



Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (DETE), Statement of Strategy 2025-2028

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly notes the preparation of a new Statement of Strategy for the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (DETE), and sets out hereunder recommendations on behalf of the Assembly. This submission has been prepared by the executive of the Regional Assembly and approved by the Cathaoirleach of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly.

1.0 Overall Context

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) is part of the regional tier of governance in Ireland. It is primarily focused on driving regional development through the formulation, adoption and implementation of the Regional, Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES), oversight and coordination of County Development Plans and Local Economic and Community Plans, management of EU Operational Programmes, EU project participation, implementation of national economic policy, and additional functions working with the National Oversight and Audit Commission. As a strategic policy body, EMRA also participates in the consultation processes of other relevant strategic plans and policies.

The role and function of the Regional Assembly, including the scope of the RSES, is currently provided for in the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended which includes support for and alignment with the economic policies and objectives of the Government. It should be noted that this legislation has been superseded by the Planning and Development Act 2024, which was signed into law on 17th October 2024. However, the provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2024 relevant to the Regional Assembly have not commenced to date, and they will commence on a staged basis in the coming months. Until then, the provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, remain in force.

It is noted that the Planning and Development Act 2024 expands the scope of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy and the functions of the Regional Assembly, including in relation to matters of direct relevance to the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (DETE). In this respect, Section 29 (1) of the Act 2024 states that an RSES shall make provision for a strategy relating to economic matters that –

- i. identifies regional strengths and opportunities having regard to economic and employment trends,

- ii. identifies the regional attributes that are essential to enhancing regional economic performance, including the quality of the environment, cities, towns and rural areas, the physical infrastructure, and the social, community and cultural facilities,
- iii. sets out proposals to maintain or augment the attributes referred to in subparagraph (ii) in such manner as will be implemented under the strategy through the activities of public bodies, private sector investment and the community, and
- iv. identifies the means of maintaining and augmenting overall regional economic performance in accordance with national economic policy.

Section 29 (1) of the Act 2024 further requires an RSES to make provision for a strategy relating to retail matters, including consideration of the location of retail development and to make provision for matters including the strategic location of employment-related development and industrial and commercial development. Furthermore, Section 29 (13) of the Act 2024 states that an RSES shall include objectives to secure the effective implementation and monitoring of the RSES, including an indication and order of priorities for infrastructure of scale relating to energy and communications networks and the provision of educational, healthcare, retail, cultural and recreational facilities; potential sources of funding for infrastructure; cross-sectoral investment and actions required to deliver planned growth and development; and co-ordination between constituent local authorities and the co-operation of public bodies.

Furthermore, Section 44 of the Local Government Reform Act 2014 (amending Section 66C of the Local Government Act 2001), provides that every Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) shall be consistent with any Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy as well as the City/County Development Plan that applies to the area of the LECP. The Act requires that the consideration of a draft plan by the Regional Assembly, shall relate to its consistency with— (i) the core strategy and the objectives of the development plan of the local authority concerned, (ii) any regional spatial and economic strategy that may apply, and (iii) the need to consider consistency between the economic and community elements of the draft plan.

The Regional Assembly is further mindful of its obligations, as a relevant body, under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 (as amended) to perform its functions in a manner consistent with achieving Ireland's national climate objective.

2.0 Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES)

The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Region was made by the Members of the Assembly in June 2019, and it is a strategic plan and investment framework to shape future growth throughout the Region. The overall vision of the Strategy is to create a sustainable and competitive Region that supports the health and wellbeing of people and places in the Region, from urban to rural, with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunity for all. The

vision of the RSES is supported by sixteen Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSOs), that are aligned with National Strategic Outcomes of the National Planning Framework (NPF) and framed around the three key principles of Healthy Placemaking, Climate Action and Economic Opportunity.

A primary statutory objective of the RSES is to support the implementation of the National Planning Framework (NPF), alignment with the investment priorities of the National Development Plan 2021-2030 (and thus Project Ireland 2040), by coupling new development with the requisite investment in services and infrastructure. In doing so, the RSES supports the spatial, economic and climate policies of the Government by providing a long-term strategic planning and economic framework for the Eastern and Midland Region. The RSES also sets the context for local authorities within the Region to develop their city and county development plans in a manner that will ensure alignment between national, regional and local plans.

The RSES presents a Spatial Strategy, devised and informed by a complementary Economic Strategy, 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 (which include Swords, Maynooth, Bray, Navan, Naas, Wicklow, Longford, Mullingar, Tullamore and Portlaoise) 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.

It is essential that strategic and cross-cutting priorities and issues addressed in the Statement of Strategy which are of relevance to the Eastern and Midland Region reflect this Spatial Strategy, and the settlement hierarchy presented, to allow managed and sustainable growth that enables each place to fulfil ambition and potential.

