



Tionól Réigiúnach an Deiscirt
Southern Regional Assembly

Southern, Eastern and Midland Regional ERDF Programme 2021 – 2027

Strategic Environmental Assessment Non-Technical Summary

Southern Regional Assembly

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CONTENTS

1	WHAT IS THE ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT AND WHY HAS IT BEEN WRITTEN?	1
2	WHAT IS THE SOUTHERN, EASTERN AND MIDLAND REGIONAL PROGRAMME 2021-27? .2	
	2.1 Background	2
	2.2 Programme Objectives	3
3	WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT IN IRELAND?	7
	3.1 Current State of the Environment.....	7
4	HOW HAS THE REGIONAL PROGRAMME BEEN ASSESSED?	13
5	WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?	14
6	WHAT ARE THE LIKELY ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF THE REGIONAL PROGRAMME?	15
7	WHAT ARE THE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MITIGATION OR ENHANCEMENTS?	17
	7.1 Minimising Adverse Effects	17
	7.2 Environmental Enhancements	18
8	HOW WILL EFFECTS BE MONITORED?	19
9	WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT?	20

1 WHAT IS THE ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT AND WHY HAS IT BEEN WRITTEN?

RSK has been instructed by the Southern Regional Assembly to carry out a Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Southern, Eastern and Midland Regional European Regional Development Fund Programme 2021 – 2027 (Hereafter referred to as ‘the Regional Programme’). This Regional Programme supports the objectives of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Southern Region 2020 - 2032 and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region 2019 - 2031.

Strategic Environmental Assessment is a systematic process for evaluating the environmental consequences of proposed plans or programmes to ensure environmental issues are fully integrated and addressed at the earliest appropriate stage of decision making, with a view to promoting sustainable development. The process of Strategic Environmental Assessment was introduced under European Directive 2001/42/EC12 on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment (Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive), and came into force in 2001.

The Directive requires the Southern Regional Assembly, as the programming authority, to assess the likely significant effects of its plans and programmes on: *“the environment, including on issues such as biodiversity, population, human health, fauna, flora, soil, water, air, climatic factors, material assets, cultural heritage including architectural and archaeological heritage, landscape and the interrelationship of the above factors”* including *“secondary, cumulative, synergistic, short, medium, and long-term, permanent and temporary positive and negative effects”*.

In Ireland the enabling legislation is the European Communities (Environmental Assessment of Certain Plans and Programmes) Regulations 2004 (SI 435/2004), as amended in 2011 by SI200/2011, and the Planning and Development (Strategic Environmental Assessment) Regulations 2004 as amended in 2011 (Irish SI 436/2004 and SI 201/2011). Hereafter collectively referred to as ‘the Strategic Environmental Assessment Regulations’.

The Environmental Report evaluates the likely environmental effects of implementing the Regional Programme as per the requirements of the Directive and the Strategic Environmental Assessment Regulations. This includes an assessment of realistic alternative approaches and options, as well as suggested mitigation and enhancement measures to prevent, reduce and offset any significant adverse effects on the environment of implementing the Regional Programme.

The Environmental Report has been issued into statutory consultation by the Southern Regional Assembly and is available to view and comment on by other interested organisations and members of the public in parallel with the consultation period for the Regional Programme. This Non-Technical Summary is a concise summary version of the Environmental Report.

2 WHAT IS THE SOUTHERN, EASTERN AND MIDLAND REGIONAL PROGRAMME 2021-27?

2.1 Background

The Southern Regional Assembly and the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly are two of three Regional Assemblies in the Republic of Ireland. Both assemblies work towards linking local and national policy goals through the implementation of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies aligned to the National Planning Policy Framework – Project Ireland 2040 within their geographical regions.

The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy is a strategic plan and investment framework to shape the future development of Ireland’s Regions to 2031 and beyond, reinforced under the European Regional Development Fund; which aims to create jobs and develop competitiveness to support the economic and social structure, by investing in areas which will enhance sustainable growth and development within regions.

Two European Regional Development Fund co-financed Regional Programmes have been developed, with the Southern Regional Assembly and the Northern and Western Regional Assembly acting as Managing Authorities.

The European Regional Development Fund currently includes provision for two Regional Programmes, comprising:

- The Southern, Eastern and Midland Regional Programme 2021-2027 – covering the combined areas of the Southern Region and the Eastern and Midland Region; and
- The Northern and Western Regional Programme 2021-2027 – covering the Northern and Western region.

