economically active Key Towns³ that provide employment and services to their surrounding areas. All of this is supported by Self-Sustaining Growth Towns, Self-Sustaining Towns and a network of multifaceted Rural Places which are home to a number of important tourism assets. It is essential that policy and investment priorities reflect this spatial strategy to allow managed and sustainable growth that enables each place to fulfil ambition and potential.</p>

² Swords, Maynooth, Bray, Navan, Naas, Wicklow, Longford, Mullingar, Tullamore and Portlaoise.

³ Swords, Maynooth, Bray, Navan, Naas, Wicklow, Longford, Mullingar, Tullamore and Portlaoise.

Topic	Recommendation(s)
Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Regional Assembly should inform research and regional analysis undertaken by the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit in SOLAS in relation to skills planning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as any other research studies of relevance to the RSES and the Eastern and Midland Region. 2. In its consideration of applications under section 29(1) of the Technological Universities Act 2018, the Department may consider it appropriate to set assessment criteria to ensure appropriate consideration of NPF population targets, the RSES settlement strategy and other relevant metrics, thus supporting and delivering on Project Ireland 2040 and the RSES. 3. In undertaking any education campus development, the Department should endeavour to progress regeneration and economic synergies both within and in proximity to the campus under development, as well as integrate the 'smart cities' concept and other 'future proofing' measures. 4. The Regional Assembly should inform the next National Research and Innovation Strategy to ensure alignment with the RSES and key national policy documents. 5. The Regional Assembly should be included in any consultation process relating to the reform of The Higher Education Authority Act and the implementation of recommendations of the TURN group's report. 6. The Department should ensure that appropriate Benchmarking is undertaken against other comparable economies to facilitate progress towards improving our comparative performance in RDI.
Education	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Regional Assembly should inform the engagement between the Department and the 12 Local Authorities across the region in strategy development for the provision of new schools to cater for future populations. In particular, the Regional Assembly and the RSES should inform policy and strategy around the intensification of the use of existing school sites in Existing Built-Up Areas and their immediate environs in order to meet future needs. 2. The Regional Assembly welcomes the production of specific and detailed medium to long-term school place projections at school planning area level that are currently being produced in addition to the annual demographic analysis pertaining to the 314 school planning areas nationally. The Regional Assembly would welcome parallel analysis pertaining to alignment with NPF population targets and the RSES settlement strategy, thus supporting and delivering on Project Ireland 2040. 3. Given EMRA's key role in regional coordination, enhancing regional connectivity, and participation on the Interreg Europe Next2Met project which is working to increase regional attractiveness with soft digitalisation measures, the Regional Assembly should be considered a key stakeholder and appropriately consulted in the development of the new Digital Strategy for Schools.
Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Regional Assembly should be afforded opportunity to liaise with the NDA to inform new guidance documents and those under review in order to facilitate enhanced implementation by local authorities and other key stakeholders. 2. The Regional Assembly should be afforded opportunity to inform the development of any successor framework to 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures 2014-2020'. 3. The Regional Assembly welcomes the interaction between the Children and Young People's Services Committees and LCDCs, as well as the cross-departmental collaboration associated with NEIC City Connects Pilot Project. The Regional Assembly would welcome the opportunity to engage with these and related processes to facilitate a coordinated approach to bridge national policy with local provision across the Eastern and Midland Region.
Housing, Local Government and Heritage	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To revise the 'applicant led' bidding process for URDF funds in order to secure enhanced and ring-fenced funding for complex and larger regeneration projects in the Dublin Metropolitan Area and the designated Regional Growth Centres (Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk) and Key Towns of the Region. Increased and ring-fenced funding sources will be instrumental in ensuring delivery of the spatial strategy of the RSES and that urban renewal schemes are adequately utilised in a manner that supports compact growth targets that have been outlined in the RSES. This recommendation is in keeping with the findings and subsequent recommendations on foot of the local authority responses related to funding. 2. Identify and provide measures in order to converge towards the NPF and RSES development scenario for Dublin City and suburbs, acknowledging trends that indicate a continuing struggle to achieve housing targets. 3. Support coordination of RSES objectives, related to strengthened and diversified rural communities, both within and across Government Departments, including the delivery of serviced sites for housing to attract people to build their own homes and live-in small towns and villages.



Acknowledgements

The production of this report has involved a number of organisations including Local Authorities, Government Departments and agencies.

EMRA is extremely grateful to the staff of the twelve local authorities in the Region that contributed to this report, namely Dublin City Council, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, Fingal County Council, South Dublin County Council, Louth County Council, Meath County Council, Kildare Council, Wicklow County Council, Longford County Council, Westmeath County Council, Offaly County Council and Laois County Council. It is acknowledged that this request came at a busy time for Local Authorities that have been impacted by the COVID 19 pandemic and are working to deliver their County Development Plans.

EMRA is also grateful to the public bodies that communicated with the Assembly on this report including The Minister for Education, The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, The Minister for Finance, The Minister for Rural and Community Development, The Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications, The Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Numerous agencies under the aegis of the aforementioned public bodies also took the time to respond to the Regional Assembly.



1.0 Introduction

This report, known as a 'Monitoring Report', outlines progress made in implementing the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Region (EMR).

The purpose of the Report is to specify the progress made in securing the overall objectives of the RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region, including progress made by relevant public bodies and each local authority in the Regional Assembly area.

A Monitoring Report is prepared every two years. This is the first Monitoring Report prepared by the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly, following the making of the RSES for the Region in June 2019.



2.0 The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES)

2.1 What is a RSES?

A Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy is a planning and economic framework that considers the future development of the region for a period of not less than 12 years and not more than 20 years. It is made by a Regional Assembly in accordance with the provisions of Chapter III of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended. A Regional Assembly is required to review the RSES every six years.

The objective of a RSES is to support the implementation of the National Planning Framework (NPF), as part of Project Ireland 2040, and the economic policies and objectives of the Government by providing a long-term strategic planning and economic framework for the development of the region. The RSES is of critical importance for the delivery of Project Ireland 2040, given that it is the succeeding tier of policy delivery in Ireland.

2.2 Alignment with a RSES

City and County Development Plans (CDPs) of a Local Authority are required to be consistent with the RSES. Similarly, Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs) must be submitted to the Regional Assembly for consideration with respect to consistency with the RSES.

Public Bodies shall assist and co-operate as far as practicable with a Regional Assembly in supporting the implementation of the RSES. Furthermore, each public body shall consult with a Regional Assembly, as appropriate, when preparing its own strategies, plans and programmes, to ensure that they are consistent, as far as practicable, with national and regional objectives set out in the National Planning Framework and Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy.

With respect to the Eastern and Midland Region, the RSES and Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) of the National Transport Authority (NTA), shall be consistent.

2.3 The RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region

The RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region (EMR) was made in June 2019. The overall vision of the Strategy is to create a sustainable and competitive Region that supports the health and wellbeing of our people and places, from urban to rural, with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunity for all.

The vision is supported by 16 Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSOs) that are framed around three key principles of Healthy Placemaking, Climate Action and Economic Opportunity. A primary statutory objective of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) is to support the implementation of the National Planning Framework (NPF), the NDP, and thus Project Ireland 2040.

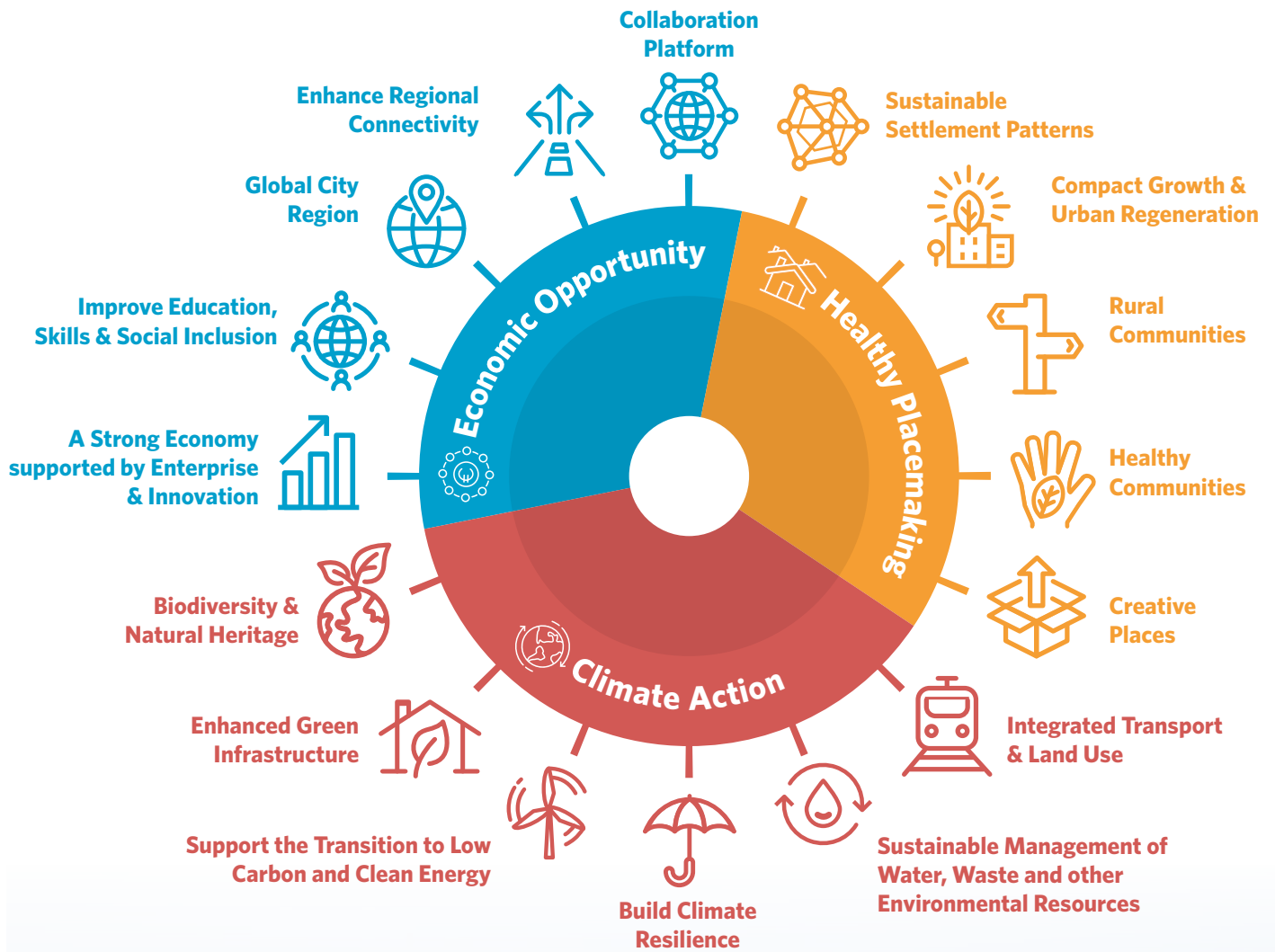


Figure 1: Key Principles and Regional Strategic Outcomes of the EMRA's RSES



3.0 Legislative Basis for this Report

This Report is prepared under Section 25A. of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (the Act).

The Act outlines that, in respect of the regional spatial and economic strategy of a regional assembly, public bodies and each local authority within the regional assembly area shall, every 2 years, prepare and submit a report to the assembly setting out progress made in supporting objectives, relevant to that body, of the strategy.

In addition, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) shall, every 2 years, prepare a report (referred to as a monitoring report) monitoring progress made in implementing the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy.

The monitoring report shall specify the progress made in securing the overall objectives of the regional spatial and economic strategy, including any specific actions and outcomes, including actions specific to the public bodies.

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly are required to submit its monitoring report to the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC). The National Oversight and Audit Commission shall consider the monitoring report of the Regional Assembly and may make recommendations to the Minister in relation to relevant measures to further support the implementation of the RSES.

The public bodies for the purpose of this report are⁴;

1. **The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage**
2. **The Minister for Rural and Community Development**
3. **The Minister for Finance**
4. **The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform**
5. **The Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment**
6. **The Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications**
7. **The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine**
8. **The Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media**
9. **The Minister for Transport**
10. **The Minister for Health**
11. **The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science**
12. **The Minister for Education**
13. **The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth**
14. **The Minister for Foreign Affairs**

⁴ The list of public bodies presented here are updated to reflect the current configuration of Government Departments. Section 22A of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, outlines that a 'public body' means (a) the Minister, (b) the Minister for Finance, (c) the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, (d) the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, (e) the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, (f) the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, (g) the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, (h) the Minister for Health, (i) the Minister for Education and Skills, (j) the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade

4.0 Collaboration between Regional Assemblies

It is envisioned that the style, content and learnings from this report will inform the Monitoring Reports of the other Regional Assemblies. Indeed, initial cooperation has started on this matter.

The Monitoring Report of the EMRA is the first to be prepared in the Country resulting from the timeframe at which the RSES was finalised i.e., two years ago. The Monitoring Reports of the Northern and Western Regional Assembly and Southern Regional Assembly are also expected two years after the finalisation of their respective RSESs which falls at the end of January 2022 for both RSESs.

Interregional collaboration has and continues to be a core component of the workings of each of the Regional Assemblies. Each regional assembly recognises that some complex strategic objectives of the RSES can only be achieved through collaboration with adjoining regions that have similar objectives and priorities.

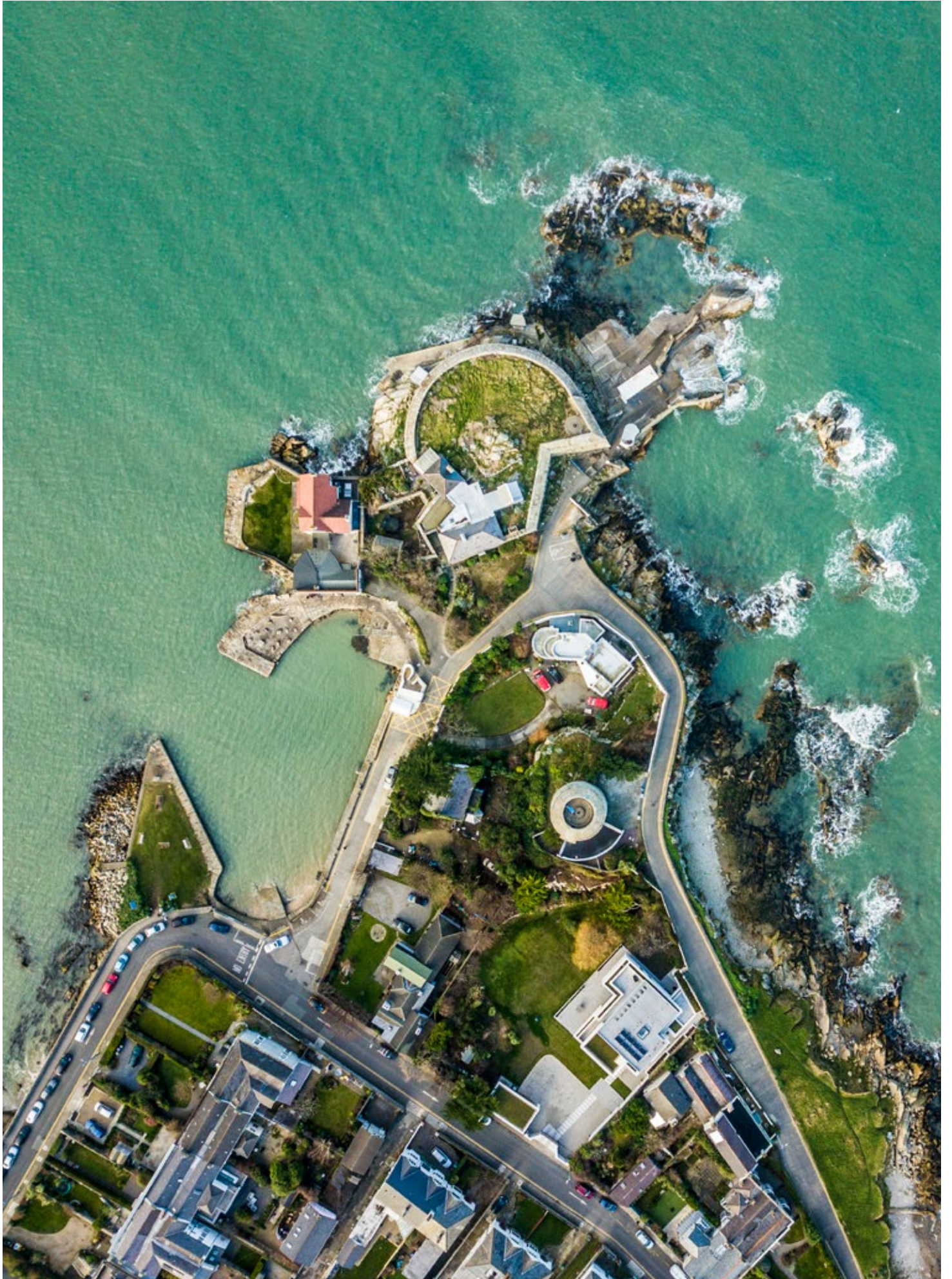
To date, good governance and leadership from the Regional Assemblies has contributed to the overall sustainability and viability of interregional and cross border initiatives. This includes;

- The Association of Irish Regions, which is a collaborative platform representing the three Regional Assemblies at both a political and executive level. This association is made up of the current and former Cathaoirígh of each of the three Regional Assemblies, supported by the Directors of each Assembly.
- Formal and Informal cooperation between Regional Assemblies not explicitly linked to the RSES, relating, for instance, to EU Regional Operational Programmes and the Committee of the Regions.
- Dedicated Strategic Planning Area (SPA) Committees made up of elected members, to provide a forum that progresses RSES Implementation, and, discusses issues unique to particular localities, including peripheral areas of the Region and those with a cross border focus. This has also been supported by a Senior Planner forum at SPA level. Please note a map of the SPA areas is provided below at Figure 2.
- A dedicated RSES Network Group that provides a forum for the executive of the three Regional Assemblies to progress implementation of the RSESs and related policy and research. This is supported by an Assistant Director Forum made up of the Senior Planners of each Regional Assembly.
- The preparation of Ireland's Regional Data Hub by the three Regional Assemblies and led by EMRA, to monitor the performance of the RSES over its lifecycle and provide a wealth of spatial data for multiple stakeholders using free web-based access.
- Ongoing engagement focused on a bilateral and multilateral basis with key implementation stakeholders to advance RSES implementation across all Regional Assemblies.

It should be noted that the Regional Assemblies regularly assess these arrangements and where appropriate recommend measures to leading stakeholders of interregional collaborative actions to ensure efficiency, sustainability and success of their projects in achieving their objectives.



Figure 2: Strategic Planning Areas (SPAs) of the Eastern and Midland Region



5.0 Progress Made in Implementing the RSES

This section of the Report will focus on progress made in implementing the RSES by;

- **Public Bodies and Local Authorities as required by the Planning and Development Act (Section 5.1 of this Report), and;**
- **The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (Section 5.2 of this Report)**

The report will specify the progress made in securing the overall objectives of the RSES, including any specific actions and outcomes.

5.1 Implementation Progress made by Local Authorities and Public Bodies

As identified above (Section 3.0), public bodies and each local authority within the regional assembly area shall, every 2 years, prepare and submit a report to the assembly setting out progress made in supporting objectives, relevant to that body, of the strategy.

The Regional Assembly facilitated these public bodies and each Local Authority to fulfil this requirement by;

- Notifying each public body and local authority of their requirement to prepare and submit a report to the Assembly, and;
- Enabling each public body and Local Authority to action this requirement through the provision of a 'Request Form' which could be completed and submitted as their report.

The 'Request Forms' circulated requested detail relating to progress performance areas relevant to public bodies and Local Authorities. These progress performance areas, chosen for this two-year review period, are reflective of the early stage in the implementation cycle of the RSES period. The 'Request Form Templates' can be found at Appendix A and B of this Report for the Local Authorities and Public Bodies templates respectively.

Local Authorities were requested to outline progress relating to their Development Plan (CDP), Urban Area Plan(s) (UAP) and Local Area Plans (LAPs). Information relating to the Dublin Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) was collected separately through the MASP Implementation Forum. In addition, Local Authorities were requested to outline progress relating to their interaction with funding streams available, Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs), and to provide any additional information that they would like to make with respect to their Local Authority and implementing the RSES, including any recommendations that they consider would facilitate the implementation of the Strategy.

Public Bodies were requested to outline the progress that had been made by their department, and a number of agencies under the aegis of their department, with respect to related policy areas within the RSES. Each 'Request Form' was tailored to the specific public body in this regard. In addition, they were also asked to provide details of any policy and funding initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to their organisation. This included detail related to funding programmes administered by their department, over the last two years, which have been awarded within the Eastern and Midland Region. Finally, each public body was asked to provide any other comments that they would like to make with respect to their department (including any agencies under the aegis of their department) and implementing the RSES, including any recommendations that they consider would facilitate the implementation of the Strategy.

5.1.1 Implementation Progress made by Local Authorities

All 12 Local Authorities within the Eastern and Midland Region submitted a Report to the Assembly setting out progress made in supporting objectives, relevant to that Local Authority, of the RSES. Please note that this Section should be read in tandem with Section 5.2.3 which documents Dublin MASP Implementation Progress by the relevant local authorities.

In order to monitor implementation progress of the RSES, a number of progress areas related to Local Authorities, have been chosen for this two-year review period. These progress areas are reflective of the early stage in the implementation cycle of the RSES period.

They include progress related to;

- Planning Policy Alignment with the RSES
- Delivering the Spatial Strategy of the RSES by each Local Authority
- Funding- the ambition and interaction of each Local Authority with Funding Mechanisms
- Local Economic and Community Plans

In addition, this section of the Report also details Local Authority comments and recommendations relating to implementing the RSES (documented at Section E below) and also a response from the Regional Assembly to the returns received (Section F).

A) Planning Policy Alignment with the RSES

The alignment of Local Authority planning policy with the RSES, is considered to be a significant progress milestone in supporting objectives, relevant to the Local Authority, of the RSES. Consistency with the RSES will enable and progress the implementation of policy and objectives contained within the Strategy. Section 12 (18) of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, explicitly states that a statutory obligation of a local authority in making a Development Plan includes the obligation to ensure that the development plan is consistent with the national and regional objectives specified in the RSES. Furthermore, Section 10 (1) A of the Act requires the core strategy of a development plan to show that the development objectives in the development plan are consistent, as far as practicable, with national and regional development objectives set out in the National Planning Framework and the regional spatial and economic strategy, and, Section 27. (1) requires that a planning authority shall ensure, when making a development plan or a local area plan, that the plan is consistent with any regional spatial and economic strategy in force for its area.

A) (i) Compliance with Section 11(1)(b) of the Act

All of the Local Authorities complied with the requirements of Section 11(1)(b) of the Act for the purposes of enabling the incorporation of the RSES into their Development Plan, within the timeframes outlined. In order to comply with the aforementioned Section of the Act, 2 Local Authorities paused their review process and then restarted it after the RSES had been made, 4 Local Authorities prepared a development plan variation, and, the remaining Local Authorities commenced a full development plan review. Those that varied their CDPs have now commenced a review of their development plans.

A) (ii) County Development Plan Progress

All Local Authorities within the Region are progressing their Development Plan review process. The Assembly welcomes the progress made to date, marking the alignment of planning policy at county and local levels with Regional and National Policy.

Table 1 outlines the review stage of City and County Development Plans across the Region.

Local Authority	Preliminary Phase	Issues Paper	Draft	Material Amendments	Made	Came into Effect	Direction	Comments
Dublin City	Complete	Current stage - consultation ended February 22nd 2021	Due to start consultation November 2022					
Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown	Complete	Complete	Current stage - public consultation up to April 16th 2021					
Fingal	Complete	Current stage - consultation ended May 12th 2021	Due to start consultation February 2022					
Kildare	Complete	Complete	Due to start consultation Dec 2021	Sept 2022	Jan 2023	Feb 2023		
Laois	Complete	Complete	Complete	July/Aug 2021	Dec 2021 (expected)	Jan 2021 (expected)		
Longford	Complete	Complete	Complete - on public display from 27th October - 18th January inclusive.	On display until 10th August 2021	18th October 2021 (expected)	29th November 2021 (expected)		In 2020 at the receipt of strategic direction stage - due to Covid 19 emergency legislation the process was stalled for 56 days (8 weeks).
Louth	Complete	Complete	Complete - on display Oct 2020-Dec 2020	Expected June 2021	Oct 2021	Nov 2021		
Meath	Complete December 2016	Complete, February 2017	Complete, March 2020	Expected completion May 2021	Expected Sept 2021	Expected Nov 2021		
Offaly	summer 2018 to summer 2019	Complete 31/7/19	Complete 27/7/20	Expected to issue notice 17/6/21	Expected September 2021	Expected October 2021		
South Dublin	Complete	Current stage - consultation ended September 28th 2020	Due to start consultation July 2021					
Westmeath	Complete 16/02/18	Complete 01/06/18	Complete 28/02/20	Complete 16/02/21	Complete 22/03/21	Complete 3/05/21	Ongoing Direction issued 29/04/21	
Wicklow	Complete	Complete Jan 2020	Public consultation 02/06/2021 to 16/08/2021					

Table 1: Stage of City and County Development Plan Reviews

A) (iii) Progress of Urban Area Plans (UAPs)

As outlined in the National Planning Framework, Urban Area Plans are prepared for Regional Growth Centres within the Region. The Eastern and Midland Region contains three Regional Growth Centres. These are Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk.

UAP PROGRESS

Athlone

Athlone straddles the administrative boundaries of Counties Westmeath and Roscommon, and the administrative boundaries of the Eastern and Midland and Northern and Western Regional Assemblies. Accordingly, a Joint UAP is to be prepared.

The formal UAP process is likely to commence Q3 2022. The preparatory research and background analysis to inform the preparation of the Athlone UAP has commenced, in conjunction with Roscommon County Council.

This preparatory research and background work includes;

- The Athlone Joint Retail Strategy which was adopted by the Elected Members of Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils in April 2019.
- Initiation of an Economic Strategy for Athlone, which also includes a Marketing Plan.
- Commissioning of an Area Based Transport Assessment for Athlone (ABTA), with work underway by SYSTRA in relation to traffic surveys and forecasting in relation to determining Travel Demand, Travel Patterns and Mode Split Assumptions. It is anticipated that the ABTA will be completed by the end of Q4 2021.
- Seeking tenders in relation to the preparation of an Urban Design Framework Plan for Athlone, funded by URDF monies. Estimated start Q3 2021 (6-month delivery).

Drogheda

Drogheda straddles the administrative boundaries of Counties Louth and Meath and accordingly, a Joint UAP is to be prepared.

The Development Plans of both local authorities are currently nearing the end of the plan making process. As material amendments, both local authorities have committed to commencing a process to make a joint plan within 6 months of the adoption of the respective county development plans.

There continues to be active engagement and cooperation between the local authorities. Background work has commenced, on both an economic and transportation position papers in order to inform a future Issues Paper on the Drogheda Joint Urban Area Plan. These documents will provide a strong evidence base for the Issues Paper.

SH OBJ 6, Chapter 3 of the Draft Meath County Development Plan 2021-2027 sets out that the existing Southern Environs of Drogheda Local Area Plan 2009 shall remain in place until it is replaced with the UAP.

The formal UAP process is likely to commence Q3 2022.

Dundalk

Dundalk is identified as a Regional Growth Centre in the RSES and the Urban Area Plan is to provide a coordinated approach to infrastructure investment for the sustainable development and growth of the urban settlements and interconnections will be necessary to build greater levels of critical mass and facilitate the effective movement of people and goods.

The Dundalk UAP will commence in 2022 following the adoption of the CDP. Similar to Drogheda, the Council will collaborate with the NTA with regards to the preparation of Local Transport Plan in tandem with the LAP and which prioritises modal shift.

A) (iv) Progress of Local Area Plans (LAPs)

Local Area Plans shall be consistent with the objectives of the development plan, its core strategy, and any regional spatial and economic strategy that apply to the area of the plan. A Local Area Plan may include objectives for the zoning of land for the use solely or primarily of particular areas for particular purposes, or such other objectives for the proper planning and sustainable development of the area, including the objective of development of land on a phased basis and, detail on community facilities and amenities and on standards for the design of developments and structures. Each planning authority within the Greater Dublin Area shall ensure that its local area plans are consistent with the transport strategy of the National Transport Authority.

Local Area Plans are to be prepared for the Key Towns of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly. Key Towns are large economically active service and/or county towns that provide employment for their surrounding areas and with high-quality transport links and the capacity to act as growth drivers to complement the Regional Growth Centres.

KEY TOWN LAP PROGRESS

DUBLIN SPA

Old Connaught LAP

Early-stage pre-draft public consultation has been undertaken with respect to the Old Connaught LAP within DLR area, to facilitate mainly residential development as part of the westward expansion of Bray. It is likely that the Old Connaught LAP will only progress to Draft stage post adoption of the new DLR County Development Plan in 2022.

This preparatory research and background work includes;

- Bray and Environs Transport Study completed by the NTA in April 2019 in conjunction with TII, DLR and Wicklow County Council.
- Consultants appointed with the aim that a Draft an Area Based Transport Assessment (ABTA) will be completed by Q2/Q3 2021.

Strategic Flood Risk Assessment progressing – expected completion in Q3 2021. AA / SEA - Environmental consultants to be appointed.

Swords LAP

The Local Authority did not complete this section of the return form. It is noted, however, in their return for the MASP Progress report, they stated that masterplans for 4 land parcels in Swords have been agreed in 2019, that the Oldtown/Mooretown LAP was adopted in 2010 and extended to 2020 and that a Swords-Lissenhall LAP is proposed.

EASTERN SPA

Bray LAP

Bray LAP 2018-2024 Review to commence 2023 to complete 2024

Naas LAP

A Draft Naas Local Area Plan 2021-2027 was published on the 9th of March 2021. The process is expected to run over a period of 41 weeks, which will conclude ca. November 2021. The Draft local Area Plan was supported by a series of evidence-based documents including but not limited to the Naas-Sallins Transport Strategy, a Social Infrastructure Audit and a Sustainable Planning and Infrastructure Assessment (in accordance with the requirements of Appendix 3 of the National Planning Framework).

Navan LAP

The Navan written statement and zoned map in the Meath Draft CDP 2021-2027 will replace current Navan DP until such times as new Navan LAP is adopted. It is expected to commence the LAP in Q1 2022, for completion in Q4 2022.

Work to date;

- Navan 2050- A Vision for the town, completed April 2021
- Town Centre Public Realm Strategy- Navan 2030- Completed 2016
- Urban Design Framework Plan, Flowerhill Abbeylands- Draft regeneration plan, scheduled for completion June 2021.
- Conservation and regeneration plan for former Council headquarters and St Pats Classical school site- Draft Plan scheduled for completion July 2021.
- Report on socio-economic impacts of Navan Rail project, April 2021

Maynooth LAP

The current LAP was prepared in 2013. The background work to prepare a joint local area plan for Maynooth is underway. It is anticipated that a Draft Maynooth LAP 2022-2028 will be published in ca. Q1 of 2022. The Draft local Area Plan will be supported by a series of evidence-based documents which are currently being prepared including but not limited to a Strategic Transport Strategy, a Social Infrastructure Audit and a Sustainable Planning and Infrastructure Assessment (in accordance with the requirements of Appendix 3 of the National Planning Framework).

Maynooth Environs Plan in Written statement (Vol 2) of Meath County Development Plan 2013-2019. A revised Maynooth written statement and zoned map is contained within Draft CDP 2021-2027 & will replace current Environs Plan until such times as new Maynooth Joint LAP is adopted by both MCC & KCC. The timeline is TBC

The Draft Meath County Development Plan 2021-2027, Volume 2 contains a written statement and land use zoning objectives map for Maynooth Environs which provides a policy framework for the area in advance of preparation of a joint plan.

Wicklow - Rathnew LAP

The review of this LAP is to commenced upon the adoption of the County Development plan to complete in 2023.

MIDLANDS SPA

Longford Town LAP

The Longford Town and Environs Local Area Plan 2016-2022 (made by way of Variation no. 2 of County Longford Development Plan 2015-2021) is set to be reviewed, beginning with provisional work commencing after completion of the County Longford Development Plan 2021-2027 (after Q4 2021). A number of studies undertaken, as a result of preparation of the County Longford Development Plan 2021-2027, will support this.

Mullingar LAP

The current Mullingar Local Area Plan has been extended and remains in place until April 2025.

Given the recent adoption of the CDP 2021-2027, it is the intention to commence the preparatory research and analysis to inform the new LAP for Mullingar. Work has commenced on the preparation of a tender for an Area Based Transport Assessment for Mullingar, which is anticipated will be completed by the end of Q4 2021.

Portlaoise LAP

The Portlaoise Local Area Plan 2018-2024 is expected to be reviewed commencing in Q1 2022. A number of documents will inform the new LAP including the Portlaoise 2040 Strategy (completed), Portlaoise Decarbonisation Zone and carbon footprint study completed March 2021, the Tyrells Land Masterplan (completed by July 2021), and a Local Transport Plan (funding received under Active Travel from NTA).

Tullamore LAP

The Tullamore Town and Environs Development Plan 2010-2016 (as extended) will expire on the coming into effect of the Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027 in October 2021. Preparation of the Tullamore Local Area Plans is expected to commence in September 2021. According to LAP Guidelines, preparatory work lasts circa 1 year up to placing the draft on display. Allowing 35 weeks from when draft goes on public display to when adopted means a likely adoption time of June 2023.

Local Area Plans may also be prepared for other settlements throughout the Eastern and Midland Region and will be determined by each Local Authority. As part of the returns from the Local Authorities, not all existing or future Local Area Plans were listed by each Local Authority. This is reflected in the table below. It should be noted, however, that some Local Authorities prepare 'Settlement Plans' which are contained within the County Development Plan and, as such, are not reflected as part of this table.

OTHER SETTLEMENTS LAP PROGRESS

DUBLIN SPA

Dublin City Council (DCC) Existing Plans

- Clongriffin / Belmayne Local Area Plan 2012 - Extended to December 2022.
- Georges Quay Local Area Plan 2021 - Extended to July 2022.
- Ashtown / Pelletstown Local Area Plan 2013 - Extended to December 2023.
- Naas Road Lands Local Area Plan 2013 - Extended to January 2023
- Ballymun Local Area Plan 2017 - 2023
- Cherry Orchard / Park West 2019 - 2025.

No ongoing LAPs reported.

DLR Existing Plans

- Ballyogan and Environs LAP 2019-2025
- Stillorgan LAP 2018-2024
- Woodbrook-Shanganagh LAP 2017-2023
- Blackrock LAP 2015-2021 - Extended to March 2025
- Goatstown LAP 2012-2018 - Extended to April 2022

DLR Proposed LAPs - Preparatory work for the following proposed LAPs has not commenced

- Dún Laoghaire & Environs
- Rathmichael
- Glencullen
- Sallynoggin
- Deansgrange
- Ballybrack / Loughlinstown
- DLR Kilternan LAP 2013-2019 - Extended to September 2023.

DLR Dundrum LAP - preparatory research and background work includes;

Early-stage pre-draft public consultation has been undertaken and preparatory work is progressing on ACA appraisal and Strategic Flood Risk Assessment progressing - expected completion in Q3 2021. Consultants appointed with the aim that a Draft ABTA would be completed by Q3/Q4 2021. Community, Cultural and Civic Action Plan completed and URDF funding awarded to progress Community, Cultural and Civic Hub and public realm upgrades. AA / SEA - Environmental consultants to be appointed.

It is likely to progress to Draft stage in 2022 post adoption of the new County Development Plan.

FCC Existing Plans

- Donabate Local Area Plan - adopted in March 2016, extended to March 2026
- Rivermeade Local Area Plan - adopted in May 2018
- Barnhill Local Area Plan - adopted in February 2019
- Kinsealy Local Area Plan - adopted in May 2019
- Dublin Airport Local Area Plan - adopted in December 2019
- Kellystown Local Area Plan - adopted in January 2021
- No ongoing LAP's.

SDCC Existing Plans

- Tallaght LAP 2020 - 2026 unless subsequently extended.
- Ballycullen LAP 2014 - Extended until June 2024
- Newcastle LAP 2014 - Extended until May 2022
- Fortunestown LAP 2014 - Extended until May 2022
- No ongoing LAPs reported.

EASTERN SPA

Kildare

- Athy LAP 2012-2018 Section 20 underway to prepare and adopt a new LAP. Supported by a Social Infrastructure Audit and a Sustainable Planning and Infrastructure Assessment
- Kildare Town 2012-2018 Local Transport Plan currently being prepared to inform new LAP- Social Infrastructure Audit and a Sustainable Planning and Infrastructure Assessment
- Current LAPs for Newbridge 2013-2021, Kilcullen 2014-2020, Kilcock 2015-2021, Celbridge 2017-2023, Clane 2017-2023, Leixlip 2020-2023, Monasterevin 2016-2022, Sallins 2016-2022.

Louth

- The operative Ardee LAP 2010-2016 will be reviewed following completion of the LAPs for Dundalk and Drogheda.
- The operative plan for Dunleer is the Dunleer LAP 2017-2023 and will be reviewed after the Ardee LAP is nearing completion.

Meath

- Kells Development Plan 2013-2019, LAP expected Q2 2022
- Trim Development Plan 2014-2020, LAP expected Q2 2022
- Ashbourne LAP 2009-2015, Additional policies and objectives, Variation 3 CDP 2013-2019. LAP expected Q2 2022
- Dunshaughlin LAP 2009-2015, Additional policies and objectives, Variation 3 CDP 2013-2019. LAP expected Q1 2023
- Dunboyne LAP 2009-2015, Additional policies and objectives, Variation 3 CDP 2013-2019. LAP expected Q1 2023
- Ratoath LAP 2009-2015, Additional policies and objectives, Variation 3 CDP 2013-2019. LAP expected Q3 2023
- Bettystown, Laytown, Mornington East, Donacorney LAP 2014-2020 expected Q3 2023
- Enfield, Stamullen, Duleek, Athboy and Oldcastle have no current LAP and Vol 2 Written Statement Meath County Development Plan 2013-2019 currently applies. LAPs expected Q1 2024.

Wicklow

- Arklow LAP 2018-2024 is expected to be reviewed in 2023 to be completed by 2024.
- Greystones LAP 2013-2019 is expected to be reviewed upon completion of the CDP and to be completed by 2023.
- Blessington LAP 2013-2019 is expected to be reviewed upon completion of the CDP and to be completed by 2023.
- Newtownmount-kennedy LAP 2008-2018, new plan is to be included in the draft CDP.
- Rathdrum LAP 2017-2023, new plan is to be included in the draft CDP.

OTHER SETTLEMENTS LAP PROGRESS

MIDLANDS SPA

Graiguecullen Joint Local Area Plan 2018 – 2022⁵;

This is a joint LAP with Carlow County Council and the timeframe is dependent on when Carlow will complete the review process for the Carlow County Development Plan 2022 – 2028. It is currently projected to commence this review formally in June 2022.

Mountmellick Local Area Plan 2018 – 2024;

It is expected to review this LAP in Q1 2022. The following key documents will inform on the new LAP including a Local Transport Plan (funding received under Active Travel from NTA) and the Mountmellick Flood Relief Scheme – Emerging options in relation to same currently on display.

Portarlinton Joint Local Area Plan 2018 – 2024;

Laois County council indicated that work is ongoing between Laois and Offaly County Councils to determine timeline with a possible date for review in Q4 2021. A number of key documents will inform on the new LAP including the Portarlinton Town Centre Regeneration Framework due for completion June 2021, and a Local Transport Plan (funding received under Active Travel from NTA to be done in collaboration with OCC who also received funding). Offaly County Council indicated that the LAP expires on 15/10/24. Therefore, working backwards using the above LAP timeline, the preparation would need to commence in February 2023.

The Birr Town and Environs Development Plan 2010-2016 (as extended);

will expire on the coming into effect of the Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027 in October 2021. Preparation of the Birr Local Area Plan is expected to commence September 2021. According to LAP Guidelines, preparatory work lasts circa 1 year up to placing the draft on display. Allowing 35 weeks from when draft goes on public display to when adopted means a likely adoption time of June 2023.

Edenderry Local Area Plan 2017- 2023;

The LAP will expire on 16/10/23 Therefore, working backwards using the above LAP timeline, the preparation would need to commence in February 2022.

PLANNING SCHEMES PROGRESS

Dublin SPA

Existing SDZ Schemes

- Poolbeg West SDZ 2019
- Grangegorman SDZ Planning Scheme 2011
- North Lotts & Grand Canal Dock SDZ 2013– Proposed Amendment (Building heights) refused by An Bord Pleanála (ABP) in 2021
- Clonburris SDZ 2019
- Adamstown SDZ 2014 – 2020 Amendment (Building height and density) approved by ABP
- Cherrywood SDZ 2014 (updated 2018)- 2020 Amendment (car parking) approved by ABP
- Hansfield SDZ 2006

⁵ Graiguecullen/ Carlow is designated as a Key Town- given that the main urban area is Carlow in County Carlow and within the administrative area of the Southern Regional Assembly, it is stated here under 'Other Settlements', although its role as a Key Town is acknowledged.

B) Delivering the Spatial Strategy

The optimum spatial strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region combines the growth of Dublin and Regional Growth Centres with a selected number of Key Towns which have the assets and capacity to grow in a sustainable manner while minimising impacts on the receiving environment. This option offers the best opportunity to align services with population and economic growth, promote compact growth in urban settlements and make the best use of infrastructure including public transport thereby reducing transport emissions and improving regional accessibility. The delivery of this spatial strategy or settlement strategy is central to monitoring progress made in implementing the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy.

B) (i) Progress of Regional Growth Centres

PROGRESS OF REGIONAL GROWTH CENTRES

Athlone

Implementation Progress of the Policy Context;

Residential Development; Planning permission was granted by ABP for a Strategic Housing Development of 426 residential units at Cornamagh, Clonbrusk and Coosan, Athlone. ABP 307508-20 refers. A further SHD for 576 dwellings at Lissywollen, Kilnafaddoge and Retreat, Athlone is under consideration by the Board: ABP-309513 refers. S.247 consultation has been held in relation to the development of 128 residential units and student accommodation comprising 304 beds at Cartronroy, Kilnafaddoge and Lissywollen Athlone.

Regeneration; Transformation of Church Street from a thoroughfare dominated by traffic to a street that is pedestrian focused with wider accessible footpaths, paved areas and seating. A Part VIII planning application has recently been advertised for the development of public realm enhancement works encompassing an area of 0.6ha at Mardyke St, Pump Lane & Sean Costello St, Athlone.

Economic Development; A number of planning applications have been granted for new and extensions to existing enterprise developments within Garrycastle Industrial Estate. There has also been economic development enabled through additional office and laboratory accommodation within the pharmaceutical sector.

Tourism; Suitability Assessment Questionnaire in the First Stage of the restricted tender procedure for the for the construction of the Athlone Cycle and Pedestrian Bridge over the River Shannon published Q1 2021. The Council has also commenced the preparation of a new Tourism Strategy for the County 2021-2027. Destination Towns Project being carried out in Athlone, includes comprehensive waymarking scheme, interpretive signage and visitor experience improvements at

Athlone Castle entrance. Feasibility study currently underway to develop a trail along the Shannon from Shannonbridge and Clonmacnoise to Athlone. Pre-development project completed for a canoe trail in the Lough Ree inner lakes at Killinure / Glasson area. Dublin to Galway Cycleway – complete to the River Shannon by August 2021 and to Athlone Castle by 2022.

2021 marketing campaign and food network being developed.

Enabling Infrastructure; Work has progressed on the Athlone Flood Alleviation Scheme. Irish Water currently carrying out upgrading works to the Athlone Water Treatment Plant (completion Q3 2021).

Implementation Progress of Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs);

Progress has been made across a number of the RPOs specific to Athlone. This includes; Preparatory reports and assessments to inform the Athlone UAP are underway with the formal UAP process to commence Q1 2022; Technological University (TU) status has been granted to Athlone Institute of Technology and Limerick Institute of Technology (5th May 2021) and permission was granted for a 6,126m² STEM building at AIT; Work is progressing on the Athlone Flood Alleviation Scheme involving nine individual flood cells and the construction of flood defences along the River Shannon waterfront in the town core have been undertaken in tandem with a public realm enhancement scheme lead by the OPW; The Joint Athlone Retail Strategy 2019-2026 was adopted by both Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils on 29th April 2019 and incorporated into the Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 by means of a Variation, and, work is underway on an Economic & Marketing Plan and Transport Study.

PROGRESS OF REGIONAL GROWTH CENTRES

Drogheda

Implementation Progress of the Policy Context;

Residential Development; There has been a number of residential applications approved on under-utilised or brownfield and/or infill sites that will contribute to achieving compact growth and which will contribute to place-making. Such include developments in close proximity to the River Boyne on town centres lands.

Regeneration; Drogheda – ‘Westgate Vision has secured funding under URDF. This project is being advanced with the appointment of consultants to bring the project to design stage.

Economic Development; With regards to Economic Development, funding has been secured under Enterprise Ireland for the provision of a Digital Hub in the Westgate area of Drogheda. It will see the regeneration of an existing structure at a gateway site to the town centre.

The build out of the IDA Business Park, Donore road is progressing with Amazon developing data centres on these lands. There are also further developments at Southgate Centre and commencement of more commercial buildings and a school campus at the intersection of the Colpe and Mill Road in Southern Drogheda.

Tourism; Funding has also been secured under the Destination Towns for the improvement of signage for tourists within Drogheda. Funding has also been secured for the enhancement of open space along the River Boyne and the intention is to provide an extended link west to Brú na Bóinne from the town centre.

Enabling Infrastructure; The Council are currently in consultation with the NTA regarding local transport plans that will be undertaken in tandem with the LAP process for Drogheda. The CFRAMS project is being advanced and it is hoped that greenways could be delivered as part of this project however this is at a preliminary stage. The provision of greenways and improved pedestrian and cycling infrastructure in collaboration with the NTA will assist in improving modal shift and provide enhance tourism opportunities.

The delivery of the PANCR remains high priority for the Council despite the unsuccessful recent URDF application. The delivery of this road is key to removing large vehicles from the town centre, removing traffic congestion, providing opportunities to improve the public realm and encourage businesses and people back to the heart of the town centre.

Implementation Progress of Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs);

Progress has been made across a number of the RPOs specific to Drogheda. This includes; Preparatory reports and assessments to inform the Drogheda Joint UAP are underway with the formal UAP process to commence Q2 2022

Dundalk

The Local Authority indicated that there had been progress made in regeneration within Dundalk.

LCC has been successful in securing funding under the URDF for St. Nicholas’ quarter and backland regeneration in Dundalk town centre. This transformative project will stimulate the development of high-quality higher density residential schemes and a rejuvenated urban quarter. The rejuvenation scheme to reinvigorate the Long Walk area to establish a new living and working quarter at the heart of Dundalk town centre is on-going. This scheme will support street improvement and upgrade, creation of improved public spaces and promotion of café culture and incorporation of public art whilst promoting compact growth in Dundalk

Furthermore, it is indicated that the Dundalk LAP will commence in 2022 following the adoption of the CDP. Similar to Drogheda, the Council will collaborate with the NTA with regards to the preparation of Local Transport Plan in tandem with the LAP and which prioritises modal shift.

B)(ii) Progress of Key Towns

PROGRESS OF KEY TOWNS

DUBLIN SPA

Bray (DLR)

Residential Development; Old Connaught, within the administrative area of Dún Laoghaire Rathdown, is primarily a residential extension of Bray and is not currently serviced. An implementation plan incorporating a phasing programme linking development with the delivery of supporting infrastructure is to be prepared as part of the forthcoming LAP.

Regeneration; Ongoing pre planning on Bray Golf Club lands. The Draft DLR County Plan promotes the ten-minute settlement neighbourhood approach consistent with the RSES.

Enabling Infrastructure; Future development in Old Connaught is contingent upon the phased delivery of infrastructure to be set out in the new LAP. Planning permission is granted for the Old Connaught-Woodbrook Water Supply Scheme, which is identified in the Irish Water Investment Plan to 2024 but not yet commenced. Irish Water is currently preparing a Bray/Shanganagh Drainage Area Plan (DAP) for south Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and north Wicklow to link up with the Shanganagh wastewater treatment plant. As an interim measure Irish Water are investigating a Local Network Reinforcement Project connecting to the pumping station at Bray.

Transport; The Bray and Environs Transport Study, prepared by the NTA in conjunction with TII, DLR County Council and Wicklow County Council, sets out the long-term transport objectives to support the development of Bray and Environs.

The Study establishes a preferred approach which identifies local transport infrastructure projects to serve both Old Connaught and Rathmichael:

- Upgrade of Ferndale Road and local roads to facilitate bus, pedestrian and cycle.
- A new link road from Ferndale Road to Dublin Road at Shanganagh.
- Cherrywood to Rathmichael Link Road.
- The phased introduction of bus services in line with increased demand.

The Study sets out a timeline for implementation of the preferred approach and projects in Phase A (2019-2027) and supports the delivery of a bus service from Sandyford to Bray DART station via Rathmichael and Old Connaught until the Luas Green Line extension to Bray is advanced.

Old Connaught Area Based Transport Assessment - DLR have appointed consultants to undertake a more detailed Area Based Transport Assessment for the Old Connaught area and it is anticipated that a Draft ABTA will be completed for Old Connaught by Q2/Q3 2021

PROGRESS OF KEY TOWNS

Swords

Key to the implementation of Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs) is the 'Sustainable Swords' place-making strategy for the strategic regeneration and compact development of Swords. This project falls out of strategic documents 'Your Swords – An Emerging City - Strategic Vision 2035' to consolidate the historic town centre, and the Fingal Development Plan 2017-2023 and aims to co-ordinate investment and decision-making across multiple stakeholders including the private sector.

The Key objectives for Sustainable Swords are to:

- Enhance the identity of the town centre through the development of Swords Civic Centre and Cultural Centre, implementation of the conservation plan for Swords Castle and an enhanced accessible child friendly public realm.
- Create a new street /pedestrian walkway fronting the river walk to the west of Main Street opening up 'backlands' and infill development on strategic sites along Main St and North St.
- Promote core recreational and amenity spaces, utilising Ward River Valley Park, Swords Cultural Quarter including Town Park, Ward River Walk west of Main Street area.
- Explore the potential of establishing a Swords Business Improvement District (BID).
- Expand upon the recommendations in the Swords section of the South Fingal Transport Study and develop a multi-modal transport strategy for Swords.
- Support community cohesion measures including, for example, a collaborative approach to promoting safer neighbourhoods and reducing antisocial behaviour for improved quality of life.
- Measures to enable regeneration of lands to enable rejuvenation of the town centre and activation of land for compact development.
- Establish a prioritised programme of measures and 'pipeline' projects that can be funded as part of future Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF).

Work began on the project in February 2021 with a 14-month project time scale. The first part of the project involves a town health check and public participation to be completed in summer 2021. Alongside the health check, detailed analysis of the public realm and of transportation will be taking place, with a public realm strategy and transportation modelling completed by Autumn 2021. The project team will identify a list of projects targeted to available funding. Business case feasibility analysis will be undertaken end 2021 - early 2022, with a report completed by Spring 2022.

PROGRESS OF KEY TOWNS

EASTERN SPA

Bray

Regeneration; There is significant potential for new development in the established town centre and built-up area, particularly since the completion of the River Dargle Flood Defence Scheme. The former Bray Golf course and Harbour Lands are designated for high density new mixed-use development with improved town centre functions, which will be significantly enhanced through the construction of the Florentine Centre on the Main Street along with the development of the seafront. Bray is well located for tourist access to the Wicklow mountains and with attractions such as Bray Seafront, the Bray-Greystones Cliff Walk, Bray Head, Bray Sea Life centre and Killruddery House.

Residential Development; Population growth in Bray has been modest compared to other settlements as expansion of the town is constrained by the coast to the east, Bray Head/Sugarloaf mountains to the south and the N/M11 to the east. In order for Bray to fulfil its growth potential, lands at Fassaroe to the west of the N/ M11 are targeted for new housing, employment and major community and sports facilities, along with development of lands at Old Connaught (Conna)-Fassaroe, which are within Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. The delivery of new mixed-use development of Bray Golf course and Harbour Lands will provide for consolidation within the established town.

Economic Development; Bray has a highly concentrated and diversified employment base and provides employment for its residents and surrounding towns as far as Wicklow, Arklow and Gorey. Due to Ardmore Studios, the town has been at the centre of the Irish Film Industry for 60 years. The town aims to attract major employment generating investment in the retail, services and industrial sectors with a particular focus on promoting Bray as a destination for high value investment in people-based industries, at accessible locations to public transport. There is also scope for employment growth at Fassaroe to improve the local employment base in Bray.

Enabling Infrastructure; Bray has access to high quality public transport including DART services and is at the terminus of the proposed Luas Green Line extension, with excellent potential to promote sustainable mobility and achieve the vision of 'walkable' communities. The development of a new centre at Fassaroe is largely dependent on the delivery of transportation infrastructure including upgrades to the N/M11 and the delivery of high-quality public transport connections to Bray. The development of Bray-Fassaroe should be undertaken in collaboration between Wicklow County Council, Dún Laoghaire- Rathdown County Council and the transport agencies to ensure the delivery of roads and public transportation infrastructure to support the westward expansion of the town

Services and Amenities; It is a strong active town that provides higher order services, including tertiary education, health, cultural and leisure facilities and is a major retail and shopping destination, attracting people from the surrounding towns and villages.

PROGRESS OF KEY TOWNS

EASTERN SPA

Maynooth

Regeneration (RPO 4.36); Opportunities exist for the Canal Harbour regeneration lands to connect to the main street and onto Carton Avenue and the St Patricks College Campus.

Residential Development (RPO 4.35); The town has experienced significant levels of new residential development both in private housing and student accommodation over the past 5 years and with extant permissions and pipeline developments, will see these levels continue for the next 3 years. New housing development on the Dunboyne, Celbridge and Dublin Roads provide for an additional 1,400 units and the proposed new neighbourhood at Railpark which will be facilitated by the LIHAF (Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund) funded Maynooth Eastern Relief Road will deliver between 800 and 900 units. There is further potential for the consolidation of the town through the redevelopment of a number of town centre sites. The delivery of these additional 2000+ units will result in a 38.6% increase in housing stock over a relatively short period of time.

Economic Development (RPO 4.34); Opportunities to further develop the development of the Maynooth University campus including the research and technology element of this is ongoing and will be borne out through the economic development strategy set out in the joint Local Area Plan for Maynooth.

Services and Amenities (RPO 4.33); Town Centre public realm improvements will be evident over the short to medium term with the progression of the Maynooth Town Centre Renewal – Strengthening the Grid URDF funded project which will link many of the broader town centre amenities such as the canal and harbour and Carton Avenue areas, through the Main Streets. Other amenity projects such as the Harbour Field Redevelopment and the Royal Canal Greenway will all contribute towards an overall improved public realm and amenity for the town.

Enabling Infrastructure; Planned upgrades to the M4 from Maynooth to Leixlip will undoubtedly provide respite in terms of congestion for the town. Other significant transport interventions such as the delivery of the DART+ West Project, the North-South Cycleways Project (5 of 6 phases complete). The delivery of a significant part of the Maynooth Outer Orbital Route (MOOR) which is essential for the optimal functioning of the town. Meath County Council has set out in the Draft County Development Plan 2021-2027 that the preparation of the joint urban plan will be afforded a high priority

Naas

Regeneration; The Urban Regeneration and Development Strategy, underpins the Draft Naas Local Area Plan 2021-2027 has been developed to address the challenges affecting the future development of Naas and to respond directly to the requirements of RPO 4.50 of the RSES. The Draft LAP has identified Core Regeneration Areas (CRAs), Key Development Areas (KDAs) and the Northwest Quadrant (NWQ) lands for the purposes of regeneration, consolidation and infill and urban expansion.

Residential Development; Overall, there is a high level of commencement and construction of planning permissions across the plan area and the town has performed significantly in meeting the County's housing targets and it is estimated that ca 1,346 residential units were constructed in Naas since Census 2016. There is also extant permission for a further 877 units.

Economic Development; The Draft Naas LAP economic strategy identifies several areas within the town to capitalise on economic growth such as the development of Corban's Lane Shopping Centre to provide significant retail and commercial functions. The strengthening of the local employment base through the development of the Mid Eastern Region Innovation Think Space (MERITS) The potential for high-quality, high-density indigenous and Foreign Direct Investment within Millennium Park in the Northwest Quadrant has also been identified along with the re-intensification of industrial lands in the north east of the town in proximity to the Maudlin's Interchange.

Services and Amenities; The completion of the Kerdiffstown Park in 2025 in addition to the progress regarding access to the Oldtown Demesne lands and the delivery of pathways and facilities to enable the use by the public of these parklands as a future park adjacent to the route of the canal and the Sallins to Naas greenway will also be a significant boost to the amenities of the town and its hinterland.

Tourism; Naas as an historic town has several built heritage assets that would expand the town's tourism offering; its historic centre, St David's Castle, Leinster Mills and Jigginstown Castle, all of which are being actively pursued by the Council including those identified under item No. 7. These sites along with the Canal Harbour have been identified in the over-arching development strategy for the town as Tourism Opportunity Sites.

Enabling Infrastructure (RPO 4.48); The completion of the M7 upgrade and Junction 9a integration of land use and planning a Local Transport Plan (Naas Sallins Transport Strategy). Irish Water indicates that there is adequate water supply to cater for the future demands generated during the lifetime of this Plan. There is sufficient capacity within the Osberstown Plant to cater for the population growth of Naas.

Navan

Regeneration; Implementation of the Navan 2030 town centre public realm plan is ongoing in partnership with the NTA. This accords with RPO 4.43. Regeneration plans are at draft stage for Flowerhill/Abbeylands, Former County Hall site and St Pats Classical school which will support the Council's focus on regeneration in Navan.

Residential Development; A number of residential proposals are currently in the planning process. The Council's Active Land Management Project which received URDF funding is also likely to provide some residential development in the town centre.

Economic Development; An additional strategic employment site has been designated in Navan at Trim Road.

Services and Amenities and Enabling Infrastructure; Work is ongoing to provide cycling infrastructure. Part VIII planning permission is in place for part of a route to serve the town. A planning application for LDR 4- a key strategic road including a new bridge across the Blackwater is currently being assessed by An Bord Pleanála. A process of public consultation was carried out in Q1 2021 around proposed route options for the Boyne Greenway between Navan and Oldbridge Estate, Drogheda.

Wicklow

Regeneration; Key regeneration opportunities include the development of Wicklow Port and Harbour, served by the port access road, to expand commercial berthing. There are opportunities for the densification and enhancement of residential and retail uses in the two town centres of Wicklow and Rathnew and to improve pedestrian mobility and connectivity. There is also potential for further development of the Wicklow County Campus as a third level education facility.

Residential Development; Redevelopment and opportunity sites within the core areas of Wicklow-Rathnew will be promoted in the first instance for new residential development, with sites close to transport infrastructure, recreational and education amenities and employment being prioritised thereafter.

