

Submission on the National Planning Framework: Ireland 2040

**On behalf of the Sligo BID CLG in respect of
the settlement of Sligo**



Planning & Environmental Consultants

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

On behalf of our client, **Sligo Business Improvement District Company Ltd**, we wish to make a submission to the National Planning Framework: Ireland 2040 – Issues and Choices Paper. The purpose of this submission is to ensure that the finalised and adopted National Planning Framework: Ireland 2040 (NPF) takes cognisance of the importance of Sligo in the national and regional context and that this importance is reflected in its designation as a significant growth centre in the adopted plan. Furthermore this submission will seek to ensure that the policies, objectives and provisions of the adopted NPF facilitate targeted growth which will contribute to the expansion and growth of business and enterprise in the town and the surrounding area.

The designation of Sligo as a growth centre in the NPF and the inclusion of policies and objectives which bolster this designation will drive both public and private investment into the town and the surrounding area. Sligo has historically suffered from a lack of connectivity with the major urban centres in the country which has led to depressed economic growth and in turn migration from the city, and the north west as a whole, to the greater Dublin area and Galway. The first national planning framework for the country (National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020) identified a number of the issues which affect Sligo and indeed, proposed measures to address these issues. However as of 2017 Sligo still suffers from a number of the issues which historically restricted its growth and success such as lack of connectivity, lack of investment and outward migration.

1.2 About Sligo BID CLG

Sligo BID (Business Improvement District) Company CLG is a non-profit Limited Company whose purpose is to implement, manage, administer and renew the BID scheme. The Sligo BID is an initiative designed to increase the footfall to Sligo city centre, to attract more businesses and to secure a long term sustainable model for the management of the town. BID represents businesses in the BID area is designed to benefit all of the business people in Sligo.

Having run a plebiscite in accordance with the Local Government Act of 2006, 66.69% of the ballots cast, voted yes to instigate a BID in Sligo. Sligo BID has as members 758 local businesses who contribute a levy calculated at 3.09% of their respective rateable value giving the BID an annual budget of approximately €375,000 per annum. The key objective of the BID is to develop and implement a series of initiatives (agreed by the members) that are designed to promote and improve the trading environment and to drive footfall to the BID zone.

Fundamental to the BID is establishing a good working relationship with the local authority (both management and elected representatives) and to date in excess of 16 projects have been completed in a spirit of productive collaboration. Worthy of note is that the BID process was supported by Sligo County Council, Sligo Chamber, Sligo Tourism, Institute of Technology, Sligo and Sligo Tidy Towns. Projects and areas of work are identified in close consultation with members of the various BID working groups. Currently Sligo BID has six such groups representing retail, hospitality and tourism, industry, festival and events, Purple Flag and residents/consumers.

The work of the BID had already engendered positive results. Sligo won a Purple Flag (ENTE ATCM) in 2015, a highly commended award from the Association of Town and City Management (ATCM UK and Ireland) for the strength of the town team partnership

(2016) and in January 2017 was certified as the first designated coach friendly town in Ireland from the Coach, Tourism, Transport Council of Ireland (CTTC). In February 2017, Sligo BID was selected as the case study for the National Urban Regeneration Framework document in development with the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation.

Finally Sligo has two Purple Flag accredited town and city assessors and the CEO of Sligo BID, Gail McGibbon was recently selected as the all-Ireland representative to the Advisory Council of ATCM - the largest town and city network of its type in Europe.

Sligo BID (Business Improvement District) was the first BID to form on the west coast of Ireland (March 2016). The BID formed as a direct result of the "Better Towns through Partnership" Project run by Sligo County Council from September 2013 to March 2015 and the first town to appoint a Town Centre Manager in the country.

2 CONTEXT

2.1 Sligo: An Overview

Sligo is located in the north western corner of the country approximately 180 kilometres north west of Dublin and approximately 45 kilometres south west of the border with Northern Ireland. It is the county town in County Sligo and has a population of 19,452¹ people making it the 24th largest urban centre in the country. It should be noted that this population is based on a boundary which is not representative of the full extent of the town of Sligo. In practice Sligo and its environs incorporate the settlements of Colloney, Strandhill, Ballisodare, Rosshill and Ballincar which increases the population to 23,660. This increase elevates Sligo to the 13th largest urban centre in the country. It is the second largest settlement in the west of Ireland after Galway and is the major urban settlement in the northwest of the country. Sligo is home to two third level education facility, Sligo Institute of Technology and St. Angela's College. It is also home to Sligo University Hospital an acute general hospital serving the northwest of the country.

