

28th March 2017

National Planning Framework Submissions
Forward Planning Section
Department of Housing Planning and Local Government
Custom House
Dublin
DO1 W6 X0

Dear Sir / Madam,

The National Planning Framework "Ireland 2014 Our Plan" was considered by the Members of Westmeath County Council at their meeting on 27th February 2017 and I enclose herewith their submission for your consideration.

Yours Sincerely



Billy Coughlan
Corporate Services

National Planning Framework (NPF) – Issues and Choices

Submission by Westmeath County Council

The National Planning Framework document ‘*Ireland 2040; Our Plan; Issues and Choices*’ was considered by the Elected Members of Westmeath County Council at our meeting on Monday 27th February. The following is a summary of the issues raised in discussion and Member’s observations:

1. Members acknowledged the strategic nature of the NPF and the associated long-term implications for spatial planning, economic development and sustainable growth nationally, regionally and at county level. The NPF, which is attempting to shape the future spatial pattern of development in Ireland and deliver a better balance of socio-economic development and population growth between regions will have major implications for County Westmeath and the Midlands. It is noted that submissions at this stage in the process are requested to be of national significance, strategic in nature and have a spatial focus.
2. The over-riding sentiment expressed was the need to input into the process, on behalf of both the county and region, in order to properly address the range of socio-economic issues identified in the paper and to actively respond to the need for timely infrastructural investment to sustain and support economic growth. County Westmeath is concerned that it could find itself outside the sphere of influence of the second tier cities option cited in the discussion paper leaving the county without a major urban centre to prime self sustaining growth and this option is not therefore acceptable.
3. The Midlands is strategically located in relation to Dublin, Galway and Limerick, and has natural advantages in terms of interregional connectivity traversed by communication and transportation corridors. In addition, Athlone has strong socio-economic linkages with Longford, Offaly, Roscommon and East Galway as an

education, commercial and employment centre and has a sphere of influence which impacts upon the Northern and Western Regions. However, the Midlands Region needs to develop greater cohesion, both internally and externally to maximise its assets and competitive strengths.

4. The importance of public transport infrastructure investment and initiatives for Westmeath and indeed the wider Midlands to support social and economic development is emphasised. The future influx of people and investment into Mullingar and Athlone and surrounding areas needs to be complemented and supported by strong transport infrastructure. There is a need for enhanced public transport links between the towns of Mullingar, Athlone and Tullamore which would also contribute to a national framework for integrated public transport.
5. National Secondary Routes need to be a major focus for investment as they connect the towns within the region and provide critical links to the north east, south west and south east of the country. This critical infrastructure will complement the radial motorway network and further enhance connectivity and accessibility of the county and the region.
6. The emphasis placed in the discussion paper on health and wellbeing was noted and welcomed. Concern was expressed however by Members at the impact of long commuting patterns on health and welfare, which is being experienced by a significant proportion of the county's workforce. The NPF should promote the stated aspiration of 'bringing people and jobs closer together' and be more effective in its delivery than the NSS, which failed to control unsustainable patterns of development. Congestion on roads and the motorway network close to Dublin, which is now evident is adversely affecting efficiency and quality of life. On the other hand, there is ample capacity on these roads leading from Dublin to Westmeath, and this represents an opportunity for economic development, which should be harnessed. The underlying cost competitiveness and capacity for plan led sustainable development in Westmeath and its lower levels of traffic congestion are seen as positive quality-of-life features which give Westmeath a natural advantage which should be capitalised upon.

7. Larger urban centres are capable of competing internationally; they retain a critical mass of skills, supporting business and educational institutions, communications and other advanced infrastructure and services. Whilst urban structure in the centre of Ireland is dispersed, it has a network of strong towns which together offer a wide range of services including access to a large and diverse workforce within a travel time of 45-60 minutes. There is a need however to boost critical mass in County Westmeath to create more self-sustaining development in the county, building on its central location, its proximity to Dublin and Galway and quality of life and natural and cultural heritage attributes. In addition, industrial development policy for Westmeath should utilise opportunities for specialisation in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, medical devices, research and development, communications and other established enterprises.
8. The critical importance of investment in broadband and telecommunications infrastructure for the county, including all rural areas, is emphasised. As part of broadband infrastructure, there will be a need for a system that will be capable of delivering telemedicine and high quality distance learning, as education becomes a lifelong obligation.
9. Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) has an important educational role in the Midlands and is of particular value in terms of its research and innovation programmes, linked to the needs of both indigenous and multi-national industry. The continued development of AIT as a key regional driver of skills, education and innovation to support continued economic development should be prioritised. Continued collaboration between industry and AIT, the advancement of research and innovation and an increase in output of higher level graduates tailored to requirements of industry is paramount. AIT should be developed to achieve university status.
10. The importance of ensuring that the natural environment of the county such as water quality, landscape, and biodiversity is protected, maintained, and enhanced, where appropriate, as a basis for future sustainable development, including tourism was noted and acknowledged. It is recognised that quality of life and lifestyle opportunities are critically important in attracting and retaining skilled people and in attracting mobile foreign direct investment. Westmeath's unique environmental and

natural heritage associated with lakelands, waterways, greenways, cultural and historic sites and peatlands present an array of lifestyle and recreational options. These offer a distinctive lifestyle rooted in a high quality living environment, rich in heritage and landscape value and represent a distinct natural advantage. Targeted investment in key tourism infrastructure, and developing a network of regional and national scale visitor attractions, including focused investment on the inland waterways should be a priority. This development should take place within the context of a wider urban / rural renewal and recreational strategy aimed at developing the full potential of river, canal and lakeland areas throughout the county and region.

11. Rural areas in the region are experiencing significant changes but the nature of these changes varies with distance from urban centres. Policies must be tailored to local conditions to ensure that the vitality of rural communities is maintained in tandem with a strengthened network of towns and villages and in a way that is sustainable in social, economic, and environmental terms. Serious concern was expressed at the loss of services in peripheral rural settlements and the need for regeneration of these areas. Issues affecting these areas are considered to be far removed and at variance with those which apply to urban areas and therefore warrant specific and targeted intervention.
12. The NPF issues document is mainly focused on cities. Areas which are peripheral to this focus may not be able to sustain vibrant rural communities with a balanced structure of age, income and occupational groups. There is need for significant intervention in rural communities that are already at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion, as economic policy to date has failed to develop sustainable and vibrant rural communities.
13. Support by way of investment in human resource development is required. Public investment should be prioritised across a range of sectors to allow rural communities to be able to respond to the challenges presented by changing economic and social conditions and altering demographic structures. Communities should have the ability to adapt to meet the needs of an aging population without older persons having to relocate outside of their lifetime community.

14. Rural communities require the establishment of an economic model that describes the value of a rural area as an amenity, tourism asset and in terms of their importance to the overall national economy. Quantifying the amenity value of rural areas of Westmeath that are peripheral to major urban areas would be beneficial to identifying the opportunities that will emerge over time.

15. Lands in ownership of Bord na Mona and Coillte in the Midlands Region, a percentage of which lie within County Westmeath, should be subject to a holistic land use plan, addressing recreation, energy, commercial, community and nature conservation requirements. Potential for the creation of a National Park to serve the Midlands and the greater Dublin area should be included as an objective of the NPF.

We the Members of Westmeath County Council request that you take all of the above points into consideration in the formulation of the National Planning Framework to 2040. This is in order to ensure that County Westmeath and the Midlands in general can grow and develop to its maximum potential and to ensure that it contributes positively to the future development of this country.



Councillor Frank McDermott

Cathaoirleach

Westmeath County Council