

A vision for County Sligo in 2030: a smart, sustainable, and socially inclusive Sligo; one that cherishes its vibrant communities, protects and celebrates its unique environment and rich culture, and is a champion of innovative growth and development. (*Sligo 2030: One voice, One vision – Local Economic & Community Plan 2023-2030*)

Chapter 1. Introduction

As the blueprint for development in County Sligo, the County Development Plan is the overarching strategic framework document for sustainable development in spatial, economic, social and environmental terms.

The development plan must offer clear guidance on sustainable development policies and objectives, addressing various issues such as the creation of sustainable communities, economic development, transport, energy, judicious use of natural resources, protection of the environment and adaptation to climate change.

Sligo County Development Plan 2024-2030 (CDP) sets out an overall strategy for the proper planning and sustainable development of County Sligo, in accordance with the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended).

The preparation of this Plan has been informed by recent social, economic and environmental changes, as well as national, regional and local policy developments.

The 2018 **National Planning Framework** (NPF) recognises Sligo's potential to serve the North-West as an accessible centre of employment and services, which can be a focal point for investment and have the widest possible regional influence.

The 2020 **Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy** (RSES) formally identifies Sligo as a Regional Growth Centre (RGC), capable of leading the development of the surrounding region.

The CDP presents the Council's outlook for the future development of County Sligo and its designated Regional Growth Centre driven by Sligo Town, for the period up to 2030, within a longer-term perspective.

The Plan provides a spatial planning framework designed to support the economic and social development of the County, as envisioned in the **Sligo 2030** strategy document (Local Economic and Community Plan).

1.1 Setting the scene

County Sligo, located in the province of Connacht, in the north-west of Ireland, encompasses a total land surface of approximately 1,837.11 sq.km. It is bordered by counties Leitrim, Roscommon and Mayo, and flanked to the west by almost 200 km of Atlantic coastline.

The main urban area is Sligo Town, which is considered a regionally important centre, serving as the administrative, commercial, service, health and educational focus for a large hinterland. It has a significant industrial role and also acts as a distribution centre in the North-West. The County's rural areas are supported by services provided in the smaller towns of Ballymote, Tobercurry and Enniscrone.

1.1.1 Natural and cultural heritage

The County has a varied natural landscape with spectacular limestone mountains, such as Ben Bulbin and Ben Wiskin, other interesting upland terrain (e.g. the Ox and Bricklieve Mountains), picturesque lakes (Loughs Gill, Arrow, Glencar, Easky, Gara and Talt), extensive inland and coastal plains and a diverse coastline comprising low-lying cliffs, indented shoreline and sandy beaches. These topographic features combine to give Sligo an outstanding landscape setting.

Sligo possesses unique archaeological and historical remains, with more than 5,000 recorded archaeological sites dating back over 6,000 years, including the prehistoric sites of Carrowmore, Carrowkeel and Creevykeel.

The beauty of the countryside, coupled with a rich cultural and historical past, has inspired musicians, artists and poets alike, including the Yeats family, St. Colmcille and Michael Coleman. This has provided Sligo with strong international recognition on which to base a thriving tourism industry.

1.1.2 Demographic trends

Census 2022 recorded 70,198 people in County Sligo, a 7.1% (4,663 persons) increase since the previous census. In 2016, the County's population had been 65,535, of which 19,200 persons lived in Sligo Town.

The most noticeable demographic trend between 2011 and 2016 was a 5% decrease in the County's working age population (15 to 64 years old) and a substantial 19% increase of the number of people aged 65 and older. The proportion of one-person households has also risen by 28% between 2011 and 2016 – the highest growth rate among all types of households.

According to the Western Development Commission's *Preliminary Results Census 2022: Analysis of results for the Western Region*, "higher old-age and youth dependency ratios suggest that there are fewer "economically active" persons to support the "economically inactive" population. Higher dependency ratios act as a constraint for future growth prospects and are related to longer-term historical structural issues such as the outward migration of the region's working-age population".

The 2022 Census preliminary results show a reversal of the 2011-2016 trend of negative net migration across the Western Region. Net inward migration was not only positive, but outweighed the natural increase in five counties, including Sligo.

