



SENATOR GED NASH

Submission by Senator Ged Nash on the National Planning Framework

Introduction

I am pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission on the proposed new National Planning Framework; Ireland 2040.

The previous government, of which I was a member, brought forward the early consideration of a plan to replace the 2002 National Spatial Strategy.

In so doing, the then government acknowledged that the 2002 Strategy was redundant and is no longer fit for purpose to guide national planning, development and investment strategy.

Objectively, in the context of evidence-based policy making the 2002 NSS was a failure.

It was narrowly-based document inspired by party political and electoral considerations and had little to do with national spatial planning as one would understand it.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the Strategy's stark failure to reflect the significance of Drogheda – Ireland's largest town – and its hinterland, and the inherent capacity of the town to act as a counter-balance to Dublin city and a regional centre and driver of economic growth, and social and cultural development.

The town – designated as a 'Primary Growth Centre' – was in essence ignored by the drafters and sponsors of the 2002 Plan.

This fact has had negative impact on the status of the town and on the policy of State agencies to its growth and development since.



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Current status of Drogheda and it's environs

Drogheda is Ireland's largest town located in one of the most heavily urbanised counties in the State. The town is located at the gateway to the historic Boyne Valley with unrivalled access to Dublin Airport, on the Dublin to Belfast rail line and at the heart of the M1 Economic Corridor the town.

With a highly skilled and mobile population of just under 40,000, there are a further 6,000 people located in housing estates within the urban fabric of the town in the southern environs of Drogheda, Co. Meath.

Unfortunately from a sustainable development and planning point of view the recent Drogheda Boundary Commission failed to recommend an extension to the Drogheda boundary into Co. Meath

There is a traditional and growing connectedness and affinity too with the now heavily urbanised Bettystown-Laytown-Mornington areas of Co. Meath, the population of which look to Drogheda for many services and supports.

It is absolutely critical that the NPF process takes into account the true and accurate measurement of the urban scale of the greater Drogheda area when decisions are being made in respect of the area's place and status in the national planning hierarchy.

It would be a travesty and unacceptable to see Drogheda's status defined merely as a town of almost 40,000, restricted geographically by an arbitrary barrier with Co. Meath which is a daily cause of frustration and confusion for many local residents.

The true scale of the area is more akin to that of Waterford city than to Dundalk and this should be reflected as such in the new NPF plan.



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The failure of the Boundary Commission to propose the extension of the boundary despite the Commission members explicitly recognising the “advantages” that would flow from such a move should not disadvantage Drogheda in terms of the consideration of this plan.

Drogheda’s advantages, potential and future status

I support the submissions made by groups such as The Mill Enterprise centre (M1 Payments Corridor) and the Drogheda City Status Group.

The City Status group has for some time worked alongside DIT academic Brian Hughes in order to develop a clear and substantive evidence-base for the growth and development of Drogheda as a ‘city’.

Arguably, Irish law is silent on a pathway to ‘city status’ and the government would be advised to develop clear legislative criteria in the context of this national plan in order to provide for such designations and in the context of a further, and in my opinion a necessary reorganisation of local government structures which should give ultimate primacy to major urban centres such as Drogheda and Dundalk as key regional drivers of growth.

In an effort to provide counterbalance to Dublin as the ‘primate city’, it would be advisable and more cost-effective to look to urbanised centres such as Drogheda with it’s own strong identity and core and to the existing infrastructural and skills strengths available in the area when the plan is seeking to designate new regional centres for growth and development.

As the Department is aware, there is sufficient zoned and serviced land to the north and south of Drogheda’s core to support an almost doubling of the population over the next generation.

The locational advantages are key and this has become a factor in recent times in terms of industrial development with IDA visits to the area more than doubling since

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2014 and with companies such as Yapstone, MTI and Kellton Tech choosing Drogheda as their EMEA base ahead of Dublin for cost, location and skills reasons.

Drogheda offers the best of both worlds to MNCs. Proximity to Dublin but at a more competitive cost and access to skilled workers in the town and along the M1 Corridor with excellent transport linkages, good quality of life and more affordable housing than in the capital.

The Regional Action Plans for Jobs, which I helped to author, recognises the need to spread growth across the State taking advantage of the existing core strengths present in a region. The area has been designated as a centre for Digital Payments and Fintech based on its existing strengths.

The plan should also recognise the intrinsic relationship between Drogheda and Dundalk and appropriately reflect the importance of the north Louth town and its relationship with Newry and the border hinterland in general, particularly in the context of Brexit and the town's location on the M1 Economic Corridor.

Investors and decision-makers identify and choose areas of scale when making investment decisions.

That is why it is crucial that Drogheda's full and true extent, its population, human capital, geographical, locational, historic and infrastructural advantages should be highlighted and emerge through the plan in terms of Drogheda's designation as the most significant urban centre in the North-East and a driver of economic growth and social and cultural development in the region.



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Conclusion

1. Drogheda should be designated as a 'city' and a legislative pathway should be created to allow the town, and other designated centres to be similarly designated under clear and objective criteria.
2. Drogheda, given its existing strengths, hinterland, infrastructure, history and location should be viewed as a top-ranking development centre under the new NPF to effectively act as an 'alternative' centre in close proximity to Dublin, on the M1 Corridor and as the largest town in the North-East and in Ireland.
3. The National Planning Framework process should reflect on the mistakes made in the Local Government Reform Act 2014 which undermined local government and democracy in urban areas and consider the re-establishment of town government and the reorganisation and consolidation of local government along urban lines as the drivers of regional development.
4. The failure of the Drogheda Boundary Review to recommend a boundary change should not blind government to the true and accurate scale and population of the area and neither should it serve as a disadvantage the town when it comes to its proper and appropriate designation under the proposed new National Planning Framework.

Ends.