3.0 Submission

The Statement of Strategy will serve as a framework for the work of the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (DETE) over the period 2025 – 2028 with its vision to *“make Ireland the best place to succeed in business across all parts of our country, with vibrant, competitive enterprises, more high-quality employment, growing trade, fair workplaces and higher productivity”*. This strategy can also achieve alignment with the cross-cutting priorities of the Draft Revised National Planning Framework (NPF) and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region (RSES).

The current Statement of Strategy 2024-2025 is structured around 6 main strategic goals:

- Goal 1: Sustain full employment and strong regional economic development.
- Goal 2: Advance the low carbon and digital transitions to ensure the competitiveness and sustainability of Irish based enterprise.
- Goal 3: Deepen and extend Ireland’s global business and trade in a responsible, fair and sustainable manner.
- Goal 4: Improve our business regulatory environment to enhance Ireland’s attractiveness as a place to do business.
- Goal 5: Promote safety in the workplace, quality employment and uphold employment rights.
- Goal 6: Build an innovative, inclusive and agile Department with a strong public service ethos driving effective and responsible policy implementation.

For ease of reference, the observations below are structured under these headings¹ insofar as they are relevant to the policies and objectives of the RSES and functions of the Regional Assembly.

Goal 1: Sustain full employment and strong regional economic development.

The RSES presents a spatial strategy, devised and informed by a complementary economic strategy, which provides a framework for future growth, ensuring the delivery of effective regional development through the realisation of viable and vital places. One of the key drivers of the RSES is to deliver sustainable and balanced growth across the Region and the key policy parameters of the RSES are set by, and closely align with national policy documents such as the National Planning Framework, and the National Enterprise Policy 2015-2025. The Assembly is also cognisant of the Government *White Paper on Enterprise* and the priorities set out in the Programme for Government as they relate to housing, health, climate action and transport. The spatial and economic strategy of the RSES is articulated through sixteen Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSOs), which are: sustainable settlement patterns; compact growth and urban regeneration; rural communities; healthy communities; creative places; integrated transport and land use; sustainable management of water, waste and other environmental resources; build climate resilience; support the transition to low carbon and clean energy; enhanced green infrastructure; biodiversity and natural heritage; a strong economy supported by enterprise and innovation; improve education skills and social inclusion; global city region; enhanced strategic connectivity and collaboration platform.

To enable the ambition and potential of the Region’s economic engines, the RSES prioritises investment and reforms in key locations of scale that support their wider hinterlands in order to build critical mass (and diversity) in population and the enterprise base of settlements to attract and retain investment and talent. In alignment with the National Planning Framework, the RSES articulates a need for prioritisation of investment in placemaking and regeneration, in making places socially inclusive and attractive for enterprise, which is complemented through ensuring critical mass in these key locations and developing sectoral clustering, driven by effective collaborations, and built around investments in research. In this respect, as part of ongoing engagement with the OECD in collaboration with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the Assembly facilitated the OECD

¹ Excluding Strategic Goal 5, which relates to workplace, quality employment and upholding employment rights and is therefore outside the scope of this submission.

Mission to explore and examine territorial attractiveness disparities and how national, regional and local policies and governance arrangements can lead to more 'balanced regional attractiveness'. This resulted in the publication of an OECD Regional Development Paper titled '[Towards Balanced Regional Attractiveness in Ireland: Enhancing the Delivery of the National Planning Framework.](#)' The OECD paper had three objectives as follows:

- i. to clarify the gaps in terms of regional attractiveness across and within Ireland's regions, including in terms of population and investment attraction;
- ii. to assess the ability for the National Planning Framework – in its current form – to address these gaps, and
- iii. to consider what multi-level governance reforms and attractiveness policies can be introduced or scaled to generate more territorially-balanced development.

The study noted that Ireland is highly centralised and fast growing, creating co-ordination challenges in terms of delivering key investments and in key policy areas like transport, housing and education. It set out the important role of effective multi-level, metropolitan and city governance for balanced regional development and the consultation undertaken with key stakeholders and actors across levels of government identified a need for a more coordinated approach. Further to this the Draft Revised National Planning Framework notes that the quality and attractiveness of our urban places is a critical factor for inward investment and talent attraction. The Assembly therefore considers that placemaking, regeneration and attractiveness should be priority areas of focus for enterprise, tourism and employment and should therefore be reflected in the Statement of Strategy.

Additionally, as noted in Section 1.0 of this submission, the provisions of the new Planning and Development Act 2024, expands the scope of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy and the functions of the Regional Assembly. In preparation for the forthcoming review of the RSES, which will commence within six months of the publication of the Revised National Planning Framework, the Assembly has commissioned an economic analysis of the region to support the development of the strategy relating to economic matters. In the context of this analysis, the Assembly would welcome engagement with the relevant units of the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (DETE) in informing this analysis and as part of any subsequent consultation process related to the RSES review. As such, the Assembly considers that the Statement of Strategy should reiterate the Department's commitment to engage with stakeholders and across Government to advocate and secure strategic investment that delivers a globally competitive and future-proofed economic and enterprise development ecosystem in education, innovation and physical infrastructure, which is in alignment with national, regional and local policy objectives.

