



Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC), Statement of Strategy 2025-2028

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly notes the preparation of a new Statement of Strategy for the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, and sets out hereunder recommendations on behalf of the Assembly. This submission has been prepared by the executive and approved by the members of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly at its meeting of 11th of April 2025.

1.0 Overall Context

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) is part of the regional tier of governance in Ireland. It is primarily focused on driving regional development through the formulation, adoption and implementation of the Regional, Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES), oversight and coordination of County Development Plans and Local Economic and Community Plans, management of EU Operational Programmes, EU project participation, implementation of national economic policy, and additional functions working with the National Oversight and Audit Commission. As a strategic policy body, EMRA also participates in the consultation processes of other relevant strategic plans and policies.

The role and function of the Regional Assembly, including the scope of the RSES, is currently provided for in the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended. It should be noted that this legislation has been superseded by the Planning and Development Act 2024, which was signed into law on 17th October 2024. However, the provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2024 relevant to the Regional Assemblies have not commenced to date, and they will commence on a staged basis in the coming months. Until then, the provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, remain in force.

It is noted that the Planning and Development Act 2024 expands the scope of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy and the functions of the Regional Assembly, including in relation to matters of direct relevance to the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. In this respect, Section 29 (1) of the Act states that an RSES shall make provision for strategies relating to onshore renewable energy; climate change adaptation and mitigation, and; marine and coastal matters that facilitates the coordination of land-sea interactions for coastal planning authorities within the region. Section 29 (1) further requires an RSES to make provision for matters including coastal zone management as a consequence of sea level change, including the identification of strategic infrastructure; the provision of water services, energy and communications networks and waste management facilities, and; the preservation and protection of the environment and its amenities. Furthermore, Section 29 (13) of the Act states that an RSES shall include objectives to secure the

effective implementation and monitoring of the RSES, including an indication and order of priorities for infrastructure of scale relating to water services, waste management, energy and communications networks; potential sources of funding for infrastructure; cross-sectoral investment and actions required to deliver planned growth and development; and co-ordination between constituent local authorities and the co-operation of public bodies.

The Regional Assembly is further mindful of its obligations, as a relevant body, under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 (as amended) to perform its functions in a manner consistent with achieving Ireland's national climate objective.

2.0 Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES)

The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Region was made by the Members of the Assembly in June 2019, and it is a strategic plan and investment framework to shape future growth throughout the Region. The overall vision of the Strategy is to create a sustainable and competitive Region that supports the health and wellbeing of people and places in the Region, from urban to rural, with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunity for all. The vision of the RSES is supported by sixteen Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSOs), that are aligned with National Strategic Outcomes of the National Planning Framework (NPF) and framed around the three key principles of Healthy Placemaking, Climate Action and Economic Opportunity.

A primary statutory objective of the RSES is to support the implementation of the National Planning Framework (NPF), alignment with the investment priorities of the National Development Plan 2021-2030 (and thus Project Ireland 2040), by coupling new development with the requisite investment in services and infrastructure. In doing so, the RSES supports the spatial, economic and climate policies of the Government by providing a long-term strategic planning and economic framework for the Eastern and Midland Region. The RSES also sets the context for local authorities within the Region to develop their city and county development plans in a manner that will ensure alignment between national, regional and local plans.

The RSES presents a Spatial Strategy, devised and informed by a complementary Economic Strategy, which provides a framework for future growth, ensuring the delivery of effective regional development through the realisation of viable and vital places. This includes championing the capital city of Dublin as a smart, climate resilient and global city region; securing Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk as Regional Growth Centres, acting as regional economic drivers and supports for their wider catchment areas; and promoting a network of large economically active Key Towns (which include Swords, Maynooth, Bray, Navan, Naas, Wicklow, Longford, Mullingar, Tullamore and Portlaoise) that provide employment and services to their surrounding areas. All of this is supported by Self-Sustaining Growth Towns, Self-Sustaining Towns and a network of multifaceted Rural Places.

