

# 1: Executive Summary

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly is one of the three Regional Assemblies of Ireland, working with key stakeholders at an EU, national, regional and local level to support effective regional development in Ireland. In June 2019, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly published its RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region. The RSES – for the first time – brought together spatial planning and economic policy to provide a strategic investment framework for the Eastern and Midland Region; marking a significant policy milestone for regional government in Ireland.

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's RSES aims to shape future growth and to better manage regional planning and economic development throughout the region, with the RSES aiming to ensure that our region can create a sustainable and competitive region that supports the health and wellbeing of our people and places – in both urban and rural communities – with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunities for all. This vision is underpinned by three key cross-cutting principles - **“Healthy Placemaking”**, **“Climate Action”** and **“Economic Opportunity”**.

By focusing on these three principles we can achieve effective regional development in line with the vision and objectives of Project Ireland 2040 - the National Planning Framework (NPF). In conjunction to this, the economic strategy of our RSES aims to build a sustainable, competitive, inclusive and resilient regional economy, by developing a strong economic base that is supported by enterprise, innovation and skills.

Delivering the economic and spatial objectives of our RSES will be an important component in tackling inter-regional imbalances that exist in Ireland and the Eastern and Midland Region, and the delivery of these objectives is needed now more than ever.

According to the latest available regional statistics, it is clear that economic disruption caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 has already had a profound impact on the region's economy. As of Q2 2020<sup>1</sup>, 456,612 people or 38.2 per cent of the Eastern and Midland Region's labour force were in receipt of either the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment”, the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” or were registered on the “Live Register”. The impact on the region's labour market varied on a sub-regional level, with the corresponding ratio for the Midlands being 40.2 per cent, with notably high ratios also recorded in the Mid-East – at 39.6 per cent – and Dublin at 37.2 per cent. From a commercial perspective, 43.6 per cent of its commercial units were operating in the worst affected sectors, implying that 29,637 of its commercial units were likely to be severely impacted as a result of the public health measures.

In this context, the National Economic Recovery Plan will be fundamental to tackling the economic disruption of COVID-19 and in achieving the overarching vision of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's RSES, namely the need to focus on **“Healthy Placemaking”**, **“Climate Action”** and **“Economic Opportunity”**. The Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs) of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's RSES are aligned to these three overarching principles, with our priorities for the forthcoming National Economic Recovery Plan identified under these three principles, which are as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2020

### **Principle 1: Healthy Placemaking**

1. Deliver the Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) for Dublin
2. Deliver the Settlement Strategy for the Region in line with the RSES and NPF
3. Co-ordinate Transport and Infrastructure delivery
4. Promote Placemaking and Regeneration of Towns, Villages and Rural Areas
5. Develop a network of co-working hubs of scale in our Region

### **Principle 2: Climate Action**

6. Promote low energy buildings and retrofitting
7. Integrate land use and transport and achieve modal shift towards sustainable and active modes of transport
8. Increase the use of indigenous low and zero carbon energy sources and ensure sufficient support is provided to allow a “Just Transition” in the Midlands
9. Address flood risk and coastal erosion to ensure resilience of critical infrastructure and water resources in the region
10. Identify, protect and enhance Green Infrastructure and Ecosystem services and the natural assets in the Region
11. Monitor our progress to delivering carbon neutrality by 2050

### **Principle 3: Economic Opportunity**

12. Ensure there is a regional approach to Smart Specialisation Strategies
13. Enhance the Eastern and Midland Region’s human capital levels and grow the enterprise base of the region
14. Continue to develop Dublin’s economy and utilise the potential of the Dublin- Belfast Economic Corridor
15. Support the economies of our Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns
16. Ensure sufficient support is provided to our rural communities

## 2: Strategic Context

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly is one of the three Regional Assemblies of Ireland, working with key stakeholders at an EU, national, regional and local level to support effective regional development in Ireland.

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly is part of the regional tier of governance in Ireland, with its primary focus on the formulation, adoption and implementation of its Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES), oversight and coordination of Local Economic and Community Plans, management of EU Operational Programs, EU project participation, implementation of national economic policy, and additional functions through working with the National Oversight and Audit Commission. In June 2019, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly published its RSES for the Eastern and Midland Region. In doing so, the RSES brings together spatial planning and economic policy providing a strategic framework for investment in the region; marking a significant policy milestone for regional government in Ireland.

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's RSES is a strategic plan and investment framework to shape the future development of the region up to 2031, with the overarching vision of the RSES to create a sustainable and competitive region that supports the health and wellbeing of our people and places – in both urban and rural communities – with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunities for all. In doing so, the RSES sets the framework for each local authority within the Eastern and Midland Region to develop their county and city development plans in a manner that ensures that the vision and objectives of the National Planning Framework (NPF) are aligned on a national, regional and local level.

The RSES is underpinned by key cross-cutting principles that reflect the three pillars of sustainability; - namely social, environmental and economic - and expressed in a manner which best reflects the challenges and opportunities of the Eastern and Midland Region. The three principles of the RSES are:

1. **“Healthy Placemaking”** which aims to promote quality of life through the creation of healthy and attractive places to live, work, study and visit in.
2. **“Climate Action”** which aims to enhance climate resilience and accelerate the transition to a low carbon economy recognising the role of natural capital and ecosystem services
3. **“Economic Opportunity”** which aims to create the right conditions and opportunities for the region to realise sustained economic growth and employment that ensures good living standards for all

To achieve our vision – and by virtue support the implementation of Project Ireland 2040 – the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the National Development Plan (NDP) – the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's RSES identifies key locations for population and employment growth, consisting of Dublin City and Suburbs, 3 Regional Growth Centres – namely Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk – along with 11 Key Towns, namely Bray, Maynooth, Swords, Navan, Naas, Wicklow-Rathnew, Carlow (Graiguecullen), Longford Town, Mullingar, Tullamore and Portlaoise. As per Regional Policy Objective (RPO) 3.2, our RSES outlines compact growth targets for future housing development in the region, targeting at least 50 per cent of all new homes to be built within or contiguous to the existing built up area of Dublin City and Suburbs, with an equivalent target of at least 30 per cent for other urban areas in the region.

Furthermore, the RSES also – for the first time – has developed an economic strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region, which aims to develop a sustainable, competitive, inclusive and resilient regional economy. With immediate challenges such as the outbreak of COVID-19 as well potential trade disruptions as a result of Brexit, our economic strategy adopts a threefold approach, namely:

1. We sustain what we have in the immediate term
2. Transform our enterprise base for longer term resilience
3. Build on our strengths to be successful in international trade while managing potential vulnerabilities

To achieve this, the RSES has adopted the following five economic principles, namely:

1. **Smart Specialisation:** The principle of Smart Specialisation aims to bring together key stakeholders in a geographic area to identify the competitive advantages of a region with the view of utilising these competitive advantages in developing economic opportunities. Advocated at a European level, this process brings together collective knowledge from local and national bodies to ensure the most effective distribution of funds while moving away from an outdated “one size fits all” policies.
2. **Clustering:** Clustering policies are initiatives that aim to create or grow industrial clusters within a region by linking or facilitating key economic actors with the view of improving the surrounding business environment.
3. **Placemaking:** Placemaking is about ensuring that geographical areas are attractive places to live, learn and work. Until recently, most employers made location decisions based upon a number of economic factors, ranging from – but not limited to – the availability of raw materials, distance to market and relatively low labour costs, with workers moving to be close to their employer. However, knowledge-based industries are now crucial for economic growth and employers are competing for qualified and high skilled workers. Instead of expecting their workforce to come to them, these employers are moving closer to where their workforce lives, namely areas with a high quality of life. Therefore, to provide workers with a high quality of life – and by virtue encourage private investment – geographical areas should aim to provide high quality public services and infrastructure, with investments in areas such as public transport and health, community and cultural amenities, green and creative spaces, education and housing.
4. **Orderly Growth:** The purpose of “Orderly Growth” is to ensure that the objectives of the NPF can be achieved. By ensuring “Orderly Growth” within our designated areas of growth, the Eastern and Midland Region can achieve its previously mentioned compact growth targets, while the benefits of developing sufficient urban centres of scale can be realised. There is ample evidence of the regional economic benefits of developing urban centres of scales and the economic strategy – specifically through our guiding principles for strategic employment development and investment prioritisation – aims to facilitate such growth for the wider benefit of the Eastern and Midland Region.
5. **Future Proof and Risk Management:** With emerging global development and challenges, such as the outbreak of COVID-19, Brexit, tax developments, trade wars, it is important to

constantly foresee and horizon scan to identify unforeseen challenges and be ready to act upon them accordingly.

### 3: Regional Economic Impact of COVID-19

Given that the National Economic Recovery Plan will chart our long term recovery from the economic disruption caused by the outbreak of COVID-19, it is important to highlight the economic impact of COVID-19 on the Eastern and Midland Region's economy to date.

As per the latest available regional statistics, it is clear that the outbreak of COVID-19 has already had a profound impact on the Eastern and Midland Region's economy. Although our region has been able to specialise in a range of high valued industries that have largely avoided the economic disruption of COVID-19, many parts of the region – particularly our rural counties – have been severely impacted due to their reliance on the hospitality, wholesale and retail industries.

To evaluate the sheer size of this economic impact to date, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly will examine recent trends in the following economic indicators, namely:

- Labour market of the Eastern and Midland Region
- Commercial market of the Eastern and Midland Region

The main findings of this analysis are as follows:

- As of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 2020, the number of people based in the Eastern and Midland Region in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” totalled 127,121, accounting for 55.2 per cent of the total number of people that were in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” in Ireland.
- Within the Eastern and Midland Region, the county with the highest number of people in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” was Dublin at 80,236, accounting for 63.1 per cent of total claimants in the region. The counties with the next highest shares in the Eastern and Midland Region were Kildare (9% or 11,399), Meath (7.3% or 9,246) and Wicklow (5.5% or 6,936).
- As of the 16<sup>th</sup> of August 2020, the number of people based in the Eastern and Midland Region in receipt of the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” totalled 115,249, accounting for 45.2 per cent of the total number of people that were in receipt of the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” in Ireland
- Within the Eastern and Midland Region, the county with the highest number of people in receipt of the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” was Dublin at 62,234, accounting for 54 per cent of total claimants in the region. The counties with the next highest shares in the Eastern and Midland Region were Kildare (10% or 11,476), Meath (9.6% or 11,067) and Louth (6.3 % or 7,313).
- As of Q2 2020<sup>2</sup>, 456,612 people or 38.2 per cent of the Eastern and Midland Region's labour force were in receipt of either the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment”, the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” or were registered on the “Live Register”, highlighting the sheer impact of COVID-19 on the Eastern and Midland Region's economy. This was below the corresponding national ratio of 39.9 per cent.

