

From: Paul Donnelly
Director of Rural Affairs

APPENDIX 1



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**
www.daera-ni.gov.uk

Mr Anthony Tohill
Chief Executive
Mid Ulster District Council
Council Offices
Circular Road
Dungannon
BT71 6DT

Ballykelly House
111 Ballykelly Road
Limavady
BT49 9HP
Tel: 028 8225 3501
E-mail: paul.donnelly@daera-ni.gov.uk

Date: 14 Oct 2020

Dear Anthony

Priority 6 Promoting social Inclusion, poverty Reduction and Economic Development in Rural Areas

As you will be aware LEADER, which is the delivery mechanism for Priority 6, has proved very successful and has benefitted rural areas across NI. To date over 600 rural businesses have received Letters of Offer worth £21.3m leveraging in over £23.1m of private sector funding and creating over 800 FTE Jobs to date. Many Community and Voluntary Sector organisations have benefited to the value of £16.4m for new or improved community facilities and the Village Renewal Scheme has provided Councils with in excess of £18m funding for village enhancement and facilities for use by rural communities. A further £4m has been allocated to Co-Operation projects.

Although outputs have been good, we have some way to go to ensure that the funding available is fully invested and no funds are lost. As of September 2020 there is still almost £25m to be drawn down of which over 70% is Council led projects under the Village Renewal and Co-Operation Schemes. The COVID19 pandemic has led to the Department providing a number of easements to assist both the Local Action Groups (LAGs) and Councils to continue to deliver LEADER and make payments. The lockdown has delayed delivery of LEADER and in order to provide sufficient time to complete the programme I am writing to confirm that the end date for drawing down all project and administration funding has been extended to 31 March 2022. There may need to be retention monies drawn down on some capital projects beyond that date which can be managed between the Council and the Department.

We now also need to review the existing LEADER contracts which have been in place since 2016 for the delivery of the current LEADER programme. The 3 LEADER legal documents are:

- Contract between the Department and the LAG,

Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone.

If you are deaf or have a hearing difficulty you can
contact the Department via the Next Generation Text
Relay Service by dialling 18001 + telephone number.



- Contract between the Council and the LAG, and
- Service Level Agreement between the Department and the Council.

Contract between DARD (now DAERA) and the LAG

The Contract between the Department and the LAG does not have an end date (cessation date) and therefore runs until the LEADER programme has been successfully delivered and all National and EU funding has been drawn down in each of the Council areas. These existing Contracts with the 10 LAGs will therefore remain in place until the programme is successfully delivered in each Council area.

Service Level Agreement (SLA) between the Council and the Department

The SLA, which ensures the delivery of administrative and advisory support services by Council to the LAG, commenced on 1st April 2016 and ceases on 31 December 2020. In order for the Department to continue to make payments to the Council beyond the 31 December 2020 the SLA now needs to be extended to 31 March 2022, in line with the new end date for drawing down all project and administration funding - 'Variation to the SLA' document is attached.

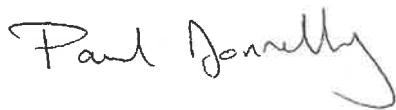
The original admin allocations provided to Councils was £12.3m within the overall LEADER budget of £70m and there is no additional resource available to Councils within the current LEADER programme.

Contract between the Council and the LAG

This contract sets out the Agreement for Councils to provide administrative support to the LAG. This contract also now needs to be extended to 31 March 2022, in line with the new end date for drawing down all project and administration funding - 'Variation to the Contract' document is attached.

I would be grateful if you would sign the SLA and the Variation to the Contract between the Council and the LAG (ensuring that the LAG Chair has also signed the Variation to Contract) and return them electronically to Gerard O'Neill (gerard.o'neill@daera-ni.gov.uk) LEADER Manager by 30 November 2020.

Yours sincerely,



PAUL DONNELLY
Director of Rural Affairs

Cc LAG Chair

Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone.

If you are deaf or have a hearing difficulty you can contact the Department via the Next Generation Text Relay Service by dialling 18001 + telephone number.



VARIATION TO CONTRACT

For the purpose of administering Priority 6 LEADER schemes of the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme in the Council area.

The Contract made between Mid Ulster District Council and Mid Ulster Rural Development Partnership Local Action Group (LAG) under the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2014- 2020 is varied as follows:

1. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) is replaced on every occurrence within the Contract with 'The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA)'.

2 SCHEDULE : The Agreement

Point 4. Replace:

'This contract shall commence from 1st April 2016 and shall remain in force until 31st December 2020, unless otherwise terminated by mutual consent, or by some act of Force Majeure.'

With:

'This contract shall commence from 1st April 2016 and shall remain in force until 31st March 2022 unless otherwise terminated by mutual consent, or by some act of Force Majeure.'

3 SCHEDULE IV: Miscellaneous Issues

Replace:

'This contract is effective until 31st December 2020, but may be extended for a further period, subject to agreement between both parties'.

With:

'This contract is effective until 31st March 2022, but may be extended for a further period, subject to agreement between both parties'.

- 4 Words and expressions in this Variation to Contract shall have the meanings given to them in the original Contract.

5. The original Contract shall remain effective and unaltered except as amended by this Variation.

Signed

Date:

Full Name:

Clerk and Chief Executive
on behalf of Mid Ulster District Council

Signed

Date:

Full Name:

Position on Board
on behalf of Mid Ulster Rural Development
Partnership Local Action Group (LAG)

VARIATION TO CONTRACT

LEADER IMPLEMENTATION SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENT

The Service Level Agreement made between the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and Mid Ulster District Council under the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2014- 2020 is varied as follows:

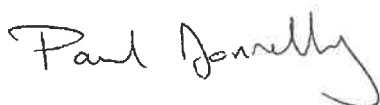
1. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) is replaced on every occurrence within the Agreement with 'The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA)'.
2. Page 4 of the Agreement replace the section.

'The SLA will commence on 1 April 2016 and cease on 31 December 2020 (the contract period), subject to any mutually agreed extension between DARD and the Council by written procedure'

With,

'The SLA will commence on 1 April 2016 and cease on 31 March 2022 (the contract period), subject to any mutually agreed extension between DAERA and the Council by written procedure'

3. Words and expressions in this Variation shall have the meanings given to them in the original Contract of 1 April 2016.
3. The Contract of 1 April 2016 shall remain effective and unaltered except as amended by this variation.



SIGNED:

DATE: 14 October 2020

For the Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs (DAERA)

Full Name: Paul Donnelly
Director of Rural Affairs
on behalf of the Department of Agriculture,
Environment and Rural Affairs

Signed:
For: Mid Ulster District Council

DATE.....

Full Name:
Chief Executive
Clerk and Chief Executive on behalf of
Mid Ulster District Council



**The Framework of
Regional Priorities for
the Central Border
Region of Ireland /
Northern Ireland,
2021–2027**



OCTOBER 2020

CONTENTS

Foreword	1
Executive Summary	2
1.0. INTRODUCTION, AMBITIONS AND VISION	6
1.1 The Purpose of the Framework of Regional Priorities	6
1.2 The Key Ambitions and Aims.....	7
1.3 The Vision and Themes for the Central Border Region	9
1.4. Setting the Context – the Urgency and Timing of this Framework	11
1.5. The Structure of this Document.....	14
2.0 THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT FOR THE CENTRAL BORDER REGION	15
2.1 Key Statutory and Planning Frameworks	15
2.2 Our Rural Identity.....	17
2.3 Relationships to International Principles and Objectives.....	18
3.0 A PROFILE OF THE CENTRAL BORDER REGION	20
3.1 Key Demographic and Economic Statistics	20
3.2 Ecology and Environment	21
3.3 Implications of the Regional Profile	21
3.4 Actions to Develop the Central Border Region	22
4.0 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	23
5.0 INFRASTRUCTURE AND CONNECTIVITY	26
6.0 HUMAN CAPITAL – EDUCATION, TRAINING & SKILLS	29
7.0 LIVEABLE COMMUNITIES	31
8.0 NATURAL CAPITAL - GREENING THE REGION	33
9.0 MANAGING AND DELIVERING THE FRAMEWORK OF REGIONAL PRIORITIES	35
9.1 Implementation Framework and Principles.....	35
9.2 Anticipated Outcomes	35
9.3 Priorities and Catalyst Projects	36
Catalyst 1: Farm to Fork	39
Catalyst 2: Greenways and Blueways	41
Catalyst 3: River Catchments Sustainability	43
Catalyst 4: A Thriving Regional Bioeconomy	44
Catalyst 5: International Mountain Biking Destination	45
ANNEX 1: THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT FOR THE CENTRAL BORDER REGION.....	48
ANNEX 2: DEMOGRAPHIC AND EMPLOYMENT DATA.....	55
ANNEX 3: HOW NATURE-BASED APPROACHES CAN SUPPORT POLICY GOALS.....	56
Endnotes	57

List of Acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CCBS	Centre for Cross Border Studies
CP	Community Plan
CSO	Council Senior Officers
EU	European Union
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
FRP	Framework for Regional Priorities
ICBAN	Irish Central Border Area Network
ICLRD	International Centre for Local and Regional Development
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
LCDC	Local and Community Development Committee
LECP	Local Economic and Community Plan
NI	Northern Ireland
NDP	National Development Plan
NPF	National Planning Framework
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
RDS	Regional Development Strategy
RoI	Republic of Ireland
RSES	Regional Economic and Spatial Strategy
RSF	Regional Strategic Framework
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UUEPC	Ulster University Economic Policy Centre
WHO	World Health Organisation

Foreword

The Irish border region is meeting some of its greatest challenges for a generation: the Covid-19 pandemic, climate disruption, and the exit of the UK from the European Union. As a result, for the first time in 50 years, the border corridor area, including the Central Border Region, is preparing for the advent where one component jurisdiction (Northern Ireland) will leave the EU while the adjacent area (Ireland) remains within the EU.

An impending Brexit has given rise to a developing conversation across the border region about how this might impact on future joint working. Amid current uncertainties and political differences, there remains a widely held commitment across local authorities, border communities and other community/voluntary groups within our region to continue working together, to preserve the gains already achieved and to realise potential benefits for future generations.

Cross-border cooperation takes on a new symbolic and practical significance in this new geo-political environment. It is important therefore to think in terms of mutual benefit and collaboration, rather than competition and divergence. Stakeholders in the Central Border Region can do this by building on existing relationships, and helping realise the ambitions which are set out within this Framework document for the period 2021-2027.

This Framework presents a strategic response that is both unique and tailored to the assets and characteristics of this particular region. In working together to advance the strategic priorities, we can develop the Central Border Region as a thriving, resilient, vibrant and diversified economy. This can be achieved through delivering on our key regional priorities; in utilising our regional strengths and assets, in supporting economic development, in enhancing citizens' quality of life, in making greater use of connections and remote working, and in developing our tourism offering. In doing so we can deliver benefits for all areas within the region: Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon; Cavan; Donegal; Fermanagh and Omagh; Leitrim; Mid-Ulster; Monaghan; and Sligo.

Finally, we wish to pass on our thanks to the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) for all their guidance and work on the project. We also wish to acknowledge all those who have inputted, including from our eight member Councils, their contributions have been very much appreciated. It is very important to also acknowledge the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Reconciliation Fund which has provided assistance in supporting the 'Border Navigator' and 'Border Animator' projects, and which have enabled the development of this Framework.

Councillor Pat Treanor, ICBAN Chair, 2019-2020

Councillor Eamon Mc Neill, ICBAN Chair, 2020-2021

Executive Summary

Background

This *Framework for Regional Priorities* (FRP) (2021 – 2027), for the Central Border Region of Ireland / Northern Ireland (FRP), provides a timely and important refresh of the *Regional Strategic Framework* (RSF) (2013 – 2027)¹. Recognising the geopolitical, economic and social changes that have occurred since the publication of the RSF, initially due to Brexit, and subsequently due to climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) Ltd., in early 2020, put in train a consultative and research process. Working in collaboration with the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD), ICBAN sought to take stock of regional assets, challenges and opportunities, and, at the mid-way point in the timeframe of the RSF, to identify new and emerging strategic priorities for the Central Border Region.

The resultant FRP has been informed by consultations with the Council Senior Officers (CSO) Forum, a survey of ICBAN Board members and of the senior executives in the eight affiliated local authorities¹, and secondary research undertaken by ICBAN and ICLRD. This purposive process needs to be ongoing and systematic, so that all eight councils are enabled, empowered and supported to actively engage with, and contribute to the implementation of the FRP.

Our Regional Priorities

This FRP is motivated by, and seeks to give effect to, ICBAN's Vision of a region *with a thriving, resilient, vibrant and diversified economy* that will be strengthened and sustained through delivering these inter-connected and mutually re-enforcing strategic regional priorities:

- **Exploiting new opportunities based on regional strengths and assets** (including latent assets), in the bioeconomy, food production and sustainable landscape management;
- **Supporting economic development** through providing adequate industrial spaces, nurturing inter-firm collaboration and innovation and strengthening linkages with education / training providers;
- **Enhancing citizens' quality of life**, through improved and more innovative modes of service delivery, life-long progression opportunities, enhanced community amenities and independent living environments;
- **Enabling greater connected/remote working**, through enhancing infrastructure and developing a network of digital hubs (in town centres), as part of the rejuvenation of towns and villages; and
- **Developing the region's tourism offering** and quality-of-life infrastructure through connected greenway and blueway networks (including inter-regional) – linked to complementary services and underpinned by increased active travel and improved regional connectivity.

¹ The member local authority areas are: Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon; Cavan; Donegal; Fermanagh and Omagh; Leitrim; Mid-Ulster; Monaghan; and Sligo

The Strategic Policy Context

The FRP takes its strategic frame of reference from the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs). This set of complementary economic, socio-cultural and environmental objectives provides an overarching supranational framework for the attainment of sustainable development, and the advancement of greater equality, including spatial equalities. Ireland and the UK endorse the UNSDGs, and both countries monitor their application in domestic policy and in their transnational and global interactions. The actions set out in this FRP are also situated within the framework of EU policy, and specifically the strategic objectives for the attainment of a Sustainable Europe by 2030. Notwithstanding the UK's departure from the EU, the European framework provides a value-driven set of pointers that enable sub-national actors to generate synergies between regional policy objectives and sustainable development goals.

In addition to reflecting and giving effect to supranational and EU policy frameworks and objectives, this FRP takes due cognisance of, and advances domestic and regional policy objectives in both the UK and Ireland, and in particular the *Framework for Cooperation – Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland* (DRD and DoEHLG, 2013)ⁱⁱ. It also complements the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy produced by the Northern and Western Regional Assemblyⁱⁱⁱ. The growth and productivity ambitions of the three NI member Councils are reflected through their aspirations as part of a City Growth Deal Strategy and bid to the UK Exchequer^{iv}.

Thus, the RSF and the FRP are:

- Regional;
- Cross-border; and
- Based on non-statutory, multi-stakeholder and collaborative approaches.

In advancing this framework, ICBAN has taken a regional approach, and the actions presented herein are regional in scale and effect; they apply across all eight local authority areas and in both jurisdictions. The deliverables articulated in this document relate primarily to the remit of local government and the added value that can be derived through inter-local authority collaboration. In addition, they relate to the remits and objectives of several statutory bodies, thus accentuating the importance of partnership between local government and other agencies. Cross-border and stakeholder collaborations are integral to sustaining the delivery of this FRP.

Building on and Respecting our Territorial Assets

The territorial assets of the Central Border Region are many and diverse:

- It is an area of **high-quality food and non-food production**;
- Through stewardship and sympathetic development of its **natural resources and landscape**, the Central Border Region is playing a key role in:
 - promoting **sustainable development**,
 - nurturing **well-being**,
 - enabling the transition to a **green economy** and mitigating the effects of climate change; and
- The region provides opportunities to promote **alternatives to fossil fuels** and to develop a circular economy.

The **growth in connected / remote working**, largely driven by COVID-19 and associated public health responses, coupled with the emerging demand / need for basic services, have the potential to rejuvenate rural towns and villages. These factors are also driving further demand for green spaces and investments in community amenities and **green infrastructure**.

The strategic actions advanced here and the approach underpinning this FRP are rooted in place making; the central essence of which is its ties to experiential and local knowledge, its sense of attachment to place and identity. Thus, they are based on these local, regional assets and they relate specifically to needs, priorities and potential within the Central Border Region. In practice, this implies capitalising on the region's rural identity and significant stock of rural assets, while promoting urban-rural partnerships.

The Five Interlocking Strategic Pillars

The strategic priorities and deliverables are presented under five inter-locking and complementary pillars namely:

- Economic development;
- Infrastructure and connectivity;
- Human capital – education and training;
- Liveable communities; and
- Greening the region.

The Emergent Catalyst Projects

Within this Framework ICBAN identifies a shortlist of regional catalyst projects, that can complement and promote the aforementioned five thematic pillars, and which would further enable the region to add value to its territorial assets.

The Emergent Catalyst projects are:

Catalyst 1: Farm to Fork – strengthening the region's agriculture sector, food processing industry, catering firms and hospitality providers to collaboratively avail of new and emerging opportunities and sectoral trends;

Catalyst 2: Greenways and Blueways – growing and connecting these vital pieces of infrastructure – to promote tourism and active travel;

Catalyst 3: River Catchments Sustainability – working with all stakeholders across river catchments – from source to sea, to enhance water quality and to drive cross-sectoral projects that will strengthen the region's economic base;

Catalyst 4: A Thriving Regional Bioeconomy – to build on Councils' work in this field through advancing research and development (R&D), upping regional skills capacity and enabling greater industrial and spatial collaboration; and

Catalyst 5: International Mountain Biking Destination – to develop a connected / networked set of mountain-biking trails – capitalising on the region’s typography and adding value to the existing suite of visitor attractions, while providing local communities with new amenities.

Moving Towards Implementation

ICBAN has a core role to play in unleashing the potential of these territorial assets, not least in the context of the key challenges of this time: namely, Brexit, climate change and COVID-19. It is incumbent on ICBAN to:

- Bring its member local authorities together to address these challenges and harness these assets;
- Provide leadership and continue its advocacy for the sustainable growth and development of the Central Border Region; and
- Act as the intermediary for the region with both the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive – not least in progressing the identified catalyst projects.

1.0. INTRODUCTION, AMBITIONS AND VISION

1.1 The Purpose of the Framework of Regional Priorities

Statement of Ambition

ICBAN aspires to having a region *with a thriving, resilient, vibrant and diversified economy* that will be strengthened and sustained through a focus on:

- Utilising our environmental assets respectfully and responsibly;
- Encouraging investment in value-added industries and promoting innovation;
- Enhancing quality of life;
- Embracing new technologies and enhancing remote working; and
- Promoting our strengths in tourism.

Through concerted investments by the EU and both governments, supported by local vision, commitment, action and collaboration, the Central Border Region can more fully realise its development potential. The Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) Ltd. seeks to identify and promote opportunities that capitalise on the region's strong work ethic and entrepreneurial drive, among other assets, and to meet any challenges arising from Brexit and the current Coronavirus pandemic. As the local authority-led cross-border development organisation for the area, ICBAN commits to harnessing and valorising these assets and to working collaboratively with all stakeholders to promote the Central Border Region's sustainable development.

The *Regional Strategic Framework* (RSF) which ICBAN published in 2013, presented a road map for the development of the Central Border Region, for the period up to 2027. Much has happened in the last seven years, including, *inter alia*, the reform of local government in both jurisdictions, the collapse and return of devolved government at Stormont and the resulting stasis in delivering on policy agendas. The region has also been affected by changing global agendas and heightening geo-political tensions, and by the decision of the UK to leave the EU. It is therefore timely to reflect on, and build on the RSF and to put forward this *Framework of Regional Priorities*, which reflects on the key priorities of the RSF while updating these in the context of the aforementioned changes, the adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the emerging new funding programmes.

