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National Planning Framework – Issues and Choices.

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Introduction

According to Heraclitus, the renowned Greek philosopher who lived 2,500 year ago, change is the only constant. Ireland in the 21st Century offers no exception to this view. The total size of population, resident in the State, has risen rapidly since the early 1990s, reflecting a combination of fertility, mortality and migration changes. The total number of births remains very high, the highest since the 19th century, despite the fertility rate being close to or below the replacement rate. A changing population structure with a greater number of women in the 25 – 40 age bracket, coupled with a modest recovery in the fertility rate since the 1990s, has pushed births up to an annual rate of 70,000 or higher in recent years (CSO, 2016).

Dublin has led the early economic recovery phase since about mid-2013, evidenced by increasing employment, population growth and a number of other significant statistical indicators. Today, there is a strong perception supporting hard statistical evidence that the remainder of the state is lagging behind and continuing to feel the brunt of the 2009 economic collapse.

Ireland 2040 provides for a significant platform on which the future development of Ireland will take place. This new framework will seek to define where we live and where we work.

The National Planning Framework (NPF) must provide clear strategic and research-based planning for housing, road infrastructure and transportation links into each region; otherwise, such infrastructural development uncertainty creates major doubts for investment decisions into the regions by the private sector, including multi-national employers. To date, it can be argued that Ireland has lacked adequate forward or strategic planning.

For instance, the location of the new National Children’s Hospital was chosen based on the assumption that it *should* be in Dublin, rather than any *need* for it to be in the city. The NFP must reassess how the government makes such key investment decisions.

The population of Ireland is expected to increase by 750,000 by 2040, and this will require a minimum of 500,000 new homes. This means building at least an additional 25,000 homes each year. The key issue is where new settlements should be located. Continuance of current spatial patterns would mean that the “hinterland” of urban centres would expand further, leading to unsustainable commuting patterns, while the less accessible rural areas would continue to decline. Indeed, without adequate

intervention, three-quarters of this growth could be centred on Dublin. The Dublin-focused growth of the 1990s and 2000s has resulted in excessive urban sprawl and the emergence of eleven “commuter counties”, with negative consequences for the environment, quality of life and society.

Despite a return to net outward migration in the years leading up to Census 2011, the population has continued to grow increasingly, due mainly to the high number of births. The CSO has projected that the population of the Republic could increase by over 600,000 by 2031, and based on present trends, over 400,000 of these will be living in the Greater Dublin area. In the event of such growth, the NPF must address regional disparities, urban sprawl and long-distance commuting; otherwise, they will persist to the long-term detriment of the state at a time when other challenges, such as climate change and international competitiveness, remain on the agenda.

The EU Commission Country Report on Ireland, published in 2016, identified that between 2010 and 2013, capital spending averaged 4.8% of total government expenditure, which was less than half the long-term average during the 1995-2008 periods.

Recent population and labour force projections issued by the Central Statistics Office (2013), indicate a number of potential scenarios and population outcomes up to the year 2046. All of these envisage some growth in total population between 2011 and 2031, and up to 2046. The projected population is dependent on varying assumptions of births, deaths (only one assumption used by CSO) and migration. These show a range of 4.9 million to 5.6 million people in 2031, and a range of 5 million to 6.7 million in the year 2046. Population in 2011 was estimated at just fewer than 4.6 million, while this has increased to almost 4.76 million in the latest census of population figures. The population age-structure will change depending on what patterns of migration, mortality and fertility prevail.

For instance, the greatest migration outflows between 2011 and 2016 were evident along the western counties of Mayo, Galway and Limerick while Donegal experienced the highest levels of outward migration over this period with 6,731 leaving the county. Conversely, not surprisingly, Dublin experienced the largest inward migration during the same period. The population of the larger and older demographic has implications for the social spending and public services. On a static basis, assuming constant or even declining labour force participation rates, it is estimated that “age-related” public expenditure will increase from a projected figure of 29.4 per cent of GDP in 2015, to 33.6 per cent in 2060 (based on the assumption of a decline in labour force participation and a modest level of

net outward migration). However, the Department of Finance indicates that “age-related” public spending is not expected to increase significantly between 2015 and 2030 (Department of Finance, 2014: 35). Nonetheless, these are factors which require long-term critical planning and which must form the central caveat of the new National Planning Framework (NPF).