The Southern, Eastern and Midlands Regional Programme areas can be seen below in Figures 2.1 and 2.2.

Figure 2.1: Eastern and Midland Region



Figure 2.2: Southern Region



2.2 Programme Objectives

The Regional Programme is being developed in the framework of the five Policy Objectives as set out in the European Union's European Regional Development Fund regulations:

- Policy Objective 1: A more competitive and smarter Europe by promoting innovative and smart eco-nomic transformation and re-gional ICT connectivity (Policy Objective 1);
- Policy Objective 2: A greener, low-carbon transitioning towards a net zero carbon economy and resilient Europe by promoting clean and fair energy transition, green and blue investment, the circular economy, climate change mitigation and adap-tation, risk prevention and management, and sustainable urban mobility (Policy Objective 2);
- Policy Objective 3: A more connected Europe by enhancing mobility (Policy Objective 3);
- Policy Objective 4: A more social and inclusive Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights (Policy Objective 4); and
- Policy Objective 5: A Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories and local initiatives (Policy Objective 5).

For this Regional Programme period of 2021 to 2027, Southern Regional Assembly's primary focus will be on PO1, 2 and 5 (A smarter Europe, a greener, low-carbon Europe, and a Europe closer to citizens) of the European Regional Development Fund.

The policies and specific objectives of the Regional Programme are outlined in Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1: European Union Policy Objectives, Specific Objectives and Proposed Types of Actions of the Regional Programme

Specific Objectives	Indicative Actions
<p>European Union Policy Objective 1: A Smarter Europe - A more competitive and smarter Europe by promoting innovative and smart economic transformation and regional ICT connectivity (PO1). Regional Programme Priority: SEM1. Smarter and More Competitive Regions</p>	
<p>RSO1.1 Developing and enhancing research and innovation capacities and the uptake of advanced technologies.</p>	<p>The following Types of Actions will be taken under this priority to develop and enhance research and innovation capacities and the uptake of advanced technologies in the programme area.</p> <p>Capacity building within the regions new Technological University (TU).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action RSO1.1.1: Establish, strengthen and systemise the technological universities' research and innovation offices which support their academic staff and researchers and wider enterprise and community stakeholders within their regions. This will include developing researcher human capital in the technological universities, including staff development, recruitment, postgraduate training and supervision, networking, and more structured collaborative knowledge-transfer and mobility schemes. • Action RSO1.1.2: Provide industry gateways with dedicated staff who work with industry to articulate company problems in a manner that can be addressed by the established expert base in each TU. Gateway staff will manage the interaction between enterprises and the technological university, help enterprises source funding where necessary, and ensure projects are delivered successfully and in an industry-friendly manner. <p>Capacity building within both universities and our Technological Universities (TUs).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action RSO1.1.3: Retain Technology Transfer specialists to help companies and investors to access new knowledge and expertise, to drive innovation through collaboration, and to identify and license new technologies and IP. These specialists will continue to develop the Technology Transfer System in public research institutions and will provide new resources to place a focus on developing spin out company opportunities. <p>Accelerating the translation of cutting-edge research into commercial applications at a regional level.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action RSO1.1.4: Establish a new "Smart Hub" model for regional innovation and entrepreneurial training. The model will integrate critical elements of a research and innovation ecosystem with entrepreneurial approaches, thus accelerating time to market from research concept to spin-outs, new product introduction, licences and innovations. The new regional Smart Hubs for Entrepreneurial Research and Innovation will be established in key thematic areas aligned with the Ireland's Smart Specialisation Strategy and regional strategic priorities.