Dublin Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP)

The Dublin Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) was prepared as part of the RSES, for the sustainable development of the Dublin Metropolitan Area. The MASP supports the phased delivery of strategic residential and economic development areas in the city centre and at key nodes along high-quality public transport corridors, existing and planned. An Implementation Group has been

established to provide a forum for collaboration between local authorities, infrastructure providers and enterprise agencies (including IDA and Enterprise Ireland) to address key infrastructure constraints and ensure the continued competitiveness of Dublin, which is a key economic driver for the Region and the State.

The RSES also identifies sectoral opportunities for key locations in the Region including the Dublin Metropolitan Area, the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor, Regional Growth Centres, Key Towns and Rural Areas, and which are set out in Chapter 6 – Economic Strategy of the RSES. The strategy sets out guiding principles for the location of strategic employment development, that include access to; suitable locations, serviced sites, strategic connectivity including access to international markets, proximity to labour force and skills development, and local strengths including a diverse sectoral mix, economic assets and clusters and an attractive living and working environment. The Assembly considers that the Department should have regard to the provisions of the MASP in the preparation of the Statement of Strategy.

Effective Regional Development

Through its statutory functions, the Assembly seeks to optimise and lead investment in the region and maximise the potential of National and European funding. This is facilitated through partnership with stakeholders and in collaboration with other agencies to drive regional development and to continue building a sustainable, healthy and resilient region. To support inclusive growth across the Region, particularly in deprived or underperforming areas that have a higher risk from disruptive technologies, the RSES sets out policy objectives to diversify local and rural economies and support SMEs and indigenous enterprise to create quality jobs that ensure a good standard of living for all.

The Assembly continually participates in externally and co-funded projects which develop and share best practice from the region with partners across Europe in the fields of the digital economy, spatial planning and the environment. Through participation in the ongoing Interreg Europe ORIGINN project, the Assembly is working to promote the economic and social transformation of rural areas through innovation, with a particular focus on the agri-food sector. Areas of thematic focus are digitalisation, industrial sustainability, social innovation, and soft innovation. Insights drawn from the project will inform the review of the RSES, to ensure that policies for innovative social and economic transformation in the Midlands reflect the needs and the potential of the region.

Furthermore, the EU Just Transition Fund, which is managed by the Assembly, is supporting the diversification of the local economy in the EU JTF Territory, with a particular focus on the development of the regenerative tourism sector, supporting the implementation of local and regional economic strategies and supporting research, development and innovation in the bioeconomy sector, as well as supporting the installation of publicly available Electric Vehicle (EV) charge point infrastructure. Further to this, the Assembly considers that the Statement of Strategy should make reference to the key EU funds which drive and support the aims of the Department, for both urban and rural areas. At the regional level, these include the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the EU Just

Transition Fund (EU JTF), both of which are part of the European Cohesion Policy and are managed by the Regional Assemblies.

Alignment of the economic principles of the RSES and Regional Enterprise Plans (REPs) is critical to underpin the achievement of national strategic outcomes at the regional and local level and give regional support for the implementation of actions identified through the REPs. Further to this, the Regional Assembly sits on the Dublin, Mid-East, North-East and Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan Steering Committees and attends quarterly meetings with the Regional Enterprise Plan Funding and Infrastructure (REPMI) Unit of the Department. The Assembly welcomes the continued and ongoing engagement with the Department to support the delivery of the Regional Enterprise Plans (REPs) which are supportive of RSES implementation.

To further enable regional development, the RSES supports investment in rural broadband and the provision of serviced sites and co-working/incubator space in towns and villages of all sizes in order to develop the potential offered by improved connectivity and digitisation and drive innovation and enterprise development in all parts of the Region. As identified in the RSES, key opportunities for the diversification of rural economies include the development of agriculture, eco-tourism, food, forestry, marine, renewable energy, bio economy, circular and low carbon sectors. The development of greenways can also contribute to unique tourism offerings that support rural job creation, as well as protecting and promoting natural assets and biodiversity. All three of Ireland's regions – the Eastern and Midland Region, the Southern Region and the Northern and Western Region – have received the designation of 'Regional Innovation Valleys' (RIV) by the European Commission. This followed a coordinated process between the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Regional Assemblies, with the European Commission. This label recognises the Regions' potential as hubs of innovation and economic growth within a network of 149 similarly designated regions across Europe. Regions selected to receive a RIV label are committed to:

- Strengthening their Research & Innovation (R&I) ecosystem
- Enhancing the co-ordination and directionality of their R&I policy and investment towards key EU priorities.
- Engaging in R&I collaboration between more and less advanced regions with complementary smart specialisation strategies.

