

Pre-Draft Consultation for the Review of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Northern and Western Regional Assembly

The Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) notes the commencement of the [Pre-Draft Consultation](#) for the Review of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Northern and Western Regional Assembly and it welcomes the opportunity to consult. This submission has been prepared by the executive and approved by the members of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly at its meeting of 8th May 2026.

The Assembly acknowledges the details set out in the Pre-Draft Consultation Paper and is cognisant of the ongoing work by the Northern and Western Regional Assembly (NWRA) in preparing a Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Northern and Western Region. As the NWRA may be aware, a Strategic Issues Paper has been prepared by the Assembly for its review of the 2019 EMRA RSES, which identifies key issues of relevance for the Eastern and Midland Region. Submissions and observations are invited to the 22nd May 2026.

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 However, this legislation has been superseded by the Planning and Development Act 2024, as amended, which was signed into law on 17th October 2024.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. 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 objectives.

2.0 Introduction

The Assembly aims to foster continued engagement and cooperation among the Northern and Western and Southern Regional Assemblies, local authorities, public bodies and a wide range of stakeholders for the betterment of Ireland's regions.

Five of the eight counties in the NWRA, namely Monaghan, Cavan, Leitrim, Roscommon and Galway, share a boundary with the Assembly sitting alongside counties Louth, Meath, Longford, Westmeath, Offaly and Laois in the Assembly area. Our regions are inextricably linked through our people, the environment and economy with many overlapping functional areas for activities and services such as retail, transport, education and health.

New legislation introduced in 2024 through the Planning and Development Act, a subsequent review of the National Planning Framework and National Development Plan in 2025 and the National Marine Planning Framework 2021 (part of Project 2040), have led to several changes with specific priorities for the country and its regions. There is a renewed emphasis on the following:

- Climate resilience and adaptation to the impacts of climate change on people, the economy and environment, coupled with a rapid move away from fossil fuel to a secure and sustainable (renewable) energy supply to achieve climate neutrality by 2050.
- More effective regional development, a growing population, in the right places where housing needs can be met and compact growth can be achieved in settlements, coupled with higher densities, regeneration, healthy placemaking and a good quality of life for diverse communities.
- A coordinated approach to infrastructure provision - transport and movement, water services, energy, communications and waste management delivery with infrastructure-led development, particularly in housing; and addressing deficits in social and community infrastructure.
- Building on the strengths of regional economies with an emphasis on indigenous businesses and supporting FDI with a circular, sustainable approach on an all-island basis and capitalising on emerging innovation as maintaining areas of specialisation.
- Integrated marine spatial planning and coastal zone management for coastal communities, economies and related infrastructure.
- Protection and management of regional landscapes with sustainable uses and management of environmental resources including blue and green infrastructure.
- Providing facilities of scale at a regional level in the areas of health, education and sport.
- Fostering community development and strengthening rural communities.
- Protecting cultural heritage, which includes the built environment and the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Gaeltachts.
- Environmental assessments which consider and seek to avoid the likely significant impacts of the strategy on the environment, habitats and species and appraising flood risk and integrate mitigation measures into the strategy.
- Implementation and monitoring of the impact of the strategy.

Whilst the detail provided in the consultation paper published by the NWRA is fully noted, the scope of this submission mainly focuses on the following issues:

1. Climate Resilience and Sustainable Energy
2. Effective Regional Development

3. People and Healthy Places – Settlement Strategies and aligning MASPs, Coordinated Area Plans and Key Towns and Rural Areas
4. Coordinated Infrastructure-Led Development for Housing Delivery and Regional Competitiveness
5. Economic Development, Enterprise and Innovation
6. Cross Border Collaboration
7. Coordinated Approach to Landscape Management (including Natural and Cultural Heritage) and Environmental Protection, Marine Spatial Planning and Coastal Zone Management
8. Implementation and Monitoring

3.0 Submission

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly considers that the issues listed above are of particular importance to delivering our common objectives and in fulfilling the shared responsibility of the three regional assemblies to appropriately address national policies and objectives of the government at a regional level.

3.1 Climate Resilience and Sustainable Energy

Achieving climate neutrality by 2050 in line with national and EU targets and becoming a climate resilient society requires a concerted effort by all policy makers, to shape behaviours which reduce greenhouse gas emissions, reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

As "relevant bodies" under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 (as amended), Regional Assemblies share a legal obligation to perform our functions in a manner consistent with achieving the national climate objective of net-zero emissions by 2050. This requires embedding both mitigation (tackling the causes of climate change) and adaptation (increasing resilience to impacts) into all spatial planning decisions. Key shared priorities include:

- Decarbonising the energy sector through coordinated Regional Renewable Energy Strategies.
- Promoting compact growth and sustainable mobility to reduce transport-related greenhouse gas emissions.
- Enhancing climate resilience of critical infrastructure, including water, energy, and transport networks, against extreme weather events and flooding.

