

# THE WEST'S AWAKE!

With a new board just appointed to the Western Development Commission, 'Council Review' takes a closer look at how the only regional development authority in the country has been helping to shape policy in the west of the country for close to 20 years.



**T**he Western Development Commission (WDC) continues to play a vital role in the economic and social development of the seven counties of the western region – Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Mayo, Galway and Clare – since it was set up in 1998.

Over the past five years, it has supported more than 2,500 jobs in the region and directed almost €13 million in investment capital to enable regional growth.

The State body was initially set up almost 20 years ago as a government response to intense public pressure to help tackle the massive population decline the region had endured over many years. The scale of this decline, coupled with the region's peripheral location and weak infrastructure, resulted in little investment being attracted to the West at that time.

The Commission was set up to promote, foster and encourage economic and social development in the seven counties. The WDC is unique as it is the only agency with the remit to advise national government on policy changes vital for the west. In fact, it is the only regional development authority in the country.

## HIGH QUALITY ANALYSIS

The WDC ensures that government policy is directed at improving the social and economic situation in the region. It also develops projects on a regional basis in a variety of sectors such as tourism, industry, marine, renewable energy, organic agri-food and technology.

The body informs and influences policy-making on economic and social development through high-quality analysis. Its cutting-edge and comprehensive research on the western region has helped throw new light on what businesses and individuals need in order to thrive and prosper in the western counties.

The WDC has developed strategies in a number of areas where the western region has a particular advantage – rural tourism, organic agri-food production and renewable energy.

One example is WDC's facilitation of the Western Organic Strategic Initiative – bringing together a dynamic network of groups to conduct research on developing the organic food market, along with a training and advisory programme and a website for trading and information dissemination.

Much of WDC's policy work focuses on infrastructure – roads, telecommunications, energy, air and rail. WDC works to ensure that clear recommendations can be made to the government on cost-effective solutions that address the growing gap between the western region and the rest of the country.

## WESTERN INVESTMENT FUND

The WDC plays a leading role in both investing in and promoting



Michael Ring, Minister for Rural and Community Development, met the new board of the WDC in Ballaghaderreen in early September.

local initiatives and businesses through the operation of a €32m Western Investment Fund (WIF). This fund, which provides loans and equity to businesses and local communities, aims to re-invest finances back into the seven counties.

Through the WIF, the WDC provides risk capital to micro, small and medium sized and social enterprises in their start-up and expansion phases.



Ian Brannigan, WDC's CEO, presents a commemorative piece in gratitude for Pat Spillane's work as Chair of the Commission for Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA). Prof Cathal O'Donoghue from NUI Galway is also pictured.



Minister Micheal Ring pictured with Dr Deirdre Garvey, WDC Chairperson.

As well as supporting local businesses with expertise and investment from the WIF, it has supported and set up projects and other initiatives both on its own and with other agencies.

It works closely with a number of regional organisations including the local authorities in the seven counties, IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, the Northern & Western Regional Assembly (NWRA) and the European Union (EU).

## PROMOTING THE BENEFITS

Another important function of the WDC is its role in the promotion of the benefits of living, working and doing business in Ireland's western region, which it is doing successfully through its LookWest.ie website (see panel).

Based in Ballaghaderreen, Co. Roscommon, the WDC has 14 full-time staff with another four people working on its collaborations running various EU projects.

The WDC's Acting CEO is Ian Brannigan who is originally from Dundalk but who fell in love with the west when he moved his family back from the UK to take up the position as Head of Regional Development with the WDC.

Now living in Sligo, Ian is passionate about the role that the WDC has to play in fostering growth in the western region of Ireland. He has previously held senior management positions in the global technology sector and led strategic economic development organisations in the UK and Ireland.

At the start of September, the new board of the WDC held its inaugural meeting, following its appointment by Michael Ring, Minister for Rural and Community Development.

## STARTING A NEW CHAPTER

Michael Ring, who addressed that meeting at Ballaghaderreen, said the appointment of the new board represented "a new chapter" for the WDC, and noted the organisation's great success in helping to generate jobs and investment.

Recently, the WDC led the national commemoration programme of WB Yeats 150th anniversary and has been involved

## LOOKWEST.IE – THE ONLINE GUIDE TO THE WEST

LookWest.ie was developed by the Western Development Commission (WDC) to promote business and lifestyle in Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Mayo, Galway and Clare.

This successful online guide to business, work and life in the west has attracted hundreds of thousands of people to its website and provides a point of access to information for those considering a move to the west.

LookWest.ie provides info for individuals setting up a business or looking to relocate to the west, and provides practical information as well as inspirational stories of those who have already made the leap.

The website contains a 'Start-Up Guide' covering everything from funding, networking, case studies and information on office spaces, while the 'Invest West Guide' also provides information on the best local agencies to talk to if you're considering a move to the west.

The jobs area showcases all the opportunities in the west as they arise, plus an active news and events section, in addition to regular interviews with business people and individuals about the 'pros' and 'cons' of moving to the west.

There is a section that provides information on the cost of living in Dublin compared to the average cost of living in the west, in addition to info on education, health care, leisure and childcare options in the region.

With almost 10,000 followers on Facebook, 8,500 on Twitter, more than 1,000 on Instagram and 1,600 members on LinkedIn, LookWest.ie has a thriving regular social media presence.

LookWest.ie has been shortlisted and winner of a number of digital marketing awards including the IIA Net Visionary Award, Social Media Awards and eGovernment Awards.



At this year's National Ploughing Championship in Tullamore, Minister Ring met some WDC members at the LookWest.ie stand.

in many high-profile events over the last few months, including events such as Galway's 'SeaFest' and the National Ploughing Championships.

Its regionally-focused ethos and a strong culture of sharing its resources and information means that the WDC continues to play a central role in bringing growth and prosperity to the west.