

2. Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)

2.1 Legal context

In June 2001, the European Parliament and Council adopted the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Directive (2001/42/EC), which was transposed into Irish law in the form of Statutory Instruments No. 435 and 436 of 2004 (SEA Regulations). Both sets of regulations became operational on 21 July 2004. The Planning and Development (Strategic Environmental Assessment) Regulations 2004 (S.I. No. 436 of 2004) are applicable to the Sligo County Development Plan.

SEA is a systematic process for evaluating, at the earliest stage of decision-making, the environmental quality and potential consequences of alternative visions incorporated in plans and programmes. The undertaking of a “full SEA”, i.e. the preparation of an Environmental Report, is mandatory in the case of development plans.

2.2 SEA stages

SEA involves several stages, the most important being:

- determining the scope of the assessment, in conjunction with prescribed environmental authorities (the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources);
- collecting baseline environmental data;
- preparing and evaluating alternative development scenarios;
- selecting the optimal scenario and preparing the Draft Plan;
- assessing the Draft Plan against the baseline data and strategic environmental objectives;
- modifying and refining the Draft Plan to minimise negative environmental impacts;
- recommending mitigation measures;
- establishing a system of monitoring the environmental effects of implementing the Plan, based on appropriate indicators and targets.

2.3 Environmental Report

The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of Sligo County Development Plan 2011-2017 has been undertaken by the environmental consultants CAAS on behalf of Sligo County Council. The resultant Environmental Report (ER) is published as a separate document.

The SEA has informed the policies and objectives included in the Plan and has also suggested appropriate mitigation measures which have been incorporated in the relevant chapters.

2.4 Scoping

The scope of environmental issues to be dealt with by the SEA, together with the level of detail in which they were to be addressed, was determined in consultation with the prescribed environmental authorities, i.e. the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources.

The most important strategic environmental issues in County Sligo were identified as follows:

- water: surface water quality and groundwater vulnerability; compliance with the Water Framework Directive and Surface Water Regulations 2009;
- wildlife: protection of Natura 2000 sites, Annex II species, non-designated species and habitats, priority habitats, marginal farmland and water-dependent habitats; ecological connectivity;
- flooding: compliance with the DoEHLG's guidelines on flood risk management by undertaking a flood risk assessment;
- landscape and cultural heritage: avoidance of unnecessary impacts of development upon sensitive rural landscapes and visually vulnerable areas; protection of the significant archaeological heritage.

The main implications for the CDP are:

- the need to limit the extents of urbanised developments to conform with the capacity of existing and planned wastewater treatment plants, which, in turn, will be limited by the assimilative capacity of the receiving waters;
- the need to ensure compliance with the highest standards in the provisions of new private wastewater treatment systems in the environs of planned settlement centres that occur within sensitive surface or groundwater catchments;
- the need to adopt measures arising from the Western River Basin Management Plan and the Shannon and North Western River Basin Management Plans and the associated Programmes of Measures and from national legislation/guidelines relating to the protection of Freshwater Pearl Mussels;
- the need to adopt measures arising from the Flood Risk Management Guidelines.

2.5 Alternatives

The SEA Directive requires that reasonable alternatives (taking into account the objectives and the geographical scope of the Plan) are identified, described and evaluated in relation to their likely significant effects on the environment.

These alternatives must be realistic, capable of implementation, and should represent a range of different approaches within statutory and operational requirements of the Plan.

Taking into account the objectives and the geographical scope of the CDP, three development scenarios were formulated through consultation between the plan-making team and the SEA consultants.

The Recent Trend, Spreading-Out Development and Focused Growth scenarios provide alternative visions of how future growth might occur in County Sligo.

As the CDP is required by legislation to be reviewed and replaced by a new development plan every six years, a Do-Nothing scenario was not considered.

Scenario 1: Recent Trends – demand-led growth

Over-zoning, developer-led growth and an increase in the number of one-off rural housing have been the main development features of recent years in County Sligo.

According to 2006 Census data, just one year after the adoption of the CDP 2005-2011 growth in the satellite villages had already attained levels beyond what was envisaged in the Settlement Strategy and what was considered sustainable in terms of Gateway promotion. Furthermore, the zoning of much more land than what was realistically needed in certain settlements has now resulted in a large number of vacant dwellings. Some of the Key Satellites of Sligo, but also other villages located in majority in the Sligo Subregion, have been affected by these trends.

