



Northern & Western
Regional Assembly

Submission on the National Bioeconomy Action Plan

2023-2025

January 2023



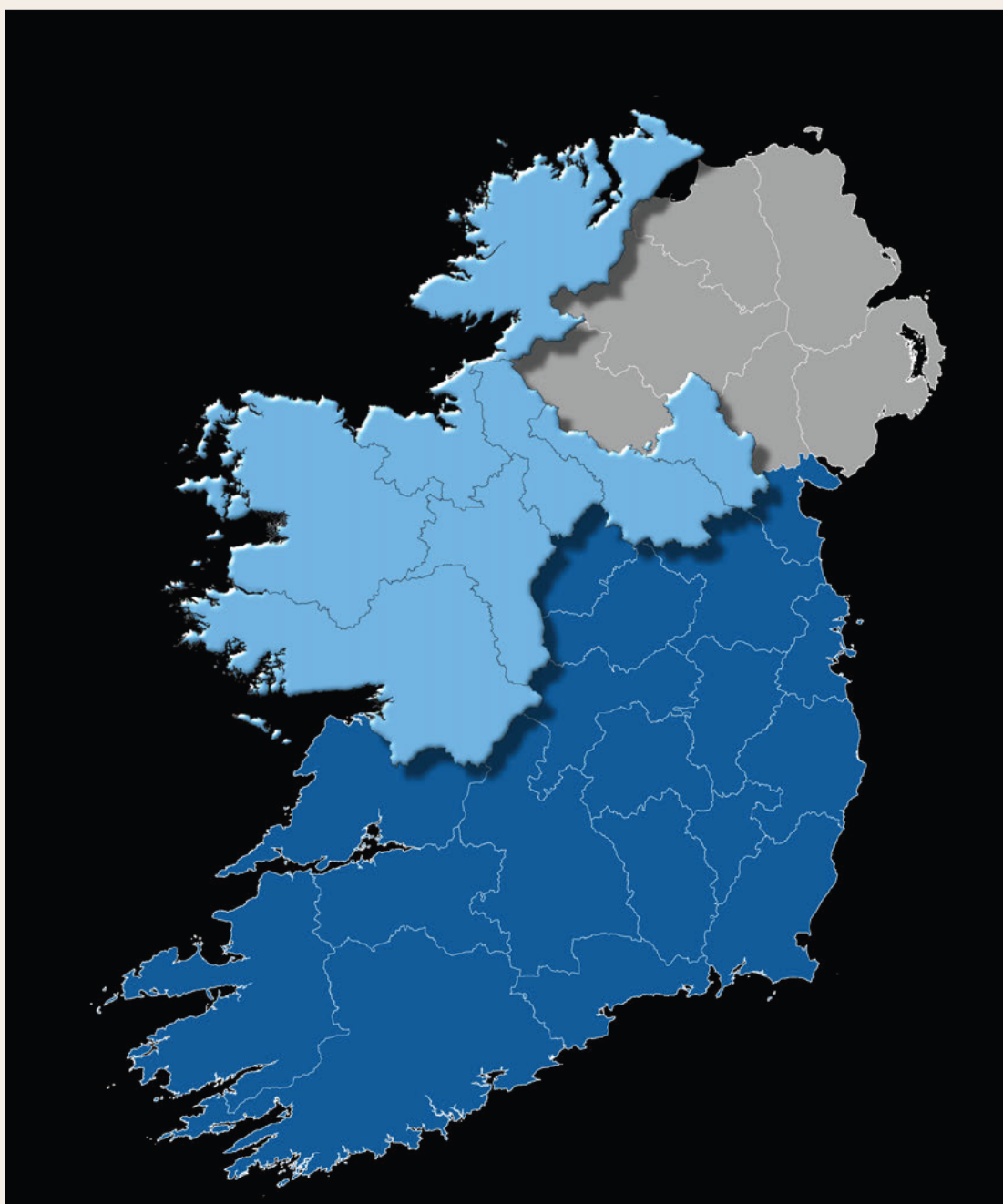
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The Northern and Western Regional Assembly welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the National Bioeconomy Action Plan 2023-2025. The Irish bioeconomy has the potential to deliver a more sustainable approach to economic development, providing significant opportunities to create more circular based business models, utilise waste and natural resources and generate more sustainable bio-based products and services for consumers. In doing so, the Irish bioeconomy can support the implementation of the objectives outlined in the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Northern and Western Region (RSES), the Climate Action Plan ¹ and support Ireland's ambition to reduce carbon emissions by 51% by 2030 and achieve net-zero emissions no later than 2050.

The RSES for the Northern and Western region was published in January 2020. It provides the roadmap for effective regional development – it implements and amplifies the provisions of the National Planning Framework. Public bodies have to ensure consistency with the RSES in preparing their plans and programmes.² The RSES identifies that our rural areas are well placed to benefit from new market opportunities that are emerging in the bioeconomy. The bioeconomy has also significant potential to support the delivery of balanced regional development in Ireland. Such potential is based on the fact that many of the relevant businesses, suppliers and natural resources that are needed to expand the bioeconomy are located or suitable for rural oriented regions – such as the Northern and Western Region of Ireland³ – and as a result the potential future growth of bio-based products, services and processes could generate significant economic opportunities in these areas.

