CARLOW KILKENNY WATERFORD WEXFORD

# South East

## ECONOMIC MONITOR – SUMMER 2025


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SENSER South East Network for Social Economic Research


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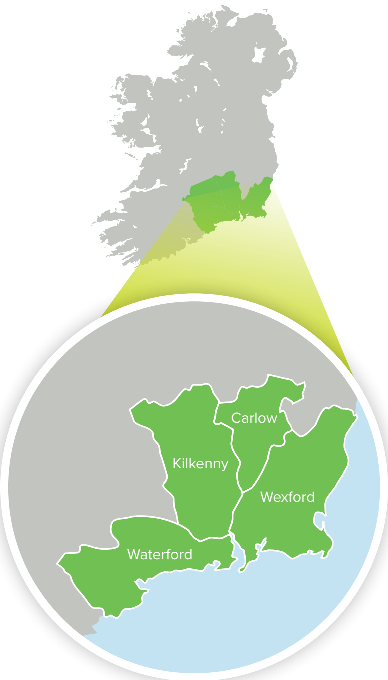
**8.9%**
of the national population live in the South East
(456,228 in Census 2022)




South East generates
**4% of National GDP**
SE GDP €20.4bn in 2023

**4% of Income Taxes**
€1.41bn of Income Taxes in 2024

**1.8%** of ongoing major public capital spending
€822m of the €46.7bn being spent

**5.4%**
of **FT undergraduate** degree places

**€286,000**
median house price
Housing remains significantly more affordable than national average

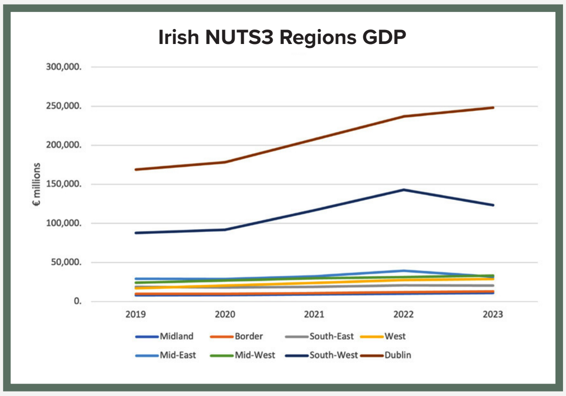
**5.4%**
of IDA supported jobs
15,580 IDA jobs 2024

**6.4%**
more people in work versus 2023.
Record number of people in work

**475,000**
estimated population 2024
A post-famine high

# ECONOMIC OVERVIEW: FLATLINING IN A BOOMING ECONOMY

**While the national economy has significantly outperformed expectations—recording GDP growth of 40.2% since 2019 and maintaining strong employment levels—the South East, like other disadvantaged regions follow a notably different trajectory.**




Over the same period, the region's GDP has grown by just 8.2%, with two of the last five years showing contraction. Despite its limitations in the Irish context, Regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) remains the primary benchmark of economic performance—and by that standard, the South East has seen virtually no growth since 2018.

The divergence between regions is becoming more pronounced. Dublin's economy is now over twelve times the size of the South East's, despite having just three times the population. In 2021, the ratio was nine to one. This gap continues to widen, driven by concentrated growth in a small number of urban cores—particularly Dublin and the South-West.

Although the national recovery from the pandemic has been strong—reflected in buoyant tax receipts and resilient domestic demand—its benefits have not been evenly distributed. The South East continues to lag behind national averages across key metrics, including labour force participation, income tax receipts, disposable income, and public capital investment.

Meanwhile, the region's foreign direct investment (FDI) base remains weak. Progress on major infrastructure projects—across higher education, healthcare, transport, and other strategic assets—has been slow or stalled, as reflected in stark capital spending data.

