

# **N4 Collooney to Castlebaldwin *Proposed Road Development***

## **APPENDIX NO. 1.1**

### **A County Planning Need: Implications of the proposed development for the proper planning and sustainable development of the area**

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## Document Control

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# 1 Introduction

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## 1.1 Context

This report is prepared in support of the Environment Impact Statement on the N4 Collooney to Castlebaldwin *Proposed Road Development*. The report focuses on the need for the proposed project in an overall planning and sustainable development context. Whilst section 1.6 of the EIS sets out the national and regional policy context for the proposed development, this report elaborates on the local policy context and particularly the Sligo County Development Plan 2011-2017.

As outlined in chapter 2 of the EIS, this section of the N4 route is currently deficient in alignment (geometry), cross-section, capacity and junction/direct access arrangements for both the calculated design speed of 100kph and the statutory speed limit of 100kph. These deficiencies have resulted in increased journey times and reduced journey reliability, both of which have negative economic impacts on both businesses and consumers. Most notably there has also been a severely high rate of accidents on this road section, including 8 fatalities between 1996 and 2010. In summary this section of road is deficient in terms of the expected standards of a road that is part of the National Primary route network.

## 1.2 Sligo County Development Plan 2011-2017

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

As such, the development plan must offer clear guidance on sustainable development policies and objectives addressing various issues such as housing and the creation of sustainable communities, transport, urban development, waste management, judicious use of natural resources, climate change etc.

Sligo County Development Plan 2011-2017 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 Plan presents the Council's outlook for the future development of the County for the period up to 2017, within the framework of a longer-term perspective. Within this strategic outlook, the Plan sets out planning policies that are aimed at:

- driving forward the economic and social development of Sligo, by boosting competitiveness and enhancing the quality of life for the citizens of Sligo within an environment of outstanding quality,

through:

- the implementation of a Core Strategy for the County aimed at achieving the balanced development of County Sligo,

and thus:

- responding to national and regional planning policy contained in the National Spatial Strategy and Regional Planning Guidelines.

## 2 County Sligo: planning issues relevant to the N4 project

### 2.1 Policy developments

A wide variety of national, regional and local government policy documents have been reviewed in preparing the EIS for the proposed development (refer to section 1.6 of the EIS). Of particular relevance to County Sligo and its future sustainable development is the National Spatial Strategy and the Border Regional Planning Guidelines. The NSS represents the first national strategic planning framework and identifies Sligo as an urban centre to be developed in an accelerated manner as a Gateway City to drive the overall development of the North-West.

Although the National Spatial Strategy is to be reviewed, the current designation of Sligo as a 'Gateway' is nonetheless a strong indication of the important role the city has to play in the broad planning framework for the balanced development of the entire country.

Section 1.6.1 of the EIS sets out the sections of the National Spatial Strategy that are particularly relevant to Sligo and the N4 as follows:

In relation to strengthening the West and North West in a National Strategic Context the NSS states:

*Additional gateways, particularly in the West and North West, where the urban structure is weakest, must be developed. In identifying new gateways, a number of key factors must be taken into account including strategic location, capacity for substantial development, an existing business and innovation dynamic and existing or potential transport linkages.*

*Critical mass in the West and North West can be strengthened by developing Sligo as a gateway to capitalise on its strategic location and energise its associated hinterland. Building up the national role and scale of Sligo will require, as a first step, the development of a planning, land use and transportation framework. This will provide a focus around which local authorities, business and community interests can reach consensus on the future development of Sligo and utilise its substantial physical capacity for development, while safeguarding its outstanding natural setting.*

**Under 3.7, Key Infrastructure, the NSS states:**

*Achieving spatial balance by developing the potential of areas will depend on enhancing capacity for the movement of people, goods, energy and information between different places. Improvements in terms of time and cost, can reduce the disadvantages of distance.*

*Physical networks of infrastructure such as roads, public transport, energy and communications are of particular relevance to the NSS, since they themselves have a spatial impact and also influence the location, timing and extent of development.*

**Under 3.7.1, Transport, the NSS states:**

*To support balanced regional development, Ireland's transport networks must*

- *build on Ireland's radial transport system of main roads and rail lines connecting Dublin to other regions, by developing an improved mesh or network of roads and public transport services;*
- *ensure, through building up the capacity and effectiveness of Ireland's public transport networks, that increases in energy demand and emissions of CO2 arising from the demand for movement are minimised;*
- *allow internal transport networks to enhance international access to all parts of the country, by facilitating effective interchange possibilities between the national transport network and international airports and sea ports;*
- *address congestion in major urban areas by increasing the use of public transport.*

*Decisions on land use and development must take account of the existing public transport networks or support the emergence and development of new or augmented networks.*

*In summary, Ireland's future transport network can be viewed in terms of*

- ***strategic radial corridors***



Since late 2007 there has been a notable change in employment levels, with increased redundancies and rising unemployment. This trend has accelerated as the recession deepened and spread from the construction and finance sectors to the rest of the economy.

As in other Western counties, employment in Sligo tended to be in sectors that are lower-skilled, lower-value-added and more vulnerable in the recession (e.g. construction, retail), with lower shares in the higher-skilled and high-value-added sectors (e.g. information and communications technology, financial services). These factors will have implications for the County's ability to respond and adapt to the decline. This employment profile means that the County is not as well placed in the move towards an increasingly knowledge-based or 'smart economy'.

