

# A REGIONAL STRATEGY FOR PROSPERITY AND CONNECTIVITY

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THE SOUTH EAST 2075



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# Executive Summary

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This document is presented by Waterford Chamber, following extensive research and stakeholder engagement led by Dr Ray Griffin, SETU; Gerald Hurley, CEO of Waterford Chamber; and Niall Harrington, Chair of Waterford Chamber's Infrastructure & Development Panel.

It sets out a long-term vision to strengthen Waterford as the anchor city for a connected South East region of 650,000 people, supported by strategic investment in education, transport, healthcare and green industry. The ambition is to unlock the region's full potential, strengthen connectivity and create the conditions for sustainable economic growth and opportunity across the South East.



# The Vision

**THE SOUTH EAST 2075** sets out a fifty-year strategy to position Waterford, Ireland's oldest city, as Ireland's first *regiopolis*, a city of 150,000 people and the anchor for a connected South East region of 650,000.

At the heart of this vision is a stronger Waterford driving shared prosperity across the region through world-class education, green industry, enhanced connectivity, a high quality of life and collaborative regional governance

A **REGIOPOLIS** is a term used in urban planning to describe a medium-sized city that acts as an accessible nucleus for essential regional services, providing innovation and economic strength to a wider functional region.

Unlike a city-region model, which implies a hierarchy where the city dominates and competes with its hinterland, the regiopolis concept describes a city in service and support of its region: anchoring shared services, dispersing economic opportunity outward, and strengthening the places around it rather than drawing from them.

# The South East region is poised for tiger growth of **+8% p.a.**

Opportunity to double the regional economy (€20bn → €45bn by 2036)

## IRELAND'S FIRST **REGIOPOLIS**

ONE REGION, CONNECTED:  
THE SOUTH EAST THRIVING TOGETHER



### CONNECTIVITY

45-minute region reaching 650k people



### TALENT

A knowledge economy anchored by 20k degree places in Waterford



### GOVERNANCE

Regional investment authority and decision-making

**A MORE CONNECTED, MORE COMPETITIVE  
AND MORE SUSTAINABLE SOUTH EAST.**

# The Opportunity

Waterford stands at a moment of real potential. For decades, the South East has played a vital role in national life, driving enterprise, anchoring maritime trade, and producing talent that has contributed to Ireland's growth. The region has strong foundations in indigenous industry, a growing university, strategic port and marine services infrastructure at Rosslare, Belview, Waterford and Dunmore East, an expanding regional airport, a modern motorway network, and a quality of life that increasingly attracts people and investment.

By 2075, Waterford will become:



**A circular city of 150,000** connected by three additional River Suir crossings and served by 15-minute neighbourhoods.



**A regiopolis and anchor for a region of 650,000 people**, connected within 45 minutes via high-speed rail and improved motorways.



**A university city of scale** with 20,000 degree places in Waterford, building on SETU's existing strengths across the region.



**Ireland's green port capital** leading the offshore wind and clean energy transition.



**An internationally connected city** with a regional airport driving tourism and trade directly into the South East.



**A visitor destination** attracting 2.5 million visitors per annum and generating €500m in revenue.



**A strong regional partner** with Wexford, Carlow, Kilkenny and South Tipperary, advancing shared progress through collaborative governance.

# The Challenge



## The Talent Challenge

25,000 graduates lost over 20 years  
= €15bn in foregone regional GDP



## The Connectivity Challenge

Regional catchment reach must be maximised.



## The Governance Challenge

Critical decisions made in Dublin with minimal  
regional accountability





## Three Challenges, Three Opportunities

Every serious strategy begins with an honest assessment of where things stand. Recent CSO data (County Incomes and GDP 2024) reveals that Waterford county is one of Ireland's stronger economic performers outside the two MNE-dominated regions: its GVA per capita of €61,209 (index 61.5) is virtually identical to the Mid-West / Limerick region (€62,030, index 62.3) and above the West / Galway region (€56,988, index 57.3). The enterprise base is strong, productive, and growing.

But the wider South East is not fully benefiting from this performance. New CSO county-level data sets (2024, the first year of county-level GVA reporting) shows Wexford (€34,274), Kilkenny (€38,151), and Carlow (€37,079) each with GVA per capita roughly half of Waterford's level. The gap is not about Waterford failing. It is about a region whose infrastructure, institutional connections, and coordination capacity do not yet allow economic impacts to disperse regionally. Three interconnected challenges explain this disconnect, and each represents a major opportunity.





## 1. The Talent Challenge: Building a Knowledge Region

The South East has a strong talent base, but higher education capacity has not yet matched regional need. SETU currently enrolls around 9,750 students in Waterford. Cork, Galway and Limerick each support 25,000-35,000 university and technological university students. Each year, approximately 4,500 school leavers from the South East leave the region to study elsewhere, and over the past twenty years the cumulative effect of this outflow, combined with limited graduate employment opportunities, has seen an estimated 25,000 young people build their careers outside the region.

This represents a significant opportunity. Expanding higher education capacity, strengthening graduate pathways, and growing the regional jobs base could unlock up to €15 billion in additional regional GDP and retain the skilled workforce the South East needs to compete.



## 2. The Connectivity Challenge: Unlocking Regional Access

Waterford's wider hinterland holds a substantial population: a decade ago, analysis indicated 650,000 people lived within a one-hour drive. However, access is highly dependent on traffic volumes and infrastructure quality. At peak times, the effective catchment contracts significantly; parts of south Wexford and south Tipperary that are near in distance terms remain far in travel time.

Targeted investment in transport, including three additional river crossings, rail electrification, and motorway upgrades, can build a genuine 45-minute region of 650,000 people, comparable to peer cities like Ghent and Groningen. This crosses the threshold at which a region can sustain a full spectrum of services in higher education, healthcare, and culture, and offer a deep, productive labour market attractive to FDI.



## 3. The Governance Challenge: A Stronger Regional Voice

Ireland's local authorities deliver vital services with strong local knowledge. However, major strategic investment decisions in areas like higher education, healthcare, transport, and port development are currently made at national level. The South East does not yet have a dedicated structure for coordinated regional planning and advocacy at the scale the region's ambitions require.

There is a clear opportunity to strengthen regional collaboration, not to replace local authority autonomy but to complement it, ensuring the South East can plan, advocate, and deliver as a connected region. The proposed South East Authority for Regeneration (SEAR) offers a flexible and evolving model to connect regional politics and policy.

## The Policy Choice

These three challenges are interconnected and self-reinforcing. Investment in education, connectivity, and regional capacity creates a virtuous cycle: more graduates stay, more employers invest, the tax base grows, services improve, and the region becomes progressively more attractive. International evidence from cities like Ghent, Groningen, and Oulu shows that targeted, sustained investment in mid-sized regional cities delivers outsized returns for national economies.

Waterford is already performing at the level of the Mid-West and above the West. The question for national policy is straightforward: does Ireland want to connect that performance to 650,000 people, or leave the wider South East operating below its potential?

**THE SOUTH EAST 2075** chooses connection and growth.

## The Solution: Four Strategic Pillars



1

### **SPATIAL TRANSFORMATION: The Circular City**

- Three additional River Suir crossings by 2045
- Eastern Ring Road completion
- 32,000 new homes in 15-minute neighbourhoods
- Riverfront transformation from industrial to civic



2

### **ECONOMIC ACCELERATION: Knowledge & Green Industry**

- SETU growth to 20,000 degree places in Waterford, building on the university's existing regional platform
- Port-to-Great Island Tech Corridor (offshore wind, ICT, clean energy) 45,000 new high-productivity jobs by 2075
- Regional productivity approaching national levels



3

### **WELLBEING INFRASTRUCTURE: Health, Culture, Care**

- Equitably funded Model 4 University Hospital at Ardkeen
- European Capital of Culture 2035 (organising ambition)
- Age-friendly and accessible city design
- Universal accessibility and lifelong housing



4

### **GOVERNANCE & DELIVERY: Collaborative Regional Leadership**

- South East Authority for Regeneration (SEAR) as a collaborative regional body
- Population-proportionate NDP investment
- Citizen participation through assemblies and engagement
- Regional partnership, not zero-sum competition

## Investment & Delivery

Total Investment 2027–2075: €40–50 billion

| Phase       | Years       | Investment | Focus                                           | Flagship Projects                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------|-------------|------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| CATALYSE    | 2027 – 2035 | €8 – 10bn  | Foundation: structural commitments delivered    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• North Quays</li> <li>• SETU Phase 1</li> <li>• UHW Phase 1 (578 beds + ED rebuild + second MRI)</li> <li>• Bridge 1</li> <li>• Dublin–Waterford hourly rail with early morning services</li> <li>• SEAR established</li> </ul>                                       |
| SCALE       | 2035 – 2045 | €13 – 16bn | Regional transformation                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dublin–Waterford electrification and sub-90-min service</li> <li>• Wexford rail reinstatement</li> <li>• UHW Phases 2-3 (cancer centre, 674 beds)</li> <li>• Waterford Airport</li> <li>• SETU 20,000 degree places in Waterford</li> <li>• Net-zero port</li> </ul> |
| CONSOLIDATE | 2045 – 2055 | €11 – 13bn | Climate and demographic leadership              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UHW Phase 3 (866 beds) + Academic Medical Centre</li> <li>• Limerick–Waterford hourly rail</li> <li>• Offshore wind Phase 2</li> <li>• SEAR delivering at full capacity</li> </ul>                                                                                   |
| SECURE      | 2055 – 2075 | €8 – 10bn  | Demographic resilience and full regional parity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UHW Phase 4 (1,058 beds, full regional benchmark)</li> <li>• Autonomous mobility</li> <li>• Innovation clusters</li> <li>• South East as national model for regional governance</li> </ul>                                                                           |

### Funding Sources:

- National Development Plan (45–55%)
- Green Bonds & EU Climate Finance (20–25%)
- Public-Private Partnerships (10–15%)
- Port Revenue Reinvestment (5–10%)
- Innovation Grants & Institutional Investment (5–10%)

## Success Metrics: 7 Headline KPIs

1. **Population:** Expanded Metro Waterford to 150,000
2. **Jobs:** High-productivity employment +45,000
3. **Connectivity:** 650,000 people within 45 minutes
4. **Talent:** 20,000 degree places in Waterford; 75%+ graduate retention
5. **Wellbeing:** National parity by 2040, outperformance by 2075
6. **Climate:** Net-zero by 2045
7. **Productivity:** Intra-regional GVA convergence; regional disposable income at or above national average







# Part One

## Why Waterford?

## Why Now?

## Why 2075?

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Waterford's strong economic performance can extend region-wide through long-term investment in education, transport, and coordinated governance, turning the South East into a connected 'regiopolis.'



# Chapter 1

## Waterford: a city ready for the next chapter

Waterford's story has always been one of connection and reinvention. Where the River Suir meets the sea. Where Ireland meets Europe. Where craft meets commerce.





Founded in 914 as a Viking trading port, Waterford became Ireland's first true city: a centre of exchange, creativity, and global reach. Across centuries, it has continuously adapted, evolving with each new wave of opportunity.

The same geography that fostered outward connection also shaped a diverse and distinctive region. The Three Sisters, the Suir, Nore, and Barrow, helped define strong local identities across the South East, creating a rich network of places with complementary strengths.

As global trade patterns shifted in the late 20th century, deep-sea activity moved to Belview and traditional industries gave way to new sectors. This transition laid the foundations for a more modern, knowledge-driven economy, one now anchored by SETU, a growing technology and life sciences sector, and one of Ireland's most strategic ports.

Today, that legacy presents a clear opportunity: to build a city that matches its historic contribution with modern scale and ambition, positioning Waterford as a dynamic regional capital for the 21st century.

914 Viking founding

Norman period

Industrial age

20th century transition

21st century renewal



## Where Waterford Stands Today

Waterford is Ireland's oldest city and designated regional capital, with real strengths: a proud civic identity, a growing university with a €1 billion regional economic impact, strategic port infrastructure across the region, an emerging clean energy sector, an expanding airport, and a quality of life that consistently attracts people and investment.

Economically, Waterford county performs strongly. CSO data published in February 2026 shows Waterford's GVA per capita at €61,209, virtually identical to the Mid-West (Limerick's region at €62,030) and above the West (Galway's region at €56,988). This places Waterford alongside the regions anchored by Ireland's other designated regional cities. SETU, the port, FDI manufacturing, and indigenous enterprise have built a productive county-level economy.

