

RSES Submissions,
Southern Regional Assembly,
Assembly House,
O'Connell Street,
Waterford.
X91 K256.

20th May, 2026

Re: The Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Southern Region and the Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) for Cork.

To whom it may concern,

Cork Chamber welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the public consultation on the Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Southern Region and the Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) for Cork.

Cork Chamber represents 1,200 members together employing 130,000 people throughout the city, metropolitan area and county. As the voice of business in Cork, Cork Chamber is committed to representing and progressing our members' interests and priorities.

Recent years have seen Cork transform into an independent economic engine and the driver of the economy in Munster. A city region that was, for a long time, viewed as a counterbalance to the capital has evolved through significant investment, unparalleled talent and an ambitious local ecosystem, driven by a vision of a thriving and prosperous region.

Ongoing growth and investment demonstrate the capacity of Cork businesses to be agile and resilient. Across all stakeholders, the ambition for Cork is evident. We share a vision for a progressive Cork region, characterised by a high quality of life, world-class educational and cultural institutions, seamless transport and active travel, and support for innovation that enables firms to grow and compete on a global scale, while also attracting and retaining talent and foreign direct investment.

At Cork Chamber, our direction is guided by our formal pledge to uphold the UN SDGs, five of which have been identified as priority areas by the Chambers Ireland network. Cork Chamber has also recently been appointed an SDG Ambassador by the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment.

Cork Chamber's advocacy priorities are driven by the needs of our members, our board and key stakeholders in Cork city and county.

We recently undertook a process of reviewing and refining our priorities through engagement with our partners, ensuring the changing economic, social and political trends affecting the business ecosystem in Cork are reflected.

This process explored how to leverage and mitigate threats and highlighted areas of particular interest for our members. Housing, talent, energy, urban evolution and infrastructure all emerged as key priorities, as did security, digitalisation and competitiveness.

It also demonstrated how interconnected all of these priorities are and highlighted the need for a holistic advocacy strategy towards Cork's development which reflects the collective ambition for the region's future.

These priorities have informed our submissions below to both the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) and Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP).

The Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Southern Region

Cork Chamber welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Southern Region. We strongly support strategic planning that both enables sustainable growth and delivers environmental protection and regulatory compliance. A plan-led approach that acknowledges and responds to projected population growth in the coming decades is welcome as Cork has a pivotal opportunity for economic growth and we cannot risk undermining this growth through infrastructure deficiencies or shortfalls in appropriately zoned and serviced land.

The new RSES aims to set out a statutory framework for planning and economic development in the region for the period to 2040 and it is critical that this framework is materially consistent with the growth targets for the region as established in the National Planning Framework and subsequent National Development Plan.

These strategies establish a shift in regional balance and increase growth targets, with 50% of growth in the coming decades to take place outside the Dublin metropolitan region. It favours compact growth, quality development and placemaking, ensuring our towns and cities are places people want to live, work and visit, and our region as a whole is well-connected and diverse.

These conditions need to be at the centre of not just the new RSES but also the subsequent local area development plans which will be prepared within this framework in the coming years.

The RSES also needs to create the conditions to ensure that our region is one where people aspire to live. It needs to ensure that our towns, villages and cities are more than places where people simply commute from but are thriving, sustainable communities.

In developing this strategy, our key areas of focus include:

- **Transport-oriented development:** To meet the housing needs of our current and future population, aligning the rezoning of new lands with those areas around proposed new transport corridors, including the expanded Cork Commuter Rail network, the proposed

Bus Connects corridors, the planned Luas Cork route, and the proposed new Cork Northern Distributor Multi-Modal Route, is essential. This would include lands west, east and north of the city with the potential for tens of thousands of new homes, all supported by high-quality transport infrastructure, and extends to urban regions of the county which are connected to rail lines, bus routes and roads. This strategy should be replicated throughout the southern region to ensure sustainable and achievable population growth to meet targets established.

