



Northern & Western  
Regional Assembly

# Submission on DRCD Statement of Strategy 2023-2025

March 2023



Rialtas  
na hÉireann  
Government  
of Ireland

Tionscadal Éireann  
Project Ireland  
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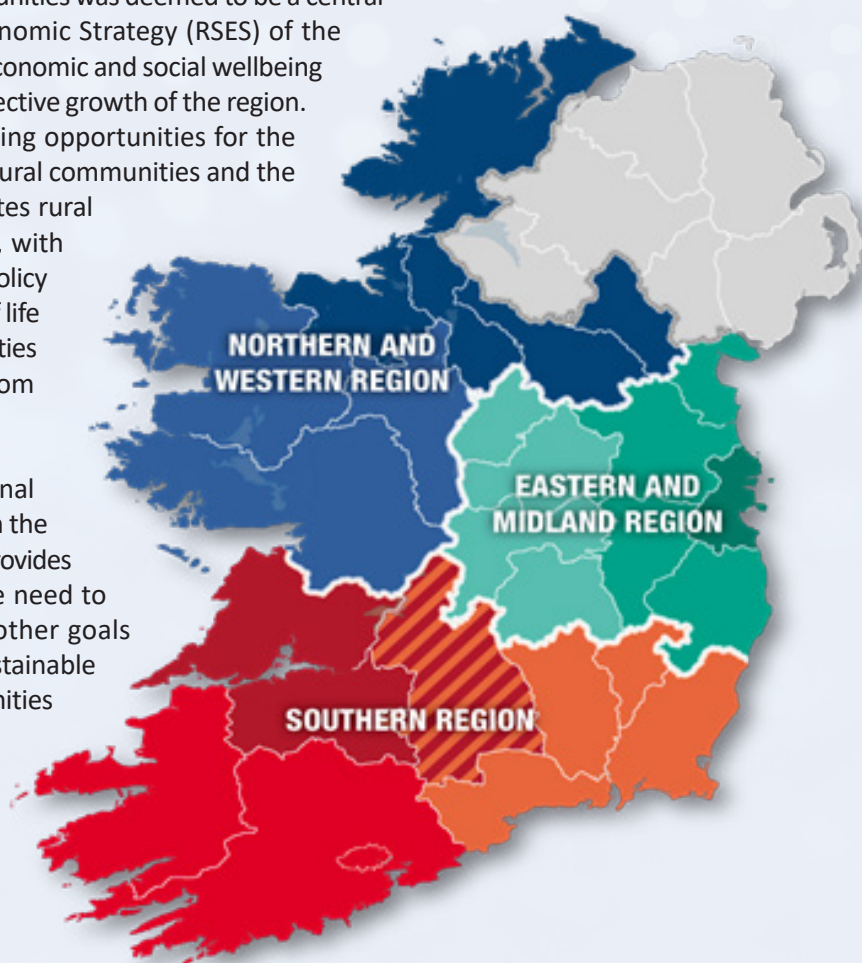


The Northern and Western Regional Assembly welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the development of the new statement of strategy for the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) for the period of 2023 to 2025.

Supporting sustainable development patterns in rural communities is of particular importance to the Northern and Western Regional Assembly, with the Northern and Western Region of Ireland defined by its unique connection to rural areas, with many parts of the region considered to be distinctively rural by nature. Notably, almost 80 per cent of the Northern and Western Region's population live in rural towns, villages and the countryside,<sup>1</sup> the region is home to two of the three largest Gaeltacht Areas in Ireland<sup>2</sup> and a host of island communities along its west coast, while the region – relative to the national norm – is far more reliant on predominantly rural oriented industries such as Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, the development of rural communities was deemed to be a central element of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) of the Northern and Western Region,<sup>4</sup> with the economic and social wellbeing of our rural areas directly linked to the collective growth of the region. The emphasis of the RSES is on highlighting opportunities for the region arising from the positive assets of rural communities and the diversity of opportunities that differentiates rural life in the Northern and Western Region, with the RSES outlining a number of “Regional Policy Objectives” (RPOs) relating to the quality of life offering, employment and digital opportunities and the sense of community that stems from life in rural areas.

As such, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly believes that the consultation on the new statement of strategy from the DRCD provides a significant opportunity to reinforce the need to implement these RPOs and to identify other goals and priorities which will facilitate more sustainable development patterns in the rural communities of the Northern and Western Region.