Specific Objectives	Indicative Actions
	<p>Supporting innovation diffusion, enterprise innovation and entrepreneurship in the regions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action RSO1.1.5: Develop new immersive-based, needs-led innovation training programmes, closely aligned to S3 in the regions and capable of attracting high calibre individuals and inter-disciplinary teams who, through their immersion and observation of real needs in their immersive environment and the use of a design methodology, will be supported to generate product and process ideas, new IP and in some cases, the creation of high-potential-start-ups (HPSUs) from research. These programmes will build on existing international and national best practice connecting on multiple levels with the industry sector clusters in the regions.
<p>RSO1.3 Enhancing sustainable growth and competitiveness of SMEs and job creation in SMEs, including by productive investments.</p>	<p>The following types of action will be taken under this priority to enhance sustainable growth and competitiveness of SMEs and job creation in SMEs, including by productive investment, in the regions and sub-regions of the programme area.</p> <p>Strengthening and developing functional regional ecosystems that support innovation diffusion, enterprise innovation and entrepreneurship in the regions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action RSO1.3.1: Provide appropriate infrastructure and key staff resources to deliver innovative solutions including support programmes to support entrepreneurship, start-ups and scaling companies. This will include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Delivery of small to medium scale regional projects (with minimum or no building requirements) or expansion of existing regional ecosystem projects. ▪ Scoping and preparing new large-scale regional projects, e.g., design and planning, project development, recruitment of key managers. ▪ Delivery of large-scale regional capital investment projects that provide key strategic infrastructural solutions to support the regional ecosystem. <p>Actions will be targeted at strategic regional locations where an identifiable deficit exists in key infrastructure which is necessary to develop functional regional ecosystems which can support this client base. Projects must be collaborative in nature, they must be innovative, viable and sustainable with metrics and Key Performance Indicators which provide additionality to the existing regional infrastructure. Projects will complement the solutions provided by the existing regional providers including higher education institutions, state agencies and private sector entities at a regional level.</p>
<p>European Union Policy Objective 2: A Greener, Low Carbon Europe - A greener, low-carbon transitioning towards a net zero carbon economy and resilient Europe by promoting clean and fair energy transition, green and blue investment, the circular economy, climate change mitigation and adaptation, risk prevention and management, and sustainable urban mobility (Policy Objective 2).</p> <p>Regional Programme Priority: SEM2. Low-Carbon Energy Efficient Regions</p>	

Specific Objectives	Indicative Actions
<p>RSO2.1 Promoting energy efficiency and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.</p>	<p>The following types of action will be taken under this priority to promote energy efficiency and reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the programme area.</p> <p>Improving the energy efficiency of residential homes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action RSO2.1.1: Support the delivery of energy efficiency renovations free of charge to owner-occupied lower-income households who meet the defined eligibility criteria and who are in, or are vulnerable to, energy poverty. This action will use learnings from similar actions in the 2014-2020 programming period and will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ retrofit homes with the aim to achieve, on average, at least a medium-depth level renovation ▪ pilot the installation of heat pumps in existing premises, to replace older less efficient heating systems ▪ gather evidence from the pilot to inform the appropriate process and approach to increasing the number of B2 upgrades and heat pump installations going forward ▪ provide an evidence base to improve the targeting of energy efficiency schemes ▪ examine the impact of retrofitting on alleviating energy poverty
<p>European Union Policy Objective 5: A Europe Closer to its Citizens - Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories and local initiatives (Policy Objective 5)</p> <p>Regional Programme Priority: SEM3. Sustainable and Integrated Urban Development</p>	
<p>RSO5.1 Fostering the integrated and inclusive social, economic and environmental development, culture, natural heritage, sustainable tourism, and security in urban areas.</p>	<p>The following types of action will be taken under this priority to foster integrated and inclusive social, economic and environmental development, culture, natural heritage, sustainable tourism, and security in urban areas within the programme area.</p> <p>Supporting locally lead and locally selected projects that take an integrated strategic approach to the regeneration of our towns, using a Town Centre First Health Check framework to gather data, develop action plans and lead actions on regeneration.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action RSO5.1.1: Prepare integrated urban regeneration action plans / masterplans (either using procured multi-disciplinary service or short-term contract within the Local Authority for required skills) which identify projects and initiatives tackling town centre regeneration, placemaking, vacancy and dereliction. • Action RSO5.1.2: Deliver pilot and pathfinder projects for selected towns (priority for Key Towns or other settlements as justified by the Local Authority under selection criteria) tackling town centre regeneration, placemaking, vacancy and dereliction. This will involve capital investment and may include public realm improvement projects.

3 WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT IN IRELAND?

The Republic of Ireland occupies a large portion of the island of Ireland and shares a land border with Northern Ireland. The geographical area of the two regions in the programme area covers 63% of the landmass of the Republic of Ireland, comprises almost 80% of the total population and encompasses the following 18 Irish counties:

- Nine counties of Ireland for the Southern Region, comprising Clare, Limerick, Kerry, Cork, Tipperary, Waterford, Kilkenny, Carlow, and Wexford; and
- Nine counties of Ireland for the Eastern and Midland Region, comprising Dublin, Kildare, Meath, Louth, Wicklow, Laois, Longford, Offaly, and Westmeath.

There are several nature conservation, landscape and cultural heritage designations in Ireland. These are designated as either statutory (protected by law) or non-statutory (a material planning consideration), and can be of international, national or local importance. Information on local and/or non-statutory designations is held by individual local authorities and has not been obtained for this strategic level assessment.

