Regional Skills

Partnerships for Skills

Regional Skills Fora 2023 Insights

A Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science initiative bringing employers and education and training providers together.

An Roinn Breisoideachais agus Ardoideachais, Taighde, Nuálaíochta agus Eolaíochta
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

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Minister Foreword



Niall Collins TD,
Minister of State for Skills and Further Education

As a small island with an open economy, Ireland has some inherent strengths which present us with opportunities. Our greatest asset is our people, and the skills and knowledge that they bring to the world of work. The right people, with the right skills, are key to our success on an international stage.

The mega-trends impacting on the world of work are well documented – most notably sustainability, adapting to decarbonisation and digitalisation, the ever-increasing impact of AI on our lives and the world of work, deglobalisation, and demographic changes. The OECD Ireland Skills Strategy Report published in May 2023 spells out a roadmap for delivering on our objectives in order to address these challenges.

We have ambitious targets to achieve on life-long learning as we seek to narrow the gap to the global leaders. We have some excellent learning programmes available to our workforce, however this needs to be constantly refreshed in this era of unprecedented change to anticipate future skills needs. Furthermore, it remains an on-going challenge to incentivise and enable enterprises to make better use of their talent and skills.

It is crucial to equip our working population with the skills needed to meet these challenges.

This is achieved by firstly identifying the different needs, secondly by finding relevant solutions to ensure supply meets demand, and thirdly through making these accessible to those who need to upskill or reskill.

This can only be made possible through effective governance of the ecosystem, including a whole-of-Government and strategic approach. It is vital that national skills policy is aligned with activities on the ground, and this is where the value of the network of nine Regional Skills Fora comes sharply into focus.

Since their advent in 2016, the Regional Skills Fora have been a key component of the national skills architecture, continuing to make a significant contribution to ensuring that national policy gets implemented at regional level. This is achieved through fostering closer collaboration amongst regional stakeholders, and crucially by strengthening engagement between the education and training system and enterprise. The pivotal role which they play was well documented in the OECD Report as an example of international best practice.

This report illustrates many practical examples of this during 2023, and throughout the European Year of Skills. I particularly commend the breadth and wide range of activities in evidence, which are helping to advance our skills agenda. I would like to thank all involved within the Regional Skills Fora who have played their part in this – Forum members and Chairpersons, as well as the nine Regional Skills Forum Managers. Looking forward, I am confident that the Regional Skills Fora network will play a significant role by continuing their good work at regional level, and working in tandem with our newly restructured National Skills Council to help us deliver our national skills priorities this year and beyond.



Niall Collins TD,
Minister of State for Skills and Further Education

What We Do

Ireland has an advanced skills policy ecosystem, driven out under the broad framework of the National Skills Strategy. The primary skills architecture includes the National Skills Council and a network of nine Regional Skills Fora (RSF), which were established in 2016.

The Regional Skills Fora foster engagement and collaboration by providing an opportunity for employers and the education and training system to work together to meet the emerging skills needs of their regions. This involves identifying, interrogating and validating skills needs, while acting as an impartial broker to ensure that employers are linked to the right places to get responses they need. The Fora also provide valuable bottom-up information and insights to ensure that Ireland has a skills agenda, at national level, which is evidence-informed and serves its purpose for people across the country.

The primary objectives of the Regional Skills Fora are to provide:

- A single contact point in each region to help employers connect with the range of services and supports available across the education and training ecosystem;
- More robust labour market information and analysis of employer needs to inform national skills policy and new programme development;
- Greater collaboration and utilisation of resources across the education and training system and enhancement of progression routes for learners;
- A structure for employers to become more involved in promoting employment roles and opportunities for career progression in their sectors.



9 Regional Skills Fora



Who We Are

Membership

Each Regional Skills Forum has a voluntary chair and a full-time manager, responsible for delivering on their strategic priorities.

Membership of each Forum is comprised of the following stakeholders at regional level:

- Employers;
- Education and training providers e.g. Third level institutions, ETB's, Skillnet Ireland networks;
- Enterprise Support Agencies e.g. IDA, Enterprise Ireland, LEO's, IBEC, Chambers of Commerce, ISME;
- Government bodies e.g. Local authorities, Regional Enterprise Programmes, Dept. of Employment Activation & Social Protection.

Structure

Regional Skills Fora are responsible for and have the flexibility to set their strategic priorities based on regional needs. This includes working closely with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to ensure alignment with the overarching objectives of national skills policy. Each Forum typically meets on average four times per annum to agree their strategic objectives and annual plans, and monitor and review progress. In addition to the main Forum membership, the Regional Skills Fora also operate a structure of industry sub-groups or clusters - working groups involving stakeholders addressing specialist or niche areas, mostly sectoral but which can also be of a thematic nature. Some of these originated within and are managed by the Regional Skills Fora, while others are led by stakeholder partners and where the Regional Skills Fora play an active role in shaping or leading the regional skills agenda.

The following pages detail some examples of these sub-groups in action, however here is an overview of some of the main sectors and themes across the nine Fora.

Sectoral:

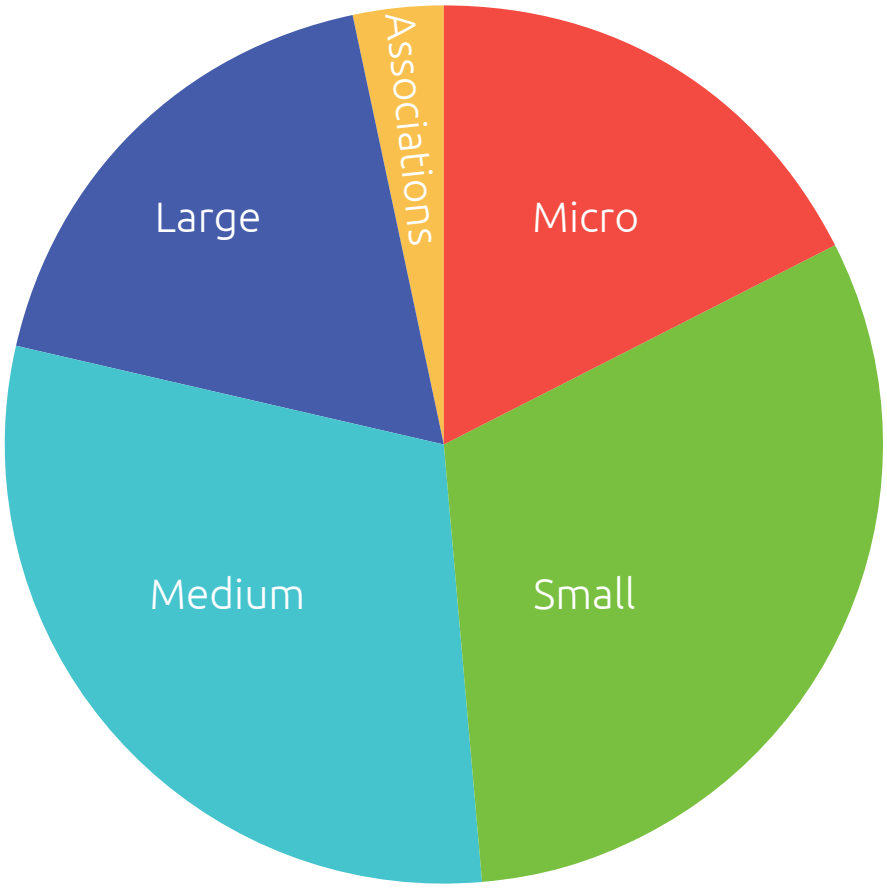
- Agriculture/ Horticulture / Forestry
- Aviation
- Biopharma
- Construction
- Creative industries
- Digital / ICT e.g. cyber, fintech
- Engineering
- Film / Screen
- Financial Services
- Food & drink
- Green Skills / Sustainability
- Hospitality / Tourism
- Life Sciences
- Logistics & Supply chain
- Manufacturing
- Retail / Wholesale

Cross-Sectoral / Thematic:

- Sales / Customer excellence
- Leadership
- Flexible Learning e.g. Microcredentials, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)
- Remote Working
- Lifelong Learning / Transversal Skills

Engagement Outcomes

Number and Size of Companies



Micro 277

Small 487

Medium 466

Large 283

Associations 51

Total 1564

This shows the breakdown of company sizes with which the RSFs engage, and underlines the variances, ranging from micro enterprises through to large companies, including multi-nationals. A notable feature is that almost half the enterprises are small or micro, a cohort which typically require more L&D support & signposting than their larger counterparts, who are mostly resourced with HRD staff.

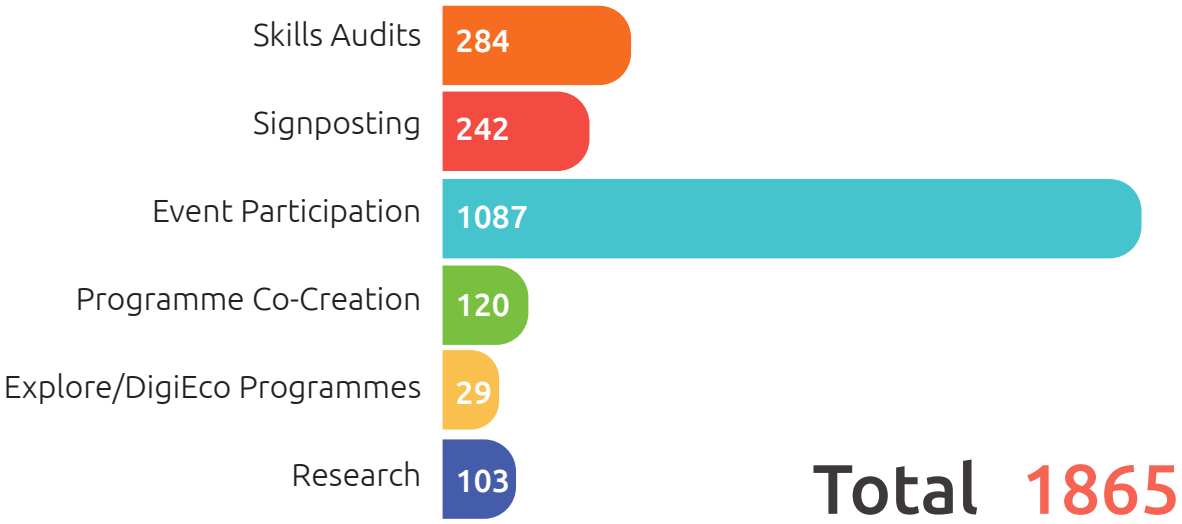
Sectoral Engagement Breakdown



Top 5 Sectors of Engagement

- Manufacturing
- ICT
- Construction
- Accommodation and Food Service Activities
- Professional, Scientific & Technical

Type of Engagement



Skills Audits –

Assessments performed by RSF Managers to identify, interrogate and validate skills and talent needs within an individual enterprise, with a view to finding relevant solutions to fill those gaps.

Signposting –

A core function of RSFs is to provide guidance for client companies towards the most suitable education, training, and talent provision supports available to address their specific needs.

Event Participation –

Engagement with enterprises attending RSF meetings, networking events and seminars. This includes events organised directly by RSFs, either individually or collaboration projects between one or more RSFs e.g. How to Grow Local Talent, Co. Tipperary (South-East & Mid-West RSFs). It also includes supporting events run by RSF stakeholder partners or other Government Departments e.g. in 2023 all nine RSFs promoted and attended the Building Better Business Roadshows organised by the Dept. of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

Programme Co-Creation –

Enterprise involvement in the development of new flexible learning programmes. This can involve a wide range of courses, with extensive RSF involvement in the development of new apprenticeships, traineeships, micro-credentials and micro-qualifications with regional enterprises and further and higher education and training providers.

Explore/DigiEco Programmes –

Enrolments in upskilling programmes piloted by the Regional Skills Fora teaching basic digital skills and awareness of environmental practices to achieve a greener workplace. These successful pilots were completed in 2023 and have been mainstreamed into further education provision.

