

Symposium: 'Where' will the Economy be in 2040?
Delivering on the National Development Framework

Delivering on the National Planning Framework

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1. INTRODUCTION

The National Planning Framework (NPF) was published by Government together with the National Development Plan, as 'Project Ireland 2040', in February 2018. An explanation of how the National Planning Framework will be implemented, is assisted by setting out the overall context for planning in Ireland, as well as the spatial pattern of settlement in recent decades. It is in this context that the logic and intent of the NPF strategy and the necessary levers for implementation, become apparent.

2. CONTEXT

The art and science of town planning, may be described as "a 20th Century solution to 19th Century problems" (source unknown). This arises as a result of the emergence and acceptance of planning concepts in the early 20th Century, as a response to unrestrained industrialisation and urbanisation, which in the context of prevailing social conditions and urban poverty, had resulted in overcrowded, chronically polluted and chaotically unsanitary cities and towns.

Although little affected by industrialisation, Dublin's slums, by the foundation of the State, were amongst the worst in Europe and the situation was mirrored in pockets throughout Ireland. One of the most significant actions taken, and sustained by successive administrations of the fledging State, was the development, on a large-scale, of predominantly single-use areas of low-density, single-family housing at with back and front gardens. This 'garden-city' model was enthusiastically adopted by private developers, and by the late 20th Century, had become the dominant form of development.

In the early years of the 21st Century, it became apparent that this model is no longer universally optimal to meet the needs of a diverse and ageing, globalised and information-based society and economy. It is largely based on 'traditional' family structures and the concept of work as an industrial and mainly male activity, which must take place elsewhere. It is also rooted in the notion that car use could be accommodated without constraint.

It is clear that we need a new model to meet the challenges of the 21st Century. A further factor in Ireland, is the remarkably enduring cultural sensitivity to questions of land and property, evident in contemporary attitudes towards rural and urban development. The play *The Field* (John B. Keane, 1965), provides dramatic explanation of this attachment, that dates back to the land struggle of the late 19th Century:-

"It's my field. It's my child. I nursed it. I nourished it. I saw to its every want. I dug the rocks out of it with my bare hands and I made a living thing of it..."

Perhaps more than anything else when it comes to population and settlement, the legacy of the Great Famine remains with us. The Famine was such a catastrophic event, that Ireland is the only country on earth that has a smaller national population within the same territory now, than it had in the early 19th Century.

'Righting' this perceived wrong continues to haunt many of those in politics and public administration, even in the face of the 21st Century realities. For example, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (DHPLG) estimate that as recently as 2010, as a consequence of 'celtic-tiger' era optimism, and prior to legislative change to tackle the issue, there was enough land zoned for housing development in a country of 4.5 million people, to accommodate a population approaching 10 million.

That is ever before consideration of the one-third of our population who live outside any settlement, in what is termed 'open countryside'. There is no need to zone any development land for a significant proportion of future population, to enable this pattern to continue. Any suggestion that it may not, even if based on evidence, preferences and trends, is met with headlines such as "*NPF will decimate rural communities*" (Limerick Leader, 25 April 2018).

Accordingly, for some, 'Planning' in Ireland means dispersed rural housing, whereas for others, it relates to land zoning. A random 'google' of the words "*land zoning Ireland*" generated a zoning plan for a small village in County Roscommon dating from 2004. There were 100 hectares zoned for residential development in that particular settlement of 590 people (Census 2006), which at conservatively low urban density, could accommodate around 2,000 homes and more than 5,000 people.

Such growth would have represented a ten-fold increase in the population of the village, yet was never realised, and the population had actually fallen to 565 people by 2016. What is remarkable however, is that local politicians and policymakers could justify and facilitate a greater than ten-fold increase in population in such a place and moreover, that this approach to 'planning' was replicated countless times over, throughout Ireland, during the same period.

3. SPATIAL PATTERN OF POPULATION GROWTH 1996-2016

In some cases the outcome was similar to the example above, whereas in others, it ultimately resulted in the construction of homes for which there was no enduring demand, the 'ghost estate' phenomenon. For settlements in the catchments of the largest cities, extensive land zoning resulted in significant and rapid population growth.

