

Visit to Flanders

I visited Flanders on 23/24 June 2025. The purpose of the visit was to look at the regeneration and economic development initiatives and approaches taken by the Flanders government.



Over the two days I visited three sites. Firstly, Thor Park in Genk, secondly the Terhills Resort and designer village in Maesmechelan, and finally the Kristolpark industrial estate outside Lommel.

Many of the regeneration initiatives in Genk and the broader Flanders coalfield region, are being delivered by LRM (Limburgse Reconvertie Maatschappij) which has played a significant role in facilitating the economic and social transition of this historically industrial region. The fund was originally established by the Flanders Government after a grant made by the Belgian federal government to fund the closure of the coalfield.

Background

Genk and the Limburg region were historically dependent on coal mining, which was a major economic driver until the mines closed in the late twentieth century. More recently the closure of the Ford car factory also led to huge job losses both in the factory itself and associated supply chains. The closures resulted in substantial economic challenges and necessitated comprehensive regeneration efforts. LRM was established to support the transition from an industrial to a diversified economy and now oversees a range of initiatives to promote sustainable development.



Genk's regeneration

Genk has become a central site for regeneration work within the Limburg region. The city hosts major projects such as C-mine, which exemplifies the adaptive reuse of former industrial sites. Through the conversion of the Winterslag colliery, C-mine now operates as a centre for creative industries, education, and cultural activity. LRM has been instrumental in securing investment, coordinating stakeholders, and supporting the development of infrastructure to facilitate this transition.

Genk also hosts the Thor Park which I visited. This is another former colliery site which has been regenerated both as an entrepreneur site and as a springboard for new industrial development and research as well as for education with a significant college campus.



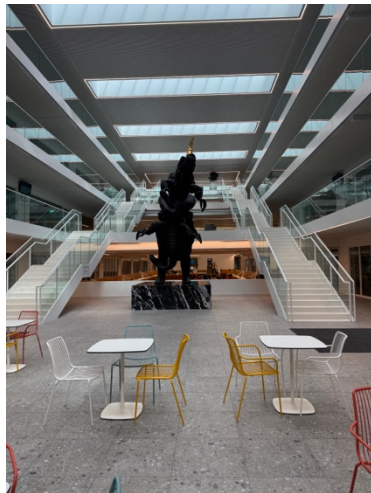
LRM's structure, role and approach

LRM operates as a public-private investment entity, providing financial support for redevelopment and innovation. It is a private company with the Government of Flanders as

its only shareholder. The Government makes all appointments to its board but it operates on the basis of an arms-length principle.

It acts as a facilitator for large-scale projects, such as C-mine and Thor Park. Thor Park, developed on the former Waterschei mining site, focuses on research and innovation in technology and energy. LRM collaborates with academic institutions and private enterprises to foster economic diversification, promote research and development, and create employment opportunities.

Community and cultural considerations



LRM's regeneration strategy incorporates community engagement and places an important emphasis on the culture and history of the region. By supporting educational initiatives, retraining programmes, and community projects, LRM aims to ensure that regeneration benefits local residents. The adaptation of former industrial spaces for public use is designed to encourage community involvement and foster a renewed sense of identity in the region.

At the same time the creation of the national park and the Terhill resort is a significant investment in both recreation and the environment of the region. It represents a far-sighted ambition to change both perceptions of the region and the leisure opportunities available for people living in the former coalfield.

Ongoing challenges

Despite progress, the former Flanders coalfield continues to face some significant challenges which are familiar to us in Wales – such as unemployment, social inclusion, and environmental remediation. The impact of regeneration is not uniform, and disparities remain between different communities. LRM's approach emphasises long-term partnership and integrated planning to address these issues.



Conclusion

The regeneration work in Genk and the Flanders coalfield, led by LRM, demonstrates a structured approach to economic diversification and community renewal in a post-industrial context. LRM's involvement has facilitated investment, supported innovation, and promoted cultural heritage while addressing the region's ongoing socioeconomic challenges. I believe that Wales has some important lessons to learn from this experience.