



Regional Planning Guidelines for the West Region 2004-2016 Review

Submission from the
Western Development Commission
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Submission from Western Development Commission (WDC) to Regional Planning Guidelines for the West Region 2004-2016 Review

1. Introduction

The Western Development Commission (WDC) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the review of the Regional Planning Guidelines (RPGs) for the West Region 2004-2016.

The WDC is a statutory body whose primary purpose is to promote economic and social development in the **Western Region**, comprising the counties of the West Region, along with Clare, Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal. The WDC operates under the aegis of DCRAGA¹ and its main aim is to ensure the region maximises its full potential for economic and social development. This is done by:

- identifying and analysing the key social and economic issues for the region and making policy recommendations;
- supporting the sustainable development of the rural economy through strategic projects;
- promoting the benefits of living, working and doing business in the region through the LookWest.ie campaign; and
- providing risk capital to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through the WDC Investment Fund.

Given the WDC's role in regional development, the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) provides a framework for many of its activities, in particular the promotion of balanced regional development. The WDC made a submission to the original formulation of the NSS and has also recently made an input to the current refresh and update of the NSS. As the overall aim of the RPGs is to ensure the successful implementation of the NSS at the regional, county and local level, the WDC's submission to this review draws on many of the issues raised in our recent input to the NSS refresh. The WDC is represented on the Mayo, Roscommon, Galway City and County Development Boards (CDBs).

In this submission, the focus will be on the areas relevant to the review of the RPGs in which the WDC has direct experience. Therefore, we have not addressed all of the headings outlined in the Background Issues Paper.

¹ Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs

2. Strategic Goals of the RPGs for the West Region

The strategic goals set out in Section 3 of the West RPGs present the vision for the West Region. Views have been requested on whether these goals are still relevant for the period 2010-2022, whether they need to be changed or if any additional strategic goals should be added. The WDC's views on each strategic goal are set out below.

2.1 Spatial Structure

To identify, formulate and implement policies that will promote the gateway Galway and hubs Tuam and Castlebar/Ballina into achieving their targets and fulfil their roll as set out in the NSS, coupled with supporting a settlement strategy that with help to encourage the growth of towns and villages enabling them to service their rural hinterlands.

The WDC believes that this strategic goal remains relevant. However the interdependence between development of the gateway and hubs and the development of the smaller settlements is perhaps not clear enough. It could be interpreted as meaning that the development of the gateway and hubs can be separate from a settlement strategy for towns and villages, when in reality they should be strongly interlinked.

2.2 Access

To put in place an integrated transport and access infrastructure that

- Facilitates access by all at a reasonable cost and with reasonable travel times to educational, work, leisure, health and other services
- Promotes a comprehensive range of public transport options – rail, bus etc for all areas
- Provides a high level of service on major roads that minimises travel times and maximises safety.
- Facilitates the movement of goods in and out of the region in a way that promotes national and international competitiveness

The WDC considers this strategic goal is still relevant, but believes the issue of sustainability of transport access, for all modes of transport, needs to be incorporated. For example it could be amended to state 'To put in place an integrated and sustainable transport ...' and the issue of sustainability could be added as an additional bullet point. The issue of air access could also be specifically mentioned within the goal, given its critical economic role in the West's development.

2.3 Service Infrastructure

To ensure that a framework is devised to meet the service infrastructural requirements of the Region both now and into the future by

- Ensuring that the telecommunications network in the region is upgraded extensively so that it can attract additional investment.
- Improving and addressing the present deficits that exist in the energy sector
- Encourage, where appropriate projects for the production of renewable energy sources
- Utilizing the valuable resource available in the Corrib Gas field to directly benefit the region and provide an additional energy source for the country as a whole

- To identify and remedy the insufficiencies that exist in the provision of services in the education and healthcare fields.

The WDC believes that the provision of improved telecommunications should not be presented simply in terms of attracting additional investment, as it is currently set out in this strategic goal. Improved broadband access is also critical to facilitating indigenous start-up businesses, teleworking, participation in distance education, access to public services and individuals' quality of life.

