



Western Development Commission (WDC) submission to the Consultation on the National Development Plan 2026 to 2035

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1. Name: Frances Hague

2. Please indicate if you are submitting on behalf of an organisation and or as an individual:

On behalf of an organisation.

3. Name of organisation (if relevant): Western Development Commission.

The Western Development Commission (WDC) is a statutory body established under the Western Development Commission Act, 1998. It operates as a state agency under the remit of the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht. The agency was created to promote and support social and economic development in Ireland's Western Region, comprising the counties of Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon, Galway, and Clare.

Our organisation monitors policy implementation, providing recommendations for adjustments where necessary to promote sustainable regional growth. The WDC welcomes the opportunity to submit its views on the National Development Plan (NDP) 2026 to 2035. As requested, we have set out our response below in answer to the questions included in the consultation paper. If there are any queries, please do not hesitate to get in touch: franceshague@wdc.ie

4. The Review of the National Development Plan will be focused to ensure that economic infrastructure can be prioritised to deliver 300,000 additional homes by 2030 and to support international competitiveness.

A) In that context, which sectors should be a national priority for additional investment

B) Why should these sectors be a national priority for additional investment?

Project Ireland 2040 recognises that optimum national growth will be realised through strong growth across all regions. This is imperative, as without such concerted policy action and direction it is likely that many regions will fall further behind. The National Development Plan remains the key mechanism through which the objectives of Project Ireland 2040 can be achieved. The efficiency of investment and overall level of spending will inform the meeting of these objectives from 2026 to 2035.

The Western Region is predominantly rural, with 63% of the population living outside settlements of 1,500 people (Census 2022)¹. Despite progress across many markers of regional development in recent years, the Western Region continues to lag behind other regions in the country². This is underlined by economic disparity in the Western Region in comparison to other regions³. The cost of not investing in infrastructure, connectivity and services and the impact it will have, if left unaddressed, is important when considering infrastructure deficits and the region's ability to harness opportunities in the future⁴. Targeted investment and economic stimulation policies (addressing the 3 Es (Education, Employment and Enterprise), and the 2 Is (Infrastructure and Innovation)⁵) to address the impact of gaps and delays to delivery must be expedited.

Capital spending and development of infrastructure should focus on the most effective investments to provide the conditions for regions to realise their full potential, and to support broader societal goals to underpin the objective of “sustainable development of the regions”. Meeting the strategic goals under the NDP and Project Ireland 2040 would assist with addressing underserved areas of infrastructure in the Western Region. Development and delivery of key infrastructure projects would provide a substantial return on investment⁶, as demonstrated by successes in the region's growth in the past two decades⁷. Regional strategic prioritisation aligns with this Government's ambition to deliver balanced regional development and targeted investment⁸ and should underpin the allocation of capital funding.

Smart specialisation in sectors is key to the growth of the region, and so relevant capital and current investment are essential. As NESC stated in their 2023 paper on regional economic resilience, “It is the sectoral mix...which has the main impact on regional growth performance”⁹. Such key sectors in the region include established sectors such as life sciences and MedTech, precision engineering, agri-business, construction, creative industries, tourism, and emerging sectors such as AI-driven software, digital business services, fintech and reg-tech, connected health, and renewables.

It is the WDC's view that investment should prioritise regional projects that will drive regional employment and enterprise growth, which in turn will drive population growth and enable communities to thrive. Therefore, while we recognise the importance of each of the sectors outlined in the consultation document, this submission focuses on key enabling infrastructure issues and recommendations to ensure the NDP supports balanced and sustainable growth in the Western Region. The sections below highlight priority sectors and the rationale for additional investment for each.

¹ [WDC Census 2022 Summary Report- for Western Region](#)

² [WDC, Bridging the Divide -25 Years of Transformation in the Western Region](#)

³ [European Commission Country Report June 2025](#), p120

⁴ [Regional Enterprise Plan, The Impact of Infrastructure to Enterprise in the North-West Region](#)

⁵ [WDC Policy Briefing - Why care about regions?](#)

⁶ [WDC Policy Briefing: The Revised National Development Plan](#)

⁷ [WDC, Bridging the Divide -25 Years of Transformation in the Western Region](#)

⁸ Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland's Future

⁹ National Economic and Social Council (NESC), [Regional Economic Resilience and Resistance in Ireland 2001-2022: The Roles of Industrial Structure and Foreign Inward Investment](#), p27

Transport

Investment in transport infrastructure is critical to supporting performance of the economy, economic growth, and population growth in the Western Region. The European Commission's "Regional Competitive Index" ranked the Northern and Western Region's transport infrastructure 218th out of 234 NUTS 2 Regions¹⁰. Transport infrastructure underpins several key objectives under the NDP, including NSO 2: Enhanced Regional Connectivity, NSO 4: Sustainable mobility, and NSO 6: High Quality International Connectivity.

