

Northern and Western Regional Assembly's Submission on the All-Island Strategic Rail Review



29th of September 2023

1: Summary

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the All-Island Strategic Rail Review¹. The provision of accessible, frequent, high-quality and affordable rail services across the Northern and Western Region of Ireland will be key to simultaneously supporting the delivery of balanced regional development in Ireland – in line with the vision and objectives of National Planning Framework² (NPF) and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) of the Northern and Western Region³ – while supporting our region’s transition to a low carbon society, in line with the targets outlined in the Climate Action Plan⁴.

The publication of the All-Island Strategic Rail Review is quite timely and could not be more important, considering the scale of the challenges associated with the region’s rail network. Due to historical removal of rail lines throughout the 20th century and considering decades of underinvestment in the region’s transport infrastructure, the Northern and Western Region’s rail network has lagged behind national norms in terms of accessibility, frequency and quality of service. Residents from the Northern and Western Region – compared to national norms – generally don’t have reasonable access to sustainable modes of public transport such as rail or tend to live close to a transport option with infrequent daily services during the working week. As a result of this historical underinvestment in our region’s rail network, residential dwellings based in the Northern and Western Region are – on average – 30.4km from a train station, which was significantly higher compared to the State average of 15.7km and the other NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland. As a result of these sizeable infrastructure deficits, the Northern and Western Region records low usage of sustainable transport modes such as rail, a high reliance on private car journeys and unsustainable commuting levels. Such challenges are occurring at a time when the Northern and Western Region’s economy has been underperforming, to the point the European Commission has downgraded the region’s economy from a “More Developed Region” to a lower economic status known as a “Transition Region”⁵; the only NUTS 2 Region in Ireland to hold such a status.

Within this context, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly welcomes the initial regional recommendations that have been outlined in the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, with the implementation of these recommendations likely to improve rail accessibility, frequency and the quality of services within the Northern and Western Region of Ireland. In particular, the Assembly welcomes commitments to supporting the delivery of rail projects such as – but not limited to – the reinstatement of the Athenry-Claremorris rail line, the connection of towns within Cavan and Monaghan via the proposed Mullingar to Portadown line and the proposed connectivity that will be delivered between Derry City and Letterkenny.

“The rail ambition for the region must be greater, and reflect the urgency in addressing regional infrastructure deficits across the Island” (NWRA)

Notwithstanding these recommendations, it is clear that the rail review needs to be far more ambitious regarding its proposals for the Northern and Western Region of Ireland, with the review lacking urgency in addressing regional transport deficits and supporting the region’s transition to a low carbon society, while the review fails to take into account the strategic importance of fully connecting the Galway Metropolitan Area, the 3 “Regional Growth Centres” and the 8 “Key Towns” of the Northern and Western Region, with such oversights contrary to the NPF and the RSES.

¹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/4d4f2-all-island-strategic-rail-review-public-consultation-for-strategic-environment-assessment/>

² <https://nwf.ie/wp-content/uploads/Project-Ireland-2040-NPF.pdf>

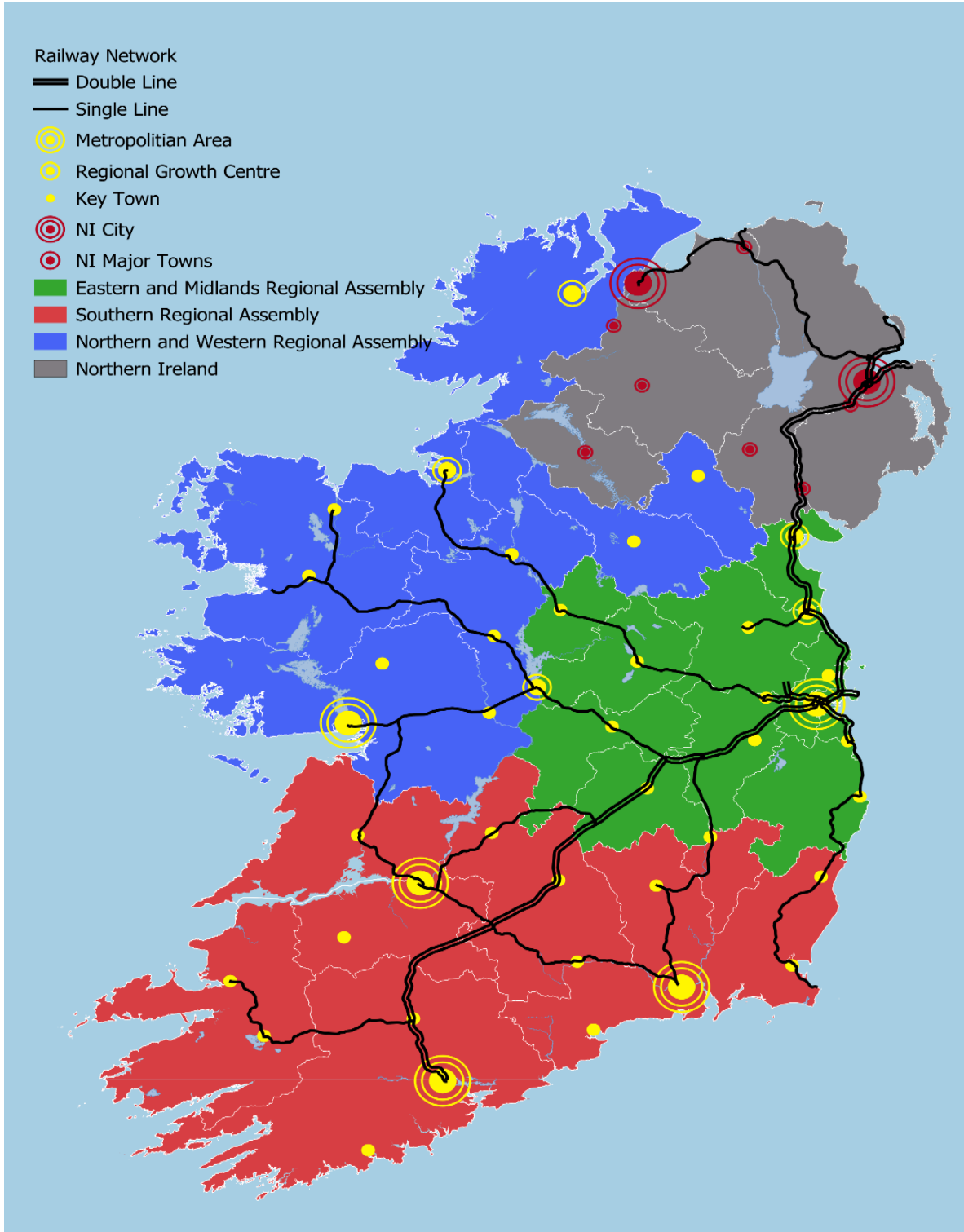
³ <https://www.nwra.ie/pdfs/NWRA-RSES-2020-2032.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7bd8c-climate-action-plan-2023/#:~:text=The%20plan%20implements%20the%20carbon,in%20the%20Programme%20for%20Government.>

⁵ <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f057c-minister-mcgrath-launches-irelands-european-regional-development-edrf-fund/>

With this in mind, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly has made a number of high-level and specific recommendations to ensure that the All-Island Strategic Rail Review is delivered in a manner which can address these challenges and can achieve its proposed vision of delivering *“accessible, efficient, safe and sustainable transport system that supports communities, households and businesses”*.

Figure 1: The Urban Hierarchy, inc. Key Towns & Regional Growth Centres, and Current Rail Network Provision.



Source: Northern and Western Regional Assembly

Therefore, the Assembly's high-level and specific recommendations for the All-Island Strategic Rail Review are as follows:

High-Level Recommendations

1. Acknowledge and support the vision, objectives and settlement hierarchy of the NPF and the RSES of the Northern and Western Region of Ireland.
2. Adopt a policy of "Positive Discrimination" towards the rail network of the Northern and Western Region of Ireland, which should include a weighting of prioritisation in areas which are not currently served by any Rail Network (e.g. Cavan, Monaghan, Donegal).
3. Provide more information on the methodology associated with the evaluation process for individual rail projects in the Northern and Western Region of Ireland

Specific Recommendations

Derry / Donegal

1. Deliver a Sligo to Letterkenny railway line to an appropriate level of service and to a standard capable of facilitating passenger and freight transport, either directly through the counties of Sligo and Donegal or indirectly through the strategic towns of Enniskillen and Omagh. Such a line should be served with dual track lines considering the strategic importance of Letterkenny and Sligo Town as "Regional Growth Centres" and the North-West City Region under the NPF and the RSES of the Northern and Western Region
2. Ensure Derry City is served with a 200 km / hr (120mph) rail line, in line with the other cities on the island of Ireland.
3. Provide rail connectivity to the strategic town of Enniskillen, in the event that a direct line between Sligo Town and Letterkenny is considered appropriate.
4. Ensure any spur linking Letterkenny to Derry City consists of a dual track line.