The challenge is that this performance is not yet spreading to the wider region. Newly published county-level CSO data (2024) shows Wexford (€34,274), Kilkenny (€38,151), and Carlow (€37,079) each with GVA per capita roughly half of Waterford's level. This is not a story of regional failure. It is a story of a strong anchor city whose economic impacts are not yet dispersing to the communities and counties around it. Three structural gaps explain why.



## The evidence points to three strategic opportunities:

### Higher education capacity has significant potential for further growth relative to peer cities.

SETU currently enrolls approximately 9,750 students in Waterford. Cork, Galway and Limerick each serve their regions with 25,000–35,000 university and technological university students. SETU is already building out its platform, with 15 research centres, expanding programme offerings, and growing international partnerships, but the scale of higher education provision does not yet match the region's size or economic needs. The Government's own *Projections of Demand for Higher Education 2025–2045* report identifies this gap as a national priority.

### Enhanced transport connectivity can unlock the region's full potential to operate as an integrated regional economy.

Waterford's wider hinterland holds a substantial population: approximately 650,000 people within a one-hour drive under normal conditions. However, access is highly sensitive to traffic volumes and infrastructure quality. At peak commuting times, the effective catchment contracts significantly. Communities in south Wexford and south Tipperary that are near in distance are often far in travel time. The first train from Dublin does not arrive in Waterford until 9:45am; the Limerick Junction line's first arrival is 11:30am. The Wexford-Waterford rail line has been closed since 2010.

A decade ago, approximately 650,000 people could reach Waterford within an hour. Despite population growth across the region since then, that catchment has not expanded, and under peak conditions it contracts to well below that figure. This is not about Waterford being isolated; it is about latent proximity that the right infrastructure investment would unlock. Serving the communities of south Wexford, south Tipperary, and the wider region with reliable, time-efficient access is both an economic imperative and a matter of regional equity.

### Stronger regional coordination can help turn shared ambition into real progress.

Ireland's local authorities deliver essential services with deep local expertise. However, the major strategic decisions that shape a region's trajectory, university investment, hospital configuration, transport priorities, port development, are made at national level. The South East does not yet have a dedicated structure for coordinated regional planning and delivery at the scale needed to compete with other regions, nationally and internationally. One consequence of this absence is visible in the data: the South East has consistently received a share of *National Development Plan* investment significantly below its population share, a pattern documented in the *South East Economic Monitor*. Without a coordinated regional voice, the region's investment case is fragmented across individual county submissions, each competing separately rather than presenting a unified, compelling case for scale.



## The Opportunity

### What Investment Unlocks

The South East has the potential to more than double its regional GDP, from approximately €20 billion today to €45 billion in a convergence scenario that brings the region to its population-proportionate share of national output. With tiger growth rates (+8% p.a.) this convergence is possible over the next decade. This is not a moonshot, and is comparable to Irish growth rates in the second half of the 1990s. It is the kind of return that competent infrastructure investment and regional coordination reliably deliver.

Waterford county already generates GVA at the same level as the Mid-West (Limerick's region). The task is to build the connectivity, education capacity, and coordination that allow the wider region to generate strong economic growth alongside it.

Expanding higher education retains more graduates in the region, which deepens the labour market, which attracts more employers, which generates the tax revenue to fund better services, which makes the region more attractive to the next generation of graduates. International evidence from Limerick, Ghent, Groningen, Oulu, and other mid-sized cities shows that this virtuous cycle, once started, compounds over decades.

Improving connectivity does not just reduce travel times. It expands the functional labour market, makes the university and hospital viable at greater scale, opens new communities to employment and services, and supports the climate transition by making public transport competitive with private cars. Critically, it enables Wexford, Kilkenny, South Tipperary, and Carlow to generate strong economic growth by participating fully in a connected regional economy.

Strengthening regional governance ensures that investment is coordinated, that projects are sequenced effectively, and that the South East presents a unified case to national government and EU funding bodies.

### The scale of potential gains is substantial:

- Regional GDP growth from approximately **€20 billion to €45 billion** in a convergence scenario, more than doubling the regional economy
- **45,000 additional high-productivity jobs** across knowledge, green energy, and service sectors
- Approximately **€4 billion in additional annual regional GVA** from intra-regional convergence alone (closing half the gap between neighbouring counties and Waterford's county-level performance)
- A region that contributes fully to Ireland's national ambitions under *Project Ireland 2040* and the *Climate Action Plan*

## Why Fifty Years?

A fifty-year horizon is not arbitrary. It reflects the timescale over which structural transformation actually happens:

1

### Universities take decades to build.

SETU's journey from regional technical college to technological university has already taken over fifty years. Reaching 20,000 degree places in Waterford is a generational project, but one with precedent: Limerick, Galway, and Cork all followed this path.

2

### Infrastructure compounds over time.

A bridge built today serves sixty years of commuters, businesses, and communities. Rail electrification transforms travel patterns for generations. The returns on these investments are measured in decades, not electoral cycles.

3

### Demographics are already in motion.

The ageing of the population, the need for migration-driven growth, the pressure on healthcare and housing: these trends are visible now but will intensify over the coming decades. Planning for 2075 means building the care infrastructure, the homes, and the services before the need becomes a crisis.

4

### Climate adaptation requires long-term planning.

Net-zero targets, flood resilience, renewable energy infrastructure, and the circular economy transition all operate on multi-decade timescales.

5

### Generational thinking changes what is possible.

A fifty-year perspective allows the region to think beyond what is immediately funded or politically convenient, and to ask: what kind of city and region do we want our grandchildren's generation to live in?



## The Regiopolis Concept

A regiopolis is not a city-state. It is a city in service:

- Waterford provides substantial regional capacity in tertiary education, acute healthcare, cultural assets, and transport hubs
- Surrounding counties maintain distinct identities, local strengths and significant regional services of their own
- Each place is connected to every other, not subordinate to a centre
- Growth benefits all: collaboration, not competition
- Governance is partnership-based, respecting the autonomy of each local authority

**One Region, Connected: The South East Thriving Together.**



# Chapter 2

## The forces shaping our future

Waterford, and the wider South East region, will be shaped over the next fifty years by powerful global, European, and national forces. Understanding these dynamics is essential for strategic planning.

### Macro forces shaping the South East

#### Demographics

Waterford now has the opportunity to build on its historic role with greater scale and ambition, becoming a dynamic regional capital for the 21st century.



#### Connectivity

Better transport and digital infrastructure can create a more connected 45-minute region, linking people, jobs and services across the South East.



#### Productivity

Closing the productivity gap can drive growth through innovation, investment and stronger FDI links.



#### Climate

The transition to net zero will bring both challenges and opportunities, from managing climate and flood risk to unlocking the South East's offshore wind potential.



#### Governance

Stronger regional coordination and collaboration will be essential to overcome centralisation and deliver infrastructure, investment and growth at the scale the South East requires.



#### Europe

Closer alignment with EU priorities can strengthen the South East's European role, unlocking opportunities through cohesion funding, strategic transport networks and international connectivity.



## 2.1 Demographic Transformation

The South East's population is projected to grow significantly over the coming decades. Under the CSO's medium scenario (M2), aligned with the Ireland 2040 trajectory, the regional population reaches approximately 608,000 by 2070, with the metro area growing to around 139,000. Under the high scenario (M1), which assumes stronger inward migration and urbanisation, the regional population reaches 669,000 and the metro area exceeds 150,000.

### Population Projections (2030–2070)

| Year | South East (M1) | Metro Area (M1) | City (M1) | South East (M2) | Metro Area (M2) | City (M2) | South East (M3) | Metro Area (M3) | City (M3) |
|------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------|
| 2030 | 486,257         | 110,845         | 64,033    | 478,592         | 109,098         | 63,024    | 471,033         | 107,374         | 62,028    |
| 2040 | 526,588         | 120,039         | 69,344    | 508,095         | 115,823         | 66,909    | 490,217         | 111,748         | 64,554    |
| 2050 | 570,265         | 129,995         | 75,096    | 539,417         | 122,963         | 71,033    | 510,182         | 116,299         | 67,184    |
| 2060 | 617,564         | 140,777         | 81,324    | 572,671         | 130,543         | 75,412    | 530,961         | 121,035         | 69,920    |
| 2070 | 668,786         | 152,454         | 88,070    | 607,974         | 138,591         | 80,061    | 552,586         | 125,965         | 72,768    |

### Scenario Key:

- **High (M1):** Higher net inward migration and urbanisation
- **Medium (M2):** Balanced scenario aligned with Ireland 2040 trajectory
- **Low (M3):** Conservative assumptions; slower growth

*The 150,000 metro population target is consistent with the M1 scenario and aligns with the Programme for Government and NDP ambitions for balanced regional growth, including modest boundary adjustments to reflect Waterford's functional urban area. Full methodology in companion Evidence Base.*

## Ageing and Dependency Pressures

One of the most significant demographic shifts is the ageing of the population. By 2075, the proportion of residents aged 65+ is projected to rise substantially in every scenario, placing increased demand on healthcare, elder care, housing adaptation, and social services. Concurrently, the dependency ratio may rise, reducing the effective working population unless mitigated by migration or productivity gains.

This ageing trend amplifies the importance of digital health, community wellbeing hubs, and age-friendly design in both housing and public realm. It also makes the case for enhanced Model 4 hospital capacity, regional care platforms and integrated social infrastructure.

### Key Trends:

- 25-40% regional population growth by 2075 (M2 scenario)
- Ageing population: 65+ cohort rises from 15% to 30%+ of regional population
- Migration-driven growth: inward migration essential to offset ageing and sustain workforce
- Dependency ratio pressure: working-age population grows slower than total population



### Strategic Implications:

- Plan for 32,000+ new homes in metro Waterford
- Expand healthcare capacity for ageing population (Model 4 + community care)
- Retain graduates to sustain workforce (higher education expansion)
- Build inclusive integration infrastructure for new residents

## 2.2 The Connectivity Opportunity

### Where We Stand

Waterford's wider hinterland holds a substantial population. A decade ago, analysis indicated approximately 650,000 people lived within a one-hour drive of the city. However, access is highly dependent on traffic volumes, road quality, and public transport provision. At peak commuting times, the effective catchment contracts significantly.

This matters because communities that are near in distance terms can be far in travel time. Parts of south Wexford and south Tipperary, areas with strong economic and social connections to Waterford, are poorly served by current transport infrastructure. The first train from Dublin does not arrive in Waterford until 9:45am; the first departure from Waterford reaches Dublin at 8:08am. The Limerick Junction line offers just two daily services, with the first arrival at 11:30am. The Wexford-Waterford rail line has been closed since 2010. A single urban bridge (Rice) handles all cross-river traffic.

Off-peak, Waterford's one-hour catchment is estimated at 580,000–650,000 people, reflecting the city's true reach for retail, healthcare, education, tourism, and cultural activity. Peak-hour commuting isochrones understate this wider influence, but they remain the correct benchmark for assessing labour market integration.