It is essential that strategic and cross-cutting priorities and issues addressed in the Statement of Strategy which are of relevance to the Eastern and Midland Region reflect this Spatial Strategy and the settlement hierarchy presented, to allow managed and sustainable growth that enables each place to fulfil ambition and potential.

3.0 Submission

The Statement of Strategy will serve as a framework for the work of the Department over the period 2025 – 2028. With its vision to deliver a climate neutral, sustainable and digitally connected Ireland, the strategy can also achieve alignment with the cross-cutting priorities of the Draft First Revision of the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region (RSES). The current Statement of Strategy, Le Chéile '25, is structured around 6 main strategic goals:

- Be a recognised leader in climate action
- Transform our energy system for a secure and affordable net zero emissions future
- Restore, protect and enhance our natural environment
- Deliver world class connectivity and communications
- Deliver improved cyber security defence and resilience across Government and Society
- Develop our people, culture and organisation.

For ease of reference the observations below are structured under each of these headings in the current Statement of Strategy, insofar as they are relevant to the policies and objectives of the RSES and functions of the Regional Assembly.

Strategic Goal 1: Be a recognised leader in climate action

Climate Action is one of the three key principles of the RSES, and the Climate Strategy of the RSES aims to ensure that the RSES drives climate resilience throughout the Region and accelerates climate action. RSO 8, 'Build Climate Resilience', seeks to ensure the long-term management of flood risk and building 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 Region.

RSO 9 of the RSES, to 'Support the Transition to Low Carbon and Clean Energy', is concerned with pursuing climate change mitigation in line with global and national targets and harnessing the potential for a more distributed renewables-focussed energy system to support the transition to a low carbon economy by 2050.

Climate focused RPOs are integrated throughout the RSES and include priorities related to the built environment, sustainable transport, energy and waste, flood resilience and water. Also supportive of this is the Assembly's participation as lead stakeholder on the ESPON QGasSP Targeted Analysis Project which focused on the development and delivery of a robust, simple and proportionate method

for quantifying and forecasting the relative GHG impacts of alternative spatial planning policies, with pan-European applicability. EMRA led stakeholder input on methodology development and multiple iterations of the various project deliverables. The final main report and the first five annexes to the Greenhouse Gas Impact Assessment Tool are available on the [ESPON QGasSP webpage](#). These include the methodology document and case study pilots, including the Ireland case study pilot which focused on Co. Meath. The final version of the [Greenhouse Gas Impact Assessment Tool](#) was launched in March 2023. The Assembly supports the development of a user-friendly tool for quantifying and forecasting the relative GHG impacts of alternative spatial planning policies in Ireland - as well as the development of a tool to collate and visualise emissions data from multiple sectors at a regional level based on international best practice - and would welcome support for the development of such user-friendly tools and resources in the revised Statement of Strategy.

Climate Action Regional Offices (CAROs)

As set in the current Statement of Strategy, one of the main strategic objectives is for Ireland to become a recognised leader in climate action. The Assembly welcomes the strategic ambition which provides a pathway to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 by 51%.

RPO 7.43 of the RSES states that Climate Action Regional Offices (CAROs) and local authorities should identify critical infrastructure within their functional areas, particularly the interdependencies between different types of sectoral infrastructure, as a first step in 'future proofing' services and to help to inform longer-term adaptation planning and investment priorities. The Assembly welcomes the support of the Climate Action Regional Offices in the current Statement of Strategy and supports the ongoing engagement with the CAROs and local authorities to support this objective. The RSES promotes best practice in resilience in critical infrastructure, including implementation of emerging European best practice and the identification of risks and vulnerabilities to key infrastructure to build organisational capacity and structures that can respond and adapt to external shocks. The Assembly recommends that the Statement of Strategy references the Department's ambition to follow and promote best practice in this regard.

