

Our Rural Future 2026 – 2031: Public Consultation Document

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly welcomes the preparation by the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (DRCDG) of the Our Rural Future 2026-2031 - [Public Consultation Document](#), which aims to provide a framework for the development of rural Ireland over the next five years.

The submission set out hereunder contains recommendations on behalf of the Regional Assembly. This submission has been prepared by the executive and approved by the Elected Members of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly at its meeting of the 12th of December 2025.

1.0 Overall Context

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

The role and function of the Regional Assembly, including the scope of the RSES 2019-2031, was provided for in the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, which included support for and alignment with the economic policies and objectives of the Government. However, this legislation has been superseded by the Planning and Development Act 2024, as amended, which was signed into law on 17th October 2024. The provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2024, as amended, relevant to the Regional Assemblies commenced on 2nd October 2025 and various sections of the legislation will commence on a phased basis in the coming months. The Planning and Development Act 2024, as amended, expands the scope of the RSES and the functions of the Regional Assembly. The Regional Assembly is further mindful of its obligations, as a 'relevant body', as prescribed under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, as amended, to perform its functions in a manner consistent with the need to achieve Ireland's national climate objective.

1.1 Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES)

The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Region was made by the Elected Members of the Assembly in June 2019, and it is a strategic plan and investment framework to shape future growth throughout the Region. The overall vision of the Strategy is to create a sustainable and competitive Region that support opportunities and wellbeing of people and

places in the Region, from urban to rural, with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunities for all.

The vision of the RSES is supported by sixteen Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSOs), that are aligned with National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs) of the National Planning Framework (NPF) and framed around the three key principles of Healthy Placemaking, Climate Action and Economic Opportunity. Of relevance to the Our Rural Future public consultation are the following RSOs:

- RSO 1 – support ‘Sustainable Settlement Patterns’
- RSO 2 – support ‘Compact Growth and Urban Regeneration’
- RSO 3 – support ‘Rural Communities’, strengthening rural networks, economies and communities
- RSO 4 - support ‘Healthy Communities’ including active lifestyles and access to services
- RSO 5 – promote ‘Creative Places’ and heritage led regeneration, enhancing and protecting arts, culture and heritage assets
- RSO 6 - promote ‘Integrated Transport and Land Use’ including the best use of existing and planned transport infrastructure, sustainable and active travel modes
- RSO 7 – ‘Sustainable management of water, waste and other Environmental Resources’, greater resource efficiency and realise the benefits of a Circular Economy
- RSO 8 - seek to ‘Build Climate Resilience’ particularly from flooding risk, extreme weather events, coastal erosion and protection of property and critical infrastructure
- RSO 9 - support the ‘Transition to Low Carbon and Clean Energy’
- RSO 10 - seek to protect and enhance ecosystem services through Enhanced Green Infrastructure’
- RSO 11 - conserve and enhance ‘Biodiversity and Natural Heritage’ and protect the landscape
- RSO 12 - support a ‘Strong Economy Supported by Enterprise and Innovation’ for economic growth
- RSO 13 - ‘Improve Education Skills and Social Inclusion’ to attract employers and ensure opportunities for quality jobs including access to education/ jobs
- RSO 15 - support ‘Enhanced Strategic Connectivity’ and regional accessibility for economic development/ resilience, strengthen rural communities, the blue-green economy and tourism

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

The RSES presents a Spatial Strategy, devised and informed by a complementary Economic Strategy, which provides a framework for future growth, ensuring the delivery of effective regional development through the realisation of viable and vital places. This includes championing the capital city of Dublin as a smart, climate resilient and global city region; securing Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk as Regional Growth Centres, acting as regional economic drivers and supports for their wider catchment areas; and promoting a network of large economically active Key Towns (which include Swords, Maynooth, Bray, Navan, Naas, Wicklow, Longford, Mullingar, Tullamore, Portlaoise and Graiguecullen-Carlow) 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.

1.2 ORIGINN Project

The Regional Assembly is a partner in an Interreg Europe project which seeks to promote the economic and social transformation of rural areas through innovation, with a particular focus on the agri-food sector. The focus of the project has been on the Midland counties of Longford, Westmeath, Offaly, and Laois. EMRA is participating in ORIGINN with a view to informing the review of the RSES with learnings from the project including several good practices in innovation-driven rural development, from across Europe, under the themes of:

- Digitalisation (including STEAM education and remote work);
- Green Economy (including bioeconomy and green tourism);
- Social Innovation (including social enterprise and citizen engagement); and
- Soft Innovation (including creativity as a driver of innovation and clustering).

These themes are key drivers of economic development in rural areas. The project will produce effective policy interventions to address the key challenges in our rural communities of the retention of young people; people leaving the agri-food sector; adding value that stays in local communities; and maintaining rural Ireland's clean, green image.

2.0 Submission

Our Rural Future 2026–2031 will inform the Government's rural policy blueprint for the development of rural Ireland over the next five years, incorporating activities across all government departments to further economic, social, cultural and environmental development of rural areas. The Assembly welcomes the opportunity to contribute with its submission and acknowledges that the Department seeks to respond to emerging opportunities and challenges and set clear and practical actions backed by investment.