# LABOUR MARKET

## Continued growth in employment, albeit at a slower pace; unemployment rate increased.

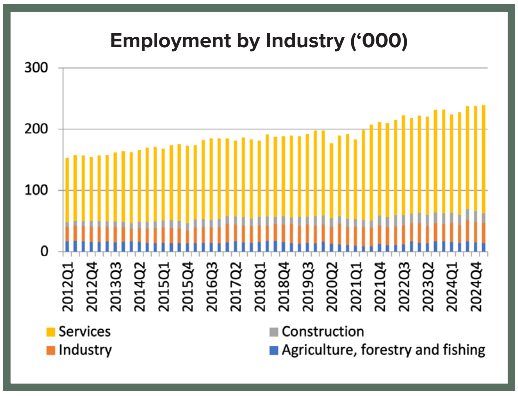
The SE labour market continues to grow, with employment growing at almost twice that of the State and reaching record levels. The last year saw a substantial increase in labour force participation in the region and this progress towards one of the pillars of the government's Future Jobs Ireland 2019. Although this is to be welcomed, it has resulted in a sharp increase in the unemployment rate and the region once again has the highest rate of all the regions. Furthermore, job quality metrics continue to display evidence that the region underperforms.

### Impressive employment growth to record high

**The number of people at work in the SE continues to grow with an additional 14,500 people at work over the 12 months to Q1 2025.**

This brings total employment to the record high of 239,400 and represents an impressive growth of 6.4%, almost double the nationwide growth rate of 3.3%. This increase is almost entirely attributable to impressive gains in the Services sector (+16,100 or +6.1% y-o-y) and relatively modest growth in Industry, which mask fewer jobs in the Construction and Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing sectors. Employment growth nationally was more balanced with growth in all broad categories except Agriculture, forestry, and fishing.

*Source: CSO LFS (Q1:2025)*

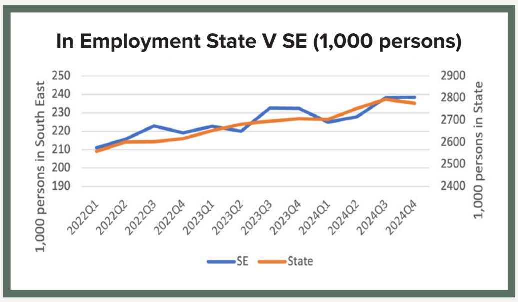



### Record regional employment

**Employment in the SE has continued to grow, with levels comfortably higher than pre-pandemic and reaching a new high.**

Employment increased annually in the region from 199,000 people in Q1 2020 to 238,400 in Q4, 2024, a 20% increase over the past five years, tracking closely the national uplift.

*Source: CSO LFS (Q4:2024)*




### Unemployment rate decreases, but still considerable labour market slack

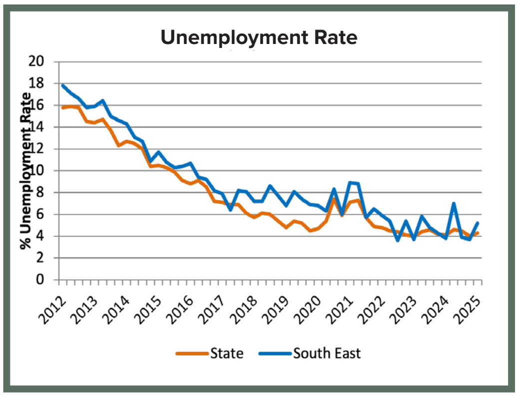
**The unemployment rate in the SE increased to 5.2% from 3.8% one year earlier despite strong job creation as the participation rate in the SE increased significantly (which is one of the goals contained in Future Jobs Ireland 2019).**

The unemployment rate in the SE remains the highest in the State. Furthermore, the gap between the region and the State is understated due to the lower participation rate in the SE (63.9 v 65.8%); however, this gap decreased significantly in the last year, and the SE no longer has the lowest rate of all regions. Were the SE to have the same participation rate as the State, an additional 7,500 people would be in the labour force in the region (down significantly from 18,800 one year earlier).

The lower participation may reflect the relative lack of high-quality work to attract people with choices into the labour market.

The Live Register figures back up the relatively weak labour market in the SE, as the region accounts for 10.7% of people on the live register. However, it did see a yearly decrease of 3.5% against the background of a national decline of approximately 1%.

*Source: CSO Live Register & LFS (Q1:2025)*




| | Unemployment Rate | | Participation Rate | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **State** | **SE Region** | **State** | **SE Region** |
| Q1 2023 | 3.7% | **4.0%** | 65.0% | **61.4%** |
| Q1 2024 | 3.8% | **4.1%** | 65.0% | **60.9%** |
| Q1 2025 | 4.3% | **5.2%** | 65.8% | **63.9%** |

# LABOUR MARKET *(continued...)*

## Household Income in the South East: Below Average and Uneven

**This table presents a snapshot of household income in the South East in 2023, benchmarked against national figures. The region accounts for just under 9% of the national population but lags behind across most headline income metrics.**

The South East generated €13.56 billion in primary income (earnings before taxes and transfers), just 83.2% of the national average per person. This is largely due to lower employee compensation, which is just 81.9% of the national per capita figure. In contrast, income from self-employment is relatively strong, exceeding the national average by 15%.

