



THE FRAMEWORK OF REGIONAL PRIORITIES

for the Central Border
Region of Ireland /
Northern Ireland,
2021–2027

Synopsis



Disclaimer

The FRP is a non-statutory document. As such it respects both the plans of the European Union and the two Governments of Ireland and Northern Ireland and the plans, policies and priorities of the local authorities and other key stakeholders in the Central Border Region. The FRP is intended to complement those plans and strategies and does not in any way supersede or dilute their authority or relevance. Nothing in this Framework of Regional Priorities will interfere with the responsibility of individual local authorities and other area stakeholders to plan and implement strategies for their own areas of responsibility, or their ability to apply for EU and national funds in their own right. Instead, it proposes to act as a framework for regional cross-border cooperation, within the context of key national, regional, and local strategies and policies.



Foreword

The border region on the island of Ireland is meeting some of its greatest challenges for a generation: the COVID-19 pandemic, climate disruption, and the exit of the UK from the European Union.

Brexit has given rise to a developing conversation across the border region about how this might impact on future joint working. Amid current uncertainties and political differences, there remains a widely held commitment across local authorities, border communities and other community/voluntary groups within our region to continue working together, to preserve the gains already achieved and to realise potential benefits for future generations.

Cross-border cooperation takes on a new symbolic and practical significance in this new geo-political environment. It is important therefore to think in terms of mutual benefit and collaboration, rather than competition and divergence. Stakeholders in the Central Border Region can do this by building on existing relationships, and helping realise the ambitions which are set out within this Framework document for the period 2021–2027.

This Framework presents a strategic response that is both unique and tailored to the assets and characteristics of this particular region. In working together to advance the strategic priorities, we can develop the Central Border Region as a *thriving, resilient, vibrant and diversified economy*. This can be achieved through delivering on our key regional priorities; in utilising our regional strengths and assets, in supporting economic development, in enhancing citizens' quality of life, in making greater use of connections and remote working, and in developing our tourism offering. In doing so we can deliver benefits for all areas within the region: Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon; Cavan; Donegal; Fermanagh and Omagh; Leitrim; Mid Ulster; Monaghan; and Sligo.

Finally, we wish to thank the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) for all their guidance and work on the project. We also wish to recognise all those who have inputted, including from our eight member Councils, their contributions have been very much appreciated. It is very important to also acknowledge the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Reconciliation Fund which has provided assistance in supporting the 'Border Navigator' and 'Border Animator' projects, and which have enabled the development of this Framework.

February 2021



Councillor Eamon Mc Neill,
ICBAN Chair,
2020–2021



Councillor Pat Treanor,
ICBAN Chair,
2019–2020

Background

This *Framework of Regional Priorities for the Central Border Region of Ireland / Northern Ireland, 2021/2027* (FRP) is a strategic initiative for the advancement of our regional economy. This is motivated by, and seeks to give effect to, ICBAN's Vision of a region *with a thriving, resilient, vibrant and diversified economy*, that will be strengthened and sustained through a focus on:

- Utilising our environmental assets respectfully and responsibly;
- Encouraging investment in value-added industries and promoting innovation;
- Enhancing quality of life;
- Embracing new technologies and enhancing remote working; and
- Promoting our strengths in tourism.

This document has been driven by the cross-border partnership, the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) Ltd., working on behalf of its eight member Councils in the area known as the Central Border Region.



Member local authority areas are shown in the adjacent map and are: Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon; Cavan; Donegal; Fermanagh and Omagh; Leitrim; Mid Ulster; Monaghan; and Sligo.

This FRP takes its strategic frame of reference from the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs). This set of complementary economic, socio-cultural and environmental objectives provides an overarching supranational framework for the attainment of sustainable development, and the advancement of greater equality, including spatial equalities. The FRP has also been mapped against the key statutory policies, strategies and planning frameworks, which are impacting on the area.

The Context

The FRP, complements, adds value to and refreshes the Regional Strategic Framework published by ICBAN in 2013. Both strategic initiatives are:

- Regional;
- Cross-border; and
- Based on non-statutory, multi-stakeholder and collaborative approaches.