The town is located on a low lying plain between Lough Gill and the Atlantic Ocean, the Garvoge River flows from Lough Gill through the town discharging into Sligo Harbour. Sligo is circled by hills and mountains with Keelogyboy Mountain to the north east, Knocknaree to the west in Strandhill and Slieve Dargan to the south west. Benbulbin further to the north is visible from the town.

Sligo serves as an administrative, employment, commercial, health and education centre for a large catchment area, while also acting as an important distribution centre for the north-west. It is the primary location for industry and enterprise within the county and the northwest as a whole due to its large pool of skilled workers, ease of access and relatively good telecommunications infrastructure. The availability of labour, transport facilities and infrastructure attracts enterprise and stimulates agglomeration effects in the local economy².

The natural scenery of Sligo is amongst the finest in the country. It is the County's primary tourist attraction. The mountains, forests, woodlands, lakes, rivers, coastline, offshore islands and largely unspoiled rural landscape offer a wide range of natural amenity and recreational pursuits³. This makes the town an important accommodation anchor for tourists with an accommodation capacity of 900 beds across six town centre hotels. This capacity is larger in number than many other towns of a similar population. The town centre retains its own heritage and cultural attractions such as The Model Niland Gallery, Sligo County Museum, the distinctive Yeats Building (c. 1895), the 13th century Sligo Abbey and the modern day operational City Hall (c. 1865) and Sligo Court House (c. 1878). Sligo is also located on the Wild Atlantic Way which is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country in its own right. It is also placed in the second tier of the national retail hierarchy, serving as a 'regional' retail centre for the western part of the Border region.

Sligo is not served by a motorway. In terms of the national motorway network the nearest embarkation point is Galway where the M6 Galway-Dublin motorway starts. If travelling by car from Dublin to Sligo the only feasible option is the M4-N4 route via

¹ Census of Ireland 2011

² Draft Sligo County Development Plan 2017-2023 – Section 4.2.3: Industry and Enterprise Locations

³ Draft Sligo County Development Plan 2017-2023 – Section 4.4 Tourism Development

Mullingar. In both cases the majority of the route would be on national primary roads as opposed to motorways. The N4 between the village of Collooney and Sligo town centre is formed by dual carriageway which provides an important link between Sligo and its surrounding hinterland to the south.

Sligo Port is one of seven ports in the Border Midlands and West Region, and the only one on the west coast other than Killybegs in County Donegal. While the significance of Sligo Port in national terms is quite low, it remains important in the regional and local economy, supporting local industry and providing an import/export transportation facility. Capital and maintenance dredging is required within the harbour, to enhance the use and longevity of the Port⁴.

There are 7 scheduled train services daily from MacDiarmada Station Sligo to Connolly Station, Dublin⁵. Bus Éireann Expressway operate 8 bus services daily to Dublin from Sligo Bus Station⁶. Sligo Airport is located in Strandhill approximately 7.5km west of the Sligo town. As of 2011 no scheduled services operate to or from the airport although it is a base for Irish Coastguard operations and is also used by a local flying club.

In 2008 a new waste water treatment plant was commissioned for Sligo and its surrounding area. The plant accepts wastewater from a population equivalent of 50,000⁷. There is significant capacity within the plant for additional loading and therefore capacity for additional development within the town and the surrounding catchment.

Sligo is the most important settlement in the north west of the country and although the population of Sligo Borough is not significantly high the population of the 'greater' Sligo area is as much as 60,000 people⁸. The town is home to higher order services that serve the wider region and not just the town or the county. There are significant levels of infrastructure serving the town and there exists opportunities to upgrade and expand the existing infrastructure. There are also significant opportunities to grow the economic footprint of the town through enterprise and tourism. It is important that Sligo is identified as a Tier 1 settlement in the adopted National Planning Framework to facilitate the future growth, success and sustainability of the town and the wider region.

