

05<sup>th</sup> November, 2017.

Submission to the National Planning Framework: Deputy Tony McLoughlin T.D. 48 John Street, Sligo.

## **Introduction**

A chara,

From the onset I wish to state that whilst I welcome many of the provisions and national policy objectives included in the 'Ireland 2040' draft planning framework which are specifically related to the North West region. Being from this area, which has witnessed decades of neglect and disregard, I had hoped that greater emphasis would have been placed upon improving the regional imbalance currently at hand and that the specific growth areas in the region such as Sligo would have been given greater categorisation and support to grow in this plan. This unfortunately does not occur here and I believe that it should be reconsidered in the final plan. Ireland needs greater alternatives to Dublin and Cork for our young people to work and live in. We need to grow our regions and urban towns to be able to cater for increased development.

The specific mention of the need for extensive planning for an extra one million people in Ireland by 2040, which will mean the need for an additional 550,000 extra homes in the report is welcomed, along with the provision to target regional parity of growth for growth in population in the East and Midland Regions to equal growth in other two regions combined.

I also welcome the provision contained inside which indicates that there will be compact development in outstanding areas, rather than further urban sprawl in our urban areas, with 40% of new housing to be delivered within existing built-up areas of cities, towns and villages.

Furthermore, the idea of linking the National Planning Framework with a 10 year National Investment Plan and the introduction of National Smart Growth Initiative which will be a competitive, bid based fund to leverage both public and private investment is also welcomed. However, there are some concerns with this Smart Growth Initiative concept with regard to access for cash poor Councils.

However, there are certainly many areas of concern which I as a public representative am worried will continue to affect the people who I was elected to represent in Sligo, Leitrim, South Donegal and West Cavan.

The most disappointing element of the Draft Plan for me is the lack of any specific categorisation or plan for the Sligo urban growth centre to develop into a regional city in the North West, the region of Ireland that has been historically neglected by consecutive Governments. The only real efforts in this regard focus on Derry City via National Policy Objective 47. Yet this is quite concerning given the fact that Brexit could introduce a return to hard borders on our island and potential barriers to movement and to trade still remain unclear.

Sligo and its urban environs in all reality is the only major urban centre in the North West region of the Republic of Ireland serving as many 400,000 people from Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Donegal, Mayo, Cavan and Fermanagh which warrants the need for special growth city classification. It is the real economic driver of growth and jobs in the region and it has the capacity and the ambition in place to deliver much more than doing so. It is ready, willing and able to grow and to help to address the regional imbalance if it is supported by national Government to do so. However, it is very disappointing that Sligo's key position in this region is once again overlooked in this Draft Plan and I firmly believe that this should be addressed and put right in the final plan. Its classification as a 'Gateway City' in the previous plan was welcomed. However, the lack of funding due to the economic crash ensured the planned development for Sligo never occurred. However, its intentions were clear.

### **CSO Classification Issue**

One element of continual frustration for planners and public representatives in Sligo is the issue with the classification of its overall urban population. I am very much of the opinion that the Sligo CSO Boundaries need to be revised by the Department in order to reflect the true size of Sligo and its potential. As it is, Sligo is classified by its population according to the size of the Borough District which was disbanded in 2014 under the local Government. It states Sligo has a population of circa 20,000. However, Sligo's urban centre far exceeds these boundaries and extends outwards. This is something which needs to be considered.

### **Regional Imbalance**

Whilst the Draft Plan offers new alternatives to the 'Business as Usual' model which are welcomed, it is feared that for it to be effective, specific key regional centres such Sligo in the North West should be receiving dedicated attention and classification on how it plans to offer this alternative. Unfortunately there is nothing in the Draft Plan in this regard and this is quite worrying.

In fact upon reading the Draft Plan, I am of the belief that there is little contained within most of the policy objectives that will go as far as attempting to address the current problems faced in the North West Region with population decline, limited job investment

when compared to the other regions, development of health services, key state infrastructure development and overall investment crossing above the 'straight line on the map from Dublin to Galway.

One example of this problem is the case of specific population numbers being needed for the development of vital health services in the region. 'Death by Geography' is the term which is often used in this regard, as people cannot access the same services in our region as they can in others due to population. An example of such is the delays, to date with developing a fixed cardio catheterisation laboratory for the North West Region at Sligo University Hospital.

