

Ireland 2040
National Planning Framework

Submission by
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Introduction

Young Fine Gael as an organisation has a network of over four thousand members, all under 35, in villages, small towns, suburbs, and cities, across Ireland. As a youth political organisation we know all too well of the challenges our country faces in the coming years. It is imperative to ensure a youth voice is added to the discussion on how planning shall be framed over the next twenty years. Ireland will face many changes over the next few decades, we can expect a growing population that will need improved infrastructure, housing, school & third level places. Future development, be it large scale, or a one off build, need to be sustainable and link under one plan.

Unfortunately a 'business as usual' approach has done us a disservice in recent times. We have seen large scale housing developments built in areas totally unsuited to that type of accommodation. Many of these were abandoned while our urban areas undergo a critical housing shortage. Underinvestment in transport infrastructure clogs our roads with commuters who have no viable public transport alternatives. We must plan to both tackle climate change, and how best to respond to it's changes in our environment, as these actions now will help protect us, and our children, for years to come.

Our Submission was assembled from the views of our members and is broken down into five key areas: Planning, Governance, Transport, Climate Change & Environment, and Implementation. Each section identifies current problems and offers some solutions that we feel should help guide the preparation of the National Planning Framework.

Priorities for Planning between now and 2040

Facilities for young people are a core component of development, from small villages to large scale suburban housing schemes. Local area plans & housing schemes must include recreational areas such as pitches, along with community centres.

Housing, industry, and recreational areas, are to be balanced to provide a sustainable environment for us to grow old in. Citizens must be given a reasonable opportunity to live near where they work & get educated. Mixed housing schemes to replace large estates of one-type of housing.

Local public transport options to be available from small towns to cities. Rail & bus to connect seamlessly to allow less time for commuting. The road network to connect provincial towns, not just direct to Dublin.

Broadband for rural towns and villages is crucial for future business planning, we cannot have new business parks without high-speed broadband. Irish cities must be able to compete with their worldwide counterparts for internet speeds.

Future industry must be balanced against environmental concerns, whilst ensuring a growing economy, we must protect the environment. This is particularly important in regards to large scale wind & hydroelectric energy projects.

Reduce red-tape and barriers to planning across all local authorities. Home builders and large scale developers should not have to wait years for planning permission, or appeals.

Planning

Identifying current problems faced in planning and building

New building that is out of character for neighbourhoods, lack of joined up thinking when granting planning permission. Housing estates not being connected & creating barriers to community development.

Overbuilding in some areas, too many housing units with little services & infrastructure to support. Current facilities cannot support the population, situation exacerbated by new housing.

Large scale flood defence schemes, while welcome, have not been architecturally integrated into the cityscape, another example of poor joined-up thinking.

Attention has been focused heavily on procuring large housing schemes in cities. Rural towns will still require housing units and need more dedicated attention from Government to ensure private developers are attracted to build sustainable housing schemes.

Overhaul of rental legislation for commercial buildings required on a national level, current system makes the building & outfitting of commercial premises in town centres unviable.

The cost of building has been a barrier for many who wish to build their own homes, planning requirements add unnecessary expense to tight budgets.

Traffic management, public transport and road quality need to be considered when allowing for or approving development. The lack of which should not slow down building though, local authorities need to keep pace with developers by improving infrastructure.

Solutions to improving our planning system

Digitise the planning process so residents can view planning & submit objections online without having to pay to view documents.

Some planning decisions need to be de-centralised and more power given to local planning authorities to make decisions that account for unique local variables. This would have the effect of both improving the efficiencies and effectiveness of planning decisions.

Planning authorities need to be better resourced. In this way, bodies such as An Bord Pleanála can process applications with greater efficiency and ensure that viable developments can be given the go ahead as soon as is practicable.

Require housing estates to connect to one another, even by footpath and local area plans to prioritise shared green spaces and community resources (play-parks, recycling sites, etc.)

Due consideration to be given to rural residents & their children who wish to build locally. While one-off housing needs to be restricted, each case should be assessed on an individual basis.

Fast tracking system for large scale development & important infrastructure. We should not have to wait five years for planning approval on rail & road projects.