The economic, social and familial disruptions, the loss of life, the threats to public health and the undermining of livelihoods caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have been far-reaching, and have obliged governments, policy makers, public bodies and the wider civil society to re-calibrate, take stock and devise appropriate strategic responses. As societies have grappled with, and responded to, the pandemic, it has become increasingly evident that collaborative approaches – at all tiers from the local to the inter-governmental, not least in public health, are more effective than traditional sectoral or silo approaches.

COVID-19 has exposed the limited resilience of cities, towns and villages around the world – from high street retail to mobility/transport systems, from education to healthcare, and from food security to medical supply chains. As argued by ARUP, resilience planning requires “an integrated response” that must be informed by strong place-based leadership, together with “shared responsibility and financial accountability, transparent use of data, strong ethics, public participation, and maintenance of natural capital”^v. The pandemic, above all else, has motivated ICBAN to advance this integrated framework document, at this particular point in time.

The *Framework of Regional Priorities* complements the RSF, and should be read in conjunction with it. Both the RSF and *Framework of Regional Priorities* adopt an integrated approach to regional development within the Central Border Region. What sets these documents apart from other strategies is:

- They are regional;
- They are cross-border; and
- They are non-statutory, multi-stakeholder and collaborative approaches.

This document has been driven by the cross-border partnership, the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) Ltd., working on behalf of its eight member Councils in the area known as the Central Border Region. The local authority areas are:

- Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon;
- Cavan;
- Donegal;
- Fermanagh and Omagh;
- Leitrim;
- Mid-Ulster;
- Monaghan; and
- Sligo.

1.2 The Key Ambitions and Aims

The key ambitions of the *Framework of Regional Priorities* reflect current and evolving challenges and opportunities at local, regional, national and international levels. They are:

- To develop as a sustainable region, characterised by increased employment, improved economic activity, social progress and ecological sustainability;
- To redress economic and social inequalities between the Central Border Region and other areas of Ireland and Northern Ireland and the inequalities which persist within the region itself;
- To influence and work with the Governments of Ireland and Northern Ireland on their investment priorities for the region, by providing an evidence base to justify investments; and
- To identify opportunities for local authorities and other stakeholders to work together to realise opportunities and to respond to the challenges facing the region.

Defining Place-making

The simplest definition is as follows: “Place-making is the process of creating quality places that people want to live, work, play, and learn in.” Place-making is a process. It is a means to an end - the creation of Quality Places (CNU, 2014).

This cross-border area has many strengths and assets. It has an outstanding natural environment and a strong cultural heritage. The area offers a high quality of life, which both residents and visitors greatly value. It has many entrepreneurial and internationally competitive businesses distributed right across the area. There is a network of county and market towns complemented by smaller villages and hamlets, which give the region much of its distinctiveness. It also has excellent and committed educational institutions, which are active in training and retraining and are engaging with local industry.

The region has the potential to develop further its unique tourism offering of coastline, lakes, inland waterways and hills, to the benefit of both residents and visitors. The area has a real potential and desire to become more competitive economically and socially, not just with other regions on the island, but also internationally. This Framework document identifies ways in which the region can capitalise on all of these strengths.

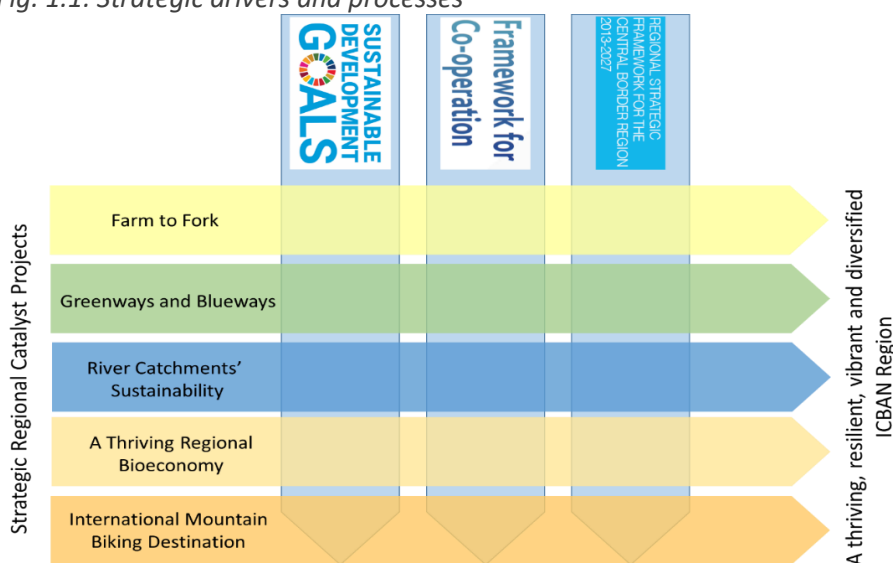
By working together with a joint Framework and agenda, the region can stimulate and realise new opportunities. Through collaborative working, it can, for example:

- Promote the critical mass - by working together and sharing resources on a cross-border basis, for example, in providing innovation support to local businesses or by encouraging joint purchasing and trade between businesses in the area;
- Tackle issues arising from the presence of the Border, such as connectivity deficits; and
- Work collaboratively with the two governments, the EU and others, including the private sector, to support investment in the region.

The implementation of the Framework will require positive cooperation between the local authorities, statutory bodies, service providers and other stakeholders in the Central Border Region. Moreover, its implementation will require support from policy and decision makers in both governments. The implementation of the Framework is considered in more detail in Chapter 9.

As a result of obtaining the financial and other resources, including government support, necessary to turn the vision into a reality, the Central Border Region will become more prosperous and offer a better future to its citizens / communities, as illustrated in the following diagram:

Fig. 1.1: Strategic drivers and processes



1.3 The Vision and Themes for the Central Border Region

The *Framework of Regional Priorities* sets out a series of opportunities and priorities for the region over the period to 2027 which, taken together and if well implemented, will lead to the area becoming more confident in itself and in its future. The Vision for the Central Border Region, as set out in the RSF, is of:

‘A sustainable region that delivers the best quality of life for its people and makes a distinctive contribution to economic and social renewal and growth on the island’.

It is proposed to organise the work to realise the Vision under the five thematic pillars of:

1. Economic development,
2. Infrastructure and connectivity,
3. Human Capital – education, training and skills
4. Liveable communities, and
5. Greening the region.

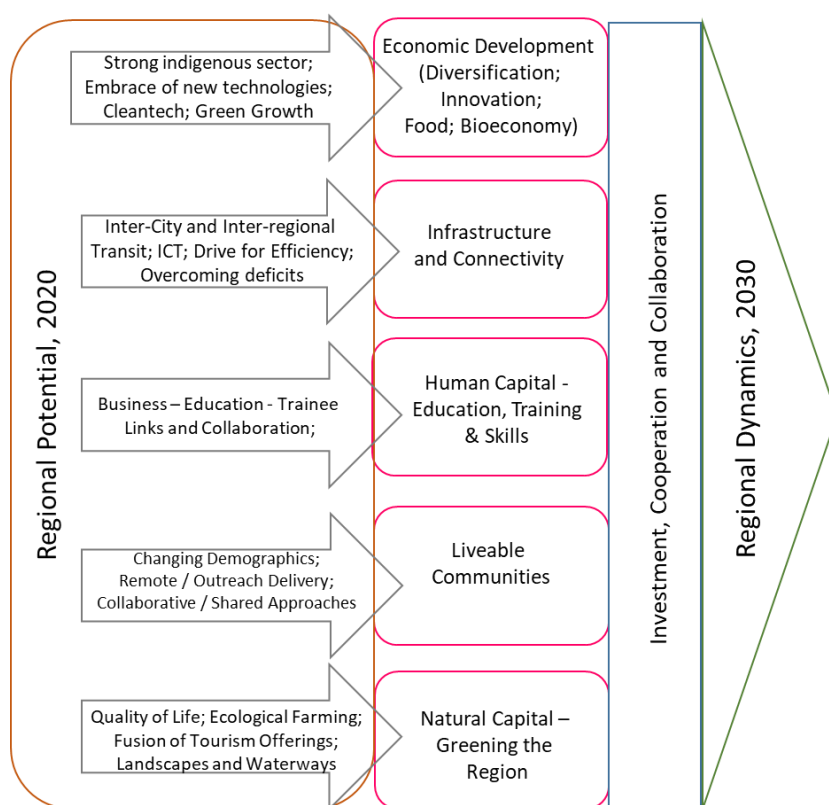
These five pillars are referenced against the internationally recognised principles of sustainable development through the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which seek to promote regional development without undermining or eroding the natural and built assets of the region to the detriment of future generations. As a result, each of the pillars is related to a particular type of asset / set of assets in the region, as shown in Figure 1.2.



The Framework must adopt a flexible approach to development, and should be updated as new opportunities and challenges arise. In addition, the Framework is strategic in nature and does not set rigid targets; instead and similar to the RSF, it provides a context or skeleton upon which more detailed operational plans and project pipelines can be developed.

The objectives and the strategic actions, presented under each of these inter-locking pillars, build on the pre-existing government commitments to regional investments, including the Ulster Canal, the A5/N2 and Sligo-Enniskillen Greenway. These government commitments are considered as ring-fenced, and the ICBAN vision and proposals, including the catalyst projects specified in Chapter Nine, represent strategic added value. Their attainment will require strong civic leadership at local and regional levels, as well as inter-agency and cross-border collaboration.

Fig. 1.2: Regional Assets underpinning the Thematic Foci and Strategic Pillars



The delivery of the priority interventions, outlined here, seek to redress the structural weaknesses, which have delimited economic growth, and thereby enable the region to realise its potential to become a strategic space for economic growth for both jurisdictions. The under-exploited potential of this region has the capacity to contribute more to all-island sustainable growth.

This Framework of Regional Priorities highlights opportunities – economic, socio-cultural, and environmental – to maximise the potential of its latent asset-base for the benefit of its citizens / communities and the all-island economy.

Economic: The local authorities of the Central Border Region have been vocal and proactive in championing digital connectivity (fibre broadband and mobile) and opportunities to develop knowledge / human capital, which will enable businesses, young people and communities to seize advantages arising from the fourth industrial revolution and the move towards more connected / remote-working.

Environmental: This environmentally rich and largely unspoilt eco-region is ideally positioned to deliver on global, regional and local needs and imperatives relating to climate change and sustainable management and enhancement of the natural, built and cultural landscapes. The region needs to strive for a just transition to a post-carbon scenario.

Socio-Cultural: The Central Border Region has a strong cultural identity – expressed in various traditional and contemporary forms. Communities have a sense of place, as evidenced by an impressive range of creative output and artistic endeavour. Civil society organisations are strong and have clear capacity to play a greater role in place-making and collaborative planning. Like other regions, the Central Border area is becoming increasingly diverse, and harnessing the talents and abilities of newcomers will stand the region in good stead.

To realise this, the region will require central governments, North and South, working with and supporting the local authorities and their partner stakeholders.

1.4. Setting the Context – the Urgency and Timing of this Framework

Regional and local authorities are continuously required to be innovative, creative and adaptive. The *Regional Strategic Framework* (RSF) for the Central Border Region (2013 – 2027) sets out a range of innovations and strategic actions that promote the Central Border Region’s competitiveness and sustainability. As we approach the mid-point in that Framework’s timeframe, it is appropriate to take stock of where the region is at and how it can respond to current and anticipated challenges and potential. The need for a stocktake and refresh of the RSF has been accentuated by the advent of Brexit and the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Brexit

The advent of Brexit has clearly altered relations between the UK and the EU – including the Republic of Ireland. While the UK was always one of the EU’s more reluctant members, few had anticipated, prior to 2016, that it would become the first country to leave the EU (Cardwell, 2016^{vi}). The referendum result presents particular problems for Northern Ireland. Since the UK entered into withdrawal negotiations, almost four years ago, the Ireland – Northern Ireland border has proven to be the greatest sticking point in respect of core issues including trade, freedom of movement and the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice (O’ Rourke, 2019^{vii}; O’Keeffe and Creamer, 2019^{viii}). While governments and EU negotiators have been dealing with macro-level issues, they have also been cognisant of the micro-level implications of Brexit, not least the effects on the Central Border Region. EU, UK and Irish government representatives have, over the past four years, visited the region, and spoken with public officials, the private sector, the farming community and civil society. Across all stakeholders and at all tiers, there is an overarching desire to avoid any return to a hard border or to jeopardise the peace process, in any way. The protracted nature of the withdrawal negotiations, the associated political machinations and uncertainties regarding Brexit’s local economic and social impacts, raise significant concerns among businesses and civil society in the Central Border Region.

In 2017, ICBAN produced a policy paper and initiated local stakeholder consultations on Brexit in collaboration with Queen’s University, Belfast. These capture the perspectives of over 1,500 people, and are documented in three reports namely: *The Border into Brexit*^{ix}; *Brexit at the Border*^x; and *Bordering on Brexit*^{xi}, as well as in a [research video](#). ICBAN also undertook specific consultations with young people, and these are captured in a short digital film: [Youthful Voices](#). These outputs, which were derived from the [Border Compass and Border Navigator Projects](#) (supported by Ireland’s Department of Foreign Affairs’ Reconciliation Fund), further enable the refresh of the RSF and provide evidence to underpin the strategic direction and catalyst projects presented here.

Climate Change

Climate disruption and its manifestations, including increased flooding, further underscore the drive towards advancing this FRP. There is an urgent need for investment in preventative and mitigating measures. Infrastructural investments need to be proofed against climate change, while the strategic framework (presented in Chapters 4 to 9) notes the importance of attitudinal, behavioural and institutional change.

COVID-19 Pandemic

This year (2020) marks a watershed in several respects. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about seismic socio-economic changes, and these changes have affected all demographics and all geographies. Regional and local authorities have found themselves delivering an increased range of frontline services and are working intensely with statutory bodies, service providers and civil society organisations to provide supports to those most affected by the pandemic (Local Authority Times, 2020^{xii}). Central government has conferred local government with increased responsibilities in respect of re-booting regional economies and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). At the same time, local authorities are coming under significant financial strain, as income from rates and amenities has reduced – here and internationally (Maher *et al.*, 2020^{xiii}). The island of Ireland and most of Europe have been plunged into recession, and many businesses have been forced to close or, at least, to downsize. All local authority areas in the Central Border Region, as elsewhere on the island, have experienced an increase in unemployment and a significant contraction in economic activity. A survey^{xiv} by Ireland's Central Statistics Office, taken since the most severe 'lockdown' restrictions were lifted, found that:

- Over half (54%) of businesses have a lower than normal turnover;
- Almost half (47%) stated that COVID-19 would have a stronger negative impact than Brexit; and
- Approximately one-third of employees were either not working or working from home.

The Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry has reported (2020)^{xv} that:

- The immediate impact of COVID-19 is having a greater impact than the 2008/09 financial crash;
- Over three-quarters (77%) of firms have already furloughed employees and 12% have made staff redundant;
- Half the Chamber's members (52%) intend to reduce staff levels post COVID-19; and
- Almost one-fifth imply that the business might not survive.

Ways of working have changed, as social distancing and remote working have become the norm, in several sectors. Where employees have returned to their usual workplaces, employers have incurred additional costs, and engagement with customers/ clients has been severely curtailed. The increase in remote working and the shift towards online delivery of public services, point towards accelerating the rollout of reliable and affordable broadband connectivity across the island of Ireland in order to enable economies and public services to function effectively.

In addition to the economic challenges associated with the pandemic, there have been significant social and cultural effects. Civil society activity has all but ceased, and that which has been maintained, has moved to online platforms. Thus, there are reduced opportunities for citizen engagement, inter-agency dialogue and mutual learning. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has become a substitute for human contact, rather than adding value to social engagement. Older people, who for several weeks, were obliged to cocoon / shield, continue to experience considerable vulnerability. Young people have been severely discommoded by the closure of schools and colleges, and by the loss of social outlets. Youth are also increasingly fearful about the future (Loades *et al.*, 2020^{xvi}).

Community-based, localised solutions and bespoke interventions are required to respond to the current and emerging needs of vulnerable cohorts and communities.

The economic and social impacts of the pandemic manifest themselves globally, and in respect of the Central Border Region, a number of observations can be made:

- There has been a considerable decrease in cross-border traffic; research by the Centre for Cross Border Studies (CCBS) indicates a 66% decline in cross-border caravan traffic between Easter 2020 and Easter 2019 (CCBS, 2020^{xvii});
- Core sectors in the regional economy, most notably agriculture and tourism, have been among the sectors most adversely affected (Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, 2020^{xviii}); and
- Particular parts of the Central Border Region have among the highest (socio-economic) vulnerabilities. Of the counties in the Republic of Ireland, Donegal and Cavan have the third and fourth highest exposure ratios. Of the 199 Irish towns analysed (by the Regional Assemblies^{xix}), Bundoran in County Donegal and Strandhill in County Sligo are the most and second-most exposed to significant economic disruption.

While the pandemic is global, its effects are uneven (Karatzias, *et al.*, 2020^{xx}), and citizens in advanced economies and well-developed welfare states are best shielded from it. On this island, the pandemic has, in terms of the number of infections and fatalities adversely affected older people, those living / working in crowded settings and migrants^{xxi}. Lessons point towards the need for increased synergies between social inclusion, local development and integration and a renewed focus on wellbeing (Carnegie UK Trust, 2020^{xxii}).

Geography is also a determinant of impacts. Rates have generally been lower in rural areas with low population densities, and while rural communities may feel physically safer, they are adversely affected by socialisation restrictions imposed, and they tend to have more digital connectivity deficits than do urban areas. Rural regions, including the Leitrim Glens, South Donegal, the Fermanagh Lakelands, Sligo and the Sperrins, in which tourism is a major economic driver, are suffering income losses due to business closures and the absence of overseas visitors. While the July-August 2020 'staycations' provided a welcome boost, this has been short term, and it is evident that the rural parts of the Central Border Region need renewed focus and attention. In the medium to long-term, rural tourism providers in the region are likely to face renewed competition from urban centres, as city-based hoteliers seek new markets to compensate for the loss of corporate business. Research identifies Dublin as among the cities most affected by COVID-19 related economic disruption (Hesse and Rafferty, 2020^{xxiii}). Sustained disruptions to the Dublin economy will most adversely affect the southeast of the Central Border Region, but there are also likely to be consequences for areas along the Dublin-Belfast Corridor. Thus, ongoing support for the SME sector and the promotion of economic diversification are integral to sustaining regional competitiveness. At the same time, there are opportunities for rural communities, associated with the increased demand for outdoor recreational spaces ([NDP Group](#), 2020; Weeden, 2020^{xxiv}). Academic research shows that outdoor green spaces are increasingly prized (Day, 2020^{xxv}; Kleinschroth and Kowarik, 2020^{xxvi}). For local government and other planning stakeholders, the pointers are towards accentuating their promotion of an accessible countryside, active travel and liveable communities.

