Regional Digitalisation Roadmap for the Midlands

Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly

With lessons learned from

Next 2 Met | Interreg Europe

December 2023

Tionól Reigiúnach Oirthir agus Lár-Tíre
Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly

Next2Met
Interreg Europe

Contents

Background

Next2Met is an interregional exchange project, co-financed by the Interreg Europe programme, which aims at increasing the attractiveness – for knowledge, opportunities, and capital – of territories located close to metropolitan areas. These areas are confronted with a lack of tools and critical mass of research, development, and innovation, and therefore struggle with keeping experienced small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as highly qualified people in the region. In this context, Next2Met works to improve the policy context of the project's partner regions through interregional learning processes and exchanges of good practices focusing on soft digitalisation measures.

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) is the Irish partner in the Next2Met project consortium. The region associated with the Next2Met project for ERMA is the Midland Strategic Planning Area located in the centre of the island of Ireland and has largely a rural, sparsely populated profile.

Through exchanges with partner regions during the project's learning phase, EMRA was inspired by the Lower Austrian partner's good practices and identified the need in our context for a mid- to long-term digitalisation framework that is implemented at a regional level. This framework or roadmap will enable EMRA to improve its implementation of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) by helping to focus the regional strategy on soft digital solutions in the Midlands.

In 2022, an Action Plan was developed to guide the development of a new digitalisation roadmap, and EMRA has since implemented this plan. In line with this Plan, a workshop was held with key stakeholders to gather input into the regional digitalisation roadmap. The following text outlines the main outcomes of the workshop. The document goes on to provide a regional digitalisation roadmap, adopted from the Lower Austrian good practice, integrating the inputs from the stakeholder workshop and complying with the competencies of EMRA.

Workshop outcomes

One of the key actions of the Action Plan developed in the Next2Met project was to hold a workshop with key stakeholders in order to collaboratively create the content of the regional digitalisation roadmap. A workshop called "Co-creating a regional digital roadmap for the Midland Region: Workshop for Next2Met Action Plan Implementation" was held online on 14th February 2023. Sixteen participants attended the workshop and represented local experts in relevant digitalisation fields from across all four Midland counties – Laois, Longford, Offaly, and Westmeath.

Clare Bannon, Assistant Director and Senior Planner in EMRA and Helena Stromberg, EU Project Officer in

EMRA began the content of the workshop with a review of the Next2Met project and contextualized the aims of the workshop. This was followed by a presentation given by Simone Hagenauer from Ecoplus, the business agency of Lower Austria, explaining the Lower Austrian good practice example of a regional Digitalization Strategy (see Figure 1 and Textbox 1 on page 3) that inspired EMRA's Action Plan.

Figure 1. Regional Digitalisation Strategy from Lower Austria
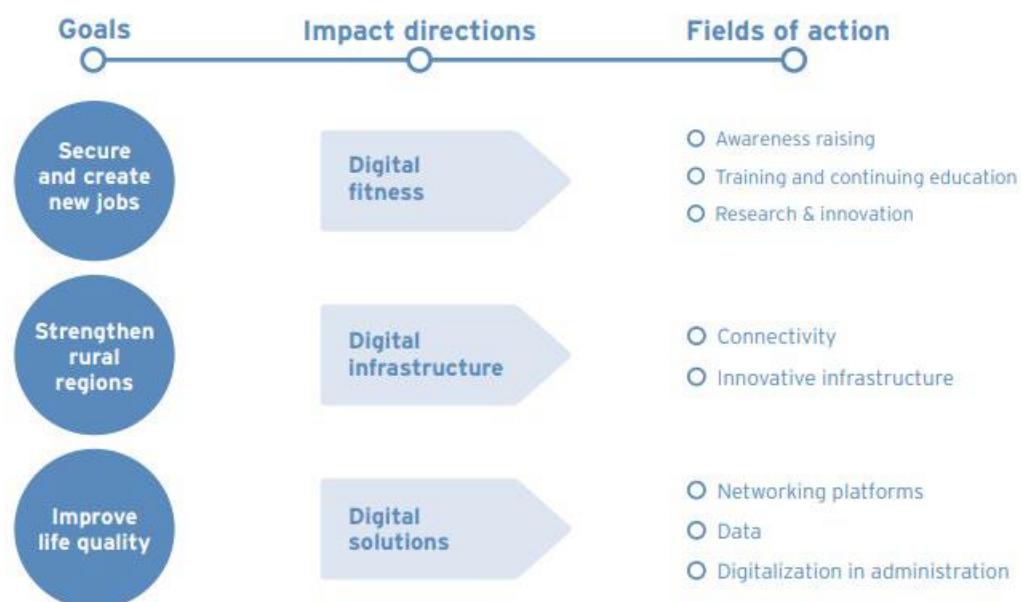
The main portion of the workshop was to capture the experience and inputs of key stakeholders in order to adapt the good practice example into the Irish context. A series of questions guided the conversation to extract key concepts and themes, which were captured via Mentimeter. The full list of questions and responses can be found in annex in this document.