Considering the environmental and economic benefits of developing the bioeconomy, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly highlighted it as an important emerging sector for the region's economy in the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) of the Northern and Western Region.⁴ In this regard, the RSES of the Northern and Western Region is a strategic framework which aims to sustainably accommodate future population and employment growth in the region up to 2032, with a number of development objectives (RPOs) relating to the bioeconomy included within the strategy, namely:

- RPO 4.27 which notes that “It is an objective to support the National Policy Statement on the Bioeconomy (2018), and the exploration of opportunities in the circular resource-efficient economy, including undertaking a bioeconomy feasibility study for this region.”
- RPO 4.28 which aims to “Support the potential creation of appropriately scaled local multi-feedstock bio-refining hubs across the region as well as potential creation of bio-districts/clusters.”
- RPO 4.29 which notes that “The Assembly supports the future-proofing of infrastructure planning to allow for the potential upgrading of existing industrial sites to bio-refining plants while also supporting the use of bio-renewable energy for the sustainable production of bio-based products.”

Within this context, it is clear that the development and implementation of the National Bioeconomy Action Plan 2023-2025 has significant potential in supporting an array of policy areas, including but not limited to the delivery of objectives outlined in the Climate Action Plan and in contributing to the implementation of the National Planning Framework and the RSES of the Northern and Western Region.

¹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7bd8c-climate-action-plan-2023/#:~:text=The%20Climate%20Action%20Plan%202023,budgets%20and%20sectoral%20emissions%20ceilings>

² Section 22A(3) of the Planning and Development Act, as amended

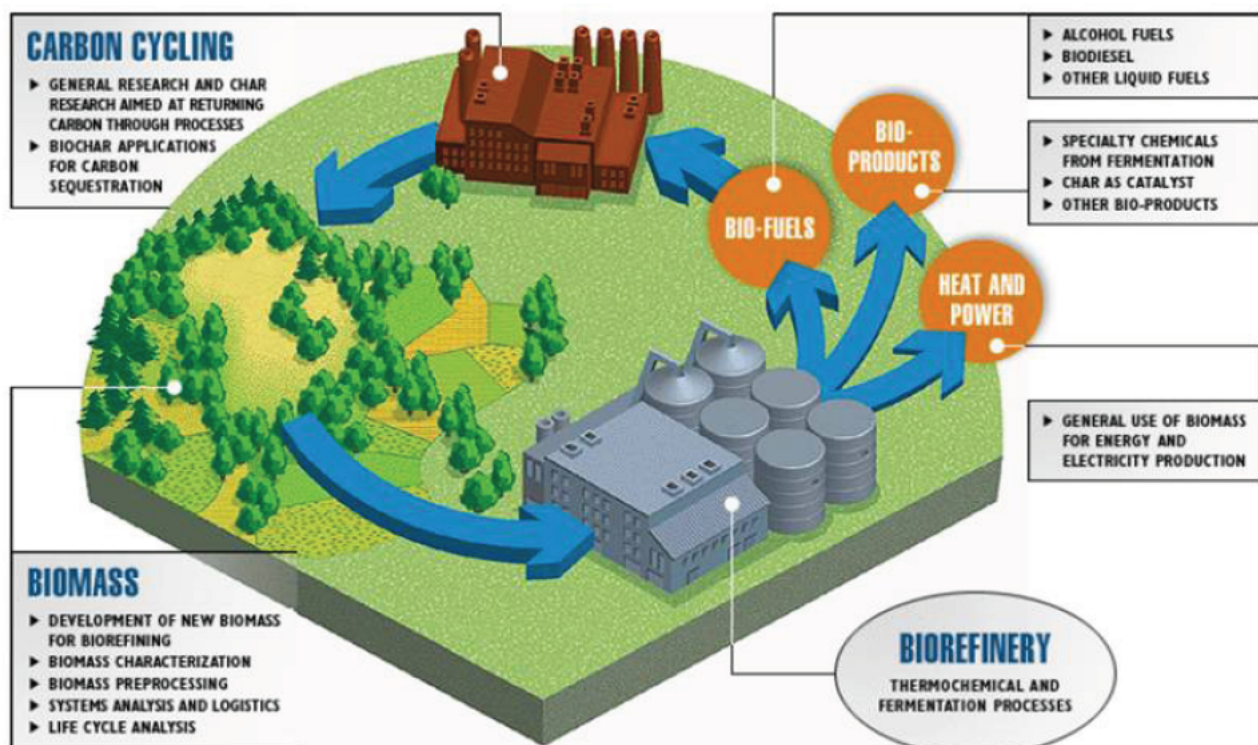
³ One of the three regions under the National Planning Framework and includes the counties of Galway, Mayo, Roscommon, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan, Sligo and Donegal: <https://www.nwra.ie/>

