Facilitating remote working throughout Ireland

Western Development Commission

Within a government-backed Connected Hubs initiative to support workers across Ireland, the Western Development Commission is using ArcGIS to underpin the creation and development of the world's first ever National Hub Network. ArcGIS solutions inform an exemplar online platform, connectedhubs.ie, for booking desks and meeting rooms nationwide.

The Challenge

When the global pandemic reached Ireland's shores in 2020 and the country went into lockdown, few could have anticipated the long-term impact that enforced home-working would have on working practices. People began to realise that they could still work effectively, while avoiding long commutes and gaining mental health benefits. Demand grew for remote working hubs, where people could rent desks, meeting rooms, private offices and podcasting studios nearer their homes.

In response, through scaling an existing Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC) Hubs Network, the Irish Government launched an initiative to create a National Hub Network, aiming to boost the economy of regional areas, as well as supporting start-up businesses and communities. However, it needed a user-friendly way to enable people to find their local hubs and book spaces at venues for specific dates or time periods. Government of Ireland policy 'Our Rural Future' set a target of 400 Connected Hubs nationwide by the end of 2025, so a quick and robust solution was also required to manage data about existing and proposed new hubs and monitor the expansion of the network.

The Solution

As an independent non-commercial state agency under the aegis of the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), the Western Development Commission (WDC) was appointed to lead this hubs programme. The organisation recognised that geographic information system (GIS) technology would need to be at the core of the solution, as almost all data about the National Hub Network had a geospatial element. It selected Esri's ArcGIS Online solution and configured this cloud-based GIS to create a live, publicly-accessible register of all public and privately owned hubs across Ireland.

This ArcGIS Online system informs an online booking platform, Connected Hubs, which enables people to easily find and book a place to work or meet, much like using Airbnb for holiday rentals. Individuals can go to the connectedhubs.ie website or app and use the near me functionality, or type in their location/postcode, to easily find the nearest hubs with their desired facilities.

In addition, the WDC uses live ArcGIS Dashboards and charts to interactively display all potential hubs nationwide, together with graphs of key metrics, including the total number of hubs in Ireland, plus the distribution and onboarding progress of hubs across 26 counties. The WDC shares data from ArcGIS Online and ArcGIS Dashboards with its parent government department weekly in advance of government business in the Houses of the Oireachtas, enabling discourse based on real-time factual information on the operation, development and growth of the National Hub Network.

The WDC and its partners also use the analytical capabilities of ArcGIS Online to analyse hub data and visualise various features per hub location. Users can easily query the solution to discover things like which hubs are onboarded that have nearby bus stops, or pinpoint the hub locations that may require further investment.

The Challenge

• Establish, expand, promote and develop the National Hub Network branded as Connected Hubs

The Benefits

• World-leading hub register and booking system
• Successful expansion of hub network
• Data-driven policy and investment decisions
• Evidenced opportunities for decarbonising hubs

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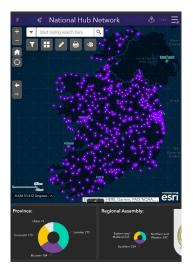
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An ArcGIS Dashboard providing an overview of key metrics about the growing National Hub Network

The Benefits

World-leading hub register and booking system

Underpinned by ArcGIS, Ireland has become the first country in the world to launch a centralised, national online booking system for coworking hubs. An interactive ArcGIS solution has become the authoritative public register for all hubs nationwide. The Connected Hubs platform is well used, with over 13,500 registered user accounts. "What we have created is a worldwide exemplar for facilitating remote working and early stage entrepreneurs," says David Murphy, Data & GIS Analyst at the WDC.

Successful expansion of hub network

ArcGIS solutions are undoubtedly helping to facilitate the hubs ecosystem development within the National Hub Network, whilst enabling potential hubs to be registered quickly and consistently. The Government's 2025 target of 400 hubs onboarded to the platform is likely to be achieved. At the time of writing there are already over 325 live hubs, with more than 5,000 desks available and nearly 500 meeting rooms. "ArcGIS Dashboards help stakeholders to expand the National Hub Network proportionally and fairly, through balanced regional development, driving economic recovery and the regeneration of communities throughout Ireland," Murphy explains.

Data-driven policy and investment decisions

The WDC, its partners and government stakeholders can also harness the power of ArcGIS for site selection to visualise gaps in national coverage and identify the best locations for proposed hubs, considering factors such as population density and transport links. Indeed, the WDC has collaborated with the Central Statistics Office on a project to assess the average distance from residential homes to hubs nationwide. "It's about not guessing," Murphy says. "ArcGIS enables us to make data-driven decisions about policies, plus understand where to invest in existing and proposed new hubs."

Evidenced opportunities for decarbonising hubs

As a central repository for spatial data pertaining to the National Hub Network, ArcGIS Online can be used to underpin and inform research studies and future funding linked to other government initiatives. ArcGIS Online has, for example, been used by Murphy in a masters research project to assess opportunities to decarbonise the hub network, by introducing energy efficiency upgrades and retrofitting hubs with things like fabric-first insulation improvements, solar photovoltaic panels, aerothermal heat pumps, water conservation fittings, electric vehicle charging facilities and other measures to ensure the long-term sustainability of Ireland's hub network.

Learn more at: esri-ireland.ie