

**Southern Regional Assembly's
Submission
on the
National Economic Recovery Plan**

11th September 2020

1: Executive Summary

The Southern Regional Assembly is one of the three Regional Assemblies of Ireland, working with key stakeholders at an EU, national, regional and local level to support effective regional development in Ireland. On the 31st of January 2020, the Southern Regional Assembly published its RSES for the Southern Region. In doing so, the RSES – for the first time – brings together spatial planning and economic policy providing a strategic framework for investment in the Southern Region; marking a significant policy milestone for regional government in Ireland.

The Southern Regional Assembly's RSES provides a long-term, strategic development framework for the future economic and social development of the Southern Region, with the RSES aiming to ensure that the Southern Region will become one of Europe's most creative and innovative, greenest and liveable regions, allowing it to achieve effective regional development as envisioned in the National Planning Framework (NPF). In doing so, the RSES sets the framework for each local authority within the Southern Region to develop their county and city development plans in a manner that will ensure national, regional and local plans align.

In this context, our spatial strategy outlines compact growth targets for future housing developments, with the aim that at least 50 per cent of all new homes that are targeted in the region's three Metropolitan Areas – namely Cork, Limerick-Shannon and Waterford City and Suburbs – are to delivered within their existing built up footprints in accordance with NPF National Policy Objective 3b and a corresponding target of at least 30 per cent within our fourteen Key Towns in accordance with NPF National Policy Objective 3c. Furthermore, the economic strategy of our RSES aims to develop a sustainable, competitive, inclusive and resilient regional economy.

Delivering the economic and spatial objectives of our RSES will be a key component in tackling regional disparities that exist in Ireland, and the delivery of these objectives is needed now more than ever. As per the latest available statistics, it is clear that the outbreak of COVID-19 has already had a profound impact on the Southern Region's economy. As of Q2 2020¹, 289,810 people or 38.5 per cent of the Southern Region's labour force were in receipt of either the "Pandemic Unemployment Payment", the "Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme" or were registered on the "Live Register", highlighting the sheer impact of COVID-19 on the region's labour market. From a commercial market perspective, 47.2 per cent of the Southern Region's commercial units were operating in the sectors most likely to be the worst affected from the economic disruption caused by COVID-19, implying that just over 27,583 commercial units in the region were likely to be severely impacted as a result of the public health measures.

In this context, the National Economic Recovery Plan will act as an important stimulus in tackling this economic disruption and in achieving the overarching vision of the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES; namely for the Southern Region to become one of Europe's most creative and innovative, greenest and liveable regions. The Regional Policy Objectives of the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES are aligned to these three overarching pillars, with our priorities for the forthcoming National Economic Recovery Plan identified under these three pillars, which are as follows:

¹ 28th of June 2020



Pillar 1: A Creative and Innovative Region:

1. Ensure there is a regional approach to Smart Specialisation Strategies
2. Enhance the Southern Region's human capital levels
3. Improve the connectivity of Southern Region's transport infrastructure
4. Enhance the region's digital infrastructure and encourage greater usage of smart technologies
5. Support the region's Marine Economy in line with the objectives of the RSES

Pillar 2: A Liveable Region:

6. Deliver infrastructure improvements that enhance the quality of life offering of the Southern Region
7. Deliver appropriate housing stock in line with the compact growth targets of the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES and the NPF
8. Ensure urban and rural renewal funding schemes are aligned to the spatial objectives of the RSES
9. Enhance the level of funding for Co-Working hubs in our key towns and metropolitan areas

Pillar 3: A Green Region:

10. Ensure continued support to allow for a transition to a low carbon economy and to build climate resilience in the Southern Region
11. Ensure investment in public transport network allows for sustainable mobility in the Southern Region

It is essential that the overarching priorities of the National Economic Recovery Plan compliment the eleven priorities set out in this submission, and by virtue the spatial and economic objectives of the Southern Regional Assembly RSES. The National Economic Recovery Plan can be a key component in tackling regional imbalances that exist in Ireland, allowing the Southern Region to develop critical mass and act as a counterbalance to the Greater Dublin Area. In doing so, the National Economic Recovery Plan can play an important role in contributing to effective regional development in the State, allowing an inclusive economic recovery across all of our regions.

2: Strategic Context

The Southern Regional Assembly is part of the regional tier of governance in Ireland. It is primarily focused on the formulation, adoption and implementation of its Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES), oversight and coordination of Local Economic and Community Plans, management of EU Operational Programs, EU project participation, implementation of national economic policy, and additional functions through working with the National Oversight and Audit Commission.

On the 31st of January 2020, the Southern Regional Assembly published its RSES for the Southern Region. In doing so, the RSES brings together spatial planning and economic policy providing a strategic framework for investment in the Southern Region; marking a significant policy milestone for not only regional government in Ireland, but also national and local government.

The Southern Regional Assembly's RSES provides a long-term, strategic development framework for the future economic and social development of the Southern Region, with the aim of achieving effective regional development in line with vision and objectives of the National Planning Framework (NPF). In doing so, the RSES sets the framework for each local authority within the Southern Region to develop their county and city development plans in a manner that will ensure national, regional and local plans align.

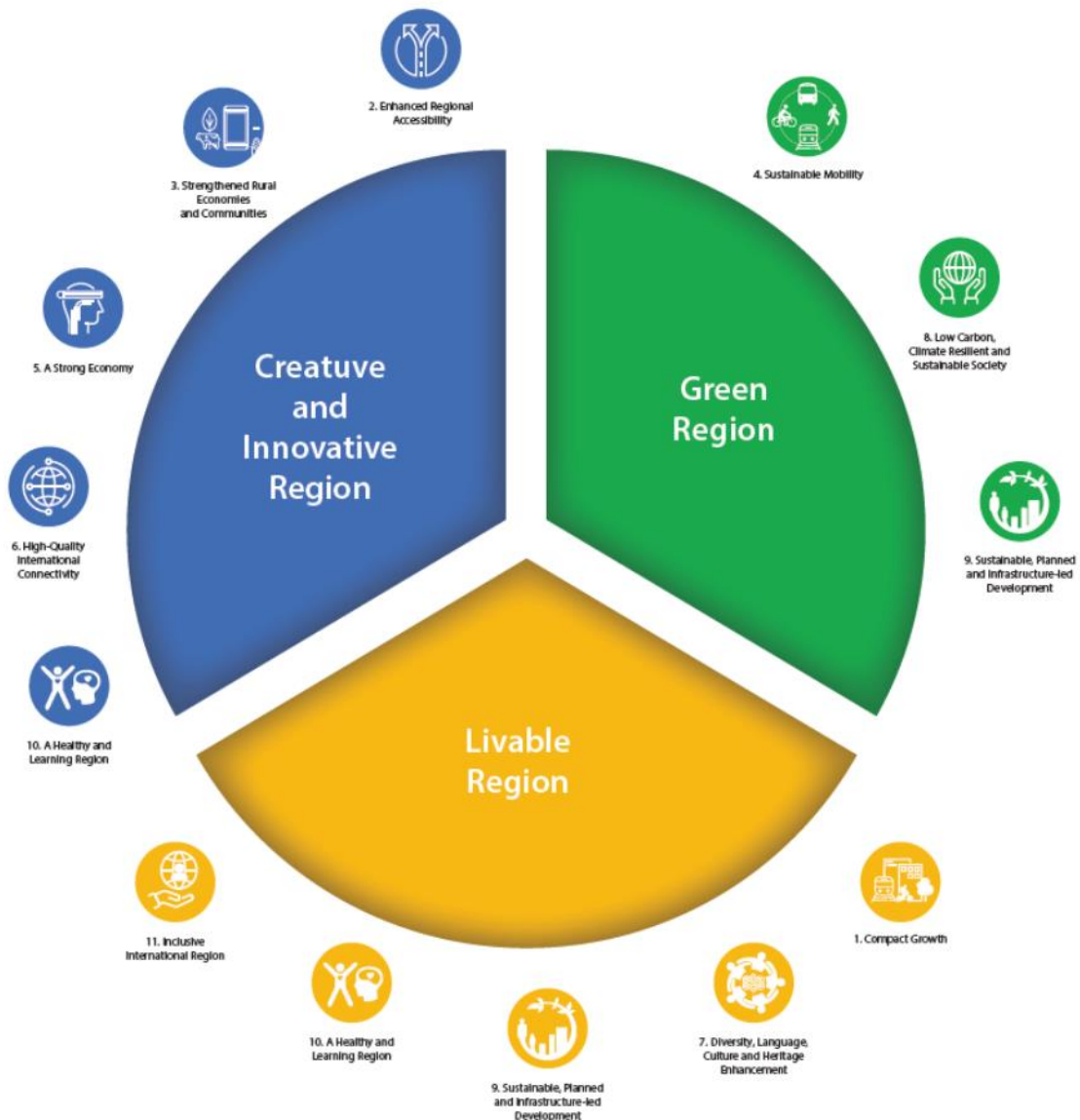
The RSES vision for the Southern Region is led by the need for transformative change. By 2040, the population of the Region is targeted to grow by 380,000 people to reach almost 2 million, requiring homes and new jobs. To achieve the spatial objectives set out in the NPF, the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES recognises the strategic role played by all areas in achieving set regional and national targets and objectives. The settlement strategy builds on the Region's three cities and metropolitan areas of Cork, Limerick -Shannon and Waterford as engines of growth supported by a network of fourteen strategically located Key Towns namely Kilkenny, Ennis, Carlow, Tralee, Wexford, Clonmel, Killarney, Mallow, Nenagh, Thurles, Newcastle West, Clonakilty, Dungarven, Gorey. The RSES identifies the important role of collaboration between the cities and metropolitan areas, collaboration across town networks and the potential for greater economic resilience across our diverse rural towns, villages and rural areas to contribute to our Region's growth.

As per Regional Policy Objective 35 (B) and (C), the RSES outlines compact growth targets of at least 50 per cent of all new homes that are targeted in the region's three metropolitan areas are to be delivered within their existing built up footprints in accordance with NPF National Policy Objective 3b and a corresponding target of at least 30 per cent within our key towns in accordance with NPF National Policy Objective 3c.

Achieving such compact growth targets – and by virtue the spatial objectives of the NPF – will require alignment in funding priorities between the forthcoming National Economic Recovery Plan and the regional policy objectives of the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES. In this context, the Southern Regional Assembly welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the prioritisation of the forthcoming National Economic Recovery Plan.