The Central Border Region:

5. Consideration should be given to the extension of the line serving Navan to Dublin to Cavan Town via Kells and Virginia, while the 1st phase of the Mullingar to Portadown line should initially connect Portadown to Cavan Town, as opposed to the existing phase 1 which would initially connect Portadown to Clones

The West of Ireland (including Sligo):

6. Deliver a Claremorris to Sligo railway line to an appropriate level of service and to a standard capable of facilitating passenger and freight transport. Such a railway line should be served by dual track lines with the view of connecting Galway City to Sligo.

7. Deliver a spur that connects Ireland West Airport Knock to any future Western Railway Corridor, ensuring residents and passengers can access the airport through the rail network, in line with the proposed commitments for Dublin Airport, Shannon Airport and Belfast.
8. Upgrade the capacity of the Athlone, Ballinasloe to Athenry railway line – including the provision of dual tracks – and support the provision of increased service stops between Athlone and Galway.
9. Enhance the capacity of the Dublin to Sligo rail line, particularly through the provision of infrastructure such as dual track lines between Sligo Town and Longford Town and provide more frequent services between Sligo Town and Dublin.
10. Upgrade the proposed timelines associated with the electrification of the Northern and Western Region's railway network, with a particular focus on direct lines connecting the Galway Metropolitan Area and the 3 Regional Growth Centres of Sligo Town, Letterkenny and Athlone.

2: Recommendations

2.1: High-Level Recommendations

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly welcomes the publication of the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, given that its implementation will likely improve rail accessibility, frequency, international connectivity and the quality of services within the Northern and Western Region of Ireland, while also supporting the region's connectivity to other regions across the island of Ireland. The provision of accessible, frequent, high-quality and affordable rail services throughout the region will be key to simultaneously supporting the delivery of balanced regional development and transitioning the region to a low carbon society.

Notwithstanding the recommendations that have been outlined in the All-Island Strategic Rail Review – particularly the initial proposals under “Goal 3: Regional and Rural” – it is clear that the rail review needs to be far more ambitious regarding its proposals for the Northern and Western Region of Ireland and that higher levels of investment will be required in order to significantly improve the rail network of the region, support the availability of more sustainable transport options and reduce the region's unsustainable reliance on private car journeys. The provision of an improved investment package for the enhancement of rail services in the Northern and Western Region of Ireland could not be more important given the scale of transport infrastructure deficits that exist in the region, its relatively high reliance on private car journeys, its existing weak urban structure and given that regional economic disparities in Ireland continue to remain notably high according to the European Commission's latest semester country report on Ireland⁶. On this basis, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly believes that the overall set of recommendations in the All-Island Strategic Rail Review is lacking urgency in addressing challenges in the following key areas, namely:

- **Regional Transport Deficits:** The current set of recommendations from the All-Island Strategic Rail Review doesn't seem to reflect any urgency in meaningfully addressing the sizeable infrastructure deficits of the Northern and Western Region's rail network and in delivering sizeable improvements regarding accessibility, frequency and quality of service. Compared to national norms, the Northern and Western Region's rail network is notably underperforming in these areas and while the current set of recommendations from the All-Island Strategic Rail Review will improve the region's performance in this regard, it is clear that far more proposals are needed if significant progress is to be made in addressing these sizeable infrastructure deficits. This is particularly relevant given that the European Commission's “Regional Competitiveness Index”⁷ found that infrastructure deficits in transport undermining the competitiveness of the region's economy, affecting its ability to attract investment and talent.
- **Climate Objectives:** The current set of proposals from the All-Island Strategic Rail Review doesn't seem to reflect appropriate level of urgency in supporting the region's transition to a low carbon society, particularly regarding the electrification of the region's rail network. Such an approach is not satisfactory given the ongoing need to reduce carbon emissions from the transport sector by 50 per cent by 2030⁸ and given the need of policymakers to provide rural residents with sustainable modes of public transport as an alternative for private car journeys. This is particularly relevant for residents in the Northern and Western Region of Ireland given the region's geographical composition and considering the region's high reliance on private car journeys as their primary mode of transport.

⁶ https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-05/IE_SWD_2023_607_en.pdf

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/assets/regional-competitiveness/index.html

⁸ <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/d3341-transport-vision-in-climate-action-plan-will-transform-how-we-travel-over-the-coming-7-years/>

- **Regional Development Objectives:** The current set of recommendations from the All-Island Strategic Rail Review also doesn't seem to take into account the NPF and the RSES of the Northern and Western Region, as the current proposals fail to support connecting all of the "Regional Growth Centres" of the region. This is despite the fact the NPF recognises that the "Regional Growth Centres" of the Northern and Western Region – namely Letterkenny, Sligo Town and Athlone – function in a similar manner to the five cities of Ireland, but at a different scale for their respective geographical areas. The "Regional Growth Centres" of the Northern and Western Region have been identified in the NPF and the RSES as areas designated for urban growth of significant scale, with the view of developing as accessible centres of employment and services that can be a focal point for investment and have the widest possible regional influence. In this regard, the All-Island Strategic Rail Review does not acknowledge their strategic importance, as evident from its failure to commit to connecting Sligo Town, Letterkenny and the wider North-West City Region including Derry City and Strabane, either directly through the counties of Sligo and Donegal or indirectly through strategic towns in Northern Ireland, such as Enniskillen and Omagh.

Within this context, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly has made the following high-level recommendations that need to be reflected in the finalised All-Island Strategic Rail Review, namely:

1. **Acknowledge and support the vision, objectives and settlement hierarchy of the NPF and the RSES of the Northern and Western Region of Ireland:** Under the current set of recommendations, the All-Island Strategic Rail Review fails to acknowledge the strategic importance that have been provided to the Galway Metropolitan Area, the "Regional Growth Centres", the "Key Towns" of the Northern and Western Region and other strategic towns in the North-West City Region as well as the need to connect these urban centres to other similarly sized settlements across the island of Ireland, as envisaged in the vision and objectives of the NPF and the three RSESs.

For example, despite the review committing to connect as many towns with populations of 10,000 people or more to the rail network, the All-Island Strategic Rail Review fails to commit to connecting the "Regional Growth Centres" of Sligo Town and Letterkenny, either directly through the counties of Sligo and Donegal or indirectly through strategic towns in Northern Ireland such as Enniskillen and Omagh. This is despite the fact that Census 2022⁹ found that the population of Letterkenny and Sligo Town amounted to 22,549 and 20,608 respectively – with the population of these areas expected to grow by 40 per cent by 2040¹⁰ – with the town of Enniskillen also having a population of 18,451 according to the Northern Irish Census of 2021¹¹. Considering these population sizes are notably higher than the review's threshold of supporting connectivity of towns with a population of 10,000 people or more, it seems that these strategic towns have been unjustly excluded for rail projects.

Although the review notes that environmental considerations were a factor in not supporting the development of a Sligo Town to Letterkenny line, the document provides little evidence that justifies such a statement. Furthermore, the All-Island Strategic Rail Review fails to commit to fully developing the Western Railway Corridor, with the current suite of recommendations not including a commitment to developing a rail line between Claremorris and Sligo. As such, the rail review fails to take into account the strategic importance of directly connecting the Galway Metropolitan Area and the "Regional Growth

⁹ <https://data.cso.ie/table/F1051>

¹⁰ Base year of 2016: <https://www.nwra.ie/pdfs/NWRA-RSES-2020-2032.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.fermanaghomagh.com/app/uploads/2023/03/Census-2021-Population-and-Households-for-Data-Zones.pdf>

Centre” of Sligo Town with other urban centres of scale and strategic infrastructure assets across Ireland, including the Limerick-Shannon Metropolitan Area – which includes Shannon Airport and Foynes Port – the Cork Metropolitan Area – which includes Cork Airport and Cork Port – and Waterford Metropolitan Area, which includes Waterford Port.

To address these gaps, it is imperative that the finalised All-Island Strategic Rail Review acknowledges and supports the vision, objectives and settlement hierarchy of the NPF and the RSES, thereby committing to support rail connectivity between the Galway Metropolitan Area, all of the “Regional Growth Centres” of the Northern and Western Region, while also acknowledging the importance of the 8 “Key Towns” of the region – namely Tuam, Ballinasloe, Castlebar, Ballina, Roscommon Town, Carrick-on-Shannon, Monaghan Town and Cavan Town – and other strategic towns located in Northern Ireland.

