

# Part I. Overall Strategy

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## Introduction

This *Sligo County Development Plan 2005-2011* sets out an overall strategy for the proper planning and sustainable development of County Sligo, in accordance with the *Planning and Development Acts, 2000-2002*. The Plan relates to the County of Sligo, except for the Sligo and Environs area, which is covered by the *Sligo and Environs Development Plan 2004-2010*.

This Plan builds on the review of the *Development Plan for the County of Sligo 1999-2004*, taking into account recent key development trends and national, regional and local policy developments. The Plan presents the Council's outlook for the future development of the County for the period up to 2011, but taking account of a longer, twenty-year perspective as well. 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 and repute,

through:

- implementation of an overall development strategy for the County aimed at achieving the balanced development of County Sligo,

and, in turn:

- responding to national and regional policy, such as the National Spatial Strategy and Regional Planning Guidelines.

Fig. 1.a County Sligo: location in context



# 1. County Sligo Today: The Planning Issues

Since the last development plan for Sligo was prepared in 1999, recent policy developments and population, economic and other trends point to issues that the development plan must address. These issues include:

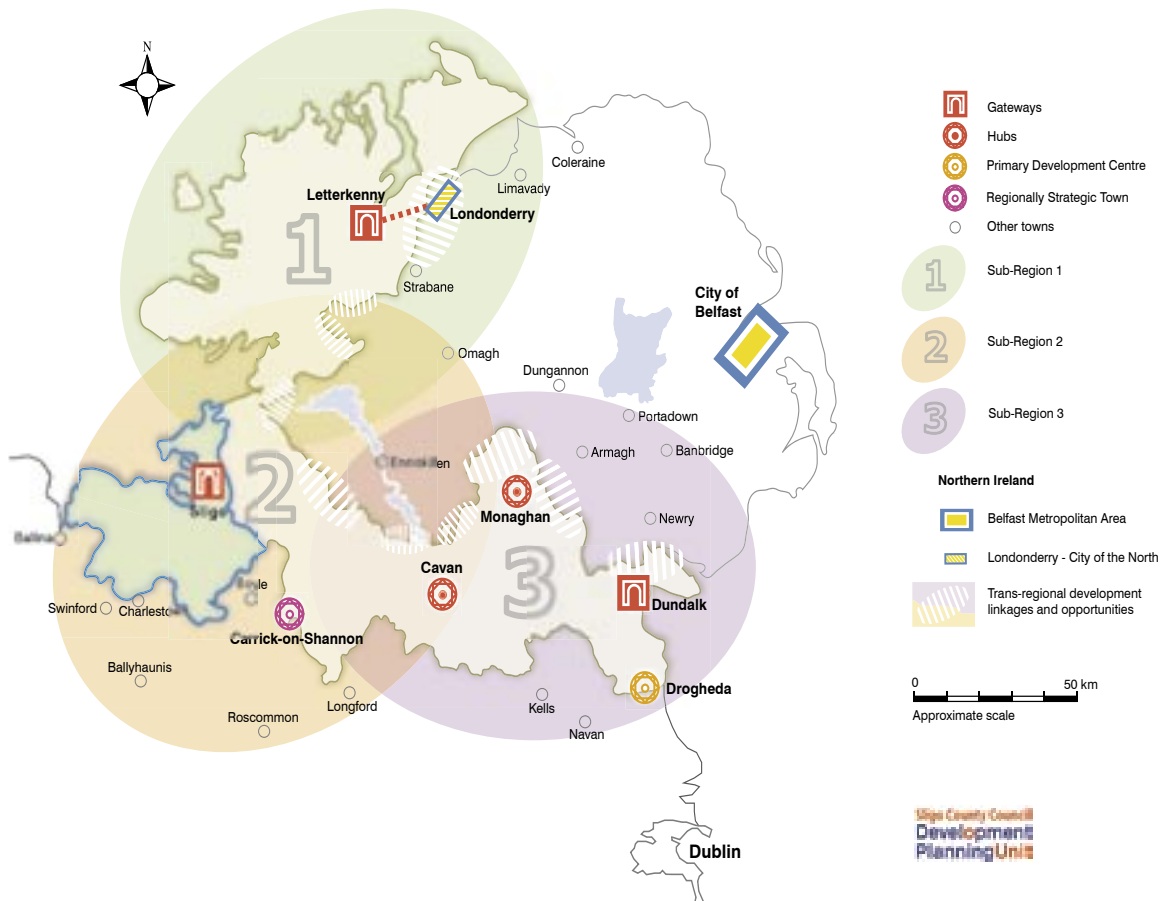
- national, regional and local policy developments;
- headline trends in relation to population, economic development, infrastructural development and environmental conditions.

