

Our vision for the West Cork Islands in 2040

The West Cork Islands Community Council (WCICC) are a voluntary group who are affiliated to Muintir Na Tire and were established to address the physical, economic, social and cultural development of the West Cork Islands of Chléire, Bere, Whiddy, Dursey, Long, Sherkin and Heir.

The WCICC in partnership with the West Cork Islands Interagency Group (WCIG) have been working on developing and implementing a strategy to make the islands a better place to live, work, visit and do business since 2009. The Strategy seeks to implement the Mission Statement of the Interdepartmental Co-ordinating Committee on Islands, as set out in their 1996 Report on Island Development: A Strategic Framework for Developing the Offshore Islands of Ireland, as a vision for the West Cork Islands. This vision is as follows: –

To support island communities in their economic, social and cultural development, to preserve and enhance their unique cultural and linguistic heritage and to enable the islanders to secure access to adequate levels of public services so as to facilitate full and active participation in the overall economic and social life of the nation.

The Report on the Interdepartmental Co-ordinating Committee on Island Development ‘A Strategic Framework for Developing the Offshore Islands of Ireland in Developing Government Policy to Address Island Communities’ (1996), recommends the following principles be taken on board in relation to developing government policy on issues affecting island communities.

Key Principles:

- The special economic, social and cultural contributions which the offshore islands make to the life of the nation should be explicitly recognised;
- The strategies to promote economic and social development must seek to safeguard vital aspects of a unique cultural, physical and environmental heritage which might be threatened by over development;
- Islanders themselves should be prime movers in strategies to maintain their own communities;
- Principles of equality, social partnership and full participation should underpin the State’s approach to developing public policy in relation to island communities;
- A partnership approach between island communities and State Agencies should be adopted in the development and implementation of policy affecting the islands;
- Long-term, sustainable solutions need to be designed, utilising scarce resources to maximum effect;
- Mutual benefits resulting from the exchange and support between the islands and the contiguous mainland should be maximised and;
- It is important to recognise that the needs of offshore islands may vary considerably and that the specific assets and characteristics of each island need individual responses.

Through our work implementing the strategy we have identified that Island specific policies need to be developed at three levels, at a European level through our work with the European Small Islands Network and EU, at a National level through our work with Comhdhail Oileain Na hEireann, Comhar Na nOileain and the Islands division of the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs and at a local level through our work with the Cork County Council and the Islands interagency group. To develop Island specific policies the Interdepartmental committee for Islands needs to be established again to assess the work that has happened on the Islands since 1996 and to develop another strategic framework for developing the Islands up to 2040. Through this work, the policies needed can be decided in consultation with the Island residents.

Island development needs to happen over four key areas:

Physical Development:

To protect and enhance the island's' valuable physical characteristics, landscapes and environments and to ensure that new development providing for improvements in the infrastructural, transport, economic, housing and recreational needs of residents and visitors occurs in a sustainable and integrated manner that is appropriate to the circumstances of the islands.

Economic Development:

To maintain vibrant island economies, focusing on the skills and resources available on the islands, fostering new skills and acknowledging the benefits of mixed activities in island settings.

Social Development:

To retain and support island populations, and ensure access to essential social and community facilities and services is available at an appropriate level.

Cultural Development:

To improve appreciation of the cultural significance of the Islands including island traditions, architectural, archaeological, maritime, and military heritage whilst also expanding the awareness of the Arts and the Irish Language within each community.

How the 2040 National Planning framework can help us achieve our aims:

Population projections:

Population decline is one of the key challenges facing the West Cork Islands over the coming years. In all planning strategies such as the National Planning Framework and Local Area Plans Island population needs to be projected. Currently there are approximately 500 inhabitants on the 7 West Cork islands.

The West Cork Islands Community Council have key actions :

The West Cork Islands to be a priority designation in the 2040 Framework

Island proof relevant policies documents for impacts on Island Population.

Support local development groups on the West Cork Islands to continue to provide innovative solutions to island needs.

(West Cork Islands Integrated Development Strategy 2010 : ref 4.3.3 page 57)

Housing challenges

To attract permanent population on the islands, one issue to be addressed is the availability of affordable housing that can be occupied on a year-round basis. There are a significant number of second homes on the islands and this affects the availability of the existing housing stock for permanent occupation. This is a persistent issue for most islands. The islands are experiencing an acute shortage of full time housing. High demand, for and access to existing housing stock for second home use drives up property value on islands, making it difficult for locals to compete on the property market. This holds true for those wishing to acquire suitable sites for new homes, which are more restricted on islands given their limited carrying capacity for new development. Increasing awareness of the implications of second homes is a first step towards achieving better occupancy rates of the existing housing stock.

The WCICC have three main objectives:

- To Develop a Housing Policy for Islands
- Investigate the potential of a voluntary Housing Bodies for the Islands
- Work with Local Authorities and National Government to access the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homeless.

In the 2040 Framework the WCICC would like these objectives to be included and also take into account the Housing Actions laid out in the West Cork Islands Integrated Development Strategy (2010:4.1.20 page 39)

Employment trends:

The prevalent economic activity on the West Cork Islands are fishing, farming, aquaculture and tourism. There are other business' in existence such as construction/plant hire, boat yards, commercial marine businesses, craft enterprises, leisure activity providers and translation services. These are found predominantly on the larger islands of Bere and Cape Clear. There is a strong entrepreneurial spirit on Heir and Sherkin. The existence of the Oil Terminal on Whiddy is notable as the only large scale employer on the West Cork Islands. The majority of employees live on the mainland.

Key objectives for the Islands:

- Continue to support eco-friendly and sustainable farming, fishing and aquaculture linked employment
- Develop island branding of quality food products to encourage/sustain artisan type employment;
- Developing new employment opportunities for IT workers working remotely;
- Develop and support island and marine tourism
- Develop the blue economy on the Islands and the connecting mainland area.

Future needs such as key national infrastructure:

- Maintain island access via the existing ferry services;
- Maintain Dursey Island access via a cable car;
- Upgrade and safeguard existing water supplies;
- Provide fibre optic broadband to the Islands
- Upgrade piers and develop marinas
- Regional roads connecting the Islands to National roads would need to be upgraded to increase the potential of the Islands to the national economy.

Realising the potential of places:

The West Cork Islands are unique to Ireland. It is important that we recognise this going forward into the future.

- Develop policies to encourage and maintain integration between services providers (Government agencies and local authorities, and the island populations);
- Encourage and maintain volunteerism which assists in social cohesion and inclusion on the islands.

The West Cork Islands Community Council will look to Framework 2040, to protect, maintain and develop strategies and policies around the Islands. It is imperative that key issues are dealt with under the framework to sustaining Islands full time population. The West Cork Islands Community Council work on Local, National and International levels. Our inclusion in the National Framework is an integral part of the growth of Ireland's unique offshore islands. Each action outlined will contribute significantly to shaping the islands for the better in the future. The 1996 Interdepartmental Report 'A Strategic Framework for Developing the Offshore Islands of Ireland in Developing Government Policy to Address Island Communities' (1996) and The West Cork Islands Integrated Development Strategy are core documents that would be vital in forming the key principles of the islands section of the Framework 2040.