



Regional Growth- rural areas, towns and cities

The capital, smaller cities, towns of different sizes, villages and open countryside have distinctive roles to play in the national economy and, more importantly, as places for people to live, work and visit. Ireland needs to enable all areas to more fully contribute to national growth, productivity and to its society¹.

The Western Development Commission (WDC) recently made a submission² to the consultation on the National Planning Framework (NPF) *Ireland 2040 Our Plan: Issues and Choices*³. This *WDC Insights* provides a short discussion of some of the points made in the submission about cities, towns and rural areas and the opportunities their development presents for Ireland's economy and society as a whole.

Cities and Towns in our Region

The focus of much regional development discussion is on how cities drive regional development but we must not assume that development of key cities constitutes full regional development. All areas need to be the focus of development policy which should address the specific needs of each type of place.

Galway⁴ is the city driver in the Western Region and, as shown by its growth and the growth of surrounding towns, it has been performing as an effective regional driver. Yet, while such key regional cities are important, towns further away from larger centres despite smaller populations effectively play a similar role particularly in less densely populated regions. What may on a national scale seem to be relatively small towns can be very significant to a region's functions and activities, acting as key service centres for education, retail, recreation, primary health and social activities. In the North West, Sligo is a clear example of a town with the potential to play the role of the regional city.

Yet the context of each town differs, in terms of distance and connectivity to other towns and to the cities, the size of the hinterland it serves and its physical area, as well as population. Therefore their infrastructure and service needs differ. In the Western Region there are five towns with a population of more than 10,000 (Ennis, Letterkenny, Sligo, Castlebar and Ballina) which, in the context of the Region, are significant centres. There are seven towns with a population of more than 5,000 (Shannon, Tuam, Bunrana, Ballinasloe, Westport, Roscommon, and Loughrea) giving a total of 13 urban centres with population of more than 5,000 in the Western Region. A further 28 towns in the Western Region have a population of more than 1,500. Many of these are important as drivers of their local economies as well as servicing their rural and remoter hinterlands. Key towns act as regional centres and appropriate investments must be made to allow them to continue to do this effectively.

Role of Towns and Villages

Towns and villages are providing employment and services for people in their area and are active centres of local economic activity. Indeed while some are facing difficulties, others are thriving and providing many opportunities for people to live, work and do business. Recognising this, the *Town and Village Renewal Scheme*⁵ aims to support the rejuvenation of towns and villages across Ireland, with initiatives in areas such as heritage, tourism, arts and culture, the re-use of vacant premises, energy efficiency and

1. Why care about regions? A new approach to regional policy, WDC 2010 available at www.wdc.ie/publications/reports-and-papers/

2. WDC Submission to Ireland 2040 – Our Plan: National Planning Framework, WDC, 2016, summary and full versions at www.wdc.ie/publications/reports-and-papers/

3. <http://npf.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Position-Paper-Issues-and-Choices-Ireland-2040-web.pdf>

4. Population 79,934, CSO, 2017, Census of Population Profile 2

5. <http://www.ahrrga.gov.ie/rural/rural-development/town-village-renewal-scheme/>



business supports. This scheme is focuses on towns with fewer than 10,000 people and should be complementary to any policies which support economic growth and development of such towns.

While the scale of activity varies between more densely populated and less densely populated areas, even at a small scale towns and villages contribute to our Region. Towns have a key role in maintaining the structure of regions in Ireland, providing employment, educational and entertainment opportunities and making important contributions to the local economy even if this is on a scale dwarfed by that in a city. Their function (and that of similar towns in other regions), needs to be clearly addressed by the NPF even while the strategies for the towns themselves may be clarified in the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies.

Rural Areas

While cities and towns are important to the functioning of the Region, it should also be remembered that more than half a million people (535,953) are living in rural areas (in small settlements and open countryside) in the Western Region. In Ireland as a whole just over a third (37%) of the population live in rural areas (that is outside towns of 1,500) while in contrast the Western Region shows the opposite pattern and 65% are living in rural areas.

These rural areas provide key resources essential to our economy and society. They are the location of our natural resources and most of our environmental, biodiversity and landscape assets. They are places of residence and employment, as well as places of amenity, recreation, refuge and are fundamental to Irish tourism. Rural areas are already supporting national economic growth, climate action objectives and local communities, albeit at a smaller scale than towns and cities. However, a greater focus on developing rural regions would increase the contribution to our economy and society. This is recognised in *Realising our Rural Potential- An Action Plan for Rural Development*⁶.

Rural communities can face particular challenges due to their age profile, the structure of their economies and a lack of access to quality infrastructure and new technologies. But all rural areas and rural communities are not the same. There are differences in remoteness and accessibility, as well as demography, natural resource assets, access to infrastructures and the influence of neighbouring urban centres. Many of our towns and villages have suffered from a lack of investment in the infrastructure which connects them locally. Such investment could improve their capacity to provide services. It could also maintain and attract enterprise and support their rural hinterlands.

The solution to maintaining vibrant rural populations, common to all areas, is the availability of employment⁷. Migration is the key cause of rural population decline, so the focus should be on enterprise and employment opportunities for rural areas, both in towns with significant rural hinterlands and in remoter areas. Investing in upskilling lower skilled workers in rural regions and working to ensure there are employment opportunities will have an important impact on regional economic development. Self employment can be a particularly important route for those living in rural areas.

Conclusions

It is important that the NPF and other policies are clearly focused on creating real opportunities for the people who live in the regions, whether in cities, towns or rural areas, and that these policies aim to improve economic and social opportunities as well as quality of life.

The Western Region is a very rural region with dispersed population and small towns. The needs of those living in these areas and the best means of providing services and access to services and employment need to be addressed urgently and coherently.

Policy on services and regional development is not just implemented through planning and capital investment but also through current spending and through sectoral decisions with spatial implications (such as those relating to the location of services and public sector jobs). Therefore it is essential that spending, investment and policy decisions are in line with the NPF rather than operating counter to it.

6. <http://www.ruralireland.ie/action-plan>

7. See Education, Enterprise & Employment – How Can Better Integration Of The 3Es Drive Growth In The Western Region? WDC, 2011 www.wdc.ie/publications/reports-and-papers/.