

## **CONTEXT**

The key to sustainability is to utilise capacity to its optimum level to provide for present and anticipated socio-economic conditions. Planned growth and attendant infrastructural development must be underpinned by visionary economic programmes and targeted policies aimed at ameliorating a range of predetermined social needs. Such visionary, albeit radical, "planning" must be geared towards effective implementation and delivery systems that are broadly accepted as being positive, fair, democratic, rational and environmentally sustainable.

I do not propose to rehearse generally or in detail past shortcomings and planning failures but a number of issues militating against the achievement of a National Planning Framework (as advocated in my opening paragraph) should be cited:

\* The National Development Plan 2000-2006 (NDP) *preceded* the National Spatial Strategy (NSS). This was a recipe for retrofitting plans in progress and political horse-trading. Confusion and dilution of growth priorities were the inevitable consequences of such uncoordinated thinking.

\* The NDP, NSS, Regional Authority Plans, County Development Plans, Area Plans, etc. attempted to "square the policy circle" by highlighting development priorities against a complex background of economic crisis, increasing regional imbalance, progressive dominance of the Greater Dublin Area, paltry housing provision and stop-go infrastructure projects. The nett result has been the antithesis of rational, value-for-money planning and policy cohesion. To the unbiased observer, the National Planning Framework experience to date is exemplified by silo thinking, uncertainty, knee-jerk crisis management (notably in the spheres of housing, waste water treatment, road building, broadband and mobile telephony projects); development policies are viewed with cynicism, especially when accompanied by voluminous documentation, long drawn-out consultation and appeal procedures, inadequate costings and patchy delivery. In making these points regarding essentially "public sector" failings, I will resist venturing into "private sector" grief around bank bail-outs, NAMA and vulture funds, underinvestment strategies and land-hoarding, Etc.

## **SOME PRACTICAL IDEAS**

The National Planning Framework (NPF) should set out clearly an audit of development priorities based on a review of competing socio-economic, sectoral and delivery interests. i.e. hard questions must be asked about the primacy of Greater Dublin, Cork, Waterford, Limerick, Galway and Sligo as growth centres and such questions must tackle issues of regional or peripheral imbalance, regional and sub-regional development hierarchies, development incentives, urban/rural resources and diversification, concomitant infrastructure provision, especially connectivity programmes and roll-out deadlines. In basic terms, the NPF should take a hard look at what our national development priorities are and determine where future growth should be channelled in order to make the whole greater than the sum of the parts. Although suffering from dismissal as buzzwords, "synergies", "joined-up thinking" and "transparency" will be key to this process. For example, the Wild Atlantic Way represents an international marketing success based on connecting scenic coastal locations as an adjunct or driver of tourism promotion; it was delivered at relatively little cost, with minimal damaging "footprints" and retains the potential for further added-value through providing allied

walking, cycling, orienteering, surfing, angling, ecotourist expansion within an environmentally-sensitive context. Similarly, the alternative energy schemes using wind, wave and tidal resources would be optimally located in rural coastal areas and related manufacturing/servicing/R&D enterprises could be promoted to create local employment and impact upon current rural decline and emigration problems. Surely we can recognise our natural resources, promote their sustainable use, incentivise related regional and local enterprise and apply/export our intellectual and manufacturing/servicing wherewithal?

Accessibility is key to the potential to live healthier lives and to benefit from health services. Outdoor amenities chronically underutilised due to poor access connectivity infrastructure in terms of roads, public transport and facilities to and at the wealth of outdoor amenities available for a plethora of healthy activities in terms of exercise and aerobic related activity whether walking, mountain climbing, jogging or more extreme forms of physical exertion.

NPF can include policies to improve access infrastructure nationwide in terms of roads and public transportation. In addition, facilities at key amenities such as mountains, lakes, rivers, hills, sea side, beaches and playing fields including access to these amenities as mentioned together with, parking, toilets at activity launch points. In the context of lakes, rivers, canals and the ocean there is almost a comical lack of berthing, slipway, marine, pier facilities at almost all of the nation's waterways. The promotion of Agri-tourism through indemnification of the farming community together with seasonal remuneration opportunities from hill walking tourism and other farm and agricultural related farming pursuits. The provision of protected walk & cycle ways on established access to work routes to encourage more use of bicycles.

Regionally accessible health services within no more than a 1.5hr one way or 3hr round trip commutable journey must become the essential prerequisite in determining investment for a complete suite of health services from diagnostic to acute, neonatal to end of life and mental health. Motorway access is essential in facilitating this.

