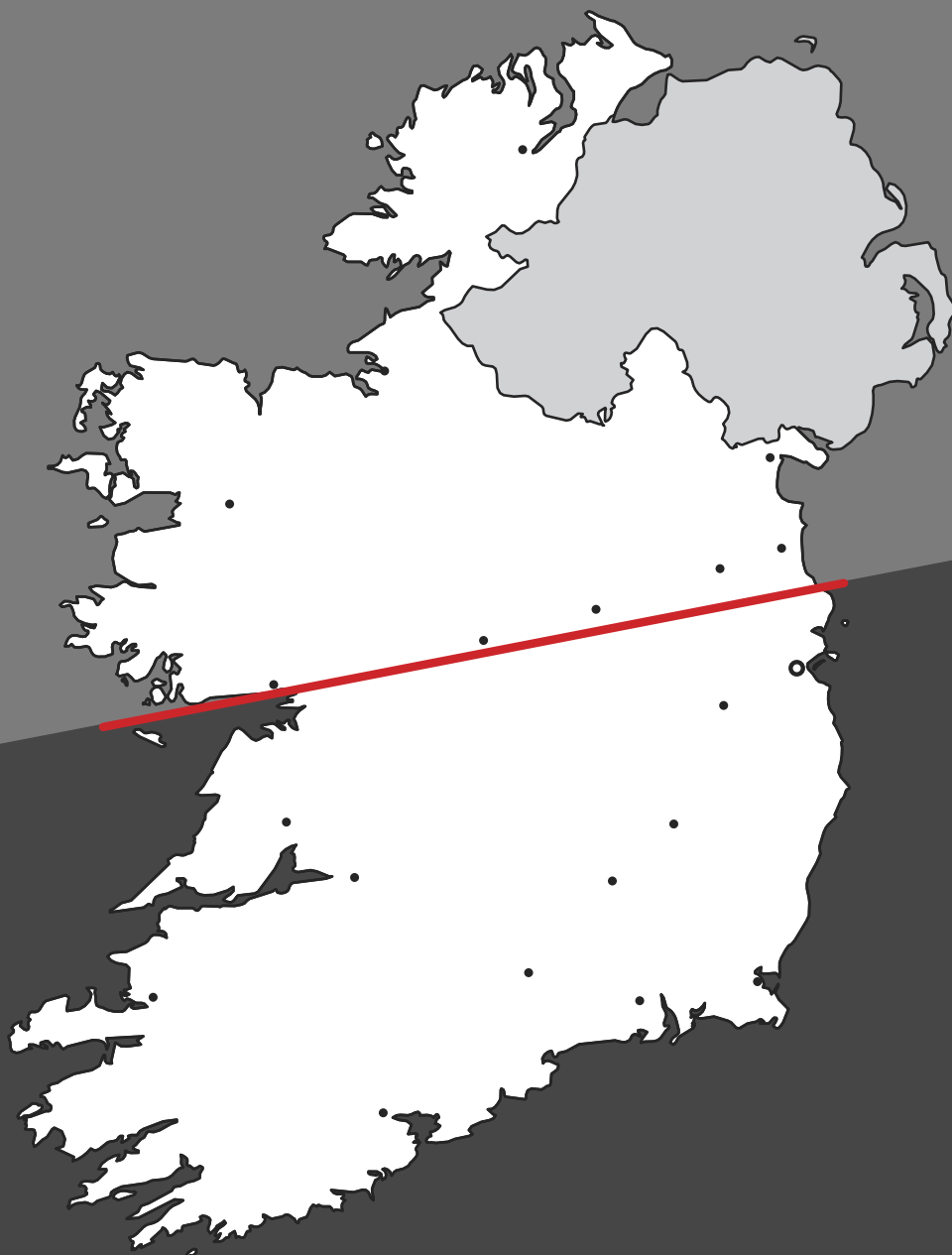


Centre for  
Cross Border Studies



# ACCELERATING GROWTH

TOWARDS AN ALL-ISLAND PERSPECTIVE  
ON REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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A Discussion Paper

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# Executive Summary

- Project 2040 (2018) with its National Planning Framework and its National Development Plan has given a strong strategic framework to regional and spatial development in the Republic of Ireland.
- Its proposed approach of strengthening the four urban cities of Cork-Limerick-Galway-Waterford to balance the growth of Dublin and its Eastern city-region is necessary and positive; it needs further emphasis on the four cities working together in partnership as a counter-balancing city-region.
- Central flaws in Project 2040's spatial strategy are:
  - lack of focus on the fundamental regional imbalance in the State i.e. the Dublin-Galway Urban Line is a clear regional economic divide, with the counties above that line falling significantly behind in economic and social development, compared to the rest of the country.
  - lack of an all-island perspective and myopia on spatial hierarchies within Northern Ireland; as a result, the opportunity is missed to address the reality that growth in the NW/Borders region is strongly contingent on growth within Northern Ireland, often more so than on growth in the other regions of the Republic.
  - To achieve true regional balance, as aspired to in Project 2040, there is a need to prioritise and step-change the development of northern counties in the Republic.
- The central development challenge for the NW/Borders and adjacent rural West region is how to significantly build self-generating internal innovation dynamics and creative capabilities and enhance and enrich its external linkages to proximate city regions.
- Such proximate city-regions include Dublin/East and the Atlantic Urban Arc of Cork-Limerick-Galway-Waterford; however, a more comprehensive and ambitious all-island economic development model would really need to consider the potential for a third urban-rural network on the island; the resulting triad of city-regions and urban-rural networks would have 2-2.5m populations each, similar to the scale of Manchester and capable of greater synergistic and balanced growth as a result.
- Whether a coherent and effective development of this grouping can be articulated and achieved across different local government structures and two jurisdictions is a major question to be addressed and is beyond the scope of this paper to consider.
- As both jurisdictions on the island are amongst the most centralised administrations in the world, such aligned development for mutual benefit of all communities on both sides of the border would be facilitated by much greater decentralisation and alignment of real powers.
- Globally all areas are interconnected and linked through urbanisation, and scale and proximity matter. On the island of Ireland, inclusive economic growth based on interdependent and balanced spatial structures and urban-rural networks is overall complementary and mutually supportive. Whether, by how much and in what form such growth can be realised will reflect the evolution in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland of major changes in perspectives, strategic development actions, and significant devolution of practical powers.

# 1. Introduction

This paper identifies the importance of developing a strong focus on the economy of the Border region as part of the Ireland 2040 National Planning Framework.<sup>1</sup> This focus comes from two imperatives:

- a) the need to improve the likelihood that a true balanced regional economy can be developed in the north-west, as aspired to in Ireland 2040.
- b) it acknowledges the unacceptable slow rate of economic development of the border region, and the opportunity to redress this downward trend by encouraging the synergies and economies of scale from potential development hubs and the broader urban-rural network encompassing both jurisdictions of the border.

Project Ireland 2040's National Planning Framework sets out ambitious plans and targets for the country to have achieved by 2040. The Framework notes that the Republic's Northern and Western region justifies a particular focus due to a historically lower level of urbanisation compared to other regions, proximity to the border and risks posed by Brexit. The Framework identifies the importance of the Letterkenny-Derry and Drogheda-Dundalk-Newry cross-border development hubs in economic strategies, and also the importance of Sligo as such a regional development hub. Various proposals are made in the National Development Plan to 2030 to address the north-west and border region, including improving transport and the peace dividend. There is reference to the targeted border Regional Economic Development fund and to various tourism and amenity improvements along the border region. However, a fundamental weakness is that none of the proposed initiatives have an ambition to improve the economic profile of the border region in a substantial and transformative way.

The recently published paper by the NESC, *'Shared Island: Projects, Progress & Policy The Island Economy'*,<sup>2</sup> points to the fact that the expansion of cross-border trade and the increased interconnections of business on the island mean that an island economy is already under development. There is a need to progress towards a sustainable pattern of economic development in both parts of the island and, in particular, the scope to promote the development of successful economic sectors on an all-island basis. Such a development would most likely have the biggest impact on the border region; investment on both sides of the border region that is based on a shared economic development strategy is now needed to ensure that this region can develop an economic platform that is truly in balance with the rest of the country, in line with the aspirations set out in Ireland 2040.

The perspective and framework presented in this paper was originally submitted as comments to the Department of Public Expenditure and Review's consultation to Renew progress of Project Ireland 2040 and the National Development Plan.<sup>3</sup> The perspective and framework were developed by the authors as a contribution to the discussion of regional development on the island of Ireland in the 50<sup>th</sup> celebration year of the founding of IT Sligo. The perspective and analysis here is building on the thought leadership of George Quigley, P.A. White, John Bradley, John Moran and others, as well as the rich framework and insights of Jane Jacobs, the renowned urbanologist, and the practical on-the-ground work of the local authorities and associated stakeholders grouped in the three cross-border partnerships of the North West Strategic Growth

<sup>1</sup> <https://npf.ie/project-ireland-2040-national-planning-framework/>.

<sup>2</sup> [http://files.nesc.ie/nesc\\_secretariat\\_papers/sec\\_25\\_SI\\_%20The\\_Island\\_Economy.pdf](http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_secretariat_papers/sec_25_SI_%20The_Island_Economy.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Review and Renew (2020), [https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/d3f3a-review-to-renew-the-public-consultation-of-the-review-of-the-national-development-plan\\_](https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/d3f3a-review-to-renew-the-public-consultation-of-the-review-of-the-national-development-plan_)

Partnership (NWSGP), the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) and the East Border Region (EBR). These ideas have now been further developed as a CCBS Research Paper. The Institute has just become the Sligo College in the new Atlantic Technology University (ATU)<sup>4</sup> and it is timely that this all-island perspective is brought to a wider audience for consideration and debate.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlantic\\_Technological\\_University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlantic_Technological_University)

## 2. SPATIAL PERSPECTIVE OF PROJECT 2040

### 2.1 CURRENT PERSPECTIVE

Project 2040's National Planning Framework, and its focus on the spatial hierarchy of urban-rural structures and forces, has provided a vital blue-print for developing spatial strategy at national, regional and local level, and is influencing positively a wide range of social and economic policies.

The overall vision of Project 2040 acknowledges that there is an over-concentration of people, homes and jobs in Dublin and sets out to achieve balanced growth across the regions outside of the Dublin metropolitan area. The strategy seeks to focus more concentrated growth on the regions, as an alternative to the ESRI "business-as-usual" scenario, and to move away from the trend whereby Dublin increasingly absorbs a greater proportion of the Republic's population.

The strategy has three spatial focuses, broadly reflecting the Eastern and Midlands Region, Southern Region, and Northern and Western Region.

- a) Developing Dublin as a global city of scale by densification and consolidation, rather than urban sprawl, with strong international connectivity.
- b) Building up the urban centres of Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford to become cities of scale, potentially combining as a cluster in counter-balance to Dublin and "*partners in regional/interregional networks*" (NPF, 2018, p. 22) as viable economic alternatives to Dublin and the east coast. The growth of these four cities and Dublin are the 'Urban Ireland' expected to take up half of the growth. The case study of the Atlantic Economic Corridor (NPF, 2018, p.41) brings out the connections and linkages between at least three of the urban areas outside Dublin.
- c) 'turn around' the North and West and Midlands regions to harvest their potential for focused investment. This strategy assumes that "*the Northern and Western region, as well as part of the Midlands, are located beyond the hinterland of cities*" (NPF, p.11).