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<sup>2</sup> 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2020

- As of Q2 2020, 54,651 people or 40.2 per cent of the Midland’s labour force were in receipt of either the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment”, the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” or were registered on the “Live Register”. Although the corresponding ratios for the Mid-East (39.6%) and Dublin (37.2%) were both below the corresponding national ratio of 39.9 per cent, such figures nevertheless highlight the considerable impact of COVID-19 on the Eastern and Midland Region’s labour market.
- From a commercial market perspective<sup>3</sup>, 43.6 per cent of the Eastern and Midland Region’s commercial units were operating in the most affected sectors, implying that 29,637 of its commercial units were likely to be severely impacted as a result of the public health measures. This was below the corresponding “COVID-19 Exposure Ratio” for the State as a whole, which was 46 per cent.
- Of the 9 counties based in the Eastern and Midland region, 7 recorded above average “COVID-19 exposure ratios”, with the highest exposure ratio in the region registered in Westmeath, with 51 per cent of its commercial units likely to be severely impacted as a result of the public health measures.
- The next most exposed county based in the Eastern and Midland Region was Meath (50.3 per cent) which was the 7<sup>th</sup> most exposed county in Ireland and then Longford (50 per cent) which was the 8<sup>th</sup> most exposed county in Ireland. Dublin – in absolute terms – had the highest number of commercial units operating in the sectors likely to be worst affected in the region, with 14,360 of its units likely to be severely impacted.
- Of the five cities of Ireland, Dublin City and Suburbs recorded the lowest “COVID-19 Exposure Ratio” with 38.4 per cent of its commercial units likely to be severely impacted as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19.
- In terms of the Regional Growth Centres / Key Towns outlined in the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly’s RSES, 8 recorded “COVID-19 Exposure Ratios” above the national average, namely Athlone, Navan, Mullingar, Swords, Drogheda, Longford Town, Portlaoise and Tullamore.

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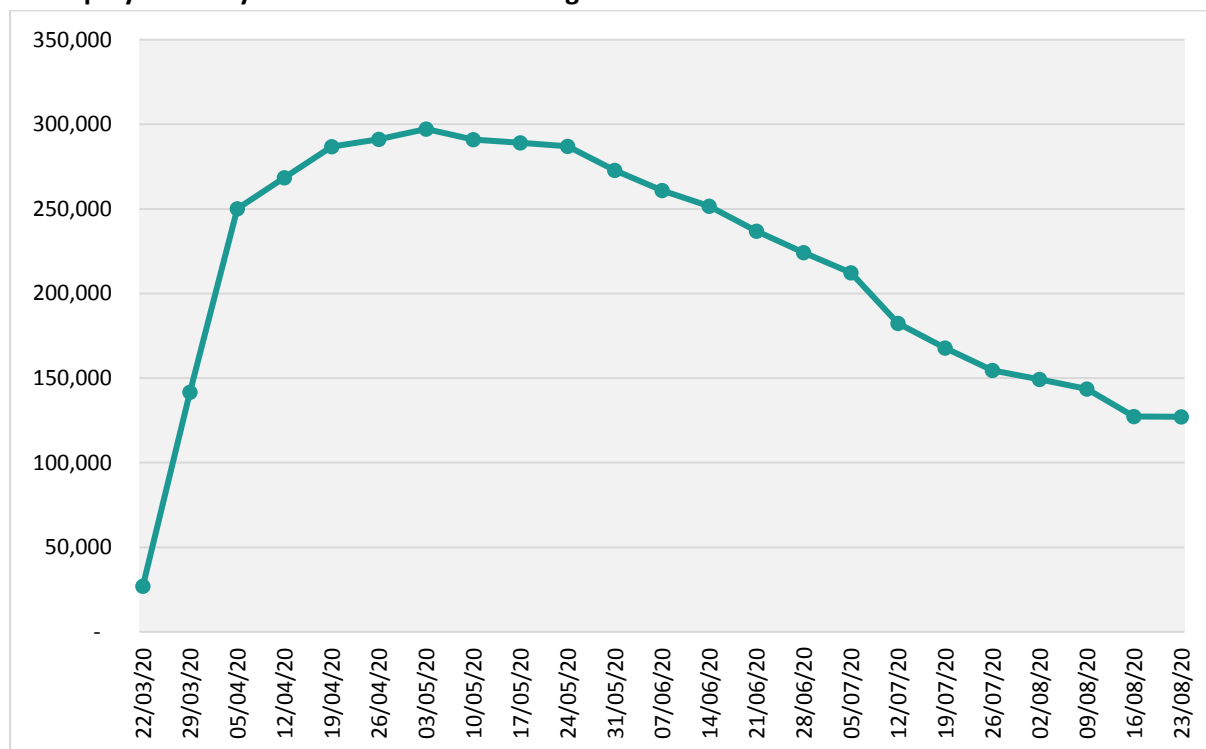
<sup>3</sup> <https://emra.ie/covid-19-regional-economic-analysis/>

### 3.1: Labour Market Impact

As a result of the public health measures needed to control the spread of COVID-19, the Eastern and Midland Region’s labour market has been severely impacted. To evaluate the extent of this impact, Figure 1 and Table 1 identify the number of people in the Eastern and Midland Region that have been in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment”, using the latest available data at the time of writing.

As of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 2020, the number of people based in the Eastern and Midland Region in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” totalled 127,121, accounting for 55.2 per cent of the total number of people that were in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” in Ireland. As evident from Figure 1, the total number of people based in the Eastern and Midland Region in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” has been progressively falling over the past number of weeks, dropping from a peak of 297,233 at the beginning of May.

**Figure 1: Total number of people in the Eastern and Midland in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” as of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 2020**



Source: CSO

Within the Eastern and Midland Region, the county with the highest number of people in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” was Dublin at 80,236, accounting for 63.1 per cent of total claimants in the region as evident from Table 1. The counties with the next highest shares in the Eastern and Midland Region were Kildare (9% or 11,399), Meath (7.3% or 9,246) and Wicklow (5.5% or 6,936).



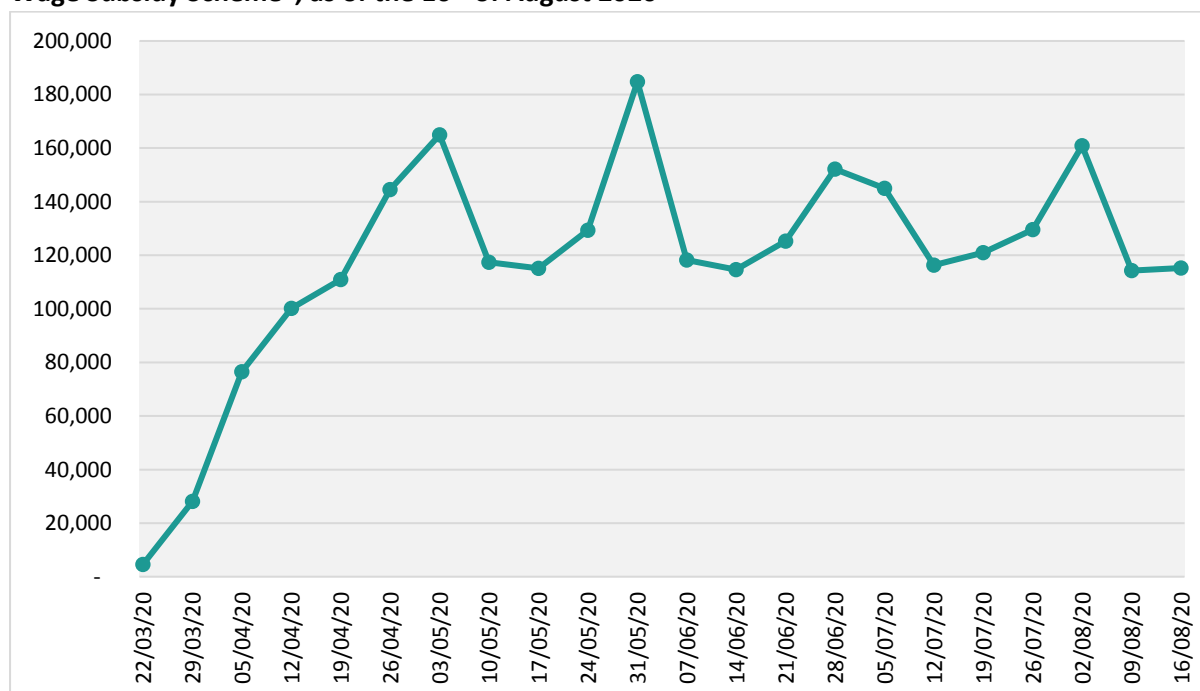
**Table 1: The total number of people in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” in each County within the Eastern and Midland Region, as of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 2020**

County	Number of People in Receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (23 <sup>rd</sup> of August 2020)	% Share of Eastern and Midland Region (23 <sup>rd</sup> of August 2020)
Dublin	80,236	63.1%
Kildare	11,399	9.0%
Meath	9,246	7.3%
Wicklow	6,936	5.5%
Louth	6,900	5.4%
Westmeath	4,015	3.2%
Laois	3,414	2.7%
Offaly	3,371	2.7%
Longford	1,604	1.3%
<b>Eastern and Midland</b>	<b>127,121</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: CSO

As of the 16<sup>th</sup> of August 2020, the number of people based in the Eastern and Midland Region in receipt of the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” totalled 115,249, accounting for 45.2 per cent of the total number of people that were in receipt of the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” in Ireland. As evident from Figure 2, the total number of people based in the Eastern and Midland Region in receipt of the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” was down from its previous peak of 184,741 at the end of May. That said, the rate of decline in the number of recipients of the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” has not been as strong compared to the corresponding decline in the number of recipients of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” in the Eastern and Midland Region.

**Figure 2: Total number of people in the Eastern and Midland Region in receipt of the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme”, as of the 16<sup>th</sup> of August 2020**



Source: CSO

Within the Eastern and Midland Region, the county with the highest number of people in receipt of the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” was Dublin at 62,234, accounting for 54 per cent of total claimants in the region as evident from Table 2. The counties with the next highest shares in the Eastern and Midland Region were Kildare (10% or 11,476), Meath (9.6% or 11,067) and Louth (6.3 % or 7,313).

**Table 2: The total number of people in receipt of the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” in each County within the Eastern and Midland Region, as of the 16th of August 2020**

County	Number of People in Receipt of the "Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme" (16 <sup>th</sup> of August 2020)	% Share of Eastern and Midland Region (16 <sup>th</sup> of August 2020)
Dublin	62,234	54.0%
Kildare	11,476	10.0%
Meath	11,067	9.6%
Louth	7,313	6.3%
Wicklow	6,958	6.0%
Westmeath	5,450	4.7%
Laois	4,353	3.8%
Offaly	4,014	3.5%
Longford	2,384	2.1%
<b>Eastern and Midland</b>	<b>115,249</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: CSO

Inevitably such developments will have severely impacted the Eastern and Midland Region’s labour market and its unemployment rate. However to what extent remains to be seen considering the lack of available unemployment rate statistics that take into account both the number of people in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” or the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” on a regional and sub-regional level

To combat this, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly has adopted a similar methodology to recently released Central Bank of Ireland research<sup>4</sup> which examines the share of the labour force registered on either the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment”, the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” or the “Live Register” on a geographical basis. In this regard, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly will – on a regional<sup>5</sup> and sub-regional<sup>6</sup> level – express the number of people registered on either the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment”, the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” or the “Live Register” as of the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2020, as a share of its corresponding labour force as of Q2 2020.