Research –

Collaboration and participation in RSF skills & talent surveys, and/or involvement with industry and educational research programmes which seek to identify and validate skills gaps, with recommendations for addressing these through the development of new solutions.

Activity Highlights

Most of the activities undertaken by a Regional Skills Forum have a regional dimension by nature, with each having their own areas of strength and relative priorities which are largely dictated by the industry profile within each region. There follows a selection of highlights from within each RSF to illustrate the diversity of activity.

Activity Highlights

This section provides a selection of highlights across all nine Regional Skills Fora to demonstrate the range of activities throughout 2023.

1. Cross-Regional Collaboration

While most of the activities have a specific regional dimension confined to within each Forum, a key feature of the Regional Skills Fora is the collaboration of activities to share best practice and create synergies across different Regions. This can happen in a variation of ways, including some examples as highlighted here.

Apprenticeship Expo 2023

The promotion of Apprenticeships as a career pathway is a key area of focus for all Regional Skills Fora, ranging from active involvement in the development of new apprenticeships to promotional activity and signposting employers to potential solutions.

In 2023, Mid-East RSF continued their association with and support for Meath Chambers on the Meath Apprenticeship Expo 2023, which saw a number of providers of apprenticeships and host companies showcasing their different opportunities to school-leavers and prospective apprentices.

Through information-sharing amongst the RSF Managers, both Dublin and the North-East RSF joined forces to promote this event to their own target group, with Meath being an ideal location for many exhibitors and visitors from the neighbouring counties of Dublin, Louth, Cavan & Monaghan. This pooling of resources created synergies for all involved, and Meath Chambers were nominated for an award by Chambers Ireland for their Apprenticeship Expo 2023 under the category of Best Partnership for Business.



Mid-East RSF Manager Siobhan Keogh and North-East RSF Manager Ray Murphy supporting the nomination of Meath Apprenticeship Expo at the Chambers Awards in 2023, along with Meath Chambers CEO Paula McCaul, Meath Chambers colleagues and President, Meath County Council and Louth Meath ETB

Digital Manufacturing Ireland

One of the key national skills priorities is the digitisation agenda. The challenges faced by Irish enterprise, especially SMEs, are well documented in this area as they struggle to adapt to technological change and maintain competitiveness. This area has been a strategic priority for the RSFs, and as part of their drive to help regional enterprises address barriers, they recently started collaborating with Digital Manufacturing Ireland.

Established by the IDA and previously known as the Advanced Manufacturing Centre, Digital Manufacturing Ireland (DMI) is an industry-led international organisation that enables Irish based manufacturers to implement digital transformation through accessing, adopting and accelerate new digital technologies which solve real world challenges and drives their future competitiveness.

With a state-of-the-art centre in Limerick, DMI provides the framework, tools and expertise to support organisations to make their digital step-change and build an enterprise transformation strategy. Following initial engagement with the Mid-West RSF, this quickly led to two very successful site visits by regional manufacturing SMEs from the Mid-West and West Regions, the latter organised through its Manufacturing Excellence industry-sub-group. On foot of this and the information sharing across the RSFs, a visit to the DMI facility was arranged and attended by all RSF Managers and the Regional Skills Co-ordinator in April 2023. This was followed by a subsequent visit in July, and plans were laid for a further visit to broaden the reach, including manufacturing companies from the Midlands region.



Representatives from manufacturing SMEs attending a digital transformation workshop at Digital Manufacturing Ireland organised by the Mid-West Regional Skills Forum in May 2023

LINC Engineering Network

Collaboration with local stakeholders is a key activity for RSFs. However many stakeholder organisations are not confined to one single region and therefore straddle more than one RSF. One such example is LINC, a member-led Engineering cluster located in East/ West Limerick and North Cork, which came together in 2014 to discuss ways to increase competitive advantage for the region.

LINC acts as an exchange forum where members can build links, share experiences and undertake joint commercial activity. The executive steering committee is represented by local Government and support agencies, including the two adjoining South-West and Mid-West RSFs. Their role is to provide linkages and knowledge between Government agencies and member companies to ensure clear communication of supports available to members.

As part of this, in November 2023 the South-West and Mid-West RSFs partnered to host an Attracting & Retaining Talent Expert Insights Round-Table in Charleville, in collaboration with North Cork LEO & LINC Engineering Cluster. The Round-Table, chaired by the South-West RSF Chairperson, Patrick Buckley of EPS Group, focused on supporting micro, small and medium sized STEM related companies in developing impactful talent recruitment & retention plans. It also included expert insights and an overview of Government funded recruitment and skills development supports to help with this process.



South-West RSF Chairperson Patrick Buckley facilitating the LINC Engineering Network Round-Table event in Charleville, Co. Cork in November 2023

2.Alignment with Sectoral Policy Initiatives

A key role of the Regional Skills Fora is to ensure that regional activities are aligned with national skills policy and the strategic priorities of Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. As part of this process, the RSF Managers act as Focal Points on a range of national initiatives – most often serving on committees or working parties who have a remit relevant to national skills policy.

The role of RSF Managers as a Focal Point is to keep a watching brief, feed back any significant developments to their peers and the Department where required, and contribute a coordinated skills perspective on behalf of the Department to the relevant stakeholders as appropriate.

Many of these are sectoral by nature, and the following are some of the main sectoral Focal Points in which the Regional Skills Fora were actively engaged during 2023.

Offshore Wind

A cross-government Offshore Wind Delivery Taskforce was established in 2022 by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications as a way of co-ordinating activities in this sector. There are a number of Workstreams covering different aspects of offshore wind energy development, and the Dept. of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science are co-leading on Workstream 8 – Skills and Workforce.

This Workstream has a number of objectives aimed at better understanding the skills and workforce requirements of offshore wind, both in the short and long-term. Linked to this is the establishment of an Expert Advisory Group in 2023, on which two RSF Managers are represented. Agreed actions included the development of a framework and working sub groups which would focus on future work packages. An early output was the publication in early 2024 of a report on "Ireland's Offshore Wind Skills and Talent Needs", which highlighted the skills challenges and opportunities if Ireland is to realise the potential of this vital sector.