Significantly, the NPF identifies Sligo and Athlone as regional development hubs that will need to fulfil regional roles to a greater extent than elsewhere, and sees Galway City exerting a strong influence in the southern part of the Northern and Western NUTS2 Region. It also acknowledges the importance of the cross-border interactions between Letterkenny and Derry, and that Drogheda-Dundalk-Newry must be taken into account.

The strategy presented in the NPF has obvious merit as the next phase in the development of a national economy – i.e. by building up a limited number of regional cities to balance the distribution of the economy across the regions. However, there is a tacit acknowledgement in the NPF that the north-west will not be developed economically at the rate of the other regions of Ireland. This is of concern as the north-west region is already well behind the rest of the country and the NPF will in fact widen the gap further by channelling the talent pool of the NW and most of the inward investment towards these additional urban growth centres.

## 2.2 DEVELOPMENT

Project 2040's core strategy of balancing and containing Dublin/Mideast growth by building counter-balancing urban centres of Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford, is a strong initial foundation towards achieving balanced regional development (Figure 1).

Project 2040's hierarchy of cities, regional towns and villages reflects the levels of activities and services at different scales of urban-rural habitation (Northern Ireland's Investment Board uses a similar hierarchy of principal cities, regional towns, smaller towns/centres and villages (<https://sibni.org/>). This approach reinforces the focus on the four cities acting as partners in networks and together to allow for higher-scale specialisation and activities. It is noteworthy that these four cities are all located in the *Atlantic Urban Arc* of Waterford-Cork-Limerick-Galway, which is a positive geographical rebalancing from the dominant Dublin-East region.

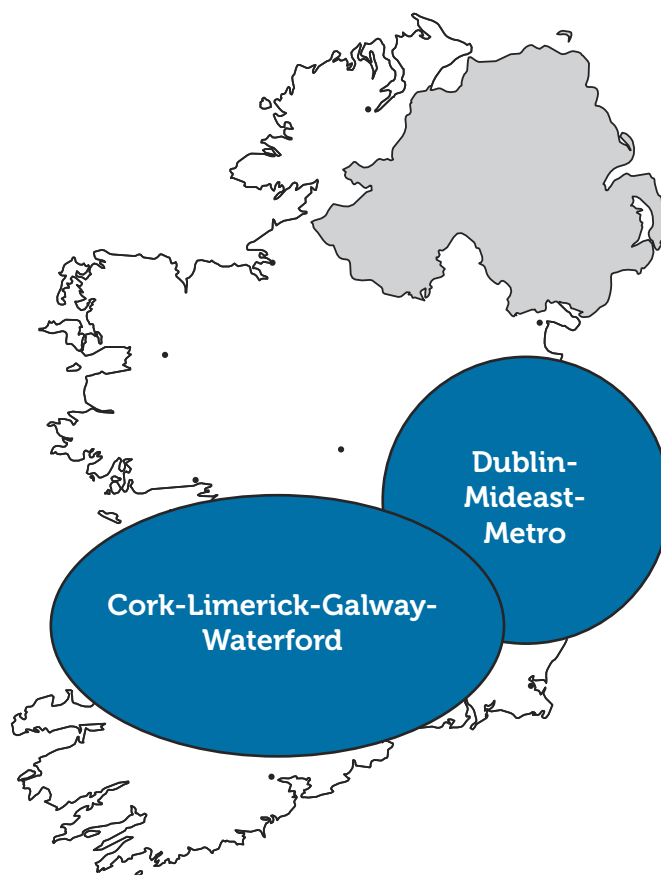


Figure 1: Project 2040: Vision of balanced regional development of Republic

John Moran, former Chair of the Land Development Agency, makes the linkage explicit.

*"I have suggested the development of a Western Economic Corridor ...with a motorway from Limerick to Waterford would mean that Cork, Waterford and Galway would each be only one hour ...from Limerick (as a) new networked urban cluster (to) provide a genuine alternative affordable quality of life to Dublin ...high-speed (rail) transport could connect our new urban cluster (of regional cities) with Dublin and shrink the width of our country ... (to within) less than an hour"*

(John Moran, *Business Post*, 11/12/2016).

More tantalisingly, some interesting questions are raised by the dynamic perspective of Jane Jacobs, in her *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (1985). Jacobs stressed that "*Cities are unique in their abilities to shape and reshape the economies of other settlements, including those far removed from them geographically*" (p. 32). Jacobs goes on to point out that city-regions typically not only produce for their own population and businesses but that this typically is at a scale that provides for others outside the city region. Jacobs concludes that these '*import-replacing cities*' achieve this scale of productivity and diversity through generating markets, jobs, transplants, technology and capital, as the great urbanising forces.

Within the core Project 2040 spatial strategy, the key question raised by Jacobs' dynamic framework is to challenge the extent to which the Republic's five urban cities have created city-regions. It seems clear that Dublin now has generated a dynamic city-region spreading way out across the Eastern part of the country, with markets for services, food, construction, etc., jobs for many people in both the private and public sector, transplants spreading out through the region (e.g. to Meath, Kilkenny etc.), shared technology (e.g. Trinity (software), UCD (agri-tech. etc.)) and capital (both for lending and equity finance).



On smaller scales but in similar fashion, it can be concluded that Cork and Limerick at least, and arguably Galway and Waterford, have created distinct city-regions in their immediate hinterlands. The strength of overseas operations (called in Jacobs' terms "*transplants*") apparent in all these cities and their immediate hinterland both complicates and completes the picture.

The key question for the Project 2040 Strategy posed by Jacobs' framework is whether the four cities outside of Dublin can network and evolve linkages together to form a city-region of a similar scale and dynamic to that of Dublin (which will always of course retain a premier role as Ireland's only global city). Strengthening Jacobs' urbanising forces, especially within the counterbalancing Atlantic Urban Arc, is key to achieving an east-west balanced growth within the Republic. However, pertaining to this analysis, it does not bring the north-west region into a similar level of economic balance.

Following from the above analysis of what is proposed, it is worth considering possible refocusing of the existing core strategy *within* Project Ireland 2040:

- a specific goal and strategy of **building Dublin and its global capabilities as Ireland's only international city**, in competition and co-operation with similar global cities in EU and UK;
- **a much stronger focus on the integration and linking up of the four urban centres within the Atlantic Urban Arc**, similar in scale and role to the Eastern Dublin mega polis, with clear priorities and investments in interconnections and economies of scale (for sectoral clustering, air and rail links, universities, hospitals etc.);
- **building linkages and synergies to maximise and spread economic and social growth** between this southern and western urban arc with
  - greater Dublin as Ireland's only global city (e.g. high-speed train) and
  - the other more rural regions in the West and Northwest (for e.g. technology transfer, sectoral clusters, cultural development and exchange and shared Higher and Further Education, as with the new Technology Universities in particular);
- **proactive use of post-covid Remote Working** to build stronger towns ("the fifteen-minute city") and villages within the larger urban areas, and to encourage migration of jobs and families to less developed areas; which overall implies a (desired) shift in population and jobs from central city areas, with a corresponding reduction of about 10% in population in such central city areas;<sup>5</sup>
- **a greater priority on the need for sustainability** over the medium-term, especially in the areas of energy and water management/flooding; recognising that meeting the climate action targets for 2030 requires immediate actions in order to be achieved; and
- **a greater priority for supporting people capability and talent development**; the current proportion of overall public funding going to primary, secondary and tertiary education and training needs to be re-thought in light of the poorer educational performance and social disadvantage within the population overall and of the lesser new sector skills and expertise being developed in Ireland's under-developed regions.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://wordpress.com/post/joinupthedots101.wordpress.com/175> and Economist (2021) "Covid-19 and cities: the cracked egg" (11/9/21 p.61).



## 2.3 FLAWS IN THE NDP SPATIAL PERSPECTIVE

As already pointed out, one central flaw in Project 2040's spatial strategy is the **lack of focus on the fundamental regional imbalance in the State, i.e. that most of the less-developing areas are north of the Dublin-Galway line (Figure 2)**. This systematic imbalance needs to be acknowledged, addressed and actioned in an integrated way. The recent down-grade by the European Commission of the Northern and Western NUTs2 Region to a region in development (driven by the NW/Border region's relative decline) is a major red flag in this regard.<sup>6</sup>

Based on 25 economic, social and educational indicators, across the Republic's eight NUTs3 Regions, the NW/Borders Region ranks last or second last in almost all indicators. Counties Mayo, Roscommon, Longford and Louth, as well as much of rural County Galway beyond Galway City and environs have similar profiles. Of real concern is that Project 2040 accepts this situation and in fact assumes continued relative decline of the northern counties in the Republic (whilst offering some useful initiatives for key areas). **To achieve true regional balance, as aspired to in Project 2040, there is a need to prioritise and step-change the development of northern counties in the Republic.**

The other central flaw in Project 2040's spatial strategy is **its lack of an all-island perspective and myopia on spatial hierarchies within Northern Ireland**, as in Figure 3. Cross-border elements of the strategy are presented as bridges between two relatively self-contained units (understandable perhaps in the context of two existing jurisdictions), not as strategies that develop the same geographical region, with shared needs. This ignores the reality – and the implications – of dynamic spatial interdependence and shared spatial hierarchies.

The Republic's Project 2040 (2018) and its predecessors, and in general discussions on the regions, lack inclusion of the important role that regional developments in Northern Ireland (particularly the border region) have on the economic uplift of the Republic. Similarly, Northern Ireland's



**Figure 2:** Dublin-Galway City Line is the key regional divide. The nine counties\* north of the Dublin – Galway Urban Line contain:

- 8 of the 9 counties in the State who had a population decline over 1911-2011
- 8 of the 11 counties in 2016 with household disposable incomes of €39k or less
- 7 of the 8 counties in 2018 with disposable income of €18.6 or less per person

\* Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Monaghan, Cavan, Mayo, Roscommon, Longford and Louth

<sup>6</sup> NWRA, Region in Transition: The Way Forward" NWRA (2020)

Regional Development Strategy – RDS 2035 is focused (again understandably when a jurisdictional perspective is taken) on Northern Ireland alone.<sup>7</sup> In both strategies there is inclusion of some cross-border initiatives, as outlined in the Shared Framework, but these are typically presented as cross-border gateways, bridges and strategic corridors rather than initiatives that develops the *geographical region* collectively. It is noted that the mapping of regional influences in NWRA Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy, 2020-2032<sup>8</sup> is clearly developed on an all-island context, and the InterTradelreland mapping of all-island clusters is also a significant exception.<sup>9</sup>

In general, though, discussion in both jurisdictions tends to see regional development as relatively self-contained, with “cross-border” being activities across and between two distinct and self-contained economic and social units. Indeed, the Project 2040 discussion on cross-border co-operation contained in Chapter 7, “Working with Our Neighbours”, begins with ‘Ireland and the EU’, and *then* addresses in following sections Ireland and Northern Ireland. The question that might be asked is there a blind spot in the Ireland Project 2040 plan in respect of Northern Ireland (see Figure 3)? The thirteen border local authorities (grouped in NWSGP, ICBAN, and EBR<sup>10</sup>), the Northern and Western Regional Assembly (NWRA), InterTradelreland and others have developed initiatives and projects that reflect spatial integration, but such developments need to be underpinning Project 2040’s spatial strategy within an all-island perspective.