It is recommended that climate resilience measures are integrated into the Draft RSEs and any related strategies or guidance and it should emphasise the need for more energy efficient development and a roll-out of renewables and related energy infrastructure.

Securing a sustainable energy supply is closely aligned with national and regional economic competitiveness and economic prosperity. By shifting away from a fossil fuel-based energy system to a renewables-led electricity-led system, maximising renewable energy potential, building flexibility into the system and integrating into Europe's energy system, Ireland can achieve sustainability and security of supply.

Regional Assemblies are tasked with facilitating the delivery of installed renewable electricity generated onshore wind (9 GW) and onshore solar PV (8 GW) by 2030 and 80% renewable electricity

by 2030. The two Assemblies (NWRA and EMRA) have been allocated a combined national target of 60% onshore wind and 57% of solar PV by 2030. A coordinated and complimentary approach to the development of Regional Renewable Energy Strategies, identifying targets at sub-regional (county level) and considerations of landscape capacity and management would be welcomed by the Assembly, particularly amongst the counties which border each other in the regions.

The Draft RSEs will need to be cognisant of existing and planned capacity expansion of the national electricity transmission grid which will support the delivery of targets and the roll out of EV charging infrastructure, and promote increased micro and small-scale generation, local community-based renewable energy projects, supply of indigenous supply of biomethane and district heating installed capacity. The RSEs will also need to support the protection of carbon pools and sustainable supply chains in the circular bioeconomy and promote steps for coordination and cooperation between public bodies. The Assembly would welcome the support for sustainable renewable energy and energy infrastructure rollout, having regard to the protection of the environment and landscape to deliver climate resilience, support climate adaptation and achieve climate neutrality by 2050.

3.2 Effective Regional Development

The National Planning Framework (NPF) First Revision 2025 emphasises the need to manage more balanced regional development to enable the three regions to grow at a planned and sustainable pace and realise their potential, enhancing regional and national competitiveness and a delivering a high quality of life for their citizens.

A target of "regional parity," aiming to split future growth equally (50:50) between the Eastern and Midland Region and the rest of the State has been set and it is in the interest of both Assemblies to ensure that Galway in the NWRA successfully realises its growth potential (+c.40% population growth targets).

While Dublin acts as a global gateway, the EMRA region encompasses economically diverse places, with the Midlands Strategic Planning Area facing socio-economic challenges more comparable to lagging areas elsewhere in the State. For instance, GDP in the Midlands stands at just 75% of the EU average, compared to over 360% in Dublin. The Midlands faces persistent socio-economic challenges, including a withdrawal from peat-fired power generation and infrastructure deficits. Census 2022 figures for disposable income by county varies substantially across the Eastern and Midland Region, with County Longford recording the lowest nationally (See Figure 1) and the 'location of jobs per local 4 5 authority' reveal that the Midlands SPA hosts the lowest number of jobs of any SPA nationally (see Figure 2). It is recognised that counties in the Border and West NUTS III areas also face similar challenges.

Strong investment in Dublin is a critical and necessary response to acute housing and infrastructure capacity constraints including a severe housing affordability crisis, critical infrastructure deficits, which, if left unaddressed, create unsustainable pressures that undermine the competitiveness of the State as a whole. However, sufficient capital investment should be directed to each region and sub region in proportion to its specific strategic needs, legacy deficits, and potential for sustainable development, ensuring that all regions have the necessary infrastructure and investment as a prerequisite to fulfilling their roles under Project Ireland 2040.

