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Oirthir agus Lár Tíre**
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Consultation on the National Development Plan Review

Submission of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly

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1.0 Overall Context

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly notes the Consultation on the National Development Plan Review and sets out hereunder observations and recommendations on behalf of the Assembly. This submission has been prepared by the executive and approved by the Cathaoirleach of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly on the 26th June 2025.

The purpose of the National Development Plan (NDP) is to set out the investment priorities that will underpin the implementation of the National Planning Framework (NPF). The NDP and the NPF combine to form Project Ireland 2040, the overarching policy and planning framework for the social, economic, and cultural development of Ireland.

The submission sets out a **number of recommendations** that the Regional Assembly consider are required to enable the delivery of the National Development Plan and its objectives. These are contained in section 3.0 of this submission.

Role and Function of the Regional Assembly

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) is part of the regional tier of governance in Ireland. The role and function of the Regional Assembly are currently provided for in the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended. It should be noted that this legislation has been superseded by the Planning and Development Act 2024, which was signed into law on 17th October 2024.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.

In addition to the role and function of the Assembly provided for in the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, and in the Planning and Development Act 2024, the Assembly participates in the design and delivery of EU funding programmes, notably the EU Just Transition Fund; is secretariat to the national delegation to the Committee of the Regions (CoR), and; oversees and supports the Irish Regions European Office (IREO) in Brussels which operates as part of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly, with the support of the Department for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. All of these functions support the implementation of the NDP at the regional level.

The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Region

The current Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Region was made by the Members of the Assembly in June 2019 and 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 our people and places, from urban to rural, with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunities for all. The vision of the RSES is supported by 16 Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSOs) that are framed around the 3 key principles of Healthy Placemaking, Climate Action and Economic Opportunity. These RSOs and key principles are closely aligned with and supportive of the National Strategic Outcomes of the National Planning Framework.

A primary statutory objective of the RSES is to support the implementation of the National Planning Framework (NPF), aligning with the investment priorities of the National Development Plan (and thus Project Ireland 2040), by coupling new development with the requisite investment in services and infrastructure. 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.

It should be noted that under Section 30 (1) of the Planning and Development Act 2024, a Regional Assembly is required, not later than 6 months after the publication of a revised or new NPF, to commence a review of the RSES for its region. As a revised NPF was approved by both Houses of the Oireachtas in April 2025, the EMRA must commence a review of its RSES by October 2025, if Section 30 (1) of the Act is enacted by then.

Ensuring Spatial Alignment

The RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region 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.

Furthermore, the cross-boundary Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor (DBEC) is a significant growth enabler within the Region, connecting Dundalk, Newry and Belfast and Dublin and Belfast air and seaports. This is complemented by an Eastern Corridor extending south to Rosslare Europort. The DBEC represents an important economic and transport link and a key enabler for spatial and economic regional growth.

The revised National Planning Framework 2025 reflects changes to government policy that have taken place since its initial publication, such as climate transition, regional development, demographics,

digitalisation and investment and prioritisation. In doing so, it reflects this Spatial Strategy, and the settlement hierarchy presented, to allow managed and sustainable growth that enables each place fulfil ambition and potential. In turn, the Regional Assembly considers that infrastructure delivery provided for under the revised NDP should be aligned closely with this settlement hierarchy to ensure that all public capital investment through to 2035 is most effectively directed to achieve the ambitious objective of Project Ireland 2040.

2.0 Submission

EMRA plays a central role in guiding the delivery of Project Ireland 2040 objectives across the most populous and economically significant region in the State. In responding to the questions in the consultation paper, this submission sets out sector-specific recommendations and cross-cutting proposals on infrastructure delivery, communication of the NDP, and how the plan can better address intra-regional disparities within our region under the following headings:

- 2.1 Intra-Regional Disparities in the Eastern and Midland Region
- 2.2 Sectoral Investment Priorities
- 2.3 Infrastructure Delivery: Constraints and Trade-Offs
- 2.4 Cross-Cutting Sustainability Priorities for Infrastructure Investment
- 2.5 Guiding Principles for Infrastructure Prioritisation
- 2.6 Governance, Communication and Public Trust
- 3.0 Recommendations
- 4.0 Conclusions

2.1 Intra-Regional Disparities in the Eastern and Midland Region

The Midland Region

While Dublin functions as a global city region with strong GDP and innovation performance, intra-regional disparities persist within the Eastern and Midland Region (EMR). The **2025 European Commission Country Report**¹ for Ireland (Country Report) reveals that while Dublin drives national GDP, the Midlands (comprising Longford, Laois, Offaly and Westmeath) underperforms on nearly all economic indicators at the NUTS 3 level. The Country Report confirms deep intra-regional disparities, particularly between Dublin and the Midlands at this level. Infrastructure accessibility is concentrated around Dublin while the Midlands lags behind in productivity, connectivity, and access to services. Similar disparities exist in R&D intensity, accessibility, and housing viability.

The transition away from peat-fired power generation has further exacerbated long-standing economic and social challenges in the Midlands, increasing the urgency of targeted regional investment. For example, **GDP per capita in Dublin is over 360% of the EU average, while the Midlands is just 75%**. Reduced industrial activity following the withdrawal from peat has removed an

¹European Commission Country Reports are part of the annual European Semester process. They are intended to assess the economic, social, and environmental challenges facing each EU member state, and to guide the formulation of Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs).

anchor employer from the region and diminished related supply chains. This transition has not yet been matched by equivalent green economy investment. Limited public transport options persist across many towns and rural areas, resulting in high car dependency, reduced access to employment, and constrained mobility for non-drivers. This affects both job accessibility and equitable participation in regional opportunities.

A socio-economic analysis undertaken by EMRA as part of the mid-term review of the EU Just Transition Fund Programme 2021-2027 reveals that population and demographic changes show an ageing population structure and significant variation in youth dependency ratios. These changes imply evolving healthcare, housing, and mobility needs across the region. Unemployment remains slightly above the national average, and long-term unemployment persists as a structural issue, despite positive gains in employment rates between 2016 and 2022. The region has a high reliance on home heating oil, exposing households to risks of energy poverty and inefficiencies in emissions. Labour and skills shortages in the construction and renewable energy sectors present real challenges to scaling up sustainable infrastructure delivery in line with national climate and housing goals.

The Country Report further identifies the need for regional enterprise diversification and identifies a productivity gap between domestic and multinational firms. This demonstrates the need for continued investment in regional enterprise centres and innovation districts, as well as digital infrastructure and smart specialisation, and business support aligned with Technological Universities and Regional Enterprise Plans. These realities reaffirm the continuing relevance of the Territorial Just Transition Plan (TJTP) for Ireland, whose key needs and development areas remain unresolved and are still relevant for the region. The ongoing use of the EU Just Transition Fund (JTF) until 2027, for which the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly is the Managing Authority, remains essential in supporting communities and businesses affected by decarbonisation and in ensuring a fair transition for workers. With the programming period for the EU JTF ending in 2027, the NDP will be crucial to realising the ambition of the TJTP and the EU JTF Programme to 2035 and beyond. To address these issues, the Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise:

- Capital investment in underperforming areas, aligned with the RSES settlement hierarchy and local development needs.
- Funding for enabling infrastructure to support the growth of new employment sectors, including clean energy, green construction, and the circular economy and innovation (including the circular bioeconomy); and continued support for manufacturing (in medical devices, pharma/bio, food and engineered products).
- Investment in public and shared mobility solutions to reduce car dependency and improve access to education, health and employment.
- Enhanced retrofitting programmes and district energy systems to address fuel poverty and decarbonisation.
- Support for upskilling, re-skilling and workforce development initiatives tailored to emerging sectors.

The long-term integration of EU JTF-funded measures into national and regional investment frameworks.

In delivering these measures, it is critical that the NDP leverages the work of regional stakeholders and aligns with existing strategies, including the RSES and the EU JTF Territorial Just Transition Plan for Ireland. The Just Transition Territory represents an important test case for Ireland's ability to implement spatially balanced and climate-just investment. The NDP must ensure that this region not only recovers from the loss of traditional industries but also emerges stronger, more connected, and environmentally resilient.

The Dublin and Eastern (Mid-East) Regions

In line with the OECD's 2023 report on balanced regional effectiveness in Ireland², it is important to acknowledge the fact that relatively high overall levels of GDP per capita, particularly in the Dublin Region, can mask large regional income disparities and indeed other multi-dimensional territorial inequalities, including inequalities within the Dublin and Eastern (Mid-East) areas. It is important to acknowledge that while GDP is a common measure of economic activity, solely relying on it in the Irish context can be problematic due to the presence of multi-national corporations (MNCs). These MNCs can inflate Ireland's GDP figures, making it appear wealthier than it is for its residents. This distortion arises because profits generated by MNCs in Ireland are included in GDP, even if those profits are subsequently repatriated (sent back to the parent company's country of origin). As indicated by the CSO³, this can lead to a disconnect between headline GDP figures and the actual economic well-being of the population.

In line with the OECD's 2023 Report, the Assembly also considers that the NDP should prioritise the following in the Eastern and Dublin Strategic Planning Areas (SPAs):

Eastern SPA

- Investment in key enabling infrastructure for housing delivery, particularly water services and electrical infrastructure and retrofitting existing housing supply.
- Targeted investment in boosting the labour market.
- Enhanced natural capital funding to create more green spaces to further elevate the region's overall well-being.
- Further investment in the digital sector and achieving a digital transition.
- Expedite the delivery of the Navan Rail line to deliver needed sustainable transport options and enable compact and sustainable growth.
- Investment in transport infrastructure, particularly extension of rail through the DART+ programme and sustainable travel initiatives; and establishment of a Metropolitan Transport Authority.
- Multi-annual fund for delivery of the Dublin Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP).
- Investment in health, public and acute hospital services and health clustering.
- Leveraging the national and international sustainable tourism offering of this region, investment in urban public realm initiatives to increase footfall through URDF and RRDF.

² OECD (2023), "Towards balanced regional attractiveness in Ireland: Enhancing the delivery of the National Planning Framework", *OECD Regional Development Papers*, No. 62, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/3df116ad-en>.