Further to the above, the Assembly considers that the Statement of Strategy should have strong regional development at its core, framed by the RIV status of all three regions, and underpinned by a competitive and enterprise friendly environment with a resilient, innovative, productive and sustainable enterprise base.

Skills, Enterprise and Innovation- Smart Specialisation

The economic strategy of the RSES is based on five key principles including Smart Specialisation, Clustering, Orderly Growth, Placemaking and Future Proofing.

Smart specialisation is a place-based innovation policy, aimed at promoting regional innovation and economic transformation by helping regions to focus on their key sectoral strengths. This may include unique characteristics or capabilities that provide advantages to that region in certain sectors. It

requires higher education, research organisations and business, along with government departments and agencies, to identify these strengths, build on competitive advantages and prioritise support based on where local potential and market opportunities lie.

National Strategic Outcome 6 of the Draft Revised NPF recognises the principles of regionally based smart specialisation and is supportive of the Assembly's ongoing engagement with the Department to support implementation of the National Smart Specialisation Strategy for Innovation 2022-2027 (S3) to create and build on regional competitive advantages, create future market opportunities and identify solutions to identified societal challenges.

Further to this, Ireland's three Regional Assemblies in collaboration with the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO) at Maynooth University and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment developed a new Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) visualisation dashboard on the Regional Development Monitor (RDM) website which was launched by Minister Burke on the 7th of February 2025. The dashboard on this platform has been developed to support the monitoring of the national Smart Specialisation Strategy by providing visualisations for several key indicators, including:

- Real Labour Productivity per Person
- International Comparison of R&D Personnel per Thousand Total Employment
- Regional Innovation Scoreboard Indicators

By offering these data-driven insights, the new S3 visualisation platform will support the monitoring of the national Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3), and will allow policymakers, researchers, and businesses in identifying areas of strategic growth, fostering innovation, and contributing to regional prosperity across Ireland. The Assembly considers that the Statement of Strategy should be developed having regard to this resource which is an excellent example of public sector collaboration. The Assembly encourages the Department and its staff to explore and utilise this open data resource.

Placemaking for Enterprise development

A key regional priority is to ensure urban and rural renewal and enterprise funding is aligned to the spatial policy objectives of the RSES to deliver public realm and quality of life improvements and attract talent and investment to our cities, towns and villages. Guiding Principles for Investment Prioritisation in Placemaking for Enterprise Development are also set out in the RSES Economic Strategy. Regional priorities in this regard include;

- Local authorities, REPs, and LECs in their preparation of projects to bid for funds, shall give due regard to factors already identified as enablers of enterprise development. This includes the availability of human capital; proximity to a third level institution, transport infrastructure; broadband infrastructure; and, a diverse local sectoral mix. As action lead on Action 2.1 of the

Dublin REP the Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan (REP) to 2025, the EMRA is drafting an Implementation Pathway document for the 15-minute city.

- Capacity of places needs to be considered, having regard to implications of commuting on quality of life.
- Align to national strategy and approach for data centres – right location for use and energy demand.
- There is an opportunity for the health / wellbeing sector with new hospitals.
- Focus on densification of existing built urban footprint around existing public transport corridors.
- Give due regard to enhanced functioning of global services centres, for instance the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) and advanced manufacturing centres.
- Identify and prioritise locations considering capacity, analysis of assets, with a vision for Dublin city and the Region.
- Facilitate data gathering and cross promotion through local business intelligence units in local authorities. Further to these Guiding Principles, the EMRA has led the development of the Regional Development Monitor, which is a publicly accessible data website that provides a national mapping and visualisation tool with a range of analytics dashboards, designed to enhance understanding of key economic and societal trends in Ireland to aid better decision making and is the biggest open-source data hub in the State.
- Explore a ‘second site’ strategy for multinational corporations (MNCs) in outlying locations.
- Location specific sectors can be addressed more clearly – energy, marine, greenways, blueways, and peatlands.

Further to the above, the Regional Assembly considers that placemaking and quality of life should be important considerations in the development of the Statement of Strategy.

Goal 2 Advance the low carbon and digital transitions to ensure the competitiveness and sustainability of Irish based enterprise.

Climate Action is one of the three key principles of the RSES, and the Climate Strategy of the RSES aims to ensure that the RSES drives climate resilience throughout the Region and accelerates climate action. RSO 8, ‘Build Climate Resilience’, seeks to ensure the long-term management of flood risk and building resilience to increased risks of extreme weather events, changes in sea level and patterns of coastal erosion to protect property, critical infrastructure and food security in the Region.

RSO 9 of the RSES, to ‘Support the Transition to Low Carbon and Clean Energy’, is concerned with pursuing climate change mitigation in line with global and national targets and harnessing the potential for a more distributed renewables-focussed energy system to support the transition to a low carbon economy by 2050.

Climate focused RPOs are integrated throughout the RSES and include priorities related to the built environment, sustainable transport, energy and waste, flood resilience and water, all of which have implications for enterprise, tourism and employment. The Assembly would welcome engagement

with the Department in advancing the low carbon and digital transitions in line with local, regional and national policy.

