



Northern & Western
Regional Assembly

Submission to National Transport Authority's Connecting Ireland Consultation

10th December 2021



Rialtas
na hÉireann
Government
of Ireland

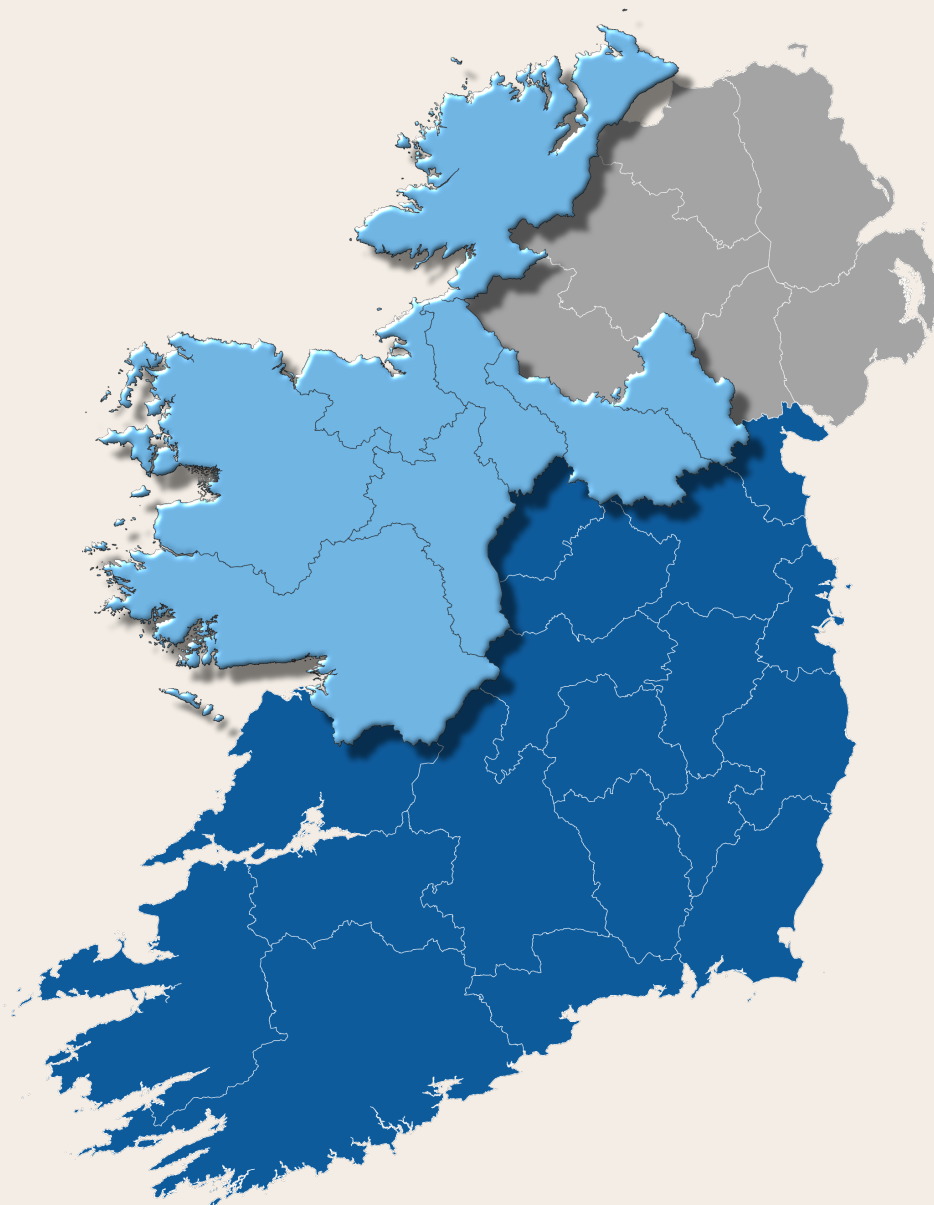
Tionscadal Éireann
Project Ireland
2040





Contents

1: Summary of Submission	1
2: Strategic Context	3
3: Regional Transport Context	5
4: Regional Recommendations	15



1: Summary of Submission

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the National Transport Authority's (NTA) "Connecting Ireland" initiative. The provision of accessible, frequent, high-quality and affordable public transport services across the Northern and Western Region will be key to simultaneously supporting the region's transition to a low carbon society and delivering balanced regional development as per the vision and objectives of the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) of the Northern and Western Region.

At a high-level, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly would like to welcome the NTA's "Connecting Ireland" regional and local corridor proposals¹ that will improve transport accessibility and frequency within the Northern and Western Region, particularly the proposals that will support transport routes relating to the Galway Metropolitan Area, the Regional Growth Centres of Sligo Town, Letterkenny and Athlone and the Key Towns² of the Northern and Western Region. Furthermore, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly welcomes the NTA's acknowledgment of the importance of supporting the NPF and the RSES, while the Assembly supports the NTA's commitment to:

- Ensuring that over 70 per cent of those living outside of the five cities of Ireland will have access to a public transport service that provides at least three return trips each weekday to a nearby town
- Providing improved mobility options for those in remote areas with the provision of demand responsive and other innovative transport services
- Providing over 100 new local centre connections from rural settlements in the hinterland, over 100 new county town connections from all types of settlements around county towns; and over 60 new regional centre and city connections, from all types of settlements around these centres and cities.³

Such commitments are to be welcomed and their implementation will likely make a reasonable contribution in improving transport accessibility and frequency in Ireland and supporting Ireland's transition to a low carbon society. However, based on the detailed evidence base presented in Section 3 of this submission, the challenges of the Northern

and Western Region's transport system are quite significant and wide ranging, with the region underperforming across a series of transport indicators with respect to accessibility, frequency and capacity.

For example – in terms of accessibility – residential dwellings based in the Northern and Western Region are – on average – 3.8km from a public bus stop, which was considerably higher relative to the corresponding State average of 2.6km, with this ratio much higher for counties such as Donegal where residential dwellings are – on average – 13.5km away from a public bus stop. In terms of access to highly frequent transport services, only 6 per cent of residents based in the Northern and Western Region lived close to a transport option with more than 50 departures each day, which was significantly lower compared to the State average of 30 per cent. The region's underperformance in this regard seems to be contributing to a low usage of bus services and an overreliance on private car journeys, all of which is leading to higher carbon emissions and longer commuting times, particularly given the number of workers commuting into the Galway Metropolitan Area, the Regional Growth Centres of Sligo Town, Letterkenny and Athlone and the Key Towns of the Northern and Western Region, as noted in Section 3 of this submission.

Addressing these challenges will be key to simultaneously delivering the vision and objectives of the RSES of the Northern and Western Region and transitioning the region to a low carbon society. It seems – based on publicly available information – that the existing proposals under the NTA's "Connecting Ireland" initiative will likely make a reasonable contribution in this regard, albeit it remains to be seen whether these proposals will fully address the lack of access, frequency and capacity in the region's transport

¹ <https://www.nationaltransport.ie/connecting-ireland/proposals/>

² Tuam, Ballinasloe, Castlebar, Ballina, Carrick-on-Shannon, Monaghan Town, Roscommon Town, Cavan Town: <https://www.nwra.ie/pdfs/NWRA-RSES-2020-2032.pdf>

³ <https://www.nationaltransport.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NTA-Connecting-Ireland-Report.pdf>

system and reduce the region's high reliance on private car journeys.

For these reasons, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly firmly believes that the NTA's "Connecting Ireland" initiative should "Positively Discriminate" towards the Northern and Western Region, by providing additional regional and local transport services that will improve the accessibility, frequency and capacity of the region's transport system. In this regard, "Positive Discrimination" should be applied with the view of addressing the significant challenges of the Northern and Western Region's transport system and supporting the region's transition to a low carbon society.

Within this context, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly would like to make a number of recommendations that should be reflected in the NTA's finalised "Connecting Ireland" initiative.

1.1: Summary of Key Regional Recommendations

1. Deliver a higher number of regional and local corridors to ensure that more than 70 per cent of those living outside of Galway City in the Northern and Western Region will have – at minimum – access to a public transport service that provides at least three return trips each weekday to a nearby town.
2. Provide additional regional and local corridor proposals in order to significantly reduce the percentage of the Northern and Western Region's population that only have access to infrequent public transport and to reduce the average distance of a residential dwelling to a public bus stop in the region.
3. Increase the number and frequency of regional and local transport services for settlements that have high commuting levels into the Galway Metropolitan Area, the Regional Growth Centres of Letterkenny, Sligo Town and Athlone and the Key Towns of the Northern and Western Region, particularly for times that are associated with high demand.
4. Regional and local corridor proposals that are delivered in the Northern and Western Region should have sufficient capacity – in terms of bus fleets and drivers – particularly for areas with high levels of private car commuting within or around the Galway Metropolitan Area, the Regional Growth Centres of Letterkenny, Sligo Town and Athlone and the Key Towns of the Northern and Western Region.
5. Provide high-quality bus interchange and waiting facilities with enhanced passenger information for all regional and local corridor routes and – where feasible – utilise smart technologies to enhance customer experience.
6. Provide more transport services that will improve interconnectivity between the Galway Metropolitan Area, the Regional Growth Centres of Letterkenny, Sligo Town and Athlone and the Key Towns of the Northern and Western Region and connectivity with other settlements outside of the region.
7. Ensure regional and local corridor proposals are socially inclusive and provide a quality of service, connectivity and facilities to meet all of society's needs, disabilities – including mobility, sensory and cognitive impairments – and the needs and opportunities of an ageing population.
8. Where possible, ensure the bus fleet that will deliver services under the proposed regional and local corridors are electric, as opposed to petrol or diesel buses.
9. Include Maps and Route details which are specific to the commuting catchment areas of Galway City as well as the Regional Growth Centres of Athlone, Sligo, and Letterkenny, which are identified as performing a significant economic and service role for a wide hinterland and are identified for accelerated growth in population and employment over the period to 2040.



2: Strategic Context

Key messages

- The RSES of the Northern and Western Region supports sustainable settlement patterns.
- Public transport is key to supporting implementation of the RSES of the Northern and Western Region
- NTA's "Connecting Ireland" initiative central to delivering the region's compact growth targets .

By 2040, Ireland's population is expected to increase by around 1 million, requiring an estimated 660,000 new jobs and 500,000 new homes during this period.⁴ In the Northern and Western Region alone, population projections suggest that there will be between 160,000 and 180,000 additional people living in the region by 2040, requiring an estimated 115,000 new jobs. Managing this significant growth in a sustainable and equitable manner will be instrumental to supporting the economic and social wellbeing of all regions in Ireland.