The pandemic has accelerated the pre-existing trend towards online retailing, and this is having negative impacts on high street retailers (Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation,

2020b^{xxvii}). The current trends add an urgency to the efforts of national and local authorities to rejuvenate town centres. Indeed, across Ireland and the UK, local authorities are currently working to Covid-proof town centres and other public spaces. As remote working becomes more established, digital hubs will become increasingly significant for rurally isolated communities as part of our economic infrastructure and urban fabric. Urban green spaces and parklands, which have long been integral to best practices in planning, will be important in preventing reverse commuting and in ensuring healthy places. As evidenced by the WHO (2016), modern life style “is associated with chronic stress, insufficient physical activity and exposure to anthropogenic environmental hazards. Urban green spaces, such as parks, playgrounds, and residential greenery, promote mental and physical health, support physical activity, stimulate social cohesion and reduce morbidity and mortality”^{xxviii}.

The Regional Response

ICBAN is cognisant of the impacts the pandemic is having and is likely to continue to have over the coming years. The organisation, therefore, advances this Framework document to provide a steer to the region in terms of dealing with current realities, anticipating future strains and ensuring effective local and regional responses. ICBAN notes that the challenges, potential opportunities and obligations associated with COVID-19 come at a time when the region is dealing with the consequences of Brexit. Research undertaken as part of the [Border Compass and Border Navigator](#) projects indicates persistent uncertainties in the region, and these uncertainties can inhibit business confidence and agencies’ abilities to plan effectively. Thus, in these contexts, ICBAN advances a set of responses that emphasise and enable:

- **Economic development:** supporting key established sectors, while simultaneously promoting diversification and enabling all sectors including manufacturing, agriculture, professional services, tourism, etc., to embrace opportunities associated with ICT and artificial intelligence (AI);
- **Infrastructure and connectivity:** enabling businesses to function effectively and grow, by ensuring they can access improved infrastructure and be assured of reliable and affordable access to broadband and ensuring that citizens can effectively access enhanced public services through ICT and social media;
- **Human capital: education, training and skills:** developing the region’s skills base to sustain economic competitiveness, promote social progress and stimulate new opportunities;
- **Liveable communities:** promoting wellbeing and improving quality of life; and
- **Natural capital - Greening the region:** including harnessing and protecting the region’s natural assets and biodiversity – for economic development, community benefit and ecological sustainability.

1.5. The Structure of this Document

This document is structured as follows:

- Section 2 is concerned with the strategic context of the Framework;
- Section 3 provides a short profile of the region, identifies its key characteristics and the actions required to further its development;
- Sections 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 deal in turn with the five key pillars of the Framework; and
- Section 9 deals with the implementation and monitoring of the Framework, and it outlines the emergent regional catalyst projects.

2.0 THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT FOR THE CENTRAL BORDER REGION

The *Framework of Regional Priorities* provides a timely regional response to a myriad of issues. These include, among others:

- The challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Globalisation/ internationalisation;
- The need to further embrace and embed sustainable development; and
- Political changes on the island, and the impending implications of Brexit.

ICBAN acknowledges the strategic priorities of the North West Regional Development Group and East Border Region Ltd., and strives to promote complementarity with these. This Framework is therefore a peer-level document to the strategies of the North West and East Border regions.

This chapter sets out a summary review of the strategic context for the region. Fuller and more expansive details are included in Annex 1.

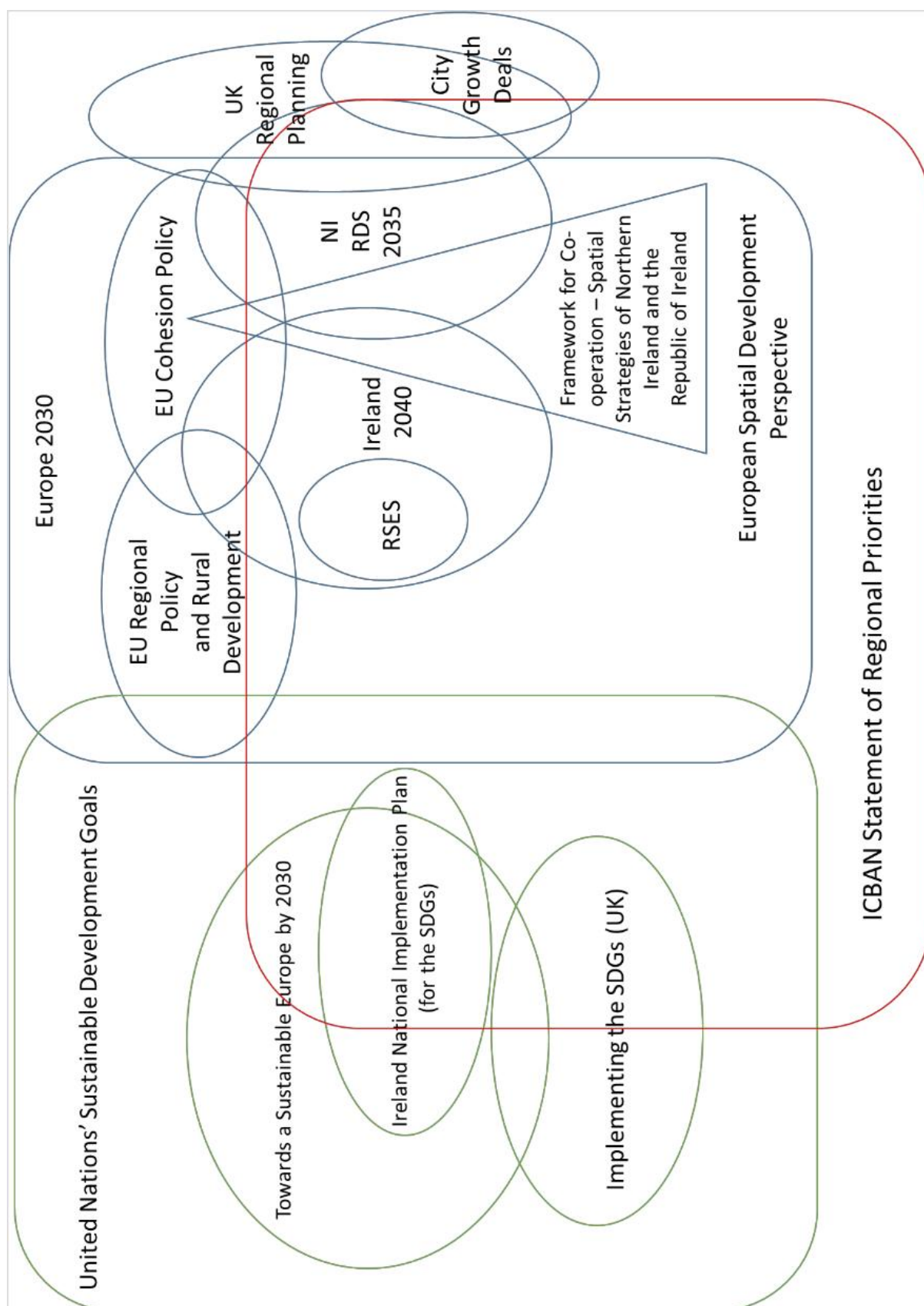
2.1 Key Statutory and Planning Frameworks

The *Framework* is informed by a number of key plans and strategies – national, regional and local. As a regional approach to development, it fits within the context of the spatial development plans of the two governments on the island of Ireland; i.e. *Ireland 2040: National Planning Framework (NPF)*^{xxix} and associated National Development Plan (NDP), and the Northern Ireland *Regional Development Strategy (RDS)*^{xxx} (to 2035). It also complements the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) produced by the Northern and Western Regional Assembly^{xxxi}. The growth and productivity ambitions of the three Northern Ireland member Councils are reflected through their aspirations as part of a Growth Deal Strategy and bid to the UK Exchequer. This FRP offers a sub-regional context to the *Framework for Co-operation – Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland*, which was agreed between the two governments in 2013. It takes cognisance of the ‘United Nations Sustainable Development Goals’ as a planning framework, and by extension to the EU-wide framework for the application of the SDGs, *Towards a Sustainable Europe for 2030*, and the key principles of EU Cohesion Policy.

The existing plans, strategies and priorities of the local authorities in the area are of critical importance, including the local economic and community plans (LECPs) of the Irish County Council areas, and the community plans (CPs) for the District Council areas of Northern Ireland. These have been augmented through a review of the various local authority development plans, corporate plans and strategies, and other statutory documents. The key strategic priorities for the area have also been endorsed in a report published by the Oireachtas Joint Committee for the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement^{xxxii}.

The implementation of these various high level national and regional strategies, in tandem, and across economic development, spatial planning, environmental management and infrastructure provision, will help to more confidently meet the challenges facing the Central Border Region. Figure 2.1 maps the relationships between this Framework and the key statutory policies, strategies and planning frameworks, which are impacting on the area.

Fig. 2.1: Nested Arrangements – Environmental and Planning Policy Frameworks



2.2 Our Rural Identity

While the Central Border Region occupies a strategic geographical position in respect of inter-urban connectivity and enabling networking between cities and towns, the region's core and its identity are essentially rural. Therefore, rural considerations need to be to the fore among stakeholders who are involved in promoting the region's development. The region's primary assets, including its landscape, countryside and waterways underpin the agriculture and tourism sectors, and their sustained growth is integral to the region's wider economic development. These are essentially rural assets and their conservation and sustainable development will enable the rural economy to diversify – generating local employment opportunities, enhancing quality of life and responding to needs that emerge in towns and cities. Addressing the region's current infrastructure and connectivity deficits will enhance inter-urban and urban-rural interfaces, and will contribute to enabling rural areas to avail of development opportunities at varying spatial scales.

In 2016, the European Commission convened a major rural development conference in Cork. This took place on the twentieth anniversary of the [Cork Declaration](#) 'A Living Countryside'. Delegates from all EU member states took stock of the trends, challenges and opportunities in the rural milieu. While acknowledging areas of decline, environmental challenges and structural weaknesses in several contexts, delegates resolved to advocate, support and advance approaches to rural development that are inclusive of all stakeholders (vertical and horizontal governance), attentive to the diversity of rural area types (not a one-size-fits all), and focused on the development of assets and resources – actual, latent and potential. The agreed Cork Declaration fits with long-standing best practices that emphasise cooperation and collaboration, rather than competition between spaces. In this context, inter-council and inter-jurisdictional collaboration are essential for the progressive and sustained development of the Central Border Region.

The current EU thinking, as derived from assessments of experiences over the past three decades, tallies with OECD observations and recommendations. [Rural 3.0](#)^{xxxiii}, the framework document that emerged from the 2018 OECD rural development conference in Edinburgh stated that, "Rural regions will play a central role in meeting the major global opportunities and challenges of the 21st century". The OECD cites opportunities in respect of energy generation, trends in food production, digital connectivity, renewed emphasis on quality of life, wellbeing and economic development. It notes that regions that make strategic investments – in hard and soft infrastructure and in governance capacity – stand to capitalise on new and emerging opportunities, while regions that fail to make structural adjustments will become increasingly peripheral.

Across the UK, the impacts of Brexit on rural communities will be significant (Shucksmith, 2019^{xxxiv}). The 2019 House of Lords report, [Time for a strategy for the rural economy](#), further recognises the increasingly diverse, dynamic and vibrant nature of the UK's rural economies. While acknowledging that there are opportunities via the digital revolution, the report notes that rural areas are at a major point of transition – the result of the inter-play between a multitude of factors ranging from Brexit, farm profitability, an ageing population, climate change and pressure from piecemeal developments. The House of Lords calls for the development of a coherent rural strategy – ideally in advance of Brexit, that will be centred on re-energised rural proofing and a place-based approach which reflects the diversity of the countryside and the capabilities and knowledge of those who live and work there.

The sentiments expressed by the House of Lords, the OECD and the [2016 Cork Declaration](#) are clearly and strongly articulated by NGOs and rural communities – as well as by policy makers and researchers. These find expression, in endogenous fora, as reflected in the [Candás Declaration](#) of the European Rural Parliament (2019) and the [Venhorst Declaration](#) (2017). These point to the importance and

merits of enhanced connectivity, stronger local economies, inclusive / welcoming communities and a particular focus on young people.

2.3 Relationships to International Principles and Objectives

This document builds on, reflects and incorporates the seventeen key strategic priorities identified by ICBAN and its member Councils, and presented to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement in February 2019. These priorities, which were identified and articulated through bottom-up processes across the region, and are underpinned by robust needs analysis, are integral to ensuring the region’s sustained competitiveness. The priorities have been further refined through engagements with public bodies and government departments in both jurisdictions. They transcend economic, socio-cultural and environmental spheres, and are mutually re-enforcing. This document emphasises their inter-connectedness – not just to one another, but to significant international and EU frameworks. Specifically, it takes the seventeen strategic priorities, and it situates and presents them in respect of their operationalisation and delivery of:

- The [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#); and
- [Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030](#).

There are seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and these were ratified by all 193 UN member states in 2015. The Goals are part of the [United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#). They seek to tackle a wide range of issues facing both developed and developing countries. These issues include poverty, inequality, climate change, inclusive societies and access to health and education. The preamble to the UN resolution adopting the SDGs states, “all countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan”. The following diagram presents the seventeen SDGs.

Fig. 2.2: United Nations’ 17 Development Goals (SDGs), 2015 – 2030



The SDGs build on and draw lessons from countries' experiences of the Millennium Development Goals (2000 – 2015), and they reaffirm and strengthen commitments to solidarity and ecological conservation.

The [UK review](#) (2019), of its progress on the SDGs, highlights the role of local government in Northern Ireland in operationalising and delivering the SDGs. It refers specifically to the planning system and to the importance of community participation, good design and positive place-making in furthering sustainable development. [Ireland's review](#) (2018) of its progress on delivering the SDG agenda is explicit in respect of ecological conservation – particularly water resources and sustainable agriculture. Authorities in both jurisdictions, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, emphasise that climate change imperatives require reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, and that planning authorities must be increasingly active in promoting whole-of-society adaptations. Authorities north and south emphasise, with reference to the SDGs, the need for an increased commitment to social inclusion and community development.

'Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030' is the EU-wide framework for the application of the SDGs. It emphasises the urgency of an ecological transition, coupled with social protection. It envisions the policy foundations for a sustainable future as: moving from a linear to a circular economy; ensuring sustainability from farm to fork; future-proofing energy, buildings and mobility; and ensuring a socially fair transition. The EU calls on all sectors and on all tiers of government to play their respective and collective parts in ensuring a Sustainable Europe, and it outlines the importance of policy coherence and partnership approaches. In response to COVID-19, the UK Government's recovery plan is aligned to the SDGs, with a commitment to "build back better and build back greener".

ICBAN has also considered current EU Cohesion Policy. Reference to this is somewhat tempered until such time as the new European Commission members take full command of their briefs and set the specifics of cohesion policy for the forthcoming programme period. The Commission has however articulated cohesion policy priorities as follows: a Smarter Europe; a Greener, carbon free Europe; a more Connected Europe; a more Social Europe; and a Europe closer to citizens, by supporting locally-led development strategies and sustainable urban development.

3.0 A PROFILE OF THE CENTRAL BORDER REGION

The Census of Population 2021, scheduled to take place contemporaneously in both jurisdictions, will provide a valuable source of data for ICBAN, local authorities and all those involved in service delivery. The alignment of statistical indicators and datasets is conducive to cross-border working, and it ensures a stronger evidence base to support informed decision-making. ICBAN is committed to updating and renewing its regional profile, as new data is released. [*The Atlas of the Island of Ireland – mapping social and economic patterns*](#) provides a useful visualisation of demographic and socio-economic variables across the island and at various spatial tiers (Gleeson *et al.*, 2015^{xxxv}).

This census atlas, as well as other research undertaken by the ICLRD, among others, highlight persistent connectivity deficits in the Central Border Region and in the northwest of the island. The severing of rail links and the absence of motorway / dual carriageway connections to key urban centres (Derry/Londonderry, Sligo and Enniskillen) place the region at a relative competitive disadvantage. Gleeson *et al.* (2015) also identify the border counties, and areas along the border corridor as having above-average levels of deprivation.

Thus, the baseline data point to the need to invest in improving intra- and inter-regional connectivity and to promoting social inclusion and community development.

3.1 Key Demographic and Economic Statistics

The local authorities that comprise the Central Border Region^{xxxvi} have a total combined population of 872,633^{xxxvii}. The population of the five Irish county council areas grew by 0.6% between 2011 and 2016, which is below the corresponding Republic of Ireland rate of 3.8%, whilst the population in the three NI Council areas has grown by 6%. The region is predominantly rural; over seventy percent of the region's population lives outside the main urban centres. The population density, based on information available for 2016 and 2018 (Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland respectively), is 50.3 persons per km², which is significantly lower than the equivalents in Ireland (70.0) and Northern Ireland (133.2). The urban areas with populations of greater than 10,000 include the Craigavon Urban Area (Portadown, Central Craigavon and Lurgan), Omagh, Sligo, Banbridge, Armagh, Dungannon, Enniskillen, Cookstown, and Cavan Town. Annex 2 presents the population of each local authority area (2001 – 2018).

Economic Features

The region's business profile is dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Over ninety percent of firms employ fewer than ten persons. Annex 2 presents the number of employees by firm size in each local authority area. The most significant employment bases in the region are agriculture, advanced manufacturing, food processing, retail/wholesale and hospitality. While these are predominantly traditional sectors, the region is characterised by a high-level of entrepreneurship, and the promotion of innovation in micro-enterprises will be integral to future economic development.

Over recent decades, economies on both sides of the border have become increasingly aligned and integrated. Thus, particularly in the context of Brexit, the maintenance of cross-border flows – of people, goods and services – is essential to sustaining existing firms. Research by the Centre for Cross Border Studies estimates that between 23,000 and 30,000 people cross the border to work (O'Kane, 2016^{xxxviii}). InterTradelreland (2018^{xxxix}) reports that a significant share of cross-border trade is associated with businesses trading in both directions (almost one in five firms). According to InterTradelreland, the total value of cross-border trade, for 2017, was £6.10bn /€6.7bn. Cross-border

economic interdependencies are more significant among firms in border areas than elsewhere on the island.

Educational Attainment

Census data also show that despite strong outputs in terms of educational attainment in local schools, many of the region's young people leave to study and work elsewhere. The recent formation of the Connacht-Ulster Alliance (new technological university) and ongoing and renewed collaborations between higher-education institutes (HEIs) in both jurisdictions, present opportunities in respect of upskilling and enabling local firms to enhance their research and design (R&D) capacity.

3.2 Ecology and Environment

The Central Border Region has a strong stock of ecological resources. Some of these, including Sliabh Beagh, Upper Lough Erne and many of the Cavan – Fermanagh – Leitrim – Sligo Uplands enjoy Natura 2000 protection^{xi}. The region's uplands are the birthplaces of some of Ireland's most significant river systems, including The Shannon. The Erne Rivers' Trust – a cross-border entity - represents one of the largest catchments on the island^{xli}. These environmental resources are generally in rude health, but their future sustainability relies on responsible human behaviour.

Some jurisdictions have legislative frameworks to ensure that public bodies and decision makers sustain ecological resources. In Wales, for example, the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act requires all decision-makers to consider not just the immediate impacts of policies and approaches, but to take account of the longer-term impacts on sustainable development. The United Nations' maxim 'think global, act local' has a particular resonance for regional and local authorities, and in border regions collaborative approaches recognise the transboundary realities of ecosystems and enable regions to acknowledge ecosystem services and harness common resources. The 2019 [profile of Ireland's uplands](#) (O'Keeffe and Crowley, 2019^{xlii}) identifies the distinctive features of uplands in the Central Border area, among others, and refers to the merits of cross-border collaboration, involving uplands communities.

