



Strategic Spatial Planning and the Framework for Co- operation: Strengthening Alignment on the Island of Ireland

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Cover image: Carlingford Lough, between County Down (NI) and County Louth (IE), site of the future Narrow Water Bridge. Photograph by Ballygally View Images via Getty Images.

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About this research

This research was commissioned by the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) to fulfil the Research Strategy 2022-2024's aim to investigate cross-border planning issues. It is also a result of the RTPI Northern Ireland Policy and Research Forum members' desire to fund research into cross-border strategic planning during the 2025-2026 Forum term.

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Abbreviations

BIC	British-Irish Council
BIIGC	British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference
CDPs	City/County Development Plans
DBEC	Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor
Dfi	Department for Infrastructure
DHLGH	Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
DHPCLG	Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government
DoELG	Department of the Environment and Local Government
DoECLG	Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government
DRD	Department for Regional Development
EBR	East Border Region Ltd.
ESDP	European Spatial Development Perspective
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
EU	European Union
ICBAN	Irish Central Border Area Network
ICLRD	International Centre for Local and Regional Development
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IPI	Irish Planning Institute
ITI	InterTradeIreland
IVI	Innovation Value Institute
LDPs	Local Development Plans
LPP	Local Policies Plan
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NDP	National Development Plan
NI	Northern Ireland
NPF	National Planning Framework
NSMC	North South Ministerial Council
NSO	National Strategic Outcome
NSS	National Spatial Strategy
NWCR	North West City Region

NWRCBG	North West Region Cross Border Group
NWRDG	North West Regional Development Group
NWSGP	North West Strategic Growth Partnership
OPR	Office of the Planning Regulator
PPS	Planning Policy Statement
PS	Place Strategy
RDS	Regional Development Strategy
RG	Regional Guidance
RPA	Review of Public Administration
RPGs	Regional Planning Guidelines
RRDF	Rural Regeneration Development Fund
RSES	Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy
RTPI	Royal Town Planning Institute
RTS	Regional Transportation Strategy
SEA	Strategic Environmental Assessment
SICAG	Settlement Information Classification and Analysis Group
SLNCR	Sligo, Leitrim, Northern Counties Railway
SPG	Strategy Planning Guidance
SPPS	Strategic Planning Policy Statement
TOD	Transport Oriented Development
URDF	Urban Regeneration Development Fund
UK	United Kingdom
UU	Ulster University

Executive summary

This report examines the evolution, alignment, and future direction of strategic spatial planning on the island of Ireland. In particular, it evaluates the role and continued relevance of the Framework for Co-operation: Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (2013).

Drawing on extensive policy analysis, a literature review, interviews with senior planners and policymakers, an online questionnaire, and sector-wide engagement through the RTPI Northern Ireland Annual Planning Conference 2025, the research provides the most comprehensive assessment to date of cross-border spatial planning practice and strategic alignment between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Strategic spatial planning on the island of Ireland

Over the past 25 years, strategic spatial planning has become an increasingly important mechanism for guiding sustainable development across the island. The publication of Northern Ireland's Regional Development Strategy 2025 (RDS, 2001) and the Republic of Ireland's National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 (NSS, 2002) marked the first formal expressions of spatial planning at whole-jurisdiction scale. The European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) strongly influenced both strategies, particularly with its emphasis on polycentric development, territorial cohesion, functional interdependencies, and balanced regional growth.

Despite being developed independently and on different statutory bases, the RDS and NSS shared many conceptual foundations. These include the identification of gateways, hubs, and economic corridors, while recognising the importance of cross-border linkages. The strategies formed the basis for a more co-ordinated approach to infrastructure investment, environmental management, and urban–rural development across the island.

However, political instability, economic shocks, institutional restructuring, and Brexit have since transformed the policy landscape. Whilst the Republic of Ireland replaced the NSS with a more robust, legislatively supported National Planning Framework (NPF) in 2018, revised again in 2025, Northern Ireland continues to rely on the RDS 2035, updated in 2012, and now over a decade old. This temporal gap has created increasing risk of strategic divergence.

The Framework for Co-operation: Spatial strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (2013) - purpose and legacy

The two jurisdictions jointly published the Framework for Co-operation in 2013 to improve coordination, reduce back-to-back planning inefficiencies, and support collaboration in four priority areas:

1. Enhancing competitiveness,
2. Competitive places,
3. Environmental quality, and
4. Spatial analysis.

It was intentionally non-statutory to allow flexibility and place-sensitive application. While the Framework provided a legitimising rationale for cross-border collaboration, particularly for local authorities, it has not become a consistently used policy instrument. Awareness has declined, especially among newer professionals.

Nevertheless, survey respondents and interviewees consistently emphasised the Framework for Co-operation's continued value as a reference point, a facilitator of co-operation, and a symbolic endorsement of all-island collaboration. This is the case even if its operational impact has diminished over time.

Stakeholder perspectives on cross-border spatial planning

Across local, regional, and central government stakeholders, the research identifies strong support for cross-border collaboration. Key benefits include:

- Enhanced policy learning and transfer
- Strengthened community and social cohesion
- Shared environmental management
- Improved competitiveness and innovation and
- More efficient infrastructure planning, particularly transport, energy, and green/blue infrastructure.

Local authorities emerged as the most active and effective scale for collaboration, exemplified by the North West Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP) and Dublin–Belfast Economic Corridor (DBEC) partnerships.

Significant structural and political barriers persist despite strong cultural and professional goodwill, including different legislative and policy frameworks, data incompatibility, funding and resource limitations, political sensitivities, and limited cross-jurisdictional understanding among professionals. Brexit has intensified administrative complexity and uncertainty, but it has also motivated renewed commitment to maintain co-operation where possible.

Alignment and divergence between the RDS 2035 and revised NPF

This report provides the first detailed comparison of the RDS 2035 and the revised NPF (2025).

Stakeholders perceive “some alignment” across the two spatial strategies but acknowledge that real alignment is neither well understood nor systematically monitored. The findings from the in-depth policy review reveal a notable policy divergence as the revised NPF has advanced more contemporary, climate-aligned and well-being-focused approaches, while Northern Ireland’s

RDS 2035 reflects a more traditional, infrastructure-led paradigm. We explored three key policy domains:

- **Transport:** Both strategies emphasise strategic transport assets as drivers of competitiveness and integration. But the revised NPF places transport within a wider agenda of climate action, compact growth and placemaking, whereas the RDS 2035 maintains a more conventional focus on network accessibility.
- **Health, well-being and quality of life:** While both recognise the link between spatial planning and health outcomes, the revised NPF has taken a more progressive, post-pandemic stance. It embeds well-being, liveability, access to nature and quality design at the centre of spatial policy.
- **Economic development:** Both frameworks continue to align around the role of cities, connectivity and skills. However, the revised NPF more explicitly advances a climate-responsive, innovation-led economic model, including the circular and marine economies.

The growing temporal gap between the two strategies risks undermining cross-border policy coherence.

Conclusions

This research demonstrates that while the island of Ireland has developed strong foundations for cross-border strategic spatial planning, significant challenges and growing policy divergence threaten future cohesion.

The RDS 2035 and revised NPF share many principles but differ substantially in currency, legislative underpinning, investment support, and scope. The Framework for Co-operation remains conceptually valuable but requires renewal to remain operationally relevant.

Achieving coherent spatial planning across the island in the future will depend on political commitment to collaboration, updated strategies, harmonised

datasets, strengthened professional capacity, and a reinvigorated Framework for Co-operation that moves beyond aspirational intent to actionable, collaborative practice.

This report provides a clear roadmap for how this can be achieved. It highlights the need for renewed investment in cross-border governance, shared evidence, and strategic alignment to address the island's shared challenges and opportunities in the decades ahead.

Recommendations: Future directions for cross-border spatial planning

Update the RDS 2035: There is broad agreement that Northern Ireland urgently requires an updated spatial strategy to maintain alignment with the revised NPF and respond to contemporary issues such as climate change, infrastructure deficits, energy transition, and demographic change.

Renew and strengthen the Framework for Co-operation: Stakeholders support a refreshed Framework for Co-operation that is strategically ambitious, politically endorsed, underpinned by a shared evidence base, more operational and implementation-focused, better communicated and embedded across public bodies.

Establish a shared evidence base: Data harmonisation is essential for effective cross-border planning, monitoring, and decision-making, particularly around transport, climate, biodiversity, and housing.

Move from co-operation to collaboration: Given the scale of shared challenges (for example, climate emergency, biodiversity loss, migration, housing needs) stakeholders expressed that long-term collaboration is necessary.

Build professional capacity: Soft skills such as negotiation, relationship-building, and communication are increasingly important. Training and Continuing Professional Development opportunities should be island-wide, sector-wide, and multi-agency.

Consider an all-island spatial strategy: most interviewees believe an all-island strategy would bring substantial benefits, despite its political challenges.

1. Introduction

The genesis of strategic spatial planning policy on the island of Ireland lay in the publication in 2001 of [Shaping our Future: Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025 \(RDS\)](#) by the then Department for Regional Development (DRD)¹, and the publication in 2002 of the [National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 \(NSS\)](#) for Ireland by the Department of the Environment and Local Government (DoELG).² Both strategies were underpinned by the principles of polycentricity, parity of access, territorial governance and functional inter-dependencies, as detailed in the 1999 [European Spatial Development Perspective \(ESDP\)](#).³

The island of Ireland was experiencing an unprecedented phase of growth, development and economic opportunity at that time, particularly in the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, the strategies offered both governments the opportunity to outline their vision for stronger regional economic growth and balanced development. By adopting a 'soft' approach and employing fuzzy boundaries, both strategies aimed to achieve a better balance of social, economic and physical development across their respective jurisdictions, supported by more effective spatial planning. This included through:

- Their strategic objectives, including enhancing competitiveness in the all-island economy and strengthening the strategic transport network across the island of Ireland,
- The identification of gateways, hubs and economic corridors (some jointly identified in both strategies), and
- Building on existing areas of co-operation and functionality.

Although they were not formally integrated, the RDS and NSS each acknowledged the importance of the other and were, in effect, designed to become more embedded in policy making on both sides of the border. In doing so, this recognised that each jurisdiction has mutually interdependent characteristics and settlements.

InterTradeIreland (ITI) commissioned the ICLRD to research the mutual areas of concern and opportunity presented by both spatial strategies five years on from their initial publication, together with their shared commitment to the advancement of the ESDP principles.

The research concluded that, given the pace of change internationally, the rate of economic and population growth on the island of Ireland, and the dividends from the peace process, much more could be done to take forward the innovative aspects of both spatial strategies within a joint framework for collaboration.⁴

Specifically, the research called for the development of a collaborative framework that would give expression to “the modalities of obtaining maximum mutual benefit from implementing the two spatial strategies through co-operation and stakeholder engagement on an all-island and cross-border basis”. In addition, the framework should “help to shape relevant planning policies and guidelines in such a way that they become part of the process of achieving greater alignment of the spatial strategies and consistency in promoting all-island economic development.”⁵

The [Framework for Co-operation](#) – Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland was published in June 2013⁶ - seven years after first being mooted. This paved the way for nurturing attempts to foster and further enhance appropriate cross-border and all-island spatial governance arrangements and relationships across planning and development cultures.

The document was jointly published by the [then] Department for Regional Development (DRD) in Northern Ireland and the [then] Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (DoECLG) in Ireland. It discusses the potential for co-operation in strategic spatial planning, and opportunities for greater policy co-ordination and cross-border working at different levels within the public sector, for mutual benefit. It highlights four priority areas for enhanced co-operation:

1. Enhancing competitiveness
2. Competitive places
3. Environmental quality, and
4. Spatial analysis.

This was a product shaped by the wider strategic EU ambition to create territories without internal frontiers amongst its member states. Responding to the potential influence of the Framework for Co-operation on future spatial strategies and planning practice, Peel and Lloyd viewed it as an expression of “spatial public diplomacy” that created “an enabling environment for joint spatial planning”.⁷

However, the macro landscape into which the Framework for Co-operation was born was anything but steady – experiencing the tailwinds of the 2008 global financial crisis and forced austerity policies, the tensions and collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and Brexit. In addition to these challenges, the micro landscape was also in a state of flux. The wider legislative context of both jurisdictions was evolving and the policy landscape, particularly at local government level, changed quite significantly since the publication of the Framework for Co-operation in 2013.

Distinct pieces of legislation, enacted in 2014, generated local government reform in both jurisdictions and, for the first time in decades, produced a degree of symmetry to local public administration on either side of the border. In particular, spatial planning functions were transferred to local councils in Northern Ireland. This was similar to what already operated in the Republic of Ireland, creating opportunities for local collaboration and greater synergies. Furthermore, other place-shaping enterprises, such as community planning in Northern Ireland and local economic and community planning in the Republic of Ireland, emerged and continue to influence spatial development and change.⁸

There has, however, also been a growing risk of policy divergence. In addition to Brexit, the spatial strategies of both jurisdictions are no longer in step with each other. In Northern Ireland, the [Regional Development Strategy \(RDS\)](#)

[2035](#) - Building a Better Future was published as a revised version in 2012.⁹ Meanwhile, in the Republic of Ireland, the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) was largely shelved by 2013, with the Irish Government noting its limited success and that it was “no longer fit for purpose”.

An Expert Review Group was established to consider the need for a new strategy which would address Ireland’s “new and altered realities”. In 2018, following a detailed consultation process that included a cross-border workshop organised by ICLRD, a new [National Planning Framework](#) (NPF)¹⁰ for Ireland was published. Following a five-year review that commenced in 2023, a second iteration, the National Planning Framework [First Revision](#), was published in April 2025.¹¹

Furthermore, as part of the original NPF/Ireland 2040 process, the Republic of Ireland has also designed and adopted a fresh set of regional spatial and economic strategies (RSEs) that are prepared at the level of the regional assemblyⁱ (see Figure 1.1). These strategies guide subregional priorities and growth. In Northern Ireland, more recent strategic policy is outlined in the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS).

The purpose and scope of this research

The spatial strategies of both jurisdictions were designed to achieve a better balance of social, economic, physical development and population growth between and across regions. However, they were initially on a different statutory footing. The Framework for Co-operation was published to ensure that both

ⁱ Following an amendment to the Local Government Act 1991 by the Local Government Reform Act 2014, the Regional Authorities were abolished and replaced by three Regional Assemblies which came into effect on 1 January 2015. The three regional assemblies are: Northern and Western Regional Assembly (9 councils), Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (12 councils) and Southern Regional Assembly (10 councils).

jurisdictions can work together on critical issues like infrastructure development, environmental protection, and regional planning to achieve a more cohesive, sustainable future for the island as a whole.

Significant challenges remain, however. Political will, differing regulations, and the long-term implications of Brexit are particularly significant. In this context, it is opportune to review the current spatial strategies and revisit the significance of the Framework for Co-operation. To what extent the RDS 2035 and the recently revised NPF are aligned, and what impact the Framework for Co-operation has had on planning policy and the planning community, are particularly significant questions. We will also consider possible recommendations for enhancing the Framework for Co-operation and, in turn, cross-border collaboration that delivers mutual benefits to all parts of the island.



Figure 1.1 Map showing the main regions on the island of Ireland
(Source: [Northern and Western Regional Assembly](#))

Research aim and objectives

The core research aims of this study are: (1) to assess the degree of alignment and divergence between the current spatial strategies of the island of Ireland (the RDS 2035 and the newly revised NPF), and (2) to critically examine the impact the Framework for Co-operation has had on strategic spatial planning, policy co-ordination and cross-border working on the island of Ireland.

To achieve its objectives, the research work programme included:

1. Conducting a literature review on cross-border spatial planning and territorial cohesion to conceptualise and position the research project.
2. Critically assessing the degree of alignment – and divergence – between the RDS 2035 (2012) and the recently revised NPF (2025).
3. Critically reviewing how the Framework for Co-operation has been referred to, cited by and operationalised in practice across both Government and cross-border agencies.
4. Considering the extent to which consultation responses and policy papers since 2013 refer to, are aligned with, and/or are influenced by the Framework for Co-operation in fostering collaborative working and policy alignment.
5. Ascertaining stakeholder perspectives on the impact and currency of the Framework for Co-operation over time.
6. Producing recommendations to enhance the enabling environment for joint spatial planning and cross-border collaboration that delivers mutual benefits to all parts of the island.

Research methods

This research employed a mixed-methods approach which combined both qualitative and quantitative data to examine policy, meeting records, government papers, consultation responses and stakeholder perspectives.

The evidence gathering and analysis work of the project was focussed around six key stages, which is summarised in Table 1.

Stage	Coverage in main report	Overview and link to research objectives
1. Desk-based literature review	Section 2	A desk-based literature review was conducted. It explored the themes of cross-border spatial planning and territorial cohesion to conceptualise and position the research project within contemporary research. (Objective 1).
2. Policy analysis	Section 3	An in-depth policy analysis of the RDS 2035 and the revised NPF was undertaken to assess the degree of alignment and divergence between the spatial strategies across a number of key priority areas. (Objective 2).
3. Questionnaire	Section 4 and 5	<p>A questionnaire was disseminated (July - September 2025) to all local planning authorities in Northern Ireland and the Irish border region. These are: Donegal County Council, Leitrim County Council, Sligo County Council, Cavan County Council, Monaghan County Council, Louth County Council.</p> <p>The questionnaire was also sent to cross-border networks, Regional Assemblies in Ireland and Government Departments in Northern Ireland and Ireland.</p> <p>Open-ended questions were used to gather detailed participant responses. These focused on understanding experiences and perspectives (as opposed to statistical data) on the</p>

		<p>impact and currency of the Framework for Co-operation over time.</p> <p>JISC Online Survey was used to create and disseminate the questionnaire and to aid the analysis of the responses. Despite repeated reminders only 11 responses to the survey were received. However, a range of perspectives were achieved with at least one response from each of the targeted stakeholder groups outlined above. (Objectives 3, 4, 5)</p>
4. Interviews	Section 4 and 5	<p>Ten interviews were undertaken with current, and previous, chief planners and regional policymakers, as well as North-South Bodies.</p> <p>Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of those involved in strategic and cross-border spatial planning and policy arenas.</p> <p>The interviews were guided by a set of pre-determined questions on cross-border planning issues, challenges, and successes.</p> <p>Interviews were transcribed and anonymised using numeric identifiers (e.g. Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, etc.). (Objectives 3, 4, 5)</p>
5. Conference proceedings	Section 4 and 5	<p>Interim findings were presented at the RTPI Northern Ireland Annual Planning</p>

		<p>Conference on 8 September 2025 in Belfast.</p> <p>As part of the presentation, over 100 conference delegates participated in an online survey via Mentimeter (see Figure 1.2 below). (Objective 5)</p>
6. Conclusions and recommendations	Section 6	<p>The various components of the research were drawn together to produce robust recommendations to enhance the enabling environment for joint spatial planning and cross-border collaboration that delivers mutual benefits to all parts of the island (Objective 6).</p>

Table 1 Research design



Figure 1.2 Delegate participating in the Mentimeter survey during the ICLRD presentation at the RTPI NI Annual Conference

(Source: [RTPI Northern Ireland 2025 Annual Conference](#))

2. Cross-border spatial planning: A literature review

Spatial planning in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland has evolved along parallel and occasionally overlapping paths, shaped significantly by European spatial planning concepts and EU environmental law.¹²

Morphet claims “Northern Ireland was the first part of the UK to develop a systematic approach to spatial planning in Shaping Our Future (DRD 2001)”.¹³ She argued that such strategic planning emerged alongside the new opportunities provided by the EU Peace and Reconciliation Funds. However, properly devolved, local land-use spatial planning arrived much later to Northern Ireland than in Ireland and other parts of the UK. Nevertheless, recent decades have witnessed efforts to foster cross-border co-operation and changes to both planning systems, offering a chance to overcome institutional and competency challenges.

The European Spatial Development Perspective

The European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) was seminal in providing an important conceptual and political impetus for the development of Northern Ireland’s Regional Development Strategy (RDS) (both versions – 2001 and 2012) and Ireland’s National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 (NSS),^{14,15,16,17,18} with Murray arguing that the ESDP created the opportunity “to imagine possibilities which transcend the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland”.¹⁹

By promoting principles such as balanced territorial development, polycentric urban systems, and improving spatial cohesion across Europe, the ESDP provided an ideal backdrop for nurturing strategic spatial planning as an integrative policy domain, rather than a purely technical exercise, on both sides of the Irish border. The ESDP influenced how national and regional governments articulated long-term spatial visions, encouraging alignment between economic competitiveness, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability. In this way, the ESDP functioned not only as a guiding framework

but also as a political catalyst for embedding spatial planning more firmly within broader governance and policy-making processes. This was timely for the island of Ireland, particularly for Northern Ireland, with the signing of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (hereafter referred to as ‘the Agreement’), following decades of protracted conflict, known as ‘the Troubles’.

Although the ESDP has been superseded by the Territorial Agendas (2007, 2020 and 2030), its core ambitions remain: improved territorial governance, importance of territorial cohesion, better co-ordination between EU, national, and regional levels, and cross-border planning as a core mechanism for achieving balanced development and reducing regional disparities. The ESDP’s legacy and current EU Territorial Agenda [2030: A future for all places](#) (2021) continue to shape the Republic of Ireland’s spatial governance and policy debates.

In addition, shared EU directives on the environment, water management, and the protection of habitats and species help harmonise planning practices and environmental standards across the island of Ireland. EU membership has long served as a key catalyst for cross-border co-operation, with EU Structural Funds, particularly INTERREG and PEACE programmes, providing essential support for peacebuilding, infrastructure investment and regional development initiatives spanning both jurisdictions.²⁰

Pathway to peace and partnerships

The Agreement established a set of institutions (below) designed to underpin sustained cross-border collaboration.^{21,22} Fortunately, the ‘peace process’ coincided with considerable governance restructuring across the UK including the ‘Third Way’ and ‘modernisation’ agendas pursued during the early years of the New Labour government. These initiatives explicitly sought to promote greater equality and democratic participation. As a result, the Blair government (1997-2001) framed the devolution of government in Northern Ireland as part of a broader programme of UK-wide reform, aimed at responding to growing concerns that local authorities were insufficiently responsive to local

communities and lacked a strong focus on performance in meeting local needs.²³ This wider reform agenda also emphasised the delivery of “joined-up government in action”,²⁴ to be achieved through more effective partnership working and greater co-operation.

Through the various strands of the Agreement, this extended to the establishment of new institutions, and relationships, between the UK and Ireland. These were both North-South [Strand 2], with the creation of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) to co-ordinate policy across the island, and East-West [Strand 3], with the establishment of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC) and the British-Irish Council (BIC). Together, these bodies have contributed to the gradual ‘de-bordering’ of the island by facilitating mobility, dismantling hard border infrastructure, and supporting joint implementation bodies such as Waterways Ireland and ITI. Nonetheless, the depth and consistency of this co-operation continue to depend heavily on political will, which remains a decisive factor in how effectively these institutions operate.

From a cross-border/all-island perspective, none of the cross-border bodies established under the Agreement, including the NSMC, have a formal role to play in the design, implementation or monitoring of strategic spatial planning policy. Rather, it is at the level of the BIC’s [Planning and Places](#) Work Sector where the eight member administrations including Ireland and Northern Ireland, have an opportunity to reflect on the many common challenges they each face, albeit the scale may be quite different. This Work Sector is currently led by the Northern Ireland Executive and has a primary focus on two key themes:

- Climate change and the biodiversity emergency: reflecting the reality that the eight administrations all face the urgent challenge of reacting to the climate change and biodiversity emergency with limited resources and within a context of ongoing planning reform.
- Skills and capacity for the public sector planning profession: responding to the reality that attracting and retaining planning staff in the public sector is increasingly a serious challenge.

Also of significance is the Shared Island Initiative, launched in Budget 2021 by the Irish Government, which aims to also enhance co-operation, connection and mutual understanding on the island, with funded programmes focusing on infrastructure, health, economy, environment, and planning issues. The initiative is, in many ways, the out-workings of the Framework for Co-operation in practice; with many of the more strategic programmes funded as key priorities of both administrations in [New Decade, New Approach](#) (2020),²⁵ the Northern Ireland [Our Plan - Doing What Matters Most](#) Programme for Government 2024-2027²⁶, and Ireland's Programme for Government 2025: [Securing Ireland's Future](#).²⁷ These include advancing the A5 Western Transport Corridor, progressing the key projects identified in the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, construction of the Narrow Water Bridge, expanding the campus of UU – Magee (in Derry/Londonderry) and developing a network of cross-border greenways. Such initiatives recognise the need for improved collaboration and alignment of policies in areas such as connectivity, education, economic development and environmental management and, to this end, progress is regularly monitored at NSMC Plenary Meetings roughly twice a year.

Together, the environmental priorities of the BIC's Planning and Places Work Sector and the wide-ranging, yet policy-informed, agenda of the Shared Island Initiative provide an impetus to critically examine the extent to which meaningful co-operation persists, is appropriate and beneficial. They also provide the platform against which the current relevance of the Framework for Co-operation can be considered – and if, 13 years on, an updated version is necessary.

