

STRATEGY FOR BALANCED REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Tomás Ó Siochán, CEO of the Western Development Commission, tells Peigin Doyle how the the Commission's statutory role of supporting balanced social and economic development in seven western and north-western counties, in addition to their five-year strategy (2019-2024), sits with the current Programme for Government.



So, how does the Western Development Commission pick its way through the plethora of plans, programmes and promises in developing the west and northwest?

“Anything that commits to the process of sustainability and regional development is welcome because a huge amount of work has been done by the regional assemblies on regional development strategies,” Tomás Ó Siochán, CEO of the Western Development Commission (WDC), told ‘Council Review’.

He said that a huge amount of the programme reflects what the WDC had outlined in its submissions [on development policies] and the feedback from stakeholders.

GOVERNMENT PLANS FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Programme for Government has committed to putting balanced regional development ‘at its heart’, to include the following commitments:

- A National Digital Strategy derived from the National Broadband Plan,
- A New Rural Policy to build on the Action Plan for Rural Development,
- A Regional Action Plan for Jobs,
- Making Villages and Rural Towns the Hubs for Sustainable Development,
- A Strategy to Revitalise Town Centres,
- A Sustainable Rural Mobility Plan to connect all settlements over a certain population to the national public transport system, using the Local Link Rural Bus Network,
- A Regional Technology and Clustering Programme to strengthen links between SMEs, multinational corporations, ETBs and colleges,
- New Apprenticeships with a regional footprint and support for technological universities,
- Promoting Increased Remote, Flexible and Hub-working Arrangements.

Most commitments are set out in national development strategies under ‘Project Ireland 2040’, while the three-year National Recovery Plan Fund to stimulate domestic enterprise, floored by Covid-19, also commits to making balanced regional growth a priority, with infrastructure development, reskilling and training and support for investment.

In the long term, the WDC emphasis is on transition to a low carbon economy, promoting sustainable and creative enterprise, identifying flagship projects and high-tech skill clusters. Risk capital from the Western Development Fund and connectivity will be vital to delivering that vision.

“The National Broadband Plan is to be accelerated and that is welcome. In terms of roll-out of broadband to date, the 300,000 homes that Eir have taken on have speeded up the process and with the National Broadband Plan huge progress has been made. In the context of broadband, the survey on remote working showed 19% of people had issues with broadband.

“We see hubs as an interim step for people. The shift to the digital economy will take time; the roll-out of broadband will be in step.”

FOCUS ON CITY GROWTH

The Programme for Government maintains the existing focus on four city growth regions of Waterford, Cork, Limerick and Galway, to counterbalance Dublin and the east. Ó Siochán sees no conflict between this and the identification of Sligo, Letterkenny and Athlone as a focus for regional development by the Northern and Western Regional Assembly (NWRA) in its new Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy.

“Each Assembly has issued regional development plans; Sligo is nominated as a key regional centre for development, Letterkenny (seen in the context of Derry/Strabane) will develop as part of a cross-border mix, while Athlone

is set to grow in the Midlands. These are not at city scale yet, and while each is set to grow but it will take longer,” Ó Siochán said.

“Remote working and hubs are important, but we have to keep a long-term view and put the correct infrastructure in place, especially from the point of view of development of the northwest and smaller growth centres.”