



**Submission to  
THE ALL ISLAND STRATEGIC RAIL  
REVIEW  
25 January 2022**

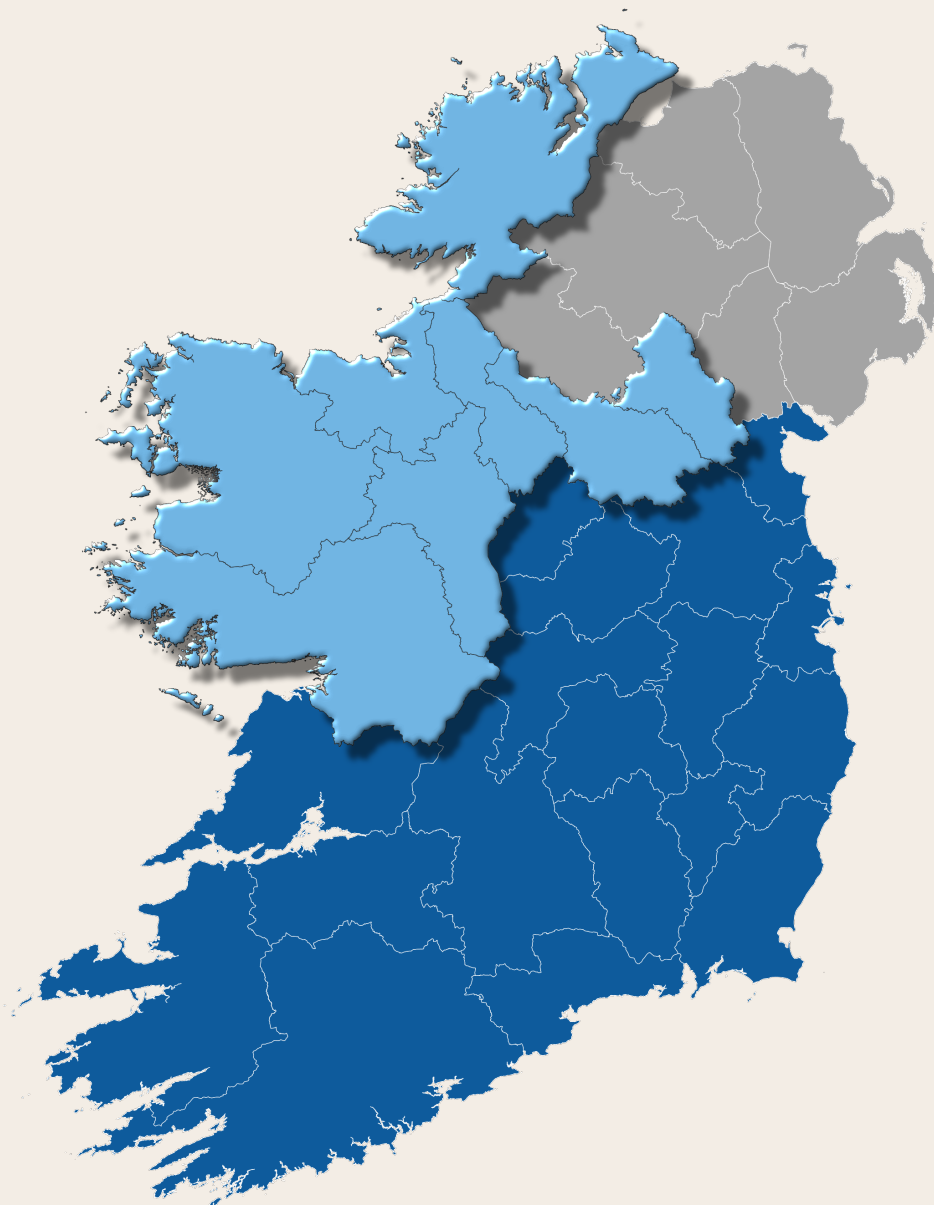


**Northern & Western  
Regional Assembly**



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# 1: Introduction

The All Island Strategic Review of the Rail Network is a welcome policy intervention, as it represents an opportunity to rebalance Regional Development across the Island of Ireland.