With an emerging optimism of economic growth, increased employment, a reformed fiscal and monetary outlook, reforms introduced to public spending and the work of NAMA all but complete, it is constructive to utilise the 2016 CSO census data as the bedrock to link the geographic spread of population growth and house construction, particularly as movement in both of these demographic factors has only begun to reignite since the last census. Hence, the critical initiative being undertaken by the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, to replace the National Spatial Strategy (NSS), which was due to run until 2020, in the coming year with the National Planning Framework (NPF) is a welcome development. Indeed, it could be suggested that this will form one of the most significant policy developments under the current government. It is hoped that in drafting the new Framework, much will be learned from analysing the successes and failures in implementing the NSS. The implementation of the NSS encountered many challenges as a consequence to the dramatically ever-changing social and economic factors, outlined by Meredith and van Egeraat (2013).

Cumulatively, it will be important to take lessons from the implementation of Scotland’s Third National Planning Framework. The Framework must endeavour to grapple with addressing new development pressures arising, alongside the need to address development legacies from the past, while setting the agenda for long-term strategic and critical thinking, ensuring that the unnecessary congestion, environmental challenges, inadequate housing provision and the onward decline of rural Ireland can be approached and planned in an objective, action-driven manner. Thus, the policy must meet the challenges of oncoming growth in a manner which adequately addresses the needs of all citizens and communities across the state, by underpinning a nation-wide investment programme within this dynamic policy environment.

By any analysis of employment figures, population growth and a number of other key statistical indicators it is clear that Dublin has led the early economic recovery phase since mid-2013. Today, there is a strong perception, supported by hard statistical evidence, that most of the remaining parts

of the State are lagging behind and continuing to feel the brunt of the 2009 economic collapse. In fact, in 2013, the Greater Dublin area accounted for 52 per cent of national economic activity, measured as gross value added; the only other substantial contributor was the South West (Cork) at 16.5 per cent, while the other three cities' regions represented fewer than 50 per cent of Cork's position.

Despite the best efforts to simultaneously assist as many towns and villages within the State as possible, there is a wealthy base of literature supported by *“statistical evidence in this increasingly post-industrial digital and post-distributive era: that Ireland's future economic and social development will increasingly depend on city-led growth, for employment, job creation and population growth”* (Hughes, 2015, p. 6). Additionally, the 2016 census provides evidence to confirm this viewpoint, with the fastest growing countries in the country comprising the four administrative areas of Dublin, along with the commuter belt counties of Meath, Kildare and Laois and the cities of Cork and Galway.

The Dublin city region now accounts for 40 per cent of the national population, which in European terms reflects the comparative weaknesses of the next tier of cities. As discussed earlier, population growth in the built-up areas of Cork, Limerick and Waterford has been significantly below the national average over recent decades. The four main regional cities (including Galway) have significant potential to complement Dublin and to drive their wider regions, particularly having regard to the establishment of three large regional assembly areas.

Thus, the central issue here, for the purposes of the new National Planning Framework (NPF), is whether the policy will focus on the abstract pursuit of Balanced Regional Development (BRD), as envisaged under the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) or alternatively, articulate a strategy to develop the cities and larger towns with a view to widen the growth momentum away from the Greater Dublin area to the rest of the State. Clearly, the literature suggests that the overall state growth would be much more robust when cities and larger towns are performing to their optimum.

New Gateway Cities required

The NSS designated eight regional centres for development, termed as gateways, with Cork, Limerick-Shannon, Galway and Waterford, referred to as “existing” gateways, and Letterkenny-Derry, Sligo, Dundalk and the Midlands gateways, termed “new” gateways. According to the NSS, *“all of the*

new gateways outside Dublin existing and new – will have to grow by a considerable factor” in order to generate or attract “*substantial new investment*” (Government of Ireland, 2002, p.44).

