

Donegal County Council welcomes the approach to the development of a clear national context for the bioeconomy sector and the economic development potential afforded in relation to sustainable, value-chain development opportunities. Donegal County Council recognises that this must be undertaken in a manner that contributes to the State's climate change responsibilities and sustains the vitality of the economy of the County and the Region. With the continued focus by Donegal County Council and other development agencies on the sector, the preparation of such a National Policy Statement is timely in the context of emerging global trends and the macro economic factors that are likely to emerge as a result of Brexit. The identification of interlinking value chains in the bio-economy sector can provide sustainable benefits for the region and assist in mitigating the impacts of the UK decision to leave the European Union.

Regionally, the bio-economy sector is considered of key significance to the North West, particularly in the context of the collaborative efforts of Donegal County Council and Derry City & Strabane District Council where the spatial contract underpinning the development of the North West City Region by the neighbouring authorities is emphasised as a vital component in building future capacity for Donegal and the North West.

The sector is strategically supported in the suite of objectives and policies contained within the County Development Plan 2012-2018 (as varied). The County Development Plan is currently being reviewed and the strategies of the Draft Plan are being examined to ensure that the Plan continues to provide for the sustainable opportunities arising from the bio-economy sector.

In the context of the alignment of a National Policy Statement with wider national strategies, it is suggested that such a policy statement should also be explicitly cognisant of the on-going preparation of the National Planning Framework to ensure that there is a direct alignment of strategy at a national level and that the Statement reflects any emerging strategic positions on the sector in the National Planning Framework. This is considered essential to ensure that regional and county strategies can accurately reflect the national strategic context and help shape county and regional priorities. The Statement should also reflect the National Mitigation Plan and the National Adaptation Framework to lay the foundations for transitioning to a low carbon, climate resilient and environmentally sustainable economy by 2050.

With regard to the specific questions in the discussion document we believe that the definition used adequately encompasses the sectors within which there are opportunities for development. However, while there are many benefits to be had from the development of the bio-economy, the challenge to many companies and potential start-ups in this sector is that the costs very often exceed the potential returns, and without either changes to existing policies and subventions that affect the sector or the introduction of new incentives or supports they are unlikely to be sustainable. Unless there are real commercial opportunities nothing will happen.

A high level policy statement would be the proper first step in the development of the sector but then needs to be backed by an integrated strategy with identified business opportunities, quantified actions, identified supports and budget . Given the nature of the sector, this strategy will also need to integrate with other national policies and strategies, and with regional and sector strategies, as already referred to. This strategy then needs to be assigned to a relevant existing organisation/organisations or agency to make it happen. This entity/these entities would then be held accountable for the delivery of the strategy and its actions via an "oversight and insight" group made up of representatives from the relevant sectors, organisations, Departments etc.

The discussion document is a good first step in identifying a possible process for developing an integrated strategy. What is now needed is the engagement with the relevant industry sectors to identify the opportunities and obstacles and the current level of innovation and co-collaboration in the bio-economy. Having identified these, to then translate their substance into an actionable strategy.

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