It is the view of the Northern and Western Regional Assembly that the provision of accessible, frequent, high-quality and affordable public transport services across the Island of Ireland will be key to simultaneously supporting the transition to a low/zero 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. Rail infrastructure can play a significant part in that transition but the reality at present is that very significant areas of the Island are at a competitive disadvantage due to the absence of any rail infrastructure. A significant part of this area lies within the Northern and Western region, in particular across the Northwest and the Central Border Region, and the remainder is in Northern Ireland and abuts this region. This is a competitive disadvantage that also presents a significant future challenge in achieving modal shift away from the use of fossil-fuel powered vehicles, which are necessary for the provision of connectivity for people and freight transport within and between Urban Centres of scale across the Island of Ireland.

The National Planning Framework identifies 10 National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs) and the provision of a rail network that provides a high quality, accessible and affordable rail network between our urban centres of scale, on an all island basis, has the potential to deliver NSO 1. Compact Growth, NSO 2. Enhanced Regional Accessibility, NSO 3. Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities, NSO 4. Sustainable Mobility, NSO 5. A Strong Economy supported by Enterprise, Innovation and Skills, NSO 6. High-Quality International Connectivity, and NSO 8. Transition to a Low Carbon and Climate Resilient Society.

The National Planning Framework has identified the urban areas of scale as the five cities. However, the NPF recognises that Sligo, Athlone, Drogheda, Dundalk and Letterkenny function in their areas in a similar manner to the five cities, but at a different scale. These places have been identified in the NPF as regional centres for urban growth of significant scale – where they develop as accessible centres of employment and services that can be a focal point for investment and have the widest possible regional influence. The Northern and Western Regional Assembly is part of the regional tier of governance in Ireland, primarily focused on the formulation, adoption and implementation of its Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES). In January 2020, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly published its RSES for the region, bringing together

spatial planning and economic policy to provide a strategic framework for investment in the Northern and Western Region. It implements and amplifies the NPF and thus includes a Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan for Galway and Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plans for Sligo, Athlone (part within Roscommon) and Letterkenny – it also includes the North West Metropolitan Spatial Planning Framework for the Cross border NW City Region (Letterkenny/Derry/Strabane). In addition, the RSES has identified Key Towns as strategic employment centres that can act as regional drivers that complement and support the higher-order urban areas of scale referenced above.

Current Regional disparities, which exist across a large number of key indicators, including Value Added Employment, Educational attainment and Household Income, are reflective of the European Commission's decision to downgrade the Northern and Western Region from a "More Developed Region" to a "Transition Region" post-2020 – the only region in Ireland to hold such a status. Furthermore, the European Parliament's Committee on Regional Development has categorised the region as a "Lagging Region". A "Lagging Region" faces specific development challenges across a host of areas, including relatively lower productivity and educational attainment and a weaker skills base and business environment. As a result, "Lagging Regions" – such as the Northern and

Western Region – can be expected to experience low economic growth which may lead to a more complex and delayed economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, the Northern and Western Region is now the only NUTS 2 Region in Ireland to be classified as a “Moderate Innovator”, according to the EU’s 2021 “Regional Innovation Scoreboard” - a region that registered an innovation index score between 70% and 100% of the EU average – whereas the Southern Region and Eastern and Midland Region were classified as being “Strong Innovators”, namely NUTS 2 Regions with an innovation index score between 100% and 125% of the EU average.

In 2020 the NWRA undertook an analysis of legacy investment trends in Ireland and published its findings in its publication “Region in Transition – The Way Forward”.<sup>1</sup> This research has confirmed that the decline in our region’s economy has been accompanied by long-term underinvestment in the region’s infrastructure, including National Roads, Regional and Local Roads, Health Infrastructure, Airport Infrastructure, Third-level Education and Research and Development.

The analysis extends to also suggest that this region can be expected to experience a more complex and long-term recovery from the current Covid-19 pandemic crisis. The Assembly, therefore, believe that it is imperative at a National Level that measures are urgently taken to redress the widening disparities. Such steps must include the consideration of positive discrimination in terms of investment in Rail (and other key enabling infrastructure) across the Border & Western Region, to enable, in particular, our Urban Centre’s of scale (as elaborated upon below) and the intra urban routes between these centre’s to be enhanced, and journey reliability, and certainty increased, with the ultimate goal of significantly reducing travel time and improving accessibility and connectivity.

The Assembly note the Strategic Goals in the consultation paper describing the review process. One of the goals of the process is to identify viable options. There is no definition given as to what might constitute a viable option, as outlined above one size does not fit all and weightings should be used to allow this region to compete fairly with the other regions on the Island.

