Limerick – A City of Opportunity?

An Analysis of Limerick City & Environs

JUNE 2008

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[Despite considerable negative media coverage, Limerick City is very clearly a city on the move. It is being transformed by very ambitious development plans that will transform it into a modern vibrant city with significant potential]

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Limerick City tends to get lots of bad press. The high profile wave of crime that has spread through a few small pockets of the city and its environs in recent years has had the effect of seriously tarnishing the external image of the city. There are clearly serious social problems in a few areas, a fact that is borne out by the recent ground-breaking decision to tackle the affected areas head on with a regeneration programme that is massive in scale and which will hopefully transform the afflicted areas.

It is unfortunate for Limerick that much of the coverage it gets is dominated by these crime issues. The reality is that Limerick City is currently in the middle of a **silent revolution** that is gradually transforming it into a modern, dynamic European city. Limerick City is a city that is very clearly on the move and the future does look very promising.

Limerick and Shannon have Gateway status under the National Spatial Strategy framework. This Gateway status means that Limerick/Shannon should act as an economic dynamo for the whole mid-west region. This role is being achieved to a significant extent, but the planned developments in the region suggest that the role will be seriously enhanced over the coming decade. The region boasts a large number of multi-national and indigenous companies of scale and there is clearly potential to build on this solid base (see Appendix 1).

Average incomes and economic growth levels in the Mid-West region are relatively high, but there are obvious challenges and vulnerabilities. The region has a relatively high dependence on manufacturing, and agricultural employment. Both of those sectors are under pressure at a national level, so policy makers will have to strive to ensure that job losses in these sectors in the mid-west region will be replaced by high-quality jobs in other areas of activity. The very ambitious development plans for Limerick City and environs would suggest that employment in construction will remain vibrant during the development phase, and thereafter significant post-development employment should be generated.

Based on the very ambitious public and private sector development that is now taking place in Limerick and more importantly the development that is planned for the next decade, the construction sector should remain a vibrant sector in the area and should fly against the trend for lower levels of construction activity at a national level. The development planned for Limerick over the next decade surpasses that planned in any other part of the country. This places Limerick in a very strong position to outperform most if not all areas of the country over the next decade.

Limerick City, as defined by the strange boundary situation, has one of the highest levels of unemployment in the country. Another significant source of concern is that between 2002 and 2006 the population of Limerick City actually declined by 2.7%, compared to national average growth of 8.2%. However, if areas officially described as Limerick County, but are actually part of Limerick City, are included, the overall picture is a much more positive one. Strong population and employment growth is occurring in areas that are officially in Limerick County but in reality are in Limerick City. These areas must be included in any economic and social profile of Limerick City and present a much stronger picture of the real situation.

Stakeholders in Limerick are very aware of the issues that have faced the city in the past and are now working hard to address them. There are major public sector and private sector initiatives underway, which totally surpass plans for any other region of the country, and which will ensure that Limerick City fulfills its Gateway status.

It would certainly appear that the long-term economic outlook for Limerick City and environs is very positive, provided current policies remain on track. The official vision for Limerick City Centre is to create a 'vibrant riverside city with a centre of world-class excellence for working, learning, leisure and living'. There is no reason why this vision cannot be realized, given the enthusiasm that all stakeholders in the region are currently displaying.

The key positives for Limerick City in the longer-term include:

- House prices in Limerick are low compared to the national average, so housing affordability is good. The quality of the housing stock is also very good. High quality affordable housing is essential to attract people to move into a city. Limerick scores well on this count;

- The city is in close proximity to an international airport at Shannon, where connectivity is good, notwithstanding the questionable decision of Government to facilitate Aer Lingus in transferring its Heathrow slots from Shannon to Belfast in January 2008;

- Limerick has a high quality third level educational offering, with a strongly reputed University and Institute of Technology;

- Limerick has a strong offering in the area of arts and culture. There is a wide range of arts & culture venues, organizations & groups, music venues, festivals & events, visual arts, dance, and arts education facilities. While the offering is strong, there are plans to seriously enhance it over the coming years;

- Limerick City now has a City Council that is ‘open for business,’ with an apparent strong ‘can-do’ attitude. The Draft City Centre Strategy is a very ambitious and wide ranging plan that sets out a very clear vision of where it wants Limerick to go in the future, and most importantly it has taken on board many of the high quality suggestions from stakeholders in the region;

- The City Council has very ambitious plans for the city. These plans include easy access by private and public transport to the city centre, pedestrian walkways, waterfront features, ample car parking, iconic buildings, a high quality and diversified retail offering, and lots of green space;

- The sporting offering in Limerick is very strong, with soccer, hurling and rugby all very vibrant. The city will shortly boast two top class stadia – the Gaelic Grounds and the very impressive new Thomond Park, which will act as a new major landmark and symbol of modern Limerick;

- The delivery of Transport 21 initiatives as they relate to Limerick is making steady progress. Access to the region by road, rail, and bus is improving at a substantial pace and within a decade will have reached a very high standard;

- The regeneration project that has just been launched with very strong local and national support should fundamentally alter the troubled estates in Moyross, Southill, Ballinacurra Weston and St. Mary’s Park.

- A number of very important initiatives have been recently launched, which are indicative of the passionate desire of interested parties to radically change Limerick. These include the EML Architects vision for Limerick, the work of Hugh Murray at MurrayOLaoire Architects, the Atlantic Way Initiative, and the Limerick Docklands Initiative;
- The Shannon Development Agency is playing a key role in promoting the region and is totally supportive of the public and private sector plans for the Limerick Region;
- In addition to the various public sector initiatives under way in Limerick, private sector companies are also pursuing very ambitious plans. These include the redevelopment of Arthur's Quay, the development of the Opera Centre, the new City Library, and considerable commercial and residential development throughout the city. It is one thing having public policy plans in place, but the very proactive approach of private sector interests to deliver major developments is a huge vote of confidence in the future of the city and the region;
- The governance structure in the city has been poor, with three councils involved in a geographically small area. This has proved inefficient and ineffective, and has certainly prevented the city from developing its real potential. This situation is now being addressed with the proposed extension of the Limerick City boundary to the North of Limerick City. It is clear that if Limerick City is to achieve its potential, a single governance structure is essential.