To achieve this, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly has combined data from the CSO’s Q2 2020 Labour Force Survey and the CSO’s data on COVID-19 Income Support and Live Register figures as of the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2020. Although the number of people in receipt of COVID-19 Income Support and “Live Register” payments change weekly, and data is available up to August 2020, it is important to compare datasets that are compatible in terms of timeframes. Therefore the data on the number of people in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” and registered on the “Live Register” as of the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2020 was considered the most

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.centralbank.ie/docs/default-source/publications/quarterly-bulletins/boxes/qb3-2020/box-e-regional-labour-market-impact-of-covid-19.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> NUTS 2 regions

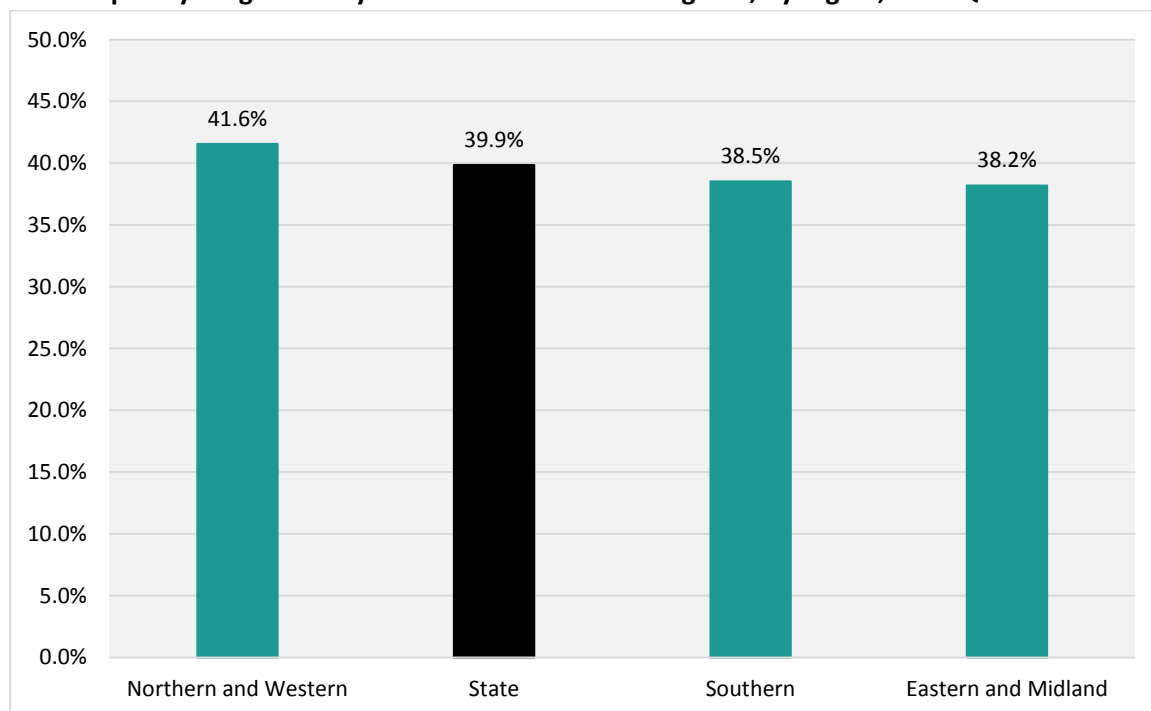
<sup>6</sup> NUTS 3 regions

appropriate dataset to compare to the regional labour force data from the CSO's Q2 2020 Labour Force Survey.

As of Q2 2020<sup>7</sup>, 456,612 people or 38.2 per cent of the Eastern and Midland Region's labour force<sup>8</sup> were in receipt of either the "Pandemic Unemployment Payment", the "Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme" or were registered on the "Live Register", highlighting the sheer impact of COVID-19 on the Eastern and Midland Region's economy, as can be seen from Figure 3. This was below the corresponding national ratio of 39.9 per cent.

As evident from Figure 4, the impact on the Eastern and Midland Region's labour market varied on a sub-regional level. As of Q2 2020<sup>9</sup>, 54,651 people or 40.2 per cent of the Midland's labour force<sup>10</sup> were in receipt of either the "Pandemic Unemployment Payment", the "Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme" or were registered on the "Live Register". This was above the corresponding national ratio of 39.9 per cent. Although the corresponding ratios for the Mid-East (39.6%) and Dublin (37.2%) were both below the corresponding national ratio of 39.9 per cent, such figures highlight the considerable impact of COVID-19 on the Eastern and Midland Region's labour market.

**Figure 3: Share of labour force in each region in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme or on the Live Register, by region, as of Q2 2020**



Source: Eastern and Midland Assembly calculations using CSO data

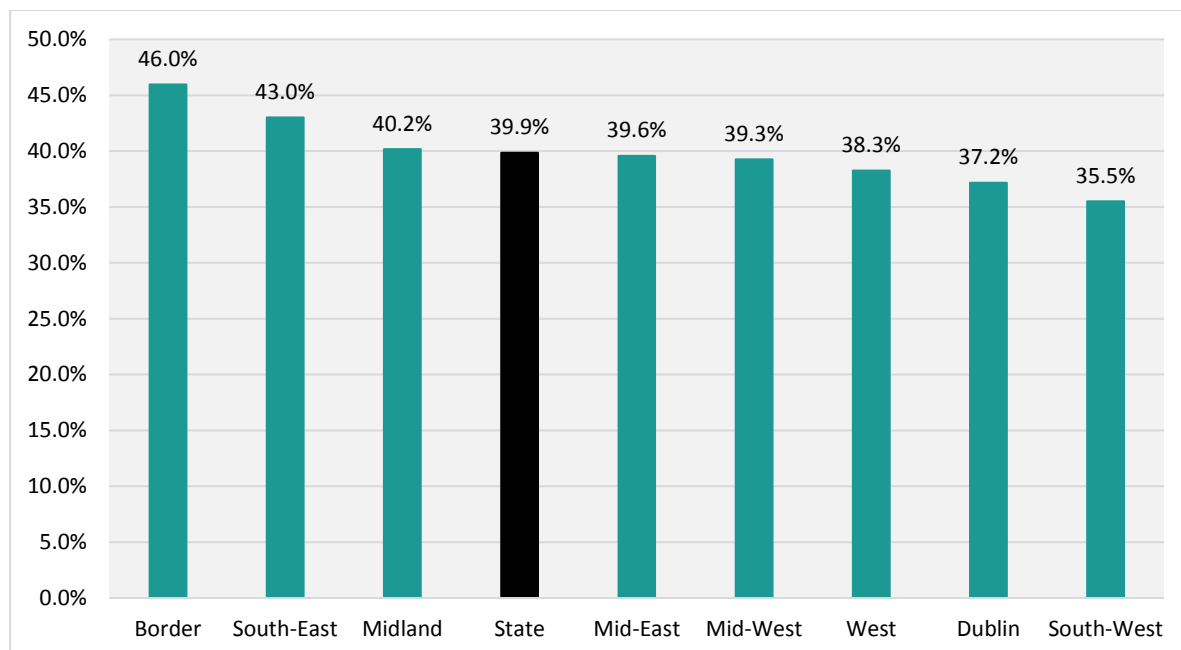
<sup>7</sup> 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2020

<sup>8</sup> Q2 2020 labour force: CSO Q2 2020 Labour Force Survey

<sup>9</sup> 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2020

<sup>10</sup> Q2 2020 labour force: CSO Q2 2020 Labour Force Survey

**Figure 4: Share of labour force in each sub-region in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme or on the Live Register, by sub-region, as of Q2 2020**



Source: Eastern and Midland Assembly calculations using CSO data

### 3.2: Commercial Market Impact

The three Regional Assemblies of Ireland prepared a “COVID-19 Regional Economic Analysis<sup>11</sup>” to identify which geographical areas in Ireland are more likely to have experienced significant economic disruption caused by the necessary measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Using the GeoDirectory commercial database, and specifically the NACE codes allocated to commercial units<sup>12</sup> as of September 2019, the three Regional Assemblies of Ireland have identified each geographical area’s reliance on the sectors that are likely to be severely affected by the public health measures needed to curtail the spread of COVID-19. The purpose of this evidence based analysis was to inform policy makers at a local, regional and national level in order to assist the process of economic recovery, allowing them to identify the degree of economic resilience of Ireland’s regions, sub-regions, counties, cities and towns; a key principal envisioned in each assembly’s RSES.

On foot of this, “COVID-19 Exposure Ratios” have been developed for each of Ireland’s regions, sub-regions, counties, cities and for 199 CSO defined settlements<sup>13</sup>; the purpose of which was to identify

<sup>11</sup> <https://emra.ie/dubh/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CV19-Regional-Economic-Analysis.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Comprises of all commercial units excluding residential units. Also excluded are units classified as Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing and Extraterritorial Organisations and Bodies (e.g. Embassies)

<sup>13</sup> CSO defined settlements with a population of 1,500 or more as per Census 2016

which geographical areas were likely to be experiencing significant economic disruption as a result of this crisis. Specifically, a geographical area's "COVID-19 Exposure Ratio" represents the total number of its commercial units that were operating in the sectors likely to be worst affected by the COVID-19 outbreak, as a proportion of its total commercial stock as of September 2019. The higher this ratio is for an area, the more likely this area is exposed to significant economic disruption as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, as many firms in these sectors are likely to be severely impacted from this crisis. Commercial units that were listed in the GeoDirectory database with the following NACE code classifications<sup>14</sup> were considered to represent the sectors likely to have been worst affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.

- NACE Code B "Mining and Quarrying"
- NACE Code F "Construction"
- NACE Code G "Wholesale and Retail Services" excluding commercial units classified as "essential services" as per the government guidelines at the time of writing
- NACE Code I "Accommodation and Food Services"
- NACE Code R "Arts, Entertainment and Recreation Services"
- NACE Code Q.88.91 "Child Day-Care Activities"
- NACE Codes S.96.02 "Hairdressing and other beauty treatment", S.96.04 "Activities of physical wellbeing institutes" and S.96.09 "Other personal service activities".

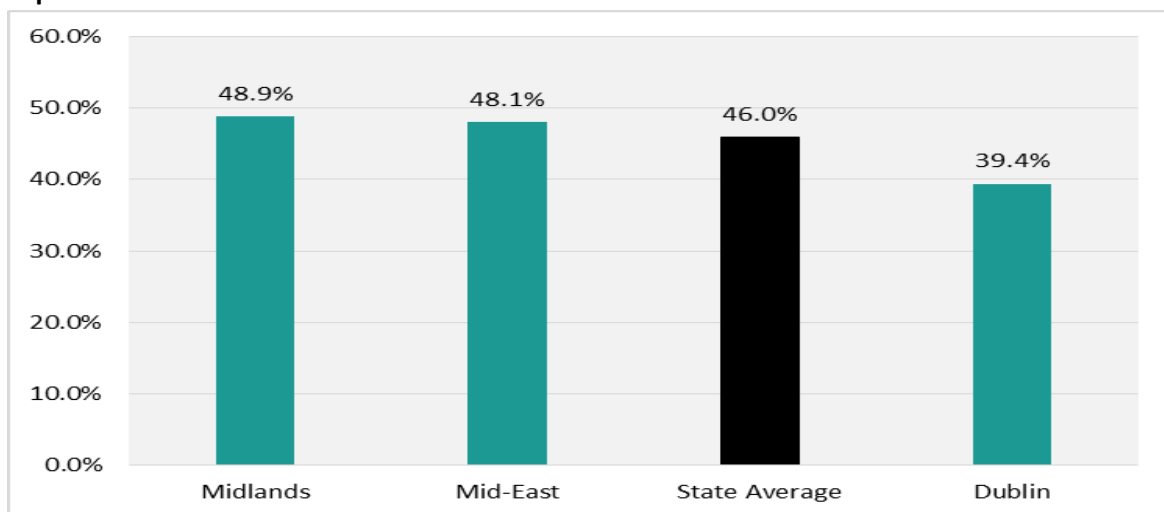
For the Eastern and Midland region as a whole, 43.6 per cent of its commercial units were operating in the most affected sectors, implying that 29,637 of its commercial units were likely to be severely impacted as a result of the public health measures. This was below the corresponding "COVID-19 Exposure Ratio" for the State as a whole, which was 46 per cent.

