

## Next 2 Met | Interreg Europe

Increasing attractiveness of Next2Met regions with soft  
digitalisation measures

### Action Plan

Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly

Ireland

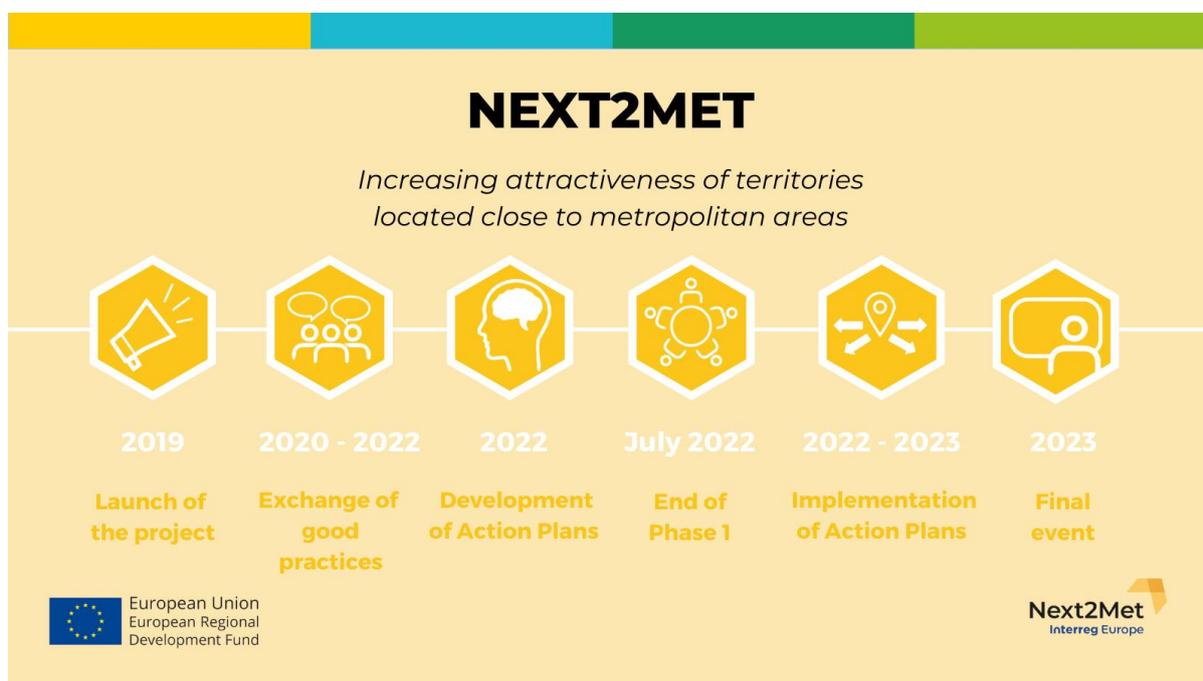
June 2022



Tionól Reigiúnach Oirthir agus Lár-Tíre  
Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly

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## Project and Policy Context



**Next2Met** is an innovative interregional exchange project, co-financed by the Interreg Europe programme, which aims at increasing attractiveness - for knowledge, opportunities, and capital - of territories located close to metropolitan areas.

These areas are confronted with a lack of tools and critical mass of research, development, and innovation, and therefore struggle with keeping experienced small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as highly qualified people in the region.

In this context, Next2Met worked for the improvement of policy instruments through interregional learning processes in **6 different regions**, focusing on **soft digitalisation measures** applied to a variety of sectors such as health care, transport, tourism, and public administration, among others.

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These actions, nurtured by the good practices exchange that took place between partners throughout the project's lifetime, are linked to a broader European policy context, which is constantly developing in response to major challenges and crises, as the COVID-19 pandemic.

By improving services and products with the use of technology and digitalisation measures, Next2Met contributes to the **digital and green transition**, helping the territories in reaching the Green Deal objectives. Furthermore, the project also addresses the following key goals identified in the European Commission's Communication [“Digital Compass: The European Way for the Digital Decade”](#), which sets out digital ambitions for the next decade:

- a digitally skilled population and highly skilled digital professionals;
- secure and sustainable digital infrastructures;
- digital transformation of businesses;
- digitalisation of public services.

Digitalisation processes and investments have been accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis which brought about a complete shift of perspective and made clear the necessity to foster digital development in numerous sectors. New trends and the use of digital tools in people's daily lives as well as in businesses' operations have emerged in this period and served as useful material and sources of inspiration for the project. As a reaction to the changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic on society and the way we live and work, the project has oriented its focus towards certain dimensions, already enclosed in its initial approach of “soft digitalisation”, such as 360° quality of life, multilocality and hybrid work, citizen participation and inclusion. The connection with citizens and their involvement in territorial development through bottom-up and participative initiatives has been further considered by the Next2Met project because of their relevance in the present context and at European policy level.

