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Submission on the First Revision to the National Planning Framework from Friends of the Irish Environment

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Author: Friends of the Irish Environment

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Draft First Revision to the National Planning Framework

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Observations:

1. The Vision

Chapter: 1. The
Vision

Friends of the Irish Environment welcome the opportunity to make this submission on the draft First Revision to the National Planning Framework, in accordance with Section 20C(6) and Section 20C(7) of the Planning and Development Act, 2000 (as amended). The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is asked to consider the submission.

The Vision

At 1.4°C above the pre-industrial baseline, 2023 was the hottest year since records began and warming is accelerating at an unprecedented speed. The latest projections put the world on track for at least a 2.5–2.9°C average temperature rise this century, well above the Paris Agreement ‘safe’ maximum of well below +2°C and striving to limit heating to +1.5°C.

Everyone is now aware of the catastrophic implications of the accelerating climate trends. The last time there was this much carbon dioxide in the atmosphere was some 4.5 million years ago when sea levels were 23 metres higher and modern humans didn’t exist.

Europe is warming twice as fast as the global average with mean land temperatures already exceeding +2°C. Recent research has shown that the Atlantic Meridian Overturning Current (AMOC) is the weakest it has been in a millennium with a 95% confidence range that it will collapse between 2025 and 2095, and more likely than not by 2050. The consequences for Ireland are beyond calamitous.

Despite the increasingly ominous scientific studies, the chapter on 'Climate Transition and Our Environment' appears as the second last chapter in the document. Despite Ireland declaring a climate and biodiversity emergency in 2019, this tells you everything that is needed in respect of how national spatial policy really views the issue. It's the economy-first and everything else is second-order. If we were to treat climate change as the emergency it is, this should be the very first chapter in the revised Draft NPF and the entire vision for the future should be developed through the lens of relentless mitigation and adaptation.

Ireland is under a legally binding obligation to comply with the carbon budgets to 2030, as proposed by the Climate Change Advisory Council and approved by the government and the Oireachtas. Ireland also has significant mitigation obligations under EU law, and a failure to achieve these targets is projected to amount to at least €8.2 billion in compliance costs. Given the scale of the risks and the systematic transformation required, it is inconceivable that reducing emissions is not the primary control factor for all future planning in the Draft NPF vision.

Instead, the NPF vision is of a future of continued, endless globalised economic growth[AJ1] . However, a recent study by the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research found that the global economy is already committed to a massive income reduction of at least 20% by 2050 and up to 60% by the end of the century if emissions are not immediately and drastically reduced. In 2023, global emissions and fossil fuel use reached record new highs.

Multiple studies have repeatedly warned that we have now entered an uncharted era of increased global supply chain disruption, price inflation and economic stagnation. We cannot continue to blindly plan the future like the past is a reliable guide. The NPF vision of the future is hopelessly outdated and increases national vulnerability in the face of the systemic risks of the global climate crisis, including as highlighted in the Government's own National Risk Assessment 2023.

A New Way Forward

The Draft NPF projects that the national population will increase from 5.15 million in 2022 to 5.7 million in 2030, with a targeted increase of 6.1 million by 2040 i.e. an additional 950,000 people. This will be driven largely by immigration, as natural population growth slows, and will give rise to the need for the construction of around 800,000 new homes over the same period.

These demographic projections are derived from the 'Baseline Scenario' of the ESRI's COSMO 'macroeconomic' model which forecasts average annual net immigration of approximately 35,000 to 2030 and 20,000 per annum thereafter. This is a much higher rate of immigration than has been experienced over the past two decades which averaged 29,000 per annum, even accounting for the large influx of migrants following the commencement of the invasion of Ukraine.

