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Introduction

County Carlow, part of the South East Region is the second smallest county in Ireland, yet Carlow town is the 14th largest Urban District in the country. The County covers an area of approx. 897 km² and based on the 2016 Census the population is 56,875. County Carlow saw a 4.1% increase in its population between 2011 and 2016, this was above the national average of 3.7%.

Carlow has a strong heritage and history in engineering and is also home to a number of FDI companies, including MSD, Unum, Keenan, Autolaunch and Thermo Air. The county is also home to many indigenous companies who have and continue to lead on a global platform in their respective areas.

Carlow is home to two top third level institutions, IT Carlow and Carlow College. IT Carlow is a multi-million euro campus providing higher education in the areas of Business, Humanities, Media & Marketing, Science & Health, Computing & Networking, Aerospace, Mechanical and Electronic Engineering which has strong links to industry in the region. With over 7000 students at the college annually, it produces in excess of 2,200 highly educated graduates per annum.

Carlow town is located beside the M9 motorway, and is also serviced by two rail stations in Carlow Town and Bagenalstown. The county is serviced by a number of bus services, the majority of which are operated by private companies servicing some of the smaller regional towns in the county.

Our Vision

The vision for Carlow is to ensure that we have a vibrant, attractive county where people want to live, shop, work and socialise.

There are many great qualities and attributes in Carlow and it is imperative that these are protected and enhanced, from the natural features of the Barrow Way and the beauty of South Carlow, right through to the businesses and companies which line the streets and towns of our county.

In order to assist the further growth and development of these businesses, we must ensure that the correct environments are in place, from planning, connectivity, transport, sustainability etc.

Overview

The county like many others faces a variety of challenges, some of which are outlined as follows:

1. Commercial Rates

The Commercial rates in the county are the 3rd highest in the country, with the variance in the rates placing businesses at a comparative disadvantage to the neighbouring regions. Rate equalisation has taken place in the county and at present rate revaluation is in progress. While both these will provide both local and national government with updated details on the valuation and status of premises across the county, the levels of rates paid needs to be adjusted downwards in line with comparable premises regionally and nationally in order to ensure the long term viability and sustainability of businesses in the county.

2. Government Funding

County Carlow receives paltry levels of government funding compared to comparable size counties in other parts of the country. For example Longford receive 52% more funding than Carlow yet have 29% fewer population. Similarly Leitrim receive 55% more government funding even though they have a population size which equates to 42% less than that of Carlow. The net effect of this is that employers & businesses in Carlow are being forced to pay the third highest commercial rates in the country even though the footfall potential is far less than in other counties with larger populations.

This disparity in government funding has an enormous impact throughout both Carlow town and county and its ability to recover following the recent economic recession. In reality this means that existing businesses are struggling to cope with exorbitant rates bills and this has led to numerous business closures in recent times. Excessive rates also prohibit new businesses from opening in the town centre and on top of that there seems to be no money in the coffers for the proper upkeep of the public spaces throughout the county including simple things like grass cutting, planting & general maintenance.

3. Insufficient FDI

The South East region and in particular Carlow are failing to attract their fair share of FDI. Within the region FDI employment grew by just over 4% in 2016, which was the second lowest of all 8 regions. The IDA has not been focused on and delivering to Carlow and this is evident in the returns and deliverables to the area over the past number of years. The plans for delivering an advance facility to the area are moving at an alarmingly slow pace and this is reflective of the attention and focus which IDA have shown to Carlow and the region.

4. Unemployment

The rate of unemployment in Carlow is 8.4% (4, 2016) and this is above the national average. This high level of unemployment is also reflected in the region with an average of 9.4% compared to the national average of 6.8%.

5. Profile of Third Level Education

IT Carlow is a great asset to Carlow and its reputation is highly regarded locally, nationally and internationally. It is imperative that the plans to create a University of the South East Progress as this will strengthen the quality of the facility to attract the right candidates and also support growth of FDI and indigenous companies in the area and region.

6. Housing Shortages

The region and county has a shortage of housing, both in the numbers of houses available and also the type of houses available. This in turn is affecting the county in various ways from its ability to attract FDI to the capacity to accommodate for the growing demands of the student population at the IT Carlow.