However, the region earns significantly less from property income: rents and dividends are just 59.0% and 86.9% of the national average respectively. This suggests a narrower asset base, pointing to deeper structural gaps between the region and the state's wealth accumulation and capital income.

Social transfers in the South East are relatively high—111.6%of the national average—reflecting the redistributive effect of the Irish welfare system. Even so, total household income (after transfers, before tax) is just 87.8% of the national average, and after taxes, 2023 disposable income per person in the South East was €26,662—about €1,700 less than the national figure.

This data confirms the region's position as structurally underperforming in income terms, with persistent shortfalls in earnings and household wealth that are only partially offset by the tax and transfer system.

*Source: CSO CIRGDP2023*

| 2023 | Wages & Salaries | Self Employed Income | Rental Income | Net Interest & dividends | Primary Income | Social Transfers | Total Household Income | Taxes | Disposable Household Income | Disposable Income per Person |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | €m | €m | €m | €m | €m | €m | €m | €m | €m | € |
| South East | 10,334 | 1,715 | 829 | 684 | 13,562 | 3,525 | 17,087 | 4,531 | 12,556 | 26,662 |
| 8.89% of State | 12,619 | 1,491 | 1,403 | 787 | 16,299 | 3,158 | 19,457 | 6,100 | 13,357 | 28,370 |
| South East compared to the State | 81.9% | 115.1% | 59.0% | 86.9% | 83.2% | 111.6% | 87.8% | 74.3% | 94.0% | 94.0% |

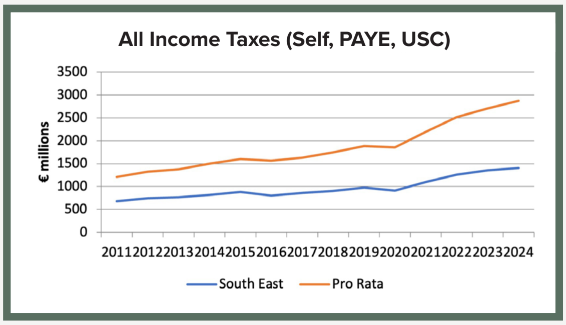
# Job Quality

## SE continues to lag State in income tax returns

**The SE returns approximately half of the income taxes that one would expect based on population share.**

This is indicative of the combined effect of lower average wages and higher rates of unemployment. The region lacks quality PAYE jobs (46% of the average PAYE+USC), with income taxes from self-employed individuals at 78% of the State average.

*Source: Revenue Commissioners*

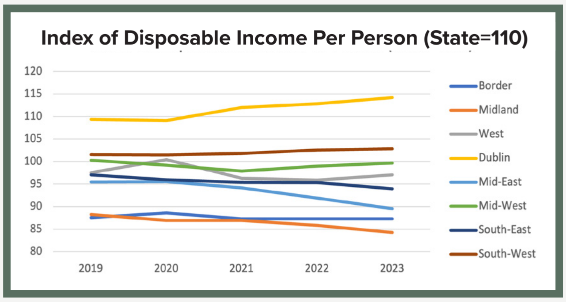



**Disposable income per capita allow us to visualise discrepancies in income between regions.**

At €32,393 per person, Dublin is significantly above the state average, and this gap as disposable income has risen by 25% in three years (from €25,801 in 2020). Post pandemic, relative disposable income has declined in the South East, Midlands and Mid East.

At €26,662, disposable income per person in the South East is 21% lower than Dublin's level.