As such, a sharper focus on the role of the Gateway cities and/or larger towns is necessary. However, this approach must be underpinned to provide support to rural areas by developing the relationships between the social and economic well-being of those areas and their proximity and accessibility to viable towns and cities. Notwithstanding this, one of the problems associated with a focus on cities is the absence of such large urban centres north of the line from Dublin to Galway. The NSS designated the towns of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar as the Midland’s gateway and the Letterkenny / Derry corridor as a linked gateway serving the Northwest; these areas will have to be addressed via urban designations in the new framework. Despite Letterkenny / Derry being the second-largest of the designated gateways, analysis carried out by van Egeraat et al., (2013) suggests that it proves problematic to quantify the overall benefits, due to the lack of employment change data for Derry. While it could be argued that it now becomes more problematic to develop any cross-border gateway, given that Brexit is likely to reinforce the practical difficulties created by two separate planning jurisdictions, it nonetheless, remains essential to the future economic and social well-being of Donegal that this option is fully explored and realised. The aligning with spatial planning in the North of Ireland, in conjunction with the objectives of the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent pathways, will be imperative to leverage the overall potential of the island of Ireland.

The initial results from census 2016 shows that every administrative area in Ireland has a positive natural population increase (more births than deaths) during the 2011 to 2016 period, aside from Donegal (-1.5%), Mayo (-0.2%) and Sligo (-0.1%). Donegal, over this period, experienced the highest rate of negative net migration in the entire State. This highlights the urgent need for intervention to address the pattern of decline and low growth in the county.

Cumulatively, the areas showing the strongest patterns of decline and low growth are all concentrated in the western region, and particularly, along the western seaboard, while the areas of highest growth are concentrated in the east of the country (CSO, 2016). Reversing this trend must be at the heart of the new framework agenda.

Letterkeny City Gateway? Or North West City Region

The optimal solution, in terms of ensuring the future development of the entire Donegal region, would rest in bestowing city status to Letterkenny, and thus providing for a crucial gateway in the most northern part of the State. Letterkenny is well-placed to carry the status of a “stand-alone” gateway. The town is the largest urban centre in Donegal with a population of 23,000, having grown by 28% from 2002-2011. It is the 22nd largest town in the State (out of a total 197 towns, CSO 2011) and is projected to grow to 25,700 by 2022. In order for the new framework to meet its final stated objectives and deliver them to the entire State, a gateway is required in the northwest. As previously indicated, the 2016 census of population indicates that Donegal has had the highest net migration over recent years, and the impact of Brexit has the potential to drastically alter the relatively stagnant economic fortunes of the county. A key urban economic driver is needed, thus Letterkenny should be categorised as a city and gateway under the new framework.

The joint proposal made by Donegal County Council and Derry City & Strabane District Council must be given serious consideration. The cross border element of the NPF cannot be understated, given the spatial patterns and the fact that 30,000 people cross the border on a daily basis. The interconnectivity of our island is a key factor in building a shared economic collaboration. For instance, CSO data shows that 14,800 people regularly make the daily commute (work and school) between both jurisdictions, comprising 8,295 northbound flows and 6,456 southbound flows (2011).

The development of the gateway involving Letterkenny, whether “stand-alone” or through a collaborated cross border alignment, is essential to address the legacy issues of under investment in the North West region. The region continues to suffer from high social deprivation, poor connectivity and negative net migration. Thus, action is needed, within the context of the NPF, to address such key social and economic factors. This ambitious, but essential proposal could well be driven by the local government units on either side of the border. The local government input, to delivering on the NPF, will be further explored later in this paper.