Section 3.1 of the Draft First Revision of the National Planning Framework (NPF) notes the imperatives of meeting the decarbonisation targets and heightening the importance of achieving more sustainable growth patterns in the regions and cities. It notes that within each region, the cities in particular play a key role in giving effect to the large-scale transition to net zero required by 2050 and can support a move towards reduced carbon living e.g. through better energy demand management and alternative energy solutions, sustainable mobility and lower carbon buildings. It further notes that regional development goals must also ensure a just transition to carbon neutrality, within the wider statutory framework of climate action, supporting alternative employment in place of traditional industries, and supporting persons and communities that may be negatively impacted by the transition.

The Assembly notes the ongoing support of the Department for the Climate Action Regional Offices and recommends that the Statement of Strategy should recognise the importance of engagement

with the CAROs and the Regional Assemblies, particularly in the context of the additional functions of the Regional Assemblies as set out in the Planning and Development Act 2024, and in light of ongoing engagement between the Department, the CAROs and the Regional Assemblies.

Just Transition Fund (EU JTF)

The Assembly welcomes specific reference to the EU Just Transition Fund (EU JTF) in the current Statement of Strategy, highlighting its support for the strategic objective of climate neutrality and resilience. The RSES Climate Action Strategy is aligned with ‘A Greener, Low-Carbon Europe’, one of the five main thematic objectives of EU Regional Development and Cohesion Policy for the 2021-2027 programming period. This focuses on transitioning towards a net zero carbon economy and resilient Europe by promoting clean and fair energy transition, green and blue investment, the circular economy, climate change mitigation and adaptation, risk prevention and management, and sustainable urban mobility. As Managing Authority for the EU JTF in Ireland, EMRA is working with the Department to support this transition. The EU JTF - one of the pillars of the Just Transition Mechanism under EU cohesion policy - aims to mitigate adverse effects of the green transition by supporting the most affected territory and workers and to promote a balanced socio-economic transition. In line with the EU JTF’s single specific objective, actions supported are directly contributing to the alleviation of negative impacts of the transition on employment by supporting diversification and modernisation of the local economy in the most impacted territory.

Sectoral Adaptation Plans

The National Adaptation Framework (NAF) adopted in June 2024, and existing climate legislation, sets out a requirement for sectoral adaptation plans covering priority national level sectors. The Assembly sits on the National Adaptation Steering Committee and welcomes the preparation of Sectoral Adaptation Plans by the relevant Departments for the sectoral areas that are most at risk from climate change impact.

Strategic Goal 2: Transform our energy system for a secure and affordable net zero emissions future

Climate policy at global, national, regional and local level will continue to be driven by the need to reduce Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions, replacement of fossil fuels or high embedded carbon products with sustainable alternatives such as biobased products and also enhancing carbon sinks. Emissions in the EMRA region largely come from energy supply, transport, residential and commercial buildings and industry.

Renewable energy

The Climate Action Plan (CAP) 2024 includes a target of 80% of energy demand to be met from renewable sources by 2030, with offshore renewable energy identified as an emerging sectoral opportunity for coastal regions with the potential to support the delivery of Ireland’s offshore wind ambitions being a particular economic development opportunity. The Draft First Revision of the NPF

notes that enabling infrastructure will be required to ensure that coastal regions are positioned to harness this growth potential. It further notes that offshore renewable energy developments typically have long lead-in times of several years from design to commissioning stages and cross-references the National Marine Planning Framework (NMPF) and the Maritime Area Planning Act 2021 in this regard.

The RSES notes that the EMRA Region will need to shift from its reliance on using fossil fuels, including natural gas, as its main energy source to a more diverse range of low and zero-carbon sources, including renewable energy and secondary heat sources. Decentralised energy will be critical to the Region's energy supply and will ensure that the Region can become more self-sufficient in relation to its energy needs.

Generating electricity supply from indigenous renewable sources requires:

- Facilitating the provision of appropriate renewable energy infrastructure and technologies and deeper cooperation with Northern Ireland and the EU
- Expansion and upgrading of the grid with the aim of increasing the share of variable renewable electricity that the all-island system can accommodate
- Onshore wind, bioenergy, solar and offshore energy
- Effective community engagement including support for micro generation
- Moving from carbon intense fossil fuel generation to lower emissions fuels Increasing the use of electricity and bioenergy to heat our homes and fuel our transport
- The need to ensure sufficient electricity to meet increased demand.