In this context, Project Ireland 2040 – through the NPF and the RSESs⁵ – provide holistic investment frameworks that will manage future population and employment growth and support effective regional development in Ireland, as the Greater Dublin Area – historically speaking – has witnessed an overconcentration of population, jobs and homes. The consequences of these historical trends have been reflected in the European Commission's "2019⁶ and 2020⁷ Semester Country Report – Ireland", with the commission noting that regional inequalities in Ireland are amongst the highest in the EU and are increasing. If these unsustainable trends remain unchecked, it will have a damaging impact on the economic and social wellbeing of all regions in Ireland, particularly rural oriented regions such as the Northern and Western Region.

Therefore, the delivery of the vision and objectives of the NPF and the RSES of the Northern and Western Region could not be more important. Launched in 2020, the RSES of the Northern and Western Region – for the first time – brings together spatial planning and economic policy to provide a long term, statutory, strategic investment framework for the region, which will assist in the implementation of the NPF in the region. By focusing on a wide range of interconnected strategic areas – such as population growth, sustainable housing patterns, transport mobility, health, education and social services, climate change and economic development – the RSES of the Northern and Western Region collectively

identifies the region's assets, opportunities and challenges, providing overarching policy responses in the form of "Regional Policy Objectives". In doing so, the RSES of the Northern and Western Region aims to achieve sustainable population and employment growth up to 2032, while supporting the Assembly's ambitions to become a region that is "**Vibrant**", "**Natural**", "**Connected**", "**Inclusive**", has high-quality "**Infrastructure**", and is consolidated by a settlement strategy focusing on '**People and Places**'.

Central to achieving these ambitions – particularly our ambition to become a region that is "**Connected**" – will be the provision of accessible, frequent, high-quality and affordable public transport services throughout the Northern and Western Region. For this reason, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly – through extensive stakeholder consultations and research in the development of the RSES – adopted a series of transport investment priorities for the region, with these priorities focusing on areas – including but not limited to – the region's bus and rural transport network. Of particular relevance to the NTA's "Connecting Ireland" initiative is the inclusion of several "Regional Policy Objectives" with respect to the region's bus and rural transport network, with these objectives seeking to enhance the overall quality and efficiency of the region's network. Therefore, it is imperative that the NTA designs the "Connecting Ireland" initiative having considered Regional Policy Objectives 6.18 to 6.22 and Regional Policy Objective 6.32, which have been outlined in greater detail on page 4 of this submission.

Furthermore, given the importance of transport accessibility, frequency and capacity in delivering compact growth, it is important that the NTA's finalised "Connecting Ireland" initiative takes into account the region's designated compact growth targets which have been outlined within the RSES of the Northern and Western Region, namely Regional Policy Objective 3.2 and 3.3. Greater detail of these Regional Policy Objectives have been outlined in page 4 of this submission.

⁴ <https://npf.ie/wp-content/uploads/Project-Ireland-2040-NPF.pdf>

⁵ RSES of the Northern and Western Region available through the attached link: <https://www.nwra.ie/pdfs/NWRA-RSES-2020-2032.pdf>

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/file_import/2019-european-semester-country-report-ireland_en.pdf

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/2020-european-semester-country-report-ireland_en.pdf

REGIONAL POLICY OBJECTIVES

RPO 6.18

Utilise smart technology to provide for enhanced service experience for customers.

RPO 6.19

Reduce dependency on fossil-fuel power vehicles.

RPO 6.20

Undertake network reviews for city, regional centres and support towns across the region, to provide local bus services.

RPO 6.21

Review bus services within and between settlements, including the rural transport programme, to provide for the enhanced and more connected provision of public transport service.

RPO 6.22

Provide new interchange facilities and enhanced bus waiting facilities together with enhanced passenger information, utilising smart technology in appropriate circumstances.

RPO 6.32

Invest in transport networks and services in the region that are socially inclusive and provide a quality of service, connectivity and facilities to meet all societal needs, disabilities (including mobility, sensory and cognitive impairments) and meet the needs and opportunities of an ageing population.

RPO 3.2










(a) Deliver at least 50% of all new city homes targeted in the Galway MASP, within the existing built-up footprint of Galway City and suburbs.

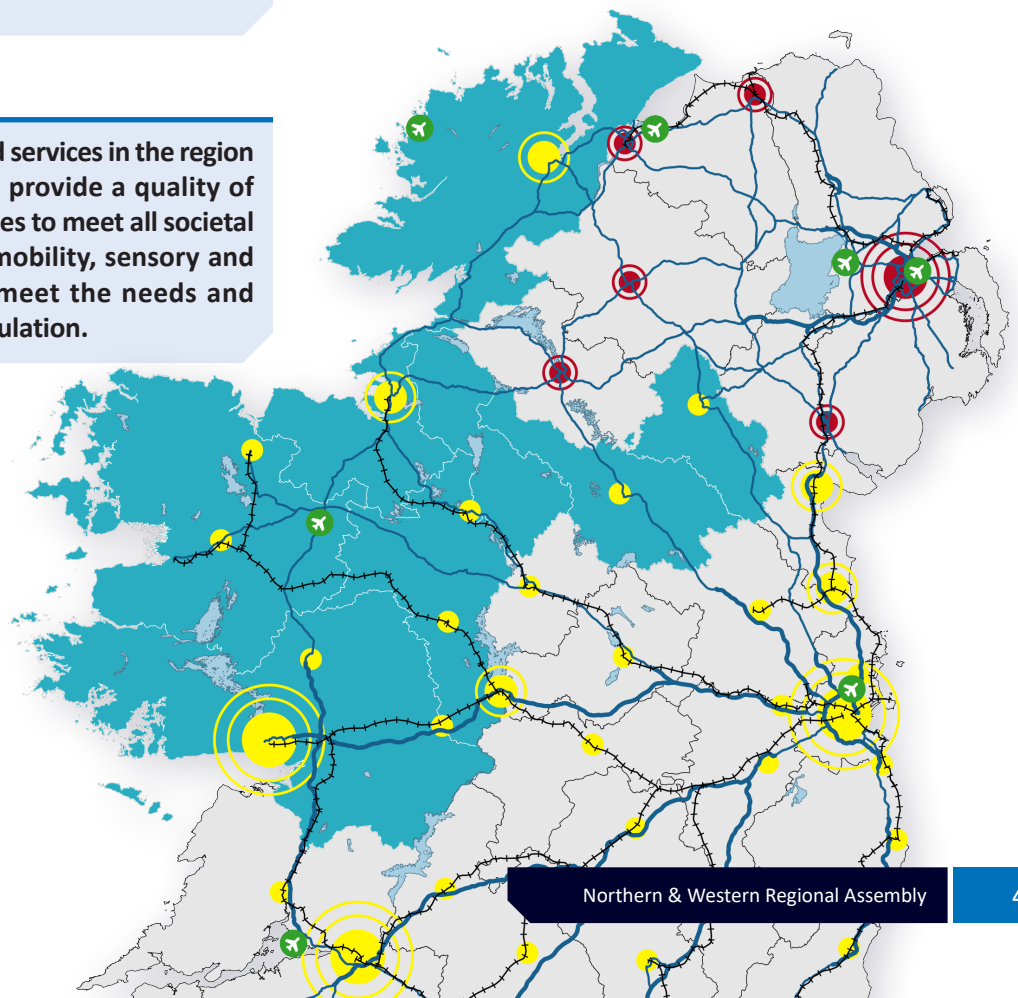
(b) Deliver at least 40% of all new housing targeted in the Regional Growth Centres, within the existing built-up footprint.

(c) Deliver at least 30% of all new homes that are targeted in settlements with a population of at least 1,500 (other than the Galway MASP and the Regional Growth Centres), within the existing built-up footprints.

RPO 3.3

Deliver at least 20% of all new housing in rural areas on brownfield sites.

-  Metropolitan Areas
-  Regional Growth Centres
-  Key Towns
-  City
-  Major Towns
-  motorways
-  National roads
-  Airports
-  railway Network



3: Regional Transport Context

Key messages

- Average distance of a home to a public bus stop is notably high in the Northern and Western Region
- Just over half of the region's population only has access to transport with less than 10 services a day
- The Northern and Western Region is notably reliant on private car journeys

Section 3 of this submission will highlight some of the key challenges facing the Northern and Western Region's transport system and the likely impact of these challenges. To achieve this, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly has analysed the region's performance with respect to a host of regional transport statistics that has been provided by the Central Statistics Office (CSO).

3.1: Regional Transport Challenges

The Northern and Western Region is experiencing a number of significant challenges in terms of transport accessibility, frequency and capacity. Such challenges are evident from the region's performance with respect to a number of key transport indicators, namely:

- Access to public bus stops
- Access to train stations
- Frequency of public transport

3.1.1: Access to Public Bus Stops

Residential dwellings based in the Northern and Western Region are – on average – 3.8km from a public bus stop, which was higher relative to the corresponding State average of 2.6km and the highest out of the three NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland, as evident from Figure 1 (page 6). As can be seen from Figure 2 (page 6), residential dwellings based in the Local Authorities of the Northern and Western Region were generally further away from public bus stops relative to the national norm. Notably, residential dwellings in Donegal were – on average – 13.5km away from a public bus stop, which was the highest average distance recorded in the State at the time of the Census. Above average distances were also registered in Galway County (3.9km), Monaghan (3.7km), Roscommon (3.2km), Mayo (2.9km) and Cavan (2.8km). Below average distances were registered in Leitrim (2.3km), Sligo (1.4km) and Galway City (0.4km).

3.1.2: Access to Train Stations

In conjunction to the lack of access to public bus stops, residents based in the Northern and Western Region also do not have adequate access to other sustainable modes of transport. For example, Figure 3 (page 7) shows that residential dwellings based in the Northern and Western Region are – on average – 30.4km from a train station, which was notably higher relative to the State average of 15.7km and the highest out of the three NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland. Notably, the Northern and Western Region's average distance to a train station is more than twice the corresponding ratio for the Southern Region and is four times larger than the equivalent ratio for the Eastern and Midland Region. In terms of Local Authorities, residential dwellings based in Donegal are – on average – 113km from a train station, with notably high distances also noted in Monaghan, Cavan, Galway County and Leitrim as evident from Figure 4 (page 7).