Textbox 1. Lower Austria's Regional Digitalization Strategy

Lower Austria faces a similar context as the Midlands of Ireland. It is a rather heterogeneous and rural environment situated in the periphery of a metropolitan area (Vienna). The divers sectoral structure and varying levels of digitalisation in the region makes for a challenging context.

The Digitalization Strategy of Lower Austria[1] is a framework used by the region to make the best possible use of the extensive opportunities of digitalisation to design the future and to position the region in the world. Launched in 2018, the strategy places people at the centre of developments, raising awareness and providing support in the face of future changes. With its mission statement "Use the digital transformation. For Country and People", the strategy maintains a user perspective above the technological infrastructure or particular industries.

---

[1] Full document available in English here:
www.noe.gv.at/noe/Digitalisierung/23_NOE_Digitalisierungsstrategie_EN.pdf

The strategy is built around goals, impact directions and actions fields. Three core goals are pursued in the framework and its associated projects: to secure and create new jobs, to strengthen rural regions and to improve life quality. To achieve these goals, three impact directions are used alongside associated fields of action through which the goals will be achieved.

To secure and create new jobs, the first impact direction 'digital fitness' recognises the importance of people, businesses and the public sector to be prepared and capable for digitalisation. This impact direction is measured along three fields of action: raising awareness of digital opportunities by allowing for discussion on the digitalisation theme and presenting digital potential; training and continuing education focusing on integration of skill-oriented learning; and research and innovation to develop new possibilities through technological product, process or organisational innovation.

The second impact direction, pursuing the goal of strengthening of rural regions, emphasises that digital infrastructure needs to be expanded and continuously upgraded. Two fields of action – the expansion of necessary infrastructure to establish connectivity and ensuring data security through intelligent infrastructure – assist in measuring the 'digital infrastructure' impact direction.

Aiming to improve the quality of life, the third impact direction of 'digital solutions' recognises the significant improvements and simplification of processes that are possible with digital technologies and means, for companies, public administration and citizens. This impact direction is pursued through three fields of action: enabling networking platforms to stimulate new developments and cooperation; facilitate access to data for improved quality of services for and in society; and promotion, development and implementation of digitalisation in administration.

To coordinate the overall strategy and to mobilise various digitalisation initiatives, a "Technology and Digitalization Unit" was created in 2017 within the regional provincial government. With a dedicated budget for undertaking initiatives, the Unit works with internal and external stakeholders in different thematic fields for flagship digitalisation projects. Implementation of the strategy is documented in annual Digi Reports and achievement of the goals is monitored using the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI). Each year the strategy and unit has a defined annual focus to draw attention to one area of digitalisation and make improvements therein. For example, one year focused on digital public administration where the unit supported improvements in the harmonisation and management of data across various internal government administrations.

Main outcomes of workshop discussion

Question 1: Do you think the Lower Austrian Good Practice example is transferable to the Midlands Region? Participants unanimously responded that the Good Practice example presented by the Lower Austrian partner is transferable to the Midlands Region with some modifications to suit the context. The main difference noted by participants was the differences in competencies and organizational structure. The Austrian counterparts have a regional unit situated within the regional government structure with a dedicated annual budget for carrying out and supporting digital projects. In the Irish

context, there exists no body with similar competencies and therefore the regional digitalisation framework would need to be adapted accordingly.

Question 2: What challenges are there in the Midlands region to increasing digital solutions? (challenges to choosing 'digital') Respondents noted a number of issues which hinder the uptake of digital solutions. Some of the comments noted challenges around awareness, mistrust of technology, need for information and investment in education, as well as factors such as the fear of failure in using new technologies. Several participants discussed issues in coordination of digital solutions mentioning that a bottom-up approach to investment where communities are key are necessary.

Question 3: Why digital? How can digital solutions help improve quality of life in the Midlands (as an attractive to live, work for investment)? The main theme emerging from this discussion is the importance of digital solutions to remain competitive for a strong local economy with a competitive workforce and to ensure robust placemaking. Respondents remarked that 'digital' should be seen as a 'tool', and that the focus should be on the services that are possible through digitalisation rather than the digital technology itself.

Question 4: How can 'digital' help make the region more agile into the future? Responses for this question focused on inclusive opportunities for all in the community and access to information and job markets. Investment in people and services in the Midlands was also mentioned as ways to support resilience in the region.