Role of rural towns and villages have in the Irish economy

Change of mindset needed on a national level – rural towns can thrive if given the opportunity.

Rural urban centres are and can provide more than agricultural benefits to the economy. With a properly developed broadband system these areas can serve as hubs for development of SMEs.

Towns such as Clonakilty and Skibbereen show how rural areas can serve as technology hubs.

Tourist destination- develop their natural resources like rivers for fishing or boating or old railways for cycling and walking. The cooperation of local business needs to be sought out to ensure tourist investment is targeted correctly.

Broadband should allow rural towns and villages to become effective local economic hubs and markets. It is important to localise govt services to support this.

Developing our urban areas while also protecting their architectural heritage

Improving the density of our urban centres is essential to ensure transport & infrastructure investment targets as many residents as possible. All Irish cities, including Dublin, would classify as low-density.

Height restrictions on residential and commercial properties should be assessed on a case by case basis. Blanket bans on building height serve no purpose but to limit future development.

To protect our architectural heritage we need to review areas of special significance within areas and ensure that these are listed appropriately. While I have no knowledge of the listing process, I would envisage a system that could be flexible to ensure that while full buildings can be listed, so too could elements of buildings to ensure that redevelopment can take place.

Planning should take account of the history of an area and this should be worked into future developments. Eg: The redevelopment of McCurtain Street in Cork to create a Victorian Quarter.

Improvement of public transport links, in tandem with procuring dedicated cycling infrastructure to make Irish cities & towns easily walkable & cyclable.

The IDA & Enterprise Ireland need to ensure Cork, Limerick, & Galway, along other cities, are marketed to the highest possible extent to overseas companies. The spread of urban development should not be confined to Dublin & commuter belt.

Governance

Government reforms needed to ensure that our urban areas are properly developed.

Department of the Environment should review each LEA (Local Electoral Area) every 5 years and plan additional houses in accordance with that.

Reform of local government to give these authorities more freedom to plan appropriately for their own specific needs and requirements.

Vacant site levy to foster development on urban land. While we must respect property rights, it is within reason that owners of empty or disused urban land be penalised for not developing their site.

Developing our border regions & ensuring an All-Island approach

The border counties need better links with the midlands, as a one 'Border Midlands Region' there should be more direct transport links – new roads & bus routes. Similarly, these links can be extended across the border.

A dedicated 'Border Regional Business Development' organisation be established. Expertise in both business development and exporting is required so the border regions are properly resourced, particularly in light of Brexit.

Clusters of industrial centres need to be further developed across border regions.

Investment into a flagship third level institution that services the border counties, be it Athlone or Donegal, should be further developed so that the auxiliary benefits from having such a resource can be realised in the region. The successful of UL and NUIG should be a template in this regard.

Electricity infrastructure should be planned on an all-island approach.

Establishment of an advisory Border Region Council with local reps in each town across the border. Regular local link-ups to discuss issues of mutual concern, the work of the Council funded and supported by Government.

Transport and Energy

Public Transport Services

Light rail in cities outside Dublin, such as Cork & Galway. Bus Rapid Transit should be instigated in tandem if light rail not viable. Light rail routes should be safeguarded for future development, if cities need more density/time for these systems to become sustainable.

Interconnectivity between public and private services, along with bus and rail, essential. The NTA needs to pay greater attention to connecting services when agreeing timetables with operators.

Continued improvement in bus lanes for urban areas & implement available technology to give buses priority when approaching a junction.

Mandate the National Transport Authority to provide Public Service Obligation (PSO) seven day public transport service to each town over 1'000 residents in Ireland.

Break up the monopoly of CIÉ, have each constituent company run its own affairs, with own board.

Transport priority projects.

Motorway from Cork to Limerick as a transport necessity for the southern region as it links four of our major cities and is an integral part of the wild Atlantic way tourist programme. This enables inter-urban development without the need to go via Dublin.

Our railway rolling stock is quite new and should last for another 15 years. We should focus on electrifying the most used rail routes such as Dublin – Cork. The railway line to Galway should be double tracked to ensure an hourly timetable is achieved.

New & reopened railway lines such as connecting Navan to Dublin along the old alignment would ensure growing towns such as Navan are attractive places for people to live and not have to commute via car.

