

Submission for the Eastern and Midland Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy -
Fergus O'Dowd TD

23/01/2019

Dear Sir/Madam,

As a local TD I welcome this opportunity to make a formal submission to the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy.

Drogheda is presently the largest town in Ireland with a census population of 40,956 (2016) persons. It is now without a Borough Council and the centre of decision making for our town of Drogheda presently resides in Louth County Council which is headquartered in Dundalk.

Drogheda was ignored in the last spatial strategy and this in turn led to Drogheda and it's environs losing out on considerable national and FDI investment. That effects of that decision is still being felt in Ireland's largest town.

I fully support the campaign to make Drogheda a city and be in control of it's own destiny. The existing population of 40,956 (2016) for the census town of Drogheda alongside present CSO population growth rates shows that the census town of Drogheda will exceed 52,000 persons by 2030, thus exceeding the 50,000 persons as defined in the draft plan as qualifying as a city. The over pinning National Planning framework will run until 2040 so I firmly believe by giving Drogheda City Status now the appropriate investment and forward planning decisions will be put in place so that Drogheda can finally grow in a measured and controlled manner, the regional spatial and economic strategy must take this fully into account when developing it's strategic plan for the North East.

There are projecting growth reports of upwards of 90,000 people to be living in Drogheda and it's Environs by 2024, the town is already above the population sprawl of Galway when it was awarded it's own City Status.

Since the abolition of the Drogheda Borough Council the influence of the voice of the people of Drogheda at Council level is considered to be much less than previously held. The significant population regardless of which CSO/specialist figure you use, shows that the population warrants that the Drogheda Borough Council should be re-introduced or at the very least the current set up to be re-structured in order to provide more powers to the elected officials in the Drogheda area. I would also favour a directly elected mayor.

Drogheda will need a City/County/Town manager that has the level of power to draw down the necessary services and funds from both the Louth and Meath County Councils to manage the town of Drogheda and its hinterlands appropriately and professionally and without the current limitations that affect so many of the estates and residents that currently live in the Drogheda, Co. Meath area which presently amounts to approximately 6-7,000 people.

Any strategy must align the current settlement and growth patterns with appropriate strategic planning. County Louth as a whole is performing well in terms of reducing unemployment levels and creating enterprise, it is becoming an ever more attractive place to live and work within. We are positioned perfectly along the Belfast-Dublin Corridor and we must plan methodically for the future resettlement from our larger cities and the possible relocation of multinational companies in our border constituency following the impending withdrawal of the UK from the EU.

While the draft strategy acknowledges Drogheda and Dundalk as larger settlements of regional importance, I believe much more prevalence should be given to both towns considering their vital position along the Dublin-Belfast Corridor and the future development plans for the DART extension to Drogheda. The re-opening of the Dunleer trains station and the delivery of a North Drogheda station should also be included in development plans.

Drogheda certainly doesn't lack in terms of local amenities on our doorstep, our heritage is second to none but yet we fail to capitalise on the volume of tourists flocking in to Dublin airport on a yearly basis. Drogheda has many famous tourist draws such as Plunkett's Head, St Laurence's Gate, Millmount Cup and Saucer, Baltray Golf Club, the Boyne Valley and many other significant historic, hospitality and family friendly draws. That said I do not believe the town's planning lends itself to being a tourist trap, we have a significant amount of derelict premises in the town centre some of which are side by side famous historic structures, we need to escalate the powers of CPO in order to ensure as funds come in the country we resolve the derelict issues that have blighted many of the fantastic towns such as Drogheda.

The town of Drogheda suffers dramatically from traffic issues and I believe the Port Access Northern Cross Route will draw the commercial traffic away from our town centre to make it more accessible and more aesthetically pleasing as such I would hope that capital funding will be made available and the regional strategy would support such a project.

For Drogheda's future planning in a radical sense I firmly believe a detailed assessment and pre planning report should be funded on the viability of a new road bridge on the East side of the Viaduct bridge to be built closer to the mouth of the River Boyne to connect the Dublin Road traffic South of Colpe Cross to the North of Drogheda in order for HGVs and commercial vehicles travelling south bound to avoid the town completely, this would certainly limit the damage the local M1 tolls are contributing to the towns traffic congestion and provide many other tourist and enterprise opportunities to develop.

The over pinning Project2040 plan will support the completion of projects currently in construction and planning and over pins the regional strategy. It will also provide the necessary resources to facilitate future population needs in accordance with the recent Health Service Capacity Review. The designation of Drogheda and Dundalk in the recent project2040 framework clearly demonstrates the need for capital funding to be ring fenced to enable the Lourdes Hospital to continue it's development as the Regional Hospital for the North East. Our Lady of Lourdes hospital provides 426 beds at present but is ever expanding, the medical services provided at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital include general medicine, cardiology, endocrinology, gastroenterology, oncology, dermatology, medicine for the older person, respiratory, pathology, microbiology and palliative Care. Oncology Day Treatment facilities are provided in Drogheda. Emergency Medicine comprises of the Emergency Department and an Acute Medical Assessment Unit in Drogheda. Critical care is provided in Drogheda with an Intensive Care Unit, a High Dependency Care Unit, Coronary Care Unit and a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

Our Lady of Lourdes hospital in Drogheda employs 2,227 people currently and the government decided some time ago that it would provide the required investment to meet the infrastructural and development challenges it faced on this site. There have been significant developments including the opening of brand new services as part of their OLOL Phase 2 project. This included Ward 1- Newgrange Level 1 - 29 beds opened 05/12/2017, Ward 2 - Newgrange Level 2 - 31 beds (opened on a phased basis between Dec 27th 2018 and 07/01/2019) and Ward 3 - Newgrange Level 3 - 23 new beds scheduled to open end Q2 2019.