Also given the importance of both education and health services to the quality of life of residents of the West Region, it may be advisable to separate these two points to make a specific point about each. In particular the provision of education and training services will be critical in a situation of rising unemployment and the need for retraining and up-skilling.

2.4 Economic Development

To generate conditions that create good service infrastructure, access and innovation promoting the ethos of advanced education and life long learning which combined, enhances the regions competitiveness in order to attract Foreign Direct Investment and promote and sustain local indigenous based industry. Such development should encourage the spread of opportunities across the region and minimise the dependency on private modes of transport.

This strategic goal would need to be clearer and more coherent, particularly in light of the downturn in the economy and the associated challenges for regional development, some of which we outline in the section on Enterprise and Employment below. Consideration should be given to setting out this strategic goal earlier so that other issues follow logically from the overarching goal of economic development which is directed at ensuring that the region is as well placed as possible to grow indigenous enterprises and attract inward investment.

2.5 The Environment, Sustainability and Quality of Life issues

To further improve the quality of life for the citizens of the West Region by promoting the concept of sustainability, protecting the environment and heritage, creating a safe society and sustaining and further promoting a sense of unique cultural identity for the Region together with ensuring access to key services including sporting and leisure facilities.

This strategic goal should begin by stating that the environment and quality of life within the West Region are key strengths that need to be preserved and enhanced, not only for current residents but also as a means of attracting new residents and business people. The goal could then set out how this is to be achieved, as it already does.

2.6 Agriculture and Rural Development

To put in place a series of measures that will help to achieve the following targets

- Preserve the tradition of small farm units in the region and safeguard their economic viability by providing opportunities for off farm incomes
- Diversify the rural economy to concentrate on producing high quality products to meet market/consumer demand

- Sustain rural communities by providing a satisfactory level of service thus ensuring a good quality of life for all

This strategic goal seems a bit more detailed than the others and needs to be stated more broadly and realistically without reference to targets or measures. The commitment to diversifying the rural economy makes reference only to producing high quality products to meet market/consumer demand. Given the discussion in Section 3 of the West RPGs, this appears to only refer to agricultural outputs. The rural economy however is composed of enterprises from almost the entire spectrum of economic activity including international and local services, high-tech manufacturing, green enterprises etc.² This strategic goal needs to incorporate a broader view of the rural economy and its economic potential than just the agriculture sector, including facilitating entrepreneurs to establish and operate businesses in rural areas.

2.7 Tourism

To expand the tourism sector in the West Region by creating an integrated approach to facilitate the promotion of all areas in a sustainable and planned manner with particular emphasis on the less developed areas, extend the tourist season and promote ‘flagship projects’ in order to create a quality competitive product to be marketed internationally. It is also essential to develop new products, services and facilities and maintain and increase the regions’ share of the market.

The WDC believes this strategic goal is still relevant. It would be useful to include a specific reference to rural, green and activity tourism which are niche markets in which the West Region has particular strengths. Green tourism in particular has been specifically identified as a growth opportunity in the Government Framework for Economic Renewal *Building Ireland’s Smart Economy*.

2.8 Inter Regional Issues

To support a framework which incorporates a network of places creating a Western Developmental Corridor which will enhance economic, social and environmental opportunities and will enable the western seaboard to compete successfully with other economic corridors, thus benefiting for the people of the whole region.

This is the strategic goal which may require the most amendment. The concept of a Western Developmental Corridor does not appear to have progressed as envisaged in the RPGs, particularly the linkage to Sligo. Rather, the Atlantic Gateways approach, which does not extend beyond Galway city, appears to have become the focus and is specifically referred to in *Building Ireland’s Smart Economy*. The West Region RPGs should pay particular attention to the area north of Galway which is currently not perceived as being part of any corridor.

The WDC believes that the strategic goal on inter regional issues should contain a number of points. These include: a reference to Galway’s role in the Atlantic Gateways initiative; to ensuring that the benefits of the Atlantic Gateways are dispersed to the rest of the West Region;

² See WDC (2007), Rural Businesses at Work: Case Studies of Rural Enterprises in the Western Region for a discussion of the rural economy and the issues faced by rural entrepreneurs: www.wdc.ie

and to inter regional connections with the gateway of Sligo, which plays a critical role in the development of north Mayo and Roscommon.

