



Action Plan for Jobs: Midland Region 2015-2017

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Minister's Foreword..... | 1 |
| Executive Summary..... | 3 |
| Chapter 1: Introduction | 7 |
| Chapter 2: Midland Region Overview | 9 |
| 2.1 Population and main urban centres | 9 |
| 2.2 Connectivity..... | 10 |
| 2.3 Quality of Life | 11 |
| Recreation and Leisure | 12 |
| Arts & Culture | 12 |
| Education..... | 12 |
| Other factors | 13 |
| 2.4 Gaps in infrastructure or assets required to deliver the region's potential..... | 13 |
| Chapter 3: Economic performance | 15 |
| 3.1 Employment and Unemployment | 15 |
| Overview..... | 15 |
| Sectoral employment trends..... | 15 |
| Employment in the Services Sector | 17 |
| Employment in Industry | 18 |
| Employment in companies supported by State agencies | 19 |
| Employment in commercial State bodies..... | 21 |
| Employment by Occupation | 22 |
| 3.2 Business Demographics in the region | 23 |
| 3.3 Education and Skills attainment..... | 25 |
| 3.4 Gross Value Added (GVA) | 26 |
| Chapter 4: Enterprise Assets..... | 28 |
| 4.1 Enterprise Agencies in the Midlands Region | 28 |
| 4.2 Local Authorities..... | 31 |
| 4.3 Community Enterprise Centres (CECs) | 32 |
| 4.4 Technology Centres and Research Centres | 33 |
| 4.5 Business Networks..... | 35 |
| 4.6 Local Development Companies | 35 |
| 4.7 Education & Training infrastructure | 36 |
| Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) | 36 |
| Education and Training Boards (ETBs)..... | 38 |

| | |
|--|----|
| Skillnets..... | 39 |
| Intreo (Employment Services) | 39 |
| 4.8 Other Bodies supporting enterprise in the Midlands..... | 40 |
| Waterways Ireland | 40 |
| InterTradeIreland | 40 |
| ConnectIreland | 40 |
| Atlantic Corridor | 41 |
| 4.9 Social and Recreational Assets | 42 |
| Chapter 5: Introduction to the Actions..... | 43 |
| Chapter 6: Driving Entrepreneurship and Growing Business | 44 |
| Chapter 7: Fostering innovation | 53 |
| Chapter 8: Attracting and embedding Foreign Direct Investment | 56 |
| Chapter 9: Building Sectoral Opportunities | 59 |
| Tourism..... | 59 |
| Manufacturing..... | 62 |
| Food Sector..... | 64 |
| Internationally Traded Services and Software | 65 |
| Energy and Sustainability | 67 |
| Chapter 10: Skills enhancement and labour market activation | 69 |
| Chapter 11: Building Business Networks | 74 |
| Chapter 12: Marketing the region as an attractive place to work and live | 77 |
| Chapter 13: Potential strategic areas for further job creation..... | 80 |
| I-LOFAR | 80 |
| Center Parcs..... | 81 |
| Trail Development | 81 |
| Water Supply project..... | 83 |
| Chapter 14: Monitoring Progress | 84 |

Minister's Foreword



One of the Government's key priorities when it came in to office was to halt the haemorrhage of job losses and rebuild a sustainable economy based on enterprise, innovation and exports. The Action Plan for Jobs has been the Government's key policy instrument to support job creation and enterprise growth. The first Action Plan, published at the start of 2012, set an ambitious target of increasing the number of people in employment by 100,000 by 2016. Employment figures published by the Central Statistics Office for the first Quarter of 2015 show that we have exceeded this target more than 18 months ahead of schedule.

However, not all regions are yet fully experiencing the benefits of economic recovery. The pace of progress in the regions – and especially those with the highest unemployment levels - needs to be accelerated through targeted supports for enterprise and job creation. Vibrant and competitive regions are important, not just from an economic perspective, but also from a societal point of view. Growing the economic base of regions supports social cohesion and provides opportunities for families to continue to live and work in their local communities.

The Government's 2015 Action Plan for Jobs includes a commitment to develop and publish a suite of regional Action Plans to support enterprise growth and job creation. The Action Plans will complement and contribute to the Local Economic and Community Plans to be developed by the Local Authorities and the regional Spatial and Economic Strategies to be developed by the new Regional Assemblies.

All regions in Ireland have potential for economic growth. It is critical that we focus on the potential within regions to position them as key contributors to Ireland's national growth and the creation of employment. Regions differ from each other in terms of potential, critical mass, stage of development, nature of sectoral strengths, skills profile and innovative capacity.

This Action Plan for Jobs for the Midlands covers the counties of Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath. The core objective of the Plan is to support the creation of extra jobs in the region through the delivery of over 100 collaborative actions focusing on increasing the number of start-ups, developing the capacity of existing enterprises, and capitalising on the strengths and opportunities of the region.

This Action Plan has been developed on the basis of a series of consultations with stakeholders in the region, identifying particular strengths and opportunities in the Midlands. Like the national Action Plan for Jobs, the Plan for the Midlands sets out a series of commitments on the part of public bodies, complemented by some actions from the private sector, which will support enterprise growth and job creation. Further actions will be added on an on-going basis, as new initiatives and commitments emerge, reflecting the dynamic nature of the new regional Action Plans. It is the cumulative effect of these measures - and the collaboration which they will bring about in their delivery - which will make a real and lasting impact on the jobs potential of the region.

While my Department has facilitated the compilation of this Action Plan through engagements with stakeholders in the Midlands, ownership of the Plan – and ensuring its delivery - rests with the people, businesses, and public bodies in the Midlands region. I want to thank all of those who made a contribution to the development of the Plan and look forward to their continued participation in the process.

To further support enterprise growth and job creation in the regions, the Government will provide up to €250 million over the next five years to support the regional Action Plan process. €150 million of this funding will support an IDA property programme, while up to €100 million will be made available through Enterprise Ireland for three separate competitive calls for proposals which will support innovative and collaborative approaches to support jobs creation across the regions.

Richard Bruton, TD

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation

Executive Summary

Vibrant and competitive regions will be central to realising our ambition of full employment by 2018. The aim of *Action Plan for Jobs: Regional* is to develop the full potential of each region building upon its assets and areas of competitive advantage. This can only be achieved by a new level of collaboration among key players in the region working to achieve common goals.

This approach has been made possible by a number of reforms that have been put in place:

- The growing impact of the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) network developed through the close cooperation between Enterprise Ireland and the Local Authorities
- The fresh mandate of the new Education and Training Boards, who like the Higher Education Institutes are now focused on developing a stronger link with their local enterprise base
- The strengthening of the Regional Offices of IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland with a new focus in their respective national strategies on regional job growth
- The emergence of stronger policy framework to underpin sectoral opportunities with a strong profile at regional level.

This Plan has been developed in a genuine bottom up way with the committed involvement of not just the region's public bodies but also many of its enterprises and business organisations and public representatives. The ambition of this Plan will only be realised through the collaborative effort of all these stakeholders. Our experience of the Action Plan for Jobs at a national level is that where all relevant parties work together, very significant results can be achieved. This is undoubtedly the case in the Midland region.

The Midlands experienced very rapid population growth in the past decade and a half. Over one quarter of those employed are working outside of the region. This pattern has contributed to relatively high levels of employment in the public service and in retail. It also presents certain new opportunities for enterprise.

The enterprise agencies focus most of their support on exporting enterprises or those with export potential. Together they number 1,052 enterprises employing 17,961 people across IDA, Enterprise Ireland and LEO networks. In the past year alone they have added over 1,000 jobs, and over 2,000 jobs since the Action Plan for Jobs was launched. A key target of this Plan will be to grow these enterprises.

Key strengths of the Midlands enterprise base include:

- A strong indigenous non-food manufacturing base
- A vibrant food manufacturing base which achieved growth through the recession and employs approximately 4,000 people
- An emerging internationally traded service sector demonstrating rapid growth

- A strong base in the Green Economy with the presence of Bord Na Mona, Coillte and ESB
- Significant tourism assets which can be developed in a more integrated way in the context of the brand experience “Ireland’s Ancient East”.

These are some of the sectors which are being targeted for development in the Plan. The Midlands is strategically located in relation to Dublin, Galway and Limerick, but the region needs to develop greater cohesion to maximise its assets and competitive strengths. The Plan is intended to be a dynamic and evolving process which will become a driving force for enterprise development with the Midlands.

The Midlands was particularly heavily hit by the crash because of its disproportionately high dependence on the Construction sector during the property boom. Employment in Construction in the Midlands fell by almost 75% from peak to trough and this ricocheted through the rest of the economy.

Overall 26,000 jobs were lost between 2007 and 2011 representing a 20% fall in employment, while unemployment rose to 19.5%. The turnaround since the Action Plan for Jobs was launched in 2012 has seen a recovery of 9,200 jobs and unemployment fall to 12.5%. This is a sign of the resilience of the enterprise base in the Midlands. The aim of the Action Plan is to build on this.

The Action Plan for Jobs for the Midland region has the primary objective of increasing employment in the region by 10-15% by 2020. By working together, the key stakeholders in the region can help deliver this ambitious target and see the region’s level of unemployment fall to the national average or below it. This goal will contribute to the Government’s overall ambition of creating sustainable full employment in Ireland from 2018 onwards.

The strategy has identified certain longer-term ambitions for the Midlands:

- Position Midlands as a Centre of Excellence for Advanced Manufacturing processes and technologies
- Position the Midlands to become a Regional Hub for Energy
- Develop a strategy to strengthen the emerging clusters in Internationally Traded Service and Food.
- Develop activity based tourism and use the marketing momentum behind Ireland’s Ancient East to integrate its Tourism services into a strong and coherent offer that will build growing visitor numbers.

Some of the higher profile projects and actions that will drive the jobs increases over the coming years in the Midland region include:

- The targeting of at least 25 additional FDI investment projects in the region over the next 5 years and the building of a new Advance Technology facility in Athlone by IDA Ireland to further attract foreign investment

- Marketing of the Midlands as a dynamic region, centrally located in the heart of Ireland, with unparalleled national interconnectivity
- The establishment of a Skills Forum to connect education providers with employers and industry on an on-going basis to collaborate in building the skills of the region
- The development of the Midlands Manufacturing Technologies Campus which will provide a dynamic industry-focused R&D environment on high end manufacturing and industrial design, with co-location of industry and academic researchers.

In addition, a number of other emerging projects have the potential to make a significant impact on job creation and enterprise growth in the Midlands. Principal amongst these are:

- the potential to attract the hosting of a next-generation radio telescope in Birr, Co. Offaly, which could stimulate a data analytics hub in the region,
- the proposed development of a Center Parcs holiday resort in Longford, and
- the further development of cycling, canoeing and walking trails along the extensive waterways in the region.

These further projects are subject to funding and/or planning agreement but would be significant for the region if they come to fruition.

In order to deliver the jobs targets, the *Midlands Regional Action Plan for Jobs* has developed a series of key ambitions for the Region:

- Increase start-ups by 25% by developing a pipeline of potential start-ups, increasing their successful flow through enterprise hubs, graduating an increasing number onto Enterprise Ireland's competitive programmes
- Support the existing agency supported companies to create new job opportunities representing 10-20% of their existing employment base by scaling up their enterprises; winning new markets and new mandates; investing in innovation; improving skills and leadership; implementing improvement in their processes and business model
- Strengthen the capacity of the region to attract new external investment and increase the number of IDA investments by 30-40%
- Develop the talent base of the region as a driver of enterprise growth.

Each of the above are underpinned by detailed actions in the Plan and will be achieved by a new level of collaboration across the different stakeholders in the region. This integration of effort is a core part of the new approach.

In total there are over 100 actions in this Action Plan, to be delivered by a range of public bodies, agencies, and enterprise interests. The actions contained in the Plan demonstrate innovation and joint effort. However the competitive calls for new initiatives will help to see new projects emerge over the coming months.

The Plan will be overseen by a Regional Implementation Committee which will review progress on the Plan every six months and prepare Progress Reports on actions delivered or delayed. These Progress Reports will be published by the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. The Plan will be a living document and new actions will be added over time as existing actions are delivered and new Actions or opportunities present themselves.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The aim of the national Action Plan for Jobs is to support enterprise growth and job creation in every region of the country. While progress has been made towards this objective, not all regions are yet fully experiencing the benefits of economic recovery. The pace of progress in the regions needs to be accelerated through targeted supports for enterprise and job creation.

Building the national Action Plan process, the Government has committed to developing Action Plans for each of the country's NUTS III level regions. This Action Plan, for the Midland region, covers the counties of Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath.

The objective of the Action Plan for the Midlands is to establish a cohesive approach to enterprise support and job creation in the region on the part of the Enterprise Development Agencies (Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland and the Local Enterprise Offices), other public bodies (e.g. Local Authorities, Education & Training institutions, Fáilte Ireland), local business leaders, and community-based enterprises. While there is already a lot of practical and strategic cooperation taking place at local and regional level, this Action Plan provides a framework in which cooperation and collaboration can be further enhanced between both public and private sector stakeholders.

The first part of the Plan provides an overview of the Midland region and identifies its strengths, assets and sectors with growth potential. This part of the Plan has been developed on the basis of desk research and a series of engagements with regional stakeholders, including a Regional Stakeholder Forum on 19th December 2014 in Athlone which was attended by approximately 150 participants. Follow-up meetings were held with a number of key stakeholders from the public and private sectors. The stakeholder engagements have played an important part in helping to identify the opportunities in the region to support enterprise growth and job creation.

The second part of the Plan contains a series of actions to support job creation in the region, grouped on a thematic basis and reflecting the areas which have been identified through the consultation process as being particularly important for the Midlands. Each action has an identified body or bodies responsible for delivery, within a given timeframe. Progress on the implementation of each of these actions will be overseen by a Monitoring Committee, which will involve the key stakeholders in the region and which will meet twice each year. Private sector participation in the monitoring of the Plan will be an important feature of the process and a number of industry "champions" will be invited to become involved in this exercise.

The Plan covers the period 2015-2017, but through the monitoring process, new actions will be added on an on-going basis during that period, making the Plan a dynamic and living tool for progressing the jobs agenda in the region.

While the objective of this Action Plan is to focus on the potential for jobs growth and enterprise development within the Midlands region, it must be recognized that trade and commerce is not confined by administrative boundaries. It is important that stakeholders work, not just across the region, but with other regions in order to maximize the potential of enterprises in the Midlands.

Synergies with Local Government Reform

This Action Plan will complement and contribute to the Local Economic and Community Plans being developed by the four local authorities in the region, as well contributing to the regional Spatial Economic Strategy (RSES) to be developed by the new Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly, in common with the other Regional Assemblies. The RSES will support implementation of national spatial policies and the economic policies and objectives of the Government, including the Action Plan for Jobs and this Regional Action Plan for Jobs, by enhancing co-ordination of planning and economic development functions of relevant Government departments and agencies and the local government sector, including the new Local Economic and Community Plans.

Chapter 2: Midland Region Overview

Midland Region - Key strengths and opportunities:

- A dynamic region, centrally located in the heart of Ireland, with unparalleled national interconnectivity.
- National corridor for road and rail infrastructure within 1 hour of Dublin and Galway.
- Good access to a number of international airports and ports to serve European and global markets.
- Significant catchment area with access to a highly qualified workforce and a diverse range of graduates and postgraduates across all disciplines.
- Strong Institute of Technology (Athlone IT) serving R&D needs of both indigenous and multinational industry, with three strategic research institutes and close links to Universities and other Institutes of Technology.
- Advanced energy networks.
- Track record in serving global markets.
- A number of Business and Technology Parks designed to international standards.
- Strong collaboration between public bodies in the region.
- A rich quality of life, clean environment, and unique heritage that is valued and safeguarded.
- Significant natural amenities and heritage to offer a unique visitor experience.

2.1 Population and main urban centres

The Midland Region is located in the heart of Ireland, and encompasses the counties of Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath. The region covers an area of around 6,524 square kilometres and accounts for 9.5% of the total area of the State. The Midlands has a combined population of 282,410¹ (6.2% of State total).

The population of the Midlands region grew by almost

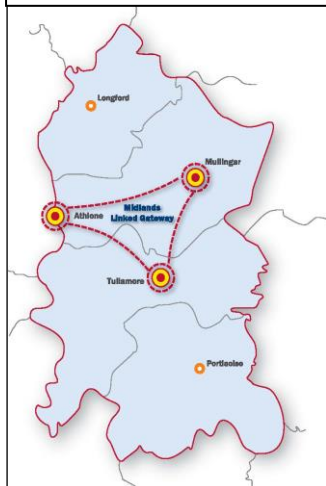
Midland population by county

| | |
|---------------|----------------|
| Laois: | 80,559 |
| Longford: | 39,000 |
| Offaly: | 76,687 |
| Westmeath: | 86,164 |
| Total: | 282,410 |

¹ CSO Census of Population, 2011

31,000 (12.2%) in the period between Census 2006 and Census 2011, with County Laois experiencing population growth of 20% in the period - the largest county level increase in Ireland - while the population in Co. Longford increased by 13.4%. Nonetheless, the Midlands has the smallest population of Ireland's eight administrative regions at NUTS III level.

Fig 1 – Gateway towns



The major urban centres are Athlone (pop. 20,153), Mullingar (pop. 20,103), Portlaoise (pop. 20,145), Tullamore (pop. 14,361), and Longford (pop. 8,836).

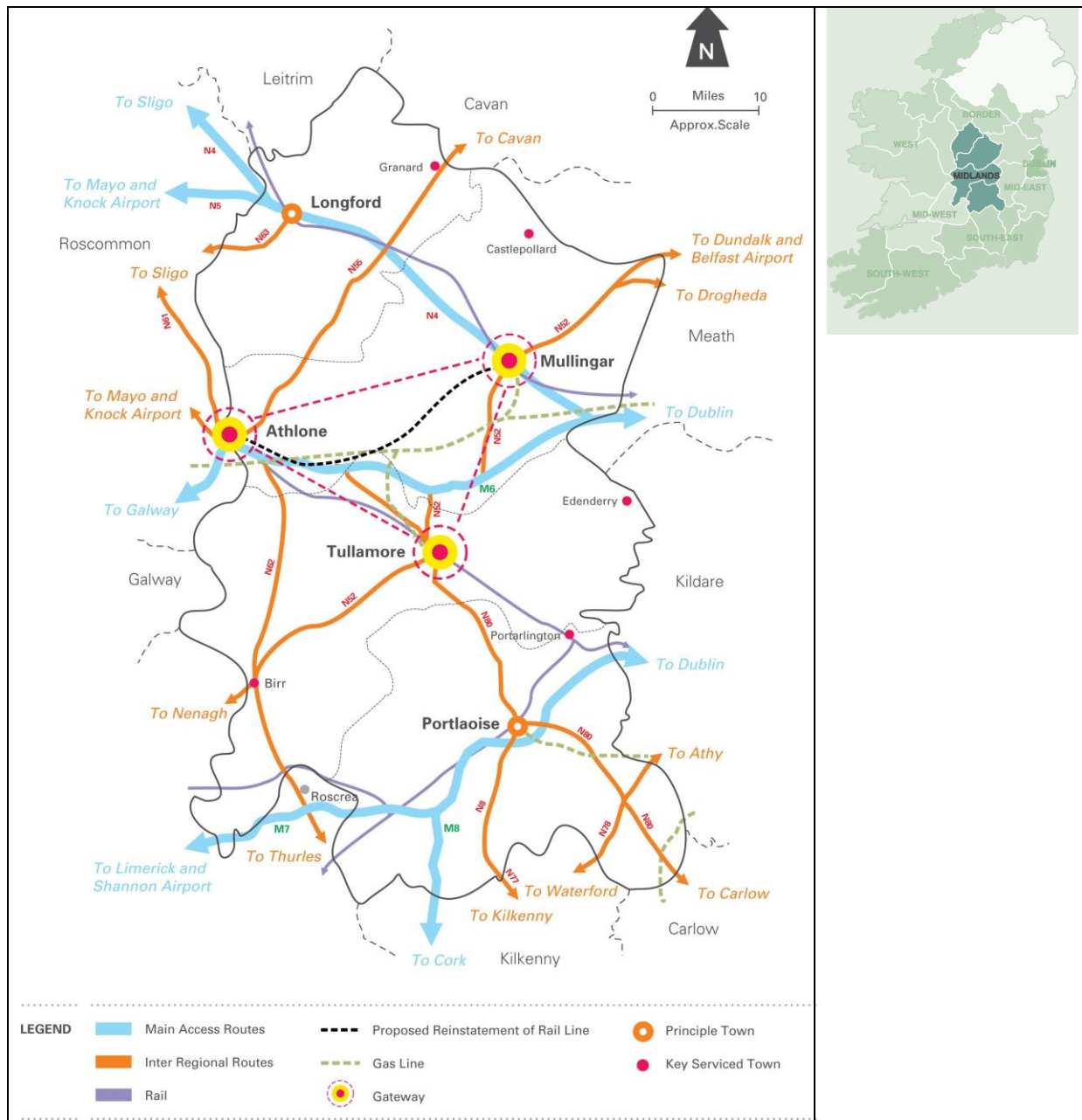
A key concept of the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) 2002-2020 was the development of potential and critical mass around a series of "Gateways" and "Hubs". Gateways are centres with a strategic location, nationally and relative to their surrounding areas, providing national-scale social and economic infrastructure and support services. The NSS designated Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar as a linked Gateway to deliver the level of critical mass needed to create more self-sustaining patterns of development.

