

26th June 2023

RE: Cork County Council Local Economic and Community Plan

To whom it concerns,

Cork Chamber represents 1,200 members employing over 100,000 people throughout the city, metropolitan area and county. Our vision is to be a world-leading Chamber of Commerce, delivering on a progressive economic, social and sustainability agenda at the heart of a vibrant business community. Our direction is guided by our formal pledge to uphold the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

On behalf of our membership, Cork Chamber welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Local Economic and Community Plan which will guide and shape our county and the communities that live within it over the next six years. Given the ongoing population growth in the county and the emergence of new living and working opportunities in non-urban areas due to the impact of COVID-19, it is vital that this plan sets out a roadmap for future growth and improvement.


From an economic point of view the county plays a huge role in the overall future development of Cork and should also reflect the ambitions of the city where plans are afoot to support predicted growth in a sustainable manner. This plan also has the scope to support social development with a focus on improvements in areas such as housing, education, healthcare, and cultural amenities which will all help to ensure the county is an attractive place to work and live and will aid the attraction and retention of a vitally important talent pool needed to foster economic growth.

This submission will focus on the following areas:

1. Sustainable, Resilient and Empowered Communities
2. A Socially Inclusive County
3. A Healthy and Active County
4. A Low Carbon and Climate Resilient County
5. A County that supports Enterprise
6. A Smart and Innovative County

We hope you will consider our observations and we look forward to seeing the outcome of this LECP.

Yours sincerely,



Conor Healy,
CEO

Sustainable, Resilient and Empowered Communities

Assessment of community needs to develop housing

It is essential as the population of the county grows that the developments to support it are constructed in a sustainable way. The focus on housing shouldn't be a 'one design fits all' concept as the factors that are considered in cities are often not applicable in more rural areas. For instance, the same levels of service provision for public transport are often not available in various parts of the county. It is for this reason that an assessment of community needs in each area should take place with engagement with local communities via surveys, public meetings etc.

The delivery of more affordable housing would have a very positive impact on the current waiting lists in the county which is now in the thousands¹. Implementing a fresh approach aimed at minimizing housing offer rejections would greatly enhance efficiency, as the current situation is causing delays in the process.

Public Transport Provision

It is imperative that public transport provision is enhanced over the course of this plan to support sustainable living in the county, this will also help to support new housing developments and reduce the need for car parking spaces to accompany each home. Many dwellings in the county are not well connected to their local town and currently transport options are limited to bus services accessible only within towns in many areas of the county. A focus needs to be placed on multi-modal transport, expanding bus routes and increasing frequency of services, expanding the current *Local Link* service, providing cycle lanes in towns, and encouraging carpooling options for school goers.

Regeneration of towns and villages

The regeneration of towns and villages across the county is equally as important as new housing developments. Many homes, shops and premises date back decades and require upgrading both from an aesthetic viewpoint and also from a sustainable perspective. It would be beneficial to raise awareness within communities about the funding models and schemes that exist to support opportunities to rejuvenate towns. The promotion of designs that are durable, adaptable, and compatible with the rural landscape is also of importance to create and empower sustainable communities.

Tourism

Cork county has an abundance of potential for tourism and has scenic views that are unrivalled, as well as a huge cultural and arts offering and a raft of festivals across the entire calendar year. It should be targeted more towards the American tourism market with the provision of more bus lay-by style stops on various routes to facilitate these tour groups. Prior to the pandemic the American tourism market delivered 1.7 million visitors and €1.6billion in revenue to the island of Ireland².

Job Creation

The pandemic has left many positive legacies, in particular the ability to work remotely. It has allowed people whose jobs were previously dependent on city living to relocate to areas in the wider county. However, for the wider county to fully thrive it must also have economic growth that can

¹ <https://www.echolive.ie/corknews/arid-41022251.html>

² <https://www.tourismireland.com/overseas-markets/north-america#:~:text=About%20North%20America&text=In%202019%2C%20the%20United%20States,%C2%A3183%20million%20in%20revenue.>

create employment opportunities. It is of vital importance that SMEs are supported in these areas as well as entrepreneurship. Providing resources and financial supports to start-ups and greater connections with the Local Enterprise Offices will have lasting impacts for the local economy.

A Socially Inclusive County

Actively encouraging community engagement and participation will build a great foundation for a socially inclusive county. It will allow the sharing of ideas and perspectives and a base from which to make positive changes. Involving members of the public in various community projects will encourage collaboration and will also be key to becoming more inclusive and ensuring all voices are heard.

It is fundamentally important that people with disabilities are seen as experts in their disability and needs and are central to any enhancements that need to be made in the community setting. There is a gap between services and needs and awareness of the dedicated section of the local authority that presides over this area should be raised to ensure this type of collaboration going forward.

Placemaking plays a key role in social inclusion and the county has an abundance of open spaces to foster an environment of inclusivity. The accessible design and revamp of spaces such as parks, community centres, and public squares will allow people to come together and connect.

