



**Local Democracy Taskforce Stakeholder Engagement Process**  
**Western Development Commission (WDC) submission to consultation**  
**August 2025**

Introduction

The Western Development Commission (WDC) welcomes the opportunity to submit its views to the Local Democracy Taskforce Stakeholder Consultation Process. The WDC recognises the value of the Taskforce and the importance of strengthened local government to support regional development across all regions.

Given the nature of our work and our engagement with local government and bodies across the Western Region, the WDC is best placed to provide insights which link more broadly with supporting regional development. Therefore, we have taken the approach of providing our insights in relation to each section heading and answering those questions most relevant to the WDC's engagement with local government. If there are any queries, please do not hesitate to get in touch: [franceshague@wdc.ie](mailto:franceshague@wdc.ie)

Section A: Structures

**1. The elected council sole has responsibility for making certain decisions and exercising powers. These are known as Reserved Functions and primarily relate to policy, financial and governance matters of the local authority. The Taskforce will consider the current decision-making role of the Council (reserved powers) and make recommendations for changes to support increased use of existing/new powers.**

While WDC does not engage directly with the reserved functions of councils in local authorities, we are familiar with the role and responsibility of elected councils in relation to policy, financial and governance matters. The WDC believes that strong local democracy underpins local development which, in turn, supports regional development.

Where possible, elected councils should be assisted in enacting their responsibilities, and the development of skills and provision of supports could assist with enhancing decision-making processes. Examples of this could include information sharing and training on region-specific focuses, the sharing of best practices which could be replicated or scaled, as well as more joint training and information sharing between neighbouring local authorities. The WDC carry

out analysis and research on the impact of policy in the Western Region, which we regularly share with local authorities in the Region with the aim of supporting informed local policy development and evidence-based decision making. Similarly, the expansion of our Connected Hubs network over the past five years presents an example of the scaling of best practice and working alongside local authorities to deliver for rural and regional economies and communities.

**2. The Taskforce will consider the role of Municipal Districts (MDs), which are sub-county structures both statutorily and in practice and make recommendations on other powers that could be mandatorily devolved from plenary council level to strengthen the role of MDs.**

Vibrant towns are key to local and regional development, and it is important that there is widespread democratic decision making as part of this. Municipal Districts (MDs) are key structures for representing different aspects of a county (for example, the differences between some different parts of a county, or rural areas compared with urban areas). It is important that, where a diversity of experiences exists, that they are represented in local authority structures. Even where aspects are the same across different MDs, it can be useful for underlining shared experiences or understanding the impact of approaches to issues across different areas. Highlighting local focuses is an important part of the role of MDs, as well as their role in seeking to ensure funding and attention to specific issues filters through to rural or less urban areas of counties. From the WDC's perspective, a core aspect of regional development is the use of place-based approaches, which differentiate between issues which affect different areas within counties and regions, rather than treating them as one uniform entity. The role of MDs as sub-county structures encourages such a place-based approach and so their work should be supported to ensure that a differentiated approach can continue and be strengthened further. The Western Region does not have any Area Committees and so the WDC cannot comment specifically on their functions with regard to regional development.

**4. The Taskforce will consider the role for a small number of town focused bodies to be introduced on a phased, regional basis to provide a focal point for raising concerns of large towns and coordinating town-focused activities.**

Town-focused bodies also play an important role for sharing issues and concerns regarding town and village areas across counties. These bodies are typically not democratically elected and so the remit of their influence should be considered in relation to this. All counties in the Western Region have Town Centre First strategies or departments in their respective local authority, which work alongside Town Teams to develop tailored plans to revitalise towns and villages. Social enterprises also play a significant role in towns and villages and work to address concerns and drive place-building within their communities. In our role, the WDC engage with Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs), Local Development Companies (LDCs) and other local development organisations, including provision of lending for community development projects. Any new town-focused bodies should link in with

existing town and village teams, community groups and social enterprises to align workplans, share insights and resources, and limit duplications of efforts where possible.

## Section B: Funding

The WDC has limited engagement and experience with funding structures in local authorities, and so our answer for this section will approach each of the questions in combination and with the lens of supporting regional development more broadly.

