



# COHESION

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## *Southern Regional Assembly Regional Action Plan*

Regional Action to Integrate the  
regional dimension for a cohesive  
S3 approach



Tionól Réigiúnach an Deiscirt  
Southern Regional Assembly



European Union  
European Regional  
Development Fund



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*Southern Regional Assembly Links*  
southernassembly.ie



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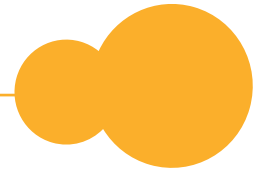
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# Glossary of Terms

ACRONYM	MEANING
DETE	Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment
EDP	Entrepreneurial Discovery Process
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GP	Good Practice
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LA	Local Authority
LRAP	Learning Region Action Plan
MLG	Multi Level Governance
MU	Maynooth University
NDP	National Development Plan
NPF	National Planning Framework
PI	Policy Instrument
R&I	Research & Innovation
RAP	Regional Action Plan
RDI	Research Development & Innovation
REP	Regional Enterprise Programme
RPO	Regional Policy Objective
RSES	Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy
RTDI	Research, Technology Development & Innovation
S3	Smart Specialisation Strategy
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SME	Small and Medium Enterprise
SR	Southern Region
SRA	Southern Regional Assembly
SSR	Smart Southern Region
STEM	Science Technology Engineering & Maths
STM	Smart Territorial Mapping
STI	Science, Technology & Innovation
SWOT	Strength Weakness Opportunity Threat

# Part 1: General Information

## 1.1 General information

**Project**

COHES3ION

**Partner organisation(s) involved**

Southern Regional Assembly (SRA)

**Description**



The Southern Regional Assembly (SRA) forms part of the regional tier of governance in Ireland with a remit for the Southern Region of Ireland. The Assembly forges links between the EU, and national and local levels through regional spatial and economic planning and European Regional Development Funding (ERDF) for the benefit of the Southern Region.

**Main functions include:**

regional  
economic  
and spatial  
planning

the  
management  
of European  
Regional  
Development  
Funding

development  
implementation  
and promotion  
of regional  
development  
policy and  
activities

acting as  
the national  
contact point  
for EU-funded  
transnational  
programmes

The Assembly  
coordinates  
actions to support  
effectiveness in  
Local Government  
and public  
services

### VISION

A Region that is economically strong, inclusive, connected, climate-resilient and sustainable.

### MISSION

To be the leader of regional development through effective, sustainable spatial planning and the delivery of EU programmes, with the support of our stakeholder.

The SRA provides an important leadership role in coordinating between EU, national, regional and local stakeholders in pursuit of Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs) to deliver on the transformative growth and vision of Project Ireland 2040 - The NPF and the RSES, using knowledge and experience in regional planning and EU projects.

**Country**

Ireland

**NUTS2 region**

Southern Region

**Contact person**

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+35351860700

## 1.2 Primary Policy Stakeholder

**Name of stakeholder** Southern Regional Assembly (SRA) – Planning Division

**Type of stakeholder** Regional Planning and Development

### Description

The Southern Regional Assembly (SRA) is one of the three Regional Assemblies of Ireland, working with key stakeholders at an EU, national, regional and local level to support effective regional development in Ireland. On the 31st of January 2020, the Southern Regional Assembly published its Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Southern Region (SR). The RSES – for the first time – brings together spatial planning and economic policy providing a strategic framework for investment in the Southern Region; marking a significant policy milestone for regional government in Ireland.

The RSES provides a long-term, strategic development framework for the future economic and social development of the SR, with the RSES aiming to ensure that the SR will become one of Europe's most **Liveable**, **Greenest** and **Creative & Innovative** regions, allowing it to achieve effective regional development as envisioned in the National Planning Framework (NPF). In doing so, the RSES sets the framework for each Local Authority within the SR to develop their county and city development plans in a manner that will ensure national, regional and local plans align.

### Responsibilities/ role within the development and implementation of the policy improvement

As the project has progressed the Regional Planning and Development Unit have become increasingly involved as stakeholders as it has become more apparent that learning from the project in addition to enhancing the RSES governance will also directly support delivering on certain Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs) thereby improving the policy instrument and helping deliver the overarching ambition of becoming the most Liveable, Greenest and Creative & Innovative region. The governance and implementation of the RSES, in particular, delivery of the Economic Strategy offer the potential to promote place-based innovation priorities through relevant governance and effective monitoring & reporting.

“ *The implementation phase of delivering the RSES will focus on policies, actions and investment programmes to deliver the Regional Strategic Outcomes. The Regional Assembly will construct a full implementation plan for the RSES with clear time bound progress indicators and transparent reporting milestones with the involvement of key stakeholders from the Region.* ”

Investment is key to delivering the objectives of the RSES and this will be achieved through a variety of funding sources, including but not limited to future ERDF co-funded Operational Programmes. The SRA, mindful of this will lead the implementation of the policy improvement set out in this Action Plan.

The SRA also act as a key stakeholder supporting department and agency initiatives that align with the RSES objectives. The SRA monitor and contribute positively to stakeholder consultation processes, bringing an emphasis on action delivery for the Region and alignment with the RSES.

**Does this organisation provide political backing to the implementation of the policy improvement? If yes, how?**

Yes. The elected members of the Assembly were ultimately responsible for adopting the RSES Policy Instrument and have an overarching role in the implementation and governance of the RSES. The elected members will provide political support at a national, regional and local level to improve the governance of our policy instrument.




## 1.3 Stakeholders involved in development & implementation of policy improvement

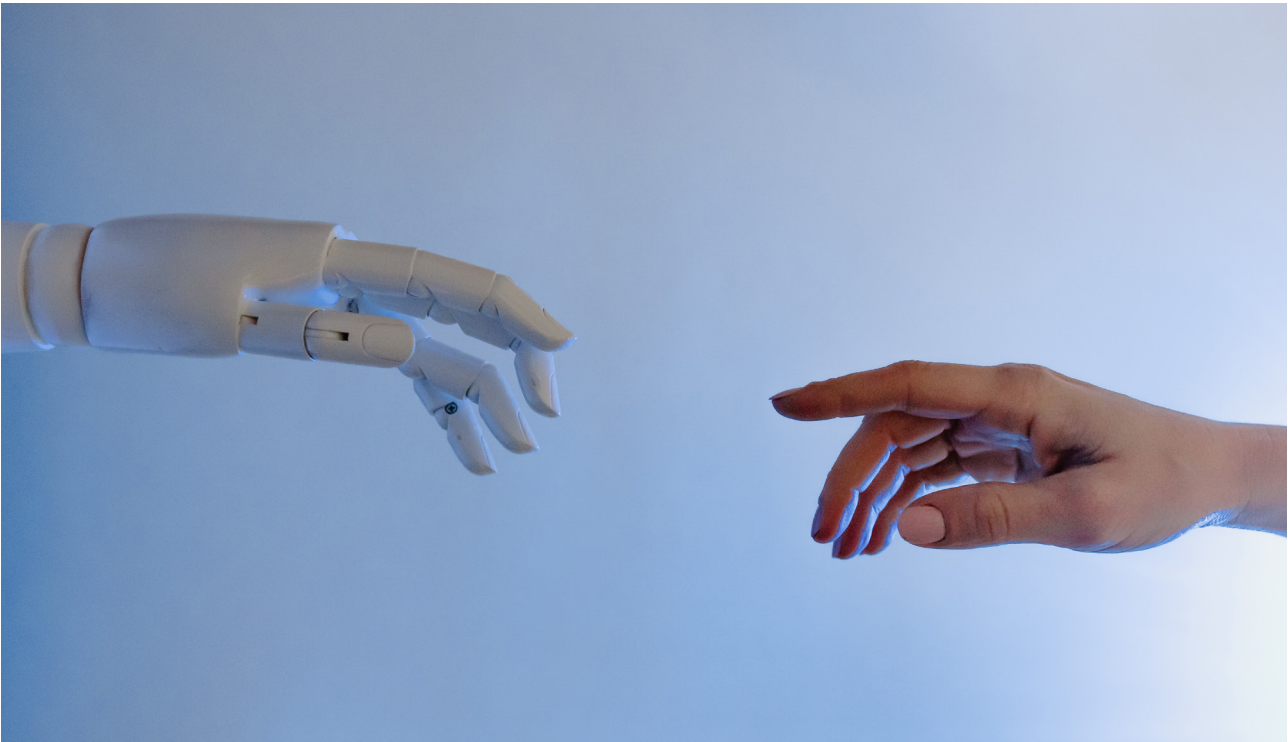
<b>Name of stakeholder</b>	Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment (DETE)
<b>Type of stakeholder</b>	Irish government department and national policy-making organisation.
<b>Responsibilities / role within the development and implementation of the policy improvement</b>	Will be involved as key national stakeholders driving the implementation of the RSES and the National Planning Framework.

