

**WESTERN
DEVELOPMENT
COMMISSION**



Bridging the Divide

25 Years of Transformation
in the Western Region





Contents

Key Report Findings	4
Key Economic Findings	6
Foreword by CEO Allan Mulrooney	8
<hr/>	
Section 1: Introduction and Background	10
1.1 Introduction	11
1.2 Background and Policy Context	11
1.3 Socio-Economic Context	14
<hr/>	
Section 2: Supporting Employment in the West of Ireland	19
2.1 The Region	20
2.2 Employment Supported by the WDC	24
2.3 Impact of Connected Hubs	27
2.4 Supporting Enterprises in the Region	28
2.5 Supporting Regional Development	29
<hr/>	
Section 3: Supporting Life/Society in the West of Ireland	30
3.1 The Region	31
3.2 Impact of Connected Hubs	36
3.3 Impact on Society and Community	37
3.4 Impact of Initiatives Supported by the WDC	39
3.5 Role of the WDC in Regional Promotion	40
<hr/>	
Section 4: Enabling Strategic Initiatives in the West of Ireland	42
4.1 Broadband and Telecommunications	43
4.2 Renewable Energy	45
4.3 Connectivity	47
4.4 Creative Economy	48
<hr/>	
Conclusions	50
<hr/>	
Annex	52
<hr/>	

25 Years of Change in the Western Region



Population Growth But Below National Average

While the Western Region's population grew by 34.9% from 1996 to 2022, it lagged behind the national growth rate of 42%. However, Galway experienced the highest growth in the region at 47.1%, highlighting its demographic and economic vitality.



Economic Disparities

Gross Value Added (GVA) per capita in the West is only 53.37% of the national average (€43,540 vs. €81,573), and for the Border Region, it is even lower at 29.7% of the national average (€24,227). The West Region's share of national GVA has decreased from 6.3% in 1999 to 5.07% in 2021, indicating the need for policy measures to enhance economic activity.



High Levels of Rural Living

64% of the region's population still lives in rural areas compared to just 36% nationally, reflecting a strong identity but also posing challenges for connectivity, infrastructure, and economic opportunities.



Boosting Education and Skills

The proportion of the population with a third-level qualification rose from 17.5% in 1996 to 43.26% in 2022, positioning the region well for future economic development in high-value sectors.



Dependency Ratio Shift

The dependency ratio in the Western Region decreased from 61.3 in 1996 to 57.8 in 2022, but the old-age dependency ratio rose to 26.9, reflecting the region's ageing population challenge.

Low Disposable Income

The average disposable income per person in the Western Region is €3,000 lower than the national average, reflecting persistent economic inequalities across the region.

Housing Supply

The housing stock in Region has increased significantly. However, the number of new house completions in the Western Region fell from 22% of the national total in 1999 to only 11% in 2023, despite the region representing 17.2% of the national population, highlighting current housing shortages and future issues with capacity for population growth.

Increasingly Diverse Employment

In 1996, just three sectors - Agriculture/Forestry/Fishing, Manufacturing and Construction - accounted for 44.1% of the region's workforce. By 2022, these had declined to 24.4%.

Rising Urban Centres

The number of towns in the Western Region with populations over 1,500 increased from 26 in 1996 to 45 in 2022, with towns like Oranmore growing by 313%, illustrating expanding urban opportunities in the region.



WDC Impact over 25 years



WDC Support



280

companies supported through 345 projects

35,347

full time equivalent (FTE) job years directly supported

90%

of enterprises supported by the WDC survive at least five years (National average = 65.9%)

66,000

indirect and induced employment supported

Connected Hubs



364

enterprise and coworking hubs onboarded to the Connected Hubs network

€1.6m

estimated value of carbon emissions savings in 2023 due to Connected Hubs

Funding Success



€25.83m

funding secured by WDC in 2023

€11m

allocated to regional bodies

Companies financially supported by the WDC have:

- Generated over **€3.35 billion** in direct revenues, including over €2.4 billion in exports
- Generated over **€639 million** in Research and Development expenditures
- Made over **€404 million** in exchequer tax contributions

When wider (indirect and induced) impacts are included the economy-wide output impact of the WDC is estimated to be almost **€4.8 billion**.

Impact Across Key Sectors

Case studies demonstrate the WDC's positive impact in areas such as broadband, renewable energy, connectivity, and the creative economy, showcasing a diverse range of regional development efforts.

Broad Support for Social Enterprises

36% of the Western Region's population lives within 5km of a WDC-supported social enterprise or community organization, and 66% within 10km, emphasizing the WDC's widespread social impact.

The economic value of volunteering within WDC-supported social enterprises is estimated between €1.3 million and €3.1 million annually, underscoring the region's high levels of community engagement.



Key Economic Findings

Direct Economic Impacts
of the Companies supported
by the WDC



35,438*

Employment (FTEs)
from 1999-2023
(3,851 in 2023)



€195.0m
Employment incomes
supported (€m) in 2023



€384.3m
Turnover / Revenue
(€m) in 2023



€277.3m
Exports (€m)
in 2023



€86.5m
R&D Expenditure
(€m) in 2023



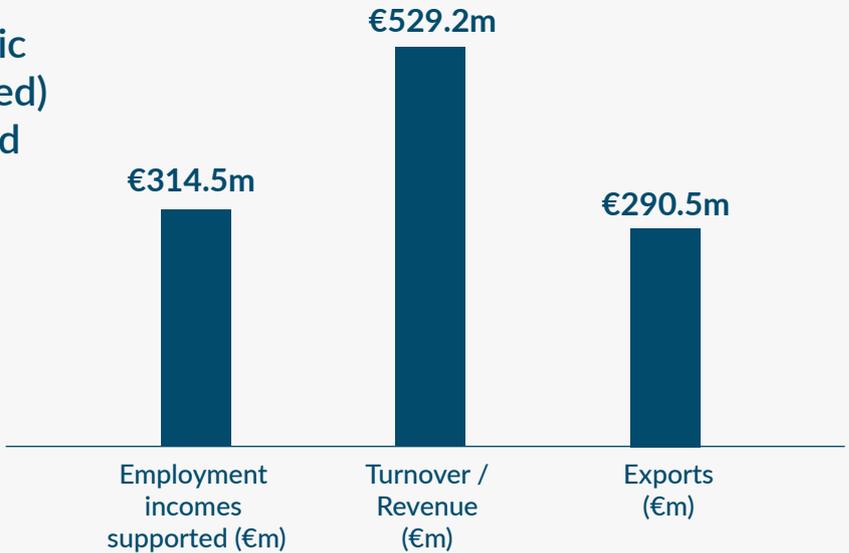
€46.1m
Tax and PRSI
Expenditure
(€m) in 2023

Summary of Wider Economic
Impacts (Indirect and Induced)
of the Companies Supported
by the WDC (through the
WIF and regional
development activities)



66,102

Employment (FTEs)
from 1999-2023
(7,292 in 2023)



€314.5m
Employment incomes
supported (€m)
in 2023



€290.5m
Turnover /
Revenue (€m)
in 2023



€290.5m
Exports (€m)
in 2023

Source: Indecon analysis of survey data, data provided by WDC and annual reports

Note: * Figure based on FTE-years (If the same person held a job in a WDC-supported company for 20 years, this would be counted as 20 FTE-years)

List of Tables

1.1	Key Statistics Concerning Irish NUTS 2 Regions – Economic and Enterprise Indicators	15
1.2	Total GVA and GVA per person (1999 vs. 2021)	18
2.1	Summary of Direct Economic Impacts of the Companies Supported by the WDC	25
2.2	Summary of Wider Economic Impacts (Indirect and Induced) of the Companies Supported by the WDC (through the WIF and regional development activities)	26
2.3	Percentage of Employees of Companies / Organisations Supported by the WDC (through the WIF) with a Graduate or Postgraduate Qualification	26
2.4	Enterprise Survival Rate (2008-2020)	27
2.5	Number of Onboarded Connected Hubs (2023)	27
2.6	Geographic Spread of Number of Projects by Organisation Type	28
2.7	Impact of Regional Development Projects/ Events where WDC played an active role (1999-2023)	29
3.1	Service Users of WDC-Supported Organisations	37
3.2	Value of Volunteering	38
Annex 1.1:	Breakdown of the Number of WIF Investments Supported by Sub-Fund, 2001-2023	53
Annex 1.2:	Breakdown by Sub-Fund of Amount Disbursed	53

List of Figures

1.1	Western Development Commission's Channels of Socio-Economic Impact	12
1.2	Population Growth in the Western Region (1996-2022)	14
1.3	Disposable Income Levels Across the Western Region (1999 vs. 2021)	16
1.4	Regional and National Attainment of Third Level Education (1999 vs. 2022)	17
1.5	Third Level Attainment by County (2022)	17
2.1	Labour Force Participation Rate (1999-2023)	20
2.2	Sectoral Employment Western Region (1996 vs. 2022)	22
2.3	Cumulative Amount Disbursed by the WIF (€m) (2001-2023)	24
3.1	Growth in Working from Home (2011 vs. 2022)	35
3.2	Map of Connected Hubs (September 2024)	36
3.3	Geographic Spread of Social Enterprises and Community Organisations Supported by the WDC	37
4.1	Passenger Numbers Ireland West Airport Knock (2000-2023)	47

Foreword by CEO Allan Mulrooney

In 2024, we mark a significant milestone—25 years since the Western Development Commission (WDC) was formally established, thanks to the leadership of then Minister for Agriculture and Food, Joe Walsh. This was the culmination of a community-led initiative that began in 1994, to create a dedicated development agency for the West. The Western Region, with its unique demographic, economic, and infrastructural challenges, needed an advocate. The WDC was entrusted with the responsibility of promoting sustainable social and economic development in Clare, Donegal, Galway, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon, and Sligo. Over the past quarter-century, the WDC, alongside its partners, has played a significant role in tackling regional disparities and fostering balanced growth. With a small, yet highly dedicated team, we have worked collaboratively with communities, agencies, and stakeholders to unlock the region's potential and deliver tangible benefits.

In early 2024, the WDC appointed Indecon to prepare this independent report, which quantifies and tells the story of the WDC's impact over a quarter of a century of innovation and collaboration. This report not only highlights the WDC's achievements but also reflects on the broader story of change across the Western Region. It explores key areas of economic, social, and demographic interest, providing insights into the region's evolution since the WDC was founded, and where gaps still remain.

Since our inception, the mission of the WDC has been to enhance the quality of life in the Western Region by stimulating innovation, creating jobs, and building resilience. Our work has made a substantial contribution to the region's development, directly supporting over 35,000 full-time equivalent job years, and contributing indirectly to 66,000 job years. These are not just figures—they represent real lives, sustainable businesses, and vibrant communities.

The WDC's economic contributions tell a compelling story. Companies supported by the WDC have generated over €3.35 billion in direct revenues, including €2.4 billion in exports, and €639 million in Research and Development expenditure. They have also contributed over €404 million in tax revenues, strengthening public finances and supporting local services. This success is a testament not only to strategic investment but also to the ecosystem of collaboration we are proud to be part of. Any success we have achieved as an agency has been made possible through partnerships with a diverse range of stakeholders—government entities, communities, investors, and other agencies. We are proud to belong to an ecosystem that is ambitious to do more and determined to drive the West forward.

Over the past 25 years, the WDC has quietly worked in the background, delivering meaningful results through a wide array of initiatives. We have provided over €21.2 million in funding to 140 social enterprises and community organisations and contributed to 180 regional development projects and events.

One key project emerging from this broad portfolio is the Connected Hubs initiative, which came at a crucial time post-COVID. This initiative has created new opportunities for communities to attract a workforce that spends locally, reinvests time once spent commuting, and brings fresh talent into the region. By enabling professionals to work closer to home, these hubs are breathing new life into towns and villages, helping to retain local populations while also reducing carbon emissions by €1.6 million annually.

The WDC has also been active in promoting the Western Region as a vibrant place to live, work, and invest. Initiatives such as the Look West programme, the WesternJobs.ie platform, and our TV show, Moving West, have showcased the region's quality of life and opportunities. These projects have fostered a positive narrative for the West, highlighting the success stories of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), indigenous enterprises, and micro-businesses. They have strengthened the region's image as a place where businesses of all sizes can thrive, further building momentum for future growth.

While we celebrate these successes, it is important to acknowledge the ongoing challenges. Infrastructure, connectivity, access to high-value employment, and average incomes still lag behind national averages. Our Policy Unit has played a vital role in identifying these disparities and advocating for targeted interventions, ensuring that the region's needs remain central to national discussions. These challenges highlight the need for continued support to ensure that the Western Region not only catches up but thrives.

Looking to the future, the Western Region stands at a crossroads. The global economy is evolving rapidly, and with a growing creative economy and significant opportunities in lifesciences, manufacturing engineering, agribusiness, and digitally enabled sectors such as AI, data analytics, and advanced manufacturing, the region is uniquely positioned to lead in key areas for future growth. The blue economy and renewable energy generation present once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to transform the region's economic landscape and ensure a sustainable future.

However, this potential can only be realised through continued partnership and collaboration with stakeholders, communities, and policymakers to ensure that growth is inclusive and sustainable. At this pivotal moment, the WDC's role is more vital than ever. With the right support and resources, we can build on the progress made, accelerate development, and ensure that the Western Region reaches its full potential in the years ahead.

Now is the moment to invest in the future of the West and North West, recognising that the progress of this region is crucial to Ireland's overall success. Balanced regional development is not just vital for local communities, but key to the country's long-term prosperity. By investing now, we ensure that the West and North West fully capitalise on their potential, driving national growth and ensuring Ireland thrives for generations to come.

Allan Mulrooney
Chief Executive Officer



Section 1: Introduction & Background



Photo credit: George Karbus

1.1 Introduction

In early 2024, the Western Development Commission appointed Indecon to prepare this independent Report which both quantifies and analyses its socio-economic impact over the last 25 years. Indecon initially engaged with the team leads of the different arms of the Western Development Commission to identify the economic and social impacts of the WDC over the 25 years. They built on the primary research conducted on the WIF in 2021, using inputs from the WDC and stakeholders to estimate the employment and other economic impact indicators. Their input-output model of the Irish economy was then applied to these figures to estimate the wider impacts of the WDC. A series of case studies were also identified through liaising with the WDC team. Geospatial analysis was conducted using the locations of organisations supported by the WDC and locations of Connected Hubs.