The Regional Assembly supports an increase in renewable energy sources under RPOs 4.84, 6.9, 7.35 8.23, 10.20 and 10.24. This includes the use of wind energy – both onshore and offshore, biomass, and solar photovoltaics and solar thermal, both on buildings and at a larger scale on appropriate sites in accordance with National policy. Furthermore, the Planning and Development Act 2024 requires that a regional spatial and economic strategy shall make provision for a strategy relating to renewable energy to (i) meet national targets, (ii) identify and facilitate electricity grid infrastructure, including upgrade projects and support infrastructure, (iii) make provision for energy security, and (iv) promote steps for coordination and cooperation between public bodies.

The Draft First Revision of the NPF sets out a range of regional renewable electricity capacity allocations which are to be integrated into the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies and the associated Regional Renewable Energy Strategies (RRESs), and, in addition, are to be translated to county-level targets that will inform city and county development plans. This is a strategic and cross-cutting priority that the Regional Assembly considers should be reflected in the Statement of Strategy. Furthermore, the Assembly recommends that the Department continues to engage to support the provision of methodological guidance for capacity allocations to the Regional Assemblies, in addition to appropriate expertise and resourcing (human and financial) to support achievement of

the targets based on the best available scientific evidence and in accordance with legislative requirements.

Micro-generation, Geothermal energy and District Heating

The RSES recognises the need to continue the micro-generation, geothermal energy, district heating, storage of heat and energy and the role of the electricity transmission and distribution network. District heating offers an efficient and cost-effective heating option using networks from a variety of potential technologies and renewable energy sources, such as combined heat and power (CHP), biomass energy, geothermal or energy from waste (RPO 7.37, 7.34, 7.38, 10.19). The use of renewable energy solutions to provide heating and hot water to houses and businesses contributes to sustainability as it reduces demand for and consumption of energy while using a renewable form of fuel. Waste heat represents a substantial indigenous resource and is the single largest available low-carbon source of energy available in the Region. The provision of infrastructure should be supported in order to facilitate a more distributed, renewables-focused energy generation system, harnessing both on-shore and off-shore potential from energy sources such as wind, wave and solar and connecting sites of optimal energy production to the major sources of demand. Further to this, CAP 24 has identified a target of up 'Up to 0.8 TWh of district heating installed capacity across both the residential and commercial building stock by 2025, and up to 2.7 TWh by 2030'. The Assembly welcomes the inclusion of this target, the acceleration of the Renewable Electricity Programme and the development of the framework for offshore renewable energy, all of which the Assembly considers should be reflected in the Statement of Strategy.

Strategic Goal 3: Restore, protect and enhance our natural environment

In relation to biodiversity and the environment, Chapter 7 of the RSES, Environment and Climate, recognises that a clean, well-protected environment supports human health and wellbeing and provides a natural resource for our agriculture and tourism industries. It also recognises that challenges remain in relation to biodiversity protection and climate resilience. The RSES has identified a number of key Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs) in relation to biodiversity and the importance of green infrastructure.

Through participation on the Interreg Europe PROGRESS project, the Assembly has developed a range of resources to support the implementation of objectives for ecosystem services and green infrastructure. These include a green infrastructure and ecosystem services mapping methodology, policy briefs which include 'how to' recommendations, good practice handbooks, and infographics.

In cooperation with Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council and the Ecological Research and Forestry Applications Centre, Barcelona, Spain, the Assembly secured Interreg Europe funding to test a Green Infrastructure Decision Support Mapping Approach for Ecosystem Services. This involved developing and testing a mapping methodology to contribute to enhanced decision-making for Green Infrastructure by scoring and mapping ecosystem services for the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County

Council administrative area. A methodology was developed, and criteria were established to transfer the SITxell conceptual model and methodology. A range of ecosystem services were mapped based on three contrasting perspectives: 1) Intrinsic value, 2) Functional value, and 3) Leisure/Cultural value. The Pilot Action also tested whether these three dimensions might be combined in order to identify the areas maximising the sum and the diversity of values.

