

Submission to the National Planning Framework – March 2017.

An immediate reaction to the Ireland 2040 National Planning Framework is that it does not show sufficient vision, or inspire enough confidence, to holistically advance the ability of the Irish people to flourish.

That said, the consultation paper does outline current and emerging issues that require appropriate but imaginative choices.

Whereas the National Spatial Strategy tried to spread spatial planning for development over far too many centres, the NPF appears to concentrate on too few, leaving large swathes of the country without a conurbation selected for accelerated development to be an effective regional driver.

10 Key Questions for the National Planning Framework

1. What should Ireland look like in 20 years?

With thoughtful, innovative, inclusive implementation of the NPF, following much lateral and imaginative thinking by key policy makers, Ireland should be home to a greatly expanded and content population. Our democracy should be in rude good health, supported by a citizenry confident in the ability of the apparatus of state, to nurture, educate, protect and foster employment. The individual should be in a position to flourish, irrespective of location or background, enabled by state of the art connectivity giving access to accommodation, employment, services and leisure, underwritten by equitable taxation and strong social justice.

It is within the grasp of our policy makers to realise this vision through the NPF process, if they are brave enough to make some revolutionary life affirming decisions for our future.

2. How do we ensure that every place can realise its potential?

Connectivity is the answer, at two levels.

High speed broadband connectivity throughout the national territory must be

a fundamental provision, so that e-commerce and the electronic cottage (working from home) are as immediate to everyone, as electricity and water are at the present time.

High speed electrified trunk rail links between all our cities and major towns, will provide the long term, fast, safe, green foundation that will provide leverage to unlock the potential of the entire country, through reducing the perception of distance.

High speed rail in the UK and mainland Europe delivers average speeds of over 200KPH.

The maximum motorway speed for buses in Ireland is 100KPH (S.I. No. 546 of 2008).

Bus based public transport cannot deliver the enhanced inter-city connectivity of high speed rail but can deliver effective connectivity from railheads, to outlying areas, provided bus and train timetables ensure efficient integration. Such integration of transport modes is required to extend real connectivity to peripheral communities.

In addition to upgrading the existing radial intercity railway routes, the partially disused cross radial route from Rosslare through Waterford, Limerick, Athenry to Sligo needs to be upgraded to enable high speed trains.

A new rail alignment from Sligo to Derry, connecting with the line to Belfast, would allow seamless connection between Waterford, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Sligo, Derry and Belfast.

Furthermore, the legacy issue of the closed trunk rail route linking Dublin with Derry needs to be rebuilt, to accelerate meaningful re-integration of the North-West's economy into the life of the nation.

A Railway Order to select the optimum route options for both these lines should be a policy priority, to complete a national high speed trunk rail network, delivering world class connectivity for generations to come.

The existing disused part of the Western Rail Corridor from Tuam to Collooney should also be subject to a Railway Order for enhanced route selection.

Sharing new motorway alignments with high speed rail should significantly reduce construction costs. Bimodal construction opportunities should be investigated for the N17/M17 corridor and between Letterkenny and Derry.

A radical change in how Ireland chooses to fund capital expenditure must be embraced if we are to catapult Ireland into the premier tier of developed

nations and break free from “Business as Usual”.

Low interest loans, over a long term (50-100 years) from the European Investment Bank, World Bank or Asian investment funds, used in conjunction with EU TEN-T funding, will allow Ireland build world class, sustainable rail and road infrastructure that will serve several generations. With demographic predictions of a population of 10 million on the island by mid-century, front loading infrastructure is not merely a prudent choice; it must be basic policy.

The omission of Sligo from co-ordinated planning and investment, on a par with the four second tier cities, is a major flaw in the NPF document, as it perpetuates the division of the country north and west of Galway into a "reservation" stunting its potential and ability to partake fully, as a net contributor to the National economy. Sligo’s Gateway City status should be restored, the nearest cities of Galway and Derry are both more than 130 kilometres away, emphasising its important position as the regional driver of the North-West.

Sligo is the largest urban centre in the North-West, serving as an administrative, commercial, health education and employment centre for a hinterland that extends far beyond the county boundaries, which is substantially larger than that of other towns of similar population.

3. Where will jobs be located and what will those jobs be?

Subject to provision of high speed connectivity as outlined above, jobs can be virtually anywhere, nationwide. A greatly increased number of people will e-work from home on a part, or full time basis. Those who travel to work should have greater choice of where they live and work, as a result of major reduction in public transport commuting times through high speed connectivity. With the increased amount of third level graduates, there will be a relative decrease in manufacturing jobs and a corresponding increase in IT, pharma, medical, educational, energy, marine sector, tourism and financial sector employment.