Economic Development; Wicklow Town plays a significant role in the provision of administrative services, delivering the functions of local government from Wicklow County Council, the provision of tertiary educational facilities at the Wicklow County Campus at Rathnew (in conjunction with Carlow IT) and higher order health facilities at Knockrobin Primary Health Centre. There is potential for the town centre to strengthen and promote economic development associated with retail and commerce, the expansion of port and harbour activities and the nearby Ashford Studios. Wicklow Port is well positioned to become a hub for the service of the off-shore wind energy sector in particular. There is potential to develop Wicklow-Rathnew as a recreation and tourism hub due to its attractive coastal location and its proximity to key destinations.

Enabling Infrastructure;

Significant investment has occurred with construction of the port access and town relief roads and a new wastewater treatment plan, with planned infrastructure upgrades on the M11 from the M50 to Kilmacanogue. While there are good pedestrian and cycling facilities on new roads, there is potential for further investment in walking and cycling within the town and to enhance connections to surrounding urban centres and regional trails.

PROGRESS OF KEY TOWNS

MIDLANDS SPA

Longford Town

The Local Authority indicated that The Draft County Longford Development Plan 2021-2027 has identified and appropriately targeted Longford Town for development in terms of placement at the top of the settlement hierarchy. In particular specific policies to target 'Key Town' growth and Longford Town have been included in Chapter 4: Core, Settlement and Housing Strategies Section 4.8.7 Key Town – Longford Town; Chapter 6: Regeneration – 6.6.1 Longford Town; and Chapter 8: Economic Development, 8.7.1.1 Primary Economic Growth Town – Longford Town. In terms of delivery on specific policies it is anticipated that this will occur during the timeframe of the Development Plan, and will be monitored in accordance with required progress reviews, such as the two-year review required under Section 15 of the Act.

Mullingar

Implementation Progress of the Policy Context

Residential Development; Initial Preplanning consultations are underway with regard to three individual SHD applications for residential schemes at Ardmore/Marlinstown, Rathgowan and Ballinderry, Mullingar which cumulatively, if permitted, would give rise to approximately 712 additional residential units in the town.

Regeneration; Enhancement of Mullingar Town Centre Civic Areas through public realm improvements including the provision of upgraded pedestrian and cyclist facilities, hard and soft landscaping, modifications to traffic control and car parking arrangements. Pre-planning consultations have also taken place with the Land Development Agency Design team regarding the regeneration of the former Columb Barracks, Mullingar.

Economic Development; Biopharmaceutical company Antylia Scientific is to create 60 jobs as part of a new facility in the National Science Park in Mullingar. Planning permission has been granted for a 616sqm ground floor extension to the Midlands regional Hospital to include Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) Unit and extensions to the Emergency and Radiology Departments.

Tourism; Royal Canal Greenway launched in March 2021 as Ireland's Longest Greenway from Longford to Maynooth, via Mullingar. New storyboards developed along the trail to be erected in May 2021 and a Visitor Experience Forum now established to work on the enhancement of this greenway. A Part VIII application was granted for the construction of Mullingar Greenway Recreation Hub at Grange South, Mullingar. The scheme consists of the provision of recreational facilities to include Junior bike trails and Activity wall, walking and cycling trails, 3 no. Pedestrian crossings and the continuation eastwards of the Greenway along the North bank of the Royal Canal from Newbrook Bridge through to Green Bridge. National Famine Way from Strokestown to Dublin via Mullingar developed with a new app and other supporting products to be launched in June 2021. An associated looped heritage trail in Mullingar is also being completed. Mullingar will also host the Fleadh in 2022.

Enabling Infrastructure; A Part VIII application was granted for the provision of a cycleway and footpaths along Ardmore Road extending over a distance of approximately 872 metres between Saunders Bridge and Curraghmore National School, Mullingar. In addition, a Part VIII has been granted for a pedestrian and cycle bridge over the Royal Canal and Dublin to Sligo railway line adjacent to the north side of Saunders Bridge on the Ardmore Road, Mullingar.

Implementation Progress of Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs)

Progress has been made across a number of the RPOs specific to Mullingar. This includes; Planning permission for an extension to the Mullingar Athlone Old Rail Trail; Discussions with the Land Development Agency in relation to the regeneration of the former Columb Barracks site, Mullingar; Planning permission granted for a 616sqm ground floor extension to the hospital to include Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) Unit and extensions to the Emergency and Radiology Departments.

Portlaoise

Implementation Progress of the Policy Context

Regeneration; Completion of the "Portlaoise Public Realm Strategy "2040 And Beyond: A Vision for Portlaoise" focused on improvements to the public realm through a programme of infrastructural works. The Cultural Quarter as identified in the Portlaoise 2040 Strategy has also received key funding under the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund. The provision of a new or refurbished courthouse is also anticipated. Furthermore, the Council has commenced an energy retrofit programme with 191 dwellings scheduled for completion to B2 standard between now and the end of 2022 many of these in the town of Portlaoise.

Residential Development; The following sites have been identified in the Draft County Development Plan and have received planning permission for residential development including the Convent Site, consisting of the construction of 51 dwelling units, CBS Lands Portlaoise Town Centre, consisting of 67 apartments and houses together with a car park to service the adjoining railway station, and the Maltings Site which is a phased development site where approximately 148 apartment units and a nursing home has received planning permission and a final phase of development is to be submitted for planning approval. A masterplan (prepared by urban designers LUC is being prepared for the Tyrrells Landbank on the Stradbally road which will deliver residential, open space, amenity and community infrastructure for the town. The masterplan is scheduled for completion by July 2021.

Economic Development; A masterplan has been developed for the Togher area - J17 National Enterprise Park Masterplan and sets out the zoning and servicing of land for enterprise, employment and industrial uses. The Council has also received significant funding to develop a multi-point incubation hub called 'The Cube' for the development of a Low Carbon Centre of Excellence, assisting in attracting and developing companies with a low carbon focus.

Services and Amenities; Development of the 'Park and Stride' policy within the Draft Plan to encourage an increase in the adoption of cycling by extending on-road and off-road cycle ways and the creation of the Triogue River Blueway as an environmental and amenity objective in the Draft Plan. The Tyrells land masterplan is currently underway which will provide detailed guidance on the development of these amenities. A mental health project for a 40-bed residential unit and the modernisation or replacement of the historic E Block in Portlaoise Prison, is anticipated.

Enabling Infrastructure; The Portlaoise Southern Distributor Road and Togher, Portlaoise Link Road Phase 2, have been completed. Works are ongoing on the R445 Mountrath Road, Portlaoise Improvements. In addition, a Part VIII has been granted and expected to commence in 2021 for the construction of a 3m wide, shared, pedestrian and cycle route from the Portlaoise Southern Circular Road to The Portlaoise Peoples Park. This proposal forms part of the overall Triogue Blueway project.

Implementation Progress of Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs)

Progress has been made across a number of RPOs specific to Portlaoise. In relation to RPO 4.71 of the RSES, the Planning Authority is committed to developing Portlaoise Demonstration Project. This project has received over €18 million in funding including proposed regeneration and climate action works.

The town has been designated Ireland's first low carbon town which is supported by RPO 4.72 of the RSES. This will achieve carbon reduction across a variety of different measures including by removing large volumes of traffic from congested areas, facilitated by utilising the recently completed South Circular Road and by the reconfiguration of existing traffic flows throughout the town centre. In addition, the Local Authority will also be upgrading the laneway's of Portlaoise by improving the overall visual appearance, retrofitting existing streetlights with energy saving LED's and adding additional lighting to poorly lit areas. Further energy efficient amenities will include the addition of 30 E Car charge points and an extension of the number of solar powered compactor bins to 50.

Tullamore

Implementation progress of the Policy Context

Regeneration; Planning applications have been lodged on two opportunity sites (the Texas site and Coen site). Street enhancement works have been completed with further planned. Completed works include footpath widening, street furniture, undergrounding overhead lines, street resurfacing, tree planting.

Residential development; The draft Offaly County Development Plan provides a core strategy table. Compact growth is planned for through the identification of Opportunity sites at brownfield locations. These opportunity sites include the sites listed in the RSES relating to Tullamore (e.g., Texas site, Grand Canal Harbour, Tanyard, Coen site, former rail yard).

Economic development; The draft Offaly County Development Plan includes a zoning map for Tullamore. It identifies two strategic employment zones and accompanying policy. A Co-working hub has also been set up in Axis Business Park.

Services; Overhead lines in the main street have been undergrounded. Public wi-fi has been provided in O'Connor Square and along the Grand Canal greenway.

Amenities; A tourist office opened in the town in Spring 2019. The Arts Centre is currently undergoing extension and refurbishment.

Enabling Infrastructure; The Grand Canal Greenway runs through Tullamore town and this section has received part VIII approval. Irish Water are carrying out preliminary examinations on a southern interceptor sewer.

Implementation Progress of Regional Policy Objectives

Progress has been made across a number of RPOs specific to Tullamore. This includes; In line with RPO 4.68, Part 8 approval for The Grand Canal Greenway with most of it completed from Tullamore to Lough Boora Discovery Park. The enhancement works will serve to improve the quality of place and attract more visitors; In line with RPO 4.69, the provision of robust enterprise policies as part of the Draft Offaly County Development Plan; In line with RPO 4.70, the inclusion of draft Development Plan policy that supports complementary third level outreach facilities in Tullamore, particularly with regard to support for Midland Regional Hospital Tullamore and where appropriate, its continued development as a Teaching / University Hospital.

C) Funding Ambition

(C)(i) Interaction with Funding Streams

This section identifies the engagement levels of each Local Authority with specific funding streams that enable the implementation of the RSES. The Assembly Request Form specifically referenced the four Project Ireland 2040 funds which are, the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF), Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF), Climate Action Fund, and the Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund.

Full details of each local authority's engagement with funding streams can be found at Appendix C.

INTERACTION WITH FUNDING STREAMS

Dublin SPA

All of the Dublin Local Authorities (DLA) have engaged with Project Ireland 2040 funding streams with the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) the most accessed fund providing c. €440 across 2 calls to 21 projects in the Dublin Region.

Under 'Call 1' of the URDF the Dublin Region was awarded €7 million for 4 projects that were 'ready to go' in 2019 including funding for Stillorgan public realm works (DLR), Cherrywood Public Parks, Greenways and Attenuation (DLR), Rutland Street NEIC (DCC) and Tallaght Town Centre Civic Plaza/Link Roads (SDCC), and a further c.€2.5million for 9 projects that require further development.

In 2021 the Dublin Region was awarded €430 million in provisional funding under 'Call 2' of the URDF for the following 8 regeneration projects;

- North Inner City Concept Area 1 (Dublin City Council) - €121.3 million
- South Inner City Concept Area 2 (Dublin City Council) - €53 million
- Cherrywood Public Access, Permeability and Amenity (Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown) - €40.4 million
- Dundrum Community, Cultural and Civic Hub (Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown) - €4 million
- Balbriggan Rejuvenation (Fingal County Council) - €25.4 million
- Dunsink Feasibility Study - Transportation and Surface Water Assessments (Fingal) - €41,250
- Clonburris - supplementary strategic infrastructure for the SDZ (South Dublin) - €176.6 million
- Adamstown - supplementary strategic infrastructure for the SDZ (South Dublin) - €9.7 million

There has been significant draw down of other Project Ireland 2040 funds including the Climate Action Fund, which invested €20 million to capture waste heat from the Dublin Waste to Energy Plant in Ringsend (DCC), and €4.5 million to establish district heating in the Tallaght area (SDCC). Applications have also been made under the current Expressions of Interest call in 2020 to DCCAE.

The DLA have also benefitted from other funding streams that support implementation of the RSES, with significant draw down of €119.6 million in funding for active travel in the Dublin Region under the 2021 Sustainable Transport measures grants (NTA). Other funding streams accessed by the DLA include the Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund (LIHAF), Serviced Sites Fund, the Large-Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF) and Failte Ireland Water based facilities grant.

Eastern SPA

The Local Authorities in the Eastern SPA have attracted significant funding in the implementation of the RSES, with funding under the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) and Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) have proving to be the most successful.

The Regional Growth Centres are probably the areas that have not benefited as much from these funds with stage 1 preliminary studies and works being successful in Drogheda under the Westgate vision and the long walk in Dundalk with only St. Nicholas Quarter in Dundalk benefiting from significant capital funding of €7,490,000.

The Key Towns across the region have been a particular focus with significant projects supported;

- Bray Public Transport Bridge €3,450,000
- Bray Harbour Area Integrated Regeneration €7.14 million
- Maynooth Town Centre Masterplan €1,900,000
- Naas Town Centre Masterplan €3,490,000
- Flowerhill and Abbeylands Regeneration Navan
- Railway Street, Navan, Regeneration and County Archive
- Wicklow town Library €1,626,000

These projects have all benefited from support in the RSES and area implementing RPOs under the the key towns policies in the RSES.

There has been significant projects under the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) which have focused on regeneration of other towns in the region such as Baltinglass, Arklow, Trim, Kells, Enfield, Athboy, Ardee and Omeath.

In the implementation of Greenways and Blueways thought the region there has been funding awarded for the delivery of the Drogheda to Navan Greenaway and navigation channel and the Bray-Arklow Blueway.

Under the Climate fund there are proposals for a Decarbonisation Zone in Arklow and the Upper Avooca River Project (both awaiting funding).

Midlands SPA

All of the Local Authorities within the Midlands have readily engaged with funding streams that progress the implementation of the RSES. The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) and Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) have proved to be the most accessed funding streams by the Local Authorities.

Under the URDF fund to date the Regional Growth Centre of Athlone has received €5,625,000 across three projects namely the Development of a Cultural Quarter to the west of Athlone, Athlone Town Centre Regeneration & Enhancement and a mixed-use quarter providing commercial, enterprise and residential development at Loughanaskin.

Regarding Key Towns, Portlaoise has been awarded €18.06 million for the Portlaoise Demonstrator Project as a low carbon town centre, Mullingar has received €4,158,750 across two projects relating to a mixed urban quarter at Blackhall and a sustainable and integrated residential district at Canal Avenue, Longford Town has received €3,431,296 across two projects namely placemaking at Longford Town Core and the Longford Camlin Quarter Regeneration Quarter, and Tullamore has received €2,245,207 for six projects.

Under the RRDF, Laois has received €1,066,000 for the Portarlinton Regeneration Framework, Longford has received a commitment of €6,982,930 across three projects, namely a digital hub at Abbeyshrule, tourism enhancement at Lanesborough and the clustering of community support services at Ballymahon. Westmeath has received €7,954,966 for a Community Library, Education and Training Centre at Kinnegad, and, the renovation of the Market house at Castlepollard. Offaly has received €17,457 for Edenderry and Banagher regeneration projects.

Longford County Council has submitted an Expression of Interest to the latest call of the Climate Action Fund, seeking between €9-€13 million, for the extension of a gas pipeline from Ballymahon to Longford and Edgeworthstown to facilitate connections to high energy users allowing them to reduce their energy usage, utilise energy efficiencies and apply renewable technologies. No other Local Authority in the Midlands has engaged with this fund. Similarly, none of the Local Authorities engaged with the Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund.

Laois County Council has received €2million for the development of the CUBE Climate Action Centre of Excellence under the Regional Enterprise Development Fund. Longford County Council have submitted an application to Fáilte Ireland for Museum of Music Ireland for €12,108,704, and are awaiting a decision. Offaly County Council has received funding of €200,000 under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme for Blundell Park, Edenderry, and €412,500 from Fáilte Ireland for Birr Tourism Destination Town.

D) Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs)

This section identifies progress that has been made with respect to LECPs across the Region. Regional Assemblies are required to adopt a statement on draft LECPs for consideration by the elected council of that local authority relating to consistency with the RSES. Consistency with the RSES will enable and progress the implementation of policy and objectives contained within the Strategy.

LOCAL ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY PLANS

Dublin SPA

The Dublin Local Authorities (DLA) provided detailed information relating to the ongoing implementation of their current LECPs as part of a collaborative approach between elected members and staff in the respective local authorities, Local Community and Development Committees (LCDCs), and Public Participation Networks (PPN), and engagement with several public, private and research partners to progress delivery of key objectives in the current plans.

Highlights in Dublin city include the hosting of the Dublin City Social Enterprise, Young Social Innovator and ENFUSE awards, upgrade of the Dublin Economic Monitor, inputs to the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor, the Dublin Branding campaign and the MODOS Circular Economy programme. Dún Laoghaire Rathdown are harnessing opportunities for economic growth through the Dun Laoghaire Town and Harbour Study, to enable the Ferry Terminal as a co working/ incubator and to improve the public realm. South Dublin is collaborating with the IDA and Chamber of Commerce on a marketing strategy, to develop skills, revitalise older industrial areas and provide serviced sites in Grangecastle Business Park, and with Failte Ireland on a tourism strategy, a wayfinding and heritage trails programme, and to promote Tallaght stadium.

It is anticipated that plan preparation process for a new round of LECPs will commence following the publication of new LECP Guidelines by the Department of Rural and Community Development, which is anticipated in Q3 2021.

Eastern SPA

The Eastern Local Authorities provided a varied response to the progress of implementation of the LECPs across the four counties. In some cases, it was stated that a review was carried out mid-term and the Department were to issue guidelines on the carrying out of a review of the LECP however, none were ever issued. All Local Authorities stated that a cross departmental working group has been established for the development of guidelines for preparing a new LECP and they await the publication of new LECP Guidelines by the Department of Rural and Community Development which will also determine the commencement of the review of the existing LECPs.

Midlands SPA

The Local Authorities in the Midlands provided limited information relating to the implementation of their respective LECPs. The Local Authorities have all indicated that they are awaiting the publication of guidelines for the development of the new LECP from the Department of Rural and Community Development, and that the content of same will inform the preparation and commencement date of a new LECP.

E) Recommendations and Comments of the Local Authorities

Additional comments were submitted by Dublin Local Authorities (DLA) highlighting progress in terms of delivery along strategic transport corridors as set out in MASP, with details outlined in the Progress Report of the MASP. It is requested that the overall Monitoring report of the Regional Assembly to NOAC include the progress set out in the returns to the MASP implementation Group⁶.

Other comments by the DLA relate to the need for central government funding to be made available to support infrastructure delivery in utility provision, public transport, climate action and housing delivery. This should be supported by continuous review of national and regional policy, in order to take account of changing circumstances and to realise the long-term development potential of areas that are undergoing incremental transformational change such as the Naas Road Masterplan lands.

The Eastern Local Authorities commented that whilst they are striving to ensure coordination and cooperation occurs at the highest level and that consistency is achieved across all spatial and economic plans, their ability to deliver on an increasing plethora of issues and requirements from the top down and bottom up is difficult and very much resource dependant. Additional supports, resources and skillsets should be made available to Local Authorities to enable the extensive programme of work to be completed in a timely fashion.

Other comments relate to unsuccessful funding applications and the desire to achieve meaningful regeneration of towns and villages increasing economic opportunity and delivering more sustainable forms of transport. It is further recommended by the Local Authorities that further resources be made available to assist in the preparation of bids for funds and in the management and delivery of that funding.

The Local Authorities of the Midlands SPA indicated that the implementation of the RSES could be advanced through;

- Additional Resources to implement objectives within the Local Authority in relation to the changing priorities at National and Regional Level. Regeneration and the promotion of the Town Centre first approach is extremely welcome, but requires significant resources to implement it in practice. This is a challenge particularly in rural local authorities where resources are prioritized towards fulfilling the legislative requirements involved in development management and enforcement.
- Coordinated spatial planning across county boundaries in areas such as renewable energy provision. Local authorities have a responsibility, but national and regional authorities can lead on this in terms of direction on spatial coordination.
- Establishment of a steering group with representatives from each of the constituent LA's to progress regional projects in collaboration with EMRA.
- The LECP process should complement and be consistent with the County Development Plan process and run concurrently, where possible. There is a risk of confusion being created between the two and consultation exhaustion. Communities need to be very clear on the purpose of the LECP and the impact it will have on their lives.

⁶ Please note that this is documented in this report at Section 5.2.3.

F) Response and Recommendations of the Regional Assembly

This section of the Report outlines a response and where appropriate recommendations of the Regional Assembly, to the findings of the Local Authority progress areas, which have been chosen for this two-year review period. These progress areas are documented above, reflective of the early stage in the implementation cycle of the RSES period and include, Planning Policy Alignment with the RSES, Delivering the Spatial Strategy of the RSES by each Local Authority, Funding- the ambition and interaction of each Local Authority with Funding Mechanisms, and Local Economic and Community Plans.

Planning Policy Alignment with the RSES

The Regional Assembly welcome the efforts of the 12 Local Authorities within the Region to ensure that county and local level planning policy is aligned with the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy.

All of the Local Authorities have complied with their legislative requirements to update and/or renew their County Development Plans. The Regional Assembly will continue to engage with the ongoing County Development Plan review processes to ensure consistency with the RSES, through formal and informal channels. It is expected that the majority of the development plans in the region will be adopted by the end of 2022 and will see greater alignment of national and regional policy and focused implementation of the RSES.

The Urban Area Plans (UAPs) that are to be prepared for the Regional Growth Centres of Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk are at varying stages. Preparatory work is well underway for the Joint Athlone UAP and the Assembly are assisting Louth and Meath Local Authorities with the progression of the Drogheda UAP.

All of the local authorities have indicated that the preparation of plans, including UAPs and LAPs for Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns respectively, are scheduled, with the review of the County Development Plan taking priority at this time.

At the Assembly meeting of July 2021, the elected members of the Assembly considered that a recommendation for consideration by NOAC, be included relating to the function of the Assembly with respect to material alterations of Draft County Development Plans.

Having regard to the above, the Regional Assembly make the following recommendations to NOAC for consideration;

- Supports should be identified and provided to enable Local Authorities to deliver planning alignment with the RSES through Urban Area Plans and Local Area Plans for the Region's Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns.
- That Regional Assemblies should have a statutory function, under Section 27 of the Act, with regard to material alterations of a Draft Development Plan, for consistency with their functions on submissions on the pre-draft plan consultations and on the draft plan consultations.

Delivering the Spatial Strategy of the RSES by each Local Authority

From the information submitted, the Regional Assembly welcome the demonstration of the Local Authorities to deliver the spatial strategy of the RSES that combines the growth of Dublin and Regional Growth Centres with a selected number of Key Towns which have the assets and capacity to grow in a sustainable manner while minimising impacts on the receiving environment. The Assembly are satisfied that the implementation of RPO 3.1 of the RSES which states that 'Key stakeholders including local authorities in the Region shall, through their policies and objectives including development plans, commit to the delivery of the Growth Strategy as detailed in the RSES', is ongoing. This is particularly apparent by Local Authorities through ensuring that appropriate and consistent policy frameworks are in place.

Notwithstanding this, the Assembly note the variation of implementation progress across the Local Authorities in terms of the role they have played in actively enabling RSES implementation in a tangible way, through delivery of policy and RPOs related to Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns across the Region.

Having regard to the above, as a first step, the Regional Assembly make the following recommendation to NOAC for consideration;

- In consultation with Local Authorities, research is undertaken to identify mechanisms which enable the implementation of the RSES by Local Authorities. Without further consultation with Local Authorities, it would be premature for the Regional Assembly to speculate as to how this should be carried out at this stage.

Funding- the ambition and interaction of each Local Authority with Funding Mechanisms

The Regional Assembly welcome the ambition shown by local authorities related to obtaining competitive funding, particularly given that this is a relatively new concept introduced to support the delivery of Project Ireland 2040 and accordingly the RSES. Successful funding applications have enabled the implementation of the RSES throughout the Region, particularly through the URDF and RRDF, and are most welcome.

The Assembly note, however, that the level of interaction with potential funding streams is extremely varied across the local authorities of the Region and consider that mechanisms are needed to provide balance in this regard, in order to support the delivery of the spatial strategy as set out in the RSES.

In addition, at the Assembly meeting of July 2021, the elected members of the Assembly considered that a recommendation for consideration by NOAC, be included relating to support for Local Authorities to engage with EU Funding streams.

Accordingly, the Regional Assembly make the following recommendations for NOAC to consider;

- Refresh the bidding process for the URDF to provide enhanced and ring-fenced funding for complex and larger regeneration projects in the Dublin Metropolitan Area and the designated Regional Growth Centres (Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk) and Key Towns of the Region. Increased and ring-fenced funding sources will be instrumental in ensuring delivery of the spatial strategy of the RSES and that urban renewal schemes are adequately utilised in a manner that supports compact growth targets that have been outlined in the RSES.
- Enhance the position and ability of local authorities to prepare successful funding applications. In recent years, it has become clear that the ability of Local Authorities to prepare successful applications for funding have mainly become resource-dependent, with funding being distributed in a manner that is not wholly aligned to the spatial objectives of the NPF and the RSES. It has been noted in discussions with our stakeholders that local authorities may be in a better position to achieve the opportunities available, particularly the national funds, if the requisite resources were available to prepare comprehensive applications for funding under the current competitive process.
- That Local Authorities are supported in engaging with EU Programming and Funding with a national approach to budgeting for matched funding

Local Economic and Community Plans

In general, limited information was submitted by Local Authorities with respect to LECP implementation. Many local authorities have also indicated that they are awaiting the publication of updated national guidance prior to reviewing their LECPs. The Assembly sit on the national steering committee relating to the preparation of the LECP Guidelines, in order to inform this process. The Assembly will ensure consistency between the RSES and any future LECPs, in accordance with statutory requirements.

Recommendations and Comments of the Local Authorities that are considered would facilitate the Process

The Regional Assembly recognise the work that the Local Authorities went to in contributing to this report. The efforts of local authorities in implementing the RSES is extremely welcome and is to be applauded, particularly following a huge period of transition over recent years that has seen the publication of the National Planning Framework, the publication of the RSES, the establishment of the Office of the Planning Regulator, and the requirement to prepare Development Plans against a backdrop of evolving national guidance on issues such as housing need demand assessments and wind energy. It is noted that there is united comment from the local authorities highlighting the challenges to achieving meaningful implementation such as availability of resources.

Having regard to the above comments, the Regional Assembly make the following recommendation for NOAC to consider;

- Consideration is given to identifying and, where appropriate, implementing measures that enable local authorities to engage in meaningful implementation of the RSES in their area.

5.1.2 Implementation Progress made by Public Bodies

All of the public bodies as listed at Section 3.0 of this report were notified of their obligations under Section 25A. of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (the Act).

Nine of the fourteen public bodies listed provided a response to the Regional Assembly. Please see the table below which documents same. The Assembly attempted to accommodate all of public bodies by extending the deadline for returns by five weeks until 10th June 2021, and one response was received on 24th June 2021.

Response Received	Response Not Received
The Minister for Education	The Minister for Foreign Affairs
The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science	The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform ⁷
The Minister for Finance	The Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment
The Minister for Rural and Community Development	The Minister for Transport
The Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications	The Minister for Health
The Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media	
The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine	
The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth	
The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage	

Table 1: Responses Received/ Not Received by Public Bodies

In order to monitor implementation progress of the RSES, a number of progress areas related to public bodies, have been chosen for this two-year review period.

These progress areas are reflective of the early stage in the cycle of the RSES period. They include;

- Progress made in supporting the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation
- Progress made by agencies that operate under the aegis of each Department, in supporting the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to that agency
- Details of any policy initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation
- Details of any funding competitions/initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation
- Details of the funding programmes administered by each Department (and agencies under the aegis of each department), over the last two years, which have been awarded within the Eastern and Midland Region
- Any other comments that were made with respect to each Department (including any agencies under the aegis of each Department) and implementing the RSES, including any recommendations that are considered would facilitate the process.

In addition, this section of the Report also details a response from the Regional Assembly to the returns received.

Whilst the Regional Assembly acknowledge the wealth of information that has been submitted by the nine aforementioned public bodies, the lack of response from the outstanding public bodies undoubtedly hinders the ability to present a complete report with respect to progress made in implementing the RSES. The specific requests of these public bodies can be viewed at Appendix 2.

⁷ It should be noted that a response was subsequently received from the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform following the approval and finalisation of this Report by the Members of the Regional Assembly.

In light of this, the assembly makes two overarching recommendations to NOAC for consideration, in order to enhance the implementation of the RSES and better document progress;

1. It is recommended that mechanisms are put in place to ensure the fulfilment by public bodies of their statutory obligations under Section 25A. of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, which require that public bodies shall, every 2 years, prepare and submit a report to the assembly setting out progress made in supporting objectives, relevant to that body, of the strategy.
2. It is recommended that mechanisms are put in place to ensure the fulfilment by public bodies of their statutory obligations under Section 22A. of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, which require that public bodies shall assist and co-operate as far as practicable with the regional assembly in the preparation of the strategy and thereafter supporting its implementation, and, that each public body shall consult with the regional assemblies, as appropriate, when preparing its own strategies, plans and programmes and so as to ensure that they are consistent, as far as practicable, with national and regional objectives set out in the National Planning Framework and RSES.

5.1.2.1 Minister for Rural and Community Development

The mission of the Department of Rural and Community Development is “to promote rural and community development and to support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland.” This is aligned to the RSES and in particular RSO 3 which supports sustainable rural development and strengthening of rural networks, economies and communities, and RSO 4 relating to the promotion of healthy communities.

A) Progress made in supporting the objectives of the RSES

The Department were asked to identify the progress that has been made in supporting the objectives of the RSES that are applicable to them. This included, for instance, progress related to housing (including serviced sites provision), regeneration, the rural economy, placemaking, vacancy, dereliction, transport, community development, a low carbon just transition and the role of digitalisation and broadband. As part of the response, it is indicated that progress has been and will be carried out through a number of funding programmes and schemes, and also through the newly published policy document ‘Our Rural Future’.

Through Our Rural Future, the Department will enhance public services in rural areas, in sectors such as public transport, health, and community safety. It is indicated that the provision of serviced sites is a commitment in the policy, to be delivered by Local Authorities and funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The policy also acknowledges the issue of water infrastructure for rural communities, with measures in the policy to be delivered by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

It is indicated that specific measures within the policy document will be dependent on a number of government departments and agencies for delivery, including the Department of Agriculture, Food & the Marine to support the sustainability of the Agriculture, Marine and Forestry sectors, over the policy's five year lifetime; The Department of Transport and the National Transport Authority to support improvements in rural transport services, including bus, rail and Local Link services; and other policy commitments relating to regional job creation will be delivered by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and relevant State Agencies, including IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland.

The Department indicated that the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) provides investment to support rural renewal, strengthen and build resilience in rural communities and assist in the regeneration of towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000, and outlying areas. The RRDF has a key role in delivering on the aims of the National Development Plan, in particular the National Strategic Outcome (NSO) of Strengthening the Rural Economy and Communities and seeks to promote balanced regional development, including reversing rural population decline and enabling population growth and development. The projects supported by the RRDF assist in the regeneration of rural towns and villages, positioning them for further growth through regeneration and town centre renewal. The types of projects supported by the RRDF include measures to address dereliction and vacancy and town centre residency projects.

The Department has also indicated that it has made progress in supporting the objectives of the RSES through a number of other programmes. This includes; the CLÁR programme which provides funding for small scale infrastructural projects in rural areas that have experienced significant levels of de-population in the past; the Town and Village Renewal Scheme including public realm improvement, community parks and infrastructure, digital hubs, as well as the regeneration of derelict buildings and enhancement works at tourism attractions and other important local amenities; The LEADER programme to guide the practice of community-led local development, providing rural communities and local enterprises throughout Ireland with an opportunity to respond to emerging challenges in their area by supporting measures that provide employment and job creation, as well as promoting the value of social capital and environmental protection; The Outdoor Recreation and Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS) that provides funding for the development and enhancement of outdoor recreational infrastructure such as cycleways, walking trails, blueways and mountain access routes in rural areas.

Relating to a low carbon Just Transition, the Department indicated that Our Rural Future outlines an ambition to support a Just Transition for rural communities to a sustainable, resilient and climate neutral economy and society. The Department of Environment, Climate and Communications has lead responsibility for a range of measures contained in the policy to contribute to the Just Transition agenda. While DRCD is not a lead Department in respect of major climate actions, the issue of the Just Transition is of particular interest as rural communities in particular are at risk at bearing a disproportionate cost of the adaptation measures that will be required to meet climate action targets. DRCD is an active participant on the Just Transition Taskforce.

Relating to the role of digitalisation and broadband, the Department indicated that Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the National Broadband Plan providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of early March 2021, 287 BCP sites have been installed by National Broadband Ireland. The National Hub Network Working Group led by the Department of Rural and Community Development has identified over 400 remote working hubs across the country and work is currently underway to map and survey the services offered by these hubs. This data will support the development of online services to support hub managers, including a publicly facing booking engine. The Connected Hubs Fund will expand existing hub facilities, providing additional hot desks, office spaces and meeting rooms for remote working.

In terms of community development, the Department are leading on a number of initiatives. The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund supports projects that deliver essential community infrastructure in the centre of rural towns and villages including the co-location of community services. Projects funded under the RRDF will deliver a range of community infrastructure including libraries and community resource centres that will enable the integration and active participation of minority groups. Tidy Towns has become Ireland's most well-known and popular local environmental and sustainable initiative. It is voluntary- based and has provided opportunities for active participation for over sixty years, increasing pride of place and improving the environment in towns across the Country.

The Seniors Alert Scheme encourages community support for vulnerable older people in our communities through the provision of personal monitored alarms to enable them to live securely in their homes with confidence, independence and peace of mind. A total of 31,231 participants from the East and Midlands region (Dublin, Louth, Meath, Kildare, Wicklow, Longford, Westmeath, Offaly and Laois inclusive) have been approved as part of the Scheme to the end of 2020.

The public library strategy, 'Our Public Libraries 2022', aims to establish a modern, progressive library service which connects and supports communities and individuals and to increase the level of usage of public libraries across communities. Among other things, the strategy focuses on removing barriers to access and improving accessibility, with a specific focus on communities and individuals at risk of being socially excluded, marginalised or disadvantaged. DRCD has provided Dormant Accounts Funding in 2019 (€650k) and 2020 (€430k) for programming in public libraries to support disadvantaged, marginalised and socially excluded communities. It is anticipated that additional funding will be provided in 2021 for similar programming including a Digital Equity and Social Inclusion Programme to purchase modern equipment in public libraries for people with a disability and those with sensory needs.

Through the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme the Department provides funding to Local Development Companies to complete work in this area. €190m of funding is being provided nationally over the five years from 2018 to 2022.

Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) are a cornerstone of meaningful participation in decision making and community development at a local level. LCDCs are groups established in each local authority area on foot of Putting People First - Action Programme for Effective Local Government and the Local Government Reform Act of 2014, and draw on the expertise and experience of public and private people and organisations in each local authority area.

The LCDC Review, published in 2019, made recommendations in relation aimed at strengthening the role and effectiveness of LCDCs. These recommendations were echoed in the 2019 policy document, Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: a five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland. DRCD are currently implementing the strategy, with current work focusing on a comprehensive training needs assessment of the sector and its supporting structures, including LCDCs. The outputs of the assessment will inform the design of supports to assist the sector and its supporting structures including LCDCs and PPNs, to build capacity, and to strengthen their role – with the ultimate objective of better outcomes for communities and the individuals who live, work in and enjoy them.

Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) is an important element of the local planning process detailed in the Local Government Reform Act 2014 and is linked with broader national and regional planning processes. The LECP sets out the objectives and actions that will be needed to promote the economic, local and community development of the relevant area, both by the Local Authority directly and in partnership with other relevant economic and community development stakeholders. A full public consultation will be undertaken by each LA to support the development of the next iteration of LECPs. Dormant account funding has been secured for the development of toolkits for Local Authorities who are involved in the LECP process to assist marginalised communities to engage fully with the process.

The Community Services Programme (CSP) supports 420 community organisations to provide local services through a social enterprise model. The CSP provides an annual co-funding contribution of €19,033 for each fulltime equivalent (FTE) position being supported, and, where warranted, provides €32,000 towards the cost of employing a manager. The aim of the CSP is to create sustainable jobs for those most distant from the labour market, in particular for those who are long term unemployed and from specific target groups.

B) Progress made by agencies that operate under the aegis of each Department, in supporting the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to that agency

Not applicable

C) Details of any policy initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

Our Rural Future

Our Rural Future is the new whole-of-Government policy for the sustainable development of rural Ireland for the period 2021-2025, which was launched on 29 March 2021. It contains more than 150 commitments for delivery across Government and is the most ambitious and transformational policy for rural development in Ireland for decades.

The policy supports the delivery of other key Government policies and objectives, including Project Ireland 2040, the forthcoming National Economic Recovery Plan, the Climate Action Plan, the National Remote Work Strategy, the forthcoming Agri-Food Strategy, and the Town Centre First initiative. It focuses on optimising the opportunities from high-speed broadband for individuals, communities and businesses, emphasising the potential for remote working to transform rural Ireland with more people living and working in rural areas.

In terms of High-Level Outcomes, Our Rural Future provides a framework to get more people living and working in rural areas, to revitalise our towns, to ensure people benefit from the transition and to ensure that communities can play an active role in shaping their futures. Amongst the measures for delivery are commitments aimed at supporting sustainable rural development, the regeneration of town centres and rural areas, meaningful career opportunities in the green and circular economies, access to public services (including rural transport links), local amenities and facilities for all cohorts, and enhanced community participation in rural development.

The Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) is currently preparing a work programme for the remainder of 2021, which will outline the key priorities for delivery this year, and this will be published in the coming weeks.

Progress will be monitored by DRCD and will be overseen by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment. Progress reports will be published every six months, with an annual work programme prepared in Q4 of each year for the forthcoming year to include new priorities and commitments.

Town Centre First

The Town Centre Living Initiative (TCLI) was a pilot scheme which aimed to develop innovative proposals to respond to challenges relating to vacant properties in rural towns and villages and encouraging people to live in town centres. An independent report on (TCLI) was published on 22nd June 2020. The report outlines the approach taken by each of 6 towns that participated and which had each received €100k to develop proposals.

The Report set out key issues to encourage increased town centre living and the repurposing of vacant properties for residential purposes and highlighted the multiplicity of factors that need to be addressed to encourage town centre living.

An Inter-Departmental Group is now considering all of the suggested actions in the report on the Town Centre Living initiative, as well as progressing the commitment in the Programme for Government to develop a Town Centre First approach to the regeneration of our towns and villages. The Group is chaired jointly by DRCD and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Review of Local Economic and Community Plans

As the LECP is an important part of the effort to support more sustainable development at a local level, it is critical that it reflects national priorities across a range of policy areas. In this context DRCD is currently engaging with sectoral interests including Regional Assemblies, C & V interests, economic groupings and PPN pillars in relation to the development of guidelines to support the LECP planning and subsequent implementation processes.

An Advisory Group has been established to support this process with representation from a number of bodies including the;

- Department of Housing, Planning, Local Government and Heritage (DHPLGH) and the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation,
- The Rural Development, Community, Tourism, Culture & Heritage (RCTCH) and the Business, Enterprise, Innovation & Urban/Town Economic Renewal (BEIUR) committees of the CCMA; and
- The three Regional Assemblies - Northern and Western Regional Assembly (NWRA), Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly (EMRA) and the Southern Regional Assembly (SRA).

New LECPs will be produced by all Local Authorities by 2022, drawing from revised LECP Guidelines, and informed by extensive consultation with stakeholders. The revised LECP Guidelines will include clear guidance on monitoring and evaluation of the LECPs.

Other Policy Initiatives/ Developments

National Social Enterprise Policy 2019-2022

Ireland's first National Social Enterprise Policy was launched in July 2019. The Policy is helping to create an enabling environment for social enterprise in Ireland to grow and contribute to Ireland's social and economic progress. It sets out a series of 26 commitments on the part of Government across three key objectives Building Awareness; Growing and Strengthening Social Enterprise and Achieving Better Policy Alignment, for the development of social enterprise over the period 2019 to 2022. The continuing implementation of the policy includes the following notable examples; A new Awareness Strategy has been developed to highlight the critical role social enterprises play in responding to many of our current challenges such as addressing the impacts of COVID-19 and to emphasise their potential to shape a more sustainable and inclusive future. It complements other critical awareness raising efforts including the National Social Enterprise Conference which took place in Croke Park in 2019 and virtually in November 2020 allowing very significant participation and engagement both nationally and internationally.

For social enterprises, as for other businesses, access to capacity building and other supports is a constant necessity. The Department of Rural and Community Development has worked to grow and strengthen social enterprise nationally in a variety of ways, including by allocating €800k for a Training and Mentoring Scheme for Social Enterprise, €2m for the Small Capital Grants Scheme which supported 230 social enterprises and €800k for the COVID-19 Social Enterprise Regeneration Programme, funded by the Dormant Accounts Fund. Significant support was also provided by the Department through the Community Services Programme (CSP), SICAP and LEADER, as well as support provided under the Social Enterprise Development Fund. The Department ensured social enterprises benefitted from supports such as the Stability Fund and Innovate Together Funds in response to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

DRCD also continued to engage with government Departments and agencies including the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, the Local Enterprise Office Centre of Excellence and Enterprise Ireland in relation to maximising access by social enterprises to mainstream business supports. To promote and facilitate the inclusion of social considerations in public procurement projects and thereby help enable market opportunities for social enterprises, DRCD actively participates in the Office of Government Procurement's Strategic Procurement Advisory Group. A series of three Procurement training and advice Webinars for social enterprises, in association with the Department of Justice and Pobal took place in 2020 with further sessions planned for 2021.

Internationally, the Department continues to engage with the British Irish Council (BIC), EU, OECD and International Labour Organization (ILO) to ensure that the critical role played by social enterprises in fostering inclusive growth, and a fairer, more sustainable society is mainstreamed at an international level. In December 2020 Minister Humphreys signed the Toledo Declaration on the Social and Solidarity Economy as a key driver for an inclusive and sustainable future on behalf of the Irish Government, joining 18 other EU member states in reaffirming Ireland's commitment to the development of this critical sector.

Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities Strategy; A five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland 2019-2024

In order to create a vibrant, sustainable and inclusive society, communities need to be empowered to develop and sustain their own wellbeing. In August 2019, the Minister for Rural and Community Development launched Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities Strategy; A five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland 2019-2024. The strategy was co-produced by Government and people from the community development, local development, community and voluntary and local government sectors through a Cross Sectoral Group (CSG).

In order to support the Department's mission to "promote rural and community development and to support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland" the Strategy seeks to use a mix of policy initiatives and funding supports for communities, non-profit organisations and the community and voluntary sector, while also working with other Government Departments and agencies that support communities.

The Strategy describes a long-term vision for our communities and sets a general direction of travel for government policy in relation to supporting communities and the community and voluntary sector in the next five years and beyond. Ongoing collaboration with the CSG, including their oversight of strategy implementation, copper-fastens the renewed relationship and partnership between Government and the community and voluntary sector which developed and strengthened during the course of the preparation of the Strategy.

D) Details of any funding competitions/initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

The third call for Category 2 proposals to the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund will be announced in May 2021. Category 2 funding will enable a project to be developed to a stage where it can apply for Category 1 funding in future calls to the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund.

Town and Village Renewal Scheme

The 2021 Town and Village Renewal Scheme was launched on 3rd May 2021. Under the Scheme €15 million in funding will be available to help revitalise rural towns and villages post Covid-19.

The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)

SICAP addresses high and persistent levels of deprivation through targeted and innovative, locally-led approaches. It supports in need groups and communities and individuals including unemployed people, people living in deprived areas, people with disabilities, single parent families, people on a low income, members of the Traveller and Roma community. This type of support will continue over the lifetime of the programme, which runs from 2018 to 2022.

Community Policy: Healthy Ireland

Healthy Ireland, A Framework for improved Health & Wellbeing 2013-2025, is the national framework for action to improve the health and wellbeing of Ireland over the coming generation administered by the Department of Health. The Government has approved the creation of a Healthy Ireland Fund to support the implementation of its objectives in a practical way such as through alignment with specific objectives contained in Local Economic & Community Plans (LECPs).

The Healthy Ireland initiative aims to create an Irish society where everyone can enjoy positive physical and mental health. This is to be achieved through supporting innovative, cross-sectoral, evidence-based projects and programmes that implement key national policies in areas such as obesity, smoking, alcohol, physical activity and mental health. In particular, an emphasis is on the Health & Wellbeing of the most disadvantaged groups and areas and those experiencing significant health inequalities.

At a local level, The Healthy Ireland Fund is administered by LCDCs, who through objectives in the Local Economic & Community Plan 2016 – 2022, has identified and set out actions and targets that align to these national health policies.



E) Details of the funding programmes administered by each Department (and agencies under the aegis of each department), over the last two years, which have been awarded within the Eastern and Midland Region

The Department provided significant information for each of the counties within the Eastern and Midland Region of funding allocations under a number of schemes during 2020. This included funding under the Community Enhancement Programme, Covid-19 Community and Voluntary Stability Scheme, Covid-19 Emergency Fund, Dormant Accounts, LEADER, Social Enterprise Grants Scheme, Town and Village Schemes, Capital Grants Scheme, CLÁR, Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme, WiFi4EU, Broadband Officer payments, Library Schemes and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund.

F) Any other comments that were made with respect to each Department (including any agencies under the aegis of each Department) and implementing the RSES, including any recommendations that are considered would facilitate the process

No further comment provided.

G) Response and Recommendations of the Regional Assembly

The Assembly welcome the detailed report received by the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) and commend the effort made in presenting a coordinated report for the purposes of RSES Monitoring.

On review of the information submitted, the Assembly are satisfied that the DRCD have demonstrated that progress has been made in implementing the RSES and have carried out a number of specific actions that enable same. This includes the publication of a comprehensive, overarching policy document, 'Our Rural Future', which sets the road map for rural development and also a number of supporting funding programmes and schemes that enable rural and community development throughout the Region.

Having regard to the information submitted, The Assembly consider that the work to date could be enhanced and make the following recommendations to NOAC for consideration;

- The Regional Assembly should inform the implementation process attached to 'Our Rural Future' to ensure that regional development occurs in a sustainable manner, which is coordinated and prioritised in line with the spatial and economic strategy defined for the Eastern and Midland Region, thus supporting and delivering on Project Ireland 2040. It should be noted that the Regional Assembly is already involved in supporting the review process of LECPs and the Town Centre First Approach.
- The Regional Assembly should inform the roll out of the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund in order to focus the delivery of funding in a coordinated manner that ensures the delivery of the spatial and economic strategy for the Region. It should be noted that alignment with the RSES is a key determinant for receipt of funding under the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) administered by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

5.1.2.2 Minister for Finance

The Department of Finance's mission is "to lead in the achievement of the government's economic, fiscal and financial policy goals, having regard to the goals set out in the Programme for Government - Our Shared Future". The role of the Department of Finance is crucial in enabling the implementation of Project Ireland 2040 and the RSES.

A) Progress made in supporting the objectives of the RSES

The Department were asked to identify the progress that has been made in supporting the objectives of the RSES that are applicable to them. This included, for instance, progress related to fiscal measures that support the settlement strategy of the RSES, housing and infrastructure provision, rural development, sustainable public transport, the development of enterprises, skills and innovation capacity, economic centres, climate action, and, future proofing and economic structural change including Just Transition, Brexit, Covid-19 and digital transitions.

The Department responded by indicating that these issues, and in particular those related to future proofing, structural change and climate action, were provided for under Budget 2021. This includes how additional carbon tax funds will be allocated in 2021 and that they will support a just transition to a low carbon economy by allocating funding to welfare increases; a retrofitting programme with an emphasis on social and low-income tenancies; and funding to encourage farmers to farm in a more sustainable way.

The Department indicated that the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) was consulted to determine the most effective measures to use the carbon tax funds to offset the regressive nature of the tax.

B) Progress made by agencies that operate under the aegis of each Department, in supporting the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to that agency

The National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) and Home Building Finance Ireland (HBFI) are bodies under the aegis of the Department of Finance.

NAMA indicated in 2015 that it aimed to facilitate the construction of up to 20,000 new residential units by 2020, subject to commercial viability. Over 90% of this delivery has been within the jurisdiction of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly, principally within the four Dublin Authorities, Wicklow, Kildare and Meath and located within the major growth towns as per the RSES settlement strategy.

Additionally, NAMA has made a positive contribution towards achieving the objective of the National Planning Framework (NPF) of securing the 25,000 new homes required annually in order to satisfy the State's housing needs up to 2040, through the delivery of 11,700 units directly and 5,300 units indirectly up to March 2020. Half of these are expected in the eastern region. Specifically, since the adoption of the RSES, in the area of the Eastern Midland Regional Assembly, NAMA secured the delivery of 1,733 units in 2019 and 639 units in 2020, with a forecasted delivery of 725 units in 2021 notwithstanding Covid-related delays.

The geographical distribution of these units is set out below:

	2019	2020	2021
Dublin	1,379	512	700
Kildare	201	0	0
Meath	31	77	12
Wicklow	122	26	13

There are residential zoned lands owned by NAMA debtors and receivers estimated to have potential for 20,641 units in the pipeline for development after 2021 within the Eastern and Midland Region, of which 594 have approved funding for construction, 4,387 units have planning permission, 254 have a planning application lodged and awaiting decision and 15,406 are at either pre-planning consultation stages, are awaiting approval of a Local Area Plan, or provision of public infrastructure.

NAMA has continued to consolidate the development of the Dublin Docklands. NAMA originally held an interest in 15 of the 20 blocks identified in the North Lotts and Grand Canal Basin Strategic Development Zone ("SDZ") and developed detailed strategies for each of the 15 blocks. Construction has been completed on a total of 1.6 million sq. ft. and 228 residential units. Since the adoption of the RSES in 2019, construction has been underway on a further 1.4million sq. ft. of commercial floor space and following the construction of 190 units in Capital Dock in 2018, a further 202 apartments have been built, and a further 246 units are on course for completion in 2021. When fully complete, NAMA's original interest in the Docklands will provide 4.2million sq. ft. of commercial space and 2,183 residential units, accommodating an estimated 20,000 office workers and homes for over 5,000 people.

NAMA has secured the regeneration of mixed-use brownfield sites for employment creation and residential uses and promoted development that integrates public transport objectives with land use planning. It has recently completed a comprehensive process to select an investment partner for the development of the former Irish Glass bottle site into a vibrant residential and commercial extension of Dublin City. This brownfield site is located within the Poolbeg West Strategic Development Zone and extends to approximately 14ha and has potential to deliver up to 3,800 residential units (including 25% social and affordable) and 1 million sq. ft. of commercial space, as well as a school and community uses and public amenities. Master planning and pre-development works are expected to commence immediately. This will transform the site into an extension of Dublin's growing City Centre.

An area of particular importance to NAMA has been the provision of homes, through the Agency's debtors and receivers, for social housing. Up to the end of 2020, NAMA had identified 7,094 houses and apartments, one third of the completed housing stock held by its debtors and receivers in Ireland, as potentially suitable for social housing (through the Housing Agency) to local authorities and approved housing bodies and 2,614 had been delivered or contracted by NAMA for social housing purposes at the end-September 2020.

Home Building Finance Ireland (HBFI) has a national remit to provide funding for commercially viable residential development. In assessing all proposals, HBFI looks at the demand for residential units in the location. In part, HBFI is addressing a market failure, by providing funding where the private sector cannot or will not provide funding. At end 2020, HBFI had approved funding for projects in 17 counties facilitating remote working in the longer term. This regional demand for funding is likely to continue given the current trend towards remote working and the Government's Rural Development Policy (2021-2025) to develop hubs in towns across the country.

In January 2021, HBFI launched a 'Green Funding Product', designed to encourage the development of sustainable housing across all HBFI products. Projects that qualify and meet the Home Performance Index (HPI) certification can avail of a discount of up to 0.5% on the margin that they could normally expect to be charged.

C) Details of any policy initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

International Financial Services Strategy 2025, including its current status and implementation. In particular, the horizontal priority of Regionalisation with respect to the Eastern and Midland Region, and actions relating to regional focus, the Grand Canal Innovation District, and Regional Skills Fora.

In April 2019, the Government launched Ireland for Finance, its whole-of-Government strategy for the further development of the international financial services sector in Ireland to 2025. The vision of the Strategy is for Ireland to be a top-tier location of choice for specialist international financial services.

Regional locations in Ireland offer a viable alternative to Dublin for providing international financial services, whether as a primary site or as a secondary site that is complementary to operations in Dublin. Over a third of international financial services jobs are located in areas outside Dublin. The sector has a significant presence in a number of regional locations including Carlow, Cavan, Clare, Cork, Donegal, Galway, Kerry, Kildare, Kilkenny, Louth, Leitrim, Limerick, Meath, Sligo, Tipperary, Waterford, Wexford, and Wicklow. Regionalisation is a horizontal priority of the Ireland for Finance strategy and successive annual Action Plans have had measures directly aimed at increasing employment in the international financial services (IFS) sector of the regions.

IDA and Enterprise Ireland have been promoting the regions as a location for conducting international financial services through close collaboration with industry, chambers of commerce, and local authorities. Financial Services Ireland expanded their apprenticeship programme and completed the first national intake of IFS apprentices in 2020. The next national intake of IFS apprentices is planned for September 2021. The innovative structure of the Regional Skills Fora and Skillnet programmes sees the work plan within each region being driven by key stakeholders in the region including employers, enterprises and education and training providers.

A Government decision to support the development of the Grand Canal Innovation District (GCID) in Dublin was made in January 2020. The GCID could support the future development of the IFS industry in Ireland. The Fintech Foresight Group will develop proposals to establish better collaboration between 'big tech' and financial services companies located in the GCID area, including collaboration with tertiary education, new start-ups and venture capital firms.

D) Details of any funding competitions/initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

HBFI has an initial fund of €730m which is directly focussed on funding commercially viable residential development projects across the State. At end 2020, HBFI had approved €395m. Due to commercial sensitivity, it is not possible to provide a breakdown of funding by project, however the approvals comprise 38 projects across 17 counties. At the end of 2020, HBFI had approved projects in the Eastern and Midland Region in Dublin (5 projects), Louth (4 projects), Meath (3 projects), Kildare (4 projects), Wicklow (2 projects), Westmeath (1 project), Offaly (3 projects) and Laois (2 projects).

E) Details of the funding programmes administered by each Department (and agencies under the aegis of each department), over the last two years, which have been awarded within the Eastern and Midland Region

See Point D) above.

F) Any other comments that were made with respect to each Department (including any agencies under the aegis of each Department) and implementing the RSES, including any recommendations that are considered would facilitate the process

Of the bodies under the Department's aegis, HBFI have stated that they will continue to address the requirement for residential development finance for viable projects right across the State. Given the current economic impact of COVID-19 and the departure of KBC and Ulster Bank from the Irish banking market, it is likely that there will be a continued demand for HBFI's product offering. Accordingly, HBFI will continue to remain flexible while adapting to market needs and in doing so bring new products to market where needed.

NAMA has raised concerns with the overall population strategy of the RSES, which they appreciate is ultimately informed by the NPF. They believe that there is a requirement to re-examine the timescales over which the disruptive growth scenario is implemented and believe it needs to take effect over a number of Development Plan cycles. That current issues around the spatial distribution of population need to be addressed is not in dispute, but NAMA believe that these problems will not be resolved by the immediate restriction of development in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA). NAMA is concerned that the household projection targets will seriously jeopardise the realisation of their mandate from Government to deliver much needed starter homes to the GDA market. The remaining development sites that NAMA holds security over are eminently capable of supporting the overarching objectives of the RSES and NPF to facilitate healthy place-making; support sustainable mobility; enhance amenity and heritage resources; provide access to education; support efficient use of infrastructure; provide economic opportunity; create conditions for climate change resilience; and ultimately lead to compact urban development. However, NAMA believe that the inevitable changes to zonings as a result of revised population and household targets means their development, in line with other policies of Government is in considerable doubt.

G) Response and Recommendations of the Regional Assembly

The Assembly welcome the information submitted by the Department of Finance and commend the effort made in presenting a coordinated report for the purposes of RSES Monitoring.

On review of the information submitted, the Assembly are satisfied that the Department of Finance have carried out a number of actions that have enabled progress to be made in implementing the RSES.

Having regard to the information submitted, The Assembly consider that the work to date could be enhanced and make the following recommendation for NOAC to consider;

- The Regional Assembly should be afforded opportunity to inform the horizontal priority of Regionalisation, as expressed in the International Financial Services Strategy 2025- Ireland for Finance, as part of the ongoing implementation process of the aforementioned strategy. This will ensure that measures directly aimed at increasing employment in the international financial services (IFS) sector of the regions is guided to appropriate locations that supports the spatial strategy of the RSES and recognises the importance of Dublin as a national economic driver; The Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor, especially in light of BREXIT and the need to develop an all-island economy; Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk as vital regional growth centres; and a number of Key Towns⁸.

⁸ Swords, Maynooth, Bray, Navan, Naas, Wicklow, Longford, Mullingar, Tullamore and Portlaoise.

5.1.2.3 Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications

The mission of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications is “to collaboratively deliver policies and programmes to empower people, communities and businesses to continue the transition to a better quality of life for current and future generations.”

The five strategic goals of the Department are:

- 1) Be a recognised leader in climate action;
- 2) Transform our energy system for a net zero emissions future;
- 3) Transition to a circular economy – protecting and restoring our environment through sustainable resource use;
- 4) Deliver world class connectivity and communications; and
- 5) Ensure best in class governance and regulation. The role of the Department is crucial in enabling the implementation of Project Ireland 2040 and the RSES according to its three underlying principles (healthy placemaking, climate action and economic opportunity) across all RSOs.

A) Progress made in supporting the objectives of the RSES

The Department were asked to identify the progress that has been made in supporting the objectives of the RSES that are applicable to them. This included, for instance: progress in decarbonising our energy system; progress in decarbonising buildings; progress in decarbonising the transport sector; progress in accelerating transition to low carbon and circular economy and society; progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and support for undertaking emissions monitoring at a regional and local authority level; progress in protecting biodiversity and natural heritage; collaboration between relevant stakeholders and the Bord na Mona transition team and in achieving a ‘just transition’ in the Midlands; progress in the preparation of a national Landscape Character Assessment; implementation of the Water Framework Directive; progress in achieving good air quality for all urban and rural areas in the Region and incorporating the objectives of the EU Environmental Noise Directive, and; the role of digitalisation in enhancing urban and rural regeneration, supporting development of a network of co-working/remote working hubs and smart cities, towns and villages in the Region, including delivery of the national broadband plan and future communications networks.

The request for information was circulated to all the Divisions within the Department and the agencies under the aegis of this Department. In total, 22 submissions were received including 11 from Divisions within the Department.

Progress in decarbonising our energy system

As set out in the response from the **Electricity Policy Division**, the Programme for Government provides that a reliable supply of safe, secure and clean energy is essential in order to deliver a phase-out of fossil fuels. The Government is committed to the rapid decarbonisation of the energy sector and will take the necessary action to deliver at least 70% renewable electricity by 2030.

The Climate Action Plan included a commitment to deliver at least 3.5 GW of offshore wind by 2030, up to 8.2 GW of onshore wind and up to 1.5 GW of solar. The Programme for Government commits to a further increase in offshore wind deployment to 5 GW by 2030. The National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP) sets out estimated trajectories by renewable energy technology in order to achieve the overall and sectoral trajectories for renewable energy from 2021 to 2030. These technology levels are indicative and for electricity the level of each technology will be driven by technology costs and competitive auctions under the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS) as well as major private sector funding through Corporate Power Purchase Agreements.