Convergence and co-operation

The 'de-bordering' effects of EU and Single Market membership, alongside the operation of the Common Travel Area and the institutional outworking of the Agreement, produced a notable symmetry across the policy landscape, council structures and competencies on the island of Ireland that previously did not exist.²⁸ This reduced the functional significance of the border by aligning regulatory frameworks and encouraging co-operation between local and regional authorities. As a result, a greater symmetry emerged in 'hard'

governance structures associated with local authorities on either side of the border.

This is reflected in comparable administrative capacities, policy instruments and decision-making competences. The combination of local government reforms in Ireland ([Local Government Reform Act 2014](#)) and Northern Ireland ([Local Government Act, 2014](#)) brought greater uniformity in relation to various planning functions. In particular, the transfer of statutory spatial planning to new local authorities in Northern Ireland, alongside the introduction of community planning powers, and the establishment of new local economic and community plans (LECP) in Ireland, fashioned local authorities on both sides of the border with many shared responsibilities for creating local planning policies and influencing public service delivery.

This devolution of place-shaping powers, incorporating forward planning (known as Local Development Plans), development management (assessing planning applications) and enforcement (addressing breaches of planning control), brings Northern Ireland into alignment with Ireland and the other UK nations. Its positioning, in theory, offers a type of 'localism' that was absent for many decades during 'Direct Rule'.²⁹ However, differences remain between local authorities in each jurisdiction on the island (for instance, unlike those in the Republic of Ireland, local authorities in Northern Ireland do not have statutory responsibility for housing and roads).

The growing symmetry between local level, yet distinct, planning systems on either side of the border has been accompanied by area-based networks to support communication and co-operation between local authorities. These are the East Border Region (EBR) and the North West Region Cross Border Group (NWRCBG)ⁱⁱ both established in 1976, and the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) in 1995 (see Figure 2.1).

ⁱⁱ Following the completion of the RPA process in 2015, the NWRCBG was replaced by the North West Regional Development Group (NWRDG).

These networks, particularly EBR and NWRCBG, faced difficulties in pursuing an agenda that was viewed as politically sensitive. This hindered trust-building and the alignment of competing priorities, and caused co-operation to be largely reactive, leading to fragmented and uneven development.³⁰

As the networks have matured, however, they have nurtured a degree of institutional 'thickening' ('institutional thickness' is understood as the density of formal and informal institutions), among their member local authorities and now function as 'soft' governance spaces for advancing distinctive, integrated spatial strategies for sub-regional development (despite enduring jurisdictional boundaries).³¹

This has strengthened inter-institutional relationships, and the shared norms and practices that underpin governance effectiveness.^{32,33,34} Greater symmetry and the degree of cross-border 'thickness', particularly in relation to local authority contact, communication, and co-operation, has been strengthened through these cross-border area networks.³⁵

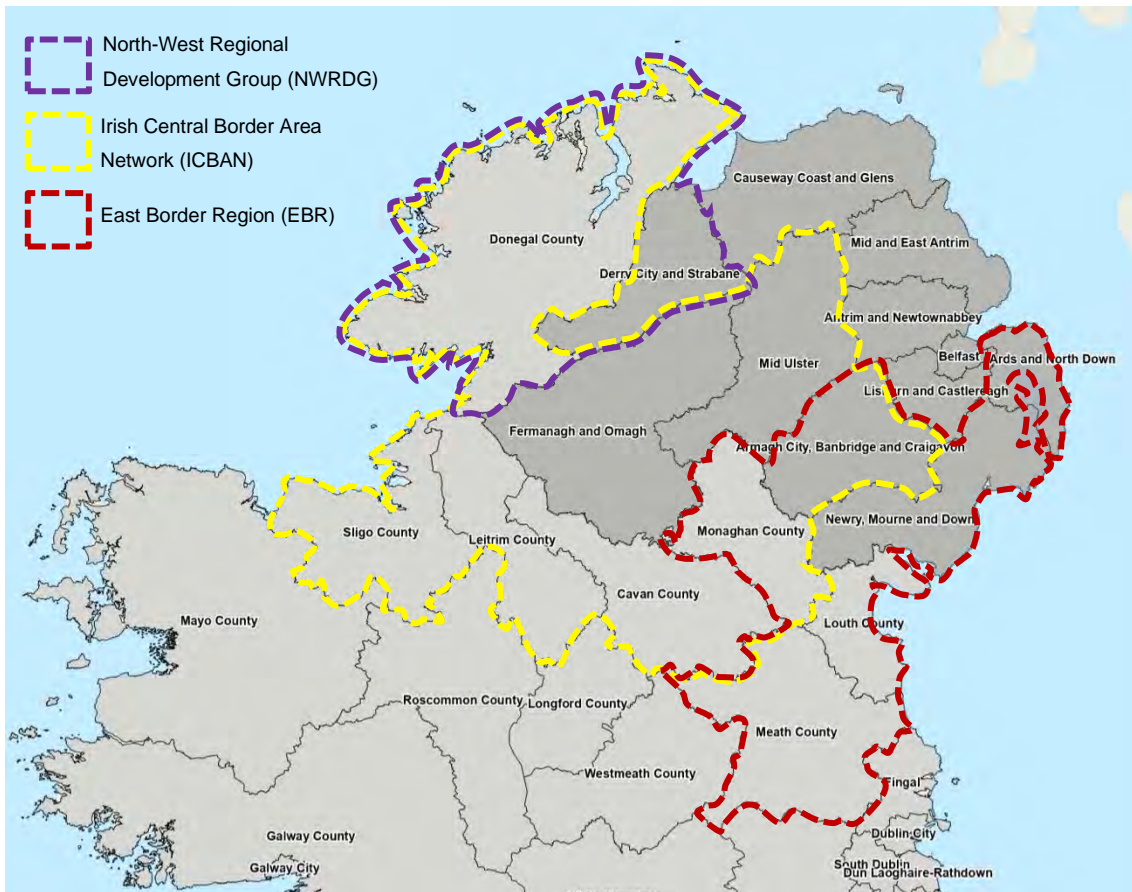


Figure 2.1 The local authority cross-border networks in the Irish border region
 [Note: County Donegal is a member of both NWRCBG (now the NWRDG) and ICBAN;
 County Monaghan and Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon are members of both
 ICBAN and EBR]

These networks typically adopt ‘constructivist’ approaches that promote interaction between local governments and foster bilateral co-operation, for example, in the delivery of shared services. As Creamer and Driscoll argue, such cross-border networks exhibit key elements of functional geographies and provide ‘soft’, supportive spaces that enable and assist local government collaboration:

“The model employed by the networks has been relatively successful, and there are undoubtedly aspects of these processes which should be considered for future shared service programmes being led by local government, including initiatives in biodiversity and energy (in which EBR has experience), and

GIS and data capture and analysis (in which both NWRCBG and ICBAN have expertise). The networks thus demonstrate how local authorities can work together for mutual benefit and provide specialised and shared service to local governments.”³⁶

The mid-2000’s onwards witnessed several bi-lateral agreements between local authorities on a cross-jurisdictional basis, acknowledging the functional relationships between them. In 2011, Newry and Mourne District Council and Louth County Council signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which provided a platform for both councils to work more closely together in delivering smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. In 2014, this was extended to include Down District Council, with a revised tri-partnership MOU signed which would see the Councils working together on selected renewable energy and green technology environmental projects, tourism and recreation programmes, sustainable economic growth and job creation, and emergency planning and shared resources.

Similarly, in 2015, Monaghan County Council and Armagh City and District Council entered into an MOU which committed both to greater co-operation and joint programming in the areas of tourism, shared services, economic development and prosperity. In 2017, this was transitioned into the Cross Border Forum - Statement of Common Ground, which involved Mid-Ulster District Council, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council and Monaghan County Council. As the name suggests, this focuses on common issues of road linkages and infrastructure, protection of river/canal corridors and wider landscapes, accommodating economic development and growth, minerals development, and advancing the North-South Interconnector.

Established in 2016, the North West Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP) is a cross-border regional development body jointly overseen by Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council. It is a successor to the North West Gateway Initiative and the North West Partnership Forum (2013-2015) and focused on the North West City Region (NWCR) which is itself

“The North West Region of the Island of Ireland is the fourth largest urban agglomeration on the island of Ireland; it is the only functional economic region of such scale on the island which experiences a national jurisdictional border. As such, specific arrangements involving regional and local government leadership and partnership with central government are required in order for the region to release its full and considerable potential as a net contributor to the economy, North and South and in an East-West context... An opportunity has been created, through the alignment of local government functions in a place-based leadership model, for a new arrangement which allows central government to coordinate its resource planning and spending as they relate to the region - leading to a corresponding impact on the region’s growth potential and optimal value for money as regards public investment in both jurisdictions”.³⁸

Rafferty argues that the central spatial planning principle underpinning this collaborative cross-border regional development approach is the creation of a new ‘soft space’ for co-operation which captures the complex multi-level and multi-scalar functional geography of this part of the island.³⁹ The vision of the North West as a ‘City Region’ also reflects the need for decisive action heightened by the economic challenges posed by Brexit for both Ireland and Northern Ireland. Initial proposals focus on developing interconnected business support hubs across the aforementioned key urban centres of Letterkenny, Derry/Londonderry and Strabane, supported by co-ordinated investment and programme delivery.

In addition to the North West, along the island’s eastern seaboard, cross-border interaction is further strengthened by the creation of the Dublin–Belfast Economic Corridor (DBEC), a key economic region stretching 100 miles between the two largest cities on the island: Dublin and Belfast (Figure 2.3). The renewed attention on the eastern socio-spatial corridor concept, originally

advanced over two decades ago by Sir George Quigley, led to eight local authorities collaborating to establish DBEC in March 2021.

The emergence of such new spatial constructs as ‘soft spaces’ with ‘softer’ planning approaches, that traverse not only intra- but inter-jurisdictional boundaries, represent progressive attempts to recognise the dynamic nature of border spaces and to understand the diverse spatial interactions that occur across jurisdictional boundaries. Drawing on Faludi, Walsh argues “that the future of European spatial planning and territorial cohesion policy will be in terms of soft processes and soft spaces at a variety of scales rather than formal instruments operating within formal jurisdictional boundaries.”⁴⁰



Figure 2.3 The eastern corridor, known as Dublin–Belfast Economic Corridor (DBEC), schematically illustrated in Ireland’s revised NPF (Source: adapted from Government of Ireland, 2025: 17)

Spatial public diplomacy

Border regions face distinct planning challenges that differ from domestic (within-state) contexts because social, economic, and spatial processes do not stop at political/administrative boundaries. Such challenges require strategic and local efforts to communicate and co-operate amongst stakeholders, involving informational (e.g. sharing policies), reputational (e.g. authentic engagement) and relational (e.g. strong ties) approaches to build understanding, trust and support to foster long-term relationships through meaningful public diplomacy.

On the island of Ireland, the 2013 Framework for Co-operation was significant in providing the cross jurisdictional conditions to strengthen structures, build trust, and create a more coherent cross-border policy environment, particularly at a time when practical co-operation needed clearer governance and long-term direction.

Scholarly debate on the Framework for Co-operation has remained limited, with only a single publication critically examining its value and influence on cross-border spatial planning. Reflecting on its development, Peel and Lloyd describe the Framework for Co-operation as a form of “spatial public diplomacy”⁴¹ that supports cross-border regionalism on the island of Ireland, emphasising that meaningful action requires cognitive and discursive commitment rather than mere rhetoric. They highlight the complexities of establishing a joint spatial planning ethos, noting that differing institutional structures and cultural histories continue to complicate co-operation efforts. For the 2013 Framework for Co-operation to amount to more than a symbolic gesture, Peel and Lloyd argue it must secure the commitment necessary to enable meaningful action, requiring several cognitive and discursive steps – how actors think and articulate the value of co-operation.⁴² As such, the Framework for Co-operation serves as a practical attempt to move beyond ad-hoc initiatives towards greater institutional co-operation.

Nonetheless, it remains unclear whether any deeper institutional ‘thickening’ in the ensuing years has reshaped behaviours and practices towards greater co-operation, with Peel and Lloyd questioning “whether the 2013 Framework for Cooperation is sufficiently robust to have the transformative potential to effect material change.”⁴³

Any transformative change in border regions secured through spatial public diplomacy, across public, private, third or civil society sectors, requires genuine dialogue, trust-building, and long-term co-operation. Such competencies should complement practical understandings of existing spatial planning and governance structures. Thato, in conducting a systematic literature review, notes how planners working in border regions require more than technical expertise, stating:

“Planners in border regions must possess not only technical expertise but also a range of essential soft skills, including effective communication, negotiation and mediation, context sensitivity and adaptability. Unlike the hard skills typically acquired through formal education or training, soft skills demand a more holistic approach involving continuous personal development, reflective practice, and meaningful interpersonal interactions. This insight demonstrates that hard skills alone are insufficient for effective planning in border regions”.⁴⁴

Acquiring, operationalising and refining these skills remain an issue in many border regions. Thato argues that while concepts like ‘soft spaces’ and ‘soft planning’ promote flexibility and relational thinking, planning practice remains largely territorial.⁴⁵ Despite some progress in promoting a decentralisation rhetoric in recent decades, the dominance of national interests/priorities and political ideologies often influence government. In effect, the weak legal status of, and any statutory requirement for, cross-border planning agreements means that cross-border planning can be trapped in territorial, nation-state-based thinking.

Contested terminology: co-operation versus collaboration

Europe's border regions face several challenges, including proactively addressing the impacts of climate change, post-pandemic recovery, migration and social cohesion, and regional inequalities. Klöters and Pijnenburg argue that the growing complexity and interplay of these challenges calls for a shift from traditional notions of cross-border co-operation towards a more integrated model of collaboration, contending that 'collaboration' more accurately reflects the advanced, sustained interactions required to produce durable and mutually beneficial outcomes.⁴⁶

The current EU policy landscape encourages a terminology that emphasises formal, structural, and quantifiable activities, favouring measurable, short-term outcomes which align more with 'co-operation'. The complexity of multilingual and legal contexts across Europe further entrenches the term 'co-operation', as translation challenges and legal embedment reinforce its use.

While 'collaboration' is recognised in academic contexts and is understood as a deeper, more engaged form of cross-border activity, it lacks formal definition and official policy endorsement, making its adoption more difficult at the policy level. By urging more deliberate and precise terminology, Klöters and Pijnenburg seek to align conceptual language with the lived realities of cross-border engagement, encouraging researchers and policymakers to rethink existing approaches and to pursue more cohesive, integrated responses.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Cross-border spatial planning on the island of Ireland has evolved from historically limited interaction to a more sophisticated and multi-layered system of co-operation. While formal, statutory integration remains limited, informal networks, EU-shaped spatial logics, the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement architecture, and emerging City-Region partnerships have significantly reshaped the borderlands.

The evolution of the political and policy landscape to the mid-2010s had provided the island with the foundations for a more integrated spatial future – one dependent on sustained political will, institutional support and adaptive governance across both jurisdictions. Despite operating within distinct constitutional and political contexts, the planning systems in both jurisdictions are showing a growing symmetry, creating conditions for more effective co-operation.

Rafferty and Blair argue that this convergence presents a step in the direction of providing the conditions necessary for nurturing deeper collaboration to develop more integrated responses to shared cross-border challenges.⁴⁸ However, the mechanisms underpinning effective cross-border co-operation were developed during a period when both jurisdictions were EU members and aligned through European spatial planning. Therefore, the question arises as to whether the institutional ‘thickness’ can be sustained, or indeed deepened, post-Brexit, in a way that would prevent policy divergence or reconcile any emerging differences and address shared concerns collaboratively across multiple levels of governance.

3. Spatial strategies on the island of Ireland: A policy analysis

Plan led systems

The planning systems of both Northern Ireland and Ireland are ‘plan-led’, meaning that the strategic policies of both jurisdictions are laid out in a planning hierarchy and planning decisions about development are primarily guided by adopted local plans. These contain the translation of, and align with, strategic (national) strategies, plans and policies. In the case of the Republic of Ireland, such decisions are also informed by regional planning policy. This approach provides a “balance between development and environmental protection, while ensuring the needs and well-being of local communities are provided for.”⁴⁹

The Republic of Ireland

The Irish spatial planning system is structured across a hierarchy of plans. At the national level, there is the National Planning Framework (NPF) First Revision (2025), supported by the [National Development Plan 2025-2035](#),⁵⁰ both of which are part of [Project Ireland 2040](#).ⁱⁱⁱ

At the regional level, the first Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES) were published between 2019 and 2020. Whilst these are operational for a period of 12 years, a revision is due to commence in 2026 to ensure alignment

ⁱⁱⁱ Project Ireland 2040 is the Irish government’s long-term overarching strategy to make Ireland a better country for everyone by enhancing regional connectivity and competitiveness, improving environmental sustainability and building a fairer, more equal country. Project Ireland 2040 is underpinned by a shared set of goals or National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs) which inform the policy direction of both the National Planning Framework and the National Development Plan.

with the revised NPF and to take account of new provisions under [the Planning and Development Act 2024](#).

At the local level, there are the City and/or County Development Plans which are prepared by the local authorities and, at the time of writing, were transitioning from spanning a six-year period to ten-years (see Figure 3.1). Each tier of the hierarchy is required to be consistent with the level above it, in addition to the Acts governing planning, and the strategies used to achieve sustainable development, as outlined in the 2018 NPF.⁵¹

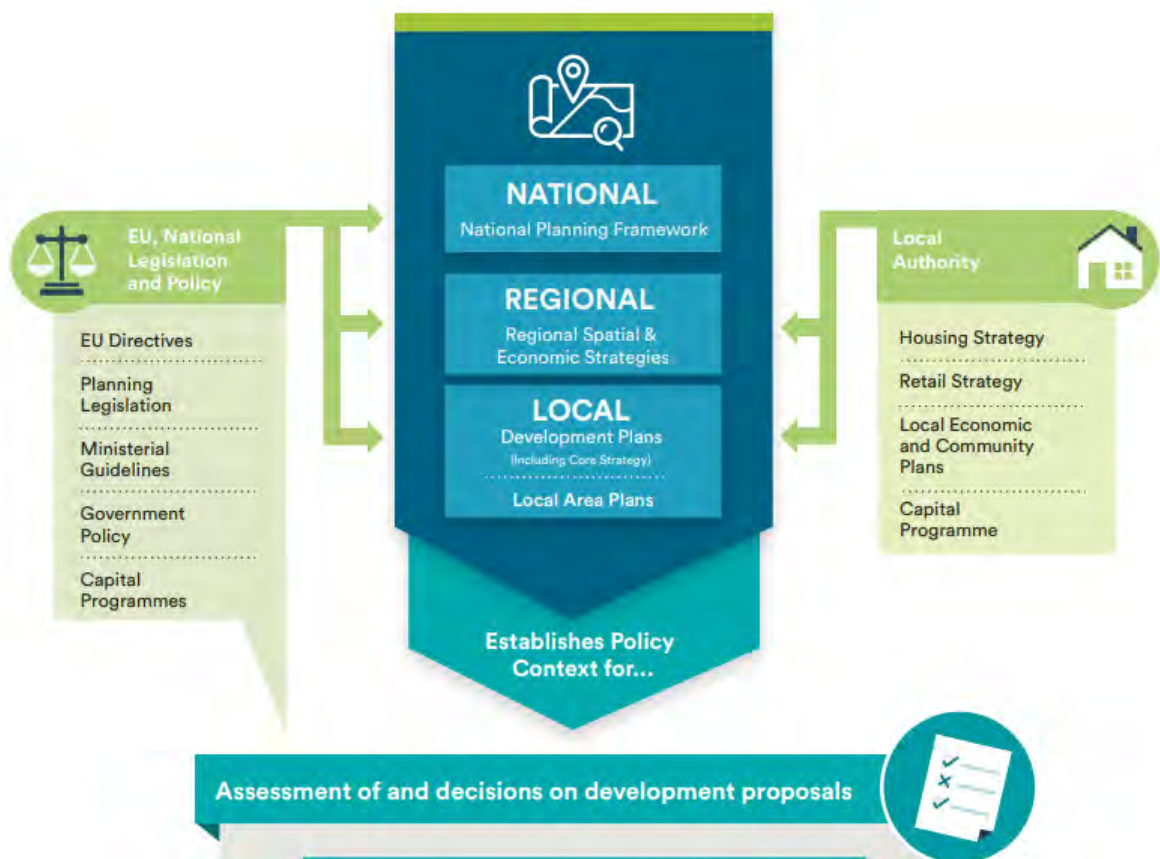


Figure 3.1 The Irish planning system hierarchy, 2018
(Source: adapted from Government of Ireland, 2018: 8)

The role of the various planning layers is detailed in the aforementioned Planning and Development Act 2024, the third largest piece of legislation

published by the State, comprising 26 Parts, 637 Sections and seven Schedules over 870 pages.

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the [Planning Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#) provides the legal basis for the current planning system, which came into effect with the reorganisation of local government and the establishment of 11 local authorities in April 2015. The planning system has undergone reform and restructuring, moving from a unitary arrangement in which all planning powers were vested in the [then] Department of the Environment's Planning Service, to a two-tier delivery model that assigns primary responsibility for key planning functions to local councils.

The spatial planning system in Northern Ireland consists of a two-tiered hierarchy (see Figure 3.2), chiefly operating across regional and local tiers. The Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035 establishes the long-term strategic spatial planning framework that sets out how the region should develop economically, socially and environmentally. It provides the strategic direction for where development should happen and how places should grow by stipulating Regional Guidance (RG) and Strategic Planning Guidelines (SPG). In doing so, it guides local development plans, planning decisions and public investment.

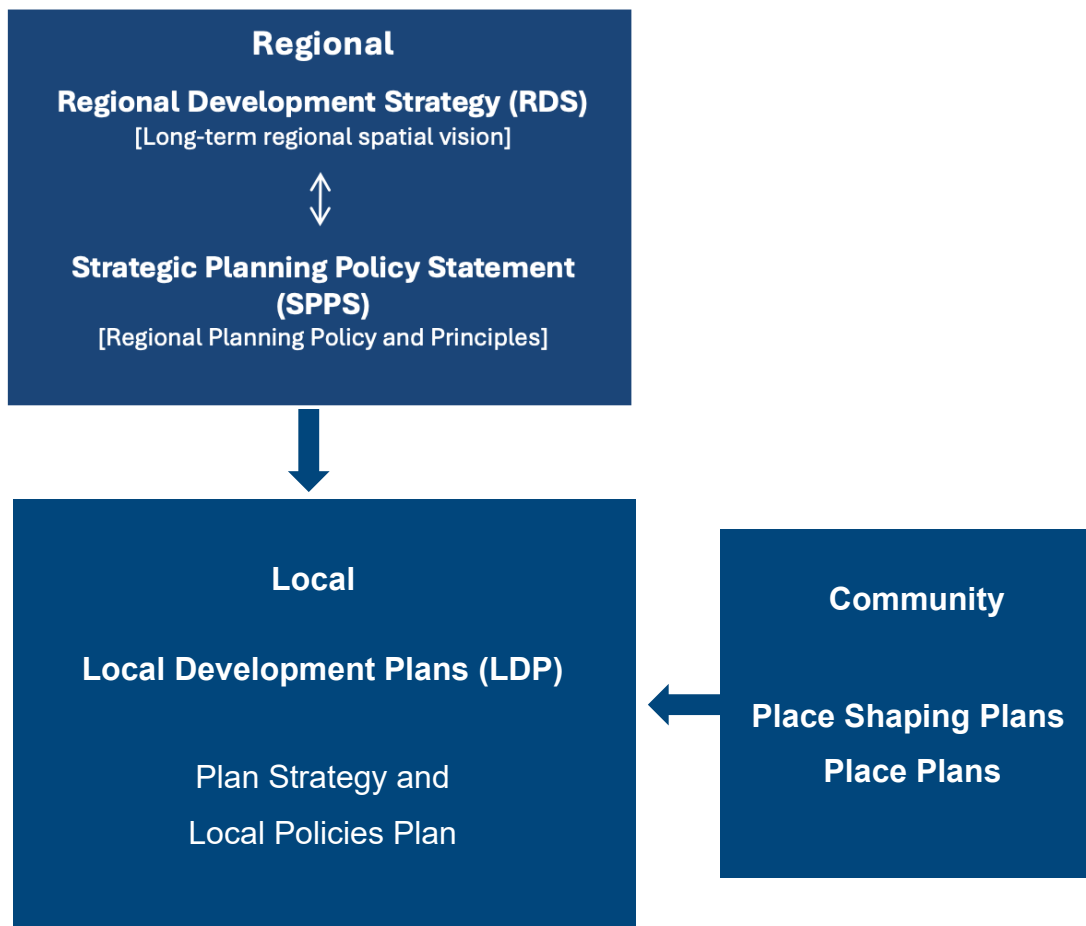


Figure 3.2 The planning policy hierarchy in Northern Ireland
(Source: Authors' own)

The [Strategic Planning Policy Statement \(SPPS\)](#),⁵² initially published in September 2015 with the second edition released in December 2025, is the overarching planning policy document that sets out the regional planning principles and policies for the development and use of land. In addition to setting out the new approach to development plan making and decision taking in the development management system, the SPPS outlines core principles underpinning the reformed planning system:

- Improving health and well-being.
- Creating and enhancing shared space.
- Supporting the economy.
- Supporting good design and positive place-making.
- Preserving and improving the built and natural environment.

