



National Recovery and Resilience Plan Consultation,
Department of the Taoiseach

Re: Western Development Commission response to the NRRP Consultation

22nd February 2021

The Western Development Commission (WDC) welcomes the opportunity to make a short submission to the consultation on the National Resilience and Recovery Plan.

The aim of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan is to mitigate the economic and social impact of the Covid 19 pandemic and to make the Irish economy and society more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the green and digital transitions. The WDC would therefore like to emphasise the importance of ensuring that the reforms and investment supported under the Plan have an inclusive, regionally balanced recovery at their heart.

Covid-19 and Brexit have had particularly strong negative impacts on the Western Region and wider Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC).¹ [Lydon and McGrath \(2020\)](#)² as well as the [WDC Timely Economic Indicator Series](#)³ have demonstrated that our region is more vulnerable to the shock of Covid-19. Our region also contains comparatively high levels of employment in those sectors more highly exposed to potential Brexit shocks⁴ as identified by [Daly & Lawless \(2020\)](#)⁵. The WDC considers therefore that the focus of the NRRP should be on ensuring that the places most affected by the Covid 19 pandemic are targeted. Investments in the projects that will drive regional employment and enterprise growth, while meeting the EU RRF objectives, need to be prioritised.

The low carbon transition, digitalisation, productivity gaps, and labour market composition are all particularly significant challenges for the Western Region and addressing these, in the context of addressing growing regional imbalance (as measured both by the impacts of Covid and the widening disparities in regional GDP), should be at the core of the NRRP. The WDC believes that infrastructure, the '3Es' (Enterprise, Employment and Education) and Innovation are the key levers for effective regional development as detailed in our Policy Briefs on the issue⁶. When these three areas complement and support each other, they drive regional growth. The NRRP should therefore provide scope for projects which enable these levers in the regional context. Below we outline two

¹ The Western Region is defined under the Western Development Commission (WDC) Act 1998 as the seven counties of Clare, Donegal, Galway, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon, and Sligo. The AEC is set out in Ireland 2040 encompasses the Western Region as well as Kerry and Limerick.

² <https://www.centralbank.ie/docs/default-source/publications/economic-letters/vol-2020-no-10-reg-impact-of-covid-19-western-reg-and-atlantic-eco-corridor-lydon-mcgrath.pdf?sfvrsn=10>

³ <https://westerndevelopment.ie/policy/publications/?q=timely%20economic%20indicators&research-areas%5B%5D=regional-statistics>

⁴ <https://westerndevelopment.ie/insights/1-in-4-working-in-agriculture-forestry-fishing-in-ireland-live-in-western-region/> and <https://westerndevelopment.ie/insights/3289/>

⁵ <https://www.esri.ie/publications/examination-of-the-sectoral-overlap-of-covid-19-and-brexit-shocks>

⁶ <https://www.wdc.ie/wp-content/uploads/reports-WDC-Policy-Briefing-Why-care-about-regions-July-2010.pdf> and <https://www.wdc.ie/wp-content/uploads/WDCPolicyBriefing-Education-Enterprise-Employment-July2011.pdf>

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potential areas for investment (low carbon transport and remote working hubs) under the plan (addressing the green transition and digital transformation) and which also address the flagship areas identified by the EU. There are of course many other areas of investment that would enhance resilience and recovery. We are happy to discuss a wider range of options with you at any time.

More than a third of the expenditure under the NRRP is to address climate issues. A recent WDC publication highlights many of the challenges and opportunities in the low carbon transition for more rural regions.⁷ There is a need for more investment in sustainable and public transport across the country, not just in major urban centres. This will be essential to the low carbon transition.

Until now there has been very limited investment in environmentally sustainable public transport in the Western Region. While models of public transport in a rural region, such as that under the WDC remit, differ from more urban regions and may operate at a smaller scale, this is a key area of investment to enable the low carbon transition. Rural public transport should service a variety of needs; in addition to its important focus on social inclusion and accessibility it should needs provide services to access employment and education.

Enhancing the reliability and the level of service within and between key settlements is needed. Investment in real time information on long distance and rural bus routes would increase use of public transport services and benefit a wide variety of potential users. Currently the lack of information about services and service arrival times deters users or may require them to wait for long periods in poor weather and unpleasant roadside conditions. In line with a development of real time information there is a need to provide transport hub interchange facilities in smaller towns, where all modes of transport including last mile services can come together. Provision of waiting facilities (which would be served by all transport providers) alongside real-time passenger information, would meet many of the EU RRF's objectives. Such facilities could also be integrated with digital hubs which are discussed below.

Investment is also needed in services such as EV charging points and other renewable fuelling points in rural areas where population is dispersed. While in more densely populated areas charging and refuelling points are likely to be provided commercially, there is clear market failure in relation to their provision in rural and remoter areas. Without these services being widely available and reliable, rural dwellers could be reluctant to adopt new vehicle technologies and it could also deter visitors who might be concerned about the availability of charging/fuelling points. In the case of HGVs and buses, lack of refuelling options could increase costs of delivery or services in more rural and peripheral regions.

In addressing digital transformation issues, support for the acceleration of the rollout of the National Broadband Plan is vital. This, alongside the development and leveraging of remote work infrastructure, is a crucial component to the progression of increased national remote work adoption⁸. Adequate infrastructure must be in place to allow employers and employees to avail of remote

⁷ [Transition-to-a-Low-Carbon-Region-WDC-Main-Report_FINAL-August-2020-1.pdf \(westerndevelopment.ie\)](#)

⁸ [Expert-Group-Remote-Working-Report-2020.pdf \(westerndevelopment.ie\)](#)
[Remote Working National Survey Phase 2 Report Oct 2020 Final \(westerndevelopment.ie\)](#)
[Remote Working National Survey Report May 2020 v3 \(westerndevelopment.ie\)](#)

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working opportunities both at home and in hubs. Ireland's remote working hub infrastructure presents significant opportunities for the development of digital remote work across the country. Remote working hubs provide a valuable solution for employers and employees seeking to adopt remote working arrangements through a blended combination of home office and local remote working hubs (Hubs and Broadband Connection Points).

The WDC is developing a network of over 100 hubs in the AEC region with a project methodology involving steps that will also form the basis as the framework for a national hub network⁹. The use of remote working hubs can have a transformative impact on local economies and communities supporting more regional employment and population retention and growth and lowering carbon emissions. To capitalise on this opportunity, the standards of the remote working hub facilities need to be improved through a dedicated investment stream.

The WDC and national hub network, when operational, will provide indicative data on the demand for, and supply of, remote work facilities, which will help inform the capital funding needs, particularly in rural areas. Co-location of hubs with other public services in these locations, will improve both awareness and delivery of available public supports. There is a particular need to provide labour market activation supports in existing areas of regional competence such as smart mobility and the bioeconomy that offer resilience in the context of Covid 19 and Brexit. In the longer term, the development of offshore wind, and onshore support services offer further scope for the development of renewable energy sources and associated sustainable economic activity.

Finally, in response to the second consultation question, the WDC believes that the most relevant of the country specific recommendations, as noted in the consultation document, relate to developing skills, particularly for those in areas of employment most affected by the Covid 19 pandemic and to focussing investment on the green and digital transition.

We hope that you find our submission on the NRRP helpful, particularly in relation to addressing ongoing regional imbalance. If you would like any more information on any of the areas addressed or would like to discuss some of suggested areas of investment, please get in touch.

Is mise,

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CEO

⁹ <https://www.atlanticeconomiccorridor.ie/hubs-map/>

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