³

<https://www.cso.ie/en/interactivezone/statisticsexplained/nationalaccountsexplained/grossdomesticproductgdp/#:~:text=GDP%20is%20the%20best%20single,it%20is%20the%20best%20choice.>

Dublin SPA

- Investment in social cohesion to support community building and inclusiveness,
- Investment in key enabling infrastructure for housing delivery is needed to correct the demand-supply imbalance.
- Increase in budget allocated to local authorities to deliver social and affordable housing.
- Targeted investment in environmental preservation and natural capital is required, along with increased provision of natural amenities.
- Targeted supports to attract talent into the labour market and increase employment through the Regional Enterprise Plans, including support for the emergent semiconductor hub.
- Continued support and investment in Regional Smart Specialisation (S3) Programme and delivery of regional actions.
- Multi-annual fund for delivery of the Dublin Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP), compact and sustainable growth.
- Establishment of a Metropolitan Transport Authority for the management of integrated land use and transportation and sustainable travel.

2.2 Sectoral Investment Priorities

The delivery of balanced, resilient, and sustainable development across the Eastern and Midland Region requires strategic, targeted investment across key sectors, which should be integrated, sequenced, and climate-aligned to deliver both compact growth and a just transition. This section sets out EMRA's priorities for public investment under the revised National Development Plan, aligned with the RSES, and supported by real-time evidence from the Regional Development Monitor (RDM). It also reflects the priorities highlighted in the 2025 European Commission Country Report for Ireland, which underscores the importance of addressing infrastructure bottlenecks, spatial disparities, and delivery capacity constraints.

2.2.1 Housing

Housing provision is central to the objectives of the RSES, particularly RSO 2: Compact Growth, RSO 4: Healthy Communities, and RSO 9: Support the Transition to a Low Carbon and Climate Resilient Society. The Eastern and Midland Region, while home to Ireland's fastest-growing counties, continues to face significant challenges in delivering sufficient and affordable housing. These challenges include land viability, infrastructure deficits, and planning and construction sector capacity.

The 2025 Country Report reaffirms that housing delivery shortfalls and affordability pressures—especially in Dublin and the Mid-East—are acting as structural constraints on competitiveness and social equity. The [Regional Development Monitor](#)^[1] (RDM) also highlights considerable intra-regional disparities, particularly in vacancy, delivery rates, and affordability outside of Dublin.

Under the Planning and Development Act 2024 and the revised National Planning Framework 2025, the Regional Assemblies now have a defined role in coordinating housing-related infrastructure

^[1]A collaborative project between the three Regional Assemblies in Ireland, the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO) at Maynooth University and spatial infrastructure partners the Tailte Éireann (TÉ) via the GeoHive platform.

delivery and monitoring the alignment of housing with spatial policy. This includes oversight of housing land activation, compact growth implementation, and infrastructure sequencing.

To respond effectively to demographic need and spatial policy, the Assembly considers that the revised NDP must be a coherent, climate-aligned infrastructure strategy that unlocks sustainable housing delivery in line with the RSES settlement hierarchy. To address these issues, the Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise:

- Infrastructure-Led Housing Activation
 - Fund the delivery of essential enabling infrastructure—water, wastewater, electricity, access roads, drainage—in areas zoned for housing.
 - Support the Housing for All Land Activation Fund with a multi-annual, regionally targeted programme aligned to the RSES.
 - Prioritise infill and brownfield sites in the Dublin Metropolitan Area, Regional Growth Centres, and Key Towns.

- Compact, Climate-Resilient Housing Development
 - Invest in housing that supports compact growth, active travel, and public transport-oriented development (TOD).
 - Support climate-proofed and energy-efficient housing aligned to carbon budgets and emissions ceilings.
 - Integrate nature-based solutions (SuDS, green corridors) and biodiversity design into new housing areas.

- Affordability and Tenure Diversity
 - Scale delivery of affordable, cost-rental, and social housing across high-pressure housing markets in the region.
 - Support land acquisition and pre-development for Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) and public agencies.
 - Promote diverse tenure mixes that reflect local demographics and support inclusive communities.

- Strategic Alignment and Data-Driven Planning
 - Support the development and consistent application of Housing Need and Demand Assessments (HNDAs) across all local authorities.
 - Provide Regional Assemblies with access to real-time data on housing, land, and infrastructure to inform regional monitoring.
 - Align local housing delivery action plans with spatial and climate strategies at regional level.

- Planning and Delivery Capacity
 - Fully implement the Ministerial Action Plan on Planning Resources, including the recruitment and retention of specialist planning staff across all tiers.
 - Establish integrated project teams across housing, infrastructure and planning agencies to accelerate delivery.

- Provide Regional Assemblies with the analytical capacity and legal clarity to monitor and support infrastructure-led housing implementation.

2.2.2 Transport

Efficient, equitable and sustainable mobility systems are essential for the delivery of compact growth, climate action, and economic opportunity. The RSES embeds this across RSO 6: Integration of Land Use and Transport and RSO 11: Transition to a Low Carbon Economy. The RSES promotes public and active transport, transport-oriented development, and investment in the Dublin Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP).

The RSES prioritises sustainable transport infrastructure that supports settlement and employment strategies, meets modal shift targets, and enables low-carbon development patterns. However, the 2025 European Commission Country Report and the Climate Change Advisory Council’s *Transport Sectoral Review: Annual Review 2025* both highlight critical gaps in delivery—especially in metropolitan rail, regional public transport, and walking and cycling infrastructure. These gaps are now contributing to rising transport emissions and missed climate targets.

The Assembly considers that the revised NDP should include a clear implementation pathway for the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, which will play a vital role in meeting the mobility needs of a growing population while remaining within emissions boundaries. Investment in high-capacity public transport, particularly rail, is essential not only to support compact growth and reduce road congestion but also to ensure long-term decarbonisation of the transport sector. The Review outlines a transformative vision for sustainable rail connectivity, and the NDP must match this with sequenced delivery, enabling infrastructure, and project-specific funding commitments.

The revised National Planning Framework and Planning and Development Act 2024 underscore the role of Regional Assemblies in integrating transport with land use and infrastructure sequencing. EMRA is therefore uniquely positioned to guide investment in a manner that aligns with the MASP and RSES objectives. To address these issues, the Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise:

- Public Transport-Led Development
 - Fully fund the delivery of critical regional infrastructure, including MetroLink Project, DART+ Programme, BusConnects, and LUAS extensions as part of the Dublin MASP, ensuring alignment with zoned housing and employment land.
 - Implement the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, including enhanced services to Athlone, Dundalk, and Portlaoise, and improved rail freight access to Dublin Port.
 - Prioritise TOD (Transport-Oriented Development) as a cross-departmental policy, including integrated housing, zoning, and station area planning.
- Delivery of the GDA Transport Strategy
 - Accelerate progress on the full range of projects outlined under the National Transport Authority’s Strategy for the GDA (2022–2042), including: Enhanced bus and rail interchanges; Active travel networks; road improvements in terms of safety, alignment, and bus priority.
 - Ensure that Local Transport Plans, required under the RSES, are adequately resourced and implemented.
- Rural, Regional and Disadvantaged Area Access

- Expand and enhance the Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan, with consistent operating funding for Local Link services.
- Address persistent infrastructure deficits in under-served areas such as the Baltinglass Municipal District and wider West Wicklow (see Case Study at Section 2.5 below); fund inclusive and accessible transport options to support people without private car access.
- Road Investment Consistent with Climate Policy
 - Targeted evaluation of strategic road projects to prioritise capital expenditure, consistent with national spatial policy that supports compact growth and addresses critical regional connectivity deficits, emphasising road safety, active travel and rural connectivity upgrades.
 - Consider a climate-based review of major road projects, in line with the model used in Wales, to ensure coherence with Ireland’s Carbon Budgets and the National Climate Objective (See section 2.5)
 - Integrate climate risk assessments into road maintenance, investment and resilience planning.
- Active Travel Infrastructure and Urban Movement
 - Expand safe walking and cycling infrastructure (including footpaths) in towns and cities, with dedicated investment streams for local authorities.
 - Prioritise funding for mobility hubs, school streets, and safe routes to stations and town centres.
 - Ensure active travel networks are co-planned with housing, schools, and public realm upgrades.
- Freight, Ports and Resilience
 - Support the development of rail freight and port access improvements, including Dublin Port and a strategic review of Bremore Port’s future potential.
 - Invest in green freight corridors and intermodal freight terminals to decarbonise logistics.
 - Strengthen transport infrastructure resilience to flooding and extreme weather events.

2.2.3 Education

Accessible, high-quality education infrastructure is critical for future-proofing regional development and supporting vibrant communities. The RSES supports this under RSO 4: Healthy Communities; RSO 5: A Strong Economy Supported by Enterprise and Innovation; and RSO 7: Quality of Life.

The region continues to experience rapid population growth, particularly in the Mid-East counties of Meath (13%), Kildare (11%), Wicklow (9%) and Louth (8%), as well as growth in younger age cohorts and more diverse communities. These trends place significant pressure on existing school infrastructure and require a coordinated approach to new provision and refurbishment.

The 2025 Country Report and national enrolment projections point to a persistent shortfall of primary and post-primary school places in expanding settlements and regeneration areas. In some locations, delays in school delivery are now a constraint on compact growth, housing development, and social equity. There is also a need for more strategic coordination across early years, primary, secondary,

and further education, and for investment in education infrastructure that is climate-resilient, digitally enabled, and spatially aligned.

Under the Planning and Development Act 2024 and the revised NPF (2025), Regional Assemblies play a greater role in monitoring demographic trends, identifying infrastructure needs, and promoting the integration of social infrastructure—including education—into land use planning. To address these issues, the Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise:

- Strategic Education Infrastructure Planning
 - Provide capital funding for school development in designated Growth Centres, Key Towns, and regeneration areas, consistent with Core Strategies and Local Transport Plans;
 - Adopt a place-based investment model that sequences school delivery with housing and public transport infrastructure;
 - Ensure national school planning processes are responsive to real-time data on enrolment, housing completions, and migration trends.
- Expansion and Renewal of School Capacity
 - Fund new school builds and extensions in fast-growing areas.
 - Support upgrading, energy retrofitting, and repurposing of older school buildings to ensure climate resilience and accessibility.
 - Address the needs of small schools in rural areas to maintain community viability and equitable access.
- Integration of Early Years and Childcare Provision
 - Co-locate early years and childcare facilities with schools, transport hubs, and town centre renewal projects.
 - Ensure that investment in childcare aligns with the RSES objectives relating to public services and compact growth.
 - Prioritise delivery of childcare infrastructure in tandem with large-scale housing developments.
- Education for Climate, Inclusion, and Wellbeing
 - Fund learning environments that support wellbeing, inclusion, and flexible curriculum delivery, including nature-based learning, digital literacy, digital classrooms, life-long learning and initiatives such as the UNESCO Dublin Learning City partnership.
 - Ensure universal access to high-speed broadband and digital devices in all schools and educational institutions.
 - Prioritise safe and sustainable travel routes to school through integrated transport investment.
- Joined-up Governance and Spatial Coordination
 - Improve coordination between the Department of Education, local authorities, and Regional Assemblies in identifying school site needs.
 - Ensure transparency in the School Building Programme and incorporate regional monitoring into decision-making.
 - Support mapping and spatial forecasting tools to anticipate infrastructure demand in emerging residential zones.