Using research conducted by the WDC Policy Team, this Report also highlights key areas of economic, social or demographic interest and change in the Western Region generally over the last 25 years. To do so, it uses a range of sources, including the landmark State of the West Report produced by the WDC Policy Team in 2001, various Census but especially Census 1996 and Census 2022 and other sources of regional data. Other than the work carried out by the WDC Policy team, there is no single source of data on the Western Region as a whole (i.e. the seven counties combined): for that we largely rely on compilation, analysis and comparison of county-level data. In cases where such county-level data is not available, we do on occasion in this Report and otherwise use as a proxy the data gathered at NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 level.¹

1.2 Background and Policy Context

In interpreting the detailed findings, Indecon highlights the broader context for the Western Development Commission (WDC) and its role in addressing regional disparities in Ireland's Western Region, a 'lagging' area. The WDC's role is to "promote, procure the promotion of, and assist in, foster and encourage economic and social development in the Western Region."² The functions laid out for the WDC as per the Statute establishing the Commission include the provision of "assistance in such form as it considers appropriate for business and social enterprises and projects, whether established or being or to be established, in the Western Region, and to foster and encourage the establishment, maintenance and expansion of such enterprises and projects" as well as the co-operation with national, regional and local bodies to foster and encourage the development of these organisations in the Western Region.

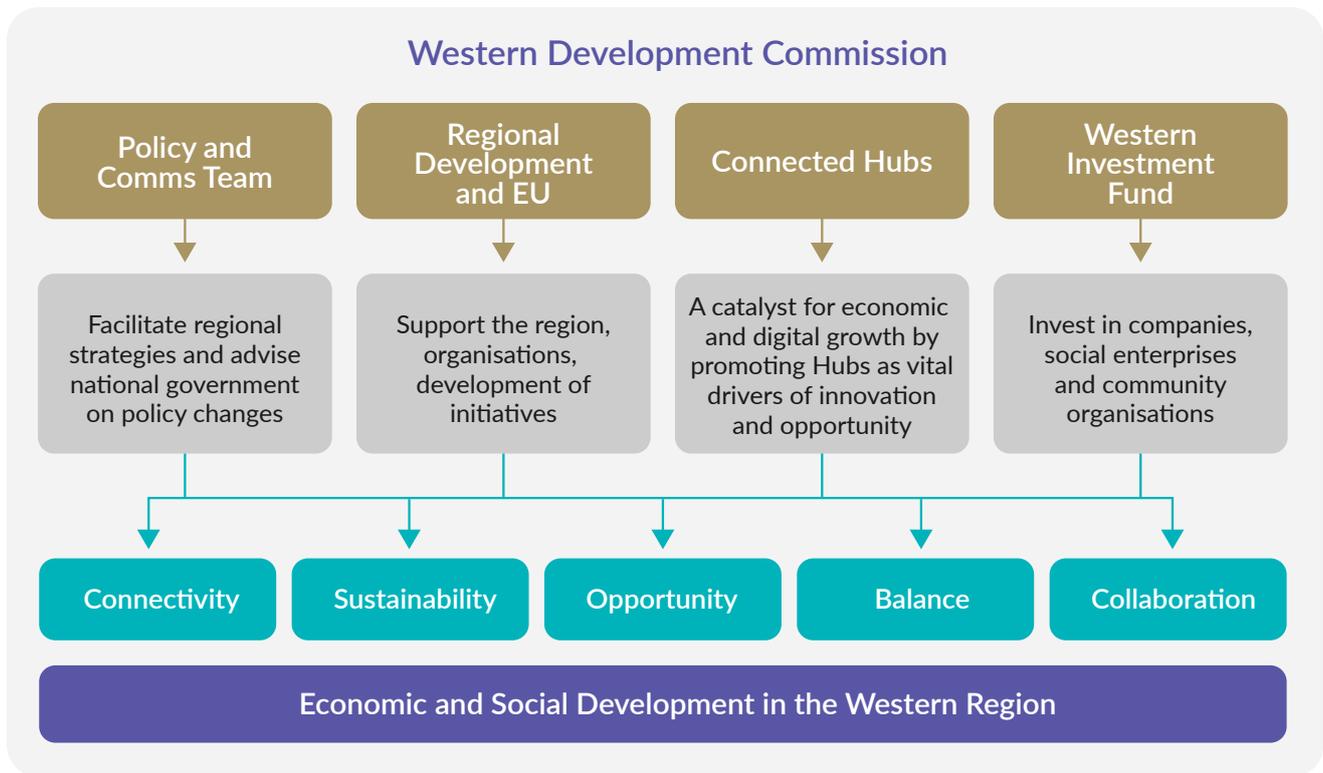
The theme of sustainable enterprise is particularly important to the WDC, given its investment profile in a significant number of enterprises in the region. WDC's Western Investment Fund (WIF) provides equity finance and loans to businesses, communities, strategic initiatives, and the creative industry based in, or moving to, the Western Region in Ireland. The WIF invests and lends on a commercial basis and looks for both a financial return and a socio-economic dividend for the region. Additionally, the WDC supports and coordinates proposals for EU funding to support regional development. The focus of recent EU co-funded projects has been on priority areas such as the Circular Economy, Creative Economy, niche tourism, and SME innovation and digitization. In 2023, the WDC secured €11 million in EU funding to support regional development in the Western Region.

The following figure outlines the various channels that the WDC uses to promote socio-economic development in the Western Region. Whilst the employment supported is mostly measured through the employment supported in companies directly financially supported by the WIF, in many cases these opportunities for investment have come as a result of the work undertaken by the wider WDC regional development and policy teams.

1 The NUTS 2 Northern and Western Region does include all of the counties in the Western Region apart from Clare but also includes Cavan and Monaghan. So it is imperfect but still useful as a proxy in the absence of the county-level data we would ideally use.

2 <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1998/act/42/section/8/enacted/en/html#sec8>

Fig 1.1: Western Development Commission's Channels of Socio-Economic Impact



Source: Indecon

The WDC's strategy emphasises "working smarter" by promoting connectivity and sustainability. This aligns with national goals to support economic development, particularly in high-skilled sectors, and to transition towards renewable energy. Aligned with national and EU policies, the WDC advocates for enhanced transport infrastructure to improve tourism and entrepreneurship. Project Ireland 2040, through its National Development Plan (NDP) and National Planning Framework (NPF), promotes regional growth, job creation, and sustainability.

The WDC's initiatives align with EU Cohesion Policy 2021-2027, which aims to reduce regional imbalances and promote economic, social, and territorial cohesion across the EU. Through its work, the WDC contributes to creating a competitive, sustainable, and inclusive regional economy in line with broader European goals. The WDC supports remote working and has prioritised infrastructure to facilitate remote working and digital connectivity in the Western Region, which is essential for balanced regional development.

Project Ireland 2040 identifies the 'National Road Network', 'Airports and Ports', and 'Environmentally Sustainable Public Transport' as key investment priorities, with the development of regional airports, such as Ireland West Airport Knock,³ seen as vital for tourism and serving as a gateway to the region. The Northern and Western Region Update for Project Ireland 2040 emphasises the importance of improving international connectivity to maintain Ireland's competitiveness.

The National Development Plan also focuses on transitioning to a climate-neutral society, which aligns with the WDC's vision of promoting connectivity and sustainability to support businesses and communities in the Western Region while protecting the environment. The WDC has prioritised the development of renewable energy enterprises in the region to drive investment and create jobs, alongside efforts to provide competitive local energy sources and retain energy spending in the area.

³ Ireland West (Knock) Airport has received funding from the WIF

The National Development Plan outlines key National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs) that support regional development, such as enhanced regional accessibility, strengthened rural economies, and high-quality international connectivity. Achieving these goals would help the Western Region address its challenges and foster economic growth. The following NSOs outlined in the National Development Plan are aligned with the investments made by the WDC, which aim to foster economic development in the region, particularly in high-skilled sectors which attract a highly educated workforce:

- **NSO 2** – Enhanced Regional Accessibility
- **NSO 3** – Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities
- **NSO 5** – A Strong Economy, supported by Enterprise, Innovation and Skills
- **NSO 6** – High-Quality International Connectivity
- **NSO 10** – Access to Quality Childcare, Education and Health Services

Additionally, the WDC’s work aligns with the vision of Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, which outlines a roadmap for rural Ireland’s recovery post-COVID-19 and is vital to “our national economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing and development”.⁴ It focuses on improving digital connectivity, supporting remote work, and enabling rural businesses to expand through online trade. The National Remote Working Survey 2023⁵ indicated that 59% are currently working remotely (the majority of whom work more days from home), and 38% are working fully remotely. Almost 14% of respondents indicated that they had already relocated within Ireland since COVID-19, with the top 5 counties being Cork, Galway, Kildare, Mayo and Donegal (two-thirds relocated from Dublin). A further third of respondents said they would or may consider relocating, with Galway the most common response for a location in Ireland to relocate to. The infrastructure must be in place to facilitate these wishes, particularly in the Western Region.



4 <https://assets.gov.ie/132413/433aebac-f12a-4640-8cac-9faf52e5ea1f.pdf>

5 McCarthy, A., McGrath, L., Frost, D., O’Sullivan, M., Whelan, E., and Mulrooney, A. (2023). 2023 Remote Working in Ireland Survey - Summary Findings Report. Galway, Ireland: University of Galway & Western Development Commission.

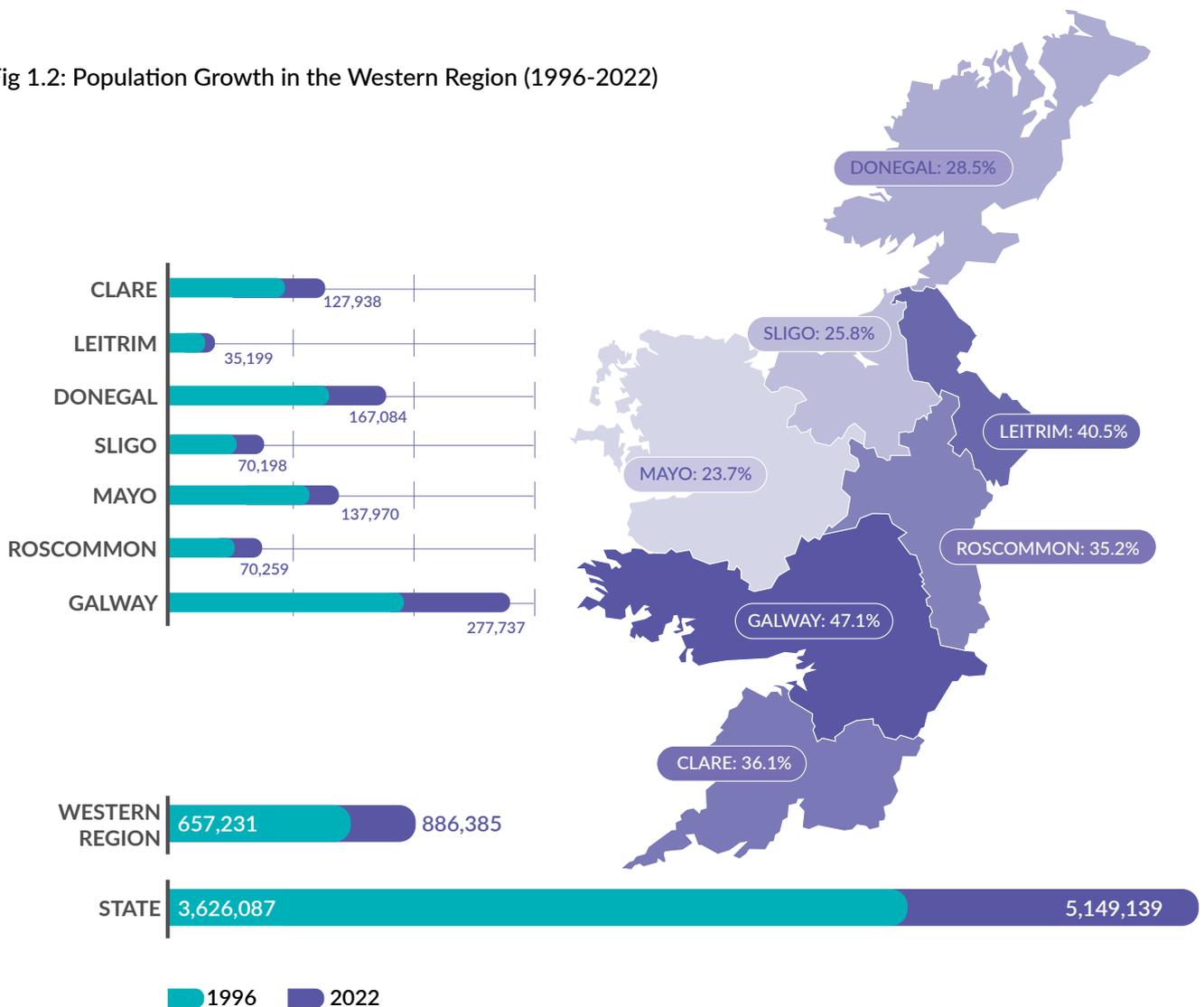
1.3 Socio-Economic Context

Population

The following table shows that between 1996 and 2022, the population in the Western Region grew by over 250,000 people (39%). However, this is a slightly slower rate of growth than the population of the State as a whole, meaning that the Western Region has become a smaller proportion of the country's population. Population growth in Galway outstripped the national rate, with the county now accounting for 31% of the region's population, compared to 28.7% in 1996.



Fig 1.2: Population Growth in the Western Region (1996-2022)



Source: WDC analysis based on CSO data (Census 1996 & Census 2022)

Economic Indicators

As outlined in the following sections of the report, the WDC, through its activities, has had a considerable impact on the Western Region in terms of facilitating growth in job numbers, economic growth, improving citizens' quality of life and regional development. These impacts are crucial given existing disparities in economic indications across regions. For example, disposable income per person is approximately €2,000 lower in the Western Region than in than in the NUTS 2 Southern Region, and GVA in the Northern and Western Region is significantly below either of the other regions. The number of persons engaged per enterprise is also lower.



Disposable income per person per annum is approximately €2,000 lower in the Western Region than in than in the NUTS 2 Southern Region and over €4000 lower than in the Eastern and Midland Region.

Table 1.1: Key Statistics Concerning Irish NUTS 2 Regions – Economic and Enterprise Indicators

	Northern and Western	Southern	Eastern and Midland
GVA (2021- €m)	30,795	153,719	224,872
GVA per-capita (2021 – €)	34,578	92,043	91,488
Disposable Income per Person (2021 – €) ⁶	21,682*	23,658	25,964
Unemployment Rate (Q4 2023)	3.7%	4.0%	4.5%
Labour Force Participation Rate (Q4 2023)	63.7%	64.0%	66.9%
Number of Engaged Persons per Enterprise (2021)	4.82*	5.40	7.34
European Innovation Scoreboard Score (2023)	113.4	114.3	134.5

Source: Various CSO databases, Eurostat data

Note: *These particular statistics are for the Western Region (i.e. the seven counties) but are compared here to the NUTS 2 Regions (Southern and Eastern Midland).