The economic strategy of the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES aims to develop a sustainable, competitive, inclusive and resilient regional economy, which – along with the delivery of other elements of the strategy – will assist the Southern Region in becoming one of Europe's most creative and innovative, greenest and liveable regions. The Southern Region will achieve this vision by focusing on the key enablers which are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Key enablers of the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES



Key to delivering our overarching vision is ensuring the region develops a strong and diverse economic base. With immediate challenges such as COVID-19, Brexit, and potential vulnerabilities for Ireland's enterprise base, it is important that the Southern Region sustains what we have in the immediate term, transforms our enterprise base for longer term resilience while managing potential vulnerabilities. The RSES seeks to achieve this vision through five economic principles:

1. **Smart Specialisation:** Bringing together key stakeholders with real local knowledge in a geographic area to identify the competitive advantages and develop new economic opportunities.
2. **Clustering:** Putting in place a favourable and connected regional business ecosystem in which new players can emerge and support new value chains and emerging new industries.
3. **Placemaking:** A significant emphasis on making attractive places to live, learn and work to attract talent.
4. **Knowledge Diffusion:** A Learning Region, developing skills, talent, research and development, education assets and access to life-long learning.
5. **Capacity Building:** The capacity to bid for funding and to respond to emerging challenges to secure greater economic resilience is supported.

3: Regional Economic Impact of COVID-19

Given that the National Economic Recovery Plan will chart our long-term recovery from the economic disruption caused by the outbreak of COVID-19, it is important to highlight the economic impact of COVID-19 on the Southern Region's economy to date.

As per the latest available regional statistics, it is clear that the outbreak of COVID-19 has already had a profound impact on the Southern Region's economy. Although our region has been able to specialise in a range of high valued industries that have largely avoided the economic disruption of COVID-19, many parts of the region – particularly our rural counties – have been severely impacted due to their reliance on the hospitality, wholesale, retail and aviation industries.

To evaluate the sheer size of this economic impact to date, the Southern Regional Assembly will examine recent trends in the following economic indicators, namely:

- Labour market of the Southern Region
- Commercial market of the Southern Region

The main findings of this analysis are as follows:

- As of the 23rd of August 2020², the number of people based in the Southern Region in receipt of the "Pandemic Unemployment Payment" totalled 66,246, accounting for 28.7 per cent of the total number of people that were in receipt of the "Pandemic Unemployment Payment" in Ireland.
- Within the Southern Region, the county with the highest number of people in receipt of the "Pandemic Unemployment Payment" was Cork at 21,719, accounting for 32.8 per cent of region's total claimants. The counties with the next highest shares in the Southern Region were Limerick (13.3% or 8,881), Kerry (10.7% or 7,084) and Tipperary (10.1% or 6,715).
- As of the 16th of August 2020, the number of people based in the Southern Region in receipt of the "Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme" totalled 85,680, accounting for 33.6 per cent of the total number of people that were in receipt of the "Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme" in Ireland.
- Within the Southern Region, the county with the highest number of people in receipt of the "Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme" was Cork at 26,893, accounting for 31.4 per cent of total claimants in the region. The counties with the next highest shares in the Southern Region were Kerry (11.8% or 10,149), Limerick (11.5% or 9,864) and Wexford (10.8% or 9,240).
- As of Q2 2020³, 289,810 people or 38.5 per cent of the Southern Region's labour force⁴ were in receipt of either the "Pandemic Unemployment Payment", the "Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme" or were registered on the "Live Register", highlighting the sheer impact of COVID-19 on the Southern Region's economy. This was below the corresponding national ratio of 39.9 per cent.

² Latest available data at the time of writing

³ 28th of June 2020

⁴ Q2 2020 labour force: CSO Q2 2020 Labour Force Survey



- The impact on the Southern Region’s labour market varied on a sub-regional level. As of Q2 2020⁵, 83,686 people or 43 per cent of the South East’s labour force⁶ were in receipt of either the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” or were registered on the “Live Register”. This was above the corresponding national ratio of 39.9 per cent.
- The corresponding ratios for the Mid-West (39.3%) and the South-West (35.5%) were both below the corresponding national ratio of 39.9 per cent.
- From a commercial market perspective⁷, 47.2 per cent of the Southern Region’s commercial units were operating in the sectors most likely to be the worst affected from the economic disruption caused by COVID-19⁸, implying that just over 27,583 commercial units in the region were likely to be severely impacted as a result of the public health measures. This was above the corresponding “COVID-19 Exposure Ratio”⁹ for the State as a whole, which was 46 per cent.
- Of the three sub-regions of the Southern Region, the South-East had the highest “COVID-19 Exposure Ratio”, with 47.7 per cent or 7,558 of its commercial units operating in the worst affected sectors. This was followed by the Mid-West with 47.3 per cent or 8,618 of its commercial units operating in the worst affected sectors. The South West registered a “COVID-19 Exposure Ratio” of 46.7 per cent, implying that 11,407 of its commercial units were likely to be operating in the worst affected sectors.
- Out of the 9 counties based in the Southern region, 6 recorded above average “COVID-19 exposure ratios”, with the highest exposure ratio in Ireland recorded in Kerry, with 53.8 per cent of its commercial units operating in the sectors likely to be worst affected.
- The next most exposed county based in the Southern region was Clare (50.4 per cent) which was the 5th more exposed county in Ireland and then Wexford (also 50.4 per cent) which was the 6th most exposed in Ireland.

⁵ 28th of June 2020

⁶ Q2 2020 labour force: CSO Q2 2020 Labour Force Survey

⁷ <http://www.southernassembly.ie/uploads/general-files/CV19-Regional-Economic-Analysis.pdf>

⁸ Specific definition of worst affected sectors noted in the “Commercial Market Impact” sub-section

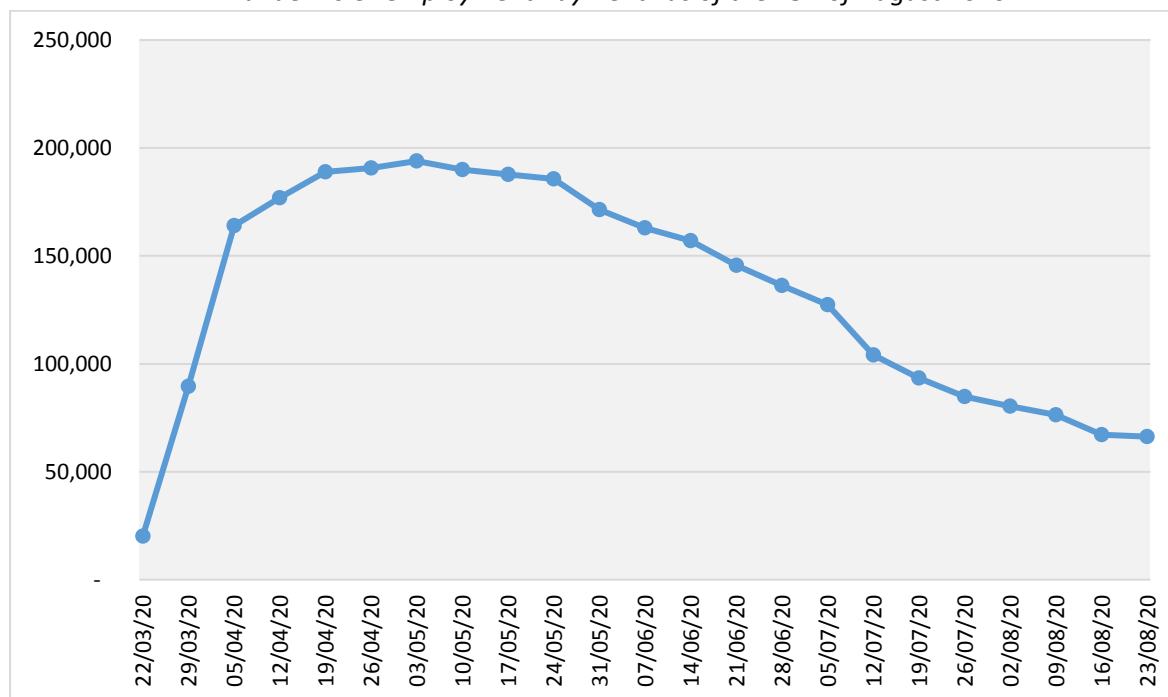
⁹ A geographical area’s “COVID-19 Exposure Ratio” represents the total number of its commercial units that were operating in the sectors likely to be worst affected by the COVID-19 outbreak, as a proportion of its total commercial stock as of September 2019

3.1: Labour Market Impact

As a result of the public health measures needed to control the spread of COVID-19, the Southern Region’s labour market has been severely impacted. To evaluate the extent of this impact, Figure 2 and Table 1 identify the number of people in the Southern Region that have been in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment”, using the latest available data at the time of writing.

As of the 23rd of August 2020, the number of people based in the Southern Region in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” totalled 66,246, accounting for 28.7 per cent of the total number of people that were in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” in Ireland. As evident from Figure 2, the total number of people based in the Southern Region in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” has been progressively falling over the past number of weeks, dropping from a peak of 193,958 at the beginning of May.

Figure 2: Total number of people in the Southern Region in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” as of the 23rd of August 2020



Source: CSO

Tables 1 provides a breakdown per county

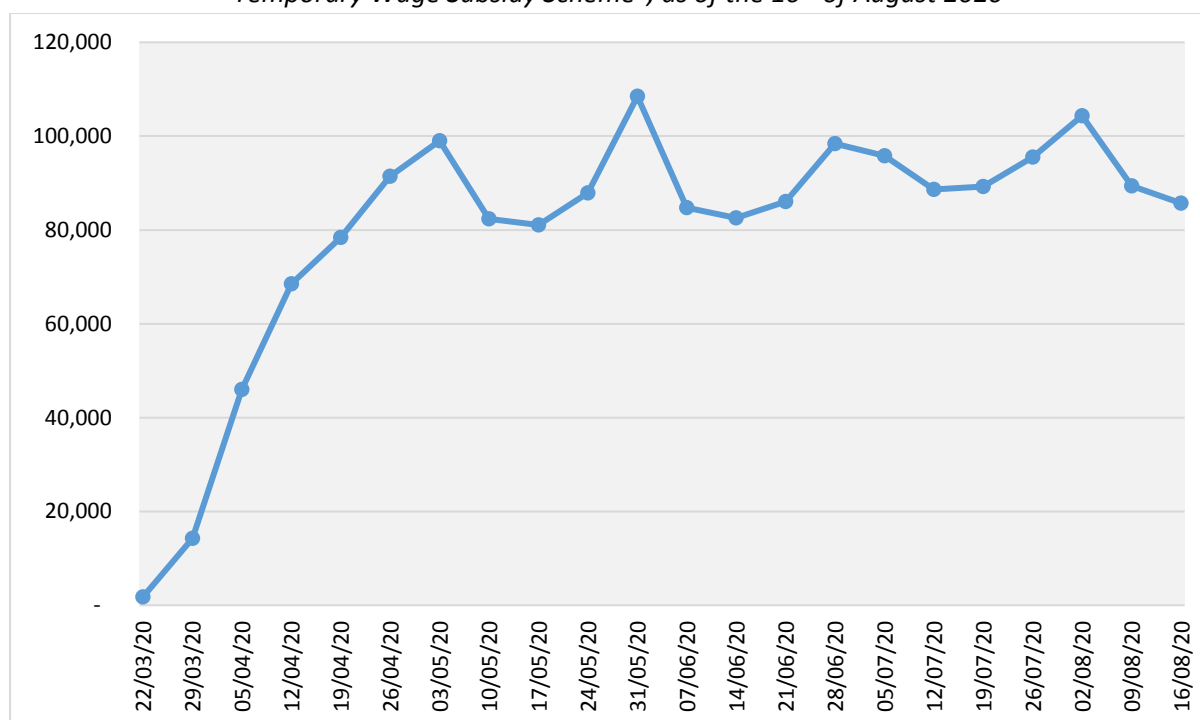
Table 1: The total number of people in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” in each County within the Southern Region, as of the 23rd of August 2020