3.1.3: Frequency of Public Transport

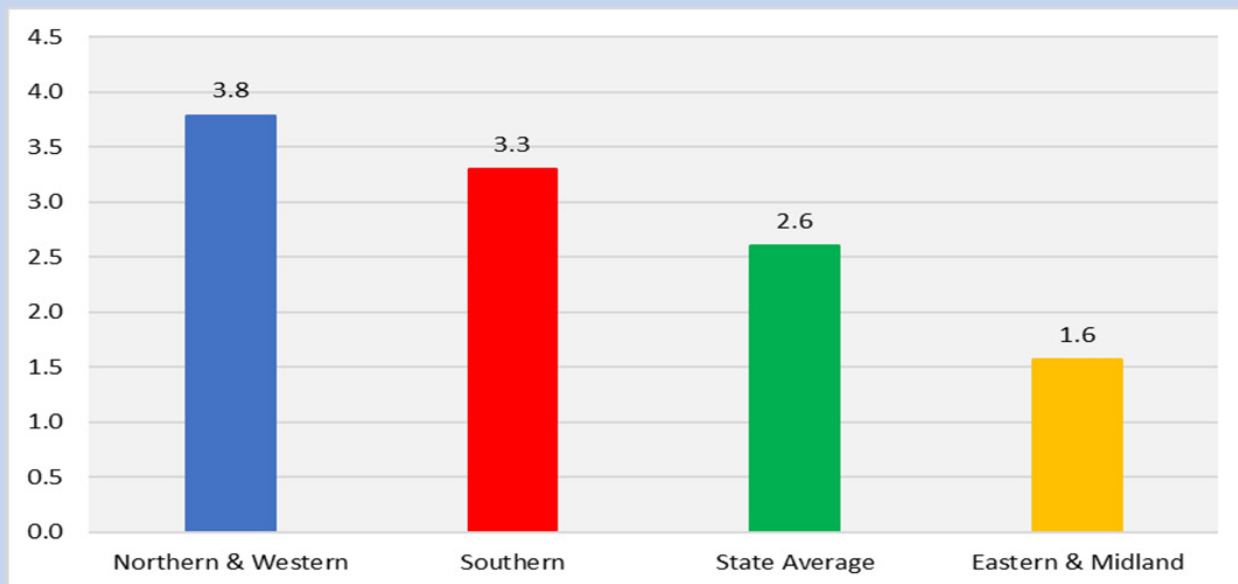
Of the three NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland, the Northern and Western Region had the highest percentage of its population living close to a transport option with less than 10 daily departures during the working week – at 50 per cent – which was considerably higher relative to the State average of 32 per cent, as evident from Figure 5 (page 8). In contrast, the Eastern and Midland Region had the lowest percentage of its population living close to a transport option with less than ten departures each day, at 18 per cent.

In terms of Local Authorities, 95 per cent of the population of Leitrim lived close to a public transport option that had less than 10 daily departures during the working week, with high ratios – relative to the national norm of 32 per cent – also recorded in Cavan at 74 per cent, Roscommon at 64 per cent, Mayo at 61 per cent, Galway County at 59 per cent and Monaghan at 55 per cent, as can be seen from Figure 6 (page 8).

In conjunction to this and as evident from Figure 7 (page 9), the Northern and Western Region also had the lowest percentage of its population living close to a transport option with more than 50 departures each day – at 6 per cent – which was substantially lower relative to the State average of 30 per cent. In contrast, the Eastern and Midland

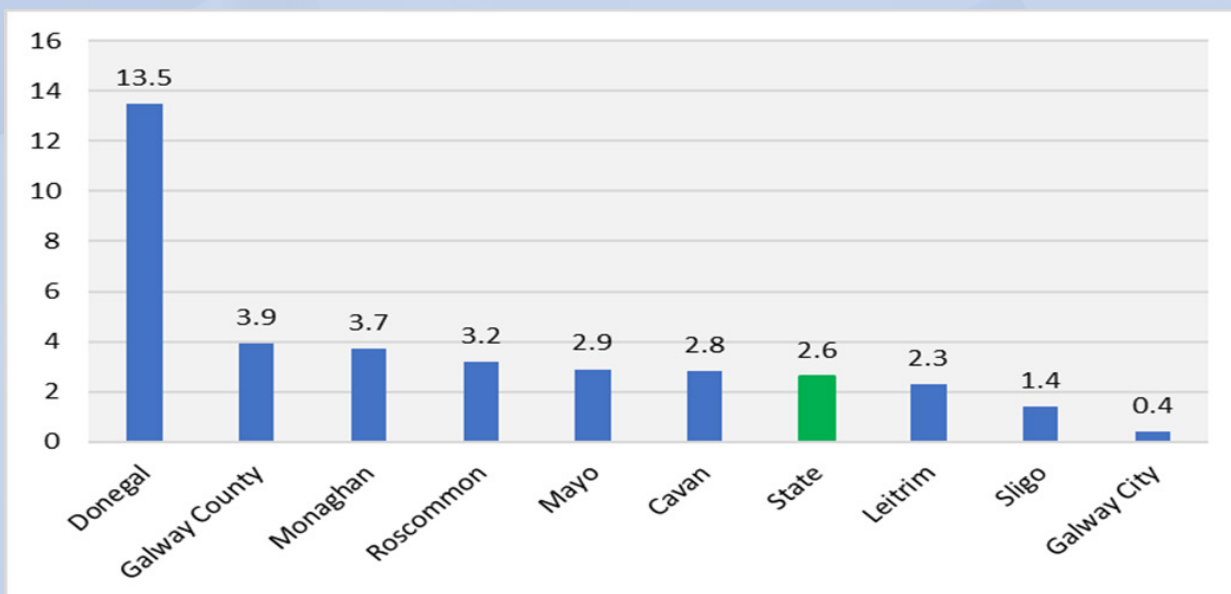
Region had the highest percentage of its population living close to a transport option with more than 50 departures each day, at 48 per cent.

Figure 1: Average distance of residential dwellings to a public bus stop (km), by NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland



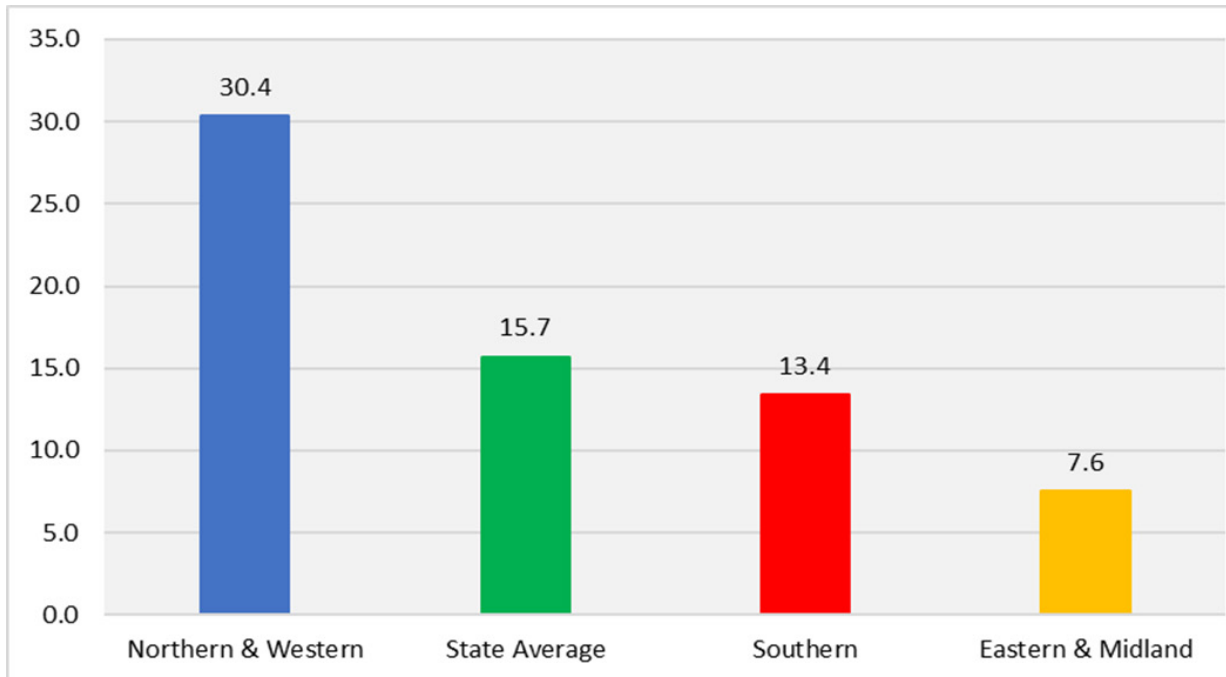
Source: CSO.

Figure 2: Average distance of residential dwellings to a public bus stop, by Local Authority Area in the Northern and Western Region



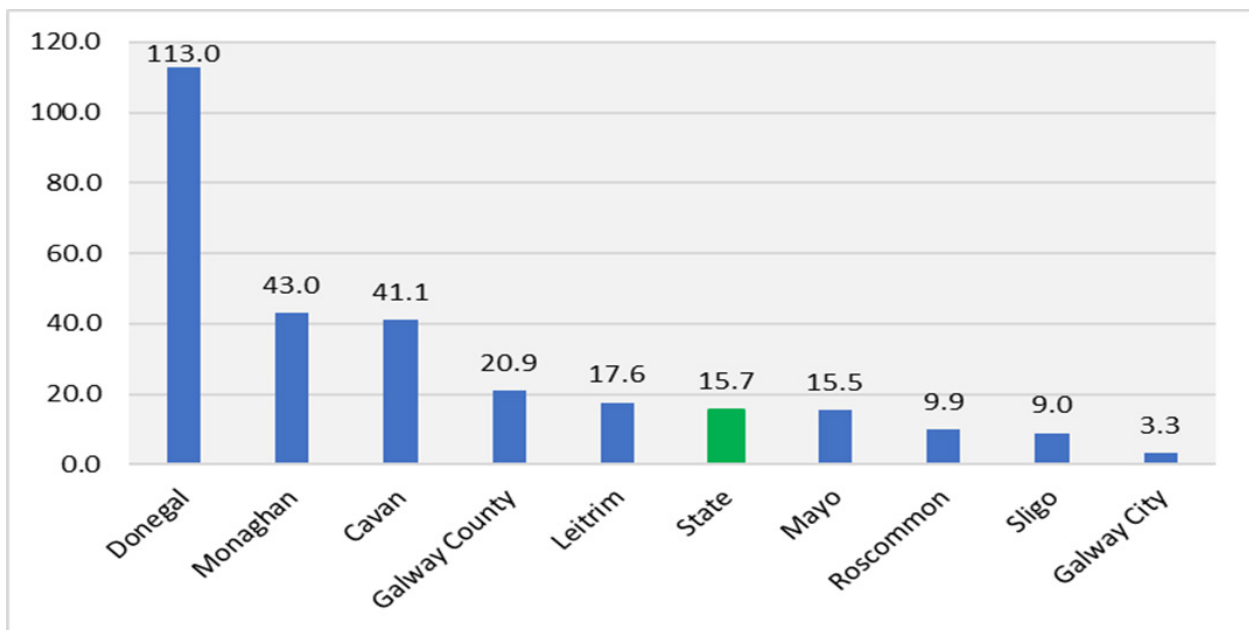
Source: CSO.