The ESRI however explicitly warn that their population projections are *“very sensitive to economic conditions”* and determined by the relative attractiveness of Ireland to alternative labour markets which *“can be volatile and difficult to predict”*. In fact, to highlight the inherent uncertainty associated with the sensitivity of projections to key assumptions, the projections are presented in terms of ranges. Nonetheless, the Draft NPF simply transforms the baseline projections into minimum targets to be achieved, while ignoring the lower international migration scenario. This is highly problematic as there is very significant uncertainty as to whether it will happen. Specifically, the projections appear to be exclusively based on a business-as-usual continuation of past macroeconomic trends and do not take into account the systemic risks of climate change.

Moreover, the ESRI projections explicitly exclude a significant increase in international protection migration noting that as *“there are no available projections on the path for international protection, we are implicitly assuming no further substantial increases over the projection horizon in the baseline scenario”*. International research has repeatedly shown that intensifying climate change and the associated famine, drought, poverty, conflict and insecurity will be a major driver of international migration and up to 1.2 billion people could be displaced globally by 2050.

At least in the short-term Ireland is likely to remain an attractive refuge. It is therefore incumbent that the Draft NPF plans for a significant increase in international protection migrant in accordance with our legal and moral obligations. This is particularly important in the context of the significant rise in anti-immigrant rhetoric across Europe, including in Ireland, which has undermined social cohesion and transformed the political landscape. It is notable that, for a strategy based largely on continued very high inward migration, that very little emphasis is placed on social resilience with the words ‘social cohesion’ appearing just twice in the entire document.

8. Working with Our Neighbours

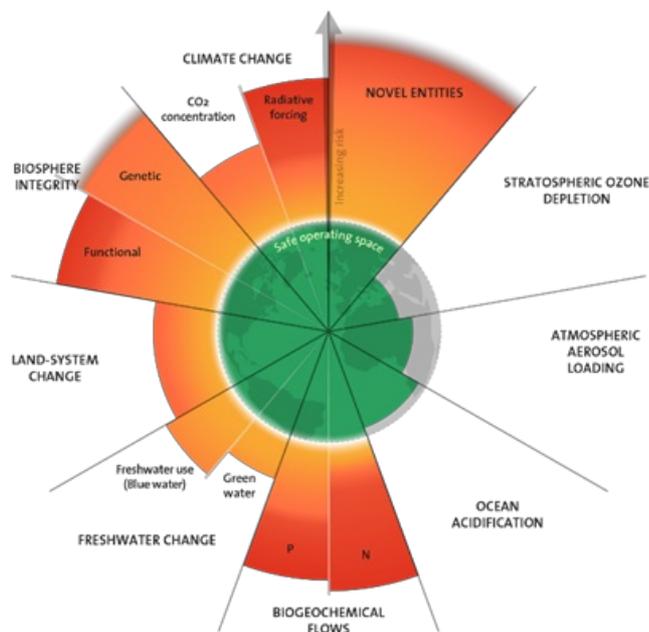
Chapter: 8. Working with Our Neighbours

UN Sustainable Development Goals

Section 1.5 of the Draft NPF identifies significant alignment between the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the NPF’s National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs). This alignment is evident in the areas of climate action, clean energy, sustainable cities and communities, economic growth, reduced inequalities, innovation and infrastructure, education, and health.

The concept of ‘Planetary Boundaries’ outlines nine key processes that regulate Earth’s stability and ensure humanity’s long-term development. First introduced in 2009 by Johan Rockström and 28 scientists, this framework has since evolved. In September 2023, scientists quantified all nine boundaries for the first time and revealed that six have already been crossed, signalling heightened risks of large-scale, irreversible environmental changes. These boundaries are interconnected, emphasising that focusing solely on climate change is insufficient.

The planetary boundaries concept can be seen as the environmental foundation for achieving the SDGs, particularly those related to environmental sustainability, while the SDGs provide a comprehensive global agenda that aligns with maintaining Earth's resilience within these ecological boundaries. Together, they reinforce the need for integrated and balanced approaches to global sustainability.



Source: Stockholm Resilience Centre, based on Richardson et al. (2023) shows that six planetary boundaries were crossed in 2023: climate change (CO₂ concentration and radiative forcing), novel entities, biogeochemical flows (phosphorous and nitrogen), freshwater change (freshwater use (blue water) and green water), land-system change, and biosphere integrity (functional and genetic).

