An Roinn Fiontar,
Turasóireachta agus Fostaíochta
Department of Enterprise,
Tourism and Employment

SOUTH-WEST

Regional Enterprise Plan 2022-2025

Final Progress Report



Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment
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Minister's Foreword

I welcome this Final Progress Report on the implementation of the South-West Regional Enterprise Plan to 2025. Since its launch in 2022, the Plan has sought to drive economic growth, innovation, and sustainable enterprise development across the region.

Since the Plan's inception, work has focused on realising the potential of the South-West region, covering Counties Cork and Kerry, ensuring that it prospers economically and plays a vital role in the overall Irish economy.

The Regional Enterprise Plans are bottom-up plans developed and led by regional stakeholders, which focus on collaborative initiatives to strengthen the enterprise environment in each region. Each Regional Enterprise Plan is tailored to reflect regional strengths and opportunities and is aligned with the National Smart Specialisation Strategy for Innovation 2022–2027 and national enterprise policy priorities such as decarbonisation and digitalisation.

To support balanced regional development and the implementation of the Regional Enterprise Plans, my Department, through Enterprise Ireland, has made over €150 million in regional enterprise development funding available since 2017. Schemes such as the Regional Enterprise Development Fund (REDF) have seen substantial investment in enterprise centres and hubs around the country, delivering supports to businesses in line with regional strengths. In the South-West, over €19 million was allocated for fifteen projects through the REDF. This funding was complemented by the Smart Regions Enterprise Innovation Scheme, launched in 2023.

Strategic sectors in the region, including financial services, agri-food, life sciences, and tourism and hospitality, have been supported through targeted investment, collaborative initiatives, and innovative programmes. A defining feature of the Regional Enterprise Plan is the spirit of collaboration. Government agencies, local authorities, educational institutions, business representative bodies, and local industry have worked together to address challenges and seize opportunities, ensuring the South-West is well positioned to compete nationally and internationally.

Over the lifetime of the Plan, the region has established the ACE Comhroinnt Consortium, a collaborative, industry-led initiative designed to strengthen Ireland's AgriTech industry and related sectors, launched the Impact Hub at the Crann Centre in Cork, a fully inclusive and accessible co-working space that

enables persons with disabilities to participate equally, and seen substantial growth in the animation and visual-effects sector, including the launch of the Munster Animation Cluster. These and the range of other initiatives supported by the Plan demonstrate the region's ambition, and commitment to innovation.

While challenges remain, the achievements documented in this report reflect the dedication and vision of all stakeholders. I have been heartened by the collaboration on display and encourage all stakeholders to continue to work together to deliver real results for the South-West.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to Chairperson Patricia Quane for her leadership and for bringing her wealth of experience to bear in driving delivery of the Plan. I would also like to thank Programme Manager Pat Reidy and his predecessors Aileen Hurley and Jonathan Hoare, the members of the Steering Committee, and all regional partners whose commitment has been instrumental in delivering the actions of the Regional Enterprise Plan.

My Department commissioned an independent review of the Regional Enterprise Plan initiative in 2025, which consulted widely with regional stakeholders and provided an opportunity to take stock of our approach. The next phase of our regional enterprise development work, taking on board the findings of the review, will be set out in the forthcoming Regional Enterprise Framework Statement.



Alan Dillon TD
Minister of State for Employment, Small Business and Retail

Chairperson's Introduction

I am pleased to present the Final Progress Report for the South-West Regional Enterprise Plan to 2025. This report sets out the progress achieved and actions delivered under the Plan up to December 2025 and reflects the collective effort undertaken across the region to strengthen enterprise performance and regional competitiveness.

I welcome the publication of this report and wish to acknowledge the sustained commitment of the wide range of stakeholders across the South-West region who have contributed to the implementation of the Plan. The South-West Regional Enterprise Plan has been delivered through strong collaboration between enterprise agencies, local authorities, business representative bodies, higher education institutions and industry stakeholders, working together through the Steering Committee and seven thematic Working Groups.

The South-West Regional Enterprise Plan is a strong example of how national enterprise policy can be implemented effectively at regional level through partnership-based governance and shared regional ownership. The Plan has enabled stakeholders to work collectively to address regional challenges, identify opportunities, and deliver practical, outcome focused actions aligned with national priorities. The progress achieved under the six Strategic Objectives demonstrates the value of a coordinated, place-based approach to regional enterprise development.

A key focus of the Plan has been to strengthen the South West's position as a competitive and attractive region in which to live, work, invest, study and visit. Actions delivered under the Plan have supported enterprise capability, innovation capacity, skills development and quality of place, building on the region's strong urban and rural enterprise base, international connectivity and research and innovation assets.

It is important that enterprise in the South-West continues to be supported to expand, strengthen resilience and respond to economic and structural change. The Plan has placed emphasis on productivity, innovation, skills and sustainable growth, recognising the need for a diverse and adaptable regional economy. These actions have assisted businesses to respond to evolving market conditions, workforce requirements and competitiveness pressures.

The South-West region continues to demonstrate strength, and ambition to lead, across a number of key sectors, including life sciences, pharmaceuticals, agrifood, maritime and marine, renewable energy, advanced manufacturing, ICT and digital technologies. The Plan has facilitated this by supporting sectoral collaboration, strengthening enterprise hubs and clusters, enhancing research industry linkages, and improving access to enterprise supports throughout the region.

Small and medium sized enterprises are central to the regional economy. The Plan has supported SME growth and innovation through targeted enterprise supports, collaborative initiatives and clearer pathways from start up through to scale up. In parallel, actions under the Plan have supported pathways to employment and self-employment through skills development initiatives, entrepreneurship supports and improved alignment between enterprise needs and education and training provision.

As the region continues its transition to a low carbon and digital economy, the Plan has supported enterprises to adapt and innovate in response to climate and technological change. Initiatives focused on renewable energy, sustainability, energy efficiency and digital adoption have contributed to enterprise resilience while supporting wider national climate objectives.

The Plan has also supported strong regional engagement with competitive funding opportunities by encouraging collaboration, strengthening project development capability and supporting effective delivery structures across the South-West. This coordinated approach has assisted in progressing a wide range of enterprise focused initiatives in the region.

The achievements outlined in this report are the result of the dedication and commitment of the Steering Committee, Working Groups, enterprise agencies, Local Enterprise Offices, local authorities, business organisations, chambers of commerce, higher education institutions and wider stakeholders. I wish to acknowledge in particular the continued support of the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, the Programme Manager, the three local authorities in the South-West, and the Government Ministers who have consistently supported regional enterprise development.



It has been a privilege to serve as independent Chair of the South-West Regional Enterprise Plan. The progress achieved reflects the value of collaboration, shared responsibility and long-term regional ambition. The experience and lessons arising from the delivery of this Plan provide a strong foundation for the continued development of the region's enterprise potential.

Patricia Quane
Chairperson of the South-West
Regional Enterprise Plan

South-West Regional Enterprise Plan Final Progress Report

This progress report documents overall implementation of the South-West Regional Enterprise Plan to the end of 2025, building on the information in the South-West mid-term progress report published in April 2024. This progress report has been prepared and signed off by the South-West Regional Enterprise Plan Steering Committee.

South-West Highlights

AGRI TECH CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE - COMHROINNT CONSORTIUM

In 2024, the AgriTech Centre of Excellence (ACE) in Tralee secured funding under the Smart Regions Enterprise Innovation Scheme (SREIS) to establish the Comhroinnt Consortium, developed in collaboration with regional stakeholders.

This consortium brings together a cohort of industry leaders and scaling SMEs to harness cross-sectoral and multi-regional expertise through a structured programme of knowledge exchange, best-practice dissemination, and the advancement of digitalisation technologies. The three-year initiative is multisectoral in scope, incorporating enterprises from the agritech, engineering, pharmaceutical, financial services, sales and service, and retail sectors, with participating partners providing 50 per cent match funding.

In alignment with Strategic Objective 4, which seeks to strengthen the South-West as a recognised leader in agritech, the REP played a facilitative and enabling role by convening partners, fostering early collaboration, and creating the conditions through which the relationships underpinning the Comhroinnt Consortium could be established. The programme is intended to support business growth, enhance workforce capability, promote job retention, and contribute to the modernisation of regional industry through the adoption of advanced digital practices.

IMPACT HUB - ENTERPRISE ACADEMY

The Impact Hub at the Crann Centre in Ovens, Co Cork promotes inclusivity in the evolving world of co-working and remote working by creating spaces that enable persons with disabilities to participate equally. As an active member of South-West REP Working Groups One and Two, the Impact Hub has successfully delivered on its assigned actions within the Plan and is now building strong support among key regional stakeholders for the Enterprise Academy project. It has undertaken a SREIS funded feasibility study to inform this initiative. Work completed to date has established significant credibility with local authorities, Local Enterprise Offices, and other key decision-makers. The network of support for this initiative has expanded to include University College Cork (UCC) and the RDI Hub in Killorglin, Co. Kerry, as well as leading employers, consultants, and funders across the region.

MUNSTER ANIMATION CLUSTER – LOCAL ENTERPRISE OFFICES/ENTERPRISE IRELAND

As a core component of Action 1.2 of the South-West Regional Enterprise Plan, substantial progress has been achieved in strengthening the animation and visual-effects sector within the region. A comprehensive strategic plan, developed with the support of Enterprise Ireland and the Local Enterprise Offices across Munster, now provides a clear and evidence-based roadmap for future sectoral development.

The formal establishment of the Munster Animation Cluster in 2024 represents a significant milestone in the delivery of Action 1.2. The Cluster has enabled a structured approach to industry engagement, skills development, and regional collaboration, directly advancing the action's objective to enhance capacity, foster innovation, and build a more cohesive ecosystem for animation enterprises. A strong professional network has now been consolidated, supporting deeper industry linkages and aligning closely with the strategic priorities set out in the Plan.

These achievements collectively position the South-West as an emerging centre of excellence for animation, with strengthened stakeholder collaboration and a clearly defined strategic direction. While the action is complete under the current Plan, ongoing implementation and sectoral development will continue under the leadership of the Munster Animation Cluster, ensuring sustained progress and long-term industry resilience.

BIOMANUFACTURING ECOSYSTEM

UCC, industry partners and Cork County Council, recently joined by Cork City Council, are collaborating on the development of a biomanufacturing ecosystem. The partners have established a Designated Activity Company (DAC) and successfully applied for funding for a study under the Smart Regions Enterprise Innovation Scheme. This study is looking at the opportunity to develop a biomanufacturing ecosystem in the southern part of the country in response to escalating energy costs, rising carbon prices and the pace of new innovation. In terms of capacity, economic growth, job creation, resilience and competitiveness, it represents a significant regional opportunity. The region has significant capability with the building blocks and ambition in place for the development of such an industry in the region. There has been extensive stakeholder engagement with a Biomanufacturing Colloquium in UCC in December 2025 with over 55 attendees across multiple sectors demonstrating significant ambition towards the creation of a biomanufacturing industry. The study which is now complete sets out a path for the development of this industry and identifies challenges and opportunities going forward.

RDI Hub - AI Accelerator

As an active member of Working Group One, the RDI Hub, in partnership with Portershed and GreenTech HQ, has secured significant funding under the Smart Regions Enterprise Innovation Scheme to deliver a national AI upskilling initiative that helps SMEs adopt and implement practical AI solutions. The programme combines masterclasses, hands-on workshops, and focused training days with wraparound one-to-one clinics and consultancy. This approach gives businesses the skills, tools, and confidence to move from awareness to real-world application. Participants also benefit from expert input and structured peer learning, building a connected network across regional hubs to help Irish companies thrive and compete in an AI-driven landscape.

NATIONAL LIFESCIENCES CLUSTER

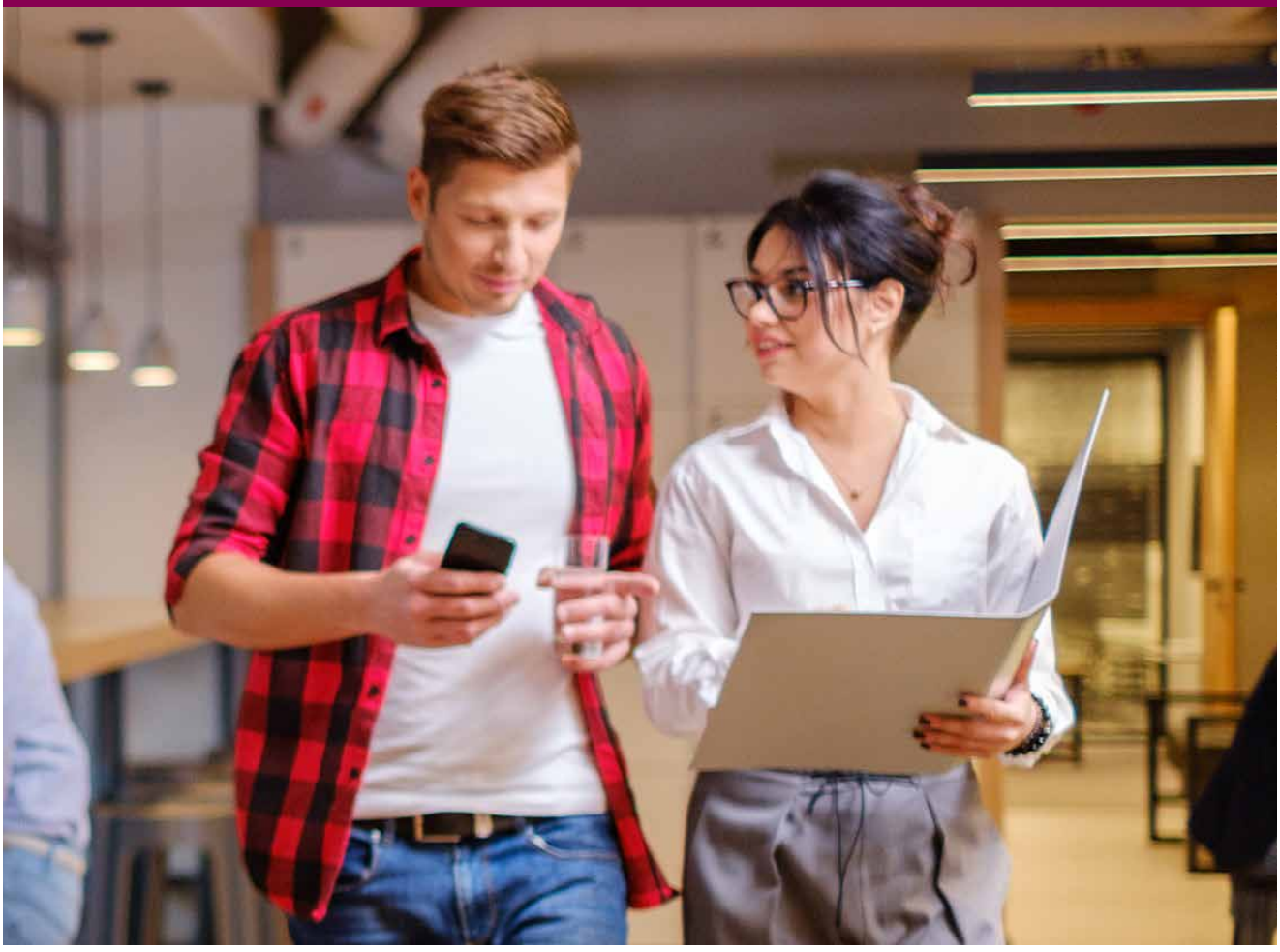
The South-West region is a national leader in life sciences, with Munster accounting for approximately 42% of Ireland's biopharma, pharma, and MedTech activity. This concentration of global companies, indigenous firms, and research institutions provides a strong foundation for continued innovation and sectoral growth.

Under Action 3.3 of the Plan, led by University College Cork, the region has prioritised strengthening coordination and strategic development within this sector. In line with this objective, work commenced in 2024 to explore the establishment of a National Life Sciences Cluster Organisation, with Cork identified as the proposed headquarters. Feasibility funding was secured through the Smart Regions Enterprise Innovation Scheme to assess industry needs and the potential benefits of a national cluster structure. As part of this, a consultation event held in Cork in June 2025 brought together over 50 senior stakeholders, confirming strong demand for a structured national entity to support competitiveness, collaboration, and innovation. Further progress was achieved with the launch of Life Sciences Ireland, including the website 'www.lifesciencesireland.ie', providing a platform to support engagement, communication, and sectoral coordination.

Throughout 2025, project partners participated in a series of workshops and engagements, including collaborative sessions with Northern Ireland stakeholders exploring Shared Island opportunities. These activities highlight the strength and maturity of the South-West's life sciences ecosystem.

CAMPAS ÍOSAGÁIN – ÚDARÁS NA GAELTACHTA

Campas Íosagáin in Ballyvourney, Co Cork, funded by Údarás na Gaeltachta, Enterprise Ireland, the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, and Cork County Council, underwent a complete renovation and connectivity upgrade and was formally opened in April 2026 as an enterprise centre where companies can develop and scale their business. A full range of training and development supports is being made available, and the campus is open to remote workers, start-ups, established indigenous companies as well as multinationals, forming part of the region's unique ecosystem. This facility is Údarás na Gaeltachta's latest Gteic and is providing a variety of office solutions as well as hot desk facilities. A large training space is included in the offering, and a manager of programmes and training has been hired to ensure this element of the centre is successful. There are also a number of meeting rooms available to tenants and users of the facility, as well as to external companies.



Case Studies from the South-West Regional Enterprise Plan

1. Regional Collaboration: Driving Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE) Cluster Development in the South-West



In 2023, the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (DETE) established an Offshore Wind Unit to develop Ireland's first industrial strategy for the sector, Powering Prosperity - Ireland's Offshore Wind Industrial Strategy, which was published in 2024. Recognising the opportunity for the South-West, the South-West Regional Enterprise Plan (SWREP) Steering Committee introduced Action 5.11 to examine enterprise potential linked to Cork Harbour, supported by a dedicated Working Group chaired by an independent industry expert.

Collaboration deepened in 2024 as the SWREP worked with other coastal regions and DETE to establish a national Offshore Wind Strategy Subgroup. Bringing together Chairs and the REP Programme Managers from the South-East, South-West, Mid-West, West, and North-West, the subgroup meets quarterly to share updates and ensure coherent alignment with national policy. In June 2024, the Irish Government hosted a joint Irish Scottish event - Advancing the Offshore Wind Opportunity: Bridging Irish and Scottish Perspectives – in Cork where ministers from both countries were joined by companies, researchers, and government departments and agencies active in the offshore wind sector. The joint annual event provides a platform to explore opportunities for collaboration on joint initiatives, support the sharing of expertise, and the development of partnerships that can maximise the economic benefit of offshore wind energy to both countries. Over 160 delegates participated in the 2024 event, resulting in rich discussions on a number of topics across the three themes: Offshore Wind Supply Chains, RDI & Skills, and

Regulation, Planning and Infrastructure. In parallel to the Industry Showcase, Irish and Scottish Government representatives took part in a tour of the Port of Cork, the National Maritime College of Ireland (NMCI), the MaREI research institute, and the ESB power station at Aghada to see first-hand the opportunities for developing a thriving offshore wind energy industry in the region.

Infrastructure capability has advanced significantly during this period. In 2024, the Port of Cork Company secured major funding to undertake works to support future offshore wind developments. An initial €38.4 million was provided under the EU's funding instrument, Connecting Europe Facility, while a further €88.5 million finance package for this first phase of development was funded through the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund. Works in this phase are due for completion in mid-2026. The development will be the first port in Ireland with a facility for ORE deployment and will allow the port to facilitate marshalling and assembly in time for the phase 1 ORE projects in Irish waters, as well as future offshore wind projects which will come from the South Coast Designated Maritime Area Plan (SC-DMAP).

Regional skills and training capability also strengthened. NMCI received €9 million for a new simulator suite. Throughout 2024, NMCI hosted Smart Maritime and Offshore Wind events and industry taster sessions to support awareness and workforce development. In 2025, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Cork further and higher education providers to establish a National Offshore Wind Skills Training Hub. NMCI also launched a Maritime and Offshore Safe Pass Pilot Programme designed to provide essential health and safety induction training for the maritime industry, mirroring the success of the existing Safe Pass programme used in construction.

In May 2025, a high-level public-sector ORE subgroup met in Cork to examine onshore economic opportunities associated with offshore renewable deployment. Cork County Council subsequently established a dedicated ORE unit to ensure local alignment with national 2030 targets. Later in 2025, the SWREP ORE Chair convened a cross-sectoral meeting at NMCI involving DETE's Offshore Wind Unit, regional enterprise leaders, local authorities, education training boards, University College Cork, the Port of Cork, and Munster Technological University. Engagement continued throughout 2025 between the SWREP ORE Working Group, NMCI, MaREI, Cork Chamber, and other partners.

Continued collaboration into 2026 and beyond will ensure the region is prepared to capture emerging opportunities in the ORE sector.

2. Building a Pipeline of Entrepreneurs in the South-West Region



The South-West has established itself as a vibrant hub for entrepreneurship, driven by a strong student population, an active research ecosystem, and close collaboration between Munster Technological University (MTU), University College Cork (UCC), and regional enterprise partners. With over 40,000 students and two leading universities, the region represents a significant source of entrepreneurial talent. Through targeted actions under the South-West Regional Enterprise Plan, entrepreneurship has been further embedded across higher education, creating a strong pipeline of student and graduate-led start-ups.

Action 1.1 strengthened this pipeline by embedding entrepreneurship in higher education and fostering entrepreneurial mindsets among students and graduates. The objective was to develop structured pathways that enable early-stage entrepreneurs to progress from initial concept to viable start-ups, ultimately becoming Local Enterprise Office clients or Enterprise Ireland High Potential Start-Ups. This approach has helped to cultivate a culture of innovation and contributed directly to regional economic development.