It is clear that Limerick City and environs are undergoing rapid and dramatic change at the moment. An agreed framework for the future growth and development of the City Centre is now virtually in place, with very strong buy-in from public and private sector interests. A lot of individuals and organizations, both public and private sector, recognize the past shortcomings in the city and are passionate about addressing them.

The economic future for Limerick is challenging, just as it is in the rest of the country. However, if the proposed policy framework is fully implemented, there is no reason why the city and the environs cannot continue to attract high quality employment, tourism, and people who want to live in the city.

The most important factor of all is that there is now a vision for the city in place, with strong support from all stakeholders. The negative image of Limerick is not justified, but the message needs to be sent out loud and clear that Limerick City is on the move and is open for business. The irrepressible spirit of Munster Rugby is now very evident from the people of Limerick.

SECTION 1

AN ECONOMIC PROFILE OF LIMERICK & THE MID-WEST REGION

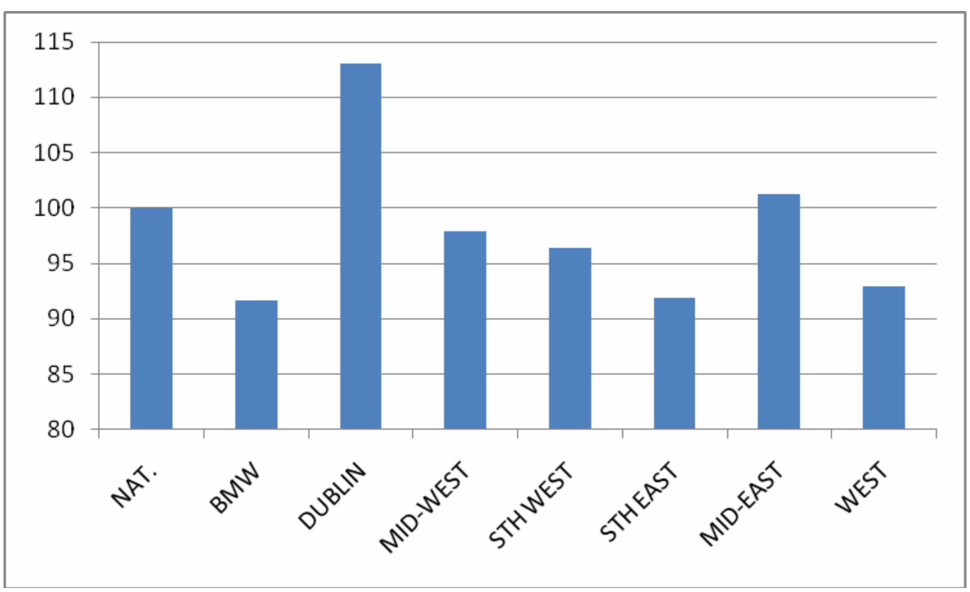
Economic Activity & Incomes

The Irish economy has come through a period of dramatic transformation. From a position where it was characterized by unacceptably high levels of unemployment and emigration, serious fiscal imbalances, depressed levels of economic activity, and low living standards, today Ireland has an economy that is characterized by strong public finances, high levels of employment, low unemployment, strong inward migration and significantly higher living standards and average incomes.

The economic prosperity has been evident throughout the countryside, but not all regions have shared the same levels of growth, prosperity and buoyancy. The unbalanced nature of economic growth and development is not unusual because different regions have different natural resources, human capital and geographical advantage. The role of policy makers is to ensure insofar as possible that growth and prosperity are dispersed as evenly as possible throughout the economy.

Figure 1

Index of Disposable Income per Person by Region (State=100)



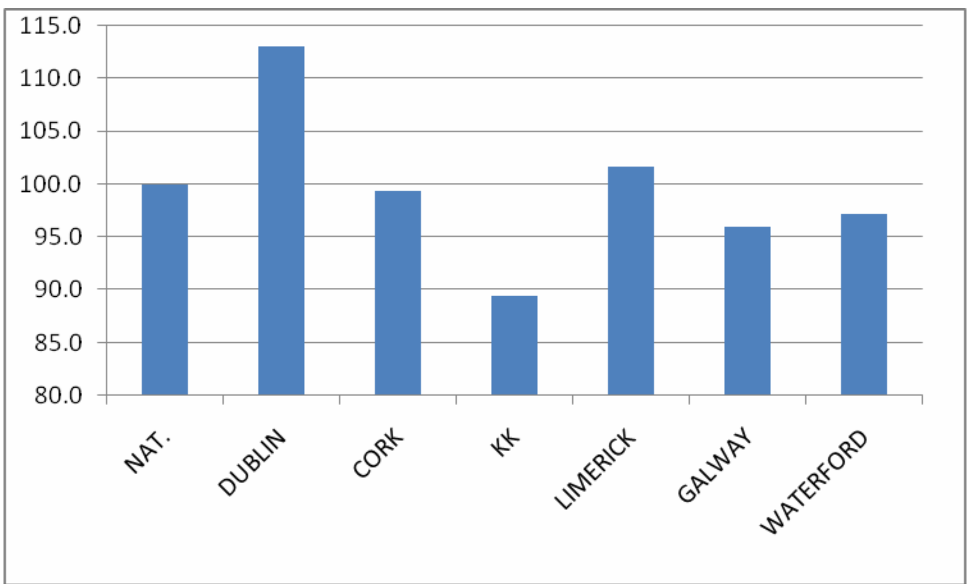
SOURCE: CSO

Data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) give us a reasonable picture of how economic growth is dispersed across the regions. Figure 1 examines the regional distribution of disposable income per person. It shows that disposable incomes in the Mid-West region, which includes Limerick, Clare & North Tipperary, are 2.1% below the national average, but 13.4% lower than the highest region, Dublin. The Mid-West region is the third highest in terms of disposable incomes per capita.