In highlighting through improved accessibility the enviable suite of outdoor amenities regardless of weather can promote and facilitate a healthier life style for all. A cultural shift in diet, alcohol use and patterns together with exercise will not be enhanced by preserving the status quo. Better access and interconnectivity nationwide will bring all amenities closer.

Dublin City as an economic driver has been crucial and remains vitally important for our future. It is in many ways beyond capacity and requires breathing space in order to take stock and prepare for the next phase of development in its role as our capital and major urban driver nationally. Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford can play a role in facilitating this but must be provided with the full service and infrastructure suite to truly realise the potential to act as an interim alternative to Dublin as well as their own longer term potential. North of a Dublin-Galway line and particularly west of Mullingar we have a very substantial proportion of the land mass of the state and despite a decreasing population over the last century is still home to a very significant proportion of Irish Citizens. One of the main failings of the NSS was the identification of too many gateways and hubs and the lack of sufficient strategic investment resources to provide for even a fraction of them. The NPF must take cognisance of using all our capacity to its optimum extent. To achieve this there must be a tangible vision to equip this north western portion of the nation to perform to its potential. A new City must become part of the plan as a driver for that region to complement the efforts of Cork, Limerick, Waterford, & Galway. Not to do this would be foolish in the extreme in that it would ensure that we ignore a substantial proportion of our national capacity. In order to achieve this all regions must have motorway connectivity and enhanced access and public transportation options in road, rail, and air. A new city, in my opinion, is self-selecting as Sligo. It is ideally placed

geographically to act as driver for the North West Region. Already a thriving administrative regional capital, its potential has never being truly acknowledged nationally in the context of strategic resource allocation. Yet with proportionally less than other locations Sligo can be equipped to perform to its potential as a regional driver which will see the North West region, heretofore dismissed and ignored as a pain in the national side, begin to make a growing and sustainable contribution to the national effort, not just economically but also in promoting the realisation of healthier wellbeing for citizens in the decades to come. An M4 from Kinnegad to Sligo, an M17 Galway to Sligo and cross-border connectivity must all be provided.

Planning policy must make it attractive for people to wish to live in towns and cities. Planning Acts sought to ensure that a mix of social, affordable and private housing would prevail. Average social housing mix in urban areas nationally is in or around 14% though Limerick, Cork and Sligo are all above 30%. This has discouraged the development of private home construction within the boroughs of these centres forcing many to seek planning in nearby rural locations or adjacent villages. The experience shows one size does not fit all and so local development plans must be permitted under legislation to take cognisance of the existing social housing ratio and provide for development which promotes the optimum balance. This is not to reduce the level of much needed social, affordable or traveller accommodation when so much is needed rather planning must ensure that an adequate mix and balance is achieved and this must take cognisance of the existing percentage breakdown.

There would appear to be a policy at least in certain local authorities not to purchase houses in former Council schemes. This practice should end immediately. An Accommodation audit both private and social should be carried out in all urban centres including Cities, Towns and Villages and incentives designed for the provision of accommodation where derelict and brown field sites are available. This can help reduce demand for rural one off planning though it is of vital importance that children reared in rural areas who have lands must be facilitated including those involved in rural pursuits including farming, tourism and those moving to an area to provide an essential service such as a teacher, GP, specialist consultant and so on. Where a dwelling or its ruins still exist, planning should be considered subject to design. The practice of Transport Infrastructure Ireland objecting to proposed dwellings accessing a national primary route should end forthwith unless an application is onto a motorway. Existing practices is discriminatory and unnecessary.

Against a backdrop of an unprecedented national housing crisis the existing stock of zoned land nationally and in particular where local authorities re designated land as part of a strategic land reserve for longer term consideration, flexibility should be given to permit shovel ready serviced lands the potential to proceed in order to provide housing in the shorter term. City life and in particular Apartment dwelling within larger towns and cities should be incentivised, Such incentives could include waivers on property tax, refuse charges, broadband and other service charges which if met by the state would encourage home owning apartment dwellers to make the move from one off or estate housing which would benefit the state. As an aging population this may be attractive to many of us on the grounds of security and ease of access to health care and amenities.

Protection of the environment for future generations is critically important. To this end it is essential that we mitigate against damage already done to the water table, air quality, coastal erosion and so on. Fracking must be outlawed in line with the legislation currently before the Oireachtas. Wastewater treatment investment must be accelerated to reduce and eradicate the distribution of untreated sewage into our waterways. Recycling and waste management needs to be further developed and promoted and a national debate on the potential of a small number of incinerators should be undertaken. While innately unpopular and resisted by all of us the incineration experience in other countries and other cities, such as Austria and Vienna with the use

of incineration for electricity generation and district heating warrants a clinical look at the pros and cons of such an approach in order to weigh up the direct and indirect problems against the direct and indirect benefits. The renewable heat initiative in the north of Ireland while infamous in media now for all the wrong reasons would be a scheme worth introducing in the Republic with appropriate limits, learning from the mistakes of NI. The growing of willow should be encouraged and incentivised both for the pellet burning potential but also the potential this species has in absorbing waste water.