2.2 Connectivity

The dispersed urban configuration of the Midlands, with no single major centre of population, poses certain challenges for the region. However, the Midlands' central location and the improvement of the national transportation network give the region a natural advantage in terms of inter-regional accessibility, and represents an opportunity on which the region can capitalise more fully. Its connectivity with other regions is exemplified by the fact that the town of Athlone quite literally straddles the border of the Midland region and the West region.

The region enjoys good national interconnectivity on the national corridors for road and rail infrastructure. It is within 1 hour of Dublin and has easy access to three international airports and all main ports. The Midland region is traversed by motorway corridors (M4, M6, M7 and M8) as well as rail lines radiating from Dublin to Sligo, Galway, Limerick and Cork, the main economic and urban areas of the country. Therefore it is ideally located to develop links with all other regions, being directly adjacent to five of the other seven regions.

The typical drive time between the main Midlands towns varies between 35 minutes in the case of Mullingar to Tullamore, and 50 minutes from Athlone to Mullingar. There is good access to the national bus network, although there are limited internal bus service links.

Fig 2: Map of Midlands Region showing connectivity

2.3 Quality of Life

“Quality of Life” is a complex and subjective matter, but is increasingly an important factor in attracting and retaining skilled people - particularly internationally mobile skilled labour - and in attracting mobile foreign direct investment.

The Midlands possesses some unique environmental/natural heritage associated with peatlands, uplands and waterways, presenting an array of lifestyle and recreational options. Alongside the region’s natural endowments, the Midlands offers a growing number and variety of cultural venues and cultural events, as well as sporting and recreational facilities.

Recreation and Leisure

The urban centres within the Midlands, with their distinct character and surrounding rural amenities, offer varied lifestyle options. The region possesses a unique landscape and heritage associated with peat boglands, uplands and waterways (incl. River Shannon, Grand Canal, Royal Canal, River Barrow, Lough Ree, Lough Ennell, Slieve Bloom mountains, Lough Boora Discovery Park, Corlea Trackway, Shannon Callows, etc.), and offers a range of outdoor activities from cycling and hill-walking to fishing, canoeing and leisure cruising. The region also has some attractive and well regarded golf courses.

The AIT International Arena, a €10 million indoor athletics facility situated on the campus of Athlone Institute of Technology, is complemented by the Athlone Regional Sports Centre and by the development of a network of leisure centres throughout the region. These amenities provide welcome additions to the choice of activities on offer in the larger towns within the region.

Arts & Culture

The Midland region is a hive of creative activity and possesses a wide variety of cultural amenities. It offers numerous channels and venues for cultural events and cultural exchange. While a small number of cultural events have a national profile, such as the Electric Picnic boutique music festival in Stradbally, Co. Laois, and the National Livestock Championships at the Tullamore Agricultural Show, there is also a vast array of smaller scale events that are community-based and family-oriented.

The region also boasts some excellent cultural venues, including the Dunamais Arts Centre (Portlaoise), the Dean Crowe Theatre and Arts Centre (Athlone), the Backstage Theatre & Arts Centre (Longford), Birr Theatre & Arts Centre, Mullingar Arts Centre, and Passionfruit Theatre (Athlone). The All-Ireland Drama Festival takes place in Athlone each year, whilst Mountmellick hosts an annual Drama Festival which recently celebrated its 25th Anniversary.

Like most communities in Ireland, the Midlands possess strong GAA links, with each town and village having access to hurling or football teams. For decades this has driven the community spirit which is at the core of the Irish identity. Other popular sports in the Midlands include rugby, triathlon, athletics, and swimming.

Education

Access to good educational facilities is an important factor for young families. The Midlands offers high quality of education for learners of all ages, with opportunities ranging from pre-school to Third Level and life long learning opportunities. There are more than 250 primary schools, 2 Education and Training Boards and 65 secondary schools in the four counties of the region. Recent years have seen considerable investment in the educational infrastructure, and facilities throughout the region are at a high standard.

Access to third level education is very practicable, with an Institute of Technology based in Athlone, while the transport infrastructure allows daily commutes to this Institute, as well as to the National

University of Ireland Galway, Institute of Technology Carlow, University of Limerick, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin City University, University College Dublin, Maynooth University and others.

Other factors

The underlying cost competitiveness of the Midlands in relation to other regions and its lower levels of traffic congestion are also seen as positive quality-of-life features. The close connectivity to Dublin, Galway, Cork and Limerick are also positive aspects of living in the Midlands region.



Mullingar by night

Mullingar has been awarded the Purple Flag designation that is given to a town that reaches a certain standard of service and security in the realm of evening and night time activities. This achievement will be built upon by the other Gateway towns and principal towns of the region over the course of this Action Plan by regional business groups with support from the Local Authorities.

2.4 Gaps in infrastructure or assets required to deliver the region's potential

The Government has recognised the need to strengthen the **Broadband infrastructure** throughout the country, and particularly outside of Ireland's cities and towns. In the modern technological-based environment, improved broadband infrastructure is necessary in the Midlands - as in most other regions – to enable companies to grow and do business more effectively.

The Government's National Broadband Plan (NBP), launched in 2012, sets out the strategy to deliver high speed broadband with at least 30Mbps connectivity being available to all homes and business throughout Ireland, regardless of location, through a combination of commercial and State-led investment.

The first step in implementing the NBP has been the development of a map outlining the existing and planned availability of high speed broadband services throughout the country. The Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources estimates that commercial operators will provide broadband with a minimum 30Mbps to 58% of premises in Laois, 48% in Longford, 53% in Offaly and 60% in Westmeath by 2016. However, commercial operators are constantly increasing their level of

coverage. Areas which are not likely to be served by these providers on a commercial basis will be supported by the State through the NBP.

The Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources expects to launch formal procurement, by the end of 2015, to deliver high speed broadband to those parts of the Midlands, and the country more generally, that will not have such services provided commercially. A detailed strategy for this intervention will be published for public consultation.

Water infrastructure: A number of wastewater networks and water schemes are operating at, or in excess of, capacity. Provision of new/upgraded facilities with improved capacity will allow for increased commercial/industrial or residential developments to proceed in these towns. A number of actions are being taken to improve the water supply in the Midlands, including new water treatment plants, grouped town sewerage schemes and water improvement supply schemes.

In March 2015, Irish Water published a report which sets out the need for a new water supply source for the Eastern and Midlands Region of the country and undertook a public consultation process on the need for a Water Supply project and a proposed “Roadmap” for the next steps in the planning process.

A further paper was published for public consultation in June 2015, which sets out four options which were independently identified as being technically viable for Irish Water. The public consultation and on-site studies on each of the four options will help to identify an emerging preferred option by late 2015. Following detailed environmental assessments on the preferred option, a planning application will be submitted by Irish Water to An Bord Pleanála in mid-2017.

The outcome of this process will be important for the Midlands region, both in terms of water supply for business and residents and in terms of job opportunities that might arise for people in the region. Developments on this project will be monitored over the course of this Action Plan.

Chapter 3: Economic performance

3.1 Employment and Unemployment

Overview

As was the case with all regions, employment in the Midlands was substantially impacted by the economic recession. In 2007, when employment in Ireland was at its highest historically, the Midland region had 127,700 people in employment (Q3 2007), with an unemployment rate of 3.7%. This was the lowest unemployment rate of all regions at the time, and well below the national figure of 4.7%.

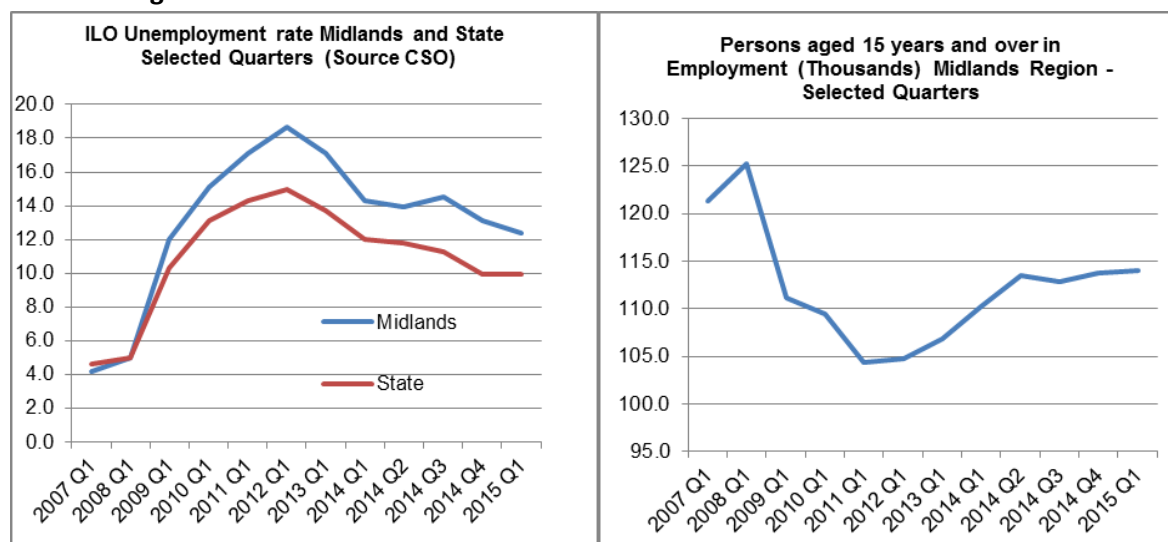
In the period up to Q3 2011, employment in the region fell by almost 26,000 and the unemployment rate for the region rose to 19.5% - 4.4% above the national average at that time. As the national economy recovers, the employment situation in the Midlands has begun to improve, with an increase of 9,200 in the numbers at work over the last three years (to Q1 2015).

Midlands region – Key labour market data, Q1 2015

| | |
|---------------------|---------|
| Nos. in employment: | 114,000 |
| Unemployed: | 16,200 |
| In Labour Force: | 130,100 |
| Unemployment Rate: | 12.4% |

In Q1 2015, employment in the region stood at 114,000, and the unemployment rate had dropped to 12.4% (see trend at Fig. 3 below). However, this compares with a national average unemployment rate of 9.9%. The Midlands currently has the second highest unemployment rate of all regions, notwithstanding the fall from a peak of 19.5% in 2011.

Figure 3. ILO Unemployment Rate(%) Midland Region and State, and Numbers Employed in Midland Region



Sectoral employment trends

Table 1 below provides a summary of employment by broad sectoral category from 2007 to 2014. The headline figure reflects the significant fall in employment in the region between 2007 and 2012,

with a reduction of 16,600 people at work. However, the table also reflects the steady recovery in employment which has taken place in the region since 2012, with 2,100 additional people at work between 2012 and 2013, 3,300 further people in employment between 2013 and 2014, and an increase of 3,800 people in employment between 2014 and 2015.

The Services Sector now accounts for 68% of employment in the Region, Industry accounts for 15%, Construction 8%, and Agriculture 9%.

Table 1 – Midlands Employment by sector, 2007-2014 (selected Quarters)

| Persons aged 15 years and over in Employment (Thousand) NACE Rev 2 Economic Sector (Selected Quarters) | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------------------------------------|-------|---------------------------------------|------|
| Midlands Region | | | | | | Change Between Q1 2007 and Q1 2012 | | Change Between Q1 2012 and Q1 2015 | |
| | 2007 Q1 | 2012 Q1 | 2013 Q1 | 2014 Q1 | 2015 Q1 | (,000) | % | (,000) | % |
| All NACE economic sectors | 121.4 | 104.8 | 106.9 | 110.2 | 114.0 | -16.6 | -13.7 | 9.2 | 8.8 |
| Agriculture, forestry and fishing (A) | 9.3 | 7.2 | 6.1 | 11.2 | 10.0 | -2.1 | -22.6 | 2.8 | 38.9 |
| Industry (B to E) | 22.0 | 15.5 | 15.1 | 15.6 | 17.0 | -6.5 | -29.5 | 1.5 | 9.7 |
| Construction (F) | 19.9 | 7.9 | 5.7 | 7.8 | 9.2 | -12.0 | -60.3 | 1.3 | 16.5 |
| Services (G to U) | 70.2 | 74.1 | 80 | 75.6 | 77.6 | 3.9 | 5.6 | 3.5 | 4.7 |
| Source: CSO StatBank/Quarterly National Household Survey Main Results / QNQ40 | | | | | | | | | |

Services

Employment in the Services sector in the Midlands remained strong relative to other sectors over the period of the recession. The Services sector accounts for over two-thirds of employment in the Midlands region, with 77,600 people working in Services at Quarter 1, 2015. The numbers employed in the sector are now 7,400 higher than at the start of 2007. The increase in Services employment in the Midlands accounts for almost 30% of the national increase in the sector since 2007 (increase of 25,200 nationally). A deeper analysis of employment in the Services sector is provided later in this Chapter.

Industry/Manufacturing

Employment in the Industry/Manufacturing Sector fell by 6,900 from a high of 22,000 in Q1 2007, to 15,100 in Q1 2013. The numbers employed in this sector has started to increase again since 2013 and currently stand at 17,000. Manufacturing in the Midlands retains a proportionately larger share of employment (15%) than the national average (12.8%).

Construction

There was a heavy dependence on Construction employment in the Midlands region in the period prior to the recession. Growth in construction employment in the Midlands region was significantly greater than the national average up to 2007. The economic downturn and its impact on Construction consequently had a significant negative impact on employment in that sector in the Midlands.

By way of illustration, the Construction sector accounted for approximately 20,000, or 16.4%, of total employment in the region during 2007, compared 12.8% of employment in the State as a whole. The numbers employed in this sector in the Midlands region fell to a low of 5,700 in Q1 2013 (down 71% from 2007), but have started to grow again. The sector currently employs 9,200 in the Midland region, accounting for 8% of Midlands employment. By way of comparison, the share of Construction employment at national level is 6.3% of all jobs.

While Construction sector employment has generally shown signs of improvement and will continue to grow in line with economic recovery, the sector is unlikely to reach the levels of employment attained in 2007, either nationally or in the Midland region. For this reason, greater diversification of jobs across other sectors is important for the region to improve its employment base.

Agriculture

Agriculture employs 10,000 people in the Midlands and accounts for approximately 9% of employment in the region. This is significantly higher than the national average of 5.6% of all employment, highlighting the importance of this sector to the Midlands region. The numbers employed in Agriculture fell sharply between 2007 and 2013, but have now recovered above 2007 levels.

Employment in the Services Sector

A closer analysis of the Services sector shows that the combined areas of Public Administration/Defence, Human health/Social work and the Education sector account for 30,000 of those employed in the Midlands - or almost 38% of total Services employment. Employment in the Human Health/Social Work area is particularly strong, with 14,600 working in that sector (see Table 2 below).

Given that a significant proportion of those employed in Human Health/Social Work and the Education sectors are likely to be public servants, it is clear that there is a very high level of public sector employment in the Midlands. Apart from the four Local Authorities, decentralised Government Departments are located in Athlone (Dept. of Education & Skills), Tullamore (Dept. of Education & Skills and Dept. of Finance), Portlaoise (Dept. of Agriculture, Food and the Marine) and Longford (Irish Prison Services and Social Protection Services), whilst Portlaoise is also home to the Midlands Prison and Portlaoise Prison. A portion of those living in the Midlands who are employed in the public service are also likely to be working outside the region, given the relatively short commuting distance to the Greater Dublin Area, as well as Galway.

Table 2 – Employment in the Services sector

| Persons aged 15 years and over in Employment (Thousand) by Region, NACE Rev 2 Economic Sector and Quarter | | | |
|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Midlands Region | 2007 Q1 | 2012 Q1 | 2015 Q1 |
| Services (G to U) | 70.2 | 74.1 | 77.6 |
| Wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles (G) | 17.5 | 16.7 | 17 |
| Transportation and storage (H) | 4.4 | 4.5 | 5.8 |
| Accommodation and food service activities (I) | 6.1 | 6.6 | 6.2 |
| Information and communication (J) | 1.9 | 2.5 | .. |
| Financial, insurance and real estate activities (K,L) | 3.1 | 3.2 | 3.3 |
| Professional, scientific and technical activities (M) | 4.9 | 4.0 | 5.7 |
| Administrative and support service activities (N) | 2.5 | 3.4 | 3.0 |
| Public administration and defence, compulsory social security (O) | 7.3 | 7.7 | 6.9 |
| Education (P) | 7.6 | 8.3 | 8.5 |
| Human health and social work activities (Q) | 10.0 | 12.3 | 14.6 |
| Other NACE activities (R to U) | 5.0 | 4.9 | 4.3 |
| Not stated | .. | .. | .. |
| Source: CSO StatBank / Quarterly National Household Survey Main Results / QNQ40 (accessed 25 May 2015) | | | |

Outside the public sector, Wholesale and Retail remains the most significant sector of employment in the region, with 17,000 people employed, representing 15% of total employment in the region. Similar to other regions throughout the country, employment in the Wholesale/Retail sector fell during the recession but has shown signs of a modest recovery in the past year. Other sub-sectors which make up the total numbers employed in the Services sector are shown on Table 2 above.

Employment in Industry

Employment in the Industry/Manufacturing Sector has increased by almost 2,000 since the low point of Q1 2013. Employment in the sector currently stands at 17,000, but is still below 2007 levels when employment in the sector stood at 22,000.

Detailed CSO employment statistics for Industry are not available below the NACE “Industry” classification. However, more detailed data is available from Enterprise Agency (Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland) employment statistics, which serves as a useful indicator of underlying trends. This data is set out on Table 3.

Table 3 – CSO Industrial Employment and Employment in Enterprise agency supported Manufacturing companies

| CSO Industrial Employment and Enterprise Agency Manufacturing Employment (Selected Periods) | | | |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Midlands Region | 2007 Q1 | 2012 Q1 | 2015 Q1 |
| CSO Industrial Employment | 22,000 | 15,500 | 17,000 |
| | | | |
| Manufacturing Employment in Enterprise Agency Supported companies | End 2006 | End 2011 | End 2014 |
| All Agency Manufacturing Employment | 12,779 | 9,860 | 10,993 |
| Food, Drink and Tobacco | 2,698 | 3,256 | 4,029 |
| Rubber and Plastic Products | 999 | 866 | 991 |
| Medical and Dental Instruments and Supplies | 2,111 | 1,728 | 1,798 |
| Machinery and Equipment | 927 | 687 | 776 |
| Basic and Fabricated Metal Products | 1,289 | 826 | 717 |
| Transport Equipment | 722 | 487 | 614 |
| Non-metallic Mineral Products | 1,230 | 593 | 603 |
| All Other Manufacturing | 2,803 | 1,417 | 1,465 |
| Source: CSO QNHS Data and DJEI 2014 Annual Agency Employment Survey | | | |

Total employment in Enterprise agency supported companies in the Manufacturing sector in the Midlands stood at 10,993 in 2014, representing two-thirds of all industrial employment in the region. The Food Sector accounts for almost 4,000 - or over a third - of all employment in the Manufacturing Sector and has grown consistently since 2007.

The Life Sciences sector is one of the largest employers in the Midlands, accounting for employment of over 2,000. Other significant manufacturing sectors in the region include Rubber and Plastics (almost 1,000 employed), Machinery and Equipment (776), Basic and Fabricated Metal Products (717), Transport Equipment (614) and Non Metallic Mineral Products (603).

Employment in companies supported by State agencies

At the end 2014, there were 14,463 people employed in Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland supported companies operating in the Midlands across all sectors, representing 12.7% of overall employment in the region. 12,921 were in permanent full time employment.

Table 4 below shows that employment in agency-supported companies fell by over 2,600 in the period 2007 to 2011. Employment levels recovered by 1,867 between 2011 and 2014, although still remain below 2006 levels.