Metro North & Dart Underground should be delivered by 2040. Each project provides not only new stations and routes, but connects existing transport infrastructure to make many new journeys possibly by public transport in the Dublin metro area.

Reforming our Energy sector for 2040 and beyond

It is imperative to reduce our national dependence on imported oil and gas. We are vulnerable to global political change & rising oil prices. Grants should be made available for householders to produce their own electricity via solar and wind.

Offshore wind farms and tidal energy should be targeted for development as it is an area that we can be world leaders in. The Irish west coast is continually battered by the Atlantic, we must try and harness this energy.

Some of our coal fired power plants such as Moneypoint should be converted to burn biogas, which can be produced locally by Irish farmers & not imported.

While we must be cognisant of not ruining the scenic beauty of our landscape, the electricity grid needs to be upgraded & allow for better interconnectivity with Northern Ireland, Great Britain, and France.

Environment, & Climate Change

Safeguarding our landscapes, seascapes and heritage in the planning process

Improving funding to research related to the above areas, particularly in third level institutions, should be made so that we have a critical mass of experts who can advise policy makers appropriately.

Commence a National Coastal Erosion plan that includes all areas throughout Ireland that are affected by coastal erosion.

Blanket banning of local practices such as bog cutting needs to be reviewed, ensure a limited system of exception is available for locals who harvest turf for personal use. Restrict new licences to such a scheme.

Stringent rules required banning building on flood plains & on areas highlighted for coastal erosion. Large scale flood defences are needed in areas where houses have been built without consideration for flooding.

Develop urban greenbelts as pioneered in UK cities. Green barriers between urban development add trees to cities helping soak up our carbon dioxide output.

Balancing a growing population with the need to be environmentally friendly

Increase building regulations so that passive house standard is the norm within 10 years. Similarly grant-aid current housing stock to retrofit energy saving measures, reducing the need for oil-fired heating.

Continue the rollout of electric car charge points throughout the country, improve the system of grants available to purchase an electric car.

Require urban transport operators to switch a minimum of 25% of their fleet to electric traction by 2040.

Alleviating the effects of climate change

Low carbon policies help you reduce our damage to the environment. Furthermore, it reduces our dependence on fossil fuels which are harmful and expensive. A policy of moving towards tidal energy to replace fossil fuels can help move our grid towards a more sustainable system.

Diversifying the use of agricultural lands, alternating crops, etc. Ensuring we maintain farming land that balances the economic needs of the farmer with protecting the environment.

Government led task force to spearhead Ireland's commitment under the 'United Nations Sustainable Development Goals'. These 17 goals & 169 targets must be achieved by 2030, leadership needs to come from Government to affect meaningful change.

Reforest uneconomical agricultural land, Ireland was once covered in forests, trees soak up the carbon dioxide that our cars & industry produce.

Implementation

Challenges of implementation

While there will always be opposition to any large scale national plan, the challenge of satisfying competing stakeholders must be carefully managed by Government. Communication is paramount, even if there is little attention, the public must be informed every step of the way.

Balancing the competing interests will be difficult, particularly when creating density for urban centres – some areas may lose out or be de-prioritised. This has to be handled by Government through engaging with local government on a proactive basis.

Public backlash over local objections, this may manifest itself in electoral anger, particularly during local elections.

Objections from vested interests & lobbying could jeopardise key targets in the plan.

Ensuring this plan gets implemented

Legislating for this plan, without a legal framework this plan is a mere guideline that will be ignored at will – as happened the ill-fated ‘National Spatial Strategy’.

Informing people & business of this plan is crucial, when completed & agreed, this plan should be the go-to guide for any housing, business, & infrastructure development in Ireland.

We see the importance of strong government who can stick to a clear long term plan, without deviating for local concerns. Development should not be dependent on local politics.

Commitment from the permanent Government, civil service, & local authorities to engage with this plan & set achievable targets for implementation.

This plan needs cross party support to be viable across multiple governments. Furthermore, engagement with all stakeholders needs to be a priority.

Revisiting the NPF within five years & update if necessary, stricter rules should be enforced on planning authorities if guidelines not adhered to.