The Mapping Approach was evaluated by target users at dedicated workshops in January 2022 and it was determined that the methodology and mapping approach was both effective and appropriate to contribute to the development of a coordinated approach for Green Infrastructure and Ecosystem Services Mapping in the Dublin Metropolitan Area. The technical report outlining the methodology of the mapping approach was published in June 2022.

Notwithstanding, issues of financial and human resourcing for the development of a standardised mapping approach and the need for enhanced Green Infrastructure mapping at national, regional and local levels emerged as key challenges. Furthermore, stakeholder engagement revealed that different methodologies for green infrastructure and ecosystem services scoring and mapping are being developed and used by local authorities and public bodies, resulting in a lack of consistency and comparability. As such, the Assembly considers that the Department should support the development of a standardised green infrastructure and ecosystem services scoring and mapping methodology, driven from the national level, down to the regional and the local to deliver common and cross-cutting priorities.

Circular economy

The RSES supports a move towards achieving a circular economy which is essential if the Region is to make better use of resources and become more resource efficient. The successful implementation of circular economy principles will help to reduce the volume of waste that the Region produces and has to manage. A key growth enabler for the Gateway Region of the midlands and border area as set out in the RSES is diversification and growth of smart specialisation of local economies with a strong focus on clustering including sustainable farming and food production, tourism, marine, energy and renewables, bioeconomy and circular economy, with a focus on publicly owned peatlands in the midlands, to support a Just Transition and realise the benefits of green technologies. In line with RSO 9, EMRA supports the development and implementation of plans, programmes and projects for climate action by local authorities and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications Climate Action and Environment aimed at accelerating the transition to a low carbon and circular economy, including Climate Action Plan 2024 (and subsequent CAPs). Further to this, the Regional Assembly recommends that the development of the Statement of Strategy should be based on robust evidence base and by supporting and enhancing research and innovation collaborations between the research and enterprise sectors.

A sustainable bioeconomy is the renewable segment of the circular economy. It can turn bio-waste, residues and discards into valuable resources and significantly cut food waste. Realising this potential requires investment and implementing systemic changes that cut across different sectors (agriculture,

forestry, fisheries, aquaculture, food, biobased industry). As set out in the RSES, the bioeconomy in Ireland has enormous potential which is yet to be unlocked. Development of the bioeconomy is also consistent with Ireland's low carbon transition objective. Favouring renewable biological resources over fossil fuel-based ones through the expansion of the bioeconomy, whilst keeping sustainability concerns to the fore, has the potential to contribute towards meeting Ireland's climate change targets. As the bioeconomy has the potential to grow rural and regional businesses and jobs, it is a useful instrument to embed pro-environmental actions. The bioeconomy extends from farming and the agri-food businesses, marine based industries, forestry, waste management, energy suppliers, and pharma and bio-technology products. Ireland has flourishing firms in all of these sectors but much more can be done to unlock the bioeconomy's commercial potential and its environmental benefits.

In line with National Policy Objective (NPO) 67 - of the draft First Revision of the NPF - which supports the circular and bioeconomy including in particular through greater efficiency in land and materials management, promoting the sustainable re-use and refurbishment of existing buildings and structures, while conserving cultural and natural heritage, the greater use of renewable resources and by reducing the rate of land use change from urban sprawl and new development. In line with RPO 7.34 of the RSES, the Assembly continues to engage with key local, regional, national and European stakeholders to strive to understand and explore the complexities of changes involved in decarbonisation and the transition to a sustainable economy. This includes rethinking sustainable economic models of sufficiency and supporting a regenerative economy by facilitating the economic circularity of materials and energy and sustainable job creation. The Assembly's engagement as a member of the Environmental Conference of the Regions of Europe (ENCORE) has a key focus on integrating a circular society to create a just transition. In relation to the circular bioeconomy, the Assembly, as partner on the Interreg Europe ORIGINN project, has engaged with EIT Climate-KIC and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in relation to agri-food in Ireland. Furthermore, as managing authority for the EU Just Transition Fund in Ireland, the Assembly is supporting research, development and innovation in the bioeconomy sector in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Marine Planning