2. Adopt a policy of “Positive Discrimination” towards the rail network of the Northern and Western Region of Ireland: A policy of “Positive Discrimination” would involve the All-Island Strategic Rail Review undertaking the following steps, namely:

- Prioritising the delivery of the current recommendations for the rail projects in the Northern and Western Region of Ireland.
- Prioritising the delivery of additional rail projects that have not been included in the All-Island Strategic Rail Review and which have been outlined in Sub-Section 2.1 of this submission and which have been supported in the RSES of the Northern and Western Region.
- Adopting a new goal for the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, which aims to address existing transport infrastructure deficits within the three designated NUTS 2 Regions of the island of Ireland. Such a goal should be considered in parallel to other key goals such as – but not limited to – alignment with existing policies and connecting towns with populations of 10,000 people or more.

Such a policy is required in order to address historical underinvestment in the Northern and Western Region’s rail network and to overcome the sizable transport infrastructure deficits which currently exist in the region. The scale of these infrastructure deficits is evident from the fact that 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 Ireland¹². 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. Adopting a policy of “Positive Discrimination” towards the rail network of the Northern and Western Region will support the region’s transition to a low carbon society – reducing the region’s above average reliance on private car journeys – while also supporting the delivery of the population and compact growth targets of the NPF and the RSES of the Northern and Western Region.

3. Provide more information on the methodology associated with the evaluation process for individual rail projects in the Northern and Western Region of Ireland. The All-Island Strategic Rail Review needs to provide a greater level of information to stakeholders on the

¹² Census 2016 data provided by the CSO. Census 2022 data was not available at the time of writing.

methodology that was used in evaluating the various rail “packages” and the individual rail projects that were considered in the Northern and Western Region of Ireland. In this regard, ARUP should provide stakeholders – amongst other things – the raw data that was used in calculating the estimated costs and benefits associated with regional rail “packages” and individual rail projects along with the assumptions and other details that were applied in these calculations. Although high-level costs and benefits surrounding various “packages” have been provided under “Work Package 3: Appraisal and Definition¹³” it is not clear how these costs and benefits were specifically generated while such information is not available for specific individual projects that were considered in the review.

2.2: Specific Recommendations

Notwithstanding the welcoming recommendations that have been outlined in the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, it is clear that the rail review needs to be far more ambitious regarding its proposals for the Northern and Western Region of Ireland and higher levels of investment will be required in order to significantly improve the rail network of the region, address historical underinvestment in the region’s rail network and to support the region’s transition to a low carbon society. In conjunction to delivering the regional projects that are currently committed to in the review, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly believes that the following specific recommendations should also be supported in the finalised All Island Strategic Rail Review, namely:

1. Deliver a Claremorris to Sligo railway line to an appropriate level of service and to a standard capable of facilitating passenger and freight transport. Such a railway line should be served by dual track lines with the view of connecting Galway City to Sligo.
2. Deliver a spur that connects Ireland West Airport Knock to any future Western Railway Corridor, ensuring residents and passengers can access the airport through the rail network, in line with the proposed commitments for Dublin Airport, Shannon Airport and Belfast.
3. Deliver a Sligo to Letterkenny railway line to an appropriate level of service and to a standard capable of facilitating passenger and freight transport, either directly through the counties of Sligo and Donegal or indirectly through the strategic towns of Enniskillen and Omagh. Such a line should be served with dual track lines considering the strategic importance of Sligo Town and Letterkenny as “Regional Growth Centres” and the North-West City Region under the NPF and the RSES of the Northern and Western Region.
4. Enhance the capacity of the Dublin to Sligo rail line, particularly through the provision of infrastructure such as dual track lines between Sligo Town and Longford Town and provide more frequent services between Sligo Town and Dublin.
5. Upgrade the capacity of the Athlone, Ballinasloe to Athenry railway line – including the provision of dual tracks – and support the provision of increased service stops between Athlone and Galway.
6. Consideration should be given to the extension of the line serving Navan to Dublin to Cavan Town via Kells and Virginia, while the 1st phase of the Mullingar to Portadown line should initially connect Portadown to Cavan Town, as opposed to the existing phase 1 which would initially connect Portadown to Clones.

¹³ <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/4d4f2-all-island-strategic-rail-review-public-consultation-for-strategic-environment-assessment/>

- 7.** Upgrade the proposed timelines associated with the electrification of the Northern and Western Region's railway network, with a particular focus on direct lines connecting the Galway Metropolitan Area and the 3 Regional Growth Centres of Sligo Town, Letterkenny and Athlone.
- 8.** Ensure Derry City is served with a 200 km / hr (120mph) rail line, in line with the other cities on the island of Ireland.
- 9.** Provide rail connectivity to the strategic town of Enniskillen, in the event that a direct line between Sligo Town and Letterkenny is considered appropriate.
- 10.** Ensure any spur linking Letterkenny to Derry City consists of a dual track line.

Appendix

Strategic Justification for Recommendations

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**
- **The enhancement of the region’s rail network will be central to delivering the region’s population and compact growth targets as per the NPF and the RSES.**

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 period¹⁴. 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 RSES¹⁵ – 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 “2021¹⁶ 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 –

¹⁴ <https://npf.ie/wp-content/uploads/Project-Ireland-2040-NPF.pdf>

¹⁵ RSES of the Northern and Western Region available through the attached link: <https://www.nwra.ie/pdfs/NWRA-RSES-2020-2032.pdf>

¹⁶ https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-05/IE_SWD_2023_607_en.pdf

including but not limited to – the region’s rail network. Of particular relevance to the All-Island Strategic Rail Review is the inclusion of several “Regional Policy Objectives” (RPOs) with respect to the region’s rail network, with these objectives seeking to enhance the overall quality and efficiency of the region’s network. Therefore, it is imperative that the All Island Strategic Rail Review considers the following objectives of this statutory framework, namely:

- RPO 6.11 which aims to “seek commencement and completion of the review of the Western Rail Corridor project as a priority for passenger and freight transport.”
- RPO 6.12 which aims to “promote the upgrade of the capacity of the Athlone - Athenry - Galway rail line, including the provision of dual tracks and support provision of increased service stops between Athlone and Galway.”
- RPO 6.13 which aims to:
 - Deliver the Athenry - Tuam - Claremorris - Sligo Rail to an appropriate level of service and to a standard capable of facilitating passenger and freight transport.
 - Progress through pre-appraisal and early planning the extension of the railway from Athenry - Tuam - Claremorris - Sligo.
- RPO 6.14 which aims to “support the provision of smarter travel infrastructure”.
- RPO 6.15 which aims to “promote enhancement of the capacity of the Sligo to Dublin rail line”.
- RPO 6.16 which aims to “investigate the feasibility of extending the rail network to the North West City Region from Sligo and Dublin”.
- RPO 6.17 which aims to “support the development of a strategy for the electrification of the rail network”.

Furthermore, given the importance of transport accessibility, frequency and capacity in delivering compact growth, it is important that the All-Island Strategic Rail Review fully takes into account the region’s designated compact growth targets which have been outlined within the RSES of the Northern and Western Region, namely:

- RPO 3.2 which aims to:
 - (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 which aims to support the regeneration and renewal of small towns and villages in rural areas

