

WDC SUPPORTS WESTERN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

With the new Programme for Government now officially in place, Tomás Ó Siochán, CEO of the Western Development Commission, spoke to Peigin Doyle about how it will sit with the Commission's statutory role of supporting balanced social and economic development in seven western and north-western counties.

Reaction to the new Programme for Government had not been all sweetness and light during the early stages of the new tripartite administration, with initial criticism levelled at the lack of ministerial appointments from the west and northwest, in addition to the absence of specific commitments to development in the north-west region.

In an unprecedented turn of events [shortly before going to press], the West of Ireland now has a senior Cabinet Minister in office, following the appointment on 15 July of Mayo TD Dara Calleary by Taoiseach Micheál Martin as the new Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The Fianna Fáil deputy leader takes his seat at the Cabinet table, after Offaly's Barry Cowen was sacked over ongoing drink-driving revelations.

Independent TD and former MEP Marian Harkin, who has a strong record on regional development, had told the Dáil on 27 June that she had some serious reservations about the Programme for Government. "It is very vague about how it will deliver a balance to the regions, manage Brexit or provide specific supports for agriculture, and how we will pay for it all," she noted.

However, on announcing his new ministerial appointment, which is now set to change matters, the Taoiseach stated that Mr Calleary would be a "very effective Minister" who will deliver on challenges facing the agriculture sector, including Brexit, climate change and the renegotiations of the EU Common Agricultural Policy.

BALANCED REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The new Programme for Government has committed to putting balanced regional development 'at its heart', with main commitments to include the following:



- A National Digital Strategy built upon the boost to connectivity 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,



For further details on the findings of the WDC/NUIG survey visit <https://www.wdc.ie/>

- Making Villages and Rural Towns the Hubs for Sustainable Development,
- A Strategy to Revitalise Town Centres,
- A Sustainable Rural Mobility Plan that promises to connect all settlements over a certain population to the national public transport system, using the Local Link rural bus network, and prioritising road improvement to enhance regional connectivity,
- 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 of these commitments are already set out in existing national development strategies under the umbrella of 'Project Ireland 2040'. In addition, 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.

PROGRAMMES & PROMISES

So, how does the Western Development Commission (WDC) 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.

"A huge amount of the programme reflects what the WDC had outlined in its submissions [on development policies] and the feedback from our stakeholders," Tomás Ó Siochán, CEO of the Western Development Commission (WDC), told 'Local Authority Journal' shortly after the Programme for Government was officially announced at the end of June.

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 strategic 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 said.

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

He emphasised the WDC's strategy of facilitating the development of 100 regional digitally connected hubs spread from Kerry to Donegal across the Atlantic Economic Corridor. Attracting successful and high potential start-up businesses to locate in these hubs was already central to the WDC medium-term strategy.

The Covid-inspired rush to home 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.



WDC strategy facilitates the development of 100 regional digitally connected hubs spread from Kerry to Donegal as part of the Atlantic Economic Corridor.

“We see hubs as a driver of the local economy in rural and regional areas. Hub opportunities are for people who are already in work and 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 and the hub manager, who is in the hub managers’ network, will tell them what training is available.”

REMOTE WORKING SURVEY

A recent WDC/NUIG national survey of remote working found that 83% of respondents wished to continue to work remotely after the Covid-19 crisis was over. “There is a huge drive to get small businesses online because of 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 of 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



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THE WESTERN DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION (WDC)

was set up in 1997 to promote social and economic development in the western region. The role of the statutory body is to advise government on issues that affect the western region and promote government policy targeted on improving social and economic standards in the region.

The WDC works within the remit of the Department of Rural and Community Development. It also collaborates with a number of national and regional agencies including local government, regional assemblies, local enterprise offices and third-level colleges plus the community and voluntary sector as one of its remits is to support social enterprise.

It runs the Western Development Fund, currently standing at €72m, with €48m available for investment, and it 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. There are disparities in development between this region and others but also between areas within the WDC region, both of which the WDC seeks to address.

now, because people are commuting long distances,” he noted.

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 REGIONS

The Programme for Government maintains the existing focus on four city growth regions to counterbalance Dublin and the east. They are

Waterford, Cork, Limerick and Galway. 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 of the Regional Assemblies has issued regional development plans. Sligo is nominated as a key regional centre for development. Letterkenny is seen in the context of Derry/Strabane and will develop as part of a cross-border mix, while Athlone is set to grow in the Midlands. It is not lacking in ambition to say that these are not at city scale yet; each is set to grow but it will take longer,” Ó Siochán said.

“The reality is that remote working and hubs are important, but we have to keep a long-term view and put infrastructure in place, especially from the point of view of development of the Northwest and smaller growth centres.”

He judged the Programme for Government to have “struck the balance in the need to move to a low-carbon economy and in extension the need to move to connectivity and public transport”.



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