

## ***WEST=on=TRACK***



### ***CONNECTING the WEST***

## **West=on=Track Submission to the National Planning Framework – March 2017**

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### **Ireland's National Planning Challenge.**

The policy choices which will emerge from the NPF process represent the most significant national planning challenges since the foundation of the state. The "business as usual" model has served us poorly, by effectively dividing the country geographically, socially and economically. This segmentation of our population and territory is not only counterproductive, it is quite unnecessary. Against a backdrop of a burgeoning population growth, a fresh, innovative approach is required of the NPF to determine spatial strategy with regard to population growth centres, centres of excellence in public services, and location of employment.

The temptation to confine an effective counterbalance to the Capital and GDA, to the four second tier cities, would be just as flawed as the National Spatial Strategy's efforts to spread the counterbalance over too many Gateways and Hubs.

It is necessary to spread the population throughout the country in a strategic way, so that communities, towns and cities can prosper in a self-sustaining fashion, while recognizing the role and importance of Dublin.

Consequently, the most important policy decision required is the provision of fit for purpose infrastructure on trunk routes between all major population centres, within a short time frame, as a foundation to strategic planning.

State of the art bimodal rail/road land transport, in parallel with fit for purpose electricity and gas grids, and high speed broadband provision, is the minimum necessary to enable a competitive platform for development.

Railways can play a disproportionately significant part in strategic planning, by shrinking the perception of distance through speed and breaking the current unsustainable "car dependency" model.

High speed rail in the UK and mainland Europe delivers average speeds of over 200KPH

The maximum motorway speed for buses in Ireland is 100KPH (S.I. No. 546 of 2008)

West-on-Track believes a radical re-examination and overhaul of the national rail asset is long overdue, requiring an implementation of innovative and imaginative policies to properly sweat the asset for the national good. The time has now passed for jaded and self-defeating concepts such as maintaining the so called "steady state", a notion repeatedly mentioned in the NTA Rail Review 2016. That review shows no understanding of the holistic opportunities rail can contribute to a rapidly expanding population and economy.

Investment in high-speed railway lines for long-distance passenger service, delivers safety, comfort, interoperability and speed, and should form the land transport gold standard, to revive the regions and to relieve development pressure on the GDA in a symbiotic way. Most importantly, high speed rail delivers optimum connectivity.

For example, by completing and upgrading the Western Rail Corridor from Limerick to Sligo, a journey time of less than 2 hours is a realistic target. At present, public transport options take over 4 hours, which does nothing to entice people from their cars.

Similar upgrading of radial routes to or from Dublin for higher speeds, could deliver journey times of 90 minutes or less from Sligo, Galway or Limerick. The key point is that by delivering high speed connectivity, people are enabled to efficiently access accommodation, employment and public service centres of excellence on an inter-regional basis. By reducing the concept of distance through high speed rail links, our second tier cities and large towns would no longer be remote from each other or from Dublin and the unsustainable

centripetal vortex effect of the GDA would be curbed.

High speed rail connectivity between regional centres and Dublin would allow greater choice in where people live and work.

The upgrading of existing lines, coupled with extending the penetration of inter-city trunk rail routes (such as Galway-Sligo-Derry), would provide connected sustainable employment hubs for communities, while simultaneously facilitating the growth of low carbon rail freight to ports

An urgent appraisal, to select the optimum rail route from Athenry through Sligo to Derry should be undertaken as a prudent, necessary advance planning measure.

Business, tourist, leisure and student travel would all be better catered for by high speed rail.

The current pedestrian average Irish Rail train speeds (for example Sligo-Dublin 75 KPH or 45MPH) have no future. Even the Cork-Dublin average of 123 KPH/74 MPH is unimpressive on a pan European-scale.

## **Health and well-being**

If the NPF perpetuates the "business as usual" model, where the West, Northwest and North Midlands are rapidly being reduced to a recreational area for domestic and overseas tourists, these regions will decline further. There must be recognition from policy makers, that tourism is but one of many diverse enterprises that need high speed rail connectivity to unlock their full potential for the benefit of all. "Access" and "Connectivity," will continue to be overused political buzzwords without provision of the necessary infrastructural links.

West-on-Track supports the enhancement of the Western Rail Corridor into a European style high speed rail route, which would transform and integrate the regions, cities and towns along the west coast. It would counteract social disadvantage, allow easy access to work, recreation, education, and healthcare, and would engender a renewed resilience and pride of place across

communities. A complementary rather than competing PSO bus service should link the rail service to outlying regions.

A step change in public transport policy and in how public transport capital projects are funded must take place if we are to leave a real legacy ensuring the health and well-being of succeeding generations.

## **Transport Strategy**

The Regional Planning Guidelines of the Mid West, West and Border Regions have consistently and collectively called for the provision of inter-city passenger and freight services on the Western Rail Corridor between Limerick and Sligo, as has West=On=Track .

To date central government has chosen to ignore the proven rail freight and passenger demand.

The programme for Government committed to including Limerick to Derry on the TEN-T Core map (road and rail), thus far, nothing has been done.

The NPF consultation document makes no mention of the Atlantic Economic Corridor despite a commitment to its aims and objectives in the programme for Government.

West=on=Track fully supports the concept of the AEC as being a fundamental tool to rebalance spatial planning and development and calls for the immediate re-instatement of Limerick to Derry as a Core route, on the TEN-T map (rail and road).