*Source: CSO RAA03 2023 data/ Feb 2025*



# INDUSTRIAL, ENTERPRISE AND INNOVATION

## Agency-Supported Employment: IDA underperforms in region; EI overperforming but overall a large deficit remains.

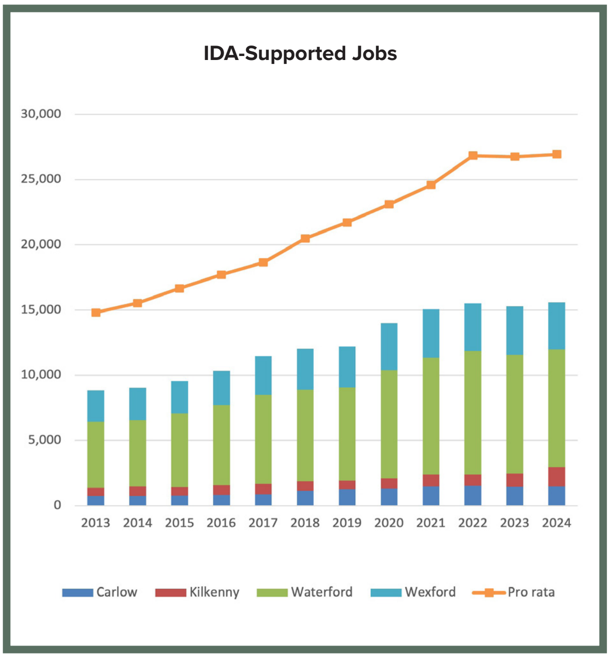
**The IDA had an underwhelming year in 2024, with national employment rising just 0.66% after a small decline in 2023.**

The South East saw modest growth of 2%, increasing its share of IDA-supported jobs to 5.4% (up from 5.1%). This reduced the region's direct jobs deficit slightly to 11,360.

Based on the IDA's multiplier (0.8 indirect jobs per 1 direct), the total IDA-related jobs shortfall in the South East is approximately 20,450.

Over the past five years, IDA-supported jobs in the region have grown by 11.5%—the second-lowest rate in the country—compared to 16% nationally. In 2024, there were 15,580 IDA jobs in the region. A population-based pro-rata share (8.89%) would be 26,940, leaving a gap of 11,360 direct jobs.

FDI roles are typically the highest-paying and most productive in the economy, with MNC employees generating €414 per hour versus €55 in the indigenous sector. Within the region, growth has been uneven: Carlow and Wexford remain static; Kilkenny has seen a significant uplift (likely due to Abbott); and Waterford has declined, with closures such as Cartamundi.

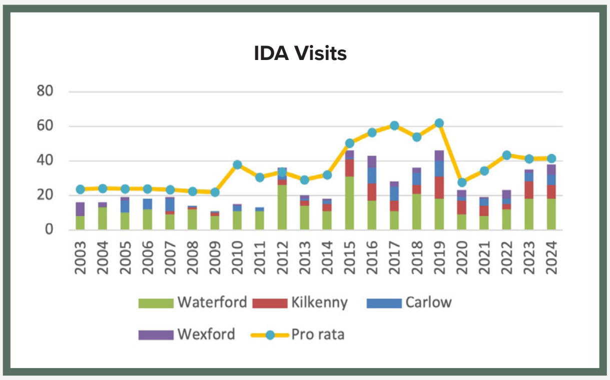



*Source: IDA; PQ [1732/25]*

## IDA job growth depends on existing firms expanding or new firms locating in Ireland.

**Site visits, though sometimes repeated or overlapping, are a useful proxy for investment intent.**

In 2024, site visits to the South East rose to 8.2% of the national total (up from 7.5% in 2023 and the decade outrun of 6.4%), which shows meaningful progress in improving the IDA pipeline of new firms.

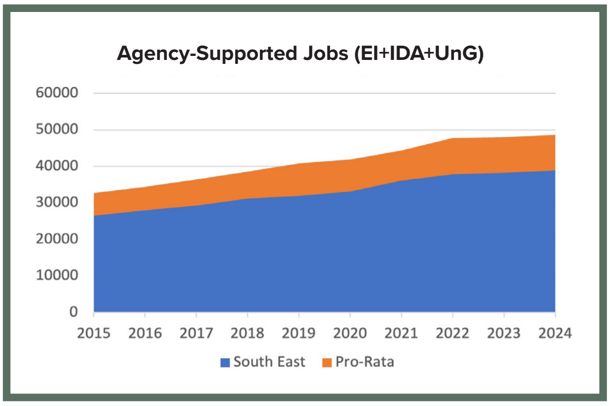



## Enterprise Ireland (EI) jobs reflect the other key source of government agency-supported jobs.

**In 2024 the SE was over-represented in these jobs, accounting for approximately 9.8% of EI-supported employment (2023: 10.1%).**

This relative over-performance represents an additional 2,174 jobs and reduces the overall deficit of agency-supported jobs. The SE performs particularly well in terms of Local Enterprise Office (LEO) grant supported clients, accounting for approximately 13.7% of these jobs in 2023.