Carrick-on-Suir, Co. Tipperary

## 2075 Vision

- **650,000+ people** within 45 minutes
- **Three additional River Suir crossings** eliminating bottlenecks
- **Electrified rail** with hourly service to Dublin, Wexford, Kilkenny
- **First train arrival 6:30am** enabling regional commuting
- **Bus rapid transit across city** with integrated ticketing

### Benchmark Against European Peers

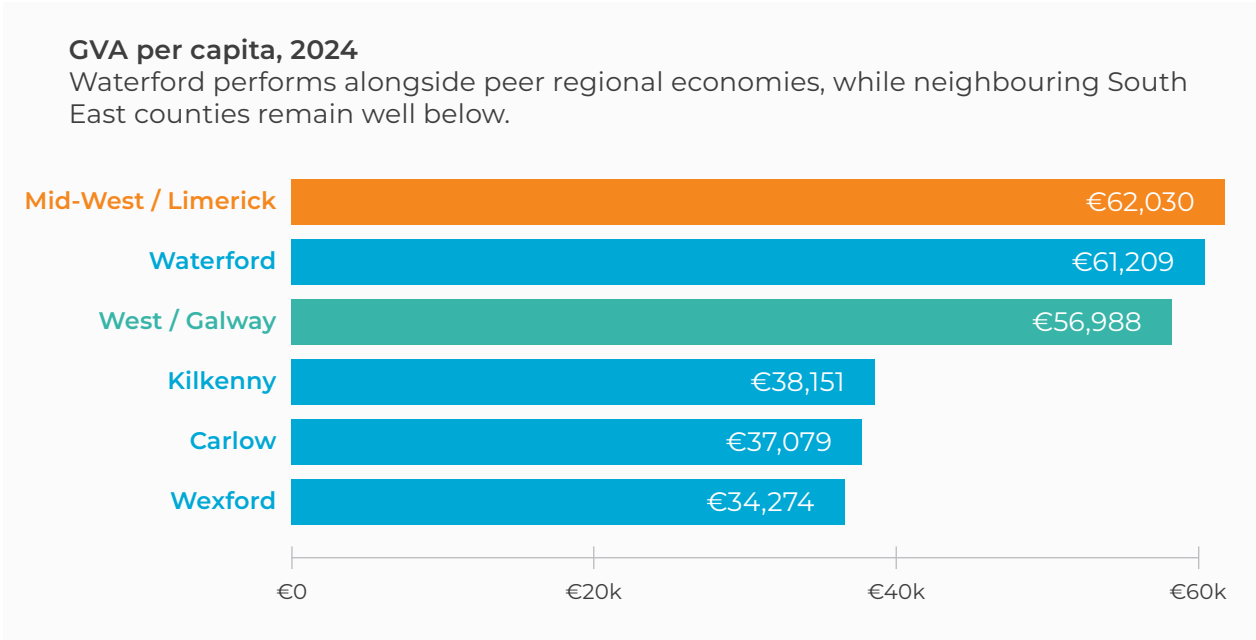
Currently, Waterford is served by eight weekday trains (five on Sundays) on the Dublin line. The following shows current European norms for comparable cities:

| City                    | Population in 45min catchment | Rail frequency to capital |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Groningen, NL           | 580,000                       | 15+ trains/day            |
| Ghent, BE               | 750,000                       | 20+ trains/day            |
| Oulu, FI                | 420,000                       | 12 trains/day             |
| <b>Waterford (2075)</b> | <b>650,000+</b>               | <b>15+ trains/day</b>     |

### Why This Matters:

- **Labour market depth:** a larger, better-connected workforce supports higher productivity and innovation
- **Service viability:** university, hospital, retail, tourism and cultural venues need sufficient catchment to operate at scale; without it, communities across the region experience service deserts in healthcare, education, and cultural provision
- **Climate action:** public transport only works with frequency and coverage
- **Regional equity:** opportunity should not depend on living within 20km of the city centre

## 2.3 Unlocking the South East's Productivity Potential



### Where We Stand

#### A Story of Two South Easts

CSO County Incomes and GDP 2024 (published February 2026) reveals a striking picture. At county level, Waterford performs strongly: GVA per capita of €61,209 places it virtually alongside the Mid-West / Limerick region (€62,030) and above the West / Galway region (€56,988). SETU, the port, FDI manufacturing, and indigenous enterprise have built a productive county-level economy.

But the wider South East is not yet sharing in this performance. Newly published county-level CSO data (2024, the first year of county-level GVA reporting) shows Wexford (€34,274), Kilkenny (€38,151), and Carlow (€37,079) each with GVA per capita roughly half of Waterford's. The South East NUTS3 average of €43,094 reflects the untapped potential of these neighbouring counties rather than any weakness in Waterford. Connecting and enabling Wexford, Kilkenny, and Carlow to catch up is the central economic opportunity of the regiopolis strategy.

This pattern has been masked for years by NUTS3 aggregation. The 2024 data, the first to be published at county level, reveals it clearly. And it reframes the productivity challenge entirely: the issue is not that Waterford underperforms, but that the region is not connected enough to benefit from what Waterford already generates.

#### The Opportunity: Intra-Regional Convergence

If Wexford, Kilkenny, and Carlow were to converge even partially toward Waterford's county-level performance, closing half the intra-regional GVA gap, the combined gain would be approximately €4 billion in additional annual regional GVA (indicative, based on published CSO data). This is the prize that connectivity, education, and coordination unlock.

## Why the Gap Exists

- **Connectivity:** without rail to Wexford, limited public transport to Kilkenny and Carlow, and peak-hour congestion, these counties operate as separate sub-scale labour markets rather than part of an integrated regional economy
- **Higher education reach:** SETU contributes to Waterford and the wider SE's performance but the talent pipeline does not yet extend reliably across the region
- **FDI spillovers not yet fully realised:** 54.8% of Waterford's GVA comes from foreign-owned enterprises, a strong multinational presence comparable to major FDI centres nationally. However, Revenue Commissioners data shows Waterford's PAYE income tax receipts per capita are moderate relative to its strong GVA, suggesting that a significant share of enterprise value is flowing out as corporate profits rather than circulating through local wages, procurement, and supply chains. This is the well-documented challenge of FDI embeddedness: without a deep university research base, developed local supply chains, and strong workforce retention, multinational presence generates headline GVA but limited local multiplier effects. Deepening these spillovers, through SETU research partnerships, graduate employment pipelines, local supplier development, and enterprise spin-out activity, would convert Waterford's strong production figures into higher wages, stronger procurement spend, and broader economic benefit across the regional economy.
- **Absent smart specialisation:** the region has not yet articulated the kind of smart specialisation strategy that focuses enterprise productivity growth in peer European regions

## How We Get There

- 1 Build the 45-minute region:**  
Connect Wexford, Kilkenny, Carlow, and South Tipperary into Waterford's effective economic catchment through rail, road, and BRT
- 2 Grow higher education capacity:**  
Expanding toward 20,000 degree places in Waterford at a comprehensive, multidisciplinary campus in Waterford, the kind of large-scale university experience that attracts students and retains them in a region, extending the talent pipeline across the South East
- 3 Develop smart specialisms:**  
Life sciences, clean energy, food and agri-tech, financial services
- 4 Coordinate regionally:**  
Ensure FDI attraction, enterprise support, and infrastructure investment are planned and delivered as a connected regional strategy

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The South East is not starting from behind. Waterford is already performing. The task is to connect that performance to 650,000 people.

## 2.4 Climate Emergency and Green Opportunity

### Navigating the climate transition

Managing risk while unlocking new opportunities for Waterford and the South East.

#### RISKS

**Coastal flooding:**  
rising sea levels  
threaten port and  
estuary communities

**Transport  
emissions:**  
private car  
dependence  
drives regional  
carbon footprint



**Economic transition:**  
fossil fuel phase-out  
requires industrial  
adaptation

#### OPPORTUNITIES

**Offshore wind:**  
South East coast  
is a prime location  
for renewable  
generation

**Green port  
transition:**  
first mover  
advantage in net-  
zero shipping and  
logistics



**Greenlink  
Interconnector:**  
Great Island as  
energy hub linking  
Ireland-Wales-  
Europe

**Dunmore Harbour  
enhancement:**  
strengthening  
fisheries, tourism,  
marine services, and  
coastal resilience

**Circular economy:**  
industrial symbiosis  
and waste-to-  
resource systems

### Strategic Positioning

Waterford can become Ireland's first net-zero port city by 2045, five years ahead of the national target. This positions the region as:

- A leader in clean industry and maritime innovation
- A magnet for green tech investment and talent
- A model for European coastal city transition



## 2.5 Strengthening Regional Governance and Democratic Voice

### The Context

Ireland has the most centralised government structure of any OECD country. The Local Autonomy Index, which measures the degree of self-governance afforded to local authorities across Europe, consistently places Ireland at or near the bottom of the ranking. Major strategic investment decisions in higher education, healthcare, transport, energy, and port development are made at national level, with local authorities playing a delivery and administrative role rather than a strategic one.

This centralisation has consequences for regions without a strong institutional voice. The South East has consistently received a share of National Development Plan investment below its population share, a pattern that reflects, in part, the absence of a coordinated regional advocacy structure.

Over the next fifty years, this picture is likely to change. Ireland may see moves toward stronger local and regional governance, and the possibility of a new constitutional settlement on the island of Ireland could further reshape the relationship between national and regional government. Planning now for enhanced regional capacity is prudent regardless of the precise institutional form it eventually takes.

### What the South East Has Already Tried

The region is not starting from scratch on regional coordination. Previous and ongoing efforts include:

Ireland's South East Development Office (ISED), which provides a platform for regional economic promotion and coordination across the South East counties. The Three Sisters 2020 European Capital of Culture bid brought Waterford, Wexford, and Kilkenny together in an ambitious regional cultural proposition, producing the *Re-Imagining Our Region* bid book and the *Better Together Three Sisters Regional Cultural Strategy (2016–2025)*. These initiatives demonstrated both the appetite and the capacity for regional collaboration.

What they also demonstrated is the limits of voluntary, project-based coordination without institutional continuity, dedicated funding, or a statutory mandate.

The consequences of fragmented governance are quantifiable. The Government's Capital Tracker (May 2025) records major public capital spending per citizen in the South East at €1,738. That is the lowest figure of any NUTS 3 region in the country, approximately €7,000 below the national average of approximately €8,700, against €23,817 in Dublin and €3,675 in the South West.

On IDA employment, the South East accounts for 8.9% of the national population but only 6.4 per cent of IDA-supported jobs: the SE Economic Monitor calculates a direct deficit of 11,360 IDA-supported posts, and a total deficit including indirect effects of approximately 20,450 jobs. These are not abstractions. They are the measurable outcome of a region whose investment case has been fragmented across individual county submissions rather than presented as a unified, evidence-based ask at regional scale.

The Waterford-Kilkenny MASP boundary provides a further illustration. The Ferrybank retail development, a major out-of-town destination permitted by Kilkenny County Council on the north bank of the Suir, affected Waterford city centre's retail market during a period of economic stress. It was not a failure of either 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 for the functional city as a whole. The same dynamic operates in health, transport, and higher education: decisions taken in frameworks that do not reflect Waterford's actual catchment consistently underserve the region they nominally govern.

## South East Authority for Regeneration (SEAR)

### Enhancing and Renewing Regional Coordination

The proposed South East Authority for Regeneration (SEAR) builds on these foundations. It is not a new idea imposed from outside; it is a renewal and strengthening of efforts the region has already begun, designed to provide the institutional continuity, analytical capacity, and delivery authority that voluntary coordination alone cannot sustain.

SEAR is envisaged as a collaborative regional body that amplifies the voice and impact of each county. It would be locally led, with representation from Waterford, Wexford, Kilkenny, Carlow, and South Tipperary, alongside business, civic society, and SETU. Each local authority would retain full control within its own area. The body's role would be to coordinate strategic planning, align investment across the region, present a unified case to national government and EU bodies, and build the analytical and delivery capacity the region needs to compete.

A pooled funding model combining exchequer, EU, and local contributions would support SEAR's work. Transparent accountability through annual reporting and citizen engagement would ensure democratic legitimacy.

### Why This Matters Now

Strengthening Waterford's designation within the *National Planning Framework*, and securing population-aligned NDP investment for the South East, benefits the entire region. SEAR provides the mechanism to ensure that investment is coordinated, sequenced effectively, and distributed in a way that lifts all five counties.

SEAR represents a practical, positive evolution of governance: one that empowers local authorities, strengthens collaboration, and ensures the South East can plan, compete, and succeed as a connected, ambitious region.

Full governance options, legislative pathways, and accountability framework set out in companion *Investment Case and Evidence Base*.

## 2.6 National and EU Strategic Context

This strategy directly supports and implements:

### National:

- Project Ireland 2040 (balanced regional development)
- Southern Regional Assembly RSES and Waterford MASP
- Housing for All (32,000 new homes target)
- Sláintecare (Model 4 hospital, integrated care)
- Climate Action Plan (net-zero by 2050)
- Future Forty (talent and productivity strategy)

### European:

- TEN-T Core Network Corridor (port and rail connectivity)
- European Green Deal (offshore wind, clean energy)
- Regional Cohesion Policy (balanced growth)
- Healthy Ageing strategy (age-friendly cities)

## The Ask: National government to match regional ambition with:

- 1 Population-proportionate NDP allocation  
(approximately 9% of investment for approximately 9% of population)
- 2 Support for SEAR as a collaborative regional development body
- 3 Fast-tracking strategic projects  
(North Quays, SETU, hospital, bridges, rail)
- 4 Multi-annual funding certainty  
(not year-to-year discretion)











# Part Two

## The Spatial Vision: A Circular City in a 45-Minute Region

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Waterford's spatial plan centres on a 'circular city' built through three new river crossings, walkable neighbourhoods, and 32,000 new homes, linked by phased transport investment bringing 650,000 people within 45 minutes by 2075.