At the same time, there has been a small but steady growth in rural one-off houses, not just in the rural areas in need of regeneration, but also in the rural areas under strong urban influence. This growth did not appear to be hindered by the rural housing policies, which were nonetheless drawn up in accordance with the Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines.

It should be emphasised that the type of development outlined in this scenario has occurred not in the absence of a Plan, but during the life and within the framework provided by the Sligo County Development Plan 2005-2011. This was possible partly because the bulk of planning permissions which led to excess housing provision in the “wrong” locations were granted before the adoption of the Plan, and partly because of over-zoning in the mini-plans, without regard to the settlement strategy and recommended population levels. It is noted that over-zoning has also occurred as part of preparing the LAPs, which were all adopted before the County Development Plan 2005-2011.

Scenario 1 – Recent Trends

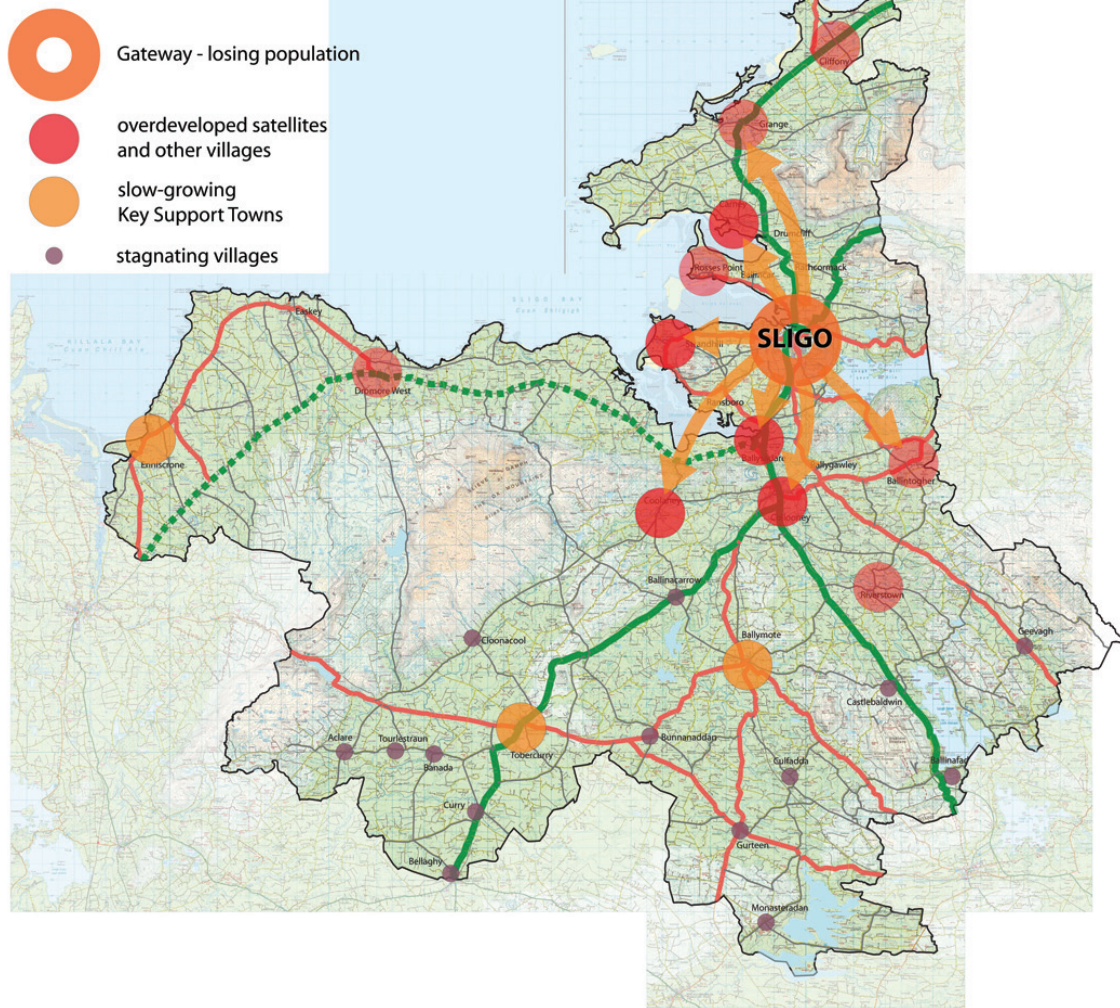


Fig. 2.A Scenario 1: Recent Trends – demand-led growth

Alternative Scenario 1 (See Figure 2.A) provides for the continuation of the above parallel trends into the period 2011-2017, which would result in the undermining of population growth in the Gateway City and in the Key Support Towns with subsequent loss of economies of scale and synergies capable of fostering sustainable urban growth. More descriptively, the Scenario would result in:

- the occurrence of population growth predominantly in a few settlements where over-zoning and consequent substantial housing development have taken place;
- continued stagnation of the Gateway and even loss of population to the satellites and smaller villages in the Sligo Subregion where there is an excess of housing and further zoned land;
- hindrance of growth in Key Support Towns and lack of consolidation of smaller villages through lack of new residents, as newly-formed households are drawn into overgrown satellites of Sligo or choose to settle in rural locations outside of towns and villages, particularly in Rural Areas in Need of Regeneration.

Scenario 2: Spreading Out Development – small-village catch-up

There are many settlements in County Sligo where very little or no development has taken place during the construction boom, primarily because no tax incentives were available for house construction at those locations.

It could be argued that these and other similar settlements also “deserve” their “fair” share of future growth, alongside the towns and villages that have already seen a substantial amount of development in recent years.

Alternative Scenario 2 (see Figure 2.B) provides for sufficient land to be zoned and serviced in those Sligo villages that were “left behind” and advocates adequate infrastructure to be put in place in order to cater for population and employment growth in these locations.

This scenario would result in:

- a degree of population growth in the more attractive and better serviced villages as a result of residential zoning and additional infrastructural commitments;
- continued stagnation or loss of the Gateway’s population to the satellites and smaller villages in the Sub-region where there is an excess of housing;
- hindrance of growth in Key Support Towns, as newly-formed households occupy vacant houses in Gateway satellites or prefer to settle in smaller villages or outside settlements, in rural areas, particularly in Rural Areas in Need of Regeneration.

Scenario 2 – Spread development

● All settlements receive an equal share of future growth as development is spread throughout the County