The two critical flaws of Project 2040’s spatial strategy – lack of an all-island perspective and Northern Ireland spatial context, and little or no visibility of addressing the systematic regional imbalance north of the Dublin-Galway Line – are linked. As a result, **Project 2040 misses the opportunity to address in a real way the reality that growth in the NW/Borders region is strongly contingent on growth within Northern Ireland, often more so than on growth in the other regions of the Republic.** Job expansion projects of one or two hundred in Derry, Enniskillen/Omagh, Newry or even the greater Belfast area, will generally have greater impact on adjacent Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan and Louth than similar job expansions in, say, Cork, Limerick, Galway or Dublin. Conversely, lack of recognition of this border region as an economic zone that needs critical support means that this region will become even more depopulated and underdeveloped compared to the rest of the island.



Figure 3: A Blind Spot?

<sup>7</sup> Department for Regional Development, Regional Development Strategy – RDS 2035: Building a Better Future, <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/regional-development-strategy-2035>.

<sup>8</sup> NWRA Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy, 2020-2032, <https://www.nwra.ie/pdfs/NWRA-RSES-2020-2032.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://intertradeireland.com/assets/publications/Mapping-the-Potential-for-All-Island-Sectoral-Ecosystems.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> The Northwest Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP) Involves Counties Derry and Donegal and has given rise to substantial FE/HE collaboration (<https://npf.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/0417-North-West-Regional-Development-Group.compressed.pdf>) Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) comprises 8 local authorities Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon, Mid-Ulster and Counties Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal. (<https://icban.com/>). Eastern Border Region (EBR) comprises six local authorities in the eastern coast on both sides of the border and is associated with the M1 project (<https://www.eastborderregion.com/>).

### 3. THE KEY REGIONAL DIVIDE IN THE REPUBLIC

#### 3.1 THE REAL REGIONAL DIVIDE IN THE REPUBLIC – THE DUBLIN-GALWAY CITY LINE

The reality of economic development in the Republic is that the Dublin-Galway Urban Line is a clear regional economic divide, with the counties above that line falling significantly behind in economic and social development, compared to the rest of the country.

The strategy in Project 2040 implies that the issue of regional balance in the Republic of Ireland will be addressed by balancing Dublin's growth with more growth in the rest of the country, driven by the growth of four other urban centres; with the assumption that these are broadly spread across the rest of the country. Within that is a prioritisation of the regional cities of Waterford, Cork, Limerick, Galway – which are clearly not 'evenly' spread across the country outside of Dublin.

The reality of economic development in the Republic is that the Dublin-Galway City Line is a regional economic divide, with the counties above that line falling significantly behind in economic and social development, compared to the rest of the country. Project 2040's current strategy of focusing most growth on the urban centres outside of Dublin will only accelerate this north-south divide within the Republic; by focusing on building up the economies of the four urban centres, and also further draining the rest of the country of talent – the very trend of Dublin that the Plan is aiming to control. While the objective that all regions outside Dublin/Mideast need broadly similar levels of catch-up is appropriate, Project 2040 downplays the real regional imbalance on the island by not proposing strong actions that will effectively address the needs of the entire geographical region north of the Dublin-Galway City line.

As shown in Figures 2 and 4, the Dublin-Galway City Line is a **key economic divide in the Republic**, with very different levels of regional development taking place above and below this line. For example, the nine counties above that line include:

- 8 of the 9 counties in the state who experienced population decline over 1911 – 2011;
- 8 of the 11 county/city areas in 2016 with household disposable incomes of €39k or less;
- 7 of the 8 counties in the state with disposable income in 2018 of € 18.6k or less per person.

This divergence will be reinforced by the post C19 and Brexit impacts, which as a result of a higher reliance on tourism and agribusiness in the Border Region and adjacent counties are expected to disproportionately have a negative impact.

This relative underdevelopment of the northern half of the country has been reflected recently in the downgrade of the

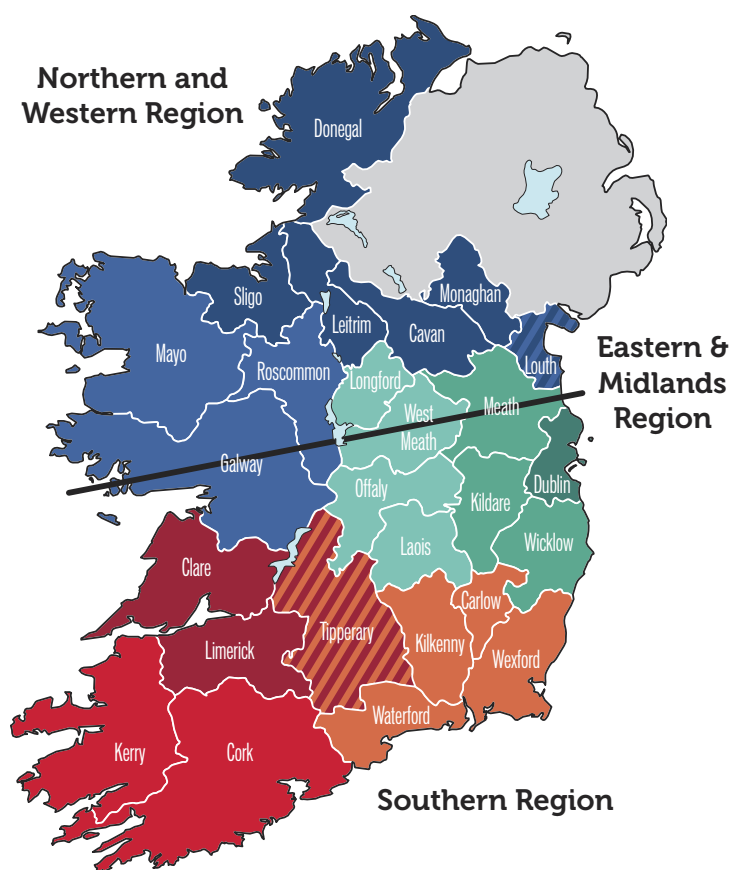


Figure 4: The Dublin-Galway City Line is the key regional divide (Source: CSO data)

Region from a Developed Region (with 100% or more of EU average GDP per person) to a Region in Transition (with between 75% to 100% of EU average GDP per person).<sup>11</sup> The decline is most obvious when the Border region itself is examined, as the success of Galway City and environs in particular masks the even further dis-improvement of the Border region and the West region's rural counties and areas (including rural Co. Galway).

### 3.2 BORDERS REGION AND ENVIRONS – SYSTEMATIC UNDERPERFORMANCE

The North-West and Mid-Borders Regions (of Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Monaghan and Cavan) are exceptionally and systematically underperforming and disadvantaged. The overall Northern and Western NUTs 2 Region in 2018 had the lowest GDP per capita of the four NUTs 2 regions on the island (i.e. the Republic's three and Northern Ireland), as in Figure 5. In particular, the Borders NUTs 3 region in 2015 had the lowest GDP per capita, and had declined in the previous period, in contrast to the West NUTs 3 region.

The sectoral structure of the Northwest Borders Region, as illustrated in Table 1, reflects a relatively high proportion of agriculture, about double that of the West region and nationally. In a Brexit context, with the agri-food industry post-Brexit being particularly exposed to new trade barriers and new competitors in the GB market, that makes it especially vulnerable. Both the Northwest and West regions' relatively high proportion of tourism services industry has made them particularly exposed to Covid and its economic impacts. The relatively lower proportion of fast-growth digital services, compared to the Dublin metropolis, in the West and especially in the Northwest, means less growth in these regions. Overall, the North-West Borders region is particularly vulnerable in the context of covid, Brexit and digitalisation, as summarised in Table 1.

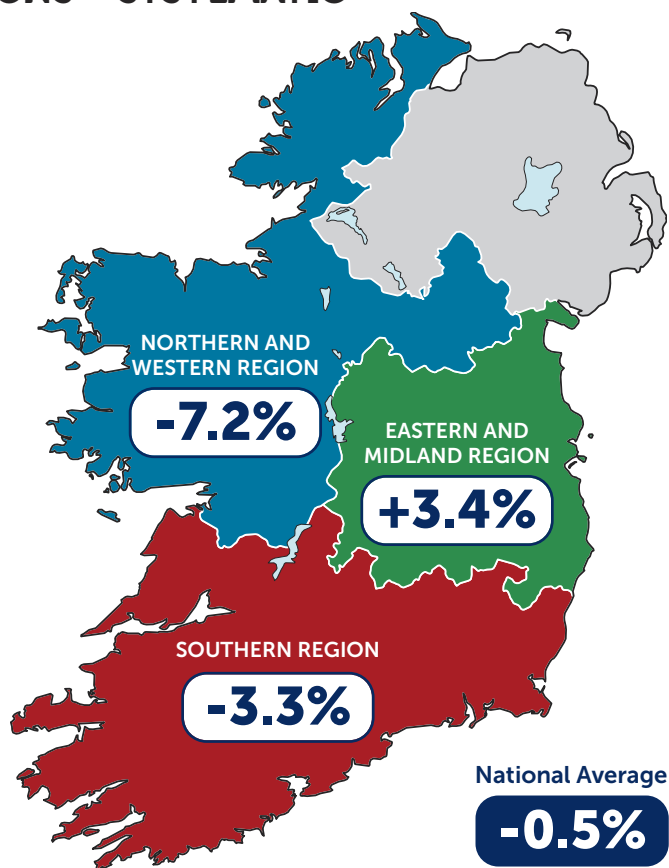


Figure 5: Northern and Western NUTs 2 region falls back to Transition Region, below EU average incomes. Source NWRA

#### Vulnerable sectoral structure in the context of Covid, Brexit and digitalisation

	NW/Borders	West	Dublin	State
Agriculture	13%	7%	0%	5%
Industry	21%*	22%	12%	19%
Services	66%**	71%**	87%***	76%

\*High food presence \*\*High tourism sector \*\*\* High international services presence

Table 1: Vulnerable sectoral structure in the context of Covid, Brexit and digitalisation [CSO Data]

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.nwra.ie/news/region-in-transition-the-way-forward/>.

Of the eight NUTs 3 regions in the Republic, the North-West region scores last or second-last in almost all of 25 key economic, social and educational indicators (average 7.3). Counties with similar challenged economic and social profiles include Mayo, Roscommon, Longford and to some extent Louth, along with much of rural Co. Galway. This profile is illustrated in Tables 2-4.

