

Consultation on the
DRAFT First Revision to the National Planning Framework

Submission from:
Roscommon County Council

Date: 12th September 2024



Comhairle Contae
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1.0 Introduction

Roscommon County Council welcomes the opportunity to participate in the consultation process on the Draft of the *First Revision of the National Planning Framework 'Ireland 2040'* hereafter generally referred to as the 'Revised NPF.' The purpose of this submission is primarily to highlight issues of strategic importance that may warrant further consideration in the Revised NPF in order to ensure that it delivers a practical, feasible and quantifiable framework that will positively impact on the development of Ireland over the next twenty years and beyond.

The legacy of the original and revised NPF will be demonstrable evidence of positive outcomes arising from national growth, shared throughout the regions of the country. Given that the National Strategic Outcomes and priorities in the Revised NPF remain largely unchanged, albeit now considered in the context of revised population growth expectations and informed by growth levels and patterns since the introduction of the original NPF, achieving balanced regional development remains the fundamental challenge, with the Northern and Western region to date being the most adversely affected by the continued growth disparity. At this juncture in planning a national framework to 2040 and beyond, Roscommon County Council consider it imperative that the Revised NPF sets out a stronger, practical policy approach to ensure that the continuing disparity in regional growth and its pronounced adverse effect on the Northern and Western region, is effectively addressed.



Fig 1: National Strategic Outcomes warranting increased policy support and funding streams

In examining the National Strategic Outcomes set out in the NPF, it is evident that many of the principles have become imbedded at the local level in County Roscommon, as expressed in local level policies and various initiatives developed and in physical works undertaken by the Council. Decisions being made and actions being taken at a local level collectively provide a solid foundation to contribute, for example, towards the national transition to a low carbon and climate resilient society. Local level activity is also successfully delivering a more sustainable approach to the management of environmental resources, active travel initiatives are assisting in a move towards more sustainable mobility alongside an enhanced appreciation. A multitude of local level initiatives, many of which have been delivered with the assistance of the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) are positively contributing to enhanced amenity offerings, alongside the safeguarding and preservation of heritage interests. However, several of the

National Strategic Outcomes are beyond the realms of achievement by local policy development and activity and initiatives undertaken at the local (county) level alone and can only be successfully achieved with the backing of a comprehensive national policy approach, and further supported in practical terms by funding streams in the National Development Plan. Strategic Outcomes where this remains critical and warranting further consideration in the Revised NPF are identified in Figure 1 above. A modified and strengthened national policy approach, backed by sufficient funding provision through the National Development Plan, is considered by Roscommon County Council as being crucial to the achievement of all national strategic outcomes on a balanced regional basis.

Taking into account the foregoing point, and the need to ensure that the Revised NPF sufficiently responds and plans for the successful achievement of all National Strategic Outcomes across the three regions, Roscommon County Council's submission will focus primarily on the following topics:

- The need for a more tailored policy approach to address and arrest continued regional growth imbalance particularly affecting the Northern and Western region;
- The regional growth centre of Athlone and the relevance of its future growth to the Eastern and Midlands region **and** the Northern and Western region;
- Essential infrastructure requirements to enhance regional connectivity and facilitate accelerated growth in the Northern and Western region; and
- The need for a more tailored development strategy for smaller towns and villages in order to more effectively achieve regional balanced growth.

Whilst the focus of this submission will be on offering constructive comment in respect of the policy position set out in the Draft Revised NPF, Roscommon County Council also consider it opportune to acknowledge the benefits that have taken place to date in a local context as a result of the strategic policy approach set out in the NPF, and supported by funding mechanisms within the National Development Plan. The Council welcomes the showcasing in the Draft Revised NPF of 'An Rioga' in Boyle and considers this an exemplar of the benefits already derived from a key tenet of the NPF, namely the regeneration and revitalisation of town centres. In practical terms, a key contributor to the successful delivery of this project which revitalised the former Royal Hotel into a multi-purpose community /enterprise / exhibition space was the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF). The undertaking of local level initiatives such as 'An Rioga' make a vital contribution to the overall regeneration and enhancement of urban and rural communities throughout Ireland.

2.0 A More Tailored Approach to Achieving Balanced Regional Growth

Realising the capacity, intrinsic values and growth potential of all regions of Ireland is key to delivering development that is balanced, appropriate and sustainable. It is clear that the Northern and Western region is falling behind other regions in the country in terms of economic growth. The growth of Dublin as an international city of scale and its supporting hinterland is fully recognised, however greater emphasis and a more tailored policy approach to achieving balanced regional growth in the regions lagging behind, in particular the Northern and Western region, is required in the Revised NPF in order to sustain and grow the regional economy, employment base and population. Therefore direct targeted integrated investment into the Northern and Western region, and into its designated regional growth centres and smaller settlements is required.

