



Tionól Réigiúnach
an Deiscirt

Southern Regional
Assembly

Cork Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan

2027 - 2040

Issues Paper

March 2026



Introduction

This paper is one of a series of four issued to assist input from the public and other stakeholders to the pre-draft consultation process for the review of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Southern Region (RSES) which takes place from 26th March 2026 to 22nd May 2026. It introduces the context and considerations for the new Cork Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (C-MASP), which will form part of the new RSES.

The other papers available at consult.southernassembly.ie are:

- The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Southern Region (RSES) 2027 – 2040 Issues Paper which provides an overview of the RSES review process and issues and should be read in conjunction with this paper.
- Limerick-Shannon Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan Issues Paper (LS-MASP).
- Waterford Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (W-MASP) Issues Paper.

The Cork MASP will guide the future strategic development of the Cork Metropolitan Area up to 2040. The MASP must align with national government policy as set out in the revised National Planning Framework (NPF), April 2025.

Responses to the challenges and questions set out in this Issues Paper will inform the draft of the new Cork MASP for 2027-2040 and are invited from anyone who wishes to contribute. The draft RSES and Cork MASP is scheduled for publication in Q4 2026, at which point there will be further opportunity to respond to the proposals within the draft.

Legislative Context

The preparation of the Cork MASP is required under Section 29(2) of the Planning & Development Act 2024 (as amended). The legislation indicates that the RSES will include an integrated land-use and transportation strategy for the metropolitan area, which should be consistent with the RSES. Section 29(5) of the Act states that ‘the ‘metropolitan area’ of a city means the area consisting of the city and its surrounding area approximating to the extent of its commuter zone.

Section 29(13) of the Act requires that the RSES and the MASP include measures to ensure the effective implementation and monitoring, including:

- Priorities for infrastructure of scale relating to transportation (including public transportation), water services, waste management, energy and communications networks and the provision of educational, healthcare, retail, cultural and recreational facilities.
- An order of priority for infrastructure provision, and potential sources of funding.
- Cross-sectoral investment and actions required to deliver planned growth and development.
- Coordination between constituent local authorities, and the cooperation of public bodies, and
- The monitoring and reporting arrangements required to measure and evaluate progress in implementing the RSES and MASPs.

What is the MASP and Why is it Important?

The Cork MASP is a key planning framework that guides the future development of the Cork Metropolitan Area, including land use and transportation infrastructure up to the year 2040 and beyond. It is a statutory planning document at the regional tier planning level that must align with national planning and other policies, and local-level planning policies, such as City and County Development Plans, must in turn align their policies and objectives with the Cork MASP.

It is a strategic document that provides the framework as to how Cork will meet its ambitious growth targets set out in the NPF to grow by at least 50% over 2016 levels by 2040 and to enhance its potential to become a city of scale and a regional driver. The NPF targets Cork City and suburbs to increase its population by approximately 96,000 people by the year 2040 and have an overall population of 320,000 people in total. The NPF sets a requirement that at least half of that growth for Cork City by 2040 should occur in the existing built-up footprint of Cork City and its suburbs.

The Cork MASP will provide a strategy to improve infrastructure, quality of life and choice in terms of housing, employment, and amenities, and address the impact of trends such as digitalisation, changing retail and working patterns.

The Story to Date - Cork MASP (2020)

Adopted in 2020, the current and first Cork MASP has operated for the past six years. The MASP has built on previous collaborations between Cork City Council and Cork County Council for the wider city region through the Cork Area Strategic Plan (CASP) framework which provided a strong pathway for a cohesive and ambitious approach to the long-term development of the wider Cork metropolitan area.