Renewable energy

The Climate Action Plan (CAP) 2024 includes a target of 80% of energy demand to be met from renewable sources by 2030, with offshore renewable energy identified as an emerging sectoral opportunity for coastal regions with the potential to support the delivery of Ireland's offshore wind ambitions being a particular economic development opportunity. The Draft Revised NPF notes that enabling infrastructure will be required to ensure that coastal regions are positioned to harness this growth potential. It further notes that offshore renewable energy developments typically have long lead-in times of several years from design to commissioning stages and cross-references the National Marine Planning Framework (NMPF) and the Maritime Area Planning Act 2021 in this regard. The Assembly is further cognisant of *Powering Prosperity*, Ireland's Offshore Wind Industrial Strategy, which includes the objectives to transform Ireland's regional capability, delivering opportunities throughout Ireland through balanced regional economic growth. The Regional Assembly would welcome, if necessary, further engagement with DETE and its relevant agencies to discuss this further.

The RSES identifies the marine as a labour-intensive economic sector which is of particular importance to the Region, given its sensitivity for job creation, maintenance and sustainability. Chapter 6 of the RSES highlights that development opportunities in the marine or blue economy include fisheries, renewables, new applications for health and medicine, and tourism. Furthermore, marine resources provide many non-commercial benefits too, for example amenity, biodiversity and climate regulation.

The Regional Assembly supports an increase in renewable energy sources under Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs) 4.84, 6.9, 7.35 8.23, 10.20 and 10.24 listed in the RSES. This includes the use of wind energy – both onshore and offshore, biomass, and solar photovoltaics and solar thermal, both on buildings and at a larger scale on appropriate sites in accordance with National policy. Furthermore, in a significant enhancement to the Regional Assemblies existing responsibilities in this area, the Planning and Development Act 2024 requires that a regional spatial and economic strategy shall make provision for a strategy relating to renewable energy, a Regional Renewable Energy Strategy (RRES), to (i) meet national targets, (ii) identify and facilitate electricity grid infrastructure, including upgrade projects and support infrastructure, (iii) make provision for energy security, and (iv) promote steps for coordination and cooperation between public bodies. Further to this, the Draft Revised NPF sets out a range of regional renewable electricity capacity allocations which are to be integrated into the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies, and through the Regional Renewable Energy Strategies (RRESs), are to be translated to county-level targets that will inform city and county development plans. The RRESs represent a strategic and cross-cutting regional level priority that the Regional Assembly considers should be reflected in the Department's Statement of Strategy.

Circular economy

The RSES supports a move towards the achievement of a circular economy which is essential if the Region is to make better use of resources and become more resource efficient. The successful implementation of circular economy principles will help to reduce the volume of waste that the Region produces and has to manage. A key growth enabler for the Gateway Region as set out in the RSES is diversification and growth of smart specialisation of local economies with a strong focus on clustering including sustainable farming and food production, tourism, marine, energy and renewables, bioeconomy and circular economy, with a focus on publicly owned peatlands in the midlands, to support a Just Transition and realise the benefits of green technologies. In line with RSO 9 of the RSES, the Assembly supports the development and implementation of plans, programmes and projects for climate action aimed at accelerating the transition to a low carbon and circular economy, including Climate Action Plan 2024 (and subsequent CAPs).

A sustainable bioeconomy is the renewable segment of the circular economy. It can turn bio-waste, residues and discards into valuable resources and significantly cuts food waste. Realising this potential requires investment and implementing systemic changes that cut across different sectors (agriculture, forestry, fisheries, aquaculture, food, biobased industry). As set out in the RSES, the bioeconomy in Ireland has enormous potential which is yet to be unlocked. Development of the bioeconomy is also consistent with Ireland's low carbon transition objective. Favouring renewable biological resources over fossil fuel-based ones through the expansion of the bioeconomy, whilst keeping sustainability concerns to the fore, has the potential to contribute towards meeting Ireland's climate change targets. As the bioeconomy has the potential to grow rural and regional businesses and jobs, it is a useful instrument to embed pro-environmental actions. The bioeconomy extends from farming and the agri-food businesses, marine based industries, forestry, waste management, energy suppliers, and pharma and bio-technology products. Ireland has flourishing firms in all of these sectors but much more can be done to unlock the bioeconomy's commercial potential and its environmental benefits.

National Policy Objective 67 of the Draft Revised NPF supports the circular and bioeconomy including in particular through greater efficiency in land and materials management, promoting the sustainable re-use and refurbishment of existing buildings and structures, while conserving cultural and natural heritage, the greater use of renewable resources and by reducing the rate of land use change from urban sprawl and new development. In line with RPO 7.34 of the RSES, the Assembly continues to engage with key local, regional, national and European stakeholders to strive to understand and explore the complexities of changes involved in decarbonisation and the transition to a sustainable economy. This includes rethinking sustainable economic models of sufficiency and supporting a regenerative economy by facilitating the economic circularity of materials and energy and sustainable job creation. The Assembly's engagement as a member of the Environmental Conference of the Regions of Europe (ENCORE) has a key focus on integrating a circular society to create a just transition.