Logistics & Supply Chain

The Logistics and Supply Chain Skills Group (LSCSG) provides a forum for collaboration and practical action to support the promotion of careers, skills development and sustainable employment in these sectors. The LSCSG membership includes cross department, industry and academia representatives. including the Regional Skills Fora, and is chaired by the Department of Transport. The core objectives include increasing the profile of the sector and the varied career pathways and occupational roles based on skill levels while also ensuring a response to changing skill needs in terms of new programme development.

Actions to date from LSCSG include the publication of a comprehensive careers in logistics and supply chain booklet to help those interested in working in the sector and school guidance counsellors navigate the various pathways in terms of upskilling and career progression. 2023 also witnessed the country's first Logistics and Supply Chain Skills Week. Between 27th March and 1st April a series of nationwide events were held both in person and online to increase awareness of the sector and its vital contribution to Ireland's economy. Many of these events were directly supported by the Regional Skills Fora. Owing to its success, the project was repeated with another Skills Week held in Q1 2024.

Biopharma

In 2022 the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) commenced a study on Future Skills Needs in the Biopharmachem Sector. The objective of the report is to identify the likely skills needs and skills gaps that will arise in the BioPharma sector in Ireland over the next five years, by identifying the skills and competencies needed by the sector and forecasting the likely supply and demand, while also make recommendations aimed at filling the gaps. Intensive work continued on this project in 2023 with one of the RSF Managers centrally involved in providing regional perspectives for same. The final report is due for publication in early 2024, and will include a number of recommendations for implementation to fulfil the potential of this high-tech sector of the economy.

3. Regional Highlights

The next section provides a selection of highlights from within each of the nine Regional Skills Fora during 2023.

ENFUSE - bringing together students, businesses and social enterprises

Regional Skills DUBLIN
Partnerships for Skills

ENFUSE
Inspiring & Fusing - Enterprises & Students

ENFUSE is a pilot and award winning project led by Dublin City Council (DCC) / Local Enterprise Office - Dublin City (LEO). It is supported by and operated in alignment with the Dublin Regional Skills Forum (DRSF), Dublin Place Brand, Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan (REP), Enterprise Ireland (EI), GradStart, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

ENFUSE matches local enterprises and social enterprises with teams of Master's university / college students embedded as part of their course. The students help provide insights, propose solutions and ultimately present a bespoke and tangible plan that sets out how the enterprise can innovate, address challenges and develop opportunities for implementation.

The mission of ENFUSE is to:

- Support local enterprises by providing bespoke plans to innovate, address challenges and develop opportunities
- Provide Masters' students with real-world consultancy and enterprise skills experience
- Enhance the local innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem regionally/nationally

In its 5th Year, the 2023 iteration saw increased collaboration with Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin), Dublin City University (DCU), National College of Ireland (NCI), University College Dublin (UCD) and Trinity College Dublin (TCD), all of whom are partners of DRSF playing an integral role in collaboration at higher education level. Another feature of the programme is the ENFUSE Finals, where shortlisted student teams represent their university and compete by pitching to a panel of judges on the plan they created for their assigned enterprise.

10 student teams competed at the 2023 ENFUSE Finals by pitching to expert industry judges representing DCC, DRSF, EI, REP & business. This was the culmination of the 2023 ENFUSE programme which involved 301 Masters' students that supported 57 local enterprises and social enterprises. The top three teams won specialist mentoring and training supports from the Local Enterprise Office and supports from the Dublin Regional Skills Forum for their allocated enterprises, alongside prizes from Dublin Place Brand.

DCU was announced as the 2023 winner. The winning pitch involved the students conducting research and analysis regarding POTA Cafe. The team formed insights, proposed solutions and ultimately presented a tangible plan setting out how POTA could expand and develop new market opportunities. Second place was awarded to UCD with XO Tile, and third place was TU Dublin with Crann.

Speaking on the night of awards, Minister of State for Trade Promotion, Digital and Company Regulation, Dara Calleary TD said:

"Congratulations to all involved in this year's ENFUSE finals. Success is often predicated on innovation and collaboration. The ENFUSE programme enables just that, bringing together students, businesses and social enterprises, and local stakeholders to better understand the challenges and fosters greater collaboration to develop solutions. As part of ENFUSE, businesses and social enterprises benefit from access to research and new ideas, students benefit from an enhanced skills and learning experience and the ecosystem benefits through improved networking, collaboration and knowledge exchange."



Testimonials from participant enterprises:

> *'With ingenuity, creativity, and flair, the fantastic team of students devised an intelligent marketing campaign that translates a complex topic into something that will really resonate with our target. Taking part in ENFUSE helped us think outside the box, provided us with a framework for how to translate theory into publicity, and shaped our marketing for the years to come.'*
> *Steve O'Reilly –*
> *The Rediscovery Centre*

> *'The team of students we worked with delved into the background of our company to try and further understand our future objectives. The final document we received helped us to achieve a more intensive expansion model and also gave us a fresh perspective on certain aspects of our business, ENFUSE was an excellent learning experience for us.'*
> *Jessica Conlon, Twigs*

ENFUSE was selected as a National Winner in the European Commission's European Enterprise Promotion Awards (EEPA) 2022 under Category 3, which recognises innovative projects and approaches that improve the business environment and support the digital transition. In addition, ENFUSE was shortlisted as an overall EEPA European finalist project. There is a vision to emulate this approach outside of the Dublin Region on account of its continued success. In 2024, there have already been over 160 applications from businesses nationally.

Wicklow Skills Strategy - 'Screen Skills to Green Skills'

Regional Skills MID EAST Partnerships for Skills

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science, Simon Harris TD announced the development of a Wicklow Skills Strategy at the 'Screen Skills to Green Skills' launch event hosted by Wicklow County Council in June 2022.

The overall aim of the Wicklow Skills Strategy is to develop a robust strategy to ensure that there will be an adequate supply of sufficiently skilled labour available in County Wicklow over the coming years to maximise potential growth in key areas.