According to the Western Development Commission<sup>1</sup>, the current tendency for economic and regional policy to focus on the role and potential of the major cities may further exacerbate the difficulties, as the Western Region, particularly its northern part, is predominantly rural, with small towns and villages where the decline in construction had a profound impact in employment terms. The WDC recommends that national economic strategies encourage the growth potential of smaller urban centres and rural areas, investment in critical infrastructure and measures to retain skilled people in the region.

On the basis of the above it is considered that the upgrading of the N4 constitutes a vital component of the infrastructural investment that is required to reverse the economic trends that are affecting County Sligo. As discussed in section 2.1 above, this also has national implications as current economic trends are adversely affecting the potential for Sligo to drive the overall development of the North-West as envisaged in the NSS.

## 2.3 Population

The County Development Plan indicates that the 2006 Census recorded a total population of 60,895 persons in County Sligo, of which 17,892 were living in Sligo Borough (as defined by Census boundaries). This represented an increase of 2,716 (4.67%) in the County's population compared to 2002, and 5,073 (9.09%) compared to 1996. The Sligo Borough area lost 581 (2.91%) of its residents between 2002 and 2006, having grown by 3.6% between 1996 and 2002.

The County area outside the Sligo urban area generally gained population at a faster pace than the urban core between 1996 and 2006, growing by 8.2% between 2002-2006 (compared to minus 2.91% in the Borough) and by 13% over the entire decade 1996-2006, when the Borough added less than 1% to its population (106 persons).

Updated analysis of the 2011 Census is included in section 6.3.2 of the EIS. Again this information points towards a continuation of 2006 trends with the population of County Sligo rising by 7.4% to 65,393 persons in 2011, whilst the Sligo and environs area rose by less than 1% to 19,452 (its should be noted that the 'Sligo and environs' area quoted in relation to 2011 does not correspond exactly with the 'Borough' area used in 2006).

These population trends highlight the need for increased focus on directing development into the Sligo Gateway and this would be aided by improved transport links including the N4 upgrading between Sligo and Dublin.

## 2.4 Gateway performance

The Gateways and Hubs Development Index (GHDI) 2012 (Sligo Gateway Report) was published in May 2013 by the BMW and South & Eastern Regional Assemblies as one in a series of nine assessing the socio-economic performance of individual Gateways as designated under the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) 2002-2020. This series serves as both an update and progression of the Gateway Development Index (GDI), which was originally compiled and published in 2009.

In the Gateway Development Index, 2009 (GDI) Sligo scored 5.0, which was in line with the national average score for the Gateways. The urban core (i.e. the Sligo and Environs area) was recorded as being fractionally weaker in some domains and stronger in others. Most significantly in relation to the N4 project, those domains which demonstrated the most need for improvement included the Transport and Connectivity domains. The 2012 report has recorded an improvement in this regard but Transport and Connectivity still remains below

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<sup>1</sup> *Work in the West: The Western Region's Employment and Unemployment Challenge* – Western Development Commission, December 2009



average when compared to the other aspects examined in the report. The 2012 GHDI overall score for Sligo Gateway was again 5.0.

Of particular relevance to the N4 project the 2012 report highlights that the decline in development and infrastructure funding has impacted upon the realisation of a number of the goals of the Sligo Gateway, particularly mentioning the suspension of a number of major road projects in the county including upgrades and improvements to N4 Collooney to Castlebaldwin route.

## 2.5 Planning implications of recent trends

Taking account of recent policy developments, economic and demographic trends, and when viewed in the context of the proposed N4 project, the major implications for a sustainable development strategy for County Sligo to 2017 and beyond are as follows:

- County Sligo should strive to retain and increase its population, building on its strategic location in the North-West, its quality of life and its natural and cultural heritage attributes, in order to realise the vision for balanced regional development presented in the NSS. Employment creation, education, training and investment in critical infrastructure including the N4 upgrading, are essential in retaining and growing the County's population.
- For balanced development to take place within County Sligo, the role of the Gateway needs to be partnered with a focus on specific development roles for other urban areas in the County, such as:
  - the larger towns of Ballymote (in close proximity to the N4 project), Enniscrone and Tobercurry
  - the Gateway satellites ( including Collooney and Ballysadare along the N4 )
  - the smaller villages ( including Castlebaldwin, Riverstown and Ballinafad along/close to the N4 ).
- County Sligo has benefited from investment in critical enabling infrastructure, such as the Sligo Inner Relief Road, upgrading of the Sligo-Dublin rail line, improvements to Sligo Regional Airport, extension of broadband services, upgrading of energy and telecommunication networks, construction and upgrading of water supplies and wastewater treatment infrastructure. This process should continue. However, to capture the maximum gain, there is a continued need for focused investment including the upgrading of the N4, to help develop the Gateway and consolidate the towns in the County as local economic engines.

## 3 Core Strategy of Sligo CDP 2011-2017

### 3.1 Core Strategy

The Planning and Development Act 2010 amended section 10 of the Principal Act by introducing the requirement of a “core strategy that shall show that the development objectives in the development plan are consistent, as far as practicable, with national and regional development objectives set out in the National Spatial Strategy and regional planning guidelines”.