In fact, a human-centred perspective is at the core of the European Commission's vision for Europe's digital transformation by 2030. In this regard, on 26 January 2022, the Commission proposed an inter-institutional solemn [declaration](#) on digital rights and principles for the digital decade, which includes a specific point on citizens' participation in the democratic process at all levels and underlines the importance of citizens' control over their own data.

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Indeed, the Next2Met project has been able to adapt to this new context and ultimately benefit from it, by fostering the exchange of good practices among its partner regions and beyond and further implementing digitalisation measures that improve people's lives and increase regional attraction.

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## Executive Summary of EMRA's Action Plan

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) is the Irish partner in the next2Met project consortium. The region associated with the Next2Met project for EMRA is the Midland Strategic Planning Area which is located in the centre of the island of Ireland and has largely a rural, sparsely populated profile.

Through exchanges of experiences with partner regions as a direct result of engagement with Next2Met, EMRA has been inspired by Good Practices from Lower Austria that will be transferred to the Midland region. These Good Practices are: a mid- to long-term digitalisation strategy that is implemented at a regional level, as well as the House of Digitalization which is an initiative to develop a regional ecosystem that supports the digital transformation. Drawing direct inspiration from these Good Practices, **the action EMRA will undertake is to lead the development of a new digitalisation strategy for the Irish Midlands region.**

The creation of a new regional digital strategy will improve the management of the target policy instrument, the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Region 2019-2031. This policy instrument, by means of Regional Planning Objectives (RPOs), sets the context for each of the 12 local authorities within the Eastern and Midland Region (including the four counties in the Midlands, the target area of the Next2Met project) to develop their county and city development plans in a manner that ensures that national, regional and local plans are in alignment. The creation of a regional digital strategy will improve RSES implementation, by being a tool that provides a concise synthesis of all aspects of digitalisation in the RSES, thereby enhancing EMRA's ability to ensure consistency between local, regional and national plans.

All four Midlands counties have similar contexts that are distinct from their surrounding counties. Currently, no strategy exists for the development of digitalisation on a regional level. Nor does one exist that specifically addresses the common challenges and opportunities experienced in the Midlands SPA. Through the coordination offered in a Midland region-wide digitalisation framework that has a mid- to long-term strategic scale, synergies and mutually advantageous initiatives are better supported in ways that benefit the whole region as a great place to live, work and visit. This is where EMRA is best able to contribute through its role as the monitoring, oversight and coordination body for local development plans, thereby promoting enhanced co-ordination.

This Action Plan document outlines the steps that will lead to the drafting and adoption of a new digitalisation strategy for the Midlands region, and how progress on these steps will be monitored.

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## I. General Information

Project	Next2Met
Partner organisation	Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly
Country	Ireland
NUTS2 region	Eastern and Midland Region

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## II. Policy Context

The Action Plan aims to impact

- Investment for Growth and Jobs programme
- European Territorial Cooperation programme
- **Other regional development policy instrument/s**

Name of the policy instrument addressed

**Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Region 2019-2031**

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### III. Details of the Actions Envisaged

## Developing a New Digitalisation Strategy for the Irish Midlands

### 1. Background and Policy Context

#### 1.1 Profile of Region

The Eastern and Midland Region (EMR) is one of three NUTS2 regions in Ireland. It is located on the east side of the island of Ireland and is subdivided into three Strategic Planning Areas (SPAs) – the Dublin, Eastern and Midlands SPAs (see map in Figure 1). These areas have very different characters; Dublin SPA contains the capital city, whereas the Eastern and Midlands SPAs are increasingly rural and large portions of their populations commute to Dublin to work.

*Figure 1. Map of Eastern and Midland Region (EMR) showing the Midlands strategic planning area, the focus of the Next2Met project, in orange.*



The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA), the Irish partner in the Next2Met project, is a regional government body comprised of the 12 local authorities of the EMR who has statutory obligations in spatial planning at NUTS2 level. EMRA's competencies includes policymaking, monitoring, oversight and promoting enhanced co-ordination in the Eastern and Midland Region. The work of the Regional Assembly is defined by the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Region 2019-2031. The RSES is a strategic policy instrument which identifies regional assets, opportunities and pressures and provides appropriate policy responses in the form of Regional Policy Objectives (more information regarding this policy instrument can be found in section 2.3 below).