While policy may reasonably seek to determine where housing can be developed, further analysis is required to determine how this correlates with the delivery of job opportunities. Trends to date demonstrate that the agglomeration of employment opportunities (and the consequent associated housing demand) remains in Dublin and its surrounding commuter catchment. Greater regional distribution of housing requires increased political commitment to a greater regional distribution of industry and commerce across all sectors, in order to serve as essential attractors to the more peripheral regions. Aligned with this is the need at national level to recognise the impediments to the attraction of industry and commerce sectors to the Northern and Western region in particular, and to ensure that the Revised NPF provides tailored strategic policy support to remedy impediments such as deficits in essential infrastructure (including water and wastewater network capacity, road infrastructure, ICT infrastructure etc.), and with associated funding provision subsequently reflected in the National Development Plan.

3.0 Athlone – A Regional Growth Centre Influencing Two Regions

Greater Recognition of the Influence of Athlone on the Northern and Western Region

As part of the initial public consultation on the Draft NPF in 2017, Roscommon County Council strongly advocated for the designation of Athlone as a Regional Growth Centre. The designation as a Regional Growth Centre, as ultimately set out in the NPF, is recognised as providing significant opportunity for the more westerly areas of the already vibrant and fast growing Eastern and Midland region and in the main is discussed in the NPF in the context of its role in that region. However, given its strategically central location nationally and its physical extent spanning an area encompassing two counties and two Regional Assembly areas, the influence of Athlone on and its benefits to the Northern and Western region cannot be underestimated.

It is imperative that the Revised NPF gives appropriate recognition to and support for the influence of Athlone in a westerly direction as well as in an eastern / midlands context. The Revised NPF should provide greater clarity on the growth ambition for Athlone as a cohesive area, in order that parity in growth projections will be duly reflected in a consistent and co-ordinated manner by the two Regional Assemblies in the respective revised *Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES)*. To date, differing growth rates / population targets have been presented in the respective *RSES* of the Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly and the Northern and Western Regional Assembly, with the potential consequence that growth in the western areas of Athlone i.e. in County Roscommon, may be inappropriately constrained relative to the more ambitious growth projections which have been applied to the eastern area of Athlone. It is essential that the Revised NPF appropriately plans for Athlone, in its totality, to be a focus for significant growth and investment and to serve as a regional economic

driver with broad influence across the two regions. Athlone's central location, established regional connectivity by road and rail to larger centres such as Dublin and Galway, along with its existing broadband infrastructure are significant attributes to further strengthen its economic base and that of its extensive catchment area, subject to localised infrastructure deficits being remedied.

Enterprise Specialisation

Athlone is already recognised as a major hub for strategic manufacturing, research and commercial activities. It has established a significant foreign direct investment footprint, with a number of the world's leading biopharmaceutical, life sciences and medical technology companies in place. It is imperative that the Revised NPF recognises this sector as a key regional economic driver and accordingly promotes Athlone as a centre of enterprise specialisation in this med-tech / life sciences sector. In order to maintain the momentum of this established sector and foster further growth in this and other sectors, strategic investment in physical and social infrastructure is a critical dependency which must be recognised and appropriately addressed in the Revised NPF in order to enable Athlone to continue to develop as a highly accessible, connected and attractive location to sustain and further establish both commerce and community.

Critical infrastructure and physical connectivity

One of the key challenges for the future growth of Athlone and its wider catchment is local connectivity and the conflict presented by its current dependency on the national road network to facilitate growth. Athlone has witnessed consistent growth in both population and commercial/industrial activity, leading to pressure on its existing infrastructure. The point of connection of the N61 national route from Sligo to the N6/M6 national primary route, together with the necessary use by local traffic of junctions on and off the N6 as it traverses through the area, continues to be a key consideration when examining Athlone's capacity for future expansion.

It is clear that investment into more efficient transportation links is necessary in order to accommodate the growth in Athlone at a scale commensurate with its designation as a regional growth centre. In this regard, the current interface between the N61 and N6/M6 requires targeted investment to ensure that the national route network is designed to provide unimpeded connectivity between the two regional growth centres of Sligo and Athlone, and that provision is made for significantly improved local connectivity in and around Athlone so as to facilitate continued growth without undue impact on the national road network. Addressing deficits in the road infrastructure serving the Athlone area requires urgent prioritisation, not only to accommodate commercial and industrial expansion, but also to enable more efficient use of local connectivity routes and by reducing dependency on the national network for local/short distance traffic movements. Further detail on this is contained below in Section 4 of this submission.

Forthcoming Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan

Currently, Roscommon County Council and Westmeath County Council are in the process of commencing the preparation of a new Joint Urban Area Plan (JUAP) for Athlone.¹ This JUAP will set a direction and vision for the future growth of Athlone. In line with the NPF, it will provide the policy framework to guide development and implement a vision for how Athlone can grow and evolve into a sustainable and resilient place of residence, employment, community, tourism, leisure and recreation, culture and education. It is imperative that the Revised NPF puts in place the conditions for the appropriately ambitious growth of Athlone, given its geographically pivotal location in the county and having regard to the extent of influence that it already has in its two constituent regions and its potential to have even greater influence as we advance to 2040. As noted above, in addition to a greater acknowledgement being warranted in the Revised NPF of the influence of Athlone now and in the

¹ Pre-draft consultation on the new Athlone JUAP concluded earlier in 2024.

future on the Northern and Western region and particularly on County Roscommon, there is also a critical need to ensure that the Revised NPF² provides enhanced policy support for the provision of improved and new infrastructure which will facilitate increased regional connectivity, as well as facilitating increased opportunity for connectivity and growth in Athlone itself.

