



WDC Insights

*providing insights on key issues for
the Western Region of Ireland*

Northern and Western Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy Issues Paper

Summary of the Submission by the
Western Development Commission



February 2018

Western Development Commission Submission

The Western Development Commission (WDC) welcomes the publication of *Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy: Issues Paper* by the Northern & Western Regional Assembly.

The preparation of *Ireland 2040* the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the *Issues Paper* for the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) are landmarks in Irish public policy and it is hoped that it will provide a realistic basis for effective regional development and balancing of development throughout Ireland.

The WDC is a statutory body established by government to promote, foster and encourage economic and social development in the Western Region (Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Mayo, Galway and Clare). It operates under the aegis of the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD). This WDC submission considers the *Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy Issues Paper* from the perspective of the Western Region, the needs of the region, the opportunities its development presents for Ireland's economy and society as a whole and the choices, investments and policy required to achieve regional growth and resilience.

The following is a summary of the key points made in response to the questions in the Northern and Western Region *Issues Paper* for the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES). It should be noted that in this submission many references are made to the draft *Ireland 2040* the National Planning Framework (NPF) and its contents, targets and objectives. However, as the draft *Ireland 2040* is expected to be significantly revised before publication (after the completion of this submission), it should be remembered that any comments made in the WDC submission in relation to *Ireland 2040* are provisional.

Key Issues for Northern & Western Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy

Overarching issues

Successful implementation of the RSES requires a clear strategy with strong goals and objectives, appropriate resources, a well-developed implementation process and an implementation body with the capacity, resources and powers to achieve co-ordinated action.

Some strategies contain too much discussion of the vision and not enough clarity on how that vision is to be realised in practice. It is important to be clear about the steps which must be taken to make implementation happen, the way in which implementation will be staged and monitored, to ensure that each place in the Region has the opportunity to achieve its potential. Without such clarity the RSES will not be implemented fairly and evenly.

In order to ensure that Galway city, the strategically located regional centres of Sligo and Letterkenny, other towns and rural areas all fulfil their regional development role, with service and infrastructure levels appropriate to each type of area; investment needs to happen in all these places. Too often a strategy is made which is supposed to be for all people and areas, but the focus becomes that of cities and other areas are left without appropriate investment.

Specific details of the role to be played by different areas in the Region's settlement hierarchy and the investments needed for these areas to fulfil their roles must be included in the RSES.

Section 2: People and Places

Population & Employment

The solution to growing the regional population is the availability of employment, which in turn requires supporting policy for infrastructural development, a strategy for education and skills and stimulation of entrepreneurship and enterprise growth. It is important that the Strategy is clearly focused on creating real opportunities to keep people living in the region and to attract more people, whether to cities, towns or rural areas. The Strategy should be appropriately resourced with money, expertise and time, as well as involvement of key stakeholders.

Aligning Population, Employment and Housing Targets

The Draft NPF *Ireland 2040* places significant responsibilities on the Regional Assemblies and the City & County Development Plan process but contains no mention of how they will be resourced to develop or implement the plans, nor what support they will receive or how their decisions will be aligned with sectoral and smaller scale capital spending to ensure implementation of the RSES.

The RSES should be explicit on the jobs targets within the Northern & Western Region and the balance between jobs growth in Galway city, large towns and the rest of the Region. These targets should be supported by a clear strategy for how employment growth at different spatial scales will be facilitated and supported through the RSES.

Smaller towns of regional significance

The nature and role of the smaller towns including county towns must be considered in more detail in the RSES and in County Development Plans. It is important to be aware, in the context of the Strategy that these towns, as well as being important drivers of their local economy, are also essential to those living in other even smaller, or less serviced towns, in villages or in the wider countryside.

In the Northern and Western Region there are only 5 towns (and Galway city, as well as part of Athlone) which have a population of more than 10,000, yet it is a relatively large region in the Irish context. It is important therefore that the Strategy focuses on the function of towns and the role they play in their hinterland, rather than being too concerned with population size as a criterion for investment.

Smart Places

The combined geography of the WDC and the NWRA represents a population of 1 million people, who reside in a dispersed, rural landscape, on the frontier of Europe. The 'Smart Places' approach builds upon the existing cities approach in order to include our rural landscape & seascape, in order to ensure 'a more balanced pattern of development'. The Smart Places study driven by the WDC and NWRA along with all other stakeholders will consider how this region can develop towards a 21st century Smart future.