Where there is any conflict between the SPPS and retained policy, the SPPS takes precedence. Once a council has adopted its Plan Strategy (PS) as part of the Local Development Plan (LDP) process, Planning Policy Statements and other supporting guidance will no longer have effect.

The local tier planning policy consists of a new style Local Development Plan (LDP) that comprises two policy documents: the aforementioned PS and the Local Policies Plan (LPP). DfI's Practice Note One: [Development Plan](#) (2015) articulates how the LDP system is to move away from a narrow land use focus towards a 'place shaping' approach.⁵³ Both the SPPS and above practice note stipulate that local councils must take account of their current community plan when preparing an LDP. In effect, new LDPs will provide a spatial expression to the community plan, thereby linking public and private sector investment through the land use planning system.

A policy review: the RDS and NSS/NPF

The European Spatial Development Strategy (ESDP), as adopted in May 1999 by the member states and the EU Commission, was in effect a non-binding agreement on common objectives and concepts for the future development of the territory of the European Union. Its fundamental goals were threefold: (1) economic and social cohesion; (2) conservation and management of natural resources and cultural heritage; and (3) more balanced competitiveness of the European territory.⁵⁴ Its guiding principles, as outlined in Chapter 1, would prove critical to informing the aims and policies of the original RDS 2025, the revised RDS 2035 and the NSS with regard to economic and transport linkages and transnational and cross-border co-operation. The concept of polycentricity, for example, was expressed in both strategies in terms of 'gateways' and 'hubs', as engines of economic growth and national competitiveness, together with urban-rural linkages to deliver more sustainable and balanced regional development.

In addition to such European influences, the original RDS 2025 and NSS were also informed by pre-existing 'national level' policies and strategies. In the case of the RDS 2025, a commitment to a new regional development strategy for

Northern Ireland was made within the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement 1998. Such a strategy, it was contended, was critical to:

“tackling the problems of a divided society and social cohesion in urban, rural and border areas, protecting and enhancing the environment, producing new approaches to transport issues, strengthening the physical infrastructure of the region, developing the advantages and resources of rural areas and rejuvenating major urban centres”.⁵⁵

The draft Regional Strategic Framework, published in 1998, was informed by a number of key policies and strategies already in existence, including: the Rural Development Programme; Well into 2000 – the Regional Strategy for Health and Well Being (1997); the Northern Ireland transport policy statement, Moving Forward (1998); and Opportunities for Change, the UK Government’s consultation paper on a revised strategy for sustainable development, published in 1998 by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

In the case of the Republic of Ireland, the preparation of the NSS was mandated “to address the future spatial structure of Ireland in the context of sustainable development” as outlined in the Irish Government’s 1997 [Sustainable Development – A Strategy for Ireland](#)⁵⁶, while also building upon the National Development Plan 2000-2006 initiatives and strategic framework for the long-term spatial development of the state.⁵⁷ Indeed, it was this emphasis on the ‘spatial structure’ that made the NSS – and the RDS 2025 – stand out from previous national social and economic plans that would have been prepared for Ireland and Northern Ireland/the UK in the past, whereby the impact of largely sectoral policies on different places was not considered or monitored. Rather, up until this point, the spatial dimension of development was considered the purview of local government.

Given their genesis, it is unsurprising that the inaugural spatial strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland share many of the same guiding principles:

- A people and community-centred approach that is couched in creating healthy environments and supporting overall well-being, whilst also acknowledging the importance of a place-based approach to balanced regional development.
- A sustainable approach to development that not only seeks to protect the environment and how we utilise natural resources but also places an emphasis on social progress and balanced growth.
- A strong perspective on achieving spatial equity, community cohesion and equality of opportunity, recognising the inter-dependence of places and regions and the value of local co-operation.
- Reconciling growth with quality of life as part of a wider competitiveness agenda that includes the growth of an all-island economy and investment in the skills and education of the populations.
- Improving connectivity and accessibility within and between the island's regions.^{58, 59}

A further guiding principle was the consolidation of peace across the island of Ireland and, in a period of stability post-Agreement, strengthening political, economic and social interactions on a North/South and East/West basis.

The RDS: From 2001 to present day

The original RDS covered the period 2001 to 2025 and was a high-level strategic planning instrument providing an overarching framework for the spatial development of Northern Ireland, with the whole of Northern Ireland treated as one region. Shaping our Future: Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025 aimed to promote balanced and integrated growth across a network of cities, main and small towns and their rural hinterlands to enhance equality of opportunity in all areas. Economic development was a cornerstone of the RDS 2025. It identified a hierarchy of employment and service centres across the region, through a hub, gateway and corridor framework for regional (polycentric) development. The RDS recognised the key role of Belfast along the Eastern Corridor and Derry/Londonderry in the North West, although it did not adopt a rigid regional growth model. Subject-based, binding Planning Policy

Statements (PPSs) translated the high level aims of the RDS 2025 into policy which, in turn, informed area plans.

The [Regional Transportation Strategy \(RTS\)](#) for Northern Ireland 2002-2012⁶⁰ was published in July 2002 outlining the strategic transportation investment priorities, potential funding sources and affordability of planned initiatives over a 10 year plan period. Importantly, the RTS supported the RDS 2025 by defining the transportation vision for the region.

The RDS 2025 was not a static document, even though it was a long-term strategy. The original RDS committed to a review after five and 10 years, and as a result, it was reviewed in 2006 and subsequently 'adjusted' in 2008.⁶¹ This was largely to take account of new EU Directives and a number of additional government strategies that had been published in the intervening years, for example, around waste management and biodiversity.

In January 2011, the Department for Regional Development (DRD) launched a 10-year review of the RDS 2025. At this stage, the strategy was recognised as an Executive initiative, playing a key role in delivering the spatial aspects of the Programme for Government. However, the original strategy was often seen as too complex, resulting in the dilution of its direction. The review recognised that structural regional disparities were persisting and that many towns were not performing the roles expected of them. In addition, the global financial crisis and climate emergency were emerging as critical macro-level issues to be taken account of in the strategic spatial planning of the region, if it were to deal effectively with the major challenges of the 21st Century. The Review of Public Administration (RPA) – then underway – would have consequences for the direction and delivery of any future iteration of the strategy. Following a period of public consultation, and associated analysis that included a review of spatial trends, the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035 – Building a Better Future was published in 2012.

The revised RDS (hereafter referred to as RDS 2035) again provides an overarching strategic planning framework for the whole of Northern Ireland. As

the spatial strategy of the Executive, it influences the Programme for Government, the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland, the spatial aspects of all policies emanating from other government departments and councils' decisions. The RDS 2035 included a significant revision of the spatial strategy, with a tighter hierarchy applied to settlements and the downgrading of a number of regional towns in terms of their classification. Instead, the spatial framework put forward a proposal around the clustering of settlements that would lead to greater complementarity in the provision of services and facilities across the region. The revised strategy also represented a refocusing of strategic guidelines – focusing on new spatial strategies and the integration of the three pillars of sustainability (environment, society and the economy) into all future development. As such, the RDS 2035 addresses economic, social and environmental issues aimed at achieving sustainable development and social cohesion, whilst also taking “greater cognisance of the size of the region and the need for greater planning and co-operation in order to achieve critical mass and benefit from economies of scale.”⁶²

On a cross-border basis, the RDS 2035 recognises the critical role that co-operation and collaboration play in providing opportunities to boost economic performance and competitiveness across the island. Its discussions on the value of cross-border co-operation centre on economic corridors – with a recognised fundamental role in regional growth – and functional territories; with specific reference to the relationships between Strabane and Lifford, the Newry-Dundalk Twin City, and Enniskillen and Sligo. Importantly, it specifically calls out the need for a joined-up approach to spatial planning for the border region, and indeed Northern Ireland as a whole, to meet its significant potential. In the section ‘Working with Neighbours’ (p.94), the RDS 2035 acknowledges the importance of collaboration on a North/South and East/West basis; with shared investment in key infrastructures such as sea and air ports, road and rail, and energy and telecommunications bringing mutual benefits to all parts of the island. In addition, this section of the RDS 2035 highlights the importance of such collaboration in meeting climate change targets. It emphasises the ‘shared natural, cultural and landscape assets’ and the need for a co-ordinated approach in their effective management.

From the NSS to the National Planning Framework first revision

The National Spatial Strategy

Published in 2002, the National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 (NSS) was considered a 20-year strategy designed to enable every place in the country to reach its potential, no matter its size or location. It recognised that the various regions of the country have different roles, and it sought to organise and co-ordinate these roles in a complementary way. Core objectives included making regions competitive according to their strengths, ensuring a high-quality urban environment, and building vibrant rural areas.⁶³ As noted by Meredith and van Egeraat:

“The strategy represented a departure from conventional planning in Ireland by taking a more holistic perspective of changing geographies of population, settlement patterns, and the distribution of employment opportunities. The implications of these changes led to the proposition of a socio-economic planning model that recognised the importance of the spatial dimension”.⁶⁴

A National Development Plan (2000, 2007) supported the NSS, ensuring the vision had a financial package to support critical infrastructure delivery. In order to achieve more balanced regional development, the NSS promoted a greater share of economic activity taking place outside of the Greater Dublin Area. Similar to the RDS, this was to be achieved through the identification of gateways, hubs and other key urban and rural settlements in a hierarchical framework, interlinked by social, cultural and economic activity. Importantly, from an all-island and cross-border perspective, the NSS committed to “provide a framework, in conjunction with the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland, Shaping our Future, for the spatial dimension of the development of an all-island economy;”⁶⁵ recognising the importance of taking an all-island approach to unleashing the potential of both urban and rural areas. In terms of implementation, the government committed that “policies and

programmes will be consistent with the NSS where they seek to enhance and build up economic and social activity within the national framework provided by the Strategy”.⁶⁶ The development of Regional Planning Guidelines (RPGs) by the [then] eight regional authorities did not transpire as intended and ultimately led to the shelving of the NSS.

The NSS did not have a legislative basis which made its delivery challenging as it was viewed “as merely a framework document that offered guidance to planners and policymakers”.⁶⁷ In what can only be described as ‘an own goal’, a number of subsequent government policies neglected to take account of the underpinning principles and goals of the NSS. The government’s decentralisation programme, published shortly after the NSS, for example, failed to align with the designated gateways and hubs and so was seen as undermining the government’s own policy^{iv}. In a similar vein, “the launch, in November 2005, of a government programme to invest €34.4bn in developing Ireland’s transport infrastructure ... made no reference to the NSS” while Enterprise Ireland’s strategy document for 2008-2010 also made no reference to the national spatial strategy.⁶⁸

Yet, the global economic downturn of 2007/2008 provided a ‘second chance’ for government in advocating for the potential of national-scale spatial strategies. As the economic crisis hit Ireland hard, spatial planning frameworks such as the NSS were viewed as “more relevant and important in maximising the long-term value of investment of increasingly scarce public funds”.⁶⁹ In addition, the regions were seen as “critical in creating a good place to live and to do business”, with spatial planning playing “a key role in setting the framework for delivery of competitive and attractive places”.⁷⁰ Government recognised the necessity of having “prioritised and strategic investments to pump-prime the

^{iv} The 2004 decentralisation programme, involving the relocation of government offices, planned to relocate 11,000 civil service jobs to 59 different locations scattered around the country; only 14% of the jobs were allocated to gateway centres. Of nine departmental headquarters to be relocated, only one was earmarked for location in a gateway centre (Breathnach, 2017).

potential of the regions...positioning them as key contributors to Ireland's overall national growth when the current difficult economic cycle ends".⁷¹

In 2009, a 'refresh' of the NSS commenced, with the core objective of considering the key drivers of future growth and development in a global, European and national economic downturn. The process included a review of what had worked, identifying challenges at different strategic levels – from gateways to rural areas – and identifying new priorities/actions. In particular, the 'refresh' recognised a continued need to build the 'hard' infrastructure while also placing a focus on 'softer' issues such as innovation and training, public realm, and regeneration and inclusion.

Coinciding with the review of the RDS 2025, the ongoing review process in both jurisdictions presented an opportunity for the adoption of a common approach to spatial planning policies at the level of the island of Ireland. The review process was intended to conclude in 2010 for both the RDS 2025 and NSS, with both strategies including a 'common chapter'.⁷² The RDS review did not meet this deadline, but the NSS Update and Outlook Report 2010 provided a critical appraisal of progress to date and provided an implementation roadmap for the near to medium-term future. The then Minister of State for Planning, Ciarán Cuffe T.D., described it as "a reaffirmation of the Government's commitment to the National Spatial Strategy as the national spatial and forward planning framework to guide more balanced regional development and inform capital investment priorities".⁷³ The 'refresh' emphasised the need for better alignment and prioritisation of sectoral infrastructure investment and the promotion of more sustainable patterns of development, both in rural and urban contexts. It brought to the fore the importance of data in supporting evidence-informed policy; while acknowledging the need for improved governance at national, regional and local levels, and monitoring of outcomes.

However, despite this 'refresh', the associated adoption of updated RPGs in 2010, the commitment to a new gateway fund to commence in 2012, and the new legislative provisions within the [Planning and Development \(Amendment\)](#)

[Act 2010](#) to include core strategies^v in development plans,⁷⁴ there were almost immediate calls for a further deep review of the NSS. In February 2013, the then Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government announced that the NSS had ultimately failed and would need to be replaced by a new framework. In December 2015, the Department published a road map for the delivery of a National Planning Framework – or NPF.⁷⁵

The National Planning Framework

The Irish Government published the draft National Planning Framework – Ireland 2040 Our Plan – in late 2017 for a period of public consultation. Its approach was, in many respects, similar to that of the NSS i.e. focusing development on the main urban centres. Indeed, in confining its focus to the four main regional centres outside of Dublin, it was more concentrated than the NSS. It was clear from the draft NPF that its main broad objective was that total population and employment growth in the Northern and Western and Southern Regional Assembly areas combined would be equal to that in the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly area in the period up to 2040.⁷⁶ The main vehicle for achieving this would be via concentrated development in each of the four main regional cities, whose combined growth would match that of the Dublin region over the period. As noted by Breathnach, this would mean that the cities of Galway, Limerick, Cork and Waterford would have to grow at twice the rate actually achieved in the 25-year period up to 2016.⁷⁷ The growth targets for each city were aspirational – with no specific mechanisms set out in the draft strategy for achieving them. The draft NPF also identified four measures which were designed to make it more effective than the NSS:

^v The objectives of the core strategies were to quantify how much development would be envisaged over the plan period, the distribution of that development and how that quantum and distribution would be consistent with the objectives of higher level plans such as the NSS and regional planning guidelines (Cussen, 2011).

1. The NPF would be given a statutory legislative basis which the NSS lacked.
2. An Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) would be established, with responsibility for overseeing implementation of the NPF.
3. Each of the three Regional Assemblies would produce and implement a Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) which would also be aligned to the objectives of the NPF.
4. A National Investment Strategy would run in parallel with the NPF and would be aligned to the objectives of the NPF (Breathnach, 2017). In addition to the National Development Plan, this would also include dedicated funds such as the Urban Regeneration Development Fund (URDF) and the Rural Regeneration Development Fund (RRDF).

In advance of the draft NPF launch, the ICLRD and Ulster University (UU), with the support of the then Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (DHPCLG) of the Irish Government (the lead department in the preparation of the NPF) held a full-day event in March 2017 in the UU Campus in Derry/Londonderry. This event, Ireland 2040: The National Planning Framework in an All-Island Context considered the cross-border dimensions of the emerging NPF.

What was, to all intents and purposes, a de facto public consultation event on an Irish document in Northern Ireland highlights the commitment at that time to ensuring the final framework acknowledged the importance of 'Working with our Neighbours' in all aspects of strategic spatial planning policy – social, economic, environmental and cultural. It could be argued that this would not have been possible had the Framework for Co-operation not been in place.

When adopted in February 2018, Ireland's National Planning Framework (NPF) – one component of Ireland 2040 – became the government's long-term overarching strategy to make the Republic of Ireland a more sustainable and resilient country. It embraced and promoted place-making, and it emphasised the linkages between planning and well-being/quality of life. From its first iteration, the NPF committed to enhancing regional connectivity and

competitiveness, improving environmental sustainability, and building a fairer, more equal Ireland, all the while acknowledging that this must be done in a way that nurtures well-being and quality of life. Ten National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs) are listed in the NPF (see Figure 3.3) and these in turn are embedded in the National Development Plan (NDP) – the funding arm of Ireland 2040. Thus, the Republic of Ireland continued to advance an integrated set of arrangements whereby government expenditure is linked to spatial planning.

As the national strategy for future development and investment decisions, there was a statutory mandate that the NPF should be updated in 2024. The process for this commenced in June 2023 with the publication of [A Road Map](#) for the First Revision of the National Planning Framework by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH).⁷⁸ Acknowledging that the NPF was only at an early stage of implementation, the road map set the context for a focused revision. Specifically, it considered the results emerging from Census 2022 in terms of distribution of growth over the intercensal period 2016-2022 and the significant weighting in favour of the East.



Figure 3.3 The National Strategic Outcomes of the National Planning Framework and National Development Plan, Project Ireland 2040
(Source: Government of Ireland, 2018:13; 2025: 5)

Other key considerations included:

- Global geo-politics and the implications of this for in-migration.
- The impacts of COVID-19, particularly in relation to trends in commuting patterns, remote working, the digitalisation of society and their implications for the changing relationships between home and work.

- Advances in the development of marine policy.
- Climate change and associated targets for both 2030 and 2050.
- The Government's commitment to tackle vacancy, dereliction and revitalise town centres.^{vi}

Also key to discussions were changes to planning policy and legislation, including the Government's [Housing for All](#) strategy (published in 2021),⁷⁹ and the [then] [draft Planning and Development Bill 2022](#).⁸⁰

The review process was supported by research undertaken by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). In addition, a Government-appointed expert group delivered a short [report](#) in August 2023 on key issues to be considered during the course of the revision.⁸¹ These ranged from spatial coherence to implementation, monitoring and governance. Quite surprisingly, this report makes no reference to Northern Ireland or cross-border/inter-jurisdictional co-operation in terms of spatial planning policy alignment.

A Planning Advisory Forum provided input into various stages of policy development of the revised NPF. Membership of the Advisory Forum was broad and included three Northern Ireland/cross-border agencies: the DfI, ITI and the ICLRD^{vii}. There were a number of consultation processes as part of the revision, including the publication of an [Issues Paper](#) in October 2023,⁸² which again made little reference to Northern Ireland or cross-border co-operation in the

^{vi} The [Town Centre First](#) policy framework was jointly published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Department of Rural and Community Development in 2022.

^{vii} This is not to imply that no other consultation mechanisms were employed to address transboundary matters or consider cross-border strategic spatial planning issues. As outlined in the revised NPF, engagement did take place with a range of Northern Ireland government departments on the NPF itself and also on associated matters such as strategic environmental assessment (SEA).

area of strategic spatial planning outside of the then commissioned All-Island Strategic Rail Review, and the publication of a [draft revised NPF](#) in July 2024.⁸³

The [National Planning Framework First Revision](#) was published in April 2025, one year later than expected. Like its predecessor, it is a framework “to guide public and private investment, to create and promote opportunities for our people, and to protect and enhance our environment – from our villages to our cities, and everything around and in between.”⁸⁴ It is a strategy committed to managing more balanced growth across the regions; with Ireland’s close relationship with Northern Ireland emphasised in the recognition of the key links between Letterkenny and Derry/Londonderry (and Strabane via the North West City Region) and Drogheda-Dundalk-Newry. The National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs) and associated strategic investment priorities remain the same as those outlined in Figure 3.3. However, in light of new analysis and evidence, there is a stronger commitment to redress continuing sprawl, the further decline of rural areas and towns, a continuing degradation of the environment, changing demographics, and an ongoing shift in population and jobs towards the East.

The revised Framework seeks to disrupt current trends and thus will require a greater investment in both governance and monitoring of delivery than was the case under the first iteration of the NPF, particularly in the delivery of the ambitious growth targets assigned to the metropolitan areas of Dublin, Galway, Cork, Limerick and Waterford, and the supporting role of the identified regional growth centres. A key innovation is the focus on delivering Transport Oriented Development (TOD) which will address key challenges around housing delivery, public transport, compact growth and the development of sustainable and vibrant communities. Shifting to a TOD approach, particularly in the metropolitan city regions, will “support the delivery of new sustainable communities at brownfield and greenfield locations along existing or planned high capacity public transport corridors within the metropolitan area”⁸⁵ and in addressing patterns of sprawl, will “locate a significant proportion of future population, housing, employment, services and amenities along high capacity transport networks and at transport nodes.”⁸⁶

The revised Framework remains committed to a close working relationship with Northern Ireland on strategic planning policy alignment, noting the many shared spatial planning challenges facing both jurisdictions (see Figure 3.4).

Implementing the revised NPF in tandem with the RDS 2035 should assist in the strategic management of the envisaged growth for long-term benefit and mutual gain, in areas such as economic development and promotion, co-ordination of social and physical infrastructure provision, climate action, the biodiversity conversation and wider environmental management across shared landscapes, heritage, water catchments. Such collaboration on trans-boundary issues continues to be supported by the Framework for Co-operation, which the revised NPF notes can be updated and revised as necessary.⁸⁷

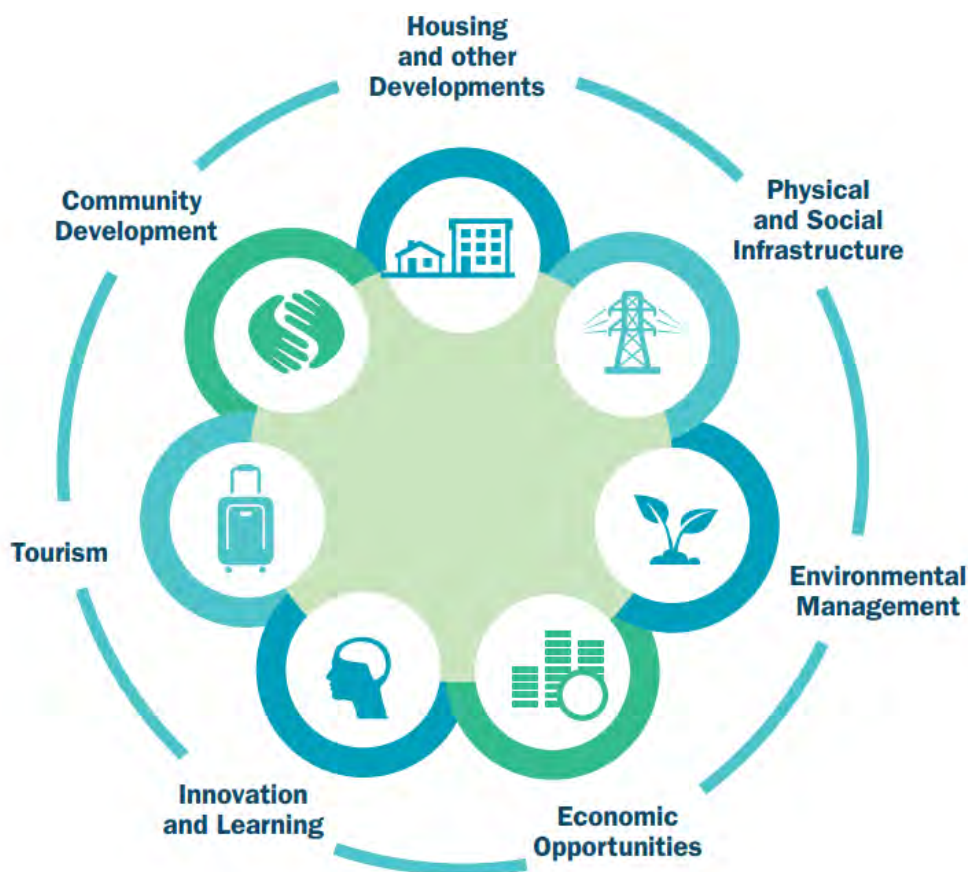


Figure 3.4 Shared planning challenges in Ireland and Northern Ireland
(Source: Government of Ireland, 2018: 109; 2025: 108)

The RDS and NPF: ongoing policy alignment or divergence?

The RDS 2035, which is the current spatial strategy informing the spatial aspects of all government departments' policies in Northern Ireland, is fourteen years old. The Irish Government's high-level strategic plan for shaping the growth and development of Ireland, the National Planning Framework First Revision is less than a year old. With such a time gap between both strategies, it is timely to consider to what extent the policies of both remain aligned – or are beginning to diverge – across several key priority areas.