⁴ <https://www.nwra.ie/pdfs/NWRA-RSES-2020-2032.pdf>

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly – in Section 2 of this submission – has provided views on the questions that were posed by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and the Department of Agriculture, Food, and the Marine in their consultation document on the National Bioeconomy Action Plan 2023-2025.⁵ Section 2 of this submission focuses on topics ranging from – but not limited to – the capabilities of the Northern and Western Region in further supporting the development of the bioeconomy, the existing barriers affecting the sector and priorities that need to be addressed over the next three years. The Northern and Western Regional Assembly’s priorities for action in the bioeconomy over the next three years should be:

Key Priorities

1. Adopt a regional approach to developing the Irish bioeconomy, with a particular focus on the Northern and Western Region.
2. Improve the funding opportunities available to businesses that wish to become more involved in the Irish bioeconomy.
3. Explore the possibility of how the tax arrangements of participants in the bioeconomy can be made more financially attractive.
4. Improve consumer awareness about the terminology and benefits of bio-based products, services, and processes, making them more visible and understandable to the general public.
5. Increase the level of resources available to Higher Education Institutes and research centres to develop courses and undertake research projects related to the bioeconomy.
6. Undertake a bioeconomy feasibility study for the Northern and Western Region, with the view of identifying and mapping areas of potential growth for the region.



Source: <https://www.intechopen.com/chapters/48650>

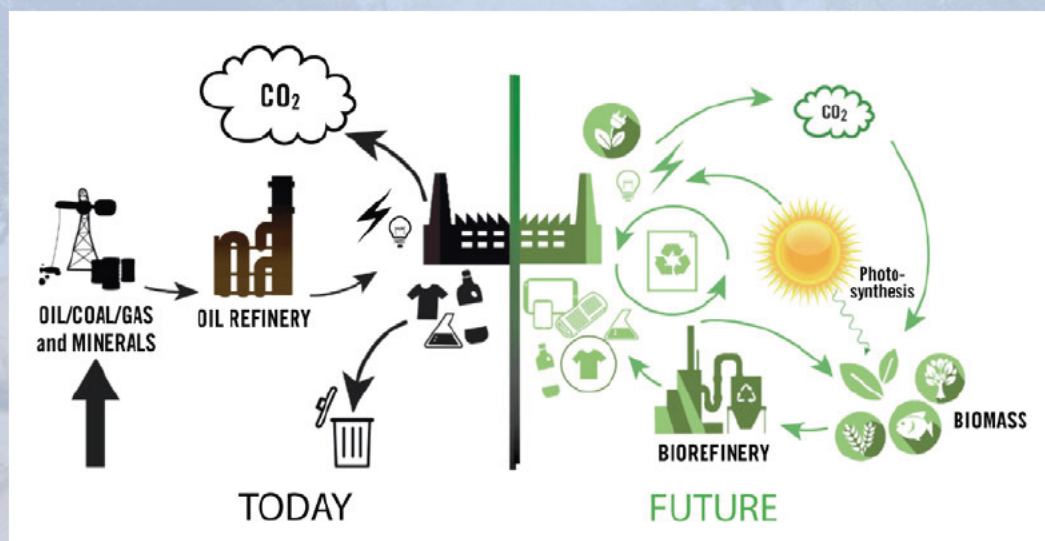
⁵ <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/fd200-bioeconomy-action-plan-consultation/>

Section 2 of this submission addresses the questions that were posed by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and the Department of Agriculture, Food, and the Marine in their consultation document on the National Bioeconomy Action Plan 2023-2025.⁶ As requested in the consultation document, the responses to each question do not exceed 250 words.

Question 1: Are you satisfied the outlined Pillars represent the structure of the Irish bioeconomy?

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly is generally satisfied that the proposed pillars represent the structure of the Irish bioeconomy, albeit the Assembly would recommend the following edits and additions:

1. Replace the pillar titled “Industry & Enterprise” with a pillar titled “Industry, Enterprise and Finance” in order to showcase the need for the bioeconomy to be supported by financial institutions such as commercial banks and credit unions. Key stakeholders have noted that one of the key development barriers facing the Irish bioeconomy is that it has less start-up capital funding opportunities in comparison to other developed economies.⁷ The National Bioeconomy Action Plan 2023-2025 should aim to overcome this challenge by improving funding opportunities available to businesses that wish to develop bio-based products, services and processes.
2. Include an additional pillar titled “Departments, Public Agencies, Regional and Local Authorities”. The purpose of this additional pillar would be to include a series of actions in the National Bioeconomy Action Plan that would aim to achieve more policy coherence and coordination in the development of the bioeconomy, ensuring policy is consistent at a national, regional, and local level. Policy coherence is regarded as being essential to growing the Irish bioeconomy and this would be consistent with the views expressed in the National Policy Statement on the Bioeconomy (2018),⁸ the Bio-Éire project, the Bioeconomy Implementation Group⁹ and the Irish Bioeconomy Foundation.¹⁰



⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/fd200-bioeconomy-action-plan-consultation/>

⁷ <https://bioeconomyfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Circular-Bioeconomy.pdf>

⁸ <https://assets.gov.ie/2244/241018115730-41d795e366bf4000a6bc0b69a136bda4.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/93222/a3720661-c532-40f3-9dbd-f0bddb029a4e.pdf#page=1>

¹⁰ <https://bioeconomyfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Circular-Bioeconomy.pdf>

Question 2: Are there specific key performance indicators and/or targets the bioeconomy should be setting out to achieve to measure its implementation?

The National Bioeconomy Action Plan 2023-2025 should incorporate the following key economic performance indicators for Irish bioeconomy, namely:

1. Direct employment, Gross Value Added and wages generated from the NACE sectors that are considered part of the bioeconomy
2. Number of firms that have become more involved in the production of bio-based products, services or processes as a result of government funding schemes
3. Absolute level of government funding that has allowed firms to become more involved in the production of bio-based products, services or processes

The NACE sectors that should be considered part of the bioeconomy should be based on research from Ronzon and Barek (2018)¹¹ which aligns with the official definition of the bioeconomy as published by the European Commission. In this regard, the bioeconomy is defined as incorporating all the economic activities related to the production and manufacturing of biomass and these economic activities correspond to the list of NACE codes presented in Table 1. The extent to which a given hybrid sector is bio-based follows the approach set out by Ronzon et al ¹² (2017).

Table 1: NACE codes that are considered part of the bioeconomy

NACE code	Bioeconomy Sector (Parent Categories in Bold)
A01	Agriculture
A02	Forestry
A03	Fishing and Aquaculture
A032	Aquaculture
A031	Fishing
-	Manufacture of food, beverages and tobacco
C10	Manufacture of food
C11	Manufacture of beverages
C12	Manufacture of tobacco
-	Manufacture of bio-based textiles
C13*	Manufacture of bio-based textiles
C14*	Manufacture of bio-based wearing apparel
C15	Manufacture of leather
-	Manufacture of wood products and furniture
C16	Manufacture of wood products
C31*	Manufacture of wooden furniture
C17	Manufacture of paper
-	Manufacture of bio-based chemicals, pharmaceuticals, plastics and rubber (excluding biofuels)
C20*	Manufacture of bio-based chemicals
C21*	Manufacture of bio-based pharmaceuticals
C22*	Manufacture of bio-based plastics and rubber
-	Manufacture of liquid biofuels
C2014*	Manufacture of bioethanol
C2059*	Manufacture of biodiesel
D3511*	Production of bioelectricity

* hybrid sector

Source: Ronzon and Barek (2018)

¹¹ Ronzon, T. and M'Barek, R., 2018. Socioeconomic indicators to monitor the EU's bioeconomy in transition. Sustainability, 10(6), p.1745. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325423183_Socioeconomic_Indicators_to_Monitor_the_EU's_Bioeconomy_in_Transition

¹² Ronzon, T.; Piotrowski, S.; M'Barek, R.; Carus, M. A systematic approach to understanding and quantifying the EU's bioeconomy. Bio-Based Appl. Econ. 2017, 1

Question 3: What other key issues should the Governance Pillar deal with?

As noted in the National Policy Statement on the Bioeconomy (2018),¹³ the bioeconomy has the potential to support the delivery of balanced regional development in Ireland, given that the majority of its associated activities and natural resources are concentrated in rural regions and counties. In the Northern and Western Region alone, the Agricultural, Forestry and Marine sectors – which represent a sizeable proportion of the Irish bioeconomy – accounted for 6.1% of total employment in the region as of Q3-2022, which was 2.4 percentage points above the national average.¹⁴ While the definition of the bioeconomy spans across various sectors outside of Agriculture, Forestry and Marine¹⁵ activities, such concentrations provide an indication of the region’s potential to build on these relevant sectoral specialisms and resources in further developing the bioeconomy.

Therefore, the “Governance” Pillar should explicitly aim to develop the Irish bioeconomy in a manner that supports balanced regional development in line with the vision and objectives of the National Planning Framework and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) of the Northern and Western Region. In this regard, the proposed activities that would fall under this Pillar should be equally distributed across the three NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland – particularly in the Northern and Western Region – given the region’s above average reliance on activities associated with the bioeconomy and considering the region’s abundance in natural assets and resources that will be key to further developing the bioeconomy.



¹³ <https://assets.gov.ie/2244/241018115730-41d795e366bf4000a6bc0b69a136bda4.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://data.cso.ie/table/QLF07>

¹⁵ See table 1 of this submission

Question 4: What key issues should the Research, Development & Innovation Pillar deal with?

/ Question 5: How could the RD&I bioeconomy approach be best structured to support the enhancement, application and scaling-up of biological knowledge and bioeconomy solutions?