Section 4.8 of the RSES, Rural Places: Towns, Villages and the Countryside, addresses the challenges and opportunities for rural areas in the Eastern and Midland Region and sets Regional Policy

Objectives (RPOs). Chapter 5 of the NPF First Revision 2025 ‘Planning for Diverse Rural Places’ is also relevant in the context of this review and consultation process.

The consultation document sets out three sections under which comments are invited. As such, this submission is structured under these three sections with relevant objectives and policies of the RSES or associated documents highlighted and recommendations/ observations made where appropriate. The sections are as follows:

- Section 1 Progress so Far – Foundations for the Future
- Section 2 Our Rural Future – A New Phase
- Section 3 The Core Pillars:
 1. Thriving Rural Places
 2. A Strong and Diverse Rural Economy
 3. Resilient Rural Economies
 4. A Greener Rural Future

2.1 Section 1 Progress so far – Foundations for the Future

The consultation document outlines some of the main areas of progress upon which the new Our Rural Future framework can be built. It references the role out of the National Broadband Plan (NBP) and its transformational impact on digital connectivity, supporting remote and hybrid working resulting in the retention of people and talent, innovation and diversification of rural economies and reduction in isolation. The Assembly welcomes the progress made to date in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) which facilitates and supports rural places with their evolving economic and social needs, as it aligns with NSO 3 of the NPF 2025 which seeks to strengthen rural economies and communities, and RSO 3 of the RSES to support ‘Rural Communities’ and strengthen rural networks, economies and communities. Furthermore, RPOs 8.25 and 8.26 of the RSES support the continued roll out of the NBP. The next steps, however, require specific measures to address any gigabit blackspots; followed by full activation and uptake, including the development of SME digital literacy for Smart Communities. This supports ‘Economic Opportunity’ and ‘Healthy Placemaking’ which are key principles of the RSES.

The Regional Enterprise Plans (REPS) and their targeted supports/ new investment are also highlighted as being particularly important to the growth of Enterprise Ireland (EI) and IDA client companies in regional locations outside Dublin. REPS are supported by RPO 6.9 of the RSES, which includes a focus on delivering a high level of economic success throughout the Region by building on local strengths and regional innovation capacity, the development of a network of innovative co-working spaces in the Region to mitigate long commuting times, the promotion of remote working opportunities and life-style benefits; and targeted measures for the Midlands, Mid-East and Dublin Region. Opportunities to link innovation ecosystems in rural areas with innovation hubs in Dublin and other

cities must be supported to enable strong performance in rural areas and capitalise on the spillover potential of strong performing regions, through tailored strategies.

Complementing this progress, has been the evolution of the Technological Universities (TUs) including TU Shannon (a merger of Limerick and Athlone Institutes of Technology (IoT)) and the opportunities for education, research and development (R&D) linked with innovation and skills development in rural areas. Such progress is supported by RPOs 6.25-6.29 of the RSES. The RPOs support the following:

- a collaborative approach to addressing skills shortages and lifelong learning challenges in the Region;
- community and education providers to provide formal/ non-formal education to targeted disadvantaged groups where barriers have been identified to participation, to increase participation rates, support progression to further education and employment;
- collaboration to identify areas of research, development and innovation; and
- the development of sites where high-tech and high potential start-ups (HPSU) can thrive, in conjunction with IoTs (e.g. Dundalk IoT) and universities, to create collaborative and innovative growth.

Education and the fostering of skills and talent are considered key drivers in achieving resilient and inclusive sustainable economic growth within rural areas, as is outlined in Section 6.6 of the RSES.

The consultation document references the revitalisation of towns and villages via the Town Centre First initiative, associated policy and funding through the Town and Village Renewal Scheme and Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF). In addition, the Community Centre Investment Fund has been utilised in the delivery of community upgrades. Such measures align with NPO 25 of the NPF 2025 which seeks to reverse rural decline in small towns and villages through sustainable targeted measures that address vacant premises and deliver sustainable reuse and regeneration outcomes. RPO 6.6 of the RSES also supports the identification of locations within rural towns and villages to drive regeneration. This can be achieved through the delivery of serviced sites for co-working/ incubator space, etc. RPOs 6.12-6.14 of the RSES also promote the renewal of Town Centres, with an emphasis on place-making, renewal plans, improvements to the streetscape and targeted financial incentives to encourage greater uptake of mixed land use in the town centre.

With respect to rural areas which have experienced significant levels of population decline, the consultation document highlights the Community Recognition Fund for small infrastructural projects as building resilience within rural communities and targeted investment through the CLÁR programme and Training and Leadership Initiatives which align with the NPF 2025. NPO 24 supports the sustainable development of rural areas by encouraging growth and arresting decline in areas that have experienced low population growth or decline and sustaining vibrant rural communities including Gaeltacht regions.

Tourism is a key economic sector within the rural areas of the Region and the National Outdoor Recreation (OR) Strategy and associated Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS) is supporting the delivery of recreational infrastructure such as new trails, cycleways for both tourism, community development, active travel, health and quality of life, which is consistent with NPO 34 of the NPF 2025, RPOs 7.24-7.25 of the RSES, the National OR Strategy and supports Fáilte Ireland's regional tourism brands of the Hidden Heartlands and Ireland's Ancient East.