As set out in the RSES, the valuable contribution that sustainable utilisation of marine resources for balanced regional development and quality of life is closely associated with effective engagement and the protection of the marine environment. Of particular relevance to sustainable and balanced development in our maritime areas are the RSOs that support a strengthening blue-green economy, that build climate resilience, that protect and enhance international connectivity and regional accessibility and that support strengthened urban and rural communities and economies along with the sustainable management of water and other environmental resources.

The overarching marine planning policies set out in the NMPF (National Marine Planning Framework) are grouped according to environmental, social and economic objectives and policies. It is acknowledged that they apply to all proposals capable of having impacts in the maritime area including land-based development. As terrestrial and marine ecosystems are closely connected, the Regional Assemblies and the coastal local authorities have an important role in ensuring integration of land and marine planning within the Region and with Northern Ireland to ensure that management of coasts and marine waters is on an all-island basis.

Figure 7.2 of the draft First Revision of the NPF includes a table to demonstrate relationships between planning policy and maritime policy at national, regional and local levels, including the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies. This has been updated to include reference to Designated Maritime Area Plans (DMAPs) at the regional tier and updates in relation to localised land-sea interactions in relation to the nearshore at the local level. While the Assembly welcomes the inclusion of this table, the flow of relationships between planning policy and maritime policy is not clear, particularly regarding the role of the Regional Assemblies in relation to DMAPs and maritime policy more generally. This includes clarity relating to the key organisation(s) and/or agency or agencies that may potentially be designated as a ‘competent authority’, the role they will provide, and greater detail relating to the relevant stakeholders and public bodies that will be involved in the preparation of DMAPs so as to achieve the vision and renewable energy targets. The Assembly notes that the provision of such detail may require coordination with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and considers that that the Statement of Strategy is developed with this in mind. Furthermore, the Planning and Development Act 2024 requires that a regional spatial and economic strategy shall make provision for a strategy relating to marine and coastal matters that facilitates the coordination of land-sea interactions for coastal planning authorities within the region and this role should also be reflected in the development of the Statement of Strategy.

Strategic Goal 4: Connectivity and communications

A strategic goal of the current Statement of Strategy is the delivery of a policy framework enabling digital infrastructure and digital economy ensuring resilience in this sector. The draft First Revision of the NPF includes a specific National Policy Objective (NPO 31) to support and facilitate delivery of the National Broadband Plan as a means of developing further opportunities for enterprise, employment, education, innovation and skills development for those who live and work in rural areas. The RSES has identified a number of key RPOs (8.25 and 8.26) in relation to Communications Networks and Digital Infrastructure which:

- Support and facilitate delivery of the National Broadband Plan.
- Facilitate enhanced international fibre communications links, including full interconnection between the fibre networks in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

- Promote and facilitate the sustainable development of a high-quality ICT network throughout the Region in order to achieve balanced social and economic development, whilst protecting the amenities of urban and rural areas.
- Support the national objective to promote Ireland as a sustainable international destination for ICT infrastructures such as data centres and associated economic activities at appropriate locations.
- Promote Dublin as a demonstrator of 5G information and communication technology.
- Supports the preparation of planning guidelines to facilitate the efficient roll out and delivery of national broadband.