# Chapter 3

## The 15-minute circular city

### The Design Logic

**THE SOUTH EAST 2075** is organised around five spatial principles:

#### 1. Circular Urban Form

- Completed by three new River Suir crossings and Eastern Ring Road
- Enables high-frequency orbital bus routes
- Reduces journey times and car dependency
- Creates development potential on both riverbanks

#### 2. City of Villages

- 15+ distinct neighbourhoods, each with local services
- Walk/cycle to daily needs (shops, school, healthcare, parks)
- Strong local identity preserved through design codes
- Mixed-income, mixed-use, intergenerational

#### 3. Riverfront as Civic Spine

- Continuous public realm along River Suir waterfront
- Former industrial lands transformed into housing, tourism, transport, innovation, culture, amenity
- Blue-green infrastructure for flood resilience and ecology
- Waterfront as the city's 'living room'

#### 4. Intensity Where Desired

- Growth focused on existing service nodes (City Centre, North Quays, Ferrybank, Ardkeen)
- Higher density near public transport and amenities
- Protects rural hinterland while enabling urban vibrancy
- 32,000 new homes delivered through strategic infill and brownfield

#### 5. Regional Integration

- Transport infrastructure extends 45-minute accessibility
- City services (university, hospital, culture) serve wider South East
- Economic clusters regionally connected
- No hard edge: city and region as continuum

# The Three Crossings Strategy

## Current Challenge

One major urban bridge (Rice) creates a bottleneck and forces all cross-river traffic through the city centre. This increases congestion and emissions, limits orbital connectivity, suppresses development on the north bank, and forces longer journey times for most residents.



**ABOVE:** Potential future bridge in Waterford City. **BELOW:** Potential future bridge at Cheekpoint, Co. Waterford. AI-modified architectural concept visualisation for design ideation, based on original drone photography and digitally composited.





## Solution: Complete the Circle

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1

### Crossing 1: Eastern Ring Bridge (2027–2032)

- **Location:** Options to consider should include Faithlegg and Cheekpoint area
  - **Function:** Complete Eastern Ring Road, carry M9/M11 to N25 traffic, airport and Model 4 hospital
  - **Design:** High bridge with cycle/pedestrian lanes, bus priority
  - **Impact:** Diverts through-traffic from city centre; enables Ardkeen-Ferrybank orbital route
  - **Cost:** €180-220 million
  - **Funding:** NDP (60%), EU TEN-T (25%), PPP (15%)
- 

2

### Crossing 2: Central Urban Bridge (2035–2040)

- **Location:** Options to consider should include John's River and Ferrybank
  - **Function:** Pedestrian/cycle priority, bus rapid transit, emergency vehicles
  - **Design:** Lower bridge, landmark architecture, integrated with public realm
  - **Impact:** Connects SETU spine to north bank; enables 15-minute neighbourhoods
  - **Cost:** €80-120 million
  - **Funding:** NDP (50%), Urban Regeneration Fund (30%), Local (20%)
- 

3

### Crossing 3: South East Gateway (2045–2050)

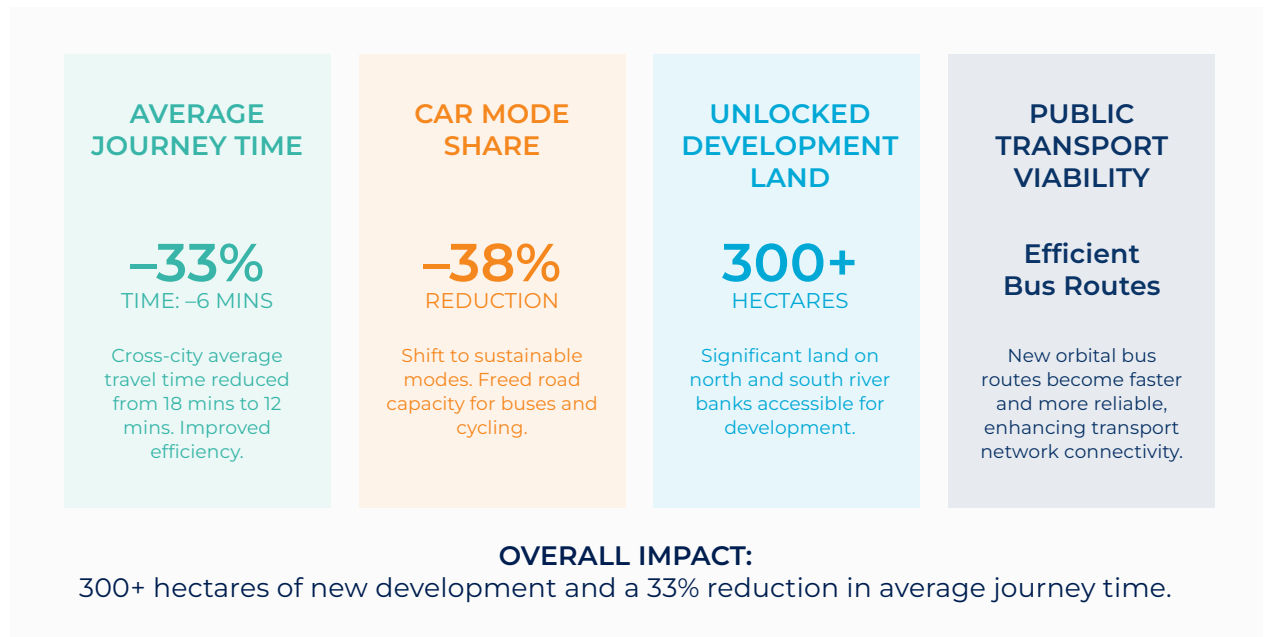
- **Location:** Options to consider should include the Ballyhack-Passage East corridor (opening south Wexford to Waterford) or a western crossing (Bilberry-Gracedieu area, freight/port oriented). The choice depends on demand modelling and strategic priorities.
- **Function:** Opening south Wexford and the Hook Peninsula to the regional economy (Ballyhack-Passage option); or future-proofing western expansion and freight access to port (western option)
- **Design:** Mixed-use crossing with cycle/pedestrian provision
- **Impact:** Either option unlocks significant development potential and regional connectivity. The Ballyhack-Passage route would directly address the south Wexford accessibility gap identified in the isochrone analysis.
- **Cost:** €150-200 million
- **Funding:** NDP (40%), Port Revenue (30%), PPP (30%)







## Impact Summary



## The 15-Minute Neighbourhoods

Every resident should access within 15 minutes walk/cycle:



# Priority Neighbourhoods for Transformation:

## City Centre (Heart of the City)

- **Vision:** Revitalised, activated city core with residential growth above ground-floor commercial, a thriving evening economy, and a strong cultural and retail offer
- **15-Minute Assets:** Full range of civic, cultural, retail, and service functions; the primary destination for the region
- **Phasing:** Ongoing, accelerating 2026–2035
- **Focus:** Vacancy activation, upper-floor residential conversion, public realm enhancement, pedestrian priority

## North Quays (New Central District)

- **Vision:** Mixed-use riverfront district with 2,500+ homes, offices, innovation space, cultural venues
- **15-Minute Assets:** New primary school, childcare, medical centre, riverside park, transport interchange
- **Phasing:** 2026–2035 (Phase 2 and 3 delivery)
- **Density:** 80–120 units/hectare (mid-rise apartments, townhouses)





### Ferrybank (North Bank Hub)

- **Vision:** Major residential expansion with rail-oriented development around relocated station
- **15-Minute Assets:** New secondary school, sports complex, commercial district, rail hub
- **Phasing:** 2027-2040
- **Density:** 50-80 units/hectare (suburban-to-urban transition)

### SETU-RSC University-Enterprise Corridor

- **Vision:** Campus-city integration with student housing, research facilities, enterprise incubation
- **15-Minute Assets:** Expanded SETU facilities, student services, student accommodation, cultural venues, sports grounds
- **Phasing:** 2027-2045
- **Density:** 60-100 units/hectare (student housing higher density)

### Ardkeen (Eastern Healthcare Hub)

- **Vision:** Model 4 hospital anchoring health and eldercare district with accessible housing
- **15-Minute Assets:** Hospital, outpatient clinics, allied health services, age-friendly housing, parks
- **Phasing:** 2027-2038
- **Density:** 45-70 units/hectare (emphasis on accessibility and ageing-in-place)

### Lisduggan-Ballybeg-Carrickphierish (Western Arc Renewal)

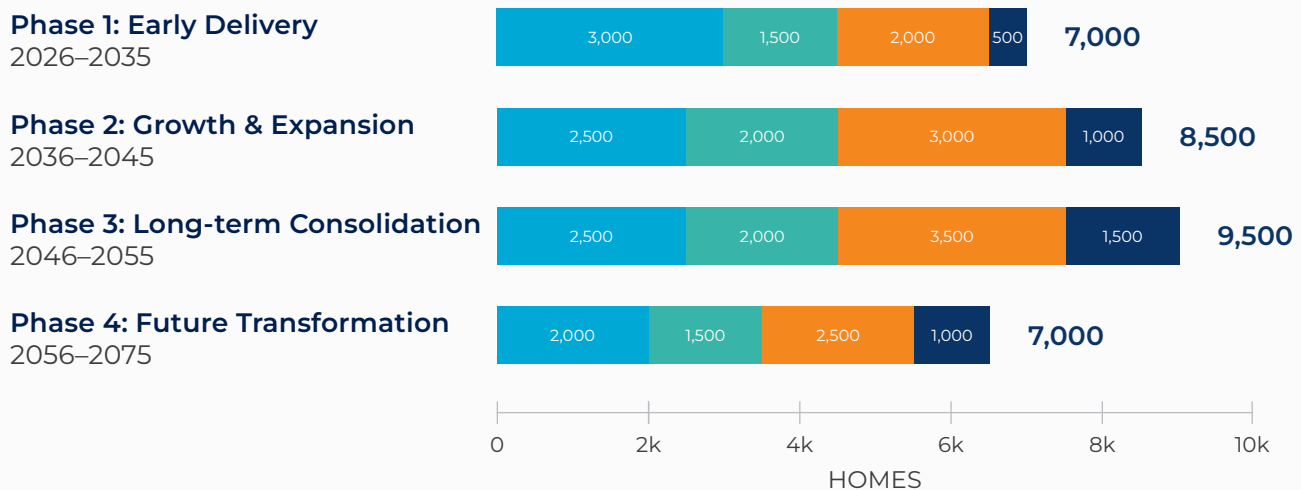
- **Vision:** Retrofit and intensify established communities with improved services and housing
- **15-Minute Assets:** Community health hubs, upgraded schools, local employment nodes, retrofitted housing
- **Phasing:** 2027-2050 (rolling programme)
- **Density:** 40-60 units/hectare (respectful intensification)

### Bilberry-Gracedieu (Southern Riverfront Transformation)

- **Vision:** Industrial brownfield transformed into mixed-use riverside neighbourhoods with circular economy focus
- **15-Minute Assets:** Innovation district, riverside parks, community facilities, sustainable transport
- **Phasing:** 2040-2060
- **Density:** 60-90 units/hectare

## Housing Delivery: 32,000 New Homes by 2075

● Apartments ● Townhouses ● Family Homes ● Student / Age-friendly / Specialist



### Delivery Mechanisms:

- **Public land activation:** Council/State lands prioritised for affordable/social housing
- **Density bonuses:** Private developers incentivised to include affordable units
- **Cost-rental partnerships:** SETU and approved housing bodies for student/workforce housing
- **Brownfield remediation fund:** Clean up industrial sites for residential use
- **Design standards:** All new housing meets energy efficiency standards and 15-minute principles

### Housing Tenure Mix (Target 2075):

- **Owner-occupied:** 55–60%
- **Social/affordable rental:** 25–30%
- **Private rental:** 10–15%
- **Student housing:** 5%