⁴ Draft Sligo County Development Plan 2017-2023 – Section 8.6 Port and Harbours

⁵ http://www.irishrail.ie/media/07_dublin-sligo_25052015.pdf (Accessed 07/03/17)

⁶ <http://www.expressway.ie/route23.php> (Accessed 07/03/17)

⁷ <http://www.caw.ie/case-studies/sligo-wastewater-treatment-works> (Accessed 07/03/17)

⁸ Sligo County Retail Strategy 2017-2023 – Section 3.1

3 STRATEGIC PLANNING POLICY

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this section is to identify and assess strategic planning policy at a national level which has guided the growth of Sligo in the recent past as well as providing a review of other existing and proposed national strategic planning policy. This submission will undertake a critical assessment of the *National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020* and undertake a review of the *National Planning Framework: Issues and Choices Paper* as well as *Realising our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development* in order to identify how these publications, and the adopted National Planning Framework, can contribute to a sustainable and successful Sligo.

3.2 National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020

The purpose of the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) was to provide a national planning framework for Ireland. The NSS aimed to achieve a better balance of social, economic and physical development across Ireland, supported by more effective planning. In order to drive development in the regions, the NSS proposed that areas of sufficient scale and critical mass will be built up through a network of gateways and hubs.

Within this framework Sligo was identified as a new national gateway which in effect ensured that the town was targeted for growth. Gateways were identified as having a strategic location, nationally and relative to their surrounding areas, and were intended to provide national scale social, economic infrastructure and support services. Gateways were therefore seen as engines of regional and national growth.

The NSS stated that critical mass in the west and north west could be strengthened by developing Sligo as a gateway to capitalise on its strategic location and energise its associated hinterland. Building up the national role and scale of Sligo was a crucial first step and this was to be achieved by the development of a planning, land use and transportation framework. It was envisaged that this framework would provide a focus around which local authorities, business and community interests could reach consensus on the future development of Sligo and utilise its substantial physical capacity for development, while safeguarding its outstanding natural setting.

In addition to the macro-level objectives and policies relating to the future development of Sligo more specific micro level actions were identified which were to contribute to building Sligo's national role and these included items such as providing improved access to Sligo that built on previous investment in road and rail routes, improving reliability of electricity and gas supply in western, north western, border and north eastern parts of the country and the provision of a Derry-Sligo-Galway-Limerick-Cork-Rosslare rail link (Western strategic rail link).

3.2.1 Critical Assessment – National Level

The NSS was not a success in the national context and the reasons can be broadly summarised under the following headings:

- **Initial Gateway and Hub Designations**

In the first instance too many hubs and gateways were identified (i.e. 9 gateways and 11 hubs) for growth which immediately spread resources too thinly over too many locations in disparate geographical locations. The initial designation of settlements became politicized which resulted in too many areas being identified for growth to satisfy individual political ambitions.

Attempts to achieve nationwide investment and growth diluted the potential positive impact of the NSS.

- **Decentralisation**

The Decentralisation Programme announced by the Government in December 2003 saw the headquarters of eight government departments decentralised from Dublin to a range of gateway, hub and other towns. These towns included Newbridge, Carlow, Trim, Longford and Carrick on Shannon which were not identified in the NSS. However, in order to accommodate new residents, these towns had to build more houses, invest in infrastructure etc. which ultimately drew growth and investment away from the settlements where it should have been directed.

- **Disconnect between NSS and Local Level Planning**

Despite the provisions set out in the NSS at local level planners continued to zone lands for housing and other development and continued to grant planning permission for development on these lands. The continued inappropriate zoning of lands for development throughout the boom years was ultimately politically driven however the decisions to permit development on these lands were entirely planning ones. Brian Hughes, in his 2015 article on the subject, articulates this view as follows –

‘Instead of the intended objective of achieving accelerated growth in the nominated Gateways and Hubs Balanced Regional Development encouraged additional, geographically scattered one-off housing completions.’⁹

He goes on to note that the construction of these housing developments continues apace despite the effects of the economic downturn. The approach set out in the NSS has, he notes, –

‘Promoted the proliferation of hundreds, of newly-emerging villages and small-town settlements, usually occurring at the expense of urban consolidation’¹⁰

A striking indictment of the overall success of the National Spatial Strategy is set out in the National Planning Framework: Issues and Choices Paper (2017) which states that:

‘Not one of the twenty-two fastest growing towns in Ireland between 2002 and 2016 was an NSS gateway or hub settlement.’¹¹

The issues set out in the National Planning Framework: Issues and Choices Paper (2017) document are discussed in further detail in Section 3.4 below.