At the time of writing (summer 2023), the CSO had published "*Profile 1 – Population Distribution and Movements*", detailing demographic data collected by the 2022 Census. The report indicates that **County Sligo is on track to achieve or even surpass the population projections set out in the National Planning Framework – Ireland 2040.**

1.1.3 Education, economy, employment

The County offers a good mix of skills, infrastructure and support services for any company establishing operations here, particularly in Sligo Town.

Education

According to Census 2016 statistics at County level, 47.7% of residents in the area aged 15 years and older held some form of third-level qualification (i.e. NQF 6, Advanced Certificate or higher), which is higher than the national average of 42%. Particularly, the number of women with masters or higher degrees increased significantly (24%). Prior to Covid-19, the Atlantic Technological University Sligo recorded 4,500 students attending courses.

Economy

In 2016 there were 19 multinational companies located in IDA business parks in County Sligo (Finisklin and Ballytivnan in Sligo Town, Collooney, Tobercurry and Ballymote). In 2020, IDA-supported companies in the County employed 2,351 people across sectors such as Engineering, Medical Technology, Biopharmaceuticals, Consumer Goods, Business and Financial services.

Sligo also has a vibrant cluster of Irish companies - 74 companies were supported by Enterprise Ireland and employed 1,992 people across the County in 2020.

Outside the towns, agriculture remains an important part of the local economy, while tourism and other small-scale, rural-based economic activities continue to support a substantial population living in villages and in the countryside.

Employment

Circa 50% of the economically active people were employed in 2016, with unemployment at 7% in 2016 - the same as the national average.

The impact of Covid-19 has facilitated the introduction of remote working for employees across many different industries. A study conducted in July 2021 (“The Best Place to Work from Home in Ireland”, available at switcher.ie) developed a remote working index to determine which town or city provides the best conditions for working from home.

Sligo was ranked the overall best place to work from home in Ireland, with particularly high ranking for affordable housing, access to a high number of GPs and several schools in the area.

1.1.4 Key issues and implications for the County Development Plan

Taking account of recent economic and demographic trends, the main implications for the formulation of a spatial development strategy for County Sligo to 2030 and beyond are as follows:

- County Sligo should continue to increase its population, building on its strategic location, improved infrastructure, quality of life and its natural and cultural heritage attributes. Education, graduate retention, employment diversification and further investment in infrastructure are required in growing the County’s population.
- Sligo’s communities need to be inclusive and healthy, catering for all age groups, but with a growing focus on the older population. Supports must be put in place for people with disabilities and those from vulnerable minority groups, regardless of whether they are in an urban or rural setting.
- It is imperative that the County’s spatial development strategy addresses carbon emissions, adaptation to climate change and mitigation of its effects. The County Development Plan is crucial for the implementation of adaptation policies, because land use and development have a significant impact on the vulnerability of settlements to the effects of climate change.
- There is a pressing need to focus on Sligo Town and its role as a Regional Growth Centre, by mobilising all national, regional and local agencies which can contribute to the development of a compact, accessible, physically attractive town, with a strong cultural identity and a business-friendly environment.
- Essential pieces of infrastructure have still not been delivered, despite being at advanced planning stages – e.g. the Eastern Garavogue Bridge and Approach Roads Scheme, Cranmore Regeneration and the IDA Business Park at Oakfield. It is critical that funding is made available for the provision of such infrastructure.

- In the interest of balanced development within County Sligo, it will be necessary to improve the functions and performance of Ballymote, Enniscrone and Tobercurry, while supporting the provision of essential services in smaller settlements;
- In the future, Sligo's cultural offering must become stronger and more diverse if the County seeks to attract increased visitor numbers and an internationally mobile workforce. By making it a priority in the Development Plan, the County Council will strive to protect and develop Sligo's distinctive character.
- At present there are new opportunities for diversifying the economy of the rural areas. There is also a growing pressure to develop large renewable energy projects, such as wind farms. In the interest of preserving the County's natural and cultural heritage, which give it a strong identity, development pressure on sensitive landscapes and associated resources needs to be carefully managed.