However, when looking at the overall picture, including also Údarás na Gaeltachta (UnG) jobs, the SE has a deficit of 9,700 direct government agency-supported jobs.




*Annual Employment Survey 2024, LEO Impact Report 2023. PQ [7861/25]*

# CAPITAL SPENDING AND COST OF LIVING

## Capital spending skewed against Balanced Regional Development

**The Government's Capital Tracker, updated in May 2025, lists 268 major public investment projects at county level, from pre-tender to implementation stages.**

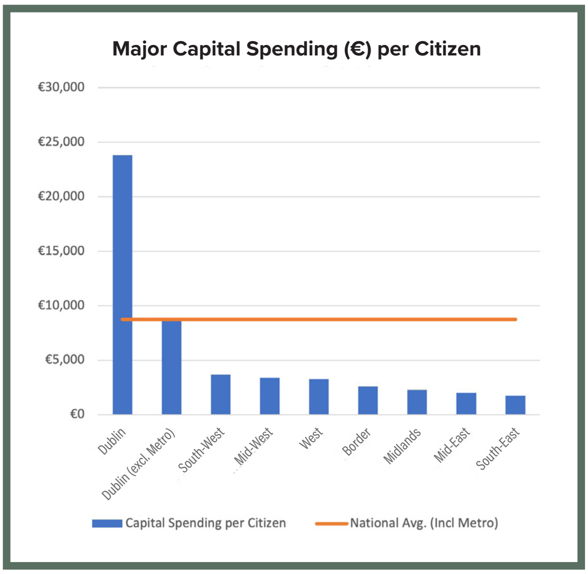
Using mid-point cost estimates and corroborated by media and political sources, we also estimate values for commercially sensitive and €1bn+ projects.

The national imbalance is stark.

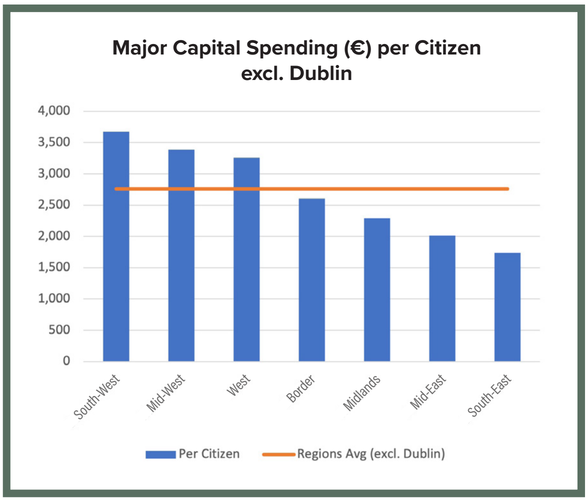
Dublin, with 28% of the population, is in the process of receiving 56% of capital spending—even excluding Metro North— that is more than double its proportional share. This highlights the failure of repeated government commitments since 2018 to deliver balanced regional development.

The South East, despite marquee projects like the North Quays, has the lowest per capita investment at €1,738—around €7,000 below the national average—reflecting a persistent pattern of regional underinvestment.

*Source: Capital Tracker, DPER, May 2025*




| | Capital Spending per Citizen |
|---|---|
| Dublin | €23,817 |
| Dublin (excl. Metro) | €8,683 |
| South-West | €3,675 |
| Mid-West | €3,389 |
| West | €3,255 |
| Border | €2,608 |
| Midlands | €2,292 |
| Mid-East | €2,013 |
| South-East | €1,738 |




## Cost of Living continues to bite

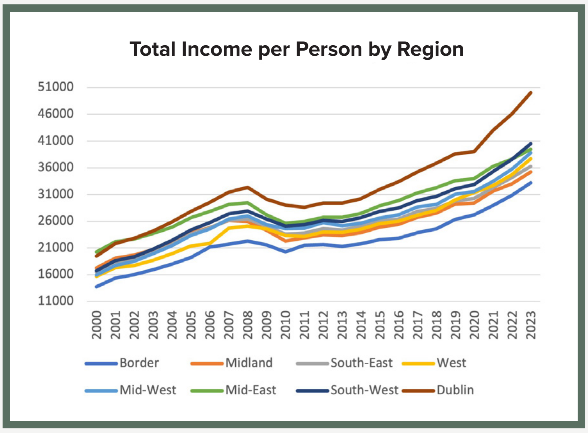
**Rising prices have defined the Irish economy since 2020. While inflation has eased, the impact on households remains significant.**

Though regional data is limited, CSO and ESRI estimates show that poorer, older, and rural households—prevalent in the South East—face higher inflation, especially for housing, energy, and transport.

