



Mid-West Regional Authority Draft Regional Planning Guidelines 2010-2022

Submission from the
Western Development Commission
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Submission from Western Development Commission (WDC) to the Mid-West Regional Authority on Draft Regional Planning Guidelines 2010-2022

1. Introduction

The Western Development Commission (WDC) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the draft Regional Planning Guidelines (RPGs) 2010-2022 for the Mid-West Region. The WDC previously made a submission to the public consultation on the review of the Mid-West RPGs in April 2009.¹ The Mid-West RPGs play an important role in setting out the strategy for achieving development of the Region and it is vital that the RPGs be supported through spending Departments and Agencies adopting a spatial perspective in their sectoral expenditure decisions.

The WDC is a statutory body whose primary purpose is to promote economic and social development in the **Western Region**, comprising the Mid-West county of Clare along with Galway, Mayo, Roscommon, Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal. The WDC operates under the aegis of DCRAGA² and further details of its work can be found at www.wdc.ie.

In this submission, the WDC concentrates on those areas within the draft RPGs of relevance to the WDC's work areas and focuses primarily on county Clare, the only county within the Mid-West Region which falls within the WDC's remit. Inter-regional linkages between the Mid-West and West are also highlighted. This submission follows the headings and structure of the draft RPGs.

2. Context

The WDC believes that this review of the RPGs presents an important opportunity to consider progress to date in implementation of both the RPGs and the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) and to revise the RPGs, as required, to take account of the changed circumstances since their publication in 2004. The opportunity presented by this review to enhance co-ordination at both a regional and inter-regional level is also critical for positioning Ireland's regions for economic recovery. The WDC has a number of specific suggestions in relation to the Context section of the draft RPGs.

National Context of the Mid-West Region

Networking the National Gateways: networking between Limerick and Galway should be mentioned in this section in addition to Limerick and Cork.

Transport corridors: the term Atlantic Road Corridor (ARC) should be used rather than western corridor, as the ARC term is in common use by the National Roads Authority. It could also be noted that this link continues north of Galway to connect the Gateways of Sligo and Letterkenny.

¹ The submission can be downloaded from <http://www.wdc.ie/publications/submissions/subs-2009/>

² Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs

Medium-sized towns: the wording of the first paragraph could be taken to imply that actions and policies for these towns should focus on their role as residential locations and sources of commuters for the Gateway, rather than as centres of enterprise and employment in their own right. Some reference to policies to support enterprise and job creation in these towns should be added.

It also states '*These actions will serve to ensure that employment, housing, retailing and other functions attracted to the region by the Gateway will also support development in other areas*'. However how this is supposed to occur is not examined and indeed in reality the opposite may occur, for example the growth of retailing in the Gateway reducing the level of activity in medium-sized towns. The mechanisms by which growth of the Gateways will support development of their wider hinterlands were not clearly outlined in the NSS and remain an issue of concern for the WDC. Research by the OECD has found that growth of cities does not automatically lead to growth of their wider hinterlands.³ This is a fundamental issue for the RPGs in terms of developing the entire Mid-West Region.

Existing and Proposed Regional Strategies: the WDC considers that the development philosophies listed as underpinning the regional strategies are extremely important and useful, in particular the points relating to the distribution of development and the need to respond to the needs of more remote as well as centralised areas. These development philosophies should also underpin the RPGs.

Regional Context of the Mid-West Region

Three issues are listed as the primary issues for inter-regional activity, namely management of natural areas, provision of energy and communication routes and development of retailing. The WDC believes that the issue of human resources, labour flows and commuting between Regions should be added to this list.

Population: the point that the pattern of population growth achieved in the Region since the RPGs were published in 2004 was not what was predicted in the Guidelines is important for this review, in particular that the Zone of North East Clare in fact experienced a decline in its population. This point should be expanded on in this section and some explanation provided.

Economic Activity: in December 2009 the WDC published a report *Work in the West: The Western Region's Employment & Unemployment Challenge* (attached). We believe that the findings and conclusions of this report would be useful for this section of the RPGs. In particular Chapters 2 and 3 of the report which examine and profile the labour market and employment patterns of the Western Region, including examining many of the sectors outlined in this section of the RPGs.

Manufacturing and Service Industry: the data given in the draft RPGs for industrial employment is based on the Forfás Annual Employment Survey. This survey only covers firms that have received assistance from IDA, EI or Udarás na Gaeltachta, it therefore does not capture

³ OECD (2006), Competitive Cities in the Global Economy

total industrial employment in the Mid-West Region. Using the Forfás data rather than CSO data underestimates the full extent and importance of manufacturing employment in the Region.