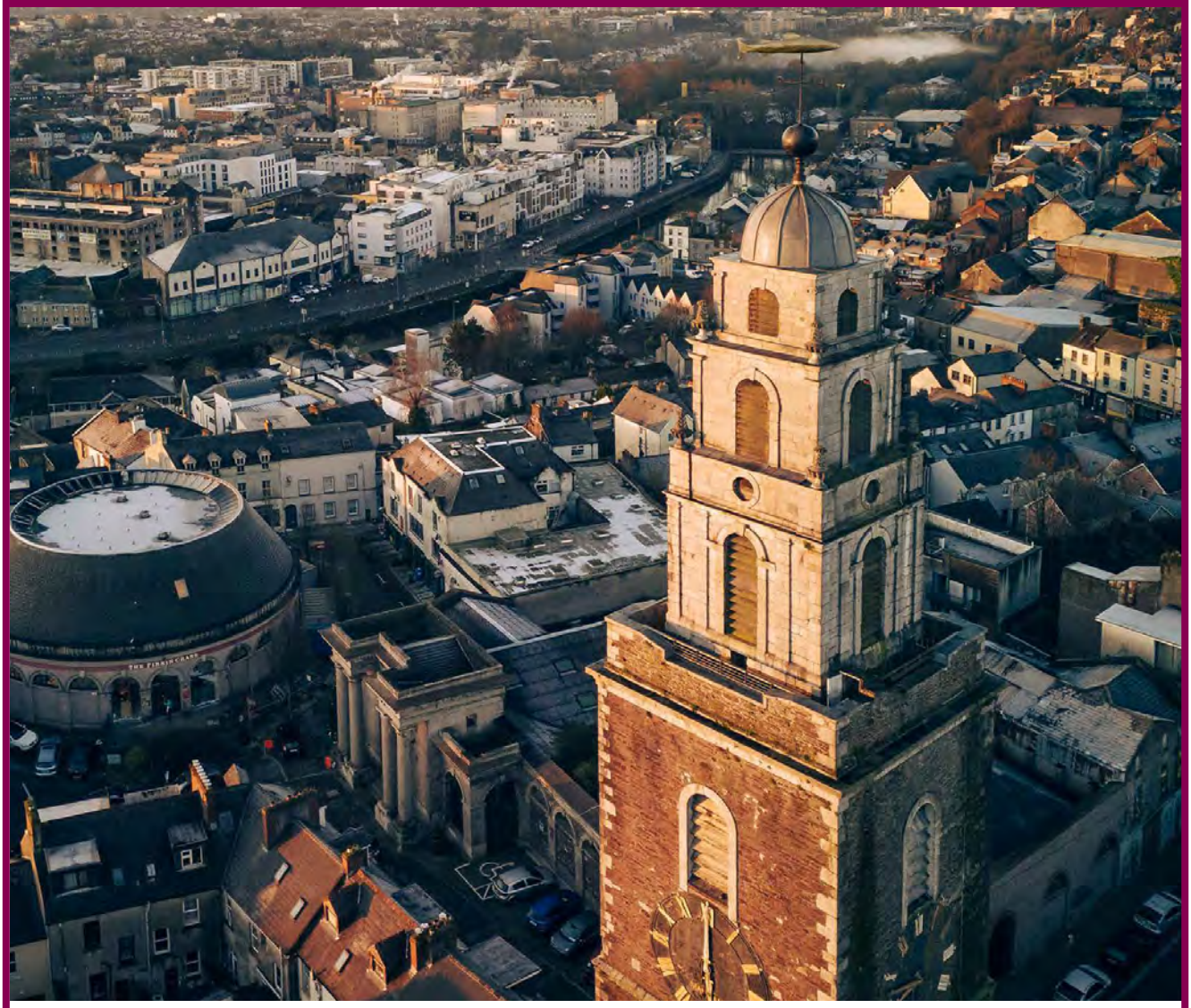
Across MTU and UCC, a diverse suite of programmes—ranging from experiential activities to micro-credentials and mentorship—has supported this goal. Flagship initiatives such as Student Inc., SPARK, the IGNITE Graduate Incubation Programme, the University-Wide Module on Developing an Entrepreneurial Mindset, SPRINT, Explorer, Cyber Innovate, and New Frontiers have provided structured supports for early-stage founders. Collectively, these initiatives engaged more than 1,000 participants, with several ventures progressing to successful start-ups and achieving national recognition. By embedding entrepreneurship, digitalisation, and innovation within both undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, the South-West has positioned itself as a national leader in developing scalable, investment-ready start-ups.

Recognising the importance of dedicated facilities to strengthen this ecosystem, Action 1.8 focused on the development of a shared entrepreneurship workspace at UCC. With a student population of approximately 40,000 in the region, the potential for start-up creation is significant. The vision for Start-up Central is to provide a collaborative hub offering workspace, mentoring, networking, and access to innovation supports.

Progress on this initiative has been steady, involving strategic planning, site identification, design development, and fundraising. In late 2025, construction began on a central entrepreneurship hub on the UCC campus, scheduled to open in 2026. This facility will become a cornerstone of the South-West's start-up ecosystem—enabling young founders to collaborate, innovate, and grow their ventures. It is expected to act as a catalyst for job creation and regional competitiveness.

The combined impact of these initiatives has been transformative. MTU and UCC have created a sustainable and diverse pipeline of new founders through embedded entrepreneurship education, access to supports, and the development of dedicated infrastructure. As a result, the South-West is well positioned for continued innovation, enterprise growth, and economic resilience. The key challenge—and opportunity—going forward will be securing ongoing investment to sustain and expand these critical entrepreneurship programmes within campus environments.

3. Transforming Cork's Northside Through the Shandon Butter Exchange Redevelopment



Action 2.7 of the South-West Regional Enterprise Plan set out to create a new urban Centre of Excellence on Cork's Northside, designed to stimulate enterprise development and job creation while delivering positive economic and social impacts. This area which is home to major employers such as Apple, Heineken, Teamwork, Blizzard Entertainment, and the Revenue Commissioners, was identified as a strategic location for this initiative. Building on the success of projects like Northside for Business in Blackpool, the historic Shandon Butter Exchange emerged as the ideal site for transformation into a hub for start-ups and scaling companies, offering capability-building programmes and fostering entrepreneurship in emerging sectors.

In 2023 Cork City Council granted a long-term lease to Recreate Shandon CLG, the entity tasked with leading the project. A diverse board of directors was established, including representatives from Cork City Council, University College Cork, Munster Technological University, KPMG, and community stakeholders, chaired by a former CEO of Cork University Hospital. Planning permission for the Tech and Innovation Hub was secured, and a detailed feasibility study was completed with support from Enterprise Ireland's Regional Enterprise Innovation Scoping Scheme (REISS). A comprehensive business plan and financial assessment were initiated to underpin an application under the Smart Regions Enterprise Innovation Scheme (SREIS).

Initial financial assessments revealed a significant funding gap, as construction costs far exceeded projected income from lettable space and services. The original funding model under SREIS was deemed unsustainable and other funding sources were sought. In response, Cork City Council and Recreate Shandon CLG pivoted toward a heritage-led approach, preparing an application under Strand Two of the THRIVE Town Centre First Heritage Revival Scheme. This revised concept incorporated the Weighmaster's House for community use, creating an expanded complex that would accommodate the Tech Hub while meeting broader community needs. This strategic shift ensured alignment with both economic and social objectives.

Cork City Council submitted an application under the THRIVE scheme in Q2 2025, while the Shandon Integrated Urban Strategy (SIUS), a roadmap for sustainable, heritage-led regeneration was adopted in Q1 2025. The enhanced proposition for Shandon Exchange now includes a multifunctional complex combining tech innovation facilities with community spaces. Construction is expected to commence in Q3 2026, contingent on funding approval.

The combined impact of multiple funding sources has supported a heritage-led regeneration project that integrates enterprise development with community revitalisation. Through strategic planning, stakeholder collaboration, and successful funding applications, the project is on track to deliver a transformative hub that supports start-ups, fosters innovation, and strengthens Cork's Northside as a vibrant economic and social district. The anticipated impact includes job creation, increased entrepreneurial activity, and enhanced community engagement, positioning Cork's Northside as a model for inclusive urban regeneration.

Overview of the Regional Enterprise Plans

Balanced regional enterprise development is a Government priority; the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and its agencies contribute to this agenda in several ways, including through the nine Regional Enterprise Plans (REPs).

The Regional Enterprise Plans 2022-2025 were bottom-up plans developed and led by regional stakeholders, which focused on collaborative initiatives to strengthen the enterprise ecosystem in each region. They were considered complementary to the ongoing work of key enterprise stakeholders including IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland. The REPs aimed to help drive economic growth and sustain better standards of living throughout Ireland. Each plan was underpinned by an understanding of the unique local strengths and assets in that region.

The REPs were aligned to national policy priorities including the National Smart Specialisation Strategy for Innovation 2022-2027, green growth and digitalisation. Each plan included several strategic objectives and actions under each of these. Some REP actions focused on delivery of enterprise centres and hubs in the regions and associated programmatic supports to businesses. Since 2017, the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment has allocated over €150 million to regional enterprise development through a range of schemes administered by Enterprise Ireland, some of which have funded key REP projects.



The nine REP regions are the North-East (Cavan, Monaghan, Louth), North-West (Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim), West (Galway, Mayo, Roscommon), Mid-West (Limerick, Clare, Tipperary), South-West (Cork, Kerry), South-East (Carlow, Kilkenny, Waterford and Wexford), Midlands (Laois, Offaly, Longford, Westmeath), Mid-East (Meath, Kildare, Wicklow) and Dublin.

The REPs evolved from the Regional Action Plans for Jobs in place from 2015 to 2017. The first set of REPs launched in 2018 and covered the period to 2020.

The latest plans launched in 2022 and were originally to run until the end of 2024; following a one-year extension to support implementation and enable an independent review of the REP initiative, the plans came to an end in December 2025. Mid-term progress reports for each of the REPs were published in April 2024 and are available on the Department's website.

At regional level, each REP is implemented by a Steering Committee made up of regional stakeholders and chaired by an enterprise champion, typically a senior private sector businessperson. A full-time REP Programme Manager, hosted in a local authority, drives implementation on the ground. The Department oversees implementation of the REP initiative at the national level; this includes hosting the REP National Oversight Group (NOG), co-chaired by the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, and Ministers of State. The NOG provides overall strategic direction for the REP initiative and typically met twice annually to review progress, share insights and guide future planning.



Smart Specialisation

In July 2022, the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (DETE) published Ireland's National Smart Specialisation Strategy for Innovation 2022–2027 (S3). Its goal is to drive innovation-led and sustainable regional growth by leveraging local sectoral strengths and emerging opportunities through collaboration among businesses, research institutions, public authorities, and civil society. S3 links DETE's Regional Enterprise Plans (REPs) and the Regional Assemblies' Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSESs) with national innovation strategies, ensuring alignment in Research, Development and Innovation (RD&I) policy and planning both regionally and nationally.

Ireland's Smart Specialisation Strategy fulfils a European Commission requirement for Ireland to access structural funding under European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Policy Objective 1: A Smarter Europe. The preparation of the strategy itself represents a key strategic outcome under Ireland's ERDF Programmes 2021-2027.

Launched in November 2022, the Regional Development Monitor (RDM) is a joint initiative of Ireland's three Regional Assemblies and the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO). The RDM provides an online mapping viewer with socio-economic and environmental indicators, enabling stakeholders to track progress under themes such as:

- Green Region
- Liveable Region
- Creative and Innovative Region

This tool supports evidence-based decision-making and promotes transparency in regional development. The Regional Development Monitor also includes a Smart Specialisation dashboard to enable better monitoring of progress.

The first progress report on Ireland's Smart Specialisation Strategy was published in March 2025 and progress under the eight goals of the strategy were highlighted.

- Goal 1: Linking national and regional enterprise and innovation policy
- Goal 2: Enabling "A Smarter Europe"
- Goal 3: Improving research and innovation capacity in Ireland's regions
- Goal 4: Encouraging more regionally dispersed RD&I
- Goal 5: Advancing the twin green and digital transformation
- Goal 6: Skills for innovation
- Goal 7: Reinforcing sectoral strengths
- Goal 8: Monitoring progress on regional innovation, and building international connections

Each of the Regional Assemblies sit on the National Smart Specialisation Implementation Group which has overall responsibility for the delivery of the Strategy's national and regional strategic priorities. In ensuring delivery of regional priorities, the Regional Assemblies also sit on the steering committees for the REPs. Working with the REPs is an important vehicle in translating S3 into regional and local impact.



Smart Specialisation in the South-West Region: Driving Innovation and Regional Growth

The South-West Regional Enterprise Plan to 2025 is considered a key contributor to the regional innovation landscape. As part of the Southern Region at NUTS 2 level, the South-West Regional Enterprise Plan (REP) embraced the Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) to align regional strengths with EU priorities, fostering research, innovation, and sustainable economic development. Through collaborative efforts between the South-West REP, Southern Regional Assembly (SRA), local authorities, higher education institutions and industry stakeholders, the region has made significant strides in implementing S3 principles.

Smart Specialisation in the South-West is anchored in a structured governance model that promotes stakeholder alignment and coordinated action. The Southern Regional Assembly's Smart Southern Region initiative comes under Action 1.6 and has been central to this effort, delivering key milestones such as:

- Smart Southern Region Project Mapping Tool: Developed in consultation with Cork City, Cork County, and Kerry County Councils, this interactive tool identifies and tracks smart projects across the region.
- Smart Southern Region Action Plan: A co-created roadmap that sets priorities for innovation-driven growth.
- Smart Southern Region Network: A collaborative platform connecting local authorities, academia, and enterprise to advance smart initiatives.

These actions are complemented by the Smart Region Maturity Framework, which provides a structured approach to assessing and enhancing regional capabilities.

A major milestone was achieved in June 2024, when the Southern Region was designated as a Regional Innovation Valley (RIV) under the EU framework (the SWREP was active in the application stage). This status enables the South-West to:

- Collaborate with other EU regions on inter-regional innovation projects.
- Access EU funding mechanisms to support cross-thematic smart initiatives in cities, towns and rural areas.
- Enhance coordination of research and innovation investments at regional level.

The RIV designation positions the South-West as a key player in Europe's innovation ecosystem, opening doors for partnerships and funding opportunities.

The Regional Development Monitor, launched in 2022 by the Regional Assemblies and AIRO provides a mapping tool highlighting socioeconomic and environmental indicators, including a Smart Specialisation dashboard. Key highlights for the South-West include:

- The Southern Region has a strong innovation ranking and scored 130 on the Regional Innovation Scoreboard 2025, ranking 63rd in Europe.
- The South-West Region has received €44.5 million in Horizon Europe Funding (2021-2024). The Southern Region received €259.6 million over this period, representing approximately 30% of total funding received by the state.
- The Southern Region accounted for €1.05 billion (27%) of national Business R&D expenditure in 2021 and €0.75 billion (10.6%) in 2023.

Horizon Europe ROBIN Project: Under Actions 5.1, 5.3, and 5.7, the South-West is actively engaged in the ROBIN Project, funded by Horizon Europe. This initiative aims to:

- Adapt governance models to accelerate circular bioeconomy targets.
- Promote social innovation while accounting for diverse regional contexts.

Key partners include Munster Technological University's CircBio Research Group, Shannon ABC, the Irish Bioeconomy Foundation and Dingle Hub, reflecting the region's strong commitment to sustainability and innovation.

Towards a Learning Region: The SRA's Towards a Learning Region report, based on UNESCO Learning City principles, sets out evidence-based recommendations to strengthen lifelong learning and skills development. In line with Action 6.4, the South-West REP and SRA are implementing these recommendations by:

- Connecting education initiatives with industry-led skills development.
- Promoting collaboration between higher and further education institutions, enterprise, and regional stakeholders.

This approach ensures that talent development aligns with S3 priorities, supporting both innovation and workforce resilience.

The S3 Progress Report published in March 2025, highlights substantial achievements, including:

- Completion of stakeholder mapping and governance structures.
- Identification and support for funding through Project Ireland 2040 and EU funds.
- South-West REP active engagement in the Talent4S3 Project, focusing on talent retention and attraction to meet regional innovation needs.

Looking ahead, the South-West REP will continue to leverage its RIV status, expand smart initiatives and strengthen collaboration between academia, enterprise, and government. Ongoing projects under the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, and Regional Enterprise Development Fund programmes will further enhance regional competitiveness and sustainability.

Smart Specialisation in the South-West has helped transform the region into a collaborative, innovation-driven region. By aligning stakeholders around a shared vision, securing EU recognition, and investing in education and research, the region is well positioned to drive economic growth, job creation, and global competitiveness. Alongside its partners and stakeholders, the South-West REP's efforts underscore its capability to lead in smart, sustainable development and serve as a model for regional innovation strategies.



Strategic Objective 1:
Enhance the enterprise eco-system across the region through innovation, entrepreneurship and digitalisation

Action 1.1: Develop Programmes to Support Undergraduate and Graduate Entrepreneurship for the South-West

Action Leader: Munster Technological University (MTU) and University College Cork (UCC)
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2025
Final Status: Complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 1.1 aimed to leverage the South-West's strong student population and research ecosystem to foster entrepreneurship among undergraduates and graduates. With two universities and over 35,000 students, the region represents a significant source of innovation. The objective was to create programmes that support student and graduate-led start-ups capable of scaling, becoming Local Enterprise Office (LEO) clients, and qualifying as Enterprise Ireland High Potential Start-Ups (HPSUs). This initiative sought to strengthen the start-up pipeline and drive regional economic growth.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023

By mid-2023, progress was evident. Munster Technological University (MTU) and University College Cork (UCC) expanded their flagship entrepreneurship programmes, Student Inc. and IGNITE, providing structured support for student and graduate entrepreneurs. The Research Development and Innovation (RDI) Hub, part of the National Digital Research Centre (NDRC), delivered *Office Hours*, *Founders Weekend*, and Pre-Accelerator opportunities, engaging 20 companies. UCC's iEd Hub prepared to launch a postgraduate entrepreneurship programme for the life sciences sector in 2024. These initiatives laid a strong foundation for sustained entrepreneurial activity.

2024

Progress continued in 2024. MTU operated *Student Inc.* as a full-time summer accelerator, with plans for national expansion pending Higher Education Authority (HEA) funding. UCC introduced new initiatives, including a HEA-funded programme promoting SDG-driven entrepreneurship, short courses, and micro-credentials. Over 100 students and 15 staff participated, and a five-day summer school introduced methodologies such as *Design Thinking* and *Business Model Canvas*. UCC launched a university-wide module, *Developing an Entrepreneurial Mindshift*, and branded extracurricular activities under SPARK, fostering a vibrant entrepreneurship culture. The IGNITE programme supported 35 founders, with alumni companies like Trustap and LegitFit securing significant investment. UCC also introduced an *Entrepreneur-in-Residence* programme, engaging over 1,000 participants.

MTU and Enterprise Ireland launched *Cyber Innovate*, a 10-month Postgraduate Diploma in Cybersecurity Innovation funded under Enterprise Ireland's *Innovator's Initiative* and co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). This needs-led programme trains mid-career professionals using tools like *Design Thinking* and *Customer Discovery*, offering scholarships worth €38,000 plus fees. The goal is to train 75 cybersecurity innovators over six years, creating a pipeline of cybersecurity-focused start-ups and HPSUs.

2025

By 2025, Action 1.1 achieved its objectives. *Student Inc.* expanded nationally, involving nine universities and 80 students in summer 2025. Four participants from 2024 progressed to MTU's Enterprise Ireland *New Frontiers Phase 2*, demonstrating the progression from student-focused supports into national start-up development programmes. MTU rebranded its entrepreneurship activities under Student Hub for Entrepreneurial Development (SHED) and continued delivering *New*

Frontiers Phases 1–3 through its incubation centres, supporting 300 entrepreneurs in Phase 1 and 60 start-ups in Phase 2 since 2021. UCC sustained its ecosystem through SPARK, micro-credentials, and mentorship programmes, embedding entrepreneurship across disciplines.

Conclusion

The suite of initiatives introduced during the plan's lifetime, including SPARK, micro-credentials, and mentorship programmes created a robust entrepreneurial culture across MTU and UCC. With ongoing entrepreneurship, digitalisation, and innovation programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, the action is considered complete when measured against the South-West Regional Enterprise Plan outcomes. Action 1.1 has successfully strengthened the region's entrepreneurial pipeline by embedding entrepreneurship into higher education. Importantly, these undergraduate and graduate entrepreneurship initiatives also create pathways into national supports such as Enterprise Ireland's national entrepreneurship programme New Frontiers which, provides a further progression route for student and graduate founders developing scalable ventures. Through initiatives such as Student Inc., IGNITE, Cyber Innovate, and New Frontiers, MTU and UCC built an ecosystem that nurtures early-stage entrepreneurs and supports scalable start-ups. With over 1,000 participants engaged and national expansion achieved, the South-West is well-positioned to benefit from continued innovation and economic growth.

Action 1.2: Support the growing animation and visual effects sector in the region

Action Leader: Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs)
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2025
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction

The South-West and Munster as a whole, had strong third-level animation programs but lagged somewhat behind other regions in industry success. A feasibility study for the region was commissioned to explore opportunities for growth and collaboration among training providers and enterprises.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023 the Munster Animation Forum completed a study outlining a roadmap for a Munster Animation Cluster and a comprehensive three-year strategy for the animation sector was produced, supported by Enterprise Ireland and Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs).

2024 Launch

The Munster Animation Cluster was formally launched at the Dingle Animation Festival in March 2024. A strong network of industry professionals was established, aligning with the Regional Enterprise Plan objectives. Initiatives included:

- Expanding membership beyond Munster.
- Exploring funding for a full-time cluster executive.
- Planning events with LEOs and educational partners.
- Leveraging potential funding through the Smart Regions Fund.

2025 Network and Initiatives

This action progressed well over the lifetime of the Plan in terms of developing the building blocks for a strong animation sector in the region through targeted supports and Cluster building. A strong strategic plan for animation sector has been produced with support from Enterprise Ireland and the LEOs in the Munster area and implementation is ongoing through a number of initiatives being undertaken within the Munster Animation Cluster. A strong network has been developed amongst industry professionals which further aligns with the action outcome in the SWREP.

Conclusion

Throughout the plans duration, strong foundations have been laid for a vibrant animation sector in the region. Key milestones, such as the strategic plan and cluster launch have been achieved, and ongoing initiatives continue to strengthen industry collaboration, skills development, and regional integration. With a strong network and clear strategic direction, the sector is well positioned for sustained growth. The action can now be considered complete within the current South-West Regional Enterprise Plan, with implementation continuing under the Munster Animation Cluster.

Action 1.3: Increase the number of start-ups in technology with a focus on Cyber Security, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies through accelerator programmes.

Action Leader: RDI Hub/Fexco
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2025
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 1.3 was designed to strengthen the South-West region's position in emerging technologies by increasing the number of start-ups in cybersecurity, artificial intelligence (AI), and related sectors through accelerator programmes. This aligns with national strategy to foster enterprise collaboration, leverage regional strengths, and build a robust innovation ecosystem. The action aimed to accelerate scaling and internationalisation of early-stage companies, integrate research at an early stage, and maximise the impact of regional funding initiatives to drive job creation and export growth.

Steps Taken During the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Driving Innovation and Regional Impact
By the end of 2023, significant progress had been achieved. The RDI Hub, working in partnership with Fexco and the National Digital Research Centre (NDRC), spearheaded a series of impactful programmes. Over 80 start-ups participated in the NDRC Pre-Accelerator between 2022 and 2023, with 14 advancing to the National Accelerator. Many of these ventures focused on cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and emerging technologies such as AR/VR and crypto. Complementary initiatives included the *Sustainability 2050 Accelerator*, *Talent Accelerator*, *HBAN Regional Partnership*, and the *€1 million Mortgage Innovation Challenge*. The return of the John McCarthy AI Summer School in September 2023 reaffirmed the region's leadership in AI, while RDI Hub's collaboration with Innovation Exchange strengthened connections between large enterprises and SMEs to accelerate solution development.

2024 Progress
Efforts continued to build into 2024 with new programmes and partnerships across MTU, UCC, and the regional hubs. MTU expanded its *Cybersecurity Masters* course and introduced dedicated start-up spaces, while RDI Hub hosted *Founders Weekend* in February, attracting 77 participants and 32 teams pitching

AI and emerging tech solutions. The NDRC Pre-Accelerator Showcase in May featured 20 start-ups, most focused on AI-driven innovation. Partnerships between RDI Hub, Ludgate Hub, and Innovation Exchange deepened, fostering collaboration between corporates and SMEs.

2025

By the end of 2025, the initiative had delivered on its objectives, driving impact and sustainability. RDI Hub, in collaboration with Portershed and Greentech HQ secured Smart Regions Enterprise Innovation Scheme funding for an AI Accelerator, offering masterclasses, workshops, and consultancy to help SMEs adopt AI solutions. Leading manufacturing and engineering firms engaged in this programme, enhancing regional competitiveness. In June, the RDI Hub hosted an *Ethics in AI* event featuring Wendell Wallach, a global thought leader in AI ethics. The year concluded with the sixth John McCarthy AI Summer School in September, focusing on *AI for Finance* and reinforcing the region's position as a hub for AI expertise.

Conclusion

The South-West's technology start-up ecosystem has been successfully enabled, embedding accelerator programmes, fostering research-industry collaboration, and securing funding for long-term sustainability. These efforts have created a strong pipeline of innovative companies, driving job creation, digital capability, and international competitiveness.