Within the National Spatial Strategy and regional planning guidelines context, Sligo is recognised as having the potential to build scale and critical mass to drive development in the North-West. The approach is to make the region competitive according to its strengths while ensuring a high-quality urban environment and vibrant rural areas. The Core Strategy of the Development Plan seeks to realise the vision for Sligo by addressing the key planning issues identified in section 2 of this report.

The implementation of the Core Strategy is supported by various elements of the Plan relevant to the N4 project including:

- the Spatial Development Framework, which sets out strategic policies on the location of residential and employment-related development, transport framework and environmental quality;
- the Settlement Structure, which defines the settlement hierarchy and indicates how future population growth should be distributed throughout the County. Section 3.3 also provides details of population targets and population change scenarios;
- the strategic policies relating to transport and mobility.

#### 3.1.1 Core aims and strategic goals of the Development Plan

Taking account of recent policy developments and trends, and the collective implications of the above for the period to 2017, the core aims of the Plan are:

- CA-1** To develop the full potential of each part of County Sligo to contribute to the optimal performance of the County as a whole – economically, socially and environmentally;
- CA-2** To adequately provide for the growth of Sligo towards a target population of up to 74,000 by 2017, structured in a balanced manner between:
- the Gateway City of Sligo (up to 34,000)
  - the wider area of County Sligo (up to 40,000), encompassing the consolidation of Key Support Towns and smaller settlements, and the maintenance of viable rural communities in the hinterlands of these towns and villages.
- CA-6** To build up the regional-level linkages between County Sligo and other parts of the Border Region and adjoining regions, such as the Western Region and Northern Ireland, by supporting the implementation of regional spatial strategies, such as the Border *Regional Planning Guidelines*, collaborating on support for critical enabling infrastructure, such as inter-regional road and rail linkages, and co-operating on areas of mutual planning interest.

Strategic goals of the Development Plan which are relevant to the N4 project include the following:

- SG-1 a.** Facilitate and encourage the development of Sligo as a Gateway City and economic growth driver for the North-West region.
- SG-1 b.** Integrate business locations with the surrounding land uses and transportation network.
- SG-1 c.** Promote economic development and the provision of industry/enterprise in the Key Support Towns of Tobercurry, Ballymote and Enniscrone.
- SG-1 h.** Work with the relevant providers of to ensure adequate infrastructure in terms of road, rail, aviation, energy and broadband telecommunications.
- SG-4 c.** Promote Sligo City as the main retail and service centre, with support from Tobercurry, Ballymote, Enniscrone, and promote Collooney and Grange as lower-tier retail/service centres.

**SG-5 a.** Target, prioritise and promote investment in inter-city and inter-county road and rail connections, as a means of realising the potential of Sligo as an important economic centre in the North-West.

### 3.2 Spatial Development Framework

#### 3.2.1 Regional Development Framework

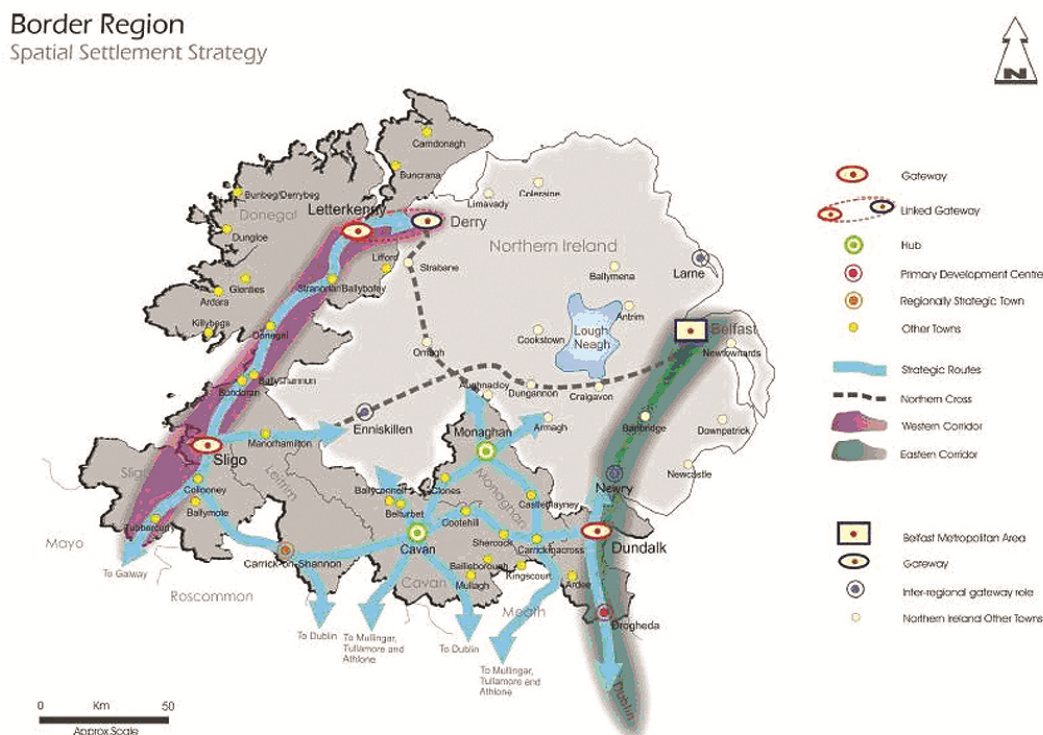
The foundation of the Core Strategy for Sligo is the Spatial Development Framework, which is based on the spatial structure outlined in the *National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020* and reinforced by the *Border Regional Planning Guidelines 2010*.