The Department refers to the expanded rural transport links through the Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan with over 150 new local bus routes nationwide since 2021, providing better connections between rural towns and villages, which are accessible to all, reducing isolation and improving access to employment. The roll out of these initiatives accords with RSO 15 of the RSES which highlights the importance of regional accessibility for economic development and resilience, strengthening rural communities and economies and supporting tourism; with RPO 8.13 also supporting the Local Link Rural Transport Programme throughout rural areas of the Region. Such measures contribute to NSOs 2, 3 and 6 of the NPF 2025 which are about delivering enhanced regional accessibility, strengthening rural economies and communities and supporting enterprise, innovation and skills. The new Our Rural Future should support the National Sustainable Mobility Policy 2022, support the preparation of a new Regional Sustainable Mobility Strategy Framework, roll out of the Bus Stop Enhancement Programme and pilot several Rural 'Mobility Hubs' that combine active travel infrastructure, electric vehicle (EV) charging, shared mobility services and local bus connectivity.

The Department's attention is drawn to the Smart and Sustainable Mobility Academy (SSMA) which is a repository of knowledge, showcasing case studies, project outcomes, and ongoing advancements across all local authorities in active travel and sustainable mobility. This repository is a key output of the Pathfinder 27 Project, the Smart and Sustainable Mobility Accelerator Programme, which is being delivered by the Assembly for the Eastern and Midland Region.

The consultation document discusses progress on climate and sustainability, with renewable energy (RE) projects as clean energy, peatland restoration supporting biodiversity, tourism and roll out of retrofitting schemes creating new jobs and opportunities. Climate Action is a key principle of the RSES, interwoven through the Strategy and supported by RSOs 6-11. The approaches outlined in Chapters 7 Environment and Climate, 8 Connectivity and 10 Quality of Life of the RSES will assist the Department in developing an integrated climate action and climate resilience and sustainability. Actions of the new Our Rural Future strategy will need to align with the Climate Action Plan (CAP) 2025 including 2030 targets (50% reduction in greenhouse gases) and a commitment to achieving climate neutrality no later than 2050.

Chapter 9 of the NPF 2025 identifies regional renewable electricity capacity allocations to be included in new Regional Renewable Energy Strategies (part of the review of the RSES). Such allocations are

intended to facilitate the accelerated roll-out and delivery of renewable electricity infrastructure for onshore wind and solar energy generation development and support the achievement of 2030 targets. In delivering these targets, there is a need to ensure that renewable energy deployment is guided by clear spatial coordination to minimise land-use conflict, avoid sensitive environments, and maintain community support. The Eastern and Midland Region must achieve 25% of the national share of onshore wind and 45% share of solar PV by 2030. Section 3.2 of the NPF 2025 references the publicly-owned peat extraction areas which will support greener energy and offshore renewable energy (RE) generation. The Assembly must also make provision for marine and coastal matters and coastal zone management, which will be relevant to rural coastal regions and the delivery of offshore RE projects.

Investment in sustainable agriculture, marine and forestry to safeguard natural resources, strengthening rural livelihoods, and supporting a just transition to a climate-neutral future is supported in the consultation document. In this regard, a key growth enabler for the Region identified in the RSES includes the diversification and growth of smart specialisation of local economies with a strong focus on clustering including sustainable farming and food production, tourism, marine, energy and renewables, bioeconomy and circular economy. There is also a focus on publicly-owned peatlands in the Midlands, to support a 'Just' transition and realise the benefits of green technologies. The ongoing restoration of peatlands in the Midland Region and support for the roll out of the EU's Just Transition Fund would be welcomed by the Assembly.

2.1.1 Emerging opportunities and challenges for rural Ireland that the new policy should address

Climate & Environmental Resilience & Sustainable Development - Ireland's obligations under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015-2021 are set out in the Climate Action Plan 2025 and this should be considered in Our Rural Future 2026-2031. The existing Our Rural Future sets out its contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and it is recommended that the next iteration also reflects the SDGs. Ireland's climate, biodiversity, and water protection objectives are now embedded in both domestic and EU law, requiring compliance in infrastructure planning and delivery under the Water Framework Directive, the Strategic Environmental Assessment and Habitats Directive, and the EU Nature Restoration Law. To ensure balanced outcomes, future rural policy should provide clearer guidance on integrating renewable deployment with environmental protection including water-quality management, biodiversity protection and nature restoration objectives. Our Rural Future should take account of these requirements.

Investment in Rural Ireland – Sustained and targeted investment in rural Ireland should underpin the new policy. The EU funding programme is expected to change post 2027 and this will inform future investment options.

Challenges & Opportunities - The NPF 2025 presents a ‘do-nothing’ scenario in the absence of cohesive strategic spatial and economic planning. This gives a clear indication as to where both challenges and thus opportunities lie. Of relevance to Our Rural Future are:

- Greater distances between where people live and where people work, notwithstanding changes in technology, as many businesses are increasingly drawn to create the employment opportunities of the future in close proximity in urban areas.
- An ongoing shift in population and jobs towards the east and to the counties around Dublin in particular.
- A degraded environment with the loss of farmland and habitat to predominantly greenfield development and increased risk of groundwater pollution.
- Further decline of rural areas and towns remote from large urban centres of population.
- Haphazard approaches to planning for infrastructure and climate action, reacting to trends rather than preparing for a low/no carbon future.
- Social disadvantage and inequality perpetuated by geographic location.

