

Calling for Planned Regional Growth in the Midlands

Ireland 2040 – Our Plan

Executive Summary

Tullamore & District Chamber of Commerce is taking this opportunity to offer a counterpoint to the assumption that the National Spatial Strategy 2002 was fatally flawed in its design, politically motivated and not grounded in enlightened thought. We will argue instead that the shortcomings in its implementation were due mainly to prevailing macro-economic turbulence, lack of funding and lack of compliance on the part of state agencies and local government.

The success of the NSS in the Midlands may be viewed as the extent to which it has prepared Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar to grow their urban populations and thereby drive regional growth. Because of investments made under the auspices of NSS, each town now has the underlying infrastructure to support centralised populations twice their current level, meaning the combined population capacity of the three towns is approximately 100,000, not including hinterland population or small towns within the Gateway region.

The vision for development of the Midlands region contained in the National Spatial Strategy 2002 was based on sound, pragmatic and well-researched sustainable concepts, having a high regard for quality of life, economic and social development and respect for the environment. The 2002 plan referenced other similar European regions such as Denmark's Triangle Region, which has implemented and demonstrated the merits of polycentric regional development (Appendix IV, page 146).

Pre-requisites for regional growth include connectivity, identity and accessibility. Connectivity refers to infrastructural linkages, viable public transport, high quality broadband and strategic alignment between government agencies, local government and interest groups, manifesting in regular, structured collaboration. Identity refers to the reinforcement, promotion and development of a

locality's unique character, history, attractions, and core competencies. Accessibility refers to local availability of education, heterogeneous skills training, diversified employment, affordable housing, public services and amenities.

It is our assertion that Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar, working together, have the potential to stand on their own two feet, drive regional growth in the Midlands and support the growth of Dublin. If supported by strategic policy and tactical initiative, the three principle towns of the Midlands offer a complementary alternative to city life and potentially ample concentration to create sustainable demand for services, efficient local commuting, economic stability, lower crime rates, lower pollution and high propensity for promoting physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of its denizens. The solutions espoused by the polycentric approach of the NSS cannot be dismissed as "one for everyone in the audience" politics; they are as applicable in 2017 Ireland as they were in 2002, and as they continue to be in Denmark.

Section 1 – Potential to Support Growth

The three midlands "Gateway" towns are at a strategic advantage to any other town in Ireland's interior in respect of their ability to sustainably support urban population growth in multiples of current population, insofar as the money has already been invested, putting in place the required infrastructure. The primary reason planned levels of population growth failed to manifest in the lifetime of the NSS is the prevailing economic conditions of the period, which meant a lack of public, private and debt funding could be used to drive local employment, lifetime learning and some further infrastructure and service upgrades. A lack of legislative oversight and some delinquency on behalf of state agencies and local governments compounded the pressures exerted on the NSS during its lifetime. This should not encourage policy which would seek to squander the investment which has been made in creating excess capacity in the region; rather, that excess capacity should now be capitalised upon.

The three towns are close enough together, close enough to Dublin and close enough to NUI Maynooth to benefit from multiple synergies. Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar can draw on a regional labour market of more than 300,000 people. The differentiated service offerings and core competencies of each town are mutually sustaining; Athlone plays host to the Region's Institute of

Technology, Tullamore and Mullingar both have large Regional Hospitals, complete with healthcare education centres. Businesses operating in Tullamore and Mullingar are not disadvantaged in attracting local talent or accessing research services, on account of the regional IT being located 25 minutes away in Athlone. Similarly, NUI Maynooth is located just 46 minutes from the centre of the “ATM” triangle. This compares favourably with local commute times within and around Dublin and is made possible by the excess capacity which exists in the Region’s motorway network and its key interchanges.

Section 2 – Successful Examples of Polycentrism

According to Duncan Smyth, University College London, Monocentric structure supports the provision of public transport, but increases work-living separation and is characterised by congestion during tidal commuting. Outer centres are efficient because they narrow the live-work relationship. Further, heterogenous town centres are more efficient and diverse than homogenous edge-cities.