In advancing the FRP, ICBAN has taken a regional approach, and the actions presented herein are regional in scale and effect; they apply across all eight local authority areas and in both jurisdictions. The deliverables articulated in this document relate primarily to the remit of local government and the added value that can be derived through inter-local authority collaboration. In addition, they relate to the remits and objectives of several statutory bodies, thus accentuating the importance of partnership between local government and other agencies. Cross-border and stakeholder collaborations are integral to sustaining the delivery of this FRP.

Responding to the Challenges of our Time

ICBAN has developed this initiative to respond to three key challenges of these times, impacting on our border region:

1. The challenges, potential opportunities and obligations associated with the **COVID-19 pandemic**, which are likely to impact for many years;
2. The consequences of **Brexit** and its impact on the economy and trading patterns, stability, and cross-border cooperation, including the work of local government; and
3. The need to mitigate the threats of **climate change**, and to therefore embrace and promote sustainable development and care for the environment.

In response, the organisation advances this Framework to provide a steer to the region in terms of dealing with current realities, anticipating future strains and ensuring effective local and regional responses.

The Key Ambitions and Aims

The key ambitions of the Framework of Regional Priorities reflect these current and evolving challenges and opportunities at local, regional, national and international levels.

- To develop as a sustainable region, characterised by increased employment, improved economic activity, social progress and ecological sustainability;
- To redress economic and social inequalities between the Central Border Region and other areas of Ireland and Northern Ireland and the inequalities which persist within the region itself;
- To influence and work with the Governments of Ireland and Northern Ireland on their investment priorities for the region, by providing an evidence base to justify investments; and
- To identify opportunities for local authorities and other stakeholders to work together to realise opportunities and to respond to the challenges facing the region.



Realising the Area's Potential

The under-exploited potential of this region has the capacity to contribute more to all-island sustainable growth. There is a real opportunity to redress the structural weaknesses, which have delimited economic growth, and thereby enable the region to realise its potential to become a strategic space for economic growth for both jurisdictions.

This Framework of Regional Priorities highlights opportunities – economic, socio-cultural, and environmental – to maximise the potential of its latent asset-base for the benefit of its citizens / communities and the all-island economy.

Economic: The local authorities of the Central Border Region have been vocal and proactive in championing digital connectivity (fibre broadband and mobile) and opportunities to develop knowledge / human capital, which will enable businesses, young people and communities to seize advantages arising from the fourth industrial revolution and the move towards more connected / remote-working.

Environmental: This environmentally rich and largely unspoilt eco-region is ideally positioned to deliver on global, regional and local needs and imperatives relating to climate change and sustainable management and enhancement of the natural, built and cultural landscapes. The region needs to strive for a just transition to a post-carbon scenario.

Socio-Cultural: The Central Border Region has a strong cultural identity – expressed in various traditional and contemporary forms. Communities have a sense of place, as evidenced by an impressive range of creative output and artistic endeavour. Civil society organisations are strong and have clear capacity to play a greater role in place-making and collaborative planning. Like other regions, the Central Border area is becoming increasingly diverse, and harnessing the talents and abilities of newcomers will stand the region in good stead.

To realise this, the region will require central governments, north and south, working with and supporting the local authorities and their partner stakeholders.

Promoting and Respecting our Territorial Assets

To help deliver on these opportunities we will draw on our own territorial assets, which are many and diverse:

- It is an area of **high-quality food and non-food production**;
- Through stewardship and sympathetic development of its **natural resources and landscape**, the Central Border Region is playing a key role in:
 - promoting **sustainable development**,
 - nurturing **well-being**,
 - enabling the transition to a **green economy** and mitigating the effects of climate change; and
- The region provides opportunities to promote **alternatives to fossil fuels** and to develop a circular economy.

The **growth in connected / remote working**, largely driven by COVID-19 and associated public health responses, coupled with the emerging demand / need for basic services, have the potential to rejuvenate rural towns and villages. These factors are also driving further demand for green spaces and investments in community amenities and **green infrastructure**.