Action 1.4: Establish a South-West 'Thought Leaders' Forum to identify enterprise opportunities in emerging technology including sustainable finance, cyber security, AI and fintech

Action Leader: South-West Programme Manager
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2025
Final Status: Action partially complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 1.4 was conceived to create a collaborative platform for industry leaders, academics, and innovators in the South-West region to identify enterprise opportunities in emerging technologies such as sustainable finance, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence (AI), and fintech. The rationale behind this initiative was to foster progressive and innovative solutions to regional challenges through multi-disciplinary engagement, leveraging co-operation to strengthen regional competitiveness and future proof economic growth.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023, groundwork was laid for the establishment of the Thought Leaders Forum. The South-West Regional Enterprise Plan (SWREP) Working Group began plans to hold the inaugural event in 2024, aiming to connect industry leaders and founders. This initiative built on the success of prior regional events such as the Founders Forum, the AI Summer School, the John McCarthy Weekend, the South-West Smart Manufacturing Meetup, and the Irish Funds Forum. These events demonstrated the region's capacity to convene thought leadership and foster dialogue on emerging technologies, setting the stage for a formalised forum.

2024 Advancements

By 2024, the action remained on target, with significant preparatory work underway. A dedicated subgroup was established in Q2 2024, comprising representatives from local authorities, universities, and Cork Chamber. This subgroup's mandate was to collaborate on the design and delivery of the Thought Leaders Forum, ensuring alignment with the action's objectives. The group focused on creating a platform for progressive and innovative solutions to regional challenges, emphasising cross-sectoral collaboration.

2025 Status

In 2025, progress was delayed and, following discussion at the Working Group, it was recommended to keep the action open

Conclusion

The Working Group made some early progress in laying the foundation for a regional Thought Leaders Forum, including stakeholder engagement, and subgroup formation providing a strong foundation for future developments in this area.

Action 1.5: Explore the opportunities for the region through research and innovation in travel/ tourism technology & Aquaculture technology.

Action Leader: RDI Hub/Fexco
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2025
Final Status: Action partially complete - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 1.5 was developed to leverage the South-West's traditional strengths in tourism and its potential in aquaculture by integrating cutting-edge technologies such as AI, the Internet of Things (IoT), virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and blockchain. The rationale was twofold: enhance digital delivery for tourism enterprises and address challenges in the rapidly growing global aquaculture industry, valued at $300 billion. By fostering innovation in these sectors, the region aimed to create sustainable growth, attract tech talent, and position Ireland at the forefront of tourism-tech and aqua-tech advancements.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
In 2023, significant developments were made in both tourism-tech and aqua-tech. Fexco, in collaboration with RDI Hub, Kerry County Council, Munster Technological University, and Kerry Tourism Industry Federation, hosted a Tourism Tech Hackathon with over 20 participants. This resulted in two Augmented Reality (AR) projects for Killarney National Park and the Kerry Way, serving as pilots for future digital tourism initiatives. Concurrently, RDI Hub prepared an INTERREG Atlantic Area funding submission for the Digital Innovation Blue Economy Social Tourism project.

On the aquaculture front, RDI Hub partnered with Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM) and HATCH to run an annual Aquatech Accelerator. By 2023, 41 participants had engaged, focusing on AI applications and emerging technologies such as seaweed extraction and alternative seafoods. These efforts attracted €14.4 million in investment, with 10 companies enrolled in the accelerator programme.

2024 Advancements
By 2024, work under this action was firmly on target. RDI Hub advanced work on the DIBEST (Digital Innovation Blue Economy and Social Tourism) project, taking responsibility for Work Package 3. This involved developing services for tourism-tech micro-enterprises in coastal regions and selecting 80

micro-enterprises for programme participation by year-end. These initiatives aligned with the action's outcomes: creating programmes for ideation, validation, and testing; building an internationally recognised ecosystem; and combining traditional tourism strengths with innovative technologies. The aquaculture sector continued to benefit from accelerator programmes and collaborative efforts among academia, tech industry, and government.

2025 Status

In 2025, the initiative continued to gain pace with the launch of the AI for Tourism Roundtable series, hosted by RDI Hub in partnership with Fáilte Ireland. The first event in May attracted over 25 hotel operators and featured speakers from CeADAR and industry innovators, showcasing AI applications for operational efficiency and guest experience enhancement. Two additional events were scheduled for later in the year, with insights feeding into Fáilte Ireland's Industry Digitalisation Strategy.

Meanwhile, the DIBEST project went live across Spain, France, Portugal, and Ireland, surpassing its target with 96 sign-ups. These developments reinforced the region's commitment to integrating technology into tourism and aquaculture, paving the way for nationwide initiatives in 2026.

Conclusion

Work under Action 1.5 has successfully positioned the South-West as a leader in tourism-tech and aqua-tech innovation. Through hackathons, accelerator programmes, European collaborations, and AI-focused initiatives, the region has built a strong ecosystem that attracts talent, investment, and expertise. Continued engagement and scaling of these programmes will ensure Ireland remains at the forefront of sustainable tourism and aquaculture technology, driving economic growth and resilience.

Action 1.6: Develop a Southern Smart Region through partnership with regional stakeholders to implement recommendations of a Smart Region Maturity Framework.

Action Leader: Southern Regional Assembly (SRA)
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 1.6 aimed to position the Southern Region as a competitive, innovative, and resilient economy by implementing the Smart Region Maturity Framework (SRMF). This initiative aligns with the *Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy* (RSES) and *Project Ireland 2040*, which emphasise leveraging cities as growth engines while revitalising towns, villages, and rural areas through smart technologies. The goal was to create a collaborative ecosystem that integrates digital infrastructure and smart solutions to support enterprise growth, service delivery, and social revitalisation in a post-COVID context.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
The *Smart Southern Region* approach was launched in January 2023. Key milestones included developing a regional *Smart Specialisation Strategy* (S3) and initiating *a Smart Southern Region* project mapping tool in consultation with local authorities and stakeholders. Work began on a *Smart Southern Region Action Plan* and the establishment of a Smart Southern Region Network. The Southern Regional Assembly (SRA), supported by the South-West REP, also prepared an application for the EU Regional Innovation Valleys (RIV) initiative, aiming to enhance inter-regional collaboration on research and innovation projects linked to EU priorities.

2024 Advancements
By 2024, substantial progress had been achieved. The *Smart Southern Region* project mapping tool was completed, providing an interactive platform to visualize smart initiatives across the region. A governance structure was agreed upon, and the *Smart Southern Region Action Plan* was finalised. A major milestone occurred in June 2024 when the Southern Region was designated as a Regional Innovation Valley (RIV), alongside other Irish regions. This designation enables access to EU funding and fosters collaboration

on cross-border innovation projects. These developments directly addressed the action outcomes, including stakeholder alignment around a co-created vision, completion of stakeholder mapping, and identification of funding opportunities for smart initiatives in urban and rural areas.

2025 Status

In 2025, the action was considered substantially complete, with ongoing work to embed the SRMF across the region. The Smart Southern Region network continued to grow, supporting knowledge sharing and project development. The S3 Progress Report was approved by Minister Peter Burke TD, submitted to the EU Commission, and published in March 2025, marking another significant achievement. Monitoring of S3 has also been embedded into the Regional Development Monitor (RDM) online platform. The RIV status continues to provide opportunities for EU-funded projects, ensuring sustained investment in smart initiatives. The SRA continues to strengthen its approach to developing a Smart Southern Region and is engaged in an EU Preparatory Action *'Innovation for place-based transformation'* (2025-2026). These efforts collectively advanced the region's ambition to serve as a living pilot testbed for smart solutions, as outlined in the Regional Economic and Spatial Strategy for the Southern Region 2020-2032, which aims to develop Smart Cities as engines for a Smart Region. At its core the initiative seeks to support Smart Cities, seeking good practices yielded through living labs, testbeds, the deployment of disruptive technologies and smart infrastructures in cities, towns, villages and rural areas and supporting investment in the initiatives of stakeholders to achieve the pillars of the EU Digital Single Market.

Conclusion

Action 1.6 successfully delivered on its objectives by creating a robust framework for smart regional development. Through strategic partnerships, governance structures, and EU engagement, the Southern Region is now positioned as a leader in smart innovation. The designation as a Regional Innovation Valley and the implementation of the Smart Region Maturity Framework have laid the foundation for long-term economic resilience, digital transformation, and inter-regional collaboration. Continued focus on funding and stakeholder engagement will ensure the region remains at the forefront of smart growth initiatives.

Action 1.7: Explore new niche market opportunities for regional enterprises and new start-ups in the Silver Economy.

Action Leader: MTU
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 1.7 was included to highlight and develop opportunities for regional enterprises and start-ups within the Silver Economy, a sector representing the purchasing power and economic activities of older adults. Valued at €3.7 trillion in Europe and projected at the time to reach €5.7 trillion by 2025, the Silver Economy is the third largest global economy after the USA and China. In Ireland, it is estimated to be worth approximately €13 billion. This action aimed to raise awareness, provide training, and foster collaboration to enable Irish entrepreneurs to capitalise on this growing market.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
In 2023, the MTU Hincks Centre for Entrepreneurship Excellence, supported by the School of Business, spearheaded research into the Silver Economy. MTU led the European-wide *Silver SMEs* project, which focused on raising awareness and identifying opportunities in this sector. Building on this, the Hincks Centre launched the *Senior Eco-Nect* project, aimed at connecting different aspects of the Silver Economy and promoting integrated, inclusive policy development. Key outputs included regional SWOT analyses, stakeholder mapping, and strategy development, culminating in a *Joint Action Plan*. These initiatives laid the groundwork for positioning the South-West region as a leader in Silver Economy innovation.

2024 Advancements
By 2024, the action was on target and progressing well. MTU continued its research and actively promoted the Silver Economy through presentations and panel discussions. Notable engagements included presentations to business leaders in Brussels (June 2024) and Skibbereen (March 2024), as well as contributions to the SWREP Working Group. These efforts increased awareness among entrepreneurs and highlighted collaboration opportunities.

The RDI Hub engaged with a European programme involving tourism and VR, suggesting synergies with MTU's work. Additionally, connections were explored between MTU and Kerry County Council's Centre for Smart Ageing, which focuses on product development for older populations. These collaborations signalled growing engagement in developing a sustainable Silver Economy ecosystem in the region.

2025 Status

By 2025, Action 1.7 was considered complete, with ongoing initiatives continuing to drive progress. The Hincks Centre remained central to this effort, advancing the *Silver SMEs* and *Senior Eco-Nect* programmes and maintaining its role as a subject expert for the European Commission's DG Research & Innovation. MTU contributed to the 2025 Internal Policy Workshop Report on *Research and Innovation for the Silver Economy*, reinforcing its leadership in this space.

Connections established in late 2024 and early 2025 between MTU, Kerry County Council, and other stakeholders strengthened regional collaboration. Opportunities for businesses to supply goods and services to the growing older population continue to expand, supported by research, policy development, and awareness campaigns.

Conclusion

Through research, European collaborations, and stakeholder engagement, work in the region has laid a strong foundation for enterprises to explore the opportunities, innovate and serve the needs of an ageing population. Continued focus on partnerships across the region and product development will ensure long-term growth and competitiveness in this emerging market.

Action 1.8: Develop shared workspace to support graduate and student start-ups in the region.

Action Leader: UCC
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action partially complete - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 1.8 was introduced to address the need for a dedicated shared workspace for student and graduate entrepreneurs in the South-West region. With approximately 40,000 third-level students, the region has significant potential to generate innovative start-ups that contribute to economic, social, and

environmental development. The rationale behind this initiative was to create a vibrant hub that fosters collaboration, networking, and mentorship, while providing the infrastructure necessary for start-ups to thrive and progress toward scaling and investment readiness.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023, UCC embedded the development of a student entrepreneurship hub within its Strategic Plan 2023–2028, *Securing Our Future*. The university leadership team endorsed the ambition to create an entrepreneurial campus, and initial scoping began to identify a suitable location for the hub. This marked a significant first step toward realising the vision of a central entrepreneurship hub that would serve as a focal point for student and graduate start-up activity.

2024 Advancements

By 2024, the project continued to progress, UCC identified a location for the shared workspace and branded the initiative as *Start-up Central*. A concept outline and design brief were developed by UCC Innovation, which informed preliminary architectural sketches. These sketches were refined through consultations with an architect and UCC's Buildings and Estates office. The next steps outlined for 2024 included developing detailed architectural designs and costings, which would form the basis for fundraising efforts. This progress aligned directly with the action outcome of creating a dedicated workspace to support a pipeline of robust start-up companies.

2025 Status

In 2025, the action continued to advance, with significant milestones achieved. Detailed architectural plans and costings for Start-up Central were completed, providing a clear roadmap for implementation. UCC initiated fundraising efforts to secure the necessary investment for refurbishing and equipping the space. The goal is to have the entrepreneurship hub operational by Semester 1, 2026. The hub is envisioned to accommodate up to 40 student and graduate-led start-ups, offering collaborative spaces, mentorship opportunities, and access to networks of experienced entrepreneurs and investors. These developments demonstrate strong alignment with the original objectives of fostering an entrepreneurial culture and creating a sustainable pipeline of start-ups in the region.

Conclusion

Action 1.8 has made steady progress toward establishing a dedicated shared workspace for student and graduate entrepreneurs. From strategic planning and site identification to design development and fundraising, the initiative is on track to deliver a transformative resource for the South-West's

start-up ecosystem. Once operational, Start-up Central will serve as a catalyst for innovation, enabling young founders to connect, collaborate, and scale their ventures. Continued focus on securing funding and completing the refurbishment will ensure the hub becomes a cornerstone of regional enterprise development, driving job creation and economic growth.

Action 1.9: Support the further development of the Scale Cork programme to support those who are in the indigenous MedTech, Agri-Tech, Digital and Connected Health and Life Sciences. This action would include those who are part of the Supply Chain of these sectors.

Action Leader: Cork County Council, Rubicon and MTU
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2025
Final Status: Action partially complete - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 1.9 was designed to build on the success of the Scale Cork pilot programme, which supports indigenous companies in MedTech, Agri-Tech, Digital, Connected Health, and Life Sciences sectors, including their supply chains. These sectors are critical to the South-West's employment and innovation ecosystem. While many companies have grown organically in the Irish market, scaling internationally requires capacity building, advanced mentoring, and market access. Scale Cork addressed these needs by leveraging benchmarking, mentoring, and partnerships to prepare companies for export growth and engagement with foreign direct investment opportunities.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
In 2023, MTU and Cork County Council continued to support Scale Cork companies and maintain the infrastructure for future programmes. Six companies in County Cork successfully completed the Scale Cork programme. A review of the 2020 cohort demonstrated tangible growth in turnover and employment, validating the programme's impact. Participants adopted digitalisation and international quality standards, creating a strong foundation for scaling. A final report was under development, outlining recommendations for future opportunities in the South-West region.

2024 Advancements

By 2024, the action remained ongoing, with progress focused on evaluating programme outcomes and planning for future iterations. MTU and Cork County Council updated performance data for participating companies, benchmarking results two years post programme against initial metrics. This review confirmed sustained growth and highlighted the importance of continued support for scaling initiatives. However, the launch of a new programme was contingent on securing funding, with ambitions to commence in Q1 2025. These efforts aligned directly with the action outcome of developing and delivering enhanced scaling capabilities for established companies in key sectors.

2025 Status

In 2025, the action continued to progress with work to secure funding for a regional initiative under the Smart Regions Enterprise Innovation Scheme. Meanwhile, MTU and Cork County Council maintained infrastructure and support for Scale Cork alumni while working on the design of the new programme with a broader stakeholder group. Building on the legacy of Scale Cork, stakeholders expressed strong ambition to expand the initiative regionally and nationally. The updated performance review from 2024 provided compelling evidence of the programme's success, reinforcing the case for investment.

Conclusion

Scale Cork demonstrated the value of targeted scaling programmes for indigenous companies in high-growth sectors. Through mentoring, benchmarking, and market access, Scale Cork enabled participating firms to increase turnover, employment, and readiness for international expansion. Plans are in train for the next iteration of a scaling programme in the South-West with preparatory work underway building on the success of the previous programme. Continued stakeholder collaboration and resource mobilisation will be essential to ensure the next phase delivers on its promise to strengthen the South-West's enterprise ecosystem.

Action 1.10 Strengthen the Enterprise Ecosystem of the South-West Region through the regeneration of city, town and village centres creating an environment that is attractive for investment in enterprise, residential and community development.

Action Leader: Local Authorities
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2025
Final Status: Action partially complete - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 1.10 was designed to enhance the South-West region's enterprise ecosystem by regenerating urban and rural centres to create attractive environments for investment in enterprise, residential, and community development. This aligns with *Project Ireland 2040* and the national *Town Centre First* policy, which emphasizes revitalizing towns and villages as sustainable hubs for living, working, and innovation. The rationale is to reverse decline, reduce vacancy, and promote compact growth through high-quality public realm improvements, adaptive reuse of buildings, and strategic investment in infrastructure.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
In 2023, progress was evident through multiple regeneration projects funded under the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF), the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF), and the Regional Enterprise Development Fund (REDF). These projects targeted Cork City, Cork County, and Kerry County Council areas. The Southern Regional Assembly (SRA), supported by the South-West REP, prepared an application for the EU Regional Innovation Valleys (RIV) initiative to strengthen inter-regional collaboration on research and innovation. Additionally, the Regional Development Monitor (RDM) was rolled out, providing an online mapping tool to track socio-economic and environmental indicators.

Furthermore, the RDI Hub represented the region at the European Start-up Villages Forum, showcasing South-West innovation potential.

2024 Advancements

By 2024, the action remained on target, with significant capital investment projects underway. The Southern Region achieved RIV designation in June 2024, unlocking EU funding opportunities for smart and sustainable regeneration. Major URDF projects included *Positioning Tralee as a Regional Economic Driver* (€21.2 million) and *Killarney: A World Class Destination* (€21.4 million), both aimed at creating vibrant urban centres. RRDF projects advanced in Cahirciveen (€19 million), Valentia (€1.27 million), Killorglin (€7 million), and Listowel (€6.7 million), focusing on public realm enhancements, heritage restoration, and multifunctional hubs. The THRIVE scheme supported heritage-led revitalization in towns such as Tralee and Killarney, with funding of €197,094 each. Cork City progressed major projects including Marina Park Phase 2, Cork Docklands enabling infrastructure, and the Grand Parade Quarter regeneration. Cork County advanced works in Macroom, Carrigaline, and other towns under RRDF and THRIVE, emphasizing public realm improvements and cultural facilities.

2025 Status

In 2025, the action continued to deliver transformative outcomes. URDF and RRDF projects moved into advanced stages, with construction commencing on several public realm schemes. Cork City's Marina Park Phase 2 and Docklands projects progressed alongside THRIVE-funded heritage strategies for Shandon. Cork County advanced Macroom's regeneration (€8.4 million) and Carrigaline's public realm scheme (€206,505). Projects in Co Kerry, including Cahirciveen's waterfront amenity and Valentia's Cable Station restoration, neared completion. These initiatives collectively enhanced urban attractiveness, supported enterprise hubs, and fostered community engagement. The RIV designation continued to facilitate EU collaboration and funding, reinforcing the region's innovation-driven regeneration strategy.

Conclusion

The South-West's enterprise ecosystem has been strengthened by the delivery of large-scale regeneration projects that enhance liveability, connectivity, and economic vitality. Through coordinated investment under URDF, RRDF, THRIVE, and EU programmes, the region is creating vibrant, sustainable centres that attract businesses, residents, and visitors. Continued implementation of these projects will ensure long-term resilience, positioning the South-West as a competitive and innovative region aligned with national and EU priorities.

Action 1.11: Support Kerry Economic Development Growth Engine (Kerry EDGE).

Action Leader: Kerry County Council
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 1.11 aimed to strengthen Kerry's economic resilience and growth following the disruption caused by COVID-19. Kerry Economic Development Growth Engine (EDGE) aims to deliver a step-change in collaborative economic development by creating jobs, attracting investment, and driving innovation across high growth sectors such as STEM and emerging technologies. The rationale recognises Kerry's unique strengths and the need for a long-term investment strategy to position the county as a competitive location for enterprise, talent, and innovation.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
In 2023, the Kerry Economic Stakeholder Forum, chaired by Kerry County Council, played a pivotal role in advancing this action. The forum identified key priorities, including collective marketing and promotion of the county and positioning Kerry as a second-site location for businesses. A dedicated subgroup began work on a brand and marketing strategy, supported by a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between partner organisations. Discussions also explored the development of a longer-term business model for marketing and investment attraction, with a feasibility study under consideration. These initial steps laid the foundation for a coordinated approach to economic development.

2024 Advancements
By 2024, the action had gained significant traction. The Employment Creation and Retention Working Group, a subgroup of the Stakeholder Forum, launched a new brand, 'Discover Kerry', and an accompanying web platform to promote Kerry as a place to invest, work, live, and visit. This initiative was supported by Kerry County Council, Tech Industry Alliance (KerrySciTech), and the Kerry Tourism Industry Federation, all of whom signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to ensure continued activation and governance of the brand. A Marketing Officer was appointed by Kerry County Council to coordinate promotional activities and manage the Discover Kerry platform. These developments marked a major milestone in positioning Kerry as an attractive investment destination. With a new Council in

place since June 2024, the Employment Creation and Retention Working Group began reforming for the new term, prioritising implementation of actions under the SWREP and the Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP).

2025 Status

In 2025, the action was considered substantially complete. The Discover Kerry brand and platform continued to serve as the cornerstone of Kerry's investment promotion strategy. Governance structures established under the MoU ensured collaborative management and sustained activation of the initiative. The Marketing Officer played a key role in driving engagement and visibility for Kerry as a hub for enterprise and innovation. The reformed Employment Creation and Retention Working Group maintained its focus on promoting Kerry as an investment location, aligning efforts with regional and national economic development priorities. These achievements reflect a successful transition from planning to implementation, delivering tangible outcomes for Kerry's economic ecosystem.

Conclusion

Kerry's economic development framework has been strengthened through strategic branding, stakeholder collaboration, and targeted promotion. The Discover Kerry initiative provides a strong platform for attracting investment and talent, while governance structures ensure sustainability.

Action 1.12: Support the development of the film/creative industries.

Action Leader: Local Authorities
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2025
Final Status: Action partially complete - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 1.12 was introduced to capitalise on the rapid global growth of the screen content industry and position the South-West region as a key player in Ireland's ambition to become a global hub for film, TV drama, and animation production. The rationale stems from the Government's *Audio-visual Action Plan* and the Section 481 tax incentive, which encourages regional filmmaking by offering enhanced tax relief for productions outside Dublin. With the Irish film, television, and animation sector contributing €692 million in gross value added and the animation sector experiencing exponential growth, this action aimed to identify industry needs, develop infrastructure, and foster collaboration among regional stakeholders.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023, significant groundwork was laid to strengthen the film and creative industries in the South-West. Local authorities demonstrated commitment by appointing dedicated officers. A major milestone was the opening of West Cork Film Studios in Skibbereen in June 2023, signalling ambitions to scale and attract productions to the region. The Regional Enterprise Plan (REP) Steering Committee continued to explore strategies for enhancing capability, infrastructure, and talent development in the sector.

2024 Advancements

By 2024, the action remained on target, with local authorities actively engaged in policy development and sectoral support. Kerry County Council initiated the recruitment of a Festival and Film Officer to further drive film sector growth. Cork City Council began reviewing its support for the screen sector and included a commitment to re-establish strategic supports in its Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) 2024–2029. Additionally, Cork City Council's Arts Office provided grant aid to the Flourish project, delivered by IndieCork Film Festival, which focused on career development for professional filmmakers, particularly in scriptwriting. Cork County Council explored opportunities to leverage national funding mechanisms to support the industry.

2025 Status

In 2025, the action continued to progress, though it remained ongoing rather than fully complete. West Cork Film Studios has been going from strength to strength with a number of productions underway. Kerry County Council successfully appointed a Festival and Film Officer, strengthening its capacity to support film sector development. Cork City Council advanced its partnership approach to screen sector support with neighbouring authorities and reaffirmed its commitment through the LECP. Cork County Council maintained its focus on accessing national funding streams to bolster regional film initiatives. The groundwork laid during 2023–2025 positioned the region for future growth, contingent on securing additional funding for infrastructure and talent development.