## 1.1 Important policy developments

A wide variety of national, regional and local government policy documents, have been reviewed in preparing this Development Plan. Policy developments with a particular relevance to County Sligo include:

- at **national** level: the *National Development Plan 2000-2006* (NDP), *National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020* (NSS) and various Planning Guidelines;
- at **regional** level: the *Regional Planning Guidelines for the Border Region 2004-2024* (RPGs), Western Development Commission's *Strategic Statement 2004-2006* and *Connaught Regional Waste Management Plan 1999-2004*;
- at **local** level: the County Development Board's *Strategy 2002-2012*, *Sligo Sub-Regional Development Strategy 2001-2021* and the *Sligo and Environs Development Plan 2004-2010*.

Fig. 1.b **Border Region: sub-regions as outlined in the Regional Planning Guidelines**

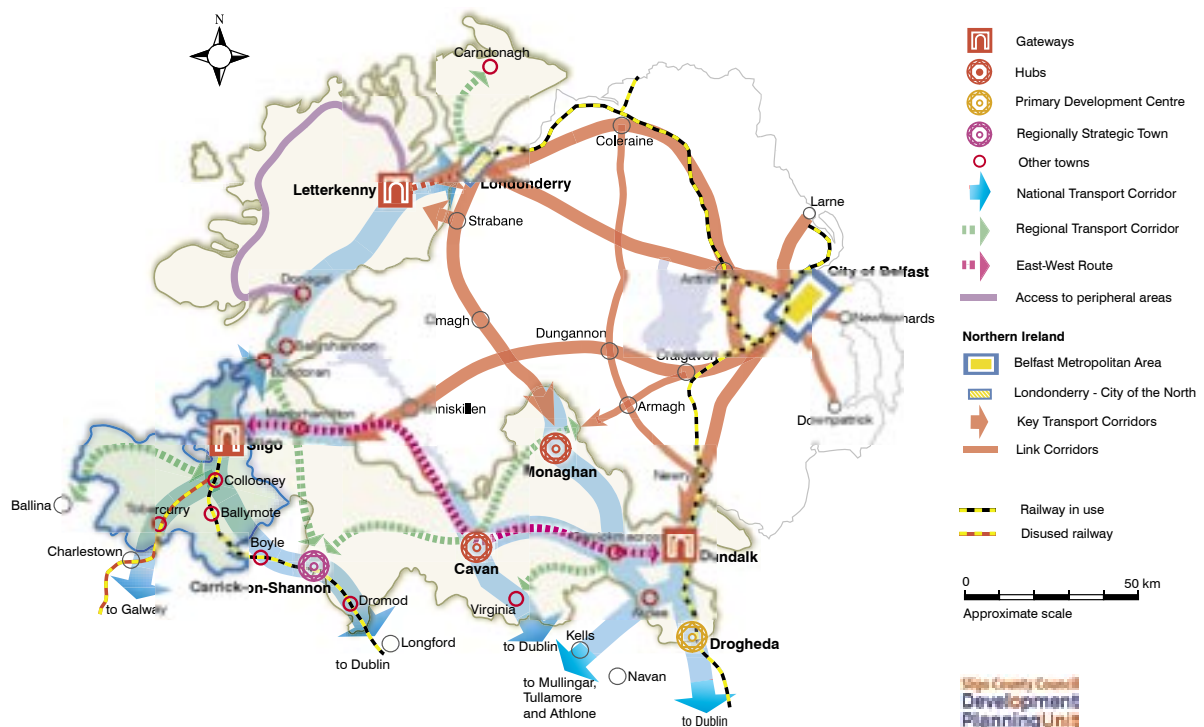


Appendix A contains key elements of policy documents that are especially relevant to this County Development Plan. Key messages from these and other relevant policy documents, to which this Plan responds, are as follows:

At *national* level:

1. The NDP aims to deliver, over the period to 2006 and beyond, a programme of prioritised and structured investment in Ireland’s physical, economic and social infrastructure, in order to strengthen Ireland’s competitiveness, sustain continued economic and employment growth, foster balanced regional development and promote social inclusion. For Sligo, the NDP represents recognition by Government that investment in critical infrastructure is necessary to sustain balanced regional development and needs to be responded to through a dynamic planning and development framework and investments prioritised and structured around a development programme.
2. 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. The *Sligo and Environs Development Plan 2004-2010* has set out a framework for Sligo City and this County Development Plan responds to the call in the NSS for frameworks at the county level to achieve balanced development in areas outside of the gateways.