# Chapter 4

## The 45-minute region: connecting the South East

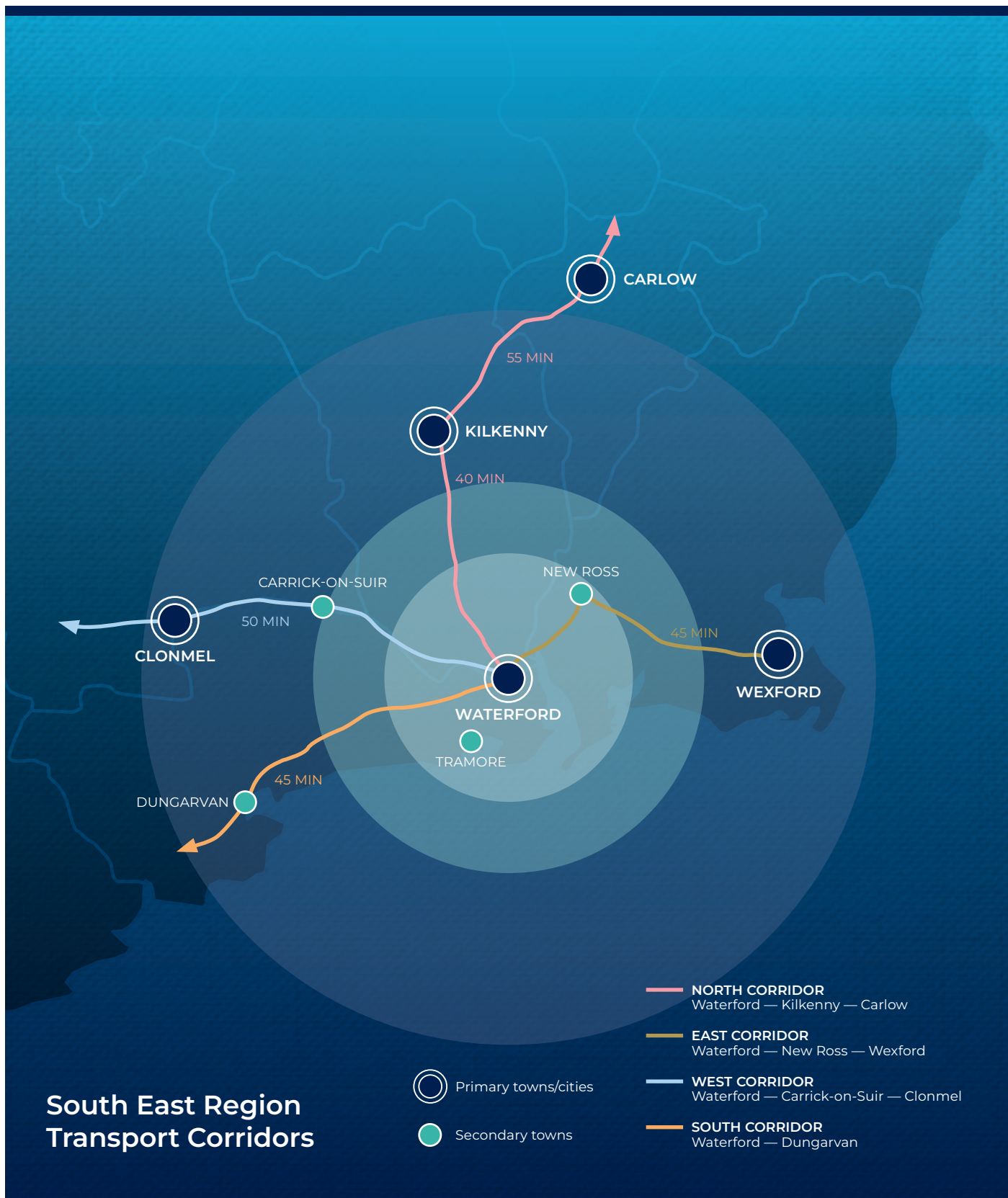
Waterford's success depends on the success of Wexford, Kilkenny, Carlow, and South Tipperary. The 45-minute region creates a functional economic area of 650,000 people: the scale needed to sustain a full-spectrum university, Model 4 hospital, international airport, and diverse economy.

### Opportunities:

- Rail connectivity presents strong potential for enhancement, including expanding services (e.g., Wexford link) and increasing frequency on existing routes
- Scope to improve early-morning rail access to Waterford, supporting commuter-friendly schedules
- Bus network offers opportunities for optimisation, including more direct routes and increased service frequency
- Strategic upgrades to the road network (e.g., M9-M11 link, easing N24/N25 pressure points) could significantly improve regional accessibility

### Benefits:

- Greater transport connectivity enables more students to access SETU from across the region
- Improved access opens up employment opportunities for the entire South East workforce
- Enhanced transport links make hospital services more accessible for patients across the region
- Better connectivity boosts attendance at cultural events and strengthens the regional retail and visitor economy





## The Regional Transport Transformation

### Phase 1:

#### Quick Wins (2027–2030): €700m–1bn

##### 1. Rail Frequency Upgrade

- Increase Dublin-Waterford to hourly service across the full day
- Wexford-Waterford reinstatement
- First train arrival 6:30am, last departure 10:00pm
- Journey time reduction: 2h30m to 2h00m (electrification prep)
- Cost: €150–200m (rolling stock, signalling, platform extensions)

##### 2. Bus Network Transformation and BRT

Building on the NTA's Waterford Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy (WMATS) and the BusConnects Waterford Area Bus Network Redesign, which together propose to approximately double public transport service levels in the Waterford metropolitan area:

- High-frequency spine routes across the city with BRT-standard priority on key corridors
- City centre to Ferrybank to Kilkenny (hourly connecting service)
- City centre to Tramore to Dunmore East
- City centre to New Ross to Wexford (connecting service)
- Cost: €200–300m (vehicles, stops, priority lanes, depot)

##### 3. Park and Ride Hubs

- Strategic locations serving key approach corridors
- Integrated ticketing with rail/bus services
- Cost: €40–60m (land, parking, shelters, systems)

##### 4. Road Safety and Flow Improvements

- N24 Carrick-Waterford upgrade
- N25 Waterford–Cork bottleneck removal
- Cost: €300–400m

## Phase 2:

### Structural Change (2030–2045): €5bn–7bn

#### 1. Rail Electrification and Speed Upgrade

- Dublin-Waterford electrification (part of national programme)
- Journey time: 2h00m to 1h30m
- Increased frequency: 15–18 daily services
- Cost: €1.5–2bn (Waterford portion of national programme)

#### 2. Wexford-Waterford Rail Upgrade

- Phased upgrade: Waterford-New Ross-Wellington Bridge-Wexford
- Hourly service, 45-minute journey time
- Integrated with Rosslare Europort connection
- Cost: €600–900m (track, stations, rolling stock)

#### 3. N24 Waterford to Limerick Strategic Transport Corridor

- The entire N24 corridor is essential to achieving the balanced regional development objectives set out in *Project Ireland 2040*
- Support for the N24 exists across national and regional policy frameworks, including successive National Development Plans, the Programme for Government, the Southern Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy, and multiple local authority development plans.
- Cost: €1.1–1.2bn

#### 4. M9-M11 Connector

- New motorway linking Waterford hinterland to Dublin-Wexford corridor
- Enables 45-minute access from Wexford to Waterford
- Cost: €800m–1.2bn

#### 5. Regional Rail Upgrades

- Waterford–Limerick service enhancement
- Waterford–Kilkenny frequency increase (30-minute intervals at peak)
- Cost: €400–600m

#### 6. Integrated Regional Mobility Platform

- Single ticketing system (rail, bus, bike share)
- Real-time information and journey planning
- Mobility-as-a-Service integration
- Cost: €50–80m

## Phase 3:

### Future-Proofing (2045–2075): €2bn–4bn

1. Autonomous public transport pilots
2. Further rail frequency optimisation
3. Rural mobility solutions (on-demand services, community transport integration)

## Rail2050 and the Ambition Gap for Waterford

Iarnród Éireann's *Rail2050* strategy is a genuinely ambitious national framework and its publication is welcome. For Waterford, however, the specific commitments it contains do not yet match the scale of the opportunity or the urgency of the need. Three gaps are material to this strategy.

### The Dublin–Waterford intercity corridor

*Rail2050* targets growth from the current 8 daily return services to 20 by 2050. But the service quality problem is not only frequency: the first Dublin arrival in Waterford is 9:45am, a schedule that is categorically unsuitable for commuters, students, or patients. Early-morning and late-evening services are a prerequisite for the corridor to function as a genuine commuter and regional connection, and this improvement should not wait for the 2040 electrification phase. The 90-minute Dublin–Waterford target journey time is the right objective; the *Rail2050* path toward it, dependent on electrification deferred to the post-2040 period, is slower than Waterford's growth trajectory warrants.

### The Waterford–Wexford line

*Rail2050*, building on the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, places reinstatement for passenger services in the 2040 phase, with connection of Rosslare Europort to the national rail network via Waterford listed only for the 2050 column. A region of 650,000 people served by a port of national and European strategic importance should not wait until 2040 or beyond for a passenger rail connection to its second-largest centre. The line has been closed since 2010; the case for earlier reinstatement, even in a limited interim form, is strong and is supported by both the freight and passenger arguments in *Rail2050*'s own framework.

### The Waterford–Limerick Junction–Limerick corridor

*Rail2050* envisages only a gradual build to two-hourly services initially, with hourly frequency as a longer-term aspiration. For a corridor linking two designated regional cities, and the only direct cross-regional connection not routed through Dublin, this is insufficiently ambitious. **THE SOUTH EAST 2075** makes the case for treating the Limerick corridor as a strategic priority, with a minimum hourly service within the first strategy period and a programme to reduce journey time below 90 minutes.

## Regional Service Integration

Transport is just one part of the picture. Building a connected 45-minute region also means aligning services so that residents across the South East can access:

### Education:

- SETU campuses accessible for daily commuting from across the region
- Regional secondary schools connected to higher education pathways
- Adult education and upskilling programmes in all county towns

### Healthcare:

- Model 4 hospital in Waterford for tertiary/complex care
- Model 3 hospitals in Wexford and Kilkenny for secondary care - Integrated community care networks across all counties
- Telemedicine reducing the need for travel

### Culture and Amenity:

- Carriganore sports/events complex serving regional catchment
- Museum, theatre, gallery programming marketed regionally
- Regional library network with shared digital resources
- Tourism trails linking Viking Triangle to Hook Peninsula to Rock of Cashel

### Economic Opportunity:

- Jobs in Waterford accessible to regional workforce
- Enterprise supports and innovation activity distributed across the region
- Coordinated FDI attraction (regional collaboration, not county competition)
- Regional supply chain integration







# Part Three

## Economic Transformation: 45,000 jobs and closing the productivity gap

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Waterford's economic plan targets 45,000 net new jobs through three engines: expanding SETU to 20,000 degree places in Waterford, building an 18,000-job green energy and tech corridor, and growing regional health, education, and cultural services.



South East Technological University, Cork Road Campus, Waterford City. AI-modified architectural concept visualisation for design ideation, based on original drone photography and digitally composited.

# Chapter 5

## The Three Economic Engines

**THE SOUTH EAST 2075** aims to deliver 45,000 net new jobs in high-productivity sectors, driving a major uplift in regional performance by 2075. This is achieved through three interconnected economic engines:

- SETU-RSC University-Enterprise Corridor – 15,000 jobs
- Port-to-Great Island Tech Corridor – 18,000 jobs
- Regional Service Economy – 12,000 jobs

## 5.1 Engine One: SETU-RSC University-Enterprise Corridor

### The Regional Need

For the South East to compete as a knowledge economy, it needs higher education provision at a scale comparable to other Irish regions. Cork, Galway, and Limerick each support 20,000+ university and technological university students. Waterford currently has approximately 9,750, a figure that reflects SETU's relatively recent establishment and the historical pattern of investment, not any limit on the region's capacity or ambition.

SETU is already making significant strides. The university has 15 research centres and an Institute, a growing international profile, expanding programme offerings across multiple campuses, and an economic impact of approximately €1 billion on the regional economy. The foundation is strong.

The aspiration is to build on this platform: growing SETU's Waterford presence toward 20,000-25,000 students over the coming decades, with the university itself determining the pace, sequencing, and academic strategy of that growth. This is a matter for SETU's internal governance. What this strategy can do is articulate the regional need and make the investment case for the infrastructure, housing, and services that would support such growth.

### Why Scale Matters

- **Talent retention:** each year, approximately 4,500 school leavers from the South East leave the region to study elsewhere. Many do not return. In Limerick, Cork, and Galway, approximately 75% of local school leavers stay in-region for higher education, benefiting from comprehensive universities that offer the breadth of disciplines and the scale of student experience that retains young people. The South East's retention rate between second level and third level of just 37% reflects the absence of that scale, not any lack of quality in what SETU offers.
- **Graduate employment:** a deeper higher education presence attracts more employers, research investment, and innovation activity, creating the jobs that retain graduates in the region.
- **Economic diversity and quality of life:** a broad-based university supports all sectors of the economy, not just STEM. Arts, humanities, social sciences, health sciences, and creative industries contribute to regional economic vitality, social cohesion, cultural richness, and quality of life, all factors that determine where people choose to live and work.
- **International comparison:** the relationship between city scale and university scale is well established. Groningen (230,000 people, 60,000+ students), Aarhus (285,000 people, 45,000 students), Oulu (210,000 people, 22,000 students), and Limerick (102,000 people, 25,000+ students across UL and TUS) all demonstrate that mid-sized cities thrive when higher education provision is right-sized to regional need. The aspiration for 20,000 degree places in Waterford is consistent with these ratios.