3.3 Implications of the Regional Profile

The following table sets out some key characteristics of the region, along with associated responses and actions:

Characteristic of the Region	Recommended Response / Action
Demography	
Low rate of urbanisation and low population density	More integrated service provision and effective public transport solutions. Enabling citizens to better access public services and engage with public bodies, through e-solutions, enhanced collaborative planning and bespoke interventions in peripheral areas.
Significantly increased proportion of older people	Development of e-health infrastructure. Support for social economy initiatives, including social housing and the promotion of independent living. Walkable neighbourhoods and healthy places.
Youth out-migration	Increase collaboration between education providers – across the region, and at all tiers. Provide incentives for diaspora to return to the area and start a business. Foster a sense of regional identity and pride, which encourage people to locate in the Central Border Region.

Economic Activity	
Dependence on manufacturing and traditional sectors	Enhance intra- and inter-regional connectivity to ensure efficient access to markets; Ensure reliable broadband connectivity. Translate agricultural sector's strengths into higher value-added opportunities. Promote a 'Manufacturing Corridor', as the basis for inter-firm collaboration and regional branding. Enhance innovation activities to develop and maintain competitive advantages.
The development of the Tertiary (Service) Sector lags behind the aggregate in both jurisdictions	Promote inter-firm collaboration. Ensure an adequate supply of high-quality business spaces and the strengthening of digital infrastructure. Strengthen linkages between industry and education. Introduce new products that are based on regional identity and assets.
Decline of towns and villages (particularly cores)	Identify key regional strengths / assets, and enable towns / villages to capitalise on these, while collaborating with adjoining towns / villages. Incentivise vibrant town and village centres, and work with local authorities and communities to strengthen town cores through collaborative place-making.
Relatively high levels of deprivation	Support social inclusion, community development, integration and inter-cultural initiatives, and work with education providers to enhance access and progression.

3.4 Actions to Develop the Central Border Region

From the list of characteristics set out above and from other information provided it is possible to identify the actions required to further the development of the area. As Chapter 2 demonstrated, there is a strong alignment between the various economic aims. Combining those insights with the analysis of this chapter suggests that the priorities include actions in the following key areas, each of which is considered in a separate chapter to follow:

- Build new economic strengths for the region based on innovation, its tradition of entrepreneurship and endowment of strong internationally competitive businesses (Chapter 4);
- Improving the ability of the Central Border Region to connect with other regions and its internal connections. These can be summarised as actions to develop new sources of competitive advantage for the Central Border Region and as a result to make a major contribution to the realisation of national policies and priorities (Chapter 5);
- Develop dynamic linkages between the education sector and the needs of industry, as well as those with the entrepreneurial drive to seize new emerging opportunities (Chapter 6);
- Ensure that the growth of the region is inclusive in its character, enabling access for everyone to key services and opportunities, particularly older people and the youth, and in turn addressing inequalities and recognising the unique challenges of a rural cross-border area (Chapter 7), and;
- Build on environmental strengths by investing in and developing expertise in renewable energy, energy conservation and sustainable development (Chapter 8).

4.0 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

4.1 The Rationale for this Objective

The Central Border Region has a strong entrepreneurial profile, and indigenous industries form the backbone of the regional economy. Agriculture and the agri-food sector is a significant employer, and will continue to be an important industry in its own right, while also supporting several ancillary and related activities. The region's small and medium sized enterprise base actively trades on a cross-border basis, and many SMEs are already feeling the effects of Brexit.

The Mid South West Councils' Regional Economic Strategy, with its focus on Advanced Manufacturing, creates opportunities for new industrial investments in the region; this includes growing the existing manufacturing and engineering base. Advances in digital technologies, the development of a network of digital innovation hubs and the commitment to broadband infrastructure in both jurisdictions are key elements of the infrastructure required to enable sustainable growth.

The region has invested in creating a distinctive set of tourism products, and cross-border attractions such as the Marble Arch Caves UNESCO Global Geopark, the Cuilcagh Way, the Seamus Heaney HomePlace and Ballinamore-Ballyconnell Canal and, more generally a network of greenways and blueways. These represent important components of the region's tourism infrastructure. Enhanced linkages between the tourism and farming sectors will ensure a sustained focus on environmental assets, while mutually re-enforcing both sectors.

Thus, the region has a demonstrable set of endogenous and place-based strengths, but it faces challenges, not just from Brexit, but from the agglomeration of economic activities in core urban regions, which is leading to out-migration of young people. The region's potential can be maximised by, *inter alia*, upskilling of the population, retaining and attracting workers – to underpin the expansion of indigenous firms, further investment in tourism – particularly ecological tourism, enhanced connectivity (including park-and-ride and public transport) and the accelerated rollout of broadband. ICBAN also notes the need to address legacy issues and current deficits. These relate to the level of Foreign Direct Investment in the region and the provision of suitable enterprise spaces. These strategic priorities are reinforced in subsequent sections of this document.

4.2 Relationship to the 'United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals'

Stakeholders in the Central Border Region are committed to inclusive growth, in line with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), the promotion of sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. While regional-level investments will generate a level of rising tide, there will be a need, in giving effect to the SDGs, to promote sector-bespoke and community-level projects. Investments will also need to target women, ethnic minorities and other cohorts who are distant from the labour market – in order to develop their capacity to derive maximum benefits from regional economic development.

4.3 Relationship to 'Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030'

Building on and investing in the region's entrepreneurial heritage (e.g. furniture making, manufacturing, engineering and textiles) and enabling enterprises to diversify will position it to

become a centre for excellence in environmentally friendly technologies, including insulation material, renewable energy and smart devices.

Engagement with the agriculture sector will enable the region to capitalise on its excellence in local food production. Artisan products, ecological farming and smart technologies will complement the region's tourism infrastructure and will enhance its competitiveness – as a destination in its own right and as a bridge between the east coast (Dublin-Belfast Corridor) and the North West.

The [UK's Industrial Strategy](#) (2017) places a strong emphasis on growth in AI and the data economy, the future of mobility and, of specific interest to the Central Border Region, clean growth and ageing society. The Strategy strongly advocates for economic development and industrial growth that is place-based and which results in dividends for both people and place.

Our five foundations align to our vision for a transformed economy



(Source: Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2017)

4.4 Opportunities for Development

The region's attractive environment, robust cultural capital and strong quality of life have attracted retirees from more urbanised parts of Ireland. Their knowledge and expertise – as business mentors and as drivers of community development can be further harnessed. The region's assets and identity have also attracted urban dwellers – initially as visitors, but increasingly as commuters and remote workers. This has been supported by a growing network of digital innovation hubs across the region. Strengthening their commitment to the region and enabling them to base themselves locally – at least for extended periods– would add to the region's skills base and enable growth in ancillary service industries.

The UK and Irish governments, along with the EU, are committed to supporting the bioeconomy, and the Central Border Region's assets stand it in good stead to leverage such investments. Local firms are open and primed to embrace opportunities associated with the knowledge economy, artificial intelligence, robotics and cobotics^{xliii}. Advances in these regards ought to enable increased productivity, while spawning new R&D activities locally. As outlined in Chapter 9, there is potential for specific catalyst projects in this regard.

The provision of additional enterprise space ought to cater for manufacturing as well as R&D.

Collaboration between industry and colleges of further / higher education is important in ensuring more added-value activities in manufacturing, new product development, patenting and joint marketing. It is also critical to ensuring the skills need of existing and emerging industries (and product lines) are serviced.

Working with other regions, particularly the North West City Region and with stakeholders on Ireland's north coast, would enable an expansion of the tourism offering and ensure extended visitor stays locally. The region's waterways represent significant ecological and tourism resources, and further capitalisation on the region's association with the island's waterways offers potential for enterprise development on both sides of the border – based on a collective strategic infrastructure that promotes conservation and accessibility, in line with SDGs 14 (Life Below Water) and 15 (Life on Land). Developments on this front will represent complementarity between economic development and 'greening the region' (Chapter 8).

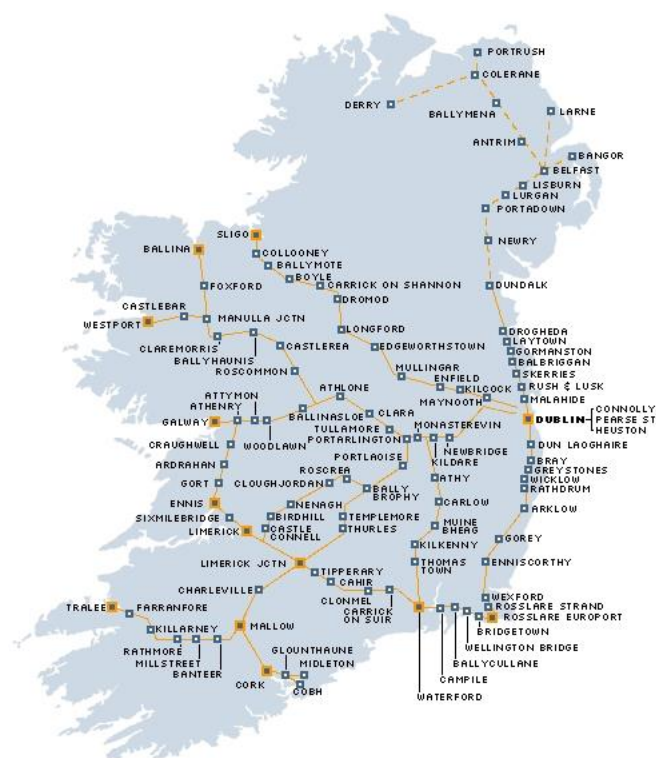
5.0 INFRASTRUCTURE AND CONNECTIVITY

5.1 The Rationale for this Objective

The region has a distinctive profile in respect of cross-border infrastructure, connectivity and transit. Unlike the Dublin-Belfast Corridor and the North-West Gateway, both of which have a respective predominant transport axis, the Central Border Region has a more dispersed set of routes, which connect several nodes and which collectively account for the single largest set of cross-border flows. Investment in the region's cross-border connectivity is, therefore, of strategic all-island importance. In addition to enhancing intra-regional connectivity, it is necessary to ensure greater connectivity between the Central Border Region, the North-West Gateway, Greater Dublin and Greater Belfast. ICBAN's proposals do not replicate, but build on and add value to those outlined by the [Department for Infrastructure](#) and [Transport Infrastructure Ireland](#). ICBAN contends that the various elements of transport infrastructure advocated, in this FRP, are complementary and mutually re-enforcing; investments in conventional road infrastructure are designed to ensure greater safety, economic development, enhanced access to services and the opening-up of active travel networks.

The severing of rail links to the region, and within it, has created an infrastructural deficit, relative to the rest of the island, and it is imperative to mitigate this. In addition to investing in more sustainable modes of transport / transit, it is necessary to strengthen the region's digital connectivity, to support entrepreneurship and to encourage greater external investment.

Fig. 5.1: The current rail network on the island of Ireland



(Source: <https://www.discoveringireland.com/trains-in-ireland/>)

At present, there are a number of broadband blackspots and digital divides – in social and geographical terms – that need to be eliminated. Meanwhile, there are opportunities associated with [Project Stratum NI](#)² and the [Irish National Broadband Plan](#) and Councils' work in ensuring fibre connectivity to public buildings. The development of town centre and rurally-based digital hubs and co-working spaces complements Councils' objectives in respect of rejuvenating rural towns and ensuring sequential development (and the avoidance of sprawl).

The region already has a number of leaders in green technologies, and supporting these entrepreneurs and linking them more with researchers and with policymakers should enable greater synergies, in line with governments' recommendations for more integrated approaches to energy production and the adoption of clean technologies. The aforementioned drive towards economic diversification is contingent on enhanced connectivity, not least in ensuring a fusion of, and crossover between, the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and complementary tourism destination offerings in Northern Ireland, including Embrace a Giant Spirit.

5.2 Relationship to the 'United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals'

SDG 9 refers to the building of resilient infrastructure, the promotion of inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and the fostering of innovation, and ICBAN has identified specific projects in this regard. The coming on stream of electric vehicles and other sustainable modes of transport implies that road construction does not have to be associated with greenhouse gas emissions to the same extent as it has been to date. Road construction and upgrading works need to happen in tandem with giving commuters real incentives for carbon-neutral travel. Moreover, road improvements, can, in the immediate term, reduce congestion and journey times, thus delivering environmental gains. The N2/A5 and A4/N16 corridors, along with the A29 (NI), and the M3 (RoI), are significant cross-border routes in that regard.

Local consultations emphasise the merits of park and ride schemes, the promotion of car-pooling, the provision of parking spaces at transport intersections and the rollout of infrastructure to enable efficient charging of electric vehicles. The development of feeder services to Translink and Bus Éireann routes, and greater alignment with Local Link operators, would facilitate greater use of public transportation.

SDG 7 notes the benefits associated with sustainable energy production. The Central Border Region's topography places limitations on it in respect of large-scale energy-generation projects, but the region is well placed to ensure local-level solutions and technological adaptations. Although not in itself a renewable form of energy, the extension of the gas network into the region will, in addition, assist with the necessary transition from fossil fuels.

5.3 Relationship to 'Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030'

The policies of the EU and both governments place considerable emphasis on digital connectivity. The accelerated rollout of respective high-speed broadband infrastructure programmes into each jurisdiction, will be integral to improving the economic competitiveness of the region. Broadband

² Project Stratum aims to improve broadband connectivity by extending Next Generation Access (NGA) broadband infrastructure to approximately 79,000 premises across Northern Ireland that cannot yet access NGA broadband services. £150m has been allocated to the project as a result of the Confidence and Supply Agreement, along with additional funding of £15m secured through the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).

connectivity will also reduce the need for travel, thus delivering environmental gain. The need for remote access across society, along with Governments' emphasis on inclusive growth, implies that the digital infrastructure and e-government services need to be accompanied by investments in enabling the population to be digitally competent. Thus, ICBAN has been actively advocating for parallel development of hard and soft infrastructure. Inclusive growth also implies that sustainable transport and associated transitional arrangements be affordable.

5.4 Opportunities for Development

As planning authorities, the member Councils of ICBAN have important roles to play in encouraging and facilitating infrastructure provision and settlement patterns that are conducive to the use of sustainable modes of transport and more sustainable consumption, in line with SDGs 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). The consolidation of villages, the strengthening and revitalising of rural towns and the prevention of urban sprawl will, in addition to promoting economic efficiencies, ensure more effective use of infrastructure. The provision of walkways and cycleways is enabling of active travel – contributing to both SDGs, in addition to delivering health gains. The rollout of greenway and blueway infrastructure on an inter-regional basis will complement active travel and public health objectives, while allowing the region to derive increased economic benefits.

With the government programmes committing to support remote working, there are heightened opportunities to invest in the further development of digital innovation hubs and hot-desking facilities across the Central Border Region. Remote working provides workers with the opportunity to revisit their work-life balances and to relocate to areas which offer a better quality of life.

The *Framework for Co-operation - Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland & the Republic of Ireland* (paragraph 2.1) states that areas beyond the Dublin-Belfast Corridor and North-West Gateway are the focus of transportation networks and will be the optimum locations for potential job creation, economic development, health and education services. The ongoing adherence to this framework, including in the context of *Ireland 2040*, ought to present leverage-opportunities to the Central Border Region.

The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) developed by the Northern and Western Regional Assembly and which encapsulates much of the Central Border Area, envisages the growth of the region as a 'Smart Region' that embraces the overwhelming digital trends underway globally. This will be enabled by investment in strategic road and rail infrastructure, public transport services and broadband. The RSES notes, "National road infrastructure is a key infrastructure in facilitating the flow of economic activity within a region, particularly with respect to freight traffic. In light of the region's poor economic performance, such results suggest that there is capacity for central government to increase funding in this area, with the view of enhancing the Northern & Western region's infrastructure and its productive capacity"³.

³ Northern and Western Regional Assembly: A Region in Transition, The Way Forward, January 2020, Page 33

6.0 HUMAN CAPITAL – EDUCATION, TRAINING & SKILLS

6.1 The Rationale for this Objective

The all-island *Framework for Cooperation* (2013) in respect of spatial planning identifies education as one of the areas in which cross-border collaboration ought to be strengthened. The FRP refers specifically to third-level education in this regard. The Central Border Region has a number of very successful, but relatively small-scale, deliverers of third-level, adult and continuing education. Their further development will enhance the region's economic competitiveness and will afford young people (in particular) the opportunity to study locally, rather than having to leave the region. Indeed, the expansion of the education sector within the region ought to attract learners. The region has the capacity to promote strong linkages between the education sector and industry, and there is scope to do so in sectors such as farming and agri-environment, energy, green technologies, tourism and environmental conservation. Education and training delivery – through a variety of pathways and across multiple campuses and in open settings, in partnership with industry and civil society – in the Central Border Region has the potential to bring a new and dynamic offering to the education landscape on the island of Ireland. Thus, ICBAN advocates for greater regional third-level provision.

Collaboration between education and training providers and industry will be important in enabling the region to expand its productive capacity and avail of new and emerging opportunities in research, design and new technologies. Regional stakeholders (including local authorities) already have valuable experience in the delivery of training programmes, and further investments in these initiatives will enhance the regional skills-pool, thereby supporting existing industries and enabling the emergence of new opportunities in the creative industries and in activities that capitalise on the region's ecological, heritage and cultural resources.

6.2 Relationship to the 'United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals'

SDG 4 envisions education as lifelong and life wide. The United Nations stresses the need for education to be inclusive and equitable. Therefore, the rollout of enhanced third-level offerings, in the region, needs to be accompanied with appropriate feeder and support programmes, including from second-level schools and from adult education centres. It also implies ensuring that learners have appropriate scaffolds to enable progression, and the Central Border Region has the potential to offer modules and learning experiences that are based in industry and community settings.

The promotion of equity in education implies specific supports to ensure greater participation by cohorts who are currently underrepresented in third level, including members of the Travelling community, urban residents of a loyalist background and males in general.

6.3 Relationship to 'Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030'

The European Commission identifies education and industry as 'important horizontal enablers' of sustainability and our ecological transition. It notes the significance of research and design in enabling the innovations that will ensure a just and equitable transition. While specialisations in education, research and industry will be enablers of sustainable production and consumption, there is, as the Commission acknowledges, a need to ensure life-long education of citizens / consumers in general about best practices in respect of sustainability. The model of university-level education, envisaged by

ICBAN, offers mechanisms for ongoing engagement in education, the dissemination of information and research outputs to a wider public than has been the case heretofore, and linkages to local infrastructure and assets, including the development of centres of innovation and digital hubs etc.

6.4 Opportunities for Development

Engaging the region's farmers and agri-processors, together with those in new and emerging sectors (the bioeconomy and creative industries) in life-long and university-level education, expanded training and apprenticeship offerings, will better equip them to promote sustainable practices – including embracing, piloting and developing new technologies and modes of production. A regionalised focus on lifelong and life-wide education with strengthened linkages between primary, secondary and third level would assist the region in addressing some of the geographical pockets of educational under-achievement and social exclusion that persist. A regionally based third-level institution, with strong links to industry and local government, and supported by Regional Skills Fora, would ensure greater profiling of the region – thus contributing to stakeholders' and policy-makers' greater understanding of regional issues, needs, dynamics and potential. In this regard, the reporting in Dáil Eireann in September 2020 that the application for Technological University status by the Connacht Ulster Alliance (CUA) is to be submitted by the end of 2020 is to be welcomed.

Investment in education within the region will spawn and sustain creative industries. Anchoring those, among other enterprises, within the region will require the provision of adequate industrial / enterprise space. Local authorities can play an enabling role in that regard – in an independent capacity and / or in collaboration with enterprise bodies.