In relation to the circular bioeconomy, the Assembly, as partner on the Interreg Europe ORIGINN project, has engaged with EIT Climate-KIC and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in

relation to agri-food in Ireland. Furthermore, as managing authority for the EU Just Transition Fund in Ireland, the Assembly is supporting research, development and innovation in the bioeconomy sector in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Further to this, the Assembly would support recognition within the Statement of Strategy of the circular economy (including the bioeconomy) as an important meta-sector for enterprise and employment, particularly in rural locations.

Digital Connectivity and Broadband

High-quality communications and addressing regional broadband weakness and digital skills deficits are essential for attracting high-value and knowledge intensive employment to the regions. National Policy Objective 31 of the Draft Revised NPF is to support and facilitate delivery of the National Broadband Plan as a means of developing further opportunities for enterprise, employment, education, innovation and skills development for those who live and work in rural areas. The RSES includes a number of RPOs (8.25 and 8.26) in relation to communications networks and digital infrastructure which:

- Support and facilitate delivery of the National Broadband Plan.
- Facilitate enhanced international fibre communications links, including full interconnection between the fibre networks in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.
- Promote and facilitate the sustainable development of a high-quality ICT network throughout the Region in order to achieve balanced social and economic development, whilst protecting the amenities of urban and rural areas.
- Support the national objective to promote Ireland as a sustainable international destination for ICT infrastructures such as data centres and associated economic activities at appropriate locations.
- Promote Dublin as a demonstrator of 5G information and communication technology.
- Supports the preparation of planning guidelines to facilitate the efficient roll out and delivery of national broadband.

The RSES supports investment in rural broadband and the provision of serviced sites and co-working/incubator space in towns and villages of all sizes in order to develop the potential offered by improved connectivity and digitisation and drive innovation and enterprise development in all parts of the Region. In October 2020, the three Regional Assemblies published the Regional Co-Working Analysis, the purpose of which was to provide data, analysis and recommendations to assist in developing the potential of remote working in our regions. The analysis identified the number of private sector workers that can operate remotely on a national, regional and local authority basis, as of Q2 2020, as well as the name, location and type of co-working hubs in each local authority in Ireland, as of September 2020. Further to this, the Assembly continues to engage with regional and local

stakeholders in this sector in the context of the Interreg Europe ORIGINN project and the EU Just Transition Fund.

Through participation on the Interreg Europe Next2Met project, the Assembly, in consultation with key stakeholders across the public and private sectors, developed a [Regional Digitalisation Roadmap for the Midlands](#). This mid- to long-term roadmap focuses on enabling a digital ecosystem in the Midlands region. The framework aligns at a regional level with national and local strategies, and builds on EU best practices, thereby providing an evidence-based framework which the Assembly encourages the Department to consider in supporting the digital transition of Irish enterprise.

Goal 3: Deepen and extend Ireland's global business and trade in a responsible, fair and sustainable manner.

Through management of the Irish Regions European Office (IREO) in Brussels and as Secretariat to the Irish Delegation to the Committee of the Regions, the Regional Assembly collaborates with Government Departments to develop international relationships and strengthen the Region's economic diplomacy. Although trade agreements are managed at EU level, measures can be put in place to build international relationships with branding and reputation, building on the culture, heritage and attractiveness of the Region, to gain a greater share in international markets and develop new markets for the Region's enterprise base. The IREO is a specialised support service which acts as a bridge between Irish local and regional government and the European Union, explaining and guiding its stakeholders through the Brussels scene and promoting Irish interests and best practices at the European level. The Assembly would welcome engagement with the Department to explore opportunities for engagement.

Strategic connectivity

The RSES recognises that high quality accessibility to international gateways, both within and outside the Region, is key for economic competitiveness through investment in the trans-European TEN-T road, rail and port network and to protect the strategic function of national transport corridors. The RSES seeks to protect and enhance land transport connections to the major ports and airports, including Dublin Airport, via delivery of Metrolink and to support the development of Dublin Port including proposals for a southern port access route, in line with priorities set out in the National Ports Policy and National Aviation Policy.

The RSES recognises the key role of the Dublin-Belfast Corridor as the largest economic agglomeration and national entry point to the island of Ireland, connecting Drogheda, Dundalk and Newry, with major airports and ports in Dublin and Belfast. The RSES supports the improvement of Dublin – Belfast Road and rail links, including feasibility for high-speed rail between Dublin Belfast and Dublin Limerick Junction/Cork, along with improved connectivity to Rosslare Europort on the Eastern Corridor. Cross border co-ordination will play a critical role in ensuring effective and resilient cross border flows and addressing opportunities and challenges. The RSES also recognises the potential of rail freight to support increased exports and the efficient movement of goods across Ireland, along with the future

role of regional ports as strategic marine related assets, whilst supporting complimentary economic uses including facilitating offshore renewable energy.