Long-term, wages in the region have broadly kept pace. But between 2020 and 2022, median wages fell behind inflation, cutting purchasing power by 10–12%—a gap likely to have widened in 2023.

Understanding real income trends is key to shaping effective, regionally responsive policy.

*Sources: CSO CPI Monthly Series, EAADS, Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics (2023, 2024)*



# HIGHER EDUCATION

## Brain-drain continues despite amalgamation of Carlow and Waterford ITs

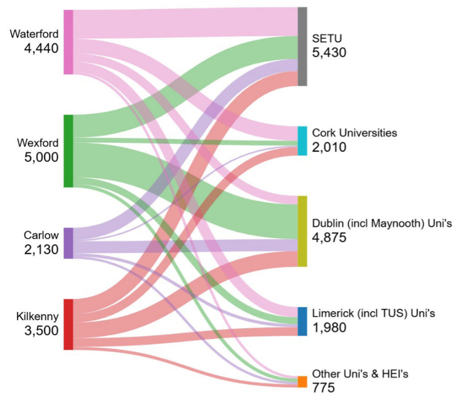
**In 2023/24, there were 15,070 full-time higher education students from the South East (down from 15,270 in 2022/23), representing 7.3% of the national total – below the region's 8.9% population share.**

Only 36% (5,430) studied within the region; 64% (9,640) left, creating economic leakage and higher costs for families during their studies. In contrast, 74.4% of students from the South West (Cork and Kerry) stayed local, with just 25.6% studying elsewhere.

The annual cost of higher education in Dublin, including accommodation, is estimated at €16,000–€20,000.

*Source: HEA; TU Dublin Students Union Cost of Living Guide*

**Full Time Undergraduate Students in Higher Education 2023/24** (n=15,270)




## Capital Spending on Higher Education

**The new Technological University is the leading initiative to halt the region's brain drain by adding new student places, courses, disciplines and resources.**

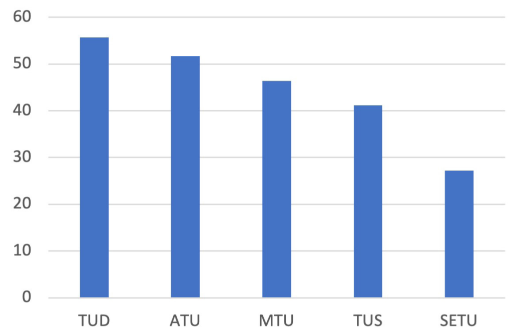
With the first TU established five years ago, we can see clearly the trend whereby SETU is funded at around half the rate of TU Dublin, Atlantic TU and Munster TU, and two thirds the rate of TU Shannon.

Since their founding, €222m of Government funding has been provided to support capital development (by April 2025), with 12% of that investment made in the South East.

In addition to these reported expenditure, significant PPP capital projects are being delivered for TU Dublin, and MTU. Important to note that most other regions with TUs have universities, each typically having a capital plan in excess of €200m every five years.

*Source: PQ 19515/25*

**Capital Expenditure Per Technological University 2020 - 2025**
(€m)




# HOUSING MARKET

## SUPPLY

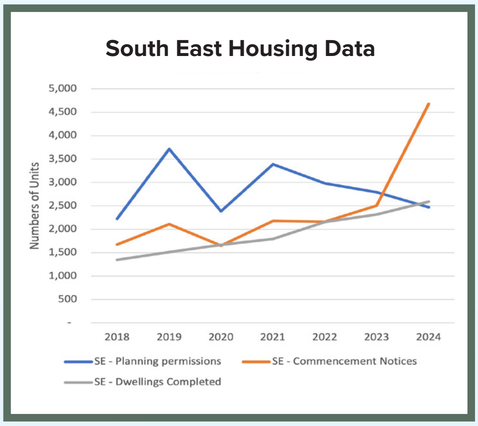
### Housing supply growing but below expected demand

