



The Mid South West Region

How the business world is critical in helping the **Mid South West Regional Economic Strategy** reach its aim of supercharging the region's economy

Companies have an important role to play in supercharging the Mid South West's (MSW) economy as part of a unique collaboration between three of Northern Ireland's most dynamic councils.

That's the conclusion of the Mid South West Regional Economic Strategy which has been developed with the aim of boosting productivity across the three council areas of Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and Mid Ulster District Council.

The input from businesses across a range of sectors has been instrumental in helping to shape the strategy by identifying areas where investment is needed to allow them to grow unimpeded and their continued input will be vital as the strategy is rolled out in the coming

months and years, according to councillor Robert Irvine, chairman of the Mid South West Region Governance Steering Group.

"Business sits at the heart of this strategy and will be fundamental in ensuring that the Mid South West's economy flourishes in the future," he said. "We have geared the actions identified in the strategy towards addressing business needs and areas of deficit in order to provide businesses, that are already proficient, with the optimum conditions for them to maximise their potential, not just locally but internationally. By targeting investment we will reinforce the region's sectoral strengths in manufacturing, engineering, agri-food, health and life sciences, tourism and construction as well as in a fast-growing digital tech sector.

"The Mid South West Business Reference Group has provided invaluable insight into the

development of the strategy and will continue to play an important roll in its delivery. Our ambitions for the Mid South West economy are far reaching, but we are confident that with the support of businesses and all stakeholders in the region they are wholly achievable."

The Mid South West Regional Economic Strategy identifies challenges and opportunities 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 those areas, the overriding goals of increasing productivity, driving business growth and competitiveness, fully realising sectoral strengths and opportunities, creating more and better-paid jobs and

ensuring the ongoing internationalisation of MSW can be achieved.

The strategy will enable the Mid South West Region to leverage financial investment from a range of sources – such as the £250m Growth Deal funding committed 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.

The strategy was launched by First Minister Arlene Foster MLA and deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill MLA at a socially-distanced event held near Dungannon at the premises

ECONOMIC STRATEGY

of EDGE Innovate, one of the companies represented on the Business Reference Group.

For further information: Email: info@midsouthwestregion.org, visit the website at midsouthwestregion.org or check out Twitter @MSW_Region

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 regional economic strategy. 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.

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 wider City/Growth Deals (ie 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 AFBI 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."