7. Connectivity

The quality and availability of basic broadband and high speed internet connectivity needs to be addressed without further delay. Across the county there are numerous areas where users do not currently have mobile phone coverage. Within our towns the quality of the broadband is below the standard we would expect and in a number of cases businesses who are operating globally have to access broadband using satellite connections as the infrastructure is not in place.

8. Transportation

While Carlow is well placed and connected directly by road and rail access to Dublin, the networks will need to be reviewed and developed further to sustain the demands which will be placed on them over the next 20 years and beyond.

The motorway network has been developed in recent years and this has given greatly reduced the travel time both north and south, allowing easier access to Dublin Airport, Dublin Port, Bellevue Port etc.

Within the county there is limited public transport linking the various towns, villages and communities, and seeing as many of these have experienced growth in recent years, the need for multi car households has also grown placing increased strain and demand on the regional and local roads networks.

What are the Priority Areas for Carlow

Within the NPF there are a number of priorities which should be addressed, in many cases these will not only work to strengthen Carlow into 2040 and beyond, but they will also ensure that the region is supported in its growth and development.

Economic Development

- The levels of rates paid across the country in the various towns and counties needs to be reviewed and adjusted. The systems which are in place were decided in times past where the factors were very different and as the demands and constraints have changed these need to be further addressed also. Carlow as a county is currently at a competitive disadvantage based on the rate levels, if we do not work to bridge this gap now, then how far will it have widened in the next 20 years.
- IDA investment into the area is required, and it is vital that they place more focus and emphasis on delivering to Carlow and the South East Region. IT Carlow is producing in excess of 2,200 graduates on an annual basis, and taking those in addition to the graduates from Waterford IT, we need to ensure that we have the skilled jobs available for them within the County and Region.

The plans for delivering an advance site to Carlow are moving at an alarmingly slow pace. This was originally advised for completion by 2017 and the various stages have continuously been pushed back. We cannot measure the benefits to the economy by the number of visits or meetings held, rather the actions that are taken and delivered upon. Earlier this week, Brexit was triggered and we need to ensure that we are in a position to capitalise on the potential benefits rather than let them go elsewhere.

- The structures and mechanisms used to determine the levels of funding distributed by central government need to be overhauled. The current measures and mechanisms are outdated, having been adopted years ago and as the environment has changed the measures have never been reviewed. The demands and constraints facing Carlow and other counties have changed. Economically this has put a further strain on Carlow, a county that has seen an above average population growth.

Housing

- The planning processes need to be further streamlined and organised to make it more user friendly to encourage the conversion of premises to residential usage. Within many towns across the county, there currently exists a shortage of available housing units, which could be addressed in the short term by the conversion of premises which are otherwise designated or setup. The processes for converting many of these premises to the standards required today are cumbersome and work as a deterrent towards adapting them for use. If we do not address this in the framework now, when looking to 2040 we can only imagine how the requirements will have changed by then.

- The development of additional student accommodation units should also be extended to other towns in the county such as Bagenalstown and Tullow, as this would also further benefit the economic viability of these areas. Bagenalstown is already serviced by a direct train link to Carlow town, however ensuring that such accommodation units are developed in line with the provision of enhanced public transport would also be of a benefit to the existing communities.
- The continued development of new housing units outside the existing towns is only working to draw the heart and soul out of the towns. It is vital that we look at ways to ensure that there is further development of affordable and functional housing units in the centre of the towns. These should be designed in such a way as to facilitate the creation of communities as this will support the areas into the long term.

Transport

- Carlow is located on the M9 with good road access to Dublin, both ports in the South East and Dublin Airport. The county is also on the main route from Galway and the west, into the South east Region, however the road infrastructure should be further enhanced to strengthen this connection from the west through to the south east. Travelling from the west through Carlow, traffic has to utilise the regional N80 which is not suitable in our view for increased levels of heavy traffic. The alternative route using the motorway network routes are all directed towards Dublin. The linkages between the M4/6 and M7/8 and M9 need to be further developed to sustain the traffic demands.
- The existing train service serving servicing Carlow on the Dublin to Waterford route should be reviewed further and the infrastructure should be updated to facilitate using the rail network to reduce the demands on the road networks for the transportation of freight. The existing infrastructure provides for a single track with passing areas from south of Kildare all the way to Waterford. This means that there are limitations on the number of trains that can be on the line at a given time and this would also affect the ability of the operators to upgrade the existing passenger services. With the increases in population and the growing numbers of people from the area commuting to Dublin on a daily basis, there needs to be further development works on the lines to provide services around the clock for commuters. The days of most people working 9-5 have changed and we are seeing further changes all the time, the existing services are geared towards facilitating people working within these times.
- Regional public transport links can be sustainable and should be developed to connect up the towns and villages of the county better. The provision of a quality and accessible service will help to reduce the need for multi car households in rural areas. Through developing student accommodation in other towns such as Tullow or Bagenalstown, additional demand for a public transport service would be created helping to ensure its sustainability while also benefiting the local economies.