⁹ Hughes, B. (2015) Effects of the 2002-2020 National Spatial Strategy (NSS) on Ireland’s Settlement Growth, Its cities, and on Other Gateways and Hubs, P5, Para 3

¹⁰ Hughes, B. (2015) Effects of the 2002-2020 National Spatial Strategy (NSS) on Ireland’s Settlement Growth, Its cities, and on Other Gateways and Hubs, P5, Para 4

¹¹ National Planning Framework: Issues and Choices Paper. Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, 2017. Print.

3.2.2 Critical Assessment – Sligo

Sligo was identified as a gateway and an engine for regional and national growth in the NSS and there was a general commitment given to drive development in the north eastern region. Furthermore it committed to building up critical mass in the town in order to drive this development. However in spite of the objectives of the NSS, in the period 2002-2011, the population of Sligo fell by 1.4% from 19,735 to 19,452¹².

In addition to the identification of Sligo as a growth centre there were more specific actions identified which were intended to drive this growth and these primarily related to the provision of infrastructure. A longstanding issue for Sligo going back to before the implementation of the NSS was the lack of a motorway link with Dublin and with nearby gateways such as Galway. The NSS set out the requirement for the establishment of strategic radial corridors emanating from Dublin to towns and cities on the west coast including Sligo. Crucial to the success of these corridors was the requirement to improve road access to Sligo and to continue to invest in road and public transport links. As of 2017 Sligo remains without a motorway to Dublin or Galway.

Similar to the above in terms of the requirement to improve connectivity and access to Sligo, in order to drive its growth, the NSS identified the importance of a Western Strategic Rail Link running from Derry-Sligo-Galway-Limerick-Cork-Rosslare. This aspiration ultimately took the form of the Western Rail Corridor with plans to link Limerick and Sligo by rail. Works were progressed in respect of the Western Rail Corridor with the Ennis-Athenry section opening in 2009. There are currently no plans to extend the corridor further which means that Sligo is not directly connected to Galway, Ennis or Limerick by rail. In a similar vein to the connectivity issues identified above scheduled services between Sligo Airport and Dublin Airport ceased in 2011.

The lack of investment in infrastructure for Sligo is also evidenced in the fact that as of March 2017 Gas Networks Ireland pipe network does not extend as far as Sligo. While the above summary is not exhaustive it demonstrates that because of a lack of investment in infrastructure, among other things, Sligo did not grow as envisaged by the NSS.

3.3 Realising our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development

The purpose of this Plan is to drive Rural Development by focusing on its positive attributes and unlock the potential of rural Ireland through a framework of supports at national and local level. While Sligo is obviously an urban centre its catchment includes a large rural hinterland and the success of Sligo is dependent on the success of the rural areas that it serves. In this regard it is important to take consideration of the actions and policies set out in the Plan.

A brief selection of key targets set out in the Plan, which are relevant in the context of Sligo, are set out below:

- Support the creation of 135,000 new jobs in rural Ireland by 2020 by supporting indigenous businesses.
- Accelerate the preparation for the rollout of high-speed broadband and ensure that all homes and businesses in rural Ireland are connected to broadband.
- Develop an Atlantic Economic Corridor to drive jobs and investment along the Western seaboard.

¹² Central Statistics Office

Sligo BID CLG welcomes these aspirations given that the creation of jobs in the rural hinterland surrounding Sligo will keep people in the region which in turn will benefit the town. Similarly the provision of high speed broadband in rural areas will allow individuals to work for business and enterprises in the town while still being based in the locality and surrounding hinterland. This will help to stem the flow of skilled workers to Dublin and other major urban centres. The retention of people and skilled people in Sligo and the surrounding hinterland will ultimately contribute to the success and sustainability of Sligo.

Sligo is specifically mentioned once within the document under the 'Growing and Attracting Enterprise' section and specifically Action 71 which is:

*'As part of the IDA's €150m property investment programme, complete the construction of three new advance buildings in Tralee, Castlebar and Sligo.'*¹³

In addition to the above the Plan sets out the aspiration to improve rural transport links through a review of services, support for regional airports and investment in rural infrastructure. Sligo BID CLG welcome the commitment to the construction of IDA buildings in the town as this will attract business and enterprise and create jobs. Sligo BID CLG also welcomes the commitment to improving rural infrastructure links and support for regional airports such as Ireland West Airport. The improvement of these links will improve connectivity between Sligo and the rest of the country which in turn will attract people, investment and employment. It is vital that the adopted National Planning Framework sets out a joined up approach which works in tandem with other existing plans and frameworks where possible (such as the Action Plan for Rural Development) and not against them.