Figure 3: Average distance of residential dwellings to a train station (km), by NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland



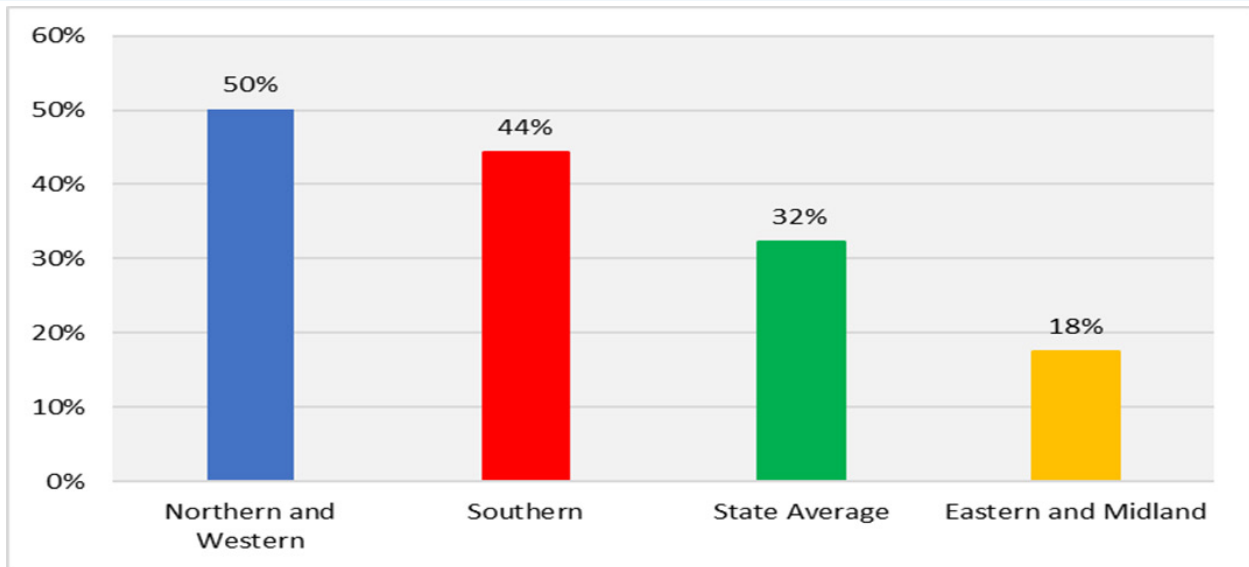
Source: CSO.

Figure 4: Average distance of residential dwellings to a train station (km), by Local Authorities based in the Northern and Western Region



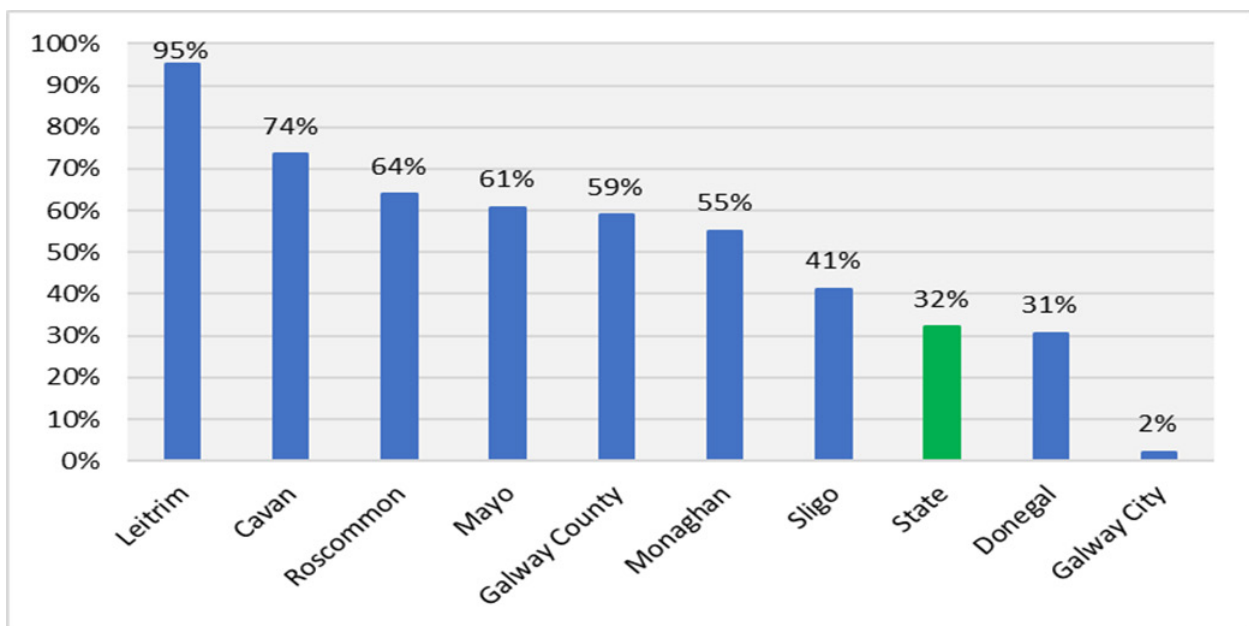
Source: CSO.

Figure 5: Percentage of population whose nearest public transport stop had infrequent services (i.e. less than ten daily departures) during the working week



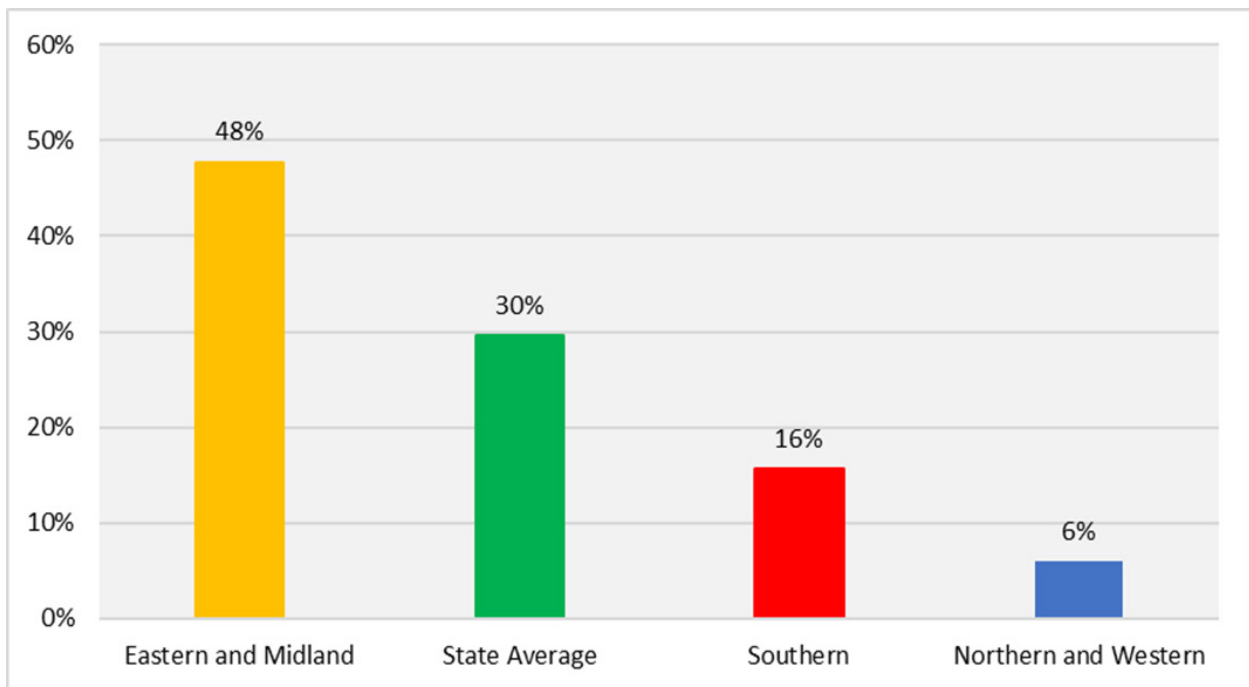
Source: CSO.

Figure 6: Percentage of population whose nearest public transport stop had infrequent services (i.e. less than ten daily departures) during the working week



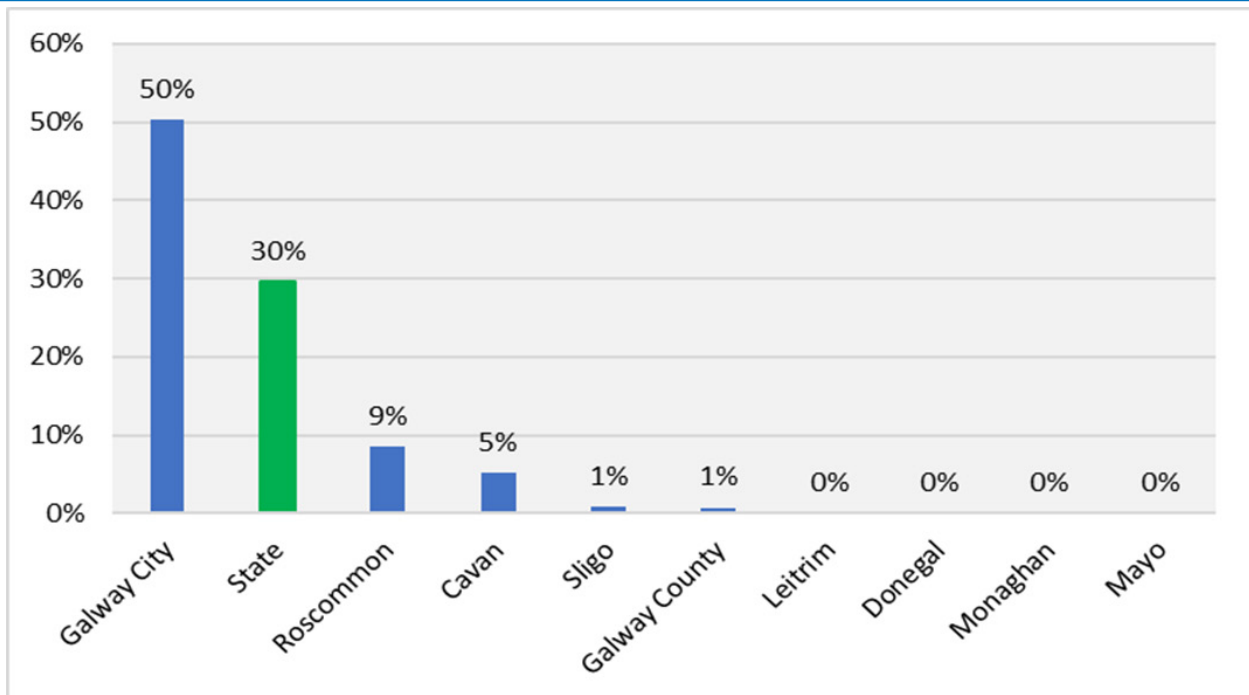
Source: CSO

Figure 7: Percentage of population where the nearest public transport stop had high frequent services (i.e. more than 50 daily departures) during the working week, by NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland



Source: CSO

Figure 8: Percentage of population where the nearest public transport stop had high frequent services (i.e. more than 50 daily departures) during the working week, by Local Authorities based in the Northern and Western Region



Source: CSO

As evident from Figure 8 (above), Galway City was the only Local Authority within the Northern and Western Region to register an above average ratio in this regard, with 50 per cent of its population living close to a transport option with more than 50 daily departures during the working week.