Table 4 – Employment in Enterprise Agency supported companies by sector (selected years)

| Employment in Enterprise Agency Supported Companies (Selected Years) | | | | | | | |
|--|--------|--------|--------|------------------------------|-------|------------------------------|------|
| Midlands Region | | | | Change between 2006 and 2011 | | Change between 2011 and 2014 | |
| | 2006 | 2011 | 2014 | (,000) | (%) | (,000) | (%) |
| All Sectors | 15,222 | 12,596 | 14,463 | -2,626 | -17.3 | 1,867 | 14.8 |
| Manufacturing | 12,779 | 9,860 | 10,993 | -2,919 | -22.8 | 1,133 | 11.5 |
| International Services | 1,357 | 1,472 | 1,873 | 115 | 8.5 | 401 | 27.2 |
| Other Sectors | 1,086 | 1,264 | 1,597 | 178 | 16.4 | 333 | 26.3 |
| Source: DJEI 2014 Annual Agency Employment Survey | | | | | | | |

Enterprise Ireland, the State agency responsible for the development of indigenous Irish companies, has 274 clients in the Midlands, representing 4% of the agency's national client base. Enterprise Ireland-supported companies employed 10,431 people in 2014, of whom 9,213 were in permanent full-time employment.

In the period 2011 to 2014, permanent full-time employment in Enterprise Ireland companies grew by 2,176, representing a 27% increase in employment over the time frame, with the majority of these jobs created in the Manufacturing sector.

A sample of Enterprise Ireland clients based in the region include Enva Limited, Dawn Meats and Coolrain Sawmills (Laois); C&D Foods Ltd, Pat The Baker, Kepak and Green Isle Foods (Longford); Rosderra Irish Meats Group Ltd, Grant Engineering, Steripak Ltd, Glenisk, and Carroll Cuisine (Offaly); Imperial Tobacco, Mergon International Trend Technologies Ltd, Carty Meats and Athlone Extrusions (Westmeath).

IDA Ireland has 35 FDI client companies in the region, employing just over 4,032 (3,707 permanent) people in a range of sectors including ICT, Life Sciences and Engineering. A sample of IDA's clients in the region include Abbott (MedTech), Ericsson (ICT), Axa Insurance (Financial Services), Covidien (MedTech), Standex (Engineering), Synergy Health (MedTech), KCI (MedTech), PPD (Pharma), Cameron (Engineering) and Teleflex (MedTech).

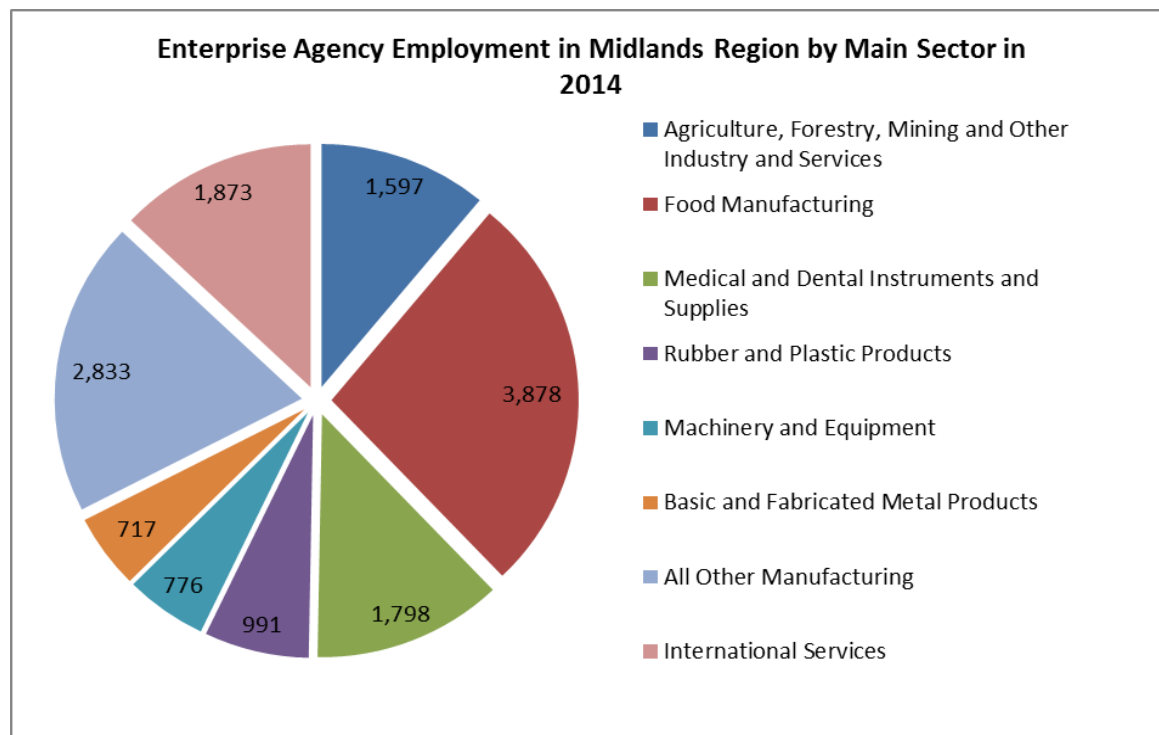
Employment in IDA-supported companies increased employment from 3,736 to 4,032 between 2011 and 2014, representing an increase of 8%. 19 IDA projects were approved in the Midlands over the period 2011-2014, the majority of which were expansions by existing clients, mainly in the International Services sector.

As outlined above and on Fig 4 below, the Manufacturing sector accounts for most of the enterprise agency-supported employment in the Midlands region, employing close to 11,000 people, with over a third of these employed in the Food and Drink Sector. Over the past decade, the numbers employed by enterprise-agency clients in the Food sector has increased by 33%.

There are almost 1,900 people employed in International Services in the region, of which 1,570 are employed in the ICT sector. The numbers employed in International Services has increased by 53%

over the last decade, albeit from a much smaller base with current employment of 1,873 (1,213 in 2005).

Fig 4 – Sectoral breakdown of Enterprise Agency supported employment, 2014



Foreign owned firms predominate in the Medical Devices and ICT services, while the cohort of indigenous firms dominates in Food & Drink and across almost all other Manufacturing sectors.

In addition to those employed in Enterprise Ireland and IDA supported companies, there were 3,498 people employed in 743 client companies of the Local Enterprise Offices in the Midlands region at end 2014, with 263 jobs created in these companies during the year.

Employment in commercial State bodies

Bord na Mona and Coillte – both commercial State companies - are significant employers and landowners in the Midland region and have grown their enterprises on the basis of the natural land resources of the Midlands region. Bord na Mona employs approximately 900 people (both full-time and seasonal) in the Midlands, while Coillte employs approximately 55 people in the four Midland counties. The activities of both companies also support many indirect jobs in the Midlands economy.

Bord na Mona is undergoing significant diversification in response to changing economic circumstances and environmental opportunity. Bord na Mona, traditionally involved in peat harvesting, has diversified into Renewable Energy, Resource Recovery, Waste Management and supporting Sustainability. The company has developed many new innovative products and services that draw on the experience and skills-sets of its employees. For example, BNM operates a factory

producing peat briquettes and supplies peat for use as growing media. The company has also commenced operation of wind farm at Mount Lucas, near its power station at Edenderry, where BNM also operates a peaking power plant.

Coillte operates in forestry, land-based businesses, renewable energy and panel products. Coillte's Midland Business Area Unit encompasses Longford, Offaly, Westmeath, and parts of Laois as well as parts of other counties, within which Coillte owns 48,630.51 hectares of land. Three-quarters of this is forested, with the remainder mostly moorland, marsh and lakes.

Coillte is a key provider of outdoor recreation and its lands offer multiple activities such as walking, hiking, fishing, canoeing, and field archaeology. The company is also in the process of commencing a feasibility study looking at the wider potential for cycle trails in the region, involving Offaly County Council and Bord na Mona. Coillte's core forestry business in the region serves a number of key local sawmill customers.

In line with the Government's decision to partially merge certain activities of BNM and Coillte, the companies are actively involved in developing Bioenergy Ireland to supply biomass for a range of customers, including power plants, CHP plants, etc. BNM is also seeking to promote the growing of willow by the farming community as a biomass feedstock and is researching growth of suitable biomass on its peatland for potential use in Anaerobic Digestion plants for energy generation.

ESB has been synonymous with the Midlands Region for over 60 years, with over 10 peat burning stations since the early 1950s in different counties dotted the country. Currently, ESB operates two peat burning stations in the Midlands Region - West Offaly Power in Shannonbridge, Co. Offaly and Lough Ree Power in Lanesboro, Co. Longford. These two stations employ 80 staff directly as well as supporting other employment in the Midlands Region through the ESB's procurement of goods and services to facilitate operations within the stations.

Down the years, ESB has had a special relationship with Bord Na Mona, which remains to this day with ESB being their biggest customer. The peat harvesting required to supply the stations is a source of substantial fulltime and seasonal employment through Bord na Mona, as they meet ESB's significant requirement for milled peat on an ongoing basis. ESB and Bord na Mona are establishing a Joint Working Group which will review all issues relating to the possible operation of the two stations beyond 2019, when the current fuel supply agreement between the two semi-State companies is due to expire. ESB is also planning major capital investment projects over the next five years to reinforce its distribution network in the Midlands.

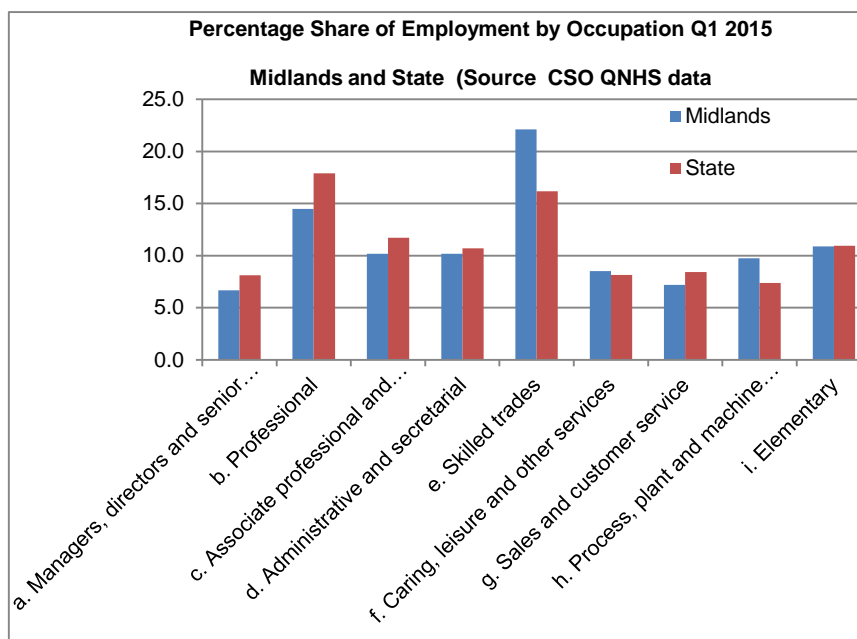
Employment by Occupation

Figure 5 below shows a breakdown of employment by occupation across the regions as at Quarter 1 2015. The highest proportion of the workforce in the region - 22.1% - is engaged in the Skilled Trades category. This compares to the national figure of 16.2%. The two other categories where the percentage of the Midlands workforce exceeds the national average are in Caring, Leisure & Other services (Category F), and Process Plant and Machine Operatives (Category H). It is also notable that

the combined figure for the ABC classifications (Managers and professionals) in the Midlands, at 31.3% of workforce, is significantly below that for the State at 37.7%.

These statistics bear out the historical reliance on employment in sectors such as Construction, Wholesale/Retail in the Midlands.

Fig. 5 - Employment by occupation: Midland versus State QNHS Q1 2015



Source: CSO Persons aged 15 years and over in employment (ILO) classified by UK SOC2010 – 1 digit and NUTS3 Region Q1 2015

3.2 Business Demographics in the region

The previous section has outlined the labour market position of those who live in the Midlands, including those who work outside the region.

A closer examination of the number of enterprises active in the region indicates that there were 9,302 active enterprises operating in the Midlands in 2012, the most recent period for which data is available from the Central Statistics Office on Business Demographics. This figure excludes Agriculture and Public Service and reflects a reduction of over 2,500 (circa. 22%) in the number of enterprises active in 2007.

Table 5 below provides a breakdown of the number of active enterprises for selected sectors in the Business Economy and the numbers employed in those enterprises in the years 2007 and 2012. The number of people employed in these sectors fell by almost 20,000 overall over the period 2007 to 2012. It is important to note that the numbers employed in these sectors differs from the corresponding sectoral data in the CSO Quarterly Household Employment Survey (QNHS), as Agriculture and the Public Services sectors are not included on the table. People living in, but working outside the region are also not included in the Business Demographic figures below.

Table 5 – No. of enterprises and employees for key sectors, Midlands region, 2007 & 2012

| Number of Enterprises and Number of Employees Selected Sectors (2007 - 2012) | | | | |
|---|--------------------|--------|--------|----------|
| Midlands Region | | 2007 | 2012 | % Change |
| Business economy excluding activities of holding companies (B to N,-642) | Active Enterprises | 11,869 | 9,302 | -21.6% |
| | Employees | 54,111 | 34,747 | -35.8% |
| Manufacturing (C) | Active Enterprises | 909 | 775 | -14.7% |
| | Employees | 12,298 | 9,412 | -23.5% |
| Construction (F) | Active Enterprises | 3,964 | 2,117 | -46.6% |
| | Employees | 11,119 | 2,816 | -74.7% |
| Wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles (G) | Active Enterprises | 2,728 | 2,442 | -10.5% |
| | Employees | 14,430 | 10,685 | -26.0% |
| Transportation and storage (H) | Active Enterprises | 711 | 575 | -19.1% |
| | Employees | 1,777 | 1,445 | -18.7% |
| Accommodation and food service activities (I) | Active Enterprises | 964 | 920 | -4.6% |
| | Employees | 5,925 | 5,184 | -12.5% |
| Professional, scientific and technical activities (M) | Active Enterprises | 1,027 | 1,032 | 0.5% |
| | Employees | 2,543 | 2,097 | -17.5% |
| Administrative and support service activities (N) | Active Enterprises | 621 | 492 | -20.8% |
| | Employees | 2,650 | 1,302 | -50.9% |
| Source: Derived from CSO Database BRA18: Business Demography NACE Rev 2 by Activity, County, Year and Statistic | | | | |

Clearly, the time period for the above data precedes the recent upturn in the economy which has seen growth over the past two years. Nonetheless, the figures indicate that the Manufacturing and Wholesale/Retail Sectors continue to be the most important sectors in terms of employment in the region.

The figures highlight the very significant decline in both the number of active companies and the number of people employed in the Construction sector in the Midlands between 2007 and 2012. There was a 47% decrease in the number of enterprises operating in Construction in the region over that period. The Manufacturing and Wholesale/Retail Sectors also suffered significant losses, in line with developments at national level.

Scale of companies

Of the 9,302 companies active in 2012, approximately:

- 8,500 (91% of total number) employed less than 10 people
- 500 (5.3%) companies employed between 10 and 20 people

- 200 (2.1%) employed between 20 and 49 people
- 85 (0.9%) employed between 50 and 249 employees, and
- a relatively small number of large companies in the region employed more than 250 employees.

These statistics reflect the fact that the enterprise base in the Midlands is dominated by small indigenous companies, with a relative small number of FDI companies accounting for approximately 4,000 employees. However, this is a profile shared with many other regions.

3.3 Education and Skills attainment

Table 6 below shows the highest level of Education completed by the population in the Midlands region, based on the 2011 Census of Population. The average for the State is provided for comparative purposes.

While there will, of course, be deviations from the national average in all regions, the most significant variation for the Midlands is in relation to those with Third Level or higher education qualifications. 22.9% of those living in the Midlands have Third Level education or higher, compared to the national average of 29.1%. The Midlands ranks lowest of all regions in this category, marginally lower than the South East (23.1%) and Border (23.4%). This clearly can have implications for some enterprises sourcing their skills locally. Dublin and the Mid-East at 36.3% and 30% respectively have the highest proportion of numbers in Third Level education.

Table 6 - Highest Level of Education completed: Midlands region and national average, 2011

| Highest Level of Education completed: Midlands region and national average, 2011 | | |
|--|--------------|----------------|
| Level of Education | Midlands | State |
| Primary or no Formal | 16.7% | 15.2% |
| Lower secondary | 18.6% | 16.6% |
| Upper secondary | 36.7% | 34.4% |
| 3rd Level + | 22.9% | 29.1% |
| Not stated | 5.1% | 4.7% |
| Persons (,000) | 182.0 | 3,003.5 |
| Source: Derived from CSO Census of Population 2011 | | |

According to Higher Education Authority (HEA) statistics, there were approximately 8,600 Full Time students from the Midland region attending HEA-Funded Institutions in 2012/13. Of these, approximately 4,000 were enrolled in Universities, and 4,100 in various Institutes of Technology. Roughly 47% (1,800) of those students enrolled in Universities were attending the three Dublin based Universities, with 22% enrolled in NUIG, 17.5% in Maynooth, and 11.4% in the University of Limerick.

Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) is the only Third Level Educational facility in the Midlands region, catering for over 5,300 students in undergraduate and post-graduate programmes. 70% of these students are drawn from the greater Midland region.

An encouraging development for the Midlands is that the number of students taking STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) subjects has increased. Recent HEA data indicates a noteworthy rise in the number of Midlands students entering third level courses in STEM subjects. The analysis, when compared with a similar study carried out in 2008, shows an average increase of 58% in the number of students in STEM courses between 2008 and 2014, and an increase of approximately 41% in the share of students choosing STEM subjects at Third level across the Midlands during that six year period (see Tables 7 and 8 below).

Table 7 - No. of Students choosing a STEM course at 3rd Level by county of origin (2008 and 2014)

| No. of Students choosing a STEM course at 3rd Level by county of origin (2008 and 2014) | | | |
|---|------|------|------------|
| County | 2008 | 2014 | % Increase |
| Laois | 73 | 110 | 51% |
| Longford | 58 | 63 | 9% |
| Offaly | 81 | 142 | 75% |
| Westmeath | 108 | 190 | 76% |
| Source: HEA Statistics | | | |

Table 8 – Percentage of Students choosing a STEM course at 3rd Level by county of origin (2008 and 2014)

| Percentage of Students choosing a STEM course at 3rd Level by county of origin (2008 and 2014) | | | |
|--|------|------|------------|
| County | 2008 | 2014 | % Increase |
| Laois | 13.1 | 17.4 | 35% |
| Longford | 16.2 | 18.6 | 15% |
| Offaly | 13.8 | 21.2 | 53% |
| Westmeath | 14.6 | 23.4 | 60% |
| National average | 15.6 | 20 | 28% |
| Source HEA Statistics | | | |

3.4 Gross Value Added (GVA)

Gross value added (GVA) is a measure of the value of goods and services produced in an area, industry or sector of an economy. In 2012, the latest year for which such data is available, the Midland Region accounted for 3.3% of the total Gross Value Added within the State - the lowest level of output of all regions. The Services sector contributed €4.1 billion to national GVA in 2012, with Industry and Agriculture contributing €1.1

Midlands region – GVA 2012 Data

Midlands GVA represents 3.3% of State Total

Composition of GVA:

Services - 77.3%

Industry - 19.9%,

Agriculture - 2.8%,

GVA per Capita 2012: €18,638 compared to the State average of €34,308

billion and €148 million respectively, reflecting the sectoral composition of employment outlined earlier in this analysis.

GVA per capita levels in the Midland Region were also significantly below those of all other regions. In 2012, the level of GVA produced per person in the Midland Region was 54.3% of the State average. Gross value added per person in 2012 was €18,638, compared to €34,308 nationally.

The relatively low level of GVA in the Midlands can be attributed in part to the low population density of the region relative to all other regions, but also indicating that the region is lacking in higher value-added activities. It is also worth noting that a certain portion of the population of the Midlands is contributing to the GVA totals in the Greater Dublin Area, with the effect of reducing the per capita figures for the Midlands region.

Chapter 4: Enterprise Assets

4.1 Enterprise Agencies in the Midlands Region

4.1.1 Enterprise Ireland

Enterprise Ireland is the national agency with responsibility for the development of Irish enterprise, deepening Ireland's footprint in world markets, and supporting employment creation in our economy.



Enterprise Ireland provides supports to enterprise across all stages of business development. Its mission is focused on increasing the number of companies starting-up, succeeding, expanding, exporting and ultimately creating jobs in Ireland. Regional enterprise development is a key element of Enterprise Ireland's corporate strategy which focuses on driving entrepreneurship, fostering innovation, developing international scale and building future competitive advantage. The Midlands Region is served via Enterprise Ireland's office in Athlone.

Enterprise Ireland supports approximately 274 companies in the Midland region, employing over 9,200 people in full-time permanent employment. The agency provides financial and non-financial support to start-up and established companies in the region. In 2014, Enterprise Ireland approved €10 million in financial support to companies in the Midlands.