County	Number of People in Receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (23 rd of August 2020)
Cork	21,719
Limerick	8,881
Kerry	7,084
Tipperary	6,715
Wexford	5,973
Clare	5,043
Waterford	4,808
Kilkenny	3,460
Carlow	2,563
Southern Region	66,246

Source: CSO

As of the 16th of August 2020, the number of people based in the Southern Region in receipt of the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” totalled 85,680, accounting for 33.6 per cent of the total number of people that were in receipt of the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” in Ireland. As evident from Figure 3, the total number of people based in the Southern Region in receipt of the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” was down from its original peak of 108,482 at the end of May. That said, the rate of decline in the number of recipients of the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” has not been as strong compared to the corresponding decline in the number of recipients of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” in the Southern Region.

Figure 3: Total number of people in the Southern Region in receipt of the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme”, as of the 16th of August 2020



Source: CSO

Tables 2 provides a breakdown per county

Table 2: The total number of people in receipt of the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” in each County within the Southern Region, as of the 16th of August 2020

County	Number of People in Receipt of the "Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme" (16 th of August 2020)
Cork	26,893
Kerry	10,149
Limerick	9,864
Wexford	9,240
Tipperary	7,481
Clare	6,865
Waterford	6,254
Kilkenny	5,205
Carlow	3,729
Southern Region	85,680

Source: CSO

Inevitably such developments will have severely impacted the Southern Region’s labour market and its unemployment rate. However, to what extent remains to be seen considering the lack of available unemployment rate statistics that take into account both the number of people in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” or the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” on a regional and sub-regional level

To combat this, the Southern Regional Assembly has adopted a similar methodology to recently released Central Bank of Ireland research¹⁰ which examines the share of the labour force registered on either the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment”, the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” or the “Live Register” on a geographical basis. In this regard, the Southern Regional Assembly will – on a regional¹¹ and sub-regional¹² level – express the number of people registered on either the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment”, the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” or the “Live Register” as of the 28th of June 2020, as a share of its corresponding labour force as of Q2 2020.

To achieve this, the Southern Regional Assembly has combined data from the CSO’s Q2 2020 Labour Force Survey and the CSO’s data on COVID-19 Income Support and Live Register figures as of the 28th of June 2020. Although the number of people in receipt of COVID-19 Income Support and “Live Register” payments change weekly, and data is available up to August 2020, it is important to compare datasets that are compatible in terms of timeframes. Therefore the data on the number of people in receipt of the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment” and the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” as of the 28th of June 2020 was considered the most appropriate dataset to compare to the labour force data from the CSO’s Q2 2020 Labour Force Survey.

As of Q2 2020¹³, 289,810 people or 38.5 per cent of the Southern Region’s labour force¹⁴ were in receipt of either the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment”, the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” or were registered on the “Live Register”, highlighting the sheer impact of COVID-19 on the Southern

¹⁰ <https://www.centralbank.ie/docs/default-source/publications/quarterly-bulletins/boxes/qb3-2020/box-e-regional-labour-market-impact-of-covid-19.pdf>

¹¹ NUTS 2 regions

¹² NUTS 3 regions

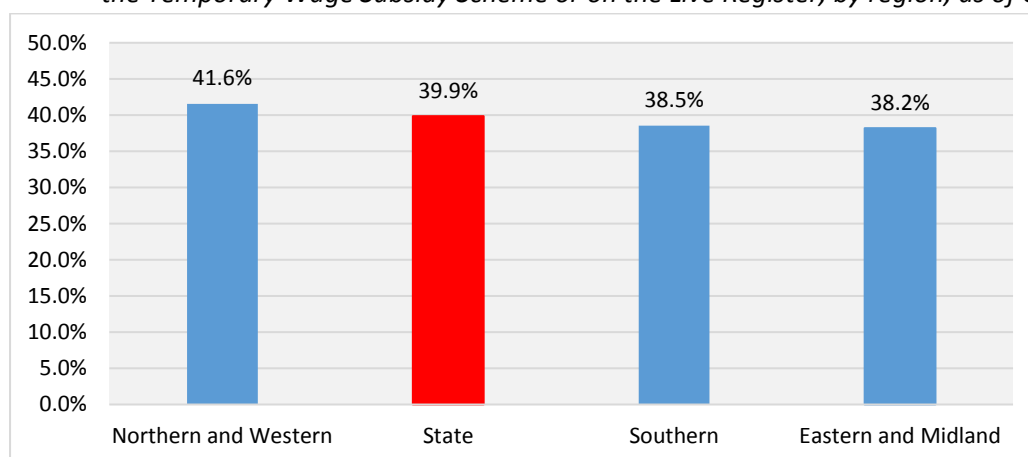
¹³ 28th of June 2020

¹⁴ Q2 2020 labour force: CSO Q2 2020 Labour Force Survey

Region’s economy, as can be seen from Figure 4. This was below the corresponding national ratio of 39.9 per cent.

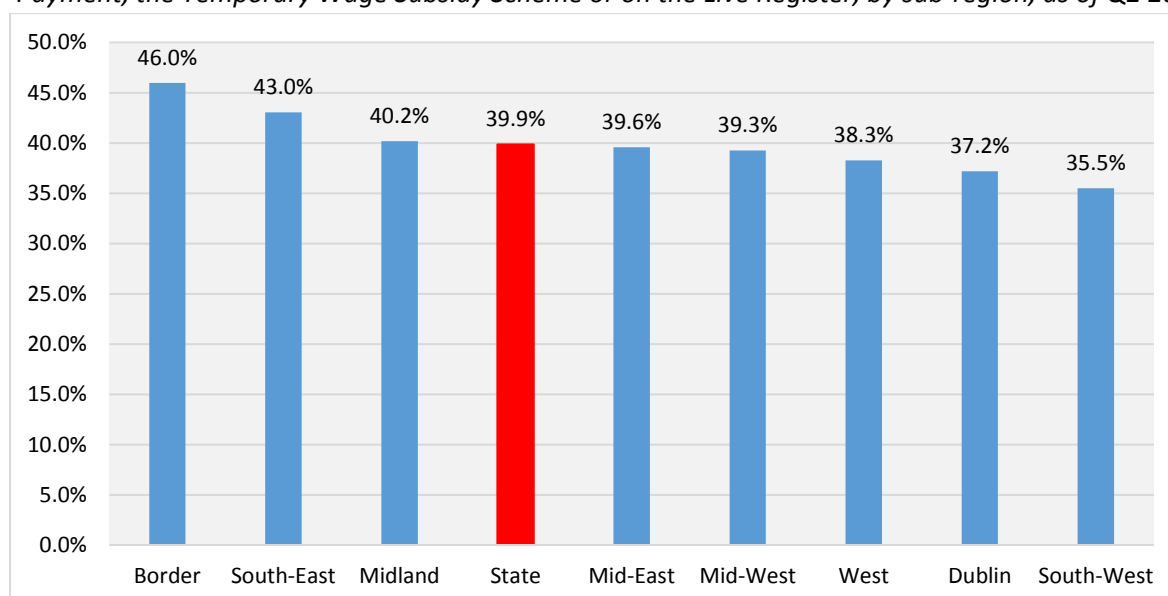
As evident from Figure 5, the impact on the Southern Region’s labour market varied on a sub-regional level. As of Q2 2020¹⁵, 83,686 people or 43 per cent of the South East’s labour force¹⁶ were in receipt of either the “Pandemic Unemployment Payment”, the “Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme” or were registered on the “Live Register”. This was above the corresponding national ratio of 39.9 per cent. Although the corresponding ratios for the Mid-West (39.3%) and the South-West (35.5%) were both below the corresponding national ratio of 39.9 per cent, such figures highlight the considerable impact of COVID-19 on the Southern Region’s labour market.

Figure 4: Share of labour force in each region in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme or on the Live Register, by region, as of Q2 2020



Source: Southern Regional Assembly calculations using CSO data

Figure 5: Share of labour force in each sub-region in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme or on the Live Register, by sub-region, as of Q2 2020



Source: Southern Regional Assembly calculations using CSO data

¹⁵ 28th of June 2020

¹⁶ Q2 2020 labour force: CSO Q2 2020 Labour Force Survey

3.2: Commercial Market Impact

While it is clear that the outbreak of COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the Southern Region's labour market, the degree to which this impact will be felt across the commercial markets of our regions, sub-regions, counties, cities and towns remains to be seen. On this basis, the three Regional Assemblies of Ireland prepared a "COVID-19 Regional Economic Analysis¹⁷" to identify which geographical areas in Ireland are more likely to have experienced significant economic disruption caused by the necessary measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Using the GeoDirectory commercial database, and specifically the NACE codes allocated to commercial units¹⁸ as of September 2019, the three Regional Assemblies of Ireland have identified each geographical area's reliance on the sectors that are likely to be severely affected by the public health measures needed to curtail the spread of COVID-19. The purpose of this evidence based analysis was to inform policy makers at a local, regional and national level in order to assist the process of economic recovery, allowing them to identify the degree of economic resilience of Ireland's regions, sub-regions, counties, cities and towns; a key principal envisioned in each assembly's RSES.