<sup>1</sup> Areas outside of the 3 Regional Growth Centres, 8 Key Towns and the Galway City Metropolitan Area in the Northern and Western Region

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nwra.ie/pdfs/NWRA-RSES-2020-2032.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Based on NACE Code employment figures from the Q4-2022 Labour Force Survey: <https://data.cso.ie/table/QLF07>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nwra.ie/pdfs/NWRA-RSES-2020-2032.pdf>



Therefore, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly has made a number of high-level recommendations which should be reflected in the new statement of strategy, namely:

1. Support the regeneration of rural towns and villages in the Northern and Western Region.
2. Capitalise on emerging digital technologies and work patterns such as remote working.
3. Utilise the transition to a low carbon economy to develop economic opportunities in rural communities across the Northern and Western Region.
4. Support traditional sectors associated with rural communities in the Northern and Western Region.
5. Improve regional stakeholder input into the development of future rural policy and funding schemes.
6. Acknowledge and target the various types of challenges being experienced by rural communities using a cross-governmental approach.
7. Utilise the role of “Public Participation Networks” in developing rural policies and funding schemes.
8. Support the development of the island communities and the Gaeltacht Areas of the Northern and Western Region.
9. Assist rural community groups and organisations in applying for rural oriented funding initiatives.
10. Support projects that will encourage more sustainable and active modes of transport in rural communities located in the Northern and Western Region.
11. Engage and collaborate with European partners in applying for EU funds that will support rural development in the Northern and Western Region.





The Northern and Western Regional Assembly has outlined a series of recommendations which should be reflected in the DRCD's new statement of strategy 2023-2025.

1. **Support the regeneration of rural towns and villages in the Northern and Western Region.** Too many of our towns and villages across the Northern and Western Region have been experiencing an unsustainable rate of economic, social, and physical decline over the past number of years, with high levels of vacancy and dereliction a consequence of such trends. The revitalisation of our town and village centres are firmly imbedded into the statutory frameworks of the National Planning Framework (NPF),<sup>5</sup> the RSES for the Northern and Western Region and in "Our Rural Future".<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, the new statement of strategy for the DRCD should aim to deliver projects that will assist in implementing the compact growth targets of the NPF and the RSES of the Northern and Western Region, specifically supporting the implementation of the following "Regional Policy Objectives" (RPO) which have been outlined in the RSES:

- ◆ **RPO 3.2**, namely deliver at least 30 per cent of all new homes that are targeted in settlements with a population of at least 1,500, within the existing built-up footprints.<sup>7</sup>
- ◆ **RPO 3.3**, namely deliver at least 20 per cent of all new housing in rural areas on brownfield sites.
- ◆ **RPO 3.4**, namely support the regeneration and renewal of small towns and villages in rural areas.

The delivery of these targets will be instrumental in supporting more sustainable development patterns in rural communities across the Northern and Western Region. In doing so, we can ensure our residents live closer to essential services and workplaces – which should reduce their reliance on private car journeys and their carbon footprint – enhance the placemaking credentials of our rural communities by reducing vacancy and dereliction and assist these areas in becoming economic, social and cultural hubs for their wider communities.

2. **Capitalise on emerging digital technologies and work patterns such as remote working.** Although, the development of urban centres of scale will continue to be the crucial component in addressing regional imbalances in Ireland, it is clear that remote working has the potential to relatively improve the growth prospects of rural communities across the Northern and Western Region. In the long term, the degree to which rural communities can capitalise on these potential benefits will depend on a variety of factors – including but not limited to – the availability of co-working hubs with high quality facilities and the provision of high speed broadband within such hubs. Therefore, the new statement of strategy from the DRCD should aim to capitalise on emerging digital technologies and work patterns such as remote and flexible working, as a means of supporting new employment and enterprise opportunities in rural communities in the Northern and Western Region.



<sup>5</sup> <https://npf.ie/wp-content/uploads/Project-Ireland-2040-NPF.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/c6f5d-our-rural-future/>