The “Research, Development & Innovation” (RD&I) Pillar should adopt a regional approach in supporting the development of the bioeconomy in Ireland. In doing so, the National Bioeconomy Action Plan 2023-2025 can support the RD&I capabilities of the Northern and Western Region, as the region has an array of relevant sectoral specialisms, natural assets and research resources suitable to supporting the development of the Irish bioeconomy. Applying a regional approach will allow Ireland to move away from an outdated and inefficient “one size fits all” policy; allowing the Northern and Western Region to make an enormous contribution in growing Ireland’s bioeconomy.

To achieve this, the RD&I Pillar should focus on actions that enhance the capabilities of Northern and Western Region’s Higher Education Institutes and research centres in undertaking industry relevant research projects on the bioeconomy, while supporting all island research projects in bioeconomy through relevant stakeholders in Northern Ireland. Specifically, the RD&I Pillar should outline actions which will support the following institutions based in the Northern and Western Region:

- BioConnect Centre
- BIA Innovator Campus
- Centre for Environmental Research Innovation and Sustainability (CERIS)
- Marine and Freshwater Discovery Centre
- Nua na Mara, Marine Innovation Development Centre
- St Angela’s Food Technology Centre
- Marine Institute
- Ryan Institute
- University of Galway
- Atlantic Technological University

Question 6: What key issues should the Nature, Climate & Circular Pillar deal with?

/ Question 7: What key issues concerning consumption patterns need to be examined to close the gap between sustainable supply of biological resources and demand?

Generating demand for bio-based products and services and providing a market for potential suppliers will be key to closing the current gap between the sustainable supply of biological resources and demand. Currently, there seems to be a lack of awareness and knowledge of bio-based products in Ireland, with research showing that 72% of Irish respondents were not aware of any of these types of products.¹⁶ As a result, the research concluded that there was a clear need to improve consumer awareness about the terminology and benefits of bio-based products, making them more visible and understandable to the general public.

Such an approach should be adopted in improving demand for bio-based products and services in the coming years. Regardless of the communication methods – whether it be social media campaigns, traditional media outlets, networking or product labelling – the language used in promoting bio-based products and services should be clear and understandable, should be locally relevant and appeal to consumers desire to support the environment but also to obtain value for money.

In conjunction to this, the public procurement process could also be used in stimulating demand for bio-based products and services and ensuring the bioeconomy becomes economically viable for potential suppliers. In doing so the public sector can act as a facilitator, establishing a buyer group with critical mass for suppliers which encourages industry to scale up its production to eventually bring bio-based products and processes onto the wider private market.

¹⁶ <https://bioswitch.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/MDPI-Sustainability-Understanding-Consumer-Perspectives-of-Bio%E2%80%90Based-Products.pdf>

Question 8: What key issues should the Agriculture, Food & the Marine Pillar deal with?

Relative to the other NUTS 2 Regions of Ireland, the Northern and Western Region is more reliant on the Agricultural, Forestry and Marine sector – which represents a sizeable proportion of the Irish bioeconomy – with this sector accounting for 1.4% and 5.8% of total employment in Eastern and Midland and Southern Regions respectively, compared to 6.1% in the Northern and Western Region. Furthermore, the Agricultural, Forestry and Fishing sector accounted for 2.6% of the Northern and Western Region’s Gross Value Added (GVA),¹⁷ which was higher than the corresponding ratios for the Eastern and Midland Region (0.4%) and the Southern Region (1.3%).

On this basis, the “Agriculture, Food & the Marine” Pillar should be particularly focused on supporting the Agricultural, Forestry and Fishing sector of the Northern and Western Region. Under this Pillar, the relevant measures should aim to support the sector’s transition to a more sustainable form of production while also encouraging more farmers and food producers to become more directly involved in bio-based products and processes. For example, such measures should – amongst other things – aim to:

- Support the potential creation of appropriately scaled local multi-feedstock bio-refining hubs as well as bio districts/clusters in the Northern and Western Region, while supporting farmers to become more involved in the bioeconomy.
- Encourage farmers to become involved in developments such as Anaerobic digestion and organics
- Encourage farmers and food producers to embrace more sustainable methods of production, embracing the measures outlined in the Teagasc Mitigation Abatement Cost Curve.

Question 9: What key issues should the Communities Pillar deal with?

/ Question 10: Are local and regional policies ensuring the consideration of bioeconomy opportunities are in scope, and are coordinated approaches on such services in place at regional assembly and local authority level?

The Northern and Western Region is well positioned to benefit from any new market opportunities that are expected to arise from the continued development of the Irish bioeconomy. For this reason, the Assembly highlighted the bioeconomy as an important emerging sector in the RSES of the Northern and Western Region.