## The Physical Opportunity: University-City Integration

The corridor extending from the current SETU campus to the Regional Sports Centre offers significant potential for integrated development: academic facilities, student housing, research and enterprise space, and community amenities. Any masterplanning of this corridor would be developed in partnership with SETU and aligned with the university's own strategic plans. The fifty-year horizon of this strategy invites SETU to develop a correspondingly long-term institutional vision, one that looks beyond the immediate priorities of merger consolidation and current planning cycles toward the kind of university the South East will need in 2050 and beyond.

## Supporting Growth: What the Region Needs to Provide

- **Student housing:** 4,000+ additional purpose-built student units (reducing pressure on the private rental market)
- **Transport connectivity:** bus rapid transit and cycling infrastructure linking campus to city and region
- **Enterprise and innovation space:** incubation facilities, collaboration spaces, and industry-partnership infrastructure
- **Cultural and social infrastructure:** the vibrancy and quality of life that attracts and retains students and staff
- **Healthcare and childcare:** services that support a growing campus community

## Research and Innovation

SETU already demonstrates research strength across multiple domains, including life sciences, engineering, ICT, food science, social innovation, and the creative industries. The opportunity is to grow this capacity in areas aligned with the region's economic strengths and its future planning needs. A region aspiring to the scale and complexity of a regiopolis will increasingly need its own analytical and foresight capacity—the ability to model its own economic futures, evaluate policy options, and generate the evidence base that underpins strategic decisions. SETU is the natural home for this regional intelligence function. Priority research clusters include:

- Life and health systems: pharmaceutical innovation, digital health, ageing research, clinical partnership with the Model 4 hospital

- Energy, maritime, and ICT: offshore renewables, smart grid technology, maritime systems, cybersecurity, AI and data science

A university that combines disciplinary excellence with deep engagement in its region's economic, social, and strategic development is the model that has driven transformation in peer cities from Groningen to Limerick. The scale of research ambition will be determined by SETU in line with its academic strategy. What this strategy identifies is the regional demand and the economic opportunity that justifies sustained investment.

### Enterprise Integration and Talent Pipelines

The relationship between university and enterprise is central to the knowledge economy:

- Work-integrated learning and cooperative education embedded across programmes
- Industry-sponsored projects connecting students to real challenges
- Entrepreneurship pathways and incubation support
- Continuing professional development for the regional workforce
- A target of 75%+ graduate retention in the South East, up from approximately 40% today

### Investment Required

Growing SETU's Waterford campus to the scale envisaged will require sustained capital investment over several decades, in academic buildings, research infrastructure, student accommodation, and supporting services. The exact phasing and quantum will be determined through SETU's own planning processes and HEA capital allocation, but the order of magnitude is likely in the range of €3–5 billion over fifty years, drawn from HEA capital grants, the *National Development Plan*, EU structural funds, private philanthropy, and SETU's own resources.

### Economic Return:

- **Direct economic impact by 2050:** €500m+ annual (salaries, procurement, student spending), catalytic impacts of €2.1bn+ across the region (currently ~€1bn)
- **Research commercialisation:** €100m+ annual by 2050
- **Productivity uplift:** the South East's regional GDP currently sits at approximately €20 billion. In a convergence scenario, reaching population-proportionate output would bring regional GDP to approximately €45bn+, more than doubling the regional economy. University expansion is a primary driver of this convergence, as demonstrated by the trajectory of Limerick, Cork, and Galway
- **Talent reconnection:** normalising graduate retention from the current 37% to the 75% seen in peer regions would add approximately 7,000 knowledge workers per degree cycle, with cumulative economic impacts over fifty years measured in billions of additional regional GDP

## 5.2 Engine Two: Port-to-Great Island Tech Corridor

### Vision

The South East coast becomes Ireland's green industrial and digital powerhouse, integrating offshore wind, the Greenlink Interconnector, data infrastructure, and advanced manufacturing into a 15km corridor from Belview Port to Great Island. This corridor delivers 18,000 high-value jobs and positions Waterford as Europe's leading net-zero port city.

**Port of Waterford.** AI-modified architectural concept visualisation for design ideation, based on original drone photography and digitally composited.







## The Geographic Spine

1

### Zone 1: Belview Deep-Water Port

- Container and ro-ro operations
- Offshore wind installation and maintenance base
- Green hydrogen and ammonia import/export facility
- Shore power for vessels (eliminate diesel emissions)
- Electrified rail freight connection
- Circular logistics hub (waste-to-resource flows)

2

### Zone 2: Port Access and Green Logistics Park

- Eco-industrial estate with district energy
- Cold storage and data centres (using waste heat/renewable power)
- Advanced manufacturing (high precision, low carbon)
- Customs and freight forwarding cluster
- Sustainable transport interchange (rail-road-sea)

3

### Zone 3: Greenlink Interconnector Landing and Energy Hub (Great Island)

- 500MW interconnector to Wales/European grid
- Grid reinforcement and storage infrastructure
- Green hydrogen production (using surplus offshore wind)
- Battery energy storage systems
- Control centre for regional energy management

4

### Zone 4: Offshore Wind Interface and Marine Services (Dunmore East & Waterford Estuary)

The South Coast Designated Maritime Area Plan (SC-DMAP), approved by the Oireachtas in October 2024, provides the spatial planning framework for offshore wind development off the south coast. The South East Wind Energy Partnership, coordinated through ISEDO, brings together public agencies, SETU, and industry to position the region at the centre of this opportunity.

Key elements: operations and maintenance base for offshore wind farms; vessel berthing and marine engineering; blade repair and component storage; training centre for offshore technicians (building on SETU's existing cybersecurity and maritime training partnerships); research and innovation facilities; enhanced harbour and estuary services at Dunmore East and along the Waterford Estuary.

5

### Zone 5: Advanced ICT and Data Cluster

- Data centres powered by offshore wind
- AI and machine learning companies
- Software development, cybersecurity and ICT services
- Digital twin and simulation services

# The Offshore Wind Opportunity

- Resource Potential: South East coast has world-class wind resource (average speeds 9-10 m/s)
- Seabed depth and proximity to shore enable both fixed and floating turbines
- Closest to UK and European markets via Greenlink

## Development Pathway:

1

### Phase 1 (2025–2035): First Generation (1,000 MW)

- 2-3 offshore wind farms under development
- Grid connection via Great Island
- Port infrastructure for installation vessels
- Operations bases established
- Jobs: 2,500 construction, 400 permanent operations

2

### Phase 2 (2035–2050): Scale-Up (3,000 MW total)

- Additional wind farms in deeper water
- Floating turbine technology deployment
- Green hydrogen production from surplus power
- Regional supply chain development
- Jobs: +1,500 operations, +3,000 supply chain

3

### Phase 3 (2050–2075): Maturity and Repowering (5,000 MW total)

- First-generation farms repowered with larger turbines
- Hybrid wind-wave-tidal systems
- Export of clean energy and hydrogen
- Established as European offshore energy hub
- Jobs: +2,000 high-skill technical roles

## Economic Impact:

- Capital investment: €12–15bn over 50 years
- Annual energy export value: €800m–1.2bn by 2050
- Energy cost savings: local industry benefits from abundant clean power
- Emissions reduction: 2 million tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>/year avoided

## The Green Hydrogen Economy

Offshore wind will frequently generate more power than regional demand. This surplus can produce green hydrogen for maritime fuel, heavy transport, industrial feedstock, and export to European markets.

### Waterford Green Hydrogen Hub

- 100MW electrolyser capacity by 2040 (expandable to 500MW)
- Hydrogen storage and compression
- Refuelling stations for port vehicles and regional transport
- Pipeline connection to industrial users
- Jobs: 300 operations, 600 supply chain
- Investment: €400–600m (mix of private and EU Innovation Fund)

## Advanced Manufacturing and ICT

### Life Sciences Manufacturing Expansion (Cork Road IDA Park)

- Build on existing pharma/medtech presence
- Add advanced therapies (cell/gene therapy manufacturing)
- Precision engineering for medical devices
- Clean-room facilities powered by renewable energy
- Jobs: +4,000 by 2050

### Clean Tech Manufacturing

- Offshore wind component manufacturing (towers, foundations)
- Electric vehicle and battery components
- Energy storage systems
- Circular materials processing
- Jobs: +2,500 by 2050

### Data and ICT Services

- Data centres powered by offshore wind (low-cost, zero-carbon)
- AI and machine learning services
- Cybersecurity for critical energy and port infrastructure
- Software development (global remote work, local headquarters)
- Jobs: +3,500 by 2050

# Net-Zero Port Transition

## Target:

Belview becomes Ireland’s first net-zero port by 2045

- 1

**2025–2030: Foundation** (-40% emissions)

  - Shore power for all berths
  - Electrify port equipment
  - LED lighting and building energy efficiency
  - Solar panels on warehouses and terminals
- 2

**2030–2040: Transformation** (-75% emissions)

  - Green hydrogen refueling for port vehicles and visiting ships
  - Electrified rail freight connection to national network
  - Circular waste management (zero to landfill)
  - Blue-green infrastructure
- 3

**2040–2045: Net Zero** (-100% emissions)

  - All remaining emissions offset through verified carbon removal
  - Port becomes net exporter of clean energy
  - Nature-based solutions restore coastal ecosystems

## Investment Required: Port-Tech Corridor

| Phase     | Total Investment | Key Components                                                    |
|-----------|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2026–2035 | €4–5bn           | Offshore wind Phase 1, port upgrades, Greenlink, initial hydrogen |
| 2035–2050 | €8–10bn          | Offshore wind Phase 2, manufacturing clusters, ICT expansion      |
| 2050–2075 | €6–8bn           | Offshore wind Phase 3, circular infrastructure, consolidation     |
| TOTAL     | €18–23bn         | Full corridor transformation                                      |

## Funding Sources:

- Private sector (offshore wind, data centres, manufacturing): 60–65%
- EU grants (Green Deal, Innovation Fund, TEN-T): 20–25%
- National Development Plan: 10–15%
- Port revenue reinvestment: 5%

## Economic Return:

- 18,000 high-value jobs (average wages 25% above regional median)
- €4–6bn annual economic output by 2050
- €1–1.5bn annual exports (energy, manufactured goods, services)
- Closes 25% of regional productivity gap alone



## 5.3 Engine Three: Regional Service Economy

### Vision

The 45-minute regional economy creates 12,000 jobs in healthcare, education, culture, tourism, professional services, and public administration, distributed across the South East to ensure balanced prosperity.

#### Healthcare and Social Care (8,000 gross new jobs)

- Model 4 University Hospital at Ardkeen: 3,500 jobs
- Model 3 Hospitals (Wexford, Kilkenny): 1,800 jobs
- Community care networks: 2,200 jobs (distributed regionally)
- Private healthcare and wellness: 500 jobs

#### Education and Childcare (2,000 gross new jobs beyond SETU staff)

- Primary and secondary schools in growth areas: 1,000 jobs
- Early years education in all 15-minute neighbourhoods: 800 jobs
- Adult and further education: 200 jobs

#### Culture, Tourism, Hospitality and Retail (7,000 gross new jobs)

- Cultural infrastructure and programming: 600 direct cultural jobs
- Tourism and visitor economy: 2,000 hospitality and tourism jobs
- European Capital of Culture 2035 legacy: 400 temporary, 200 permanent
- Target: 2.5 million annual visitors by 2075 (up from 800,000)

#### Public Administration and Professional Services (1,500 gross new jobs)

- SEAR and expanded local authority capacity: 300 jobs
- Professional services (legal, accounting, engineering, architecture): 800 jobs
- Public services and decentralisation opportunities: 400 jobs



**Dunmore East, Co. Waterford.** AI-modified architectural concept visualisation for design ideation, based on original drone photography and digitally composited.