<b>Name of stakeholder</b>	Regional Enterprise Programme (REP) for the: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• South-West NUTS III region</li> <li>• South-East NUTS III region</li> <li>• Mid-West NUTS III region</li> </ul>
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<b>Type of stakeholder</b>	Regional Enterprise Development - NUTS III level
<b>Responsibilities / role within the development and implementation of the policy improvement</b>	<p>The Regional Enterprise Plans (REPs), which fall under the remit of DETE, are developed by regional stakeholders and focus on undertaking collaborative initiatives that can help realise enterprise growth and job creation in each of the nine regions across Ireland. They are an important part of the Programme for Government commitment to achieving more balanced regional enterprise development.</p> <p>These 'bottom-up' REP's complement and build on core strategies of the Enterprise Agencies, the Local Enterprise Offices and the wider range of State Bodies directly involved in supporting enterprise development in the regions. They aim to garner added value and increased impact through regional and local actors working collaboratively on vulnerabilities and new enterprise development opportunities in the regions.</p> <p>Implementation of each Regional Enterprise Plan is overseen by a Regional Steering Committee (SC) comprising representatives of the Local Authorities, LEOs, Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, Regional Skills Forum, Higher and Further Education Institutes, Education and Training Boards, private sector and others, and chaired by a senior level private sector businessperson.</p> <p>The REPs have been tasked with delivering the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP) for the S3 and delivery of the strategy on the ground in collaboration with the Steering Committee members and relevant Regional Stakeholders. How this will be executed is still under discussion.</p> <p>The SRA Planning team are active members of the REP Steering Committees in the region.</p>



Name of stakeholder	Bable GmbH Consultancy
Type of stakeholder	Smart Consultancy Services
<p>Responsibilities / role within the development and implementation of the policy improvement</p> 	<p>The main purpose of BABLE is to support the sustainable development of cities in Europe and beyond. They strive to create liveable, future-proof and sustainable cities based on innovation and collaboration.</p> <p>Bable deliver on development of business innovation and digitalisation strategies, facilitation of multi-stakeholder partnerships on sustainability and innovation &amp; smart specialisation strategy together with systems analysis. Using a development-focused approach to support concept-to-implementation strategies for both public and private organisations.</p> <p>In support of project objectives Bable were contracted to work with SRA to advise on a regional approach to Smart Specialisation in the SR. The initial step to establish a framework for a Southern Region S3, through an in-depth analysis of the region's, identified sectors as the basis for identifying the specific specialisations on which the region will base its research and innovation policies, interventions, and investment. This will form the basis for building a framework and informing the national S3 with relevant regional data. The final report details the findings and steps that the SR is undertaking towards defining a regional approach to S3 by identifying priority areas for the SR through an evidence-based and participatory approach. The strategy builds on the findings of the Irish National S3 for Research and Innovation published in 2014 and the advisory report from EPPC on the Irish RIS3.</p> <p>Bable will also support the delivery of the 'Smart Southern Region' in line with the framework developed.</p>



Name of stakeholder

Maynooth University

Type of stakeholder

Third Level Institution

Responsibilities / role  
within the development  
and implementation of  
the policy improvement



**Maynooth  
University**  
National University  
of Ireland Maynooth

Maynooth University (MU) is an internationally recognised institution located 25 kilometres outside of Dublin, Ireland, and is the nation's fastest growing university. One of four constituent universities of the National University of Ireland, MU in 2021 placed #88 in the global top 100 universities under 50 years old in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings. In addition to being named in THE's Top 100 Under 50, MU is recognised among the top 350 universities in the world, the top 200 European universities, and as one of the top 200 universities for international connections and outlook. MU fosters an interdisciplinary approach to research, which its world-class academics bring to bear in tackling some of the most fundamental challenges facing society today. The University's research institutes and centres consolidate and deliver this impact as vibrant communities of learning, discovery and creation. Research at Maynooth University is also very much central to its teaching, and the University prides itself on placing equal value on its research and teaching missions.

In response to a perceived lack of a clear definition of what a 'Smart Region' is and through our involvement on COHES3ION the SRA are working with Maynooth University to define what a Smart Region looks like for the SR. The successful implementation of Smart Region initiatives relies on new and transformative concepts and we are seeking to develop a more in-depth understanding of what the development of a Smart Region means for different locations with differing attributes. This includes examining learnings from regional and international good practices and creating a framework of good principles and good practices as a tool to assist the integration of resilient Smart Region principles and processes across different themes throughout plans at the local level.



# Part 2: Policy Context of Action Plan

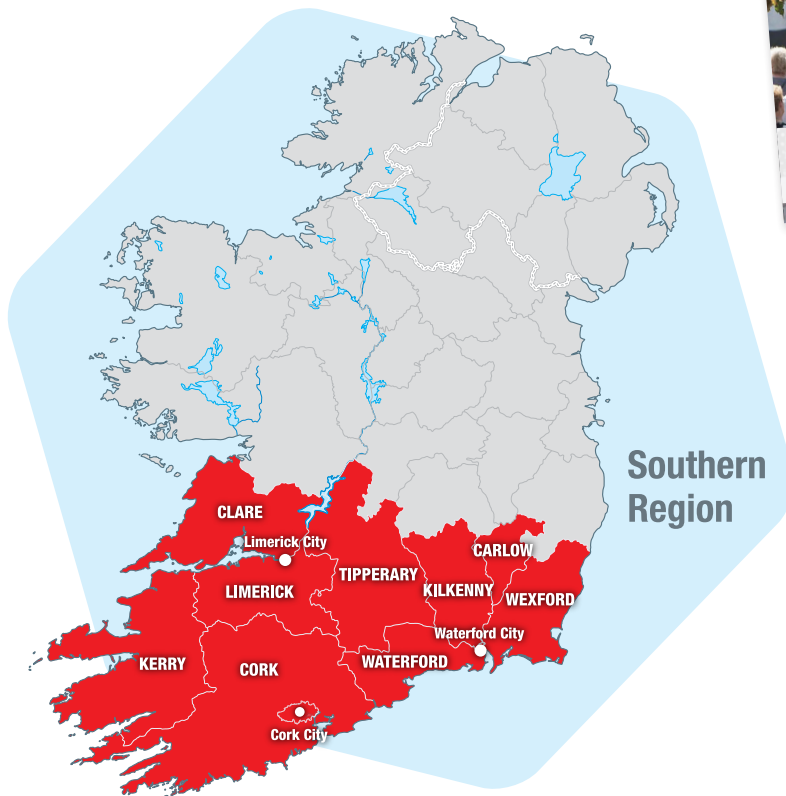
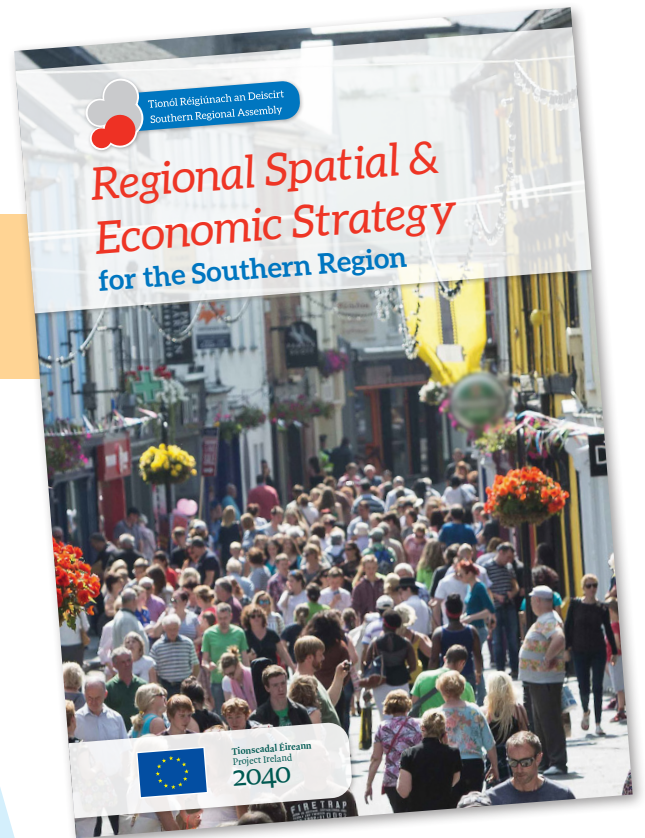
## General information

The Action Plan aims to impact:

- Investment for Growth and Jobs Programme
- European Territorial Cooperation Programme
- Other regional development policy instrument

Name of the policy instrument(s) addressed:

Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Southern Region of Ireland



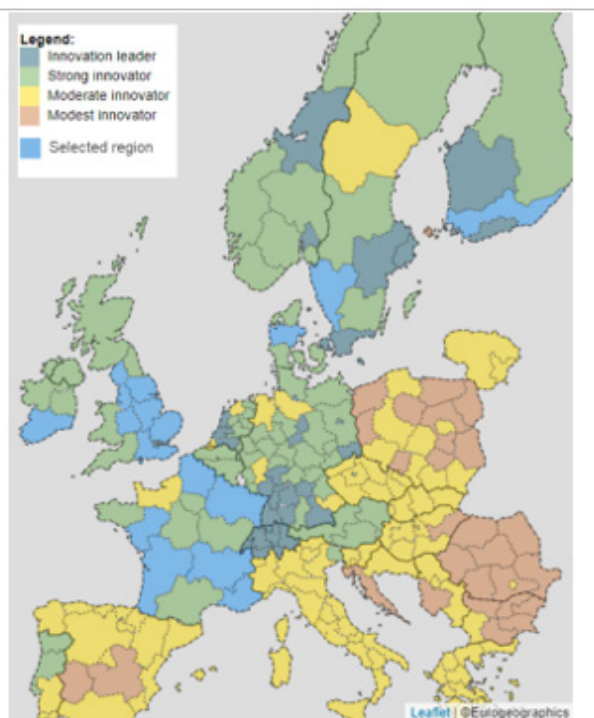
## Description of the Regional Policy Context

Ireland is rated as one of the most open economies in the EU and has received significant FDI due to its competitive corporate tax rate, geography, high education attainment levels, EU membership, and favourable living environment. The Southern Region (SR) has benefited greatly from FDI with several technology and life science multinational companies (MNCs) having a presence in the region. The 'Regional Approach for development of a Smart

Specialisation Strategy in the Southern Region' produced by BABLE on behalf of the Southern Regional Assembly, benchmarked the Southern Region against other regions in Europe. Using the Benchmarking Regional Structure Tool available at the S3 Platform, 15 regions were identified which share the most similar structural conditions<sup>1</sup> to the Southern Region. These regions are:

The 15 nearest regions to Southern Region	
1.	South East, England - UK ★
2.	Rhône-Alpes - France S3
3.	East of England - UK ★
4.	East Midlands, England - UK
5.	Pays de la Loire - France S3
6.	Etelä-Suomi - Finland ★ S3*
7.	Yorkshire and the Humber - UK
8.	Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur - France S3
9.	West Midlands, England - UK
10.	Aquitaine - France S3
11.	North West, England - UK
12.	Västsverige - Sweden ★ S3*
13.	Nord - Pas-de-Calais - France S3
14.	Alsace - France S3
15.	Midtjylland - Denmark ★ S3*

★: Innovation leader regions, S3: Region (or subregions\*) with a codified Smart Specialisation Strategy  
Source: (S3 Platform, 2020) – Benchmarking Regional Structure Rev. 2013. [Link](#)



This regional profiling and benchmarking with other European regions that share similar structural conditions to the SR reveal that although the region has the highest GDP per capita nationally, it also has the lowest real growth rate of regional Gross Value Added (GVA). This can be attributed in part to the presence of MNCs, making the region vulnerable to corporate tax reforms indicating the need for more support towards indigenous growth.