Figure 2 considers disposable income on a county by county basis. Within the Mid-West region, Limerick is doing well, and has the third highest level of disposable income in the country. Disposable incomes in Limerick are 1.6% above the national average, are 2.2% ahead of Cork, 4.5% ahead of Waterford and 5.5% ahead of Galway. Incomes in Limerick are 10.1% behind Dublin, which is the highest in the country.

Figure 2

Index of Disposable Income per Person by County (State=100)



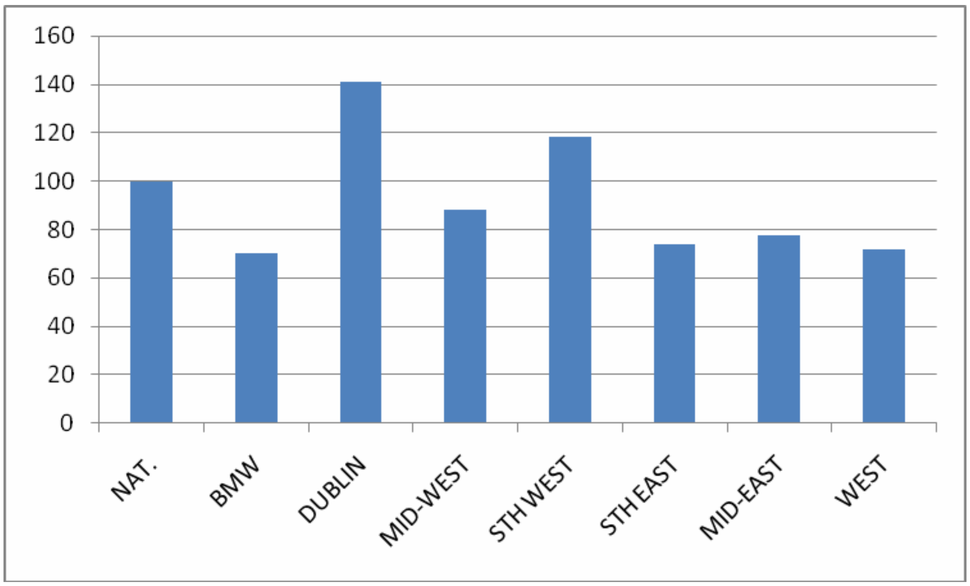
Source: CSO

Figure 3 examines the regional breakdown of Gross Value Added (GVA). GVA measures the value of goods and services produced within a region. It is only available on a regional basis and not on a county-by-county basis.

It shows that economic output per person in the Mid –West is 11.7% below the national average and is 37.3% below the strongest region, Dublin. The Mid-West is 25.5% below the South-West. Economic activity is the South-West is given a major boost by the presence of some major Pharmaceutical and ICT multi-national companies in Cork, which exaggerate economic output in the region.

Figure 3

Index of Gross Value Added per Person (State=100)



SOURCE: CSO

Labour Market Developments

The Quarterly National Household Survey is the key report on labour market conditions at a regional level.

Table 1 highlights the relative labour market performance in the Mid-West in the final quarter of 2007. The latest available data show:

- The unemployment rate in the final quarter of 2007 stood at 5.1%, which is above the national average of 4.5%;
- Between 1997 and the third quarter of 2007, employment in the Mid-West expanded by 38.6%. This is well below the national growth rate of 45.9%;

- Labour force participation rates in the Mid-West at 61.9%, are below the national average of 63.9%.

In overall terms, the labour market performance in the Mid-West is lagging and there is a clear requirement to address policy measures in this direction.

Table 1

Labour Market Indicators

	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE (Q4 2007)	**EMPLOYMENT GROWTH (Q4 1997-Q3 2007)**	**LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE (Q4 2007)**
MID-WEST	5.1%	38.6%	61.9%
BORDER	5.5%	52.5%	61.4%
MIDLAND	4.4%	63.9%	64.3%
MID-EAST	3.6%	63.7%	67.6%
DUBLIN	4.6%	31.4%	65.4%
SOUTH-EAST	4.9%	53.2%	62.5%
SOUTH-WEST	4.1%	47.4%	62.4%
STATE	4.5%	45.9%	63.9%

Source: CSO QNHS.

A key part of the Limerick regeneration project is focused on alleviating poverty and the associated social problems. If the regeneration is to be effective in sorting out the social problems in the affected areas, there will have to be a strong emphasis on creating sustainable employment opportunities. Greater economic prosperity, if accompanied by other appropriate social policies, would seriously enhance prospects for sorting out the problems in a sustainable manner.

Table 2 breaks down employment by sector in the Mid-West relative to the national average. A number of key points emerge from this analysis:

Table 2

Employment by Sector

SECTOR	MID-WEST	NATIONAL AVERAGE
AGRICULTURE, F&F	7.6%	5.5%
OTHER PRODUCTION	17.5%	13.9%
CONSTRUCTION	13.2%	13.2%
WHOLESALE & RETAIL TRADE	15.1%	14.5%
HOTELS & RESTAURANTS	5.8%	6.1%
TRANSPORT/STORAGE/COMMUNICATIONS	6.2%	5.7%
FINANCIAL & OTHER BUSINESS SERVICES	9.4%	13.8%
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION & DEFENCE	4.4%	5.2%
EDUCATION	6.7%	6.1%
HEALTH	8.8%	10.2%
OTHER SERVICES	5.3%	5.8%

Source: CSO QNHS.

- The Mid-West has a significantly higher labour market dependence on Agriculture and Manufacturing than the economy as a whole;
- The percentage of the labour force involved in Financial & Other Business Services is considerably lower than the national average.

The breakdown of employment by sector highlights a significant vulnerability for the economy of the Mid-West. 38.3% of the labour force is employed in Agriculture, Construction and Manufacturing in the region. This compares to 32.6% for the economy as a whole. On a more positive note, it is clear that the construction activity that will flow from the public and private sector investment planned for Limerick City should ensure that the City will not be as vulnerable as other parts of the country to the general slowdown in construction activity.