To illustrate this point, in Q2 2008 the seven county Western Region, according to the CSO's Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS), had 46,200 persons in industrial employment, whereas in the same year there were only 38,687 persons employed in assisted manufacturing as measured by the Forfás Annual Employment Survey. Using the latest CSO QNHS figures for manufacturing employment in the Mid-West would give a more comprehensive picture of manufacturing employment in the Region. Though it must also be noted that QNHS data is based on where people live so figures for the Mid-West would include people who live in the Region but commute to work in other regions, whereas the Forfás data is based on where the company is located and therefore is based on where people work thereby counting people who may not live in the Mid-West but commute there for work.

Transport:

The National Road System: completion of the N18 to Galway and the N17 onwards to Sligo should also be referred to here.

The rail system: continuation of the Western Rail Corridor (WRC) north of Galway to Tuam, Claremorris and on to Sligo should be referred to here.

Broadband Communications: the last sentence which notes the problems with access to broadband in many areas of the Region should be followed by a comment on how this constrains development in such areas. Difficulties for enterprise, business start-ups, home-working, distance education and accessing online public services for people living in areas without adequate broadband access could be noted.

Higher Education (HE): this section covers the HE infrastructure of the region, research and innovation and skill levels. It would be better to focus on HE infrastructure, research and innovation here and have a separate heading for skill levels. Given the central role of **human capital** in regional development, examining this issue under a separate heading would be useful. The Mid-West's human resource in terms of numbers in the labour force, education and skill levels and also the possible re-emergence of emigration, is critical to its future economic growth. This topic is examined for the Western Region in Chapters 5 and 6 of the WDC's report *Work in the West: The Western Region's Employment & Unemployment Challenge*; while the WDC's report *Travel to Work and Labour Catchments in the Western Region: A Profile of Seven Town Labour Catchments* (attached) examines issues of labour supply in the Western Region. Some of the results of this research are referred to in later sections.

Quality of Life: the example of the WDC's LookWest.ie campaign might be a useful model in terms of promoting the quality of life advantages of the Mid-West, see www.lookwest.ie.

The Region Sub-Zones

The WDC has a query in relation to the travel to work data provided for each of the Region Sub-Zones. The section compares 2002 and 2006 data on fixed workplaces and commuting. The WDC has commissioned research on the Place of Work Sample of Anonymised Records (POWSAR) 2002 and Place of Work Census of Anonymised Records (POWCAR) 2006 Census

of Population datasets. Our understanding is that the POWSAR 2002 represents just 15% of the 2002 Census results. In the draft RPGs is the 2002 data based upon a grossing up of the 15% sample at national level? If this is the case, it is unlikely to be robust at the lower spatial scale of Region Sub-Zones. In interpreting the results it would be important that there is sufficient comparability between 2002 and 2006 data.