The RSES of the Northern and Western Region acts as the regional implementation of the National Planning Framework and is a strategic investment framework which aims to sustainably accommodate future population and employment growth in the region up to 2032. Within the RSES, the Assembly has outlined a series of “Regional Policy Objectives” (RPOs) which will support the implementation of its vision, with a number of RPOs relating to the bioeconomy included within the strategy, namely:

- **RPO 4.27** which notes that “It is an objective to support the National Policy Statement on the Bioeconomy (2018), and the exploration of opportunities in the circular resource-efficient economy, including undertaking a bioeconomy feasibility study for this region.
- **RPO 4.28** which aims to “Support the potential creation of appropriately scaled local multi-feedstock bio-refining hubs across the region as well as potential creation of bio-districts/clusters.”
- **RPO 4.29** which notes that “The Assembly supports the future-proofing of infrastructure planning to allow for the potential upgrading of existing industrial sites to bio-refining plants while also supporting the use of bio-renewable energy for the sustainable production of bio-based products.”

¹⁷ In 2019: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/NAMA_10R_3GVA_custom_4377707/default/table?lang=en

Question 11: What key issues should the Industry & Enterprise Pillar deal with?
/ Question 12: What lead market initiatives could support entrepreneurship, development, innovation and the commercialisation of bio-based products, processes, information, and services?
/ Question 13: Due to the requirement for capital and operational investment what innovations aimed at financing infrastructures and technical and economic evaluation of innovation are necessary to scale up the bioeconomy?

According to the Irish Bioeconomy Foundation, one of the key development challenges facing the Irish bioeconomy is that it has less start-up capital funding opportunities in comparison to other developed economies.¹⁸ On this basis, the predominant focus of the “Industry & Enterprise” Pillar should be on developing actions which aims to overcome this challenge.

In order to scale up the bioeconomy, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) – through the Regional Enterprise Development Fund (REDF) – should be encouraged to provide a preference for project applicants that are or intend to be involved in the production of bio-based products or processes, thereby supporting the development of potential or existing suppliers in the sector. Similar efforts should be adopted for other rural oriented funding streams such as – but not limited to – the LEADER programme and the Rural Development Programme.

In conjunction to this, the public procurement process could be used in stimulating demand for bio-based products and processes, ensuring the Irish bioeconomy becomes more economically viable for potential suppliers and thereby making these firms more likely to obtain financial capital from commercial banks and credit unions. Furthermore, policymakers should examine how the tax arrangements of bio-based suppliers can be made more financially attractive relative to suppliers with a linear based business model, while greater efforts should be made to encourage potential bio-based suppliers and stakeholders to apply for funding streams that are available at a EU level.

Question 14: What key issues should the Knowledge & Skills Pillar deal with?
/ Question 15: Can the regional skills and regional enterprise approaches better support bioeconomy development?

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly believes that the “Knowledge and Skills” Pillar of the National Bioeconomy Action Plan 2023-2025 needs to address the following issues:

1. **Encourage and facilitate collaboration between key stakeholders of the bioeconomy:**¹⁹ Growing the bioeconomy’s skills base will require extensive collaboration efforts between Higher and Further Education providers, industry, enterprise agencies and policymakers, ensuring the development of educational and skills courses align with the needs of industry participants in the bioeconomy. In this regard, the Regional Skills Forum would be a useful resource as it provides an opportunity for employers and the education and training system to work together to meet the emerging skills needs of their regions.
2. **Promote the activities of the bioeconomy in primary and secondary schools:** The Action Plan needs to support the development of interactive programs that promotes the concept, activities and benefits of the bioeconomy to students at an early stage of their education. For example, the Junior Entrepreneur Programme²⁰ through their curriculum, games and learning aids, provide primary school students with a clear idea of entrepreneurship. The Action Plan should aim to develop a similar programme that focuses on the bioeconomy.
3. **Provide students with education and career opportunities in the key sectors of the bioeconomy:** Working with stakeholders, the Action Plan should aim to develop and promote education and career pathways in key areas such as bioplastics and non-plastic biomaterials, bioactives and functional ingredients, biobased chemicals and biofuels.

¹⁸ <https://bioeconomyfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Circular-Bioeconomy.pdf>

¹⁹ Irish Bioeconomy Forum’s report on education, training and skills, research and innovation

²⁰ <https://www.juniorentrepreneur.ie/>

Question 16: An important part of developing the bioeconomy is to determine the most appropriate practices, treatments, technologies, logistics and business models to valorise ecosystem services, primary and secondary biomass resources. What role do advisory systems play in addressing this challenge?

Considering the cross cutting nature of the bioeconomy – particularly in utilising waste to generate separate bio-based products across various sectors – there is a significant opportunity to integrate more circular based business models into firm’s production processes, allowing for more sustainable industrial development. However, identifying opportunities across the various sectors that encompass the bioeconomy and generating potential cross-sectoral partnerships can be quite challenging; a challenge if unaddressed is likely to restrict its ability to grow in the future.

