



Comhairle Chontae Liatroma Leitrim County Council

Public Consultation Questionnaire New Regional Airports Programme 2020-2024

Question 1: What category of stakeholder do you represent?

Leitrim County Council- Local Authority

Leitrim County Council is a shareholder in Ireland West Airport Knock (IWAK) and recognises the importance of the airport to regional development. IWAK is a driver of enterprise and economic development by providing business travel inbound and outbound, bringing tourism to the region and providing a link for the region's Diaspora.

A recent passenger tracking survey conducted by Red C for IWAK showed that 38% of passengers travelling to IWAK were holidaymakers with an estimated annual spend of €174 million in the region. It is evident from the research that the natural and unspoilt landscape offered by the region is one of the main attractions for visitors with hiking, cross country walking and visiting national parks and forests amongst the main activities undertaken by passengers travelling to/from IWAK.

The average spend per passenger in the region during their stay is estimated to be €696 (excluding flights) therefore demonstrating the significance of the airport to the local economy and return on investment to date.

Question 2: Having regard to the actions on regional airports in the National Aviation Policy, what are your views on the effectiveness of the current Regional Airports Programme?

A key function of regional airports is to improve connectivity nationally and internationally, this is of particular importance to the North West where other forms of connections are limited- for example- rail. Regional airports also contribute to tourism, enterprise and job creation regionally, this is evidenced in recent publications such as the draft RSES for the North West region and Red C survey completed by IWAK. As Leitrim and the North West continue to undertake initiatives to improve the region's growth through programmes such as the Atlantic Economic Corridor it is important that the Regional Airports Programme remains an integral part of the National Aviation Policy.

With reference to the actions outlined in the National Aviation Policy, Leitrim County Council recognises and welcomes the work completed to date and the support received to the regional airports. As a key stakeholder in IWAK we are aware of its significance as an economic driver for growth in the region and strongly recommend that the support received to date is sustained and grown.

Action 4.2.3 of the National Aviation Policy: *Exchequer support for capital expenditure will be limited to safety and security related expenditure.*

Since 2011 support for capital projects at regional airports has been limited to safety and security enhancements. While this support is welcome and has provided for the provision of key developments in IWAK if the goal of the National Aviation Policy -*to ensure regional airports achieve a sustainable contribution to their local economies*- is to be achieved a change in the current approach must be made. We strongly support a change to this action.

In order to promote development at a regional scale IWAK and other airports must be in a position to realise expansionary projects. IWAK has capacity for further development in terms of its handling capacity to increase passenger numbers and routes and we advocate that support be available from the exchequer to pursue development proposals.

4.2.4 of the National Aviation Policy: *Clear business plans will be required from the airports seeking supports. In considering funding to regional airports, the Department will take account of the level of regional involvement, including investment by local authorities and/or business*

Leitrim County Council supports the approach taken by the Department to produce clear business plans for supports sought. The case for ensuring supports for regional airports is evident as IWAK and others improve their viability but we recognise that sustainability must be demonstrated to show return on investment and value for money. The involvement of local authorities and businesses is significant in the case of IWAK. In 2017 Leitrim along with five other County Councils became shareholders in IWAK. This investment is an acknowledgment of the importance of IWAK to the region for national and international connectivity, tourism promotion and economic development. Since the investment in 2017 Leitrim County Council has contributed to the continued development of IWAK. This is evidenced in the opening of a new state of the art Visitor Discovery Centre at the airport in 2018. The centre is a result of the local authorities working with the Western Development Commission and DRCD. The new centre features information on attractions, activities, events and visitor experiences from across the region and presents opportunities for local suppliers to showcase local crafts and food tastings. It is managed by dedicated staff members trained by Fáilte Ireland. In summer 2019 Leitrim County Council in collaboration with local businesses ran a showcase in IWAK to demonstrate the regional offering to those visitors arriving at the airport. Through our tourism office we also work closely with IWAK to roll out marketing campaigns to promote the region and sustain routes. This level of engagement between the local authorities of the region and IWAK could be strengthened through working groups, staff secondment and in particular by going beyond collaboration on tourism. A wider partnership of the IWAK development strategy and the economic development of the region can be achieved through programmes such as the Atlantic Economic Corridor.