⁶ This has been calculated in the case of the Western Region by weighting the disposable income per person by size of county. <https://data.cso.ie/table/RAA02>

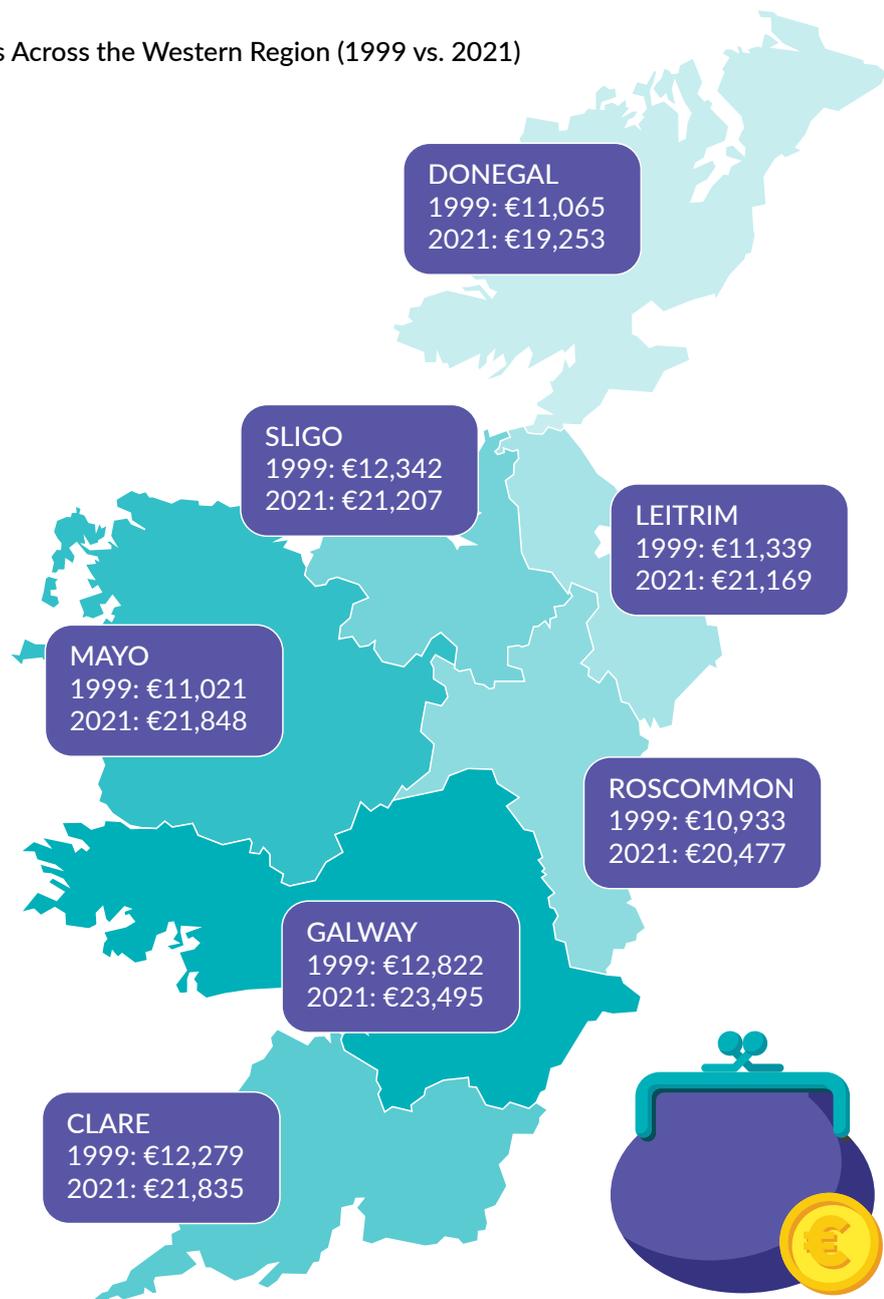
Disposable Income

There has been a substantial increase in average disposable income per person in the Western Region and at national level between 1999 and the year for which we have the most up-to-date data, 2021.

In 1999, the average for the Western Region was €11,685, 11.1% below the State average of €13,146. In 2021, the average disposable income had increased significantly to €21,326 but was 12.5% below the State average of €24,276.

Galway remained the county with the highest average disposable income in the Western Region in both 1999 and 2021: in 1999 it stood at €12,822 (or 97.5% of the State average) and in 2021 at €23,495 (or 96.38%). Roscommon was the county with the lowest average disposable income in 1999, at €10,933 (or 83% of the State average) but in 2021 this was Donegal, where the average disposable income was €19,253, 79% of the State average and in fact the lowest in the State.

Fig 1.3: Disposable Income Levels Across the Western Region (1999 vs. 2021)



Source: WDC analysis of CSO data https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/economy/1999/regincome_1999.pdf; CSO, 2021: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cirgdp/countyincomesandregionalgdp2021/disposableincomebycounty/>

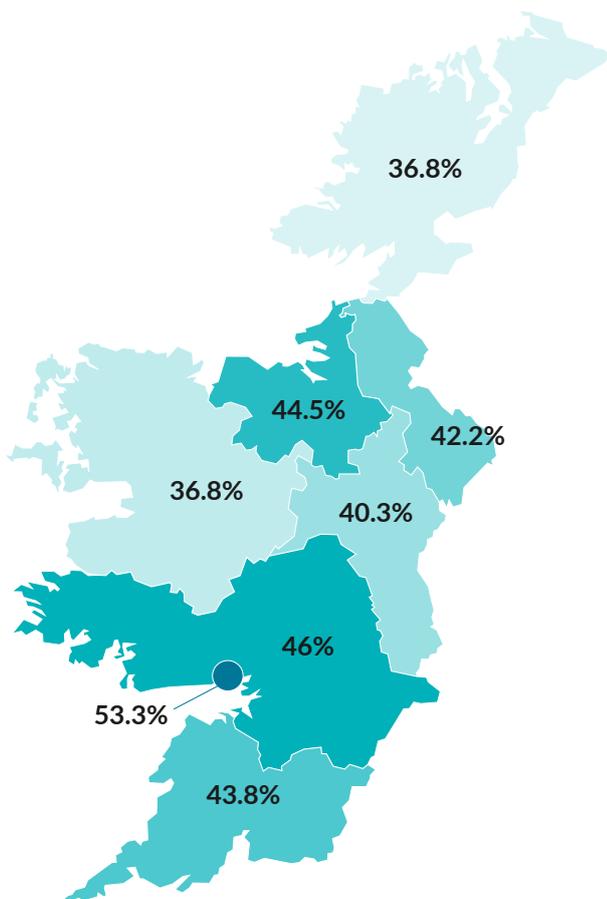
Levels of Third-Level Education

Over the past 25 years, the Western Region has seen a substantial rise in the number of people completing third-level education. In 1996, only 17.5% of those aged 15 and over had a third-level qualification, compared to 33.1% whose highest level of education was primary or none. By 2022, 43.26% of the region's population had completed third-level education, close to the national figure of 45.3%, while those with only primary or no education fell sharply to 10.9%.

Regional Differences in Educational Attainment

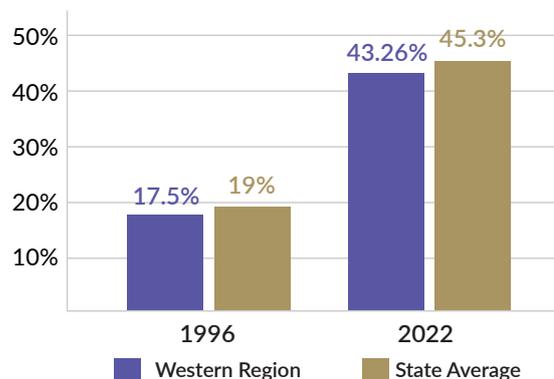
Galway City continues to lead in educational attainment, with 53.3% of its population holding a third-level degree in 2022, the second highest in the country. Other counties such as Galway County (46%), Sligo (44.5%), and Clare (43.8%) are now closer to the national average, while Donegal (36.8%), Mayo (39.2%), and Roscommon (40.3%) have the lowest levels in the region.

Fig 1.5: Third-level Attainment by County (2022)



Source: WDC analysis based on CSO data (Census 1996 & Census 2022)

Fig 1.4: Regional and National Attainment of Third-level Education (1999 vs. 2022)



Enhanced Educational Opportunities

The region's educational landscape has strengthened with the establishment of Atlantic Technological University (ATU) and the continued growth of the University of Galway. In 2022/2023, 55.5% of students from the Western Region attended third-level institutions within the region⁷, indicating a growing capacity for young people in the region to remain in the region for third-level – and beyond.

Addressing the 'Brain Drain'

Historically, the Western Region faced a so-called 'brain drain', a long-standing pattern whereby a relatively high proportion of those who grew up in the Western Region both left to be educated in other regions and then gained employment elsewhere – they were to some extent 'educated away' from the West. However, recent data shows improvement. In 2021, 56% of graduates from the West Region stayed or returned to the region for work⁸, compared to 29% in 1998. Although the trend persists, it is less pronounced, with more young people choosing and having the capacity to study and work locally.

7 HEA, 2023. Key Facts and Figures | Statistics | Higher Education Authority (hea.ie)

8 HEA 2022. Research Info-Byte – Regional Mobility of Irish Graduates | Publications | Higher Education Authority (hea.ie)

9 HEA, First destinations of Award Recipients in Higher Education, 1998, Special Analysis for WDC.



Growing Disparities in Gross Value Added (GVA)

Gross Value Added (GVA) provides us with a complex but very important and widely used indicator of regional economic activity and growth. There have been widening disparities between the West and Border regions and the rest of Ireland over the past 25 years.

1999 GVA Baseline

In 1999, the West and Border regions accounted for 6.3% and 7.37% of the total GVA for the state, respectively. GVA per person was 72.25% of the state average for the West and 75.37% for the Border region, compared to 133% for Dublin.

2021 GVA Figures: Widening Gaps

By 2021, these disparities had widened:

- **West Region:** The West Region's share of national GVA decreased to 5.07%, and GVA per person fell to 53.37% of the state average (€43,540 vs. €81,573).
- **Border Region:** The Border region's share dropped much further, to 2.44% of national GVA, with GVA per person at only 29.7% of the state average (€24,227).
- **Dublin:** GVA per person in Dublin rose to €132,259, well above the national average.

Contributing Factors to GVA Disparities

1. **Concentration in High-Value Sectors:** Higher productivity in regions like Dublin and the Southwest due to growth in finance, technology, and pharmaceuticals.
2. **Commuting Patterns and Workforce Distribution:** Greater worker concentration in urban areas boosts regional productivity.

3. **Need for Regional Development Focus:** These disparities highlight the need for policies promoting high-value sector growth across all regions.

The increasing GVA disparities underscore the importance of targeted regional development to support high-value sector investment and achieve balanced economic growth nationwide.

Table 1.2: Total GVA and GVA per person (1999 vs 2021)

1999

	Total GVA (€million)	As % of Total State GVA	GVA per person (€ per annum)	As % of State average
State	89,029		21,171	-
West	5604	6.3%	15,298	72.25%
Border	6559	7.37%	15,958	75.37%
Dublin	30,874	34.67%	28,151	133%

2021

	Total GVA (€million)	As % of Total State GVA	GVA per person (€ per annum)	As % of State average
State	409,386		81,573	-
West	20,781	5.07%	43,540	53.37%
Border	10,013	2.44%	24,227	29.7%
Dublin	187,773	45.85%	132,259	162%

Source: WDC analysis of CSO data https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/economy/1999/regincome_1999.pdf; CSO RAA05 Gross Value Added, Taxes and Subsidies by region (2021)

10 As we do not have county-level data, we are using the NUTS 3 regions of the West (counties Galway, Mayo and Roscommon) and the Border (counties Sligo, Leitrim, Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan) as a proxy. Clare is the only Western Region county not in these regions.

Section 2: Supporting Employment in the West of Ireland



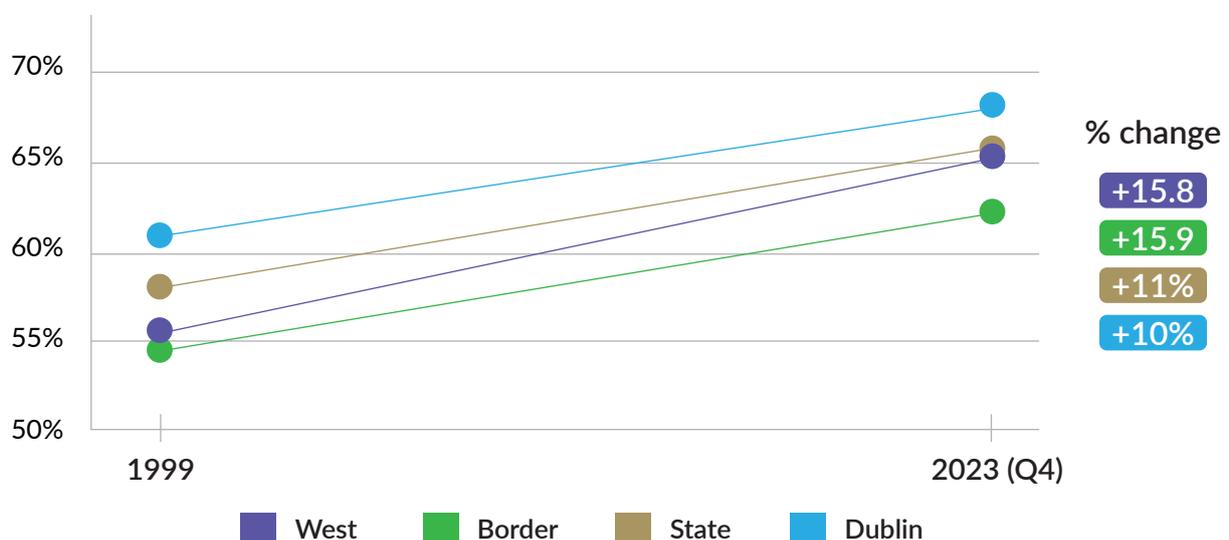
This section outlines how the WDC has supported employment in the Western Region. While the Western Investment Fund (WIF) is crucial in financially supporting businesses and jobs, regional development and policy work have played a key role in supporting nascent industries and promoting economic activity in the Western Region. In many cases, the WIF has invested in sectors or areas following initial work conducted by the wider WDC, which has identified and enabled the growth of these sectors.

2.1 The Region

Employment Trends and Sectoral Changes

Employment in the Western Region has grown significantly, with the labour force participation rate increasing from 56.2% in 1999 to 65.1% in 2023. This reflects the growth of the economy generally and increased female participation in the workforce. The WDC’s initiatives in creating jobs and retaining talent in the region have also played a role. However, this rate still trails the national average of 67.8%, underscoring the need for continued job creation efforts.

Fig 2.1: Labour Force Participation Rate (1999-2023)



Source: CSO QNHS 1999; CSO QLF08 Labour Force Participation rates by regions/quarter (2024)

Age and Dependency Ratios: Implications for Employment and Economic Planning

Understanding the age structure and dependency ratios in the Western Region is essential for comprehending the dynamics of employment and labour supply. Over the past 25 years, there has been significant demographic change that affects both the available workforce and the demand for different types of jobs and services.