2.2.4 Higher Education, Research and Innovation

Higher education infrastructure is critical to delivering on smart specialisation, innovation, and regional economic resilience. This is embedded in RSO 5 of the RSES, with emphasis on knowledge-based economic growth.

Technological Universities (e.g. TUS, TU Dublin) require sustained capital investment to function as regional anchors. The Country Report points to gaps in R&D intensity and the need to better link research with regional enterprise. Furthermore, all three of Ireland's regions – the Eastern and Midland Region, Southern Region and the Northern and Western Region – have received the designation of 'Regional Innovation Valley' (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 coordination and directionality of their R&I policy and investment towards key EU priorities; and engaging in R&I collaboration between more and less advanced regions with complementary smart specialisation strategies. To address these issues, the Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise:

- Strengthening regional research & innovation (R&I) ecosystems in line with the RIV label.
- Support sectoral clusters aligned to smart specialisation, including cleantech, advanced manufacturing, digital services, medtech, agri-food, and creative industries.
- Development of innovation and incubation facilities.
- Strategic investment in TU campuses and research equipment.
- Provide targeted capital and programme funding for research-industry partnerships.

2.2.5 Energy

The transition to a low-carbon, secure and regionally balanced energy system is among the most critical challenges facing Ireland. The RSES identifies this through RSO 9: Support the Transition to Low Carbon and Climate Resilient Society and RSO 11: Enhanced Regional Accessibility and Infrastructure Delivery.

The 2025 Country Report underlines Ireland's ongoing energy system constraints—including grid congestion, long connection timelines, and delays in planning consents—which risk undermining progress on both climate and housing targets. In the Eastern and Midland Region, these issues are particularly acute. Grid infrastructure limitations are now a binding constraint on housing delivery in several high-growth towns and regional centres. At the same time, the region offers enormous potential to contribute to national energy objectives—including through grid-enabled housing development, offshore renewable energy infrastructure (including port and data infrastructure), community energy projects, and new strategic energy corridors (i.e. electricity interconnectors with mainland Europe and the UK).

The revised National Planning Framework 2025 and the Planning and Development Act 2024 now explicitly task the Regional Assemblies with a key role in the spatial coordination of Ireland's energy transition. This includes, for the first time, a formal function in setting indicative regional targets for

onshore wind and solar PV deployment—ensuring that national climate and energy goals are delivered in a spatially balanced, environmentally sustainable, and community-embedded manner.

This represents a significant step forward in aligning land use planning with energy policy. However, for this new function to be delivered effectively, Regional Assemblies must be adequately resourced. Currently, there is a gap between the scale of responsibility and the technical, analytical, and staffing resources available to the Regional Assemblies. There is also a need for structured engagement with national agencies such as EirGrid, SEAI, ESB Networks, and MARA to coordinate delivery and ensure joined-up spatial energy planning. To address these issues, the Assembly considers that the revised NDP should prioritise:

- Resourcing the Role of Regional Assemblies in Energy Planning
 - Provide dedicated multi-annual funding for Regional Assemblies to undertake energy spatial planning functions under the revised NPF 2025 and Planning and Development Act 2024.
 - Support the development of technical capacity within the Regional Assemblies, including GIS analysis, spatial modelling, and stakeholder engagement expertise.
- Grid Capacity as a Critical Enabler
 - Accelerate investment in grid reinforcement in identified growth settlements and employment locations constrained by connection capacity.
 - Prioritise electricity infrastructure that unlocks compact growth and renewable energy deployment in line with RSES and Core Strategies of City and County Development Plans.
 - Enable joint planning between grid upgrades and investment programmes in housing, enterprise, and public transport.
- Delivery of Regional Renewable Energy Targets
 - Support the identification, zoning, and infrastructure planning for renewable energy opportunity areas through the NDP.
 - Fund enabling infrastructure and environmental assessments needed to support the deployment of new renewables aligned to regional and national targets.
 - Integrate spatial energy planning with biodiversity protection, landscape character and community benefit.

2.2.6 Health

Health infrastructure is a foundational element of sustainable regional development. The RSES embeds health as a cross-sectoral objective through RSO 4: Healthy Communities. This recognises the essential link between place, planning, and population wellbeing—and the need to embed access to healthcare and wellness services in spatial investment decisions.

The Eastern and Midland Region is home to both the largest urban population in the State and some of the fastest-growing peri-urban and rural communities. These areas face distinct health challenges, including acute demand pressures in metropolitan hospitals, limited access to primary care in many towns and rural areas, and growing needs associated with ageing populations and socioeconomic disadvantage.

The RSES highlights the need for: health infrastructure that is accessible, integrated with transport and services, and climate-resilient; spatial alignment of new healthcare facilities with Core Strategies and population growth; and greater investment in primary, preventive, and community-based care.

The Planning and Development Act 2024 and the revised National Planning Framework 2025 reinforce the role of Regional Assemblies in aligning infrastructure investment, such as health, with spatial policy. This establishes a statutory basis for enhanced coordination among the Department of Health, HSE, and planning authorities in delivering effective and inclusive health infrastructure. To address these issues, the Assembly considers that the revised NDP should prioritise:

- Spatially Integrated Healthcare Infrastructure
 - Ensure new health facilities—hospitals, primary care centres, community health networks—are aligned with Core Strategies and settlement hierarchies.
 - Prioritise locations in Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns where population growth is high and access gaps exist.
 - Apply transport-oriented development principles to major health infrastructure to maximise access and sustainability.
- Primary and Community Care Expansion
- Climate-Resilient and Sustainable Health Infrastructure
- Health Inequalities and Inclusive Access
- Integrated Planning and Delivery Structures

2.2.7 Water and Wastewater

Resilient, climate-aligned, and spatially targeted water infrastructure is critical to achieving the objectives of the RSES. Water and wastewater systems underpin compact growth, support public health, protect environmental quality, and enable the delivery of housing and enterprise zones. These systems are directly linked to RSO 9: Environmental Sustainability, RSO 10: Infrastructure Delivery, and RSO 2: Compact Growth of the RSES.

However, infrastructure delivery in the water sector continues to lag behind development needs. The 2025 European Commission Country Report highlights deficiencies in wastewater treatment compliance, the slow pace of upgrades in urban centres, and the challenge of sequencing development with infrastructure availability. These issues delay housing delivery, particularly in designated growth centres and regeneration areas, and increase Ireland’s risk of environmental non-compliance under EU Directives such as the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive and the Water Framework Directive.

The Planning and Development Act 2024 and revised National Planning Framework 2025 now require greater alignment between land use planning and utility investment. As such, Regional Assemblies are well-positioned to play a coordinating role in ensuring that Irish Water’s Capital Investment Plan is matched with zoning, housing activation, and environmental objectives. The revised NDP must recognise the central role of this infrastructure in enabling the NPF and RSES to be delivered effectively. To achieve this, the Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise:

- Infrastructure to Enable Compact and Sustainable Growth

- Prioritise investment in wastewater and water supply schemes in Key Towns, Regional Growth Centres, and regeneration areas identified in the RSES.
- Accelerate delivery of upgrades to large urban wastewater treatment plants such as Ringsend and strategic regional schemes in Portlaoise, Longford, Drogheda, and Athlone.
- Fund “Tier 2” enabling works for infill and brownfield development where full upgrades are not yet possible.
- Strategic Alignment and Investment Sequencing
 - Establish a structured framework for aligning Irish Water’s Capital Investment Plan with spatial and housing investment plans.
 - Ensure that zoned and serviced land pipelines are actively monitored at regional level and incorporated into investment decisions.
- Compliance with Environmental and Climate Obligations
 - Fund upgrades to achieve full compliance with the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, particularly in settlements currently discharging untreated or inadequately treated effluent.
 - Ensure that all infrastructure investments are assessed for alignment with the Water Framework Directive, Floods Directive, and the Nature Restoration Law.
 - Support catchment-based planning and integrated water management approaches in coordination with the EPA and LAWPRO.
- Nature-Based Solutions and Climate Resilience
 - Expand investment in sustainable urban drainage systems (SuDS), rainwater harvesting, constructed wetlands, and other nature-based solutions in new and retrofitted developments.
 - Fund adaptation measures to protect infrastructure from extreme weather, sea level rise, and drought.
 - Integrate green and blue infrastructure into public realm projects and town centre renewal schemes.
- Rural Settlement
 - Provide targeted investment for small towns and villages where wastewater infrastructure is a barrier to rural housing and enterprise.
 - Develop a long-term strategy for water service provision in unsewered rural areas that supports environmental protection and rural development.

2.2.8 Agriculture and Rural Development

Agriculture, rural enterprise, and sustainable land use are vital components of the economic, social, and environmental fabric of the Eastern and Midland Region. The RSES, through RSO 6: Rural Areas and Natural Resources, promotes a vision of vibrant and resilient rural communities grounded in innovation, environmental sustainability, and economic diversification. While regional challenges vary, many rural areas across the region share common needs: Pressures on traditional land-based industries; lack of high-quality digital and transport infrastructure; skills shortages and demographic change (including ageing populations and youth outmigration), and; the need for alternative income streams in the face of climate and market transitions.

Through participation in the Interreg Europe ORIGINN project (which is ongoing), 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 - for which the Assembly is Managing Authority - 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 at community centre sites. To address these issues, the Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise:

- Enhance the competitiveness of the agricultural sector by addressing the urgent need for mitigation, as well as implementing real and effective adaptation mechanisms, to ensure the long-term sustainability of the sector.
- Support for rural innovation, enterprise, agri-food processing and the circular bioeconomy.
- Support for diversification and land-use innovation, including ongoing support for EU JTF initiatives in the Midlands; expansion of regenerative land use practices across all suitable areas (e.g. afforestation, rewetting, habitat restoration); and support for rural landowners and communities to access climate-related funding streams.
- Rural digital and transport infrastructure to include: broadband and digital service upgrades in rural areas; investment in Local Link services and shared rural mobility schemes; and installation of Electric Vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure at rural community hubs and local facilities.
- Support for skills and workforce development.

