

# Western Development Commission (WDC) Submission on the Draft First Revision to the National Planning Framework (NPF)

September 2024

## Introduction

The Western Development Commission (WDC) welcomes the opportunity to submit feedback on the Draft First Revision to the National Planning Framework (NPF). The WDC's mission is to ensure that government policy reflects the needs and maximises the potential of the Western Region, focusing on infrastructure, natural resources, enterprise, and rural development. Our organisation carefully monitors policy implementation, providing recommendations for adjustments where necessary to promote sustainable regional growth.

The WDC is a statutory body established under the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD). We work in close collaboration with national, regional, and local stakeholders to support the economic and social development of the Western Region through:

- Analysing economic and social trends and making policy recommendations;
- Promoting the Western Region as a place to live, work, and do business;
- Supporting the rural economy through strategic initiatives such as Connected Hubs;
- Providing risk capital to businesses and community projects via the WDC Investment Fund.

The Western Region is predominantly rural, with **63% of the population living outside settlements of 1,500 people** (Census 2022). Only **22.6% of the population** lives in towns of 10,000 or more, compared to **58% for the rest of the state**. This submission highlights key issues and offers actionable recommendations to ensure the NPF promotes balanced and sustainable growth, particularly in the Northern and Western Region (NWR).

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## Key Points

The original NPF (2018) set ambitious goals for rebalancing population and employment growth, but **Census 2022 data** shows limited progress. The **NWR's population growth rate of 6.8%** significantly lags behind the **9.1% growth in the Eastern and Midland Region (EMR)**. If the NPF is to achieve its objectives, stronger, more targeted policies are required, particularly for the NWR.

### 1. Regional Balance: Prioritising the North West

The NPF must give greater attention to the **Northern and Western Region (NWR)** to address its long-standing challenges. We recommend strengthening **Letterkenny's role as a Regional Growth Centre**, given its dual role as a key part of the **North West City Region** and **Sligo's role as a key driver in the north west**. The revised NPF should clearly identify the critical enabling infrastructure and investment needed to support **Letterkenny and Sligo**, similar to the approach for the five cities.

Additionally, to address the **persistent underinvestment** caused by the region's proximity to the border, the NPF should include a **specific investment bias** for critical infrastructure in the NWR. This will ensure the region is not further disadvantaged, and will prevent a widening of regional disparities.

## 2. Alignment of Sectoral Policy with NPF Goals

The NPF rightly acknowledges the role of sectoral policies, but stronger alignment is required to deliver the National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs). For regional balance, sectoral policies related to **transport, education, and employment** need to be integrated more explicitly into the NPF's objectives.

The electrification and **double-tracking of the Sligo-Dublin rail line**, currently the third most-used rail line, is essential to improving regional connectivity. The NPF must outline how such investments will align with broader sectoral goals and include clear timelines and funding commitments. Prioritising these investments will ensure **high-value employment opportunities** in the NWR can be realised.

## 3. Infrastructure Investment: Enabling Growth and Connectivity

While the NPF includes the goal of improving **inter-urban accessibility**, more specific details are required, particularly for the **Northern and Western Region**. As a key growth centre, **Letterkenny** must have access to critical infrastructure investments to support its development as part of the **North West City Region**. This requires a focus on **road and rail linkages**, with a particular emphasis on improving connections between **Sligo, Galway, and Letterkenny** along the Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC).

Further, the **North West City Region** must be treated with the same strategic importance as other **cross-border regions**, such as the **Belfast-Dublin Corridor**. The potential of this trans-boundary region should be fully recognised, and its economic development potential should be supported accordingly.

## 4. Strengthening Rural Economies: High-Value Employment

The NWR has great potential for **high-value employment** beyond traditional industries like agriculture and tourism. The success of **remote working** provides a blueprint for future growth, as evidenced by the **13.7% of remote workers** who have relocated since the pandemic. To maximise this potential, the NPF should commit to accelerating the **National Broadband Plan** to ensure rural areas can fully participate in the digital economy.

The **maritime economy**, a key enabler of regional development, must also be recognised in the NPF. References to its significance, which were removed from earlier drafts, should be reinstated in **Chapter 7**, as this sector is essential to the long-term growth of coastal regions, particularly in the NWR.