Notably, no residents based in Leitrim, Mayo, Donegal and Monaghan lived close to a transport option with 50 daily departures during the working week, with low ratios also recorded in Cavan, Sligo and Roscommon.

3.2: Impact of Regional Transport Challenges

Based on the findings of Sub-Section 3.1 of this submission, it is clear that residents in the Northern and Western Region – relative to the national norm – tend to live further away from sustainable modes of public transport and generally live close to a transport option with infrequent daily services during the working week. Such trends seem to be having an impact on the Northern and Western Region's transport system, based on trends in the following indicators:

- Low Usage of Buses, Coaches and Minibuses
- Reliance on Private Car Journeys
- High Commuting Levels

3.2.1: Low Usage of Buses, Coaches and Minibuses

As can be seen from Figure 9 (page 11), only 9.8 per cent of all journeys in the Northern and Western Region were completed through buses, coaches or minibuses, which is below the State average of 10.2 per cent. Of the three NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland, residents based in the Eastern and Midland Region had the highest proportion of journeys completed through this transport mode, with 12.2 per cent of journeys carried out through buses, coaches or minibuses.

In terms of Local Authorities, only 7.6 per cent of journeys in Sligo were completed through buses, coaches or minibuses, which was the lowest out of the 9 Local Authorities based in the Northern and Western Region. Other Local Authorities to record below average ratios in this regard included Roscommon (8%), Mayo (8.4%), Galway County (8.6%), Galway City (9.6%) and Monaghan (10.2%), as evident from Figure 10 (page 11). The challenges associated with the region's transport system – specifically in terms of accessibility, frequency and capacity – are likely to have contributed to this low uptake of buses, coaches or minibuses.

3.2.2: Reliance on Private Car Journeys

Figure 11 (page 12) shows how reliant the residents of the Northern and Western Region were on private cars – both in terms of driver and passenger journeys – with 64 per cent of all journeys in the region completed through private cars at the time of the previous Census. Such a ratio was higher than the corresponding State average of 58 per cent.

Likewise, as evident from Figure 12 (page 12), residents based in the Local Authorities within the Northern and Western Region were largely reliant on private car journeys, with residents based in Roscommon and Galway County most reliant on this transport mode, with 68 per cent of all journeys completed using private cars in these areas. Overall, 8 out of the 9 Local Authorities based in the Northern and

Western Region registered an above average reliance on private car journeys. The challenges associated with the Northern and Western Region's transport system – in terms of accessibility, frequency and capacity – are likely to have contributed to such a high reliance on private cars.

3.2.3: High Commuting Levels

There are certain settlements that have high levels of commuting into the Galway Metropolitan Area, the Regional Growth Centres of Letterkenny, Sligo Town and Athlone and the Key Towns of the Northern and Western Region. Given the reliance on private car journeys – at both a regional and local authority level – it is highly likely that a sizeable proportion of these commuters are using private cars as their mode of travel since the region's transport system has issues with respect to accessibility, frequency and capacity. As a result, the lack of alternative travel options and high levels of commuting – which are expected to be completed using private cars – is likely to be needlessly contributing to higher carbon emissions and longer commuting times.

Figure 13 (page 13) provides a sense of the scale of this challenge, with the graphic showing the overall number of workers who travelled into the Galway Metropolitan Area, the Regional Growth Centres of Letterkenny, Sligo Town and Athlone and the Key Towns of the Northern and Western Region to their place of employment. As evident from Figure 13 (page 13), a total of 22,105 workers – who were not resident in Galway City and Suburbs – travelled into this settlement to their place of employment at the time of the Census, with high commuting levels also noted in settlements such as – but not limited to – Sligo Town (8,632 commuters), Athlone (8,178), Letterkenny (6,677), and Castlebar (6,417), while significant levels of commuting were also evident in remaining Key Towns of the Northern and Western Region.

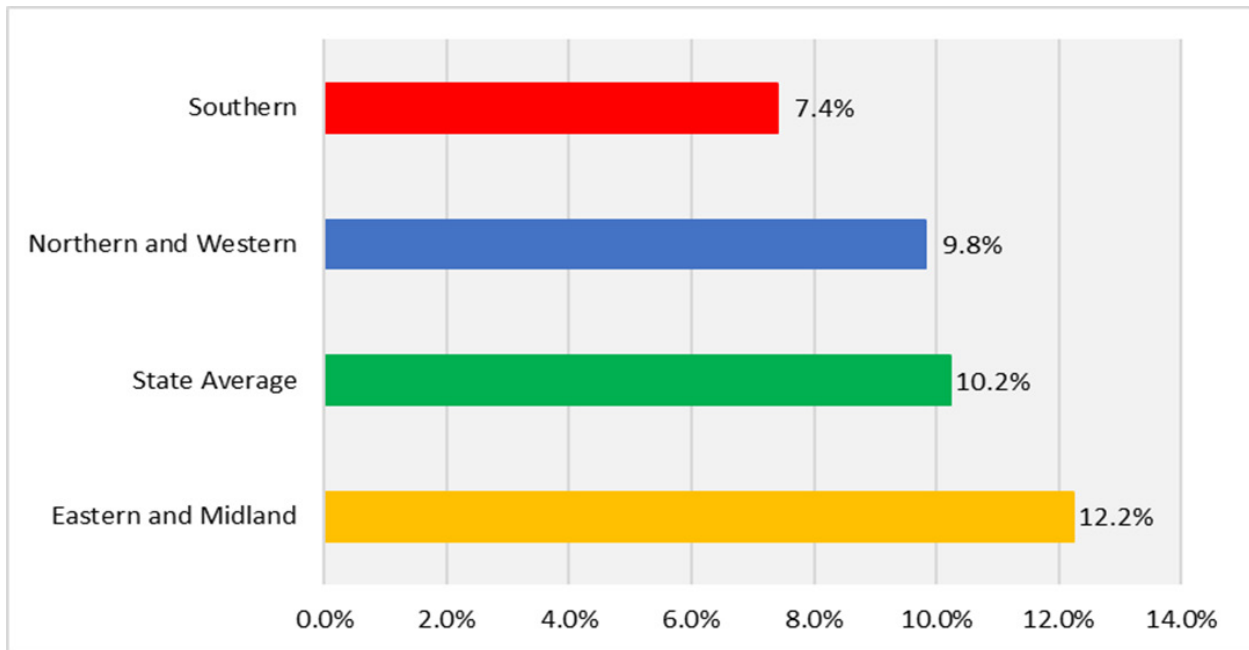
To what extent these commuters integrate with public transport or use private cars as their mode of transport remains to be seen but given the fact that – at a regional and local authority level – commuters are notably reliant on private cars, it is likely that a sizeable proportion of these commuters are using private car journeys as their mode of travel, which – as a result – is contributing to higher carbon emissions and longer commute times.

Since these commuters are by definition coming from outside of the region's designated settlements, it is clear that there are other settlements in close proximity that have high levels of commuting into the Galway Metropolitan Area, the Regional Growth Centres of Letterkenny, Sligo Town and Athlone and the Key Towns of the Northern and Western Region.

For example, as can be seen from Figure 14 (page 13), there are a number of individual settlements which experience high levels of commuting into Galway City and Suburbs – including but not limited to – Oranmore (1,190 workers commute into Galway City and Suburbs), Tuam (675), Athenry (658), Bearna (491), Loughrea (483), Moycullen (348), Gort (187), Ennis (154), Ballinasloe (139) and Athlone (88). Furthermore, commuting into Galway City and Suburbs

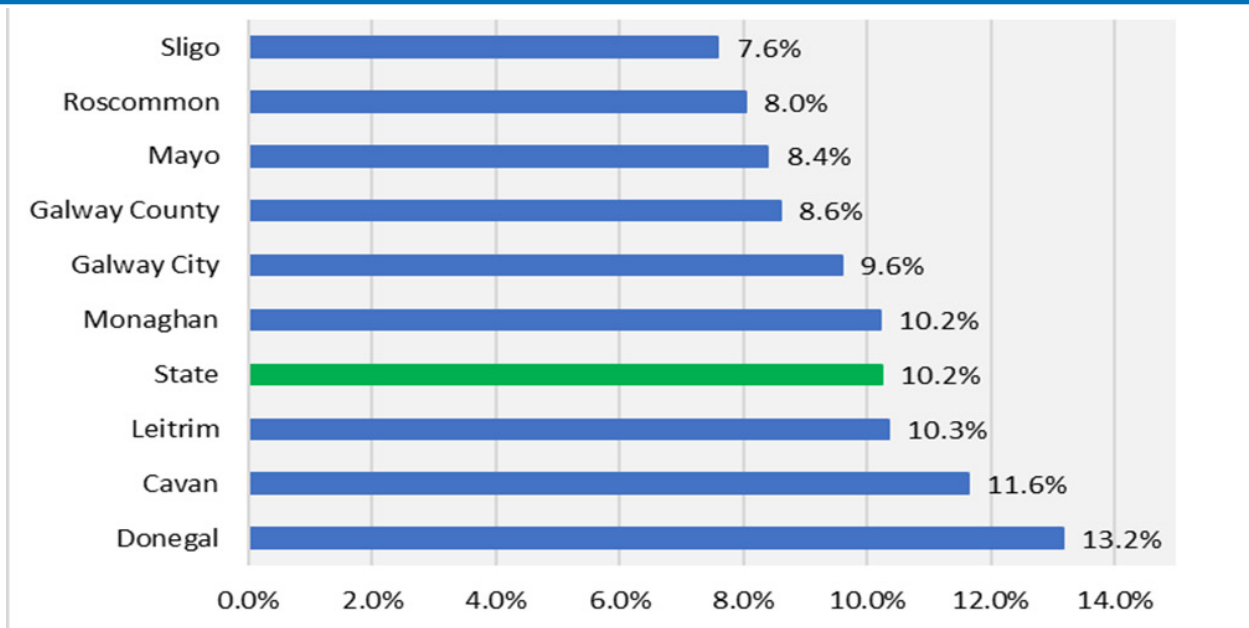
– for work purposes – was also high from towns with a population between 500 and 999 (877), from towns with a population with less than 500 (861) and from towns with a population between 1,000 and 1,499 (538). Similar results are evident for Letterkenny and Sligo Town in Figure 15 and 16 respectively.

