

National Planning Framework Submission Eamon Scanlon TD

Potential for the North West

We need to see viability and economies of scale in the North West. It is a large rural region and Sligo is the best located large urban centre to support development throughout much of the North West region.

With effective linkages to other urban centres throughout the region and improved connectivity, along with support from regional and national stakeholders, Sligo can become a more effective regional driver, supporting a greater share of population, economic and employment growth in Sligo itself and the wider North West region. There has been a clear failure by the Government to create a balanced jobs strategy for the regions, with the bulk of new employment opportunities focused almost exclusively in the capital and commuter belt region. In 2016, 48% of all IDA Ireland jobs were in the Greater Dublin Area and commuter counties – compare that to 2.9% in the North West region. Those figures speak for themselves.

Investment in infrastructure must be made a key priority if the North West is to become a viable option for economic opportunities.

Regional Transport Projects

The North West of the country is at a disadvantage compared to other regions with regard to motorway access. If the second tier cities, other larger urban centres and rural areas are to play a greater role in the economic and social development of the country, these centres will need to be supported through investment in infrastructure.

Regional and minor regional roads are in serious disrepair in this country and urgent investment is required to upgrade them. From 2013 to 2016, maintenance spending on the regional and local roads has been approximately 48% below what is required to keep the roads in good condition. Grants to fund the regional and local roads should be boosted and the Local Improvement Scheme should be restored.

In terms of regional road connectivity which is vital for regional development an upgrade to motorway status for the N4 Longford to Sligo road is urgently needed and should be a priority. This would potentially provide much needed access for the Northwest region which is a necessity given Brexit and the challenges facing the regions under the National Planning Framework. In the same light, the N5/N26 Mayo and Roscommon road urgently needs upgrading and should be made a priority.

Over the long term we need to seriously assess road and infrastructure connectivity for the regional areas. Specifically the idea of an Atlantic Economic Corridor needs to be explored whereby Waterford is connected to Sligo via Cork, Limerick and Galway.

The regional airport network is a core component of our national transport network. It is essential to attracting and retaining international investment as well as strengthening transport links. On-going exchequer support for the four regional airports in conjunction with local authorities and businesses is required in order for regional areas

to have access to air travel. In order to better achieve investment outcomes for the regions, issues with the rural development agencies must be addressed.

The Chair of the Western Development Commission stepped down recently citing frustration with the lack of progress or interest by the Government. This shows that the Government has little to no interest in addressing rural decline in Ireland. As mentioned earlier, balanced regional development is required in order to prevent rural decline and it is very regrettable that the Government is taking such an attitude toward rural development agencies like the Western Development Commission.

The route connecting Galway with Sligo and the northwest is known as the N17. In September 2017, it was replaced with a motorway to the east, originating in the mega interchange of the M6, M18 and M17, west of Athenry, and terminating west of the small town of Tuam. A very poor quality section of route follows, as the road negotiates bogs, fields and hills. South of Claremorris, an old good quality grade separated single carriageway road takes the route further past Knock. North of here, the route is very poor the whole way to Collooney. It passes Ireland Knock International Airport, the N5 at Charlestown, and the town of Tubbercurry. The whole route from the end of the motorway at Tuam to the far end at Collooney needs to be upgraded to a dual carriageway.

There's little vision on where priorities are on Ireland's road network at present. The Atlantic Corridor needs to become the priority with a big budget and a clearly defined list of sub-projects. Then the N17 will see progress.

Regional Jobs and IDA Investment

This is clear evidence of a two-tier recovery with new job creation heavily concentrated in the Greater Dublin Area.

- 45% of all IDA site visits in 2016 were in Dublin and 50% of all IDA jobs were in both the capital and commuter belt area
- 50% of all IDA site visits under successive Fine Gael led governments in 2012 – 2016 period were in Dublin
- In 2016, 48% of all IDA jobs were in the capital and commuter belt area.
- Midlands, North East and North West have been almost ignored, with the number of IDA jobs there accounting for a measly 2.1%, 2.6% and 2.9% of the total in this period.

There is a very disproportionate concentration of our economy in one region and is not sustainable. To put into perspective, London accounts for 20% of the UK's total GDP. The Irish concentration in our capital is double this.

