

# Mid South West collaboration lays down plans for a prosperous future

How the input of local and central government can help to deliver on the ambitions of the Mid South West Regional Economic Strategy



Pictured, from left, are: Councillor Robert Irvine, Chair of the Mid South West Region Governance Steering Group, Roger Wilson, Chief Executive of Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, First Minister Arlene Foster MLA, Minister of State for Northern Ireland, Robin Walker MP, Minister for the Economy Diane Dodds MLA, Alison McCullagh, Chief Executive of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill MLA, Anthony Tohill, former Chief Executive of Mid Ulster District Council and Councillor Cathal Mallaghan, former Chair of the Mid South West Region Governance Steering Group.

A unique collaboration bringing together three Northern Ireland councils and the private, third level and education sectors has produced a strategy aimed at supercharging economic growth across the region in the coming years.

Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and Mid Ulster District Council have joined forces to form the Mid South West (MSW) Region with the primary aim of creating the optimum conditions to attract investment and drive economic growth.

To realise this ambition, they have developed a Regional Economic Strategy (RES) which has identified the areas where funding can be most effectively invested to address a range of challenges and ultimately boost

economic growth opportunities.

Launched at a socially-distanced event at Edge Innovate in Dungannon on 9 September 2020 by First Minister Arlene Foster MLA and deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill MLA, the strategy was developed following extensive research and analysis of the region's economy and was informed by engagement with the major employers located in the region.

Further collaboration from both local and central government will be necessary to help make, shape and support the case for change.

"The Regional Economic Strategy has been borne out of collaboration across the councils, across sectors and across geographies," Councillor Robert Irvine, Chair of the Mid South West Region

Governance Steering Group, said. "Its success relies on the continued input from all stakeholders to help keep our growth trajectory on course and to feed back on the needs of businesses operating in an ever-changing world.

"By working closely together over the next few years we will be able to boost productivity in the Mid South West Region and create more and better jobs. This region has proved itself to be the engine room of the Northern Ireland economy; our aim is to turbocharge the engine and create a more prosperous future for everyone."

The strategy identifies challenges and opportunities for the region and sets out four pillars to guide investment and grow the collective economy. The pillars are: future proofing the skills base, enabling



infrastructure, boosting innovation and digital capacity and building a high performing tourism economy. By focusing on these areas, the overriding goals of increasing productivity, driving business growth, fully realising sectoral strengths and opportunities, creating more and better-paid jobs and ensuring the ongoing internationalisation of MSW can be achieved.

Implementation of the RES will enable the Mid South West Region to leverage financial investment from a range of sources, such as the Growth Deal funding announced recently by the UK Government and Northern Ireland Executive, the PEACE PLUS Programme, the UK Government's Shared Prosperity Fund, Innovate UK and other central government funding.

"We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create an even better place to live, work and invest across the Mid South West Region," Councillor Irvine adds. "This co-ordinated, bottom-up approach ensures that we will leave no stone unturned in our pursuit for economic growth and we call upon all stakeholders across all sectors including the public, private and education sectors, to join us in putting a shoulder to the region's economic wheel."

## The Mid South West Regional Economic Strategy in detail

The Regional Economic Strategy sets out a path to grow the economy of the Mid South West Region and Northern Ireland. It was an important initiative when work first began on it in 2018 and it's even more important now as the region deals with the economic effects of and recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic.

"The strategy has been developed in close consultation with government departments and agencies, Invest

Northern Ireland, Tourism Northern Ireland, skills bodies, business representative groups, educational institutions, universities and, crucially, businesses from a wide range of sectors."

The key to its success is putting businesses and the MSW economy at the heart of plans to ensure that funding support, whether public or private, is invested in the most responsible and effective manner.

Significant investment will be required to deliver the strategy with a total commitment to date of a quarter of a billion pounds towards a Growth Deal





from the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. As previously stated, MSW will also pursue a range of other funding opportunities, such as investment through PEACE PLUS and the Shared Prosperity Fund, to name a few.