This County Development Plan addresses the spatial implications of the key issues listed above, thus complementing the Local Economic and Community Plan, which is focused on the non-spatial goals, objectives and actions governing Sligo's future development.

1.2 Spatial development options

Current planning and environmental legislation requires local authorities to consider a range of options when preparing their development plans. These possible scenarios for future development must be reasonable, taking into account the objectives and the geographical scope of a development plan.

The alternative options must be evaluated and compared in terms of their potential environmental effects. The process results in the selection of a preferred development option.

There are three stages to the consideration of alternatives:

- Identify reasonable alternatives;
- Evaluate and compare the alternatives;
- Provide reasons for the choice of preferred alternative.

In terms of overall spatial development strategy, Sligo County Council has identified two realistic alternatives to the default option of “doing nothing” (which means retaining the existing development plan policies and objectives unchanged).

The potential development scenarios are all based on the same settlement hierarchy – which is not subject to change in the short or medium term – but the strategies for the various tiers of settlements are slightly different.

1.2.1 Option 1 – “Do nothing”

The “default” option is to “do nothing”, which in planning terms would mean to retain the existing development plan with minimal updates, where required by changes in national/regional policy and legislation.

Current zoning and development objectives for Sligo and Environs, Ballymote, Enniscrone, the Satellite Villages and smaller settlements would be largely the same. Any changes to zoning would result from the infrastructural assessment required by the NPF. This would involve a small reduction in the total amount of zoned land. Lands in Tobercurry would remain unzoned.

Additional future population would be accommodated throughout the County’s towns and villages theoretically in proportion to the amount of greenfield land zoned for residential and mixed uses in settlements with adequate service infrastructure.

No housing or population growth targets would be assigned to villages where wastewater treatment is deficient or inexistent. As indicated in the NPF, land that cannot be serviced during the life of the Plan should not be zoned.

1.2.2 Option 2 – Support “towns-only” growth

Under this option, Sligo Town would continue to sit at the top of the settlement hierarchy, with the second tier being represented by the Support Towns of Ballymote, Enniscrone and Tobercurry.

The existing residential and mixed-use zoning in Ballymote and Enniscrone would be largely retained. Up to 23 ha would be zoned in Tobercurry (as per the Draft LAP 2015). All zoning would be subject to infrastructural assessment.

Future population and housing would be directed into Sligo Town, Ballymote, Enniscrone and Tobercurry, where employment and services can be provided more efficiently.

In order to ensure that sufficient housing land is available in the four towns, no sites would be zoned for housing outside these urban areas. Greenfield lands previously zoned for residential and mixed uses in villages would be zoned “RV” (Rural Village) instead.

The flexible “RV” (Rural Village) zoning objective would allow for local housing need to be catered for in villages with adequate service infrastructure, while unserved settlements would not be zoned.

1.2.3 Option 3 – Driving growth in the County through the Sligo RGC

This option would see the majority of population accommodated in the Sligo Town and its Satellite Villages located within the RGC Strategic Plan area.

This approach would be the most closely aligned with the RSES, which promotes development in the Sligo Regional Growth Centre and requires a Local Transport Plan for the Sligo RGC Strategic Plan Area. Population and housing growth would be promoted in the area where land-use can be best integrated with public transport and active travel.

While the focus remains on Sligo Town, there would be suitable population and housing allocations for the three Support Towns (Ballymote, Enniscrone, Tobercurry), recognising their roles in the Settlement Strategy.

Similar to Option 2, the flexible “RV” (Rural Village) zoning objective would allow for locally-needed housing in the remaining villages with adequate service infrastructure, while unserved settlements would not be zoned.

Option 3 is the preferred spatial development scenario for County Sligo up to 2030.

1.3 Environmental assessments

In accordance with current legislation, the policies, objectives and zoning included in the County Development Plan have been subject to three types of environmental assessment: Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Appropriate Assessment (AA) and Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA). The respective reports are published as separate documents. Their recommendations have been incorporated into the Draft Plan – written statement and zoning maps.