- The RSES should explicitly recognise freight, logistics and supply-chain connectivity as a core component of regional economic infrastructure. This should be reflected in spatial planning policy through the identification and protection of appropriately located land, and through the provision of integrated multimodal connectivity to support trade, export competitiveness and industrial development across the Southern Region.
- Prioritising serviced lands: Lands which are already serviced or can be easily serviced with water, wastewater, transport and energy infrastructure will enable much quicker delivery of housing on the scale needed. The rezoning directive assigned to local authorities in 2025 could result in the rezoning of land for thousands of additional homes but will not achieve its full potential unless these are prepared with the input and support of Uisce Éireann, ESB Networks, EirGrid, TII and NTA. Growth targets must be matched by accelerated delivery of water and wastewater capacity, with priority investment aligned to identified growth centres and housing delivery locations. It is crucial to ensure that input from all key stakeholders is incorporated into strategies for the city and wider region to accelerate housing and economic growth.
- Protect strategic lands: In addition to a growing housing need, national strategies identify further economic development in Cork as a core priority and it is vital that we protect lands that will be needed to deliver this industry on a large scale. This includes a potential Next Generation Strategic Land Bank for future manufacturing and cutting edge industries, but also needs to take heed of future transport corridors, such as expansions on the Luas Cork route to new population centres or Cork Airport, and potential new roads or lands needed to widen existing corridors. A holistic approach to the growth of the region must be at the heart of all planning.
- Social infrastructure: Climate-adaptation infrastructure, including flood defences, and essential amenities in health, education and childcare all need to be delivered in conjunction with housing to ensure our city remains an attractive place to live and work. Accessible childcare should also be recognised as essential enabling economic infrastructure, supporting workforce participation, gender equality in the labour market and talent retention. We need to take steps to protect biodiversity and the natural environment and continue to develop parks and recreational areas in and close to our communities.
- Energy: Investing in Ireland's energy security and domestic renewable energy is critical and must be prioritised as part of our regional development. It presents a significant opportunity for economic development through onshore and offshore renewables and their associated industries. In the current context of geopolitical uncertainty, it is also important to provide security through the development of our own domestic energy

sources to ensure confidence in supply. Sustained investment in our energy grid is also crucial and must be a core element of any strategy.

- To this end, it is vital to support the ecosystem needed to develop our offshore renewable industry, from the physical infrastructure at the Port of Cork in Ringaskiddy to the maritime skills needed to sustain and develop this sector going forward. The RSES should incorporate specific sections on the energy sector and green skills clustering, linking in with our universities and technological universities throughout the region to future-proof the workforce.
- Cork Airport is the gateway to the entire southern region and it must be supported to grow through better public transport provision. These links should connect the entire hinterland to the airport and should be prioritised as an element of economic and tourism development.
- Competitiveness and economic growth: We need to futureproof our competitive economic offering by improving the environment for domestic businesses and start-ups to survive, scale and grow. We also need to diversify to ensure we continue to attract the best in FDI, including new industries. The strategy should support sectoral clustering in areas of strategic competitive advantage, including life sciences, medtech, digital technologies, offshore renewables, maritime industries, food innovation and advanced manufacturing. It is also vital to ring-fence land for future commercial and infrastructural development to sustain the economic growth of the entire region, as mapped out in national policy. Housing is a pressing need, but any comprehensive policy for the southern region must also recognise the need for future delivery in terms of strategic landbanks for industry, green energy and other commercial developments in coordination with IDA Ireland, and securing land for future transport projects.
- Talent and skills: One of the key components of Cork's economic competitiveness is our talent and skills. The region already punches above its weight when it comes to economic output and our future ability to grow and scale across sectors depends on our ability to continue to produce, attract and sustain a talented workforce, from work-ready graduates to highly skilled international talent, apprentices and more. Greater emphasis should be placed on graduate retention and international talent attraction, recognising that housing supply, quality of life and urban amenity provision are critical components of talent competitiveness, alongside strengthened linkages between higher education institutions and industry.

In addition to the above, we must recognise the funding imbalance when it comes to infrastructure development and delivery. Some 77.3% of capital funding committed to metropolitan areas under the National Development Plan is for Dublin, with just 12.6% for Cork. If Cork is to bridge the gap and achieve the priorities set out under the NPF and NDP, it is simply not viable to see this volume of funding concentrated in the Dublin Metropolitan Area and we need a greater re-balancing.