Figure 9: Percentage of journeys that were completed through buses, coaches and minibuses, by the NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland



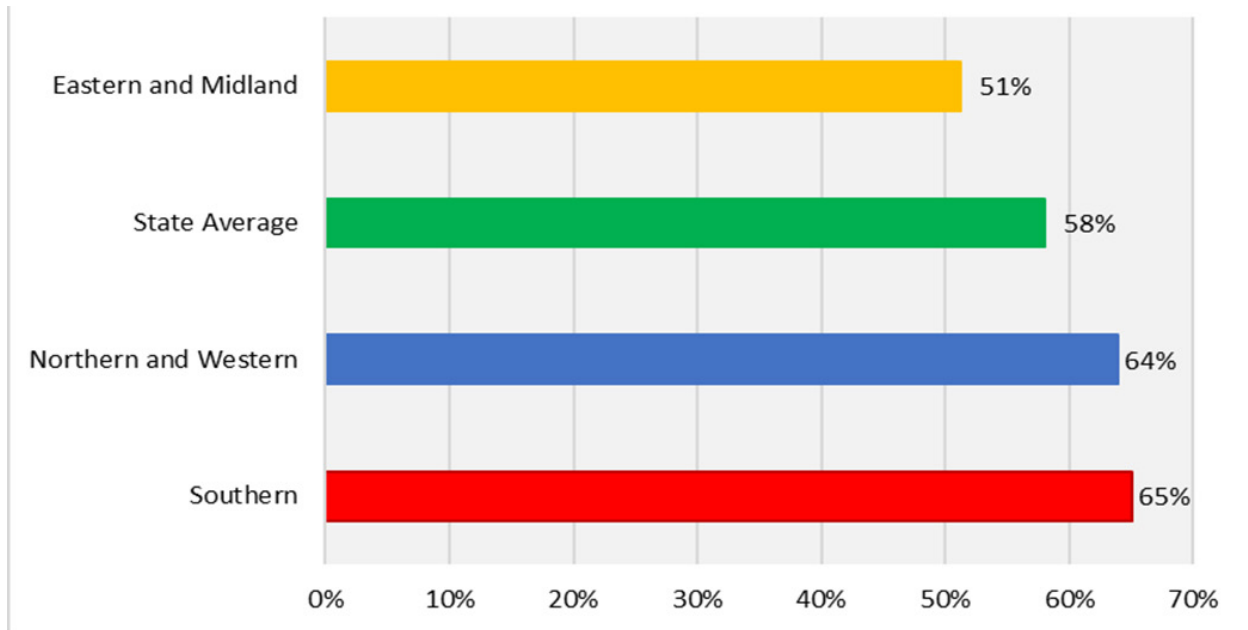
Source: CSO

Figure 10: Percentage of journeys that were achieved through buses, coaches and minibuses, by the Local Authorities of the Northern and Western Region



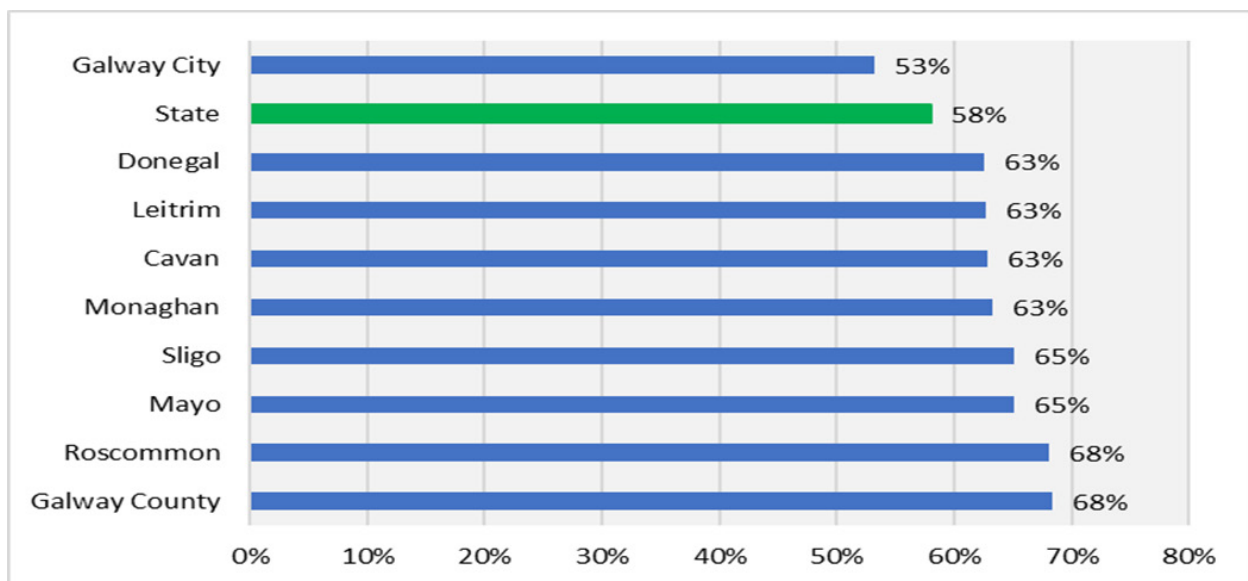
Source: CSO

Figure 11: Percentage of all journeys that were completed through private cars, by the NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland



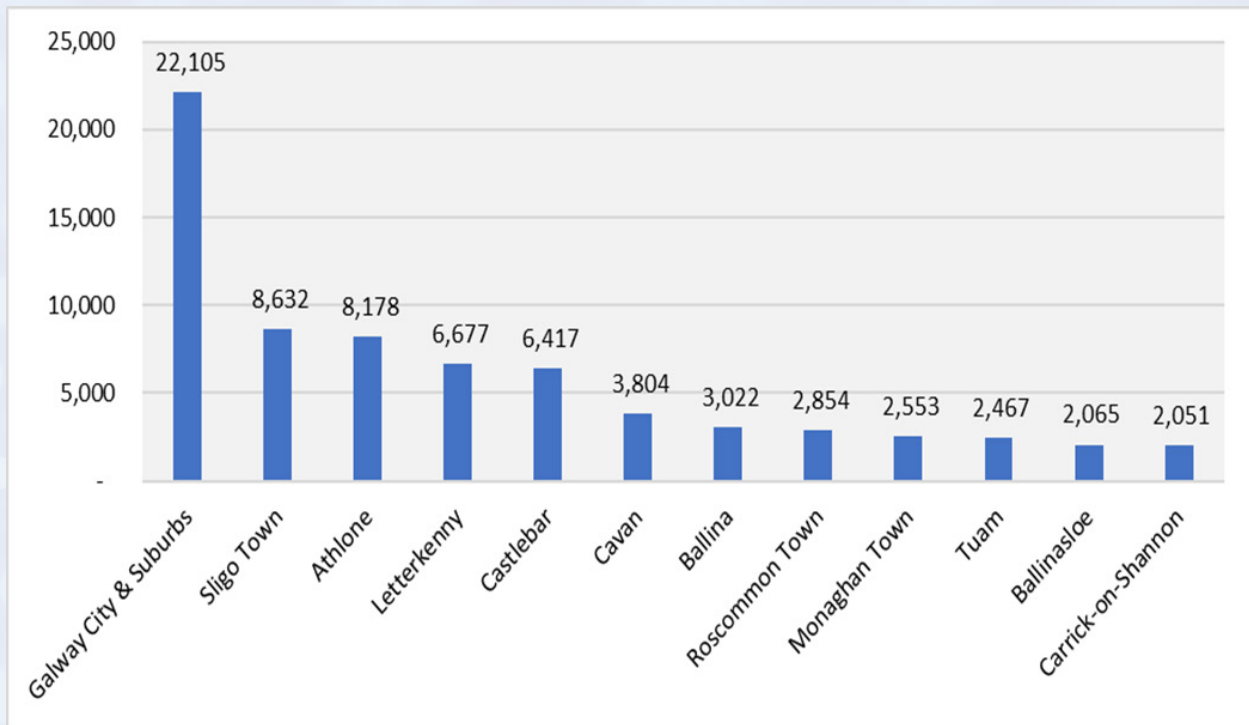
Source: CSO

Figure 12: Percentage of all journeys that were completed through private cars, by the Local Authorities based in the Northern and Western Region



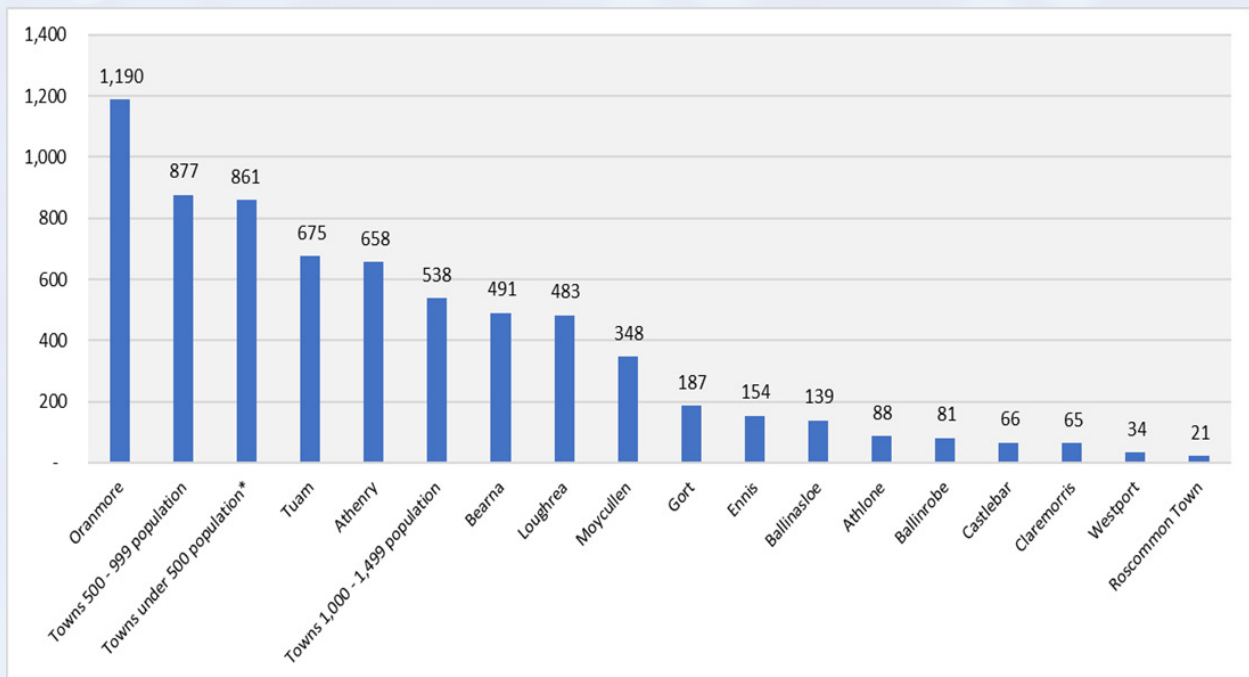
Source: CSO

Figure 13: Number of commuters that travel to their place of work in Galway City and Suburbs, the Regional Growth Centres and the Key Towns of the Northern and Western Region