## 5.4 Job Creation Summary and Sectoral Balance

| Sector                           | 2026–2035     | 2035–2050     | 2050–2075     | Total         |
|----------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| SETU and Research                | 2,000         | 2,500         | 500           | 5,000         |
| SETU Spin-Outs and Enterprise    | 3,000         | 4,000         | 3,000         | 10,000        |
| Port-Tech Corridor               | 5,000         | 8,000         | 5,000         | 18,000        |
| Healthcare                       | 2,500         | 3,500         | 2,000         | 8,000         |
| Education and Childcare          | 600           | 800           | 600           | 2,000         |
| Culture and Tourism              | 800           | 1,200         | 1,000         | 3,000         |
| Professional Services            | 400           | 600           | 500           | 1,500         |
| Retail and Local Services        | 1,200         | 1,900         | 900           | 4,000         |
| Construction                     | 2,500         | 4,000         | 2,500         | 9,000         |
| <b>TOTAL GROSS</b>               | <b>18,000</b> | <b>26,500</b> | <b>16,000</b> | <b>60,500</b> |
| Less Natural Turnover/Automation | –3,000        | –7,000        | –5,500        | –15,500       |
| <b>NET JOB CREATION</b>          | <b>15,000</b> | <b>19,500</b> | <b>10,500</b> | <b>45,000</b> |

### Geographic Distribution:

Waterford City: 25K (55%) • Metro Waterford: 10K (22.5%) • Wider South East: 10K (22.5%)

### The Opportunity:

Invest in a region where scale, talent, and productivity are aligning to deliver long-term, sustainable growth. With GVA per capita rising toward approximately €75,000, the South East becomes a competitive, innovation-led economy.





# Part Four

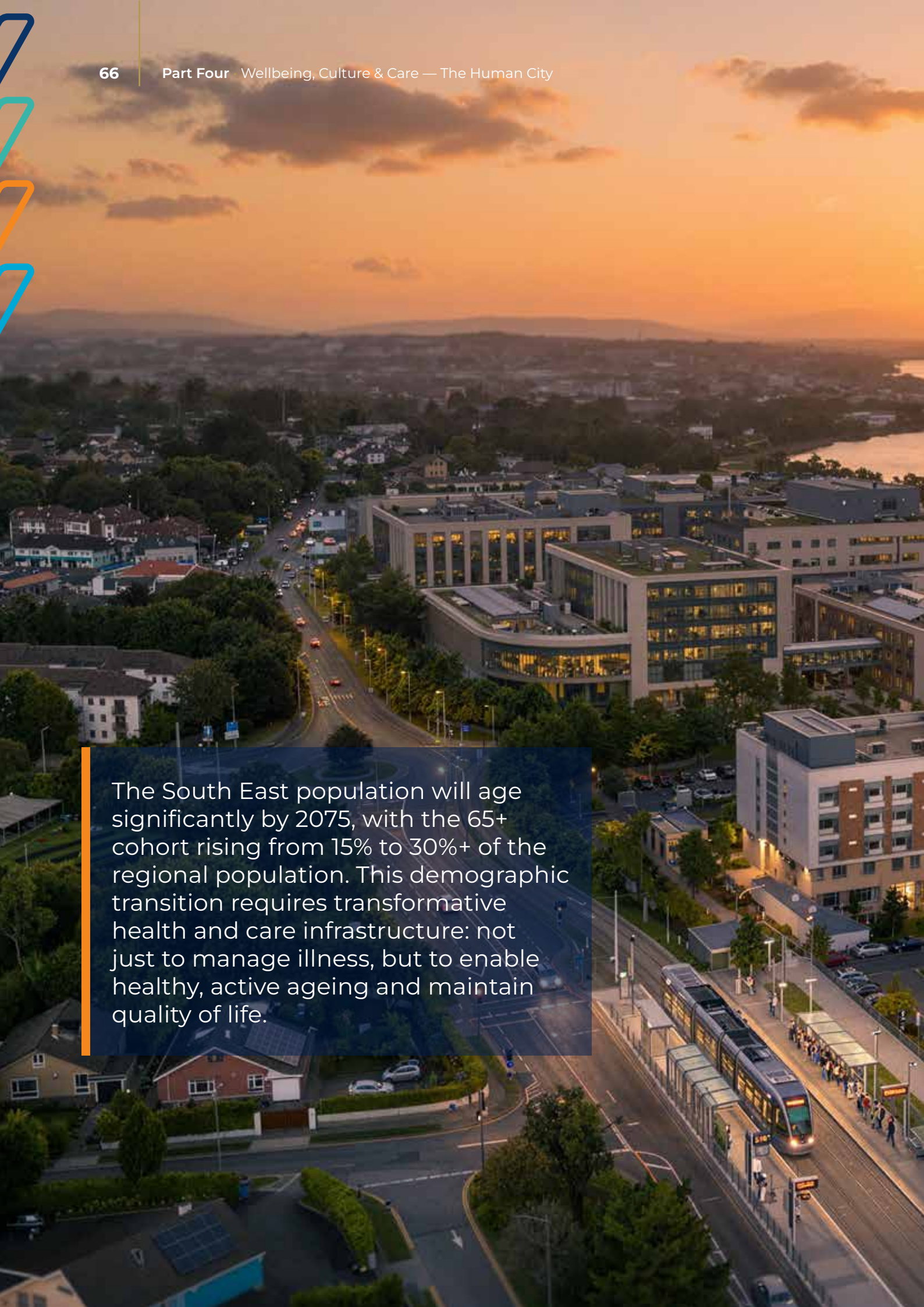
## Wellbeing, culture & care: The Human City

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Waterford's wellbeing plan is to nearly triple hospital capacity, invest in culture (including a 2035 Capital of Culture bid), and deliver 32,000 homes in metro Waterford to support a rapidly ageing region.





An aerial photograph of a city at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue. In the foreground, a tram is stopped at a station platform. The city below is a mix of residential houses and modern commercial buildings. A large, modern building with many windows is prominent in the middle ground. The city extends to the water in the distance.

The South East population will age significantly by 2075, with the 65+ cohort rising from 15% to 30%+ of the regional population. This demographic transition requires transformative health and care infrastructure: not just to manage illness, but to enable healthy, active ageing and maintain quality of life.



University Hospital Waterford. AI-modified architectural concept visualisation for design ideation, based on original drone photography and digitally composited.



# Chapter 6

## Health Infrastructure for an Ageing Region

### Health Governance: A Structural Anomaly

The 2024 restructuring of the HSE into six HSE health regions placed Waterford and the South East counties within HSE Dublin and South East, a region of 971,093 people stretching from parts of south Dublin through Wicklow to Waterford and South Tipperary. Previously, University Hospital Waterford sat within the South/South West Hospital Group (alongside Cork); it transferred to the Ireland East Hospital Group in February 2024 before being absorbed into the new structure.

This creates a structural anomaly. In HSE Dublin and North East, the Model 4 hospitals are in Dublin. In HSE Dublin and Midlands, the Model 4 hospitals are in Dublin. In HSE Dublin and South East, the tertiary centre for the South East population is University Hospital Waterford, the only non-Dublin Model 4 anchor in any of the three Dublin-paired regions. Over time, this configuration will create pressure: the South East's healthcare needs, particularly in an ageing population, will increasingly require integrated regional planning, dedicated regional health leadership, and concentration of specialist services at a scale that a Dublin-paired structure may not prioritise.

A region of 650,000 people, ageing faster than the national average, needs the capacity to plan and deliver its own integrated care pathway, from primary care through community services to acute hospital and specialist care, without service cliffs at regional boundaries. This is the health governance case for enhanced regional coordination, and it reinforces the broader argument for a body like SEAR.

The governance record compounds this structural inequity and is without precedent in the Irish acute hospital system. No other Model 4 hospital has been transferred between governance structures with the frequency or absence of due process applied to UHW. The *Higgins Report* reallocated UHW to the South/South West Hospital Group, a Cork-centred structure, without a commissioned impact assessment or regional consultation. UHW was subsequently transferred to Ireland East, again without analysis, before the current Regional Health Area structure was applied.

Three governance regimes in as many years; none designed around the South East's functional geography or accountable to its population. The consequences are not abstract: each transition has reset institutional relationships, disrupted capital planning timelines, and placed UHW's strategic interests in the hands of structures whose centre of gravity lies elsewhere.

**A region that campaigns for the ordinary:**

Standard services have had to be won here, through fundraising and public campaigning.

**Cardiac care:**

The only region without 24/7 emergency intervention. A 2016 review found a second catheterisation laboratory unwarranted. Consultants across the region rejected its findings, thousands marched in Waterford, and campaigners worked the issue for a further nine years. Cabinet approval for a 24/7 service came in 2025.

**Radiation oncology:**

Public capacity went to Dublin, Cork and Galway. Since 2005 a volunteer charity has driven South East patients to treatment.

**Palliative care:**

No specialist inpatient unit until 2023, thirty-five years after the Waterford Hospice Movement began fundraising for one.

**Mortuary:**

UHW's mortuary was assessed as unfit for purpose in 2004. A 2006 design was approved in 2013 and received planning permission in 2016. The new mortuary was approved only when internal documents describing conditions in the facility entered the public domain. It opened in 2021, seventeen years after the first assessment.

None of this is a reflection on the hospital. UHW does not set its own capital allocation, its service configuration or its staffing ceiling. Those decisions are taken above it and outside the region. In each of these four high-profile cases more than a decade passed between a need being formally documented and a service being delivered, often through fundraising and public protest. A region of 650,000 people should not have to run a campaign to obtain standard care.

## The Model 4 University Hospital (Ardkeen)

**Scale and Scope:**

UHW currently operates 386 acute beds against a central benchmark need of 799 beds for its 558,000-person catchment (1.43 beds per 1,000, the unweighted average of comparator NUTS 3 hospitals). This represents an existing structural deficit of 413 beds: a present-day equity failure, not a future planning problem. The four-phase delivery programme brings UHW to approximately 1,058 beds by 2075, approaching full parity with the Irish regional benchmark.

- Emergency Department: 24/7 with helipad for air ambulance and trauma services
- Specialist Services: cardiology, oncology, neurology, orthopaedics, complex surgery, ICU
- Maternity and Paediatrics: regional mother-and-baby services
- Mental Health: integrated acute psychiatric unit
- Research and Teaching: co-located with SETU
- Diagnostic Capacity: a second static MRI (immediate priority), three CT scanners by 2040, two cardiac catheterisation laboratories operational 24/7, and integrated radiotherapy (two linear accelerators) commissioned alongside the Phase 2 cancer centre

**Why Ardkeen:**

- Existing hospital site with room for expansion
- Eastern location balances access across South East
- Near Eastern Ring Road for regional connectivity
- Space for campus model (hospital, research, education, community care)



## Phasing:

1

### Phase 1 (2027–2032): Foundation – €600m

The immediate priority is the delivery of two HSE standard bed blocks (192 additional beds, in units of 96 single-occupancy beds each), bringing UHW to 578 acute beds and addressing the most urgent tranche of the structural deficit. Hospital management has identified three bed blocks (288 beds) as their current capital ask; this phase delivers two, with the third to follow in Phase 2. Also:

- New emergency department and critical care block
- Expanded surgical theatres
- Second static MRI scanner (most urgent diagnostic upgrade given 77,000+ annual ED attendances)
- Helipad and ambulance bay

2

### Phase 2 (2032–2038): Expansion – €500m

- One further bed block (+96 beds), completing the hospital management's three-block ask and bringing the total to 674 acute beds
- Specialist cancer centre with two integrated linear accelerators (radiotherapy)
- Two cardiac catheterisation laboratories at full 24/7 operation
- Maternity and children's hospital block
- Research institute (partnership with SETU)
- A residual gap of approximately 297 beds against the full-catchment central benchmark remains at Phase 2 completion; Phase 3 addresses this

3

### Phase 3 (2038–2055): Scale for Growth – €400m

- Two further bed blocks (+192 beds), responding to population growth toward 650,000 and accelerating demographic ageing; total reaches 866 beds
- Outpatient and day procedure centre
- Rehabilitation and long-term care wing
- Expanded teaching and simulation facilities
- This phase requires the Academic Medical Centre to have been initiated by 2030 to generate the specialist consultant pipeline needed for commissioning at scale (see *Section 5.3*)

4

### Phase 4 (2055–2075): Full Benchmark – €350m

- Two final bed blocks (+192 beds), bringing UHW to 1,058 acute beds, within 82 beds of the full-catchment central benchmark need of 1,140 beds at 2075, effectively parity given modelling uncertainty
- Additional surgical theatres (target 20 total) and expanded allied health capacity
- Age-adjusted demand by 2075 assumes approximately 30% of the catchment population will be in the 65+ cohort. Each percentage point of ageing adds approximately 15 to 18 beds of demand, independent of population growth.