2.2.9 Enterprise and Innovation

Enterprise and innovation are central to delivering the objectives of the RSES, particularly under RSO 5: A Strong Economy Supported by Enterprise and Innovation. The RSES outlines a spatially balanced and resilient economic model built on place-based innovation, clustering, and support for indigenous enterprise across urban and rural areas.

The region is home to Ireland's capital and major international clusters, but also to underdeveloped areas with untapped economic potential. The 2025 European Commission Country Report highlights key challenges facing the Irish enterprise ecosystem, including productivity gaps between multinational and domestic firms, low uptake of digital and green innovations by SMEs, regional economic concentration, particularly in Dublin, and the need to strengthen growth in second-tier cities and regional centres.

These challenges reinforce the RSES goal of fostering diverse, competitive and inclusive enterprise ecosystems—especially outside the metropolitan core. The Dublin Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) identifies strategic employment locations for cluster development and innovation zones.

These areas benefit from public transport access and are well-positioned for high-density employment, co-location with housing, and smart infrastructure investment.

Beyond the MASP area, Regional Growth Centres such as Athlone, Dundalk and Drogheda, as well as the Key Towns of Navan, Naas, Mullingar, Tullamore, Longford, Portlaoise, Carlow/Graigucullen, Maynooth, Swords, and Wicklow, provide critical nodes for spatially balanced economic growth. These towns and cities support smart specialisation, SME development, and the localisation of research and skills ecosystems.

The Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor (DBEC) is a key economic region for both Northern Ireland, Ireland and the EMRA region, extending between the two largest cities on the island - Dublin and Belfast. The partnership behind the collaboration involves eight councils, north and south and two universities. DBEC is a gateway for Northern Irish, UK, Irish, EU, and international markets, and a strategic location for cross-border trade, serving as an economic driver for the region. It boasts an excellent rail and road network, six seaports, two airports, and high-quality digital connectivity. To become a leading economic corridor in Europe and achieve sustainable growth, dedicated funding is required to support the necessary infrastructure and collaborative research and development.

The revised National Planning Framework 2025 and the Planning and Development Act 2024 strengthen the role of Regional Assemblies in coordinating the spatial aspects of enterprise and innovation delivery. EMRA sits on the steering committees of the Regional Enterprise Plans (REPs), helping ensure alignment between enterprise strategy, land use, infrastructure, and smart specialisation priorities. To support regional enterprise objectives, the Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise:

- Enterprise Infrastructure in the MASP and Beyond
 - Fund innovation districts and enterprise hubs in MASP-designated locations.
 - Support economic infrastructure in Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns, particularly where zoned employment lands are underserved.
 - Provide targeted investment in enabling infrastructure (transport, broadband, energy) to unlock enterprise potential in lagging sub-regions.
- Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor (DBEC)
 - Dedicated funding for the delivery of the Corridor and supporting infrastructure.
 - Cross-border funding for policy partnerships and their implementation (particularly in the areas of enterprise development, research and development and spatial planning).
- Clustering and Sectoral Specialisation
 - Strengthen supports for sectoral clusters (e.g. clean tech, digital, life sciences, agri-tech, and creative industries).
 - Integrate funding and planning for smart specialisation through collaboration between Technological Universities (TUs), industry, and local authorities.
 - Expand facilities for applied research, prototyping, and early-stage manufacturing in designated growth areas.
- SME and Indigenous Enterprise Growth
 - Expand capital and capacity supports for SMEs in rural areas and smaller urban centres.

- Fund Local Enterprise Offices, digital innovation hubs, and rural enterprise centres as regional enterprise enablers.
- Support SME access to export markets, digital transformation, and the green economy in line with the challenges identified in the 2025 Country Report.
- Digital and Smart Economy Infrastructure
 - Deliver high-speed broadband to all designated enterprise locations.
 - Invest in smart city/region platforms, digital testing zones, and innovation ecosystems integrated with public transport and housing.
 - Support cybersecurity, cloud services, and digital entrepreneurship as part of a future-proofed economic strategy.
- Inclusive and Place-Based Economic Models
 - Support social enterprise, regenerative tourism, and circular economy initiatives—particularly in rural areas.
 - Integrate enterprise infrastructure with compact growth, housing, education and mobility to maximise community benefit.
 - Ensure that economic development is inclusive, environmentally sustainable, and spatially balanced.

2.2.10 Climate Action

Climate action is a cross-cutting priority embedded throughout the RSES, with RSO 9: Support the Transition to Low Carbon and Climate Resilient Society framing a region-wide commitment to emissions reduction, resilience, and sustainability. Infrastructure investment, spatial planning, and economic development must all align with national and EU climate commitments, including the National Climate Objective under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act; Ireland’s carbon budgets and sectoral ceilings; EU Fit for 55 and Green Deal targets, and; compliance with legally binding Directives (e.g. Energy Efficiency, Renewable Energy, Alternative Fuels Infrastructure).

The 2025 Country Report notes that while Ireland has adopted strong climate targets, implementation remains uneven—especially in sectors like transport, the built environment, and agriculture. The Assembly recognises these findings and emphasises the need for integrated infrastructure planning that supports carbon reduction, climate adaptation, and the mainstreaming of nature-based solutions.

As a regional body, EMRA plays a key role in coordinating climate policy implementation at the territorial level. Without a capital or implementation budget, the RSES provides a spatial framework for aligning climate policy with land use, settlement planning, and investment prioritisation. In this context, the Assembly considers that the NDP must act as a delivery mechanism for climate action across all sectors. To achieve this, the Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise:

- Climate-Aligned Infrastructure Delivery.
- Active and Public Transport-Oriented Development.
- Biodiversity, Nature-Based and Climate Resilient Solutions.
- Retrofit, Energy and Demand Reduction.

2.2.11 Broadband and Digital Connectivity

Digital connectivity is an important enabler of regional development, enterprise growth, public service access, and social inclusion. In the RSES, digital infrastructure supports several Regional Strategic Outcomes, including: RSO 5: A Strong Economy Supported by Enterprise and Innovation; RSO 6: Rural Areas and Natural Resources, and; RSO 10: Enhanced Connectivity and Infrastructure.

The 2025 Country Report highlights digital access gaps and their impact on regional competitiveness, education, and access to healthcare. In rural areas of counties such as Laois, Longford, Meath, Offaly, and Wicklow, connectivity constraints continue to limit local economic development, enterprise potential, and remote working opportunities.

To achieve truly inclusive digital development, the Assembly considers that the NDP must go beyond fibre rollout alone. It should support smart infrastructure ecosystems, enable enterprise digitalisation, and ensure universal service access across all parts of the region—including disadvantaged urban areas, dispersed rural settlements, and key tourism destinations. To address these issues, the NDP should prioritise:

- Accelerated completion of the National Broadband Plan with fibre deployment coordinated with public infrastructure projects (e.g. roads, housing, energy, water) to minimise cost and delay.
- Digital Infrastructure for Economic Development.
- Inclusive Access and Social Cohesion.

2.2.12 Culture and Placemaking

Culture is a vital dimension of sustainable regional development. It contributes to quality of life, place identity, community cohesion, and the attractiveness of towns and cities as places to live, work and invest. The RSES recognises this through: RSO 4: Healthy Communities, which supports cultural inclusion and access to services, and RSO 7: Quality of Life, which promotes vibrant and attractive places that reflect the diversity of their communities.

Culture is also central to the EMRA region’s tourism offer, local enterprise ecosystem, and public realm strategies. It is a key driver of urban regeneration, town centre renewal, and social innovation, especially in areas undergoing transition. In rural areas, cultural infrastructure and creative activity sustain community vitality and support visitor-based economies.

Creative and cultural initiatives play a key role in reimagining underutilised spaces, empowering young people, and anchoring community development. They also help to embed heritage and identity in the transition to more compact and climate-resilient forms of development.

The Assembly considers that the revised NDP should recognise the enabling role of culture in achieving broader social, economic and environmental goals, and fund it accordingly as a key part of placemaking and spatial policy implementation. To achieve this, the Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise:

- Cultural Infrastructure and Creative Hubs
- Creative Placemaking and Urban Regeneration
- Cultural Participation and Inclusion

- Creative Industries, Strategic Cultural Planning and Capacity Building

2.3 Infrastructure Delivery: Constraints and Trade-Offs

Delivering infrastructure at scale across housing, transport, education, energy, enterprise, and public services is essential to achieving the objectives of Project Ireland 2040, the RSES, and Ireland’s Climate Action Plan. However, significant trade-offs and constraints remain. These span planning, environmental, spatial, financial, labour and governance domains, and are particularly pronounced in the Eastern and Midland Region as a rapidly growing region.

The 2025 European Commission Country Report for Ireland reinforces this context, highlighting systemic delivery delays, regional infrastructure imbalances, and environmental compliance risks. These issues are increasingly interdependent, and the Assembly considers that they must be addressed holistically in the revised NDP.

Delivering infrastructure at scale requires managing complexity, balancing long-term goals with short-term pressures, and aligning investment with spatial and environmental policy. The Assembly considers that the revised NDP should explicitly acknowledge these trade-offs and provide mechanisms—financial, institutional, and regulatory—to manage them strategically.

2.3.1 Institutional and Spatial Coordination Capacity

There is limited cross-sectoral coordination in project planning and sequencing, especially at regional and sub-regional levels. The mandates of Regional Assemblies, local authorities, and delivery agencies are evolving, but not yet fully aligned or adequately resourced.

The Assembly considers that Regional Assemblies should be appropriately resourced to fulfil new statutory functions under the Planning and Development Act 2024, including setting indicative renewable energy targets and coordinating regional infrastructure delivery. Furthermore, the Regional Development Monitor (RDM) should be used as a live evidence base to support investment prioritisation and delivery tracking across sectors and geographies.

2.3.2 Environmental Compliance and Climate-Linked Constraints

Infrastructure delivery must now align with Ireland’s carbon budgets, Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act, the EU Water Framework Directive, the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, and the Nature Restoration Law. Balancing development with biodiversity, emissions and water quality targets is also increasingly complex.

