

Engineers Ireland

Submission on ‘Northern & Western Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy Issues Paper’

For the attention of the Northern & Western Regional Assembly

15th February 2018

Highlights

- The RSES Issues Paper is a welcome step in the implementation of the NPF
- The NWRA should coordinate with the SRA to develop the Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC)
- The RSES should embrace cross-border collaboration, particularly for the NW City Region
- There is major potential for the Region to become a net exporter of Green Energy
- Priority projects include the AEC, A5, N4, N5, Broadband, renewable technologies etc.

1. Introduction

Engineers Ireland warmly welcomes the publication of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) Issues Paper for the Northern & Western Region. We believe this process is an important step in the implementation of ‘Ireland 2040 Our Plan – National Planning Framework’ (NPF). It is vital that the RSES is aligned at the national level with the NPF and the National Development Plan and at the local level with Local Economic & Community Plans, City/County Development Plans and, later, with Metropolitan Area Strategic Plans (MASPs).

Firstly, we strongly support the Northern & Western Regional Assembly’s (NWRA) vision for a:

- Vibrant Place
- Low Carbon Place
- Natural Place
- Inclusive Place
- Connected Place
- Smart Place

As envisaged in the NPF and the RSES Issues Paper, achieving this vision will require a long-term mindset in the order of 20 years. Engineers are prepared to step up to the challenges of achieving these objectives, drawing on the diversity, innovation and integrity of our profession.

2. Effective Regional Development and the Atlantic Economic Corridor

The Draft NPF makes clear the importance of effective regional development and relieving pressure on the Greater Dublin Area. We believe that the Northern & Western Region offers significant potential for development of an effective counter-balance to the Greater Dublin Area. Yet the current targeted population increase (150,000 to 175,000) and new jobs (110,000) – representing just 20% and 16% of national increases, respectively – must be more ambitious to act as a counterbalance.

According to a recent ESRI report by Edgar Morgenroth¹, business-as-usual trends will see the region's population increasing by 115,000. To achieve the 'EMR<50%' scenario where more than half of the population increase takes place outside the Eastern & Midlands Region (EMR), the population of the Northern & Western Region must grow by approximately 230,000 to 1,082,000. This growth should be concentrated in compact urban centres such as Galway City.

The Southern Region also offers significant potential and we believe that if an effective counter-balance is to be developed, coordination and not competition will be required between these two Regional Assemblies and should be clearly set out in their respective RSEs. We do not find it helpful that:

- The Northern & Western Region RSES Issues Paper states: *“the NWRA contends that our region presents the most significant potential for the development of an effective counter-balance to the Greater Dublin Area”* (p14)
- Meanwhile, the Southern Region RSES Issues Paper states: *“the SRA contends that the Southern Region presents the most significant potential for the development of an effective counter-balance to the Greater Dublin Area”* (p6)

These statements should be amended for the full RSEs, noting the potential for inter-regional coordination.

We believe that both RSEs should focus on developing the Atlantic Economic Corridor to act as the effective counterbalance to Dublin. Both RSEs should examine the 'Atlantic City Regions: Development and Connectivity' report² which analyses in considerable detail, both the potential for, and current obstacles to, enhanced growth through improved connectivity across a range of areas including energy, land transport, ports, water/wastewater and complementary employment growth through industry concentration. This should include improved accessibility to the North West, for example between Dublin and Sligo.

In the Northern & Western Region, particular attention must be paid to growth potential in Galway City. However, Galway City is also the most bottlenecked in terms of current capacity to grow, primarily by transport issues. A key component of effective regional development must therefore be unlocking capacity in Galway City though, for example, investment in public transport options such as Bus Rapid Transit and commuter rail. Further forward-looking investment to enable population

¹ Morgenroth, E. (2018). Prospects for Irish regions and counties: Scenarios and implications. ESRI Research Series Number 70.

² Irish Academy of Engineering (2015). Atlantic City Regions: Development and Connectivity.

and employment growth should be targeted at water and wastewater networks – where ‘lead in’ investment can yield significant economic benefit in the long term.

3. Cross-border collaboration and Brexit

We agree that “the full implications of Brexit cannot yet be determined” and that “the impacts of Brexit will be most acutely felt along the Border” (p16). Nevertheless, Engineers Ireland is strongly supportive of an all-island approach to connectivity and growth and would like to see significantly improved connectivity on corridors such as Galway-Sligo-Letterkenny-Derry, Dublin-Dundalk-Belfast and Dublin-Derry/Letterkenny. Such connectivity would enhance the attractiveness of all of these centres, providing focal points for growth throughout and between the regions.