Question 5: What should be included in a regional digital framework/roadmap to help with local or national plans/strategies? One message that emerged from discussion under this question was that strategies should be people-centred and should bring the community along in a bottom-up approach. Policy should also link with potential funding avenues. This point supports the alignment of all levels of policy – from European to national, regional and local levels – to facilitate the flow of funds along coordinated policy streams.

Policy context

In Ireland, there exists already a number of policy efforts at the local and national levels aimed at stimulating digital activities and solutions. At the national level, for instance, the Government of Ireland launched on 1 February 2022 a National Digital Strategy entitled 'Harnessing Digital – The Digital Ireland Framework'[2]. This national strategy aims to drive and enable the digital transition across the Irish economy and society, and updates the previous strategy which was published in 2013.

Ireland's National Digital Strategy

This national strategy is a high-level framework which aims to make Ireland a digital leader in Europe and the globe, in a time when the world faces a turning point led by the twin digital and

---

[2] Harnessing Digital – The Digital Ireland Framework document is available at:
www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/214584/fa3161da-aa9d-4b11-b160-9cac3a6f6148.pdf#page=null

decarbonisation transitions. As summarised in the 2022 Progress Report[3], "the Strategy sets out a roadmap to drive and enable the digital transition across the economy and society, to maximise the efficiency of public services, the productivity and innovation of enterprise, and our overall competitiveness and sustainability". It recognises that the digital transition requires the adoption of digital technologies by all levels of society and the promotion of the digital agenda across all areas of Government policy and service delivery. The strategy places emphasis on inclusiveness, security and safety, with strong governance and a robust regulatory framework.

The strategy is comprised of four core dimensions which are in line with the four points of EU's Digital Compass: Digital Transformation of Business, Digital Infrastructure, Skills, and Digitalisation of Public services. A set of targets, workstreams and associated deliverables correspond to these dimensions to drive the strategy's implementation. Figure 2 below shows an infographic outlining the strategy.

Additionally, the National Broadband Plan is set to complement the national digital strategy by focusing on the physical aspects of the digital transition. This Plan is a national government initiative to deliver high-speed broadband services to all premises in Ireland. The roll out of the National Broadband Plan will provide the essential assets needed for all localities and communities across the nation to have access to the solutions and services afforded through the digital transition.

The national strategy encompasses a great deal of topics to support the extensive uptake of digitalisation, using a broad stroke to capture all sectors of the economy and society, addressing provision of digital skills for all levels, ensuring widespread access to digital public services such as passport renewal and tax return filings. However, as a high-level plan, local and regional specificities are overlooked, particularly when it comes to recognising and addressing the different challenges in implantation of the strategy on the ground.

---

[3] Harnessing Digital – the Digital Ireland Framework, 2022 Progress Report. Available at
www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/241714/bedc64c6-baaf-4100-9255-02f5e07dd3f9.pdf#page=null

Figure 2. Infographic of the national digitalisation strategy 'Harnessing Digital - The Digital Ireland Framework'

Harnessing Digital - The Digital Ireland Framework

Positioning Ireland as a digital leader, driving and enabling digital transformation across the economy and society.

Dimension 1: Digital Transformation of Business	Dimension 2: Digital Infrastructure	Dimension 3: Skills	Dimension 4: Digitalisation of Public Services

Targets

75% enterprise take-up in Cloud, Big Data, AI by 2030 90% of SMEs at basic digital intensity by 2030 At least 800 businesses supported by 2026 under the €85 million Digital Transition Fund At least 35% of State funding for start-up & early stage businesses invested in innovative digital businesses from 2022	All households and businesses covered by Gigabit network by 2028 All populated areas covered by 5G by 2030 Digital connectivity to all Connected Hubs and Schools by 2023 All operators of essential services, Government Departments and key agencies verified to have implemented robust cyber security mitigation measures by 2024	Increase the share of adults with at least basic digital skills to 80% by 2030 Increase graduates with higher-level digital skills to over 12,400 by end-2022, with ambition to further increase digital skills provision in following years	90% of applicable services consumed online by 2030 80% of eligible citizens using MyGovID by 2030 20% of employees in the public sector remote working (post-pandemic)

Workstreams

Comprehensively support enterprise across all aspects of their **digital transformation**. Pursue a coherent, integrated, proactive approach to the digital transition, through a robust ecosystem and strong enablers.	Drive increased gigabit and 5G connectivity, including international connectivity. Address energy & circular economy challenges from digital technologies. Prioritise Ireland's **cyber security** capacity, expertise, and infrastructure.	**Provide inter-connected** cluster of skills policy responses to meet the digital transformation. Deliver **Digital Skills for Society**, to enable all cohorts to engage with digitalisation.	Drive further **digitalisation of public services**, with a focus on the health system. Fully implement steps to ensure **public service data** is used safely and effectively.