Key strategic goals outlined in the *Regional Planning Guidelines 2010* that are relevant to the N4 project include:

- SG-2 Ensure the development of the key urban settlements and the strategic links between them and facilitate integrated sustainable development between urban and rural areas.
- SG-3 Improve intra- and inter-regional connectivity and mobility throughout the region.

The Spatial Development Framework for County Sligo is intended to guide growth and investment while carefully managing resources in the County in accordance with the strategic goals of this Plan as outlined in Section 3.1 of this report, and is supported by the Settlement Structure and transport networks including the N4 corridor.

Fig. 3.A below shows the regional context, including the N4 strategic route, while fig. 3.B overleaf illustrates the spatial development framework for County Sligo.



**Fig. 3.A** Border Regional Planning Guidelines 2010 – Spatial Strategy Map

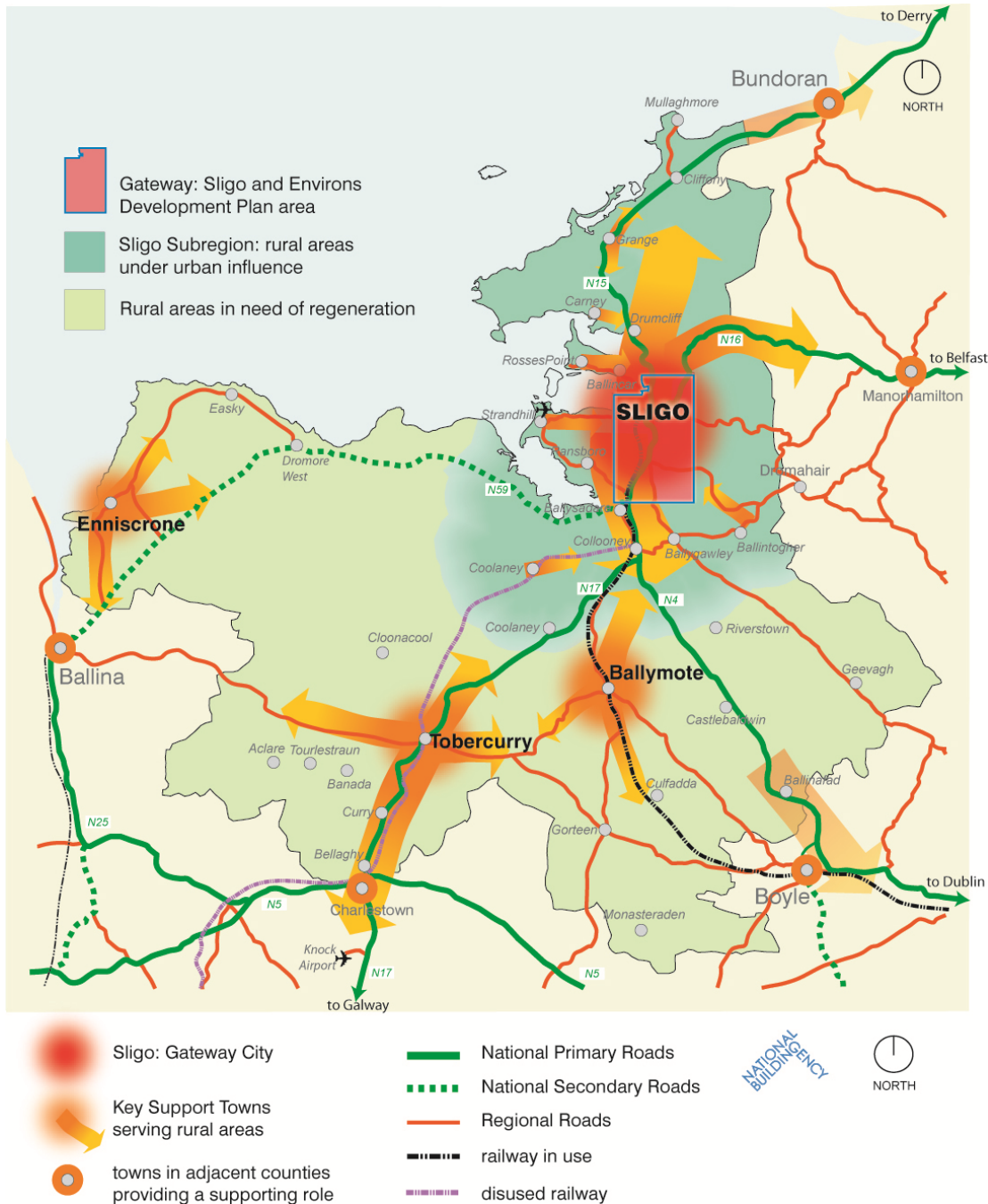
#### 3.2.2 Spatial Development Principles

The spatial development principles of the County Development Plan are closely linked to transport infrastructure and those that are relevant to the N4 project include the following:

**Gateway focus**

The Spatial Development Framework is a structured approach to planned growth in Co. Sligo, centred on the core aim CA-1 of developing Sligo Gateway as envisaged by the National Spatial Strategy – a nationally significant urban centre, whose location and scale support the desired critical mass necessary to sustain strong levels of economic growth and prosperity in the North-West – and reinforce its links with Gateways and Hubs in neighbouring counties.

