

Northern and Western Regional Assembly Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) Pre-Draft Consultation Paper



Tionól Réigiúnach
an Tuaiscirt & an Iarthair
Northern & Western
Regional Assembly

Have Your Say on the Future of the Northern and Western Region

Context

Regional Government in Ireland as we know it today was part of Government reforms in the mid-2010s where three Regional Assemblies were established in 2015. One function of the Regional Assemblies' was to prepare, adopt and implement a **Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES)** for each of the Regions. In tandem with this, the government published **Project Ireland 2040** - the government's long-term overarching strategy to make Ireland a better country for all and to build a more resilient and sustainable future - which consists of two frameworks (plans) – the **National Planning Framework (NPF)** and the **National Development Plan (NDP)**. The NPF sets the vision and strategy for the development of our country to 2040 and the NDP provides the enabling investment to implement that strategy. Project Ireland 2040 sets out the national planning objectives and the identification of various funding streams for their delivery. To ensure alignment across the planning system, lower tier plans and strategies such as the RSES must be materially consistent with national policy.



The Northern and Western Regional Assembly adopted its first Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy in early 2020 for the period 2020-2032, and its implementation

has been on-going over the last 6 years. As part of the monitoring and implementation of the RSES, the Assembly has produced two reports assessing the progress of regional ambitions, and these reports are available on the NWRA website, and their conclusions included a series of recommendations across a number of different areas of policy and project delivery.

In 2024 the **Planning and Development Act 2024** was enacted and Part 3 (Chapter 4) of that Act, now commenced, provides for a review of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy where the National Planning Framework has been revised. The National Planning Framework First Revision was approved by government in April 2025, and this was followed by a review of the National Development Plan in late 2025. Having considered the requirements of the planning and related legislation, along with the National Planning Framework First Revision, the revised National Development Plan and the current focus by Government on accelerating the provision of critical infrastructure, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly have come to the conclusion that a new Regional Spatial and Economic Development Strategy for the Northern and Western Region is required.

This Consultation Paper marks the first stage of the strategy-making process – the pre-draft consultation process. This paper sets out:

- What a Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy is alongside the strategy-making process,
- What areas of policy should be incorporated into the strategy,
- A summary of our region today, including key indicators across demographics and economic performance,
- The emerging challenges and opportunities for our region, and
- How you can make a submission to this stage of the strategy-making process.

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly invite **prescribed bodies, public bodies, individuals, communities and all our stakeholders** to help shape the future of the Region by making a submission.

The Regional Economic and Spatial Strategy

What is the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES)?

The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) is an important statutory document for the long-term strategic planning for the spatial and economic development of the Northern and Western Region. It sets out how the region should grow, where investment should be focused and how national policy should be delivered at a regional and local level (the latter mainly through County Development Plans) over the next 20 years, and beyond. As a statutory framework adopted by elected local councillors nominated from constituent local authorities¹ in the region, the RSES ensures that regional development is grounded in democratic representation and public participation.

What the new Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) must do?

The content of a RSES is set out in [Section 29 of the Planning & Development Act 2024 \(as amended\)](#) and may be summarised as follows:

- Provides a regional plan for sustainable settlements, population and housing targets, infrastructure (transport, energy, water, communications, waste management) climate action, marine and coastal matters, cultural and natural heritage, economic and employment-related development (retail, industry and commercial) and social infrastructure (third level education, healthcare, sports of scale) by making provision for, or making strategies for, the above mentioned areas.
- Support, and be materially consistent with, the National Planning Framework, National Marine Planning Framework and relevant National Policies and Measures.
- Be in accordance with the principles of proper planning and sustainable development.

¹ The 9 Local Authorities in the Northern and Western Region are Cavan, Donegal, Galway, Leitrim, Mayo, Monaghan, Roscommon and Sligo

Environmental Assessments

In preparing the RSES, the environmental impact resulting from the making of and implementation of the RSES must be considered at each step of the strategy-making process in a parallel process. This will ensure that the implementation of the RSES will not result in a significant and/or adverse impact on the environment and/or a “European site”.²

There are three formal environmental processes which form part of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy preparation:

- Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA),
- Appropriate Assessment (AA) and
- Regional Flood Risk Appraisal (RFRA)

² “European sites” generally refer to protected ecological areas under the EU Natura 2000 network, comprising Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) designated to conserve natural habitats and wild species.