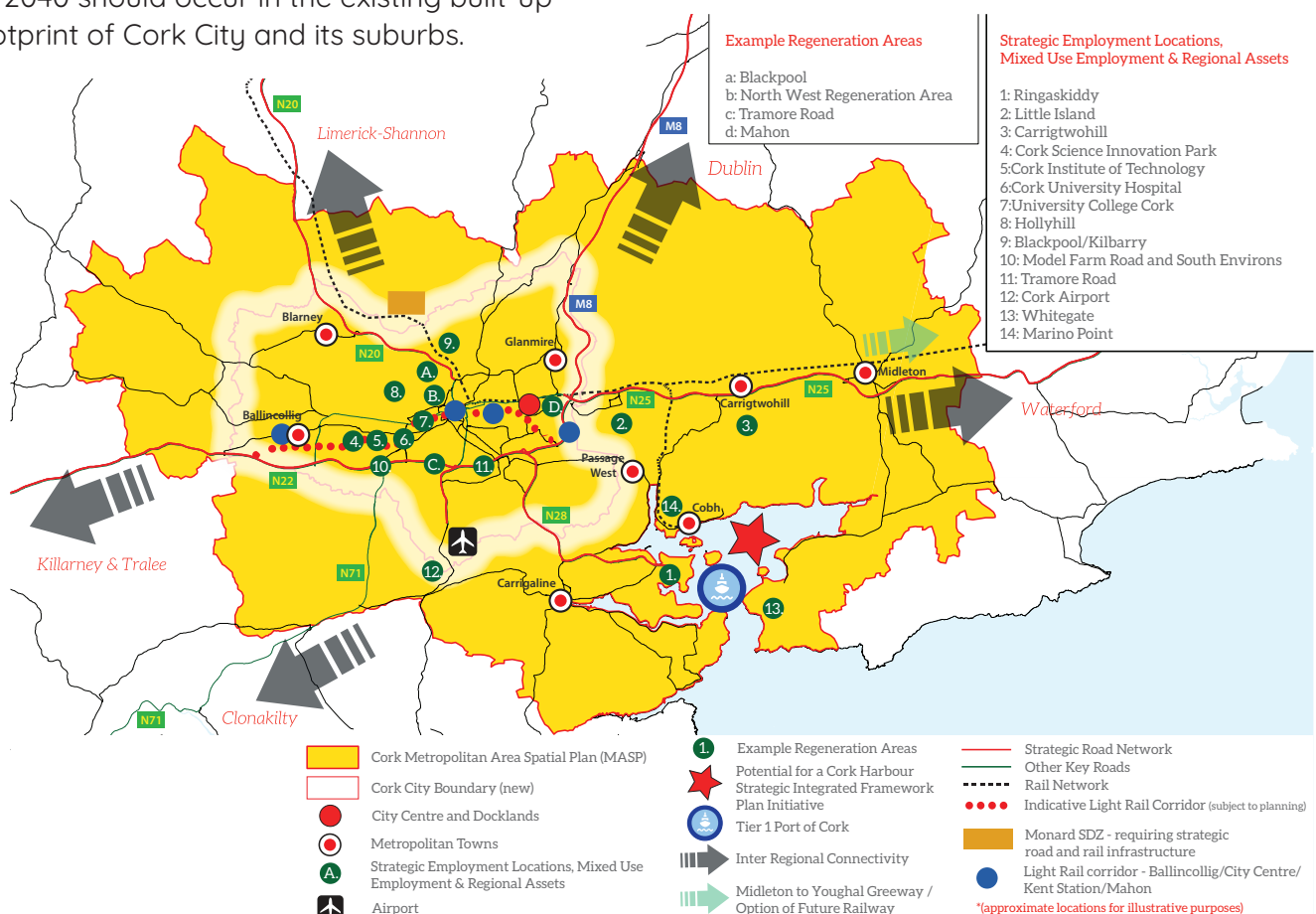


Figure 1: Cork Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan Map, Current RSES/MASP

Although in its initial stages of implementation, the current Cork MASP has assisted successes in key infrastructure planning and delivery, such as:

