



• Clones, 'Blayney links a focus of report

INCREASED CO-OPERATION CAN ARREST BORDER DECLINE

A programme of sustained co-operation across a broad range of linkages, rather than individual intervention, is necessary to arrest the economic decline of the Border region and secure a trend of positive growth, a major study has found.

Links between Clones and the Co Fermanagh towns of Roslea, Newtownbutler and Lisnaskea, and Castleblayney's connections with the Crossmaglen area of Co Armagh formed key focus points for case study research by the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) and the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA).

The report produced by the research, which was based at NUI Maynooth, was launched last Friday.

Addressing the "challenges and opportunities in connecting Irish Border towns", the report recommends that all future cross-Border projects should be made up of "a wide mix of local stakeholders."

Project Co-ordinator Caroline Creamer of NUI Maynooth commented that, "The level of cross-Border collaboration taking place varies across sectors due to differences in the resources available and the different organisational structures in the District and Co Councils."

As well as the linkages involving Clones and Castleblayney, the study analysed cross-Border co-operation involving Lifford-Strabane; Kiltyclogher-Cashel/Scribbagh-Garrison-Rossinver; and Blacklion-Belcoo-Glenfarne.

Caroline Creamer said that a key recommendation was that, "Service provision should be based on proximity rather than jurisdiction of residence or nationality."

She said that a concern common to all areas was the issue of serv-

ice provision in such sectors as Accident & Emergency medical provision, the location and availability of doctors' surgeries, banking facilities and other infrastructural provisions such as post offices, public libraries, fire services and schools. Stress had been placed by the public on the need to access the closest available facility irrespective of jurisdiction.

The report finds that inward investment has increased and cross-Border relations in general have improved since the Peace Process.

However, it pinpoints the need to develop integrated cross-

Border planning structures involving local government, planning authorities and infrastructure providers from both jurisdictions.

"There is an increasing role to be played by both the private sector and the Councils to develop a strategic cross-Border vision for the provision of complementary services," Ms Creamer stated.

Funding for the research programme was provided by the International Fund for Ireland and the Higher Education Authority. Friday's launch was performed by novelist Colm Tobin, MLA Jim Wells and Eamon Scanlon TD.

KEY FINDINGS

The following are the key findings of the report:

"The principal sustainable means for arresting decline and securing positive growth in the Irish Border region is through co-operation rather than individual interventions.

"Working in collaboration across jurisdictions and amongst stakeholder groups has demonstrated the potential to yield significant mutual socio-economic benefits - for example, through the sharing of ideas and information and the

improvement of service delivery on a cross-jurisdictional basis.

"Such collaboration is of particular importance to the future of the Irish Border region, particularly given that this region has been characterised by decades of back-to-back spatial planning and policy development.

"Some of the key issues/challenges flagged during the research programme included:

- There is a disconnect not only on a North-South basis but also on an East-West basis - and this is of particular significance in the central border area.

- The level of cross-Border collaboration taking place today varies across sectors, with involvement being dependent on available resources (people, time and money) and overcoming different internal organisational structures e.g. County and District Councils.

- There is a high level of concern that many of the funding programmes continue to be project-focused, stand-alone and time-limited.

"In most areas along the Border, collaboration emerged from the bottom up and out of a sense of frustration with the actual and perceived neglect on the part of central government in both jurisdictions.

"The resulting cross-Border initiatives, as applied at a local scale, have helped to drive the Peace Process forward. Since the commencement of the Peace Process, supported by cross-Border programmes, community and voluntary groups have been very much to the fore in the promotion of cross-Border linkages on the island of Ireland.

"The models of collaboration that have emerged generally reflect a strong endogenous (bottom-up) leaning.

"The Peace Process has also

made possible huge improvements in Anglo-Irish and North-South relations; it has dismantled restrictive security barriers, thereby enabling people to cross the Border without fear or inhibition, and it has consequently opened up prospects for inward investment, economic renewal and social advancement.

“Furthermore:

- There is a strong local community spirit within, and generally between, each of the cross-Border case study clusters. Add to this the abundance of experience, knowledge and skills community groups have gained through their involvement in collaborative initiatives and it becomes clear why the focus of cross-Border initiatives are becoming increasingly innovative and creative. Programmes are moving away from a purely social orientation towards a mix of socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-environmental enterprises and projects.

- Border communities are increasingly becoming business-savvy in terms of moving forward. There is a growing realisation that the Border region as a whole must think outside the box, break moulds and create new paths of co-operation.

- In recognition of the many common traits and challenges shared by towns and villages in the Irish Border region, a wide range of organisations - community, local government, health - are increasingly working together on a cross-Border basis, albeit to varying degrees. There are still issues to be overcome, particularly in terms of capacity for engagement.

- Going forward, there is widespread agreement that all future cross-Border projects and partnerships should be made up of a wide mix of local stakeholders. The emphasis should no longer be put on communities or Councils individually driving physical,

social, economic, cultural and environmental co-operation. Rather there is an increasing role to be played by the private sector and councillors in terms of developing connections and adopting a strategic, cross-Border vision in the provision of complementary services.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Advancing a number of recommendations, the study states that cross-Border initiatives can have a long-lasting impact on upskilling and community confidence which, together with the development of identified “endogenous” (or local) resources and assets, are essential ingredients for the sustainable development of settlements.

It adds:

“For the future, representatives from the five case study clusters have put forward a number of recommendations as to how the processes of co-operation and collaboration can become more strategic in their focus and effective on the ground.

“These include:

- The preparation of cross-Border integrated plans which consider how a Border area should develop - not only physically, socially and economically but also in terms of infrastructure and service provision.

- The establishment of a civil society forum - as promoted by political leaders under the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, 1998 and the St Andrew’s Agreement, 2006.

- The establishment of a cross-Border councillors’ forum - as part of the already existing British-Irish Council.

- The development of business networks at a sub-regional level (possibly based around clusters of micro-enterprises).

“By networking, groups and associations can develop common causes and solutions that would not be possible were they to pursue an isolationist approach.

“Rural communities, development agencies and policy makers are increasingly advocating that the sustainable development of rural areas cannot be advanced by trying to compete with urban centres. Instead, sustainable rural development requires a valorisation of local assets and the implementation of interventions that unleash the development potential of rural resources.

“For the Irish Border region, this necessitates working on an inter-jurisdictional basis.”