Wicklow County Council has identified the following sectors as key areas of economic growth in the county:

- Screen and Content Creation
- Renewable Energies and Maritime Industries
- Agri Food and Forestry
- Tourism and Hospitality



'Screen Skills to Green Skills' launch event hosted by Wicklow County Council

These and other sectors will require a supply of skilled labour to adequately meet the future needs of employers. Following the 'Screen Skills to Green Skills' event, a Wicklow Skills Task Force was established to support the development of the Wicklow Skills Strategy. The Task Force is compiled of representatives from Mid-East Regional Skills Forum (MERSF), Kildare and Wicklow Education Training Board (KWETB), South-East Technological University (SETU), Wicklow County Council, Local Enterprise Office (LEO), Enterprise Ireland, National Maritime College of Ireland and industry representatives from the food, film and renewable energy sectors.

In 2023, KPMG Future Analytics were commissioned to conduct a skills and talent audit and supporting strategy for the county. Draft recommendations, which were informed by the stakeholder engagement, were circulated to the Wicklow Skills Task Force for their consideration and input. These have the following aims:

- Build on strengths of County Wicklow
- Champion engagement, partnership and collaboration with all stakeholders
- Explore emerging opportunities for skills and job creation
- Increase training at all levels - from micro-credentials, apprenticeships, work-based training, through to further and higher education
- Target training to meet current and future business needs
- Encourage partnerships to advance new training facilities.



Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris TD, at the 'Screen Skills to Green Skills' launch event

The Mid-East Regional Skills Forum (MERSF) support the Wicklow Skills Strategy through active collaboration and cooperation between all stakeholders in the skills and training development of potential employees for the identified key sectors in the county - screen and content creation, renewable energies and maritime industries, agri-food and forestry, and food and hospitality. The CEO of Wicklow County Council, Ms Emer O'Gorman, presented to the MERSF Q4 Forum meeting as part of the process of further strengthening the engagement and commitment levels of members and key stakeholders.

MERSF have been identified as a key supporting partner in the recommendations under three themes for each sector:

Theme 1: Strategic and Collaborative Approaches for Innovation and Skills Development

Theme 2: Supporting Existing and Attracting New Creative Businesses in Wicklow

Theme 3: Promotion of Career Pathways and Work Experience Opportunities.

The development of the Wicklow Skills Strategy will continue in early 2024 and the next steps include:

- Agreement of final recommendations, identification of lead organisation and supports, timeframe and KPIs
- Sign off on Skills Strategy by Wicklow Skills Taskforce and launch of Strategy
- Establishment of working groups to ensure implementation of recommendations and exploration of options for funding.

> *"It's wonderful to see that a skills strategy which was successfully executed in Fingal County Council is now being developed and implemented in Wicklow and that the learnings and experiences of Wicklow County Council, and indeed the Mid-East Regional Skills Forum, can be applied in the future as similar strategies are developed in other counties."*
> *John Cunningham, Epicom Ireland Ltd. (Mid-East RSF Chairperson)*

From Arts to Industry



Digital Midwest members who have designed a new 'Arts to Industry' course in partnership with University of Limerick

Digital Midwest is an industry-led network of ICT companies managed by the Mid-West RSF (MWRSF) which collaborates with education and training providers in addressing current and future skill needs. The network has spearheaded a number of successful regional initiatives, including the 'Women in Coding' programme as part of an ongoing effort to identify and create new talent pipelines.

In today's world of business, employers are looking for core skills in areas such as critical thinking, emotional intelligence, team working, communication and problem-solving abilities. With an ever-tightening labour market and the competition for new talent increasing, Digital Midwest has identified the potential of Arts graduates to consider careers with tech companies.

In collaboration with the Humanities faculty in the University of Limerick, a new post-graduate Diploma entitled 'Arts to Industry' is being designed following a series of facilitated round-table discussions on the competencies and learning outcomes required to enable Arts graduates to transition into industry roles. Those learners who undertake the Diploma will also have the opportunity to undertake an internship with a nominated employer.

> *"There are a range of skills required to work in ICT applicable to graduates from non-engineering backgrounds, and the 'Arts to Industry' courses will help inform and offer these graduates the opportunity of careers in tech that heretofore they may not have considered'.*
>
> *Alan Kenny, General Motors*

With hundreds of Arts graduates annually, many are unaware of the career pathways on offer to work within tech companies, as distinct to working in more technical specific roles. Transversal skills are the primary requirement from employers, with all additional skills developed on the job and through further upskilling.

According to Alan Kenny, General Motors (GM) Site Lead: "Access to talent is vital to achieve our growth plans, both in GM and in supporting the further development of the ICT sector in the region. This pilot initiative to create short courses in partnership with the University of Limerick and facilitated by the Mid-West Regional Skills Forum will offer Arts graduates the opportunity to consider a career with tech companies, albeit not necessarily in tech roles".

The collaboration to date has seen the launch of the 'Professional Diploma in Transversal Skills' in 2023. The proposed new 'Arts to Industry' post-graduate Diploma will provide learners with a deeper understanding in areas such as data analytics, project management and technical writing. Once launched, it will help strengthen links not just between regional tech companies and Arts graduates, but all graduates from within the Humanities faculty including Law, Languages and Social sciences.

The war for new talent will continue. Therefore, establishing and strengthening links between industry and education providers will ensure that we can best meet the changing skill needs of employers by designing and delivering bespoke courses as required.

Realising the Potential for the Midlands as a Tech Hub

Regional Skills MIDLANDS Partnerships for Skills

One of the primary objectives of the Regional Skills Fora is the identification and interrogation of current & future skills needs. This has always been a sustained priority focus for the Midlands Regional Skills Forum (MRSF), and in recent years conducting formal research has been utilised with great success. December 2022 saw the publication of the Midlands Advanced Manufacturing Survey, and 2024 will see the culmination of a survey on the regional food & drink sector. This provides objective data on skills and talent needs and also reveals subjective data in relation to strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOTs) as envisaged by enterprise in the region.