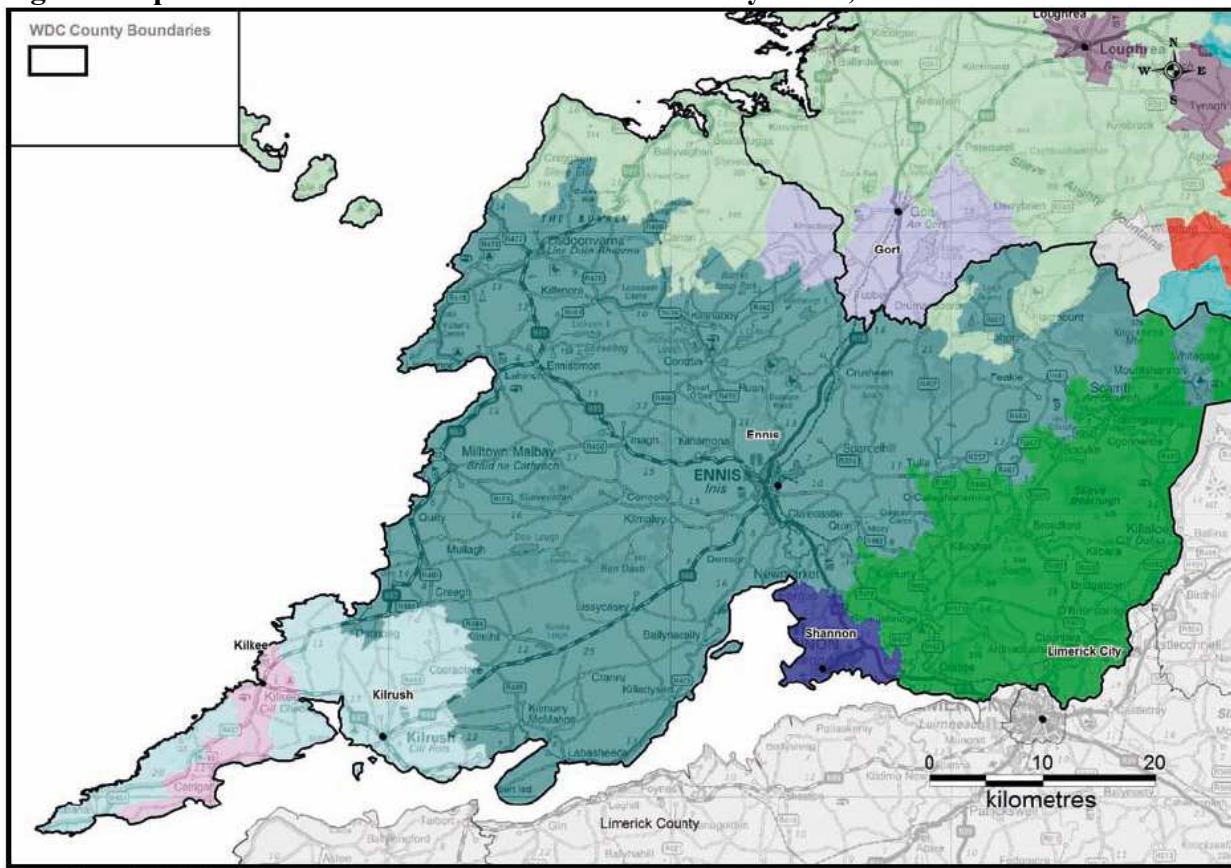
In relation to 2006, the WDC commissioned an analysis of the POWCAR dataset (which covers the entire Census 2006 results) to identify travel to work patterns and labour catchments in the Western Region. This research identified 45 labour catchments in the Western Region. In July 2009 we produced the report *Travel to Work and Labour Catchments in the Western Region: A Profile of Seven Town Labour Catchments* which profiles the labour catchments of the seven principal towns in the Western Region, including Ennis (see Appendix 1). The WDC also has data for all of the smaller town catchments identified by the research but not profiled in our 2009 report.

As can be seen from Figure 1, county Clare is covered by a number of labour catchments, namely Ennis (blue/green), Limerick city (part of) (strong green), Shannon (blue), Kilrush (light blue), Kilkee (pink), Gort (part of) (lilac) and Galway city (part of) (light green). This analysis of labour flows and movements within county Clare would be useful in an examination of the Sub-Zones within the Region. Some particular points are given below.

Zone One: the WDC's analysis supports the RPGs view of the importance of Zone One as an employment centre within the Mid-West. As can be seen from Figure 1, the Ennis labour catchment and that part of the Limerick catchment in county Clare and the Shannon catchment combined cover most of the county. In total 34,669 persons who were at work in 2006 lived in these three labour catchments. The socio-economic profile of those 'at work' who lived in the Ennis labour catchment is contained in Appendix 1.

Although a significant labour force lived in the catchments of the Gateway/Hub, not everyone who lived in these catchments actually worked in the Gateway or Hub centres. In the case of the Ennis labour catchment 39.4% (8,398) of those who lived in the catchment area worked in the town of Ennis, while a larger number, 44.1% (9,406), worked in rural areas (outside centres of 1,000+ population) of county Clare. This highlights the significance and extent of **rural employment** even within Zone One, a fact that must be borne in mind in development plans for the Zone, in particular in the context of the objective to create a '*single integrated urban agglomeration*' of the Gateway/Hub.

Figure 1: Spatial extent of labour catchments in County Clare, 2006



Source: Gleeson, J., NIRSA 2009. Map extracted from Map 2.1.

Source: WDC (2009) *Travel to Work and Labour Catchments in the Western Region: A Profile of Seven Town Labour Catchments* (p. 33)

North West Clare: from Figure 1 it can be seen that the northern part of this zone falls within the labour catchment of Galway city, while in the east of the Zone, Gort has an influence as a place of work. In the discussion in the RPGs of job location for residents of North West Clare, travel to work in Galway city and county should be mentioned, especially as this is referred to in section 2 of the RPGs when the potential and needs of the Zone are highlighted. As noted previously inter-regional labour flows and commuting are an important issue that need to be considered in terms of inter-regional co-operation.

