

# Submission on the National Planning Framework

From:

(Dr.) Bríd Quinn

[Redacted]

Please note: this submission is being made in a personal capacity

**Address:**

[Redacted]  
[Redacted]  
[Redacted]  
[Redacted]  
[Redacted]

A National Planning Framework for Ireland is needed and welcome. It is reassuring that a wide consultative process and an emphasis on making 'decisions based on evidence, on expertise, as well as politics' underpin the process of developing the strategy. This submission focuses on the place-making dimension of the plan, deliberately highlighting the regional and rural issues. However, it is acknowledged that the health and well-being, sustainability, infrastructural and implementation dimensions are inextricably linked with place-making, as are the issues arising from an ageing population.

### **Towards a Place-making strategy**

Ireland needs a comprehensive place-making strategy that holistically addresses the needs of our urban and rural areas and tackles issues of equity and effectiveness. . The provision\distribution\allocation of jobs, transport, education, housing, health, environment, energy and communications in a strategic manner will determine Ireland's short-, medium- and long-term future. In the past, short-termism, a politically parochial approach to prioritisation and a pragmatic rather than strategic approach to policies have resulted in uncoordinated and skewed approaches to development. More recently, we do have stratagems such as URBACT initiatives and the *Action Plan for Rural Development* but there are still inconsistencies, disconnections and a lack of coordination. The NPF process offers an opportunity to apply the lessons of the past and avoid making the same errors.

For our urban areas we need to articulate an urban development policy that is not Dublin centric. Examples abound from countries as diverse as Germany and Uganda where urban policies for second-tier cities take account not only of economic development dimensions but also service, information, communication and cultural factors which enhance the quality of life and foster more balanced national development. We need to maximise the potential of our second tier cities and connect our towns and cities with their hinterlands in in a manner that enables development that is ecologically, economically, and institutionally sustainable. The EU's Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) approach offers an opportunity to be availed of. The Smart Cities initiatives in various cities such as Limerick are raising the profile of second-tier cities but much remains to be done. There is already evidence that Irish regions containing a large urban centre generally performed stronger than rural regions without a major urban centre (MacFeely, 2016). To achieve spatial, functional and institutional integration and increase regional human capital we need to adjust our political, administrative and developmental approaches

to accommodate the 'citification of the region' and the 'rurbanisation' of some of our towns. This may require a softening of local authority boundaries in some cases but precedents have already been set.<sup>1</sup> A further problem to be dealt with is the inconsistency about Ireland's approach to urban governance. While the urban issues cannot be dealt with in isolation from rural concerns, international evidence points to the need for explicit city-based governance if second-tier cities are to succeed. Ireland's move towards merging Limerick and Waterford (and possibly Cork and Galway) cities with their respective counties suggests that Dublin may soon be the only city in Ireland with a specific urban governance architecture. This would reinforce its dominance. Perhaps Metropolitan Districts should be realigned to enable, when appropriate, a city wide decision-making structure. Second-tier city-led growth could provide a boost for our regions and, with targeted regional infrastructure development through the NPF, could also revitalise rural areas in the regions and increase territorial capital.

Inconsistency with regard to regional structures, boundaries and functions persists in Ireland. The 2015 Regional Assembly designations create further confusion and do not facilitate clear data comparison. The radical but most effective solution would be to redraw the regional designations of ALL organisations which deliver public services to ensure co-terminous regional boundaries whether as discrete or composite units. Regional structures need to foster development strategies through organisational and institutional arrangements that consider the specific innovation opportunities and knowledge bases required as well as addressing the particular problems prevailing in different regions. Alignment of regions would enable creation of an information-base to support decision-making and frame implementation (such an approach has enabled successful regional development in Victoria, Australia). If well-resourced and fully recognised in the governance process, the Regional Assemblies could play an important role in achieving co-ordination, communication and collaboration as well as fostering innovation and investment, thereby steering effective regional development. The debate on the NPF must include governance issues and how to implement territorially differentiated yet co-ordinated planning and development strategies. Human capital will only increase if regions are attractive places to live and work in.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Rural Economic Development Zones (REDZ) are functional rather than administrative geographic areas. The Athlone Boundary Committee's recommends 'a new programme of structured cooperation between local authorities'.