Transport policy

The key transport policy priorities emphasized in the RDS 2035 and the revised NPF (and the Irish strategies in between) show the evolution that has taken place in transport policy, particularly in Ireland, over the past 14 years (see Table 2). The RDS 2035 places a heavy emphasis on public transport, rail, ports/airports and transport corridors, highlighting, for example, the key role that rail makes in improving accessibility and reducing peripherality, and the desire to see more investment in rail “to ensure the efficient movement of goods and people.”⁸⁸ The strategy further acknowledges that “certain key infrastructure, such as sea and air ports, road and rail, energy and telecommunication connectivity brings mutual benefit to all parts of the island”⁸⁹ and hence that strategic planning co-operation is critical to ensuring that investments in shared infrastructure deliver the greatest added value. The design and delivery of these transport services is critical to both jurisdictions.

These same policy areas are also front and centre of the revised National Planning Framework (NPF) and the preceding strategies, including the NSS (2002) and the first NPF (2018). The potential of rail is deeply embedded within the revised NPF, in the wider housing and transport-oriented development (TOD) agendas, with future housing development located in existing and/or planned high-capacity public transport corridors. Noting the value of the Enterprise train service (between Belfast and Dublin) as the only cross-border rail service on the island of Ireland, the revised NPF recognises the need for

enhanced regional connectivity across the island as a whole, whilst also calling for improved average journey times by rail (and road) – an identified need largely in line with the recommendations of the [All-Island Strategic Rail Review](#) (published July 2024).⁹⁰

	RDS	NSS	NPF – 1	NPF – 2
Transport	133	201	156	265
Sustainable Transport	0	1	6	15
Public Transport	31	72	55	79
Road Transport	0	1	0	0
Rail Transport	0	3	0	0
Rural Transport/Rural Bus/Local Link	1	1	5	2
Park and Ride	2	0	0	0
Commute/Commuter(s)	4	10	25	26
Transport Corridor(s)	17	12	8	17
Strategic Transport Corridors	0	1	0	0
Strategic Road Network	2	1	0	0
Road Network	5	5	3	7
Car/Private Transport	0	1	1	2
Good Transport	1	5	0	0
Modal Shift	3	0	0	0
Active Travel	0	0	0	7
Roads	5	28	34	9
Rail	22	48	27	58
Ports/Airports	23	49	57	75
Cycling	6	5	21	34
Walking	7	5	19	31
Bus/QBCs/BusConnects	5	12	5	16
Green Infrastructure	3	0	9	5
Greenways	2	0	19	18
Blueways	0	0	15	14
Peatways	0	0	12	13
National Transport Framework	0	5	0	0
All-island Transportation Framework	0	1	0	0
Cross-Border	4	9	24	35

Table 2 Frequency with which key elements of a comprehensive transport policy appear in each spatial strategy

(Source: Authors' analysis)

While this continued alignment in policy is to be welcomed, it is also possible to discern a more holistic and well-developed rationale to why such investment in rail is critical. In addition to recognising the role of access to the appropriate siting of future housing development, connectivity is recognised as critical to “enable further strengthening of the economic links between Ireland and Northern Ireland, supporting the common travel areas, decongesting roads, reducing carbon emissions and promoting all-island tourism.”⁹¹ For those parts of Ireland still recognised as being peripheral and underperforming due to decades of little or no investment in infrastructure, the revised NPF recognises the need for an inter-urban transport system which includes ongoing road upgrades while the potential for improved rail links is investigated.

A comparison of both strategies highlights the increasing relevance attached to specific components of a comprehensive transport strategy, namely walking, cycling, green infrastructure, and public transport/bus usage; all largely related to the advancement of an active travel agenda. This agenda is, in turn, both influenced by and strongly aligned to the priorities of quality of life, health and well-being, compact growth, climate change, environmental management, and economic development via tourism. Within the revised NPF, access to sustainable and efficient movement is dependent on quality design and placemaking, which in turn enhances a sense of place and helps to create desirable settlements in “which people want to live, work or visit and contribute to ongoing quality of life and well-being”.⁹²

The RDS 2035 and the revised NPF both commit to providing alternative modes of travel to the private car. Within the RDS 2035, there is a recognised need to improve the facilities and investment for walking and cycling infrastructure, linking this to tourism, economic development, health and safer streets. With regard to future housing developments, the strategy highlights the need for transport tests to be carried out which would “assess the potential for integrating land use and public transport and walking and cycling routes to help reduce reliance on the car”.⁹³ Similarly, the NSS highlighted the need to maximise access to cycling and walking as part of a wider sustainable development/sustainable transport agenda. Increasing opportunities for walking

and cycling as part of a wider sustainable transport agenda in the revised NPF is a key aspect of the National Strategic Outcome (NSO) on 'Sustainable Mobility'. As with the RDS 2035, improvements to walking and cycling facilities is linked to health and well-being and is seen as a vital component of future housing development design, supporting the transition to a lower carbon society. The policy pathway for cutting transport emissions, as outlined in the revised NPF, is around the 'Avoid-Shift-Improve' approach, with the 'SHIFT' component relating to "improving the relative attractiveness and accessibility of sustainable travel modes (Public Transport, Cycling and Walking), to provide as many opportunities as possible to shift away from car use e.g. Transport Orientated Development, improved 'Active Travel' infrastructure, and better public realm".⁹⁴

Therefore, a degree of alignment remains across both jurisdictions as they both emphasize the need for promoting walking and cycling. However, over time, the inter-relationship between policies has become clearer and better understood, and so more recent strategies draw out these connections in more detail. This is critical to explaining the rationale behind certain policies and ensuring the public understands why particular approaches are taken and the associated culture changes required.

This analysis also clearly demonstrates the evolutions that have taken place in transport policy in the past ten to fifteen years. Within the RDS 2035, for example, a key-word search will find no reference to such concepts as sustainable transport or active travel, or the development of blueways and peatways.⁹⁵ Indeed, such concepts and initiatives would not be found in the NSS either. However, the revised NPF demonstrates a growing commitment to these agendas; a shift which can be explained by a "co-ordinated approach to the sustainable management of outdoor recreation sites" while also supporting the diversification of rural and regional economies through, for example, their role as part of a wider suite of tourism offerings locally and regionally.⁹⁶ An holistic approach to connectivity is both environmentally sustainable, addressing both biodiversity and climate targets, and achieves maximum impact and connectivity at national and regional level.⁹⁷

In terms of the mutual benefits resulting from cross-border transport policy alignment, the RDS 2035 at a most basic level speaks to the need for accessibility linking economic corridors and gateways and the role of connectivity in boosting “economic performance and competitiveness”.⁹⁸ The revised NPF takes a deeper analysis of the value added by considering the implications of “the island’s growing population together with the continued growth in tourism numbers and freight traffic” and the further demands this will place on transportation infrastructure. The revised NPF also reflects on the need to balance this increased demand with “the need to decarbonise the connected transport networks across the island” and the implications of this for enhanced “joined up planning and investment”.⁹⁹

Health, well-being and quality of life policy

The focus of spatial planning has come full circle from its origins in growing concerns with public health and slum conditions across industrial cities in the 19th Century^{100, 101} to a renewed interest in the relationship between spatial planning and ‘health and well-being’ in the 21st Century.¹⁰² While planning at a local level is becoming more conscious of the need to address inequalities in the quality of places from a health and well-being perspective, so too are national and regional strategies (see Table 3). An analysis of the RDS 2035 and the revised NPF – and the Irish strategies in between – highlights the growing significance and priority attached to the cross-cutting theme of health, well-being and quality of life over the past 14 years. This is particularly evidenced by the doubling and in some cases quintupling of the appearance of such keywords as ‘community’, ‘amenities’, ‘health’, ‘housing’, ‘landscape’, ‘public realm’ and ‘sustainability’.

A core aim of the RDS 2035 is to “promote development which improves the health and well-being of communities”; the rationale being that a “healthy community is better able to take advantage of the economic, social and environmental opportunities which are open to it”.¹⁰³ Achieving improved health and well-being requires the creation of a safe and attractive environment (linked

to a quality public realm), a strong economy, more social and affordable housing, and better access to appropriate services and facilities which, in turn, enable citizens and visitors to be active.

The RDS 2035 makes the connection between improved health and well-being and other priorities such as climate action, waste management and the protection of heritage assets, noting that “effective care of the environment provides very real benefits in terms of improving health and wellbeing, promoting economic development and addressing social problems which result from a poor-quality environment”.¹⁰⁴

	RDS	NSS	NPF - 1	NPF - 2
Quality of Life	9	49	62	63
Community	38	42	84	85
Social Cohesion	3	2	1	2
Social inclusion	4	3	4	4
Integrated communities	0	1	3	3
Equality of opportunity	3	0	2	2
Social sustainability	0	0	0	3
Well-being	6	3	8	13
Health provision/healthcare	23	19	82	128
Housing - supply/affordability	99	142	219	249
Community well-being	0	0	8	1
Community health	0	0	0	0
Community planning	1	0	0	0
Natural assets	3	0	8	7
Amenities	7	13	8	54
Open spaces	4	0	8	3
Green spaces	3	1	8	8
Parks/urban parks	9	7	14	20
Public spaces/public realm	4	4	29	23
High quality public spaces/urban areas	0	1	8	7
Built environment	4	5	8	11
Natural environment	6	2	8	9
Liveability/liveable	2	0	13	12
Attractiveness	2	18	8	13
Landscape(s)	33	33	8	55
Natural landscape/assets/environment	2	1	8	83
Historic landscape/buildings/sites	1	0	8	14
Protected landscape/sites/heritage	1	0	8	15
Distinctive landscape/places	1	0	8	10
Attractive landscapes/environment/places	0	3	8	42
Jobs	21	16	8	68
Connectivity	12	1	62	72
Environment	124	144	230	274
Environmental assets	7	2	2	2
Environmental quality	3	9	6	5
Sustainability	4	4	20	22

Table 3 Frequency with which key elements of a comprehensive health and well-being policy appear in each spatial strategy

(Source: Authors' analysis)

Critically, at the time of its publication, the RDS 2035 supported the Northern Ireland Executive’s principles towards achieving balanced sub-regional growth, with well-being as a core principle (see Figure 3.5). The relationship between health, well-being, quality of life and sustainability/sustainable places was recognised from the outset,¹⁰⁵ with the RDS 2035 noting that sustainable communities are those places where people want to live, work and play, which meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, and contribute to a high quality of life. Furthermore, it notes the importance of regeneration measures and targeting social need and community disadvantage in order to close the gap in quality of life for those living in deprived areas.¹⁰⁶



Figure 3.5 Northern Ireland Executive’s principles of balanced sub-regional growth (Source: Department for Regional Development, 2012: 22)

Both iterations of the NPF have recognised that “the places in which we live, work, and play can affect both our physical and mental well-being”;¹⁰⁷ and that the concept of well-being is not homogenous. In a spatial context, one needs to consider the “wider cultural, environmental, and economic well-being of the local community”.¹⁰⁸ Similar to the RDS 2035, the well-being and quality of life agenda within the revised NPF is closely aligned with design quality, place-

making, transport and connectivity, access to good quality open spaces and, associated with this, the built and cultural heritage.

One of the National Strategic Outcomes (NSO), 'Enhanced Amenities and Heritage' (see Figure 3.3), highlights how good quality of life requires investment in well-designed public realm, which includes public spaces, parks and streets, recreational infrastructure, amenities in rural areas such as national and forest parks, and activity-based tourism and trails such as greenways, blueways and peatways. Access to forestry and woodlands, for example, which can cater for a wide range of activities, has been shown to have "a tangible impact on public health and well-being of both young and old".¹⁰⁹ Indeed, a number of recent studies have highlighted how increased engagement with nature during the COVID-19 pandemic supported many people in maintaining their physical and mental health and well-being during the restrictions on movement.¹¹⁰ This has brought to the fore a number of environmental and land management issues in national spatial planning policy. For instance, there needs to be a balance struck between encouraging people to benefit from the great outdoors whilst protecting nature.

Within the revised NPF, a role for involving "local people in design and management, and the celebration of local heritage" is seen as critical to adding to a 'sense of place' and 'belonging to place'.¹¹¹ Indeed, the revised NPF goes so far as to acknowledge that what constitutes 'quality of life' varies depending on people's circumstances and stage of life and, as such, 'place' is intrinsic to delivering on 'quality of life' (see Figure 3.6):

"the quality of our immediate environment, our ability to access services and amenities, such as education and healthcare, shops and parks, the leisure and social interactions available to us and the prospect of securing employment, all combine to make a real difference to people's lives".¹¹²



Figure 3.6 Elements supporting quality of life as outlined in the revised National Planning Framework

(Source: Government of Ireland, 2018: 80; 2025: 79).

Across all regions, the concept of quality of life within the revised NPF is also closely aligned with:

- Future housing development, including housing choice,
- Infrastructure provision and employment growth,
- Sustainable transport accessibility, rather than unsustainable commuting patterns.¹¹³

The revised NPF acknowledges that “at a time when many people wish to live close to where they work and to the services and amenities necessary to enjoy a good quality of life, they struggle to do so because the urban housing market has become constrained”.¹¹⁴ [Research by Crowley et al.](#) found that compact, mixed-use developments reduce the distances between residential areas and

places of economic (i.e. jobs) and social (i.e. amenities) interest, thereby encouraging greater public and active travel and increasing the competitiveness and convenience attached to walking, cycling and taking the bus. This provides firm support for the land-use development objectives of Project Ireland 2040. More recently, [research by the ICLRD](#) examined the effects of out-commuting on small rural settlements using a case-study approach focused on selected communities from across the island of Ireland (Northern Ireland and Ireland) and the State of Maryland, USA. It investigated the interplay between home, community and workplace, contending that the COVID-19 pandemic, and the far-reaching changes that it wrought in commuting and the home/work relationship, led to an increased understanding of the importance of quality spaces to both our individual health and community well-being.

Very closely aligned to the advancement of health, well-being and quality of life via spatial planning is the inter-relationship with the environment. During- and post-pandemic, the international narrative has positively turned to 'building back better' and creating resilient places and liveable communities grounded in sustainable development principles. The emphasis on health, well-being and quality of life within the revised NPF is reflective of key movements in post-pandemic planning and their embeddedness within national spatial planning frameworks. The revised NPF recognises that "Ireland's landscape offers a wealth of natural and cultural assets which support our quality of life and our visitor economy" and that, as custodians of the environment, we have a duty "to future generations to use these assets responsibly whilst making our existing infrastructure work harder to deliver more benefits".¹¹⁵ The resulting policy framework reflects the importance attached to the role of public spaces in enhancing health and well-being, and the need for urban planners to address spatial and environmental inequalities, as well as health disparities.

This analysis clearly demonstrates the evolutions that have taken place in health, quality of life and well-being policy in the past ten to fifteen years. Within the RDS 2035, for example, a key-word search will find little or no reference to such concepts as community health, community well-being, liveability,

amenities or public realm/public spaces. Indeed, such concepts and initiatives would similarly not be found in high frequency, if at all, in the NSS.

However, the revised NPF demonstrates a growing commitment to these agendas - a shift which can be explained by a growing recognition that:

“how future development in Ireland is planned will continue to be a significant determinant of people’s quality of life. Location and place have an important influence on the quality of life that people enjoy”.¹¹⁶

From an all-island/cross-border perspective, the need to plan for 1.4 million extra people over the next fifteen years or so, and the homes, places of work and infrastructure necessary to support this growth, will require “managing our growth strategically for long term benefit in terms of economic and social development and environmental quality”; “working together for mutual advantage in areas such as economic development and promotion, co-ordination of social and physical infrastructure provision, climate action, biodiversity conservation and other environmental management”.¹¹⁷ This requires the revised NPF and RDS 2035 to be implemented in tandem.

Economic policy

Just as the 1999 ESDP outlined the economic development priorities for the European Union, emphasising the need for balanced and sustainable development across all regions, so too the national spatial strategies of Northern Ireland and Ireland called for economic and social cohesion, and more balanced competitiveness across their respective territories. The RDS 2035, for example, “aims to take account of the economic ambitions and needs of the Region, and put in place spatial planning, transport and housing priorities that will support and enable the aspirations of the Region to be met”.¹¹⁸ In its Foreword, the then Minister for Regional Development, Danny Kennedy MLA, highlights “the important role Belfast plays in generating regional prosperity and that Londonderry is the focus for economic growth in the North West region”.¹¹⁹ He also noted the strategy’s key role in delivering, complementing and/or

informing the spatial aspects of the strategies/plans of all government departments in Northern Ireland. This includes the promotion of “balanced sub-regional growth and recognises the importance of key settlements as centres for growth and investment”.¹²⁰

Similarly, the NSS, when published in 2002, was the then Government’s attempt “to promote balanced regional development”.¹²¹ It was “designed to enable every place in the country to reach its potential, no matter what its size or location” while recognising that “the various regions of the country have different roles” and that a core aim of the NSS was “about making regions competitive according to their strengths”.¹²²

Fast forward 25 years, and a core underpinning of the revised NPF remains that of managing balanced growth across Ireland’s three regions, with the NPF being “the Government’s high-level strategic plan for shaping the future growth and development of our country out to the year 2040”.¹²³ Within the revised NPF, one of the ten National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs) centres on the delivery of “A Strong Economy supported by Enterprise, Innovation and Skills” (see Figure 3.3). Delivering on this outcome is dependent on “creating places that can foster enterprise and innovation and attract investment and talent”. This relies on “recognising and supporting enterprise specialisations and clusters which can drive economic activity in each region by strengthening linkages between companies of different sizes and stages of development” including on a cross-border/all-island basis.¹²⁴

An analysis of the RDS 2035 and the revised NPF – and the Irish strategies in between - demonstrates the critical role that the economy has played in the balanced regional growth and competitiveness agendas of both jurisdictions (see Table 4). This is illustrated by the high frequency of terms such as ‘economy’, ‘economic’, ‘employment’, ‘jobs’, ‘competitive’, ‘innovation’, ‘education’ and ‘regional development’ across each of the documents; albeit the significant fall-off in the use of the latter term from the NSS to the revised NPF is striking.

	RDS	NSS	NPF - 1	NPF - 2
Economy	38	44	103	139
Economic	124	240	200	241
Employment	40	112	167	169
Employment growth	0	10	26	28
Competitive(ness)	23	63	51	50
Unemployment	1	1	2	2
Economic inactivity	2	0	0	0
Rural economies	0	4	9	8
Regional development	20	108	19	29
Jobs	21	16	8	68
Connectivity	12	1	62	72
Potential	70	285	149	179
Business	38	57	34	46
Business park(s)	1	1	2	1
Enterprise(s)	3	77	64	110
Foreign direct investment/Foreign markets	1	7	4	5
Small and Medium Enterprise(s)/SMEs	1	4	3	5
Retail	24	24	10	11
Manufacturing	5	5	3	9
Construction	8	2	8	18
Agriculture/Food/Fishing/Fisheries/Forestry	10	103	130	174
Technology/Technologies	8	25	25	44
Innovation/Innovative	12	28	66	82
Services	99	154	148	215
Tourism	40	99	56	75
Education	11	40	84	107
Skills	3	14	31	34
Collaboration	7	6	7	15
Partnership	3	20	17	21
Carbon footprint/emissions	10	0	5	10
Commuter/Commuting	3	23	35	36
Decarbonisation	1	0	0	11
Circular economy	0	0	14	34
Marine/Marine economy	15	15	35	49

Table 4 Frequency with which key elements of a comprehensive economic policy appear in each spatial strategy

(Source: Authors' analysis)

The RDS 2035 lists eight main aims, all of which either directly or indirectly speak to the importance of the economy, economic growth and tackling regional imbalance in the development of Northern Ireland. The aim of ‘Support strong, sustainable growth for the benefit of all parts of Northern Ireland’ speaks to how a growing regional economy, supported by strong urban and rural areas, “needs a co-ordinated approach to the provision of services, jobs and infrastructure and a focus on co-operation between service providers”.¹²⁵

Several aims speak to the potential of places, whether city, town or village, as drivers and catalysts of strong economic growth, and their importance in being attractive settlements in which to invest, live and work. From a business perspective, the aims ‘Improve connectivity to enhance the movement of people, goods, energy and information between places’ and ‘Take action to reduce our carbon footprint and facilitate adaptation to climate change’ speak to the importance of connectivity in supporting networks of towns, in ensuring linkages between where we live and where we work and providing modal choice, thereby promoting “sustainable construction, consumption and production”.¹²⁶

As a spatial framework, the RDS 2035 identifies three primary tiers of settlement as the focus for economic growth, taking advantage of their location on regional transport networks:

- Belfast Metropolitan Area,
- Derry/Londonderry – as the principal city of the North West, and
- Hubs and Clusters of Hubs – as identified in the 2006 Settlement Information Classification and Analysis Group (SICAG) Report (see Figure 3.7).

Unsurprisingly, given their close relationship to the ESDP and new influences such as Porter’s theory of industrial clusters and competitive advantage,¹²⁷ the focus on ‘clusters’ is evident in both the RDS 2035 and the NSS. Within the RDS 2035, the identification of clusters brings the added value of creating critical mass to attract growth. Services can be shared, rather than duplicated,

across the cluster. Furthermore, these “networks of smaller towns in less densely settled and economically weaker regions”, including on a cross-border basis, can lead to the development of “functional complementarities” which “may be the only possibility for achieving viable markets and maintaining institutions and services which could not be achieved by the towns on their own”.¹²⁸

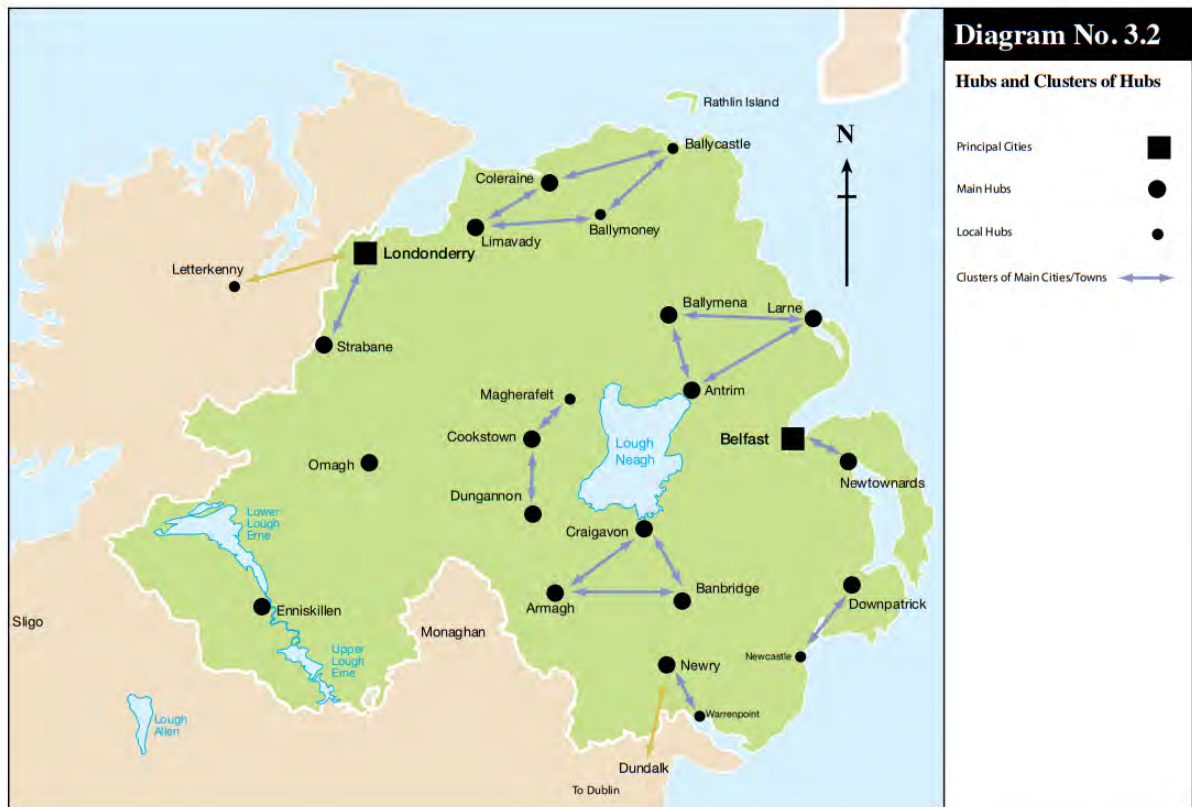


Figure 3.7 Identified hubs and potential cluster of hubs across Northern Ireland (Source: Department for Regional Development, 2012: 73)

While the NSS also speaks to the importance of spatial clusters, its emphasis was more on encouraging clusters of economic activity, the establishment and strengthening of which would “require the support of high quality education, skills and research, together with physical infrastructure”.¹²⁹ Importantly, the spatial policies surrounding the concept of clusters in Ireland was not wholly spatially-blind.¹³⁰ Despite its focus on the interplay between similar type businesses, it recognised that such consolidations happen in “particular geographic areas because of the advantages available locally and the resulting synergies” and that it was critical that the policy landscape for all parts of the

country – both urban and rural – took account of this. The value of economic clusters and enterprise specialisations remains evident in the revised NPF, as it acknowledges their core role in building a strong economy and being “key anchors for sustainable regions”.¹³¹ The NPF advances the agenda by also noting the need for the “development of clusters of technology and expertise, the higher education and skills sector” in order to open up “business opportunities regionally and nationally”.¹³²

Linked to this is the whole area of supporting innovation and technology advancements. Within the RDS 2035, innovations are encouraged around public transport, the use of under-utilised land and buildings, quality design, and work practices. Added to this is the potential of new and developing technologies, particularly in the areas of telecommunications, transportation, and renewables. Together, these offer opportunities to consider flexible working models – indicative of how the RDS was ahead of the curve in particular policy areas – and to reduce carbon emissions. In the revised NPF, places of all scale and density are recognised as important locations of innovation and learning which, in turn, inform inward investment and talent attraction. Through an emphasis on place-based innovation policy “aimed at promoting regional innovation and economic transformation”, the goal is to support regions to focus on, and harness the potentiality of, their key sectoral strengths.¹³³

In terms of cross-border connections, each strategy acknowledges the economic interdependencies between both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. A core aim of the RDS 2035 is to “strengthen links between north and south, east and west, with Europe and the rest of the world”;¹³⁴ building on the connections already in place and promoting the development of the cross-border gateways, in particular Letterkenny-Derry/Londonderry and Newry-Dundalk. While the RDS 2035 was written pre-Brexit and both versions of the NPF post-Brexit, there remains strong alignment between their overall goals and objectives in terms of broader economic development and the all-island economy. The revised NPF calls out both significant opportunities and challenges resulting from Brexit:

“...including the potential for increased economic investment into Ireland, while at the same time continuing to harness the potential of the all-island economy and maintaining the trade, infrastructural and many other linkages with our nearest neighbours”.¹³⁵

This review of the economic policies of the RDS 2035 and the revised NPF highlights the significant evolutions that are taking place – from the role of disruptive technologies to the growth in new economies such as the marine economy and the circular economy (as a direct response to climate change). Whilst recognising the key role of sectors such as services and tourism, and continued investment in these to the island of Ireland economy, it also highlights the shift that has taken place over time from a focus on key sectoral growth areas such as construction, manufacturing and retail, to the adoption of a more holistic approach to economic growth that centres on ‘place’ and its social, economic, environmental and cultural development.

