

AT THE CENTRE OF OUR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT



Response to the Draft National Planning Framework, “Ireland 2040 – Our Plan”.

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INTRODUCTION

Our development as a country should be planned, and decisions feeding into or emanating from this plan should be based on objective criteria. There is clearly a need for a national framework that will guide policy and decision making in the areas of future investment, infrastructure and sustainable development and this framework should serve as a targeted driver of development, employment and population growth.

We need a clear vision of what Ireland will look like in 20 years time and I, therefore, welcome the fact that we are now moving towards a final draft of a development framework and I am happy to avail of the opportunity to have an input into it. I also welcome the fact that it will be supported by legislation and that it will be deployed in tandem with the National Investment Plan – that in practice it will become an all of Government focus.

There are, however, a few concerns regarding some of the proposals and approaches outlined in the draft National Planning Framework which are elaborated below.

BACKGROUND

Ireland underwent a period of significant change and growth during the early 2000's. We can, in hindsight, see the unstructured way in which that growth happened, and we must learn the lessons from it.

The elements and decisions within this plan must be based on objective criteria and be evidence based. This may involve taking tough decisions, but it is our duty to do what is correct rather than do what is popular.

The National Spatial Strategy published in 2002 was flawed in that it failed to make tough decisions. It failed because it did not prioritise the development of strong urban centres. It was a political plan rather than a development plan, trying to “spread the goodies around” rather than making choices and targeting development around them. The

proliferation of gateways and hubs was designed for political reasons and we would have been much better off if that Government had had the courage to pick eight or nine urban centres and designate them as regional growth drivers.

CURRENT DRAFT FRAMEWORK

The primary shortcoming of the current draft framework published in September is that it goes too far in the other direction in only prescribing four cities outside of Dublin to be drivers of regional development. The World Bank has identified density of economic activity is the most important driver for economic development and regions without such density will continue to be left behind.

Such density of activity is the logic inherent in designating the current five cities. But the same logic would further suggest designating many additional regional growth drivers rather than leaving this to a regional planning process, as outlined in the draft document.

If the Planning Framework is to avoid the unbalanced development of the past, it must consciously decide to do so. At number of other designated centres would be necessary – one in the Midlands, one in the Northwest, with the Northeast and the Southwest also making some sense.



THE CASE FOR THE MIDLANDS

As outlined in the Draft Framework, the two key variables to be considered are the scale of concentration of activity and the relative distance, or ease of accessibility, to centres of

scale. All five cities which are currently designated as centres of scale are located on the coast and taking a 50km radius around them as a reasonable area of accessibility, there is a very obvious gap in the Midlands. If we view the issue from an All-Island perspective, the location of a designated Urban centre of development in the Midlands is even more obvious.

In the Eastern & Midland Region, much of the development has taken place in Counties Dublin, Louth, Meath, Kildare and Wicklow. National Policy Objective 1 projects an additional 500,000 people in the region between now and 2040. There is already a huge concentration of population and job growth within 50km of Dublin and we have seen the difficulties of rapid growth in the capital and in the doughnut surrounding it. With every passing day, traffic is becoming more congested and the shortage of affordable accommodation, school places, water and wastewater facilities, etc is becoming increasingly problematic. While some measures must and will be taken to alleviate these symptoms, the addition of another 500,000 people into the Eastern half of the region (which already has a population density of 260/km² compared with 40/km² in the Midlands) would make an already difficult situation even worse. Therefore, every effort should be made to ensure that the additional growth forecasted is spread across the less densely populated part of the region.

To achieve this, it will be necessary to designate a counterpoint to Dublin and the logical location for such a City is in the Midlands. This would benefit not only the Midlands, but the country as a whole.

THE CASE FOR ATHLONE

Any decision in designating specific areas must be evidence based and in harmony with the overall objectives of the National Development Framework. If there were to be only one additional designated centre for development in the country, the correct place for it is in the Midlands and within the Midlands, the objectively most suitable location is Athlone.

Athlone is the largest urban area in the Midlands, it has a key strategic location being almost exactly in the centre of the country. It acts as a gateway to the West and Northwest of Ireland. It is halfway between Dublin and Galway, straddling two provinces, two Regional Authorities and is the meeting point for rail, river, gas and road as well as having a thriving third level college. It is a pharma and distribution hub and is a popular tourist destination. It has in place a social and cultural infrastructure unrivalled in the region. Furthermore, plans are also under development for an airport close to Athlone.

The chosen location needs to be sufficiently distanced from Dublin so that it acts as a counterpoint rather than increasing the sprawl of the greater Dublin area. As economic development has become more concentrated and house prices have increased, we see the distance between where people live and where they work increase dramatically over the last 20 years. We do not want or need a situation where the entire Eastern and Midlands region is effectively part of the commuter belt of Dublin. We must bring the jobs to the people rather than the people to the jobs. Athlone, being at the opposite end of the region is ideally placed to pull development away from the Dublin region. Would it not be infinitely preferable for some of those who spend an hour and a half travelling from Tullamore to Dublin, for example, if their daily commute was reduced to a half hour trip westward?

As well as being the most suitable location in the Eastern and Midlands Region, Athlone would also be a significant driver of growth for the Northern and Western Region. The 50km catchment area of Athlone takes in most of Counties Westmeath, Longford, Offaly and Roscommon and parts of East Galway, Laois, Leitrim and Tipperary – in summary the parts of the Midlands which have not seen the growth evident in the Dublin and eastern area.