4.0 Infrastructure

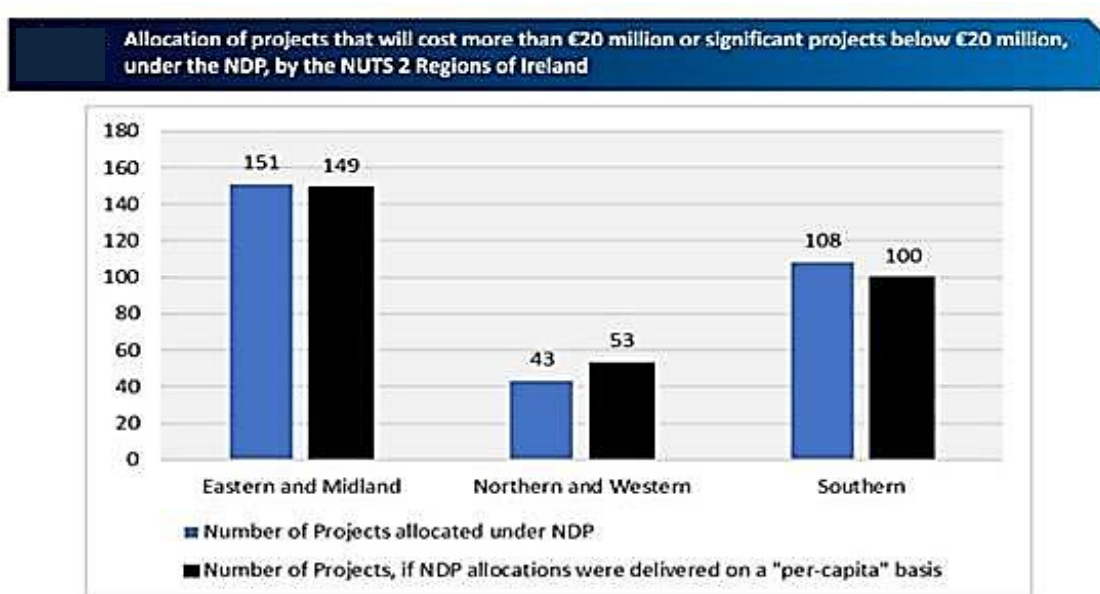
Road Infrastructure

Population growth rates between 2016 and 2022 in the Eastern and Midland Region accounted for approximately 55%, with the Northern and Western Region and the Southern Region collectively accounting for the remaining 45% of national growth.

The regional demographic and economic imbalance is acutely evident in the Northern and Western region, with a quantifiable factor which has contributed to this being insufficient investment in critical infrastructure. The growth potential of this region and the population projections set out in the Draft Revised NPF will unfortunately not be realised without the necessary enabling infrastructure required to attract and provide industry and commerce with connected, accessible and attractive locations to invest.

There is currently a significant economic disparity between the Northern & Western Region and the Eastern and Midland Region and Southern Region. The Northern and Western Region is now identified as a 'Lagging Region' by the European Commission, which reflects its performance across a number of key growth indicators in comparison to the other two Regions. It is the clear this continued level of imbalanced growth will require a detailed review of the current strategic infrastructure investment programmes and the subsequent appropriate allocation of investment towards the North Western region, as part of a National Development Plan (NDP) review.

Figure 2 below demonstrates the National Development Plan (NDP) allocation of projects. The clear funding deficit for the Northern and Western region when compared to the other regions in Ireland is evident.



Source: Northern and Western Regional Assembly's calculations using data from DPER's "Investment Tracker" (February 2023)

Fig. 2: Regional project / funding disparities

² And subsequently reflected in the NDP

Figure 3 below compares the European Commission’s ‘Regional Competitive Index’ for the three Regional Assemblies, the average for Ireland and the EU. The diagram shows that the Northern and Western region scores lower across a range of areas, in particular in relation to infrastructure, where it remains very significantly behind the rest of the country and the EU average. The Northern and Western region is ranked 218th out of 234 regions in the EU under the heading of Infrastructure.