Dependency Ratios: The dependency ratio, which measures the proportion of people under 15 and over 64 compared to the working-age population (15-64 years), has shown some positive movement. In 1996, the Western Region had a dependency ratio of 61.3, significantly higher than the national figure of 53.1. By 2022, the region's dependency ratio had decreased to 57.8, closer to the national figure of 53.2. This trend reflects an increasing proportion of the population at working age, which is a positive development for the regional labour market and economic activity.

Old Dependency Ratio: However, the old dependency ratio (the ratio of people aged 65 and over to those of working age) has increased substantially, from 22 in 1996 to 26.9 in 2022 for the Western Region, compared to an increase from 17.5 to 23.1 for the state overall. This ageing trend is particularly pronounced in counties like Mayo (32.4), Leitrim (30.6), and Roscommon (30.2), which have some of the highest old dependency ratios in the country. The increasing proportion of older residents has significant implications for economic planning, particularly in terms of workforce availability, healthcare needs, and social services.

Impact on Employment Opportunities: The ageing population presents both challenges and opportunities for the Western Region. While an older population could lead to a smaller pool of available workers, it also creates new job opportunities in sectors such as healthcare, elder care, and community services. The WDC has supported this shift by investing in these sectors, ensuring they can meet the growing demand driven by demographic changes. Furthermore, the relatively lower age dependency ratio in Galway City (17.7) highlights the importance of urban centers in attracting and retaining younger populations, which helps to balance the overall demographic profile of the region.

Strategic Implications for the WDC's Employment Initiatives:

The demographic shifts underscore the need for targeted policies that address the specific needs of the Western Region's evolving population. The WDC's strategy to support remote work through initiatives like the Connected Hubs network, and to develop age-friendly employment opportunities, aligns well with these demographic trends. By fostering a diversified economic base and supporting sectors that cater to an ageing population, the WDC is ensuring that employment growth remains robust and inclusive.

Broader Demographic Context and Regional Variations:

It is also notable that six of the eight counties with the highest average age in the State are located in the Western Region: Mayo has the highest average age at 41.6, followed by Roscommon, Leitrim, Sligo, Clare, and Donegal. These counties face unique challenges in terms of maintaining a vibrant workforce, but they also have the potential to develop specialized services and industries catering to an older demographic. For instance, health services, recreational activities tailored to older adults, and age-friendly housing solutions are areas with strong potential for job creation and economic growth.

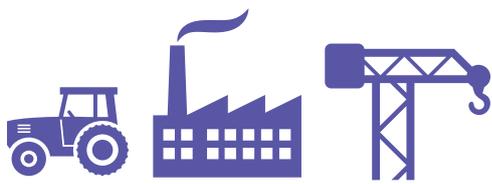
Source: WDC analysis based on CSO data (Census 1996 & Census 2022)



Over the past 25 years, there has been significant demographic change that affects both the available workforce and the demand for different types of jobs and services.

Sectoral Employment: Significant Changes and Increased Diversity

Over the past 25 years, the Western Region has experienced notable changes in the diversity and distribution of sectoral employment. Although direct comparisons between 1996 and 2022 are challenging due to differences in classification systems—the 1996 Census grouped sectors into nine categories, while the 2022 Census, using the NACE Rev.2 classification, delineates 18 categories—key trends can still be identified.



In 1996, three sectors—Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing; Manufacturing; and Construction—accounted for 44.1% of the region’s workforce.

By 2022, this had declined to 24.4%, just under a quarter of the total workforce.

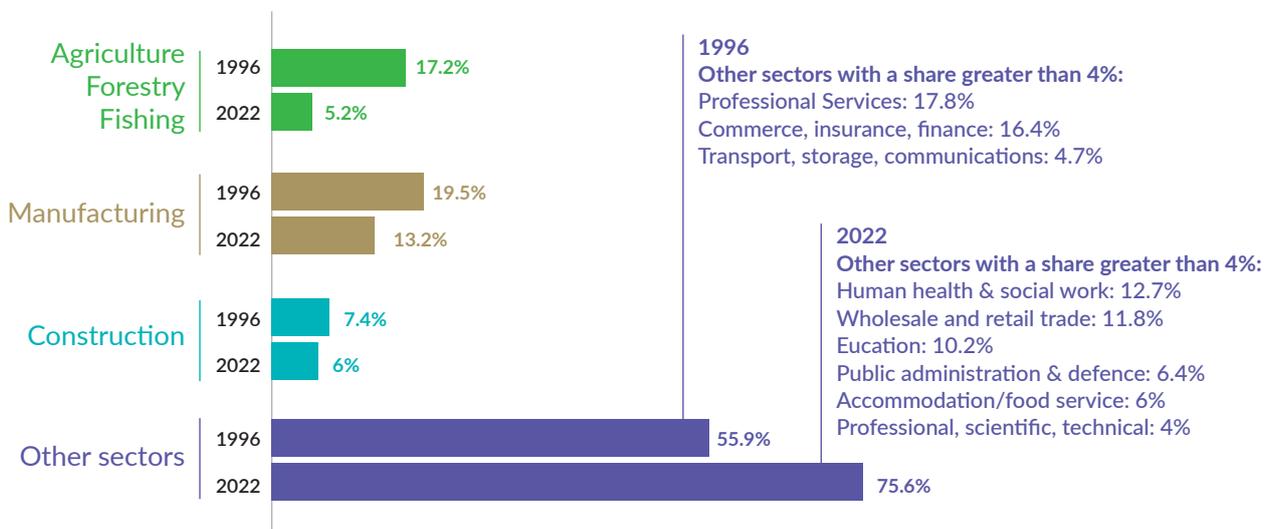
Decline in Traditional Sectors

In 1996, three sectors—Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing; Manufacturing; and Construction—accounted for 44.1% of the region’s workforce. By 2022, this had declined to 24.4%, just under a quarter of the total workforce.

Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing saw the largest decline, dropping from 17.2% of total employment in 1996 (and up to 25% in counties like Roscommon, Leitrim, and Galway) to 5.2% in 2022. Despite this decrease, the sector remains more significant in the Western Region than nationally, where it represents just 3.5% of employment. In counties like Roscommon, Leitrim, and Mayo, it still exceeds 6%, reflecting the ongoing economic, social, and cultural importance of farming in these areas.

Manufacturing also experienced a decline, from 19.5% in 1996 to 13.2% in 2022. However, this reduction was less severe than the national decline, where manufacturing dropped from 19% to 9.6%.

Fig 2.2: Sectoral Employment Western Region (1996 vs. 2022)



Source: WDC analysis of CSO data (Census 1996 and Census 2022)

Growth in Public Sector Employment

The Western Region has seen an increase in public sector employment compared to the national average:

Human Health and Social Work: 12.6% of the region's workforce is employed in this sector, compared to 10.6% nationally.

Education: 10.2% of the region's workforce versus 8.4% nationally.

Public Administration and Defence: 6.4% of the regional workforce compared to 5.2% nationally.

Differences in Private Sector Employment

Employment in private sector activities is relatively lower in the Western Region compared to national levels:

Information and Communication: 3.6% in the Western Region versus 5% nationally.

Financial and Insurance Activities: 2.7% in the Western Region compared to 4.2% nationally.

Professional, Scientific, and Technical Activities: 4.8% in the Western Region compared to 6.3% nationally.

While it is challenging to compare employment data from 1996 and 2022 directly due to changes in classification systems, the Western Region now has a more diverse employment base. However, there are still notable differences between the region and the State as a whole in terms of sectoral employment distribution, particularly the greater reliance on public sector roles and the lower representation in key private sector activities. This again highlights the need for additional investment which will build a more balanced regional economic profile.

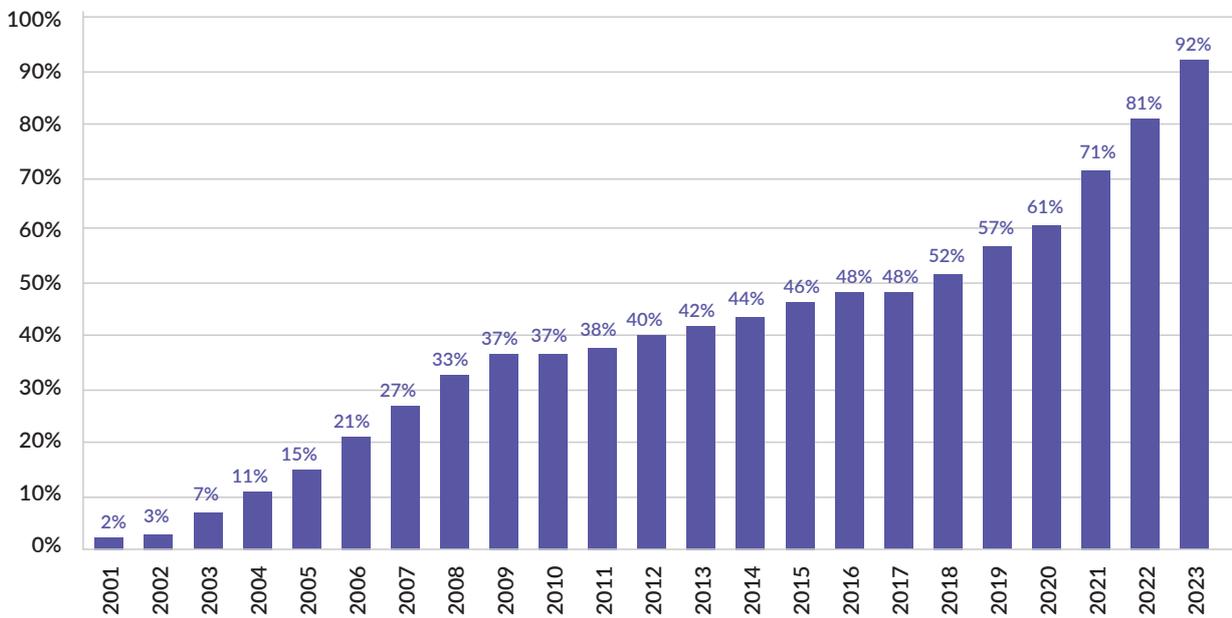


2.2 Employment Supported by the WDC

The Western Investment Fund (WIF) is a financial evergreen fund managed by the WDC to support economic and social development in Ireland’s Western Region. The WIF offers financial support to SMEs through equity investments and loans. As depicted in Figure 2.3, between 2001 and 2023, over €92 million was invested by the WIF in SMEs and companies. There was significant growth in investment over the period, with the total amount disbursed growing by over €3.7

million annually between 2003-2009. Albeit there was a decline during the financial crisis, since 2018, there has been a steady return to growth, with over €10 million disbursed by the WIF in the last three years. This funding enabled enterprises to leverage over €520 million in additional financing from other sources. This includes €185 million that portfolio companies secured via EU/ Irish R&D funding mechanisms.

Fig 2.3: Cumulative Amount Disbursed by the WIF (€m) (2001-2023)



Source: Data provided by WDC



The Regional Development Team also supports enterprises, entrepreneurs and individuals in the Western Region. The team helps SMEs, community projects, and infrastructure initiatives to stimulate growth and improve the quality of life in the region. An example of the type of support provided by the WDC via their regional development team is outlined in the following case study, The Entrepreneur Exchange and MeetWest.

Case Study: The Entrepreneur Exchange and MeetWest

The Entrepreneur Exchange, run in partnership with Sligo Chamber from 2014 to 2018, was destined to foster entrepreneurship and business development in the Western Region of Ireland. Supported by the WDC, it connected early-stage and established entrepreneurs with experienced business leaders and investors for mentoring and networking. The initiative provided resources, guidance, and professional networks. WDC helped manage the programme and attract participants, establishing 24 regional companies and involving 24 mentors. Sligo Chamber CEO Paul Keyes stated:

“The Entrepreneur Exchange [was] an opportunity for entrepreneurs with an investor-ready proposition or an established business who want to focus on growing their business to get a competitive edge. It is also further evidence of the collaborative public/private partnership that will get the Western Region back on its feet.”

Participating companies benefitted from a full day of tailored business mentoring meetings, complemented by a networking dinner. The event delivered significant value, with some participants receiving business investments worth up to €100,000. The non-financial benefits included extensive networking opportunities and lasting professional relationships developed through the programme.

MeetWest 2016

LookWest.ie participated in MeetWest, the largest business networking event in the West of Ireland, held in Mayo in 2016. The event brought together over 300 companies, facilitating approximately 4,500 business meetings with companies from the Western Region and beyond. MeetWest was organised through a collaborative partnership between Galway City Council, Galway County Council, Galway Local Enterprise Office, Roscommon County Council, Roscommon Local Enterprise Office, Mayo County Council, Mayo Local Enterprise Office, and the WDC, in association with Údarás na Gaeltachta, Enterprise Ireland, and IDA Ireland.

The following table summarises the direct economic impacts of the WDC through the employment, turnover, exports, and expenditures supported, with the majority of the direct financial implications generated via the WIF. However, as noted previously, the support provided by the broader WDC organisation has been crucial in unlocking the potential of these organisations and sectors. The WDC directly supported 3,851 FTE employees in 2023, with 35,438 FTE years supported between 1999-2023. The WDC directly supported over €195 million in incomes, including wages and salaries expenditure in companies during 2023 and almost €1.5 billion across 1999-2023. Regarding revenue/turnover for companies, the WDC directly supported €384 million in 2023 and €3.4 billion during this period, with approximately 72% of this figure generated by exports.

For R&D expenditure in companies, the WDC support led to €86.5 million in 2023 and €638 million across the period. Previous research conducted amongst companies supported indicated that in the absence of the WIF, 95% of respondents indicated that there would have been a very significant or significant market gap in the availability of financing. This suggests that some companies may not have grown as fast or as large in the absence of the WIF, given this potential market gap. However, it should be noted that some of these companies may have grown at similar rates or to similar sizes in the absence of WIF and WDC support, but a precise level of this potential deadweight is unknown. Due to the evergreen nature of the WIF, it is likely that the cost per job (in terms of public funding) is relatively low. It is difficult to measure this figure with precision.

Table 2.1: Summary of Direct Economic Impacts of the Companies Supported by the WDC

	2023	1999 - 2023
Employment (FTEs)	3,851	35,438*
Employment incomes supported (€m)	195.0	1,489
Turnover / Revenue (€m)	384.3	3,353
Exports (€m)	277.3	2,419
R&D Expenditure (€m)	86.5	639
Tax and PRSI Expenditure (€m)	46.1	404

Source: Indecon analysis of survey data, data provided by WDC and annual reports

Note: * Figure based on FTE-years (If the same person held a job in a WDC-supported company for 20 years, this would be counted as 20 FTE-years)

In addition to the direct economic impact, Indecon estimated the wider economic impact (indirect and induced economic effects) of the WDC using Type I and II multipliers. These multipliers enable the modelling of indirect and induced multiplier impacts on a sectoral basis for output, employment, R&D, tax and PRSI expenditure, and incomes.