We would also ask that an additional cross-cutting strategic goal would be considered in the review. The considerations should include a goal to maximise the use of existing assets which is generally a very sustainable form of development. There are for example many closed stations on the existing networks in this region including those on closed lines and the review should examine the viability of bringing them

into service with a particular reference to climate change and the possibility of changing settlement patterns arising from remote working and other new ways of doing business. The NWRA note the consultation paper also identifies the stark position for accessibility in the NW and Central Border area. Given the acknowledged pronounced infrastructural deficit which applies to the Northern and Western Region, the outcome of any such review should apply a proportionate weighting in assessing all future investment propositions across Rail projects in favour of this region. The NWRA call for positive discrimination in favour of the Northern and Western Region.

The out-workings of this initial All Island Rail Consultation should reflect the need to redress legacy underinvestment, the historic removal of Rail Routes during the 20th century across many Counties in the Northern half of the Island of Ireland, and the unintended consequences of this removal, the legacy of decades of underinvestment, particularly area’s straddling the Border, and along the Western seaboard.



<sup>1</sup> [www.nwra.ie/publications](http://www.nwra.ie/publications)

## 2. The RSES – Policy Priorities for Transport Investment

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly adopted the Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy 2020 – 2032 (RSES) for the Northern and Western Region in January 2020. The Strategy is available on the NWRA website<sup>2</sup>. It identifies regional development objectives and coordinating initiatives that support the delivery and implementation of national planning and economic policy that are bespoke to the region and which implements and amplifies the National Policy Objectives and National Strategic Outcomes of the National Planning Framework (NPF).

As well as seeking to significantly grow our Urban Centre's and encourage Compact Growth, and in the process, deliver the National Strategic Outcomes of the National Planning Framework, the Regional Strategy at its outset clearly acknowledges the Infrastructural imbalance which has become pronounced in Ireland over the last number of decades, with the West and Border Regions falling significantly behind in the provision of a number of key infrastructural areas, including, critically, all elements of Transport provision. In order to redress the geographic imbalance which has emerged, the National Planning Framework sets out a series of ambitions to boost critical mass in a number of centres and enhance access to the regions, these include :



### NPO 2a

A target of half (50%) of future population and employment growth focused in the existing five cities and their suburbs, which includes Galway in the N&W region

### NPO 2b

The Regional Roles of Athlone, Sligo & Letterkenny will be identified and supported in the RSES.

### NPO 2c

Access to the North West of Ireland and between centres of scale will be significantly improved.

### NPO 3c

Deliver 30% of all new homes (outside of the 5 Cities) within the existing footprint of settlements.

### NPO 45

Support and promote the development of the North West City Region as interlinked areas of strategic importance in the North-West of Ireland, through collaborative structures and a joined-up approach to spatial planning.

