

C.I.F. Southern Construct 2019

Chairman, dignitaries, delegates and members it's great to see you here and it's really important that this gathering is taking place today.

I'll tell you why.

Cork has huge potential – it has a great story to tell – it's a great place to live and to work – and it has a vital role in Project Ireland 2040.

You know that – I know that – but don't take it for granted that everyone else in the country appreciates it and is supportive.

If we look at government statements on Project Ireland 2040 this is the aspiration and I quote;

“Project Ireland 2040 is the government's long-term overarching strategy to make Ireland a better country for all of us. Project Ireland 2040 is about doing things differently.”

A better country for all of us – That's a great statement and aspiration but it won't just happen because it's written in a document. It has to be made happen. It's no different to saying Kerry will beat Dublin in the replay and expect it to just happen. Kerry has to show-up with an unwavering determination – they will have to be well prepared – they will have to be focussed and accurate – they will have to stay the course against the best opposition in the country.

It's exactly the same for regional development. So I say to you – don't take it for granted, MAKE Project Ireland 2040 happen for Cork.

Those of us who have worked in the UK saw at first hand the huge economic disparity in England between the south-east and the rest of the country. In a short space of time we have seen an even greater economic disparity develop in this country. We must find a better balance between the Regions and the Greater Dublin Area or we will face huge social challenges.

That's at the core of Project Ireland 2040 – a sustainable economic region from Waterford to Galway and onto Sligo and the North-west – with it's centre of gravity on the Cork-Limerick axis.

Quoting again from Project Ireland 2040;

“Not every route has to look east and so accessibility and connectivity between places like Cork and Limerick, to give one example, and through the Atlantic Economic Corridor to Galway as well as access to the North-West is essential.”

As the 2nd largest city, any credible Government initiative to generate growth and opportunity outside Dublin must have Cork at its centre.

Indeed, the august body that is the Irish Academy of Engineering identified Cork as central in developing an economic corridor including Waterford, Limerick, Galway and Sligo to counter-balance Dublin's economic gravity.

The National Planning Framework, or Project Ireland 2040, envisages these cities and regions growing at twice the rate of Dublin.

This is a hugely ambitious undertaking; a genuine societal effort. Diverting demographic flows, economic migration and investment from the capital towards other cities over 20 years is a huge challenge to our political system.

Infrastructure is key to achieving this goal.

Infrastructure.

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The Construction Industry is fundamentally a service industry that provides the necessary infrastructure for society. We build the roads, the hospitals, the houses, the railway lines but we are at the end of a lengthy process that relies on others to design, plan and procure the projects. We rely on the private and public sector to function efficiently so that we can productively provide society with the necessary infrastructure. Ireland is creaking at the moment because over the last 10 years we have not been building enough houses, roads, hospitals, water and wastewater plants, etc.

A significant number of the major problems that we now face as a country is because we have not invested. While you cannot simply treat managing a country as a business it is quite clear that investment yields returns. What business would survive if it did not invest in the physical infrastructure that makes it function?

Our Housing crisis is one of the great examples. Over the last number of years we didn't invest enough in the provision of social housing, we didn't invest enough in the roads to estates, we didn't invest enough in the water and waste water infrastructure, we didn't invest and now we are suffering as a result.

Infrastructure is critical to developing the cities, towns and communities of regions outside Dublin so Irish people locate there to work, live and raise a family. The goal is that 20 year hence a young person in Youghal, or Tralee, or Cashel thinks, 'I don't have to relocate to Dublin for work, there's loads of opportunities here for me.'

Infrastructure is key to realising the potential of Cork and having it assume its position as the centre of an economic corridor to counter balance Dublin.

Unfortunately, infrastructure takes time. Infrastructure in Ireland can take decades. Ministerial careers generally last about 19 months on average. That's why it is so important for each region to never stop making the case for the implementation of Project Ireland 2040.

Several motorways, bypasses and road improvements that are necessary to developing the southern region should have

started 5 years ago to have a real impact. And many are now delayed or stalled.

Two things need to change to prevent these issues continuing to disadvantage the regions: planning and procurement. On planning; it's important that people can object when they are affected by development but who defends the benefit to the wider population of an entire region. A specialist court must be established with requisite expertise to make decisions quickly and efficiently on large scale projects.

On procurement, the CIF has for decades advocated changes to the public sector procurement system that would reduce the likelihood of delays. Delays mainly derive from issues at the design stage of projects. Changing this system would help prevent disputes, delays and the derailment of major projects.

The National Development Plan has allocated €116 billion with a central objective being the development of Cork, Limerick, Waterford, Galway and Sligo as an economic counter-balance to Dublin. Cork is currently second in terms of construction activity outside of Dublin. But to highlight the imbalance in activity we only have to look at the crane count. Currently Dublin has more the six times the number of working tower cranes than Cork, Limerick & Galway combined.

Facing this sort of challenge, you might expect a frenzy of

activity amongst politicians or prioritisation and fast-tracking of key infrastructure projects or significant increases in planning permission for apartment building in urban centres or a strong coalition between local government and industry advocating for the region's development. But there will not be a frenzy of activity unless you persist in demanding improvements for your region.

Project Ireland 2040 envisages that 75% of the additional 1 million population growth anticipated over the next 20 years will live and work outside Dublin. The southern region with Cork to the fore has a proven track record in attracting inward investment in areas including Pharma, Life Sciences, ICT and boasts a large cluster of Cyber Security and IT companies.

The ability of our industry to build some of the most complicated process engineering facilities for the Life Sciences sector in particular is one of the reasons these industries choose to locate in Cork and Ireland. The private sector knows we can deliver productively.

This region is attracting the skilled people for these jobs but is now straining as public sector investment has not kept pace with private sector investment. We must demand investment in this region to continue. We and I mean the whole of the construction sector can help Cork do this whilst spreading the benefits of increased investment by connecting other cities in

the region with world class infrastructure. From the outside, a multi-national corporation making investment decisions should see this region as a fully-serviced economic zone.

In the round, Cork has a great story to tell.

I want this conference to be a starting point for the cities in this region working together more closely. Don't take anything for granted – we have to MAKE Project Ireland 2040 happen for Cork. And for Waterford, Limerick, Galway, Sligo and Letterkenny the same must be said. Everyone has to campaign for their own area, no one else will do it for you. Remember the old saying “a quite priest never got a parish”.

But it doesn't stop there we all need to get together and make a coalition for the Atlantic Economic Corridor to apply political pressure on policymakers in Dublin. This will involve supporting each other. More genuine collaboration between county and city councils across the regions than in the past. Industry, chambers of commerce, Ibec, the Colleges and the CIF will also have to band together and make the case. The CIF will facilitate and engage to support this initiative and our regional directors and branch chairmen will participate strongly.

So that's my call to action for all stakeholders in the Cork region. The Government must match the excellent job the city has done in attracting private sector investment into the area. If it doesn't, then this work will be undone and Cork's potential will continue to be squandered.

Today's conference is a call to action. It's a call to action for everyone in this region and other regions around Ireland to collaborate and make a case in Dublin for increased investment that cannot be ignored – and to realise the ambition of making Ireland a better country for all of us.