3.1 Current State of the Environment

Ecology and Nature Conservation

Strengths and Opportunities

- Large area of land and sea of international and national nature conservation value
- Many designated protected areas that are of importance for biodiversity conservation
- Ireland committed to establishing Marine Protected Areas to further protect biodiversity
- Has a high proportion of Europe's remaining peatlands
- Over half of the Habitat Directive-listed species are in favourable condition and many are demonstrating stable or improving trends
- Many assessed seabird species are increasing
- Ireland's ecosystems have recently been mapped as part of a first step towards a framework for a National Ecosystem Assessment

Weaknesses and Threats

- Unfavourable condition of habitats and species in protected sites due to unsustainable agricultural and fishing practices
- Continuing declines in species and habitats within protected areas, particularly from agriculture
- Continuing increase in man-made pressure to coastal and marine biodiversity
- Peatlands facing threat due to habitat changes, invasive species, nutrient pollution and climate change
- Continuing threats facing habitats and resource due to climate change, habitat exploitation and nutrient pollution
- Continuing decline in species and habitats outside of protected areas

Health and Quality of Life

Strengths and Opportunities

- Life expectancy at birth has increased for males
- Ireland has the highest self-perceived health status in the European Union, as many people rate their own health as very good or good
- Low levels of depression amongst the population
- Prevalence of long-standing illness or health conditions has declined
- The availability of health services compares favourably to other comparable countries

Weaknesses and Threats

- High levels of obesity, particularly since the start of Covid-19 restrictions
- High levels of older population being limited by health problems
- Increased psychological distress amongst the population due to Covid-19 associated restrictions
- High levels of population dealing with long-term conditions within the Midland region
- Negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on hospital activity

Population: Socio-economics

Strengths and Opportunities

- Increase in national population accompanied by growth in cities and suburbs
- Increase in tertiary education levels
- Within the programme area Dublin, Cork, Kildare, Meath and Wicklow counties score above average on the Deprivation Index
- Low unemployment rate in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown
- Declining percentage of population living in consistent poverty
- 'Housing for All 2021' plan committed to eradicating homelessness by 2030

Weaknesses and Threats

- Continuing declines in percentage of people living in smaller towns and villages in the Southern Region
- Lowest tertiary education achievement within counties of Longford, Wexford and Offaly
- Within the programme area, many counties score below average on the Deprivation Index
- Children remain the most vulnerable to poverty age group
- The South-East has the highest at risk of poverty rate
- Rising unemployment rates
- Allied to continued growth in rented accommodation close to half of elderly tenants are spending more than a third of their disposable income on rent
- High number of homeless persons, particularly in Dublin

Soil and Land Use

Strengths and Opportunities

- The most important country in Europe for blanket bog
- Soil quality is good overall with more than half being suitable for agriculture

- Increase in average farm size
- Forest cover is now estimated to be at its highest level in over 350 years
- Diverse geology that is prospective for a wide range of mineral deposits
- Comparably low number of brownfield sites or facilities with contaminated land legacies

Weaknesses and Threats

- Continuing disturbance of degraded peatlands by extraction and agriculture
- Many peatland soils lack protection
- Only a small portion of the raised bog and blanket peatlands resource are suitable for conservation as natural peatlands
- Increasing pressure on soil, particularly from man-made pressures
- Downward trend in total agricultural land use since last Census of Agriculture
- Increase in artificial area has the potential for increased soil sealing
- Soil compaction can lead to increased surface run-off, flooding, erosion and transport of nutrients and agrochemicals to open water
- Scarce availability of specific legislation or policy mechanisms to protect soils

Water

Strengths and Opportunities

- An abundant supply of fresh water, which constitutes a key resource in economic, amenity and aesthetic terms
- Measures to address wastewater discharges are being implemented through Irish Water's Capital Investment Plan 2020 - 2024
- Wastewater discharges must now be authorised by the Environmental Protection Agency
- Nitrates Derogation evaluated using The Agricultural Catchment Programme
- Measures to improve overall water quality and achieve 'good' ecological status in water bodies are being implemented through River Basin Management Plan 2022-2027
- The levels of seriously polluted river water have fallen
- Most of surveyed bathing water sites had good water quality or sufficient water quality
- Most of groundwater bodies and coastal waters are of satisfactory quality
- Increase in proportion of watercourse samples showing low nitrate levels

