



Kate Willard – corporate affairs director, Stobart Group

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*From running the UK's first rural regeneration agency to her role as corporate affairs director and company secretary at North West superbrand the Stobart Group, **Kate Willard** is passionate about regeneration. Currently on the board of the Atlantic Gateway project, she talks to Move Commercial about balancing private sector concerns with public sector projects.*

The Atlantic Gateway has been described by Tory peer Lord Hestletine as the most significant current growth opportunity in the UK to attract investment. It aims to create 250,000 new jobs in the Atlantic Gateway area and bring £14 billion of new investment through a board made up of some of the region's biggest private sector movers and shakers.

For board member Kate Willard, the role of private companies in attracting investment to the area stretching from Liverpool's docks and the ambitious Superport project to Manchester, Port Salford and beyond, is essential.

“Regeneration is led by the private sector. Certainly there aren't vast swathes of cash sitting around in the public sector to invest. It is the responsibility of the private sector to work closely with public sector partners to rebalance the economy in terms of that north-south axis.”

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The Atlantic Gateway board aims to identify the opportunities across the area and help Local Enterprise Partnerships from the public sector work with private investors to increase investment and growth. “The best chance we've got of success is if we get the public and private sector partnership working. Critically, it needs to work and we need to be walking down this road shoulder to shoulder and it's not always easy. We have different imperatives, expectations and time frames and different wants.”

Willard is no stranger to seeing public and private stakeholders work together, having worked for regeneration agencies in Hungary, Belgium and France, establishing the first UK Hungarian cultural

partnership trust in the process. It was this experience that led to a role as CEO at the UK's first rural regeneration company, Rural Regeneration Cumbria, which was set up after the foot and mouth outbreak hit the region.



During the role in Cumbria, Willard got to know the chief executive of the Stobart Group, Andrew Tinkler. After taking a job at the company, Willard completed the journey to bringing the creativity of the public sector together with the financial clout of the private sector.

“I came here about six or seven years ago and it’s been a really interesting journey. Working at the Stobart Group brings everything together, the ability to work with regeneration partners, public sector partners, local authorities, regeneration agencies and that was a really nice opportunity to bring the two sides of my career together.

“There’s a number of colleagues in the group who have the relationship with the public sector. It’s certainly a big focus of work we do.”

Willard not only represents the group on the board of the Atlantic Gateway but also has a place on the board of Liverpool LEP and the Superport sub-committee. It is in this role where Stobart’s investment in the North West, the Atlantic Gateway project and public sector interests intersect.

“We need to be walking down this road shoulder to shoulder and it’s not always easy. We have different imperatives, expectations and time frames and different wants. It needs really strong, open, transparent, dialogue between public and private sectors and the LEPs are absolutely critical in that. I’m incredibly proud to be on the LEP board and the Superport sub-committee.”

One thing the public sector can learn from the private sector is to introduce KPIs (Key Performance Indicator) to projects, even when they are as broad as Atlantic Gateway. Willard says: “If a body is there and it’s taking time and energy and space then it needs to be able to articulate what it has done in a very concrete way to deliver success. We need to be able to say Atlantic Gateway delivers X this year and will deliver Y next year. It’s difficult to quantify those but I’m interested in knowing how we go about that.”

According to Willard, major infrastructure projects within the North West are proof the partnership is working. The likes of Peel’s Liverpool2 Superport will be able to handle all but the largest container ships in the world, while schemes such as Wirral Waters and Port Salford have brought jobs and investment to the Atlantic Gateway.

“[These projects] are absolutely on the radar with the LEPs. They’ll have played a key role in making sure those big construction projects get off the ground. They’re shining examples of LEPs working with

private sector partners to get big projects off the ground. I sit round that board table with a good balance of public and private sector partners and it's really working."

I care passionately about the success of the group and the people who work in it. I have a passion for making a good difference in terms of that regeneration agenda.

Willard's daily work takes her from Stobart Group's investments in the energy sector in Cumbria to London Southend Airport, which went from zero to 1.1 million passengers in a year and is one of the fastest growing airports in London. Combining that with the Atlantic Gateway project and work with LEP can be challenging, but the key is being passionate about the role regeneration has in the North West and beyond.

"I have a passion about what I do," she explains. "I care passionately about the success of the group and the people who work in it. I have a passion for making a good difference in terms of that regeneration agenda. I am very passionate about trying to encourage the right thing to happen and about us playing our right role within that as a private sector group."