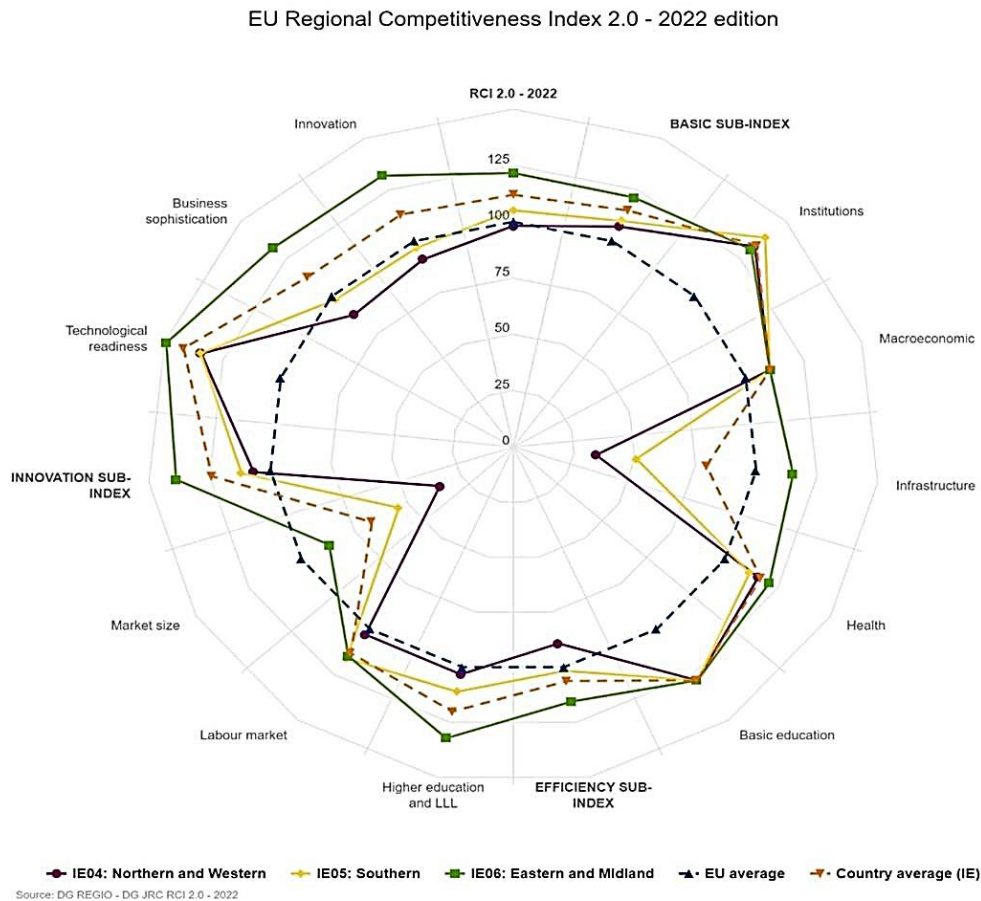


Fig. 3: Northern and Western region competitiveness in context

The information contained in Figures 2 and 3 represents the stark reality of a significant underspend in the Northern and Western region, which is directly undermining regional connectivity and accessibility as well as stifling economic growth and development for this region. A legitimate commitment towards the delivery of balanced regional growth can only be demonstrated by political commitment to review the national infrastructure investment programme and provide a more equitable and proportionate level of funding to the Northern and Western Region.

The N61 – A Regional Priority Route

In February 2024, Roscommon County Council prepared a comprehensive report which outlined a considered and clear rationale for the reclassification of the N61 from a national secondary road to a national primary road. This was presented to the Department of Transport for consideration. This report highlighted the role of the N61 as a strategic national transport corridor at a local, regional and national level. The N61 route is a critical point of connectivity between the two designated regional growth centres of Athlone and Sligo, with the route extending through almost the entire extent of County Roscommon on a north south axis, via Roscommon town and Boyle. It is the key strategic road link between the Regional Centres of Athlone and Sligo.

Roscommon County Council recently received a response from the Office of the Minister for Transport, which outlined that he will not be exercising his powers in relation to the reclassification of roads under Section 10(1) of the Roads Act 1993 (as amended).

Notwithstanding the recent position set out by the Minister, Roscommon County Council respectfully considers it reasonable and appropriate in this current submission to call for the Revised NPF to recognise the strategic importance of the N61 national route to, not only Roscommon, but to the transport network of the entire Northern and Western region. The delivery of more balanced regional growth will be significantly strengthened by the appropriate investment and recognition of the need for strategic transport routes, such as the N61, to be upgraded to National Primary status.

The upgrading of the N61 route (in terms of both classification and physical works) is essential to ensure that the Northern and Western region does not have obstacles to the extent of growth envisaged in national, regional and local level policy. The Revised NPF must clearly recognise and support the importance of the strategic connectivity provided by the N61 between Regional Centres, as well as connectivity to proximate urban centres and their rural hinterlands. This action would serve to re-dress, in part, inequalities in regional growth, which has particularly affected the Northern and Western region. The re-classification of the N61 to national primary route status would also secure the preservation of journey times (having regard to the 100km/h design speed associated with national primary routes, in comparison to the impending 80km/h on national secondary routes) and ensure that planned and future upgrades to this strategic route continue to be designed to deliver the target average interurban speed of 90km/h between Regional Centres, as required by both the NPF and the National Roads (NR2040) Strategy.