Underpinned by a coherent governance structure, and a modern, cohesive, well-resourced regulatory framework.

Local level strategies and initiatives

On a more local level, there exist already well-developed, shorter-term digitalisation strategies at the county-level. Each local authority in Ireland has recently drafted county-specific strategies to support local digitalisation aims. The four strategies produced by the Midland counties of Laois[4], Longford[5], Offaly[6] and Westmeath[7] – the target area for the Next2Met project – are quite similar in the overall selection of key themes, pillars or objectives. They all address the infrastructure requirements for digitalisation, digitalisation for businesses and economic development, impact on the citizen and community, and digital skill requirements.

Furthermore, there are plenty of local initiatives to promote digitalisation within the fabric of local communities. For instance, the 'Digital innovation Programme', launched in 2021, provides funding for piloting of original and innovative local authority-led digital and telecommunications projects. Grow Remote, an organisation that aims to uncover and build a community around remote working across Ireland, provides training on remote working for managers, employees and job seekers, as well as supporting local chapters in creating local employment.

Space for Regional Policy

The national digitalisation framework and the local strategies all help promote the roll-out and uptake of digital infrastructure and services throughout Ireland. However, **there currently is no strategy for the development of digitalisation at a regional level. Nor does a strategy exist that specifically addresses the common challenges and opportunities experienced in the Midlands SPA. The present regional digitalisation roadmap fills this gap, or missing node, in the current digitalisation policy architecture**. By having a narrower and local reach of a framework, opportunities from cross-county collaboration and long-term planning prospects may be missed. Similarly, having a nation-wide approach misses locally-defined priorities and the potential challenges to implementation of a top-down framework[8]. There is therefore a need for a policy structure at a regional level.

From an analysis of the current digitalisation strategies as developed by Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath, there exist opportunities for further scope and value added in creating a regionally coordinated approach to digitalisation. Firstly, while these are the first digital strategies produced in the counties, the local authority digital strategies operate on various two- and four-year timeframes – ranging between 2020 to 2022, between 2021 to 2023 or yet another from 2020 to 2024. It was also noted in cross-examining these county-level strategies that potential exists for a more cohesive focus

---

[4] Laois Digital Strategy 2020-2024 can be found here: https://consult.laois.ie/en/consultation/laois-digital-strategy

[5] Longford's Digital Strategy 2021-2023 can be found here: www.longfordcoco.ie/your-council/policy-and-publications/digital-strategy-2021-2023/

[6] Offaly's Digital Strategy 2020-2022 can be found here: www.longfordcoco.ie/your-council/policy-and-publications/digital-strategy-2021-2023/

[7] Westmeath's Digital Strategy 2020-2024 can be found here: www.westmeathcoco.ie/en/ourservices/digitalandbroadband/digitalstrategy/

[8] The *Smart Community Initiatives* is part of the Government's digital strategy which intends to expose and support local communities to digital content and technology into the community. However, it is not integrated explicitly in the national policy stage.

on promoting investment and linking to funding for further developments in the region. Learnings from Next2Met could enhance these digital strategies in the Midlands context, particularly in the context of remote working, working hubs, placemaking, smart tourism and clusters, which were among the good practices identified by Next2Met partners. All four Midlands counties have similar contexts that are distinct from their surrounding counties. By coordinating a Midland region-wide digitalisation framework that has a mid- to long-term strategic scale, there could be synergies and mutually beneficial initiatives that cross county boundaries to benefit the whole region as a great place to live, work and visit. This is where EMRA can contribute through its role as the monitoring, oversight and coordination body for local development plans, thereby promoting enhanced co-ordination.

_____

EMRA's Regional Digitalisation Roadmap

The inputs from the workshop provides clear support from local stakeholders for the alignment of local, national and European level strategies with a digitalisation roadmap for the Midlands Region, as inspired by the Lower Austrian example, with some modifications to suit our context. EMRA has therefore reviewed the good practice example alongside the feedback from the workshop and amended the Lower Austrian strategy (see Figure 1) to be applicable to the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) and its upcoming review, following the national review of the National Planning Framework in 2024.

