



RESPONSE to Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly's

Draft Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy

The Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) is the representative body for all councils in Northern Ireland. It is currently the only functioning, constituted, all Party institution developing government policy – albeit local government policy - within NI and advocating NI's needs externally.

NILGA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly's (EMRA) draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES). We recognise that border area councils in Northern Ireland will be responding to EMRA on issues of local and regional importance, therefore our response will focus on issues of pan-regional / North – South importance.

We welcome the EMRA's vision 'to create a sustainable and competitive region that supports the health and wellbeing of our people and places, from urban to rural, with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunities for all'.

It is encouraging that the RSES has been prepared in collaboration with local authorities and government agencies in Northern Ireland. Our councils have powerful legislation to be economic and community hubs and they want to continue to develop and secure cross-border strategic infrastructure and economic projects in order to deliver inclusive growth and sustainable places. As such the vision of the RSES is mutually complementary with the councils' local development plans, community plans, economic strategies and regional cooperation initiatives. We would encourage EMRA to collaborate with NILGA and councils in Northern Ireland to investigate opportunities for joint funding of initiatives where required to deliver maximum regional benefits. Existing **cross-border partnerships**, such as the East Border Region and ICBAN as well as their member councils, can play a vital role in identifying, promoting and securing funding for such initiatives. We would also encourage EMRA to consider the role councils in Northern Ireland can play in advocating the benefits of synergies with the RSES to Northern Ireland's government departments.

In terms of **all-island cohesion**, the draft RSES highlights the importance of collaborating for mutual advantage on economic development & promotion, coordination of social & physical infrastructure and environmental management. The strategy notes the Dublin – Belfast corridor, greenways, blueways, North-South interconnector, communications links, tourism and environmental management as areas of current cross-border cooperation. NILGA would agree there is a strong desire to maintain the long-term history of North – South cooperation, as well as between the island and the UK – to ensure the economy and the Peace Process is protected. The interconnectedness of economic growth, industrial processes and social cohesion between Northern Ireland and ROI must be recognised and safeguarded.

The RSES's **Economic Strategy** focuses on smart specialisation, clustering, orderly growth, placemaking and future proof. NILGA believes there are advantages to be gained if EMRA, NI councils and other relevant bodies collaborate to determine how supply chains and businesses on each side of the border can maximise opportunities of smart specialisation and clustering, particularly along the Dublin – Belfast corridor. We would also encourage EMRA to reach out to the private sector and education sector in Northern Ireland since this will be critical to the development of a high growth and highly skilled society in the region.

The RSES details one **regional policy objective** on all-island cohesion: *In cooperation with the relevant departments in Northern Ireland, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly will support mutually beneficial policy development and activity in the areas of spatial infrastructure planning and related spheres.* Given the opportunities presented under the economic strategy, NILGA would recommend that this objective is specifically extended to cover economic growth.

NILGA welcomes the drive to strengthen cross-border synergy in services and functions on the Dublin-Belfast corridor and encourages EMRA to liaise with NILGA to put in place arrangements for collaboration with councils in Northern Ireland in order to best achieve this, as it will be critical to transforming the region's enterprise base and to ensuring competitiveness in international markets.

NILGA encourages EMRA to take account of emerging **City & Growth Deals** in Northern Ireland which have the potential to maximise economic growth prospects for the island. These partnerships will accelerate delivery of economic and infrastructural projects, tackle regional inequalities and be a catalyst for social renewal and inclusive growth in Northern Ireland.

The RSES recognises that access to **international gateways** is fundamental for traded goods and services in order to maintain economic competitiveness at regional and international levels. NILGA therefore welcomes the recent initiative by eight councils along the Eastern corridor between Belfast & Dublin to explore opportunities for collaborative investment and would encourage EMRA to engage with the City Region deal partners as well as neighbouring council areas in Northern Ireland. Rather than an insular approach we would propose that given the interconnectedness of the economies and supply chains in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Great Britain, NILGA can act as an axis for East – West engagement with appropriate local authority groupings (in particular the Borderlands Growth Deal area) and local government associations in England, Scotland and Wales, around port infrastructure, key transport links and growth opportunities.

We note the **synergies on infrastructure** that are prevalent in all three regional assembly plans, in particular the enhancement of the road and rail network, opening of the canals network and digital connectivity investments. Addressing these issues on an all-island basis across local, regional and central government will bring greater attention, agreed prioritisation and synergies of resources. We would call on the three Regional Assemblies to work with NILGA and our councils to examine how an all-island approach can be facilitated where required. It is to our mutual advantage that regionally significant infrastructure projects on both sides of the border are completed.

We recognise the importance of **digital connectivity** for the island as a whole and would encourage EMRA and both governments to examine an all-island approach to connectivity and growth, particularly where individual national plans and initiatives have failed to deliver, most notably in the border area. As the border corridor is significantly disadvantaged in terms of broadband connectivity, there will be synergy if policy makers and operators can work together to provide solutions for the border counties. Opportunities to connect to Project Kelvin and other planned full fibre networks should be explored by EMRA and the border area councils.

The RSES rightly recognises the risks associated with Brexit for the region, both in terms of infrastructure and growth. Despite the future uncertainty surrounding **the UK's exit from the EU**, it will be essential that successful cross-border collaboration between the regional assembly and border area local authorities can continue. NILGA would support the creation of a ring-fenced Brexit fund for the border region – this should be over and above any funding secured under the PEACE PLUS programme and would merit a joined-up approach between the two governments.

NILGA maintains that there must be a **legal framework for all-island cooperation** and would call for an evaluation of the levels of cooperation under the 2010 “Framework for Cooperation - Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland & the Republic of Ireland” with a view to recommending how it can be bolstered. This should take account of

- (a) the 2015 Review of Public Administration which conferred the responsibility for planning, creating Local Development Plans and Community Plans to councils.
- (b) Regional strategic collaboration on City & Growth Deals that councils are undertaking to develop infrastructure and economic growth in Northern Ireland, in addition to continuing to build strategic alliances and collaborate for mutual synergies across the island.

In the absence of the Assembly and a statutory, Ministerial Partnership Panel for Northern Ireland, the formative “*Central – Local Government Political Partnership Forum*” provides political scrutiny and joint awareness on critical issues affecting the sector and more widely. The structure of the forum is illustrated in the attached appendix and NILGA would welcome dialogue and encourage the EMRA to engage with this cross-party body on issues of North - South significance.

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