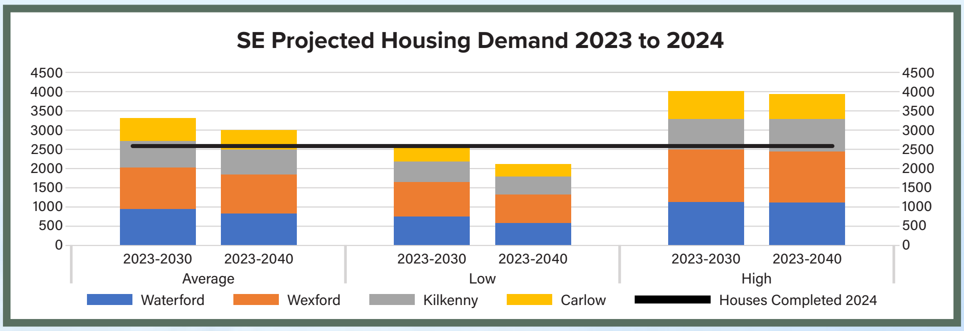
**Housing affordability depends on supply, which government policy aims to boost. Future supply follows a pipeline from planning permissions to commencements to completions—often with delays.**

Completions have risen steadily for six years, reaching over 2,500 units in the South East in 2024. However, this is still 21% below projected demand—although this represents a better outcome than the national shortfall of 31%.

*Source: CSO Planning permissions, commencement notices, dwellings completed*

*Source: Housing projections Bergin, Adele, and Egan, Paul. Population projections, the flow of new households and structural housing demand. ESRI No. 190. Research Series, 2024.*




# HOUSING MARKET *(continued...)*

## AFFORDABILITY

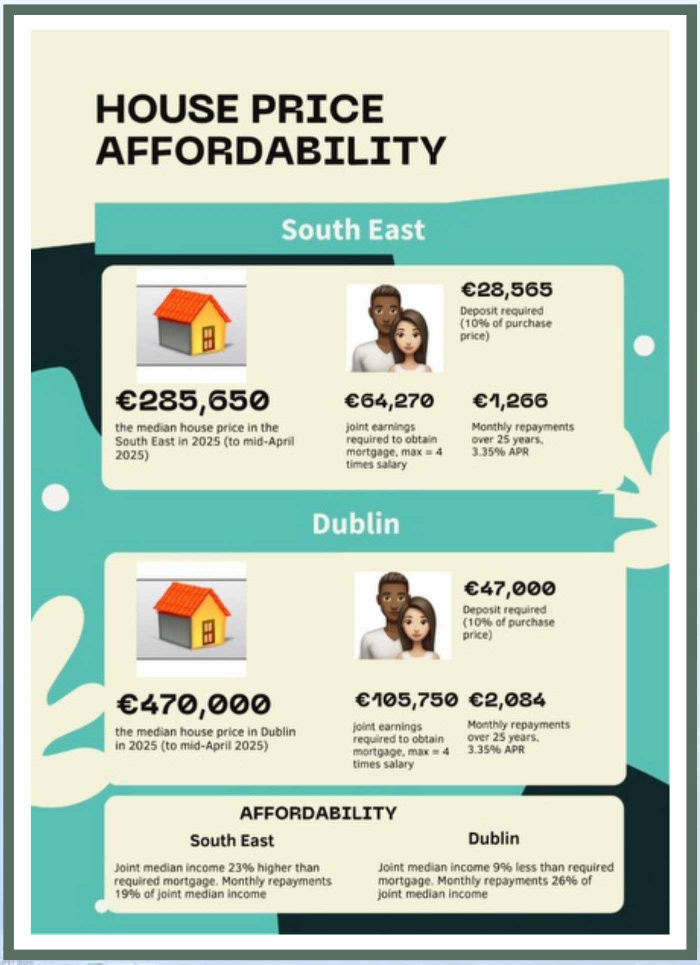
### Housing in the South-East is relatively more affordable

**House prices in the South East have recovered strongly since the crash, with all counties following similar trends.**

While still below the national average – skewed by Dublin – the median house price in the region has more than doubled from €125,000 in 2014 to €285,650 in 2024.

