STRATEGY FOR BALANCED REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Tomás Ó Siochán, CEO of the Western Development Commission, tells Peigin Doyle how 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.
While welcoming any additional resources that may arise from these programmes, the key focus of the WDC’s five-year strategy (2019-2024) is the 80% of the population within the WDC region who live in rural and urban areas of less than 10,000 population.

“The strategy sets out short, medium and long-term aims. These goals of promoting the region, especially through its regional information portal – www.lookwest.ie – supporting the digitisation of SMEs and facilitating the transition to a low-carbon economy were all ‘heavily aligned with the programme,” he noted.

STRATEGY REMAINS ON TRACK

Ó Siochán also identified that “creative thinking” in the programme plans to link local bus and hackney services to public transport networks, whilst also acknowledging that rural transport was especially challenging in terms of developing rural areas.

Part of the WDC’s current strategy is to facilitate the development of 100 digitally-connected regional hubs spread from Kerry to Donegal across the Atlantic Economic Corridor. Attracting successful and high potential start-up businesses to locate in these hubs has already been central to the WDC medium-term strategy.

The Covid-inspired rush to remote working and commitments by outgoing Minister of State Sean Canney to invest €300,000 in the digital centres can serve to feed into this strategy of hub development, the WDC chief noted.

“We see hubs as a driver of the local economy in rural and regional areas. Hub opportunities are for people who want to work from home, but the centres will be very good places to do job activation, if you can attract those businesses.

“Labour activation will be hugely important; reskilling, supports like childcare and office facilities. If people use the hubs they will upskill through learning from their peers while the hub manager will tell them what training is available.”

MAIN HUBS OF ACTIVITY

A recent WDC/NUIG national survey of remote working found that 83% of respondents wished to continue to work remotely once the Covid-19 crisis was over. “There is a huge drive to get small businesses online due to Covid-19. Our intention is to make people aware that remote work is not just working from home. We have developed a common online space booking engine and point-of-contact for use by the hubs,” he said.

Tomás Ó Siochán sees the hubs as an opportunity to support the programme goal of revitalising town and village centres. “Most people will not work a five-day week in the hub, mixing it with home and office-based work, but if they use the hubs they will bring their presence and spend into a town or village that does not have that now, because people are commuting long distances,” he noted.

WESTERN DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

First set up in 1997 to promote social and economic development in the western region, the Western Development Commission (WDC) advises government on issues affecting the region and promotes government policy targeted at improving social and economic standards.

The statutory body now works within the remit of the Department of Rural and Community Development under the current Programme for Government. It also collaborates with national and regional agencies including local government, regional assemblies, local enterprise offices, third-level colleges plus the community and voluntary sector, considering that one of its remits is to support social enterprise.

In addition to running the Western Development Fund, currently standing at €72m, with €48m available for investment, it also operates the www.lookwest.ie information portal.

The WDC region comprises the counties of Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo, Galway, Roscommon and Clare and is home to 17.4% of the state’s population. Of these, 80% live outside large urban areas and two-thirds outside centres whose populations are 1,500.

For more information visit www.wdc.ie/
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 Siocháin 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.”