Opportunities exist to grow the training and apprenticeship programmes in response to the needs of existing and emerging advanced manufacturing clusters in the region, particularly in forward planning for the Mid South West Growth Deal dividend. This will require close collaboration with industry and business to ensure their future needs are catered for. In many instances, this will require investment in micro-credentials rather than multi-annual Degree or Masters programmes. COVID-19 will also, undoubtedly, create an upswing in the already emerging need for upskilling and reskilling in response to the digital transformation underway.

7.0 LIVEABLE COMMUNITIES

7.1 The Rationale for this Objective

While service delivery, particularly for ICBAN member Councils among other public bodies, implies universality, stakeholder consultations have identified the need for bespoke and targeted services for two population cohorts in particular, namely, older people and youth. Consultations also emphasise the importance of growing and sustaining ease of access to public and community services on a cross-border basis. This is particularly the case in health – especially mental health - and education, where several good practices and solid frameworks are already in place – some deriving from the [EU Cross-Border Healthcare Directive](#). The need for comprehensive and seamless service provision is accentuated by demographic variables. The region's population, especially in rural areas, has been ageing and will continue to age more rapidly than in most other parts of the island of Ireland, with the exception of peripheral areas on the west coast. Consequently, needs are emerging and growing in respect of healthcare, respite, social inclusion and transport.

The region's demographic profile is also affected by youth out-migration, as young people have tended to seek third-level education and employment opportunities in the cities. Thus, the delivery of enhanced education services and the rollout of infrastructure (see Chapter 5) to enable more young people to work and study in the region are integral to enabling the Central Border Region to be more demographically sustainable.

Innovations in new technologies and the priorities in respect of infrastructure and economic development, as expressed elsewhere in this document, offer tools and enablers to allow public bodies and commercial entities to provide better services, especially in rural communities. In addition, further investment in the social economy will enable civil society organisations to play an increasingly active role on this front.

7.2 Relationship to the 'United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals'

SDG 3 places particular emphasis on youth and older people. It advocates healthy lives and the promotion of wellbeing for all at all ages. Its principles, and the standards advocated by the World Health Organisation (WHO), are reflected in the policies that pertain in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, although their full implementation has been hampered by resource and systemic constraints. Community-based interventions and preventive measures are important in alleviating systemic pressures and in ensuring more effective and targeted service delivery.

SDG 11, sustainable cities and communities, places a strong emphasis on building resilient societies and economies through, for example, creating career and business opportunities, providing safe and affordable housing, ensuring access to safe and sustainable transport systems, delivering universal access to inclusive and accessible green and public spaces and strengthening national and regional development planning. It involves investment in public transport, creating green public spaces, and improving urban planning and management in participatory and inclusive ways.

SDG 16 has a particular, but not exclusive, relevance in Northern Ireland and in border communities. It refers to peaceful and inclusive societies, justice and inclusive institutions. Community development, place-based approaches and civil society engagement in decision-making, service

delivery and governance contribute to inclusion and sustainability. Thus, Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs) in Ireland and Community Plans in Northern Ireland, along with the participatory planning being pursued by ICBAN member Councils, should continue to provide frameworks for citizen / community engagement.

7.3 Relationship to ‘Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030’

The European Commission, in this strategy, cites the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) and specifically its advocacy of social fairness, equal opportunities, social dialogue, and access to good quality care services, including affordable quality healthcare for all, child and long-term care, housing assistance and other essential services. The Commission also encourages regulators (including local authorities) to work with business and civil society to ensure that sustainable modes of service delivery are the most affordable and effective ones.

7.4 Opportunities for Development

Quality of life and the promotion of citizen / community wellbeing are very much to the fore of local plans across the Central Border Region. Collaborative and inter-agency approaches, including on a cross-border basis, offer service providers new and greater possibilities in terms of sharing information, equipment and resources, as well as co-delivering services.

Government funding mechanisms for sheltered housing and support services for older people are in place, and there is a growing range of assistive technologies to enable independent living. Local authorities from both jurisdictions are engaging with the WHO’s age friendly programme, with Ireland becoming the first country in the world in December 2019, where all local authorities became members of the WHO’s Global Network for Age Friendly Cities and Communities. The Governments are increasingly cognisant of the productive capacity of the social economy sector, and both jurisdictions have formulated policy frameworks and have provided for increased funding to enable community businesses and social economy activities to develop.

Both jurisdictions have policy frameworks in place to support the development of the community and voluntary sector – as a partner in service delivery (in conjunction with public bodies) and / or as an independent deliverer of community-based services. Collaborative structures, such as the Local and Community Development Committees (LCDCs) in Ireland and Community Planning Partnerships in Northern Ireland provide mechanisms to enable reviews / evaluations of service delivery models. These can offer useful feedback and feedforward mechanisms in respect of the optimisation of services.

The aligned functions of local authorities in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in respect of spatial planning can support opportunities for intra-regional approaches to enabling the delivery of accessible and bespoke services.

8.0 NATURAL CAPITAL - GREENING THE REGION

8.1 The Rationale for this Objective

Green principles and values are manifest throughout this document, and they inform and underpin the priorities that are articulated herein. Like all regions on the island of Ireland and across these islands, there is an ecological, and indeed moral imperative to transition to carbon neutrality and to sustainable modes of production and consumption.

In addition, sustainability implies social solidarity and inclusion – hence the ICBAN emphasis on human resource development and capacity-building, in addition to hard infrastructure. The economic case for sustainability was clearly articulated in the [*Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change*^{xliv}](#), authored by Sir Nicholas Stern, and published by the UK government (in 2007), this report detailed the economic costs associated with failing to ameliorate climate change. Since then, grassroots movements, particularly by young people have underscored the importance of the green agenda.

Despite failings to ensure a global consensus, the UK and Ireland are among the countries that remain committed to achieving carbon neutrality. In line with the UN maxim ‘Think Global – Act Local’, it behoves the Central Border Region to embrace the green agenda and to promote sustainability in all spheres.

The Central Border area is rich in natural assets which include geology, soil, air, water and all living things. The value of this natural capital has never been more evident than during the COVID-19 crisis, when it provided the benefits of recreation and well-being. Other benefits, frequently referred to as ecosystem services, include the provision of food, materials, clean water, clean air, climate regulation, flood prevention, and pollination.

8.2 Relationship to the ‘United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals’

Carbon neutrality and ecological equilibrium represent the underpinnings of the SDGs. They place a particular onus and responsibility on us, in the West, to change our ways, as our actions are already having severe consequences for populations in developing countries. Thus, the SDGs represent a call and a framework for the promotion of global solidarity. The growing attention being given to the SDGs is ushering in new ways of thinking, including systemic change in industry, education and government. Local government needs to be part of that change.

8.3 Relationship to ‘Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030’

Cognisant of the West’s association with the excesses of consumption, the European Commission seeks to be radical in advocating that the EU become a ‘trailblazer’ in sustainability. The forthcoming EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030 recognises that nature and, related to this biodiversity, are in crisis – yet these are our biggest ally in addressing climate change. Nature-based solutions such as protecting and restoring wetlands peatlands or reforestation, and the sustainable management of grasslands and agricultural lands, will be essential to reduce harmful emissions and climate adaptation.

In the UK, Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England’s wildlife and ecosystem services^{xlv}, outlines how international commitments to biodiversity recovery will be delivered, with the core objective of

halting “overall biodiversity loss, support healthy well-functioning ecosystems and establish coherent ecological networks, with more and better places for nature for the benefit of wildlife and people” (2020: 4)

8.4 Opportunities for Development

Young people in the Central Border Region, and throughout these islands, have a particular consciousness and an informed scientific knowledge in relation to green issues. They have the capacity to ‘teach’ the rest of society about the changes that need to be made. Thus, by engaging young people more formally in decision-making, regional stakeholders can tap into their energies, insights and commitment. Engagement with young people can also offer mechanisms to future-proof strategies.

The green and circular economy offers opportunities for economic development and the diversification of the regional economic base, and firms across the region can, with appropriate supports, strengthen their capacity to expand along sustainable trajectories. The region’s asset base, and in particular its landscapes and waterways, lends itself to a renewed focus on sustainability, which through Community-Led Local Development and creativity (as exhibited in initiatives such as the Dark Skies Reserve) offers tremendous potential in respect of ecological tourism and farming.

The renewal of towns and villages as innovative centres will represent a significant contribution towards enhancing public realm, thereby improving quality of life and reducing carbon emissions, as citizens are in closer proximity to places of work, commerce, recreation and social engagement. Linked to this is investment in living communities – grounded in sustainable practices (such as Farm to Fork, a proposed catalyst project in Chapter 9) – and natural capital for the range of benefits as outlined above, not least recreation and well-being.

Investing in the region’s green infrastructure, including a network of connected greenways and blueways (as specified in the catalyst projects outlined in Chapter 9) will contribute to local economic development and advance active travel / transport. It is essential that these elements of infrastructure be inter-connected – within the Central Border Region – and complement existing environmental resources, including its heritage and built environment. Among the region’s notable built environment assets are Armagh’s Georgian City, Navan Fort and various *Game of Thrones* sites. Inter-regional green connectivity to Lough Neagh and the Shannon will consolidate the appeal and value of the region’s landscape.

9.0 MANAGING AND DELIVERING THE FRAMEWORK OF REGIONAL PRIORITIES

9.1 Implementation Framework and Principles

The next stage, implementation, will necessitate prioritisation of the key ambitions and opportunities. This should be completed through an Action Plan, setting out the targets and resources involved.

The Framework is an initiative for the region. It is not a framework for delivery by ICBAN or by its member local authorities exclusively. To be effective implementation will require a multi-sectoral partnership approach, drawing on a range of expertise, experience and capacities. Those involved are to work to the common purpose and have a sense of real involvement. Their full buy-in and participation is critical to success.

Through such a 'mixed economy' approach, there will be initiatives that are to be led by local authorities, others might be delivered by government development agencies, others by the third level educational institutions, the community and voluntary sectors and some by the private sector. The principles of partnership working, embracing change and adopting creative approaches to complex challenges will be the keys to success.

Whether new structures will be needed to deliver on the ambitions will be the subject of further consideration. In the first instance advocacy and monitoring will be driven by the ICBAN Management Board, working closely with senior officials in member local authorities. Further engagement is welcomed with the governments on advancing these aims and objectives.

If the Framework is to be effective and to make a difference it must:

- Be driven by key stakeholders who embrace the spirit of combined actions and who will provide a leadership thrust as agents of change;
- Enable the Central Border Region to speak with a single strategic 'voice' on the priorities for the area;
- Form the core of an evidence informed lobbying approach to the Governments of ROI, NI, UK and to the EU, and other authorities who can allocate funds to the area;
- Link into and complement the spatial, economic, social and community planning of the local authorities involved;
- Be the subject of rigorous and timely monitoring and evaluation of the outcomes of the Framework; and
- Help to integrate and make more effective public and private investment across the region.

9.2 Anticipated Outcomes

The following table presents the anticipated outcomes by 2027, in respect of each of thematic foci. These represent the headline evaluation indicators that ICBAN can use to monitor its progress in delivering the associated actions.

Pillars	2027 Outcomes
Economic Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanded provision of industrial and R&D Space • Enhanced linkages between industry and education / training providers • Greater supports for new product development, firm diversification, the embracing of AI / new technologies and the bioeconomy
Infrastructure and Connectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wider and swifter broadband rollout and uptake – enabling rural economic development • Enhanced inter-regional and intra-regional connectivity • More sustainable and efficient transport / transit options – for commuters, industry and visitors
Human Capital – Education, Training and Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased skill levels in the region’s population • Attraction, retention and inter-cultural integration of migrant workers
Liveable Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater efficiencies and more innovations in service delivery • Increased complementarity and alignment between all tiers in planning from local / community to the RDS and RSES • Wider adoption of new technologies in the delivery of services and the promotion of more user-friendly service delivery models • Strengthened youth participation in decision-making and regional governance
Greening the Region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced carbon / ecological footprint • More vibrant town and village centres with mixed uses and enhanced public realm • Trailblazer and show case projects – symbolising the region’s just transition • Expanded tourist offering and greater complementarity and synergies between tourism brands, and between tourism, farming and ecology

9.3 Regional Priorities and Catalyst Projects

The aforementioned imperatives associated with the production of this framework document had a mobilising effect on regional actors, and all agencies / organisations have been obliged to review their strategic approaches and to consider their trajectories for the coming years. At the same time, however, actors, and in particular those in local government have been intensely preoccupied by the effective delivery of frontline services in 2020, and have been obliged to do so in an unprecedented and challenging context. In formulating this document, ICBAN sought to consult with stakeholders and it is essential that all local authorities and other strategic partners be enabled to actively contribute

to ensuring that this framework remains relevant and applicable – underpinned by local ownership and a shared regional vision.

ICBAN's Management Board played an important leadership role in the process. In summer 2020, ICBAN Board members and staff, along with senior local authority staff participated in a bespoke training and capacity-building programme, called Border Animator. This was delivered by the ICLRD, and it represents a significant investment in the professional development and capacity of the cross-border organisation. The interactive training programme afforded a forum in which to discuss regional issues and priorities, and these are reflected in this document. This document also reflects the deliberations of Council Senior Officers (CSO Forum members), as articulated at regularly convened workshops through 2019 and 2020.

While acknowledging the frontline pressures on local authorities, ICBAN, through the ICLRD, issued a survey questionnaire to local authorities to enable them to identify specific regional priorities and flagship projects. The decision to do so arose from the training programme, which, while noting the merits of the various proposals in the first draft of the Framework for Regional Priorities, recommended prioritising and streamlining strategic actions. Given the timing of this survey-based consultation, and the contemporaneous competing pressures on the sector, the ICLRD recommends further and ongoing systemic dialogue and engagement with all local authority stakeholders, particularly senior staff, to ensure regional embeddedness and buy-in.

The following tables present, in sequence, the strategic priorities under each of the Framework's thematic areas:

Economic Development

Priorities
Enable greater remote working within the region - excellent infrastructure, including hubs
Expand the regional tourist offering – in partnership with the north coast, north-west and inland waterways – focusing particularly on eco-tourism and landscapes
Work with local authorities, statutory bodies and the private sector to increase the provision of additional industrial spaces (for manufacturing and other economic activities)
Support collaboration between industry and higher / further education (especially in engineering and food businesses)
Stimulate and support the development and expansion of the bioeconomy – to increase industrial output and promote research & development (R&D)
Increase business support infrastructure – including mentoring
Promote energy efficiency among businesses and enable the region to exploit opportunities in renewables and sustainable building techniques

Infrastructure and Connectivity

Priorities
Improve broadband connectivity
Work to ensure enhanced inter-regional road infrastructure (A5 / N2 and N16 / A4 etc.)
Support and encourage the roll out, maintenance and promotion of blueway and greenway infrastructure (Ulster Canal, Sligo-Enniskillen Greenway) on a regional scale
Promote active travel - walking and cycling

Human Capital – education, training and skills

Priorities
Promote innovations in the bioeconomy
Capitalise on the forthcoming technological university (Connacht-Ulster)
Enhance linkages between all tiers in the education system

Liveable Communities

Priorities
Promote the application of Smart Villages across the region, and enable towns and villages to leverage support
Advocate and promote the consolidation of town centres / cores
Expand rural transport services (e.g., Rural Lift)
Independent living and community-based housing for older persons
Advocate and promote walkable neighbourhoods

Natural Capital – greening the region

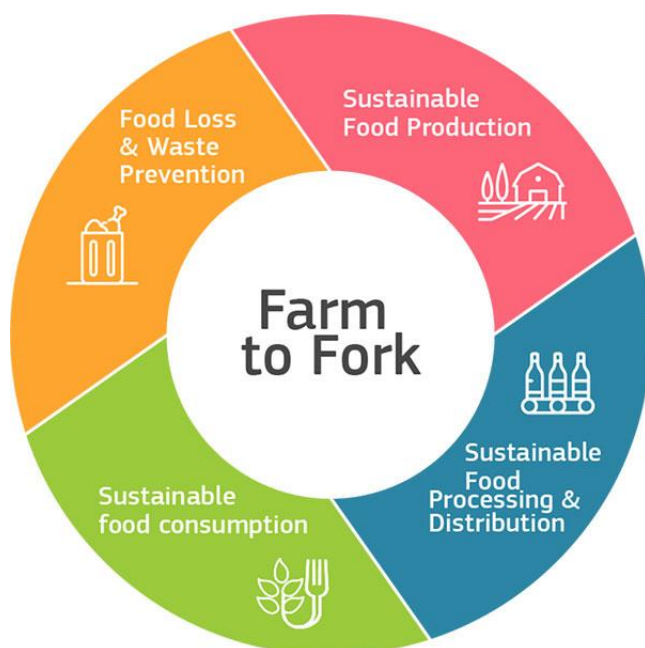
Priorities
Promote opportunities in the green economy and circular economy
Support the development of regional / cross—border landscape conservation initiatives e.g., Sliabh Beagh Geopark / Conservation Area
Lead cross-boundary River Catchment Management Plans – to improve water quality and stimulate rural economic diversification
Increase the region’s biodiversity in collaboration with communities, landowners, agencies and local government

While these priorities align with the five pillars under which the *Framework for Regional Priorities* is organised, they are cross-cutting and their realisation will require inter-sectoral collaboration. By the same token, their impacts will be manifest across the dimensions of sustainable development – economic, socio-cultural and environmental. As noted during the training and capacity-building programme (summer 2020), ICBAN Board members advocated the advancement of a select number of catalyst projects, initially, that would deliver cross-cutting outputs and have impacts across the five thematic areas, and which would stimulate new projects – by the statutory, private and community / voluntary sectors. The following are the proposed catalyst projects.

Catalyst 1: Farm to Fork

The [Farm to Fork Strategy](#) is at the heart of the European Green Deal⁴, aiming to make food systems fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly. It recognises the inextricable links between healthy people, healthy societies and a healthy planet (European Commission, 2020). The EU Biodiversity Strategy, published alongside Farm to Fork, includes an ambitious action plan to halt biodiversity loss in Europe which is key to a resilient food system. The importance of a robust and resilient food system and food security – that includes access to affordable food – has been brought to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic; there is increasing evidence that our current food system accounts for “nearly one-third of global GHG emissions, consumes large amounts of natural resources, results in biodiversity loss and negative health impacts (due to both under- and over-nutrition) and does not allow fair economic returns and livelihoods for all actors, in particular for primary producers” (https://ec.europa.eu/food/farm2fork_en). The [UK Agriculture Bill](#) (2019-21) contains similar provisions.

In response, and in building on the experiences in rural communities, not least those enabled under Pillar II measures of the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP), the EU has proposed and is advocating an integrated policy and practice model as illustrated below. This approach recognises the importance of collaboration between all stakeholders in the food industry – farmers, processors, distributors, retailers, the hospitality sector and consumers. There are pre-existing food networks in the Central Border Region, and there is scope, over the coming years, to strengthen these and to improve inter-stakeholder collaboration and to promote regional food initiatives.



As noted by the European Commission, “putting our food systems on a sustainable path requires new opportunities for operators in the food value chain”. Within the Central Border Region, there is already a strong base on which to develop and market ‘place’, based on quality food production,

⁴ European Commission (2020) *A Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system*, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 20.5.2020, COM(2020) 381 final.

preparation and presentation; this base includes a number of organic farms, major food producers, centres of further education and internationally-renowned restaurants and bistros. [Taste of Cavan](#), for example, started in 2012 as a showcase for local produce in the Cavan area. Over the years the festival has become a platform for producers to showcase their wares to tens of thousands of local consumers, and has proved to be a fertile ground for doing business. Other food-based festivals celebrating the region's offerings include Flavour of Tyrone, Armagh's Food and Cider Festival, and the Donegal Food Festival.