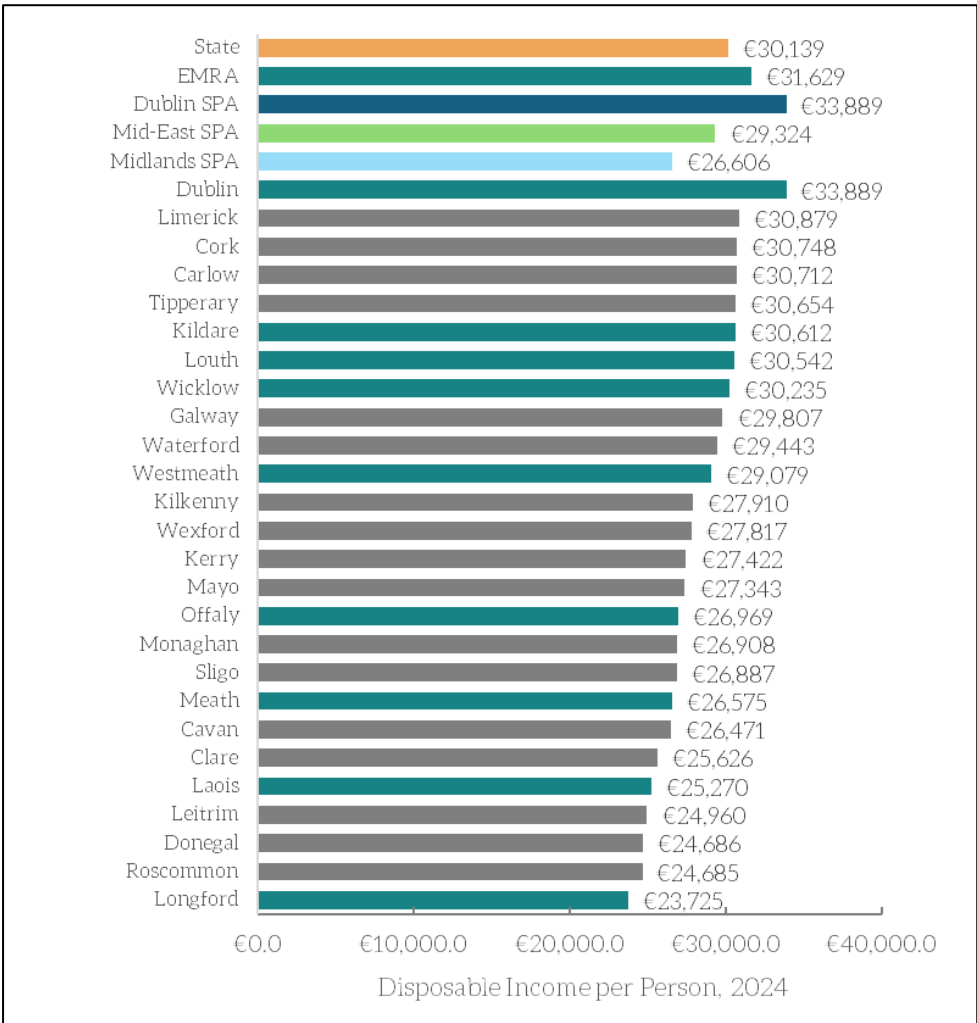


Figure 1: AIRO analysis of Disposable Income per Person, 2024

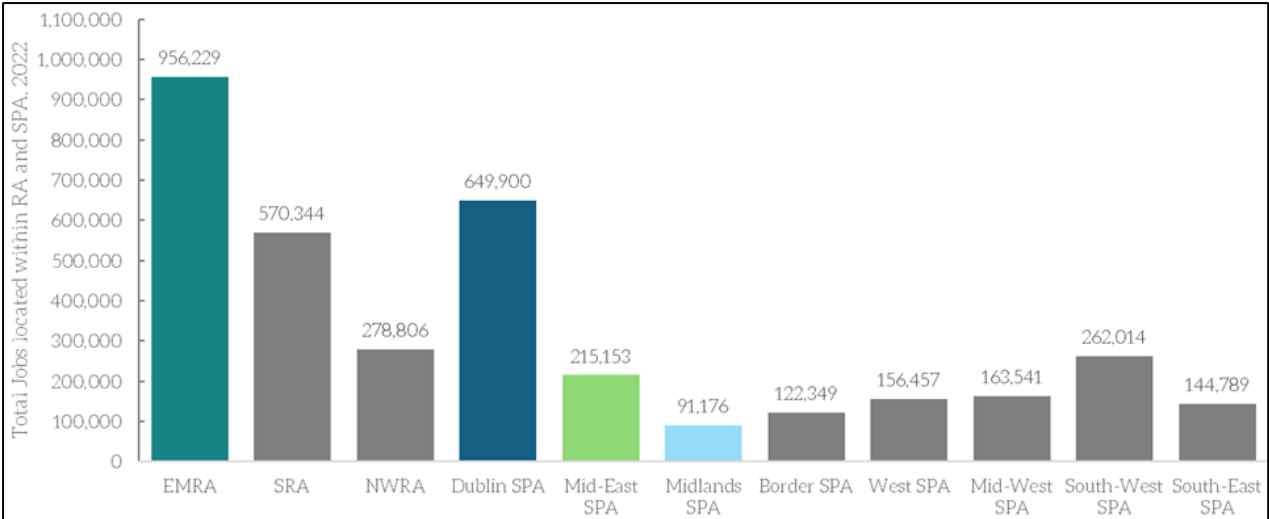


Figure 2: AIRO analysis of Census 2022 POWSCAR Data

3.3 People and Healthy Places – Settlement Strategies and aligning MASPs, Coordinated Area Plans, Key Towns and Rural Areas

The Assembly considers that a settlement strategy for the NWRA which defines a hierarchy based on size, role and function and includes the sustainable growth of Galway City Metropolitan area, the regional growth centres of Sligo, Letterkenny and Athlone and key towns of sufficient scale and quality (to support regional growth centres), is critical to the sustainable growth of the Northern and Western Region. Though, it must be coupled with the necessary investment in plan-led infrastructure to support delivery of housing targets, address deficits, support economic growth and the provision of services to meet the needs of the communities.