- Compact growth and regeneration proposals such as works commencing on the Creamfields site on the Tramore Road and the Railyard apartments at Albert Quay, where the two schemes will collectively deliver over 820 new housing units.
- The commencement of infrastructure-led development at brownfield regeneration sites such as the Cork City Docklands to create as a mixed use, sustainable and socially inclusive district.
- Continued investment in Cork Harbour and the expansion of the Port of Cork at Ringaskiddy as a strategic asset of the Cork Metropolitan Area and the Region.
- Delivery of Phase 1 of the Cork Area Commuter Rail Programme including the completion of the Kent Station Through Platform, twin-tracking between Glounthaune and Midleton and a comprehensive update of signalling, and communications systems. Phase 2 of the project will focus on the proposals for eight new stations, three station updates, a new depot and full electrification of the Cork rail network.
- Advancement of the proposed design and planning of the Cork Light Rail (LUAS) project by Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), with the completion of the first round of public consultation on the emerging preferred route in 2025, linking Mahon Point to Ballincollig through the city centre.
- Government approval in October 2025 of a transformative multi-billion-euro Bus Connects Cork programme of investment in Cork's bus and cycle system. The programme will include 11 Sustainable Transport Corridors across Cork City covering 90km of segregated bus lanes and 95km of high-quality segregated cycling routes.

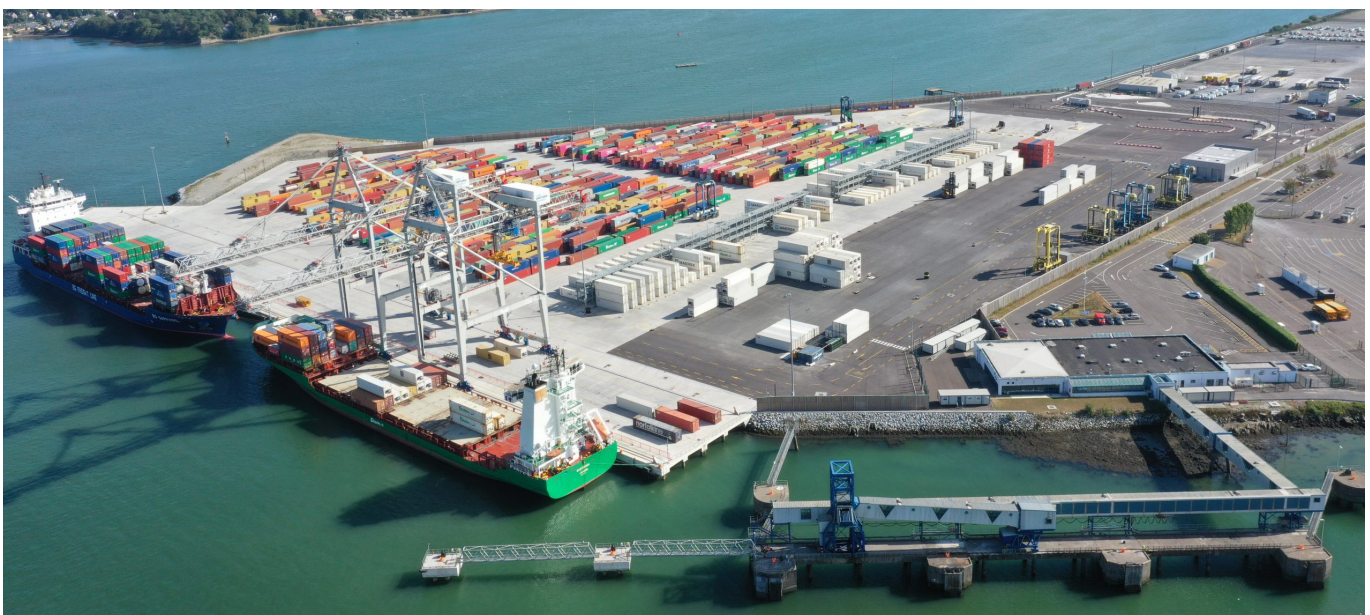


Figure 2: Port of Cork Expansion, Ringaskiddy (Credit: Port of Cork)

The NPF identifies the following growth enablers for the area:

- Delivering ambitious large-scale regeneration projects for the provision of new employment, housing and supporting infrastructure in Cork Docklands (City Docks and Tivoli) as integrated, sustainable developments, including relocation of two 'Seveso' sites from the City Docks.
- The development of a much-enhanced Citywide public transport system based on the Cork Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy (CMATS), incorporating the implementation of BusConnects Cork plus the Cork Area Commuter Rail Programme, and including enhanced connectivity to the Airport.
- Progressing the sustainable development of new brownfield and greenfield areas for housing along existing and planned high capacity public transport corridors with a particular focus on large-scale Transport Orientated Development (TOD) opportunities within the metropolitan area.
- Implementation of a comprehensive cycle network for Cork as set out in the Cork Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy.
- Measures to enhance and better link the existing network of green and blue spaces, in line with the County and City Biodiversity Action Plans, subject to carrying out a routing study and any necessary environmental assessments. Identifying infill and regeneration opportunities to intensify housing development in inner city and inner suburban areas, supported by public realm and urban amenity projects.
- Enabling enhanced opportunities for existing communities as development and diversification occurs, particularly through employment, learning and education support; Development of a new science and innovation park to the west of the City, accessible by public transport.
- The continued expansion of and integration with the City's third level institutions including University College Cork and the Munster Technological University, of which, three of six campuses are located in Cork City; Improved Ringaskiddy Port access.
- Enhanced regional connectivity through improved average journey times by road; Key enabling projects required to facilitate the regeneration of Cork City Docklands, including completion of the M28 Cork to Ringaskiddy project and delivering the Great Island Connectivity Scheme to improve transport connectivity from the mainland to Great Island and Cobh.
- Improved rail journey times to Dublin and consideration of improved onward direct network connections.
- Ensuring that water supply and waste-water needs are met by new strategic projects to enhance Cork's water supply and increase waste water treatment capacity; Improving sustainability in terms of energy, waste management and resource efficiency and water, to include district heating, water conservation.

Key Focus Areas

Creating Sustainable Communities

The population of the overall Metropolitan Area grew by 7.7% in the most recent census period (2016-2022) to 346,338 residents. Cork City Council's part of the metropolitan area grew by 7.3%, which is half of its projected growth in the NPF. The wider Metropolitan Area within Cork County Council's functional area grew at a higher rate of 8.5%, though still at only two thirds of its projected growth as set out under the National Planning Framework.

It is noteworthy that the non-metropolitan area of County Cork saw a marginally higher rate of population growth than Cork City, at 7.5%. The City Centre saw the lowest levels of population growth, with comparatively higher growth in many suburban locations. This imbalance needs to be addressed and there is a future pipeline of large-scale residential housing schemes in the city centre, including Cork Docklands developments, which will help address this imbalance.



Figure 3: Housing Delivery in Cork Docklands

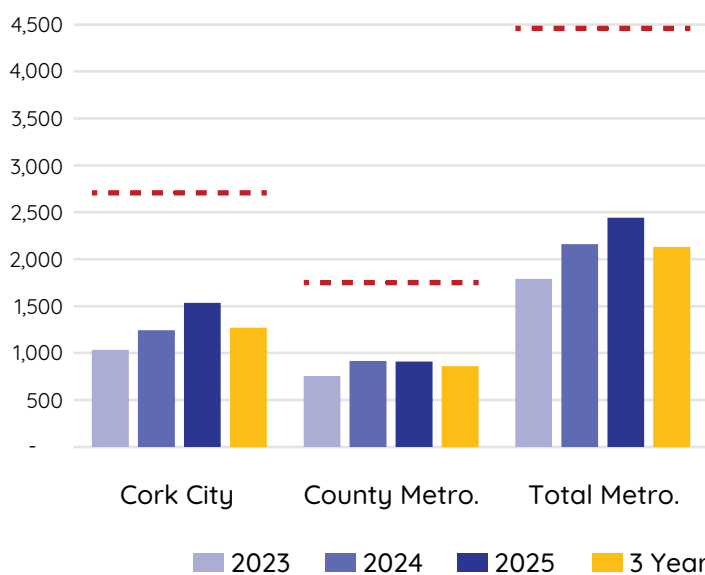
Housing delivery within the Cork Metropolitan Area has been below Development Plan targets, achieving only 48% of target from 2023 to 2025.