A value added feature of Farm to Fork is that it goes beyond creating a robust and resilient food system and ensuring food security, it also contributes to climate adaptation, supports the bioeconomy and circular economy and halts biodiversity decline. It leads to investments in knowledge and innovation centres to facilitate new thinking in the agri-food sector. It builds partnerships between farmers, fisherman, and scientists. It creates opportunities for new businesses in the area of agri-tourism, gourmet trails and nutrition and healthy living.

Catalyst 2: Greenways and Blueways

Across the island of Ireland, and internationally, outdoor adventure tourism is a key growth sector. The provision of greenways is an integral component of that sector, playing a key role in not only reinvigorating underused and historic transport infrastructure, such as canal towpaths and old railways, but also in safeguarding important habitats, and providing corridors for wildlife and people (McClelland, 2016)⁵. Research by Fáilte Ireland (2013)⁶ on adventure tourism highlighted that, for cycling / walking routes, key issues were:

- Beautiful scenery and landscape (a top priority for the overseas and domestic markets);
- Preference for traffic free and safe cycling routes (reflecting the large proportion of the market that travels with children);
- Access to towns and villages and attractive cities and towns, offering a range of things to see and do; and
- As 41% of the potential domestic market and 38% of the potential overseas market for cycling in Ireland travel with children, the importance of delivering trails which cater to the needs of a family.

In addition, international evidence suggests that a higher demand for cycle tourism occurs where good cycling networks are already in place, such as in Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands. Quite apart from its social, environmental, and health benefits, there is an increasing recognition of its economic potential. As noted in the ICLRD Report, *Cross-Border Greenways and Cycle Routes on the Island of Ireland: A review of policies and future opportunities in the development of a regional network*, “the creation of long-distance greenway and cycle routes, particularly in rural areas, not only enhances the visitor attractions and existing tourist facilities within the vicinity of the route, but they also become destinations and reasons to visit in their own right” (McClelland, 2014: 20)⁷.

Of significance to the Central Border Region is the signal of both governments – via the new Programme for Government (2020) and *New Decade, New Approach* (2020) – of future investment in greenways, specifically the Sligo-Enniskillen Greenway (subject to feasibility). Investment in this Greenway, as part of a wider vision for a regional greenway network centred on the Central Border Region, with spurs into the North West and Eastern Corridors, has the potential to be a catalyst for sustainable regional growth and development, and synergies will be maximised where the infrastructure intersects with and complements existing and new blueway offerings and other elements of outdoor recreation. As demonstrated by other greenway projects, it is essential that such infrastructure be part of a web of developments, rather than a transit corridor.

The Sligo-Enniskillen Greenway centres on 72km of the Sligo, Leitrim and Northern Counties (SLNCR) railway. Envisaged as a multi-use trail for cyclists, walkers and the mobility challenged, the project is

⁵ McClelland, A. (2016) ‘Every Turn of the Wheel is a Revolution’: Towards the Development of a Cross-Border Greenways and Cycle-Route Network in the Irish Border Region. *Borderlands: The Journal of Spatial Planning in Ireland*, 5: 20-33. ISSN 9781906879167

⁶ This research report can be accessed at:

<https://www.failteireland.ie/Failteireland/media/WebsiteStructure/Documents/In%20Your%20Sector/Cycling-Market-Research-2013.pdf>

⁷ McClelland, A. (2014) *Cross-Border Greenways and Cycle Routes on the Island of Ireland: A review of policies and future opportunities in the development of a regional network*. Armagh: ICLRD.

currently costed in the region of Stg£11million. In July 2020, the Irish Government announced €500,000 funding to take a section of the greenway, Sligo Town to Blacklion, to statutory process.



(Source: <https://www.impartialreporter.com/news/14430218.greenway-cycle-route-from-sligo-to-enniskillen-pedals-on-to-second-stage/>, 15th April 2016)

Research on greenways clearly demonstrates that the length of a greenway directly impacts on the time and money spent in the locale. On its own, the Sligo-Enniskillen Greenway has the potential to be a positive sub-regional catalyst project. The benefit to the wider Central Border Region comes from building an inter-connected network of greenways. There are, for example, a number of greenways currently underway – or in development stage – that could intersect with the Sligo-Enniskillen Greenway:

- Enniskillen to Clones Greenway: a 35km route from Enniskillen to Clones via Maguiresbridge and Lisnaskea;
- Omagh to Enniskillen Greenway: a 43km route from Omagh to Enniskillen via Fintona and Ballinamallard;
- Lough Erne Greenway: a 24km route from a junction between Trillick and Ballinamallard to Pettigo and Belleek, and from here on into Donegal and the towns of Ballyshannon and Bundoran on the Atlantic coast;
- Ulster Canal Greenway: incl. a 22km section from Smithboro to Middletown and a 14km section from Clones to Smithboro (at various stages in their development);
- Sligo Greenway: a 35.5km stretch of the Collonee to Bellaghy, County Sligo /Charlestown, County Mayo;
- Cavan Railway Greenway: a 26km section from the Ulster Canal Greenway north of Castle Saunderson, and with a link to the Cavan-Leitrim Greenway; and
- Cavan-Leitrim Greenway: a 41km route between Mohill and Belturbet; with work already commenced on a 16km stretch between Ballinamore – Aughawillan – Ballyconnell.

Building on work commenced by the NWRA (previously the Border Regional Authority) in 2011/12, there is a role for ICBAN to support the local authorities in the development of a connected greenway network across the Central Border area, with the necessary services and attractions in place to ensure the sustainability of this multi-faceted asset.

Catalyst 3: River Catchments Sustainability

The Central Border Region contains several significant river catchments and sub-catchments, many of which straddle the border. The Erne is the largest of these, and it includes parts of Cavan, Fermanagh & Omagh and Donegal.

Catchment geographies are increasingly advocated in promoting collaborative and multi-stakeholder engagements. Catchments generally extend from upland rural areas to lowland urban and coastal communities, and they represent a shared space in which diverse stakeholders have a common interest in a mutual resource that is integral to human health and sustainable development. Catchment-based approaches allow for alliance building and partnership working, and catchment management approaches deliver ecological and economic gains. Farmer participation in agri-environmental programmes at catchment level incentivises conservation and benefits rural economies. Lowland and urban communities come to recognise and appreciate the conservation efforts of upland communities and inter-community collaboration is engendered. In many instances, the solutions to lowland problems, including flooding, are found upstream. Catchment-based initiatives have spawned the emergence of lakes and rivers trusts, including in the Erne Catchment. Moreover, inter-local authority collaborations are already underway to improve and safeguard water quality in the region. Thus, there are institutional and community-led efforts in place, which ICBAN can support in advancing the rollout of its natural capital initiatives.

The formulation of a Catchment Sustainability Plan to imagine a shared vision for the Upper Erne would provide a coalescing framework for the mobilisation of stakeholders, the leveraging of resources and the delivery of complementary greenway and blueway infrastructure. The formulation of any catchment sustainability plan for the Upper Erne should form part of a broader natural capital framework. Given the rich diversity of the region's landscape (lakelands, mountains/uplands, boglands, heathlands, coast/marine) and flora and fauna, such a framework would provide the region with a baseline of existing and potential environmental or 'ecosystem' services. Adopting such an approach is "about thinking of nature as an asset, or set of assets that benefit people. The ability of natural capital assets to provide goods and services is determined by their quality, quantity and location" (DEFRA, 2020⁸). The value of an area's natural capital was never being more evident as now - having been brought more fully to light during the pandemic.

In the context of local and regional development and regeneration, natural capital forms an integral part of the infrastructure that underpins desirable, liveable places. Establishing a natural capital framework for the Central Border Region would benefit all local authorities in the area by providing a key evidence-base on the value added that natural capital can bring to the policy environment (see Annex 3).

⁸ Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (2020) *Enabling a Natural Capital Approach: Guidance for policy and decision makers to help them consider the value of a natural capital approach*. London: Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs

Catalyst 4: A Thriving Regional Bioeconomy

Harnessing the natural bioeconomy to its full potential, in a sustainable way, can contribute significantly to rural development objectives. As noted by Teagasc, the bioeconomy is fundamentally a strategy for sustainable growth. It includes activities such as producing food, fuel, feed, fibre and fertiliser (the 5Fs), creating jobs - particularly in rural areas, and doing this in a way that enhances the soil, protects biodiversity and supports climate action.

While the transition to a bioeconomy across the island of Ireland is at a very early stage, the [Action Plan for Rural Development 2017](#) considers how it can contribute to growing (inter)national imperatives such as decarbonisation, sustainable growth and job creation in the agricultural, industrial and technological sectors in rural areas. Growing the bioeconomy is also integral to delivery of SDG 12, ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns. The UK's [Bioeconomy Strategy, 2018-2030](#), building on the already 5.2m jobs supported by the sector (est. in 2014), addresses key challenges in food, chemicals, materials, energy production, health and the environment. Aligned to the UK's Industrial Strategy to maximise the opportunities for UK industry from the global shift to a low carbon resource efficient economy, the strategy's vision is to ensure the UK becomes a global leader in developing, manufacturing, using and exporting bio-based solutions that improve lives, strengthen the UK economy and move the UK towards a low carbon future.

Growing the bioeconomy of the island of Ireland, particularly in the agri-food sector, is identified across a range of government strategies, North and South, as playing a key role in rural economic diversification. Drawing on key sectors of the Central Border Region's economy, the higher and further education expertise there, and the diverse industrial base, key elements of the bioeconomy that could be progressed include:

- Sustainability and the Future of Food; recognising that “the agri-food sector in both Northern Ireland and Ireland serves as a vital component of the domestic economy and is the largest cross-border trading sector on the island of Ireland” (Centre for Cross Border Studies, 2016: 3); and
- Innovations in food technology; building on the potential of the Bioconnect Innovation Centre and MBio in Monaghan, which are leading the creation of an active biotechnology cluster in the Border Region⁹.

In advancing the bioeconomy, opportunities also exist in the development of biofuels/bioenergy and in the promotion of low carbon construction materials across residential, commercial and industrial buildings designed to release little or no carbon over their lifetimes. In relation to the latter, and the significance of construction firms in the Central Border area, there are opportunities to contribute to the growth of the green economy by bringing all stakeholders in the lifecycle of a building (from conception to build, to fit-out and retrofitting) to the table, to consider opportunities for more sustainable building practices.

There are key roles for ICBAN in documenting international innovations in the bioeconomy, and working with all local authorities to identify how the region can become a leader in progressing those strands of the bioeconomy, where the area has the relevant natural assets.

⁹ Centre for Cross Border Studies (2016), *A Study of Cross-Border Flows Within the Agri-Food Sector*, Armagh: CCBS.

Catalyst 5: International Mountain Biking Destination

As part of the growth in outdoor tourism and activities, the island of Ireland has witnessed a growth in mountain bike trails of varying length and difficulty. The growth in mountain biking is recognised as bringing many benefits – in terms of health, economy and environment; ranging from promotion of a healthy lifestyle (for both physical and mental health), increasing tourism in an area and the associated economic benefits that go with that, enhanced awareness of environmental assets and the threats they face, and diversification of land-use.

The potential for a regionally and nationally significant project of scale in the Central Border Region is made attractive by the learning stemming from the ambitions of the ‘Destination Borderlands’ initiative in the border region between England and Scotland, where a state of the art mountain biking centre is being planned. Other examples of mountain biking initiatives, some crossing borders, of note include:

- [Borderlands Mountain Bike Project](#) across Québec, Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont (Canada/USA), involving eight destinations across three states, a province, and two jurisdictions;
- The [Ballyhoura Mountain Bike](#) trails offer 92km of trails that traverses the Cork – Limerick border. This local development project has spawned other rural tourism projects locally;
- [BikePark Wales](#) is home to the UK's greatest and most diverse selection of all weather mountain bike trails; with on-site services including a vehicular uplift service to transport users / visitors to the top of the trails, bike and equipment hire, coaching, guiding and an on-site café; and
- Within the Czech Republic, the [Bohemian Tour](#) is situated in northern and eastern Bohemia and includes several trail centres as well as picturesque valleys with sandstone rocks and remarkable natural trails. The ‘Singltrek pod Smrkem’ is one of the well-known single-trail destinations on the Czech-Polish border, and is one of the Czech mountain trail biking jewels.

The development of a regionally significant mountain biking trail(s) in the Central Border Region is already aided by the existence of both well-established and newer trails, for example:

- [Davagh Forest](#), located close to Cookstown and managed by Mid-Ulster District Council with a range of trails including a 16km ‘red trail’;
- [Gortin Mountain Bike Trail](#) located close to Omagh, which in its current phase involves the development of 12km of both ‘blue’ and red’ trails to complement existing trails incl. a downhill course;
- [Blessingbourne Mountain Bike Trail](#) located on a private estate in the picturesque Clogher Valley, which caters for mountain bikers of all ages and abilities with a range of wide flowing blue trails and more technical red trails packed full of exciting trail features such as berms, log rides and rock drops;
- and [Coolaney Mountain Bike Trail](#) located in Sligo which as part of its Phase 1 build includes a 16.5km trail broken down into a mix of ‘blue’, ‘red’ and ‘black’ tracks that eventually will range from 3km to 22km.

This is a rich resource upon which the Central Border Region has the opportunity to build upon; with increasing evidence that where there is a sufficient offering (package) in place, mountain bikers will travel internationally for new experiences and thrills.

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT FOR THE CENTRAL BORDER REGION

This section, compiled specifically by ICBAN, sets out the strategic context for the Central Border Region and how actors intend to work together to achieve the vision. It is built on:

- An understanding of the relationships between the RSF, the *Framework of Regional Priorities* and key strategies and policies at international, national, regional and local levels; and
- A consideration of the potential impact of Brexit.

The Framework of Regional Priorities and the Policies and Strategies of Ireland and Northern Ireland

The *Framework of Regional Priorities* is a follow-up to the 'Regional Strategic Framework for the Central Border Region' (RSF), which was published in 2013. The original RSF project was funded by the INTERREG IVA Programme, the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, and was the first concerted attempt to develop a sub-regional border plan, which married high-level and local ambitions in a cross-border environment.

In recent years, the challenges of globalisation, the need to embrace sustainable development more proactively, political changes on the island and the advent of Brexit require that these strategic ambitions be reflected upon. This Framework is a response to this need.

There are two important high-level intervention policies, which must be considered for the region. In Ireland, the 'Ireland 2040: National Planning Framework' (NPF) will guide high-level strategic planning and development for the country over the next 20+ years, so that growth is sustainable in economic, social and environmental terms. In Northern Ireland, the Regional Development Strategy (to 2035) considers spatial development implications. The principles of these documents, the UN Sustainable Development Goals and related EU frameworks and policies, together with the identified needs of the Central Border Region, have been among the principal building blocks of this Framework document.

The history of collaboration and joint-working in the Central Border Region means that the local authorities and stakeholders, in the area, can confidently step up to deliver on the three key areas of focus for cross-border working as set out in the NPF chapter on 'Working with our Neighbours' (2018):

- Regional co-operation arrangements;
- Joint initiatives; and
- Co-ordinated spatial planning.

As previously mentioned, in 2013, the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (now Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government) in Ireland and the Department for Regional Development in Northern Ireland (now Department for Infrastructure) agreed a 'Framework for Co-operation - Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland'. The [Framework for Co-operation](#) examines the key planning challenges faced in the two jurisdictions and identifies the potential for non-statutory collaboration in spatial planning to mutual benefit. The *Framework for Co-operation* described this (regional level) form of working together as Level 2 Co-operation, where local authorities North and South are 'responsible for achieving national

and regional spatial planning objectives through the delivery of local plans, programmes and projects that are well integrated in a cross-border context'.¹⁰

In February 2019, a delegation from ICBAN and the member Councils of the Region gave evidence to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. This focused on seventeen Strategic Regional Priorities, which underpin development needs for the area. Subsequently the Irish Government Committee have endorsed these priorities by setting these out in the Report recommendations, 'Communities and Cross-Border Cooperation: Challenges and Opportunities'¹¹. This report stated, "The Committee endorses the role of local authorities along the border in developing a bottom-up needs-based strategy for the Border Corridor to offset the challenges and identify any opportunities associated with Brexit".¹² In addition, alignments with the NI draft Industrial Strategy and the Northern and Western Regional Assembly's 'Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy' are important.

The Framework of Regional Priorities and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy

The aforementioned Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy published by the Northern and Western Regional Assembly, entitled 'Region in Transition – The Way Forward', highlights inequalities (for the area encompassing the five county councils), in comparison to national investments in health, education, infrastructure and transport. The 'In Transition' title refers to the new EU designation for the assembly area.

Key findings note that the region has received just €87,240 per km investment in national roads, compared to a national average of €116,054. Investment in third-level infrastructure per student stood at €141, compared to the national average of €197.

The NWRA calls for an official policy of positive discrimination in regional investments and it highlights eleven recommendations, not dissimilar to those noted in this cross-border framework. The ambitions are for a region that is more urban, networked, digitally smart and vibrant.

The implementation of these various high-level national and regional strategies, in tandem, and across economic development, spatial planning, environmental management and infrastructure provision, will help to more confidently meet the challenges facing the island.

The Framework of Regional Priorities and International Sustainable Development Goals

There are seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and these were ratified by all 193 United Nations (UN) member states in 2015. The Goals are part of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They seek to tackle a wide range of issues facing both developed and developing countries. These issues include poverty, inequality, climate change, inclusive societies and access to health and education. This document emphasises their inter-connectedness – not just to

¹⁰ Framework for Co-operation: Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland & the Republic of Ireland (Page 29)

¹¹ The Committee's report can be accessed at:

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_the_implementation_of_the_good_friday_agreement/reports/2019/2019-10-24_report-on-communities-and-cross-border-cooperation-challenges-and-opportunities_en.pdf

¹² Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement: Communities and Cross-Border Cooperation: Challenges and Opportunities, August 2019 (Page 7)

one another, but to significant international and EU frameworks, including 'Towards a Sustainable Europe for 2030'. This EU framework emphasises the urgency of an ecological transition, coupled with social protection. It envisions the policy foundations for a sustainable future, within which the Region can develop.

The Framework of Regional Priorities and EU Cohesion Policy

ICBAN has also considered current EU Cohesion Policy. In exiting the European Union, the UK will be working to develop a new relationship with the 27 member states. Brexit presents NI with a unique perspective in what has been termed 'a place between' the UK and EU, in having membership of both UK and EU Customs Unions (subject to full application of the UK withdrawal agreement). The ambitions of this Framework must therefore be closely aligned with the policy priorities of EU Cohesion Policy: a Smarter Europe; a Greener and Carbon-free Europe; a more Connected Europe; a more Social Europe; and a Europe closer to citizens - by supporting locally led development strategies and sustainable urban development across the EU.

The Framework of Regional Priorities and Local Strategies

Local development plans, strategies and priorities are an important input to the *Framework of Regional Priorities*, providing a bottom-up complement to the top-down perspectives, which arise from EU and Governmental strategies and priorities.

The development of the *Framework of Regional Priorities* will enable local authorities, on both sides of the border, to enhance opportunities for joint working, given that, in recent years, there has been a greater convergence of functions and roles. Local authorities are now expected to play a more proactive role in supporting economic development and job creation in their areas and wider regions. This is done in a number of ways, including through local capital investments, economic and community planning, and the provision of goods, services and community infrastructure. However, it is acknowledged that many of the major issues affecting local area development are contingent on national policy and government funding.

