

Chapter 7. Economic strategy

Like all local authorities, Sligo County Council plays an important role in supporting communities through economic and enterprise development at local level. This is done in a number of ways, including through the Council's capital and current budgets, infrastructure provision, undertaking socio-economic research and analysis, spatial and economic planning, and the provision of services and community infrastructure.

The County Development Plan draws on the frameworks set out by the NWRA's *Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy* (RSES) and by the document *Sligo 2030: Once Voice, One Vision*, which is also the County's Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP).

As indicated in the Development Plan Guidelines (2022), "the development plan is primarily focused on physical planning issues such as the location of development, the provision of infrastructure and the appropriate use of land" in the context of the economic objectives of the community.

The economic strategy of this development plan focuses on the spatial elements of economic activity in County Sligo.

7.1 Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy provisions

The NWRA's *Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy* (RSES) has an economic policy role, which provides a framework for the economic strategy of the Sligo County Development Plan 2024-2030.

The framework is presented in the RSES as five "Growth Ambitions" with corresponding Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs). Not all RPOs are applicable to Sligo Town, the Regional Growth Centre or to County Sligo.

All the relevant RPOs have been incorporated into the strategic and general development policies in Volumes 1, 2 and 3 of this Development Plan.

7.1.1 RSES Growth Ambition 1: Economy and Employment

The main element of Chapter 4 of the RSES, titled "Growth Ambition 1: Economy and Employment – Vibrant Region", and most relevant to Sligo Regional Growth Centre, is the **Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC)**.

The AEC seeks to "maximise the Atlantic region's assets and connect the economic hubs, clusters and catchments of the region" in order to support job creation.

The RSES expresses a strong support for "indigenous enterprise" areas, primarily tourism and agri-business, but also for emerging clusters of Irish and foreign-owned companies operating in "MedTech and Life Sciences". The Regional Strategy acknowledges the imperative requirements for renewable energy, ICT services (information and communication technology), innovation and the development of a low-carbon, circular economy.

The RPOs pertaining to the Growth Ambition 1 support tourism in the form of increased access to the countryside (RPO 4.1), to state lands such as National Parks, Forest Parks, Monuments and Historic Properties (RPO 4.2) and through the preparation of Visitor Experience Development Plans within the North-West Region. Further RPOs (4.4 to 4.15) support tourism along the Wild Atlantic Way, in “Destination Towns” and in other specific locations.

The Economy and Employment section of the RSES also contains RPOs relating to energy, building efficiency, agri-food industry, bio-economy, marine economy, port infrastructure, research & development, town revitalisation and retail development, of which the most relevant are reflected in this CDP.

7.1.2 RSES Growth Ambition 2: Environment

Under the heading “Economic Progress and Environmental Impacts”, the Regional Strategy acknowledges the need to consider the interdependence between population growth, economic development, resource management and environmental impacts.

Landscape, natural, built and cultural heritage are considered assets with potential, which need to be used sustainably, while ensuring their protection and conservation.

Particularly relevant provisions for Sligo are contained in RPO 5.11 – supporting the upgrading of cultural facilities in Regional Growth Towns, and RPO 5.18 – development of regional greenway projects, such as the SLNCR (Sligo-Leitrim-Northern Counties Railway) Greenway.

This Development Plan incorporates the above RSES provisions through relevant policies and objectives in Volume 2 (Urban development) and Volume 3 (General policies).

7.1.3 RSES Growth Ambition 3: Connectivity

Investment in transport, sustainable travel and digitalisation are the main themes of this Growth Ambition. While the provision of digital infrastructure is seen as the key to delivering a “Smart Region”, the emphasis remains on improving physical connectivity, i.e. transport links.

Of special importance to Sligo is the requirement to prepare a Local Transport Plan for the Regional Growth Centre, detailed in RPOs 6.27 and 6.28 (refer also to **Chapter 9 Transport Strategy**).

The national road network is one of the Regional Strategy’s main priorities, translating into RPOs designed to connect the major urban centres in the region. The RSES supports the following ongoing road projects in County Sligo:

- National roads: N-17 Knock to Collooney (realignment), N-59 Sligo to Ballina (upgrade) – RPOs 6.7 and 6.8;
- Regional and local roads: Eastern Garavogue Bridge and Approach Roads Scheme – RPO 6.9.