The omission of Sligo from co-ordinated planning and investment, on a par with the four second tier cities, is a major flaw in the NPF document, as it perpetuates the division of the country north and west of Galway into a "reservation" stunting its potential and ability to partake fully, as a net contributor to the National economy. Sligo's Gateway City status should be restored, the nearest cities of Galway and Derry are both more than 130 kilometres away, emphasising its important position as the regional driver of the North-West.

Sligo is the largest urban centre in the North-West, serving as an

administrative, commercial, health education and employment centre for a hinterland that extends far beyond the county boundaries, and is substantially larger than that of other towns of similar population.

West=on=Track, as a constituent of the Atlantic Rail Alliance fully endorses and supports the provision of a rail link from Sligo through Donegal, to provide a cross border connection into the Northern Ireland Railway system in Derry. Selection of the optimum route should be a priority for the NPF, with the added impetus of Brexit.

West=On=Track maintains, that radical changes are required in how Ireland funds capital expenditure on infrastructure, to enable short term delivery in an orderly and sustainable way.

Low interest loans, over a long term (50-100 years) from the European Investment Bank, World Bank or Asian investment funds, used in conjunction with EU TEN-T funding, will allow Ireland build world class, sustainable infrastructure that will serve several generations. With demographic predictions of 10 million on the island by mid-century, front loading infrastructure is not merely a prudent choice it is an urgent policy necessity. The present incremental funding model, linked to the boom-bust cycle, needs to be replaced by a rolling capital investment programme, funded from long term low interest loans. This would allow orderly and predictable delivery of critical infrastructure.

Failure to change the funding model will render the NPF as rhetorical and irrelevant as the NSS became.

## **Ireland's Unique Environment - Climate Change and Sustainability**

The NPF can ensure delivery of a sustainable future for a growing population, by supporting the economy and society while meeting climate change obligations, through providing high speed, carbon friendly, and electrified rail links. A significant portion of the cost can be recouped, through mitigation of massive EU carbon fines achieved through a modal shift to rail freight.

West=on=Track advocates that plans should now be formulated and advanced, to prepare for the electrification of the entire rail network, before the existing

diesel railcar and diesel locomotive fleet are life expired in 20-25 years' time. Benefits that would accrue from electrification include a major reduction in carbon emissions, with the potential to greatly reduce EU carbon fines, through providing a verifiable emission reduction plan. A major, on-going improvement to Ireland's balance of payments would happen through reduced fossil fuel imports. The efficiency of electric traction allows high speed running, with rapid acceleration.

Savings in electricity grid distribution systems can be achieved in symbiosis with electrification of the rail network.

West coast renewable energy, from dedicated estuarine (or marine inlet) tidal power stations, or existing wind farms, fed into peripheral railheads, would power an electrified rail system, and use the railway infrastructure for distribution, reducing the need for transmission pylons.

West-on-Track believes the provision of new rail alignments alongside new motorways, for example between Claremorris and Sligo on the N17 corridor (or between Letterkenny and Derry), would yield significant construction cost savings. West-on-Track also supports the concept of the Western Rail Corridor serving Shannon and Knock airports, and Knock Shrine.

Unless the connectivity of high speed rail is provided from Limerick through the West and North-West, to Derry, and the newly upgraded Derry-Belfast line, the entire region will continue to fall behind the East and South.

## **Equipping Ireland for Future Development – Infrastructure**

Completion of the Western Rail Corridor from Galway to Mayo and Sligo, dovetailed with the building of a new railway alignment between Sligo, Letterkenny and Derry, is a nationally important infrastructure project for Ireland that requires delivery within the next twenty years.

It will unlock the significant potential of existing embedded infrastructure and will optimise best value for money and efficiency, in terms of infrastructural spending.

By enhancing existing medical, educational, housing and public service social infrastructure, it will facilitate and justify an equitable affordable further development of urban centres to drive and sustain regional and rural development in the North-West region.

A cross radial state of the art rail link from Limerick to Derry will provide the missing foundation to effectively connect the West coast regions, allowing full and equal participation by all citizens in the life of the nation.

Given the repeated warnings from the EPA about our inability to meet our transport climate targets the creation of sustainable commuter zones for our large towns and cities must now be urgently addressed. In the case of Galway, for example, where large segments of the working population are forced to commute daily by car from Tuam and Claremorris the existing rail line should be urgently renewed. This is a shovel-ready project of the kind that will show that the NPF is about action and delivery. In Limerick the Foynes link offers similar possibilities. Developing these routes will also allow for the free movement of rail freight through the western region to the ports of Foynes and Waterford, relieving Dublin and encouraging economic growth throughout the sector. For example, Waterford Port has recently indicated that it needs the rail link to the West to expand and develop its operations and to attract new business.

## **Enabling the vision - Implementing the National Planning Framework**

The most significant barrier to implementation of the NPF would be the failure to implement a fundamental change in policy with regard to how infrastructural capital is borrowed.

Without long term loans over 50 to 100 years, this plan will not deliver what Ireland needs to the taxpayer. Another significant barrier would be a lack of vision or courage, on the part of policy makers to imagine how our nation could be in 100 years' time. As in all progressive European countries modern railway infrastructure, delivering real connectivity will enable that vision.