Transport Justification for Recommendations

Key messages

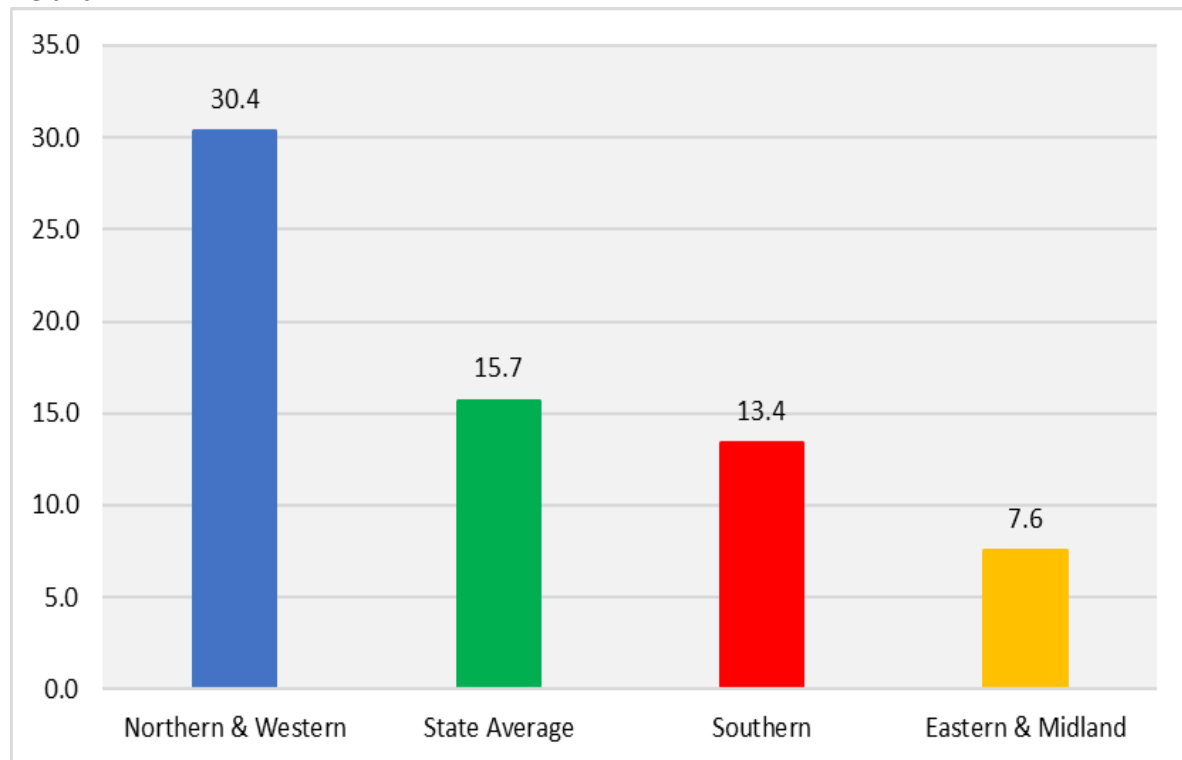
- **Just over half of the region’s population only has access to transport with less than 10 services a day**
- **The Northern and Western Region is notably reliant on private car journeys**

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). At the time of writing, such information was only available as of Census 2016. 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 train stations, frequency of existing public transport stops, reliance on private car journeys and high commuting levels

Average Distance to Train Stations

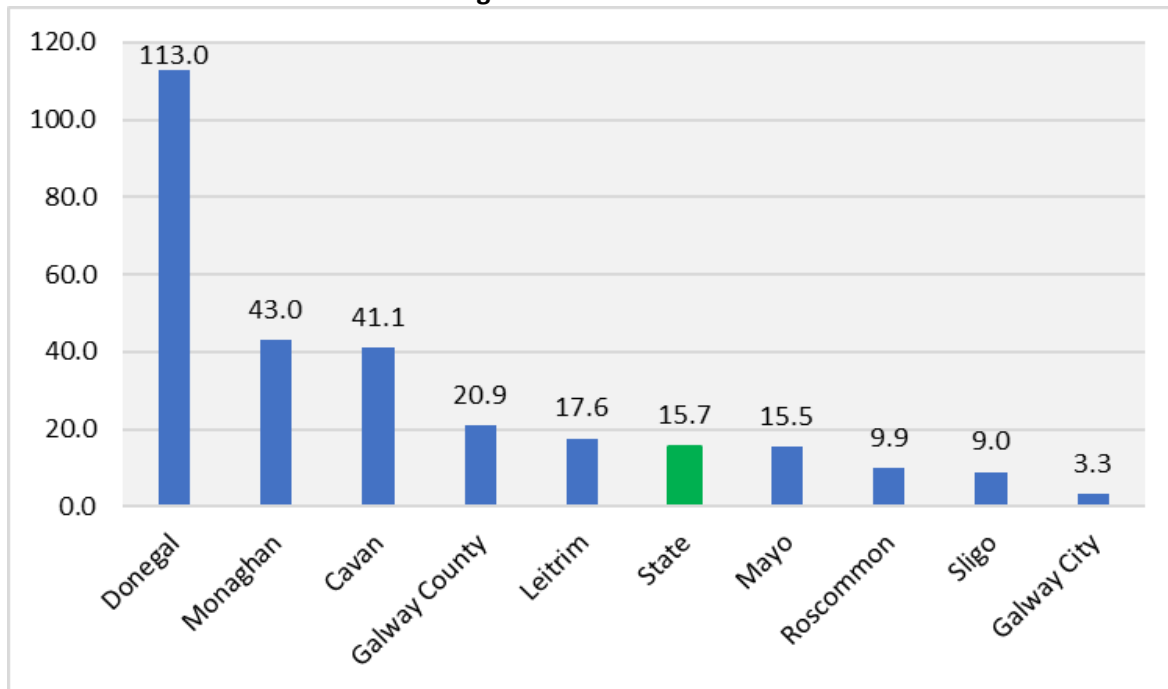
Figure 2 shows that residential dwellings based in the Northern and Western Region are – on average – 30.4km from a train station, which was notably higher relative to the State average of 15.7km and the highest out of the three NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland. Notably, the Northern and Western Region’s average 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.

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



Source: CSO

Figure 3: Average distance of residential dwellings to a train station (km), by Local Authorities based in the Northern and Western Region



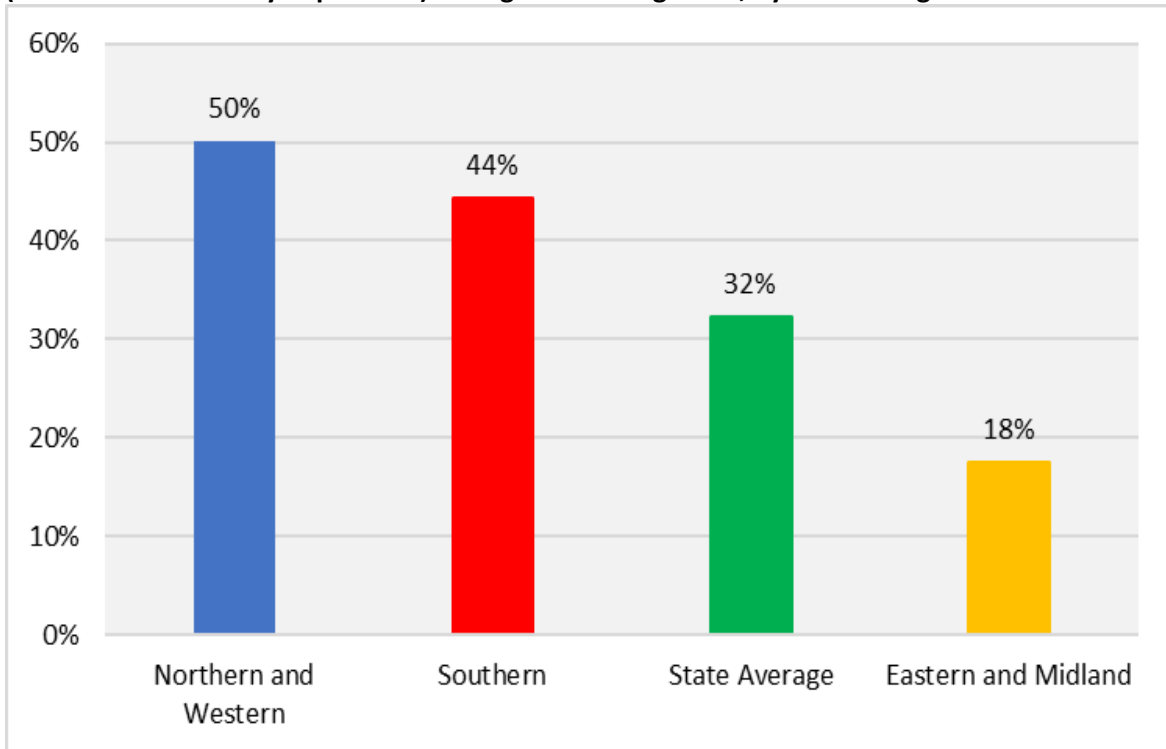
Source: CSO

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 4. 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.