On foot of this, "COVID-19 Exposure Ratios" have been developed for each of Ireland's regions, sub-regions, counties, cities and for 199 CSO defined settlements¹⁹; the purpose of which was to identify which geographical areas were likely to be experiencing significant economic disruption as a result of this crisis. Specifically, a geographical area's "COVID-19 Exposure Ratio" represents the total number of its commercial units that were operating in the sectors likely to be worst affected by the COVID-19 outbreak, as a proportion of its total commercial stock as of September 2019. The higher this ratio is for an area, the more likely this area is exposed to significant economic disruption as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, as many firms in these sectors are likely to be severely impacted from this crisis. Commercial units that were listed in the GeoDirectory database with the following NACE code classifications²⁰ were considered to represent the sectors likely to have been worst affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.

- NACE Code B "Mining and Quarrying"
- NACE Code F "Construction"
- NACE Code G "Wholesale and Retail Services" excluding commercial units classified as "essential services" as per the government guidelines at the time of writing
- NACE Code I "Accommodation and Food Services"
- NACE Code R "Arts, Entertainment and Recreation Services"
- NACE Code Q.88.91 "Child Day-Care Activities"
- NACE Codes S.96.02 "Hairdressing and other beauty treatment", S.96.04 "Activities of physical wellbeing institutes" and S.96.09 "Other personal service activities".

For the Southern region as a whole, 47.2 per cent of its commercial units were operating in the most affected sectors, implying that just over 27,583 of its commercial units were likely to be severely impacted as a result of the public health measures. This was above the corresponding "COVID-19 Exposure Ratio" for the State as a whole, which was 46 per cent.

All three sub-regions of the Southern region recorded "COVID-19 exposure ratios" above the national average of 46 per cent. Of the three sub-regions of the Southern Region, the South-East had the

¹⁷ <http://www.southernassembly.ie/uploads/general-files/CV19-Regional-Economic-Analysis.pdf>

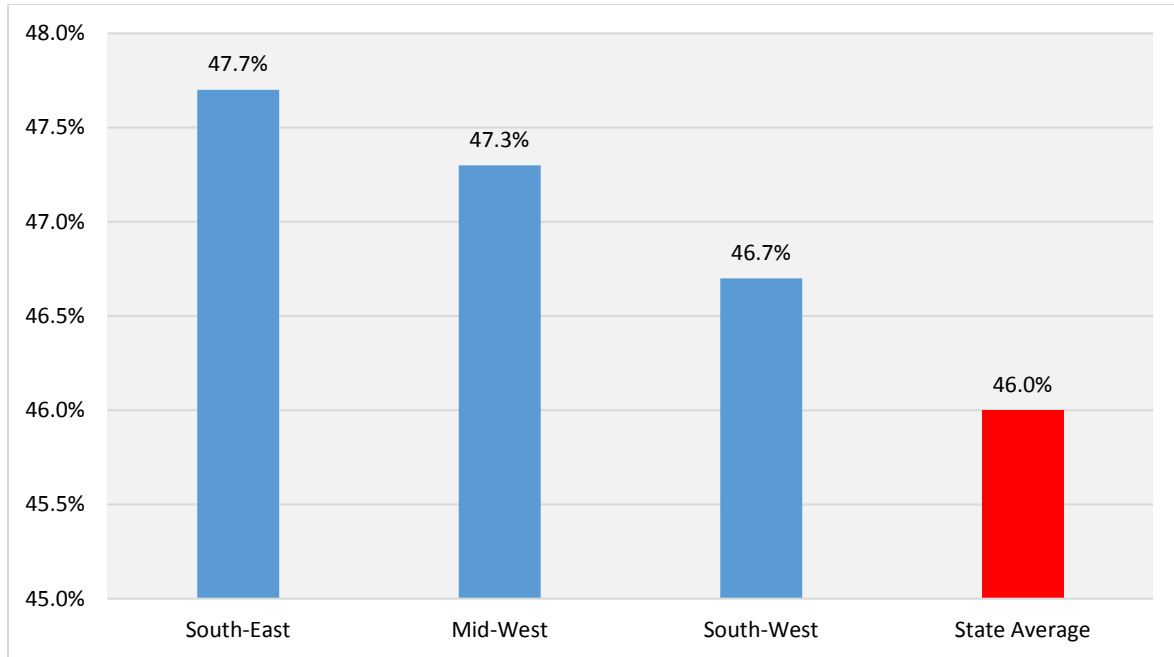
¹⁸ Comprises of all commercial units excluding residential units. Also excluded are units classified as Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing and Extraterritorial Organisations and Bodies (e.g. Embassies)

¹⁹ CSO defined settlements with a population of 1,500 or more as per Census 2016

²⁰ <https://statbank.cso.ie/px/u/NACECoder/NACEItems/searchnace.asp>

highest “COVID-19 Exposure Ratio”, with 47.7 per cent or 7,558 of its commercial units likely to be severely impacted as a result of the public health measures. This was followed by the Mid-West with 47.3 per cent or 8,618 of its commercial units likely to be severely impacted as a result of the public health measures. The South West registered a “COVID-19 Exposure Ratio” of 46.7 per cent, implying that 11,407 of its commercial units were likely to be severely impacted as a result of the public health measures.

Figure 6: COVID-19 Exposure Ratios, for the sub-regions of the Southern Region, September 2019



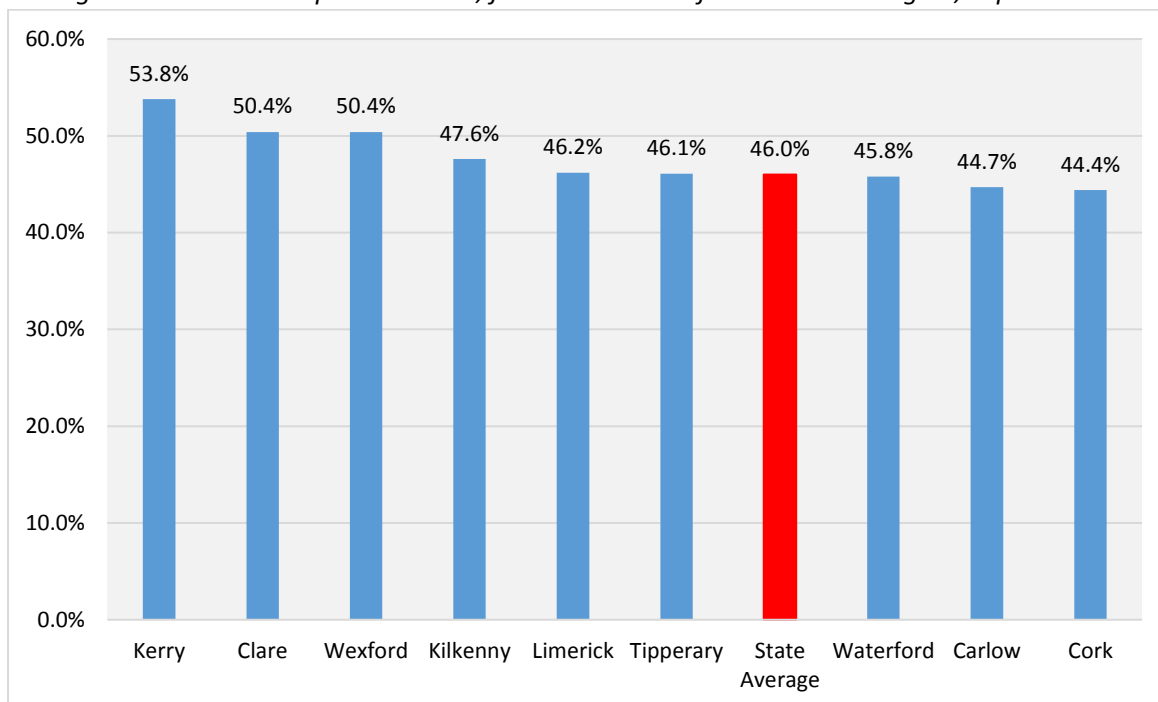
Source: Regional Assemblies of Ireland “COVID-19 Regional Economic Analysis”

In terms of counties, coastal and rural counties are more likely to be severely impacted due to their reliance on commercial units that generally require human interaction and cannot be operated remotely. In contrast, exposure is likely to be lower in more urban based counties as such counties rely more on economic activities that are capable of operating remotely; namely activities such as finance, ICT and professional and technical services.

Out of the 9 counties based in the Southern region, 6 recorded above average “COVID-19 exposure ratios”, with the highest exposure ratio in Ireland recorded in Kerry, with 53.8 per cent of its commercial units likely to be severely impacted as a result of the public health measures.

The next most exposed county based in the Southern Region was Clare (50.4 per cent) which was the 5th most exposed county in Ireland and then Wexford (also 50.4 per cent) which was the 6th most exposed county in Ireland. Notwithstanding its below average ratio (44.4%), Cork – in absolute terms – had the highest number of commercial units operating in the sectors likely to be worst affected, with just over 8,144 of its units likely to be severely impacted.

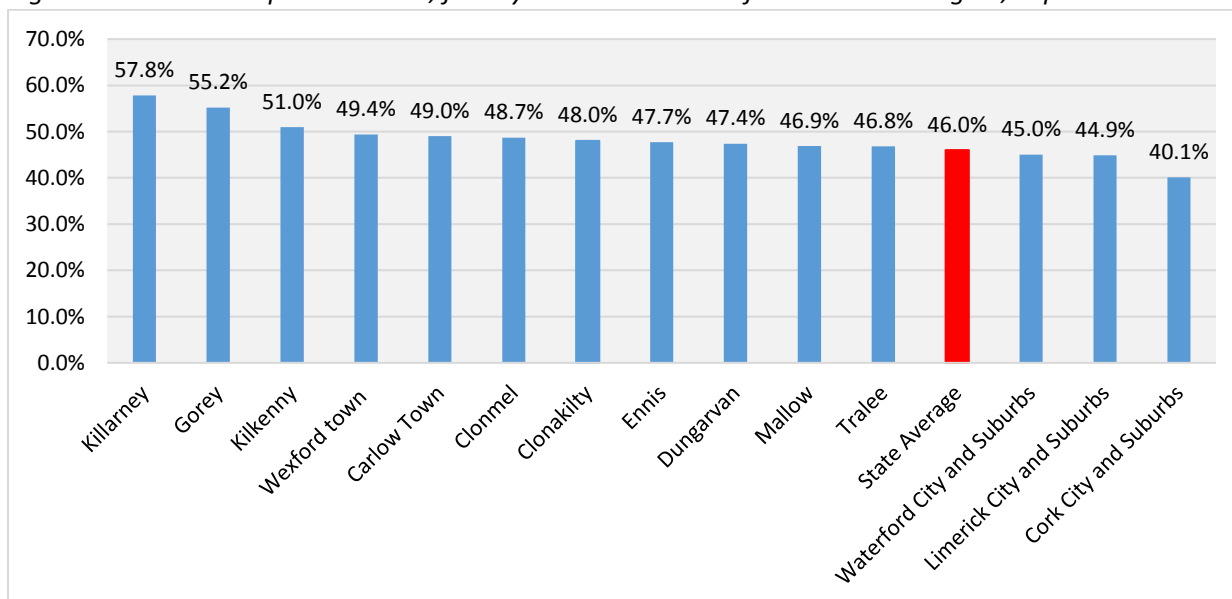
Figure 7: COVID-19 Exposure Ratios, for the counties of the Southern Region, September 2019



Source: Regional Assemblies of Ireland “COVID-19 Regional Economic Analysis”

All three cities based within the Southern region recorded below average exposure ratios, with the lowest being in Cork City with 40.1 per cent of its commercial units likely to be severely impacted. Despite being below the national average, this is notably high as a standalone figure, highlighting the sheer severity of this crisis. Out of the 14 Key Towns outlined in the Southern Regional Assembly’s RSES, 11 of these towns recorded “COVID-19 Exposure Ratios” above the national average, namely Kilkenny, Ennis, Carlow Town, Tralee, Gorey, Wexford town, Clonmel, Mallow, Killarney, Clonakilty and Dungarvan, as evident from Figure 8.