The response from the **International & Offshore Energy Division** addressed “increasing renewable energy, including offshore potential” as follows:

In order to achieve our 2030 targets the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications worked closely with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government on the development of the Maritime Area Planning Bill (MAP). For the future Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE) regime, the MAP Bill provides flexibility to allow for both a centralised and decentralised approach to the development of offshore renewable energy projects.

Work on the development and future operation of a new consenting regime for offshore renewable energy is underway within DECC. The first offshore RESS auction is planned to launch in 2021, following enactment of the MAP Bill and in line with the timeline set out in the Programme for Government.

DECC has established a Working Group on the Framework for Offshore Electricity Grid to assess options available for a suitable offshore grid model. Group consists of DECC (Chair), Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU), EirGrid and ESB Networks.

The response from the **Geoscience Policy Division** included updates relating to Petroleum Exploration and Production, Mineral Exploration and Mining and Geothermal Energy.

The Programme for Government contains a commitment to end the issuing of new licences for the exploration for and extraction of natural gas; this commitment was given effect immediately upon the Minister taking office. The Department is no longer accepting new applications for exploration licences for natural gas or oil, nor will there be any future licensing rounds. In line with the implementation of the 2019 prohibition on exploration for oil, existing applications and authorisations will not be affected by the ban. This means that all such applications and authorisations for natural gas exploration in place before this time can continue to apply to progress through the standard lifecycle stages towards extraction / production.

Government approval was given on 2 February 2021 to draft Heads of Bill which would give statutory effect to this Programme for Government commitment through the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill. The intention is to amend the Petroleum and Other Minerals Development Act 1960 to statutorily prohibit the granting of new petroleum prospecting licences, licensing options, exploration licences, lease undertakings and petroleum leases. These proposed amendments, intended to be introduced at Committee Stage, will further emphasise that Ireland is moving away from oil and natural gas exploration and extraction. The Minister will also publish a revised policy statement to replace the current Policy Statement – Petroleum Exploration and Production Activities as part of Ireland's Transition to a Low Carbon Economy.

The Minister will shortly publish a draft policy statement on mineral exploration and mining which will highlight the important role that the sector can play in the sustainable supply and management of the raw materials necessary for transitioning to a low carbon and circular economy and society, and also to decarbonise Ireland's energy and transport systems.

The Minister has also committed to developing a modern, robust policy and regulatory framework to support the increased use of geothermal energy in Ireland to decarbonise the heat sector as part of the move towards less reliance on fossil fuels across every sector of our society. Following the publication in November, 2020 of An Assessment of Geothermal Energy for District Heating in Ireland and Geothermal Energy in Ireland, A roadmap for a policy and regulatory framework (available on gov.ie), it is intended to publish a draft policy for consultation before year end 2021.

Progress in decarbonising buildings

The response from the **Residential Energy Efficiency Division** of the department outlined how, over the last decade, Government has progressively strengthened the Building Regulations relating to the conservation of fuel and energy in new dwellings. The regulations now require new buildings to be at "NZEB" performance levels which is the equivalent of an A2 Building Energy Rating for a typical dwelling. This also encourages the use of renewable technologies and the movement away from traditional fossil fuels. For existing buildings, Government has put a number of supports in place across the residential, commercial and public sectors. These supports incentivise projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions by improving energy efficiency and increasing the use of renewable energy.

The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 older homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2/cost optimal and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next 10 years. The development of a new retrofit plan to achieve these targets is well underway.

The Programme for Government commits to providing €5 billion to part fund a socially progressive national retrofit programme targeting all homes but with a particular focus on the Midlands region and on social and lower income tenancies. €3.7 billion is allocated to support our retrofit targets in the National Development Plan. In 2020 17,616 Government supported energy efficiency upgrades in existing homes were carried out.

Progress in decarbonising the transport sector

The response of the **Climate Governance Division** noted that ESB e-cars is currently installing new modern electric vehicle chargers and upgrade the existing charging network nationally at a cost of €10m.

Progress in accelerating transition to low carbon and circular economy and society

The joint response from the **Waste Policy & Resource Efficiency and Circular Economy Divisions** of the Department notes that our current national waste policy, the 'Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy' was launched in September 2020. This Plan outlines the various measures which will be necessary to help achieve a circular economy, focusing not just on how we manage our waste but also on preventing waste arising in the first place and on how we can manage our products and resources more efficiently and sustainably.

Progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and support for undertaking emissions monitoring at a regional and local authority level

The response from the **Climate Governance Division** of the Department provided progress updates as follows:

On 18 December 2020 the EU transmitted its submission on the nationally determined contribution of its member states to the UNFCCC. The submission contains an updated and enhanced target of at least a 55% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to 1990, following the guidance of the European Council given on 11 December 2020.

The EU Effort Sharing Regulation EU/2018/842 (ESR) established binding annual greenhouse gas emission targets for Member States for the period 2021–2030. These targets concern sectors outside of the EU Emissions Trading System, such as agriculture, transport, buildings and waste. The ESR sets Ireland a target of 30% reduction in emissions by 2030 compared to 2005 levels. Full implementation of the Climate Action Plan 2019 would see Ireland achieving this target. It is important to note that this target will be amended following the European Council's decision to increase ambition from its existing EU-wide 2030 target of 40% reduction to at least 55%, compared to 1990 levels. Legislative proposals to implement the new EU 2030 target, including revising Member States' existing targets for 2030, are expected to be presented by the European Commission by June 2021.

In terms of compliance with 2020 targets, Ireland's non-Emissions Trading Scheme (non-ETS) emissions are projected to be 2% and 4% below 2005 levels in 2020 under the With Existing Measures and With Additional Measures scenarios, respectively (based on the latest emissions projections published in July 2020). This compares to the target of 20% below 2005 levels by 2020.

Under the 2019 Climate Action Plan, significant new governance structures were established to ensure that climate policy is implemented, including the establishment of a Climate Action Delivery Board within the Department of the Taoiseach to oversee delivery of the 2019 Climate Action Plan and publish quarterly progress reports. These governance mechanisms will continue going forward.

With regard to implementation of the Climate Action Plan 2019, 78% of the measures due to the end of Q4 2020 were delivered, with 391 measures completed out of a total of 500 measures due. Full details of delivery rates and measures achieved across each quarter are provided in quarterly Progress Reports, published online.

The EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) is a cornerstone of EU policy on climate change mitigation promoting cost-effective emissions reduction in heavy industry and power-generation. It is the first and largest carbon market and works on the 'cap and trade' principle. A cap is set on the total amount of greenhouse gases that can be emitted by installations covered by the system. The cap is reduced over time so that total emissions fall. Within the cap, companies receive (for free) or buy emission allowances which they can trade with one another as needed. The limit on the total number of allowances available ensures that they have a value.

After each year, a company must surrender enough allowances to cover all of its emissions, otherwise heavy fines are imposed. If a company reduces its emissions, it can keep any spare allowances to cover its future needs or else sell these to another company that is short of allowances. The ETS operates in all EU countries plus Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway. It limits emissions from more than 11,000 heavy energy-using installations (power stations and large industrial plants) and airlines operating between these countries and covers around 45% of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions. Over approximately 100 stationary installations and 15 aircraft operators currently come within the system in Ireland.

The ETS plays a lesser role in Ireland than the EU average due to a large agriculture sector and relatively small heavy industry. The ETS is currently designed to deliver a reduction of 43% of emissions EU-wide by 2030. However, to achieve a climate-neutral EU by 2050 and the intermediate target of an at least 55% net reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, the Commission is proposing to revise and possibly expand the scope of the EU ETS. The Commission are currently preparing legislative proposals on this.

Ireland has supported the reforms in Phase IV of the ETS (2021-2030), the key ones being the adjustments to the Market Stability Reserve (MSR):

- Agreement was reached to significantly tighten its parameters so that it takes more allowances out of circulation each year.
- It will also now cancel allowances if the surplus becomes large enough.

Following implementation of these reforms, prices have strengthened considerably, albeit there was a temporary dampening of during the onset of Covid-19. This has resulted in a higher and more robust carbon price, which helped to ensure a year-on-year total emissions reduction in Ireland of 9% in 2019, with a reduction of 14.9% in electricity and heat production and a 1.9% reduction in industry. Prices are currently hovering between 40-46 €/tonne, as of April 2021. Industrial process emissions have dropped slightly between 2005 and 2019 and prices have also risen steadily over this period. However, emissions from energy industries have fell significantly over the same time period with a decrease in national total ETS emissions therefore occurring.

Progress in protecting biodiversity and natural heritage

As reported in the response from the **Climate Governance Division**, the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021 places on a statutory basis a 'national climate objective', which commits to pursue and achieve no later than 2050, the transition to a climate resilient, biodiversity-rich, environmentally-sustainable and climate-neutral economy.



Collaboration between relevant stakeholders and the Bord na Móna transition team and in achieving a 'just transition' in the Midlands

The response from the **Just Transition Division** reported on the Department of the Taoiseach Inter-Departmental Group, the Just Transition Review Group under the NESC, as well as the work of the Midlands Regional Transition Team (of which EMRA is a member) and the Just Transition Commissioner.

Department of the Taoiseach Inter-Departmental Group

An interdepartmental group on Just Transition led by the Department of An Taoiseach was established to coordinate the work of Government which cuts across a number of Government Departments, including; Environment; Public Expenditure and Reform; Housing, Planning, and Local Government; Business, Enterprise, and Innovation; Culture, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht; Education and Skills; Employment Affairs and Social Protection; Transport, Tourism, and Sport; Agriculture, Food, and the Marine; and Rural and Community Development. The Group last met in August 2020 where topics such as the role of the JT Commissioner, the Just Transition Fund, the Peatlands Rehabilitation Programme, retrofitting in the Midlands and Programme for Government commitments were discussed.

National Economic and Social Council (NESC)

In 2019, the Government asked NESC to identify steps that could be taken to address the vulnerability arising for workers, firms and sectors in relation to the transition to a low-carbon and more digital and automated future. The NESC was asked to examine the transition to a low-carbon future and to provide recommendations in order to better understand and prepare for a 'just transition'. NESC was also asked to establish a Just Transition Review Group under its working group structures to advise the Climate Action Delivery Board. These requests were elements of the Climate Action Plan and Future Jobs Ireland 2019. The Council has completed its research and published its advice to Government in a series of reports.

Midlands Regional Transition Team (MRTT)

The MRTT was established in response to the acceleration of Bord na Mona's decarbonisation programme and the closure of 21 active bogs and the two power stations in Offaly and Longford.

The establishment of the MRTT was under the auspices of the Midland Regional Enterprise Plan, under the Department of Trade and Enterprise, and was established to fulfil two objectives:

1. Pursue funding opportunities to mitigate BNM job losses – impact on individuals and region
2. Position region to attract investment and secure alternative employment opportunities

The MRTT has been the key collaborative mechanism driving Just Transition in the region. It has taken a broader approach than that set out in the above objective which was more directly linked to Bord na Mona and the Bord na Mona biodiversity plan. It consists of both members and Working Groups.

The four Working Groups are:

1. Working Group 1 - Education/Training/Research
2. Working Group 2 - Employment Generation
3. Working Group 3 - Employment Continuity Pathways
4. Working Group 4 - Community Assistance Programme/Social Enterprise Interventions

Membership of the MRTT includes the Department and Just Transition Commissioner, Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan, EMRA, local councillors, and the Cathaoirleach representing all counties in the region. The MRTT is not a statutory body and does not report to the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC). It was reformed following findings from the Just Transitions Commissioner's first progress report, published on 22nd May 2020, to expand to eight wider midlands counties and to put in place the four working groups named above.

The Midlands Regional Transition Team has played a key role in the establishment of the Just Transition Fund. The MRTT facilitated a midlands engagement process, with assistance from the EU Coal Regions in Transition Platform and the START programme, whereby the first stage of applying for JT funding was through the MRTT. 154 projects registered with opportunities in areas such as tourism, remote working, the circular economy, training, and green and clean technologies. Only projects which had registered with the MRTT were eligible to submit an application to the national JTF.

In July 2019, the European Commission agreed to include the Midlands Region Transition Team in the Platform for Coal Regions in Transition. The overall purpose is to assist EU countries and their coal (and fossil fuel) regions with networking, knowledge sharing, and technical and advisory support. Membership of the Initiative enabled the Midlands Region to apply for assistance under its START programme (Secretariat Technical Assistance for Regions in Transition) to develop a Holistic Plan for Just Transition in the Midland Region and to assist with the development of strategies and projects for the region, focusing in particular on the employment challenges faced by workers affected by decarbonisation.

The Department has supported the MRTT. DECC provides updates in relation to the EU Just Transition Fund and the national fund at its quarterly steering committee meetings. DECC also holds monthly meetings with the MRTT secretariat to ensure the ongoing exchange of information.

Just Transition Commissioner

The Just Transition Commissioner was appointed by the Minister of the Department in November 2019, with a mandate to engage with stakeholders in the Midlands region and to recommend the essential elements of a just transition for workers and communities in the Midlands. The Commissioner has contributed significantly to ensuring a collaborative and shared approach to Just Transition, and the Commissioner and his team have been supported and funded by the Department.

The first progress report of the Just Transition Commissioner was published in May 2020. It reflects a comprehensive engagement with stakeholders and presents an analysis of the challenges facing the region arising from an accelerated exit from peat harvesting. The Government published an initial response to this report on 22nd May 2020. The Commissioner has published three progress reports and it is anticipated that at least one further report will be delivered by the Commissioner before the end of 2021.

The Commissioner's reports contain a number of recommendations; some of these are already being addressed by Government and the remainder will be addressed in an Implementation Plan which will be integrated into the Department's updated Climate Action Plan 2021. The recommendations will support job creation efforts and create new opportunities for Bord na Móna workers in the Midlands.

Progress in the preparation of a national Landscape Character Assessment

No response provided

Implementation of the Water Framework Directive

Per the response of the **Geological Survey of Ireland (GSI)**, GSI provide maps, data and technical input into the Water Policy Advisory Committee; National Implementation Group and Regional Operational Committees.

Progress in achieving good air quality for all urban and rural areas in the Region and incorporating the objectives of the EU Environmental Noise Directive

The response from the **Air Quality Division** outlined progress in the implementation of policies and programmes relating to air quality and the preparation of Noise Action Plans by Local Authorities.

Ambient Air Quality Monitoring Programme (AAMP)

Monitoring of ambient air quality in Ireland is carried out by the EPA. The AAMP has undergone a significant upgrade in recent years and has expanded the network of stations nationwide from 30 to 90. In 2020 there were 18 stations installed, 11 of which were in the Eastern and Midland Region.

The monitoring stations collect air quality data for a range of pollutants in order to provide information to the public and to ensure air quality is within the EU limit values. All stations and data are available at <https://airquality.ie/>

Life Emerald Project

The EPA in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders recently commenced a three year EU funded project called LIFE EMERALD which will also improve Ireland's ambient air quality information and support greater monitoring and management capabilities. This will allow for greater understanding of air quality between current monitoring stations and at a more localised level across the region. It will also provide the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the factors contributing to poor air quality.

Ecosystems Monitoring System

The monitoring of negative impacts of air pollution upon ecosystems based on a network of sites that is representative of their freshwater, natural and semi-natural habitats and forest ecosystem types, taking a cost-effective and risk-based approach. The initial stage of development of the network has been completed and working with key stakeholder's, additional work will be undertaken to identify the most appropriate monitoring site across the country.

Noise Action Plans

Local Authorities are required under SI No 549 of 2018, which implements the Environmental Noise Directive (END), to report progress each year on the implementation of their Noise Action Plans (NAPs). Compliance among LA with this requirement resulted in the objective being met and all NAPs required for year 1 of Round 3 were submitted to the EPA. The EPA reviewed the NAPs and supplied feedback to the LAs including on areas where improvements were considered warranted.

The role of digitalisation in enhancing urban and rural regeneration, supporting development of a network of co-working/remote working hubs and smart cities, towns and villages in the Region, including delivery of the national broadband plan and future communications networks.

As set out in the response from the **National Broadband Plan Division** of the Department, the National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention is being delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed in November 2019, to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the over 544,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools.

The deployment plan forecasts construction commenced in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high-speed broadband within the next four years.

Design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands in every county in Ireland, with over 204,000 premises surveyed as of 15 April. This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area and build work has started in rural parts of Cork, Limerick, Cavan and Galway. The first homes have been connected in Carrigaline, Co Cork and construction work is continuing with significant technical testing and validation taking place prior to a wider release. Since 25 January, retailers are able to resell the service and householders in these areas will be able to order high speed broadband provided via the NBI network. Premises in Cavan have also been connected with Galway and Limerick to follow over the coming months.

Bringing connectivity to remote rural locations is central to promoting regional development and Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) represent an important delivery in the early stages of the National Broadband Plan by providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network.

As at 15 April 2021, some 189 BCP publicly accessible sites have been installed by NBI of which 172 of these are connected with high-speed broadband service through a service provider contract with Vodafone which is managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites.

In addition, primary school BCPs are also being provided with high-speed broadband, for educational use only, through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Education and Skills. As at 15 April, 113 schools have been installed with high-speed broadband for educational access of which 41 are connected. The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications continues to work with the Department of Education and Skills to prioritise the remaining schools to be connected over the term of the NBP. In this regard, an acceleration of this aspect of the National Broadband Plan has just been announced which will see some 679 primary schools connected to high-speed broadband by 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026.

While substantial progress has been made to date, the Covid 19 pandemic has had an impact on the delivery of the fibre network. The extent of this impact is currently being assessed and NBI has committed to put in place measures to mitigate the impact in as far as possible.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also highlighted the importance of good reliable broadband to ensure that citizens across Ireland can avail of remote working, education and other essential online facilities. This is reflected in the commitments in the Programme for Government where delivery of the National Broadband Plan will be a key enabler to many of the policies envisaged particularly around increased levels of remote working.

The Programme for Government has committed to seek to accelerate the roll out of the National Broadband Plan. NBI has established a dedicated team to investigate acceleration of the rollout from its current contracted schedule of seven years. Exploring the potential to accelerate the network rollout is being undertaken in parallel with the measures required to mitigate delays arising as a result of Covid-19.

B) Progress made by agencies that operate under the aegis of each Department, in supporting the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to that agency

Responses were received from eleven of the agencies under the aegis of the Department as follows: An Post, Bord na Móna, The Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg), the Digital Hub Development Agency (DHDA), Eirgrid, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Electricity Supply Board (ESB), Inland Fisheries Ireland, National Oil Reserves Agency (NORA), the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) and the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU).

Most of these responses were structured according to the response template issued to the Department. As such, this section is structured accordingly with responses from the agencies included in the order listed above under each heading.

Progress in decarbonising our energy system

The response from **An Post** states that An Post is supporting the government target of improving the public sector energy efficiency by 33% by 2020. In 2019 An Post achieved a 14.7% improvement in energy efficiency and are on track to improve our energy efficiency by at least 29% percent from a 2009 baseline. (Data submitted to SEAI as part of M&R Report, which is awaiting validation). All of the electricity used by An Post buildings is certified as being from renewable sources. An Post plans to generate renewable energy by installing 2MW peak of solar energy in their properties too maximise potential for microgeneration. An Post is a member of the Limerick City Exchange Project, Ireland's first microgeneration project. An Post plan to expand the brief of this project to include the generation of renewable electricity for use in their own premises and to supply power to local communities.

Bord na Móna has formally realigned its strategic direction from 'Brown to Green' and announced earlier this year its cessation of peat harvesting. The company's Edenderry Power Station is planning to run exclusively on 100% sustainable biomass. In formally supporting the decarbonisation and the continued running of EPL on the national grid, Eirgrid recently stated "Edenderry has been important in maintaining the high levels of security of supply we currently enjoy in Ireland and can continue to play an important role into the future. This is especially important in the context of the forecast challenges from October 2023" Bord na Móna continues to build out its 'renewable energy' portfolio. In addition, to the existing renewable gas unit [Drehid 5MW] and wind farms at [Bellacorrick (7MW), Mount Lucas (84MW), Bruckana (42MW), Sliabh Bawn (58 MW JV with Coillte)] Bord na Móna brought online the Phase-1 Oweninny 93MW (JV with ESB) windfarm, commenced construction on the Cloncreen Windfarm (75MW) and obtained planning consent for the proposed Derryadd Windfarm (90 MW). In the coming decade, Bord na Móna will continue to build out its 'renewable' pipeline, incorporating wind, solar, and storage assets as well as examining other technological solutions to deliver safe, secure energy to Irish consumers.

In its response, the **Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg)** noted that in 2019 it assigned radio spectrum rights of use specifically for the provision of Smart Grid during the 400 MHz Award process. A number of international and national studies have estimated the carbon reductions from using Smart Grids. For example, the Electrical Power Research Institute ('EPRI') has estimated that Smart Grid enabled electrical distribution could reduce electrical energy consumption by 5-10% and carbon dioxide emissions by 13-25%. The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland estimates that by 2050, Smart Grids will see an accumulated reduction in energy related CO2 emissions of 250 million tonnes.

The **Digital Hub Development Agency (DHDA)** has established a staff led 'green team' which undertook to progress renewable energy installations for its campus. It has recently commissioned a 13.5kw Solar PV to trial microgeneration. DHDA undertook an energy audit and evaluated the potential to enter into an energy performance contract in 2020.

The response from **EirGrid** was structured according to EirGrid's contribution to, or alignment with, specific RPOs in the RSES. In relation to RPO 10.20 - which is to support and facilitate the development of enhanced electricity and gas supplies, and associated networks, to serve the existing and future needs of the Region and facilitate new transmission infrastructure projects that might be brought forward in the lifetime of this Strategy - EirGrid's response noted that renewable generation accounted for 43% of all electricity consumed in Ireland during 2020, as EirGrid works to facilitate increased amounts of renewable energy on the grid at any one time. Statistics compiled by EirGrid, operator of the national electricity grid, show that the use of renewable electricity jumped from 36% in 2019 to 43% last year. Wind generation accounted for most of the renewables, along with small amounts of hydro, bio energy, ocean energy and "renewable combined heat and power".

In relation to the subsection i of RPO 10.22 relating to EMRA's support for the facilitation of interconnection to Europe, particularly the 'Celtic Interconnector' to France and further interconnection to Europe/the UK in the longer term, EirGrid has confirmed the route for the cable for the Celtic Interconnector following a review that was conducted after concerns were expressed by some local residents. In November 2020, following technical assessments and feedback from local stakeholders, EirGrid announced the route of the cable along the public road network from where it lands at Claycastle Beach in Youghal to a new converter station at Ballyadam in Carrigtwohill. In February 2021 it was confirmed that the route would bypass the villages of Castlemartyr and Killeagh.

Regarding subsection ii of RPO 10.22 - interconnection to Northern Ireland, particularly the 'North-South Interconnector and further co-operation with relevant departments in Northern Ireland to enhance interconnection across the island in the longer term - EirGrid received the decision by Northern Ireland Minister Mallon MLA to approve planning permission for the North South Interconnector in September 2020, which is critical to improving the security of electricity supply across the island of Ireland, helping us to move towards 70% renewable electricity by 2030 in Ireland.

RSES RPO 10.23 is specific to EirGrid as follows:

Support EirGrid's Implementation Plan 2017 -2022 and Transmission Development Plan (TDP) 2016 and any subsequent plans prepared during the lifetime of the RSES that facilitate the timely delivery of major investment projects subject to appropriate environmental assessment and the outcome of the planning process, in particular:

i. Support reinforcement of the Greater Dublin Area between Dunstown and Woodland 400 kV substations to increase the capacity of the often congested and highly loaded Dublin transmission network to enable the transmission system to safely accommodate more diverse power flows and also facilitate future load growth in the area

EirGrid has selected an underground cable option for this critical, new electricity project that will reinforce the network across Kildare and Meath. The upgrade will help to more effectively transfer power to the east of the country and distribute it within the electricity network in Meath, Kildare and Dublin. It will help to facilitate the integration of renewables on the grid by strengthening the network and help meet the growing demand for electricity in the East. This growth is due to increased economic activity and the planned connection of new large-scale IT industry infrastructure in the region. Following extensive local engagement and a multi-criteria assessment, the Kildare-Meath Grid Upgrade project team has selected a single 400 kilovolt (kV) underground cable as the best-performing option from a shortlist of overhead and underground technologies that were put forward for public consultation last year.

ii. Support the installation of additional transformer capacity and increased circuit capacity to meet Dublin demand growth to strengthen the network for all electricity users and improve the security and quality of supply

EirGrid continues to install additional transformer capacity and increased circuit capacity in line with its Transmission Development Plan.

iii. Support the Laois-Kilkenny Reinforcement Project to strengthen the network in large parts of the Midlands and provide additional capacity for potential demand growth in the wider region and strengthen the Region's transmission network by improving security and quality of supply and ensuring there is the potential for demand growth.

EirGrid and ESB Networks established a voluntary community forum early in 2020, as recommended by Irish Rural Link in its independent evaluation of the Laois Kilkenny Reinforcement Project in October 2019. The project involved the development of new transmission infrastructure, including substations and overhead lines, from Coolnabacky in Laois to Ballyragget in Kilkenny. In recognition of the importance of working closely with communities, EirGrid will launch a project Community Fund in 2021. It is intended that the voluntary community forum will, through its civic, social and political representatives, provide input into the administration of the fund. The forum will also receive regular updates on the construction programme from ESB Networks.

Inland Fisheries Ireland has signed up to SEAI's partnership program and the 2030 energy reduction target of 33.33% has been exceeded - 44.5% has been achieved. An energy Performance Officer has been appointed, a Climate Action Portal has been completed and a National Green Team Network has been established. Four PV Systems completed to date (total capacity 130 kW).

The **National Oil Reserves Agency (NORA)** continues to pursue its energy saving targets through participation in SEAI's system for Energy Monitoring and Reporting. In 2019 NORA made a 54.4% saving and met its Public Body Energy Management obligations set out in S.I. No. 426/2014.

By means of response, the **Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI)** appended two documents with their return to which they refer throughout the document - this includes an excel spreadsheet relating to SEAI Renewable energy and energy related CO2 emissions, as well as a document summarising SEAI Achievements 2019-2020 which provides information on how SEAI activities during 2019 and 2020 have supported citizens, communities, the public sector, business, and policy makers to make the transition to sustainable, low carbon energy use. Included are wide-ranging facts and figures which substantiate progress in decarbonising our energy system, including information on SEAI support for the development of ocean energy.

The response of the **Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU)** comprised a detailed outline of actions linked to the CRU corporate strategy, as well as high-quality updates on their implementation to date. Actions 1-4 have the strategic priority to 'Ensure utility network policies and infrastructure development deliver a low carbon future whilst supporting competitiveness and security of supply'.

1. Action 1 is 'Enduring Connection Policy – Stage 2 (ECP-2) Decision' with the objective of delivering 'An enduring electricity connection policy that supports climate targets.'
2. Action 2 is 'Offshore Grid Connection Policy' with the objective of commencing development of Offshore Wind connection policy and regulatory framework.
3. Action 3 is 'Electricity Interconnectors' with the objective to deliver new electricity interconnectors to support the integration of renewable power into the Irish energy system and provide an additional layer of security of supply. Updates were provided for the 'Greenlink' and 'Celtic' interconnectors.
4. Action 4 is 'Emergency Planning and Preparedness' with the objective of implementing the Electricity Risk Preparedness Regulation and continuation of review of emergency plans.
5. Action 5 is 'Electricity Generation Consenting' with the strategic priority to 'Build resilience in our processes and priorities to account for changes in the external environment including Brexit and the implementation of the Clean Energy Package' and the following objective: "Generator applications and authorisations future planning including accommodation of Renewable Energy Support Scheme (RESS) update".
6. Action 6 is 'Gas Tariffs – 2020/21' with the objective to 'Deliver consultation and decision on EU Tariffs for New Connections and follow through on implementation'
7. Action 7 is "Future Role of Gas" with the objective of ensuring effective understanding and consideration of the future role of gas.
8. Action 8 is 'Price Review Five' with the objective to ensure utility network policies and infrastructure development deliver a low carbon future whilst supporting competitiveness and security of supply. A 52% Increase in Transmission Operational Expenditure.
9. Action 9 is 'DS3 & System Services'. Objectives: RoCoF Trial Phase 1 completed; 100MW of additional wind on the system at one time due to Negative Reserve; System Services Future Arrangements project launched.
10. Action 10 is 'EU Network Code Implementation Project' with the objective to 'build resilience in our processes and priorities to account for changes in the external environment including Brexit and the implementation of the Clean Energy Package'.
11. Action 11 is 'Clean Energy Package – Active Consumers and Energy Communities' with the objective to build resilience in our processes and priorities to account for changes in the external environment including Brexit and the implementation of the Clean Energy Package.
12. Action 12 is 'Delivery of First Renewable Electricity Support Scheme Auction' with the objective to 'deliver market policies that support a low carbon future whilst supporting competitiveness and security of supply'.

Progress in decarbonising buildings

The response from **An Post** notes that as part of their submission to the Climate Action Plan, they have requested to collaborate with DECC, SEAI and DPER to find a cost effective solution for An Post and other public bodies to undertake retrofitting on older buildings in their ownership.

Furthermore, it is An Post's intention to explore the achievement of additional energy efficiencies through:

- The conversion of their LPG heating systems to Bio LPG.
- The use of smart energy management systems.
- The replacement of internal lighting with LED.

Their ambition is to assist 30,000 homeowners in retrofitting their homes as seamlessly as possible by 2030. An Post have successfully created the Green Hub which helps Irish citizens live more sustainable lifestyles by providing access to advice, affordable finance and trustworthy suppliers.

It offers homeowners two options for undertaking a home retrofit project:

- The One-Stop-Shop provides an end-to-end managed service, which includes appointing a project manager to keep things running smoothly. This covers everything from the initial home assessment, costing of work, coordination of contractors and management of the SEAI grant application process. When the retrofit is complete, the project manager handles quality assessment and submits the final sign-off and BER certification to SEAI.
- The DIV is their option for customers who want to manage the project themselves.

Although **Bord na Móna** is not commercially or directly involved in the development or delivery of NZEB infrastructure, Bord na Móna is progressing Energy Efficiency measures within the Public Sector Energy Efficiency Strategy (as part of the National Energy Efficiency Action Plan (NEEAP) and the Energy Efficiency Obligation Scheme. Bord na Móna is deemed a Public Body for the purposes of the Public Sector Energy Efficiency Strategy and as such the company must demonstrate a 33% reduction in energy efficiency by 2020. Latest figures indicate that Bord na Móna were successful in meeting this target.

In addition, Bord na Móna are also a participant in the Energy Efficiency Obligation Scheme (EEOS) by virtue of the fact that it sells energy to final consumers. Compliance with this Scheme requires Bord na Móna (and other obligated parties) demonstrate that they are responsible for a defined amount of energy saving across different sectors. This is achieved by effectively delivering energy efficiency projects (including but not limited to residential retrofitting) across the region and country. For the last audited year, Bord na Móna achieved 103% of its obligated EEOS target.

The Policy Statement of the **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)** recognises that the EPA occupies a unique position in respect of care for the environment and states that "Consequently, we are committed to incorporating good environmental management and practice into our everyday activities. The EPA aims to minimise the environmental impact of our own activities to achieve continual environmental improvement, to prevent pollution, to measure and reduce our carbon footprint and adapt to climate change and to encourage environmental awareness within our organisation."

Influences on the strategic direction for greening the EPA include the 2020 Programme for Government, Ireland's Climate Action Plan (Ireland's 2030 Energy Efficiency & Carbon), Targets for Public Buildings, EPA's 2021 – 2016 strategy development, the leadership of Senior Management and staff.

The EPA have an active Green Team since 2007 which is chaired by the Director of Office of Communications & Corporate Services. The major highlights to date include;

- a 50% reduction in energy demand since 2006 and achievement of the 2020 government efficiency target ahead of time
- a 54% reduction in water usage since 2010 and
- a 17% reduction in municipal waste and 23% reduction in mixed recyclables in an eight-year period.

The EPA achieved certification to the international standard (ISO 14001:2015) in 2011 and continues to maintain an Environmental Management System (EMS), to help control the EPA's impact on the environment from their activities and facilities. In the EPA Dublin offices, which are within the Eastern & Midland RSES area, they are currently undertaking detailed energy audits in 2021 that will inform future actions focused on decarbonising our buildings and achieving energy efficiencies as outlined in the Climate Action and National Energy Efficiency Action Plans.

A number of building upgrades are underway or completed including:

- Upgrade to a Hybrid Heating Solution in a building with electric heat pumps as the primary heat source. The heating system upgrade has resulted in a total energy saving of 75,778 kWh for a twelve-month period post project completion.
- Electric Vehicle charge point infrastructure has been installed in all EPA buildings.
- Design commenced to upgrade lighting to LED with anticipated reductions in lighting energy of up to 78% based on similar projects completed in other EPA buildings.
- Upgrade of 100M2 office space in Dublin to NZEB standards as a pilot.
- Upgrade underway for Building Management Systems (BMS) to help maintain efficiencies to date and to deliver further improvements in building efficiencies.
- In 2021 the EPA is exploring opportunities to expand SolarPV installations with a view to further roll outs in 2022.
- Building managers are undergoing SEAI Energy Map training in 2021

Inland Fisheries Ireland have installed High Resolution Energy Monitoring Software at two properties. A Water Harvesting Pilot Project successfully completed. Building Fabric Upgrades completed and ongoing at eight IFI properties. Researched all facilities KVA(MIC) and reduced loads where possible with monitoring ongoing. A Root and Branch building fabric analysis is ongoing for all IFI properties and IFI is building a comprehensive energy database to provide robust evidence base for future works.

In December 2019, the **National Oil Reserves Agency (NORA)** moved its head office to a LEED accredited designed building with a BER rating of B1.

By means of response, the **Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI)** appended two documents with their return to which they refer throughout the document – this includes an excel spreadsheet relating to SEAI Renewable energy and energy related CO2 emissions, as well as a document summarising SEAI Achievements 2019-2020. These include wide-ranging facts and figures which substantiate strong progress by SEAI in decarbonising our buildings including the numbers of homes and businesses that have had energy efficiency upgrades across the various SEAI schemes for 2019 and 2020.

Progress in decarbonising the transport sector

In their response, **An Post** notes that they operate one of Ireland's largest vehicle fleets and the transition to a sustainable transport fleet is at the core of their decarbonisation strategy. An Post regards itself as a pioneer in the procurement and deployment of electric vehicles (EVs) in their light commercial vehicle fleet. In 2020 An Post increased the number of sustainable vehicles and extended emission-free deliveries to more cities across the country. At the end of 2020, sustainable vehicles made up 28% of their 4,062 strong fleet. In 2019 An Post introduced emission-free deliveries between the canals in Dublin. They have extended their emission-free deliveries to include the cities of Kilkenny and Waterford in 2020. Due to COVID-19, the planned extension of emission-free deliveries to Galway, Limerick and Cork cities will not be achieved until 2021.

In addition to the initiatives discussed above, the following are key areas of focus for An Post:

Electric Vehicle Charging

- Investigate EV home garaging through the installation of charging points at employees' homes, where the installation of chargers is not feasible at An Post premises or if space is constrained.
- Develop an improved charging system to maximise use of night-time charging rates.

Transport Fleet

- Extend emission-free deliveries to the cities of Cork, Galway and Limerick as well as other urban areas.
- Increase the number of EVs in the fleet to 2,000 by 2022.
- Increase the number of eTrikes in the Fleet to 150 by 2022.

An Post's ambition is to transition the HGV fleet to Hydrogen and to be a first adopter of zero emission HGV technologies. The ambitions of An Post regarding Climate Action are further detailed in their CAP 21 submission to DECC which was included in their response.

Bord na Móna is actively engaged in examining the potential for the enhanced electrification of transport and mobility.

The **DHDA** has actively supported and promoted Cycling to work across its campus.

The **EPA** have a vehicle management policy in place which promotes the purchase of carbon efficient vehicles for their fleet. This has led to the introduction of five plug in hybrid vehicles and two fully electric vehicles in the fleet. The purchase of additional fully electric vehicles is planned in 2021. The EPA has been developing its EV charging infrastructure and now has charging points in all of its buildings. The EPA promotes cycling to work and provides secure bicycle parking and showers for cyclists.

ESB eCars was established in 2010 to roll out the public charging infrastructure for electric vehicles (EVs) across Ireland and to support the introduction and demand for electric vehicles nationally. eCars operates and maintains approximately 1,100 public charge points across the island of Ireland. These are available for electric vehicles and are found nationwide in locations such as on-street, shopping centres, vehicle parks etc. In addition, eCars has over 130 Rapid/Fast Chargers located in London and Coventry and has just begun a partnership with Birmingham City Council to install almost 400 charge points in the city. eCars is currently undertaking a €20m programme expand and enhance the charging network across Ireland which includes €10m funding from the Irish Government's Climate Action Fund, to help meet the expected growth of electric vehicles in the coming years.

Inland Fisheries Ireland has installed Four EV Charging Points to date and 3 more are underway. Electric vehicles rolled out to IFI bases – total of 13 on fleet. Board approval has been received to extend by a further 19.

The **National Oil Reserves Agency (NORA)** is responsible for the administration of Ireland's Biofuels Obligation Scheme (BOS) and for the assessment of compliance of obligated parties with the provisions of Article 7(a) of the Fuel Quality Directive (FQD) as set out in S.I. 160 (2017). The Agency works closely on an ongoing basis with all key stakeholders (in particular, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications; the Department of Transport; the downstream Oil and Biofuels industries, and all parties obligated under legislation associated with the BOS, the EU Renewable Energy Directive (RED) and the Fuel Quality Directive) in the development and implementation of key policies promoting the use and further development of renewable fuels in transport and the reduction of carbon emissions.

By means of response, the **Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI)** appended two documents with their return to which they refer throughout the document – this includes an excel spreadsheet relating to SEAI Renewable energy and energy related CO2 emissions, as well as a document summarising SEAI Achievements 2019-2020. These include wide-ranging facts and figures which substantiate strong progress by SEAI in decarbonising the transport sector including the numbers of EV grants and EV home chargers that have been supported by SEAI for 2019 and 2020.

Progress in accelerating transition to low carbon and circular economy and society

An Post's ambition is to further reduce waste and increase circularity in our systems. We are committed to living our values through our supply chains and practice green and responsible procurement as we align with ISO 20400. In their response, they identify An Post as the first public sector company in Ireland to look at Sustainability in their supply chain, auditing suppliers to ensure that they live An Post values in relation to decent work, climate action and sustainable production and consumption. In 2020 as part of An Post's contribution to the circular economy, 'Re-Cycled' delivery bikes were introduced. This involves the donation of bicycles from decommissioned cycle routes to frontline workers in homeless charities who can use them for their daily work. It is the intention of An Post to devise a circular business model to design waste out of their systems and work with suppliers to ensure less waste and lower energy usage. The potential reuse of redundant batteries from the Electric Vehicle fleet to store energy created during the day for use at night is also being investigated.

Bord na Móna's resource recovery business AES continued to drive progress in the circular economy, particularly in terms of the recycling and the reuse of valuable resources. Bord na Móna commissioned a plastics recycling plant in 2019 and continue to operate the country's only tyre recycling plant in Co Louth. In addition, the biological treatment facility for organic waste in Co Kildare is the largest facility of its kind in the state and is responsible for diverting circa 25,000 tonnes pa from disposal.

As noted above, Bord na Móna formally announced the end of peat harvesting, in parallel with this cessation and in compliance with the obligations of the EPA licences for these peatlands, Bord na Móna will now commence the formal decommissioning and rehabilitation of these bogs. In addition, to the licence requirements, Government funding is also being made available to support the enhanced decommissioning, rehabilitation & restoration of circa 33,000 Ha. The proposed fund for the enhanced decommissioning, rehabilitation and restoration of the peatlands will also include a scientific monitoring programme and will deliver benefits across climate action (GHG mitigation through reduced carbon emissions and acceleration towards carbon sequestration), enrich the State's natural capital, increase eco-system services, strengthen biodiversity, provide employment, improve water quality and storage attenuation as well as developing the amenity potential of the peatlands.

The **EPA** actively promotes re-use within its buildings. Long standing processes are in place for the re-use of furniture, stationary and other such consumables within the agency. Where re-use is not possible internally, we actively seek re-use outlets outside of the agency. We partner with the Community Reuse Network and the Re-Discovery Centre to identify re-use outlets. The EPA uses Green Public Procurement (GPP) in all of its procurement and has delivered GPP training to all of its relevant staff.

The **ESB** Brighter Future Strategy has focussed internal structures and resources around delivering low carbon electricity to customers. The following is an outline of what the various businesses of ESB are doing to support the low carbon transition:

ESB Networks (ESBN)

ESBN is at the centre of the low carbon transition. Ireland has substantial electrification potential and working with EirGrid as TSO, ESB Networks can support a significant increase in the share of low carbon electricity in final demand, up from the modest 20% figure today. ESBN has connected more than 4GW of wind generation and plans to connect 8GW by 2025. ESBN will also play a significant role in connecting offshore wind. Alongside connecting renewables, ESBN is also enabling customers with micro or mini generation to sell excess power back to the grid as well as facilitating energy communities. All of this will contribute to meeting the 70% renewable electricity target by 2030, in an efficient and timely manner. ESB Networks is rolling out smart meters which include the meter assets and all the back-end IT Systems to support customers engaging in the energy transition. ESB Networks has put in place investment plans to support the increasing demand occasioned by low carbon electrification (e.g. electric vehicles and heat pumps). ESB Networks is transforming its role as Distribution System Operator to enable maximum efficient use of available generation and flexible demand through a new Active System Management program and at the same time seeking to foster internal and external innovations in areas such as flexibility and non-wires solutions. With increasing electrification, the quality, condition and performance of the network becomes increasingly important. ESB Networks is undertaking a project to increase the resilience and performance of the network.

ESB Customer Solutions

Customer Solutions comprises ESB's customer facing contestable activities in a way that ensures they can best serve current and future customer requirements. Electric Ireland is a key customer facing brand and serves more than 1.2m customers on the Island. In addition to consistently proving excellent value and customer service, Electric Ireland is working with customers to provide them with low carbon technologies. There are already offerings for customers who wish to complete energy efficiency measures and install smart home technology, small solar panels and batteries. The roll out of smart meters will be a key enabler of utilising variable renewables through more flexible demand. Electric Ireland has a significant program of work ongoing in this area. ESB Customer Solutions has identified a possible market opportunity and role for itself as an 'Energy Advisor' to offer a 'one stop shop' service to end consumers including energy design, contractor selection, project management and grant administration of domestic retrofit projects. Customer Solutions is examining the best form of market entry including whether to develop this business organically or by way of a partnership with an existing player and the report of the National Retrofit Task Force will be key to finalising this decision.

ESB Smart Energy Services (SES) offers businesses managed energy services through a partnership approach which leverages cutting-edge technology and funding solutions to reduce energy consumption and costs for the industrial and commercial sectors. SES works with businesses across Ireland and the UK in areas such as energy efficient lighting, battery storage, transport, and low carbon heating solutions. By end of 2020, SES has forecast that it will have delivered €150m in savings for its customers. SES will look to play a leading role in helping business in Ireland reduce their energy requirements and their carbon footprint.

ESB Generation and Trading (GT)

ESB GT manages and trades ESB's generation assets on the Island of Ireland and GB. ESB has had generation assets in Ireland since the building of Ardnacrusha and has been operating in the UK for 25 years. During this time, the generation fleet has seen and will continue to see significant change. CO2 emissions from GT's thermal generation plants in 2019 are 58% lower than 2005 and the carbon intensity has reduced by 37% to 422 g/kWh. ESB GT has a strategic objective to produce 70% of its generation output from renewable energy sources by 2030. At the end of 2019, ESB GT has 884MW of renewable capacity comprising hydro and wind generation. GT's strategy is to have 3.5GW of renewable generation by 2030. This will involve significant effort by GT and will also involve many joint venture partnerships. GT already works on this basis with Bord Na Mona, Coillte and others in Ireland and with players like EDF in GB. In the coming years, GT will work with Parkwind to deliver the Oriel offshore wind farm and on the west coast of Ireland, GT will work with the Norwegian company Equinor to bring offshore wind ashore from the Atlantic Ocean. In Early 2021, ESB GT launched the Green Atlantic project which will transform the Moneypoint site on the west coast into an energy hub for offshore wind and green hydrogen. GT retains a significant fleet of dispatchable thermal plant. The vast majority of this is gas fired; this capacity will play a significant role in achieving Ireland's 70% renewable electricity by 2030 target. The existing fleet is being made much more flexible to accommodate the variable nature of wind generation while still providing a full system backup to wind. This capacity remains the backbone of the electricity out to 2030 at least.

As part of its long-term strategy, ESB GT is planning for the electricity system after 2030, it is exploring the role flexibility services will play, and it is examining how a close to zero carbon electricity system can be achieved. This involves the role that hydrogen, gas and CCS might play in the energy system and consideration of what role electricity and gas system sectoral coupling might play. ESB GT recently decided in principle to invest in a grid stabilization project at Moneypoint and is making a €50m investment in a synchronous compensator due for commercial operation in 2022. This is a large generator and flywheel that will provide short-circuit power and inertia for stable operation of the grid while also supplying and absorbing reactive power which controls voltage levels on the network. A key strategic objective of GT is to maximise the use of existing infrastructure through the use of hybrid connections. This will allow connections at large thermal power stations to be used for wind and solar when the renewable resources are available and for dispatchable generation when the renewable resources are not available.

At **Inland Fisheries Ireland** green procurement training is ongoing and ecodriving training had been rolled out to over 300 staff. Training of current energy team is ongoing, and an Energy Policy, a Strategy Action Plan for workplace engagement and an Energy MAP diagnostic document have all been drafted. IFI also made submissions to the Climate Action Plan.

By means of response, the **Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI)** appended two documents with their return to which they refer throughout the document – this includes an excel spreadsheet relating to SEAI Renewable energy and energy related CO2 emissions, as well as a document summarising SEAI Achievements 2019-2020. These include wide-ranging facts and figures which substantiate strong progress by SEAI in accelerating transition to low carbon economy and society.

Progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and support for undertaking emissions monitoring at a regional and local authority level

In line with targets a regional and local authority level **An Post** aims to achieve net zero carbon emissions from their operations by 2030. Carbon emissions have reduced by 23% since 2009 and An Post is on track to reduce carbon emissions by 50% by 2025. This reduction in carbon emissions will lead to corresponding reduction in our greenhouse gas emissions. See table for more detail on emissions. Though the Green Hub An Post are helping Irish citizens to adopt more sustainable lifestyles. They provide information, the inspiration and the tools to live more sustainably, with the resulting reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. An Post have identified objectives and metrics to monitor progress in relation to each of the five Sustainable Development Goals to which they are committed.

At its core **Bord na Móna** is fundamentally transforming its business from 'Fossil Fuel' to 'Climate Solutions'. At present, BnM is delivering climate solutions via the development of its renewable energy portfolio and the delivery of the enhanced peatlands decommissioning, rehabilitation and restoration scheme (note this scheme will also include GHG monitoring across the Bord na Móna estate).

In its response, the **DHDA** notes that waste segregation facilities have been installed across the campus and actively promoted. The DHDA has actively promoted the campus for green technology companies and strived to build a cluster of green technology companies.

The **EPA** exceeded the National energy reduction target of 33% set out under the National Energy Efficiency Action Plan by achieving a 50% reduction in its energy use up to 2020. The EPA use a variety of energy sources to power and heat its buildings. Sources include biomass, natural gas, thermal solar, Photovoltaic (PV), Bio-petroleum gas (Bio-LPG), kerosene and electricity (air-to-water heat pumps). Electricity is now purchased from 100% renewable sources. Diesel is used to power standby generators. Ireland's Climate Action Plan includes ambitious reductions and changes in energy use by way of a decarbonisation pathway and as such the EPA is well placed to continue its energy and carbon reduction with further building improvements planned for lighting upgrades with energy efficient LED, expansion of Solar PV and a continued focus on its carbon emissions.

The EPA have commenced planning to identify actions that will help to achieve the 2030 targets for Carbon and Energy reductions. A number of projects including LED Lighting, Heating and SolarPV upgrades are already well underway.

The **National Oil Reserves Agency (NORA)** is responsible for the administration of Ireland's Biofuels Obligation Scheme (BOS) and for the assessment of compliance of obligated parties with the provisions of Article 7(a) of the Fuel Quality Directive as set out in S.I. 160 (2017). The Agency works closely with all key stakeholders in the fulfilment of its remit, assisting in the development of renewable fuels in transport, thus reducing carbon emissions and promoting high levels of compliance with prevailing legislation.

By means of response, the **Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI)** appended two documents with their return to which they refer throughout the document – this includes an excel spreadsheet relating to SEAI Renewable energy and energy related CO2 emissions, as well as a document summarising SEAI Achievements 2019-2020. These include wide-ranging facts and figures which substantiate strong progress by SEAI in reducing greenhouse gas emissions across multiple sectors.

Progress in protecting biodiversity and natural heritage

Bord na Móna has ceased peat harvesting. Following the announcement of Government support, Bord na Móna is engaging on an ambitious scheme of enhanced decommissioning, rehabilitation and restoration of former industrial peatlands. The proposed improvements, under the Scheme which will be in compliance with the Habitats Directive, will include a scientific monitoring program and will deliver benefits across climate action (GHG mitigation through reduced carbon emissions and acceleration towards carbon sequestration), enrich the State's natural capital, increase eco-system services, strengthen biodiversity, provide employment, improve water quality and storage attenuation as well as developing the amenity potential of the peatlands. It is also expected that the work will also lead to the development of best practice guidelines for future projects.

The **DHDA** lead an initiative whereby beehives are located on lesser used parts of its campus.

The **EPA** manage 50% of its available green spaces for biodiversity and follow the guiding principles of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan.

Collaboration between relevant stakeholders and the Bord na Móna transition team and in achieving a 'just transition' in the Midlands

Bord na Móna has participated and engaged with stakeholders in the Midlands re the company's cessation of peat harvesting (and the subsequent focus on peatlands rehabilitation and restoration) – which also takes cognisance of the organisation's Biodiversity Plan and the national Climate Mitigation and Adaptation Plans. This engagement has primarily been via the Midlands Regional Transition Team. Bord na Móna also worked with the Department at European level to ensure that the Midlands region was included in the Coal Regions in Transition which should allow projects in the region access the EU Just Transition Fund. Furthermore, Bord na Móna has provided feedback and information into the preparation of Ireland's 'Territorial Just Transition Plan'. Bord na Móna is also the Co-ordinating Beneficiary for the EU LIFE Peatlands and People project which aims to connect our peatlands, policies and people to support the realisation of a carbon neutral, low-emission, climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable society and economy by 2050. Bord na Móna have also applied for funding (including supporting other applications) from the national Just Transition Fund, as well as participating with AIT in the Empower ECO initiative.

ESB has been participating in a number of working groups established under the Just Transition programme which looked at the future of the Midlands area following the closure of the ESB Midlands stations and the ending of the harvesting of peat by Bord na Móna. As part of this, ESB GT commissioned an internal engineering report to examine how the power plants might be re-used in the future. Options reviewed included possibility of using other types of fuel. The report, which was independently externally reviewed, has not identified any viable alternative use for the existing power plants. ESB GT intends to lodge planning applications shortly to develop additional energy services at these sites.

Progress in the preparation of a national Landscape Character Assessment

No response provided

Implementation of the Water Framework Directive

Bord na Móna is a member of the Midlands & Eastern Water & Environment Operational Committee under the auspices of the Local Authority Water Programme whose function, inter alia, is to implement the deliverables under the 2nd cycle of river basin management plans. Bord na Móna has engaged with the Committee explaining the rollout and potential positive impacts of the enhanced peatland decommissioning, rehabilitation and restorations scheme (see above), detailing the improvements that will be implemented and to ensure the associated success criteria (in relation to water quality) are aligned with the WFD.

The response of the **Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU)** comprised a detailed outline of actions linked to the CRU corporate strategy, as well as high-quality updates on their implementation to date.

Action 13 is 'Monitoring & Reporting on Irish Water's Performance' with the objective to provide effective regulation of Irish Water to deliver secure, efficient, and sustainable outcomes in the public interest.

Action 14 is 'Non-Domestic Tariff Application Rules' with the objective to Provide effective regulation of Irish Water to deliver secure, efficient, and sustainable outcomes in the public interest.

Action 15 is 'Revenue Control 3 & Financial Performance Incentives'. The key objectives of this action are i) Provide effective regulation of Irish Water to deliver secure, efficient, and sustainable outcomes in the public interest, and ii) Proactively and transparently place the public interest at the centre of the CRU's policy development and ensure that the customer's voice is heard and reflected in CRU decisions.

Progress in achieving good air quality for all urban and rural areas in the Region and incorporating the objectives of the EU Environmental Noise Directive

Bord na Móna recently made a detailed submission to the Government's 'Consultation on the Development of new Solid Fuel Regulations for Ireland'. This consultation flowed from the PfG Clean Air Strategy, which included inter alia, extending the ban on bituminous ("smoky") coal to new towns and, over the term of Government, moving towards a full nationwide ban, so that the environmental and health benefits that have already been brought to our cities and towns can reach every region in the country.

The role of digitalisation in enhancing urban and rural regeneration, supporting development of a network of co-working/remote working hubs and smart cities, towns and villages in the Region, including delivery of the national broadband plan and future communications networks.

In its response **ComReg** noted that while it is not responsible for the National Broadband Plan, as the sector specific NRA, ComReg makes itself available to assist policymakers to design state interventions that complement the market and regulation. Over the coming period, ComReg will monitor access by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) to Eircom's physical infrastructure assets to help contribute to the successful and timely rollout of the NBP. ComReg will also consider NBI's impact when carrying out its market analyses. In addition, ComReg also continues to provide technical advice to DECC in matters relating to NBI's role and State Aid generally where ComReg has relevant expertise.



C) Details of any policy initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

Responses were included for the following policy initiatives/developments:

Climate Action Plan & Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021

The response from the **Climate Governance Division** provided the following details relating to the Climate Action Plan & Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021.

The Programme for Government commits to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030 (a 51% reduction over the decade), and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050. The 2050 target will be set in law by the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development ((Amendment) Bill.

These commitments will be reflected in the upcoming Climate Action Plan 2021. This plan will have a strong focus on implementation. It will be informed by a process of co-design with all Departments and Bodies and by successful approaches in other countries. It will also involve extensive and ongoing collaboration with Departments and Bodies right across the Government system and consultation with the public; these will be key elements of the overall approach to development of the Plan, which is to be published in 2021.

Achieving these targets will be challenging and will require fundamental changes in many parts of Irish life. In making these changes, we will be able to improve the health, welfare and security of all our people.

The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021 will support Ireland's transition to Net Zero and achieve a climate neutral economy by no later than 2050. It will establish a legally binding framework with clear targets and commitments set in law, and ensure the necessary structures and processes are embedded on a statutory basis to ensure we achieve our national, EU and international climate goals and obligations in the near and long term.

The Bill includes the following key elements:

- Places on a statutory basis a 'national climate objective', which commits to pursue and achieve no later than 2050, the transition to a climate resilient, biodiversity-rich, environmentally-sustainable and climate-neutral economy
- Embeds the process of carbon budgeting into law, Government are required to adopt a series of economy-wide five-year carbon budgets, including sectoral targets for each relevant sector, on a rolling 15-year basis, starting in 2021
- Actions for each sector will be detailed in the Climate Action Plan, updated annually
- A National Long Term Climate Action Strategy will be prepared every five years
- Government Ministers will be responsible for achieving the legally-binding targets for their own sectoral area with each Minister accounting for their performance towards sectoral targets and actions before an Oireachtas Committee each year
- Strengthens the role of the Climate Change Advisory Council, tasking it with proposing carbon budgets to the Minister
- Provides that the first two five-year carbon budgets proposed by the Climate Change Advisory Council should equate to a total reduction of 51% emissions over the period to 2030, in line with the Programme for Government commitment
- Expands the Climate Change Advisory Council from eleven to fourteen members, and provides that future appointments to the Council provide for a greater range of relevant expertise and gender balanced
- Introduces a requirement for each local authority to prepare a Climate Action Plan, which will include both mitigation and adaptation measures and be updated every five years. Local authority Development Plans will also align with their Climate Action Plan
- Public Bodies will be obliged to perform their functions in a manner consistent with national climate plans and strategies, and furthering the achievement of the national climate objective

The response from the **Business Energy & Gas Policy Division** provided updates relating to sustainable heating under the Climate Action Plan. The Climate Action Plan reaffirmed the significant contribution district heating can make to increasing the level of renewable energy in the heat sector. Action 70 committed to finalising a Policy Framework for district heating in Ireland, focussing on the key areas of regulation, planning, funding, and research. A public consultation was carried out in late 2019 to early 2020 seeking views in order to inform the direction of the policy framework. The Department is currently finalising the policy framework, which will include actions designed to promote the development of district heating.

Alongside this, the SEAI is conducting an updated Comprehensive Assessment of Heating and Cooling Potentials in Ireland, which will identify areas where density is sufficiently high to potentially support district heating projects.

The Support Scheme for Renewable Heat (SSRH) was developed to financially support the adoption of renewable heating systems by commercial, industrial, agricultural, district heating and other non-domestic heat users. The SSRH includes an operational support for biomass and anaerobic digestion heating systems in the form of an ongoing payment, for up to 15 years, based on prescribed tariffs.

The response from the **Geological Survey of Ireland (GSI)** reported on the delivery of three actions under the Climate Action Plan as follows:

Action 26 – Complete offshore mapping through INFOMAR, which supports offshore planning and development including Offshore Renewable Energy Development by 2026. This programme is on-going and on target.

Action 70 – Examine the potential of geothermal energy to contribute to district heating and develop a roadmap. This has been completed and GSI are now in discussions with GSPD re progressing policy and, separately, are investigating the possibility of installing geothermal demonstration boreholes and compiling a database to help de-risk geothermal exploration. The Roadmap documents, consisting of both a Technical Assessment and Policy Roadmap were published online in late 2020: <https://www.gsi.ie/en-ie/programmes-and-projects/geoenergy/Pages/default.aspx>

Action 133 – Evaluate natural resources concealed by peat cover in the midlands and how geoscience might contribute to supporting the Just Transition. An initial GSI report was submitted to the Just Transition Commissioner in late 2020 and work is on-going.

The response from **Bord na Móna** sets out its role as lead stakeholder in a number of Actions within the Climate Action Plan. All of these Actions are underway and are progressing, including ongoing work with Teagasc to “Assess the options for land use management of re-wetted organic soils” and to carry out “Research on the potential for productive use of rewetted peatlands, including paludiculture” (131). In addition, Bord na Móna has started to “Assess the optimum postproduction after-use across all Bord na Móna peat extraction sites” – (133). This work is progressing in conjunction with the enhanced decommissioning, rehabilitation and restoration scheme, see above, and early indication support the benefits of continuing to locate renewable energy assets on peatlands, including co-locating renewable energy assets on rehabilitated peatlands.