Notwithstanding the regional and local level commitment to the principles of sustainable mobility and modal shift from private vehicle dependency, the practical reality, given the predominantly rural nature of the Northern and Western region and the lower population base, the road network remains the primary means of access to and around the region for freight and for access to the workplace, to education facilities and to tourism and recreation opportunities etc.. This will remain the case for the foreseeable future, due to the impracticalities of delivering a comprehensive public transport network to serve as a realistic alternative means of movement around the region. It is vital that further recognition is afforded in the Revised NPF to the importance of the road network in this region, along with a review of the decision in relation to the reclassification of the N61 to a national primary route.

5.0 A Tailored Development Strategy for Towns and Villages

Investment in Infrastructure to Support the Development of Towns and Villages

As set out in the introductory section of this submission, achieving several of the primary National Strategic Outcomes such as Enhanced Regional Accessibility, Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities and Access to Quality Childcare, Education and Health Services is broadly dependent on the delivery of essential public infrastructure into our towns and villages. The delivery of such infrastructure and services requires significant support and funding at national level.

For predominantly rural counties like Roscommon, serviced towns and villages can offer the best of both worlds for existing and prospective residents by providing a balance between the amenities of urban life and the tranquillity of rural settings. The availability of essential infrastructure such as water, roads and broadband ensures that residents have access to modern conveniences while experiencing a close-knit community atmosphere. These factors should make towns and villages an attractive proposition which is not only convenient and economically viable, but also sustainable and socially vibrant, offering a higher quality of life.

Investment in roads, water and wastewater networks, broadband, energy and community infrastructure in towns and villages will support the growth of new communities and offer a viable and attractive alternative to the development of less sustainable and remote one-off houses. In this regard, the role of smaller settlements and their suitability to accommodate proportionate growth levels cannot be underestimated. Roscommon County Council strongly supports the principles which continue to be set out in the Draft Revised NPF in respect of ‘targeting the reversal of rural decline in the core of small towns and villages’ (NPO 25), and the promotion of the concept of serviced sites in town and villages as set out in NPO 27. While NPO 28 details continued support for programmes for ‘new homes in smaller towns and villages’ and references “public infrastructure agencies such as Uisce Éireann” in this context, the reality is that many rural villages are unserved by critical public infrastructure, particularly wastewater treatment facilities, despite being otherwise reasonably well served with educational, social and community facilities. Passing reference in NPO 28 to public infrastructure agencies such as Uisce Éireann in the context of the development of new homes in smaller towns and villages is considered insufficient and fails to set out a clear and realistic policy position for the future development of unserved villages which are otherwise capable of accommodating proportionate growth. In the absence of clarity on a development model to address public infrastructure deficiencies in smaller settlements, some of the policy principles of the NPF in growing and strengthening rural villages and communities cannot be achieved.

Infrastructural investment requirements also extend in some area to educational services, healthcare facilities, and other social services that are necessary to accommodate growing populations in rural towns and villages. This includes building new facilities and upgrading existing ones to ensure they meet the needs of expanded communities. Increased delivery of community and cultural facilities are required to support town and village living in rural counties. Developing community centres, sports facilities, and cultural amenities will can enhance the quality of life offering, making rural settlements more attractive places to live. This also supports social cohesion and community development.

A broad range of Government funded capital infrastructure investment in both our urban and rural built up settlements is critical to realising the ambitions of the NPF in regards to town/village living. The availability of the above referenced essential physical, social and community infrastructure will serve to provide the practical, economic, and social benefits for many underpopulated town and village centres throughout the country.

Investing in infrastructure is essential to overcoming the challenges posed by the NPF's focus on strengthening our towns and villages. A coordinated approach that integrates transport, utilities, digital connectivity, social services, environmental sustainability, and housing is necessary to ensure that rural counties can meet the NPF's housing targets while supporting economic growth and maintaining community identity. To successfully achieve this will require collaboration between national government, local authorities and public infrastructure providers, as well as the private sector. The Revised NPF should outline a clear and targeted approach for as to how this will be delivered.

The Continued Need for Funding Initiatives

The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) have had significant positive impacts on towns and villages in many rural counties, including County Roscommon. These funds have helped to reinvigorate town centres, making them more attractive places to live and visit, thereby helping to stimulate the local economy and support local businesses.

Continued capital investment in public spaces, community facilities, and cultural projects will enhance investment opportunities and the liveability of towns and villages. These projects not only address immediate infrastructural needs but also create long-term opportunities for economic development, community cohesion, and population retention. The emphasis on sustainability and cultural preservation will further ensure that towns and villages in County Roscommon and other similar counties are positioned for future growth while retaining their unique character.

While many towns and villages throughout Roscommon have benefitted from capital support initiatives which have made them more attractive destinations to live, work and visit, it is however envisaged that the delivery of population growth projections, together with the provision of consolidated growth in rural counties such as Roscommon will continue to present challenges. Further positive incentives to stimulate residential development and entice a more inclusive and wider socio-economic demographic will be necessary, in order to sustain and enhance residential growth within our towns and villages. Further consideration on this is set out in Section 6 below.