The Assembly considers that climate and environmental screening should be embedded into all major infrastructure projects, using carbon impact, water resource constraints and nature restoration as criteria for project prioritisation. The Assembly further considers that nature-based solutions and sustainable urban drainage systems (SuDS) should be mainstreamed in housing and public realm projects and that the NDP should fund low-carbon, spatially efficient infrastructure as a matter of priority (e.g. public transport, compact housing, retrofit, district energy) to meet obligations and avoid EU compliance costs (as flagged in the 2025 Country Report).

2.3.3 Rural Infrastructure and Agricultural Transition

Rural areas, including those in the EU Just Transition Territory, face longstanding underinvestment in roads, water, broadband, and enterprise infrastructure. These deficits hinder diversification of rural economies and the agri-food sector's transition to climate-smart production.

The Assembly considers that NDP investment in rural infrastructure should focus on sustainable agriculture, rural innovation, regenerative tourism, and the circular bioeconomy, in line with RSO 6 of the RSES and ensure coordination with the Territorial Just Transition Plan and projects funded under the EU Just Transition Fund (JTF) beyond the timeframe of the EU JTF. The Assembly considers that the NDP should support infrastructure-led rural renewal in Key Towns and their hinterlands, including EV charging, road upgrades, and wastewater treatment for villages.

2.3.4 Digital Infrastructure and Economic Disparity

Delays in digital infrastructure—particularly in rural and peri-urban areas—continue to limit access to education, enterprise support, and public services. According to the 2025 Country Report, Ireland's regional digital gap is among the highest in the EU. The Assembly considers that the delivery of the National Broadband Plan should be accelerated and that digital infrastructure investment should be integrated with enterprise zoning, innovation districts, and rural development programmes.

2.3.5 Labour Market and Skills Constraints

Shortages in planning, engineering, construction, energy, and ICT sectors undermine delivery timelines and risk inflation in capital costs. The Assembly acknowledges the Government's publication of the Ministerial Action Plan on Planning Resources (2024) as a welcome and timely intervention to address significant capacity deficits across the planning system. The inclusion of planners on the Critical Skills Occupations List is a positive signal of intent; however, meaningful and targeted action will be required to translate this into real system-wide capacity gains. The Assembly considers that the NDP should support fast-track recruitment and retention of critical skills (e.g. planners, quantity surveyors, electricians) with market-aligned salary offers and contracts and expand apprenticeships, modular training, and on-site learning tied to strategic NDP projects.

2.3.6 Governance of Public Realm, Culture, and Placemaking Infrastructure

Cultural, community and placemaking infrastructure is often under-prioritised or siloed from “hard” infrastructure investment, despite its role in supporting regeneration, wellbeing, and climate resilience. The Assembly considers that culture and placemaking infrastructure should be integrated into all urban regeneration, housing and public transport programmes and that the NDP should fund flexible, multi-use civic and cultural spaces in town centres, MASP Key Urban Centres, and Just Transition areas to support inclusion, wellbeing and local identity. In doing so, cultural indicators and access to public realm assets should be included as key metrics in infrastructure impact assessment.

2.3.7 Planning and Project Delivery Frameworks

Legal, regulatory and institutional bottlenecks in planning, procurement, and consents persist—particularly for energy, housing and transport projects. The Assembly supports the simplification and streamlining of planning and procurement processes through implementation of the Planning and Development Act 2024 and planning resource reforms and supports the establishment of clear regional sequencing for infrastructure based on population and housing delivery targets, grid

readiness, and RSES alignment. With the Regional Development Monitor (RDM) as a good practice example, the NDP should ensure transparency and data-sharing between delivery bodies and regional structures. The Assembly further supports, through NDP implementation reform, the review of environmental assessment and planning legislation at EU and national level, to simplify procedures for projects of public importance while maintaining legal robustness, environmental integrity and protecting democratic oversight.

2.4 Cross-Cutting Sustainability Priorities for Infrastructure Investment

The NDP consultation paper appropriately identifies a number of “factors that contribute to the increased needs for strategic infrastructure.” However, the infrastructural needs arising from the urgent energy transition, particularly in relation to grid upgrades, renewable integration, and electrification of transport and heating;

- The infrastructure required for climate change adaptation, including coastal defence, flood resilience, and resilient urban water and green infrastructure systems.
- The infrastructure and environmental management required to meet biodiversity, water quality, and ecosystem restoration objectives, especially under the Water Framework Directive, Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, Birds and Habitats Directives, and the EU Nature Restoration Law.

An integrated approach to these requirements will help ensure that infrastructure delivery remains aligned with Ireland’s national and international commitments on climate and biodiversity, including the National Climate Objective and compliance with Carbon Budgets.

The 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan calls for a transformative, whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to biodiversity. Key priorities include scaling up conservation and restoration efforts, expanding protected areas (including marine), supporting community and cross-sector engagement, and embedding biodiversity’s value across policy, culture, and the economy. Investment in biodiversity data, monitoring, and natural capital accounting is essential, as is strengthening Ireland’s role in international biodiversity commitments. These actions must be mainstreamed and resourced through the NDP to ensure long-term environmental and societal resilience.

The Planning and Development Act 2024 provides strong legislative backing for integrating the National Biodiversity Action Plan across all levels of spatial planning. It mandates that the National Planning Framework and National Planning Statements incorporate biodiversity objectives (Sections 21 and 26), including alignment with the EU Biodiversity Strategy. Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies must explicitly provide for biodiversity protection and integration (Section 29), while local Development Plans are required to include strategies and objectives for the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity, particularly ecologically significant features (Section 50). These provisions create a clear statutory basis to embed the transformative actions of the NBAP into Ireland’s planning system and should be fully resourced and implemented through the NDP.

Furthermore, while the consultation document highlights key constraints such as consent processes, labour market availability, and the institutional capacity of private construction actors, the Assembly considers that it must also explicitly address:

- Environmental and resource limits, particularly those defined by the concept of planetary boundaries and sustainable material consumption.
- Enhancing the institutional capacity of the public sector, beyond planning consents alone, to manage and coordinate large-scale infrastructure portfolios.
- Support implementation of the Dublin Metropolitan Area Spatial Plan (MASP), recognising the increasing complexity of inter-institutional governance, especially in metropolitan and cross-boundary settings and focusing on the necessary legislative supports and resourcing to deliver the MASPs within each Regional Assembly.

2.5 Guiding Principles for Infrastructure Prioritisation

The Assembly recommends that the revised NDP adopt an integrated framework rooted in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which we pursue through our own RSES and regional monitoring. This involves ensuring that infrastructure contributes to sustainable prosperity by meeting people's social and economic needs while staying within ecological and resource boundaries.

To that end, the Assembly proposes that four principles guide infrastructure prioritisation under the revised NDP:

1. **Support for the Metropolitan Area Strategic Plans (MASPs):**
Coordinated investment in transport, housing, utilities and climate resilience is essential to realise the role of metropolitan areas in national and regional growth strategies. Without sufficient infrastructure, the ambitions of the NPF and RSESs will not be fulfilled.
2. **Align Infrastructure Capital Investment Strategies with the RSES Settlement Strategy**
Coordination between the delivery of strategic infrastructure and the settlement strategy and hierarchy set out in the RSES is critical to achieving compact and sustainable settlements within the region, as set out for Regional Growth Centres, Key Towns, Self-Sustaining Growth Towns, Self-Sustaining Towns and rural towns and villages.
3. **Application of Public Transport-Oriented Development (PTOD):**
The entire NDP should reinforce a pattern of compact, mixed-use urban development that maximises the role of public transport networks and minimises reliance on private car travel. This is essential for achieving carbon neutrality, accessibility, and economic efficiency.
4. **Mainstreaming of Nature-Based Solutions (NBS):**
The revised NDP must embrace green infrastructure and ecological design across all sectors—especially in flood management, urban cooling, water purification, and public health—to reduce costs, enhance resilience and restore ecosystem function.

The Assembly considers that a targeted evaluation should be conducted to ensure that limited capital resources are targeted in line with the spatial planning framework set out in the revised NPF, RSES and national climate targets. A similar approach was applied to road projects in Wales and designed to ensure that limited capital resources are directed toward projects that demonstrably support compact growth, address critical regional connectivity deficits, reduce transport emissions, and

improve road safety – See Case Study below which illustrates the need for such a review to also consider equity and legacy underinvestment as part of balanced regional development.

Case Study: Strategic Investment Needs in West Wicklow – The N81 Corridor

The Eastern and Midland Region includes areas of intense urban growth as well as rural districts that have experienced persistent underinvestment in critical infrastructure. The Baltinglass Municipal District in West Wicklow, located between the M11/N11 and N7 corridors, exemplifies the spatial and infrastructural imbalances that persist within the region. Despite its proximity to Dublin and its importance to regional accessibility, the area remains poorly served by both public transport and road infrastructure, limiting access to employment, housing development, and economic opportunity.

The N81 – A Forgotten National Route

The N81 corridor, running from Tallaght in Dublin through Blessington and onward to Tullow in Carlow, functions as the principal transport artery for West Wicklow and parts of County Kildare and Carlow. It is the only national primary route serving the capital that has not undergone significant upgrades in over 80 years. The road carries significant volumes of commuter, freight, and local traffic, yet suffers from poor alignment, narrow cross-sections, and limited capacity. These deficiencies not only restrict economic growth and housing development but also present a serious road safety hazard, with a long-documented history of fatal and serious accidents.

A preferred route for an N81 upgrade from Tallaght to Hollywood was previously identified, with route protection in place. However, progress has stalled, and land remains frozen under a project that has now been deferred, thereby undermining investment confidence and development potential in the area.

The Assembly notes the objectives in the Greater Dublin Area Transport Strategy 2022-2042 relating to the N81:

- It designates the N81 as a Regional Core Bus Corridor, with an objective “to continue to provide enhanced levels of bus priority on the Regional Core Bus Corridors, in particular addressing sections where bus delays are caused, or will be caused in the future, by traffic congestion” and notes a lack of investment to date in relation to this objective.
- Included within the list of National Roads Projects in the Strategy is “Safety, alignment and bus priority enhancements to the N81.”

However, the necessary funding has not been allocated to pursue these objectives.

Public Transport and Modal Deficits

West Wicklow is also underserved by public transport. Blessington and Ballymore Eustace have limited Dublin Bus service, while Bus Éireann connections south of Blessington are sporadic and unreliable. The area has no rail service with public transport options available today being inferior to those that existed in the 1940s and 1950s, when a rail line ran through Dunlavin and Baltinglass. This absence of viable alternatives leads to near-total car dependency, increases household

transport costs, and restricts access to employment and services—particularly for non-drivers and older residents.