Atlantic Economic Corridor and Investment

The draft NPF *Ireland 2040-Our Plan* contains a reference to *incrementally* improving access to the North West but this is not a sufficient commitment. If the North West is to develop and be able to meet its growth targets there must be accelerated investment in infrastructure improving access and connectivity and providing the large towns with the capacity to grow. The Atlantic Economic Corridor process provides a mechanism through which this investment can be prioritised and objectives for the area achieved.

The fact that the RSES will not be finalised and agreed until after the publication of the NPF and the Capital Investment Plan (CIP) is a cause for concern. If the CIP is to be published alongside *Ireland*

2040-Our Plan, but the RSEs are not published for another year, the CIP might not include investments needed to implement the RSEs.

Rural Towns and Villages

Although smaller towns can face significant challenges they also have key assets such as cultural heritage, historic buildings, local businesses and high levels of social capital. These all provide opportunities for diversification and adaptation of the town and its social network to embrace future opportunities, whether it is improved tourism product, attracting people to live there, or developing knowledge and sectoral clusters such as creative industries.

Many towns have strong indigenous industries which may be exporting and a substantial number have some foreign direct investment, albeit on a small scale. There are other enterprises and employers too, and important local services sectors and small scale manufacturing serving a local market. These are very significant parts of the local economy and important local employers. All of these can be leveraged to support the development of local communities.

Housing in Rural Areas

It is important to recognise the need for a more flexible approach to planning in remoter rural areas where housing and residence is an important part of maintaining viable communities. However, the Strategy should set clear overarching policy for one off housing and provide the context for local decisions, as the needs and situation of rural areas can differ widely, but rural housing should not be a solution to urban spill over.

Where housing in the countryside is permitted the landscape effects should be considered carefully and the Strategy should give guidance on principles for housing in the countryside, and how it should be planned, perhaps with clusters or small groups, which would reduce the cost of infrastructure and servicing of the houses with utilities.

Section 3: Our Vibrant Place

Disrupters

One of the characteristics of 'disrupters' is that they give rise to *unexpected* economic and social changes. They are, by their nature unpredictable. There must be emphasis here is on developing a ready and responsive region, rather than on predicting change.

It is likely that the development of the Internet of things (IoT), more renewable energy, electric vehicles, driverless cars, changing patterns of ownership (for cars and other assets) the development of 3D printing with impact on local supply chains could all have important consequences for the region in 2040. How we respond to these changes and how well we are positioned in 2020 will all influence future outcomes for the region.

Ways of working are likely to have changed significantly by 2040 in response to a number of different factors. The gig economy and associated self-employment, the rise in global working and digital management of work flows will change the way we work. Similarly social change, for example and changes in the way household function, with more female participation in the workforce, and more equitable sharing of family and homecare responsibilities may also influence work patterns.

Brexit

Brexit is a key strategic issue for the Northern and Western Region. Cross-border linkages including cross-border commuting, access to services, retail and trade are key strategic issues which will undergo massive changes in the context of Brexit. Planning for how to mitigate the impact of Brexit

on border communities and the economy of the Border region in particular must be a core priority of the RSES.

Growth

Infrastructure, the '3Es' (Enterprise, Employment and Education) and Innovation are the key levers for effective regional development. When they work together they drive regional growth. Each has a distinctive role, and needs its own policy focus, but they are most effective when addressed through an integrated policy approach.

The Western Region has a number of key regional assets which form part of its 'value proposition' as a location to live, work, do business and visit. Other regions have their own unique package of assets. Effective regional development requires harnessing these regional assets.

Sectors which could provide significant opportunities for the region include:

- Creative industries
- Tourism
- Agri-food
- Renewable Energy
- Medical technology
- ICT
- Marine
- Social Economy and Social Enterprise

Broadband access and other communications infrastructure have enabled more varied work practices as well as more varied work locations to emerge. Self-employment, the 'gig' or 'sharing' economy, contract work, freelancing, e-Working, multiple income streams, online business are all trends enabled by new technologies and are dramatically redefining the concept of work, enterprise, and their physical location with more work taking place at home. This trend is likely to continue and presents an opportunity for the Northern & Western Region.

The central aim of the Strategy should be to provide the conditions for the Region, its city, towns and rural areas to grow and realise their full potential. The Northern & Western Region's high quality of life and attractive natural environment make it an attractive location for people to live, work and visit.