1.3.1 Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)

The European Directive 2001/42/EC of 27 June 2001, also known as the SEA Directive, was transposed into Irish law in the form of two sets of Regulations. The Planning and Development (Strategic Environmental Assessment) Regulations 2004 (S.I. 436 of 2004) apply to the preparation, review and amendment of land use plans. Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is mandatory for development plans (i.e. those plans that cover the entire functional area of a planning authority).

During public consultation, the Draft CDP 2024-2030 is accompanied by an Environmental Report (ER) and a Non-Technical Summary (NTS). The ER indicates how alternative development scenarios were considered and how decisions were made to select a preferred scenario. It also explains how the Draft Plan's policies and objectives have been assessed against environmental objectives.

Any proposed amendments that will be subject to the final round of public consultation will also be assessed against environmental objectives, informing the Chief Executive's recommendations and the final decision-making by the elected members of Sligo County Council.

Upon adoption of the Plan, a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Statement will be published, showing how environmental considerations were integrated into the Plan.

1.3.2 Appropriate Assessment (AA)

An assessment under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) is commonly referred to as an Appropriate Assessment (AA) or a Habitats Directive Assessment (HDA) of a plan or project. This relates to the likely significant environmental effects on Natura 2000¹ sites, resulting from the implementation of the plan.

An Appropriate Assessment Report has been prepared in conjunction with the Draft CDP. Any amendments that might be proposed following public consultation on the Draft Plan must also be assessed for potential impacts on Natura 2000 sites.

1.3.3 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA)

Following from the implementation of the Floods Directive (2007/60/EC) into Irish legislation, the *Planning System and Flood Risk Management Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (DoEHLG/OPW, 2009) indicate that county development plans must establish the flood risk assessment requirements for their functional area. Planning authorities must ensure that development is not permitted and land is not zoned in areas of high flood risk, particularly floodplains, except where there is no suitable alternative. The Strategic Flood Risk Assessment which accompanies the Draft CDP focuses on land use zoning and flood risk management policy. It is based on the best available and emerging information on flood risk indicators, as well as climate change considerations.

¹ Natura 2000 is a network of nature protection areas in the EU territory, made up of Special Areas of Conservation designated under the Habitats Directive and Special Protection Areas designated under the Birds Directive.

1.4 Plan structure

The CDP 2024-2030 is the first development plan to incorporate the strategy, zoning, policies and objectives for ALL settlements in County Sligo that are designated for growth in terms of population and housing. Given the extended scope and complexity, the Plan has been structured in four volumes, with a number of nine appendices.

VOLUME 1 (this volume) contains the sectoral strategies which, together, make up the Core Strategy of the Development Plan: **Settlement, Housing Delivery, Economic, Retail and Transport Strategies**.

Climate Action is located at the forefront of the CDP, setting the framework for the Council's commitments and obligations under the Climate Action Plan.

The chapter dedicated to the **Sligo Regional Growth Centre Strategic Plan** demonstrates how the relevant Regional Policy Objectives (RPOs) contained in the NWRA's Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) are reflected in the Development Plan.

The **Core Strategy Statement** summarizes the process of distributing population and housing across the County's settlements.

VOLUME 2 provides the detailed compact growth designations, zoning and specific objectives for the **12 towns and villages** where development will be promoted during the Plan period.

Fewer objectives are included in relation to **Sligo Town**, for which a Local Area Plan must be prepared following the adoption of this Development Plan.

VOLUME 3 contains all the **general policies and objectives** designed to guide development in the County, thematically grouped in chapters such as Residential Development, Community and Social Infrastructure, Economic Development, Water infrastructure, Transport Infrastructure, Energy and Telecommunications etc.

This volume also sets out the development management standards used by the Planning Authority in the assessment of planning applications.

VOLUME 4 includes specific objectives for the villages sustaining rural communities, where no significant population or housing growth is envisaged.

The Development Plan policies and objectives have been informed by the **Housing Strategy** and the (Draft) **Sligo Local Transport Plan**. These documents accompany the Draft Plan on public display, along with the **Wine Street Car Park Masterplan**.