Of the eight sub-regions of Ireland, Dublin had the lowest "COVID-19 Exposure Ratio", with 39.4 per cent or 14,360 of its commercial units likely to be severely impacted as a result of the public health measures.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://statbank.cso.ie/px/u/NACECoder/NACEItems/searchnace.asp>

**Figure 5: COVID-19 Exposure Ratios, for the sub-regions of the Eastern and Midland Region, September 2019**

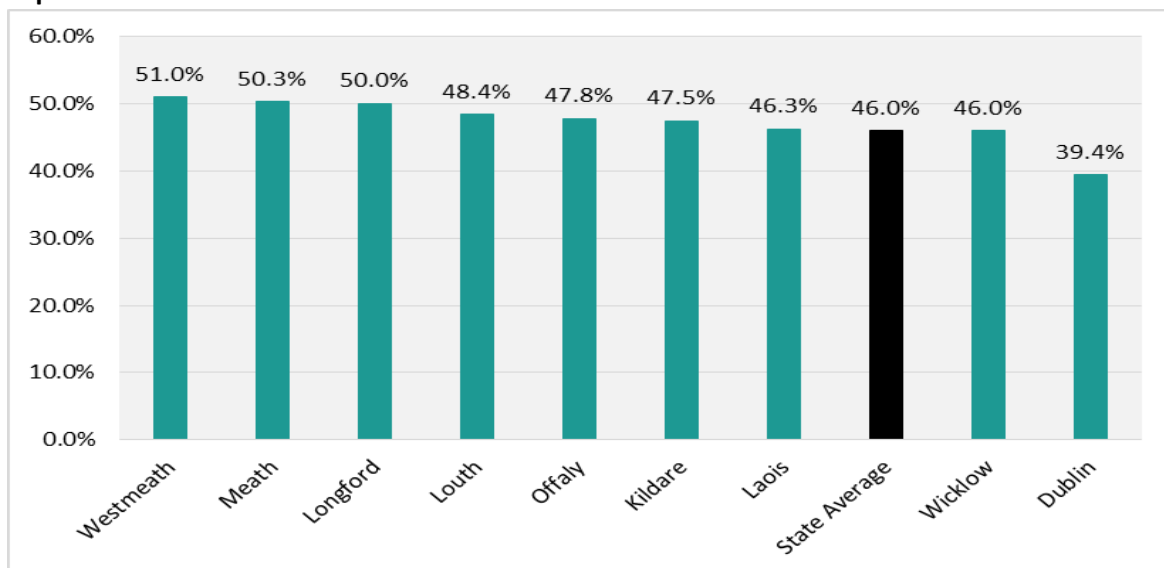


Source: Regional Assemblies of Ireland “COVID-19 Regional Economic Analysis”

In terms of counties, coastal and rural counties are more likely to be severely impacted due to their reliance on commercial units that generally require human interaction and cannot be operated remotely. In contrast, exposure is likely to be lower in more urban based counties as such counties rely more on economic activities that are capable of operating remotely; namely activities such as finance, ICT and professional and technical services.

Of the 9 counties based in the Eastern and Midland region, 7 recorded above average “COVID-19 exposure ratios”, with the highest exposure ratio in the region registered in Westmeath, with 51 per cent of its commercial units likely to be severely impacted as a result of the public health measures. The next most exposed county based in the Eastern and Midland Region was Meath (50.3 per cent) which was the 7<sup>th</sup> most exposed county in Ireland and then Longford (50 per cent) which was the 8<sup>th</sup> most exposed county in Ireland. Dublin – in absolute terms – had the highest number of commercial units operating in the sectors likely to be worst affected in the region, with 14,360 of its units likely to be severely impacted.

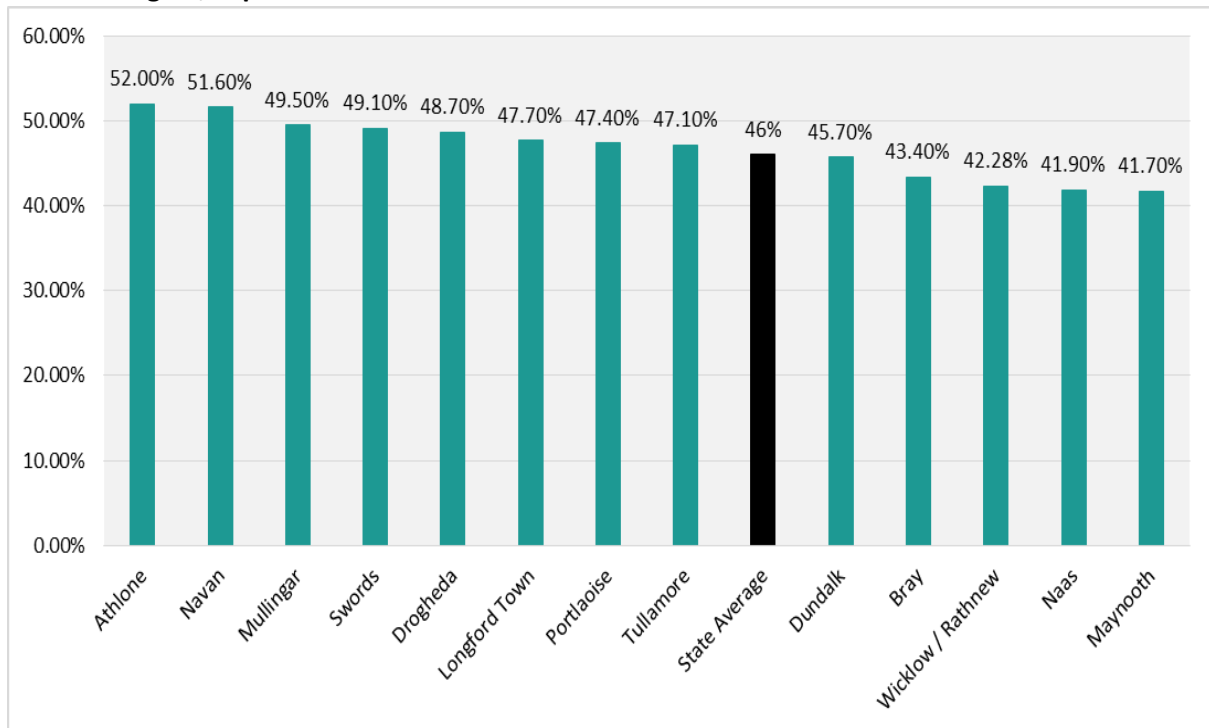
**Figure 6: COVID-19 Exposure Ratios, for the counties of the Eastern and Midland Region, September 2019**



Source: Regional Assemblies of Ireland “COVID-19 Regional Economic Analysis”

Of the five cities of Ireland, Dublin City and Suburbs recorded the lowest “COVID-19 Exposure Ratio” with 38.4 per cent of its commercial units likely to be severely impacted as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19. In terms of the Regional Growth Centres / Key Towns outlined in the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly’s RSES, 8 registered “COVID-19 Exposure Ratios” above the national average, namely Athlone, Navan, Mullingar, Swords, Drogheda, Longford Town, Portlaoise and Tullamore, as evident from Figure 7.

**Figure 7: COVID-19 Exposure Ratios, for regional growth centres and key towns of the Eastern and Midland Region, September 2019<sup>15</sup>**



Source: Regional Assemblies of Ireland “COVID-19 Regional Economic Analysis”

<sup>15</sup> Data was not available for Graiguecullen

## 4: Priorities of the Eastern and Midland Region

The National Economic Recovery Plan will act as an important stimulus in combating the economic disruption caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 and in achieving the overarching vision of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's RSES; which is to create a sustainable and competitive region that supports the health and wellbeing of our people and places – in both urban and rural communities – with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunities for all.

As previously mentioned, the RSES is underpinned by key cross-cutting principles that reflect the three pillars of sustainability - namely social, environmental and economic - and expressed in a manner which best reflects the challenges and opportunities of the Eastern and Midland Region. The three principles of the RSES are:

1. **“Healthy Placemaking”** which aims to promote quality of life through the creation of healthy and attractive places to live, work, study and visit in.
2. **“Climate Action”** which aims to enhance climate resilience and accelerate the transition to a low carbon economy recognising the role of natural capital and ecosystem services
3. **“Economic Opportunity”** which aims to create the right conditions and opportunities for the region to realise sustained economic growth and employment that ensures good living standards for all

By focusing on these principles, we can build the economic resilience, develop places with a high quality of life offering and enhance the competitiveness of the Eastern and Midland Region's economy, allowing the region to withstand any future challenges.

The RPOs of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's RSES are aligned to these three overarching principles, with the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's high level priorities for the forthcoming National Economic Recovery Plan listed under these three principles, namely:

### Principle 1: Healthy Placemaking

1. Deliver the Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) for Dublin
2. Deliver the Settlement Strategy for the Region in line with RSES and NPF
3. Co-ordinate Transport and Infrastructure delivery
4. Promote Placemaking and Regeneration of Towns, Villages and Rural Areas
5. Develop a network of co-working hubs of scale in our Region

### Principle 2: Climate Action

6. Promote low energy buildings and retrofitting
7. Integrate land use and transport and achieve modal shift towards sustainable and active modes of transport
8. Increase the use of indigenous low and zero carbon energy sources and ensure sufficient support is provided to allow a “Just Transition” in the Midlands
9. Address flood risk and coastal erosion to ensure resilience of critical infrastructure and water resources in the region



10. Identify, protect and enhance Green Infrastructure and Ecosystem services and the natural assets in the Region
11. Monitor our progress to delivering carbon neutrality by 2050

**Principle 3: Economic Opportunity**

12. Ensure there is a regional approach to Smart Specialisation Strategies
13. Enhance the Eastern and Midland Region's human capital levels and grow the enterprise base of the region
14. Continue to develop Dublin's economy and utilise the potential of the Dublin- Belfast Economic Corridor
15. Support the ecosystems of our Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns
16. Ensure sufficient support is provided to our rural communities

## 4.1: Healthy Placemaking

The RSES seeks to create healthy and attractive places to live, work, study, visit and invest in as identified under the principle of ‘Healthy Placemaking’. In this regard, the Eastern Midland Regional Assembly’s priorities for the National Economic Recovery Plan are as follows:

- Deliver the Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) for Dublin
- Deliver the Settlement Strategy for the Region in line with the RSES and NPF
- Co-ordinate Transport and Infrastructure delivery
- Promote Placemaking and Regeneration of Towns, Villages and Rural Areas
- Develop a network of co-working hubs of scale in our Region