The region has strong historical and cultural identity which can form a part of a confident regional identity as well as providing the opportunity to develop regional expertise in local history and local culture, both past and present. Our marine assets are tremendous; tied in with development of ports and harbours and land based transport, there is potential for a significant contribution to the region's economy. Social enterprise and a strong social economy are areas of great potential in the region, creating jobs, providing services and addressing local needs.

Our Natural Place

Transition towards a Low Carbon Economy

The high number of environmental designations should be viewed as key assets on which we can build. Areas of potential include niche eco-tourism, developing an identity for the region associated with high environmental quality and developing tourism options for those with an interest in the area. It is also an important area for the development of research and environmental management expertise and specialisms.

The region is uniquely placed to develop a wood energy sector because it has the forestry resource required to supply market demands, now and in the future. Developing the sector has a potentially important impact arising from its possible longer term role in developing viable economic activity in rural areas. Wood heating makes use of existing natural resources, most of the employment is rural, and the costs of transport mean that the activities tend to be locally based, bringing benefits throughout the region.

The Strategy will provide the context for regional development to 2040 and much of the move to a low carbon economy will take place in that time period. It is important that the Strategy plans for this so that structures are in place for the development of the low carbon practices which will be required. This will mean a clear vision for transport, for industrial development, for energy production and consumption and for agriculture in the region will be necessary. If the Strategy provides direction on this, and local authorities will act in line with the strategy then it will be easier to address these responsibilities for mitigation of climate change and adaptation to its consequences over the longer term.

Marine

Developing our maritime potential needs to be supported by and integrated with land based investment to ensure that the benefits of developments in our island and marine economy are felt among the communities living adjacent to marine opportunities.

The goal to realise our island and maritime potential, makes recognition of the importance of our Atlantic ports essential and policy needs to change to support a greater role for ports such as Galway Port and Killybegs among others.

An Gaeltacht

The areas deemed to be 'Gaeltacht' and their governance under regional and local governance structures needs to be considered, both in terms of the integrity of the Gaeltacht areas covered, their boundaries and also their relationship with English speaking areas. Planning for economic development must address issues of language development as essential to Gaeltacht regions and also address the balance between maintaining social and cultural identity of Gaeltacht regions while avoiding discrimination against those who do not originate in the Gaeltacht.

Greenways

Drivers of the rural economy such as tourism, green products and services and the creative industries need jobs and innovation policies which are cognisant of the particular characteristics of these sectors in rural areas and address the barriers to their growth. At the same time, the sensitive development of our biodiversity, conservation, cultural heritage and landscape assets is important both for our society and for the planning of tourism developments.

Areas with high quality natural social and cultural assets should develop trails or routes which showcase these assets and maximise the experience of the user. Greenways and tourist routes are more than simply a means of travel from start to finish, they provide opportunities for exploring, for stop offs and for deviations from the route. Thus greenways and other routes should always highlight any places of interest, providing the visitor with the option for further exploration if the area of interest is not directly on the route.

Our Healthy Place

Health

Good access to primary, secondary and tertiary health services is very important. Local GP services need to be a focus of health planning, and access to secondary and tertiary health services must be well designed and take full account of the needs of those who are distant from the service. This means there should be good, extensive car parking available at a reasonable price, and for those who cannot drive or be driven, that a co-ordinated travel service for hospital appointments is available. An increase in the number of tertiary clinics held away from the main centres should also be considered so that, where possible, services travel to the people rather than the other way around.

Education

Increasing human capital at a regional level has three key purposes: to provide a skilled labour force; to improve employability and life skills for individuals; and to stimulate entrepreneurship. All three must be seen as priorities when developing regions' human capital. To ensure that upskilling is future proofed and accessible to all in the Northern and Western Region, education and training content needs to be relevant to employers both within the region and to the industries that are likely to establish a base within the region.

Greater collaboration among education and training institutions at all levels and alignment of education and training provision with areas of regional strength and future employment growth, as well as provision of transferable and entrepreneurial skills, will be most effective in enhancing regions' human capital.

A technological university in the region would act as a focal point for applied higher education and training in the region, attracting students and resources and being a facilitating factor in inward economic investment. It would be a dynamic driver in the region creating energy for generation of enterprise, wealth and social and cultural cohesion. It would be a partner with industry and employers in the region, developing applied research programmes, and shared centres of practice as well as providing training and education based on the regions needs and its growth opportunities.

The delivery of education and training is increasingly on a 'blended' basis; part in a classroom, or 'on the job' basis and part on-line and 'remote' from the trainer, usually from home. This online element and increasingly also class based delivery require quality resilient broadband.