The Five Interlocking Strategic Pillars

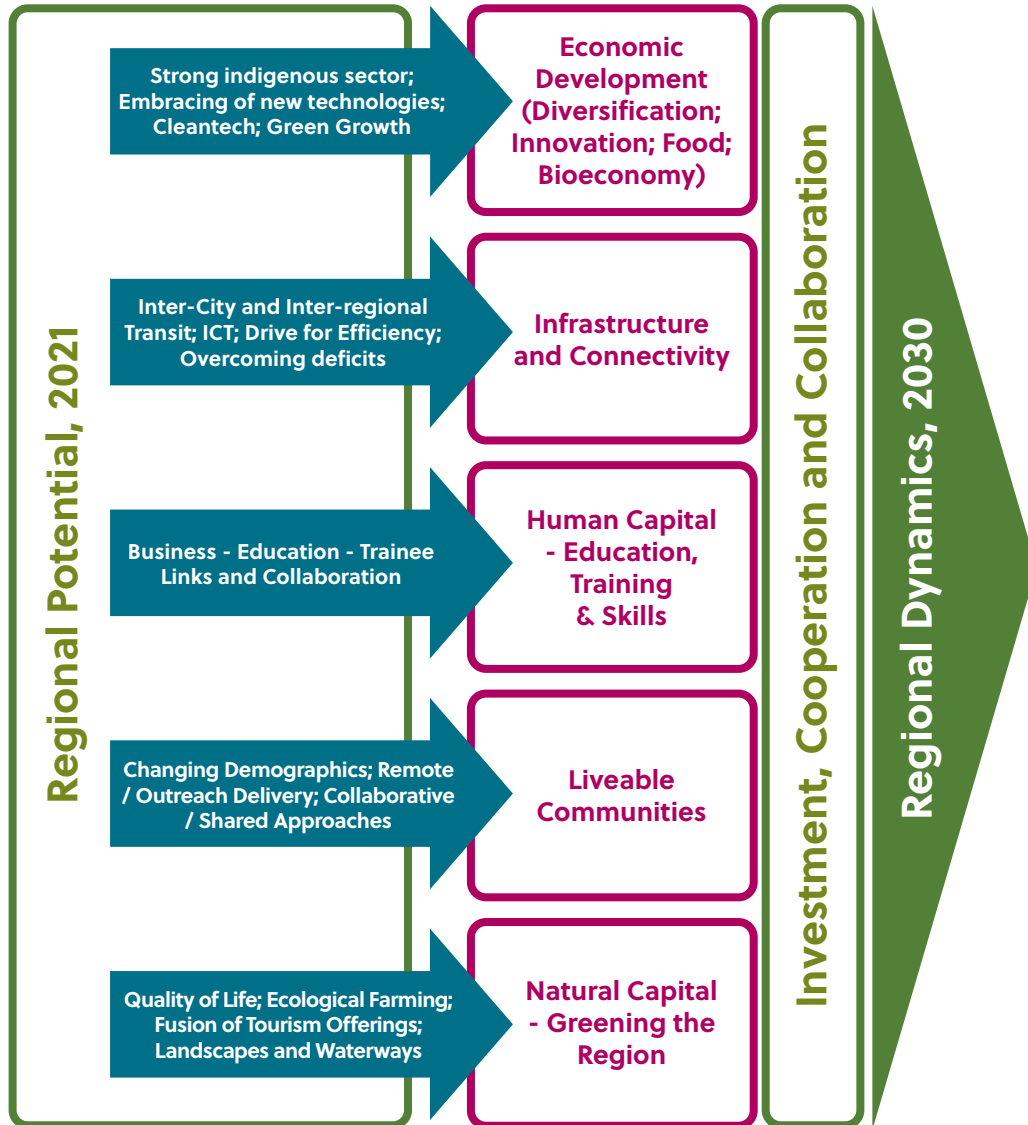
The strategic actions advanced here and the approach underpinning this FRP are rooted in place-making. Thus, they are based on local and regional assets, and they relate specifically to needs, priorities and potential within the Central Border Region. In practice, this implies capitalising on the region's rural identity and significant stock of rural assets, while promoting urban-rural partnerships.

The region is also characterised by significant cross-border movements and connectivity - physical, economic, cultural and social, and investment in sustaining connectivity is therefore of strategic regional importance. The strategic priorities and deliverables are presented here under five interlocking and complementary pillars namely:

- Economic development;
- Infrastructure and connectivity;
- Human Capital – Education, Training and Skills;
- Liveable communities; and
- Natural Capital – Greening the Region.

Each of these pillars / themes is related to a particular type of asset / set of assets in the region, as shown in the following figure.