Indirect impacts include the secondary effects of initial economic activities, such as the supported company's purchase of goods and services. Induced impacts result from the spending of income earned by employees, both directly and indirectly. This spending supports additional economic activity and job creation as workers purchase goods and services, further stimulating the economy. The following table outlines the wider economic impacts (indirect and induced) of the companies supported by the WDC's activities. Regarding employment, the WDC (through the WIF and regional development activities) indirectly supported/induced 7,292 FTEs in 2023, or just over 66,000 FTEs years, across the 1999-2023 period.

Table 2.2: Summary of Wider Economic Impacts (Indirect and Induced) of the Companies Supported by the WDC (through the WIF and regional development activities)

	2023	1999 - 2023
Employment (FTEs)	7,292	66,102
Employment incomes supported (€m)	314.5	2,457
Turnover / Revenue (€m)	529.2	4,823
Exports (€m)	290.5	2,606

Source: Indecon analysis of survey data, data provided by WDC and annual reports. Note: Figure based on FTE-years

Most employment is in SMEs and micro-enterprises rather than social enterprises and community organisations. This is important to acknowledge because the average response from companies to Indecon's survey indicated that over 70% of company employees had graduate qualifications, and over 40% had a postgraduate qualification. As per the most recent Labour Force Survey, approximately 56% of those in employment in Ireland in Q2 2024 had some form of third-level degree.

This indicates that the workforce in companies supported by the WDC (through the WIF) attracts highly skilled individuals compared to the national average, and this is in line with the aims of the WDC to support smart specialisation in the region. This demonstrates the WDC's alignment with the NSOs in the NDP to strengthen rural economies through enterprises, innovation and skills.

Table 2.3: Percentage of Employees of Companies / Organisations Supported by the WDC (through the WIF) with a Graduate or Postgraduate Qualification

	Companies		Social Enterprises and Community Organisations	
	% with a graduate qual.	% with a postgrad qual.	% with a graduate qual.	% with a postgrad qual.
Average response	71.1%	41.3%	25.8%	9.7%
Median response	80.0%	33.3%	10.5%	0.0%
National Average	56% of those in employment had some form of 3rd Level degree			

Source: Indecon analysis of a survey of companies and organisations supported by the WIF (2021)

Given that the qualification levels are higher in companies supported by the WDC, unsurprisingly, the average earnings amongst employees in organisations supported by the WDC are higher than the majority of counties in the Western Region, as well as the majority of counties in the country.

The workforce in companies supported by the WDC (through the WIF) attracts highly skilled individuals compared to the national average.

CSO enterprise survival rate statistics are shown in the following table, with just under two-thirds of new enterprises surviving five years after their birth. In comparison, previous research indicated that 90% of those who received WIF investment survived at least five years. It is important to acknowledge the sample size of WIF companies compared to CSO enterprises. Still, the evidence suggests that companies receiving support from the WDC (through the WIF) have greater survival rates than the national average. The WDC's WIF specifically targets early-stage companies which is an important feature of the fund. This indicates that the WDC has been successful in generating sustainable employment opportunities.

2.3 Impact of Connected Hubs

The Connected Hubs initiative is another example of how the WDC has enabled employment. Connected Hubs is a central driver of the Irish National Hub Network, a Government of Ireland initiative to establish and strategically expand a network of interconnected Hub facilities throughout the country. In May 2021, together with the Department of Rural and Community Development, the WDC launched Connected Hubs. Following the pilot project's success in the West of Ireland, the Connected Hubs initiative is now national. Almost all the hubs in the network are independent businesses that provide different mixes of facilities, services, and support. Some hubs are privately owned, but the majority are run as non-profits by social enterprises and community groups with support from local authorities and other agencies. The following table shows the spread of Connected Hubs, with 118 of the 364 hubs located in the Western Region. After Dublin and Cork, Galway and Mayo are the two most significant in terms of number of Connected Hubs. Currently, the active hubs have over 10,000 unique users, who, on average, spend 40% of their working week in these hubs.

Over half of the population (52%) of the Western Region live within 5km of a current Connected Hub (over 85% are within 10 kilometres). This highlights the ubiquity of the Connected Hubs and this figure will likely increase as the number of hubs increases. It offers a sustainable infrastructure for remote and hybrid working. The wider societal benefits to the region of Connected Hubs are outlined in the next section.

Table 2.4: Enterprise Survival Rate (2008-2020)

Year	Enterprise Births in Year	Enterprises Surviving ...				
		One Year	Two Years	Three Years	Four Years	Five Years
Average survival rate (All Enterprises)		87.2%	87.2%	41.3%	41.3%	41.3%
Survival Rate for WDC-supported companies						90.0%

Source: Indecon analysis of CSO data

Table 2.5: Number of Onboarded Connected Hubs (2023)

County	Number of Hubs	Percentage of Hubs
Carlow	5	1.40%
Cavan	8	2.20%
Cork	36	9.90%
Dublin	49	13.50%
Kerry	20	5.50%
Kildare	9	2.50%
Kilkenny	5	1.40%
Laois	6	1.60%
Limerick	17	4.70%
Longford	5	1.40%
Louth	10	2.70%
Meath	7	1.90%
Monaghan	9	2.50%
Offaly	10	2.70%
Tipperary	16	4.40%
Waterford	10	2.70%
Westmeath	4	1.10%
Wexford	12	3.30%
Wicklow	8	2.20%
Clare	14	3.80%
Donegal	20	5.50%
Galway	32	8.80%
Leitrim	11	3.00%
Mayo	24	6.60%
Roscommon	8	2.20%
Sligo	9	2.50%
Western Region	118	32.40%
Total	364	100%

Source: Indecon analysis of WDC data

2.4 Supporting Enterprises in the Region

In addition to funding for private-sector enterprises, the WDC has provided over €21.2 million to 140 such social enterprises and community organisations, primarily through the WIF's Community Loan Fund. This support addresses the unique challenges and opportunities for social enterprise development in the Western Region's rural areas. The WDC's input aims to leverage the WDC's experience and understanding of the Western Region's needs and potential and also support the implementation of Trading for Impact, the National Social Enterprise Policy (2024-2027).

Taking all types of projects funded by the WIF, Galway City leads with the highest number of projects (71), accounting for 20.6% of the total projects, and also receives the largest share of funding at €33.7 million, which is 35.9% of the total dispersed. This high funding results in a substantial amount of €398,782 being dispersed per 1,000 population, significantly higher than any other county.

Galway County has a significant amount, with 62 projects representing 19.1% of the total, and receives €21.2 million, making up 24% of the total dispersed funds. This amounts to €109,722 per 1,000 people, considerably lower than Galway City but still substantial compared to other counties. Thus, the dispersed amounts are more concentrated in Galway, reflecting the existing companies based in this area. MedTech/Lifescience companies, in particular, are heavily concentrated in Galway City and

tend to have much larger funding requirements, skewing the investment figures in Galway City. The total dispersed across all counties amounts to €92.0 million, with an average of €103,751 per 1,000 population.

Table 2.6 provides an overview of the distribution of projects across various counties by different organisation types, including Business, Social Enterprise/Community Development, and Creative Enterprises. Galway City has the highest percentage of business projects at 37%, and it also leads in creative enterprises with 21% of the projects. Galway County follows with 22% of projects in the business category and also has a notable share of creative enterprises and social enterprise/community development projects, each constituting 21% and 15%, respectively. Thus, when combined, Galway City and County account for over half of the business investments made by the WDC (through the WIF) between 1999 and 2023 and almost half for Creative Enterprises.

However, investments in social enterprises and community development are more distributed across counties in the Western Region. Roscommon has a particularly high proportion of social enterprise/community development projects, which comprise 29% of its total projects, the highest among the counties. Overall, the data highlights Galway City and County as key hubs for both business and creative projects, while Roscommon stands out for its emphasis on community-oriented initiatives.

Table 2.6: Geographic Spread of Number of Projects by Organisation Type

	Business	Social Enterprise / Community Development	Creative Enterprises	Overall
Clare	4%	6%	14%	6%
Donegal	11%	9%	5%	9%
Galway City	37%	4%	21%	21%
Galway County	22%	15%	21%	19%
Leitrim	2%	9%	2%	5%
Mayo	13%	15%	15%	14%
Roscommon	8%	29%	19%	17%
Sligo	4%	13%	14%	9%
Number of Projects	139	140	66	345

Source: WDC data

2.5 Supporting Regional Development

In the last 25 years, the WDC has been involved in circa 180 regional development projects or events. These projects involved collaborating with a large number of stakeholders in the Western Region, including SMEs, Local Authorities, Higher Education Institutions and Community and Voluntary groups. The scale and type of the projects that the WDC has been involved in are quite diverse. Many of these projects involved the WDC taking a leadership role in coordinating proposals and projects to support regional development in the Western Region. The WDC also hosted a number of events which provided significant opportunities to develop networks and collaborations. Such enabling activities are likely to have a positive impact on regional development.

A significant number of projects led to the successful receipt of EU funding. It must also be noted that the WDC has been particularly successful in relation to EU funding applications in the last five years with support for 14 successful applications, which amounts to €30.1 million. In 2023 alone, the WDC secured €25.83 million in funding of which €11 million went to regional bodies. This does not include leveraged WIF funds which may avail of support from the regional development activities of the WDC. Such impacts, as discussed previously, are likely to be of significant benefit to the region.



The WDC has been particularly successful in relation to EU funding applications in the last five years, with support for 14 successful applications amounting to €30.1 million.

Table 2.7: Impact of Regional Development Projects/ Events where WDC played an active role (1999-2023)

No. of Regional Development Projects/ events	180
No. of SMEs/Entrepreneurs supported	2,723
No. of SMEs/ Entrepreneurs engaged	5,147
Funding/Value of activities	€70.2 million
Funding Value of activities (2020-2024)	€30.1 million

Source: WDC data

The work done by the WDC, and the regional development team, in relation to the Galway Convention Bureau (Business tourism) has also had a significant impact in terms of business tourism development in recent years and looks to build on this existing impact through the development of its pipeline in the years ahead. The Bureau offers services to support international business events to locate in the region, including, bid assistance, supported and organised site inspections, free venue finding service etc.

These headline figures do not fully highlight the impact of each of these projects on supporting the WDC's objectives. Various case studies will highlight how the WDC's role in supporting regional development positively impacts the Western Region.

Section 3: Supporting Life/Society in the West of Ireland



This section of the report discusses how the WDC’s activities have supported life and society in the Western Region. It outlines the impact of Connected Hubs and wider remote working initiatives. It investigates the social impact the WDC has had through supporting social enterprises and community organisations. Importantly, the section also outlines the role of the WDC in promoting the Western Region as a place to work and relocate.

3.1 The Region

We have already referred to some of the key features of and changes in life and society in the Western Region in the last 25 years. These include the growth in population – albeit at a lesser rate than in the State as a whole - and the particular demographic characteristics in terms of age and dependency ratios. Here we focus on a range of other notable features which are of interest in our analysis of twenty five years of change in the Western Region and which will continue to guide the work of the WDC.

Rural and Urban Living in the Western Region

While the region has urbanised somewhat in the last 25 years, the big story is how rural the settlement pattern in the Western Region remains, especially when compared to the rest of the State.



Then...

72%

In 1996, 72% of the population of the Western Region lived rurally (i.e. in settlements of less than 1500).

The corresponding figure for the State as a whole was **55%**.

Now...

64%

of the population of the Western Region are still living rurally. Only **21.5%** live in settlements of 10,000+

In the State as a whole, on the other hand, only **36%** live rurally and **58%** live in settlements of 10,000+.

So while the State as a whole has urbanised greatly in the last 25 years, the Western Region remains largely rural in character with all the features – but also the challenges – associated with this.

Source: WDC analysis of CSO data (Census 1996 and Census 2022)

Changes in Towns & Settlements



Then...

4

cities/towns with a population greater than 10,000: Galway, Sligo, Ennis and Letterkenny.

Now...

7

cities/towns with a population greater than 10,000: Galway, Sligo, Ennis and Letterkenny, Castlebar, Ballina, Shannon.

Of these, Letterkenny has experienced the highest growth in population (88%) and Sligo the lowest (11%).

There are significantly more towns of scale in 2022:

- In 1996, there were 26 towns with a population of over 1500.
- In 2022, there were 45 towns with a population of over 1500.

The towns which have experienced the most significant growth between 1996 and 2022 are generally those in commutable distance of large centres of employment.

Top 10

Oranmore	313%
Moycullen	279%
Collooney	214%
Athenry	185%
Ballisodare	185%
Strandhill	159%
Carrick-on-Shannon	154%
Sixmilebridge	148%
Oughterard	146%
Gort	143%



Source: WDC analysis of CSO data (Census 1996 and Census 2022)

An increasingly diverse region

It is only in more recent Census that specific questions have been asked about nationality and citizenship, but we have some ways of measuring change over 25 years.

Census 1996: 15% of the population of the Western Region was actually born outside of Ireland. But 92% of this group were born in Great Britain, Northern Ireland or the USA - a legacy of historical emigration patterns and a reflection of the geographical location of some parts of the region. In terms of the population as a whole, the number of people born outside of the State in countries other than these hovered at only around 1%, both in the Western Region and in the State as whole.

Census 2022: A changed Ireland and a changed region. While the proportion of people born outside the State has risen – from 15% to 19% at regional level and from 12% to 20% at State level – it is the make up of the population as a whole that is really interesting. For this we look to the Citizenship question in the 2022 Census.

- 16% of the population of the Western Region are now citizens of another country or have joint citizenship between Ireland and another country.
- 72% of this group of 140, 903 people are citizens of countries other than Great Britain and Northern Ireland or the USA, a significant change from 1996 and indicative a significantly more diverse population. This is a very diverse group but the top 10 citizenship groups in order of share of population are: UK, Poland, Ireland-USA, Ireland-UK, India, Brazil, Lithuania, Ireland-Australia, USA, Ireland-Poland.
- Clare and Galway are the counties with the most diverse population base in the region – in both cases the highest proportion of non-Irish citizens are Polish ((1.96% and 2.02% respectively) and they also have marginally higher proportions of citizens from countries like India, Latvia, Lithuania and Brazil than most of the other Western counties.

Source: WDC analysis of CSO data (Census 1996 and Census 2022)

Housing Stock, Housing Completions and Planning Permissions

Western Region Housing Stock



Source: WDC analysis of CSO data (Census 1996 and Census 2022)

Comparing figures for Census 2002 and 2022, the housing stock in the Western Region grew by 46% overall in that 20-year period, very close to the average for the State overall of 45%. There is no major variation in the growth figures, but Leitrim had the highest rate of growth at 56% and Clare and Mayo the lowest (both at 39%).