The **Midlands strategic planning area (SPA)**, the focus of EMRA's Next2Met project, is a region located close to a metropolitan area (Dublin) and has suffered from underinvestment in the past and is currently experiencing a decline in some economic sectors, particularly extractive and carbon-intensive industries such as peat harvesting for electricity production.

The Midlands SPA covers four local authorities (Laois, Longford, Offaly, Westmeath) in the heart of Ireland and is the most sparsely populated area in the EMR, with just 44 persons per square kilometre. Compared to the State and EMRA, the Midlands SPA is economically depressed with a median yearly income in 2017 of €17,035 compared to the EMRA average of €20,367 and national average of €19,178. While the region's economy has historically been dependent on extractive and carbon intensive industries, a key employer (Bord na Móna<sup>1</sup>) is diversifying away from peat extraction leading to recent job losses in the region. Conversely, the region has also seen a recent increase in foreign and Irish-owned companies in manufacturing (medical devices, pharma/bio, food, and engineering) due to the region's excellent national connectivity, educated workforce and relatively low cost of living. While it is well connected by national roads and rail networks, long commuting times can be a feature of life in the region, which is deleterious to quality of life. Additionally, an ongoing economic impediment for the region is the lack of rural broadband in certain areas.

*Assets in the Midlands Region:*

Enterprise and Industrial Assets, Tourism and Cultural Assets, Higher Education and Research Assets, Transport Assets.

*Challenges in the Midlands Region:*

Inadequate property solutions, lack of urban centres of scale, co-working infrastructure, lack of broadband connectivity, competition with larger cities for people, talent and knowledge.

<sup>1</sup> Bord na Móna is a semi-state company in Ireland that traditionally used peatlands as a fuel source for energy production. These peatlands that were used were largely located in the wider Midlands region in the centre of Ireland. In recent years, the company has fully suspended peat harvesting on its lands and is now focusing on renewable energy generation, recycling, waste management, and carbon sequestration. This rapid change in activities has had an impact on local employment.

The Midland region has immense heritage and natural beauty that supports multiple tourism, recreation, and amenity opportunities. While the region welcomes around 640,000 overseas and domestic visitors yearly (2017 figures) and brings in around €156 million (in 2017), there is a need for greater promotion and commercialisation of the tourism offerings and greater coordination across the tourism routes and destinations.

## 1.2 Digital Context

There have been efforts at the local, regional and national levels in Ireland to stimulate activity in the digital sector. Some relevant examples include:

- *National Digital Strategy* – the government launched on 1 February 2022 a new National Digital Strategy ‘Harnessing Digital – the Digital Ireland Framework’. This national strategy aims to drive and enable the digital transition across the Irish economy and society, and updates the previous strategy which was published in 2013.
- *National Broadband Plan* – a national government initiative to deliver high-speed broadband services to all premises in Ireland. Roll-out across Ireland is ongoing.
- *Local authority digital strategies* – each local authority in Ireland has recently drafted county-specific strategies to support local digitalisation aims.
- *Smart Community Initiatives* – part of the government’s digital strategy intends to expose and support local communities to digital content and technology into the community.
- *Digital innovation Programme* – provides funding for piloting of original and innovative local authority-led digital projects.
- *Grow Remote* – an organisation that aims to uncover and build a community around remote working.
- *EU Just Transition Plan* – Under the European Union’s Just Transition Mechanism, Ireland’s territorial plan for the EU Just Transition Fund will be applied to the wider Midlands region<sup>2</sup> (inducing the four counties within the Midlands SPA). This Plan will provide targeted support to Europe’s regions most affected by the transition to climate neutrality by enabling economic development and diversification and help people adapt to a changing labour market. Though the Plan is in early stages of development

<sup>2</sup> In relation to Ireland’s Territorial Just Transition Plan, the applicable area has yet to be defined at the time of writing. However, it will be applied to the ‘wider Midland region’.

and its application is being determined at the time of writing this document, it will support significant investment in the wider Midlands region. Additionally, EMRA has been designated the 'Managing Authority' to deliver the EU Just Transition Fund within Ireland.

These strategies help promote the roll-out and uptake of digital infrastructure and services throughout Ireland. However, although strategies exist on the national and local levels, **there currently is no strategy for the development of digitalisation on a regional level. Nor does a strategy exist that specifically addresses the common challenges and opportunities experienced in the Midlands SPA.** From an analysis of the current digitalisation strategies as developed by Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath, there exist opportunities for further scope and value added in creating a regionally coordinated approach to digitalisation.

