

Galway County Development Plan 2022-2028

Submission by Éamon Ó Cuív, TD

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Overview:

This document gives the impression that Galway County Council sees itself and the area it represents, as an adjunct of Galway City rather than a distinct area in its own right. It is important in the development of the County to examine how both the west and the east of the county could be developed in their own right while recognising the importance of neighbouring local authorities on each boundary to Galway County. The fact that the headquarters of the local authority is in another local authority's area (Galway City) might add to this and there is a case, in the post Covid era, to be made for decentralising much more of the administration of the county to the Municipal districts, with only a small staff being retained in the City. For example, Galway County could have an administrative unit based in Connemara for Connemara that would provide Irish and English language services in that region.

Housing:

The main indications from the plan are that it is being written in a hierarchical way and that ultimately the place where people should live should be decided, not by personal choice, but by a directed plan. The questions are asked "Where should the increase in population within the county be directed". Again, two questions further down in the issues paper, the question is asked "Where in the County should population growth be directed to achieve the balanced growth as per the RSES?". The plan seems to be directing growth towards the centre with lesser nodes in some peripheral areas. Surely to achieve balanced growth particular focus should be given to those areas that have suffered continued population decline or stagnation over many years. Implicitly, the plan seems to be moving in the opposite direction. This policy is wasteful of resources leaving under used resources in some areas and an impossible challenge in other areas with housing, infrastructure and social services always lagging behind the "directed" growth. Particularly in the post Covid era there is a need, as part of the process of developing the plan, to move away from a directed approach to a community lead approach where communities and individuals within those communities would have an input in what housing would be provided and what balance would be struck between dispersed settlements and clustered settlements in town and villages in the county.

The question is asked: How can the County Council policy protect areas within the county currently under severe pressure for one-off developments. The question that needs to be asked

is why is this happening? Is it an unintended consequence of county spatial planning that has sucked everything in towards Galway City and left many outlying areas with serious population decline? Is it good policy that the proposed settlement hierarchy of the present plan continues with this policy? With the dramatic changes in people's lives, post Covid, and the clear link between prevalence of the disease and population density will more people choose not to live in high-density settings. Will new lifestyles appear with many people either partially or fully working from home and choosing where they live based on health safety, community and family attachments and a desire to rear children in what they perceive to be safe communities. The question is asked whether there is a deficit in the provision of a particular type of housing that should be addressed? e.g. apartment, duplex etc. This seems subtly directional. There are many types of houses and apartments needed. These vary from area to area and the council should carry out a detailed scientific study of what peoples' preferences are in terms of location, type of accommodation etc. There is certainly, above all else, a need for the provision of affordable rural and urban housing.

The question is asked: How can the plan best address increased residential densities? A fundamental question needs to be debated whether most communities in Galway wish to have increased residential densities and in what areas they wish to have these increased densities.

The question is asked: "How should social housing be delivered, and do we have the right balance between social and private housing". Social housing should be delivered in the areas people wish to live in based on demand. The objective should be that all eligible long-term social housing need would be met by social housing not, unless by choice of the tenant, by the HAP scheme. It should therefore be demand led both in type and location. Rural social housing should once again be provided where families can provide suitable sites. Where possible our town, villages and rural areas should have socially integrated communities and one of the ways of achieving this is to have socially integrated housing between private and social housing.

Urban Living and Place Making

It is imperative that, as happened in Adamstown in Dublin, rapid housing development would be preceded by infrastructure development in terms not only of infrastructure such as roads, cycle paths, sewerage and water but also in the development of health, social educational infrastructure as well.

The above is the vital ingredient to make our urban areas more attractive to live in.

The question is asked “How can we make our towns and our urban areas more attractive and connected for pedestrians and cyclists?” The simple answer is to properly fund, design and develop these facilities. They will not be delivered without the funding of all the grandiose plans.

Rural Place Making and the Countryside

Many rural areas already have very vibrant and cohesive communities. These need to be strengthened and in areas of population decline the most basic requirement is an increase in population through facilitation of housing. Traditionally, west of the Corrib, most people lived in dispersed communities and before an effort is made to change this basic geography there is a need to have an open debate on the merits of destroying a settlement pattern in townlands that goes back to the mists of time. Recent events have shown that the need to physically live near services and work in large workplaces is rapidly changing. The question is ‘Will the new reality be recognised or will it continue with a model that is already suddenly redundant?’

