

NWRA IS JUST GOING FOR IT!

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly (NWRA) is evolving as a key advocate and leader for its region, as the Regional Assemblies become increasingly prominent players on the public policy landscape. Since taking up the role of Cathaoirleach, and guiding the organisation through a turbulent period, Cllr David Maxwell gives an insight into the work of his Assembly.

As a leader you should not sit in a seat of power and just enjoy the experience. You've got to try and do something extraordinary. You might only have a short time as an elected member, so use the time wisely.

It's all about timing and courage. If you're dodging the issues, are you really doing your job?" We have had change, transition and Covid-19 to deal with, and they have been tackled with great courage and determination, but most importantly results. There's an expression – *'To speak truth unto power. That's the job of a political representative'*.

With the Regional Assembly that spectrum of influence extends locally to Brussels – which is an absolutely critical part of the role particularly, when you are advocating on behalf of a region.

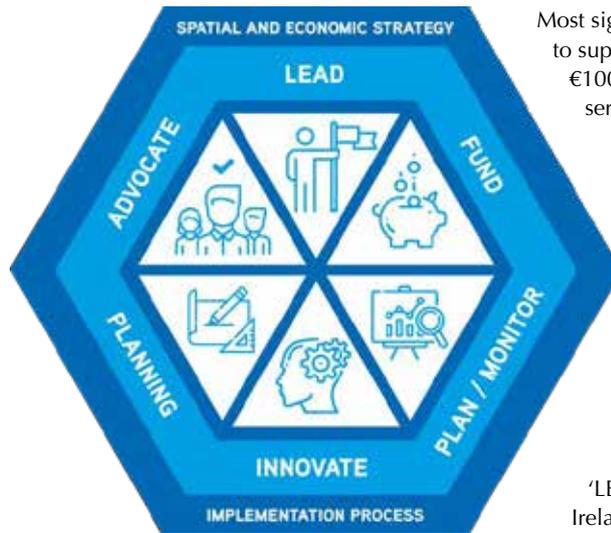
The members of the NWRA have developed a suite of impressive strategies, most notably the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy – all designed to deliver a better place for this and the next generation of communities. Now it is about implementation.

The entire premise of the corporate strategy is unashamedly around improving the wellbeing of our region. The strategy is simple but meaningful and makes no apologies for being ambitious. We managed these challenges because our purpose is clear whilst the NWRA's culture is to:

- Make things happen.
- Work together.
- Think differently.
- Act with integrity.

Over the past year, the results of our actions have been clearly evident.

WORKING VIRTUALLY DURING COVID-19
There's no doubt that the last few months have been a crazy ride with significant lessons learned and areas of adapted along the way. We've had to learn how to work



Most significantly was the work done to support the HSE investment of over €100m in PPE for health care and health service providers across the region.

The PPE helped to protect frontline staff from the Covid-19 virus in hospitals, acute and primary care settings, testing centres, assessment hubs and residential care settings.

In Ireland, the speed of this response was critical to support the provision of care required at multiple locations across the region.

'LET'S BE MORE' CAMPAIGN

Ireland has one of the highest levels of regional inequalities amongst EU member states. Despite the country's economic growth, a very uneven pattern of economic success can be identified where some areas of the country benefit significantly less than our capital region. This presents a less positive micro picture of economic success. What does this mean?

The Northern and Western Region has been downgraded to a 'Transition Region'

virtually, how to work in isolation and we've had to learn how to maintain morale levels with our people with the absence of face-to-face interaction.

The NWRA is one of three Regional Assemblies, working with key stakeholders at EU, national, regional and local level to respond to the complex impact of Covid.



NWRA's Cathaoirleach Cllr David Maxwell – "Ireland has one of the highest levels of regional inequalities amongst EU member states".

by the European Commission, resulting in a pledge to contribute €60 for every €100 invested by the Government in the next wave of ERDF funding. In contrast, the east and south are to get just €40 from every €100 spent by the Government.

Earlier this year, I launched a campaign titled 'Let's Be More' because I believe Ireland needs all of its regions perform. To address complex issues like improving sustainability alongside productivity, international evidence suggests strengthening the institutions that are close to the action, in regions where they have the local knowledge and contacts to improve policy implementation and bring projects to fruition.