Unfortunately, the Bus Connects network redesign plan is for an hourly service on the N81, effectively the same as the current service. Such a low frequency service, while vital for those without car access, will not achieve modal shift in line with national and regional objectives, which undoubtedly contributes to the congestion on the route. There is an inadequate Dublin Bus Service (the 65) servicing the town of Blessington and Ballymore Eustace (Co. Kildare) and a sporadic Bus Eireann Service (132) servicing South of Blessington, i.e. Hollywood, Donard, Dunlavin, Baltinglass, Rathville and Tullow (Co. Carlow). In line with the objectives of the GDA Transport Strategy 2022-2042 and approved TII investment, bus priority enhancements to the N81, as a minimum, should extend to Hollywood Cross, creating an enhanced service to the people of west Wicklow.

Infrastructure as a Prerequisite for Development

There is broad consensus locally and regionally that economic, residential and social development in West Wicklow cannot progress without a step change in infrastructure delivery. The area has strong potential for sustainable growth, but this potential is constrained by infrastructure that is not fit for purpose and does not support the development of compact, resilient communities. Investment in the N81 is essential to unlocking this potential and ensuring that current policy policies do not inadvertently reinforce existing disparities.

Climate and Spatial Considerations

The need for investment in the N81 must be viewed not as an exception to climate objectives, but as an opportunity to apply climate-aligned design standards, safety enhancements, and multimodal access in a regional equity context. The Assembly supports a structured review of all NDP-listed road projects but emphasises that such a review must not be reductive or solely emissions-based. Instead, it must consider legacy underinvestment, road safety, spatial equity, and modal integration. In this context, the N81 should be recognised as a priority for sustainable regional connectivity, rather than being overlooked due to its rural character. Investment in the N81 presents a critical opportunity to address legacy underinvestment and deliver sustainable regional connectivity, while advancing national climate and transport objectives through safety-led realignment, road improvement, multimodal integration, and environmental protection.

The revised N81 route should address serious safety deficiencies in ways that would increase congestion or exacerbate downstream bottlenecks at Tallaght. Realignment and upgrades must prioritise high-quality, segregated cycling infrastructure to support both daily active travel and leisure use, given the road's importance to routes such as the Wicklow Way and historic Tour de France segments. Provision for pedestrian underpasses should be strategically located at Greenway access points to ensure continuous, safe connectivity for walkers.

Futureproofing the corridor to accommodate population growth will require critical utility infrastructure improvements, including the relocation of the foul water line away from Golden Falls and the Ballymore Eustace Water Treatment Plant, which supplies more than 50% of the Greater Dublin Area's drinking water.

Environmental sustainability must be a central component of all interventions with a view to minimising ecological disruption and protecting visual amenity. In tandem, robust pollution control

systems should be installed at all new and existing drainage outfalls to safeguard nearby water bodies.

Collectively, these measures would position the N81 as a model for safety-first climate-resilient, regional infrastructure—integrating sustainable regional connectivity, public transport, active travel and environmental stewardship.

2.6 Governance, Communication and Public Trust in NDP Delivery

The National Development Plan (NDP) is a critical pillar of national policy. It underpins delivery of the National Planning Framework (NPF), informs private and public sector investment decisions, and shapes the physical, economic and environmental future of the country. However, the scale of ambition across sectors—from housing and transport to energy and digital infrastructure—has at times outpaced public confidence in the system’s ability to deliver.

The 2025 European Commission Country Report highlights “capacity bottlenecks” in planning and delivery, while surveys and regional feedback point to public confusion about what the NDP means in practice and how it connects to real-world outcomes in people’s communities.

To ensure the NDP remains credible, effective and democratically supported, Government must renew its focus on clear governance, accessible communication, and sustained public trust. This includes greater visibility of how investment decisions are made, how delivery is sequenced, and how local and regional stakeholders are empowered in the process. Furthermore, the credibility of the NDP depends not just on delivery, but on the governance systems and public trust mechanisms that underpin it. As detailed below, the Assembly considers that a more visible, regionally attuned, and participatory approach to NDP communication and implementation will strengthen both public confidence in the NDP and its democratic legitimacy.

2.6.1 Move from Abstract to Place-Based Communication

National-level reports and mapping tools (such as the Project Ireland 2040 Tracker) are valuable for policymakers and sectoral professionals but can be inaccessible or abstract for the wider public. For many communities, the visibility of delivery is what builds trust. The Assembly recommends the following:

- That regional and county-level dashboards are developed, maintained and promoted, showing what NDP-funded projects are underway, in planning, or complete.
- That accessible language, infographics, short-form messaging and videos are used to communicate key milestones—not just policy intentions.
- That real case studies (e.g. N81 upgrade needs in Wicklow, or successful rural enterprise projects) are embedded to illustrate regional value.

2.6.2 Strengthen the Role of Regional Structures in NDP Governance

The Planning and Development Act 2024 and the revised NPF 2025 acknowledge the Regional Assemblies as key actors in coordinating infrastructure with spatial development. However, their role in NDP implementation and communication is not yet fully formalised. The Assembly considers that formal mechanisms for Regional Assemblies to feed into NDP review cycles, target-setting, and project

sequencing should be established. Further to this, the Assembly would welcome the use of the Regional Development Monitor to inform public reporting and identify delivery gaps or regional disparities.

2.6.3 Align Strategic Communication with Spatial Justice

Public trust in infrastructure is not built solely through announcements. It relies on the visibility of fairness in investment decisions, especially in areas that have experienced legacy underinvestment. Examples such as the Wicklow N81 corridor, where no major upgrade has occurred in 80+ years, or slow progress in rural broadband rollout, illustrate the risk of perceived regional neglect. The Assembly considers that the NDP communication strategy should highlight how spatial equity and balanced development are being prioritised. In so doing, communication on NDP implementation should be transparent about how and why certain projects are advancing while others are deferred, especially where trade-offs are involved. NDP communications should also demonstrate how legacy deficits are being addressed—not just where new investment is being allocated.

2.6.4 Modernise Communication Channels and Build Two-Way Dialogue

Public communication in relation to infrastructure is often one-directional. Communities, businesses and civil society want to see progress, but also be part of the decision-making process. The Assembly considers that digital channels, mobile engagement units and participatory platforms could be used to invite public feedback on major projects and infrastructure priorities. Furthermore, the Assembly considers that the NDP could be better communicated through enhanced visibility, utilising channels such as in-situ signage, progress counters, school and business engagement, and physical exhibitions in community halls or libraries.

2.6.5 Increase Transparency

The public is increasingly aware that infrastructure is complex and that climate, environmental, and planning systems involve trade-offs. What erodes trust is not delay, but the perception of opacity, inconsistency, or inaction. The Assembly considers that bottlenecks in planning, funding, skills, consents and coordination are reported on annually, along with progress. This can also be used as a tool for institutional learning and continuous improvement, not just for public relations, and demonstrates how lessons from case studies (e.g., delays in delivering broadband or the absence of wastewater infrastructure in small towns) are shaping new delivery models.

3.0 Recommendations

The following are recommendations by the Regional Assembly that should be taken into consideration in the review of the National Development Plan:

Ensuring Spatial Alignment

1. a) Infrastructure delivery provided for under the revised NDP should be closely aligned with the settlement hierarchy set out in the RSES to ensure that all public capital investment through to 2035 is directed most effectively to achieve the ambitious objective of Project Ireland 2040.

Intra-Regional Disparities in the Eastern and Midland Region

2. The Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise the following in under-performing areas to address intra-regional disparities in the Eastern and Midland Region:
 - a) Capital investment in underperforming areas, aligned with the RSES settlement hierarchy and local development needs. For example, in the following Strategic Planning Areas (SPA) the following areas should be focused on:

Midlands SPA

- Funding for enabling infrastructure to support the growth of new employment sectors, including clean energy, green construction, and the circular economy and innovation (including the circular bioeconomy); and continued support for manufacturing (in medical devices, pharma/bio, food and engineered products).
- Investment in public and shared mobility solutions to reduce car dependency and improve access to education, health and employment.
- Enhanced retrofitting programmes and district energy systems to address fuel poverty and decarbonisation.
- Support for upskilling, re-skilling and workforce development initiatives tailored to emerging sectors.
- The long-term integration of EU JTF-funded measures into national and regional investment frameworks.

Eastern SPA

- Investment in key enabling infrastructure for housing delivery, particularly in water services and electrical infrastructure, as well as retrofitting existing housing supply.
- Targeted investment in boosting the labour market.
- Enhanced natural capital funding to create more green spaces to elevate the region's overall well-being further
- Further investment in the digital sector and achieving a digital transition.
- Expedite the delivery of the Navan Rail line to deliver needed sustainable transport options and enable compact and sustainable growth.
- Investment in transport infrastructure, particularly the extension of rail through the DART+ programme and sustainable travel initiatives, as well as the establishment of a Metropolitan Transport Authority.
- Multi-annual fund for delivery of the Dublin Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP).
- Investment in health, public and acute hospital services and health clustering.
- Leveraging the national and international sustainable tourism offering of this region, investment in urban public realm initiatives to increase footfall through URDF and RRDF.

Dublin SPA

- Investment in social cohesion to support community building and inclusiveness.
- Investment in key enabling infrastructure for housing delivery is needed to correct the demand-supply imbalance.
- Increase in budget allocated to local authorities to deliver social and affordable housing.
- Targeted investment in environmental preservation and natural capital is required, along with increased provision of natural amenities.
- Targeted supports to attract talent into the labour market and increase employment through the Regional Enterprise Plans, including support for the emergent semiconductor hub.
- Continued support and investment in Regional Smart Specialisation (S3) Programme and delivery of regional actions.
- Multi-annual fund for delivery of the Dublin Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP), compact and sustainable growth.
- Establishment of a Metropolitan Transport Authority for the management of integrated land use and transportation and sustainable travel.

Housing

3. The Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise the following to address key challenges in delivering sufficient and affordable housing:
 - a) Infrastructure-Led Housing Activation
 - Fund the delivery of essential enabling infrastructure—such as water, wastewater, electricity, access roads, and drainage—in areas zoned for housing.
 - Support the Housing for All Land Activation Fund with a multi-annual, regionally targeted programme aligned to the RSES.
 - Prioritise infill and brownfield sites in the Dublin Metropolitan Area, Regional Growth Centres, and Key Towns.
 - b) Compact, Climate-Resilient Housing Development
 - Invest in housing that supports compact growth, active travel, and public transport-oriented development (TOD).
 - Support climate-proofed and energy-efficient housing aligned to carbon budgets and emissions ceilings.
 - Integrate nature-based solutions (SuDS, green corridors) and biodiversity design into new housing areas.
 - c) Affordability and Tenure Diversity
 - Scale delivery of affordable, cost-rental, and social housing across high-pressure housing markets in the region.
 - Support land acquisition and pre-development for Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) and public agencies.