Weaknesses and Threats

- Deteriorating water quality has been caused by municipal wastewater treatment plants and diffuse agricultural sources
- Increase in number of slightly and moderately polluted rivers, as nearly half of rivers remain in unsatisfactory quality
- Nearly half of rivers are in unsatisfactory quality
- Increase in the proportion of watercourses with higher nitrate levels

Air Quality

Strengths and Opportunities

- Monitoring of key pollutants in 2018 shows that Ireland continues to meet the European Union air quality standards for most pollutants

- There has been an overall reduction in emissions between 1990 and 2018
- Emissions of sulphur dioxide continue to decrease

Weaknesses and Threats

- Localised air quality issues associated with nitrogen dioxide and particulates
- Areas of Dublin city and its suburbs where the limit for nitrogen emissions have been significantly exceeded
- Higher than average methane and nitrogen per capita emissions when compared to other European Union member states
- Wood and peat burning is a significant contributor to particulate emissions
- Poor performance with progress towards the 2010 targets set by National Emissions Ceilings Directive
- Increasing ammonia emissions from agriculture and non-compliance with the National Emission Ceilings Directive emission target
- Nitrogen oxide and non-methane volatile organic compound emissions non-compliance with the National Emission Ceilings Directive emission targets

Climate Change

Strengths and Opportunities

- Longer agricultural growing season, which allows for increased crop yield productivity
- Decreasing total greenhouse gas emissions
- Ireland committed to halving its greenhouse gas emission by 2030, the target is currently expected to be achieved
- Reduction in energy related carbon dioxide emissions
- Compliance with the European Union 2020 renewable energy share in transport binding target

Weaknesses and Threats

- Increasing threat of climate change impacts
- Burning of fossil fuels accounts for a large share of greenhouse gas emissions
- Non-compliance with the European Union 2020 overall renewable energy share in final consumption of energy target

Material Assets

Strengths and Opportunities

- Ireland has significant natural resources such as water, carbon rich soils and high quality grassland. Wind makes up the largest natural resources harnessed for renewable energy generation.
- Significant mineral deposits which are an important component of the economy
- Increase in municipal waste exported for recycling recovery
- Overall packaging recycling rate is exceeding the current Packaging Directive recycling target
- Wind is the largest source of renewable energy
- Improved energy security through an increase in domestic gas production

Weaknesses and Threats

- Sixth highest level of municipal waste generated per capita in the European Union
- Challenge in meeting the revised Packaging Directive plastic packaging recycling targets for 2025 and 2030
- Heavy reliance on export market, for recycling in particular
- Incompliance with the European Union 2020 renewable energy share in final consumption of energy binding target
- High reliance on fossil fuels for energy supply as oil continues to be the dominant source of energy, comprising just under a half of primary energy supply

Historic Environment

Strengths and Opportunities

- Rich heritage with a large number of monuments recorded under state care
- Two UNESCO World Heritage Sites
- The Built & Archaeological Heritage Climate Change Sectoral Adaption Plan includes actions to build adaptive capacity and reduce vulnerability to climate change
- The Heritage Council of Ireland sets out objectives in advancing national heritage priorities

Weaknesses and Threats

- Vulnerability of built and archaeological heritage to impacts of climate change
- Decline in archaeological monuments in the countryside and degradation of field monuments
- Threat of man-made pressures on Irish Archaeology
- Public consultation undertaken as part of the new national heritage plan identified concerns over the state of the built heritage

Landscape

Strengths and Opportunities

- There are six National Parks designated and recognised as nationally important landscapes, three of which are within the programme area
- The National Landscape Strategy was published in 2015 ongoing to 2025 which will be used to ensure compliance with the European Landscape Convention
- Increase in forestry land cover since 1990

Weaknesses and Threats

- Vulnerability of Ireland's tourist economy to urbanisation and landscape fragmentation, as a result of natural scenery loss
- Difficulty planning important strategic infrastructure as National Landscape Character maps have not been implemented yet

Natural Capital

Strengths and Opportunities

- Preliminary map of Green Infrastructure assets throughout Ireland has been created, including designated nature conservation sites, watercourses, landcover classes and recreational assets

- Number of studies carried out to identify the value of natural assets
- The marine environment is essential to the bio-economy, transport, tourism and recreational sector
- Natural assets, including landscape and cultural heritage, are a significant draw for tourists

Weaknesses and Threats

- Difficulty accounting for non-market values for human health, well-being and society
- Inter-relationship between sustainability topics, as worsening of status or quality of a sustainability topic has the potential to negatively influence other sustainability topics