The review of the MASPs for Galway, Dublin, Cork, Limerick-Shannon, and Waterford presents a major opportunity to ensure consistency between the five MASPs nationally and support regional growth. Indeed, the influence of Galway City extends to the Midland counties in areas such as economic development, education and research centres and retail.

Metropolitan Area Strategic Plans (MASPs) - The Assembly recommends that in drafting MASPs for the five cities, the three regional assemblies work together and with relevant local authorities, State agencies and bodies to ensure that our objectives are aligned. In particular, the Assembly would welcome methodological alignment in the application of consistent compact growth targets (50% in cities / 30% elsewhere). Furthermore, the NPF allows MASPs to target up to 20% of phased population growth to the wider metropolitan area. The Assembly considers that this flexibility should follow Transport-Orientated Development (TOD) principles along high-capacity corridors in alignment with NPF objectives. The Assembly also supports the integration of the 15-Minute City concept into the MASPs.

As identified in the 2023 Expert Group Review for the First Revision of the National Planning Framework and the OECD 'Towards Balanced Regional Attractiveness in Ireland' report (2023), there is an urgent need to clarify and strengthen the roles of bodies involved in MASP implementation. The Assembly notes that current MASP governance relies on informal implementation groups lacking a legislative framework. The Assembly considers that the three regional assemblies should continue to advocate for statutory implementation mechanisms for MASPs to enable us to coordinate and prioritise infrastructure sequencing in collaboration with relevant State agencies.

Coordinated Area Plans - A coordinated plan-led approach to the sustainable development of Athlone which straddles the regions and county boundaries is supported and the Assembly will work collaboratively with the NWRA to support the Regional Growth Centre located in Counties Westmeath and Roscommon. Athlone is recognised as a key regional driver in the Midland Region (as a focal point for employment, education, retail, transport, and public services), supporting south Roscommon and Leitrim and east Galway; with a level 2 retail function in the 2019 EMRA RSES.

Coordinated Area Plans will guide population and employment growth in a compact urban development form, setting out population and/ or employment growth targets, associated housing development needs and housing land requirement for each local authority area.

Both Assemblies and local authorities will consider their role as principal and associated planning authority for preparing the plan, having regard to the location of the town centre, extent of the settlement in each local authority area, amount of population or employment growth for each area,

and the membership and appointment of a plan committee. It is recommended that the Draft RSES supports a range of coordinated measures to deliver sustainable settlement patterns and transportation strategies in urban and rural areas, including Athlone. Further to Section 73 of the Planning and Development Act 2024 (as amended), the Assembly supports ongoing engagement and collaboration, including engagement with Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils to ensure consistency of approach.

Influence of Regional Growth Centres outside the NWRA – Counties Monaghan and Cavan are functionally connected to the Regional Growth Centres of Drogheda and Dundalk located within the Eastern and Midland Region. In this respect, Drogheda, provides a critical healthcare resource for the north-east region, and Dundalk provides third-level education and training, with both towns located on the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor.

Key Towns - A harmonised approach to the selection of criteria to designate Key Towns across Assembly areas, may be adopted, if a classification of Key Towns is being considered. Such criteria and indicators could include population size, role and function, economic strengths, enterprise and employment capacity, social development potential, transport infrastructure and connectivity, capacity of the environment, infrastructure, etc. An asset/ potential-based method (Table 3.1) in the RSES 2019 (EMRA) could assist with defining such towns. The Assembly would welcome further collaboration and discussion regarding this so that there is a consistency in approach across the Regional Assemblies.

Rural Areas - Counties in our regions share commonality with rural and agriculture-based communities facing similar challenges, and it is recommended that this is recognised in the Draft RSES. Our respective RSESs should highlight opportunities to support towns and villages in rural areas and their hinterlands, seeking to strengthen rural service hubs, create attractive, healthy, and high-quality urban and rural places, revive town centres, reverse decline and provide employment and services, to reduce the need for long-distance commuting.

Innovation and funding can revitalise smaller towns and villages and there are opportunities to build on the strengths developed in vibrant towns such as Westport and Sligo and replicate them elsewhere in the region. The NWRA are invited to consider the good practices in the [15 Minute City](#) report prepared by EMRA (2025).