**Fig. 3.B The Core Strategy map as a spatial development framework**



**Improved connectivity and mobility**

Essential to Sligo’s further growth are an improvement in its road and rail connectivity with other NSS Gateways and Hubs, good links to Northern Ireland and secure air connections with Dublin and the UK.

### **Managed growth in the Subregion**

In order to support Gateway development, it is essential to control growth in the Sligo Subregion. This is the immediate hinterland of the Gateway, which has been subject to significant development pressure in recent years. Development in the Subregion should be limited and directed into the satellites of the Gateway including Collooney and Ballysadare along the N4.

### **Key Support Towns consolidation**

Throughout much of County Sligo, particularly the south and west, there is a need to address the regional imbalance at County level and build on the strengths and scale of existing settlements. Three Key Support Towns have been identified – Ballymote (to which the proposed N4 project would provide improved linkages), Tobercurry and Enniscrone – to assist in promoting, sustaining and diversifying the rural economy. A strong transport network is required to ensure optimal connections between the Gateway and its Key Support Towns, which need to be consolidated and equipped with adequate infrastructure in order to serve the local needs of smaller settlements' and rural areas' residents.

### **Promoting settlements with special functions**

Riverstown is identified as having a regionally significant cultural role. The proposed N4 project would provide improved linkages to Riverstown from Sligo and Dublin.

### **Integrating public transport and settlement**

National primary and secondary roads, as well as strategic non-national roads reinforce the County's transport network, connect the Gateway with other important urban centres and link it with its satellites and the Key Support Towns.

Strategic spatial development policies of the County Development Plan that are relevant to the N4 project include the following:

- SP-SD-1** Promote residential and employment growth in the Gateway City of Sligo.
- SP-SD-2** Support the ongoing development of the Atlantic Road Corridor, and the upgrading of road links to other NSS Gateways, important urban centres and Northern Ireland.
- SP-SD-3** Promote public transport by road and rail and support the reopening of the Western Rail Corridor.
- SP-SD-4** Seek co-ordination between residential/economic development and transport corridors and encourage concentration of such development at locations that are optimally served by existing and planned road/rail connections.
- SP-SD-8** Consolidate the three Key Support Towns of Ballymote (serving South Sligo), Enniscrone (serving West Sligo) and Tobercurry (serving South-West Sligo) by providing them with an appropriate range of services including social infrastructure, retail, office, commercial and enterprise facilities to enable them to serve their respective rural catchments in an optimal manner.

## **3.3 Settlement Structure**

This section of the CDP expands on the core aims of the Development Plan by setting out a Settlement Structure for the County. The Settlement Structure draws on the Border Regional Planning Guidelines and *Sligo Subregional Development Strategy 2001-2021*.

### **3.3.1 Developing a settlement strategy**

The Border RPGs provide that County Development Plans must be in line with the prescribed population targets contained therein and that a settlement strategy must be developed based on this information. The Settlement Structure of the County Development Plan reflects the Spatial Development Framework outlined in Section 3.2, which sets out the principles for orderly growth in the County. These principles are illustrated in Fig. 3.C below.

**Fig. 3.C Settlement Structure - guiding principles**

### 3.3.2 Settlement hierarchy

The settlement hierarchy of the County Development Plan is as follows:

<b>Gateway City:</b>	Sligo and Environs
<b>Principal Gateway Satellites:</b>	Ballysadare, Collooney, Grange, Rosses Point, Strandhill
<b>Secondary Gateway Satellites:</b>	Ballincar, Ballintogher, Ballygawley, Carney, Coolaney, Drumcliff, Ransboro, Rathcormack
<b>Key Support Towns:</b>	Ballymote, Tobercurry, Enniscrone
<b>Villages sustaining rural communities:</b>	Aclare, Ballinacarrow, Ballinafad, Banada, Bunnanadden, Castlebaldwin, Cliffony, Cloonacool, Culfadda, Curry, Dromore West, Easky, Geevagh, Gurteen, Monasteraden, Mullaghmore, Riverstown, Tourlestrane

The settlement structure and hierarchy are illustrated in Fig. 3.D overleaf. With particular reference to the N4 it should be again noted that in the wider context it provides the strategic link between the Gateway City of Sligo and Dublin, via the midlands.

The N4 project will also provide improved accessibility to Ballymote which is designated as a Key Support Town in order to assist in promoting, sustaining and diversifying the rural economy. The County Development Plan emphasises that a strong transport network is required to ensure optimal connections to Key Support Towns.

Collooney and Ballysadare are designated as 'principal satellites' along the N4. The County Development Plan aims to direct development into these settlements in order to manage growth in the Sligo sub-region. Section 4.1.4 of the Plan highlights the potential for the direction of additional industry and enterprise development into Collooney.