However, Western Region counties combined had just under 33% of the number of house completions in 2023 as they did in 1999. It is also noteworthy that this compares to a figure for the State as a whole of 70.29%. Perhaps a more sobering statistic from the perspective of regional balance is the decline in the national share of house completions from 1999 to 2023. Western Region counties combined had 22% of new house completions in the State in 1999. In 2023, they had only 11% of total new house completions, significantly less than might be expected with a population share of 17.2% of population (Census 2022).

Only 3,444 planning permissions for new houses or apartments were granted in the Western Region in total in 2023, compared to 17,494 in 1999, a decline of just over 80%. In 1996, the Western Region counties accounted for 23% of planning permissions granted nationally. In 2023, the Western Region counties accounted for only just over 8% of planning permissions granted. These figures are a crude and imprecise measure of ultimate housing completion and availability. But especially in the context of housing shortages throughout the country, the (comparatively) low rates suggest that imbalances in terms of regional population growth are likely to continue into the future.

Sources: CSO F2021: Total Housing Stock by Census Year; Department of the Environment Housing Statistics Bulletin, 2000; CSO New Dwellings Completion 2023, released January 2024.

A More Connected Region, But with Significant Gaps

Road

Road transport remains the dominant mode in the Western Region, driven by its rural nature and high dependence on private cars. There have been some positive developments since 1999, such as the construction of key motorways like the M4/M6, connecting Galway to Dublin, and the M17/M18, linking Shannon in Co. Clare to Tuam in Co. Galway. These routes have significantly improved regional connectivity. The Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan has also enhanced public transport in rural areas.

However, underinvestment in road infrastructure remains a major barrier to regional growth. The transport infrastructure of the North-West Regional Assembly Region, which includes all Western Region counties except Clare, ranks 218th out of 234 NUTS 2 Regions in the European Commission's Regional Competitiveness Index (2022), underscoring the need for more investment.

Rail

All counties in the Western Region, except Donegal, have rail access, but services are predominantly focused on routes to Dublin. Issues with capacity, journey times, and scheduling persist, particularly on the Sligo-Dublin line. The reopening of part of the Western Railway Corridor to Athenry in 2010 has improved access, but further expansion is needed to enhance regional connectivity.

Air

Air access remains critical for tourism, business, and connectivity in the Western Region. Key changes since 1999 include:

- **Ireland West Airport Knock:** Passenger numbers increased from 207,994 in 1999 to 818,000 in 2023, with new services such as a daily route to London Heathrow being particularly significant.
- **Shannon Airport:** Passenger numbers declined from 2,190,522 in 1999 to 1,958,000 in 2023¹¹.
- **Galway and Sligo Airports:** Both closed to commercial flights.
- **Dublin Airport:** Increased its dominance, handling 85% of passengers in 2023, up from 76% in 1999.

Source: Aer Rianta data on passenger movements (1999); CSO Aviation Statistics 2023 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-as/aviationstatisticsquarter4andyear2023/>



11 The ending of the mandatory Shannon stopover in 2008 – which had required transatlantic carriers to land a proportion of US flights at Shannon – accounts for much of the relative decline of Shannon over this time period. However, it has experienced significant growth in recent years, including a 29% increase in passenger numbers from 2022 to 2023, when it had its highest passenger numbers since 2009.

Energy

The Western Region remains constrained by its underdeveloped electricity grid, limiting its ability to lead Ireland's transition to renewable energy, despite its strong potential for wind generation. Strengthening the electricity infrastructure is essential to support the region's energy ambitions.

Digital Connectivity

High-quality broadband connectivity is critical for economic and social development in the predominantly rural Western Region. While provision was weak in 1999, significant progress has been made under the National Broadband Plan. By 2022, 88.3% of households in the region had internet access, slightly below the state average of 91.3%. Leitrim, Mayo, and Roscommon have the lowest connectivity, but all exceed 86%.

In addition to household access, 118 hubs across the Western Region are now part of the WDC-supported Connected Hubs Network (as of September 2024), offering high-quality connectivity and supporting remote working and collaboration.



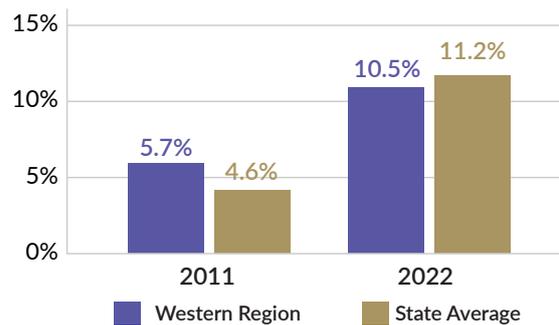
By 2022,
88.3%
of households in the region had internet access, slightly below the state average of 91.3%.

Increased Patterns of Working from Home in the Region

Over the past decade, there has been a significant rise in the number of people in the Western Region working primarily from home. In 2011, 5.7% of the region's workforce mostly worked from home, higher than the state average of 4.6%, partly due to the high number of farmers in the area. By 2022, this figure had nearly doubled to 10.5%, although it is now slightly below the state average of 11.2%.

The WDC's Remote Work Surveys highlight how increased opportunities for remote work—whether fully from home or through local Connected Hubs—are transforming the region. This shift is expanding the choices for people to live, work, and build fulfilling professional lives across the Western Region.

Fig 3.1: Growth in Working from Home (2011 vs. 2022)



Source: WDC analysis of CSO data (Census 2011 and Census 2022)

3.2 Impact of Connected Hubs

The development of Connected Hubs has played a key role in promoting Ireland's Western Region. These Connected Hubs provide services and business development supports for startups, entrepreneurs, remote workers and corporates to work in the region, reducing the need to commute or migrate. Thus, the hubs enable individuals and families to remain connected to their social networks, contributing to economic development and retaining the population in the West. With more people - including a more diverse community - settling in rural areas especially, there is a renewed demand for local services, schools, and social events, which fosters stronger community engagement.

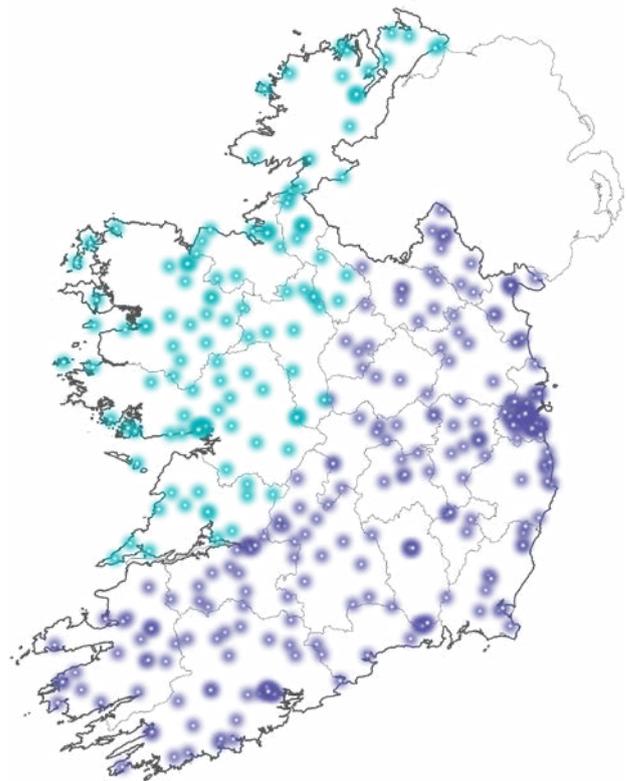
In January 2024, the WDC undertook a survey of over 530 hub users to examine the impact of the Connected Hubs. The survey indicated that users spend 40% of their working week in these hubs, with the users predominately in the professional, technical, scientific, and ICT sectors. Key highlights from the survey include:

- **Rural Relocation:** 32% of respondents relocated since the pandemic, with nearly 80% moving to a different county or region, indicating a trend towards rural living facilitated by remote work.
- **Environmental Impact:** Hub users save an average of one hour per day on commuting, reducing carbon emissions by an estimated 5,000 metric tons annually, equivalent to removing 1,100 cars from the road. Applying the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform's Shadow Price of Carbon means that the carbon emissions avoided are worth over €1.9 million annually to Irish society. Additionally, 67% reported reduced energy consumption on days they worked from a hub.
- **Economic and Social Benefits:** Reduced commuting time enhances work-life balance, increases local economic engagement, and supports community activities. Over 25% of users value social interaction and entrepreneurial networks available at hubs.

The Connected Hubs initiative has supported remote working initiatives by establishing a network of co-working spaces across the Western Region of Ireland. Thus, the Connected Hubs Network is crucial in decentralising the workforce, promoting rural economic revitalisation, and supporting environmental sustainability by reducing commuting and energy use. As the

Connected Hubs initiative builds on work undertaken previously under the LookWest campaign, the impact of the WDC over the past 25 years is discernible. This network provided the necessary infrastructure for remote working, making the region more attractive to remote workers and businesses.

Fig 3.2: Map of Connected Hubs



364

live hub profiles nationwide on the Connected Hubs platform as of 18th September 2024

118

Number of Connected Hubs in Western Region (33% of national number)

3.3 Impact on Society and Community

As noted previously, 140 community development and social enterprises have received funding from the Western Development Commission over the last 25 years.

Table 3.1 provides an overview of the service users associated with companies supported by the WDC. According to the data, on average, each WDC-supported organisation currently supports 12,406 service users. However, it is important to note that this figure includes Ireland West Airport Knock. Excluding airport users provides an average number of service users of 1,087, with a median number of 250. This suggests close to 15,000 individuals have benefitted directly from services provided by community enterprises that were supported by the WDC. These organisations provide a range of services and include sports clubs, development associations, heritage societies, community councils and centres, and arts groups, amongst others. The range of organisations supported helps achieve a range of different benefits, including:

- health benefits associated with sport through a reduction in the prevalence of certain diseases¹²
- mental health, personal and social well-being benefits through participation in community centre activities¹³
- activating the benefits of arts and culture including promotion of civic pride and sense of local and national identity, improved social cohesion and enhanced quality of life.¹⁴

Table 3.1: Service Users of WDC-Supported Organisations

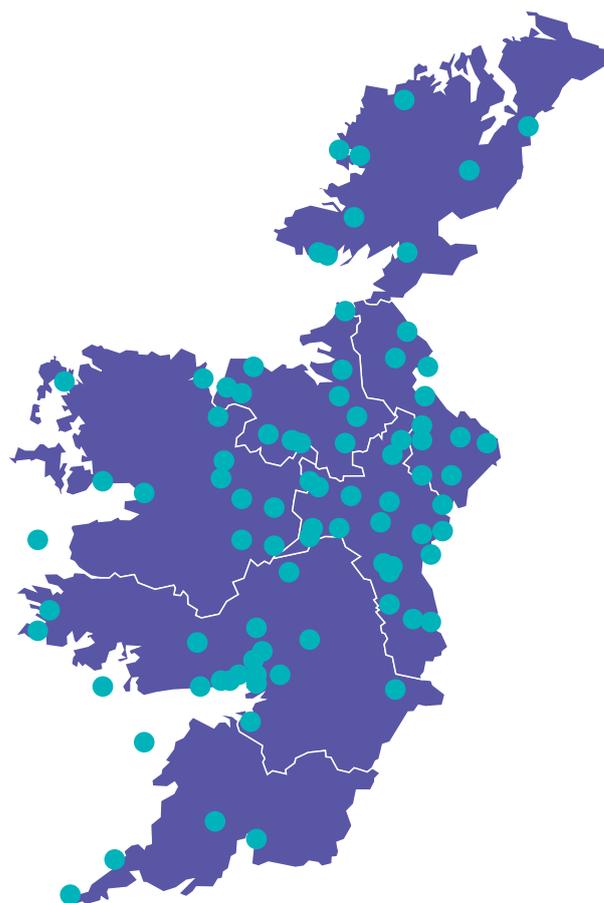
	1999 – 2023
Average Service Users per WDC-supported organisations	12,406
Average Service Users per WDC-supported organisations, excluding Ireland West Airport Knock	1,087
Median Service Users per WDC-supported organisations	250

Source: Indecon Analysis of WDC data

Note: This calculation excludes the number of service users in the Connaught Airport Development Company Limited

It is also important to consider the regional spread of the social and community organisations supported by the WDC in the Western Region. Modelling undertaken by Indecon indicates that over 1 in 3 people (36%) living in the Western Region live within 5 kilometres of a social enterprise or community organisation supported by the WDC. As seen below, there is a significant geographic spread in the number of community organisations and social enterprises supported by the WDC. Over 70% of those living in Sligo, Leitrim and Roscommon live within 5 kilometres of a social enterprise or community organisation that the WDC supported. Additional enterprises and organisations were supported but are no longer in existence.

Fig 3.3: Geographic Spread of Social Enterprises and Community Organisations Supported by the WDC



Source: Indecon analysis based on data provided by WDC

12 <https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/media/document/2021-09/vos-report-final-19-07-21.pdf>

13 Jones M, Kimberlee R, Deave T, Evans S. The role of community centre-based arts, leisure and social activities in promoting adult well-being and healthy lifestyles. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2013 May 10;10(5):1948-62. doi: 10.3390/ijerph10051948. PMID: 23665850; PMCID: PMC3709358.

14 https://www.artscouncil.ie/uploadedFiles/Arts_Council_-_Economic_Impact_-_Final_Report.pdf

Volunteering

To analyse the socio-economic impact of the WDC, it is essential to recognise the value of volunteering, which helps highlight the social benefits these activities provide. Table 3.2 details volunteering activities within companies supported by the WDC. Through consultation with social enterprises and organisations supported by the WDC, Indecon developed an estimate of the average number of volunteers per organisation. Based on these responses, Indecon has estimated the total number of volunteers and the overall volunteer hours across all WDC-supported social enterprises and community organisations. Using these estimates, in conjunction with estimates of the time value for staff (minimum and median hourly wage), Indecon has calculated the economic value of volunteering within these companies to between €1.3 million and €3.1 million, respectively.

Table 3.2: Value of Volunteering

Estimated Total Number of Volunteers	1,074
Estimated Number of Volunteer Hours per Year	103,056
Value of Volunteering (Minimum Wage)	€1,308,811
Value of Volunteering (Median Hourly Wage)	€3,073,130

Source: Indecon Analysis of WDC and CSO data



15 Based on the median number of hours volunteered in UK research (8 hours per month). NVCO, Time Well Spent: A national survey on the volunteer experience. Véronique Jochum, John Davies, Joy Dobbs, Lisa Hornung [https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/time-well-spent-national-survey-volunteer-experience/volunteer-participation/#:~:text=Levels%20of%20participation,-Of%20those%20surveyed&text=The%20average%20\(median\)%20hours%20of,per%20month%20is%20eight%20hours](https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/time-well-spent-national-survey-volunteer-experience/volunteer-participation/#:~:text=Levels%20of%20participation,-Of%20those%20surveyed&text=The%20average%20(median)%20hours%20of,per%20month%20is%20eight%20hours)

3.4 Impact of Initiatives Supported by the WDC

Impact of Initiatives Supported by the WDC

One area that the WDC (through the WIF) have had a significant impact over the last 25 years is in the development of the MedTech/Life Sciences cluster in the Western Region. An overview of the impact is outlined in the case study below.