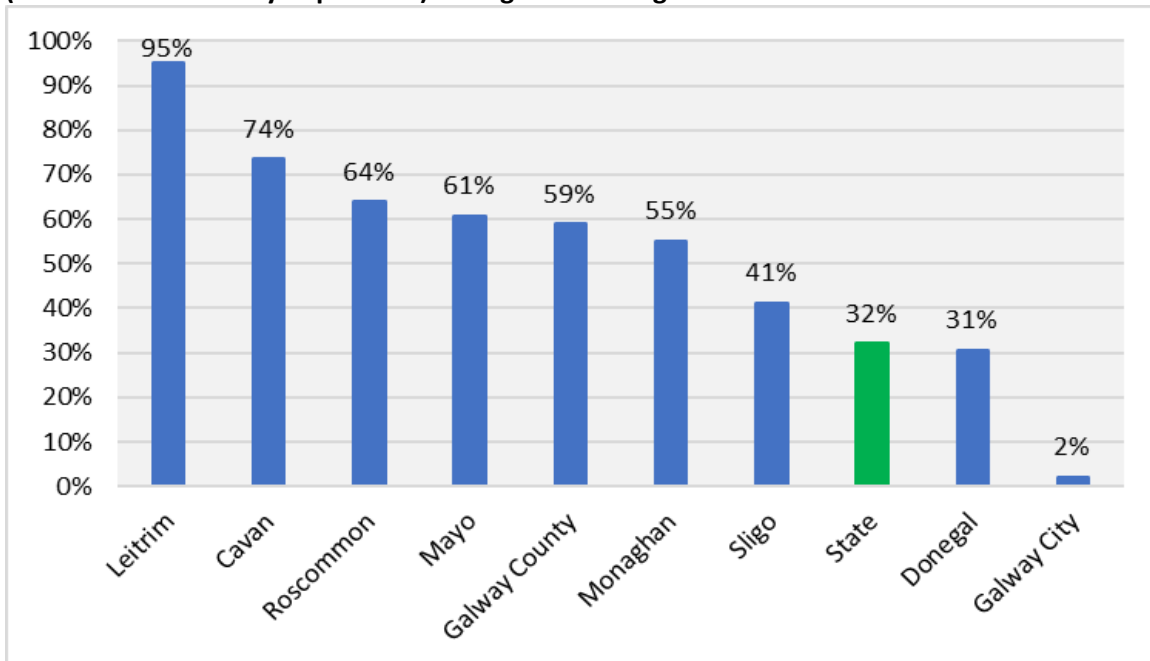
In terms of Local Authorities, 95 per cent of the population of Leitrim lived close to a public transport option that had less than 10 daily departures during the working week, with high ratios – relative to the national norm of 32 per cent – also recorded in Cavan at 74 per cent, Roscommon at 64 per cent, Mayo at 61 per cent, Galway County at 59 per cent and Monaghan at 55 per cent, as can be seen from Figure 5.

Figure 4: Percentage of population whose nearest public transport stop had infrequent services (i.e. less than ten daily departures) during the working week, by NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland



Source: CSO

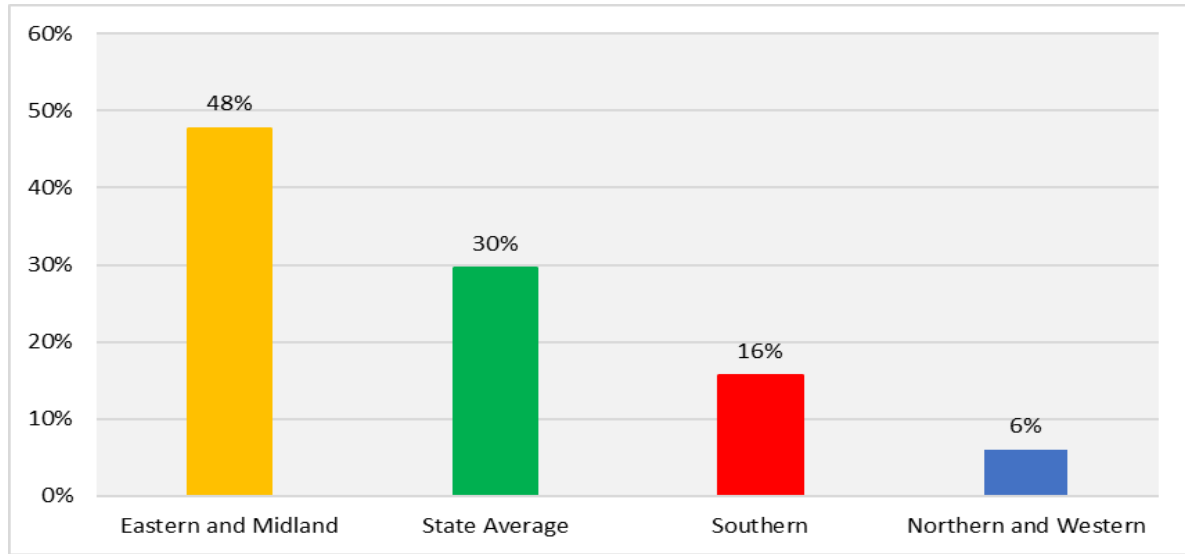
Figure 5: Percentage of population whose nearest public transport stop had infrequent services (i.e. less than ten daily departures) during the working week



Source: CSO

In conjunction to this, 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.

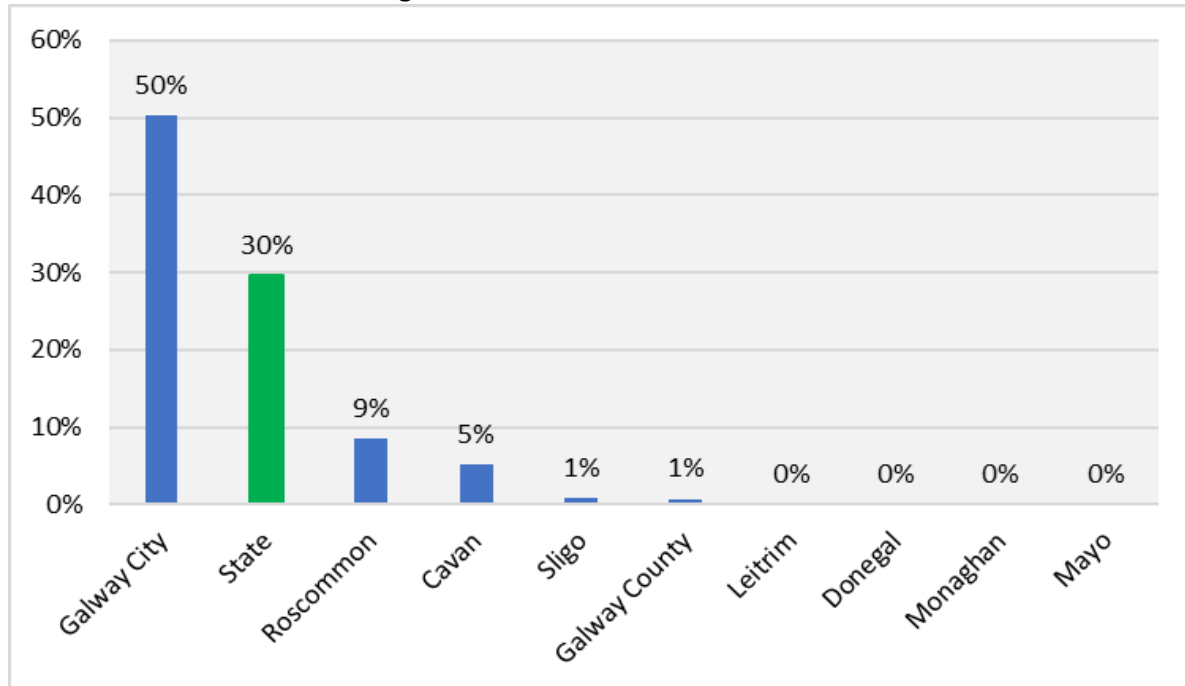
Figure 6: Percentage of population where the nearest public transport stop had high frequent services (i.e. more than 50 daily departures) during the working week, by NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland



Source: CSO

As evident from Figure 7, 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 ratio also recorded in Cavan, Sligo and Roscommon.

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 Local Authorities based in the Northern and Western Region