Census 2006 shows that Limerick City has an unemployment rate of 14.6%, which is the highest in the country[i]. Given the public and private investment that is now happening in the Limerick region and which is planned for the future, it certainly would appear that the labour market performance will improve going forward. It is also important to point out that in relation to official statistics on Limerick City, there is a serious issue concerning the boundary issue, which means that three local authorities have responsibility in the City and the footprint for what is officially defined as the City is very small and is not reflective of the true situation in the broader Limerick City area.

From a national perspective, the three aforementioned economic sectors are under pressure in terms of activity and employment levels:

- The construction sector peaked in 2007 and looks set to be driven lower by a significant decline in residential house building at a national level over the next couple of years;
- While the fortunes of agriculture have improved over the past year against a background of higher global food prices, the sector has been consistently shedding jobs in Ireland over recent decades, and this trend is unlikely to be reversed;
- Manufacturing activity in Ireland is under pressure due to a significant erosion of cost competitiveness over the past five years, and the unleashing of strong competitive forces as a direct result of economic globalization. These trends are putting significant pressure on manufacturing activities in Ireland and this is likely to result in further job losses in manufacturing in the short to medium-term.

Table 3 looks at the employment changes in the Mid-West over the past 3 years. Manufacturing shed 200 jobs over the period and agriculture shed 1,300 jobs. These are the only two sectors to shed employment. Construction and the public sector accounted for 73.1% of the total jobs created over the period. Clearly these sectors are unlikely to sustain this sort of momentum going forward, given the fact that the residential construction sector at a national level is now in decline, and tighter public finances will limit the scope for growth in public sector employment.

Provided the public and private sector developments plans are brought to fruition, Limerick City could be well set to buck the national decline in construction activity. With the substantial public and private sector investment that is now under way and planned for the Limerick region over the next decade, it would appear that construction activity and employment will actually expand rather than contract over the coming years. This will represent a major plus for economic activity and general prosperity in Limerick over the next decade. Clearly, the positive trend in employment in financial services, the wholesale & retail trade, and the hospitality sector are positive developments, but the picture should be better. Going forward, there will have to be an increased emphasis on these sectors as sources of job creation in the region.

Table 3

Employment Change by Sector in Mid-West Region Q3 2004 to Q3 2007

SECTOR	**Q3 2004 (000s)**	**Q3 2007 (000s)**	**EMPLOYMENT CHANGE**
AGRICULTURE, F&F	14.4	13.1	-1,300
OTHER PRODUCTION	30.6	30.4	-200
CONSTRUCTION	18.5	22.9	+4,400
WHOLESALE & RETAIL TRADE	24.4	26.2	+1,800
HOTELS & RESTAURANTS	9.5	10.0	+500
TRANSPORT/STORAGE/COMMUNICATIONS	10.3	10.7	+400
FINANCIAL & OTHER BUSINESS SERVICES	14.1	16.3	+2,200
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION & DEFENCE	5.6	7.7	+2,100
EDUCATION	9.4	11.6	+2,200
HEALTH	14.2	15.3	+1,100
OTHER SERVICES	9.0	9.2	+200
TOTAL	160.0	173.5	+13,500

Source: QNHS Database Direct, CSO

Recent Demographic Trends

Growth in population is a key indicator of how a region, a city or a county is performing. If population is growing strongly, it is generally indicative of a desire to live in an area and conveys a strong message about economic opportunity and quality of life. Population growth is also an important driver of economic activity in a country or in a region within a country. Quality of life issues would include the availability and quality of public services such as health, education and water quality, the quality of roads and general transport infrastructure, the quality and affordability of the housing stock, the availability of a high quality and diversified retail offering, quality of the hotel offering, crime levels, and social amenities.

Table 4
Growth in Population

COUNTY/CITY	**2002**	**2006**	**% CHANGE**
STATE	3,917,203	4,239,848	+8.2%
GALWAY	209,077	231,670	+10.8%
LIMERICK	175,304	184,055	+5.0%
of which: LIMERICK CITY	54,023	52,539	-2.7%
LIMERICK COUNTY	121,281	131,516	+8.4%
WATERFORD COUNTY	56,952	62,213	+9.2%
WATERFORD CITY	44,594	45,748	+2.6%
DUBLIN	1,122,821	1,187,176	+5.7%
KILKENNY	80,339	87,558	+9.0%
NORTH TIPPERARY	61,010	66,023	+8.2%
WEXFORD	116,596	131,749	+13.0%
KERRY	132,527	139,835	+5.5%
CORK	447,829	481,295	+7.5%

Source: Census 2006-Volume 1 Population Classified by Area

Table 4 examines the population changes that have occurred in a selected number of cities and counties in the country between the census periods of 2002 and 2006. Limerick County experienced population growth of 8.4%, but Limerick City actually saw a decline of 2.7%.

The decline in the population of Limerick City should in theory be a source of concern and may be indicative of shortcomings within the city. Population decline may be suggesting a lack of economic opportunity, a lack of a high quality diversified retail offering, a lack of suitable high quality housing, or a shortcoming in some other area that comes within the broad quality of life definition.

However, in practice it is very important to bear in mind that the boundary division of the City seriously distorts the data. The growth of population in Limerick County is largely down to population growth in suburbs of Limerick City, which are officially part of Limerick County due to the strange boundary divisions, but which are actually part of the City. Areas like Ballysimon, Castletroy, Dooradoyle and Raheen have experienced strong growth in population in recent years, but this is not captured in the data for Limerick City. In considering population data and indeed other data, it is important to bear in mind the difference between what officially constitutes Limerick City and what actually constitutes it.

In summary, while the economy of the Mid-West has been doing reasonably well, there is a heavy dependence on sectors that are now under considerable pressure at a national level- namely, agriculture, manufacturing and construction.

Limerick City broadly defined which is the Gateway definition, is increasingly fulfilling its status as the Gateway City in the Mid-West region and is becoming an increasingly strong engine of growth in the region.

Despite the obvious progress that is being made, the challenge for policy makers in Limerick City is to address the deficiencies that still exist and ensure that an environment for economic activity and growth in population is nurtured. What is needed is a city, in which people desire to live, work, visit and spend money.