The Emergency Department Extension includes the upgrade and refurbishment works commenced in December 2018, these works will take approximately 6 months to complete. The new expanded Emergency Department will be fully functioning post the completion of these works. The new Theatre suite is also scheduled to open in Q3 2019. All of this large scale development strengthens the case for OLOL to remain as the Regional hospital for the North East. The capital spend on the hospital was €30m in 2017 and almost €7m up to July of 2018.

The current transport network available in Drogheda alongside the planned DART Expansion includes the required road and rail network for a hospital of regional importance and strengthens it's strategic position along the Belfast-Drogheda Corridor. Drogheda is Ireland's largest town with almost 41,000 people as of the last census, the evidence is clear and supports the need for further significant investment and development in Our Lady of Lourdes as the North East's Regional Hospital.

The proposed M1 Payment Corridor is an example of the potential enterprise and job growth that can be achieved in the Drogheda and environ area. We have a significant number of highly skilled people in the largest town in Ireland, however as Drogheda was excluded from the previous spacial strategy we have none of the required infrastructure required to attract and harness these types of Fintech companies. The IDA needs to re-evaluate Drogheda's position within it's portfolio as we are now the largest town in Ireland and we are not given sufficient priority on it's website and we have a business park on the Donore Rd in Drogheda almost empty. The focus within the IDA has to change and deliver for the people of Drogheda in particular with the DART expansion on the way and the ability for Drogheda to decrease it's commuter numbers and attract big business.

Drogheda and Dundalk should be planned for as strategic employment centres along the Dublin- Belfast Economic Corridor to follow on from their designation in Project 2040 with equal status as Centre's for economic growth and jobs. The IDA should treat and promote both on equal footings. Local employment has continued to rise and the live register has dramatically fallen since 2012, however we cannot boast the availability of large type business premises and business parks that would provide the larger business model the option of expansion in the area. There is currently no Local Enterprise Office in the town of Drogheda. The 30min trip to the Dundalk LEO does not lend itself to providing hands on advice and practical help to what is the largest town in Ireland. There is no reason as to why we can't look at the overall plan to include a LEO. The local enterprise Hub the Mill must be fully supported going forward as it provides a vital stepping stone for entrepreneurs and a professional surrounding for established business.

In respect of the strategy I believe this submission along with many from the Drogheda area will lead to identifying Drogheda as a unique opportunity. Drogheda needs and deserves a plan that will identify the mistakes made over the last 2 decades and provide and plan to cater for the huge levels of growth that can be expected in the area, this will involve a more thorough plan to address our road and rail network, our connectivity, our health services, our water and utility network among many others.

The people of Ardee and Dunleer in Mid Louth are also relying on a strong spatial plan that will draw down on it's many strengths. The Mid Louth area is central between Belfast and Dublin and with required transport links such as the re-opening of the Dunleer Train station the mid Louth area would be in a position to grow, decrease the carbon footprint and increase tourism and trade. The Ardee Bypass has been approved and is a vital infrastructure project for the people of Ardee, traffic congestion in particular has become unbearable in the town itself, having a major impact on the traders of the town. The Bypass will certainly give the town the opportunity to develop, in particular it will rid the town of the unwanted congestion and HGV traffic that has plighted trade in the town over the last number of years. Once this project is complete the spatial strategy must look at how the town of Ardee can sustainably grow and offer more in attracting tourists with amazing attractions such as the historic Ardee Castle which we hope to see open to the public in coming years.

In East Meath, the village of Julianstown has been adversely affected by traffic congestion since the M1 Tolls came into operation. This traffic congestion can amount to tens of thousands of vehicles on a daily basis and is strangling the village. Capital investment alongside professional planning can completely transform the village but it will take brave decision makers and proficient local planning to achieve.

The coastal area of Mornington, Bettystown and Laytown have seen significant population sprawl over recent times and has unfortunately suffered from very poor local planning decisions of the past. Whilst improvements are in the pipeline including the new Spine Road in Bettystown and the council's improvement works within Bettystown village, I believe the strategy should take into account the future projected population increase and put significant resources into developing an adequate spatial plan that will protect the coastline and improve quality of life. With access directly to the M1 and areas of natural beauty it can be promoted as a serious resettlement area for businesses and families to work and live within. The DART expansion will certainly add to this development. A large scale park n ride should be developed alongside the expansion of DART services and the IDA should certainly increase their footprint in the area.

My sincere thanks for your consideration on my submission,

Kind regards,

Fergus O'Dowd

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