In its response, **ComReg** noted its publication of a Call for Inputs on “Connectivity and Decarbonisation” (December 2019). As noted in the Climate Action Plan 2019, access to high-speed broadband can enable a range of environmental benefits, such as remote working and smart meters. With the continued roll out of fibre networks through a mixture of private investment and the advancement of the National Broadband Plan, ComReg sought to improve their understanding of the enabling potential of connectivity. To do this, they sought input from stakeholders on how their sector can enable other sectors to decarbonise. At the same time, they also wanted to understand how the sector can reduce its own carbon footprint and how it can adapt to a changing environment.

Importantly, during this process, they looked beyond their traditional stakeholders and engaged with interested parties from a variety of sectors to understand the role of connectivity in their decarbonisation efforts. More than thirty stakeholders were contacted, including from the energy sector, industry bodies, agencies and research institutes. Seven written responses to this Call for Inputs have now been published, though some additional confidential responses and informal engagements have also informed the views of ComReg. Findings from this process suggest that connectivity can enable significant abatement of greenhouse gas emissions in other sectors, such as energy, transport, agriculture and industry. At the same time, the responses received underlined the efficiency benefits which can be delivered by the roll out of Very High Capacity Networks (VHCN), such as fibre to the home networks.

In addition, ComReg is actively contributing to the work of the recently established Ad Hoc Sustainability Working Group at BEREC (Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications). The group is scheduled to run for two years in its current form (2020-2022) and is composed of experts from Electronic Communications National Regulatory Authorities (NRAs) across Europe. ComReg has been at the forefront of the work of the group up to this point, participating in workshops and sharing experiences with colleagues from across member states. The group is currently working on a two-part external study and has launched bilateral meetings with stakeholders, including intergovernmental organisations, NGOs and other groups within BEREC. The study is comprised of a literature review on the environmental impact of electronic communications, followed by an assessment of the adverse environmental effects of the sector and successful sustainability initiatives. This working group organized two workshops in October 2020 and the co-chair presented on sustainability issues at the BEREC Stakeholder Forum in April 2021. They are set to propose topics for BEREC's future work programme. ComReg will continue to play an active role in contributing to this upcoming study which will consider the impact of the digital sector on the environment, in general, and of the electronic communications sector, in particular. If considered useful, ComReg intend to use the findings of the study to inform future efforts to decarbonise the sector.

As part of the remit of the **National Oil Reserves Agency (NORA)** as set out under National Oil Reserves Agency (Amendment) and Provision of Central Treasury Services Act 2020, NORA makes a significant financial contribution to the Climate Action Fund on an ongoing and annual basis. In 2020, NORA contributed €28 million to the Climate Action Fund. For the period 2021 – 2025, NORA expects to contribute a total of c. €400 million to the Climate Action Fund.

Just Transition Fund

As set out in the response from the **Just Transition Division**, The Government is committed to a just transition in the Midlands region and has dedicated significant funding to supporting workers, companies and communities affected by the closure of the peat-fired power stations and the end of peat harvesting by Bord na Móna.

The Department established a national Just Transition Fund in early 2020 to invite direct project applications to seek funding. 101 applications were received, of which approximately 65 received provisional offers. Projects seeking funding represent innovative plans from businesses, local authorities and communities in the midlands who are committed to creating a green and sustainable economy for the region and will contribute to the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the Wider Midlands region. Projects cut across three priority areas: Enterprise and Employment Supports; Training and Upskilling Supports; Community Transitioning Supports.

Agreements were finalised with 16 smaller value projects in 2020, with a total funding commitment of €1.2 million. Work on delivering these projects has commenced. Further details of these projects can be found on the Just Transition Gov.ie webpage. In addition, provisional offers of funding totalling €27.8 million have been made to 47 projects and these projects are currently going through a verification process. All funded projects are due for completion by 31st December 2023. It is expected that the Fund will have a significant combined effect on the Midlands region and develop a synergy from multiple projects operating in a confined geographical area.

The establishment of the role of the Just Transition Commissioner has been an important contribution to developing the Just Transition agenda. The Department has also prepared an interim update to the Climate Action Plan in relation to Just Transition and the actions and targets under each.

In addition, the Department has been progressing the EU Just Transition Fund (JTF) which will contribute to the just transition objective. The EU fund is a new structural fund to assist communities to meet the challenges of the green transition. In line with the objectives of achieving EU climate neutrality by 2050 in an effective and fair manner, the European Green Deal proposed a Just Transition Mechanism to ensure that no one community or region is left behind during this transition. The JTF is the first pillar of the Just Transition Mechanism and will provide support to all Member States. Ireland can secure up to €77 million from the EU Just Transition Fund over the period 2021 to 2027, with match funding from the Exchequer.

To access the Just Transition Fund, EU Member States must produce and submit Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTps) to the European Commission. The territorial plans will outline the regions and sector seeking funding and should include the economic, social and environmental implications for the regions for decarbonising greenhouse gas-intensive sectors. The plans will outline a timetable of the proposed transition process until 2030, in terms of regional economic development, labour market training and reskilling needs, and environmental protection. The Department is working to prepare and submit a Territorial Just Transition Plan to the Commission during the course of 2020. The Department is being supported by consultants appointed under the Commission's Structural Reform Support Programme to develop the TJTP.

In its response, **Bord na Móna** indicated its participation in seven applications to the national Just Transition Fund.

National Energy Efficiency Action Plan (NEEAP)

The response from the **Residential Energy Efficiency Division** indicated that the NEEAP has been replaced with the National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP). In accordance with the Governance of the Energy Union and Climate Action Regulation, Ireland's NECP 2021-2030 was submitted to the European Commission last year. The NECP took into account energy and climate policies developed up to that point, the levels of demographic and economic growth identified in the Project Ireland 2040 process and included the climate and energy measures set out in the National Development Plan 2018-2027 and 2019 Climate Action Plan.

Under the Programme for Government, Ireland is committed to achieving a 7% annual average reduction in greenhouse gas emissions between 2021 and 2030 which represents a significant step up in ambition relative to that underpinning the NECP. The European Council also decided in December 2020 to increase ambition from its existing EU-wide 2030 target of 40% reduction to at least 55%, compared to 1990 levels.

Legislative proposals to implement the new EU 2030 target, including revising Member States' existing targets for 2030, are expected to be presented by the Commission by June 2021. This increased ambition and the Programme for Government commitments will be reflected in a revised NECP.

The Energy Efficiency Directive (EED), as amended in 2018, extends the Article 7 energy saving obligation to the period from 2021 to 2030. For the new obligation period, we are designing a new energy efficiency obligation scheme (EEOS) underpinned by new legislation, which we intend to put in place by 2022.

In its response, **Bord na Móna** indicated that it is on course to meet its obligations under the Public Sector Energy Efficiency Strategy. The company is on course to meet the 33% reduction in energy use.

National Broadband Plan

The response from the **National Broadband Plan Division** of the Department did not provide a response beyond the progress outlined in Section A above.

National Marine Planning Framework (NMPF) (elements relevant to DECC)

No response provided

Any other policy initiatives/developments that are relevant, including those by agencies under the aegis of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications

The response from the **Air Quality Division** included: an update and outline of the Clean Air Strategy which is currently being finalised; changes to existing and development of new Solid Fuel Regulations; the establishment of the Urban Transport-Related Air Pollution (UTRAP) Working Group, and; an update to the National Air Pollution Control Programme.

Clean Air Strategy

The Clean Air Strategy is currently being finalised. It will outline how we will enhance and protect the quality of the air that we breathe and realise the full environmental and health benefits of cleaner air. The Strategy sets out a pathway based on a comprehensive cross-Government programme of policies and measures that will tackle all sources of air pollution

A key priority under the plan is to establish a regional approach to air enforcement. Local authorities have responsibility for enforcement across a range of environmental areas this regional approach will support the local authorities in their enforcement role and enhance regulation and improve the effectiveness of our enforcement systems.

Other priorities include:

- Increase ambition in addressing all sources of air pollution;
- Ensure the integration of clean air considerations into policy development across Government;
- Increase the evidence base that will help us to continue to evolve our understanding of the sources of pollution in order to address them more effectively;
- Promote and increase awareness of the importance of clean air; and,
- Ensure effective oversight and cross-sectoral action to reduce emissions

Solid Fuel Regulations

The first regulation of a solid fuel was introduced in Dublin in September 1990. As a result of its success in improving air quality and reducing health impacts, the regulations have been gradually extended to cover a total of 41 urban areas nationwide. In September 2020, 13 new low smoke zones were introduced, 2 of which are located in the Eastern and Midland region. All designated Low Smoke Zones can be viewed using an interactive map.

In light of additional data from our enhanced National Ambient Air Monitoring Network and emerging research, it is clear that a more comprehensive approach is required to reduce air pollution emissions attributed to the use of solid fuels in the residential sector.

To ensure a high standard of air quality in all areas we are now developing new solid fuel regulations for Ireland that will;

- broaden the regulation of solid fuels to apply across the entire state
- increase the range of solid fuels to be regulated
- support enhanced enforcement

Urban Transport-Related Air Pollution (UTRAP) Working Group

The UTRAP Working Group was jointly convened by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC) and the Department of Transport (DoT) due to an exceedance of the EU ambient air quality limit value for NO_x being recorded in Dublin in 2019.

The primary aim of the group is to examine transport-related air pollution and to develop an evidence-based national policy framework within which local authorities could reduce traffic related air pollution to reduce the potential for exceedances of EU limits. The UTRAP working group will also assist the four Dublin local authorities who now must prepare an Air Quality Action Plan to address the NO_x exceedance in Dublin City.

National Air Pollution Control Programme

This year, Ireland submitted an update to the National Air Pollution Control Programme (NAPCP) to the EU. The NAPCP includes:

- An overview of the current outlook for compliance with NEC targets for each pollutant
- Projections of relevant pollutant emissions to 2030
- Policy options, measures and actions across sectors but in particular in the residential, transport, agricultural and energy sectors aimed at reducing emissions of the five specified air pollutants.

The response from the **Business Energy & Gas Policy Division** outlined the Public Sector Energy Efficiency Programme and the Business Supports Programme.

Public Sector Energy Efficiency Programme

The Public Sector Energy Efficiency Programme is an energy management and advisory programme which supports public bodies in achieving its energy targets - 33% energy efficiency target by 2020, increasing to 50% by 2030. The programme offers comprehensive support and engagement to guide public bodies in reaching their targets focussing on capacity building and energy management principals, which are low cost means of delivering energy efficiency improvements.

The Public Sector Pathfinder Retrofit programme element (introduced in 2017), is a capital support programme co-funded by DECC and administered by the SEAI. The Programme is aimed at testing retrofit approaches, building capacity and developing a scalable model that can be replicated across the wider public sector including schools. There are currently 5 partners participating - the Department of Education & Skills, Higher Education Authority, Office of Public Works HSE, and the Local Authority sector. Since 2017, the DECC has contributed over €36 million to the Public Sector Pathfinder Programme, which has supported energy retrofits in over 250 public. The 2021 budget for the programme is €21 million.

Business Supports Programme

Funding is provided to businesses that undertake design, construction and commissioning projects that use the Excellence in Energy Efficient Design (EXEED) certification process. SEAI's Energy Academy which is a new online resource that gives businesses free access to high quality energy training. The provision of information and advisory services to businesses including briefings, workshops, workplace resources, access to energy auditing services and case studies of best practice. The Large Industry Energy Network which accounts for over 20% of Ireland's energy use and works together to improve energy performance and share experiences. Accelerated Capital Allowances which allow businesses to reduce their taxable profits by the full level of expenditure on energy efficient equipment in the year the investment is made.

The response from the **Electricity Policy Division** outlined the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS) and the Microgeneration Support Scheme.

Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS)

RESS provides a minimum guaranteed price, which is decided following a competitive auction, to generators for a 15-year period. The results of the first RESS auction were approved by Government in September 2020, with 82 approved projects made up of 479MW of onshore wind energy projects and 796MW of solar energy projects.

The Eastern and Midland Region accounted for 39% of the successful projects in the auction. This is made up of 23 projects with a combined capacity of 494 MW as broken down by EMRA county in the table below.

Area	Total Projects	Solar Projects	Wind Projects	Amount in MW
Dublin	1	1	0	4.95
Kildare	7	7	0	46.48
Longford	1	1	0	8
Louth	1	1	0	3.99
Meath	7	7	0	291.13
Offaly	3	1	2	113
Wicklow	3	3	0	27

The Government is committed to achieving net zero emissions by 2050 and an annual reduction of 7% in overall greenhouse gas emissions to 2030, including through maximising the amount of renewable energy on the grid. Future advances in system flexibility, storage technologies including batteries and green hydrogen as well as regional and international interconnection will enable very high levels of renewable electricity on our grid.

The Programme for Government noted that the Government would 'ensure that community energy can play a role in reaching at least 70% renewable electricity, including a community benefit fund and a community category within the [Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS)] auction'.

To deliver on these commitments under RESS a new Enabling Framework for Community Participation is being established with these key pillars already in progress:

- A mandatory Community Benefit Fund (CBF) must be provided for by all developer-led projects successful in a RESS auction. The contribution is to be set at €2/MWh for all RES-E projects. From the first RESS auction alone this means in the region of €1.2 million per annum for the next 15 years to be invested into communities in the EMRA region. This funding will be used in part by communities for sustainability and climate action measures.
- A separate community category within the RESS auction to give a route to market for community-led generation projects. In the first RESS auction this led to a total of 7 community projects of which 2 were 100% community owned. The EMRA region did not have any community projects successful in the first auction but there is plenty of potential for community projects from the region to apply to future auctions.
- A range of community supports will ensure that community projects will emerge for the RESS auctions. The SEAI through their network of Sustainable Energy Communities, of which there are nearly 150 members in the EMRA region, will be the implementation body for the development of a Community Enabling Framework to provide supports to community projects.

Microgeneration support scheme

Under the Climate Action Plan and the 2020 Programme for Government, Ireland is committed to supporting the development of micro-generation and the implementation of a solar strategy to assist meeting our 2030 renewable energy ambitions. The Micro-generation Support scheme (MSS) will deliver a range of measures to support micro-generation in Ireland out to 2030 to meet these commitments and the requirements of the recast Renewable Energy Directive (REDII). This will be achieved through a Framework that is proposed to be implemented by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) with support from other industry stakeholders including ESB Networks. Barriers to the development of micro-generation will be reduced under the framework through the introduction of a payment for electricity exported to the grid from renewables self-consumers and renewable energy communities, revisions to the Planning Regulations that will increase the exemptions for rooftop solar PV, and through changes to the grid connection process for installations with a capacity of between 12kW and 50kW.

Under Article 21, 2(d) of RED II, customers are entitled to 'receive remuneration, including, where applicable, through support schemes, for the self-generated renewable electricity they feed into the grid, which reflects the market value of that electricity and which may take into account its long-term value to the grid, the environment and society'.

A public consultation on the design of the new Microgeneration Support Scheme was carried out in early 2021 which outlined the details of the proposed supports for existing and future micro-generators. Submissions are currently under review and the MSS is due to open in Q3 2021.

Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy

As outlined in Section A, the joint response from the **Waste Policy & Resource Efficiency and Circular Economy Divisions** of the Department notes that our current national waste policy, the 'Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy' was launched in September 2020. This Plan outlines the various measures which will be necessary to help achieve a circular economy, focusing not just on how we manage our waste but also on preventing waste arising in the first place and on how we can manage our products and resources more efficiently and sustainably.

Shaping Our Electricity Future

EirGrid launched a nationwide consultation on the future of Ireland's electricity system on the 8th March 2021. EirGrid, operator of the national electricity grid, is seeking feedback on Shaping Our Electricity Future; a new report that details innovative approaches to developing the grid in order to meet ambitious 2030 renewable energy targets. EirGrid has been asked by the Government to transform the electricity system in anticipation of a future without coal, oil, peat and ultimately one with net zero emissions. Specifically, it must redevelop the grid to manage 70% of Ireland's electricity coming from renewable sources by 2030. Shaping Our Electricity Future comprises four approaches to achieving this, as well as meeting the projected increase demand for electricity over the coming years.

- **Generation-Led:** Government policy would influence where renewable energy is generated – favouring locations where the grid is already strong
- **Developer-Led:** In this approach, we continue to connect new sources of renewable electricity as requested in any location
- **Technology-Led:** This approach uses technical solutions to make the grid more resilient so it can better handle the variable nature of renewable energy
- **Demand-Led:** Government policy determines where large energy users locate in Ireland

Each of the four approaches requires numerous investments in network development projects throughout the country, with costs ranging from €500 million to €2 billion. There are some foundation projects that are common to all four approaches and the final plan is likely to include elements of all approaches, strongly led by one of them.

D) Details of any funding competitions/initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

The response from the **Climate Governance Division** included the Climate Action Fund under Project Ireland 2040 as follows:

Climate Action Fund

As set out in the RSES, a major innovation in the reformed funding model for the National Development Plan was the establishment of four funds to drive the delivery of specific core priorities detailed in the NPF, that were subsequently translated into the RSES.

One of these Funds, the Climate Action Fund, was established on a statutory basis with effect from 1 August 2020, with a key objective of providing support for projects, initiatives and research that contribute to the achievement of Ireland's climate and energy targets, and for projects and initiatives in regions of the State, and within sectors of the economy, impacted by the transition to a low carbon economy. The Fund is resourced from proceeds from the levy paid to the National Oil Reserves Agency (NORA) in respect of relevant disposals of petroleum products, after the funding requirements of NORA have been met. In the region of €500 million is expected to accrue to the Climate Action Fund to 2027. This will ensure that substantial funding is available to provide support projects, initiatives and research over that period.

On 9 July 2018, the first Call for Applications under the Climate Action Fund was published. The call was open to larger scale projects – seeking grant funding in excess of €1 million and the focus was to support a broad range of projects that, in the absence of support from the Climate Action Fund, would not otherwise be developed. Seven projects in the first call were approved to proceed to validation stage at a maximum CAF support level of €77 million. Four projects are now in delivery with two impacting the Eastern and Midland Region as detailed in Section E.

DECC is currently developing proposals to provide further support from the Climate Action Fund through a community climate action programme. The design of this programme will be informed by feedback received through the climate consultation that is currently ongoing and, in particular, the conversations that are taking place at local level through the Public Participation Networks. The consultation is open until 18 May 2021 and analysis on the feedback from these conversations will help shape the community programme in terms of identifying where financial support is required, where capacity building is needed, and the types of projects and initiatives that are being considered at local level.

Information on the types of projects that may be supported, who may apply for this support and the application process, will be published on DECC's website when the programme is launched shortly.

In advance of the finalisation of this programme, Creative Ireland, in collaboration with DECC, has launched Creative Climate Action, a competitive fund of up to €2 million supported by the Climate Action Fund and the Creative Ireland Programme.

The Fund will support creative and cultural projects up to the end of 2022 which will connect people with the profound changes that are happening in our environment, society and economy arising from climate change, and can transform that connection into behaviour change or climate action.

Two strands of funding are available:

- An open call – to organisations, NGOs, charities, enterprises, institutions and collectives/networks working with creative and cultural practitioners
- A closed call – to local authorities, either individually, with other local authorities or external partners

Further information including a briefing note and details on how to apply are set out on the Creative Ireland website.

The response from the **Electricity Policy Division** reported on the 'Community Enabling Framework' and the 'Solar PV Pilot Grant' under SEAI - Sustainable Energy Communities, Home Energy, Retrofit and EV Grants.

Community Enabling Framework

The first Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS) auction contained a community category, which facilitated community-led projects to apply for support. As a consequence, seven community-led projects were issued a letter of offer. To encourage the development of a meaningful community electricity generation sector, a Community Enabling Framework is being rolled out by SEAI as the RESS Communities Implementation Body. Its work will be overseen by a Steering Group chaired by DECC with representatives from the community stakeholders, trusted intermediaries and national bodies. €3 million in Budget 2021 has been approved for the Framework.

The Framework will require a mix of supports including:

- financial supports including grants and soft loans;
- a trusted intermediary network to work with them through the various stages of the project;
- a trusted advisor network to be available to them to give them specialist advice such as legal and financial;
- a trusted information source for a variety of “how-to” information guides; and,
- a central point of contact organisation to co-ordinate all of these enabling services.

Solar PV Pilot Grant

The SEAI implemented a new solar PV grant scheme in 2018 for existing domestic homes built before 2011. To date, 4,810 homes have been supported to install 17MW of micro generation, saving 4,471 tonnes of CO₂ emissions per annum at a cost of € 11.75m. In January 2020, following a scheme review, the grant rates were changed and a minimum Building Energy Rating (BER) C rating requirement was introduced to ensure energy efficiency first principles are achieved. According to SEAI, applications to this grant scheme have led to further upgrades to homes as a package of measures, including approximately 1,000 homes who achieved a B2 BER. The scheme has been allocated €8m funding in 2021. The role of grants in support of the objectives under the forthcoming Microgeneration Support Scheme (MSS) is under review with a view to a smooth transition over to the MSS Framework.

In their response, the **DHDA** noted their submission of proposal to the ‘Innovation Fund 2021’ and the SEAI RD&D Fund 2021. The former (which was in partnership with Codema) was unsuccessful and the decision on the latter (in partnership with Codema and TCD) is pending.

SEAI Funded Programmes

SEAI administers a range of funded programmes on behalf of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications that support individuals, communities and businesses to transition to sustainable, efficient energy use, some of which have already been referenced above: National retrofit programme; Community grant programmes; Sustainable transport (EV and infrastructure) grants; Business grants and supports; Renewable Electricity Support Scheme, and; Sustainable energy research funding.

E) Details of the funding programmes administered by each Department (and agencies under the aegis of each department), over the last two years, which have been awarded within the Eastern and Midland Region

The *Climate Governance Division* of the Department identified two large funding awards under the Climate Action Fund which are of Relevance to the Eastern and Midland Region. These are, the 'South Dublin County Council - Tallaght District Heating Scheme' which is funded to the tune of €4.5m, and the nationwide ESB e-cars project (to install new modern electric vehicle chargers and upgrade the existing charging network nationally) which has a fund of €10m.

As set out in the response of the *Just Transition Division*, many projects cut across multiple counties, so it is not possible to give a precise figure for funding allocated to Counties in the Eastern and Midland Region. However, of the 16 projects funded under Strand 1 of the National Just Transition Fund to the total value of €1.2m, 13 (over 81%) include partners from the Eastern and Midland region - Kildare, Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath. Funding agreements have not been finalised with the 47 Strand 2 projects which have been provisionally awarded €27.8m.

The *Business Energy & Gas Policy Division* of the Department provided detailed information for multiple energy efficiency projects (at various stages including complete) funded to the value of approximately €12.3m across five schemes including EXEED, Public Sector Pathfinder, SME the Lighting Grant and the Dairy Energy Efficiency Grant.

F) Any other comments that were made with respect to each Department (including any agencies under the aegis of each Department) and implementing the RSES, including any recommendations that are considered would facilitate the process

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) submitted their response on the progress made in supporting the objectives of the RSES. The EPA believe of most relevance here is the work completed/ongoing to reduce EPA's impact on the environment. To this end, they pointed out that reference is made to their accredited Environmental Management System and the achievements to-date. It is noted that the EPA provides technical assistance on many of the other areas included in the form such as the Water Framework Directive. However, responsibility for the various measures to improve water quality for example is not within their remit.

The SEAI provided supporting documentation with their return - this includes an excel spreadsheet relating to SEAI Renewable energy and energy related CO2 emissions, as well as a document summarising SEAI Achievements 2019-2020.

G) Response and Recommendations of the Regional Assembly

The Assembly welcome the detailed responses received from 11 Divisions and 11 Agencies of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and commend the effort of these Divisions and Agencies in presenting coordinated reports for the purposes of RSES Monitoring.

On review of the information submitted, the Assembly are satisfied that the DECC have demonstrated that progress has been made in implementing the RSES and have carried out a number of specific actions that enable same. This includes, for example, the response from EirGrid which explicitly demonstrated delivery of specific RPOs in the RSES, Bord na Móna's active engagement with the Midlands Regional Transition Team and the ongoing development and implementation of wide-ranging programmes which are aligned with RSES objectives.

At the Assembly meeting of July 2021, the elected members of the Assembly considered that a recommendation for consideration by NOAC, be included relating to the Climate Action Plans of the local authorities.

Having regard to the information submitted, The Assembly consider that the work to date could be enhanced and make the following recommendations for NOAC to consider;

- The Regional Assembly should be considered a key stakeholder and appropriately consulted in the development of new DECC (and Agency) policies and programmes which relate to the themes sought and addressed in this report and which are aligned with RSES objectives (RSOs and RPOs)
- The Regional Assemblies should be considered as a prescribed body for submissions on the forthcoming local authority climate action plans to develop consistency with spatial planning policy. This would be similar to the role the Assembly performs in planning policy, LECs and other policy areas relevant to the role of the Assembly.

5.1.2.4 Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine

The vision of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is to ensure an innovative and sustainable agri-food sector operating to the highest standards by leading, developing and regulating the agri-food sector, protecting public health and optimising social, economic and environmental benefits. This is underpinned by strategic goals that align with the content of the RSES (such as RSOs 3, 4 and 12 aimed at supporting rural communities, healthy communities and a strong economy), including, to provide income and market supports to underpin the rural economy and the environment, to provide the optimum policy framework for the sustainable development of the agri-food sector, to deliver a sustainable, growth driven sector focused on competitiveness and innovation driven by a skilled workforce delivering value added products in line with market demands, and, to maintain and develop strategic, operational, regulatory and technical capacity to achieve operational excellence.

A) Progress made in supporting the objectives of the RSES

The Department were asked to identify the progress that has been made in supporting the objectives of the RSES that are applicable to them. This included, for instance, detail on enhancing the competitiveness of the agriculture sector, measures aimed at enhancing the rural economy, recognising the value of horticultural land, promotion of sustainable farming practices and support the achievement of climate targets, measures addressing the potential impact that Brexit will have on agriculture, food and marine sectors, future proofing of the agricultural economy and the establishment of sustainable farming practices, progress relating to the future of former peat production bogs and peatlands, transformation of our food systems in line with the sustainable development goals and building climate resilience, and marine planning and the sustainable management of Marine Waters including the development of the National Marine Planning Framework.

Progress relating to Enhancing the Competitiveness of the Agriculture Sector and the Rural Economy

The Department have indicated that they are currently preparing a successor strategy to Food Wise 2025. The process to develop the new agri-food strategy to 2030 reached a milestone recently with the agreement of a draft by the representative Stakeholder Committee chaired by Tom Arnold, which was on public consultation until the 15th June.

The Committee adopted a food systems approach and draws on the internationally accepted definition of what constitutes a “Sustainable Food System”; one that delivers food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, environmental and social basis to generate food and nutrition for future generations are not compromised. The vision of the Strategy is that Ireland will become a world leader in Sustainable Food Systems over the next decade. This should deliver significant benefits for the Irish agri-food sector, for Irish society and the environment. To realise this vision, the draft contains four high level Missions for the agri-food sector to deliver, including A Climate Smart, Environmentally Sustainable Agri-Food Sector, Viable and Resilient Primary Producers with Enhanced Well-Being, Food that is safe, nutritious and appealing: trusted and valued at home and abroad and an Innovative, Competitive and Resilient Sector, driven by Technology and Talent.

In terms of enhancing the rural economy, the overall objectives of the national Rural Development Programme (RDP) overseen by DAFM include enhanced competitiveness and are further detailed into six broad priority areas. These priorities are distributed into key focus areas related to the competitiveness and viability of agriculture and agri-environment objectives. The largest measure directly relating to enhancing the competitiveness of agriculture in Ireland’s Rural Development Programme is TAMS II which involves investment in physical assets. TAMS II and other schemes, for example, the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI), are targeted at improving the competitiveness of agriculture but it also improves long-term sustainability through research and innovation.

DAFM’s competitive research programme, through Research Performing Organisations in the regions, support ‘public good’ research projects to enhance the competitiveness, resilience and sustainability of the sectoral agri-food supply chain, forest and marine activities. The DAFM research programme also supports cross cutting issues such as ICT, the Bioeconomy, rural development and the development of human capital, skills and innovation in particular for early-stage researchers (Masters and PhD students and post-docs). Over the last seven years, approx. €140.4m has been committed to agri-food, forest and marine research projects through the programme.

In addition to the above, Teagasc delivers a broad-ranging programme of national activities to the Irish agri-food sector through the combined efforts of integrated research, advisory and education services. This work is guided by their Statement of Strategy, the Programme for Government and the EU Policy context. While most significant initiatives undertaken during the RSES reporting period in question have a national focus – many are being progressed in, or are directly relevant to, the EMRA area.

A selection of recent relevant initiatives include;

- Teagasc Marginal Abatement Cost Curves (MACCs): The Teagasc Ammonia MACC was published in September 2020. DAFM's recently published AgClimatise paper, which builds on the Teagasc MACCs for GHGs and ammonia, sets out a roadmap and actions to develop a climate-neutral food system by 2050.
- Teagasc will shortly launch the Signpost Programme, a whole of industry initiative to lead climate action by Irish farmers. The Programme aims to 1) reduce agricultural GHG emissions and ammonia emissions, 2) reduce nutrient loss to the environment and contribute to improved water quality and biodiversity, and 3) promote and develop economically sustainable farming systems, including diversification of land use for climate action. Further details are available on our website.
- Teagasc advisory services support farmer innovation in the management of their farms and provides access to the technologies they can apply to improve their competitiveness and address the sustainability challenges on their farms. The advisory programme is delivered by about 340 'front-line' advisors located in 12 regional advisory areas. These advisors are in contact with some 80,000 farmers and rural dwellers each year, of whom approximately 45,000 avail of our intensive farm advisory services. The services are delivered through one-to-one engagement and interactive innovation approaches, including Discussion Groups that focus on 'peer to peer' learning. The counties in the EMRA area are served by three Teagasc Advisory Regions:
 - Laois/Kildare/Meath/Dublin Louth
 - Westmeath/Offaly/Cavan/Monaghan
 - Wicklow/Carlow/Wexford
- Specifically, in the EMRA area counties, Teagasc runs 131 Discussion Groups, involving a total of 2,037 participant farmers. In 2020, Discussion Group meetings were largely run online due to Covid-19. This has proven very popular with participants and has helped to accelerate Teagasc's transition towards providing a comprehensive digital service offering to farmers alongside our traditional face-to-face services. In 2020, Teagasc advisory staff in the EMRA area counties also produced 53 advisory videos on specific topics relevant to farmers in the region.
- Funded by the Interreg Atlantic Area Program, the Dairy-4-Future project focusses on four key issues: analysing strengths and weaknesses of the dairy sector in Atlantic Area, fostering dairy sector economic resilience, improving resource use efficiency, and determining sustainable dairy systems for the future. Dairy-4-Future project involves five countries (Ireland, United Kingdom, France, Spain and Portugal) and covers, from Scotland to Azores, 12 Atlantic regions that together represent 20% of EU-28 milk production and 100 000 farmers working in a wide diversity of milk production systems. Its objective is to identify, evaluate and then widely propagate innovative practices to the European dairy industry, through transnational seminars or farm open days, publications and videos. The programme is comprised of 100 farms across the 12 Atlantic regions and two of the ten Irish farms participating in the programme are located in the eastern and midland region. Teagasc are the associated partner coordinating activities in Ireland.
- Funding was secured for the establishment of the National Agricultural Soil Carbon Observatory, which will be instrumented at ten agricultural sites across Ireland to quantify soil carbon sequestration to offset greenhouse gas emissions. Site selection is underway at the moment and there will be up to three sites in the eastern and midlands region.
- The Agricultural Catchments Programme – Phase 4 began in January 2020. There continues to be one catchments in the eastern and midlands region of the country (Dunleer) monitoring the Nitrates Action Programme under the EU Nitrates Directive. As part of the current phase gaseous emissions are being monitored in the catchments with instrumentation planned for each of the catchments.

Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM) indicated that they provide a range of measures aimed at enhancing the rural economy. One specific scheme that is focused on community led local development is the Fisheries Local Action Group (FLAGs) grant aid under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund Operational Programme 2014 -2020, co-funded by the European Union and Irish Government. Project proposals must be consistent with the FLAG Local Development Strategy for the FLAG area in question and address specific themes including, adding value to fishery and aquaculture products, creating/maintaining jobs in coastal areas, promoting innovation in fisheries and aquaculture, supporting diversification within coastal communities, lifelong learning, attracting young people into fisheries, aquaculture, and marine related careers and activities, promoting social well-being and cultural heritage in fisheries and aquaculture areas, promoting best environmental practices and strengthening the role and governance of fisheries communities in local development. BIM also provides training services and advisory support that contribute to enhancing the rural economy.

Progress relating to Protecting Farm Landscapes and Supporting the Achievement of Climate Targets

In terms of protecting farm landscapes and achieving climate targets, in December 2020, DAFM released a roadmap to climate neutrality called “AgClimatise” containing 29 different actions. The vision for “AgClimatise” is to develop a climate neutral food system compatible with the Paris Agreement temperature goals, whereby the climate impact of biogenic methane is reduced to zero and remaining agricultural emissions are balanced by removals through land use and a significant contribution to renewable energy.

The roadmap contains 6 key tasks that will help meet our climate and environmental objectives while maintaining viable farm incomes. These are to reduce GHG emissions from the sector, to increase the carbon sequestration and carbon storage potential of Ireland’s land sector, to reduce nutrient loss to the environment and contribute to improved water quality and biodiversity, to meet our ammonia emissions reduction targets, to build sustainable, resilient food production and land use management systems that satisfy our climate obligations while also meeting market expectations, and to transparently communicate our progress, through Origin Green for example.

The Agriculture, Forest and Seafood Climate Change Sectoral Adaptation Plan sets out the projected changes in climate focussing on those identified as most likely to impact the agriculture, forest and seafood sector. It also lists priority risks and possible consequences. This Plan was built on the non-statutory adaptation planning document in 2017 “Adaptation Planning – Developing Resilience to Climate Change in the Irish Agriculture and Forest Sector” and the impact and vulnerability assessment undertaken as part of that process which provided excellent baseline data for the current Plan. This also aligns better with the goals and objectives identified in the Department’s Statement of Strategy.

Climate change adaptation is integrated into a range of DAFM policies, measures and schemes currently but this work is dynamic and continually evolving. The Agriculture, Forest and Seafood Climate Change Sectoral Adaptation Plan provides an extensive list detailing what is being carried out.

The Department of Rural and Community Development (DRC) recently published “Our Rural Future, Ireland’s Rural Development Policy 2021 – 2025” which includes a chapter on Supporting Sustainability of Agriculture, the Marine and Forestry and where the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) has 16 actions assigned as lead or shared responsibility. DAFM will work with DRC and others to deliver this framework for the economic and social development of rural areas over the next 5 years.

The draft Agri-Food Strategy to 2030 also recognises the importance of the rural economy and includes three actions specifically on Rural Development which are, to continue to focus on implementation of the Rural Development policy, the rapid roll-out of the National Broadband Plan, and to ensure that the contribution of the entire agri-food sector to the economic and social fabric of the country is recognised in public policy.

The Rural Development Programme (RDP) is a vital support to the viability of Ireland’s rural economy. Estimates indicate that the total direct and indirect impact of RDP expenditure on the rural economy is of the order of €1,863m in output, compared to the aggregate national impact of RDP expenditure of €2,186m. Assuming that the expected level of expenditure is all spent by the end of the original programme, it is estimated that there will be €3,217 million in direct and indirect impacts. If induced impacts are included, this figure rises to €3,629 million. This compares to a national impact of €4,240 million. It is also estimated that RDP expenditure supports 4,178 jobs on an annual basis in the rural economy.

Specific support comes from the Areas of Natural Constraints (ANC) Scheme and the LEADER Scheme which has proven to be an effective tool for supporting the economic and social development of rural communities by providing the resources necessary for communities to support their own development.

Measures supported under Rural Development Programme (RDP) Priority Areas 4 and 5 typically come under the overall CAP objective of ensuring sustainable management of natural resources, landscape and climate management. The main measures under Priority Areas 4 and 5 include Green, Low-Carbon, Agri-Environment Schemes (GLAS), Beef Data and Genomics Programme (BDGP) and Areas of Natural Constraints (ANC). These three measures account for nearly 68% of the overall RDP budget. Other schemes contributing to Priority Areas 4 and 5 include the Organic Farming Scheme, the Burren Programme, the locally-led EIP-AGRI Operational Groups and the GLAS Traditional Farm Building Scheme.

Following the reopening of the Organic Farming Scheme new participants began their conversion to organic farming in January 2019. The Scheme has once again been reopened for applications in March 2021. As with the 2019 OFS, this year’s Scheme is prioritising applications for conversion to organic horticulture, tillage and dairy.

DAFM's competitive research programme, through Research Performing Organisations in the regions, support 'public good' research projects that provide the scientific basis to guide policy formation and deliver solutions for practical challenges and opportunities that underpin the value and development of sustainable primary production (including horticulture and crop production), farm and land management for the mitigation of GHG emissions and adaptation to climate change, maintain healthy ecosystems and biodiversity, food product development and process innovation. These connected themes seek a systems-based approach to landscape management and support sustainable measures for the achievement of climate targets and protecting food security and nutrition. Over the last seven years, approx. €140.4m has been committed to agri-food, forest and marine research projects through the programme.

AgClimatise contains a number of actions in this regard. The tillage and horticulture sectors are the most carbon efficient sectors of Irish agriculture, hence it is important that the area under cultivation in these sectors is retained, at a minimum, or indeed increased. Currently, there are approximately 300,000 hectares of tillage crops (cereals, legumes and potatoes) produced annually and this area must be retained, despite increasing land competition.

Climate change adaptation is integrated into a range of DAFM policies, measures and schemes currently but this work is dynamic and continually evolving. The Agriculture, Forest and Seafood Climate Change Sectoral Adaptation Plan provides an extensive list detailing what DAFM are doing but some examples include, DAFM actively promotes and supports practices around adaptation and mitigation through two vital funding supports, the EU Producer Organisation Scheme and Commercial Horticulture Grant Aid Scheme, DAFM issues fire risk warnings and has provided training in the use of prescribed burning, early warning systems for blight for example, surveillance for certain diseases affecting animals and plants which must be notified to DAFM if suspected or confirmed.

In addition to the above, Teagasc provided detail of a suite of measures initiated by them, that contribute towards progress of the RSES in this regard. Teagasc advisory services provide extensive supports in the promotion of sustainable farming practices. The ongoing 'Signpost Series' of sustainable agriculture webinars began in April 2020, covering a range of sustainability topics in detail. Teagasc will shortly launch the Signpost Programme, a whole of industry initiative to lead climate action by Irish farmers. ASSAP, the Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme working with farmers to help improve water quality is ongoing. The first ASSAP interim Report was published in 2020. The Agriculture Catchments Programme is ongoing, working with 300 farmers across six catchments in Ireland, including one in the EMRA. Details on the Programme can be found on our website. A field event was held in 2019 for farmers on best practise rush control, which addressed the MCPA issue in relation to water quality. There are ongoing stakeholder meetings twice yearly on water quality involving Longford/Leitrim/Roscommon Co. Councils, Teagasc, LAWPRO, DAFM, LAWSAT, APHA and others.

Progress relating to Future Proofing of the Agricultural Economy and the establishment of Sustainable Farming Practices and Production Methods, particularly in light of Climate Change

There are a number of schemes that support low carbon farming. GLAS promotes agricultural actions which introduce or continue to apply agricultural production methods that aim to address the issues of climate change mitigation, water quality and the preservation of priority habitats and species. BDGP includes Carbon Navigator tools which estimate the potential greenhouse gas reductions and financial savings that can be made on each farm through enhanced farm efficiency. It also allows individual farmers to set future targets and make comparisons with average and best performing farmers.

There are several EIP-AGRI Operational Groups that deal with research and innovation in Low-Carbon and Biomass including Biomass to Biochar for Farm Bioeconomy (BBFB), Biorefinery Glas and the DANÚ Farming Group who are researching a Biological Farming Transition Programme.

The Good Agricultural Practice for Protection of Waters Regulations gives legal effect in Ireland to the Nitrates Directive and to our Nitrates Action Programme (NAP) and are the responsibility for the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, however the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine play a key role in implementing these regulations at both a national and regional level to ensure compliance, protection and reduce agriculture footprint on the environment. The current Nitrates Action Programme concludes in 2021 however a review is underway with a second stage consultation planned to commence in May 2021. All stakeholder submissions are welcome for consideration as part of this important review.

DAFM's research programme supports cross cutting issues such as ICT, the Bioeconomy, rural development and the development of human capital, skills and innovation in particular for early-stage researchers (Masters and PhD students and post-docs). AgClimatise contains a number of actions in this regard including, to promote the development of a sustainable circular bioeconomy within the agri-food sector, explore all options in relation to land use diversification, increase afforestation levels and maximise the contribution of existing forests to climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Ireland has an abundance of mineral soils under grassland and research indicates that livestock, sward and nutrient management can be optimised to maximise carbon sequestration in mineral soils. In order to fully capitalise on the opportunities for Irish grasslands and carbon sequestration, the issue of carbon losses from organic soils must be addressed. It is proposed to address this issue through reducing the management intensity of at least 40,000ha of peat based agricultural soils to reduce CO2 loss.

Hedgerows provide another important carbon pool in the landscape and they also act as an important habitat for biodiversity. However, there is no national inventory system, let alone a farm level system to facilitate the accounting of hedgerow sinks given the lack of historic baseline data to be used as a reference period for calculating greenhouse gas changes over time. Hedgerows in terms of the above and below surface biomass need to be measured through a focused survey of representative hedgerow types and through actions of digging up/burning to provide estimates.

Carbon farming refers to the farm-level management of carbon pools and flows with the purpose of mitigating against climate change. Result-based carbon farming schemes require that a direct and explicit link is established between the results delivered (e.g. GHG emissions avoided or CO2 sequestered) and the payments made to the land manager. These schemes offer opportunities to better incentivise farmers to undertake climate-friendly actions.

Teagasc have indicated that they contributed to progress in this regard. These measures include, Learners participating in Teagasc Green Cert programmes complete mandatory modules on Sustainable Farming/Soils and the Environment. In October 2020 for Bioeconomy Ireland Week, Teagasc produced the 'Communicating the bioeconomy through maps' series. Teagasc is involved in a number of significant research projects in the area of the circular bioeconomy with national and international partners. An episode of Teagasc's the Research Field podcast, titled 'Developing Ireland's Bioeconomy' was produced in 2020. Teagasc Forestry Development Department provides an ongoing programme of research and advice, with regular forestry promotion events, clinics and webinars around the country and online. The Agricultural Catchments Programme (ACP) is funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and is operated by Teagasc. Its core objective is to measure the effectiveness of the Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) measures implemented under the Nitrates Directive, i.e. the Nitrates Regulations, at catchment scale while also evaluating the efficacy of the nitrates derogation. The ACP's remit has recently been expanded to include Gaseous Emissions and Carbon Sequestration. The programme operates in partnership with over 300 farmers across six selected agricultural study catchments that represent different soil types and farming systems. One of the six ACP catchments, near Dunleer in Co. Louth, is located in the Eastern and Midland region.

BIM also provided details of progress that they have made in this regard. Introduced under the 2013 reform of the Common Fisheries Policy, the European Union 'Landing Obligation' aims to reduce the wasteful practice of discarding by encouraging fishers to avoid unwanted catches. Fully implemented in 2019, this new fisheries management approach raised challenges for Ireland's commercially important bottom trawl fisheries for Dublin Bay prawns – or Nephrops – and for fish species such as cod, haddock and whiting. BIM and the Irish Industry collaborated closely on a range of technical solutions to reduce unwanted catches in these fisheries. BIM supports the Seafood sector to achieve Origin Green verification (the programme is the world's only national food and drink sustainability programme) by working directly with businesses to develop plans and establish targets and actions. It also supports seafood businesses in achieving their targets by addressing key issues that emerge and are a sustainability challenge. One BIM project in 2019 to address a sustainability issue, looked at the areas on options for end of life oyster bags in order to find a sustainable solution. Responsibly Sourced Seafood (RSS) Scheme the Responsibly Sourced Seafood (RSS) scheme addresses target requirements of Certified Raw Material Sourcing and Sustainability Initiatives as required by Bord Bia's Origin Green, the national food and drink Sustainability Charter. BIM's RSS scheme is a product certification system assuring that catches have been fished responsibly, are of the highest quality and are traceable.

Progress relating to Exports and Brexit

In terms of food exports, one of the features of Irish agriculture is its dependence on export markets. This suggests that Brexit has the potential to significantly negatively impact on Irish agriculture. Irish agri-food exports have been sold primarily to the UK, followed by other EU Member States. On average over the 2013 to 2018 period, the UK accounted for 42% of agri-food exports, while the rest of the EU and the rest of the world accounted for 31% and 27% respectively. Brexit has created very significant challenges for the agri-food sector given the highly integrated nature of supply chains and the value of Ireland-GB agri-food trade, and indeed Ireland-EU trade via the UK landbridge, to the agri-food sector here and to the wider economy.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), in collaboration with other Government Departments and Agencies, dedicated substantial time and resources preparing for Brexit over a number of years to ensure they facilitated trading arrangements to the maximum extent possible while also maintaining the integrity of the EU Single Market. Detailed work by the DAFM across Government provided for infrastructure, IT support systems and staffing required for additional customs, SPS and regulatory checks for trade with and through Great Britain.

A range of measures have been established to help farmers, fishers and businesses with Brexit readiness in the form of advisory and training supports, direct aid and the provision of low-cost loans. The €100 million Capital Investment Scheme for the Processing and Marketing of Agricultural Products, and the €5 billion EU Brexit Adjustment Reserve will provide additional support.

However, the seamless trading arrangements between Ireland and Great Britain that were in place up to the end of December 2020 no longer exist. Additional administrative burdens are being placed on operators, and on state agencies. The Department indicate that all of those engaged in the trade and movement of goods have to acknowledge this reality and accept that these new arrangements are permanent. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is working closely with business operators to help businesses adapt to this very significant change. Following on from the extensive engagement undertaken through a range of fora and communications channels in the period leading up to December 2020, they are continuing to assist operators in practical matters such as the submission of documents and the resolution of technical difficulties.

Extensive preparations are also ongoing to ensure that Irish agri-food exporters meet new UK requirements which include the need for pre-notification to UK systems and the provision of an Export Health Certificate accompanying consignments to Great Britain. In light of the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland, none of these new controls apply to North/South trade.

CSO trade statistics for 2020 show that the UK continues to be Ireland's largest market for food and drink with CSO data from 2020 showing that Ireland exported €5.3 billion of agri-food products, (37.2% of the total agri-food exports) to the UK, while €4.6 billion of agri-food imports, (45.3% of the total) came from the UK. Initial data from January and February 2021 shows that exports of agri-food products to the UK are down 15% while imports are down 46% compared to the same period in 2020. However, the three-month period December 2020 to February 2021 compared to the same period in 2019/20 shows exports to the UK are down 1.5% and imports are down 22% reflecting the stockpiling in advance of the transition period ending.

The department have indicated that the medium to longer-term effects on the agri-food sector remain uncertain as trading patterns adjust to the new requirements, so ongoing economic analysis will be required to accurately estimate these impacts on Irish agri-food trade with the UK. UK trade deals with other countries may also increase competition for the sector and impact on trade.

Teagasc has undertaken extensive analysis for Government of the implications of various Brexit scenarios for Irish Agriculture. Teagasc communications regarding Brexit are detailed on their website and an 'Is your farm Brexit Ready?' factsheet was published in 2019. The implications of Brexit on various sectors of Irish agriculture continue to be explored in detail through Teagasc podcasts and webinars. Potatoes are grown extensively in the eastern and midland region, with the lion's share in Dublin, Meath and Louth. The industry relies on imported seed from UK and further afield to meet approximately 50% of seed requirements. Following Brexit, the EU and the UK are in dispute on plant health issues with the result the suspension of seed potatoes, particularly from Scotland, from the start of 2021. Teagasc with the Potato Development Group (Teagasc, Bord Bia, IFA and DAFM) have put in place a number of measures to stimulate the production of seed potatoes (especially royalty-free varieties) in the Republic of Ireland. Industry stakeholder meetings have already taken place and grower meetings are ongoing. The group are in the process of commissioning a report on the Irish seed industry to identify barriers for expansion.

SFPA (Sea Fisheries Protection Authority) responded to the regulatory challenges presented by the UK exit from the EU (Brexit) by establishing controls and processes to facilitate continued market access for compliant industry operators and safeguard against breaches in related legislation. A particular focus was placed by SFPA on the proactive promotion of compliance by industry through communication of regulatory changes via SFPA website, dedicated contact email addresses, SFPA led and delivered technical content industry seminars and query management, collaboration with BIM in ensuring consistency of messaging and active focused communication efforts to multiple specific areas of the seafood industry that carry out import and export trade with the UK. For imports to Ireland as an EU member state from Great Britain, SFPA provided regulatory response to the applicability of full third country status to the UK from January 1st, 2021. For imports of fish and fishery products, regulatory changes included requirements on prenotification, entry through Border Control Post, provision of export health certificates, and in the case of wild-caught marine fish, anti-IUU catch certificates. For imports from GB to Ireland, a substantial change arising for SFPA was the need to conduct anti-IUU controls on consignments of fishery products entering the EU from UK, at an Irish Border Control Post. Whilst EU legislation set out a requiring for 3 working days advance submission of documentation, SFPA made an administrative decision to accept 24 hours' advance submission for scenarios including imports UK, acknowledging the practicality for operators and increasing the burden of rapid processing by SFPA. In order to streamline the process for industry, SFPA engaged with DAFM to enable Irish fishery product importers to use a single window to apply for and have these imports processed. Regulatory conditions on exports from Ireland to GB were informed by UK policy decisions as importing country. UK trade and food safety criteria were set by UK on a time phased basis, requiring related response from SFPA. This involved SFPA controlling anti-IUU trade with UK, including catch certification from January 1st, 2021, while export health certification to UK, originally signalled to begin on April 1st 2021, was subsequently deferred by UK authorities to October 1st 2021.

BIM indicated that undoubtedly, Ireland has been disproportionately impacted by the quota transfers under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) compared to other Member States and the loss of quota will have a significant impact on the longer-term viability of the Irish fleet. Exporters and importers of seafood have also been impacted by the new trading relationship with the UK and the addition of new custom requirements for businesses wishing to trade to or through the UK. In November 2020, BIM introduced the Brexit Mentoring Programme for the seafood industry. The programme has supported forty-eight companies, of which thirty-four are seafood processing companies and fourteen are aquaculture producers. The programme focuses on supporting individual seafood companies to identify and action key steps in relation to customs, tariffs, and non-EU trade requirements, specifically customs classifications, customs procedures, lodging declarations, trade with Northern Ireland, border controls, VAT position, origin status and AEO authorisation. In addition to the Brexit Mentoring Programme, BIM is running a Brexit helpdesk service for customs support where seafood businesses can get assistance with specific queries. Throughout 2020 and the beginning of 2021, BIM has hosted and taken part in several industry webinars to build an awareness of the customs requirements that would impact seafood businesses. The BIM Brexit Hub was launched in November 2020 which has had strong engagement from industry. Here, seafood businesses can read through a Brexit FAQ section, apply for the Brexit Mentoring Programme and find additional information on the Brexit Business Planning Support scheme.

Progress relating to the future of former peat production bogs and peatlands, including ensuring a Just Transition

Again, several EIP-AGRI Operational Groups have been set up to research this area including the Blackstairs Farming Futures which aims to develop a new revenue stream for commonage farmers for the delivery of innovative ecosystem services whilst simultaneously improving habitat conditions in Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and adjacent habitats including peatlands. The North Connemara Locally Led Agri-Environmental Scheme is developing an incentive system for improving agricultural management of upland heaths and peatlands and enable the restoration of peatland and grassland habitats. A new EIP-AGRI Operational Group is in the early stages of being set up to aid in the re-wetting of former peatlands. Teagasc with Gurteen College, Laois Offaly ETB and Bord na Móna are providing a QQI accredited Level 5 and 6 Green Cert programme to Bord na Móna employees with an interest in land sector careers.

BIM indicated that following on from exploratory work in the 2000s, BIM identified significant swathes of land in Ireland which could be utilised for aquaculture. In particular, marginalised rural land and cutaway peatlands form a significant land holding which offers little in the way of commercial return at present. The RAMPS (Recirculating Aquaculture Multitrophic Pond Systems) project developed out of preliminary work in perch pond production and is based on a modified design of similar systems used for catfish in North America. The RAMPS project began in 2018 and has quickly established the potential of these systems. Based at two licensed sites in Keywater, Co. Sligo and Mount Lucas, Co. Offaly, work has concentrated on system design and modification, system efficiency, algae and duckweed management, water quality, fish health and all the necessary components of a viable aquaculture system. This is an innovative project aimed at expanding Ireland's freshwater aquaculture sector. BIM is committed to helping industry assess its impact on the environment and implement innovative solutions to reducing discharges. The project seeks to get a better understanding of water quality of effluent and develop methods for remediating effluent. The project further seeks to explore the potential for developing multi trophic freshwater systems on marginalised agricultural land and cutaway peatlands. Using algae and duckweed to treat fish waste and recirculating water in pond systems thereby reducing discharges and abstraction. An ancillary benefit of such systems is that they have the potential to not only develop as circular economy projects but produce commercially viable protein which can be abstracted from the algae and duckweed.

Progress relating to the Transformation of our Food Systems in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and Building Climate Resilience

DAFM's competitive research funding programme has a strong focus on supporting research aimed at ensuring food and nutrition security while addressing environmental and societal challenges and is underpinned by a food systems approach. In particular it aims to facilitate innovation throughout the food chain by encouraging the development of sustainable and healthier food options while producing and processing food in a more sustainable manner and reducing food loss and waste. Such a food systems approach will help to tackle a number of grand societal challenges relating to climate action, good health and well-being, responsible production and consumption, zero hunger and more.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Transforming Our World, which was adopted by Ireland in 2015 aims to deliver a more sustainable, prosperous and peaceful future for the entire world. It sets out a framework for how to achieve this comprising 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Ireland's National Implementation Plan 2018-2020 further details how the SDGs will be implemented to support national policy. Goal 13: Climate Action is particularly relevant to the Sectoral Adaptation Plan as it aims to strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity; integrate climate change measures into national policy and measures; raise awareness and educate which are reflected in its objectives.

The RDP includes a number of national policy objectives in the areas of promoting food chain organisation and the development of the farming and wider agri-food sectors. These include strategies such as Food Harvest 2020 (FH2020) and Foodwise 2025 (FW2025). These programmes identify over 400 recommendations to achieve sustainable growth over a range of cross-cutting themes. Thus, many themes that are central to the objectives and priorities of Rural Development Regulation and Ireland's RDP are consistent with national as well as EU agricultural policy.

The emphasis is also to support the organisation of artisan and small-scale food production, especially in the areas of added value production, participation in quality schemes, and strengthening of producers' position in the market that facilitates cooperation and collaboration as well as strengthening the links between agriculture, food production and forestry, and research and innovation, including for the purpose of improved environmental management and performance.

BIM is committed to working on and funding projects that enhance the sustainability of Ireland's seafood production processes. Food Heroes is an Interreg project with the primary aim of seeking solutions to increase the utilisation of by product or to reduce the amount of food wasted through landfill. It was also aimed at channelling this through the human food chain. The Seafood Processing Capital Investment Scheme is established in Ireland's Operational Programme under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund 2014 – 2020, co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Commission.

The scheme aims to fund seafood businesses that undertake projects related to:

- Contributing to energy saving or reducing the impact on the environment, including waste treatment;
- Improving safety, hygiene, health and working conditions;
- Supporting the processing of catches of commercial fish that cannot be destined for human consumption;
- Relating to the processing of by-products resulting from main processing activities;
- Relating to the processing of organic aquaculture products; and
- That lead to new or improved products or new or improved processes, or new or improved management and organisation systems

Progress related to Marine Planning and the Sustainable Management of Marine Waters

The Marine Institute is the State agency responsible for marine research, technology development and innovation in Ireland. The Institute provides scientific and technical advice to Government to help inform policy and to support the sustainable development of Ireland's marine resource. This also includes supporting Ireland's regional economic development and assisting in creating sustainable ocean and coastal economies through the Institute's research (performance and funding), infrastructure, advisory & regulatory services, and maritime development activities (this includes the mandate of the Marine Institute's Irish Maritime Development Office, which provides support for the shipping and shipping services sector).

In terms of Eastern & Midlands Region, over the period 2019-2020 an estimated 81 marine research projects were funded amounting to approximately €17.2m investment/grant-aid. This grant aid was awarded to 4 counties in the Region.

Of these 81 projects:

- 59 projects were funded from national funding bodies (MI, SEAI, GSI, DAFM, EPA, IRC, DECC, Met Éireann, SFI) amounting to €5.2m; and
- 22 projects were funded from the EC valued at €12m. 20 of these projects are EC H2020 funding, valued at €10.5m

The following provides a breakdown of the spatial distribution of these awards across 4 counties in the Region,

- Dublin = €14.8m (65 projects – 25 recipients – 13 enterprises (primarily SME), 5 HEI's & 7 public bodies). Research projects cover topics related to the marine bioeconomy, marine renewables, marine biodiversity, climate change.
- Kildare = €1.4m (9 projects), awarded to researchers in NUIM (focusing on research related to marine climate change and also marine renewables)
- Louth = €0.8m (5 projects), awarded to DKIT & 1 enterprise, in the areas of maritime safety, and information & spatial technologies
- Westmeath – €0.3m awarded to Athlone Institute of Technology in the area of the marine bioeconomy

B) Progress made by agencies that operate under the aegis of each Department, in supporting the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to that agency

The information contained at Section A above, includes the progress that has been made by agencies that operate under the aegis of the Department. Bord Bia, Bord Iascaigh Mhara, Marine Institute Ireland, Sea Fisheries Protection Authority and Teagasc submitted responses in addition to the main response from the DAFM. Coillte indicated that they had nothing additional to add to the main response submitted by the Department.

In addition, Bord Bia outlined the importance of the content of Origin Green, which is Ireland's food and drink sustainability programme and is led by Bord Bia. A voluntary programme, Origin Green membership comprises farmers, food producers, retailers and foodservice operators and the programme aims to achieve increased levels of sustainable food production. Origin Green enables members to set and achieve measurable sustainability targets that respect the environment and serve local communities more effectively. Bord Bia shared with EMRA the latest Origin Green progress report, which captures data up to 2017. A more recent progress report covering the years from 2017 to 2020 is due for release in July of this year and can be shared with the Assembly at that time. The progress report deals with issues including, Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Water Consumption & Quality, Animal Welfare, Biodiversity, Grassland Management, Seafood, Raw Material Sourcing, Manufacturing Processes, Social Sustainability, and Retail & Foodservice. The EMRA look forward to the upcoming progress report.

