**Annex 2:** Policy and development context detail

Policy and development context

Joyce Country and Western Lakes Geopark aims to achieve and retain UNESCO Global Geopark status for its region. In so doing, it will assist the communities, businesses, education and other service providers of the area have confidence about their livelihoods in the medium- to long-term. The following sub-sections indicate how this goal and ambition are aligned with the policy framework and its various levels.

**The policy context**

Ireland’s national planning framework is comprised of both primary and secondary legislation, i.e Acts and Regulations. The framework is set out in the Planning and Development Acts 2000-2018 and the detail is prescribed in the Planning and Development Regulations 2001-2020. The 2000 Act forms the basis for the Irish planning code, setting out the detail of regional planning guidelines, development plans and local area plans. It provides the statutory basis for protecting our natural and architectural heritage, the carrying out of Environmental Impact Assessments and the provision of social and affordable housing.

**National level policy**

Ireland’s national development policy for the period 2020 to 2040 is detailed within the **National Planning Framework** (known as Project Ireland 2040, and aligning with EU-level objectives)[[1]](#footnote-1). It guides, at a high-level, strategic planning and development for the country, so that as the population grows, that growth is sustainable (in economic, social and environmental terms). The NPF, alongside the ten-year **National Development Plan**, puts together one plan to guide strategic development and infrastructure investment at national level.

The Government’s **Rural Development Policy 2021-2025** (Our Rural Future)[[2]](#footnote-2) endorses the importance of geoheritage to the geotourism offering in rural areas in stating “Successful initiatives such as the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East, and Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands, along with our UNESCO Geoparks and Geoheritage sites and National Parks, provide a blueprint for further development of tourism offerings in rural areas.” Support measures are evident from development policies and schemes managed by government agencies including Geological Survey Ireland, Fáilte Ireland, National Parks and Wildlife Service, and Coillte (national forestry body).

Those documents also set the context for each of Ireland’s three regional assemblies (Eastern and Midland, Northern and Western Region, and Southern) to develop their **Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies** (RSESs) taking account of and co-ordinating **local authority County and City Development Plans** ensuring national, regional and local plans align.

**The operating context – learning from the past**

The National Planning Framework (NPF) is a long-term framework that sets out how Ireland can move away from the previous, ‘business as usual’ pattern of development which was on cities and towns in Ireland which were designated as ‘gateways’ or ‘hubs’ to drive growth and build scale in their surrounding regions and localities. This gave rise to a perception of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ that undermined the objectives the policy was seeking to achieve.

In contrast, **Project Ireland 2040** emphasises the need to manage more balanced growth between the country’s three regions. The aim is to see a roughly 50:50 distribution of growth between the Eastern and Midland region, and the Southern, and Northern and Western regions, with 75% of the growth to be outside of Dublin and its suburbs. The plan targets Ireland’s five cities >50,000 people (Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Waterford) for 50% of overall national growth between them, with Ireland’s large and smaller towns, villages and rural areas delivering the other 50% growth. Geographically, Galway, and to a lesser extent Sligo, are noted in the NPF as providing accessible centres of employment and services that can be a focal point for investment and have the widest possible regional influence. (The JCWL Geopark is nestled within reach of Galway and Sligo cities.)

The **NPF ultimate objectives** include enabling people to live closer to where they work, regenerate rural Ireland by promoting environmentally sustainable growth patterns, plan for and implement a better distribution of jobs and prosperity, transform settlements of all sizes through imaginative urban regeneration and bring life / jobs back into cities, towns and villages, and co-ordinate delivery of infrastructure and services in tandem with growth.

**Ireland’s Rural Fabric**

So we see in the NPF strategy framework, these priority points for sustainable development of Ireland’s rural fabric:

* Reversing town/village and rural population decline, by encouraging new roles and functions for buildings, streets and sites
* Supporting sustainable growth of rural communities
* Implementing a planned local authority-led approach to identifying, meeting and managing the real housing needs arising in countryside areas
* Improving local connectivity to principal communication (broadband), energy, transport and water networks
* Promoting new economic opportunities arising from digital connectivity and indigenous
* innovation and enterprise as well as more traditional natural and resource assets (e.g. food, energy, tourism), underpinned by the quality of life offering

**Northern and Western Region policy**

Through targeted policies, by 2040 the Northern and Western Region will be more than 1 million people, 180,000 more than today. The biggest challenge facing this region, in which the JCWL Geopark lies, is identification and implementation of actions that will build up its urban structure, diversify and strengthen its rural areas as they transition towards a more broadly based mix of economic activities sufficient to underpin long term self-sustaining local communities, complemented by improved accessibility.