On this basis, there is an opportunity in utilising the industrial knowledge and networks of regional based advisory agencies such as the Local Enterprise Offices, Enterprise Ireland, the IDA, the Regional Enterprise Plan programme managers, research centres and Higher Education Institutes in identifying potential opportunities to develop regional partnerships between firms that wish to embrace circular based business models; all with the view of supporting the development of the bioeconomy.

These regional based advisory agencies would be well positioned to link firms that could develop mutually beneficial partnerships while they could provide a profile of relevant client companies to active participants in the bioeconomy looking for potential collaboration opportunities. In doing so, these regional based advisory agencies could act as a facilitator, linking firms that could potentially work together in developing a more circular based business model, thereby developing job opportunities, supporting more sustainable and efficient industrial practices and growing the Irish bioeconomy.

Question 17: Are there any further Pillars/Issues which this Action Plan should address?

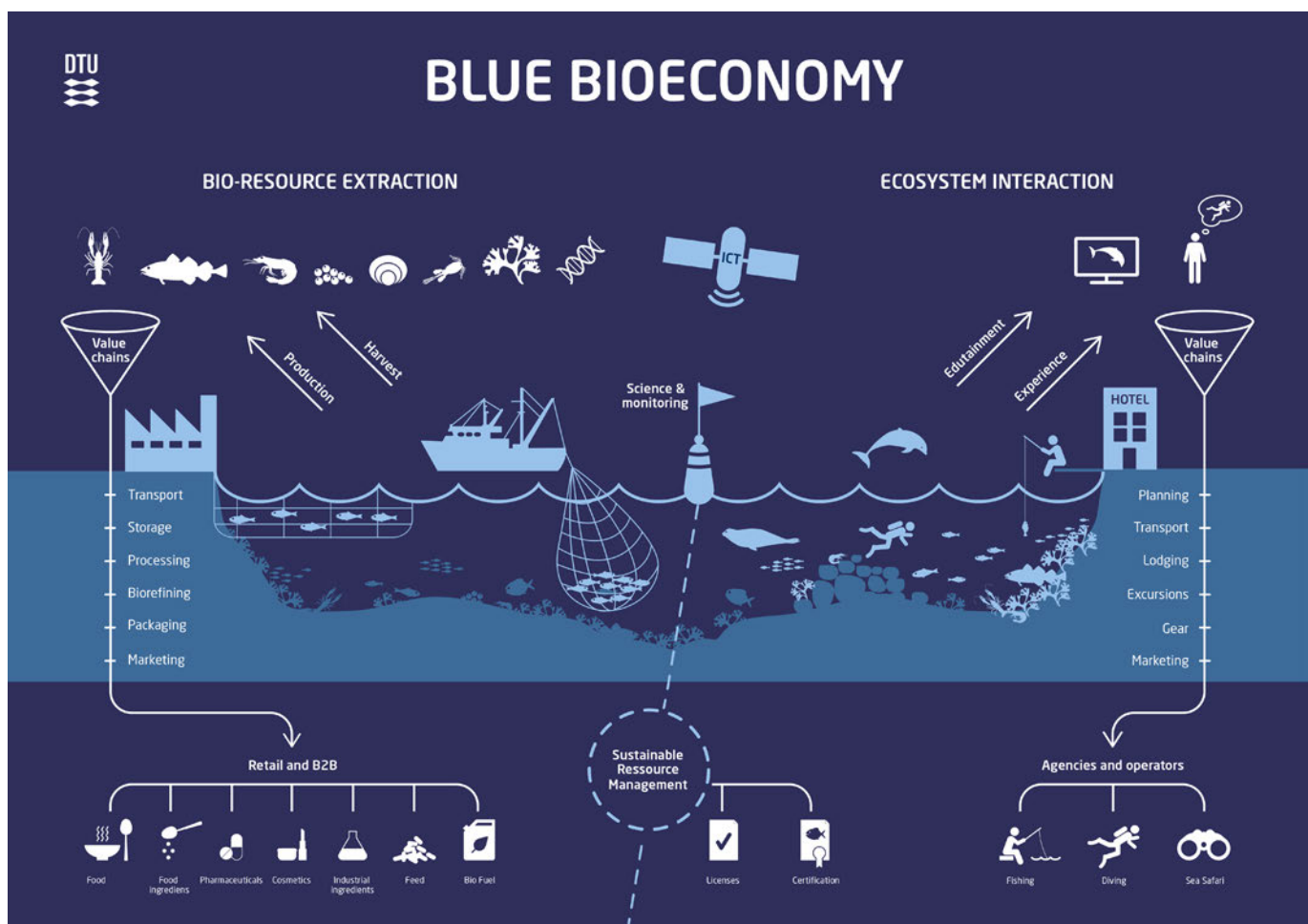
As previously noted, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly is generally satisfied with the Pillars that have been outlined in the consultation document on the National Bioeconomy Action Plan 2023-2025. That said, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly would recommend including an additional Pillar titled “Departments, Public Agencies, Regional and Local Authorities”. The purpose of this additional pillar would be to include a series of actions in the National Bioeconomy Action Plan which seeks to achieve more policy coherence and coordination in the development of the bioeconomy, ensuring policy is consistent at a national, regional and local level. Policy coherence is regarded as being essential to growing the Irish bioeconomy and this would be consistent with the views expressed in the National Policy Statement on the Bioeconomy (2018), the Bio-Éire project and stakeholders involved in the Irish Bioeconomy Foundation²¹ and the Bioeconomy Implementation Group.²²

²¹ <https://bioeconomyfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Circular-Bioeconomy.pdf>

²² <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/93222/41770461-c532-40f3-9abd-f0bddd03934e.pdf#page=1>

Question 18: Indicate what the top five priorities for action in the bioeconomy over the next three years should be?