C) Details of any policy initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

Draft Agri-Food Strategy to 2030

Draft Agri-Food Strategy to 2030 due to be published in Summer 2021.

There are a number of policy developments or initiatives:

- AgClimatise – A Roadmap towards Climate Neutrality
- Climate Action Plan 2019
- Climate Action Plan 2021
- gov.ie - Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021 (www.gov.ie)
- Agriculture, Forest and Seafood Climate Change Sectoral Adaptation Plan.

A new EIP-AGRI Operational Group is in the early stages of being set up to aid in the re-wetting of former peatlands.

National Marine Planning Framework

In relation to the National Marine Planning Framework, throughout 2019 and 2020, the Marine Institute provided significant support to the DHLGH for the preparation of the National Marine Planning Framework (NMPF). This included the identification and collation of relevant datasets; data analysis and preparation of maps. The Marine Institute, in partnership with NUI Galway, also provide economic (macro and spatial) data related to Ireland's ocean and coastal economies. Further economic and social analysis is underway to support the implementation of the NMPF and subsequent regional marine plans as required. This includes progressing an ocean satellite account for Ireland (in association with the OECD and national organisations).

National Strategic Plan for Sustainable Aquaculture 2021-2030

This National Strategic Plan for Sustainable Aquaculture Development (2021 – 2030) is the successor plan to that developed in 2015 for the period up to 2020. Its purpose is similar to its predecessor and is as follows:

- To ensure that the recently updated but non-binding guidance for the sustainable development of EU aquaculture (2021 – 2030) is mainstreamed into national aquaculture sector planning.
- To help inform the investment priorities for aquaculture in Ireland's new Seafood Development Programme 2021-27 (EMFAF).
- To ensure that strategic planning for the aquaculture sector in Ireland responds to the latest thinking in terms of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for Irish aquaculture in order to promote the development of a sustainable and forward-looking sector.

The Irish Inshore Fisheries Sector Strategy 2019-2023

This strategy sets out the aspirations and objectives for the future of the sector and identifies clear actions to be delivered through an implementation plan that gives effect to the vision outlined for the sector. This 'bottom up' Strategy developed through the Inshore Fisheries Forums not only maps out a sustainable future path for the sector but will inform the implementation of the Seafood Operational Programme 2016-2022, the development of the EU legal framework to replace the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund from 2020 and the development of a Maritime Spatial Plan for Ireland in 2019/2020.

D) Details of any funding competitions/initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

The Agricultural Catchments Programme

The Agricultural Catchments Programme is in place since 2006 and is used to evaluate the impact of Ireland's Nitrates Action Programme (NAP) and the Nitrates Derogation which are implemented under the Nitrates Directive. This Programme has been funded by the Department and has been delivered by Teagasc since its inception.

The Programme is primarily designed to monitor the effectiveness of the Nitrates Regulations, and this will be a central focus of the 2021 EU Nitrates Review. However, the scientific findings will also provide an assessment of the contribution that Irish farmers are making to the delivery of Water Framework Directive objectives, the key driver of EU water policy.

The Nitrates Derogation allows more intensive farmers to operate at a higher stocking rate than that stipulated in the Directive, subject to adherence to stricter rules to be implemented by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The derogation will run to the end of 2021 when the fourth Nitrates Action Programme concludes.

Competitive Research Programme

DAFM's competitive research programme, launched approximately every 18-months, support 'public good' research projects and innovation in Research Performing Organisations in the regions to address challenges and opportunities in the agri-food, forest and marine sectors. The research Calls also support the development of human capital, skills and innovation in particular for early-stage researchers (Masters and PhD students and post-docs). Over the last seven years, approx. €140.4m has been committed to agri-food, forest and marine research projects through the programme. The DAFM Research Programme also collaborates in project co-funding arrangements with other national (EPA, SEAI, SFI, HRB) and international (EU countries, DAERA NI, USDA) research funding bodies and their competitive research calls.

National Marine Research Programme

The Marine Institute manages the National Marine Research Programme, which includes Industry-Led awards, Networking & Marine Research Communications grants, funding for access to ship-time, as well as National Infrastructure Access Programme and other targeted project calls. Details of investments (2019 and 2020 relevant to the Eastern & Midland region) included in 2019, 24 Awards, €563,315 Grant-Aid, and in 2020, 7 Awards, €856,825 Grant-Aid.

Bord Bia's Marketing Assistance Programme and Step Change Programme

Bord Bia operates a Marketing Assistance Programme and Step Change Programme which provide grants to companies who meet certain criteria and who are members of the Origin Green programme. Grants are for eligible marketing activities such as website development, packaging design and trade fair attendance. Bord Bia indicated that €1,618,000 in marketing grants was approved for companies located in the relevant counties of the Eastern and Midland Region in 2019, 2020 and 2021 to date.

European Maritime Fisheries Fund (EMFF)

Grant aid to the EMRA region in the years 2019/2020 to projects approved under the European Maritime Fisheries Fund (EMFF) operational Programme 2014 – 2020 amounted to over €3.4m. Full details of this scheme, by county, were provided by BIM. BIM continually reviews the funding it provides in conjunction with DAFM and is currently planning for the implementation of the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) Operational Programme (OP) which will replace the EMFF OP within the next year.

Other

Schemes supported through the Irish RDP continue to open from time to time and the next round of supports (the CAP Strategic Plan (CSP)) is currently being negotiated and prepared for implementation in 2023. This will include a suite of new supports and environmental measures.

E) Details of the funding programmes administered by each Department (and agencies under the aegis of each department), over the last two years, which have been awarded within the Eastern and Midland Region

In addition to the information provided in the above sections, the department provided funding details relating funds obtained in the Region under the Agricultural Catchments Programme, the National Federation of Group Water Schemes, DAFM's National Competitive Call for Research Proposals, DAFM's Transnational ERA-NET Call and the 2020 HDHL Call.

Furthermore, BIM operates a suite of grant aid schemes with the objective of the sustainable development of the seafood sector and coastal community development. These range from capital and current supports for primary production (catching and aquaculture) through to processing of seafood products. Support is also provided in conjunction with Bord Bia for the development of overseas markets. In addition, BIM administers the Fisheries Local Area Development Group Scheme which provides support to coastal community projects. In general, all grant aid schemes support environmentally sustainable development in the sector and economic development of coastal communities.

F) Any other comments that were made with respect to each Department (including any agencies under the aegis of each Department) and implementing the RSES, including any recommendations that are considered would facilitate the process

No further comments to those that have been incorporated above.

G) Response and Recommendations of the Regional Assembly

The Assembly welcome the detailed report received by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and commend the effort made in presenting a coordinated report for the purposes of RSES Monitoring. In addition, the reports received by agencies under the aegis of the Department, including Bord Bia, Bord Iascaigh Mhara, Marine Institute Ireland, Sea Fisheries Protection Authority and Teagasc, are extremely welcome.

On review of the information submitted, the Assembly are satisfied that the DAFM have demonstrated that progress has been made in implementing the RSES and have carried out a number of specific actions that enable same. This includes the Department's efforts in progressing initiatives aimed at delivering on the RSES, including for instance, in December 2020, the release of a roadmap to climate neutrality called "AgClimatise" containing 29 different actions, the vision of which is to develop a climate neutral food system compatible with the Paris Agreement temperature goals, and, investment made under TAMS II scheme which presents farmers with investment opportunities that will allow for the development of Irish agriculture.

Having regard to the information submitted, The Assembly consider that the work to date could be enhanced and make the following recommendation to NOAC for consideration;

- The Regional Assembly should inform the implementation of the new Agri-Food Strategy to 2030. This will ensure that implementation measures (and in particular those centred on a climate smart, environmentally sustainable agri-food sector; viable and resilient primary producers; and an innovative, competitive and resilient sector, driven by technology and talent) are aligned to the policy contained within the RSES, which provides a framework for future growth, ensuring the delivery of effective regional development through the realisation of viable and vital places. It is essential that implementation policy and investment priorities reflect the RSES to allow managed and sustainable growth that enables each place to fulfil ambition and potential.

5.1.2.5 Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media

The mission of the Department of Tourism, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media is to; support the tourism industry in increasing revenue and employment through enhancing competitiveness and through marketing and product development; promote, nurture and develop Ireland's culture and arts; support and promote the use of the Irish language and to facilitate the development of the Gaeltacht; contribute to a healthier and more active society by promoting sports participation, and by supporting high performance and the provision of facilities; and develop broadcasting and media policy, including online safety legislation, and to provide oversight of the BAI, RTÉ and TG4. This mission is aligned several RSOs of the RSES including, RSO 4 Healthy Communities, RSO 5 Creative Places and RSO 12 A Strong Economy.

A) Progress made in supporting the objectives of the RSES

The Department were asked to identify the progress that has been made in supporting the objectives of the RSES that are applicable to them. This included, for instance, progress related to the enhancement of the tourism sector in the Region including tourism supports in line with the settlement strategy, the promotion of arts and culture in the Region, the enhancement of the Region's Gaeltachts, the enhancement of objectives of the National Sports Policy, and supports for the clustering of the film and audio-visual sector.

Tourism

Fáilte Ireland indicated that significant progress had been made with respect to Tourism in the Region, demonstrating progress across a number of RSOs and RPOs of the RSES. Likewise, Tourism Ireland continues to promote the visitor experiences on offer within the three regional brands (Dublin – Surprising by Nature, Ireland's Ancient East and Ireland's Hidden Heartland) within the Eastern and Midland Region in key markets around the world. However, it was indicated that, because of COVID-19, much of Tourism Ireland's traditional promotional activity is currently on hold.

Specific Tourism Actions;

Dublin SPA

With respect to the Dublin Region, Dublin is positioned as a global city leader in tourism and a member of European Cities Marketing, an association of over 110 cities across Europe. The City share and learn across a range of relevant areas such as research and statistics, the meetings industry, tourist offices, marketing, city cards, digital destinations and sustainability. Dublin is also a member of BestCities Global Alliance which is a forum where 12 business events destinations from across the globe who uphold the highest standards within our industry, share knowledge and insights and shape the development of our industry.

In late 2020 Fáilte Ireland partnered with Dublin City Council for a 2-year proof of concept, creating a new smart tourism pillar within the existing Smart Dublin team. A dedicated programme manager was recruited to deliver core outputs, including Tourism trail apps & best practice digital trail guidelines, data capture, orientation and digital transformation to enhance all aspects of the tourism experience as well as to help local businesses to grow. This programme will provide advice and advocacy for digital opportunities and digital best practice. In addition, Fáilte Ireland is supportive of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council (DLR) participation in the 'Tourism Friendly Cities' network of the Urbact Action Planning Network.

Access to the water is a key focus in the Dublin region and there are a number of programmes focused on optimising these assets – from the Docklands destination & experience development plan, to the development of the canal greenway opportunity. In 2020 Fáilte Ireland, through its strategic partnership with Waterways Ireland, co-funded a tourism feasibility study of the Dublin Canal Greenway Loop.

Fáilte Ireland is also supporting Waterways Ireland in its Steering group (formed Feb 21) to bring the loop to fruition as a joined up, viable Dublin tourism product promoting prime tourism locations and attractions, as well as the abundance of hidden gems. Two of Dublin's "destination towns" (Docklands and Lucan) will be incorporated as destinations in the proposition.

The Dublin Coastal Trail, which is part of Fáilte Ireland's Visitor Orientation Programme, aims to link locations along the coast into one experience for visitors to explore. Visitors will be encouraged, through a suite of signage (to be delivered H2 2021), to visit places of interest in coastal locations. Important cultural, historical, architectural, and literary heritage will be presented to visitors through the trail as well as interpretation on natural biodiversity wildlife and the UNESCO Dublin Bay Biosphere.

Fáilte Ireland is also investing €19 million nationwide to develop state-of-the-art facilities for outdoor water-based activities to improve access to water in areas with the potential to serve the public and commercial providers. The two Dublin areas that have been approved for grant funding (subject to planning) are Docklands Water Sports, North Wall Quay, Pontoons, Dublin 1, and, DLRCC Killiney Beach Facilities Project, Killiney Beach, Killiney, Co Dublin.

Dublin has two Visitor Experience Development Plans (VEDPs) at implementation stage, one in the docklands, and the other for the coast. Both plans are designed to increase dwell time and spend by supporting businesses through facilitating networking and cross promotion and provide supports for businesses to market and sell the destination. There is also a focus on product, with supports in place to enable businesses maximise the commercial potential of their offering.

In addition to the above, a new detailed brand guidelines and toolkit was developed and launched in a webinar to almost 300 businesses in March 2021. A range of supports were developed for businesses from Dublin specific research debriefs to support the development of sales propositions and marketing on a shoestring (with a focus on adoption and alignment to Surprising by Nature) – with 62 attendees, across 60 businesses partaking.

Dublin Destination Towns were identified through active consultation with Local Authority partners through Dublin tourism steering and working groups, destination development fora and alignment of tourism strategies. Rationale and objectives were assessed through the application process and alignment tested versus Fáilte Ireland initiatives & objectives, with site visits conducted.

Local Authority - Destination Town	Grant	Failte Ireland Alignment
SDCC- Lucan	€500,000	Canal Greenway Loop
DLR- Dunlaoghaire	€321,000	Coastal Trail and Coastal DDEP
DCC- Docklands	€500,000	Coastal Trail and Docklands DDEP
Fingal - Skerries	€411,000	Coastal Trail and Coastal DDEP

Fáilte Ireland participates in the Dublin Bay UNESCO Biosphere Partnership meetings. It has signed up to the business charter and has contributed to promotional videos produced in 2020 highlighting how citizens and visitors can best appreciate and responsibly engage with the Biosphere. Through the Coastal Destination Development Plan the Biosphere has been highlighted and included in coastal activation and saleable experience workshops to bring new visitor experiences to the market and ensure responsible enjoyment of the Biosphere.

Fáilte Ireland is investing heavily in marketing Dublin this year, with a specific focus on Dublin within the Keep Discovering national campaign (national spend of €1.5m) and a targeted, sales driven campaign with a number of partners (spend €200k for Dublin). The arts and cultural enjoyment are among the pillars of this campaign. Fáilte Ireland will also partner with Dublin City Council to support the city recovery plan, including the Dublin city marketing campaign.

Fáilte Ireland supports festivals such as Bram Stoker, New Year's Festival etc. Fáilte Ireland also supports the Regional Festival Fund via the Dublin local authorities. Financial support for these events from Fáilte Ireland total in 2019 totalled €2.34M. In so doing it attracts visitors to enjoy the city providing vehicles to celebrate identity and the arts: thus, showcasing the role of arts and culture in economic development.

Eastern SPA

The Ancient Destination Experience Development Plan (ADEDPP) is a five-year destination plan. It is designed to be a roadmap for enhancing the existing ancient visitor proposition to achieve the objectives of addressing seasonality, increasing visitor numbers, improving dwell time and visitor dispersion across the destination. This DEDP will be completed over the next five years and is primarily focussed on the area known as the Boyne Valley extending across counties Meath and South Louth. The DEDP will extend into North Louth and parts of Cavan, Monaghan and Westmeath with relevance to the ancient proposition.

An OPW Masterplan has also been prepared as an interpretative framework developed to act as a guide for interpretation in the Boyne Valley (Louth/Meath). It is intended to be a catalyst in creating a joined-up approach that links thematically the whole valley as a starting point to revitalise the visitor experience at individual sites.

The key objectives are as follows:

- Ensure the local enterprises are brought to life through the development of the optimal mix of hero and ancillary products that get people into the area and retain them.
- Unlock the economic growth potential of an area by progressing a range of key initiatives that will motivate and facilitate potential tourists to visit and stay in the local area.
- The Puca Festival was developed and the inaugural event was held over 3 towns (Trim, Athboy and Drogheda) in 2019. Due to Covid 19 the 2020 event was postponed but plans are in place to proceed with the festival (government restrictions allowing) in 2021. This new festival celebrates the origins of Halloween in an authentic manner and is supported by Fáilte Ireland in conjunction with the Louth and Meath Local Authorities.
- Develop a sustainable basis for commercial development centred on creating strong signature, supporting and ancillary experiences that are commoditised through the creation of saleable experiences that excite consumers and buyers alike.
- Create the condition to encourage international visitors to immerse themselves actively in the locale, interact with local people engaging the senses by immersing themselves in the destination.
- Strengthen the value of tourism to the local community by providing employment opportunities.

Drogheda Town has been identified for development as the Gateway to the Boyne Valley in the recently launched Ancient Destination Experience Development Plan. Fáilte Ireland and Louth Local Authority are currently engaged in research to identify a potential Attraction of Scale to be located in Drogheda Town capable of attracting a domestic and crucially an international audience. Drogheda has been identified as a Destination Town for development under the Destination Towns Capital Scheme and is one of the 3 centres for the new Halloween Festival, Puca, that originated in 2019.

The Boyne Valley Tourism Recovery Taskforce was established in June 2020 as an emergency response to the decimation of the tourism sector in Louth and Meath and is expected to remain in place for a period of 12-18 months. The purpose of this taskforce is to lead and co-ordinate all relevant stakeholders and industry in the phased re-opening of the destination to visitors in line with the Government's published roadmap and to ensure the resiliency of the tourism sector. The Boyne Valley Destination Recovery Taskforce comprises representatives of the key stakeholders that manage the destination, Louth and Meath Local Authorities, OPW, the key tourism employers/businesses in the destination and community interests. In 2021 the Taskforce has identified 4 core activities that it will concentrate its efforts.

Boyne Valley Drive Review (Investment of €130k), as identified as a catalyst project in the Ancient DDP, reviews the existing Boyne Valley Drive to re-optimize the Drive as the world's most experiential ancient route. The key outputs of this review include; a reimagined Boyne Valley Drive, transforming it into an internationally iconic experiential route which possesses a myriad of experience layers, linking existing attractions on the Boyne Valley route with an extended focus on new and supporting experiences; defined thematic experience route options that enhance the existing offering from being a point to point journey across heritage sites to providing multi-faceted experiences telling the ancient story and blending a range of experiences from food and activities to attractions; Pinpointing of brilliant visitor experiences that will disrupt typical visitor flow along the route; Development of focused industry clusters/hubs targeting overnights; Provision of connections to the Boyne river, Boyne Valley Greenways and Blueways; and a new visitor flow/orientation presents the Boyne Valley Drive as the world's most experiential Ancient route.

The Wicklow Tourism Recovery Taskforce was established in June 2020 as an emergency response to the decimation of the tourism sector in Wicklow and is expected to remain in place for a period of 12-18 months. The taskforce is co-chaired by Brian O'Flynn, Head of Ireland's Ancient East and Frank Curran, CEO of Wicklow County Council. The purpose of this taskforce is to lead and co-ordinate all relevant stakeholders and industry in the phased re-opening of the destination to visitors in line with the Government's published roadmap and to ensure the resiliency of the tourism sector. The Wicklow Destination Recovery Taskforce comprises representatives of the key stakeholders that manage the destination, the key tourism employers in the destination and community interests.

As part of this, work is ongoing to create a Masterplan for Glendalough and Wicklow Mountains National Park & Visitor Orientation - the plans will look at the wider orientation of visitors through Co. Wicklow and €8 million is being invested in the re-development of Avondale Forest Park in Wicklow with the new experience due to open in 2022.

Carlingford '31 is a tourism masterplan focused on a series of projects to provide a framework for sustainable tourism development delivering long term economic, social and environmental benefits for the town and surrounding communities. It is designed to develop and promote outstanding visitor experiences to position Carlingford as a destination of choice for visitors who seek to immerse themselves in compelling outdoor and cultural experiences. It identifies a range of physical infrastructure projects that will enhance the visitor experience, prepare for tourism growth and improve the quality of life for residents.

The Thoroughbred Country Destination Development Plan (TCDDP) represents a five-year destination development plan with a vision to deliver the world's best collective thoroughbred visitor experience. The objective of the TCDDP is to realise the domestic and international tourism opportunity that can be delivered through the heritage of the thoroughbred and the wider ecosystem that surrounds the industry. The plan will form a key element in building future destination resilience post COVID-19 and provide a collaborative platform for tourism activity contributing to sustained recovery.

In terms of Greenways, The Royal Canal Greenway which passes through Kildare, Meath, Westmeath and Laois launched in March 2021. The Boyne Navigation & Greenway Development has the potential to become one of the most fascinating land and water heritage trail journeys for visitors. It will develop an international positioning as one of the most iconic heritage trails in the world, while also linking destination towns and village.

There has also been investment in development of the Blue-light Blueway from Bray along the coast of Wicklow to Wexford which was awarded €499,338 under the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme; €6.4m investment in phase 2 of the Blessington Greenway, Wicklow; and €200,000 for the Boyne Greenway - North Bank - Drogheda including clearance & drainage with surfacing and fencing, walls & signage.

As part of the developed & emerging destination town Capital Investment Programme, the following is worth noting;

- Kildare Town was awarded €500,000 funding under the Destination Towns scheme. The Kildare Town Project proposes the complete upgrade of Market Square to a high quality, pedestrian focused civic space, with enhanced vibrancy and vitality. The aim is to enhance the attractiveness and accessibility of the Square, creating a clear sense of place and arrival in Kildare Town, connecting the town's tourism assets and heritage sites and acting as a key focal point for visitors to the town. This project aims to provide a new opportunity to host events, increase attractiveness of the town. The Project will be progressed in conjunction with two other projects identified under the Town Renewal Plan).
- Wicklow Town's €500,000 Destination Towns investment comprises the following three projects: 1. The Abbey Gardens and Events Space - enhancement and redevelopment of the Abbey grounds into a more multi-functional public gardens with purpose-built events space 2. Wicklow Tourism App 3. The Church Hill Heritage Trail Improvements - undergrounding of cables and removal of poles on Church Hill at Wicklow Church of Ireland.
- Drogheda was awarded €499,924 under the Destination Towns programme. The Drogheda Town project is about 'Linking the Historic Features', the East-West; between Old Abbey and St Lawrence's Gate and the North-South; between Magdalene Tower and Millmount Fort. New interpretation media will reflect and link to information available online and will be focused on three strong stories and themes relating to Drogheda; Old Town Walls, Oliver Cromwell and Saint Oliver Plunkett. This will create a unified narrative and a consistent interpretive experience which is more easily understood by visitors.
- Trim Destination Town: Support of €500k awarded to Trim under the FI destination Towns Initiative for the Porchfield project. This project aims to provide the first outdoor performance space in Meath catering for up to 10,000 people and will allow for greater animation of the stories of Trim. The space will be used by local groups to host outdoor heritage and cultural performances targeted at tourists. The site was carefully chosen in order to maximise the spectacular views over the River Boyne to Newtown and a breath-taking view of Trim Castle as a backdrop to the performance area.

Midland SPA

The Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail in counties Laois and Offaly, received €4.35m out of €13.6m allocated to national mountain bike trails for RRDF 2019. Coillte is leading on the project with Fáilte Ireland as partners. To maximise this investment, Fáilte Ireland developed the Slieve Bloom experience development programme to activate businesses in Laois and Offaly to support them in leveraging the Slieve Bloom MBT as a key tourism product in their area.

The programme ran from November 2020 to April 2021 and focussed on areas such as: consumer insights and planning, cycling destination best practice, marketing and sales, planning, collaboration, communications and a local expert's programme aimed at visitor-facing staff to equip them with knowledge of the product and local area(s). The programme engaged with 40 local businesses, supported 12 new activity and visitor-focussed saleable experiences, trained 45 front-facing staff on the Get to Know Your Local Area programme, developed and issued the Slieve Bloom Business Owners' Guide and had significant reach on social media (113,885 impressions and 1,493 engagements).

The Royal Canal Greenway which passes through Kildare, Meath, Westmeath and Laois launched in March 2021, whilst commercial plans are being developed for Lough Boora and Birr Castle.

As part of Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, the Shannon Tourism Masterplan was launched in March 2021 with details of capital funding under the Shannon Masterplan to follow once available. There are currently two large capital grant projects in the Hidden Heartlands, with one located in the Midlands SPA namely the Granard Motte in Longford, due to open in 2022.

Ireland's Hidden Heartlands is also running a website improvement programme. This grant scheme is helping approximately 40 tourism businesses with new websites (Visitor Attractions and Activity providers) to improve the user experience and online booking capability.

Developed and Emerging Destination Town Capital Investment Programme under Ireland's Ancient East includes the following;

- Portlaoise was awarded €500,00 for Destination Towns to address the pedestrian flow throughout the town with appropriate access, lighting, and signage, to ensure visitors find out what the town has to offer whilst also feeling safe and enjoying their visit in a relaxed and welcoming way. Revitalisation of the three lanes will enable them to function effectively in encouraging visitors to enter the 'old town', with appropriate animation and interpretation.
- Birr Destination Town: Over €400,000 awarded to Birr under the FI destination Towns Initiative. The Birr Town project plans to develop a series of new orientation signs, new map boards and two information kiosks within the town to provide the visitor with a series of clear routes and directions to allow them to explore the many hidden gems of the town. A scheme will be developed for Castle Street, the aim of which will be to create a new destination focal point with the castle at the core. The increased visual connectivity will help strengthen the physical relationship of the town and the Castle.

Culture and Arts

The Department indicated that under Project Ireland 2040, the National Development Plan (NDP), there is a large programme of investment in culture and creativity across the EMRA area. This ambitious programme includes a range of high value projects which will contribute significantly to the development of Ireland's cultural facilities, as well as important economic investments in tourism and rural infrastructure and facilities.

The majority of the Department's major capital projects fall within an ambitious €460 million programme of redevelopment and renovation of the National Cultural Institutions which encompass iconic cultural venues including the National Gallery, the Irish Museum of Modern Art at the Royal Hospital Kilmainham, the National Library, the National Museum (Kildare Street and Natural History Museum), the Chester Beatty Library, the National Archives and the National Concert Hall, all of which are located in Dublin City.

Considerable work has been undertaken to date in partnership with the OPW in advancing the redevelopment of these institutions through appraisal and planning stages. Work is due to commence on the National Archives shortly to construct a new repository building while the west wing of the National Library is currently undergoing preparatory works which will help define the next phase of work to include specialist conservation repair works to roof, windows and doors. Planning in relation to the other institutions is also well advanced. Other flagship projects include the redevelopment of the Irish Heritage Trust/Poetry Ireland HQs in Parnell Square in Dublin city centre under URDF and the redevelopment of the Royal Irish Academy of Music, in partnership with the Department of Education.

Funding of over €1m was also distributed through the Cultural Digitisation Scheme in 2020, which will preserve and enhance the accessibility of our cultural heritage. A flagship initiative under this scheme is the Beyond 2022 digitisation project led by Trinity College Dublin which was progressed during 2020. This project seeks to rediscover and restore much of the archival material lost in the destruction of the Public Record Office in the Civil War

Recent years have seen the development of a nationwide infrastructure of arts centres, many of which were initiated and funded by local authorities and supported through capital schemes largely operated by the Department. Capital funding schemes operated by the Department continue to be focused on enhancing this existing stock of arts and culture centres. Over €2.6 million was invested in 2020 in enhancing local arts and cultural infrastructure to create and maintain opportunities for creativity, participation and creation across the EMRA region. This included support for projects under the various schemes such as under the Arts & Culture Capital Enhancement Support Scheme (ACCESS II) and the Arts and Culture Capital Scheme, the Cultural Capital Scheme and funding under the Live Performance Support Scheme, introduced to support artists and musicians of all genres, performers, technicians and other support staff in the live performance sector during the Covid pandemic.

Gaeltachts

The development of a flagship Irish language centre at 6 Harcourt Street, Dublin (Conradh na Gaeilge Headquarters) was progressed with planning permission obtained in late 2020. This centre will be a central place for Irish language learners and for Dublin's Irish speakers and will add a great deal to the visibility of the language and to the status of the Irish language in the capital.

Údarás na Gaeltachta is committed to progressing the following projects in the Meath Gaeltacht

- Novelplast – Baile Ghib - €3.5m. Refurbishment and upgrading of industrial building. 39 people employed in the company
- gteic@Baile Ghib - €60,000. This project will be completed by end of 2021
- gteic@ Rath Cairn - €100,000. Údarás expect to commence this project in 2021

In relation to tourism, the tourism executive with responsibility for strategic projects across the 7 counties is working with Comharchumann Ráth Chairn (executive & co-op members) to develop a local Heritage Centre (visitor attraction) and develop local tourism amenities in the area. A tourism working group is being set up. Údarás plans to invest €60,000 over a two-year period in a tourism officer that will oversee the development of the proposed visitor attraction. Prior to this, Údarás will appoint a tourism expert to prepare an overall tourism plan for area and the Centre to ensure the Officer will have a clear workplan and deliverables. This is planned for September/October 2021.

Sports

Sport Ireland launched a policy on Sport and Physical Activity in the Outdoors in September 2020. The goals of the policy are built around four target areas:

- Provide Leadership
- Build Capacity
- Support Infrastructure Development
- Create Opportunities

The policy contained specific national goals including, to continue to support the development of recreational trails in Ireland by promoting quality criteria and best practice and maintain a National Trails Register, and, to activate and promote existing and new outdoor recreation infrastructure in the State including Trails, Greenways, Parks, Forest Recreation Sites, Mountain Bike Trails and Blueways.

Sport Ireland supports a national network of 29 Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) charged with increasing participation rates in sport and physical activity in their respective counties. The LSP network coordinates and implements a broad mix of participation programmes and initiatives annually, based on the needs of local communities. In recent years, Sport Ireland have supported LSPs in delivering for their communities through the provision of various funding streams and initiatives under and including Dormant Account Funding, Healthy Ireland Funding, Core Funding, Covid-19 Funding and Women in Sport Funding.



B) Progress made by agencies that operate under the aegis of each Department, in supporting the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to that agency

The information contained at Section A above, includes the progress that has been made by agencies that operate under the aegis of the Department. The response submitted includes Sport Ireland, Údarás na Gaeltachta, Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland.

C) Details of any policy initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

The ongoing implementation of People, Place and Policy- Growing Tourism to 2025 and the Tourism Action Plan 2019-2021;

The Government's Tourism Policy Statement has been successfully implemented by way of two Tourism Action Plans, initially from 2016-2018 and latterly from 2019-2021. The implementation of the most recent Action Plan was interrupted by the need to respond to the devastating impact the COVID-19 crisis has wrought on the Irish tourism sector.

However, this Action Plan contained actions that aim to extend the regional benefits of tourism and ensure sustainable growth of Ireland's tourism sector in line with the objectives of the RSES. As provided for in the Action Plan a working group was established to review international best practice in sustainable tourism and to propose guiding principles for sustainable tourism development in Ireland. The group completed its work on this action in late 2019 and its report was subsequently published.

In line with the Programme for Government commitment, the development of a new national tourism policy, that mainstreams sustainability, will commence in the latter half of 2021 when the tourism sector starts to recover from the COVID-19 crisis. The development of this new policy set out a path for the coming years which will support a sustainable recovery and subsequent growth in the sector.

Central to developing a more resilient and sustainable tourism sector will be an increased focus on regional growth and season extension to deliver greater visitor dispersal throughout the country with a more even spread of demand across the year.

The ongoing work of the Recovery Oversight Group for the Tourism Sector;

On foot of the recommendation in the Tourism Recovery Plan 2020-2023, Minister Martin appointed an independently chaired Recovery Oversight Group in December 2020. The purpose of the Group is to monitor the implementation of the Recovery Plan produced by the Tourism Recovery Taskforce and monitor the sector's recovery from the COVID crisis.

The Oversight Group presented its first report to the Minister on the 15th February. The report highlights a number of areas on which it recommends the Government should focus its attention. The Group recently submitted its second report which focuses on reopening inbound tourism.

The Minister brought these reports to the attention of her colleagues in Government to ensure they are fully up to date with the position in tourism and to help inform the National Economic Recovery Plan. The Minister will keep the content of these report under review, together with the initial Recovery Plan produced by the Tourism Recovery Taskforce as the situation evolves.

Any other policy initiatives/developments that enhance the Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media sectors;

Major Sporting Events have the potential to drive participation in sport and contribute to economic growth. Major Events Division are developing a Major Sporting Events Policy to provide clear direction in the management and attraction of major sporting events to Ireland.

In addition to the above, The National Development Plan is currently being reviewed which will set out the Department's capital spending priorities to 2030. This will include investment in the National Cultural Institutions, in regional cultural development, in tourism projects and Fáilte Ireland, support investment in sport and Sport Ireland and in the Gaeltacht, Irish language and Údarás na Gaeltachta. It is expected the revised NDP will be published late summer 2021.

D) Details of any funding competitions/initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

Please also consult the above sections for details of relevant funding competitions/ initiatives/ developments that support the tourism sector in the Eastern and Midland Region.

Sports Capital Programme

The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country. In 2020, €26.2m was distributed to organisations allocated grants under previous rounds of the programme including €13.9 in the Eastern and Midland Region. Payment of these grants will continue throughout 2021.

At the end of 2020 a new round of the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme was opened for applications. By the closing date of 1st March, 3,106 applications were submitted seeking over €200m in funding. This is the highest number of applications ever received. 1,179 applications were submitted from the Eastern and Midland Region seeking €76m. Allocations will be made in tranches during 2021 as assessments are completed.

Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF)

The Large-Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF) was launched in 2018 to provide Exchequer support for larger sports facility projects, including swimming pools, with at least €100m being made available over the period to 2027. The current fund opened for applications in 2018 and closed on 17th April 2019. Approximately €86.4m of the €100m allocation has been awarded to date.

Of the 33 projects in receipt of LSSIF funding, 14 are from the Eastern and Midland Region and they have been allocated funding in excess of €38m.

Annual Funding (Arts, Culture and Film)

The Department indicated that a number of organisations are in receipt of annual funding from the Department for the EMR for the period 2020-2021. These projects address a specific cultural need and support the high-level goal of the Department in relation to enhancing access to the arts, culture and film sectors and recognising the social and economic role of these sectors in Ireland. The projects make a very important contribution to the development and promotion of Ireland's cultural tourism offering, to the benefit of both the domestic and foreign tourist and represent an important component of the delivery of the cultural tourism commitments in the Programme for Government.

Grantees 2020	Area	Amount
Marsh's Library	Dublin	€445,000.00
Science Gallery	Dublin	€350,000.00
Irish Manuscript Commission	Dublin	€297,500.00
James Joyce Centre	Dublin	€207,000.00
National Print Museum	Dublin	€175,000.00
Little Museum of Dublin	Dublin	€70,000.00
Irish Museums Association (IMA)	Dublin	€40,000.00
National Maritime Museum	Dublin	€14,500.00
National Transport Museum	Dublin	€20,000.00

Grantees 2021	Area	Amount
Marsh's Library	Dublin	€ 410,000.00
Science Gallery	Dublin	€ 320,000.00
Irish Manuscript Commission	Dublin	€ 270,000.00
James Joyce Centre	Dublin	€ 185,000.00
National Print Museum	Dublin	€ 155,000.00
Little Museum of Dublin	Dublin	€ 70,000.00
Irish Museums Association (IMA)	Dublin	€ 60,000.00
National Maritime Museum	Dublin	€ 15,000.00
National Transport Museum	Dublin	€ 20,000.00

Small Scale Local Festivals and Summer Schools Funding Scheme

The Small-Scale Local Festivals and Summer Schools Funding Scheme is reserved for appropriate not-for-profit festivals, summer schools and other such similar events. The Scheme is designed to support local cultural festivals and summer schools which are not in receipt of other central Government monies and which may not be eligible under funding criteria for larger scale events supported by Fáilte Ireland, the Arts Council and similar bodies. Events which are funded by the Arts Council and Fáilte Ireland are not eligible. The projects make a very important contribution to the development and promotion of Ireland's cultural tourism offering, to the benefit of both the domestic and foreign tourist and represent an important component of the delivery of the cultural tourism commitments in the Programme for Government.

Small Scale Local Festivals & Summer Schools Funding Scheme 2020	Area	Amount
Dublin Arabic Film Festival	Dublin	€3,000.00
Drama League of Ireland CLG	Dublin	€5,000.00
Cherry Orchard Dublin Circus Festival	Dublin	€3,000.00
Clowns Without Border's	Dublin	€3,000.00
Smashing Times International Centre	Dublin	€3,500.00

The Small Scale Local Festivals and Summer Schools Funding Scheme ran again in 2021 and assessment of applications will take place shortly.

Co-operation with Northern Ireland Funding Scheme

This scheme provides funding support for small self-contained projects which seek to enhance, celebrate or commemorate the artistic, cultural, musical, film or heritage of the Island of Ireland on a North/South basis. Projects funded this scheme meet a specific cultural need and support the Department in the delivery of its objective to nurture and develop Irish artistic and creative talent and enhance arts access, the national cultural institutions, regional arts infrastructure and cultural tourism countrywide, in cooperation with national and local authorities and other partners.

Co-operation with Northern Ireland Funding Scheme 2020	Area	Amount
Irish Heritage Trust	Dublin	€6,000.00
Children's Books Ireland	Dublin	€10,000.00
Irish Museums Association (IMA)	Dublin	€9,000.00
Fighting Words	Dublin	€9,000.00
Smashing Times	Dublin	€15,000.00
The Irish Military Heritage Foundation	Kildare	€9,000.00

The Co-operation with Northern Ireland Funding Scheme ran again in 2021 and assessment of applications will take place shortly.

Regional Museum Exhibition Scheme

The Regional Museum Exhibition Scheme provides funding support for local, regional and specialised museums, to promote and enhance the marketing of these institutions through the provision of funding for capital exhibition costs.

Regional Museum Exhibition Scheme 2020	Area	Amount
National Transport Museum	Dublin	€7,500.00
Irish Architectural Archive (IAA)	Dublin	€9,785.00
Little Museum of Dublin	Dublin	€10,000.00
Marsh's Library	Dublin	€10,000.00
DIAS Dunsink Observatory	Dublin	€10,000.00
The GAA Museum	Dublin	€5,000.00
Highlanes Gallery	Louth	€10,000.00

The Regional Museum Exhibition Scheme ran again in 2021 and assessment of applications will take place shortly.

E) Details of the funding programmes administered by each Department (and agencies under the aegis of each department), over the last two years, which have been awarded within the Eastern and Midland Region

Please see above section.

F) Any other comments that were made with respect to each Department (including any agencies under the aegis of each Department) and implementing the RSES, including any recommendations that are considered would facilitate the process

The Department and its agencies are committed to building strong working relationship with the EMRA given mutual areas of interest and strong synergies between the Department's investment priorities and those of the EMRA.

G) Response and Recommendations of the Regional Assembly

The Assembly welcome the information submitted by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, and commend the effort made in presenting a coordinated report for the purposes of RSES Monitoring.

On review of the information submitted, the Assembly are satisfied that the Department have carried out a number of actions that have enabled progress to be made in implementing the RSES and welcome this progress.

Having regard to the information submitted, The Assembly consider that the work to date could be enhanced and make the following recommendation to NOAC for consideration;

- The Regional Assembly should be afforded opportunity to inform the implementation process of the Department's Tourism Action Plan, other relevant tourism policy documents, and at a high level the direction of funding, to ensure that tourism measures, and in particular those aimed at enhancing regional destinations, are guided to appropriate and necessary locations that support the spatial strategy of the RSES, which provides a framework for future growth, ensuring the delivery of effective regional development through the realisation of viable and vital places. This includes championing the capital city of Dublin as a smart, climate-resilient and global city region; securing Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk as Regional Growth Centres, acting as regional economic drivers and supports for their wider catchment areas; and promoting a network of large economically active Key Towns⁹ that provide employment and services to their surrounding areas. All of this is supported by Self-Sustaining Growth Towns, Self-Sustaining Towns and a network of multifaceted Rural Places which are home to a number of important tourism assets. It is essential that policy and investment priorities reflect this spatial strategy to allow managed and sustainable growth that enables each place to fulfil ambition and potential.

⁹ Swords, Maynooth, Bray, Navan, Naas, Wicklow, Longford, Mullingar, Tullamore and Portlaoise.

5.1.2.6 Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

The mission of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is to provide high-quality education which will (a) enable individuals to achieve their full potential and to participate fully as members of society; and (b) contribute to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development. This is aligned to the RSES and in particular RSO 13 which is to "improve education skills and social inclusion" and RSO 12 which is "to build a resilient economic base and promote innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystems that support smart specialisation, cluster development and sustained economic growth." It is also aligned with RSO 5 which is to "enhance, integrate and protect our arts, culture and heritage assets to promote creative places and heritage led regeneration."

A) Progress made in supporting the objectives of the RSES

The Department were asked to identify the progress that has been made in supporting the objectives of the RSES that are applicable to them. This included, for instance: learning and training activities; the role of universities, research centres and Education Training Boards; progress in the development of multi-campus Technological Universities (TUs); progressing regeneration and economic synergies in proximity to education campus development; the development of Technology and Innovation Poles anchored by Regional Scientific Centres, and the development of sites where high-tech and high potential start-ups can thrive, in conjunction with IoTs and Universities; the enhancement of skills, talent and innovation and fostering of collaboration between enterprise, higher education institutions and public sector, to identify areas for investment in Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) as part of a smart specialisation approach; rolling out the 'Smart Cities' concept throughout the Region; future proofing and anticipating economic structural change, and; benchmarking Ireland's performance in RDI against other comparable economies and progress towards improving our comparative performance.

Ministerial cover letter

In the cover letter attached to the report submitted by the Department, the Minister outlined the determination of the Department to help deliver balanced regional development that supports the aspirations of our young people no matter their background, to provide education services in the region that act as a catalyst for economic and social development into the future, to support research efforts which will position our country as a global research leader, and to ensure nobody is left behind as we emerge from this global crisis which has changed so much for so many people. The cover letter identified the Department's efforts in progressing initiatives aimed at delivering on the RSES, including the continued advancement of the Technological Universities agenda (including the Technological Universities Transformation Fund), the development of the Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024, the reform of the Higher Education Authority Act 1971, the Science Foundation Ireland strategy 2025, and the Skills to Advance initiative.

Learning and training activities

Under the Skills to Advance policy initiative, SOLAS and the ETBs have developed a wide range of programmes and flexible delivery systems to provide over 7,800 upskilling opportunities to employees in the EMR from 2019 to end March 2021. The policy supports both employees who are vulnerable to disruption of their employment due to technology, market diversification and change in work practices and their employers who benefit from highly subsidised training solutions to sustain and grow their businesses. Companies are being supported by ETBs to partner in the development of their staff to achieve improved productivity, competitiveness and sustained development of the region.

The Skills and Labour Market Research Unit in SOLAS have supported the Eastern and Midlands area through targeted research and regional analysis in relation to skills planning and in support of their response to the Pandemic. Two specific reports applicable to the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly area were carried out by SOLAS. The Reports can be accessed via the SOLAS website.

In terms of education and training activity, the Grangegorman Labour and Learning Forum (GLLF) identified the area of digital skills as a key focus for future engagement. In pursuit of this a survey of current provision of basic digital skills in and around the Grangegorman area was undertaken. A submission to the SOLAS Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital literacy 10-Year Strategy for Ireland that highlighted the connections between a digital divide and a literacy/numeracy divide, and underlined the necessity for basic proficiency in literacy and numeracy in order to access the digital world was made. The Education and Training Coordinator continued to advise and support TU Dublin's Access & Civic Engagement Path 3 Programme, a HEA-funded programme that supports the development of regional and community partnership strategies for increasing access to higher education by specified groups. The GLLF also continued to support and promote the TU Dublin Access to Apprenticeship Programme whose latest cohort of learners began the programme in September.

In addition, the Public Art Project at Grangegorman has worked with education, health and community groups to deliver the ground-breaking Pre-Texts Literacy and Citizenship programme to teachers, trainers, artists, community workers and youth leaders working in Dublin's North West Inner City.

The role of universities, research centres and Education Training Boards

The Department's response can be summarised in terms of 'Capital Investment', 'Upskilling and Training' and 'Research'.

Capital Investment

The Public-Private Partnership Programme for the Higher Education sector will deliver a number of major capital projects for the region in the coming years, including buildings at TU Dublin Tallaght, TU Dublin Blanchardstown, Athlone IT (newly established TU with LIT) and IADT. This programme responds directly to skills needs at the regional level, with a particular emphasis on STEM disciplines.

Other major Higher Education capital projects in the region include:

- The Dublin City University teaching, research and innovation building which is at final design phase.
- Trinity College Dublin E3 building which is on site for the enabling works phase of the project.
- UCD Future Campus Project which has recently secured planning permission.
- The Maynooth University Technology Society and Innovation Building which is under construction.
- The Royal Irish Academy of Music Westland Row Project which is under construction.

Upskilling and Training

As well as provision of skills for the economy through mainstream undergraduate and postgraduate provision, higher education institutions provide targeted skills initiatives to provide support for people to upskill and reskill in areas of identified skills need.

Springboard+ 2020 and HCI Pillar 1 were announced on 17th June 2020. The initiatives complement the core State-funded education and training system and provide free and subsidised upskilling and reskilling higher education opportunities in areas of identified skills need. Under both programmes almost 19,000 new places are available to people seeking to upskill or reskill over the next 3 years. This includes an additional 2,129 places across both programmes in 2020, as a response to upskilling and reskilling needs arising from the Covid-19 pandemic and a further 2,000 places under July stimulus funding. 15,000 commenced in 2020, with the additional 4,000 places coming on stream over the remaining 2 years. 14,641 people are currently enrolled on Springboard+ 2020/21 courses. Of the 14,641 enrolled, 3,467 participants are unemployed people, 426 are Returners and 10,748 are in employment.

Courses are free for unemployed, including those in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, returners and those in employment participating at level 6 of the NFQ. Employed people participating on courses at levels 7 and above in the NFQ contribute 10% of the course cost, with the remainder being funded by the Government. Courses are delivered in areas such as ICT, Engineering, Manufacturing, Medical Devices, Construction, Hospitality, Business, Administration and Entrepreneurship. In addition to addressing identified skills needs, providers are asked to be cognisant of four areas which have been deemed by Government as being of critical importance: digital skills, transversal skills, management and leadership, and the workplace of the future.

Springboard+ 2020 courses were delivered in all of the Universities and Institutes of Technology, TU Dublin, 14 privately-run colleges and one College of Further Education and Training. Almost half of the courses approved are in the Eastern and Midlands area.

The Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in the Eastern and Midlands area include: Longford & Westmeath, Laois & Offaly, Kildare & Wicklow and Louth & Meath. Specific information on overall FET provision is available in the FET System Reports for 2018 and 2019 with specific detail at an individual ETB level available in the SOLAS published service plans. Data and reports on 2020 are still being finalised.

Under the Skills to advance policy focused initiatives and programmes are being created and rolled out by ETBs to meet emerging skills and to provide upskilling and reskilling opportunities to support those in low skilled employment to avoid displacement and retain employment.

These include:

- Leadership and management to provide critical skills to assist companies to adapt to the new business environment and upskill their supervisors in key skills such as managing remote workers, teamworking, motivating staff, managing change, lean principles and digital skills.
- Hospitality and tourism: Developing Leaders for Hospitality and Tourism covers upskilling opportunities and provides career paths for those working in the sector. Key skills include: operational, customer care, people management, financial/controls, green / sustainability, strategic planning and management, change management, communications, health and safety, digital skills
- High demand courses are also in healthcare support, management, early childcare support, business administration and ICDL
- Innovation projects are being funded by SOLAS and developed by ETBs in the region and focus on new areas such as NZEB, advanced manufacturing, innovative technology use in curriculum design and delivery, enterprise engagement and RPL.

These initiatives have been designed and developed in collaboration with strategic partners to include companies, industry for a, enterprise bodies, Higher Education institutions and the Regional Skills Fora.

Research

The Department's response states that Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) funds research that makes a real difference to our society and economy, now and into the future. SFI funds research in Ireland's Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) - often in partnership with Industry or other national and international research funders. Through this funding they are ensuring that Ireland has the skills, ideas and technologies that is needed to be a true global knowledge economy and that societal challenges are being addressed. SFI ensure that they are only funding world class research by engaging independent international experts, all of whom are based outside of Ireland, to review the research proposals that SFI receives and to review the investments they make. SFI funding opportunities are open to all HEIs across the country and through an extensive peer review process funding is awarded based on the available budget. SFI strive to ensure a balanced portfolio which places an emphasis on early and advanced research careers, frontiers/discovery and applied research, research projects that are led by individuals and small groups as well as large scale research centres. SFI research teams are at the forefront of new discoveries and advancements and are producing the highly skilled talent needed for companies that have established a presence in Ireland, SMEs, and for academia and our public sector. SFI Research Professors are acting as magnets for the best international talent and industry and SFI is investing in the critical infrastructure, providing institutes and researchers with the equipment they require to carry out world class research.

In March of 2021, An Taoiseach, Micheal Martin along with Simon Harris, Minister for Further and Higher Education Research, Innovation and Science, launched SFI's new 2025 Strategy, Shaping our Future. The new strategy has been developed through extensive consultation with stakeholders throughout Ireland and aims to further unlock the potential of Irish research to meet current challenges, seize future opportunities and support the priorities outlined in Ireland's recent Programme for Government: Our Shared Future. In response to the current challenges Ireland is facing, the strategy optimises Ireland's ability to prepare for future crises and to scale its knowledge economy. The Department's response states that as we prepare for Ireland's future, science will play a crucial role in helping us as a country anticipate what's next, plan for our future skills and collaborate with the research community, industry, citizens, agencies and Government. These ambitions are addressed under two pillars within the strategy, 'Delivering Today' and 'Preparing for Tomorrow'. 'Delivering Today' focuses on developing Ireland's top talent, building on our excellent research base and maximising tangible societal and economic benefits for Ireland in the immediate future. 'Preparing for Tomorrow' seeks to position Ireland to take first-mover advantage on new and emerging fields. To do this, SFI will focus on anticipating what's next and developing the skills needed for the future of work using a data led approach. To achieve this SFI will increase collaborations across the research ecosystem to maximise efficiencies and impact.

Since launching in 2012, the SFI Research Centres have transformed the research ecosystem in Ireland, creating an environment where multi-institutional and multi/inter-disciplinary collaborations are now the norm and where industry (both SMEs and MNCs) can effectively join and collaborate with these academic networks. The SFI Research Centres are helping to improve the quality of people's lives through healthcare, informing public policy on climate change mitigation and they have been instrumental in the delivery of SFI's Education and Public Engagement strategy, including increasing engagement with underserved and underrepresented communities across Ireland. SFI Research Centres will play a critical role in helping Ireland recover from and succeed in the face of unprecedented global challenges such as BREXIT, future pandemics and climate change. Such threats also present opportunities to harness Ireland's scientific human capital to create innovative solutions through research and innovation, to ultimately create a more resilient economy and society. To date, Centres have developed research excellence in areas of national priority, supporting indigenous and multinational industries as well as informing policy development through collaborations with government departments. The Centres rapidly pulled together in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, with boundaries between Centres no longer visible, responding as a highly interconnected, coordinated and open network ready to respond to the specific challenges to be addressed.

A key objective of the Centres is to support SME competitiveness through R&D collaborations, an objective that is critically important in terms of realising the potential for Centres to positively impact on rebooting of the Irish economy. According to the most recent data, SMEs represents approximately 30% of all industry contracts signed with Centres. The majority of contracts represent one-off engagements with low levels of repeat business. The extent of engagement is highly sector dependent with sectors such as medical devices, renewable energy and IT characterised by high SME engagement, while others such as Pharma are dominated by multi-nationals. Centres have adopted a variety of models to ensure SMEs can collaborate and are not disadvantaged by cost share requirements. These include consortium/membership models (lower co-funding contribution required by SMEs) in addition to the provision of consultancy and innovation services and training workshops. Much of the engagement is facilitated through EI programmes, such as the Innovation Voucher, which Centres use as a relationship building tool, effectively a steppingstone to a full R&D collaboration.

SFI currently supports 16 SFI Research Centres, 8 of which are hosted in Higher Education Institutes within the Eastern and Midland Region. A key objective of the Centres is to support SME competitiveness through R&D collaborations, an objective that is critically important in terms of realising the potential for Centres to positively impact on rebooting of the Irish economy. It is important to note that although the Higher Education Institutes with responsibility for these Research Centres are based within the Eastern and Midland Region (Dublin) their academic and industry partners are located right across Ireland. Equally, HEIs within the Eastern and Midland Region that are not hosts of the other 8 SFI Research Centres are academic partners on those Centres.

Cross-cutting 'upskilling and training' and 'research', SFI currently funds 6 SFI Centres for Research Training (CRTs) that are collectively hosted across a partner network of 10 research bodies. The purpose of the Centres is to provide cohorts of academically outstanding future research leaders and with the skills and knowledge required to address the future challenges of an ever-changing work environment. The SFI Centres for Research Training aim to promote excellence in research and education and will train over 700 doctoral students in data and ICT skills; equipping them with transversal, cross-sectoral and discipline specific skills. The SFI Centres for Research Training are a new and critical dimension of Ireland's fourth level education system which have been modelled on international best practice and have been funded following rigorous international peer review. There are currently 6 SFI Centres for Research Training, two of which are hosted at Higher Education Institutes in the Eastern and Midland Region 1) SFI Centre for Research Training in Machine Learning, 2) SFI Centre for Research Training in Digitally Enhanced Reality. As is the case with SFI Research Centres, the SFI Centres for Research Training involve industry and academic partners across Ireland.

Progress in the development of multi-campus Technological Universities (TUs)

The creation of Technological Universities is a key commitment within the Programme for Government and will deliver significant advantages to national priorities in relation to Higher Education access, research-informed teaching and learning, as well as supporting enterprise and regional development. The Technological Universities Act (2018) highlights the role of the TUs in developing and promoting strong social and cultural links, and links supporting creativity, between the technological university and the community in the region in which the campuses of the technological university are located. The Act also promotes effective relationships between TUs and organisations representing the social, creative and cultural interests of the community in the region in which the campuses of the technological university are located.

The Department's response provides progress updates for TU Dublin, the Athlone IT and Limerick IT Consortium, the TUSEI Consortium, Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT), and for the Institute of Art, Design and Technology Dun Laoghaire (IADT).

TU Dublin

Campus locations: Grangegorman, Tallaght, Blanchardstown

In 2019, TU Dublin was the largest provider of third level education in Ireland with over 29,000 students enrolled in a wide range of disciplines. The university provided opportunities across the NFQ levels and for a diverse student base, with a large cohort of part-time learners representing almost 20% of the national part-time student population. In its first year, TU Dublin conferred 8,232 graduates with qualifications ranging from Level 6 to Level 10. TU Dublin has some 3,500 staff.

TU Dublin published both its first strategic report and annual report in 2020. The plan "TU Dublin Strategic Intent 2030" centres on the three pillars of 'People', 'Planet' and 'Partnership' with a vision to 'Create a Better World Together'. Notable goals include the aims to have at least 1/6 of revenues from non-Exchequer sources, delivery of a new organisational design, 1/3 of offerings delivered through multiple pathways, be in the top 3 Irish universities for graduate employability and be the largest provider of lifelong learning for industry and the professions, all by 2023.

Along with investment in technology enabled systems, the design and investment of over 200,000m² of new campus development is prioritised in the TU Dublin strategy. The university is seeing the roll-out of state-of-the art facilities in the city campus and this building programme, the largest education infrastructure project underway in the State, will continue at Grangegorman through the period of the strategic plan to 2023. New PPP facilities of 4,000m² and 5,200 m² respectively are at final business case stage for the Blanchardstown and Tallaght campuses.

Athlone IT and Limerick IT Consortium

Campus locations: Athlone (AIT) Limerick City - Clare St (UT), Clonmel (LIT), Moylish (LIT), Ennis (LIT), Thurles (LIT).

On 20 November 2020, the Minister received a joint application under section 29(1) of the Technological Universities Act 2018 from Athlone Institute of Technology and Limerick Institute of Technology seeking technological university designation. On 21 December 2020, the Minister appointed an advisory panel to assess the application and to furnish a report thereon to the HEA. The advisory panel's report was furnished to the HEA on 12 February 2021.

The Minister received this report along with the views of the HEA on 1 April 2021 and is currently considering this material before making a decision on the application.

TUSEI consortium

Campus locations: Cork Road Campus - Waterford City (WIT), College Street Campus - Waterford City (WIT), The Granary Campus (Architecture Dept) - Waterford City (WIT), West Campus (WIT Arena & Arc Labs) - Waterford City (WIT), Applied Technology Campus (in the IDA Industrial Estate off Browne's Road) - Waterford City (WIT) Carlow Town (IT Carlow), Wexford Town (IT Carlow) & Wicklow (IT Carlow).

The TUSEI consortium, comprising IT Carlow and Waterford IT, submitted an application for TU designation to the Minister on 30 April 2021. The Department and the Higher Education Authority are in ongoing engagement with both Waterford Institute of Technology and Institute of Technology Carlow in relation to campus development plans across all proposed TU locations. IT Carlow offers courses at its Wicklow County Campus, Rathnew, Co. Wicklow. IT Carlow advised the Department that it has an excellent relationship with Wicklow County Council and a shared ambition for the development of Wicklow County Campus. The Department understands that an MOU was agreed between the parties reaffirming their commitment to Wicklow County Campus.

Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT)

As autonomous higher education institutes established under statute, it remains a matter for the governing body of an Institute of Technology to set the institute's particular strategic pathway within the higher education landscape, including whether or not to seek joint TU designation through the prescribed legal processes. Under the statutory framework provided in the Technological Universities Act 2018, two or more IoTs may jointly seek TU designation through a prescribed legislative process. Section 29 of the 2018 Act provides for the application jointly by two or more applicant institutes to the Minister of Education and Skills for an order seeking designation as a TU subject to their jointly meeting specified eligibility criteria. Section 38 of the 2018 Act provides that an applicant institute and an established technological university may apply to the Minister for an order.

In June 2020, DkIT launched a new three-year strategic plan in which the Institute articulates a mission to be a leader for higher education and craft apprenticeships, and the engine for growth and social cohesion in North Leinster-South Ulster through the achievement of TU status and strengthened cross-border alliances. Dr Ruaidhri Neavyn was appointed by the HEA as an advisor to assist the President, Governing Body and Management Team in achieving DkIT's strategic objective to achieve Technological University (TU) status. DkIT is currently developing a TU Vision which lays out its ambitions, capabilities and strengths in terms of how it will contribute to the strategic development and evolution of a multi campus TU as described in the 2018 TU legislation. DkIT has recently submitted an application to the HEA for further funding, as part of the second cycle of the TU Transformation Fund initiative, to support their aim to meet the required TU metrics as soon as possible.

Institute of Art, Design and Technology

Dun Laoghaire (IADT)

In October 2020, IADT received funding under the Transformation Fund to explore potential trajectories towards TU designation under the 2018 Act.

Progressing regeneration and economic synergies in proximity to education campus development

The request form provided to the Department from EMRA sought information regarding regeneration and economic synergies in proximity to education campus development campus development in the Dublin Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) including Grangegorman, St. James Hospital-Diageo lands, a new Maynooth Research and Technology Park, and the Dublin Enterprise Zone (in proximity to Blanchardstown IT). The response from the Department was limited to developments at Grangegorman.