Conclusion

Action 1.12 has made meaningful progress in fostering a supportive environment for the film and creative industries in the South-West. Through the opening of the West Cork Film Studios, strategic appointments, policy commitments, and targeted initiatives, the region is building the foundations for a vibrant screen sector. Continued regional collaboration and investment will be critical to realising the long-term vision of making the South-West a leading destination for film and creative production.

Action 1.13: Explore the feasibility of developing an eHealth & Community Wellbeing Innovation District in the South-West Region 'Project An Oilean'

Action Leader: Kerry Innovation Centre
Timeframe for delivery: Q3 2022
Final Status: Action discontinued

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 1.13 was conceived in response to the heightened focus on healthcare following the COVID-19 pandemic and recent cyber-attacks. These events underscored the critical importance of accessible, secure, and innovative health services. Traditionally considered low-innovation domains, areas such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, GP services, pharmacy, and medical supply chains became central to public discourse. This shift created significant opportunities for digital transformation and entrepreneurial activity in healthcare. The proposed initiative, Project An Oilean, aimed to explore the feasibility of establishing a pioneering eHealth and Community Wellbeing Innovation District in the South-West region, leveraging a multidisciplinary public-private partnership to drive innovation, enterprise development, and community engagement.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
In 2023, initial efforts focused on securing funding and establishing the consortium required to advance the feasibility study. The founding group included stakeholders from education, healthcare providers, industry, enterprise development agencies, and local government. The vision was to create an integrated ecosystem for healthcare innovation, talent development, and community wellbeing. However, despite these ambitions, the project encountered significant challenges, including that Regional Enterprise Development Fund funding was not drawn down amid changing organisational structures. These developments ultimately led to the discontinuation of the project before the feasibility stage could be completed.

2024 Status
By 2024, the action was officially marked as discontinued. While the rationale for the initiative remained compelling, given ongoing trends in healthcare innovation and digital transformation, the absence of a governance structure and financial backing prevented further advancement. No alternative proposals or revised plans were reported during this period, confirming the cessation of activity under this action.

2025 Status

In 2025, the status of Action 1.13 remained unchanged. The project was not revived, and no new feasibility studies or related initiatives were undertaken within the scope of the South-West Regional Enterprise Plan. The discontinuation reflects the challenges of implementing complex, multidisciplinary projects without secured funding and sustained organisational commitment. While the concept of an eHealth and Community Wellbeing Innovation District aligns with national and global trends, its realisation in the South-West region will require renewed interest, strategic alignment, and resource mobilisation in future planning cycles.

Conclusion

Action 1.13 did not progress beyond its initial conceptual stage due to funding constraints and organisational changes. Although discontinued, the rationale behind the initiative remains relevant, highlighting significant opportunities for innovation in healthcare and community wellbeing. Future regional strategies may revisit this concept, leveraging lessons learned to ensure stronger governance, stakeholder alignment, and financial planning. Establishing such an innovation district could position the South-West as a leader in health technology and community focused innovation, provided the necessary conditions for success are met.



Strategic Objective 2:
Maximise the potential of digital enterprise and innovation hubs to support digitalisation, business growth, climate action and smart working

Action 2.1: Strengthen the networks of digital hubs in the region and increase knowledge sharing among hubs.

Action Leader: Munster Technological University (MTU)
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 2.1 was designed to enhance collaboration among digital and innovation hubs across Cork and Kerry, fostering a vibrant ecosystem that supports freelancers, entrepreneurs, start-ups, SMEs, multinationals, and remote workers. The rationale recognises the strategic role of hubs in driving digitalisation, business growth, climate action, and smart working practices. By strengthening regional networks and connecting them to national structures such as the National Hub Network and the Community Enterprise Association Ireland (CEAI), this action aimed to deliver benefits to hub members, clients, and local communities through shared knowledge, innovation, and funding opportunities.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

Significant progress was achieved in 2023. The Cork and Kerry Hub Networks were formally established and chaired by Munster Technological University (MTU) campuses in Cork and Tralee. These networks facilitated collaboration among hubs and planned a joint event for Q4 2023 to promote knowledge sharing and best practice exchange. The rollout of the QHubs programme, developed by CEAI, was scheduled to commence, further supporting hub development. Investment by Enterprise Ireland and Údarás na Gaeltachta over several years resulted in a strong foundation of hubs across the South-West region. Additionally, plans were underway for the opening of a new Gteic hub in Ballyvourney in 2024 and a feasibility study for an enterprise hub in Shandon, Cork City. Regular meetings among hub managers ensured ongoing collaboration and alignment with regional objectives.

2024 Advancements

By 2024, the action continued to progress well. The Cork and Kerry Hub Networks had successfully hosted their first joint event for hub managers in Q4 2023 and began planning another event for Q3 2024 (later deferred to early 2025). The SWREP Working Group played a key role in enabling collaboration and identifying opportunities for hubs to innovate and share best practices in digitalisation, climate action, and business growth. The network continued to advance through ongoing programmes focused on digital transformation and sustainability.

2025 Status

In 2025, the hub ecosystem expanded significantly, with approximately 50 hubs now operating across the South-West, including community, enterprise, and remote working hubs. The Cork and Kerry Hub Networks continued to be chaired by MTU. These networks, supported by the SWREP Working Group, remained instrumental in fostering innovation and knowledge sharing. Programmes addressing digitalisation, climate action, and business development continued to deliver tangible benefits to hub members and their communities, positioning the South-West as a leader in hub-based enterprise support.

Conclusion

Collaborative work under Action 2.1 has successfully strengthened the digital hub network in the South-West, creating an environment that drives innovation, sustainability, and economic growth. Through strategic partnerships, events, and ongoing programmes, the region now boasts a robust network of enterprise and innovation hubs. Continued alignment with national strategies and funding mechanisms should ensure these hubs remain vital engines for enterprise development and community resilience.

Action 2.2: Develop the research and evidence base of the benefit of hubs for job creation, climate action and digitalisation

Action Leader: Community Enterprise Association Ireland (CEAI)

Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 2.2 was introduced to strengthen the understanding of the economic, environmental, and digital impact of enterprise hubs across the South-West region. The rationale recognises the National Hub Network as a critical national asset. By gathering concrete data on metrics such as job creation, innovation, governance, sustainability, and digitalisation, this action aimed to provide evidence for policy development and investment decisions, ensuring hubs continue to drive regional growth and resilience.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
In 2023, the Working Group identified a significant gap: the absence of a centralised database on hubs and their impacts. Initial discussions focused on the feasibility of conducting a research study to evaluate the contribution of hubs to employment creation, climate action, and digitalisation. This preparatory phase emphasised the need for robust data collection and collaboration with research partners, including the Western Development Commission. While no formal research was completed during this period, groundwork was laid for a comprehensive evaluation by CEAI.

2024 Progress
By 2024, a significant milestone was achieved with the completion of CEAI's comprehensive economic evaluation and assessment of the enterprise centre and innovation hub sector across Ireland. This nine-month exercise gathered anonymised data to independently assess the sector's value in key areas such as Gross Value Added (GVA), employment numbers, and innovation performance. The aggregated findings were presented in a detailed report shared with senior government offices, including the Taoiseach Simon Harris, Minister Peter Burke, and Minister Jack Chambers, in Q4 2024.

The results were unveiled at the National Hub Summit on November 14th, 2024. The report highlighted the sector's impressive contribution to the Irish economy and regional development, with strong engagement from the Cork and Kerry Hubs Network. This study provided an independent, high-level evaluation of the sector's economic and social impact, reinforcing the strategic importance of hubs for job creation, sustainability, and digital transformation.

2025 Status

In 2025, the action was deemed complete. The national assessment closed successfully, delivering the intended evidence base. While the project concluded at a national level, stakeholders expressed interest in regionalising the findings for the South-West, subject to future funding availability. The CEAI announced plans to repeat the research biennially, with the next report scheduled for late 2026, ensuring ongoing monitoring and sectoral insights.

Conclusion

A comprehensive evidence base has been delivered demonstrating the economic and societal benefits of hubs. By quantifying their impact on job creation, climate action, and digitalisation, the initiative has strengthened the case for continued investment in hub infrastructure and services. Future regional studies will build on this foundation, ensuring that hubs remain central to Ireland's innovation ecosystem and regional economic strategy.

Action 2.3: Mainstream the role of sustainability, climate action and digitalisation in hubs.

Action Leader: CEAI
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2025
Final Status: Action partially achieved - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 2.3 was designed to embed sustainability, climate action, and digitalisation into the operational and strategic framework of enterprise hubs across the South-West region. Recognising the critical role hubs play in supporting SMEs and start-ups, this initiative aimed to transition these centres to environmentally responsible and digitally advanced ecosystems. The rationale was supported by CEAI's *Sustainability Blueprint Plan* and the *Erasmus Plus Sustainable Futures for Enterprise Centres* project, which sought to create replicable learning models for hub managers and tenant businesses.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023, early efforts focused on integrating sustainability and digitalisation into hub operations. The *QHubs Quality and Innovation Management Programme* began considering the inclusion of training modules on sustainability and climate action as part of the forthcoming *National Hubs Strategy*. Meanwhile, several hubs in the South-West actively engaged in climate and digital initiatives. Notable examples included Cork Urban Enterprises, Ballingeary Hub, and Dingle Hub, which participated in programmes related to digital transformation, social enterprise development, and micro-enterprise support. These activities demonstrated a growing awareness and commitment to embedding sustainable practices within hub communities.

2024 Advancements

CEAI developed a feasibility study under the Smart Regions Enterprise Innovation Scheme to support an application for a Centre of Excellence and Shared Services Centre for the hub sector nationally. The business case highlighted the benefits of a centralised approach, including cost savings, access to expert resources, and streamlined operations. This initiative aligned directly with the action outcome of increasing awareness and activity in hubs around sustainability and digitalisation. The proposed model aimed to deliver scalable impact, ensuring hubs across the South-West and beyond could adopt best practices in climate action and digital transformation.

2025 Status

In 2025, CEAI advanced its plans by developing an application for a Centre of Excellence and a Shared Services Centre Model for Stream 2 of the Smart Regions programme (Clusters & Consortia). This submission represents a critical step toward institutionalising sustainability and digitalisation within the hub network. The proposed Centre of Excellence would serve as a national resource, providing training, shared services, and strategic guidance to hubs, while fostering collaboration and innovation in climate action and digital technologies.

Conclusion

There has been substantial progress in mainstreaming sustainability, climate action, and digitalisation within the South-West's hub ecosystem. From initial training considerations and local hub initiatives to work to develop a national Centre of Excellence, work undertaken under this action reflects a clear trajectory toward systemic change. Continued investment and collaboration will ensure hubs not only support enterprise development but also lead in advancing Ireland's green and digital transition, reinforcing their role as engines of innovation and community resilience.

Action 2.4: Foster and develop links between hubs in the South-West with international peers to support learning and knowledge exchange, collaboration, and investment.

Action Leader: MTU
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome: Achieved

Introduction

Action 2.4 was introduced to strengthen the South-West's hub ecosystem by fostering international connections that enable knowledge exchange, collaboration, and investment. The rationale recognises the region's unique advantages, such as strong connectivity and quality of life which position it as an attractive location for start-ups and second-site operations. By leveraging international networks and partnerships, the South-West aimed to enhance its competitiveness, support trade and innovation, and establish itself as a preferred destination for business growth.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023, initial efforts focused on leveraging existing international programmes to build relationships and share best practices. Members of the South-West Regional Enterprise Plan (SWREP) Working Group participated in initiatives such as the *iEER Interreg* flagship project, *Horizon Europe*, and *Peace Plus*. These engagements provided valuable insights into international hub models and collaborative approaches, which were disseminated across the region to benefit local hubs and their client base. Additionally, Munster Technological University (MTU) began exploring opportunities to collaborate with Cork County Council on EU-funded projects linked to hubs and enterprise programmes, laying the groundwork for future partnerships.

2024 Advancements

By 2024, the action continued to progress, with Working Group members maintaining involvement in international programmes. Knowledge sharing remained a key focus, ensuring that lessons learned from European initiatives informed regional hub strategies. The anticipated publication of the *National Hubs Strategy* (NHS) was identified as a critical milestone, expected to provide strategic direction and funding opportunities to further advance international linkages.

2025 Status

In 2025, the action reached a point of substantial completion. Working Group members sustained their participation in international programmes, continuing to share expertise and foster collaborative relationships. However, further progress was contingent on the publication of the *National Hubs Strategy*, which will inform future policy and funding priorities. The groundwork laid during 2023–2025 ensures that the region is well-positioned to capitalise on future opportunities for global collaboration and investment.

Conclusion

Through active participation in European programmes and strategic collaborations, the region has strengthened its knowledge base and positioned itself for future growth. While the full realisation of this action depends on forthcoming national strategies and funding streams, the progress achieved to date provides a strong foundation for continued international engagement. Sustained focus on global partnerships will be essential to enhancing the region's innovation capacity and attracting investment in the years ahead.

Action 2.5: Investment in shared programmes and training for Hub Managers and Staff

Action Leader: CEAI
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2025
Final Status: Action partially achieved - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 2.5 was introduced to address the growing need for structured training, mentoring, and professional development within the National Hub Network. Recognising that hub managers and staff play a critical role in delivering high-quality services to clients and communities. The ambition was to enhance capability, consistency, and service excellence across hubs, ensuring they remain competitive and responsive to evolving enterprise needs.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023, the original action wording of 'Investment in shared programmes across hubs for clients and training for Hub Managers and staff' was refined to emphasise its focus on programmes for hub managers and staff. Key preparatory steps included assessing learning and development needs across hubs in the South-West and aligning these with the Competency and Career Framework under development for the National Hub Network. The Working Group identified priorities such as creating a learning pathway tailored to current demands and securing funding for programme delivery. These foundational activities set the stage for a coordinated approach to professional development across the region.

2024 Advancements

By 2024, significant progress was achieved with the completion of a *Career and Competency Framework Report*, presented to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. This report represented over 12 months of research and consultation by learning and development experts, funded jointly by CEAI and Skillnet Ireland. While the report was not widely circulated, it received strong support from key stakeholders, including the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, Skillnet Ireland, Learning and Development Institute, and Enterprise Ireland.

2025 Status

In 2025, CEAI was a founding member of the Wheel Consultative Group for a Level 6 Apprenticeship in Non-profit Studies. The Technological University Dublin has been appointed as academic partners for the provision of this apprenticeship programme with the ambition to launch in 2027. CEAI also led a consortium from the social enterprise sector to submit an application for a Level 9 Executive Apprenticeship in Community and Social Economy to the Apprenticeship Council. The appointed academic partner is the University of Limerick. Pending approval, the first intake of students is planned for January 2027.

Conclusion

A strong foundation for professional development has been laid across the South-West's hub network. From needs assessment and framework development to piloting innovative programmes, work linked with this action demonstrates a clear trajectory toward enhancing skills and capabilities for hub managers and staff. While full implementation depends on national strategy and funding, the progress achieved ensures hubs are well-positioned to deliver consistent, high-quality services to support Ireland's enterprise ecosystem into the future.

Action 2.6: Support the hub ecosystem within the region.

Action Leader: Hub Network

Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2025
Final Status: Action partially achieved - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 2.6 was introduced to strengthen the hub ecosystem in the South-West region, recognising its critical role in supporting remote and blended working, entrepreneurship, and SME development. Hubs provide essential infrastructure for innovation, collaboration, and enterprise growth, forming a cornerstone of the region's economic resilience. This action aimed to enhance hub infrastructure, embed hubs within local enterprise environments, and ensure the provision of remote working facilities aligned with national enterprise strategies.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan
2023 Progress
In 2023, significant groundwork was undertaken to map and evaluate the existing hub infrastructure across the South-West. The Cork and Kerry Hub Networks led efforts to catalogue hub locations and service offerings, providing a comprehensive overview of the regional ecosystem. Concurrently, the Community Enterprise Association of Ireland's QHubs Quality and Innovation Management diagnostic was rolled out to assess hub performance across key areas, including service delivery, programmatic supports, and operational management. These evaluations informed discussions with stakeholders to identify gaps and opportunities for improvement, ensuring hubs could deliver best-in-class services and support entrepreneurial development.

2024 Advancements
By 2024, the action progressed with tangible infrastructure developments. Notably, Campas Íosagáin in Ballyvourney commenced construction under a 15-month build programme. Phase 1, comprising 1,720 square meters of office space, meeting rooms, training facilities, and a canteen, was scheduled for completion by late 2025, with full opening anticipated in Q1 2026. The overall facility will span 3,400 square meters, positioning Campas Íosagáin as a major hub for enterprise and innovation in the region. Additionally, three new hubs funded under the Town and Village Renewal (T&VR) scheme began development in Cork County, located in Cobh, Kiskeam, and Mitchelstown. These hubs were designed to provide flexible workspace and community-oriented facilities, supporting local businesses and remote workers. The opening of these hubs in Q1 2025 marked a significant expansion of the region's hub network.

2025 Status

In 2025, the hub ecosystem continued to grow, with the three T&VR-funded hubs in Cobh, Kiskeam, and Mitchelstown officially opened, delivering new opportunities for enterprise and remote working. Progress was made on plans for the Shandon Butter Exchange and construction at Campas Íosagáin remained on track, with Phase One nearing completion and preparations underway for its 2026 launch. These developments reflect a strong commitment to enhancing hub infrastructure and embedding hubs within local enterprise environments. The expansion of physical infrastructure was complemented by ongoing stakeholder engagement to ensure hubs deliver high quality services and align with regional and national strategies for digitalisation and sustainability.

Conclusion

Substantial progress has been made in strengthening the South-West's hub ecosystem. Through strategic mapping, performance evaluation, and significant investment in new infrastructure, the region is well-positioned to support entrepreneurship, remote working, and SME growth. The opening of new hubs in Cork and Kerry plus the development of Campas Íosagáin, which was formally opened in April 2026, underscore the region's commitment to fostering innovation and connectivity. Continued focus on operational excellence and stakeholder collaboration will ensure hubs remain integral to the South-West's economic development and resilience.

Action 2.7: Establish a new urban Centre of Excellence in the Northside of Cork City to support enterprise and job creation in the area whilst creating a positive impact both economically and socially.

Action Leader: Recreate Shandon CLG and Cork City Council
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action partially achieved - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 2.7 was introduced to create a new urban Centre of Excellence on Cork's Northside, aimed at supporting enterprise development and job creation while delivering positive economic and social impacts. Cork's Northside is home to major employers such as Apple, Heineken, Teamwork, Blizzard Entertainment, and the Revenue Commissioners. Building on the success of initiatives like Northside for Business in Blackpool, the historic Shandon Butter Exchange was identified as the ideal location for this project. The vision was to transform the Exchange into a hub for start-ups and scaling companies, offering capability-building programmes and fostering entrepreneurship in emerging sectors.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

Significant preparatory work was completed in 2023 to advance the Shandon Butter Exchange redevelopment. Key milestones included Cork City Council granting a long-term lease to Recreate Shandon CLG, which will lead the project. A board of directors was established, comprising representatives from Cork City Council, UCC, MTU, KPMG, and community stakeholders, chaired by a former CEO of Cork University Hospital. Planning permission for the Tech and Innovation Hub was secured, and a detailed feasibility study was completed with support from Enterprise Ireland's Regional Enterprise Innovation Scoping Scheme (REISS).

2024 Advancements

In 2024, the project faced challenges related to funding viability. Financial assessments revealed a significant funding gap, as construction costs were disproportionately high compared to the projected income from lettable space and services. To address this, Cork City Council and Recreate Shandon CLG pivoted toward a heritage-led approach, preparing an application for funding under Strand Two of the THRIVE Town Centre First Heritage Revival Scheme. This revised concept aimed to incorporate the Weighmaster's House for community use, creating an expanded complex that would accommodate the proposed Tech Hub while meeting broader community needs. Subject to funding approval, construction was projected to begin in late 2025.

2025 Status

By 2025, the project achieved critical progress. Cork City Council successfully submitted an application under the THRIVE scheme in Q2 2025. Additionally, the Shandon Integrated Urban Strategy (SIUS)—a 185-page roadmap for sustainable, heritage-led regeneration—was adopted in Q1 2025. The enhanced proposition for Shandon Exchange now includes a multifunctional complex combining tech innovation facilities with community spaces, ensuring economic and social benefits for the area. Construction is expected to commence in Q3 2026, contingent on funding, marking a significant step toward realising the vision of a Centre of Excellence in Cork's Northside.

Conclusion

Substantial progress has been made despite funding challenges, evolving into a heritage led regeneration project that integrates enterprise development with community revitalisation. Through strategic planning, stakeholder collaboration, and successful funding applications, the initiative is on track to deliver a transformative hub that supports start-ups, fosters innovation, and strengthens Cork's Northside as a vibrant economic and social district.

Action 2.8: Pilot the establishment of an inclusive co-working space which creates opportunities for persons with disabilities to participate equally in the new world of co-working/remote working.

Action Leader: The Crann Centre
Timeframe for delivery: Q2 2022
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 2.8 was introduced to promote inclusivity in the evolving world of co-working and remote working by creating spaces that enable persons with disabilities to participate equally. The initiative centred on the Impact Hub at the Crann Centre, located in Ovens near Ballincollig, as a model for inclusive enterprise development. The hub was designed to provide a bright, modern, fully accessible environment, offering business supports through partnerships with the Rubicon Centre at Munster Technological University, Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs), local authorities, and the Open Doors Initiative. The ultimate goal was to establish a template for inclusive co-working spaces that could be replicated across the South-West region.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
By 2023, the Impact Hub, (which opened in April 2022), had already begun serving as an exemplar of inclusivity. The hub provided tailored supports for persons with disabilities, including occupational rehabilitation, mentoring, and networking opportunities. Collaborative programmes with the Rubicon Centre and LEOs offered training and business development resources, enabling individuals to start and grow their own enterprises. The hub also engaged with the wider community through outreach programmes, showcasing the benefits of inclusive workspaces. A key challenge identified during this period was the need for a Business Support Manager to expand the scope of activities and secure sustainable funding.

2024 Advancements
In 2024, the action was considered complete in terms of its initial objectives, but the Impact Hub continued to play an active role in the South-West enterprise ecosystem through Working Groups One and Two. The hub maintained its focus on inclusivity, delivering training and mentoring programmes

and supporting enterprise development for persons with disabilities. Efforts to secure funding for a Business Support Manager persisted, reflecting the hub's ambition to broaden its impact. The hub's ongoing engagement demonstrated its commitment to embedding inclusivity within regional enterprise strategies and fostering collaboration among stakeholders.

2025 Status

By 2025, the Impact Hub had evolved into a cornerstone of inclusive enterprise development in the region. As key members of the SWREP Working Groups, the Crann Centre leveraged its success to build support for a new initiative, the *Enterprise Academy* project. This project has attracted strong backing from local authorities, LEOs, University College Cork, the RDI Hub in Killorglin, and leading employers, consultants, and funders. The high level of stakeholder buy-in underscored the hub's credibility and the potential for replication of its model elsewhere. A major milestone was achieved when the Crann Centre secured funding under Stream 4 of the Enterprise Ireland Smart Regions Enterprise Innovation Scheme for a feasibility study. This study, focused on the *Enterprise Academy* concept, commenced in 2025 and scheduled for completion in January 2026.

Conclusion

Work under Action 2.8 successfully delivered on the goal of piloting an inclusive co-working space, establishing the Impact Hub as a best-practice model for accessibility and enterprise development. Through strategic partnerships, community engagement, and innovative projects like the proposed Enterprise Academy, the initiative has created a strong foundation for scaling inclusivity across the region. Continued investment and collaboration will ensure this model becomes a replicable template, driving equality and opportunity in the future of work.