3. Enterprise and Employment

Clearly many of the enterprise and employment issues in 2009 are different from those in 2004 when the RPGs were prepared. For example the unemployment rate in the West Region in 2004 was 3.7% compared with 8.9% in 2008.³ The number of people on the live register continues to increase (there was an 85% increase in the number of people on the live register in the West Region between March 2008 and 2009 to bring the total to 35,101⁴) and it is likely that the unemployment rate will rise further over the course of 2009. At the end of 2008 the rate in the West Region was higher than the national average (8.9% v 7.7%). The RPGs will therefore need to incorporate job creation and training and support for the unemployed to a greater extent than currently.

The WDC prepared a briefing paper *Employment and Unemployment in the Western Region 2000-2008*⁵ in late 2008 which may be of benefit during the review of the West's RPGs. In the WDC's view, the key enterprise and employment issues for the West Region which need to be taken into account in the RPGs are:

- *Decline of the construction sector:* In 2006 14% of all employment in the West Region was in construction (national rate was 11%). This greater reliance on construction employment, particularly in the more rural areas of the region, makes it vulnerable in the current decline. This decline has reduced off-farm employment opportunities for farmers and also created a large cohort of unemployed young men with low educational qualifications.
- *Reliance on locally traded services:* The locally traded services sector⁶ accounted for about a third of all employment in the West in 2006. As such it is the largest employment sector and is particularly important for small and medium-sized towns with limited manufacturing and international services activity. As this sector depends on local demand it is reliant on the level of activity, purchases and wages in other sectors of the economy e.g. construction, export businesses, the public sector. Growth in inward investment and public sector employment can also underpin demand for locally traded services and lessen the impact of industrial closures.⁷ The enterprise and employment elements of the RPGs must recognise the interconnections within the West's regional economy between enterprises which export and those which trade locally.
- *Skills profile of the labour force:* In 2006 28% of the people aged over 15 years, whose full-time education has ceased, in the West Region had a third level qualification (29% nationally). Unsurprisingly Galway dominates in this regard, with both Mayo and

³ CSO, Quarterly National Household Survey 2004 and 2008

⁴ CSO, Live Register March 2009

⁵ This briefing paper can be downloaded at www.wdc.ie/publications_reports.html

⁶ This includes wholesale, retail, hotels, restaurants, transport, storage, communication, banking, financial services and real estate.

⁷ For instance, the WDC regards relocation of public sector jobs as, in effect, a form of inward investment in the services sector, with the stable jobs involved providing longer term security than is the case with some other forms of inward investment. An exploratory study of public sector relocations to the region showed that on average for every five jobs relocated, an additional job is created in the local economy. 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*

Roscommon having rates considerably below the state average. The educational attainment level of the workforce has improved significantly over the course of the decade, however the improvement for younger women has far exceeded that for younger men.⁸ The buoyancy of the construction sector which offered well-paid jobs to young men is likely to have played a role in this. Thus, while the current skills profile of the workforce has improved from previous periods, there is still a considerable skills challenge, particularly for young men, if the West Region is to play a role in Ireland's 'smart economy'. There will also be a need for the provision of up-skilling and retraining for older workers becoming unemployed from traditional manufacturing and construction.

- *Return of the brain drain:* Over the past 15 years the West Region has experienced significant growth in human resource capacity due to increases in the economically active population, improved education levels and inward migration. Human capital has been central to the region's economic growth, and will be one of the main factors in economic recovery. The possible return of the brain drain which severely depleted the region's human capital base during previous recessions is one of the most critical enterprise and employment issues facing the region. Facilitating the region's workforce to remain in the West should be a key goal of the West's RPGs.