The Grangegorman Development Agency (GDA) - along with development partners - are continuing to implement one of the largest regeneration projects undertaken in Dublin in recent years. Located within the north inner Dublin City, the development will reveal Grangegorman as a new health and education urban quarter. The c.30ha project site has been designated a Strategic Development Zone (SDZ), in recognition of its significance to the Irish Government as a project of economic and social importance to the State. The project is being procured, coordinated and delivered by the GDA, on behalf of our stakeholders - the Health Service Executive (HSE), Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin), the Department of Education and the communities in the neighbourhoods about the site.

The Construction of a c. 4,414 m² Greenway Hub building, a c.16,000m² East Quad and a c.33,000m² Central Quad (PPPs) is now complete, accommodating academic activities and facilities required for the environmental health sciences institute and business incubation space, the College of Arts & Tourism, College of Sciences & Health and College of Engineering & Built Environment. It is anticipated that the TU Dublin developments will provide capacity for a student population of c.15,000 by 2024.

The Lower House, formerly the Richmond Lunatic Asylum is now open to c. 4335.3m² of development that includes music practice rooms, student union offices, a restaurant and coffee shop, some sport and recreation activities (exercise studios, dance studio) and general student support services. Other key elements to be delivered in the short term include the HSE new primary care centre (located in the Old Laundry Building), all-weather, GAA, Rugby and soccer pitches opened along with new playground for local children, a new link from Broadstone Plaza and the first phase of a new site energy centre complete.

By 2023, the GDA also expects to have delivered a c.100 bed Residential Care Neighbourhood project for the HSE. This project will provide homes for the elderly and those with a mental health support need. There are a series of significant further developments for the HSE which are at an initial stage of pre-development discussion. These projects will include clinical and administrative spaces along with potential capacity for further housing development all bordering the North Circular Road. In addition, the SDZ includes provision for a substantial - c.60,000m² - multi-storey mixed-use commercial development at Broadstone. These developments will significantly increase the diversity of the site population and increase the demand to access the site from the North Circular Rd. in particular. A new 24 Classroom Educate Together National School is also now under construction. The new complex of buildings will replace a current temporary facility, and will be home to a school population of c.700 when it opens in late 2022.

The development of Technology and Innovation Poles anchored by Regional Scientific Centres, and the development of sites where high-tech and high potential start-ups can thrive, in conjunction with IoTs and Universities.

A key goal of SFI's Strategy, Shaping our Future, is to "increase geographical involvement and engagement across the country, including through the SFI Research Centres, and increased collaboration with the new Technological Universities and the Institutes of Technology to ensure that benefits arising from SFI activities are realised across the entirety of Ireland." In support of this goal, the newly formed Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFERIS) provided budget to SFI to support excellent and impactful research which benefits from the unique strengths of both sectors. Consequently, a research programme will be launched inviting research proposals led by the Technological University (TU)/ Institutes of Technology (IoT) sector with partners from the established University sector. This investment will not only increase financially supported collaboration between the sectors but importantly will provide leadership opportunities for the TU/IoT sector.

The enhancement of skills, talent and innovation and fostering of collaboration between enterprise, higher education institutions and public sector, to identify areas for investment in Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) as part of a smart specialisation approach

The Department is leading the development of the next national Research and Innovation Strategy. The next strategy contributes to and aligns with key national economic and social policy documents, such as Project 2040, (the National Economic Plan/National Recovery and Resilience Plan, Programme for Government, Statement of Strategy for DFHERIS), as well as the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. DETE is currently developing Ireland's new S3 which involves a 'bottom-up' consultation process where government, business, academia and civil society identify a region's strengths and comparative assets, prioritise research and innovation investment in competitive areas and define a shared vision for regional innovation. DFHERIS will be a member of the S3 steering group led by DETE. DFHERIS will work with DETE and other key stakeholders to ensure that the priorities identified in the S3 are reflected in the next national Strategy and that there is coordination/collaboration and efficiency in the development of both over the coming months.

SFI's 2025 strategy Shaping Our Future sets out the vision that Ireland will be a global innovation leader in scientific and engineering research for the advancement of Ireland's economy and society. The 'Tangible Benefits' theme in 'Delivering Today' aims for the research SFI fund to make the greatest possible difference for our society and economy. In support of this, SFI seeks to foster academia-industry interactions by building strategic partnerships with industry to perform cutting-edge, industry-informed STEM research. There are three key themes within 'Preparing for' Tomorrow: A Cohesive Ecosystem, Future Skills and Anticipating What's Next. Actions under the Cohesive Ecosystem pillar include improving how SFI communicate, engage and work with others in the Irish RD&I system to increase our collective performance and efficiency. It is about better co-funding of programmes and alignment and cooperation nationally, and with Northern Ireland and Britain. Key to this will be significantly upscaling engagement with the public to determine their priorities and highlighting opportunities for them to play a role in the research conducted in Ireland.

The SFI Research Centres are a critical platform for industry/academic research collaboration. The Centres and their industry partners are working together in areas of strategic importance to Ireland and in line with the national research prioritisation areas. The newly launched SFI Industry RD&I Fellowship seeks to support academia-industry interactions and to address industry-informed challenges. Awards under this programme can be made to academic researchers (at faculty and postdoctoral level) wishing to spend time in industry worldwide through the temporary placement of academic researchers with an industry partner.

SFI also launched the SFI Public Service Fellowship in 2020 as an initiative offering researchers a unique opportunity to be temporarily seconded to Government Departments, Agencies and the Library & Research Service of the Oireachtas to work on projects with mutually beneficial outcomes. Host organisations included: Office of the Revenue Commissioners, Local Government Management Agency, Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, Food Safety Authority of Ireland, Oireachtas Library & Research Service, Houses of the Oireachtas Service and Department of Justice and Equality.

The fellowships awarded will foster innovation within the Public Sector by supporting the development and implementation of data-driven and evidence-based approaches. This programme was run as a pilot programme but it is anticipated that it will run again, should requisite budget and resources become available.

Rolling out the 'Smart Cities' concept throughout the Region

The response from the Department made reference to the Grangegorman development and 'challenge-based funding'.

The Grangegorman site now benefits from increased levels of accessibility following the delivery of several initiatives proposed in the Transport Strategy (2016 - 2035) currently under review. This includes the Luas Cross City. Grangegorman has also benefited from the expansion of the Dublin Bikes scheme and the Luas Green Line Capacity Enhancement. The progression of the Luas Green Line Extension to Finglas and DART+ in recent times is welcomed. These schemes will improve transportation options for Grangegorman further when delivered. Most recently, measures delivered as part of the joint NTA/Dublin City Council (DCC) COVID Interim Mobility Intervention Programme have delivered safety and environmental improvements to the Grangegorman area.

'Challenge-based funding' is a solution-focused approach to research funding that uses prizes, strict timelines, teamwork, and competition to direct research activities at ambitious societal problems. Several leading countries and private philanthropic funding organisations have pioneered this approach in recent years. Many of the existing challenges facing humanity are encapsulated in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, including climate action, affordable and clean energy, and sustainable cities and communities.

SFI plans to develop, with others, a national challenge-based funding programme to deliver solutions to cross cutting challenges laid out in Our Shared Future and Project Ireland 2040. This national approach, involving several departments and actors, would be a step-change in the national system and a step-change in how Irish research creates positive benefits and value for the people of Ireland. SFI is already running a number of Challenge based Funding programmes, which are open to all HEIs across the country to put together teams and apply to the programme.

These include:

- Food Challenge
- Plastics Challenge
- AI for Societal Good Challenge
- Zero Emissions Challenge

Future proofing and anticipating economic structural change

The response from the Department made reference to the Grangegorman development and SFI Investments.

Uncertainty still persists in relation to the long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic - from no change in the long term to substantial change in patterns of attendance at work and study. In the meantime, Architects are attempting to design in flexibility in terms of future use of space at Grangegorman and mechanical and passive ventilation to help sanitise working environments. To some degree, the possible and potential effects of Brexit have been masked by COVID but in the meantime, the general consensus is that business will deal with the impacts as they arise, and pass on the cost to the customer where necessary.

The preparation of design briefs for teams appointed to the Grangegorman project is carefully considered in terms of future proofing the buildings on campus. Each brief is prepared for the particular type of building planned and its intended use in either the healthcare or education sector. Design teams are requested to select plant and materials to be used in the construction process that comply with EU standards to allow procurement specialists to select manufacturers within the EU and thus mitigate the negative impacts of Brexit on the supply chains. All buildings must be flexible to address the rapidly changing technology sector and to ensure that the end product, when constructed, is harnessed with the latest proven technologies.

The Grangegorman Development Agency is - through the procurement process currently underway for technical consultants for the new FOCAS Research Institute (4,500m² research facility) - pursuing digital and technological advances in off-site construction methods and addressing the impact of embodied carbon on climate change. The project sets out as a primary objective Environmental Responsibility and will address whole life considerations such as embodied carbon and circularity. Targets have been set around embodied carbon that will be developed, integrated and evaluated through Life Cycle Assessment. A Life Cycle Assessor will form part of the Design Team from the earliest stages demonstrating a commitment to advancing this aspect of action on climate change. It is stipulated in the briefing and procurement documentation that a range of solutions and opportunities must be considered in the reduction of embodied carbon. It is anticipated that integration of structure, facade, service strategies and fire engineering will be critical in the success of a low embodied carbon solution. The potential for off-site, modular construction and low carbon materials such as mass timber both to affect whole life carbon and minimise time-on-site must be interrogated as fundamental design principles. This reflects potential advancement of construction technologies and the digitisation of the construction process.

The investments in research made by SFI, on behalf of the Government of Ireland, are central to providing the people, skills, ideas, knowledge, technologies, companies and infrastructure that Ireland needs as we emerge from the pandemic and address other challenges such as climate change and BREXIT. One of the core ambitions in the new SFI Strategy is Preparing for Tomorrow.

This encompasses the three key themes: A Cohesive Ecosystem, Future Skills and Anticipating What's Next.

- Anticipating What's Next is about working with the very latest data, data analytics and expertise to pro-actively identify areas Ireland could and should have strategic advantage in, what research areas to invest in, who to partner with and why this should happen in Ireland.
- It is also about exploring new ways of working within SFI and new ways of doing research, such as advancing and increasing the scale of Challenge-based funding and using ARPA like approaches whereby programme managers will have direct involvement in the management and direction of the research, with opportunities to fund high-risk high-gain and disruptive innovation projects within them to achieve specific goals and objectives.
- The outputs from Anticipating What's Next will feed into the development of new programmes launched across other themes within the strategy and will feed into the evolution of existing SFI programmes.

Benchmarking Ireland's performance in RDI against other comparable economies and progress towards improving our comparative performance

No response provided

B) Progress made by agencies that operate under the aegis of each Department, in supporting the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to that agency

Programmes are being rolled out across the regions through the local Education and Training Boards using innovative approaches to ensure sustainable employment for those in low skilled work. The aim is to provide them with upskilling and reskilling opportunities in order to avail of emerging opportunities and or to avoid displacement. Companies can harness these new and enhanced skillsets to boost productivity and growth of their business. The policy also supports SMEs to invest in and futureproof their workforce by anticipating and responding to disruptions in work due to the impact of technology, changing work practices and business processes and market trends. Opportunities offered through STA incorporate digital, socio-emotional and technical skills development for employees and employers.

Apprenticeships

- 60 national apprenticeship programmes in operation, and increase of 35 since 2016.
- These programmes include craft professions such as electrician, carpentry, plumbing and motor mechanics but now provision also includes a variety of new careers such as IT, finance, insurance, accounting technician, hairdressing, cheffing, bio-pharma, auctioneering and more.
- Population of c20,000 Apprentices as of end-Dec 2020.
- Increase in female participation, from 26 in 2015 to 1000+ at end 2020.
- 25% of registrations on craft apprenticeships In 2020 were from those who had a junior certificate as their highest level of qualification.
- All apprenticeship programmes have significant industry input with consortia-led apprenticeships employer-led. This ensures apprenticeship provides up-to-date skills.
- Pre-apprenticeship courses being provided by ETBs.

Skillnet Ireland

Skillnet Ireland delivers skills and talent development that is aligned with the needs of businesses in the Eastern and Midlands Region, supporting over 7,700 businesses in 2020. This was achieved through the more than 30 Skillnet Business Networks operating in this region. In 2020 and 2021, Skillnet Ireland also established four national Skillnet Business Networks, located within the region, which support the construction, engineering and hospitality sectors, as well as the fast-growing immersive technology industry.

Businesses have seen an accelerated pace of change through the impacts of COVID-19, decarbonisation and digitalisation, which together are transforming industry and the economy of the region. Skillnet Ireland recently launched Climate Ready, an initiative to help businesses to become more sustainable, in partnership with Wind Energy Ireland, Chambers Ireland and Sustainable Finance Ireland. Mixed sectoral Skillnet Business Networks within the region are also supporting the 'brown to green' transition, through the upskilling and retraining of people impacted by the phasing out of fossil fuels in Ireland.

Skillnet Ireland also offers specialist upskilling opportunities to technology companies located across the region, and supports the broader digital transformation of businesses from non-tech sectors located within the Eastern and Midlands Region. Skillnet Ireland provides a range of other talent development supports through its MentorsWork and Skills Connect initiatives to support the upskilling of businesses and the workforce in the region.

C) Details of any policy initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

Policy initiatives included in the response by the Department include the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-2024, Innovation 2020, review of the Grangegorman Sustainability Strategy, and Reform of the Higher Education Authority Act.

The new FET Strategy 2020-24 was launched in July 2020 and is framed around a vision for future FET in Ireland. The strategy outlines how FET will provide pathways for a diverse group of learners, will support societal participation and strong communities, will prepare people for successful careers and a lifetime of learning and development and will be a major driver of Ireland's next critical phase of economic and social development. The strategy sets out the role of FET within a more collaborative and cohesive tertiary education system for Ireland. It outlines the contribution FET will make alongside higher education providers to serve school leavers, lifelong learners, employees looking to upskill and marginalised people who want to re-engage in education, while also supporting employers and communities. Priorities are set out across three core pillars: building skills; creating pathways, and; fostering inclusion. There is also a strong focus on enabling themes including staffing, professional development and digital transformation in FET, as well as capital investment and measurement and data.

The FET Strategy states that, by the end of 2024:

- There will be a greater overall penetration of FET across the population of Ireland.
- A greater share of school leavers will be choosing FET or apprenticeship as their first destination.
- People will move seamlessly between FET & HE with clear transition criteria in large numbers.
- A significant and growing cohort of people in employment using FET to upskill and of employers viewing FET as a critical enterprise resource.
- Progression levels through FET will increase strongly, with pathways from core skills and community education available to all who wish to pursue them.
- A digitally transformed FET system will offer a large portfolio of flexible, online and blended opportunities

To support the achievement of these goals, strategy implementation will be informed by core FET Targets, a clearer framework for tertiary education, strategic planning and funding processes, the enhancement of quality assurance processes in FET and the transformation in the availability and use of FET data. Since its launch and publication, the Department has been engaging with SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority of Ireland, in relation to the development of implementation plans and oversight structures.

The Department is currently developing the next national Research and Innovation Strategy – Innovation 2020. A public consultation will be launched in the coming weeks which will provide the opportunity for interested groups to participate in the new strategy.

The Grangegorman Masterplan embodied a documented Sustainability strategy that set a range of specific targets and metrics in ten categories of Sustainability. The energy and carbon category in this document identified a requirement for zero carbon in operation by 2050. This document identified objectives well ahead of any other development in the public sector when it was initially prepared and adopted in 2012.

In the light of rapid changes in energy and carbon performance identified within the EU Directive (nZEB) and the subsequent incorporation of these requirements into the 2019 update of Part L of the Building Regulations and the later government guidance on much more stringent building performance by 2030, the GDA is currently reviewing the Sustainability Strategy with a view to formally updating the targets set out therein by the end of 2021.

The Higher Education Authority Act, 1971 is being reformed. Government approval was received on 4 May 2021 for the General Scheme of a Bill to reform the Higher Education Authority Act, 1971. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is the statutory body which oversees the higher education sector. It provides policy advice to the Minister in relation to the higher education system and acts as an intermediary between higher education institutions (HEIs) and the State. The HEA is responsible for the allocation of public funding to universities, technological universities, institutes of technology and a number of other HEIs. It is responsible for securing the achievement of Government objectives for the higher education system on the basis of the public funding provided to HEIs and for ensuring accountability and value-for-money from HEIs for these resources.

The Higher Education Authority Act, 1971 established the HEA, set out its functions and provided for its governance. Some minor amendments have been made to this legislation since its enactment in 1971.

The higher education sector has been transformed since the HEA legislation was first put in place 50 years ago. In 1971 there were approximately 20,000 students in higher education and this has increased to over 200,000 students in the present day. The HEA is now responsible for a much more extensive and diverse higher education sector. In 1971, the HEA's remit covered a small number of universities and its remit has now expanded to an increased number of universities, new technological universities and institutes of technology. The role of the HEA has expanded commensurately in the past 50 years, often on the basis of implied rather than explicit legal powers under the Higher Education Authority Act, 1971. The HEA has increasingly relied on specific mechanisms which are not explicitly provided for in legislation to discharge its role, such as the System Performance Framework and other frameworks, codes and guidelines.

The higher education system has a central role in contributing to national and regional economic and social sustainability through skills and human capital development, research and innovation. It is essential therefore to bring a clear and specific definition to the relationship between HEIs, the HEA and the State. In July 2019, the previous Government agreed to the reform of the Higher Education Authority legislation.

The overall aim of the reform is to provide a high quality, student focused system with appropriate oversight and accountability to underpin public confidence of stakeholders, students and the public. The vision for the higher education system is that it provides high quality education which is innovative and adaptive to the needs of the learner, advances equality, diversity and inclusion, strengthens engagement with the wider education system and wider society, creates knowledge and maximises the contribution of higher education to social, economic and cultural development. The new legislation will provide a detailed and modernised framework to provide for the achievement of this vision and for the regulation and oversight of the performance of HEIs including the safeguarding of the reputation of the Irish higher education system aligned with best international practice.

The core objectives of the legislative reform are:

- Promote and support HEIs in achieving excellence in teaching, learning and research in higher education,
- Promote and safeguard the interests of students,
- Advance equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education,
- Provide a comprehensive governance and accountability framework to safeguard Exchequer investment in the sector and ensure accountability by HEIs for that funding,
- Maximise the contributions of higher education to social, economic, cultural and environmental development and sustainability and
- Maintain and enhance the reputation of the higher education sector, including international reputation.

D) Details of any funding competitions/initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

The response from the Department identified the SFI Frontiers for the Future Funding Programme and the Technological University Transformation Fund (TUTF).

SFI, in collaboration with the Geological Survey of Ireland (GSI) and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) are open for applications to the Frontiers for the Future Awards. These provide larger scale funding for innovative, collaborative and excellent research programmes that have the potential to deliver economic and societal impact.

In addition, a key goal of SFI's Strategy, Shaping our Future, is to "increase geographical involvement and engagement across the country, including through the SFI Research Centres, and increased collaboration with the new Technological Universities and the Institutes of Technology to ensure that benefits arising from our activities are realised across the entirety of Ireland." In support of this action, the newly formed Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFERIS) provided budget to SFI to support excellent and impactful research which benefits from the unique strengths of both sectors.

SFI developed the SFI Frontiers for Partnership Awards which is a component of the SFI Frontiers for the Future Programme in collaboration with the Geological Survey of Ireland (GSI) and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). This funding competition is open to applications until the end of May. The research proposals will be led by the Technological University (TU) / Institutes of Technology (IoT) sector with partners from the established University sector. This investment will not only increase financially supported collaboration between the sectors, with projects ranging from €0.5-1 million, but importantly will provide leadership opportunities for the TU/IoT sector.

In Budget 2020, the Government announced the launch of a major multi-annual Technological University Transformation Fund (TUTF) of €90 million for technological universities over 3 years. The TUTF supersedes and builds upon Higher Education Landscape Funding, as provided by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Department of Education and Skills in recent years, towards reform of the higher education landscape, including the establishment of Technological Universities.

The HEA is responsible for the design and implementation of the TUTF, with the Technological University Research Network (TURN) group acting in an advisory capacity. The TURN group comprises the Presidents of TU Dublin and MTU and the Presidents of each institute of technology participating in development consortia working towards TU designation, together with senior representatives from the Technological Higher Education Association. It is chaired by the Chief Executive of the HEA.

Funding allocated through the TUTF supports the implementation of recommendations set out in the TURN group's report "Connectedness & Collaboration enabled by Connectivity", published in October 2019. The report makes a series of 12 recommendations for outcomes that will provide TUs with a solid foundation for their development.

These centre upon three thematic areas that TURN identified as the essential building blocks for successful TUs:

- investment in integrated multi-campus digital infrastructure to provide regional cohesion and to facilitate new modes of learning and the prioritisation of capital investment in TUs;
- investment in research capacity building by developing researcher human capital, facilitating research activity and opportunities for existing academic staff and implementing a researcher career development and employment framework, addressing infrastructural deficits and prioritising research strategies within TUs, exploiting fully the mutually supporting roles of teaching and research; and
- realignment of the policy framework and funding for TUs including an expansion of institutional autonomy and reform through the implementation of TU-apposite career structures, the reform of the grant allocation model to accommodate TUs, the creation of a dedicated TU funding stream including in the post-establishment phase and the creation of a borrowing framework for TUs.

The TURN report recognises that relevant priority actions can only be achieved through a structured, system wide, relevant and dynamic process that will ensure value for money, underpinned by a robust and evidence-based set of monitoring and evaluation arrangements.

E) Details of the funding programmes administered by each Department (and agencies under the aegis of each department), over the last two years, which have been awarded within the Eastern and Midland Region

Tables are included in the response report submitted by the Department, which include key SFI Investments in 2019 and 2020. For each research project listed, the name of the funding programme is included, along with the project name/description, the HEI with responsibility for the award, the amount awarded and the expiration date. As set out in the response report, the benefits and impact of the awards themselves are very often disseminated well beyond the host organisation - e.g., SFI Research Centres have several academic and industry partners right across the country.

F) Any other comments that were made with respect to each Department (including any agencies under the aegis of each Department) and implementing the RSES, including any recommendations that are considered would facilitate the process

No further comment provided.

G) Response and Recommendations of the Regional Assembly

The Assembly welcome the detailed report received by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and commend the effort made in presenting a coordinated report for the purposes of RSES Monitoring.

On review of the information submitted, the Assembly are satisfied that the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science have demonstrated that progress has been made in implementing the RSES and have carried out a number of specific actions that enable same. This includes the Department's efforts in progressing initiatives aimed at delivering on the RSES, including the continued advancement of the Technological Universities agenda (including the Technological Universities Transformation Fund), the development of the Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024, the reform of the Higher Education Authority Act 1971, the Science Foundation Ireland Strategy 2025, and the Skills to Advance initiative, among others.

Having regard to the information submitted, The Assembly consider that the work to date could be enhanced and make the following recommendations for NOAC to consider;

- The Regional Assembly should inform research and regional analysis undertaken by the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit in SOLAS in relation to skills planning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as any other research studies of relevance to the RSES and the Eastern and Midland Region.
- In its consideration of applications under section 29(1) of the Technological Universities Act 2018, the Department may consider it appropriate to set assessment criteria to ensure appropriate consideration of NPF population targets, the RSES settlement strategy and other relevant metrics, thus supporting and delivering on Project Ireland 2040 and the RSES.
- In undertaking any education campus development, the Department should endeavour to progress regeneration and economic synergies both within and in proximity to the campus under development, as well as integrate the 'smart cities' concept and other 'future proofing' measures.
- The Regional Assembly should inform the next National Research and Innovation Strategy to ensure alignment with the RSES and key national policy documents.
- The Regional Assembly should be included in any consultation process relating to the reform of The Higher Education Authority Act and the implementation of recommendations of the TURN group's report.
- The Department should ensure that appropriate Benchmarking is undertaken against other comparable economies to facilitate progress towards improving our comparative performance in RDI.

5.1.2.7 Minister for Education

The mission of the Department of Education is “to facilitate children and young people, through learning, to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland’s social, economic and cultural development.” This is aligned to the RSES and in particular RSO 13 which is to “improve education skills and social inclusion” and RSO 5 which is to “enhance, integrate and protect our arts, culture and heritage assets to promote creative places and heritage led regeneration.”

A) Progress made in supporting the objectives of the RSES

The Department were asked to identify the progress that has been made in supporting the objectives of the RSES that are applicable to them. This included, for instance, progress related to equality of access to education, school provision in locations experiencing population growth, provision and enhancement of play and recreation facilities, universal design in new school buildings and promoting and facilitating access to arts, culture and heritage (including support for the development of the Irish language).

Equality of access to education

The response of the Department referred to the legal basis on which the education system in Ireland operates on an inclusive basis in keeping with obligations under the Constitution, national and international law. The response states that the Department fulfils its commitment through supporting the operations of the school system according to the principles of equality set out in law, as well as making specific reference to all immigrant children, including children of asylum seekers, refugees, migrant workers and unaccompanied minors who are entitled to access pre-school, first and second level education in a manner similar to Irish nationals, until they have reached the age of 18 years.

The DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in schools) programme is the Department’s main policy initiative to address educational disadvantage. The total Department spend on DEIS in 2021 is in the region of €150million, which includes over €26million for the School Completion Programme (SCP). In the 2020/21 academic year there are 887 schools in the DEIS Programme serving over 185,000 pupils - 689 Primary schools and 198 Post Primary schools. This represents approx. 22% of schools overall.

The Traveller Education Policy has, in recent years, been phasing out segregated Traveller provision and the inclusion of Traveller children and young people in mainstream education. Furthermore, the Department is engaging in number of initiatives across the sector with a view to improving educational outcomes for Travellers and Roma. The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) provides the framework and strategic direction for interventions to support the additional needs of the Traveller and Roma communities in Ireland. A 2-year pilot project has been established to target attendance, participation and school completion in specific Traveller and Roma Communities regionally. The pilot project is underway in four areas (in Galway, Dublin, Wexford and Cork) across 50+ schools. Expected outcomes of the pilot include improved attendance, participation and retention of Travellers and Roma in education and improved engagement with Traveller representative groups. It is intended that the evaluation of the pilot will inform future policy initiatives to support children and young people from the Travelling and Roma communities in their education.

School provision in locations experiencing population growth

All twelve local authorities in the EMR have engaged with the Department at the preparatory stages of the making of their new Development Plans, at Issues Stage and Draft Plan Stage (in the case of those authorities whose draft plan is advanced). The Department is also a statutory consultee in the statutory planning process (for Development Plans and Local Area Plans). This engagement between the local authorities and the Department includes an assessment of existing schools provision in the various settlements in a Development Plan area, and more importantly, the distribution of the likely planned population increase over the lifetime of the plan. The process is that where population increases are indicated by the local authority, the Department examines closely the extent of the increase in a particular settlement, the location of the proposed additional population and the capacity of the existing schools in the particular settlement to cater for it; whether it would be feasible (or appropriate) to extend an existing school or schools in order to meet the projected future need or whether a new school altogether is likely to be required.

This engagement, which is reported by the Department as being strong, is considered invaluable and essential to identifying likely requirements to provide new schools to cater for future populations. It also assists the planning authorities in considering the most appropriate site or sites from a physical and schools planning perspective and proposing a suitable zoning.

As well as the allocation of new sites for schools, the inclusion of buffer zones and land use designations that support education development adjacent to existing and established schools (where required to facilitate potential future expansion) is identified as being critical by the Department as regards meeting school accommodation requirements arising in Existing Built-Up Areas. In some instances, such provision may present the only viable solution for the provision of school places to meet the needs of the local community. The Department therefore requests strong support for the intensification of the use of existing school sites and their immediate environs in order to meet future needs.

Provision and enhancement of play and recreation facilities

The response from the Department states that many schools have a general-purpose room/sports hall and practically all schools have outdoor play areas. In addition, many schools, use adjacent local facilities, including community halls, public parks, playing fields and swimming pools. The provision of general-purpose rooms, PE halls and outdoor hard play areas form part of the accommodation brief for all new school buildings or where a major building or refurbishment project is being delivered for an existing school.

Under the National Development Plan (NDP), increased funding has been provided for the school sector capital investment programme. This funding will address ancillary accommodation requirements across schools, particularly to support the reform and modernisation of school curricula (e.g. STEM and PE) involving a PE Hall and laboratory build and modernisation programmes in line with the existing NDP objectives and Programme for Government commitments.

The Department's understanding is that in general there is a large degree of interaction and co-operation between schools and their immediate communities regarding use of school facilities. The guidelines prepared by the Department on the use of school buildings were prepared after consultation with representatives of the school authorities and were issued with their support. These guidelines provide information to assist schools in processing requests for use of their facilities. As stated, the Department's policy is to support the use of school facilities for education, community and recreational purposes.

In respect of funding provided to schools by the Department, this is in respect of education provision at primary and post-primary level. Schools may access funding from other government departments, from their own resources or other sources in respect of facilities provided by the school for their own use or the use of the wider community. The decision on the use of school facilities/buildings outside of school hours is a matter for the owner of the school property and the school authorities taking into consideration the requirements of the school, staff and students. In their response, the Department states that efforts to enhance the use of school facilities should build on the linkages that exist between schools and their communities. The Department is planning to engage further with the representatives of the school authorities to identify any further guidance and information it may provide to schools to assist them in making their school facilities available to the wider community.

Universal design in new school buildings

To facilitate and enhance the design of school buildings, the Department has developed a suite of technical and school design guidance with a view to offering better guidance to school authorities and Design Teams. These are available on the Department's website and are continually reviewed and updated based on an ongoing policy of research and feedback. Underpinning the design guidelines are the Universal Access principles incorporating guidance from the NDA Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (CEUD) which include specific advice on the external and internal environments, sanitary ware and vertical circulation, provision for the use of induction loops, signage using braille and high colour contrast and the creation of suitable acoustic environments within school buildings. In its response, the Department stated its commitment to ensuring that school building designs continue to incorporate the provisions of Universal Design and accessibility through adherence to the Department's suite of technical and design guidance in the delivery of its annual capital building programme.

In addition to departmental guidance, building owners and designers are obliged to comply with the national building regulations which include the Part M requirements setting out specific standards on accessibility and the requirement to obtain a statutory Disability Access Certificate.

The Department has carried out an extensive review of recently built schools. The lessons learned - incorporating feedback from schools, international best practice and specialist subject inspectors, has resulted in significant revision of design guidance resulting in the commitment to develop inclusive school settings and to providing special education needs accommodation to compliment the mainstream school building environments enhancing the overall accessibility of schools. More recently, the Department has developed updated school design guidance for Special Needs Accommodation in mainstream schools, providing information on space planning and design for the provision of inclusive SEN accommodation in mainstream schools. The Department is also developing a new design guide for Special Schools following extensive research on the design of new special school projects. It will include the requirement for closer consultation in the development of design proposals for new schools and adaptation of existing facilities, with all stakeholders and end users, taking site specific factors and specialist needs into consideration. In addition, any school with an access requirement may apply for funding under the Department's Emergency Works Scheme which provides funding on a devolved basis.

Promoting and facilitating access to arts, culture and heritage

In its response relating to this objective, the Department focused on supports for the development of the Irish language including in the Gaeltacht areas in Co Meath and throughout the Region.

The development of the Irish language in Gaeltacht areas in Co Meath and throughout the Region is being supported by the implementation of the Department's Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022 (POG). The overarching objective of the POG, which is aligned with the objectives of the 20-year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030, is to support and promote the use of the Irish language in Gaeltacht communities by ensuring the delivery of high-quality Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht language-planning areas. To support this objective, the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme (Scheme) was launched in 2017 to provide schools in Gaeltacht language-planning areas with the option to seek recognition as Gaeltacht schools on the basis of the implementation of specified language-based criteria, which include a requirement for participation by schools in the language-planning processes provided for under the Gaeltacht Act, 2012. Schools in the Scheme are eligible to access a range of additional supports and resources to assist with the implementation of the language-based criteria, including additional Irish language support teaching hours based on enrolment, an annual grant of €1,200 to purchase Irish-medium teaching resources, additional CPD opportunities provided by An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) and targeted advisory visits from the Department's Inspectorate. A number of supporting documents and guides on best practice in immersion education have also been made available to schools in the Scheme to assist them in implementing the language-based criteria.

A guide for schools is currently being developed by the Department of Education in collaboration with the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Údarás na Gaeltachta, COGG, Gaeloideachas and other relevant agencies, to provide information on how best to strengthen links, engagement and participation between school management, their school community and local language-planning committee. A guide for Gaeltacht primary schools to strengthen links between early-years settings and schools, which has been informed by COGG commissioned research, will also be published by the Department in 2021. Scoil Uí Ghramhnaigh (Athboy), Scoil Ultain Naofa (Gibbstown), and Coláiste Pobail Ráth Chairn (Athboy), which are all schools located in County Meath, joined the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme in 2017 and have since been in receipt of the additional resources which are being made available to facilitate participation in the Scheme.

In 2019, Coláiste Pobail Ráth Chairn was selected to participate in the e-hub pilot project, which provides students in Gaeltacht post-primary schools in the Scheme with the opportunity to access the Leaving Certificate Physics programme through the medium of Irish using an online interactive approach. Under the terms of the project, the school has received additional funding to purchase digital technology and will receive an annual additional allocation of teaching hours for supervision arrangements for the duration of the school's participation in the project. Expressions of Interest were recently sought from all Gaeltacht post-primary schools, including Pobalscoil Ráth Cairn, inviting them to participate in the next Leaving Certificate Physics e-hub programme from September 2021.

In addition to the Scheme a number of other initiatives are also being implemented to enhance the delivery of Irish-medium education, particularly in Gaeltacht areas, including the commencement of two new Irish-medium teacher education programmes offering up to 60 new Irish-medium teacher education places annually and the provision of additional resources to the Professional Masters in Education at the National University of Ireland, Galway, to work towards increasing the number of teachers who can deliver Irish-medium education across a range of subjects at post-primary level.

The Department is also engaged in initial planning work for the development of an Irish-medium policy for the education sector which will build on the positive outcomes achieved already in the implementation of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education to strengthen Irish-medium education and which will be informed by a stakeholder consultation process.

B) Progress made by agencies that operate under the aegis of each Department, in supporting the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to that agency

Not applicable

C) Details of any policy initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

The response by the Department references relevant schools building programmes and identifying the need for and delivery of school accommodation. In order to plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data, this Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas. An annual demographic analysis is conducted for school planning purposes which takes into account multiple factors, including the residential development activity, child benefit data and school enrolments to identify future requirements. This analysis informs the Department's projection of school place requirements in the short to medium term and facilitates provision to meet that need. The longer-term perspective, informed by the NPF, RSES and Development Plans as appropriate is also closely considered. Information on residential development activity is an important element in the assessment of the need for school accommodation provision and the timing of same. This Department liaises with local authorities in that respect.

On the basis of these demographic analyses, 47 new schools at national level have been announced to be established since 2018, at both primary and post primary level, with the majority of these schools (24 primary and 16 post-primary) to be located in the EMRA area. The Department is now implementing a shorter cycle for demographic projection exercises, with these now occurring on an annual basis. This will ensure capital investment decisions are informed by the most current available data. In order to further support strategic planning for school accommodation provision by the Department, more specific and detailed medium to long-term school place projections at school planning area level are currently being produced, aligned with NPF population targets. This will inform school planning in correlation with NPF and RSES goals.

The monitoring of progress towards NPF targets, including the quantum and timing of housing delivery, is another critical element of the school planning process. Enrolment trends are closely monitored in that regard and the Department has also continuously worked to strengthen the process for identifying and monitoring residential development activity. Recently, a new system has been implemented using the Geodirectory facility on the Department's Geographical Information System which facilitates quarterly updates on new dwelling completions at a local level. This will better support the appropriate timing of school accommodation provision, in line with the pace of residential development. This Department's use of its Geographical Information System continues to expand, and is an integral element of the school planning system, for both analysis and communication purposes.

D) Details of any funding competitions/initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

In line with the EMRA request, the Department's response includes: Primary and Post Primary School Buildings, and; Digital Strategy for Schools.

Primary and Post Primary School Buildings

The Department's capital investment programme is designed to provide an appropriate teaching and learning environment for the over 1 million students and 100,000 school staff across a network of almost 4,000 schools. During the period 2018-2020, there were 526 completed building projects under the Large-Scale Capital Programme (LSCP) and the Additional School Accommodation Scheme (ASA). These projects delivered in excess of 48,000 school places, which included permanent accommodation for 229 special classes and additional capacity for 67 classrooms in 14 special schools throughout the country. 140 of these projects were delivered in the Eastern Midlands region.

The Department has a significant existing pipeline of projects to be delivered over the coming years to meet capacity needs managed under the Large-Scale Capital Programme and the Additional School Accommodation Scheme. This involves in excess of 1200 school building projects across the various stages of planning, design, tender and construction of which 499 of these projects are in the Eastern Midlands Regional Area.

Digital Strategy for Schools

The 'Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020: Enhancing Teaching, Learning and Assessment' focuses on the effective use of digital technologies in teaching and learning, assessment and in leadership and management. Under the Strategy, €210m in capital funding has been issued in grant funding to schools, including €100m in 2020, which schools were advised to utilise to support the continuity of teaching and learning during the pandemic, including loaning digital devices to learners and teachers to provide for remote learning. Some 325 post-primary schools and 1,022 primary schools in the EMRA counties received this funding.

The current Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 expires at the end of this school year and work is now underway on the development of the new strategy. The new strategy to build on the existing one whilst also taking into account the progress made to date in embedding digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment throughout the school system and what might be priority areas going forward. A wide-ranging consultation process is underway, facilitated by a consultation framework developed with various strands.

One strand of this is already live involving an open public call for submissions and it is seeking stakeholder's views on how the current strategy has supported the effective use of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment, any challenges that have arisen and what areas should be focused on and prioritised for the new strategy. While the current Digital Strategy was underpinned by a total investment of over €210m, under Project Ireland 2040, the new Digital Strategy will be supported through further NDP investment of over €200m.

This allocation will support further funding for schools, in particular to build on investment to date including through providing for wireless infrastructure in schools, targeted grant funding to address educational disadvantage and provision for technical support for schools.

A key deliverable will be enhanced connectivity for primary schools, through the schools broadband programme, providing broadband connectivity to recognised primary and post-primary schools, at an annual cost of some €13m. Under this programme, all post-primary schools are provided with high-speed connectivity, while some 900 of the 3,100 primary schools are also on high-speed connectivity. A key priority of the National Broadband Plan Intervention area (NBP IA) is to provide broadband speeds of 100Mbps/sec or greater to 679 of the most rural schools in the country where current services are poor. A number of these schools have already been upgraded under the NBP IA implementation. A Department of Education led Broadband Enhancement Project for Primary schools will supplement that programme and industry provision, to ensure that all primary schools will be provided with similar connectivity by 2022/early 2023. This will likely include some 1,100 primary schools, and planning is underway for this, with a Project Steering Group comprising stakeholders from the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, HEAnet as the providers of the Schools Broadband Network, and the Professional Development Service for Teachers – Technology in Education, as manager of the Schools Broadband Service Desk on behalf of the Department.

E) Details of the funding programmes administered by each Department (and agencies under the aegis of each department), over the last two years, which have been awarded within the Eastern and Midland Region

In their response, the Department has indicated that the status of School Building projects is listed on a county-by-county basis on the Department's website at www.education.ie and is updated on a monthly basis to reflect their progress through the various stages of capital appraisal, site acquisition, design, tender and construction. Links were also provided for approved works under the Additional Accommodation Scheme 2021, the Summer Works Scheme, as well as for Emergency Works Approvals.

F) Any other comments that were made with respect to each Department (including any agencies under the aegis of each Department) and implementing the RSES, including any recommendations that are considered would facilitate the process

In its response, the Department considered it important to note that given the early stage in terms of the implementation of the RSESs, as well as the existing pipeline of planning permissions and planned housing developments that were already in the system, they consider it too early to see the full impact of the growth strategy of the NPF being reflected where housing is being located and ultimately school provision.



G) Response and Recommendations of the Regional Assembly

The Assembly welcome the detailed report received by the Department of Education and commend the effort made in presenting a coordinated report for the purposes of RSES Monitoring.

On review of the information submitted, the Assembly are satisfied that the Department of Education have demonstrated that despite the existing pipeline of planning permissions and planned housing developments that were already in the system, progress has been made in implementing the RSES and have carried out a number of specific actions that enable same. This includes an annual demographic analysis for school planning purposes across 314 planning areas; the adoption of a system to monitor the quantum and timing of housing delivery to better support the appropriate timing of school accommodation provision; ongoing capital investment in Primary and Post Primary School Buildings with specific figures provided for the EMR; ongoing rollout of the Digital Strategy for Schools; engagement between all 12 local authorities and the Department in the statutory plan-making process; the development of updated school design guidance for Special Needs Accommodation in mainstream schools, in addition to the ongoing development of a new design guide for Special Schools following extensive research on the design of new special school projects; ongoing schemes and the development of useful guides to support the development of the Irish language.

Having regard to the information submitted, The Assembly consider that the work to date could be enhanced and make the following recommendations to NOAC for consideration;

- The Regional Assembly should inform the engagement between the Department and the 12 Local Authorities across the region in strategy development for the provision of new schools to cater for future populations. In particular, the Regional Assembly and the RSES should inform policy and strategy around the intensification of the use of existing school sites in Existing Built-Up Areas and their immediate environs in order to meet future needs.
- The Regional Assembly welcomes the production of specific and detailed medium to long-term school place projections at school planning area level that are currently being produced in addition to the annual demographic analysis pertaining to the 314 school planning areas nationally. The Regional Assembly would welcome parallel analysis pertaining to alignment with NPF population targets and the RSES settlement strategy, thus supporting and delivering on Project Ireland 2040.
- Given EMRA's key role in regional coordination, enhancing regional connectivity, and participation on the Interreg Europe Next2Met project which is working to increase regional attractiveness with soft digitalisation measures, the Regional Assembly should be considered a key stakeholder and appropriately consulted in the development of the new Digital Strategy for Schools.



5.1.2.8 Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

The mission of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is “to enhance the lives of children, young people, adults, families and communities, recognising diversity and promoting equality of opportunity”. This is aligned to the RSES and in particular RSO 13 which is to “improve education and develop the right skills to attract employers and retain talent and promote social inclusion to ensure opportunities for quality jobs across the Region” and RSO 4 which is to “protect and enhance the quality of our built and natural environment to support active lifestyles including walking and cycling, ensure clean air and water for all and quality healthcare and services that support human health”.

A) Progress made in supporting the objectives of the RSES

The Department were asked to identify the progress that has been made in supporting the objectives of the RSES that are applicable to them. This included, for instance, access to childcare and education; investment in childcare services; support the development of policies to address the play and recreation needs of children and young people; ensure new buildings and public spaces are designed to ensure accessibility, and; Integration of i) age friendly and family friendly strategies by local authorities, and ii) migrants and minority groups including non-Irish nationals and Travellers.

Access to Early Learning and Childcare is a key objective of Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and a wide range of funding schemes and policy initiatives support this goal including the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme, the National Childcare Scheme and the Access and Inclusion Model. ECCE provides a two-year programme of free preschool provision to children for the two years before they begin primary school. NCS provides tailored subsidies to families to offset the costs of childcare, based on family composition, income and number of childcare hours used. The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) supports children with additional needs to fully participate in the universal preschool programme by providing supports in line with children’s level of need.

First 5, a whole of government strategy for babies, young children and their families was published in November 2018 and covers a ten-year timeframe. It was followed by a three-year implementation plan which is reported on annually. The 2019 Annual Implementation Report has been completed and the 2020 Annual Implementation Report is currently being drafted. The original strategy and subsequent implementation plan set out an ambitious programme of reform for Early Learning and Care provision including the launch of the National Childcare Scheme, the development of a new funding model, a review of the operating system and a workforce development among other significant reforms. All of these projects are currently underway. The strategy also commits to doubling investment in ELC over the lifetime of the strategy and significant increases in investment have been seen since then.

B) Progress made by agencies that operate under the aegis of each Department, in supporting the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to that agency

Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC)

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission is Ireland’s national human rights and equality institution. It is an independent public body that accounts to the Oireachtas, with a mandate established under the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 (IHREC Act 2014). The IHREC Act includes and further enhances the functions of the former Irish Human Rights Commission and the former Equality Authority. It is funded through the vote of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Its purpose is to protect and promote human rights and equality in Ireland and build a culture of respect for human rights, equality and intercultural understanding in the State. Its work is determined independently by the fifteen members of the Commission who were appointed by President Michael D. Higgins, in 2014. The diverse membership of the Commission broadly reflects the nature of Irish society.

National Disability Authority (NDA)

The National Disability Authority is the statutory agency with a role to provide independent evidence-informed advice to government on disability policy and practice, and to promote Universal Design. Universal Design (UD) is the design and composition of the environment, products and services and ICT, so that they can be accessed, used and understood by all users, regardless of age, size, ability or disability.

The NDA delivers on its role and remit through:

- Undertaking or commissioning research relevant to disability policy and practice
- Delivering practical, evidence informed advice to government departments and public bodies
- Monitoring and/or assessing progress in implementation of legislation, strategies, policies and programmes relevant to disability
- Development of guidance to support implementation of good practice
- Contribution to development of standards to support an inclusive society
- Collection and analysis of disability data and statistics
- Engagement with professional bodies to drive Universal Design as good design in the products, services or systems relevant to their sector

NDA deliverables relevant to the RSES include the following:

- Support to DCEDIY on the design and delivery of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), which provides a graduated model of support to ensure children with disabilities can attend Early Childhood Care and Education settings on an equal basis with their non-disabled peers. The ongoing support and advice includes membership of the AIM oversight and implementation structures, and support for the review of the programme thus far. The NDA has also delivered advice to the Department on a range of education and childcare matters relevant to children with disabilities, including advice on how proposals for a school-aged childcare scheme can be fully inclusive, informed by the learning and experiences from the AIM programme to date.
- Development of 2019 guidelines for the Universal Design of Early Childhood Care and Education Settings, which are the first of their kind in the world. These guidelines are for operators in the early childhood care space, and professionals in the built environment, and provide practical guidance for developing physical settings that are inclusive for all. The NDA is currently scoping a programme of work with the Department to disseminate and promote this guidance through an eLearning platform and dedicated website.
- Funding of research on Universally Designed playgrounds through a Research Promotion Grant Scheme (2017), which highlighted users' experiences of playgrounds in the Cork City area. The research focused on how children with disabilities and their families experienced a number of playgrounds in the region, and where barriers or challenges to their enjoyment of these facilities arose. It also highlighted the lack of awareness of Universal Design among planners and council staff. The research will inform further NDA work for all regions on inclusive playgrounds and play-spaces in due course and there is some overlap with the work already progressed to develop the Universal Design guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education settings referred above.
- The NDA has prepared a suite of guidance for public bodies on meeting the needs of persons with autism spectrum disorder. This includes consideration of the needs of children with autism and their families in the area of housing, and in interaction with the criminal justice sector. Guidance has also been prepared for employers and line managers to guide how they can be supportive and inclusive employers of persons with autism and all stages of the employment journey.
- The NDA has prepared policy advice for the Department of Housing, currently under consideration, regarding a Universal Design approach to new housing builds, which will allow for delivery of housing that can be adapted over the lifecourse, thereby enabling individuals to remain within their communities for as long as possible. This in turn leads to sustainable communities. This work will be complimented by a cost-benefit-analysis of UD Housing, to be delivered by end 2021.

Tusla: The Child and Family Agency

Tusla, the Child and Family Agency is dedicated and committed to working in partnership with children, families & communities to ensure that children in need or at risk of harm are supported, protected and connected to people who can safeguard and promote their wellbeing throughout their lives. Tusla's vision is that families & communities are empowered and strengthened to keep children safe and nurtured, recognising a child's right to protection, stability and the support of a family and community network.

Under the Child and Family Act 2013, the Child and Family Agency is charged with supporting and promoting the development, welfare and protection of children, and the effective functioning of families;

- Offering care and protection for children in circumstances where their parents have not been able to, or are unlikely to, provide the care that a child needs. In order to discharge these responsibilities, the Agency is required to maintain and develop the services needed in order to deliver these supports to children and families and provide certain services for the psychological welfare of children and their families;
- Responsibility for ensuring that every child in the State attends school or otherwise receives an education, and for providing educational welfare services to support and monitor children's attendance, participation and retention in education;
- Ensuring that the best interests of the child guide all decisions affecting individual children;
- Consulting children and families so that they help to shape the agency's policies and services;
- Strengthening interagency co-operation to ensure seamless services responsive to needs;
- Undertaking research relating to its functions and providing information and advice to the Minister regarding those functions; and
- Commissioning services relating to the provision of child and family services

Tusla's Annual Reports to 2019 and Tusla's Business Plan 2021 are available to view online. Tusla's Corporate Plan 2021-2023 and Annual Report 2020 are due for publication. The publication of both documents has been delayed because of the impact of the cyber-attack on the HSE servers.



C) Details of any policy initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020

'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020' represented the first overarching national children's policy framework comprehending the age ranges spanning children and young people (0 – 24 years). It adopts a whole-of-Government approach and was underpinned by a number of constituent strategies in the areas of early years, youth LGBTI+ and participation. Over 70% of commitments contained in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures have been completed to date with the final Annual Report for 2020 due for publication by the end of 2021 with progress on more commitments expected.

The First 5 strategy as described above is a constituent strategy of the BOBF framework. Full detail on the strategy including the first three-year implementation plan and the 2019 annual implementation report are available online.

Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC)

Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) ensure effective inter-agency co-ordination and collaboration to achieve the best outcomes for all children and young people in its area. This is achieved through effective planning, co-ordination and oversight of policy implementation and service provision locally. CYPSC act as the structure whereby services can work together in a systematic manner to achieve shared goals and bridge national policy with local provision. The Vice Chair of each CYPSC is from the local authority and CYPSC interact regularly with LCDCs.

Through their work in local areas, the CYPSC aim to realise the five national outcomes set out in Better Outcomes, Brighter Future, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, (2014-2020). CYPSC receive policy and strategic direction from DCEDIY through the policy document CYPSC Shared Vision, Next Steps 2019-2024.

The CYPSC Children and Young Persons Plan (CYPPs) 3 year plan outlines local priorities that the CYPSC has agreed to address and includes a detailed action plan of activities which will be undertaken by the CYPSC and its sub groups to make impact on those priorities. The CYPPs plan are expected to link to national service and programme plans (e.g. HSE National Service Plan; Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programmes) and co-ordinating their local implementation with a view to creating integrated responses to the needs of children and young people.

Dublin North East Inner City (NEIC) Initiative – City Connects pilot

A new pilot programme, called NEIC City Connects Pilot Project, has been implemented in the 10 North East Inner City (NEIC) primary schools from the beginning of October 2020 which involves 3 City Connects coordinators being allocated directly to those schools, overseen by a dedicated Programme Manager. They engage with the schools, building relationships with staff, working alongside existing in-school services and engaging with agencies and the community and voluntary sector to bring awareness to the new pilot.

The pilot is a collaboration between the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), Department of Education (DoE), Boston College, Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) and Mary Immaculate College (MIC) and is based on the US model originally conceived in Boston. The pilot will run until August 2020 and will be fully evaluated. Funding is provided by the NEIC Programme Implementation Board, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and the Department of Education (DoE).

The City Connect Programme is strengths-based and works to the principle of progressive universalism. This approach means that the strengths of each individual child within a school setting are identified and a set of supports identified which can build on these strengths, while addressing areas of need. This approach provides the child with confidence and positive reinforcement which can assist with getting buy in of the child to the programme.

One of the key lessons that the programme identified in the early phase of implementation was that planned and systemic working is the optimum approach to achieving impact, as opposed to random interventions in a child's life. Crucially, the City Connects Programme emphasises the culture and context in terms of its implementation, the competencies and collaborative requirements of practitioners involved, the necessity for ongoing support and supervision of the coordinator position and the requirement for discernment in determining the 'added value' offering from community partners.

National Disability Authority (NDA)

The NDA has a role to provide independent monitoring and support for the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024. This Strategy offers a whole-of-government approach to improving employment outcomes for persons with disabilities. Some of the priorities within the Strategy include improving the supports young people with disabilities receive at school in order to acquire skills, qualifications and guidance relevant to transitioning to employment. The NDA provides an annual independent assessment of progress under the Strategy, and is also responsible for delivery of specific research and guidance to support implementation of same.

The NDA is currently engaged in a programme of research with the ESRI to quantify the skills and attainment levels of persons with disabilities in order to map this to current labour market requirements. This work will provide empirical analysis of skills levels, thereby highlighting any gaps or areas requiring further focus in order to enhance labour force participation for persons with disabilities of all ages.

The NDA is also engaged in a partnership research project with the OECD, aimed at exploring effective employer engagement in order to improve labour market outcomes for persons with disabilities. The report will include a series of recommendations on how employers – local and national – can be supported to employ persons with disabilities, while also linking in with commitments already being progressed through the Comprehensive Employment Strategy.

D) Details of any funding competitions/initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

The response from the Department identifies RSES Objectives 6.1 and 6.27 on employment, and 6.31 and 6.32 re entrepreneurship as being of relevance for the following schemes.

ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020 (PEIL)

Under the PEIL, the Department manages funding for activity in regard to gender equality. Projects are funded under two strands.

Strand A - Women Returning to the Workforce supports projects for initiatives targeted at women currently detached from the labour market, but wishing to take up paid employment. 11 of 26 projects were located in the Eastern and Midlands region; further detail can be seen in the table at 4b.

Strand B - Women's Entrepreneurship, funds projects to support women's entrepreneurship. 4 of 9 projects were located in the Eastern and Midlands region and again further detail can be seen in the table at 4b. Following an initial call for applications in 2016, a second call issued in 2019 and the successful projects have received funding. The detail in table 4b includes projects that have received funding since June 2019 under both calls.

Under the 'Integration and Employment of Migrants' stream of PEIL, there was a call for proposals in 2016, 5 projects were approved, of whom 4 are located in the Eastern and Midlands region. The aim of these projects is to provide employment-readiness training for third country nationals. As outlined in the response, this initiative is directly relevant to RSES RPOs 6.1, 6.27 and 9.2.

The National Collective of Community-based Women's Networks (NCCWN)

NCCWN is a network of 17 community women's organisations nationwide which is involved broadly in activation and outreach for disadvantaged women. The Department has provided funding towards salaries, administration and overhead costs incurred in the implementation of agreed activities supporting women's equality and community development in line with the objectives contained in the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020. In 2020, the total grant received by NCCWN was €1.49m and in 2021, they will receive funding of €1.56m.

Other funding schemes which are identified as being of direct relevance to RSES RPO 9.2 "Support local authority and sectoral initiatives to increase active participation and social integration of minority groups, including non-Irish nationals and Travellers" were also set out in the response as follows:

The Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund 2014-2020 (AMIF)

AMIF includes initiatives aimed at supporting asylum seekers and refugees to access basic services such as housing, education and healthcare, and to integrate fully into life in Ireland. This was delivered via Calls for Proposals in 2016 and 2019, and also by direct award grants to Local Authorities, funded by AMIF and Irish Refugee Protection Programme ("IRPP"). 26 of 39 projects were located in the Eastern and Midlands region.

National Integration Funding

An Open Call for National Integration Funding was run in 2020. The National Funding Programme 2020 arose from Action 6 of the Migrant Integration Strategy which called for funding to be made available to promote positive action initiatives to address areas where migrants find it difficult to avail of opportunities on an equal basis with other members of Irish society.

Of the 18 projects awarded funding in 2020, 14 of these are either fully based in counties in the Eastern and Midland Region, or are being run nationwide. Total funding awarded to these (over a 3 year period) is €1.9million.

2020 LGBTI+ Community Services Funding Call

The 2020 LGBTI+ Community Services Funding Call was run under The National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019-2021 adopted by Government and launched in November 2019. It provides a whole-of-Government framework for identifying and addressing issues which may prevent LGBTI+ people from enjoying full equality in practice in Irish society. The Strategy is based on four thematic pillars providing a vision of an Ireland where members of the LGBTI+ community are visible and included, treated equally, healthy, and safe and supported. Positive visibility and increased non-stereotypical representation of LGBTI+ identities is vital to support long-term attitudinal change.

The 2020 LGBTI+ Community Services Funding Call is an important element in achieving overall objective of the National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy. The Call plans to assist the development of rural community infrastructure to be inclusive and welcoming of LGBTI+ persons, address gaps in LGBTI+ services and support existing LGBTI+ community organisations.

Of the 29 projects awarded funding in 2020 12 of these are either fully based in counties in the Eastern and Midland Region or are being run nationwide. Total funding awarded to these (for 1 year) is €311k.

Communities Integration Fund

The Communities Integration Fund has been operating since 2017 and its purpose is to support communities across Ireland to play a greater role in promoting the integration of migrants. Organisations eligible to apply include local community groups, sports clubs, faith-based groups, arts groups, formal and informal schools and theatrical and cultural organisations. In 2019 123 organisations were awarded funding of which 54 of these are based in relevant counties. Total funding awarded to these (for 1 year) is €232k. In 2020 112 organisations were awarded funding of which 53 of these are based in relevant counties. Total funding awarded to these (for 1 year) is €235k.

National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017 - 2021 (NTRIS)

The Department funds 38 Traveller and Roma organisations under NTRIS. Of these 17 are based in counties in the Eastern and Midland Region or are working nationwide and were in receipt of €2.95m for both 2020 and 2021.

Youth Funding

The Department provides funding (€66.8 million in 2021) to support the provision of youth services in urban and rural communities nationwide.

UBU Your Place Your Space scheme

€41.8 million in youth funding is currently allocated via the UBU Your Place Your Space scheme (2021). The mission of this scheme is to provide out-of-school supports to marginalised, disadvantaged or vulnerable young people in their communities to enable them to overcome adverse circumstances and achieve their full potential, including through the development of social and personal competencies that are likely to enhance their employability. Following a reform process, the UBU Your Place Your Space targeted youth funding scheme was launched in December 2019 and became fully operational on 1 July 2020. At the time of becoming fully operational, 252 organisations had successfully applied for funding under the scheme.

E) Details of the funding programmes administered by each Department (and agencies under the aegis of each department), over the last two years, which have been awarded within the Eastern and Midland Region

The response from the Department provides a detailed list of projects which have been funded in the Eastern and Midland Region and Nationwide under the various funding programmes outlined in Section D above.

Funding for youth services is administered via the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and the Department's response includes a breakdown in respect of the ETBs relevant to the RSES. The total amounts allocated via City of Dublin ETB, Dublin Dun Laoghaire ETB, Louth Meath ETB, Kildare Wicklow ETB, Longford Westmeath ETB and Laois Offaly ETB were €30.2m in 2020 and €29.8m to date in 2021.

F) Any other comments that were made with respect to each Department (including any agencies under the aegis of each Department) and implementing the RSES, including any recommendations that are considered would facilitate the process

As a result of the impact of the recent cyber-attack on the HSE servers, which has affected Tusla's access to IT systems, it is not possible at this time to provide specific funding details for the bodies bodies in the area covered by the request.

G) Response and Recommendations of the Regional Assembly

The Assembly welcome the detailed report received by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and commend the effort made in presenting a coordinated report for the purposes of RSES Monitoring.