This phenomenon was partly facilitated by improvements in accessibility and connectivity brought about by the development of the national road and motorway network. In combination with relatively lower land values and development costs in smaller settlements, in part due to land zoning and lower density requirements, there has been a significant market trend towards the rapid development of smaller settlements in city hinterlands.

Analysis of population growth of urban settlements in Ireland over the twenty years from 1996 to 2016, undertaken by DHPLG as preparatory work for the NPF, indicates that the highest percentage rates of population growth, were in settlements with average pre-expansion population levels that range from 1,500-3,500 people. Moving down the settlement hierarchy, the rate of urban population growth generally increases as cities/towns decrease in size, peaking in settlements in the 3,000-5,000 population range in 2016 (89% growth compared to the overall national average of 31%), before falling back significantly.

In contrast, the average rate of population growth of Dublin and the four regional cities in the twenty years to 2016, equates with that of the smallest settlements of less than 2,000 people and all rural areas combined, i.e. 23% in each case. In other words, the five cities, when compared to the smallest towns, villages and rural areas, had almost identical growth rates, that were significantly less than the national average (31%), over the period.

The actual population of settlements of less than 2,000 people and all rural areas combined in 2016, increased by the same quantum as the combined urban areas of our nine largest cities and towns, i.e. Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Waterford, Drogheda, Swords, Dundalk and Bray, between 1996 and 2016.

This means that notwithstanding the scale and importance of our largest cities and towns, particularly for employment and a range of other functions, there has been an equivalent level of population growth in rural areas and in the smallest towns and villages, over the twenty years to 2016.

A typical settlement of 1,500-3,500 people, where rapid population growth occurred, would generally have had basic services such as a primary school, church, pub and some local shops. Zoned lands would generally be within walking distance or short driving distance of original main street.

In many instances, growth had not been planned for other than on a zoning map, did not occur incrementally and had been at a rate and scale that challenged the capacity of local services. In some cases, this was overwhelming and in almost all, led to requirements for new infrastructure, facilities and services, which have lagged behind population growth.

Settlements of this scale are not generally centres of employment and have neither the population nor the density to support viable public transport, or all but the most basic services. This means that residents are inevitably car dependent, which limits the potential benefit of having an increased population living locally. The new population must travel by car for employment and for most shopping and leisure/recreational activities as well as education beyond primary level, to a larger town.

While the impact of traffic generation on an individual settlement basis may be modest, cumulatively, this pattern of car dependence has a negative and costly impact on the wider road network, particularly in and around the larger cities and towns on which dispersed population growth is dependent. It means that many city and particularly town-based businesses and services require significant car parking to ensure viability, being dependent on an increasingly dispersed car-borne catchment. This has resulted in a move towards out of town or edge of town shopping, business, leisure and service activity.

The combined impacts of the dispersal of population growth to smaller settlements and rural areas, a consequent increase in car traffic and requirements for car parking, have influenced a move towards out-of-centre, car dominated employment, shopping and leisure. This has undermined existing urban environments and has made it more difficult to ensure that our cities and towns remain attractive, viable places.

It has meant that existing services and infrastructure have in some cases become underutilised or redundant, serving diminishing, ageing populations. It has also required people to travel relatively long distances, as facilities cannot be replicated everywhere new populations have emerged. It has made effective service and infrastructure planning difficult, as there is no clear pattern as to where people will be, or in what numbers.

It also means that larger, planned and relatively higher density growth areas in cities and larger towns cannot compete on a comparable development cost basis with basic lower density development on many greenfield sites at the edge of small settlements. These strategic development areas are often supported by significant public investment in costly enabling infrastructure, the potential benefit of which, cannot be realised.

A further related consequence of this type of growth is the continued attraction of dispersed rural housing for those engaged in predominantly urban occupations. It is apparent that when faced with the choice of a rapidly developing small town or a relatively more expensive larger urban centre, a large proportion of people choose to live in a one-off house in a rural area.

4. NATIONAL AND REGIONAL PLANNING STRATEGIES

The pattern described above was exacerbated in the absence of an overall national planning strategy, addressed for the first time by publication of the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) in 2002. A combination of factors undermined implementation of the NSS, initially exemplified by the contrary decentralisation programme in 2003, but ultimately terminated by the economic crisis from 2008 onwards.