Some local authorities in the Western Region are smaller than those in other parts of the country and have fewer options to raise revenue (for example, the cost of implementing parking fees may be as much as the revenue raised). There are also differences between the revenue-raising potential of councils in cities versus councils with more rural communities. The WDC engages with local authorities and regional assemblies to support joined-up approaches to economic development and infrastructure investment. It could be beneficial for local authorities to share best-practices regarding methods used to raise revenue, and this could be done within regions or by grouping local authorities with similar populations or features to ensure that learnings are useful and can be applied across different areas. It could also be beneficial for smaller and larger local authorities *within* regions to collaborate on approaches to revenue-raising, both to support regional development and to limit gaps between less wealthy and more wealthy councils. Data-sharing and analysis of the performance of revenue-raising measures by councils, and the open sharing of this information, could assist with enhancing decision-making around economic development and funding.

In relation to revenue-raising and enhancing regional development, where possible, methods should consider opportunities which assist the growth of enterprises, including social enterprises, in an area. For example, while rates are set through the process of determining the valuation and Annual Rate of Valuation (ARV) and are recognised as an important means of raising revenue which goes back into local authorities, there is discretion on how they are applied. Some local authorities could consider utilising this discretion to differentiate commercial rates for start-up enterprises in their locality, in order assist new enterprises in their first years of operation and support economic growth and social enterprise development locally and regionally. The ability to exercise such discretion will of course vary from council to council and, again, it could be beneficial for local authorities to be able to share best practices with each other to understand what methods can be adopted to support local and regional development.

## Section C: Functions

**1. The Taskforce will consider which existing local government functions could be further strengthened and/or powers devolved locally to the elected Council either at plenary or Municipal District level and will explore opportunities to increase reserved functions.**

The WDC works with local government bodies in a stakeholder capacity, and it is important to note that our insights are informed by this engagement, rather than working internally with or as part of the reserved functions of local authorities. Based on this experience, there are some areas where local government functions and engagement could be increased to support regional development. An example of this is regarding tourism. Tourism is an important sector for counties in the Western Region, and WDC research has previously underlined opportunities to develop tourism across the region<sup>1</sup>. Specific approaches to product development, marketing, infrastructure and access, and co-ordination and organising of tourism are required to promote and grow tourism in the west and north west. While individual councils have their own tourism strategies, from a regional development perspective there could be greater intra-regional coordination around the bundling of tourism products, as seen through the success of initiatives such as the Wild Atlantic Way tourism trail.

Section D: Governance and Accountability

**2. The Taskforce will examine how information/data on local service provision can be significantly enhanced to support local decision-making and public awareness of the role and impact of the Council.**

Data sharing plays a significant role in supporting informed decision-making and enhancing policy development to assist regional development. The role of data collection and data sharing in supporting the west and north west as a ‘smart region’ is underlined in the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) 2020-2032 for the Northern and Western Region<sup>2</sup>. In particular, the use of open data portals is cited as beneficial for sharing data on local services and assets within county council areas, and the RSES references collaboration across the three Regional Assemblies in the State to support assessment of local and regional development through key indicators. The WDC views this approach as very beneficial for analysing and assessing regional development in the Western Region, but also for understanding progress in relation to the national context, too. As an organisation we engage with local authorities and other partners to utilise relevant data in shaping local economic plans and strategies. However, the ability of individual authorities to collect and compile data across a range of indicators and focuses varies. For example, smaller local authorities often have fewer GIS analysts due to lower levels of resources available to recruit and maintain these positions. Therefore, provision of specific funding to assist all local authorities with recruiting data and/or GIS analysts could be beneficial for ensuring consistency in the

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<sup>1</sup> [WDC, Blueprint for Tourism Development in the West](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Northern & Western Regional Assembly \(NWRA\), RSES for Northern & Western Region](#)

availability of information to support decision-making and assessment and analysis of policies.

Awareness of other data collection mechanisms and resources could also be enhanced to support local decision-making and analysis of the impact of councils. For example, promotion and raising awareness amongst local authorities, relevant organisations and the public about platforms such as [LGReturns](#) are useful for sharing comparative national data from local authorities. As well as centralised national data sources, greater utilisation of policy and data analysis by regional organisations such as the WDC or NWRA could assist with decision-making and understanding of trends, challenges and opportunities at a regional level. For example, the WDC's Sustainable Mobility Report provides an understanding of active modes and public transport for 40 rural towns across the seven counties in the Western Region. The report was recently updated for 2024<sup>3</sup>, which provides comparison between towns in the region over time, reflects shifts in national and regional transport policies, and presents gaps and opportunities for the future of sustainable mobility in these areas. The WDC has engaged extensively with local authorities in the region, and our policy team is available to provide policy and data analysis to assist with local decision-making and support regional development; particularly at key points, such as the development of county development plans and in relation to the application of National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP) at local levels.