North East Clare: again, from Figure 1 it can be seen that part of this Zone also falls within the labour catchment of Galway city.

South West Clare: from Figure 1 it can be seen that both Kilrush and Kilkee have distinct labour catchments in this area. While these are not analysed in the WDC's 2009 report, the data is available and the WDC can provide an analysis of these labour catchments to assist in the writing of the RPGs.

Progress in Implementation of the RPGs 2004-2016

Infrastructure Objectives: when referring to the Ennis-Galway route it would be better to use the term Atlantic Road Corridor (as above) and note its continuation northwards to Sligo and Letterkenny.

Current Key Planning and Development Issues

Economic Development: the first bullet should also refer to job losses in the local services sector (e.g. retail, hospitality, personal services), this is particularly important for smaller centres. We feel that two additional points could also be added to this list. Firstly, the need to stimulate and support new business start-ups and entrepreneurship. Secondly, the need to support innovation, both product and process, right across the regional economy. Current international policy debates on regional development place a lot of focus on the critical role of innovation in stimulating regional growth, particularly during a period of recession.⁴ While this is relevant to the point about linkages between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and enterprises, innovation is a broader concept that is not always associated with HEIs or science-based R&D activity.

Finally, in relation to the last bullet, we agree that enterprise development in rural areas must not lead to unacceptable environmental impacts. However the potential environmental impacts of large scale commuting from rural areas if job creation were solely concentrated in large urban centres should also be considered.

3. Vision for the Region

The WDC has concerns about the objective of developing Limerick/Shannon/Ennis as a '*single integrated urban agglomeration*'. This area covers a substantial land area with many rural and amenity areas within it. The rural areas of the Zone are also important employment locations, as noted above 44.1% of those living in the Ennis labour catchment and 'at work' in 2006 worked in rural areas of County Clare. The desirability of this entire area becoming an '*urban agglomeration*' from environmental, efficiency and quality of life perspectives is questionable.

The WDC welcomes the amendment to objective 8 of the vision. Considering Sub-Zones in terms of their potential to contribute to regional growth based on their strengths and resources rather than simply in terms of their needs is important to ensure the achievement of the Region's full potential and to ensure that areas beyond the Gateway/Hub Zone participate in and benefit from that development. The new objective 13 seems to be very closely connected to objective 5, there may be a benefit in combining these.

Achieving the Vision

In general it would be useful to name the service centre(s) in each Zone in this table.

Zone 2, Outer Core area: we believe the last bullet under the Needs for this Zone should be expanded. Linkages between this Zone and Galway are broader than the connection to Shannon Airport; other important enterprise, labour supply, education, retail and recreation linkages exist and need to be enhanced. The Needs for this Zone do not make any reference to education or training facilities, if appropriate this should be added.

⁴ OECD (2009), Regions Matter: Economic Recovery, Innovation and Sustainable Growth

Zone 3, West Clare: the fifth bullet under Potential refers to '*High-quality residential location for those working in the Gateway/Hub area*'. While this is an important potential for the Zone, the potential to be a high-quality residential location for those living and working within the Zone itself should also be included. Given that it has already been noted the Zone has potential for social and commercial facilities, indigenous SMEs, tourism and agriculture, it is important that the area offers a high-quality living environment in order to attract and retain workers to enterprises operating within the Zone. The WDC's research on the labour catchments of Kilrush and Kilkee illustrate the diversity of employment for those living in this Zone.

Zone 4, North Clare: the same point as for Zone 3 in relation to providing a high-quality residential location for those working in the Zone itself.

Zone 8, North East Clare: the same point as for Zones 3 and 4 in relation to providing a high-quality residential location for those working in the Zone itself.

4. Economic Development Strategy

Summary of the Economic Strengths & Challenges Facing The Region

Challenges: the list of sectors currently under severe pressure could also include local services (e.g. retail, hospitality, personal services). The list of challenges for the Region set out in the final paragraph should include innovation and the challenge of stimulating further innovation activity in the Region.