Investment in Sligo’s rail network is addressed in RPOs 6.11 (review of Western Rail Corridor); RPO 6.13 (extension of railway from Athenry to Sligo) and RPOs 6.15 and 6.16 (enhance and expand the Dublin-Sligo railway towards the north-west).

There are no Sligo-specific RPOs relating to the bus network, rural transport, walking, cycling or electric vehicle infrastructure.

All these areas are suitably addressed, at County level, in the **Transport Strategy** (Chapter 9) and in the **Transport Infrastructure chapter** (Chapter 29) of this CDP.

7.1.4 RSES Growth Ambition 4: Quality of life

“Inclusive growth” is considered imperative for the Northern and Western Region in order to strengthen social cohesion. There is a historic pattern of exclusion and deprivation not only in peripheral areas, but also in urban centres, among disadvantaged or minority groups.

Improving access to housing, education and jobs is essential for reducing deprivation. The RSES sets requirements for a built environment that is age-friendly and supports physical health and well-being, with an accent on housing designed to meet the needs of all groups and communities.

The majority of RPOs under this Ambition are of a general nature, with no specific objective relating to Sligo. The **Residential Development chapter** (Chapter 26) of this Plan includes new and extensive provisions on housing for people of all ages and levels of ability.

7.1.5 RSES Growth Ambition 5: Infrastructure

The RSES indicates that the delivery and prudent management of critically enabling infrastructure must support the vision for the region over the 20 years of the Strategy.

The focus of the RPOs under this Growth Ambition is on electricity transmission and gas networks, water services and waste infrastructure, as well as on managing flood risk and protecting water resources.

RPO 8.5 supports the “build-out of the gas supply network” in County Sligo, while a relevant Case Study discusses the proposal for a “Sligo CNG” - local network fed with compressed natural gas. The project is sponsored by the SEAI and led by Sligo Sustainable Energy Community, which represents “a collaboration between HSE, Sligo County Council, AbbVie, Abbott, PlanEnergy, Aurivo and Sligo Chamber of Commerce”

7.2 Sligo 2030: One Voice, One Vision

The **Sligo 2030** strategic framework approved by Sligo County Council in 2023 also acts as the County's statutory Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP). It sets out a vision for Sligo as it moves towards 2030 along with high-level goals and specific objectives, outcomes and actions.

The plan seeks to position Sligo as a cutting-edge and forward-thinking County that is smart and sustainable, embraces change and creates innovative solutions for its challenges. As such, it is envisaged that the County in 2030 will have enhanced levels of employment and be transformed through digital and green actions.

A sustainable economy is the main pillar of the 'Smart Sligo' model. This means "focusing on attracting investment in jobs of the future (e.g. industry 4.0, renewables, retrofitting), developing meaningful employment for the County's people by building on existing highly-skilled sectors such as MedTech and Pharmaceuticals, increasing industry-academia collaboration to address skill gaps and increase R & D, and using an industry-led approach to creating an innovative ecosystem where entrepreneurs and SMEs can flourish".

The economic elements of the plan include objectives and actions related to attracting investment to the County, supporting the needs of existing companies and encouraging entrepreneurship, developing and upskilling the workforce, the regeneration of urban centres, development of sustainable and green economy and the use of existing public assets for the deployment of smart technology.

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, the Sligo CDP 2024-2030 focuses on the **spatial elements of economic activity**.

7.2.1 Sligo's economic profile

The LECP provides some useful baseline information about the nature of the local economy, in terms of broad economic activity trends and local specialisations, none of which include spatial elements of particular relevance to the development plan.

According to the Western Development Commission's "*Industry in the Western Region – Sectoral Profile*" (2019), manufacturing of chemicals and pharmaceuticals is by far the largest industrial employer in county Sligo, accounting for almost one in three industrial workers.

The share of industrial employment in these fields in Sligo is second highest in the country (after Waterford) and considerably greater than the next highest western county (21% in Mayo) and national average (18%).

Companies including AbbVie, GSK, Brusa and TopChem are involved in this area. At 24%, Sligo has the third highest share of industrial employment in MedTech in the state. After these two high-tech manufacturing sub-sectors, the next largest are Agri-Food and Metals & Other, both accounting for 10% of industrial employment.

