WDC

WESTERN DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION
COIMISIÚN FORBARTHA AN IARTHAIR

Public Consultation

Green Paper on Local Government 'Stronger Local Democracy – Options for Change'

Submission from the

Western Development Commission

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Submission from the Western Development Commission (WDC) to the Public Consultation on the Green Paper on Local Government 'Stronger Local Democracy – Options for Change'

1.   Introduction

The Western Development Commission (WDC) welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the public consultation on the Green Paper on Local Government.

The WDC was established as a statutory body in 1999. It operates under the aegis of DCRAGA[1], with the twelve-member Commission appointed by the Minister. The WDC's remit is to promote and encourage economic and social development in the Western Region.[2]

The WDC works in co-operation with national, regional and local bodies involved in western development to ensure that the Western Region maximises its full development potential by:

- analysing economic and social trends and making policy recommendations;
- promoting the Western Region through the **LookWest.ie** campaign;
- supporting the rural economy through facilitating strategic initiatives (e.g. rural tourism, renewable energy); and
- providing risk capital to businesses through the WDC Investment Fund.[3]

The WDC is represented on the eight City and County Development Boards (CDBs) in the region.

Chapter 1 of the Green Paper sets out the rationale for its preparation, which includes the need to achieve *'... greater regional balance in a country which depends on the free market for much of its economic success'* (pg 13). This reflects the national government commitment to achieving more balanced regional development which is set out in the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) and the National Development Plan (NDP) 2007-2013. Another reason given for the preparation of the Green Paper is the need to maintain *'... a vibrant and sustainable **rural** Ireland ...'* (pg 13, emphasis added). This is of particular importance to the WDC given that the Western Region is a predominantly rural region with 68% of its population living outside of towns of 1,500 or more persons.[4]

The WDC believes that achieving more balanced regional development requires consideration of regional governance issues.[5] This submission will focus primarily on Chapter 9 of the Green Paper in the context of these issues.

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[1] Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

[2] Counties Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Mayo, Galway and Clare.

[3] See www.wdc.ie

[4] WDC (2008), The Western Region: Key Statistics

[5] WDC (2008), The Regional Development Challenge: A Western Region Perspective, paper presented at WDC Conference 2008 www.wdc.ie

2.   Regional Governance

The Green Paper sets out the options in relation to regional governance. Ireland has limited regional governance structures at present. Indeed, the Green Paper acknowledges that it was *'... the need for arrangements to draw down EU structural funds [that] led to the creation of the current regional structures including two Regional Assemblies and eight Regional Authorities'* (pg 95), rather than a recognition within Ireland of the need for regional governance.

Governance issues have emerged as a key feature of regional development in the most successful OECD countries. Effective local government involvement is regarded as critical to the success of regional development in OECD policy reviews.[6] Those countries with well developed local government structures have been found to have the most effective and creative regional development policies.

The WDC believes that in Ireland, the need for more effective regional development policies is underlined by the persistence of regional disparities across Ireland's regions, particularly in economic terms. The recent publication of *Regional Quality of Life in Ireland 2008* by the CSO, as well as various publications by the WDC,[7] has highlighted these disparities. For example Gross Value Added (GVA) per person in 2005 varied from 70.8% of the state average in the Border region to 140.9% of the state average in Dublin, while household disposable income ranged from 90.6% of the state average in the Border region to 113% of the state average in Dublin.[8] The gap in GVA between the richest and poorest regions was greater in 2005 than it had been in 2000.

Furthermore, improved systems for regional governance, that are more responsive to the particular needs of individual regions, could contribute significantly to achieving more balanced development across all of Ireland's regions. In the following sections we address some points in the Green Paper that we consider relevant to this goal.

2.1   Regional governance - Gateways and beyond

Chapter 9 begins with a short background to current regional governance structures and then leads on to a discussion of regional issues in an exclusively city-focussed context. The discussion of dynamic regions (pg 96) is based upon a city region concept where large urban centres are presented as the drivers of the national economy. Only passing reference is made to rural areas (pg 96).

The discussion in the Green Paper on regional governance appears to be mainly based upon an unpublished draft of a NESC report and concentrates particularly on urban-led growth. The

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[6] See OECD (2006), The New Rural Paradigm: Policies and Governance; and OECD (2007), Competitive Regional Clusters: National Policy Approaches.
[7] See WDC (2008), The Western Region: Key Statistics; WDC (2007), Indicators, Balanced Regional Development and the National Development Plan 2007-2013
[8] The gap in disposable income is less than the gap in GVA due to income transfers and commuting patterns between regions. These factors increase the level of income in poorer regions where there is a higher share of those receiving welfare payments e.g. older persons, unemployed, and people may commute to richer regions to work where their output would be measured in the region where they work but their income would be measured in the region where they live.

discussion of the role of regions in national development refers to the challenge of facilitating development of the NSS designated Gateways and hubs. The key role for regional governance, however structured, is seen as aiding '... *the emergence of strong and coherent city region perspectives in strategic areas ... in the State ...*' (pg 97).