Upon reflection on the national digitalisation framework, regional digital strategies and the European good practice example identified in the project, there is clear alignment within them all. The major thematic areas remain as distinct threads running throughout each of the policy frameworks. All of the frameworks examined in this context contain a strong focus on digital transformation of business and enterprise, recognise the infrastructural and skills base needed for the transformation and the enhanced service delivery possible through digitalisation. EMRA's regional digitalisation roadmap takes these clear themes from the national strategy and distils them to reflect the competencies of the Regional Assembly within the structure of the European good practice example from the Lower Austrian project partner. The roadmap also complements the shared focus of the local level strategies in a way that provides a longer-term, collaborative and regional approach.

The **regional digitalisation roadmap in Figure 3** below has thus been constructed to mirror both the National Digital Strategy and the European level good practice example of the Lower Austrian Digitalisation Strategy whilst reflecting EMRA's key competencies and strengths as an organisation and Regional Assembly. As indicated in the above section, although they focus on different scales, these frameworks align well with one another and have the potential to fortify each other's impact. It brings digital solutions and learnings from the Next2Met project to the forefront when the RSES is being implemented in the Midlands.

This roadmap does not constitute a new statutory strategy. Rather, it aims to respect and align with the policy architecture already in place at county and national levels. The framework does, however, integrate the learnings from the Next2Met project in a way that allows for a sort of lens to be applied to the RSES that can help focus the regional strategy on digitalisation solutions in the Midlands. There are a number of Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs) in the RSES that align with supporting digitalisation.
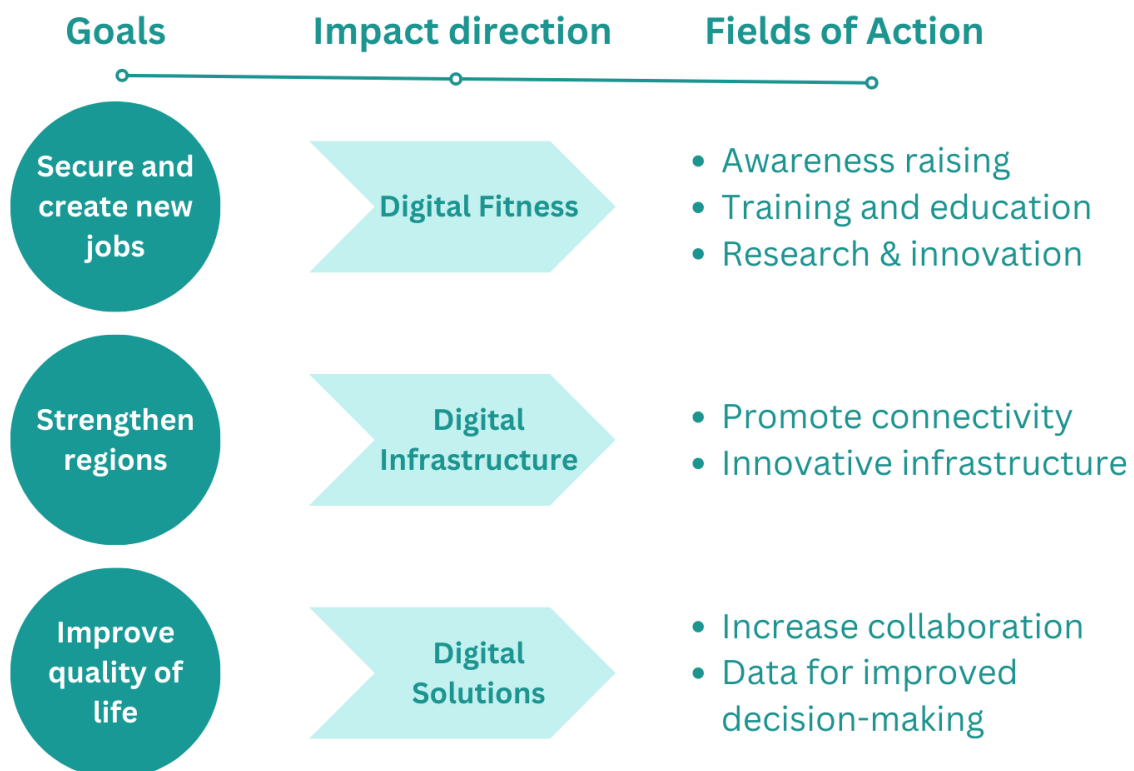
With the additional tool of the roadmap these RPOs will be applied in a more targeted and focused manner in the future. The regional digitalisation roadmap does this by increasing awareness for digital solutions in policy implementation at a regional level.