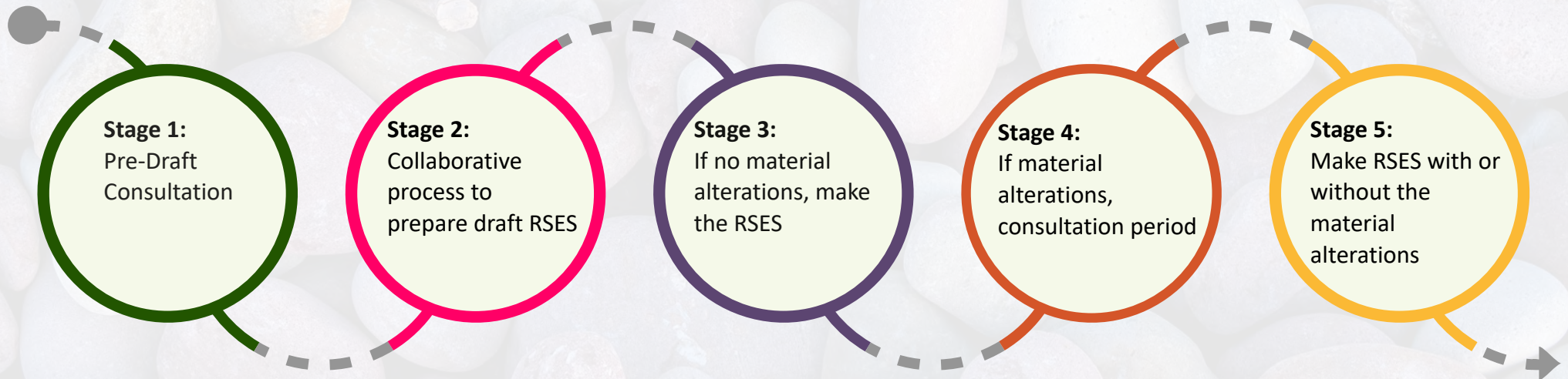
How long will it take to prepare the new Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Northern and Western Region?

The review of the current Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Northern and Western Region (2020-2032) and the process of making a new strategy begins on 26th of March 2026, with a first draft RSES anticipated to be prepared by Q4 of 2026, with any Material Amendment Stage in Q2 of 2027. Below is an indicative timeline for the RSES process (subject to change).

Public notice issued;
Minimum 8 week consultation;
SEA, AA & RFRA processes commences.

Report sent to Members on Draft RSES Consultation & SEA, AA & RFRA Reports.

Publish completed document



Collaborative process to prepare draft RSES including engagement with Members and other stakeholders.
10 week consultation process on Draft RSES with SEA, AA & RFRA Reports.

Report to Members on Material Alterations & SEA, AA and RFRA

OUR REGION TODAY

The Northern and Western Region

The Northern and Western Region comprises of eight counties - the counties of Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon, Galway, Monaghan and Cavan - having nine constituent local authorities with Galway having two local authorities (Galway City and Galway County).

Topographically it is Ireland's largest region, covering 37% of the State's land area; and has a population of over 900,000 people. The Region contains a diverse network of settlements ranging from a city, towns, villages and rural communities and has a strong economic base in education, tourism, agri-food, med-tech, advanced manufacturing, marine industries and renewable energy. The infographics below provides a snapshot of the Region's performance in relation to employment, education, climate, environment and economic activity.

In terms of regional urban settlements as set out in the current RSES, the region includes the Galway Metropolitan Area and a network of Regional Growth Centres (Letterkenny, Sligo, Galway, Athlone (Western catchment)) and Key Towns (Ballina, Castlebar, Tuam, Monaghan, Cavan, Carrick-on-Shannon, and Ballinasloe). These settlements play a critical role in supporting balanced growth, jobs, services and housing.

A snapshot of up-to-date data is summarised in the infographic on p.6 and data on demographics, housing, economy, transport and carbon for the region and for each county in the Northern and Western region is due to be published on the website at www.nwra.ie.

The current RSES is available to view at [Regional Spatial And Economic Strategy 2020-2032](#), and was subject to two 2-year reviews that are available at [2020 – 2022 report](#) and [2022-2024 report](#).