The RSES also supports investment in rural broadband and the provision of serviced sites and co-working/incubator space in towns and villages of all sizes in order to develop the potential offered by improved connectivity and digitisation and drive innovation and enterprise development in all parts of the Region. In October 2020, the three Regional Assemblies published the Regional Co-Working Analysis, the purpose of which was to provide data, analysis and recommendations to assist in developing the potential of remote working in our regions. The analysis identified the number of private sector workers that can operate remotely on a national, regional and local authority basis, as of Q2 2020, as well as the name, location and type of co-working hubs in each local authority in Ireland, as of September 2020. Further to this, the Assembly continues to engage with regional and local stakeholders in this sector in the context of the Interreg Europe ORIGINN project and the EU Just Transition Fund.

Through participation on the Interreg Europe Next2Met project, the Assembly, in consultation with key stakeholders across the public and private sectors, has developed a [Regional Digitalisation Roadmap for the Midlands](#). This mid- to long-term roadmap focuses on enabling a digital ecosystem in the Midland region. The new framework aligns at a regional level with national and local strategies, and builds on EU best practices.

Smart Specialisation

National Policy Objective 6 of the Draft First Revision of the NPF recognises the principles of regionally based smart specialisation. Smart specialisation is a place-based innovation policy, aimed at promoting regional innovation and economic transformation by helping regions to focus on their key sectoral strengths. This may include unique characteristics or capabilities that provide advantages to that region in certain sectors. It requires higher education, research organisations and business, along with government departments and agencies, to identify these strengths, build on competitive advantages and prioritise support based on where local potential and market opportunities lie.

The Draft First Revision of the NPF is supportive of the Assembly's ongoing engagement with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) to support implementation of the National

Smart Specialisation Strategy for Innovation 2022-2027 (S3) to create and build on regional competitive advantages, create future market opportunities and identify solutions to identified societal challenges.

The economic strategy of the RSES is based on five key principles; one of which would include the economic principle of Smart Specialisation. This would enable using a sector or cluster-like policy concept not only to reinforce regions in their most advanced industrial sectors, but also to diversify their economic bases in a smart way, in the most promising areas with the most socio-economic potential. By applying a regional dimension to Ireland's Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3), policy makers can utilise capital funding resources in a far more efficient manner, allowing regions to capitalise on self-identified competitive advantages for the economic benefit of their own geographical areas.

Therefore, the Assembly considers the Statement of Strategy should refer to the National Smart Specialisation Strategy for Innovation 2022-2027, the purpose of which is to further maximise sectoral strengths through clustering and the scaling of Ireland's existing areas of research excellence.

Strategic Goal 5: Deliver enhanced cyber security defence and resilience across Government and Society

The RSES promotes sectoral opportunities in these areas, particularly in Dublin and the Eastern SPA. In order to capitalise on the strengths of its own enterprise base, the RSES states that Dublin should explore opportunities for further development on 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. Strategic Objective 4 of the Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan aims to identify and harness new opportunities that can be commercialised to provide economic development in key areas of future technology e.g. LINC Collaborative in cybersecurity.

Strategic Goal 6: Develop our people, culture and organisation

This strategic goal recognises the importance of national government and how the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC) will deliver in terms of its leadership, delivery, services and performance. The Regional Assembly has developed a wide stakeholder network, across the region, nationally and in a European Context, and this has been further enhanced during the collaborative approach that was taken in the formulation of the RSES for the Region. With this collective engagement the Assembly provides capacity building for the planning system in the Region by providing a common evidence base, a methodological approach to core strategies of local authority development plans including data sets of assets of settlements across the region and fora to deal with strategic, common and cross boundary issues.

Furthermore, the Regional Assembly is conscious of its legal responsibilities arising from the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act, as amended, in particular s.15, which has implications across the Assembly's functions. The Assembly, as well as local authorities, has benefited from the work of the Climate Action Regional Offices (although they are not geographically aligned with the region). However, since the Climate Change Advisory Council's advisory function only extends to the national government, the Assembly considers that increased support at the regional and local levels is needed to address climate responsibilities.

Regional Development Monitor

The Regional Development Monitor (RDM) Hub is a collaborative project between the three Regional Assemblies in Ireland, the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO) at Maynooth University and spatial infrastructure partners, Tailte Éireann (TÉ) via the GeoHive platform.