## 5. Airports and Ports: Supporting Regional Growth

The role of **regional airports and ports** in rebalancing growth should be more prominent in the NPF. **Shannon, Ireland West, and Cork** airports are crucial to decentralising economic activity from Dublin, yet they are not sufficiently supported. These airports need investment

in **surface connectivity** and innovative approaches to route development to attract more traffic and support regional growth.

Similarly, **Killybegs Port** should be recognised for its contributions to both the fishing industry and offshore wind energy. This deepwater port is a key enabler of future economic growth in the NWR and should be referenced in the **NPF's investment priorities**.

## 6. Transition to a Low-Carbon Economy

The NWR is ideally positioned to lead Ireland's **transition to renewable energy**, particularly in wind generation. However, the region is severely constrained by its **underdeveloped electricity grid**. The NPF must prioritise grid investment to unlock the NWR's renewable energy potential and ensure alignment with **Ireland's 2040 climate targets**.

The NPF should avoid focusing solely on minimising grid investment costs. Instead, it should ensure grid infrastructure is developed where it is most needed, even if it requires higher initial investment. This approach will maximise long-term benefits for both the region and Ireland as a whole.

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## National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs)

### NSO1: Compact Growth

The competitive nature of the **URDF and RRDF** limits access to key infrastructure resources for rural areas. Funding for **critical infrastructure** in the NWR should be prioritised through direct allocations to avoid competition-based delays.

### NSO2: Enhanced Regional Accessibility

The NWR's connectivity must be prioritised to improve regional accessibility. We welcome the target to improve **inter-urban travel speeds**, but greater clarity is needed on how this applies to smaller centres like **Sligo, Letterkenny, and Athlone**. Rail investments, such as the **electrification of the Sligo-Dublin line**, should be fast-tracked.

### NSO3: Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities

The rural economy of the NWR has much more potential than agriculture and tourism alone. **High-value employment opportunities** must be created to ensure these regions do not fall further behind. The NPF should accelerate broadband access and improve remote work infrastructure to sustain rural development.

### NSO4: High-Quality International Connectivity

**Shannon, Ireland West, and Cork airports** must be better integrated into Ireland's overall economic strategy. Investment in **surface connectivity** and creative approaches to route development will decentralise economic growth from Dublin and strengthen regional airports.

## **NSO5: Sustainable Mobility**

The **WDC Sustainable Mobility Index** highlights areas for improvement in public transport and active travel. Investments in **sustainable mobility infrastructure** should focus on improving connections between **towns and key service centres** in the NWR.

## **NSO6: A Strong Economy Supported by Innovation and Skills**

To achieve balanced growth in population and employment, the development of **economic drivers** must be prioritised in regions like the NWR, which have experienced slower growth. While we welcome the **White Paper on Enterprise's** targets for employment growth outside Dublin, it is crucial that **the WDC be better resourced** to support these objectives.

In recent years, resourcing for the WDC has not been a priority, despite the critical role we play in promoting economic development in the Western Region. For the NPF to succeed, the WDC requires **increased budget and staffing capacity** to:

- Drive the implementation of key regional policies,
- Facilitate greater access to funding for businesses and community projects,
- Support the development of strategic initiatives like **remote work hubs**, and
- Enhance the capacity to provide risk capital through the **WDC Investment Fund**.

The **Regional Enterprise Plans** (REPs), which have been vital in improving the business environment, are currently under-resourced, with only one person employed per region. This limits the ability to effect real change. By significantly increasing the WDC's budget and resources, we can better support the implementation of the NPF and help ensure that regional economic targets are met.

## **NSO7: Enhanced Amenities and Heritage**

We support the NPF's commitment to enhancing amenities and heritage, but greater funding allocation is needed. The competitive nature of existing funding streams makes it difficult for many regions to take full advantage of available resources.

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## **Conclusion**

The WDC is committed to supporting the successful implementation of the NPF, particularly in fostering balanced growth in the Northern and Western Region. By prioritising infrastructure investment, high-value employment opportunities, and stronger sectoral alignment, the NPF can achieve its long-term vision for sustainable regional development.

We look forward to further discussions and remain available to provide additional insight on any points raised in this submission.