The Doughnut for Urban Development: Manual, Appendix, and Database is a comprehensive framework designed to apply the principles of Doughnut Economics to urban planning and development. The concept is an extension of Doughnut Economics, originally proposed by ecological economist Kate Raworth, which visualises a balanced and sustainable economy through two concentric rings:

- The inner ring represents the social foundation, ensuring basic human needs and well-being.
- The outer ring represents the ecological ceiling, highlighting the environmental limits within which humanity must operate to avoid ecological collapse.

Between these two rings is the "safe and just space" where humanity can thrive without exceeding planetary ecological boundaries or neglecting social equity.

The 'Doughnut for Urban Development' is a specific adaptation of Doughnut Economics tailored to cities and urban areas. It provides tools for city planners, policymakers, and communities to create sustainable and equitable urban environments. It integrates ecological sustainability with social justice, guiding cities to operate within social and planetary limits.

The manual was developed to provide the entire construction industry with a practical tool for evaluating the sustainability of their projects and identifying steps to enhance their sustainability. This manual encompasses social and planetary sustainability while considering both local and global dimensions.

10. Implementing the National Planning Framework

Chapter: 10. Implementing the National Planning Framework

Translating the NPF to City and County Levels

Section 2.7 of the draft first revision addresses coordinated population allocations.

“National Policy Objective 11: Planned growth at a settlement level shall be determined at development plan-making stage and addressed within the objectives of the plan. The consideration of individual development proposals on zoned and serviced development land subject of consenting processes under the Planning and Development Act shall have regard to a broader set of considerations beyond the targets including, in particular, the receiving capacity of the environment.”

The first sentence of NPO 11 should be amended to reflect the relationship between the objectives of the development plan and the growth allocations set out in the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies.

People, Homes & Communities

The Draft NPF states on page 81:

“Continued economic success will ensure sustained improvement in living standards and quality of life for all of our citizens. It also provides the best possible platform from which to pursue key social and environmental goals, such as tackling disadvantage and responding to climate change”.

“Continued economic success” here is assumed to mean *“continued economic growth.”* It is stated that it *“will ensure sustained improvement in living standards and quality of life for all”* and *“provide the best possible platform from which to pursue key social and environmental goals such as tackling disadvantage and responding to climate change”*.

The threat posed by climate change to the economy, living standards and quality of life is, to the degree that economic growth uncoupled from climate impacts, cannot be said to be putting us on *“the best possible platform to respond to climate change”*. Quite the opposite; climate change, similar to other exceedances of planetary boundaries, is an enormous risk to global prosperity, quality of life and public health.

If *“continued economic success”* means *“continued economic growth”*, there is no empirical evidence for this statement. In high income countries, such as Ireland, research has shown that it would take more than 220 years to reduce emissions to ‘net-zero’ at achieved decoupling rates. Within that time, we would have burned 27 times our fair share of the 1.5°C global carbon budget and many parts of our world would be uninhabitable.

There is an assumption throughout the Draft NPF that urban densification and 'compact growth' is synonymous with sustainability. In reality, urbanisation is the primary driver of environmental change, accounting for some 70% of global climate pollution, largely caused by high-consumption, high-carbon urban lifestyles in high-income countries and globally telecoupled ecological footprints. It is not simply the case that urban densification will deliver more sustainable outcomes. Moreover, despite urban densification being showcased throughout the revised Draft NPF, Census data clearly shows ever-continuing private car-dependent and market-led commuter urban and 'rurban' sprawl outside of all our main cities, particularly Dublin. It must be recognised that all spatial policy has so far failed dismally to prevent these trends and no credible policies are provided in the revised Draft NPF as to how these trends will be reversed.