Key issues listed in the NPF 2025 include the likelihood of 23% of the national population being aged 65 and over in 2040, an emphasised declining and ageing population in rural areas, a need for 50,000 additional households per annum to 2040, shift to hybrid working models and demands for more highly skilled and educated workforce, lack of access to quality infrastructure and new technologies and urban generated pressures in some locations. Section 3.2 of the NPF 2025 emphasises that housing development should be infrastructure-led (including social and community), primarily based upon employment growth, accessibility to sustainable transport modes and quality of life, rather than unsustainable commuting patterns.

The Assembly directs the Department to the recent OECD 2025 publication [Reinforcing Rural Resilience](#) which sets out opportunities for rural areas. The report outlines how persistent rural challenges and climate change actions have presented unique economic opportunities. It identifies four STAR drivers of growth, to be focused on rural regions, as **S**pecific assets of rural places, **T**radeable specialisation, **A**ccess to urban markets and rural-urban linkages, and **R**esources (natural resources). A working example in the Midland Region is the use of former industrial peatlands for the green transition and RE generation, paludiculture ventures, innovative bio-based technologies and associated upskilling to present unique opportunities. However, this needs to be balanced with the conservation and restoration of peatlands to support ecosystem services, sequester carbon and RE generation. The publication emphasises that competitiveness must focus on fostering skills, enhancing innovation/ entrepreneurship and improving digital connectivity.

2.2 Section 2 Our Rural Future – A New Phase

Section 2 of the consultation document sets about defining what ‘rural’ means in the current era, not relying on a single definition. In this respect the consultation document seeks to include a clear

statement which sets out what the rural policy should focus on - respecting communities, economies and places.

The concept of 'rural Ireland' potentially limits the variety of identities and experiences in rural areas across the country. While the consultation document acknowledges that defining 'rural' is a challenge, the label 'rural Ireland' emphasises the shared characteristics of rural areas.

The elements included in the proposed definition are reflections of 'rural areas' (i.e. including geographical location outside cities and large towns, settlement pattern, access/ distance to services and community life, dispersed populations, different employment opportunities, many different rural areas and communities, experience of rural life and close interdependence between rural and urban communities) and Section 4.8 of the RSES recognises the diverse range of natural amenities and landscapes of rural parts of the Eastern and Midland Region, its many vibrant communities and differences between the many types of rural areas.

However, the policy could be strengthened by supporting the aspects of rural life that make areas distinct from one rural place to another. For example, the new Midlands Flavours campaign for promoting and supporting Midlands-based food and drinks companies incorporates many of the typical rural characteristics shared across Ireland – a clean, green image with producers that are small-scale, local, and family-run, embracing a traditional farm-to-fork ethos. This brand is nonetheless distinctly of the Midlands, and this unique geographic identity is key to its success. Branding allows local and regional areas to set themselves apart and emphasise their unique strengths across a range of sectors and specialisations, including tourism, food and drink production, and culture. Our Rural Future would be strengthened by reflecting the variety and differences across Ireland's rural areas rather than only emphasising the common elements.

A renewed vision and actions are proposed to respond to opportunities and challenges, and this is supported by the Assembly. The draft vision statement set out is:

"Our vision is for a thriving and inclusive rural Ireland. This is a place where people can live, learn and work in connected, sustainable and vibrant places, supported by strong local economies and resilient communities. It's a vision rooted in a deep respect for, and engagement with, our language, culture, and heritage, and where wellbeing is at the heart of rural life."

It is noted that whilst the RSES Key Principles of Healthy Placemaking, Climate Action and Economic Opportunity are not explicitly stated within the vision statement, the proposed vision does reflect the same aspirations. It is recommended that 'climate resilience', 'balanced and effective regional development', 'rural communities which thrive socially, economically, and environmentally' and local

economies 'linked with urban markets' and connected 'rural-urban places' are incorporated into the vision to align with the NPF and RSES.

With respect to a pathway toward the realisation of such a vision, the Department is again directed to the OECD (2025) Reinforcing Rural Resilience document. The document highlights emerging opportunities to strengthen rural resilience suggesting that "rural regions can leverage opportunities across renewable energy, digital innovation, and advanced manufacturing, ensuring that no community is left behind".

2.3 Section 3 Our Rural Future – The Core Pillars

The Department has outlined four core pillars around which the next phase of Our Rural Future is to be built. These are:

Pillar 1: Thriving Rural Places – *'Support rural towns, villages and communities to become more vibrant, well connected, and inclusive places, with quality infrastructure, housing and services that support economic and social development and a high quality of life'*.

Pillar 2: A Strong and Diverse Rural Economy – *'Foster a strong and diverse rural economy that provides employment, supports enterprise and innovation, and harnesses the unique strengths of rural Ireland across traditional and emerging sectors.'*

Pillar 3: Resilient Rural Communities – *'Build resilient rural communities that are inclusive, connected and empowered – with strong local organisations, safe and welcoming places, and opportunities for all to participate in community life, nurture traditions, and celebrate language, culture and heritage'*.

Pillar 4: A Greener Rural Future – *'Support rural communities to lead in climate adaptation and sustainability, ensuring a fair transition to a climate-neutral future while building resilience to climate impacts, protecting livelihoods, enhancing biodiversity and creating new opportunities for growth'*.