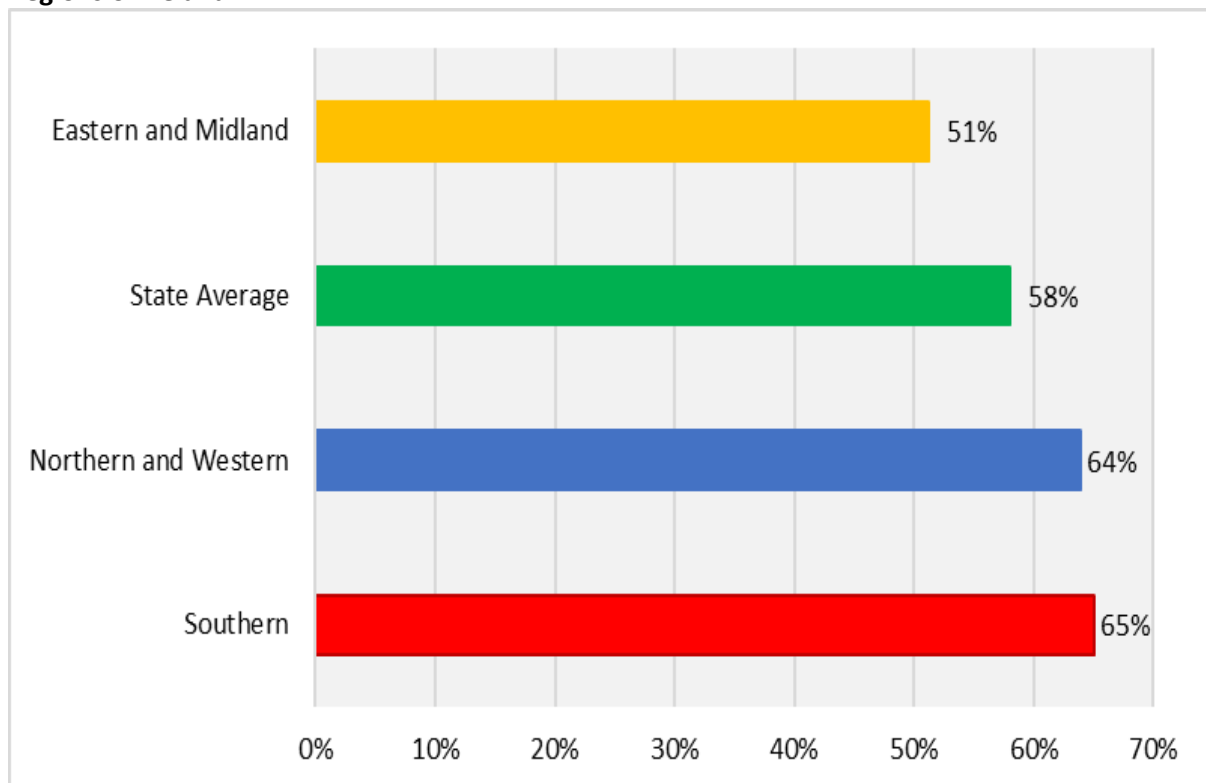
Source: CSO

Reliance on Private Car Journeys

Figure 8 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.

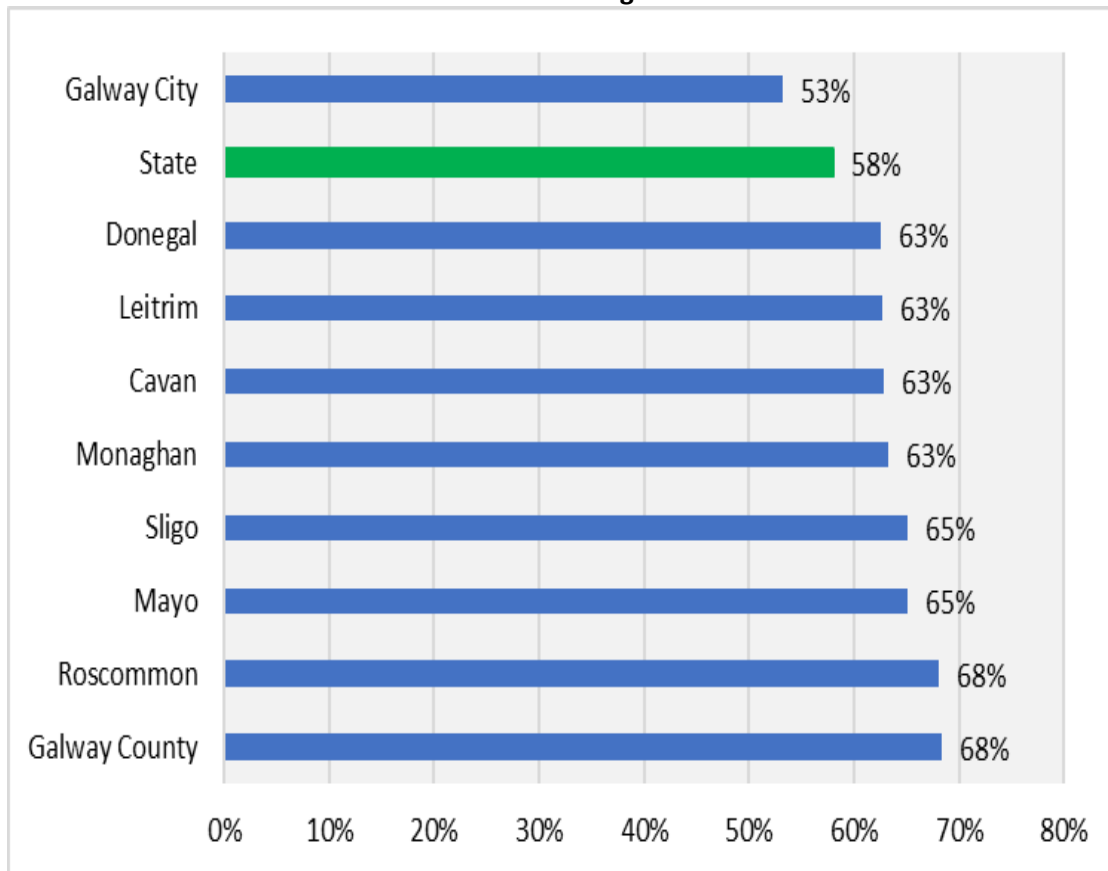
Likewise, as evident from Figure 9, residents based in the Local Authorities within the Northern and Western Region were largely reliant on private car journeys, with residents based in Roscommon and Galway County most reliant on this transport mode, with 68 per cent of all journeys completed using private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

Figure 8: Percentage of all journeys that were completed through private cars, by the NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland



Source: CSO

Figure 9: Percentage of all journeys that were completed through private cars, by the Local Authorities based in the Northern and Western Region



Source: CSO

High Commuting Levels

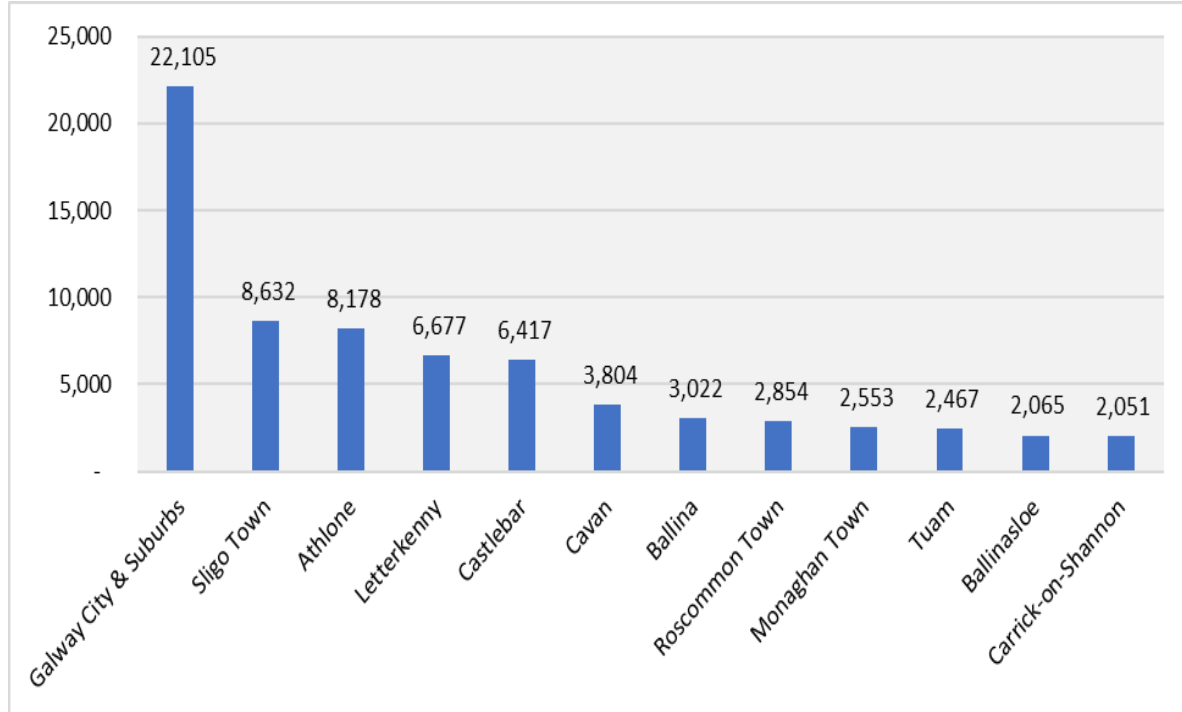
There are certain settlements that have high levels of commuting into the Galway Metropolitan Area, the Regional Growth Centres of Letterkenny, Sligo Town and Athlone and the Key Towns of the Northern and Western Region. Given the reliance on private car journeys – at both a regional and local authority 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 rail network 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 10 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 10 – and based on Census 2016 data – 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 (3,804), 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 journey as their mode of travel, which – as a result – is contributing to higher carbon emissions and longer commute times.