Contents of the Roadmap

At an overview, EMRA's regional digitalisation roadmap consists of three main goals: to secure and create new jobs, to strengthen regions, and to improve quality of life. In essence, these align well with the RSES main themes of Economic Opportunity, Healthy Placemaking and Climate Action. The framework directs its goals around the areas of digital fitness, digital infrastructure and digital solutions. To support these goals, the roadmap outlines key areas of action for EMRA which recognise the competencies and strengths of the organisation. These include awareness raising of digital solutions; training and education on digital skills and opportunities; research and innovation; promoting connectivity and innovative infrastructure; increasing collaboration between various groups including business groups, universities and research institutions and policymakers; and promotion of accessible, high-quality data for improved decision-making by all stakeholders for better lives. The text below provides more detail on the goals, impact direction and fields of action.

Figure 3. EMRA's Regional Digitalisation Roadmap

Regional Digitalisation Roadmap

Goals	Impact direction	Fields of Action
Secure and create new jobs	Digital Fitness	• Awareness raising • Training and education • Research & innovation
Strengthen regions	Digital Infrastructure	• Promote connectivity • Innovative infrastructure
Improve quality of life	Digital Solutions	• Increase collaboration • Data for improved decision-making

Advancements in digital technology and the solutions possible through its application brings immense new opportunity and prospects for not just the Midlands as a region but also for businesses and society overall. The goals in the regional digitalisation roadmap set thematic parameters to drive a digital agenda forward. A multitude of measures have been outlined to describe the goals, impact directions and fields of action in the section below. Further measures can continuously be added.

- **Secure and create new jobs** – As an objective in the uptake of digital solutions, the use of digital innovations, new business models and processes, and continuing education activities can be used to secure and create new jobs in the region. It can also connect the Midlands region with employment opportunities further afield than the immediate vicinity of the four midlands counties through connection to remote work prospects.

- **Strengthen regions** – Expansion and enhancements of digital infrastructure and implementation of new digital services can strengthen rural regions. People in rural areas can thus benefit from e-learning opportunities or connect to decentralised business models.

- **Improve quality of life** – harnessing digital solutions can make the region a more attractive place to live work and visit. Quicker and improved use of data makes it possible to improve services, for example those that enable remote working. When working from one's own home or locality becomes more feasible, traffic volumes and CO_2 emissions can thus be reduced. Administrative data such as those for public services enable local authorities to enhance the management of public spaces such as parks and town centres.

Impact Directions & Fields of Action

These goals are pursued in the regional digitalisation roadmap through three impact directions. Subsequent fields of action outline projects and measures which will help realise the goals of the Roadmap.

- **Digital Fitness** – to achieve digitalisation goals, particularly in securing and creating new jobs, it is important that people, businesses, and the public sector are fit and ready for the digital transition. This impact direction aims to increase people's interest in new digital technologies, to be able to use them and to effectively work with them. Companies should be capable in their use of digital technologies to develop new business models, drive new products and process innovations, and develop new technologies. Citizens should be able to feel confident and comfortable with the emerging technologies to be able to use them safely to benefit from the digital services available, such as the purchase and delivery of a local product or contacting the local authority for road maintenance.

  - **Field of Action: Awareness Raising** – Society, public sector and private sector actors should take the opportunity to discuss digitalisation and promote the services that come with it. Knowledge of the opportunities from digital technologies as well as an understanding of the security risks should be explored. Coordination and collaboration within several of EMRA's regional networks can help promote awareness of digital solutions and activities.

  - **Field of Action: Training and Education** – From pre-school to higher education and vocational training, the focus should be on integrating skills learning, interdisciplinary

thinking and teaching digital skills. The aim should be to ensure inclusion of all and equity so that all people can benefit from the digital transition.

- o **Field of Action: Research and Innovation** – The development of new digital possibilities through technological products, processes, or organisational innovations should be promoted. Networking and cooperation between companies and research institutions should be advocated in the region. Some of the relevant thematic areas that emerged during the Next2Met project include the Internet of Things, Big Data, 5G technology, artificial intelligence, 3D printing and medical innovations, and virtual reality.

- **Digital Infrastructure** – The necessary infrastructure must also be expanded and continuously upgraded. The continued expansion of broadband access should be promoted. A well-functioning infrastructure is a basic requirement for the use of digital technologies.

  - o **Field of Action**: **Promote Connectivity** – Access to the internet and improved mobile and Wi-Fi connections through a well-developed digital infrastructure should be promoted. With the expansion of the necessary infrastructure, the basic requirements for digital solutions and services are established.

  - o **Field of Action**: **Innovative Infrastructure** – Existing infrastructure can be improved with digital solutions. So-called "smart" solutions such as traffic sensors and parking sensors along with the use of data can enhance public service delivery in localities. Data collection and analysis are key resources for this. Data security and control over one's own data should be given due considered.