**The Northern and Western Region is economically, socially and educationally challenged - the NW/Borders averages last and the West averages around the middle of the Republic's eight Regions. (Indicators 1 & 2)**

Indicator (Population 2016)	Border (394.3k)	West (453.1k)	Dublin (1347.4k)	Republic (4761.9k)
Population 2011/16 growth	0.6% 8 <sup>th</sup>	1.7% 6 <sup>th</sup>	5.8%	3.8%
Population density 2016	35 7 <sup>th</sup>	33 8 <sup>th</sup>	1458	70
Ruralto1500% total 2016	71% 8 <sup>th</sup>	62% 7 <sup>th</sup>	2%	37%
Dependency ratio 2016 (proj. 2036)	59.4% 8 <sup>th</sup> (65% 8 <sup>th</sup> )	56.0% 5 <sup>th</sup> (62% 6 <sup>th</sup> )	46.1% (47%)	52.7% (55.5%)
Median Income Household (Individual)	€33k 8 <sup>th</sup> (€18k 8 <sup>th</sup> )	€37k 6 <sup>th</sup> (€22k 5 <sup>th</sup> )	€49k (€27k)	
At risk of poverty (Consistent Poverty) 2018	21% 8 <sup>th</sup> (9% 7 <sup>th</sup> )	19% 6 <sup>th</sup> (7.1% 6 <sup>th</sup> )	10% (3%)	
Deprivation rate 2019	21% 8 <sup>th</sup>	18% 4 <sup>th</sup>	17%	

Sources: CSO Regional Sustainable Development Goals 2017; Regional Population Projections (M2F2DI), Census of Population 2016; County Incomes and Regional GDP 2018 (Prelim); Survey of Incomes and Living Standards; Labour Force Survey, and CBI QEC May 2020 (for PUPs) Note: \*These are the eight NUTS3 regions in the Republic

**Table 2:** Indicators showing that the Northern and Western Region is economically, socially and educationally challenged – the NW/Border region averages last, and West region averages around the middle of the Republic's eight Regions

Indicator (Population 2016)	Border (394.3k)	West (453.1k)	Dublin (1347.4k)	Republic (4761.9k)
Medical Cards 2017	43% 8 <sup>th</sup>	39% 5 <sup>th</sup>	28%	34%
3 <sup>rd</sup> level grants 2017	24% 8 <sup>th</sup>	22% 7 <sup>th</sup>	11%	17%
Households with PCs 2016	63% 8 <sup>th</sup>	67% 5 <sup>th</sup>	72%	68%
Cars for 1000 pop 2016	537 7 <sup>th</sup>	569 5 <sup>th</sup>	496	558
ILO Unemp Rate 2020 Q1 Pre-Covid (Q2C19)	5.5% 7 <sup>th</sup> (5.2% 3 <sup>rd</sup> )	3.0% 1 <sup>st</sup> (5.5% 6 <sup>th</sup> )	4.6% 5.4%	4.7% (5.1%)
ILO Participation Rate 2020	58.1% 8 <sup>th</sup>	61.5% 4 <sup>th</sup>	65.7%	62.3%
PUPs % 18-66 working	29.5% 8 <sup>th</sup>	26.2% 5 <sup>th</sup>	24.3%	25.9%

Sources: CSO Regional Sustainable Development Goals 2017; Regional Population Projections (M2F2DI), Census of Population 2016; County Incomes and Regional GDP 2018 (Prelim); Survey of Incomes and Living Standards; Labour Force Survey, and CBI QEC May 2020 (for PUPs) Note: \*These are the eight NUTS3 regions in the Republic

**Table 3:** Further indicators showing that the Northern and Western Region is economically, socially and educationally challenged – the NW/Border region averages last, and West region averages around the middle of the Republic's eight Regions



Regional Educational Achievement - similar underperformance, especially in NW/Border (Indicators 3)

Indicator	NW/Border		West		Dublin	Republic
Projected population changes in the period 2021-36						
	Change	Rank	Change	Rank	Change	Change
15-24 year olds (future Leaving Certs etc)	-7%	8 <sup>th</sup>	+2%	4 <sup>th</sup>	+23%	+7%
Highest educational qualification in population (15-64 year olds) 2019						
Primary	10%	8 <sup>th</sup>	5%	6 <sup>th</sup>	5%	5%
Lower Secondary (Combined Prim/LS)	13% 23%	7 <sup>th</sup>	10% 15%	2 <sup>nd</sup>	9% 14%	11% 16%
3 <sup>rd</sup> Level	37%	7 <sup>th</sup>	47%	2 <sup>nd</sup>	57%	47%
Postgraduate (or 3 <sup>rd</sup> level)	8%	8 <sup>th</sup>	13%	2 <sup>nd</sup>	19%	13%
Working population (25-64 year olds) participating in adult education within last 12 months 2017						
Formal	5%	8 <sup>th</sup>	8%	5 <sup>th</sup>	12%	
Life long learning	41%	8 <sup>th</sup>	53%	4 <sup>th</sup>	63%	

Source: CSO Adult Education Survey; Regional Population Projections to 2036; Education Attainment 2019

**Table 4:** Indicators of regional Educational achievement: showing further evidence of under-performance, especially in NW/Border.

Within the NWRA Strategy, the Borders Region is projected at best to relatively weaken over the coming years. While there are a number of scenarios, the most realistic CSO population projection is for the Borders to fall in its share of the Republic's population, from 8.6% in 2011 to 7.4% in 2036. The Implementation Roadmap for the NPF projects a population increase by 2031 of +10k for Co. Sligo (+15%), +40k for the Northwest (+15%), and + 21.5k for the Mid-Borders (+16%); and + 76k for Co. Galway (+30%), +20k for Co. Mayo (+15%) and + 106.5k for the West region overall (+24%).<sup>12</sup> The economic drivers to achieve these ambitious population growth levels and the associated job creation required are not identified in the plan in any specific or substantial way.

Overall, the Border region ranks 8<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> in a range of eight key economic and social drivers. Indeed, with the overall regional performance ranked as it is, it has to be considered that **the Borders Region (and adjacent counties) is a region in serious economic and social trouble.**

The relative disadvantage of the northern counties in the Republic, with the Border region coming last or second last in almost all major economic, social and educational indicators, is broadly matched by the performance of many sub-regions in Northern Ireland. Overall, NI's income and outputs per capita overall are amongst the bottom three regions in the UK (Fermanagh/Omagh NUTS3 Region is 70% of EU average GDP in 2015, the same as that of the Border Region, according to Eurostat).

<sup>12</sup> <http://npf.ie/wp-content/uploads/NPF-Implementation-Roadmap.pdf>.

## 4. TOWARDS AN ALL-ISLAND PERSPECTIVE – GIVING THE NORTHERN COUNTIES A REAL CHANCE

### 4.1 “BEYOND THE HINTERLAND OF CITIES” - IMPLICATIONS

The questions for the Northern and Western region posed by a static framework of scale for high-level services and activities and by Jacobs’ dynamic framework are similar if more fundamental to that of the Southern region and the allied Atlantic Urban Arc of Waterford-Cork-Limerick-Galway. Where is the scale for higher-level services and activities to be found in the Northern and Western region? How can the region leverage the power and vitality of cities and city-regions that is so essential to the growth of the rural hinterland? In particular, what are the implications of the NPF declaration that the NW/Borders and some of Midlands are “*beyond the hinterland of cities*” (NPF p.11)?

For people living in the NW/Borders in particular, the question is where are the higher-level activities and services such as HEIs, specialised hospitals, international airports, internal transport etc. – and more generally what Jacobs calls “*city vitality*” – to be found? One answer explicit in the NDF is “*Improving access from the north-west to Dublin and the east and to Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford to the south*” (NPF p.22).

Improved access to the Dublin-East city region is useful and important, but, as both Sandbu (2021) and Jacobs (1985) point out, such access may only improve the ease and speed by which people can leave the region and goods and services are brought in, as distinct from building up the region’s capability to create and produce itself. Strengthening key linkages of markets, jobs, technology, transplants and capital all of course can strengthen the NW/Borders region, especially if they assist the development of internal capabilities and creativities. However, while increasingly so connected – and vital that this happens – it is not credible to conceive of the NW/Borders as being attached to the Dublin-East city region, and benefiting as such.

More promising is the strengthening of the Northwest/Borders and adjacent rural counties involvement (albeit at the periphery and margins) with the Atlantic Urban Arc of Galway-Limerick-Cork-Waterford, through the Atlantic Economic Corridor with better transport, shared higher education institutional linkages such as ATU and NUIG, and sectoral networks. The intensification of the urban drivers and linages of markets, jobs, technology, transfers and capital are key to this development, especially and critically if they assist the development of internal capabilities and creativities. Further development of these linkages towards the southwest include, for example, M17, deeper sectoral clusters (especially in medtech), connections through ATU as the “*anchor HEI*” for and throughout the overall Northwest and West Regions, greater NUIG collaboration, development of Knock Airport, extension of Western rail corridor, etc. Again, the more northern areas are less likely to experience benefits other than migration of people and goods and services unless they also experience considerable internal capability development.

However, notwithstanding the potential of the Atlantic Urban Arc to help the NW/Border region and environs to grow, an overall approach that focuses primarily on two loci (i.e. Dublin-East and the four regional cities based along the southern and western coasts) driving balanced growth in the Republic unavoidably assigns the NW/Border region to slower growth and perpetual peripherality. In referring to the northern region of the Republic, Project 2040 National Planning Framework itself points out that “*It is generally the case that the further these urban centres are from a city, the more likely they are to have experienced stagnation or decline in recent years*” (p. 45).

The fundamental challenge for the NW/Borders and rural West regions is how to become closely linked to “*city regions (that) produce amply and diversely for their own people and producers as well as for others*” (Jacobs (1985), p.57). Whatever the practical challenges of building internal capabilities and making linkages with cities and city-regions, Jacobs is clear that without such



proactive connections, the development of a region is fraught and destined to fail. Centrally, *"it is either do it yourself or don't develop"* (Jacobs, p.140), the region needs to *"continually...inject improvisations into everyday economic life"* (Jacobs, p.155), and to support *"an improvisational drift into unprecedented kinds of work that carry unprecedented problems, then drifting into improvised solutions..."* (Jacobs, p.221). **The central development challenge for the NW/Borders region and adjacent rural West is how to significantly build such internal innovation dynamics and creative capabilities and enhancing and enriching its external linkages to proximate city regions.** (Even with such proactive connections, Jacobs is sceptical that development of regions that are not close to vibrant cities as fully part of their city-regions has much potential, and falling back on transfers and subsidies and other forms of long-term dependencies and decline start to emerge.)

The NPF targets set out for the urban centres (Sligo, Letterkenny, Dundalk and Athlone), which are mostly north of the Dublin-Galway Line, whilst in all fairness are substantial towns, are significantly smaller in size and economy than the Atlantic Urban Arc of Waterford-Cork-Limerick-Galway. The NPF population projections to 2031 similarly envisage less growth for the NW/Border region than other regions and so a continued declining share of national population and has an inbuilt assumption that this is the best that can be achieved for this region.