The aim of the RDM Hub is to collate and visualise a range of relevant socio-economic and environmental indicators to present the performance of each of the three regions in terms of achieving the objectives outlined in their respective Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES). The RDM provides a series of new national mapping and visualisation infrastructures to assist Government Departments, Regional Assemblies, Local Authorities, Planners, Policy Makers, Researchers and members of the public in gaining a greater insight into social, economic and environmental trends to aid better decision making. The Assembly invites the Department and its staff to explore and utilise this open resource to deliver in terms of its leadership, delivery, services and performance.

National and EU Funding

The Assembly seeks to optimise and lead investment in the Region and maximise the potential of National and European funding. This is facilitated through partnership with stakeholders and in collaboration with other agencies to drive regional development and to continue building a sustainable, healthy and resilient region. EMRA continually participates in externally funded learning platforms and projects which develop and share best practice from the region with partners across Europe in the fields of the digital economy, spatial planning and the environment.

4.0 Recommendations

The following are recommendations by the Regional Assembly that should be taken into consideration in the finalisation of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, Statement of Strategy 2025-2028:

1. The Assembly recommends that the Statement of Strategy should set out a commitment by the Department to support the development of relevant user-friendly tools and resources to assist in the achievement of its goals, for example, the ESPON QGasSP Greenhouse Gas Impact Assessment Tool and a tool to collate and visualise emissions data from multiple sectors at a regional level.

Reason: To ensure effective cross-cutting policy implementation at the national, regional and local levels.

2. The Statement of Strategy should have regard to the key role of the Regional Assemblies in relation to renewable energy and renewable energy infrastructures as they relate to the work of the Department.

Reason: To ensure consistency between the Statement of Strategy, the revised NPF and the Planning and Development Act 2024 and to ensure effective implementation of the RSEs.

3. The Assembly recommends that the Department continues to engage to support the provision of methodological guidance for onshore renewable energy capacity allocations to the Regional Assemblies, in addition to appropriate expertise and resourcing (human and financial) to support achievement of the targets based on the best available scientific evidence and in accordance with legislative requirements.

Reason: To ensure consistency between the Statement of Strategy, the revised NPF and the Planning and Development Act 2024 and to ensure effective implementation of the RSEs.

4. The Statement of Strategy should have regard to the statutory role of the Regional Assemblies in relation to marine and coastal matters as it relates to the work of the Department.

Reason: To ensure consistency between the Statement of Strategy, the revised NPF and the Planning and Development Act 2024 and to ensure effective implementation of the RSEs.

In formulating the Statement of Strategy, the Department should ensure engagement with the CAROs, the regional assemblies and local authorities with a view to identifying critical infrastructure within their functional areas, particularly the interdependencies between different types of sectoral infrastructure. Reason: To ensure consistency with RPO 7.43 of the RSEs and as a first step in 'future proofing' services and to help to inform longer-term adaptation planning and investment priorities.

5. In formulating the Statement of Strategy, the Department should commit to supporting the regional assemblies and local authorities in meeting their obligations under the Climate Act, through the Climate Action Regional Offices and/or otherwise.

Reason: To ensure consistency with the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act.

6. The Assembly considers the Statement of Strategy should have regard to the National Smart Specialisation Strategy for Innovation 2022-2027.

Reason: To ensure consistency between the Statement of Strategy, the revised NPF and the Planning and Development Act 2024, and to ensure effective implementation of the RSEs.

7. The Regional Assembly recommends that the development of the Statement of Strategy should be based on robust evidence base and by supporting and enhancing research and innovation collaborations between the research and enterprise sectors.

Reason: To ensure effective cross-cutting policy implementation at the national, regional and local levels.

5.0 Conclusion

The Regional Assembly welcomes the opportunity to engage in the process of preparing the new Statement of Strategy 2025-2028 and looks forward to continuing engagement with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications.

Regards,



Clare Bannon
A/Director
Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly
11th April 2025