Figure 8: COVID-19 Exposure Ratios, for key towns and cities of the Southern Region, September 2019



Source: Regional Assemblies of Ireland “COVID-19 Regional Economic Analysis”

4: Priorities of the Southern Regional Assembly

The National Economic Recovery Plan will act as an important stimulus in achieving the overarching vision of the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES; which is to become one of Europe's most creative, innovative, greenest and liveable regions. By achieving this vision, we can build the economic resilience and enhance the competitiveness of the Southern Region's economy, allowing us to withstand any future challenges in the coming years.

The Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs) of the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES are aligned to three overarching pillars that will deliver our strategy, with the Southern Regional Assembly's priorities for the National Economic Recovery Plan identified under these three pillars, namely:

Pillar 1: A Creative and Innovative Region:

1. Ensure there is a regional approach to Smart Specialisation Strategies
2. Enhance the Southern Region's human capital levels
3. Improve the connectivity of Southern Region's transport infrastructure
4. Enhance the region's digital infrastructure and encourage greater usage of smart technologies
5. Support the region's Marine Economy in line with the objectives of the RSES

Pillar 2: A Liveable Region:

6. Deliver infrastructure improvements that enhance the quality of life offering of the Southern Region
7. Deliver appropriate housing stock in line with the compact growth targets of the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES and the NPF
8. Ensure urban and rural renewal funding schemes are aligned to the spatial objectives of the RSES
9. Enhance the level of funding for Co-Working hubs in our key towns and metropolitan areas

Pillar 3: A Green Region:

10. Ensure continued support to allow for a transition to a low carbon economy and to build climate resilience in the Southern Region
11. Ensure investment in public transport network allows for sustainable mobility in the Southern Region

4.1: Creative and Innovative Region

The Southern Regional Assembly's priorities for the National Economic Recovery Plan identified under the first pillar are as follows:

- Ensure there is a regional approach to Smart Specialisation Strategies
- Enhance the Southern Region's human capital levels
- Improve the connectivity of Southern Region's transport infrastructure
- Enhance the region's digital infrastructure and encourage greater usage of smart technologies
- Support the region's Marine Economy in line with the objectives of the RSES

4.1.1: Ensure there is a regional approach to Smart Specialisation Strategies

The economic strategy of the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES is based on five key principles; one of which would include the economic principle of Smart Specialisation Strategy. Smart Specialisation aims to bring together key stakeholders in a geographic area to identify the competitive advantages of a region with the view of utilising these competitive advantages in developing economic opportunities.

Advocated at a European level, this process brings together collective knowledge from local and national bodies to ensure the most effective distribution of funds while moving away from an outdated "one size fits all" policy. With input from local and regional stakeholders, Smart Specialisation aims to improve a region's productivity levels, regain lost competitiveness, increase export intensity and diversify markets, offering an innovative approach to kick-starting regional economies. The Southern Region's economy has its own unique competitive advantages where priority areas are of significant importance to the region.

Building on these unique competitive advantages will only assist in rebuilding our region's economy. This is evident from a recent report "Expert Advice and Support on Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) in Ireland" by Alison Hunter of the Economic and Public Policy Consultancy (EPPC). The report highlights that *"as a priority, Ireland will require to adopt a more strategic and cohesive approach to Smart Specialisation if it is to benefit from this agenda. This is likely to challenge established 'thinking' concerning the future direction for the country's wider R&I policy framework. Five key topics should be addressed which will support the country to make the shift necessary. These are: governance, place-based focus to policy making, cooperation, digitalisation and a revised SME support programme"*.

Insights from this report highlight the need for more regionally focused smart specialisation strategies and the importance of the regions and the RSES in this regard. Specifically, the report notes that:

- Ireland's approach to R&I is strongly centrally driven by the national government. As a consequence, it lacks sensitivity to and awareness of local issues (both successes and challenges).
- The recently launched RSESs offer an opportunity to re-orient the country's R&I governance with a stronger place-based focus. This could also address the concern expressed by several regional actors during the consultation programme of being 'left behind' in relation to targeted R&I capacity building support and investment, especially in rural Ireland.

- A ‘place-based’ emphasis generates value by identifying and connecting the many local examples of R&I excellence which exist across the country (e.g. in clusters and Institutes of Technology) which are often not very visible. By connecting these efforts, the country can help to overcome both market size challenges and reduce fragmentation of effort. In addition, this can also support Ireland to create a stronger presence and profile as an EU R&I ‘front-runner’, improving opportunities to boost innovation efforts with EU partners of choice.

By bringing a regional dimension to Ireland’s economic recovery process, policy makers can utilise funding resources in a far more efficient manner, allowing regions to utilise self-identified competitive advantages for the economic benefit of their own geographical areas. Such an approach is aligned with a variety of sections and RPOs of the Southern Regional Assembly’s RSES, namely:

- The economic vision for the Southern Region - under Section 4.2 of the RSES - is to enable sustainable, competitive, inclusive and resilient growth. To address economic challenges and vulnerabilities, it is important that the Southern Region sustains what we have in the immediate term and transforms our enterprise base for longer term resilience. To achieve this, Smart Specialisation is a key.
- It is an objective to identify and pursue opportunities for enterprise growth, innovation and diversity within our Regions’ sectors of strength, including the potential of enterprise ecosystems in sectors identified in the Regional Enterprise Plans (REPs) and their successors (RPO 51).
- It is an objective to maintain and leverage existing enterprise ecosystems to support enterprise development (RPO 67)
- Undertake on-going research and adopt a flexible and adaptable policy approach to allow for the integration on good practice, innovation and knowledge internationally from regions sharing similar challenges (RPO 69).
- Support diversification, economic resilience and to devise and introduce contingency plans and pilot projects based on the strengths of the Region to counteract the effects from industrial decline and potential external shocks in the Region (RPO 75).

To achieve these RPOs, it is imperative that a regional approach to a Smart Specialisation Strategy is developed. This regional smart specialisation approach would complement the work of the RSES in creating an effective market-led business ecosystem, which gives all regions a chance to thrive. The SRA are partners on the Interreg Europe funded COHES3ION project whose aim is to spread prosperity across the partners regions by building in a regional reflection to Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3). As part of this project, a diagnostic analysis of the Southern Region was carried out to identify multi-level synergies in S3 priorities and corresponding gaps/opportunities in S3 policies. This exercise highlighted the diverse range of specialist capabilities that exist across the region emphasising the need to develop targeted place-based smart priorities that are reflective of the regions strengths and boost our competitive advantage, which prompts the question of how to effectively prioritise, manage and support them. This regional smart specialisation approach would complement the work of the RSES in creating an effective market-led business ecosystem, which gives everyone a chance to thrive. To differentiate from the national smart specialisation strategy, this regional smart specialisation

strategy could focus on actions rather than sectors. For example, an action could focus on life-long learning to satisfy the ever-changing innovation landscape and meet skills demands. This approach would fulfil needs across many of the specialist sectors identified and could be achieved through the forum of the RSES.

4.1.2: Enhance the Southern Region's human capital levels

The Southern Region's ability to develop, nurture, retain and attract talent has never been more critical than it is in today's dramatically changing world. Going forward the economic recovery of the Southern Region will rely heavily on our ability to grow our 'human capital' base.

To develop a more resilient economy and society, the RSES recognises the value and necessity for lifelong learning. To support lifelong learning levels, the RSES seeks to develop a "**Learning Region**" by expanding the Learning City initiatives of Cork and Limerick to other urban and rural centres of population in the Southern Region, supporting the initiatives of the Irish Network of Learning Cities as well as preparing and implementing a Learning Region Strategy. A "Learning Region" can build pillars of inclusive and sustainable development that will benefit all. Promoting this culture of learning will assist in the continued success of all education and learning provisions and enhance the skills and employment opportunities for our Region's population. The apprenticeship model of learning between learning institutions and private companies (for example the Learning Academy in University Limerick) will be a key driver in the economic recovery of the Southern Region.

Therefore, to enhance the region's ability to promote learning and enhance its overall human capital base, the RSES seeks to implement the following RPOs which should be reflected in the forthcoming National Economic Recovery Plan. Relevant RPOs in the RSES are:

- Address the skills shortages challenges through improvements in lifelong learning rates across the Southern Region and to explore the attraction and absorption of incoming talent, with emphasis on accommodation, education and integration (RPO 63)
- Enhance the Regional Skills Fora as a permanent part of the education and training infrastructure (see RPO 188)
- Increase investment in addressing the Southern Region's educational and skills needs through investment in the higher education and further education and training sector (see RPO 189)
- Integrate Lifelong Learning and Healthy City initiatives across the Southern Region as essential components, as exemplified in Cork and Limerick's attainment of the UNESCO Learning City status and extend the UNESCO Learning City status to Waterford city, to create a regional knowledge triangle (see RPO 190)

The Southern Regional Assembly is currently preparing a **Learning Region Action Plan** in conjunction with a wide variety of stakeholders including the Education and Training Boards, Regional Skills Managers of the Southern Region, Higher Education Institutes based in the Region, Local Authorities, inter alia. This Action Plan aims to do three things:

1. Identify what is needed to develop the Southern Region's skills, talent and education proposition
2. Respond to the economic impact of COVID-19, from a skills, lifelong learning and education perspective and in doing so build in a resilience against similar future challenges to the economy.
3. Identify what is needed to support the current activities of the Learning City initiatives in the Southern Region, but also identify the best way to expand these initiatives to become a Learning Region.