The Green Paper then goes on to set out options which equate 'city regions' with the NSS designated Gateways. It quotes the draft NESC report in claiming that governance frameworks to allow co-ordinated actions in the Gateways is '... *the greatest and most urgent challenge facing the implementation of the NSS.*' (pg 98). While this may be the most urgent challenge, it is not the only one and it does not seem appropriate that a Green Paper which seeks to set the agenda for reform of the local government structure of Ireland would limit its suggestions on regional governance to Gateways. The approach taken should recognise that the NSS sets out an approach to regional development based upon the identification of a hierarchy of spatial areas – from rural areas, to county and other towns, hubs and Gateways. Each level is seen as playing its own specific and vital role in the development of the regions. Thus, the NSS is about more than the Gateways.

This exclusive focus on the Gateways raises a number of issues:

- **Spatial extent of the Gateways**: it is not clear from the Green Paper what area would be incorporated within a Gateway for governance purposes. Clearly, given that the Paper relates to Local Government, local authority boundaries are the main spatial units used. The options presented seem to imply that the extent of a Gateway is defined by local authority boundaries, though which boundaries may vary between the Gateways. In the case of Sligo for example it is suggested that the borough and county local authorities may be combined for the purpose of considering the Sligo Gateway in governance terms, however for Galway it notes that combining Galway City and County local authority boundaries may be a problem due to the size of Galway County. The difficulties in situations where a gateway extends into an adjoining county is also highlighted e.g. Limerick and Clare.

  The international literature on city regions would usually define them in a broader sense than local authority boundaries. They are sometimes presented in terms of Travel to Work patterns which would define a city region in terms of the spatial extent of its employment influence.[9] The NSS presented a vision of the Gateways playing a driving role in their wider regions, with complex inter-dependencies between the Gateways, their hubs and rural hinterlands. The NDP 2007-2013 referred to 'gateway regions' which, while not precisely defined, would appear to not necessarily be aligned with local authority boundaries. Defining Gateways based upon local authority boundaries for governance purposes, as set out in the Green Paper options, appears to present a narrower view of the role and influence of Gateways than intended by the NSS.

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[9] Though analysis of Travel to Work data suggests that there are parts of Ireland that fall outside the sphere of influence of any Gateway or hub. Walsh, J., Foley, R., Kavanagh, A. and McEllwain, A., (2006), Origins, Destinations and Catchments: Mapping Travel to Work in Ireland in 2002, Journal of Statistical and Social Enquiry Society of Ireland, vol.XXXV

- **Areas beyond Gateways**: regional governance options presented for the Gateways only, especially if narrowly defined by local authority boundaries, result in large areas of the country being excluded from consideration. There is no discussion of the limitations of current governance structures for the development of areas outside of Gateways, such as part or all of counties Mayo, Roscommon, Leitrim, Kerry, Tipperary, Kilkenny, Wexford, Wicklow, Carlow, Laois, Cavan and Monaghan. This is in spite of the fact that the Green Paper acknowledges that *'If new approaches are adopted [to governance of the Gateways], consideration in turn may have to be given to the role and geographical remit of the existing regional structures.'* (pg 98)

The WDC believes that the impending White Paper on Local Government, which should include a chapter on regional governance, needs to set out national policy on aspects other than the governance of Gateways. The very limited nature of the regional governance options presented in the Green Paper is a missed opportunity, as there is a need for a wider debate on governance options for more balanced regional development. This was clear from the debates which took place at the WDC's conference *Delivering Balanced Regional Development: A Challenge for Policy* which was held in May 2008.[10] The White Paper should set out government policy in relation to the existing regional structures and whether any changes are necessary in the regional governance framework for areas outside of Gateways, in addition to any new structures in the Gateways.

2.2 Possible options for new approaches in selected Gateway cities

The Green Paper presents a number of options for revising the governance structures of the Gateways to make them more effective in fulfilling their NSS role. It is suggested that alternative approaches may be used in the different Gateways. This recognition that the circumstances of the different Gateways vary, requiring different solutions, is welcome. The WDC has previously drawn attention to the large variation among the nine Gateways in terms of their size and location and current levels of development.[11] For instance, just considering the towns/cities and their environs, the population of Sligo is just one tenth of that of Cork city which in turn is just 18% of the population of Dublin.[12] The newer, smaller Gateways, all of which are located north of a line from Galway to Dublin, require different and more intensive public sector intervention to fulfil their regional development role, and consequently may require different governance structures.