In keeping with national policy imperatives and the digital mega-trend, one of the strategic priorities for the MRSF in 2023 was to address the needs of the regional ICT sector. Centrally located, as Ireland's most connected region, the Midlands has a thriving ICT sector attracting global talent to the heart of Ireland as an increasingly important technology hub.

A Midlands ICT Cluster Skills Report was commissioned, with a task orientation looking at the future potential for the Midlands as a tech hub, and identifying what skills its population needs to focus on in order to achieve this. A survey methodology was undertaken on behalf of the Midlands ICT Cluster by its Skills & Talent Working Group and the MRSF. The survey identified critical vacancies, key skills needs, and other related SWOTs relevant to the sector in the region.

Launched in October 2023, some of the key findings from the Report were:

- 70% of respondents had current critical vacancies.
- Respondent companies expect to create up to 800 jobs over the next three years.
- Opportunities exist in Cloud Computing, Software Development, Data Analytics, AI and Machine Learning, Cyber Security, Networking, IT Service Management, and Project Management.



Pictured at the launch of the Midlands ICT Cluster Skills Survey report were (l to r): Eileen O'Meara Hayes, Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan; Dr. Mary Giblin, Technological University of the Shannon; John Costello, Midlands Regional Skills Forum; Emmet Kavanagh, Midlands Ireland; Sinéad Pillion, Ericsson Athlone & Chair of the Midlands ICT Cluster; Dr. Anne Cusack, Chair of the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan; Niall O'Somachain, Intertrade Ireland; Sarah Morgan, Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan; Orla Martin, Local Enterprise Office Offaly; Carole Green, IDA Ireland; Dr. Enda Fallon, Technological University of the Shannon.

> *Sinéad Pillion, head of Operations for Ericsson and industry chair of the Midlands ICT Cluster Steering Committee, said: "The launch of the Midlands ICT Cluster Skills Survey highlights the genuine opportunities that exist supporting the already strong ICT ecosystem in the region."*

Report recommendations were focused on addressing the needs of employers, with a keen eye towards the urgency to create talent pipelines which are relevant and sustainable. The survey team made several recommendations including the call for co-creation of bespoke industry-led courses, advocation of collaboration between educators and industry as particularly valuable for R&D, and highlighted Apprenticeships as an efficient and effective way to address skills gaps.

The full Midlands ICT Cluster Skills Survey Report 2023 can be viewed at:
https://www.midlandsireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Midlands-ICT-Cluster-Skills-Survey-2023.pdf

This research activity and the Report publication have initiated tremendous feedback and inspired co-ordinated action plans across the region in supporting ICT education, training, and skills development programmes. Midlands Regional Skills Forum Manager John Costello noted: "The ICT survey and subsequent action plans represent a strong endorsement of how such collaborative research can inspire dedicated work being carried out by key stakeholders across the region, in a focused effort to enhance the level of skills and talent available to employers. This ranges from enterprise input towards shaping schools programmes, to the promotion of ICT career pathways, and the further development of innovative, inclusive, and flexible third level qualifications."

Boost Skills, Boost Business Event

One of the key objectives of the North-East Regional Skills Forum (NERSF) is awareness-building among local businesses of the range of training, upskilling, reskilling and staff development opportunities available through its collaborative partners. Working in partnership with Louth Meath Education and Training Board (LMETB), it was agreed to host an event to highlight the FET Skills to Advance initiative, along with highlighting the Life Long Learning opportunities and business supports available to employers and employees.

The Skills to Advance initiative is targeted at employed people and employers in Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) to assist with upskilling and reskilling of the workforce. All courses are accredited at QQI Level 5 or 6 and are 70% -100% Government funded. Courses are flexible to fit around business hours and work schedules and are provided either in-person, online or blended. Key focus areas of training included Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Sustainability and Digital Skills.

On Apr 21st 2023 the NERSF and LMETB held a collaborative event called "Boost Skills, Boost Business" in the Ardee Parochial Hall. The purpose of the event was to bring all those key business support stakeholders, Government agencies and training and education providers in the Louth Meath region under one roof.

Ardee Parochial Hall was chosen due to its central location just off the N2 and the M1 motorway, as the NERSF receives repeated feedback from employers that they are time poor and find it very difficult to find time to attend business support events and networking opportunities. To overcome this issue, NESRF and LMETB decided to hold an early morning local breakfast event, travelling to the employers and hosting the event in proximity to their businesses. The first of these was held in the preceding year in 2022 in Carlingford, north Co. Louth. Although Carlingford is a small rural location, it was a successful pilot event.

With this event in Ardee, the aim was to target the business community located in central Louth, while attracting the bordering business community in east Meath. Businesses from north Louth and south Louth were also within east commuting distance, as were businesses from the wider North-East region who may be traveling on the N2 or M1. To widen the appeal for employers, it was decided to include information on employer funding supports, enterprise resources and employment supports by inviting the key stakeholders in our region to partake in the event.

Through extensive marketing activities and promotion in local newspapers and radio, along with Eventbrite invites, there were over 20 key stakeholder stands showcasing all the employer supports available in the region. Over 50 sole traders and companies attended the event, along with numerous individual walk-ins, and feedback from the event was very positive on the vast range of supports available and the information on same.





Patrick Mulligan, Owner of Mulligan Transport commented 'a great event for small business with so much information on supports available for business under one roof in a central location'

Eddie Ferguson, CEO Americold also remarked 'fantastic to see the array of training and educational opportunities available for employers and their staff'.



Enhancing Strategic Partnerships in the North West Region

Regional Skills North West is dedicated to fostering collaboration with key stakeholders to advance the enterprise agenda in the region. Given the North-West's position as a border region, fostering strong ties with Northern Ireland is vital to its strategic objectives.
In February 2018 the North West Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP), in partnership with the tertiary education providers of the North West City Region, announced a new agreement in education, training and innovation to establish the now titled North West Tertiary Education Cluster. The NWSGP is led by Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council. It is a unique interjurisdictional structure endorsed by both Governments through the North-South Ministerial Council.