The strategy is structured around four intervention pillars:

1. 'Future Proofing' the Skills Base
2. Enabling Infrastructure
3. Boosting Innovation and Digital Capacity
4. Building a High-Performing Tourism Economy

The interventions will be geared towards delivering exponential and long-term benefits including:

- increasing productivity levels and closing the productivity gap;
- driving business growth;
- protecting our unique sectoral advantages and realising sectoral opportunities;
- creating more, better paid jobs;
- rebalancing the regional economy;
- increasing our global impact and underlining the benefits to the Northern Ireland economy.

### The MSW pillars

#### 'Future Proofing' the Skills Base

Future proofing the skills base is becoming ever more important and was a top priority emerging from engagements with businesses during the development of the RES. MSW wants to ensure the requisite skills are available in scale and profile to underpin the region's ambitions and those of the successful businesses which already exist there.

As well as requiring significant financial investment, the strategy seeks to drive change in four policy areas:

- access to labour/lobbying for a differentiated migration policy;
- policy changes to 'off-the-shelf' apprenticeships;
- extending the range of higher-level apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships available in the region; and
- a greater focus on shared apprenticeship schemes.



*"We want to make it a positive moment in our history. the beginning of something transformative which builds on the region's creativity and innovation."*

#### Enabling Infrastructure

Investment in infrastructure is critical to drive economic growth across MSW. Strategic road infrastructure enables businesses in the region to access all areas including ports and distribution points. The strategy has pinpointed where improvements are needed: the Armagh East Link; the A29 Cookstown bypass, the A4 Enniskillen Southern bypass, as well as the development of the A3 Armagh North & West Link, the A29 Dungannon bypass and the A32 Omagh to Enniskillen.

Investment will also be targeted at:

- addressing broadband, mobile coverage and reliability;
- transforming our high streets to be places of choice for our local communities;
- enabling access to available industrial land;
- driving investment in electricity supply; and
- supporting opportunities for regeneration and site development.

#### Boosting Innovation and Digital Capacity

Advanced manufacturing is one of MSW's big success stories and has enormous potential. The region is placing its ambitions in this area into the Northern Ireland-wide 'ecosystem' and at the centre of what is being discussed within the City/Growth Deals (i.e. the Advanced Manufacturing Innovation Centre in the Belfast Region City Deal and the Centre for Industrial Digitalisation, Robotics and Automation in Derry/Londonderry City Region). The ambition is to create an innovation and skills academy delivered by the South West College in Dungannon. In relation to agri-food, the impact of the strategy is global. The RES will support CAFRE in the development of a Northern Ireland Agri-food Robotics Centre at the Loughry Campus and work in collaboration with AFB1 to develop a centre for Agri-Tech Innovation. It will develop agri-food incubation space to support food development for smaller SMEs, an area currently being explored by the Southern Regional College. The strategy also sets out plans to develop a network of Digi-Hubs to support the sector's growth. In addition to exploring

a number of potential health innovation proposals with the region's two leading and acute teaching hospitals, MSW is also exploring a new-build Health and Care Centre in Cookstown.

#### Building a High-Performing Tourism Economy

The MSW has a host of tourism offerings: the Fermanagh Lakes, the Sperrins, our literary heritage, the cultural significance of Ireland's oldest city, Armagh, where Patrick established his first church, the Ulster American Folk Park, Marble Arch Caves UNESCO Global Geopark and more besides, including the recent announcement of the commitment to the Game of Thrones Legacy Project.

MSW's aim is to invest in the development of its tourism product, including cross-border, in actions that stimulate/de-risk and expedite quality hotel investment as well as improving infrastructure for routing/ signposting and visitor engagement.

#### The future

MSW has already engaged extensively with businesses and key sectors, with politicians locally, regionally and nationally, with central government, with education and the wider stakeholder community, and that will continue.

"We will continue to work closely with the other Northern Ireland City/Growth Deal regions to ensure complementarity and to take advantage of any synergies which may exist and continue to welcome the input and guidance of our industry/business base," Councillor Irvine explains. "We need their continued engagement with this initiative as we move through the next stages in development."

"The collaboration of our three councils to develop the Mid South West Regional Economic Strategy is a model of what can be achieved by people working together for the common good. We are living in truly life-changing times. In years to come, people will look back on 2020 and the Coronavirus pandemic and see it as a challenging experience for us all."

"We want to make it a positive moment in our history. The beginning of something transformative which builds on the region's creativity and innovation."

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