Our Connected Place

Public Transport

Some of the analysis on car dependence and car use assumes that the use of the private car is always by choice. Many Western Region residents do not have any choice but to use their car to travel to work, education and health services and retail and leisure activities. Given the service levels within the Western Region, largely only those living in the centres of Galway and Sligo can reasonably expect to access services using public transport and it will likely be only a subset of these will be able to access suitable services to meet their needs

Bus

Investment in infrastructure and services including Bus Stations, Timetabling and ticketing, Rural transport services, PSO services and new transport hubs are all required and are detailed below.

A Review should be undertaken of the entire bus network across the region to identify new service routes and strategic locations for the creation of new, high quality transport hubs which would facilitate passengers to easily switch between services. Improved timetabling and ticketing to encourage greater take-up of this, more sustainable, transport mode.

In the context of Brexit, cross-border bus services must be maintained and if possible services increased to encourage modal shift from car to bus. Current agreements in relation to use of travel passes should also be maintained.

Roads

It is important that we continue to prioritise investment in national roads in line with RSES priorities. This includes investment in motorways in the region and in national primary roads. National secondary routes are critical for inter-regional linkages and ensuring access from rural areas to services and employment in larger urban centres.

We should identify and address emerging bottlenecks/improvements needed to support border communities in light of Brexit and we need to increase regional and local roads funding to allow road maintenance programme to be enhanced and to improve roads that have not been maintained to the appropriate standard.

Soft Infrastructure

Further capital investment in enhancing infrastructure and facilities at NUI Galway, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Sligo and Letterkenny Institute of Technology is needed to ensure that the full benefit of previous state investment can be realised and that the role of the higher education institutions in economic growth can be maximised. Investment in Further Education and training centres and facilities across the region is also needed to ensure upskilling across all skill levels.

Rail

Rail activity serving the Western Region can be enhanced through a more strategic policy focus, better service levels and additional investment. These include investments to support increased frequencies and service levels and a more competitive fare structure on all routes serving the Western Region, electrification of routes for shorter journey times and emissions savings, in the first instance Dublin to Sligo and Dublin to Galway, thereafter the other routes in the Western Region, passing loops (passenger and freight capacity) in the short-term and double tracking in the longer term to accommodate increased rail traffic. Better and less expensive car-parking facilities would encourage greater modal shift.

The Government committed to a feasibility study in advance of the Mid Term Review of the Capital Plan designed to identify what supports are required to increase the share of rail freight. This study needs to be completed to inform both investment needed to support the current rail freight traffic and the policy decisions to support a greater modal shift to rail freight so as to realise further emissions savings.

Air

Ireland West Airport requires funding for various maintenance and improvements to the main runway, Apron and car parking facilities which are the subject of capital and operational expenditure requests to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. New EU State Aid Guidelines permit additional aid in exceptional circumstances. The Government needs to support Ireland West Airport Knock in seeking approval for a higher aid rate.

There is an increasing focus on regional airports to be commercially independent with declining State aid rates over a 10 year period to 2025. The impact of this needs to be reviewed over the period so as to ensure the continuing viability of airports in the Region. Ireland West Airport Knock

and Donegal airport need to be supported to increase patronage levels which in turn will help support the Airports' viability.

Broadband and Communications Infrastructure

The government must ensure the National Broadband Plan NBP (i) is implemented fully (ii) can deliver on planned future EU target speeds by deploying future proofed infrastructure.

The Implementation Group of the mobile phone and broadband taskforce needs to ensure that actions to provide immediate solutions to the broadband and mobile phone coverage deficit in rural Ireland take effect at the earliest opportunity.

There are towns which have not yet had investment in Metropolitan Area Networks (MANs) infrastructure, (fibre rings enhancing broadband capacity in towns). These include Tuam and Westport and should be deployed.

Energy Infrastructure

The WDC regards the provision of quality energy transmission and distribution networks as important elements of the infrastructure required to underpin the economic development of the region. A commitment to investment in energy infrastructure is important to achieving regional development goals through the RSES.

It is important that investments in electricity network reinforcement are made, which will both allow for the transmission of significant amounts of renewable energy from the region, as well as providing high quality electricity infrastructure for enterprise in the region (both existing and potential). Lack of gas infrastructure may become a disincentive to investment, reducing a region's competitiveness and increasing existing disparities. The Strategy needs to be clear about the requirement for natural gas infrastructure in the North West, in particular in the larger towns of Sligo and Letterkenny.

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