3.4 National Planning Framework: Issues and Choices Paper

The purpose of this paper is to set out the main issues and possible choices for the development of Ireland as a place, beyond 100 years of statehood over the next twenty years or more, to 2040. Ultimately the next step is to produce a National Planning Framework which will be a high-level document that will provide the framework for future development and investment in Ireland.

The town of Sligo is not mentioned in the Issues and Choices Paper. However Sligo BID CLG welcome the admission that Irelands growth trajectory will continue to grow and give rise to additional people, homes, jobs and infrastructure and that it is undesirable that this growth be accommodated in the way that it previously has been in the period 2002-2016. Furthermore the document acknowledges that a continuation of the pattern of development in Ireland over the last twenty years without intervention would more than likely cause quality of life and overall societal wellbeing to deteriorate and that a more tailored approach to regional development is required. Sligo BID CLG welcome this position and also the aspiration in the NPF Issues Paper which notes that strengthening regional cities and towns as drivers of growth is a key priority. The NPF Issues Paper is only a high level discussion document to inform the future adoption of a National Planning Framework however Sligo BID CLG welcome the admission that the previous approach to national spatial planning has not been successful. Furthermore they broadly welcome and support the proposed solutions within the paper which aim to ensure that the adopted framework will avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. Sligo BID CLG's vision for Sligo within the National Planning Framework is set out in Section 5 of this submission.

¹³ Realising Our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development. Publication. Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, 2017. Print.

4 SWOT ANALYSIS

We have prepared a SWOT analysis in the context of the National Planning Framework which sets out the strengths and weaknesses of the town of Sligo, the opportunities that exist for the town and the threats which it faces.

