

Department of Rural and Community Development,  
Trinity Point,  
10-11 South Leinster Street,  
Dublin 2,  
D02 EF85.

24<sup>th</sup> April 2025

To whom it concerns,

Cork Chamber welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to inform the development of the Department of Rural and Community Development's Statement of Strategy for the period 2025 – 2028.

Cork Chamber represents 1,200 members together employing 130,000 people throughout the city, metropolitan area and county. Our vision is to lead a transforming and ambitious Cork City and County, and our purpose is to unite, represent and support our members and community. Our direction is guided by our formal pledge to uphold the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Cork Chamber has also been designated an SDG Champion by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications for 2024 – 2025.

Cork Chamber's advocacy efforts are guided by the views and priorities of our partners, and are shaped by our continuous engagement with members, our Board and key stakeholders in Cork City and County.

A number of our priority areas are closely aligned with the work of the Department of Rural and Community Development, particularly in relation to sustainable development and regional economic development.

Cork Chamber's membership includes a wide range of sectors, operating across both County Cork and Cork City, and indeed further afield. Supporting and developing our regional towns and cities is critical to Ireland's ongoing competitiveness and economic growth, helping to attract investment and talent to every corner of the country.

Initiatives that attract and sustain investment in regional centres and urban areas, such as the National Hub Network, should be supported and expanded. Creating and maintaining employment opportunities across regions is vital to support thriving communities across the country, and can provide additional opportunities for businesses looking to scale and develop, particularly start-ups and SMEs. Similarly, the shift to remote and hybrid working that has occurred in the post-pandemic era provides further opportunity to leverage local working

hubs and facilitate the movement of people away from large urban centres to help sustain rural communities, and this should be further encouraged.

Promoting social enterprise and social innovation is another vital strand of regional economic development, and the Department should continue to expand the National Social Enterprise Policy in tandem with other initiatives that support community-based, inclusive economic development.

Cork Chamber supports the Department's current vision of a sustainable society with individual and community wellbeing at its heart, supporting thriving rural communities, and where all communities, urban and rural, have opportunities to grow and develop economically, socially and culturally.

County Cork is uniquely positioned to support thriving, sustainable towns and communities. While Cork City acts as the focal point of the surrounding county, Cork is also home to a number of other significant urban centres that play an important role in sustaining economic activities and communities across the county. In addition, County Cork has an important rural dimension, with significant economic activity in agriculture and other sectors, and must be supported sufficiently and appropriately.

Urban evolution has been identified by Cork Chamber's members as a key priority for progress. This relates to the creation and maintenance of safe, welcoming and thriving urban centres, bolstered by community amenities, Garda resources and attractive public realm spaces. Such centres are vital to Ireland's competitiveness, providing spaces in which individuals want to live and work, and domestic enterprises and multinationals want to invest.

Existing initiatives like the Town First Policy provide an important avenue for the future-proof, sustainable development of urban centres across the country, and should be supported to the fullest extent possible by the Department. Mitigating the impact of depopulation and dereliction and promoting economic development and population growth is critical to sustain towns and villages into the future.

In particular, the Department should seek to explore innovative solutions that can help bring people back into regional town centres, supporting local economies and communities. Investing in public realm spaces, green areas and other public amenities should be to the fore in this work, as well as supporting the realisation of innovative housing solutions that can play an important role in sustaining communities in the heart of an urban centre. While primarily under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the Department should support initiatives to promote above-shop living, the conversion of derelict buildings and the development of brownfields sites insofar as possible.

In addition, the Department should prioritise engagement with local authorities, the Department of Transport and other agencies, such as the NTA and TII, where possible in order to support the improvement and expansion of vital infrastructure links across rural

communities. Considerable and welcome progress has been made in recent years in terms of the provision of public transport in rural areas through the expansion of Local Link operations, for example. Such initiatives are critical to support communities, providing enhanced active and multi-modal travel options for those living and working in regional urban centres and more rural areas alike.

Furthermore, collaboration with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage should be prioritised with regard to the implementation of the revised National Planning Framework and the anticipated revision to the National Development Plan. It is vital that balanced, regional development is prioritised in all planning for Ireland's future, both urban and rural. Alignment with local development plans through engagement with local authorities is critical, particularly in a county like Cork, which spans the jurisdiction of two local authorities, serving an interconnected city and county region.

Sustainable community development is a key cornerstone of the Department's work and initiatives like the LEADER Programme provide an important avenue for community-based organisations to access supports. As a member of Cork County's Local Action Groups (LAG) across North Cork, South Cork and West Cork, Cork Chamber is delighted to play a role in assisting with the administration of the LEADER Programme in the region. Such initiatives are critical to support the amenities that help to sustain regional communities, and expanding similar programmes should remain a core focus of the Department's work.

The Department's current commitment to placing the Sustainable Development Goals at the heart of its policies is particularly welcome. As an SDG Champion for 2024 – 2025, all of Cork Chamber's policy outputs and activities aim to work in support of the achievement of the SDGs. In addition, the Chambers Ireland network has identified five SDGs as priority areas for progress, guiding all aspects of Cork Chamber's work.

Progressing sustainable development across every region in Ireland is vital not only to meeting climate and other targets in the years ahead, but also to promoting Ireland's competitive edge and unique offering on the global market. Alongside key sustainable actions such as active travel, biodiversity supports and renewable energy development, it is vital that diversity, equality and inclusion are prioritised in all regional development efforts.

With evolving demographics across Ireland, inclusion and integration should be supported by the Department in all of its initiatives. Working with state agencies like the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and SOLAS, as well as community groups, to promote pathways to education, further training and employment is vital to support integration and social inclusion across rural communities. Expanded access to ETB Further Education and Training courses and increased supports for English language classes, for example, should be prioritised in this regard.

In summary, a coordinated approach to rural and community development across Government departments, state agencies, local authorities and other key stakeholders is

essential to ensure the viability and sustainability of our rural regions. Promoting sustainable economic and community development must be a key focus of the Department's work for 2025 to 2028 to ensure that we achieve the balanced regional development that is so critical to Ireland's economic future, particularly as the country's population continues to grow.

Cork Chamber welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to inform the development of the Department's new Statement of Strategy and looks forward to continuing to support sustainable growth and development across the Cork region.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cathal McSweeney', with a stylized, flowing script.

Cathal McSweeney

Director of Public and International Affairs