### NPO 46

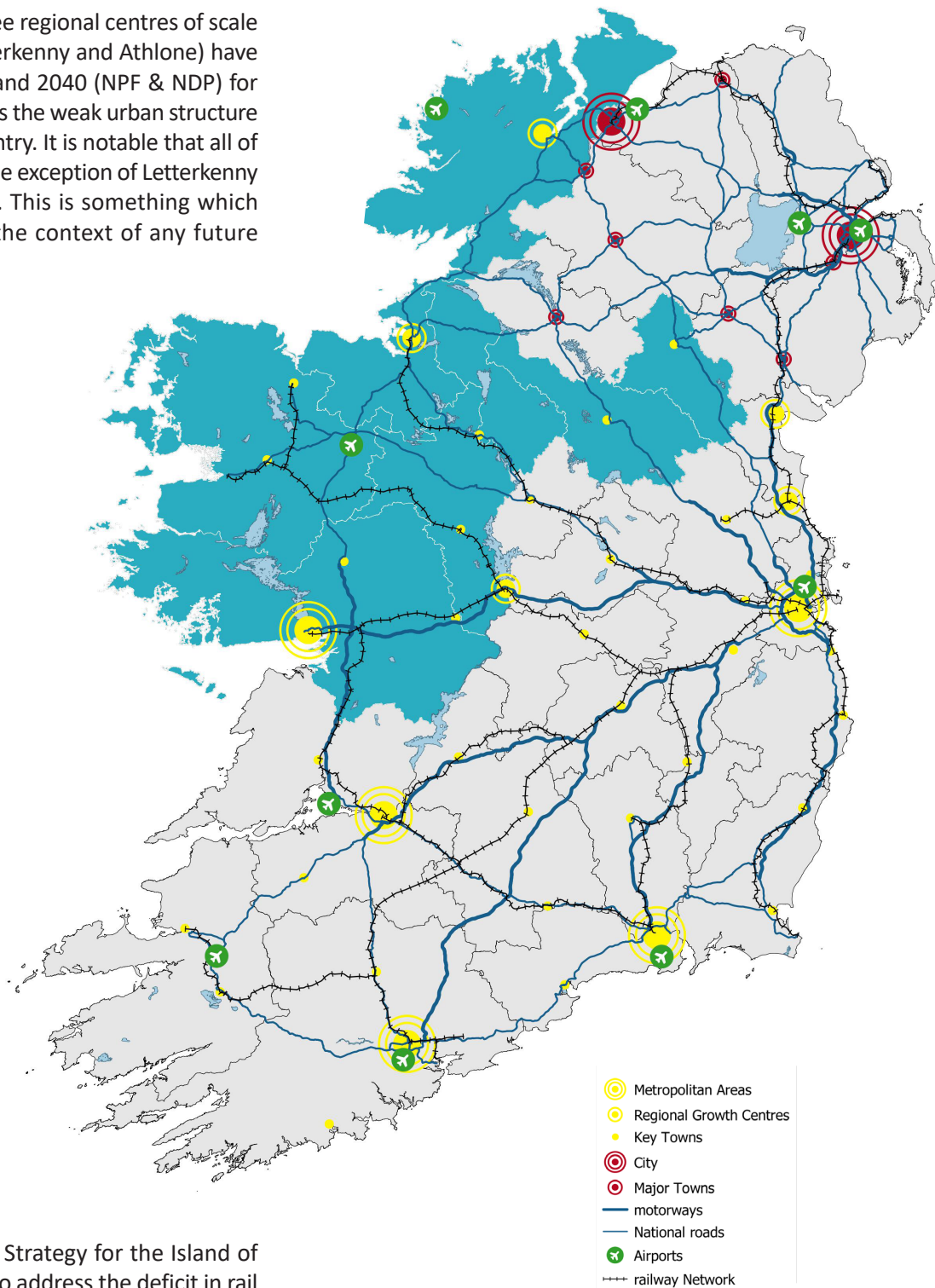
Provide enhanced Transport connectivity (including rail) between Ireland and Northern Ireland, in co-operation with Departments in Northern Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> [www.nwra.ie/rses](http://www.nwra.ie/rses)

The Strategic Rail Consultation correctly identifies the critical role of the five cities in accommodating growth. However, it fails to appropriately reflect the importance given in the NPF and the RSES to the Regional Centres of scale - Letterkenny, Sligo and Athlone (partly within N&W Region), together with Drogheda and Dundalk in the Eastern & Midlands region – this deficit needs to be rectified in the strategy.

Therefore, Galway and the three regional centres of scale in the N&W region (Sligo, Letterkenny and Athlone) have been called out in Project Ireland 2040 (NPF & NDP) for significant investment to redress the weak urban structure in the northern half of the country. It is notable that all of these Regional Centre's, with the exception of Letterkenny are currently serviced by Rail. This is something which should be addressed within the context of any future All Island Framework, particularly in the context of the wider North West, with Letterkenny / Derry / Strabane in combination comprising the fourth largest City Region on the Island of Ireland. The NPF identifies the need to improve accessibility between centres of scale, with a particular focus on improving accessibility and connectivity northwards on the emerging Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC) network, that links a network of major centres on the western seaboard with Derry.

There is ongoing continuous, strategic engagement across a number of areas between the Local Authorities in the North West (Donegal County Council & Derry City & Strabane District Council), and this collaboration is supported by the North/South Ministerial Council, through relevant Government Departments, including the Dept of An Taoiseach. It is therefore vitally important that any Rail Strategy for the Island of Ireland should reflect a target to address the deficit in rail infrastructure in the NW City Region.