However, data on housing commencements from the same period indicates a significant uplift in activity, particularly within the city where commencements now account for 100% of housing targets from 2023 to 2025. This increase in activity has been underpinned by a strong pipeline of permitted schemes, and in particular larger scale schemes delivering over 250 homes each. Another significant factor has been the commencement of several large-scale apartment led development, which have benefited from public support through partnership with the Land Development Agency, Cork City Council, and/or Approved Housing Bodies.

While not captured in the formal housing figures, student accommodation has made an important contribution to housing needs for the City's student population. Continued delivery will play a key role in addressing wider housing needs.

The new MASP will need to include policies and supports that will build on the momentum for housing delivery across Cork City and its wider metropolitan area in line with government policy including the National Planning Framework and the Government's new housing plan 'Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030: An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness' DHLGH 2025.

Housing Completions (City and Metropolitan Area)



Housing Commencements (Local Authorities)

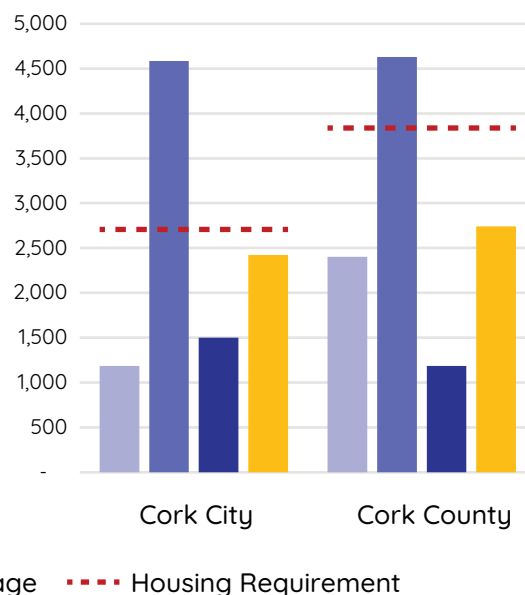


Figure 4: Housing Delivery in Cork Metropolitan Area 2023 – 2025 (Source: NPF Implementation Housing Growth Requirements, CSO Housing Statistics)

Transport Orientated Development (TOD) is a concept that promotes the delivery of housing at scale in tandem with existing and planned future high-capacity transportation infrastructure. The Government has published a report for Dublin in 2023, with the intention to publish follow-on reports for the other regional cities including Cork. TOD can play a significant role in delivering the ambitious vision for population growth in Cork in a sustainable and plan led manner. With the commitment to provide significant public transport improvements across Cork over the next decade including the delivery of the Cork Luas and Cork Bus Connects programme, the new MASP will support the expansion of the TOD to the Cork Metropolitan Area.

Creating Sustainable Communities Questions

- What measures can be taken to ensure Cork City/suburbs and the wider Metropolitan Area can grow to a city of scale in a sustainable and compact manner?
- What factors should be considered when setting out the overall planning strategy for the Cork MASP to deliver such population growth?
- What Transport Orientated Development opportunities does Cork have?
- How can the Cork MASP support brownfield regeneration and revitalisation of key settlements within the Metropolitan Area?

Transportation

The Assembly notes the ambitious plans to significantly enhance and transform the public transportation network across the Cork metropolitan area over the next decade that have Government commitment and support.

BusConnects Cork is at an advanced stage of public consultation, with major progress made on the Cork Commuter Rail programme.

The Cork Light Rail project will be essential in increasing public transport use in Cork by linking the City Centre with high demand destinations across the city and its early delivery should be a commitment of the National Development Plan. The data also demonstrates the critical importance of sustainable patterns of residential development through compact growth, and housing provision within Cork’s Urban Core including the Docklands.