In relation to enterprise and employment, the WDC is concerned about the statement made in the Background Issues Paper that *'Investment must be encouraged and attracted into the main centres in order to facilitate a knock-on positive effect towards the outlying peripheral areas of the region.'* Research commissioned by the WDC shows that areas in the West Region outside of the main centres of the gateway and hubs are very important places of employment. For instance, analysis of the Galway city labour catchment shows that 30% of those living there actually work in rural areas (places with less than 1,000 persons) in counties Galway and Mayo. In the case of Castlebar, over 32% of people living in the Castlebar labour catchment work outside the town and in rural areas.⁹

These data highlight the significance of employment in rural locations. Further analysis shows that this employment is not just based on agriculture and the RPGs should recognise the dispersed nature of employment. It will be important that supports for the recently unemployed to access re-training and re-skilling should also be made available in smaller centres.

4. Industrial and Commercial Development

The WDC agrees that the strategies of the state development agencies for the West Region need to be aligned to ensure a coherent approach to industrial development across the region. The gateway and hub towns should be a priority for the development agencies in terms of industrial and commercial development. This is critical to achieving critical mass in these centres and ensuring their capacity to fulfil the role envisaged for them in the NSS and RPGs.

There also exists potential to establish Strategic Development Zones (SDZs) to promote industrial and commercial development in specific locations in the West. The WDC believes that Ireland West Airport Knock would be a suitable location for such an SDZ. This would position

⁸ CSO, Quarterly National Household Survey Educational Attainment Q2 2002 – Q2 2008

⁹ Meredith and Foley (2008), Local and Regional Labour Markets in the Western Region: Spatial Analysis of Daily Mobility Patterns, 2006 for WDC

the airport to act as a focal point for a regional innovation hub. Such a designation would provide an accessible location for innovative enterprise development as well as enhancing demand for the airport's services which may lead to increased direct international access for the West Region.

As mentioned above, a focus on particular locations in development agency strategies should not exclude other centres and rural areas, as large parts of the West Region do not fall within the catchments of the gateway or hub towns. Significant industrial activity and employment is taking place in areas beyond the gateway and hub towns and the retention of this activity must also be a focus of the West RPGs and future industrial strategies. For example in Roscommon town, which is neither gateway nor hub, there were 2,290 residents at work in 2006, 45% of whom were working in the industrial and commercial sectors.¹⁰ It would be regrettable if too great a focus on the attraction of new industry to the gateway and hubs was at the expense of existing employers in those and other areas. The West RPGs should incorporate recognition of the important industrial and commercial role of centres not designated a gateway or hub.

The NSS and the current West RPGs recognise the key role of indigenous enterprise. In 2007 51% of all state supported employment in the West Region was in Irish-owned companies and over the period 2003-2007 while there was a net increase of only 140 jobs in foreign-owned state supported companies in the West, the net increase in jobs in Irish-owned companies was ten times greater (1,465 jobs).¹¹ The West needs to position itself to encourage indigenous enterprises. This can be achieved through supporting innovation (in both high-tech and traditional enterprises) and encouraging business start-ups¹² to enable the region to contribute to the 'smart economy'.

WDC research has shown that indigenous firms will set up in the West Region, including in small and medium-sized towns, largely because of the residential location or preference of the entrepreneur (provided the facilities at specific sites meet their needs).¹³ A growing number of Irish-owned high-tech firms that produce and utilise sophisticated ICT and employ highly skilled and creative workers are located in the West Region. Indeed, some firms in more traditional manufacturing sectors are also becoming more innovative, globally competitive and growing their export markets.¹⁴ It is important that the West RPGs recognise the contribution of Irish-owned manufacturing firms to local economies and that enterprise support policies are directed to sustaining those that are competitive and can maintain employment.

For rural areas, sectors based on natural resources such as renewable energy,¹⁵ food production, rural tourism, the creative sector¹⁶ and marine need to be prioritised, and creative and innovative strategies that maximise their employment and growth potential put in place.

¹⁰ CSO Census of Population 2006, Vol 7

¹¹ Forfás Annual Employment Survey 2007

¹² The WDC Investment Fund has supported 50 start-ups, the majority outside gateways. Data from the Revenue Commissioners show that the growth of small businesses in the seven western counties 2003-2007 has exceeded the state average.