In the Midlands Enterprise Ireland focuses on:

Enterprise Ireland: Overview of impact in the Midland region

- ✓ 274 client companies in the region
- ✓ 9,213 people in permanent full-time employment in client companies
- ✓ €10m approved in 2014 to companies in the region
- ✓ 37 entrepreneurs supported on New Frontiers programme since 2012
- ✓ 10 High Potential Start-Up companies supported since 2011
- ✓ Provides financial support to 2 Technology Gateways in AIT and funded the establishment of an incubation centre at AIT
- ✓ Co-funded the establishment of 8 Community Enterprise Centres

Entrepreneurship & New Companies: Developing the pipe-line of Midlands' entrepreneurs and start-up companies with the potential to trade internationally in the future. Supports include, for example, Enterprise Start workshops, the New Frontiers Development Programme, Competitive Feasibility Funds and Competitive Start Funds. Since the advent of the network of Local Enterprise Offices, which are funded by Enterprise Ireland, the agency plays a critical role in driving and nurturing entrepreneurship all the way from an originating idea at local level, to taking-on global markets. Enterprise Ireland works closely with the Local Enterprise Office in each county and collaborates with other regional enterprise partners such as IDA Ireland, Local Authorities, Education and Training Boards and AIT to support job creation and enterprise development.

Non-Exporting Established Companies: Working with domestically focussed companies in the Midlands with the potential to export via Enterprise Ireland's Potential Exporters Division. Regionally-based seminars, workshops, on-line diagnostic tools, and market research resources are all provided to companies seeking new opportunities and preparing to enter new markets.

Scaling Established (exporting) Companies: Enterprise Ireland engages with established companies based in the Midlands in developing their capability to consolidate and deepen their footprint in existing export markets. Supports range from LEAN, R&D, Management development, funding and access to 30 overseas offices – all as part of a comprehensive growth strategy.

In addition, in partnership with the Institutes of Technology, Enterprise Ireland has established a nationwide network of 12 Technology Gateways which deliver technology solutions for Irish industry close to their market needs. Two of the Gateways are located in the Midlands, at AIT.

4.1.2 IDA Ireland

IDA Ireland is the agency responsible for attracting foreign direct investment into Ireland. IDA Ireland's Midland office is located in Athlone. In 2014, IDA supported 35 companies in the Midlands with just over 4,000 full time employees.



IDA Ireland's regional strategy implementation is focussed on:

- Working with public bodies and the private sector on the Regional Action Plans for Jobs.
- Working closely with existing clients to retain and strengthen their presence through continued company transformation.
- Increasing Global Business Services and High Tech Manufacturing investments.
- Aligning IDA business sectors with the region and their corresponding strengths to develop sectoral ecosystems.
- Working more closely with Enterprise Ireland and its indigenous base of companies to identify synergies, enhance clusters, participate in site visits and maximise benefits for the region.
- Pursuing new areas of opportunity for clients companies.
- Developing appropriate property solutions through the provision of infrastructure and sites in designated locations.
- Increasing IDA Ireland's regional footprint to adequately support the regional strategy.

In February 2015, IDA Ireland launched a new five-year corporate strategy which places a renewed emphasis on FDI in the regions. IDA is targeting a minimum increase in investment of 30% to 40% in each region outside Dublin over the period 2015-2019 compared to the agency's 2010-2014 strategy. This would equate to a minimum of 25 additional projects in the Midlands region by 2019.

Impact of IDA Ireland in the Midlands

- ✓ 35 client companies
- ✓ 4,032 jobs in supported companies
- ✓ 4 Industrial & Technology Parks
- ✓ 19 investment projects approved 2010-2014
- ✓ 25+ additional investments targeted for 2015-2019

However, the strategy recognises that, ultimately, the decision on where companies locate is a matter for the companies themselves. Moreover, not all counties in the country – or a particular

region – will be able to compete at the same level due to a combination of constraints. For example, the need to locate close to Third level colleges and ensure a supply of relevant talent and skills is a key criterion for potential clients which not all counties may be able to meet.

Regions will need a stronger focus to develop “pull” factors to compete with international competition to attract companies to visit, locate and be retained in regions.

IDA property

IDA Ireland is committed to ensuring a good supply of suitable property solutions is available for FDI in regional locations, and where the private sector is not delivering a solution, IDA has taken a lead role in the construction of new facilities in designated locations as outlined in the new building programme in the strategy.

The IDA has built and developed a number of industrial parks in the Midlands which offer strategic facilities for companies which may be interested in locating in the Midlands. The key parks include:

Athlone Business & Technology Park, a fully landscaped 40 hectare (100 acre) park with direct access to the N6 National Primary Route and M4 motorway to Dublin. The Business Park has been landscaped and designed to a high standard offering accommodation for both manufacturing and international services clients. The park has greenfield areas for future development. The IDA has just completed a new Advanced Technology Building in the park of c. 2,674m², part two storey and part double-height single storey. Athlone is also earmarked for a further property investment in 2017 by IDA.

Mullingar Business & Technology Park, a 27 hectare (68 acre) park located adjacent to the N52 Dundalk to Limerick Route and the M4/M6 Motorway to Dublin. The site boasts existing designs for advanced technology buildings and high specification office facilities to suit both manufacturing and internationally traded services clients. The services infrastructure has been developed to suit client requirements and there are greenfield sites available for future development on the park.

Portlaoise Business & Technology Park, is a 18-hectare (46 acre) park adjacent to the N7 National Primary Route connecting Limerick and Cork with Dublin. The park has been fully landscaped and has a services infrastructure to suit the needs of both manufacturing and international services clients. The park is within walking distance of Portlaoise town and there are designs in place for high specification office and technology building as well as greenfield sites for future development.

Tullamore Business and Technology Park A 31 hectare park a short distance from Tullamore town. The Business Park has been landscaped and designed to a high standard and has all the services infrastructure to suit the needs of both manufacturing and international services clients with approx. 9 hectares of greenfield site available for future development.

4.1.3 Local Enterprise Offices

Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs), which operate within the Local Authority structure, act as a “First Stop Shop” for anyone seeking information and support on starting or growing a business in Ireland. Their role is to drive the development of local enterprise, putting local micro and small business at the heart of job creation. They support business start-ups and work to increase the job potential of new and existing micro and small businesses. Support is provided in the form of information, advice, training, mentoring, seminars and selective financial support.



Local Enterprise Offices are located in Longford, Mullingar, Portlaoise and Tullamore. They will play a key role in supporting entrepreneurship and enterprise development within the Midlands region.

The LEOs provide a range of services in the areas of:

- Business Information and Advisory Services
- Enterprise Support and Development Services
- Entrepreneurship Support Services
- Local Economic Development Services

In 2014, the four Midlands LEOs had 743 clients with a combined total of 3,498 jobs. 263 net new jobs were created by LEO clients in the Midlands in 2014. For 2015 and subsequent years, each LEO will publish an annual Business Plan, setting out clear targets for job creation and enterprise support.

4.2 Local Authorities

There are four Local Authorities in the Midlands region – Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath Co. Councils. The Local Authorities provide an extensive range of services for the residents of the Midlands counties, covering areas such as economic development, tourism and planning, the environment, community development, housing, and physical infrastructure. The Authorities play an active role in the development of industry, business, social, arts, heritage and cultural affairs.



Supports provided to assist in the creation of new enterprises include, but are not limited to:

- Information, advice, training, mentoring, seminars and selective financial support.
- Assisting business people tendering for larger contracts, including through Regional Procurement Events.
- Provision and maintenance of innovation/enterprise unit space, for example:
 - Laois: Portlaoise and Portarlington Enterprise Centres, Mountmellick Development Association

- Longford: Longford Enterprise Centre
 - Offaly: Birr, Ferbane, Portarlinton, Rhode, The Junction
 - Westmeath: Mullingar eWorking Centre, Blry Industrial Park, Athlone and in Innova Business Park, Castlepollard
- Assisting businesses in the identification of suitable premises through tailored property solutions.
 - Use of vacant units to support Creative Industries, e.g. Pop-Up shops.
 - Active engagement with the Diaspora to promote job opportunities in the region.
 - Active engagement with Connect Ireland to promote job opportunities in the region.

The economic development role of Local Authorities has been significantly enhanced under the Local Government reform programme as set out in the Government's *Action Programme for Effective Local Government* (October 2013) and given statutory effect by the Local Government Reform Act, 2014.

In addition to their enterprise support functions, based particularly on the operation of the Local Enterprise Offices, this involves, not only an increased focus on economic development in Local Authority functions generally, such as planning, infrastructure, amenity and environment, but also pursuing economic development as a core Local Authority function in its own right. Key strategic objectives of the Local Authority economic development role will be to implement action to capitalise fully on the economic potential of local strengths and assets, and also to collaborate with relevant agencies to maximise the economic impact of major growth centres, in accordance with regional economic priorities which, in future, will be agreed in the context of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies.

The Local Authorities collectively employ approximately 1,400 people in the Midlands, making them important employers in their own right in the region. As part of the provision of on-going services, the Local Authorities will continue to improve and maintain the infrastructural services of the region, making it an attractive location in which to reside, invest and study.

The ***MidlandsIreland.ie*** brand, is supported by the four Local Authorities in the region, and showcases the Midland Region across four pillars of: Living, Learning, Tourism and Enterprise.

4.3 Community Enterprise Centres (CECs)

Community Enterprise Centres (CECs) provide a supportive environment for entrepreneurs and support the development of local entrepreneurship in urban and rural locations. Since the Community Enterprise Centres scheme was established in 1989, €61.4 million has been approved and over 100 CECs have been set up across the country.

There are eight Community Enterprise Centres (CECs) located in the Midlands which collectively represent a total State investment in the range of €3 million (€1.6 million approved by Enterprise Ireland). There are approximately 400 people employed across the eight Community Enterprise

Centres in the Midlands. Table 9 presents information on each of the eight CECs in the Midlands in 2013. Many of the Community Enterprise Centres offer 'hot desk' facilities with associated supporting infrastructure including broadband and access to meeting rooms. The Local Authorities also have serviced sites available in their portfolio.

Table 9: Overview of the CECs in the Midlands (2013)

| Community Enterprise Centre | Occupancy rates | Square Footage |
|--|-----------------|----------------|
| Athlone Community Development Association Ltd, Co. Westmeath | 80% | 6,333 |
| Ferbane Business and Technology Park Ltd, Co. Offaly | 100% | 12,500 |
| Longford Enterprise Development Co Ltd, Co. Longford | 90% | 18,500 |
| Mountmellick Development Association Ltd, Co. Laois | 85% | 59,000 |
| Mullingar Enterprise Technology and Innovation Centre Ltd, Co. Westmeath | 90% | 15,000 |
| Portarlington Enterprise Centre Ltd, Co. Laois | 80% | 13,000 |
| Portlaoise Enterprise Centre Ltd, Co. Laois | 80% | 18,000 |
| Mullingar Enterprise Centre Ltd, Co. Westmeath | 100% | 6,100 |
| Source : Enterprise Ireland Analysis - Occupancy rates can vary at any given time given the nature of the business | | |

This table represents a snapshot of the CECs in 2013. There may be scope for increasing throughput of new business through these centres and for expansion in some areas.

4.4 Technology Centres and Research Centres

Technology Gateways

Two of the Enterprise Ireland-funded Technology Gateways, APT and COMAND are located in the Midlands and are hosted by AIT. APT (Applied Polymer Technologies) houses expertise in polymer technologies and COMAND (Connected Digital Media), expertise in connected media. To date, Enterprise Ireland has invested over €500,000 in these centres which actively contribute to the 2015 national target of 260 industry engagements for the national Gateway Network.

In addition, between 2008 and 2013, Enterprise Ireland approved €1.125 million in Innovation Vouchers for research and innovation carried out under this initiative at AIT. AIT ranks second in terms of completed innovation voucher projects across the higher education sector.

Strategic Research Institutes

In addition to the Technology Gateways, AIT has three strategic research institutes on campus, in Materials (MRI), Bioscience (BRI) and Software (SRI).

AIT's Centre for Industrial Services and Design (CISD) specialises in Engineering and Design services including Rapid Prototyping (product design, 3D printing, additive manufacturing) and hosts extensive analytical laboratories. Further research clusters exist at school level.

Clients of the institutes include:

Start-ups: Caramagic, TownApps, Lir Agri , Cúltec

Indigenous SMEs/international: Arantico, Openet, Mergon, Vistamed

Multinationals: Ericsson, Wyeth Nutrition, Boston Scientific and Medtronic.

AIT is a core partner in the Irish Centre for Cloud Computing & Commerce (IC4), a multi-institutional research centre located at Dublin City University (DCU) which also includes researchers from University College Cork (UCC). IC4 carries out applied technical and business research in cloud computing, in areas that are chosen by its industrial members and that are strategically important for future growth in the Irish economy.

The Midlands Innovation and Research Centre (MIRC)

As part of a €50 million euro investment initiative to build on-campus entrepreneurship and business incubation facilities in all Higher Education Institutes across the country, Enterprise Ireland supported the establishment of the Midlands Innovation and Research Centre (MIRC) located in AIT. MIRC provides incubation facilities for innovative and knowledge-based enterprise, an enterprise programme for entrepreneurs and start-ups (New Frontiers Programme), and makes available the resources and expertise of AIT to support client companies. The New Frontiers programme is delivered in the Midlands and Mid-East regions by the MIRC in partnership with Maynooth University. The MIRC has supported 140 knowledge-based start-ups to date.

Midlands Manufacturing Technologies Campus (MMTC)

AIT in partnership with Industry and regional public bodies is progressing development of the Midlands Manufacturing Technologies Campus. Located on a 1.7 hectare site in the Garrycastle Business and Technology Park, the MMTC – with a focus on Advanced/Discrete/Additive Manufacturing technologies, Industrial/Product Design and 'Smart Factories' – will provide a dynamic industry-focused R&D environment with co-location of industry and academic researchers, industry training, industry access to specialised equipment and facilities, and regional outreach.

Incubation facilities (including access to clean room facilities) will support early-stage FDI companies, international entrepreneurs, and second-stage indigenous companies with high growth potential. Community engagement, including a conference facility, will actively engage research and industry partners as well as local stakeholders.

4.5 Business Networks

There are a number of Chambers of Commerce and business networks in the Midlands region, including:

- Tullamore Chamber of Commerce
- Athlone Chamber of Commerce
- Mullingar Chamber of Commerce
- Birr Chamber of Commerce
- Longford Chamber of Commerce
- Downtown Portlaoise
- Longford Business Forum

The Midlands Gateway Chamber of Commerce represents Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar Chambers as a single entity, and serves as a lobby group that supports issues and projects that are critical to enhancing business growth in the Midlands region. The Midlands Gateway Chamber was formed in 2007 by members of the town Chambers who recognised the need for one regional voice representing the Midlands. The board of the Midlands Gateway Chamber comprises of regional business professionals from both the public and private sectors as well as representatives from the local chambers in Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore.

The Midland Gateway Chamber in partnership with other business interest groups of the Midlands and the Local Authorities, together with the Enterprise Development Agencies, hosts an annual Business Awards Event to recognise the business leaders of the region.

4.6 Local Development Companies

Integrated Local Development Companies are not-for-profit companies that target the areas of greatest need in the country, to provide an area-based response to long-term unemployment and to promote social inclusion across three measures: Services for the Unemployed, Community Development and Community Based Youth Initiatives. There are four Integrated Local Development Companies in the Midlands:

- Offaly Local Development Company
- Westmeath Community Development Ltd.
- Laois Partnership Company
- Longford Community Resources Ltd.

The focus of the Local Development Companies falls into two broad categories – Rural Development and Social Inclusion. They provide a range of services to clients, including services to support the development of enterprise throughout the region. Programmes provided include the Rural Development Programme, Business Development Training Programmes and Coach and Mentoring services.

The Local Development Companies have supported social enterprise throughout the region, many of which operate on a fully commercial basis. The Companies also provide supports to clients under

the Back To Work Enterprise Allowance Scheme and the Social Inclusion & Community Activation Programme (SICAP), which are funded by the Department of Social Protection and the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government respectively. SICAP includes an Economic Development strand.

The Local Development Companies work as closely as possible with the LEOs and have successfully progressed some clients to LEO supports (see example below). Laois Development Company piloted a training course in Wind Energy skills with Fasttrack to IT (FIT) and trained 15 people who had lost their jobs in the construction sector for the emerging renewable energy industry. All 15 trainees subsequently found employment in the sector.



From Local Development Company client to international supermarket shelf – G's Gourmet Jams

G's Gourmet Jams, Co.Laois, was founded by Helen Gee in 1998 and launched in 1999 with partial funding from Laois Partnership Company. It was set up as an alternative farm enterprise and is family run. The jams are made the traditional way, stirred and poured by hand from an open pan boiling method. Only the very best quality fruit and natural ingredients are used with no artificial colouring or preservatives giving

it a very distinctive homemade taste. G's Gourmet Jams has grown to be an Enterprise Ireland client company and supplies jams and chutneys to supermarkets, restaurants and hotels throughout Ireland and abroad.

4.7 Education & Training infrastructure

Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT)

Athlone Institute of Technology is situated in the heart of the region and currently has 5,313 students engaged in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes across Business, Humanities, Accounting, Information Technology Hospitality and Tourism Studies, Engineering and Science. 70% of the students are drawn from the greater Midlands region.

As outlined above, AIT hosts two Technology Gateways and the Midlands Innovation and Research Centre (MIRC). The Institute also has three strategic research institutes in Materials (MRI), Biosciences (BRI) and Software (SRI). The Institute's Centre for Industrial Services and Design (CISD) specialises in Engineering and Design services including rapid prototyping (product design, 3D printing, additive manufacturing). Analytical laboratories are made available to industry for research and development purposes.

The Midlands also benefits from close proximity to other Institutes of Technology and Universities – for example: Maynooth University, Institute of Technology Carlow, Waterford Institute of

Technology and their outreach facilities. In 2013, AIT and Maynooth University established a strategic partnership - supported by a Memorandum of Understanding - to facilitate collaboration in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, student access and progression and internationalisation. This memorandum builds on the success of existing and growing collaborative work between the institutions in research, commercialisation and entrepreneurship.

AIT plays a central role in research and innovation programmes in the Midlands - linking its research and innovation to the needs of both indigenous and multi-national industry through its Office of Research. AIT's research and development is characterised by 'smart specialisation' – building competitive advantage in companies and in the region by developing and matching AIT's research and innovation strengths to business needs in order to address emerging opportunities and market developments. This collaboration with industry and other regional, national and international partners is strengthened through the Institute's network of companies and universities across Europe, Asia and the US.

AIT is second among 39 Knowledge Providers nationally for completion of Enterprise Ireland Innovation Voucher projects on behalf of SMEs, and second among the Institutes of Technology for completion of larger-scale Innovation Partnership projects on behalf of companies. From 2007 to 2014, Enterprise Ireland approved €1.125 million in Innovation Vouchers.

The development of the Midlands Manufacturing Technologies Campus (MMTC) will be an important step in building regional competitiveness and innovation capacity in the Midlands.





AIT is on a developmental pathway to become a Technological University, which AIT envisages will be a key attraction for the location of companies within the region and will act as a focus for the retention of graduate expertise within the broader area.

Industrial Design

An opportunity is emerging in the Midland region to build a focus on industrial design, through collaboration between industry and Athlone Institute of Technology.

AIT's Centre for Industrial Services and Design (CISD) provides a full service of industrial design and engineering of products ranging from discrete plastic parts to large mechanical systems. Services provided include Product Design, from concept to manufacture; Surface and Solid 3D CAD Modelling and Assemblies; Product Concept Digital Visualisation/3D Product Visualisation; Prototyping; Design for Manufacture/Assembly/Environment; Computer Aided Engineering; Material Selection; 3D Scanning and Reverse Engineering; Manufacturing/Tooling Support. AIT's Centre for Industrial Services and Design has completed 1,264 projects for 316 companies.