Social Infrastructure - A function of the new RSESs will be to identify education and health facilities of a regional scale. Furthermore, it is noted that there is enhanced emphasis on social infrastructure provision in the NPF. In this respect there are opportunities for the Regional Assemblies to coordinate on the criteria used, in conjunction with relevant stakeholders. The Regional Assemblies could jointly propose criteria and/ or guiding principles for Social Infrastructure Assessments/ Audits which are prepared by local authorities; and potentially develop regional benchmarks for parks or sports centres of a regional scale to allow for a consistent approach in determining community needs.

3.4 Coordinated Infrastructure-Led Development for Housing Delivery and Regional Competitiveness

Ireland's three regional assemblies, through our RSESs should support the coordination and sequencing of the delivery of transport (including public transport), water services, waste management facilities, communications networks and energy infrastructure. Plan-led infrastructure is

essential for sustainable growth and strong communities. Good transport links, utilities, and digital networks boost economic development while helping create attractive, well-connected places, where people wish to work and live. They also support communities by providing access to essential services such as schools, healthcare, public transport, and housing.

It is a shared responsibility of our regions to support and enhance the Trans-European Networks for Transport (TEN-T) (road, rail and port), for Energy (TEN-E) and Telecommunications (eTEN). The RSEs must protect and enhance the strategic function of core international gateways (such as Dublin Port and Airport) and key regional ports and airports such as Galway Port and Ireland West Airport Knock.

Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans will be developed for the urban nodes on the TEN-T by the National Transport Authority (NTA) which will need to be factored into new Metropolitan Strategic Area Plans for the five MASP cities.

Strategic connectivity between our regions is essential for national economic competitiveness. The Assembly recommends the implementation of Transport Orientated Development (TOD) principles in the Galway MASP and the transition to sustainable travel options. TOD principles focus on maximising the use of land in the provision of housing, employment opportunities, public services and leisure space close to high quality transport services. This approach can guide the selection of strategic locations for new residential development and 'live work' communities.

Further to this, the Assembly considers that policy alignment on inter-regional commuter rail and bus services will be critical as remote and hybrid working patterns continue to evolve. The Assembly considers that the Regional Assemblies, through the RSEs should jointly advocate for the implementation of the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, maintaining and enhancing the networks linking our regions, including the national rail network, vital for efficient logistics and labour mobility and accessibility. It is recommended that the RSEs continue to support the National Transport Authority's Rural Transport Programme to deliver enhanced regional accessibility, strengthening our rural economies and communities and support investment in intra-regional transportation corridors for public transport, road and rail travel, international access and support rural transport and accessibility.

The Assembly considers that the RSEs should respectively include objectives to support the coordination of infrastructure and ensure that infrastructure roll-out is spatially sequenced to match our settlement hierarchies (defined in the RSEs) and housing activation needs and ensure that our respective RSEs support electricity grid development. In this regard, the Assembly draws the Northern and Western Regional Assembly's attention to [EirGrid's Strategic Framework for Grid Development in the Northern and Western Region](#) which complements aligned Strategic Framework for the Eastern and Midland Region and Southern Region.

Under the NDP Review 2025, which allocates €275.4 billion in total investment to 2035, there is an unprecedented opportunity to expedite projects of mutual relevance. To accelerate delivery, the RSEs should support early-stage, spatially aligned infrastructure planning across all sectors. The Regional Assemblies can lead by example through the coordination of the Regional Renewable Energy Strategies (RRES) to meet 2030 targets. The Assembly considers that the Regional Assemblies should continue to advocate for formal statutory roles for Regional Assemblies in NDP monitoring to ensure that multi-annual funding streams are spatially targeted as intended.

Implementation of Uisce Éireann capital programmes will support the delivery of housing in our regions and the RSES will need to support the expansion of the electricity transmission grid to cater to existing and future population and economic and social development including meeting onshore and offshore renewable energy infrastructure needs, development of a national sub-sea interconnector to connect to the European transmission grid and maintenance of existing sub-sea cables which are considered critical infrastructure to the island.

There are several interregional projects of importance including the Athlone Main Drainage Project which is moving towards completion and the M4 Mullingar to Longford (and Sligo) Strategic Road project.

It is recommended that all regions emphasise the active travel opportunities and case studies and initiatives developed through the Pathfinder Programme Project – Smart and Sustainable Mobility Accelerator (SSMA) and related [Sustainable Mobility Academy](#) developed to support the work of local authorities to improve walking and cycling networks in established settlements, enhancing accessibility and reducing the need for shorter car journeys.