Strategic Objective 3: Support Cluster Organisations in driving the development and growth of enterprises

Action 3.1 – Support the Development and Management of Best-in-Class Cluster Organisations in the South-West through the provision of cluster training and expertise

Action Leader: Munster Technological University (MTU) and University College Cork (UCC)
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action partially achieved - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 3.1 was introduced to strengthen cluster organisations in the South-West region by providing training, expertise, and strategic support. Clusters are recognised by the European Commission as key drivers of competitiveness, innovation, and resilience, particularly in advancing green and digital transitions. In Ireland, clustering is still in its early stages, making targeted interventions essential to ensure clusters can deliver transformative benefits for SMEs and regional economies. This action aimed to establish a foundation for best-in-class cluster management and sustainability through training, collaboration, and funding.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023, significant activity took place to build capacity among cluster managers and organisations. Munster Technological University (MTU) and University College Cork (UCC) delivered a comprehensive training module for national cluster managers in Q4 2022, in partnership with InterTrade Ireland. Additionally, MTU and UCC completed an all-island cluster gap analysis report under InterTrade Ireland's *Synergy* Programme. This report gathered insights from SMEs, cluster managers, policymakers, and academics, enhancing knowledge transfer and identifying development opportunities. The South-West Cluster Managers Forum and the Regional Enterprise Plan Clusters Working Group participated in the *Accelerate GDT (Green and Digital Transition)* programme launch at MTU in April 2023. This Interreg Europe-funded initiative focuses on reinventing cluster policies to support green and digital transitions and SME competitiveness. Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, and third-level institutions continued reviewing supports for cluster managers, including participation in the TCI (The Competitiveness Institute) *Network Cluster Accelerator Programme*, a global initiative for cluster and innovation ecosystem development.

2024 Advancement

By 2024, the action progressed through national level engagement. Members of the South-West REP Clusters Working Group attended the National Clustering Programme Stakeholder Workshop in Dublin in May, facilitated by TCI. Additionally, the Regional Technology Cluster Fund (RTCF), administered by Enterprise Ireland, was extended for two years, supporting 12 clusters nationwide, including key South-West based clusters such as Cyber Ireland, AgriTech Ireland, and Circular Bioeconomy Ireland. These clusters play a vital role in fostering innovation and collaboration across sectors, aligning with regional and national priorities for competitiveness and sustainability.

2025 Status

Over 2025, individual clusters continued to develop and participate in events and knowledge-sharing initiatives. These engagements underscore the region's commitment to embedding clusters as engines of innovation and resilience. In October 2025, a number of cluster managers from the South-West region, specifically the three RTCF cluster managers representing Cyber Ireland, Circular Bioeconomy Cluster, and AgriTech Ireland, along with colleagues from MTU and UCC, attended the Shared Island-supported TCI Conference in Dublin. This engagement was a key step in supporting their Continuing Professional Development and strengthening international best practice in cluster management. Participation in this global clustering event provided valuable insights into emerging trends, collaborative opportunities, and advanced methodologies for cluster development, aligning with the objectives of Action 3.1 to build best-in-class cluster organisations in the South-West. In addition, at the TCI Conference, Cyber Ireland was announced as one of three pilot clusters as part of DETE's new International Impact Clustering Programme.

Conclusion

Action 3.1 has made substantial progress in building capacity and strategic alignment for cluster development in the South-West. Through targeted training, national consultations, and regional collaboration, the region is well-positioned to leverage clusters for economic growth, sustainability, and digital transformation. The clusters in the South-West will benefit from ongoing supports and training to evolve into best-in-class organisations, driving competitiveness and innovation across the region in line with national policy and international best practice.

Action 3.2: Establish a South-West cluster forum to bring together cluster managers across the region to support cross-cluster collaboration as well as supporting stakeholders from academia and government

Action Leader: Munster Technological University (MTU) and Cluster Organisations
Timeframe for delivery: Q2 2022
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 3.2 was introduced to create a formal platform for cluster managers in the South-West region to collaborate strategically, share knowledge, and engage with stakeholders from academia and government. The rationale stems from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform's recognition that cross-cluster collaboration can unlock opportunities for trade, research, and innovation, driving job creation and regional competitiveness. Prior to this initiative, clusters in the South-West operated independently, limiting their ability to leverage synergies. The establishment of a cluster forum aimed to address this gap, fostering cooperation and aligning regional efforts with national clustering policies and Smart Specialisation strategies.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

Although delayed from its original timeline, the South-West Cluster Managers Forum was successfully established in February 2023 and convened its first meeting in April. During this meeting, the terms of reference were presented and agreed upon, ensuring clarity of purpose and governance. All clusters in the region committed to participating, marking a significant milestone in fostering collaboration. The forum began facilitating networking and knowledge exchange among cluster managers and policy makers. An

overview and baseline survey of clusters in the South-West was initiated to map existing activities and inform future priorities. Early signs of cross-collaboration emerged, exemplified by partnerships among Enterprise Ireland-funded clusters, such as Tech Industry Alliance, Cyber Ireland, Circular BioEconomy South-West, and AgriTech Ireland, who jointly showcased regional initiatives at TechFest 2023.

2024 Advancements

In 2024, the forum strengthened its role as a conduit for policy engagement and strategic alignment. A key development was engagement meeting with the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment's National Clustering Programme Unit. The baseline survey of clusters progressed significantly, with findings presented and discussed at the forum meeting. Cluster managers contributed directly to refining the survey, ensuring it accurately reflected the region's capabilities and needs. Additionally, several cluster managers and the South-West REP Programme Manager participated in the National Clustering Programme Stakeholder Workshop facilitated by TCI in Dublin in May 2024, reinforcing the region's voice in shaping national clustering policy.

2025 Status

By 2025, Action 3.2 had achieved its core objectives. The cluster forum continued to operate as a strategic platform for collaboration, policy engagement, and knowledge sharing. The completed baseline survey provided a valuable resource for mapping cluster activities and identifying opportunities for cross-sector partnerships. Participation in national workshops and consultations ensured the South-West remained aligned with emerging clustering strategies at both regional and national levels. These efforts collectively enhanced cooperation among clusters and positioned the region to capitalise on collaborative opportunities for innovation and growth.

Conclusion

Under Action 3.2 a South-West Cluster Forum was successfully established, creating a structured mechanism for collaboration among clusters and engagement with key stakeholders. Through regular meetings, policy input, and joint initiatives, the forum has strengthened regional competitiveness and laid the groundwork for future innovation-driven partnerships. Continued operation and alignment with national clustering strategies will ensure the South-West maximises its potential as a hub for enterprise and research excellence.

Action 3.3: Develop a new cluster organisation for Technology Innovation in Life Science, Medical/Health Sciences and Advanced Technologies (TILMHS Cluster)

Action Leader: UCC
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2025
Final Status: Action partially complete - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 3.3 was introduced to harness the South-West region's significant strengths in life sciences, medical and health sciences, and advanced technologies. These sectors represent a major concentration of activity in Munster, accounting for 42% of Ireland's biopharma, pharma, and medtech operations. The rationale behind this action was to create synergies through cross-sector collaboration, enabling disruptive technologies and job creation. The proposed Technology Innovation in Life Science, Medical Health Sciences and Advanced Technologies (TILMHS) cluster aimed to bring together key stakeholders, including CorkBioHub, Health Innovation Hub Ireland, and the iEd Hub, to develop a health innovation corridor and position the region as a global leader in life sciences innovation.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
In 2023, foundational work began with the integration of existing initiatives into the cluster framework. CorkBioHub, supported by University College Cork, Cork County Council, and Enterprise Ireland's Regional Enterprise Development Fund, was established as a one-stop shop for life science start-ups, offering tailored support for bio-based businesses. The iEd Hub, funded under the Higher Education Authority's Human Capital Initiative, launched postgraduate programmes to address skills gaps in biopharma and medical device sectors. Health Innovation Hub Ireland continued to drive technology development and clinical engagement. Collectively, these initiatives laid the groundwork for a cohesive cluster strategy.

2024 Advancements
By 2024, the cluster concept advanced significantly. A life sciences cluster organisation, headquartered in Cork, led by UCC, was proposed to foster collaboration and growth across the sector. Feasibility funding was secured under Stream 4 of the Smart Regions Enterprise Innovation Scheme (SREIS) in Q3 2024

to support the development of this cluster. The feasibility study aimed to define the cluster's structure, governance, and value proposition, targeting all stakeholders in the life sciences value chain, from large multinationals to SMEs. This progress directly aligned with the SWREP's objectives of establishing a cluster and strengthening regional hubs like CorkBioHub and iEd Hub.

2025 Status

In 2025, the feasibility study continued, supported by strong stakeholder engagement. A major milestone was the in-person consultation event held in Cork in June 2025, attended by 50 senior-level representatives from across Ireland. The event validated the need for a dedicated cluster organisation and provided impetus for the next phase. The cluster proposers also engaged in workshops and explored partnerships with Northern Ireland entities under Shared Island initiatives.

Conclusion

Work under Action 3.3 has made substantial progress toward establishing a life sciences cluster organisation in the South-West. Through feasibility funding, stakeholder consultations, and integration of existing hubs, the region is well-positioned to capitalise on its strengths in biopharma, medtech, and advanced technologies. The proposed cluster will drive innovation, attract investment, and create high-value jobs, reinforcing the South-West's role as a leading hub for life sciences and health technology.

Action 3.4: Support the development and management of STEM South-West Cluster as an industry led cluster for the South-West Region.

Action Leader: Munster Technological University and Local Authorities
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 3.4 was introduced to strengthen the South-West's position as a hub for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) by supporting the development and management of the STEM South-West Cluster. This industry-led cluster represents life sciences, engineering, and technology companies, alongside third-level institutions and government agencies. Its mission is to promote collaboration, enhance the talent pipeline, and drive innovation and economic growth in the region. By creating a dedicated STEM network, the cluster aims to increase visibility, foster research partnerships, and attract investment to Cork and Kerry.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023, STEM South-West consolidated its organisational structure, having been formally established as a company limited by guarantee (CLG) in 2022. An industry-led board was in place, and the cluster actively participated in the South-West Clusters Forum and the REP Clusters Working Group. During this period, the cluster focused on fostering collaborative synergies among members and advancing industry-academic partnerships, notably with the iEd Hub. The overarching ambition was to drive transformative advancements, attract top-tier talent, and catalyse sustainable development across the region.

2024 Advancements

By 2024, STEM South-West delivered a series of high-profile engagements under its three strategic pillars. These included Leadership Dialogues with Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland in Q1 and Q2, and a session with Derval O'Rourke, Olympian and World Champion in Q4. The cluster also hosted the STEM South-West Leaders Awards and the STEM SW Expo, which attracted over 2,500 attendees in Q4 2024. These events showcased the region's STEM capabilities, strengthened industry-academic collaboration, and enhanced the cluster's visibility nationally and internationally. STEM South-West continued to play an active role in the Clusters Forum and Working Group, reinforcing its influence in shaping regional enterprise policy.

2025 Status

In 2025, STEM South-West expanded its outreach and engagement activities significantly. Key events included Leadership Dialogues featuring Patricia Quane, SWREP Steering Committee Chair and Chair of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs for the Biopharma Industry, and a special session with Young Scientist winners at MTU Kerry Campus in Q1. In Q2, the cluster collaborated with BioPharmaChem Apprenticeships, IBEC, and Lab Apprenticeships for a discussion on pathways and talent development, followed by a major event in June with European Commissioner Michael McGrath on navigating global economic uncertainty.

A notable initiative launched in 2025 was *Adopt a School*, developed in collaboration with BPCI (BioPharmaChem Ireland) Skillnet and the Department of Education. This programme identified schools across Cork and Kerry for STEM outreach, with eight schools expressing interest. The initiative aims to inspire future talent and strengthen STEM education at grassroots level. STEM South-West also maintained its representation on the SWREP Skills Working Group, ensuring alignment with regional skills strategies.

Conclusion

STEM South-West has been successfully established as a dynamic, industry-led cluster. Through strategic events, educational initiatives, and strong governance, the cluster has enhanced collaboration, promoted STEM careers, and positioned the region as a leader in innovation. Continued investment and stakeholder engagement will ensure the cluster remains a catalyst for economic growth and talent development in the South-West.

Action 3.5: Progress the Establishment of a National Space Industry Cluster

Action Leader: MTU
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action partially complete - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 3.5 was introduced to position Ireland—and specifically the South-West region—as a key player in the rapidly evolving global space sector. The rationale stems from the *National Space Strategy for Enterprise (2019–2025)*, which sets ambitious targets to double space-related revenue and employment in Irish companies. The emergence of "Space 4.0," driven by SMEs from both space and non-space sectors, presents significant opportunities for diversification and innovation. This action aimed to create a Space Industry Cluster that would enable SMEs, regardless of prior experience, to access and capitalise on opportunities in the global space economy.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023, foundational work was focused on building the evidence base for the cluster. The National Space Industry Cluster secured representation on both the South-West Cluster Managers Forum and the SWREP Clusters Working Group, ensuring alignment with regional enterprise strategies. A major milestone was the completion of a comprehensive feasibility report funded through an Enterprise Ireland Regional Enterprise Innovation Scoping Scheme (REISS) Feasibility Grant. Compiled by KPMG, the report provided critical insights into the potential for a space cluster and highlighted the need to engage companies with no existing space pedigree. The findings underscored a lack of awareness among SMEs about the benefits of space technologies and the need for structures to deliver education, business intelligence, and financial guidance.

2024 Advancements

By 2024, the feasibility report continued to serve as the cornerstone for planning and advocacy efforts. The report's unique focus on non-space companies reinforced the cluster's inclusive approach, aiming to broaden participation beyond traditional aerospace firms. The analysis emphasised the importance of creating mechanisms for knowledge transfer and capacity building to help SMEs integrate space-related technologies into their business models. The cluster maintained its active role in regional forums, ensuring that space sector development remained a priority within the South-West's enterprise ecosystem. These efforts laid the groundwork for future engagement activities and funding applications.

2025 Status

In 2025, the initiative moved from planning to active engagement. A significant milestone was the Space Industry event hosted by Tech Industry Alliance in conjunction with MTU at Blackrock Castle Observatory in October 2025. This event marked the first major outreach effort to connect SMEs with opportunities in the space sector and foster collaboration among industry stakeholders. The event's success has led to plans for it to become an annual fixture. This development signals rising engagement and stakeholder commitment to establishing a formal cluster structure in the coming years.

Conclusion

Work under Action 3.5 has resulted in meaningful progress toward creating a National Space Industry Cluster. From securing feasibility funding and producing a comprehensive evidence base to hosting a landmark industry event, the initiative has built strong foundations for future growth. Continued engagement, awareness-building, and strategic partnerships will be critical to achieving the long-term vision of integrating Irish SMEs into the global space economy and driving innovation across sectors.



Strategic Objective 4: Bolster the South-West as a leader in sustainable Food Production and Agri-Tech through education, technology, and innovation

Action 4.1 – Establish a Regional Innovation Incubator to develop technology solutions that will improve farm productivity enabling the production of more high-quality food while reducing the environmental impact

Action leader: Agri Tech Cluster
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024. Timeframe extended for completion Q2 2025
Final Status: Action discontinued

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 4.1 was introduced to address the dual challenge facing modern agriculture: meeting growing global food demands while reducing environmental impact. The proposed Regional Innovation Incubator aimed to create a collaborative space where agritech researchers, start-ups, SMEs, large companies, and farmers could co-develop technologies to improve farm productivity and sustainability. The incubator was envisioned as a hub for innovation, leveraging digital immersive technologies and advanced engineering capabilities to accelerate agritech business growth and deliver high-impact solutions for farms of the future.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023, Enterprise Ireland's Regional Enterprise Innovation Scoping Scheme (REISS) provided funding to assess the feasibility of establishing a physical agritech incubator in the South-West. The feasibility report confirmed a strong opportunity for such a facility, highlighting the region's unique advantages, including MTU Kerry campus's academic base, technical expertise, and proximity to diverse farm types. The report emphasised the need for structured programs and collaborative approaches to integrate immersive technologies into farming practices. Based on these findings, initial plans were made to develop a proposal for the Smart Regions Enterprise Innovation Scheme (SREIS).

2024 Advancement

By 2024, the concept for the incubator evolved into an engineering focused innovation hub designed to support early-stage and established businesses in converting product ideas into prototypes and conducting lab-based testing prior to field trials. The proposed facility aimed to house personnel and equipment to enable rapid development and validation of agritech solutions. The working group team engaged with stakeholders and contributed to the BIA Innovator REISS feasibility project for an agritech incubator in the West of Ireland, while noting the existence of AgTechUCD in the East. This positioned the South-West incubator as a complementary solution, serving as the agritech innovation hub for the southern region.

Despite these developments, the project did not progress to application stage under the SREIS fund due to the need for further stakeholder engagement and validation of the business case. Additional consultations were required to ensure alignment with regional priorities and secure long-term funding commitments.

2025 Status

In 2025, following extensive discussions between Kerry County Council and Munster Technological University, it was decided that the action would not be pursued at this time. The decision reflected challenges in securing sufficient stakeholder buy-in and funding to support the establishment of a dedicated incubator. While the feasibility study confirmed the potential benefits of such a facility, competing priorities and resource constraints prevented the project from advancing to implementation.

Conclusion

Action 4.1 highlighted the significant opportunity for an agritech innovation incubator in the South-West, supported by strong feasibility evidence and regional capabilities. However, despite initial progress and stakeholder engagement, the project was ultimately discontinued due to funding and strategic alignment challenges. The rationale for the incubator remains compelling, and future regional strategies may revisit this concept to capitalise on the growing demand for sustainable farming technologies and Ireland's ambition to lead in agritech innovation.

Action 4.2: Accelerate the adoption of Digitalisation in the AgriTech domain to include solutions for AgriTech companies and farmers.

Action Leader: AgriTech cluster and Agri service provider
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2023
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 4.2 was designed to address the low adoption of digital technologies in agriculture compared to other sectors. Digitalisation has the potential to transform farming practices, optimise productivity, and reduce environmental impact. However, barriers such as limited availability of cost effective and user-friendly solutions have slowed uptake among farmers and agritech companies. This action aimed to accelerate digital adoption by expanding the National Centre for Agricultural Engineering at MTU Kerry campus as a centre of excellence and fostering collaboration across the agritech ecosystem.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023, the groundwork for this action focused on defining the scope and objectives of the digitalisation initiative. Stakeholder consultations highlighted the need for integrated solutions that could support both agritech companies and farmers. The MTU Kerry campus was identified as the ideal location for a centre of excellence, given its strong academic base and proximity to diverse farming operations. Plans were initiated to explore partnerships with technology providers and research farms to create a collaborative environment for testing and validating digital solutions. These early steps laid the foundation for structured programmes aimed at promoting best practices and accelerating adoption.

2024 Advancement

Over 2024, the concept for the centre of excellence was further developed. The proposed expansion of the National Centre for Agricultural Engineering included facilities for research, training, and demonstration of digital technologies such as precision farming tools, data analytics platforms, and immersive technologies for virtual farm management. Engagement with stakeholders intensified, with MTU Kerry collaborating with industry partners and farmer networks to identify priority areas for digital transformation. This initiative emphasised the importance of creating accessible and affordable solutions to overcome adoption barriers. While formal funding applications were still in progress, the strategic vision for the centre was clearly articulated, positioning it as a hub for innovation and knowledge sharing in agritech.

2025 Status

In 2025, efforts continued to focus on stakeholder engagement and planning for implementation. MTU Kerry advanced discussions with technology providers and research collaborators to design pilot programmes that would demonstrate the benefits of digitalisation in real-world farming scenarios. These programmes would showcase how digital tools could improve efficiency, reduce costs, and support sustainability goals. Although the centre's physical expansion had not yet been completed, the groundwork for collaborative projects and training initiatives was well underway. The emphasis remained on creating a seamless pathway for farmers and agritech companies to access cutting-edge technologies and integrate them into their operations.

Conclusion

There has been steady progress toward accelerating digital adoption in the agritech sector. Through strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and the development of a centre of excellence concept, the South-West region is positioning itself as a leader in agricultural innovation. Continued investment and collaboration will be essential to translate this vision into tangible outcomes, enabling farmers and agritech companies to harness digital technologies for sustainable growth and enhanced productivity.

Action 4.3: Research and development of digitalisation and tech-based solutions

Action Leader: AgriTech cluster and IMaR research centre
Timeframe for delivery: Q3 2024
Final Status: Action partially complete - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 4.3 was intended to accelerate the adoption of digital technologies in agriculture, a critical step toward enhancing competitiveness and enabling sustainable economic growth. The rationale recognises that cost-effective, easy-to-use digital solutions are essential for improving food production efficiency and reducing environmental impact. This action aimed to identify digitalisation needs within the agriculture sector, foster research collaborations, and develop pathways to bridge gaps through innovative technology solutions. By leveraging alliances with European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIHs) and research networks, the South-West region sought to position Ireland as a global leader in agritech innovation.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
In 2023, significant progress was made in establishing strategic alliances. Partnerships were developed with established EDIHs through the EU Smart Agri Hubs network, creating opportunities for knowledge exchange and collaboration on digital solutions. The IMaR research centre, a Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) research entity, maintained a comprehensive portfolio of projects focused on digitalisation and tech-based solutions for agriculture. IMaR and Vistamilk began regular meetings to identify collaborative research opportunities. Additionally, the AgriTech cluster launched AgriTEAM Innovator, a service designed to stimulate research, development, and innovation (RD&I) among SMEs by connecting researchers with new opportunities and building multidisciplinary project teams. These initiatives laid the foundation for future research and funding activities.

2024 Advancement
By 2024, alliances with EDIHs strengthened further, with the AgriTech cluster actively participating in Synergy Days, an annual event that connects EU research projects and EDIHs to boost involvement in international collaborations. Several project consortiums were formed, and a major milestone was the commencement of AgriFoodConnect, a cross-border initiative between MTU and Queen's University

Belfast. This project aims to connect researchers, AgriTech and FoodTech businesses, and farmers to accelerate innovation in sustainable agriculture. IMaR continued to expand its research portfolio and deepened collaboration with Vistamilk to develop advanced technology solutions for the sector. The AgriTEAM Innovator service remained active, fostering RD&I in SMEs and supporting the creation of project teams focused on digitalisation and smart farming technologies.

2025 Status

In 2025, the progress continued with multiple funding applications submitted at EU and national levels by the AgriTech Cluster, ACE, and IMaR. These applications targeted projects involving digital skills development, augmented reality robotics, and agritech digitalisation. Stakeholders actively explored local, national, and international partnerships to secure resources for advancing research and innovation. The collaborative efforts of research centres and industry partners reinforced the region's commitment to developing cutting-edge solutions that address the challenges of modern agriculture. While some projects were still in the funding pipeline, the groundwork for impactful research and technology deployment was firmly established.

Conclusion

Research and development in agritech digitalisation has been successfully advanced through strategic alliances, collaborative projects, and targeted funding initiatives. By engaging with European DIHs, launching innovative services like AgriTEAM Innovator, and initiating cross-border projects, the region has positioned itself as a leader in agricultural technology innovation. Continued investment and collaboration will be essential to translate these efforts into scalable solutions that enhance productivity, sustainability, and global competitiveness.

Action 4.4: Skills development and training

Action Leader: MTU
Timeframe for delivery: Q2 2023
Final Status: Action partially complete - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 4.4 plans to revolutionise training and education in the agritech sector through immersive learning technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). These methods offer significant advantages over traditional training, including faster learning, greater focus, and improved confidence

in applying skills. The rationale behind this action was to establish a connected network of VR facilities and integrate digitalisation content into apprenticeship, undergraduate, and postgraduate programmes. By doing so, the South-West region aimed to build a skilled workforce capable of leveraging digital technologies for sustainable growth and competitiveness.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023, initial steps focused on rolling out immersive learning projects through partnerships between MTU, UCC, ACE, and AgriTech stakeholders. A connected network of AR and VR facilities began to take shape through the REP Working Group. Key institutions such as Teagasc, Moorepark, and Tyndall National Institute collaborated on training, and skills programmes designed to help businesses implement digital training solutions. These initiatives marked the beginning of a structured approach to embedding digitalisation into workforce development.