At the lower level of the hierarchy villages are identified as having a role of sustaining rural communities. Most relevant to the N4 Project in this regard are Castlebaldwin, Riverstown and Ballinafad.





**Fig. 3.D County Sligo – settlement structure and hierarchy**

**3.3.3 Population and development land requirements**

On the basis of various elements of the Core Strategy as outlined above, the County Development Plan allocates future population levels and development land requirements for each settlement in the County. Section 3.4.1 of the Plan highlights that these allocations are heavily influenced by the County’s infrastructural endowments, including the north-south transport axis and the south-eastern road link to Dublin.

The aim of growing the Sligo Gateway population to 34,000 by 2017 has already been outlined. The Plan also includes significant growth recommendations for other settlements relevant to the N4 project. This includes an increase in Ballymote from 1,229 in 2006 to 1,700 in 2017 (2011 recorded census population was 1,539). Collooney and Ballysadare are to grow from 2006 levels of 892 and 971 respectively, to 1,500 (2011 recorded census populations were 1,369 and 1,344 respectively).

## 4 Economic Development

### 4.1 Current trends and challenges

As is highlighted in section 2.2 of this report, the County Development Plan acknowledges the dramatic changes that have occurred in the economy and the very real difficulties that are being encountered. It is stated that, in order to address these challenges, the promotion of economic development will depend on a number of key components including the provision of essential infrastructure, including the N4 upgrading.

Strategic economic development policies of the CDP considered relevant to the N4 project include the following:

- SP-ED-1** Ensure that sufficient and suitable land is reserved for new enterprise development at key locations throughout the County, particularly in the Key Support Towns of Tobercurry, Ballymote and Enniscrone, and promote these towns as secondary employment centres, after Sligo City.
- SP-ED-8** Liaise with the IDA, Enterprise Ireland and the County Enterprise Board, to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the provision of necessary infrastructure and services to support enterprise and industrial development.
- SP-ED-9** Promote the integration of employment with other land uses and the transportation network and ensure, in particular, that employment-intensive uses are located in proximity to existing and planned strategic routes, where public transport is most viable.

### 4.2 County Sligo Retail Strategy

All planning authorities are required to prepare a Retail Strategy for inclusion in the development plan for their area, as set out in the *Retail Planning Guidelines for Planning Authorities* published by the DoEHLG in December 2000 (reviewed in January 2005).

Unlike many Irish counties, Sligo is mono-nodal, with Sligo City being by far the largest and most dominant urban centre in the County. Outside the Gateway, five centres in the County are of significance in terms of retail, due to their size, location or acknowledged importance in the NSS – Tobercurry, Enniscrone, Grange and, with relevance to the N4 project, Ballymote and Collooney.

The Retail Strategy acknowledges that there is limited scope for the provision of additional retail floorspace within the County, the exception to this being the potential identified to facilitate an additional supermarket in Ballymote to serve the wider rural hinterland of South Sligo.

### 4.3 Tourism development

Section 4.4.1 of the CDP highlights tourism as one of the major growth areas of the national economy. County Sligo, with its wealth of beautiful scenery, still remains largely unspoiled and relatively undiscovered. The County's cultural heritage and landscape, its accessibility by road, rail and air, and the range of activities available augur well for the continued expansion of this sector.

The natural scenery of Sligo is amongst the finest and most spectacular in the country. It is the County's primary tourist attraction. The mountains, forests, woodlands, lakes, rivers, coastline, offshore islands and largely unspoiled rural landscape offer the widest range of natural amenity and recreational pursuits.

However, with 156,000 overseas tourists who generated revenue of €39m in 2006, Sligo had just one-third of the visitors of neighbouring County Mayo and only one-tenth of the revenue of County Galway. There are strong indications that Sligo has not capitalised on its full tourism potential. Accessibility is a major factor in attracting visitors to the area and it is considered that the N4 upgrading has the potential to make significant improvements in this regard, particularly in relation to the Dublin market.



## 5 Transport and mobility

Development Plan policy aims to integrate transport and land use in order to provide a sustainable framework for economic and social development. The peripheral location of County Sligo and its important regional role and location require a strong transportation network, which is essential to the competitiveness and vitality of the county.

The designation of Sligo as a Gateway City in the National Spatial Strategy further emphasises the importance of strong and strategic links to urban centres in the Border Region, along the Atlantic Corridor, beyond regional and national boundaries. The Border Regional Planning Guidelines specifically support the development of a number of strategic routes in order to ensure Sligo's success as a Gateway, including all national roads and rail links.

Sligo functions as the major transportation node in the North-West. The city is located at the end of the national primary road N4 connecting with Dublin, via Mullingar and Longford. Other primary and secondary roads link Sligo with Galway, Belfast, Letterkenny/Derry and other urban centres.

### 5.1 Sligo as a regional transportation node

Sligo is the largest transportation node in the North-West. Sligo city is connected to Dublin (via Carrick-on-Shannon) by the National Primary Road N4. Other national primary and secondary roads connect Sligo with Belfast (via Enniskillen), Derry and Letterkenny (via Donegal Town), Galway, Ballina, and other urban centres.