The driver of a city-focused agenda, within the new framework, must not be allowed to ignore the needs of the Northwest, simply based on the lack of a large urban population centre. Such a move would fail to provide for adequate initiatives, envisaged to consolidate, promote and develop the entire

area outside Dublin. It would also result in the government effectively “turning its back” on an entire northwest region. This cannot be allowed to occur at a time when a new initiative highlighted in the non-statutory Planning Policy Statement (PPS), published by the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (2015), identifies urban drivers and advising that:

“...an urban Regeneration Measure will be rolled out as part of the next round of EU structural and regional development funding, matched by Irish investment to create new creative clusters to generate sustainable economic investment and employment in the heart of major cities in need of regeneration.”

The new framework must reset Dublin’s disproportionate share of new employment creation, especially in terms of inward foreign investment. Analysis of spatial distribution of employment in new firms between 2001 to 2011 show, contrary to NSS objectives, that Dublin accounted for 34.9 percent of all employment in assisted firms in 2001 and 45.9 percent of employment in new firms between 2001 and 2011 (Forfás). The figures for the combined regional gateways were 24.3 and 24.0 per cent respectively, i.e. attracting a disproportionately low share of the new firm employment over the same period. Meanwhile, the figures for the Letterkenny gateways show 0.6 per cent of all employment in assisted firms in 2001 and 0.3 per cent of employment in new firms between 2001 and 2011. Conversely, Dublin’s share of initial foreign-firm employment and its share of all new foreign-firm widened to almost fifteen percentage points over the 2001 – 2011 period, attracting 52.6 per cent of all new foreign investment during this period. Over the same time frame, Letterkenny started with 1 per cent foreign-firm employment and only garnered a 0.7 per cent of new foreign-firm employment. Clearly, targeted and focused measures are needed to address this position.

Additionally, Donegal has a significant cross-border dimension with 84 per cent of its border adjoining Derry City & Strabane District Council and Fermanagh & Omagh District Council, while 16 per cent adjoins County Leitrim. The border area has developed as a unique region within the Northwest and indicates many unique challenges and opportunities for both economic collaboration and community development. The resurrection of the A5 link project must be a key priority and/or objective within the new framework, in order to develop the significant potential for further economic, social and cultural development at this new potential gateway location.

The unique border region has particular characteristics, regarding trade, currency fluctuation, shared history, culture and heritage as well as the shared legacy and impact of the Troubles. It is also distinctive in terms of its role in providing the backbone of strategic roads infrastructure to the county. However, with the implications of Brexit unclear to the entire border region, the new framework must provide mitigating economic boosters to this region.

Midlands Gateway

The midlands region of Ireland, I argue, will continue to haemorrhage potential commercial and economic opportunity to the Greater Dublin area, unless the NPF addresses this issue. Ironically, the better road system, that was constructed to channel economic and commercial activity and growth to the regions, has had the polar-opposite effect. Instead, communities from further and further away make their way to the Capital, on a daily basis, which is quickly gridlocking our road network. This, in turn, means that the new overpopulated Dublin is draining the life blood out of the Midland's region.

Ireland needs a series of strong second tier cities to drive regional economic development and to encourage a more balanced spatial structure. These cities would provide a counterbalance to Dublin's dominance, while at the same time, acting as a complement to the Capital. Importantly, these cities would also support regional and rural opportunities.

The development of our existing cities of Cork, Waterford, Galway and Limerick, as a means of maximising potential and driving economic priorities as a major urban corridor that can complement and compete more favourably with Dublin, is much-needed. However, this approach leaves the Northwest and the Midlands parts of the country without a key urban economic driver.

The Athlone location on the river Shannon and as the gateway to the border, midlands and western region, it is placed as an ideal gateway hub to provide for the development of the midlands region over the lifetime of the NPF. The ongoing development of Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) provides the third and fourth level educational dimension of research and development desired by inward investment decisions-makers. The 370,000 people who live in this region must be prioritised in the new framework, and the recognition of Athlone as the key gateway presents the best platform to do this.

The National Planning Framework must be designed in such a manner as to ensure counties such as Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo, Mayo, Cavan, Monaghan, Roscommon, Longford and Westmeath are not alienated due to the lack of urban drivers.