- **Digital Solutions** – Digital solutions contribute to significant improvements and simplification of processes and communication. With this impact direction, companies can develop new services and products. Citizens can benefit from products and services that improve the quality of life in the region. Public administration will benefit from increased use and analysis of data to enable a better decision-making process.

  - o **Field of Action: Increase Collaboration** – Collaboration and networking between various groups such as businesses, public administration, education and research institutions, and policymakers should be promoted on a regional level. This can stimulate new developments and cooperation. In its coordination role, the Regional Assembly can bring together a wide range of relevant stakeholders to encourage cross-sectoral discussions and collaboration.

  - o **Field of Action: Data for improved decision making** – Promotion of accessible, high-quality data for improved decision making by all levels of stakeholders for better lives for all. Innovative solutions and digital applications should be promoted, developed and implemented for use by decision-makers, researchers and the general public.

Ongoing Digital Actions in the Midlands

To note, several impressive actions related to digitalisation are already happening in the Midland counties in these fields of action. For example:

- Within <u>training and education action</u>, Longford's Microsoft Dream Space event aims to encourage technology and computer sciences in primary schools. In its Age Friendly Digital

Training, Westmeath Library Service has Digital Ambassadors to help show residents how to access library services online.

- The smart bins are installed with sensors that notify authorities when they are full for optimal collection in Edenderry, Co Offaly are a great example of <u>Innovative infrastructure</u>. As are the Smart Benches installed in Durrow, Co Laois. The bench has embedded solar panels and a bike station with ports for charging mobile devices and electric scooters. Powered by sunlight, it even has a wi-fi hotspot, <u>promoting connectivity</u> in the town. These innovative infrastructural solutions improve the quality of life for local residents and make the use of public spaces more attractive.

- Within the <u>Increased Collaboration</u> action for digital solutions, there is collaboration between business groups and research institutions at the Irish Manufacturing Research centre in Mullingar (Co Westmeath) to secure new jobs, new products and innovative processes.

- Another example of <u>collaboration</u> is The Cube Centre in Portlaoise which serves as a centre of excellence for collaboration in the low-carbon economy and co-working infrastructure for improved quality of life.

- The new Regional Development Monitor (RDM), created in collaboration between the three Regional Assemblies in Ireland, All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO) at Maynooth University and spatial infrastructure partners the Ordnance Survey Ireland (OSI) via the GeoHive platform, is an excellent case study on <u>data for improved decision-making</u>. The RDM collates and visualises a range of socio-economic and environmental indicators on an interactive dashboard to enhance the understanding of key societal trends in Ireland for better decision-making. The open-source tool can be used by departments, local authorities, planners, policymakers, researchers and members of the public. Data specific to Smart Specialisation (S3) is also included as part of the RDM and is expected to be publicly available in 2024.

- Out of a <u>collaboration</u> between Abbeyleix Tidy Towns and UCD (WeCount Project), Makeport Makerspace in Portarlington and TOG Makerspace in Dublin, the Smart Sensor Project in Abbeyleix, Co Laois uses sensors based on Internet Of Things (IoT) technology and data collected to improve real-time monitoring of such things as traffic, air quality and weather, making <u>data available for improved decision-making</u>. Edenderry, Co Offaly follows a similar approach with their Smart Parking initiative. Sensors help enable remote monitoring the appropriate use of parking spaces, including loading bays, spaces for wheelchair users, and electric vehicle charging points.

In summary

EMRA's regional digitalisation roadmap provides a simple yet flexible framework to digitalisation that focuses on the services possible through digitalisation rather than the technology itself. It maintains a people-centred approach to development that supports vibrant communities and localities in the Midlands. The roadmap retains the holistic approach by concentrating on methodologies rather than specific sectors or technologies, a point which was reflected in the workshop discussions. This method is therefore applicable to all sectors that exist in the region, present and future, and it is flexible enough to apply to new technologies as they emerge in the future.

Through this regional framework with its additional lens providing greater focus to digital solutions in the Midlands region, key Regional Planning Objectives in the RSES are strengthened in their implementation. This roadmap will be used by EMRA and will serve as a guide in its approach to digital

solutions for the Midlands (and wider EMRA Region) during the review of the RSES, following the national review of the National Planning Framework in 2024.

