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Sent: 11 October 2017 11:43
To: National Planning Framework
Cc: minister@dttas.ie; Robert Troy; sean.kyne@oireachtas.ie; imelda.munster@oireachtas.ie
Subject: Submission to the National Planning Framework consultation

To whom it concerns,

I work as a Project Manager on the Thameslink Programme, a major engineering project that transforms one of London's Cross-City Railway lines. I have worked in the UK railway industry since 1989. I am originally from Donegal and have lived in London since 1985.

The Draft National Planning Framework highlights the strategic importance of the proposed Atlantic Economic Corridor for the West of Ireland but the document only speaks of the AEC as a motorway link. The motorway is only one component of the proposed Atlantic Economic Corridor which has the potential to completely transform how we do business and lead our lives.

The Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC) was conceived as a joint project by several Chambers of Commerce in major towns in the west of Ireland. The AEC would link up Belfast to Cork along an arc running through Derry, Letterkenny, Sligo, Galway and Limerick. Along the way we have five major airports and major sea ports. Some may think it is merely a case of building a motorway between all of these cities and towns but the AEC is much more than that.

The Belfast to Derry railway, long neglected is now enjoying a renaissance thanks to a more frequent and faster train service and the prospect of a major new transport hub in Derry on the site of the old Victorian Waterside station. The railway line from Limerick to Galway re-opened to passenger traffic in 2010 and is now enjoying in excess of 250,000 passengers per year. Between these points lies the currently closed Athenry to Sligo railway line, and a closed railway link exists between Foynes deep sea port and Limerick. The AEC proposals include the re-opening of these railway lines to allow passengers and freight to travel along the west coast right up to Sligo. But these lines could go further and revolutionise transport across all of Ireland.

Key counties like Fermanagh and Donegal have been without railway connections for generations. The roads in these counties have not improved significantly since the mass railway closures. It is no accident that the British Government chose Enniskillen as the venue of the G8 summit. After all, if it is already difficult to travel to a place then it follows that protests will be minimised! The AEC is specifically intended to link all of these places, but improved rail and road connections are not enough.

A clear plan to develop and expand towns served by the AEC road and rail links is vital if we are to avoid the sprawl of one off housing and shopping parks located away from our town and city centres. A rethink in the Republic in particular of one-off housing and developer-led town sprawl is necessary for the proposals to achieve all of their objectives.

A recent article in the Irish Independent by the writer Carlo Gebler highlighted the heavy use of the Sligo railway line by commuters to Dublin. Incredibly the article claims that Iarnród Éireann were only using ticket office and not including ticket machine data to measure passenger numbers and that passenger surveys appeared to be only undertaken mid week mornings in November. If these claims are true it would seem that passenger numbers are being deliberately under-estimated. Is this to justify closures?

Our airports could be better served by non-road transport. All of Northern Ireland's main airports, Belfast City, Belfast International and City of Derry all have railway lines running next to them. Rail services should stop at the airports to allow faster onward connections. Knock Airport and Shannon have nearby rail connections. These airports must have rail connections also, as this will encourage more passengers to use them. The National Transport Authority's assessment that only the proposed Metro North railway is sufficient to meet Dublin Airport's transport needs in the future is flawed; their Greater Dublin Area Transport Strategy does not take into account the wider national catchment of Dublin Airport. I welcome the words in the introduction to the NPF that a Heavy Rail option to Dublin Airport should also be considered. Bringing Heavy Rail as well as Metro North to Dublin Airport would transform Inter City rail services, as this would allow air passengers to take trains directly to and from Dublin Airport to any rail connected town or city in Ireland.

The NPF appears to deliberately avoid discussing railway connections between the major towns and cities apart from connections to Dublin. There are direct rail connections between Waterford, Limerick and Galway and an indirect route between Cork and Limerick. These connections are not mentioned at all in the NPF, instead we are told that there will be enhanced road connections. Ireland is already in breach of EU carbon emission targets. Eliminating non-Dublin railway links will make this situation far worse. It is frankly incredible that a policy document would ignore a whole method of transport. What is required for the Ireland of 2040 is a combination of both road and rail connections. This is the norm in other European countries, Ireland is not a special case that justifies the virtual elimination of our railway system.

We have to get out of the uniquely Irish mentality that railways are slow and no longer necessary. This is never the case but there are many voices out there who want to cannibalise our railways into greenways to ensure the railway lines will never come back. We need to fight back against this kind of groupthink and have the courage to re-engineer Ireland as a strong and vibrant place that can handle both population expansion in a methodical way and meet the inevitable challenge of Brexit.

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