A vibrant city needs strong and diversified retail offering, high quality restaurants, coffee shops & hotels, high quality modern office space, parks, pedestrian ways, a road high quality education offering, and social & cultural amenities. On the positive side it is very clear that Limerick City is now experiencing a period of rapid development and it is clear from public and private sector development plans that the identified shortcomings are now being addressed in a very aggressive manner. This bodes well for the future of the City.

SECTION 2

THE RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY MARKET IN LIMERICK

For anybody considering moving in to an area the price and availability of a high quality housing stock is clearly of paramount importance.

Table 5 tracks the increase in house prices between 2001 and 2007:

- New house prices in Limerick increased by 89.4%, which compares to a national average increase of 76.4%;

- Second hand house prices in Limerick increased by 74.1%, which compares to a national average increase of 83.3%.

Table 5

Average House Price Change 2001-2007

	NEW HOUSE	SECOND HAND HOUSE
NATIONAL	+76.4%	+83.3%
DUBLIN	+71.2%	+84.9%
CORK	+86.5%	+105.1%
GALWAY	+75.7%	+81.8%
LIMERICK	+89.4%	+74.1%
WATERFORD	+87.8%	+85.2%

Source: Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government

Table 6 examines new housing supply in a number of areas between 2001 and 2007. It shows that both Limerick City and County lagged Cork and Galway considerably over the period in terms of new house building. Relative population would explain some of this, but in relation to Galway City for example, Limerick City completed 63% as many houses, but has 72% of the population of Galway. It appears that limited new housing supply in Limerick explains in part the higher level of new house price inflation in Limerick over the period 2001 to 2007.

Table 6

New Housing Supply 2001-2007 by Area

AREA	TOTAL COMPLETIONS
CORK CITY	8,939
CORK COUNTY	44,540
CORK TOTAL	53,479
GALWAY CITY	9,919
GALWAY COUNTY	23,192
GALWAY TOTAL	33,111
LIMERICK CITY	6,250
LIMERICK COUNTY	13,071
LIMERICK TOTAL	19,321
WATERFORD CITY	4,804
WATERFORD COUNTY	8,858
WATERFORD TOTAL	13,662

Source: Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government

The latest data on house prices from the Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government relates to 2007. Table 7 compares average new and second hand house price levels in 2007 in a number of areas. The data show:

- The average new house price and second hand house price in Limerick is the lowest of the regions considered;
- The average new house price in Limerick is equivalent to 89.3% of the national average and 69.2% of the average new house price in Dublin;

- The average second hand house price in Limerick is equivalent to 72.4% of the national average, and 55.2% of the average second hand house price in Dublin.

Table 7

Average House Prices

2007	NEW HOUSE	SECOND HAND HOUSE
NATIONAL	€322,634	€377,850
DUBLIN	€416,225	€495,576
CORK	€325,453	€368,523
GALWAY	€300,750	€344,958
LIMERICK	€288,202	€273,640
WATERFORD	€292,057	€287,483

Source: Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government

House prices in Limerick are still relatively low and hence affordability for prospective house buyers is still relatively good.

In terms of measuring affordability, the net monthly mortgage repayment is instructive. The examples of new and second hand housing affordability in Table 8 are based on a number of assumptions:

- First-time buyer couple availing of full mortgage interest relief;
- A Loan to Value ratio of 90%;
- Average house prices in 2007;
- Mortgage term of 30 Years; and
- Standard Variable Mortgage rate of 5.35%.

For a first-time buyer couple in Limerick buying a new house, the net monthly mortgage repayment at €1,181.76 is equivalent to 87.2% of the national average, 86.3% of Cork, 98.4% of Waterford, 64.7% of Dublin and 94.9% of Galway.

For a first-time buyer couple in Limerick buying a second-hand house, the net monthly mortgage repayment at €1,108.58 is equivalent to 67.9 % of the national average, 69.9% of Cork, 75.6% of Galway, 49.8% of Dublin and 94% of Waterford.

Table 8

Affordability Based on Net Monthly Mortgage Repayment

LOCATION	NEW HOUSE	2ND HAND HOUSE
WHOLE COUNTRY	€1354.81	€1,632.31
DUBLIN	€1,825.17	€2,223.97
CORK	€1,368.97	€1,585.43
GALWAY	€1,244.83	€1,467.00
LIMERICK	€1,181.76	€1,108.58
WATERFORD	€1,201.14	€1,178.15

Source: Own Calculations

House prices in Limerick are relatively low and affordability is very good compared with the other Gateway cities. Consequently, for somebody contemplating moving to the Limerick region to work and live, relative house prices and the mortgage burden are very favourable.

Given the level of house prices in Limerick and the house price inflation experienced in recent years, house prices in Limerick look more sustainable. Indeed the latest data on house prices from the Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government relating to the fourth quarter of 2007, show that new house prices in Limerick were 9.8% ahead of the final quarter of 2006 and second hand house prices were 11.1% ahead. At a national level, new house prices were up by 0.4% and second hand prices fell by 2.3%.

The Limerick Housing market certainly slowed in 2007 like the rest of the country, but the performance was more solid than the other regions.

In summary, affordability in the Limerick residential property market is good, with relatively low house prices. Supply has been quite limited in recent years, and while the local market has softened somewhat over the past year, the market is holding up relatively well.

SECTION 3

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LIMERICK CITY

While the physical face of Limerick City has changed dramatically in recent years, the development of the city is not yet complete and is currently in the midst of a major regeneration programme that will totally transform the city into a modern, vibrant and lived in city. As the capital of the Mid-West region and the officially designated Gateway City with Shannon, Limerick has enormous potential to strengthen its role as the head of the regional hierarchy for business, employment, shopping, leisure, cultural, social and sporting activities over the coming years.

It is very evident in Limerick today that there is a very strong desire on the part of public and private sector interests to continue to develop the city and environs and ensure that it becomes a modern and vibrant city that will fulfill its Gateway potential and become the dynamo for the Mid-West region.

A number of initiatives and visions are in place regarding the future of Limerick City. These include proposals by EML Architects, the Atlantic Way, the Limerick Docklands Initiative, and Murray O'Laoire Architects.