### 3. Rail Priorities for the Region within the RSES

The RSES includes cross cutting themes with measures which commit to a low carbon region, modal shift to public transport and active travel journeys, and include a clear commitment to predominantly urban based consolidation. It provides for accelerated growth for a number of key centre's of scale (See Table 1), whilst delivering more Compact Growth, Sustainable Transport, commitment to public transport, walking and cycling, as well as targeted expansion of employment and educational offer within the Urban Hierarchy of the Region. The RSES focus on developing ambitions for Rail across our Region are set out within Sec. 6.3 of the RSES. The Strategy acknowledges the crucial role of the Intercity Rail Service, in providing for longer distance trips, and improved interregional connectivity.

The RSES additionally recognises the scope over the lifetime of the Strategy (out to 2032), to further upgrade elements of the service in the Region, the key higher level regional priorities can be summarised as follows:

#### Intra Regional Priorities:

To provide an adequate level of Rail Services, including the following:

#### 1. Galway Metropolitan Area:

- The City is a significant rail destination and has intercity services to/from Dublin via Athlone and to Limerick via Ennis. These services need to be augmented through the provision of direct linkages northwards to Derry via Sligo (utilising the Western Rail Corridor and servicing IWAK) and southwards to Cork
- Redevelopment of Ceannt Station Quarter as a regional multi-modal transport interchange with capacity for increased rail service frequency
- Double tracking of the rail line to Athlone
- Provide light rail freight service from Galway Harbour
- Support ramping up commuter services to commuter towns within the city region, such as Ballinasloe, Athenry, Craughwell and Oranmore, including provision of support infrastructure, such as Park & Ride facilities

#### 2. Athlone Regional Growth Centre:

- To introduce Dual Tracking between Galway & Athlone.
- Improve connectivity to Sligo (option of opening of western rail corridor would facilitate same)

#### 3. Sligo Regional Growth Centre:

- Improving the Sligo – Dublin Service
- Connecting Sligo to Galway via the western rail corridor, which can enable improved linkage to Ballina, Castlebar & Westport
- Examine potential to provide transit stop at the IDA Oakfield Business Park, which is of strategic importance for the economic future of Sligo.

#### 4. Letterkenny Regional Growth Centre and NW City Region:

- Provide a Rail link from Letterkenny to Derry (NWCR)
- Provide a rail link from NW City Region (Letterkenny/Derry/Strabane) to Sligo
- Provide a rail link from NW City Region (Letterkenny/Derry/Strabane) to Dublin via Omagh
- Provision of a Regional Transport Hub in Letterkenny – any potential rail link may influence location and design of same.



## Inter-Regional Priorities:

The delivery of the above regional priorities needs to be designed to provide for timely inter-regional connectivity across the Island of Ireland; The building out of the western rail corridor and the link northwards to the NW City Region (Letterkenny/Derry/Strabane) is of particular significance as it will also provide inter-linkages between the separate lines that currently serve this region – namely Galway-Dublin via Athlone, Castlebar / Ballina to Dublin via Athlone, Sligo to Dublin via Longford and Galway to Limerick. The Rail service in Derry would provide access to Belfast but travel time to Dublin would not be competitive to road transport. Therefore, it will be necessary to provide separate connectivity to the North West of Ireland (Donegal). Additionally the Central Border Region (Cavan / Monaghan) also lacks connectivity and linkages need to be provided to the All Island Rail Network.

It would also be of benefit to consider the future Rail Network within the context of the Regional imbalance in Ireland’s current Tiered Port Structure (due to be reviewed in 2022) and the ongoing review of the EU TEN-T Network – which presents the opportunity to augment the EU Ten-T Comprehensive Network by connecting our Ports into a revised Rail Network, recognising the strategic value and potentially expanded role of the Ports of Killybegs, Rossaveal & Galway.

The Regional Assembly would additionally highlight that the apparent focus on the All Island Strategic Rail Review to investment in Rail upgrades / reduced journey times between the 3 main cities Dublin / Belfast / Cork is a missed opportunity to advance the commitments and vision given in the National Planning Framework that seeks balanced regional development as a counter balance to the growth of Dublin. It needs to give this commitment to Galway, NW City Region and Sligo.