Firstly, while these are the first digital strategies produced in the counties, the local authority digital strategies operate on various two- and four-year timeframes – ranging between 2020 to 2022, between 2021 to 2023 or yet another from 2020 to 2024. It was also noted in cross-examining these county-level strategies that potential exists for a more cohesive focus on promoting investment and linking to funding for further developments in the region. Learnings from Next2Met could enhance these digital strategies in the Midlands context, particularly in the context of remote working, working hubs, placemaking, smart tourism and clusters, which were among the good practices identified by Next2Met partners. All four Midlands counties have similar contexts that are distinct from their surrounding counties. By coordinating a Midland region-wide digitalisation framework that has a mid- to long-term strategic scale, there could be synergies and mutually beneficial initiatives that cross county boundaries to benefit the whole region as a great place to live, work and visit. This is where EMRA can contribute through its role as the monitoring, oversight and coordination body for local development plans, thereby promoting enhanced co-ordination.

### 1.3 Policy instrument focused on regional development

The policy instrument which is being addressed in this Action Plan for the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly is the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region 2019-2031. This policy instrument, by means of Regional Planning Objectives (RPOs), sets the context for each of the 12 local authorities within the Eastern and Midland Region (including the four counties in the Midlands, the target area of Next2Met) to develop their county and city development plans in a manner that will ensure that national, regional and local plans are in alignment. At this strategic level the RSES provides a framework for

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investment of local and national funds to better manage spatial planning and economic development to sustainably grow the Region to 2031 and beyond.

The RSES is built around three key principles, which are **healthy placemaking, climate action** and **economic opportunity**. Digitalisation as a topic is present in many sections of the RSES. Within the context of the Midlands region, 'digital' is mentioned in the RSES in relation to connectivity and infrastructure, regeneration and rural development, technologies embedded in smart cities and towns, and economic development. Furthermore, digital measures are directly applicable within 12 Regional Planning Objectives (RPOs). These RPOs are listed in Annex 1 of this document and relate to areas such as:

- Enhancing rural economic opportunities and resilience;
- Addressing climate change and sustainability;
- Supporting skills and innovation; and
- Promoting sustainable and high-quality ICT network in the region.

Having a digital approach to these 12 RPOs will make developments along these Objectives more impactful in the Midlands region for they will be more targeted in their delivery. As such, the management of these 12 RPOs will be improved through a cohesive regional-level framework around digitalisation at the core of this Action Plan.

The creation of a regional digital strategy will improve RSES implementation, by being a tool that provides a concise synthesis of all aspects of digitalisation in the RSES, thereby enhancing EMRA's ability to ensure consistency between local, regional and national plans. Additionally, the new regional digital strategy will incorporate important learnings from Next2Met that will make the framework more impactful.

Alignment with Next2Met project themes, and the opportunity to implement interregional learnings and transfers into a Midlands-level framework for digitalisation, as described in this Action Plan, represents a significant opportunity for EMRA to enhance application of RSES policy and practice on the ground. A co-operative digital strategy at the regional level that facilitates the implementation of the Regional Policy Objectives of the RSES allows for cohesive regional development and opens up future opportunities for funding from local or national funds, as it will help better coordinate activities at a regional level.

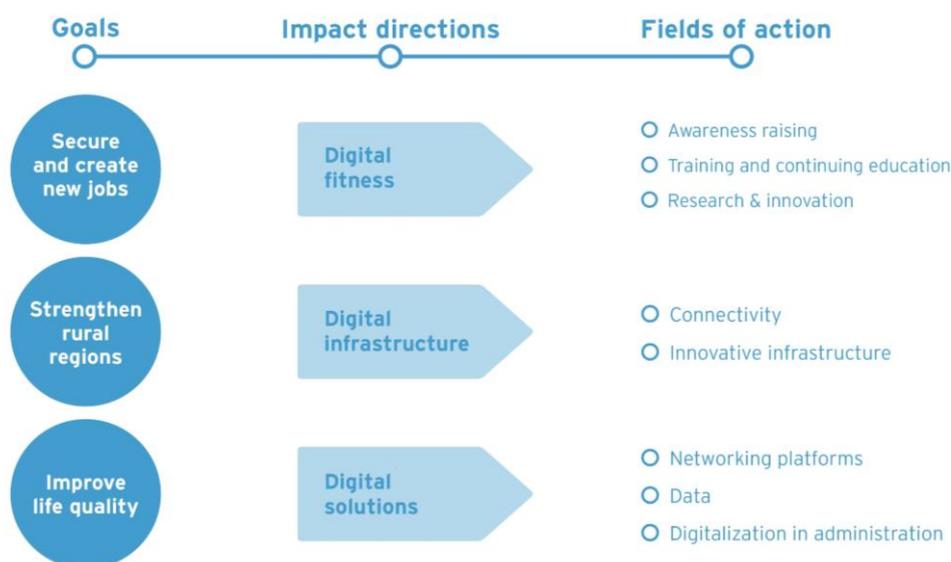
## 1.4 Lessons learned

From engagement with the Next2Met project and its partners, EMRA has engaged in valuable exchanges from which it has obtained key lessons for implementation into the local context. Of the good practices examined throughout the process, the ones that are deemed to potentially have the greatest impact in our context are the mid- to long-term digitalisation strategy and the House of Digitalisation examples, both good practices presented by Lower Austria.

