

NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK

Submission by the Labour Party

Introduction

Ireland 2040 must be a radical and ambitious vision for the development of the country over the next 20 years, underpinned by values of solidarity, equity and sustainability. Providing for a population of an additional million people, the plan must be designed to ensure that growth is balanced and sustainable and provides economic opportunity, a healthy and clean environment across the island, and fairness for all.

Choices will have to be made: to build on the strengths of each region; to balance the growth of the greater Dublin area with significant growth in the other cities; to prioritise city and town centres over peripheral expansion; to invest in alternatives to fossil fuels and take serious action on carbon emissions. This means a courageous and bold approach that is firmly focused on an ambitious and realistic vision of the development of society and the environment into the medium and long term.

It is particularly important that the exigencies of short-term political priorities are not permitted to dictate what needs to be a long-term plan.

It must also be a 'whole of Government' plan, that commits all Departments to purposeful and coherent action. All significant investment decisions and plans of Government Departments and Agencies need to be aligned with the NPF.

Accordingly, a proofing mechanism to ensure consistency – or to advise Government in the case of variance – needs to be put in place across Government and the State apparatus.

Plans within the Plan

The National Planning Framework is the overarching plan for the country but within it Regional, City and County and Local Area plans need to be aligned. This is, in theory, how it works now. But, from tribunals to decentralisation to building on flood plains to sprawling estates on the edges of cities, national spatial planning has not functioned well in Ireland.

There is a careful balance to be struck here. The needs of local democracy, through formal local government and, more generally, through community participation, must be carefully calibrated with the plan to permit its operation within the principles of subsidiarity.

To work, it needs both to be led from Government and embraced and understood at community level.

The consultation process is important in this regard but so too is implementation of the outstanding recommendations of the Planning Tribunal, including establishment of the office of Planning Regulator. One of the functions of that office is educational.

We also propose that each Local Authority take on an education function, in order to develop a sense of common purpose and to achieve what is best for the community as a whole, ahead of the interests of individual developers or special pleading.

Sustainable Growth and a Just Transition

Reaching our targets on carbon reduction and ensuring sustainable growth demands timelines that are consistently monitored and rigorous action across sectors including energy, transport, building and agriculture.

Planning for carbon mitigation and spatial planning for an increasing population are inseparable. Population growth, labour force participation rates, settlement patterns and increased affordability of transport all serve to increase energy demand. Indeed, settlement patterns play a fundamental role in influencing how people travel, both the distances undertaken and the modal choice.

Transport policies aimed at reducing travel demand can only be delivered if there are effective spatial policies, implemented at local and national level. The spatial relationship between where a person lives, works, goes to school, shops and socialises forms the basis for this demand.

Sustainable transport alternatives can only be effective if matched with development patterns that locate future populations close to employment centres and complementary services such as education, retail and leisure.

It is clear that land use policy is a key determinant of transport investment decisions, so it is vital that land use planning and transport planning are fully aligned.

A just transition to a low carbon future is required, with the support of an informed public, so that alternative employment is created when old energy production methods are discontinued.

"Just Transition" means a framework, developed by the trade union movement and NGOs, to encompass a range of social interventions needed to secure workers' jobs and livelihoods when economies are shifting to sustainable production. It is a concept that has been endorsed by governments in different arenas, including the International Labour Organisation and most recently in the Paris Climate Agreement.

A just transition must include initiatives such as a green infrastructure funds, support for community energy projects, an expanded use of district heating, directing State-owned companies to increase their use of green energy sources and ultimately a realistic deadline for the end of fossil fuels.

We have the natural resources to achieve this and, as a coal importer rather than a coal producer, it should be easier for us than for other parts of the world.

Key principals of sustainability that are evidenced in projects such as the Cloughjordan eco-village should be mainstreamed.

Crucial to a plan that looks out to 2040 is the next generation of decision makers, who are currently in primary and secondary school. We need to acknowledge that, on environmental and energy issues, that generation is already more advanced in its thinking than the generation that will shape and draft this plan.

Initiatives such as the Green Flag project and sow and grow programmes in our schools work. They instil lifelong appreciation of sustainability and energy reduction. This is the generation that have the most impact on making Ireland 2040 a reality and we would urge that our young generation has a way to make a formal input into developing this strategy.