Figure 10: 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



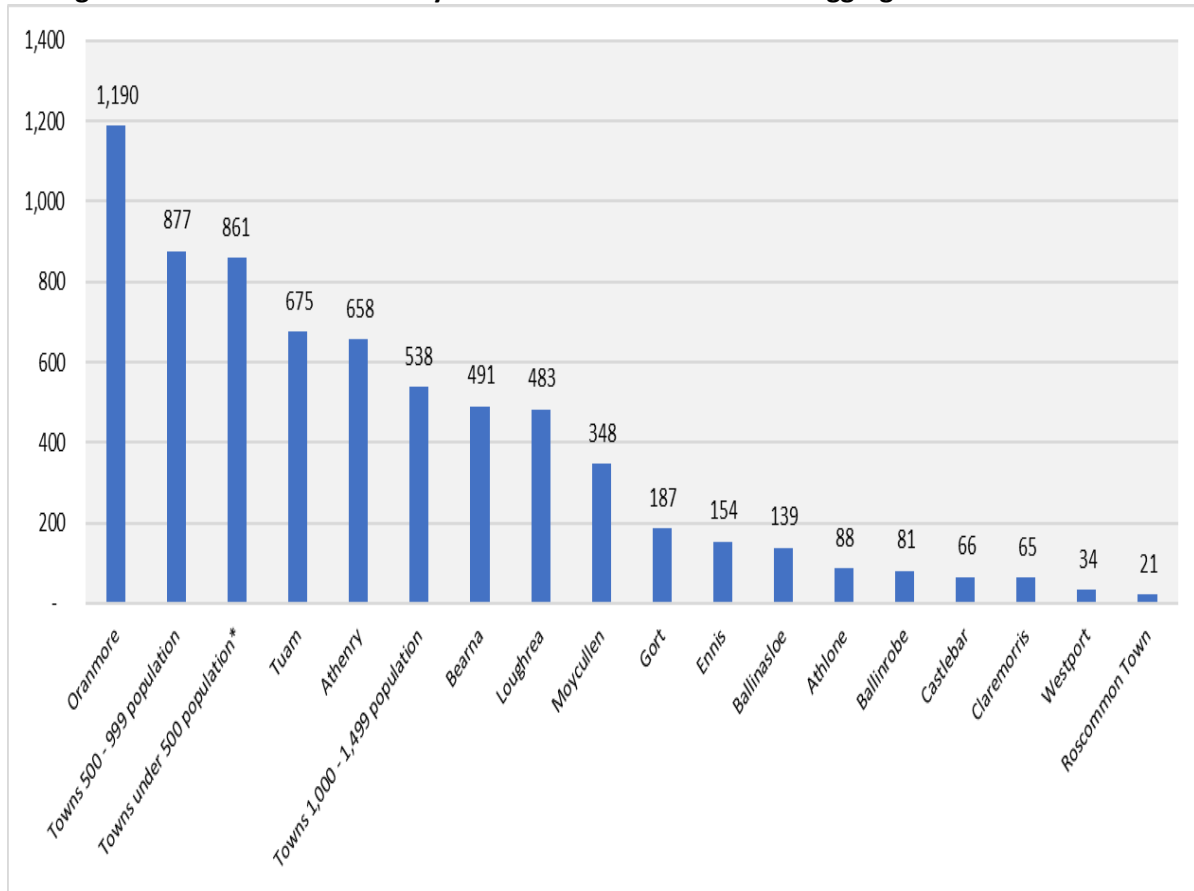
Source: CSO

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 11, 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), Bearnna (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 12 and 13 respectively.

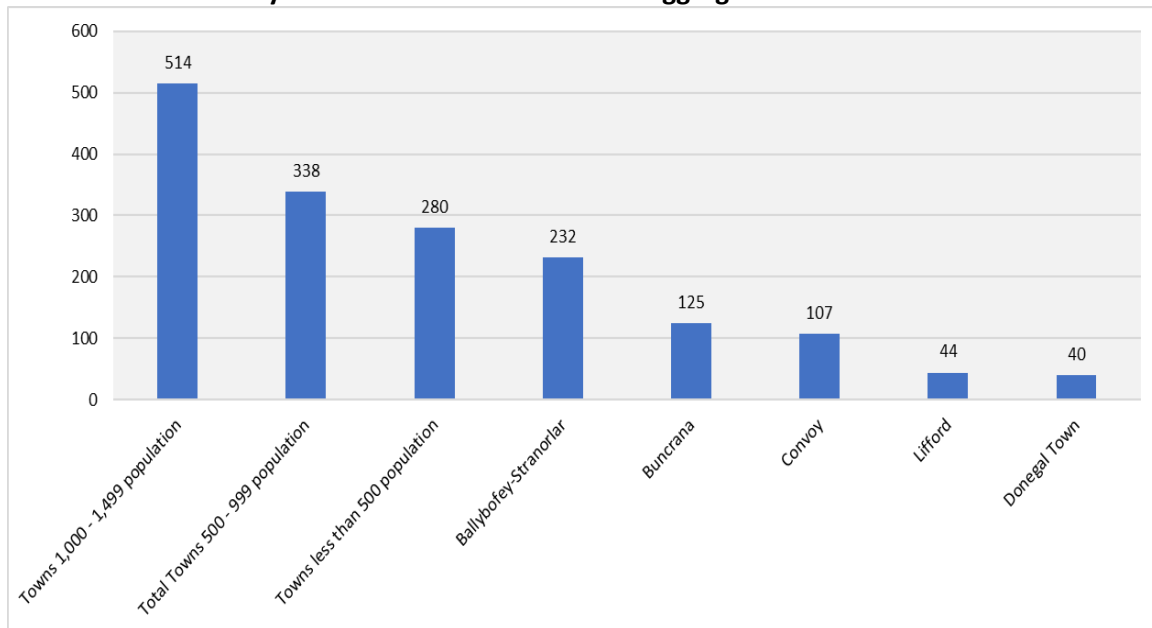
To what degree these commuters integrate with public transport or rely on private car journeys remains to be seen, but it is well established that commuters within the Local Authority areas of Galway City – and particularly in Galway County – are quite reliant on private car journeys as a means of travel, which suggests it is highly likely that a sizeable proportion of these commuters are using private car journey as their mode of travel. In the context of the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, this provides extensive opportunities to target these communities with accessible, frequent, high-quality and affordable rail services, providing high-quality and sustainable travel options and facilities to commuters based in these communities.

Figure 11: 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



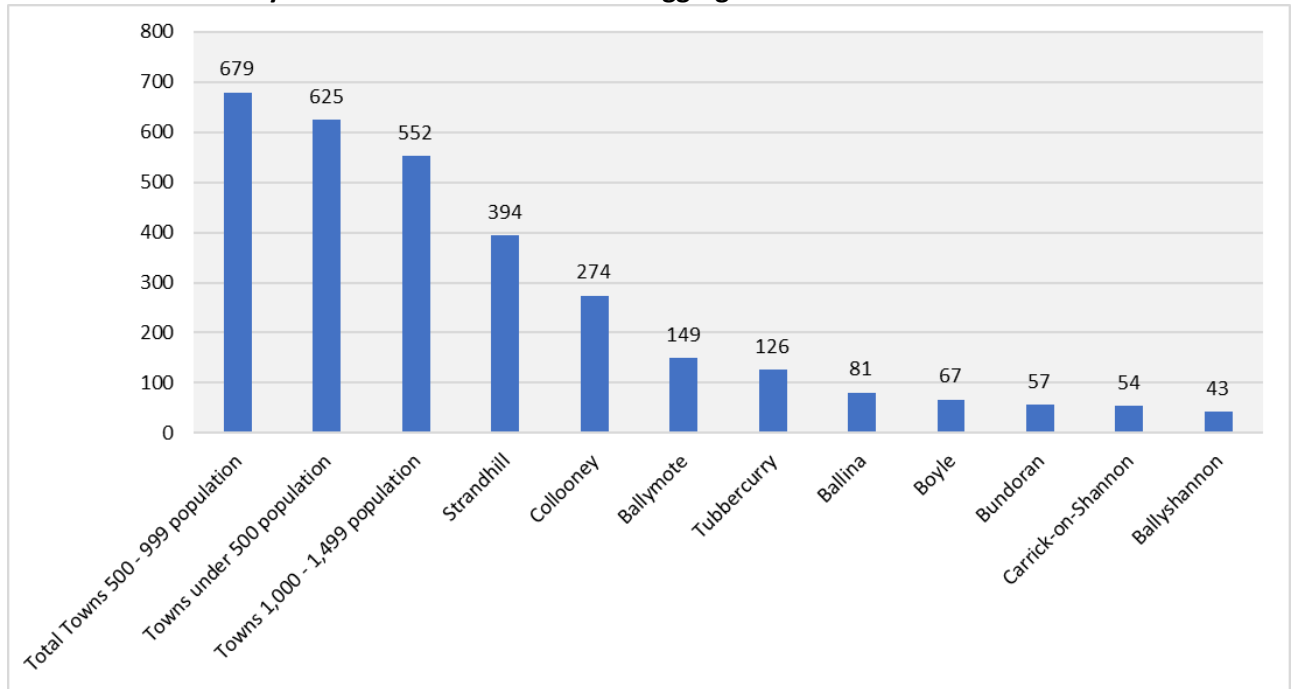
Source: CSO. * Towns under 500 population, with at least 50 inhabited houses