Specifically, the construction and built environment sectors currently account for about 37% of Ireland's emissions (about the same as agriculture) with 14% consisting of embodied carbon. Despite this, the revised Draft NPF mentions embodied carbon just once. Given the scale of the housing infrastructure proposed in the Draft NPF, this is a major issue that requires serious consideration in the context of the state's emissions obligations. A study by the Irish Green Building Council has previously estimated that, even with the construction of all the housing and physical infrastructure proposed in the existing NPF, it would result in a built environment with over three times the 2030 emissions target.

9. Climate Transition and Our Environment

Chapter: 9. Climate Transition and Our Environment

Strategic Environmental Assessment - Environmental Report

This is the first revision of the NPF following the enactment of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 which introduced significant amendments to the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 (the **2015 Act**) including:

- Places on a statutory basis a 'national climate objective', which commits to pursue and achieve no later than 2050, the transition to a climate resilient, biodiversity-rich, environmentally-sustainable and climate-neutral economy.
- Embeds the process of carbon budgeting into law with the government required to adopt a series of economy-wide five-year carbon budgets, including sectoral targets for each relevant sector, on a rolling 15-year basis, starting in 2021.
- Actions for each sector detailed in the Climate Action Plan, updated annually.
- A National Long Term Climate Action Strategy prepared every five years.
- Government Ministers are responsible for achieving the legally-binding targets for their own sectoral area, with each Minister accounting for their performance towards sectoral targets and actions before an Oireachtas Committee each year.
- Strengthening the role of the Climate Change Advisory Council, tasking it with proposing carbon budgets to the Minister.
- Providing that the first two five-year carbon budgets proposed by the Climate Change Advisory Council should equate to a total reduction of 51% emissions over the period to 2030, in line with the Programme for Government commitment.

- Expanding the Climate Change Advisory Council from eleven to fourteen members, and providing that future appointments to the Council provide for a greater range of relevant expertise and gender balanced.
- Introducing a requirement for each local authority to prepare a Climate Action Plan, which will include both mitigation and adaptation measures and be updated every five years. Local authority Development Plans must also align with their Climate Action Plan.
- Public Bodies are obliged to perform their functions in a manner consistent with national climate plans and strategies, and furthering the achievement of the national climate objective.

The EPA has recently issued a report detailing Ireland's Greenhouse Gas Emissions projections between 2023 and 2050. For the First Carbon Budget (2021-2025), the latest EPA projections show that this is projected to be exceeded by 26 million tonnes (Mt) in the WEM scenario and 19 Mt in the WAM scenario. Based on this assessment, the Second Carbon Budget (2026-2030) is projected to be exceeded by 109 Mt in the WEM scenario and by 67 Mt in the WAM scenario. The Third Carbon Budget (2031-2035) is projected to be exceeded by 143 Mt in the WEM scenario and by 86 Mt in the WAM scenario.

It is an obligation under the 2015 Act that, where the total greenhouse gas emissions for a preceding budget period exceed the carbon budget for that period, the excess greenhouse gas emissions from the preceding budget period are carried forward to the next period. The carbon budget for the next period is then decreased by the amount carried forward.

Using the projections presented by the EPA, the Second Carbon Budget would be reduced by 26 Mt to 174 Mt in the WEM scenario and by 19 Mt in the WAM scenario to 181 Mt CO₂ eq. With this carryover, the Second Carbon Budget is projected to be exceeded by 135 Mt in the WEM scenario and by 85 Mt in the WAM scenario. **Consequently, far higher emissions reductions will be needed in order to comply with the Second and Third carbon budgets.**

The key assumptions grounding the EPA's analysis are set out in the table below.

