

## Submission to Draft Nation Planning Framework

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The public consultation on the National Planning Frameworks - Ireland 2040 - Our Plan Draft is to be welcomed.

Regrettably however, we are still no closer to implementing and delivering on the necessary real, sustainable change our society requires to prosper in 2040.

Pushing delivery of the objectives contained in the Draft, such as housing education, health care and environmentally clean viable alternatives for transport, out to the next 20 years however is a cynical ploy allowing the current government to essentially ignore these issues in the short term.

Real action is needed now, in the next 1-5 years, in order to have the infrastructure in place for Ireland to truly be "*... the most successful, advanced, competitive and environmentally sustainable economy and society in Europe*" as the Draft Plan suggests.

It is clear both from the NPF pre-draft consultation process, to which over 600 individual, local and national community groups submitted their Ireland Vision 2040 submissions, and from the Citizen's Assembly, that the citizens of Ireland are ready to engage on all levels to implement solutions now in easing our transition to a prosperous 2040 with a good quality of life for all which does not compromise on our environmental responsibilities.

The ESRI population projections for Galway over the next 20 years amount to our population rising to over 120,000. In order to facilitate this increase in the population, implementation of strong transport policy, including frequent buses and more rail for Galway as the city grows, is needed now. Galway simply will not solve its traffic congestion issues without these measures.

### **TRANSPORT**

Galway has a severe traffic problem which is not addressed with any weight in the Draft. Intensive active and public transport, is the only way to meet the objectives of increasing the population in Galway by 50/60% and end urban sprawl by 2040. It is simply not achievable in a car dependent city.

#### **A. Cycling**

We must ensure that there are more cycle routes and that these are safer for vulnerable road users such as children to use. Galway has the third highest vehicle volume in the country, with more than a quarter of the overall volume occurring during school collection times (CSO 2013). Cycle routes would ensure the success of the Green Schools Transport Scheme.

The OECD recommends that 20% of the Transport budget should be spent on cycling and pedestrians. This type of expenditure is essential to ensure that Galway grows in a healthy manner with active transport options.

#### **B. Light Rail**

A network of public transport that can operate within a small centre with a massive growth in population would ensure that the city centre remains vibrant and culturally relevant and that businesses can be accessed. It also allows communities to grow as centres around the stops created.

Light-rail is seen a solution to air quality, congestion and can ensure renewable energy sources are used for transport. The infrastructure required does not disturb existing land users to any significant extent and is welcomed by local businesses. A feasibility study should be carried out as soon as possible.

### **C. Bus**

Bus is an essential part of public transport, especially in cities outside of Dublin, as it ensures that the elderly and non-drivers have access to the consolidated centres. Safe pedestrian disembarkation platforms have been lacking around the county are likely to discourage use of such services. In many areas of Galway city a bus comes every hour. Increasing this to every 15 minutes would encourage use and build up a demand quickly.

### **D. Rail**

A solution for commuter towns is to reopen rail in these areas and to simply build lay-bys to allow trains to pass each other without laying lengthy portions of additional track.

### **E. Greenway Strategy**

Galway has a wide variety of amenities to attract tourists, and yet most of the county has poor cycle and surfaced pedestrian routes. A route from the city, with its rich cultural and social life through magnificent countryside to the coastline at Clifden would be a huge draw for the county.

The Connemara Greenway has been partially funded and should be part of a strategy, which could link with urban routes. Currently Salthill promenade is the focus for walking in the city and further routes would complement this.

The Athenry Greenway again should receive investment, particularly as an off-rail track solution to ensure that both options can be retained.

### **F. Electric Vehicles**

While Electric Vehicles are the future of car transport, they are not a solution in and of themselves. All of the above mentioned active and public transport options should be the priority.

There is a production and congestion cost that remains when no other available forms of transport are available.

In order to ensure however that users can switch to EVs we need to significantly increase our charge points around Galway City and County. The Green Party Pre-budgetary submission 2018 called for charge points at every service station.

## **ENVIRONMENT**

The physical and social environment must be at the heart of a Planning Framework. A focus on sustainable development means bringing a sensitivity back to all of us around our natural world, which will in turn allow us to protect it for future generations.

We know that we have a mental health crisis, particularly in young people (17% of 17/18 year olds report having self-harmed according to the 'Growing Up in Ireland Study') and that being in our environment provides an opportunity for well-being like no other.

Increasingly studies are finding that mental health is affected not only by physical activity, but by physical activity in nature. Research has shown that people who walked for 90 minutes in a natural area, as opposed to participants who walked in a high-traffic urban setting, showed decreased activity in a region of the brain associated with a key factor in depression (Bratman et al, 2015). The Nature and Environment to Attain and Restore Health (NEAR) project in NUI Galway aims to connect people with nature spaces for this reason.