Furthermore, sustainability remains a core principle underpinning the Chamber's policy position. As an SDG Ambassador, Cork Chamber supports the integration of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals across all aspects of planning policy. Compact growth, investment in public transport, renewable energy deployment, and the protection of

environmental assets must remain central to the Development Plan. However, sustainability objectives must be matched by delivery mechanisms that enable, rather than delay, critical infrastructure and housing provision.

The Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) for Cork

Cork Chamber also welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) for Cork.

National policy establishes ambitious growth targets for the Cork Metropolitan Area for the coming decades. The population of Cork city and suburbs will increase by 96,000 to 320,000 by 2040, with significant increases in housing and economic development needed to support this. Substantial investment in a range of key infrastructure, including transport, energy, water, wastewater, health, educational and social amenities, is needed to improve quality of life and ensure that Cork remains a place that people want to visit, live and work.

The coming decades also present a range of opportunities in digitalisation and changing retail and work patterns, as well as challenges and opportunities in areas such as renewable energy and decarbonisation, and it is vital these elements are at the heart of the new MASP.

Recent years have seen Cork develop as an independent economic engine and the driver of the economy in Munster. A city region that was, for a long time, viewed as a counterbalance to the capital has evolved through significant investment, unparalleled talent and an ambitious local ecosystem, driven by a vision of a thriving and prosperous region. It is essential that national policy and, accordingly, the MASP recognises this standing and that appropriate levels of funding follow suit to ensure the Cork Metropolitan Area and the wider Cork region can continue to develop, driving the economy of the south of Ireland.

However, despite this strong economic performance, housing delivery in the Cork Metropolitan Area is below its targets as set out under the National Development Plan, with just 48% of its 2023-2025 targets delivered. Housing commencements and planning permissions are increasing and it is vital that supports are in place to ensure these schemes are viable.

It is essential that the MASP helps to create the conditions needed to sharply increase this housing output through the better alignment of stakeholders and the prioritising of policies which will enable the delivery of more housing at the volumes needed. We also need to see the prioritising of enabling infrastructure, including water, wastewater and energy infrastructure, as well as public transport and roads development which will allow access to workplaces, healthcare, educational and sporting facilities and more.

In addition to the key areas of focus listed above, we also feel the below are crucial elements in the preparation of the MASP.

- Ongoing support for development in crucial areas, such as the Cork Docklands, and additional investment to ensure regeneration in the core city centre area. This should also reflect the evolving nature of commercial and office demand, with a focus on flexible workspace provision, adaptive reuse of existing buildings, mixed-use development, and

innovation-led workspaces to support enterprise, SMEs and hybrid working patterns in the city centre. In addition to identifying new lands for expanding the city footprint and delivering new housing on a large scale, we must also not lose sight of the importance of our core city centre and the opportunities for brownfield development and infill housing in the existing urban centre. We must also use this as a chance to reinvigorate areas of our existing city and towns that have not seen new developments in recent years. The benefits of having a larger population living in these urban areas will be felt by all stakeholders, supporting our retail and hospitality businesses and providing a form of passive policing by those living in the city. Cork Chamber supports the goal of further urban development and evolution in this regard and we hope to see it remain as a core part of this and future strategies.

- Further investment to unlock and support development in areas outside the city that are seeing housing development, including Midleton, Carrigtwohill, Cobh, Carrigaline and Blarney, as well as proposed new areas as identified under the City and County Development Plans, including Monard, Kilbarry and Water-rock.
- Support to unlock the development of Tivoli by enabling the Port of Cork to move its operations to Ringaskiddy, allowing the port to develop as a key trading asset, a base for offshore renewable energy and also freeing up swathes of land for housing in the city centre.
- Continued investment in projects which are delivering economic boosts and unlocking significant land for housing, including the Cork Area Commuter Rail Programme, Cork Luas and Bus Connects Cork. Data from Census 2022 also demonstrates the reliance in the Cork Metropolitan Area on private cars for travel. Some 71% of people used private transport to travel to school, college or work, according to Census 2022, with just 19% walking or cycling and 10% using public transport. This is unsustainable in the current environment, with traffic congestion and emissions a persistent issue, and this will only worsen as the population increases if the required public transport services aren't implemented quickly.
- Investment in key roads projects is essential to unlocking land for housing and economic development. These include the Cork Northern Distributor Road, the N25 and the R624 Cobh Road/Great Island Connectivity Scheme. Longer-term, it may also be needed to develop the likes of the Southern Distributor Road and additional spurs connecting the Luas route to new population centres or amenities like Cork Airport. As such, it is important to recognise the land that may be needed for these developments and preserve it now to minimise disruption in delivering these key schemes in the future.
- While the Chamber strongly supports the transition towards sustainable transport, road infrastructure will continue to play a vital role in supporting regional connectivity and economic activity. Improved access from West Cork, East Cork and North Cork to Cork City is essential to support labour market accessibility, reduce congestion, and enable balanced regional development. Failure to address these constraints will limit the effectiveness of other infrastructure investments and inhibit growth.
- Cork Chamber continues to emphasise the importance of integrated land use and infrastructure planning. The sequencing of development must be aligned with