It is of equally critical importance that we respect and support our culture in Ireland which has for centuries lent itself to small clusters of housing throughout the Country. Rural Ireland was always home to many 100,000s of families. It is important that we balance future growth and the resources to support this with the responsibility to respect and support the will of our people. People have always lived in the Country side and many will always want to. While seeking to attract more people for more sustainably supported living in urban centres by enhancing the life experience of villages, towns and cities we must absolutely support the cultural fabric rural Ireland exists on and that people live and want to live there.

Brexit poses enormous challenges to integrated strategies on economics, climate change cooperation, social programmes and so on between North & South. Again improved access is key to the realisation of potential in this regard. The M1 to Belfast is secure and of great assistance but equally the provision of a motorway M3/A5 and M15 / M16 must be an essential part of a plan to realise the true potential of an all-Ireland approach irrespective of how the implications of Brexit play out in terms of customs and border controls.

Key access infrastructure to promote all water based leisure and commercial activity needs to be prioritised with adequate slipways, piers and berthing facilities at all coastal and inland waterways. To use Sligo as one example, there are inadequate facilities at a variety of locations within the country namely, Easkey, Portavad, Culleenamore, Rosses Point, and the tidal nature of Raughly and Mullaghmore on the coast while Loughgill and many other lakes and rivers have totally inadequate access for people and craft whatever the activity. This is replicated in many counties nationwide. The marine commercial and tourism potential relative to our coastline is totally underutilised and ignored in its potential to facilitate economic activity.

### **Land Use – Rural Ireland**

Agricultural activity is and needs to remain an important economic driver for the country. While the Common Agricultural Policy provides certain supports by way of the Basic Payment Scheme, Area of Natural Constraint Scheme, REPs, AEOS, Glas among others there is a need for further supports if we are to keep food production at optimum levels to ensure food security. Certain regions such as the North West region have viability problems with smaller holdings, longer winters and poorer land. Whether through restructuring the existing CAP or the introduction of a new vehicle there is a need for a 'small holding viability support' to encourage people to stay on the land. This region produces in the region of 40% of the nation's weanlings, arguably the engine room of our nations beef industry. With small holding viability issues and the increasing cost of living farmers will die off and not be replaced which will lead to land abandonment. Already where our national target for afforestation is 35%, lands are being bought up in this region for the purposes of forestry edging out local farmers seeking to increase scale due to better subsidies. Forestry is of course a positive carbon eater however it needs to be spread nationally rather than over focused within a certain region at the expense of potentially the very existence of more traditional forms of farming in the region including suckling, dairying and finishing.

## **Arts Heritage Archaeology**

Culture and the Arts are a tremendous asset in Ireland. In many ways internationally it's our unique selling point and we must intensify our support for and focus on the area. Land of saints and scholars a plethora of playwrights, poets, authors, actors, artists, sculptors, musicians, song writers and national monuments provide us with a resource the bounty from which we have not even begun to truly realise. Educational, Literary and Archaeological Tourism are immense in a global context and we have neither the inclination or the supporting infrastructure to truly realise its potential at this time. An audit of the top 20 brands across all of the arts should be identified; interpretive centres developed at the appropriate regional locations and marketed heavily so that we can make a start at following a plan to reach our potential in this regard. Marine Archaeology is all but unknown in Ireland yet the very substantial graveyard of ship wrecks within Irish Waters is truly remarkable, none more famous than the 26 wrecks of the Spanish Armada sprinkled from Off the Antrim Coast to the Dingle Peninsula and 3 clustered at Streedagh Co Sligo very close to shore. A national centre for marine archaeology needs to be developed together with a national maritime museum to protect these sites and document this valuable resource not least begin to realise the tourism and commercial potential it has. We are rich in national monuments though many are under threat due to lack of appropriate resources, some are on lands not within state control and many are in danger of disappearing altogether. Appropriate resources need to be made available to ensure the protection of these monuments through the state acquiring important national monuments not resting on state owned lands and also to effectively manage a staggered access programme to ensure that certain monuments are 'rested' from public access for periods to protect their further decay. Again the tourism potential offered by correctly caring for and managing access to our national monuments can be an excellent economic contributor.