Regional Assets underpinning the Thematic Foci and Strategic Pillars



Framework of Regional Priorities

Our Regional Priorities

The consultation process with member Councils and other stakeholders identified a number of inter-connected and mutually re-enforcing strategic regional priorities.

- **Exploiting new opportunities based on regional strengths and assets** (including latent assets), in the bioeconomy, food production and sustainable landscape management;
- **Supporting economic development** through providing adequate industrial spaces, nurturing inter-firm collaboration and innovation, and strengthening linkages with education / training providers;
- **Enhancing citizens' quality of life**, through improved and more innovative modes of service delivery, life-long progression opportunities, enhanced community amenities and independent living environments;
- **Enabling greater connected/remote working**, through enhancing infrastructure and developing a network of digital hubs (in town centres), as part of the rejuvenation of towns and villages; and
- **Developing the region's tourism offering and quality of life infrastructure** through connected greenway and blueway networks (including inter-regional) – linked to complementary services and underpinned by increased active travel and improved regional connectivity.

These priorities are cross-cutting and their realisation will require inter-sectoral collaboration. By the same token, their impacts will be manifest across the dimensions of sustainable development – economic, socio-cultural and environmental.

The Emergent Catalyst Projects

The cross-border partnership emphasises the merits of creating a shortlist of strategic regional catalyst projects, that can complement and promote the aforementioned five thematic areas.

The importance of innovation, inter-project complementarity and focusing on the regional dimension, have all been considered in the development of these catalysts.

The Emergent Catalyst projects are:



Catalyst 1: Farm to Fork – strengthening the region’s agriculture sector, food processing industry, catering firms and hospitality providers to collaboratively avail of new and emerging opportunities and sectoral trends;



Catalyst 2: Greenways and Blueways – growing and connecting these vital pieces of infrastructure – to promote tourism and active travel;



Catalyst 3: River Catchments Sustainability – working with all stakeholders across river catchments – from source to sea, to enhance water quality and to drive cross-sectoral projects that will strengthen the region’s economic base;



Catalyst 4: A Thriving Regional Bioeconomy – to build on Councils’ work in this field through advancing research and development (R&D), upping regional skills capacity and enabling greater industrial and spatial collaboration; and



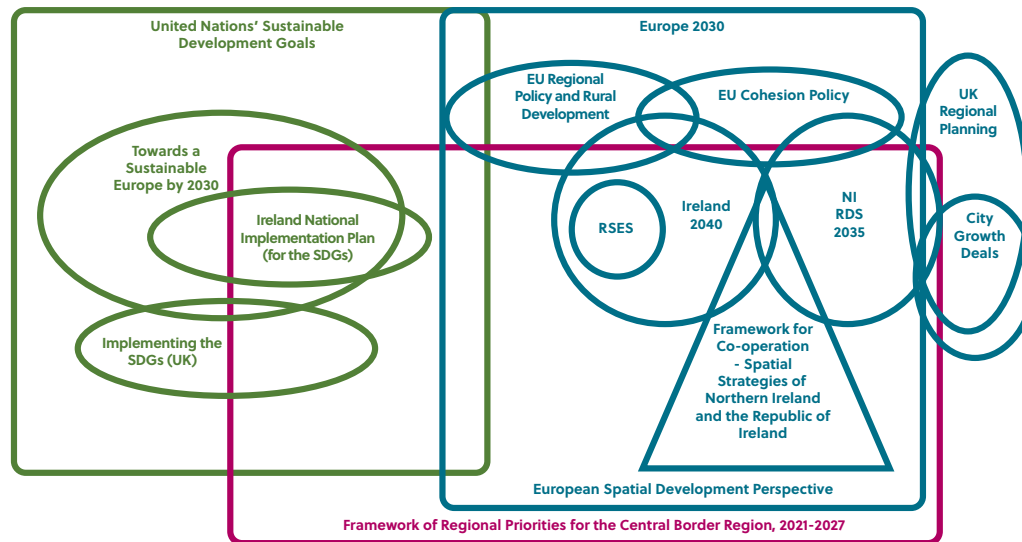
Catalyst 5: International Mountain Biking Destination – to develop a connected / networked set of mountain-biking trails – capitalising on the region’s topography and adding value to the existing suite of visitor attractions, while providing local communities with new amenities.