## 4.2 RETHINKING CROSS-BORDER REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Bradley and Best (2012) conducted a major review of the economics on both sides of the border and identified characteristic weaknesses of the cross-border economy.<sup>13</sup>

- the sense of 'peripherality' manifested as psychological distance and complaints of metropolitan neglect that undermines the attainment of regional goals in a manner that simultaneously delivers benefits nationally and for other disadvantaged regions;
- the fact of low population density and the low rate of urbanisation, which do not provide the critical mass of people and infrastructure to attract inward investment;
- the relative sparseness of third level establishments needed to produce the kinds of talent needed by the local business environment;
- an economic environment with declining sectors and a lack of market services needed to sustain a "modern base" leading to the departure of local graduates from the region seeking employment elsewhere; and
- a low level of strategic development expertise and a dearth of publicly available sub-regional data.

The key to growth in the region identified in this study is clustering for *"developing a distinctive capability"* i.e. *"the ongoing process of focusing on core capability and partnering for complementary capabilities underlines or sparks increases in capability differentiation and derived innovation activities in the participating companies"* (Bradley and Best, p. 197). They set out the sectoral cluster dynamics that drive growth, illustrated with case studies in food processing, aerospace, wood processing and science-based clusters, and the authors call for the border region to develop policies and infrastructure that foster these processes.

*"The aim of policy in the future needs to be to ensure that the more remote geographic areas continue to be facilitated in their efforts to link into these urban growth poles through the development of physical infrastructure and the identification of sectors that can thrive in non-urban environments."*

(Bradley and Best, p. 203).

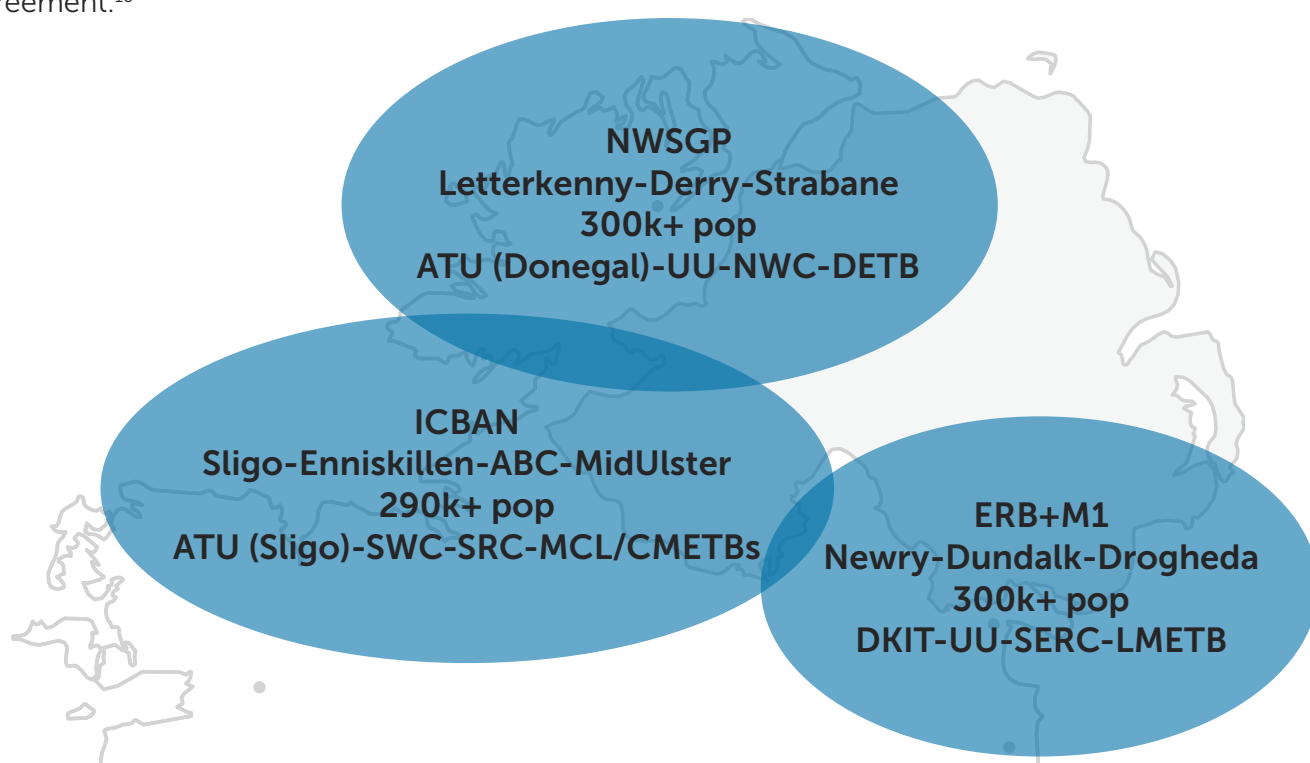
<sup>13</sup> Cross border Economic Renewal Rethinking Regional Policy in Ireland (2012); pp 109-116; <https://www.crossborder.ie/pubs/2012-economic-report.pdf>

The major recommendation from this study is the need to support the proposal (originally made by former IDA MD P.A. White (2011)) for

- a) a **cross-border economic development zone** that would address the combined issues of peripherality and the border, and
- b) identification of both the common economic threats and also the economic potentials, that local authorities along the border can co-ordinate a focus on the needs and potential of the border regions and drive economic development.

This is a proposal to articulate a shared vision of the challenges faced within the **“Border Development Zone”** that will refocus existing institutional policy frameworks on both sides of the border, working with a common goal so that the weaknesses caused by co-ordination failure can be overcome.

This perspective was subsequently endorsed in the 2016 Oireachtas Committee Report on the All-island economy. Cross-border groupings of local authorities have strongly articulated the need to progress this pragmatic vision and the positive practical co-operation achieved to date, as in ICBAN’s Regional Strategic Framework,<sup>14</sup> Brexit and the Border Corridor report,<sup>15</sup> and the submissions to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 6:** Cross-border Economic Development Zone: Three existing border alliances (with 200k+ populations) to drive economic growth along the border region.

<sup>14</sup> Regional Strategic Framework, ICBAN, 2013, <https://icban.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Regional-Strategic-Framework-Nov-13.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Brexit and the Border Corridor report, 2017, commissioned by the 11 border local authorities, <https://www.fermanaghmagh.com/eu-exit-advice-guidance-support/brexit-border-corridor-report-published/?download=file&file=24239>.

<sup>16</sup> Submissions to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement by three local authority groupings (ICBAN, NWSGP and EBR) covering in all thirteen local authorities on both sides of the border.

Figure 6 gives a visual representation of how the cross-border economic development zone is already being developed. As noted earlier, the Northwest Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP), the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) and the Eastern Border Region (EBR) already exist, and the development of a border economic zone can be built around these partnerships. Driving the growth of these cross-border clusters with populations of the scale of 250-300k+ will be critical to regional growth in the northern half of the Republic, as is clearly advocated by, and aspired to in, Project 2040.

It is important to acknowledge that there is some consideration to cross-border development in Project 2040 and the identification of key growth hubs that are elaborated and further developed in the NWRA RSES 2020-32. Similarly, there are references to gateways in the NI RDS (2010). These are important seeds from which to develop a more holistic perspective, as proposed above.

### 4.3 THE QUESTION OF A POTENTIAL NORTHERN URBAN-RURAL NETWORK PROVIDING AN ALL-ISLAND ECONOMIC BALANCE?

The NPF, while advocating *"Improving access from the north-west to Dublin and the east and to Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford to the south"*, (NPF P.22) omits the option of also looking north to Belfast, which for both Sligo and Letterkenny is closer (at 200/150km respectively) than either Dublin (210/240 km) or Cork (320/430km), and Galway is 140/250 km respectively.

As already mentioned, there is a close correlation between growth and urbanisation; dynamic and vibrant cities create growth that transforms the immediate hinterland – a rural region will not do this on its own and cities are in fact the key engines of regional growth (Jacobs 1985 – see also <https://www.centreforcities.org/blog/why-strong-cities-are-crucial-for-levelling-up-towns/>). So, a key question is how can the North-West/Borders region become more part of, or closely linked to broader urban city-regions that would help drive its growth and ease its peripherality?

**A more comprehensive and ambitious all-island economic development model that has a chance to achieve real effective regional economic balance on the island would really need to consider a third potential urban-rural network on the island.**

In the context of the NW/Border region, it is considered here that this urban-rural conglomeration can realistically only come about by a grouping of the twelve plus northern counties across both jurisdictions clustering as a shared macro-zone of inclusive growth, with stronger linkages and higher-level shared services (Figure 7). With over 2-2.5m people (similar in size to cities such as Manchester), such a network, for higher level purposes at least, could potentially balance Dublin/Mideast and the Atlantic Urban Arc comprising Waterford-Cork-Limerick-Galway.

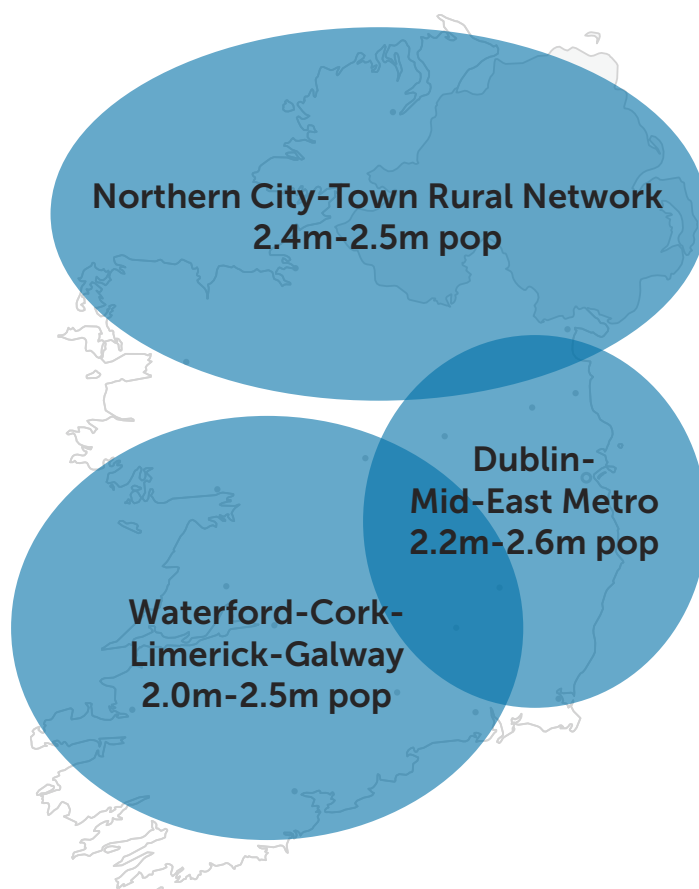


Figure 7: Effective all-island regional development implies three urban-rural networks of a scale at 2-2.5m people. (See Appendix A for population estimates sources).