Benchmarking comparisons indicate the SR ranks highly in terms of specialisation in high-tech and

knowledge-intensive sectors, but the region faces significant challenges in terms of recent rises in unemployment as a result of the Covid pandemic. In response to major economic challenges, such as COVID-19 and Brexit, there is a need for the region to drive structural transformation and enhance local capabilities to make the region's economy fit for the future and ensure long-term inclusive prosperity.

Classified as a 'more developed region', the SR ranks 22nd out of all European regions in terms of regional GDP and 2nd at the national level. The region has

1. The methodology jointly developed by Orkestra - Basque Institute of Competitiveness and the S3 Platform sets a list of 15 elements for the identification of regions with similar structural conditions, based on 7 dimensions: (1) Geo-demography – regional size, ageing, urbanisation, and accessibility; (2) Human Resources – educational level; (3) Technological specialisation – technological distribution and concentration (patents); (4) Sectoral structure – economy's sectoral distribution, sectoral concentration, and industrial sectoral structure; (5) Firms – firm size; (6) Open-ness – trade openness; and (7) Institutions and values – multilevel government, social and institutional capital, and entrepreneurial / innovative attitudes.

also the highest GDP per capita nationally however, it is important to note that GDP figures are mainly due to MNC influence, the real growth rate of regional GVA was the lowest, at 4.3% in the same year (Eurostat, 2020). The regional economy relies heavily on a range of multinational companies that specialise in areas such as:

- Bioeconomy and biomaterials
- Electronics and medical technology
- Pharmaceuticals
- Green technology

Despite its strong economic performance, the SR faces significant challenges in terms of unemployment. Since 2012, the regional unemployment rate has steadily decreased thanks to the economic recovery, reaching 5.5% in 2019 (Eurostat, 2021). However, following the pandemic, the unemployment rate grew to 6.4% by the end of 2020 (CSO, 2021). The region still records the highest rate in the country, remaining above the national average (5.7%), but below the EU level (7.3%). Considering the NUTS III sub-regions, the South-East had the highest unemployment rate nationally (6.6%) on average over 2020, followed by Mid-West (6.1%), however, the South-West registers the second-lowest rate (5.1%) in the country (CSO, 2019). On the other hand, the region's employment rate showed a steady increase % between 2015 and 2019, growing from 64.1% to 67.4 (Eurostat, 2020); however, the employment rate dropped to 59.4% by the end of 2020, scoring below the national average (61.1%) (CSO, 2021).

The presence of universities, institutes of technology, research centres -both private and public, and new technological university help drive and support the innovation potential of the region. It represents an attractive area for investment due to the important role played by the IT industry. The region's strong focus on education and access to multiple research centres has fuelled the staffing and skill requirements of multinationals, making it a hotbed for Life Science, Technology, Multilingual and Engineering graduates. The Southern Region ranks the second highest in population with tertiary education, reflecting the Region's track record in meeting the skills required by multinationals. However, there is a significantly lower performance in lifelong learning with the Southern Region placed

last and a considerable distance behind the high performers. This is a critical indicator for the Region to focus on, given the massive transformations expected in almost all industries with the disruption of new technologies and digitalisation. The data shows that participation in Lifelong Learning is a major weakness in the Southern Region and there is a substantial gap to bridge in order to compete with European leaders in this area.

Overall, the region's economy, as well as the Irish economy, has performed positively in recent years and is expected to continue to expand, albeit at a more stable pace. However, Covid-19 will have an impact on the Irish economy comparable to that of the EU. The EC's Spring 2020 projections foresaw a decline of 7.9% during 2020 and an increase of 6.1% in 2021. Looking forward the commission forecast the Irish economy would grow in GDP (gross domestic product) terms by 14.6% this year, moderating to 5.1% in 2022 and 4.1% in 2023. Forecasts for the EU on average are similar, with a decline of 7.4% in 2020 followed by an increase of 6.1% in 2021. Nevertheless, although positive, the economic prospects of the regions remain uncertain due to the ongoing impacts of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Between 2014 and 2021, the SR ranked as a Strong Innovator (+), according to the Regional Innovation Scoreboard, with an increasing innovation performance over time (2.9%) relative to that in 2014. Although the region was able to raise its Innovation Index above the national performance since 2011 (from 99.9% to 103%), its position relative to the EU average weakened (from 113.3% to 111.3%), though remained above average.

The regional performance shows relative strength for several innovation indicators, such as marketing/organisational innovation and R&D expenditures in the public sector. For the latter, the score is above the national average (149%) and equal to the EU average (100%). Weak performance is instead registered for design applications, for which the region performs significantly below both the national and EU average (51% and 28%, respectively).

Ireland's Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) developed as a pre-condition of the 2014-2020 ERDF programming period was informed from a National Research Prioritisation Exercise (NRPE)



in 2014 identifying 14 priority research areas. This was further refined to 6 overarching priorities but has not undergone review since. Accordingly, the strategy places emphasis on research driven innovation with success however in terms of supporting innovation in enterprise the strategy was generally considered ‘not fit for purpose’. Ireland’s S3 is purely a national strategy with no noted recognition of regional specificities and no separate smart specialisation strategies at Ireland’s 3 NUTS II regions (1. Southern, 2. Eastern & Midland and 3. Northern & Western). However, each region has its own individual strengths and competitive advantage where priority areas are of more importance to the economy in that region. This was further emphasised through the Smart Territorial Mapping (STM) Exercise and subsequent identification of regional priorities.

The European Commission sought expert advice and support on ‘Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) in Ireland’ from Alison Hunter, Economic and Public Policy Consultancy (EPPC) SPRL. The report sought to gain insight and understanding of ‘the implementation of Smart Specialisation in Ireland’, focusing on how the country’s current and planned agenda ‘fit’ with post-2020 Smart Specialisation requirements. The report recommends that 5 key themes should be further explored and actioned in Ireland to upgrade the country’s post-2020 RIS3<sup>2</sup>:

1. **Governance** – a key ‘acid test’ for R&I governance structures is the extent to which they enable connections to and across relevant R&I initiatives. The report noted that ‘Ireland’s R&I governance is strongly centralised and has tended to under-estimate the value in using local / regional evidence for R&I policy

making’. This report also advocates for the Regional Assemblies to be integrated into the governance and oversight of the S3 recognising the opportunity the RSES offer to re-orient the country’s R&I governance with a stronger place-based focus.

2. **Place-based policy making** – a new ‘line of sight’ should be generated between policy making and impacts on the ground and to address a current tendency towards ‘space-blind’ R&I policy making. The RSES process offers scope to increase sensitivity to the ‘bottom-up’ route to developing Ireland’s future R&I policy framework, by applying RIS3 principles. The EU’s Green Deal and associated Just Transition Mechanism could provide a very significant opportunity for Ireland to address its transition challenges, in the areas of energy, industry and digitalisation
3. **Cooperation** – Ireland should generate a stronger, unified ecosystem approach to R&I, across the country, to strengthen the visibility of a number of key existing / emerging R&I strengths (both within and beyond the country) and to address the vulnerability of market size. This also offers much greater scope to position Ireland on the EU’s R&I cooperation ‘map’, signalling new areas and new approaches to working with EU partners of choice – a vision very much in line with the EU’s direction of travel to support industrial competitiveness, through value chain collaboration.
4. **Digitalisation** – accelerating Ireland’s R&I momentum could be boosted by improved alignment of the country’s ICT and digitalisation expertise, initiatives and investments. This could generate multiplier effects, reduce ‘distance’ to accessing R&I support and significantly boost the diffusion of R&I benefits across the country
5. **SME R&I support programme** – Ireland’s supply-side R&I services are fragmented and are not sufficiently targeted and aligned to the needs of the county’s extensive SME community. This target group should be at the core of the country’s post-2020 RIS3 agenda, with the aim of boosting R&I capacity and performance, especially in the areas of non-technical innovation support (including management / leadership skills), boosting the uptake of digital skills and technologies and offering improved, tailored support for internationalisation.

2. ‘Expert advice and support on Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) in Ireland’, Alison Hunter, EPPC

Ireland's Country Report for 2019 indicated a clear need to address regional differences in competitiveness across the country, much of which is driven by the concentration of Multi-National Corporations in the Dublin area that employ large numbers of highly-skilled employees by offering higher salaries. The resulting lack of qualified employees and skilled managers in small and medium-sized enterprises reduces their innovation capacity and competitiveness. The report also noted a significant digital divide between the different

local authority levels exacerbated by the lack of access to broadband in many rural areas. To date, these (and other) examples of disparities have failed to gain much traction at the national level. The further point of interest arising from the report is the limited progress in enhancing the productivity of domestic firms by stimulating research and innovation and promoting cooperation between foreign companies, local firms and public research centres.<sup>3</sup>



“

*Smart Specialisation, focuses on boosting productivity, regaining lost competitiveness, increasing export intensity and diversity of markets. It focuses on measures to improve our attractiveness as a location for national and foreign investment and increasing entrepreneurial activity. Smart Specialisation requires strengthening enterprise engagement with academic research.*

3. 'Expert advice and support on Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) in Ireland', Alison Hunter, EPPC

## Description of the Policy Instrument selected for improvement

On the 31st of January 2020, the Southern Regional Assembly published its **Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Southern Region**. In doing so, the RSES brings together spatial planning and economic policy for the first time providing a strategic framework for investment in the SR, marking a significant policy milestone for not only regional government in Ireland, but also national and local government.