The RSES further supports the delivery of key public transport projects: 'BusConnects', DART expansion and LUAS extension programmes, Metro Link and the Greater Dublin Metropolitan Cycle Network, along with the provision of park and rides and improved interchanges to provide a fully integrated public transport network to ensure the continued success and competitiveness of the capital city region. One of the key challenges facing the Eastern and Midland Region is the need for better alignment between population and employment growth and the delivery of enabling transport and infrastructure. The RSES spatial strategy seeks to ensure that investment is targeted in the right locations with a focus on compact growth within the existing built-up area of cities, towns and villages and would welcome continued engagement with the Department and its agencies in addressing this challenge.

Goal 4: Improve our business regulatory environment to enhance Ireland's attractiveness as a place to do business.

As outlined under Goal 4 of the current Statement of Strategy, the Department will lead across Government on the development of evidence and data-based policy recommendations that will contribute to a competitive environment for investment, productivity, entrepreneurship and employment.

The Assembly provides research and analysis to support evidence-based policy-making and inform our implementation and monitoring function. This has been illustrated by the development of the Regional Development Monitor (RDM). Led by the EMRA, the RDM is a collaborative project between the three Regional Assemblies in Ireland, the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO) at Maynooth University and spatial infrastructure partners, Tailte Éireann (TÉ) via the GeoHive platform.

The aim of the RDM is to collate and visualise a range of relevant socio-economic and environmental indicators to present the performance of each of the three regions in terms of achieving the objectives outlined in their respective Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES). The RDM provides a series of new national mapping and visualisation infrastructures to assist Government Departments, Regional Assemblies, Local Authorities, Planners, Policy Makers, Researchers and members of the public in gaining a greater insight into social, economic and environmental trends to aid better decision making. In addition to ongoing engagement in relation to the S3 Dashboard, the Assembly invites the Department and its staff to explore and utilise this open data visualisation and mapping resource to deliver in terms of its leadership, delivery, services and performance.

Goal 6: Build an innovative, inclusive and agile Department with a strong public service ethos driving effective and responsible policy implementation.

This strategic goal of the current Statement of Strategy recognises the importance of national government and how the Department will deliver in terms of its leadership, delivery, services and performance. The Regional Assembly has developed a wide stakeholder network, across the region,

nationally and in a European context, and this has been further enhanced during the collaborative approach that was taken in the formulation of the RSES for the Region, the EU Just Transition Fund Programme and the Regional Development Monitor. With this collective engagement, the Assembly provides capacity building for the planning system in the Region by providing a common evidence base, a methodological approach to core strategies of local authority development plans including data sets of assets of settlements across the region and fora to deal with strategic, common and cross boundary issues.

Tourism

The Assembly notes that the updated Statement of Strategy will need to reflect the Department's new functions related to tourism, Ireland's most significant indigenous sector. As set out in the RSES, there is the need for on-going investment in the tourism industry, investing in heritage, promoting and appreciating placemaking in a manner that will not only benefit tourism as an economic sector, but also local communities. In this respect, RPO 6.21 of the RSES is that EMRA will work with local authorities and Fáilte Ireland to identify destination towns within the Region for the prioritisation of investment and supports to drive tourism growth in the Region, to spread the benefit of tourism throughout the Region and to encourage the increase of tourism product development. Related to this, RPOs 4.79 and 4.84 seek to maximise opportunities in emerging sectors, such as agri-business, renewable energy, and RPOs 6.15 to 6.20 seek to:

- Support the preparation and implementation of Visitor Experience Development Plans within the Region to underpin the overarching regional tourism brands and to deliver greater tourism benefits and to promote the natural and cultural assets of the Region.
- Support working with relevant landowners and recreational/ tourism agencies to increase access to the countryside and coastal areas to ensure maintenance of the existing network.
- Support the maintenance of, and enhanced access to state and semi-state lands such as National Parks, Forest Parks, Waterways, etc., together with Monuments and Historic Properties, for recreation and tourism purposes. Access should be planned and managed in a sustainable manner that protects environmental sensitivities, ecological corridors, and the ability of local infrastructure to support increased tourism.
- Support the preparation and implementation of local authority tourism strategies and diaspora strategies. All tourism strategies and plans should include clear monitoring protocols to monitor the ongoing effect of tourism on sensitive features with particular focus on natural and built heritage assets.
- Support the local strategies that are already in place to link the River Shannon Blueway, The Royal and Grand Canal Greenways and the proposed Barrow Blueway right across the Midlands, incorporating the towns of Longford, Athlone, Mullingar, Tullamore and Portarlinton.
- Support Offaly County Council, Bord na Móna and Coillte in the development of the 'Midlands Cycling Destination- Offaly'.