Case Study: Role of WDC in the Evolution of the MedTech/Life Sciences Cluster in the West

The MedTech and Life Science sector is one which the WDC (through the WIF) has been investing in since the early 2000s. The WDC (through the WIF) has invested over €21 million in the sector, accounting for over one-third of the total amount invested by the fund.

The 38 projects that have received investment from the WDC have gone on to grow and take in outside investment which has further accelerated their development. The wider MedTech sector in Ireland has grown from approximately 50 companies in the early 1990s to approximately 450, with 60% of these companies indigenous to Ireland. Employment in the medical device manufacturing sector has almost doubled since 2000, far outstripping the growth in employment across all sectors over that time.

The role played by the WDC (through the WIF) in helping the sector grow should not be understated with an estimated 1,083 employed in companies in the sector who received funding. Stakeholder views highlighted the specific feature of the fund as it is viewed primarily as seed or early investing seed fund. Stakeholders with detailed knowledge of the sector also noted that medical device startups differ significantly from startups in the ICT, media, food and agri business in that it requires much higher seed type financing with typical funding needs at least €1.5 million to develop proof of principle, initial prototypes and to attract key medical opinion leaders to its scientific boards. These stakeholders also noted that without the WDC fund many startups would find it extremely difficult to attract others such as Enterprise Ireland or angel investors to co-invest. It is important to consider the potential for the investment in the MedTech sector to act as a blueprint for how to grow a sector and cluster of firms in other industries, such as FinTech, Cleantech, AI, Big Data and Analytics and Advanced Manufacturing and Robotics which have been identified by the WDC as important strategic areas.

3.5 Role of the WDC in Regional Promotion

An important aspect of the remit of the WDC is to promote the Western Region and highlight its strengths to individuals and companies to set up or relocate in the region. The WDC has supported a number of initiatives over the last 25 years which have targeted both national and internationally-based companies and individuals. Below is a case study on the LookWest programme and other initiatives that have promoted and supported the growth of the region through projects, conferences and websites.

Case Study: The Look West Campaign, Conferences and Digital Promotion

The LookWest programme was launched in 2004, with support from the WDC, to promote the Western Region of Ireland as an attractive location for individuals to live, work, and invest and to highlight the high quality of life and economic opportunities available in the West. By attracting businesses and entrepreneurs to the region, the campaign aimed to stimulate economic growth, enhance population growth, create jobs, and support local communities. For maximum effect, the campaign focused on sectors where the Western Region had competitive advantages, such as renewable energy, creative industries, tourism, and technology.

The LookWest campaign hosted conferences and events highlighting the advantages of living, working, and investing in the Western Region. Indeed, the conferences discussed the success of businesses and individuals who had relocated to or invested in the Western Region, illustrating the potential benefits. They also offered an opportunity for networking and collaborative partnerships. In addition, several workshops and panel discussions on unique aspects of the Western Region, including digital transformation, rural development, renewable energy, and creative industries, were hosted.

The WDC oversaw the marketing and promotional activities associated with LookWest, including the development of the www.lookwest.ie website and by creating and disseminating content that highlights the advantages of living and working in the Western Region, such as lower living costs, a vibrant cultural scene, beautiful landscapes, and a growing business environment. The WDC worked closely with eight local authorities to compile the lookwest.ie website. The local authorities provided links to town websites, sometimes involving creating entirely new sites. An increasingly popular section on LookWest was jobs, which showcased unique job opportunities in the Western Region. Akin to the conferences, several case studies were featured on the website, which told the unique stories of people living, working, and doing business in the West. In 2013, the LookWest website was shortlisted for the Social Media Awards 2013 in 'Best Use of Social Media by a State Body' and was a 'Gold Finalist' in the Digital Media Awards 'Government to Consumer Innovation' category in March 2013. LookWest was also awarded a Golden Spider.

As part of its role, the WDC conducted research to understand better the factors influencing people's decisions to move to or invest in the Western Region. This research provided valuable insights into the motivations and barriers for potential relocators and informed the campaign's messaging and strategy. Based on the findings from its study, the WDC advocated for policies and initiatives that would support regional development and make the Western Region more attractive to potential newcomers and investors. Although this programme is no longer active, the objectives and goals it set out to achieve continue through the WDC's ongoing regional development effort and set the groundwork for promoting the Western lifestyle and remote working from the region.

Moving West

This TV series has been commissioned for a third year running on TG4. The series is produced by Dundara Television & Media in association with the Western Development Commission. The WDC, through its work and support for the series, aims to shine a light on all the West of Ireland has to offer in terms of lifestyle, outdoor amenities, food culture and quality of life. Minister for Rural and Community Development, Heather Humphreys TD said of the series:

“The Government’s National rural development policy, Our Rural Future, is all about giving our young people the option to live and work from within their own communities. There are now over 320 remote working hubs on the national Connected Hubs network enabling thousands of people to work from their own locality every day. We are already seeing the positive impact of remote working with the recent Census results showing population growth in every county for the first time – a huge boost for rural counties. Moving West tells the human stories behind these figures. This hugely successful series shows that the tide is turning and instead of our young people having to leave rural Ireland, many are now returning home and availing of job opportunities locally together with a better quality of life.”

More to Life

The WDC continues to support and promote the growing number of careers and lifestyle opportunities in the Western Region. The recent “More to Life” campaign, which includes a free online jobs portal, highlights the WDC’s role in promoting relocation and life in the Western Region. The campaign included a number of promotional videos highlighting the benefits of living in the Western Region.

Source: WDC



Section 4: Enabling Strategic Initiatives in the West of Ireland



The WDC has played a positive role through its various activities in addressing some of the key strategic challenges facing the Western Region. The WDC has also worked on initiatives that present significant opportunities for the region.

Some of these key challenges and opportunities include:

- Broadband and Telecommunications
- Renewable Energy
- Connectivity
- Creative Economy

This section includes a number of case studies which help to demonstrate the role of the WDC in supporting strategic initiatives to address these challenges and avail of potential opportunities.

4.1 Broadband and Telecommunications

The following is a case study of WDC's impact on broadband/telecoms, which demonstrates the impact the WDC can have on enabling strategic development in the region.

Case Study: Broadband & Telecommunications (Policy and Research Insights)

Through a series of publications in the early 2000s and 2010s, the WDC stressed the importance of telecommunications and broadband infrastructure (particularly for the Western Region), including:

- The State of the West, 2001
- Update on Telecommunications in the Western Region, 2002
- Consultation on the Report of the Next Generation Broadband Taskforce Enabling a Connected Society, 2012
- Connecting the West - Next Generation in the Broadband Region, 2012
- Submission to the Consultation on Ireland's proposed Broadband Intervention Strategy 2015
- Submission to Call for Input National Broadband Plan – Mapping Consultation, 2015

The WDC partnered with local authorities, businesses, and community groups to launch the Western Regional Broadband Programme to improve broadband access across the Western Region. The WDC identified areas that lagged in connectivity and worked with telecom providers to ensure these areas were prioritised. The programme included working with local groups to plan and implement broadband projects, thus ensuring that the broadband solutions were tailored to the needs of each area.

The programme identified significant disparities in broadband access between rural and urban areas, with many rural areas in the Western Region under or completely unserved. Even in areas with broadband, the speeds were often far below the national average. To combat these issues, the programme enabled an increase in broadband coverage across the Western Region, particularly in rural areas, and, for some areas, residents received access to broadband for the first time. In areas where broadband was already available, there were upgrades to higher-speed connections. This improvement helped individuals to access faster and more reliable internet services, reducing the digital divide between rural and urban areas.

Source: WDC

Following on from promoting the need for broadband in the region, the WDC have also promoted the benefits of remote working as outlined below.

Case Study: Remote & E-Working

Initial Work

Since the early 2000s, the WDC policy team has been involved in research and promotion of remote and e-working, with teleworking available for staff since the establishment of the WDC. Indeed, the WDC has produced various reports on remote work and regional and rural development potential. The WDC initiated a collaboration with the University of Galway in 2019 on the potential for Remote Work (the Government published a report on Remote Work as part of Labour Activation measures). With the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic, the WDC and the University decided to conduct a National Survey, which was very successful; four annual Surveys followed. The WDC is also on the Interdepartmental Group on Remote Work. The WDC also led the Digiwest project with various local authorities which set up four working hubs which acted as a precursor and proof of concept for Connected Hubs.

Connected Hubs

As the pandemic forced widespread lockdowns and remote work became necessary, it became apparent that traditional home-working environments could be improved to better meet professional needs. There was a growing demand for co-working spaces and remote working hubs where people could access desks, meeting rooms, and other office facilities outside their homes. To address this, the Irish Government launched an initiative to create a National Hub Network to provide these services nationwide. To implement this vision, the WDC utilised spatial software to develop the world's first-ever National Hub Network. This enabled the WDC to create connectedhubs.ie, a comprehensive online platform for booking desks and meeting rooms nationwide. This innovative solution allowed the WDC to manage data about existing and proposed new hubs.

"What we have created is a worldwide exemplar for facilitating remote working and early-stage entrepreneurs."

The project's implementation provided several key benefits, including delivering 366 live hubs with over 5,000 desks available for booking on the website. Additionally, using spatial software allowed the WDC to support the introduction of energy efficiency upgrades and promote sustainability.

The WDC presented a policy briefing on remote working and relocation based on the 2023 National Remote Working Survey by the WDC and the University of Galway. It highlights that since the COVID-19 pandemic, over 14% of respondents have relocated, mostly from urban to rural areas, with a significant number moving out of Dublin, likely enabled by the enhancement of co-working hubs. Cork, Galway, Kildare, Mayo, and Donegal are the most popular relocation destinations. Further, the survey found that those typically earning higher incomes, between €70,000 and €120,000, were more likely to relocate to these areas.

Digital First Day and National Hub Summit

In November 2022, Connected Hubs supported the Digital First Day. Through this initiative, 53 hubs hosted events, seminars, meetups, and workshops demonstrating how to use digital tools to attract investment and remote workers to their local areas. The initiative successfully attracted over 1,250 attendees. Additionally, Connected Hubs hosted an in-person conference involving 250 delegates, including businesses, hub managers, and policymakers. It included panel discussions and focus groups to provide feedback for developing the National Hub Strategy.

myRWH Interactive Map

In September 2022, the Connected Hubs dataset was used as an award-winning online tool designed to enhance the location and use of remote working hubs. The interactive map uses artificial intelligence to help users identify the most suitable hub close to their home, thereby reducing the need to travel. In 2022, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) also utilised the Connected Hubs dataset to map the distance of residential dwellings from hubs. The results indicated that 82% of dwellings are within 10 kilometres of their nearest hub.

Source: WDC

4.2 Renewable Energy

Below is a case study of how the WDC has supported renewable energy adoption in the Western region. As with other areas, the WDC supports strategic initiatives by inputting to policy development, coordinating regional funding opportunities and providing direct investment support through the WIF. The WDC also undertook valuable policy work which examined the eligibility criteria for connections to the gas network. This work contributed to an increased number of gas connections in the region than was originally envisaged.

Case Study: Supporting the Renewable Energy Economy

Since 2004, the WDC has focused on renewable energy, supporting communities and enterprises in energy generation, fuel supply, and energy services. Over the past 20 years, the WDC (in collaboration with other stakeholders) has produced more than 70 publications on wind-farm energy, offshore wind, renewable energy generation, microgeneration, and net-zero strategies. The WDC's work focuses on developing guidelines, identifying opportunities and challenges in energy infrastructure, and promoting sustainable energy across domestic and non-domestic markets in the Western Region. Their support for offshore wind development and sustainable energy practices is crucial to Ireland's goal of reaching net-zero emissions by 2050, with a focus on inclusive development along the Atlantic Coast.

Wind Farm Energy Generation

The WDC, in collaboration with the Renewable Energy Partnership (REP), published a 2004 report that highlighted the potential for local investment in wind farms, suggesting a shift from the AER bidding system to a feed-in tariff to enhance accessibility. They also advocated for the establishment of a Renewable Energy Advisory Group (REAG) to support communities in navigating ownership and financing options. Thus, wind farms should be promoted as an accessible renewable energy generation method.

In 2020, the WDC supported a community-based wind farm pilot project in Killala, Co. Mayo. This project used a co-investment model that allowed community members to invest. The goal was to create a replicable model for community investment in renewable energy, enabling other regions to adopt similar initiatives. Through this project, the WDC has significantly contributed to the Western Region's energy economy by fostering community-led renewable energy development and demonstrating the success of co-investment wind farms.

Offshore-Wind Generation

In 2022, a study on off-shore wind generation was commissioned by the Mid-West, North-West and West Regional Enterprise Offices and funded by County and City Councils in the Western Region and the WDC. In this report, the WDC and partners identified that the Atlantic region has significant natural resources, including nearly 30 GW of offshore floating wind power that could be harnessed by 2050.

Renewable Generation

In 2019, the WDC invested in Arigna Fuels, a family business in the West, to support its transition from carbon-based products to renewable biomass fuels. The WDC's investment ensures the company's continued success in the renewable energy sector. By supporting this transition, the WDC encourages innovation and sustainable practices within the energy sector and provides a case study of a successful transition to clean energy.

In 2021, WDC supported the Mayo, Sligo, and Leitrim Education and Training Board (MSLETB) in securing over €500k in funding from SOLAS to develop the Immersive Technology Skills "ImTech Skills" project. This initiative uses Virtual Reality tools to upskill workers in the renewable wind energy sector, initially targeting wind turbine engineers. Thus, the WDC initiative aims to create new training opportunities and position the West of Ireland as a leader in renewable technologies.

Microgeneration Support

In 2021, the WDC responded to the Public Consultation on the Microgeneration Support Scheme (MSS) in Ireland, offering strategic guidance to the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications. The WDC highlighted the importance of ensuring that rural dwellers can participate in the low-carbon transition without imposing additional costs on those who do not participate. The WDC raised concerns about the complexity of the proposed tariff structures and called for clearer guidance to avoid deterring participation. Additionally, the WDC expressed concern about the affordability of retrofitting homes, noting that this could limit participation. Their guidance ensures the Support Scheme is accessible, focusing on enhancing participation and minimising barriers.

Regional Approaches to Stimulating Local Renewable Energy Solutions (RASLRES) Project

The Regional Approaches to Stimulating Local Renewable Energy Solutions (RASLRES) project, led by the WDC, promoted local renewable energy development in Western Ireland, focusing on biomass energy. The project mainly focused on ensuring biomass energy generation capacity and stimulating demand. The project had a significant economic impact, creating 29 jobs and 10 new businesses. The project predominately impacted local employment in forestry management, biomass fuel supply, and infrastructure development. It also supported professional services in renewable energy.