The RSES for the Southern Region provides a long-term, strategic development framework for the future economic and social development of the region, with the aim of achieving effective regional development in line with the vision and objectives of the National Planning Framework (NPF). In doing so, the RSES sets the framework for each local authority within the Southern Region to develop their county and city development plans in a manner that will ensure national, regional and local plans align.

## Irish Planning System An Overview



Source NPF 2040

The RSES vision for the Southern Region is led by the need for transformative change. By 2040, the population of the Region is targeted to grow by 380,000 people to reach almost 2 million, requiring homes and new jobs. To achieve the spatial objectives set out in the NPF, the Southern Regional Assembly's RSES recognises the strategic role played by all areas in achieving set regional and national targets and objectives.

The RSES sets out an ambition vision for the Southern Region to become the most **Liveable, Greenest and Creative & Innovative**. This will be achieved through the 11 Regional Strategic Objectives that frame the RSES.

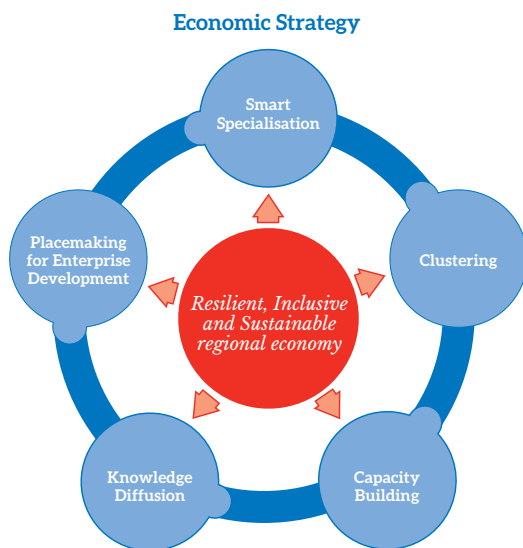
The economic strategy of the RSES for the SR aims to develop a sustainable, competitive, inclusive and resilient regional economy. Key to delivering the



overarching vision is ensuring the region develops a strong and diverse economic base. With immediate challenges such as COVID-19, Brexit, and potential vulnerabilities for Ireland's enterprise base, it is important that the SR sustains what we have in the immediate term, transforms our enterprise base for longer term resilience while managing potential vulnerabilities. The RSES seeks to achieve this vision through five economic principles:

1. **Smart Specialisation:** Bringing together key stakeholders with real local knowledge in a geographic area to identify the competitive advantages and develop new economic opportunities.

2. **Clustering:** Putting in place a favourable and connected regional business ecosystem in which new players can emerge and support new value chains and emerging new industries.
3. **Placemaking:** A significant emphasis on making attractive places to live, learn and work to attract talent.
4. **Knowledge Diffusion:** A Learning Region, developing skills, talent, research and development, education assets and access to life-long learning.
5. **Capacity Building:** The capacity to bid for funding and to respond to emerging challenges to secure greater economic resilience is supported.



Opportunities for economic growth across the SR will be achieved by supporting synergies between talent and place, building on identified assets and potential opportunities to strengthen and transform enterprise ecosystems and provide quality jobs, re-intensifying employment in existing urban areas, complemented by strategic employment growth in the right locations and diversifying local and rural economies.

As part of the active implementation of the strategy the SRA have identified 41 objectives as “active”, where the SRA is providing leadership and regional level co-ordination between stakeholders to progress actions and achieve strengthened policy commitments, funding and delivery of projects under the RSES pillars of a Creative and Innovative, Liveable and Green Region. Facilitated by learnings through Cohes3ion examples of active objectives and tangible progress under themes are ‘Guidance on a Regional Approach to S3’, ‘Smart Region Definition and

Framework’, ‘Learning Region’, and ‘International Connectivity’. Significantly for promoting Life-Long Learning as a key attribute of knowledge diffusion throughout the SR the SRA is developing a Learning Region Action Plan in conjunction with a wide variety of education and training stakeholders. The aims of this action plan are directly relevant and supportive of the S3 strategy and for objectives and actions in support of our higher education and training sectors under the S3 strategy.

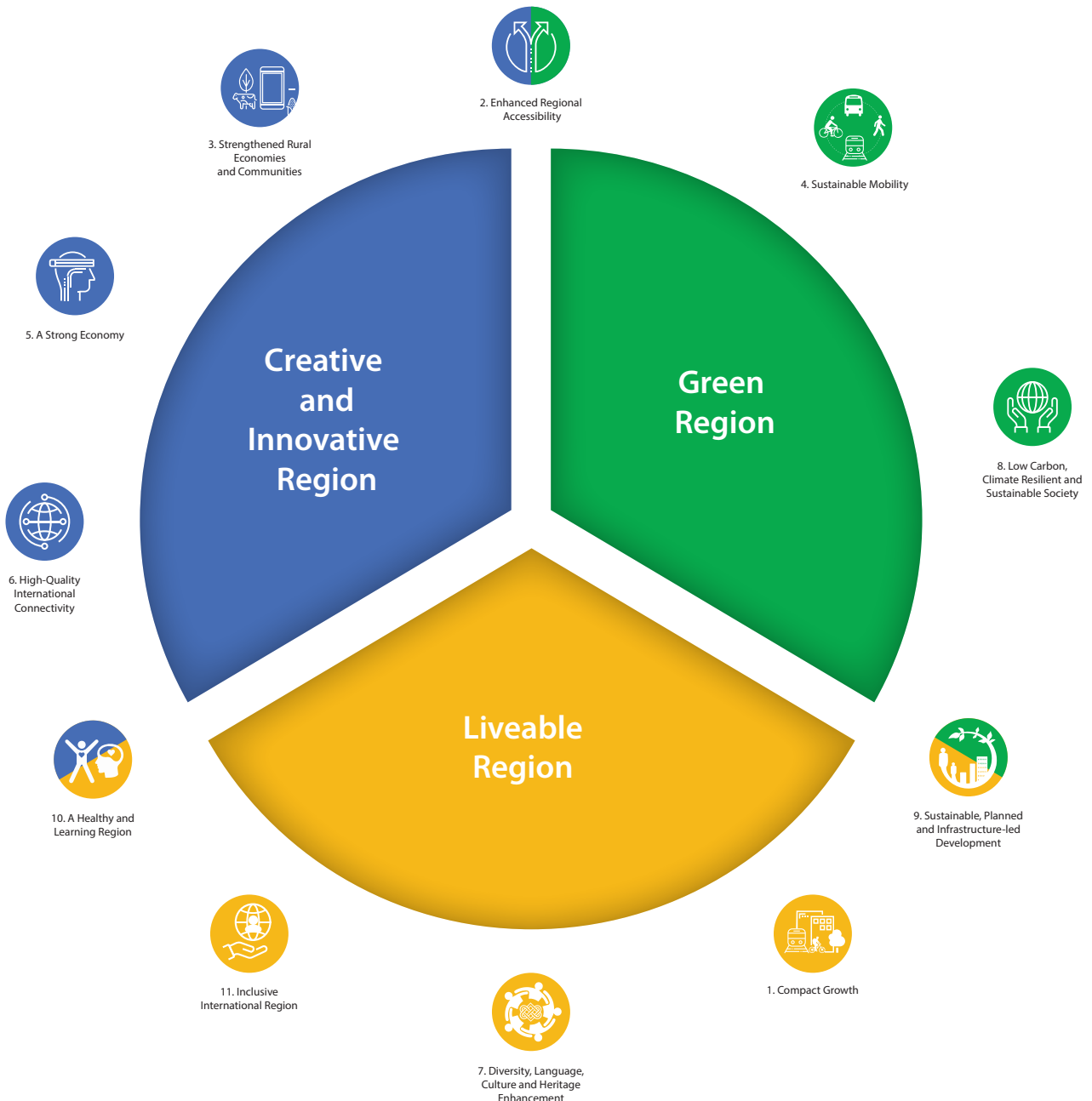
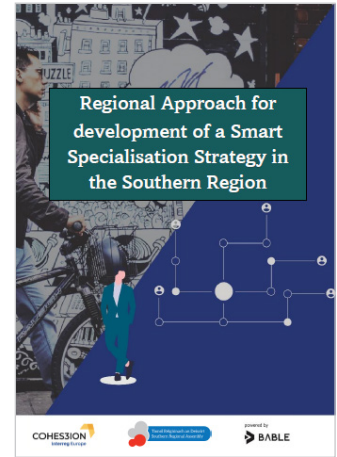
As outlined previously the economic vision for the Southern Region is to enable sustainable, competitive, inclusive and resilient growth requiring the development of a strong and diverse economic base. Key to achieving this is recognising and building on the Region's strengths and competitive advantages in order to develop economic opportunities. It requires smart strategic choices, evidence-based policymaking and the strengthening of enterprise engagement with academic research. The RSES recognises smart specialisation as the key to boosting productivity, regaining lost competitiveness, increasing export intensity and diversity of markets. This approach can only work if choices are based on real knowledge of local potential involving a bottom-up approach through established structures such as the RSES and Regional Innovation Strategies.

To advance the RSES economic strategy and in alignment with the objectives of the COHES3ION project the SRA are exploring how best to inform a regional Smart Specialisation approach, and building on the COHES3ION Smart Territorial

Mapping (STM) exercise, have identified key actions to facilitate this process. The initial step being to establish a framework for a Southern Region S3 through an 'in-depth analysis of the Region's identified sectors as the basis for identifying the specific specialisations on which the Region will base its research and innovation policies, interventions and investment'. This will form the foundation for building a framework and informing the national S3 with relevant regional data.