### 4.1.1: Deliver the Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) for Dublin

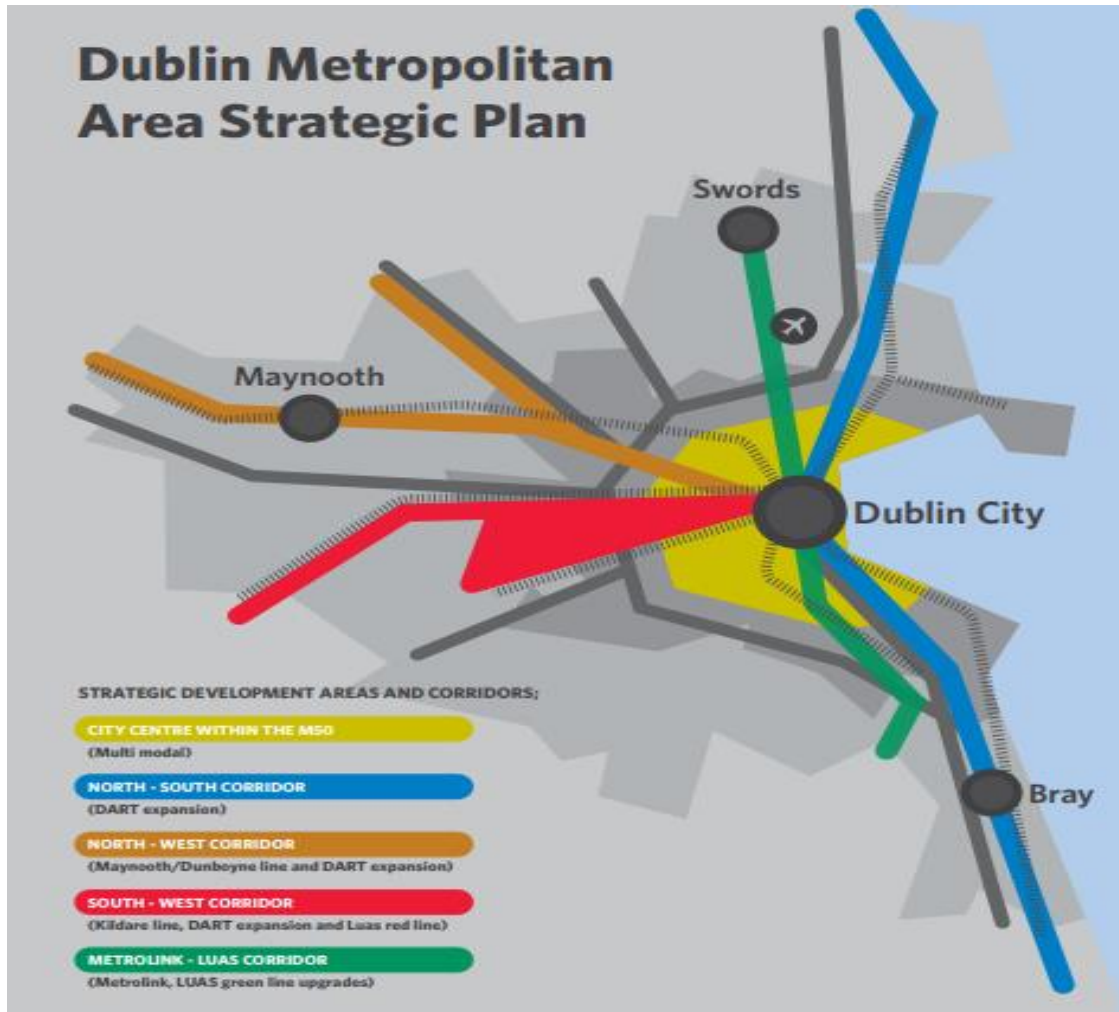
The Dublin Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) is the first statutory spatial plan for the Dublin metropolitan area, and was prepared in tandem with and as part of the RSES. The MASP sets out a vision and spatial framework for the sustainable growth and economic development of the Metropolitan Area, to 1.65 million population by 2031.

Planned growth is to be delivered in tandem with the delivery of key public transport projects including Metrolink DART and LUAS expansion programs, Busconnects and the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) Metropolitan Cycle Network and the provision of metropolitan scale amenities and Green Infrastructure. The MASP supports the overall Settlement Strategy for the Region set out in RSES to deliver compact growth with a focus on the consolidation of Dublin city and suburbs and the Key Towns of Bray, Maynooth and Swords.

RPOs 5.4 and 5.5 of the RSES support the delivery of strategic residential and employment development areas, which are identified on the basis of their potential for sustainable compact growth, linked to the phased delivery of enabling infrastructure along key public transport corridors, existing and planned and are set out in the Table 5.1 of the MASP.

Priority areas for targeted investment to deliver accelerated housing supply and increased employment densities at key strategic locations in the city centre and key nodes, the four Strategic Corridors; North-South (DART) Corridor, North-West (Maynooth/M3 rail line), South West (Kildare line/LUAS redline) and Metrolink/LUAS greenline are set out in Table 5.1 of the RSES.

Figure 8: Dublin Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan



Source: Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly

#### 4.1.2: Deliver the Settlement Strategy for the Region in line with RSES and NPF

Investment is needed to underpin the role of designated growth settlements in the Eastern and Midland Region's settlement hierarchy which sets out the capital city of Dublin as the top tier, supported by a network of strategically located Regional Growth Centres and key towns. The National Economic Recovery Plan, aligning with the RSES, should have a key focus on enabling the sustainable development in these key settlements, which have been designated for growth on the basis of their identified assets and potential for sustainable employment and compact growth. Section 4.5 of the RSES sets out key enablers for significant population and employment growth in the Regional Growth Centres of Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk, while Section 4.6 sets out priorities for the 11 Key Towns.

**Table 3: Settlement Hierarchy of the Eastern and Midland RSES**

Settlement Typology	Description	Areas		
		Metropolitan	Core Region	Gateway Region
<b>Dublin City and suburbs</b>	International business core with a highly concentrated and diversified employment base and higher order retail, arts, culture and leisure offer. Acts as national transport hub with strong inter and intra-regional connections and an extensive commuter catchment.	Dublin City and suburbs		
<b>Regional Growth Centres</b>	Regional Growth Centres are large towns with a high level of self-sustaining employment and services that act as regional economic drivers and play a significant role for a wide catchment area.		Drogheda	Athlone Dundalk
<b>Key Towns</b>	Large economically active service and/or county towns that provide employment for their surrounding areas and with high-quality transport links and the capacity to act as growth drivers to complement the Regional Growth Centres.	Bray Maynooth Swords	Navan Naas Wicklow-Rathnew	Graigucullen (Carlow) Longford Mullingar Tullamore Portlaoise

Source: Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly

From a spatial perspective, our priorities for targeted investment are as follows:

- **Athlone (RPOs 4.4 to 4.10 refer):** The RSES identifies strategic development and investment opportunities to support the growth of Athlone to 30,000 population by 2031, capitalising on its strategic location in the centre of Ireland and along the River Shannon to develop its leisure and tourism offer. There are also opportunities to develop synergies with Athlone IT and the Midlands Innovation and Research Centre to support enterprise and smart specialisation.
- **Drogheda (RPOs 4.11-4.18):** The RSES identifies a number of strategic development and investment opportunities to support the growth of Drogheda to 50,000 population by 2031, capitalising on its strategic location on the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor to support the development of the Drogheda-Dundalk-Newry cross border network. Drogheda's location as the gateway to the Boyne Valley and UNESCO heritage site of Bru na Boinne offers significant tourism potential, along with potential to develop the Boyne Greenway.
- **Dundalk (RPOs 4.19 – 4.25).** The RSES identifies strategic development and investment opportunities to support the growth of Dundalk to 50,000 population by 2031, capitalising on its location on the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor to support development of the Drogheda-Dundalk-Newry cross border network. There is support for the role of Dundalk as a strategic employment centre, the IDA Business and Technology Park and to develop Dundalk IT as a centre of excellence in the north east.
- **Key towns (RPOs 4.26 to 4.76).** These are large economically active towns that provide employment for their surrounding areas and have high quality transport links. Key towns have the capacity to act as regional drivers to complement the Regional Growth Centres.

### 4.1.3: Co-ordinate Transport and Infrastructure delivery

The RSES recognises that the sustainable growth of the Region requires the provision of services and infrastructure in a plan led manner to ensure that there is adequate capacity to support future development and ensure people can live closer to where they work.

Integrated transport and land use planning, from regional to local transport plans and associated transport investment priorities, are set out in Table 8.3 of the RSES. The RSES is aligned with the NTAs Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area, which provides a framework for the planning and delivery of transport infrastructure in the Region. Transport policies and objectives for the Midlands and County Louth, as well as the Greater Dublin Area include:

- On-going management and enhancement of the national and strategic road networks to address the Region's intra-regional, interregional and international connectivity.
- Maintenance of an appropriate level of rail service and enhancements
- Provision for enhanced regional and local bus services
- Improvements to walking and cycling provision in towns and villages; and
- Improvements to public transport provision in rural areas.

The RSES provides a policy framework to prioritise the delivery of key enabling infrastructure and services by government and state agencies including the following strategic priorities:

- Strategic interregional and international connectivity, through investment in and access improvements to Dublin Port and Airport, regional ports and the trans-European TEN-T network. For all island cohesion, there is support for improved rail and road links on the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor and between Dublin and Rosslare Europort, and for cross border collaboration in key infrastructure delivery including interconnection of electricity grids, gas and fibre networks. There is support for roll out of the National Broadband Plan and smart grids, to support the development of renewables, smart cities and towns and green technologies.
- Protect and improve the national road network and deliver key public transport projects; Bus Connects, Metrolink, DART and LUAS expansion programmes, and the National Cycle Plan including Greenway and Blueway projects.
- Pollution from urban waste water is one of the key threats to water quality in the Region. To address this, the Strategy supports delivery of the Greater Dublin Drainage Project, Ringsend Wastewater Treatment Plant Project, Athlone Main Drainage Project and Upper Liffey Valley Sewerage Scheme. A key priority is to ensure delivery of the Water Supply Project for the Eastern and Midland Region, the Rural Water Programme and Vartry water supply scheme

#### **4.1.4: Promote Placemaking and Regeneration of Towns, Villages and Rural Areas**

Ensure urban and rural renewal and enterprise funding is aligned to the spatial objectives of the RSES to deliver public realm and quality of life improvements and attract talent and investment to our cities, towns and villages, and targeted supports for areas that are most exposed to COVID-19.

Healthy Placemaking RPOs 9.10 to 9.13 of the RSES highlight the need for improvements to both physical and social infrastructure including public realm enhancements, sustainable transport, recreation and open space, heritage led regeneration and the provision of community facilities and services to create sustainable inclusive communities. Support for placemaking is embedded in the Economic Strategy of the RSS and linked to enterprise growth.

The forthcoming National Economic Recovery Plan should acknowledge the following priorities of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly prioritises, namely:

- Ensure area based and plan led urban regeneration of strategic development areas and opportunity sites in key towns that are identified in the MASP and the RSES. To deliver revitalised mixed-use town and village centres, new homes and targeted measures to reduce vacancy, retrofit existing building stock, brownfield site remediation and enable site assembly for regeneration.
- Ensure rural funding schemes are aligned to promote diversification of rural economies and develop the smart green economy, with targeted investment in rural broadband and provision of serviced sites and co-working/incubator space in towns and villages of all sizes in order to improve connectivity and digitisation and to drive innovation and enterprise development in all parts of the Region. Key opportunities for the diversification of rural economies include the development of agriculture, tourism, food, forestry, marine, energy, bio economy and low carbon sectors. The development of greenways can contribute to unique tourism offerings that support the rural economy and job creation, as well as protecting and promoting natural assets and biodiversity.
- Continued support for specific COVID -19 related measures and placemaking initiatives across our settlements as a critical economic intervention to combat declining footfall and vitality in our commercial centres as a result of restrictions, and other future potential economic disruptions. This should include supports for sectors which have been particularly exposed to COVID including tourism, retail and services, also addressing the challenge to traditional on street retailing from online shopping to develop new and enhanced leisure and retail experiences in our cities, towns and villages.