This catchment area also encompasses the significant towns of Mullingar, Longford, Roscommon, Tullamore, Ballinasloe and Birr as well as a variety of other towns and villages all of which are all would benefit from proximity to a Strategic Development Centre.

There has historically been a long-term trend of population shift from the North and West towards Dublin and the East. Athlone would not only open up development to areas such as East Galway and Roscommon but would provide an alternative “stopping point” for those moving from further West and Northwest.

Based on fact and evidence, Athlone is by far the best and most logical location to drive development in the Midlands. Along with its ideal strategic location and transport and infrastructural centrality, Athlone has several significant employers, a third level college, an educated workforce, fabulous pubs, restaurants and hotels and a fantastic setting.

Athlone today has the capacity to grow into a city of over 50,000 people by 2040, whether or not it is officially designated as such. The real challenge is to ensure that the growth of Athlone is planned and sustainable and that it delivers on its potential as a maximum driver of growth for the entire Midlands area.

The NPF does allow, through the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) process for each Regional Assembly to target large towns as potential regional growth drivers for their surrounding catchments. However, given its centrality to delivering on the aims of the development plan, and the fact that its effect would straddle two Regional Authorities, the designation of Athlone as a City for the Midlands should be included in the overall National Planning Framework.

If, as the logic of the NFP suggests, we should have such a designation, why not just make the decision now rather than pushing it down the road and into a process that may be liable to parochialism and unwillingness to make a decision.

OTHER ISSUES

Technological University: As the only third level Institution in the Midlands, AIT is a key element in the jigsaw of future growth and development of the region. It is a leader in the educational sector, having recently been awarded the Sunday Times Institute of Technology of the Year. Its significance has been further enhanced by the announcement of funding towards a new STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) facility which will include science labs, lecture theatres, classrooms and other facilities. I welcome the news that the Technological Universities Bill has just received Cabinet approval to move through the Oireachtas.

The IDA and Enterprise Ireland have identified that having a University is essential to delivering significant investment to the region and without which the overall thrust of the NPF fails for the Midlands. So, while the remit of the NPF is about planned development rather than education specifically, one decision that would significantly boost development of the Midlands would be designation of AIT as a Technological University.

Targets or Limits?: Section 2 of the NPF outlines Regional growth targets for the growth of population and employment and housing. While it is important to try to forecast growth patterns in order to plan ahead, there is concern in some quarters that these projections may become limiting factors. For example, the projections for the Northern and Western Region and the Southern Region should both be viewed as targets to be met or exceeded rather than as ceilings for development as they are more sparsely populated and less developed. On the other hand, a limit on the growth of the Eastern and Midlands region might be seen as sensible for obvious reasons. However, it must not become a case where rapid growth of the Dublin doughnut would then limit on the development of the more sparsely populated and less developed part of the Region. Therefore, there should be flexibility to review the targets at various intervals or to amend the plan to avoid any unintended outcomes.

One Off Planning: While much of the discourse surrounding the NPF concentrates on the larger population centres as drivers of economic development, we do need to ensure that

rural areas are not forgotten. One provision which is causing some concern in rural areas is the part of objective 18 which states that “in rural areas under urban influence, to facilitate the provision of single housing in the countryside based on the core consideration of demonstrable economic need to live in a rural area”. The lack of any effective control on rural planning has led us to ribbon development and overspill with towns and villages stretching along roadways, rather than concentrated around a central hub. However, we must not make planning so difficult in rural areas that it becomes virtually impossible to get planning in the countryside. This would lead to a decline in rural areas, with an increasingly older and more isolated population. While unrestricted building is to be discouraged, we should offer those with roots and family ties rural areas some realistic option of living in their home place. In this regard a phrase such as “demonstrable economic need” should be replaced by a criterion such as “demonstrable social need”.

CONCLUSION

The biggest issue to be addressed in this Framework is where best to plan for our growing population and economy. National Policy Objective 5 is to “Develop cities and towns of sufficient scale and quality to compete internationally and to be drivers of national and regional growth and investment.” If we accept that the nature of urban places is a critical factor in determining economic growth and regional development, we must then ensure that there are a range of quality urban places in which people will choose to live, work and invest.

The National Spatial Strategy, published in 2002 failed to make real decisions or set logical priorities. In the Midlands, for example it proposed a triad of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar as “linked Gateways” that would drive the economic and social development of the region. In the end, little happened because the wrong decision had been made. It was the classic political solution of trying to please everyone, and that is why it failed.

Let us not now fall in to the contrary trap of trying to offend no-one. Rather than such an approach, we should select one location and develop it properly. This would benefit all the towns in the region, rather than the approach of the NDP which saw development continuing to stream eastwards to Dublin and its hinterland.

The essence of the Ireland 2040 framework is about making the correct decisions now rather than allowing development to happen on a haphazard basis. It is about proper spatial planning. The Midlands needs a City with sufficient population and facilities to offer an alternative to the Eastern part of the region and Athlone is objectively the most suitable candidate to fulfill this criterion. Let us just make the decision and get started on the work on ensuring that both the Midlands and Ireland will continue on a path of economic, environmental and social progress right up to 2040 and beyond.