A number of initiatives already running in the county should be enhanced and replicated due to their success. For instance, the Age Friendly parking initiative seen across some towns is a successful way to increase accessibility for elderly members of the public. Cork Chamber is a member of the Age Friendly Alliance, and the following are some of the recommendations we are putting forward for both LECP consultations in Cork:

- Design and placemaking
 - The inclusion of more street furniture.
 - The inclusion of age-friendly parking spaces.
 - Removal of barriers to the use of outdoor spaces; footpath maintenance and addressing physical hazards i.e., potholes etc.
 - Dedicated age friendly toilet facilities.
 - Dedicated age friendly green spaces.
 - Ensure adequate lighting is available especially in walking spaces.
- Accessibility
 - Ensure shops and businesses are accessible to those with mobility challenges or those who use the aid of wheelchairs/walking aids etc.
 - Ensure sign posting is adequate.
 - Heavy doors are opened or replaced with an electronic alternative.
- Transport
 - The provision of more bus shelters.
 - Community bus services that could incorporate an age friendly door-to-door 'whole journey' approach to travel.
 - Tackle anti-social behaviour on public transport.
 - Introducing more traffic calming measures in built up areas to increase safety.
 - Improving the walkability of built-up areas.

- Ensuring adequate road crossings are in place.
- Social Inclusion
 - The introduction of initiatives to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour with increased visibility of gardaí.
 - Offer more age friendly activities and initiatives to combat loneliness.
- Civic Participation and Employment
 - Creating employment and volunteering opportunities.
 - Ensuring that those in employment have the opportunity to access upskilling and training.

This LECF is also an opportunity to encourage a focus on mental health services which must be improved and better funded in the county. It is of huge benefit to society and will have a long-term impact for future generations. More counselling drop-in in centers would help in tackling rising rates of anxiety and depression as well increasing the number of available therapists. Poverty and social exclusion are closely linked but this link is not always as obvious in rural settings. Initiatives and services to combat poverty should also be enhanced and established.

A Healthy and Active County

The benefits of promoting a healthy and active county will be felt in a number of other areas already mentioned in this document particularly in the promotion of active travel such as walking and cycling.

There are a number of key strategies that could be implemented within the context of the LECF that would help to create an environment that supports a healthy and active county and subsequently a thriving active community:

- Active Travel
 - Future town planning or any plans to revamp areas within towns should have a focus on walking and cycling, creating a physical environment that fosters this as a mode of travel and recreation.
 - The pedestrianisation of some streets.
 - Enhancing footpaths and walkways.
 - Connecting parts of towns and villages with walkways and cycleways.
- Public Realm
 - Enhance and introduce as much green space as possible, with a focus on the development of existing parks.
 - Provide a range of amenities that encourage physical activity such as sports fields, playgrounds etc.
 - The inclusion of more street furniture to promote the outdoors and encourage social integration.
- Local Produce
 - Cork has a vast range of fresh, locally produced goods and services. Farmers markets play a key role in the distribution and promotion of these goods. More towns should establish and increase their frequency of farmers markets.
 - Establish community gardens, which are also a form of social integration.

- Health facilities
 - Enhance health services within towns, and ensure they are easily accessible.
 - When building new developments, consideration should be given to the proximity of health facilities, particularly in more rural parts of the county.
 - Address any health inequalities that exist, ensuring older people and those with disabilities are better connected to the services they need.

A Low Carbon and Climate Resilient County

Addressing and reversing climate change in a bold manner has never been more urgent, in order to restore the health of our planet and biodiversity, mitigate the risks associated with climate change and put in place the systems and tools to increase climate resilience and climate justice.

First and foremost, a just transition needs to be at the heart of all climate actions ensuring all cohorts, industries and sectors within the County are accounted for. Without this the transition will be even further delayed, potentially unachievable, and have negative socio-economic impacts.

This LECP must also acknowledge that the climate crisis is not bound by any local authority or any one group so the solutions cannot be either. This LECP should integrate solutions and overcome the silos that currently exist across funding opportunities, actions and decision making. Collaboration will determine Cork's ability to take real climate action, and this collaboration amongst community groups, the private sector, public sector and higher education institutes needs to be enabled.

Renewable Energy

Cork has significant opportunities to decarbonise electricity and industry through the deployment of renewable energy. Cork Harbour has the capacity to become an unparalleled hub for floating offshore wind energy in the Celtic Sea and offers an opportunity for a new industrial sector to emerge in the region, for both electricity generation and green hydrogen.

The specific actions for advancing this industry need to be mapped out, aligning with the Port of Cork, the Phase 1, 2 and 3 wind auctions and the upcoming National Industrial Strategy for Offshore Wind. Cork's voice must remain heard and strong to ensure the highest level of economic and environmental return be made as Government plans where and when Ireland's wind energy resources will be developed.

Decarbonising Agriculture

Utilising currently underutilised and often wasted agricultural resources through anaerobic digestion also presents opportunities to decarbonise agriculture and provide an additional revenue stream to farmers. The immense value of creating better and more sustainable organic fertilizers in the form of digestate further illuminates the potential awaiting the nation in transitioning to a circular bioeconomy.