Table A.1 Key macroeconomic assumptions underlying the projections out to 2050

	2023	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045	2050
	Average Annual % Growth Rate						
GNI*	-4.4	3.1	3.0	3.2	3.2	3.2	3.3
	2022	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045	2050
Housing Stock ('000)	1,944	1,995	2,165	2,308	2,450	2,590	2,728
Population ('000)	4,962	5,043	5,250	5,466	5,690	5,924	6,166
EUETS: Carbon €/tCO₂	82	82	82	84	87	133	164
Carbon tax €/tCO₂ (WEM Scenario)	48.5	63.5	100	100	100	100	100
Coal €/toe	146	128	130	131	139	146	153
Oil €/toe	442	643	643	643	680	738	824
Gas €/toe	389	554	473	473	473	473	494
Peat €/MWh	25	25	25	25	25	25	25

* Modified GNI

This table assumes that the population will be 5.25 million in 2030 and 5.69 million in 2040. The NPF, however, projects and targets a much higher rate of population growth such that it aims to increase the population to 5.7 million in 2030 and 6.1 million by 2040. This exceeds the EPA's modelled 2040 population by 420,000 people.

The SEA Environmental Report appears to acknowledge this in Table 5-1 under 'Waste and Circular Economy' but not under the 'Climate' heading. At current per capita emission levels, the EPA estimates that each additional 500,000 people would contribute an additional 6 million tonnes of CO₂eq annually. Even if per capita emissions are halved by 2030, the increased population growth targeted in the draft revised NPF is still an additional 3 million tonnes. The Draft NPF is completely silent as to how this gap is to be bridged.

In our view, this raises significant issues in terms of the revised Draft NPF's compliance with national and EU climate change law, as well as with the requirements of the SEA Directive. The Department is under a direct legal obligation under the 2015 Act (as amended) to carry out its functions, in so far as practicable, in a manner consistent with, inter alia, the most recent approved climate action plan and the furtherance of the national climate objective. **The targeted population growth is not consistent with the carbon budgets as prescribed in the Climate Action Plan 2024.**

Environmental Report and Assessment of Alternatives

Article 5(1) of the SEA Directive specifies the contents of the Environmental Report which must be prepared as part of the assessment under Article 3(1). This report must identify, describe and evaluate the likely significant effects on the environment of implementing the plan or programme, and reasonable alternatives taking into account the objectives and the geographical scope of the plan or programme.

Article 5(2) of the SEA Directive specifies the content of the Environmental Report in more detail. This report shall include the information that may reasonably be required taking into account current knowledge and methods of assessment, the contents and level of detail in the plan or programme, its stage in the decision-making process and the extent to which certain matters are more appropriately assessed at different levels in that process in order to avoid duplication of assessment.

The Advocate General (AG) in Case C-727/22 *Friends of the Irish Environment (Project Ireland 2040)* has explained in more detail how these articles should be interpreted (§§54 to 64) .

According to the AG, the first step is to identify the reasonable alternatives which require a closer assessment based on the plan objectives and geographical scope, taking into account the stage of the plan or programme and the extent to which certain matters are more appropriately assessed at different levels in the process to avoid duplication.

The conclusion of this selection process must give an outline of the reasons for selecting the reasonable alternatives and must show why the alternatives dealt with are considered reasonable while others are not, and thus how reasonable alternatives have been identified. The notion of an 'outline' does not apply to the description and evaluation of the reasonable alternatives chosen and therefore does not limit the scope of the information that must be provided.

The presentation of the effects on the environment must, in particular, show that the plan or programme is compatible with the applicable substantive requirements of environmental law. Effects on the environment which infringe environmental legislation are significant factors.

In relation to alternatives, that information must first allow a comparison to be made between the preferred option and the alternatives in the light of the arguments that are relevant to the decision. Second, the information must allow the relevant environmental concerns to be taken into account in that comparison.

If, however, the advantages and disadvantages of the different options have similar weight, it becomes more difficult to justify the selection. In that case, it may become necessary to provide more detailed information on the

reasonable alternatives in the Environmental Report, even if this involves considerable effort.

In light of the above, the information presented in the Environmental Report does not comply with Article 5 of the SEA Directive.