Town Centre Growth

County Roscommon's urban and rural built up settlements function as local economic and social drivers for their surrounding hinterlands. They provide services, a significant share of homes and jobs, and act as hubs for a much wider rural community. As is evident in foregoing sections of this submission, Roscommon County Council acknowledges the commitments set out in the NPF to revitalise rural towns and villages through investment projects aimed at incentivising opportunities for economic growth, increasing footfall and increasing residential occupancy. Roscommon has benefitted significantly from the wide range of funding programmes centered on the regeneration of both urban and rural settlements, through for example public realm enhancement schemes and redevelopment of sites and buildings.

As referenced in the introductory section of this submission, the Council strongly welcomes and appreciates the showcasing of 'An Rioga' in Boyle in the Draft Revised NPF. The project is a key example of the benefit of the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF). The development of 'An Rioga' as a multi-purpose community space in the town centre forms part of a wider Masterplan for the town envisaged through *Boyle 2040*. Further RRDF aided projects in Boyle will see a revitalisation of its key cultural tourism asset, King House, as well as the delivery of a state of the art new Community Library. Such initiatives, which are vital to both urban and rural communities throughout Ireland, rely on the continuation of the key funding programmes, including the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF), Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF), Just Transition, Outdoor Recreation and Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS) and Town and Village (T&V) Scheme.

The Council acknowledges the national policy objective under the Government's Housing for All, National Housing Plan to 2030 and funding mechanisms through for example, Croí Cónaithe, which has witnessed a significant uptake throughout the county. It is recognised that such initiatives aim to deliver more homes in our cities, towns and village, supporting compact growth and vibrant communities. They will also support positive climate change, reduce vacancy and redress dereliction.

Land Activation Measures – The Challenges of a 'One Size Fits All' Approach

Roscommon County Council supports the reaffirmed commitment in the Draft Revised NPF to compact growth, but considers it appropriate to highlight the challenges that exist in relation to the delivery of higher density multi-unit town centre developments in rural towns. Reference to Land Activation and Active Land Management in the Draft Revised NPF and namely the Residential Zoned Land Tax, are considered to potentially incentivise residential development of such zoned land in the built up primary urban settlements. However, such land activation measures in the smaller rural towns in counties like Roscommon are not considered likely to activate private sector housing developments, where market indicators impact upon the financial viability of these developments. This approach needs to be reconsidered and further positive incentives are required in order to incentivise private sector construction in smaller urban settlements in rural counties, where residential demand is not at the scale of the larger cities and regional growth centre settlements.

6.0 Housing and Population Growth

Section 1.2 of the Draft Revised NPF refers to “developing a region-focused strategy for managing growth.” This is motivated by the ambition to reverse the concentration of population, homes and jobs in Dublin and, to a lesser extent, the Eastern and Midland region. In order to address this, the target is an approximate “50:50 distribution of growth between the Eastern and Midland region, and the Southern and Northern and Western regions”.

National Planning Framework Phased Population Growth

Region	2030 Growth	%	2040 Growth	%
EMRA	270,000	49%	470,000	49%
NWRA	85,000	15%	150,000	15%
SRA	195,000	35%	330,000	35%
State Growth	555,000		950,000	
State Total Population	5,700,00		6,100,000	

Source: Draft Revised NPF

Under the Draft Revised NPF, as per the table above³, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) is to accommodate c. 49% of national population growth, with the Southern Regional Assembly (SRA) and Northern and Western Regional Assembly (NWRA) intended to respectively provide 35% and 15% of the targeted population growth nationally. This is underpinned by NPO 4, which targets half of the future population and employment growth within the five cities, i.e. Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford and their suburbs.

Since the publication of NPF 2018 growth trends to date have provided little evidence to suggest that there has been a rebalancing throughout the EMRA, NWRA and Southern regions. The 2022 census data demonstrated the reality in terms of population growth differences across the three regions.

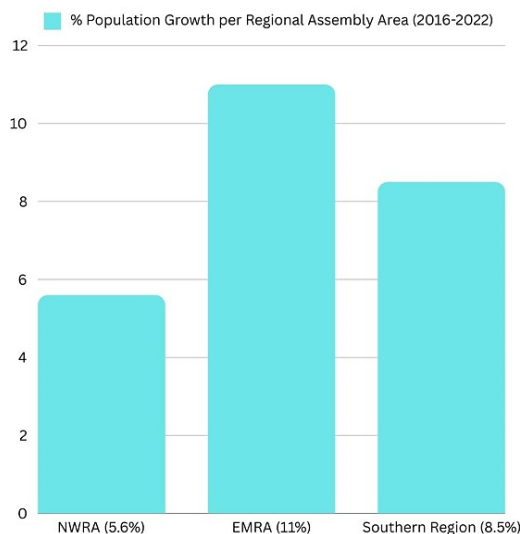


Fig. 4 Analysis of Census 2022 Data

³ Table 10.1 of the Draft Revised NPF

Recent published reports have served to highlight housing growth trends and the capacity to deliver housing throughout Ireland. Analysis shows that the Northern and Western region has approximately 40% of the national quantum of residential zoned lands, however only 18% of households are situated in this region. This clearly demonstrates the capacity for housing delivery in this region exists, however this can only be realised by increased investment in enabling infrastructure i.e. roads, water, broadband, community services etc.

