

Submission to the National Planning Framework By Midlands Regional Skills Forum

The Midlands Regional Skills Forum sees the forthcoming National Planning Framework as a key enabler in the forums effort to sustain and further develop the Industrial growth along with bringing job creation to the region.

Job creation and industry clusters will not be successful if not underpinned by proper infrastructure.

The Forum has identified the following key attributes that are needed:

- Designation of Athlone City Region as a growth centre for the Midlands. The Midlands is well placed to pull development away from the Dublin Region, but this will only happen if there is a city with a critical mass that will act as anchor for the region. Government, through the National Planning Framework need to lead the way by investing in the region and enabling industries and business to locate into a receptive environment that has a ready supply of skilled workers.
An alternative view was expressed from members from Offaly. They believe that the Midlands should be developed as a polycentric region comprising the Gateway towns of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar.
- Significant investment in Connectivity including high speed Broadband, road upgrade and rail investment. High speed Broadband is now just as critical as power and water and is needed throughout the region not just in some major population centres. Broadband infrastructure to be prioritised for all rural areas within 12 -18 months. While east/west road connections are good, the Midlands needs further development of North South and North East/ South West routes, N4/N5, N51/N52.
- Rail links from Galway and Sligo to Dublin running to Dublin should be high speed links thus reducing commuting time and enhancing the viability and attractiveness of the Midlands as a residential location and removing pressure from the larger urban areas.
- Designation of AIT as a Technological University for the Region. Agencies such as IDA and Enterprise Ireland have stated that a University for the region is essential if they are to deliver new investment for the region. On the International scene, the designation “University” is becoming more important and over time non-university, institutions will have diminishing recognition. According to leading expert Simon Marginson “...universities are generally more proactive and more autonomous bodies than non-universities, more capable of anticipating and responding to

local needs and taking national and international influences. More is rightly expected and they can get more done, especially in active collaboration with local stakeholders.”

The Forum has identified the following strengths in the Region:

- A strong and growing Biopharma and MedTech cluster
- An emerging Software cluster
- Potential to develop Construction based employment in the Region
- Manufacturing and Engineering, particularly in the area of Agri-Tech
- Food – Both Artisan and Large Scale Processing
- Energy Production

Where are the regions immediate skills gaps?

- Tech/software Engineers, Quantity Surveyors, Civil Engineers
- MedTech - Quality Compliance, Lean, Regulatory Affairs, Validation, Stability Testing/Control
- Biopharma Sector – Pure Chemists, Cell Culture, Supply Chain, Microbiologists
- Manufacturing – Robotics, automation, data analytics – Big Data. Technicians/engineers in polymer processing
- Softskills/Entrepreneurial Skills – Team building, leadership, management

What can be done within the regional skills fora?

Promote STEM and Apprenticeships within the schools through the forum members e.g. ETB's etc. Industry talks and visits to schools. Actively promote Midlands science festivals. Involve Industry in AIT's open days, career days etc.

Development of multi sector strategy for inward investment with a particular focus on 0-20 employee companies from abroad to provide sustained SME development.

What the RSM is currently working on to help immediate and future skills needs.

- Introducing Work Placement to all training programmes across all sectors and levels – ensuring a work-ready ethos
- Introducing industry advisory boards for third level courses will also introduce this for ETBs
- More industry input into secondary schools e.g. Company site visits etc. to include promotion of third level courses that will lead to employment in those companies* and also the promotion of apprenticeships as a really viable career option to students and parents.

- Apprenticeship/Career Traineeship models need to be increased
- *Courses linked to local industry/sector
- Upskilling of unemployed
- A more unique and complex skill set is required by industry so we need to react quickly in order to respond to Industry needs. The Fora training and education sub group need to work closely in order to deliver these "new emerging skills" and rapidly build a pipeline of talented people.

Future skills of the region

- Smart Manufacturing - Production/manufacturing Operatives
- Engineers – Tech, Robotics, Programming, Mechanical engineers, polymer
- Construction sector – QS, civil etc.
- Food sector – quality, Chefs, hospitality
- Biopharma - supply chain

Midlands's future comparative advantage?

- Biopharma & MedTech – ready established cluster gives competitive advantage. Industry focused Faculty's within in AIT
- APT in AIT - Smart Manufacturing – polymer, automation, Robotics. First Polymer Training Skillnet centre in Athlone– only centre of its kind in ROI catering for processing skills needs of the polymer industry.
- Tech/IT – AIT/SRI New H2020 funding for software
- Ability to design & deliver bespoke training for industry

Conclusion

The midlands stands ready to make a contribution to balanced regional development. The Midlands Regional Skills Forum will assist this process by ensuring that the region possesses a well trained workforce with a ready supply of graduates that will meet the emerging skills needs of the region.