<sup>7</sup> Defined as CSO settlement boundary



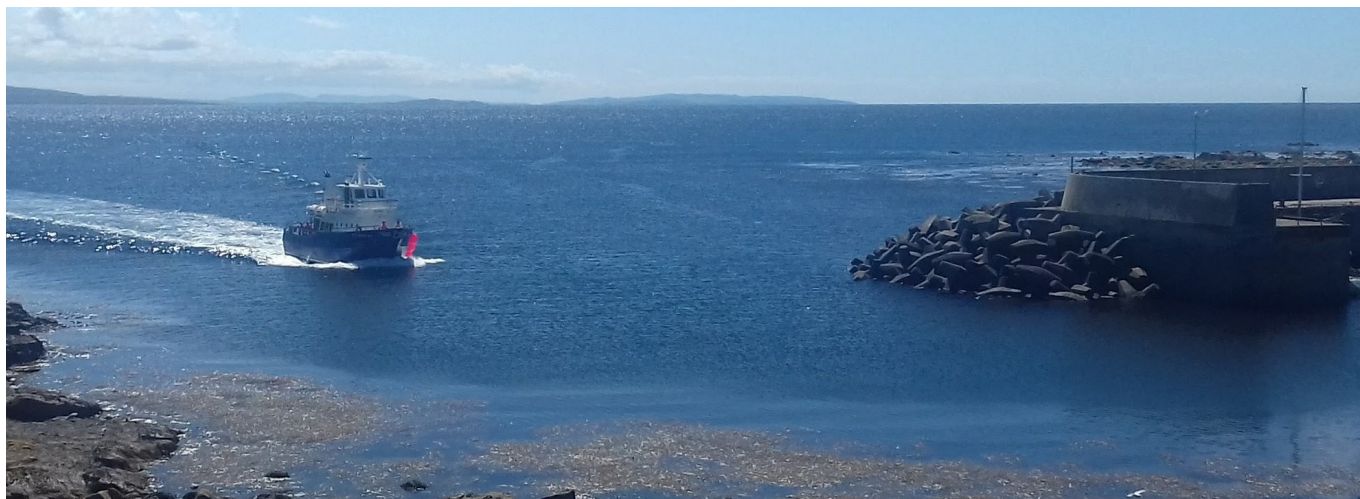
- 3. Utilise the transition to a low carbon economy to develop economic opportunities in rural communities across the Northern and Western Region.** It is imperative that the new statement of strategy from the DRCD aims to capitalise on the emerging opportunities from the transition to a low carbon economy, with the view of providing rural communities with the relevant funding, knowledge and infrastructure to make the most of these opportunities. Considering the Northern and Western Region's natural endowments – which range from its geographical location alongside the Atlantic coast to its natural assets and resources – the region's rural communities are well positioned to capitalise on the potential economic and environmental opportunities of this transition. In doing so, our rural areas can generate sustainable employment opportunities, support future population growth, and safeguard the delivering of essential services in their community. Therefore, such potential should be reflected and targeted in the new statement of strategy from the DRCD.
- 4. Support traditional sectors associated with rural communities in the Northern and Western Region.** Although emerging trends in terms of the green and digital economy have the potential to support ample opportunities across rural communities, it is clear that Tourism, Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing will continue to remain the foundation of economic activity in rural areas. For example, the islands off the western seaboard of Donegal, Mayo and Galway and our coastal areas contain some of our most vibrant and culturally distinctive rural communities in Ireland, with many of these areas continuing to be highly dependent on employment within the Fishing, Agriculture and Hospitality sectors.

This is particularly relevant for the Northern and Western Region, with employment in Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing sectors accounting for 6.6 per cent of total employment in the region as of Q4-2022<sup>8</sup> – which was higher than the corresponding state average of 3.9 per cent – with much of this employment likely to be located within or connected to rural communities in the region. Therefore, in consultation with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, the Regional Assemblies and other relevant state agencies, the new statement of strategy from the DRCD should aim to deliver projects that will support existing activities and emerging trends in the Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing sectors, as means of supporting rural economies. Furthermore, the new statement of strategy from the DRCD should also aim to maximise the potential of the tourism assets and natural scenery of the Northern and Western Region, with the hospitality sector providing a value source of economic activity and employment for residents living in rural areas across the region.

- 5. Improve regional stakeholder input into the development of future rural policy and funding schemes.** For example, there should be a role for the three Regional Assemblies of Ireland in managing and distributing the Rural Regeneration Development Fund (RRDF) across their respective NUTS 2 Regions, given the knowledge of the Assemblies with respect to rural towns and villages that are experiencing decline or urban pressures and considering the Assemblies extensive experience as the Managing Authorities of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The purpose of this would be to capitalise on regional and local knowledge so that targeted measures can be developed in supporting rural communities across Ireland.
- 6. Acknowledge and target the various types of challenges being experienced by rural communities using a cross-governmental approach.** It is necessary to make our rural areas more resilient to challenges, but it is clear that various types of challenges are being experienced across rural communities, ranging from urban generated pressures from the demand for houses within commuting distance of our urban centres, declining and ageing population – which can lead to issues of isolation and mental health struggles – the ever-changing structure of the economy, crime and a lack of access to high quality infrastructure and social services. On this basis, the new statement of strategy from the DRCD should acknowledge the need for a cross governmental approach in addressing these challenges and that a place-based approach will be needed in supporting the development of various types of rural communities across the Northern and Western Region. The DRCD should have a particular focus on supporting a coordinated approach in areas relating to health, housing, transport, digital services, recreational and cultural services and farming.