With agriculture accounting for 530,000 hectares of land in Cork County and being the largest contributor of sectoral carbon emissions, electricity carbon emissions, and methane and nitrous oxide emissions, this opportunity cannot be ignored. Cork can make its mark globally as a leader in the bioeconomy if rightly supported. Please see Cork Chamber's Anaerobic Digestion report³, which extensively deals with this topic.

³ https://www.corkchamber.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/10793-Anaerobic-Digestion-report_final.pdf

Regenerative agriculture, which goes a step beyond sustainability and reducing emissions, takes a holistic approach focusing on strengthening the health of the ecological system as a whole. Regenerative agriculture has five main principles: improving soil health, increasing biodiversity, carbon sequestration, humane treatment of livestock and farmworkers, and improving the overall ecosystem. By focusing on soil health, biodiversity, and incorporating polyculture in agricultural practices, fewer inputs including fertiliser are required.

A number of policy, legislative, financial and behavioural barriers exist, delaying the uptake of such practices. Partnering with organisations such as Teagasc to carry out communication and information campaigns and create programmes to engage the agri-food industry in Cork would be beneficial towards supporting the industry in their transition.

A County that supports Enterprise

Cork has a strong record of supporting enterprise and attracting foreign direct investment into the region. We need to ensure that this legacy continues by addressing current infrastructure gaps and future proofing the region. Ensuring affordable housing in the right places, addressing infrastructure deficits across power, water and transport for both housing and business parks and providing well connected and safe active and public travel infrastructure are all key to ensuring the county remains an attractive place for investment and job creation.

Serviced sites for economic development

A full review of appropriate and serviced sites currently available and for future use for economic development in Cork should be undertaken to paint a full picture. The choice and scale of sites and the necessary infrastructure to service them, including water infrastructure, access to the sites e.g., roads and public transport, and a secure, reliable and green energy source are all key industry needs. Cork's ability to continue to attract FDI depends on our reputation and ability to meet these core needs. Creating a future landbank of sites is vital to the economic development of the region.

Enterprise supports

To advance our entrepreneurial potential the LECP should look at introducing new supports for businesses at seed funding stage and beyond to support the ecosystem of developing entrepreneurs. At the moment, a significant proportion of these innovative companies move from Cork at that stage, and supports need to be developed to address this gap.

Enterprise also needs to be supported in transitioning to a low-carbon economy, in particular SMEs. The LECP should look at introducing retrofitting supports for both building owners and renters to overcome the split incentives barrier and funding barriers. The creation of a taskforce to tackle the decarbonisation of commercial buildings in the county should be integrated into this LECP and the Cork County Climate Action Plan.

Housing

The lack of sufficient and affordable housing has now become an economic problem. Businesses have been reporting difficulties in attracting and retaining staff due to an inability to find suitable accommodation. This has become even more pronounced in the county with accommodation being filled by refugees. As the climate continues to warm, especially impacting those in developing countries, Ireland will no doubt be welcoming climate refugees.

This LECP should set out goals to achieve improvements in housing supply and the necessary accompanying infrastructure, accounting for both natural population growth and potential refugees. A new assessment of housing for the specific time period of this plan could be beneficial to establish more accurate targets and generate new ideas to achieve housing delivery.

Broadband

The rollout of broadband to the county must progress at pace, and any obstacles or barriers that exist should be addressed. It recently emerged that parts of the county will not receive fibre connections before 2030, and some parts face connection dates beyond this timeframe⁴. In order for the county to prosper, attract inward investment and be an attractive location to live and work, reliable and fast broadband speeds are essential. Many people also rely on broadband to work remotely, which has other knock on effects for talent attraction and retention, the economy and the environment.

A Smart and Innovative County

Harbour Economy

There are various ports across the county that have strong associations with the local communities, many of whom use them for recreational purposes, such as sailing, boating and other tourism purposes. Many of these ports are also fishing ports, a business which due to its unpredictable nature and dwindling natural stocks does not always guarantee a daily return. This LECP should set out actions and targets to promote and invest in the harbour economy, supporting sustainable fishing ventures and tourism offerings.

A Diverse Talent Pool

Cork's future success is intrinsically linked to our ability to continue to attract and retain high quality and diverse talent and on skills building to fulfil future needs for the digital and climate transition. Further to this, skills requirements and an increase in the uptake of apprenticeships are needed to meet Cork's climate targets.

For example, the Government has committed to retrofitting 500,000 homes to a B2 BER rating or cost optimal equivalent by 2030. The Cork region is also in the midst of transforming into a hub for renewable energy, for both fixed-bottom and floating offshore wind, contributing to the Government target of delivering 5GW and an additional 2GW of floating wind in development by the end of the decade.

Skills requirements and an increase in the uptake of apprenticeships are needed to meet these targets. Communication campaigns are needed targeting secondary school students, their parents and adults seeking to continue education to shift the cultural mindset regarding higher and further education in Ireland which favours university over apprenticeships. Both pathways are equally important and the inclusion of apprenticeships on the CAO would be very welcome to shift the perception many have towards them.

⁴ <https://www.echolive.ie/corklives/arid-40797378.html>

It is essential that industry, the County Council and the third level institutions work together to map out the skills needed to achieve this target and to ensure the County can better access a highly skilled and diverse talent pool.