Where do we see our region in twenty years time?

This review has come at a time of significant challenges and opportunities for the Northern and Western Region, which include population changes, economic opportunities, the delivery of necessary infrastructure to support existing and future population growth, the delivery of climate change and adaptation measures, and the restoration, protection and enhancement of amenity and heritage.





962,200 **17.6%**

Population
(2025)

Share of Ireland's population
(2025)

180,400 **124,400**
Age 0-14 Age 15-24

488,200 **169,200**
Age 25-64 Age 65+

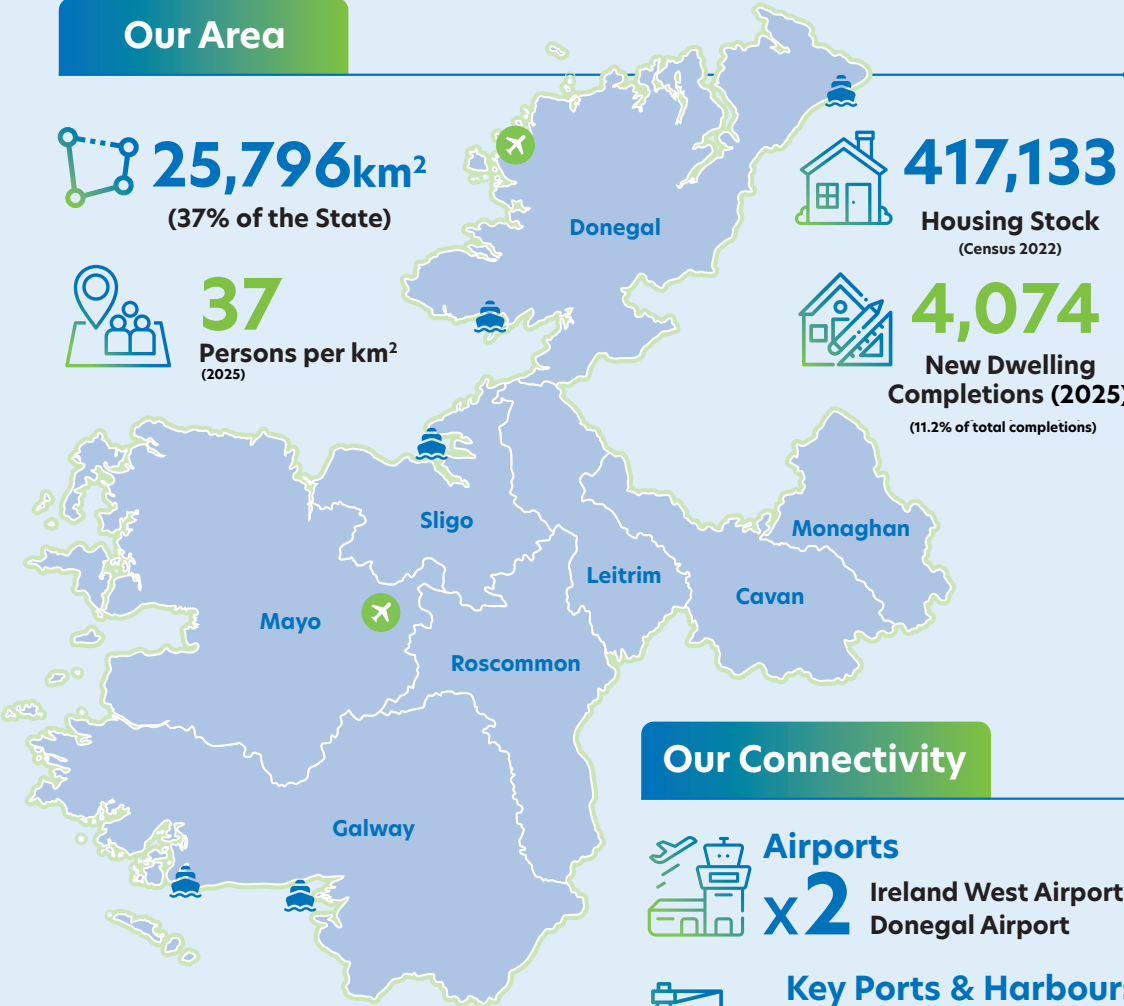
Our Area

25,796km²
(37% of the State)