¹³ WDC (2007), Rural Businesses at Work: Case studies of rural enterprises in the Western Region

¹⁴ JFC Manufacturing, Tuam, Co Galway; McHales Engineering, Ballinrobe, Co Mayo

¹⁵ WDC (2008), Wood Energy Strategy for the Western Region; WDC (2004), To Catch the Wind

5. Transportation

5.1 Road

The road infrastructure of the West Region is fundamental to both its economic and social development. The vast majority of internal transport in Ireland, both private and business, is conducted via the road network. Road transport is even more important in more rural regions where there is relatively limited access to public transport. For example 77% of those living in the West Region travelled to work in a car or van compared with 70% nationally in 2006.¹⁷ There is considerable scope to enhance public transport options in the West Region both rail (see below) and also bus. Bus transport clearly depends upon a high quality road network.

While completion of the M6 Major Inter Urban (MIU) route to Galway in 2010 will be of major benefit to the region, it will make the deficiencies in the road network in the region north of Galway even more apparent. At present this area has no motorways and very few roads of dual carriageway standard. The current constraints on the public finances have led to a postponement of road projects in the West Region. It is vital that the West RPGs outline the importance of road connections within the region which interlink the gateway and hubs with each other and smaller centres. Enhanced access to Dublin is not sufficient to stimulate regional development in the West Region.

The WDC considers the main road infrastructure priorities for the West Region, which should be incorporated in the West RPGs and completed by 2015, to be:

- Completion of the M6 to Galway.
- A commitment to at least dual-carriageway status for the N5/N26 to the hubs of Castlebar and Ballina. This includes the Ballaghaderreen bypass, N5 Strategic Route Corridor (Frenchpark-Tulsk), Strokestown bypass, Westport-Castlebar and Ballina-Bohola Phase II.
- A commitment to at least dual-carriageway status for the entire Atlantic Road Corridor (ARC) linking the gateways of Sligo, Galway and Limerick via the hub of Tuam. This includes Collooney-Charlestown, Mayo county boundary-Milltown bypass and the proposed M17 PPP project combining the Tuam bypass, Galway-Tuam and Oranmore-Gort projects.
- A number of regional roads are also important strategic routes and should be included in the RPGs. N61 linking Boyle with Roscommon and Athlone; N60 linking Roscommon with Castlebar; N63 linking Roscommon with Galway; N84/N58 linking Galway with Castlebar and Ballina.
- There is also a need for improvement of the N59 coastal route linking Sligo with Galway via Ballina, Westport and Clifden.

Enhancing road connections to international access points is necessary if the full benefits of improved direct international air access to the West Region are to be realised. Ireland West Airport Knock is served by part of the ARC and the N5 radial route. Improvements to these

¹⁶ The WDC has undertaken baseline research on the creative sector in the Western Region and identified the potential for further growth of this sector. WDC (2009), Creative West: The Creative Sector in the Western Region

¹⁷ CSO, Census of Population 2006. These figures relate to those who drive and also those who travel as passengers.

routes will extend the catchment area for the airport. Likewise improvements to the N18 route will improve access from the West Region to Shannon airport.

5.2 Rail

The current railway network of the West Region consists of radial services to Galway, Castlebar/Westport and Ballina from Dublin. Passenger numbers have increased on each of these services in part due to greater frequency of services, better timetabling and improved rolling stock. The West RPGs should include a statement on the importance of the further planned improvements to enhance the attractiveness of rail as a sustainable public transport mode.

The Government has committed to a phased re-opening of the Western Rail Corridor (WRC), linking the NSS gateway of Sligo to the gateways of Galway and Limerick with onward connections to Cork and Waterford. Services connecting Galway to Limerick are due to commence in August 2009. This will substantially improve the public transport links between the second, third and fourth largest gateways and will encourage much greater interaction between them enabling an improved regional balance in economic activity. The next phases of the WRC will connect Galway to Tuam (2011) and Claremorris (2014). This will facilitate a greater take-up of public transport services for those working in Galway. Currently 75% of those living in county Galway travel to work by private car or van and the main transport arteries into the city face major congestion.

