

Heather Cooke

From: Lisa O'Kane <[REDACTED]>
Sent: 23 January 2019 16:03
To: RSES
Cc: Malachy Bradley
Subject: NILGA response to RSES
Attachments: draft response Eastern Midland Regional Assembly RSES.docx; Central-Local Government Political Partnership Forum Structure.docx

Dear Sir, Madam,

Please find attached NILGA's draft response (and appendix) to the consultation on the RSES. Due to the timing of our Executive Committee meetings we will only be able to forward a final response when this is approved at our next meeting on 8 February, which I hope you can accept.

Regards,

Lisa O'Kane

Lisa O'Kane
Programmes Manager (Partnerships & Investment)
Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA)
Bradford Court
Upper Galwally
BELFAST
BT8 6RB
Tel: 028 9079 8972
Email: [REDACTED]
www.nilga.org
Follow us on twitter: NI_LGA



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]



DRAFT¹ RESPONSE to Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly's

Draft Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy

The Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) is the representative body for all councils in Northern Ireland. It is currently the only functioning, constituted, all Party institution developing government policy – albeit local government policy - within NI and advocating NI's needs externally.

NILGA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's (EMRA) draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES). We recognise that border area councils in Northern Ireland will be responding to EMRA on issues of local and regional importance, therefore our response will focus on issues of pan-regional / North – South importance.

We welcome the EMRA's vision *'to create a sustainable and competitive region that supports the health and wellbeing of our people and places, from urban to rural, with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunities for all'*.

It is encouraging that the RSES has been prepared in collaboration with local authorities and government agencies in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's councils have powerful legislation to be economic and community hubs and they want to continue to develop and secure cross-border strategic infrastructure and economic projects in order to deliver inclusive growth and sustainable places. As such, the aims and vision of the RSES are mutually complementary with the councils' local development plans, economic strategies and regional cooperation initiatives.

In terms of **all-island cohesion**, the draft RSES highlights the importance of collaborating for mutual advantage on economic development & promotion, coordination of social & physical infrastructure and environmental management. The strategy notes the Dublin – Belfast corridor, greenways, blueways, North-South interconnector, communications links, tourism and environmental management as areas of current cross-border cooperation.

The RSES's **Economic Strategy** focuses on smart specialisation, clustering, orderly growth, placemaking and future proof. NILGA believes there are advantages to be gained if EMRA, NI councils and Invest Northern Ireland engage and collaborate to determine how supply chains and businesses on each side of the border can maximise opportunities of smart specialisation and clustering, particularly along the Dublin – Belfast corridor.

The RSES details one **regional policy objective** on all-island cohesion: *In cooperation with the relevant departments in Northern Ireland, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly will support mutually beneficial policy development and activity in the areas of spatial infrastructure planning and related spheres.* Given the opportunities presented under the economic strategy, NILGA would recommend that this objective is specifically extended to cover economic growth.

¹ Draft submitted on 23/1/19, final version to be approved by NILGA Executive on 8 February 2019 & forwarded to EMRA

NILGA welcomes the drive to strengthen cross-border synergy in services and functions on the Dublin-Belfast corridor and encourages EMRA to liaise with NILGA to put in place arrangements for collaboration with councils in Northern Ireland in order to best achieve this, as it will be critical to transforming the region's enterprise base and to ensuring competitiveness in international markets.

By developing infrastructure, skills and innovation the **Belfast City Region Deal** (and any emerging City & Growth Deals in NI) has the potential to maximise economic growth prospects for the east of the island and this will be further enhanced by collaboration for mutually interdependent advantage. NILGA therefore welcomes the recent initiative by eight councils along the Eastern corridor between Belfast & Dublin to explore opportunities for collaborative investment and would encourage EMRA to engage with the City Region deal partners as well as neighbouring council areas in Northern Ireland.

We note the **synergies on infrastructure** that are prevalent in all three regional assembly plans, in particular the enhancement of the road and rail network, opening of the canals network and digital connectivity investments. Addressing these issues on an all-island basis across local, regional and central government will bring greater attention, agreed prioritisation and synergies of resources. We would call on the Regional Assemblies to examine how an all-island approach can be facilitated where required for mutual advantage.

The RSES recognises that access to **international gateways** is fundamental for traded goods and services in order to maintain economic competitiveness at regional and international levels. Rather than an insular approach we would propose that given the interconnectedness of the economies and supply chains in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Great Britain, NILGA can act as an axis for East – West engagement with appropriate local authority groupings (in particular the Borderlands Growth Deal area) and local government associations in England, Scotland and Wales, around port infrastructure, key transport links and the internationally important Dublin – Belfast corridor.

We recognise the importance of **digital connectivity** for the island as a whole and would encourage EMRA and both governments to examine an all-island approach to connectivity and growth, particularly where individual national plans and initiatives have failed to deliver, in particular for the border area. As the border corridor is significantly disadvantaged in terms of broadband connectivity, there will be synergy if policy makers and operators can work together to provide solutions for the border counties.

The RSES rightly recognises that despite the future uncertainty surrounding **the UK's exit from the EU**, it will be essential that successful cross-border collaboration between the regional assembly and border area local authorities can continue. NILGA would agree there is a strong desire to maintain the long-term history of North – South cooperation, as well as between the island and the UK – to ensure the economy and the Peace Process is protected. The interconnectedness of economic growth, industrial processes and social cohesion between Northern Ireland and ROI must be recognised and safeguarded.

NILGA maintains that there must be a **legal framework for all-island cooperation** and would call for an evaluation of the levels of cooperation under the 2010 "Framework for Cooperation - Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland & the Republic of Ireland". In the absence of the Northern Ireland Assembly and since the eleven councils in Northern Ireland are responsible for planning, creating Local Development Plans and Community Plans for their areas it is essential that local authorities and the Regional Assemblies can continue to work collaboratively to develop infrastructure and their areas to achieve inclusive growth.

In the absence of the Assembly and a statutory, Ministerial Partnership Panel for Northern Ireland, the formative “*Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum*” provides political scrutiny and joint awareness on critical issues affecting the sector and more widely. The structure of the forum is illustrated in the attached appendix and NILGA would welcome dialogue and encourage the EMRA to engage with this cross-party body on issues of North - South significance.

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