

Building Competitiveness Through Partnership

I chair the North West Chamber of Commerce Initiative. This initiative was founded in 2001 by the Chambers of Commerce in Gweedore, Letterkenny, Londonderry, Strabane and Roe Valley. Coleraine, Ballybofey and Donegal town Chambers joined the group later. This represents a combined membership of over 1500 businesses in the North West and is a powerful lobby group.

The group was formed to promote the economic regeneration of the North West and in the context of the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland and the National Spatial Strategy for the Republic of Ireland.

We were, at least partly, motivated at the time by the recognition of the Letterkenny/Derry Gateway in both strategies – a unique situation at the time and one for which the Chambers of Commerce take some credit.

That is the partnership – how do we build competitiveness?

We see our role as removing the barriers to good business and improving the business climate and physical infrastructure.

As well as partnering with other Chambers we work with many other bodies to achieve our aims.- Councils , Colleges , IDA, InvestNI etc. We are fully committed to working together to achieve maximum benefit.

The background to the study published today clearly demonstrates the problems of the border areas and the social and economic deficits resulting from many years of troubles and from peripherality.

We recognized that the Good Friday Agreement and the 2 National Strategies opened the way for cross- border development but much more needed to be done. Political/ public/ private / community partnerships were required to establish goals, determine strategies and ensure implementation.

For their part the Chambers of Commerce in the North West have a reasonably strong, though underfunded, alliance through the NWCCI but particularly through the stronger chambers – Derry, Letterkenny, Coleraine, Limavady and Strabane.

The main cross-cutting theme for chambers are Transport infrastructure and Education and skills.

Access to the region - by road, rail, air and sea – is a key economic driver. I don't have to tell anyone here about the underinvestment in roads, especially as one goes further north.

The Chambers, both individually, and collectively through the NWCCI, have been consistently lobbying for further funding for these essential services for many years.

Roads

Many people are fed up hearing us banging on about the roads but I am afraid if we stop we may get very little.

Some improvements have been made to the **main arterial routes** into the region, particularly on the N15 Western Corridor and some improvements to the A5 and A6. We have commitments to major improvements on the A5 and A6, namely the Derry to Dungiven dualling and the Letterkenny/Derry/ Aughnacloy dualling, which is to be dual funded by both governments. It is absolutely essential that all organizations pull together in ensuring that these projects go ahead as quickly as possible. Under our current straitened circumstances governments may be tempted to delay these which would be disastrous for the region.

I do not believe there is any prospect of having the **rail line from Belfast to Derry** extended but it is essential that what is there is maintained and upgraded. Passenger numbers increased greatly when rolling stock and frequencies were improved. Further major increases are envisaged if the journey times can be improved. This requires track upgrading and will need constant lobbying to achieve.

City of Derry Airport serves the whole region and in spite of shortcomings is a major economic asset. We have seen capital investment from both governments in this facility, recognizing its cross- border value.

The airport will never realize its full potential being owned and operated by Derry City Council and the sooner it goes into private ownership the better.

The Chambers have been playing their part in working with both Governments and Derry City Council in securing investment and planning the way forward.

The Port of Derry at Lisahally is operating well and growing. It is strongly supported by the private sector.

Education / Skills

There are a number of workforce development forums set up with DELs help in N.I..

The North West Workforce Development Forum (NWWDF) is the only one which is a cross-border body.

These were set up to determine the current and future skills requirements and to align these with the education curriculum,

The NWWDF is chaired by a leading businessman and has representatives from Fas and DEL and from Letterkenny Institute of Technology and the NW Institute for Further and Higher Education.

The work is progressing well but slowly. This is one of the problems with partnerships with cross-border representation – things take longer – more people to be consulted – more clearances to be got from government departments. However it is worth persevering with as the final results should have everybody's commitment.

NETWORK TO GET WORK is another collaborative project worth mentioning. This is a cross border scheme using the Chamber network to help businesses to sell to each other. This is particularly useful for introducing small businesses to bigger ones and also helps businesses on both sides of the border to see the whole island as their market

You may ask who do we speak to on these issues. Well mainly it's the usual suspects –politicians and civil servants on both sides of the border, However there is another British/Irish inter governmental body set up specifically to facilitate North West economic regeneration, i.e. The North West Gateway Initiative.

This body was set up a number of years ago and was making some progress but with elections and leadership changes on both sides of the border went into a kind of suspension. They have now been revitalized and will be the body through which all major development in the North will be channeled. They are quite clear they do not wish to speak to all the bodies ,of which we have plenty, with all their varying demands. We must build one coherent body, representative of all the stakeholders in the region which will have the authority to prioritise objectives and oversee implementation. I believe this to be crucial and urgent and needs to be completed in the next couple of months. It is important that this body speaks with one strong voice. Sectoral and sub regional demands may have to be subsumed into the greater good.

I hope you will all support this aim.

THANK YOU.