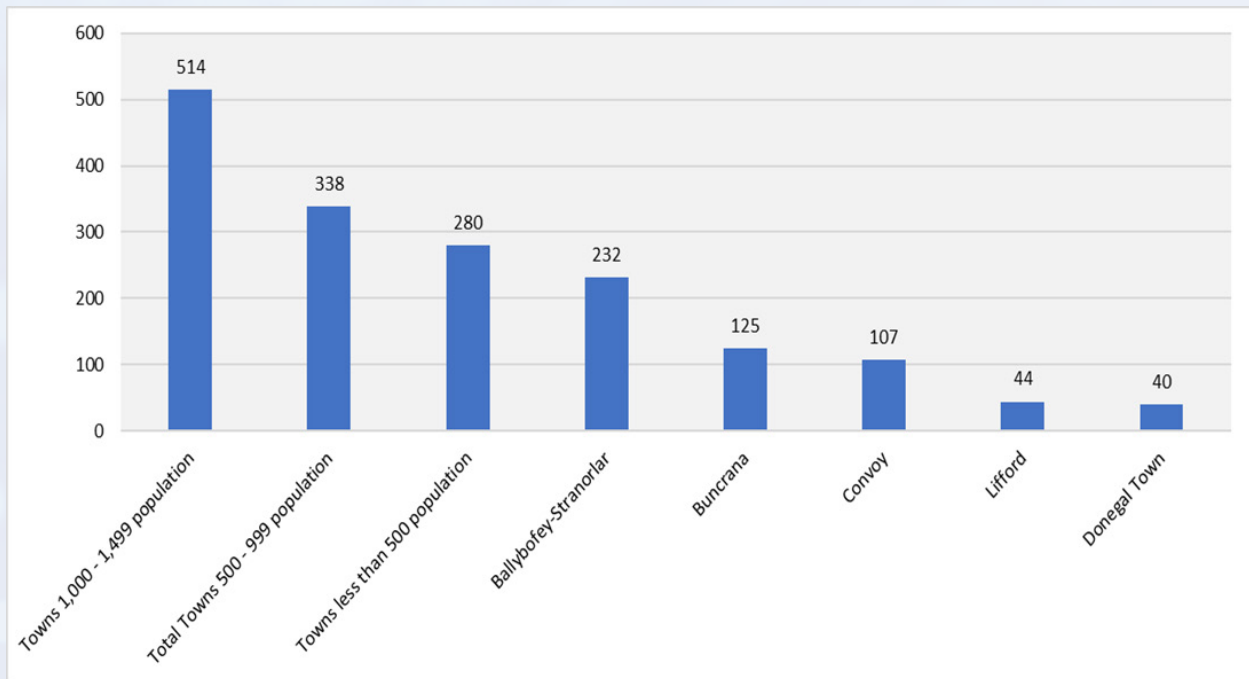
source CSO

Figure 14: Number of commuters that travel to Galway City and Suburbs for work purposes, that were greater than 20 commuters by CSO defined settlements and aggregated rural towns



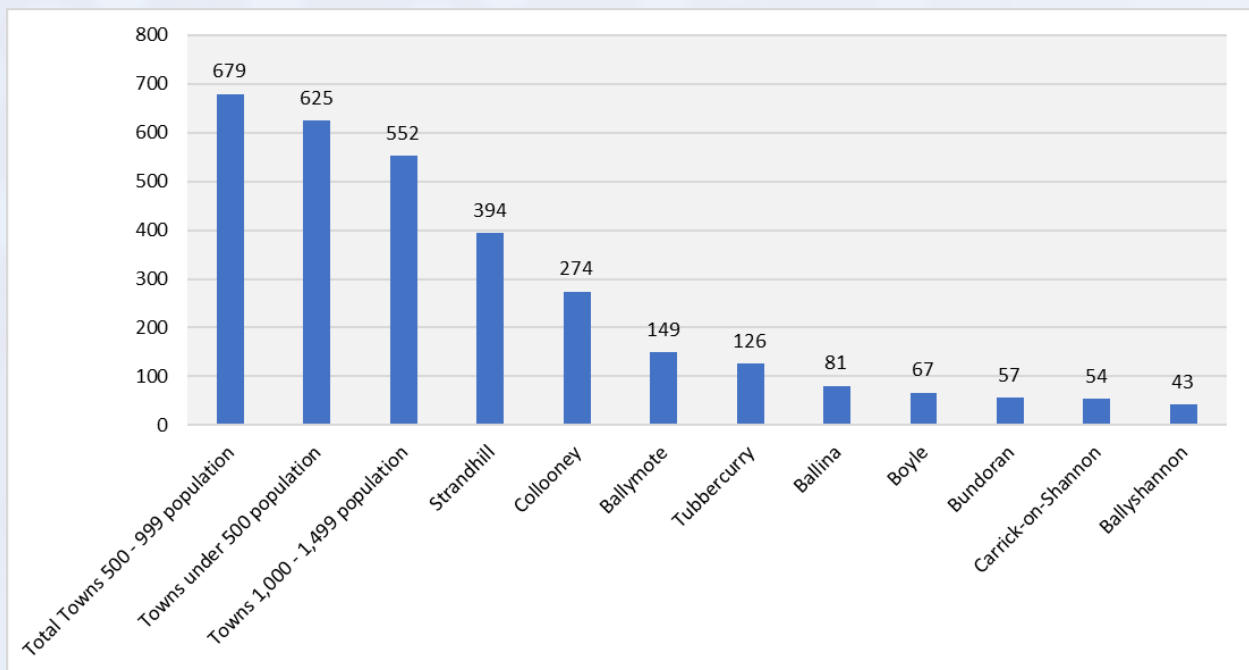
* Towns under 500 population, with at least 50 inhabited houses
source CSO

Figure 15: Number of commuters that travel to Letterkenny for work purposes, that were greater than 20 commuters by CSO defined settlements and aggregated rural towns



* Towns under 500 population, with at least 50 inhabited houses
source CSO

Figure 16: Number of commuters that travel to Sligo Town for work purposes, that were greater than 20 commuters by CSO defined settlements and aggregated rural towns



* Towns under 500 population, with at least 50 inhabited houses
source CSO

4: Regional Recommendations

Key messages

- The Northern and Western Regional Assembly broadly welcomes the draft NTA proposals.
- That said, based on the challenges of the region’s transport system, more bus routes may be needed.
- The Assembly has made a number of recommendations to assist “Connecting Ireland” proposals

At a high-level, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly would like to welcome the NTA’s “Connecting Ireland” initiative, given that it will likely improve transport accessibility, frequency and the quality of transport services within the Northern and Western Region. The provision of accessible, frequent, high-quality and affordable public transport services throughout the region will be key to simultaneously supporting the vision and objectives of the RSES of the Northern and Western Region and transitioning the region to a low carbon economy.

Notwithstanding these positive proposals, and as evident from the detailed evidence base provided in Section 3 of this submission, it is clear that the challenges of the Northern and Western Region’s transport system are quite significant and wide ranging, with the region underperforming across a range of transport indicators with respect to accessibility, frequency and capacity.

On this basis, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly firmly believes that the NTA’s “Connecting Ireland” initiative should “Positively Discriminate” towards the Northern and Western Region, by providing additional regional and local transport services that will improve the accessibility, frequency and capacity of the region’s transport system. In this regard, “Positive Discrimination” should be applied with the view of addressing the significant challenges of the Northern and Western Region’s transport system and supporting the region’s transition to a low carbon society. With this in mind, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly would like to make a number of recommendations that should be reflected in the NTA’s finalised “Connecting Ireland” initiative.

4.1.1: Key Regional Recommendations

1. **Deliver a higher number of regional and local corridors to ensure that more than 70 per cent of those living outside of Galway City in the Northern and Western Region will have – at minimum – access to a public transport service that provides at least three return trips each weekday to a nearby town.** At a national level, the NTA’s “Connecting Ireland” initiative commits to ensuring that over 70 per cent of those living outside the five cities of Ireland will have access to a public transport service that provides at least three return trips each weekday to a nearby town. Based on the information released by the NTA, it is not clear how the regional and local corridor proposals outlined in the “Connecting Ireland” initiative will deliver a similar ratio in the Northern and Western Region. In finalising the “Connecting Ireland” initiative, the NTA needs to provide a higher number of regional and local corridors to ensure that more than 70 per cent of residents living outside of Galway City in the Northern and Western Region will have – at minimum – access to a public transport service that provides at least three return trips each weekday to a nearby town.
2. **Provide additional regional and local corridor proposals in order to significantly reduce the percentage of the Northern and Western Region’s population that only have access to infrequent public transport and to reduce the average distance of a residential dwelling to a public bus stop in the region.** To what degree the regional and local corridor proposals will make progress in this regard remains to be seen and was not evident from the publicly available material on the NTA’s website. Therefore, when finalising the regional and local corridors, it is crucial that the NTA develops these proposals in a manner which reduces the average distance to a public bus stop and enhances the frequency of bus services for residents based in the Northern and Western Region. Improving the accessibility and frequency of public bus services will encourage greater use of these services and provide residents with the option to travel using a



sustainable mode of transport, as opposed to relying on private cars. In doing so, the NTA will be able to support the implementation of the NPF and the RSES of the Northern and Western Region and assist the region's transition to a low carbon society.