### *A future-oriented mid- to long-term digitalisation strategy, presented by Lower Austria*

The good practice that has inspired EMRA was a regional, mid- to long-term digitalisation strategy that is people-centred with a holistic approach. The Next2Met partner from Lower Austria initially introduced EMRA to this concept during the second Policy Learning Event that took place on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2020 and was hosted by the Office of Lower Austria Federal Government. EMRA learned further details about this good practice when it was discussed with the Lower Austrian partner during two bilateral meetings between Ecoplus<sup>3</sup>, the Business Agency of Lower Austria, and EMRA on 9<sup>th</sup> February 2021 and 13<sup>th</sup> January 2022. There has also been ongoing correspondence between EMRA and Ecoplus to gain further clarification on specific details of the strategy. More profound learnings of the Lower Austrian strategy were attained during the Study Visit hosted by the Austrian partners on 17-18 May 2022.

Figure 2. Image presenting the outlines of the Digitalization Strategy of Lower Austria. Source: Office of the Lower Austrian Provincial Government, (no date). 'Digitalization Strategy – Lower Austria: Use the digital transformation. For country and people', Department of Economy, Tourism and Technology.



<sup>3</sup> Ecoplus is the Lower Austrian Business Agency implementing regional innovation programmes on behalf of the Regional Government.

To outline the inspirational good practice, Lower Austria has created and adopted a digitalisation strategy to develop digital transformation in the region. The strategy consists of three main goals: **to secure and create new jobs, to strengthen rural regions, and to improve quality of life**. It directs its actions around the areas of digital fitness, digital infrastructure and digital solutions. See image in Figure 2 showing outline of Lower Austria’s digitalisation strategy. The strategy states that it puts **“people” at the centre** of developments and hence focuses actions on raising awareness, supporting the transformation, enabling citizens to get the right qualifications and providing support. Lower Austria took a **holistic approach** to the strategy, concentrating rather **on methodologies than specific sectors**. This method provides applicability to all sectors that exist in the region, present and future, and it is flexible enough to apply to new technologies as they emerge in the future.

#### *House of Digitalization, presented by Lower Austria*

During the same above-mentioned discussions and meetings with the Lower Austrian partners, EMRA was also inspired by the House of Digitalization initiative. This is the lighthouse project of the Lower Austrian digitalisation strategy as just described. It is an initiative to develop a **regional ecosystem for education and training, science, industry, and administration in the digital transformation**. It aims to help companies within the region in their digital transformation, providing easy access to information, training, infrastructure and potential partners across institutions and sectors. A network of hubs throughout the region links experts in research centres and universities and facilitate technology transfers in collaborative projects. Additionally, an interactive web-based platform was established to provide information (relevant trainings, events, funds, etc.), showcases local success stories and matchmaking. The House of Digitalization is supported by regional government, with ERDF and regional funds and implemented by Lower Austrian business agency Ecoplus as the coordinating body, managing 4 clusters and 4 technopoles in Lower Austria. Ecoplus is also the Next2Met partner in Austria as of 2021.

### **1.5 How EMRA will adapt Good Practices to the Midlands Region**

Drawing inspiration from the Lower Austrian good practices described above, EMRA **will lead the development of a new Digitalisation Strategy for the Midlands region**. The regional strategy will also extract lessons from the effective use of networks in their House of Digitalization initiative to establish a digital **ecosystem** in the Midlands that will aim to create a **culture of digitalisation to support placemaking and economic development** in the area.

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EMRA will consult with local stakeholders and coordinate a regional strategy that incorporates the lessons from these Lower Austria's Good Practice examples. The strategy will take a **holistic approach** that does not single out particular sectors in order to support the diverse industries operating in the region – including agricultural sector, regional government, tourism and hospitality, pharmaceutical, food and engineering, and many more – and concentrate on maintaining a **mid- to long-term approach**.