The policy document Transport 21 and the Roads Sub-Programme of the National Development Plan 2007-2013 outline the government's principal objectives which impact on Sligo and the N4:

#### **Ongoing development of the Atlantic Road Corridor**

The N17, N4 (Collooney to Sligo) and the N15 form part of the Atlantic Corridor, which loops from Waterford, via Cork, Limerick, Galway and Sligo to Letterkenny. The upgrading of this route is identified as a specific project to be delivered under Transport 21.

#### **Improvement of road links between the NSS Gateways**

Links from Sligo to other NSS Gateways include the N17 to Galway and the N15 to Letterkenny (both forming part of the Atlantic Corridor outlined above), the N4 to Mullingar and the N16 which forms part of the west-east connection from Sligo to the Gateway of Dundalk.

#### **5.1.1 Provisions of the Regional Planning Guidelines**

The Regional Planning Guidelines 2010 also identify a Strategic Radial Corridor that is important in relation to Sligo and the N4 project: the Western Radial Route (M4/N4), which connects Dublin to Sligo via the linked Gateway of Athlone/Tullamore/Mullingar, Longford and Carrick-on-Shannon, and is the primary access route to the west of the Border Region.

The provision of a high quality link between Sligo and Dublin was also identified as a specific project to be delivered under Transport 21. The County Development highlights that although this N4 route has seen significant investment in recent years in areas outside of the Border Region, the Collooney–Castlebaldwin section remains substandard.

### 5.2 Road Network

Sligo County Council's Capital Roads Programme for National Routes is framed within the targets set out in the *National Development Plan 2007-2013* and *Transport 21*. These publications provide a basis on which policy decisions for the development of the National Road network are to be made over the period 2000-2019. Continuing improvements to the national primary and secondary road network will enable the catchment area of County Sligo to expand – particularly south to parts of Mayo and Roscommon, via the N17 and N4, and north to Donegal, via the N15. Improvements to the N16 to Enniskillen will enhance connections to both Northern Ireland and the boarder region. Links via Enniskillen will be improved to Belfast, and to the boarder towns of Cavan of Dundalk.

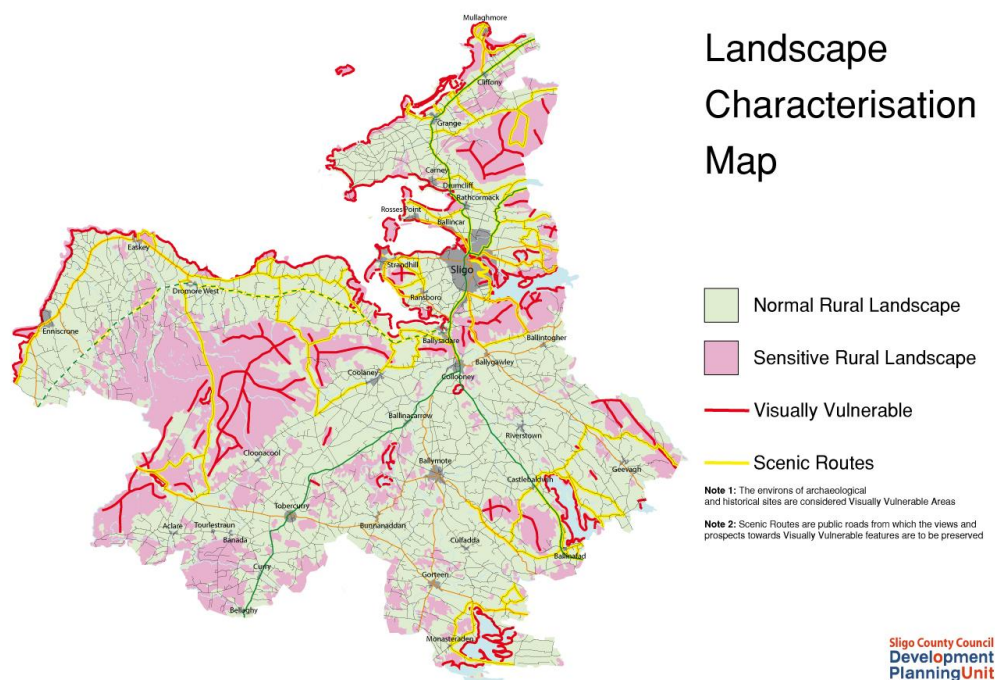
Policies and objectives of the Plan that are relevant to the N4 project include the following:

- O-R-1** It is the objective of Sligo County Council to bring National Roads up to appropriate standards, as resources become available, and to continue improvement works on non-national roads so as to develop a safe and comprehensive road system for the county.
- O-NR-1** Facilitate programmed improvements to the National Road network, including the programme of realignments and upgrades, as set out in Table 8.B (*including the N4 Collooney to Castlebaldwin project*), subject to compliance with the requirements of the Habitats Directive.

## 6 Landscape character

### 6.1 CDP Landscape Character Assessment

The County Development Plan highlights Sligo's varied natural landscape with spectacular mountains, picturesque lakes, enclosed farmland and a diverse coastline comprising low-lying cliffs, indented shoreline and sandy beaches. These topographical attributes combine to give Sligo an outstanding landscape setting. Section 7.4 of the Sligo County Development Plan 2011-2017 deals with landscape character and includes a Landscape Characterisation Map (see figure 6.A below) which classifies the County according to its visual sensitivity and ability to absorb new development without compromising the scenic character of the area.