Chapter 7 of the RSES, Environment and Climate, recognises that a clean, well-protected environment supports human health and wellbeing and provides a natural resource for our agriculture and tourism

industries. It also recognises that challenges remain in relation to biodiversity protection and climate resilience and includes a series of RPOs (7.16 to 7.23) relating to biodiversity and green infrastructure, and includes as a series of guiding principles for green infrastructure, which should be taken into account in any tourism development.

The EU Just Transition Fund, which is managed by the Assembly, supports the diversification of the local economy in the EU JTF Territory, with a particular focus on the development of the regenerative tourism sector. This includes the Regenerative Tourism and Placemaking Scheme for Ireland's Midlands 2023-2026 being delivered by Fáilte Ireland and the EU Just Transition Tourism Learning Network Programme.

Further to the above, the Assembly considers the Statement of Strategy should support tourism initiatives which protect and enhance natural and cultural heritage, as well as amenity development for healthy placemaking and tourism which is consistent with achieving Ireland's national climate objective.

4.0 Recommendations

The following are recommendations by the Regional Assembly that should be taken into consideration in the preparation of the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, Statement of Strategy 2025-2028:

1. The Statement of Strategy should have regard to the statutory role of the Regional Assembly in relation to economic matters, the Dublin MASP, LECs and other matters of relevance to the Department as outlined in Planning and Development Act 2024 and the Local Government Reform Act 2014.
Reason: To ensure consistency between the Statement of Strategy, the Planning and Development Act 2024, the Local Government Reform Act 2014, and the revised NPF, and to ensure effective implementation of the RSES.
2. Placemaking, urban regeneration and regional attractiveness should be priority areas of focus in the development of the Statement of Strategy.
Reason: To ensure consistency between the Statement of Strategy and the revised NPF, and to ensure effective implementation of the RSES.
3. The Statement of Strategy should reiterate the Department's commitment to engage with stakeholders to advocate and secure strategic investment that delivers a globally competitive and future-proofed economic and enterprise development ecosystem in education, innovation and physical infrastructure and local policy objectives and in advancing the low carbon and digital transitions in line with local, regional and national policy.
Reason: To ensure consistency between the Statement of Strategy and the revised NPF, and to ensure effective review and implementation of the RSES.

4. The Statement of Strategy should support alignment of Regional Enterprise Plans objectives and Regional Enterprise Development Funding with national and regional policy, framed by the RIV status of all three regions, and underpinned by a competitive and enterprise friendly environment with a resilient, innovative, productive and sustainable enterprise base.
Reason: To ensure consistency between the Statement of Strategy the revised NPF and the National Development Plan, and to ensure effective review and implementation of the RSES.
5. The Statement of Strategy should be developed having regard to the development of the S3 Dashboard of the Regional Development Monitor in collaboration with the Department, as well as the ongoing collaboration between the Regional Assembly and the Department to inform and support the implementation of the National Smart Specialisation Strategy for Innovation 2022-2027.
Reason: To ensure consistency between the Statement of Strategy and the revised NPF and to ensure effective review and implementation of the RSES.
6. The Statement of Strategy should have regard to the key role of the Regional Assembly in relation to renewable energy and renewable energy infrastructures as they relate to the work of the Department.
Reason: To ensure consistency between the Statement of Strategy, the revised NPF and the Planning and Development Act 2024 and to ensure effective implementation of the RSESs.
7. The Statement of Strategy should recognise the circular economy (including the circular bioeconomy) as an important meta-sector for enterprise and employment, particularly in rural locations.
Reason: To ensure consistency between the Statement of Strategy and the revised NPF, and to ensure effective implementation of the RSES.
8. The Statement of Strategy should be based on robust evidence and should support enhanced research and innovation collaborations between the research and enterprise sectors, including support for the development, resourcing and utilisation of relevant user-friendly tools and resources to assist in the achievement of its goals, and draw on international best practice, for example, the Regional Development Monitor.
Reason: To ensure effective cross-cutting policy development, implementation and monitoring at the national, regional and local levels.
9. The Statement of Strategy should seek to ensure that investment is targeted in the right locations with a focus on compact growth within the existing built-up area of cities, towns and villages.
Reason: To ensure consistency between the Statement of Strategy the revised NPF and the National Development Plan, and to ensure effective review and implementation of the RSES.

10. The Statement of Strategy should support tourism initiatives which protect and enhance natural and cultural heritage, as well as amenity development for healthy placemaking and tourism which is consistent with achieving Ireland's national climate objective.

Reason: To ensure consistency between the Statement of Strategy and the revised NPF, and to ensure effective implementation of the RSES.

5.0 Conclusion

The Regional Assembly welcomes the opportunity to engage in the process of preparing the new Statement of Strategy 2025-2028 and looks forward to continuing engagement with the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment.

Regards,



Clare Bannon
A/Director
Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly
25th April 2025