As part of an exercise in combatting urban sprawl, appropriate urban green spaces should be prioritised, such as community gardens, forest walks and the preservation of already existing urban spaces rich in biodiversity. Once lost it is almost impossible to recreate.

## **HOUSING**

### **A. Living City**

In any discussion of planning, an objective must be to ensure that built environments contain at least 20% green space and 10% space allocation for pedestrian and cycle use. Clean safe transport, such as light rail, is also a must for living, breathing cities. To qualify as a living city, all sections of the local population should be able to work, attend education and live in the city, without hours of commute due to rising prices which in turn sees our city turn into a place only for the richest sections of society.

Growth of 50/60% of the population in such a culturally significant city requires careful planning and prohibits ad hoc decision making.

**Action:** We are calling for the government to pass the Green Party bill on Living Cities.

### **B. Rural Development**

Our towns are closing for business and the National Planning Framework has a role in linking smaller towns, without compromising on compact growth, through sustainable active and public transport. Broadband would also ensure that these towns around Galway and Mayo can be active again, now that business has moved on to require more technology.

### **C. Affordable Home Company**

We must end the reliance on the private sector which is being identified by academics as an unhelpful solution and is creating an ever more unstable housing market, as landlords primary function is to chase profit and drive up rental prices. Tax incentivisation of the private market must end and a 15-30% foreign investor speculative investment tax as in Canada could be introduced to ensure that lands are used rather than hoarded to sell on.

### **D. Land hoarding and vacant sites**

The practice of land hoarding must come to an end. According to the census 2016, over 3,000 housing units in Galway are vacant, which does not take into account land. Land-hoarding and vacant sites (which are a result of tax incentives), are not specifically mentioned in the objectives, although this remains one of the biggest areas of concern. The Green Party proposed our Derelict

and Vacant Sites Bill to deal with vacant sites in a number of ways in the Seanad on 8 February 2017. The Bill was voted down by Fine Gael and Fianna Fail despite support from NGOs and experts.

One of the biggest issues is the purchase by foreign investment companies of Irish property, which was facilitated by sales from NAMA and tax exemptions. This has ensured that government influence over housing stock is severely hampered.

- **Penalties for vacancy**

There should be hefty penalties for those found to be hoarding land or retaining vacant housing units, with exemptions for those properties that are genuinely struggling, such as rural businesses. A 15-30% foreign investor speculative investment tax as in Canada could be introduced to ensure that lands are used rather than hoarded to sell on.

- **Compulsory Leasing Order**

According to academic Rory Hearne (TASC Conference 2017), compulsory leasing orders could be used to deal with empty units.

- **Compulsory Purchase Order**

Under the Green Party's Derelict and Vacant Sites Bill 2017, a local authority may acquire by agreement or compulsorily any vacant site situated within their functional area for housing purposes. This would both give the local authority an input in an area where they understand the nuances of the housing situation and allow for individuals on the housing list to be accommodated.

- **Greater Transparency in how sites are added to the Vacant and Derelict Sites Registers**

## **E. Security of tenure**

There is a lack of security of tenure which causes renters, particularly families, older persons and vulnerable adults to live under constant threat of eviction. I would support long-term tenancies such as is seen in other countries. In the medium term the legislation in relation to the ending of tenancies, as laid down in the Residential Tenancies Acts, must be strengthened.

## **F. Building standards**

The objectives must explicitly state a commitment to improving building standards. Catherine Martin TD, The Green Party, had a building standards motion passed in the Dail and we would like to see the recommendations implemented and included in the Framework, including remedies for those who discover latent defects. Social housing is the worst hit by low building standards.

**Action:** Implement the Green Party Building Standards motion passed in the Dail.

## **G. Housing in Galway**

Planning in Galway has been an exercise in 'what not to do'. It has been ad hoc and has led to a congestion problem that is not going away easily. The majority of the housing has been built on the West side of the city, whereas employment has been built on the East.

It is important to examine the housing crisis as part of the National Planning Framework both to find solutions and to guard against future problems. Galway has some specific issues that must be taken into account.

## Disability

The number of people with a disability on the social housing list in Galway is twice the national average at over 660. The ***Strategic Plan for housing Persons with a Disability*** for Galway must be implemented and future planning taken into account. The waiting time for those with a disability on the social housing list can be up to 20 years due to a lack of suitable housing. An objective needs to reflect the requirement for housing that is suitable for those with a disability and to ascertain the impact of the housing crisis on those who are living in the most vulnerable situations.

### Individuals

Galway has a high number of homeless men sleeping rough, according to homeless services in the city, and this is a unique problem that needs to be addressed, particularly in relation to long term homelessness and the provision of suitable accommodation for individuals (See below for suggested solutions).