A potential **Northern Urban-Rural Network** would position Belfast as the leading metropolitan area and incorporating the urban-rural clusters of Derry-Letterkenny, Sligo-Enniskillen/Omagh, the MidBorders area, Newry-Dundalk-Drogheda, and Causeway-Antrim towns. A grouping at that scale has the potential to evolve to maximise and share the benefits of synergies and economies of scale throughout the broad region.

**Whether a coherent and effective development of this grouping can be articulated and achieved across different local government structures and two jurisdictions is a major question to be addressed, and is beyond the scope of this paper to consider.** Clearly, it will involve pragmatic consideration of organising, co-ordinating and providing higher level services that need population concentrations of scale. More fundamentally, while Belfast is clearly a city undergoing considerable revitalisation (see latest city development plan<sup>17</sup>) the question that Jacobs' dynamic framework poses is whether the Belfast metropolitan area is or could become the catalyst for a city-region, both in its immediate hinterland and throughout the broader region envisaged. In any case, how to do this by intensifying the five drivers of urban growth and Jacobs' "city vitality" of markets, jobs, transplants, technology and capital throughout the region is the question. While greater transport infrastructure and access and improved education provision at primary, secondary and higher/further levels are key, there are also significant sectoral clustering opportunities such as engineering/advanced manufacturing, cultural industries, financial services and fintech, and agri-food industries. Central to that is the proactive linking and encouragement of the regional growth clusters within the broad region linked to the Belfast metropolitan area, as illustrated in Figure 8.



Figure 8: The Northern Urban-Rural Network: Growth hubs to drive development.

Note: Sligo-Enniskillen regional development hub includes Sligo County, Leitrim County, South Donegal (Ballyshannon, Donegal Town), North Mayo (Ballina+) and Council District Fermanagh and Omagh; the Mid-borders region includes County Cavan, County Monaghan, Borough Council Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon (ABC), and Council District Mid Ulster.

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/Planning-and-building-control/Planning/Local-development-plan-\(1\).](https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/Planning-and-building-control/Planning/Local-development-plan-(1).)

This Northern Urban-Rural Network has the potential to significantly increase the likelihood of success for the North-West/Borders to deliver the goals as set out in Project 2040, “for most people and goods to have access to international connections within 90 minutes of their home or work base”. Such a spatial network could provide a strong urban-rural network and hierarchy within which the smaller rural towns and villages that are characteristic of the Border counties on both sides have an opportunity to develop and even flourish, with proper and appropriate planning, connections, digitalisation and services. As Jacobs’ framework points out, rural areas no matter how remote are influenced by distant external forces driven by cities and city regions.

#### 4.4 LINKAGES AND BRIDGES BETWEEN VARIOUS URBAN-REGIONAL NETWORKS

What is central to all locations and communities on the island is that they can and do participate in multiple regional and inter-regional networks that helps progress their economic and social growth, both on the island and with other locations and geographies. As the NPF (2018) puts it, “there are many complementing and connecting assets shared between regions.” (p. 30). Examples (as illustrated in Figure 9) include:

- **Between the Dublin-East and Northern Urban-Rural Network**
  - high speed rail
  - M1 Belfast – Dublin project
  - M4/N4/A5 roads
  - sectoral clusters (e.g. finance, software, engineering)
- **Between the Dublin-East and Atlantic Urban Arc**
  - High –speed rail
  - improved rail and air networks to rest of EU
  - sectoral clusters (e.g. software, food industry)
- **Between the Atlantic Urban Arc and Northern Urban-Rural Network**
  - Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC LINK)
  - “Wild Atlantic Way”
  - Atlantic Technology University (ATU)
  - sectoral clusters (medtech, pharma)

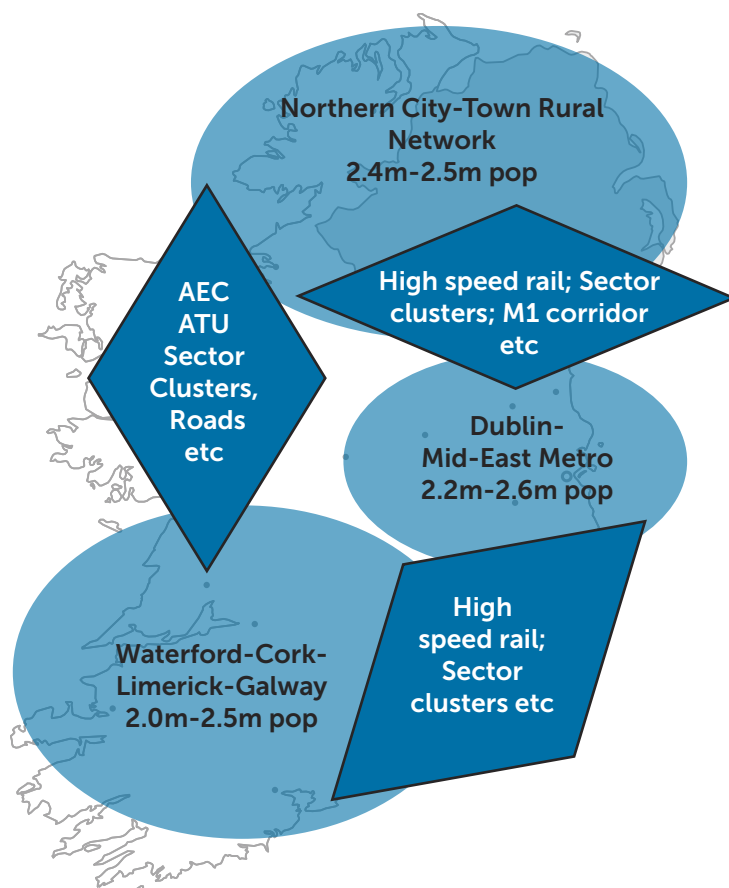


Figure 9: All-island balanced regional development: urban-rural networks with strong reinforcing linkages

The implication is that, to achieve balanced regional development on the island overall requires three growth loci that are each well intra- and inter-networked to optimise the urban-rural synergies. However, whether in the longer-term, the proposed Northern Urban-Rural Network can in practice collaborate to deliver synergies and emerge as a regional counter-balance to the other two urban loci on the island (i.e. Dublin/Mideast and the Atlantic Urban Arc), located south of the Dublin-Galway City Line, is a key – and open – question!



## 4.5 COMPLEMENTARY GROWTH FOR ALL?

The spatial perspective presented above advances the opportunity to accelerate growth throughout the island, both in the Republic and in Northern Ireland, for the benefit of all. The post-Covid recovery and growth strategies as outlined in the Republic's medium term economic strategy (National Development Plan to 2030)<sup>18</sup> and Northern Ireland's 10X Strategy<sup>19</sup> will in any case drive a level of spatial growth as well as everything else, within their respective jurisdictions.

An analysis of the North's overall economy carried out by former ESRI specialists, Fitzgerald and Morgenroth,<sup>20</sup> identifies that Northern Ireland has suffered from very low productivity and economic growth. The authors identify the key factor contributing to this as being the low investment in physical and human capital. The paper notes that **"The failure to reform the education system to reduce the number of early school leavers and increase the numbers of graduates is the single most important factor in the low growth"** (p.1). The paper concludes that, to achieve a sustainable growth path, regional economic policy must strongly support economic growth by investing in education and infrastructure.

More generally, Brexit is a major challenge for all, and how the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland is applied and what form the UK/EU trade relationships emerge and evolve, will determine the scale and nature of the challenge. Nevertheless, the implication of the NI Protocol in placing Northern Ireland in both the UK and EU single markets needs exploring, especially as to the medium-term benefits and opportunities, once the shorter-term costs and adjustments are absorbed.<sup>21</sup>

The Shared Island Unit fund of €500m is a significant commitment that requires an all-island perspective. Working strategically to support the realisation of the various opportunities now opening up for Northern Ireland has to be a priority at both central and regional level and should have in the medium-term significant positive impacts on the border regions on both sides.<sup>22</sup>

In short, inclusive economic growth in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland is overall complementary and mutually supportive.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/774e2-national-development-plan-2021-2030/>.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/10x-economy-economic-vision-decade-innovation>.

<sup>20</sup> The Northern Ireland Economy: Problems and Prospects John FitzGerald and Edgar L. W. Morgenroth, July 31 2019; <https://www.tcd.ie/Economics/TEP/2019/tep0619.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> See <https://www.iiea.com/publications/the-trade-and-investment-advantages-of-the-protocol-on-ireland-northern-ireland>.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/c3417-shared-island/>.

## 5. STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT APPROACH FOR THE NORTH-WEST/BORDERS REGION AND ADJACENT RURAL COUNTIES

### 5.1 CHALLENGE AND RESPONSE

To address the issue of regional imbalance of growth on the island of Ireland between the northern and southern counties, with the Dublin-Galway City Line as the demarcation, requires, as the thirteen border local authorities called for in 2019, **a Northern and Western Growth Agenda**. This strategic initiative should seek to position the northern counties as a central core, rather than a peripheral fringe, and so should drive productivity and income growth and sectoral and sub-sectoral change, and sustain and generate existing and new employment and a major shift into higher value-add sectors and subsectors. It would also facilitate linkages and connections with all three of the emerging and potential urban-rural networks.

This strategy is already articulated in the NWRA's Focus on Positive Discrimination and its overall Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy, ICBAN's Framework for Regional Priorities as well as in Northern Ireland's DfE "10x Strategy" with its focus on *"place-based growth in Northern Ireland's decade of innovation"* and related Northern Ireland regional strategies. A suggested indicative "menu" for a Northern and Western Growth Agenda is outlined in Table 5 below, which can be considered and discussed and progressed for choosing, planning and costing key projects and implementation as agreed.

### 5.2 THE NORTHWEST ALL-ISLAND CONNECTIONS...

Overall, from a North-west/Borders and adjacent rural counties perspective, a Northern network can considerably increase the opportunities to connect with and participate in an urban-rural structure that will only enhance economic and social growth. It is, however, not an either /or option, in that the NW/Borders and adjacent rural West can be, and needs to be, proactively involved with the Atlantic Urban Arc through the Atlantic Economic Corridor etc. and connected and linked with Dublin as the only global City on the island of Ireland (Figure 10).

