

Submission on the Draft Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy for the Southern Region



Submission by:

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Foreword

County Carlow Chamber of Commerce, Industry & Tourism CLG wish to make a submission on the “Draft Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy for the Southern Region”. The Chamber recognises the importance of ensuring that we have a strong vision for the region and look forward to building on that vision. It is important that the vision for the region is complete, balanced and reflects the needs, challenges and objectives for all areas.

Carlow is strategically located within both the Southern and the South East Region, for several reasons. The Chamber is dedicated to fostering a thriving county and is a catalyst in the promotion and progression of the town, county and region. We support the economic and social development of County Carlow through our work with other stakeholders and businesses and our proactive approach to policy development. The Chamber have and will continue to work with all stakeholders to ensure that the plans are right for Carlow, its businesses and the wider community; we are also focused on ensuring that any plans agreed upon are delivered for the businesses and people of Carlow and the region.

County Carlow Chamber

The County Carlow Chamber was established over 71 years ago, working on behalf of member businesses to assist in the social and economic development of Carlow. The Chamber has lead on many projects over the years and continues to work on behalf of members on a range of policy priorities.

The County Carlow Chamber currently represents over 175 businesses throughout the County including many of the county’s largest employers. In total, Chamber members employ approx. 4500 people across the county operating in a range of sectors including tourism, retail, manufacturing, services and education. It is through harnessing this wide range of skills and expertise within the organisation that defines the direction and focus of the Chamber.

While the economic development of the county is a priority, the Chamber is also focused on the growth and development of the region and country. We work within the network of Chambers across Ireland on several projects and additionally we work with the Chambers from the counties of Wexford, Waterford, Kilkenny and Tipperary in the issues and challenges facing the South East Region.

Carlow - Positioning

The Draft RSES identifies the strategic location of Carlow within the South East Waterford City Region, however it there needs to be more recognised in relation to supporting this and ensuring that the area capitalises on this location.

Carlow town is located on the intersection of the N80 (Wexford to Portlaoise) and the M9 (Waterford to Dublin) motorway. This places **Carlow ideally in a position to further develop as a Logistics Hub, connecting the South East with the Eastern & Midlands and the West Regions.**

The South East Region, Midlands Region and Mid East Region all meet at Carlow, presenting the town and county with a unique opportunity at the centre of these areas. This **location also ensures that the wider hinterland and catchment areas provide for a wide skills base to suit a range of industries including pharmaceutical, engineering and finance.**

The borders of Carlow and Laois intersect in Carlow Town where the wider urban area includes Graiguecullen which lies in Co. Laois, this is also where the interests of the Southern Regional Economic Strategy and the Eastern & Midlands Regional Strategy meet and intersect. Businesses and people in the area operate daily without seeing any boundaries and it is vital that there is clear cooperation between both areas. The statistics for the wider urban areas should be used to promote the area and the services on offer.

The Framework

The Draft Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy for the Southern Region identifies several key economic areas including Metropolitan Areas and Key towns, however it is our view that the designations in this area are flawed and are too narrow, demanding further review. The designation of Key Towns in the plan does not consider the status of the towns in relation to their county or indeed current size.

The towns of Carlow, Kilkenny, Tralee and Wexford should be designated as Regional Growth Centres rather than Key Towns. This designation would also serve to recognise the importance of these towns both as the County Town for their respective counties.

Across the southern region, there are several areas which should be considered as Key Towns and have not been listed as such. Within Co. Carlow the towns of Tullow (Pop 3,972) is the gateway to Wicklow and the costal areas and is one of the key employment areas in the region. Similarly, Bagenalstown, continues to grow and develop as a centre of excellence in precision engineering, where it is home to companies such as Autolaunch, Tanco, Hi-Spec, P.B Machine Tech and many more where it has become a global hub with links to international markets everywhere.

The RSES in its identification and review of the urban centres classified as Key Towns, needs to deliver further in relation to the strategic development of these areas. In developing this framework, the RSES needs to further identify all the necessary requirements to delivering on the vision for each urban area, including key infrastructure, strategy for economic development and the priorities in relation to the development of skills, education and connectivity.

M9 Economic Corridor

The **Waterford to Dublin corridor along the M9 is an area that holds the most significant economic potential on the Island**. The corridor connects the areas of Waterford, Kilkenny, Carlow, Kildare and Dublin, stretching across two assemblies and bringing together a population of over 2.3 million.

There are several key growth enablers along the M9 Economic Corridor including:

- The location of Carlow on the intersection of the N80 and the M9 positions it as an ideal **location for the development of a Logistics Hub**
- Compact and focused growth in the Regional Growth Centres of Kilkenny, and Carlow to grow to city scale
- Enhance the linkage between Waterford and Dublin to strengthen a synergy in services and functions, this will further enhance the connections from Belleview, Dublin Port and the respective Airports. This will also ensure that **we get the best from the region's existing and potential infrastructural assets** (roads, gas, networks, ports, rail, broadband, etc.),
- Creating and adding high-value-added jobs which increases Gross Value Added (GVA) in the region
- **Developing a well-skilled labour pool in the region**, which will attract both Irish and foreign-owned enterprises to the region. This is also supported through the development of the **Technological University of the South East**
- Driving **research and innovation** in the public and private sector to increase opportunities for the region,
- **Educational opportunities for lifelong learning and professional development** across the region, this is currently supported by IT Carlow and Waterford IT and will be further enhanced through the development of a Multi Campus Technological University.