The **Northern and Western Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy 2020-2032** (NWRA-RSES)[[3]](#footnote-3), is a roadmap and sustainable strategy to deliver transformational change needed to achieve the objectives and vision of the Northern and Western Regional Assembly (the JCWL Geopark is in the region). It aims to address the causes of the cycle of regional economic decline evident during the last 50 years – decline due to the ongoing shift of people and jobs to the east coast, a degrading environment, continuing disparity between where people live and work with increased commuting times, rural and village decline, and regional urban areas being under-served. Five growth ambitions underpin the NW-RSES: compact growth, sustainable growth, low carbon future, innovative people, great place to live, and supportive infrastructure.

The regional tier of governance in Ireland sits in the middle of the planning hierarchy and the development objectives of the RSES are implemented through the review by local authorities of all development plans and Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs), to ensure their consistency with the RSES. Key state agencies and sectoral bodies also review their strategies and investment plans in relation to the RSES, to ensure consistency.

**Local authority and agency level policy**

The territory of JCWL Geopark is approx. 60% in County Galway and 40% in County Mayo, however, the total geopark population of approx. 20,000 is the other way round – 60% Mayo and 40% Galway. **Galway County Council** and **Mayo County Council** are the two local authorities responsible for development in their respective counties. **Údaras na Gaeltachta**, is a regional authority responsible for the economic, social and cultural development of the Gaeltacht. The two local authorities and Údaras na Gaeltachta have development plans with strategic priorities and related actions to achieve their stated visions.

The **Mayo County Development Plan 2022-2028[[4]](#footnote-4)** seeks to address development challenges in these areas: housing; economic development; tourism development; movement and transport; strategic road network; infrastructural development; sustainable communities; built environment; natural environment; climate action and renewable energy; and settlements. While each of these priority areas are important to the JCWL Geopark, the description for settlements is particularly relevant:

*To develop Mayo's settlements as a network of attractive, liveable towns, villages and countryside in the county with sustainable levels of population, employment activity and enhanced levels of amenity which encourage a high quality of life and well-being and support a sustainable synergy with the rural countryside.*

Chapter 10 (Natural Environment) of Mayo’s County plan has the following strategic aim, and sub-objective 12 is a specific geopark priority:

*The strategic aim of this chapter is to continue to protect and enhance the county’s natural heritage and biodiversity and ensure that networks of green and blue infrastructure are identified, created, protected and enhanced to provide a wide range of environmental, social and economic benefits to communities; To also improve the knowledge and understanding of the county’s landscape and coast, and enhance the overall characteristics, qualities and diversity of landscape character, its sense of place and local distinctiveness in recognition of the amenity potential of the county.*

***Natural Environment Objective 12****: To support the Joyce Country and Western Lakes Geopark’s aim of establishing a new UNESCO Global Geopark in the South Mayo and North Connemara area of County Galway.*

The **Galway County Development Plan 2022-2028[[5]](#footnote-5)** has the following strategic objective, and policy objective in Chapter 10 Natural Heritage, Biodiversity and Green/Blue Infrastructure:

***Strategic objective Chapter 10****: To contribute towards the protection, conservation and management of biodiversity and natural heritage including sites designated at national and EU Level and protected species and habitats outside of designated sites and to develop a green/blue infrastructure network in the interests of the proper planning and sustainable development of the county.*

***Policy Objective UNESCO Global Geopark Status UGG 1****: To continue to work in partnership with all relevant stakeholders to facilitate and support the ongoing work of the Joyce Country and Western Lakes aspiring Geopark and its application for full UNESCO Global Geopark status.*

Tourism development is one of seven priorities in the **Údarás na Gaeltachta Strategic Plan** 2021-2025[[6]](#footnote-6). The approach is based on partnerships between the various relevant organisations and on the maximisation of the potential of resources such as the Wild Atlantic Way. The geopark Tourism Officer is funded by a grant from Údarás, acknowledging the importance of the geopark as a strategic community initiative capable of driving economic and social development in parallel with promotion Gaeilge as a living language.



**United Nations Sustainable Development Goals**

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) set out a vision and a blueprint to achieve a fairer and more sustainable future for all by 2030. All sectors of society have been called on to mobilise between 2020 and 2030 for a decade of action on three levels[[7]](#footnote-7):

* Global action – to secure greater leadership, more resources and smarter solutions for the SDG
* Local action – embedding the needed transitions in the policies, budgets, institutions and regulatory frameworks of governments, cities and local authorities.
* People action – including by youth, civil society, the media, the private sector, unions, academia, and other stakeholders, to generate an unstoppable movement pushing for the required transformations.

