



**Kildare County Council  
via website**

Date: 4<sup>th</sup> March 2022

Dear Sir/Madam,

**RE: Kildare Digital Strategic Plan**

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

County Kildare Chamber is the business organisation in Kildare, proactively working to identify and progress developments that are facilitative of economic and sustainable growth. Representing an employer base of 400 businesses and over 38,000 employees across the county, County Kildare Chamber is the largest business organisation in the mid-east region of Ireland.

Given the significant breadth and depth of our membership, and our representation on various bodies at local and national level, County Kildare Chamber constitutes the representative voice for business in Kildare, a particularly important role given the current economic circumstances in the county and the state.

## **2.0 SUBMISSION**

Digital inclusion, at its simplest, means that everybody can contribute to and benefit from the digital economy and society. County Kildare Chamber welcomes the chance to contribute to the discussion on a Digital Strategy for Kildare.

Irish society and its economy have gone through a turbulent two-year period, with the Covid-19 pandemic and it has transformed the way in which many of us conduct our lives and business. However, with restrictions now easing, stakeholders can begin to plan and future proof the trends and opportunities emerging. According to latest figures Ireland's €50 billion digital economy accounts for 13% of our GDP (IBEC Future Needs, Future Thinking 2021). The digital economy here is growing at a rate of 16% per year. This is more than 10 times the rate of growth in the economy as a whole and supports almost 95,000 jobs, directly and indirectly, with this figure continuing to increase.



Recent global trends associated with digital technology have led to a new era. It is a new revolution (the “fourth industrial revolution”). This new era is less about online shopping, online services, and social media, and more about everyday objects being connected to the internet (the “Internet of Things”), artificial intelligence, automation, and robotics and is fuelled by data, and a new wave of innovation across many sectors. Like the industrial revolutions of the past, it will provide us with an unprecedented opportunity to develop our economy, to improve quality of life, and to truly transform our services.

We are excited by this new innovative strategy led by Kildare County Council. The strengths of the economy in Kildare mean we are well-placed to embrace the “The Fourth Age”. Our digital sector is our fastest growing economic sector in Kildare with, businesses embracing digital transformation in every town and village. This is not a standalone tech cluster of digital businesses, but a diverse and overlapping sector with digital jobs underpinning many of Kildare’s other sectors.

With our strategic partner in Maynooth University, Kildare is home and has access to some of the best emerging talent in Ireland. We have a critical mass of expertise, passion and innovation in Kildare and the Chamber is working currently in attracting new emerging businesses to set up in the county. Most recently we have welcomed American Fruit and Flavors, Keurig Dr Pepper and Nikon to the county. We have a unique opportunity in Kildare to create new innovation districts. The investment recently in Leixlip Technology Park demonstrates that Kildare is primed to become the location of choice for potential business enterprise. Our upcoming County Development Plan must enable businesses and investors to set up with ease in Kildare with appropriate zoning in all towns in Kildare so we can attract new sectors to Kildare.

County Kildare Chamber sees this strategy as a blueprint to making Kildare the best County to connect and grow business. We believe that by supporting SMEs and their employees we can grow the digital economy even further. We can also support this by the increased use and co-operation between digital hubs and co-working spaces around the County, and by supporting and developing the smart towns initiative.



The benefits for digital transformation for our stakeholders are;

- their ability to grow and create new revenue streams,
- improved productivity and
- increased national and international competitiveness.

For this to be realistic however, citizens need to be digitally skilled and engaged. We also recognise and acknowledge that digital is having a disruptive influence across global economic markets. Many older smaller businesses do not have the resources to upskill their staff in digital training and support.

Increasing demands are now being put on companies, who need to know how to market, network, communicate and manage an online presence to grow their business. In some cases, major household brands have been consigned to the history books. This is a trend that is likely to continue and affect other sectors in similar ways, bringing with it new levels of task automation, and therefore impacting upon the future of work.

We now need to ensure that these opportunities are available to everybody within Kildare and we need to ensure that our businesses are prepared for the changes ahead. Access to digital technology can improve quality of life, financial inclusion, health and wellbeing, employability, and civic participation. However, not everybody in Kildare currently has access to it. Being digitally excluded can exacerbate social and economic exclusion and tackling the digital divide must be a key priority for Kildare and all stakeholders within the county.

Providing digital skills and technical support, increase access to devices and connections, and building trust and confidence with disengaged groups, are ways in which the Council can help these businesses. In this regard, the existing regional infrastructure should continue to be supported and developed. Libraries, ETBs, LEO's and community centres already engage groups and provide access to devices and upskilling.



We encourage Kildare County Council to look at other County Digital Strategies, such as Cork County's which includes commitments on digital skills training, one to one support sessions in libraries, supporting the rollout of broadband connection points and the development of a digital rights charter. It also commits to more services being available online.

In terms of digital investment, a town-centre first approach can also be supported through investing in high-speed broadband to support co-working hubs in urban centres which will enable the return of workers to urban spaces, supporting footfall and the local economies of these areas. The new innovation centres in Kildare, like MERITS and the Equine Hub in the Irish National Stud are just two examples of centres which are driving digital technology in the County.

Expedited delivery of the National Broadband Plan (NBP), the government's initiative to deliver high speed broadband services to all premises in Ireland, has never been more critical. The NBP is acknowledged as a key aspect of government strategy across a number of key areas including business, climate, agriculture, education, health, transport, tourism and sustainable growth. According to the NBP, approximately 300 Broadband Connections Points (BCPs) have been identified to be connected to high speed broadband this year, to assist communities quickly getting free public access to high speed broadband in advance of the main NBP deployment.

In Kildare itself, an update from NBP sees 14,849 residential and commercial premises will eventually benefit from high speed broadband, with mapping currently ongoing for much of the county and dates between January 2023 and December 2024 used in most cases. County Kildare Chamber believes this work must continue and be delivered on time to meet the growing demand for remote working.

We also understand that each local authority in the Country employs a broadband officer. To date, this role is primarily focused on facilitating the rollout of broadband infrastructure within the LA area. County Kildare Chamber believes this role could be reviewed or expanded into a digital development and strategic role, as the infrastructure is finalised and delivered over the coming years.



Finally, County Kildare Chamber understands that it is vital that we continue to foster a collective approach to digital and technological education and development for society, business, and our communities. It is only by working together, in collective partnership with all of our stakeholders that we reap the rewards.

Underpinning this vision we set out two principal aims which will define the outcomes we all want to achieve, and a number of key actions we commit to undertaking.

- Aim 1: We want businesses across all of our sectors to realise the potential that digital provides, to stimulate innovation, and to establish Kildare as the destination of choice for business
- Aim 2: We want Kildare to be recognised as the most pioneering and innovative county in Ireland and we want to apply this innovation to transforming our public services and to also enable our start up businesses to flourish

These will of course need the collective agreement of key stakeholders in Kildare of which County Kildare Chamber are willing to lead and engage with.

### **3.0 CONCLUSION**

We want to lead the strategy from the industry perspective, given our position as a key stakeholder and voice for world leading businesses in not just the IT, Pharmaceutical industry but also retail, and SME's. Our connections and membership of Chambers Ireland, EuroChambres and the International Chamber of Commerce also provide us with a unique perspective on similar strategies and projects rolled out across Europe and further afield.

We trust that the contents of this submission will be taken into consideration by Kildare County Council. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any queries regarding this submission.

Yours faithfully,

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