The Assembly generally supports the proposed pillars and the themes which have emerged from the consultation process. In addition, the Assembly supports the proposed delivery of the new framework through a dedicated Action Plan and targeted investment.

2.3.1 Additions to the proposed Pillars of Our Rural Future

Climate Resilience - As noted above, it is also suggested that Pillar Four (i.e. a greener rural future related to climate resilience) is reflected in the proposed vision.

Monitoring - The Assembly advises that monitoring of implementation/ continuing progress and changes in policy and actions is incorporated into the four Pillars. Such an addition would align with NPO 107 of the NPF 2025 which seeks to continue to ensure the alignment of the NPF and the NDP

through delivery of the NSOs; and NPO 108 which seeks to develop and implement a new programme of monitoring of the implementation of the NPF 2025, with a focus on measuring outcomes relative to the key strategic objectives of the NPF including more balanced and effective regional development, compact growth and infrastructure delivery, etc. In addition, it would align with Chapter 12 of the RSES on Monitoring and Implementation.

In this respect the Assembly wishes to draw attention to the [Regional Development Monitor](#) (RDM) which provides a series of mapping and visualisation tools (continually updated) which are intended to be of assistance to policy and decision makers in gaining a greater insight into social, economic and environmental trends to aid better monitoring.

2.3.2 Pillar 1: Thriving Rural Places

The Department highlights positive impacts from implementing the first Our Rural Future and challenges that remain.

Positives include better broadband access, expanded rural transport options, upgraded community facilities and positive impacts on quality of life from remote/hybrid working and new economic and educational opportunities enabled by digital connectivity.

Challenges remain including a nation-wide housing shortage, delivery of supporting infrastructure including roads, water and energy, access to essential services including childcare, healthcare, disability services and social care services, more availability of and accessible public transport and ensuring that services and places are inclusive and accessible to all.

The alignment of Our Rural Future with the NPF 2025, NDP 2025, and 'Delivering Homes, Building Communities Action Plan 2025-2030' is supported, along with the proposed areas of focus and 9 no. priority areas including balanced and effective regional development; capable broadband to support digital transformation; modern-resilient-smart infrastructure; access to high-quality education; sustainable rural housing; town and village regeneration and Town Centre First; modern-safe-accessible public transport; equitable and timely access to healthcare services; and affordable childcare services.

2.3.2.1 Specific actions to be considered for inclusion in the new policy to deliver on Pillar 1

STEM Education - The current Our Rural Future strategy deals with strengthening the labour force through education and skills but only as regards post-secondary and life-long learning. While it is acknowledged that this consultation document refers to 'all levels', the development of STEM education in primary and secondary schools is crucial to encourage students to pursue this area at third level and beyond in preparation for high-skilled jobs. The Midland County Councils' STEM Education programme, supported by the EU Just Transition Fund, provides an excellent template for

this. This programme was developed with a view to future-proofing the Midland labour force, supporting students to pursue careers in STEM that are emerging through the Midland ICT and ATIM (Advanced Technology in Manufacturing) Clusters. The STEM Education programme has been recognised as an example of international best practice as part of the Interreg Europe platform.

Other Linked Priorities - Town Centre First and RRDF funding should be supported through this Pillar. It is also recommended that ‘transport infrastructure’ is included in the priority area on infrastructure and ‘reliable’ should be included in the accessible public transport priority area. Similarly, a commitment to the development of ‘Rural Mobility Hubs’ should be supported in the public transport priority area.

Sustainable Rural Housing - The Department should link the provision of sustainable rural housing with existing Section 28 Guidelines or new National Planning Statements issued under the Planning Acts and include support for compact development with new housing on zoned, serviced land with access to community services in rural towns and villages in accordance with the NPF and RSES. It is also recommended that roll out of the Croí Cónaithe (Vacant Property Refurbishment) Grant is continued, given its positive contribution to the reduction of obsolescence within the established housing stock.

Monitoring - To align with NPO 107 of the NPF 2025 and Chapter 12 of the RSES, a programme of monitoring of the implementation of the Core Pillars should be progressed in conjunction with key stakeholders including the NDP Accelerating Infrastructure Taskforce, Housing Activation Office, Regional Assemblies, Local Authorities and Town Regeneration Officers, etc. Indicators should be identified within each Core Pillar which are consistent with the strategic objectives of the NPF 2025 and RSES, particularly the NPF targets for balanced and effective regional development ensuring that rural communities are climate and economically resilient. Clear indicators within each Pillar would enhance the ability to measure outcomes related to climate resilience, environmental protection, economic diversification and community wellbeing.

2.3.3 Pillar 2: A Strong and Diverse Rural Economy

The Department highlights positive impacts from implementing the first Our Rural Future and challenges that remain before outlining the proposed priorities in the next phase. The consultation document recognises the importance of a strong and diverse rural economy to supporting Ireland’s national competitiveness, which underpins vibrant communities, securing quality jobs now and into the future and identifies key requirements.

Positive impacts of the first Our Rural Future include Connected Hubs (digitally connected offices/workspaces), improved access to remote and hybrid working, LEO supports and further

development of rural tourism such as festivals, cultural events, the Arts, national heritage and agri-tourism, RE generation and green energy.