EML Architects Vision for Limerick

In reaction to figures from the CSO showing that the population of Limerick City is in decline, and other data showing that in Limerick sub-urban commercial rents are higher than those in the city centre, architects EML commenced on a project laying out a vision for Limerick. This vision was a reaction to what it saw as a lack of direction and leadership in regenerating the city centre and it has to date hosted two landmark breakfast presentations in July and November 2007. At these breakfast meetings, EML presented their vision for Limerick City for 2020 – a 24 hour city.

The vision suggests major development in four critical areas of the city:

- A new civic and cultural centre at Arthur's Quay and riverside development. The proposal is to demolish Sarsfield House and develop a new civic and cultural centre at Arthur's Quay and a visual connection to the Historic Quarter across the Abbey River;
- A business district with a cluster of high-rise buildings along Howley's Quay and Bishop's Quay. The proposal is to see the development of a cluster of tall buildings around Riverpoint, to signify Limerick's business district. Projects on the river would include a new pedestrian bridge, swimming baths and a waterways centre;

- The regeneration of the Georgian buildings for residential use, with upgraded mews lanes; and
- A new Plaza at Colbert Train Station with an urban stroll-way down to the business district.

EML cited international precedents such as Copenhagen, Vancouver and Leeds, which are cities that give people a reason to live there. These cities have been extremely successful in revitalizing and regenerating urban centres that had been in decline. EML argued that policy makers in Limerick need to think about a European model with mixed developments, cultural activities and strong city centre neighbor hoods. This initiative from EML is indicative of the heartfelt desire to create something very good in Limerick. Much of what has been suggested is incorporated in the Draft City Centre Strategy published by Limerick City Council.

Atlantic Way

Atlantic Way was established in 2005 as a voluntary organization comprised of leaders and decision makers in business, education, community organizations, local government, voluntary services and development based in the West and Mid-West of Ireland. Its key aim is to establish strong alliances and cooperation between people and business with the intention of creating a region of excellence for future economic and social growth along the Galway-Limerick/Shannon corridor.

The group will commission research, establish forums, workshops and conferences for the sharing of information and expertise on how to create a vibrant Western counter-pole to the east coast. In conjunction with a number of agencies, a group was brought together to explore the notion of finding an Iconic Project' for the heart of Limerick that would lift visitor numbers to the city. Peter Coyne and Edward Walsh were engaged to review the conclusions from a series of 'Iconic Project' meetings.

Walsh & Coyne produced a report in October 2007 titled 'Revitalisation of Urban Limerick'. The vision of Limerick presented in this report is of *'a modern, progressive, prosperous, socially and economically balanced, thriving European waterfront city serving its region as a business, retail and cultural centre with the western corridor (and thus the national economy) as integrated, added-value infrastructure'*. They concluded that Limerick today is not viewed like that.

Within this vision the authors want to see Limerick City growing in the region, with potential for a 250,000 metropolitan population; a proper city with ambitious and accountable government and a can-do attitude; a honey pot for inward investment; a bustling and exciting waterfront as an iconic heart to the city; a 18-24 hour city; a critical mass of tourist attractions; a family friendly city; the retail centre for the region; the university as an inextricable element of the city brand; new economic activities based on knowledge industries based on synergies with a growing 3rd and 4th level; excellent transport infrastructure; several big civic pride icons-buildings and places to put Limerick on the world stage; citizens taking pride and caring for the city; leadership; a city known for arts and culture; and finally a city with a vision.

The authors identified what they regard as the principal barriers to the economic development of the city. These are:

- A poor brand image of social disorder and crime – both real and perceived;
- An absence of an overarching vision for the future of Limerick;
- Dysfunctional structure of local government, with three councils in one city; and
- An absence of overall drive and leadership on the issues of physical and economic renewal across the wider area.

The report made two key recommendations on how the vision set out could be achieved:

1. The existing regeneration agencies should be joined by a third sister 'City Centre Agency' created specifically for the physical and economic development of the urban centre of Limerick including King's Island, the Docklands, and the urban riverside;
2. An independent economic and administrative analysis should be undertaken as a matter of urgency to determine the optimal local authority boundaries for Limerick.

Limerick Docklands Initiative

The Limerick Docklands Initiative could result in part, if not all, of the 44 acre site in Limerick Port, which is owned by the Shannon Foynes Port Company, redeveloped and its activities transferred down river to Foynes port. This site offers tremendous potential for redevelopment and could form a key role in realizing the overall future vision for Limerick City.

As a working dock, Limerick is hamstrung by the fact that it is 50 km up river and can only take small vessels due to tidal restrictions. It does not make commercial sense to retain a working port in Limerick, given that Foynes Port is down river and could easily handle current business volumes in Limerick. The proceeds of the sale of the Limerick Port lands could be used to redevelop Foynes Port. Having a working port in a city such as Limerick does not make sense when there is a viable alternative close by. The loss of the port to Limerick would be more than compensated for by the redevelopment of the lands into retail, residential commercial and leisure facilities.

A Limerick Docklands Consultative Forum was set up in October 2006, under the chairmanship of Mr. Tom Kirby to consider the future of Limerick Port. It reported back in April 2008[ii]. The Kirby report concluded that 'given the nature of the commercial cargo activity, it is my view that in the long term this is not sustainable in a modern developing city….serious consideration must be given by the Board of Shannon Foynes to re-locating the existing activity to Foynes'. It goes on to argue that in a relocation scenario, the area currently occupied as a commercial cargo port should be targeted for use in the leisure cruise market.

Given the water depths in Limerick Port it is not clear that use in the leisure cruise market is feasible. However, the Kirby Report recognizes clearly, as have many other interested parties, the potential that the docklands area offers to achieving the official vision for Limerick City. Many other cities in the world have redeveloped their docklands to form an integral part of a modern vibrant city. This potential clearly exists in Limerick, and there is an existing port facility that would accommodate the transfer of existing business from Limerick Port. It would be a wasted opportunity if there was a failure to exploit this potential.