Product sectors supported include Consumer and Lifestyle Products, Medical Devices, Baby & Children's Products, Construction, Automotive, Sports Goods, Green Technology, Brewing, Veterinary and Agricultural.

| From the Midlands to global markets – examples of CISD Client success | |
|---|---|
| <p>Offshore Handling Systems required a series of hand tools for use in the oil and gas industry. CISD designed and developed a range of 8 products with an ergonomic handle and different attachments to be used in various areas and functions on offshore rigs. The products were designed using 3D CAD, and rotational moulding was chosen to build the polyethylene components, combined with a light aluminium staff. Offshore Handling Systems are now successfully exporting these products to oil/gas platforms all over the world.</p> |  |
| <p>Equiniche Sciences had a concept for a hay feeder that enables horses in a stabled routine to eat at ground level and throughout the day. CISD built 3D CAD models and developed a prototype of the Hayfeeder. The main plastic parts were designed for the rotational moulding process and rubber parts using the compression moulding process. Final assembly and fixing details were defined, enabling Equiniche to purchase tooling for the components and units to be manufactured. The Harmony Hayfeeder has the potential to be a global product with significant equine populations in Europe, the US, Japan and Australia.</p> |  |
| <p>SmartBandStand had an idea for a stand/armband which would enable a smartphone to be used while on a user's arm or wrist, keeping hands free and enabling the smartphone to be detached or replaced in one simple movement. CISD developed the concept which required multiple rotating parts, with systems to clasp onto an arm or any object while also being able to open and sit on a flat surface. Bespoke systems were designed to allow quick attachment and rotation of smart phone cases. All parts were designed for injection moulding. Numerous prototypes were built and tested for verification of form, fit and function. The product is currently being prepared for tooling and manufacture.</p> |  |
| <p>Sedana Medical's AnaConDa is an anaesthetic delivery system for mechanically ventilated patients. The existing product however was identified as not being suitable for patients with a low lung volume capacity, such as with children. CISD has developed a lower volume system suitable for paediatric use. The paediatric Anaconda is now currently in prototype tooling stage for advanced testing and verification.</p> |  |

Education and Training Boards (ETBs)

There are two ETBs located in the Midland region:

- *Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board*, with services available in Laois and Offaly and Headquarters in Portlaoise;
- *Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board*, with services available in Longford and Westmeath and headquarter in Mullingar.

Collectively serving the needs of over 16,500 learners in the Region, the ETBs are statutory education authorities which have responsibility for the provision of further education and training programmes, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. ETBs manage and operate second-level schools, further education colleges, pilot community national schools and a range of adult and further education and Training centres (including former FAS Training Centres) delivering education and training programmes to support learners in the region .

The ETBs also administer the national Construction Training Centre in Mount Lucas, Co. Offaly.

Skillnets

Skillnets actively supports and works with businesses in Ireland to help them address their current and future skills needs through an enterprise-led approach. Skillnets funds groups of companies with similar training needs, through training networks that deliver subsidised training to Irish businesses and their employees, as well as free training to job-seekers. Skillnets has 63 training networks nationwide. Through its ManagementWorks programme, which offers structured learning and one to one mentoring support, Skillnets works with SMEs to build their management capability. Skillnets training networks based in the Midlands:

- First Polymer Skillnet
- Taste4Success Skillnet
- MBE Skillnet (Midlands, Border, East)
- Space Industry Skillnet

Other national sectoral Skillnets that deliver training to companies in the Midlands include:

- ICT Ireland Skillnet
- Rural Enterprise Skillnet
- IFA Skillnet (Irish Farmers Association)
- IMDA Skillnet (Irish Medical Devices Association)
- SIMI Skillnet (Society of the Irish Motor Industry)
- FDII Skillnet (Food & Drink Industry Ireland)

Over 500 companies in the Midlands were members of a Skillnets training network in 2014 and over 1,300 employees benefited from training. The main sectors supported by Skillnets in the Midlands are food and drink, medical devices and life sciences, plastics, ICT technology and manufacturing.

Intreo (Employment Services)

In January 2012, FÁS's Employment Services and Programmes transferred to the Department of Social Protection. October 2012 saw the launch of Intreo, a new service managed by the Department of Social Protection. Intreo Centres act as a single point of contact for all employment services and supports for both Jobseekers and Employers, providing support regarding benefits entitlements, advice on training options and assistance in securing employment/employees.

Intreo centres are located in Longford, Tullamore, and Athlone, with Mullingar to come on stream shortly. The Department of Social Protection also provides services from offices in Portarlinton, Portlaoise, Rathdowney, Birr, Edenderry and Castlepollard.

In total c.28,000 jobseekers are provided with employment and income support services via Intreo in the Midlands regions. A further c.9,000 are supported in employment through schemes such as Family Income Supplement and part-time working options, and c.2,500 are supported on programmes such as JobBridge, Community Employment, Gateway and Tús.

4.8 Other Bodies supporting enterprise in the Midlands

Waterways Ireland

Given the extensive waterways that cut through the Midland region, and the employment associated with activities on those assets, Waterways Ireland has a strong role to play in supporting job creation and retention in the region.

Waterways Ireland is one of six North-South Implementation Bodies established under the British-Irish Agreement in 1999. It has responsibility for the management, maintenance, development, promotion and restoration of inland navigable waterways, principally for recreational purposes.

The waterways under the remit of the Body are the Shannon-Erne Waterway, the Shannon, the Erne Navigation, the Barrow Navigation, the Grand Canal, the Lower Bann, and the Royal Canal. The Shannon river and the Grand and Royal Canals are key features of the Midlands topography.

InterTradeIreland

InterTradeIreland is a Cross-Border trade and business development body funded by the Department of Jobs Enterprise and Innovation and the Northern Ireland Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The organisation supports businesses throughout the island of Ireland to take advantage of North/South co-operative opportunities to improve capability, drive competitiveness, growth and jobs. Since its establishment, 25,000 SMEs have benefited from InterTradeIreland's cross-border information; 6,000 companies have taken part in all-island programmes; over €500 million (stg£700m) worth of trade and business development has been generated, and 3,000 new jobs created.

InterTradeIreland supports SMEs to prepare for public procurement opportunities through workshops, Meet the Buyer events and tender alerts. The body also helps SMEs to gain access to cross-Border sales through programmes such as Acumen and Elevate, and to identify sources of finance. Activities in the latter area include workshops under the "Funding for Growth" initiative to promote all traditional and non-traditional sources of finance to local businesses, equity awareness events including equity advisory clinics where companies can meet with an equity expert, business planning workshops and venture capital case studies.

The annual Seedcorn Competition, run by InterTradeIreland, is aimed at early and new start companies that have a new equity funding requirement and has a total cash prize fund of €280,000. The competition is run on a regional basis across four regions – Munster, Connaught & Leinster, Dublin and Northern Ireland. There will be two winners in each region, one for New Start companies and one for Early Stage companies.

InterTradeIreland will deliver its programmes in the Midlands region in support of this Action Plan for Jobs.

ConnectIreland

Succeed in Ireland is a Government-supported initiative to create new jobs by harnessing the power of the global Diaspora to attract into Ireland, through the diaspora, foreign companies that are expanding internationally. The initiative provides financial rewards those that help attract new,

sustainable jobs into the country. *Succeed in Ireland* complements the work of IDA Ireland and is delivered by ConnectIreland.

Over the lifetime of the *Succeed in Ireland* initiative, 2,500 companies have been introduced to the programme. 48 companies involved in internationally traded services have been approved by IDA Ireland under the programme and these companies hope to create over 1,300 jobs. A further 78 companies are considering locating to Ireland and will continue to be in dialogue with IDA Ireland and ConnectIreland.

In 2014, ConnectIreland began running a more regional and community focused campaign and introduced their Community Action Plan. The overall objective of the campaign is to create visibility and awareness jointly with the 31 City and County Councils of the key role that communities can play in job creation through the use of the ConnectIreland mechanism. Each county is encouraged to appoint a local ambassador who will champion the campaign in their area. The Community Action Plan is an ongoing campaign that has already yielded company introductions in several counties.

ConnectIreland is also running an initiative to encourage Higher Education Institutions at regional level to create and engage an alumni network. A structured network will support the goal of reminding alumni of the advantages of returning to Ireland's regions to do business.

ConnectIreland's **Connectivation** competition asks members of Third Level institutions to submit engagement models to assist in increasing the audience of the ConnectIreland message and ultimately raise further awareness of the advantages of 'doing business' in the region and the importance of the link between diaspora relations and increasing FDI. The competition will be looking for an understanding of both the areas of diaspora engagement and FDI by competitors.

Atlantic Corridor

Atlantic Corridor is a collaborative company, funded by corporate and public sponsors, whose goal is to work in collaboration with key stakeholders to ensure that the Midlands is more attractive to companies, particularly those with a technology focus. Its key objectives are to assist indigenous companies in developing their businesses through collaborative relationships with Atlantic Corridor's international partners, and to grow the exposure and teaching of STEM subjects in schools.

In early 2015, Atlantic Corridor received funding approval from Science Foundation Ireland for a new project which aims to increase participation in STEM education and careers in the Midlands region. A new suite of activities will be delivered in collaboration with Trinity College and will specifically focus on the Midlands Life Sciences sector.

Atlantic Corridor is also working on a new diaspora-based framework to promote economic development across the Midlands and will continue to lever existing connections with North America to create opportunities for entrepreneurs and educational institutions.

4.9 Social and Recreational Assets

Today, location decisions by companies (both foreign and indigenous) are not only considered in terms of relative cost, but also in terms of access to skills and talent, access to markets and customers (locally and internationally), innovative capacity and capability, and an environment offering an attractive quality of life for a mobile workforce.

The Midlands Region has a rich tradition of literature, culture, arts and music as well as offering an abundance of water sports and other outdoor activities. The Midlands arts and culture scene is flourishing, with the Backstage Theatre, Birr Theatre & Arts Centre, the Dunamais Arts Centre & Theatre, the Mullingar Arts Centre, Passionfruit Theatre Company, and the All-Ireland Drama Festival all offering lots to see and do. The region boasts excellent education facilities as well as recreational facilities, as set out in Chapter 2 above.

MidlandsIreland.ie has produced a digital tourism guide to the region, in collaboration with public and private service providers based in the region. The guide showcases the natural assets of the Midlands, and celebrates its culture and heritage. As outlined in Chapter 2, the Midlands is also an attractive destination for water sports and activities, including river cruising, angling and wind surfing.

AIT's new €10 million International Sports Arena facility opened its doors to the public in mid-January 2013. To date the arena has hosted an International Athletics Grand Prix, the AAI Combined Event Championships, the AAI Open Indoor Games, National Indoor Finals, Masters, Under 23s championships, Connacht & Leinster Indoor Championships, as well as several club and athlete training days.

In 2013, Athlone was designated the European Town of Sport. The town held the European Triathlon Championships in 2010 and other international triathlon events have subsequently been held in the region. The sports facilities in the Midlands region – and their proximity to most of Ireland's major urban centres – provide an opportunity that can be capitalised on further. The region has shown its ability to showcase major international events and it can build further on its natural terrain, particularly for events such as triathlon and marathon.

At its peak, the bogland at Boora supplied over 1 million tonnes of peat every year. Lough Boora is



now a sanctuary for wildlife and an amenity for the community. 50kms of cycle and walking routes allow visitors to absorb the unique atmosphere of this special landscape.

In 2015 Lough Boora Discovery Park won the National Tourism Award for Environmental Innovation, adding to its attraction as a place to visit.

Lough Boora Discovery Park, Co. Offaly

Chapter 5: Introduction to the Actions

In preparing this Action Plan, consultation was carried out with key stakeholders in the region to identify key strengths and opportunities which could be optimised to support enterprise growth and job creation in the Midlands. This consultation included a major Stakeholder Forum event in Athlone in December 2014.

Arising from this process, a number of strengths and opportunities were identified for the Midlands region. Specific actions to capitalise on these strengths and opportunities are set out in the following section of this Action Plan, on a thematic basis. The actions will be implemented over the period 2015-2017, with specific timelines and the bodies responsible for their delivery set out against each action.

The Midlands possesses a number of strengths and regionally based assets (as outlined in Chapter 4) that can be harnessed to further develop the existing enterprise base and to capture future employment opportunities. It is also important to note that regional/administrative boundaries should be considered fluid in this context, and that often, potential can be realised by recognising opportunity within broader cross-regional and national level networks and sectoral clusters.

The region has strategic advantages in terms of its central location, ready access and connectivity to other regions through good national transport infrastructure (both road and rail) and access to international airports and ports. The highly developed physical infrastructure is matched by a strong business culture and knowledge base.

Athlone Institute of Technology and its complimentary suite of research activities build on these key sectoral strengths, forging synergistic relationships with other institutions and connecting companies, disciplines and sectors, supported by the strong business support networks of IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland.

International companies in a number of key sectors have recognised these benefits and have become established in the region. There are 35 multinational companies from a range of business sectors operating in the region including a thriving group of innovative Life Sciences and International Business Services companies.

The excellent collaboration between public bodies in the region (e.g. Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, LEOs, Local Authorities, InterTradeIreland, AIT, Bord na Mona, Coillte, Waterways Ireland, etc.) is also an asset that can be built upon to support job creation.

Chapter 6: Driving Entrepreneurship and Growing Business

Entrepreneurship is the essential ingredient in realising the ambition of Ireland becoming the best country in Europe in which to start a new business. Supporting the establishment of new start-up businesses is crucial to the creation of a vibrant indigenous business sector. The entrepreneurs of today are the business leaders of tomorrow, and have the potential to make an important contribution to employment creation in Ireland - two-thirds of all new jobs are created by companies in the first five years following their establishment. The Government is committed to fostering entrepreneurship in line with the *National Policy Statement on Entrepreneurship in Ireland*.

Key priorities under the regional Action Plans in relation to Driving Entrepreneurship and Growing Business will be to:

- Increase the number of start-up businesses in the region.
- Support existing enterprises to grow and improve performance.
- Strengthen the impact of incubation and other work space on the ability of entrepreneurs to grow.
- Promote and encourage entrepreneurship through various other initiatives.

Key targets for this section of the Action Plan are to increase the number of entrepreneurs/start-ups by 25%, improve the 5-year survival rate by 25% and improve scaling performance of companies by 25%.

Growing and scaling companies and helping them to find new markets and export their products and services is also a key ambition of the Plan and a core objective of Enterprise Ireland. Enterprise Ireland client companies exported €18.6 billion million in goods and services in 2014. The agency will lead the drive to increase exports by Irish companies to €22 billion by 2016.

Enterprise Ireland

Fostering entrepreneurship is a key pillar of Enterprise Ireland's corporate strategy. Enterprise Ireland, including its Midlands Regional Office, will work closely with entrepreneurs, local development agencies and local representative bodies to develop a pipeline of entrepreneurs and start-up companies. It will help these entrepreneurs and start-ups to achieve stronger progression through a range of Enterprise Ireland supports, including, for example, the New Frontiers Programme, the Commercialisation Fund, Competitive Feasibility Funds, Competitive Start Fund and the Innovative High Potential Start Up Programme. Enterprise Ireland will run Enterprise Start events, exporting awareness events and workshops targeting start-ups. It will provide business mentors and run Financing for Growth seminars regionally to support entrepreneurs and start-ups.

A central part of Enterprise Ireland's Strategy is to achieve scaling at all stages of growth. Enterprise Ireland assist companies in the Midlands grow internationally by building capability, accessing opportunities for markets and ideas, providing resources and finance, and influencing their business

environment. As part of this Action Plan for Jobs, Enterprise Ireland will step up delivery of a range of programmes, events and supports in the Midlands.

Enterprise Ireland's "Innovating Start-ups" events will help to develop the pipeline of innovative start-ups in the region. These events will target and network those actively interested in starting an innovative business in the Midlands and will include advice and learnings from guest entrepreneurs. The agency will also pilot an Entrepreneurial Partnering Programme in the Midlands which will match new enterprises with established entrepreneurs in the region. Enterprise Ireland will also deliver a range of other programmes and workshops in the Midlands, as set out in the actions below, and will work closely with the four Local Enterprise Offices in the region to support entrepreneurship and microenterprises.

Local Enterprise Offices

Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) act as a "*First Stop Shop*" for anyone seeking information and support on starting or growing a business in Ireland. They will drive the development of local enterprise, putting local microenterprise and small business at the heart of job creation. They will support business start-ups and work to increase the job potential of new and existing micro and small businesses. Support will be provided in the form of information, advice, training, mentoring, seminars and selective financial support.

The LEOs have already embraced new innovative programmes such as Microfinance and the development of the region's best young entrepreneurs, and they will seize the new opportunities for further innovation presented by Enterprise Ireland's competitive funding calls.

In 2014, the Midland LEOs supported the creation of 263 net new jobs – a 7.5% increase on their baseline. For 2015 and subsequent years, the four Midlands LEOs will publish annual Business Plans, setting out clear targets for enterprise support. As well as delivering an established range of supports in 2015, the LEOs will run a new ACCELERATE programme, which is aimed at helping local small businesses develop their management capabilities, improve their sustainability and accelerate their growth prospects.

The LEOs in the Midlands are also exploring providing supports for Part-Time Entrepreneurship Initiatives (e.g. "5pm to 9pm"), which will enable entrepreneurs to explore self-employment, while continuing with the security of day job; and to develop and explore a business concept.

Property Solutions for Enterprise

Incubation space is an important requirement to support start-up companies. The eight Community Enterprise Centres in the Midlands region support approximately 400 jobs. There is scope for increasing throughput of new business through these centres and for expansion in some areas.

The *Community Enterprise Initiatives* competitive call for proposals launched by Enterprise Ireland in May 2015 provides an opportunity for a step-up in new and innovative approaches to providing incubation space, supporting hubs, and encouraging entrepreneurship.

The provision of Business Incentive Schemes by the Local Authorities in the Midland Region will also assist start-ups by providing grant incentives to make use of vacant industrial or commercial premises within designated areas.

E Working

An increasing feature of modern work organisations is the growing prevalence of teleworking. Teleworking allows employers and entrepreneurs to work remotely using modern communications technology.

In 2014, Westmeath Co. Council established an E-Working Centre in Mullingar, adjacent to County Buildings. The E-Working Centre comprises 18 work stations and provides residents of the region who normally travel to work with an option of working closer to home, availing of modern work space and state of the art telecommunications systems. The centre is also available to entrepreneurs who require desk space. Clients of the E-Working centre also have access to the County Council's ancillary facilities, including car parking.

Public Procurement

Public procurement presents a business opportunity for enterprise in the region. The presence of four Local Authorities, along with Government Departments and agencies and commercial State bodies in the region, represents a significant purchasing base for companies that can supply products and services. While public procurement cannot be confined to regional suppliers, opportunities exist for local businesses that may be able to provide supplies or services that meet the requirements of public bodies. The LEOs, Enterprise Ireland and InterTradeIreland will work with SMEs in the Midlands region to support them in preparing for public procurement.

Access to Finance

Access to credit has been a particular difficulty for start-ups and other SMEs since the recession. The Government has introduced a number of initiatives to improve access to finance for SMEs, including the Microenterprise Loan Fund, the Credit Guarantee Scheme and the provision of funds through the new Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland. Enterprise Ireland and the Local Enterprise Office network promote and provide information on these, and other schemes which are available nationally to clients, and aim for increased take-up.

InterTradeIreland will also take a series of actions to promote access to finance from start-ups through to those seeking new export opportunities in Northern Ireland. These activities include workshops under their "Funding for Growth" initiative, equity awareness events, equity advisory clinics and annual Seedcorn Competition which is run on a regional basis across four regions – Munster, Connaught & Leinster, Dublin and Northern Ireland. There will be two winners in each region, one for New Start companies and one for Early Stage companies.

In addition, through its Trade Accelerator Voucher scheme, InterTradeIreland will help companies to identify and break down barriers to trade leading to new export opportunities in Northern Ireland.