3. **Increase the number and frequency of regional and local transport services for settlements that have high commuting levels into the Galway Metropolitan Area, the Regional Growth Centres of Letterkenny, Sligo Town and Athlone and the Key Towns of the Northern and Western Region, particularly for times that are associated with high demand.** As noted in Section 3 of this submission, a large number of workers commute into the Galway Metropolitan Area, the Regional Growth Centres of Letterkenny, Sligo Town and Athlone and the Key Towns of the Northern and Western Region. Given the reliance on private car journeys – at both a regional and local authority level – it is highly likely that a sizeable proportion of these commuters are using private cars as their mode of travel. Based on the regional and local corridors proposals that have been outlined in the NTA's "Connecting Ireland" initiative and considering the number of workers that are commuting into the Galway Metropolitan Area and the Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns of the Northern and Western Region, it seems that more frequent services – on the existing corridors – coupled with additional bus corridors – which are high quality, accessible and frequent – will be required to achieve a significant reduction in the number of private car commuters.
4. **Regional and local corridor proposals that are delivered in the Northern and Western Region should have sufficient capacity – in terms of bus fleets and drivers – particularly for areas with high levels of private car commuting within or around the Galway Metropolitan Area, the Regional Growth Centres of Letterkenny, Sligo Town and Athlone and the Key Towns of the Northern and Western Region.** Regional and local corridors that will be delivered under the NTA's "Connecting Ireland" initiative need to be provided with sufficient capacity in terms of available bus drivers and reasonably sized bus fleets. Providing sufficient capacity will ensure that bus services can meet increased demand for these services. Furthermore, providing sufficient capacity will also make the bus network a viable travel option for residents based in the Northern and Western Region.
5. **Provide high-quality bus interchange and waiting facilities with enhanced passenger information for all regional and local corridor routes and – where feasible – utilise smart technologies to enhance customer experience.** The provision of high quality waiting areas, interchange facilities and clear passenger information – along with the provision of frequent and accessible bus services – will encourage more residents of the Northern and Western Region to utilise this sustainable mode of transport, thereby reducing private car usage throughout the region. The use of smart technologies – where feasible – provides opportunities to enhance the service experience for passengers while allowing for efficiency gains in terms of bus journey times.
6. **Provide more transport services that will improve interconnectivity between the Galway Metropolitan Area, the Regional Growth Centres of Letterkenny, Sligo Town and Athlone and the Key Towns of the Northern and Western Region and connectivity with other settlements outside of the region.** In supporting the implementation of the economic and spatial objectives outlined in the RSES of the Northern and Western Region, the NTA's "Connecting Ireland" initiative needs to provide more transport services – which are highly frequent – that connect the Galway Metropolitan Area, the Regional Growth Centres of Letterkenny, Sligo Town and Athlone and the Key Towns of the Northern and Western. For example, it seems that there is no regional corridor proposed between Athlone to Sligo Town, via Roscommon Town, which is not aligned with the provisions of the RSES.
7. **Ensure regional and local corridor proposals are socially inclusive and provide a quality of service, connectivity and facilities to meet all of society's needs, disabilities – including mobility, sensory and cognitive impairments – and the needs and opportunities of an ageing population.** As noted in the RSES of the Northern and Western Region, one of the strongest foundations and emerging propositions this region has to build on is its placemaking credentials, with this region aspiring to be one of the most liveable places in Europe. On this basis, the regional and local corridors that will be provided under the NTA's "Connecting Ireland" initiative needs to ensure that facilities meet all of society's needs.
8. **Where possible, ensure the bus fleet that will deliver services under the proposed regional and local corridors are electric, as opposed to petrol or diesel buses.** Based on the availability of appropriate EV charge points at bus facilities, the NTA should deliver the "Connecting Ireland" initiative using an electric fleet of buses.

9. **Include Maps and Route details which are specific to the commuting catchment areas of Galway City as well as the Regional Growth Centres of Athlone, Sligo, and Letterkenny, which are identified as performing a significant economic and service role for a wide hinterland and are identified for accelerated growth in population and employment over the period to 2040.** The designated Regional Growth Centres of the Northern and Western Region – namely Athlone, Letterkenny and Sligo Town – have been earmarked for significant population growth in the coming years, with these key settlements expected to grow by 40 per cent by 2040.

4.1.2: Rationale of Recommendations

- **The average distance of a residential dwelling to a public bus stop is notably high in the Northern and Western Region:** Residential dwellings based in the Northern and Western Region are – on average – 3.8km from a public bus stop, which was considerably higher relative to the State average of 2.6km and the highest out of the three NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland. Notably, residential dwellings in Donegal were – on average – 13.5 km away from a public bus stop, which was the highest average distance recorded in the State at the time of the Census. Above average distances were also recorded in Galway County (3.9km), Monaghan (3.7km), Roscommon (3.2km), Mayo (2.9km) and Cavan (2.8km).
- **The bus network is the best – and often the only – option for commuters in the Northern and Western Region that cannot walk to their destination but wish to use a sustainable mode of transport:** For example, residential dwellings based in the Northern and Western Region are – on average – 30.4km from a train station, which was notably higher relative to the State average of 15.7km and the highest out of the three NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland. The Northern and Western Region’s average distance to a train station is more than twice the corresponding ratio for the Southern Region and is four times larger than the equivalent ratio for the Eastern and Midland Region. Notably, residential dwellings based in Donegal are – on average – 113 km from a train station, while above average distances were also recorded in Monaghan (43km), Cavan (41.1km) and Galway County (20.9km).
- **Residents in the Northern and Western Region are too reliant on the private car journeys; with the challenges associated with the region’s transport system likely to be contributing to this trend:** Based on CSO statistics, 64 per cent of all journeys carried out by residents based in the Northern and Western Region were completed using a private car, which was higher than the corresponding State average of 58 per cent.
- **Settlements in close proximity to the Galway Metropolitan Area and the Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns of the Northern and Western Region experience high commuting levels into these designated settlements.** For example, there are a number of individual settlements which experience high levels of commuting into Galway City and Suburbs – including but not limited to – Oranmore (1,190 commuters to work within Galway City and Suburbs), Tuam (675), Athenry (658), Bearna (491), Loughrea (483), Moycullen (348), Gort (187), Ennis (154), Ballinasloe (139) and Athlone (88). Furthermore, commuting into Galway City and Suburbs – for work purposes – was also high from towns with a population between 500 and 999 (877), from towns with a population with less than 500 (861) and from towns with a population between 1,000 and 1,499 (538).
To what degree these commuters integrate with public transport or rely on private car journeys remains to be seen, but it is well established that commuters within the Local Authority areas of Galway City – and particularly in Galway County – are quite reliant on private car journeys as a means of travel, which suggests it is highly likely that a sizeable proportion of these commuters are using private car journeys as their mode of travel. In the context of the “Connecting Ireland” initiative, this provides extensive opportunities to target these communities with accessible, frequent, high-quality and affordable transport services, providing a high-quality and sustainable travel option to commuters based in these communities.
- **Half of all residents based in the Northern and Western Region only had access to infrequent transport services:** The Northern and Western Region had the highest percentage of its population living close to a transport option with less than 10 daily departures during the working week – at 50 per cent – which was significantly higher relative to the corresponding State average of 32 per cent. In contrast, the Eastern and Midland Region had the lowest percentage of its population living close to a transport option with less than 10 daily departures during the working week, at 18 per cent. As evident from Section 3, such a result is largely consistent when the data is examined by Local Authorities based in the Northern and Western Region.

- Less than 1 in 10 residents based in the Northern and Western Region had access to highly frequent transport services:** Of the three NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland, the Northern and Western Region had the lowest percentage of its population living close to a transport service with more than 50 daily departures during the working week – at 6 per cent – which was considerably lower relative to the corresponding State average of 30 per cent. In contrast, the Eastern and Midland Region had the highest percentage of its population living close to a transport option with more than 50 daily departures during the working week, at 48 per cent. Of the Local Authorities based in the Northern and Western Region, Galway City was the only Local Authority to record an above average ratio.
- Usage of bus services in the Northern and Western Region is quite low and failure to provide greater accessibility, frequency and capacity in the region’s bus network will ensure that this performance remains unchanged:** As per the latest Census, only 9.8 per cent of journeys in the Northern and Western Region were completed through buses, coaches or minibuses, which is low relative to the State average of 10.2 per cent. Providing additional regional and local corridors is likely to be needed in order to improve the region’s performance in this regard.
- The Galway Metropolitan Area, the Regional Growth Centres of Letterkenny, Sligo Town and Athlone and the Key Towns of the Northern and Western Region have been prioritized for significant growth as per the NPF and the RSES of the Northern and Western Region:** As noted in Tables 3 and 4 of the RSES of the Northern and Western Region, the designated key settlements of the region have been earmarked for significant growth in the coming years, with Galway City and Suburbs expected to grow between 50 and 55 per cent, Sligo Town, Letterkenny and Athlone expected to grow by 40 per cent and the Key Towns of the Region expected to grow by 30 per cent by 2040.
- The RSES is a legal framework and should be considered in finalising the “Connecting Ireland” initiative:** The principal statutory purpose of the RSES is to support the implementation of Project Ireland 2040 – the National Planning Framework and National Development Plan and the economic policies of the Government – by providing a long-term strategic planning and economic framework for the development of the Regions. Thereafter, it is a statutory requirement for local authorities and public bodies – including the NTA – to consult with Regional Assemblies when preparing its strategies, plans and programmes so as to ensure they are consistent with the RSES (footnote to s22A of Planning and Development Act 2000 as amended).

The provision of accessible, frequent and high-quality public transport services throughout the entire Northern and Western Region will be key to delivering the RSES of the Northern and Western Region and transitioning the region to a low carbon economy. For this reason, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly – through extensive stakeholder consultations and research in the developed of the RSES – prepared a series of transport investment priorities for the region, with these priorities – amongst other things – focusing on the bus network and rural transport. Of particular relevance to the NTA’s “Connecting Ireland” proposals is the inclusion of several “Regional Policy Objectives” with respect to the region’s bus networks and rural transport, with these objectives seeking to enhance the overall quality and efficiency of the region’s public bus network. In this regard, it is imperative that the NTA designs the “Connecting Ireland” proposals having considered the objectives which have been outlined in Section 2 of this submission.






Northern & Western Regional Assembly

Northern & Western Regional Assembly

The Square, Ballaghaderreen, Co. Roscommon

 +353 (0)94 9862970

 +353 (0)94 9862973

 info@nwra.ie

www.nwra.ie



Rialtas
na hÉireann
Government
of Ireland

Tionscadal Éireann
Project Ireland
2040