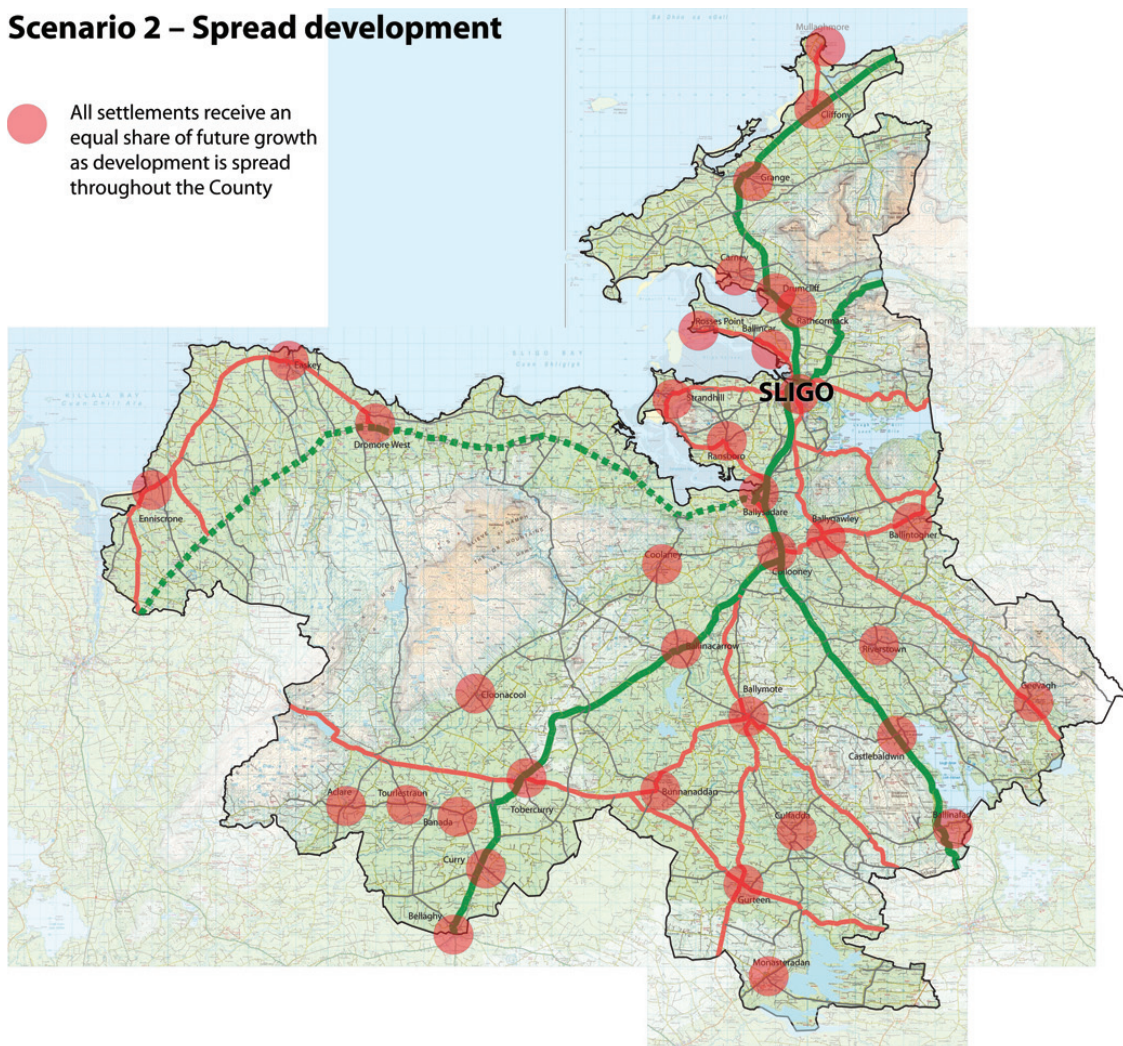


Fig. 2.B Scenario 2: Spreading Out Development – small-village catch-up

Scenario 3: Focused Growth – Gateway focus and Key Town consolidation

The development of the Gateway as envisaged in the National Spatial Strategy and the consolidation of a number of key towns that provide services to rural areas are the main elements of Alternative Scenario 3 (See Figure 2.C below).