Moving Towards Implementation

ICBAN has a core leadership and facilitation role to play in working with a range of key stakeholders, including member local authorities, in unleashing the potential of these territorial assets, not least in the context of the key challenges of this time: namely, Brexit, climate change and COVID-19. It is incumbent on ICBAN to:

- Bring its member local authorities together to address these challenges and harness these assets;
- Provide leadership and continue its advocacy for the sustainable growth and development of the Central Border Region; and
- Act as the intermediary for the region, working with the governments - not least in progressing the identified catalyst projects.

Nested Arrangements – Environmental and Planning Policy Frameworks



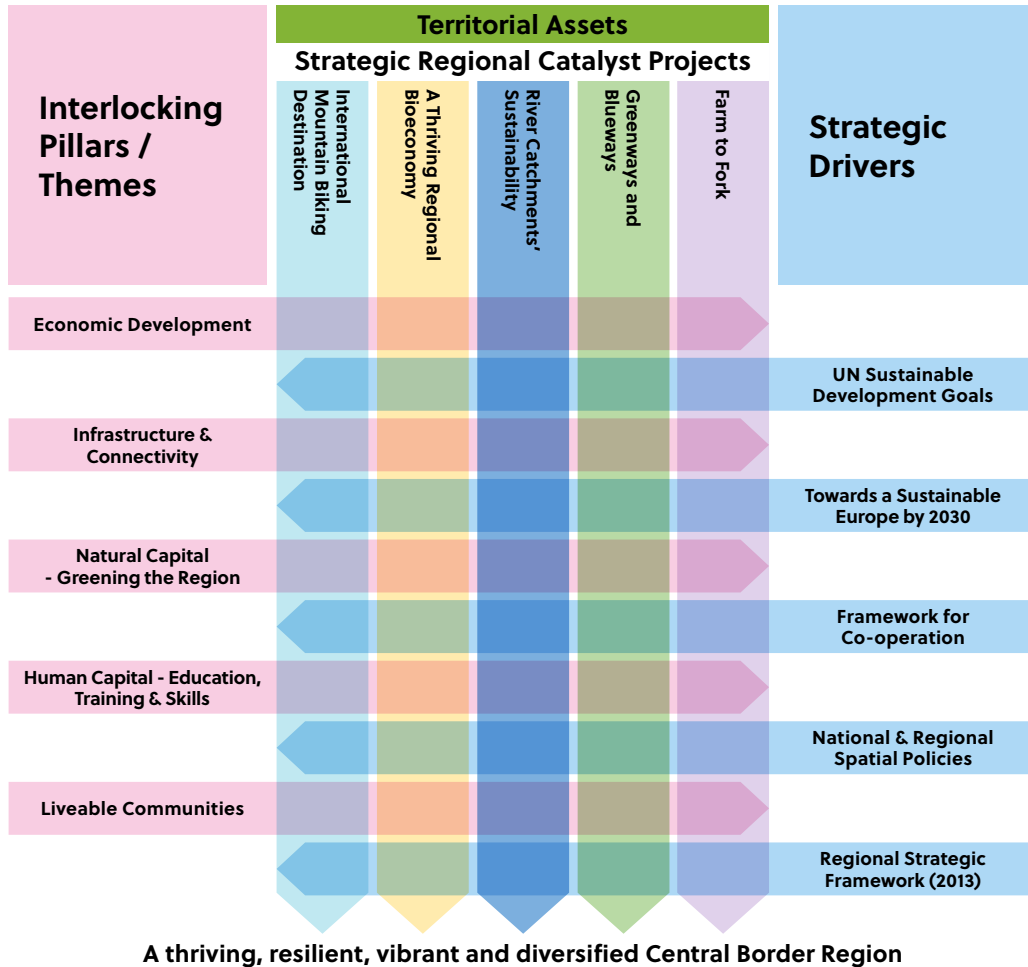
The Framework will help deliver on the key international, national, regional and local policies and strategies, which are impacting on the area, as shown in the diagram.

As a result of obtaining the financial and other resources, including government support, necessary to turn the Vision into a reality, the Central Border Region will become more prosperous and offer a better future to its citizens / communities.

The Framework at a Glance: Strategic Drivers and Processes

This diagram captures all the component elements of the Framework, and how these are interlinked to help deliver on the Vision.