Roads

Several key national road network commitments in the west and northwest have been delivered under the current NDP 2021-2030. However, road infrastructure commitments in the revised NDP 2026-2035 must include and accelerate progress on the following routes:

- Atlantic Road Corridor projects, including sections of the N15 and N17, to support the linking of regions and urban areas (outside Dublin) and enable balanced regional development.
- Redevelopment of N17 Knock to Collooney to a dual carriageway to meet capacity demands.
- Sections of the TEN-T network in Donegal identified for upgrade, i.e. the N15/N13, N56/N13, and N14/ A5 Link.
- Improvements to N15 Stranorlar-Lifford to meet capacity and safety demands.
- Key connecting routes in Donegal, including N2/A5, N56, and N13.
- N4 Carrick-on-Shannon to Dromod, including the Carrick-on-Shannon bypass.
- Improvements to N4/N5 Mullingar to Longford.
- N16 Road Realignment Project to improve route consistency of the network.
- Upgrade of N5, N26 and N58 road corridors.
- N6 Galway City Ringroad scheme to provide a long-term solution to traffic challenges facing the city and accessibility within the county.

Rail

Investment in rail infrastructure is crucial for supporting balanced development in the Western Region. The following focuses have not been specifically included in the current NDP and should be included in the revised NDP 2026-2035:

- Plans for the electrification and double-tracking of the Sligo-Dublin and Galway-Dublin lines, to support regional connectivity and high-value employment in the Western Region.
- Capacity and service level improvements across all lines serving the region; Galway-Dublin, Sligo-Dublin, Ballina/Westport/ Castlebar-Dublin.

¹⁰ [Inforegio, EU Regional Competitiveness Index 2.0 2022](#) (The NUTS 2 Northern and Western Region includes all of the counties in the Western Region except for Clare, but also includes Cavan and Monaghan. It is not exact but is useful as a proxy in the absence of specific county-level data.

The current NDP notes that opportunities for improving regional rail connectivity represent an area where there is a need for investment in existing and new infrastructure:

- The reopening of Western Railway Corridor lines Claremorris- Tuam – Athenry, included in the current NDP and All-Island Strategic Rail Review, should be accelerated.

Public Transport

The WDC's recently published Sustainable Mobility Index 2024 highlights the importance of investing in high-quality public transport services which link key service centres, towns and cities, and are not just about east-west connections and getting to Dublin¹¹. Bus services play an important role in connecting urban and rural communities in the Western Region, providing services which enable access to employment and education and support social inclusion and community cohesion. Bus services offer critical, scalable transport connections to airports in the region and support tourism, often where other public transport links are not currently available.

Rural areas provide much of the urban workforce and urban demand, and rural-urban linkages must be prioritised for investment in public transport infrastructure and services in the revised NDP:

- For example, the rural transport programme has expanded upon and supported connectivity of rural and urban towns and villages in rural areas through TFI Local Link services. However, continued investment in and enhancement of public transport services is needed, to ensure enhanced and connected service provision.
- Public transport in the Western Region is a prime area for further investment in the transition to low carbon and sustainable public transport¹².
- Greater integration of public and private bus services should also be encouraged to maximise connectivity.
- Investment in transport hub interchange facilities, enhanced bus waiting facilities and the use of smart technology (where appropriate) to provide real-time passenger information should be explored as part of integrating and improving public transport services and connections in the Western Region.
- While mention of greenways in the current NDP is positive, investment needs to include other areas of active travel and to connect to central hubs in towns to enable public transport services to link up effectively.

Airports and Ports

Regional airports and ports play an important role in rebalancing growth in the Western Region and decentralising economic activity from Dublin. The current NDP identifies airports and ports as strategic investment priorities, and these priorities should be prominent in terms of policy alignment and investment in the NDP 2026-2035.