The WDC's report *Work in the West* (attached) identifies the three main employment challenges for the Western Region as:

- *Challenge 1: Adjusting to the Decline in Construction Employment:* At the peak of the building boom in 2007, 1 in 4 men in the Western Region worked in construction, a higher share than in the rest of the state. Since then a third of the region's construction workforce (16,400 people) have lost their jobs. This has led to very substantial increases in unemployment among men in the region, especially in more rural counties and is associated with some significant changes:
 - During the building boom the availability of relatively highly paid jobs in the construction sector led many young men to forego third level education and enter the labour market earlier. As many in this group are now becoming unemployed, they will find it particularly difficult to get other jobs because of their low level of qualifications.
 - Rising unemployment among professionals from the construction sector, and the danger that this human resource could be lost to the region, is a cause for concern in terms of growing the region's knowledge economy.
 - The loss of supplementary off-farm employment in the construction sector for part-time farmers in the region has implications for the viability of the region's already vulnerable agricultural sector.

- The level of reliance on construction employment in the region means that its dramatic decline necessitates that the region's economy adjust to a more sustainable basis.
- *Challenge 2: Return of the Brain Drain?*: The Western Region has a long legacy of out-migration with movements to the east of the country and overseas. The reversal of this pattern and the substantial growth in the region's human resources is one of the most important benefits of the boom years for the Western Region. The challenge facing the region now is to prevent the human resource gains of the past decade from being lost during the recession. Nationally, 2009 represented the first time Ireland experienced net emigration since 1995. Anecdotal evidence from the region also indicates that the level of emigration is rising. This seems to be particularly the case for new graduates, recent immigrants and construction workers, including professionals. A particular concern is that as the recession continues, more highly skilled and experienced employees, as well as new graduates, may choose to emigrate as they will be unwilling to remain in the region in unemployment. A return to large scale emigration from the region would undermine its capacity to grow, or attract, new enterprises. The availability of a skilled workforce is a critical deciding factor in inward investment decisions and the location of business start-ups.
- *Challenge 3: Delivery of Education and Training in the Region*: Job seekers are a highly diverse group in terms of occupation, education, age and location with a wide range of education and training needs. There has been an increase in unemployment across all education levels, including among those with a third level qualification. However those in lower skilled occupations and with lower education levels are experiencing the highest unemployment rates and are at greater risk of becoming unemployed. This group, who are at most risk, must be the target of improved labour market interventions to increase their education and training levels and enhance their employability. One particular issue for the region is the cohort of young men with relatively low education levels who are becoming unemployed, mainly from construction. This presents an immediate challenge for the region both economically and socially.

These challenges are examined in detail in Chapters 4-6 of the report. The WDC believes they are of relevance to the Mid-West Region and may be useful in this section of the RPGs. The report also considers areas of strength and future potential which are of relevance for the next section of the RPGs.

Strengths: the WDC's *Work in the West* report includes a list of sectors which the WDC believes have future growth potential for the Western Region. The sectors listed in the RPGs (and in the Forfás Regional Competitiveness Agenda for the Mid-West) are included in the WDC's list (with the exception of Logistics and Supply Chain Management). The WDC also lists a number of additional sectors:

- Creative sector: the features of businesses which are based on creativity (such as design, digital media, fashion, crafts, visual arts) are compatible with the characteristics of the Western Region. They are often small scale with quality of life an important location factor. The WDC published an examination of the Western Region's creative sector in 2009,

*Creative West: The Creative Sector in the Western Region*⁵ which sets out the potential of this sector for growth.

- Caring sector: the region has a higher share of its population in the older age categories and the demand for elder care will grow in future, as will the requirement for formal qualifications among those working in the sector.
- Marine: the Western Region has significant and under-developed marine resources and there is potential to tap into these in the areas of ocean energy, water-based tourism, marine food and transport and shipping activities.

Consideration of these sectors may be useful in the context of the RPGs.

The “Life” Sciences, Biotechnology and Medical Technology: this section, and the section on the sector’s development potential, should make reference to creating linkages with the existing strong cluster of medical technology and device companies based in the West Region.

Tourism & Leisure: specific reference could be made to water-based tourism here, especially as it is emphasised later in terms of the development potential for the sector.

Realising Future Economic Development Potential

The proposal for each of the regional sub-elements to have their own economic development strategy is welcome. These should have appropriate linkages with Local Area Plans and identify local areas’ strengths and ways of building on them. A suggestion in the WDC’s earlier submission to the consultation process of the Mid-West RPGs remains useful in this context:

Rural towns act as the focal point for employment, trade and services for their rural hinterlands. The origins and current profile of such towns are diverse e.g. seaside ports and resorts, market and administrative centres, dormitories for larger urban centres. Many of their traditional functions are changing with consequent employment and service impacts.

