

## OPENING STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF ICBAN TO THE OIREACHTAS JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT, 22/06/2021

The Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN), is the local authority-led cross-border development partnership which works in the area of the island known as the Central Border Region. The 8 Council members of the partnership are: Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Monaghan, Sligo and Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon, Fermanagh and Omagh, and Mid Ulster.

The partnership has been advocating for common solutions to common cross-border problems since 1995. The Region, though largely rural, contains some larger urban centres. It is remote from national capitals, and as a consequence the area and its communities have been regularly overlooked in terms of investment.

The Joint Committee has sought evidence on the opportunities for our cross-border region through the new strategy initiative, 'The Framework of Regional Priorities', (referred to as the 'Framework' or 'FRP' here after).

This is our second related meeting with the Joint Committee, having previously submitted evidence on Valentines Day 2019. In the Joint Committee's follow-up report, '**Communities and Cross-Border Cooperation: Challenges and Opportunities**' it was stated that: *"The Committee endorses the role of local authorities along the border in developing a bottom-up needs-based strategy for the Border Corridor to offset the challenges and identify any opportunities associated with Brexit."*

Since that meeting in February 2019 we have been working on developing the FRP strategy document and this was launched in March of this year. It is a strategic cross-border and regional response to the 3 key challenges of our time: Brexit, the pandemic and climate change.

I am aware that the Committee have been provided with a link to the FRP document and what I will do in a few moments is outline some of the key messages from this:

- This is an agreed strategic response on behalf of the 8 member Councils that make up the area known as the Central Border Region.
- The FRP draws upon the unique needs, strengths, assets and characteristics of our own rural region. This is an area with a population of over 870,000, is recognised as an area with an outstanding natural beauty, with a coastline, mountain ranges, loughs and rivers etc. Most of the areas population live outside of the main towns and our industry is driven by local entrepreneurial flair, serviced by some of the best educational and training institutions.
- The most significant employment bases in the region are agriculture, advanced manufacturing, food processing, retail/wholesale and hospitality. Local authorities and other key stakeholders are keen to widen our industrial base by targeting the potential in agri food, green energy, bio-economy, advanced manufacturing and AI, robotics and cobotics
- We recognise that one of our key assets is our landscape and natural environment and we focus on responsible use of this through the UN's Sustainable Development Goals Planning

Framework, and that is the basis of our developmental approach. We are keen to promote the quality of life and natural landscape of our region to both governments, as they grapple with finding solutions and ways forward out of the public health crisis.

In promoting our regional priorities we make the case for Balanced Regional Development, across five inter-locking pillars or themes: Economic Development; Greening Our Region; Liveable Communities; Education, Skills and Training; and Infrastructure and Connectivity. The regional priorities are considered as key accelerators that will help grow the population, improve connections and create jobs. We will set these out below within three areas: Core Infrastructure, Natural Infrastructure and Enabling Infrastructure.

### **On Core Infrastructure**

Businesses need a modern effective transport infrastructure through which they can get their goods to market. There is a high dependency on travel by road in the Region. In the absence of a rail network, strategic road corridors are key for access and movement. Whilst there have been improvements across the Region, there remains important strategic projects which have not been sufficiently advanced and thus hinder regional growth and regeneration. We would draw your attention to 2 key arterial corridors that link and service the region, and are critical to unlocking potential of the wider NW quadrant of the island:

- The completion of the long-planned N2-A5 Dublin to Donegal dualling project, is key to the longer-term development of the area;
- As is another key arterial route, the N16-A4 from Sligo to Ballygawley, and onwards linking the West to the city of Belfast and the ports there and in Larne.

Our region has the greatest flows of cross-border freight and evidence from Transport Infrastructure Ireland suggests that spending per head on transport infrastructure in the border area is only around 45% that of other regions. The ways and means must therefore be found to accelerate their delivery.

The Business Case for the Ulster Canal highlights the many positive outcomes. Whilst we welcome support for Phase 2 works, and the planning and developments supports for a Phase 3, we wish to underline the need to achieve the high-level Vision for the Ulster Canal linking the Erne System to Lough Neagh. All the cross-border Councils directly involved promote the Canal's regeneration.

Timely and much-needed improvements in broadband provision are critical also. Our small towns and villages could flourish again because they would be effectively 'future-proofed'. Such connectivity would enable many businesses to operate in rural areas instead, which offer the added attractiveness of idyllic locations, leisure & recreation, cheaper living, less crime. We all know of the vital importance that broadband has in enabling remote working and access to education, health and other key services during this pandemic and lockdowns.

## **On Natural Infrastructure**

There is collective local authority support for opportunities to promote 'slow tourism' markets, such as cycling and walking, local artisan food experiences, literary tourism etc. The FRP promotes a focus on the responsible utilisation of natural assets. This includes a Greenways Vision, from Sligo to Lough Neagh, linking the SLNCR Greenway Plans with those of the Ulster Canal Greenway, connecting onto Lisburn-Belfast, and with linkages to the Wild Atlantic Way. Developments in Blueways across the area, along with river catchments and water quality improvements, can regenerate communities and stop cross-border pollution.

Other key elements of what we could term as our natural infrastructure have already been touched on, such as developments to promote the agri-food sector, new growth opportunities in the bio-economy, and of course the Ulster Canal's key vision.

## **On Enabling Infrastructure**

Over the past 30 years and more there have been significant developments in supply chain linkages, particularly in agri-food industry, between towns and communities on both sides of the border. There is the need now to build on these linkages and to harness the commercial connections between key towns on both sides of the border, through creating 'economic corridors'. These would connect sub-regional pockets and inter-firm collaborations where key industries including engineering, manufacturing, tourism and agri-food etc. are flourishing. In planning terms it should be recognised that it is not just about connecting urban areas, but is also about connecting centres of production with customers, workers, supply chains etc.

An important development opportunity has been driven by our three NI Councils, under the Mid, South and Western Councils, to develop this region as an economic growth engine and in applying for City Growth Deal supports through the UK Treasury. If supported these plans can help drive productivity and infrastructure improvements on the northern side of the border and we would raise with this Committee, that reciprocal supports need to be considered for adjoining border counties of Monaghan, Cavan, Leitrim, Sligo and Donegal, which together could help accelerate the entire Central Border Region.

Other key elements of our enabling infrastructure include promoting linkages between industry and education / training providers, on Industry needs, new product development processes, patenting, and joint marketing. Our region also has the need for government backed industrial spaces / techno parks to promote opportunities and particularly where there is a failure by the market to invest in such.

## **In Conclusion:**

We bring these key issues to the attention of the Joint Committee as we seek your help and guidance in promoting the opportunity of investments in the Central Border Region, across government. Our emphasis has been on the positive and the potential of the area. Our region has delivered much

despite lesser investments than other areas on the island, and therefore supports for hard infrastructure, soft infrastructure and key quality of life factors could help transform the area to the benefit of both jurisdictions. We ask again - what could not be achieved if the area received a comparable level of investment to other similar regions!?

We would welcome the Committee's support in promoting the Region as an area of national importance. Such designation must be reinforced by a national commitment to support the ambitions of the FRP and the regional priorities set out within that.

We appreciate the Committee taking the interest and would welcome advocacy across government. As can be seen through the 'Framework of Regional Priorities', this is a collective issue for all of the area's Councils. We are not here asking for government to solely resolve the issues but we seek overarching high-level interest and assistance to help tackle these.