2024 Advancements

By 2024, progress accelerated with the successful implementation of several strategic projects. MTU Kerry's Department of Engineering secured funding under the EU Just Transition Fund Programme 2021–2027 for the ReSHAPE project (Regional Skills Horizon and Pathways to Employment), in partnership with TUS and the University of Limerick. This initiative aimed to deliver education, training, and skills development opportunities to support economic development and environmental sustainability.

Additionally, ACE advanced its Smart Regions application, focusing on skills development for regional enterprises. A major milestone was achieved when ACE secured funding under SREIS Stream 2 Clusters and Consortia for the Comhroinnt project, a collaborative effort to promote knowledge sharing and best practices in digitalisation. The initial collaboration on these projects emerged through connections established within the SWREP Working Group. These developments directly addressed the action outcomes by expanding immersive learning capabilities and integrating digitalisation into formal education pathways.

2025 Status

In 2025, efforts continued to build with the Comhroinnt Consortium, comprising industry leaders and scaling SMEs, launching a three-year programme to leverage cross-sectoral and multi-regional expertise. This initiative focuses on knowledge sharing, adoption of digital technologies, and workforce optimisation across sectors including agritech, engineering, pharma, finance, and retail. The programme aims to modernise regional industry, drive business growth, and enhance job retention through advanced digitalisation practices. Funding includes 50% match contributions from consortium partners, underscoring strong industry commitment.

Conclusion

Significant progress has been achieved in embedding digitalisation within skills development across the South-West, and the REP has played a central role in driving this work. Through the SWREP Working Group structure, partners were brought together in a coordinated and collaborative forum that accelerated the adoption of immersive learning technologies and enabled the development of projects such as ReSHAPE and Comhroinnt. The SWREP provided the platform through which relationships between MTU, UCC, ACE, Teagasc, Tyndall, and industry stakeholders were formed and strengthened, directly influencing the design of integrated training pathways and supporting the region's successful funding applications. Continued investment and collaboration, guided through REP mechanisms, will help sustain this progress and reinforce the South-West's position as a leader in digital skills and innovation.

Action 4.5: Set up Virtual Testing Facility in addition to testbed partners

Action Leader: MTU
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action partially achieved - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 4.5 focuses on establishing a virtual testing facility to complement existing testbed partners, aiming to accelerate the adoption of digital immersive technologies within the agritech sector. These technologies, such as extended reality (XR), offer transformative potential for agricultural processes by enabling cost-effective, timesaving, and capability-enhancing solutions. The initiative emphasises collaboration among key stakeholders, including Munster Technological University (MTU), ACE (Agri Tech Centre of Excellence), regional research farms, and industry clusters, to ensure that innovative solutions are rigorously tested and accessible to agritech companies.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

The foundation for this action was laid with the establishment of the ACE virtual testing facility at MTU in 2022. This facility leverages immersive learning technologies to enhance regional companies' capabilities. Throughout 2023, significant knowledge-sharing occurred via the REP Working Group, fostering collaboration among Tyndall National Institute, MTU, UCC, ACE, and AgriTech Cluster partners.

These entities rolled out targeted projects to integrate XR technologies into agricultural applications. Collaborative efforts with Teagasc and Tyndall National Institute were instrumental in developing programs that align with industry needs.

2024 Progress

The pace continued in 2024, with IMaR joining ACE and the AgriTech Cluster to strengthen ties with the VistaMilk project. This partnership underscores the commitment to advancing digital innovation in agriculture. Conversations with Teagasc remained active, focusing on the creation of a dedicated virtual testing facility. However, the realisation of this goal hinged on securing an appropriate funding mechanism. The SWREP Working Group maintained its role as a knowledge-sharing hub, ensuring alignment among stakeholders and fostering synergies between research and industry.

2025 Progress

By 2025, the collaborative framework continued, with IMaR, ACE, and the AgriTech Cluster continuing their engagement with VistaMilk. Discussions with Teagasc advanced, but the challenge of identifying sustainable funding remained a barrier. Despite this, the groundwork laid in previous years positioned the initiative for success once financial resources are secured. The ongoing partnerships reflect a strong commitment to delivering cutting-edge virtual testing capabilities that will benefit AgriTech companies and the broader agricultural community.

Conclusion

Notable progress has been made in developing the infrastructure and partnerships required to establish a virtual testing facility. While full realisation of the facility remains dependent on securing appropriate funding, the collaborative ecosystem built through MTU, ACE, IMaR, Teagasc, Tyndall, UCC, and the AgriTech Cluster demonstrates significant advancement. Crucially, the South-West REP enhanced this collaboration by providing a structured forum for partners to engage, share expertise, and align activities. Through the SWREP Working Group, stakeholders were able to coordinate project development, identify shared priorities, and strengthen links between research, industry, and enterprise policy. These efforts have already improved regional capacity in immersive agritech solutions and created clear pathways for companies to access advanced digital technologies.

Action 4.6: Support the development of food enterprises in the region

Action Leader: Local Authorities, Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) and Local Development Companies
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action partially achieved - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 4.6 aims to strengthen the food production sector in the South-West region, recognising its historical and ongoing importance to rural economies. Food production remains a cornerstone of income and employment, both directly and indirectly, and continues to evolve in response to modernisation, market development, and environmental challenges. This action seeks to foster innovation, support start-ups, and enhance research and development opportunities, ensuring that food enterprises remain competitive and sustainable in a rapidly changing economic landscape.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
In 2023, significant engagement occurred between local authorities, Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs), and ten local development companies (seven in Cork and three in Kerry) to support food producers across the region. Key programmes included the Digital School of Food, Food Starter Programme, Food Academy Programme, and the Cork Incubator Kitchens initiative. Flagship projects advanced during this period, notably the development and expansion of food hubs in Listowel and Firies, the Cork Incubator Kitchens in Carrigaline, and the Moorepark Food Research Centre in Fermoy. Additionally, the Corca Dhuibhne/Dingle Peninsula 2030 plan continued to provide strategic direction for food enterprise development.

2024 Progress
Building on the previous year's progress, 2024 saw continued delivery of core programmes and expansion of flagship projects. Local development companies, such as Avondhu Blackwater Partnership, introduced targeted initiatives to strengthen farm-to-fork enterprises. In collaboration with Munster Technological University (MTU), Avondhu Blackwater offered farmers educational support to enhance strategic planning and decision-making. This programme, funded through the LEADER programme and implemented in partnership with the North Cork Local Action Group, successfully engaged twelve participants. These efforts reflect a growing emphasis on capacity building and innovation within the food sector.

2025 Progress

In 2025, progress continued with active engagement from stakeholders and presentations at the South-West REP Working Group meeting in Q1. Highlights included updates on the Comhroinnt application under the SREIS Stream 2 (Clusters and Consortia), and a comprehensive overview by Avondhu Blackwater and LEO North and West Cork on their LEADER-funded initiatives. Core programmes such as the Digital School of Food, Food Starter Programme, Food Academy Programme, and Cork Incubator Kitchens remained central to enterprise development. Flagship projects, including the Listowel and Firies food hubs and Moorepark Food Research Centre, continued to expand. The educational initiative with MTU and Avondhu Blackwater served as a model for supporting farmers in transitioning to value-added food enterprises.

Conclusion

Sustained progress has been delivered in supporting food enterprises across the South-West region. Through collaborative efforts involving local authorities, LEOs, local development companies, and educational institutions, the action has strengthened infrastructure, expanded food hubs, and provided targeted training and innovation support. While challenges such as market adaptation and environmental considerations remain, the initiatives undertaken have positioned the region's food sector for long-term growth, increased employment, and enhanced competitiveness in domestic and international markets.

Action 4.7: Further develop both full-time and part-time education, training and executive education flexible pathways for food, agri-food and seafood industry personnel from artisan food producers to multinational companies in the South-West Region. This includes both technical and food management initiatives at accredited and non-accredited levels.

Action Leader: Food Industry Training Unit (FITU) UCC
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 4.7 focuses on expanding education, training, and executive education pathways for personnel in the food, agri-food, and seafood industries within the region. This initiative targets a broad spectrum of learners, from artisan food producers to multinational companies, and encompasses both technical and management-focused programmes at accredited and non-accredited levels. Leveraging the strong

partnership between University College Cork (UCC) and the regional agri-food sector, the action aims to deliver market-led, research-informed courses that address evolving industry needs. Central to this effort is UCC's Food Industry Training Unit (FITU), a unique hub dedicated to serving part-time education and training requirements for nearly three decades.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023, UCC's FITU made significant progress in developing flexible education pathways. Collaborating with Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) and Skillnet, FITU introduced a suite of offerings designed to accommodate diverse learning needs. These included specialised webinars, short courses—often accredited as micro-credentials—and full programmes. A notable innovation was the introduction of stackable qualifications, enabling industry professionals to begin with short courses and progress to advanced degrees, including Master's and PhD pathways. This modular approach provided flexibility for learners seeking to upskill or reskill. Concurrently, the LEOs advanced complementary initiatives such as the Digital School of Food, Food Starter Programme, and Food Academy Programme, reinforcing the region's commitment to education and enterprise development.

2024 Progress

Efforts continued to build in 2024, with FITU further refining its flexible learning model. The stackable qualification system gained traction, offering learners clear progression routes from micro-credentials to higher-level qualifications. FITU's offerings remained responsive to industry demands, incorporating themes such as sustainability, artisan food production, and food tourism. These programmes were delivered through both in-person and online formats, ensuring accessibility for participants across the region. Collaboration with Skillnet and LEOs continued, strengthening the ecosystem of support for food sector professionals. The emphasis on research-informed content, facilitated through partnerships with Teagasc and other stakeholders, ensured that courses remained relevant and future-focused.

2025 Progress

By 2025, the action had reached completion. The comprehensive suite of accredited and non-accredited programmes, combined with innovative delivery models, positioned the South-West region as a leader in agri-food education and training. FITU's role as a central hub for industry-focused learning was firmly established, and the collaborative framework involving UCC, LEOs, and Skillnet ensured sustainability and continued responsiveness to emerging trends.

Conclusion

The creation of flexible, market-led education and training pathways for the agri-food and seafood sectors has had a significant impact. Through FITU's pioneering approach and strong stakeholder collaboration, the region now offers a robust portfolio of learning opportunities, from micro-credentials to advanced degrees. These initiatives enhance workforce capabilities and support innovation, sustainability, and competitiveness within the agri-food industry. The work marks a significant milestone in aligning education with industry needs and fostering long-term regional growth.

Action 4.8: Work with stakeholders to develop food tourism opportunities through the implementation of the Destination Experience Development Plans (DEDPs)

Action Leader: Fáilte Ireland
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action partially achieved - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 4.8 seeks to position the South-West region, encompassing Cork and Kerry, as a premier food and drink destination by leveraging its rich base of artisan producers and culinary heritage. The initiative focuses on implementing Food Tourism actions outlined in the *Destination Experience Development Plans* (DEDPs) to enhance visitor experiences, strengthen the region's gastronomic reputation, and create new economic opportunities. By fostering collaboration among public, private, and educational stakeholders, this action aims to integrate food tourism into the broader tourism strategy and capitalise on global trends in experiential travel.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023, the South-West Regional Enterprise Plan Working Group, comprising representatives from ACE, Fáilte Ireland, Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs), local authorities, and local development companies, began exploring collaborative projects under the Cork and Kerry DEDPs. Efforts included identifying opportunities through the Digital that Delivers Programme, which supports businesses in digitalising their offerings to improve visitor experiences. These initial steps laid the foundation for structured food tourism development, emphasising digital transformation and stakeholder engagement.

2024 Progress

Significant progress was made in 2024 with the completion of two *Food and Drink Action Plans* aligned with both the West Cork and Kenmare DEDP and the Cork City and Harbour DEDP. These plans set out an ambition to position Cork and Kenmare as Ireland's leading gastronomic destinations by 2027. Adopting a strengths-based approach, the strategy leveraged the region's well-established food and drink experiences and its strong reputation for high-quality cuisine. To support comprehensive development, the actions were structured around four strategic pillars: People, Place, Product, and Provenance. A number of important initiatives were advanced during the year, including a learning journey to Catalunya, where stakeholders examined international best practice from a region designated as the World Region of Gastronomy 2025. The work also included an audit of food and drink businesses across Cork and Kenmare, capturing hotels, restaurants, and cafés noted for exceptional culinary experiences. In addition, plans were developed to establish a Food Implementation Group, bringing together agencies such as BIM, Teagasc, Bord Bia, LEADER, Cork City and County Councils, and Fáilte Ireland.

2025 Progress

By 2025, the *Food and Drink Action Plans* continued to guide implementation efforts. The audit of businesses progressed, and stakeholder meetings focused on developing a roadmap and agreeing on key priorities. Collaboration remained central, with public, private, and educational sectors working toward a unified goal. The emphasis on creating integrated food itineraries and enhancing visitor dispersal reflects a commitment to sustainable tourism growth and regional economic development.

Conclusion

There has been significant progress in embedding food tourism within the South-West's tourism strategy. Through comprehensive planning, stakeholder collaboration, and innovative initiatives, the region is on track to achieve recognition as a major gastronomic destination. The groundwork laid through audits, action plans, and learning exchanges ensures a robust framework for future growth, positioning the region to capitalise on global food tourism trends and deliver exceptional visitor experiences.



Strategic Objective 5:
Embrace the opportunities of Climate Action in the Marine, Circular Bioeconomy, Tourism and Energy Sectors

Action 5.1 To Increase the number of Start-ups and SMEs with Sustainable Marine, Circular Bioeconomy and Energy Solutions through relevant accelerator programmes

Action leader: MaREI, Circular Bioeconomy Cluster South-West and Energy Cork
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action partially achieved - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 5.1 aims to foster innovation and entrepreneurship in the region by increasing the number of start-ups and SMEs developing sustainable solutions in marine, circular bioeconomy, and energy sectors. These industries are critical to addressing climate challenges and advancing Ireland's green transition. The action emphasises the role of accelerator programmes and tailored supports to strengthen the regional ecosystem, create jobs, and build resilience through collaboration with initiatives such as Ignite, New Frontiers, and MaREI.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023 the Working Group collaborated to identify gaps in expertise and specialised supports not currently addressed by existing accelerators. Programmes such as Ignite and New Frontiers provide entrepreneurship pathways, while InterTrade Ireland and MaREI, the SFI Research Centre for Energy, Climate and Marine research, play pivotal roles in supporting innovation. MaREI's coordination through UCC's Environmental Research Institute ensures strong research-industry linkages. Collectively, these efforts strengthen the regional ecosystem, positioning it to support SMEs tackling sustainability challenges.

2024 Progress

In 2024, progress accelerated with several impactful initiatives. *The Dingle Peninsula 2030* project emerged as a flagship example of community-driven sustainability, integrating climate action into local development plans and creating new jobs through energy focused start-ups such as Solar Beo and DC6 Technologies. MaREI advanced its leadership role by spearheading the MARINERG-I project, included on the ESFRI roadmap as one of Europe's key research infrastructures for offshore renewable energy (ORE). This project provides a long-term strategy for collaboration among ORE testing facilities, offering vital support to start-ups and industry players. The MARINERG-i_PP (Preparatory Phase) commenced in Q1 2024, involving 15 partners from 10 countries, reinforcing Ireland's position in the European energy innovation landscape. Additionally, MaREI's contributions were highlighted in *Powering Prosperity: Ireland's Offshore Wind Industrial Strategy*, showcasing case studies of industry engagement.

Meanwhile, Energy Cork established a representative Working Group to assess training and support gaps. Findings indicated strong foundational support for start-ups but highlighted the need for highly specialised mentoring and technical expertise in niche areas.

2025 Progress

By 2025, the initiatives launched in previous years continued to deliver tangible outcomes. *The Dingle Peninsula 2030* project sustained progress, embedding sustainability into community planning and fostering local enterprise growth and acting as an exemplar for initiatives in other areas. MaREI's MARINERG-I project remained central to advancing offshore renewable energy innovation, ensuring integration and collaboration across Europe. The preparatory phase involving international partners strengthened Ireland's research and industry networks, creating pathways for SMEs to access cutting edge facilities and expertise.

Conclusion

The region's capacity to nurture start-ups and SMEs in marine, bioeconomy, and energy sectors has been significantly enhanced through the lifetime of the Plan. Through strategic partnerships, accelerator programmes, and research-led initiatives, the region is building a robust ecosystem for sustainable innovation. Continued collaboration and targeted supports will be essential to maintain progress, attract investment, and position the South-West as a leader in climate solutions and green enterprise development.

Action 5.2: Strengthen the links between the digital/ICT technology sector and the marine, agriculture, energy, forestry, tourism and industrial sectors to encourage collaboration between start-ups, SMEs and industry

Action Leader: it@Cork, Circular Bioeconomy Cluster South-West, MaREI and Energy Cork
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action partially achieved - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 5.2 aimed to foster collaboration between the digital and ICT technology sector and traditional industries such as marine, agriculture, energy, forestry, tourism, and manufacturing. By creating stronger connections among start-ups, SMEs, and established companies, this initiative seeks to accelerate innovation, enable cross-sector knowledge sharing, and deliver greater economic value to the region. The rationale was clear: integrating digital solutions into these sectors will drive efficiency, sustainability, and competitiveness while positioning the region as a leader in technology enabled transformation.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023, regional clusters played a pivotal role in advancing this action through partnerships with industry and stakeholders. Cluster organisations actively promoted digitalisation among SMEs, encouraging collaboration with multinational corporations. A key milestone was the Skillnet-funded Innovation Exchange, hosted by RDI and Ludgate hubs, which connected established companies with SMEs to accelerate digital transformation. This programme provided SMEs with access to customer pipelines and frameworks for navigating sales and procurement, ultimately supporting commercial success.

Additionally, it@Cork, operating under the Tech Industry Alliance in collaboration with KerrySciTech, maintained its focus on sustainability and innovation. Its flagship event, TechFest 2023, themed *The Future of Power – Addressing the Energy Crisis*, brought together leaders from academia and industry to explore opportunities and challenges in energy and technology for Ireland and the South-West region.

2024 Progress

Building on the previous year's achievements, 2024 saw continued efforts to strengthen inter-sectoral linkages. Regional industry clusters organised joint networking and briefing events to facilitate collaboration and knowledge exchange. A notable development was MaREI (UCC) initiating the Irish Building Stock Observatory as part of its work on a Barometer of Ireland's Progress Towards National Retrofit Targets. This initiative provided reliable, consistent, and comparable data on building energy performance, addressing a critical gap in implementing Climate Action Plan objectives. By sharing insights between research and industry, MaREI contributed to bridging the divide between technology and energy sectors, reinforcing the action's objectives.

2025 Progress

In 2025, the focus remained on deepening these collaborative ties. Industry clusters continued hosting joint events to enhance engagement across sectors. MaREI's work on the Building Stock Observatory progressed further, offering valuable data to inform energy efficiency strategies and retrofit initiatives. These efforts exemplify how digital and ICT solutions can support sustainability goals while creating new opportunities for innovation and growth. The ongoing collaboration between clusters, research institutions, and businesses underscores the region's commitment to integrated development and climate resilience.

Conclusion

The integration of digital technologies into traditional sectors has been advanced through strategic partnerships, knowledge-sharing platforms, and targeted initiatives. Programmes like the Innovation Exchange and MaREI's retrofit barometer highlight the tangible benefits of cross-sector collaboration. While continued engagement and resource alignment will be essential, the groundwork laid during the lifetime of the Plan positions the South-West region as a hub for technology driven transformation, fostering economic growth and sustainability across multiple industries.

Action 5.3: Build greater collaboration in the energy sector and climate action sectors between enterprises in Cork and Kerry

Action Leader: Energy Cork, MaREI and Circular Bioeconomy Cluster South-West
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action partially complete - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 5.3 intends to strengthen collaboration between enterprises in Cork and Kerry within the energy and climate action sectors. The region faces shared challenges and opportunities in transitioning to a low-carbon economy, requiring coordinated efforts among businesses, research institutions, and public bodies. By leveraging existing clusters such as Energy Cork, the Circular Bioeconomy Cluster South-West, and the MaREI Centre's extensive partnerships, this action seeks to foster innovation, share best practices, and accelerate enterprise development in sustainability and climate resilience.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
In 2023, the South-West Regional Enterprise Plan Working Group collaborated with regional clusters and local authorities to organise sectoral events promoting networking and knowledge exchange. Events such as TechFest and the STEM South-West Expo were supported by clusters including Energy Cork, the Tech Industry Alliance, and the Bioeconomy Cluster, alongside universities and state agencies. These events provided platforms for enterprises to engage with cutting-edge technologies and sustainability practices, reinforcing the region's commitment to zero carbon initiatives and just transition strategies.

2024 Progress
In 2024, the *Dingle Peninsula 2030* initiative, led by MaREI at UCC, achieved significant progress, demonstrating the impact of engaged research and community-driven climate action. The project focused on co-designing practical emission-reduction pathways, strengthening partnerships, and building local capacity to support the region's transition to a low-carbon future. This community-centred approach has already delivered tangible outcomes, including the formation of Sustainable Energy Communities for both farmers and tourism operators, the accelerated deployment of low-carbon technologies, the development of a rural low-carbon transport strategy, and the integration of climate action priorities into regional development plans. Beyond these achievements, the *Dingle 2030* initiative also served as a

catalyst for participation in the ENPOWER Horizon Europe Project, a €7 million, three-year programme launched in Q1 2024. Involving partners such as MaREI@UCC, the Dingle Creativity and Innovation Hub (MOL TEIC), and DCSIX Technologies Limited in Cork, the project aims to strengthen energy systems by empowering citizens and enabling energy-secure communities through innovative methodologies and emerging technologies. Collectively, these efforts reinforce the region's leadership in collaborative climate action and energy innovation.

2025 Progress

Work under the *Dingle Peninsula 2030* progressed and the groundwork laid in previous years, through events, community initiatives, and international collaborations, established a strong foundation for ongoing progress.

Conclusion

The Working Group members successfully advanced collaboration in the South-West's energy and climate action sectors. Through networking events, community-led initiatives like *Dingle Peninsula 2030*, and participation in major European projects, the region has demonstrated its capacity to innovate and lead in sustainability. The achievements to date have created lasting impacts, fostering a collaborative ecosystem that supports low carbon transition, energy security, and enterprise growth. Continued engagement and resource mobilisation will be key to continued progress and achieving long-term climate goals.

Action 5.4: Support the work of the CARO/enterprise opportunities initiative. Consideration could be given to linking with decarbonisation zones in local authority areas

Action Leader: South-West Programme Manager
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2025
Final Status: Action partially complete - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 5.4 focuses on leveraging climate action as a driver of economic and enterprise opportunities in the South-West region. Through collaboration with the Climate Action Regional Office (CARO) and local authorities, this initiative aims to identify and realise business prospects arising from decarbonisation

and sustainability efforts. By aligning enterprise development with climate objectives, the action seeks to foster innovation, create employment, and enhance regional resilience. A key component involves linking with designated Decarbonisation Zones to support companies in transitioning to low carbon practices.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023, progress was limited as local Climate Action Plans were still under development. The SWREP Working Group recommended re-engaging with CARO and local Climate Action Units to explore enterprise opportunities in the South-West when plans were finalised. Preliminary discussions focused on potential collaboration with regional clusters and CARO to organise projects and events around decarbonisation. These early steps laid the groundwork for future engagement once formal plans were in place.

2024 Progress

Significant progress occurred in 2024 with the publication of three Climate Action Plans for Cork City, Cork County, and Kerry. Representatives from CARO and local climate action offices presented to the stakeholders on enterprise opportunities linked to these plans, directly addressing the action's objectives. Key opportunities exist in designated Decarbonisation Zones, including Cork City, the Dingle Peninsula, Macroom, and Bishopstown. These zones are intended to serve as innovation hubs for low carbon solutions, offering businesses pathways to participate in climate focused projects. The presentations highlighted potential collaborations and funding streams, reinforcing the role of local authorities and enterprise agencies in supporting companies to capitalise on sustainability-driven economic growth.