Fig. 1.c **Border Region: transportation structure and connections with Northern Ireland, as outlined in the Regional Planning Guidelines**



At *regional* level:

3. The RPGs aim to support the development of the gateways identified in the NSS, but within a wider and more detailed, regional level framework that supports the development of key towns and villages outside the gateways and a diversified and more vibrant structure of rural communities. The Guidelines establish a broad framework for county development plans to ensure that the accelerated development of the gateways under the NSS moves forward in tandem with a process of strengthening other important urban areas and supporting a dynamic rural community.
4. The Western Development Commission (WDC) has published, in 2003, *Jobs for Towns*, a substantial contribution to the development of a strategy for investment and employment in Western towns. This Development Plan takes account of and supports this report.

At *local* level:

5. The County Development Board has established an economic, social and cultural development strategy for Sligo with the support of key interest groups and agencies. This strategy promotes balanced spatial development, social inclusion and enhancement of the living culture of Sligo as the aims for the future.
6. The *Sligo Sub-Regional Development Strategy 2001-2021* has established a framework for managing the growth and development of the area covered by Sligo and the settlements directly influenced by it.
7. The *Sligo and Environs Development Plan 2004-2010* established a detailed development framework to transform Sligo towards the goal of a Gateway City, as outlined in the NSS.

## 1.2 Sligo – physical development factors



County Sligo, located in the province of Connaught, in the north-west border region of Ireland, encompasses a total land surface of approximately 1,837.11 km<sup>2</sup>, bordered by Counties Leitrim, Roscommon and Mayo, and flanked to the west by almost 200 km of Atlantic coastline.

### Landscape context

The County is characterised by a varied natural landscape that includes spectacular limestone mountains, such as Benbulbin and Benwisquin, other interesting upland terrain (e.g. the Ox and Bricklieve Mountains), numerous picturesque lakes (e.g. Loughs Arrow, Easkey, Gara, Glencar, Gill and Talt), 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.

### Heritage and culture

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.

## Economic context

Sligo serves as the administrative, commercial, service, health and educational centre for a large hinterland. It also acts as an important distribution centre in the North-West. Recent years have seen Sligo develop as a major industrial, commercial and residential centre supporting a regional airport, a railway terminus, a port, two expanding third-level colleges and a general hospital.

Important employment centres in industry include Sligo City, Tobercurry and Grange. Currently there are 47 companies located in four IDA business parks in the County. Sligo City, with a sizeable mass of labour and skills, underpinned by its ease of access and availability of infrastructure and services, has developed as the key location for industry in County Sligo.

Outside the City, agriculture remains an important part of the local economy, though its share of economic output and employment declines in proportional terms, while forestry, tourism and other rural-based economic activities emerge and continue to support the smaller towns and villages of the County.

## 1.3 Population

The 2002 Census recorded a population of 58,200 in County Sligo, including Sligo Borough. This represents an increase of 3,444 (6.2%) over the 1991 census figure, and 2,379 (4.26%) compared with 1996.

Sligo Borough, as defined by its administrative boundaries, grew by 1.9% between 1991-1996 and by 3.6% between 1996 and 2002. The town's overspill development between 1996 and 2002 was reflected in significant growth within some electoral divisions (EDs) adjacent to, or within commuting distance of Sligo Borough. The best example is Knockaree ED, which includes the satellite village of Strandhill and Sligo's expansion along the Strandhill Road: the population of the ED grew by 38.6% between 1996 and 2002.

More rural parts of County Sligo, i.e. the county area outside the borough, experienced a similar growth rate between 1991 and 1996 – 1.55%, but grew faster than the urban core between 1996 and 2002, gaining 4.5% in population.

Between 1991 and 2002, the population of rural areas in the central and northern parts of the County has risen consistently, while more western and southern parts lost population. Certain EDs, such as Dromard East and Annagh, lost as much as 18% of their 1991 population. However, population growth over 10% was recorded in twenty-one EDs, six of them experiencing growth of over 15%.

Overall, of a total of 79 rural EDs, 36 continually lost population from 1991 to 2002. Nevertheless, the pace of depopulation appears to have slowed down: between 1991 and 1996, 40 rural EDs lost population, but only 34 rural EDs underwent this process between 1996 and 2002. Many of the areas that have experienced population decline are also areas of extensive uplands and remoter rural areas of marginal agricultural value.

Key issues that emerge from a review of population trends include:

- the population of the County, including Sligo town, is growing, but at a rate that would have to be accelerated to achieve the critical mass for Sligo City outlined in the NSS.
- the process of population decline is stabilising and reversing in many central and northern parts of the County, with substantial rates of increase being recorded in some areas adjacent to Sligo town.
- western parts of County Sligo exhibit more persistent patterns of population stability or decline, apart from the areas associated with particular towns, but the areas of most significant decline are generally the more mountainous and remote parts of the County.

Other demographic trends in Sligo are outlined in Appendix B.

### 1.3.1 Estimates of future population

Estimates of future population levels were derived from an examination of past and potential population shares. The method was applied first in relation to the Border Region's share of national population and subsequently to County Sligo's share of population within the Border Region.