**Table 1: RSES Urban Centre’s – Growth Projections**

Region	Settlement	Policy Framework within RSES	Forecast Demographic Growth Ambition
<b>City</b>	Galway	Galway MASP (3.6 of RSES)	50% 140,000
<b>Regional Centre</b>	Sligo RGCSP (3.6 of RSES)	Galway MASP (3.6 of RSES)	40% to 26,000
	Letterkenny RGCSP (3.6 of the RSES)	Sligo RGCSP (3.6 of RSES)	40% to 26,000
	Athlone RGCSP (Sec. 3.6 of the RSES)	Athlone RGCSP (Sec. 3.6 of the RSES)	40% to 28,500
<b>Key Towns</b>	Roscommon, Carrick-on-Shannon Cavan, Monaghan, Ballina, Castlebar, Tuam, Ballinasloe	Section 3.8 of RSES	By 30% in each Settlement

## 4: Regional Asks

### Regional Ask 1:

The context and background section of any future All Island Rail Framework should clearly and appropriately reflect the importance given in the NPF and the RSES to the Regional Centres of scale - Letterkenny, Sligo and Athlone (partly within N&W Region),

### Regional Ask 2:

Any future All Island Rail Framework needs to redress legacy underinvestment in the Northern and Western region and ensure that there is positive discrimination in favour of the Northern and Western region in future investment decisions, thus helping to address the competitive disadvantage it has inherited and reverse the trends that have resulted in it being identified as a 'Region in Transition', 'Lagging Region' and a 'Moderate Innovator'.

### Regional Ask 3:

Any future All Island Rail Framework should give a weighting to the infrastructural deficiencies in the Northern and Western Region. The pipeline Rail projects planned over the next decade are almost exclusively outside of this Northern & Western Region, and predominantly located in the South & East of the Country, this lack of balance should be redressed in medium term.

This weighting, which should be inbuilt into the Public Spending Codes relating to infrastructure projects, should seek to address the fact this Region is across large parts of its land-mass devoid of rail infrastructure or motorways and does not possess a network of high-quality National Roads. Consequently, the normal hierarchy of Transport Investment priorities must be amended in certain cases, this would reflect the disparity between this region, and the rest of the country.

### Regional Ask 4:

That any future All Island Rail Framework address the outlier of Letterkenny as the only City / Regional Growth Centre in the NPF without a Rail Link. It should include an Objective to link Derry City / Letterkenny / Strabane by Rail to aid cross border collaboration, and enable the potential of the North West City Region to be realised for the benefit of communities within both jurisdictions.

### Regional Ask 5:

That any future All Island Rail Framework be mandated to include a brief to fully audit and assess the potential future viability of all existing disused Rail Assets, including corridors, and stations across the Northern & Western Region.

### Regional Ask 6:

That the All Island Rail Framework include the significant Interregional Connectivity gaps which exist across this Region at present, including the need to provide new routes from:

- i. NWCR - Sligo - Galway (as part of realising the Atlantic Economic Corridor)
- ii. NWCR - Omagh – Dublin (This route should be provided via Monaghan if topography and gradient considerations allow), otherwise the route should run via Omagh / Dungannon, and to the existing line at Portadown)
- iii. Cavan & Monaghan Towns (via Potential Spur to (ii) above)- Dublin.
- iv. Limerick – Cork (as part of realising the Atlantic Economic Corridor)

### Regional Ask 7:

That the Rail priorities of the RSES (Sec.6.3 – Transport Investment Priorities) for the Northern & Western Region be reflected in the All Island Rail Framework, including:

- i. Completion of the review of the Western Rail Corridor project as a priority for passenger and freight transport.
- ii. A Spur on the Western Rail Corridor which serves Ireland West Airport Knock (IWAK)
- iii. Expansion of the Role of Rail Freight with a line which link Ballina to Foynes Port, Limerick.
- iv. Upgrade the capacity of the Athlone - Atherry - Galway Rail Line, including the provision of Dual Tracking.
- v. Promote enhancement of the Capacity of Sligo – Dublin Line, with a Dual Track from Sligo to Longford.

- vi. Deliver the Athenry – Tuam – Claremorris – Sligo Line, through Planning and to an appropriate Level of service.
- vii. Support electrification of the Regional rail network

### Regional Ask 8:

That the All Island Rail Framework should acknowledge the important role of the Regional Growth Centres and that whilst these settlements are lesser in scale, they perform City like functions for significant sub-regions, which span County Boundaries in all cases.