Affordability remains a concern. However, a median-income couple in the South East can buy the median house within Central Bank lending limits, with repayments at just 19% of joint income. In contrast, Dublin's median couple cannot qualify for a mortgage on a median-priced home, despite higher incomes, highlighting a sharper affordability crisis there.

*Source: Property Price Register (market based transactions to April 2025). Median earnings from CSO (Administrative Data Sources. Prices are 2025, Earnings are lagged one year).*




# DEMOGRAPHICS

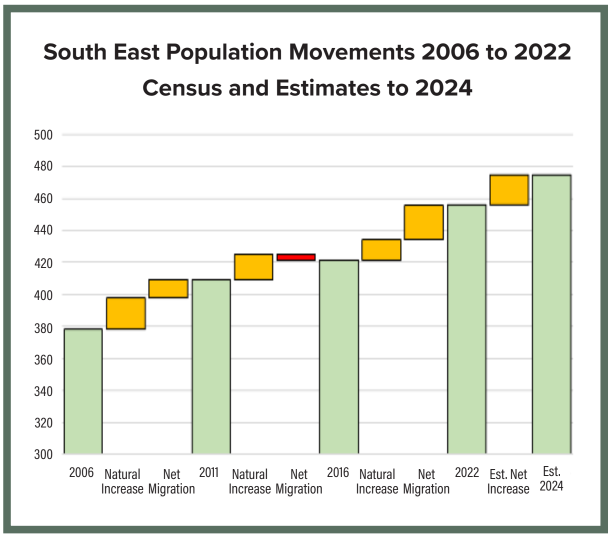
## Demographic Changes

**The South East's population has grown by 26% since 2006, mirroring national trends. Growth has continued since the 2022 Census, increasing pressure on health, education, and housing.**

Net migration is the main driver, with strong inflows since the last census. However, natural increase is declining—likely due to lower fertility and an ageing population. Migration, as past recessions show, remains sensitive to economic conditions.

The population of the region is now at a 160 year high, although there is some way to go before the population exceeds that of the 1841 census where there were 687,000 in the region.

*CSO Census 2022 Preliminary Results (and prior census) and CSO Population Estimates for 2023 and 2024. CSO historic census data.*




# SENTIMENT INDICATORS: CONSUMPTION

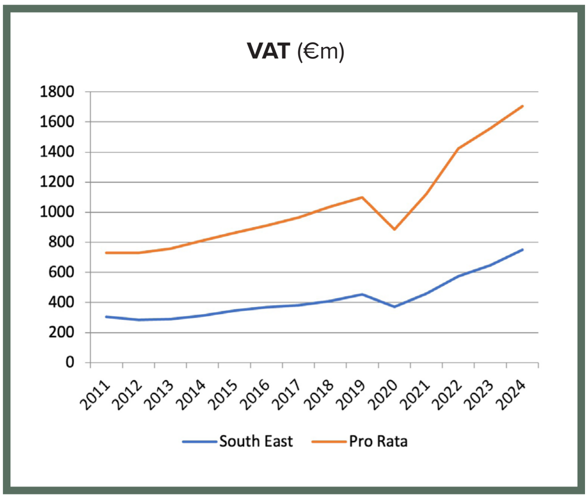
## VAT returns increase significantly but still provide evidence of relatively low consumption

**In the absence of regional data on consumer spending and sentiment, VAT receipts by county provides a proxy.**

In 2024 VAT returns increased at a faster rate than across the State (16% v 9.4%). Although this resulted in an increase in the SE share, with 8.9% of the population of Ireland living in the SE, the region returns just 3.9% of the VAT, i.e., approximately 44% (2023: 40%) of what might be expected based on population.

While a certain amount of this arises from retail leakage to other regions, it does suggest relatively weaker consumer spending and sentiment in the region, possibly arising from the weaker labour market.

*Source: Revenue Commissioners*




# ABOUT

This is the eighth edition of the South East Economic Monitor. Since 2016, it has tracked the economic fortunes of the South East region. The report is prepared by independent, non-politically affiliated academics who are part of the South East Network for Social and Economic Research (SENSER), an initiative of the School of Business at South East Technological University. All opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the university. SENSER is committed to publishing research that meets appropriate academic standards and is fully open to public scrutiny. We welcome feedback and encourage readers to bring any errors or omissions to our attention.

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