We are supportive of the NPF’s areas for practical co-operation between relevant Departments and local authorities in Ireland and Northern Ireland, including the North-West Strategic Growth Partnership:

“Promote the development of the North West City Region as interlinked areas of strategic importance in the North-West of Ireland, through collaborative structures and a joined-up approach to spatial planning.” (National Policy Objective 47)

The North-West City Region (Derry-Letterkenny-Strabane) is currently depicted on page 8 of the RSES Issues Paper, however, we would like to see further attention paid to the opportunities and challenges for cross-border collaboration in this Region. This should consider, for example, industrial development and access to employment, ports, airports, road infrastructure, greenways, education, communications and energy interconnection.

4. Climate Action and the transition to a Low Carbon Economy

The latest greenhouse gas emissions accounts show a 7.3% increase in the past two years³, making for alarming reading. EPA projections suggest that it is highly unlikely that Ireland will achieve 2020 climate targets and this will make the achievement of 2030 targets all the more difficult. Engineers Ireland believes that each of us have our part to play in the transition to a low carbon economy. We agree that significant potential exists for climate action in the Northern & Western Region.

As noted in the Issues Paper (p20), the Region boasts consistent and high wind speeds and currently generates relatively high levels of wind energy. Very high potential exists for the expansion of wind energy output and for further renewable energy generation from wave, tidal and other sources. The RSES should set out the long-term planning, infrastructure, skills and investment required to transform the Region into a net exporter of Green Energy (p21). This plan should align with, for example, the National Mitigation Plan and the National Adaptation Framework, both published in recent months. Like the remainder of the country, the Region must tackle the particular challenges facing the decarbonisation of the transport and heating sectors.

³ Environmental Protection Agency (2017). Ireland’s Provisional Greenhouse Gas Emissions 1990-2016.

5. Capital Investment and Priority Projects

The membership of Engineers Ireland has a wealth of experience in designing, planning and delivering capital projects spanning many decades. Over the past decade, we have observed and campaigned on the acute underinvestment in infrastructure and we welcome recent increases in capital investment and, in particular, the move towards long-term investment planning.

We welcome the approach taken in the Issues Paper to identifying 'Critically Enabling Infrastructure' (p31-34). Each year, Engineers Ireland prepares 'The State of Ireland,' an independent assessment of infrastructure, recommending two-year and five-year actions in transport, communications, energy, water, wastewater, flooding and waste^{4,5}.

Some of the priority projects we have recommended are:

- Implementation of the National Broadband Plan
- Upgraded access to the North-West border area, including the A5 Aughnacloy to Derry
- Construction of the N4 Collooney to Castlebaldwin and N5 Westport to Turlough
- Speed and ease of road access to Ireland West Airport Knock
- Improved connectivity to coastal assets, particularly ports in the North-West
- Improved port infrastructure and facilities to support renewable energy and energy security
- Infrastructure to support electric vehicles and alternative fuels
- Infrastructure to support 5G information and communications technology
- North-South Interconnector to bolster security of supply and reduce cost
- Implementation of Flood Risk Management Plans
- Specific planning measures to support renewable energy technologies

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⁴ Engineers Ireland (2017). The State of Ireland 2017: Special focus on Transport and Communications. Available at: engineersireland.ie/Communications.aspx

⁵ Engineers Ireland (2016). The State of Ireland 2016: Special focus on Energy. Available at: engineersireland.ie/Communications.aspx

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Background to Engineers Ireland

With over 23,000 members from every discipline of engineering, Engineers Ireland is the voice of the engineering profession in Ireland. Engineers Ireland was established in 1835 making us one of the oldest and largest professional bodies in the country. Members come from every discipline of engineering, and range from engineering students to fellows of the profession.

Our responsibility is to

- Promote knowledge of engineering
- Establish and maintain standards of professional engineering and engineering education
- Provide opportunities for Continuing Professional Development (CPD)
- Maintain standards of professional ethics and conduct
- Ensure that professional titles are granted to qualified candidates
- Act as the authoritative voice of the engineering profession in Ireland

Our Vision Statement

Engineers Ireland: a community of creative professionals delivering solutions for society.

Our Mission Statement

Engineers Ireland is an organisation that enables the engineering community to progress their professional development, make an impact on society and encourage and educate the future generations of engineers.