2.2.1 Cross Boundary Executive/Political Offices

The Green Paper presents an option for a metropolitan mayor's office with a small executive and crossing city/county boundaries. Whether this would be a directly elected mayor is not outlined

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[10] Copies of the papers presented at the conference can be downloaded from www.wdc.ie

[11] WDC and BMW (2008), Dynamic Regions for a Dynamic Island: Joint brief from the BMW Regional Assembly and WDC to the Review of *Towards 2016*; WDC (2008), The Regional Development Challenge: A Western Region Perspective, paper presented at WDC Conference 2008 www.wdc.ie

[12] Census 2006, Volume 1, Table 7. Population of Sligo (including suburbs or environs) 19,402, population of Cork (including suburbs or environs) 190,384, population of Greater Dublin Area (including suburbs or environs) 1,045,769. The description *Greater Dublin Area* in the 2006 Census denotes Dublin City and its suburbs (i.e. Greater Dublin Suburbs).

in Chapter 9, but given the proposals elsewhere in the Green Paper it is likely that this is the intention. It is implied in the Green Paper that this option would only be appropriate for the larger Gateways. These are essentially the five large cities which were designated as the original Gateways in the 2000-2006 NDP – Dublin, Waterford, Cork, Limerick and Galway.

It is argued that the role of such a mayor's office would be to deliver a 'city region' focus to certain strategic functions e.g. land-use planning, key regional infrastructure. It would also propose a 'city region' agenda in the making of the regional planning guidelines. This office would not disrupt existing local authority structures but would work with local and regional authorities. It is not made clear what the legal basis or funding structure would be for these mayors' offices.

Any proposal which provides a more strategic approach to the long term development of the Gateways is to be welcomed.   If such mayors' offices are to be established, their central remit should be to focus on the long term development of the gateway rather than the day-to-day operational issues of the local authorities. It would also be critical that enhancing the role of the Gateway as a driver of its wider region – beyond local authority county boundaries – should be a key objective.

The drawback of creating another 'level' of governance, in addition to what already exists, is referred to in the Green Paper. The WDC considers that proposing greater complexity to the regional governance structures, without concurrently presenting any proposals in relation to the existing regional structures, is a shortcoming of the Green Paper.

2.2.2   Consolidation or Joint Leadership of Key Authorities

Options that do not involve the establishment of a new office are also presented. There are a number of options put forward and it is clear that different options may be appropriate depending on local circumstances. For example it is suggested that for Limerick and Waterford, where there are relatively small county councils, combining the city and county councils into a single authority may be appropriate. This combined authority would have the responsibility for the Gateways' development.

A minimal change option is also presented, of simply having a single mayor elected to chair both authorities – city and county. It is suggested that such an approach would only be suitable for those Gateways in relatively small counties.

The options presented for small Gateways are relatively weak and underdeveloped compared to the option of the new mayor's office which is set out in more detail. As noted, the mayors' office option seems mainly intended for the larger city Gateways. Given the greater need for development in the smaller Gateways to fulfil their NSS role, it is unfortunate that the governance options presented for them are more limited. The need for a strategic focus on long term development and the role of the Gateway in driving its wider region is just as great for these smaller Gateways as for the larger cities. The options presented do not seem to adequately address this need for a strategic approach to Gateway development in the smaller centres.

3.   Conclusion

Consideration of the achievement of the government objective of balanced regional development requires a thorough appraisal of the existing governance frameworks. The limited nature of the options presented by the Green Paper, focussed on the Gateways, is a missed opportunity to consider the wider issues of regional governance in Ireland. Hopefully the public consultation process for the Green Paper will stimulate debate on these issues. The focus of the Green Paper on a city-led approach to regional development is indicative of a general trend at national level. This is a cause of concern for those based in more rural regions of the country, outside of Gateways and hubs, and for those involved in trying to promote development within these areas.

In addition to concerns about the Gateway focus of the Green Paper, the weaker options presented for the newer, smaller Gateways to enhance their governance frameworks is also a concern. The most detailed option presented, metropolitan mayors' offices, appears to be viewed as an option for the larger city Gateways rather than the smaller Gateways, all of which are situated in the northern half of the country. Again, hopefully the public consultation will lead to more concrete proposals on how changes to the governance structures of the smaller Gateways can enhance their strategic focus on achieving the role set out for them in the NSS.

If there are any queries in relation to the points raised in this submission, we would be happy to discuss it further. Please contact

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