This Learning Region Action Plan is still in progress and the Southern Regional Assembly would appreciate the opportunity to present this to the Department when complete. While the recommendations from the Action Plan will be wide ranging the emerging issues include low capital funding for ETBs, the need for incentives in certain circumstances to encourage employers to allow employees undertake development courses, the consistent decline in funding for third level institutions and opportunities to enhance emerging industrial cluster initiatives by certain Skills Fora within our Region. Ireland is trading on the basis of being a knowledge economy and it is important that enhanced investment maintains this major economic proposition for the Southern Region.

4.1.3: Improve the connectivity of Southern Region's transport infrastructure

Strengthened connectivity across the region (transportation and the efficient movement of freight) will enable interaction and collaborations between our regional economic drivers. These are Cork, Limerick-Shannon and Waterford Cities and Metropolitan Areas, the Eastern Economic Corridor, Atlantic Economic Corridor, 14 designated key towns, urban networks, other towns, villages and rural areas.

The efficient multi-modal movement of freight to our ports is essential for an island based open market economy. Strategic infrastructure projects identified under the current National Development Plan, NPF and RSES in terms of our strategic road network, public transport networks (including rail and bus) and the completion of the Trans European Transport Network (TEN-T) need to be delivered. Continued support for timely delivery, including resources for the responsible agencies and stakeholders to expedite delivery, are required.

In this regard, the RSES seeks to implement the following RPOs which should be reflected in the forthcoming National Economic Recovery Plan. Relevant RPOs in the RSES are:

- Enhance the Southern Region's international connectivity and delivery of projects in Ireland under the TEN-T network (RPO 140).
- Strengthening inter-regional multi-modal transport connections between each of the Region's Cities and Metropolitan Areas, Atlantic Economic Corridor, Eastern Economic Corridor, Ports and Airports (RPO 166).

- In pursuit of Enhanced Regional Accessibility under the NPF, support should be provided for projects identified under the National Development Plan 2018-2027 for strategic road (RPOs 167 & 168), rail (RPO 170) and bus (RPO 171).
- Improve inter-regional and intra-regional connectivity (public transport, strategic road network and digital) between each Metropolitan Area to each other, to economic corridors, key towns, other towns and urban networks and rural areas for strengthened economic interactions (Cork MASP Policy Objective 4, Limerick Shannon Policy Objective 9 and Waterford MASP Policy Objective 2). This will support the role of the cities and metropolitan areas as primary drivers of economic and population growth in the Southern Region.

To progress actions that deliver enhanced regional accessibility and high-quality international connectivity to our Region, the Southern Regional Assembly will be co-ordinating stakeholders in the preparation of a **Regional Freight Strategy** to improve efficiency in the distribution of freight throughout our Region, including optimisation of our rail network, the role of rail freight and potential for a rail freight and passenger hub in our region. The implementation phase of the RSES will co-ordinate the relevant stakeholders to identify the scope, role and actions arising from the strategy. Furthermore, a similar initiative will be undertaken with stakeholders to optimise the collective strength and capacity of our Region's Port and Airport assets through **Port and Airport Strategies for the Southern Region** to drive economic growth in our region (RPOs 141, 145 and 149 apply). The Southern Regional Assembly will welcome an opportunity to present progress to the Department on these strategies as they develop.

4.1.4: Enhance the region's digital infrastructure and encourage greater usage of smart technologies

Digital infrastructure and smart technologies are critical enablers for economic resilience and social revitalisation. This is particularly critical for the labour force, businesses and delivery of services in the Covid-19 context.

Smart Cities are the engines of a Smart Region and are key drivers in the delivery of a regional approach to Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3). Collaboration through Smart City initiatives is a significant opportunity where Smart Cities work together to solve problems, share knowledge, cultivate best practice and foster innovation. The RSES offers an opportunity to co-ordinate efforts with the All-Ireland Smart Cities Forum to facilitate shared learning to further reinforce and cement this approach. A good practice model in the Southern Region is the Limerick Digital Strategy which seeks to enable the development of a smart, sustainable city and region where digital technologies improve quality of life, empower communities and enable economic growth. It demonstrates what can be achieved with resources and funding supports (for example digital officers and resources to project manage and deliver on Local Authority digital strategies).

Funding the delivery of digital infrastructure and optimising smart technologies across all sectors is critical to extend Smart City initiatives region wide. The delivery of high-speed high capacity broadband, Broadband Connection Points, wireless networks, high capacity ICT infrastructure implementing Smart City and Smart Town/Village initiatives and Local Authority Digital Strategy actions need strong support.

In this regard, the RSES seeks to implement the following RPOs which should be reflected in the forthcoming National Economic Recovery Plan. Relevant RPOs in the RSES are:

- Diversity and innovation in the smart economic specialisms across our rural Region will be developed through access to high speed, high capacity broadband, the development of innovation hubs and centres of excellence and strengthening digital and physical infrastructure in rural settlements (RPOs 46, 48, 49, 50).
- Capitalising on Smart City concepts across towns and villages will require on-going investment in broadband, fibre technologies, wireless networks and integrated infrastructures. The RSES seeks to build a leadership role for the Southern Region as an innovator in smart technology, as an enabler for social and economic development in all locations, and to build on Smart City initiatives in Cork, Limerick and Waterford extending to towns, villages and rural areas (RPOs 133, 134, 135, 136 and 137 apply).
- The RSES supports the implementation of actions under digital strategies prepared by each Local Authority and supports the role of the Mobile and Broadband Taskforce in addressing digital and mobile coverage blackspots and rural digital connectivity (RPO 138).

Under these objectives, through the implementation stages of the RSES, the Southern Regional Assembly will co-ordinate with stakeholders to identify the scope, role and effective actions under a **Smart Region Strategy** to expand smart initiatives region wide. The SRA are also intending to contribute as a stakeholder partner with Waterford Institute of technology in an EU project entitled DORIC (Digitally Optimised Rural Based Integrated Communities), which is aimed at boosting rural economies through cross-sector digital service platforms. This project is pending approval and represents an important opportunity to work with stakeholders on delivering transformational best practices to increase the connectivity and digitisation of rural communities. The Southern Regional Assembly will welcome an opportunity to present progress to the Department in pursuit of a Smart Region.

4.1.5: Support the region's Marine Economy

The Southern Regional Assembly's RSES supports the role of our Region's marine assets, growth of the marine economy and seeks to position our Region as a leader and first mover under the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive and the National Marine Planning Framework.

The Southern Regional Assembly recommend strengthened resources for key stakeholders to implement the National Marine Planning Framework and to progress and implement Regional Marine Plans, Local Marine Plans and Framework Plans for Harbours in Cork and Waterford (building on the successful precedent of the Strategic Integrated Framework Plan for the Shannon Estuary). Our Region possesses a significant coastal resource with port and harbour assets to drive the marine economy.

Support is sought for the role of our Tier 1 and Tier 2 Ports of Cork, Shannon-Foynes, Port of Waterford, Rosslare Europort, our Regional Ports and Fishery Harbours, especially improved connectivity, which are important drivers for rural economic development. In addition, funding for the research and innovation sectors pioneering our marine potential on a global stage, especially in areas of off shore renewable energy, Marine ICT and Bio-Technology is strongly supported.

Relevant RPOs in the RSES are:

- RSES identifies priorities for our Region in the development of the Marine Economy, including alignment with the National Marine Planning Framework, implementation of Fishing Local Area Group Development Strategies to support coastal and island communities, objectives to develop the enterprises in the Blue Economy, the seafood sector, off shore renewable energy resources and research driven clusters in Marine ICT and biotechnology are supported (RPOs 77-86).
- RSES recognises the good practice example of the Strategic Integrated Framework Plan for the Shannon Estuary (SIFP) as a land and marine based framework to guide the future sustainable development of the estuary in Strategic Development Locations for marine related enterprise. Such approaches balance economic, port, tourism, heritage, community, environment and ecology priorities for a shared vision and framework. RPO 79 supports actions under the SIFP and to develop similar frameworks for Cork Harbour and Waterford Harbour.
- Investment is sought for connectivity and infrastructure that supports the strategic economic role played by our ports and fishing harbours through RPOs 142-147.

The Southern Regional Assembly - in co-ordination with the other two Regional Assemblies - made a comprehensive submission to the Marine Planning Section of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government in the development of the National Marine Planning Framework. Our submissions demonstrated that the existing regional tier, in terms of geography, structure, co-ordination with stakeholders, experience in delivering national policy at the regional scale and statutory basis, is strongly placed to assist delivery of Regional Marine Plans.

4.2: Liveable Region

The Southern Regional Assembly's priorities for the National Economic Recovery Plan identified under the second pillar are as follows:

- Deliver infrastructure improvements that enhance the quality of life offering of the Southern Region
- Deliver appropriate housing stock in line with the compact growth targets of the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES and the NPF
- Ensure urban and rural renewal funding schemes are aligned to the spatial objectives of the RSES
- Enhance the level of funding for Co-Working hubs in our key towns and metropolitan areas

4.2.1: Deliver infrastructure improvements that enhance the quality of life offering of the Southern Region

Investment is needed to underpin the role of all locations under the Southern Region's settlement hierarchy, which is based on the pillars of our three cities, supported by a network of strategically located key towns, other towns, villages and rural areas.

The National Economic Recovery Plan, aligning with the RSES, should be committed to supporting all of these places, and our settlements should be supported in developing their quality of life offering. Continued funding for transformational projects within cities, towns and villages and supporting the capacity for agencies to deliver regeneration is needed. This will enhance the placemaking qualities of our settlements, enhancing their quality of life offering, making them attractive and competitive for both living and financial investments.

In this regard, the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES seeks to implement the following RPOs which should be reflected in the forthcoming National Economic Recovery Plan. Relevant RPOs in the RSES are:

- The need for investment packages to deliver quality of place attributes in our cities and metropolitan areas of Cork, Limerick-Shannon and Waterford (RPO 8). Furthermore, each Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (Volume 2 of the RSES) has tailored objectives for investment to deliver key enablers for each City and Metropolitan Area, covering themes on regeneration, servicing of strategic housing and enterprise locations, sustainable transport, digital infrastructure, green infrastructure, recreation and amenities, education and training, skills development, health infrastructure, community infrastructure, strengthening social inclusion inter alia. MASP Policy Objective 1 for Cork, Limerick-Shannon and Waterford captures the essence of the priorities for each MASP and need for investment.
- Investment is sought for holistic infrastructure delivery across our key towns, inclusive of utilities, sustainable mobility, social and community, digital, recreational, heritage, green infrastructure, bio diversity and public realm regeneration inter alia (RPO 11). Further, each of the Region's 14 Key Towns has a tailored objective in support of infrastructure investment and delivery of transformative projects for those towns (RPOs 12-25).