The WDC believes that quality services, good timetabling and good rolling stock are required to ensure the success of services on the line. Sufficient Park and Ride facilities and much better integration with other transport modes are also required and the RPGs should reflect this. Furthermore the WRC provides many new options for rail freight transport from counties Galway and Mayo.

5.3 Air

International air access is vital to connecting the West Region to the UK, Europe and the rest of the world. The WDC believes that quality services to and from the West Region's international airport at Ireland West Airport Knock, as well as Shannon airport just south of the region, are fundamental to connecting the region globally. The RPGs should contain a commitment to ensuring that these airports are enabled to continue to support the enterprise and tourism needs of the region connecting suppliers and customers to international markets.

Improving land journey times and access to and from the airports, thereby extending the airports' catchments, will also be important in supporting the airports' development. Improvements to the surface transport links to these airports are required, in particular the N17, N18 and N5.

6. Energy and Communication Networks

6.1 Energy

Quality energy infrastructure and supply are essential to underpin the economic development of the West Region. Appropriate investments in energy infrastructure will allow the region to compete in attracting industry, maintaining existing enterprises and developing the renewable energy sector.

Quality and reliable electricity supply is essential for productive economic activity, as well as for the quality of life of those living in the region. Investment in electricity infrastructure is key to meeting the future needs of the region and also to enabling the West to capitalise on the important natural energy assets in the region. The West Region has some of the best conditions in the world for the generation of electricity from wind and wave energy. Developing the electricity grid will enable the electricity produced in the region to be exported to other parts of the country, and beyond in future. The RPGs should clearly facilitate the development of such important strategic infrastructure and ensure that local planning guidelines reflect this.

The West Region has a significant proportion of the national forestry asset (19%).¹⁸ This is also an important renewable energy resource which can be used for producing heat. The WDC has recently launched a strategy for the development of wood heat in the Western Region. It was found that the growth of the wood energy sector in the Western Region, as proposed under the regional strategy would result in the following impacts:

- Generate 477MW of heat energy by 2020 utilising 472,000 tonnes of timber with an annual value of €1.7 million to the farming sector
- Increase annual Gross Value Added (GVA) in the Western Region of €15 million by 2020
- Create 887 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs by 2020
- Generate CO₂ savings of 619,000 tonnes per annum by 2020 (This would be a benefit of €6.9m in 2020 if carbon is valued at €15 per tonne).

A significant proportion of these benefits will occur in the West Region. Therefore the RPGs should seek to facilitate the development of wood heat and provide clear direction for the planning and development of this sector.

The WDC also believes that further development of the natural gas grid will bring a range of benefits to the region and help to make its industries more competitive.

6.2 Communications

Availability of high quality affordable broadband infrastructure is essential to the economic and social development of the West, as pointed out in Section 2.3 above. While significant advances have been made in rollout nationally and to larger regional centres, using fixed, wireless and mobile technologies, and larger towns are relatively well-served, progress in rural areas has been limited. Even when broadband is available, services are often patchy, unstable, and with limited capacity. As Next Generation Networks (NGNs) requiring ever higher bandwidths come on stream, there is a real danger that broadband capacity in areas outside of large centres will be insufficient to support NGNs and that the spatial digital divide will widen.

The WDC believes it is important that local and regional authorities take the lead in facilitating the rollout of high quality affordable broadband infrastructure in their planning regulations, and through support for the development of fibre-based open access networks, including providing ducts as part of infrastructure development programmes. A facilitative approach to road openings and infrastructure sharing should be adopted.

¹⁸ Forest Service (2007), National Forest Inventory, Republic of Ireland

7. Tourism

The NSS identified tourism as a sector which had considerable potential to contribute to the development of the West Region. The West Region has considerable natural and manmade assets which make it an attractive tourist destination, including highly scenic coastlines and inland areas, the culturally distinctive Gaeltacht and vibrant centres such as Galway city and Westport.