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|---|---|-----------|---------------------------|
| | Increasing the number of start-ups | | |
| 1 | Enterprise Ireland will increase enterprise formation in the Midlands through initiatives such as Enterprise Start workshops, the New Frontiers Entrepreneurial Development Programme, Competitive Feasibility Fund and Competitive Start Fund. | Ongoing | Enterprise Ireland |
| 2 | <p>Each of the Local Enterprise Offices in the Midlands region will aim to increase employment in its baseline through increased start-ups and the scaling of existing clients. Annual Business Plans, setting out clear targets and objectives to support start-ups and enterprises in their region. Key aggregate targets for the Midland LEOs for 2015 are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - €1.437 million will be available in grant assistance and enterprise development supports - 40 Start Your Own Business courses will be run, for over 500 participants - 4 Export Awareness Initiatives to be delivered to approx. 50 participants - Over 60 clients will be assigned Start-up mentors - 164 clients will be assigned Business Development mentors - Over 800 women will participate on core LEO training programmes (Start Your Own Business, Accelerate, Hi Start, Export Awareness, Lean, Mentoring) - 65 schools to participate in Student Enterprise programme <p>These targets will be further developed in 2016 and 2017.</p> | 2015 | Midland LEOs |
| 3 | The four Local Authorities in the Midland region will implement Business Incentive Schemes which will provide grants to encourage early stage businesses to locate in vacant commercial or industrial units within designated areas. | 2015-2016 | Midland Local Authorities |

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|----|--|----------|--|
| 4 | Enterprise Ireland will work with the LEOs to develop new ways of delivering capacity improvement. | Ongoing | Enterprise Ireland and LEOs |
| 5 | Working with enterprise partners in the region, Enterprise Ireland will pilot an Entrepreneurial Partnering Programme with 5 entrepreneurs. This mentoring programme will seek to match new entrepreneurs with leading enterprises. | 2016 | Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, LEOs and industry |
| 6 | Enterprise Ireland will <ul style="list-style-type: none"> promote the €5 million Community Enterprise Initiative Scheme launched in May 2015 in the Midlands Region; assess applications; and approve grant funding as appropriate for new projects for job creation in the Region. | 2015 | Enterprise Ireland |
| 7 | Enterprise Ireland will run a separate Competitive Feasibility Fund for the Midlands Region in 2015 to assist new start-up companies/entrepreneurs in the region. Approximately 10 innovation-led projects will be approved under this Fund. | 2015 | Enterprise Ireland |
| 8 | Offaly Co. Council will support and develop The Junction Innovation Centre in Tullamore to facilitate the creation of new enterprises and promote the use of industrial design and innovative thinking. | 2015 | Offaly Co. Council |
| 9 | Enterprise Ireland will support the participation of 12 entrepreneurs in the Midlands on Phase 2 of the New Frontiers Entrepreneurial Development Programme. Enterprise Ireland will implement the findings from the review of the Programme in order to maximise the positive impacts of the programme on entrepreneurship in the region, working closely with AIT (in partnership with NUIM) in the provision of the Programme. | Ongoing | Enterprise Ireland, AIT |
| 10 | Enterprise Ireland will run a "Start-up Open Days & Clinics" in the Midlands for newly registered Start-ups in Manufacturing and Internationally Traded Services from the region, with a view to prospecting for future start-ups | Ongoing | Enterprise Ireland, LEOs |

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|----|---|----------|--|
| | and communicating and raising awareness of supports available to potential entrepreneurs in the Midlands. | | |
| 11 | InterTradeIreland will run its Seedcorn competition on a regional basis in 2015, with the Leinster & Connaught final (incorporating the Midlands region) taking place in Athlone. | 2015 | InterTradeIreland |
| 12 | Enterprise Ireland, working with other enterprise partners in the region, will increase its start-ups from the enterprise infrastructure in the region (e.g. incubators). | Ongoing | Enterprise Ireland with relevant public and private partners |
| 13 | Enterprise Ireland will run four “Innovating Start-ups” events in the Midlands to develop the pipeline of innovative start-ups in the region. | 2016 | Enterprise Ireland |
| 14 | Enterprise Ireland will run two facilitated Lean Start-up workshop for at least 16 start-ups in the region. | 2015 | Enterprise Ireland |
| 15 | The four Local Development Companies in the region will provide an area-based response to long-term unemployment and deliver a range of programmes to support entrepreneurship and social enterprise. The Local Development Companies will also work with the LEOs, with a view to progressing clients to the LEO services. | Ongoing | Local Development Companies |
| 16 | Run a pilot competitive entrepreneurial development programme targeting rural women, in support of the recommendations of the CEDRA report | 2015 | Dept. of Agriculture, Food and the Marine |
| | Support existing companies to grow and improve performance | | |
| 17 | Promote existing schemes to provide access to finance to start-ups and existing companies. | Ongoing | Enterprise Ireland, LEOs |
| 18 | Enterprise Ireland will work with client companies from the region, including high potential start-ups, to increase participation on programmes and accelerate their capacity to scale up and succeed in international markets. | Ongoing | Enterprise Ireland |

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|----|---|-----------|--------------------|
| 19 | <p>InterTradelreland will host 6 workshops under its “Funding for Growth” initiative in the region to promote all traditional and non traditional sources of finance to local businesses.</p> <p>ITI will also deliver equity awareness events including equity advisory clinics where companies can meet with an equity expert, business planning workshops and venture capital case studies.</p> | 2015-2016 | InterTradelreland |
| 20 | InterTradelreland will promote its Acumen and Elevate programmes in the region. ITI will target 5 Acumen approvals in the Midlands, providing financial assistance to local companies to investigate and pursue export opportunities in Northern Ireland. | 2015-2016 | InterTradelreland |
| 21 | Through its Trade Accelerator Voucher scheme InterTradelreland will help companies to identify and break down barriers to trade leading to new export opportunities in Northern Ireland. The Trade Accelerator Voucher can help businesses get advice from participating expert providers in Northern Ireland and Ireland, and can be redeemed against the cost of practical advice and expertise on specific issues. | 2015-2016 | InterTradelreland |
| 22 | The Midland LEOs will run the new ACCELERATE step-up programme, which is aimed at helping local small businesses to develop their management capabilities, improve their sustainability and accelerate their growth prospects. | 2015 | LEOs |
| 23 | <p>InterTradelreland will deliver 3 Public Tendering workshops for SMEs over the period 2015-2016 and provide relevant training for local small businesses.</p> <p>InterTradelreland will also promote public tendering opportunities to SMEs in the region, including cross border public sector opportunities, consortia building for larger contracts and below threshold contracts.</p> | 2015-2016 | InterTradelreland |

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|--|--|----------|--|
| 24 | The LEOs will deliver procurement seminars and workshops to assist business people tendering for larger contracts. | 2015 | LEOs |
| Ensuring the availability of work space for entrepreneurs | | | |
| 25 | The Local Authorities in the Midland region will manage enterprise space and lands in the main towns to facilitate and encourage economic development, whether by start-up companies, expansion of existing businesses or inward investment. | Ongoing | Midland Local Authorities |
| 26 | The Local Authorities will assist businesses in the identification of suitable premises/sites through the development of a Property Database of Industrial and Commercial properties available for sale or let. | 2015 | Midland Local Authorities |
| 27 | Westmeath Co. Council and Westmeath LEO will develop and roll-out an awareness campaign to highlight the regional E-Working Centre in Mullingar. | Ongoing | Westmeath Co. Council and Westmeath LEO |
| Other initiatives to promote and encourage Entrepreneurship | | | |
| 28 | The Local Authorities in the Midland region will each develop and publish a Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) to support economic development and local community development in their administrative regions. | 2015 | Midland Local Authorities |
| 29 | Provide support and assistance to pop up shops and markets in the principal towns of the region, enabling artists and craft makers to showcase and sell products. | Ongoing | Midland Local Authorities and LEOs |
| 30 | Pilot "Out-of-Hours" access for people to utilise the library services outside of normal opening hours. | 2015 | Offaly Co. Council |
| 31 | Longford and Offaly Library services will pilot the provision of business supports and job seeking supports through a collaboration between the Library and the Local Enterprise Office. | 2015 | Offaly & Longford County Councils and LEOs |

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|----|--|----------|--|
| 32 | Pilot a Part-time Entrepreneurship initiative, which would involve support for those who wish to develop an enterprise on a part-time basis, outside their normal working hours. | 2015 | LEOs |
| 33 | The ETBs will deliver inputs on entrepreneurship to all participants on relevant Further Education and Training programmes and promote self-employment within the Adult Guidance Service. | Ongoing | Midland ETBs |
| 34 | Examine the potential to run a Business Expo in the Midlands, highlighting available enterprise supports and information on business regulation. | 2015 | Local Authorities, LEOs, relevant Departments and agencies |
| 35 | Under the Teagasc Option programmes support farm family diversification in the Midland region, including support measures to diversify into artisan foods, rural tourism, alternative land use and other entrepreneurial activities. | Ongoing | Teagasc |

Chapter 7: Fostering innovation

Innovation is the engine of economic growth. Increasing the innovative capability and capacity of the region as a whole was identified by stakeholders as key to driving enterprise development in the region. The aim of the Action Plan for Jobs for the Midland region is to see more of the entrepreneur base in the region investing in innovation and design and growing by introducing innovative products and services to their range.

Enterprise Ireland plays a crucial role in supporting R&D in local enterprises in the Midlands. In addition to in-company R&D support, a major aspect of Enterprise Ireland's work is to extract maximum value from Ireland's research system through commercialisation of existing research in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) such as AIT and by connecting industry to academic researchers who can provide commercially relevant solutions to industry. The objective of these activities is to secure commercial purpose, leading to jobs and sales, for technologies and ideas developed in Irish research institutions.

In addition, Enterprise Ireland's Campus Incubation Programme is an important driver of regional development. This programme allows for the development of technology-led companies that are incubated on-campus in every Higher Education Institute in the State. These regionally located facilities are critical to the development of the companies in question. A recent independent evaluation of the campus incubation programme found that 94% of companies within incubators reported that they will stay in the local area post-incubation. In the Midlands region, AIT hosts an Enterprise Ireland supported Campus Incubator, the Midlands Innovation and Research Centre (MIRC).

Enterprise Ireland will also facilitate a Regional Innovation Forum in the Midlands in 2015, to encourage innovation by connecting HEIs with SMEs. HEIs involved in this event will include: Athlone Institute of Technology, Maynooth University, Institute of Technology Carlow and Waterford Institute of Technology.

AIT's innovation activities focus on addressing the needs of regional and national industry by actively collaborating with start-ups and established companies of all sizes via market-informed applied research in its areas of expertise and by providing a comprehensive range of knowledge intensive support services. AIT's industry collaborations range from problem-solving engagements to strategic R&D projects - all to help companies address complex technology problems and exploit international market opportunities.

AIT's core areas of research and development are based on competencies built up over many years and aligned with regional needs and national research priorities. Details of the Institute's research institutes are set out in Chapter 4 of this Action Plan. AIT will undertake initiatives to increase awareness of – and access to – its R&D/knowledge resources among enterprise and industry in the region to increase the competitive advantage of companies in the region through innovation.

IDA Ireland will, as part of its Company Transformation initiative, continue to roll out its Research, Development & Innovation Program to incentivise companies to develop new processes and products.

InterTradeIreland will promote its Fusion programme in the region. This programme helps to fund a high calibre science, engineering or technology graduate in a company and partnering the company with a Third Level institution with specific expertise for a period of 12-18 months. InterTradeIreland will also provide access to its Challenge programme, through which SMEs in the region will have the opportunity to learn how to develop a culture of innovation through briefings, workshops and mentoring.

MetriIreland is a Medical Technologies Research and Innovation Consortium founded and funded by senior management from 5 Irish HEIs - NUI Galway, University of Limerick, Galway-Mayo IT, IT Sligo and AIT. It offers MedTech enterprises efficient and effective access to the Higher Education sector via a single, professional contact point. The goal is develop and sustain mutually beneficial relationships between the MedTech industry and Academia, delivering greater Innovation to the entire ecosystem. AIT will promote awareness of this consortium. AIT will work to increase awareness of MetriIreland across the medical technology sector in order to deliver greater market and needs-driven innovation within the sector.

The actions which will be taken to foster innovation in the Midlands, as set out below, will focus on:

- Increasing capacity to deliver more innovative projects in the region.
- Supporting companies to develop new products and processes.
- Increasing awareness of the resources available to support innovation.

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|----|---|----------------------|--------------------|
| 36 | Enterprise Ireland will publish a call for proposals to increase the capacity in the Technology Gateways network to deliver more applied research and innovation projects for industry. | 2015 | Enterprise Ireland |
| 37 | Enterprise Ireland will hold a national competitive call for proposals for the extension of Campus Incubation facilities. | 2015 | Enterprise Ireland |
| 38 | IDA Ireland will continue to roll out its Research, Development & Innovation Program to incentivise client companies to develop new processes and products. | Ongoing 2015-2019 | IDA Ireland |

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|-----------|--|-----------------|---------------------------------------|
| 39 | InterTradeIreland will provide access to its Challenge programme, giving SMEs the opportunity to learn how to develop a culture of innovation through the use of a sustainable and repeatable innovation process. | 2015-2016 | InterTradeIreland |
| 40 | Enterprise Ireland will facilitate a Regional Innovation Forum to encourage peer to peer interactions and SME-HEI linkages to promote and showcase innovation (people, resources, training and research). HEIs involved in this event will include: Maynooth University (MU) working with Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT), Institute of Technology Carlow (ITC), Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT). | 2015 | Enterprise Ireland, AIT, MU, ITC, WIT |
| 41 | AIT will increase awareness of – and access to – AIT’s R&D/knowledge resources among enterprise and industry in the region. | Ongoing | AIT |
| 42 | AIT will increase awareness of MetricIreland to help more companies navigate and gain easier access to the MedTech-related research capabilities within the HE sector. | Ongoing | AIT |

Chapter 8: Attracting and embedding Foreign Direct Investment

A key objective of the *Action Plan for Jobs: Regional* strategy is to win new Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) for the region, and to support existing enterprises to win new mandates from their parent companies by using and developing the region's competitive strengths to offer a supportive environment for the growth of those enterprises.

IDA's primary responsibility is to attract and win FDI into Ireland and to retain, transform and expand the existing base of FDI companies that have already invested and located here. IDA's new five-year corporate strategy places a renewed emphasis on FDI in the regions. The agency is targeting a minimum increase in investment of 30% to 40% in each region outside Dublin over the period 2015-2019 compared to the agency's 2010-2014 strategy. This would equate to a minimum of 25 additional projects in the Midlands region by 2019.

Ultimately, the decision on where companies locate is a matter for the companies themselves. The achievement of the IDA's targets will crucially depend on the support and collaboration of local stakeholders to demonstrate that the Midland region is an attractive proposition for potential FDI companies.

The main FDI activity clusters that have emerged in the Midlands are in manufacturing - mainly in Life Sciences (both medical devices, pharma/bio) - and international business services across different sectors (Life Sciences, ICT and Financial Services for example).

Currently, IDA positions the Midlands as having an established cluster of companies in Medical Technologies and Life Sciences (Abbott, Covidien, Integra, Freund, Utah, KCI, AMS) and International Business Services (Teleflex, AXA, NPD Group and PPD). The international business services cluster is supported by an IT/technology capability which is referenced by the Ericsson software facility in Athlone employing over 800 staff. These international brands are an attractive and very significant reference point for additional companies to potentially locate in the Midlands. In addition to the FDI sector, this cluster is supported by over 600 people employed in Medical Technologies related industries from the indigenous sector, from manufacturing to delivery of elements of the supply chain.

The arrival of Jazz Pharmaceuticals to Athlone, and the announcement of investment from Alexion Pharma - combined with the existing presence of Alkermes, employing c 400 staff - reflects a new cluster in the Midlands in bio pharmaceuticals.

The ICT Sector comprises of only two main companies, Ericsson employing over 800 people in Athlone, and Sennheiser in Tullamore that employs c150 people. However, combined, this ICT footprint provides the necessary confidence for the development of an International Business Services cluster of technical/ICT related skills in the region.

The clusters in Life Sciences and International Business Services with the brand names in ICT and Engineering - coupled with close proximity to Dublin - form the basis of the value proposition to clients.

IDA recently completed an Advanced Technology Building in Athlone which will bring an additional focus to the region and serve as a “pull” factor or magnet for itineraries. IDA is committed to building a second such facility in Athlone 2017. A further selling point for the Midlands as a location for FDI is its connectivity with other regions, particularly the East and Mid-East, its proximity to the capital city, and a critical mass of almost half a million people within one hour’s drive. This is important in the context of investors increasingly looking to cities and centres of scale.

Complementing IDA Ireland’s strategy to attract FDI to the regions, ConnectIreland will operate its *Succeed in Ireland* initiative to attract into Ireland, through the diaspora, foreign companies that are expanding internationally. ConnectIreland will develop a Regional ConnectIreland Plan in collaboration with Local Authorities, initiate and run the Connectivation competition inviting Third Level students to share their ideas for the future development of the Succeed in Ireland initiative, and encourage improved engagement between Third Level institutions and their alumni.

Actions that will be taken to attract and embed FDI in the Midlands over the period of this Action Plan are set out below. IDA is also involved in the delivery of actions under other areas of this Action Plan (e.g. Building Business Networks, Marketing the Region) which will further support FDI.

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|----|--|-----------|---|
| 43 | IDA Ireland will appoint a dedicated Regional Business Development Manager for the Midland region, based in Athlone. | Q3 2015 | IDA Ireland |
| 44 | IDA Ireland will target at least 25 additional investment projects in the Midland region over the period 2015-2019. | 2015-2019 | IDA Ireland |
| 45 | IDA will develop a marketing proposition around an existing cluster in Global Business Services in the Midlands. This is supported by an IT/technology capability in the region. | 2015 | IDA, Enterprise Ireland, AIT and private sector |
| 46 | IDA will source clients for its Advance manufacturing facility in IDA Garrycastle Business & Technology Park, Athlone. | Ongoing | IDA |
| 47 | IDA is committed to building a second Advance Technology facility in Athlone in 2017, following on from the completion and occupation of the facility in Garrycastle. | 2017-2018 | IDA Ireland |

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|-----------|--|-------------------|---------------------------|
| 48 | Relevant IDA Executives based overseas will visit the Midland region and relevant companies to enhance their knowledge of the region to market it to potential investors. | By end-2015 | IDA Ireland |
| 49 | IDA will drive its Transformation programme with its established base of client companies, through increased client interaction. | Ongoing 2015-2019 | IDA Ireland |
| 50 | Develop a Regional ConnectIreland Plan that is integrated with the Local Authorities' enterprise development and job-creation activities. Formalise the name of a nominated officer from each county in the region for the roll-out of the Plan. | 2015 | Connect Ireland |
| 51 | Announce and run the Connectivation competition, inviting Third Level students to share their ideas for the future development of the Succeed in Ireland initiative. | 2016 | Connect Ireland |
| 52 | Liaise with AIT with a view to holding partnership events to create a network that will allow greater communication between the institution and its alumni. | 2016 | Connect Ireland |

Chapter 9: Building Sectoral Opportunities

One of the major aims of the Action Plan for Jobs for the Midland region is to help to develop strong sectoral clusters with sustainable competitive advantage rooted in the region. This will require a step-up in collaboration by key stakeholders, including in enterprise programmes and research, as well as vigorous promotion of the opportunities in the region. Sectors of strength which can be built upon in the Midlands include Tourism, Manufacturing, Agri-Food, Internationally Traded Services and Software and Energy & Sustainability.

Tourism

The Tourism sector is job-intensive and offers the potential for the creation of new jobs in a variety of areas, including accommodation, food services, sport and leisure activities and even new products and experiences using digital technologies. The Midlands has a number of key assets that positions it well as an attractive location for tourism. It has much to offer tourists, from both a land-based and water-based perspective. Natural heritage, archaeology, architecture, festivals and food are other important attractions. Improved road access to the region from Dublin has boosted its potential as a short stay destination.

Water based amenities include the River Shannon, the Grand and Royal canals, and the numerous lakes throughout the region which offer opportunities for outdoor activities and pursuits including boating, angling, canoeing, cycling, walking and wildlife watching. Other attractions include the monastic sites of Clonmacnoise, Fore, Ardagh and the islands of Lough Ree. The wetland areas of Lough Boora Discovery Park and the Slieve Bloom Environmental Park present an innovative way for tourists to interact with the unique landscape of the peatlands. Other attractions of interest to tourists include Athlone Castle, Corlea Tramway, Tullamore Dew Visitor Centre, Timahoe Round Tower, Rock of Dunamase, Emo Court and Gardens, Kilbeggan Distillery, the Slieve Bloom Mountains, Belvedere House, Gardens and Park and Birr Castle, Gardens and Demesne.

A number of high quality hotel/conference facilities in Athlone, Tullamore, Mullingar and Portlaoise have attracted national and international conferences to the region.

The Midland region is marketed by Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland as part of their Lakelands and Inland Waterways offering, as well as part of the new tourism brand, *Ireland's Ancient East*. The four Local Authorities in the Midlands are working in partnership with national and regional agencies and communities to promote, develop and enhance the tourism offering of the region, including direct support for emerging and existing festivals.

Joint promotion of the Lakelands and Inland Waterways by Fáilte Ireland and Waterways Ireland is a key action area for further product development and marketing. Related activities identified for further development include walking and cycling, canoeing, cruising, angling, golf and gastronomy. Other areas of focus in the operational plan include: the development and promotion of quality heritage and culture-based tourism products, exploitation of the region's proximity to Dublin, and

business enterprise support. There is also potential to benefit from the Midlands' central location and good transport connections.

Building on this centrality, *Destination Athlone* is an entity created and supported by a large cross section of the community within the region, including Westmeath County Council, Waterways Ireland, Failte Ireland, AIT, Tidy Towns, Athlone Chamber of Commerce, Hotels and Accommodation, Restaurants, Vintners, Activities and Attractions, Arts and Heritage and Industry. The objective is to develop Athlone one of the top five centres for short breaks in Ireland, and, importantly, bring a higher number of visitors to the region as a whole.

Cycling is a growing tourism segment, both for domestic and international visitors, and Co. Westmeath is centrally located on the first national cycleway, which will link Dublin and Galway. The county can benefit significantly from increased cycling tourist numbers, particularly in Mullingar and Athlone, which are the largest towns on the national route. While the project will be developed in phases, the section through Westmeath will be substantially complete by mid-2015 and benefits should begin to accrue immediately. The potential to develop an off-road mountain bike trail in the Slieve Bloom mountains will also be explored.