Question 3: What, if any, changes would you like to see reflected in the new Programme and why?

As previously mentioned we support a change in the eligibility for grant support to go beyond safety and security measures. Grant supports should include capital projects that will expand and develop the regional airports. This will build them towards sustainability and viability. It will also ensure objectives of supporting regional growth and facilitating connectivity for social, business and tourism purposes are met.

We note that the current suggestion for the above change is 50% grant aid. We recognise that support from other private and local authority sources should be sought for such projects however we would suggest that the level of grant support available for development and expansion projects be considered for revision upwards in order to ensure strategic projects can move forward.

CAPEX Funding

Leitrim County Council supports the IWAK proposal that state aid rules for CAPEX funding be reviewed to include up to 100% aid intensity for airports with less than 1million annual passengers. This will assist airports to move towards increasing their passenger numbers and go beyond the 1 million passenger threshold. We also support the proposal that provision be made for multi-year investment programmes for regional airports that allow for deviations as long as overall aid intensity of programmes stay within limits.

Question 4: How do you think the new Programme can best support Ireland's transition to a low carbon economy, having regard to policy on climate action and sustainability?

Leitrim County Council views opportunities at IWAK to develop smart energy initiatives. This could include the increase in use of electric vehicles and the generation of energy from renewable sources for example biomass or solar. Linking supports under the new programme to demonstrating how projects will contribute to low carbon economy and sustainability would be welcomed and help to achieve regional and national targets.

As airports use a number of vehicles across short distances switching to electric vehicles would contribute to low carbon approach with minimal disruption to ongoing services.

The new developments within the Strategic Development Zone (SDZ) at IWAK should incorporate low carbon initiatives and link with the local economy for supply of energy from renewable sources. For example increase use of biomass given the availability of sources in County Leitrim and surrounding counties.

Leitrim County Council believes that linking funding supports to renewable energy approaches that utilise local resources and support the local economy would be a beneficial approach. It would ensure that exchequer funding provided for implementing a low carbon approach were not only contributing to achieving targets but would have the added benefit of improving the local and regional economy

Question 5: What are your views on the PSO Scheme, the air service routes currently being supported and the need for a continuation of the Scheme beyond 2022?

4.2.5 of the National Aviation Policy : From 2015, PSO contracts, for Donegal/Dublin and Kerry/Dublin air services will run for two years initially and, subject to a satisfactory review after 18 months, may be extended by a maximum of one year.

Leitrim County Council believes that the new programme should consider additional route developments to improve regional connectivity. Under Project Ireland 2040: National Planning Framework the lack of high quality connectivity between the regions within the Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC) is seen as a major impediment to the development of the western seaboard as a counter balance to Dublin and the East Coast. The Framework outlines a particular focus on improving accessibility and connectivity northwards on the emerging Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC) network that links a network of major centres on the western seaboard. There are currently no routes connecting the regions of the AEC. In order for the AEC to release its full potential routes along the AEC should be examined- For example IWAK to Kerry or Donegal to Kerry. A cross border route of IWAK to Derry would not only link the northern region of the AEC but would also offer a route to Northern Ireland post-Brexit.

Additional Comments

As outlined in the draft RSES for the North West IWAK plays a significant economic role in creating opportunities by attracting investment to the region. It acts as an economic driver for the region and has a major impact on the social and economic infrastructure of the surrounding area. Leitrim County Council acknowledges the potential of IWAK for future development through its Strategic Development Zone (SDZ) status. The zone will provide a clear blueprint for the development offering and play an important role in the delivery and implementation of high level infrastructure for the area. It will see airport and aviation related developments as well as providing a regionally focused business and enterprise hub that will drive economic development across the region and the AEC. Leitrim County Council recognises that developments in the SDZ will be primarily private sector led and recommends that some public investment should be considered in the preparation of lands for development.

In order to utilise regional connectivity Leitrim County Council proposes an integrated transport strategy for IWAK. This would enable car park expansion and improve public transport links. Through Bus Eireann and local link connections to and from Leitrim and other surrounding counties could be greatly enhanced to grow the potential of IWAK in contributing to the regional economy. Services similar to those provided by local link to Donegal and Kerry airports should be replicated through regional collaboration.

Leitrim County Council
30 September 2019