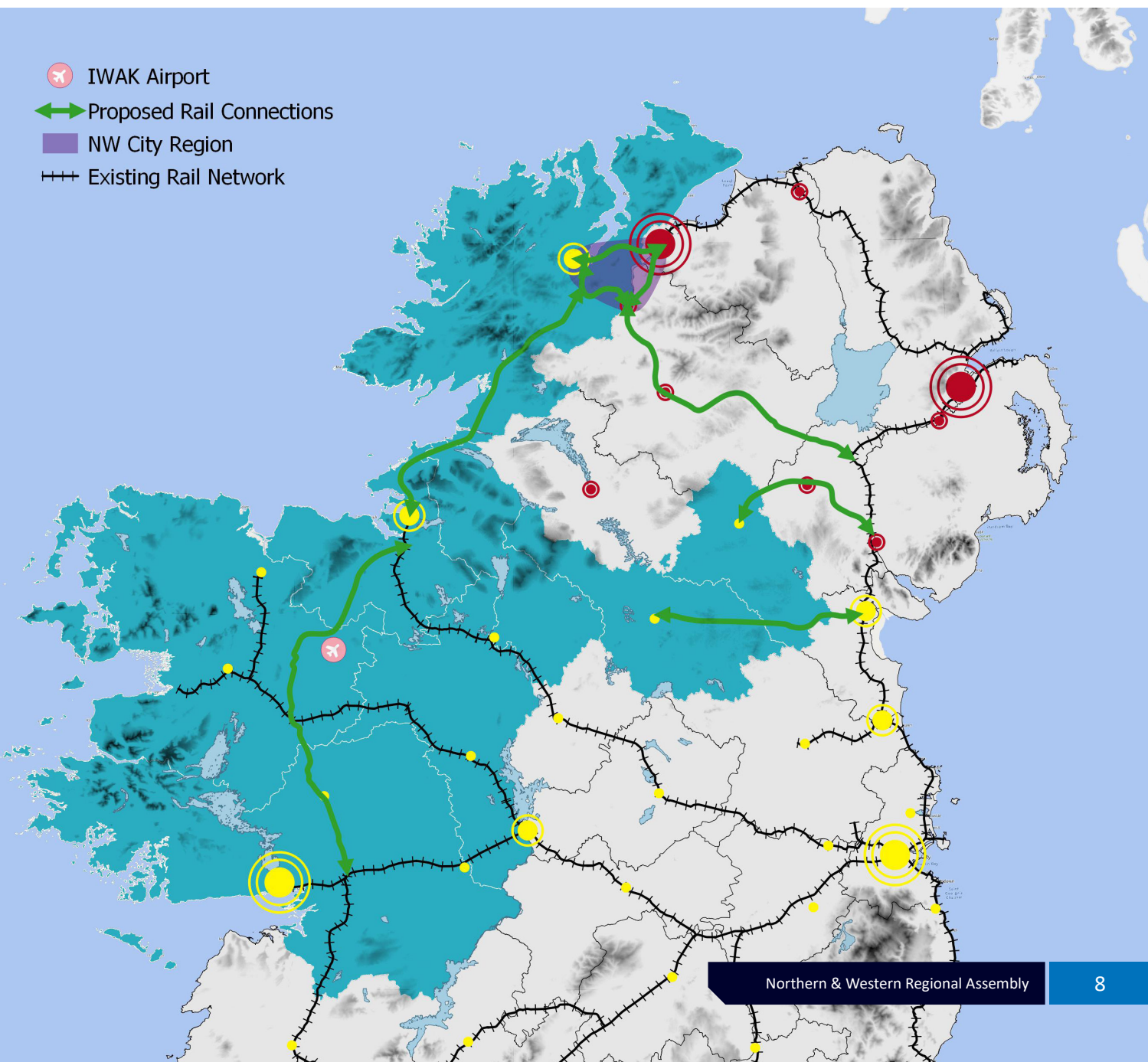
### Regional Ask 9:

All future National Road projects within this Region, committed to under the National Planning Framework, and National Development Plan should not be in any way compromised or delayed within the context of the identification of potential future Rail Corridors across the West, and the Border Region.

### Regional Ask 10:

That the existing rail network and services be provided to ensure they are socially inclusive, provide facilities to meet all societal needs and utilise smart technology to provide for enhanced service experience for customers.

Figure 1: Connecting the Northern & Western Region via an All Island Rail Network






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