Underpinning the challenges ahead are concerns around the quality, variety and availability of jobs in rural areas in addition to start up/ growth/ business costs, access to business supports and skills development and retention. Agriculture, food, marine, forestry and tourism sectors are identified as key sectors to sustaining rural economies. However, there are challenges in sustaining the rural economy, ensuring farm viability and generational renewal, adaptation to evolving environmental and climate requirements, and competing pressures on land use including the protection of water quality and biodiversity. The Assembly supports the opportunities identified which include diversification through the development of low-carbon and circular bioeconomy initiatives, alignment with the Government's Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity (September 2025), Regional Skills policies and REPS. In this regard, the Department are advised that the review of the RSES will include an Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region, aligning with national economic policies, in accordance with planning legislation.

The Assembly supports the priority areas listed in the consultation document including the development of Gaeltacht areas. It is considered that this Pillar is consistent with the RSES, and in particular Section 4.8 of the RSES.

2.3.3.1 Specific actions to be considered for inclusion in the new policy to deliver Pillar 2

The areas set out in Chapter 3, 4 and 5 of the current Our Rural Future document around optimising digital connectivity, supporting employment and careers in rural areas and revitalising rural towns and villages remain relevant and should be carried forward into the new Our Rural Future document.

Connected Hubs – This has been a significant development in facilitating remote working and connecting local entrepreneurs and start-ups with business supports through Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs). Through the ORIGINN project, the [co:worx hub](#) in Edgeworthstown, County Longford, has been recognised internationally as a best practice in developing rural remote work hubs. The service-offering varies from hub to hub, but co:worx stands out as a particularly effective model due to the community-led nature of its development and the multiple functions it serves in the local economy and community. It supports remote workers and local enterprises as a working and meeting space, but it also supports the local cultural life of the area by hosting cultural events and facilitates remote training opportunities by linking with TUS and the Education and Training Board to support life-long learning and skills development. This community-led holistic approach serves as a strong example of how to maximise the impact of these hubs in rural areas and should be considered in the development of the Connected Hubs network. There is further potential for Connected Hubs to contribute to local sustainability by integrating with low-carbon energy solutions and acting as focal points for digital, economic, climate-resilient services and sustainable transport within rural towns and villages.

Bioeconomy - The bioeconomy offers many potentially transformative opportunities for the rural economy. A whole-of-government approach is needed to support the emergence of a strong and innovative bioeconomy. At present, the emphasis from Government is on the bioeconomy as it pertains to the agri-food sector and RE, but a broader scope is required. The bioeconomy offers a wide range of opportunities for job creation and green transition, including improved household and commercial waste management; diversification of farm incomes through valorisation of farm waste; promotion of regenerative farming techniques for the production of high value goods; and bio-based alternatives to fossil-fuel-based chemicals, used in a vast array of consumer products. The Department is directed to the recommendations of the EPA Report No. 479 “A Review of Circular Economy and Bioeconomy Governance in Ireland” in this regard. Beyond agriculture, forestry, and marine governance, the bioeconomy needs to be supported through investment in relevant infrastructure, research and innovation, enterprise support, and skills and education development. To maximise these opportunities, clear governance structures and sustainability criteria will be needed to ensure that emerging bioeconomy activities complement environmental objectives, protect sensitive land and water resources, and support rural communities.

Through participation in the ORIGINN project, EMRA is exploring ways to develop policy to support the bioeconomy in our Region, particularly by engaging with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), Climate-KIC, and partners across the EU to ensure that this reflects best practice. Regional and local governance of the bioeconomy should be enhanced to ensure community buy-in.

In 2024, DAFM awarded funding for two Bioeconomy Demonstration Initiative Schemes under the EU Just Transition Fund (EU JTF)¹ to support the development of the bioeconomy and communities most affected by the transition to climate neutrality, particularly the move away from peat production and electricity generation from peat. €5 million was awarded to both projects under the Initiative, which will have the following outcomes:

- **Lisheen Bioeconomy Scaleup Initiative (*BioScaleUp*)** will demonstrate innovative technologies at the National Bioeconomy Campus in Co. Tipperary where there is a national pilot biorefinery facility. Renewable biobased feedstocks will be converted into biobased chemicals, materials, food ingredients, biofuels and other bioproducts. It will support diversification opportunities within the agri-food sector.
- **Mount Lucas Circular Bioeconomy Aquaculture Initiative (*Circular IMTA*)** will demonstrate the production of new feeds/ foods from cultivated-duckweed and macroalgae at scale, using fish-culture waste streams. This will be carried out at a peatland-based integrated aquaculture site at Mount Lucas in Co. Offaly and will focus on developing new sustainable circular solutions in the development of bio-based products².

¹ As Managing Authority of the EU Just Transition Fund (JTF) created under 2021-2027 EU Programming, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly has overall responsibility for implementation, management, monitoring and evaluation of the programme. Source:

² <https://capnetworkireland.eu/two-bioeconomy-projects-receive-e10m-in-just-transition-funding/> ;

A further call for projects was launched in August 2025 with new projects expected to be awarded and commence in early 2026. The EU JTF Priority 1 seeks to diversify the local economy of the wider Midlands. The inclusion of the Bioeconomy in this Priority is an example of local, national, and EU policy aligning with the UN Sustainable Development goals to encourage the promotion of the Region's unique strengths to create an environment which allows people to work where they live.