Cork Airport is Ireland’s second largest international airport, serving over 6,000 passengers daily rising to over 11,000 during peak season with destinations across the UK and Continental Europe. The airport is a key asset in the MASP area for business investment, tourism and population connectivity across Cork and the wider region. The new MASP will acknowledge the strategic importance of this key infrastructure asset and provide for its sustainable growth.

Transportation Questions

- How can transport and land use be better aligned to delivery sustainable population growth in Cork?
- What key transport infrastructure do you consider should be delivered in the next 10 to 20 years to enable Cork to become a city of scale?
- What are the gaps in the transportation network that should be addressed?



Figure 5: Proposed Cork Luas (Source: TII)

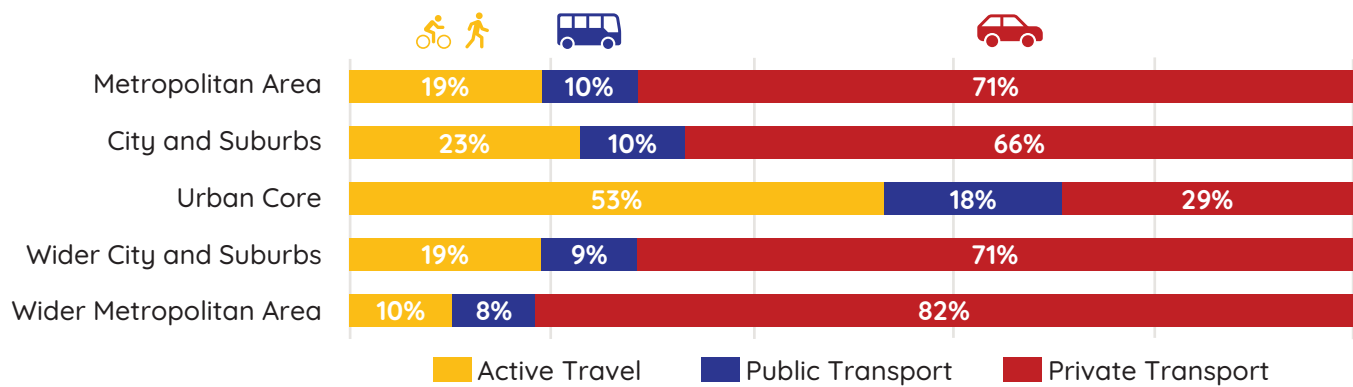


Figure 6: Modal Share of Travel to Work, School, or College in the Cork Metropolitan Area (Source: Census 2022)

Economy and Employment

The Cork Metropolitan Area is a key driver for economic development across the Southern Region, benefitting from a well-educated, multi-cultural workforce, a thriving domestic start-up culture, large Foreign Direct Investment, and strong academic-industry collaboration through third-level institutions such as University College Cork (UCC) and Munster Technological University (MTU). Key industry sectors in Cork include;

- Technology and IT
- Pharmaceuticals and Biotechnology/
Life Sciences
- Financial Services
- Cyber Security
- Healthcare
- Renewable Energy and Green Economy
- Digital Media

Between 2016 and 2022 there was an increase of 16% in the number of jobs in the Metropolitan Area; Cork City and Suburbs showed an increase of 11% in the same period, and in 2022 recorded the lowest unemployment rate of any city in Ireland.

In the wider Metropolitan Area: Ringaskiddy, Little Island, Midleton, Carrigtwohill, Carrigaline and Cobh are major employment locations, and have also recorded major increases in jobs figures.

Cork Harbour is a strategic employment asset in the Cork MASP area, and wide southern region, with the Tier 1 Port of Cork. It's continued expansion and investment in sustainable development linked with future growth areas in Marine Spatial Planning and renewable energy provision offer a unique opportunity to be a first mover in this high growth sector.