Regional Strengths

The plan has to have a clear understanding that "one for everyone in the audience" is not an option if we are to create a truly viable plan. This means that realistic and strong decisions in the initial plan and in subsequent investment decisions must be aimed at reinforcing and building critical mass in a way that optimises the growth and development opportunities in an efficient and equitable manner.

Central to the plan should be the concept of resilience. This is often taken to mean environmental resilience and the ability to meet the demands of climate change. However, social and economic resilience needs to be a core value of the National Planning Framework. This means that areas need to have the capacity and resources to sustain and reproduce themselves. To achieve this, certain levels of economic activity, demography and public services will be required, and the Framework needs to address this.

However, the core task of the Planning Framework must be to identify and support the key strengths of regions, to identify untapped potential, and to ensure that regions can avail of opportunities in new sectors or technologies.

Cities and Urban Centres

It is clear that most population growth will take place in cities and towns. This needs to be a clear policy decision and to be supported by the plan.

Growth in all cities, towns and villages should be in a compact urban form of walkable and vibrant neighbourhoods that discourage unnecessary car use and encourage a high degree of vitality, with good public services and well integrated private use. This must optimise use of infrastructure and opportunities for cycling and public transport.

The Framework must demand the creation and development of high quality places in which to live, work, learn and educate in an integrated and balanced way. This will mean higher densities and new models of development.

Higher density does not have to mean greater building height and the traditional form of Irish towns and villages can be reinvigorated and reinvented to create integrated, vital, modern urban communities. Our centres should be inclusive, open, safe, attractive and accessible. These principles need to be set out in the NPF and carried throughout the planning system.

There needs to be clear positive discrimination in favour of city and town centres, with ambition to use available space usefully. This includes making use of empty living spaces, reviving the Living Over the Shop programme, reforming the Living City Initiative and giving support to businesses so that spare appropriate commercial space can be used for community, creative or not-for-profit initiatives.

Our ageing population and falling household size means that smaller housing units will be required in the future. The NPF needs to acknowledge the need of a changing Ireland and promote design that is suitable and accessible for all.

However, the plan needs to recognise the interdependence of all citizens and that our community life is strengthened when people of all ages, social classes and ethnic backgrounds share common space.

We should avoid plans that strictly segregate housing or community facilities by any specific social label. Recent examples of creative thinking in this regard include successful projects in the USA and the Netherlands where crèche facilities share space with a nursing home – we should plan for this type of intergenerational mix.

As our President Michael D Higgins has said: "There is something extraordinarily natural, imaginatively and ethically superior when you have solidarity between generations".

In term of reinforcing and optimising the potential of our existing urban centres, there is a need for both orbital and radial transport routes that link to centres. New building outside centres on public transportation routes, together with densification and consolidation strategies, can greatly enhance the quality of life for existing and future residents and bring services and amenities closer to people

Dublin

The challenge for Dublin is to optimise growth and provide for the opportunities that only a capital city can attract. Dublin is, and will remain, Ireland's most important engine of economic growth and employment. Ensuring that it can work to maximum efficiency is vital for the country as a whole.

However, this does not mean that Dublin should attract investment and opportunities that might be better made elsewhere. Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges of the NPF is to find the balance between supporting Dublin as an economic centre while channelling appropriate development to where it can operate to the optimum.

This challenge highlights the importance of a cross-Government approach to the NPF and of an understanding across the public sector of the spatial dimension of investment and policy decisions.

We should also recognise that aspects of current policy do strike this balance. For instance, last year 52% of all IDA supported jobs created were outside of Dublin.

The points made earlier are particularly relevant to Dublin: densities appropriate to the need for housing; priority for public transport and pedestrian and cycling access;

containing peripheral sprawl; an outer orbital route with radial connections and new housing concentrated at those junctions as well as in and near the centre.

Other Cities

It is likely that other cities in Ireland will double their populations by 2040. It is critical that this takes place in a way that is socially, economically and environmentally sustainable.

Central to this is that the "doughnut" effect, whereby activity and development has tended to move from the centre to the periphery, must be reversed. There is great potential for substantial revitalisation of our cities and towns and it is of paramount importance that we get this right.

Given the small size of the island, its already dispersed population pattern and the potential of existing centres, it is difficult to make the case for new urban centres or for any structures that would undermine the potential to reinvigorate existing centres.