Food Vision 2030 - This Pillar of Our Rural Future should align with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's Food Vision 2030 Strategy and consider the indicators set out in the Food Vision 2030 Dashboard to monitor its implementation.

Monitoring – Similar to the recommended monitoring section under Pillar 1, however, the key stakeholders should also include the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and Regional Enterprise Plan Officers, and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

2.3.4 Pillar 3: Resilient Rural Communities

The Department recognises that rural Ireland's primary strength is its people and their deep ties to place, culture and communities. It acknowledges that resilient communities are inclusive of all abilities, ages, backgrounds, orientations, minority groups and those who may be marginalised. Included in Pillar 3 resilient rural communities are the Gaeltacht areas, and the consultation document recognises the importance of sustaining such areas, nurturing the Irish language and providing services through Irish to meet community needs, culture, heritage and sporting traditions for our communities, sense of place, tourism and enterprise development. The role of local groups, clubs and sporting organisations are recognised and the pressures they face, including long-term viability.

Our Rural Future will focus on strengthening the resilience, the inclusivity and sustainability of rural communities by placing strong emphasis on developing skills, volunteering and leadership underpinned by strategies to encourage the next generation. It is stated that the approach will be to build on and complement wider national strategies for housing, language, culture, heritage, sport and sustaining the Gaeltacht. Continued demographic change, volunteer capacity challenges, and the out-migration of younger people highlight a need for more structured supports to strengthen community leadership, intergenerational living models and skills development.

Priority areas within this Pillar are also supported and are consistent with NPO23 which seeks to *“protect and promote the sense of place and culture and the quality, character and distinctiveness of the Irish rural landscape including island communities that make Ireland's rural areas authentic and attractive as places to live, work and visit”* and is supportive of RPO 9.28 which seeks to develop a

<https://www.ucd.ie/research/news/2024/biorbicleadsresearchonnew5millionbioeconomyproject/> ; and https://tus.ie/rdi/research/centres-groups/empower-eco/circular_imta_demo-project/

diverse and inclusive Region and support the implementation of language plans and the development of the Gaeltacht in County Meath.

2.3.4.1 Specific actions to be considered for inclusion in the new policy to deliver Pillar 3

Farm viability and generational renewal - Retention of young people is a major challenge for rural communities, including in relation to agriculture and farming. Regenerative farming offers opportunities to diversify agriculture. The [Peatlands for Prosperity](#) project offers a good roadmap for this. Supporting young farmers to diversify their incomes through the development of on-farm food and drinks businesses has had success (for example, [Ballykilcavan Farm and Brewery](#) and [Feighery's Farm Beetroot Juice](#)) and these policy supports should be enhanced. The uptake of regenerative farming offers a similar opportunity to encourage younger generations to continue their family farm. It creates access to new value chains through the bioeconomy and the cultivation of higher value crops. It also empowers farmers to be leaders in driving innovative solutions to the environmental crises. These are issues of great concern to younger generations and supporting them to participate in the solutions to these challenges will be an enabling factor in retaining young people in the agriculture sector.

Monitoring - Similar to the recommended monitoring section under Pillars 1 and 2, however, the key stakeholders should also include Údarás Na Gaeltachta, Social Clubs, Cultural and Arts Societies, Sporting Organisations, etc.

2.3.5 Pillar 4: A Greener Rural Future

The Department emphasises the strengths of Ireland's natural heritage and the obligation to protect its biodiversity and the natural resources which will sustain farming, forestry, fishing and tourism, while also supporting the wellbeing and quality of life all of which are deemed vital to the identity and prosperity of rural areas. With climate change putting these assets and resources under pressure via extreme weather events, flooding and coastal erosion, long term, resilient measures are needed to address the existing and future challenges. A more defined approach to rural climate adaptation—including heat, flood, drought, coastal risks and nature-based resilience measures—would support long-term sustainability and strengthen local preparedness.

It is recognised that there are opportunities for rural Ireland in RE generation, sustainable agriculture, the bioeconomy, waste management and the Circular Economy to create new opportunities for jobs, innovation and investment.

The Assembly supports this approach and the recognised need to deliver more sustainable transport options, including safe active travel routes, and greater provision of electric vehicle infrastructure to support transition.

Priority areas identified in this Pillar are supported by the Regional Assembly. There are opportunities for RE generation and related enterprises. Sustainable tourism should be supported by a high-quality rural transport system connecting accommodation centres to tourism experiences. There remains a need to address persistent gaps in rural mobility, particularly in active travel, demand-responsive transport, and low-carbon rural freight solutions. The roll out of Connecting Ireland by the NTA should be continued, towards an “*every village, every hour*” integrated public transport network, so communities can fully access employment, services and tourism opportunities.

The natural resource sector – agriculture, forestry, marine should also be supported to continue to operate in a sustainable manner which will facilitate a transition to a climate neutral economy and sustain the long-term management of the rural landscape which supports biodiversity and ecosystem services.

The priority areas identified in the Pillar align with the Environment and Climate Strategy set out in Chapter 7 of the RSES.

2.3.5.1 Specific actions to be considered for inclusion in the new policy to deliver Pillar 4

Consistency with NPF, RSES, Planning and Climate Acts – The Assembly recommends that the Department ensures consistency between the Our Rural Future Policy document, the NPF 2025, the Planning and Development Acts 2024-2025, the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Acts 2015-2021 and the Climate Action Plan 2025, as a step towards ‘future proofing’ services and to help to inform longer-term adaptation planning and investment priorities.