<sup>8</sup> <https://data.cso.ie/table/C11F07>





7. **Utilise the role of “Public Participation Networks” in developing rural policies and funding schemes.** A Public Participation Network (PPN) is a network that allows local authorities to connect with community groups around the country, with the PPN regarded as essential for Local Authorities who wish to utilise community and voluntary expertise in their area.<sup>9</sup> For the new statement of strategy, the DRCD should acknowledge the important role of the PPNs.
8. **Support the development of the island communities and the Gaeltacht Areas of the Northern and Western Region.** Our region is renowned for its island communities and Gaeltacht areas, with these areas celebrated for their contribution to our national cultural and rural heritage, with some of Ireland’s largest Gaeltacht Areas – namely in Connemara, Mayo and West Donegal – and island communities located in the Northern and Western Region. Supporting these rural based communities reinforces our sense of identity and fosters a sense of place and wellbeing that presents a competitive advantage to the region and Ireland, therefore the new statement of strategy for the DRCD should support the implementation of the following RPOs within the RSES:
- ◆ **RPO 5.8**, namely promote, enhance and protect the linguistic, cultural and heritage value of our Gaeltacht Communities
  - ◆ **RPO 5.10**, namely support the provision of adequate broadband capacity that enables the further development of the vibrant film, video and digital media sectors in the region in particular and that facilitates collaboration between cultural sector practitioners
  - ◆ **RPO 5.11**, namely support the provision and/or upgrade of cultural facilities – such as multi-purpose arts centres, theatres, galleries, libraries, museums – where the public, and visitors to the region may enjoy and participate in cultural activities, with a particular focus on Gaeltacht Towns.
  - ◆ **RPO 6.25**, which seeks for the continued improvement of pier infrastructure on Inis Oír and Inis Meáin in the Aran Islands and at Machaire Rabhartaigh
9. **Assist rural community groups and organisations in applying for rural oriented funding initiatives.** The role of community groups and organisations in supporting rural residents cannot be underestimated, with these groups and organisations – on a daily basis – helping vulnerable and isolated members of the community, providing essential services to the public and contributing to the strong sense of community that is often associated with rural areas.

Considering the voluntary nature of their services and activities, these community groups and organisations are notably reliant on fundraising activities and public funding from Government Departments, with the provision of such funding to be strongly welcomed. That said, the application for public funding streams seems to be associated with notably tight deadlines and a resource intensive application process, which can prove difficult for small community groups and organisations. The next statement of strategy from the DRCD should aim to overcome these challenges with the provision of timely announcements and a significant promotional campaign highlighting announcements from the DRCD on funding applications and deadlines. Furthermore, the statement of strategy should aim to simplify the process and requirements for rural community groups and organisations in applying for funding streams under the DRCD.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/b59ee9-community-network-groups/>



- 10. Support projects that will encourage more sustainable and active modes of transport in rural communities located in the Northern and Western Region:** The provision of more accessible, frequent and high quality sustainable modes of public transport through the Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan,<sup>10</sup> the expansion of the public EV charge point network and the delivery of more active travel infrastructure will be key to reducing the carbon footprint of our rural communities and supporting the delivery of the emission reduction targets outlined in the Climate Action Plan.<sup>11</sup> Although the delivery of these types of projects fall under the remit of the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC), the statement of strategy from the DRCD should explicitly aim to coordinate with the relevant state agencies and the DECC in the rollout of these projects, ensuring rural communities are adequately represented on these matters.

Considering the sizeable challenges associated with the Northern and Western Region’s public transport system – as highlighted in the Assembly’s submission on the NTA’s “Connecting Ireland” proposals<sup>12</sup> – the provision of more active and sustainable modes of transport in rural communities could not be more important in our region’s transition to a low carbon society. In coordinating with the DECC, the statement of strategy should have regard for the following RPOs outlined in the RSES of the Northern and Western Region, namely:

- ◆ **RPO 6.20**, namely utilise smart technology to provide for enhanced service experience for customers.
  - ◆ **RPO 6.21**, namely 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**, namely provide new interchange facilities and enhanced bus waiting facilities together with enhanced passenger information, utilising smart technology in appropriate circumstances
  - ◆ **RPO 6.23**, namely provide sustainable travel which will be supported by providing walking and cycling facilities (including Greenway and Blueway projects) as a priority across the region.
  - ◆ **RPO 6.26 (b)**, namely support the delivery of safe walking and cycle infrastructure in rural areas
  - ◆ **RPO 6.26 (c)**, namely support the development of a network of greenways
  - ◆ **RPO 6.34**, namely promote the deployment of targeted, convenient and safe recharging infrastructure across the region to meet the changing needs of EVs, with a particular emphasis in public parking areas and employment locations.
- 11. Engage and collaborate with European partners in applying for EU funds that will support rural development in the Northern and Western Region.** The new statement of strategy from the DRCD should aim to engage and collaborate with the Regional Assemblies of Ireland and European funding partners in applying for EU funding sources that will support rural development in the Northern and Western Region, focusing on programmes under the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, the European Regional Development Fund and other EU funding initiatives.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nationaltransport.ie/connecting-ireland/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7bd8c-climate-action-plan-2023/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nwra.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/northern-and-western-regional-assembly-submission-on-ntas-connecting-ireland.pdf>






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