



# Senator Ged Nash

**Constituency Office:** Connolly Hall, Palace Street,  
Drogheda, A92 YV70  
Phone: 041 9810811 Fax: 01 618 4397  
Email: [gerald.nash@oir.ie](mailto:gerald.nash@oir.ie)  

## Submission by Senator Ged Nash on the draft National Planning Framework

### Introduction

This submission seeks to make the case for the inclusion of the town and environs of Drogheda, Co. Louth as a first-tier development centre leading to the ultimate designation of the agglomerated urban area as a city.

The National Planning Framework, the scoping process for which was commenced by the government of which I was a member, provides a once in a generation opportunity to plan, develop and 'future-proof' our country in a way that promotes sustainable development, good governance and administration and the efficient and effective delivery of both public and private investment.

It is widely acknowledged that the 2002 National Spatial Strategy (NSS) was a manifest failure. Informed primarily by narrow and parochial political considerations with no basis in the objective principles of spatial planning, the document became redundant and discredited before the ink was dry.

The base and over-arching political motivations driving the 2002 NSS document led to the deliberate exclusion of Drogheda, Co. Louth from the 'Gateway' categorisation its population and location merited.

The town – lumbered with the nebulous title of 'Primary Growth Centre' – was in essence ignored by the drafters and decision-makers who were responsible for the plan.

Drogheda (contrary to the objective economic, planning and demographic evidence available at the time) was in effect relegated to the third division of development centres.

This government's willingness to learn the lessons of the past and to take major policy decisions based on robust evidence will be firmly tested by its approach to, and the outcome of the National Planning Framework process.

If the proposed Plan is to be truly evidence-based, then the logic follows that there is an unimpeachable case to define Drogheda as a first-tier development centre given its location, true scale, actual growth levels and development potential.

In the current draft of the NPF, Drogheda is erroneously included with the 40 'other' towns with populations in excess of 10,000.

This is frankly a bizarre and inexplicable designation, given that the population and scale of the Drogheda area in general has a current population base of in excess of 80,000, with the immediate recognised urban area alone exceeding 50,000.

Drogheda's population is equivalent to that of Waterford city, and not Tramore. It follows that the area should be recognised as such under the NPF and its categorisation corrected. Regrettably, the draft plan appears to be blind to this indisputable fact.

Drogheda is ideally positioned with the population, skills, infrastructure, scale and services to act as an east coast counter-balance to the unsustainable sprawl of Dublin city.

### **Recent development trends and history**

The 2016 Census results confirm that Drogheda is Ireland's most populous town.

As far back as the 1960's, the high-level Buchanan Report identified Drogheda as a major growth centre.

In reality, population growth in the area in recent decades has occurred in spite of government policy (i.e. the 2002 NSS), and despite the constraints imposed by the fact that the urban area and its immediate hinterland straddles two separate local government administrations (Louth & Meath County Councils respectively).

The CSO has confirmed that the municipal area of the Borough of Drogheda together with the agglomerated contiguous urbanised areas of counties Louth and Meath has witnessed stunning population growth of 80% between 1996 and 2016. The official population of this area (which includes Laytown-Bettystown-Mornington (LBM) now stands at 83,042 (up from 46,451 just two decades ago). It is confidently predicted that the LBM area will grow by a further 5,000 in the intercensal period up to 2021.

Very considerable growth is anticipated for the immediate environs of Drogheda (north and south) with zoned land in both the Drogheda Northern Environs and the southern environs in Meath sufficient to accommodate an additional 15,000 to 20,000 people.

Therefore (and leaving aside entirely the enormous recent and anticipated growth of the LBM area) the population of the Drogheda urban area (including the immediate northern and southern environs) will, within the lifetime of the National Planning Framework reach in excess of 70,000 under the terms of current plans separately and democratically adopted by both Louth & Meath County Councils.

### **Boundary extension – a missed opportunity**

Inexplicably, the Boundary Review which was originally commissioned by the government in which I served subsequently, and after many delays, recommended that the Drogheda Borough boundary with Meath should not be extended.

The document's narrative made a strong case for the extension of the borough boundary to include the circa 7,000 people living in housing estates in Drogheda, Co. Meath on the basis of good governance, local democracy and the efficient delivery of public services.

Yet, in the final analysis, the authors bizarrely elected to subvert that logic and recommend that the status quo remain. Further advice from the Commission urged Louth & Meath County Councils to work in partnership to better manage local administration in the area.

While first-rate officials in both local authorities work closely together on issues of common interest to the area, the experience of development planning in the area (e.g. the controversial development of the Drogheda Southern environs plan in the mid-2000s) and the development of competing shopping facilities and retail parks on the boundary of the town illustrates how the area in its entirety has been damaged by the fragmentation of local administration in Drogheda.

The boundary review debacle and the ill-informed parochial debate around the initiative represented a missed opportunity for the people of Drogheda, South Louth and East Meath.