Tourism & Heritage

- The importance of maintaining, preserving, mapping and developing the tourism and heritage of the County cannot be overstated. Heritage Officers work to build a better understanding and appreciation of our natural and built heritage. They work within the Local Authority to safeguard our heritage, strengthen communities and support jobs. They research and evaluate local heritage with the view to creating new amenities and services for local communities. They also highlight the importance of our historical buildings and unique landscapes through collaborative policy development with other Local Authority officials. Heritage Officers encourage us to celebrate the built, natural and cultural heritage of our cities, towns, villages and countryside through year-round activities and especially during National Heritage Week. They help communities to identify the aspects of our heritage that need to be nurtured for future generations. They work with conservation architects, archaeologists, sustainable forestry and agricultural advisors, ecologists, cultural and eco-tourism businesses, researchers and innovators who find new ways for the public to interact with, record and protect their local environment.

Carlow currently does not have a Heritage Officer, and this is a position which has been vacant for a number of years. The NPF should look at this as a priority in looking to how we plan and develop for the future; the correct people for the correct roles need to be available.

- There are many natural and historical resources that are available to us and these need to be preserved and developed in a manner which will protect them and also make them accessible to all. Locally there are opportunities for the Barrow Way and also the old railway from Bagenalstown to Glynn for a Green Way. With the growth and development of towns, it is vital that we continue to maintain spaces for recreation and tourism and allow future generations to explore the stunning valleys and countryside.

Education

- The delivery of a Technical University for the South East Region is a priority
- Further investment in the delivery of School places across Carlow and the South East, there needs to be a focus to ensure that these places are accessible to all

Connectivity

- The roll out of the national broadband plan needs to be completed sooner.
- With the development of technology, there needs to be a focus on eliminating the blackspot areas where mobile coverage is unavailable or of poor quality. It is vital that the rural towns and communities are able to connect with the same quality and speed as individuals and businesses in the main towns and cities.

Future proof

The NPF must be designed in a way that ensures it is future proof, allowing for flexibility which can be adopted in response to changes in circumstances and new challenges as they arise. If we have learned anything from what has happened over the last 10 years, is that the country must be in a position to adapt to changes both nationally and internationally in an expedient manner.

It is imperative that we are in a position to review, evaluate and implement new technology without delay. The rate of change in technology alone makes systems and processes redundant at short notice, and the ability to stay ahead will continue to give Carlow and Ireland an edge in the international market.

In future proofing, it is important that there is strong cross departmental communication in the planning and review of projects and placement of infrastructure across the country. The infrastructure going in place should be multi-functional and in many ways projects should be combined so as to have minimal environmental impact on the county and landscape. What do we mean by this? The Water Supply Project Eastern to Midlands Region is currently in consultation, with a view to developing a pipeline to bring water from the Shannon to the East of the country. Was this project in review while work on the M7 was being carried out? Would it have been possible to bury infrastructure beneath the road to facilitate a water pipeline, or even to house the inter-connectors rather than having multiple services running parallel through the country?

Conclusion

There are many challenges facing the county and the region both currently and into the future, how these will change or impact come 2040 nobody can be certain. What is certain is that the current challenges must be addressed to ensure that the county is ready for any new challenges as they arise. Carlow has been at a disadvantage for a number of years in relation to funding and has and continues to impact on the growth and development of the County.

The current shortages in infrastructure and housing need to be met and from there we can move forward. A priority in this must be the review of the planning processes and engagement with the key stakeholders throughout; in addition the need for each process to be guided by suitably qualified individuals is vital.

Carlow and the South East region have not been receiving their fair share, and there needs to be more focus and emphasis from all the agencies to help in reducing the unemployment levels and attracting more employers providing highly skilled jobs to the area. Progressing the Technological University of the South East is a priority and this will further enhance the region.