In the course of this project, key local strategies for each of the member Council areas have been reviewed and analysed, including, Local Economic and Community Plans (RoI), Community Plans (NI), Council Corporate Plans, Economic Development Strategies and County Development Plans.

All of the Local Economic Community Plans (LECPs) / Community Plans (CPs), across the ICBAN Region, present a range of proposals to help achieve a number of Government priorities and address inherent structural regional weaknesses. The common strands, namely, economic, socio-cultural and environmental, are brought together in an integrated way. Community planning powers granted to local authorities and their partner stakeholders harness unique geographical perspectives that provide an enhanced facilitative role to guide local delivery.

In 2018, ICBAN completed a detailed mapping exercise of the LECPs and CPs across the region. The findings demonstrate that there are many similarities across the pillars referenced therein. The findings also provide reassurance that the respective areas are all coming from a common basis and sets of objectives, albeit with bespoke responses to local conditions. In both jurisdictions, this *Framework of Regional Priorities* can represent an important input and complement to the community planning processes.

The Framework of Regional Priorities and UK City Growth Deal Ambitions

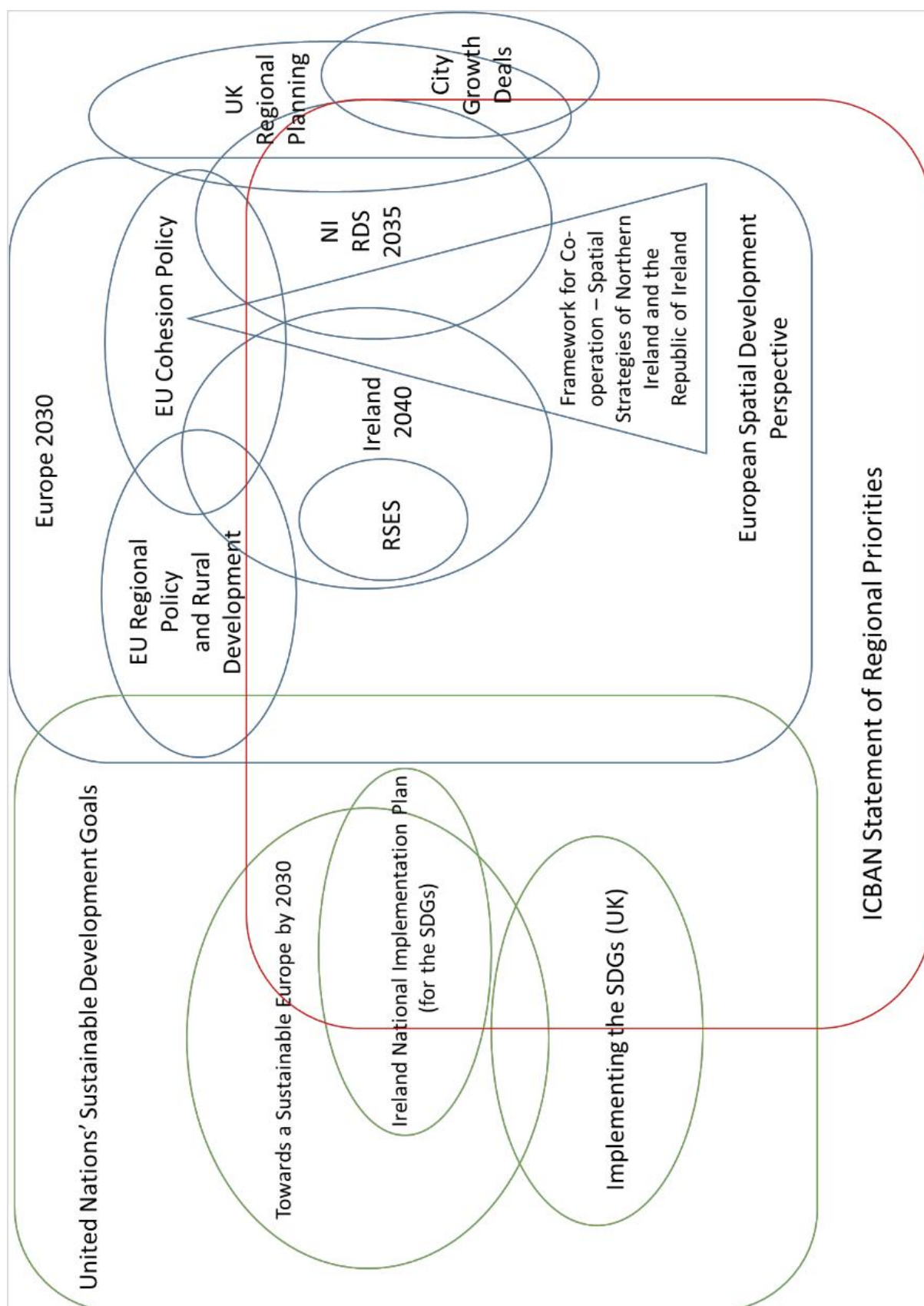
The ambitions being promoted by the Mid Southern and West Councils Group (which includes the Councils of Mid Ulster; Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon; and Fermanagh & Omagh) as part of a City Growth Deal bid to the UK Exchequer, have been considered. In October 2018, work began towards a Growth Deal bid to boost economic growth and deliver a step change to the future prospects of the three councils' area. This highlights the importance of enhancing productivity, innovation and exporting - through the utilisation of a smart specialisation approach i.e. focusing on key clusters/sectors, based on the region's strengths.

During the period of this *Framework of Regional Priorities*, Councils in the Central Border Region will have the opportunity to learn from each other's approaches and to share strategic and operational perspectives around an enhanced range of issues and functions, including the potential for joint initiatives. These include the following: emergency services; arts, heritage and culture; recreation services; tourism; and environmental and technical services.

The *Framework of Regional Priorities*, together with the RSF, provides an agenda for the development of such shared perspectives and the development of joint strategies and initiatives. The convergence of functions in relation to economic development enables the councils in the Region to deliver many of the actions highlighted in the Framework. However, further detailed work is required to identify the full potential of joint working by Councils to realise cross-border development opportunities and priorities.

The implementation of these various high level national and regional strategies, in tandem, and across economic development, spatial planning, environmental management and infrastructure provision, will help to more confidently meet the challenges facing the Central Border Region. Figure 2.1 below maps the relationships between this Framework and the key statutory policies, strategies and planning frameworks, which are impacting on the area.

Fig. 2.1: Nested Arrangements – Environmental and Planning Policy Frameworks



Meeting the Challenges and Opportunities of Brexit

Research conducted by ICBAN, working with Queen's University Belfast during each of the past three years, has identified how sensitive businesses and citizens of the Region feel about the advent of Brexit and the ways in which the UK Government handled the border issue¹³. Concerns have been widely expressed about delivering Brexit against the backdrop of political instability. Research by the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) on the Border Corridor examined the regional weaknesses and vulnerabilities, whereby small numbers of entrepreneurial firms are strongly reliant on the island economy and access to the Single Market and Customs Union, and are those, which a poorly-managed UK exit from the EU could turn a spotlight upon.

The economic outlook is uncertain due, in part, to Brexit. A best-case scenario presented by UUEPC is one in which smooth border management ensures continued free cross-border movement for residents, goods and services, and any opportunities arising can be realised through investment in areas such as infrastructural connectivity, increased supports for small businesses and the continuation of various funding streams.

It is incumbent on both governments that they must put in place adequate measures and actions that will both mitigate the challenges and exploit the opportunities that Brexit will bring to this Region.

At the time of writing, the UK government has formally adopted the Withdrawal Agreement to exit the EU. A challenging one-year timeframe has been set to conclude a new free trade agreement between the EU and the UK. There are still many unknowns affecting the Region's future in relation to Brexit and further insight and detail are required to fully determine the extent of such challenges and opportunities.

Pre-existing infrastructural weaknesses must be addressed through a range of interventions, to ensure the region is best placed to confidently meet the challenges of Brexit. Doing so will help transform the economic context within which this area operates.

To better enable the region to rise to the challenges the following Brexit specific recommendations are made:

- Regional and sub-regional structures should be utilised so that the challenges and opportunities stemming from Brexit are identified and addressed in a timely, collaborative and effective manner;
- A specific territorial policy framework is required to support co-ordinated growth in the existing functional relationships across the border region;
- The appropriate supports must be provided to broaden what is a solid but relatively narrow economic base, and to attend to obstacles and opportunities that will be presented in areas of trade, retail and tourism. One such high priority must be the creation of higher skilled jobs to help stem the flow of young educated people out of the area;
- The requisite investments must be made into the pre-existing connectivity infrastructure weaknesses, to help manage the consequences of the United Kingdom leaving the European

¹³ <http://icban.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Bordering-On-Brexit-FINAL-Nov-17.pdf>;
<http://icban.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Brexit-at-the-Border-FINAL-Jun-18.pdf>;
http://icban.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/TheBorderIntoBrexit_Report-Dec-2019.pdf

Union, and ensure strong links along the border are maintained. These will help maintain a seamless border arrangement, lessen journey times for freight and commuters, and to take advantage of digital developments opportunities arising from the 4th industrial revolution;

- Continuing availability of EU (or alternative UK/Irish government) structural funding and investments for key sectors including agriculture, are seen as critical by communities across the border region;
- Further research into how the border region and its businesses can take advantage of the opportunities being presented through NI becoming what has been termed as ‘a place between’ UK and EU and having in effect dual Customs Union memberships (EU and UK), whilst being the connecting point between the UK and EU/Irish land border. Managing and maintaining important established North-South and East-West linkages and ensuring against any new arising back-to-back developments will also be key factors that need to be considered and articulated accordingly by the cross-border partnership and its member Councils; and
- Partnership between various stakeholders along the border must be utilised on issues including the delivery of spatial plans to drive developments affecting both sides of the border.

Working with Other Areas and Partnerships

The Central Border Region is an outward-looking region, and ICBAN seeks to embrace and enhance its connections across the border region, on the island of Ireland, in an East-West context with Britain, and internationally, in delivering on these strategic ambitions.

The Central Border Region is one of three sub-regions, which make up the Ireland / Northern Ireland border corridor area, along with the North West and Eastern border regions. As and when necessary the three cross-border networks have worked together and delivered results for the wider border area. ICBAN is committed to delivering for the Central Border Region area, which is the organisation’s primary remit, but will also work strategically in the interests of the entire border area, along with fellow networks, the East Border Region and the North West Strategic Growth Partnership. This Framework is a peer-level document to the strategies of the North West and East Border regions.

ICBAN has engaged, and will continue to engage, in partnership working and joint ventures with organisations and businesses outside of our region and beyond our shores, where there are similar interests and opportunities to be realised in pooling strengths and resources, for the benefit of the Central Border Region.

ANNEX 2: DEMOGRAPHIC AND EMPLOYMENT DATA

2.1: Total Populations in the local authority areas that form the ICBAN Region

Area	Population 2001/2002	Population 2011	Population 2016	Population 2018	Population Change 2011 -2016/2018	Population Densities/person per km ² 2016/2018
Cavan	56,546	73,183	76,176		4.1	41.4
Donegal	137,575	161,137	159,192		-1.2	33.6
Leitrim	25,799	31,798	32,044		0.8	21.5
Monaghan	52,593	60,483	61,386		1.5	48.7
Sligo	58,200	65,393	65,535		0.2	36.9
Armagh City Banbridge & Craigavon	176,326	200,298		214,100	6.9	149.2
Fermanagh & Omagh	105,480	113,501		116,800	2.9	41.3
Mid Ulster	120,092	139,011		147,400	6.0	74.5
Region	732,611	844,804		872,633	3.2	50.3
Rol	3,917,203	4,588,252	4,761,865		3.8	70.0
Northern Ireland	1,685,267	1,810,863		1,881,700	3.9	133.2

2.2: Number of employees by firm size in each local authority area

Area	Number of Employees				Total number of firms
	0-9	10-49	50-249	250+	
Cavan	3,739	252	51	5	4,047
Donegal	7,467	580	83	5	8,135
Leitrim	1,862	33	11	0	1,906
Monaghan	3,015	250	49	3	3,317
Sligo	3,102	192	32	5	3,331
Armagh City Banbridge & Craigavon	7,890	665	130	30	8,715
Fermanagh & Omagh	7,715	415	60	10	8,200
Mid Ulster	8,325	585	130	15	9,055
Region	43,115	2,972	546	73	46,706
Rol	249,690	17,713	3,154	609	271,166
NI	67,285	6,535	1,370	305	75,485

ANNEX 3: HOW NATURE-BASED APPROACHES CAN SUPPORT POLICY GOALS

Policy area / goal	How natural capital can contribute
Supporting physical health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nature-based recreation (various habitats) • Settings for walking and cycling routes • Removal of air pollution
Improving mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nature-based recreation for different ages • Mitigation of road traffic noise • Incorporating views of greenspace from schools, hospitals, workplaces • Nature volunteering and green prescriptions
Productivity and industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nature-based tourism and outdoor leisure • Greenspace amenity in workplaces • Cooling effect of urban green and blue space during extreme temperatures (mitigating output loss)
Housing and place-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of recreation and amenity • Contribution to sense of place • Mitigation of pollution pressures from new development • Streamlined approaches to compensating for biodiversity loss
Reducing greenhouse gas emissions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Woodland creation • Saltmarsh creation • Peatland restoration
Climate resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural flood management approaches • Sustainable urban drainage schemes • Cooling effect of vegetation in cities • Habitat restoration
Improving education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Settings for outdoor learning • Support for ecological knowledge and qualifications
Social cohesion and loneliness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good quality green space provides opportunities for community events and interaction • Safer more welcoming outdoor environments • Nature-based volunteering
Cultural heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many aspects of cultural heritage (for example, historic landscapes, ancient monuments), are underpinning or surrounded by natural capital

(Source: DEFRA, 2020: 30-31)

Endnotes

- ⁱ ICBAN 'Regional Strategic Framework' (2013) Available via: <http://icban.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Regional-Strategic-Framework-Nov-13.pdf>
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/drd/spatial-strategy-framework.pdf>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Northern and Western Regional Assembly (2020) *Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Northern and Western Regional Assembly*. Ballaghaderreen: Northern and Western Regional Assembly.
- ^{iv} MSW Economic Engine (2020), 'Regional Economic Strategy'. Available via <https://midsouthwestregion.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/PDF-Regional-Economic-Strategy-Documents-4SEPT20.pdf>
- ^v <https://www.arup.com/perspectives/five-city-resilience-lessons-from-coronavirus>
- ^{vi} Cardwell, P.J. (2016) 'The 'hokey cokey' approach to EU membership: legal options for the UK and EU' *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23 (9): 1285-1293.
- ^{vii} O'Rourke, K.H. (2019) A short history of Brexit: from Brentry to backstop. UK: Pelican.
- ^{viii} O'Keeffe, B. and Creamer, C. (2019) 'Models of Cross-Border Collaboration in a Post-Brexit Landscape – Insights from External EU Borders' *Irish Geography*, 52 (2): 153-173. Available via: <http://irishgeography.ie/index.php/irishgeography/article/view/1399>
- ^{ix} ICBAN / QUB, *The Border Into Brexit* (2019). Available at: http://icban.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/TheBorderIntoBrexit_Report-Dec-2019.pdf
- ^x ICBAN / QUB, 'Brexit at the Border' (2018). Available at: <http://icban.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Brexit-at-the-Border-FINAL-Jun-18.pdf>
- ^{xi} ICBAN / QUB, 'Bordering on Brexit' (2017). Available at <http://icban.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Bordering-On-Brexit-FINAL-Nov-17.pdf>
- ^{xii} See Summer 2020 issue of *Local Authority Times* (various articles)
- ^{xiii} Maher, C.S.; Hoang, T. and Hindery, A. (2020) 'Fiscal Responses to COVID-19: Evidence from Local Governments and Nonprofits' *Public Administration Review* 80(4): 644–650
- ^{xiv} Central Statistics Office (2020) *Business Impacts of COVID-19*. Dublin: CSO. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/bic19/businessimpactofCOVID-19survey29juntoto26jul2020/>
- ^{xv} Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2020) *Quarterly Economic Survey, 2 July 2020*. Belfast: NI Chamber of Commerce and Industry.
- ^{xvi} Loades, M.E. *et al.* (2020) 'Rapid Systematic Review: The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of COVID-19' *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2020), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2020.05.009>
- ^{xvii} CCBS (2020) *Briefing Paper - The impacts of COVID-19 on cross-border tourism on the island of Ireland: A snapshot*. Armagh: CCBS.
- ^{xviii} Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (2020) *Focus on Agri-Food and Beverages, August 2020*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.
- ^{xix} Regional Assemblies of Ireland (2020) 'COVID-19 – regional economic analysis'. Available at: <https://www.nwra.ie/news/coronavirus-the-towns-most-economically-at-risk/>
- ^{xx} Karatzias, T. *et al.*, (2020) 'Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms and Associated Comorbidity During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ireland: A Population-Based Study' *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 33(4): 365-370
- ^{xxi} 'COVID-19 worsening plight of UK migrants, report finds' *The Guardian*, 29 June 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jun/29/COVID-19-worsening-plight-of-uk-migrants-report-finds>
- See, for example: *Special Committee on COVID-19 Response debate* - Friday, 10 July, 2020
- ^{xxii} Carnegie UK Trust (2020) *Building Back for the Better*. Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust. Report available at: <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/news/building-back-for-the-better-a-perspective-from-cukt/>
- ^{xxiii} Hesse, M. and Rafferty, M. (2020) 'Relational Cities Disrupted: Reflections on the Particular Geographies of COVID-19 for Small But Global Urbanisation in Dublin, Ireland, and Luxembourg City, Luxembourg' *Journal of Economic and Social Geography*. 111:3 (451–464).
- ^{xxiv} Weeden, S.A. (2020) The coronavirus pandemic is pushing Canadians out of cities and into the countryside (University of Guelph) <https://theconversation-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/theconversation.com/amp/the-coronavirus-pandemic-is-pushing-canadians-out-of-cities-and-into-the-countryside-144479>
- ^{xxv} Day, B.H. (2020) 'The Value of Greenspace under Pandemic Lockdown' *Environmental and Resource Economics*. Vol. 76: 1161–1185
- ^{xxvi} Kleinschroth, F. and Kowarik, I. (2020) 'COVID-19 crisis demonstrates the urgent need for urban greenspaces' *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*. <https://doi-org.ucd.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/fee.2230>
- ^{xxvii} Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (2020b) *Focus on Retail, August 2020*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.