It can only be hoped that considerably more courage will be shown by government when it comes to making an evidence-based policy decision on Drogheda's future status in the context of the NPF than was displayed by those responsible for the defective outcome of the recent boundary review process.

## **The case for Drogheda**

### ***Ireland's "Invisible City"***

Drogheda could be accurately described as Ireland's "Invisible City".

We are extremely proud of our rich history and our past. Moreover, we are even more confident of our potential and of our future.

Drogheda is a city in all but name.

In the draft of the NPF document, the town is classified in precisely the same cohort of towns with a population of over 10,000 such as Cavan town and Castlebar.

Respectfully, Drogheda is not Cavan town and neither is it Castlebar.

This specious categorisation only serves to disguise our true scale, significance and limitless social, economic and cultural potential.

Located on the M1 just 30 minutes' drive from Ireland's only major international airport, on the Dublin to Belfast railway line and with a major port in the area, the skills and talent base in Drogheda has in recent years attracted multi-national corporations such as IFS Statestreet, Kellontech (2016) and MTI (2017).

During my period as Employment Minister, under the Action Plan for Jobs I designated the area as a hub for the Digital Payments and FinTech industries. This project is gaining momentum and we can be justifiably optimistic that additional foreign direct investment in this space will be delivered shortly. Equally, we have ambitions to obtain additional support through Enterprise Ireland to enable us to develop the indigenous enterprise base in the FinTech space locally and along the M1 Corridor.

Having worked closely with IDA and having led international trade missions and engaged with key MNC investors globally, it is abundantly clear to me that investors choose (among other factors) to select areas as destinations for FDI based on population scale and critical mass.

The designation of the Drogheda area as a first-tier centre/city will greatly enhance the already strong case for additional investment into the area which provides greater accessibility for MNC executives and staff than is the case for many parts of Dublin.

### ***The need to pivot away from Dublin city centre***

Dublin, as the primate city, has attracted enormous and indeed very welcome investment from technology and financial services companies in particular in recent years.

This success though continues to have enormous consequences for the availability of housing and school places in the city and in the city's suburbs.

In considering Drogheda's status in the NPF 2040 plan, policy makers should be mindful of the warnings from the American Chamber of Commerce (Irish Times, 5<sup>th</sup> November, 2017) of the damage the lack of housing supply in Dublin is having on our competitiveness and on our ability to adequately house current and future workers.

Clearly the connection between the capacity to provide for additional and affordable housing is directly linked to our future economic success. Dublin city is simply incapable of providing the housing that is required to meet our short to medium term economic and social needs. This is a fact that is all too familiar to the shamefully high numbers of families and individuals in the city who are, today, the victims of an unprecedented housing supply crisis.

For this, and for many other cogent reasons, significant degrees of investment should pivot away from Dublin city centre to be directed to areas of scale such as Drogheda.

Such a move would represent smart and robust economic, social and development planning but it will only be achieved in a planned and managed way if the political will, expressed through a radically revised and balanced National Planning Framework exists.

Until recently, there was no single and accepted harmonised definition of a 'city' available to policy makers. This is no longer the case. In 2011, the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation & Development (OECD) and the European Commission developed a new definition of a city and its commuting zone. Ireland is a member of the OECD and of course a member of the European Union. Therefore, one would be entitled to expect that this definition will be applied in an Irish context in the National Planning Framework.

By any measurement, the town of Drogheda and the agglomerated area surrounding it meets the internationally accepted criteria for city status.

## **Conclusions**

As I stated in a recent Oireachtas debate (Seanad Eireann, 24<sup>th</sup> October), the people of Drogheda are not requesting any "special favours" from government in the context of the NPF. We merely expect that an evidence-based process accepts the facts as they are and that these irrefutable facts are reflected in official government policy.

1. The government should have the courage to act on the evidence and on the facts on the ground and recognise that Ireland's economic success and our sustainable development depends on designating first-tier population centres such as Drogheda as cities.
2. The internationally accepted OECD/European Commission definition of a city, developed in 2011 should be applied to Drogheda and other analogous urban areas where the clearly laid out criteria are met. This can be achieved while respecting the diversity of historic county affinities and identity in the area
3. The failure of the recent Drogheda Boundary review to provide for an extension of the borough boundary into Drogheda, Co. Meath should not be used to disguise the true scale of the Drogheda urban area in the context of the NPF
4. The Drogheda area, given its existing strengths, hinterland, infrastructure, history and location will be poorly served by its planned designation (as per the current draft of the NPF) amongst 40 'other' towns as prescribed in the draft plan
5. The present fragmented local government structures militate against the potential development of vibrant and growing areas such as Drogheda. More appropriate administrative arrangements must be found to ensure that the greater Drogheda area is allowed and encouraged to reach full potential. Our national economic and social success depends on this.

***Ends.***