



WATERFORD CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
SUBMISSION TO THE SOUTHERN REGIONAL ASSEMBLY

Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) Southern Region 2027 to 2040 | Pre-Draft Consultation



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Chamber**
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Executive Summary

Waterford Chamber of Commerce welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the pre-draft consultation on the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) 2027 to 2040. This submission is made on behalf of the business community of Waterford city and region, with the support of the Chamber's Infrastructure and Development Panel.

Waterford has real strengths: a growing enterprise base, a port of national strategic importance, an expanding technological university, and a city centre undergoing genuine physical transformation. The purpose of this submission is not to question those foundations but to make the case that Waterford's development potential cannot be fully realised without a step change in three areas where the RSES has historically identified priorities but delivery has fallen short.

THREE STRUCTURAL ASKS

- **A genuine transformation of higher education provision:** SETU must become the gamechanger for talent retention that the region was promised, with a step change in the high-volume regulated disciplines, above all teacher training and medicine, that will bring it to the scale needed to stem the brain drain.
- **Credible, time-bound connectivity commitments:** improved internal regional connectivity to ensure citizens across the South East can access University Hospital Waterford, SETU Waterford, Waterford Airport, and other key urban services, alongside the intercity rail improvements already committed in national plans.
- **Governance reform:** clear cross-boundary coordination for the MASP area spanning Waterford and Kilkenny, with explicit alignment between spatial planning designations and sectoral governance in health and transport.

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The Regional Context: Opportunity and Persistent Underperformance

1.1 A REGION WITH STRUCTURAL POTENTIAL

The South East has features that should, in a well-functioning investment environment, support strong economic growth: a deep manufacturing and life-sciences base, a strategic deep-water port at Belview, a growing technological university, a UNESCO Learning City, a relatively young and growing population, and housing that remains accessible compared to the eastern seaboard.

The SENSER South East Economic Monitor (Summer 2025) records record employment in the region, with 239,400 people at work, representing a 20 per cent increase over five years. Enterprise Ireland-supported companies in Waterford recorded the third-highest net job growth rate in Ireland in 2025, at 5.7 per cent. These are genuine indicators of momentum in the domestic enterprise base.

1.2 KEY PERFORMANCE GAPS

Against that backdrop, a number of structural gaps persist. They are documented in the SE Economic Monitor and in the CSO's Regional Accounts, and they represent the context within which this submission's asks are framed.

Indicator	South East / Waterford
SE GDP growth 2019 to 2024 (vs 40.2% nationally)	8.2% (SENSER 2025)
SE unemployment rate Q1 2025 (highest in state)	5.2%
Labour force participation rate (vs 65.8% nationally)	63.9%
Disposable income per person (SE)	€26,662 (94% of state average)
IDA-supported jobs in SE (vs 8.9% population share)	15,580 (6.4% share)
Direct IDA jobs deficit against population share	11,360 jobs (SENSER 2025)
Major public capital spending per citizen (SE)	€1,738 (lowest of all regions, SENSER 2025)
South East student retention in higher education	36% (vs 74.4% in Cork and Kerry)
Housing delivery in Waterford Metropolitan Area vs targets	54% of Core Strategy targets 2023 to 2025



Two features of this data are particularly significant for the RSES. First, the IDA position: the South East accounts for 8.9 per cent of the national population but only 6.4 per cent of IDA-supported employment. The SE Economic Monitor calculates a direct deficit of 11,360 IDA jobs and a total deficit, including indirect effects, of approximately 20,450 jobs. Within the region, Waterford has specifically seen IDA-supported employment decline in recent years. FDI roles are the highest-paying in the economy, and the region's relative weakness in attracting them is a structural constraint on income growth.

Second, and most striking, is the capital investment position. The Government's Capital Tracker (DPER, May 2025) shows major public capital spending per citizen in the South East at €1,738 per person. That is the lowest figure of any NUTS3 region in the country, and is around €7,000 below the national average. Dublin receives €23,817 per citizen. The South-West receives €3,675. By any measure of balanced regional development, the South East's share of capital investment requires correction.