Specialised sectors identified by the LECP in Sligo include Hospitality and Tourism, Performing Arts, Environmental Services, Medical Device Production, Metalworking Technology and Heavy Machinery Technology.

In 2021, IDA-supported companies in the County employed 2,732 people across sectors such as Engineering, Medical Technology, Biopharmaceuticals, Consumer Goods, and Business and Financial services. 74 companies were supported by Enterprise Ireland and employed 1,992 people across the County in 2020. The Innovation Centre at IT Sligo is home to over 35 businesses at different stages of development.

It is vital that manufacturing's continued central role in County Sligo's economy is fully recognised in policy decisions. Industry and enterprise in the County are supported mainly by the IDA, Enterprise Ireland and Sligo County Council's Local Enterprise Office (LEO).

The CDP must ensure that the spatial planning framework facilitates further industrial and enterprise development in Sligo.

7.2.2 LECP-identified needs

Following socio-economic analysis and stakeholder consultation carried out in 2022, the Sligo 2030/LECP document identified the essential needs of the County in terms of economic development. In summary, a significant increase in job creation and employment needs to be planned for and delivered.

The CDP must address the above needs from a spatial perspective, including:

- attracting new investment and supporting existing businesses, including those in the retail, hospitality and tourism sectors;
- ensuring the necessary infrastructure, including office space, is in place;
- promoting increased mobility and accessibility between and within towns and villages;
- revitalising town centres and improving the settlements' public realm;
- zoning adequate amounts of land for housing, education, healthcare, community and recreational facilities, to improve quality of life;
- preparing to meet the challenges posed by climate change (e.g. increased flood risk).

The private sector will have a vital role to play in addressing these needs, as will government departments and semi-state providers and agencies, such as Enterprise Ireland, IDA, Irish Water, EirGrid, TII and NTA.

7.2.3 High-Level Goals of the LECP

Following analysis and extensive consultation, Sligo County Council and its partners have developed six "High-Level Goals" and more detailed objectives designed to realise the Sligo 2030 vision.

Table 7.1 below indicates the manner in which the relevant LECP goals are supported by the CDP 2024-2030.

Table 7.1 LECP High-Level Goals – incorporation of spatial planning elements into the CDP

High-Level Goals	Goal description	Needs addressed	Corresponding CDP chapters
Goal 1 Economy and employment	Sligo will be a Regional Growth Centre that drives sustainable economic activity and employment throughout the region and increases the population across the County.	Economy and employment, housing, community and quality of life, infrastructure and accessibility, revitalising town centres, environment and sustainability	All of Volume 1 - Core Strategy Chapter 26 Residential development Chapter 27 Community facilities Chapter 28 Economic Development Chapter 29 Transport infrastructure Chapter 30 Water infrastructure Chapter 31 Energy and telecommunications
Goal 2 Smart Sligo	Sligo will become a smart county and a leader in the utilisation of smart technology through partnership with educational and commercial third parties.	Economy and employment, community and quality of life, environment and sustainability, infrastructure and accessibility, defining and measuring Sligo as a smart county	No direct spatial planning implications, but contributing elements are found in: Chapter 29 Transport infrastructure Chapter 30 Water infrastructure Chapter 31 Energy and telecommunications
Goal 3 Climate action	Sligo will be a proactive county in the fight against climate change and a model of best practice in climate action with sustainability central to all areas of life	Environment and sustainability, infrastructure and accessibility, community and quality of life, economy and employment	Chapter 2 Climate action Chapter 31 Energy and telecommunications Chapter 32 Flood Risk Management
Goal 4 Vibrant communities	Sligo will be a healthy and equitable society that supports its vibrant communities and champions active inclusion	Economy and employment, community and quality of life, revitalising town centres	All chapters containing Town and Village Plans Chapter 9 Transport Strategy Chapter 10 Urban development principles Chapter 27 Community Facilities
Goal 5 Heritage and tourism	Sligo will celebrate its exceptional heritage, creative sector, and realise its tourism potential in a sustainable manner	Economy and employment, community and quality of life, revitalising town centres, environment and sustainability	Chapter 10 Urban development principles Chapter 23 Landscape Character Chapter 24 Natural Heritage Chapter 25 Built Heritage Chapter 28 Economic Development
Goal 6 Collaboration and innovation	A collaborative and innovative Sligo	Seeks to address and contribute to all identified needs	No spatial planning implications to be addressed in the CDP.