### **Accessible Centres of Scale:**

Page 37 of the Draft Report states; "The lowest per capita rates of projected population and jobs growth would be in the mid-border and north-western Counties, due in part to relative remoteness and an absence of larger cities or urban areas to drive their development.

However, despite the fact that the Draft Report states that "Accessibility to the north-west of Ireland and between centres of scale separate from Dublin will be improved" it is quite concerning that this is planned to be done only incrementally. In my opinion this points to the real lack of ambition for the North West region in this plan.

### **Dedicated State Investment in Infrastructure Key to Opening up the Northwest:**

We all know that one of the most effective ways to develop a rural region is to provide greater access to it from our larger urban areas. If it takes too long to get to other urban areas, or if there is limited public transport services, people will not want to travel to, or live, in the regions. This argument has been known and understood by successive Governments. However, for decades the road infrastructure to the West and North West from the South and East of Ireland was overlooked in comparison to other developments. The Celtic Tiger boom did little for our region and we have suffered as such here accordingly.

Whilst I welcome the fact that priority is given in the Draft Plan towards improving accessibility to the North West region and to the upgrading of the N4 and N17. The Draft Plan does not go near far enough in addressing the access issues.

The N4 Collooney to Castlebaldwin has been the most dangerous stretch of road in Ireland for decades. The thirty white crosses which run along the road symbolise the loss of life which have occurred there. The upgrading of the 14 KM section between 'Collooney to Castlebaldwin' is expected to commence in 2019. However, the entire N4 from Sligo to the

M4 in Mullingar needs to be upgraded to motorway status to link the West Coast in Sligo with East Coast in Dublin. Just like what occurred with the M5 from Galway to Dublin.

The N17 from Sligo to Galway is another section of national road infrastructure that is well below standard. In accordance with the Atlantic Economic Corridor proposal this road way from Galway northwards needs urgent upgrade for the region to realise its potential southwards.

Whilst improving access routes to and from other urban centres are important. Ensuring that urban growth centres such as Sligo are able to grow and have infrastructure in place to do so is another aspect which is missed in this plan.

The Western Distributor Road and The Eastern Garavogue Bridge are as such two vital infrastructure projects which will help Sligo to achieve this goal and they need to be identified and funded in the capital plan.

Train services are also vital for connectivity between the regions. It currently takes 3 hours to get from Sligo to Dublin. However, the trains can travel much faster if the lines were upgraded and this should be addressed.

Knock Airport is vital to the continued development of the Northwest region. Its appointment as a Strategic Development Zone needs to be further supported with infrastructure funding and investment. The airport is growing is the fastest growing airport in the country. With such growth come great opportunities for the creation of business and employment. In 2015, The National Aviation Policy reiterated the importance of Ireland West Airport and also acknowledged that the airport plays a more regional role in terms of access than other airports given its location in the North West. The proposed SDZ at Knock will secure the future of the airport as an all-important hub for transport, tourism, business and employment in the North West. However, it needs to be supported to help it grow and boost the region. I also feel that Sligo Airport also has a role to play in the development of Sligo and the Northwest region and should funding become available, that subventions for a Dublin - Sligo flight be returned.

### **Greenways**

The development of a National Greenway infrastructure route is something which I also believe would boost the North West and West regions. Large greenway infrastructure projects would not only provide jobs and increased tourism numbers, a Greenway from Galway to Sligo and onto Northern Ireland would help to improve access to the regions in line with EU schemes such as the Euro Velo.

On this basis, I fully support the proposal for the creation of this greenway until such a time as rail transport policy of the western rail corridor is developed and most importantly funded by national Government.

**Conclusion:**

Whilst there are many aspects of the plan which I am happy to see included, it is with great disappointment that Sligo's position in the Northwest has not been recognised or further supported by this Draft Report.

Sligo is the biggest urban centre and economic hub in the entire Northwest region. However, this is completely overlooked by the Draft Report. As such I believe that it lacks the real ambition needed to grow the North West region, it lacks new thinking to address the urgent need for balanced regional development and it unfortunately does not make me feel optimistic for the future of our region. It would seem as though that yet again the once in a decade or two opportunity for action to be taken to address the regional imbalances will be missed if the Draft Report is not edited.

Kindest Regards,

Tony McLoughlin TD

Sligo – Leitrim Constituency