Southern Relief Road

The M9 motorway lies east of Carlow Town, while the N80 crosses the town on the North West / South East axis. The N80 also connects along the north of Carlow, providing a partial ring road around the town, from the North West to the South East along the north of the town.

The south of Carlow is served by the R448 Kilkenny Road, and the town also has two bridges crossing the river Barrow, Graigue Bridge and the newer bridge located as part of the N80 crossing on the North of the town.

The south of the town has seen considerable growth over the last number of years, and it is vital that this part of the town is properly connected and serviced for the future. In September 2019, the delayed 10,000 sqm Tyndall College is due to open, and the continued development of IT Carlow sees the new sports campus due online in the coming months. **The Southern Relief road is an important part of this, ensuring that the south of the town is connected to the wider ring road** and allows easier access to the N80 routes for commuter, heavy goods, school transport and much more.

Walking and Cycling Infrastructure

The plan needs to ensure that across all areas in the South, we are focused on addressing the areas of **sustainability, environment and climate**. Part of our focus needs to include the provision for and development of suitable walking and cycling routes. The draft plan mentions both supporting investment in and the development of greenways, blueways and peatways, however it falls short in its aims.

The River Barrow traverses 115km of the South East, from Kildare through Laois and Carlow and the plan does not mention or recognise the potential of this asset.

In late 2017, the Chamber surveyed members in relation to proposed plans for the development of the Barrow Blueway, and the results showed that 90.7% of members were in favour of the development. There was a strong view among the responses in favour of the project that it **would act as a significant tourism asset for Carlow and the region, and potentially be a catalyst for growth** in the tourism industry.

Education & Skills

Ireland's **South East is experiencing a period of significant change** with population increases, an economy that is diversifying and a changing socio-cultural landscape marked by increased diversity, new patterns of population distribution and a new demographic profile. The multi-campus **Technological University will provide leadership as the force at the centre of knowledge, research and innovation** in the region.

The respective institutes of Technology bring a range of skills and expertise in the formation of the Technological University and it is vital that we ensure the supports and funding are in place to deliver on this and other measures to ensure the growing skills shortage is addressed.

The **plan fails to place adequate focus on the importance of developing the Technological University** of the South East and needs to place more emphasis and importance on this. In addition to the development of the Technological University, it is important that the **funding of 3rd and 4th level institutions is reviewed to put them in the best positions to full address the growing skills gaps across the various sectors.**

The higher educational institutions in the region recognise Research and Development as important activities and the RSES needs to place more focus and emphasis on developing this further. Placing more focus on R&D will continue to support the strategies for economic development across the identified Key Towns, Metropolitan Areas and provide strong supports for rural innovation and development.

Connectivity

The enhancement of infrastructure connecting the town and county to the wider region, country and internationally is vital to its continued growth. Carlow already maintains a strong global presence, with local companies exporting and collaborating with almost every country in the world.

The plan already identifies some key Priority Transport Infrastructure for Carlow, including enhanced rail services, the Town Bus Services, Southern Relief Road and the N80 upgrade. The timely delivery of these is vital to the continued growth of the town and county, with some of the identified projects already well overdue.

The Train Station in Carlow town continues to have restricted accessibility, passengers with mobility issues on a train which pulls into platform two at the train station in Carlow town cannot cross the footbridge. The footbridge has steps and they are difficult and steep, if passengers cannot cross the footbridge, they cannot leave the train station. Passengers with mobility issues looking to access Carlow town must use Bagenalstown Station, almost 18kms outside Carlow town and approximately a twenty-minute drive away. This is a situation which had been highlighted to Irish Rail for many years and still the work has not progressed

Conclusion

In opening the Draft Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy for the Southern Region, David Kelly comments, how the plan is poised to benefit the State and its regions through unlocking the latent potential of less developed areas while increasing the competitiveness of the more developed areas. We believe that the plan is a step towards delivering on this, however, more needs to be done for Carlow and for the wider Region.

Carlow is strategically positioned, between the South East, Mid East and Midlands while also having connected the Southern and the Eastern & Midlands Region. The importance of this location needs to be recognised in the plan and more focus is needed towards developing this and ensuring that the county has strong involvement in both regions.

Development of the M9 Economic Corridor will have strong benefits for the South East, highlighting not only the potential but also the rich assets along the route. This can and will work as a significant driver for enterprise growth and investment, supported by the development of skills and expertise through adequately funded higher educational institutions.

The final RSES must align with local development plans, helping to ensure alignment between Regional Growth Centres, Key Towns, Metropolitan Areas and rural communities, ensuring that across the region growth is consistent and equivalent. The various local authorities of the region must work together to ensure this happens and as skills and expertise will vary across one local authority to another, they must work together for the wider benefit of the region sharing resources and expertise as necessary.

The plan outlines several priorities for the region, just like the other plans deliver for the other regions of the country. We need to ensure that we can deliver on these priorities to ensure consistent growth across the country and for that reason there needs to be more focus on identifying and securing funding.