Ireland is a signatory to the SDGs, which frame national agendas and policies to 2030. There is significant alignment between the UN SDGs and the National Planning Framework’s National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs) in areas such as climate action, clean energy, sustainable cities and communities, economic growth, reduced inequalities and innovation and infrastructure, as well as education and health, as in the illustrations.





**Economic potential from JCWL Geopark development**

According to the Economic Review of the Irish Geoscience Sector (commissioned by Geological Survey Ireland, authors Indecon International, 2018) the total expenditure in Ireland by Geotourism and Geoheritage visitors in 2016 was €370 million, and this supported 8,700 jobs. The Cuilcagh Lakelands UNESCO Global Geopark (Counties Fermanagh & Cavan) was estimated as contributing €17.2m per year to the surrounding economy.

There are strong indications that increased visitor numbers, as a result of the marketing strategies of JCWL Geopark and the public bodies, will bring a similar expenditure both by overseas tourists and by Irish domestic visitors to the JCWL Geopark region.

According to Destination Mayo 2016-2021 (Mayo County Council’s Strategy for the Future Development of Tourism in County Mayo) walking is Mayo’s signature activity product. 1.4 million overseas visitors engage in hiking/walking while in Ireland with the most popular trails being looped walks or themed trails, such as heritage/historical. The trails within JCWL Geopark sit well within this market. BRIEF NOTES FOR GALWAY COMING

UNESCO Global Geoparks and development

*The Statutes and Operational Guidelines of the UNESCO Global Geoparks set the development context.* [*https://en.unesco.org/global-geoparks*](https://en.unesco.org/global-geoparks)REVIEW

(i) UNESCO Global Geoparks are single, unified geographical areas where sites and landscapes of international geological significance are managed with a holistic concept of protection, education and sustainable development. A UNESCO Global Geopark must have a clearly defined border, be of adequate size to fulfil its functions and contain geological heritage of international significance as independently verified by scientific professionals.

(ii) A UNESCO Global Geopark uses its geological heritage, in connection with all other aspects of the area’s natural and cultural heritage, to enhance awareness and understanding of key issues facing society, such as using our earth’s resources sustainably, mitigating the effects of climate change and reducing natural hazard-related risks. This gives local people a sense of pride in their region and strengthen their identification with the area. The creation of innovative local enterprises, new jobs and high-quality training courses is stimulated as new sources of revenue are generated through geotourism, while the geological resources of the area are protected.

(iii) UNESCO Global Geoparks empower local communities and give them the opportunity to develop cohesive partnerships with the common goal of promoting the area’s significant geological processes, features, periods of time, historical themes linked to geology, or outstanding geological beauty. They are established through a bottom-up process involving all relevant local and regional stakeholders and authorities in the area (e.g. land owners, community groups, tourism providers, indigenous people, and local organizations). This process requires firm commitment by the local communities, a strong local multiple partnership with long-term public and political support, and the development of a comprehensive strategy that will meet all the communities’ goals while showcasing and protecting the area’s geological heritage.

(iv) The Global Geoparks Network (GGN), of which membership is obligatory for UNESCO Global Geoparks, is a legally constituted not-for-profit organisation with an annual membership fee. The GGN was founded in 2004 and is a dynamic network where members are committed to work together and exchange ideas of best practise and join in common projects to raise the quality standards of all products and practises of a UNESCO Global Geopark. While the GGN as a whole comes together every two years, it functions through the operation of regional networks, such as the European Geoparks Network that meets twice a year to develop and promote joint activities.

1. https://npf.ie/wp-content/uploads/Project-Ireland-2040-NPF.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://assets.gov.ie/128716/e7d34436-6e0a-4bb0-a7b1-230165357529.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.nwra.ie/pdfs/NWRA-RSES-2020-2032.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.mayo.ie/planning/county-development-plans/2022-2028 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://consult.galway.ie/en/consultation/adopted-galway-county-development-plan-2022-2028 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://udaras.ie/assets/uploads/2019/10/Plean-Straite%CC%81iseach-U%CC%81dara%CC%81s-na-Gaeltachta-2021-2025.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [Decade of Action - United Nations Sustainable Development](https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/decade-of-action/) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)