

## Heather Cooke

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**From:** William Parnell (DRCD) <[REDACTED]>  
**Sent:** 23 January 2019 21:54  
**To:** RSES  
**Subject:** Submission on draft RSES  
**Attachments:** DRCD obs on EMRA RSES, Jan 2019.pdf

**Follow Up Flag:** Follow up  
**Flag Status:** Flagged

Please find attached provisional observations from the Department of Rural and Community Development on the draft RSES for the Eastern and Midlands Region. The Department wishes to acknowledge the work of the Director and the staff of the Assembly in compiling this comprehensive Strategy.

A key issue for the Department relates to the definition of rural areas in the draft Strategy. The definition of rural areas should be consistent, across each of the RSEs, with the approach adopted in the National Planning Framework and reflected in the work of this Department, which focuses on settlements with a population of 10,000 or less, and outlying areas (including the open countryside).

The Department is available to discuss any of the points made in the submission with the staff of the Assembly, if required. Contact details are provided below.

**William Parnell**  
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*Rural Development & Regional Affairs Division*

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*William Parnell is a Designated Public Official under the Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015*

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An Roinn Forbartha  
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Department of Rural and  
Community Development

**Department of Rural and Community Development:  
Comments on Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the  
Eastern and Midlands Region**

**Definition of Rural Areas**

There are many different benchmarks used nationally and internationally to define “rural” areas. For example, the report of the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA) defined “rural” as any area outside Ireland’s five cities. However, this broad definition does not convey the multiplicity and heterogeneous nature of rural areas and communities in Ireland.

The RSES uses the CSO definition of “rural” as areas outside settlements with a population of 1,500 or more people. This definition, however, is not consistent with the target constituency of the Department of Rural and Community Development, or with the National Planning Framework which highlights that:

“there are many towns and villages with populations of more than 1,500 people that are intrinsic to sustaining viable rural communities and do not function independent of their rural hinterland.”

The RSES must reflect the agreed focus of national rural development policy which is on towns of up to 10,000 people, as well as villages and the open countryside. The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund – a key instrument of Project Ireland 2040 to strengthen rural economies and communities – is open to settlements with a population of less than 10,000 people. The Department’s Town and Village Renewal Scheme is also targeted at settlements of less than 10,000.

In Section 6.4, we welcome the recognition of the need to promote new economic opportunities in smaller towns and rural areas. We also welcome the focus in Section 6.5 on town centre renewal.

## **Regional Policy Objectives**

Subject to the comments above, DRCD welcomes the specific policy objectives in the RSES to support rural areas, but offers the following comments:

### **RPO 4.23:**

In relation to a number of the Key Towns, reference to increasing the “ratio of jobs to workers” should perhaps read “ratio of jobs to **local** workers”.

### **RPO 4.50:**

We note that this objective references Local Authorities prioritising the regeneration of rural towns and villages through identification of significant ready-to-go projects for rural villages and rural areas with investment, inter alia, from the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF). It should be noted that the RRDF does not only support ready-to-go projects, but supports two categories of application:

Category 1: “Ready-to-Go” proposals, and

Category 2: Proposals that have clear potential and quantifiable objectives but require further development to enable them to be potentially submitted as Category 1 proposals subsequently.

RPO 4.50 should reflect these two possibilities. Deleting the phrase “ready-to-go” in the text of the RPO would achieve this.

### **RPO 4.52:**

This RPO focuses on policies to support existing rural economies. While this is welcome, there is scope to expand this RPO to support the diversification of rural economies to create additional jobs and maximise opportunities in emerging sectors, including opportunities that will be created by the roll out of high-speed broadband.

Supporting the diversification of rural economies into new sectors and services is a stated National Policy Objective in the NPF (NPO 21) and should therefore be reflected consistently in the RSES.

It is noted and welcome that this issue is addressed in RPOs 6.6 to 6.8. However, it should also be reflected in the RPOs in Section 4.8.

### **RPO 4.55:**

*“Local Authorities shall ensure that economic development that is urban in nature should be in the first instance located in urban areas.”*

It is not clear what this Objective is intended to achieve, or what is defined as economic development that is “urban in nature”. The Objective, as currently drafted, is not consistent with the National Policy Objective in the NPF to support the diversification of rural economies. There is no reason why sectors such as ICT and financial services should not be

encouraged to develop in rural areas (which includes towns of up to 10,000), particularly with improved broadband connectivity, to provide local employment, reduce commuting and address rural depopulation.

As currently drafted, or without clarification, the Department of Rural and Community Development would have difficulty with this RPO being included in the RSES.

## **Other comments**

### **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

Cross-references in the graphics numbering in this chapter need to be checked, particularly in relation to Travel Patterns (page 15).

### **Section 1.6 – Regional Profile**

Population figures in Figure 1.5 are labelled as 2011. Can these figures be updated to reflect the 2016 Census of Population?

### **Chapter 2 – Strategic Vision**

DRCD welcomes the inclusion of Rural Communities in the Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSO) section. However, the focus in the RSES is on spatial growth and does not correctly reflect the National Strategic Outcomes in the NPF which refers to Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities. RSO 3 need to capture the economic development of rural communities, as well as spatial development.

The issue is better articulated in the Growth Strategy, in the reference to Rural Fabric (but see comments above in relation to the definition of rural areas in the RSES).

The Department welcomes the reference in the RSOs to improving social inclusion (RSO 13) which needs to be a part of participative and inclusive regional growth. The Department notes that social inclusion measures are also included in a number of the Regional Policy Objectives in the Strategy.

### **Chapter 3 - Growth Strategy**

Economic and social development are not confined by administrative boundaries and it is important that collaboration between the regions is reflected and implemented across each of the three RSES being developed by the Regional Assemblies.

While the EMRA Growth Strategy chapter includes a section on collaboration across boundaries, the Strategy places a strong focus on North-South collaboration and connectivity. However, it needs to also include collaboration and connectivity with the other NUTS II regions to reflect a joined-up approach to regional development.

**Athlone and the Key Towns in the region – and particularly the Outer Region - need to look to the West and the South (and not just to Dublin or Belfast) in terms of building economic activity and trade.**

**Department of Rural and Community Development  
23 January 2019**