On review of the information submitted, the Assembly are satisfied that Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth have demonstrated that progress has been made in implementing the RSES and have carried out a number of specific actions that enable same. This includes, for example: i) actions by the National Disability Authority (NDA) aligned with RSES objectives, particularly around the delivery of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), development of guidelines for the Universal Design of Early Childhood Care and Education Settings, Housing, as well as a suite of guidance for public bodies on meeting the needs of persons with autism spectrum disorder, among others; ii) the whole-of-Government approach adopted by 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures'; and iii) funding initiatives whose objectives are aligned with specific RSES RPOs, namely RPO 6.1, 6.27, 6.31 and 9.2.

Having regard to the information submitted, The Assembly consider that the work to date could be enhanced and make the following recommendations for NOAC to consider;

- The Regional Assembly should be afforded opportunity to liaise with the NDA to inform new guidance documents and those under review in order to facilitate enhanced implementation by local authorities and other key stakeholders.
- The Regional Assembly should be afforded opportunity to inform the development of any successor framework to 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures 2014-2020'.
- The Regional Assembly welcomes the interaction between the Children and Young People's Services Committees and LCDCs, as well as the cross-departmental collaboration associated with NEIC City Connects Pilot Project. The Regional Assembly would welcome the opportunity to engage with these and related processes to facilitate a coordinated approach to bridge national policy with local provision across the Eastern and Midland Region.

5.1.2.9 Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage's mission is to support the sustainable and efficient delivery of well-planned homes and effective local government. Central to this are a number of key goals including, ensuring that planning and building in our regions and communities contributes to sustainable and balanced development, providing for a stable and sustainable supply of good quality housing, providing a framework for the sustainable management of water resources, managing the Irish State's nature conservation responsibilities under national and European law, formulation and implementation of policy relating to Ireland's architectural heritage, and, responsibility for built heritage including the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage. These goals are directly aligned to a number of Regional Strategic Outcomes defined by the RSES including for instance, Sustainable Settlement Patterns (RSO1), Compact Growth and Urban regeneration (RSO 2), Rural Communities (RSO 3), Healthy Communities (RSO 4), and, Biodiversity and Natural Heritage (RSO 11).

A) Progress made in supporting the objectives of the RSES

The Department were asked to identify the progress that has been made in supporting the objectives of the RSES that are applicable to them. The response of the Department can be summarised as follows;

Progress of sustainable settlement patterns and enhancement of the settlement strategy identified in the RSES

The department has indicated that since the adoption of the EMRA RSES, the Department (DHLGH) has undertaken a range of initiatives to secure the objectives of the RSES including both funding and investment measures and supporting legislative and regulation. Significant funding of major urban regeneration projects, through the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) in Dublin, the Regional Growth Centres and other Key Towns has been progressed. In terms of 'championing the Capital City of Dublin', the Department has committed funding in excess of €500m for the City, across a wide range of transformative regeneration projects. In other areas of investment, major funding of social and affordable housing has also been targeted at the urban centres of the Region.

In summary, investment in the Region has continued across all areas of the department, but of particular note –

- Urban regeneration and enabling infrastructure through the URDF.
- Serviced Site Fund (SSF) investment for enabling infrastructure for affordable housing
- Funding for social housing through Department programmes such as CAS, CALF and SCHEP
- Continued investment in water services infrastructure in the Dublin region to facilitate targeted growth

In terms of supporting and improving the plan-making process, the Housing and Planning Divisions of the Department jointly engaged the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) to undertake independent research into structural housing demand in Ireland to 2040. The findings of the ESRI work were published as a research paper on Structural Housing Demand at County Level and provides a robust, up-to-date and independently developed housing demand projection, to inform policy and investment with regard to housing at national and local levels. The ESRI projection model and paper are now the definitive source of information for Government, and the Department issued guidelines on the use of the structural housing targets, issued under Section 28 of the Planning and Development Act (as amended).

The ESRI work underpins the development of the Housing Need and Demand Assessment (HNDA) tool for local authorities and provides a consistent national methodology for translating the population targets set out in the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the three Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSEs), into projected demand for new households.

The postponement of the census until 2022 means that it is not yet possible to confirm the trends in population and employment growth in the Region since the adoption of the RSES. Using housing construction trends as a proxy, it is clear that while continued growth in all counties in the region is evident in recent years, the unevenness of growth highlights the challenge ahead. It must be taken into account that since the adoption of the RSES in June 2019, four of the seven quarters of data that have been published by CSO on new dwelling completions have been negatively impacted, to some extent, by the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, medium-term trends indicate that the four Dublin Counties combined – and Dublin City in particular – have struggled to meet housing targets relative to other counties in region. It will likely take several years to converge towards targeted annual average housing output nationally, and at individual local authority level, convergence with targeted annual average housing output will also occur over time.

To facilitate convergence with the NPF development scenario, Government will enhance the alignment of public investment with NPF objectives to stimulate urban brownfield and public transport-led housing development at scale in Dublin and the other cities, including measures to encourage accelerated regional-city growth and balanced regional development, in accordance with the NPF strategy.

The department further indicated that progress on implementation of NPF and RSES will be driven by the adoption of County and City Development Plans in the region and by the continued targeted investment in enabling infrastructure and social and economic development. The implementation of RSES settlement priorities will be enacted through these development Plan processes and subject to evaluation and scrutiny by the OPR.

Detail on compact growth and urban regeneration

The department reiterated the importance of the overarching policy document, the NPF which includes specific objectives to regenerate cities, towns and villages of all types and scale, and in particular to reverse the stagnation or decline of many smaller urban centres, including measure to reduce vacancy, re-use existing buildings and promote infill and area or site-based regeneration. The County/City Plans under preparation at the moment must reflect these specific spatial targets for ‘infill’ and brownfield development which must be set out in the Core Strategy of the plans. This focussing of growth within the existing built-up area of cities and towns is a new policy requirement and is supported by a range of initiatives of the Department, from funding for transformative regeneration and public realm projects through the URDF to regulatory measures such as the vacant site levy and simplifying the change of use from commercial to residential in town centres.

From a funding perspective, significant resourcing is being provided to enhance the urban environment of our cities, towns and villages through the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund established under Project Ireland 2040: The National Development Plan. The URDF was launched in 2018 and has an overall provision of €2 billion to 2027. The URDF was established to support applicant-led projects that will contribute to regeneration and rejuvenation of Ireland’s five cities and other large towns, in line with the objectives of the NPF and the NDP.

The aim is to achieve more compact, sustainable and mixed-use development, with a view to ensuring that more parts of our urban areas can become attractive and vibrant places in which people choose to live and work, as well as to invest and to visit. A wide range of proposals have been supported through the first two calls for funding that contribute to the re-development of key brownfield areas, including areas containing derelict sites and buildings, both by enabling infrastructure and new master-planned development proposals.

The department indicates that Local authorities have been provided with a number of powers and measures to deal with the issue of vacancy and dereliction of in urban centres and to incentivise redevelopment and renewal.

From a legislative perspective, this includes for example:-

- the vacant site levy provisions in the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015, under which planning authorities were empowered to apply a vacant site levy of 3% of the market valuation of relevant properties which were listed on local authority vacant site registers in 2018, which relevant owners were liable to pay in January 2019. The rate of the levy increased to 7% for sites listed on local authority vacant sites register from 2019 onwards which site owners became liable to pay in January 2020.
- the Derelict Sites Act 1990, which imposes a general duty on every owner and occupier of land to take all reasonable steps to ensure that the land does not become, or continue to be, a derelict site. The Act also imposes a duty on local authorities to take all reasonable steps, including the exercise of appropriate statutory powers, to ensure that any land within their functional area does not become, or continue to be, a derelict site;
- the Planning and Development (Amendment) (No.2) Regulations 2018, which came into operation on 8 February 2018, and provides for an exemption from the requirement to obtain planning permission in respect of the change of use of certain vacant commercial premises, including vacant areas above ground floor premises, to residential use. This measure is aimed at facilitating the productive re-use of qualifying vacant commercial buildings as homes, while also facilitating urban renewal and the bringing on stream of increased housing supply

Incentivising the re-use of vacant residential property has also been the focus of a number of initiatives. Under the National Vacant Home Reuse Strategy 2018-21, the Vacant Homes Unit in the Department has provided annual funding to each local authority to support the work of a Vacant Homes Office. Each such office is tasked to support, implement and further develop, update, monitor and review the progress of local authorities' Vacant Homes Action Plans and actions to address vacant private housing; in addition to other core functions to identify and bring back vacant homes into use. In addition, under the Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan on Housing and Homelessness, two schemes were introduced to assist in bringing vacant stock back into use.

- the Repair and Leasing Scheme introduced to assist property owners in bringing vacant properties back into use for social housing purposes. The scheme is particularly targeted at owners of vacant properties who cannot afford or access the funding needed to bring their properties up to the required standard for rental properties.
- the Buy and Renew Scheme introduced to support local authorities in purchasing and renewing housing units in need of repair which can then be made available for social housing use. The Buy and Renew Scheme particularly focuses on older vacant homes to help tackle the problem of dereliction and improve the appearance of the community. As a complementary initiative to the Repair and Leasing Scheme, it provides the option for suitable properties to be purchased rather than leased, if that is the preference of the owners of vacant properties.

The importance of promoting urban renewal and brownfield regeneration is reflected in the development of a "Town Centre First" policy, an inter-departmental initiative of the DHLGH and the Department of Rural and Community Development which was established in late 2020 to consider the regeneration of towns and villages and which will issue its report and proposed actions in the near future.

It is also of note that the forthcoming Development Plan Guidelines will seek to improve the monitoring of brownfield targets in plans, to provide a more regular, annual monitoring and report process for local authorities.

Detail on the provision of housing and supporting infrastructure, in line with the RSES Settlement Strategy, to enable the population growth identified as part of the RSES and NPF. In particular, this includes detail on the delivery of housing and enabling infrastructure on key sites that contribute to housing and compact growth targets in the Dublin Metropolitan Area and, detail relating to rural housing supply such as the 'New Homes in Small Towns and Villages'.

The department indicated that progress has been made in the delivery of water and wastewater infrastructure to support housing delivery in the Region, specifically the Water Supply Project for the Eastern and Midland Region, the Vartry Water Supply Scheme, The Rural Water Programme, the active leakage control and water mains rehabilitation programme, the Greater Dublin Drainage Programme, Ringsend Wastewater Treatment Plant Project, Athlone Main Drainage Project, and the Upper Liffey Valley Sewerage Scheme.

In relation to the provision of infrastructure to support the development of 'New Homes in Small Towns and Villages', of significance is Irish Water's 'Small Towns and Villages Growth Programme' (STVGP). The STVGP is intended to provide capacity primarily in Wastewater Treatment Plants (WWTPs) to cater for growth in smaller settlements which would not otherwise be provided for in the larger scale investment plan. Capacity may also be provided in Water Treatment Plants (WTPs) in suitable cases. An overall budget of €98 million has been allocated to the programme over the 5 years 2020-2024 and it is limited to supporting growth in settlements which are already served by Irish Water infrastructure. The programme is directed at settlements with a population of less than 2,000 persons (Census 2016), with identified capacity constraints and also no Irish Water capacity upgrade project currently proposed. The programme offers the potential for housing development in settlements in rural areas to be provided as an alternative to one-off rural housing.

Detail on the provision of Housing Need Demand Assessment (HNDA) supports to inform housing and land use zoning proposals.

Further to work commissioned by the Housing and Planning Divisions of the Department, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) published a report into structural housing demand in Ireland to 2040, in December 2020. The ESRI research report "Regional Demographics and Structural Housing Demand at County Level" projects an annual new household demand figure for each county from 2016 to 2040, for a number of different development scenarios, including the National Planning Framework (NPF) scenario which supports balanced regional development and the consolidation of cities, towns and other urban areas.

Subsequently, a Ministerial Circular, and Ministerial Guidelines - 'Housing Supply Target Methodology for Development Planning, Guidelines for Planning Authorities' under Section 28 of the Planning & Development Act, 2000 (as amended), were issued to local authorities. The Guidelines introduced a standardised national approach, based on the ESRI data, to be applied by each planning authority in projecting housing supply targets for each specific six-year period, when reviewing city or county development plans.

The housing supply target methodology also provides for a convergence period towards the NPF scenario to 2026, recognising that housing demand projections associated with existing spatial patterns (i.e., the baseline) will need a period to align with the NPF strategy projection. The housing supply target then forms the basis of the Housing Need Demand Assessment (HNDA) process.

The purpose of the HNDA is to: assist local authorities to develop long-term strategic views of housing need across all tenures; provide a robust evidence base to support decisions about new housing supply, wider investment and housing related services that inform an overall national housing profile; inform policies about the proportion of social and affordable housing required and provide evidence to inform policies related to the provision of specialist housing and housing related services.

A HNDA Framework is a standardised methodology that allows local authorities to assess local housing needs, existing and future, using consistent evidence bases and within a standardised framework. The HNDA assessment is prepared by the local authority and involves a number of important steps, the first of which is to examine and review the existing housing environment, followed by estimating need to inform housing policy and development plan policy, where relevant.

The HNDA guidance was issued to local authorities in April 2021, including the Excel-based HNDA Tool with associated instructions, data sources and other background information. The Circular advised local authorities that it is expected that a HNDA will be completed in accordance with the associated guidance as part of the development plan review process in cases where the notice of the review of the plan issues subsequent to 14 April 2021.

Detail on sustainable rural development including; strengthened rural networks, economies and communities; regeneration of rural areas and enhanced vibrancy in these areas; the management of urban generated growth in areas under strong urban influence; and the encouragement of sustainable growth in areas that have experienced decline or stagnation.

The Department have indicated that The National Planning Framework (NPF) fully supports the concept of the sustainable development of rural areas by encouraging their growth and prosperity while also seeking to arrest the decline in areas that have experienced low population growth in recent decades. Chapter 5.3 'Planning for the Future Growth and Development of Rural Areas' of the NPF features several specific National Policy Objectives (NPOs) that aim to support the overall rural and small-town pattern of development in Ireland and deliver strengthened and diversified rural communities.

In particular, the NPF also recognises that in rural Ireland many people seek to have an opportunity to build their own homes. Under National Policy Objective 18b the Department is committed to developing a programme with local authorities, public infrastructure agencies such as Irish Water and local communities for the provision of serviced sites for housing to attract people to build their own homes and live-in small towns and villages.

The development of a 'Town Centre First' (TCF) policy reflects the challenges faced by towns and villages in rural areas and their need to function as viable and vibrant locations for people to live and work. A TCF Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) has been established to consider the regeneration of rural towns and villages and will report shortly.

Further support to the development of rural Ireland is available through the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF), one of the "Four Funds" under the National Development Plan which is a commitment of €1 billion by government to be invested in rural Ireland over the period 2019 to 2027.

The RRDF provides an unprecedented opportunity to support the revitalisation of rural Ireland, to make a significant and sustainable impact on rural communities, and to address de-population in small rural towns, villages and rural areas. It will be a key instrument to support the objectives of the National Planning Framework, and in particular to achieve Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities – one of the National Strategic Outcomes of Project Ireland 2040.

Detail on placemaking and the enhancement of the quality of our built and natural environment, including to support active lifestyles such as walking and cycling, providing clean air and water for all and quality healthcare and services that support human health. This also includes detail on Green Infrastructure, which offers opportunity to develop integrated strategies around economic development, urban and rural placemaking.

The RSES emphasise the concept of placemaking as a tool to enable sustained economic growth and employment including the integration of better urban design, public realm, amenities and heritage to create attractive and liveable places that support active lifestyles and human health. These objectives have been supported and developed by the Department through the targeting of URDF funding toward transformative placemaking projects.

The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF), which was launched in 2018 to support more compact and sustainable development, is one of four funds established under the National Development Plan 2018-2027. The URDF supported capital programme is applicant led and all applications for URDF support are assessed in terms of their alignment with the intended purpose of the URDF programme and also their viability before being considered for approval.

There have been two calls for proposals under the URDF. In 2019, approval in principle together with provisional funding allocations issued in respect of the 87 projects approved under the first call which was launched in 2018. The second call for proposals was launched last year and a further 45 projects were approved for URDF support.

57 projects were approved in the EMRA region under both calls for funding together with provisional URDF funding allocations. There was a total of 38 projects approved in the Region under Call 1, totalling €123,278,777 and a total of 19 projects approved in Call 2, totalling €494,207,844. In total, a combined sum of €617,486,621 has been committed to urban regeneration projects in the EMRA region.

A key objective of the URDF funding initiative has been to promote placemaking improvements in urban centres and projects in the EMRA region have been selected for funding as catalysts for wider urban regeneration, projects which can produce area-wide, social, economic and environmental/physical benefits. Of the 57 projects funded in the region through URDF, a significant number involve transformative placemaking proposals, very often through the regeneration of brownfield areas in towns and cities.

Some notable examples include the Stillorgan Public Realm works in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, the Tallaght Town Centre Civic Plaza in South Dublin, the Newbridge Cultural and Civic Quarter in Kildare, the Westgate Vision in Drogheda Louth and the Tullamore Public Realm project in Offaly.

In relation to Green Infrastructure, an increasing number of Local Authorities in the region have published Green Infrastructure Strategies as part of the Development Plan process. Significant progress has been made in recent years in developing a plan-led process in this area with the integration of green infrastructure policy into Climate Adaptation Plans at a local level. The majority of Local Authorities in the Region have Green Infrastructure Strategies or Guidelines in place, or are progressing their strategies through the draft plan process.

Detail relating to the heritage of the Region, including built, archaeological, natural and marine heritage. This includes its protection and enhancement through initiatives including heritage led regeneration.

The Historic Towns Initiative (HTI) is a joint undertaking by the Department and the Heritage Council and provides a good template for heritage-led regeneration. Heritage-led regeneration can stimulate economic activity as footfall and visitor numbers increase and opportunities arise to address retail and commercial vacancy.

A total of €1.5 million has been allocated for the heritage-led regeneration of towns around the country. To date, a total of 18 towns have benefitted under the scheme with a variety of projects funded over the past three years.

In the Region, funding has been made available under the HTI initiative for the following projects:

- Meath - Revitalising Railway Street, Navan
- Façade refurbishment to shopfronts, windows, doors, signage, to a rundown Victorian Terrace on an important approach road to Navan Town Centre
- Offaly - Birr Courthouse - conservation and reuse of a landmark building
- To carry out works to conserve the building envelope of Birr Courthouse focusing on the roof and facade. Heritage Council supports adds great weight to a project and gives trust to other agencies
- Laois - Regeneration of Old Fort Quarter and Fort Protector, Portlaoise.
- To conserve & develop the historic Old Fort Quarter in Portlaoise, & use this as a catalyst for regeneration of the historic core of the town
- Meath - Kells Heritage Townscape
- To unify and create a coherent and comprehensive conservation led visual impact for the streetscape of Kells

Detail relating to the Department and the NPWS including; the implementation of the Habitats Directives in achieving an improvement in the conservation status of protected species and habitats in the Region and to ensure alignment between the core objectives of the EU Birds and Habitats Directives and local authority development plans; Support for the development of ecological networks and enhanced connectivity between protected sites whilst also addressing the need for management of alien invasive species and the conservation of native species; promotion of the development of all aspects of park management in the Wicklow National Park and the Slieve Bloom Mountains; Consideration of designating a National Park for the peatlands area in the Midlands; and promoting the development of improved visitor experiences, nature conservation and sustainable development activities within the Dublin Bay Biosphere in cooperation with the Dublin Bay UNESCO Biosphere Partnership.

The Department has indicated that a response for this is to be sent on.

Detail on landscape, including the development of a national landscape character assessment.

Arising from Ireland's ratification of the European Landscape Convention, the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs launched the National Landscape Strategy for Ireland 2015-2025 in May 2015. The National Landscape Strategy 2015-2020, provides a platform for thinking more holistically at a landscape scale about the coherence and connectivity of Protected Areas within Ireland. The steps proposed to realise the core objectives of the Strategy include the recognition of landscapes in Irish law, developing a national landscape character assessment (which has yet to be published), increasing landscape awareness and strengthening public participation through education, research and training.

Detail on the sustainable management of water and wastewater resources including The Water Supply Project for the Eastern and Midland Region, the Vartry Water Supply Scheme, The Rural Water Programme, the active leakage control and water mains rehabilitation programme, the Greater Dublin Drainage Programme, Ringsend Wastewater Treatment Plan Project, Athlone Main Drainage Project, and the Upper Liffey Valley Sewerage Scheme.

The Irish Water Strategic Funding Plan sets out Irish Water's multi-annual strategic funding requirement of €11bn to 2024, comprised of a €6.1bn investment in infrastructure and assets and €4.9bn in operating costs. As well as significant investment to improve compliance with public health and environmental standards, the plan aims to ensure that public and private water services investment decisions are aligned with the broad strategic aims of the National Planning Framework and the RSES. An update on the priority projects for the EMRA region are detailed below.

Water Supply Project, Eastern and Midlands Region

The Water Supply Project, Eastern and Midlands Region ("WSP") is the first major comprehensive upgrade to Ireland's "New Source" water infrastructure in the region in over 60 years. The project is a key element of Irish Water's Capital Investment Programme and a strategic national project. Projected population and economic growth in the Greater Dublin Area and the Eastern and Midlands Region will drive growth in the demand for water. Water conservation remains a key focus for Irish Water. However, water saved through leakage reduction will not be enough to meet future demand. The reality is a combination of leakage reduction and the development of a new source is necessary to meet the water supply requirements of the region.

The project will not just provide additional water to meet growing demand, it will also provide increased resilience in the system against loss of supply, contamination/pollution events or risks arising from climate change, in addition to making provision for additional capacity 'headroom' – a requirement of all modern water supply systems. Operating in conjunction with other water supplies in the region, WSP will meet the long-term water supply requirements of the Eastern and Midlands Region in a sustainable manner to 2050 and beyond.

The preferred scheme for the project, identified after an extensive four stage public consultation process, involves the abstraction of water from the River Shannon at Parteen Basin, treatment nearby at Birdhill, together with a 170km underground treated water pipeline from Birdhill, in Co. Tipperary, to Peamount Co. Dublin capable of providing treated water to communities in the Greater Dublin Area and across the Eastern and Midlands Region.

Irish Water is continuing to progress the preparation of a Strategic Infrastructure Development (SID) planning application for the project. A further phase of non-statutory consultation will be undertaken on the project in 2022 following consultation and adoption of Irish Water's first National Water Resources Plan - Framework Plan and the Regional Water Resources Plan - Eastern and Midlands. A Planning and Compulsory Purchase Order application will be submitted to An Bord Pleanála following enactment of abstraction legislation. An abstraction licence application will be made under the proposed abstraction licensing regime subject to enactment of the relevant legislation.

Vartry Water Supply Scheme

The Vartry Water Supply Scheme, developed by Dublin Corporation in the 1860s, provides drinking water for a supply area stretching from Roundwood through north Wicklow up to south Dublin, serving over 200,000 people.

The significant investment in the Vartry Water Supply Scheme Upgrade Project will provide a population of 200,000 with safe and sustainable drinking water.

The project includes the construction of a new water treatment plant at Vartry, a new pipeline (the Vartry to Callowhill link) to replace the 150 year old Vartry tunnel and the construction of a new covered storage reservoir at Stillorgan. The Vartry to Callowhill link pipeline was commissioned in December 2018. Works on the new Vartry water treatment plant commenced in July 2018 and are at an advanced stage, with the new water treatment plant structurally complete and scheduled to be operational in the second half of 2021.

The existing Stillorgan site contains three open water reservoirs that store treated drinking water. This is one of the last such sites in Europe. Construction on the covered reservoir began in November 2018 and the new reservoir is now structurally complete and will be operational in the second half of 2021. Work on the decommissioning of existing water treatment plant at Vartry and the decommissioning of the open reservoirs at Stillorgan will continue in 2022.

Greater Dublin Drainage ("GDD") Project

Irish Water is developing a new regional wastewater treatment facility and associated infrastructure to serve the population of Dublin, Kildare and Meath. This project proposes a new regional wastewater treatment facility be built in Clonsilla in County Dublin along with associated infrastructure to serve the population of the Dublin, Kildare and Meath areas. The volume of wastewater generated in the Greater Dublin Region is projected to increase by more than 50% in the period to 2050. The GDD project is part of our investment in wastewater infrastructure for the Greater Dublin region and will facilitate this growth while also protecting public health and safeguarding the environment.

The planning permission and associated conditions for the GDD project are the subject of Judicial Review (JR) proceedings (2020 No. 22JR). The High Court determined in November 2020 that the planning permission for the project should be quashed and in April 2021 Irish Water's planning application was remitted to An Bord Pleanála.

The GDD project is vital for residential and commercial development across north Dublin and south Fingal. New homes and businesses can only be built with new wastewater infrastructure to support them. GDD will also alleviate pressure within the wider wastewater network, and help to ensure that the wastewater generated every day in our homes, schools and workplaces is treated safely, in compliance with the EU and national wastewater treatment regulations. Progressing this critical piece of infrastructure has been a priority for Irish Water since it took responsibility for water and wastewater services in 2014. The delivery of the GDD project is an investment priority under Project Ireland 2040, and a key objective of the regional guidelines and local development plans.

Ringsend Wastewater Treatment Plant Upgrade Project

Wastewater from Dublin has been treated in Ringsend since 1906. Built in 2005, the current plant is the largest in Ireland and was designed to cater for an equivalent of 1.64 million people. The Ringsend Wastewater Treatment Plant ("WwTP"), which provides over 40% of Ireland's wastewater treatment capacity, is currently overloaded and is not in compliance with the EU's Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive. The average daily load received at Ringsend WwTP in 2019 was 1.98 million population equivalent with peaks well in excess of this.

The major upgrade that is now underway will allow the Ringsend WwTP to treat the increasing volumes of wastewater arriving at the plant to the required standard, enabling future housing and commercial development. The project will deliver, on a phased basis, the capacity to treat the wastewater for a population equivalent of 2.4 million while achieving the standards of the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive.

The project comprises four key elements:

- Provision of additional secondary treatment capacity with nutrient reduction (400,000 population equivalent);
- Upgrade of the 24 existing secondary treatment tanks to provide additional capacity and nutrient reduction, which is essential to protect the nutrient-sensitive Dublin Bay area;
- Provision of a new phosphorous recovery process; and
- Expansion of the plant's sludge treatment facilities.

Underpinning these four key elements is a substantial programme of ancillary works.

In February 2018, work commenced on the first element, the construction of a new 400,000 population equivalent extension at the WWTP. These works are at an advanced stage with testing and commissioning stages expected to be completed in the second half of 2021.

Works on the first of four contracts to upgrade the secondary treatment tanks at the plant with Aerobic Granular Sludge technology commenced in November 2020. The second contract is at procurement stage and is expected to commence in Q3 2021. These contracts are phased to ensure that the WWTP can continue to treat wastewater from the homes, businesses, schools and hospitals of the Greater Dublin Area. Construction of the new phosphorous recovery facility commenced at the end of Q1 2021 and will take approximately two years to complete.

Initial upgrades to sludge treatment facilities commenced in 2020 and are scheduled to be completed in Q2 2021. Further elements are anticipated to progress towards the end of 2021 and continue into 2024.

Upper Liffey Valley Sewerage Scheme

The Upper Liffey Valley Regional Sewerage Scheme serves a number of towns in north Kildare, including Naas, Newbridge, Sallins, Clane, Kill, and others with sewage flows connected to a regional wastewater treatment plant at Osberstown. Irish Water, working in partnership with Kildare County Council, has progressed the upgrade of the wastewater infrastructure throughout the Upper Liffey Valley Sewerage Scheme. The Osberstown Wastewater Treatment Plant has been upgraded to increase capacity, and to ensure that wastewater is treated to meet the requirements of European regulations. Works are now underway to upgrade over 28km of wastewater network across various locations in north Kildare. These upgrades will ensure the wastewater network has enough capacity for future growth and will reduce the risk of overflows during storms. Works on the final contract are underway and expected to be completed by early 2022.

Athlone Main Drainage

Irish Water, working in partnership with Westmeath County Council, is progressing the Athlone Main Drainage Sewer Network Upgrade project. When completed, the scheme will reduce the risk of sewer flooding in Athlone and address non-compliant sewer overflows into the River Shannon. It will also improve the capacity of the sewer network allowing for current and future population growth. The project involves the construction of new pumping stations and the construction of almost 3km of sewer network. It will also involve the removal of six existing overflows and the construction of two new overflows designed to Irish Water standards as well as connecting the new and existing sewer networks together. Irish Water is progressing with the project procurement with a view to a contract award in the second half of 2022.

Active leakage control and water mains rehabilitation programme

Find & Fix- the find and fix program is the primary mechanism Irish Water employs to reduce leakage across the country. Local Authority crews working in parallel with supporting Contractor crews find leaks using best class industry standard tools which are then repaired to reduce leakage. This work is planned at a District Meter Area level using a world class Leakage management system to direct & track outputs. Traditional leak detection tools are used in conjunction with cutting edge technology to maximise the leakage reduction.

Watermain Rehabilitation- the watermain rehabilitation program is strategically planned to reduce customer interruptions from water main bursts, improve water quality & replace water mains which are at their end of life. Traditional open dig methods are supplemented by advanced "no dig" pipe replacement tools where local restrictions such as high levels of traffic or congestion caused by other underground services cause challenges.

Detail on the sustainable management of Marine Waters including the development of the National Marine Planning Framework, the protection of the marine environment and growth of the marine economy.

Two key developments in this area since the adoption of the RSES have been the national marine planning framework, NMPF, which sets out overarching and sectoral planning policies to shape marine development and activities to 2040, and the legislation underpinning marine planning decision making, the Marine Area Planning (MAP) Bill (formerly the Marine Planning and Development Bill).

The NMPF was approved by Government in March 2021 and represents the proposed approach to managing Ireland's marine activities to ensure the sustainable use of marine resources up to 2040. This single framework, bringing together all marine-based human activities, sets out objectives and planning policies for each activity. Those activities include offshore renewable energy; fisheries; ports, harbours and shipping; safety at sea; sport and recreation; tourism; and wastewater treatment and disposal. The NMPF will be the key decision-making tool for Government departments, State agencies, regulatory authorities and policymakers for decisions on marine activities.

The MAP Bill seeks to establish in law a new regime for the maritime area which will replace existing State and development consent regimes, making the system straightforward for applicants while retaining a strong emphasis on environmental assessment and public participation. Development of the Bill is being led by the Department with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications leading the development of provisions specific to offshore renewable energy. The General Scheme was approved by Government in December 2019. The Bill underwent pre-legislative scrutiny in November/December 2020 and the report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee was laid before the Houses on the 16th of February. Consideration of the report and recommendations is currently in progress.

The current marine consent system only covers the foreshore area, which covers some 12 nautical miles offshore. A planning system generally comprises three main elements: forward planning, development management and enforcement. The existing system lacks coherence and consistency. There is no forward planning framework, multiple development management systems are operating independently and enforcement is fragmented. The draft Bill gives legal underpinning to an entirely new marine planning system for a coherent, end-to-end forward planning, development management and enforcement regime.

The marine planning system will move towards being planned through the NMPF. The NMPF is a parallel document to the national planning framework, NPF. Both of these spatial plans are concerned with the long-term future of our land and sea areas and with identifying opportunities for protection, growth and development so that our land and marine areas can be managed in the best interests of the public. The NPF recognises the importance of integration and co-ordination with the land planning regime at national, regional and local levels.

In future, it will be equally important that national, regional and local terrestrial plans are consistent with the NMPF, and they will be required to be so under the provisions of the proposed Bill. This Bill provides for strategic marine activity zones. Once approved, the zone becomes part of the NMPF. This ensures there is a joined-up approach to marine forward planning, with binding considerations for decision makers.

The proposed Bill will replace the antiquated Foreshore Act 1933 with a new maritime area consent, MAC, to manage the occupation of the maritime area. On receipt of the MAC, a developer can then proceed to An Bord Pleanála or a local authority for planning permission as appropriate. This streamlines the application process into a two-stage procedure. This sequential regime, with clearly delineated roles for Ministers and planning authorities, streamlines the existing disjointed system and ensures a single environmental assessment.

The pillars of the Aarhus Convention are the foundation on which the marine planning and development management Bill regime stands. Effective and meaningful public participation is a fundamental feature of the new regime at policy and project levels. Participation at a policy level maximises the opportunities for the public to influence how decisions are made. Pre-application requirements ensure visibility of projects and early consideration of issues by developers.

Marine planning and development management will deliver a better planned and better managed maritime area, with a co-ordinated, inclusive and coherent approach to decision-making and governance, including the long-term vision for proper management, enforcement and environmental protection of Ireland's seas.

B) Progress made by agencies that operate under the aegis of each Department, in supporting the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to that agency

Irish Water

In addition to the information provided above on the main Irish Water projects in the EMRA region, detail was provided on the progress of the Rural Water Programme. Funding under the Rural Water Programme provides for capital investment to the rural water sector – where public (Irish Water) services are not available or planned – and operational and management subsidies for the group water sector. The day-to-day delivery of the Programme is by the local authorities.

The capital funding is delivered through a multi-annual programme which comprises of a range of measures aimed at improving the quality, reliability and efficiency of rural water services infrastructure serving rural households. Current funding provides an annual subsidy payable by local authorities to group water schemes towards their operational and management costs of supplying water for domestic use.

The current three-year funding cycle of the Multi-annual Rural Water Programme commenced in 2019. The allocation for the Eastern and Midlands Region under the multi-annual programme for the 2019-2021 funding cycle was €5.1m. The capital funding, across a range of measures, is used mainly to address: source protection, water treatment, mains upgrading (water conservation), the taking in charge by Irish Water of group water schemes and mains extensions. The work on the various projects is complete in some cases and ongoing in others.

In addition to the above, demand led funding is available for improvements to private wells and on-site wastewater treatment systems (more commonly known as septic tanks). The funding allows householders that are dependent on these services to obtain funding support for their improvement. The funding provided for improvements to private or household wells in the region amounted to just over €0.8m and €0.1m for septic tanks in 2020. In 2019 funding was €1.3m on wells and €0.1 on septic tanks. The current funding provided for the operational and management subsidies for the group water sector in the region amounted to just under €1.9m in 2020 with a similar amount in 2019.

Also of significance is Irish Water's 'Small Towns and Villages Growth Programme' (STVGP). The STVGP is intended to provide capacity primarily in Wastewater Treatment Plants (WWTPs) to cater for growth in smaller settlements which would not otherwise be provided for in the larger scale investment plan. Capacity may also be provided in Water Treatment Plants (WTPs) in suitable cases. An overall budget of €98 million has been allocated to the programme over the 5 years 2020-2024 and it is limited to supporting growth in settlements which are already served by Irish Water infrastructure. The programme is directed at settlements with a population of less than 2,000 persons (Census 2016), with identified capacity constraints and also no Irish Water capacity upgrade project currently proposed. The programme offers the potential for housing development in settlements in rural areas to be provided as an alternative to one-off rural housing.

Following a programme of workshops with local authorities, a total of 72 eligible settlements were identified by the local authorities in the EMRA region, including fourteen settlements in Wicklow, twelve settlements in Meath, ten settlements in Kildare and fewer than ten settlements in Laois, Louth, Offaly, Fingal and Westmeath. The process of finalising the selection of projects is ongoing.

The Heritage Council

The Department provides financial support for the protection of heritage buildings and historic structures through two grant schemes which are, in the main, administered by the local authorities. These are the Built Heritage Investment Scheme (BHIS) and the Historic Structures Fund (HSF). Also introduced this year was the Community Monuments Fund (CMF) for conservation and other works at national monuments.

The BHIS is a scheme for the repair and conservation of structures on the local authority Record of Protected Structures. It is designed to leverage private capital for investment in small scale conservation projects across the country and to support the employment of skilled conservation professionals. The HSF is for conservation and enhancement to heritage structures and historic buildings, in both private and public ownership, for the benefit of communities and the public.

This year 450 heritage projects across every county in the country have benefited from a combined sum of over €4.3m under BHIS and HSF. An extra €1m in funding was secured for built heritage projects under the July Jobs Stimulus Package 2020, which aims to offset some of the effects of Covid-19. This funding supplements 28 BHIS and HSF projects and supported 12 new ones, in addition to capital works by the Heritage Council and the Irish Heritage Trust. The BHIS and HSF allocations for 2021, amounted to a combined €6m, an increase of nearly 40% on the previous year.

A further €1 million in funding was approved nationally for the Historic Towns Initiative 2020, which is a joint initiative of the Department and the Heritage Council.

The Heritage Council also has a role in allocating funding to heritage sites across the country through its own grant schemes. It is primarily a matter for the Heritage Council to decide how this funding should be allocated across the range of research, education and conservation programmes it supports annually.

The Department has also supported projects under a new fund, the Community Monuments Fund (CMF) for investment in archaeological heritage. The CMF is prioritised for local authorities, private owners and custodians, and community groups for the care, maintenance, protection and promotion of local monuments and historic sites and the provision of any required measures to ensure safe access during the Covid-19 pandemic. A total of 25 CMF projects are being supported in the region.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service

Some initiatives of the National Parks and Wildlife Service in securing the objectives of the EMRA RSES can be outlined as follows:

Provision of advice on built heritage matters to the formulation of the new EMRA Regional plan and the identification of Regional Planning Objectives in respect of historic urban centres, heritage-led regeneration, the reuse of vacant building stock in support of housing strategy and economic vibrancy and the linking of built heritage with the provision of blue and green infrastructure, flood relief works and the provision of greater access to cultural heritage, amenity providing social cohesion and well-being.

On – going liaison/co-ordination with the EMRA /Regional Assembly Fora in general through the SEA Forum in which the Department is a stakeholder on the environment and the opportunity to provide awareness of the remit of built heritage and its potential as a key component of climate action, urban regeneration and a key contributor to regional vibrancy/sustainable development. Currently Built Heritage/National Monument Service are looking at developing guidance for SEA for cultural heritage and the identification of indicators that can be referenced/measured as part of the overall built environment.

Webinar on Historic Town Centres in Ireland, the EU Green Deal and Creation of SEA Indicators, March 2021 - in partnership with the Heritage Council, Dept. of Housing, Local Government & Heritage, Dept. of Health, Irish Regions European Office (IREO).

Town funding programmes – Historic Towns Initiative, Irish Walled Town Network and the Historic Structures Fund on an annual basis which supports the regeneration of built heritage within historic urban centres, which can act as the catalyst for change, community engagement and capacity building.

Waterways Ireland

The most significant Waterways Ireland initiative in the EMRA region has been the recent opening of the Royal Canal Greenway in March 2021, a scenic 130km walking and cycling amenity alongside the canal, which runs through Kildare, Meath, Westmeath and Longford. It is Ireland's longest greenway, stretching from the towns of Maynooth, Enfield, Mullingar, Longford and Cloondara and represents a major tourism and green infrastructure amenity for the region. The Greenway was completed in partnership with Waterways Ireland; the four local authorities of Kildare, Longford, Meath and Westmeath County Councils; the Department of Transport, and Transport Infrastructure Ireland. Separately, works are ongoing to develop sections of the Grand Canal Towpath to Greenway standard.

The Land Development Agency

The Land Development Agency (LDA) was established as a State agency under secondary legislation in September 2018. The initial focus of the Agency is on managing the State's own lands to develop new homes, and regenerate under-utilised sites. In the longer-term it will assemble strategic landbanks from a mix of public and private lands, making these available for housing in a controlled manner which brings essential long-term stability to the Irish housing market. The Land Development Agency Bill 2021 is presently at committee stage. The Bill establishes the LDA on a statutory basis and sets out the core goals of the LDA to undertake strategic land assembly and fully utilise state lands to build affordable homes and sustainable communities. The Bill focuses initially on public lands in towns of over 10,000 people. It provides that the LDA will periodically report to Government on public lands which could be suitable for housing or urban development and the Government may direct that such lands be transferred to the LDA and also provides that the LDA will have first refusal to purchase public lands being put up for sale. The Agency can also provide services to local authorities for the development of large scale multi-tenure sites for housing and urban development in urban centres over 30,000 population.

The LDA is advancing a range of projects in the EMRA region and whilst most projects are at early stages, preliminary estimates indicate development potential for approximately 4000 homes on the various sites. More detail is provided below.

Projects in the Eastern and Midlands Region:

- **Shanganagh, Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown**

At Shanganagh the LDA will deliver 597 homes in partnership with Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council, the first partnership of its kind. The LDA and DLR intends to deliver over 300 of the 597 homes as cost rental homes to be delivered at affordable rents. The preliminary design stage is complete.

- **'Dundrum Central', Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown**

The Central Mental Hospital is currently an operational mental health facility and it is intended to relocate the residents to a new purpose-built facility in St Ita's, Portrane, Co Dublin in Q3 2020.

The site extends to approximately 11.3 ha and while the optimum residential unit mix and number and ancillary uses will be determined as part of the detailed design process, a development of approximately 1,300 no. new build residential units with appropriate supporting amenities, to include the adaptive reuse of the heritage buildings, is proposed. The project is at Draft Masterplan / Stage 4 Public Engagement stage.

- **Hacketstown, Fingal**

This 7.30 ha site is located on the south side of Skerries town, approximately 1.5 km from the centre of town and the bulk of the lands located within 1 Km of Skerries railway station. It is envisaged that the site has a capacity of c 200 units. Preliminary design stage has been completed.

- **Devoy Barracks, Naas, Kildare**

The Devoy Barracks site extends to approximately 4.14 hectares and is located to the southwest of Naas Town Centre. The proposed development of the Devoy Barracks site is for the construction of 221 new homes. The new neighbourhood provides homezones, on street parking, tree planting, and open spaces that seamlessly connect throughout and with adjoining lands. A Strategic Housing Development planning application was submitted to An Bord Pleanála in April 2021.

- **Castlelands, Balbriggan, Fingal**

The Castlelands lands comprise circa. 24.2 ha of greenfield land with potential for up to 800 homes. A design team has been appointed and a preliminary design is in preparation.

- **Meath Hospital, Dublin City**

The property comprises the original Meath Hospital (a 4 storey, limestone structure) two disused buildings and surface car parking located within the Meath Hospital Campus at Heytesbury Street and Long Lane, Dublin 8 and covering a site area of 0.31 ha (0.76 acres) approximately. The optimum development, design and planning strategies will be determined and finalised once the professional teams are appointed and the project is progressing through the various stages.

- **Donore Project, Dublin City**

The LDA, in partnership with Dublin City Council, propose to bring forward development plans for the subject site which extends to circa 5.87 hectares and is located adjacent to the Coombe Hospital, Donore Avenue and is approximately 2km from Dublin City Centre.

While the optimum residential unit mix and number and ancillary uses will be determined as part of the detailed design process, cognisant of planning policy requirements, a development of approximately 700 new build residential units with appropriate supporting amenities, to include retail and a creche, is proposed. A design team has been appointed and public engagement is underway.

- **Columb Barracks, Mullingar, Westmeath**

A design team has been appointed and preliminary design work is ongoing. The lands have an estimated capacity for up to 100 homes.

The Housing Agency

The Housing Agency works with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) in the delivery of housing and housing services. The Agency also implements the Pyrite Remediation Scheme and is the interim regulator of the AHB sector.

The Housing Agency is involved in delivery of a wide range of actions, including policy development through the provision of data analysis and research and the publication of best practice guidance. The Agency also supports local authorities and Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) through project feasibility and development of housing, procurement and contracts preparation and advisory services on Part V delivery, turnkey delivery, and design and build tenders. Many of the Agency's activities in the housing sector, particularly in relation to policy research and development operate at the national level.

The Agency supports a wide range of projects that impact the EMRA region, particularly in relation to Land Development and Management. At the end of December 2019, The Housing Agency had 80 sites in its ownership situated across the country. The Agency has a responsibility to manage these sites, but more importantly, to identify appropriate sites for the development of housing. Several large sites in the EMRA region were transferred to local authorities for social and affordable housing projects including lands at Enniskerry Road, Sandyford, Co. Dublin to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council for 155 homes, including cost rental, lands at Craddockstown, Naas, Co. Kildare for 74 social housing homes, lands at Nancy's Lane, Clane, Co. Kildare for 77 social housing homes.

The Office of the Planning Regulator

The OPR have sought to secure the objectives of the RSES via the three statutory functions of the Office, namely (a) assessment of statutory plans (b) reviews of local authority planning functions and (c) education, training and research and awareness.

OPR Statutory Plan Evaluation in the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly Area

The OPR carries out an assessment and evaluation of statutory plans to ensure consistency with national and regional planning policy. These plans include City/ County Development Plans (including Variations to these plans) and Local Area Plans (including Alterations to these plans). The plan making process has multiple stages and the OPR makes submissions at the different stages as appropriate.

City/ County Development Plans

The RSES for the EMRA was the first of the three RSESs to be adopted (June 2019), initiating the review of the county and city development plans in that region. All 12 local authorities within the Eastern and Midlands Region have now commenced the review process. The plan making process is on-going for all local authorities, with the exception of the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027 which was adopted 22 March 2021. The OPR has made 18 submissions on City/ County Development Plans in the EMRA area between June 2019 and May 2021.

Local Area Plans

A further 9 submissions were made at the various consultation stages of the development of draft local area plans; four of which were in Kildare County between June 2019 and May 2021.

OPR Recommendations and Observations

The OPR submissions to local authorities may include recommendations and/or observations which directly relate to national and regional policy, and the legislative requirements relating to statutory plans.

Recommendations are made on matters considered to constitute a potential material breach of legislative or policy requirements and which may affect the co-ordination of national, regional and local planning requirements. Failure to comply with a recommendation may ultimately lead to the issuing of a Ministerial Direction under section 31 of the Planning and Development Act (the Act).

Observations are advisory and generally issue on discretionary or more minor matters, often in the context of broader legislative and/or policy requirements where no material breach arises.

The OPR made a total of 123 recommendations and 96 observations on statutory plans in the Eastern and Midlands Region between June 2019 and May 2021. The OPR does not make formal observations or recommendations on issues papers. Strategic advice and/or guidance is offered instead. In relation to the OPR recommendations, a total of 25 recommendations specifically related to consistency with the objectives of the RSES. Key themes or topics that these recommendations covered included settlement hierarchy, core strategy, compact growth, modal shift and renewable energy.

In relation to observations, a total of 20 specifically related to consistency with the objectives of the RSES. Key themes or topics that the OPR observations addressed were settlement hierarchy, regeneration, compact growth, housing yield and zoning.

Outcomes

With the exception of the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027, the OPR has been satisfied that all the recommendations of the OPR were satisfactorily addressed in the Eastern and Midlands region where plans have been adopted by the local authority.

In the case of the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027, the OPR recommended that the Minister issue a draft direction in relation to the county's wind energy policy in the adopted development plan. This matter did not relate, or refer to an inconsistency with the RSES. At the time of writing this report, this is progressing in accordance with the requirements of Section 31AN of the Act.

Engagement with the Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly

EMRA joined the OPR-led Plans Evaluation Forum (the Forum) on the 3rd September 2020. The Forum was established in June 2019. The purpose of the Forum is to facilitate discussion and information sharing in the consideration of statutory plans and encourage greater policy alignment amongst stakeholders in the context of the plan making process. Forum members meet approximately every four to six weeks.

Engagement with Local Authorities within the Eastern and Midlands Region

The OPR has engaged proactively with the forward planning teams in each of the 12 planning authorities in the eastern and midlands region. In response to COVID-19 restrictions meetings with the planning authorities were held online in a virtual meeting room. The focus of the meetings was to discuss the preparation of the 10 county's pending development plan and/or a variation to an existing plan. The alignment of plans to the EMRA RSES was a reoccurring topic for discussion at these meetings.

OPR's Research, Education, Training and Public Awareness Activity functions

Under Section 31(Q)(1) of the Act a core function of the OPR is to conduct education and training programmes for elected members and staff of planning authorities and regional assemblies. This includes the staff and elected members in the eastern and midlands region.

The EMRA RSES has 16 Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSOs) which are aligned with international, EU and national policy and which in turn set the framework for city and county development plans in the eastern and midlands region. The OPR training and research programme strongly supports the implementation of these objectives, by upskilling and informing staff, elected representatives and decision makers in local authorities and regional assemblies on the principles, policies and procedures that support the implementation of these policy objectives.

The OPR has collaborated with the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) to develop a tailor-made planning training programme for elected members and this included the elected members of the eastern and midlands region. The programme currently focuses on four topical themes relevant to the members' role in making and reviewing development plans and aligned with the relevant regional strategic (RSOs) objectives, including: communications, housing, de-carbonisation and active travel. Training is delivered on a monthly basis in conjunction with the AILG, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and the Housing Agency.

OPR review of systems and procedures used by planning authorities

In 2020, the OPR initiated its programme of reviews of the systems and procedures used by planning authorities across the county in the delivery of their planning services, including forward planning operations.

The implementation of the reviews programme is intended as a developmental resource for the planning sector, identifying best practice and achievements, and promoting such learning between planning authorities, in addition to highlighting areas that may be in need of improvement. This will in turn strengthen planning authorities' systems and procedures for forward planning and other planning operations, which will contribute to the effective implementation by the relevant planning authorities of the objectives for the EMRA area.

The OPR, through its GIS and Spatial Data Management capability, is providing the critical evidence base its planners need to evaluate draft local authority plans. This has enabled the OPR to make submissions on draft development plans grounded in evidence and ensure that plan proposals support the Regional Strategic Outcomes.

Some specific examples of this include supporting:

- RSO 2. Compact Growth and Urban Regeneration – the OPR, in conjunction with the DHLGH, are developing a tracking mechanism focusing initially on housing completions for measuring progress in delivery of NPF objectives regarding Compact Growth through development plan review cycles.
- RSO 9. Support the Transition to Low Carbon and Clean Energy – the OPR are using GIS modelling to undertake technical assessments regarding the viability of Wind Energy Strategy proposals in local authority plans. This analytical capability has enabled the OPR to evaluate plans ensuring local authority targets are in line with national targets to support the transition to a low carbon economy by 2050.

An Bord Pleanála

An Bord Pleanála has continued to undertake a significant caseload for the EMRA Region, across all operations including normal planning appeals, strategic infrastructure developments, strategic housing developments and vacant site levy appeals. The most recently available data indicates that almost 60% of all normal planning appeals handled by An Bord Pleanála were in the EMRA region.

In relation to Strategic Housing Developments, the EMRA region has seen the most significant level of activity. Of the 320 applications submitted to An Bord Pleanála to date under SHD, 255 (or 80%) have been submitted in the EMRA region. Almost 41,000 houses and apartments have been granted planning permission in the region, under the SHD legislation. This figure comprises 83% of all residential units granted permission under the SHD legislation. This has made a significant contribution to meeting the overall increasing demands for new homes under the Government's Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness. What is also worth noting is the significant increase in the number of apartment and multi-unit developments applied for and granted permission in our cities and larger towns, helping to realise the compact growth and sustainable building objectives set down in the National Planning Framework and the RSES. Despite the substantial growth in SHD applications during the last two years, the Board have been able to maintain 100% compliance with the statutory timelines set down in legislation (16 weeks generally, or 24 weeks for cases where an oral hearing is held).

The Board has approved a number of Strategic Development Zone proposals for the region, in Balgaddy/Clonburris and Poolbeg, both in Dublin, which will deliver in excess of 11,000 new housing units between them and also for amendments to the Cherrywood scheme, also in Dublin.

Applications for strategic infrastructure developments are made directly to An Bord Pleanála from private entities and statutory undertakers and from local authorities. These applications relate to large scale developments comprising energy, transport, environmental and health infrastructure.

Some notable strategic infrastructure proposals dealt with by ABP in the Region include:

- Ringsend wastewater treatment plant upgrade project including a regional biosolids storage facility, Dublin Grant Permission with Conditions;
- Greater Dublin Drainage Project, Co. Dublin- Grant Permission with Conditions;
- Wastewater Treatment Plant, Arklow, Co. Wicklow- Grant Permission with Conditions;
- Permanent continuation of use of 6,122 long-term car parking spaces, Dublin Airport, Co. Dublin- Grant Permission with Conditions;
- Continued operation of peat-fuelled power station to facilitate the phased transition to exclusive firing with biomass, Shannonbridge, Co. Offaly- Refuse Permission;
- Proposed electrical substation and associated infrastructure required to connect ground mounted solar PV generation to the electrical transmission system, Duleek, Co. Meath- Approve with Conditions;
- Double circuit 110kV underground transmission line between the Belcamp 220kV and 110kV substation and the Darndale 110kV substation, Dublin 17- Approve with Conditions;
- 110kV substation and connection to facilitate the connection of a consented solar farm, Dunboyne, Co. Meath- Approve with Conditions;
- 220 kV Gas Insulated Switchgear substation with various 220 kV underground circuits and other associated works, Leixlip, Co. Kildare- Approve with Conditions.

C) Details of any policy initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

The Department provided details with regard to the Town Centre First (TCF) approach and indicated that the important roles of towns and villages, is reflected in the Programme for Government with the proposed development of a “Town Centre First” policy. In this context, the Programme for Government (PFG) committed in outline to the development of a Town Centre First (TCF) policy. The Department of Rural and Community Development launched the ‘Town Centre First Pilot Scheme’ in 2018 with a goal to better understand the issues faced by towns and to provide a range of innovative proposals for the re-use of vacant buildings in town centres. Six towns were selected including one in the region – Banagher in Offaly – and a synthesis report ‘The Town Centre Living Initiative’ was published detailing the findings and suggested actions.

Each of these towns had an established town team made up members of the public, local business and the Local Authority. These teams were funded to engage consultants to carry out analysis of their towns and propose solutions for revitalizing them. With a view to giving effect to this commitment and the actions outlined in the PFG, a TCF inter-Departmental Group (IDG) was established in late 2020 to consider the regeneration of towns and villages.

The IDG is jointly chaired by the Department and the Department of Rural and Community Development and aims to progress the commitment and associated actions in relation to the Town Centre First approach in the Programme for Government. A TCF policy is under preparation through the forum of the IDG with many strands to be considered including that of appropriate stakeholder engagement and public consultation.

In parallel, a Town Centre First advisory group has been established, to enable the experiences of a broader group of stakeholders to be brought to bear in informing the process of policy development.

Local authorities also have compulsory purchase order powers which can be used in certain circumstances to address these issues.

D) Details of any funding competitions/initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES which are relevant to the organisation

Urban Regeneration and Development Fund

There have been two calls for proposals under the URDF. In 2019, approval in principle together with provisional funding allocations issued in respect of the 87 projects approved under the first call which was launched in 2018. The second call for proposals was launched last year and a further 45 projects were approved for URDF support.

The tables below list the 57 projects approved in the EMRA region under both calls for funding together with provisional URDF funding allocations. There was a total of 38 projects approved under Call 1, totalling €123,278,777 and a total of 19 projects approved in Call 2, totalling €494,207,844. In total, a combined sum of €617,486,621 has been committed to urban regeneration projects in the EMRA region.

TABLE 1 - Projects Approved under URDF Call 1

County	Applicant	Project	Provisional Allocation
Dublin City	Dublin City Council	Santry River Restoration Project	750,000
Dublin City	Dublin City Council	Artists' Workspaces	200,000
Dublin City	Dublin City Council	Inchicore - St Michael's Estate & Environs Regeneration	150,000
Dublin City	Dublin City Council	Rutland Street NEIC	8,969,460
Dublin City	Dublin City Council	Park West/Cherry Orchard Industrial Lands Analysis	150,000
Dublin City	Dublin City Council	Naas Road LAP lands	200,000
Dublin City	Trinity College Dublin	Campus at Grand Canal Quay (Public Realm Re-use)	1,500,000
Dublin City	Dept of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht	Redevelopment and repurposing of the historically significant No. 11 Parnell Square	3,862,500
Dublin County	Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	Stillorgan (Public Realm works)	7,658,379
Dublin County	Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	Dundrum Community, Cultural and Civic Action Plan	65,679
Dublin County	Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	Spatial and Economic Action Plan for Dún Laoghaire	75,000
Dublin County	Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	Cherrywood Public Parks, Greenways & Attenuation	13,358,102
Dublin County	Fingal County Council	Balbriggan Planning and Design Works	2,125,000
Dublin County	Fingal County Council	Sustainable Swords	375,000
Dublin County	South Dublin County Council	Tallaght Town Centre (Civic Plaza/Link Road)	31,894,325
Dublin County	South Dublin County Council	Naas Road/Ballymount	200,000
Kildare	Kildare County Council	Naas Library (including Public Realm works)	4,445,243
Kildare	Kildare County Council	Celbridge Southern Relief Road & Second Liffey Crossing	400,000
Kildare	Kildare County Council	Newbridge Cultural and Civic Quarter	492,000
Kildare	Kildare County Council	Canal Quarter Naas	195,000
Laois	Laois County Council	Portlaoise - A Cultural Quarter	7,028,640
Laois	Laois County Council	Portlaoise - A Low Carbon Town	2,026,372
Longford	Longford County Council	Longford Connected (Public Realm Marketsquare)	2,990,355
Louth	Louth County Council	Long Walk Quarter Dundalk	533,000
Louth	Louth County Council	Westgate Vision Drogheda	476,000
Meath	Meath County Council	Ashbourne Road and Public Realm Improvement	6,376,050
Meath	Meath County Council	Flowerhill Regeneration Project	75,000
Meath	Meath County Council	Navan Active Land Management Project	3,683,000
Meath	Meath County Council	Railway Street Regeneration and County Archive	187,500
Offaly	Offaly County Council	Tullamore Urban Area (Public Realm)	3,000,000
Westmeath	Westmeath County Council	Loughanaskin Masterplanning	750,000
Westmeath	Westmeath County Council	Canal Avenue & Environs Regeneration Project	1,706,250
Westmeath	Westmeath County Council	Athlone Tourism Cultural Quarter	750,000
Westmeath	Westmeath County Council	Blackhall, Mullingar	2,452,500
Westmeath	Westmeath County Council	Athlone Town Centre Regeneration and Enhancement	750,000
Wicklow	Wicklow County Council	Bray Public Transport Bridge	6,450,000
Wicklow	Wicklow County Council	Arklow Historic Town Core	2,351,013
Wicklow	Wicklow County Council	Wicklow Town - Relocation and upgrading of the library and Fitzwilliam square upgrade and street improvement.	4,627,409
Total			€123,278,777

TABLE 2 - Projects approved under URDF Call 2

County	Applicant	Project	Provisional Allocation
Dublin City	Dublin City Council	North Inner City	121,285,388
Dublin City	Dublin City Council	South Inner City	53,015,166
Dublin County	Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	Cherrywood Public Access, Permeability and Amenity	40,361,115
Dublin County	Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	Dundrum Community, Cultural and Civic Hub	4,000,000
Dublin County	Fingal County Council	Balbriggan Rejuvenation	25,438,875
Dublin County	Fingal County Council	Dunsink Feasibility Study - Transportation and Surface Water Assessments	41,250
Dublin County	South Dublin County Council	Adamstown SDZ	9,725,000
Dublin County	South Dublin County Council	Clonburris	176,598,057
Kildare	Kildare County Council	Maynooth Town Centre Renewal	1,908,750
Kildare	Kildare County Council	Naas Town Renewal Masterplan	3,496,374
Kildare	Kildare County Council	Celbridge to Hazelhatch Link Road	10,237,500
Laois	Laois County Council	Portlaoise - Placemaking for a Low Carbon Town	9,000,000
Longford	Longford County Council	Camlin Quarter Regeneration	10,440,941
Louth	Louth County Council	St. Nicholas Quarter and Backlands Regeneration	7,487,771
Meath	Meath County Council	Flowerhill	7,661,250
Offaly	Offaly County Council	Tullamore Urban Regeneration and Development 2020	2,245,407
Westmeath	Westmeath County Council	Athlone Town Centre Regeneration and Enhancement	4,125,000
Wicklow	Wicklow County Council	Bray Harbour Area Integrated Regeneration	7,140,000
Total			€494,207,844

E) Details of the funding programmes administered by the Department (and agencies under the aegis of each department), over the last two years, which have been awarded within the Eastern and Midland Region

Social Housing Current Expenditure Programme (SHCEP)

The Social Housing Current Expenditure Programme (SHCEP) supports the delivery of social housing by providing financial support to local authorities and Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) for the leasing of houses and apartments. These properties are either privately owned or owned by AHBs. Properties made available under the programme are used to accommodate households from local authority waiting lists.