Parallel data for NI indicate the disproportionate effect on rural economic activities: *UK Government HMRC Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme Statistics and Self-Employment Income Support Scheme*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/self-employment-income-support-scheme-statistics-july-2020>

xxviii <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/environment-and-health/urban-health/publications/2016/urban-green-spaces-and-health-a-review-of-evidence-2016>

xxix Government of Ireland (2018) *Project Ireland 2040 – National Planning Framework*. Dublin: Government Publications. Available at: <http://icban.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Regional-Strategic-Framework-Nov-13.pdf>

xxx Department of Regional Development (2010) *Regional Development Strategy – RDS 2035 - Building a Better Future*. Belfast: Department of Regional Development. Available at: <https://www.planningni.gov.uk/index/policy/rds2035.pdf>

xxxi Northern and Western Regional Assembly (2020) *Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Northern and Western Regional Assembly*. Ballaghaderreen: Northern and Western Regional Assembly.

xxxii Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement (2019) *Communities and Cross-Border Cooperation: Challenges and Opportunities, August 2019*. Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas. Available at : https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_the_implementation_of_the_good_friday_agreement/reports/2019/2019-10-24_report-on-communities-and-cross-border-cooperation-challenges-and-opportunities_en.pdf

xxxiii OECD (2019) *Rural 3.0 – people-centred rural policy*. Paris: OECD.

xxxiv Mark Shucksmith (2019) Rural policy after Brexit, *Contemporary Social Science*, 14:2, 312-326, DOI: 10.1080/21582041.2018.1558279

xxxv Gleeson, J. et al., (2015) *The Atlas of the Island of Ireland – mapping social and economic patterns*. Maynooth & Armagh: All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO) and the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD).

xxxvi Since the publication of the *Regional Strategic Framework* in 2013, there has been a geographical reconfiguration of local government in NI. The most significant impact on the Central Border Region and the work of ICBAN is that the former Council areas of Banbridge and Craigavon have now become included, through the establishment of the new Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, the second largest Local Government District in NI.

xxxvii Data relate to the Census of Population (Ireland) 2016 and NISRA Mid-Year Population Estimates (2018) for NI.

xxxviii O’Kane, A.M. (2016) *Border People Briefing - The Referendum on UK Membership of the EU: Freedom of Movement of People. No. 5, May 2016*. Armagh: Centre for Cross-Border Studies. Available at: <http://borderpeople.info/site/wp-content/uploads/Briefing-5-revision15June2016.pdf>

xxxix InterTrade Ireland (2018) *Cross-Border Trade & Supply Chain Linkages*. Newry: InterTrade Ireland. Available at: <https://intertradeireland.com/news/cross-border-trade-supply-chain-linkages>

xl For details, including maps, please see the website of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (NI) and National Parks and Wildlife Service (NI), via the following links: <https://intertradeireland.com/news/cross-border-trade-supply-chain-linkages> and <https://www.npws.ie/nature-reserves>

xli Details of river catchments can be accessed on: <https://www.catchments.ie/the-growth-of-the-rivers-trust-movement-on-the-island-of-ireland/>

xlii O’Keeffe, B., and Crowley C. (2019) *A profile of Ireland’s Uplands – an all-island study highlighting their strategic importance*. Dublin: Irish Uplands Forum

xliii Cobotics refers to collaboration between a person and a robot. The objective of these cobots is to automate a large range of tasks and perform work in closer collaboration with people.

xliv Stern, N. (2007) *The Economics of Climate Change: The Stern Review*. Cambridge University Press.

xlv DEFRA (2020), Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England’s wildlife and ecosystem services, see https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/69446/pb13583-biodiversity-strategy-2020-111111.pdf



An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha
agus Trádála
Department of Foreign Affairs
and Trade

This ICBAN initiative is part of the 'Border Navigator' project, working with the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) and enabled through funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Reconciliation Fund.

Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) Ltd., Enniskillen Business Centre, 21 Lackaghboy Road, Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh, Northern Ireland, BT74 4RL.

T: +44 (0) 28 6634 0710

E: info@icban.com

W: www.icban.com



**The Framework of
Regional Priorities for
the Central Border
Region of Ireland /
Northern Ireland,
2021–2027**

- A Synopsis



OCTOBER 2020

Foreword

The Irish border region is meeting some of its greatest challenges for a generation: the Covid-19 pandemic, climate disruption, and the exit of the UK from the European Union. As a result, for the first time in 50 years, the border corridor area, including the Central Border Region, is preparing for the advent where one component jurisdiction (Northern Ireland) will leave the EU while the adjacent area (Ireland) remains within the EU.

An impending Brexit has given rise to a developing conversation across the border region about how this might impact on future joint working. Amid current uncertainties and political differences, there remains a widely held commitment across local authorities, border communities and other community/voluntary groups within our region to continue working together, to preserve the gains already achieved and to realise potential benefits for future generations.

Cross-border cooperation takes on a new symbolic and practical significance in this new geo-political environment. It is important therefore to think in terms of mutual benefit and collaboration, rather than competition and divergence. Stakeholders in the Central Border Region can do this by building on existing relationships, and helping realise the ambitions which are set out within this Framework document for the period 2021-2027.

This Framework presents a strategic response that is both unique and tailored to the assets and characteristics of this particular region. In working together to advance the strategic priorities, we can develop the Central Border Region as a thriving, resilient, vibrant and diversified economy. This can be achieved through delivering on our key regional priorities; in utilising our regional strengths and assets, in supporting economic development, in enhancing citizens' quality of life, in making greater use of connections and remote working, and in developing our tourism offering. In doing so we can deliver benefits for all areas within the region: Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon; Cavan; Donegal; Fermanagh and Omagh; Leitrim; Mid-Ulster; Monaghan; and Sligo.

Finally, we wish to pass on our thanks to the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) for all their guidance and work on the project. We also wish to acknowledge all those who have inputted, including from our eight member Councils, their contributions have been very much appreciated. It is very important to also acknowledge the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Reconciliation Fund which has provided assistance in supporting the 'Border Navigator' and 'Border Animator' projects, and which have enabled the development of this Framework.

Councillor Pat Treanor, ICBAN Chair, 2019-2020
Councillor Eamon Mc Neill, ICBAN Chair, 2020-2021

Background and Context

This *Framework of Regional Priorities for the Central Border Region of Ireland / Northern Ireland, 2021/2027* (FRP) is a strategic initiative for the advancement of our regional economy. This is motivated by, and seeks to give effect to, ICBAN's Vision of a region *with a thriving, resilient, vibrant and diversified economy*, that will be strengthened and sustained through a focus on:

- Utilising our environmental assets respectfully and responsibly;
- Encouraging investment in value-added industries and promoting innovation;
- Enhancing quality of life;
- Embracing new technologies and enhancing remote working; and
- Promoting our strengths in tourism.

This document has been driven by the cross-border partnership, the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) Ltd., working on behalf of its eight member Councils in the area known as the Central Border Region. The local authority areas are:

- Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon;
- Cavan;
- Donegal;
- Fermanagh and Omagh;
- Leitrim;
- Mid-Ulster;
- Monaghan; and
- Sligo.

This FRP takes its strategic frame of reference from the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs). This set of complementary economic, socio-cultural and environmental objectives provides an overarching supranational framework for the attainment of sustainable development, and the advancement of greater equality, including spatial equalities. The FRP has also been mapped against the key statutory policies, strategies and planning frameworks, which are impacting on the area

The FRP, complements, adds value to and refreshes the Regional Strategic Framework published by ICBAN in 2013. Both strategic initiatives are:

- Regional;
- Cross-border; and
- Based on non-statutory, multi-stakeholder and collaborative approaches.

In advancing the FRP, ICBAN has taken a regional approach, and the actions presented herein are regional in scale and effect; they apply across all eight local authority areas and in both jurisdictions. The deliverables articulated in this document relate primarily to the remit of local government and the added value that can be derived through inter-local authority collaboration. In addition, they relate to the remits and objectives of several statutory bodies, thus accentuating the importance of partnership between local government and other agencies. Cross-border and stakeholder collaborations are integral to sustaining the delivery of this FRP.

Responding to the Challenges of our Time

ICBAN has developed this initiative to respond to three key challenges of these times, impacting on our border region:

1. The challenges, potential opportunities and obligations associated with the **COVID-19 pandemic**, which are likely to impact for many years;
2. The consequences of **Brexit** and its impact on the economy and trading patterns, stability, and cross-border cooperation, including the work of local government; and
3. The need to mitigate the threats of **climate change**, and to therefore embrace and promote sustainable development and care for the environment.

In response, the organisation advances this Framework to provide a steer to the region in terms of dealing with current realities, anticipating future strains and ensuring effective local and regional responses.

The Key Ambitions and Aims

The key ambitions of the Framework of Regional Priorities reflect these current and evolving challenges and opportunities at local, regional, national and international levels. They are:

- To develop as a sustainable region, characterised by increased employment, improved economic activity, social progress and ecological sustainability;
- To redress economic and social inequalities between the Central Border Region and other areas of Ireland and Northern Ireland and the inequalities which persist within the region itself;
- To influence and work with the Governments of Ireland and Northern Ireland on their investment priorities for the region, by providing an evidence base to justify investments; and
- To identify opportunities for local authorities and other stakeholders to work together to realise opportunities and to respond to the challenges facing the region.

Realising the Area's Potential

The under-exploited potential of this region has the capacity to contribute more to all-island sustainable growth. There is a real opportunity to redress the structural weaknesses, which have delimited economic growth, and thereby enable the region to realise its potential to become a strategic space for economic growth for both jurisdictions.

This Framework of Regional Priorities highlights opportunities – economic, environmental and socio-cultural – to maximise the potential of its latent asset-base for the benefit of its citizens / communities and the all-island economy.

Economic: The local authorities of the Central Border Region have been vocal and proactive in championing digital connectivity (fibre broadband and mobile) and opportunities to develop knowledge / human capital, which will enable businesses, young people and communities to seize advantages arising from the fourth industrial revolution and the move towards more connected / remote-working.

Environmental: This environmentally rich and largely unspoilt eco-region is ideally positioned to deliver on global, regional and local needs and imperatives relating to climate change and sustainable management and enhancement of the natural, built and cultural landscapes. The region needs to strive for a just transition to a post-carbon scenario.

Socio-Cultural: The Central Border Region has a strong cultural identity – expressed in various traditional and contemporary forms. Communities have a sense of place, as evidenced by an impressive range of creative output and artistic endeavour. Civil society organisations are strong and have clear capacity to play a greater role in place-making and collaborative planning. Like other regions, the Central Border area is becoming increasingly diverse, and harnessing the talents and abilities of newcomers will stand the region in good stead.

Promoting and Respecting our Territorial Assets

To help deliver on these opportunities we will draw on our own territorial assets, which are many and diverse:

- It is an area of **high-quality food and non-food production**;
- Through stewardship and sympathetic development of its **natural resources and landscape**, the Central Border Region is playing a key role in:
 - promoting **sustainable development**,
 - nurturing **well-being**,
 - enabling the transition to a **green economy** and mitigating the effects of climate change; and
- The region provides opportunities to promote **alternatives to fossil fuels** and to develop a circular economy.

The **growth in connected/remote working**, largely driven by COVID-19 and associated public health responses, coupled with the emerging demand/need for basic services, have the potential to rejuvenate rural towns and villages. These factors are also driving further demand for green spaces and investments in community amenities and **green infrastructure**.

The Five Interlocking Strategic Pillars

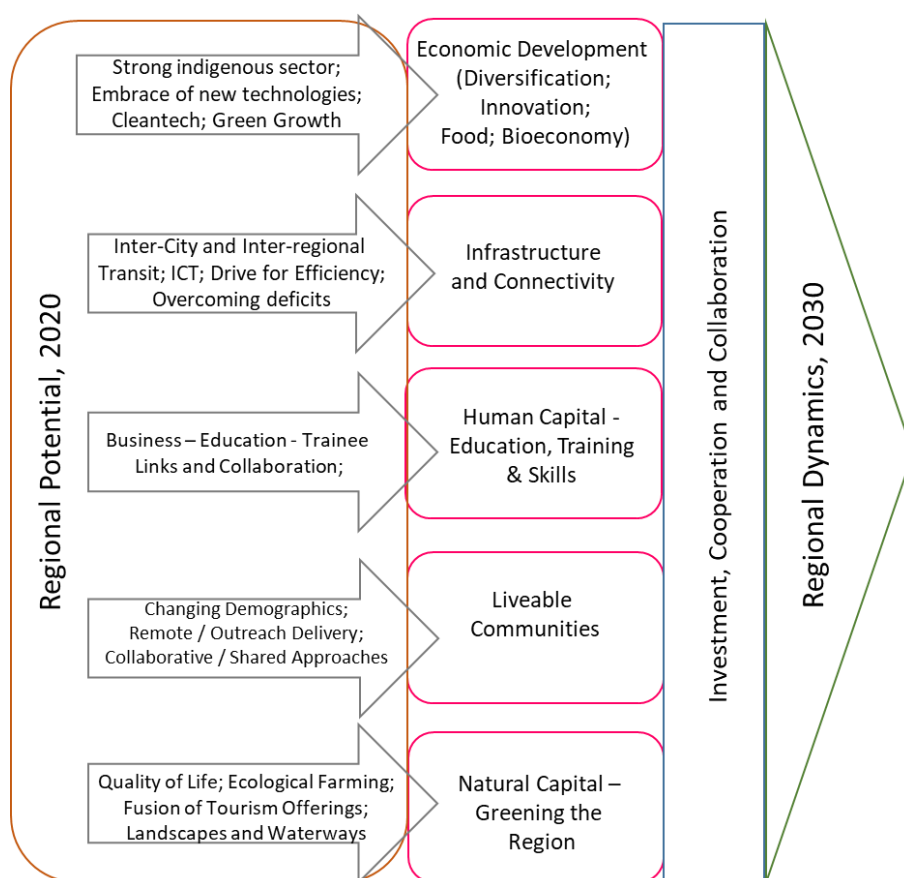
The strategic actions advanced here and the approach underpinning this FRP are rooted in place-making. Thus, they are based on local and regional assets, and they relate specifically to needs, priorities and potential within the Central Border Region. In practice, this implies capitalising on the region's rural identity and significant stock of rural assets, while promoting urban-rural partnerships.

The region is also characterised by significant cross-border movements and connectivity - physical, economic, cultural and social, and investment in sustaining connectivity is of strategic regional importance. The strategic priorities and deliverables are presented here under five interlocking and complementary pillars namely:

- Economic development;
- Infrastructure and connectivity;
- Human capital – education and training;
- Liveable communities; and
- Greening the region.

Each of these themes is related to a particular type of asset / set of assets in the region, as shown in the following figure.

Regional Assets underpinning the Thematic Foci and Strategic Pillars



Our Regional Priorities

The consultation process with member councils and other stakeholders identified a number of inter-connected and mutually re-enforcing strategic regional priorities. These centre on:

- **Exploiting new opportunities based on regional strengths and assets** (including latent assets), in the bioeconomy, food production and sustainable landscape management;
- **Supporting economic development** through providing adequate industrial spaces, nurturing inter-firm collaboration and innovation and strengthening linkages with education / training providers;
- **Enhancing citizens' quality of life**, through improved and more innovative modes of service delivery, life-long progression opportunities, enhanced community amenities and independent living environments;

- **Enabling greater connected / remote working**, through enhancing infrastructure and developing a network of digital hubs (in town centres), as part of the rejuvenation of towns and villages; and
- **Developing the region's tourism offering** and quality-of-life infrastructure through connected greenway and blueway networks (including inter-regional) – linked to complementary services and underpinned by increased active travel and improved regional connectivity.

These priorities are cross-cutting and their realisation will require inter-sectoral collaboration. By the same token, their impacts will be manifest across the dimensions of sustainable development – economic, socio-cultural and environmental.

The Emergent Catalyst Projects

The cross-border partnership has emphasised the merits of creating a shortlist of strategic regional catalyst projects, that can complement and promote the aforementioned five thematic areas.

The importance of innovation, inter-project complementarity and focusing on the regional dimension have all been considered in the development of these catalysts.

The Emergent Catalyst projects are:

Catalyst 1: Farm to Fork – strengthening the region's agriculture sector, food processing industry, catering firms and hospitality providers to collaboratively avail of new and emerging opportunities and sectoral trends;

Catalyst 2: Greenways and Blueways – growing and connecting these vital pieces of infrastructure – to promote tourism and active travel;

Catalyst 3: River Catchments Sustainability – working with all stakeholders across river catchments – from source to sea, to enhance water quality and to drive cross-sectoral projects that will strengthen the region's economic base;

Catalyst 4: A Thriving Regional Bioeconomy – to build on Councils' work in this field through advancing research and development (R&D), upping regional skills capacity and enabling greater industrial and spatial collaboration; and

Catalyst 5: International Mountain Biking Destination – to develop a connected / networked set of mountain-biking trails – capitalising on the region's topography and adding value to the existing suite of visitor attractions, while providing local communities with new amenities.

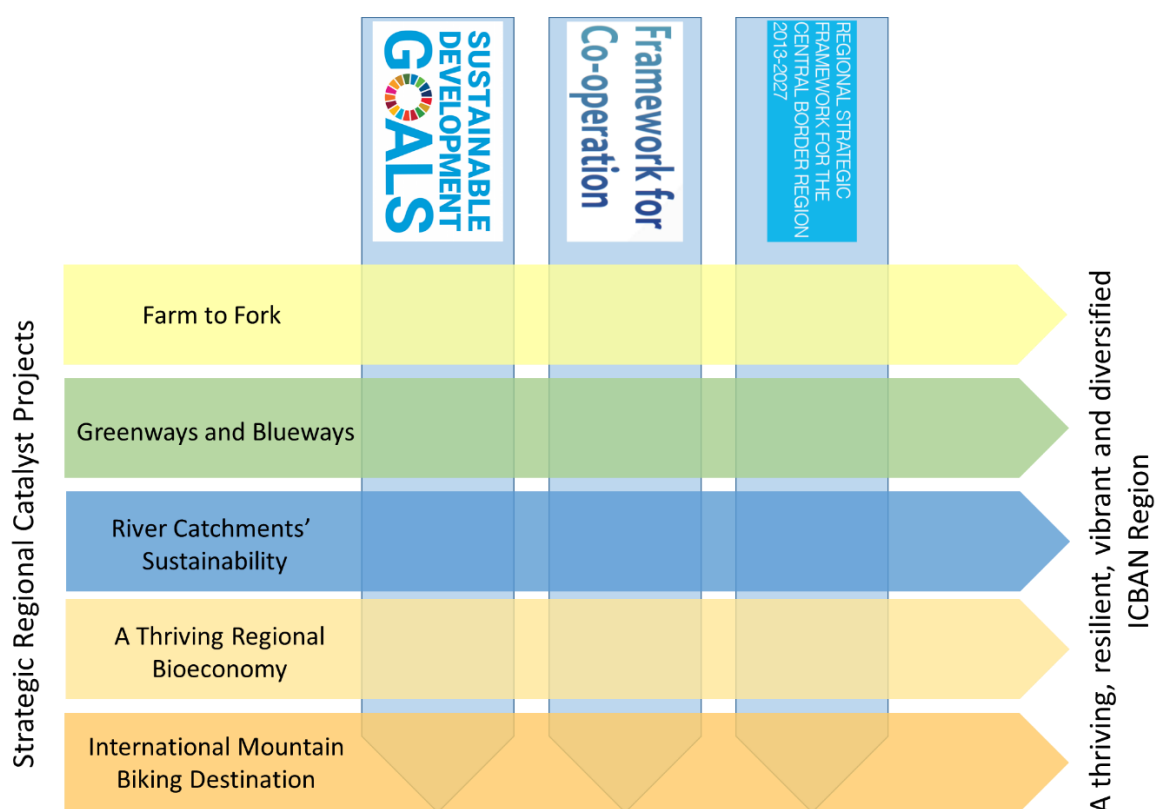
Moving Towards Implementation

ICBAN has a core leadership and facilitation role to play in working with a range of key stakeholders, including member local authorities, in unleashing the potential of these territorial assets, not least in the context of the key challenges of this time: namely, Brexit, climate change and COVID-19. It is incumbent on ICBAN to:

- bring its member local authorities together to address these challenges and harness these assets;
- provide leadership and continue its advocacy for the sustainable growth and development of the Central Border Region and;
- act as the intermediary for the region with both the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive – not least in progressing the identified catalyst projects.

As a result of obtaining the financial and other resources, including government support, necessary to turn the vision into a reality, the Central Border Region will become more prosperous and offer a better future to its citizens / communities, as illustrated in the following diagram:

Strategic drivers and processes



For further details, please refer to the full document version of the FRP, complete with Annexes.