Framework of Regional Priorities

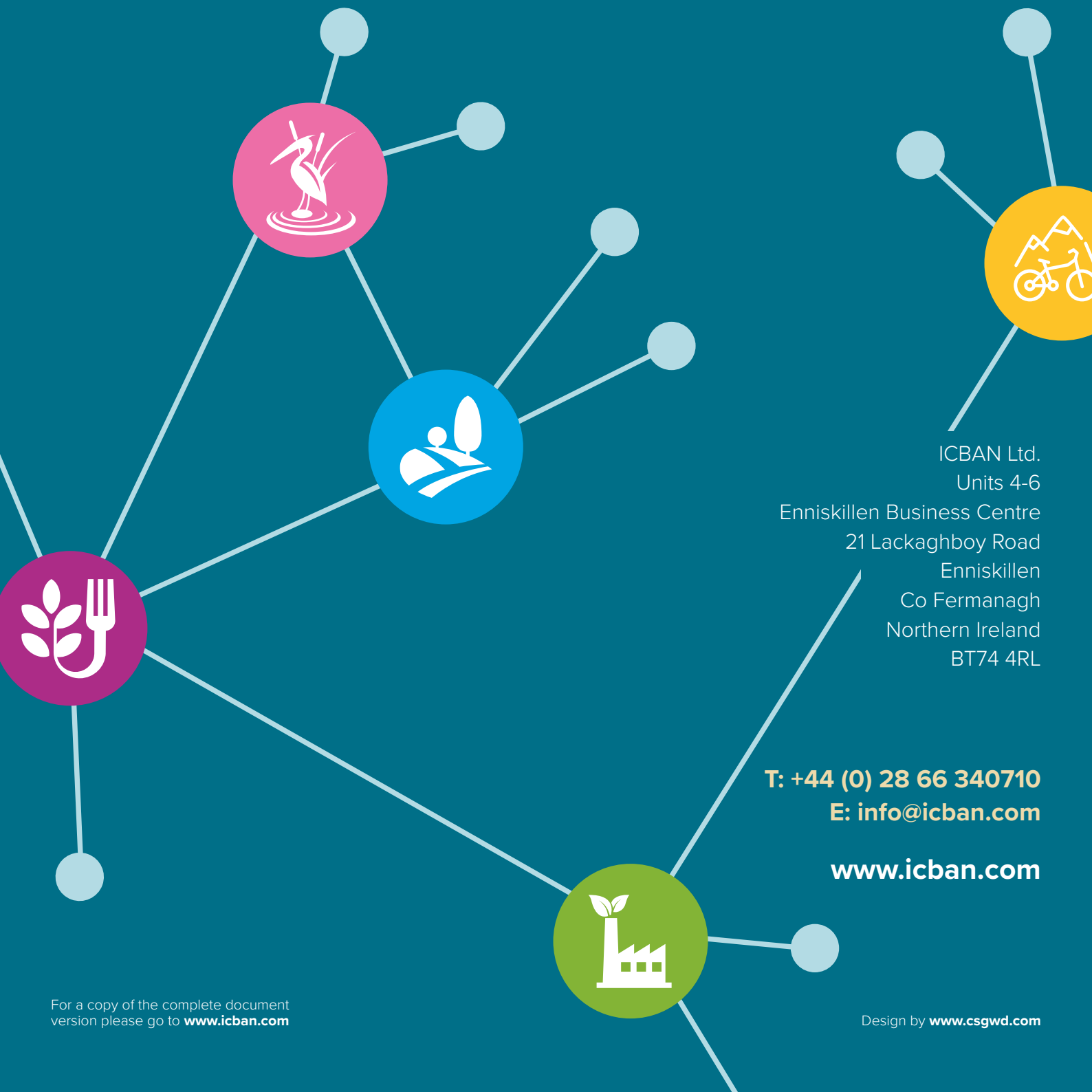


Adapted from: Lundgren, A. (2020) 'Linking Innovation and Resilience: Synergy Effects for Regional Development' presentation to *Northern Periphery Programme Annual Conference*, 23 September 2020.



The Vision for our Region:

'A sustainable region that delivers the best quality of life for its people and makes a distinctive contribution to economic and social renewal and growth on the island'.



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