4 HOW HAS THE REGIONAL PROGRAMME BEEN ASSESSED?

The Regional Programme has been assessed against a number of Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives designed to cover the broad range of environmental issues facing the programme area:

- **Ecology and Nature Conservation** – Protect, enhance and manage biodiversity assets and ecosystems
- **Health and Quality of Life** – Improve health and quality of life
- **Population and Socio-economic Factors** – Support the growth of business and enterprise and enhance life opportunities
- **Soil and Land Use** – Protect and enhance soil quality and encourage sustainable land use
- **Water** – Protect, enhance and manage water resources and flood risk
- **Air Quality** – Reduce air pollution and ensure continued improvements to air quality
- **Climate Change** – Minimise contribution to climate change and adapt to its predicted effects
- **Material Assets** – Safeguard natural resources and increase recycling rates
- **Historic Environment** – Protect, enhance and manage archaeological and cultural heritage
- **Landscape** - Protect, enhance and manage the character and quality of the landscape
- **Natural Capital** – Encourage multifunctionality of greenspace and facilitate access and connection to the natural environment

These objectives are used within high level and detailed assessment matrices to ascertain the magnitude of likely impacts, the sensitivity or value of the receiving environment (including people and wildlife) and the resultant significance of effects of the Policy Objectives of the Regional Programme.

Assessments of alternatives to the Regional Programme have been undertaken, along with an assessment of likely cumulative effects of the Regional Programme itself and accounting for likely in-combination effects with other plans and programmes. Opportunities for improvement and measures to address possible effects have also been identified.

5 WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

With European funded programmes such as the Regional Programme, constraints on what practical alternatives exist are often restricted by the need to comply with pre-determined criteria set at a European level. This can have the effect of limiting the alternatives that are available to the programme makers.

Three strategic alternatives have been assessed against the Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives:

- **Alternative 1** – The Programme as currently proposed
- **Alternative 2** – Alternative actions
- **Alternative 3** – Reallocation of resources

Alternative 1 performs the best in terms of assessment against the Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives. It performs positively against population related objectives of socio-economics and health and quality of life. This may have indirect benefits on local economies by encouraging further investment and property development within regenerated areas. Nevertheless there is an potential for adverse impacts on material assets and natural capital, as projects funding town centre regeneration and the retrofitting of homes can lead to a high consumption of raw materials and produce large amounts of waste. Uncertain effects are anticipated for ecology and nature conservation, water, historic environment and landscape.

Alternative 2 performs similarly, representing only a slight shift in the Alternative 1 programme objectives. It also maintains the same level of investment of European Regional Development Fund resources under each of the programme objectives. Comparably to Alternative 1, beneficial effects are anticipated against population related objectives of socio-economics and health and quality of life. The key difference is that it proposes an alternative set of actions under Specific Objective 2.1. The focus on promoting energy efficiency and reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the programme area remains. However, the programme would support actions to retrofit and improve the energy efficiency of public sector buildings rather than residential homes. This would have fewer beneficial effects than Alternative 1 in terms of health and quality of life as it would not target those at risk of energy poverty within the programme area. Due to larger scale renovations and retrofitting there is increased potential for negative impacts on material assets, historic environment, landscape and natural capital.

Alternative 3 also performs similarly, representing no shift in the respective Alternative 1 programme objectives. The difference being it proposes a reallocation of resources, through reduction of funding going towards actions supporting sustainable and integrated urban development under Policy Objective 5, and increasing the allocation to actions under Policy Objective 1. Beneficial effects are anticipated for health and quality of life through the retrofitting and energy improvements to residential homes, and increased funding allocation for PO1. Even though the focus on town centre regeneration in the programme area remains, there would be fewer beneficial effects on the quality of life of the local population, as less funding would be provided to town centre regeneration. There is potential for adverse effects on material assets and natural capital due to likely high consumption of raw materials and production of waste as a result of projects funding retrofitting of homes and town centre regeneration.

Therefore, the Policy Objectives included in the Alternative 1 for the Regional Programme is presented for public consultation.

6 WHAT ARE THE LIKELY ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF THE REGIONAL PROGRAMME?

As a predominantly community focused programme, all the Regional Programme objectives are found to have a generally beneficial effects on the population focused Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives of health and quality of life and socio-economic.