The Draft RSES can support high quality communications and energy networks to sustain existing enterprises and communities and attract high-value, knowledge-based jobs to the NWRA, building on existing clusters. Digital connectivity and maximising access to digital infrastructure is particularly important in rural areas to encourage uptake of infrastructure provided by the National Broadband Plan to support ‘Smart’ and connected communities, cities, towns and villages.

Infrastructure can have considerable impact on the landscape and both RSESs will need to consider how this is balanced with the community needs, environmental protection and climate resilience.

3.5 Economic Development, Enterprise and Innovation

The NPF recognises that Ireland’s economic success depends on creating places that foster innovation and attract global talent. As the State transitions toward a carbon-neutral and digitally driven economy, strategic economic corridors serve as key spatial frameworks for achieving all-island cohesion and regional parity. The Planning and Development Act 2024 (as amended) strengthens this approach by tasking Regional Assemblies with coordinating the spatial aspects of enterprise delivery and smart specialisation through our economic strategies.

The Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor (DBEC) is the island’s primary economic engine and its largest economic agglomeration, home to approximately 2 million people. EMRA identifies the DBEC as a distinct spatial area with international visibility that has the potential to compete with major EU city regions. The growth centres of Drogheda and Dundalk are critical to this corridor, with the ambition for both to reach a city-scale population of 50,000 by 2031.

EMRA supports the Atlantic Economic Corridor, an initiative of Ireland 2040 and the economic benefits for the Northern and Western Region and which can complement the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor supporting trade along the east and west coasts and facilitating the movement of goods, people, and energy.

The EU Regional Innovation Scoreboard (RIS) shows Ireland’s regions as strong to innovation leaders but there are variations within the country. Across Europe, capital city regions outperform in innovation within each country. Some innovation ecosystems enable strong performance even in

regions distant from major cities. This connects rural declining ageing areas with innovation hubs. EMRA and the NWRA have mutual regional strengths and opportunities which can enhance regional economic performance, key attributes and overall regional economic performance. Regions thrive with a highly skilled workforce (attractive to FDI) and critical infrastructure (innovation hubs and research centres). The RIS indicators inform strengths and areas for improvement, patterns and disparities and offer opportunities for peer learning.

All three of Ireland's regions have been designated as 'Regional Innovation Valleys' (RIV) by the European Commission. This designation commits the Regional Assemblies to strengthening our Research & Innovation (R&I) ecosystems and collaborating on EU-wide priorities. Technological Universities (TUs), such as Technological University of the Shannon (TUS), act as regional anchors for talent and research-industry partnerships. Sustained capital investment is required to ensure these institutions drive the scale-up of high-potential start-ups (HPSUs). Further to this, both regions should prioritise supports for sectoral clusters in high-value areas, including Biopharma, ICT, Fintech, MedTech, and the Circular Bioeconomy.

A resilient economic base must be built on Smart Specialisation (S3) and clustering, leveraging the unique strengths of each region to drive productivity and regain lost competitiveness or enhance it. Furthermore, digital connectivity and access to energy, are the fundamental enablers for modern enterprise, particularly in rural and underperforming sub-regions. As set out in the Consultation Paper, the Draft RSES can support the identification of strategic sites capable of supporting sustainable economic development, having regard to access to infrastructure, benefits to communities and protection of the environment.

The North-East Regional Enterprise Plan (REP) encompasses counties Cavan, Monaghan and Louth and recognises the links within this region such as a Connected Health and Wellbeing cluster at Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) with EI funded research and development specialities of ICT, health and ageing. The North-East REP refers to opportunities in manufacturing, food and beverage production, financial services, ICT, health and education, and a continued focus on tourism opportunities and experience development in conjunction with Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland.

Sectoral opportunities relevant to the Midlands (including Athlone) will also be important to the adjoining counties in the NWRA (including south Roscommon and east Galway) such as smart advanced manufacturing, medical and implanted devices, pharmaceuticals and biotechnology, as well as food production and engineered products. The Midland REP emphasises the existing Midlands ICT sector and area of Smart Specialisation and Advanced Technology in Manufacturing Cluster. The REP proposes to grow the Green Economy and advance solutions for complex societal challenges and work has begun on a new Digital Hub on the Athlone campus of TUS, which is contributing to the regeneration of the town centre. It is also seeking to establish a Food and Drinks Cluster.

The Draft RSESs should seek to foster continued collaboration around education and training with the Athlone campus of the TUS and other Technological Universities, Institutes of Technology and Universities as well as opportunities for outreach training/ upskilling/ reskilling and lifelong learning in the Midland and West and Border NUTS III regions. Skills and education should be aligned with future needs.

In addition, opportunities will emerge for employment based around renewable energy (RE), such as operation, management and maintenance of offshore RE off the west and north-west coasts supported by green-tech skills and should be considered in the Draft RSES.

