

The centre of attention

Carlow is one of Ireland's most vibrant towns and with significant investment under its belt, it is well positioned for future growth, writes Hannah-Louise Dunne.

Combining a central location at the core of the fast-growing south Leinster region with a highly educated workforce, two third-level institutions, the National Crops Research Centre, substantial infrastructural developments and proximity to both Dublin and the major transport hubs, Carlow is an ideal location for business. With all the necessary facilities and highly skilled labour force required for any company involved in the knowledge-led sector or any business seeking a location to establish a start-up operation or to expand, county Carlow has it all.

Designated as a growth centre in the Regional Spatial Strategy, Carlow offers a high quality of life along with a strong record in industrial and business performance. A fast-growing area, county Carlow alone has a population base of 50,000. However, as Joe Crockett, county manager with Carlow County Council points out, "Carlow, due to its location, has a very wide population catchment from Laois, south-west Wicklow, Kildare and Kilkenny. Within a 30 mile radius, Carlow has a labour force of 100,000 which is a formidable resource." So, far from a satellite town, Carlow is "a strong, self-sustaining centre in its own right."

Carlow's potential has not gone unnoticed. Over the last number of years, national bodies have invested substantial interest and capital in key strategic infrastructural developments. Under the auspices of the National Development Plan (NDP), the region's road network is currently undergoing significant improvement with a €1bn investment in the N9/N10 upgrade. Scheduled for completion by mid-2008, the 18 km Carlow by-pass at a cost of €212m will bring much of the traffic out of Carlow town-centre. As Crockett notes, "It is the single biggest strategic infrastructural spend that has ever taken place in Carlow," and will facilitate substantial development of the town centre. Already a retail centre for the region, plans for a proposed €300m investment in three key developments are in the pipeline.

With a variety of local amenities, a lower cost of living, reasonable property rates and excellent infrastructural and educational



Institute of Technology, Carlow

The road network is seeing significant improvement with a €1bn investment in the N9/N10 upgrade

facilities nearby, Carlow is the location of choice for many who work outside the county. In a 2005 commuter study, the Industrial Development Authority and the County Council found a total of approximately 6,000 people who live in the area, yet commute outside of Carlow daily to work. The profile of the respondents is indicative of Carlow's highly skilled labour pool with the average respondent a young, highly educated professional. 60% of people profiled indicated that they would take a similar job in Carlow to their existing one, if it were available. A further 24% of those surveyed indicated that they would even accept a reduction in salary if a similar Carlow-based job should become available.

As a result of the commuter study, a database designed to identify skills and qualifications of those based in the Carlow

area, for interested businesses to view was created by Carlow County Council and is led by Mary McEvoy, economic promotion and development officer for Carlow. Her role is funded by FÁS, Enterprise Ireland, Carlow County Enterprise Board and Carlow County Council. In its four months of operation, the 'clickforcarlow' site has proven a great success with almost 700 people already registered. An analysis of those surveyed revealed that 85% of people currently registered on the site are third-level graduates.

According to Dr. Ruadhri Neavyn, director of Carlow's Institute of Technology (ITC), the survey and the success of the website shows that "at the moment, of the 6,000 people who commute out of Carlow to work, there is an ample supply of graduates who would prefer to work closer to home." Indeed, fundamental to Carlow's appeal is the location within the town of two third-level educational institutions, the leading technological and business centre, the ITC, and Carlow College, which has an illustrious history dating back to the Penal Laws. "Carlow is," essentially as Crockett points out, "a de facto university centre."

A leading national educator in the

technological, engineering and business sector, the ITC has a current student enrolment of 5,000, with a full-time staff of 200 and a further 200 part-time. Producing 1,000 highly qualified graduates annually, the Institute has established a reputation for its industry focus. As Neavyn explains, "When we design a course, it is usually in conjunction with industry requirements, so when students graduate they are ready and able to enter straight into the workforce." Offering students a comprehensive range of courses across business and humanities, computing, technology and engineering, the ITC is currently developing new courses for the forthcoming academic year. Current niche specialities include degree courses in computer games development and aircraft systems and software development.

In addition, the ITC's external links with industry are extensive. Alongside a substantial range of evening courses, the ITC has also established two ground-breaking centres for research and development. The first, the Campus Innovation Centre, was established in 1992 as a centre to support selected projects through the research and development process. With a fulltime occupancy rate since its inception, success stories from the centre include Irish Skin Care Ltd. who have captured a 15% share of the Irish sunscreen market with their product 'Parasol,' developed during their time there. As a result of the centre's success, the ITC was awarded additional funding to set up the Campus Incubation Centre, which will, as Neavyn explains, "offer space and services to start-up companies, to create indigenous high-technology industry to meet the requirements of a knowledge-based economy."

Also contributing to the area's high standard of education is Carlow College, one of Ireland's oldest third-level institutions. Established in the wake of the Penal Laws, Carlow College was the second largest provider of graduates to the Kings Inn throughout the nineteenth century and has since the late 1980s offered a wide range of courses in humanities and social studies to its



500 strong student population.

Both institutions are also involved in improving the quality of life of Carlow and its surrounding area through separate projects with Carlow County Council. In the case of the ITC, the joint venture involves the development of a new, state-of-the-art leisure complex, while Carlow College has donated substantial land to the Carlow Local Authorities for the establishment of a Visual Arts Centre and 350 seat theatre to be called the George Bernard Shaw. With a strong local tradition of involvement with the arts through the annual Éigse Carlow Arts Festival, Fr. Caoimhín O'Neill, president of Carlow College is positive that, "the new centre will be the crowning joy of hard work that has been put into arts in Carlow over the years."

To boot, Carlow also boasts a national research centre. The Teagasc National Arable Crops Research and Plant Biotechnology Unit at Oak Park is the nation's leading centre in biomass research, primarily concerned with researching and developing non-food uses of crops and plants, such as researching the use of crops and plants in the development of bio-fuels.

A current proposal submitted to Enterprise Ireland could potentially make Carlow the centre of the fast-growing industrial biotechnology sector, if the bid submitted by Teagasc in collaboration with Carlow County Council, IT Carlow and a number of third-level institutions for the establishment of a National Bioenergy and Industrial Biotechnology Centre (NBIBC) in Carlow is approved. If successful, the centre could bring its current research on towards the next stage, as Dr. James Burke, director of the centre explains, "At the moment, we do all the research in relation to plant breeding, in relation to chemical constituents of all these crops and so on. The NBIBC would bring it all to a higher level where we could incorporate all the new technologies that are coming on-stream in biotechnology."

All in all, with a highly qualified pool of workers, leading educational and research centres, excellent facilities and amenities, careful urban planning and key infrastructural developments in place, it is not surprising that Crockett is quietly confident of Carlow's success. As he states, "All the fundamentals are right in Carlow for successful business and industrial growth." ■

In the race for a great business location?



CARLOW COUNTY COUNCIL
COMHAIRLE CHONTAE CHEATHARLOCHA

Get a headstart in Carlow

Carlow has so much to offer if you are relocating your business, starting up a new business or expanding your operations.

So if you're looking for a bright, eager and available workforce along with high-spec premises, easy access to Dublin by road and rail, and a real can-do local attitude, look no further than Carlow.

www.thinkcarlow.ie