1.3 DELIVERY IN CONTEXT: WHAT HAS AND HAS NOT BEEN ACHIEVED

It is important to acknowledge that two of the most symbolically significant asks from previous regional strategies have recently been delivered. Waterford Airport is seeing the impending return of scheduled commercial services, achieved through private investor commitment after a prolonged period of uncertainty. University Hospital Waterford has secured a commitment to 24/7 primary PCI cardiac care, following sustained advocacy by clinicians, communities, and public representatives.

Both outcomes are genuinely welcome, and both demonstrate the quality of the underlying case for investment in Waterford. However, the manner of their delivery also illustrates the broader pattern this submission seeks to address. Strategic public investments should not depend on private capital stepping in where public commitment has been absent, nor should they require years of campaigning before being adopted. Where delivery is ad hoc and reactive, the signal to investors, talent, and businesses considering the region is not a positive one. The RSES 2027 to 2040 has an opportunity to replace that pattern with systematic, committed, and monitored delivery.



Three Structural Asks

2.1 ASK ONE: SETU AS A GENUINE GAMECHANGER FOR TALENT RETENTION

The establishment of South East Technological University in 2022 was among the most significant institutional investments in the region’s recent history, and the Chamber has been a consistent advocate for it. Now in its third year and midway through its five-year institutional strategy, *Connecting for Impact* (2023 to 2028), SETU is delivering real progress: growing research capacity through the Walton Institute, SEAM, PMBRC, and RIKON, strengthened industry partnerships, and the early development of the University Enterprise Quarter at the Glassworks site.

The ambition set out in *Connecting for Impact* is genuinely transformative. The strategy committed SETU to developing three new high-impact discipline areas: Pharmacy, Veterinary Medicine, and Teacher Training, explicitly framed as the primary mechanism for reversing the South East’s talent outflow. SETU’s Performance Agreement with the HEA (2024 to 2028) names these as immediate priorities. Pharmacy and Veterinary Medicine have now progressed to the point of commencement, representing a significant step forward. The outstanding ask, and the one with the greatest potential impact on student retention, is Teacher Training, alongside the medium-term development of undergraduate medical education.

Against that backdrop, the undergraduate growth target in SETU’s strategy is notably modest: an increase of approximately 1,000 full-time undergraduate students over five years. The Chamber does not read this as a lack of institutional ambition. It is a realistic projection in the absence of a fully funded state commitment to the high-volume regulated programmes that would generate that scale of growth. Teacher training and medicine are programmes where student intake is determined by national quota, funded centrally, and allocated by the HEA.

Without an allocation of those quotas in favour of the South East, SETU cannot grow its way to the student population the region requires, regardless of the strength of its institutional strategy. The development of undergraduate medical education at SETU is particularly significant: it would directly support the staffing pipeline for University Hospital Waterford and for community health provision across the South East catchment.

The brain drain data makes the scale of the gap concrete. In 2023 to 2024, only 36 per cent of full-time undergraduate students from the South East studied within the region; in Cork and Kerry the figure was 74.4 per cent. Approximately 9,640 young people from the South East leave the region for higher education every year. The SE Economic Monitor calculates that the region returns roughly half the income tax revenue one would expect from its population, a direct consequence of the combined effect of lower wages, weaker graduate retention, and constrained labour market attachment. The South East accounts for 5.4 per cent of full-time undergraduate places nationally, against an 8.9 per cent population share. That gap is not closed by institutional mergers; it is closed by funded programme expansion.

The capital position compounds this. Since the first technological universities were established, € 222 million in government capital funding has been allocated to TU development nationally. The South East received 12 per cent of that total, approximately € 26.6 million, despite, uniquely, there being no traditional university anywhere in the region. Every other region with a TU also has at least one university. The South East has SETU alone. The investment programme has not reflected that distinction.