The NPF is a national plan with statutory requirements for lower tier plans to be consistent with it (i.e. Regional Spatial & Economic Strategies, County and City Development Plans, and Local Area Plans). Therefore, it is imperative that the NPF itself identifies significant effects on climate change and that it is prepared in a manner that complies with Section 15(1) of the 2015 Act. Otherwise, public authorities tasked with preparing lower tier plans will be presented with the irreconcilable task of simultaneously complying with their obligations under the 2015 Act and with preparing plans that are consistent with the NPF. At the very least, this will create significant legal uncertainty for downstream authorities. The Environmental Report is therefore required to clearly demonstrate; through the identification, description and assessment of likely significant effects on the environment; that the NPF is consistent with Irish and EU climate change law.

In a legal framework which mandates climate budgets, compliance must be demonstrated quantitatively. In other words, it must be quantitatively demonstrated that the greenhouse gas emissions from the implementation of the NPF will not exceed the relevant carbon budgets and/or sectoral emissions ceilings.

The Environmental Report fails to demonstrate this and is therefore contrary to Article 5 of the SEA Directive.

In fact, the Environmental report appears to envisage very significant exceedances of the carbon budgets by targeting population growth significantly greater than that which was used in the preparation of the Climate Action Plan 2024, the national long term climate action strategy and, ultimately, the National Climate Objective without making any provision for achieving this growth within the carbon budgets.

There is nothing in the revised Draft NPF or the Environmental Report to show how an accelerated population growth can be achieved without causing very significant greenhouse gas emissions over and above the amount envisaged in the carbon budgets. Equally, there is nothing in the published documentation which sets out the per capita emissions that would be required in order to grow the population at this rate so that appropriate measures could be incorporated into the NPF to facilitate population growth within the constraints of the carbon budgets.

Similarly, with the information presented in relation to reasonable alternatives, there is no quantitative information presented estimating the greenhouse gas emissions in each alternative, nor are there reasonable alternatives with lower rates of population growth which would entail lower emissions so as to ensure that the NPF remained within the carbon budgets.

Mitigation

Paragraph (g) of Annex 1 of the SEA Directive requires the Environmental Report to set out the measures envisaged to prevent, reduce and as fully as possible offset any significant adverse effects on the environment of implementing the plan or programme.

The 'SEA Mitigation' proposed in §9.1.1 and Table 9-1 of the Environmental Report is incomprehensible since it is organised around chapters and not around likely significant effects on the environment of implementing the revised Draft NPF. Therefore, there is no way to connect the mitigation measures with likely significant adverse effects on the environment of implementing the plan. For this reason, it is also not possible to monitor the effectiveness of the mitigation measures such as they are.

Monitoring

The monitoring proposed in relation to climate change does not comply with Article 10 of the SEA Directive.

The first monitoring measure on page 232 targets a net decrease in emissions for relevant sectors. However national and EU climate change law mandates carbon budgets, sectoral ceilings and other limits on annual and cumulative carbon emissions. Therefore the appropriate target of the SEA monitoring should be compliance with statutory obligations in relation to emissions. Similarly, the threshold for remediation is expressed to be “*a net increase in GHG emissions for relevant sectors*”. However, this is not a meaningful threshold for remediation given that halting increases in greenhouse gas emissions is not sufficient to either comply with climate change law or to avoid significant effects on the environment. This monitoring measure is therefore ineffective.

In relation to renewable energy, we can identify no measure which guarantees that new renewable energy generation capacity will cause a reduction in fossil fuel generation. Data recently published by the SEAI indicates that since 2016 the growth in wind generation has matched the growth in data centre electricity demand. Growth in renewable energy generation, in and of itself, does not reduce emissions. Greenhouse gas emissions can only be reduced in the energy sector by reducing and ultimately eliminating as far as possible emitting generation technologies.

Therefore, achievement of renewable energy targets is not an indicator of likely significant effects on climate. What should be measured are factors such as the average emissions intensity and ultimately whether the electricity sector stays within the carbon budget and the sectoral emissions ceiling.

Signed on behalf of Friends of the Irish Environment

Tony Lowes, Director

Documents Attached: No
Boundaries Captured on No
Map: