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16th February 2018

Our Ref: SCP171205.1

Re: SEA Scoping for the Regional and Spatial Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Northern and Western Region

Dear Mr Kelly,

I acknowledge your correspondence, dated 13th December 2017, in relation to the preparation of the Regional and Spatial Economic Strategy (the RSES) for the Northern and Western Region and the associated Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) scoping process.

This scoping submission is intended to inform and support the integration of environmental considerations and related commitments into the RSES to ensure that the environment is placed at the centre of decision making in preparing and implementing the RSES.

We look forward to working with the Regional Assembly in the ongoing development of the RSES and SEA. We welcome that a common approach to the SEA process is being adopted for all three RSESs and we would welcome the convening of a focussed SEA-related workshop for the three RSESs which the EPA will participate in. There is also merit in considering adopting a similar standardised approach in preparing the Strategies.

Our submission outlines the key overarching recommendations to consider in preparing the RSES and the SEA Environmental Report. Additionally, specific comments on the Issues Paper are provided in Appendix I and observations on the SEA Scoping Report are included Appendix II. We also attach *Guidance on the Integration of Environmental Considerations into the RSES* (Attachment 1). Our submissions on the Draft National Planning Framework – Ireland 2040 (DHPLG, 2017) at Draft Plan and SEA Scoping Stages are also attached for reference (Attachment 2).

Ireland's Environment and the RSES

The Agency welcomes that Ireland's *Environment - An Assessment 2016*¹ (SoER) is recognised as a key document informing the preparation of the SEA. The importance of a good quality environment in contributing to our health and well-being and in underpinning our economy should

¹ <http://www.epa.ie/irelandsenvironment/stateoftheenvironmentreport/>

be highlighted in the RSES along with relevant policies, objectives, actions and commitments to ensure this is realised.

The SoER provides a timely opportunity to inform preparation of the RSES and the SEA. The 7 Key Environmental Actions for Ireland described within the SoER include:

1. *Environment and Health and Wellbeing* - Recognition of the benefits of a good quality environment to health and wellbeing.
2. *Climate Change* - Accelerate mitigation actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and implement adaptation measures to increase our resilience in dealing with adverse climate impacts.
3. *Implementation of Legislation* – Improve the tracking of plans and policy and the implementation and enforcement of environmental legislation to protect the environment.
4. *Restore and Protect Water Quality* – Implement measures that achieve ongoing improvement in the environmental status of water bodies from source to the sea.
5. *Sustainable Economic Activities* – Integrating resource efficiency and sustainability ideas and performance accounting across all economic sectors.
6. *Nature and Wild Places* – Protect pristine and wild places that act as biodiversity hubs, contribute to health and wellbeing and provide sustainable tourism opportunities.
7. *Community Engagement* – Inform, engage and support communities in the protection and improvement of the environment.

These actions are also linked to several of the 17 UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Addressing and implementing these key actions will be important in delivering environmental protection and promoting sustainable development in Ireland. The RSES and SEA should consider the relevant aspects of these Actions and the related sub actions. To reflect this, a commitment to contributing to the 7 Key Actions could be included in the RSES. This will emphasise the fundamental benefits of maintaining a good quality environment to our health and well-being and economy as well as the attractiveness of Ireland as a place to live, work and visit.

Relationship with other Plans and Programmes

The RSES will play a significant role in ensuring that the objectives and vision of the NPF are implemented and integrated in a consistent manner a regional and sub-regional level.

The RSES-preparation process coincides with consultations on several key Draft national plans/programmes including the *Draft River Basin Management Plan* and '*Cleaning Our Air - A National Clean Air Strategy for Ireland*'. While currently at consultation stage, provisions should be included for the relevant aspects of these environmental plans /strategies to be reflected in the environmental commitments in the RSES, to ensure that future development strategies are fully aligned with national environmental policy.

The series of *Flood Risk Management Plans* currently being finalised, are also of relevance. The final series of FRMPs will be accompanied by an interactive web based flood related information system. Some other key Plans/ Programmes to consider are also included in the Scoping Guidance document attached in Appendix II. The relevant aspects of these should be taken into consideration in the overall RSES and SEA processes.

Implementation and Governance

Aligning the implementation and governance aspects of the RSES, with the approach to governance and implementation outlined in NPF (*Section 7- Enabling the Vision –Implementing the National Planning Framework*), will provide for robust and transparent mechanisms to ensure delivery of the NPF objectives and commitments through the RSES.



Considering support for the development of integrated and robust planning enforcement and cooperation mechanisms in association with the DHPLG, relevant Government Departments, and the proposed Office of the Planning Regulator, other Regional Assemblies and local authorities should also be considered.

The EPA recognises in *Ireland's Environment* that Government departments, regional and local authorities have significant responsibility to plan for, design and integrate social, educational and infrastructural systems that support our ambition to become a carbon-neutral, climate-resilient and sustainably competitive society. The RSES has significant potential to contribute to the integrated long-term bigger picture planning needed to drive the scale and nature of the transformational change required to achieve these overall objectives.

A commitment to preparing an RSES Implementation Programme alongside the RSES should be considered. This could potentially set out key responsibilities (including lead /partner Departments/Authorities etc.), priorities and where appropriate, timescales, alongside each of the objectives/ commitments in the RSES. The alignment of the RSES with future National Investment Plans has a potential to play a significant role in informing key decisions on investment and prioritisation of infrastructure at a national level and where appropriate regional level. This will ensure that priority is given to investing in infrastructure that can provide overall national and regional benefit.

Scoping Process Guidance

Guidance on the SEA Scoping Process, including an SEA Pack, Integration Guidance, SEA Checklist, SEA Spatial Information Sources and guidance on Integrating Climate Change into SEA, is available on the EPA website and should be considered in the preparation of the SEA. See: <http://www.epa.ie/pubs/advice/ea/>

The EPA's GIS based SEA Search and Reporting Tool application can be accessed via www.edenireland.ie/.

Consultation

Under the SEA Regulations notice should also be given to the relevant statutory environmental authorities. In addition, consultation on SEA can also extend to other relevant Government Departments and key stakeholders where they have a role in environmental protection and sustainability. This consultation should also include consultation with relevant transboundary authorities.

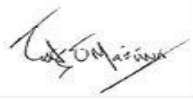
The EPA welcomes the opportunity to provide input at this stage of the RSES and SEA process. We will continue to contribute to the process by way of participation in SEA related region specific workshops and combined national workshops.

Further comment will be provided on receipt of the Draft RSES and SEA Environmental Report and associated documents during the next statutory consultation phase of the Plan and SEA Process.

The EPA is committed to providing relevant information, data and input at the implementation phase.

Should you have any queries or require further information in relation to the above please contact the undersigned. We would be grateful if an acknowledgement of receipt of this submission could be sent to: sea@epa.ie.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tadhg O'Mahony', enclosed within a thin black rectangular border.

Tadhg O'Mahony
Senior Scientific Officer
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Regional Inspectorate,
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Appendix I - Comments on the North and Western Regional Assembly RSES Issues Paper

Comments are provided below in response to a number of specific questions posed in the Issues Paper.

How do we integrate sustainable policy and practice into our RSES so that they add value and not just regulate our practices?

The RSES should identify the environmental sensitivities within the region, and ensure that the key plans for protecting and managing our environmental resources are implemented at a regional and county level. Promotion of collaborative approaches to planning and development, coordination with other bodies/agencies such as Irish Water, should also be encouraged.

Development should be linked to the ability to provide the appropriate critical service infrastructure, as well as considering the potential for the environmental capacity to absorb further development. Developing environmental sensitivity maps as a regional level would greatly assist at directing development to the most appropriate areas, while protecting those areas most vulnerable to potential adverse impacts.

How can the RSES assist local authorities and other stakeholders in addressing its climate change responsibilities and targets?

The RSES should promote that the key climate change mitigation and adaptation measures described within the National Mitigation Plan and National Adaptation Framework, are reviewed within the context of the Region, and consider developing a regional climate change adaptation / mitigation strategies. The methodology used in its preparation could help inform Local Authority adaptation / mitigation strategies.

What are the opportunities presented by our natural, built and cultural assets? Where are they located? How can they be conserved and their potential harnessed and what barriers exist that need to be resolved?

Ireland has significant environmental resources, which provide many ecosystem services in terms of tourism, recreation, health and wellbeing. It is important that our natural heritage is managed, maintained, protected and where possible enhanced. By encouraging local authorities to review/update their respective heritage and biodiversity plans / green infrastructure strategies over the lifetime of the Strategy, a greater understanding of what the current status of this heritage is.

Considering a potential high level regional heritage plan to highlight the key environmental resources, potential barriers and opportunities would be useful to help grow the region while providing the appropriate protection and management of environmental sensitivities.

Where will public recreational spaces be provided for citizens and what are appropriate levels?

Considering the use of areas at risk of significant flood risk as liner parks may be suitable areas for recreation. In particular, given the limited land uses usually considered suitable in high flood risk areas.

Possible re-development of vacant sites, for example (once suitably remediated) may provide pocket-parks which could act as both refuges from urban noise sources and serve support for urban biodiversity.

How do we enable modes of 'active transport' or 'smarter travel'?

Developing the infrastructure within the region where remote working can be supported, and may result in limiting the need to commute. Providing sufficient public transport alternatives and walking / cycling infrastructure to grow the numbers availing of non-vehicular transport. Providing sufficient charging points for electric vehicles may also assist.

Consideration of how to implement 'active transport' / 'smarter travel' recommendations could be explored within regional transport strategies and metropolitan area plans.

Appendix II – Comments on the Scoping Report

Section 5.3 – Scoping of Strategic Environmental Assessment Topics

5.3.1 – Population and Human Health

We note that the Key supporting policy under this section relates to the *HSE Healthy Ireland Framework and Wellbeing 2015-25*. There is also merit from a population perspective to include a specific reference to the *National Planning Framework*.

The EPA SoER and Ireland's Environment section of the EPA website, provides environmental related health information and updates on related indicators such as on bathing water, air quality, drinking water and wastewater status.

5.3.2 – Biodiversity, Flora and Fauna

In relation to the Opportunities, bullet 2 “*More Coherent protection and enhancement of biodiversity as a whole on a regional and local level*”, could also consider including a reference to ‘monitoring’ and ‘management’ also. Could also amend this bullet to “*Support national level policies at a regional level to protect and enhance natural heritage assets*”.

Opportunities Bullet 7 could also be amended to recognise the opportunity to establish a coordinated regional approach to habitat mapping, ecosystem services and river basin catchment management.

5.3.4 – Water

In relation to Opportunities for the ‘Water’ topic, the wording of bullet 2, should be amended ‘addressing its impacts’ is vague in detail.

Improve water quality by identifying and addressing ~~its~~ impacts on the water environment

Under ‘Challenges’, additional challenges could include:

ensuring leisure activities do not adversely impact on the aquatic environment, dredging and dumping at sea activities should also be considered here.

Drinking Water

The priority areas for drinking water and wastewater are set out in the Remedial Action List and the Priority Areas (formerly called the Wastewater Action List). These are the areas where the EPA have identified that there are deficiencies leading either to a failure to meet the drinking water standards or the UWWT directive or licence standards (meaning there is a potential impact on receiving waters). These priority areas, should be taken into consideration in the RSES and the SEA making process.

Wastewater

In relation to consideration of Wastewater within the RSES area. Urban waste water discharges into the environment from over 1,000 urban areas (cities, towns and villages) in Ireland. Waste water has the potential to pollute rivers, lakes and coastal waters, and create a health risk, if it is not adequately treated.

An assessment carried out by Irish Water on wastewater indicates that many plants are not capable of taking additional capacity as they are not meeting the discharge conditions and this situation will not change in many of them in the near future (i.e. by 2021). This means that if additional development occurs in these areas, it is likely to push the discharge over the licence limits and therefore potentially impact on water quality. Irish Water holds the data for this which shows

where the constraints are but the EPA recognises that most are in smaller towns and villages rather than the larger urban centres. If these licenses are to be complied with, many of these areas will not be capable of supporting additional development as it currently stands. This aspect needs taken into account in the RSES and SEA process.

In order to help direct resources where they are most needed, the EPA has targeted six priorities that must be addressed to protect our environment from the harmful effects of waste water:

1. Collect and treat waste water to the standards required by the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive.
2. Eliminate discharges of raw sewage.
3. Prevent pollution of rivers, lakes, estuaries and coastal waters by inadequately treated waste water, and restore affected waters to good quality (WFD environmental objectives).
4. Prevent pollution of bathing waters by inadequately treated waste water.
5. Protect freshwater pearl mussels at risk from waste water discharges.
6. Protect shellfish at risk from waste water discharges.

Using information available in mid-2017, the EPA identified 148 urban areas where improvements in the collection and treatment of waste water are necessary to resolve these six priority issues. The 148 areas are shown on the map at <https://gis.epa.ie/EPAMaps/SewageTreatment> and are also listed in the attached spreadsheet.

The key actions required to resolve these issues are:

1. Significant capital investment to upgrade waste water treatment systems.
2. Improvements in the operation and management of waste water systems to optimise performance.

The European Commission is taking Ireland to the Court of Justice of the European Union because of the failure to comply with the requirements of the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive. It is essential that Ireland improves waste water treatment at non-compliant areas, to ensure that waste water is treated to the required standards.

A planning authority must take waste water discharges into consideration when considering a planning application (refer to Regulation 43 of the Waste Water Discharge (Authorisation) Regulations). This means that a lack of treatment capacity may constrain development in some urban areas, until such time as discharges from these areas meet the necessary environmental standards.

Compliance with the requirements of Waste Water Discharge Authorisations is the key to reducing the environment impact of waste water on the receiving environment.

The key aspects highlighted above in relation to critical water related infrastructure need to be given due consideration in the RSES and the associated environmental assessments.

5.3.5 Air Quality

DCCAIE are at the advanced stages of preparing a clean air strategy for Ireland. Once finalised the policies, Objectives and actions in the RSES should reflect the relevant key actions, commitments and recommendations in this Strategy.

Amending Opportunity Bullet 4 for clarity “*Encourage modal shift away from private vehicular transport to more sustainable options, especially in towns and cities*”;

Under ‘Challenges’, an additional challenge could relate to ‘emissions from industry’ within the region.

Road Transport

Our transport system is highly fossil fuel dependent, which results in significant emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs) and air pollutants that are contained in exhaust fumes. Overall, 19.5% (11.3 Mt CO₂eq) of Ireland’s GHG emissions are from the transport sector, and this proportion is expected to increase substantially by 2020.

A key challenge to be considered will be how to protect and maintain good air quality while also accommodating increased number of vehicles and possible port-related traffic over the lifetime of the RSES.

The actions set out in the Department of Transport’s *Smarter Travel – A Sustainable Transport Future* should be implemented in the Strategy to improve air quality. These include actions to reduce travel demand, increase alternatives to the private car and improve the efficiency of motorised transport. Enhanced incentives to encourage vehicle owners to switch to electric options should also be encouraged.

Air Pollution and Transport

The transport sector accounted for 12% of all air pollutant emissions in 2015 and is one of the largest contributors to particulate matter pollution in cities. The diesel car fleet is a key source of this particulate pollution. There are significant human health impacts from particulate matter (PM) and nitrogen oxides (NO_x) emissions, which include cardiovascular disease, lung disease and heart attacks (EPA, 2015). This points to a clear need to reduce transport-related pollution emissions and should be recognised and reflected in RSES commitments.

Noise Pollution

Noise pollution is a serious health concern affecting quality of life and wellbeing, and road transport is one of the main sources of environmental noise pollution in Europe. The European Commission recently published the first comprehensive overview of EU environmental policies and laws covering noise. This review has concluded that the Directive remains highly relevant as ‘*excessive noise is the second-worst environmental cause of ill health behind only ultra-fine particulate matter air pollution*’. Most member states are concerned about the lack of enforcement mechanisms for noise reducing measures.

The objectives of EU and Irish noise legislation is “*to avoid, prevent or reduce harmful effects on human health and the environment as a whole*”, and this includes noise nuisance. To this effect, the RSES should ensure this requirement is complied with. The assessment and management of noise from the main infrastructural transport sources (roads, rail, and airports) are governed by the Environmental Noise Directive and associated 2006 Environmental Noise Regulations (S.I. 140 of 2006). In this context, as appropriate, the RSES should promote the implementation of Environmental Noise Directive and associated national regulations. <http://www.environ.ie/environment/noise/si-140-2006-environmental-noise-regulations-2006>

Available Noise Action Plans should be considered also and reviewed as required, to reflect the Plan period and associated development proposals. Consideration should be given to any relevant noise maps, and action plans. Strategic noise maps are designed to assess noise exposure resulting from major roads, railways and airports. Noise action plans are designed to act as a means of managing environmental noise through land use planning, traffic management and control of noise sources. The third round of noise mapping is currently underway in Ireland and will be completed in 2018. <http://noise.eionet.europa.eu/help.html>.

Consideration should be given to protect, where relevant, any designated quiet areas in open country. In 2003, the EPA commissioned a research project to establish baseline data for the identification of quiet areas in rural locations. Quiet Areas are defined as “*an area in open country, substantially unaffected by anthropogenic noise.*” A range of minimum distance criteria from man-made noise sources such as urban areas, industry and major road sources were defined, and the report includes several key recommendations for the identification and control of Quiet Areas.

In seeking to minimise transport related noise, it would be useful for the RSES to acknowledge and support the need for a National-level Noise Policy / Strategy. Devising a National Noise Policy or Strategy will be an essential component if Ireland is to adequately address transport-related and other key sources of noise (including industry, construction, & domestic noise nuisance).

In addition to engineering and technology based solutions needed for mitigating transport noise, options focusing on preventative and management aspects should also be considered. Options looking at utilisation of more environmentally friendly alternatives, such as public and private electric transport, and more attractive means of transport modes in the RSES area could be considered.

5.3.6 Climatic Factors

Opportunity Bullet Point 4 could be amended like that described in the above comment on air quality.

Climate Change Mitigation

At national level, the National Policy Position (DECLG, 2014) and the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 provide the policy framework for actions. In combination with EU-level emissions targets for 2020 and 2030, these specify the short-term actions and longer-term strategy to advance mitigation and adaptation actions.

The relevant transport-related actions and measures in the *National Mitigation Plan* (DCCAE, 2017) should be considered and addressed as appropriate in the RSES. The RSES should describe how it proposes to support Ireland’s urgent and growing need to reduce its CO₂ and air pollutant emissions and transition to a low carbon society.

A national climate policy goal in the *Draft National Planning Framework* is to reduce overall emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂) by at least 80% of 1990 levels by 2050. Ireland also has various targets in the transport sector that it must achieve, including an obligation to deliver 10% of transport energy from renewable sources by 2020. These stringent goals will require a major transformation in how our transport network is operated and managed. The RSES should consider how best to support and implement the relevant aspects of the National Planning Framework.

There is an urgent need for better urban and spatial planning, as well as a major investment programme to encourage much more fuel-efficient transport, a switch to cleaner and alternative fuels, a rapid increase in the electrification of our car stock and a very significant shift from private car to public transport. Without these measures, Ireland will fall well short of meeting its various targets in the transport sector, and of ultimately reducing its emissions of CO₂ by at least 80% by 2050. The RSES should include commitments to support the transitions required in the transport sector.

Climate Change Adaptation

There is an urgent need for the transport sector to adapt to the effects of climate change, including flooding, extreme weather events and managing increasing volumes of runoff. The RSES should consider the impacts on local and regional exposure and vulnerability to weather and climate events, and projected changes to these due to climate change. The assessment of the impact of climate change should be explicit and consider any adaptation response required. Traffic flows, preferred commuter transport mode and associated impact on traffic volume/congestion is strongly influenced by weather conditions, and not just weather extremes, which should also be considered.

The inclusion of a commitment preparation of a Regional Climate Adaptation Strategy should be considered for inclusion in the RSES

5.3.7 Material Assets

The first Opportunity bullet could include a reference to modern communications infrastructure.

Alternative Fuels

The use of alternative fuels, including electricity, forms a significant part of government policy to reduce transport emissions. Under the EU's Renewable Energy Directive (2009/28/EC), Ireland is obliged to deliver 10% of transport energy by renewable sources by 2020. The objectives of *Smarter Travel* and the *National Policy Framework for Alternative Fuels Infrastructure for Transport* (DTTAS, 2017) should be supported in the RSES.

5.3.9 Landscape

Opportunity could also include coordination of protection of sensitive and high landscape character areas in inter-county and inter regional context.

Coordinated regional approach should be adopted to identifying and protection, regional LCA's opportunity.

A commitment should be included in the RSES to the preparation Regional Landscape Character Assessment (RLCA). This should follow the relevant aspects of the methodology applied for the National Landscape Character Assessment (NLCA) expected to commence later in 2018. The RLCA should commence on completion of the NLCA.

Chapter 6 – Preliminary Environmental Baseline

We welcome the commitment in the Scoping report that the overarching 7 key recommendations in Chapter 13 of the EPA SoER, will be integrated into the RSES.

We note the inclusion of *Table 6.1 Baseline Data Sources* and suggested potential data sources and potential extent of assessment based on data sources. The series of ongoing EPA reports on drinking water, waste water, water quality, air quality etc. should be integrated as appropriate.

Possible Health / Quality of Life data may include OPW records on flooding incidents of properties or businesses, Local Authority noise / odour complaints, illegal dumping incidents etc.

For 'Water', specific reference should be made to the EPA UWWT Reports where discharges to surface waters (including coastal) are identified as needing appropriate remediation / investment.

For 'Climatic Factors' topic, the www.climateireland.ie platform could be a useful additional resource

Under 'Landscape' topic, each LA area has their own LCA, and while different approaches may have been undertaken for different counties, a list of the key visually sensitive areas within the region (on a county by county basis could be prepared using existing information at a Local Authority level).

Chapter 7 – Proposed Framework for Assessing Environmental Effects

The preparation of the SEA Environmental Objectives should be set in the context of the environmental objectives set in the National Planning Framework to ensure consistency, while also expanding on the regional specific variation and issues/challenges that exist.

Table 7.1 – Draft SEA Environmental Objectives

Under the 'Water' topic, a sub-objective should be included for ensuring the Floods Directive and National CFRAMS programme is implemented, and supporting implementation of relevant actions and measures set out in the final FRMP's once adopted.

Effecting Coastal Zone Management and associated implications for land use zoning should also be considered for inclusion.

Under 'Air Quality'; Noise considerations should also be represented as a specific Draft Objective and Target in *Table 7.1 – Draft SEA Environmental Objectives*.

Under 'Climate' topic

Support and facilitate the preparation of local authority climate adaptation strategies

Under 'Landscape', aspects such as protecting streetscapes, seascapes of recognised quality and enhancing provision of and access to green space in urban areas.

Under Material Assets (and relating specifically to Waste)

- Opportunity to support RWMP recommendations to establish buffer areas between industrial/commercial areas and residential areas. This is in the context of avoiding or minimise proximity to activities which can potentially generate odorous emissions / nuisance. The types of activities would typically be waste management (waste transfer stations, waste processing activities, composting), food and drink production related activities (cooking, food processing, rendering activities).

The RSES should also take into consideration the need to provide for adequate separation between sensitive receptors and industrial activities in order to minimise the potential for nuisance issues.

Section 7.3 Outline of Alternatives

There is merit in considering a tiered approach to the consideration of alternatives in the SEA for the RSES, to align with the new national planning hierarchy. The EPA guidance document on the Development of Assessment of Alternatives in SEA will be useful in this regard.

The convening of alternatives workshops would be useful with key stakeholders participating to inform the development, consideration and environmental appraisal of the RSES options and combinations of RSES options.