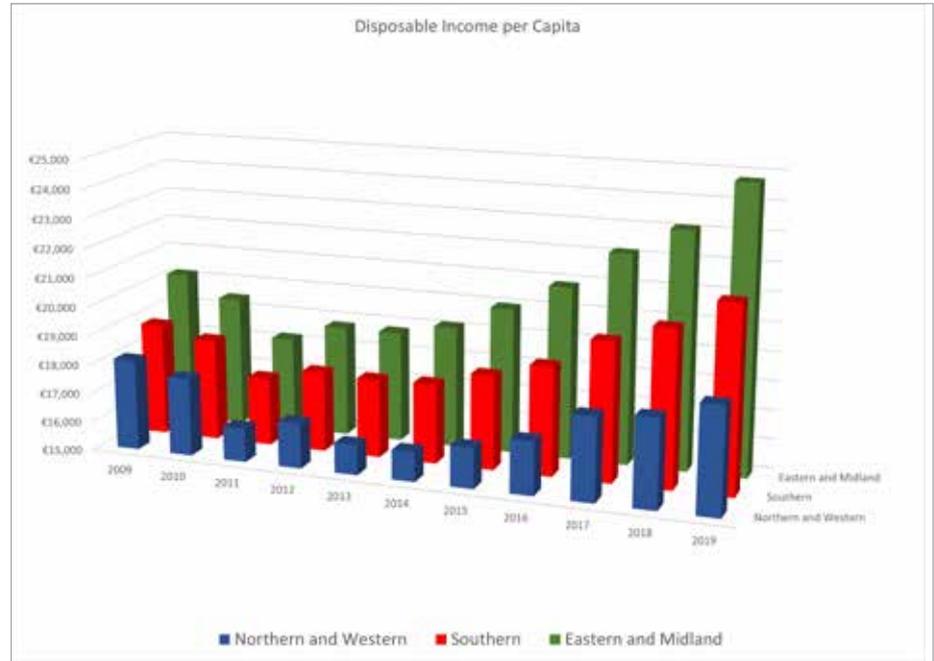
The region needs additional investment. Our biggest challenge is having a weak urban fabric. For example, we need to invest in Galway and the region's designated 'Regional Growth Centres and Key Towns'.

We need to improve the region's human capital levels via our third level institutes, enhance regional infrastructure that enables growth, support SMEs in rural communities and support our further education and training bodies.

This will also underpin the digital transition that will support industry 'Let's Be More' advocates for a sustained policy focus on the border and west regions to ensure long-term economic inclusion.

POWERING UP THE REGIONS

We need to do something 'immediate and different'. The Northern and Western Region's economy was valued at €22.1 billion in 2019, equating to €24,926 per head of population. This is in stark contrast with the state average of €66,716. It is incredible to me that the gap in disposable income per person between the Northern and Western



Region and the State average has increased to €3,869 since 2009.

During the pandemic I published a report by the Northern and Western Regional Assembly calling for a regionally-led approach to unlock regional potential in Ireland. The report notes that for too long regional development has been top-down and centrally driven and that if we are to achieve a sustainable, productive and inclusive economy, as the Government's 2040 Plan calls for, then regions need to be empowered to develop their own economies and specialisations.

I commend the Government for the Project Ireland Funds, but it is time to move to the next level in delivery. This would include our city-regions, improved intra- and inter-regional considerations

for infrastructure, innovation and 'smart specialisations', and a more place-based approach.

I am delighted to see a sustained change under-way and we are working with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment on its new Smart Specialisation Strategy. This is calling specifically for policies that enable regional innovation and specialisation through cluster development and continuing to invest in innovation. Ultimately this will give more strength to our local institutions and local democratic mandate.

SOLUTION FOCUSED

The world is changing and the Northern and Western region is acutely exposed due to its rurality and peripherality. Our Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy' is keen to tackle this. The fact of the matter is that our dispersed settlement patterns and low population density result in a high proportion of journeys being made by private car.

The Northern and Western region is highly dependent on the private car for travel to work and education. This is reflective of the low level of suitable alternative transport options.

Ireland's 2030 decarbonisation ambition will need to address this and we are joining a research partnership led by IT Sligo and GMIT to model our 'transition to a Low-Carbon, Climate-Resilient and Sustainable Transport Model'. For me, this is how we bring about real change. Collective action for mutual benefit.



Shauna Ward from Ward Automation. (a precision engineering company based in Sligo), pictured with NWRA's Director David Minton and Cathaoirleach Cllr David Maxwell at the launch of the 'Let's Be More' campaign.