Policy Objective 1 is likely to have a strong beneficial effect on population and socio–economics and some beneficial effects on quality of life. The majority of the actions referenced under PO1 relate primarily to research, innovation and support for start-ups, scaling companies support for small and medium size enterprises and job creation. There would be no, or minimal small-scale new buildings/infrastructure associated with the funded projects. Neutral effects are predicted on the environmental focused Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives.

Policy Objective 2 is anticipated to have the potential for moderate/minor beneficial effects on climate change, as this would facilitate the move away from fossil fuel in residential homes. It will also have major/moderate effects on health and quality of life and some moderate/minor beneficial effects on population and socio-economics. Alternatively, minor adverse effects are anticipated on material assets, whilst neutral effects are predicted on all other environmental focused objectives.

Policy Objective 5 has the potential for moderate beneficial effects on health and quality of life as town centre regeneration would make a positive contribution to the wellbeing and mental health of residents through having a cleaner, safer and more aesthetically pleasing urban area. In relation to this, Moderate/minor beneficial effects are also anticipated on landscape. Moderate beneficial effects are also anticipated for population and socio-economics as investment in the public realm would likely increase foot traffic, tourism and further development.

A minor beneficial effect is predicted on historic environment, as the setting of heritage assets will be enhanced where construction and regeneration are handled sensibly. Furthermore, minor/negligible beneficial effects are anticipated on soils and land use, as RSO5.1 encourages the use of previously developed land and vacant or derelict premises. Air quality and climate change are not anticipated to be affected by this PO and therefore effects are assessed to be neutral.

In addition, Policy Objective 5 has the potential for minor adverse impacts on ecology and nature conservation, due to potential for localised disturbance of protected sites, flora, fauna and habitats subject to the work's location. Even so, local planning controls and associated regulations relating to protected species and sites provide means of assessing impacts on ecology, and hence it is unlikely that there would be significant negative effects on ecology and nature conservation.

The programme does not directly encourage multifunctionality of greenspace to enhance human health and quality of life, water, soil, air quality, climate regulation and biodiversity. Due to this and the minor adverse effects anticipated on ecology and nature conservation, water and material assets, minor adverse effects are therefore also anticipated for natural capital.

Depending on the extent of works required to be undertaken and their location, there is potential for minor adverse impacts on ecology and nature conservation, water, material assets and by extension natural capital. Nevertheless such works will be subject to controls through the project

design, planning process and relevant regulations to ensure that there would be no significant negative effects at the programme level.

Overall the Regional Programme is considered to have significant beneficial effects on the health and quality of life and socio-economic objectives and beneficial effects on soil and land use, historic environment, landscape and climate change. No significant adverse effects are predicted.

Cumulative Effects with Other Plans and Programmes

While significant adverse effects primarily associated with other programmes cannot be discounted, the Regional Programme is considered to support the identified Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives and therefore it is not anticipated to lead to significant adverse effects either singularly or in combination with other plans and programmes.

Transboundary Effects

The Regional Programme covers the Southern, Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly boundary within Ireland and therefore projects that fall outside of this boundary will not be funded under this Programme. Although this is the case, the effects of the Regional Programme are not strictly limited to its administrative boundary. There is a shared land border with other Regions and between Ireland and Northern Ireland and therefore by its nature, the effects of the Regional Programme are transboundary.

However no significant adverse transboundary effects are anticipated because the few potentially adverse effects predicted were due to localised small scale impacts of projects funded under the Regional Programme which are no more than minor adverse significance.

7 WHAT ARE THE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MITIGATION OR ENHANCEMENTS?

7.1 Minimising Adverse Effects

No significant adverse effects are identified and therefore there is no requirement for mitigation. Nevertheless the following measures are identified in order to reduce the potential for adverse, non-significant, effects in respect of Policy Objective 2 and Policy Objective 5:

Ecology and Nature Conservation

- Where development/regeneration takes place, planners and developers must ensure rigorous and sensible site selection processes are carried out to minimise any potentially adverse effects. Construction Environmental Management Plans should be produced to help ensure impacts on humans and the environment are minimised; and
- Where potential for disturbance/displacement effects have been identified, measures such as buffer zones at the edge of developments, timing works to avoid sensitive times (such as bird breeding season, or fish migration periods), noise mitigation, visual screening (natural and artificial) and reducing access to sensitive habitats should be incorporated into scheme designs to avoid such effects; and
- Any removal of vegetation such as hedges should be preceded by an ecological survey. Where invasive species are present, equipment should be cleaned to help prevent these species from spreading.