Several population growth scenarios were put forward, starting from the demographic projections that formed the basis of the NSS, slightly adjusted to reflect the actual population enumerated in Census 2002.

Combining a variety of assumptions regarding the growth options for the Border Region and County Sligo's share in this growth, four models were eventually outlined. These models are summarised in Table 1.A below.

Table 1.A Summary of population growth models for County Sligo to the year 2011

Model	Main assumptions	Projected 2011 population
<b>Conservative Growth</b>	The Border Region and County Sligo continue to lose their respective shares in the national and regional population (extrapolation of current trends).	65,000
<b>Moderate Growth</b>	The Border Region and County Sligo maintain their 2002 population shares.	68,000
<b>Gradual Growth</b>	The Border Region's share in the national population remains at its 2002 level, while County Sligo's regional share stops falling and begins to increase gradually.	71,000
<b>Faster Growth</b>	The Border Region's national share begins to grow, while County Sligo's regional share grows at a higher rate than in the Gradual Growth Model.	75,000

Regardless of the future population scenario chosen, the key driver of Sligo's population growth is the extent of migration into the County, and the degree to which such migration will cancel out or exceed out-migration. Migration is the key factor because the level of natural increase is rather low and tends to fall. High in-migration to Sligo is mainly dependent on business development and job creation, supported by local entrepreneurship and investment in physical and social infrastructure.

The assumption on which the **Conservative** and the **Moderate Growth** projections are based is that there would be no effective policy changes at national level in the short to medium term. As a consequence, Sligo would not grow enough to attain the required critical mass that would make it a true gateway. The other urban and rural settlements in County Sligo would continue to decline or, at best, maintain their existing levels of population and economic activity.

The **Gradual Growth** and the **Faster Growth** models are based on the assumption that the NSS will be implemented in full, primarily through the NDP 2000-2006 and subsequent national investment programmes. Building on improved infrastructure and a well-preserved, scenic natural setting, Sligo would become highly attractive as a place in which to invest, work, live and recreate.

The Development Plan for County Sligo is based on the **Faster Growth** scenario, i.e. the working assumption is to aim, over the Plan period and beyond, for a population of between 75,000 and 80,000 people, structured in terms of:

- promoting the development of Sligo City towards a population of around 35,000-40,000 by 2011, as outlined in the *Sligo and Environs Development Plan 2004-2010*.
- promoting the development of the remainder of County Sligo towards a population of around 40,000, within a balanced framework of key towns at strategic locations throughout the County and wider rural hinterlands.



The Faster Growth scenario concurs with the RPGs population target for Sligo City, i.e. 40,000 by the year 2020.

In terms of housing requirements that flow from such population estimates, taking account of current and future housing development trends, it is estimated that in the period to 2011, provision will need to be made for up to 7,300 housing units for the County and Borough combined, well distributed across urban and rural areas and in terms of private, social and affordable housing.

The Housing Strategy element of the Development Plan provides more detail in this regard.

## **1.4 Recent trends – implications for the County Development Plan**

Taking account of recent policy developments and trends, the key implications for the formulation of a new development strategy for County Sligo in the period to 2011 are as follows:

- Sligo needs to boost its critical mass and 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.
- To support national efforts towards balanced regional development and achieve important regional and local benefits, there is a need to focus on the Gateway City of Sligo, by taking a strategic approach to the planning and development of Sligo and its environs and aiming to deliver, over the period to 2020, a compact, business-friendly, public transport-based and physically attractive city.
- For balanced development to take place within County Sligo, the role of the Gateway needs to be partnered with a focus on particular development roles for both urban and rural areas in the County, such as:
  - the northern coastal zone between the Ox Mountains, the N59 and the coast;
  - the central and western area between the N4, the N17 and the Ox Mountains;
  - the eastern area between the N4 and the Leitrim boundary;
  - the northern area between Sligo City and the Leitrim boundary.
- Rural areas in Sligo are experiencing significant economic, demographic and physical changes.
  - Some areas are growing rapidly in population, pointing to the need to carefully manage overspill development associated with Sligo reaching outwards.
  - Other areas are declining in population, pointing to the need for a flexible and quality-led approach in accommodating new housing development.
  - Extensive areas of upland and marginal agricultural land present new opportunities for diversifying the rural economy.
  - The County's coastline, uplands, rivers, ecosystems and built and cultural heritage give it national and international identity and are a resource to be wisely managed in sustaining the development of the County into the future.
- County Sligo is benefiting 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 and upgrading of energy and telecommunication networks. This process will continue and intensify. However, to capture the maximum gain, there is a need for matching local public and private investment to, inter alia, build up the small towns and villages in the County as local engines of growth, to balance the accelerated development of the Gateway.