¹¹ [WDC, Sustainable Mobility Index 2024](#)

¹² [WDC, Transition to a Low Carbon Region](#)

The three airports located within the Western Region – Donegal, Ireland West Airport and Shannon – are quite different airports, operating at different scales and with different catchments. All three provide national and international connectivity and act as economic drivers for the region¹³, with the potential for further growth. To support this:

- The current NDP’s commitment to “continued Exchequer support for smaller regional airports”¹⁴ and identification of innovative approaches (acknowledging state aid rules) should be included and built upon in the revised NDP and successive Regional Airports Programme (RAP).
- Airports in the region require investment in surface connectivity and innovative approaches to route development to attract more traffic and to support regional growth. Improved transport infrastructure should be expedited, including upgrades to airport access roads (such as the N17 upgrade from Knock to Collooney and the N19 Shannon Airport Access Road scheme), better public transport connections and extension of the rail network.
- Commitment is needed for investment in Ireland Airport West Knock Strategic Development Zone (SDZ), including buildout of action points as part of roadmap development for the zone.

In the context of improving regional balance and the post-Brexit landscape, there is a need to support ports in the Western Region. The ongoing upgrade and improvement of the region’s harbours and ports, such as Killybegs Port, Galway Harbour and Port and Shannon Foynes Port, are important for the development of fisheries, the marine, and offshore energy in the region. There is currently a prohibition on state funding for ports and, while there is no case for public funding of established commercial port operations, there are instances where public funding should be considered as part of the revised NDP to ensure the achievement of government policy in a variety of areas:

- Government policy to achieve Net Zero by 2050 is explicit and it will require significant renewable development (onshore, offshore electricity generation and other renewable generation as well as Power to X) to meet this which in turn will require significant investment in the development of port infrastructure.
- To achieve investment in a timely manner, some form of public funding will likely be required to kick start developments, help bring some certainty in the sector as well as helping to unlock other sources of funding.

Energy

The Western Region is severely constrained by its underdeveloped electricity grid and significant investment is needed to meet long-term needs¹⁵ and should be expedited. Linking with NSO 8: Climate Resilient Society, there is a need to focus on spending on low carbon

¹³ [Regional Enterprise Plan, The Impact of Infrastructure to Enterprise in the North-West Region](#)

¹⁴ National Development Plan 2021-2030, p67

¹⁵ [WDC submission to the CRU Consultation on the Draft EirGrid Transmission Development Plan 2021-2030](#)

transition in more rural regions, including energy infrastructure¹⁶. There must be NDP commitment in the following areas:

- Significant investment in electricity transmission into Donegal and the northwest to ensure there is has sufficient transmission capacity to reduce current curtailment to less than 3%, to allow for further onshore development in the county and to position offshore Donegal as a viable area for ORE.
- In Mayo, the North Connacht 110kV project will be at capacity once commissioned as there is already significant contracted generation in that area. There is urgent need to address in the lack of capacity in Mayo, to reduce curtailment and to allow for further onshore development, including at current sites, and to have sufficient capacity to allow of development of ORE off the coast.

The WDC has long highlighted this lack of transmission infrastructure in the northwest¹⁷. While a number of projects in the region have reached pre planning stages, these have been shelved for a variety of reasons. It is important that this does not happen again and that grid development in the west and northwest is prioritised. The revised NDP should have a clear listing of these specific projects in the west and northwest with an associated funding stream for these projects.

Parts of the Western Region were severely impacted by Storm Éowyn and other recent storms and severe weather, which caused significant disruption to households and businesses across the region and beyond. The current NDP refers to achieving “climate adaption” and further investment is crucial to decrease vulnerability and to ensure responsive and adaptive energy infrastructure is in place to mitigate the impact of severe weather events.

Water

The NDP must prioritise the maintenance and improvement of the water supply to houses and businesses, and to the management of the environmental water quality in the Western Region. The EPA’s report on urban wastewater treatment in 2023 identified 16 towns and villages where untreated wastewater in being discharged, more than half (9) of which are in the region (2 in Clare, 4 in Donegal, 2 in Galway, and 1 in Mayo)¹⁸. While these towns and villages are scheduled for treatment by 2027, they must be expedited and listed as priority infrastructure given the environmental consequences they pose for those communities and the wider region.