The Role of Local Government

Irish Local Government has delivered a wide range of services and fulfilled many complex roles over the past two decades, in particular. In the context of an expanding country and growing population, the question has been raised as to whether the local government system in Ireland has the requisite powers or whether further devolution will be necessary. Demands for national delivery of many local government functions are and will remain a key feature of policy dialogue in Ireland over the lifespan of the new framework.

Against the backdrop of the new framework, it is important to empower and strengthen the system of local government, ensuring it is capable of responding to current and future challenges arising from population growth, increased public expectations and the need to demonstrate performance in a transparent and accountable manner, while aligned to the point of democracy closest to the citizen.

In the aftermath of the most recent local government reform measures introduced in 2014, there remains a large gap in capability for action at the local level; cohesiveness in central-local interaction is unbalanced; and, committed executive leadership, at both levels, can be difficult to pinpoint. The role of local government cannot be understated, in terms of delivering on the new objectives of the NPF. International experience suggests that citizen-based services and many routine public services are better delivered at the local level, promoting a sense of identity and providing opportunities for local accountability and responsibilities. A general move towards the localised delivery of person focused public services has been seen across the OECD, given the difficulties associated with centralised delivery.

While the delivery of public services across large dispersed populations will always prove challenging, international experience clearly denotes that certain services are best delivered at district/town level, others at city/county level, with others at a more regional level (Ó Riordáin, et al, 2015). This argument can be further extrapolated as directing central government to the tasks it is

meant to carry out, which include setting the agenda, providing the direction, evaluating performance, providing the regulation platform and addressing international headwinds.

Recent debate around the almost on-going call for merging local authorities or an un-evidenced acceptance that “bigger is better” directs attention in the wrong direction, doing little to address requirements to provide a 21st century local government system armed with additional powers, financial autonomy and increased capacity. In fact, international evidence shows that larger local authority units, with larger populations, are not necessarily better performing, do not in many cases cost less, and do not necessarily deliver better value for money (Cole, 2008). Research shows in some cases, there is no correlation between the population size of local authorities and the costs of service delivery. Where there is a correlation, this can, depending on the service area concerned, illustrate either economies or diseconomies of scale – i.e. the average costs can actually increase as well as decrease as the size of the population increases.

It is time to address the institutional weaknesses within local government, which include, for instance, under developed regional mandate, inadequate links to central government, and a lack of financial autonomy. It remains clear that significant strategic planning and change application, within the local government and the local to national policy system, is now necessary within the NPF direction. It is argued that local government must be empowered to deliver upon the fresh objectives of the NPF. This will require a robust and informed strategic planning process to enable definite choices as to which areas are to be focused upon.

Some modern strategic thinkers articulate the viewpoint that it is no longer possible to use traditional corporate planning frameworks, based on previous experience as the bedrock for strategic planning in an increasingly changing, and sometimes, unpredictable macro-environment. Calls have, thus, been made for increased capacity to cater for such events. The recent 2008 financial crisis springs to mind. More recently, the requirement for local authorities to provide social housing units and address homelessness of a scale unprecedented in recent decades has emerged. This requires flexibility, enhanced capabilities and recognition that an organisation’s internal strengths can often be its greatest weakness. Hence, local government must be permitted to compete on relevant policy platforms and not merely seen as a delivery mechanism for key services. The standard information

flow mechanism should be adapted to account for this, so that key activities stimulate growth and dynamism through internal and external change.

Regional Economic Development

The Irish state played a key role in developing the economy in the 1990s, according to Ó Riain (2004), particularly around the area of Irish high tech industry. Some of this role involved the fostering of local networks of learning and innovation assisted by the use of decentralised state institutions, which draw on local, national and global networks and relationships. Ó Riain further posits the term “Development Network State” to describe this. In addition, research by Jenkins et al. (2008), based on case studies in the US over a long period of time, suggests that programmes providing grant-aid and loans for new technology, combined with technology research parks have positive impacts on regional growth, while controlling location and agglomeration factors.

Regional enterprise development growth will be dependent on a number of crucial factors including banking provision and its interaction with investment, savings and lending policies.