The Programme for Government sets a target for creating 300,000 additional jobs in the state by the year 2030. The Cork metropolitan area and the wider southwest region is a significant location of employment having the second largest share of national GDP by subregion. The new MASP will look to build on the competitive advantages of Cork as a place to innovate and grow employment opportunities and the next strategy should provide a clear guidance on the strategic location for employment related development and industrial and commercial development.

The Cork Metropolitan Area is major centre for retail activity, from everyday essential items to more specialised and higher-value products. This is not only important for individuals' needs or leisure but also underpins essential service and trade industry product requirements.



Figure 7: Bridge Street, Cork City

Economy and Employment Questions

- What strengths and challenges/risks does Cork have in terms of employment and economic delivery, including new growth sectors in the economy?
- Are there strategic areas across the city and metropolitan area where the new MASP should focus new employment delivery on?
- How can Cork provide for resilience in its economic sectors?
- How can Cork benefit from green economy initiatives and other potential future growth areas?
- What infrastructure improvements are needed to facilitate continued expansion and diversity of Cork's employment base?
- How can the RSES stimulate further investment in Cork's domestic and multi-national employment base?
- What improvements would you make to Cork's retail provision and the location of such development?
- How can the nighttime economy be developed and enhanced from the perspective of retail activity and hospitality?

Environment

Sustainable management of the city is essential for the protection and enhancement of the natural environment, transitioning to a climate-resilient future, and ensuring the quality of life of people who live in Cork.

The Cork MASP will aim to integrate these principles into its strategy for economic and social development, through initiatives such as;

- Continued roll out of high-quality green and blue spaces to enhance local biodiversity and nature, plus benefits to people's health and wellbeing.
- Blue Green Infrastructure across the Cork MASP area will need to be carefully considered on how such assets can be best delivered to maximise usage. Initiatives such as nature-based solutions to reduce flood risk impacts and enhancing public green spaces are some examples of this.

- Reducing carbon emissions across the metropolitan area by promoting the use of sustainable modes of transport (increasing modal share of walking, cycling and public transport) and improving air quality.
- Actively encourage urban renewal proposals that enhance public spaces and the public realm.

Environmental Questions

- How can the new MASP provide for an enhanced built and natural environment across the city and metropolitan area?
- What improvements would you consider are most needed to improve the local environment and be more climate resilient?