Enterprise

To achieve balanced growth in population and employment under NSO 3: Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities, the development of economic drivers must be prioritised in the Western Region, which has experienced slower growth¹⁹. It is important to note that all focuses included in this submission are also cross-cutting with enterprise and enabling economic

¹⁶ [WDC, Transition to a Low Carbon Region](#)

¹⁷ [WDC Briefing on electricity transmission infrastructure needs in the west and northwest](#)

¹⁸ [Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\) Urban Wastewater Treatment Report 2023](#)

¹⁹ [WDC, Bridging the Divide: 25 Years of Transformation in the Western Region](#)

growth. The NDP 2026-2035 should prioritise building regional economic drivers and supporting opportunities to diversify and strengthen rural economies:

- Enterprises based in the region should be supported to be innovative and competitive, to increase sustainable employment in its rural and urban areas.
- The URDF, REDF and RRDF have been very important in stimulating development but regions with lower industrial base and emerging sectors are particularly challenged by the match funding requirements. These should be reduced or eliminated for the most rural counties and emerging sectors, and the projects should be supported for longer (5 to 7 years).
- The Digital Ireland Framework commits to driving the digitisation of enterprise, infrastructure and services, and this commitment should be reflected in the revised NDP. Resourcing to support both larger businesses and SMEs based in the region with digitisation should be provided to assist with meeting digital targets and scaling innovative enterprise.

Sustainable employment, remote working and enterprise hubs

The Western Region has potential for growth in high-value employment²⁰, beyond traditional industries like agriculture and tourism. The success of remote and blended working practices provides a blueprint for future growth, as evidenced by the 13.7% of remote workers who have relocated since the pandemic²¹. The growth of the Connected Hubs remote working hub network since 2021 demonstrates the importance of continued investment in remote working infrastructure:

- To support regional employment and enable people to live and work in their own communities and facilitate relocation from congested urban areas.
- To support SME's, entrepreneurs, the startup ecosystem, and operate as early-stage landings spaces for foreign direct investment (FDI) companies.

The Programme for Government references the importance of Connected Hubs, particularly regarding their impact on rural communities and the “huge additional potential” they have. Connected Hubs play an important role in the Western Region, and the Government’s intention to expand the remit of and promote Connected Hubs²² is one which should be prioritised and progressed to support employment, enterprises and communities in rural areas.

The Programme for Government also notes that the increase in remote working has been “hugely positive” for rural Ireland and reiterates the commitment to the rollout of highspeed broadband under the National Broadband Plan to support connectivity²³. A Key Data report from ComReg for Q1 of 2025 showed that 67% of active broadband lines have speeds of 500Mbps, while 20% have speeds of 1Gbps²⁴. As of 2024, 76.4% of rural households had access

²⁰ [WDC, Understanding our regional economy: growth and change in sectoral GVA](#)

²¹ [WDC Annual Remote Working Survey 2023](#)

²² [Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future](#) p107

²³ [Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future](#) p35

²⁴ [ComReg Quarterly Key Data Report Q1 2025](#)

to 5G coverage²⁵, but is notable that many of the largest areas with no 5G coverage are located in the west and north-west²⁶.

Completion of the National Broadband Plan and rollout of mobile coverage should be accelerated, to ensure rural areas can fully participate in the digital economy. In particular, the following targets should be prioritised in the revised NDP:

- All Irish households and businesses should be covered by a Gigabit network no later than 2028.
- All populated areas should be covered by 5G no later than 2030.

Housing, Health and Education

A report from the WDC found that the number of people living and working in the Western Region increased by 13.3% between 2016 and 2022²⁷. An increased population leads to higher demand for capital assets and public services²⁸ and commitments to funding for education, healthcare and housing for rural communities must be continued and built upon in the revised NDP.

All the key pillars of regional development are reliant to some degree on both the availability of suitable housing for rent or purchase and its being accessible at prices that are affordable relative to regional income levels. While there is some progress around housing completions and commencements across the Region in 2024 and Q1 of 2025, rates of both are below national levels and supply remains below regional needs²⁹. Housing development is not happening at the level that is needed either to meet current demand or provide for the kind of population growth and regional re-balancing which is desirable from a regional development perspective. Under NSO 1: Compact Growth, greater investment should be made to:

- Meet regional and local targets for housing in line with projected population growth, and ensuring zoned lands are serviced.
- Further invest in the refurbishment of derelict buildings and ensuring the financial viability of bringing these buildings back into use. Doing so assists with providing housing and brings vitality and employment opportunities to rural towns and villages.
- Continue investment in water, energy, and wastewater infrastructure to support additional housing development.

