Sligo County Council welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Transport, Tourism & Sport’s Statement of Strategy 2017-2019. It also recognises and fully supports the DTT&S in its efforts to provide and plan for a 21st century transport infrastructure and network in the Republic of Ireland to meet the demands of the 21st century as well as capitalising on the growth of the tourism sector and making Ireland a number one tourist destination of choice.

1. **Accessibility to Sligo and the North West Region**

Sligo is recognised as the regional capital of the North West and in the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) 2002-2020 was identified as the Gateway of this region. It is acknowledged at a national level that this region suffers from regional inequalities and disparities across a number of areas for a variety of different reasons, not least due in no small part its close proximity to the Border which during the period of the Troubles from the 1960’s onwards had a disastrous effect on economic development and job creation locally. It is also accepted and acknowledged that this region did not receive or benefit from the same level of investment from central government sources during the years of the NSS prior to the economic decline as other regions did.

Sligo County Council would encourage that any future investment in transport infrastructure is done in an equitable, fair and transparent way and that priority is given to those areas who are, by their location, on the island of Ireland deemed to be peripheral and/or disadvantaged or who have not in the recent past benefitted from the large scale investment made in transport infrastructure by the State to date and are therefore lagging behind the rest of the country in terms of growth, employment output and economic development.

**Population decline:** The recent Census 2016 shows that in the recent downturn of the economy that only three counties in the country experienced a population decline during the five year period between 2011 and 2016. It is significant that these three counties are located side by side in the North West/West Region of the country, the three most peripheral counties with the lowest level of investment in transport infrastructure and the furthest removed from our capital city. Donegal, Sligo and Mayo were the only counties who experienced population decline and/or out migration during this period (see map below).

![Map 1 - Percentage population change by county, 2011-2016](http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp/censusofpopulation2016-preliminaryresults/geochan/)

Road Infrastructure Deficit:
When one looks at a map of Ireland with an overlay of the transport networks it is worthy to note that not one motorway exists north of a line between Dublin and Galway (see map below). This fact has resulted in this region not being able to promote itself on a par with the rest of the country and has therefore meant the North West Region has lost competitive advantage with other regions of comparable size. We would encourage the DTT&S to rectify this deficit in any new round of Investment in Transport Infrastructure and in the new National Planning Framework and a statement prioritising investment for upgrading the N4 to Motorway standard, as the primary access route to this region, be made in the Statement of Strategy now being planned by the DTT&S.
Sligo LECP 2016-2021:
In Sligo County Council’s own Local Economic & Community Plan 2016 -2021 our goal is to collectively promote and develop Sligo as the economic driver of the North West Region as an attractive location for Investment, Tourism, Entrepreneurship and Employment. In this regard, we recognise the critical component that road infrastructure plays in facilitating the economic and social development of our county and region, in job creation and in all quality of life issues. Our experience of our current road transport deficits has resulted in our county and region not performing to its potential and as a consequence in a loss of jobs to the region. It also hinders our collective ability in how we can promote the region.

Rectification of the current transport infrastructure deficiencies to Sligo and the North West Region is required as a minimum to allow us to maximise the regional significance of Sligo as an economic hub and the Gateway to the North West Region so as to improve the counties and region’s connectivity and economic infrastructure.

Other key strategic infrastructure along with the N4 in this region includes the N15 (Sligo to Derry), N16 (Sligo to Belfast), N17 (Sligo to Galway) and N59. We would encourage the DTT&S to improve all of these main arteries as critical transport arteries in our region in any new round of investment in Transport Infrastructure and in the new National Planning Framework and a statement prioritising such investment in this region be made in the Statement of Strategy now being planned by the DTT&S.

Key strategic infrastructure for the development of Sligo City as an economic driver and Gateway includes the Western Distributor Road (access to IDA lands) and the Eastern Garavogue Bridge. Good transport links required to facilitate inward investment, large scale business development, SME sector and micro business sectors as well as tourism development. All business and commercial sectors will benefit. We would encourage the DTT&S to prioritise investment in these planned proposals so that Sligo City can fulfil its role as the regional capital and the economic driver for this region. Likewise we would encourage the DTT&S to include in its Statement of Strategy priority investment for these worthwhile road infrastructural projects.

It is critical that the current road infrastructure is improved in order to address the perceived peripherality of the county and region in the national context.

2. Tourism Development:
Sligo and the North West Region has a hugely significant potential for tourism development. Sligo’s rich heritage, environment, landscape, literary legacy and cultural traditions are central to the county’s unique identity. Tourism is seen as a sector that can contribute a significant amount of jobs and growth potential.

The development of the Wild Atlantic Way as a brand has opened up opportunities and possibilities for this area to be promoted on a world wide scale by Tourism Ireland and further developed by Fálte Ireland. Sligo County Council has worked with Fálte Ireland to date in terms of developing the tourism infrastructure to support the WAW signature discovery points that build on the county’s unique selling points.