Consistent with the position outlined in Section 4 above in relation to the development of smaller towns and villages, in overall terms, the increased delivery of housing in Northern and Western region necessitates positive and productive coordination between Local Authorities and public agencies such as Transport Infrastructure Ireland and Uisce Éireann, and continued national commitment to the efficient delivery of the National Broadband Plan. There is a need for greater cross-sectoral policy co-ordination, monitoring and implementation to drive the NPF ambition for more balanced delivery of housing to accommodate our growing population and strengthen the Northern and Western region. Furthermore, for rural counties like Roscommon, it is clear that additional growth incentives and proactive measures are required in the form of tax benefits for residential development, with increased benefits for town centre development.

The NPF ambition for greater equity in spatial growth needs to be expanded upon. The tangible delivery of balanced regional growth requires a meaningful review in the NPF, along with a pathway to how this can be delivered, supported by a targeted policy framework. Therefore whilst the 50:50 population growth approach set out in the NPF is acknowledged as the policy framework for balanced regional development, its delivery is dependent upon a significant departure from the established and trending demographic and economic growth indicators. This remains the fundamental challenge for the NPF. As noted earlier, the Draft Revised NPF requires further analysis, linking infrastructure, jobs and housing to the delivery of equitable population and economic growth beyond Dublin and the Eastern and Midland region, into the Southern and Northern & Western regions.

Roscommon County Council acknowledges the compact urban growth strategy outlined in the NPF, aimed at strengthening our cities, towns and villages. The Council supports opportunities to promote higher residential densities in urban areas, making better use of existing infrastructure, e.g., public transport, schools, services and reducing reliance on car-based commuting. However, the challenge to deliver 30% of new homes, within the existing built-up areas of rural towns in Roscommon will be significant. High density, brownfield or Greenfield development in these towns will need to be significantly supported by public investment to incentivise developers to invest in such developments. This also necessitates recognition that national policy on urban residential development may not be a 'one size fits all' approach and further consideration of NPO 27 (which aims to support the proportionate and appropriate development in rural towns) may be warranted in this regard.

7.0 Miscellaneous

Ireland West Airport Knock (IWA)

Connectivity is one of the most critical factors for the achievement of balanced regional growth, In this regard, the critical role of Ireland West Airport Knock (IWA) in the context of the Northern and Western region warrants national recognition. This includes recognition of the need for continued investment in IWA, including in the development of its Strategic Development Zone (SDZ), is essential in order that it can function and grow to its full potential, in order to make a significant contribution to the local and wider regional economy.

The Strategic Development Zone (SDZ) around the airport represents an opportunity to create a regional destination for industry and commerce to grow. This aligns with the NPF strategy, which emphasises regional development, sustainable communities, and economic balance between urban and rural areas. The proximity of County Roscommon to Ireland West Airport Knock (IWA), especially in the context of the N5 road upgrade, offers significant benefits for the county. These advantages primarily relate to improved connectivity, economic development, and enhanced opportunities for tourism, industry, and regional growth. The completion of the new section of the N5 will shorten travel time between Roscommon and IWA. This improved connectivity means that the key urban settlements throughout County Roscommon will be within a shorter and more efficient drive from the airport, offering the potential to encourage greater movement of people and goods into the county through IWA.

Enhanced Economic Development and Investment due to Proximity to IWA

With the improved road network and proximity to IWA, County Roscommon has the potential to become a more attractive location for investors and businesses looking to establish or expand operations in the west of Ireland. This is particularly true for industries reliant on good transport links, such as logistics, distribution and manufacturing. The development of enhanced road and airport infrastructure also provides an opportunity for County Roscommon can market itself as a convenient and accessible destination for international tourists arriving via IWA. Attractions such as Strokestown Park House, the National Famine Museum and Boyle Abbey can draw more visitors, contributing to local economic activity.

Roscommon's immediate proximity to Ireland West Airport provides an opportunity for strategic investment in the areas of tourism, industry and commerce. The benefits of this closer connection include faster travel times, enhanced economic opportunities, job creation, and a stronger role in the Northern and Western regions' overall growth strategy. County Roscommon's proximity, combined with a high quality infrastructural link give this county a significant opportunity to position itself as a key player in the economic and social development of this region.

Recreation and Amenity Development

Roscommon County Council welcomes the continued recognition of the importance of greenways and blueways in the Draft Revised NPF, and the unique opportunities that such developments can provide for visitors to access and enjoy rural counties. The Council supports the National Cycling Network and the establishment of connecting greenways which will be central to the long-term socio-economic, environmental, and tourism economy in the Northern and Western region.