Since its establishment, the North West Tertiary Education Cluster (NWTEC) has brought together the four education partners in the North West City Region; namely Atlantic Technological University, Ulster University, North West Regional College and Donegal Education and Training Board. The aim of the cluster is to provide pathways and progression routes for students on a cross-border basis, and to work with industry to ensure greater economic prosperity and high value jobs for the region.

Regional Skills North West actively supports the NWTEC by engaging in projects geared towards facilitating pathways for students, including those from non-traditional backgrounds, to advance from further education and training to higher education, with a special emphasis on cross-border co-operation. This initiative aligns with the strategic goals of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science, aiming to develop diverse and progressive educational pathways for learners across further and higher education sectors.

An important initiative of NWTEC was the establishment in February 2021 of the Smart Industry Board (SIB) to give a strong voice to industry in the region, while ensuring that it is not duplicating but is adding to the work of all stakeholders on both sides of the border. SIB complements the work of existing regional groups, including Derry City and Strabane District Council's Education and Skills Delivery Partnership, and the three working groups under the skills partnership: Digital & Creative Technologies, Advanced Manufacturing & Engineering, and Hospitality & Tourism.

The Smart Industry Board operates as a strategic enabler for the North West Tertiary Education Cluster, driving forward its strategic objectives in alignment with its adopted terms of reference. Regional Skills North West actively participates in the SIB alongside education partners, local authorities, and other stakeholders, representing enterprises across the region's key sectors, thus fostering a collaborative ecosystem geared towards sustainable growth and development.



Members of the North West Tertiary Education Cluster pictured at the re-signing of the MoU during the North West Strategic Growth Partnership Meeting in November 2023

> *"It is imperative that we give a strong voice to industry in the region and working in collaboration with key stakeholders, we are responsive to emerging industry needs, providing a talent pool that gives confidence to our existing businesses and continues to attract investment from FDIs bringing high value jobs to our region. The ongoing collaboration with the Regional Skills Forum is central to this engagement and we value the contribution, insight and oversight given by the Regional Skills Forum and other stakeholders as we continue to support the economic development of the North West".*
>
> *Paul Hannigan, Head of College, ATU Donegal*

High Purity Pipe Fitting & Welding - Filling a Niche Skills Gap

Regional Skills SOUTH EAST Partnerships for Skills

The presence of leading multi-national players and global brands in sectors such as life sciences, pharmaceutical, semi-conductor and data centres amongst others has earned Ireland a reputation for operational and innovation excellence world-wide. Many indigenous engineering companies have grown through servicing these multinationals, meaning Ireland has also built an excellent reputation for specialist mechanical and electrical engineering capabilities. This has been achieved through servicing their clients' needs both domestically and also internationally as their capabilities and ambition have grown.

As technologies evolve, these companies need to upskill and achieve the standards set by their clients. One such company, Suir Engineering based in Waterford, was experiencing difficulties with high purity pipework installation at Intel's new Fab34 facility at Leixlip, Co. Kildare. It became evident that this issue was also was arising with other subcontractors at the Intel site and elsewhere. Hence an approach was made to the South-East Regional Skills Forum for a solution.

In June 2022 South-East RSF convened a meeting to interrogate the issue with the relevant parties i.e. Intel, DPG Group (mechanical & electrical engineering consultants to Intel) and Suir Engineering. This identified a growing gap between the quality of workmanship in high purity pipe fitting and welding and the raised industry standards for same, which was leading to significant reworking at substantial cost.

The core issue identified was that prospective staff engaging in high purity pipefitting and welding are mainly fitters and plumbers, and many welders lack the skills or training in high purity welding. This was compounded by a lack of accredited specialist training in high purity pipework fitting and welding in Ireland. The mechanical and electrical contractors were concerned that this skills mismatch was translating into insufficient skilled personnel for projects in Ireland and abroad.

Having validated the problem, the next urgent step was to look at implementing a solution. Through their well-established network of contacts, a further meeting was set up by South-East RSF with relevant experts in the field and education providers, including the 'Engineering the South East' (ESE) cluster and Waterford and Wexford ETB.

Having identified the core competencies and skills required for the role, a detailed skills and competencies framework was developed and compiled by the South-East Regional Skills Forum. A Steering Group was formed, with meetings held in the Construction Industry Federation (CIF) Dublin. Membership was widened to include Intel, Suir Engineering, Mercury Engineering, Jones Engineering, Designer Group, Weltech Engineering, Leo Lynch Engineering, Tim Kelly Group, Lynskey Engineering and others.

Educational providers were represented by Waterford and Wexford ETB and Donegal ETB, who jointly developed and presented a draft curriculum to the Steering Group. Following final consultations, the curriculum was accepted by the enterprise representatives, with the outcome being a new 8-week programme which is being submitted to QQI and will comprise two 10 credit micro-qualifications at Level 6. A pilot programme is planned for delivery in early 2024, and the new curriculum will also serve to inform and update the current Pipefitting Apprenticeship when it is next reviewed.





"We have been delighted with the partnership approach facilitated by the South-East Regional Skills Forum, whereby industry and the Waterford and Wexford ETB and Donegal ETB were able to work together to develop a curriculum and delivery model that exactly meets our needs."
Paul Cremmins, Suir Engineering

Addressing a Built Environment Labour Market Skills Need



South-West RSF Building Engineering Services Industry & MTU Round-Table - February 2023

The challenges in sourcing sufficient building services engineering graduates to meet market demand across consultancy, contractor and wider industry was highlighted as a critical skills challenge by multiple companies to the South-West Regional Skills Forum in 2022. The absence of higher education programmes in the region to build a pipeline of talent into the future was further exacerbating the challenges reported by companies.

In response to this demand, the Forum established a Building Services Engineering Industry Skills Group in Q1 2023 comprised of industry experts from across 15 of the leading consultancy engineering and building contractor companies in the region. The Forum facilitated Skills Requirements Scoping Round-Tables with the industry group to identify the specific technical, energy, design software and project management related skills needed at pipeline and upskilling levels to address the critical skills gaps reported by the sector.