Further opportunities exist within the established Fáilte Ireland tourism and marketing initiatives for Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and the Wild Atlantic Way, with the provision of greenways, blueways and peatways to support sustainable tourism and activities for healthy placemaking, recreation and economic diversification. An interregional approach to delivery of tourist experiences and community development should be supported in the Draft RSESs.

EMRA is the managing authority for the EU Just Transition Fund (JTF) under the 2021-2027 EU Programme which includes part of the NWRA (Roscommon and east Galway). The EUJTF aims to support communities across Europe with meeting the challenges posed by the transition to a zero carbon economy. EMRA continues to support the transition from carbon-intensive industry to sustainable enterprise opportunities in both regions. The Assembly's Interreg ORIGINN project and EUJTF showcase alternative carbon neutral employment opportunities within the circular bioeconomy, opportunities to boost population in rural communities as well as the viability of community services with hubs for remote working, business start-ups and community activities. ORIGINN has also highlighted the importance of circular economy principles and the emergence of the circular bioeconomy.

3.6 North-South Collaboration

The Assembly will continue to work collaboratively with the NWRA, local government and agencies in Northern Ireland for community development, housing and other development, physical and social infrastructure, economic opportunities (including tourism and innovation), education, environmental management of shared environmental resources for long term benefit and mutual advantage to the island of Ireland.

It is recommended that the Draft RSESs support continued cross border trade, networks and communities in the Louth, Cavan and Monaghan border area with a focus on key sectoral specialisms in the region including, but not limited to, advanced manufacturing, medtech, civil engineering, tourism, agri-food, marine industries and renewable energy.

The DBEC can also support the north-east region including counties Monaghan, Cavan and counties Armagh, Down and Antrim in the vicinity of Newry and Belfast in Northern Ireland with the goal of attracting FDI and indigenous companies into the region. Inter-regional connectivity with roads and rail links and access to airports and ports must be maintained and enhanced.

3.7 Coordinated Approach to Landscape Management (including Natural and Cultural Heritage), Environmental Protection, Marine Spatial Planning and Coastal Zone Management

Environmental systems, including rivers, wetlands, and floodplains, operate at a catchment scale and frequently extend beyond administrative boundaries and planning jurisdictions. Recognition that the island of Ireland functions as a single ecological entity necessitates well-coordinated cross-border approaches to address the generational challenges of climate change and the biodiversity crisis. To ensure the sustainable management of our shared natural capital (comprising landscapes, soils, water

systems, and habitats) the planning system must remain responsive to national environmental challenges and ensure development occurs within established environmental limits.

The Draft RSEs can support a prosperous and healthy society, respecting planetary boundaries, in compliance with environmental and climate laws. Thus, the Assembly would welcome a coordinated and sustainable approach to landscape and environmental resource management, marine spatial planning and coastal zone management. This will include a role in coordinating the categorisation of landscapes and landscape character assessments across regions to ensure a consistent approach to the protection of areas that straddle regional boundaries.

The RSEs must align with the National Biodiversity Action Plan to ensure "no net loss" of biodiversity and support the implementation of the forthcoming National Restoration Plan. Biodiversity restoration will increase our climate resilience.

Green and Blue Infrastructure (GBI) comprises strategically planned networks of high-quality natural and semi-natural areas designed to deliver a wide range of ecosystem services and protect biodiversity. In alignment with the NPF, the RSEs must promote an ecosystem services approach that enhances the interrelationships between green (ecology) and blue (hydrology) ecosystems. Coordination across regional and local authority boundaries is required to identify, manage, and develop GBI to enhance strategic connections, such as the network of greenways, blueways, and peatways. In this regard, the Assembly considers that nature-based solutions (NBS) and Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) must be mainstreamed as critical infrastructure for climate adaptation, urban cooling, and the sustainable management of surface water runoff.

The Planning and Development Act 2024 (as amended) and the Maritime Area Planning Act 2021 have overhauled the governance of marine areas, requiring the RSEs to include strategies for marine and coastal matters that facilitate the coordination of land-sea interactions. This integrated approach is essential for achieving "Good Environmental Status" for marine waters and ensuring the sustainable use of shared resources, particularly for Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE). Designated Maritime Area Plans (DMAPs), such as the South Coast DMAP, serve as critical tools for delivering plan-led maritime development, protecting "Blue Carbon" habitats, which are essential for carbon sequestration and managing Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) for a healthy and resilient marine ecosystem. The RSEs must seek to sustain coastal communities and economies, ports and ports infrastructure for transport of goods and people and facilitating ORE and identifying strategic infrastructure. Coastal zone management must proactively address the risks of sea-level rise through plan-led adaptation and Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) and support coastal communities and economies.