**Total Investment (all four phases): €1.85bn**

## Regional Hospital Network Integration

The Model 4 does not work in isolation. It anchors a coordinated South East healthcare system:

- **Wexford General:** Enhanced for secondary care, coordinated oncology services
- **St Luke's Kilkenny:** Upgraded orthopaedics and elder care, coordinated cardiology
- **South Tipperary:** Enhanced for secondary care, coordinated oncology services

### Community and Primary Care Transformation

Hospital care is vital, and even greater impact can be achieved by strengthening care beyond hospital settings:

- Primary care centres in every town
- Community health hubs in Waterford neighbourhoods
- Expanded home care and ageing in place support
- Integrated mental health services
- Investment: €400–600m over 50 years

### Age-Friendly City Certification and Universal Design

Waterford commits to WHO Age-Friendly City standards across all urban planning, encompassing the built environment, transport, housing, and social participation.

**Investment: €150–200m in accessibility upgrades, retrofits, community facilities**

# Chapter 7

## Culture as economic and social infrastructure

Culture is core economic and social infrastructure: it attracts talent, supports wellbeing, and defines regional identity. Waterford's Viking heritage, creative industries, and the wider South East's cultural assets (including the National Opera House, VISUAL in Kilkenny, Cartoon Saloon, and Nemeton) are competitive advantages that must be leveraged strategically.

### Tourism Impact



# The Cultural Quarter and Viking Triangle

## Current Assets:

- Medieval walls and towers
- Viking museum and archaeological sites
- Waterford Treasures museums
- Theatre Royal
- Garter Lane Arts Centre

## Transformation Plan:

### Heritage Enhancement (€80–100m):

- Complete walkable city walls circuit with interpretation
- Viking experience centre (immersive, world-class attraction)
- Medieval Mile trail linking all heritage sites
- Digital augmented reality experiences

### Contemporary Arts Infrastructure (€60–80m):

- Expanded performance and exhibition spaces
- Purpose-built contemporary art gallery
- Music venue for 1,500–2,000 capacity
- Artist studios and maker spaces

### Public Realm and Animation (€30–40m):

- Pedestrianised historic core with high-quality public realm
- Year-round festivals and markets
- Street art and public sculpture programme

## European Capital of Culture 2035: The Organising Ambition

Waterford bids for *European Capital of Culture 2035* as a near-term organising goal that forces early cultural infrastructure investment, raises international profile, demonstrates the regiopolis model through South East-wide programming, and creates momentum and civic pride.

**Budget: €60–80m | Jobs: 400 temporary, 200 permanent legacy**

## Creative Industries and Cultural Employment

The South East has a growing creative sector spanning film, TV, and media production (including Cartoon Saloon in Kilkenny and Nemeton in Waterford), music, visual arts and craft, design, heritage, cultural tourism, and events management. SETU's programmes across these disciplines provide a growing talent pipeline. The opportunity is to coordinate and scale these regional strengths into a nationally significant creative cluster.

**Job Target: 3,000 by 2050**



# Chapter 8

## Housing, public realm and the 15-minute city

Housing Strategy: 32,000 Homes by 2075

### Overarching Principles:

1. Density without sprawl: prioritise infill and brownfield over greenfield
2. Mixed-income communities: every neighbourhood has social, affordable, market housing
3. Universal design: all new homes accessible and adaptable
4. Climate resilience: net-zero carbon, flood-resistant, energy-efficient
5. 15-minute neighbourhoods: locate housing near services and transport

#### Delivery by Location:

- City Centre: residential growth through upper-floor conversion and infill
- North Quays: 2,500 homes (80–120 units/hectare)
- Ferrybank: 5,500 homes (50–80 units/hectare)
- SETU Corridor: 4,000 homes (60–100 units/hectare)
- Ardkeen: 3,500 homes (45–70 units/hectare, age-friendly)
- Lisduggan–Ballybeg–Carrickphierish: 6,000 homes (40–60 units/hectare)
- Bilberry–Gracedieu: 4,500 homes (60–90 units/hectare)
- Other Infill and Brownfield: 6,000 homes

#### Affordable and Social Housing Delivery Mechanisms:

1. Public land activation
2. Part V compliance
3. Density bonus incentives
4. Direct build programmes
5. Cost rental expansion (target: 4,000 cost rental units by 2050)
6. Brownfield remediation fund

#### Affordability Target:

- Purchase: 3.5x median household income
- Rent: max 30% of gross household income
- Investment Required: €6–8bn over 50 years

#### Priority Public Realm Projects:

- Quayside Transformation (2026–2040): €80m, continuous waterfront promenade
- City Centre Enhancement (2026–2035): €40m, pedestrian priority, high-quality public realm
- Greenway Network Completion (2026–2050): €100m, 200km of off-road walking/cycling paths connecting Waterford to regional destinations

#### Neighbourhood Parks and Blue-Green Infrastructure

- Target: every resident within 400m (5-minute walk) of quality green space.
- Investment: €150–200m in parks, greenways, and blue-green infrastructure









# Part Five

## Climate Leadership and Circular Systems

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Waterford's climate plan sets a net-zero-by-2045 target, five years ahead of Ireland's national goal, through phased transport, building, and energy decarbonisation, offshore wind expansion, circular economy measures, and nature-based solutions.



# Chapter 9

## Net-Zero by 2045: Waterford as Ireland's climate leader

Ireland's national target is net-zero by 2050. Waterford commits to net-zero by 2045, positioning as Ireland's first climate-neutral port city and demonstrating that regional cities can lead, not follow.

### Current Emissions Profile (Indicative Baseline)

The following is an indicative sectoral breakdown for the Waterford metropolitan area, estimated from EPA national emissions inventory data, SEAI sectoral analysis, and CSO population proportions. A precise local emissions inventory would be a priority workstream for a net-zero transition plan.

| Sector                | Annual Emissions (tonnes CO <sub>2</sub> e) | Share       |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Transport             | 580,000                                     | 42%         |
| Residential Heating   | 320,000                                     | 23%         |
| Industry and Commerce | 280,000                                     | 20%         |
| Agriculture           | 140,000                                     | 10%         |
| Waste                 | 60,000                                      | 4%          |
| Other                 | 20,000                                      | 1%          |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>1,400,000</b>                            | <b>100%</b> |

### Emissions Reduction Pathway to 2045

- **Phase 1 (2026–2030):** -25% through renewable generation, retrofits, bus electrification, active travel
- **Phase 2 (2030–2040):** -60% through offshore wind at scale, deep retrofits, EV uptake, rail electrification
- **Phase 3 (2040–2045):** -95% through full renewable electricity, 90% building retrofit, green hydrogen
- **Phase 4 (2045):** Net-zero through carbon removal and nature-based solutions

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## Transport Decarbonisation

- Mode shift targets: private car from 68% to 30% by 2075; public transport from 8% to 40%
- Investment: €2–3bn over 20 years
- Emissions impact: transport emissions reduced 75% by 2045

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## Building Decarbonisation

- All social housing retrofitted to BER B2+ by 2035
- 90% of all housing retrofitted by 2045
- All new homes net-zero energy by 2030
- Investment: €4–5bn over 25 years
- Emissions impact: residential heating reduced 85% by 2045

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## Renewable Energy Generation

Target: 100% renewable electricity by 2040, surplus for export and hydrogen production.

- Offshore wind: 5,000 MW capacity by 2075
- Onshore wind: 200 MW by 2040
- Solar PV: 400 MW by 2040
- Biomass and biogas: 100 MW by 2040

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## District Heating and Circular Energy Systems

- Networks planned for North Quays, Cork Road industrial area, and city centre, using waste heat from data centres and industry.
- Investment: €200–300m

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## Circular Economy

- Vision: Waterford becomes Ireland's first circular economy city. Key interventions in materials recovery (70% recycling by 2035, zero landfill by 2040), industrial symbiosis in the Port-Tech Corridor, repair and reuse infrastructure, circular construction, and sustainable food systems.
- Investment: €100–150m

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## Nature-Based Solutions

- 40% tree canopy cover target (up from 15%), 10,000 trees by 2035
- 500 hectares of wetland restoration
- Coastal habitat protection
- Carbon sequestration: 15,000–20,000 tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>/year by 2045
- Investment: €80–120m

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## Climate Adaptation and Resilience

- Flood management, urban cooling, water security, and resilient infrastructure design standards.
- Investment: €300–400m over 50 years





# Building Momentum: 2026–2028

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Waterford's 2026–2028 plan sets early milestones: advancing North Quays and SETU expansion, starting the Eastern Ring Bridge, securing hospital funding, scaling home retrofits, and establishing a regional coordination body to build momentum for further investment.





### Now (2026):

- North Quays Phase 2 infrastructure advancing
- SETU expansion planning and HEA funding discussions underway
- BusConnects Waterford network redesign implementation beginning
- Lobbying and advocacy for Ireland's allocation under the European Capital of Culture framework
- Building retrofit programme: target 1,000-2,000 homes per year, contributing to the national Climate Action Plan target of 500,000 retrofits by 2030. Retrofit is both a climate measure and an economic stimulus—each home retrofit generates local employment in construction, insulation, heat pump installation, and electrical work
- Regional coordination capacity-building: advancing the SEAR development pathway



### 2027:

- Eastern Ring Bridge design competition and route selection
- Model 4 Hospital planning approval and funding commitment secured
- Rail frequency increase to hourly Dublin–Waterford service
- First phase quayside public realm transformation complete
- 1,500 affordable homes delivered (cumulative)
- Retrofit programme scaled to 2,000+ homes per year



### 2028:

- North Quays Phase 2/3 substantially complete
- SEAR or equivalent regional coordination body established
- BRT/BusConnects spine routes operational
- SETU Phase 1 campus expansion underway
- Wexford–Waterford rail reinstatement: strategic assessment complete
- Retrofit programme contributing measurably to regional emissions reduction









# What Ireland Gains

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The South East's success is a national gain, adding an estimated €25 billion to the economy while advancing climate, economic, and governance goals—a generational choice to build a connected, thriving region.



## The South East's success is Ireland's success:

### 1. Balanced Regional Development and National Economic Contribution

Closing the productivity gap adds approximately €25 billion to the national economy over the next decade, bringing South East GDP from ~€20bn toward its population-proportionate share of ~€45bn+. This generates substantial additional tax revenue for the exchequer, reduces transfer dependency, and contributes to the balanced growth that *Project Ireland 2040* envisions. It reduces pressure on Dublin and the GDA, demonstrates that regional cities can thrive, and offers a model potentially replicable in other regions.

### 2. Climate Leadership

- First net-zero port city showing pathway for others. Offshore wind contributing to national renewable targets
- Green skills and industries creating competitive advantage

### 3. Economic Resilience

- Diversified geography of growth
- New high-value sectors (clean energy, life sciences, digital)
- Connection to European markets via port and interconnector

### 4. Democratic Innovation

- SEAR model for effective regional governance
- Citizen participation mechanisms scalable nationally
- Demonstrates that regions can lead, not just follow

### 5. Social Cohesion

- Reduces regional inequality
- Retains families and communities in place
- Integrates new migrants into thriving regional cities
- Builds national solidarity through shared prosperity







# Conclusion

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Waterford's story is 1,100 years old. This strategy shapes the next fifty years and beyond. It is ambitious because the opportunities are profound. It is grounded in evidence because vague aspirations change nothing. It is collaborative because no city succeeds alone.

**The South East 2075 is not a prediction. It is a choice.**

- A choice to build a city of 150,000 that serves a region of 650,000.
- A choice to become Ireland's first regiopolis: a city in service, not dominance.
- A choice to lead on climate, education, wellbeing, and regional collaboration.
- A choice to stay, return, and thrive rather than leave and lament.

**This is the work of generations:**

- Parents choosing to raise families here
- Young people building careers here
- Elders ageing with dignity here
- Newcomers finding welcome here
- Businesses investing here
- Leaders governing for here

**The foundations are strong:**

- 1,100 years of resilience and reinvention
- Strategic location at the Atlantic edge
- World-class port and energy infrastructure
- A growing university and talent base
- Civic pride and community strength
- Natural beauty and heritage

**The opportunities are real:**

- Offshore wind and clean energy
- European funding and policy support
- National commitment to regional balance
- Technological change enabling remote work
- Demographic dividend if talent retained
- Quality of life as competitive advantage

**Success requires patience and persistence.**

Infrastructure takes decades. Culture changes slowly. Trees grow at their own pace. But if we plant them now, our grandchildren's generation will live in their shade. Waterford has always been a city that makes things.

Now, it chooses to make its own future.

**The work begins today. The benefits compound for generations.**







# **The South East 2075**

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**Where the South East thrives together**

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