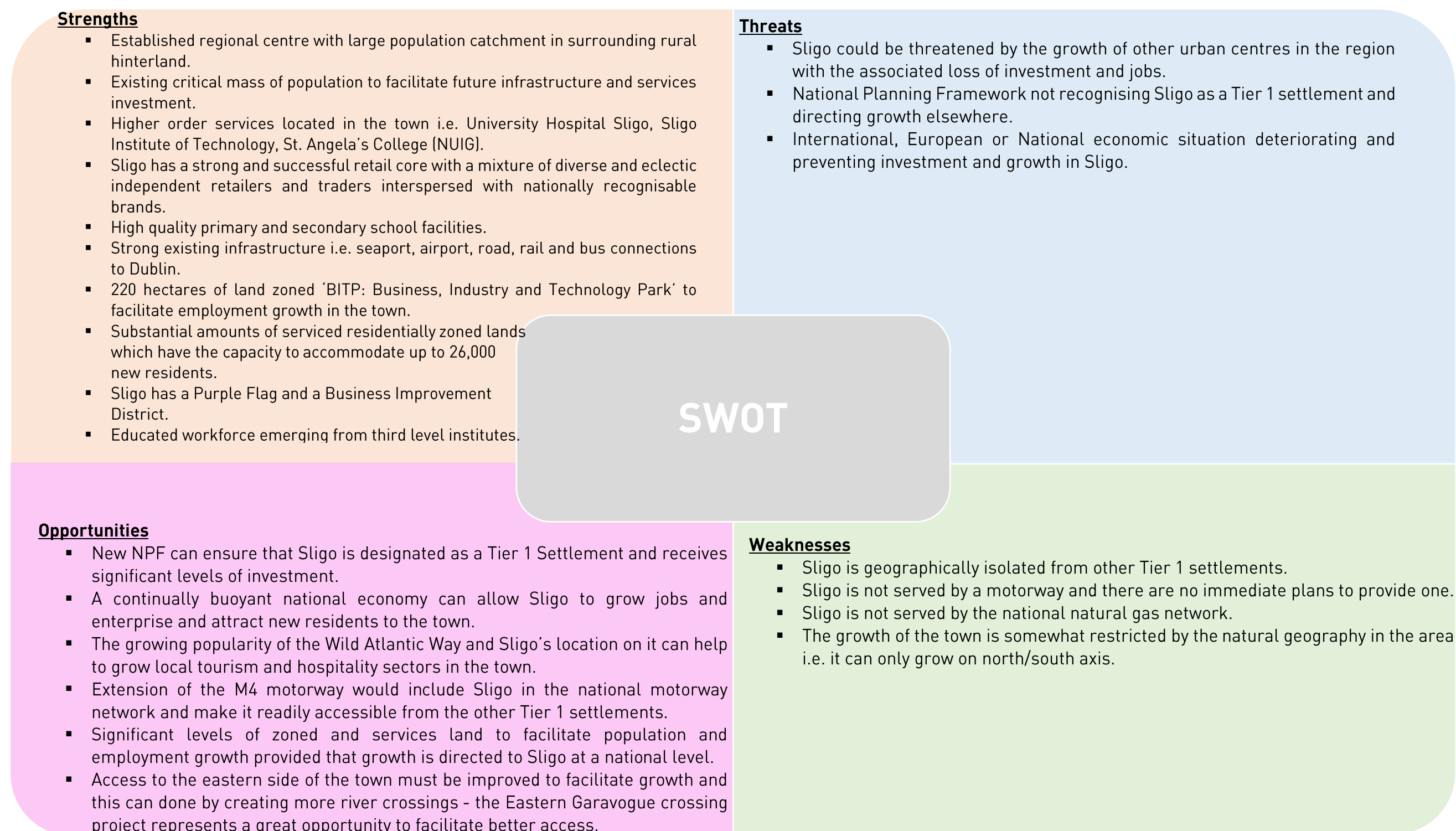


Figure 4.1– SWOT Analysis

5 SLIGO AND THE NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK

The adopted National Planning Framework (NPF) must learn from the mistakes of its predecessor. The NPF must drive Balanced Regional Development (BRD) and not of the type fostered in the National Spatial Strategy. The type of BRD which is pursued must strike a balance between Dublin and the five regional centres. At present Dublin is attracting an unsustainable level of investment, jobs and growth to the detriment of the rest of the country. The NPF must clearly identify the 5 regional centres – Cork, Waterford, Limerick, Galway and Sligo which will be targeted for major employment growth and housing construction and act as a counterbalance to Dublin. Plans for this growth should be developed concurrently with a capital works investment programme which ensures that infrastructure serving and within these centres can facilitate the growth i.e. road, rail, public transport, waste water etc.

Previous attempts to ensure that all settlements, of any significant size, within the State should be targeted for new jobs and significant levels of housing has proven to be a failure and has led to unsustainable patterns of development. Critical mass should be pursued in the regional centres referred to above and in turn their rural hinterlands and satellite towns will benefit and flourish. The adopted NPF must clearly set out the strategy referred to above with clear objectives and policies which will facilitate the desired outcomes. The primacy of the ‘top tier’ settlements must be entrenched in the framework from the outset.

While the NPF can set out a strategy and the associated policies and objectives it is ultimately the regional and local development plan policies which will determine outcomes on the ground. The structure and implementation of local and regional development plan policies and objectives must not be permitted to run contrary to the overall strategy set out in the NPF. Similarly the zoning designations associated with these development plans and the decisions on individual planning applications must, first and foremost, accord with the provisions of the NPF. This will facilitate a shift from developer-led planning to plan-led planning. The primacy of the NPF, in the planning hierarchy, should be enshrined both legislatively and practically to prevent development management outcomes that run contrary to the NPF and which will only serve to undermine it.

5.1 Why Sligo?

Sligo is the most important settlement in the north west of the country and although the population of Sligo Borough is 19,500 the ‘greater’ Sligo area has a population of as much as 60,000 people¹⁴. It is the obvious candidate in the north west for designation as a regional centre as it already functions as the administrative, economic and cultural centre for south County Donegal, County Sligo and parts of Counties Leitrim, Roscommon and Mayo. The population of the north west as a whole is in the order of 250,000 people and Sligo is the regional anchor for this entire catchment. There is already a strong foundation in place in a demographic context for achieving critical mass which will drive Sligo on to further growth.

In the Sligo and Environs Development Plan 2010-2016, which is the current statutory planning document for the town, there is sufficient lands zoned in the settlement (including the strategic land reserve) for the provision of housing for up to 26,000 new residents. Following investment by Sligo County Council in the 2000’s there is substantial capacity within the wastewater treatment system which can accommodate

¹⁴ Sligo County Retail Strategy 2017-2023 – Section 3.1

this growth. Therefore Sligo is prepared for and has the infrastructure in place to accommodate significant population growth through the provision of new housing.