The Mid-West’s RPGs should facilitate rural towns to adapt to changes in the rural economy. In order to do that a process to assess a town’s particular assets, and its economic, social and environmental strengths and weaknesses should be developed (this could be based on a process similar to the ‘Healthcheck’ used in England). This could lead to an Action Plan for each town linked into the County Development Plans, RPGs and the NSS. The advantage of this approach is that, although the same process would apply to all towns, the strength of each town is individually assessed and developed. (pp. 4)

Logistics and Supply Chain Management: there appears to be an error in the paragraph under this heading as it does not seem to refer to this sector.

Tourism & Leisure: it would be important that specific reference is made to the role of direct international air access through Shannon Airport for the development of this sector in the Region.

⁵ This report can be downloaded from www.wdc.ie

Renewable and Sustainable Energy: the development potential of biomass from forestry should be included here as it was mentioned in the previous Strengths section. The WDC is currently implementing a Wood Energy Strategy for the Western Region through an EU-funded programme designed to stimulate the creation of local wood energy supply chains. The potential of this element of the renewable energy sector, which Clare has developed through the Clare Wood Energy Project, should be recognised in the RPGs.

Planning and Economic Development

Reference is made to the '*population distribution suggested above*' however this issue does not seem to be outlined until section 4. It would be helpful if an indication of the proposed population distribution was provided in connection with this discussion on employment creation to sustain this distribution.

The WDC is concerned about the presentation of the indigenous sector as being involved in '*developing the areas of tourism, agriculture, agri-business and the processing of the region's natural resources.*' While these are clearly important elements of the indigenous sector, it is far more diverse, with indigenous businesses active across the economic spectrum in areas such as high-tech manufacturing, engineering, medical technology, ICT services, software, creative industry, local services, international services and many others. To present the indigenous sector as solely involved in, broadly speaking, natural resource based activities underestimates both its current and potential contribution to the regional economy and future growth. Given competitiveness concerns and the emergence of an increasing number of competing locations, the Mid-West's economic future is unlikely to rest exclusively with FDI, rather it will be driven by the indigenous sector. It is important that the Mid-West RPGs fully recognise the contribution of Irish-owned firms to local economies and that enterprise support policies are directed at sustaining those that are competitive and can maintain employment, and at encouraging new business start-ups and entrepreneurship.

It should be noted that the increase in the number of people with no fixed workplace between Census 2002 and 2006 was largely associated with the substantial growth in construction employment over that period. Analysis of the POWCAR dataset from Census 2006 has clearly shown that a large proportion of construction workers indicated no fixed workplace (as a consequence they are under-represented in the POWCAR dataset and travel to work analyses).

The WDC has concerns about the level of focus in this section on concentrating employment in central locations, in particular in the Gateway city centre. The creation of jobs close to where people currently live would reduce commuting times/distances, increase the options for walking or cycling to work, relieve congestion in the city centre, spread the benefits of economic growth more widely through the Region and improve the quality of life of those who can work closer to home.

The statement that half of all employment growth in the Mid-West Region to 2022 must occur in Limerick city centre in order to achieve national public transport targets is also questionable. It is stated that this is based on taking Dublin as a '*workable model for the provision of public transport*', however given the considerable concerns and problems with Dublin's public transport

system and the substantial levels of investment already made and planned in that system, we would question this assumption. Public transport models from other countries, designed to meet the needs of more dispersed population and employment patterns, could be investigated as possibly being more appropriate for the circumstances in the Mid-West Region. Public transport should also respond to employment needs. While not advocating excessive dispersal of employment, concentrating employment in the city in order to meet public transport targets does not seem to be consistent with a number of the RPGs objectives relating to developing the entire Region, nor with the underlying ethos of the *Smarter Travel* policy.

5. Settlement Strategy, Population and Housing

There may be a benefit to putting this section before the Economic Development Strategy. The discussion of population targets for the various Zones in this section is very closely tied to the discussion of the needs and potential of the Zones in section 2 and it may therefore be better to have this section directly following section 2. In addition, some of the issues and points in this section provide useful context for the Economic Development Strategy.