While some local authorities may be aware of the range of data analysis available to them, there could be greater promotion or collation of data sources and evidence which is available to supplement decision-making and enhance the sharing of resources and the sharing of best policy practice and investment to support local and regional development.

**4. The Taskforce will examine how the current number of councillors is determined.**

**5. The Taskforce will explore proposals for initiatives and mechanisms to make the role of Councillor more attractive to a greater number of people from more diverse backgrounds.**

Ireland has a high average population per council, as well as a high average municipal area<sup>4</sup>. This places it in a group of countries with large local authority jurisdictions, which includes the UK (166,000) and Korea (224,500)<sup>5</sup>. While the WDC is not necessarily suggesting that there must be more councillors, this should be considered when reviewing the remit of local government and the capacity of elected representatives to carry out and support the work of their councils. Consideration should also be given to the growing population in Ireland and the Western Region<sup>6</sup> when determining the number of elected representatives per council area. The number of councillors varies by county across the Western Region, which is to be

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<sup>3</sup> [Sustainable Mobility Index 2024 - Western Development Commission](#)

<sup>4</sup> [OECD, 2017, Multi-level Governance Reforms: Overview of OECD Country Experiences](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Quinlivan, A, 2019. The 2019 Local Elections in the Republic of Ireland](#)

<sup>6</sup> [WDC - Census 2022 Summary Report for the Western-Region](#)

expected given the variation of sizes of county populations in the region and differences in urban-rural makeup across each of those seven counties. Projecting how many elected representatives might be needed to future-proof decision making should take into account the differentiations between areas within counties and within regions.

From the lens of regional development, lived experience and representation of those living in the region is essential and it is important to have that reflected in local government. Again, the WDC cannot specifically advise on what initiatives or mechanisms should be put in place to attract people from more diverse backgrounds but note that the representation of needs and experiences is important for local development, which in turn supports regional development.

Determining the number of councillors and the backgrounds they might come from would benefit significantly from utilising research and comparative data analysis. For example, the WDC have carried out regional analysis of data from the CSO for over twenty years and regularly analyse demographic changes in the Western Region from Census data and other national datasets. We recently published our 'Bridging the Divide' report on 25 years of change in the Western Region, which highlights key areas of economic, social and demographic interest<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, bodies working on electoral reform and political media engagement, such as The Electoral Commission and Coimisiún na Méan, carry out research nationally which provides insight into initiatives and mechanisms which may attract local representatives from more diverse backgrounds. It would be beneficial if research in this area was disaggregated by county and region to understand the regional implications of those findings.

## Section E: General and Conclusion

### **1. What is the nature of your Organisation's interaction with local authorities and local councillors?**

The WDC engage with local authorities across a range of focuses. Our Enterprise and Regional Development teams work with businesses, social enterprises, academic institutions and regional bodies to support economic growth and promote the region, and link in with local authority departments and staff as part of this work. Our Connected Hubs team works with councils to build the DigiHub network and support flexible working practices and provide high-quality local spaces and other complementary services for workers, businesses, entrepreneurs and community groups. Our policy team carries out policy and data analysis and engages with local authorities and regional assemblies to support evidence-informed decision-making and joined-up approaches to economic development and infrastructure investment.

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<sup>7</sup> [WDC, Bridging the Divide: 25 Years of Transformation in the Western Region](#)

**2. Does your organisation work with:**

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|----|--|-----|
| a) | Individual local authorities                                     | YES |
| b) | Sub-county/city structures (Municipal Districts/Area Committees) | NO  |
| c) | National organisations (e.g., AILG, LAMA, CCMA)                  | YES |

**3. Do you have any other suggestions or information that you would like the Taskforce to consider?**

The WDC welcomes the opportunity to submit our views to the Local Democracy Taskforce regarding our work with local government and through a regional development lens. As noted in our answers above, we believe that local authorities have a significant role to play in supporting regional development, and that collaboration and information- and resource-sharing between county councils are a key part of enhancing local and regional development. Many counties in the Western Region have shared experiences around issues such as infrastructure, housing, and climate action and transition to renewable energy (and particularly in relation to the development of offshore energy in the west and north west). With this in mind, as part of its work the Taskforce could consider how stronger cross-council cooperation can deliver for communities locally, regionally, and nationally.