#### *Action's effect on selected policy instrument*

EMRA plans to achieve a Type 2 policy change (a change in the management of the policy instrument – improved governance). Developing a Digitalisation Strategy for the Midlands would assist in the implementation of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) and relates to many Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs), particularly in regard to supporting a resilient economy, future proofing, building capacity, anticipating change, support urban and rural communities, and also more broadly around quality of life. As mentioned in section 1.3 above, the regional digital strategy will act as a tool that provides concise synthesis of all aspects of digitalisation in the RSES, ensuring consistency between local, regional, and national plans. It will also bring emphasis on the delivery of development objectives in a manner that supports digital solutions. Quicker and improved use of data makes it possible to enhance public, tourism, and health sector services, among others. Remote working can reduce traffic volume and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, assisting in the transition to a low-carbon and circular economy and better life quality for the region's citizens.

The expected outcomes of the Digitalisation Strategy will therefore be a new framework through which the RSES is implemented in the Midland region. It will be a new document administered alongside the RSES laying out a structure, or a more precise lens, that will accompany the application of the RSES within the identified territory. This will make the application of the RSES more targeted in the Midlands in ways that would emphasise soft digital solutions in the region's development. The digital Strategy will later be able to inform and contribute to the statutory review of the RSES due to take place between 2023 and 2025.

#### Expected Results of the Action Plan

The outcomes of this Action Plan are:

- To set in motion the steps that will enable the drafting of a Midlands Regional Digitalisation Strategy
- To co-create a new policy framework in the form of a Digitalisation Strategy that will benefit the Midlands Region

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## 2. Action

As described in the previous section, the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA), through direct engagement with the Next2Met project, was inspired by Lower Austria's good practices of implementing a mid- to long-term regional digitalisation strategy, as well as their holistic, ecosystem approach to the methodology and resulting strategy as presented in their House of Digitalization initiative. From these Next2Met learnings, **EMRA will lead the development of a new Digitalisation Strategy for the Irish Midlands region.** The below activities and steps to achieve this Action will enable EMRA to create this digitalisation strategy.

### 2.1 Steps to be taken and timeframes

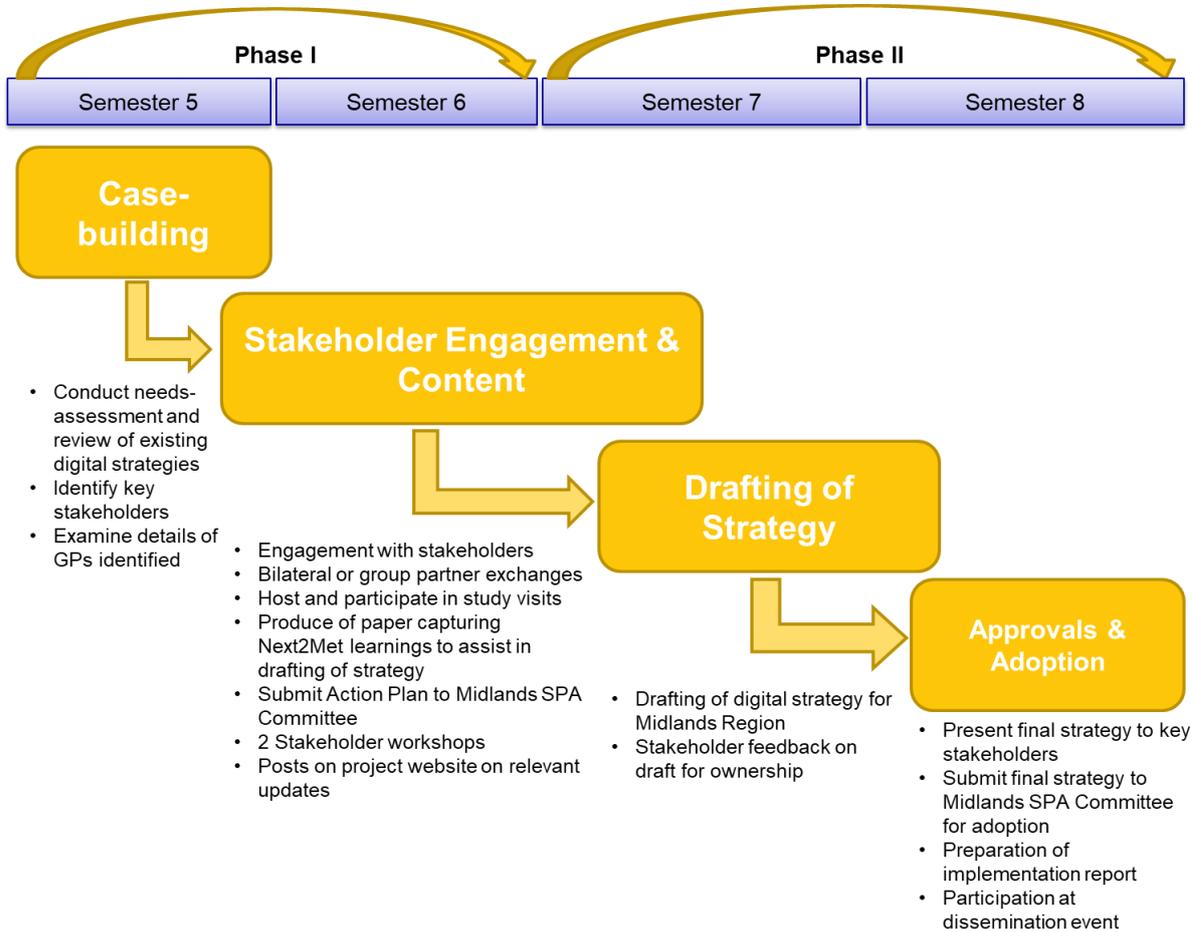
To implement the Action described – development of a new digitalisation strategy in the Irish Midlands – several steps will be required. These activities will centre around fact-finding and case building actions, actively engaging with local and regional stakeholder, drafting of the strategy through a co-operative manner, and assuring the appropriate approvals for adoption of the strategy. These steps are detailed with timeframes in the table below and are summarised graphically in Figure 3.