37
Persons per km²
(2025)

417,133
Housing Stock
(Census 2022)

4,074
New Dwelling Completions (2025)
(11.2% of total completions)



Our Connectivity

Airports
x2 Ireland West Airport
Donegal Airport

Key Ports & Harbours
Port of Galway, Killybegs,
Sligo Port, Ros An Mhíl
and Greencastle



19,297
SEAI energy upgrade measures
(2025)



1,104
Heat pumps Installed
(2025)



14.0%
Full EVs as a percentage of new
private car registrations in the region
(12 months to Jan 2026)



3,275 GWh (gigawatt-hour)
Wind Energy Generation
(2023)

Our Environment

56%
Percentage of Rivers
with a "High" or "Good"
Biological Quality (2019-24)

45%
Percentage of Lakes
with a "High" or "Good"
Biological Quality (2019-24)

13.6
(t CO₂-eq/capita)
GHG emissions
per capita (2023)

Our Economy

43,969
Commerical
Properties
(Q2-2025)



14.7%
Commerical
Vacancy Rate
(Q2-2025)

4.5%
Unemployment
Rate
(Q4-2025)



487,900
People in
Employment
(Q4-2025)

510,500
People in Labour Force
(Q4-2025)

203
IDA Client
Companies
(2025)



44,127
Jobs supported
by IDA Client
Companies
(2025)

€44.9 billion
GDP (2024)



€51,324
Median Household
Disposable Income
(2025)



Transition Region
EU Funding
Status (2021-2027)



Our Education

2 Universities
The Atlantic
Technological
University



University of Galway



46,030
Higher Education
Enrolments
(2023/2024)



54%
Tertiary Education
Attainment Rate
(2024)



102,169
Students in Primary Education
(2024-2025)



76,760
Students in Secondary School Education
(2024-2025)

Some emerging challenges for the region

- The peripheral location of the region, exacerbated by challenges in transport connectivity across the West and Border counties.
- Emerging two-tier EU regional policy classification within the Northern and Western (NUTS2) at NUTS 3 level i.e. Border is below EU27 average in terms of GDP per capita – whereas West is above the EU27 average.
- Future EU funding uncertainty post 2027.
- City/town centre population decline, with some evidence of demographic shifts to suburbs.
- High rates of vacancy and dereliction, particularly across medium size towns in the region.
- Pronounced infrastructural deficits and the slow pace of progressing projects of scale across the region.
- The need for structured governance and oversight to drive progress across the Galway Metropolitan Area.
- Growing trend of traffic congestion in our city and towns.
- Climate change, including increasing shifts in weather patterns, including an increase in the frequency severe events.
- The need to effectively implement RSES policy objectives.
- Population decline in some of the region's peripheral locations, and the associated challenges in the viability of community services.

Some emerging opportunities for the region

- Gateway to Europe from the west.
- Leverage above average economic activity in the West and work to extend this to the Border.
- Be EU funding ready.
- Continuing to plan for the growth and success of Galway City & environs, as well as accelerating the growth of Sligo & Letterkenny as Regional Growth Centres.
- Re-imagining our city and town centres with sustainable development/ place-making creating vibrancy.
- Leverage on positives aspects of European Commission's "Regional Competitiveness Index".
- Realise the potential of Ireland West Airport Knock and the Strategic Development Zone adjacent.
- Grow our skill-based through continued support to our third level education institutions.
- Identify 'mega sites' or similar for sustainable economic development.
- Support sustainable development of renewable energy.
- Combine climate action measures to restore habitats and species.
- Sustainably develop our Gaeltacht areas and cultural heritage.
- Provide healthy living environments.
- Cross border networks and supporting the all-island economy.
- Capitalise on key sectoral specialisms in the region including – but not limited to – advanced manufacturing, med-tech, civil engineering, tourism, agri-food, marine industries and renewable energy.