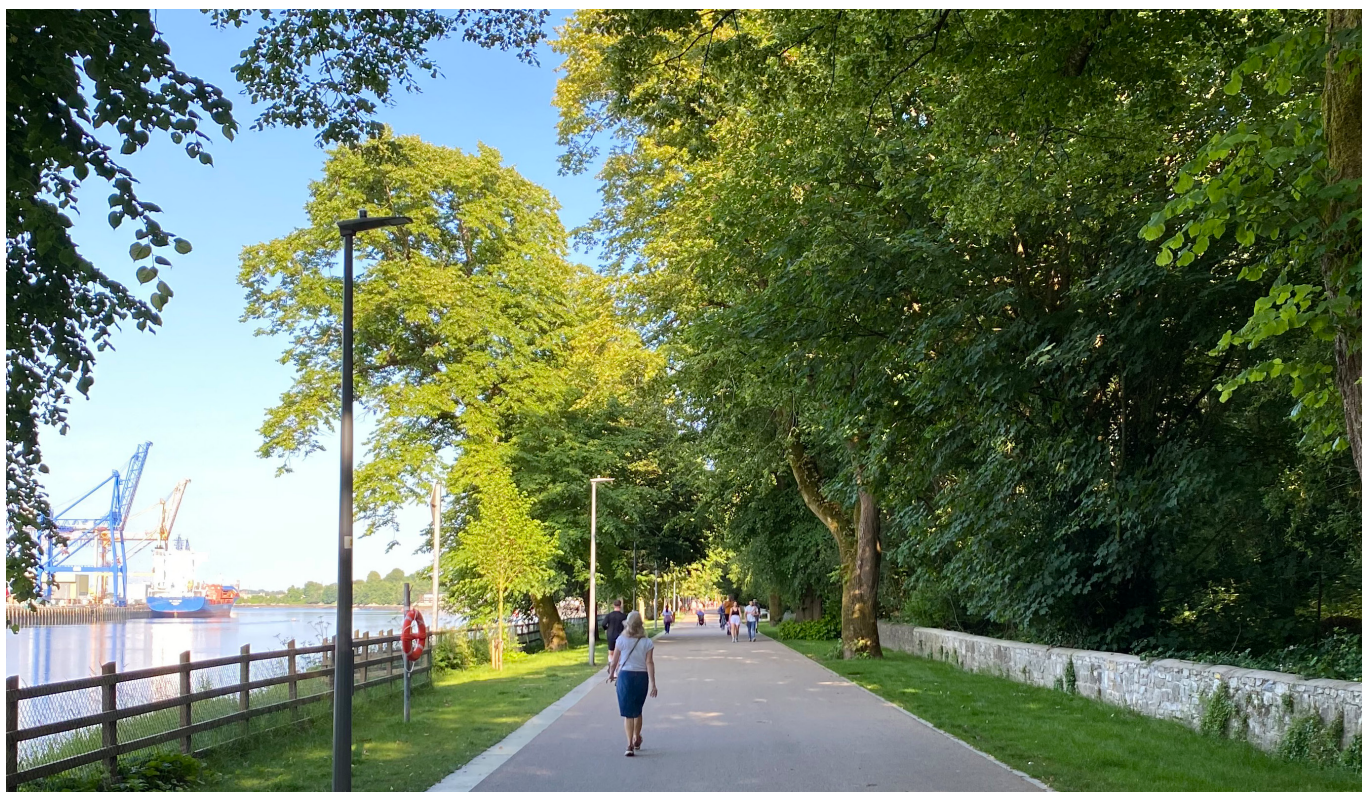


Figure 8: Marina Promende

Social and Cultural Infrastructure

With ambitious population and employment growth targets for Cork, alongside significant infrastructural change, it is essential that the MASP provides a strategic approach to the provision of education, health, and community facilities. The Cork MASP will therefore support ongoing collaboration with regional stakeholders to ensure that social infrastructure needs are met and that opportunities for both social and physical regeneration are fully realised.

The Assembly will continue to support measures that enhance the overall social and cultural assets of the metropolitan area with the following areas of note;

- Support Cork as a Learning City and seek investment in initiatives that support the Cork Learning City Initiative which promote lifelong learning for all.
- Assist the role of Cork as WHO Healthy City that promotes the health and wellbeing of its citizens and its support infrastructure.
- Seek investment in health service infrastructure to meet its current and future

population needs including facilities for Cork University Hospital.

- Promote Cork as a Smart Gateway where smart technology providers, researchers and citizens can come together in solving challenges and improving city life.
- Seek continued investment in initiatives that achieve physical, economic, social, and environmental regeneration of disadvantaged areas.

Social and Cultural Questions

- What are the most important cultural and social/recreational spaces in the city and metropolitan area and how can these be enhanced (e.g. libraries, parks, and theatres)?
- What makes the city and metropolitan area a great place to live, work, learn and play and how can the new MASP support the enhancement of key social infrastructural assets?



Figure 9: School Campus, Carrigtwohill

Making a Submission

The Southern Regional Assembly is keen to receive views on any strategic planning issue facing the city and its wider metropolitan area to inform the new Cork MASP. We would also welcome your views on the wider RSES review itself.

We welcome your views on any or all the questions that we have set out in this Issues Paper, as well as general comments, ideas, or suggestions about matters that you feel have not been fully addressed in this paper.

This consultation will open on Thursday 26th March 2026 and conclude at 5pm on Friday 22nd May 2026.

Submissions can be made through the Southern Regional Assemblies dedicated online consultation portal available at: consult.southernassembly.ie, by email to rses@southernassembly.ie, or by post to RSES Submissions, Regional Planning Unit, Southern Regional Assembly, Assembly House, O'Connell Street, Waterford X91 F8PC.



Figure 10: Tivoli Docks



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