4. Where will we live and what type of housing will be needed?

We will increasingly live in or near urban areas, with high speed rail connectivity for easy access to a multiplicity of services and amenities both nearby and at a distance. A regeneration of urban centre living (“over the shop”) should be encouraged, reducing unnecessary car ownership and commutes. Putting a policy of affirmative action/positive discrimination in place, should increase urban vibrancy and quality of life with a reduction of anti-social activity. Doughnut type development around urban areas should be discouraged by building more central 1 and 2 person, mid/high rise apartment complexes.

Proximity of homes to jobs will have as much to do with high speed access and connectivity, as with geography. Speed of travel would reduce the size of the country in relative terms and render centres of excellence more accessible to a wider spread of population. With high speed rail links one could travel from Dublin to Sligo-Galway or Limerick in less than 90 minutes, or from Limerick to Sligo or Westport in less than two hours. Galway to Limerick-Castlebar or Limerick to Cork-Waterford would entail a journey time of less than one hour, Sligo would be within an hour’s journey from Mullingar and Castlebar would be within an hour’s journey from Athlone.

It would make housing in a more dispersed spatial structure more attractive, helping the creation of connected and sustainable communities, where future employment will be located. A policy commitment to rail transport will facilitate the growth of carbon friendly rail freight traffic to and from Ports. Railways are a strategic infrastructure that must be prioritised and should be the gold standard of land transportation.

5. What are the key services people will need?

People will need easy access to housing, healthcare, education, employment, public services and amenities, delivered by enhanced connectivity at a physical and electronic level within and between each region. We must avoid continuing the present scenario of providing third level courses that have scant employment prospects. Furthermore, it is a waste of resources training graduates for export, we need to closely couple supply to demand.

6. Where will Ireland be in a wider (geographical) context?

By 2040, following balanced spatial development, brought about by far-sighted advance planning, Ireland will be the Gateway Nation to the EU and beyond. Courageous, innovative policy decisions will allow Ireland to be rightly recognised as a leader in sustainable quality food production, green technology, marine energy production, high end tourism, IT excellence, education and many other fields. As an island nation we will have embraced the full range of our ocean resources.

7. What are the planning responses to key environmental challenges?

Domestic electricity production must be diversified and ramped up to deliver major marine based, renewable generating capacity. This will significantly reduce the national carbon footprint. The provision of high speed electrified rail lines and a suitably dense network of charging points for a large fleet of electric vehicles will obviate the need for internal combustion for land transport.

Coastlines vulnerable to inundation from rising sea levels and flood plains must be designated as no build zones. New and existing critical infrastructure must be future proofed from flooding and increasing sea levels.

8. What infrastructure is required-what are the national priorities?

Finish the motorways from Tuam to Derry and from Dublin to Derry. Electrify the entire rail system to allow high speed running with added trunk lines from Galway to Derry and Dublin to Derry. Connect all our first and second tier ports to the rail network. With bedrock of quality rail and road infrastructure in place, access and connectivity will be enhanced. This will allow unlocking and leveraging of the potential of disparate regions, to become net contributors to the national economy. It will reduce the concept that anywhere on this small island is remote.

Rosslare Europort needs to expand its portfolio to include intermodal freight trains. The Limerick-Foynes TEN-T Core railway should be re-opened without delay.

9. How should a National Planning Framework be implemented?

NPF implementation should be delivered from the bottom up as well as from the top down. Due cognisance should be taken of the Regional Planning Guide lines and County Plans especially with regard to infrastructure that crosses administrative boundaries. More decision making power should be devolved to the Regional Assemblies. The current lopsided spatial spread of our cities must be counteracted by developing Sligo as a second tier city. The majority of jobs will be in the urban hierarchy of cities and towns. Connectivity through high speed rail links needs to be recognised as a real and valid strategy, not a “wish list item”. How we do place making requires a fundamental shift towards enhanced connectivity. This is not about saving life expired post offices. The reviewed capital investment plan needs to be revisited, to make a radical policy shift in how capital projects are funded.

10. What will success look like?

If our present policy makers have the same grit and courage as their predecessors at the foundation of the state, to take bold decisions, we can confidently look forward to better, prosperous and less selfish times ahead.