## **Strategic Commercial Clustering & Employment Support.**

The United States whether by chance or design have enjoyed a certain success through economic clustering. Government and administration in Washington DC bordering Virginia and Maryland, Heavy Manufacturing – Michigan, Services – Georgia, Financial Services- New York, Pharma & Medical Devices Illinois & Massachusetts, Information Technology in California and Agriculture and Farming in the Great Plains. The NPF should prioritise similar clustering following the centres of the Greater Dublin Area, Waterford, Cork, Limerick, Galway & Sligo as regional drivers, Employment supports and incentives should promote such a policy while the efforts of IDA & Enterprise Ireland should mirror such a clustering vision. Indigenous Industry must be supported in a much greater way than heretofore. The SME sector remains the driving force of our economy despite the higher profile of State Supported Foreign commercial enterprises. A priority scheme must undertake a clinical examination as to the state related costs of enterprise establishment and continuity. The regulatory burden, rates, taxes and licencing requirements and all state related costs must be reduced and balanced with the capability and potential of business types, size and geographic location relative to the employment need at that location.

## **Infrastructure.**

Key infrastructure required for Ireland for the next 20 years should be prioritised to support the key regional drivers namely the Greater Dublin Area, Cork, Limerick, Waterford, Galway and Sligo. They must include motorway connectivity, improved public transport, to each other and the Capital City. Each region requires availability of 4 levels of education including the established universities being added to with the expansion and upgrading of Waterford IT and the realisation of the Connaught Ulster Alliance promoting a multi campus North Western University of Technology headquartered in

Sligo together with the NUIG Campus at St Angelas Sligo. A critical mass of acute health services including all the adopted national clinical programmes including the national cancer control programme and cardiology together with the other disciplines. Clearly a critical mass of services already exists in Dublin and where surgery is not possible to regionalise all post-operative treatments must be with the exception of cardiology which demands 90 minute turn around following an episode and so demands regional access at each of the mentioned centres. The virtual border which exists north of Dublin-Galway line and west of Mullingar must be removed. The provision of an M4 through to Sligo, M17 from Galway to Sligo and M15 & 16 must be prioritised, resourced and realised in the mentioned order and within the 20 year life span of the NPF

### **Implementation.**

The challenge to implementation is the provision of adequate resources and how we prioritise. The focus on firefighting needs to be replaced with the provision of capacity before demand. Nationally our debt to GDP ratio is heading south of 80%. This is indeed welcome and a notable turnaround when measured against the all-time high of 135% in the 80s and heading towards 120% during the recent crash. EU rules seek all to have a much lower ratio and to meet targets which are not conducive with a country seeking to undertake a strategic planning and investment strategy to prepare our country to grow and develop to our potential and thrive in a sustainable manner which improves everyone's health and quality of life. Capital investment in the order of 10bn per year over the course of 20 years is probably the sort of level which is required. With the arrival of 100 year money through the good offices of the National Treasury Management Agency bond issue at what are extremely low interest rates it is certainly possible to meet some of this demand through borrowing on a very long term basis but the impact on our debt to GDP ratio and deficit/surplus current account expectations in line with EU rules means that doing so may not be impossible. In the absence of an unlikely round of additional structural funds from the EU it is hard to imagine how as a nation we may be able to trade our way to the provision of 10bn or its equivalent in capital expenditure every year for the next 20. Negotiation on this level is required with the EU and perhaps the targeting of 5bn from own resources for capital expenditure and the borrowing of 5bn for the exclusive purposes of providing critical infrastructure to support the plan. Given the road infrastructure projects necessary there is merit in the examination of whether Transport Infrastructure Ireland or a new state entity could undertake the design build and management of all new motorways given the tolling returns over time. This may be better than subcontracting however difficult it may be given the revenue streams this could provide for the exchequer in the future.

The success of the potential of this plan is to ensure the correct geographical spread and the ambition to identify the potential of each region and lay out a plan and resources in services and infrastructure to allow each region to perform to its potential driven by the regional growth centres and adjacent towns and villages. Ambition is vital in drawing up the detail and this should not be hampered by the current lack of resources. Once the plan potential is accepted and the resources and services required to reach that potential are identified solutions can be considered for financing.

### **Conclusion.**

In the final analysis the success of any plan can only be measured by how it has provided the template and environment to reach our potential. In the foregoing I have outlined some of my suggestions of how this might be achieved. Access, Connectivity, Economic and Environmental Sustainability and the realisation that we must seek to use all of our available capacity as a nation are central themes. Those ultimately adjudicating on the shape of the final plan must be ambitious. Equally they must not be swayed by political expediency or the current fiscal constraints. To do so will inevitably scuttle the potential for success. Resource solutions can and will be found to progress any agreed plan.

Marc Mac Sharry TD  
Knockaderry House  
Stephen Street  
Sligo.