SETU: SPECIFIC ASKS FOR THE RSES

- **An explicit RSES commitment to securing the HEA programme allocations and capital funding required for SETU** to commence initial Teacher Training within the first half of the strategy period, delivering on the commitment already made in SETU's Performance Agreement with the HEA.
- **A structured development pathway, initiated early in the RSES period, for undergraduate medical education at SETU Waterford** in partnership with University Hospital Waterford, addressing the South East's status as the only region in Ireland without a medical school and supporting the longer-term workforce pipeline for the region's acute and community health services.
- **A dedicated SETU capital investment envelope within the NDP**, ring-fenced and benchmarked against comparator regions higher education systems (universities and technological universities), that closes the per-student funding gap within the lifetime of the RSES.
- **RSES targets for higher education participation and retention** within the South East, with a trajectory towards 75 per cent regional retention by 2035, consistent with the norm in Cork and Kerry, and annual monitoring by the Southern Regional Assembly.



2.2 ASK TWO: CONNECTIVITY THAT SERVES THE WHOLE REGION

Waterford's connectivity requirements are well established in previous strategies. The focus of this submission is on an aspect that has received less attention: internal regional connectivity, specifically the ability of citizens across Wexford, Kilkenny, Carlow, and South Tipperary to access Waterford's key regional services, including University Hospital Waterford, SETU Waterford, and Waterford Airport.

The geography is straightforward. Much of the South East's catchment population lives within 80 kilometres of Waterford city. In a well-connected region, that should translate to journey times of under 60 minutes by car, bus, or rail. In practice, journey times from significant population centres in Wexford, south Kilkenny, and south Tipperary regularly exceed 60 to 75 minutes, due to the absence of dual carriageway standard roads on key corridors, congested bottlenecks that make journey times unpredictable, and limited rail services.

The rail position is particularly acute. The Waterford to Rosslare Europort line, serving communities in south Wexford and providing a potential freight connection to the port, remains closed to passenger services, with no reopening planned before 2040 under the All Island Strategic Rail Review. This leaves a substantial population corridor without rail connectivity to Waterford and without a realistic prospect of that changing within the current strategy period. The first train on the Dublin-Waterford line arrives at 9.45am each morning, and so is categorically unsuitable for most commuters to the city. The Chamber notes this situation in the context of significant rail investment and service expansion elsewhere in the country, and considers the case for a reappraisal of the city's rail to be strong.

The consequence for UHW is clinical as well as logistical. As a regional hospital serving a catchment of over 560,000 people, UHW's value depends on its being accessible to the population it serves. Journey time is not an administrative inconvenience; it is a determinant of health outcomes, particularly for time-sensitive admissions. The commitment to 24/7 cardiac care at UHW, while welcome, is only fully realised if patients across the catchment can reach the hospital within clinically appropriate timeframes.

The return of commercial services to Waterford Airport is similarly contingent on surface access. The airport's commercial viability depends on whether it is accessible to a sufficient population catchment within a reasonable journey time. Improving road quality and journey time reliability on the key access corridors from Wexford and Kilkenny is, in this context, an investment in the airport's catchment as much as in roads infrastructure.

CONNECTIVITY: SPECIFIC ASKS FOR THE RSES

- **Upgrade of key road corridors** connecting the South East's population centres to Waterford city, with dual carriageway standard on routes where current journey times prevent equitable access to UHW, SETU, and Waterford Airport.
- **A time-bound commitment to reopening the Waterford to Rosslare rail line** for passenger services, ahead of the current 2040 horizon, with an interim programme of bus connectivity on the corridor.
- **Delivery of the committed Dublin to Waterford rail improvements** from the All Island Strategic Rail Review within the first half of the strategy period, targeting a sub-90-minute Dublin to Waterford journey.
- **Completion of the North Quays transport interchange** as a genuinely intermodal hub, with rail, bus, and active travel connections.
- **Development of park-and-ride facilities** on key access corridors to support reliable, high-quality access to the city centre and to facilitate a city orbital public transport route.