Accordingly, the SRA worked with external experts Bable GMBH to advise on the 'Development of a framework/toolkit to support a regional approach for Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) in the Southern Region' with 2 key objectives:

1. Provide evidence-based recommendations of potential S3 priority areas for the region
2. Develop a methodology framework to inform the next steps for the regional S3 approach



Work Packages included:

## MACRO-ANALYSIS & BENCHMARKING

- Analyze regional Innovation Performance
- High-level challenges, market trends and opportunities transformation
- Existing R&I initiatives to assess level of innovation and critical mass in key sectors

## STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

- Current and emerging areas of innovation activity “on the ground”
- Deeper understanding on the local needs, framework conditions and perceptions
- Assess readiness and willingness to drive the S3 Entrepreneurial Discovery Process

## MAPPING & SWOT ANALYSIS

- SWOT analysis on place-based capabilities, resources, externalities, complementarities
- Mapping key stakeholder and innovation activities
- Mapping S3 areas with high potential (based on capacity and opportunity)

BABLE

## FRAMEWORK & RECOMMENDATIONS

- Prioritisation criteria for selection of S3 areas
- Recommendations on key stakeholder, enablers, and levers – (links with Smart Region)
- Practical framework/toolkit to inform further S3 development
- KPIs for monitoring and evaluation

Further to the regional macroanalysis external experts Bable performed a sectoral SWOT analysis and informed by stakeholder input identified **21 priority areas** to consider for smart specialisation for the Southern Region. These build on existing sectoral strengths and are centred around a direction of transformation. The priority areas are cross-sectoral and have the potential to impact on several sectors and markets.

There are efficiencies to be gained by such collaboration as demonstrated by the SRA’s initiative in the procurement through our partnership in the Interreg Europe Cohes3ion project of Bable to

develop a Regional Approach for the Development of a S3 Strategy in the Southern Region. This has strongly benefitted this consultation process.

A Regional S3 Framework will provide the foundation to initiate integration of the territorial dimension for cohesive S3 and provide a bridge between EU, National and Local policy through the regional tier.

**The SRA are committed as a key stakeholder to help align policies, objectives and actions between RSES, ROP 2021-2027 and S3 implementation, which closely align.**



## Smart Southern Region Ambition

The RSES recognises Smart Specialisation as the path to smart cities and a competitive, innovative and productive regional economy. Key to achieving this vision is for all locations, urban and rural, to

collaborate on Smart Region Initiatives. A number of the RSES Objectives (RPOs) are dedicated to the Smart Region initiative including but not limited to:

### RPO 2

#### Planning for Diverse Areas

The RSES recognises the strategic role played by all areas, both urban and rural, in achieving the set regional and national targets and objectives. The RSES supports sustainable enterprise growth, services, physical and social infrastructure investment and the sustainable growth of all communities in the Region. The overall strategy builds on cities and their associated metropolitan areas as engines of growth and seeks, in parallel, to re-position the Region's strong network of towns, villages and diverse rural areas in an economically resilient, imaginative and smart way to foster sustainable competitive advantage.

### RPO 134

#### Smart Cities and Smart Region

It is an objective to:

Build on Smart Cities and Smart Region initiatives in Cork, Limerick and Waterford, such as the All Ireland Smart Cities Forum, and seek to extend such initiatives to towns, villages and rural areas to support a Smart Region;

Seek investment in broadband, fibre technologies, wireless networks (including an Internet of Things Network across the Region) and integrated digital infrastructures to enable actions that sustainably deliver on smart technologies to increase the innovative, sustainable and competitive placemaking dividend for the Southern Region;

Support a leadership role for the Southern Region as an innovator in smart technologies and smart mobility;

Seek and support investment for initiatives in smart technology as an enabler for education and life-long learning in all locations.

The successful implementation of these initiatives relates to new and transformative concepts and the RSES seeks to develop an applied understanding of what the development of a Smart Region means for different locations with differing attributes. This includes examining learnings from regional and international good practices and creating a framework of good principles and good practices as a tool to assist the integration of resilient Smart Region principles and processes across different themes throughout plans at the local level.

The overarching concept of “smart” is aimed at stimulating the best from each region and city and the SRA see a Smart Region being a

key enabler in a regional approach to Smart Specialisation. One can't happen without the other. This work will consider what is a smart region, and how such a region could harness advancements in technological innovation and digitalisation to effectively deliver on the SRA regional priority goals.

To support the S3 delivery and to advance the RSES Smart Region ambition the SRA are working with external experts Maynooth University (MU) to engage with regional stakeholders, including Local Authorities, to agree a definition of what a Smart Southern Region looks like and to develop a maturity framework to assist stakeholder initiatives in pursuit of a Smart Region.



programme (2021-27) is 'A Smarter Europe' with a strong emphasis on innovative, digitalisation & smart economic transformation building on place-based strengths & potentials. This requires a strengthened interconnectedness between regional socio-economic development, environmental management and spatial planning practice and policy. There is a growing recognition that every type of region is facing industrial transition - as a result of changes to traditional manufacturing, digitalisation and technological advancements,

climate change and, more recently, COVID-19 and its impact on retail trends - and thus have distinct needs. Meeting these needs over the next decade will require greater collaboration via the quadruple helix model to harness local and regional opportunities and endogenous assets in a smart and sustainable manner that not only diversifies the local/regional asset base and nurtures industry and technology clusters, but which also creates places that are adaptable with a strong transversal skills-base (Creamer, Connolly & Riveria, 2021).

### Leadership Role

The SRA regards a well-run Smart Specialisation and EDP process as essential to delivering better innovation outcomes. Lack of commitment to this will have an adverse impact on regional development, research and innovation and enterprise.

The SRA's EU links, access to good practice knowledge, role in dissemination and transfer of knowledge, role in the development of

frameworks and toolkits to assist actions by regional stakeholders, role in EU policy formation and role in development and managing the ROP 2021-2027 with the EU under themes aligned to S3 (smart cities and a smart region, lower carbon emissions, climate resilience and urban regeneration) position us strongly to support our Region's S3 sectors. These links and networks support the SRA as a key stakeholder for DETE in national and regional S3 development and implementation.



## Description of the need(s) to be addressed through the policy improvement

- The perceived **lack of visibility** of Ireland's RIS3 and no clear sense that it acts as a 'living' document with perceived currency across the R&I community<sup>4</sup>.  
– Through our work with external experts Bable there was extensive stakeholder consultation and engagement with REP managers that has facilitated raising the awareness of S3 within the region. This work will continue as we disseminate the findings of the report and implement the actions detailed.
- The requirement to have **effective monitoring and evaluation in place to measure performance** towards the objectives of the strategy – The previous S3 was noted to have 'insufficient metrics in place to monitor and evaluate effectiveness especially from an industry perspective'<sup>5</sup> In response to this and following guidance from The European Commission's Implementing Smart Specialisation Strategies Handbook external experts Bable have developed a set of regional KPIs and metrics aligned to the 11 Regional Strategic Outcomes of the RSES that could inform reporting to the national S3.
- Existing **governance** structures have highlighted both a lack of connectivity across different R&I actions and a rather 'place-blind' and highly centralised approach to policy making<sup>6</sup> - Not only are the Regional Assemblies the Managing Authorities for ERDF implementation, and therefore extremely familiar with the S3 enabling conditions for EC reporting; they are building a governance model designed to facilitate regional consultation and implementation of schemes for regional development through their RSES. Key to effective S3 governance are good working relationships, experience and access to quadruple helix actors which the RSES governance already has in place. Commitment and support to the role of the Assemblies and RSES needs to be strengthened to reflect the active phase of RSES implementation and leverage the leadership and co-ordinating role of Regional Assemblies through our diverse roles.
- Central to a successful S3 is the requirement to **strengthen collaboration, coordination and engagement** bringing together key stakeholders (including researchers and industry) in a geographic area to identify the competitive advantages of a region with the view of developing economic opportunities. SRA in collaboration with external experts Bable and Maynooth University have conducted extensive stakeholder consultation facilitating collaboration, coordination and engagement around S3 priorities, opportunities and enablers. Going forward consistency in approach from DETE with other government departments is required.
- **Lack of up-to-date regional data** – In response to the lack of up-to-date regional data and analysis SRA collaborated with external experts Bable to perform an extensive macroanalysis of the SR. An array of methods were utilised to identify the priority areas, both quantitative and qualitative. These included stakeholder interviews and workshops, regional profiling and benchmarking, patent analysis and detailed SWOT analysis of key regional economic sectors. These analyses were broken down further into the Southern Region's three NUTS III sub-regions of the Mid-West, South-West, and South-East. The sectoral SWOT analysis for the SR was conducted based on comprehensive desk-top research, individual stakeholder interviews, and collective stakeholder inputs gave a deeper understanding of the local needs, framework conditions, and innovation activities "on the ground". From the region's industrial structure and specialisation in terms of local quotient and patent and cluster analysis, potential sectors for smart specialisation were identified by BABLE, and further streamlined through stakeholder inputs into nine priority sectors. The SWOT analysis outlined the sectoral strengths of the region and shows the current and emerging areas of innovation activity by key regional assets for the nine sectors. It also outlined the major challenges and areas of opportunity for

4. Expert advice and support on Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) in Ireland', Alison Hunter, EPPC

5. Expert advice and support on Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) in Ireland', Alison Hunter, EPPC

6. Expert advice and support on Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) in Ireland', Alison Hunter, EPPC

each sector, as well as key areas of technological specialisation. The macroeconomic analysis, the sectoral SWOT analysis, and the inputs from the stakeholder consultation informed the identification of 21 priority areas for the SR. Each of the priority areas builds on existing sectoral strengths indicated in the SWOT and is centred around a direction of transformation identified through the stakeholder interviews and workshops and market analysis. The identified areas were strengthened through analysis of the regional ecosystem potential and global opportunities. The priority areas are cross-sectoral, having an impact on several sectors and markets each of which are identified. The SRA will disseminate this information and use this to inform the direction of the regional S3 approach. We will continue to collaborate with DETE as to how best to use this information to inform the regional element of the S3.