As evident from the previous section, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly carried out analysis to identify which urban centres within our region are most exposed to economic disruption caused by the outbreak of COVID-19. Supports should allow accelerated measures to improve the public realm and walking and cycling in our cities, towns and villages, and the implementation of permanent solutions where clear quality of life and regeneration benefits are identified.

- Ensure funding schemes are aligned to the spatial policy objectives of the RSES, with particular focus on Project Ireland 2040 urban and rural regeneration funds, climate and disruptive technology funds as well as other funding schemes including Regional Enterprise Development fund, the Ireland Strategic Investment fund, and support for draw down of EU funds and the European Investment Bank. Funding to deliver Irish Water Investment Plans, is critical for our Region’s sustainable growth, in addition to other funding streams such as the Local Authority Housing Activation Fund, Community Support Funds, Living Cities Initiative, Town and Village Renewal Grants, Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme, Clár Scheme, Leader, Social Inclusion and Community Activation Funds to support placemaking and economic resilience.

Simplified and ring-fenced funding streams - especially for the scale of cities and metropolitan areas - and careful consideration around the need for match funding by Local Authorities will be important measures in ensuring effective draw down of funding along with the need for capacity building to support Local Authorities, state bodies, stakeholders and communities in bidding for and winning competitive funds nationally and under EU funds. The Regional Assemblies of Ireland can play a key role in this regard. Tracking project delivery and the drawdown of funding will be a focus area for the establishment of Implementation Groups to oversee the delivery of NPF and NDP at local level through the MASP and RSES.

#### **4.1.5: Enhance the level of funding for Co-Working hubs of scale in our Region**

The outbreak of COVID-19 has had a profound impact on all of our working environments. In a matter of weeks, both public and private sector workers have been forced to suddenly shift to remote working, with the public and private sector utilising technology and adopting work practises in a manner and scale never seen before.

From a strategic perspective, the ability of policy makers to utilise the potential benefits of remote working will also be a key factor in ensuring the vision and objectives of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly’s RSES can be implemented, allowing for effective economic development to be achieved across Ireland. In this regard, the development of urban centres of scale continues to be a crucial component in addressing regional imbalances and remote working has the potential to enhance the growth prospects of the Dublin Metropolitan Area, our Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns. In the long term, the degree to which regions can capitalise on these potential benefits will depend on a variety of factors - including but not limited to - the availability of co-working hubs with high quality facilities and the provision of high speed broadband within such hubs.

To allow all of our regions to capitalise on the potential of remote working, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly considers that the National Economic Recovery Plan should provide greater levels of funding to the “Regional Enterprise Development Fund” (REDF) - or divert resources from other existing funds - in order to deliver more co-working hubs in our region. Such funding should also be delivered using local knowledge from appropriate local authorities and the Regional Assemblies of Ireland. Additional funding in this regard should be concentrated on delivering high quality co-working hubs of scale within or in close proximity to our Metropolitan Areas and Key Towns as defined by our RSES and prominent rural communities in the region.

Furthermore, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly supports exploring a range of match funding opportunities for REDF projects that will deliver additional co-working hubs of scale within or in close proximity to Designated Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns as defined by each Assembly's RSES and prominent rural communities. This could involve – but wouldn't be limited to – encouraging private sector companies to provide an element of match funding for these type of REDF projects or possibly removing the 20 per cent for these type of REDF projects that will provide a sizeable economic uplift to a geographical area.

Our network of co-working could be centrally directed but locally managed to drive enterprise, creativity and innovation capacity. Notable examples of hubs in our region include the Kells Technology Hub and MERITs Thinkspace in Naas.

## 4.2: Climate Action

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's priorities for the National Economic Recovery Plan identified under Climate Action are based on the need to enhance climate resilience and accelerate transition to a low carbon economy, recognising the role of natural capital and ecosystem services in achieving this. The transition to a low carbon society is a key challenge for the region and action will focus on the following six high level priorities which are at the core of the RSES Climate Strategy, namely:

- Promote low energy buildings and retrofitting
- Integrate land use and transport and achieve modal shift towards sustainable and active modes of transport
- Increase the use of indigenous low and zero carbon energy sources and ensure sufficient support is provided to allow a "Just Transition" in the Midlands
- Address flood risk and coastal erosion to ensure resilience of critical infrastructure and water resources in the region
- Identify, protect and enhance Green Infrastructure and Ecosystem services and the natural assets in the Region
- Monitor our progress to delivering carbon neutrality by 2050

### 4.2.1: Promote low energy buildings and retrofitting

In order to promote low energy buildings and energy efficiency, the upcoming National Economic Recovery Plan should take into account the priorities of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly in this regard, which have been outlined through a variety of RPOs in the RSES, namely:

- Ensure local authorities report annually on energy usage and achieve a 33 per cent improvement in efficiency (RPO 7.39).
- Ensure all new buildings within the Eastern and Midland Region achieve the Nearly Zero-Energy Buildings (NZEB) standard in line with the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (EPBD) (RPO 7.40).



- Support and promote structural materials in the construction industry that have low to zero embodied energy and CO2 emissions (RPO 7.41)

#### **4.2.2: Integrate land use and transport and achieve modal shift towards sustainable and active modes of transport**

The integration of land use and transport to create well-planned settlements enables the establishment of sustainable transport patterns and a reduction of CO2 emissions. The RSES provides suites of guiding principles for the integration of land use and transport for both urban and rural areas and strategic employment locations in statutory land use plans (RPO 8.10), and these principles should be reflected in the National Economic Recovery Plan.

The RSES supports the promotion of sustainable and active modes of transport – such as improvements to the pedestrian environment and cycling network, and road enhancements to facilitate these (RPO 8.6, 8.8, 8.9, 8.14, 5.2) and sufficient levels of funding should be allocated towards these priorities under the National Economic Recovery Plan.

Combined with these investments is the need to decarbonise transport and the RSES acknowledges that the roll out of EV charging infrastructure must be integrated and mainstreamed into spatial planning policies to allow us to meet the current and future needs of the region. With this in mind, it is imperative National Economic Recovery Plan commits to providing sufficient levels of EV charging infrastructure across the Eastern and Midland Region, in order to encourage greater uptake of EVs and reduce emissions levels from private transport usage.

#### **4.2.3: Increase the use of indigenous low and zero carbon energy sources and ensure that sufficient support is provided to allow a “Just Transition” in the Midlands**

The RSES acknowledges that the region will need to shift from its reliance on using fossil fuels - including peat-fired stations in the Midlands - and move to a more diverse range of low and zero-carbon sources, including renewable energy and secondary heat sources, onshore and offshore wind, biomass and solar and it is imperative that the overarching priorities of the National Economic Recovery Plan compliment these needs. Facilitating enabling infrastructure is a priority that needs to be reflected in the National Economic Recovery Plan, specifically with respect to the infrastructure roll out of smart grids, district heating and micro generation in our Region (RPO 10.19, 7.38).

The employment losses that will continue to occur as Bord na Móna transitions away from peat extraction activities presents a significant challenge to the Midland’s economy. Unless there is significant and effective investment to counter these site closures, the Midland’s economy will be severely impacted particularly in rural communities based in Longford and Offaly.

The RSES supports a ‘Just Transition’ in the Midlands; recognising the need to improve skills and to ensure a just transition for the future use of Bord na Móna peatlands, while leveraging clean energy and green economy opportunities (RPO 4.84). To achieve this, the National Economic Recovery Plan needs to:

- Ensure sufficient support is provided to the education and training boards of the Midlands in order to counter the expected labour market implications of the transition to a low carbon economy
- Assist individuals or companies that wish to develop commercial opportunities in the green economy in the Midlands. Funding in this regard should aim to support sustainable employment opportunities in renewable energy, retrofitting, eco-tourism, aquaculture activities, birch water and medicinal herbs production
- Ensure adequate funding is provided to the Just Transition Fund for the Midlands including stimulus measures to build on and add value to the existing and any future clusters of renewable energy infrastructure in the wider Midland Region. This includes employment and economic potential around developing servicing expertise, research on renewable energies and associated technologies, academic research, stimulus for related start-ups, and incentivised geographic specific strategic energy zones/ hubs.

In terms of Waste Management, the RSES advocates the move to achieving a circular economy (RPO 10.25) and the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly have been exploring opportunities in this area collaborating with the National Centre for the Circular Economy at the ReDiscovery Centre sharing knowledge and best practice and exploring research partnering on EU projects and funding. The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly welcomes any opportunity to present progress to the Department on this initiative as it develops.

#### **4.2.4: Address flood risk and coastal erosion to ensure resilience of critical infrastructure and water resources in the region**

Central to the need to build climate resilience is to ensure the long term management of flood risk and build resilience to increased risks of extreme weather events, changes in sea level and patterns of coastal erosion, to protect property, critical infrastructure and food security in the Eastern and Midland Region.

The CFRAM programme is central to the medium to long term strategy for the reduction and proactive management of flood risk in Ireland and the assembly will be working with the local authorities, the OPW and other agencies to implement CFRAM recommendations to ensure that flood risk management policies and infrastructure are progressively implemented (RPO 7.13). It is imperative that the CFRAM programme is maintained and adequate support is provided in this regard.

Enhanced support to local authorities and Irish Water will be key to ensuring the delivery of the investment works programme to service settlements in accordance with the settlement strategy of the RSES and local authority core strategies (RPO 10.3), and support in this regard should be reflected in the forthcoming National Economic Recovery Plan.

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly also acknowledges that the region is experiencing ‘coastal squeeze’ - from increasing population and development pressures and the effects of climate change - with the east coast particularly vulnerable to sea level rise. To combat, it is important that any resources provided to developing climate resilience should reflect the need to provide further resources to coastal defences in appropriate sites in the Eastern and Midland Region.

#### **4.2.5: Identify, protect and enhance Green Infrastructure and Ecosystem services and the natural assets in the Region**

The enhancement, connectedness and provision of strategic green infrastructure and ecosystem services is a key element of the RSES (RPO 7.22, 7.23) and supportive measures should be incorporated into any upcoming recovery plan for the Eastern and Midland Regional Region. An integrated strategic green infrastructure network of metropolitan scale amenities and co-ordinating across local authority boundaries is identified as a key policy within the Dublin Metropolitan Area Spatial Plan (RPO 5.7). This will form part of an integrated National Greenways Strategy as identified in the recent Programme for Government which will have the potential to transform modal shift, improve air quality and public health.

The Eastern and Midland Region’s Peatlands are an important regional landscape feature and are also key for both climate mitigation and adaptation, such as providing important carbon sinks, water attenuation and flooding protection. They also have a role in renewable energy production and can contribute to an existing tourism potential and ecosystem potential. On this topic, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly is a partner on the Interreg Care-Peat project which explores mechanisms to reduce carbon emissions and restore the carbon storage capacity of European peatlands. It aims to set up and demonstrate innovative tools and techniques to restore bogs and measure the carbon they capture, and involve local and regional stakeholders. The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly welcomes any opportunity to present progress to the Department on this initiative.