The West Region experienced a 24% increase in the number of overseas visitors and a 17% increase in overseas tourist revenue between 2002 and 2007. Some 73% of these overseas visitors were holidaymakers, a higher share than for either the Shannon or North West regions. Domestic tourism is also vital to the West with 45% of total tourist visits to the region in 2007 being made by domestic tourists.¹⁹

While the region has experienced tourism growth over the past few years, this is not evenly distributed across the region. In line with international trends towards city breaks, Galway city has experienced far stronger tourism growth than rural areas and Roscommon in particular, continues to have a low level of tourism activity. In 2007 Roscommon accounted for just 4% of all overseas visitors to the West Region, Mayo for 23% and Galway for the remainder.

There is potential for rural tourism to develop and contribute more to the rural economy of the West Region. The West RPGs should incorporate a commitment to rural tourism and the wider dispersion of tourism development across the region. The WDC have been involved in this area since publishing research and an action plan in 2001 intended to stimulate the rural tourism product in the Western Region.²⁰ As a result the multi-agency Western Development Tourism Programme (WDTP) was established to oversee the implementation of the action plan through a pilot programme of innovative rural tourism projects.²¹ Some of the projects initiated by the WDTP include Walking in the West (a guide for the development of long walking trails), the Tourism Tastes Trails and the Green Box (Ireland's first integrated eco-tourism destination). These are examples of innovative tourism products based in rural areas and servicing niche markets. The WDC believes such an approach should be included in the RPGs.

8. Achieving Critical Mass

The WDC's views on balanced regional development, what it should be trying to achieve and how it might be effectively delivered, were set out in a paper to the WDC Policy Conference *Delivering Balanced Regional Development: A Challenge for Policy*, in May 2008. The issue of critical mass is examined and the issues and required policy responses discussed in that paper are now even more urgent in light of the downturn in the economy.²²

The WDC believes that appropriate investment strategies are required to ensure that the gateway and hubs in the West Region can grow to fulfil their respective roles. The West RPGs have an important role in setting out these strategies, but more fundamental is the need to ensure that the

¹⁹ Fáilte Ireland, West Region Fact Sheet 2007

²⁰ WDC (2001), Blueprint for Tourism Development in the West: An Action Plan for Rural Areas

²¹ A case study of the approach taken in the WDTP and its activities is contained in WDC (2006), The WDC's Model of Rural Development

²² This paper can be downloaded at www.wdc.ie/DeliveringBalancedRegionalDevelopmentConference_000.htm

spending Departments adopt a spatial perspective in their sectoral expenditure decisions. In this regard, the postponement of the Gateway Innovation Fund is regrettable as it represented an important step in recognising a commitment to the objectives of the NSS and balanced regional development.

While the regional development focus of the NDP is on the gateways, with the assumption that achievement of critical mass in the gateways will drive development of their ‘gateway regions’, in reality the interactions between a gateway and its region are complex and not very well understood. For example, in the West Region there are areas of north Mayo and north Roscommon which fall within the natural hinterland of the Sligo gateway rather than Galway, while areas of east Galway and south Roscommon are more closely linked with Athlone. Research on travel to work patterns from Census 2006 has provided useful information to the WDC on the reality of workers’ commuting patterns and the extent of interaction between the West Region’s gateway, hubs, other towns and rural areas.²³

9. Rural Part of the Region

The West outside of the gateway and hubs is predominately rural – characterised by medium-sized and small market towns, villages and open countryside. The recent buoyancy in the economy, particularly in construction, has generally enabled rural economies to absorb the decline in the primary sectors of agriculture and fisheries, and some elements of industry. As employment opportunities expanded, many rural areas gained population. However, employment in rural areas is under pressure with the downturn in construction activity and pressure on the local services sector (see above). The challenges faced by rural areas, and rural towns, must be incorporated within the RPGs.

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 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.

The 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.

²³ Meredith and Foley (2008), Local and Regional Labour Markets in the Western Region: Spatial Analysis of Daily Mobility Patterns, 2006 for WDC

Rural areas are often seen as residential locations from where workers commute to larger urban centres. The WDC believes that the 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, where most rural dwellers have been able to work relatively close to where they live.

Rather, the 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,²⁴ 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 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.

10. Conclusion

This review of the Regional Planning Guidelines for the West Region presents a significant opportunity to address the challenges facing the 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 West Regional Authority to discuss this submission.

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²⁴ 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