Analysis of the NSS undertaken by DHPLG in advance of the preparation of the NPF, compared population growth from 2002-2016 in the twenty-three 'designated' NSS gateways and hubs, with that of the twenty-three fastest growing large settlements (>5,000 people) over the same period. It is remarkable that not one of the fastest growing towns in Ireland (in percentage terms) from 2002-16, was a NSS designated gateway or hub.

Moreover, excluding Dublin, the actual level of population growth was almost identical for both the twenty-two NSS gateways and hubs, and the twenty-two different, but fastest growing large towns. This means that the level of population growth in the 22 designated NSS gateways and hubs other than Dublin since 2002 was actually replicated in 22 completely different, non-designated settlements that were also much smaller to begin with.

The average population of the 22 NSS gateways and hubs in 2002 was just under 30,000 people, excluding Dublin. The average population of the 22 fastest growing large towns in 2002 was five times smaller, or just under 6,000 people.

All of this means that the spatial distribution of Ireland's population has become increasingly more dispersed, with growth focused on the commuting catchments of our largest cities and towns, at a radius of up to 80km/50 miles, between 1996/2002 and 2016. This is the continuation of a fifty-year trend, which dates back to the 1960's.

A core purpose of regional and urban planning is to enable strategic choices to be made about the future, to optimise investment in employment, infrastructure and services, rather than simply facilitating the zoning of land or the building of individual houses. This was recognised by the State at a critical point in the social and economic development of the Country.

In 1966, Colin Buchanan and Partners were commissioned to prepare a National and Regional planning strategy for Ireland. *Regional Studies in Ireland*, known as 'the Buchanan Report', was completed in 1968 and published in 1969. The strategy identified Cork and Limerick as the two principal national growth centres to be supported to grow significantly, to 250,000 and 175,000 people respectively, to complement Dublin, together with a further six regional growth centres that include Galway, Waterford, Athlone, Drogheda and Dundalk, to be targeted for more modest growth. Reference was also made to four local growth centres, Cavan, Castlebar, Letterkenny and Tralee.

Buchanan was never adopted and an official strategy of regional dispersal was pursued thereafter. As a consequence, although the projected level of national population growth to 1986 (c600,000 people) was accurate, on the ground, this was much more widely distributed throughout all parts of rural and urban Ireland, than Buchanan had envisaged. It remains the case that by 2016, neither Cork nor Limerick had achieved the 1986 population targeted by Buchanan in 1968, despite a national population increase of 1.8 million people to 2016 (three times the quantum to 1986).

5. TRENDS AND PROJECTIONS

The development of the NPF included an examination of long-term population trends and demographic and econometric modelling, at the scale of the three Regional Assembly areas that were established in 2014. Trends were examined from 1966, which was the baseline year for the Buchanan Report, in twenty-five year intervals, to 1991 and 2016. Projections were modelled from 2016 to 2041, using a number of alternative scenarios.

These 25 year intervals highlight a persistent macro-trend, especially when projected forward under a 'Business as Usual' (BaU), scenario. Partly due to scale, there is a three-way divergence in the quantum of total population growth, with the Eastern and Midland area growing by approximately four times that of the Northern and Western Region, and the Southern Region, growing by twice that of the North and West, but half that of East and Midlands. Without intervention, it is projected that this trend will continue and accelerate.

When looked at more closely, at a sub-regional level in terms of the rate of growth and indexed (Table 1, Index of Regional Population Change), a more accurate distribution of spatial population growth distribution emerges.

Table 1: Index of Regional Population Change (own work/DHPLG)

Area	25 Years 1991-2016	10 Years 2006-16
Ireland	100	100
Dublin	90	110
Mid-East	187	142
Midlands	126	131
Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly	119	122
South-East	95	87
Mid-West	68	54
South-West	85	91
Southern Regional Assembly	84	81
West	92	76
North-West	67	67
Mid-Border	92	119
Northern and Western Regional Assembly	84	80

It is apparent that notwithstanding differences in scale, the rate of population growth in both the Southern and Northern and Western Regions, is almost identical. Both were 84% of the national average over the 25 years to 2016, and were 81% and 80% respectively in the 10 years to 2016. The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly area has been at around 120% of the national average in the 25 years to 2016, with a slight increase to 122% over the more recent 10 year period.