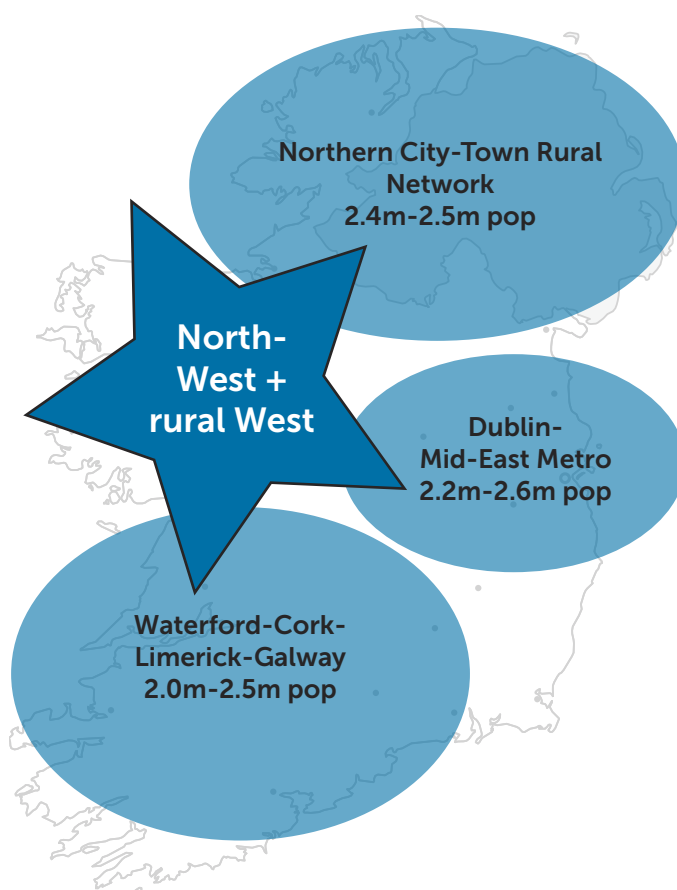


Figure 10: Development of North West/Borders region and adjacent rural counties needs proactive linkages with all of the three urban-rural networks on the island

### 5.3 ... AND WIDER AFIELD

The North-West/Borders region and adjacent rural counties also need to build global networks and economic relationships. Intensification of the global linkages of the island of Ireland are also critical to development of all its regional networks and locations, as illustrated in Figures 11 and 12. Such linkages include those with city regions within Great Britain/UK (such as Manchester,



Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool, London, Glasgow and Edinburgh), the broader European Union (especially its more Northern and Atlantic city-regions such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Brussels, Paris/Lille, Essen, Aachen, Dusseldorf, Hamburg, Copenhagen, Barcelona, Lisbon, etc.) , USA/Canada, and the wider globe of Africa, Middle East, Asia, China, India, South America etc. The recent agreement on renewable energy co-operation by the city leaders of Manchester, Liverpool, Belfast and Dublin shows that such “city-to-city” diplomacy has already started.

More fundamentally and longer-term, the more visionary Regionalism 2.0 of Niven (2019) reframes our **“northwest European archipelago”** as consisting of two big islands and over 160 smaller inhabited ones, which contains a striking level of heterogeneity and diversity and various multi-vocal identities, which in turn have been and are connected by sea and air to, and enriched by, continental Europe. Niven advocates much more regional empowerment and radical devolution to *“rather fluid and variously connected regional units”*, and an overturn of the London-centric design of the islands. He envisages over the long-run a transnational and multi-jurisdiction network of Northern and Western Triangle cities as an alternative centre of gravity to the power of the Southeast Corner of London and South-east England. Implied in his perspective are multiple, rich and direct linkages to continental European urban centres and diverse regional units, including within and with the European Union.

Even more fundamentally, as O’ Leary (2019) points out,

*“the natural sciences have predicted one possible future for the Isles...(and) forecasts their extensive littoral erosion. A century hence, the cities of Dublin, Edinburgh, London and Galway may depart beneath the waves. Cork and Belfast, perhaps, would survive the inundations, though doubts there must be because the Lee floods its banks and central Belfast was built on a marsh. (It is) a truly archipelagic future, unless further global warning can be averted”*

(O’Leary, p.305).

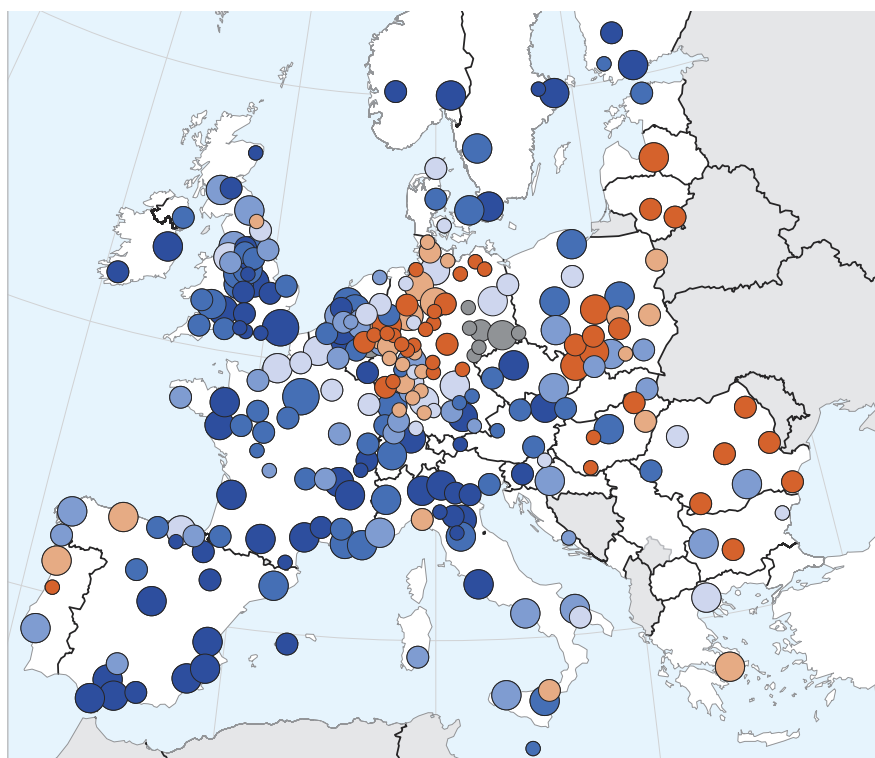


Figure 11: Ireland and the wider European urban network,  
<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3217494/7596823/KS-01-16-691-EN-N.pdf>.  
(Circle size relates to population scale in 2014, and colour to population change)



Figure 12: The island of Ireland in the World – a multiplicity of connections!

## 5.4 PROGRESSION

Such aligned development for mutual development would be facilitated by **much greater decentralisation and alignment of real powers within both jurisdictions on the island**. Both the UK and the Republic are amongst the most centralised state structures in the world, with the share of taxation controlled by the central administration in both jurisdictions being over 80-90%, and double that of the European Union average.<sup>23</sup> It is highly unlikely that the London-centric and Dublin-centric metropolitan decision-making structures can adequately, cooperatively or rapidly enough facilitate what needs to be done regionally for the growth and prosperity of the dozen or so northern counties on the island. Taking back control, to coin a phrase, along the principle of subsidiarity, of the powers that make a practical difference to the lives of northern communities on both sides of the border is needed. The emerging debate on devolution and regionalisation within the UK and the Republic may give an opportunity to progress that.<sup>24</sup>

In the short-term, it is suggested that a forum under the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement North-South strand is needed to facilitate the practical co-ordination of the spatial strategy proposed in this paper to mutual benefit. Specifically, the North South Ministerial Council should explicitly include in its remit the practical co-ordination of regional strategy. Table 5 below presents ten indicative areas of strategic actions that would step-change growth in the northern half of the island of Ireland.

An implication of this might mean the realignment of **the Republic's three Regional Assemblies to incorporate the envisaged all-island urban-rural structures**. If this were to happen, Eastern and Midlands Region as currently defined reflects broadly the Dublin/Mideast region, whereas the Southern Region would need to incorporate Galway County and City to reflect the Atlantic Urban Arc. (Galway, of course, could be in two regional Assemblies, reflecting two distinctive regional

<sup>23</sup> See <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3217494/5786841/KS-DU-14-001-EN.PDF.pdf/7bec4a16-f111-4386-a4b4-8f1087be1063?t=1414777859000>.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom> and its promise of "root and branch reform of government and governance of the UK" (p.6).

roles – already Galway Chamber of Commerce interacts with both Assemblies). The Northern and Western Regional Assembly (NWRA) would need to incorporate Co Louth (Co Louth was part of the region until 2014), and also perhaps Co Longford. Overall, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly (NRWA) needs to have a much clearer mandate to take an all-island northern counties/urban-rural network perspective.

## **5.5 OVERALL CONCLUSION**

Globally all areas are interconnected and linked through urbanisation, and scale and proximity matter. On the island of Ireland, inclusive economic growth based on interdependent and balanced spatial structures and urban-rural networks is overall complementary and mutually supportive. Whether, by how much and in what form such growth can be realised will reflect the evolution in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland of major changes in perspectives, strategic development actions, and significant devolution of practical powers.

## AN INDICATIVE NORTHERN AND WESTERN GROWTH AGENDA

- 1) **Develop business productivity** throughout all sizes of businesses, though
  - a major push for much more company-based employee skills learning, education and training, faster adoption of digitalisation, lean and innovation, build-up of market access skills (e.g. languages etc.), learning better business planning skills, etc. (through North-West regional skills forum, agencies, manufacturing clustering project etc.).
  - greater diffusion of research and innovation driven by greater involvement of higher and further education in the development of productivity throughout all businesses and organisations in the region.
- 2) **Within the region, strengthen the implementation of national strategies and resources for growing different categories of business,**
  - for micros/small general businesses, high growth potential start-ups, innovative existing SMES, large Irish corporates, large MNC plants, and attraction of new FDI and mobile Irish international businesses
  - through engagement and co-ordination within the region of development agencies, WDC, NWRA, UnaG, chambers of commerce, banks, other sources of finance, experienced mentors, North-West regional skills forum, regional clustering groups etc.
- 3) **Put in place a dedicated Remote Working (RW) Initiative specifically for the NW/Borders and related areas** with an ambitious five-year target of 35k plus mobile RW jobs and people to move into the region, using maximum employment and training grant, dedicated agency staff (EI, IDA, WDC, UnaG, WDC, NWRA) and operational targets, and targeting relevant businesses and individuals located now in Dublin, other cities in Ireland and overseas.
- 4) **Develop a clear understanding of, and database for the sectoral and sub-sectoral capabilities current in the region and how they can be developed and expanded; and of the sectors that can be built further or emerge from those capabilities.** Key sector-specific specialised knowledge/expertise infrastructure, building on the work of Inter-trade Ireland and the smart specialisation project of NWRA. Major developments need to include:
  - recently approved projects in manufacturing need to be implemented asap
  - support for SMEs in food (NB a revived Technology Food Centre) as well as development of research and innovation services for dairy, beef and fish products and processes
  - a major research investment in e-health, social health (social robotics, social care, community nursing) and medtech to leverage the regions medtech, pharma, hospital and nursing strengths, involving ATU, NUIG and UU (Magee).
  - for digital services, a regionally based applied research and innovation centre to support back-office and similar services as well as remote working models is needed
  - resources to develop innovative approaches to social and nursing care, especially of the elderly and others challenged in both physical and mental health
  - resources to develop innovative approaches to tourism, recreation and related areas

- Investment in locally-based strategic planning for regional, rural and cross-border development.

**5) Driving fundamental and urgent transformation of education and training in the region**

- progressive deployment in the region of Atlantic Technology University (ATU) as a world-class university servicing the wider region that is very regionally, employee and SME engaged;
- an integrated educational quarter in Sligo regional hub (key elements include joint NUIG/ATU medical and e-health research centre, integration of St Angela's with ATU (Sligo College), major development, promotion and branding of online ATU employee and life-long learning education, further ETB/ATU collaborations and pathways etc.)
- working with the Regional Skills Forums to identify and provide relevant education and training to meet learning needs.