- Facilitate **‘effective functioning of entrepreneurial discovery process’** – key to the work of external experts Bable a fully-fledged participatory process was under-taken to ensure the level of granularity needed to identify the potential areas as well as the key stakeholders to drive them forward. Furthermore, this was supported with BABLE’s experiences in other relevant innovation strategies from across Europe, guiding the Southern Region’s businesses, research organisations, educational institutions, and other key stakeholders to take the next steps to become an Innovative and Smart Region. While a fully-fledged EDP was beyond the scope of the work the aim was to co-develop a S3 framework that enables and empowers the local stakeholders to pursue the S3 development and the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP). Bable and SRA worked closely with the Regional Enterprise Programme Managers tasked with delivering S3 on the ground during the consultation to ensure a co-ordinated effort aligned to regional and national objectives. The SRA have taken every opportunity to promote the need for an ongoing approach to EDP that is built into the implementation of the S3.
- **Address the lack of regional focus in the national strategy** – ‘Illustrate the importance of recognising the enterprise and innovation potential specific to each of the NUTS II regions

and reducing disparities between the regions – this must be a key objective of Ireland’s new Smart Specialisation Strategy. The RSES process was established to build in a regional tier to the national planning process and in doing so articulate the needs at the local level. It has provided a ‘refreshed ‘voice’ at the regional level. ‘The making of the RSES has provided a significant and new territorial evidence base across the 3 regional assemblies (NUTS II). This effort has also helped to identify both challenges and opportunities (mirrored in the STM), which may not be on the radar of national level thinking or decision-making. The RSESs also challenge the more conventional thinking around the geographical ‘boundaries’ of innovation efforts and investments. The collective RSES evidence base offers significant potential in providing a new momentum for place-based, R&I policymaking, supported by targeted investment.<sup>7</sup> External experts Bable conducted an in-depth sectoral analysis as the basis to identify specific specialisations on which the SR will base its R&I policies, interventions, and investment. This has been presented to S3 policy owner DETE who have welcomed the informed evidenced based approach, they are now considering how to incorporate this into the national strategy to best effect. Through learnings on Cohes3ion the SRA have been in a position to put forward an informed argument for the inclusion of a regional perspective into the refresh of the national strategy which had not been available to us before. SRA will continue to collaborate with DETE on the inclusion of a regional perspective into the S3.

- Support the goal of **regional parity** which is key to both the NPF and RSES implementation and needs to be supported by the actions of central government. Developing S3 in the regions and NPF/RSES implementation are therefore interdependent.
- Provide a **clear and shared regional vision** for regional development which plays a critical role in ensuring long-term stakeholder engagement in the S3 process. Emerging from an extensive stakeholder consultation the SRA has an ambitious vision to become the most **Liveable, Greenest and Creative & Innovative** regions in Europe which could form the basis for defining

7. *Expert advice and support on Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) in Ireland’, Alison Hunter, EPPC*



the vision for the S3 further defined with the regional innovation ecosystem.

- **Aligning actions** under the new national S3 Strategy with RSES implementation actions and a strong regional dimension for S3, reinforces the successful implementation of both strategies and presents a fundamental opportunity for **partnership**.
- Ensure **priorities are understood and driven at the local level** - The foundation of the innovation ecosystem is built upon knowledge creating and sharing across the quadruple helix model meaning local authorities also have a crucial role to play in this collaborative approach both in facilitating and adopting innovative methods. This could be coordinated by the Assemblies through the RSES implementation.
- **Enabling conditions** such as the Smart Region

As outlined above the impact of learnings and work of the Cohes3ion project on the RSES for the Southern Region is already evident. Work through Cohes3ion also heavily influenced the submission from the SRA to the public consultation of the national S3 in August 2021 strongly advocating for:

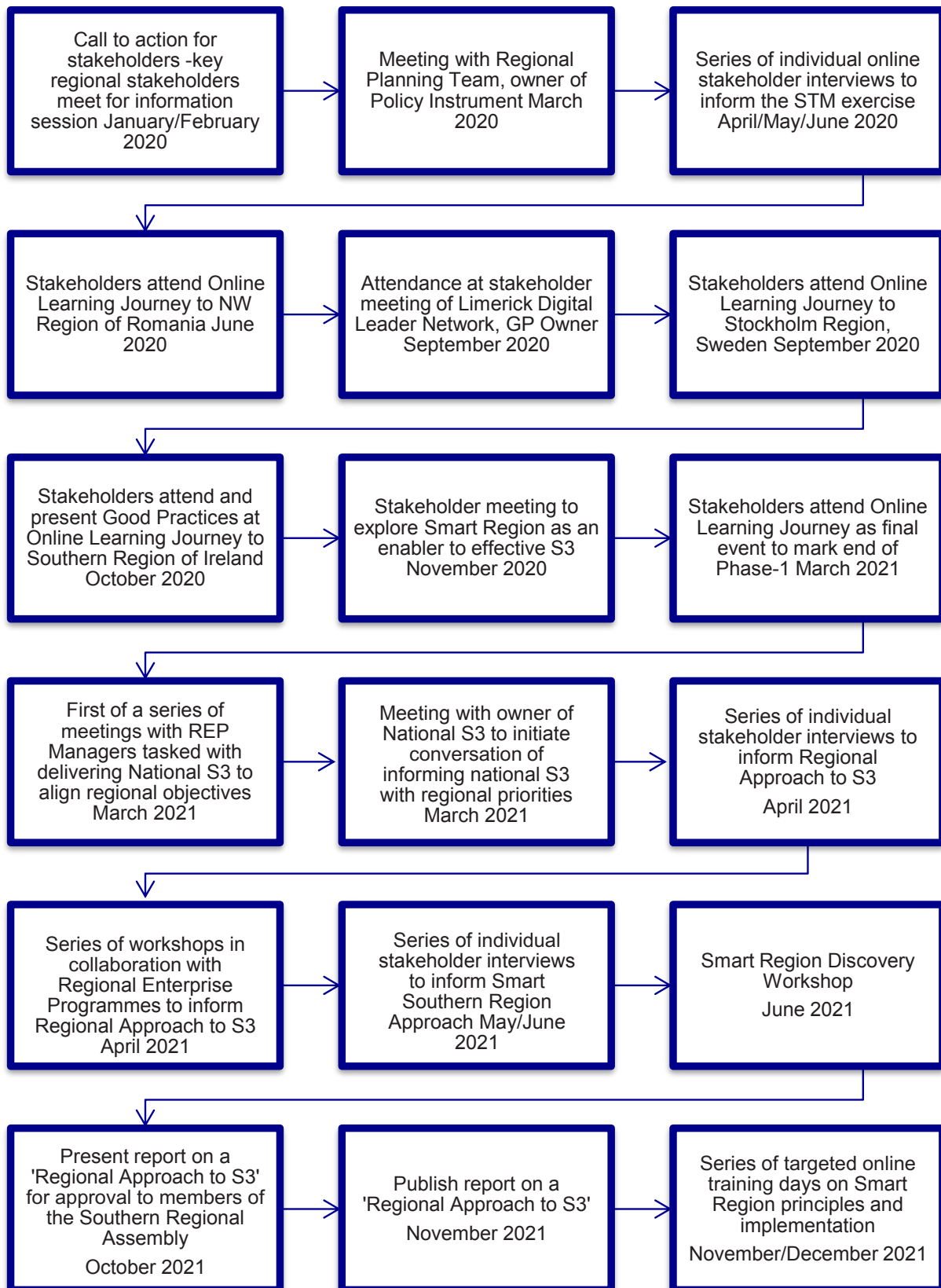
- Strong Government Department support to the regions would prove transformative in driving sustainable growth, economic prosperity and

regional parity, the goal of national policy under Project Ireland 2040: NPF, RSES and stated goals for new Smart Specialisation Strategy for Ireland.

- The regional tier, in terms of geography, structure, coordination with stakeholders and experience in delivering EU and national policy at the regional scale, is strongly placed to facilitate and action the work of central government in achieving its goals under a new S3 strategy, especially as a strategic bridge for S3 between national and NUTS II regional level, in complement to the role of NUTS III level Regional Enterprise Plans which will further support S3 with regional and local stakeholder inclusion.
- A regional approach to the S3 strategy tailored to regionally informed strengths, competitive advantages, emerging opportunities and issues to address in support of enterprise, research, development and innovation (RD& I) growth needs to be articulated and committed to within the S3 strategy for Ireland.
- Alignment of regional S3 objectives and actions with RSES Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs) which have shared themes and stakeholder interests and leveraging the strategic role of the Assemblies for EU and national policy delivery at the regional level, is welcomed and needs firm commitment within the final S3 strategy.



## Stakeholder Involvement



# Part 3: Regional Actions & Timeframe



## Regional Action 1

Incorporate a strong regional expression and function into the governance of the national S3 to oversee the governance and reporting on regional priorities for the Southern Region.

### Relevance to the Project



At the Cohes3ion kick-off meeting in Bilbao, Spain which took place in October 2019 the project objectives were clarified, and the importance of effective monitoring and evaluation was highlighted. This was further emphasised through a number of the good practices presented. The **Invest in Bilbao Biscay strategy** introduced a comprehensive work system and governance model which promoted characterising projects within the region by both priority and potential impact. This could be measured through the introduction of appropriate KPIs. The governance structure established, which in many ways emulates the proposed governance structure of the RSES, emphasises monitoring and evaluation as key criteria of good governance. It calls for clarity through defined and balanced leadership that takes advantage of relevant partner strengths.