- Promote diverse tenure mixes that reflect local demographics and support inclusive communities.
- d) Strategic Alignment and Data-Driven Planning
- Support the development and consistent application of Housing Need and Demand Assessments (HNDAs) across all local authorities.
 - Provide Regional Assemblies with access to real-time data on housing, land, and infrastructure to inform regional monitoring.
 - Align local housing delivery action plans with spatial and climate strategies at regional level.
- e) Planning and Delivery Capacity
- Fully implement the Ministerial Action Plan on Planning Resources, including the recruitment and retention of specialist planning staff across all tiers.
 - Establish integrated project teams across housing, infrastructure and planning agencies to accelerate delivery.
 - Provide Regional Assemblies with the analytical capacity and legal clarity to monitor and support the implementation of infrastructure-led housing.

Transport

4. The Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise the following to address key challenges in delivering efficient, equitable and sustainable mobility systems:
- a) Public Transport-Led Development
- Fully fund and expedite the delivery of critical regional infrastructure, including MetroLink Project, DART+ Programme, BusConnects, and LUAS extensions as part of the Dublin MASP, ensuring alignment with zoned housing and employment land.
 - Implement the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, including enhanced services to Athlone, Dundalk, and Portlaoise, and improved rail freight access to Dublin Port.
 - Prioritise TOD (Transport-Oriented Development) as a cross-departmental policy, including integrated housing, zoning, and station area planning.
- b) Delivery of the GDA Transport Strategy
- Accelerate progress on the full range of projects outlined under the National Transport Authority's Strategy for the GDA (2022–2042), including: Enhanced bus and rail interchanges; Active travel networks; road improvements in terms of bus priority, safety and alignment.
 - Ensure that Local Transport Plans, required under the RSES, are adequately resourced and implemented.
- c) Rural, Regional and Disadvantaged Area Access
- Expand and enhance the Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan, with consistent operating funding for Local Link services.
 - Address persistent infrastructure deficits in under-served areas, such as the Baltinglass Municipal District and wider West Wicklow (see Case Study at Section 2.5

regarding the N81); fund inclusive and accessible transport options to support people without access to a private car.

- d) Road Investment Consistent with Climate Policy
 - Targeted evaluation of strategic road projects to prioritise capital expenditure, consistent with national spatial policy that supports compact growth and addresses critical regional connectivity deficits, emphasising road safety, active travel and rural connectivity upgrades.
 - Targeted evaluation of strategic road projects to prioritise capital expenditure, consistent with national spatial policy that supports compact growth and addresses critical regional connectivity deficits, which includes a focus on active travel, rural connectivity upgrades and safety.
 - Consider a climate-based review of major road projects, in line with the model used in Wales, to ensure coherence with Ireland’s Carbon Budgets and the National Climate Objective (See section 2.5). Integrate climate risk assessments into road maintenance, investment and resilience planning.
- e) Active Travel Infrastructure and Urban Movement
 - Expand safe walking and cycling infrastructure (including footpaths) in towns and cities, with dedicated investment streams for local authorities.
 - Prioritise funding for mobility hubs, school streets, and safe routes to stations and town centres.
 - Ensure active travel networks are co-planned with housing, schools, and public realm upgrades.
- f) Freight, Ports and Resilience
 - Support the development of rail freight and port access improvements, including Dublin Port and a strategic review of Bremore Port’s future potential.
 - Invest in green freight corridors and intermodal freight terminals to decarbonise logistics.
 - Strengthen transport infrastructure resilience to flooding and extreme weather events.

Education

- 5. The Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise the following to address key challenges in delivering accessible, high-quality education infrastructure:
 - a) Strategic Education Infrastructure Planning
 - Provide capital funding for school development in designated Growth Centres, Key Towns, and regeneration areas, consistent with Core Strategies and Local Transport Plans.
 - Adopt a place-based investment model that sequences school delivery with housing and public transport infrastructure.
 - Ensure national school planning processes are responsive to real-time data on enrolment, housing completions, and migration trends.
 - b) Expansion and Renewal of School Capacity
 - Fund new school builds and extensions in fast-growing areas.
 - Support upgrading, energy retrofitting, and repurposing of older school buildings to ensure climate resilience and accessibility.

- Address the needs of small schools in rural areas to maintain community viability and equitable access.
- c) Integration of Early Years and Childcare Provision
 - Co-locate early years and childcare facilities with schools, transport hubs, and town centre renewal projects.
 - Ensure that investment in childcare aligns with the RSES objectives relating to public services and compact growth.
 - Prioritise delivery of childcare infrastructure in tandem with large-scale housing developments.
- d) Education for Climate, Inclusion, and Wellbeing
 - Fund learning environments that support wellbeing, inclusion, and flexible curriculum delivery, including nature-based learning, digital literacy, digital classrooms, life-long learning and initiatives such as the UNESCO Dublin Learning City partnership.
 - Ensure universal access to high-speed broadband and digital devices in all schools and educational institutions.
 - Prioritise safe and sustainable travel routes to school through integrated transport investment.
- e) Joined-up Governance and Spatial Coordination
 - Improve coordination between the Department of Education, local authorities, and Regional Assemblies in identifying school site needs.
 - Ensure transparency in the School Building Programme and incorporate regional monitoring into the decision-making process.
 - Support mapping and spatial forecasting tools to anticipate infrastructure demand in emerging residential zones.

Higher Education, Research and Innovation

6. The Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise the following to address key challenges in delivering on smart specialisation, innovation, and regional economic resilience:
 - a) Strengthening regional research & innovation (R&I) ecosystems in line with the RIV label.
 - b) Support sectoral clusters aligned to smart specialisation, including cleantech, advanced manufacturing, digital services, medtech, agri-food, and creative industries.
 - c) Development of innovation and incubation facilities.
 - d) Strategic investment in TU campuses and research equipment.
 - e) Provide targeted capital and programme funding for research-industry partnerships.

Energy

7. The Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise the following to address key challenges in supporting the transition to a low-carbon, secure and regionally balanced energy system:
 - a) Resourcing the Role of Regional Assemblies in Energy Planning

- Provide dedicated multi-annual funding for Regional Assemblies to undertake energy spatial planning functions under the revised NPF 2025 and Planning and Development Act 2024.
 - Support the development of technical capacity within the Regional Assemblies, including GIS analysis, spatial modelling, and stakeholder engagement expertise.
- b) Grid Capacity as a Critical Enabler
- Accelerate investment in grid reinforcement in identified growth settlements and employment locations constrained by connection capacity.
 - Prioritise electricity infrastructure that unlocks compact growth and renewable energy deployment in line with RSES and Core Strategies of City and County Development Plans.
 - Enable joint planning between grid upgrades and investment programmes in housing, enterprise, and public transport.
- c) Delivery of Regional Renewable Energy Targets
- Support the identification, zoning, and infrastructure planning for renewable energy opportunity areas through the NDP.
 - Fund enabling infrastructure and environmental assessments needed to support the deployment of new renewables aligned to regional and national targets.
 - Integrate spatial energy planning with biodiversity protection, landscape character and community benefit.

Health

8. The Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise the following to address key challenges in delivering effective and inclusive health infrastructure:
- a) Spatially Integrated Healthcare Infrastructure
- Ensure new health facilities—hospitals, primary care centres, community health networks—are aligned with the NPF and RSES Settlement Strategy and policy.
 - Prioritise locations in Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns where population growth is high and access gaps exist.
 - Apply transport-oriented development principles to major health infrastructure to maximise access and sustainability.
- b) Primary and Community Care Expansion
- c) Climate-Resilient and Sustainable Health Infrastructure
- d) Health Inequalities and Inclusive Access
- e) Integrated Planning and Delivery Structures

Water and Wastewater

9. The Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise the following to address key challenges in delivering resilient, climate-aligned, and spatially targeted water infrastructure:
- a) Infrastructure to Enable Compact and Sustainable Growth

- Prioritise investment in wastewater and water supply schemes in Key Towns, Regional Growth Centres, and regeneration areas identified in the RSES.
 - Accelerate delivery of upgrades to large urban wastewater treatment plants such as Ringsend and strategic regional schemes in Portlaoise, Longford, Drogheda, and Athlone.
 - Fund “Tier 2” enabling works for infill and brownfield development where full upgrades are not yet possible.
- b) Strategic Alignment and Investment Sequencing
- Establish a structured framework for aligning Irish Water’s Capital Investment Plan with spatial and housing investment plans.
 - Ensure that zoned and serviced land pipelines are actively monitored at regional level and incorporated into investment decisions.
- c) Compliance with Environmental and Climate Obligations
- Fund upgrades to achieve full compliance with the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, particularly in settlements currently discharging untreated or inadequately treated effluent.
 - Ensure that all infrastructure investments are assessed for alignment with the Water Framework Directive, Floods Directive, and the Nature Restoration Law.
 - Support catchment-based planning and integrated water management approaches in coordination with the EPA and LAWPRO.
- d) Nature-Based Solutions and Climate Resilience
- Expand investment in sustainable urban drainage systems (SuDS), rainwater harvesting, constructed wetlands, and other nature-based solutions in new and retrofitted developments.
 - Fund adaptation measures to protect infrastructure from extreme weather, sea level rise, and drought.
 - Integrate green and blue infrastructure into public realm projects and town centre renewal schemes.
- e) Rural Settlement
- Provide targeted investment for small towns and villages where wastewater infrastructure is a barrier to rural housing and enterprise.
 - Develop a long-term strategy for water service provision in unsewered rural areas that supports environmental protection and rural development.

Agriculture and Rural Development

10. The Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise the following to address key challenges to support vibrant and resilient rural communities grounded in innovation, environmental sustainability, and economic diversification:
- a) Enhance the competitiveness of the agriculture sector with an urgent need for mitigation, as well as real and effective adaptation mechanisms for the long-term sustainability of the agri-sector.
 - b) Support for rural innovation, enterprise, agri-food processing and the circular bioeconomy.