- Support for strengthening the economic vitality of our towns and villages is advocated under RPO 26 which seeks support for initiatives that deliver revitalised mixed-use town and village centres, new homes in town and village centres, pilot urban renewal projects, investment in water services, digital infrastructure, facilities to strengthen tourism and enhance the retail experience inter alia (RPO 26).
- Support for placemaking is specifically advocated under Section 3.9 of the RSES, RPO 31 and linked to enterprise growth, under RPO 61 Health Place Audits for Placemaking.
- Specific investment for urban regeneration initiatives including targeted measures to reduce the extent of vacancy, retrofit the quality of the existing building stock, brownfield site remediation and initiatives that enable site assembly for regeneration is sought through RPO 34.

Through the implementation stages of the RSES, the SRA are closely monitoring and guiding the preparation of County and City Development Plans in the Southern Region and are seeking placemaking initiatives as a key policy response and action area at the local level. Strengthened financial support and staff resources to Local Government to deliver placemaking projects across our settlements is a critical economic proposition, especially to help combat declining footfall and vitality in our city, town and village streets as a result of Covid-19 and other future potential economic disruptions.

4.2.2: Deliver appropriate housing stock in line with the compact growth targets of the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES and the NPF

The Southern Region needs the right type of homes in the right locations, serviced with high quality infrastructure to retain and attract talent and a skilled workforce to our settlements. A mix of housing responses and affordable housing is needed to align with employment growth. There is a national policy requirement in the NPF to deliver at least 50 per cent of all new homes that are targeted in the region's three cities and suburbs of Cork, Limerick and Waterford within their existing built up footprints and 30 per cent for new homes in all other settlements. Such growth needs to be evidence based on availability and deliverability of lands. It will place a significant focus on initiatives to regenerate vacant and derelict buildings and lands, activate state and public lands and remediate brownfield lands (such as docklands) in prime urban centre locations.

To fulfil this requirement, significant investment to co-ordinate regeneration and deliver infrastructure will be required. The Department should co-ordinate with the Project Ireland 2040 Board to agree what practical and effective measures can be given to incentivise Compact Growth delivery and encourage public and private sector take up to meet these targets, deliver regeneration and deliver quality affordable housing in the right locations. This may include a combination of fiscal incentives to make regeneration viable and attractive, incentives for developers and extra resources for Local Government and agencies such as the Land Development Agency, so they can build up multi-discipline project management capacity to achieve actions. The Limerick Twenty Thirty Strategic Development DAC is a good model. Relevant RPOs in the RSES include:

- Prioritise housing and employment development in locations within and contiguous to existing city footprints where it can be served by public transport, walking and cycling and identify strategic initiatives in Local Authority Core Strategies for the Cities and Metropolitan areas, which will achieve the compact growth targets on brownfield and infill sites at a minimum and achieve growth targets (RPO 10).
- Local Authorities, through Development Plan and Local Area Plan policies, shall identify rejuvenation priorities within our Region's settlements which demonstrate achievement of National Strategic Outcome: Compact Growth and set out a transitional minimum requirement to deliver at least half (50 per cent) of all new homes that are targeted in the region's three Cities and suburbs of Cork, Limerick and Waterford, within their existing built up footprints and at least 30 per cent of all new homes that are targeted in settlements other than the cities and suburbs, within their existing built-up footprints. This will be evidence based on availability and deliverability of lands (RPO 35).
- The RSES supports the delivery of actions in the Southern Region through initiatives of the Land Development Agency which include co-ordinating appropriate State lands and private owned lands for regeneration and development, opening key sites which are not being used effectively for housing delivery and driving strategic land assembly (RPO 36).

Through the implementation stages of the RSES, the SRA are seeking County and City Development Plan policy to firmly adhere to land use and transport planning integration, the principles of regeneration and consolidation and high-quality, high density outcomes in achieving compact growth targets. Pro-active approaches to urban regeneration and co-ordinating infrastructure delivery are required within Local Authorities. The need for resources for multi-disciplinary project management and strengthening capacity to bid for funding is being impressed on local authorities in our observations to the development of new Development Plan policies.

4.2.3: Ensure urban and rural renewal funding schemes are aligned to the spatial objectives of the RSES

To support compact growth targets and to enhance the placemaking qualities of the Southern Region, holistic approaches to delivering physical and social infrastructure packages to regenerate, retrofit and ensure future growth is infrastructure led is needed.

Funding to deliver Irish Water Investment Plans in particular, is critical for our Region's settlement hierarchy. The initiatives of Project Ireland 2040 under the Urban Regeneration Development Fund, Rural Regeneration Development Fund, Disruptive Technologies Fund and Climate Action Fund, in addition to other funding streams for urban and rural renewal managed by different Departments (such as the Local Authority Housing Activation Fund, Community Support Funds, Living Cities Initiative, Town and Village Renewal Grants, Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme, Clár Scheme, Leader, Social Inclusion and Community Activation Funds) all make a critical difference to placemaking and economic resilience.

They are a compliment to economic funding supports - such as the Regional Enterprise Development Funds - ensuring that resilient settlements and a high quality of life offer is equally enabled to support enterprise growth. Increased and ring-fenced funding streams - especially for the scale of cities and metropolitan areas - simplified processes to draw down funding and the removal of the need for match funding by local authorities - who are financially constrained from the financial impact of Covid-19 – will be important measures in ensuring urban and rural renewal schemes are adequately utilised.

To ensure equity of access to funding and avoid the potential for competition between regions for resources, it is essential to build in regional specialisations and improved targeting of how priorities can better connect across Ireland's territories, which could further leverage cross boundary economic opportunities. A targeted regional approach to S3 would facilitate cross-regional collaboration and equity of access to funding. Capacity building is a key feature of the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES with the acknowledgement that there is a need to ensure sufficient capacity in bidding for and winning competitive bids for funding.

In this regard, relevant RPOs in the RSES are as follows:

- To deliver infrastructure that supports population and employment growth aligned to the growth strategy for each Local Authority, RPO 4.
- Funding to deliver strategic investment priorities in cities and metropolitan areas, delivery of collaborative projects under the NPF funding streams, funding to Local Government and Departments to prioritise compact growth and holistic infrastructure packages are supported across RPOs 7-9 and within each MASP for Cork, Limerick Shannon and Waterford, specifically Cork MASP Policy Objectives 5 & 6, Limerick Shannon MASP Policy Objectives 4 & 5 and Waterford MASP Policy Objectives 4 & 5.
- To deliver on infrastructure that create a platform for enterprise creation and innovation in the Southern Region, RPO 68.
- Funding to deliver the strategic water and wastewater infrastructure under Irish Water Investment Plans to service national and regional growth targets and settlement hierarchy (RPOs 208-216).
- Support for Local Authorities, state bodies, stakeholders and communities in achieving the drawdown of investment funds nationally and under EU funds available to the Southern Region (RPO 227).

In the implementation stages of the RSES, cross-sectoral and cross regional stakeholder steering groups will be established with a remit to ensure actions under national and regional policy are measurable, attainable, realistic and time-bound. Tracking project delivery and the drawdown of funding through national and other funding streams will be a focus area for these committees. Continued funding supports to deliver on the NPF, NDP and RSES at the local level are critical for economic recovery and building future economic resilience.

4.2.4: Enhance the level of funding for Co-Working hubs in our key towns and metropolitan areas

The outbreak of COVID-19 has had a profound impact on all of our working environments. In a matter of weeks, both public and private sector workers have been forced to suddenly shift to remote working, with the public and private sector utilising technology and adopting work practises in a manner and scale never seen before.

With remote working very much becoming part of normal working patterns in certain sectors, it is clear that such changes have the potential to open up an array of economic and environmental opportunities for all of our regions. By supporting remote working, policy makers could help provide a wider range of options for workers and open opportunities for business solutions. This includes allowing some workers to live and work in geographical areas of their own choice, reducing business costs associated with commercial properties, enhancing staff retention and wellbeing, providing greater access to a larger pool of applicants and talent, increasing productivity, reducing traffic congestion, enhancing quality of life and family time and reducing the level of greenhouse gas emissions from car usage.

From a strategic perspective, the ability of policy makers to utilise the potential benefits of remote working will also be a key factor in ensuring the vision and objectives of the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES can be implemented, allowing for effective economic development to be achieved across Ireland. In this regard, the development of urban centres of scale continues to be a crucial component in addressing regional imbalances and remote working has the potential to enhance the growth prospects of the Southern Region's Metropolitan Areas and Key Towns.

Furthermore, remote working has the potential to provide greater employment flexibility to all workers whose jobs are considered to be remote workable, which could enhance the quality of life offering of each of our regions; a key objective of the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES. In the long term, the degree to which regions can capitalise on these potential benefits will depend on a variety of factors - including but not limited to - the availability of co-working hubs with high quality facilities and the provision of high speed broadband within such hubs.

To allow all of our regions to capitalise on the potential of remote working, the Southern Regional Assembly considers that the National Economic Recovery Plan should provide greater levels of funding to the "Regional Enterprise Development Fund" (REDF) - or divert resources from other existing funds - in order to deliver more co-working hubs in the Southern Region. Such funding should also be delivered using local knowledge from appropriate local authorities and the Regional Assemblies of Ireland. Additional funding in this regard should be concentrated on delivering high quality co-working hubs of scale within or in close proximity to our Metropolitan Areas and Key Towns as defined by the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES and prominent rural communities in the region.

Furthermore, the Southern Regional Assembly supports exploring a range of match funding opportunities for REDF projects that will deliver additional co-working hubs of scale within or in close proximity to Designated Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns as defined by each Assembly's RSES and prominent rural communities. This could involve – but wouldn't be limited to – encouraging private sector companies to provide an element of match funding for these type of REDF projects or possibly removing the 20 per cent for these type of REDF projects that will provide a sizeable economic uplift to a geographical area.

4.3: Green Region

The Southern Regional Assembly's priorities for the National Economic Recovery Plan identified under the third pillar are as follows:

- Ensure continued support to allow for a transition to a low carbon economy and to build climate resilience in the Southern Region
- Ensure investment in public transport network allows for sustainable mobility in the Southern Region

4.3.1: Ensure continued support to allow for a transition to a low carbon economy and to build climate resilience in the Southern Region

The RSES prioritises action on climate change across all economic sectors. The Southern Regional Assembly is committed to implementing national policy under Ireland's Transition to a Low Carbon Energy Future 2015-2030 and Climate Action Plan 2019 to enable the Region's transition to a low carbon, climate resilient and environmentally sustainable economy and society. The RSES identifies priorities to build climate resilience and drive decarbonisation across all sectors and achieve resource efficiency. Achieving these objectives is essential for economic recovery and builds our innovation capacity in the green economy. To be future proofed and resilient, it is important to continue support for diversification within our existing sectors and a Just Transition of the labour force to a greener future.