**BIC BIZKAIA - Business Incubator** presented an effective MLG approach incorporating differing regional entities through a clearly defined reporting structure. **Bizkaia Orekan - Biscay at Balance** promotes a place-based approach to innovation analysing the strengths of the region at municipal level aligning to the Priorities of the Economic Development Department of the Provincial Council of Biscay for the term 2015 - 2019. This place-based approach is also reflected in the governance resulting in a better allocation of resources and implementation of policies.

At the 4th study visit to Cluj, Romania which took place online in June 2020 the **'Framework document regarding The National Strategy for Research, Innovation and Smart Specialisation'** was introduced. As noted previously Ireland's S3 was published in 2014 with no noted regional specialities; the 14 priorities identified in Ireland's S3 were borne from a National Research Prioritisation Exercise. NW Romania appear to be at a similar stage in its regional S3 journey in terms of having a national strategy with no noted regional specialities. Much like Romania the Irish S3 is undergoing a revision in line with ERDF programme requirements. In conjunction with the lack of regional insight the S3 also lacked appropriate governance, monitoring and evaluation. This framework sets out an EDP calendar at both national and regional level with

the monitoring and evaluation building on this. The framework also emphasises the need for specific and measurable objectives. At this visit the North West Romanian Development Agency presented the **'North West Region of Romania Smart Specialisation Strategy'** which included building in regional governance by including relevant

representatives from different territorial levels in the Steering Committee, Scientific Committee, working groups and in all workshops during the EDP sessions. This is a model the Southern Region would like to promote here in Ireland with the inclusion of the Southern Regional Assembly taking a more formal and active role in the S3 governance.

## Nature of the Action

This action will improve the policy instrument by enhancing the governance and implementation of the RSES for the Southern Region. Governance over a targeted place-based approach will promote place-making for enterprise development. It will facilitate a better coordination between innovation support services at regional and local level and the Regional Structures. The improved management and monitoring mechanisms of smart specialisation will be embedded at the regional level through the RSES implementation and monitoring and by extension improve governance.

Research and stakeholder consultations including targeted bi-lateral interviews and focused workshops to identify regional priorities carried out during the project have highlighted the lack of S3 presence or impact at the regional or local level. As noted previously and highlighted in the expert advice on Ireland's S3 approach, Irish regions tend to act as functional 'units' to deliver on national level initiatives. This poses challenges for Ireland's 'regions' and the 3 Regional Assemblies in terms of having a recognised role. The RSES marks a significant shift in Ireland's approach to delivering policy as opposed to just implementing the national policy at regional level. The success of this approach is evident in the development of the RSES where each of the Assemblies were assigned with developing their own (statutory) vision of how to implement the National Planning Framework reflective of the region with the added responsibility for oversight. It has been noted that Ireland's R&I activity still tends to be focused on the national level which can result in limited attention to trends and performance at the regional level.<sup>8</sup>

Local Authorities have a statutory requirement to review their Development Plans to align with RSES objectives. Therefore, the RSES provides a clear mechanism for mainstreaming and embedding the

national S3 into the regional, county and city level ensuring a MLG approach. In addition, the Local Economic and Community Plans (LECP), also have a statutory requirement to align with the RSES.

S3 governance should encourage co-ownership and sharing of the strategy enabling collaborative leadership. The project objectives are focused on how best to incorporate this MLG model into the S3. As recommended Ireland needs to move from the traditional top-down centralised approach to a more network like structure where-in hierarchies in decision-making are flexible to let each actor have a role and eventually take the lead in specific phases of the strategy, according to actors' characteristics, background, and capacities. This co-ownership and shared responsibility would encourage collaboration efforts for the shared success of S3 implementation. It is a key advantage to S3 owner DETE to leverage the unique position and experience of the Regional Assemblies through RSES development and implementation, EU Project partnerships and ERDF ROP development and management as a key stakeholder in the development and implementation of the national and regional Smart Specialisation Strategy. Drawing from collaborative networks with stakeholders across the EU, national, regional and local level, the Assemblies are well positioned as a strategic bridge between national level enterprise RD&I priorities, regional local priorities, ensuring policy coherence and connection across all tiers.

The SRA are positioned strongly to support our Regions S3 sectors through:

- Established EU links,
- Access to good practice knowledge,
- Role in dissemination and transfer of knowledge,
- Role in the development of frameworks and toolkits to assist actions by regional stakeholders,

8. *Expert advice and support on Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) in Ireland*, Alison Hunter, EPPC

- Role in EU policy formation and role in development and managing the ROP 2021-2027 in partnership with the EU under themes aligned to S3 (smart cities and a smart region, lower carbon emissions, climate resilience and urban regeneration). These links and networks support the SRA as a key stakeholder for DETE in national and regional S3 development and implementation.

As the national institution responsible for the management of the S3 DETE have oversight at the national level. However if the regional priorities are to be managed effectively, they must be driven at the regional level and there must be a strong regional expression in any national policy. As noted in the Bable report the S3 platform recommends the governance structure to have a dedicated management team, a Knowledge Leadership Group and thematic or

project specific working groups. Findings from the Cohes3ion project and RSES governance will inform and support the governance for the national and regional S3. The RSES implementation offers a timely opportunity to embed management of the S3 at the regional level in collaboration with the REP's.

A commitment to applying a regional dimension to Ireland's S3 is welcomed and needs to be strengthened to build sectoral strengths and opportunities in RD & I for the Region informed by local and regional knowledge.

A Regional S3 Framework will optimise the role of the Regional Assemblies in managing and co-ordinating RSES Implementation, European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and Regional Operational Programmes (ROPs) to assist the work of central government under S3.

	Main Steps	Deadline	Results
A	Continued active participation in the S3 Steering Group	Ongoing	
B	Publication of Irelands S3 to take into account Southern Region smart specialisations identified for the Southern Region in Bable S3 report	Dec 2021	
C	Establishment of S3 Implementation Group inclusive of the SRA	Q1 2022	
D	Inaugural meeting of the S3 Implementation Group with a defined role for the SRA	H1 2022	
E	Continued collaboration with the policy owner the Regional Planning Unit to include S3 as a topic in future RSES events	Ongoing	

### Stakeholders Involved

Southern Regional Assembly

### Timeframe

Policy Improvement to be achieved by December 2022

### Costs and funding

The costs to be incurred with the implementation of the action will be internalised in the current activities of the different organisations involved.

## Performance Indicators

- Establishment of the implementation and monitoring committee of Irelands S3 to include the Southern Regional Assembly – 1 to be established
- First meeting of the S3 Implementation Committee to have taken place to cement the role of the SRA
- Publication of Ireland S3 in advance of the ROP 2021 – 2027 to reflect specialisations for the Southern Region identified in the report on a ‘Regional Approach to S3’ by Bable GmbH.
- Incorporate relevant KPI’s identified in the report on a ‘Regional Approach to S3’ by Bable GmbH.
- Continued awareness raising around the benefits of a targeted S3 approach through the RSES implementation – one event scheduled for RSES implementation in 2022 to have a focus on S3

## Regional Action 2

Develop implementation and dissemination plan for the roll-out of the Smart Region Definition and Framework across the Southern Region.

### Relevance to the Project

Throughout the Cohes3ion learning journey it became increasingly evident that having the correct enabling supports in place was as important to the effective delivery of S3 as having the right governance in place. The SRA consider ‘Smart’ as the way to stimulate the best from the region and have identified the pursuit of establishing ourselves as a Smart Region as a key enabler to the effective implementation of S3. This approach was emphasised through many of the good practices presented.

At the kick-off meeting in Bilbao, Spain in October 2019 the **Azaro Foundation** presented the 4.0 Challenge Program which has the objective of driving digitalisation in SMEs by identifying and prioritising digital challenges. Resulting in the implementation of solutions for the digital challenges raised working with the relevant stakeholders. This can include cooperation with stakeholders outside the district.

The second stop on the Cohes3ion learning journey was to the Ruhr region in Germany in January 2020. **WiN Emscher-Lippe** presented their role in ‘organizing regional change in a multi-actor environment’. As part of this they presented the **Umbau21 – Smart Region** supporting innovation through relevant digital technologies. They have prioritised particular regional projects to advance

through government grants. This includes the Smart Network project which has among others the objective of strengthening the region for a digital future, detecting synergies at the regional level and promoting digital transformation. The ‘Serviceportal Wirtschaft Emscher-Lippe’ also has applicable learnings in the focus and delivery of e-government services.

At the 4th study visit the North West Development Agency introduced the ‘**North West Region of Romania Smart Specialisation Strategy**’ who as part of the process selected priority areas taking into account quantitative and qualitative aspects. Sectoral strengths were identified under three overarching pillars with Pillar III being ‘Digital Transformation’ in support of the Regional Digital Agenda.

At the final learning event hosted by the Welsh Government in March 2021 they presented their ‘**Economic Action Plan**’ for Wales including a ‘call to action’ for digitalisation and support innovation through smart initiatives. Ongoing bi-lateral discussions with Welsh partner have informed our work on a smart region which included a review of the Cardiff Capital Region which shortly after its conception initiated a smart city programme. Learnings from this will be incorporated into the framework for the Southern Region Smart Region approach.

## Nature of the Action



Digital infrastructure and smart technologies are critical enablers for economic resilience and social revitalisation. This is particularly critical for the labour force, businesses, and delivery of services in the Covid-19 context. The rapid development of digital technologies is resulting in terms such as ‘smart cities’, ‘smart society’ and ‘smart regions’ becoming more and more popular in the modern changing world (Bauer et al, 2019). Smart Cities are the engines of a Smart Region and are key drivers in the delivery of a regional approach to Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3). Key to achieving a competitive, innovative and productive regional economy is for all locations, urban and rural, to collaborate on Smart Region Initiatives. Collaboration through Smart City, Smart Towns and Smart Village initiatives is a significant opportunity where Smart Cities work together to solve problems, share knowledge, cultivate best practice and foster innovation.