The region can build on, and fully utilise its natural and historic assets. A tourism new experience brand, *Ireland's Ancient East*, has been developed by Failte Ireland for the South, East and Midlands of Ireland, which will provide international recognition for the region based on its comparative advantage in built and cultural heritage.

Drawing on the cultural heritage in the Midlands, Enterprise Ireland will examine the development of a pilot digital heritage project based on the concept of the "experience economy", focusing on the potential of companies to develop new products and services through digital platforms to enhance the experience of tourists.

Actions to support jobs growth in the Midlands in the Tourism sector will focus on:

- Developing and marketing *Ireland's Ancient East* and *Lakelands and Inland Waterways* tourism offering in relation to the Midlands attractions.
- Exploring the use of digital technologies to enhance the tourism experience for visitors.
- Maintaining and promoting existing tourism assets.
- Developing recreational tourism offerings.

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|----|---|------------------|---------------------------------|
| 53 | Develop and market <i>Ireland's Ancient East</i> , which will help in scaling up the asset base and achieve international "stand-out" for the region based on its comparative advantage in built and cultural heritage. | 2015 and Ongoing | Failte Ireland, Tourism Ireland |

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|----|---|----------|--|
| 54 | Promote the Lakelands as part of Discover Ireland home holiday campaign. | 2015 | Failte Ireland |
| 55 | As part of the <i>Ireland's Ancient East</i> and <i>Lakelands and Inland Waterways</i> tourism offerings, work with clusters of tourism businesses, mostly in the accommodation and food sector, to improve their ability to generate international sales and food experience for visitors. | 2015 | Failte Ireland, Tourism Ireland, Industry |
| 56 | Develop <i>Destination Athlone</i> to make Athlone one of the top five centres for short breaks in Ireland, and bring a higher number of visitors to the region as a whole. | Ongoing | Westmeath Co. Council, Athlone Chamber, Failte Ireland and Waterways Ireland |
| 57 | Support a suite of festivals that complement <i>Ireland's Ancient East</i> and <i>Lakelands and Inland Waterways</i> offerings. | 2015 | Failte Ireland, Waterways Ireland, Midland Local Authorities |
| 58 | Enterprise Ireland will establish a consortium to develop a pilot digital heritage workshop initiative to connect actors from the heritage and ICT sectors to explore start-up opportunities in the area of the "experience economy". This pilot will support companies to identify and develop new products or services, using digital technologies, to enhance the experience of tourists. | 2016 | Enterprise Ireland, and other regional stakeholders as required |
| 59 | The Local Authorities will maintain and manage local tourism attractions on an on-going basis. | Ongoing | Midland Local Authorities |
| 60 | Invest €4 million in the Midlands region in 2015 as part of the development of the Dublin-Galway cycle route, for the section between Mullingar and Athlone. | 2015 | DTTS, Westmeath Co. Council |
| 61 | Offaly and Laois Local Authorities will continue to work with Fáilte Ireland and Coillte to develop an off-road Mountain Bike Trail in the Slieve Bloom mountains on part of the Coillte landbank. | Ongoing | Offaly and Laois Co. Councils, Coillte, Failte Ireland |
| 62 | Coillte will commence a feasibility study shortly looking at the wider potential for cycle trails in the region as part of the joint | Ongoing | Coillte, Bord na Mona |

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|----|---|----------|---|
| | venture process with Bord na Móna | | |
| 63 | Progress the development and promotion of Greenway and Blueways to capitalise on the centrality of the Midlands, linking the River Shannon, Royal Canal, Grand Canal, and River Barrow. | 2015 | Midland Local Authorities, DTTAS, Waterways Ireland, Failte Ireland |

Manufacturing

The manufacturing sector in the Midlands is a key employer in the region, only surpassed by the Wholesale/Retail and Health/Social Work sectors. The vast majority of agency supported employment in the Midlands region is in the Manufacturing Sector (10,993), with over a third of these employed in the Food Processing Sector.

Irish owned manufacturing companies based in the region span a range of sectors including Food, Engineering, Life Sciences, Cleantech, Electronic, and Paper, Print & Packaging.

Challenges and opportunities facing the manufacturing sector over the next decade include:

- The adoption of next generation manufacturing technologies including Additive Manufacturing (3D Printing).
- The greater incorporation of ICT into production processes – ‘Smart Factories’ in which individual manufacturing operations are directly linked to each other through the web and data analytics support more efficient processes.
- The ongoing need to address capability gaps and weaknesses to enable companies to scale and to drive competitiveness in high-precision high-value manufacturing.
- The availability of key skills required to enable companies to grow.
- Development of a pipeline of new manufacturing technology start-ups.

Building on the region’s demonstrated capabilities in manufacturing processes and technologies and AIT strengths in this area, there is an opportunity to position the Midlands as a Centre of Excellence for the development and adoption of advanced manufacturing processes and technologies.

In line with its new corporate strategy, Enterprise Ireland will continue to utilise the supports within its remit to assist manufacturing companies in the region to start, scale, innovate and succeed in international markets. A number of manufacturing companies from the region are currently involved in Enterprise Ireland’s pilot Mid-Tier Programme. The initiative was developed to explore new ways of working with client companies to accelerate them on the path to becoming "mid-tier" companies, i.e. occupying the middle-tier space between SMEs and MNCs.

The recent announcements by IDA clients Jazz Pharmaceuticals and Alexion, clustering with established clients such as Covidien, Cameron, Abbott, Integra and KCI, highlights the strength of the advanced manufacturing cluster throughout the region.

Industrial design plays an important role in manufacturing and offers potential for further development in the Midland region. AIT in partnership with industry and regional/Local Agencies/Authorities is progressing development of the Midlands Manufacturing Technologies Campus (MMTC) which will focus on Advanced/Discrete/Additive Manufacturing technologies, Industrial/Product Design and 'Smart Factories'.

The vision is that the MMTC will position the Midlands at the leading edge of technology development and adoption, building the necessary skills and capabilities in companies, providing a dynamic industry-focused R&D environment with co-location of industry and academic researchers, industry training, industry access to specialised equipment and facilities, and regional outreach. Incubation facilities will support early-stage technology companies focused on addressing the needs of the manufacturing sector.

Actions which will support the Manufacturing sector in the Midlands over the life of this Action Plan are as follows:

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|----|--|------------------|---|
| 64 | Enterprise Ireland will target manufacturing companies in the Midlands region to scale, innovate and develop international markets. | Ongoing | Enterprise Ireland |
| 65 | IDA Ireland will develop a marketing proposition on High Value Manufacturing, built around the cluster in the region. | 2015 | IDA, Enterprise Ireland, AIT and private sector |
| 66 | Develop a Regional Design & Manufacturing Network, linking companies and AIT research centres to progress regional design and manufacturing opportunities. | | AIT, Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, industry |
| 67 | Progress the development of the Midlands Manufacturing Technologies Campus (MMTC) - which will focus on Advanced/Discrete/Additive Manufacturing technologies, Industrial/Product Design and 'Smart Factories. | 2015 and ongoing | AIT, Industry, regional/Local Agencies, Local Authorities |
| 68 | Enterprise Ireland and AIT will host an Innovation workshop with a particular focus on Manufacturing firms (including Med-Tech) in the second half of 2015. | 2015 | Enterprise Ireland, AIT |

Food Sector

The Food Sector offers potential for growth of Midlands-based companies. Employment in food companies in the Midlands accounts for 48% of total employment in Enterprise Ireland-supported companies in the region, with key markets including: Meat Processing, Bread, Pastries and Confectionary, Beverages, Petfood, Animal Feed, and Horticulture Products. Major clients and household names include Green Isle Foods, C&D Foods, Pat the Baker, Keyapak, Dawn Meats, Carroll Cuisine, amongst others. There are also over 100 Artisan food companies operating in the Midlands region.

There is potential for a cohort of the smaller companies to scale up and create further employment opportunities in the region. The region has two food test facilities, in Ferbane and Mountmellick. This limited provision potentially presents a barrier to new companies emerging and existing small and medium sized food companies expanding in the region. On this basis, a review of the demand for food infrastructure, such as test food kitchens, will be undertaken to identify potential gaps based on defined industry needs.

The *Food Academy* training programme is a 2-month programme for those looking to develop and grow a small-scale food or drink production business. The Food Academy Programme is a collaboration between Bord Bia, Local Enterprise Offices and Supervalu. The programme provides integrated support and training to food companies as they progress on their journey of growth from start-up to national distribution and export. The Food Academy programme is a comprehensive training programme which consists of a number of modules covering Finance, Distribution, the Market and the Consumer, Production and Marketing. The Midland LEOs will seek to increase the number of participants on this programme.

At a further level, the *Food Works* programme is operated by Bord Bia, Teagasc and Enterprise Ireland to identify and support food producers with export potential and provide them with the skills, knowledge and expertise to validate their business for scalable and export potential. Enterprise Ireland will run pre-Food Works clinics in the Midland region in 2015 and again in 2016. The Local Authorities will also provide complementary supports to the Food sector in the region.

Actions which will be taken to support the Food in the Midlands are set out below.

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|----|---|-------------|--|
| 69 | Enterprise Ireland will target, with its new company engagement model, food companies in the Midlands to scale, innovate and develop international markets. | Ongoing | Enterprise Ireland |
| 70 | To ensure a good quality pipeline of food entrepreneurs, Enterprise Ireland will run a pre Food Works clinic in the region in 2015 and in 2016. | 2015 & 2016 | Enterprise Ireland, LEOs, Bord Bia and Teagasc |

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|----|--|----------|---|
| 71 | The Local Authorities and LEOs will work with the Failte Ireland Food Champion to roll out a series of workshops to assist food producers in the development of their Food Story to contribute to the overall marketing of food producers whilst strengthening the visitor experience. | 2015 | Failte Ireland, Local Authorities, LEOs |
| 72 | Enterprise Ireland and Bord Bia will facilitate collaboration/co-opetition on new product development and promote synergistic opportunities between large and small food companies in the region. | Ongoing | Enterprise Ireland, Bord Bia |
| 73 | Review the demand for food infrastructure, such a test food kitchens, to identify potential gaps based on defined industry needs, including that of micro food enterprises. | 2015 | Local Authorities, CECs, AIT, Enterprise Ireland, LEOs |
| 74 | The LEOs will target and increase in the number of participants on the Food Academy Programme. | 2015 | LEOs, Bord Bia, Enterprise Ireland and Super Valu |
| 75 | The Midland Local Authorities will run a Food Event of scale to support artisan food producers of the region. | 2016 | Local Authorities, LEOs, Bord Bia, Enterprise Ireland, Failte Ireland & Waterways Ireland |
| 76 | Assist in the development of the agri food and agri tech sectors within the region in line with Harvest 2020 objectives and the Rural Development Programme. | Ongoing | Midland Local Development Companies |
| 77 | AIT will host an annual event which will showcase regional artisan foods. | Annual | AIT |

Internationally Traded Services and Software

In the Midlands there is a cluster of Irish owned companies focused on targeting the Mobile Telecommunications Market. This cluster is based around Athlone. The services provided by the companies range from Next Generation Network Management Solutions, Network Optimisation and Outsourced R&D to the design/development of High Performance Antennas for 4G Networks. Typical customers include global telecommunications companies and network service providers.

These companies are R&D intensive requiring highly qualified, experienced, technical employees. The cluster benefits from co-location with both Ericsson's Athlone facility and AIT.

International Education has developed as an emerging international service in recent years and one in which Ireland has particular strengths and a tradition. AIT is a key participant in the Education in Ireland Programme, promoting Ireland as a destination for overseas students. AIT currently has 550 international students (approximately 11% of full-time student body). Students are primarily drawn from priority markets: China, Malaysia, EU, Brazil & Saudi Arabia, and AIT are actively targeting emerging markets in Indonesia, Vietnam, Oman and Canada.

AIT has very well established links in China. An example of a successful collaboration is with East China Institute of Technology (ECIT) where AIT has two cooperation programmes approved by the Ministry of Higher Education. Lecturers from AIT's School of Engineering deliver modules in Software Engineering and Mechanical Engineering at ECIT Nanchang campus where students transfer to final year of the Bachelor of Engineering in Software Engineering at AIT.

While the Construction sector is heavily associated with the domestic economy, there are a number of Irish-owned construction companies who trade overseas. Enterprise Ireland will utilise supports within its remit to assist relevant construction companies in the Midlands to scale, innovate and develop international markets.

Actions which will be taken to support internationally traded services in the Midlands are set out below.

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|----|--|----------|--------------------|
| 78 | Enterprise Ireland will continue to utilise supports within its remit to assist Internationally Traded Services and Software companies in the Midlands to scale, innovate and develop international markets. | Ongoing | Enterprise Ireland |
| 79 | Enterprise Ireland will run an Internet Marketing Awareness Workshop targeted at Midland based businesses, including understanding of EI supports available. | 2015 | Enterprise Ireland |
| 80 | Enterprise Ireland will continue to work on an individual basis with the companies in the Mobile Telecommunications cluster to support employment growth and development of their export market plans. | 2015 | Enterprise Ireland |
| 81 | Enterprise Ireland will continue to promote AIT overseas as part of the Education in Ireland brand. | 2015 | Enterprise Ireland |

| | | | |
|----|---|---------|--------------------|
| 82 | Enterprise Ireland will continue to utilise supports within its remit to assist relevant construction companies in the Midlands to scale, innovate and develop international markets. | Ongoing | Enterprise Ireland |
|----|---|---------|--------------------|

Energy and Sustainability

The Midland region has a strong history of energy production and transmission and is well placed to relay the history of energy generation and transmission. Bord na Mona has harvested the peatlands of the region for many years and has provided substantial levels of employment. The ESB is also a significant employer in the Midland region.

The region has embraced the renewable sector with the presence of co-fired peat and biomass and wind power, whilst also being home to the internationally significant Clara Bog and the 2015 National Tourism Award Winner for Environmental Innovation with Lough Boora Discovery Park.

Under EU's Climate and Energy Package for 2020, Ireland is required to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, increase the share of EU energy consumption produced from renewable resources and improve its energy efficiency. Ireland has a target to provide 40% of its electricity from renewable sources by 2020. This commitment means that the Midland region must explore and capitalise on the transition from traditional forms of energy generation to renewables in a way that environmentally and publicly acceptable.

Ireland – and the Midlands - has a number of strengths which it can use to leverage employment opportunities in renewable energy, including excellent renewable energy resources, strengths in key sectors such as engineering and ICT, and a strong R&D base. Given these strengths and its tradition in energy production, the Midlands is ideally positioned to become home to a Regional Energy Hub with a cluster of demonstration projects.

The Local Authorities in the region have established a Midlands Energy Agency, a collaboration between Local Authorities to embed energy management into every section of the Local Authorities and to achieve ongoing and sustained reductions in the amount of energy used to deliver local services. In 2015, the Midland Energy Agency in partnership with SEAI and other bodies will co-ordinate a Regional Energy Forum where experts will impart their knowledge to regional stakeholders on various forms of renewable technologies.

The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) plays a leading role in transforming Ireland into a society based on sustainable energy structures, technologies and practices. It runs a range of programmes and schemes to assist businesses, public sector bodies, homeowners and communities to achieve energy savings. As energy is a significant cost for businesses and homeowners alike, improving energy efficiency will improve the competitiveness of businesses and support job creation. SEAI programmes, such as Better Energy Homes, also supports employment in companies involved in retrofitting houses.

The SEAI will work to build capacity with the region to deliver sustainable energy projects of scale and to leverage funding for local investment.

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|----|---|-----------|--|
| 83 | Progress the development of a Regional Energy Hub in the Midland Region. | 2015-2020 | Offaly Co. Council |
| 84 | The Midland Energy Agency will co-ordinate a Regional Energy Forum to provide information on forms of renewable energy. | 2015 | Midland Energy Agency, SEAI |
| 85 | Promote and assist the delivery costs savings through energy efficiency programmes and training for businesses and public sector organisations in the region. | Ongoing | SEAI, Midland Energy Agency, other public bodies |
| 86 | Work to develop and promote Sustainable Energy Communities model in the region and identify willing early adopter communities to act as exemplars. | 2015-2017 | SEAI, Midland Energy Agency, other relevant bodies |
| 87 | As part of the alignment of Further Education and Training provision with local and future skills needs in the region, ETBs will identify skills gaps and develop tailored training solutions to enable the region to maximise economic benefits from the emerging Green Economy. | Ongoing | ETBs |
| 88 | Develop Bioenergy Ireland to supply biomass for a range of customers, including power plants, CHP plants, etc. | Ongoing | Bord na Mona, Coillte |
| 89 | Research the growing of suitable biomass on Bord na Mona peatland for potential use in Anaerobic Digestion plants for energy generation. | Ongoing | Bord na Mona |

Chapter 10: Skills enhancement and labour market activation

One of the objectives of the *Action Plan for Jobs: Regional* strategy is to focus skills development on the opportunities identified for the region. The availability of skills in the Midland region is a requisite for enterprise development and further job creation. On-going training and upskilling by companies is also important for the retention of staff and for improved productivity.

The stakeholder consultation process in the Midlands identified a desire for greater interaction between industry and education and training providers to ensure that the skills needs of enterprises are addressed, particularly in the software sector. As other sectors, such as Agri-food and Renewable Energy, expand in the region, there will also be a need to ensure an adequate supply of skilled and knowledgeable workers to support the development of those sectors. The Midlands must also ensure that the displaced construction workers are in a position to benefit from sustainable employment.

Closer engagement between enterprise and the education and training sector is a core objective of the wide ranging reforms to the Further and Higher Education sectors which are underway. National education and skills policies are seeking to connect skills with job creation, productivity and innovation for national prosperity.

With the support of the Department of Education and Skills, a process is already underway to establish a Skills Forum in each region to strengthen collaboration between the Further and Higher Education institutions and enterprise in identifying and addressing the particular skills needs of each region. A Steering Group, comprising all public education and training providers in the region, together with employers and other public bodies with an enterprise remit, will lead the process to establish the Forum in the Midlands. The Forum will provide a platform for on-going engagement between employers and the education/training sector on skills issues in the Midland region.

The Local Authorities will also separately engage with the Department of Education and Skills and Third Level providers to determine the feasibility of establishing outreach facilities in the Midlands.

Meanwhile, Skillnets will continue to support groups of companies with similar training needs, through training networks that deliver subsidised training to Irish businesses and their employees, as well as free training to job-seekers.

Education and Training Boards

The two Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in the Midlands - Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board and Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board - will play an important role in the provision of further education and training for employment locally. A strategy has been developed to enhance alignment of Further Education and Training provision by the ETBs with local skills needs in the region. Consultation with employers has identified the importance of developing 'employability' and generic transferrable skills in future employees. To this end, courses are being

collaboratively developed with employers and the Department of Social Protection to equip learners with these skills.

Provision in 2015 will address the needs of the local/regional economy with targeted short term courses linked directly to local employment, along with longer term courses that have been strategically identified and collaboratively developed with the Higher Education sector in the region and neighbouring regions, such as Carlow IT and Limerick IT.

Existing training facilities, such as the National Construction Training Facility at Mount Lucas, Co. Offaly, may have scope to for the provision of specialist programmes to upskill/reskill workers in a range of emerging sectors, such as the Green Economy.

Graduate placement

To promote growth in indigenous enterprise sector, it is essential for companies to attract graduates to work for them in order to compete internationally, and deliver an employment base that has the sophistication to develop new products, processes, supply chain improvement, market and management capability. In May 2015, Enterprise Ireland launched a new Graduate Business Growth Initiative. This initiative is targeted at Enterprise Ireland's SME client companies and will support companies to hire up to two graduates per annum, with support of up to 50% of the graduate's first year salary to a maximum of €15,000.

Labour Market Activation

Employment in the Midlands fell by over 23,000 between the end of 2007 and the end of 2011. Despite an improvement in the labour market, there are many people who continue to struggle to find employment. Supporting the re-integration into the workforce of those people is also a priority of the Government and the Department of Social Protection, through its INTREO centres in the region, will provide support services to those seeking employment. Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland will collaborate with the Department of Social Protection by promoting the recruitment of people from the Live Register amongst their client companies.

Atlantic Corridor

Atlantic Corridor is a collaborative company based in the Midlands whose goal is to work in collaboration with key stakeholders to ensure that the Midlands is more attractive to companies, particularly those with a technology focus. In early 2015, Atlantic Corridor received funding approval from Science Foundation Ireland for a new project which aims to increase participation in STEM education and careers in the Midland region. A new suite of activities will be delivered in collaboration with Trinity College which will specifically focus on the Life Sciences sector in the Midlands.

Gateway

Gateway is a Local Authority work placement scheme for unemployed people. The scheme is intended to assist the personal and social development of participants by providing short-term work opportunities with the objective of bridging the gap between unemployment and re-entering the

workforce. The work opportunities are intended to benefit the local area and are identified and provided by Local Authorities in both urban and rural areas.