Water

- For construction works best practice construction methods should be followed to ensure that land, water and air pollution does not occur, or is reduced to minimal levels. Town centre regeneration projects should retain existing buildings where possible and prevent loss of permeable surfaces.
- Construction Environmental Management Plans should be produced to help ensure impacts on humans and the environment are minimised.

Material Assets

- Operators must limit waste generation related construction and demolition in accordance with the European Union Construction and Demolition Waste Management Protocol, take into account best available techniques, use selective demolition to enable removal and safe handling of hazardous substances, as well as facilitate reuse and recycling; and
- Retrofitting materials should be obtained from sustainable sources and constructed in line with best practice from the model of a circular economy. Projects resulting from the programme should align with the Whole of Government Circular Economy Strategy 2022-2023.

Natural Capital

- Town centre regeneration should include provision of multifunctional greenspaces including walking and cycling routes and other opportunities for outdoor recreation such as green gyms, play areas or allotments to enhance health and wellbeing.

Accounting for the mitigation measures discussed above, the Regional Programme is not anticipated to have any significant adverse residual effects on the identified Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives.

7.2 Environmental Enhancements

The following potential enhancement measures are recommended. These are intended to improve the overall performance of the Regional Programme with a focus on the environment based objectives. The adoption of these recommendations is not a mandatory part of the Strategic Environmental Assessment process and hence it is for Southern Regional Assembly as the plan-making body to decide on the extent to which they should form part of the final programme.

The Inclusion of Green and Blue Infrastructure

There is opportunity to direct funding towards environmental improvements, including simple measures such as erection of bird and bat boxes and other ecological measures, to the more ambitious such as creation of new green space that includes vital habitats, for instance pocket parks and urban wildlife gardens. Sustainable urban drainage systems could be considered in programmes funded under the Regional Programme.

Climate Adaption Opportunities

Environmental enhancement measures should be encouraged for all town centre regeneration projects, particularly opportunities to help adaptation to climate change impacts such as multifunctional green spaces, sustainable urban drainage systems and street trees. Walking and cycling should be facilitated as part of regeneration proposals, to reduce GHG emissions from transport.

Town Centre Regeneration and Energy Retrofits– Waste and Circular Economy

Construction and renovation activities that are funded through the Regional Programme should support circularity, assessing the disassembly or adaptability of materials, and where possible, projects should be designed to be more resource efficient, adaptable, flexible and dismantlable to enable reuse and recycling.

8 HOW WILL EFFECTS BE MONITORED?

Article 10 of the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive requires the Southern Regional Assembly, as the Managing Authority, to monitor significant environmental effects of implementing the Regional Programme. Monitoring should commence as soon as the Regional Programme is adopted, with annual reporting carried out over its lifespan.

As noted in Section 6, no significant adverse residual environmental effects are anticipated although it is noted that there are some uncertainties arising from the lack of project details that will be funded through the Regional Programme. Therefore indicators that the Southern Regional Assembly or other managing authorities could consider, to monitor the environmental impact and achievement of the Regional Programme are summarised below.

- Monitoring the level of reduced energy demand in retrofitted housing;
- Monitoring the number of town centre regeneration projects and their environmental outcomes;
- Monitor the number of projects under Policy Objective 5 that include green and blue infrastructure;
- Monitoring the number of Small & Medium Sized Enterprises supported in the environmental services sector; and
- Monitoring the number of research projects funded with an environmental sustainability focus.

In addition to this, a Programme Monitoring Committee will be set up and meet at least once yearly to examine and make recommendations on all issues affecting programme implementation, progress in achieving milestones and targets and measures taken to address issues.

The selection methodology and evaluation criteria for the selection of operations will be approved by the Programme Monitoring Committee. In selecting projects, consideration will be given to potential environmental effects of the proposed projects. The selection of projects will be made based on criteria that consider the most environmentally sustainable solutions. These criteria shall be adapted to the nature of the intervention and applied as widely as possible across the specific objectives.

9 WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT?

The Environmental Report, including this Non-technical Summary is being presented for public and statutory consultation for a period of six weeks commencing 3rd August 2022, all documents can be found at the following web address: <http://www.southernassembly.ie/eu-programmes/sem2127>

The Environmental Report has been issued to the relevant Consultation Bodies in Ireland and made available to other interested parties to facilitate determination of the likely effect of the Southern, Eastern and Midland Regional Programme, as currently drafted, on the environment.

Once the Regional Programme has been adopted, a Strategic Environmental Assessment Statement will be produced to provide information on how the Environmental Report and consultees' opinions were taken into account in deciding the final form of the Regional Programme.