The Region has a high proportion of the State's "remote/rural areas"³⁰ and a relatively high ageing population³¹ so has additional challenges in accessing health care. The development of

²⁵ [European Commission, Broadband coverage in Europe 2024 – Mapping progress towards the coverage objectives of the digital decade](#)

²⁶ [ComReg information to DECC in support of JOC request](#)

²⁷ [WDC, Travel to Work and Labour Catchments in the Western Region - Census 2022](#)

²⁸ [Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, Ireland's Infrastructure Demands](#)

²⁹ [WDC, Recent Housing Statistics in the Western Region: A Regional Development Perspective](#)

³⁰ [CSO, Introduction Urban and Rural Life in Ireland, 2019](#)

³¹ Six of the eight counties with the highest average age in the State are in the Western Region: Mayo has the highest average age at 41.6, followed by Roscommon, Leitrim, Sligo, Clare, and Donegal. Based on WDC analysis of CSO Census Data 2022.

Connected Health networks for remote rural areas including the islands is both a major need and opportunity, building on the expertise in rural medicine in University of Galway, the WDC led Clare Island pilot experience, and related ATU and private sector capabilities. Linked with NSO 10: Access to quality Childcare, Education and Health Services, investment should be made to support:

- The design and delivery of health services in accessible locations for those living in rural communities. Services should be provided at key locations in the region, and the provision of connected and accessible transport opportunities must be integral to service provision.

The Region's educational landscape has strengthened with the establishment of Atlantic Technological University (ATU) and the continued growth of the University of Galway. In 2022/2023, 55.5% of students from the Western Region attended third-level institutions within the region³², indicating both growing capacity and the potential for further development in this area. Also linked with NSO 10, investment should support:

- Development of capital infrastructure (including buildings, facilities and equipment) and approval to appoint professors, to enable Technical Universities (TUs) in the Region to further develop their research capacity.
- Provision of a borrowing framework for TUs to amplify investment across their institutions.
- Increased provision of student accommodation and the rollout of a specific borrowing framework to enable TUs to develop accommodation.

5. In the context of the need to boost the delivery of infrastructure, what trade-offs and constraints should the government be aware of and how should these be managed as part of the Review of the National Development Plan?

There are a range of capacity constraints and considerations which inform the context around the delivery of infrastructure through the NDP³³. Issues such as the planning and regulatory environment, labour supply and construction sector capacity influence the delivery of projects, both nationally and regionally. The WDC suggests that infrastructure development should focus on the most efficient investments to deliver economic growth and balanced regional development. We advocate for the following to manage the delivery of infrastructure:

- Project management needs to focus on delivery and improvement of projects which support the objectives of Project Ireland 2040, and especially those supporting regional employment and population growth. Delivering agencies, such as local authorities, should be equipped with project management resources.
- Project delivery should prioritise the “frontloading” of regional development projects, with emphasis of speedy delivery of projects which are crucial for harnessing balanced development, economic growth and societal wellbeing in the Western Region.

³² [Higher Education Authority \(HEA\), Key Facts and Figures 2023](#)

³³ [Economic and Social Research Institute \(ESRI\), The National Development Plan in 2023: Priorities and capacity](#) p98

- Geographic concentration of ‘National’ investment in the Eastern and Midlands Regions must be addressed in the revised NDP 2026-2035 to deliver on objectives around balanced regional development. As noted, strategic investment in the Western Region is crucial to addressing its infrastructure deficit and to harness opportunities. A more balanced geographic spread of projects is required to achieve overall value for investment and regarding the over-arching national and regional objectives of Project Ireland 2040.
- Appraisal methods often focus on the specific benefits of investment and do not necessarily consider the wider context of investing in less developed regions versus more densely populated areas. There is often little understanding or method of assessing the costs associated with a lack of infrastructural investment, and particularly the opportunity costs of lack of investment. While more complex, appraisal methods should be adjusted to take account of any potential wider economic and social benefits of a project and its potential to contribute to regional development objectives.

6. Government has been communicating on National Development Plan delivery in several ways, including through the Project Ireland 2040 Interactive Map and Tracker, and the Project Ireland 2040 Annual and Regional Reports. How can government best communicate the National Development Plan?

The breakdown of projects provided by region and category via the Interactive Project Map and Tracker is a valuable resource, but it would be useful to have the status of each project made clearer (e.g. colour-coding or the ability to filter by project phase). There should be accuracy in reporting successes and timelines, for example in reporting what projects were delivered under this NDP or its predecessor(s). It would also be useful to have relevant NDP documents collated (current and previous NDP documents) on a designated website page or hub for reference purposes.