Unemployed people who are eligible to participate in the scheme are selected and contacted by the Department of Social Protection. The types of projects to be worked on under Gateway include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Village Enhancement Schemes
- Landscaping
- Tourism Ambassadors
- Control of animals
- Libraries
- New projects - Brown Field Site Remediation

The Local Authorities in the Midland region operate the Gateway programme and had approximately 172 participants on the programme in June 2015. The Local Authorities are committed to increasing the number of participants on this 22-month programme in accordance with targets set at national level over the lifetime of this Action Plan.

Actions to support skills and labour market activation in the Midlands, as set out below, will focus on:

- Improving engagement between employers and education providers to ensure that skills supply meets the current and future needs of the region.
- The provision of specific courses to address identified skills needs for enterprise.
- Improving participation in work and training.

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|-----------|--|------------------|---|
| | Improving engagement between employers and skills providers | | |
| 90 | Establish a Steering Group, comprising all public education and training providers in the region, together with employers and other public bodies with an enterprise remit, to oversee the process of establishing a Skills Forum in the region. The Steering Group will prepare a draft Project Plan scoping out the initial steps required to establish the Forum. | 2015 | Regional Education and Training providers, industry, relevant public bodies |
| 91 | Following on the work of the Steering Group, establish a Skills Forum in the Midlands region which will connect education providers with employers and industry stakeholders on an on-going basis to collaborate in building the skills of the region. | 2015 and Ongoing | Regional Education and Training providers, industry, relevant public bodies |

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|----|---|------------------|--|
| 92 | AIT will task an office holder with responsibility for driving AIT's engagement with enterprise and coordinating AIT-related Actions and deliverables under this Action Plan for Jobs for the Midlands. | 2015-2016 | AIT |
| 93 | <p>The ETBs will work in collaboration with a number of new partners and local employers in 2015 to develop and deliver targeted responses to local skills and employment needs in areas such as Retail, Hospitality, Manufacturing, Marketing, Languages and IT.</p> <p>These partners include Fasttrack to IT (FIT) in the ICT and Engineering sectors, and SOLAS (developing a Traineeship programme in Hospitality targeting 18-24 year olds under the Youth Guarantee). These approaches will be piloted in 2015 with a view to further expanding provision in 2016.</p> | 2015 and Ongoing | Midland ETBs, FIT, SOLAS, Hospitality sector employers, DSP/Intreo |
| 94 | The ETBs will develop local course design processes to reflect direct employer involvement in ITN, curriculum development, pilot and evaluation to meet the needs of employers, learners, jobseekers and priority cohorts so that processes are available and are embedded into and adhere to the relevant Awarding Body quality system. | 2015 and Ongoing | Midland ETBs, local employers, DSP/Intreo |
| | Delivering courses to address identified skills needs | | |
| 95 | The Education & Training Boards (ETBs) will increase provision in the STEM subject areas. | 2015 and Ongoing | Midland ETBs, local employers, Athlone IT, Carlow IT, Limerick IT |
| 96 | The ETBs will deliver short term courses in security, retail, hospitality, and generic employment skills to target vacancies in the local economy. | 2015 and Ongoing | Midland ETBs |
| 97 | Promote the Graduate Business Growth Initiative through EI's regional office in the Midlands. The programme supports the placement of graduates with SME companies. | 2015 | Enterprise Ireland |
| 98 | Skillnets will continue to fund groups of | Ongoing | Skillnets |

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|-----|---|-----------|--|
| | companies with similar training needs, through training networks that deliver subsidised training to Irish businesses and their employees, as well as free training to job-seekers. | | |
| 99 | Atlantic Corridor will run its 'Science with Inspirational Mentors' (SWIM) programme in partnership with SFI and the Amber Centre in Trinity College Dublin to increase participation in STEM education and careers in the Midlands region, with a focus on the Life Sciences sector. | 2015 | Atlantic Corridor |
| | Improving participation in work and training | | |
| 100 | Engage with Department of Education, IoTs and Universities to determine the feasibility of establishing Third Level outreach facilities. | 2015-2016 | Midland Local Authorities |
| 101 | The Midlands Local Authorities will increase the number of 22-month work placements under the Gateway scheme from 159 to 245, to assist participants gain or update experience of the workplace, to learn new skills and return to the routine of work. | 2015-2017 | Midland Local Authorities |
| 102 | IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland will continue to collaborate with the Dept. of Social Protection and SOLAS in promoting the recruitment of people from the Live Register amongst client companies. | Ongoing | IDA, Enterprise Ireland, Department of Social Protection & SOLAS |

Chapter 11: Building Business Networks

A 2006 InterTradeIreland report, *Business Networks on the Island of Ireland*, highlights the importance of business networks in achieving critical mass and economies of scale in order to compete in larger, more diverse and competitive markets. Networks allow firms to share costs and risks which have become too high for firms working in isolation. They facilitate knowledge transfer, help to disseminate market knowledge, foster innovation, inform the research agenda and identify infrastructure needs specific to local economic development. Business networks also open up supply chain opportunities as well as opportunities for collaboration on tenders or projects where the shared expertise creates a much stronger value proposition.

Other benefits that can flow from improved business networking include:

- Connecting small business with large businesses with a specific focus on mentoring
- Connecting with, and utilising the region's diaspora to assist with regional enterprise development.
- Connecting young entrepreneurs.

Notwithstanding the presence of the Midlands Gateway Chamber and other Chambers of Commerce and business groups in Athlone, Tullamore, Mullingar, Portlaoise Longford and Birr, the consultation process with key stakeholders in the Midlands identified scope for increased networking between indigenous companies, foreign-owned companies, enterprise development agencies and educational and research institutions operating within the Midlands region, as well as for interaction with networks in other regions. The latter is particularly relevant in the case of the Midlands, given its central location and its good connectivity with other regions.

Ultimately, business networks require strong business leadership and a level of involvement and commitment by the network members. However, the State sector can help to support the establishment of business networks in the Midlands and provide facilitation to enable the emergence of a strong and sustainable network. As a key initiative under this Plan, Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland will facilitate the establishment of an industry-led CEO Forum to connect key client companies.

Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland and the local authorities in the Midlands also meet on a regular basis to ensure a co-ordinated approach to enterprise projects in the region and will deepen this collaboration through this Action Plan. It is envisaged that local authorities will separately establish an Economic Forum on a regional (NUTS III) basis, to provide a high-level strategic perspective to economic development and input to the local authority economic role by leaders in business and other key sectors.

The Midlands Gateway Chamber will continue to promote networking in the region and will host annual Enterprise Awards to recognise best practice in business. There may also be scope to strengthen the Chambers/business networks throughout the region and the competitive funding call

to support the Regional Action Plan for Jobs process provides an opportunity for the business sector to respond in this regard.

In addition, Enterprise Ireland will work with IDA Ireland on their joint Global Sourcing strategy to increase the level of engagement between Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) based in Ireland and indigenous companies. The goal is to deepen the penetration by Irish companies of the multinational sector in Ireland, through sales, technology partnerships, investment or other collaborative engagements. This is done on a targeted basis with Enterprise Ireland clients and includes getting them to meet potential FDI investors, making introductions to overseas-based buyers in MNCs, and direct introductions to the procurement teams here in Ireland.

A joint Enterprise Ireland/IDA Global Sourcing Team has met with more than 100 multinationals across Ireland since 2013 to discuss their procurement strategies with the primary aim of identifying import substitution opportunities. The agencies will build on this work in the Midlands region over the course of this Action Plan, with a view to increasing linkages between larger companies and potential Irish SME suppliers.

Recognising the importance of improving business networks in the region as an essential ingredient to support enterprise growth, the following suite of actions will be taken in the Midlands region.

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|-----|---|------------------|--|
| 103 | Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland will facilitate the establishment of an industry-led CEO Forum in the Midlands to connect Irish and foreign owned companies in the region. | Ongoing | Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, in collaboration with enterprise sector and business representatives |
| 104 | Regular meetings of local public enterprise partners will be held at regional level to discuss innovative approaches to collaboration to harness the enterprise potential of the region. | 2015 and ongoing | Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, Midland Local Authorities, LEOs, AIT and other relevant public bodies |
| 105 | The Midland Local Authorities will establish an Economic Forum comprising leaders of indigenous and foreign owned businesses and in other key sectors working in partnership with Local Authorities and other relevant organisations to provide a strategic perspective for economic development and help drive economic activity at county and regional level. | 2015 | Midland Local Authorities |
| 106 | As part of their Global Sourcing initiative, IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland will work together to increase collaboration - including the sourcing of goods - between Multinational and indigenous companies. The agencies will | Ongoing | IDA and Enterprise Ireland |

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|-----|--|----------|----------------------------|
| | ensure that their clients in the region, where appropriate, are engaged in this initiative. | | |
| 107 | Introduce relevant Enterprise Ireland clients to potential FDI investors to highlight possible collaborations for those investors if locating in Ireland. | Ongoing | IDA and Enterprise Ireland |
| 108 | The Midlands Gateway Chamber will celebrate and recognise the contribution of indigenous and multi national companies to the economy of the Midland Region through its annual Best in Business Awards. | Annual | Midland Gateway Chamber |

Chapter 12: Marketing the region as an attractive place to work and live



The consultation process in the Midlands highlighted the need to better market the region and strengthen its identity as an attractive place in which to live and to do business. The *MidlandsIreland.ie* web site is an existing tool to brand the region and is maintained by the Local Authorities in the region. It provides information on the region under the headings of Enterprise, Tourism, Living, and Learning. However, feedback from the consultation process suggests that there is scope to strengthen the marketing of the brand to increase brand awareness and recognition, to highlight the region's successes and to promote the region's value proposition to investors and tourists alike. Achieving greater involvement in the marketing of the brand by all stakeholders in the region, and especially the business sector, could also help to strengthen the *MidlandsIreland.ie* brand.

Place making

As outlined in Part 1, quality of life is an increasingly important factor in attracting investment to a region and in attracting and retaining skilled labour. The Midland region offers an attractive location to live and work which combines the best aspects of town and rural living with ease of access to the cities of Dublin and Galway.

The Midlands local authorities will play a key role in place-making through many of their functions amenity, environment and economic and community/local development. They will commence a regeneration programme to eliminate dereliction in the main towns and villages of the region, making these areas and units more attractive. This will be hugely beneficial in marketing the towns and villages to tourists, investors and prospective residents.

Continued investment in recreational and leisure facilities and improving the attractiveness of town centres will also help to support the Midlands as a location of choice for people to live in.

Building on the existing social, cultural and community assets in the region, the following actions will be taken to market the Midlands as an attractive place to live, visit and work in, and to improve the "sense of place" of the region.

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|-----|---|------------------|---------------------------|
| | Marketing the region | | |
| 109 | Appoint a dedicated official at middle management level to co-ordinate the efforts of the four Local Authorities in providing a cohesive regional focus to the Authorities' activities under the Midlands Action Plan for Jobs, acting as an exemplar to other regions. | 2015 and ongoing | Midland Local Authorities |

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|-----|---|-----------|---|
| 110 | Strengthen the marketing of MidlandsIreland.ie, and continue to support the MidlandsIreland.ie website to promote the region across the straplines of Tourism, Enterprise, Living and Learning, in the interests of regional economic development. An annual work plan will be implemented across these different straplines. | 2015-2017 | Midland Local Authorities, in collaboration with relevant agencies and industry |
| 111 | <p>While maintaining a whole-of-region approach to enterprise support and job creation, the Local Authorities will develop a suite of branding initiatives to attract and locate businesses to the Midlands. These include, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guide to Doing Business in Laois. - Invest in Mullingar. - Westmeath Business Promotion Fund. - Doing Business in Offaly Guide. - Marketing Strategy for lands in Council ownership in Longford. - Strategy to enhance tourism and other enterprise potential in Offaly. - Destination Athlone | 2015-2017 | Midland Local Authorities |
| 112 | Attract at least one additional major employer to the region in the short-term through a collaborative approach on the part of industry | Ongoing | Midlands Chambers |
| 113 | Work with Film Offaly to promote Offaly as a destination for film production, with benefits to local professional, people and businesses. | 2015 | Offaly Co. Council |
| | Place making | | |
| 114 | The Midlands Local Authorities will commence a regeneration programme to enhance the streetscape in the main towns and villages. | 2015-2018 | Midland Local Authorities |
| 115 | Explore funding options to pilot Rural Economic Development Zones, as recommended in the CEDRA report. | 2015 | Midland Local Authorities |

| | Action | Timeline | Responsible bodies |
|-----|--|-----------|---------------------------------|
| 116 | Work with local businesses in the Gateway and principal towns to apply for the Purple Flag ² , enhancing the region's reputation as a place to work, live or visit. | 2015-2016 | Midland Local Authorities |
| 117 | The Midland Local Authorities will continue to develop comprehensive programmes for Culture Night and Heritage Week across the region. | 2015-2017 | Midland Local Authorities |
| 118 | Construct new Library in Portlaoise. This €3.2m development in the Main Street area of Portlaoise, will be a very significant regeneration of a vacant property | 2017 | Laois Co. Council |
| 119 | Refurbish Portarlington and Edgesworthtown Libraries. | 2015 | Laois and Longford Co. Councils |

FilmOffaly (www.filmoffaly.ie) is Offaly's Film Commission and a project of Offaly County Council working to promote the county as an attractive location for film production.



FilmOffaly had much success to date working with both the Irish Film Board and the local film community. *Pure Mule*, a six-part RTE drama, brought over €1m to the local economy in Banagher in 2004/5. This alone ensured a second two-part series and the same production company brought the feature film *Eden* to Offaly in 2007.

About a third of a film's budget is spent on its location. The economy of scale is significant, from low-budget short films (approx budget €12,000), Irish feature films (€500,000 - €2m), to large TV drama series or big budget feature films (€3m to €30m).

FilmOffaly works hard to ensure that visiting production companies have a positive experience, as many come back. Currently FilmOffaly is promoting a temporary film studio in Tullamore to the film industry with the aim of attracting a large budget feature film or drama series. In addition, the local film industry has raised their game significantly, flying the flag for film in Offaly.

² The Purple Flag is a designation that is given to a town that reaches a certain standard of service and security in the realm of evening and night time activities and has recently been awarded to Mullingar.

Chapter 13: Potential strategic areas for further job creation

At the time of finalisation of this Action Plan, there were a number of emerging projects with potential for job creation and enterprise opportunity in the region in the future. These project require further development by the promoters and are medium-term in timescale. Progress on these projects will be kept under review over the lifetime of the Action Plan.

I-LOFAR

The establishment of a next-generation radio telescope in Birr was identified in consultations with stakeholders as holding potential for the creation of a research and data analytics hub in the Midlands.

LOFAR (Low Frequency Array) is a next-generation radio telescope that is currently being deployed across Europe, with stations already operating in the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, and the UK at an investment of €150 million.

I-LOFAR refers to a proposal by a consortium of Irish universities and Research Institutes (which includes Athlone Institute of Technology and is led by Trinity College Dublin) to build and operate an Irish LOFAR radio telescope at Birr Castle which will connect Ireland into the International LOFAR telescope and sensor network.

Birr Castle Demense & Gardens is the site of preference of the Irish consortium, as Birr has little radio interference, making it ideal for radio astronomy. Birr Castle Demense & Gardens has an existing Science Visitor Centre and is internationally recognized for its tradition in astronomy. The plan is to facilitate the development of the iLOFAR on a 6 acre site in the Demesne & Gardens.

The local availability of a fibre network (MAN, ^{or Metropolitan Area Network}) makes data-transport at high rates suitable for radio astronomy a possibility. I-LOFAR will use approximately 30% of a **10 Gbps** fibre connection to Birr. Internet providers will be able to use the remainder to provide high-speed broadband to users on the Birr MAN and companies at the Birr Technology Centre, for example. The data acquired by the telescope will generate daily a volume of data on par to Ireland's total daily internet traffic. The facility has the potential to provide the data resources for data analysis on a scale not currently possible in Ireland.

From an enterprise and jobs perspective, locating this infrastructure in the Midlands would:

- Act as a magnet to attract data analytic companies and create a cluster of data start-ups in the region and the Midlands Innovation and Research Centre in AIT and enhance the capabilities of the research institutes based at AIT, including the Software Research Institute.

- Attract additional tourists into the Midland Region with the development of an I-LOFAR visitor centre for tourists and students, which will overlook the radio telescope.³
- Create better links between the Midland Region and multinationals.
- Provide a platform for educational outreach STEM subjects for students of all ages.
- Attract further R&D activities and funding (e.g., from Horizon 2020) to the Midland Region.

Center Parcs

Center Parcs, one of the UK's largest holiday resorts, announced plans in April 2015 to build a €100 million complex close to Ballymahon in Co Longford that would reportedly create 750 jobs during construction and 1,000 permanent jobs if the project goes ahead. The complex would include a large water dome, at least 200 lodges and villas, tree houses, restaurants, bars, swimming pools and spas. It could reportedly add €32 million to the economy annually.

More than 200 indoor and outdoor activities will be on offer including archery, wall climbing, high rope challenges and spa retreats set in forests, which extend to both sides of the river Inny.

The development is subject to receiving satisfactory planning permission. Coillte has entered into an agreement to sell 375 acres of forestry to Center Parcs subject to planning permission being successful. This project clearly has potential to add to employment and to the local economy in the Midlands region. Developments in relation to the project will be monitored over the course of this Action Plan and any tangible actions arising out of the project will be added to the Plan.

Trail Development

The development and roll out of the National Cycle Network, including the phase from Athlone and Mullingar, which will link Dublin and Galway affords many opportunities to link with and develop complementary strategic corridors and routes to the South and North of the region. Examples could include loop developments of the Grand and Royal Canals with a hub at Edenderry, linking Athlone-Shannonharbour where the Grand Canal meets the Shannon, and linking the Grand Canal to the Barrow Blueway at Robertstown.

In Spring 2015, Waterways Ireland in partnership with Longford County Council and Longford Tourism launched the second phase of the Shannon Blueway in Clondra Co. Longford. This Camlin Blueway offers a 10km looped Kayak/Canoe trail on Grade 1 water starting and ending in the picturesque village of Clondra along the Camlin and Shannon rivers.

The Shannon Blueway provides a range of recreational leisure activities such as walking, cycling, canoeing, fishing and cruising all linked by the waterways to local towns and villages. It has the potential to have a very positive impact on jobs and the regional economy as it extends its reach along the Shannon and its tributaries down through the Midlands region. The Blueway will allow local businesses to capitalise on an increase in demand for transport, equipment hire, accommodation, and entertainment.

³ Once the iLOFAR station is operational it is intended to develop a visitor centre

Water Supply project

In March 2015, Irish Water published a report which sets out the need for a new water supply source for the Eastern and Midlands Region of the country and undertook public consultation on the need for a Water Supply project and a proposed “Roadmap” for the next steps in the planning process.

A further paper was published for public consultation in June 2015, which set out four options which were independently identified as being technically viable for Irish Water. The public consultation and on-site studies on each of the four options will help to identify an emerging preferred option by late 2015. Following detailed environmental assessments on the preferred option, a planning application will be submitted by Irish Water to An Bord Pleanála in mid-2017.

The outcome of this process will be important for the Midlands region, both in terms of water supply for business and residents and in terms of job opportunities that might arise for people in the region. Developments on this project will be monitored over the course of this Action Plan.

Chapter 14: Monitoring Progress

The Action Plans for Jobs for the Midland region has been developed following wide local stakeholder engagement, using a “bottom-up” approach, with actions coming from regional stakeholders including the private sector.

The Action Plan covers a three-year timeframe, 2015-2017, to allow for the process to take hold and develop, and to capture a more medium-term ambition for the regions. The Plan will be flexible and dynamic to allow additional actions and ideas to be added as they emerge over the period of the Plan.

Progress on the actions will be monitored on a 6 monthly basis by a Monitoring Committee, and Progress Reports on the implementation of the Plan will be published twice each year. The Progress Reports will also identify areas for further action in a rolling framework.

All of the key regional stakeholders who have actions for delivery in the Action Plan will be involved on the Monitoring Committee, and will be asked to provide updates on the delivery of actions.

Strong business representation is also required to drive the enterprise and jobs focus of the Plan. To this end, the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation will invite locally-based enterprise champions to participate on the Monitoring Committee and to work with the public bodies on the implementation of the Plan.

The Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation will also appoint the Chair of the Monitoring Committee. The Chair will have recognised strengths in promoting a strong enterprise agenda across the region. The initial period of appointment will be for 18 months.

Notwithstanding the objective of devolving ownership of the actions to the regions, the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and innovation will continue to oversee the Plan at political level and facilitate updates to the Plan through membership of the Monitoring Committees.

Processes put in place to monitor the regional Action Plan should complement other monitoring arrangements in the Local Government sphere.