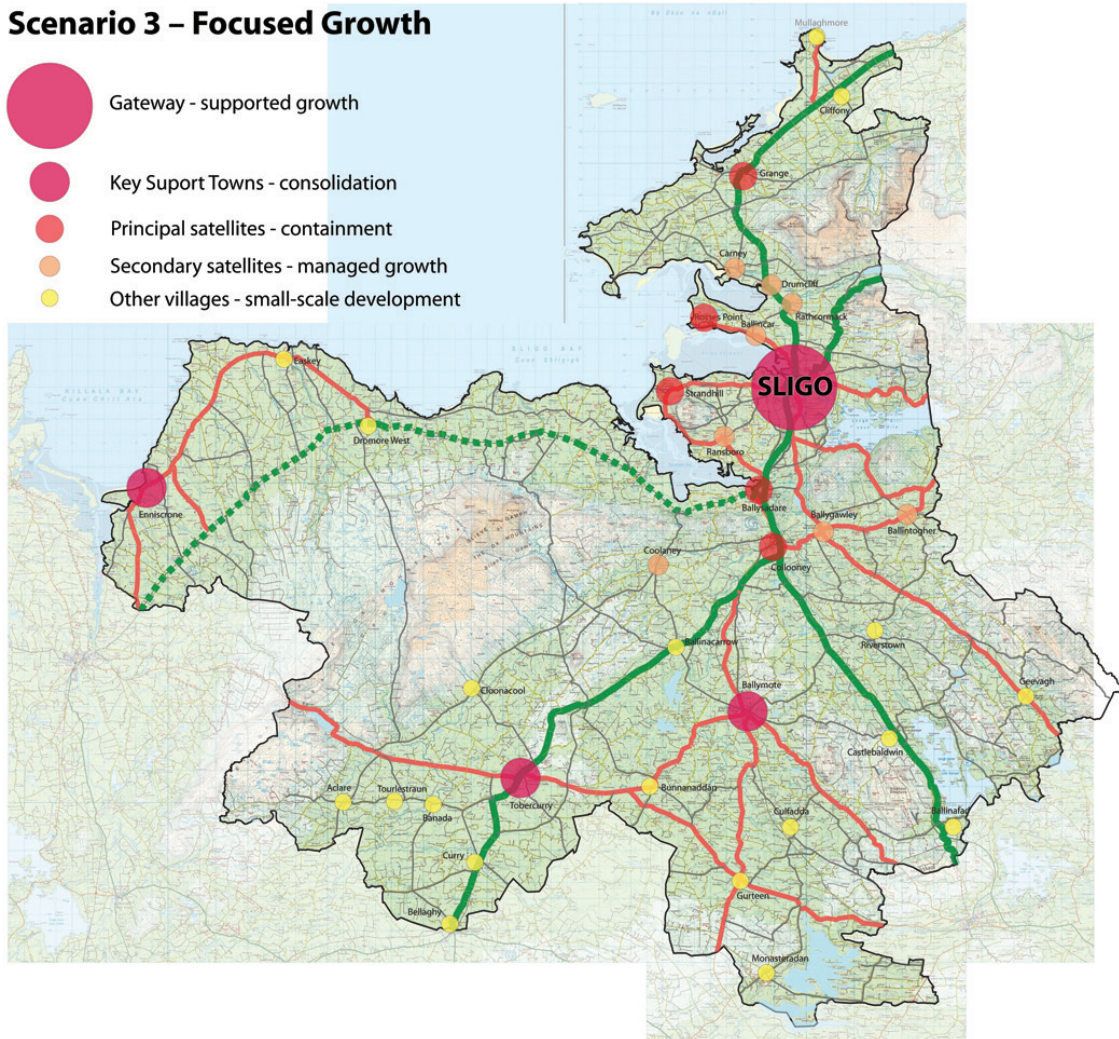


Fig. 2.C Scenario 3: Focused Growth – Gateway focus and Key Town consolidation

In order to channel growth into these selected locations, development in other, non-strategic locations would be confined to levels that would not undermine the potential of the Gateway and Key Support Towns.

No additional residential development would take place in the majority of the satellites, where housing is already in excess supply. This would be achieved through the introduction of a moratorium on the construction of multiple-housing schemes, which would be reviewed in 2013, two years after the next Census.

The Key Support Towns would see a limited amount of growth, in a reasonable proportion to their existing population, and only small-scale residential development would be facilitated in small villages that need new residents in order to retain and support local services.

Under this scenario:

- The loss of Gateway population could be halted and possibly reversed;
- Key Support Towns would develop in proportion to their strategic role and size;
- There would be small-scale population growth in smaller villages;
- The further growth of satellites would be curtailed.

It is acknowledged that some of the satellites and other villages have new wastewater treatment plants with a capacity much higher than their existing and envisaged population.

However, wastewater treatment capacity is only one in an array of planning issues that must be taken into consideration when determining the optimal population level in a particular settlement for the period of a development plan.

Scenario 3 is the preferred scenario for the development of County Sligo over the period of the CDP 2011-2017.

2.6 Evaluation of the Draft Plan

Section 8 of the Environmental Report evaluates the goals, policies and objectives of this plan against sixteen Strategic Environmental Objectives (SEOs), making use of the baseline environmental information and a wide range of maps.

The SEOs were developed from international, national and regional policies which generally govern environmental protection objectives.

The SEOs are used as standards against which the development strategies, goals, policies and objectives of the Draft Plan can be evaluated in order to help identify areas in which significant adverse impacts are likely to occur, if unmitigated against.

A total of 617 sets of policies and objectives were assessed against the SEOs. The assessment indicates that:

- 565 groups of policies and objectives are likely to improve the status of certain SEOs;
- 302 groups of policies and objectives are potentially conflicting with the status of certain SEOs, but this is likely to be mitigated;
- 345 groups of policies and objectives are not likely to interact with the status of the SEOs.

The Environmental Report concludes that, with the integration of appropriate mitigation measures, potential adverse environmental effects which could arise as a result of implementing the Draft Plan would be likely to be avoided, reduced or offset.

2.7 Mitigation measures

Mitigation measures are measures envisaged to prevent, reduce and, as fully as possible, offset any significant adverse impacts on the environment of implementing the Development Plan.

Section 9 of the Environmental Report recommends general mitigation measures, which have been incorporated into the relevant Draft Plan chapters.

Additional and more detailed mitigation measures than those which have been integrated into the Plan are likely to be required by the development management and EIA processes for individual projects.

2.8 Monitoring

The SEA Directive requires that the significant environmental effects of the implementation of plans and programmes are monitored.

Monitoring enables, at an early stage, the identification of unforeseen adverse effects and the undertaking of appropriate remedial action. In addition to this, monitoring can also play an important role in assessing whether the Plan is achieving its environmental objectives and targets and whether the proposed mitigation measures are being implemented.

The Environmental Report puts forward proposals for monitoring the environmental effects of the CDP. The proposals include specific indicators and targets as well as suggestions for putting in place a monitoring system within the local authority.