The RSES also advocates for the incorporation and consideration of an ecosystem services approach to policy and plan making (RPO 7.21) and this means recognising and sustaining the benefits provided by the environment whilst delivering other economic and social functions. To enhance knowledge and expertise in this area, EMRA has partnered with other regional authorities and agencies across Europe on an Interreg Project – PROGRESS – which, through an exchange of best practice and learning, will achieve an improvement in the making and implementation of policies in this area. The approach is firmly based on policy learning and capacity building in areas such as promoting the measurement of the costs and benefits of ecosystem services, integration into sectoral policies and plans, innovative financial and marketing mechanisms for payment and improving landscape governance for economic and environmental sustainability. The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly also welcomes any opportunity to present progress to the Department on this initiative.

In order to take into account these key priorities, assets and the work of these listed projects, it is important that National Economic Recovery Plan recognises, incorporates and supports the benefits of green infrastructure and ecosystem services in future policy development that assists Ireland's recovery.

#### **4.2.6: Monitor our progress to delivering carbon neutrality by 2050**

Key to achieving our national commitment to reduce GHG emissions and achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 is our ability to monitor what progress has been made in this regard and the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly have committed to work with the Climate Action Regional Offices (CAROs) to establish a regional GHG emission inventory and agree reduction targets in accordance with national sectoral plans (RPO 7.30, 7.31).

To deliver on this work, EMRA are leading on a new ESPON EU research programme called Quantitative Greenhouse Gas Impact Assessment for Spatial Planning Policy (QGasSP) with the aim of identifying a robust method for quantifying the relative GHG impacts of alternative spatial planning policies, the outputs of which are anticipated in 2021 which will inform a regional emissions assessment. The objective of this 12 month research project is to develop a methodology that will allow competent planning authorities at national, regional and local levels quantify the influence of spatial planning policies on GHG emissions in a consistent manner.

The availability and advancement of assessment tools in the climate area such as these will be critical to inform an evidence base for decision makers on the future sustainable and climate resilient development of the Region to 2050 and these should be supported and promoted in the National Economic Recovery Plan.

## 4.3: Economic Opportunity

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's priorities for the forthcoming National Economic Recovery Plan identified under the principle of "Economic Opportunity" are as follows:

- Ensure there is a regional approach to Smart Specialisation Strategies
- Enhance the Eastern and Midland Region's human capital levels and grow the enterprise base of the region
- Continue to develop Dublin's economy and utilise the potential of the Dublin- Belfast Economic Corridor
- Support the economies of our Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns
- Ensure sufficient support is provided to our rural communities

### 4.3.1: Ensure there is a regional approach to Smart Specialisation Strategies

The economic strategy of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's RSES is based on five key principles; one of which would include the economic principle of Smart Specialisation Strategy. Smart Specialisation aims to bring together key stakeholders in a geographic area to identify the competitive advantages of a region with the view of utilising these competitive advantages in developing economic opportunities.

Advocated at a European level, this process brings together collective knowledge from local and national bodies to ensure the most effective distribution of funds while moving away from an outdated "one size fits all" policy. With input from local and regional stakeholders, Smart Specialisation aims to improve a region's productivity levels, regain lost competitiveness, increase export intensity and diversify markets, offering an innovative approach to kick-starting regional economies. Our region's economy has its own unique competitive advantages where priority areas are of significant importance to the region.

Building on these unique competitive advantages will only assist in rebuilding our region's economy. This is evident from a recent report "Expert Advice and Support on Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) in Ireland" by the Economic and Public Policy Consultancy (EPPC). Insights from this report highlight the need for more regionally focused smart specialisation strategies and the importance of the regions and the RSES in this regard. Specifically, the report notes that:

- Ireland's approach to RIS3 is strongly centrally-driven by the national government.
- The recently launched RSEs offer an opportunity to re-orient the country's R&I governance with a stronger place-based focus. This could also address the concern expressed by several regional actors during the consultation programme of being 'left behind' in relation to targeted RIS3 capacity building support and investment, especially in rural Ireland.
- A 'place-based' emphasis generates value by identifying and connecting the many local examples of RIS3 excellence which exist across the country – such as clusters and Institutes of Technology - which are often not very visible.

By developing a regional dimension to Ireland's economic recovery process, policy makers can utilise funding resources in a far more efficient manner, allowing regions to utilise self-identified competitive advantages for the economic benefit of their own geographical areas. Such an approach

is aligned with a core principal of the economic strategy of the region, as evident from section 6.3 of the RSES.

### **4.3.2: Enhance the Eastern and Midland Region's human capital levels and grow the enterprise base of the region**

There is ample levels of international research that shows that regions with inadequate levels of human capital will not develop economically, whereas regions with increased levels of human capital will experience sustained economic growth. OECD research has showed that infrastructure alone has no impact on regional growth unless these regions are endowed with adequate levels of human capital and innovation<sup>16</sup>.

Amongst other factors, human capital is generally nurtured through the provision of high quality Higher Education Institutes, Further Education and Training (FET) bodies and other education providers. Therefore education - as an investment in human capital - is regarded as a key determinant of sustainable economic growth. By providing additional resources to the Eastern and Midland Region's Higher Education Institute, Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and education providers, our region will be able to develop greater levels of human capital, enhancing the skills and talent profile of our labour force and ensuring the region can achieve sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

With this in mind, any future National Economic Recovery Plan should acknowledge the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's prioritises for developing human capital levels which have been outlined through a variety of RPOs in the RSES, namely:

- Support the role of Athlone Institute of Technology as a centre of excellence for education and in achieving its status as a Technological University (RPO 4.6) and support the role of Dundalk Institute of Technology as a centre of excellence for education (RPO 4.22).
- Support Wicklow-Rathnew's role in the provision of third level education at the Wicklow County Campus Rathnew - in association with Institute of Technology Carlow - and in particular, to support the development of the campus as a hub for the Film Industry and Screen Content Creation Sector (RPO 4.55).
- Support REPs, LEOs and local authorities to collaborate with the Regional Skills Fora managers, Higher Education Institutes, Education and Training Boards and local stakeholders to address skills shortages and lifelong learning challenges in the Region (RPO 6.25).
- Support and foster the collaboration of industry and research to identify areas of research, development and innovation, and to identify projects for funding (RPO 6.26).
- Support community and adult education providers who are already providing formal and non-formal education to targeted disadvantage groups and who have already identified the barriers to participation in lifelong learning to increase participation rates and support progression into further education and employment (RPO 6.27).

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/regional/searf2009/42576934.pdf>

- Support the development of sites where high-tech and high potential start-ups (HPSU29) can thrive, in conjunction with IoTs and Universities, to create collaborative and innovative growth (RPO 6.29).
- Support the role of Higher Education Institutions and Educational Training Boards in addressing skills shortages and life-long learning needs in the Region, and to support the further development of multi-campus Technological Universities to drive research and innovation (RPO 9.22).

Sufficient levels of funding should also be provided Higher Education Institutes based in the Dublin and Mid-East Regions, which would include Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, Dublin City University, Technological University Dublin and Maynooth University.

The development and enhancement of our enterprise base and innovation capacity will also be a key component in growing our region's economy and enhancing our quality of life offering. This reinforces the need to provide adequate resources to our region's Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) and our enterprise development agencies, ensure cross body collaboration between all key stakeholders in this sphere and encourage greater cooperation between large scale multinational companies and our indigenous enterprise base.

Therefore, any future National Economic Recovery Plan should recognise the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's priorities with respect to enterprise development and innovation, which have been outlined through a variety of RPOs in the RSES, namely:

- Support the national economic agencies, Local Enterprises Offices, Regional Enterprise Plan Steering Committees, local authorities and other relevant stakeholders within the Eastern and Midland Region, with their plans for job creation and enterprise development with an emphasis on:
  - an enterprise base with increased productivity and more diversification – including diversification of their markets - with high levels of innovation, skills adaptability, and relatively low costs of doing business.
  - maintaining full-employment with unemployment rates of each Strategic Planning Area not exceeding the State average by more than one percentage point
  - applying the Guiding Principles for strategic employment and investment prioritisation in placemaking for enterprise development presented in this RSES (RPO 6.1).
- Support enterprise development agencies and LEOs in their efforts to increase business innovation capacity, to create a distributed network of co-working hubs, to promote Ireland's Edge to strengthen linkages between Irish-owned enterprises and foreign owned enterprises in our region, and to support existing Irish entrepreneurs and to attract overseas entrepreneurs (RPO 6.31).

### **4.3.3: Continue to develop Dublin's economy and utilise the potential of the Dublin - Belfast Economic Corridor**

Dublin plays a key role as a location of choice for mobile investment in Ireland, competing with other cities based throughout Europe and internationally. It is a world class city of scale that provides access to a multilingual skills base, that facilitates mobility of people and international access, and is the only city in Ireland with international scale acting as the driver of the Irish economy. It hosts a variety of enterprises with large concentration of multi-nationals; a large number of universities, institutes and research centres with a young and well-educated population.

In conjunction to this, the capital's is also part of the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor which is the largest economic agglomeration on the island of Ireland with the cities and towns along the corridor home to a population of around 2 million. The Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor links the two largest cities on the island of Ireland and the large towns of Drogheda, Dundalk and Newry by high capacity road and national rail links and plays a critical role in supporting economic growth and competitiveness.

To capitalise on these competitive advantages and strategic assets, the forthcoming National Economic Recovery Plan should align with our economic oriented priorities of the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor and the Dublin Metropolitan Area, which have been outlined through the following RPOs, namely:

- Enhance Drogheda's and Dundalk's role as a strategic employment centre on the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor and provide for employment opportunities through identification of suitable sites for new industry (RPO 4.18 and RPO 4.21).
- Ensure the development of future employment lands in the Dublin Metropolitan Area shall follow a sequential approach, with a focus on the re-intensification of employment lands within the M50 and at selected strategic development areas and provision of appropriate employment densities in tandem with the provision of high quality public transport corridors (RPO 5.6).
- Support the effective planning and development of large centres of population and employment along the main economic corridor, in particular Drogheda and Dundalk (RPO 6.3).
- Support existing smart city initiatives such as Smart Dublin and the All Ireland Smart Cities Forum and support the development of smart city programmes in Dundalk and Drogheda (RPO 6.30)
- Support the improvement, and protection, of the EU TEN-T network and the strategic function of the Dublin to Belfast road network (RPO 8.11).
- Support the delivery of a higher speed rail connection between Belfast and Dublin (RPO 8.12)

As evident from section 6.4 of the RSES - and based on information from REPs, LECPs, localised enterprise strategies and other stakeholders - a list of sectoral opportunities has been identified for the Dublin Region and the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor. The National Economic Recovery Plan



should take this list into account when focusing on sectoral opportunities for these geographical areas.

Specifically, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's RSES notes that the Dublin Region should explore opportunities for further development in Fintech, CorpTech, personalised and regenerative medicine, internet of things, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, technology consulting, sharing economy, international education services, investment management and administration, and marine energy. The Dublin Regional Enterprise strategy (2017-2019) identifies key sectors and employment levels, together with the clustering of activity and supports across the Region, including: administration; professional services; tourism and leisure; education and training; manufacturing and industry; transport and logistics; construction; information and communication technology, and, retail and wholesale. Current REPs and LECs identify manufacturing, distribution and logistics, technology, pharmaceutical, equine foods, and creative industries/film.