In addition to the capacity for population growth there is significant capacity for growth in industry and employment within the town. In the Sligo and Environs Development Plan 2010-2016 there are 220 hectares¹⁵ of land zoned 'BITP: Business, Industry and Technology Park'. This is a substantial land bank which, with support from the IDA and other national bodies, could be promoted and incentivised for development. Population and employment growth are intrinsically linked and the conditions exist in Sligo to facilitate the substantial growth of both. We urge the Department to ensure that the finalised National Planning Framework identifies Sligo for significant levels of growth in order that it can achieve its potential.

Sligo is home to two third level education facility, Sligo Institute of Technology and St. Angela's College as well as a variety of high quality primary and secondary schools which are an attractive proposition for people and families considering coming the area. In addition to this Sligo has a strong and successful retail core with a mixture of diverse and eclectic independent retailers and traders interspersed with nationally recognisable brands. The town centre is compact, pedestrian friendly and walkable which are the fundamentals of a successful town centre. While there are vacancies these units can serve as the location for future growth on the back of wider population and employment growth. In addition to a strong retail core the town has appropriately located retail parks to facilitate larger scale retailers and bulky goods retailers. There is capacity in these parks to accommodate future growth.

While Sligo has a substantial and growing population and the capacity to expand significantly in terms of employment and population numbers it also offers the appeal of an attractive historic town centre and easy access to the open country side, beach resort at Strandhill as well as many other cultural and heritage destinations. The town offers the best of city and country and is therefore an attractive proposition for both young professionals and families. In addition to the points above the cost of living in Sligo is considerably lower than in the other regional centres and particularly in the context of Dublin. Rents and house prices are affordable in contrast to Dublin and some of the other Tier 1 settlements. The cost of doing business is also lower than the other Tier 1 settlements with rates and commercial rents which are affordable.

It is fostering a sense of place that makes a settlement successful and attractive to existing residents as well as newcomers. Sligo is striving to create a sense of place and enhance the offer and attractiveness of the town centre. This is evidenced in the fact that Sligo is the only town in Ireland with a Business Improvement District and a Purple Flag. A Purple Flag is an award for excellence in the evening and night time economy. There is also significant potential to further develop Sligo as a tourism destination given that it is located on the section of the Wild Atlantic Way which is closest to Dublin. Provided that good quality linkages and infrastructure can be developed between Sligo and Dublin in the near future (the completion of the M4) then Sligo could become the jumping off point for people travelling north or south on the Wild Atlantic Way.

On the basis of the above and the strong and obvious case that exists we respectfully request that Sligo is identified as a Tier 1 settlement in the adopted National Planning Framework to facilitate the future growth, success and sustainability of the town.

¹⁵ Sligo and Environs Development Plan 2010-2016

Below the Tier 1 settlements the NPF should identify a network of Tier 2 Support towns. The purpose of these towns, as the name suggests, is to support the primary functions of the Tier 1 settlements. It is envisaged that these towns will be close, in geographical terms, to the Tier 1 settlements. They will facilitate growth in their own right but at an organic level and not anywhere near the level of growth which will be targeted at the main settlements. It is envisaged that the primary employers in these settlements will be SME's. Beyond these settlements will be Rural Areas which will also include some small towns and villages. The target for these areas is to develop fibre broadband capability as soon as possible to establish connectivity with the designated settlements. These towns and villages should focus on resilience and working to retain population and should be encouraged to identify niche activities which will sustain them whether that be tourism, agriculture, renewable energy.

5.2 Implementation of the NPF

The adopted National Planning Framework must identify Sligo as a Tier 1 settlement and on foot of this designation must direct significant infrastructure investment to the town. This infrastructure investment should then facilitate and lay the foundation for growth in population and employment. This investment should be targeted at ensuring Sligo has better connectivity with Dublin and the other Tier 1 settlements.

The National Planning Framework should also be given a statutory basis so that the next Regional Development Plan, Sligo County Development Plan and all Local Area Plans are obliged to accord with its provisions. This in turn will ensure that development management decisions at local level, both in Sligo and across the country, are made in accordance with the provisions of the Framework and not contrary to it which is one of the reasons why the previous spatial strategy failed. In addition to the above all future government plans and strategies should take cognisance of the provisions of the NPF to facilitate a 'joined up approach'. This will help to ensure that investment is directed to the right areas and that the mechanisms of government are all pulling in the right direction to ensure a prosperous and sustainable future for Sligo and for the rest of the country.