In contrast, the GDP being generated by the regions is lagging considerably behind as a proportion of the economy: Midlands (3.2%); Border (5.4%); West (6.9%), South East (7.3%) and Mid-West (6.3%).

If there is to be any real recovery; it must extend to all regions and communities in a fair and balanced way. Otherwise, it will lead to the desertification of rural Ireland

communities with declining populations as people will be left with no choice but to go to Dublin for work.

Fianna Fáil has consistently argued that Ireland needs a new strategy to set out a blueprint for a better balance of social, economic and infrastructure development across the entire country. A relatively small number of strategically located growth centres must be identified, which can in turn attract economic activity to their neighbouring towns and rural catchment areas.

For the plan to succeed, the administrative and political system must prioritise investment in these areas. Rural areas are already supporting national economic growth, climate action objectives and the development of local communities but a greater focus on developing rural regions would increase the contribution to our economy and society made by rural areas.

The solution to maintaining rural populations is common to all areas however; the availability of employment. As migration is the key cause of rural population decline, the focus should be on enterprise and employment opportunities in rural areas. Investing in upskilling lower skilled workers in rural regions can have an important impact on regional economic development. It is important that the National Planning Framework is truly focused on creating real opportunities for the people who live in the regions, whether in cities, towns or rural areas, and that the National Planning Framework should achieve improvements in people's quality of life as well as their economic and social opportunities.

Many of our towns and villages have suffered from a lack of investment in the infrastructure which connects them locally, and which could improve their capacity to provide services and maintain and attract enterprise. Where services are not provided locally, there should be a clear means of access to services in other centres.

Digital Infrastructure/Broadband

The failure to ensure universal access to a reliable and fast mobile and broader digital infrastructure is a key driver of unbalanced regional development.

A core issue with communications in many parts of Ireland is the dire quality of mobile phone signals. This is directly harming business as well as frustrating people in their day to day lives, another example of the digital communications divide that is leaving many behind. Instead of "*hot spots*" these rural areas are "*not spots*" struggling to stay connected with the wider world.

In order to reduce rural isolation and ensure businesses across the country have a fair opportunity to compete we need to actively tackle the mobile phone signal deficit. All communities in Ireland need rapid high speed broadband access. It is vital for rural sustainability that homes and businesses join the global digital community.

Broadband can help open up a global market for rural tourism and small local producers. Ad hoc approaches must be replaced with a bold, ambitious long term plan that will place Ireland at the forefront of the IT revolution. Rolling out Fibre to the Home broadband (FTTH) will be a future proofed policy that will equip Ireland with an

infrastructure capable of competing in the global economy. FTTH is fibre optic cable capable of delivering download speeds of up to 1 Gigabit per second (Gbps) directly to households and businesses.

Agriculture

The Agri-Food Sector is facing a major challenge with the onset of Brexit. Most of our food produce is exported to the UK and this is under serious threat, particularly if a hard Brexit takes place and we see a return to tariffs and trade barriers.

Foodwise 2025 needs to be urgently reviewed to take account of Brexit. Further the Department of Agriculture underspent capital expenditure in 2016 by €37 million. This is inexcusable given that agriculture is likely to be hardest hit by the UK leaving the EU.

It is vital that the current national network of regional Veterinary Laboratories is strengthened with increased capital investment to secure its long term viability. The possible closure of three labs in Sligo, Limerick and Kilkenny by this government is very concerning and would be a disaster for maintaining our premier disease surveillance facilities at key regional locations. This is in addition to denying veterinary services for many farmers who will be forced to travel longer distances.

Sligo veterinary lab provides essential services for farmers in the North West – with more than 3,000 post-mortems and 25,500 samples tested there in 2015 alone. The facility serves seven counties – including Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim and Cavan – and is the only veterinary lab in the whole of the North West. The closure of this facility would have an extremely destructive impact on the agri industry in the North West. It would force farmers to transport dead animals hundreds of miles across the country for services that are currently on their doorstep and it would fly in the face of the Rural Action Plan.

The retention of the Sligo lab is even more important given the threat of Brexit, which is already impacting the agri-sector. We need to be supporting our farmers, not forcing them to make costly and unnecessary journeys for essential services.

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