

# NWRA CALLS FOR MAJOR INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS TO BE FAST-TRACKED IN REGION

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly (NWRA) is urging the Government to fast-track the delivery of 13 major infrastructure projects in Ireland's northern and western region after a new study found that the region is now on par with the least well-off areas of Europe in terms of infrastructure.

New research by the NWRA has revealed that investment in transport, health, education, housing and energy infrastructure in the Northern and Western Region is languishing far below that of its counterparts in Ireland and across the continent – with transport infrastructure ranked the 17th worst of 234 European regions.

To address these infrastructure deficits, the NWRA believes a policy of “Positive Discrimination” is needed to deliver regional equality across Ireland and to take pressure off an ever-expanding Greater Dublin Area.

Such a policy would involve creating a Ministry for “Regional Development” which would have a significant budget for delivering key infrastructure priorities across the regions. Many countries – such as Australia, Canada, Japan, France and Brazil – have created ministerial roles specifically focused on addressing regional development inequities.

The organisation's ‘Regional Infrastructural Tracker’ has for the first-time harnessed data from public and private sources. It reveals that since 2016, the Northern and Western Region has received less than 10% of the nationwide total investment in infrastructure projects worth more than €1m, and just 5.7% of investment from infrastructure projects worth more than €20m, despite accounting for 17.6% of Ireland's population.

## BIAS TOWARDS GREATER DUBLIN AREA

In contrast, the Eastern and Midlands Region received 66.5% of investment from projects worth more than €1m, and 75% of those worth more than €20m. As the Eastern and Midlands Region accounts for less than 50% of the population of Ireland, the NWRA believes the figures reveal an obvious bias towards the Greater Dublin Area.

The NWRA – one of three regional



**Pictured at the launch of NWRA's Regional Infrastructural Tracker on the N17 Collooney to Ireland West Airport Knock route (l-r): John Daly, NWRA Economist, Cathaoirleach Cllr Jarlath Munnely, NWRA Director Denis Kelly and Cllr Niamh Kennedy, Donegal County Council. (Pic: James Connolly)**

assemblies in Ireland – represents counties Cavan, Donegal, Monaghan, Leitrim, Sligo, Roscommon, Mayo and Galway. The Northern and Western Region is officially classified as a ‘Transition Region’ as it has a GDP per capita between 75% and 100% of the EU average, the only region in Ireland to hold such a status.

However, the NWRA's research has found that, in terms of competitiveness, the Northern and Western Region ranks below some regions categorised as “less developed”, which are regions with a GDP per capita less than 75% of the EU average.

To bridge the growing infrastructure deficit, the NWRA is calling on the Government to ringfence more than half of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) for the Northern and Western Region and to prioritise 13 infrastructure projects for the region.

These include the delivery of the Donegal T-Ten road projects and N17 Knock to Collooney Road Scheme, and the reopening of the Western Rail Corridor from Athenry to Collooney.

The report estimates that the total capital cost of delivering these priority projects would range from €4.8 billion to €6.8 billion, which would deliver transformative benefits in areas of climate action, regional development and the all-island economy, while costing considerably less than the overall cost of the Dublin Metro.

## MORE AUTONOMY FOR LOCAL REGIONS

The report also calls for a Citizens Assembly to examine how more autonomy can be given to local authorities and regional assemblies to address their own infrastructure deficits.

As this work is undertaken, the report recommends that a “Minister for Regional Development” should be designated with a significant budget for delivering key infrastructure priorities.

Denis Kelly, Director with the Northern and Western Regional Assembly, said: “We need to grow the economy in a manner that benefits all regions – not just the few. Adopting a regional approach for the revised National Planning Framework will be crucial to overcoming these sizeable infrastructure deficits in the Northern and Western Region.

“Delivering on these 13 priority infrastructure projects will go a long way in achieving this. These absolutely essential and urgent projects include the Donegal Ten-T Projects, the N2 Clontibret to the Border and the A5 road scheme – and the expansion of higher and research education infrastructure assets in the region.”

Cllr Jarlath Munnely, NWRA Cathaoirleach, said: “Without this type of regional approach in Ireland, we will inevitably see greater pressures being placed on the Greater Dublin Area – undermining the quality of life of its residents through excessive demand on public services, higher housing costs and urban sprawl – while also further blunting the economic potential of the Northern and Western region of Ireland.”

**REGIONAL INEQUALITIES CONTINUE**

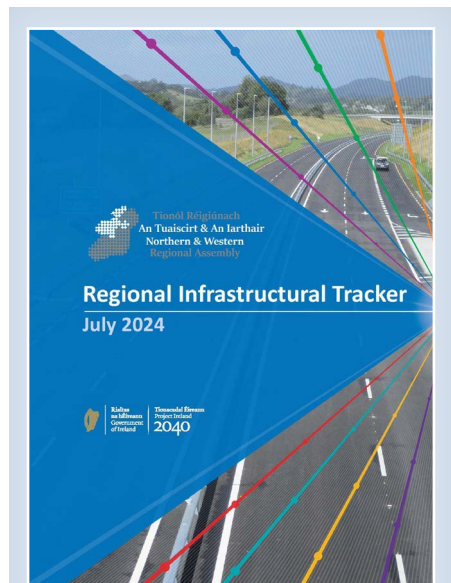
John Daly, NWRA’s Economist, said: “Given

the exceptional growth of the Irish economy – and the abundance of exchequer returns in recent years – it is remarkable that the Northern and Western Region of Ireland is in the bottom 20 EU Regions in terms of transport infrastructure.

“With notable underinvestment also evident across the region’s higher education, research, water, road and rail network, it is no surprise to see that regional inequalities in Ireland have continued to rise as population, employment and income growth remains overly concentrated around the Greater Dublin Area.”

He said that in addition to this, the level of underinvestment in the region also has the potential to contribute to greater political discontent. “Ample research from the OECD has noted that rising regional inequalities tend to undermine the trust of regional voters in national governments and lead voters to more extreme political parties or choices.

“The delivery of our 13 priority infrastructure projects represents significant value for money for the State in the long-term. The delivery of these projects has the potential to rejuvenate our region, while simultaneously supporting our climate targets and growing the all-island economy; all at a cost considerably lower compared to, for example, the latest cost estimates for Dublin Metro.”



**The report’s other key findings include:**

- The Northern and Western Region ranks 218th out of 234 NUTS 2 regions in terms of transport infrastructure. Its Regional Competitiveness Index score is like ‘less developed’ regions in Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia.
- Patients presenting at Emergency Departments across the Northern and Western Region of Ireland are waiting longer to be admitted or discharged than the national average, with more than half of attendees at Galway University Hospital (51%) waiting more than 12 hours.
- Some 6,950 households on the waiting list for social housing supports from the Northern and Western Region of Ireland’s local authorities – a number considerably higher than the 1,143 new social housing units produced in the region last year, with below average allocations in each year since 2016.
- There are two SFI Research Centres in the Northern and Western Region but none outside Galway City.
- Just 79% of households along the Border, and 83% in the West, have a fixed broadband connection. This is below the State average of 86%.
- More than a quarter of settlements (25.2%) in the region have no spare treatment capacity for wastewater treatment, while the increase in onshore wind generation in Donegal and Sligo risks overloading the existing energy infrastructure.



The NWRA – one of three regional assemblies in Ireland – represents Cavan, Donegal, Monaghan, Leitrim, Sligo, Roscommon, Mayo and Galway.