Mentimeter results from the workshop "Co-creating a regional digital roadmap for the Midland Region: Workshop for Next2Met Action Plan Implementation" held online on 14ᵗʰ February 2023

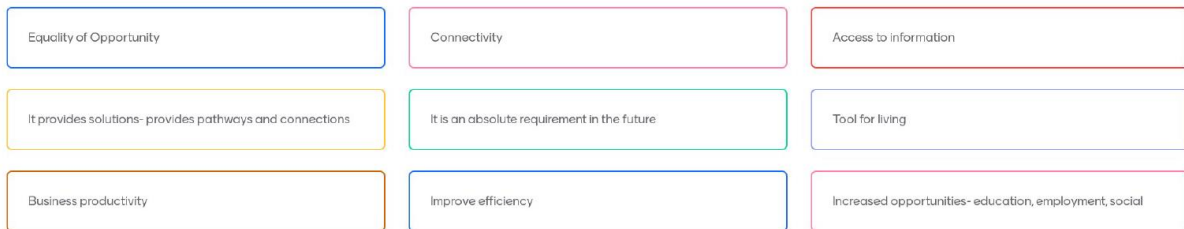## 1. Do you think the Lower Austrian Good Practice example is transferable to the Midlands Region?
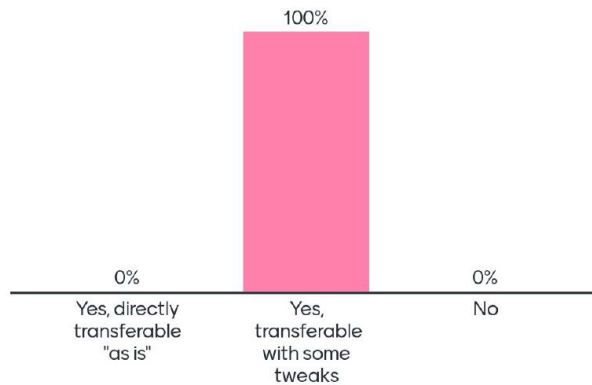
2. What challenges are there in Midlands region to increasing digital solutions? (challenges to choosing 'digital'?)

3. Why digital? How can digital solutions help improve quality of life (attractive to live, work, for investment)?

Equality of Opportunity	Connectivity	Access to information
It provides solutions- provides pathways and connections	It is an absolute requirement in the future	Tool for living
Business productivity	Improve efficiency	Increased opportunities- education, employment, social

3. Why digital? How can digital solutions help improve quality of life (attractive to live, work, for investment)?
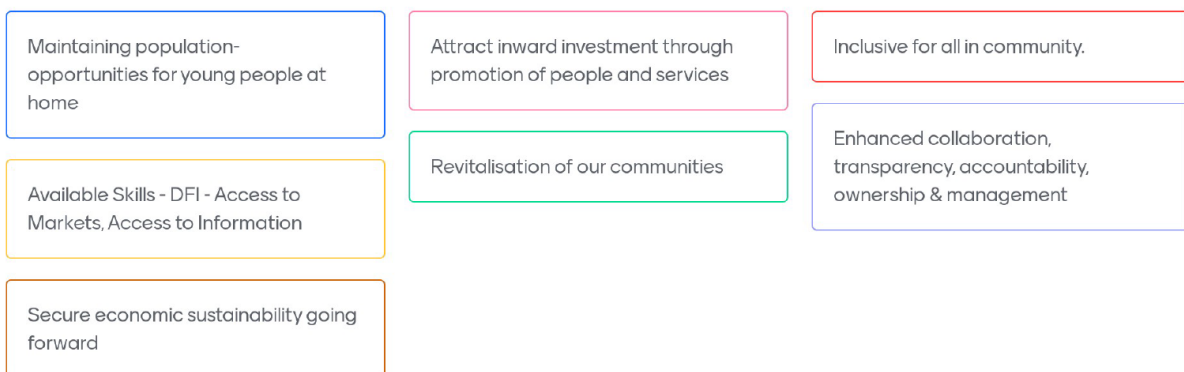
Reduces need to commute/travel	To be competitive	Upskilling - pathways to employment, promotion and to further any higher education
Increased community engagement & networking; share activities & information in the community.Local Business Engagement- Shop Local- events, markets, opening hours, discountsQuality of Life improvements; bus stop real time information for passengers	Connecting the supply and demand	

4. How can "digital" help make the region more agile into the future?

Maintaining population- opportunities for young people at home	Attract inward investment through promotion of people and services	Inclusive for all in community.
Available Skills - DFI - Access to Markets, Access to Information	Revitalisation of our communities	Enhanced collaboration, transparency, accountability, ownership & management
Secure economic sustainability going forward		

Question number 5 about was skipped during the workshop.

6. What should be included in a regional digital framework/roadmap to help with local or national plans/strategies?

people centred approach

examples

applied digital learning   active stakeholders

implementation   reinvent county

pathways to education   support for education

shared knowledge

opportunities   plans for every level

simple accessible languag

actual digital hub

co-connect programme   community engagement

possible funding avenues   employment

education   business supports

targets   community   relevant