

**Minister Ó Cuív's announcement of extra monies to speed up
Western Rail Corridor
'another milestone for the development of the Western Region' -
Western Development Commission**

The Chief Executive of the Western Development Commission (WDC), Gillian Buckley, has said that today's (Friday 13th April) announcement by Éamon Ó Cuív T.D., Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs of extra funding, on top of the €5 million already committed under his Department's Clár programme to fund advance line clearance work on the Western Rail Corridor, is another milestone for the development of the Western Region.

Speaking at today's conference on the Western Rail Corridor, held in Claremorris, County Mayo, Ms. Buckley said, "I welcome the Minister's commitment to the earmarking of further funds towards the earlier introduction of services on the Tuam to Claremorris stretch of the Corridor. This moves the opening of the entire Western Rail Corridor further from 'if' to 'when' as the new National Development Plan and the National Spatial Strategy advocates. The Plan says that the linking of gateways and hubs via a public transport network will enable greater economic activity between these centres and act as a spur for growth in the West.

"However, the WDC strongly advocates the re-introduction of services as far as Sligo which is experiencing significant growth, and will be the only gateway town whose rail link to other gateways is via Dublin. Opening the line will also connect fourteen medium and smaller sized towns on a North-South transport corridor, generating additional demand and employment growth, attracting new enterprises and growing tourism.

"The Western Region is host to thousands of enterprises and has major clusters of big international businesses ranging from medical devices to IT. In order to compete globally these firms need good transport networks, as the movement of people and knowledge is absolutely essential to them. Another benefit will be the concentration of economic activity at the hubs and interchanges, increasing the size of the labour market and helping attract investment.

Tourism, another important element of the Region's economy – needs much better transport access to and within the Region and this is particularly true where the trend is to shorter, more frequent holidays. Introducing these services will literally put towns on the map, raising their profiles.

"There is a population in the six counties served by the Western Rail Corridor of 770,000 (Census 2006) mostly located in its immediate catchment area¹. Add to this the CSO's own population projections which indicate that the West will be the second fastest growing region increasing its population by 35% to 2021.

There are 2 million bus passengers and over 7 million cars travelling the Sligo-Limerick route annually indicating a huge potential market for services on the Western Rail Corridor. We already know that the provision of a rail service will in itself generate demand. This has been

¹ Counties Sligo, Mayo, Galway, Roscommon, Clare, Limerick.

the experience with the reopening of the Limerick-Ennis line. Passenger numbers in the first year of operation exceeded all expectations.

She added, "The investment required to reinstate services on the Western Rail Corridor represents value for money which far outweighs that from any other comparable investment in new transport infrastructure. Unlike many major capital investment programmes, the basic infrastructure for the Western Rail Corridor is already in place – the land is in public ownership and there are no planning issues involved. Costs are limited to track and signalling renewal and the provision of rolling stock."

A well integrated and connected transport network is what the country needs to grow in a more sustainable regionally balanced manner, providing a counter attraction to the concentration of economic activity on the East coast. Improved accessibility will enable the Region to capitalise on the many advantages of living and working in the West, as is the message of the WDC's 'Look West' campaign that aims to encourage people to relocate to the Region. Ms. Buckley also noted the work of many, particularly Fr. Micheál Mac Gréil, the Inter-County Railway Committee and West-on-Track among others who have campaigned for so long, along with the WDC, to have the line re-opened.

Ends

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Notes to editors on the Western Development Commission (WDC)

The WDC is a statutory body promoting economic and social development in counties Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Mayo, Galway and Clare.

The WDC's 4 strategic aims are:

- Promoting the west and identifying regional issues
- Highlighting infrastructural needs
- WDC Investment Fund – investing in regional strategic projects and innovative enterprises
- Fostering the development of rural areas