**Fig. 6.A Landscape Characterisation Map**

The map indicates, inter alia, designated:

- **Normal Rural Landscapes:** areas with natural enclosing features (e.g. topography, vegetation), which have the capacity to absorb a wide range of new development forms – these are the main farming areas of the County.
- **Sensitive Rural Landscapes:** areas that tend to be open in character, with intrinsic scenic quality and a low capacity to absorb new development – e.g. Knocknarea, Aughris Head, Coney Island.
- **Visually Vulnerable Areas:** distinctive and conspicuous natural features of significant natural beauty or interest, which have extremely low capacity to absorb new development – examples are the Ben Bulbin plateau, the Sligo coastline, lakeshores.
- **Scenic Routes:** public roads that coincide generally with popular tourist routes passing through or close to Sensitive Rural Landscapes, or adjoining Visually Vulnerable Areas, and affording unique scenic views of one or more distinctive natural features.

With regard to the above classifications it can be seen that there is a high density of sensitive/vulnerable/scenic features throughout the County, particularly in the upland/coastline areas of the north and west. However, the area surrounding the Collooney – Castlebaldwin route is notably different to much of the County in that it is dominated by Normal Rural Landscape and has, therefore, a

higher capacity to absorb development. Furthermore it should be noted that the proposed route is not affected by any 'scenic views to be preserved' as outlined in Appendix G of the County Development Plan.

Whilst it is acknowledged that there are small instances of designated Sensitive Rural Landscape/Visually Vulnerable Area between Toberscanavan Loughs and Lough Corran/Boathole Lough which would be relevant to the proposed development, it is considered that visual impacts would be minor and would not adversely impact on landscape character.

## 6.2 Road design

The planning authority acknowledges the need to ensure that the design of the road project is commensurate with the route function and the character of the surrounding landscape. In this regard the proposed development consists of a Type 2 Dual Carriageway with a small section of Standard Single Carriageway required for tie in purposes to the existing network south of Castlebaldwin. It also includes a significant extent of online upgrading for the northern section of the road.

The area is characterised as a Normal Rural Landscape and it is considered that the existing N4 constitutes an integral element of the existing landscape, both in terms of its visual impact and the established functional role of the area as an important transport corridor.

It is considered that the proposed development would only consolidate the established character of the area. Furthermore it is considered that the upgrading would simply render this section of road more consistent with existing upgraded sections to the north and south of proposed development, particularly the existing dual carriageway between Sligo City and Collooney. Accordingly it is not considered that the proposed development would have an adverse impact upon the surrounding landscape character.

## 7 Conclusions

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This report has highlighted the important role that Sligo has to play as a designated 'Gateway' in accordance with the NSS and as set out in the Border Regional Planning Guidelines. This identifies Sligo as an urban centre to be developed in an accelerated manner to drive the overall development of the North-West, thereby supporting balanced regional development.

However it must be acknowledged that achieving spatial balance will depend on enhancing capacity for the movement of people, goods, energy and information between different places. Improvements in terms of time and cost can reduce the disadvantages of distance, and physical networks of infrastructure such as the N4 route (identified as a Strategic Radial Corridor in the NSS) are of particular relevance in this regard.

Progress on achieving balanced regional development as envisaged in the NSS has been limited due to a number of factors including the significant national slowdown in development since late 2007. Census information for 2006 and 2011 has outlined that the Sligo Gateway population has essentially remained stagnant. Analysis of Gateway performance by regional assemblies has also outlined that Sligo has scored below average in terms of transport and connectivity, with the N4 Collooney to Castlebaldwin route being highlighted as an infrastructural project of particular importance.

Furthermore there is a real concern that, in terms of economic recovery, current tendencies for economic and regional policy to focus on the major cities will hinder the potential of development in smaller urban centres such as Sligo. In this regard it is considered essential that investment in critical infrastructure such as the N4 takes place.

The spatial development principles of the County Development Plan are closely linked to transport infrastructure. The N4 route is considered to be a vital element of the Core Strategy, including the spatial development framework and the settlement structure. Whilst the development of Sligo as a Gateway is the ultimate aim of the Core Strategy, other settlements play an important complimentary role and particularly relevant to the N4 project. Collooney and Ballysadare are identified as principal satellites with the function of absorbing development demand in the Sligo sub-region, with Collooney also being identified as having an important retail, industry and enterprise function. The N4 project also involves improved linkages to Ballymote which is designated as a Key Support Town with the capacity to absorb additional housing, retail and industrial development.

Improved accessibility is considered to be a vital aspect of economic development and the upgrading of the N4 would be considered a significant development in the challenge to attract investment to the area. Sligo plays a regionally significant role in relation to industry, public services, retail and tourism, and this could be expanded upon with the provision of improved transport links.

In light of the above it is considered that the N4 route plays a central and significant role in the context of the development of Sligo Gateway and the county as a whole. This in turn has the potential to contribute significantly to balanced regional development as envisaged in the National Spatial Strategy.

It is considered that the proposed N4 Collooney to Castlebaldwin road development is an essential piece of infrastructure which will reduce journey times, improve reliability and improve traffic safety for users. The proposed development should therefore be progressed in the interests of the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.