2025 Progress

In 2025, Cork City reached a major milestone by joining the EU Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Mission, committing to reduce emissions by 80% and achieve climate neutrality by 2030. The city received the EU Mission Label early in the year, confirming the credibility of its net-zero pathway and associated investment plan assessed by the European Commission and the European Investment Bank.

Cork County Council continued to advance climate initiatives within the Macroom Decarbonisation Zone, working with public and private partners to progress innovative projects. Its *Local Authority Climate Action Plan* sets out over 245 actions, including strong enterprise engagement. The LEO Green for Business programme supported 66 companies in 2024 and a further 23 by April 2025 to adopt more sustainable practices. Cork City and County Councils also explored opportunities for shared climate projects, with their climate action teams meeting several times in 2025 to scope areas for collaboration.

Conclusion

There has been progress from planning to implementation, embedding climate action into enterprise development strategies across the South-West. Through CARO collaboration, Decarbonisation Zones, and flagship initiatives like Cork City's EU Mission Label, the region is positioning itself as a leader in sustainability driven economic growth. Continued support from local authorities, enterprise agencies, and industry will be critical to sustained progress, fostering innovation, and achieving long term climate and economic objectives.

Action 5.5: Collaborate with the Mid-West region to support economic development potential of the Shannon Estuary and surrounding region

Action Leader: Local Authorities
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 5.5 focuses on harnessing the economic potential of the Shannon Estuary and surrounding region through collaboration between the South-West and Mid-West. The emergence of offshore floating wind as a cost-effective renewable energy source positions Ireland's Atlantic coastline as a global leader in clean energy. The Shannon Estuary offers unique advantages, deep-water port conditions, existing grid infrastructure, and a skilled workforce, making it an ideal hub for offshore wind development. This action aims to align regional strategies to attract investment, create jobs, and establish an Atlantic Green Digital Basin, coupling renewable energy generation with industrial growth.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In June 2023, the Shannon Estuary Economic Taskforce published its report, setting out an ambitious roadmap for delivering up to 300GW of Atlantic Offshore Wind by 2050. Alongside this long-term vision, the report outlined a series of recommendations to accelerate onshore renewable energy deployment and proposed new initiatives across transport, logistics, connectivity, and tourism. This regional progress was reinforced by several parallel developments. Shannon Foynes Port Company's Vision 2041 highlighted the port's potential as a critical hub for offshore wind infrastructure and large-scale floating wind deployment. Over the same period, project developers including ESB, DP Energy, Simply Blue,

and Mainstream held public consultation events on proposed offshore wind projects off the coasts of West Clare and North Kerry, helping to build public awareness and engagement. In addition, the South-West Working Group continued its collaboration with DETE on its work to develop a national industrial strategy for the offshore wind sector, with department officials meeting the REP Working Group in Ringaskiddy in June 2023. Collectively, these activities strengthened regional alignment and further positioned the Shannon Estuary as a strategic national energy hub.

2024 Progress

In 2024, collaboration deepened between regional Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE) groups. The SWREP ORE Working Group and its Chair connected with the Mid-West Region ORE group and other regional chairs to identify common interests and economic opportunities. Quarterly meetings with DETE's Offshore Wind Unit began in September 2024, fostering alignment on national policy and regional priorities. These engagements ensured that both regions worked cohesively to advocate for solutions such as offshore consenting regimes, grid planning, and commercial auction scheduling.

2025 Progress

By 2025, the South-West continued to strengthen ties with other ORE regions. The SWREP ORE Working Group Chair and Programme Manager collaborated closely with regional counterparts, meeting DETE's Offshore Wind Unit in February and May. Plans were finalised for the South-West to host the ORE regional meeting in September 2025, reinforcing its leadership role in shaping Ireland's offshore wind strategy. These efforts highlight a sustained commitment to regional cooperation and the development of a robust supply chain ecosystem to support offshore wind projects.

Conclusion

Action 5.5 has seen significant progress in advancing regional collaboration to unlock the Shannon Estuary's economic potential. Through strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and alignment with national policy, the South-West and Mid-West regions are well-positioned to capitalise on Ireland's offshore wind resources. The groundwork laid through taskforce reports, public consultations, and inter-regional cooperation will drive investment, job creation, and industrial growth, positioning the Shannon Estuary to become a cornerstone of Ireland's renewable energy future.

Action 5.6: Collaborate with the Mid-West Region to build regional research, education and training capacity for emerging renewable energy opportunities in the Shannon Estuary and surrounding region

Action Leader: Shannon Foynes Port Company, Mid-West Regional Enterprise Plan, University of Limerick, Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest and MTU Kerry
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 5.6 aims to strengthen research, education, and training capacity in the South-West and Mid-West regions to support emerging renewable energy opportunities, particularly in the Shannon Estuary. With offshore wind and hydrogen production poised to transform Ireland's energy landscape, this initiative seeks to ensure that academic institutions and training providers deliver the talent pipeline and research capabilities needed for a low carbon future. The establishment of the Mid-West Renewable Energy Cluster, comprising an Education and Training Working Group (ETWG) and a Research Working Group (RWG), underpins this effort by aligning skills development and research priorities with industry needs.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
Collaboration between South-West and Mid-West Regional Enterprise Plan Programme Managers began early in 2023. Key milestones included:

- January 2023: Mid-West education and training providers presented to the Norwegian ambassador, exploring collaborative educational links.
- February 2023: The National Maritime College of Ireland hosted a Seafarers Conference in Limerick, bringing together maritime industry representatives to discuss opportunities in fishing and offshore wind.
- June 2023: A bilateral meeting between Mid-West education providers and Canadian marine skills providers occurred during the Oceans 23 delegation, fostering international collaboration.
- Oceans 23 International Conference at the University of Limerick attracted over 1,000 delegates from industry, academia, and government, focusing on marine energy, climate change, and emerging technologies.

Additionally, the Mid-West education and training group expanded its membership and geographical reach, engaging South-West stakeholders to capitalise on opportunities in north Kerry and the Shannon Estuary. A mapping document of existing course offerings was developed, forming the basis for new modules and programmes to address future skills needs.

2024 Progress

In 2024, collaboration deepened through structured engagement between Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE) regional groups. The SWREP ORE Working Group and its Chair connected with the Mid-West ORE group and other regional chairs to identify common interests and economic opportunities. Quarterly meetings with the Offshore Wind Unit in DETE commenced in September, ensuring alignment between regional initiatives and national policy.

2025 Progress

By 2025, inter-regional cooperation continued to strengthen. The SWREP ORE Working Group Chair and Programme Manager worked closely with counterparts in other regions, meeting DETE's Offshore Wind Unit in February and May. The South-West REP hosted the ORE regional meeting at the National Maritime College Ireland in Cork in September 2025, reinforcing its leadership role in shaping Ireland's renewable energy strategy. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed between MTU, UCC and the ETBs to work together to develop courses responsive to industry needs. These engagements support the long-term goal of building a responsive education and research ecosystem to meet industry demands.

Conclusion

Significant progress has been made in building collaborative capacity between education providers, research institutions, and industry to support renewable energy development in the Shannon Estuary region. International engagement, major conferences, and structured inter-regional coordination have created a strong foundation for future skills and research needs. Crucially, the South-West REP played a central role in enabling this progress by providing the forum through which regional partners could connect, align priorities, and coordinate actions with the Mid-West. Through the REP Working Group, stakeholders were able to integrate education, training, and research agendas and engage collectively with national policy. This coordinated approach has strengthened the region's readiness to meet emerging workforce demands and supports the long-term goal of positioning the Shannon Estuary as a leading hub for renewable energy innovation, talent, and investment.

Action 5.7: Develop funding applications for Innovation Programmes and infrastructure facilities for Climate Action, Blue Economy, Circular Bioeconomy, Energy, Sustainable Port Activities, and Just Transition

Action Leader: MaREI, Energy Cork, Circular Bioeconomy Cluster South-West and it@Cork
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action partially complete - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 5.7 focuses on securing funding for innovation programmes and infrastructure projects that advance climate action, the blue economy, circular bioeconomy, energy transition, sustainable port activities, and just transition initiatives. The rationale behind this action is to ensure that the South-West region capitalises on emerging opportunities by developing collaborative funding applications that align with national and European priorities. By pooling expertise from industry, research institutions, and clusters, this initiative aims to deliver impactful projects that support economic growth and sustainability.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
In 2023, foundational work began through Interreg collaborations involving the SRA, MTU and UCC. These partnerships targeted funding calls in the blue economy, including initiatives such as the Sustainable Green Procurement testbed. This early engagement demonstrated the region's commitment to leveraging European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programmes to support climate and sustainability objectives.

2024 Progress
By 2024, the Working Group under Strategic Objective 5 had deepened its collaboration with the SRA, engaging through both steering committees and formal Working Group structures. This strengthened partnership helped increase the involvement of Irish stakeholders across a range of ETC programmes, including PEACEPLUS, Interreg North-West Europe, Interreg Northern Periphery and Arctic, Interreg Atlantic Area, Interreg Europe, URBACT IV, ESPON 2030, and Horizon Europe. Several significant projects were initiated during this period, such as FutureECOS, a four-year Interreg Europe project (2024–2028) focused on addressing sustainability and connectivity challenges in growth corridor regions; DISC, a two-year PEACEPLUS project aimed at strengthening cross-border economic and social

cooperation between Ireland, Northern Ireland, Wales, and Scotland; and ROBIN, a two-year Horizon initiative designed to support governance models that advance circular bioeconomy goals while enabling social innovation. In addition, MaREI secured €4.2 million through the SFI Infrastructure Programme, co-funded by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, to develop the FLOWT-EOB Floating Wind Testbed at the Lir National Ocean Test Facility. This new infrastructure provides offshore renewable energy developers with the capabilities needed to address key knowledge gaps and optimise energy utilisation, further enhancing the region's capacity for innovation.

2025 Progress

In 2025, the Circular Bioeconomy Cluster spearheaded a €1.5 million INTERREG Northern Periphery and Arctic project exploring the use of natural fibres in 3D printing. Led by Centria University of Applied Sciences (Finland) and involving MTU and Future Cast, this project runs from March 2025 to February 2028. Also in 2025, the Mara Blue initiative commenced a feasibility study to explore the potential for Ireland's first full-scale marine biorefinery, with support from the Smart Regions Enterprise Innovation Scheme and Cork County Council. The project is being led by Munster Technological University (MTU) in collaboration with Pure Ocean Algae, and the Castletownbere Fishermen's Co-Op. The initiatives outlined in the 2024 report continued to progress, reinforcing the region's leadership in securing funding for transformative projects.

Conclusion

The South-West's capacity to attract funding for innovation and infrastructure projects aligned with climate action and sustainability goals has been advanced over the lifetime of the Plan. Through strategic partnerships, participation in European programmes, and targeted initiatives such as FLOWT-EOB and the natural fibre project, the region is building a robust foundation for future economic growth and environmental resilience. Continued collaboration and proactive engagement with funding opportunities will be critical to sustaining this momentum.

Action 5.8: Provide training and education supports to develop the necessary human capital, skills and competences required for the transition to a zero carbon and circular economy across a broad base of enterprise and industry within the South-West Region

Action Leader: Environmental Research Institute (ERI) - UCC
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 5.8 addresses the critical need for skilled professionals capable of driving the transition to a zero-carbon and circular economy across the South-West region. As businesses face increasing regulatory and market pressures to integrate sustainability into their operations, the demand for expertise in climate action, decarbonisation, and resource efficiency has grown significantly. This action aims to deliver bespoke training schemes co-designed with industry, ensuring that enterprises of all sizes have access to the skills and knowledge required to meet Ireland's climate targets while fostering innovation and profitability.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
In 2023, University College Cork (UCC) spearheaded efforts through the Sustainable Futures project, funded by the Higher Education Authority's Human Capital Initiative (HCI). This collaborative programme, involving Maynooth University, the Atlantic Technological University, and multiple industry partners, focused on climate action, environmental sustainability, and achieving net zero in enterprise. Sustainable Futures created a community driven environment offering educational programmes designed to produce leaders equipped to guide businesses through the sustainability transition. The SWREP Working Group acknowledged ongoing opportunities for companies in renewable energy and innovation, with skills training initiatives being developed to meet these emerging needs.

2024 Progress

2024 marked a significant milestone with the graduation of the first cohort from the MSc in Sustainability in Enterprise, a two-year programme under Sustainable Futures. Recognising the growing demand for sustainability expertise, the initiative introduced a joint Postgraduate Certificate and MSc, delivered part time and online to accommodate recent graduates and professionals in employment. Additionally,

Sustainable Futures launched a suite of MicroCredentials, offering flexible, stackable learning options that enable participants to upskill in targeted areas such as renewable energy and sustainability strategy. A notable development in 2024 was the introduction of an 80% subsidy on MicroCredential fees under HCI Pillar 3, making these programmes highly accessible. The content of these courses was informed by industry partners, ensuring relevance and practical application. Learners gained a toolkit of actionable skills to embed sustainability within their organisations, directly addressing the action's objective of aligning training with enterprise needs.

2025 Progress

By 2025, the Sustainable Futures programme continued to thrive, with the MSc and post-grad certificate offerings firmly established as leading qualifications in sustainability. MicroCredentials remained central to the initiative, supporting lifelong learning and professional development across the region. These programmes have significantly contributed to efforts to build a skilled workforce for the green economy. While the action is considered complete, new programmes and modules continue to emerge, reflecting the dynamic nature of sustainability education and the ongoing collaboration between academia and industry.

Conclusion

A comprehensive suite of training and education supports has been delivered over the lifetime of the Plan to equip enterprises for the zero-carbon transition. Through flagship programmes like the MSc in Sustainability in Enterprise and innovative MicroCredentials, the South-West region is working towards robust talent pipeline aligned with industry needs. This achievement not only strengthens regional competitiveness but also ensures businesses are prepared to meet climate challenges and capitalise on new opportunities in the circular economy.

Action 5.9: Engage with stakeholders to scope out enterprise opportunities for coastal communities in the South-West arising from the post Brexit and Climate Transition

Action Leader: Local Authorities and LEOs
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action partially complete - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 5.9 focuses on identifying and developing enterprise opportunities for coastal communities in the South-West region in response to challenges and opportunities arising from Brexit and the climate transition. With Ireland receiving over €1 billion under the Brexit Adjustment Reserve (BAR), the largest allocation among EU Member States, this action aimed to maximise funding drawdown for coastal communities, supporting sectors such as fisheries, agri-food, and renewable energy. The initiative emphasises collaboration among local authorities, Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs), Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs), and other stakeholders to ensure sustainable economic development.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
Although the initial timeframe for BAR funding had passed, engagement continued through the SWREP Working Group, LEOs, MTU, and FLAGs. The Brexit Blue Economy Scheme provided targeted supports for fisheries and coastal enterprises, while discussions began on leveraging future opportunities linked to the *National Industrial Strategy for Offshore Wind*. These efforts laid the groundwork for ongoing collaboration and highlighted the potential for coastal communities to benefit from emerging blue economy initiatives.

2024 Progress
By 2024, the Brexit Blue Economy Scheme had closed, but new initiatives emerged to sustain progress:

- FLAG boards and strategies were reconstituted for the next funding cycle, adopting a Leader-type approach to community-led development.
- Kerry County Council and LEO Kerry engaged with coastal enterprises to scope opportunities, while participating at board level in the South-West FLAG Programme.

- The South-West FLAG Strategy, developed through broad public consultation, was finalised and submitted for funding allocation.
- The Bere Island Project Group joined a European initiative—Beara Marine and Offshore Renewable Energy (Beara-MORE/B-More)—to foster regional skills partnerships and explore renewable energy opportunities.
- These developments reinforced the commitment to supporting coastal communities through strategic planning and stakeholder collaboration.

2025 Progress

In 2025, the focus shifted to the FLAG Coastal Communities Development Scheme, implemented under the Seafood Development Programme and co-funded by the Irish Government and the EU through the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund.

Key highlights:

- Seven FLAGs nationwide, including South (Cork) and South-West (Kerry and Limerick), will manage a €15 million local development fund from 2025–2029. Applications will be open for FLAG funding into the early part of 2026.
- Strategies developed through extensive consultation guide project selection to ensure alignment with local priorities.
- LEOs and local authorities continue to engage with coastal enterprises, supporting applications and project development.

Conclusion

The region has successfully transitioned from Brexit related supports to long term blue economy initiatives, ensuring coastal communities remain resilient and economically vibrant. Through FLAG strategies, European partnerships, and targeted funding schemes, the South-West region is well positioned to capitalise on opportunities in fisheries, marine renewables, and sustainable enterprise. Continued collaboration and proactive engagement will be essential to sustain progress and deliver lasting benefits for coastal communities.

Action 5.10: Support the development of sustainable and green enterprise within the tourism economy

Action Leader: Fáilte Ireland
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 5.10 focuses on fostering sustainable and green enterprises within the tourism sector in the region. This initiative aligns with national and EU climate objectives while responding to evolving market dynamics and consumer expectations for environmentally responsible tourism. By integrating new technologies and digitalisation, the action aims to enhance competitiveness, extend the tourism season, and deliver cost-effective services. The goal is to expand existing enterprises and establish new ones that prioritise environmental awareness and green practices.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
In 2023, the Working Group established a strong foundation for advancing sustainability by engaging with Fáilte Ireland and a wide network of partners. A major focus was the development of a *Sustainable Tourism Plan*, progressed through the Cork and Kerry Convention Bureaus and supported by the Regenerative Tourism Programme. Complementing this work, sustainable green procurement testbeds were introduced to promote more environmentally responsible purchasing practices across the sector. The Working Group supported delivery of the *Visit Cork Strategy 2022–2026*, which positions sustainability as a central pillar. At a community level, initiatives such as the Dingle Sustainable Energy Community for the hospitality sector—backed by Fáilte Ireland and Kerry County Council—demonstrated how local engagement can drive meaningful change. Capacity building was strengthened through MTU's delivery of an MA in Regenerative Tourism. Practical interventions were also piloted throughout the year, including the Killarney Coffee Cup initiative and the waste-free model introduced at the Dingle Food Festival, showcasing innovative approaches to reducing environmental impact in tourism settings.

2024 Progress

In 2024, substantial progress was achieved with the launch of Fáilte Ireland's Climate Action Programme in Q1, a hands-on initiative designed to equip tourism businesses with tailored sustainability support and investment guidance. Delivered by specialist sustainability advisors, the programme mentors participating businesses over a three-year period to help them align with Ireland's national target of net-zero emissions by 2050. The strong uptake, with more than 50 businesses across Cork and Kerry enrolled, demonstrates the growing industry commitment to climate action. Further progress was evident through several developments. All Irish convention bureaus completed the GDS-Index, the international benchmark for destination sustainability, with Kerry and Cork placing 19th and 21st respectively in 2024, signalling continued progress in sustainable tourism practices. The launch of the *Visit Cork Strategy 2022–2026* reinforced the region's long-term commitment to sustainability, and work on the Dingle SEC Masterplan progressed ahead of public release. Fáilte Ireland expanded its collaboration with local partners, including the Killarney Chamber of Tourism and Commerce, to scope new sustainability initiatives for Killarney, culminating in a Kerry Tourism Strategy Workshop held in December 2024. MTU continued to deliver the MA in Regenerative Tourism, and ongoing pilot initiatives, such as the Dingle Food Festival waste-free programme provided practical demonstrations of community-driven environmental innovation.

2025 Progress

By 2025, the Climate Action Programme continued to support participating businesses, driving tangible changes in operations and investment strategies. The programme remains a cornerstone of efforts to embed sustainability within the tourism economy, ensuring long-term resilience and competitiveness.

Conclusion

Much of the work underway linked with this action has successfully advanced the integration of sustainability into the South-West tourism sector. Through strategic planning, capacity building programmes, and practical interventions, the region is positioning itself as a leader in green tourism. Continued collaboration with Fáilte Ireland and local stakeholders will be essential to maintain traction and achieve Ireland's climate and tourism objectives.

Action 5.11: Examine the potential of establishing an industry led cluster to develop a policy on exploiting the potential of offshore renewable energy in the Cork Harbour region

Action Leader: Working Group Chair and REP Programme Manager
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2025
Final Status: Action partially complete - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 5.11 was introduced in 2023 to explore the creation of an industry-led cluster focused on offshore renewable energy (ORE) in Cork Harbour. This initiative reflects the growing importance of offshore wind in Ireland's energy transition and the significant opportunities for the region to benefit from this emerging sector. By fostering collaboration among public and private stakeholders, the action aims to recognise the first mover potential of Cork Harbour & Coastline and position the Cork Harbour region as a strategic hub for ORE development.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023
In Q2 2023, the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (DETE) established a new unit tasked with developing a national industrial strategy for offshore wind.

Recognising the absence of a dedicated action in the Plan for Cork Harbour, the Steering Committee added Action 5.11 to enable strategic examination of enterprise opportunities linked to offshore wind. A dedicated Working Group (WG7) was formed to lead delivery. This work aligned with the *Cork County Development Plan 2022-2028*, initiatives by the Southern Regional Assembly and other regional actions, ensuring a coordinated approach to ORE development.

2024
A number of significant developments in 2024 paved the way for further work and collaboration at regional level:

In March, Cork County Council published a high-level strategic document entitled *A Renewable Energy Vision for Cork Harbour & Coastline - Establishing Cork as Ireland's leading offshore wind energy and green industry location*.

The *South Coast Designated Maritime Area Plan* (DMAP) was approved in Q3, identifying four future offshore wind sites off Wexford and Waterford. This approval paved the way for an auction in 2025 for the first site which will host the 900 MW Tonn Nua wind farm.

The Port of Cork secured loans to significantly develop its infrastructure and facilities to position the port to serve offshore wind projects on the south and east coasts. Works began in October 2024, with first ORE cargo expected in 2026. In addition, discussions with Belfast Port under the Shared Island initiative advanced plans for crew servicing and logistics.

The National Maritime College of Ireland (NMCI) announced €8 million in funding for its simulator suite, with an additional €15 million sought. NMCI hosted key events promoting careers in renewable energy, including the Smart Maritime and Offshore Wind and Wind Industry Taster Cork events in November.

2025

In 2025, progress accelerated:

- The Working Group engaged with DETE's Offshore Wind Unit through meetings in Waterford (February) and Mayo (May).
- A public sector Offshore Renewables Leadership Group was established, chaired by Cork County Council's Chief Executive, to examine onshore economic opportunities arising from ORE.
- Cork County Council established a dedicated ORE unit to coordinate actions aligned with national ORE goals for 2030 – necessary to facilitate the delivery of offshore renewable energy in the south-west and to support opportunities arising from the generation of large-scale renewable energy.
- Regular engagement with Cork Chamber's ORE group included events with Scottish delegations and the British ambassador.
- A SWREP ORE Working Group meeting in June 2025 featured a detailed DETE presentation, followed by a joint DETE/REP stakeholder meeting hosted at NMCI in September.

In addition, a major national milestone was achieved in December 2025 with the successful auction of the Tonn Nua project, positioning the South-West to benefit from the next phase of Ireland's offshore renewable energy industry.

Conclusion

Action 5.11 has made substantial progress in laying the foundation for an industry-led ORE cluster in the Cork Harbour region. Continued efforts to align public and private initiatives will ensure Cork Harbour becomes a key player in Ireland's renewable energy future, driving economic growth and supporting climate objectives.