Regarding building capacity for biomass energy generation, the WDC organised workshops, seminars, and training sessions for local workers to ensure they have the skills for biomass energy projects to refine local expertise in the renewable energy sector. The WDC demonstrated the viability of biomass energy and influenced policies to support renewable energy solutions by coordinating local stakeholders and developing pilot projects. Overall, RASLRES promoted the development of an indigenous, sustainable, renewable energy resource in the Western Region.

Source: WDC



4.3 Connectivity

Air Connectivity

Air connectivity is an important strategic issue for the Western Region. The WDC (through the WIF) invested in Ireland West Airport Knock three times in the mid-2000s. The WDC also made a number of submissions to the Department of Transport advocating for Ireland West Airport Knock to be recognised as the international airport to serve the Western Region. The case study is an example of how the WDC has supported Ireland West Airport to facilitate regional development and increase connectivity for residents of the Western Region.

Case Study: Ireland West Airport Knock

International air access is essential for Ireland's economy and connecting remote regions such as the Western Region. The Republic of Ireland has two airports in the Western Region, Shannon and Ireland West Airport Knock, which offer a range of international flights. Focusing on the Ireland West Airport Knock, the WDC (through the WIF) made three investments in Ireland West Airport Knock in 2003, 2005 and 2006. Ireland West Airport Knock is the fourth largest in the Republic of Ireland, behind Dublin, Shannon and Cork airports. As shown in the following figure, passenger numbers have grown significantly, with passenger numbers in 2023 311% higher than in 2003, the first year of WIF investment. While the pandemic had impacted passenger numbers substantially, the number of passengers has steadily returned to pre-COVID levels in recent years.

Fig 4.1: Passenger Numbers Ireland West Airport Knock (2000-2023)



Ireland West Airport Knock provides essential infrastructure for the economic development of the Western Region by supporting local businesses, tourism, and hospitality industries. As the airport is a significant employer in the area, it indirectly supports many other jobs in related sectors such as tourism, transportation, and retail. The WDC has also made various policy submissions to the Department of Transport advocating for the airport to be recognised as the international airport for the Western Region.

Focusing on residents in the Western Region, Ireland West Airport Knock provides vital connectivity for residents and businesses in the west of Ireland to the rest of the country, Europe, and internationally. It helps reduce travel times significantly compared to Dublin, particularly for people in the more remote parts of Connacht and surrounding areas. The airport acts as a gateway to the Western Region for tourism and enterprise and provides transport facilities for residents.

4.4 Creative Economy

The WDC initiated the Western Region's understanding and support of its nascent creative economy which encompasses the creative industries and the cultural sectors. In 2009, WDC policy and development staff engaged with hundreds of regional businesses to scope the sector and define priority growth actions under the innovative Creative West programme. This identified a unique western creative economy which was valued at approximately €500 million.

Creative West became an initiative to promote the creative economy in Western Ireland, focusing on arts, design, media, and cultural enterprises to drive economic growth, innovation, and artistic development. The WDC supports this initiative by offering mentoring programs, networking events, and collaborative projects. The WDC also partners with University of Galway to research and assess the creative sector's economic impact. The 2010 Economic Impact Assessment indicated there was potential for over 10,000 new jobs by 2020 if export activities were enhanced. It also revealed that 66% of creative businesses were not involved in the global market, with less than 5% of revenue from exports, prompting a WDC-led development initiative supported by EU funding.

The WDC's activities in the creative industries are focused on developing the creative sector in the Western Region, including arts, design, media, film, and technology-driven enterprises. The WDC established the Creative Industries Micro-Loan Fund and the Western Region Audio-visual Producer's (WRAP) Fund to support these industries. The Micro-Loan Fund was designed to help entrepreneurs or small businesses that may not have had access to traditional forms of financing, providing financial assistance for start-ups and expansions.

The WRAP Fund, on the other hand, is aimed at fostering the growth and development of the audio-visual and creative industries in the Western Region. It provides comprehensive support for developing film, television, and other media projects, including funding, resources, and networking opportunities. WRAP productions focus on supporting the production phase of audio-visual projects, offering financial assistance and resources to help bring creative projects from development through to production. Micro-loans, WRAP development, and WRAP productions account for 6.4% (0.4%), 4.9% (0.2%), and 5.2% (2.9%) of projects (the total amount dispersed) of overall WIF funding, respectively. The 2017 Douglas Hyde Conference was organised by Roscommon County Council in collaboration with the WDC, focusing on the Creative Sector. The conference has been restructured to serve as a platform for research into the creative industries, aiming to influence policy and programme development at local, regional, and national levels. Furthermore, a peer-to-peer mentoring programme involving 26 enterprises designed to enhance skills and foster collaboration across regions was held. In addition, the Creative Exchanges initiative acts as an information-sharing and networking medium, bringing together students and businesses and enhancing creative talents.





Below is a case study of the creative economy in the Western Region, in which the WDC and, subsequently, the WIF play an active role in supporting.

Case Study: Supporting the Creative Economy

Since the late 2000s, the WDC has enabled the growth of the creative economy in the Western Region of Ireland. This commitment was formalised with the publication of the Creative West report in 2009, which served as a strategic blueprint for the sector's development. The WDC recognised the region's unique creative assets and potential to attract innovators, entrepreneurs, and visitors. In their 2022 White paper submission, the WDC's policy unit stated that, with appropriate strategic, sustained, targeted investment in the creative economy, at least 1,000 self-sustaining jobs would be created in the region in the coming years. The following examples illustrate the actions taken by the WDC and the WIF to foster the growth and development of this sector.

WRAP (Western Region Audio-visual Production) Fund

The WRAP Fund was set up to help build the region's audio-visual sector. It is a joint initiative between the Galway Film Centre and WDC with local authorities in Clare, Donegal, Galway City, Galway County, Mayo, Roscommon, Sligo, and Údarás na Gaeltachta. This fund aims to stimulate economic growth by fostering the development of the region's film, television, and digital media production. The fund seeks to attract and retain talent, enhance the region's cultural offerings, and boost local employment by providing financial assistance to projects that demonstrate potential for high-quality output and regional engagement.

The WRAP Fund has supported acclaimed film and drama series, including 32 projects since 2018. Since its inception, the projects developed by the WRAP Fund have received 86 award nominations and 12 award wins. In terms of employment, over 600 local crew positions and 150 local trainees have been employed, over 1,500 regional extras have been employed, and over 75 residents have been cast in the projects.

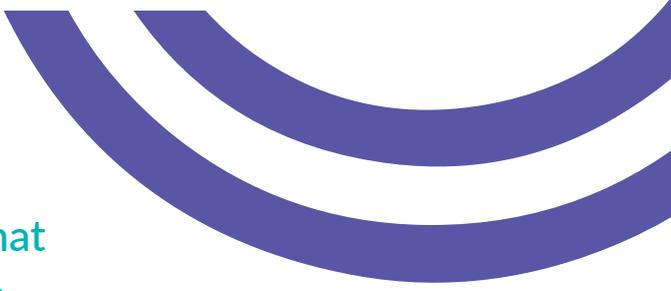
The Creative Momentum Project

The Creative Momentum project, led by the WDC and co-funded by the Northern Periphery & Arctic Programme, was a three-year initiative (May 2015-May 2018) to support the creative industries sector. Through this project, the WDC provided support and visibility to innovative enterprises by using the MyCreativeEdge.eu platform, which showcased 242 creative profiles and organised 41 Creative Exchange networking events. Further, an initiative under the project, Creative Steps workshops, paired students with enterprises for collaborative innovation and enhanced knowledge exchange. By supporting 22 enterprises at international trade fairs, the WDC enabled these businesses to engage with global markets.

Source: WDC

Conclusions





Indecon's independent research suggests that the Western Development Commission has had a significant economic and social impact on the Western Region since its inception.

The empirical evidence examined show that over the last 25 years from 1999 to 2023, companies financially supported by the WDC have:

Generated over €3.35 billion in direct revenues, including over €2.4 billion in exports

Generated over €639 million in Research and Development expenditures

Made over €404 million in exchequer tax contributions

When wider (indirect and induced) impacts are included the economy-wide output impact of the WDC is estimated to be almost €4.8 billion.

The employment supported through investments and activities undertaken by the WDC is outlined below:

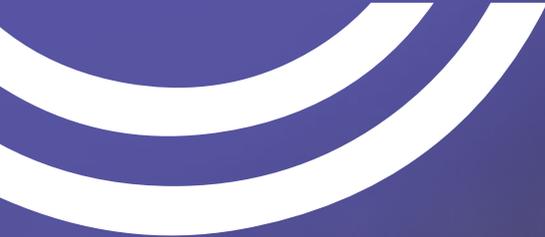
In 2023 companies and organisations supported by the WDC directly supported almost 3,851 FTEs directly, with economy-wide employment of almost 7,292 supported through indirect and induced effects.

In addition to these economic benefits, there are also a number of wider societal benefits that are supported by the WDC. These were outlined previously and include supporting regional development, connectivity, contributing to the creative economy, fostering an enterprise ecosystem and providing supports to social enterprises and community groups. The WDC has also had a significant impact on the development of the MedTech sector in the region. The WDC has also contributed significantly to regional development through its central role in the development of Connected Hubs.

However, despite these positive impacts and significant progress across many measures, the Western Region continues to lag behind other regions in the country. Many of the statistics for the region highlighted within this Report reveal significant – and in some cases increasing gaps – over 25 years in key areas of relevance to the economic and social health of the region such as population growth and demographic balance, infrastructure and connectivity, access to high-value employment opportunities and average incomes. The reasons for this are manifold but the evidence highlights the need for increased and targeted supports for the region to reduce these disparities, with the Western Development Commission playing a valuable role across multiple areas.

It will continue to advocate for the region through its policy work and otherwise and as this Report has demonstrated, to carry out the kind of innovative economic and social development work needed to meet the challenges and opportunities of the Western Region in the next quarter century.

Annex



Annex 1: Additional Analysis

The tables below identify the number of investments supported by the WIF and the amount dispersed, broken down by sector.

Annex 1.1: Breakdown of the Number of WIF Investments Supported by Sub-Fund, 2001-2023

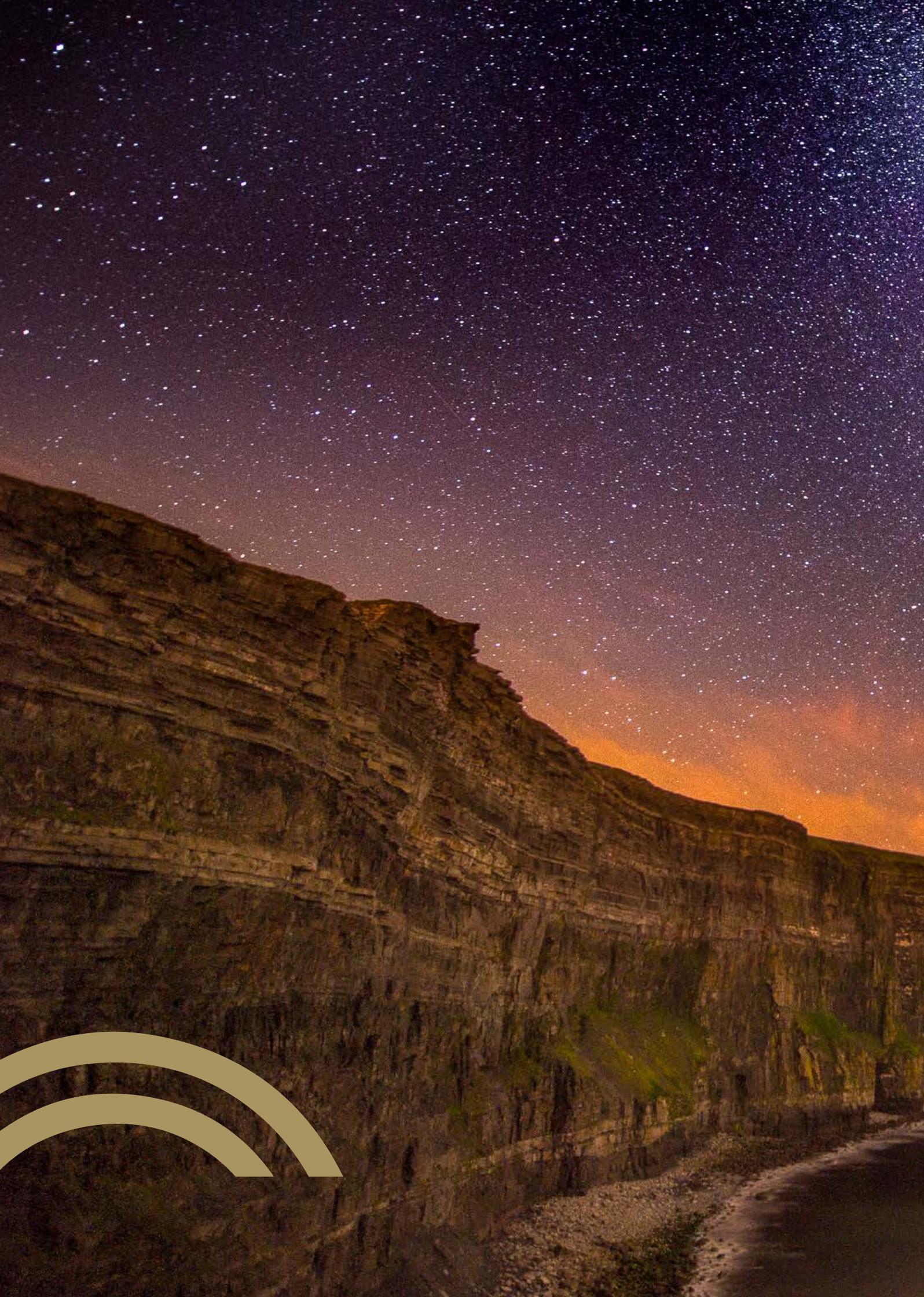
	Number of Projects	Percentage of Projects
Business Investment Fund	139	40.3%
- Equity	116	33.6%
- Term Loan	23	6.7%
Community Investment	140	40.6%
- Bridging Facility	76	22.0%
- Term Loan	64	18.6%
Creative Industries	57	16.5%
- Micro-Loan	22	6.4%
- WRAP Development	17	4.9%
- WRAP Production	18	5.2%
Strategic Investment Fund	9	2.6%
Total	345	100%

Source: WDC data

Annex 1.2: Breakdown by Sub-Fund of Amount Disbursed

	Amount Disbursed (€m)	Percentage of Total Disbursed
Business Investment Fund	139	40.3%
- Equity	116	33.6%
- Term Loan	23	6.7%
Community Investment	140	40.6%
- Bridging Facility	76	22.0%
- Term Loan	64	18.6%
Creative Industries	57	16.5%
- Micro-Loan	22	6.4%
- WRAP Development	17	4.9%
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