Demographic and Econometric modelling projections undertaken for the DHPLG by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) in 2017, identify likely population growth of 870,000 people to 2040, based on a medium migration (net immigration of 18,500 people per annum) and modest, but sustained economic growth scenario. This level of growth will require in the region of 660,000 additional jobs and will result in the formation of approximately 550,000 new households (*Prospects for Irish Regions and Counties: Scenarios and Implications*, Edgar Morgenroth, ESRI, 2017).

Ireland's future population will be older, with the number of people aged over 65 likely to double to by 2040 and comprise almost one-quarter of the national population. The birth rate in Ireland has already fallen below replacement and this trend will continue, with Ireland dependent on net inward migration to sustain population growth (*Population and Labour Force Projections*, CSO, 2018). It is primarily for this reason that any demographic planning scenario is significantly influenced by migration assumptions.

The pattern of migration in Ireland is highly volatile, with record levels of net in-migration in the decade to 2008, followed by a period of net out-migration to 2014. A return to net-in migration in 2015 has now become firmly established at levels in excess of those modelled in the long term to 2040. The twenty year pattern from 1996-2016 of net in-migration of 20,000 people per annum on average equates with the 'medium' growth scenario used by the CSO in forecasting long-term population growth in 2018.

6. NPF 'MACRO-SPATIAL' CONSIDERATIONS

A key challenge in the formation of the NPF strategy was to develop alternative scenarios to influence the location of where future population growth takes place. These were described as 'macro-spatial' considerations under three principal headings as follows:-

Balance Between the Regions – this is the distribution of growth/jobs/housing *between* the Regions and alternatives ranged from a ‘Greater Dublin Area focus’ to ‘regional dominance’. The scale of Dublin and the East is such that a modest shift is considered feasible, whereby it would be possible to aim to match the level of growth in Dublin and the Eastern and Midland Region, in the other two regions combined. This targets a ‘50:50’ approach, whereas ‘BaU’ would be 55:45 in favour of Dublin and the East. Notably, to achieve this by 2040 would break the fifty-year pattern evident since the 1960’s.

Concentration versus Dispersal – these are options for where growth is located, ranging from a high proportion in a small number of locations as per Buchanan, to a low proportion in many, variants of which include NSS and ‘BaU’. Almost all evidence suggests the optimal growth impact is to target a limited number of accessible centres of scale, with a good range of employment and services, including in particular, third-level education and research and proximity to international airports and motorways/ports, see for example, *Reshaping Economic Geography*, World Development Report, World Bank, 2009.

Compact Growth versus Sprawl – this is the format of growth where it does occur and the extent to which it is geographically compact or spread out. This consideration offers significant potential long term growth impacts and variables include the density of development, the extent of ‘infill’ or ‘brownfield’ development and growth that is generally more proportionate to the scale of settlement in which it is situated. See *Analysis of Public Policies that Unintentionally Encourage and Subsidise Urban Sprawl*, Victoria Transport Policy Institute/LSE Cities, 2015

A further set of related considerations was the extent of which the above would be aligned with infrastructure delivery. For example, infrastructure provided in advance of, or in tandem with, development, or alternatively, lagging afterwards.

Finally, it is critically important that all three macro-spatial considerations would operate in concert, as a true *strategy*. A mutually supportive set of measures to co-ordinate all three, together with a mechanism to ensure the timely provision of infrastructure, are needed for an effective long-term Framework.

7. NPF ‘CORE’ STRATEGY

The resultant NPF strategy was described as the ‘50:50 City’ scenario, and is based on targeting:-

- Combined NWRA/SRA growth to match that of EMRA i.e. 50:50;
- 50% of national population growth to take place in the five cities (Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford), roughly split 50:50 between Dublin and the other four cities combined. This means above average growth in Dublin and an ambitious 50% growth rate in the other four to 2040;
- In parts of Ireland outside the principal commuting catchments of the cities, the development of five regional/cross-border ‘leads’, i.e. Athlone, Sligo, Letterkenny, Dundalk and Drogheda;
- Compact growth within the existing built footprint of all settlements, to comprise 50% of housing within the five cities and 30% elsewhere, which equates to 40% nationally, together with higher residential densities at appropriate urban locations;
- Alignment with the funding envelope set out in the National Development Plan (NDP), a €116 Billion ten-year public investment plan to 2027, with both the NPF and NDP focused on ten shared National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs).