The development pattern encouraged by Galway County Council over the years has led to a destruction in many areas of large parts of the landscape as viewed from the public road, particularly the main tourist roads. Rural areas have a good capacity to absorb rural houses without destroying the aesthetics of areas if we move away from the linear driven development of houses along roadsides. Allowing more flexible development patterns suited to local need and the contours of the land can avoid this. So-called cluster developments and back lands developments should be considered on their merits. Screening and siting should play a much more important part in planning so that the visibility from main tourist routes would be minimised. The question is asked: ‘How can the New County Development Plan support development within the smaller settlements that do not have zoning plans? The first requirement is to ensure that these villages have municipal sewerage systems and other basic infrastructure.

Economic Enterprise, Tourism and Retail Development

The question is asked: “How can inward investment and job creation be supported in the county and where should it be directed?” It must first be recognised that the day of a lot of our new enterprise and investment coming from abroad could be coming to an end. Those companies that are here are likely to stay and hopefully expand. We must therefore face the challenge that a lot more of our investment and job creation in the future will come from the indigenous sector.

There is no doubt that the foreign investment tended to cluster into cities and towns. However, the location of indigenous investment is much more diverse and often is dictated by personal choice and a founder's background. It would be immensely useful in determining future policy to have precise information of where existing enterprise is located in the county between rural and urban areas and to use that as a basic tool in determining policy for the future. It should be recognised that there are some enterprises that lend themselves to urban locations and other that lend them self to rural locations and some where it totally depends on the promoter.

Transport

The transport links in Galway County are totally deficient both road and rail. The bypass of Galway is urgently needed as is the replacement R336 to Ros a' Mhíl. The N59 needs an upgrade from Galway through Clifden to the county border at Leenane. All regional roads in the County should be brought up to a uniform and high standard.

The rail links to Galway should be improved by double tracking the Athlone-Galway rail line and the Athenry- Claremorris line should be re-opened. All the rail lines leading into Galway i.e. the Athlone line, the Limerick line and the Claremorris line need high quality frequent commuter services on them to cater for long distance commuters.

All the main roads leading in and out of Galway should have very frequent bus services on them, particularly at peak hours with a frequency of at least each half an hour. Bearná, Moycullen, Oranmore and Claregalway should have services with a ten-minute frequency at peak hours. Expand rural transport links to the above-mentioned services.

All areas of the county should have an integrated network of cycles ways, greenways and pedestrian paths.

An Gaeltacht.

In the long term, the Gaeltacht cannot survive without Irish speaking communities and families. It appears from the plans already in place and the questions raised in this issues paper that the Council have decided tacitly that towns such as Bearná, Maigh Cuilinn and Baile Chláir have no future as Irish language Gaeltacht Communities. The plan must facilitate local people from the Gaeltacht settling in the Gaeltacht both in urban and rural settings

The plan must refocus the “Polasaí Nearthú Gaeltachta” towards attracting genuine Irish speaking families to settle in the Gaeltacht. Housing estate in the Gaeltacht should primarily be for Irish speakers and Irish speaking families. Instead of the present policy, that the Council decides who qualifies under the Polasaí Nearthú Gaeltachta and under Irish language clauses in housing estates, there should be independent outside validation required of the compliance of applicants with this condition.

All resources in the Gaeltacht need to be developed. However, it must be recognised that the language itself is the greatest resource in terms of job creation both actual and potential. For example, the Irish language media (Raidió na Gaeltachta, TG4, etc) and media companies, the public service (Údarás na Gaeltachta, Roinn na Gaeltachta, Coimisinéir Teanga etc.), Irish language education (Schools, NUIG etc), the Irish Colleges and cultural tourism all employ large numbers. The development of this potential further should be a central part of the new development plan

Marine

The development of the marine sector should be a central part of the plan with comprehensive objectives outlined in the plan. The development of fishing, the seaweed industry, marine leisure, energy and resource development should all be cornerstones of this. It should be an objective in the plan to upgrade, as resources permit, all council piers both big and small for local fishing and for leisure purposes. The County plan should have a clear objective to facilitate the development of Ros a’Mhíl harbour to its full potential as a fishery harbour, a ferry port, a leisure centre and for other new uses that will arise as we develop our marine resources. The importance of the lakes in Galway, particularly, Lough Corrib and their preservation and development should be high level objective of the plan.

The continuous development and promotion of safety on piers on the islands of Inishbofin, Inis Mór, Inis Meáin and Inis Oírr should be an objective of the plan in view of their ownership by the Council and the importance of the piers to the islands

The development and use of island serving airstrips should also be an objective in the plan

Islands

There should be a dedicated section in the plan for the islands providing tailored provisions to enable their development.

Agriculture and Forestry

There needs to be clear policies in the plan for both sectors and how the supporting infrastructure will be provided to support these vital industries in the County.

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