Next2Met Project Phases	Timeframe	Activities / Steps
<b>Activities planned during PHASE 1 OF PROJECT</b> (Planning stage for the development of a new digitalisation strategy)	<b>Semester 5 (Q4 2021)</b>	<b>Conduct a needs assessment through desk review</b> of existing digitalisation strategies drafted by local authorities and national strategy. Purpose is to define key advantages of a regional strategy for stakeholders. This action will identify needs of a regional strategy, where the existing strategies do and do not align, and how the strategy can be mutually supportive of existing strategies. It will also explore the reporting structures and timeline to identify potential synergies.
	<b>Semester 5 (Q4 2021)</b>	<b>Identify key stakeholders for network.</b> Phase 1 actions will include identifying and liaising with an initial and core group of stakeholders. The network of stakeholders will continue to expand as the action implementation progresses in Phase 2. This will be stakeholder-lead in that stakeholders will inform network composition and EMRA will act as the organising body of this network.

	<b>Semesters 5 &amp; Semester 6</b>	<b>Meetings and ongoing discussions with Ecoplus</b> , the Lower Austrian Next2Met partner, to clarify details of good practices (GPs) identified.
	<b>Semesters 5 &amp; Semester 6</b>	<b>Bilateral / group exchanges</b> with partners in connection to action plans and continued learning.
	<b>Semester 6 (Q1 2022)</b>	<b>Submit action to Assembly Members and the Midlands Strategic Planning Area (SPA)</b> Committee for political buy-in and engagement. This step will signal an agreement by Members that the action is a meaningful undertaking to improving the policy instrument (the RSES).
	<b>Semester 6 (Q2 2022)</b>	<b>Study visits to partner regions.</b> Participate in visits hosted by Witeno in Greifswald (30 March), Barcelona Provincial Council (27-28 April, EMRA to attend virtually), and by Ecoplus and the Office of the Lower Austrian Federal Government in Krems an der Donau (17-18 May) to gain deeper insights into the good practices identified and continue to learn from each other.
	<b>Semester 6 (Q2 2022)</b>	<b>Organise and host study visit to Irish Midlands.</b> EMRA to host Next2Met partners in the Midlands region to showcase and learn about digitalisation measures and opportunities in the region.
	<b>Semester 6 (Q2 2022)</b>	<b>Produce an internal memo</b> for drafting of the Digitalisation Strategy for the Midlands. This document will pull together all the relevant learnings obtained through the Next2Met project to help inform the drafting of the strategy and to ensure institutional transfer of knowledge across the organisation.
<b>Activities planned during PHASE 2 OF PROJECT</b> (Implementation and monitoring stage for the development of a new digitalisation strategy)	<b>Semester 6 &amp; 7 (Q2 &amp; Q3 2022)</b>	<b>Engage with key stakeholders in Midlands region to present Action Plan details</b> and begin building path towards a regional digitalisation strategy.
	<b>Semester 7 (Q3 2022)</b>	<b>Workshop 1.</b> A series of 2 workshops will be set up with the network and facilitated by EMRA to allow for collaborative creation of a regional digital strategy. The aim of the workshops is for the stakeholders to agree on a regional vision, define how they might work with each other, what they would need from each other and then to co-create the mid- and long-term digitalisation strategy.