- 1. Adopt a regional approach to developing the Irish bioeconomy, with a particular focus on the Northern and Western Region:** Adopting a regional approach to developing the bioeconomy will allow Ireland to move away from an inefficient “one size fits all” approach and build on each region’s distinctive competitive advantages.
- 2. Improve the funding opportunities available to businesses that wish to become more involved in the Irish bioeconomy:** One of the key development barriers facing the Irish Bioeconomy is that it has less capital funding opportunities available in comparison to other developed economies.²³
- 3. Explore the possibility of how the tax arrangements of participants in the bioeconomy can be made more financially attractive:** It has been noted by the Irish Bioeconomy Foundation²⁴ that the current taxation arrangements make circular business models less attractive for businesses compared to traditional linear based business models.
- 4. Improve consumer awareness about the terminology and benefits of bio-based products, services, and processes, making them more visible and understandable to the general public:** Research shows that 72% of Irish respondents were not aware of any bio-based products.²⁵ Improving consumer awareness will be key to improving demand for bio-based products and supporting the economic viability of the bioeconomy.
- 5. Increase the level of resources available to Higher Education Institutes and research centres to develop courses and undertake research projects related to the bioeconomy:** Supporting research and innovation will be key to supporting the viability of the Irish bioeconomy.



source: <https://www.aqua.dtu.dk/english/research/topics/blue-bioeconomy>

²³ <https://bioeconomyfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Circular-Bioeconomy.pdf>

²⁴ <https://bioeconomyfoundation.com/>

²⁵ <https://bioswitch.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/MDPI-Sustainability-Understanding-Consumer-Perspectives-of-Bio%E2%80%90Based-Products.pdf>

The continued development of the Irish bioeconomy has the potential to make a significant contribution to the implementation of National Planning Framework, Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for this region and the Climate Action Plan, providing extensive opportunities to provide more circular based business models, utilise waste and natural resources and generate more sustainable bio-based products and services for consumers.

Furthermore, the development of the bioeconomy also offers significant opportunities to support the delivery of balanced regional development in Ireland, given that many of the relevant businesses, suppliers and natural resources are located or suitable for rural oriented regions, such as the Northern and Western Region. As a result, the potential future growth of bio-based products and processes could generate significant economic opportunities in the Northern and Western Region's economy.

Capitalising on this potential could not be more important given that the region's economy has been experiencing significant challenges in recent years. As documented in the Assembly's submission on Budget 2023,²⁶ the European Commission downgraded the Northern and Western Region from a "More Developed Region" to a "Transition Region" – the only NUTS 2 Region in Ireland to hold such a status – while the European Parliament's Committee on Regional Development categorised the region as a "Lagging Region", which is a region characterised by extremely low growth which is divergent from the rest of its country. In conjunction to this, the Northern and Western Region is now the only NUTS 2 Region in Ireland to be classified by the European Commission as a "Moderate Innovator", which is a region to record a regional innovation index score between 70% and 100% of the EU average.

Considering these challenges and given that the Northern and Western Region has an array of relevant sectoral specialisms, natural assets and research resources that are applicable to the bioeconomy, it is clear that the National Bioeconomy Action Plan 2023-2025 has significant potential in rejuvenating the region's economy while also supporting our region's transition to a low carbon society. To achieve this, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly has provided its views on the proposed questions in the consultation document – as evident from Section 2 of this submission – with the Assembly's high-level priorities summarised below:

Key Priorities

1. Adopt a regional approach to developing the Irish bioeconomy, with a particular focus on the Northern and Western Region.
2. Improve the funding opportunities available to businesses that wish to become more involved in the Irish bioeconomy.
3. Explore the possibility of how the tax arrangements of participants in the bioeconomy can be made more financially attractive.
4. Improve consumer awareness about the terminology and benefits of bio-based products, services, and processes, making them more visible and understandable to the general public.
5. Increase the level of resources available to Higher Education Institutes and research centres to develop courses and undertake research projects related to the bioeconomy.
6. Undertake a bioeconomy feasibility study for the Northern and Western Region, with the view of identifying and mapping areas of potential growth for the region.

²⁶ <https://www.nwra.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/northern-and-western-regional-assembly-pre-budget-2023-submission97.pdf>



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