Particularly striking is how use of the terms ‘regional development’ or ‘balanced regional development’ has waned in the intervening 14 years between the adoption of the RDS 2035 and the more recent revised NPF – and yet the concept remains a critical underpinning of both strategies. In the Irish context, the mechanisms for achieving balanced regional development have shifted into the RSEs and other key government policies such as the [White Paper on Enterprise 2022-2030](#).¹³⁶ One of the core aims of the RSEs is to support the sustainable growth strategy outlined in the revised NPF, further emphasising the importance of ‘place’.

Across all strategies, city-based growth and infrastructure delivery are noted as critical to achieving balanced regional development, with compact growth also essential in the Irish context. In their own way, each strategy emphasises the importance of sustainable mobility, regional connectivity, compact urban development, and the delivery of housing at scale to support regional growth, cross-border connections, and climate action. They recognise the need to greater align spatial planning and infrastructure delivery with the overall goal of

creating more liveable, sustainable communities. However, the risk to these goals not being met and the potential for policy divergence to emerge arises due to the datedness of the RDS 2035 vis-à-vis the newly adopted revised NPF.

Conclusion

Twenty-five years on, the journey of strategic spatial planning policy in Northern Ireland and Ireland reveals a gradual maturation from loose, informal and sometimes fragmented sectoral approaches towards a more integrated, planned system whereby spatial planning policy is at the centre of balanced development, place-based investment and an evolving governance model.

Whilst not perfect by any means, the spatial strategies of both jurisdictions were key innovations in strategic planning at a time of unparalleled growth, drawing as they did on early inspiration from the ESDP and the shared post-Belfast/Good Friday Agreement objectives of balanced regional development and competitiveness, and social and economic cohesion. As the strategies were revised and evolved, they demonstrated an increasing convergence in strategic intent, including recognising the importance of cross-border co-operation in addressing shared economic, environmental and infrastructural challenges.

In transport policy, both the RDS 2035 and the revised NPF emphasise the strategic importance of rail, ports, airports and key corridors as drivers of economic competitiveness, social cohesion and cross-border integration. Yet, divergence in policy is increasingly evident in the depth, framing and currency of policy. The RDS 2035 was published over a decade ago, and its policies reflect a rather traditional transport paradigm focused on networks and accessibility while the revised NPF embeds transport within a more holistic agenda encompassing climate action, compact growth, health and quality place-making.

In health, well-being and quality of life policy, both strategies clearly recognise the relationship between spatial planning, health, environmental quality and social equity. However, the revised NPF advances this policy space considerably, placing well-being, liveability and quality of life at the core of

spatial planning policy and explicitly linking them to housing delivery, public realm, access to nature, and place-based design. The revised NPF, given its recent review, demonstrates a more developed post-pandemic perspective, with a strong emphasis on amenities, public spaces, and the differentiated nature of well-being across life stages.

Economic policy across both strategies demonstrates enduring alignment – despite more recent challenges of Brexit and geo-political uncertainties. Both strategies position cities, key settlements and clusters as engines of growth and recognise the value of cross-border economic interdependencies. They both emphasise connectivity, skills and enterprise as the foundations of prosperity. However, the revised NPF takes this a step further by advancing a place-based, innovation-led, and climate responsive economic model, with emerging priorities in areas such as the circular economy, decarbonisation and the marine economy more explicitly articulated.

What is becoming increasingly clear is that while the innovativeness of both sets of strategies – across their various iterations – has ensured broad-based alignment in key policy areas, the increasing temporal gap between the two strategies is heightening the risk that common objectives may increasingly be pursued through divergent – and dated – spatial policy pathways. The contemporary challenge facing the spatial strategies of both Northern Ireland and Ireland lies not in the absence of a strategic vision but in ensuring effective implementation, monitoring and sustained political commitment.

This has implications as to whether strategic spatial planning policy across the island of Ireland can continue to act in a largely coherent way that fosters mutual benefit. It definitely raises questions around the need for an updated spatial strategy in Northern Ireland to ensure that policy alignment remains operational, rather than conceptual.

4. Strategic cross-border spatial planning and co-operation on the island of Ireland: research findings

Understanding how stakeholders experience, interpret, and engage in spatial planning across territorial boundaries is central to revealing both the potential and the persistent realities that shape cross-border working. Different stakeholders, including policymakers, practitioners, and cross-border agencies, occupy different institutional contexts and cultures, and bring distinct expectations, capacities, and priorities to the fore.

This qualitative study adopts a multi-method research design in which questionnaires, interviews, and a survey were deliberately aligned around a shared set of core questions, whilst being tailored to distinct participant groups. This approach ensured conceptual consistency across data collection instruments, enabling comparability of responses, whilst also allowing each method to be adjusted to the expertise, roles, and perspectives of different stakeholder groupings.

We distributed questionnaires to local planning authorities and government departments in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, as well as to the Regional Assemblies in Ireland, and cross-border agencies. This provided structured insights from institutional and policy-oriented actors. We conducted semi-structured interviews with a more targeted group of current, or past, chief planners and North-South bodies, allowing for in-depth exploration of specialist knowledge, interpretive perspectives, and contextual nuance. In parallel, we distributed a survey during the RTPI Northern Ireland annual conference, thus capturing a wider range of experiences and practices within the field. By posing broadly comparable questions across these instruments, the methodology facilitated triangulation of findings across governance, expert, and practitioner perspectives. At the same time, the differentiated targeting of each method enhanced the relevance and richness of the data, strengthening the overall validity and robustness of the research.

Chapters 4 and 5 give a presentation and examination of the research findings. In this section, we focus on the identified:

- Opportunities and benefits of cross-border co-operation on the island of Ireland and the extent to which it takes places at present,
- Key challenges to cross-border spatial planning,
- Perspectives on the degree of alignment and divergence between the spatial strategies of the island of Ireland, and
- Future aspirations and requirements for sustaining and enhancing current practices and policies.

The findings highlight the mechanisms that enable co-operation, such as interpersonal relationships, established partnership networks, and shared projects, as well as the barriers that impede it, including differing regulatory frameworks and resource constraints. By analysing practical experiences, the research reveals not only where opportunities for greater alignment exist, but also the obstacles that persist despite formal commitments to co-operation.

Opportunities, benefits and examples of strategic spatial planning

The interviewees and questionnaire respondents proposed several opportunities for, and benefits of, cross-border co-operation on the island of Ireland, drawing on a wide range of experiences, projects and scales.

Opportunities

Geographically, the small size of the island was viewed as advantageous in terms of fostering learning and tackling shared issues, noting that:

“we're part of the one island geographically and there are, you know, a huge amount of functional and other linkages, economic and other linkages which determine/influence spatial patterns of spatial development.” (Interviewee 4)

“there's definitely opportunities for us to learn from each other in terms of best practice and what's being done in each jurisdiction.” (Interviewee 3)

The relatively small size of the spatial planning community was also felt to engender a supportive environment and facilitate opportunities for mutual support, meaning:

“there's always a degree of professional warmth or candour.”
(Interviewee 4)

“I think there are big opportunities for both sides to work together better and more cohesively. I think officials generally have a willingness and openness to do things jointly and, and even Ministers do as well... there's no hard ‘no’s’ to do things generally.” (Interviewee 6)

The interviewees tended to place emphasis on the value of informal processes and relationships for providing opportunities to collaborate, as opposed to more formalised structures or requirements. The importance of personal connections was repeatedly stressed:

“You can set up all the structures you want, but if you've got good sort of personal relationships and good personal connections, not saying that it makes everything, you know, rosy, but at least you've got a name and a phone number and a connection on a professional basis that you can speak to somebody about and engage with.” (Interviewee 2)

“if they develop sort of organically as there's a shared common need, they tend to stick around and that's ultimately what we want to see, you know.” (Interviewee 6)

The role of professional networks in terms of facilitating lesson learning and networking is an important one:

“We're all members of the RTPI or IPI [Irish Planning Institute], ...there's a sharing of professional expertise and just networking, which means that you meet people and they're then it makes it much easier then when you need to speak to people.” (Interviewee 2)

“we do tend to interact very well with each other informally and there's lots of structures for that, you know, through the professional bodies and various conferences and events...” (Interviewee 4)

Interviewees saw the opportunity to share or ‘pool’ resources, primarily funding, as particularly important for Northern Ireland, in terms of progressing infrastructure projects which would otherwise not be feasible:

“the only way that citizens, and indeed maybe Departments, would actually recognise the value and the potential of cross-border, is through the investment process.” (Interviewee 5)

Interviewees identified future opportunities for policy learning in relation to the expansion of renewable energy, the decarbonisation of the residential sector, and the need to tackle shared environmental challenges on an all-island basis. While these insights were especially prominent among actors in Northern Ireland, the learning process was recognised as reciprocal, with an interviewee from Ireland stating:

“from an environmental assessment and climate policy perspective, we're making, you know, trying to make the most of those connections to be able to look at it on a much more strategic and all-island basis.” (Interviewee 3)

Benefits

Questionnaire respondents were asked to select from a predetermined list of benefits and to add any additional perceived benefits. The questionnaire responses (Figure 4.2) demonstrate a healthy spread of benefits of cross-border co-operation, articulated across social, economic, environmental, and institutional dimensions. Cross-border co-operation was understood to generate significant social and community gains by 'strengthened community and social cohesion' (82%), but less so in terms of 'improved public services' (55%). Other notable benefits were associated with enhanced innovation and research (64%) and policy learning and transfer (82%), demonstrating strong knowledge-based gains. These highlight the value of cross-border engagement as a mechanism for mutual learning and diffusion of best practice that has the potential to generate enduring improvements in institutional resilience and progress towards strategic coherence across the island. Many respondents (64%) agreed that cross-border collaboration has environmental benefits in terms of stronger environmental management and/or protection. From an economic perspective, respondents emphasised 'increased competitiveness' (64%) but fewer agreed that it creates economies of scale (45%).

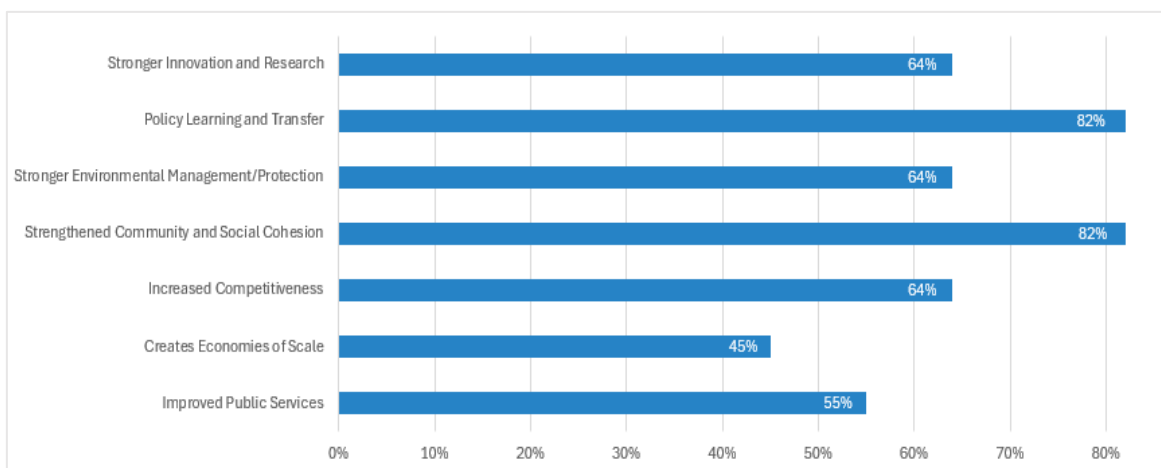


Figure 4.1 Benefits of cross-border co-operation on the island of Ireland

The interviews identified a range of benefits of cross-border spatial planning. Interviewees referenced many existing or anticipated infrastructure projects to

illustrate the ways in which cross-border co-operation has (or will) generated benefits for specific localities, as well as for the regions more broadly. These included cross-border greenways and blueways as a means of promoting active travel, the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, the North-South Interconnector (a project which will connect the electricity grids in Ireland and Northern Ireland), the A5 Western Transport Corridor project, and the Narrow Water Bridge (a new bridge under construction across Carlingford Lough, linking County Down (NI) and County Louth (IE)). However, interviewees referred to the NWSGP most frequently, as an example of existing cross-border co-operation:

“I don't think the North West Strategic Growth Partnership gets sufficient recognition for the seriously sort of broad and deep collaborative work that's going on in the region... built up over many years, but fostered through basis of very good relationships.” (Interviewee 2)

Across the interviews, participants emphasised the importance of leveraging established successes, such as the North West City Region (NWCR), whilst simultaneously widening the strategic lens beyond the cross-border region, which they regarded as an area where co-operation is already structurally embedded:

“isn't cross-border cooperation an absolutely fantastic idea? And isn't the North West City Region a really great idea? Now let's go and look at Cork.” (Interviewee 1)

“I suppose that's the type of thing we're trying to promote and probably using that plan-led approach, informed by data of course, as an opportunity to develop those [and] the ability for the planning system to play a really important role in development generally on an all-island basis.” (Interviewee 3)

Examples

Questionnaire respondents were asked to rate the extent to which their organisation engages in cross-border collaboration on spatial planning (Table 5) across a range of governance scales. The findings illustrate that whilst, many participants report that cross-border collaboration is happening, the extent of this collaboration is 'uneven'.

Degrees of collaboration in spatial planning	Examples
Extensive	formal relationships, working together regularly, joint decision-making, possible sharing of resources
Moderate	semi-formal relationships, participation in joint studies/projects, opportunities to exchange ideas/feedback
Some	communication channels available, consult when required
Limited	informal relationships, interaction/information only when necessary
No collaboration	

Table 5 Degrees of collaboration

Figure 4.1 suggests that higher governance scales (Regional Assemblies and Central Government) tend to have lower 'extensive' collaboration and more 'limited' or 'no collaboration'. In comparison, lower levels of governance, most notably local communities and cross-border agencies/networks, experience 'some' or 'moderate' collaboration, but rarely 'extensive'. A more mixed picture is revealed for local authorities which have relatively higher levels of 'extensive' and 'moderate' collaboration compared to other scales. A notable percentage of the questionnaire respondents reported that no collaboration takes place at any scale. The findings thus reflect considerable heterogeneity. The questionnaire respondents are affiliated with a range of organisations and engage at multiple governance scales, therefore their perspectives may reflect differing institutional contexts, priorities and experiences.

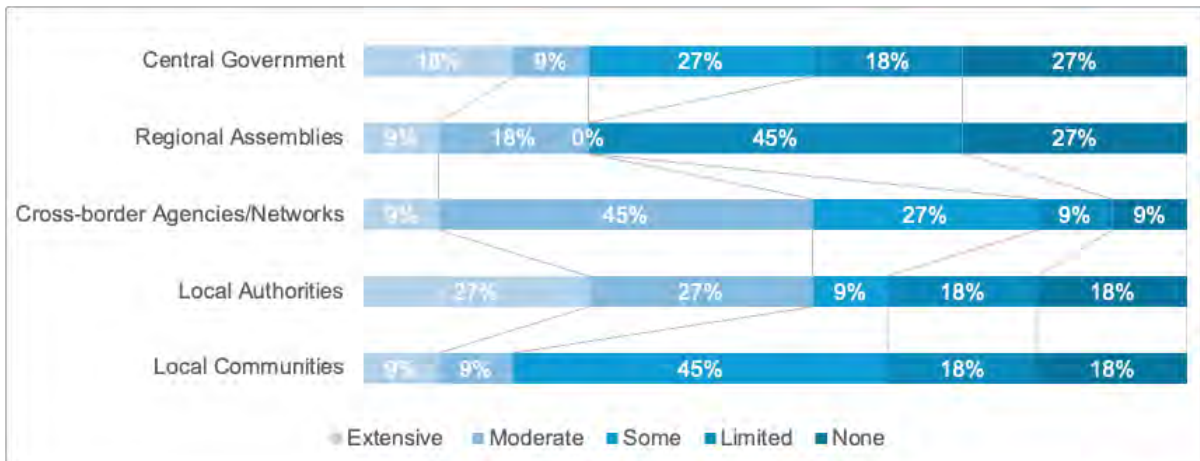


Figure 4.2 Extent of collaboration across governance scales

Questionnaire respondents were asked to share examples of cross-border collaboration with the different stakeholder groups/governance levels outlined in Figure 4.1. At the local authority level, respondents referred to existing partnership arrangements, reflecting the contextual drivers for cross-border spatial planning. For example, the North West Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP) was highlighted as “a unique platform for strategic spatial planning and Brexit mitigation measures”. Another respondent referred to the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Louth County Council and Newry, Mourne, and Down District Council. The MOU sets out the detailed workings which seek to support and promote the economic development and competitiveness of the region.

Some respondents highlighted specific cross-border projects e.g. the Sligo, Leitrim, Northern Counties (SLNCR) Greenway project, and the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor Network (DBEC) to demonstrate collaborative working in practice. The role of Peace and Peace Plus funded projects was also identified as a driver of cross-border collaboration due to the requirement for joint participation and project implementation of such initiatives. Others referred to particular cross-border agencies as providing a platform for collaboration, including the DBEC Partnership, ICLRD, ICBAN, and Cross Border Development Plan Group, as well as higher education institutions.

Study participants from government departments tended to refer to official structures such as the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) and the British-Irish Council (BIC), or legal requirements such as the completion of Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs), as examples of cross-border 'collaboration'. The interviewees also outlined that the Departments meet regularly through formal processes and undertake various study trips etc. which helps facilitate learning, not just between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, but with other UK jurisdictions and elsewhere, with one respondent stating:

“we have a very good network and I regularly engage with my counterparts.” (Interviewee 3)

Here the role of local authorities as pivotal actors in facilitating cross-border collaboration and in driving the development and implementation of cross-border initiatives was emphasised. Indeed, many of the interviewees suggested that collaboration at the local government level yields more tangible practical benefits than high-level Ministerial dialogue:

“Local leadership is absolutely key... Departments needed to realise that the lever sat with them.” (Interviewee 1)

“There were people who were willing to put their time and efforts... they shared a common view that this would actually be of value.” (Interviewee 5)

Key challenges for strategic spatial planning

Both interview and questionnaire findings identified structural and cultural barriers to effective cross-border spatial planning.

Two distinct systems

In terms of structural barriers, one of the most consistent challenges mentioned is the difficulty of aligning planning efforts across two distinct legal and policy systems:

“There are challenges when you're trying to do it on a cross-border basis and obviously working across different legislative codes and policy codes.” (Interviewee 3)

“the jurisdictional, the different legislative bases, political differences, you know, presents fairly serious challenge.”
(Interviewee 2)

At least one interviewee suggested that planning professionals are generally well-versed in their own regulatory environment but lack substantive insight into neighbouring planning systems:

“people are very familiar with their own systems, how their own systems work, where their money comes from, what their lines are reporting, or what their lines of communication. But whenever you're looking at trying to do things with two jurisdictions together, there's not the level of awareness across jurisdictions you know.” (Interviewee 6)

A lack of understanding of the legislative frameworks, policy processes, or decision-making structures of adjacent jurisdictions can present several barriers to effective cross-border co-operation, including prolonged project development, administrative bottlenecks, and incompatible proposals. Limited knowledge of neighbouring regimes also makes it difficult to align development plans, environmental assessments, or infrastructure strategies/projects. Indeed, the interviewees noted the absence of a coherent, shared strategic vision or delivery plan across the border:

“We kind of do is go away and do our own thing and then come together and try and tie the two together... It’s vaguely human, but it looks quite strange.” (Interviewee 1)

“There wasn’t that kind of systematic approach... even though it was acknowledged and there absolutely should have been.” (Interviewee 9)

‘Institutional and administrative differences’ and ‘different legislative and policy frameworks’ also emerged as key barriers (with 82% of the respondents selecting these options) in the questionnaire (Figure 4.3).

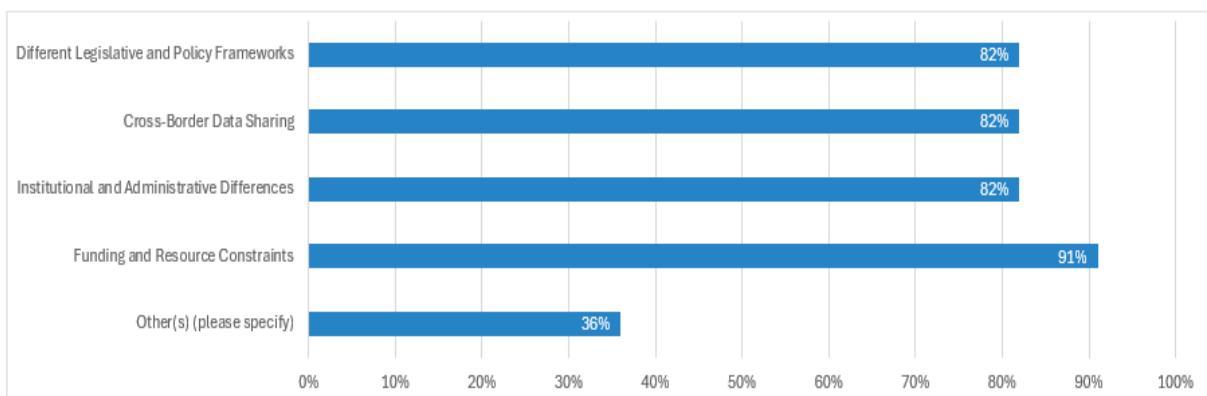


Figure 4.3 Key challenges for cross-border collaboration on the island of Ireland

Resource constraints

The majority of questionnaire respondents (91%) cited ‘funding and resource constraints’ as a key barrier (Figure 4.3) to cross-border collaboration. Whilst interviewees also frequently cited resource constraints, including institutional capacity, limited funding and staff, as barriers to sustained cross-border engagement, they placed less emphasis on them in comparison to other barriers.

“There’s less opportunities I think because of the lack of funding up North and there's just less schemes.” (Interviewee 8)

“You can't be at every space, everywhere, everything all at once... the core remit has to come first.” (Interviewee 7)

Lack of data harmonisation

Interviewees perceived that the lack of harmonised data collection and analysis across jurisdictions undermines evidence-based planning on a cross-border basis:

“there are still practical issues around the comparability of data both sides of the border, the different census periods, the collection of different sets of data which make cross-border comparisons [difficult].” (Interviewee 2)

“...there were significant data mismatches and gaps because of the different statistical information gathering systems and timeframes and all of that.” (Interviewee 4)

Cross-border data sharing also emerged as a key barrier in the questionnaire (Figure 4.3). Questionnaire respondents identified the lack of an up-to-date spatial strategy for Northern Ireland, reflecting the Irish policy updates and taking account of the implications of various contemporary social, political, and environmental issues and targets (e.g. Brexit and climate action), as a potential barrier.