We need to future proof our settlements, our built assets and our strategic infrastructure from the impacts of climate change, including severe weather events - such as flooding and coastal erosion - that continue to cause significant disruption to our economy and essential services. Failure to comply with our responsibilities to reduce carbon omissions to achieve the EU target of zero emissions by 2050 will have a significant economic impact in terms of financial penalties, cost to the exchequer and erosion of our international competitiveness.

Support for renewable energy sectors, transition of traditional sectors - especially in energy, agriculture and manufacturing - retrofitting our buildings, support for sustainable mobility, carbon sequestration, support for the circular economy, ecosystems services approaches, support for green and blue infrastructure and nature-based solutions offers both mitigation and enterprise opportunities.

The integration of green and blue infrastructure and nature-based solutions into policy formulation and project planning offers opportunities to reduce costs, enhance utilisation of existing infrastructure while creating a climate resilient economy. For example, the integration of Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) will better manage surface water which creates greater capacity in wastewater treatment infrastructure. Stakeholder engagement through the SRAs role on the EU Interreg Europe [Blue Green City Project](#) has found that there are significant gaps in know-how and practical application of green and blue infrastructure and nature-based solutions at a local level. A clear national policy direction with supporting elements such as guidelines and training would assist in making progress.

The RSES advocates for greater economic and sectoral diversification, particularly in rural areas where it has been shown that many towns and villages are vulnerable to the effects of economic changes and shocks such as COVID-19 restrictions. The transition to a low carbon economy can offer significant

opportunities to achieve sectoral diversification in these areas. However, it requires support, structures and investment.

In this regard, the RSES requires that continued support is provided for the work of research and development, centres of excellence in the green economy and pilot projects, for example the National Bio-Economy Hub in Lisheen in the Southern Region. Supporting actions at a local level, especially for funding and resources to implement our national policy, regional and local actions through the Climate Action Regional Offices and Local Authority Climate Change Adaptation Strategies is important for progress in this area.

Relevant RPOs in the RSES that reflect our priorities in this area can be found below:

- Ensure there is urgency in the transition to a low carbon future, low carbon economy and circular economy through mechanisms such as the Climate Action Competitive Fund (RPO 56).
- Reduce carbon emissions across business, public and residential sectors and increase the use of renewable energy resources across electricity supply, heating, transport and agriculture (RPO 87 with specific sector objectives for Transport (RPOs 91-93), Agriculture (RPO 94), Heating (RPO 105) and Retrofitting (RPO 106)).
- Ensure there are specific supports for renewable energy generation, upgrading older infrastructure with smart and green technologies and support for innovation and research funding (RPOs 95-104)
- Support for innovation in the bioeconomy as a major contributor to our indigenous renewable energy resources and as an economic driver for our rural areas (RPOs 55-57)
- Support for social enterprises and the circular economy within local communities to benefit environmental protection, employment generation and community development (RPO 60 and RPOs 107-109)
- The promotion of an Ecosystems Services approach which integrates economic thinking in the protection of natural ecosystems. Practical examples of where this has been achieved, such as the *Burren Programme* and *Upstream Thinking in the United Kingdom*, are provided in the RSES. This will be partially important for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) post 2020 as agricultural policy continues to align with environmental and climate action considerations (RPOs 110 and 124).
- The completion of flood relief schemes and development of capital works under the flood capital investment programme, integrating green infrastructure techniques (RPOs 113-120).

Through the implementation stages of the RSES, the Southern Regional Assembly are developing a **Regional Decarbonisation Plan** in collaboration with key stakeholders to provide a framework for action on de-carbonisation across all sectors. We are a partner agency on an EU Interreg Europe Project FIRESPOL which is finding new solutions to address the financial barriers currently impeding greater investment in the generation and storage of Renewable Energy Sources. The Southern Regional Assembly will integrate the ongoing work of the FIRESPOL Project into a **Regional Renewable**

Energy Strategy (RRES) to complement the **Regional Decarbonisation Plan**. These two actions are being implemented in the Region with multiple partners from the public and private sectors and Government can, through the Regional Assemblies, see the Actions set out in the Climate Action Plan 2019 developed and implemented on the ground, and thereby assist in meeting the state's national and international obligations. By backing initiatives in this area, strengthened mechanisms to deliver on Climate Action - as a strengthening of the Climate Action Plan 2019 which the courts recently found were lacking - will be achieved.

The Southern Regional Assembly also continue to collaborate closely with the Climate Action Regional Offices to support Local Authority policy and actions on mitigation and adaptation, which increasingly have a focus on economic opportunities in the green economy. Supporting the resources of agencies proactively advancing actions for the green economy and strengthened funding through streams such as the Climate Action Fund, are strongly encouraged. The SRA will welcome an opportunity to discuss progress on these initiatives with the Department.

4.3.2: Ensure investment in public transport network allows for sustainable mobility in the Southern Region

Congestion caused by the dominance of private transport for most of our journeys is a cost to our economy, environment and health. It is eroding our quality of life, quality of our places and attractiveness for investment. Change to sustainable travel is urgently needed to ensure targeted growth is infrastructure led.

This will require a commitment to better land use and transport planning integration, investment and project delivery for public transport, active travel and modal integration, especially where population and jobs growth will be concentrated. Recent reviews on sustainable mobility policy from the Department of Transport Tourism and Sport highlighted that commuting trips nationally are expected to rise by 35 per cent over current levels by 2040. While the more recent impacts of Covid-19 on travel to work patterns, with increased working from home and decreased private and public transport journeys to access work will require assessment, these predictions still indicate a potential long-term trend that presents a significant challenge in the context of high levels of jobs and employment growth targeted through the NPF and RSES.

The National Economic Recovery Plan needs to support funding to projects that deliver public transport and active travel (walking and cycling) across all our settlements. Importantly, support should be provided to the National Transport Authority, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, Local Authorities and transport bodies to implement Metropolitan Area Transport Strategies in Cork, Limerick-Shannon and Waterford and forthcoming Local Transport Plans across key towns and other settlements. Funding for Local Authority works that progress smarter travel, e-mobility and improve walking and cycling permeability to achieve sustainable 10-Minute City and Town Concepts need support.

In this regard, the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES seeks to implement the below RPOs which should be reflected in the forthcoming National Economic Recovery Plan. Relevant RPOs in the RSES are as follows:

- To invest in public transport networks, multi-modal interchange, smart mobility, walking and cycling for strengthened sustainable mobility within and between our settlements (RPO 160 & 161)
- To develop and implement Metropolitan Area Transport Strategies for Cork, Limerick-Shannon and Waterford (RPO 164) and additionally specific transport projects within Cork MASP Policy Objectives 7-9, Limerick Shannon MASP Policy Objectives 6-8 and Waterford MASP Policy Objective 6-7.
- To develop and implement multi-modal Local Transport Plans for Key Towns as designated in the RSES and other towns as identified by Local Authorities as a complement to Metropolitan Area Transport Strategies (RPO 157).
- To significantly upscale investment in infrastructure and facilities that delivers extensive designated and segregated walking and cycling networks within and between our settlements for every day trips, inclusive of smaller scaled interventions that improve local permeability for walking and cycling between home, work, schools and services to strategic greenway corridors (RPO 174).
- The RSES supports a 10-Minute City/ Town as a concept whereby a range of community facilities and services are accessible in short walking and cycling timeframes from homes or are accessible by high quality public transport services by connecting people to larger scaled settlements delivering these services (RPO 176).

Through the implementation stages of the RSES, the Southern Regional Assembly will continue to coordinate closely with the National Transport Authority, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, Local Authorities and other agencies in the preparation and implementation of Metropolitan Transport Strategies and Local Transport Plans.

Through our role in both an EU Interreg Europe project called MATCH-UP - which aims to achieve significant improvements of modal interchange to foster low-carbon urban mobility - and the RSES, the Southern Regional Assembly have created a framework tool (Accessibility and Framework Report - 10 Minute Towns) for the implementation of 10 Minute City/Town concepts that can be used for all settlements in our Region. The benefits of achieving this framework - which requires cost effective projects at a local level - are considerable. The Southern Regional Assembly would welcome an opportunity to discuss effectiveness of supporting such frameworks with the Department for placemaking, sustainable mobility, health, and quality of life, which supports a strong economy and enterprise growth in Southern Region.


5: Conclusion

The Southern Regional Assembly's RSES provides a long-term, strategic development framework for the future economic and social development of the Southern Region, with the RSES aiming to ensure that the Southern Region will become one of Europe's most creative and innovative, greenest and liveable regions, allowing it to achieve effective regional development as envisioned in the National Planning Framework (NPF). In doing so, the RSES sets the framework for each local authority within the Southern Region to develop their county and city development plans in a manner that will ensure national, regional and local plans align.

Delivering the economic and spatial objectives of our RSES will be a key component in tackling regional disparities that exist in Ireland, and the delivery of these objectives is needed now more than ever. As per the latest available statistics, it is clear that the outbreak of COVID-19 has already had a profound impact on the Southern Region's economy. As of Q2 2020, 289,810 people or 38.5 per cent of the Southern Region's labour force were in receipt of either the "Pandemic Unemployment Payment", the "Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme" or were registered on the "Live Register", highlighting the sheer impact of COVID-19 on the region's labour market. From a commercial market perspective, 47.2 per cent of the Southern Region's commercial units were operating in the sectors most likely to be the worst affected from the economic disruption caused by COVID-19, implying that just over 27,583 commercial units in the region were likely to be severely impacted as a result of the public health measures.

In this context, the National Economic Recovery Plan will act as an important stimulus in combating this economic disruption and in achieving the overarching vision of the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES; namely for the Southern Region to become one of Europe's most creative and innovative, greenest and liveable regions. To allow for an inclusive economic recovery, it is imperative that the overarching priorities of the National Economic Recovery Plan compliment the eleven priorities set out in this submission, and by virtue the spatial and economic objectives of the Southern Regional Assembly RSES. In doing so, the National Economic Recovery Plan can be a key component in tackling regional imbalances that exist in Ireland, allowing the Southern Region to develop critical mass and act as a counterbalance to the Greater Dublin Area.

Going forward, the Southern Regional Assembly as a key regional stakeholder welcomes future consultations with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment on further developing the priorities of the National Economic Recovery Plan as well as engaging with the Department on several initiatives that have been mentioned in this submission, especially the Learning Region Action Plan.



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