The following schemes are currently supported under SHCEP:

- properties leased and owned by AHBs, including properties funded under CALF, and delivered under payment and Availability Agreements (P&As)
- direct leasing by local authorities from private owners
- properties in the Repair and Leasing Scheme (RLS)
- AHB Mortgage to Rent (MTR) and the expanded MTR scheme
- properties leased to local authorities and AHBs from NARPS
- unsold Affordable Dwellings managed by AHBs for local authorities
- enhanced Leasing

Local Authority	Spend- 2019	Spend- 2020	Total
DLR	€6,536,365	€10,339,054	€16,875,419
Dublin City	€26,457,500	€34,318,459	€60,775,959
Fingal	€13,071,439	€21,552,593	€34,624,032
Kildare	€8,132,096	€11,174,081	€19,306,177
Laois	€2,585,754	€3,178,153	€5,763,907
Longford	€755,252	€834,441	€1,589,693
Louth	€7,939,292	€13,874,493	€21,813,785
Meath	€7,207,940	€10,086,353	€17,294,293
Offaly	€2,283,497	€2,319,936	€4,603,433
South Dublin	€15,307,999	€21,369,821	€36,677,820
Westmeath	€2,501,123	€3,327,835	€5,828,958
Wicklow	€2,371,902	€4,667,064	€7,038,966
	€95,150,159	€137,042,283	€232,192,442



Service Sites Fund

The Serviced Sites Fund, which has a total of €310 million available support local authorities out to 2021, was established to provide key facilitating infrastructure, on public lands, to support the delivery of affordable homes to purchase or rent.

The homes that will be delivered via this funding support, will be made available for affordable purchase under the provisions of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2009. Alternatively, SSF funding is also being made available to support innovative delivery of homes for rent under a 'Cost Rental' model which it is anticipated will deliver rental options at rates significantly below market levels.

Call 1

Local Authority	Project/Location	Cost of Proposal €	Total Housing Potential
Dublin City	Cherry Orchard	€7,645,415	183
Dublin City	Balbutcher, Ballymun	€4,135,351	74
Dublin City	Silloogue, Ballymun	€3,975,000	83
DLR	Enniskerry Road	€4,537,576	155
Fingal	Church Fields, Mulhuddart	€11,000,000	1255
Fingal	Dun Emer, Lusk	€1,500,000	99
Fingal	Hackettstown, Skerries	€2,198,667	98
Total		€42,870,926	2192

Call 2

Local Authority	Site	Project Cost	Dept. cost (89%)	Affordable Units
Dublin City Council	O Devaney Gardens*	€10,233,682	€9,107,977	117
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council	Ballyogan Court	€2,342,745	€2,085,043	52
	St. Laurence's Park, Stillorgan	€1,960,698	€1,745,021	40
South Dublin County Council	Killinarden	€9,987,000	€8,888,430	300
	Rathcoole	€3,712,000	€3,303,680	100
	Clonburris*	€6,968,000	€6,201,520	133
Fingal County Council	Cappaghfinn	€3,552,500	€3,161,725	122
Kildare County Council	Ardclough Rd., Celbridge	€363,732	€323,721	10
Wicklow County Council	Rathnew	€676,000	€601,640	21

Subsequent SSF approvals, outside the scope of a call for funding

Local Authority	Project/Location	Total Provisional Cost of Proposal	Provisional Exchequer Grant Amount	Provisional LA Contribution	Affordable Housing Potential
Dublin City Council	Emmet Road	€18,750,000	€16,867,500	€2,062,500	375
Dublin City Council	Oscar Traynor Road	€8,700,000	€7,743,000	€957,000	172
DLRCC	Shanganagh	€19,850,000	€17,666,500	€2,183,500	397
Fingal	Ballymastone	€10,478,400	€9,325,776	€1,152,624	238
Total		€57,778,000	€51,422,776	€6,355,624	1,182

Heritage Funding

The Department provided significant information with regard to heritage funding allocated across the Region. This includes funds allocated under the July Jobs Stimulus Package Grants allocated 2020- Built Heritage, the July Jobs Stimulus Package Grants allocated 2020- Community Monuments Fund, the Built Heritage Investment Fund Grants allocated 2020, and the Historic Structures Fund- Grants allocated 2020.

F) Any other comments that were made with respect to each Department (including any agencies under the aegis of each Department) and implementing the RSES, including any recommendations that are considered would facilitate the process

Nothing further indicated

G) Response and Recommendations of the Regional Assembly

The Assembly welcome the information submitted by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and commend the effort made in presenting a coordinated report for the purposes of RSES Monitoring.

The response by the Department has indicated progress across a number of areas of the RSES including RSOs, such as RSO 2 which focuses on compact growth and urban regeneration and RSO 9 to support the transition to low carbon and clean energy. Accordingly, on review of the information submitted, the Assembly are satisfied that the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and the agencies under its aegis, have carried out a number of actions that have enabled progress to be made in implementing the RSES.

However, having regard to the information submitted, The Assembly consider that the work to date could be enhanced and make the following recommendations to NOAC for consideration;

- To revise the 'applicant led' bidding process for URDF funds in order to secure enhanced and ring-fenced funding for complex and larger regeneration projects in the Dublin Metropolitan Area and the designated Regional Growth Centres (Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk) and Key Towns of the Region. Increased and ring-fenced funding sources will be instrumental in ensuring delivery of the spatial strategy of the RSES and that urban renewal schemes are adequately utilised in a manner that supports compact growth targets that have been outlined in the RSES. This recommendation is in keeping with the findings and subsequent recommendations on foot of the local authority responses related to funding.
- Identify and provide measures in order to converge towards the NPF and RSES development scenario for Dublin City and suburbs, acknowledging trends that indicate a continuing struggle to achieve housing targets.
- Support coordination of RSES objectives, related to strengthened and diversified rural communities, both within and across Government Departments, including the delivery of serviced sites for housing to attract people to build their own homes and live-in small towns and villages.

5.2 Implementation Progress made by the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly

This section of the Report outlines the implementation progress made by the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly during the two-year period since the making of the RSES in June 2019. It outlines the measures that have been put in place, as well as additional policy and research carried out by the Assembly, to enable and deliver implementation.

Since 2019 Implementation of the RSES has been the focus of the Assembly to support the achievement of the regional strategic outcomes of the Strategy. To this end, the Assembly has established governance structures and worked through dedicated forums, to advance RSES implementation.

5.2.1 Establishment of Governance Structures for RSES Implementation

A specific structure was established for the making of the RSES. This allowed for the members of the Assembly to perform their function in making the Strategy and to be supported by political Strategic Planning Area Committees and thematic working groups, consisting of key stakeholders.

This structure has been reimagined for the implementation of the RSES to ensure coordination, focus and drive in the delivery of the RSES policies and objectives. The implementation structure has an implementation group for the overall RSES and a specific implementation group for the MASP (see below) with political oversight from the existing Strategic Planning Area Committees and a new MASP SPA Committee.

5.2.1.1 Strategic Planning Area Committees (SPAs)

The Strategic Planning Area Committees for the Midlands, Eastern and Dublin were reconstituted as part of the new Assembly in 2019 following on from the Local and European elections of May 2019. These Committees and the MASP Committee, have met online, adopted standing orders and nominated chairpersons. They provide a forum for members to advance priorities and policies specific to each strategic planning area and have informed the prioritisation of the implementation of the RSES.

5.2.1.2 Implementation Group

The implementation group consists of the key stakeholders, local authorities and agencies who are integral to the implementation of the RSES and were also co-producers of the Strategy. Due to Covid restrictions this Group has met online in an implementation forum and the Assembly continues to engage with these stakeholders in a bilateral basis. In June 2020, the Assembly also held an online RSES implementation webinar that attracted a large number of attendees from a wide range of stakeholders. The webinar detailed implementation progress of the RSES across the three key principles of Healthy Placemaking, Economic Opportunity and Climate Action, and provided opportunity for attendees to contribute to the discussion.

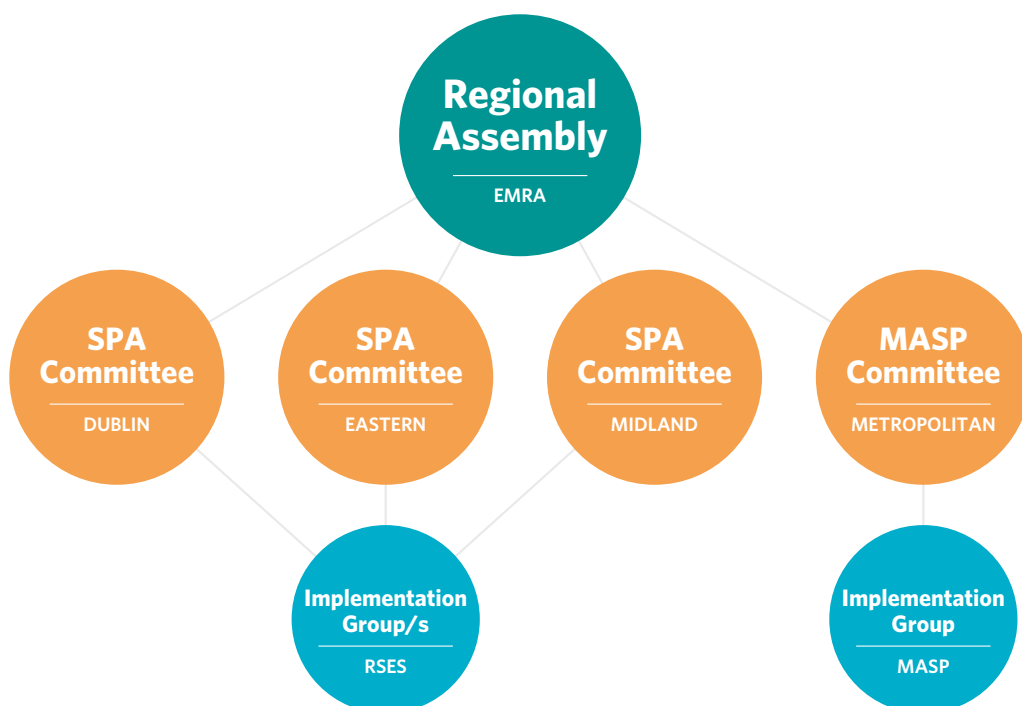


Figure 3: Governance Structures

5.2.2 Ensuring Consistency with the RSES

5.2.2.1 Submissions and Observations by the Assembly

The Regional Assembly has a statutory function under Section 27 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended) with regard to the preparation of a draft development plan, the making of a draft development plan and the variation of a development plan. It should be noted that the Regional Assembly does not have a statutory function, under Section 27 of the Act, with regard to material alterations of a Draft Development Plan. As detailed in the previous section, all the local authority development plans in the region have commenced a full review process of their development plans and the Assembly has exercised its function in relation to section 27 in all cases.

This has provided for detailed statutory submissions and observations on the Issues Papers to the review of the county development plans of Louth, Offaly, Longford, Wicklow, Laois, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, South Dublin, Dublin City and Fingal Councils. Submissions were issued regarding the Westmeath, Offaly, Louth, Longford, Laois and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown Draft County Development Plans. Furthermore, submissions were made to a number of variations of development plans in the local authorities of Kildare, Fingal, Dublin City, Longford, South Dublin and Fingal.

The Assembly also made submissions to six local authorities adjacent to the Region namely, Roscommon, Cavan, Carlow, Monaghan, Wexford and Kilkenny with respect to their County Development Plan review processes, in the interests of cross regional consistency.

In formulating these submissions, the Assembly has worked with the local authorities in the preparation of City and County Development Plans both formally through the requirements of Section 27 by way of observations on Development Plans and variations of Development Plans, and informally through the executive in preparation of the core strategy of Development Plans.

The Assembly has a remit to ensure policy consistency across a wide range of sectors at different scales to ensure delivery and implementation of the RSES.

In influencing EU and national policy, submissions were made to the European Union Guidelines for the development of the trans-European transport network, the EU Commission's Long Term Vision for Rural Areas, to the DHLGH on the Review of Planning Provisions regarding SHDs, the Marine Policy Statement Draft Consultation, Ireland's Long-term Strategy on Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reduction, Office of the Planning Regulator's Draft Strategic Plan 2019-2024, Ireland's Strategy Winning: Foreign Direct Investment 2020-2024, DTTAS Sustainable Mobility Policy, the National Policy on Architecture, the National Marine Planning Framework, Significant Water Management Issues in Ireland consultation, Rail Freight 2040 Strategy, the National Economic Recovery

Plan, the DHLGH Statement of Strategy, the Department of Transport Statement of Strategy, the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment Statement of Strategy, Review to Renew- National Development Plan Review, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, Housing for All, National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland, DART + South West, and Eirgrid's Shaping Our Electricity Future.

In influencing the regional agenda submissions included the Draft Tourism Masterplan for the Shannon 2020-2030, the Regional Seascape Character Assessment Survey, DART + West. A number of other submissions were made including to the Needs Analysis for the ERDF and the ESF, the OPR's Measuring Planning Outcomes Survey and the Sizewell C Nuclear Power Station and Dowel No.1 & 2 Nuclear Power Plant.

The Assembly also made submissions to the material amendments to the draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies of the North Western Regional Assembly and the Southern Regional Assembly.

The Assembly as a prescribed body made submissions to significant spatial plans that relate to the RSES, specifically those of designated settlements – Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns and those of national significance such as Strategic Development Zones. In this regard submissions have been made to Strategic Development Zone Planning Schemes at North Lotts and Grand Canal Dock (Dublin City), the Draft Dublin Airport Local Area Plan (LAP) 2020-2026, and the Draft Naas Local Area Plan 2021-2027.

There is a statutory requirement for the National Transport Authority – Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area to be consistent with the RSES for the region. The RSES is required by legislation to be consistent with the Transport Strategy of the NTA, as set out in Section 23(7)(c) of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended). Likewise, the Transport Strategy is also required to be consistent with the relevant RSES in force for the GDA, as set out in Section 12(6) of the Dublin Transport Authority Act (DTA) 2008 (as amended). Section 12 of the DTA Act sets out further procedures for the NTA to consult with and consider the views of the relevant regional assemblies, in the course of preparing a Transport Strategy, and after publication of a draft Strategy. In this regard the Assembly made a submission to the NTA Review of the Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area (2016-2035) and will make a submission to the draft strategy and a statement of consistency to the final strategy.

5.2.2.2 Stakeholder Cooperation

The co-production element and existing statutory functions of the Assembly require that Implementation of the RSES is performed by a wide range of stakeholders in the public sector. In this regard ongoing engagement, promotion and integration of the RSES in other forums on a bilateral and multilateral basis with key implementation stakeholders is critical. To this end, the Assembly worked with the following forums, committees and groups to advance RSES implementation;

Forum
NTA Transport Strategy for the GDA Advisory Board
Midlands Regional Transition Team
DCRD Review of LECP Guidelines Working Group
Regional Enterprise Plans for Dublin, Midlands, Mid-East, and North-East.
Dublin Economic Monitor
National Climate Change Adaptation Forum
DCCAE REPDF Steering Group
Dublin and Eastern and Midland CARO Steering Groups
National SEA and AA Forums
Irish Planning Institute Council
DHLGH - HNDA Advisory Board
DHLGH - Development Plan Guidelines Advisory Group
Cross Border Development Plan Group
Midlands Planning Forum
Irish Planning Institute Public Sector Committee
Smart Dublin Advisory Board
Midlands Regional Transition Team (MRTT)
OPR Plan Evaluation Forum

5.2.3 Dublin MASP Implementation

The Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP), adopted in 2019, is the first statutory plan for the Dublin metropolitan area (DMA) covering Dublin City, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and South Dublin, and parts of Fingal, Meath, Kildare and Wicklow. The MASP is an integrated land use and transportation plan to deliver compact growth in the city centre within the M50 and at accessible locations along key public transport corridors, existing and planned.

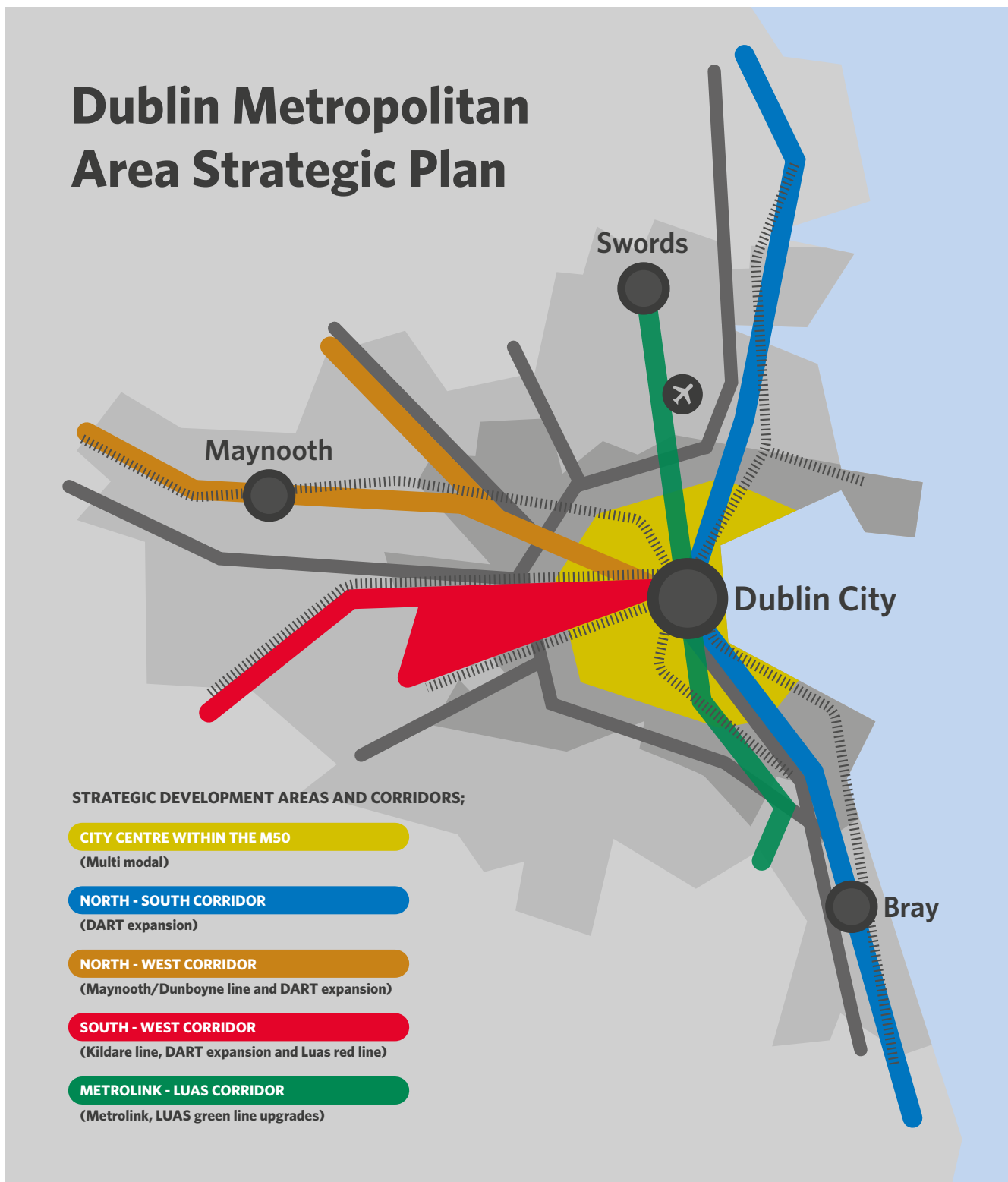


Figure 4: Dublin MASP

5.2.3.1 Establishment of Governance Structures to Oversee and Drive Delivery

A new Strategic Planning Area (SPA) Committee for the Dublin Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan was established in 2019 comprising of a proportion of elected members from each of the 7 local authorities, to oversee the implementation of the MASP. This committee has met on numerous occasions and has made recommendations to the full Assembly.

The Transitional Populations for the MASP were agreed in consultation with the MASP Implementation Group and the MASP Committee, and were approved by the elected members of the Regional Assembly on July 10th, 2020. These population projections are now being transposed into the core strategies of the relevant local authority city and county development plans.

The MASP Implementation Group includes key stakeholders from the infrastructure and enterprise agencies, local authorities and Department of Housing Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH), and the MASP Committee comprises elected members representing the seven local authorities.

The Implementation group provides a forum to co-ordinate planning, transport and infrastructure delivery in the MASP. An early task was to update progress on Table 5.1 of the MASP, to assess delivery of strategic development areas since the adoption of MASP in 2019, and to inform the prioritisation of investment and delivery to achieve the objectives of the MASP.

5.2.3.2 Significant Housing Delivery on all Strategic Corridors and in the Core

There was significant site activity reported within identified strategic development areas (SDAs) in the city and docklands, on the north, west and southern urban fringes, and in Donabate and Swords. There was reported c.12,000 units constructed or under construction up to the COVID emergency period, representing 9 % of the total identified 280,000 population capacity in the MASP.

Based on local authority returns, a number of outstanding plans and studies are required to deliver on the MASP, including new Local Area Plans (LAPs) for Maynooth, Dunboyne/ Portan and Old Conna. Required non statutory plans include a review of Industrial lands in the city, a Joint Framework Plan for Naas Rd/Ballymount, feasibility for Dunsink, masterplans for Leixlip sites, Clongriffin Retail/Economic studies, and town centre regeneration projects in Ballymun, Bray, Tallaght and Swords.

A number of key strategic infrastructure projects are needed to drive delivery of mixed-use districts including Poolbeg (Dodder Bridge), Docklands (pedestrian/cycle bridges) Parkwest-Cherryorchard (amenities) Adamstown (public spaces), Clonburris (transport, water/drainage, social), Cherrywood (transport), Sandyford (open space), Kiltiernan- Glenamuck (Distributor Road), Belmayne/ Belcamp (transport), Dunboyne (roads), Bray Environs (transport), and Woodbrook-Shanganagh (new station).

5.2.3.3 Progress in Delivery of Key Transport and Infrastructure Projects

Through the Implementation Group, EMRA is working with infrastructure agencies to address key transport, water and wastewater deficits to support planned population and employment growth.

In 2020, the NTA commenced a review of the Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) and Irish Water also published its first draft 25 year strategic National Water Resources Plan.

Developing an Integrated Public Transport and Cycle Network Despite COVID, work is progressing on key projects, with planning applications expected to go to An Bord Pleanála in 2020 for Busconnects Core Bus Corridors, Metrolink preferred route, and the extension of DART to Maynooth (Dart + West) and Cellbridge/Hazelhatch (DART + Kildare). The first consultation was held on the extension of LUAS to Finglas, with feasibility expected to commence on LUAS to Lucan. Subject to review of NTAs Transport Strategy, it is intended to commence planning for LUAS extensions to Bray and Poolbeg.

Further to Sustainable Transport Measures Grants, the NTA Allocated €35m to metropolitan authorities for cycling and walking projects, and a number of public realm projects were also progressed under COVID accelerated measures grants. Progress will continue in 2021 with the establishment of active travel teams in all local authorities, as well as a Regional Cycle Design Office.

5.2.3.4 Alignment of Project Ireland 2040 and Enterprise Funds

Tracking project delivery and the drawdown of funding will be a priority to oversee the delivery of Project Ireland 2040, enterprise funds and other funding at local level through the MASP and RSES, as detailed by the local authorities in their responses to the preparation of this report.

Call 1 of the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) awarded €9.9 million in funding for 'ready to go' projects in the Dublin metropolitan area, works at Rutland Street, Bray Public Transport bridge, Tallaght public realm, innovation and mobility hub, Cherrywood Green Infrastructure and Stillorgan public realm works and c.€2.5 million for 'further development' was awarded to St Michael's estate, Park West/Cherry Orchard/Naas Road Joint Framework Plan, and Sustainable Swords.

Call 2 of the URDF awarded an additional €449 million in provisional funding in 2021 for metropolitan projects including; the South and North Inner City Concept Areas (Dublin City Council), Cherrywood Public Access, Permeability and Amenity and Dundrum Community, Cultural and Civic Hub (Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, Balbriggan Rejuvenation and Dunsink Feasibility Study (Fingal), supplementary strategic infrastructure for the Clonburris and Adamstown SDZs (South Dublin), Celbridge to Hazelhatch Link Road and Maynooth Town Centre Renewal (Kildare County Council), and the Bray Harbour Area Integrated Regeneration (Wicklow County Council). Infrastructure delivery was also enabled by Local Authority Housing Activation Fund (LIHAF) and Serviced Sites Initiative (SSI) funds.

Climate and Technology Funds - The PI 2040 Climate Fund provided investment to develop district heating in Dublin Docklands and in Tallaght. The PI 2040 Technologies Funds supported innovative Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) partnerships, while Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) awarded funding to Research Centres in UCD and Trinity in collaboration with DCC and DLR councils.

Enterprise and Innovation Funds Enterprise Ireland (EI) rolled out COVID supports and a Community Enterprise Centres (CEC) fund, and EMRA has carried out analysis of the potential to develop a network of co-working/remote working hubs. EIs Regional Enterprise Development fund (REDF) provided funding to provide incubator/co-working space in the Guinness Enterprise Centre, an innovation hub at TU Dublin-Blanchardstown and a UCD Agtech hub in Kildare. The Irish Strategic Investment fund (ISIF) provided investment to develop a media campus on the IDA Strategic Site in Greystones.

5.2.3.5 Next Steps- MASP Implementation

A key priority for 2021 will be to identify and prioritise a 'pipeline' of projects in the Dublin Metropolitan Areas to leverage future funds and partnership opportunities, in collaboration with the MASP Implementation Group and Committee of elected members. It is also intended to establish indicators for monitoring of delivery and reporting for MASP, in line with the emerging RSES monitoring framework and national Guidelines.

5.2.4 Policy Development and Research

In order to Progress the RSES, EMRA has carried out its own policy development and research to enable implementation and to inform and guide stakeholders in their own policy making and RSES implementation. This includes the following;

5.2.4.1 COVID-19 Regional Economic Analysis

In May 2020, the EMRA, in partnership with the other Regional Assemblies, published the COVID-19 Regional Economic Analysis. Using GeoDirectory commercial data, the COVID-19 Regional Economic Analysis identified which geographical areas in Ireland, from a commercial perspective, were more likely to be exposed to economic disruption caused by the public health measures. This report informed policymakers at a local, regional and national level to the extent of economic exposure and resilience across each region in Ireland and was aligned to RPO 6.38 of the RSES that focuses on anticipating economic structural change and dealing with economic shocks.

5.2.4.2 Regional Co-Working Analysis

In October 2020, EMRA, in collaboration with the other Regional Assemblies, published the Regional Co-Working Analysis. Specifically, the Regional Co-Working Analysis:

- Identified the number of private sector workers that can operate remotely on a national, regional and local authority basis, as of Q2 2020.
- Identified the name, location and type of co-working hubs in each local authority in Ireland, as of September 2020.
- Provided a series of considerations that should assist policymakers in developing additional co-working hubs across Ireland.

The purpose of the Regional Co-Working Analysis was to provide data that will assist in developing the potential of remote working in our regions. Furthermore, the Regional Co-Working Analysis identified eight areas for consideration, the purpose of which was to identify how gaps in information can be addressed, commence a discussion on actions that could be taken and to establish an evidence-based approach to grow remote working. These eight areas of considerations should further inform policy makers of the next steps needed to deliver additional co-working hubs in line with the spatial and economic objectives of the RSES.

5.2.4.3 Midland's Economic Briefing Paper

The EMRA have almost finalised a Midland's Economic Briefing Paper as part of the implementation of the RSES. The aim of the Paper is to provide specific recommendations for stakeholders as to how the economic oriented RPOs of the RSES can be practically implemented in the Midlands. In this regard, the EMRA has adopted a "Smart Specialisation" approach, which is a key economic principal of the RSES and advocated at a European level, with the recommendations of this paper based on up-to-date data, research and input from over twenty different stakeholders based in the Midlands.

5.2.5 Regional Development Monitor as Ireland's Regional Data Hub

The Regional Assemblies, led by the EMRA, have initiated the preparation of a Regional Development Monitor (RDM) which will be presented as Ireland's Regional Data Hub.

The RDM will monitor the performance of the RSES in a dynamic and responsive manner that recognises change over the lifecycle of the RSES, and, will present this performance in a highly accessible and comprehensible way for multiple stakeholders, using an existing national platform for accessing authoritative geospatial information which provides free web-based access.

This will enable an informed and evidence-based assessment of the state of the region and allow for important policy decisions to be made by multiple stakeholders, in order to progress the implementation of the RSES, thus ensuring sustainable growth of the Region and optimal use of resources.

The RDM will present data for key indicators, monitored spatially, across a number of themes related to the Key Principles (Healthy Placemaking, Economic Opportunity and Climate Action) and Regional Strategic Outcomes of the RSES.

The RDM will be coordinated across the Regional Assemblies and prepared in consultation with a multitude of stakeholders (for instance, academics, proficient experts, dedicated agencies and organisations), and aligned with the monitoring arrangements of the Project Ireland 2040 Delivery Board through the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

The project is aligned to Regional Policy Objectives (RPO) 6.36 and 12.5 of the RSES, and is expected to be launched in Q4 2021.

5.2.6 National Funding Programmes

The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund requires, as a prerequisite of receiving funding under the scheme, that all proposals demonstrate alignment with RSES policy.

Accordingly, the Assembly, where requested and where regionally significant, provide summary information to Local Authorities which identifies key areas of the RSES with which there are linkages with a URDF proposal. This information is available for local authorities to submit as part of their application for funding if desired. In this regard, the Assembly has provided assistance to a number of local authorities over the past two years.



5.2.7 EU Projects

EMRA is a partner in a number of EU projects, strategically selected in order to advance the implementation of the RSES.

PROGRESS

PROGRESS is an INTERREG funded project with the objective of promoting improved governance for regional ecosystem services through policy learning and capacity building activities. Through stakeholder network activity and the development of a dedicated Action Plan, the objective of the PROGRESS partnership for EMRA is to improve the governance of ecosystem services across the Eastern and Midland Region and to inform the local authorities in the implementation of RPO 7.2. EMRA is a one of partner 6 regional partner organisations from across the EU - Ireland, Italy, Spain, Latvia, Romania and Hungary.

PROGRESS formally commenced in August 2019 and will run until mid-2023. EMRA has participated fully in all project activities including Good Practice (GP) identification through local stakeholder engagement, communication & networking activities, international project seminars, online training workshops and Pilot Action development.

Highlights include the inclusion of two EMRA GPs in the 1st PROGRESS project handbook; strong EMRA stakeholder representation at international learning events with national, regional and local government and state agencies, as well as relevant sectoral and interest groups in attendance from Ireland. EMRA organised the 2nd Thematic Seminar online in October 2020 and Action Plan development commenced to feed into RSES and MASP implementation for ecosystem services and green infrastructure RPOs based on international exchange of experience.

As a direct result of EMRA's involvement in the PROGRESS project and in implementing RSES objectives relating to ecosystem services, a specific Action for Regional Assemblies is now included in the new All-Ireland Pollinator Plan (Action 31) and improved language for biodiversity is now included in the MRTT Midlands Pathway to Transition document.

Next2Met

Next2Met is an Interreg Europe funded project that aims to increase the attractiveness of the Midland Region as a place to live, work and visit. The project focuses on attracting and retaining qualified people and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Midlands by identifying and supporting soft digitalisation measures. Through stakeholder network activity and the development of a dedicated Action Plan, the objective of the Next2Met partnership for EMRA is to enhance RSES implementation in line with these objectives. The project brings together 6 regional and local actors and 1 Advisory Partner namely Ireland, Finland, Spain, Germany, Austria, Poland and France, sharing this common challenge and working together to implement policy solutions.

Next2Met formally commenced in August 2019 and will run until mid-2023 (following the approval of a 6-month extension). EMRA has participated fully in all project activities including Interregional learning events and Good Practice (GP) identification, which have been shared with Midland stakeholders through 1:1 bilateral exchange and three stakeholder events. In 2021, the focus of the project has shifted from GP identification to Action Plan Development and specifically, the potential of a Digitalisation as a priority within the Midlands.

QGasSP

This is a 12-month ESPON Targeted Analysis Project, EMRA are the lead stakeholder. The aim of this research project is the development and delivery of a robust, simple and proportionate method for quantifying and forecasting the relative GHG impacts of alternative spatial planning policies, with pan-European applicability. This project aims to clearly set out how our stakeholder can implement RPO 3.6. The stakeholders in this project along with EMRA, are the Scottish Government, Department of Infrastructure Northern Ireland and Regional Council of Kymenlaakso, Finland. Each stakeholder is providing a pilot to test the tool and methodology, in our case the pilot is County Meath.

CarePeat

This project explores mechanisms to reduce carbon emissions and restore the carbon storage capacity of European peatlands. Diverse Irish partners are involved, including NUIG (Irish lead), EMRA, Bord na Móna, NPWS, Community Wetlands Forum and Irish Peatlands Conservation Council. In addition to developing peatland restoration mechanisms, Care-Peat is evaluating new economic uses for cutaway bogs and is active at EU, national and local political levels to ensure policy and resources facilitate the economic, social, and environmental transition takes place are available.

EU Social Progress Index (EU-SPI)

The key aim of this project is to test how the EU-SPI index could be used to inform and improve policy-making. It aims to actively involve regional stakeholders in the exchange of knowledge and review of the EU-SPI so as to identify aspects to be improved. EMRA was a key stakeholder in this project which will inform the production of the Regional Development Monitor.

Urb-Adapt

The Urb-Adapt project aim was to detect and characterise climate change impacts in the region up to 2060, it identified possible risks to the population living in the Greater Dublin Region and future risks posed under a changing climate for future populations. The project officially ended on the 2nd of September 2019.



5.2.8 The Just Transition Process- EMRA's Role

Since the making of the RSES in June 2019, the 'Just Transition' has grown as a key European, national and regional policy priority. EMRA, together with the IREO has been working to effectively articulate regional priorities which are consistent with the RSES and build regional capacity.

EU Just Transition

In line with the objective of achieving EU climate neutrality by 2050 in an effective and fair manner, the European Green Deal proposed a Just Transition Mechanism, to leave no one behind. The Just Transition Fund (JTF) is the first pillar of the Just Transition Mechanism and will provide support to all Member States. Established within the framework of cohesion policy, the JTF will be a key tool to support the territories most affected by social and economic impacts of the transition towards climate neutrality. In Ireland, there is a need to accelerate the transition from peat in the Midlands and EMRA has naturally been involved in this process. Total support from EU JTF for Ireland will amount to 77m EUR over the 2021-2027 programming period.

In 2018, EMRA identified an opportunity for the Midlands to join the START Secretariat (Secretariat Technical Assistance to Regions in Transition). Joining the START Secretariat enhanced the Midlands' transition-related expertise, capabilities and capacities in line with Regional Strategic Objectives defined in the RSES. This paved the way for further work relating to the Just Transition, both nationally and at EU level.

When the EU JTF proposal was published in December 2019, EMRA was involved in providing the regional position on the negotiations at the EU level via DPER, which was then considered during the negotiations at the EU Council level.

Currently EMRA is actively involved in the preparation of the EU Territorial Just Transition Plan (TJTP) via the Just Transition Steering Group. The Plan, which requires prior approval by the European Commission, will serve as a basis for the spending of the allocation of the EU Just Transition Fund for Ireland and will set out the priorities, objectives and targets to be fulfilled during the next programming period.

National Just Transition

Acceleration of the Bord na Móna decarbonisation programme from 2018 onwards has placed substantial emphasis on the identification of funding opportunities and actions to mitigate the impact of job losses, and the associated impact on the local and regional economy. This process has emphasised the need for effective implementation of RPOs which respond to the social, economic and environmental impacts of the low carbon transition., the RSES recognises the need to enhance climate resilience and to accelerate a transition to a low carbon society recognising the role of natural capital and ecosystem services in achieving this.

RSES RPO 4.84 is to support the rural economy and initiatives in relation to diversification, agri-business, rural tourism and renewable energy so as to sustain the employment opportunities in rural areas. Is a key RPO for the Just Transition. In progressing implementation of this RPO, EMRA has engaged closely with key stakeholders including Local Authorities in the Midlands, the Midlands Regional Transition Team (MRTT), the Just Transition Unit of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (DCCAE), the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) and the Office of the Just Transition Commissioner. In particular, EMRA was consulted to inform the Recommendations contained in the 1st Progress Report of the Just Transition Commissioner and maintains continuous engagement with the Just Transition Unit in DCCAE and other relevant government departments regarding policy development, implementation and funding (including assessment and approval of the national Just Transition projects via assessment panel membership and a place on the evaluation steering group).

As a result of our ongoing engagement with the Just Transition process in the Midlands, EMRA is a formally invited member of the MRTT. Aligned with this, EMRA was formally consulted on the development of the MRTT 'Midlands Pathway to Transition' document in Autumn 2020.

Further to Measure 4.1, EMRA is a key national stakeholder informing the development of the national Territorial Just Transition Plan (TJTP) that is required in the context of the European Just Transition Fund (EU JTF). EMRA has been involved at all levels of consultation and is engaging with the Commission appointed consultants in the process of informing the Irish national TJTP.

Together with the other two Regional Assemblies, EMRA published a report on the regional impact of the Covid-19 crisis in Ireland in May 2020. This report was designed to inform policy makers at a local, regional and national level of the extent of economic exposure and resilience across Ireland and our region in coherence with the key principle of building economic resilience which is outlined in the RSES.

EMRA is currently a partner on several EU projects which facilitate the Just Transition in relation to 1) Retention of Employment; 2) Training and Reskilling; 3) Enterprise Opportunities; 4) Infrastructure (use of existing sites); 5) Culture & Heritage; and 6) Tourism. These are: Next2Met, Care-Peat and PROGRESS (detailed above).

Conclusion

Through enhanced and widespread engagement, EMRA continues to develop its profile as a key national and regional stakeholder in the Just Transition process. Through its statutory functions, expertise, structures and governance procedures, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly, in collaboration with the IREO, has the demonstrated capacity to help coordinate the overall Just Transition agenda at a regional level and to provide this “whole of region” approach that will be necessary to ensure the Midlands and Ireland can realise their full potential.



5.2.9 EU Programming and Funding

For the past two years, EMRA has been involved in the delivery of EU funding. Members of the Assembly and of the executive team sit on the Programme Monitoring Committees (PMC) of several EU funding programmes, notably programmes co-funded by the European Regional Development Funds (ERDF).

For the 2014-2020 programming period, EMRA sits on the PMCs of the two ERDF Regional Operational Programmes (ROP), the Southern and Eastern ROP and the Border, Midlands and Western ROP. EMRA also takes part in the following INTERREG programmes PMC: Ireland-Wales, Peace, North West-Europe, Atlantic Area and Urbact. In all instances, EMRA ensures that the programmes are delivering and supporting projects of regional interest.

EMRA is currently involved in the preparation of the 2021-2027 EU programming period. For the past two years, EMRA has engaged extensively with the other Regional Assemblies, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the European Commission to prepare the next round of European funding programmes in Ireland.

In cooperation with the Southern Regional Assembly, EMRA will design and implement the future ERDF programme covering the Eastern & Midland and Southern regions. The future programme will be strongly informed by the RSES and its objectives which gives the Assembly a fantastic opportunity to align the delivery of EU funding with regional policy. In accordance with EU regulation, the main priorities that will be addressed in the programme are smart cities and regions, low-carbon and climate resilience and the urban dimension, which all align with the RSES main objectives. In 2020, EMRA set up an EU sub-committee made of eight Assembly members whose goal will be to follow the preparation of the programme and ensure consistency between the future programme and the RSES.

EMRA is also taking part in the preparation of the future North West Europe, Atlantic Area, Peace + and URBACT programmes, ensuring they will support transnational projects aligned with regional priorities.

Since 2018, EMRA is the National Contact Point for the URBACT programme. This European programme promotes integrated sustainable urban development in cities and towns across Europe. The role of contact point enables EMRA to guide Irish towns and cities willing to participate in activities and to disseminate the good practices resulting from the programme. EMRA is thus developing its expertise and capacities in relation to sustainable urban development that encompasses the three main objectives of the RSES – healthy placemaking, climate action and economic opportunities. In 2021 and 2022, EMRA as URBACT contact point will coordinate a new practice transfer initiative where five Irish cities will benefit from the experience of Cork city of the integration of games and playful interventions in the public realm to foster social inclusion, healthy placemaking and economic prosperity.

EMRA also benefits from the expertise of the Irish Regions European Office (IREO). Based in Brussels, the IREO is ideally positioned to identify relevant EU funding and policy opportunities that will help the Regional Assembly and local authorities to implement the RSES.

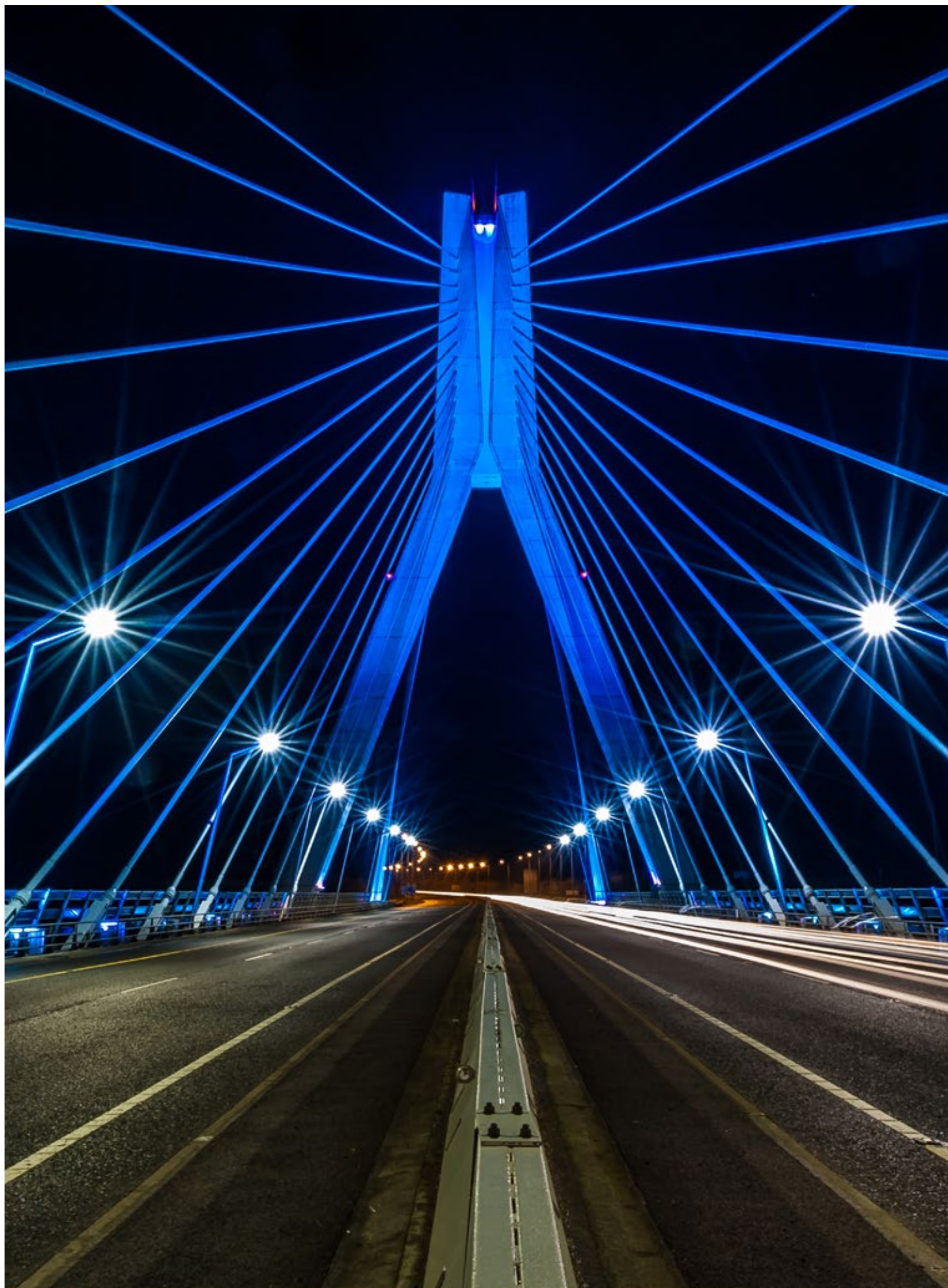
5.2.10 Website Development

EMRA are currently working to provide a new and upgraded website to enhance the online presence of EMRA, ensure quality communication with our stakeholders and the wider public, and to increase awareness of EMRA and its functions.

The Assembly recognises the need to improve our digital offer, as the relationship with technology has changed and expectations have increased since the development of the current website. The Assembly are changing the way the website will look and work, making it simpler to navigate and developing website functionality to allow stakeholders and the public, engage with the Assembly in an efficient and user-friendly way.

The new website will provide a dedicated member's portal and will improve transparency through publication of all statutory and non-statutory submissions, and other related policy, research and EU functions.





6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This process thus far has enabled the Regional Assembly to get a greater understanding and insight into the successes and challenges that face public bodies and local authorities in implementing the RSES. In addition, it has also enabled the Regional Assembly to reflect on the work that it has carried out over the past two years since the finalisation of the RSES.

Numerous good practices have been identified along the way, for instance the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's approach to ensuring stakeholder-led strategies that have enabled tangible change on the ground through related funding schemes that enhance the rural economy, and, the involvement of the Regional Assembly on several implementation groups such as the Town Centre First Initiative and the LECP review group thus enabling the prioritisation of the policy context and spatial strategy of the RSES and Project Ireland 2040.

In addition, the Regional Assembly has identified a number of good practices from its own implementation work that has progressed the RSES. This includes for instance, the establishment of the MASP Implementation Group which provides a forum that brings together key stakeholders of the Dublin MASP; the targeted use of European Funding Projects to advance complex and challenging RSES implementation issues such as the QGasSP Espon Project, and, Next 2 Met and Progress Interreg Projects; the preparation of Ireland's Regional Data Hub, to monitor the performance of the RSES over its lifecycle and provide a wealth of spatial data for multiple stakeholders using free web-based access; and the production of a number of timely economic reports such as COVID-19 Regional Economic Analysis and Regional Co-working Analysis.

It is important to note that the material in this report is reflective of the position at this time, which is two years into the implementation of a statutory six-year strategy which has a twelve-year horizon. It is also important to note that for this 2021 Monitoring Report, the EMRA recognises the impact that the COVID 19 pandemic is having on local authorities and public bodies, and acknowledge how this may have influenced implementation progress of the RSES. It should also be noted that in some instances it has accelerated the conversation in certain implementation areas, particularly around placemaking resulting from sustainable transport initiatives and on-street dining, and remote working. In addition to this, the impacts of BREXIT are acknowledged.

On foot of the information received as part of this process, the table below documents the recommendations of the Regional Assembly for consideration by NOAC. These recommendations outline where the implementation progress to date could be enhanced. Please note that the Local Authorities also put forward recommendations to enhance this process and these are contained at Section 5.1.1 E) of this Report;

Recommendations for Consideration by NOAC

	Topic	Recommendation(s)
Local Authority	Planning Policy Alignment	<p>1. Supports should be identified and provided to enable Local Authorities to deliver planning alignment with the RSES through Urban Area Plans and Local Area Plans for the Region's Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns.</p> <p>2. That Regional Assemblies should have a statutory function, under Section 27 of the Act, with regard to material alterations of a Draft Development Plan, for consistency with their functions on submissions on the pre-draft plan consultations and on the draft plan consultations.</p>
	Delivering the Spatial Strategy of the RSES	<p>1. In consultation with Local Authorities, research should be undertaken to identify mechanisms which enable the implementation of the RSES by Local Authorities. Without further consultation with Local Authorities, it would be premature for the Regional Assembly to speculate as to how this should be carried out at this stage.</p>
	Funding- Ambition and Interaction with Funding Mechanisms	<p>1. Refresh the bidding process for the URDF to provide enhanced and ring-fenced funding for complex and larger regeneration projects in the Dublin Metropolitan Area and the designated Regional Growth Centres (Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk) and Key Towns of the Region. Increased and ring-fenced funding sources will be instrumental in ensuring delivery of the spatial strategy of the RSES and that urban renewal schemes are adequately utilised in a manner that supports compact growth targets that have been outlined in the RSES.</p> <p>2. Enhance the position and ability of local authorities to prepare successful funding applications. In recent years, it has become clear that the ability of Local Authorities to prepare successful applications for funding have mainly become resource-dependent, with funding being distributed in a manner that is not wholly aligned to the spatial objectives of the NPF and the RSES. It has been noted in discussions with our stakeholders that local authorities may be in a better position to achieve the opportunities available, particularly the national funds, if the requisite resources were available to prepare comprehensive applications for funding under the current competitive process.</p> <p>3. That Local Authorities are supported in engaging with EU Programming and Funding with a national approach to budgeting for matched funding.</p>
	Recommendations and Comments of the Local Authorities that are considered would facilitate the Process	<p>1. Consideration is given to identifying and, where appropriate, implementing measures that enable local authorities to engage in meaningful implementation of the RSES in their area.</p>
Public Bodies	Engagement with the Regional Assembly	<p>1. It is recommended that mechanisms are put in place to ensure the fulfilment by public bodies of their statutory obligations under Section 25A. of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, which require that public bodies shall, every 2 years, prepare and submit a report to the assembly setting out progress made in supporting objectives, relevant to that body, of the strategy.</p> <p>2. It is recommended that mechanisms are put in place to ensure the fulfilment by public bodies of their statutory obligations under Section 22A. of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, which require that public bodies shall assist and co-operate as far as practicable with the regional assembly in the preparation of the strategy and thereafter supporting its implementation, and, that each public body shall consult with the regional assemblies, as appropriate, when preparing its own strategies, plans and programmes and so as to ensure that they are consistent, as far as practicable, with national and regional objectives set out in the National Planning Framework and RSES.</p>
	Rural and Community Development	<p>1. The Regional Assembly should inform the implementation process attached to 'Our Rural Future' to ensure that regional development occurs in a sustainable manner, which is coordinated and prioritised in line with the spatial and economic strategy defined for the Eastern and Midland Region, thus supporting and delivering on Project Ireland 2040.</p> <p>It should be noted that the Regional Assembly is already involved in supporting the review process of LECs and the Town Centre First Approach.</p> <p>2. The Regional Assembly should inform the roll out of the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund in order to focus the delivery of funding in a coordinated manner that ensures the delivery of the spatial and economic strategy for the Region.</p> <p>It should be noted that alignment with the RSES is a key determinant for receipt of funding under the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) administered by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.</p>

Topic	Recommendation(s)
Finance	1. The Regional Assembly should be afforded opportunity to inform the horizontal priority of Regionalisation, as expressed in the International Financial Services Strategy 2025-Ireland for Finance, as part of the ongoing implementation process of the aforementioned strategy. This will ensure that measures directly aimed at increasing employment in the international financial services (IFS) sector of the regions is guided to appropriate locations that supports the spatial strategy of the RSES and recognises the importance of Dublin as a national economic driver; The Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor, especially in light of BREXIT and the need to develop an all-island economy; Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk as vital regional growth centres; and a number of Key Towns ¹⁰ .
Environment, Climate and Communications	1. The Regional Assembly should be considered a key stakeholder and appropriately consulted in the development of new DECC (and Agency) policies and programmes which relate to the themes sought and addressed in this report and which are aligned with RSES objectives (RSOs and RPOs) 2. That Regional Assemblies are established as a prescribed body for submissions on climate action plans to develop cohesiveness with spatial planning - analogous to the links between spatial planning and transport planning.
Agriculture, Food and the Marine	1. The Regional Assembly should inform the implementation of the new Agri-Food Strategy to 2030. This will ensure that implementation measures (and in particular those centred on a climate smart, environmentally sustainable agri-food sector; viable and resilient primary producers; and an innovative, competitive and resilient sector, driven by technology and talent) are aligned to the policy contained within the RSES, which provides a framework for future growth, ensuring the delivery of effective regional development through the realisation of viable and vital places. It is essential that implementation policy and investment priorities reflect the RSES to allow managed and sustainable growth that enables each place to fulfil ambition and potential.
Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media	1. The Regional Assembly should be afforded opportunity to inform the implementation process of the Department's Tourism Action Plan, other relevant tourism policy documents, and at a high level the direction of funding, to ensure that tourism measures, and in particular those aimed at enhancing regional destinations, are guided to appropriate and necessary locations that support the spatial strategy of the RSES, which provides a framework for future growth, ensuring the delivery of effective regional development through the realisation of viable and vital places. This includes championing the capital city of Dublin as a smart, climate-resilient and global city region; securing Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk as Regional Growth Centres, acting as regional economic drivers and supports for their wider catchment areas; and promoting a network of large economically active Key Towns ¹¹ that provide employment and services to their surrounding areas. All of this is supported by Self-Sustaining Growth Towns, Self-Sustaining Towns and a network of multifaceted Rural Places which are home to a number of important tourism assets. It is essential that policy and investment priorities reflect this spatial strategy to allow managed and sustainable growth that enables each place to fulfil ambition and potential.
Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science	1. The Regional Assembly should inform research and regional analysis undertaken by the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit in SOLAS in relation to skills planning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as any other research studies of relevance to the RSES and the Eastern and Midland Region. 2. In its consideration of applications under section 29(1) of the Technological Universities Act 2018, the Department may consider it appropriate to set assessment criteria to ensure appropriate consideration of NPF population targets, the RSES settlement strategy and other relevant metrics, thus supporting and delivering on Project Ireland 2040 and the RSES. 3. In undertaking any education campus development, the Department should endeavour to progress regeneration and economic synergies both within and in proximity to the campus under development, as well as integrate the 'smart cities' concept and other 'future proofing' measures. 4. The Regional Assembly should inform the next National Research and Innovation Strategy to ensure alignment with the RSES and key national policy documents. 5. The Regional Assembly should be included in any consultation process relating to the reform of The Higher Education Authority Act and the implementation of recommendations of the TURN group's report. 6. The Department should ensure that appropriate Benchmarking is undertaken against other comparable economies to facilitate progress towards improving our comparative performance in RDI.

¹⁰ Swords, Maynooth, Bray, Navan, Naas, Wicklow, Longford, Mullingar, Tullamore and Portlaoise.

¹¹ Swords, Maynooth, Bray, Navan, Naas, Wicklow, Longford, Mullingar, Tullamore and Portlaoise.

Topic	Recommendation(s)
Education	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Regional Assembly should inform the engagement between the Department and the 12 Local Authorities across the region in strategy development for the provision of new schools to cater for future populations. In particular, the Regional Assembly and the RSES should inform policy and strategy around the intensification of the use of existing school sites in Existing Built-Up Areas and their immediate environs in order to meet future needs. 2. The Regional Assembly welcomes the production of specific and detailed medium to long-term school place projections at school planning area level that are currently being produced in addition to the annual demographic analysis pertaining to the 314 school planning areas nationally. The Regional Assembly would welcome parallel analysis pertaining to alignment with NPF population targets and the RSES settlement strategy, thus supporting and delivering on Project Ireland 2040. 3. Given EMRA's key role in regional coordination, enhancing regional connectivity, and participation on the Interreg Europe Next2Met project which is working to increase regional attractiveness with soft digitalisation measures, the Regional Assembly should be considered a key stakeholder and appropriately consulted in the development of the new Digital Strategy for Schools.
Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Regional Assembly should be afforded opportunity to liaise with the NDA to inform new guidance documents and those under review in order to facilitate enhanced implementation by local authorities and other key stakeholders. 2. The Regional Assembly should be afforded opportunity to inform the development of any successor framework to 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures 2014-2020'. 3. The Regional Assembly welcomes the interaction between the Children and Young People's Services Committees and LCDCs, as well as the cross-departmental collaboration associated with NEIC City Connects Pilot Project. The Regional Assembly would welcome the opportunity to engage with these and related processes to facilitate a coordinated approach to bridge national policy with local provision across the Eastern and Midland Region.
Housing, Local Government and Heritage	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To revise the 'applicant led' bidding process for URDF funds in order to secure enhanced and ring-fenced funding for complex and larger regeneration projects in the Dublin Metropolitan Area and the designated Regional Growth Centres (Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk) and Key Towns of the Region. Increased and ring-fenced funding sources will be instrumental in ensuring delivery of the spatial strategy of the RSES and that urban renewal schemes are adequately utilised in a manner that supports compact growth targets that have been outlined in the RSES. This recommendation is in keeping with the findings and subsequent recommendations on foot of the local authority responses related to funding. 2. Identify and provide measures in order to converge towards the NPF and RSES development scenario for Dublin City and suburbs, acknowledging trends that indicate a continuing struggle to achieve housing targets. 3. Support coordination of RSES objectives, related to strengthened and diversified rural communities, both within and across Government Departments, including the delivery of serviced sites for housing to attract people to build their own homes and live-in small towns and villages.





7.0 Next Steps

This Report was approved by the Members of the Regional Assembly at the Assembly meeting of July 2021 and shall be submitted to the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) for consideration.

The National Oversight and Audit Commission shall consider the Monitoring Report of the Regional Assembly and may make recommendations to the Minister in relation to relevant measures to further support the implementation of the RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region.

The executive of the Regional Assembly held an initial meeting with NOAC in June 2021 to inform them of the forthcoming report. It has been agreed that NOAC and the Regional Assembly will meet again following the submission of this Report to them under Section 25A. of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended. As part of this, the Regional Assembly will convey the content of this Report and, where appropriate, how the Regional Assembly can continue to deliver on RSES implementation.

In the meantime, and pending any future interaction with NOAC and the Minister (if required), the Regional Assembly will continue its work to implement the RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region, through progressing the high-level priorities related to the RSES spatial strategy and centres of scale, a resilient economy, placemaking, connectivity, infrastructure, and environment and climate action.





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