7.2.4 LECP Actions with direct implications for the CDP

The objectives associated with the **High-Level Goal 1** of the LECP (economy and employment) seek to increase employment, housing supply, connectivity and public transport.

Some of the actions required for implementing the economic objectives have evident spatial planning implications, which must be addressed in the CDP.

- **Action 5(A)** under Goal 1/Objective 1.1 (Increase employment), relating to under-utilised Council-owned lands in the Docklands area, mandates the following:

*“Improve the business environment across the County through: (A) Developing a **masterplan for the regeneration of the Sligo town docklands** into a net zero area for potentially recreational, commercial and residential purposes with NZEB buildings. (medium-term timeframe, with Sligo County Council as lead agency) •(B) Developing a masterplan for **provision of enterprise space, including hubs and cluster centres across the county.** (medium term, Enterprise Ireland as lead)*

Chapter 28 Economic development supports the provision of enterprise space in all towns and villages. All settlement plans contained in Volume 2 include lands specifically zoned for business, industry and enterprise uses.

- **Action 8(C)** under Goal 1/Objective 1.2 (Increase housing supply) specifies:

*“Address current and future housing needs and requirements in Sligo through: ...
(C) **Preparing a Housing Needs Demand Assessment (HNDA) as part of the County Development Plan process.** (ST)”*

The Housing Need and Demand Assessment (HNDA) has been prepared in accordance with DHLGL guidance, and informs the Housing Strategy which accompanies this development plan.

- **Action 10(A-B)** under Goal 1/Objective 1.3 (Increase connectivity) specifies:

*“Invest in **critical transport infrastructure** to maximise the opportunities and build future transport needs of the county across road, rail and smart travel including: •(A) Continuing to support upgrades and improvements to Sligo’s road networks including the N15 to Letterkenny, N17 to Galway, as well as the N4 to Dublin and the N16 to Enniskillen and Belfast. •(B) Exploring further options to reduce traffic congestion in Sligo Town including construction of the **Garavogue Bridge**”*

The Transport Strategy and the Transport Infrastructure chapters of this Plan (Chapters 9 and 29) contain strategic and specific policies and objectives supporting the implementation of Action 10.

- **Action 14(A-C)** under Goal 1/Objective 1.4 (Reduce the commercial vacancy rate in Sligo Town and County) specifies:

*“Explore and implement initiatives, including the **Town Centre First policy**, to reduce the high vacancy rate in Sligo and other urban centres. This will include: •(A) Conducting a study to identify ownership of vacant and derelict properties throughout Sligo and initiate dialogue with identified owners. (short term) •(B) Repurposing vacant property for residential and recreational purposes where commercial use is not viable including digital and creative hubs. (long term) •(C) **In relation to Town Centre First, achieve pathfinder status for Sligo Town and become a pilot town for the night-time economy task force.** (short term)”*

The implementation of Action 14(C) requires the preparation of a **“Town Centre First” Plan** for Sligo Town, for which the CDP provides the general development policy framework.

- **Action 27(A-B)** under Goal 3/Objective 3.1 (Reduce emissions) specifies:

*“Encourage smarter travel and **increase and upgrade active travel infrastructure including cycleways, greenways and cycle paths across the county (long-term)**. This will include: ●(A) Developing a segregated cycling network through committing to all new cycle paths being segregated from other traffic (pedestrian and vehicular) where feasible and upgrade existing cycle paths to segregate from traffic where possible. (short-term) ●(B) Exploring options for the development of new greenways in the County. (short-term)*

The Transport Strategy, Community Facilities and Transport Infrastructure chapters of this Plan (Chapters 9, 27 and 29) contain strategic and specific policies and objectives supporting the implementation of Action 27.

- **Action 28(A)** under Goal 3/Objective 3.1 (Reduce emissions) specifies:

*“Increase the use of renewable / alternative energy sources across Sligo: ●(A) **Developing a renewable energy strategy for Sligo and ensuring that policy frameworks are in place to assist the attraction of investment in this area. (short term)**”*

Chapters 23 Landscape Character Assessment and 31 Energy and Telecommunications include the required policy framework to assist development proposals and investment. Chapter 31 also includes an objective to prepare a Renewable Energy Strategy for the County.