2.3 ASK THREE: GOVERNANCE THAT MATCHES THE FUNCTIONAL CITY

Waterford’s metropolitan area functions as a single city. The River Suir does not divide two separate urban areas; it flows through a concentric city whose northern bank, the Ferrybank and Slieverue communities, is administered by Kilkenny County Council, while the southern bank and city core are governed by Waterford City and County Council. The W-MASP exists to bridge this governance gap, and the current review is an opportunity to strengthen that bridge significantly.

The Ferrybank retail development is the most visible consequence of the current arrangement. A major out-of-town retail destination was permitted north of the river in a planning process to which Waterford City and County Council was not a party. Its effect on Waterford city centre’s retail market during a period of urban economic stress is well documented. This was not a failure of any individual authority acting in bad faith; it was a predictable outcome of a governance structure in which two councils, each acting within their own mandate, produced a collectively suboptimal result.

The structural issue extends beyond planning decisions. University Hospital Waterford has passed through three separate hospital group governance arrangements, from the South South West Hospital Group to Ireland East to the current Regional Health Area structure, none of which has been designed around the South East’s functional geography. Transport authority boundaries and ETB remits present the same misalignment. The result is that key decisions affecting Waterford’s development are taken in frameworks that do not reflect the city’s actual role and catchment.

GOVERNANCE: SPECIFIC ASKS FOR THE RSES

- **A binding joint spatial planning protocol for the MASP area**, with agreed policies on retail, strategic employment land, and major residential development that apply equally to Waterford City and County Council and Kilkenny County Council; or, in the absence of effective cross-boundary coordination, implementation of the 2017 boundary extension to create a unified administrative unit for the functional city area.
- **A formal Waterford City-Region coordination structure**, including elected representatives from both councils, SETU, and the HSE, with a mandate and reporting obligations aligned to the RSES strategy period.
- **An explicit RSES requirement for sectoral agencies**, including the Regional Health Area, ETBs, and transport authorities, to review governance arrangements affecting the South East for alignment with the MASP area boundary, with a reporting obligation to the Southern Regional Assembly.
- **A mandatory joint Infrastructure Delivery Programme for the MASP area**, updated annually, publicly reported, and with named responsible officers in each constituent authority.



Conclusion

The evidence base for Waterford’s development as the primary city of the South East is well established and has been set out in successive national and regional plans. The RSES 2027 to 2040 has an opportunity to build on genuine recent progress, including the commitment to 24/7 cardiac care at UHW, the return of services to Waterford Airport, the continued growth of the North Quays, and SETU’s expanding research and enterprise partnerships.

What is needed to fully realise that potential is investment that matches the designation: a higher education system with the scale and disciplinary range to retain the region’s talent; connectivity that makes the city’s assets accessible to its full catchment; and governance structures that allow the metropolitan area to function as a coherent unit.

The SE Economic Monitor’s capital spending data provides the most direct measure of the gap: €1,738 per person in large public capital investments, against a national average of approximately €8,700 and a South-West figure of €3,675. Closing that gap, systematically and over the lifetime of this strategy, is the single most important thing the RSES 2027 to 2040 could do for Waterford and the South East.

Waterford Chamber of Commerce commits to engaging constructively throughout the RSES preparation process and looks forward to the publication of the draft strategy in Q4 2026.

Principal sources:

- SENSER South East Economic Monitor, Summer 2025
- CSO Census 2022
- CSO Regional Accounts (RAA03) 2023
- HEA Higher Education Key Facts and Figures 2023 to 2024
- DPER Capital Tracker May 2025
- NPF Implementation Housing Growth Requirements
- Waterford Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy (2023)
- All Island Strategic Rail Review (2023)
- IDA Ireland Annual Employment Survey 2024
- Revenue Commissioners PAYE and Income Tax Returns 2024

Waterford Chamber of Commerce, May 2026.
Submitted via consult.southernassembly.ie



SUBMITTED BY:

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