infrastructure capacity, with a clear focus on ensuring that zoned and serviced land is available and development ready.

- The innovation and economic eco-system of the Metropolitan Area needs further support to ensure it continues to develop. To this end, we would favour some scope for innovation districts, enterprise space, affordable commercial space and support for entrepreneurship clusters which would support a city centre SME and innovation ecosystem.
- Key social infrastructure, including healthcare and education facilities, sports facilities and climate-adaptation schemes, such as flood defences, must be delivered in a timely manner to cater to the growing population to ensure our towns and villages are viable places for people to live and work.
- In addition, Cork Chamber would like to see explicit acknowledgements of the need to create and sustain safe and attractive urban environments in the revised MASP, incorporating public realm quality, urban vibrancy and measures such as enhanced lighting, anti-vacancy measures and cultural infrastructure, all of which contribute to the evolution of our towns and cities.
- The revised MASP should also align with Cork's designation as an EU Mission: Climate-Neutral and Smart City and support the large-scale decarbonisation projects required to meet these commitments.
- International connectivity through Cork Airport remains critical to the competitiveness of the southern region and should be supported through improved multimodal access and long-term transport integration. Cork Airport is the gateway to the entire Southern Region, as well as a direct link to Cork city, and priority should be given to policies which better connect the airport to regional population centres, including hinterland towns, through regular, reliable public transport.
- Tourism, culture and the public realm should be recognised as essential components of economic infrastructure and regional competitiveness. A vibrant, attractive and culturally rich city region enhances quality of life, supports talent attraction and retention, and strengthens Cork's international profile as a destination for investment, tourism and enterprise. Continued investment in cultural venues, festivals, heritage assets, public spaces, wayfinding, waterfront amenities and the night-time economy will support the regeneration and animation of Cork city and towns across the metropolitan area. These investments also provide significant economic benefits for the retail, hospitality and tourism sectors, while contributing to more liveable, connected and inclusive communities.

A holistic approach to planning for current and future developments is vital to ensure Cork can reach the population and commercial objectives established in national policy and become an economic driver as envisioned.

Cork is now powering the Munster economy and, as consistently highlighted in Cork Chamber's budget submissions and national policy engagements, Cork's ability to fulfil its role as a counterbalance to Dublin and a driver of national growth is contingent on the pace of delivery. The policy framework is well established; the challenge now is implementation and it is vital that all stakeholders collaborate to ensure this happens.

In this context, Cork Chamber stresses that the success of these strategies will ultimately be measured not by policy intent, but by outcomes. There is a clear and immediate need to accelerate the delivery of housing and enabling infrastructure. This requires stronger alignment between national and local investment, streamlined processes, and a sustained focus on execution.

Better cross-agency coordination, planning reform, statutory timelines, infrastructure sequencing, funding certainty, delivery accountability and implementation monitoring are all vital in delivering our current national plans and these must be incorporated into the RSES and the MASP to ensure this is reflected regionally and locally too.

Without a step change in delivery, the objectives of the NPF and NDP will not be realised in Cork. With it, Cork can deliver compact, sustainable growth at scale, strengthening regional resilience and contributing meaningfully to national economic performance.

We look forward to continued engagement on the development of the strategies and welcome the opportunity to engage in further collaboration to ensure the key aims of this strategy are achieved in a timely manner.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'CH', is positioned above the printed name.

Conor Healy

CEO