Furthermore, section 6.4 of the RSES notes that the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor should explore opportunities for further development in advanced manufacturing, smart manufacturing, biopharma, bioprocessing, applied nanotechnology, alcoholic beverages, marine energy, energy storage, wind energy, advanced manufacturing, experiential tourism, and Fintech.

#### **4.3.4: Support the economies of our Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns**

The role of Athlone, Dundalk and Drogheda as Regional Growth Centres within our RSES is to serve as a focal point to gain critical mass, to deliver positive economic benefits to their surrounding areas and enhance overall regional and national growth. To ensure our Regional Growth Centres can fulfil the growth potential envisioned in our RSES, the upcoming National Economic Recovery Plan should reflect our economic oriented priorities for these geographical areas, which have been outlined through a variety of RPOs that aim to develop their own respective ecosystems by supporting employment growth, tourism and higher education.

In terms of supporting employment growth in our Regional Growth Centres, the National Economic Recovery Plan reflect the following priorities:

- Develop Athlone as a key location for regional economic development supporting the provision of increased employment through the expansion of the existing enterprise ecosystem in Athlone and smart specialisation, that have developed through collaboration with the relevant enterprise agencies including the IDA, Athlone Institute of Technology and the Midlands Innovation and Research Centre and support the provision of physical infrastructure and zoned lands to realise the phased delivery of strategic employment lands in central accessible locations (RPO 4.5).
- Enhance Drogheda and Dundalk's role as a strategic employment centre on the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor and provide for employment opportunities through identification of suitable sites for new industry (RPO 4.18 and RPO 4.21).
- Promote and enhance cross-border interactions to realise the growth potential of Drogheda-Dundalk-Newry as an important cross border network for regional development (RPO 4.13 and RPO 4.20).
- Enhance potential for economic development and regeneration at Dundalk Port/ Harbour area subject to a feasibility study and appropriate coastal zone management (RPO 4.23).

- Promote self-sustaining economic and employment-based development opportunities to match and catch-up on rapid phases of housing delivery in recent years to provide for employment growth and reverse commuting patterns in Drogheda (RPO 4.14).
- Support social inclusion measures including the revitalisation of areas in Drogheda and Dundalk by physical regeneration, planning, investment and community development (RPO 4.16 and RPO 4.24).

In terms of supporting tourism growth in our Regional Growth Centres, the National Economic Recovery Plan should reflect the following priorities:

- Promote Athlone as a key tourism destination in the Midlands, building on Fáilte Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand and the Shannon Tourism Masterplan to enhance the potential of waterways including the River Shannon and Lough Ree and the development of a greenway network including the Galway to Dublin Cycleway. (RPO 4.7, RPO 6.21).
- Promote Drogheda as an urban tourism destination while protecting its natural and built heritage resources with a particular focus on capitalising on the town's role as a gateway to the Boyne Valley heritage sites and World Heritage site at Brú Na Bóinne, the amenity potential of the River Boyne including the Boyne Greenway and Fáilte Ireland's Ancient East designation (RPO 4.15).

In conjunction to supporting these investments, it is also essential that our Key Towns can fulfil their growth potential as envisioned in our RSES. It is important to note that the Key Towns of the Eastern and Midland Region, are Swords, Maynooth and Bray in the "Metropolitan Area", Navan, Naas and Wicklow-Rathnew in the "Core Region" and Longford, Mullingar, Tullamore, Portlaoise and Graiguecullen (Carlow) in the "Gateway Region".

Therefore, any future National Economic Recovery Plan should reflect our economic oriented priorities for these geographical areas, which have been outlined through a variety of RPOs that aim to develop their own respective ecosystems by supporting employment growth and tourism. With respect to developing employment growth in our Key Towns, the National Economic Recovery Plan needs to reflect the following priorities of our RSES, namely:

- Support Swords-Dublin Airport as a key location for airport related economic development and employment provision linked to the protection and enhancement of access to Dublin Airport lands including the delivery of Metrolink (RPO 4.31).
- Support Maynooth as a key town to act as an economic driver for north Kildare and provide for strategic employment at key locations to improve the economic base of the town and provide for an increased number of local jobs. (RPO 4.34).
- Support the development of Bray as a strategic employment location with a particular focus on attracting high value investment in 'people' based industries at accessible locations (RPO 4.38).

- Support the development of strategic employment lands on the Trim Rd in Navan, subject to the outcome of appropriate environmental assessment and the planning process. (RPO 4.47).
- Strengthen the local employment base in Naas through the development of MERITS, Millennium Park in the North West Quadrant and the regeneration of underutilised lands including industrial lands in the north east of Naas. (RPO 4.51).
- Support the plan-led development and regeneration of publicly owned land banks in for employment opportunities Longford Town (RPO 4.62) and Mullingar (RPO 4.65),
- Support Mullingar's role as an important employment hub by promoting economic development and clustering of related enterprises (RPO 4.67), particularly in terms of the Med-Tech industry.
- Support the vision and objectives of the J17 National Enterprise Park Masterplan, where appropriate, which aims to deliver a viable economic zone within Portlaoise which will accommodate a range of potential businesses and industries whilst having regard to spatial planning, infrastructural, environmental and transportation requirements and compatibility with adjoining land uses (RPO 4.73).

With respect to developing the tourism potential of our Key Towns, the National Economic Recovery Plan should reflect the following priorities:

- Support enhancement and expansion of Wicklow Port and Harbour, to expand commercial berthing and pleasure craft capacity subject to a feasibility study with particular focus on avoiding adverse impacts on the integrity of adjacent European Sites (RPO 4.56).
- Support the development of Wicklow-Rathnew as a tourism hub having regard to its accessibility to key tourist destinations in the Region (RPO 4.57).
- Support the development of Longford as a tourism hub having regard to its accessibility to key tourist destinations in the Region including Center Parcs, and proximity to natural amenities, recreational opportunities and the town's location on the Rebel Longford Trail (RPO 4.60).
- Support Tullamore's role as a tourism hub and development as a Tourism Destination Town having particular regard to its distilling heritage and industry and accessibility to key tourist and natural assets including, the Grand Canal Greenways, Lough Boora Discovery Park, Slieve Bloom Mountains and peatlands. Furthermore, support should also be provided for Tullamore as a service hub for the 'Midlands Cycle destination – Offaly' and the recognition of the settlement's potential as a conferencing and event hub. (RPO 4.68)
- Support Failte Ireland in the identification of destination towns within the Region for the prioritisation of investment and supports to drive tourism growth in the Region, to spread the benefit of tourism throughout the Region and to encourage the increase of tourism product development (RPO 6.21)

#### **4.3.5: Ensure sufficient support is provided to our rural communities**

Our rural communities are an important part of the social fabric of the Eastern and Midland Region. Following the outbreak of COVID-19 – and considering the reliance of our rural communities on badly affected sector such as hospitality and retail – there is a pressing need to develop new economic opportunities in our rural communities. It is essential that new and sustainable employment opportunities can be developed for the rural economies of our region, while supporting rural businesses that have been notably affected by the impact of COVID-19 on the hospitality and retail industries.

In this context, the upcoming National Economic Recovery Plan should reflect the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's priorities to support and diversify rural economies in our region, which have been outlined through a variety of RPOs in the RSES, namely:

- Support measures for regeneration in small towns and village cores that have been identified by Local authorities (RPO 6.4).
- Support local authorities to explore projects that enhance the competitiveness of our rural areas by supporting innovation in rural economic development and enterprise through the diversification of the rural economy into new sectors and services, including ICT-based industries and those addressing climate change and sustainability. (RPO 6.5).
- Support local authorities to explore mechanisms for the emergence of a diversified sectoral mix in rural areas, including the identification of appropriate locations to drive regeneration of these rural towns and villages and the provision of serviced sites for housing and co-working/incubator space near Institutes of Technology. (RPO 6.6).
- Support local authorities to develop sustainable and economically efficient rural economies through initiatives to enhance sectors such as agricultural and food, forestry, fishing and aquaculture, energy and extractive industries, the bioeconomy, tourism, and diversification into alternative on-farm and off-farm activities (RPO 6.7).
- Support the sustainable development of tourism in the Eastern and Midland Region in line with the strategic objectives of both Ireland's Ancient East and Ireland's Hidden Heartlands experience brand propositions (RPO 6.8)

Countering the economic disruption caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 in our rural communities will also require investment in our rural town and village centres. This should assist in mitigating against this economic impact and enhance the quality of life offering of our rural communities. On this basis, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly feels that any future National Economic Recovery Plan should provide adequate resources to allow the use of targeted financial incentives to re-establish the dominant role of town centres to encourage a greater take up of town centre development opportunities for retail, residential, commercial, and leisure uses (RPO 6.14).

Furthermore, considering the importance of the tourism and hospitality sector to the economic vibrancy of our rural communities, it is extremely important that the forthcoming National Economic Recovery Plan takes into account our priorities on growing the region's tourism base, which is reflected in the following RPOs, namely:

- Support tourism agencies to increase access to the countryside and coastal areas to ensure maintenance of the existing network. (RPO 6.16).
- Support the maintenance of, and enhanced access to state and semi-state lands such as National Parks, Forest Parks, Waterways, etc., together with Monuments and Historic Properties, for recreation and tourism purposes (RPO 6.17).
- Support the implementation of local authority tourism strategies and diaspora strategies (RPO 6.18)
- Support the local strategies that are already in place to link the River Shannon Blueway, The Royal and Grand Canal Greenways and the proposed Barrow Blueway right across the Midlands, incorporating the towns of Longford, Athlone, Mullingar, Tullamore and Portarlinton (RPO 6.19).
- Support Offaly County Council, Bord na Móna and Coillte in the development of the 'Midlands Cycling Destination- Offaly' (RPO 6.20).

## 5: Conclusion

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's RSES aims to shape future growth and to better manage regional planning and economic development throughout the Eastern and Midland Region. The overarching vision of the RSES is to ensure that we can create a sustainable and competitive region that supports the health and wellbeing of our people and places – in both urban and rural communities – with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunities for all. This vision is underpinned by key cross-cutting principles namely **“Healthy Placemaking”**, **“Climate Action”** and **“Economic Opportunity”**.

Delivering the economic and spatial objectives of our RSES will be an important component in tackling inter-regional imbalances that exist in Ireland and the Eastern and Midland Region, and the delivery of these objectives is needed now more than ever. As per the latest available statistics, it is clear that the outbreak of COVID-19 has already had a profound impact on the Eastern and Midland Region's economy. As of Q2 2020, 456,612 people or 38.2 per cent of the Eastern and Midland Region's labour force were in receipt of either the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment”, the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” or were registered on the “Live Register”. From a commercial perspective, 43.6 per cent of the region's commercial units were operating in the worst affected sectors, implying that 29,637 of its commercial units were likely to be severely impacted as a result of the public health measures.

In this context, the National Economic Recovery Plan will act as an important stimulus in dealing with this economic disruption and in achieving the overarching vision of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's RSES. To allow for an inclusive economic recovery and to achieve the economic and spatial objectives of our RSES, it is imperative that the priorities of the National Economic Recovery Plan compliment the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's priorities that have outlined in this submission. In doing so, the National Economic Recovery Plan can play a key role in tackling inter-regional disparities that exist in Ireland and the Eastern and Midland Region.

Going forward, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly as a key regional stakeholder welcomes future consultations with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment on further developing the priorities of the National Economic Recovery Plan as well as engaging with the Department on several initiatives that have been mentioned in this submission.