- c) Support for diversification and land-use innovation, including ongoing support for EU JTF initiatives in the Midlands; expansion of regenerative land use practices across all suitable areas (e.g. afforestation, rewetting, habitat restoration); and support for rural landowners and communities to access climate-related funding streams.
- d) Rural digital and transport infrastructure to include: broadband and digital service upgrades in rural areas; investment in Local Link services and shared rural mobility schemes; and installation of Electric Vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure at rural community hubs and local facilities.
- e) Support for skills and workforce development.

Enterprise and Innovation

11. The Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise the following to address key challenges to support enterprise and innovation:

- a) Enterprise Infrastructure in the MASP and beyond
 - Fund innovation districts and enterprise hubs in MASP-designated locations.
 - Support economic infrastructure in Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns, particularly where zoned employment lands are underserved.
 - Provide targeted investment in enabling infrastructure (transport, broadband, energy) to unlock enterprise potential in lagging sub-regions.
- b) Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor (DBEC)
 - Dedicated funding for the delivery of the Corridor and supporting infrastructure.
 - Cross-border funding for policy partnerships and their implementation (particularly in the areas of enterprise development, research and development and spatial planning).
- c) Clustering and Sectoral Specialisation
 - Strengthen supports for sectoral clusters (e.g. clean tech, digital, life sciences, agri-tech, and creative industries).
 - Integrate funding and planning for smart specialisation through collaboration between Technological Universities (TUs), industry, and local authorities.
 - Expand facilities for applied research, prototyping, and early-stage manufacturing in designated growth areas.
- d) SME and Indigenous Enterprise Growth
 - Expand capital and capacity supports for SMEs in rural areas and smaller urban centres.
 - Fund Local Enterprise Offices, digital innovation hubs, and rural enterprise centres as regional enterprise enablers.
 - Support SME access to export markets, digital transformation, and the green economy in line with the challenges identified in the 2025 Country Report.
- e) Digital and Smart Economy Infrastructure
 - Deliver high-speed broadband to all designated enterprise locations.
 - Invest in smart city/region platforms, digital testing zones, and innovation ecosystems that are integrated with public transportation and housing.

- Support cybersecurity, cloud services, and digital entrepreneurship as part of a future-proofed economic strategy.
- f) Inclusive and Place-Based Economic Models
 - Support social enterprise, regenerative tourism, and circular economy initiatives—particularly in rural areas.
 - Integrate enterprise infrastructure with compact growth, housing, education and mobility to maximise community benefit.
 - Ensure that economic development is inclusive, environmentally sustainable, and spatially balanced.

Climate Action

12. The Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise the following to address key challenges to support climate action across all sectors:

- a) Climate-Aligned Infrastructure Delivery.
- b) Active and Public Transport-Oriented Development.
- c) Biodiversity, Nature-Based and Climate Resilient Solutions.
- d) Retrofit, Energy and Demand Reduction.

Broadband and Digital Connectivity

13. The Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise the following to support digital connectivity, which is an important enabler of regional development, enterprise growth, public service access, and social inclusion:

- a) Accelerated completion of the National Broadband Plan with fibre deployment coordinated with public infrastructure projects (e.g. rail, energy, water, housing, roads) to minimise cost and delay.
- b) Digital Infrastructure for Economic Development.
- c) Inclusive Access and Social Cohesion.

Culture and Placemaking

14. The Assembly considers that the NDP should prioritise the following to support the enabling role of culture in achieving broader social, economic and environmental goals:

- a) Cultural Infrastructure and Creative Hubs
- b) Creative Placemaking and Urban Regeneration
- c) Cultural Participation and Inclusion
- d) Creative Industries, Strategic Cultural Planning and Capacity Building

Infrastructure Delivery: Constraints and Trade-Offs

15. To address constraints and trade-offs in infrastructure delivery, the Assembly considers that:

- a) The Infrastructure Capital Investment Programmes must align with the spatial and settlement hierarchy as set out in the NPF and RSES to ensure that the Dublin area can prosper, that the Mid-East counties can become more self-sustaining, and that the Midland counties can be supported through a just transition to a low-carbon and resilient region.
- b) Regional Assemblies should be appropriately resourced to fulfil new statutory functions under the Planning and Development Act 2024, including setting indicative renewable energy targets and coordinating regional infrastructure delivery.
- c) The Regional Development Monitor (RDM) should be used as a live evidence base to support investment prioritisation and delivery tracking across sectors and geographies.
- d) Climate and environmental screening should be embedded into all major infrastructure projects, using carbon impact, water resource constraints and nature restoration as criteria for project prioritisation.
- e) Biodiversity, nature-based solutions and sustainable urban drainage systems (SuDS) should be mainstreamed in housing and public realm projects, and that the NDP should prioritise funding for low-carbon, spatially efficient infrastructure such as public transport, compact housing, retrofitting, and district energy systems) to fulfil Ireland’s role in collective EU climate action, in line with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities. Failure to meet EU targets could result in non-compliance penalties costing Ireland billions—funds that would otherwise be invested in local communities but may instead be redirected to overseas mitigation efforts. In contrast, the long-term costs of inaction—ranging from increased flooding and extreme weather to disruptions in agriculture—are likely to far exceed the cost of early, effective intervention.
- f) NDP investment in rural infrastructure should focus on sustainable agriculture, rural innovation, regenerative tourism, and the circular bioeconomy, in line with RSO 6 of the RSES, and ensure coordination with the Territorial Just Transition Plan and projects funded under the EU Just Transition Fund (JTF) beyond the timeframe of the EU JTF.
- g) The NDP should support infrastructure-led rural renewal in Key Towns and their hinterlands, including EV charging, road upgrades, and wastewater treatment for villages.
- h) The delivery of the National Broadband Plan should be accelerated, and that digital infrastructure investment should be integrated with enterprise zoning, innovation districts, and rural development programmes.
- i) The NDP should support fast-track recruitment and retention of critical skills (e.g. planners, quantity surveyors, electricians) with market-aligned salary offers and contracts and expand apprenticeships, modular training, and on-site learning tied to strategic NDP projects.
- j) Culture and placemaking infrastructure should be integrated into all urban regeneration, housing and public transport programmes and that the NDP should fund flexible, multi-use civic and cultural spaces in town centres, MASP Key Urban Centres, and Just Transition areas to support inclusion, wellbeing and local identity.
- k) The NDP should ensure transparency and data-sharing between delivery bodies and regional structures.

Furthermore:

- l) The Assembly supports the simplification and streamlining of planning and procurement processes through implementation of the Planning and Development Act 2024 and planning

resource reforms and supports the establishment of clear regional sequencing for infrastructure based on population and housing delivery targets, grid readiness, and RSES alignment.

- m) The Assembly further supports, through NDP implementation reform, the review of environmental assessment and planning legislation at EU and national level, to simplify procedures for projects of public importance while maintaining legal robustness, environmental integrity and protecting democratic oversight.

Cross-Cutting Sustainability Priorities for Infrastructure Investment

16. The Assembly strongly recommends that the following additional dimensions be explicitly integrated into the development and prioritisation of the revised National Development Plan:

- a) The infrastructure required for climate change adaptation, including coastal defence, flood resilience, and resilient urban water and green infrastructure systems.
- b) The infrastructure and environmental management required to meet biodiversity, water quality, and ecosystem restoration objectives, especially under the Water Framework Directive, Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, Birds and Habitats Directives, and the EU Nature Restoration Law.

17. The Assembly considers that the revised National Development Plan must also explicitly address:

- a) Environmental and resource limits, particularly those defined by the concept of planetary boundaries and sustainable material consumption.
- b) Enhancing the institutional capacity of the public sector, beyond planning consents alone, to manage and coordinate large-scale infrastructure portfolios.
- c) Support implementation of the Dublin Metropolitan Area and other MASPs, recognising the increasing complexity of inter-institutional governance, especially in metropolitan and cross-boundary settings and focus on the necessary legislative supports and resourcing to deliver the MASPs within each Regional Assembly.

Guiding Principles for Infrastructure Prioritisation

18. a) The Assembly recommends that the revised NDP adopt an integrated framework rooted in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) based on the following guiding principles as detailed above:

- Support for the Metropolitan Area Strategic Plans (MASPs).
Coordinated investment in transport, housing, utilities and climate resilience is essential to realise the role of metropolitan areas in national and regional growth strategies. Without sufficient infrastructure, the ambitions of the NPF and RSESs will not be fulfilled.
- Align Infrastructure Capital Investment Strategies with the RSES Settlement Strategy.
Coordination between the delivery of strategic infrastructure with the settlement strategy and hierarchy set out in the RSES is critical to achieve the compact and sustainable settlements within the region, as set out for Regional Growth Centres, Key Towns, Self-Sustaining Growth Towns, Self-Sustaining Towns and rural towns and villages.
- Application of Public Transport-Oriented Development (PTOD).

The entire NDP should reinforce a pattern of compact, mixed-use urban development that maximises the role of public transport networks and minimises reliance on private car travel. This is essential for achieving carbon neutrality, accessibility, and economic efficiency.

- Mainstreaming of Nature-Based Solutions (NBS).

The revised NDP must embrace green infrastructure and ecological design across all sectors, especially in flood management, urban cooling, water purification, and public health to reduce costs, enhance resilience and restore ecosystem function.

b) The Assembly considers that a targeted evaluation should take place to ensure that limited capital resources are targeted in line with the spatial planning framework set out in the revised NPF, RSES and national climate targets.

Governance, Communication and Public Trust in NDP Delivery

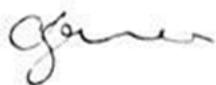
19. The Assembly considers that – as detailed above - the following actions can deliver a more visible, regionally attuned, and participatory approach to NDP communication and implementation and will strengthen both public confidence in the NDP and its democratic legitimacy.

- a) Move from Abstract to Place-Based Communication
- b) Strengthen the Role of Regional Structures in NDP Governance
- c) Align Strategic Communication with Spatial Justice
- d) Modernise Communication Channels and Build Two-Way Dialogue
- e) Increase Transparency

4.0 Conclusion

The Regional Assembly welcomes the consultation on the National Development Plan Review and trusts that the recommendations set out in Section 3.0 of this submission, along with the supporting observations made throughout, will be considered in the finalisation of the National Development Plan to 2035 and the environmental assessment thereof. It should be noted that officials from the Regional Assembly are available to discuss the matters raised above, and the Assembly welcomes further opportunities to engage in the review of the National Development Plan.

Regards,



Clare Bannon
A/Director
Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly
26th June 2025