Figure 12: Number of commuters that travel to Letterkenny for work purposes, that were greater than 20 commuters by CSO defined settlements and aggregated rural towns



Source: CSO. * Towns under 500 population, with at least 50 inhabited houses

Figure 13: 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



Source: CSO. * Towns under 500 population, with at least 50 inhabited houses

Economic Justification for Recommendations

Key messages

- **The Northern and Western Region’s economy is not as competitive compared to Irish and EU norms.**
- **Out of the 234 EU Regions, the Northern and Western Region had the 17th worst ranking in terms of infrastructure.**
- **Addressing infrastructure deficits outside of the Eastern and Midland Region will be key to attracting more jobs, investment and talent to Ireland.**

Data from the European Commission’s “Regional Competitiveness Index” 2022¹⁷ found that infrastructure deficits in the Northern and Western Region and the Southern Region of Ireland seem to be undermining the competitiveness of the Irish economy to attract further investment, jobs and talent. Specifically, the index measures the competitiveness of the NUTS 2 Regions of the EU27, evaluating their performance in areas such as – but not limited to – infrastructure, innovation capabilities, technologies readiness, education and labour market conditions.

The overall score of each NUTS 2 Region – and their subsequent performance with respect to each indicator – is measured relative to the EU27 average which has been set at an index score of 100. Of the 3 NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland, the Northern and Western Region was the only region in Ireland that was below the EU27 average in terms of competitiveness, with an overall index score of 98.2, with above average index scores registered in the Southern Region (105.1) and the Eastern and Midland Region (121.7). Out of the 234 regions in the EU27, the Eastern and Midland Region was ranked as the 24th most competitive regional economy, with the Southern Region ranked 94th and the Northern and Western Region ranked 114th. Of the 234 EU regions examined, the Province of Utrecht in the Netherlands was the EU’s most competitive region, followed by another Dutch region – namely Zuid- Holland – and Île-de-France, which is the region of Paris. All of the NUTS 2 Regions of the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Denmark, Sweden and Finland, all recorded overall index scores which were above the EU average.

Notably, the index goes further than simply providing an overall score and actually identifies the specific strengths and weaknesses of the economy of each EU Member State and its regions, showing policymakers where their respective country or region has to make improvements or can make further progress. At a national level, Ireland – relative to the EU27 average – was found to be relatively strong in a wide range of areas key to attracting investment, jobs and talent, with above average performances evident in innovation capabilities, business sophistication, technological readiness, labour market conditions, higher education and lifelong learning, basic education, health of its citizens, macroeconomic conditions and institutions. That said, where Ireland notably underperforms and records relatively weak scores is in the area of “Market Size” but predominantly in the area of “Infrastructure”, with notably poor performances in the Northern and Western Region and the Southern Region of Ireland credited to these scores. Overall, Ireland was ranked the 9th most competitive economy in the EU27, with the Netherlands classified as the most competitive economy.

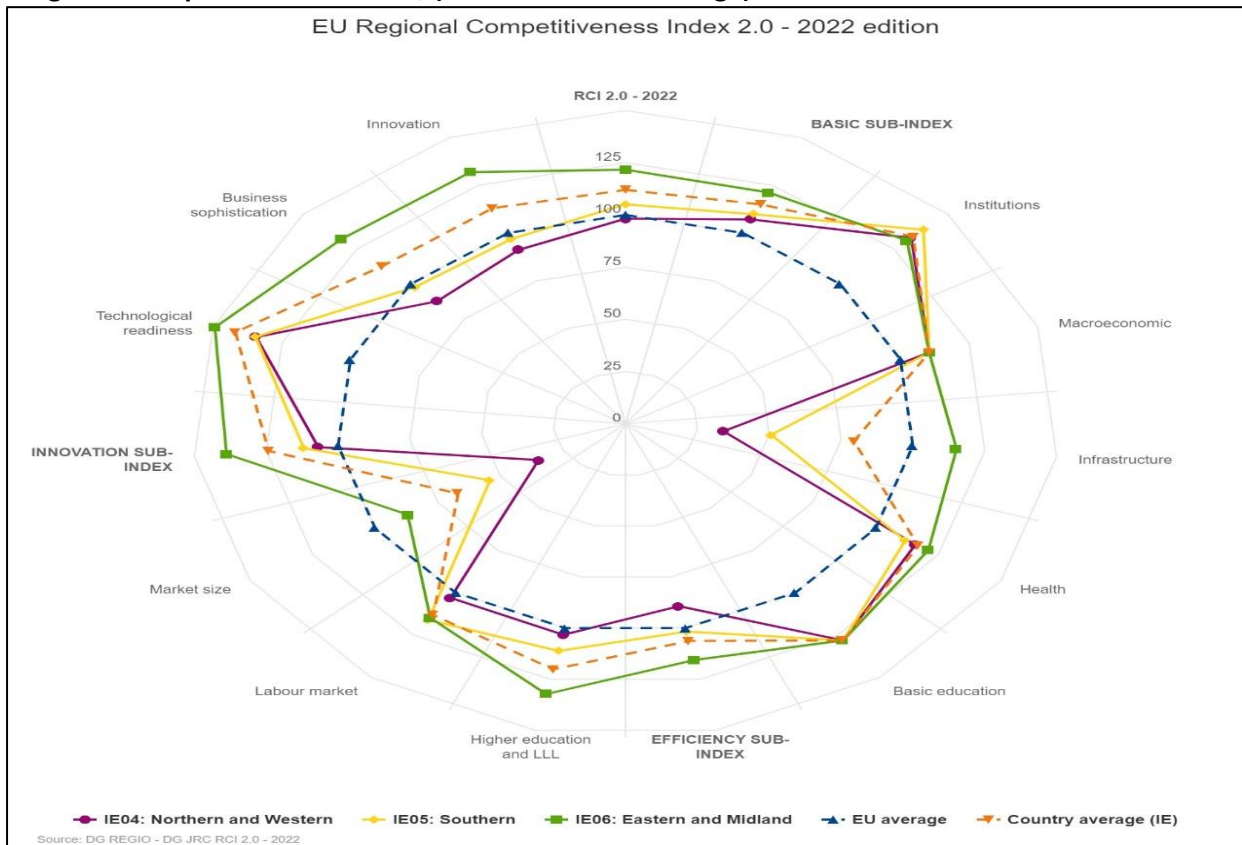
In terms of infrastructure, the Eastern and Midland Region recorded an above average index score of 115.2, whereas Ireland’s most rural region under Project Ireland 2040 – namely the Northern and Western Region – recorded an infrastructure index score of only 34.1 while the Southern Region also recorded a below average score of 50.7. Similar regional differences were found with respect to market size capabilities. The score for the Eastern and Midland Region is reflective of the trend across the EU, whereby “Capital City” regions are the most competitive in all Member States except

¹⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/assets/regional-competitiveness/index.html#/

Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. The more competitive countries tend to have a smaller gap between their “Capital City” region and the other regions. The promotion of upward convergence is critical in helping those less competitive regions to improve their performance and ensure that the most competitive regions continue to thrive.

Therefore, if policymakers are to improve the competitiveness of the Irish economy, then it is clear that the ambition, quality and scale of infrastructure projects delivered to the Northern and Western Region will have to be significantly upgraded. This also underlines the importance of delivering an integrated sustainable development approach to the prioritization and delivery of large scale infrastructure projects necessary to harness the potential of our regional assets, in our urban centres of scale such as Galway City, Sligo Town, Letterkenny and Athlone; at our sea ports of regional scale – such as Galway Harbour, Killybegs and Ros a Mhil – and at our airports. This will require the timely delivery of those infrastructure needs identified and prioritized within the RSES of the Northern and Western Region. In doing so, policymakers can significantly improve the chances of attracting more investment, jobs and high-quality talent to Ireland, while simultaneously supporting better “balanced regional development” across all of our regions. In other areas central to developing a highly competitive economy, the Northern and Western Region also recorded below average performances in terms of Market Size (index score of 34.7), Business Sophistication (87.7) and Innovation Capabilities (91.1).

Figure 14: Index scores of the NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland in the European Commission’s 2022 “Regional Competitiveness Index”, (Blue line = EU27 average)



Source: European Commission