Sligo County Council supports the DTT&S in its efforts to provide the direction and policy to promote and develop tourism in the country. It would, therefore, welcome inclusion in the Department’s Statement of Strategy 2017-2019 support and assistance for Local Authorities in their efforts to:

- Improve access and interpretation of heritage sites and other discovery points along the WAW.
- Support the development of greenways, blueways and cycling routes, and walking routes both inland and coastal to improve access to the countryside.
• Support for a series of coastal protection works to safeguard local amenities and tourism facilities.
• Support to maintain and improve piers and harbours particularly those close to the WAW viewing points.
• Support and co-ordination of festivals and events to maximise their economic potential.
• Support and encourage the sustainable tourism potential of the countryside as a recreational resource for visitors.
• Support to develop an iconic must see visitor attraction based on the Yeats’ family literary and cultural legacy as a major flagship national tourism and cultural attraction.

**WAW North of Galway Initiative:**
Sligo County Council would also be supportive of efforts nationally to prioritise investment in the promotion and marketing of the region, north of Galway on the WAW. This region only receives 12% of visits from international visitors compared to 61% for the southern region and 63% nationally and only and 6% of bed nights compared to 47% for the southern region and 53% nationally. This region suffers from a very low profile internationally and has not featured to any significant extent in major marketing campaigns by Tourism Ireland or Fáilte Ireland in the past or has not been able to capitalise to any great extent on previous marketing efforts. The WAW could be the game changer in all of this as the northern WAW counties have an abundance of potential for a varied and unique product offering, if investment is made to harness, develop and market this potential. The northern WAW counties require more pronounced and consistent marketing campaigns, nationally and overseas to rectify the situation and a commitment that this be prioritised on a continuous basis. (See below map on Regional Spread of International Visitors.)

![Regional spread of International Visitors](image)

In conjunction with priority support for marketing of our tourism potential, this Council would also recognise that investment in the tourism product offering, including the building of the accommodation capacity north of a line from Galway on the WAW, also needs to be prioritised. Currently, the northern WAW counties have less than a quarter of the capacity to
accommodate visitors compared to the southern WAW counties. (See below table on accommodation capacity along the WAW.)

### Accommodation Capacity along the Wild Atlantic Way

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hotels</th>
<th>Guesthouses</th>
<th>B&amp;Bs</th>
<th>Self-Catering</th>
<th>Caravan &amp; Camping</th>
<th>Hostels</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>North Wild Atlantic Way</strong></td>
<td>15,672</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>1,964</td>
<td>2,666</td>
<td>4,332</td>
<td>778</td>
<td>26,142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Galway</strong></td>
<td>10,283</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>1,764</td>
<td>899</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>1,002</td>
<td>15,183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>South Wild Atlantic Way</strong></td>
<td>32,155</td>
<td>2,307</td>
<td>5,258</td>
<td>10,816</td>
<td>8,271</td>
<td>2,392</td>
<td>61,219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>58,080</td>
<td>3,582</td>
<td>8,955</td>
<td>14,361</td>
<td>18,303</td>
<td>4,252</td>
<td>102,564</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Fáilte Ireland 2015*

This prioritisation of investment into this region in terms of tourism development and promotion is necessary to maximise the latent and untapped potential already existing there. This would have significant benefits in terms of job creation and employment.

**N59: The N59 (Coast route linking Sligo to Galway through Mayo, Connemara etc.) is an important artery traversing the North West and West Regions along the coast and is therefore seen as a critical piece of infrastructure to ensure ease of access within the North West and West Regions. The N59 strategic importance relates primarily to access to key tourist/water sports destinations of Easkey and Enniscrone in Co. Sligo with Easkey developing a reputation as an international premier surfing destination and Enniscrone a key tourist town with unique tourism products in a) Enniscrone Golf Club recognised as home of one of the top links golf courses in Europe and b) the well publicised plans for a unique Quirky ‘Glamping’ business by Mr. David McGowan. This Council would encourage that this route be prioritised for investment due to its strategic purpose and location for tourist development within the region.**

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, we would urge that priority be given to Sligo and the North West Region in investments proposed in transport infrastructure in the next round of funding from the DTT&S and the National Planning Framework to ensure parity of esteem and BALANCED REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT. We would urge that priority be given to Sligo and North West Region in terms of investment in tourism marketing/promotion and also in investment in the development of product offerings to capitalise and maximise the opportunities offered by the WAW.

Of huge concern to this region is the impact of the recent Brexit vote in the UK. This has the potential to be hugely damaging for this region and will only emphasise and further entrench its peripherality. Once the mechanism to exit the EU is triggered by the UK Government the impact on economic potential, growth and employment in this area will be catastrophic and should not be underestimated. Measures need to be taken now to insulate this region and counteract the negative consequences that will result.

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Director of Services  
Planning/Community & Economic Development, Arts & Culture