The RSES has a number of Regional Policy Objectives centred around the ambition to achieve a Smart Southern Region. To further emphasise commitment to this ambition it has been identified as a **priority** action however given the lack of information and guidance on a Smart Region approach it has proven challenging. Learning identified from the good practices on the respective Learning Journey’s will be crucial to the successful development of the Smart Region throughout phase-2 and beyond. This action will have long and far-reaching outcomes that will continue well beyond the life of the Cohes3ion Project.

Further to the good practices the Cohes3ion project has facilitated the SRA working with Maynooth University to advise the SRA and our stakeholders on a Smart Region definition and to create a framework to facilitate Smart Cities Driving a Smart

Region. Recommendations from the framework will be an important toolkit resource to assist our progress as a Smart Region and initiate smart region actions by stakeholders across smart themes (smart infrastructure, smart mobility, smart energy, smart technology, smart education, smart healthcare, smart governance inter alia). This will support our work across RSES implementation, the ERDF ROP 2021-2027 (under which Smart Regions are a leading theme) and Climate Action. The final outputs from this work will be consulted on and shared with DETE to assist implementation of S3 actions.

In alignment with RSES objectives the Local Authorities now have a statutory obligation to consider how best to incorporate Smart Initiatives into their respective Development Plans however throughout the consultation process there was a concern raised as to lack of awareness as to what this actually means and how to initiate and implement this effectively. In response to this the SRA collaborated with Bable consultancy and the European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT), to offer co-funded Smart City & Smart Regions training on how to practically apply smart principles. The pilot training was primarily targeted at Local Authorities and related bodies to assist in the development and implementation of Smart City & Smart Region strategies. The training provided:

- A comprehensive overview of current developments and solutions in the field of digital and sustainable development
- Learn from good practices and examples of lighthouse cities worldwide.
- Benefit from the exchange of experiences with other participants and discuss issues with our experts.

Further to this each LA has been tasked with developing a digital strategy and are at different stages in the process. This type of activity is crucial to the success of any future S3. A more coordinated effort of smart initiatives under the Smart Southern Region driven by the SRA would facilitate coherence across the region and ensure no-one is left behind. The RSES offers an opportunity to co-ordinate efforts with the All-Ireland Smart Cities Forum to facilitate shared learning to further reinforce and cement this approach.

A further ambition of the RSES is to explore the opportunities of the SR as a living pilot testbed as noted in RPO 133. Research performed as part of the Smart Region approach has assessed amongst others the potential learnings of a key tool used by regions in Finland, the concept of agile piloting, a co-creation method where companies develop their products in close collaboration with residents and city government. This will be explored further as the Smart Region work evolves in collaboration with the Local Authorities and relevant key stakeholders.

To facilitate this RSES ambition of a Smart Southern Region the SRA has recommended to DETE they should support the delivery of digital infrastructure and optimising smart technologies across all sectors as it is critical to extend Smart Region initiatives region wide and therefore needs to be a priority under the S3 strategy. DETE demonstrated they are open to this concept by attendance at the Smart Region Discovery Process in June 2021 which was a key part of the stakeholder consultation phase. SRA will continue to keep DETE informed of the Smart Region progress.

	Main Steps	Deadline	Results
A	Smart Region Training - SRA have collaborated with Smart City Consultants Bable GmbH to develop Smart Region Training informed by the work of Maynooth University - a maximum of 2 attendees from each LA was permitted	December 2021	Completed with nine out of the regions 10 Local Authorities attending. There is an ambition to host the training again in 2022 as part of the RSES implementation.
B	Finalisation of Smart Region reports being developed by Maynooth University	January 2022	
C	Redesign of Smart Region Reports to facilitate use as an implementation tool for the RSES	January 2022	
D	Present Smart Region reports and work programme for the Smart Southern Region to the Members of the Southern Regional Assembly	Q1 2022	
E	Development of 'Smart Mapping Tool' in collaboration with Maynooth University to form the basis for ongoing collation of smart projects across the region. The Local Authorities will identify a contact person to inform the update of the map	Q1 2022 for initial mapping exercise after which the intention is to keep the map interactive by updating on regular basis	
F	Development of a methodology for collecting information on smart projects on a regular basis to build on the foundation work Maynooth University have developed	Q1 2022	
G	Agree priorities, focus and principles for the Smart Southern Region.	Q1 2022	
I	Dissemination event to launch the Smart Region work including learnings from Good Practice Research and Smart Region Maturity Framework	Before May 2022	
J	Promoting the Smart Region Maturity Framework and agreed definition for SR	December 2022	



## Stakeholders Involved

Southern Regional Assembly

## Timeframe

Policy Improvement to be achieved by the end of Phase 2

## Costs and funding

The costs to be incurred with the implementation of the action will be internalised in the current activities of the different organisations involved.

## Performance Indicators

- Building awareness of the Smart Region principles, definition and implementation in response to need raised by stakeholders consulted with
- Dissemination of Smart Region Maturity Framework and monitoring improvement through the indicators developed within this framework – 1 dissemination event
- Increase in the number of ‘Smart’ projects or initiatives taking place across the region captured through the mapping – smart mapping tool will form the basis from which to measure this against
- The number of Local Authority staff that complete the Smart Region Training
- Evidence of the implementation of learnings from the Smart Region training through the roll-out of the development plans

## Regional Action 3

Building capacity of stakeholders to access EU funding to support implementation of S3 priorities through EU Funded programmes e.g., the North West Europe (NWE) Programme

## Relevance to the Project

As part of the learning journey to Poland they presented on their Integrated Territorial Investments for the Warsaw Metropolis. A key objective of this approach is to increase influence of local authorities on the policy and actions delivered in functional areas in particular under EU cohesion policy programmes. This capacity building has been an aim of the SRA in support of RSES objectives as outlined below. This approach inspired this action in line with S3 objectives. A key challenge identified by Warsaw was ‘Raising the awareness of the benefits of working together’ which this action acknowledges and will address through the targeting of relevant stakeholders.

This was further complimented by Azaro Case Study who presented a method to develop project ideas which promoted showcasing knowledge to generate a portfolio of ideas and innovation projects. This targeted approach is also based on building the capacity of stakeholders.

At the final event hosted by Wales the Cardiff Capital Region/City Deal was presented. This approach is centred on making the region ‘Connected, Competitive and Resilient’ to stimulate economic benefits for the region and local wealth building. Being ‘Connected’ is reliant on the right partnerships and ensuring the stakeholders are being targeted which is a key activity of this action.

## Nature of the Action

Capacity Building is one of the five principles of the Economic Strategy stating: The capacity to bid for funding and to respond to emerging challenges to secure greater economic resilience is supported. The RSES strongly supports enhancing the bidding

capacity of regional stakeholders ‘with the introduction of competitive bids as part of Project Ireland 2040 and similar frameworks to access funds from sources such as EU programmes, there is a need to ensure that all local authorities and local stakeholders have sufficient

capacity to identify funding sources and to prepare professional and robust applications.<sup>9</sup>

As the RSES marries spatial planning and economics, there is a strong emphasis on placemaking for enterprise development i.e., creating attractive places to attract skills and talent. The emphasis on placemaking for enterprise growth is supported through Health Place Audits (RPO 61) to create attractive, enterprise development friendly, high-quality places that are home to a diverse enterprise mix. To implement placemaking initiatives, bidding capacity is required to bid for and win competitive funds. There includes the need to build capacity to access competitive R&D funds across all research stakeholders, including local authorities and local stakeholders and SMEs. Developing this capacity is essential to access competitive funds available.

The RSES looks to the various EU funding programmes as potential sources of funding which going forward will include projects to advance the 21 priority areas identified for the Southern Region. To facilitate this in line with the upcoming North-West Europe (NWE) programme the SRA will liaise with Ireland's NWE Contact Point to facilitate connections for regional stakeholders under Priority 4: Fostering innovation capacity in NWE regions and more specifically SO 1.1: Developing and enhancing research and innovation capacities and the uptake of advanced technologies.

In support of this action the SRA will explore how best to leverage and collaborate with Committee of the Region members sitting on the SRA to further animate this ambition of building capacity.

	Main Steps	Deadline	Results
A	Develop a database of stakeholders under priority areas of specialisation identified in collaboration with the NWE Contact Point	02/2022	
B	Build a campaign to target the relevant stakeholders	Q1/2022	
C	Organise one-to-one meetings or info sessions to disseminate and discuss potential projects under the priority areas	Ongoing	

### Stakeholders Involved

Southern Regional Assembly & NWE Programme Contact Point

### Timeframe

Policy Improvement to be achieved by the end of Phase 2

### Costs and funding

The costs to be incurred with the implementation of the action will be internalised in the current activities of the different organisations involved.

### Performance Indicators

- Identification and inclusion of new stakeholders in database over phase 2
- Increased capacity of those within the 21 priority areas identified around awareness of the S3 principles and 21 priority areas identified for the Southern Region
- Execution of campaign to target relevant stakeholders
- A minimum of 5 meetings to be arranged in collaboration with NWE Contact Point with potential project applicants/consortiums
- Evidence of partnerships facilitated through targeted intervention

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**Date:** 21<sup>st</sup> December 2021

**Name of the Organisation(s):** Southern Regional Assembly

**Signatures of the relevant organisation(s):**

**Mr David Kelly,  
Director, Southern Regional Assembly**

**Mr Kevin Lynch,  
Assistant Director, Regional Planning Unit, Southern Regional Assembly**

**Mr Pip Breen,  
Cathaoirleach, Southern Regional Assembly**







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Tionól Réigiúnach an Deiscirt  
Southern Regional Assembly



Ireland's European Structural and  
Investment Funds Programmes  
2014-2020  
Co-funded by the Irish Government  
and the European Union



**European Union**  
European Regional  
Development Fund