Cultural differences

Beyond technical and political issues, cultural perceptions and mindsets were seen as major obstacles to effective collaboration, particularly amongst the interviewees:

“The main constraint sometimes is mental barriers... not just about North aligning with South but also the other way – it's a two-way street.” (Interviewee 10)

“start to emphasise in some people's minds the fact that these are areas that function as an area regardless of the border.”
(Interviewee 2)

While planning frameworks and strategies exist, respondents perceived that they often fail to translate into meaningful action or investment, and that government appetite for another strategy at this time is limited:

“The National Planning Framework talks about the border areas... It doesn't actually do much about it to be perfectly honest.” (Interviewee 1)

“There's only one thing they're interested in at the moment and it's delivery... the ambition around medium to long term strategies... it's not great.” (Interviewee 4)

Political environment

Political dynamics, including Brexit and changing leadership, were seen as major influences on the feasibility of, and approach to, cross-border planning:

“The biggest barrier is political will... we have to be respectful of other sides – political piece still remains and is very important.”
(Interviewee 10)

“I think a lot of that has to do with political will and a lot of that has to do with personalities. So as people move on, it's the ability to sustain it.” (Interviewee 9)

Similarly, questionnaire respondents commented that the political environment of Northern Ireland, political will, and gaining 'buy-in' are additional barriers to cross-border collaboration. They cited Brexit as a particular challenge to the delivery of services/trade, environmental legislation, and access to funding.

The questionnaire respondents believe Brexit has had a more negative, than positive, impact on cross-border collaboration (Figure 4.4). However, a significant proportion (36%) selected a neutral stance, suggesting a layered and multifaceted understanding of the implications of Brexit. Such nuanced perceptions were identified in the interviews. In particular, the interviewees stated that Brexit has led to uncertainty which was seen as detrimental to development and planning on both sides of the border:

“The worst thing for development is the uncertainty.”

(Interviewee 9)

“Brexit has been going on for a long time and there's been a lot of uncertainty for a long time.” (Interviewee 7)

In addition to this uncertainty, Brexit introduced new rules and administrative burdens, especially around environmental assessments and trade, which has, or has the potential to, hinder cross-border co-operation:

“there are some practical and logistical challenges around for example, now operating as a non-EU member state, operating under different rules from an environmental assessment perspective for example.” (Interviewee 3)

However, there was an agreement across the interviewees that pre-existing cross-border relationships helped mitigate the otherwise potentially negative impacts of Brexit. Some interviewees felt it strengthened co-operation or that there was a renewed determination because of Brexit:

“If anything actually there was more engagement with colleagues down South because of Brexit...almost a kind of a renewed determination to sort of make sure that there was that close working [relationship] and if there were any kind of impacts that somehow we would be able to get around them and manage them.” (Interviewee 8)

“We’ve all worked very hard to make sure that we’re still all engaging.” (Interviewee 3)

“Cooperation is happening again pretty routinely.” (Interviewee 7)

“Brexit was a shock to the system and made everybody think, well, we can't afford not to co-operate. If you live in a border region, functionally we can't afford not to co-operate, whether it's on planning or transport or health or education or whatever.” (Interviewee 2)

Rather than preventing cross-border co-operation, new ways of working emerged, emphasising the importance of adaptative forms of governance:

“we're not unused to moving and adapting to new sets of rules and regulations.” (Interviewee 3)

“the co-operation still continues... we share the island and there's always practical co-operation going on both within our institution and outside.” (Interviewee 7)

Yet, at the same time, some felt that government officials became more cautious in public discourse due to political sensitivities:

“Fear of actually putting their foot in the middle of a very sensitive debate.” (Interviewee 5)

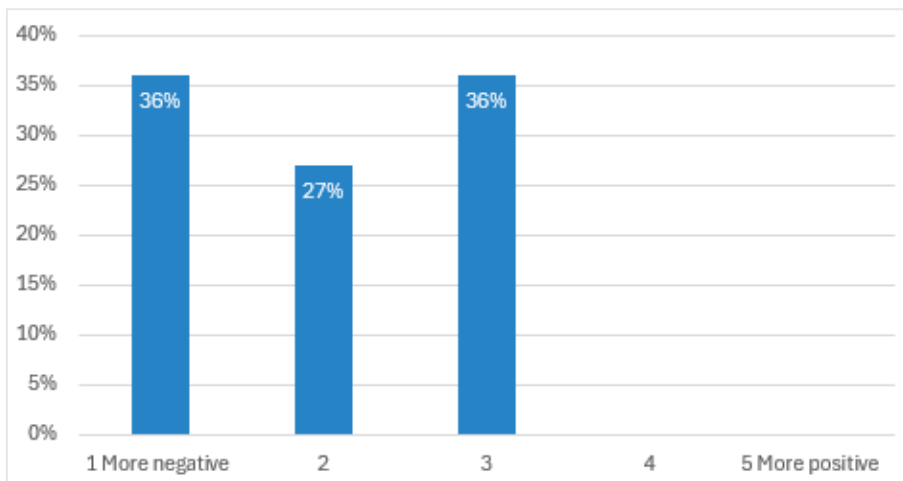


Figure 4.4 Perceived impact of Brexit on cross-border collaboration

Some interviewees felt ‘disruptions’, such as Brexit, the Trump administration, and civil unrest in Gaza and Ukraine, have taken the focus away from other aspects of cross-border co-operation, including the Framework for Co-operation:

“governments and politicians are grappling with at the moment with many disruptor factors around is just creating a lot of turbulence, creating a lot of interference around getting in, getting back into that kind of thinking, you know.” (Interviewee 4)

Perspectives of alignment and divergence

The interviewees all agreed that the spatial strategies are in general alignment with each other, particularly in terms of their underlying foundation in sustainable development. However, the interviewees also admitted to possessing limited knowledge of the strategy from outside their region, highlighting that the actual degree of alignment – and divergence – is unknown, or untested, to date.

“I’d be surprised, you know, if there wasn’t a very, very good fit.”
(Interviewee 4)

“I think the greater the integration between the spatial strategies, the better.” (Interviewee 8)

Conference delegates at the RTPI NI annual conference were asked to reflect on the extent to which they believe there is policy alignment between the RDS 2035 and revised NPF (Figure 4.5).

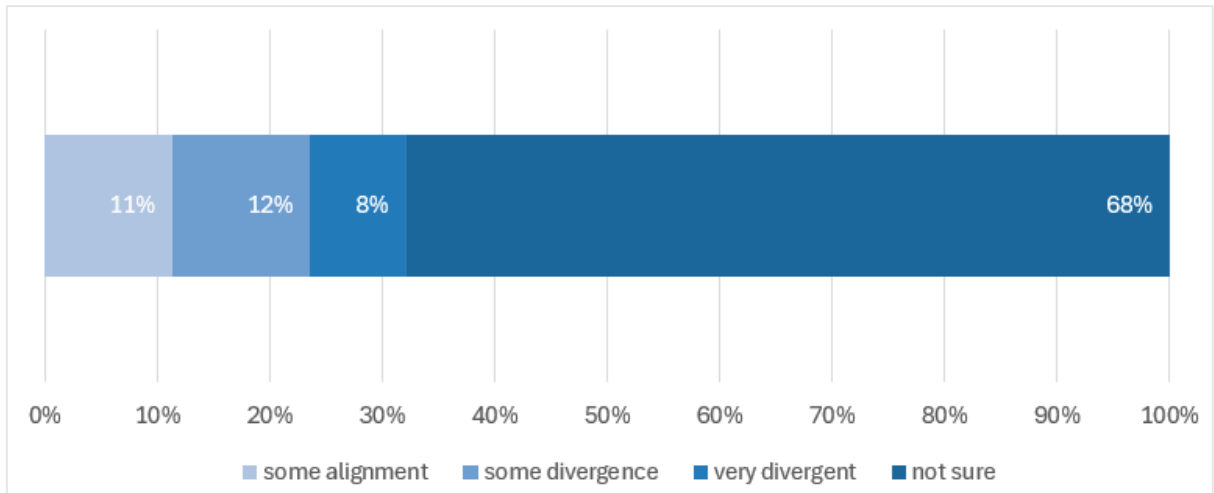


Figure 4.5 Perceived extent of alignment across the RDS 2035 and the revised NPF

The majority responded ‘not sure’ (68%) and no one selected ‘very aligned’. Only 11% believe there is ‘some alignment’, while the rest voted some divergence (12%) or very divergent (8%) (Figure 4.5).

Questionnaire respondents were asked the extent to which they felt the spatial strategies were aligned in relation to various policy areas (Figure 4.6). The responses indicate a low presumed level of significant alignment (i.e. very aligned) across the policy domains. Rather, the findings suggest there is some alignment between the RDS 2035 and revised NPF on issues of transport (82%) climate change and adaptation (73%), economic development (73%), environmental protection and biodiversity (64%) and health, well-being and quality of life (55%). Housing received a more mixed response, with the majority of respondents perceiving the spatial strategies to have some divergence (36%) or be very divergent (10%) on this policy domain. This was the only category which some respondents selected ‘very divergent’.

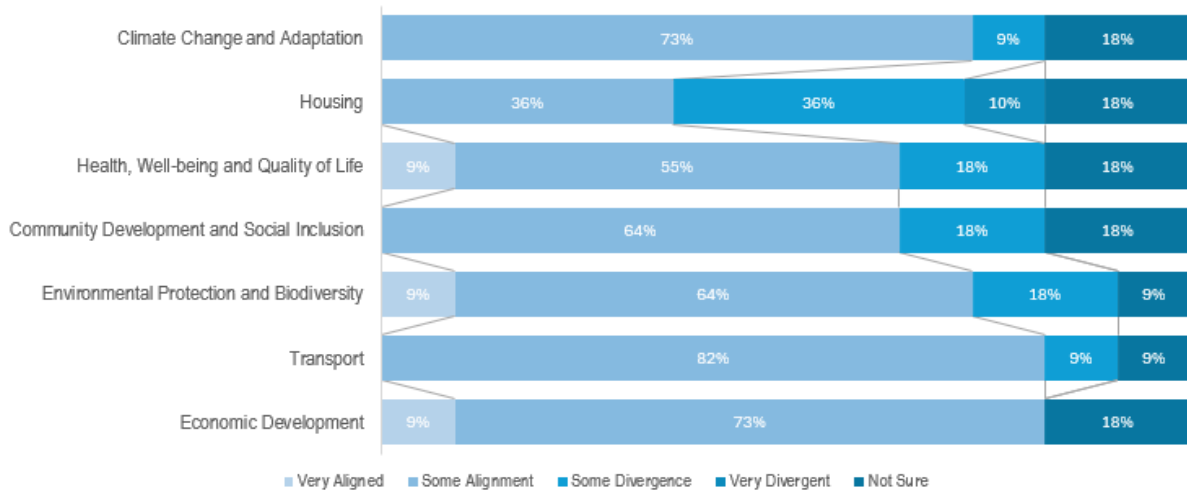


Figure 4.6 Degree of alignment across various policy domains within the RDS 2035 and the revised NPF

Conference delegates were also asked to select which policy areas they believe are most aligned between the RDS 2035 and the revised NPF (Figure 4.7). The majority of delegates (28%) voted ‘climate change and adaptation’, followed by ‘economic development’ (23%) and ‘transport’ (20%). The policy theme perceived to be least aligned was ‘health, well-being and quality of life’ (4%).

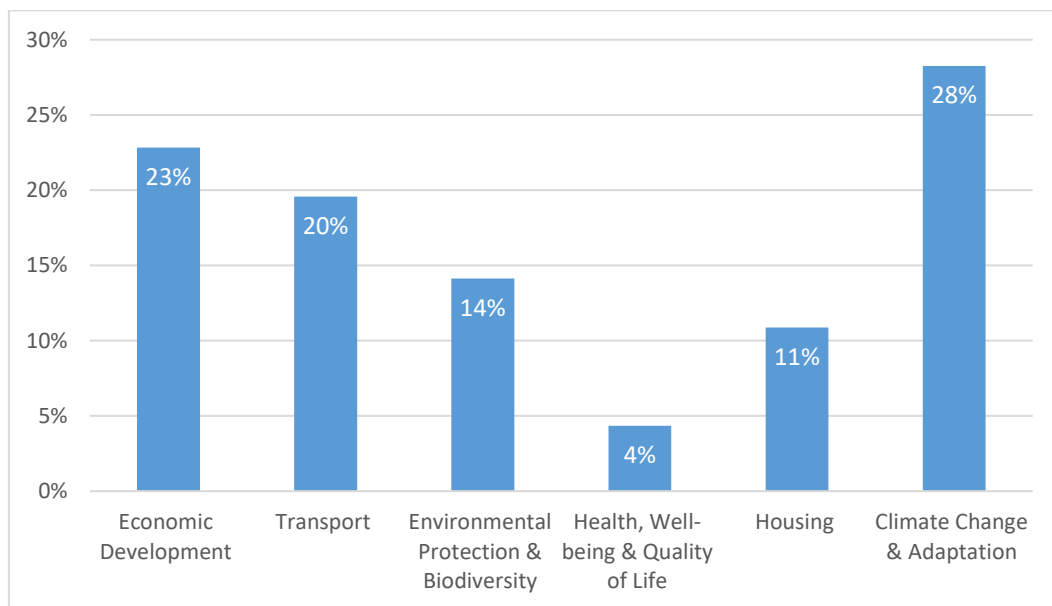


Figure 4.7 Perceived degree of alignment across various policy domains of the RDS 2035 and the revised NPF – RTPI Northern Ireland conference delegate responses

We identified different 'degrees' of alignment across the findings:

- Project-level,
- Strategic co-existence, and
- Reflexive alignment.

Project-level alignment

In demonstrating alignment, the interviewees tended to draw upon specific cross-border/all-island past, present and future projects and initiatives which have 'knitted' the strategies together. These included the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, the DBEC Partnership, the N-S interconnector, Narrow Water Bridge, and the proposed A5 Western Corridor. Thus, the key drivers for alignment include the desire to support long-term co-ordination of transboundary transport networks (rail, road, energy grids), avoiding duplication of investments and enabling economies of scale.

"it's very much about working in co-operation with relevant departments in Northern Ireland and supporting, you know, collaboration and promotion of all-island initiatives." (Interviewee 3)

The development, growth, and success of the North West City Region was referred to by all of the interviewees as a successful example of cross-border working, with some suggesting it should be further supported by any future iteration of the spatial strategies, not just in terms of the region itself, but also any lessons and practices that could be taken forward elsewhere on the island.

At the smaller scale, efforts to align the strategies during their development stage were noted:

"there was lots of, if you like, good technical work, you know around ensuring that the mapping, the imagery, you know the

concepts that were in the RDS were, you know, appropriately reflected from an ROI perspective.” (Interviewee 4)

Strategic coexistence

The interviewees were more likely to state that the review of the NPF was informed by the RDS 2035 as opposed to tying themselves to it. Whilst the strategies may not be specifically aligned on all aspects, they are not in conflict with each other either:

“Certainly in my time it never felt like there was a there was a conflict... it always felt like there was plenty of opportunity and scope for that sort of collaborative approach.” (Interviewee 8)

Various interviewees mentioned the section on ‘Working with our Neighbours’ in the revised NPF as a demonstration of effort to sustain and further enhance compatibility across the jurisdictions. Despite the inherent tensions of working across borders and the cultural sensitivities of doing so on the island of Ireland, we found that this section was not overly contentious, due to the well-established tradition of cross-border working and the existence of cross-border initiatives or projects:

“that part of the NPF was probably one of the least contentious pieces to write because everybody agreed with it from the very get go. And you know it naturally flowed out of the knowledge bank that we had from the engagement down through the years – and acknowledging of, or being aware of, you know, long held planning concepts North of the border, whether it is in terms of the North West Gateway or it's in relation to the Dublin Belfast Corridor, you know, areas that you would want to protect or manage carefully.” (Interviewee 4)

Whilst the jurisdictions have many shared ambitions, opportunities and challenges, the interviewees emphasised the role of politics and that policy priorities will be determined by the respective governments:

“the approach we took on the NPF revision that was very much informed by the RDS and our engagement and collaboration, but I suppose we were very keen to progress the policy initiatives on the basis of what the, you know, the intentions of the government were, and reflect those as appropriate.”

(Interviewee 3)

Reflexive alignment

The original development of the NSS was informed by the RDS:

“the significance of the RDS being in place before the NSS shouldn't be underestimated or understated...it was in many ways, you know, a really, really good template to work off.”

(Interviewee 3).

However, the Northern Ireland interviewees, in particular, highlighted specific areas where greater alignment with the revised NPF would now be advantageous for the region, particularly in regard to renewable energy. A reflexive process has thus emerged, wherein the RDS helped shape the NSS and subsequently the NPF, but the RDS now needs to be revised in light of the publication of the revised NPF. However, alignment for the sake of alignment should be avoided:

“As kids, you fold up a piece of paper and you draw a head and someone else draws a body and someone else draws a leg. It's vaguely human, but it looks quite strange, right? And I think there's a danger we get into that kind of space with it. We're trying to retrofit strategies to a certain degree.” (Interviewee 1)

Alignment between the strategies should thus be meaningful and present real opportunity for mutual benefits but also reflect contextual differences and priorities.

Summary of barriers to alignment

Commonality across fundamental principles is identified, but there is divergence in how these are translated or reflected in wider government policy for their implementation. Institutional positioning and political context were highlighted as important to the effectiveness of the spatial strategies. Some interviewees felt that the RDS 2035 has largely been regarded as a 'Department for Infrastructure strategy', with other Departments not taking full cognisance of it.

“Had it sat more clearly at the centre being driven by the Executive, I think it might have had more of an impact... being seen to be driven by a Minister from a minority party... was always going to be a challenge.” (Interviewee 1)

In contrast, interviewees perceived that the revised NPF has secured greater political buy-in from different departments and sectors because of the political structures in place.

Interviewees highlighted a number of stressors as potentially problematic for continued alignment of the current spatial strategies, including Brexit:

“obviously, things have happened in between – Brexit for example – and we’ve had to adapt and move with all of that.” (Interviewee 3)

Many of the interviewees highlighted the need to update the RDS 2035 to ensure continued alignment into the future:

“It’s a good bit out of date in a couple of areas, but the broad concepts are fundamentals. They are mirrored in the, in the

NPF whose, if you like, empirical and statistical underpinning is very much up to date.” (Interviewee 4)

Summary of areas of divergence

Key points of divergence identified include the different legislative underpinnings, political priorities and processes, and methods of implementation. With regards to implementation, all Northern Ireland interviewees lamented the fact that the revised NPF, unlike the RDS 2035, is supported by the National Development Plan (NDP). One interviewee referred to the different timescales involved in the statutory review of the strategies, noting the protracted review timescale experienced in Northern Ireland.

Future deviation may be experienced given that any future iteration of the RDS will not need to align with EU priorities and agendas. Interviewees believe this to represent a key challenge:

“there's only so far that both those documents can go in a sense that they're being prepared under different legislation.”
(Interviewee 2)

“when you're dealing with cross-border policy development where very much the same issues may be at play on either side of the border and it's, ultimately, it's a decision for the respective governments, as to you know, what the policy approach should be.” (Interviewee 3)

Interviewees were aware that the revised NPF, because it has been recently updated, addresses more contemporary issues and evidence pertaining to, for example, the climate crisis and associated targets for renewable energy, demographic change, and housing need.

Towards an all-island planning strategy?

From a spatial planning perspective, all interviewees concurred that an integrated, all-island strategy would be advantageous, with some stating:

“...at the end of the day like it's just an artificial border on the island. So you know whatever the particular issue that you're looking at, whether it's corridors or hubs or you know, sustainable development, climate change, it's the same one side of the border than the other... So all of these different issues...They're not really affected by the border.” (Interviewee 8)

“from a professional planning point of view on an island this size, to be not to have a cohesive spatial framework for the entire island doesn't really make any sense. But I wouldn't underestimate the political and, you know, administrative, logistical hurdles that would be presented by that.” (Interviewee 2)

“Makes absolute sense for an island this size to have that level of structured and integrated approach to spatial planning.” (Interviewee 9)

However, interviewees acknowledged the difficulty in achieving this, particularly in terms of political barriers:

“the potential for that [all-island planning strategy] is about leadership and political leadership, and if there's a political will to do that, it will happen. And if there's not a political will, it won't happen.” (Interviewee 9)

“from a purely planning, professional planning point of view, it would be hard to say that there shouldn't be a more formalised

process. But I think that the legislative, probably the political hurdles would be tough to tackle, but doesn't mean to say that we shouldn't try." (Interviewee 2)

"it will take an awful lot of work to minimise the, or to neutralise the concerns that might develop around that on both sides of our traditional community divides." (Interviewee 1)

As means of overcoming potential resistance to an 'all-island' plan, some suggested the potential to look at regions, taking inspiration from the NWCR, but also the regional assembly structure in Ireland. In all, there is strong agreement on greater alignment but also acknowledgement that the strategies are still to reflect contextual specificities:

"I still think it's important that there is a clear delineation between the two jurisdictions and their decision-making and, you know, but I think there is certainly scope for greater alignment than there was 25 years ago." (Interviewee 5)

Key findings

The findings reveal a wide range of opportunities for, and benefits of, cross-border spatial planning on the island of Ireland. However, levels of co-operation are variable across governance scales, and there are persistent structural, political and cultural challenges to be overcome. The degree of alignment between the RDS 2035 and revised NPF is also regarded as 'uneven' with risk of further divergence.

Perceived opportunities and benefits of cross-border co-operation

- Strong foundations for co-operation already exist on the island of Ireland: participants highlighted long standing relationships, a culture of collaboration, and clear willingness to work together.

- The extent of co-operation varies widely: whilst many participants report that cross-border collaboration is happening, the extent of this collaboration is 'uneven', ranging from simple information exchange to participation in, and delivery of, joint projects. The most substantial forms of collaboration are perceived to be driven primarily by local authorities, and the importance of local leadership was emphasised.
- Learning from existing projects and partnerships is a key asset: participants called upon a range of examples of cross-border co-operation on the island of Ireland to demonstrate collaborative working in practice. Participants referred to the North West City Region as a leading example to be sustained and replicated elsewhere.
- Strong working relationships: co-operation requires both formal structures (e.g. the NSMC, BIC and shared professional networks) to provide legitimacy, accountability, and scale, and informal relationships to enable trust, flexibility, and momentum. Success depends on the strength of both.
- Unlocking the benefits of co-operation: the key perceived benefits of cross-border co-operation in spatial planning include the sharing (or 'pooling') of resources, policy learning (especially in regard to renewable energy and decarbonisation), and strengthened community and social cohesion. Participants also emphasised the place-specific benefits of cross-border co-operation for local areas/communities alongside broader regional outcomes.

Key challenges to cross-border spatial planning

- Institutional compatibility: despite a shared willingness to co-operate on spatial planning issues, persistent structural barriers remain, including differing legal systems, policy processes, and decision-making structures.
- Funding and resource pressures: constraints on funding and staffing capacity can limit the scope, consistency, and sustainability of cross-border co-operation.

- Data incompatibility: participants noted difficulties accessing compatible or timely data across Northern Ireland and Ireland.
- Political commitment and priorities: many participants felt strongly that the future of cross-border spatial planning is dependent on political will and 'buy-in'. The current political climate, including the ongoing implications of Brexit, are found to complicate the practical delivery of cross-border initiatives and working arrangements.
- Limited cross-jurisdictional understanding: the findings reveal a general lack of practitioner understanding of legislative, policy, and decision-making arrangements in neighbouring jurisdictions.
- Socio-cultural barriers: cultural factors, particularly differing mindsets, are perceived as a key barrier inhibiting effective cross-border co-operation.

Perspectives on the degree of alignment between the spatial strategies

- Perceived close alignment: participants generally perceive strong alignment between the two strategies, although many express uncertainty due to a self-reported lack of familiarity with the neighbouring plan.
- Varying degrees of alignment: participants believe the strategies to be most strongly aligned in the policy domains of climate action, economic development, and transport; and much less aligned in the areas of housing, health, well-being, and quality of life. However, the research identified a nuanced spectrum of alignment: from collaboration on shared projects to coexistence without conflict and reflexive learning.
- Creating an enabling environment: the political context and political buy-in are critical to strengthening alignment between the strategies.
- Structural divergence: whilst the strategies are underpinned by the same core principles (particularly in regard to sustainability), divergence arises due to the differing legislative frameworks, political priorities, and implementation mechanisms that characterise each jurisdiction.
- Divergence may become more pronounced: many participants emphasised the need to update the RDS 2035, backed by a dedicated

investment plan and more up-to-date data, to take account of contemporary challenges, policy priorities, and external conditions in a post-Brexit, post pandemic era. Failure to do so is seen as a precursor to increased divergence between the two strategies.