- **Action 40(B)** under Goal 4/Objective 4.1 (Improve the health of the community) specifies:

*“In line with the Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan, promote healthy life choices ... including: ●(B) **Developing necessary infrastructure and support new and existing campaigns to encourage healthy mobility and social inclusion, such as building on the existing investment in walking, cycling, and outdoor products and promoting the use of outdoor open spaces through creative community engagement initiatives.***

Chapter 27 Community Facilities contains outdoor recreation policies and objectives which support the implementation of Action 40.

- **Action 42(A, E)** under Goal 4/Objective 4.2 (Improve the health of the community) specifies:

*“Continue to increase participation in sport, recreation and physical activity in Sligo through ... ●(A) **Lead in the development of a County Sligo Sports Plan in collaboration with Sligo Sport and Recreation Partnership and stakeholders ... ●(E) Developing opportunities for physical activity in the outdoors utilising our rich natural landscape and urban settings”***

Chapter 27 Community Facilities contains policies and objectives which support the implementation of Action 42.

- **Action 44(D)** under Goal 4/Objective 4.3 (Support rural communities) specifies:

*“Maximise the opportunities for rural communities in Sligo under the Rural Development Programme (LEADER element) by: ... ●(D) **Supporting the development of social, economic and cultural infrastructure and services in hard-to-reach and geographically disadvantaged communities.**”*

Chapter 27 Community Facilities and **Chapter 28 Economic Development** set out policies and objectives supporting the implementation of Action 44. The Town and Village Plans contained in Volume 2 include lands specifically zoned for community facilities, as well as business, industry and enterprise uses.

- **Action 55(B, F)** under Goal 5/Objective 5.3 (Enhance Sligo as a tourist destination) specifies:

*“Develop Sligo’s leisure tourism offering to deliver world class visitor experiences including through: ... ●(B) Developing further **quality attractions (including outdoor activities)** and the variety of events and festivals across the County ... ●(F) Encouraging the development of an **increased tourism offering where the choice and variety of tourism accommodation includes boutique hotels, hostels, glamping, 5-star hotels etc.**”*

The Tourism section of **Chapter 28 Economic Development** contains policies and objectives supporting the implementation of Action 55.

7.3 Spatial planning for economic development

County Sligo’s ability to attract investment continues to be restricted by its relatively weak infrastructure, including under-provision of broadband services. These barriers to the economic development of the county are addressed in the Development Plan essentially through policies relating to energy generation and transmission, telecommunications and transport infrastructure.

The promotion of economic development in general, and industry and enterprise in particular, requires a multi-pronged approach, the key components of which are:

- earmarking specific settlements for focused growth (see **Chapter 5 – Settlement Strategy**);
- ensuring that towns and villages become more attractive to investors by offering a good quality of life to those who live and work in them (see **Chapter 27 Community facilities** and all Town and Village Plans)
- providing or supporting the provision of essential infrastructure, including high-speed telecommunications (see **Chapters 29 Transport Infrastructure, 30 Water Infrastructure and 31 Energy and Telecommunications**)
- reserving sufficient land in suitable locations for industry and enterprise uses (see the Town and Village Plans in Volume 2);
- supporting the provision of energy from renewable and reliable sources (see **Chapter 31**);
- securing high standards of landscape and environmental protection (see **Chapters 23 Landscape character, 24 Natural heritage, 25 Built heritage and 32 Flood risk and coastal protection**);

The strategic policies for economic development outlined below need to be paralleled by initiatives in education, training and enterprise support provided by both the private and the public sectors.

Strategic policies for economic development

It is the policy of Sligo County Council to:

- SP-ED-1** Ensure that sufficient, serviced and suitable land is reserved for new enterprise development at key locations in Sligo Town, Tobercurry, Ballymote and Enniscrone, and promote the Support Towns as secondary employment centres, after Sligo Town.
- SP-ED-2** Promote the integration of employment with other land uses and the transportation network and ensure that employment-intensive uses are located in proximity to existing and planned strategic routes, where public transport is most viable.
- SP-ED-3** Facilitate the development of small-scale enterprise space, including digital hubs and cluster centres in villages where good access, infrastructure and services are readily available or can be provided at a reasonable cost.
- SP-ED-4** Liaise with the IDA and Enterprise Ireland to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the provision of necessary infrastructure and services to support enterprise and industrial development.