Population and Housing Trends and Targets

The issue of migration, both emigration of Irish and foreign nationals, and internal migration between Regions in Ireland should be added to the list of factors which the distribution of population must respond to. The issue of migration and the experiences of the Mid-West Region in this regard need to be discussed in this section. Given that uncertainty about future migration trends is fundamental to population projections, analysis of this issue is required. The out-migration of foreign nationals, for example, could have a notable impact on the population targets. Similarly, a return to large scale emigration of Irish nationals in a situation where improved employment prospects in the Mid-West lag recovery in other countries or other areas of Ireland e.g. the GDA, would have serious long-term regional development impacts.

Table 4.1: an explanation of the two different CSO population projection scenarios for the Region should be provided. This is important in light of the above comment on the role of, and uncertainty surrounding, migration in such projections.

Table 4.2: the base scenario should be explained, it is not clear what year it refers to.

Table 4.5, 4.6 and 4.7: additional explanation of the content of these tables would be helpful, especially given the centrality of the population targets to the RPGs. For example it is not clear what the term ‘Allocation’ in the tables refers to.

We believe an additional point should be added to the four principal purposes of managing population distribution set out in 2004. Given the dramatic change in employment and labour market conditions, an additional purpose related to creating employment and generating economic development at the various spatial scales within the Region could be added.

The point made in the final paragraph of this section '*the point must be reinforced that the growth proposed will not occur unless supported appropriately*' is key to the RPGs and it would be useful to expand upon the point. Indeed it could also be brought out earlier in the document.

Summary of Strategic Land-Use Development Options

The WDC agrees with the selection of Option 3 for the development of the Region – ‘*Development of a strong core area in Limerick/Ennis/Shannon, complemented by other key regional towns with encouragement of development in other centres and in the rural areas of the region*’. We believe it is important that all aspects of this approach to development of the Region should be supported by the RPGs including the development of other centres and rural areas. It is noted that in reality the population out-turn in the 2002-2006 period was closer to Option 1 (concentration in the Gateway/Hub with overspill) and it is critical that this review of the RPGs keeps its focus on Option 3 and the means to achieve it.

Concerns raised earlier in relation to comparison of POWSAR and POWCAR data at the Region Sub-Zone level also apply here.

Core Settlement Strategy for the Region

Reference is made to coordination zones in this section, it would be useful to expand on this idea.

It is stated that Local Authorities should have regard to the sectoral needs of the key enterprise sectors identified in Section 3 of the RPGs when developing their development plans. Only six enterprise sectors are included in Section 3 however, and these may be more or less important for each of the Zones. For some Zones, other enterprise sectors such as engineering, local or international services, aquaculture etc. may be more important, while from an employment perspective the public sector may in fact be most important. Identification of the enterprise and employment sectors of key importance to each Zone or Local Authority area is central to their approach to economic development. This should complement and support the identification of the sectors of greatest importance to the Region as a whole.

The WDC believes an additional point should be added to the 2004 list of the needs of the sectors, zones and areas. Human resources are fundamental to the capacity for development of sectors and areas. The availability of a labour supply, in terms of numbers and skill/education levels, is key to the location of business start-ups and inward investment. The up-skilling and re-skilling of the Region’s labour force to improve people’s employability is critical to its future growth. As noted above the WDC has raised particular concerns about the relatively low level of qualifications among young men becoming unemployed from the construction sector. In 2008 just 23% of men in the Western Region had a third level qualification compared with 27% of men in the rest of the state and 33% of women in the Western Region.⁶ The human capital available in the Mid-West Region is as important for economic development, if not more so, than physical infrastructure or the other needs identified in this section.

Co-ordinated Development of Geographical Areas: it may be useful to make a reference to inter-regional co-ordination with neighbouring Regions in this section.

⁶ WDC (2009), Work in the West: The Western Region’s Employment & Unemployment Challenge

6. Transport and Infrastructure Strategy

Priority Transport Infrastructure

Inclusion of a specific heading and discussion of air transport would be useful in this section. Currently the role and importance of aviation is only mentioned briefly and is primarily linked to the reconsideration of the feasibility of the rail link to Shannon International Airport. It is critical that Shannon Airport itself be identified in this section as a transport priority for the Region given the vital role of direct international air access for regional growth. It would be useful if the paragraph relating to Shannon Airport in section 7.3 of the draft RPGs were repeated here.

Public Transport: Rail: the first sentence of this paragraph could be perceived as quite negative in terms of a discussion of rail. Also the reference to the WRC could specify the need to continue the WRC beyond Athenry to connect to Tuam, Claremorris and onwards to Sligo in order to realise the full benefits of inter-regional connectivity.