**6) Develop and intensify cross-border further and higher education collaborations,** building on the work of the NW City Region Cross-border FE/HE Cluster and emerging ICBAN and EBR projects. Step-change of key infrastructure – e.g. access to broadband (through the acceleration of the national broadband plan in the area and the implementation of the urban digital pilot/ smart city technology; access to and development of Knock international airport; link-up of Letterkenny and Sligo/Enniskillen as part of the development of the all-island rail network; improved roads for Sligo/Enniskillen (N16), Derry/Letterkenny, Dundalk/Drogheda M1 corridor and Atlantic seaboard /Galway (N17); and better access from key Border locations to Dublin (A5/N7) and Belfast.

**7) Development of quality of life** in towns in the region, through development of public realm, cultural resources, primary and secondary schools, health services, overseas languages/cultures, improved shopping facilities in the areas, more safe sporting and night-life for younger adults, development of resources to support safe lifestyles for older people etc.

**8) Maximising the use of digitalisation for revitalising of smaller rural towns and villages,** to rethink and enrich living and working in remote locations by connecting them to wider opportunities and services, and more intensive use of local outreach services as Local Link, Post Office services, mobile libraries etc.

**9) Acceleration of the NWRA RSES/similar proposals for key regional growth hubs.** Implement the NWRA RSES proposals for the development of key growth hubs (Letterkenny, Sligo) and similar proposals (M1/Dundalk/Newry, and Mid-Borders) within the Border region and adjacent counties. The implementation of these proposals needs to be reviewed and key actions that will impact on regional growth urgently prioritised and invested in.

**10) Develop an all-island integrated cross-border approach** that repositions the Border region and adjacent counties as a central core, rather than a peripheral fringe, on the island, that builds on the existing work in developing cross-border collaboration and clustering (see e.g. ICBAN 2019 proposals to Oireachtas Committee) and progresses and contributes towards all-island balanced regional growth. Key indicative actions here include

- Major step-change investment plan for increasing Northern Ireland educational levels at primary, secondary and tertiary levels (including increasing student university caps to ensure maximum local take-up, along with the required levels of capacity to “level up” its output of graduates, easier translation of A levels into CAO points, promotion of Erasmus and Horizon, promotion of regional colleges HE linkages within Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, Great Britain, wider European Union etc.)
- Drive step-change in education and training for people at work and life-long learning, to make it a distinctive feature of the island’s workforce (using the lead online distance learning HEIs in Ireland, that is Open University and ATU (Sligo College), as well as other initiatives, to ramp-up rapidly)
- Support for implementing 12.5%/15% Corporate Profits Tax in Northern Ireland (along lines advocated by Independent Fiscal Commission Northern Ireland), and give the IDA a mandate and metric for joint marketing overseas with Invest NI for FDI projects of Northern Ireland overall (or at least for locations west of Bann).
- Enterprise Ireland, IDA, SFI, Invest NI, Inter-trade Ireland etc. to develop all-island framework sectoral strategies to grow and sustain quality employment, in light of European Union NextGen strategy and Economic Resilient Fund of E750b.
- Major joint programme to realise the positive advantages of Northern Ireland being part of two single markets for goods and to minimise within the EU Single Market principles costs of GB-NI trade.
- Consideration of key infrastructure such as Belfast-Dublin-Cork speed train, and with extensions to Derry, Sligo/Enniskillen, and to Galway/Limerick; and acceleration of high-quality broadband throughout island, to avail of next wave of digitalisation and innovation (EU phone roaming charges need to apply on both sides of border)
- The leveraging of the four City and Growth Deals totalling £617m. in Belfast, Derry-Londonderry and Strabane, Mid South West and Causeway Coast/Glens, to accelerate growth both in these areas and the broader region.
- The development of the five regional growth hubs of Greater Belfast, Mid and East Antrim/Causeway and Glens, Derry / Letterkenny / Strabane, Sligo / Enniskillen+ / MidBorders(ICBAN) and Dundalk / Newry / Drogheda that will drive growth in the northern half of the island.

**Table 5: An indicative Northern and Western growth agenda: 10 strategic actions needed to step-change growth in the northern half of the island of Ireland.**

Based on the agenda set out in the Framework of regional priorities for the Central Border, see [https://icban.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ICBAN\\_FRP-Synopsis\\_SP.pdf](https://icban.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ICBAN_FRP-Synopsis_SP.pdf)

# Appendix A.1

## POPULATION PROJECTIONS FOR REGIONS ON ALL - ISLAND

	2016	2026	2031
DUBLIN/MIDEAST/MIDLANDS* (Dublin + Global City - Region)	2.2m (47%)	2.4 - 2.5m (45% - 46%)	2.5 - 2.6m (45% - 46%)
SOUTHERN AND WEST (Atlantic Metropolitan Arc)	2.0m (43%)	2.3 - 2.3m (43%)	2.4 - 2.5m (44%)
NW AND MIDBORDER*	0.5m (11%)	0.6 - 0.6m (11%)	0.6 - 0.6m (10.5%)
REPUBLIC	4.7m	5.3 - 5.4m	5.5 - 5.7m
NI	1.88m (2018)	1.95m (2028)	
Northern City - Town Cluster**	2.4m	2.5m	2.5m - 2.6m(?)
	6.6m	7.2 - 7.3m	7.4m - 7.7m

\* Co. Louth switched from Dublin etc. to NW/Midborder

\*\* 12 Northern counties i.e. NI six counties and NW/Midborder+ Co Louth.

Sources: Implementation Roadmap for NPF; Population Projections NI



## Appendix A.2

### ALLIANCES TO ACHIEVE GROWTH

**Insert 1:** The Atlantic Technological University (ATU) as driver of synergies within and between regions (Extract from ATU/CUA submission to be designated as a Technological University, May 2021 and related press releases).

“Despite being characterised as a predominately rural region, the West and North-West region does encompass one of the five major cities of Ireland i.e. Galway City” (p.18). “In the Northern and Western Region (NUTS 2) there are two sub-regions (NUTS3) i.e. The North-West, which is challenged economically and socially with Brexit and other issues, and the West, which is experiencing strong growth especial in technology related areas, but it also faces many challenges. **The exciting opportunity for the TU is to systematically leverage and maximise the synergies that exist between and within the two regions.**”

As Minister Harris put it, “The new TU will now take its rightful place in the higher education landscape in a very important strategic part of the country bordering as it will both the Atlantic and Northern Ireland”.

Such ATU synergies include

- sharing and rolling out innovative technologies in the regions key sectors,
- “acceleration of digitalisation to transform rural and urban communities...,”
- driving a step-change in environmental sustainability...,
- developing and elevating the cultural richness and capabilities..., and
- developing cross-border, all-island and wider perspectives and linkages central to Irelands development over the coming decades. (CUA p.19).”

From CUA Press Release “[It will offer] academic depth to attract, educate, nurture and retain talent in the west, north-west and cross-border region.” Chair of the CUA steering group, Martin Cronin, added that a strong technological university would “enhance the capacity of the region to prosper in an ever more technology-intensive world”.

## **Insert 2: The North West Region Strategic Growth Partnership for Counties Derry and Donegal** (Hanigan et al. (2020)

<https://crossborder.ie/reports/briefing-paper-the-cross-border-further-education-and-higher-education-cluster-for-the-north-west-city-region/>

"The National Development Plan recognises Derry, Letterkenny and Strabane as the North West City Region, ... as the fourth largest urban agglomeration on the island of Ireland" (CUA p.19). The Derry City and Strabane City Deal approved in 2019/2020 confirms the region as a key growth area. The North West Strategic Growth Partnership led by Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council initiated in 2018 the Cross-border FE HE Cluster, which comprises University Ulster (UU) (esp. Magee College), Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LkIT), North West Regional College (NWRC), and Donegal Education and Training Board (ETB).

The 2007 LkIT led study supported by UU and carried out by Indecon Int/London Economics "identified a number of specific areas where the critical mass formed through (their) strategic alliance..., including

- "additional high-quality programmes of study to help retain graduates in the North-West..."
- "additional facilities and support services for a greater student population"
- "improved research capability ... further commercialisation ... with industry"
- "increased resources to ...support regional development and ...workforce development"
- "widening participation and improving support systems for non-traditional learners"
- "enhanced lifelong learning opportunities encompassing flexible modes of delivery and elearning"
- "stronger identity and voice for this unique cross-border Gateway"

Cross-border projects and initiatives over the past two decades that deliver that agenda include:

- expansion of university provision at the Magee campus of Ulster University, including the establishment of a Graduate Entry Medical School, with financial support from the RII Shared Island Fund;
- LkIT offering of UU's Certificate in Higher Education Practice (PgCHEP) and development of Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching (PgCHET);
- joint UU/LkIT development of the innovative action learning two-year MSc Public Service Leadership and Innovation for public servants both from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland;
- the focus of EpiCentre in developing a strong industrial research base by integrating existing capabilities within the three educational partners;
- Interreg funding for three significant research projects:
  - the Centre for Personalised Medicine (CPM), with UU, LkIT, University of Highlands and Islands (UHI) and NUIG;
  - NW Centre for Advanced Manufacturing, with LkIT, UU, University of Glasgow and ITS;
  - Bryden Renewable Energy Centre, with QUB, UU, LkIT, UHI and Agri-food and Biosciences Institute (ABI).

Further development of this cross-border cluster is envisaged with the creation of the ATU (CUA p.19).

### **Insert 3: The Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) Human Capital Pillar**

"The Irish Central Border Area Network or ICBAN was founded in 1995 to promote cross-border co-operation and communication at a Local Government level on common regional development concerns, as a forum to respond to the unique economic and social needs of the Central Border Region.

The eight Member Councils areas of the Central Border Region includes Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon; Fermanagh and Omagh; Mid Ulster and the counties of Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Monaghan and Sligo. Many of these areas share similar geographical, economic, social, administrative and political characteristics and experience common problems and concerns: a need to re-enforce and expand infrastructure, a sense of distance from centralised decision-making, a perceived peripherality from each jurisdiction, in addition to the peripherality in an EU context".

Thus, in these contexts, ICBAN advances a set of responses as Pillars in its Framework for Regional Priorities (2021) that emphasise and enable:

- Economic development
- Infrastructure and connectivity
- Human capital
- Liveable communities, and
- Natural capital.

The main features of ICBANs Human Capital Pillar are "developing the region's skills base to sustain economic competitiveness, promote social progress and stimulate new opportunities".

ICBAN has initiated a process in autumn 2021 involving HE and FE institutions in the middle border region to consider and plan collaborative projects that can progress the overall Pillar. Those institutions initially are Sligo Institute of Technology (soon to be Sligo College of the Atlantic Technology University), South-West College (SWC) and Southern Regional College (SRC) as well as Mayo Sligo Leitrim Educational and Training Board (MSLETB) and Cavan and Monaghan Educational and Training Board (ETB).

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