Future aspirations for strengthening cross-border practice

- Towards an all-island strategy? From a practical perspective, there is strong consensus that an integrated, all-island spatial planning strategy would offer significant value. However, participants acknowledged the substantial political obstacles that would need to be overcome to progress this ambition.

5. The Framework for Co-operation

The Framework for Co-operation was first mooted in 2006 as a preferred option for enhanced collaborative action on the island of Ireland. The vision was that it would ratchet up “the existing engagement that occurs between the respective government departments responsible for spatial planning in a more novel and inclusive way to incorporate other departments, North and South, public agencies, as well as business interests and other relevant stakeholders”.¹³⁷ The contention was that (a) rapid economic growth in Ireland between 1990-2006, in parallel with the dividends of the peace process in Northern Ireland, provided new opportunities for collaborative action;¹³⁸ and (b) enhanced collaboration was critical to addressing any handicaps (perceived or otherwise) resulting from the RDS and NSS having been developed as separate efforts.¹³⁹

In 2013, the then Department for Regional Development (NI) and the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (IE) jointly published *The Framework for Co-operation: Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland*. This followed a public consultation process between February and April 2011, which overlapped with the publication of proposed revisions to the 2001 RDS and the reform of local government in Northern Ireland under the Review of Public Administration (RPA). The Framework is designed to deliver positive outcomes in strategic spatial planning by adopting an inter-jurisdictional approach to the social, economic and environmental development of the island of Ireland; thus ending the negative outcomes of ‘back-to-back’ planning that had pervaded for decades, particularly in the border region.

The consultation process

The consultation document on the preparation of the Framework (entitled ‘Spatial Strategies on the Island of Ireland: Framework for Collaboration’) noted that co-operation and collaboration is not new on the island of Ireland – whether between the Northern Ireland Executive and the Government of Ireland or between networks of local authorities or community groups, either side of the

border. It noted that the two spatial strategies of the time – the RDS in Northern Ireland and the NSS in Ireland – were key foundations on which future strategic investment decisions in each jurisdiction would be made. The document also emphasised the need for co-operation on issues that transcend boundaries, including the importance of working together in the provision of services and critical infrastructure for the development of urban and rural areas. It also highlighted the experience of collaboration across Europe and the added value that has been documented from both policy and practice:

- The role of collaboration in solving cross-boundary issues that cannot be dealt with by regions on their own.
- The value of having consistency across policy at different levels.
- The benefits of networking on cross-boundary issues and projects.
- The significance of policy supports in action and fiscal measures to achieve co-operation.

The consultation document included a comparison of both the RDS and NSS. The main difference between both was in their differing legislative basis. In terms of similarities, both strategies are couched in the promotion of sustainable development, the advancement of balanced regional development and the endorsement of tiers of urban centres, gateways and hubs. In terms of cross-border co-operation, both strategies note the importance of working with their nearest neighbours and identify areas where co-operation can be mutually beneficial. For example, both strategies recognise the potential of the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor and wider eastern seaboard corridor, including the Newry/Dundalk Twin City and the need for greater investment into the Derry/Londonderry/Letterkenny gateway and the wider North West region.

When considering the spatial challenges and similarities on the island of Ireland, the consultation document focused on five key areas:

- Settlement Patterns (including population and housing),
- Economy,
- Environment (including climate change),

- Connectivity (including transport), and
- Energy (including electricity, gas and telecommunications).

The analysis highlighted the similarity between many of the key planning and development issues facing both jurisdictions, and the need for more integrated datasets to support policy alignment and joint action. Additionally, it is critical that it is understood in the context of the time in which it was drafted – in the midst of a global economic crisis.

The consultation document proposed that any framework would focus on four priority areas of collaboration:

- **Equipping the island:** Focused on enhancing physical connectivity, services and facilities, including the sharing of scarce and expensive infrastructure such as ports and airports, and the development of energy and communication grids. Improving access to the North West and Derry/Londonderry was also a key focus, ensuring that its potential as a principal city on the island would be maximised.
- **Competitive places:** Emphasising the importance of unleashing the potential of key settlements such as Dublin-Belfast, Derry/Londonderry-Letterkenny and Newry-Dundalk as key gateways through integrated planning processes where government departments, agencies and authorities work together.
- **Environmental quality:** recognising the importance of addressing environmental issues emerging from spatial planning processes through careful conservation and enhancement of shared natural and cultural heritage assets, especially in relation to water quality, habitats, archaeology and architectural heritage. This included contributing to the unique and distinctive identity of places and spaces.
- **Spatial analysis:** Harnessing the role of evidence-based approaches in place-making; with a particular emphasis on the harmonisation and integration of key datasets that enable planners to identify and manage development trends in a more timely and informed way.

Finally, the consultation document focused on the levels of engagement and co-operation needed to deliver on these priority areas, noting that this requires working at two levels: (1) at governmental level, and (2) at regional and local government level.

In terms of monitoring and evaluation, the document proposed that a review of the framework would be carried out after two years, with a report on actions presented to both governments as part of the existing monitoring arrangements for the RDS and NSS. In addition, regular reports on spatial planning workstreams would be presented to the BIC meetings.

The Framework for Co-operation

The Framework for Co-operation sets out areas of co-operation at different levels within the public sector which could result in mutual benefit. It is non-statutory across both jurisdictions; the rationale being that this approach would provide a flexibility to shape important strategic co-operation, whilst allowing individual programmes and projects to be tailored to specific spatial/geographical scales and place-based issues, as well as those which transcend boundaries (see Figure 5.1). In addition, it “seeks to encourage policy-makers in the public sectors to take account of the wider impact of their work, to recognise and exploit opportunities for a wider perspective and to avoid ‘back-to-back’ planning”.¹⁴⁰

The Framework for Co-operation did not deviate to any great extent from the vision and priority themes of the consultation document. In addition to subtle, yet arguably significant, changes to the title, the only other significant changes were:

- An amendment to the identified priority areas for co-operation, with ‘Equipping the Island’ replaced by ‘Enhancing Competitiveness’ – albeit the focus on the provision of critical infrastructure remained.
- A softening of the commitment to a review of the Framework for Co-operation after two years. Instead, the commitment was to a review of

existing co-operative mechanisms and measurement of outputs on a biennial basis.

The Framework for Co-operation also opened the door to the inclusion of additional areas and/or mechanisms to be brought to bear where it was considered that co-operation in spatial planning would be beneficial.



Figure 5.1 The positioning of the non-statutory Framework for Co-operation in the planning systems of both Northern Ireland and Ireland (Source: Authors' own)

The Framework for Co-operation twelve years on

Participants across the interviews, questionnaire, and survey were asked about their awareness of the Framework for Co-operation, how they have used it in practice, the relevance of the four priority areas, and suggestions for improvement.

Knowledge/awareness of the Framework for Co-operation

“awareness is definitely an issue.” (Interviewee 8)

Levels of knowledge and awareness of the Framework for Co-operation vary across the interviewees; from those who had no prior knowledge before being introduced to the study, to those who actively worked on the development of the document at the time of its inception. The interviewees perceived the awareness of others, whether at government or local authority level, as being limited. For example, from the Northern Ireland context:

“there's a complete lack of awareness of it across other parts of government and departments and even within the same department.” (Interviewee 8)

A temporal aspect also emerged, whereby interviewees suggested that awareness of the Framework for Co-operation has declined over time as people have moved on in their professional career or retired, illustrating the loss of institutional memory. This is further reflected by the fact that those interviewees new to post (within the past five years) had not heard of the Framework for Co-operation before the invitation to interview.

The majority of questionnaire respondents reported having some level of awareness of the Framework for Co-operation (Figure 5.2): 45% are completely aware, a further 18% are less aware, 36% are not at all aware of the document.

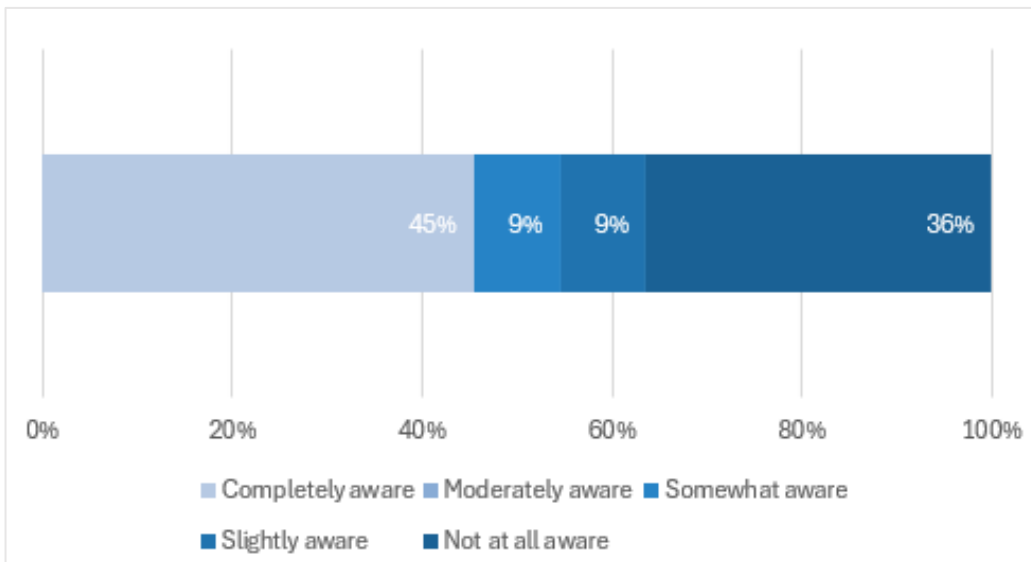


Figure 5.2 Level of awareness of the Framework for Co-operation

In contrast, the majority of RTPI Northern Ireland conference delegates (81%) were not at all familiar with the Framework for Co-operation (Figure 5.3). Only 5% of the delegates were either completely familiar (2%) or moderately aware (3%).

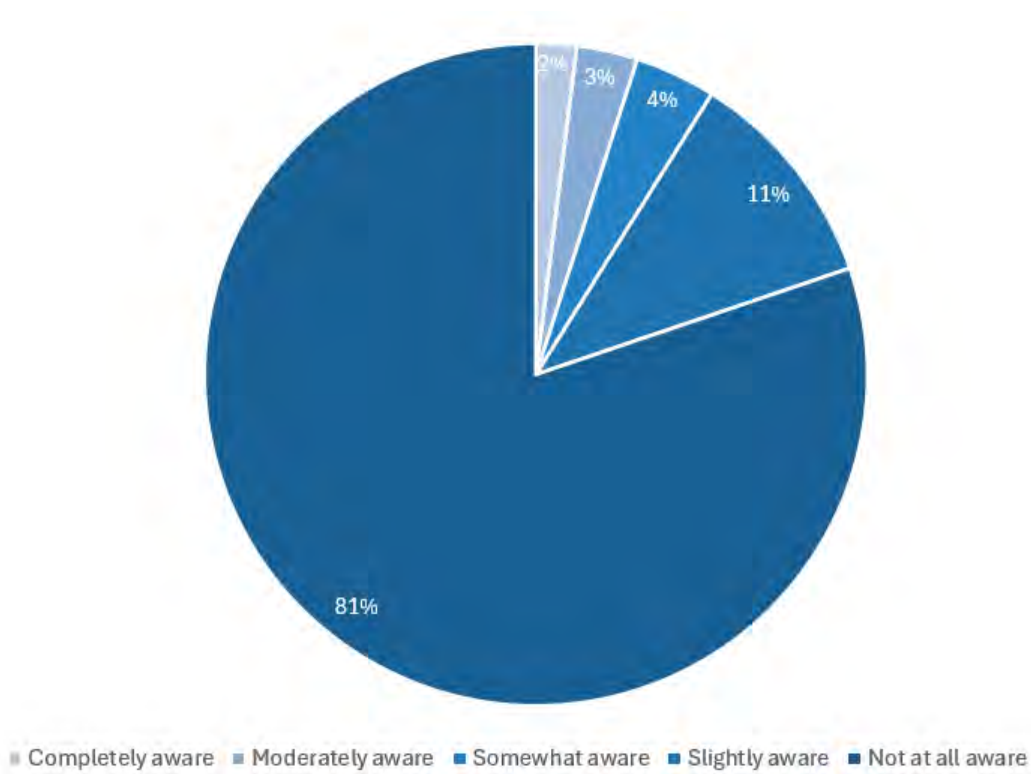


Figure 5.3 Level of awareness of the Framework for Co-operation – RTPi Northern Ireland conference delegates

All questionnaire respondents and interviewees, including those who were not previously aware or had limited prior knowledge, could see value in having such a document. Consequently, all participants highlighted a need to enhance awareness of the Framework for Co-operation.

Perceived value of the Framework for Co-operation

Several key themes emerged regarding the perceived value, use, and limitations of the Framework for Co-operation, reflecting a nuanced understanding of how the document has functioned in practice.

Many interviewees described the Framework for Co-operation as ‘passive’ in terms of something that enables (or legitimises) action, as opposed to driving action. Co-operation/collaboration has tended to happen organically or through existing formal or informal relationships, as opposed to being steered by the Framework for Co-operation:

“There’s a passiveness to it in the sense it wasn’t that it was making me do collaborative spatial planning work. I was probably doing that anyway.” (Interviewee 8)

“the majority of my time would have been spent working in border regions, so I didn't need a Framework for Co-operation to tell me that it was a good idea to cooperate”. (Interviewee 2)

The majority of questionnaire respondents believe the Framework for Co-operation is relevant to their work, with only one respondent selecting ‘irrelevant’. The majority stated that it is ‘somewhat’ relevant, and one respondent perceived it as being very relevant (Figure 5.4).

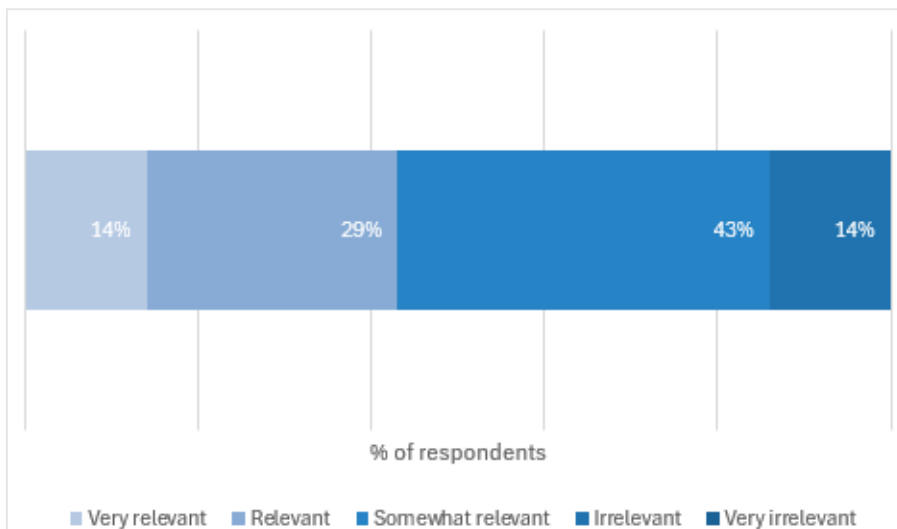


Figure 5.4 The perceived relevance of the Framework for Co-operation to current practice

The questionnaire respondents were subsequently asked to provide examples of when they have engaged with, used, and/or made reference to the Framework for Co-operation. Respondents referred to using the Framework for Co-operation in: formal consultations, notably the NPF and NDP review (2024/25), as well as the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES); public engagements such as the recurring North West Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP) meetings from 2016 onwards; and in Departmental communications and research outputs up to 2022. Thus, engagement with the Framework for Co-operation has been episodic rather than continuous, with its relevance often ‘reactivated’ by formal consultation processes rather than embedded in ongoing practices.

One respondent reflected on how the Framework for Co-operation is used to support co-operative approaches at the local development planning level (pre-2020). Another stated, “the Framework provides a strong basis for enabling organisations like ours to collaborate”. This further suggests that the Framework for Co-operation serves as a legitimising or co-ordinating reference point, as opposed to a binding framework guiding practice. Many interviewees also described the Framework for Co-operation as providing a form of “cover” or

“permission” to legitimately engage in cross-border co-operation, especially when political sensitivities were present:

“My experience of the Framework was it was brilliant at providing us with the sort of permission - as far as that's right word - within which to work collaboratively across the border whenever opportunities came up.” (Interviewee 8)

“having a document like the Framework for Co-operation then that gives you that permission to go and do what you think maybe you can't do.” (Interviewee 1)

While the Framework for Co-operation facilitated some initiatives, it was seen as falling short in delivering on its broader ambitions, specifically in terms of integrated transport and data harmonisation. However, interviewees acknowledged that the Framework for Co-operation had an ambitious agenda and that “it might have been a tall order to expect the Framework for Co-operation to deliver all of that.” (Interviewee 2). One questionnaire respondent explicitly stated that there has been no recent reference to the Framework for Co-operation in local authority reports or meetings. The range of perspectives articulated by respondents demonstrates variability in both awareness and adoption across different stakeholders and different geographies.

Many of the interviewee and questionnaire respondents noted the Framework for Co-operation's age, with one respondent describing it as “quite dated and as a result is unlikely to command much ongoing influence.” Despite this, the validity of the Framework for Co-operation's aspirations, particularly regarding cross-jurisdictional spatial planning, still hold true:

“...much of its content and aspirations, especially potential for progress in co-operation on spatial planning between both jurisdictions, remains very much relevant.” (questionnaire respondent).

Questionnaire respondents were asked to what extent they felt the Framework for Co-operation has been an important strategic framework for influencing/supporting a range of activities (Figure 5.5).

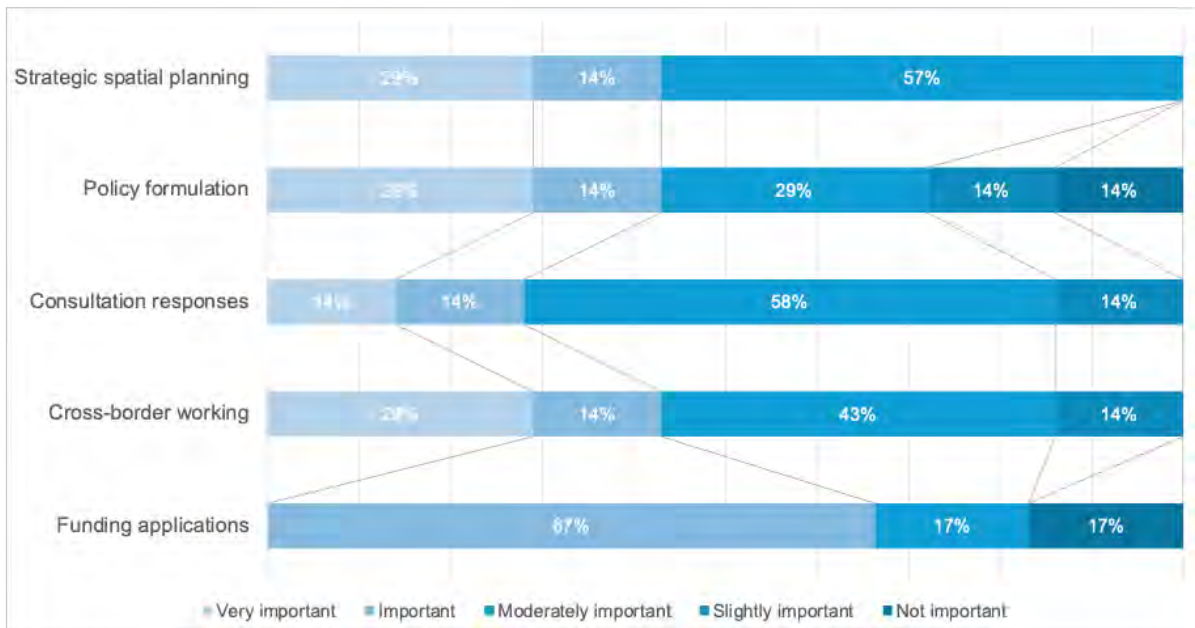


Figure 5.5 Perceived importance of the Framework for Co-operation across various activities

Study participants unanimously agreed that the Framework for Co-operation is important for influencing or supporting strategic spatial planning, with most respondents rating it as ‘moderately important’ (57%), followed by ‘very important’ (29%) and ‘important’ (14%), and none viewing it as ‘unimportant’. This indicates a strong shared recognition of its strategic legitimacy and relevance, suggesting that the Framework is widely accepted as a guiding reference for shaping long-term spatial thinking.

Nonetheless, and similar to other research insights (above), the Framework for Co-operation’s perceived influence is more variable in directly driving policy formation and decision-making. Study participants gave equal weight (29%) to the Framework being ‘very’ and ‘moderately’ important for policy formulation, but some also viewed it as ‘slightly’ (14%) or ‘not important’ (14%). These point to uncertainty about the Framework for Co-operation’s capacity to meaningfully

influence upstream policy development and indicate that its role in shaping concrete policy choices may be uneven, indirect, or contingent on institutional context.

Fewer study participants considered the Framework for Co-operation to be 'very important' to consultation responses, but it was still regarded as 'moderately important' by more than half (58%). This implies that it is not consistently considered, or used, as a strategic policy document in formal planning or place-making processes, despite its strategic intent. As such, this may indicate a gap between the Framework for Co-operation's conceptual value as a product of spatial diplomacy and its operational deployment.

In terms of cross-border working, all respondents agreed it is either 'very' (29%) or 'moderately' (43%) important. No respondents selected 'not important', demonstrating a strong recognition and clear consensus of its value in cross-border co-operation. This underscores the Framework for Co-operation's function as a shared supporting reference that helps bridge jurisdictional boundaries and legitimise any practices of cross-border working.

The majority of respondents considered the Framework for Co-operation 'important' (67%) for funding applications. However, this is the only statement that no one rated as 'very important', suggesting a more limited perceived impact in this area.

Overall, respondents saw the Framework for Co-operation as 'moderately' to 'very important' across most of the categories. Strategic spatial planning and cross-border working received the most consistent position ratings. There was more variability in the policy formation and funding applications categories, indicating different views on the strategic value of the Framework for Co-operation here. Most questionnaire respondents (82%) either strongly agreed or agreed that the Framework for Co-operation 'should encourage policymakers in the public sector to take account of the wider impact of their work and the potential benefits of avoiding "back-to-back" planning'. The significance of the

findings is that the Framework for Co-operation is viewed as consistently valuable but primarily enabling rather than directive.

Current relevance of priority areas

The interviewees agreed that the four priority areas remained relevant: “as pillars they remain important and remain priorities” (Interviewee 3). This corresponds with the questionnaire findings (Figure 5.6).

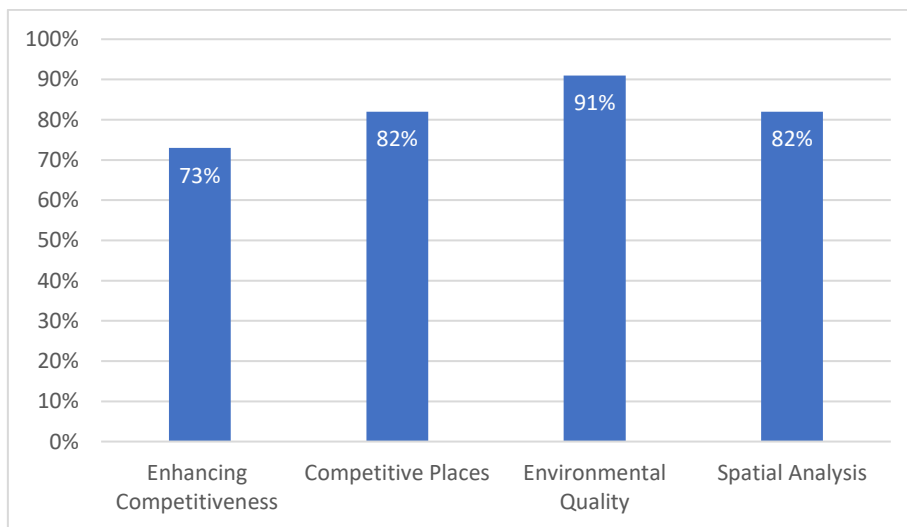


Figure 5.6 The perceived relevance of the Framework for Co-operation's priority areas to respondent's area of work

‘Environmental quality’ emerged as the most relevant dimension to respondents’ work (91%), highlighting a strong cross-jurisdictional commitment to environmental protection and sustainable policy alignment. ‘Competitive places’ and ‘spatial analysis’ were each selected by 82% of the respondents, reflecting the continued importance of spatial evidence and urban competitiveness in regional planning agendas. ‘Enhancing competitiveness’ – while still significant at 73% - is less prioritised by the respondents, suggesting that environmental and analytical priorities, rather than purely economic considerations, are more deeply embedded in current professional practice and policy.