Intrinsic links exist with the linguistic and cultural heritage of the County Galway, Mayo and Donegal Gaeltachtaí and the Gaeltacht areas of County Meath and it is recommended that the RSEs seek to sustain the communities which foster the language and emphasise the need for Language Plans, and support of Gaeltacht Service Towns and Irish Language Networks following a common approach in each Regional Assembly area.

The region's unique natural and cultural heritage is available for the enjoyment of communities and visitors alike, as a key component of placemaking and urban renewal. There are opportunities to 'package' and sustainably manage the tourism experiences and attractions which will draw visitors to parts of the regions, outside of the traditional stronghold areas for tourists, north from Galway City towards Donegal and across the Midlands and wider Hidden Heartlands. The Royal Sites of Ireland are

on the Tentative List for designation as UNESCO World Heritage Sites and there is an opportunity for these to be supported in the RSEs.

Overall it is recommended that the RSEs promote a climate-neutral, environmentally sustainable economy that respects environmental limits and planetary boundaries, aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and support major EU Directives and obligations including the Water Framework Directive, the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, the Strategic Environmental Assessment, Habitats Directive, the Nature Restoration Law and EU climate and energy targets.

3.8 Implementation and Monitoring

Implementation of the RSEs depends strongly on actions taken by local authorities, government departments, and agencies, and therefore close collaboration during the consultation and plan-making process is essential to ensure shared ownership of the strategy and effective delivery on the ground.

The Assembly considers that the absence of effective implementation structures for the current RSEs has been identified as a key factor in why certain RSE objectives have not been fully realised to date. The establishment of effective implementation structures, with clear roles and responsibilities for all relevant stakeholders, will be a key requirement to support our revised strategies, and this should be underpinned by legislative support and commensurate resourcing.

Effective implementation and monitoring of the RSEs depends on a robust monitoring framework to track environmental, economic, and social outcomes. The Regional Development Monitor (RDM) serves as a live evidence base for monitoring implementation of the RSEs' objectives. The Assembly strongly supports the continued joint development and use of the Regional Development Monitor (RDM) as a shared tool for evidence-based planning.

Furthermore, Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Appropriate Assessment (AA) and Regional Flood Risk Appraisal (RFRA) must be carried out as an integrated part of strategy preparation to identify and mitigate any unforeseen adverse effects on the environment early in the planning process. The Assembly supports mutual engagement in our respective environmental assessment processes and ongoing monitoring into the future.

The Assembly welcomes the proposed Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Bound (SMART) approach to the design of regional policy objectives in the Draft RSE for the NWRA, which will support implementation and monitoring. As the RSEs are being drafted by the Regional Assemblies, opportunities may arise to identify common social, economic and environment indicators.

Both RSEs must set clear priorities and sequencing of regional infrastructure, so serviced land is delivered in line with housing targets and include actions to improve coordination between local authorities, public bodies, and infrastructure providers.

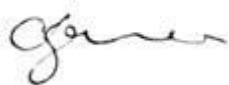
4.0 Conclusion

The Regional Assembly welcomes the commencement of the Pre-Draft Consultation for the Review of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSE) for the Northern and Western Region and notes that many aspects of the new Draft RSEs will require a coordinated approach which will mutually benefit the regions. This will require the Assemblies to work closely with each other, local authorities, government departments, state agencies and a range of stakeholders. Areas of commonality include:

- a) The role of Assemblies in supporting regional climate resilience with the development of a consistent approach to Regional Renewable Energy Strategies, landscape protection and environmental resource management, marine spatial planning and coastal zone management.
- b) The Regional Assemblies have an opportunity to coordinate the future development of towns which straddle regional boundaries and the criteria for classifying sub-regional settlements such as Key Towns and support rural areas of the region.
- c) Regional competitiveness, economic development and delivery of homes for our increasing and diverse population will be underpinned by infrastructure delivery to create healthy places for our citizens to live, work, visit and enjoy a high quality of life.
- d) Enterprise clusters and networks operate across regional boundaries, and the Assemblies must work to support their development and capitalise on innovation, supporting indigenous SMEs and attracting FDI investment.
- e) The roll out of the Regional Development Monitor (RDM) and its use by government departments, state agencies, local authorities and many others has proven its usefulness in monitoring the implementation of the RSES for the three Regional Assemblies. The Assembly would welcome continued collaboration on its future development to ensure it is an effective and evolving tool which supports the delivery of Project 2040.

The Assembly looks forward to working with the Northern and Western Regional Assembly to ensure the development of complementary and mutually supportive Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies which will deliver tangible benefits for our regions and the State as a whole.

Regards,



Clare Bannon

Director

Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly

8th May 2026