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**Submission to: Ireland 2040, The National Planning Framework**

**Submitted by: Sligo Public Participation Network – Environmental College**

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The Environmental College of Sligo Public Participation Network (PPN) consists of the many community and voluntary organisations, representing hundreds of local residents, working throughout County Sligo to protect and improve the environment, and to promote initiatives and policies that advance sustainable development.

The continuing success, health and long-term sustainability of Irish society will depend upon our ability to develop and implement frameworks and policies that ensure sustainable economic growth and societal well-being without diminishing our environment, e.g. landscape, water, biodiversity, air, etc. Recognising the global challenges facing Irish society in relation to climate change, biodiversity loss, unsustainable use of natural resources, the Environmental College welcomes this opportunity to inform the Ireland 2040 Plan. Our view of for Sligo is:

*By 2040, Sligo City and its environs will be a thriving, environmentally sustainable, economically successful, and healthy community in which to live and work. Through the effective implementation of imaginative policies, future residents will enjoy opportunities for sustainable employment, education, cultural and recreational activities, and easy access to health, transport, and other services. The people of Sligo will enjoy a highly desirable quality of life, living in safe, healthy, and connected communities where they can raise families and grow older, while enjoying and safeguarding the natural environment that sustains us.*

To achieve this vision for all, **Sligo is ready to grow**, and should be determined as a specific area of investment as part of the 2040 National Planning Framework.

## **Sligo**

Recent archaeological finds suggest that County Sligo may have been one of the earliest parts of Ireland to have been settled, and today the County has a population of approximately 65,000, a third of which live in Sligo city and its immediate environs. The 'gateway' to the North West, Sligo is situated at a historic and strategically important point separating Connacht and Ulster. It is two and a half hours car drive from Dublin, and two hours from both Galway and Derry.

Sligo City is the capital of a coastal county on the Wild Atlantic Way that is rich in cultural, natural and heritage amenities. Referred to as the 'capital of the North West', a *Gateway city*, Sligo is the North West's largest urban centre and the region's principal economic, social, cultural, and administrative centre. The City is a transport hub with bus and rail terminuses, and an airport, and is home to two third-level educational institutions, a regional hospital, 22 major multi-national employers, banks and other financial institutions, basic services and retail businesses. Its physical setting and infrastructural assets, especially accommodation and visitor-friendly services, has resulted in its designation by Failte Ireland as an Adventure Hub for outdoor recreation activity.

The following responses are provided to questions posed in the *Ireland 2040 Issues and Choices* document:

### **Effective Regional Development**

Centrally located within the North West Regional Assembly and Central Border Area Network areas, possessing all the infrastructure and resources required to be a regional centre of growth, home to vibrant communities, and serving as the administrative capital of the region, Sligo is a logical choice for future investment in developing sustainable regional development.

Sligo has the capacity, and potential, to grow sustainably and targeted investment will facilitate the future 'place-making' development of the City and its hinterlands which have experienced decline in recent years. Under-investment in the area to date means that Sligo is not realising its potential in terms of employment, tourism, or improving the quality of life and well-being of its residents.

Improving public transportation links, the provision of high-speed broadband, and the design and creation of liveable, affordable, sustainable and connected communities will ensure that Sligo remains a desirable place to work and live. The fostering of a favourable social and economic environment, while protecting and enhancing the natural environment, will attract and encourage employment opportunities that will keep young people in the region, leading in turn to vibrant communities. While local leadership is required in promoting Sligo as a place to work, live and visit, as already demonstrated by the Sligo Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP), national backing and investment is necessary to make this goal a reality.

## **Sustainable Development**

The most significant challenge facing 21<sup>st</sup> century society is that of Climate Change. Therefore, there it is an imperative that we immediately transition to healthier and more sustainable lifestyles, communities, and economies, which will require leadership and investment at all levels. It is a key goal of the Sligo PPN's Environmental College that Sligo be recognised as a leader in promoting environmental sustainability and the conservation of natural resources, for the betterment of our communities. Furthermore, the Sligo LECP calls for improving environmental sustainability by reducing waste and car dependency, and by increasing the green economy and efficient energy usage. There is local commitment to achieve these objectives, and sustainable economic growth, without harming the environment, but these require policies and investment at national level to make them a reality.

## **Healthier Places**

While Sligo possesses much of the infrastructure required to be a regional growth centre, as with other regions there are adults and families in Sligo currently experiencing poverty, ill health and social exclusion. A key objective of the 2040 plan must be to achieve ***greater equality in living standards*** for all members of society including carers, people with disabilities, the elderly, members of new and minority communities, and all who suffer from exclusion, ill health and poverty. Future investment in Sligo as a regional growth centre will ensure better access to resources that will improve their quality of life and general well-being of all citizens, especially those living in the North West region. By 2040, the implementation of effective plans and policies, and corresponding investment, will ensure better quality of life, living standards and over all well-being for all residents of the region.

## **Maintaining Rural Populations**

Decimated by population loss and reducing public services, etc., Ireland's rural communities are no longer sustainable. However, proximity to vibrant urban centres having employment and educational opportunities, access to services, etc., has the ability to reinvigorate rural areas and sustain rural economies. As the region's major urban centre, by prioritising Sligo for targeted future investment, the many smaller rural communities throughout County Sligo and neighbouring Counties Mayo, Donegal, Leitrim, Cavan, Fermanagh and Roscommon will benefit. The strengthening of rural communities and local services, balanced with policies targeting urban centres such as Sligo, will encourage and support those settling in rural towns and villages. The provision of efficient, affordable, and sustainable public transport options between towns, villages and urban centres will facilitate strategic development throughout the region not just in major urban areas. There is considerable potential to increase food production, tourism and other industries within rural areas in a sustainable way that benefits both the local community and the wider North West region.

### **Coordination with Northern Ireland**

Due to its strategic location, Sligo is extremely well positioned to further develop and expand existing economic, social, and cultural linkages with adjoining areas including Northern Ireland to the benefit of the North West and Western regions. The potential for collaboration and partnership in the provision of research and education opportunities, health services, job creation, tourism, etc., cannot be underestimated. For example, linkages between further and higher education colleges, local authorities and community-based services, and between commercial and tourism bodies, if supported by effective policy implementation and investment, will strengthen Sligo and the North West as a viable centre for growth. Collaborative partnerships, especially cross border, will greatly strengthen the capacity and ability of the region, and the rest of Ireland, to respond to change and take full advantage of all opportunities that arise in the years to 2040.

### **Measuring Success for Sligo and the region**

As previously noted, in 2040 Sligo will be considered a successful community if all its citizens have experience of greatly improved living standards, quality of life, and general well-being, while living more sustainable lifestyles with considerably reduced carbon footprints. A vibrant, thriving Sligo will be a much desired place for people to live and work, and to visit, and its success will support those living and working in rural communities throughout the region.

The only way that this will occur, and that the North West will experience any degree of positive development in the years ahead, is for the designating of Sligo as a centre for growth and focussed investment. Sligo possesses the capacity and willingness to develop further as an important regional centre, and in a sustainable manner. Furthermore, Sligo has proven itself to be capable of successfully partnering with agencies, community groups and businesses in Sligo and in adjoining areas, to include cross border, to strengthen local communities and services for the benefit of all.

If Ireland is to truly have balanced regional development, and sustainable rural communities by 2040, then Sligo must be designated as a centre for sustainable regional growth and investment.