Once the skills needs scoping phase of work was completed, the Forum facilitated an onward solutions planning meeting with Engineering and Construction School and Department Heads in Munster Technological University (MTU). Specific actions agreed through this partnership approach included:

- The phased introduction of building services related modules in Building Services Processes and HVAC Systems across targeted degree programmes from autumn 2023 to support the development of specific technical skills required for graduate roles.
- The refinement and subsequent incorporation of an updated REVIT/MEP BIM module across targeted programmes from autumn 2024.

The need to showcase both opportunities and benefits of careers in the construction sector at second and third level was unanimously agreed by the industry/education group as a required parallel action, to incentivise uptake of new modules and the development of an expanded talent pipeline to meet industry needs. Specific actions agreed to support this included:

- Industry facilitated summer job opportunities for 1st and 2nd year students across relevant programmes to incentivise undergraduates to consider careers in building services.
- Shared industry/education on-campus promotional campaigns to relevant student cohorts to incentivise uptake of new elective modules and subsequent work-placements/summer jobs in building services.

In summer of 2023, companies from the Forum's industry group offered 20+ summer job opportunities to 1st and 2nd year students which were promoted by MTU across relevant disciplines, and the phased delivery of new modules commenced in autumn 2023, as industry and education continue to collaborate to build key skills required by the sector.

Focus on Food - Bakery Traineeship Launched

Regional Skills WEST
Partnerships for Skills

A strategic priority of the West Regional Skills Forum (WRSF) Food and Drink industry cluster group is to "Stimulate regional regeneration by enhancing the strength, standards and well-being of the Western region's agri-food sector in partnership with Bia Innovator Campus". In 2022, the WRSF undertook research which led to the publication of the "Appetite for Growth: Insights into the Skills Needs of Food and Drink Manufacturers in the West" report. This report set out a strong ambition for developing the skills needs of the sector, with one key recommendation being to "develop an industry platform for businesses to engage with training providers to create easy-access and engaging training courses".

One of the industry representatives on the forum, Declan Molloy (Molloy's Bakery, Roscommon town), who was concerned about the skills needs in this sector, highlighted the issue and the lack of recognised qualifications. Following engagement with Galway Roscommon Education and Training Board (GRETB) and employers in the region, a working group was formed to develop a programme in partnership with the GRETB, culminating the delivery of the Bakery Traineeship (FDQ Level 2 Diploma in Proficiency in Baking Industry Skills).

This 24-week course is the first of its kind in the West of Ireland, and positions learners to develop the skills and competencies required to allow them to gain employment in small and large bakeries and commercial businesses. Learners come from a variety of backgrounds, from those currently employed in the industry wishing to upskill, to those who have a passion for baking wishing to develop their skills so they can forge a new career in the industry. The traineeship encompasses a significant element of work experience, with learners based in college two days per week and in the workplace for the remaining three days per week. The location of the delivery of the traineeship in the new state-of-the-art culinary training kitchen in the BIA Innovator Campus in Athenry, ensures learners have access to the very latest in technology, innovation and methodologies associated with the culinary arts.

The success of this initiative and the collaboration between multiple stakeholders was recognised at the West Regional Skills Forum Annual Awards ceremony in December 2023, where Molloy's Bakery, BIA Innovator Campus and GRETB won the "Outstanding Contribution Award". As a result of this new programme co-creation, a solution has been provided to meet a critical skills gap and a new career pathway and flexible learning programme has been developed for learners in the region.





Pictured at the presentation of the WRSF 2023 'Outstanding Contribution Award' were (l to r): Mark Gantly, WRSF Chairperson; Ken Farragher, GRETB; Eithne nic Dhonnchadha, Bia Innovator Campus; Declan Molloy, Molloy's Bakery; Peter Feeney, Bia Innovator Campus.

> *"As a third-generation owner of our family business, facing challenges in hiring and retaining staff, we could see the strong need to have the skill of baking and the opportunity of developing a career in this indigenous craft industry, recognised by a formal professional qualification. Working with the WRSF, the GRETB and other employers in the region, the concept of developing a Bakery Traineeship was born – it's exciting to see it being delivered within such a short timeframe".*
> *Declan Molloy*
> *- Molloy's Artisan Bakery*

> *"The development and delivery of the Bakery Traineeship aligns closely with GRETB's Strategy (2022-2026). We welcomed the first cohort of Bakery Traineeship learners in January 2024 under the tutelage of renowned Michelin Star Chef Enda McEvoy and plan the next iteration of the traineeship to commence in the Autumn".*
> *Darleen O'Malley - GRETB*


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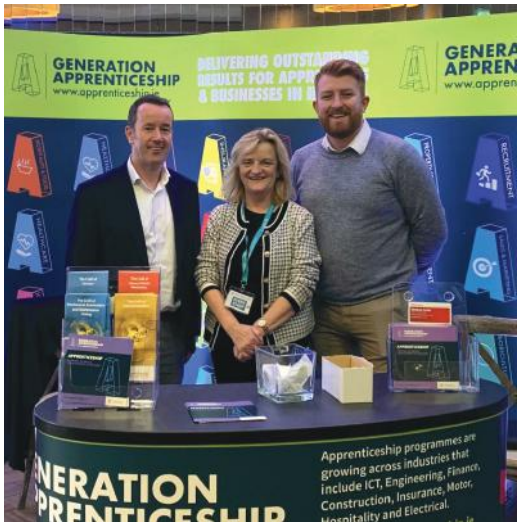

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Mid-East -	Michael Brougham, Enterprise Ireland / John Cunningham, Epicom *
Mid-West -	Padraic McElwee, Clare LEO
Midlands	John McKenna, TUS Midlands
North-East -	Justin Lawless, Intact Software
North-West -	Orla Bourke, Fenero
South-East -	Lar Conroy, Security Risk Advisors / Roseline Dalton, Jabil *
South-West -	Patrick Buckley, EPS Group
West -	Mark Gantly, Independent Consultant

** denotes a change in chairperson during the year*

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Regional Skills
Partnerships for Skills

An Roinn Breisoideachais agus Ardoideachais, Taighde, Nuálaíochta agus Eolaíochta
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

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