Key Greenway Projects in /through County Roscommon include:

1. Dublin – Galway Greenway (Through Roscommon)

As part of Ireland's first coast-to-coast greenway, the Dublin to Galway greenway will attract

both domestic and international tourists, boosting local economies through the growth of hospitality, accommodation, bike rentals etc. fostering entrepreneurship in rural areas. This greenway will improve the connectivity between rural areas of Roscommon and major urban centres like Athlone and Galway, providing more sustainable transport options for commuting and recreational travel.

2. Boyle – Carrick-on-Shannon Greenway

The Boyle to Carrick-on-Shannon Greenway once operational, will connect two designated ‘Key Towns’ in the west of Ireland and will further aid the promotion of the tourism economy in both counties Roscommon and Leitrim. This greenway will encourage visitors to explore local attractions such as Boyle Abbey, Lough Key Forest and Activity Park, and Carrick’s river-based activities. It will also tie into Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands tourism brand, helping to highlight the scenic beauty and history of the region. Small towns along the greenway route could see investment in hospitality, retail, and recreational services, offering opportunities for job creation in the region.

3. Athlone – Roscommon – Strokestown Greenway

This greenway is part of an extensive initiative which will connect Athlone, Roscommon Town, and Strokestown, and it aligns with TII’s goal to build a comprehensive cycling network across Ireland. Athlone is already a key hub for cycling infrastructure, and the extension of this route into Roscommon will link key tourist destinations such as the National Famine Museum in Strokestown and Strokestown Park House. This greenway has the potential to establish Roscommon Town and Strokestown as cycling tourism destinations, drawing visitors to explore historical and cultural attractions. In the wider national context, it will also tie into national recreation routes such as the Dublin-Galway Greenway and the Shannon Blueway.

The continued investment in greenways plays a vital role in promoting balanced regional development. By connecting rural and urban communities, greenways help decentralise economic growth, bringing tourists and business opportunities to counties like Roscommon. The development of these greenways will link remote communities, improving access to services and fostering social inclusion. This is particularly important in a county like Roscommon, where geographic isolation can limit access to amenities and opportunities.

Greenways are vital infrastructure that offer Roscommon both economic and environmental benefits. From boosting tourism and local economies to promoting sustainable transport and reducing carbon emissions, the investment in greenways is a long-term strategy for rural and regional development. By providing a natural and accessible means of travel, greenways not only attract tourists but also help to protect and enhance the environment, contributing to a greener, healthier, and more sustainable future for Roscommon. The Council would welcome further prominence being given to role of greenway infrastructure in the Revised NPF.

[Investment in Third Level Education Facilities](#)

Investing in third-level education and apprenticeship programmes in counties like Roscommon, which currently lack a dedicated higher education facility, can have a transformative impact on the local economy, workforce, and social fabric. Outreach centres affiliated with larger proximal institutions such as the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) and the National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG) can serve as smaller, localised hubs that deliver courses and apprenticeship programs in centrally located and logistically accessible towns like Roscommon.

One of the broader benefits of investing in third-level education and apprenticeship programs in counties like Roscommon is the promotion of balanced regional development. By spreading educational

opportunities beyond the primary urban centres, towns like Roscommon can become more socially and economically vibrant. The establishment of third-level outreach centres and the expansion of apprenticeship programs in rural counties can have far-reaching benefits. These initiatives reduce travel costs, boost local economies, and make education more accessible. By fostering local talent, supporting regional industries, and delivering cost-effective education solutions, these facilities can contribute to balanced regional development. This investment in education is a crucial driver of long-term social and economic resilience for the region and should be appropriately reflected in the Revised NPF.

Case Study – An Bealach

Planning permission was granted in 2023 for An Bealach, in Ballaghaderreen, County Roscommon. The advancement of this ambitious and unique development will provide an accessible space for training, film production, and collaboration with the digital arts sector and can serve as a space for a wide range of fields, including film production, animation, graphic design, digital marketing, game development, music production, web design, and virtual reality. This sector is growing rapidly and offers numerous opportunities for job creation, entrepreneurship, and regional development. The project has the potential to provide a significant opportunity to develop an educational, business and enterprise hub for academics, entrepreneurs, and businesses to grow and thrive and given the range of facilities that it would deliver, it's future potential in a local, regional and national context should be supported.

In addition to distinctive facilities to accommodate aspects of film production etc., it also has the potential to develop in an educational context, as it is anticipated to deliver opportunities to partner with third level institutions in the region to offer full-time, part-time, and blended learning programs in creative and digital arts. An Bealach can serve as an educational, training, production and research hub, working with the regional universities on innovative projects in the digital arts space. Strengthening links between An Bealach and third level education centres in Galway, Athlone and Sligo would have numerous economic and social benefits for this rural area. An Bealach has the potential to serve as a regional training facility for the creative and digital arts sector by linking with nearby universities and leveraging its resources to offer cutting-edge education, practical training, and industry collaboration. By doing so, it would not only benefit the local economy but also play a pivotal role in transforming County Roscommon into a regional and potentially a national hub for creative and digital innovation, offering unique opportunities for students, businesses, and creative professionals.