		The first workshop will be an initial introduction to each other, getting familiar with the Good Practice identified from the Lower Austrian examples, the goals of creating a regional strategy, and identify some challenges to the current strategies and the opportunities in a regional strategy. It is envisioned that this workshop takes place in an in-person format (health situation permitting) to allow for networking opportunities.
	<b>Semester 7 (Q3 2022)</b>	<b>Workshop 2.</b> This second workshop will allow stakeholders to co-create the content and priorities of a long-term digital strategy for the Midland region. Details of this workshop will be developed. It is envisioned that this workshop will take place online or hybrid format to allow for maximum participation in remote areas.
	<b>Semester 7 (Q3 2022)</b>	<b>Regular communications posted on project website</b> will be made following each workshop.
	<b>Semesters 7 &amp; 8 (Q3 2022 - Q1 2023)</b>	<b>Drafting of a Digitalisation strategy for the Irish Midlands</b> – EMRA will lead the drafting of the strategy alongside the key stakeholders. The strategy will be informed by all the work done to date including the Good Practice identified, the internal memo, consultations with stakeholders through stakeholder meetings and in the workshops process.
	<b>Semester 8 (Q1 2023)</b>	<b>Submission of the Digitalisation Strategy</b> to the Midlands SPA Committee and advisory key stakeholders for approval. It would thereafter go to the full Assembly for approval. This will be recorded in the minutes of the Assembly meeting. This step will signal the policy change in implementation of the RSES policy instrument.
	<b>Semester 8 (Q 1 2023)</b>	<b>Submit Policy Change into iOLF</b> following submission to the Midlands SPA Committee and the Assembly.
	<b>Semester 8 (Q1 &amp; Q2 2023)</b>	<b>Preparation of an implementation report</b> on the achievements of this action plan for dissemination event and final report to joint secretariat.
	<b>Semester 8 (Q2 2023)</b>	<b>Participation at final Next2Met project dissemination event and partner meeting.</b>

Figure 3. Graphic Summary of how EMRA will implement the Action Plan



### 3. Players involved

To drive forward the process of creating the regional Digitalisation Strategy and for the long-term buy-in, involvement of stakeholders from multiple sectors will be required. It is also beneficial to include stakeholders who already have a broad range of contacts within their own networks and communities. EMRA will direct the network activities and lead in the drafting of the new regional digitalisation strategy with input from the stakeholders. The stakeholders in the network will form an advisory body that is consulted to co-create the strategy's content.

On a higher-level view, EMRA will look to involve local stakeholders from the following areas:

- Local Authorities in Midlands, including the digitalisation officers within each county council
- Local Enterprise Offices in the Midlands
- Private sector associations
- Community and Voluntary groups
- Education institutions
- SMEs representatives
- Agri-sector representatives
- Tourism sector bodies
- Midlands Regional Transition Team (MRTT)
- EMRA members (Assembly) through the Midlands SPA committee
- Department of Public Expenditure and Reform - Governing body for the National Development Plan's Digital Transition Fund which is directed at supporting SMEs in their digital transitions
- Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications – National government body guiding the National Broadband Plan and the National Digital Strategy.

#### 4. Costs and Funding Sources

The staff of EMRA will undertake the actions outlined in this Action Plan as part of their institutional activities, implying no additional costs besides those outlined in the initial application budget. Local stakeholders will use their own resources.

## 5. Monitoring and indicators

The overall objective of EMRA's Next2Met Action Plan is to create a new digitalisation strategy for the Midlands Region. The existence of this new strategy will in turn enhance the management and implementation of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) as it aligns Regional Planning Objectives along the themes of the Next2Met project and co-ordinates action at a regional level. The Action Plan outcomes represents a significant opportunity to enhance policy and practice and opens up future opportunities for funding from local and national funds.

To monitor the implementation of this Action Plan, the following indicators will apply:

- **2 workshops** will be conducted to create the strategy itself. Strategic objectives contained in the strategy will be stakeholder led with facilitation by EMRA.
- **Creation of a policy framework** via a Digitalisation Strategy for the Irish Midlands that creates the conditions for digitalisation products, applications and services that help regional priority RIS3 sectors.
- **Approval** of the policy framework by the Midlands SPA Committee. This will be captured in the meeting minutes.

<b>Date</b>	EASTERN & MIDLAND 27 JUN 2022
<b>Signature</b>	REGIONAL ASSEMBLY 
<b>Stamp of the organisation (if available)</b>	EASTERN & MIDLAND REGIONAL ASSEMBLY

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