Energy and Utilities

Renewable energy: the potential of wood biomass for renewable energy could be included here.

7. Implementation, Monitoring and Indicators

The WDC believes that the implementation of the RPGs will be more successful if national level Departments and Agencies adopt a spatial perspective in their expenditure decisions which is supportive of the RPGs objectives. This is one of the most critical issues for implementation of the RPGs.

Cross-regional implementation: increased co-ordination between Regions will be important for implementation of the Mid-West RPGs and the RPGs of its neighbouring Regions. It would be useful if the RPGs provided some additional information on the nature of, and areas to be addressed by, the proposed working groups to facilitate such co-ordination.

Monitoring, Evaluation & Review

Targets and Indicators: following publication of the NDP 2007-2013 the WDC prepared a report *Indicators, Balanced Regional Development and the National Development Plan 2007-2013* (attached). The purpose of this paper was to identify a basket of indicators which could be used to assess the achievement of balanced regional development. We believe these may be useful in deciding upon the indicators to be used to monitor the impact of the RPGs on regional development. The 19 chosen indicators were based on six themes ranging from demographics to innovation performance. These are detailed below.

1. Demographic Indicators

- 1.1 Population Change and Population Distribution
- 1.2 Age Structure – Population of Working Age (15-64 years)

2. Labour Market Indicators

- 2.1 Labour Force Participation Rates by Gender
- 2.2 Employment Change, Employment Rate and Employment Distribution
- 2.3 Unemployment, Unemployment Rate and Long-Term Unemployment Rate

3. Economic Structure and Performance Indicators

- 3.1 Employment and Employment Share by Sector
- 3.2 Output – Regional GDP per Person
- 3.3 Gross Value Added by Broad Sector
- 3.4 Regional Share of each Broad Sector GVA
- 3.5 The Knowledge Economy – Employment in Knowledge Intensive Sectors

4. Education Indicators

- 4.1 Population Classified by Highest Level of Education Attained
- 4.2 Employed Graduates by County of Origin and County of First Employment

5. Income and Poverty Indicators

- 5.1 Income per Capita
- 5.2 Poverty; Consistent Poverty Rate
- 5.3 Poverty; At-Risk-of-Poverty Rate

6. Innovation and Technology Indicators

- 6.1 Household Broadband Access
- 6.2 Higher Education Research and Development Expenditure and Performance
- 6.3 Business Research and Development Expenditure and Performance
- 6.4 Innovation Activity

8. Conclusion

The NSS suggests that many of the strengths of smaller towns and villages lie in their capacity to accommodate employment, residential and other functions on the basis of their lower costs and quality of life. However, the functions of rural areas and small and medium-sized provincial towns, and their contribution to the achievement of the NSS and RPG objectives, have not been very clearly defined.

Rural areas are often seen as residential locations from where workers commute to larger urban centres. The WDC believes that the Mid-West's RPGs should not envisage rural regions solely as sites for consumption, or as sources of labour for regional centres thereby giving rise to extensive commuting. This strategy would run directly counter to the trend of rural population growth in recent years, and the evidence that most rural dwellers have been able to work relatively close to where they live.

The Mid-West's RPGs should facilitate small and medium-sized provincial towns and their rural hinterlands to develop at their own scale. They can continue to be active and dynamic parts of the productive economy, beyond the agriculture, tourism and natural resource sectors which are often assumed to be the dominant sectors of the rural economy.

The findings from the WDC's LookWest.ie campaign, as well as the WDC's exploratory study on the relocation of public offices to rural towns,⁷ illustrate that people want to live and work in rural areas. The motivations for this vary between individuals, but quality of life emerges as the

⁷ WDC (2008), Moving West: An exploratory study of the social and economic effects of the relocation of public sector offices to towns in the Western Region

primary motivating factor. A situation where people want to, and do, live in rural areas, but job creation strategies concentrate on gateways and hubs only, creates a situation of unsustainable and undesirable commuting patterns.

This review of the RPGs for the Mid-West Region presents a significant opportunity to address the challenges facing the Mid-West in a more difficult economic situation. The WDC hopes that this submission will be of benefit to this process and would welcome an opportunity to meet with the Mid-West Regional Authority to discuss this submission.

**Western Development Commission
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Appendix 1: Profile of the Ennis Labour Catchment

Source: Chapter 4 of WDC (2009), Travel to Work and Labour Catchments in the Western Region: A Profile of Seven Town Labour Catchments