It is vital that the NPF not over-extend itself in a way that will dilute the impact of good consolidation policies or lead to over-diffusion of scarce resources, or sprawl effects as one catchment area starts to spill into another.

However, there are specific questions that inevitably arise in considering the spatial framework. In particular, attention needs to be paid to the Dublin-Belfast corridor, the North West and its connectivity to Northern Ireland, the potential of the Limerick-Shannon region and the need to progress a technological university for the South East.

Towns, Villages and Rural Areas

Irish towns, villages and rural areas are vital to the social and economic wellbeing of the country. The NPF needs to plan for population growth, but not on same scale as in the cities.

We need to consider whether current local authority areas are always conducive to ensuring an integrated relationship between towns and villages and their rural hinterlands.

Should there be other zones for spatial planning purposes, such as the West and South coasts, which could exploit a shared approach to opportunities such as the Wild Atlantic Way and other tourism, fishing, offshore energy and other coastal opportunities?

Could the Shannon basin present another opportunity for spatial planning?

Connectivity

Public transport is under threat. Both Iarnród Éireann and Bus Éireann need to be specifically referenced in the NPF, with an explicit commitment to support them as a matter of principle in discharging the State's obligation to ensure public transport network.

Greenways and cycleways should be mapped and their development planned, out to 2040.

Our motorway system in terms of links to Dublin is good. But we need high quality road networks between the other cities. The most glaring example is between our second and third cities, Cork and Limerick, but others also need to be advanced, as does the link to the North-West.

High-speed broadband connectivity is an essential requirement for enterprise development nationwide.

In the context of planning for Brexit, connectivity with the European mainland becomes of paramount importance. Our national and regional seaports and airports must be considered vital national infrastructure needing ongoing support in order to secure our future connectivity beyond the island.

Housing

Planning for housing is perhaps the most important challenge of the NPF. The location and nature of housing can dictate quality of life. How this is planned, delivered and provided for is a determinant of the sustainability of the overall spatial structure and environmental wellbeing of the country.

It is clear that new models of housing and new typologies will be required to cater for smaller households and an older population. This means locating housing where it is accessible to services. The NPF must ensure that the planning system is able to deliver affordable, secure and efficient housing to every household as a key social and economic priority for Ireland. Housing is crucial not only to the wellbeing of individuals and families but also to the good of society and the economy as a whole. Housing needs to be seen as core infrastructure that supports and facilitates wider social and economic development.

As we age and live longer, the population of retired people by 2040 will be very large. More one bedroomed homes and more accessible and supported housing schemes for older people as alternative to nursing homes will be needed.

Building regulations, SEAI grants, etc., have all contributed to making new homes more energy efficient. We can take this further and expand on retrofitting to improve BER ratings on older houses and other buildings.

Our planning laws must include an overall high-level requirement of zoning for sustainability.

Land and Sea

The NPF will need to incorporate a marine spatial strategy that defines the optimum relationship with the sea around us, including planning for coastal zones, the foreshore and its interaction with the land.

Ireland's potential to replace fossil fuels with off-shore energy sources is an opportunity that simply must be exploited during the lifetime of the plan. Technology is advancing in terms of the cost-effectiveness of wind and wave energy. The plan

must commit to the necessary research and investment in what is potentially a huge win for the environment, the economy and the coastal communities of Ireland.

The success of the Wild Atlantic Way has brought jobs and opportunities to parts of the country that can further benefit in a real way by the development of offshore energy, fishing and other resources. An integrated marine spatial strategy as part of the NPF is essential to this.

Implementation and Timelines

The NPF will be the overarching plan within which Government strategy is developed. It will guide and underwrite the policies underpinning capital planning, the Action Plan for Jobs, Housing Action Plans, Regional Skills Planning, and so on.

It will need to contain timelines for priority actions particularly in the area of supply of housing and reaching energy and sustainability targets.

Clearly, an immediate priority will be Brexit preparation, how the island as a whole responds to the many challenges that will bring, how we work with other countries to develop a Social Europe and how we relate to our neighbours in Britain.

Finally, and importantly, the Labour Party believes that the National Planning Framework should be guided by the spirit of inclusion as well as the mental and physical wellbeing of all of our people. It should accordingly have as a stated goal the ending of poverty, including food poverty and energy poverty, and it should future-proof this goal beyond the lifetime of the plan.

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