SMEs account for almost 99.8 per cent of active Irish enterprise. They are viewed by most western governments as the engine of economic growth, the incubator of innovation, and the solution to persistent unemployment. The CEDRA report (2013) posits that, although SMEs employ almost 70 per cent of the workforce, that they only account for 52 per cent of the turnover and 47 per cent of gross value added. Furthermore, the turnover contribution is lower in Irish SMEs than their European counterparts, suggesting the labour productivity is lower in Irish SMEs than those in Europe.

Supports for SMEs must be customised to address and overcome the varying constraints and challenges facing small firms, and in particular, small firms operating in rural areas. Micro-enterprises are especially prevalent in rural areas where SMEs have a tendency to be very small, including a high proportion of one-person businesses. As such, there is a requirement for a rural-specific policy agenda to counteract the inabilities associated with small-size and rural locations. Clearly, new opportunities and unique challenges exist for SME expansion in a post-Brexit landscape.

Establishment of a State investment Bank

The establishment of a state investment bank would be an important step in channelling investment into small and medium-sized enterprises, facing difficulties in accessing finance. Lending could be complemented by the use of advisory and “early warning” facilities to strengthen companies and raise standards of efficiency and performance. A reformed banking system is essential to provide for a stronger social and local enterprise dimension – something that was lost during the period leading up to the 2008 economic crash, when Irish banks did not display responsible lending practices. It is worth reflecting upon and learning from the experience of the 1930s when the Irish State established the Industrial Credit Company, as well as the experience of public development banks in other countries (notably Germany, where the KfW has been highly successful since the 1950s).

Regional enterprise and SME job growth, over the next 20 years, will depend on regionally-based firms accessing finance and ensuring banks are not left to their own devices of promoting finance availability in favour of enterprises in larger urban areas. The time has come to act now. The success or otherwise of the new framework may well depend upon such an initiative to drive economic revitalisation, job sustainability and growth in rural and regional settings.

Concluding remarks

As argued within this paper, the New Planning Framework must rebalance the economic activity away from Dublin and into the regions. It is argued that the two regions lagged more behind, namely the north-west and midlands regions, require special attention. This new policy will drive the future agenda or roadmap of this State and, as such, every part of the State must be included. The new framework should set clear, specific and above all, time-measurable objectives for each region/county area’s infrastructural priorities, including broadband provision and identify and support specific themes for each region to allow for enhanced region economic development as a counterbalance to the capital. Above all else, the policy must provide territorial balance so that each region/city/county can optimise their potential, and an entire country approach is developed and measured to avoid disparities. This will assist in avoiding unequal development patterns emerging, where some regions would systematically outperform other areas. Critically, the stated targeted measures within the

framework should be objectively analysed on an annual basis to assess, review and realign as appropriate. This process should also involve parliamentary scrutiny.

Local government must be adapted, strengthened and empowered to play a key delivery role. However, effective implementation cannot solely rely on the local planning system policy system or the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. All other government departments, with major capital programmes, must be closely aligned in contributing to the National Planning Framework debate and they should be directed to interact with local government, respect to their role within the planning processes that authorities can and should play. The implementation of the NPF can reinvigorate local government by providing it with a key purpose around targeted, ambitious but achievable objectives.

Finally, care should be taken not to create an over reliance on the city regions as a delivery mechanism. Measures must be brought to the mix to develop the interrelationships between urban and rural areas. The 2013 Report of the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas highlighted the increasingly diverse nature of rural areas, and advocated an approach based on locally-led, place-based development (CEDRA, 2013). There are three key local policy development platforms recognised across the globe: those specifically addressing urban needs, those addressing rural communities and those which characterise the rural/urban interface. Such interfaces are more often than not at the genesis of regional planning processes across OECD countries. The local government component must be central to this next chapter in Ireland's future. In turn, this presents a wonderful opportunity to provide for the delivery and assessments of the new framework at the level of government closest to the people and removes any danger of abstract ownership or silo mentality emerging.

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