Suggestions for co-operation

Participants made a variety of suggestions for enhancing the Framework for Co-operation, relating to its scope, content and delivery mechanisms. They suggested a need for:

- Establishing a common evidence base,
- Clarification of the agreed basis for collaboration, post-Brexit,
- A refresh to respond to emerging issues and contemporary policy concerns, and
- The Framework for Co-operation to be more practical, embedded, and enforceable.

Establishing a common evidence base is critical for effective policymaking as it underpins coherent decision-making on, for example, climate change and regional inequality, and informs the provision of targeted infrastructure necessary for planned growth and the development of high-quality, connected environments. However, respondents perceived that the ‘data pillar’ of the Framework for Co-operation has experienced the least progress and warrants further attention, particularly regarding the identification of data gaps, overlaps, and potential synergies:

“...everybody talks about evidence-based decision making, but we're one small island and we don't have comparable databases and a whole lot of critical information.” (Interviewee 2)

“...the planning system has been moving more into an evidential and a quantitatively driven space for quite some time...it would be very important that the Framework for Co-operation would have a commitment to providing the evidence base to ensure that local authorities...have appropriate instruction in terms of what allowances or what factors to build into their quantitative approaches.” (Interviewee 4)

A number of respondents highlighted the need to consider the impact of, and learning from, Brexit. They raised concerns about the ability to collaborate effectively in the absence of a common EU-led approach. Thus, any new iteration of the Framework for Co-operation must clarify the agreed basis for collaboration.

“a lot has changed politically in 12 years.” (Interviewee 9)

Study participants also highlighted that the policy context of the Framework for Co-operation needs to be considerably updated following the Reform of Public Administration (RPA) and planning reform in Northern Ireland, as well as the publication of new planning strategies in Ireland at the local, regional and national level. They also suggested that there should be more reference to recent cross-border projects/partnerships such as DBEC, the NWSGP and the Shared Island Initiative, as well as the Regional Assemblies and their role in facilitating cross-border collaboration.

Both interviewees and questionnaire respondents indicated that the Framework for Co-operation requires revision to maintain its relevance amid escalating global environmental challenges, shifting socio-political conditions, demographic change, emerging policy drivers, and advances in ICT. Accordingly, participants offered a range of recommendations. For example, several interviewees commented on how the concept of ‘place’ has changed, driven by COVID and the rise of hybrid and remote working, which has had an impact on spatial planning and economic development. Others noted the growing prominence of environmental concerns and conscience, alongside the emergence of new legislative requirements, for example through the [Climate Change Act 2022](#).

The RTPI Northern Ireland conference delegates were likewise asked to indicate which areas the Framework for Co-operation should prioritise or update in any future refresh. The most dominant themes emerging from the responses were climate change, infrastructure (specifically transport and energy infrastructure), and environmental concerns (Figure 5.7).

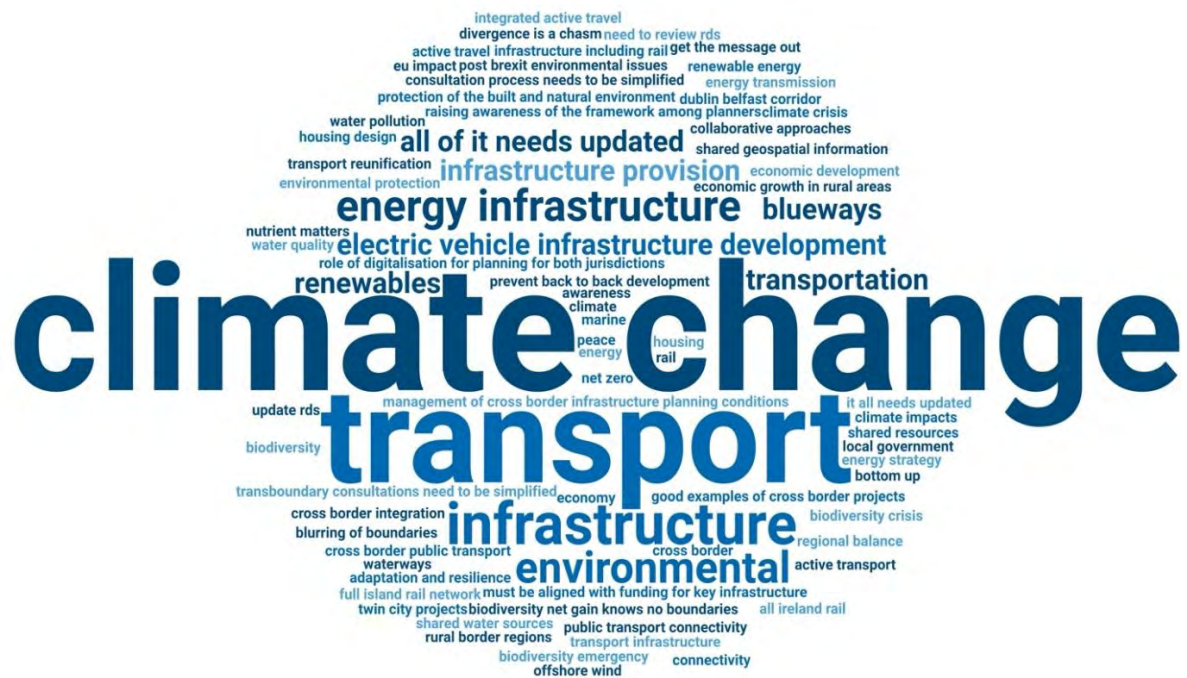


Figure 5.7 Word cloud for RTPI Northern Ireland conference delegate responses

Specific ideas within these key themes included:

- Climate change: adaptation and resilience,
- Transport infrastructure: active travel, all-island rail, electrical vehicle infrastructure development, public transport, connectivity,
- Energy infrastructure: renewable energy infrastructure, energy transmission, and
- Environmental: biodiversity crisis/emergency, environmental protection, marine, shared water sources.

Other cross-cutting themes identified include the need to share resources, consider the impact of Brexit, and learn from and share good practice examples:

“We have good examples of cross border projects e.g. A1/N1 and active travel schemes at Carlingford and Muff. All have been delivered. We

need to extend this thinking to wider island of Ireland.” (Conference delegate)

Delegates also mentioned the need to raise awareness of the Framework for Co-operation and update the RDS 2035:

“The best way to promote all Ireland spatial co-operation would be an updated RDS to address the ‘gap’ that’s emerging with the national spatial strategy in the South.” (Conference delegate)

“the divergence is a chasm.” (Conference delegate)

Several respondents advocated for a stronger, more enforceable Framework for Co-operation, suggesting dissatisfaction with the limited influence of the current document. Calls for “clout and teeth” and “political support from both sides of the border” reveal concerns over governance legitimacy and implementation capacity. Similarly, several interviewees emphasised the need for more formal structures and resources to support cross-border spatial planning, beyond reliance on goodwill or informal networks:

“It shouldn’t depend on relationships... it needs to be part of a structure or a machine.” (Interviewee 9)

“It’s a well-intentioned document, but it’s a statement of aspiration and, you know, it has no teeth.” (Interviewee 2)

“You’d need to have a broad policy agreement at a government level... tying in through the North-South structures, a greater understanding at different department levels, but also maybe a political acknowledgement and a political buy in.” (Interviewee 5)

Study participants highlighted the lack of political commitment and diverging policy agendas, especially following Brexit, as major impediments to the Framework for Co-operation. For example, one questionnaire respondent stated insufficient recognition “by those who should be implementing and using it”, implying a top-down deficit.

Participants suggested adding work streams into the Framework for Co-operation to help both planning systems with the practical aspects of cross-border spatial planning projects, such as the All-Ireland Rail Strategy, and to share approaches in dealing with environmental concerns. Another suggestion was for any future iteration of the Framework for Co-operation to include examples/case studies of successful cross-border working to illustrate how it can happen in practice. A new chapter was proposed that focuses on delivery aspects including a clear set of actions, timeframes, resources, and delivery bodies (local, regional, national government, third-level education, state agencies, tourism and economic development agencies).

Despite these suggestions, participants emphasised that flexibility is key to the success of the Framework for Co-operation and that it should remain intentionally ambiguous:

“things move and change all the time and it's how you set in stone what your priority areas are and allow for movement and flexibility which will inevitably need to happen around those.”
(Interviewee 3)

“you're trying to, to kind of put enough down there that actually everyone can agree to without actually putting something that's so specific that becomes almost a problem for some and then becomes a political issue.” (Interviewee 5)

Key findings

Published in 2013, the Framework for Co-operation: Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland was developed to promote positive outcomes in strategic spatial planning by taking an inter-jurisdictional approach to the island's social, economic and environmental development. In doing so, it sought to move beyond the longstanding pattern of disconnected, 'back-to-back' planning that had persisted for decades, particularly within the border region, and represented a new era of 'spatial public diplomacy'. However, findings from the interviews, questionnaire and survey revealed somewhat uneven levels of awareness and use of the Framework for Co-operation over the last 13 years, and various proposals for any future revision.

Current awareness and value

- Limited awareness: the majority of participants had limited or no prior knowledge of the Framework for Co-operation. Yet, despite this, participants could see its relevance to their work, and there were unanimous calls to increase awareness of the Framework.
- Untapped potential: the Framework for Co-operation has been used, or referred to, on an intermittent rather than a continuous basis, with relevance typically re-emerging during formal consultation processes (e.g. for the NPF and RSEs) rather than being embedded in routine practice. While respondents continue to value its ethos of collaboration, its practical influence has waned due to institutional inertia, policy divergence following Brexit, and temporal obsolescence (now 13 years old).
- The Framework for Co-operation as a legitimisation tool: the Framework for Co-operation currently functions more as a legacy or reference document, than as an operational policy tool; a function perceived as valuable, despite its limitations, to those working in cross-border areas in terms of providing 'permission' to work collaboratively.

Continued relevance of existing priority areas

- **Currency:** although developed in an earlier context, the priority areas continue to resonate with practitioners. While participants felt the priority areas should be updated to reflect contemporary socio-political realities and a stronger environmental consciousness, they also emphasised the importance of retaining flexibility and deliberate ambiguity.

Towards a renewed Framework for Co-operation?

- **Ripe for review:** collectively, the participants advocated for a renewed Framework for Co-operation that is strategic, politically endorsed, and operationally embedded; capable of advancing cross-border spatial planning and sustainable growth within an evolving governance landscape and climate crisis.
- **Operationalising the Framework for Co-operation:** suggestions for improving the Framework for Co-operation included introducing clearly defined work streams and incorporating examples or case studies of successful cross-border projects and/or partnerships to demonstrate practical implementation. Participants also proposed the addition of a dedicated delivery-focused chapter, setting out specific actions, indicative timeframes, required resources, and clearly identified delivery bodies spanning local, regional and national government, third-level education institutions, state agencies, and tourism and economic development organisations (for example).

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This research traces the evolution of strategic spatial planning on the island of Ireland from the early 2000s to the present, highlighting the parallel development of Northern Ireland's Regional Development Strategy 2035 – Building a Better Future (RDS 2035), Ireland's National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 (NSS) and more recently, the National Planning Framework – First Revision (revised NPF).

EU principles such as polycentric development and functional interdependencies have influenced all these spatial strategies and they have all aimed at balanced all-island growth. Although not formally integrated, these strategies acknowledged mutual interdependence, prompting research and policy calls for stronger cross-border collaboration, which culminated in the publication in 2013 of the Framework for Co-operation: Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Since then, there has been significant progress in cross-border co-operation and local government reform, creating new opportunities for alignment. However, the policy landscape has become more complex and potentially divergent due to factors such as economic crises, political instability, Brexit, and the replacement or revision of key strategies in both jurisdictions.

Spatial planning has played a central enabling role in advancing cross-border co-operation on the island of Ireland by providing shared concepts, governance spaces and practical mechanisms through which collaboration can occur across jurisdictional boundaries. Influenced strongly by the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), EU environmental law and funding programmes such as INTERREG and PEACE, spatial planning emerged as an integrative policy domain capable of transcending the border by aligning economic competitiveness, social cohesion and environmental sustainability. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement further embedded this trajectory by creating institutional architectures that supported North–South engagement, while subsequent local government reforms in both jurisdictions increased symmetry in planning functions and strengthened the capacity of local

authorities to engage in cross-border place-shaping. Through area-based networks and 'soft spaces' such as the East Border Region (EBR), the North West Region Cross Border Group (NWRCBG) [more recently the North West Regional Development Group], and the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN), spatial planning has facilitated trust-building, shared learning and the development of functional, sub-regional spatial strategies, despite the absence of statutory all-island planning powers.

More recent initiatives, including the North West Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP) and the Dublin–Belfast Economic Corridor (DBEC), demonstrate how spatial planning can operationalise cross-border co-operation by recognising functional geographies and supporting co-ordinated investment, infrastructure delivery and regional development at city-region scale. The 2013 Framework for Co-operation represents a key moment of 'spatial public diplomacy', seeking to move cross-border planning beyond ad hoc initiatives towards more coherent and enduring institutional practices, though its transformative impact remains debated.

Overall, the research highlights that, while formal integration remains limited and political will remains decisive (particularly in the post-Brexit context) growing convergence between planning systems, the use of soft planning approaches, and the development of institutional 'thickness' have positioned spatial planning as a critical vehicle for sustaining and deepening cross-border co-operation on the island of Ireland.

The research highlights significant opportunities and benefits associated with cross-border co-operation in spatial planning on the island of Ireland. These opportunities are shaped by the island's small geographic scale, dense functional linkages, and a relatively close-knit professional planning community. The evidence also reveals that co-operation is uneven across governance scales, with notable variation in depth, formality, and effectiveness. Today, while no formal all-island governance structure exists for strategic spatial planning, initiatives such as the British-Irish Council's Planning and Places Work Sector and Ireland's Shared Island Initiative provide renewed impetus to

reassess, and potentially update, mechanisms for effective cross-border spatial co-operation. These can then respond to shared challenges like climate change, infrastructure, and planning capacity.

Government departments have tended to frame co-operation more narrowly, focusing on formal structures and compliance-based interaction, whereas research respondents more broadly stressed the value of informal, organic collaboration. Local authorities and cross-border partnerships are the primary engines of meaningful collaboration, while higher-level governance structures play a more limited, facilitative role. Strengthening and extending successful place-based models, while embedding collaboration more consistently across governance scales, represents a major opportunity for future spatial planning on an all-island basis.

Key reflections on the degree of alignment/divergence

Cross-border co-operation is widely valued and occurring but unevenly distributed

Cross-border co-operation on the island of Ireland is valued, productive, and increasingly normalised. The findings confirm that co-operation is necessary for addressing cross-border challenges. There is clear evidence that it is actively occurring in various ways, and to varying degrees across a diverse range of cross-border and all-island bodies. However, co-operation is fragmented and highly context-dependent, rather than systematic across spatial planning systems and governance tiers. Its distribution remains uneven across regions and actors, and tends to be more often heavily reliant on local leadership and informal relationships.

Greater symmetry has emerged, yet structural and institutional barriers remain

Governance structures across both jurisdictions have increasingly converged since the 1970s following recent decades of 'de-bordering' and local

government reforms. While not identical, significant symmetry exists, particularly visible at project and programme levels, where joint initiatives act as de facto alignment mechanisms. Large-scale infrastructure and spatial initiatives, such as the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, the North–South Interconnector, the A5 Western Transport Corridor, and cross-border greenways, demonstrate a shared logic of co-ordination, economies of scale and avoidance of duplication. These conditions make it more feasible for further institutional ‘thickening’, particularly in local government, supported by cross-border area networks and city-region partnerships. There is also potential for this at central government level, depending heavily on managerial and political champions. Despite growing alignment, the research confirms persistent structural and institutional barriers, particularly with regards to differing regulatory frameworks, and further potential divergence of EU-derived policy, particularly post-Brexit. Structural differences with resources, incompatible data collection/systems, and political ideologies continue to present challenges for collaborating to tackle pressing social, economic and environmental challenges facing the entire island.

‘Soft spaces’ are necessary for facilitating spatial public diplomacy for addressing bordering effects

The evidence illustrates that in the absence of having an all-island spatial strategy or fully symmetrical local and strategic planning structures/instruments, ‘soft spaces’ remain indispensable for facilitating spatial public diplomacy in addressing bordering effects on the island of Ireland. ‘Soft spaces’ have emerged as primary arenas for the dialogue, design and execution of ideas, programmes and projects, for example cross-border area networks such as EBR and ICBAN, North West Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP) and the Dublin–Belfast Economic Corridor (DBEC). These spaces operate between formal governance systems, allowing actors to negotiate shared spatial imaginaries without triggering political or constitutional sensitivities. This signifies how these softer spaces help reduce the ‘hardness’ of the border by building trust, nurturing mutual understanding and developing shared narratives and actions to experiment with ways to respond to common challenges.

Alignment between the RDS 2035 and the revised NPF is often assumed, without assessing differences in governance, planning systems, political context, and funding cycles

Across interviews, questionnaire and survey, alignment between the RDS 2035 and the revised NPF is often assumed rather than demonstrated. Interviewees repeatedly express confidence that the strategies “fit” or are “not in conflict” yet also admit to limited familiarity with the other jurisdiction’s strategy. At the same time, practitioners acknowledge they have not meaningfully tested this “fit”. Evidentially, it is assumed that both planning frameworks/strategies are aligned because they reference sustainable development, climate change and balanced regional growth. However, both have been produced in two very different contexts.

Contextual and policy divergence is increasingly evident and is at risk of growing

A central concern emerging from the analysis is the increasingly temporal gap between the two spatial frameworks/strategies. This is particularly evident in the policy analysis, with transport policy reflecting a more traditional, network forced model in the RDS 2035, while the revised NPF integrates transport policies in a more sophisticated way with climate action, compact growth, health and place-making. Similarly, in relation to health, well-being and quality of life, the revised NPF goes further in placing them as core to planning and linking them to housing, public realm, design and access to nature. The RDS 2035 was published over a decade ago, reflecting particular empirical dynamics and investment imperatives, while Brexit, the COVID 19 pandemic, and climate emergency represent recent inflection points that are reflected in the revised NPF. Divergent frameworks make it harder to address these challenges strategically and coherently. A key divergence, particularly strong from Northern Ireland respondents, was how Ireland’s NPF, unlike the RDS 2035, is supported by the NDP and multi-annual capital funding cycles, providing much clearer implementation pathways.

Key reflections on the impact of the Framework for Co-operation

The Framework is a tool to initiate/intensify cross-border co-operation

Cross-border working was occurring and evolving before the publication of the Framework for Co-operation, particularly on a project basis (e.g. energy interconnection), funding programme basis (e.g. EU funding), and cross-border functional geographies (e.g. EBR). This indicates how co-operation can be innately organic, situational and pragmatic. However, this likely causes co-operation to be uneven rather than uniform. The arrival of the Framework provided the conditions to initiate, or intensify, existing cross-border co-operation and, as demonstrated by research respondents, remains a valuable directive means for legitimatising cross-border working.

The Framework's formulation was perceived as an exercise in 'policy articulation' rather than directing 'planned action'

The Framework for Co-operation articulates high-level commitments to collaboration, alignment and mutual benefit across the island of Ireland. It signals an openness to, and provides legitimatisation for, co-operation. However, in doing so, it has largely codified existing practices, such as cross-border networks, without substantially strengthening or resourcing them, or fundamentally providing clear implementation pathways. In many ways, the Framework has been perceived as descriptive rather than directive. Given the political sensitivities on the island, the Framework has likely been intentionally non-prescriptive and cautious in its ambitions.

Nonetheless, many respondents, as practitioners, see merit in an all-island approach to direct action on pressing matters, such as climate change. In effect, the Framework should perhaps be more than just a reference document or an expression of spatial diplomatic intent. However, it neither should, nor could, be a statutory delivery tool. Yet, the findings infer a desire for the Framework to become a stronger operational instrument, preferably guiding clear delivery mechanisms and supported by shared resources.

The Framework is still relevant but needs to be refreshed

The findings point to the Framework for Co-operation retaining strategic and symbolic value, specifically because it legitimises cross-border engagement and reflects enduring functional interdependencies on the island of Ireland. Its core purpose and principles remain valid. However, the evidence presented in this research indicates that while the Framework still matters in principle, its practical influence has diminished over time due to institutional, political, and contextual changes. It needs refreshed to reflect the evolving social, economic, environmental and policy contexts, to strengthen implementation and governance mechanisms, to harmonise evidence and datasets, and to rebuild awareness and institutional memory.

Advancing an integrated approach to spatial planning on the island of Ireland is appreciated, but there are nuances

Across the interviews, questionnaire and survey responses, stakeholders generally agree that cross-border co-operation, particularly in relation to spatial planning, is necessary. The basic *raison d'être* for the Framework for Co-operation is recognised and supported for avoiding “back-to-back” planning, as articulated in the Framework’s introduction. However, as evidenced in this research, professional awareness of the Framework is low, especially for newer staff. Furthermore, persistent political and institutional challenges and changes tend to constrain the delivery of the Framework and hinder cross-border spatial planning.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Review Northern Ireland’s Regional Development Strategy (RDS)

The RDS 2035 should be reviewed, and arguably revised, to take account of contemporary challenges, policy priorities, and external conditions in a post-Brexit, post pandemic era. The RDS 2035 is dated, reflecting older planning and

transport paradigms and perspectives, and lacks policy ambitions to meaningfully tackle contemporary issues, such as post-pandemic well-being, climate urgency and housing needs. Our study found that the RDS 2035 is seen as being at risk of diverging further from Ireland's revised NPF, so there is an urgent need to consider how to maintain alignment between both strategies. In addition, any review ought to consider the option for a dedicated investment plan, similar to that which accompanies the NPF in Ireland. This would support cross departmental buy-in and implementation of identified strategic priorities. There is a window of opportunity to refresh the RDS 2035, in Northern Ireland, in parallel with a statutory review of the RSEs, in Ireland, due to commence in early 2026.

Recommendation 2: Revisit and revive the Framework for Co-operation

The research confirms that there is a pressing desire and need to revisit and update the Framework for Co-operation. Any review should take account of, and present a constructive pathway for navigating, the challenges associated with Brexit and political shifts, building on initiatives like New Decade, New Approach, with more clearly defined priorities and ambitions. Any review should recognise the value of, and continued support for, 'soft spaces' for addressing structural and practical issues, as well as the importance of spatial public diplomacy. A revised Framework should include examples of good practice and build on existing co-operation to strengthen collaboration. It must become widely used by policymakers across both jurisdictions, serving as a 'living document' to ensure relevance and impact. In doing so, a revised Framework for Co-operation will offer greater guidance to local authorities on what factors/allowances to build into their approaches to facilitate cross-border co-operation and deeper collaboration. A review needs to involve local practitioners and policymakers in a co-design and co-delivery approach.

Recommendation 3: Improve data reconciliation and shared performance monitoring

Reliable, compatible, and shared data systems are essential for evidence-based cross-border planning, as they provide the necessary foundation for identifying shared challenges, assessing spatial trends, and designing co-ordinated interventions. A harmonised evidence base must be a priority in the delivery of the spatial strategies on the island of Ireland to address current mismatches in datasets, collection methods, and availability across jurisdictions. There is an onus on both governments to recognise data as critical infrastructure in terms of both implementation and performance management. Equally important is the establishment of supportive governance structures for delivering on-going alignment between the spatial strategies. This will ensure that collaborative planning is not merely aspirational, but is systematically pursued, resourced, and evaluated over time.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen resourcing and professional development training

Given the complexities associated with translating policies in a cross-border context, planners working in border regions require more than technical expertise. Both jurisdictions need to invest in dedicated resourcing and structured professional development to ensure effective cross-border spatial planning. A structured CPD-style training programme should be introduced, focusing specifically on strategic cross-border spatial planning. Such training must go beyond technical competencies to appreciate the value of 'soft spaces' and 'softer' planning approaches, and develop essential soft skills, such as effective communication, negotiation, mediation, contextual sensitivity, and adaptability; recognising that these are critical for navigating the complex political, institutional, and social dynamics of border regions. This training must be open to professionals working across all tiers of spatial governance, not just local government. The design and delivery of said programmes would benefit from a partnership approach involving, for example, third level institutions,

professional bodies, such as the RTPI, IPI, and OPR, and research networks, such as the ICLRD.

Recommendation 5: Move beyond co-operation to collaboration

The interconnected nature of contemporary issues, such as climate change, post-pandemic recovery, migration, social cohesion, and regional inequalities, are particularly challenging in cross-border regions, and require sustained long-term joint action. This collective action should move beyond ad hoc or project-based co-operation towards deeper collaboration. Therefore, any refreshed Framework for Co-operation must be reframed and strengthened to explicitly support collaboration rather than mere co-operation – as originally intended – reflecting the depth and gravity of cross-border challenges. It should adopt terminology and promote governance arrangements that acknowledge and facilitate long-term collaborative processes and behaviours.

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