Murray O'Laoire Architects

In addition to the John FitzGerald Report, Limerick City Council has taken on responsibility for the regeneration of St. Mary's Park, or as it is colloquially referred to, the Island Field. The Council engaged consultants to survey all 460 residents in St. Mary's Park to redevelop the estate. A key part of this process will revolve around a proposal by Hugh Murray of *Murray O'Laoire Architects* to develop the area into a tourist and residential hub costing over €500 million. The proposal includes a two mile riverfront around the estate that will include a 90 acre urban quarter, including residential and affordable housing along with shopping districts and sporting facilities.

PUBLIC & PRIVATE SECTOR POLICY INITIATIVES

The official vision for Limerick City Centre is to create a 'vibrant riverside city with a centre of world-class excellence for working, learning, leisure and living'.[iii] Much progress is being made towards ensuring that Limerick fulfills its potential and realizes the vision, but considerable further progress will have to be made over the coming years. The omens are very positive in this regard, because the city is currently in the midst of a major regeneration and development phase that will see it transformed utterly over the coming years.

A number of key policy projects will have a major bearing on how Limerick City will develop over the coming years. These projects are being driven by the public sector and a number of private sector developers.

PUBLIC PROJECTS

Transport Infrastructure

Access to any city or region is a key requirement for economic and social development. Limerick already has an international airport at Shannon, but road and rail access to the city are also well underway.

Transport 21, which was launched in 2005, provides the blueprint for the development of Ireland's transport infrastructure. It is the capital investment framework through which the transport system in Ireland will be developed over the period from 2006 to 2015. The aim of the ambitious transport plan is to increase accessibility, ensure sustainability, expand capacity, increase use and enhance quality.

The Government committed to a total investment framework of €34.4 billion over the 10 year period. The plan states that the funding will be directed towards a number of areas:

- Complete the development of the inter-urban motorway network by 2010;
- Bring about improvements in the rest of the national road network, focusing particularly on the balanced regional development objectives of the National Spatial Strategy;
- Complete the safety programme on the national road network;
- Bring about a radical improvement in the level and quality of rail services;
- Transform the transport system in the Greater Dublin Area;
- Develop the public transport systems in the provincial cities;
- Improve regional and rural public transport services;
- Fund essential capital works at the six existing regional airports;
- Address accessibility for people with mobility, sensory and cognitive impairments; and
- Deliver a sustainable transport system that balances social, economic, and environmental considerations.

The key road developments contained in Transport 21 for Limerick are the upgrading of the N7 Dublin to Limerick route, the upgrading of the N18 from Limerick to Galway.

The N7 is one of the major interurban routes due for completion by 2010. Substantial elements of the plan have already been delivered. The section of the road from Dublin to beyond Port Laoise has already been completed and now delivers a motorway/high quality dual carriageway.

The Nenagh to Limerick section of the N7 will comprise 28 kms of high quality dual carriageway built to motorway standard and the upgrading of 10 kms to dual carriageway standard. This section is due for completion by 2009.

The total project is due for completion by 2010 and will significantly reduce travel time between Dublin and Limerick and should provide a major boost to Limerick and the Mid-West region in general.

The other major road infrastructure project in Transport 21 for Limerick is the Atlantic Corridor. This will run from Letterkenny to Waterford, via Sligo, Tuam, Ennis, Limerick, Mallow and Cork. This is not due for completion until 2015, but already considerable progress is being made. There is currently a dual-carriageway from Limerick to Ennis, but two further upgrades are imminent, which will significantly improve the road connection between Limerick and Galway by 2011. When the Atlantic Corridor is completed, the access from Limerick up the west coast and to the South-West and South-East will be seriously enhanced.

As part of the Atlantic Corridor, work commenced on the Limerick Tunnel Project in October 2006. This project comprises 10 kms of dual carriageway and 900 metres of Shannon tunnel. It is due to be completed by 2010. The Limerick Tunnel will create a bypass of Limerick and will link the Dublin Road to the Ennis Road. This tunnel will be capable of handling up to 40,000 vehicles per day and will remove considerable traffic volumes from Limerick City centre.

In relation to rail access to Limerick, there are two major elements contained in Transport 21 – the Western Rail Corridor and enhanced Intercity Rolling Stock.

Under the Western Rail Corridor proposal, there will be a phased re-opening of the sections of the Western Rail Corridor from Ennis to Claremorris, and the upgrade, for commuter services, of the Athenry to Galway line. The completion of the project will provide for a strong rail link between Limerick and Galway, with an onward connection to Claremorris on the Dublin-Wesport line. This project is due to be completed by 2014.

The second batch of 183 new Intercity Railcars entered into service between Dublin and Limerick in January 2008.

Serious progress is being made in improving the physical and transport infrastructure for access to Limerick. Upon completion of these developments, Limerick City will be opened up and should benefit enormously from an economic and social perspective. The reality is that economic activity tends to follow infrastructure and not the other way around.

Limerick City Council Draft City Centre Strategy

It is clear from Transport 21 developments that external access to Limerick City is being significantly enhanced and by 2015 the city will be very accessible. In recognition of this improved access, Limerick City Council has produced a draft City Centre Strategy that has as a key theme improved access to the city centre and movement within the city centre.

The Plan sets out a detailed strategy to co-ordinate development in the city centre. The key objective of the plan is to allow easy access to the city centre by public and private transport, to park safely and conveniently, and the ability to 'move safely and easily on foot through places of enhanced environmental quality'[iv].

To achieve this core objective, the City Council has laid out a number of strategic objectives:

- To promote a sustainable city centre, through the provision of an integrated transportation system in the city;
- To aid the creation of a pedestrian core within the city centre;
- To create an inner orbital transport route around the city centre to facilitate the removal of non-essential traffic from the Central Core and to provide more efficient public transport;
- To prepare a regional Land Use Transportation Study;
- To upgrade the main access roads to the city centre;
- To support the provision of an additional 1,500 off-street parking spaces adjacent to the city centre;
- To provide dedicated bicycle parking within the city centre;
- To provide for an integrated cycle and walking network through the city centre to sub-urban areas;
- To examine the feasibility of a dedicated green route on the inner orbital route;
- To provide a park and ride service from the new and existing orbital route car parks;
- To encourage the use of underground car parking where appropriate and possible.