### Traveller Accommodation

I condemn the eviction of families from Cúl an Trá halting site without culturally appropriate accommodation for these families and individuals to move to and call for a full implementation of the ***Galway City Council Traveller Accommodation Programme 2014-2018***. The council consistently failed to meet its targets under the previous programme.

### Students

As a university city with escalating rental prices due to vacant housing, population growth, poor housing stock replacement and an over-emphasis on the private rental market Galway, as with all university towns, is letting students and their families down with poor accommodation.

### Families

Four main issues affect families:

A) The HAP and other rental support schemes are not well understood and are over-reliant on private landowners agreeing to be part of the scheme. Rent limits are unrealistic and below market rate.

B) Social housing stock is not adequate.

c) Families are struggling financially compared to other sections of the population due to having to pay for accommodation space for non-earning children, which means that they cannot compete to rent or buy houses, particularly in the cities with individuals who do not have to rent larger accommodation. The government must recognise, either by Universal Basic Income or by a significant increase in Children's Allowance the cost of bringing up the next generation or families are going to continue to be evicted and to fail to pay their mortgages despite any other steps taken

D) There is a lack of security of tenure. I would support long-term tenancies such as is seen in other countries. In the medium term strengthen the legislation in relation to the ending of tenancies, as laid down in the Residential Tenancies Acts.

### Lone parents

Lone parents are in the most precarious position and are much more likely to be living in poverty compared to other sections of the population, as are their children. There is a housing specific need, however ending poverty and increasing the standard of all homes in the country would ensure that these families can have a home not just a roof over their heads. I support the implementation of the

***Report of the Joint Committee on Social Protection Report on the Position of Lone Parents in Ireland June 2017.***

Non-national inhabitants

There are a host of issues around the treatment of those from outside of Ireland. Galway has the highest number of people who are not from Ireland and this needs to be taken into account in a housing strategy. Of specific concern is the issue of Direct Provision centres in the city, which must be closed down as a matter of urgency.

**F. Ensure safety from violence**

Direct Provision centres are places of fear and these as well as other emergency accommodation sites must be put to the top of the agenda in relation to housing. It is shocking that such violations of human rights exist in our country.

**RENEWABLE ENERGY SCHEMES**

The time has come to stop extraction and purchase of all fossil fuel energy. We know that in order to keep the Earth's temperature rise below 2% the majority of oil must stay below the ground. The Galway Green Party protested drilling for oil off the coast of Ireland at Salthill in Summer 2017, as part of the Not Here Not Anywhere campaign.



We must take brave steps in social partnership rather than selling off land to Wind Farm corporations and developers.

**A. Co-ownership of community energy**

Taking Denmark as a model, there is a real opportunity to build capacity and to have communities co-owning the energy that supports their homes. The Green Party **Community Energy (Co-ownership) Bill** would ensure that planning for renewable energy production facilities is contingent on the local community being able to invest in the scheme. Up to 30% of the ownership could be vested in the people who use the energy.

### **B. Micro-generation**

There should be a right to self-consumption, without grid costs. The largest factor affecting owner/consumers is the buy-in cost and therefore a scheme to support the initial costs should be commenced. The pilot scheme with Electric Ireland, which has not been open to new customers since 2014, is due to finish in December of this year. The benefits in the scheme were not large enough to encourage large-scale transition to micro-generation and therefore an expanded scheme such be commenced with far greater benefits.

## **EMPLOYMENT**

Ireland is rich in sources of renewable energy which provide huge potential for employment, both in the production of renewable energy and in the export of skills and patents based on the energy production. The world is moving towards renewable energy and we have the choice now as to whether we will be followers or leaders.

However, this must happen in social partnership. The government has closed Bord Na Mona plants in the midlands with no consideration for workers and their families. In order to move to low-carbon, renewable energy, we need a just transition that puts people at the heart of the solution, ensuring that the lived experience of people in rural areas, whose families have worked bogs for generations can continue to provide for their families with jobs which are reflective of their skills.

## **EDUCATION**

### **A. Additional capacity**

It is clear that additional capacity is required for secondary schools in Galway by 2018, according to the Galway Educate Together Second Level School Group figures provided to the Department of Education and Skills.

On top of this current need, under the Draft Framework, we are now talking about an additional population boost of 50/60% and this needs capacity building IMMEDIATELY for both secondary and national level schooling.

### **B. Environmental protection**

There is little recognition of the impact of climate change across the world on our nation by people on the ground. Hunger and mass migration is the result and this is already having an impact on us, but this message needs to be made clearer.

Educational programmes such as those provided by Green Schools Ireland and by ECO-UNESCO should continue and be integrated across all subject areas, which is not currently happening, particularly in second level.

Exam pressure in secondary school is such that the assessed aspects of schooling leave little time, untaught, in nature. An overhaul of the education system could give greater freedom to explore and care for the natural world as well as an understanding of social realities outside of exam subjects.

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