3.0 Recommendations/Observations

The Regional Assembly requests that the Department takes account of the following issues in the preparation of Our Rural Future 2026-2031 to ensure consistency with Project Ireland 2040 (National Planning Framework, National Marine Planning Framework and National Development Plan), the Climate Action Plan 2025, the Regional Spatial Economic Strategy (RSES) and any future RSES, and other relevant policies. The Assembly makes the following recommendations:

Recommendations:

1. Our Rural Future should illustrate how it is connected to and aligned with other national plans and policies and the Sustainable Development Goals, including identifying a role for the Regional Assemblies and in particular regional strategies for the development and protection of rural areas in Ireland and recent EU energy legislation relevant to rural development planning.

Reason: To ensure full alignment between national, regional and local policies.

2. Sustained and targeted investment in rural Ireland should underpin Our Rural Future, and Our Rural Future should be developed having regard to the role of EU funding, including of the EU Just Transition Fund, which is managed by the Assembly and supports the diversification of the local economy in the EU JTF Territory.
Reason: To ensure consistency between Our Rural Future and EU Programme Funding.
3. The definition of 'Rural Areas' should reflect the variety and differences across Ireland's rural areas.
Reason: To ensure a broad definition of rural areas is used in Our Rural Future and to align with Section 4.8 of the RSES.
4. The vision statement should be enhanced, to incorporate the terms 'climate resilience' and 'balanced and effective regional development'.
Reason: To strengthen the vision and to support alignment with the NPF 2025, Climate Action Plan 2025 and the RSES.
5. Our Rural Future should emphasise and support opportunities to link innovation ecosystems and R&D in rural areas with innovation hubs and R&D in Ireland's urban areas, including the continued support of Connected Hubs, to enable strong performance in rural areas and capitalise on the spillover potential of strong performing regions, through tailored strategies.
Reason: To ensure alignment with the NPF 2025, national economic policies and the RSES.
6. Our Rural Future should take the recommendations of the EPA's Report No. 479 "A Review of Circular Economy and Bioeconomy Governance in Ireland" into account, including the opportunities that regenerative farming offers to diversify agriculture.
Reason: To maximise emerging opportunities within the bioeconomy in rural areas and to support implementation of the NPF 2025, national economic policies and the RSES.
7. Our Rural Future should support regeneration within rural towns and villages with an emphasis on place-making.
Reason: To ensure alignment with the NPF 2025 and the RSES.
8. Our Rural Future should support the consistent branding and marketing of rural tourism businesses under the umbrella of Fáilte Ireland's regional strategies.
Reason: To support rural tourism and economic development and ensure alignment with the NPF 2025 and the RSES.
9. STEM education should be developed at all levels of education to encourage students to pursue this area in preparation for high-skilled jobs to future proof the labour force, particularly in rural areas.
Reason: To support implementation of the Regional Enterprise Plans and RSES.
10. Sustainable rural housing should be addressed in the context of the NPF 2025, RSES, existing Section 28 Planning Guidelines (or future National Planning Statements).
Reason: To ensure consistency with the NPF 2025, RSES and Planning and Development Acts.
11. Our Rural Future should be informed by the requirements of Strategic Environmental Assessment, Habitats, Birds, Floods, Nature Restoration, Marine and other EU Directives.

Reason: To ensure obligations under European Environmental Directives are achieved.

12. Consideration should be given to the monitoring of Our Rural Future and how implementation will be delivered through key stakeholders at national, regional and local level.

Reason: To ensure effective monitoring and implementation of the policy document.

Observations:

The following are observations by the Regional Assembly for the consideration of the Department in the preparation of Our Rural Future 2026-2031.

1. The Assembly refers the Department to the Interreg Europe [ORIGINN project](#) which is working to promote the economic and social transformation of rural areas through innovation, with a particular focus on digitalisation, green economy, industrial sustainability, social innovation, and soft innovation in the agri-food sector.

Reason: In the interest of best practice.

2. The Assembly directs the Department to the recent OECD publication [Reinforcing Rural Resilience](#) which outlines climate change actions that have presented unique economic opportunities and identifies the drivers for rural development.

Reason: In the interest of best practice.

3. The Assembly refers the Department to the [Smart and Sustainable Mobility Academy](#) which is a repository of knowledge, showcasing case studies, project outcomes, and ongoing advancements across all local authorities in the area of active travel and sustainable mobility.

Reason: In the interest of best practice.

4. The Assembly wishes to draw attention to the [Regional Development Monitor](#) (RDM) which provides a series of mapping and visualisation tools which are intended to be of assistance to policy and decision makers in gaining a greater insight into social, economic and environmental trends to aid better monitoring.

Reason: In the interest of best practice.

5. Our Rural Future should seek to support the full implementation of the National Broadband Plan infrastructure to support Smart Communities in rural areas and the core pillars of the Our Rural Future policy.

Reason: In the interest of utilising critical digital infrastructure to the benefit of rural areas.

4.0 Conclusion

The Regional Assembly welcomes the opportunity to engage in the process of preparing the new Our Rural Future 2026 - 2031 and looks forward to continuing engagement with the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht.

Regards,



Clare Bannon
A/ Director
Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly
12th December 2025