Map 1: National Planning Framework 'Core' Strategy

Illustration 2: NPF ‘National Strategic Outcomes’ and NDP Priorities



Ultimately, the NPF strategy seeks to influence locational choice of firms and individuals. More than ever before, the relative attractiveness of places in Ireland to talent & enterprise, will enable regional & local ambition to be realised.

8. IMPLEMENTING THE NPF

The key difference about the NPF when compared to the NSS, is that there is integrated institutional and financial backing for the Framework, across Government.

There will be a new tier of statutory regional plans, known as ‘Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies’, to be prepared by each of the three Regional Assemblies. Each will further detail regional planning and investment priorities arising from the NPF and will serve to inform the preparation of city and county Development Plans, all of which must be reviewed to be consistent with the NPF and RSESs.

Each RSES must also include a new high-level Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan (MASP) for the metropolitan area of each of the five cities. The five ‘metro’ areas have been defined by DHPLG, further to the NPF.

Arising from a key planning recommendation of the Mahon Tribunal in 2012, the development planning system will be overseen by a new statutory Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR), whose core statutory role will be independent oversight of regional and local plans, including land zoning in city and county level plans.

The legislation establishing the OPR includes additional legislative provision for the NPF to be reviewed and updated, on an ongoing basis.

A new national regeneration and development agency, to be known as the Land Development Agency, or LDA, will be established, to develop surplus public land and to establish a long-term strategic land bank.

Most critically, the NPF is aligned with the ten-year €116 Billion NDP to 2027, to ensure horizontal integration across all Departments and Agencies. As ‘Project Ireland 2040’ (PI2040), this is overseen by the PI 2040 Project Delivery Board, which reports to cabinet and includes the Secretary General of each Government Department. It is chaired by the Secretaries General of the Departments of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) and Housing, Planning and Local Government (DHPLG).

The PI2040 Board is supported by an investment projects and programmes office in DPER, whose role includes the development and monitoring of a strategic projects and programmes tracker.

The establishment of four new funds worth €4 Billion to 2027 in the NDP to support the NPF, includes a €2 Billion Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF), overseen by DHPLG and a €1 Billion Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF), overseen by the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD).

A further €1 Billion is divided evenly between a Disruptive Technologies fund (Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation – DBEI) and a Climate Action Fund (Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment – DCCAE). All four funds include representation from each of the four Departments, as well as others, on project assessment boards.

In addition to supporting the PI2040 Project Delivery Board, the three immediate NPF priorities for DHPLG are:-

1. Working with Regional Assemblies and the local government sector to ensure effective Regional Strategies and Metropolitan and Local Plans that operationalise the NPF;
2. Creating operational frameworks for new funds, synchronising with existing capital expenditure in housing, transport and water;
3. Developing and establishing the Land Development Agency, as a national regeneration and development agency.

9. CONCLUSION

While implementation of the NPF is clearly at a very early stage, its influence *horizontally* across Government, through alignment with the €116 Billion NDP and the PI2040 Project Delivery Board, and *vertically*, through setting the framework for the regional and local (city and county) planning system and the establishment of the LDA and €4 Billion of specific funding, is making an impact.

The integration of spatial considerations with sectoral investment priorities is recognition of the importance of place-based considerations in the locational and investment decisions of talent and enterprise. It is acknowledgement that the attractiveness of places in Ireland will differentiate them from elsewhere in the future.

It is clear that Dublin will remain critically important, but needs to be enabled to grow more sustainably. The latent potential of Irelands regions, led by the compact growth of the four cities other than Dublin and other key centres, to accommodate significantly more employment and population, would be a much-needed 'gamechanger' for regional development in Ireland.

The nature and extent of change from 'Business as Usual' required to make a difference in the overall pattern of spatial development is such that it will be 2026-27, by the time the impact of a full cycle of change, aligned with the 10-year NDP, will be measurable to a significant extent.

It will remain necessary to monitor and review implementation throughout the next decade, especially to inform and refine the policy, fiscal and investment measures required to achieve the overall long-term outcomes of the NPF.