As well as issues around access and movement within the city centre, the Plan, which is the blueprint for Limerick City of the future also focuses in great detail on urban design, housing, recreation & tourism, heritage & culture, education & employment, the retail offering, environmental management, and measure to release strategic blocks of land.

The Council sees the redevelopment of Arthur's Quay and the building of the Opera Centre on Rutland Street as the main catalysts for the regeneration of the city centre. In relation to releasing strategic blocks of land, the Council has identified 300 derelict sites in the city centre that are open for development and if the owners fail to use them, Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) will be placed on them by the Council. A further 11 sites have been identified by the Council as underused and CPOs will be placed on them.

A key aspect of the Plan is the division of the city into six quarters for structured redevelopment. The six quarters are: the Medieval Quarter; the North City Quarter; the Central Core; The Park Canal Corridor; the South City Quarter; and the Georgian Quarter.

In summary, the Draft City Centre Strategy document sets out a very detailed and ambitious programme for Limerick City. If implemented, Limerick City will become a city characterized by a high quality and diverse retail offering, pedestrianised streets, riverside walks, buildings of high architectural quality and design, good public transport, good access and parking for private transport, high quality social and cultural amenities, and high quality employment opportunities.

Regeneration Project
The image of Limerick City has been seriously tainted in recent years by social deprivation and crime. In response to the escalating crime and anti-social behavior in certain areas in the city, the former Dublin City Manager, John Fitzgerald, was appointed Chairman of Limerick Regeneration.

Limerick Regeneration comprises two separate but inter-related agencies: The Limerick Southside Regeneration Agency and the Limerick Northside Regeneration Agency. These agencies were established by Ministerial orders in June 2007.
The Agency Objectives are:

- Improve the physical environment;
- Prepare detailed proposals and master plans;
- Develop strategies on key social issues;
- Attract new investment;
- Strategically co-ordinate existing services;
- Create a sustainable housing mix;
- Create employment;
- Improve quality of life and environment for residents; and
- Implement the Fitzgerald Report recommendations.

In January 2008, two reports were produced[v], which set out a vision for the regeneration of Southill & Ballinacurra Weston on the south side of the city, and Moyross on the north side of the city. Master planning consultants will commence work in late February 2008, with the aim of finalizing a social, physical and economic master plan by June 30th 2008. This will put the detail to the vision proposals.

A central element of the plan is to significantly re-develop the housing in the areas, with many planned to be rebuilt and the rest retained and refurbished. There are 1360 existing houses in Southill & Ballinacurra Weston, and 1,160 in Moyross. Some 2,000 houses will be demolished. It is planned to start rebuilding higher quality houses at the beginning of 2009.

The three key proposals in the vision documents revolve around intensive policing intervention, economic & infrastructural regeneration, and a coordinated response to social and educational disadvantage. The challenge contained in the vision statements is to transform the targeted areas into the most vibrant and sustainable suburbs in the country.

In addition to the reports from the regeneration agencies, Limerick City Council has also taken on responsibility for the regeneration of St. Mary's Park, which is known colloquially as the Island Field. There are proposals to turn St, Mary's Park into a tourist and residential hub, with a two mile river front around the estate, residential and affordable housing, and shopping districts and sporting facilities.

One of the potential pitfalls with the private housing element of the regeneration is that it could result in a migration from other parts of the city, and particularly the city centre. It would be totally counter-productive to denude other parts of the city of people, economic activity and vibrancy. Joined up thinking is required and all relevant agencies, from the regeneration agencies to developers, must work closely together to ensure that the best possible outcome is achieved for the whole of Limerick City.

Limerick's reputation has been seriously tarnished by crime and anti-social behavior in small pockets of the city. A strong official response to the issues and the affected areas is now in train. An ambitious programme is under way to address the problems. Progress will be hard to achieve, but the commitment, both financial and otherwise, from Government, the local authority and local stakeholders is very strong. Provided the regeneration is engineered properly, this initiative could seriously enhance the reputation and long-term economic future of Limerick City.

PRIVATE PROJECTS

In addition to the various public policy initiatives under way in relation to the future development of Limerick City and environs, there is also significant private sector development happening.

Arthur's Quay

There is official recognition that Limerick City lacks a focus of retail and pedestrian activity. The City Council acknowledges the considerable potential of the Arthur's Quay area and supports the principle of redevelopment of this area in order to achieve the strategic goal of creating a vibrant retail, walkable and liveable area in the Central Core zone.

A major plan is being put in place for the redevelopment of Arthur's Quay shopping centre. It consists of an 8 acre site from Sarsfield Bridge to the Hunt Museum. The €500 million project would involve knocking a number of existing retail outlets such as Dunnes Stores, Martin's Pub, Penneys, the Revenue Commissioners Office, and the current Arthur's Quay development. As well as these retailers, the new development would include riverside walks, restaurants & cafes, a park, a cinema complex, extensive underground car parking, outdoor performance space, and a Visual & Performance Arts Centre.

The Opera Centre

The proposed €500 million development of the Opera Shopping Centre on Patrick Street will further enhance the retail potential of the Central Core zone. This site is adjacent to the proposed Arthur's Quay development and now includes the Granary building.

In addition to these landmark retail developments, there are a number of other proposed developments in the city centre area, ranging from a new City Library to office and residential developments on Henry Street,

REFERENCES

[i] 'Revitalisation of Urban Limerick', Coyne & Walsh, October 2007.

[ii] Limerick Docklands Initiative, Independent Report, Tom Kirby. April 2008.

[iii] Limerick City Centre Strategy 2007 (Draft), Limerick City Council.

[iv] Limerick City Centre Strategy 2007 (Draft), Limerick City Council.

[v] 'Our Community, Our Vision, Our Future – Regeneration of Southill and Ballinacurra Weston' Limerick Southside Regeneration Agency, January 2008 & ''Our Community, Our Vision, Our Future – Regeneration of Moyross' Limerick Northside Regeneration Agency, January 2008.

APPENDIX 1

Sample Companies in the Region

NOTE: Photos are courtesy of Press 22