Strategic Objective 6:
Ensure a strong pipeline of talent in the region, focusing on sustainable high-quality jobs

Action 6.1: Develop Innovation and Design Thinking Training and Development Programmes to prepare SMEs to supply the South-West FDI companies

Action Leader: Munster Technological University (MTU)
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2023
Final Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction

Action 6.1 aims to equip small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the South-West region with innovation and design thinking capabilities to strengthen their ability to supply foreign direct investment (FDI) companies. Design thinking, a user centred methodology widely adopted by leading global institutions such as Stanford, Oxford, and MIT, has become a standard practice across industries including healthcare, pharmaceuticals, software development, and government. By fostering these skills, the action seeks to create sustainable partnerships between SMEs and multinational corporations (MNCs), enhancing supply chain integration and competitiveness.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress

In 2023, the Regional Enterprise Plan Working Group for this action was established, comprising representatives from agencies, academia, government, and the private sector. The group focused on proposals to strengthen supply chain links between start-ups, SMEs, and MNCs in the South-West. A key development was the Innovation Exchange, led by the RDI Hub and Ludgate Hub, which emerged as a platform to connect SMEs with MNCs and exploit supply chain opportunities. This initiative was presented to the Working Group and identified as a strategic mechanism to advance the action, particularly in the context of green supply chains.

2024 Progress

By 2024, the Innovation Exchange had gained significant traction as a national programme, with strong regional participation through Ludgate Hub (Skibbereen) and RDI Hub (Killorglin). At the November 2024 Working Group meeting, representatives outlined the programme's progress and its role in facilitating connections between SMEs and MNCs. The Innovation Exchange targets companies facing digital challenges and matches them with ambitious SMEs offering fast-track solutions. Nationally, the programme engaged over 1,000 companies, published 50 challenges, received 120 pitches, and secured 25 deals in its first year.

2025 Progress

In 2025, the Innovation Exchange continued to drive progress under Action 6.1. The programme maintained its partnerships with Ludgate and RDI hubs and actively sought SME engagement through the Working Group. A notable milestone was the Innovation Exchange's presentation to the Southern Regional Assembly Talent4S3 stakeholder group in Q1 2025, where the South-West REP Programme Manager participated alongside counterparts from the Mid-West and South-East regions. This engagement reinforced the alignment between innovation initiatives and regional skills strategies, ensuring that SMEs are prepared to meet evolving supply chain demands.

Conclusion

Action 6.1 has successfully advanced its objective of preparing SMEs to supply FDI companies through innovation and design thinking. The Skillnet Innovation Exchange has fostered meaningful connections between SMEs and MNCs, driving collaborative solutions to industry challenges with €5 million in deal revenue generated for SMEs through 30+ contracts, 70+ Innovation challenges published, 6,000 training days delivered and delivering 50+ national and regional events per annum.

With many companies engaged and deals secured, the programme demonstrates tangible impact – outlined in the independent economic impact report published in 2025. Continued focus on skills development and regional collaboration will be essential for continued progress and position the South-West as a hub for innovative, supply ready enterprises.

Action 6.2 – Introduce Supports for the Services Industry to Achieve Resource Efficiency through Targeted Training Initiatives

Action Leader: Munster Technological University (MTU)
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2025
Final Status: Action partially complete - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 6.2 addresses the need for targeted training initiatives to help the services industry, particularly SMEs, achieve resource efficiency. This action aligns with global and national sustainability frameworks, including the UN Sustainable Development Goals, EU Circular Economy Policy, and Ireland's Climate Action Plan. Many SMEs lack expertise in managing key resources such as energy, water, and raw materials. By building management capacity and introducing practical, low-cost solutions, this initiative aims to reduce costs, improve productivity, and enhance competitiveness while supporting climate and sustainability objectives.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
In 2023, the REP Working Group began examining the potential to map resource efficiency opportunities for SMEs, focusing on green and sustainable procurement and better management of water, waste, and raw materials. A notable development was the Energy Champion feasibility study, undertaken by Energy Cork and Cork Chamber, with support from Enterprise Ireland's Regional Enterprise Innovation Scoping Scheme. This pilot engaged 12 SMEs to explore energy efficiency strategies, with ambitions to scale participation to 100 SMEs. These early efforts laid the foundation for practical interventions to help businesses adopt resource-efficient practices.

2024 Progress

By 2024, the group looked at broader skills development initiatives. Cyber Ireland hired an Industry Skills Coordinator to manage talent and skills programmes, engaging with industry to identify cybersecurity needs and collaborating with education providers nationally.

While cybersecurity is not directly linked to resource efficiency, these initiatives reflect a growing emphasis on equipping businesses with critical skills for sustainability and resilience in a digital economy. Additionally, the further education and training bodies and Munster Technological University (MTU) began developing a careers portal to attract younger generations to careers in technology and sustainability. Regional clusters such as Energy Cork, Tech Industry Alliance, and STEM South-West Expo continued outreach efforts, promoting resource efficiency and green practices through industry engagement and educational events.

2025 Progress

In 2025, substantial progress was made in strengthening training and skills development across key digital disciplines, particularly in cybersecurity. A major milestone was Ireland's first National Cybersecurity Career Fair, hosted in March at MTU, which attracted more than 500 attendees and featured 17 industry exhibitors, highlighting growing interest in cybersecurity careers. The year also saw the launch of Women4Cyber, a European initiative aimed at increasing female participation in the cybersecurity sector and fostering greater diversity within the digital workforce. Cyber Ireland advanced its national leadership role through the establishment of the Cyber Workforce Collective, which is mapping Ireland's cybersecurity workforce and developing competency frameworks as part of initiatives such as Project Atlas. Complementing these efforts, European digital-skills projects, including Digital4Security and Cyberhubs, were initiated to strengthen cybersecurity expertise and support secure, resilient digital infrastructure, contributing indirectly to sustainability by underpinning resource-efficient operations. Educational programmes targeting younger learners were also expanded, with MTU delivering initiatives such as Cyber Futures and the Cyber Security Academy in June 2025. While these activities primarily focus on digital and cybersecurity capabilities, they play a vital role in building the broader capacity required for sustainable, efficient, and future-ready business practices in an increasingly digital economy.

Conclusion

Action 6.2 has progressed from initial resource efficiency mapping to broader capacity-building initiatives that support sustainability and resilience in the services sector. Through targeted training, feasibility studies, and collaborative programmes, SMEs in the region are gaining the knowledge and tools needed to reduce resource consumption and improve competitiveness.

Action 6.3: Provide training and education supports in the synthesis and continuous processing of Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs) to meet the demand for highly skilled postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers in the pharmaceutical industry in the South-West Region

Action Leader: UCC Analytical & Biological Chemistry Research Facility (ABCRF)
Timeframe for delivery: Q4 2024
Status: Action complete

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 6.3 was designed to address the growing demand for highly skilled postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers in the pharmaceutical industry within the region. Advances in technologies such as continuous processing, biocatalysis, and green chemistry have transformed pharmaceutical manufacturing, creating a need for chemists proficient in these areas. By leveraging University College Cork's structured PhD programme in Organic and Pharmaceutical Chemistry and related initiatives, this action aimed to equip early-career researchers with cutting-edge skills to support enhanced Process R&D and maintain Ireland's global leadership in pharma innovation.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
In 2023, the Analytical and Biological Chemistry Research Facility (ABCRF) at UCC played a pivotal role in advancing this action. As a leading research centre, ABCRF focuses on synthetic organic chemistry, medicinal chemistry, analytical chemistry, and biochemistry. Its core mission includes training PhD students and postdoctoral researchers in pharmaceutical sciences directly aligned with industry needs. Central to this effort was the structured PhD programme in Organic and Pharmaceutical Chemistry, which emphasises continuous flow processing, biocatalysis, and green chemistry. Other key developments included:

- The launch of UCC Future Pharmaceuticals, a strategic initiative supported by partners such as the National Institute for Bioprocessing Research and Training (NIBRT) and SSPC, the Research Ireland Centre for Pharmaceuticals at the University of Limerick.

- The i-Ed Hub, a collaboration between UCC, MTU, enterprise stakeholders, and leading health and science industries, began delivering postgraduate courses to close skills gaps in pharma, biopharma, and medical devices. This initiative is funded by the Higher Education Authority's Human Capital Initiative.
- MTU and UCC introduced a range of upskilling programmes through Springboard+, promoted via the South-West Regional Skills Forum, addressing challenges posed by digitalisation and sustainability.

2024 Progress

By 2024, these initiatives continued to expand. ABCRF maintained its leadership in training early-career researchers, while UCC's Future Pharmaceuticals initiative strengthened partnerships with NIBRT and SSPC. The i-Ed Hub delivered targeted postgraduate programmes addressing unmet industry needs, ensuring a steady pipeline of skilled professionals. Springboard+ funded courses remained central to workforce development, and MTU's Smart Product Engineering degree attracted students to careers in advanced product design and manufacturing. Collectively, these efforts reinforced the region's capacity to meet evolving pharmaceutical industry demands.

2025 Progress

As of the second half of 2024, the action was deemed complete. The structured training programmes, strategic collaborations, and new educational offerings successfully delivered on the objective of equipping researchers with expertise in API synthesis, continuous processing, and green chemistry. These achievements position the South-West region as a hub for pharmaceutical innovation and talent development.

Conclusion

Work in the South-West has effectively addressed the current skills gap in pharmaceutical process R&D through comprehensive education and training supports. By leveraging UCC's ABCRF, strategic partnerships, and innovative programmes, the region now boasts a strong pipeline of PhD graduates and postdoctoral researchers equipped with advanced skills. This initiative not only strengthens Ireland's pharmaceutical sector but also ensures long-term competitiveness in a rapidly evolving global market.

Action 6.4: Establish an agreed and coordinated approach to life-long learning, skills and talent development and retention across regional stakeholders

Action Leader: South-West Programme Manager
Timeframe for delivery: **Q4 2025**
Final Status: Action partially complete - ongoing

Final Outcome:

Introduction
Action 6.4 aimed to create a coherent and coordinated approach to lifelong learning, skills development, and talent retention across the region. Knowledge diffusion is a critical enabler of economic resilience and growth, and this action seeks to align efforts among higher education institutions, education and training boards, Regional Skills Fora, and industry stakeholders. By leveraging initiatives such as UNESCO Learning City principles and EU-funded projects, the region intends to build a robust talent roadmap that supports workforce adaptability and competitiveness in a rapidly evolving economy.

Steps Taken Across the Lifetime of the Plan

2023 Progress
In 2023, the Working Group began to explore practical pathways for advancing this action, focusing on strengthening regional learning capacity and addressing emerging workforce needs. A key development during the year was engagement with the Southern Regional Assembly (SRA) on its *Towards a Learning Region* report, which sets out evidence-based recommendations for establishing a regional learning model aligned with UNESCO Learning City principles. The South-West REP and the SRA jointly committed to progressing these recommendations through continued collaboration. At the same time, the Working Group initiated discussions on expanding apprenticeships and national qualification opportunities for non-European Economic Area nationals, working in partnership with the i-Ed Hub to identify solutions that could support industry employment needs. Consideration was also given to forming strategic partnerships aimed at developing bridging programmes for skilled migrants to facilitate smoother workforce integration.

Industry engagement featured strongly throughout the year, with the Tech Industry Alliance (TIA) talent forum convening representatives from industry, academia, and cluster organisations to address regional talent challenges. The TIA HR Leaders Forum, comprising more than 40 members across Cork and Kerry,

advanced initiatives focused on flexible working practices, while complementary diversity and inclusion efforts included planning for a regional Diversity Conference. Work also progressed on developing place-branding strategies for Kerry to support long-term talent attraction and retention.

2024 Progress

In 2024, collaboration between the Working Group and the SRA deepened significantly. The SRA presented on the EU-funded Talent4S3 project at the November Working Group meeting, strengthening shared understanding of regional talent development priorities. Members were subsequently invited to participate in the SRA Steering Group, and the South-West REP Programme Manager committed to active involvement in this work. These discussions highlighted clear synergies between lifelong learning initiatives and broader regional talent strategies, underscoring the value of aligning UNESCO Learning City principles with industry-led skills development to create a cohesive regional approach.

Throughout the year, the Tech Industry Alliance continued its focus on talent retention, advancing initiatives related to flexible work practices, diversity, and inclusion, while further strengthening collaboration between academia and enterprise. Partners also maintained close engagement with the i-Ed Hub, exploring opportunities to develop new postgraduate programmes designed to meet evolving industry requirements and support a responsive, future-ready workforce.

2025 Progress

By 2025, the SRA remained a key partner, actively advancing the Talent4S3 project. The stakeholder group met in March and September, with discussions narrowing to specific areas of talent retention and attraction aligned with *Smart Specialisation Strategy* priorities. Work continued on implementing recommendations from *Towards a Learning Region*, with efforts to integrate UNESCO Learning City initiatives into regional strategies. Knowledge sharing across stakeholders was prioritised, ensuring alignment between education providers, enterprise, and EU funded projects.

Conclusion

Action 6.4 has made significant progress in fostering a coordinated approach to lifelong learning and talent development in the region. Through strategic partnerships, EU projects, and collaborative forums, the region is building a comprehensive talent roadmap that supports workforce adaptability and economic resilience. Continued engagement with initiatives like Talent4S3 and UNESCO Learning City principles will be essential to sustaining progress and positioning the South-West as a leader in skills development and talent retention.

Action Status Key

Action complete: *The Steering Committee has deemed that these actions have been fully completed.*

Action discontinued: *The Steering Committee has agreed that these actions are no longer being pursued.*

Action partially complete: *The Steering Committee notes that this action is partially completed; work may continue to progress beyond the finalisation of current plans.*

Action could not be completed: *The Steering Committee has determined that this action could not be delivered as originally envisaged.*

This final progress report documents implementation to end of Q4 2025 and has been prepared and signed off by the South-West Regional Enterprise Plan Steering Committee

Action Status Table by Strategic Objectives

Strategic Objective 1: Enhance the enterprise eco-system across the region through innovation, entrepreneurship and digitalisation	Status	Completion Date
Action 1.1: Develop programmes to support undergraduate and graduate entrepreneurship for the South-West	Complete	Q4 2025
Action 1.2: Support the growing animation and visual effects sector in the region	Action complete	Q4 2025
Action 1.3: Increase the number of start-ups in technology with a focus on Cyber Security, AI and other emerging technologies through accelerator programmes	Action complete	Q4 2025
Action 1.4: Establish a South-West 'Thought Leaders' Forum' to identify enterprise opportunities in emerging technology including sustainable finance, cyber security, AI and fintech	Action partially complete	Q4 2025
Action 1.5: Explore the opportunities for the region through research and innovation in travel/tourism technology and aquaculture technology	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2025

Action 1.6: Develop a Southern Smart Region through partnership with regional stakeholders to implement recommendations of a Smart Region Maturity Framework	Action complete	Q4 2024
Action 1.7: Explore new niche market opportunities for regional enterprises and new start-ups in the Silver Economy	Action complete	Q4 2024
Action 1.8: Develop shared workspace to support graduate and student start-ups in the region	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2024
Action 1.9: Support the further development of the Scale Cork programme to support those who are in the indigenous MedTech, Agri-Tech, Digital and Connected Health and Life Sciences. This Action would include those who are part of the supply chain of these sectors	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2025
Action 1.10: Strengthen the enterprise ecosystem of the South-West Region through the regeneration of city, town and village centres creating an environment that is attractive for investment in enterprise, residential and community development	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2025
Action 1.11: Support Kerry Economic Development Growth Engine (Kerry EDGE)	Action complete	Q4 2024
Action 1.12: Support the development of the film/creative industries	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2025
Action 1.13: Explore the feasibility of developing an eHealth and Community Wellbeing Innovation District in the South-West region 'Project An Oilean'	Action discontinued	Q3 2022

Strategic Objective 2: Maximise the potential of digital enterprise and innovation hubs to support digitalisation, business growth, climate action and smart working	**Status**	**Completion Date**
Action 2.1: Strengthen the networks of digital hubs in the region and increase knowledge sharing among hubs	Action complete	Q4 2024
Action 2.2: Develop the research and evidence base of the benefit of hubs for job creation, climate action and digitalisation	Action complete	Q4 2024

Action 2.3: Mainstream the role of sustainability, climate action and digitalisation in hubs	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2025
Action 2.4: Foster and develop links between hubs in the South-West with international peers to support learning and knowledge exchange, collaboration, and investment	Action complete	Q4 2024
Action 2.5: Investment in shared programmes and training for Hub Managers and Staff [Amended]	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2025
Action 2.6: Support the hub ecosystem within the region	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2025
Action 2.7: Establish a new urban Centre of Excellence in the Northside of Cork City to support enterprise and job creation in the area whilst creating a positive impact both economically and socially	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2024
Action 2.8: Pilot the establishment of an inclusive co-working space which creates opportunities for persons with disabilities to participate equally in the new world of co-working/remote working	Action complete	Q2 2022

Strategic Objective 3: Support Cluster Organisations in driving the development and growth of enterprises	**Status**	**Completion Date**
Action 3.1: Support the development and management of best-in-class cluster organisations in the South-West through the provision of cluster training and expertise	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2024
Action 3.2: Establish a South-West cluster forum to bring together cluster managers across the region to support cross-cluster collaboration as well as supporting stakeholders from academia and government	Action complete	Q2 2022
Action 3.3: Develop a new cluster organisation for Technology Innovation in Life Science, Medical/Health Sciences and Advanced Technologies (TILMHS Cluster)	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2024
Action 3.4: Support the development and management of STEM South-West Cluster as an industry led cluster for the South-West region	Action complete	Q4 2024

Action 3.5: Progress the Establishment of a National Space Industry Cluster.	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2024

Strategic Objective 4: Bolster the South-West as a leader in sustainable Food Production and Agri-Tech through education, technology and innovation	Status	Completion Date
Action 4.1: Establish a Regional Innovation Incubator to develop technology solutions that will improve farm productivity enabling the production of more high-quality food while reducing the environmental impact	Action discontinued	Q2 2025
Action 4.2: Accelerate the adoption of Digitalisation in the AgriTech domain to include solutions for AgriTech companies and farmers	Action complete	Q4 2023
Action 4.3: Research and development of digitalisation and tech-based solutions	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q3 2024
Action 4.4: Skills development and training	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q2 2023
Action 4.5: Set up Virtual Testing Facility in addition to testbed partners	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2024
Action 4.6: Support the development of food enterprises in the region	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2024
Action 4.7: Further develop both full-time and part-time education, training and executive education flexible pathways for food, agri-food and seafood industry personnel from artisan food producers to multinational companies in the South-West Region. This includes both technical and food management initiatives at accredited and non-accredited levels	Action complete	Q4 2024
Action 4.8: Work with stakeholders to develop food tourism opportunities through the implementation of the Destination Experience Development Plans (DEDPs)	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2024

Strategic Objective 5: Embrace the opportunities of Climate Action in the Marine, Circular Bioeconomy, Tourism and Energy Sectors.	Status	Completion Date
Action 5.1: To increase the number of start-ups and SMEs with sustainable marine, circular bioeconomy and energy solutions through relevant accelerator programmes.	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2024
Action 5.2: Strengthen the links between the digital/ICT technology sector and the marine, agriculture, energy, forestry, tourism and industrial sectors to encourage collaboration between start-ups, SMEs and industry.	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2024
Action 5.3: Build greater collaboration in the energy sector and climate action sectors between enterprises in Cork and Kerry.	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2024
Action 5.4: Support the work of the CARO/enterprise opportunities initiative. Consideration could be given to linking with decarbonisation zones in local authority areas.	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2025
Action 5.5: Collaborate with the Mid-West Region to support economic development potential of the Shannon Estuary and surrounding region.	Action complete	Q4 2024
Action 5.6: Collaborate with the Mid-West Region to build regional research, education and training capacity for emerging renewable energy opportunities in the Shannon Estuary and surrounding region.	Action complete	Q4 2024
Action 5.7: Develop funding applications for Innovation Programmes and infrastructure facilities for Climate Action, Blue Economy, Circular Bioeconomy, Energy, Sustainable Port Activities, and Just Transition.	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2024
Action 5.8: Provide training and education supports to develop the necessary human capital, skills and competences required for the transition to a zero carbon and circular economy across a broad base of enterprise and industry within the South-West Region.	Action complete	Q4 2024

Action 5.9: Engage with stakeholders to scope out enterprise opportunities for coastal communities in the South-West arising from the post Brexit and Climate Transition	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2024
Action 5.10: Support the development of sustainable and green enterprise within the tourism economy.	Action complete	Q4 2024
Action 5.11: Examine the potential of establishing an industry led cluster to develop a policy on exploiting the potential of offshore renewable energy in the Cork Harbour region [New]	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2025

Strategic Objective 6: Ensure a strong pipeline of talent in the region, focusing on sustainable high-quality jobs.	**Status**	**Completion Date**
Action 6.1: Develop Innovation and Design Thinking Training and Development Programmes to prepare SMEs to supply the South-West FDI companies.	Action complete	Q4 2023
Action 6.2: Introduce supports for the services industry to achieve resource efficiency through targeted training initiatives.	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2025
Action 6.3: Provide training and education supports in the synthesis and continuous processing of Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs) to meet the demand for highly skilled postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers in the pharmaceutical industry in the South-West Region.	Action complete	Q4 2024
Action 6.4: Establish an agreed and coordinated approach to life-long learning, skills and talent development and retention across regional stakeholders.	Action partially complete - ongoing	Q4 2025

Appendices

Appendix 1 Membership of Regional Steering Committee

Chairperson of South-West Regional Enterprise Plan
Ms. Patricia Quane, Chairperson of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs for the BioPharma Industry and former Vice President and General Manager of Astellas
Programme Manager of South-West Regional Enterprise Plan
Mr. Patrick Reidy
Membership of the Committee
Cork City Council
Kerry County Council
Cork County Council
IDA Ireland
Enterprise Ireland
Munster Technological University
University College Cork
Education and Training Board
Cork Chamber
Tralee Chamber
South-West Regional Skills Forum
Údarás Na Gaeltachta
Southern Regional Assembly
Local Enterprise Office – Representative Head of LEO South-West
Private Sector – ORE South-West Chair

Appendix 2 Statistical Snapshot

Constituent counties	Cork and Kerry
South-West Population[1]	783,600
Persons aged 15 years and over in Employment[2]	420,800
ILO Participation Rate[3]	67.4%
ILO Unemployment Rate[4]	3.6%
Persons aged 15 years and over in Employment (Male)[5]	224,300
Persons aged 15 years and over in Employment (Female)[6]	196,500
Persons aged 15 years and over in Employment in Q1 2019	331,100
Persons aged 15 years and over in Employment from Q3 2025[7]	420,800
Actual Increase in Employment from Q1 2019 – Q3 2025	89,700
Employment Growth Rate between Q1 2019 – Q3 2025	27.1%
Persons aged 25 years and over on Live Register in the South-West region at 01/12/2025[8]	17,056
Irish-owned Companies - Agency Assisted Employment in the South-West, Jobs 2019[9]	27,466
Irish-owned Companies - Agency Assisted Employment in the South-West, Jobs 2025[10]	31,224
Changes between 2019-2025[11]	3,758
Foreign-owned Companies - Agency Assisted Employment in the South-West, Jobs 2019[12]	46,757
Foreign-owned Companies - Agency Assisted Employment in the South-West, Jobs 2025	54,937
Changes between 2019-2025	8,174

Endnotes

1 To note: The NUTS 3 classification was used to compile the statistical snapshot
2 CSO - Labour Force Survey - https://data.cso.ie/table/QLF08
3 CSO - Labour Force Survey - https://data.cso.ie/table/QLF08
4 CSO - Labour Force Survey - https://data.cso.ie/table/QLF08
5 CSO - Labour Force Survey - https://data.cso.ie/table/QLF01
6 CSO - Labour Force Survey - https://data.cso.ie/table/QLF01
7 CSO - Labour Force Survey - https://data.cso.ie/table/QLF01
8 CSO - Persons on Live Register - https://data.cso.ie/table/LRM17
9 DETE - Annual Employment Survey 2024 – companies under the remit of IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, Údarás na Gaeltachta
10 DETE - Annual Employment Survey 2024 – companies under the remit of IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, Údarás na Gaeltachta
11 DETE - Annual Employment Survey 2024 – companies under the remit of IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, Údarás na Gaeltachta
12 DETE - Annual Employment Survey 2024 – companies under the remit of IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, Údarás na Gaeltachta

An Roinn Fiontar, Turasóireachta agus Fostaíochta
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