Per Sir Peter Hall, also of UCL, London has promoted, and is benefitted, by the development of specialist satellite cities which can stand on their own two feet. Young people move to cities for study, first job and excitement but what happens when they want to have children? Surrounding towns can boom in their own right if they can offer sustainable employment opportunities. They can also support the efficiency and development of the “parent” city, providing complementary lifestyle alternatives, narrowing the work-life divide and relieving tidal pressure on transport infrastructure.

Examples of successful polycentrism throughout the globe are manifold, including conurbations like Tokyo-Yokohama, the San Francisco Bay Area, Sydney-Parramatta, the Ruhr Region, Malmö-Copenhagen and even Stoke-on-Trent. More realistic peer-type examples can be found in Sweden and Denmark per table 1 below. Commute times between the dominant towns in each polycentric region highlighted is comparable to Ireland’s Midland Region – 25 to 45 minutes by car. National population density and distribution in these countries are comparable to Ireland’s. However, there has been a

greater historical emphasis on urban clustering and development of larger heterogeneous labour markets, especially in Sweden since the economic crisis of the 1990's which had the effect of segmenting the labour market, creating a mismatch between skills and employment available in small monocentric markets. The subsequent and strategic promotion of regional imbalances in respect of training and employment opportunities had the effect of driving migration towards regional urban centres, creating critical mass.

Table 1. Successful Examples of Regional Growth Promoted by Polycentric Urban Development			
Example	Combined Urban Pop. (Number of Municipalities)	Smallest Constituent Urban Centre Population	Largest Constituent Urban Centre Population
Denmark's Triangle <i>*example of a self-sustaining Region</i>	205,000 (7)	Billund (pop. 6,000)	Kolding (pop. 58,000)
Stockholm – Uppsala <i>*example of a capital city linked with Region</i>	1,150,000 (2)	Uppsala Municipality (pop. 215,000)	Stockholm (pop. 932,000)
Copenhagen - Scania <i>*example of enhanced connectivity linking a large city with a smaller city-region</i>	2,580,000 (2)	Malmö (pop. 342,000)	Copenhagen (pop. 1,280,000)

Section 3 – Pre-requisites for Regional Growth

1. **Interconnectedness** of urban centres and hinterland rural areas. Adequate public transport, road network, broadband as well as frequent and formal cooperation between local government and regional state agencies are essential to providing adequate connectivity between selected regional drivers of growth and critical work-life centres.
2. **Identity:** The differentiation of core competencies and social fabric of towns and villages in the region should be supported, maintained and developed. This can help the midland region

stand on its own two feet and offer a complementary alternative to city life whilst facilitating the development of other urban centres such as Dublin.

3. **Access:** Strategy which seeks to reduce the amount of daily tidal migration of skilled labour out of the Midland Region to access employment in Dublin's service based economy and seeks to provide access to realistic alternative employment within the Region is to be supported. A larger, more diversified local labour market will accommodate increased numbers of different jobs for more categories of people. Provision for strategic investment in human capital which takes cognisance of disruptive technologies, tackles market segmentation and closes skills gaps needs to be at the forefront of the National Planning Framework and is key future sustainability and development of the Midland Region.

Conclusion

The Local Governments and associate Chambers of Commerce in Offaly/Westmeath have striven side by side in difficult economic circumstances to position the Midlands as a model for sustainable development in a modern context. To realise that vision, it is essential that the new National Planning Framework continues in the vein of polycentric development for the Midlands. It is our view that a shift in priority away from regional growth, driven by polycentric urban development would be to squander the efforts and investment of the past 15 years, and could turn the Midlands into Ireland's dormitory region.

While it is accepted that there is no one location across the region approaching a city population threshold of 100,000 people, with all the associated educational and health services and infrastructural assets required to support that population, the work of the past 15 years has without doubt, left the centres of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar with a combined capacity of well over that number and hard-won levels of cooperation and cohesion to ensure delivery of city-scale amenities and services.

In a National context, lessons must be learned from the patterns of the past. Economic development around the cities of the Southern and Eastern regions has given rise to a very clear sense of imbalanced development and prosperity across the country. It is essential that the National Planning Framework through to 2040 addresses this imbalance with a concerted, realistic and attainable strategic impetus for the benefit of the entire central region. It must set a realistic framework for development, be

underpinned by legislation and guaranteed by adequate oversight and receive a proper and adequate level of funding for local authorities and government agencies to follow through on the commitments of previous policies and strategies.