The 'opportunity deprivation' of Ireland's rural areas is well documented. The NPF can reduce such deprivation by ensuring Ireland's rural areas have a desirable future. The knowledge and service economies provide opportunities that were not available to rural areas when manufacturing dominated. The OECD has frequently advocated an emphasis on territorial rather than sectoral support for rural regions, an approach now supported by the EU and an approach on which the NPF should be based. This would involve a focus on capital (financial and territorial) and capacity enhancement (to valorise available assets and make it easier to access and absorb available supports). The serendipity of the EU's declarations on rural development having both been agreed in Cork increases the onus on Ireland to 'systematically review other macro and sectorial policies through a rural lens, considering potential and actual impacts and implications on rural jobs and growth and development prospects, social well-being, and the environmental quality of rural areas and communities'(Cork 2.0). Rural areas need support to reach their potential but their potential is significant for Ireland's future. To harness that rural potential the NPF will have to enable what I consider the '5 I's' of rural development: institutions (with power to act); infrastructure (for access and connectivity), investment (to prime sustainable development) and inducement factors (quality of life, amenities, services). Knowledge-based development and social entrepreneurship will be key contributors to future growth. Already, initiatives such as LEADER have demonstrated the potential for social as well as conventional entrepreneurship in Ireland's rural areas. The Local Enterprise Offices have shown the potential of small businesses to create jobs in various types of locality. Knowledge-based regional and rural development elsewhere has led to innovation and job creation in a range of sectors usually associated with urban milieux (for example, education in Sweden, digital health in Scotland and smart food in Finland). Ireland too can achieve similar regional and rural development outcomes by putting the right structural dynamics in place through the NPF.

Access to public services is a major determinant of quality of life and the NPF needs to ensure a system of multi-level governance that champions provision of public services in non-urban areas. Current concerns about bus services and post offices reflect the fragility of rural services and the propensity for them to be decimated if decisions are made only on financial considerations. Without transport and communication services, rural areas will deteriorate rather than reach their potential.

The NPF can ensure that service provision reflects social and demographic as well as economic considerations but in a structured and purposeful manner. In recent years, some developments have the potential to achieve ‘joined-up’ government and ensure optimum strategies, services and supports. The local government reform built on *Putting People First* places a strong emphasis on local government’s economic development role and linkage with public, private and community organisations. One of the functions of the new Regional Assemblies is to promote effectiveness in local government and public services in the region. The planning hierarchy aims to link development strategies from area-plans to regional and national level strategies. The action plans for jobs and for rural development assign responsibility for specific actions to named government departments. The NPF must enshrine a joined up approach, not just with aspirational exhortations but with assessable and enforceable commitments. It is worrying that the ambitious action plan for rural development was launched before specific ‘appropriate output and impact indicators’ have been selected. Our rural potential is less likely to be realised without clear priorities and targets and a focus on outcomes. Let us not replicate this oversight in the NPF.

As we approach the centenary of Irish state’s creation, it is clear that achieving ‘a long-term and place-based aspect to public policy and investment’ requires a change of mind-set from public managers, politicians, the private and third sectors and citizens alike. The NPF is not only about physical planning, investment strategies and resource allocation, it will determine the quality of life of generations to come. An effective NPF requires different skills, capacities and competences from those needed in the past and a strategic, flexible, responsible and responsive approach. Critical decisions need to be taken about our system of government (especially the structure and interaction of local regional and national levels); the design and operation of our public service; mechanisms for democratic input; accountability systems as well as monitoring and evaluation processes. For the 42% of Ireland’s population who live in rural areas, the NPF will determine whether we flourish, survive or shrivel.

The early stages of the NPF process have been positive – an evidence-based document has prompted debate and wide involvement. The final framework needs to be decisive, detailed and definitively underwritten.