Submission Deadline: Friday 22nd May 2026 at 6pm



Potential Emerging Priorities

The preparation of a new RSES provides us with an opportunity to plan for strategic spatial and economic matters which are crucial for the Northern and Western region to grow and thrive sustainably, including:

- The identification of key settlements for accelerated growth, and which will deliver housing at scale in sustainable locations,
- Supporting vibrant city and town centres as well as reducing vacancy and dereliction,
- Effectively aligning the future spatial development of the region alongside its economic development, and where possible, to match demographic growth with added focus on employment opportunities for our citizens,
- Addressing infrastructure by
 - a. Identifying and prioritising the critically enabling infrastructure projects across the region,
 - b. Assessing the infrastructure needs of the region in a manner which future proofs our Counties for the next generation ,
- An ongoing focus on third level education, research, healthcare and sports facilities of a scale that would serve wide areas / sub regions across our Border & Western Counties,
- Focus on maritime economic opportunities, as well as conserving our seascapes, and ocean assets – taking into account challenges in respect of coastal erosion,
- A balanced approach to regional development to ensure our spatial and economic policy assists in distributing sustainable growth across all counties and communities of this region,
- Focusing on measures which enable our region to more effectively mitigate and respond to extreme weather events, as well as a general approach to matters relating to climate change guided by the Climate Action Plan, which was updated in 2025,
- Managing the transition to a low-carbon economy, and
- EU funding management, particularly in the context of the new Multiannual Financial Framework 2028- 2034. Ensuring alignment of European funding with the policy priorities of the RSES.

The new RSES must provide a plan to support the delivery of these and other relevant matters in an integrated and coordinated way, supporting, and in accordance with, national policy. It is intended to do this by creating “SMART” (see image) Regional Policy Objectives along with a robust implementation and monitoring strategy.



HAVE YOUR SAY

We would like to hear your views

We are seeking your views on the future spatial and economic development of the Northern and Western region. How do you see the region evolving in terms of matters outlined above?

Submissions / observations may be made at our online consultation platform:

consult.nwra.ie

or by email to

rses@nwra.ie with the subject “**Pre-Draft RSES Consultation Paper**”

or by post marked “**Pre-Draft RSES Consultation Paper**” to

Northern & Western Regional Assembly,
Dillon House,
Ballaghaderreen,
Co. Roscommon,
F45 WY26,
Ireland.

The preferred method of making submissions is by the consultation platform. Please use only one method (i.e. consult platform, e-mail or other method) for making a submission.

Any submission made must include **YOUR NAME** and **ORGANISATION NAME/ PRIVATE INDIVIDUAL**

DEADLINE

The deadline for the receipt of submissions / observations is: **Friday 22nd May 2026 at 6pm**

Late submissions or submissions that are unsigned or have an unidentified author will not be considered.

Please note the RSES is a **STRATEGIC DOCUMENT** at REGIONAL LEVEL and does not zone individual plots of land. Zoning is carried out through City and County Development Plans which must be consistent with the RSES.

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What Happens Next

Next steps for the RSES strategy-making process.

This pre-draft Consultation Paper is the first stage in the preparation of the new RSES. Its purpose is to gather views, identify key strategic regional matters, and understand the priorities of all our stakeholders for the sustainable development of the Northern and Western Region for the common good.

Following the close of the consultation period:

- All submissions will be reviewed and considered by the Northern & Western Regional Assembly.
- A Director's Report will be prepared which will summarise the priority themes and main issues raised in the submissions and recommendations for consideration by the members of the Northern & Western Regional Assembly.
- The feedback received through submissions will help inform the preparation of the Draft RSES, including the identification of strategic priorities, and supporting policy objectives. It is our intention that all objectives will be S.M.A.R.T. (Specific, Measurable, Achievable and Timebound).
- A draft RSES will be prepared which will then be considered and approved by the Regional Assembly members and will be published for formal public consultation, providing further opportunities for engagement and feedback.
- Submissions received at draft RSES stage will also be considered as part of the statutory strategy-making process.

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly encourage all interested parties to participate throughout the process and welcomes your participation in shaping the future of the Region.

Submission Deadline: Friday 22nd May 2026 at 6pm



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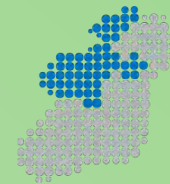
Big Smoke Studio

Courtesy Failte Ireland

Courtesy Christian McLeod for Failte Ireland

Courtesy Gareth McCormack

Courtesy Failte Ireland



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